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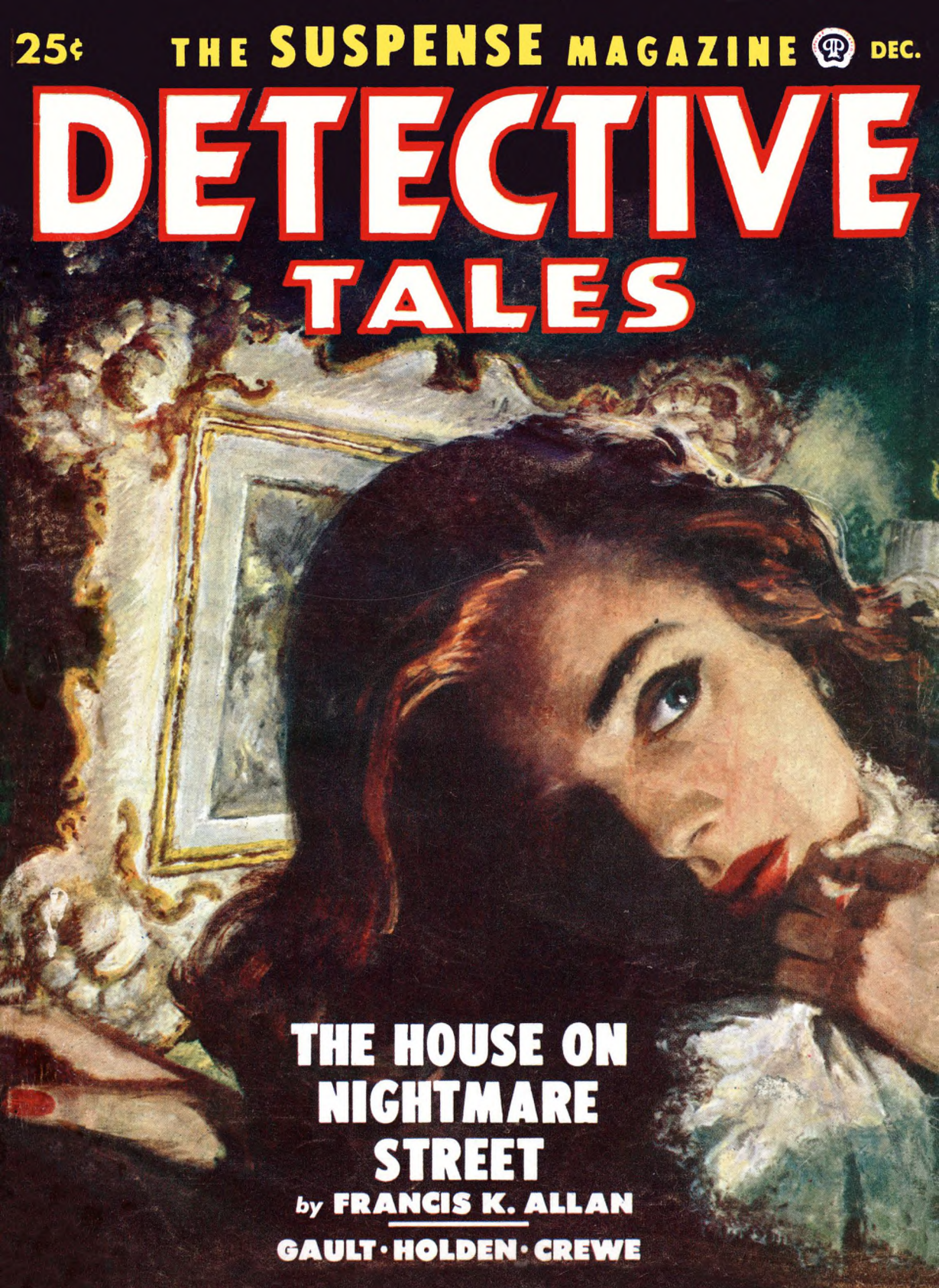

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by FRANCIS K. ALLAN

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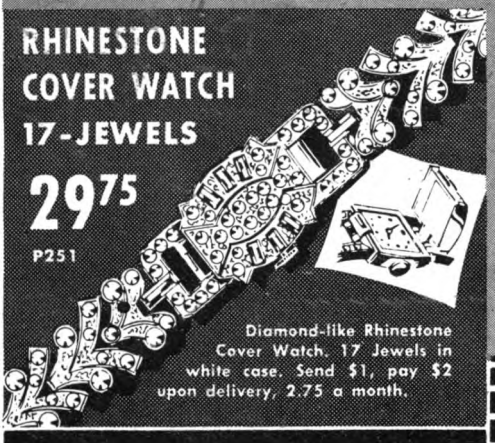

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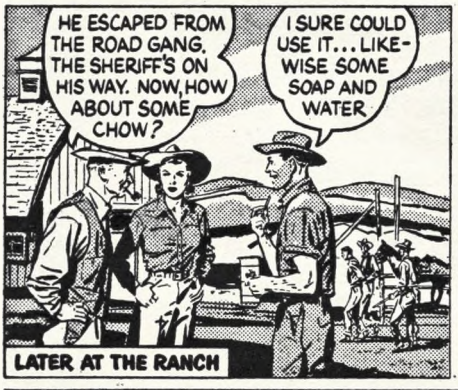
ECHOING UP A NEARBY DRAW, HER CRY REACHES A YOUNG GEOLOGIST



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VOL. FORTY-EIGHT DECEMBER, 1951 NUMBER FOUR

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THE CRIME CLINIC

HOW about a psychological "Bertillon system"—to identify criminals *before* the crime has been committed?

Recently a Brooklyn judge, faced with the prospect of having to sentence a youthful slum-bred murderer to the chair, berated the convicted man as a "punk who had arrogated to himself the powers of life and death" among his fellows, and suggested that such tendencies might, under a different penal system, have been detected earlier—and a murder thus prevented.

To us, the judge had a point. Identifying the criminal before the crime has long been a problem occupying some of the most astute students of humanity. Innumerable physiological traits have been catalogued in vain efforts to discover a "criminal type." Phrenologists have had their day of attempting to predict crime waves by the bumps on the average citizen's head. Society's apologists have done their best to explain away crimes by making certain defendants—such as our Brooklyn "punk"—all but heroes.

None of these quite worthwhile efforts have brought us appreciably closer to the goal. Murder, in most instances, appears to be unpreventable. Yet overwhelming evidence would seem to indicate that the causes of murder lie far beyond the killer's immediate motivations—in the very nature of the murderer himself.

The judge's "arrogant punk" would seem to us to make a fine basis upon which to draw a more detailed psychological picture of the average murderer. There's hardly any doubt that just about all killers have taken themselves extremely seriously. You can probably think of any number of instances to support this view yourself, but we'd like to remind you of one of our favorite cases—that of Chester Jordan.

One reason we like the Jordan case is that it suggests the judge's definition holds in all strata of society. Far from being an underprivileged hoodlum, Chester Jordan came of a good family and was, in fact, a Yale graduate. As for his financial standing, he was related by marriage to Jesse Livermore, the famed "Boy Plunger of Wall Street," whose successful stock market operations made financial history, and much of whose fortune was at one time spent in a futile effort to clear Jordan of murder.

In his personal life, too, Chester Jordan had little reason to feel frustrated—he had married one of the more beautiful women of his day in actress Irene Shannon, before

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

her into a steamer trunk.

he cut her up into a dozen parts and packed

He drove himself and the trunk, one night, to Boston's Steamship Wharf, intending to book passage on one of two departing liners, and dispose of the remains far at sea. Then, for reasons that didn't become clear until the later stages of his trial, he failed to sail, and instead drove back to his apartment, where the trunk and its grisly contents were inevitably discovered.

Psychiatrists paid considerable attention to the case in the course of the subsequent trial, during which Chester Jordan was adjudged sane and sentenced to the electric chair. They discovered several things.

One was Jordan's impeccable background; he not only came of a good family, but was something of a Bible student. There might have been a number of reasons, they decided, for Chester Jordan's having killed his wife—among them the fact that she had taunted him with never having gotten over going to Yale.

But it wasn't until they asked him why he hadn't made the obvious getaway by sailing with his incriminating trunk and dumping it overboard some dark night that they received an inkling of the basic composition of Chester Jordan.

Two boats had been scheduled to depart Steamship Wharf on the fatal night, one named *Yale,* the other *Harvard.* Jordan, it turned out, had arrived at the pier too late to book the *Yale* and . . .

"As a Yale man, after all," Jordan answered, "I could not sail on the *Harvard!*"

The obvious touch here is comedy—yet a woman died and a man paid with his life for the crime.

Look back upon the killers you've read about, heard about—or even possibly known. Isn't there a better than average chance that the common denominator among murderers is that they're simply over-important to themselves— in common parlance, stuffed shirts? And isn't there a chance that out of our judge's comment a basic brain-picture might be worked out, as rugged and catalogueable as fingerprints—and lest we be misunderstood, let us point out that no one was ever convicted of having his fingerprints taken.

Merely identified.

The next issue of DETECTIVE TALES will be published November 21st.—THE EDITOR.

REQUEST GRANTED

SAMUEL WHITTAKER, of Los Angeles, knew he had a gold mine in his wife. Not only had she been good to him for most of his lifetime, but, properly managed, she would serve him well in his last years. So he took out some insurance on her, and then, with the aid of a tramp, staged a fake holdup, in the course of which the hobo supposedly shot her to death.

Samuel Whittaker was so taken with grief that he went into a private sanitarium—out of which the police dragged him to try him for murder. They had the testimony of the tramp who'd helped him, in addition to proof from ballistics that at least one of the four bullets found in his wife's body had come from Whittaker's gun, with which he claimed he'd shot at the tramp.

Whittaker wouldn't give in. Convicted, he struck a dramatic pose, cried, "May God strike me dead if I'm guilty!"

Most discouragingly for himself—he fell down dead!

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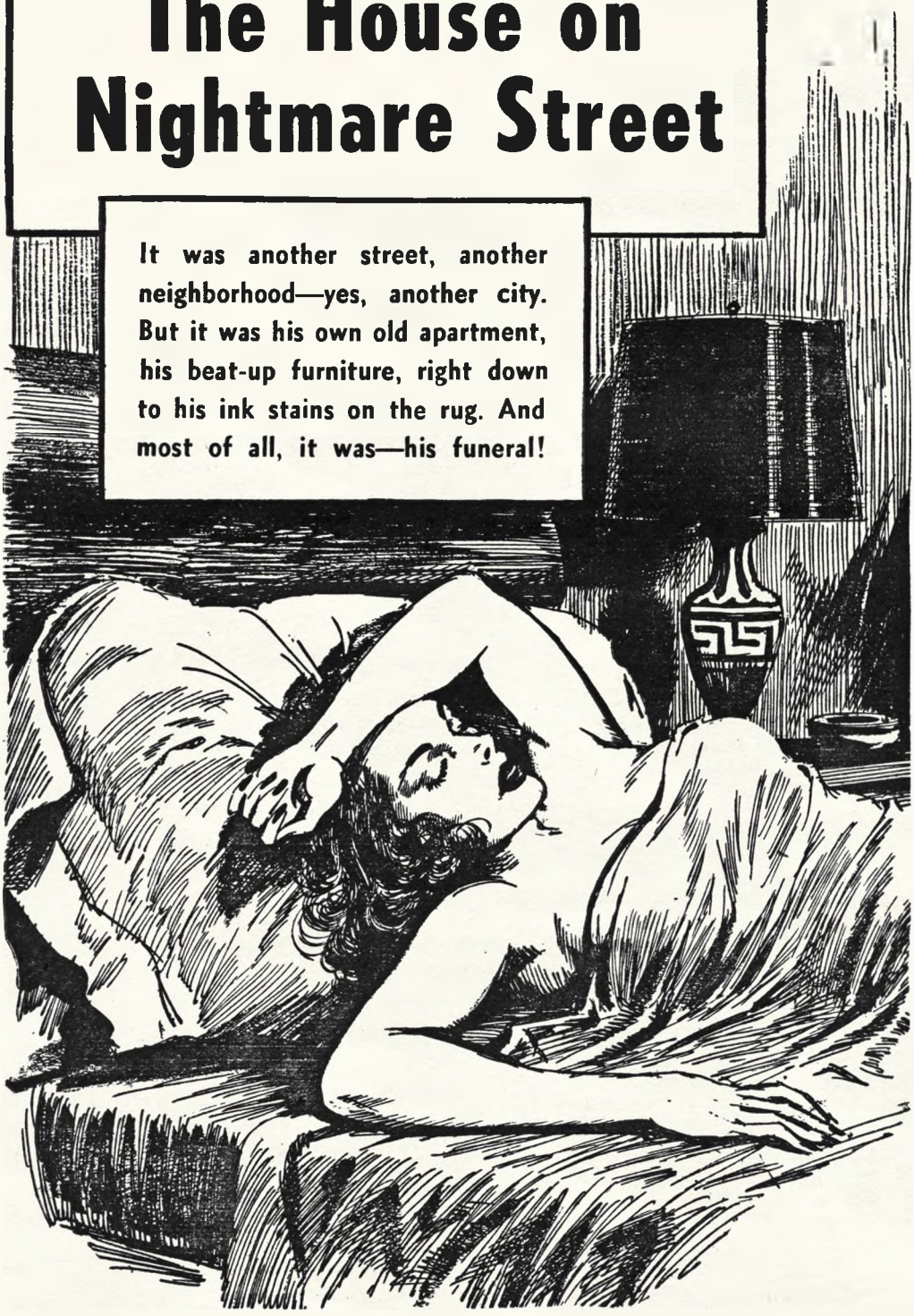
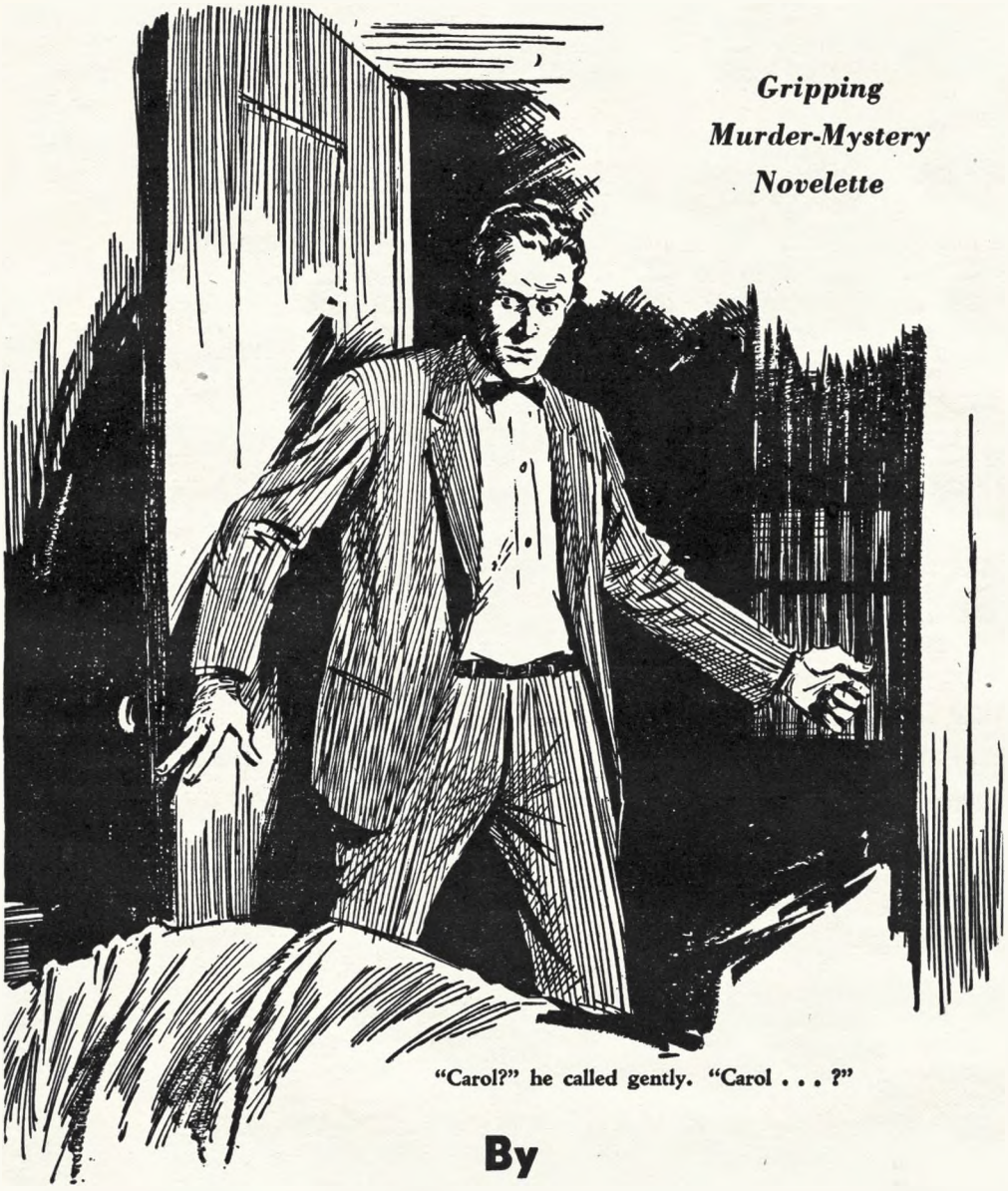
The House on Nightmare Street

It was another street, another neighborhood—yes, another city. But it was his own old apartment, his beat-up furniture, right down to his ink stains on the rug. And most of all, it was—his funeral!



Gripping Murder-Mystery Novelette



"Carol?" he called gently. "Carol . . . ?"

By

FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

The Hanging Man

IT WAS a hot July afternoon, and Joe walked slowly along the shabby Brooklyn street. One after another, the houses were all alike: old, two stories, of weathered red brick. One apartment upstairs, one down; a stone gargoyle over each doorway, and every hallway smelled of cooked cabbage and dust.

At each house Joe rang the doorbells. He smiled at the thin, tired women or

the fat, hot women and said, "I'm Mr. Dulaney of radio station WITT. We are conducting our annual survey to learn which programs—"

The women, fat or thin, usually slammed the door at that point. They weren't interested in surveys, and Joe didn't blame them. He wasn't either. There were fifty-two weeks in the year, and for fifty of those, WITT was as good a place as any to work, if you had to work. The other two were strictly poison. Leghorne, the owner of the station, couldn't forget that he'd made his first buck selling shoe polish, door to door. Know the public, rub elbows, feel the pulse, get out in the field and see what gives, walk and talk with the average man . . . ! Once a year he gave such a speech to everybody from the switchboard girl to the all-night disc jockey. The next day you were out meeting people, getting the feel of a door in your face.

At the end of the block, Joe sat down in a bar. "Martini," he said. It was like ether at an operation. Two martinis per block, and you didn't really feel the pain. He drank the first and called for the second. His red bow tie was limp, his suit baggy. His curly black hair was damp, and his eyes were gloomy. He wished he were home taking a nap, or on a vacation, or as rich as Leghorne probably was. He sighed and looked at the clock. 4:30. He'd work the other side of the block and quit.

No, said the women and slammed their doors. And then Joe reached for a doorbell and noticed the name card. Joe Dulaney, it said. Well, well, maybe a tenth cousin who would try to borrow a five. . . .

Joe's thoughts bogged down. The door was open a few inches, and he had the queer sensation that he was looking back—back across the space of a year, back to the apartment on Tenth Street in Greenwich Village that he and Lois had rented just before she was killed.

The green carpet was the same. The corner bookcase, the chair with the ink stain where he'd spilled the . . . His thoughts froze. *There was the ink stain!*

Joe's hand went out, pushing the door open, and suddenly the sticky aftertaste of martinis filed his throat. How many had he drunk? A lot, but not this many.

ON THE coffee table were four beer cans and a sack of potato chips, just the way it had been that last night with Lois. That last night, when he'd gone out at midnight to get the Sunday paper; when he had come back and called to her, "Want another beer?" When she hadn't answered, he'd decided she was asleep. Then the cop had come to ask, Would he come downstairs and look? Somebody had fallen out of a window, down into the court . . . Joe could still hear himself saying, down in that court, "Yes, my wife, but . . . But I just went to get the paper! She had some flowers on the fire escape. She might have leaned out to water them. I just went to get the paper. I wasn't gone long." As if it mattered the slightest how long it had been.

But that had been a year ago in Manhattan. This was today, Brooklyn, a building he'd never seen before. And Joe felt his feet carying him into this room. It was hot and silent. He breathed in swift shallow sucks. He tried to swallow away the hot taste of martini. He closed his eyes, then looked again. Nothing had changed. Here it was.

Beyond the living room was a short hall, two doors. They pulled at Joe against his every warning and caution. He must not, he must not, he kept telling himself. And a more insistent voice said, "Yes, look!"

He looked into a small kitchen. It was drab. The ice box hummed serenely. He turned to the other door—a closed door — across the hall. He touched the knob. His fingers were wet and they slipped as he turned the knob. The shades were drawn against the glaring sunlight, and the room was filled with a greenish-yellow haze.

A girl was asleep on the bed, her arm thrown across her eyes to shield them from the glare. Her hair was black as coal Her legs were long and curved, her body slender and beautiful She lay there, wearing only a sheet which she'd pushed half aside. A corner of Joe's brain kept warning him: Get out of here, you fool!

He didn't move. His eyes roamed around the room until they reached the dresser. There was his photograph *His*, on this strange dresser, in this unknown room, in Brooklyn. It seemed to mock him, to say to him; You don't know as much of me as you think, Joe.

The girl yawned drowsily and stirred. Joe stiffened, then retreated into the hall, panic rising in him. He bumped into a wall, and the girl called sleepily, "Joe? You're early, aren't you, Joe?"

He heard the bed creak. He ran. It was the first time in his life that Joe had yielded to blind terror He was running from insanity. Because he *knew* in one small and forgotten corner of his mind that what he had seen was not real. It could not be. The furniture, the photo, the beer and chips — all those remnants of Lois's last night . . . . That was a year ago and gone.

At last, out of breath, he stopped running. The late afternoon sun shone. People walked by carrying grocery sacks. Cabs and trucks bumped along the street. Here on this corner, the sane and ordinary world went by. A cab came and Joe climbed in. He wanted to leave this place, to feel the motion of wheels taking him away. He mopped his face. His hands shook when he lit a cigarette. He tried to make himself breathe deeply, slowly.

But he couldn't understand, and it frightened him. It was like walking along an unknown street and meeting yourself — another you, whom you'd never suspected, who did things you didn't know about, who . . . "Oh, nuts!" he raged at himself. "It was a hot day. You blasted yourself with martinis at every bar, then you blew a fuse."

He said it angrily to himself, half aloud. To Joe things were yes or no, up or down, right or wrong He was that kind of guy.

After Lois's death he'd felt lost for a few months. He'd drunk more than before, and he'd gotten tired of hearing people talk. Sometime he'd tormented himself with the question: If I had't gone for the paper, wouldn't she still be alive? But slowly the past had shrunk into small type. Sometimes it seemed like something that might have happened many years ago, when he was a kid After all, he'd known Lois only a year and a few months. They'd been married only four months. He had loved her, and he still missed her at times. But it was over and done. There was no use in getting drunk and seeing pictures in your head. And anyway, he told himself, Lois was a blonde, and his little dream girl today had had the blackest hair in six states.

But no matter how he talked to himself, he couldn't get the taste of it out of his mind. His fingers still shook slightly, and he was frightened.

HE GOT out of the cab on Forty-sixth Street near Times Square, where he had a room at the Moon Hotel. He'd given up the apartment and lent the furniture to friends around town who . . . Where was that furniture now? He stood still, wondering, and suddenly he wanted to see it, to see for sure where it was. Then he shook himself. This was getting silly!

And yet, when he got to his room, he dug into the dresser until he found the photo of himself. He breathed a sigh of relief. See? It was right here, not at some zombie flat in Brooklyn. He felt better. He took a shower, put on an old seersucker suit, and went out to eat.

He walked east toward Sully's Restaurant on Third Avenue, but at Lexington he paused. Why not? Why not, he kept

thinking. Take a look and get it out of the way . . . So he went uptown to the Fifties and climbed two flights of stairs to Clay Horton's apartment. The radio was playing when he rang the bell. Clay peered out, then let him in. He had on nothing but shorts, and he was drinking a highball.

"Tonight I'm going to get so drunk I won't sober up for two weeks," Clay announced cheerfully. "Want to know why? Because tomorrow it's my turn to start meeting the public, rubbing the elbows, taking the pulse." He poured another drink. "Staten Island is where Leghorne's sending me. Damn Staten Island. Damn Harry Leghorne. You want a drink, Joe?" He mixed it anyway. Clay was long and bony and gauntly handsome. He looked like an ex-Man of Distinction who was trying to wake up on the morning after. But in front of a microphone, his voice sounded like whipped cream hitting a velvet rug. He handled the Celebrity Interview Hour and the Man-On-The-Corner broadcast.

But Joe was looking at the chair he'd lent Clay. There it was, ink stain and all. There was the couch, the bookcase, the rug. "Nobody borrowed this junk for a few hours today, did they?" he asked.

"What? Borrowed what?"

"Nothing," Joe said self-consciously. He could see the dust line at the edge of the rug. Nobody had even swept the thing in weeks, much less moved it. And it would have taken a month to unpile Clay's dirty shirts off the couch.

"What's the matter with you?" Clay asked.

"Nothing," Joe said again and picked up his drink. "Tired, that's all. I've been seeing Brooklyn for Leghorne. I finished today, thank God."

"In hell I hope they make Leghorne sell winter underwear from door to door." Clay made another drink. Joe sat down and rubbed his hand abstractedly over the arm of the chair. When Clay poured another drink, he took it. For some reason he dreaded being alone again. He sat there listening to Clay talk, taking another drink, and the interlude of the hot twisted afternoon lost its terror. It became a grotesque joke. He laughed out loud, and Clay blinked at him.

"What the hell goes on with you tonight?" Clay asked. "You act like you're in a fog."

Joe was thinking. The whiskey was bright and warm in him. "Remember, Clay, what they say about airplane crackups? You've got to go back and fly again, or it starts to eat on you." He grinned. "You wouldn't like to go to Brooklyn tonight, would you?"

"No," Clay said. "Why?" His grey eyes became more puzzled.

Joe opened his mouth, then closed it. Clay would only say he was nuts. So Joe finished his drink and told Clay to have fun ringing doorbells.

He took the subway back to Brooklyn. He stood on the corner in front of the bar where he'd had the last two martinis. He looked down the dark street at the unvarying dirty houses. This one, he thought, walking slowly. But the name beneath the bell was John Haroski. Then it was the house next door, he was certain. But there the name was Murray Rose.

JOE stopped at every house, looked at every door. Joe Dulaney didn't live here, anywhere.

He turned back toward the corner. A skinny little man came limping along in the shadows, carrying a grocery sack. He turned in at one of the houses.

"Just a minute," Joe called. "Do you know anybody named Joe Dulaney in this neighborhood? He . . . . Well, he might live in this house, or the next, or . . . I'm not sure, see?" Joe floundered.

The skinny man shook his head. Light from the distant street lamp shone on his thick glasses. His face was pale. It was a timid and earnest face, a worried and sol-

emn face. "Oh, no," he said, as if apologizing. "No, I'm sorry, but I don't know him. People come and go a lot here."

"Or a girl? A slender girl, very black hair. A beautiful girl."

"No, I don't know her, either. I'm awfully sorry. I've only lived here a little while, and I don't get around much. I'm really very sorry."

"Don't let it get you down. Thanks, anyway." And that was that. He'd asked and the little guy didn't know. Joe went back to the bar. The bartender shook his head. Naw, nobody named Dulaney he'd ever met. A beautiful babe? Was Joe kidding? Listen, around here nothing was beautiful.

Now he could go home and sleep, Joe told himself. He returned to the street. And then, through the still hot night, he heard the tinny music of a cheap phonograph. It was playing *Sad River Blues,* and the record was cracked. A Negro girl was singing the words.

Joe stopped breathing. His ears held the music. It was *his* record! *His* cracked record of the best blues song ever written! He'd played it a thousand times.

The music came from midway down the block. Joe began to trace it. The music stopped. The street was dark and silent again. But then the melancholy whang of the music burst upon the night again. From that house there! He went up the walk. He opened the door into the entry hall. The music beat and moaned just beyond the closed door.

The name card beneath the bell said Joe Dulaney.

But he'd been in every house on this side of the block! He'd looked at every name card! He knew he hadn't made a mistake, and yet . . . . His hand went out toward the bell.

With a desperate effort, he breathed slowly. He told himself that now he must find out; now he must see. He pressed the bell and licked his dry lips. The music played and stopped, then the same record started again. Again he pressed the bell. There was still no answer. His hand went down to the knob and began to turn. The door swung inward.

Here it was, all of it: the green rug, the bookcase, the couch, the ink-stained chair he'd left in Clay's apartment only a couple of hours ago. And on the floor was *his* phonograph. It had an automatic changer and was set to replay the record over and over.

The music pounded at the close walls. Joe had always liked *Sad River Blues*; it was his favorite. But suddenly he hated the sound of it. He stood there with sweat streaming down his face, and his eyes moved inevitably toward the bedroom where the girl had been sleeping. Silently he tiptoed until his hand touched the bedroom door.

Here it was again: his photo on the dresser and the same bed. But the girl was gone. The room was dark, but light shone from a bathroom and into the bedroom. And the light threw a strange silhouette across the rug. Like a picture frame, it framed a limp rag-doll shadow: a dangling shadow of a human shape.

Joe moved three steps into the room, and he saw what it was. "God," he whispered, but the word was soundless. The music kept playing.

From the shower rod hung Harry Leghorne's body, hanging by the neck on a purple-tasseled cord. His oversized bald head glistened in the light. His mouth was open and crooked. Something was wrong with it. Then Joe realized that Leghorne's upper plate of false teeth had fallen out. His plump gnome-like body seemed to have shrunk with the dying. It was like a child's, now; like a doll, foolish and pathetic. Not the body of a rich little man who liked to give advice, to keep gardenias on his desk, to make pep talks to his staff and to remind people that once he'd sold shoe polish, door to door, for the first dollar he'd ever made. Now he was just a dead shiny doll

hanging by a cord from the shower rod.

Terror swept through Joe's mind The music banged and whanged, and his control cracked. "Shut up! Shut up!" he raged at the music. His shouting fanned his terror. Someone upstairs would hear him!

He turned and rushed at the door. He plunged through the living room, out the front hall, away from the house and along the dark street. The music followed him, then fell behind and blurred into nothing against the sound of traffic from a main street nearby. On that main street, Joe crawled into a cab. He closed his eyes and rubbed his palms roughly against his cheeks. He shook his head from side to side. Dear God, dear God, I must be going crazy, he thought.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cracked Record

THAT night Joe didn't sleep. When morning came he had smoked all his cigarettes. His head ached. How long since he'd eaten? He couldn't remember. And now it was time to go handle the Breakfast Ballroom program.

The WITT building on Fifth Avenue was pale and tall in the misty morning. The avenue was not yet crowded, and the building was cool. In Studio Two Joe ran over the script while Nick Devine finished the Sunrise Hour, brought to you by Tuthill's Tomato Juice. Joe got the engineer's signal and smiled greenly at his microphone. This sunny morning, he told his listeners, would be a happier day if only they stopped by their drug store for a large economy package of . . . Later he played music. Then Lucy Markam dropped by as a guest, with a few hints on menu planning. At ten o'clock he was off until twelve. He needed it. His stomach was grinding. Even his eyeballs hurt. He felt as if he was walking far off the floor.

Helen Warren wrinkled her nose and grinned at him from her desk in the main reception room. "Are you dead or alive?" she kidded.

The reception room was empty. Joe looked back down the hall. Nobody was in sight. "After Lois was killed, remember?" he said. "I lent you some records and my old phonograph."

"And now you want 'em back, I suppose?"

"No, but do you still have them? *Sad River Blues* was one of the records. It was cracked, but—"

"But it still played and I've still got it. Come by and listen. Or no, you don't like redheads that much. Skip it. If . . ." Somebody came in and wanted to see the chief engineer. Helen gave him directions. She was tiny, with an untilted nose, bronze-red hair, big brown eyes, and a temper plus. She looked at Joe and frowned. "You're not sick, are you?" she asked. "I'm being tactful. I mean, how drunk are you?"

Joe scarcely heard her. "Has Leghorne come in yet?"

"Nope. And you better not see him, either, looking the way you do."

Joe gave her a half-hearted grin and went downstairs for a load of black coffee. The afternoon was hot and seemingly endless. Joe was in command of the Variety Matinee, which was just a way of saying soup or pickles or corsets or Munchie Flakes, plus recorded music. At five o'clock he told his listening family cheerio for now, and left the studio. Helen was putting on fresh lipstick to quit for the day.

"When did Leghorne finally come in?" Joe asked, trying to sound as if he was asking about the weather.

"He didn't. He decided to go sail his boat." She wrinkled her brows. "Since when did Leghorne get on your mind so much?"

"Since I decided to ask for a raise, that's all." He walked with her to the elevators. "So he went for a sail on his little yacht, did he?" Joe put in a laugh, ha ha. "How'd

you find out about it?" he inquired.

"It was very complicated. The phone rang. I answered. It was Harry Leghorne, and he said, 'Miss Warren, I'm going sailing along the coast of Maine for two weeks. In case of emergency, I can be located through the Bay Yachting Club. Thank you.' " The elevator let them out and the steaming heat of Fifth Avenue was like a blast from a Turkish bath.

JOE walked along beside Helen, thinking of Harry's corpse taking a vacation. It seemed improbable, but so did a lot of other things.

"Helen, what about me coming by your place and hearing *Sad River Blues* on my old record?" he wondered suddenly.

"I can't think of a more innocent reason," she said wryly. She stopped and bought some beer. She lived in a little semi-basement flat on Third Avenue. The phonograph and records were in the closet, she said. He could drag them out while she opened the beer. Joe finally found them under a stack of blankets. The phonograph was dusty and so were the records. He closed the closet door. He didn't want to hear the music. It was too close to last night, that record.

Helen couldn't figure it out. Hadn't he said he'd wanted to play the record? Her eyes were curious and concerned. "What is it, Joe? I know something's wrong," she insisted. He opened and closed his mouth.

"Nothing, Helen," he said at last. "Stay out of it, please." She flushed, and Joe was sorry he'd snapped at her. Helen was nice. She had a gentle voice, and she was prettier, too, than she'd been a year ago. Joe hadn't paid much attention to girls, since Lois. Suddenly, here and now, he wanted to talk to Helen. He was lonely. He needed someone besides himself.

Yet he drew back. Because, if he started talking, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop. He would make a fool of himself. So he sat there saying things that didn't matter.

He talked of the old days when he and Lois and Helen and Clay Horton and Andy and all the others at WITT had played poker and stayed up too late; days when he and Lois had kept a party going almost all the time; when the apartment in the Village had been practically everybody's second home. He talked restlessly, and Helen said things like, "Yes, it was fun . . . Yes, it seems like a long time ago, now."

Joe looked at her and said exactly what he was thinking just then. "Helen, you're nice and you're sweet. Some day I'll thank you for listening to all this and not asking —" He stopped and stood up. He knew with certainty that it was time to go. One more wave of solitude, one more look in her eyes and he'd be talking about a night in Brooklyn.

"Good night, Joe," she said. "But Joe, be sure to let me know if—if I can do anything."

AT NINE that night, Joe had to go back to WITT. He was the m. c. for Musical Bank, the guess-it-and-get-rich program. He changed into his boiled suit after he got to the station, and the studio audience gave him a fat hand when he bounced across the stage trying to look cheerful, like a man giving away twenty grand of somebody else's money.

"Hello, hello, out there and everywhere," he called. "And before the clock has struck ten, you or you or *you* may have a fortune! Remember, the account at Musical Bank has climbed to twenty—yes, I said *twenty* — thousand dollars for tonight's Forgotten Tune. So stay tuned, folks, for soon it may be yours! But first, a vital message from Goliath Vitamin Pills. Did you ever stop to consider . . ."

After Joe had helped the radio and studio audience consider, the band played a couple of new songs, then stopped and gave a fanfare. The audience moved forward on the edges of their seats and listeners, coast to coast, told the kids to shut up so they

could guess this one for the twenty grand.

Joe gave it the big pitch. "In just a moment now the phone will start ringing in someone's house! Will he or she be there? Will they know the name of tonight's Forgotten Tune? Will a messenger from Goliath's Vitamin Pills hand them a check for twenty thousand beautiful, beautiful dollars? Wait and listen. And for those in our studio audience: If your phone is called, you too get a chance to answer, plus valuable prizes if you miss. So here we go, and in come the guards with the safe of Musical Bank! In they come!"

Out of the wings came two ushers, dressed as bank guards, shoving on wheels a dude safe painted red and white, the colors of Goliath Co.

"And now," said Joe, "I will ask three members of the studio audience to step to the stage — you and you and you, over there! Please observe that the safe is sealed and the seal is dated and signed by none other than Mr. Harry Leghorne, the owner of WITT. Only Mr. Leghorne knows the identity of tonight's Forgotten Tune. Not even the band knows, yet. Now! In the presence of our audience, I will break the seal! I will open the safe!" The audience let out a soft gasp. "And here is the Forgotten Tune!" Swiftly Joe handed the sheets of music to the band.

"Now," he cried, "we open the inner vault of the bank!" He swung the inner door open. "Here we have the magic jars!" He took out three large glass jars. "In the blue jar are the numbers which will lead us to some town, some city, some hamlet — but which?" He reached into the blue jar, pulled out a capsule, broke it open, and read the number on the slip of paper inside. "Number seventy-nine! And tonight that's Brooklyn!"

"Brooklyn!" yelled the audience.

"And in the green jar we have the pages of the phone book." He reached in and broke another capsule. "Page thirty-six!" he shouted.

"And finally, in the red jar, the column and number of the lucky name! Are you ready, operator, to make the golden call! Here we go!" He reached into the third jar and broke a capsule. "Number two, dash nineteen! Column two, name number nineteen from the top! Operator, who is that lucky person?"

"Ammati, James T . . . Gunley Avenue," the operator replied.

"Play the tune!" Joe shouted to the band. "Make the call! Oh, Mr. Ammati, will you be listening? Will you know the tune? Will this be — Wait, the operator's got him!" Joe seized the stage extension of the phone. "Mr. Ammati, have you been listening to Musical Bank this . . . Ah, Mr. Ammati has been listening! And now, for twenty thousand bright, bright dollars can you tell us the name of tonight's tune from yesteryear? What's that? You say it's *Baby, Hold My Hand*?"

Joe threw up his hands victoriously. "Right, Mr. Ammati! And within an hour, a messenger will hand you a check for twenty thousand dollars! Have a good time! And now, ladies and gentlemen, you see how easy it is. And it's just as easy to feel well if you take Goliath Vita— My God, that street is— I mean, take our kills—pills, I mean, when you feel stinky— I mean, good night," he finally finished. He stumbled off the stage. The band straggled into a song. Joe shut himself in his two-by-four office and leaned back against the door, sweating.

AMMATI, JAMES T . . . He could see the name card under one of those doorbells in Brooklyn. And Gunley had been the name of the nightmare street! The same street, the same name, twenty grand. A coincidence? Like hell, he thought.

He lit a cigarette and his fingers shook. Twenty grand tonight, he was thinking furiously. But how many of the winners had been honest? The jackpot was normally ten thousand a week. If the tune wasn't iden-

tified, the money stacked up. But ten grand a week for fifty-two weeks meant over half a million a year. A sweet bowl of gravy to stir with a crooked spoon, if . . .

His thought banged to a hard stop. He snapped his fingers. "Those capsules in those jars!" he exclaimed. He turned and hurried back toward the studio. The band was gone. The audience was gone. Porters were sweeping the floor. The safe had been moved from the stage to a crowded prop room behind. There it stood, the door open. But the three jars were gone. Joe grabbed a porter and asked him.

The man shrugged. "I ain't paid to take care of jars," he said sourly.

Joe swore, more at himself than the man. He hunted the trash cans that held the sweepings. But the jars of capsules hadn't been thrown out. As he passed the prop room, he glanced in again.

There were the jars — red, green and blue — nestled innocently inside the open safe. Nobody here but us honest jars, Joe thought wryly. There was no use looking now. It was too late. But he broke a few capsules from each jar, anyway; and as he'd suspected, the numbers were different each time. Just as honest, now, as the bingo game at a church bazaar. But they hadn't been here five minutes ago.

He stood still, staring at the jars, but seeing in his mind the drab houses along Gunley Street. He saw again the name card on one of the doors: Ammati, James T . . . And suddenly Joe knew it was time to go back to Brooklyn, now and fast. Suddenly he sensed that none of it had been a martini nightmare on a hot day. It was all a part of a plan. A half million dollars was part of the plan too, wasn't it? And he, the cheerful m. c., was scheduled to take some bows when the proper time came.

And so, once more, Joe returned to Gunley Street — a drab street where a man named Ammati, James T., had broken the monotony by winning twenty thousand bright, bright dollars. And this time Joe returned with a different kind of fear inside him: a fear of something real and solid as money, plus the deepening conviction that he was being fitted for a frame.

CHAPTER THREE

The Big Steal

TONIGHT Gunley Street was buzzing. Press cars and a police car were parked at the curb in front of the house — *his* zombie house. The front yard was full of people. The hallway and stairs were jammed. They'd discovered Leghorne's body, Joe thought in terror. Then he heard laughter, and flashbulbs popped. Somebody was yelling, "Ammati's gonna buy us all a drink, ain't you, Ammati?"

People loved a winner, Joe reflected. The pictures would be in the paper. Human interest and heart throb, etc.

He drifted into the crowd. A cop was telling people not to shove. A yell went up as a skinny little man came out on the landing of the upstairs apartment. It was the same timid, earnest little man to whom Joe had spoken last night. The light glistened on his thick glasses, turning them to discs of chrome. He plucked in bewilderment at his cuffs and blinked helplessly. The man in the crowd kept yelling for Ammati to buy a drink, huh? Ammati clutched the idea and nodded.

"Yes, yes, we must all go to the bar and have a drink."

It was a stampede. The cops had to pull it apart. Ammati tiptoed down the stairs and blinked at Joe.

"Oh, yes, I recall you. The gentleman who spoke so pleasantly last night. And you must have a drink with me, too."

"Oh, sure," said Joe. He was thinking: Very peculiar that a little turtle like Ammati had known the name of the Forgotten Tune. He put on the act of a guy who wouldn't know his own name in a noisy crowd. Ammati would be cute to talk to.

The stampede moved toward the bar at the corner. Joe fell behind in the darkness. The street became quiet and empty. The press cars and the cop drove away. Joe edged back toward the house and looked at the name card on his phantom flat. This time, as once before, it bore the name, Murray Rose.

He took a deep breath and pressed the bell. He rang and waited for three minutes. There was no answer. He tried the knob. The door was locked. He moved around the house to the rear door. It was also locked. Joe went back to the front stairs. The crowd was still at the bar. He tried Ammati's door and found it unlocked. He closed it behind him. He took a look around.

The apartment was shabbily furnished, even naked in places. It contained nothing to indicate what Ammati did for a living, what he was like, where he had come from. It was as impersonal as a hotel room. Joe sat down to wait. He was sweating slowly and he could feel the quick pulsation in his throat.

At last he heard voices. They moved nearer along the street. People were telling Ammati he should go in partnership with them on a nice delicatessen. They were saying they had a cousin who could handle some real estate for him. Finally the voices departed and Ammati came timidly up the stairs. He opened and closed the door, then blinked at Joe.

"Goodness, didn't I invite you to have a drink? How rude of—"

"You invited me and I decided no," Joe said, stopping the syrup. "But there *is* something you can do for me. Listen." He whistled *Happy Morning,* a song that had come out the same year as *Baby, Hold My Hand,* and had been ten times as popular. "Now," said Joe, "what is the name of that?"

Ammati shook his head. "Isn't that forgetful of me? And such a lovely melody, too."

"Um-hum. By the way," said Joe, "do me a few bars of *Baby,* please."

This time Ammati looked positively humiliated. He hung his head and shuffled his feet and finally he whispered, "To tell you the truth, I'm not very musical."

"Putting it another way, you don't know the song that won you the money tonight —right?"

"Seems fantastic, doesn't it?" Ammati murmured gently.

"You're damned right it does! Who fixed it for you?" Joe demanded.

Ammati blinked wistfully and smiled. "But that would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, you little clown, it would be. And it's going to be! Who touted you onto the name of . . ." Joe's words dissolved. Plaintively and softly from the apartment below came the music of *Sad River Blues.* It was the same cracked record, the same Negro girl singing.

Ammati put his hand to his cheek. "She must be lonesome tonight."

"Who must be? Who do you mean?" Joe breathed.

"The strange girl who plays the music. Perhaps she's the one you were asking about last night," he said. "I've never seen her well. I don't see well, you know." He smiled with the tenderness of a child. "And please, don't call me a clown. You should show respect for your elders. Particularly those who will soon disappear from existence."

"I'll respect you after— What did you say?"

"Yes," said the little man with a sad smile. "James Ammati has only a few more hours. Then he will dissolve, vanish, and never return again." Ammati was smiling like a sad fox, and Joe couldn't stop staring at him. He did a retake on the words and started to say something. But Ammati began to talk again. "Yes, it is so tragic. Here I am, of many faces, many places, but never for long, and always on my way. Look at me."

Joe was looking. He couldn't keep from looking. He couldn't drag his eyes from Ammati's even in that last instant when he heard a soft footstep behind him, when he realized, too late, that Ammati had been half hypnotizing him while someone crept up behind. Then came the heavy blow. Joe felt the pain and the jump of his eyeballs. He felt as if he were spinning downward, slowly and gently.

Yet, even as he fell toward the chasm of unconsciousness, a thick and familiar aroma drifted to his nostrils. He thought, Damn Clay Horton's pipe. Why doesn't he throw it away? It stinks.

Then his brain clutched back at fading consciousness.

Clay Horton and his pipe! Remember it later—if there was a later!

THE hot air was filled with the odor of oil and dust when Joe woke up. His mouth tasted flat and swollen. His eyeballs burned and his head ached. He lay on a floor and above him a leaky roof admitted slivers of sunlight. To his left were two rusty gas pumps, and to his right was a grease rack and pit.

He sat up slowly, took a rest, then stood up. There were sliding metal doors at the front of this section of the garage, and off one corner of this large room was an office enclosure. Joe coughed and it hurt his head. He staggered to the office. Outside was brilliant sunshine and a drab street. A little girl was playing with a doll carriage. A faded sign across the front window of the office said, "For Lease or Sale. Call Or Write At Once." The number to call had long since been worn away by the sun.

There was a piece of mirror over a grease-stained wash basin. Joe looked at himself. It was funny. He felt like a second-hand corpse and he only looked like a hangover. He rubbed his hand across his

skull. Two bumps. No, three. What time was it? Two o'clock. God, a bowl of plain old ice cream would taste nice. Even an ice cube to suck on.

He dragged the sagging door open and stepped out into the hot sun. He was remembering it now. Ammati and the music downstairs, then the sound behind him and the pain. And the thick ripe stink of Clay's pipe tobacco.

At the corner he stopped. Midway down the block, the street was roped off. Firemen were storing hose into a truck. Cops leaned against their squad cars, and people pressed curiously against the ropes, pointing and talking.

And then Joe realized. Here was Gunley Street again. But his phantom house was gone — burned. Only the front wall was standing, with its leering gargoyle over the doorway. Ammati's words flickered across his memory: "James Ammati has only a few more hours. Then he will dissolve, vanish, and never return again . . ." Ammati had never been more correct.

The fire was out. Men were digging into the blackened wreckage, and Joe heard the excited voices. Such was life, the people were saying. Twenty thousand dollars last night; today — dead!

Joe moved nearer and stopped beside a wrinkled old man. "He—he was in the fire? Ammati, I mean?" he asked.

The old man nodded. "And the money, gone," he added sadly. "Only this morning he let us touch it in the bar. In cash. Only once in his life, he says, he wants to feel so much money in his fingers. Then he will put it back into a bank. Where is it now?" He sighed.

"He had cashed the check?" Joe said slowly. "But the fire? How did it happen? Was it—"

"Murder. Didn't you hear on the radio?" He stared at Joe. "It was the man from the radio program where Ammati won the money. They were scheming together, Ammati and this Dulaney. The police know all about it. It's been going on all the time —Dulaney arranging for someone to win, then taking most of the money himself. This time they had an argument, maybe, and now Ammati is dead and his money gone. Now the cops are hunting for Dulaney."

Joe scarcely heard the words. He was looking at the blackened ruins of the building. Then he saw the two cops. They had stopped talking. They were staring at him. One moved his jaw, speaking. The other nodded, and they tossed away their cigarettes. Deliberately they sauntered toward the crowd, toward Joe.

He took a step backward, fear crowding into his throat. They would never believe him if he told the truth. He knew it. The cops were moving faster, closer. Joe retreated, even as a corner of his brain told him that innocent men didn't flee; they stayed and told the truth.

"Stand still, Dulaney!" one of the cops shouted.

A WOMAN screamed as the cop reached for his gun. Shouting broke out all through the crowd, turning Joe's fear into terror. He turned, thrust the man aside, and ran. The shouting followed. Feet pounded behind him. He turned the corner and kept going. His chest burned. His legs wobbled. It seemed miles to the busy business street at the far end of the block. He stumbled past children who were playing baseball in the street. The cops wouldn't shoot into the kids. Don't let the cops shoot into the kids, he prayed. Give him a chance to get away, to think, to fight back. Please, just let him get to the corner . . .

At the corner, he took a desperate gamble. He stopped running and walked slowly into a super-market. He knelt down, as if searching for canned goods on the bottom shelf. The cops raced past the window. A curious throng trailed after them, then the attention of the entire block focused in

the direction the cops had gone. Joe walked out, mopping his face, breathing in starved gasps. He forced himself to walk casually for two blocks, then crawled into a cab.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

The question stopped Joe. Where to from here? From murder, where?

"Grand Central Station," he said.

At the station he bought the latest newspapers. One glance showed him that he was the big news today. The headlines said: HUNT RADIO STAR IN QUIZ SHOW LOOTING, MURDER! And there was his picture. Joe kept his head down as he crossed Forty-second Street and settled himself in the back booth of the dirtiest and gloomiest Third Avenue bar he could find.

"Black coffee and the fattest sandwich you can make in a hurry," he ordered. His stomach felt like sandpaper. It didn't feel any better when he read the papers: "Radio Station Owner Missing! Stooge Winner Burned to Death in $400,000 Quiz Show Steal! Radio Racket Exposed, Master of Ceremonies Sought for Murder!"

The main story told him things he hadn't known: Three weeks ago, it was now revealed, Harry Leghorne had hired private detectives to investigate the awarding of prize money on the big give-away show, Musical Bank. Leghorne had first become suspicious when he discovered that someone was tampering with the sealed safe that held the Forgotten Tune music. His suspicions deepened as he noticed that thirty-nine of the last forty-two winners lived in the New York vicinity, whereas the drawings were designed to include the entire country. Leghorne wanted the investigation conducted with utmost secrecy, to prevent a scandal that might wreck the good will and reputation of his radio station.

The story went on, pointing out that suspicion had immediately focused itself on Joe Dulaney, m. c. of the show, and the only person who was in a position to palm

off rigged numbers—numbers that directed the phone calls to the possible winners. While Dulaney was under constant watch, private detectives had also been busy checking on the past winners. Here the case had taken a bizarre turn. Not one of the thirty-nine local winners of the past year could be located All thirty-nine had vanished without trace, leaving no families, no business, no record of where they had come from, what they had done, or where they had gone.

Further curious coincidences had come to light: In every case, the winners had lived in cheap flats or one-room apartments. In every case, their telephones had been installed in the same month of last winter, just before the phone directories had been printed. In every case, the winners were unknown in their neighborhoods. Finally, it was discovered that the thirty-nine winners had all fallen into two groups. They had been either girls, attractive and young, or small, elderly men. Now it was believed that Dulaney had operated his racket with perhaps no more than two associates, a girl and an older small man, who alternated in the role of winner and moved from address to address, using many disguises.

THE big break in the case had come last night when the twenty-thousand-dollar winner was a certain James T. Ammati of Gunley Avenue in Brooklyn. Private detectives had, the previous night, followed Dulaney to this same address in Brooklyn. After last night's program, detectives again followed Dulaney to Ammati's apartment. They were ready to make the arrests, but were unable to locate Leghorne to get his consent. The detectives were informed that Leghorne could be reached at the Bay Yacht Club in Maine. However, the Bay Yacht Club advised the detectives by phone that Leghorne had not visited the club in several weeks. This gave rise to concern over Leghorne's safety and, after a night and early morning spent in fruitless efforts to locate the missing man, the private detectives placed all their information in the capable hands of the Police Department.

Police went immediately to Ammati's apartment, only to discover the Fire Department fighting a blaze that had broken out after a mysterious explosion. Ammati's house was completely destroyed and the charred remains of a body, identified as Ammati's, were found in the ruins. . . . The story went on and on, telling that Ammati had cashed his Musical Bank check that morning and was known to have had the twenty thousand dollars in cash prior to the fire. Police now believed that Dulaney realized his racket was doomed. He murdered Ammati to avoid splitting the loot, calculated at $400,000, and fled with the girl-stooge. Police were still unable to locate Harry Leghorne and the fear was growing that Dulaney had also . . .

Joe pushed the paper away. He didn't need to read any more. It was as neat and clean a fit as the straps on an electric chair. And wouldn't the police love the truth, if he walked in and told it! Wouldn't they buy that phantom apartment stuff and eat it like cake?

He sweated as he sat there. The last-second odor of Clay Horton's pipe—that was all he had to play with. A thousand people, ten thousand people, might smoke that same tobacco. But it had to be Clay. It *had* to be!

It was five o'clock. Wait for darkness, Joe warned himself. Don't get in a panic. Clay will wait. Clay doesn't know anybody's thinking of him. He's smiling now. Counting his money, planning a trip to Miami. He'll wait. He doesn't know.

Joe spent the rest of daylight in a movie, waiting, thinking of Clay. He'd known Clay as long as anybody else in New York. Clay had introduced him to Lois. He wondered if Clay had wanted her himself. Then his thoughts twisted sharply, going back to the night Lois had been killed in the fall. Or had it been a fall? Had she been mur-

dered for reasons he'd never known?

In that dark theater, watching a movie he didn't see at all, Joe began to hate Clay with a certainty that needed no more proof. It was the illogical lonely hatred of a lonely and hunted man who had drifted along in life, trusting most people and believing that It Couldn't Happen To Him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cocktails for the Corpse

AT NINE O'CLOCK that night, Joe left the movie and walked up Lexington Avenue toward Clay's apartment. The later papers were out. Joe stopped to stare at the headlines:

LEGHORNE'S BODY FOUND IN BURNED BUILDING!

Police Unearth Second Victim in Quiz-Show Murders! Nine State Alarm Issued On Dulaney! Eludes Brooklyn Police!

Joe walked more slowly. He was sorry about Leghorne, the little man who'd once sold shoe polish, door to door, to make his first buck. It was a long road to work to get murdered.

From a cigar store, Joe phoned Clay's apartment. When Clay answered, Joe gave a gibberish about wanting the man who cleaned rugs. Wrong number, said Clay irritably. But now Joe knew he was home. Would he stay home? If not, where would he go? To the girl. That was the answer Joe wanted. The girl, he'd read somewhere, was always the weak spot, the Achilles heel of any crime she had a piece of.

Joe hoped that the guy who said that was right.

He walked up and down the sidewalk, across the street from Clay's apartment. He watched the light in Clay's window, and when it went out at 9:40, he felt his breath stop a moment.

Clay came out and took a walk uptown

and east toward Sutton Place. He went into a trim little building, a walkup painted black, with shiny brass lanterns beside the door. One minute later, Joe went in, too. It was not a bad place to live in, and the hall led past the stairs to a neatly kept garden. The garden was dark and filled with the soft splashing of a fountain. The building went up around the garden, and terraces hung outside long doors. Up there a man was handing a girl a cigarette. On another terrace two cigarettes were close enough for kissing. A radio played softly, and Joe stood beside the fountain and looked up and wondered: which one?

It didn't take long to find out. Clay appeared momentarily on a third-floor terrace. He was packing his pipe. He struck the match and the flame glowed over his bony face, then he flipped the match down into the garden and turned. "No, Scotch, darling," he called. Presently a girl came out with two highball glasses. She was tall and curved and her hair was black as coal, as it had been in Brooklyn.

Joe whistled softly to himself. "Honey, I'm glad to see *you* again," he whispered. He sat down on a stone bench beside the tinkling fountain. He waited.

They were talking softly, up there. They were having a lot of highballs. Clay's laughter grew louder and once his words echoed across the garden: ". . . give a hundred bucks to see him telling the cops about that apartment with his . . ."

"Shut up, Clay," said the girl sharply. Joe heard no more. He felt the muscles relax all across his shoulders, along his jaws and chest. He didn't need to hear any more. Now he knew. Now, he thought ironically, all he needed was a little thing called proof.

At two in the morning, every terrace was dark but that certain one. Then Clay kissed the girl. Even from down in the garden, she made it look good. It took a long time, but at last it was over. Joe rose. Finally Clay appeared in the main-floor hall. From the garden, Joe watched him leave the building. He watched the lights go out in the girl's apartment. He waited another thirty minutes; then he went quietly up the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. He wasn't afraid. He felt cool and lean. He read the name card under the bell: Carol Wayne, it said. He pressed the bell. Finally her voice answered, drowsy with sleep and Scotch.

"Who is it?"

"Clay," Joe said in a thick voice. "I forgot my pipe."

"All right." She opened the door, and there she was. Just as beautiful as the nightgown ads ever dreamed of being: blue-black eyes that were a little drunk, but getting wider fast. Lips that were hungry, but were slipping a little out of place—fast. Black hair around her shoulders, and a hand that was going to her throat. She gasped and Joe shut the door behind him.

"Honey, if you scream, I swear I'll slug you," he said. But she began to scream. He slugged her and it felt strange and exciting. He caught her on the jaw and she went down on the rug and lay there with one lovely leg trembling a moment in reflex. Then she was still.

JOE moved fast. He locked the door, closed all the windows and pulled down the shades. Next he did a quick look in the places where girls might put guns. For his pains he got a very competent-looking automatic out of the bedside-table drawer. He put it in his pocket.

Next he got towels from the bathroom and tied the girl up like a Christmas present, including something for her to chew on. Then he took the apartment apart, inch by inch and every hiding place. He found three thousand dollars in cash in a coffee can in the kitchen. He found a bracelet and two rings that didn't come from the five-and-ten. But he didn't find what he wanted most: something that would point back-

ward to other places, something the cops would call proof. He continued the search.

The next time he looked at Carol, her eyes were open. They were furious and frightened and she'd cut her lip, chewing on the gag. She sat very still on the couch, where he'd propped her, and he could see her hating him and wishing she knew what he was thinking.

He told her. "I'm thinking I'm hungry, so I'll eat and we'll talk." He loaded a plate with everything in the ice box, opened a can of beer, and sat down. He watched her while he ate, and she was sweating. You never thought of a beautiful girl really sweating, but Carol was scared.

"Now," said Joe quietly, "let me remind you. There's an old saying: You might as well get shot for a sheep as a lamb. In other words, honey, if I happened to lose patience and kill you, I wouldn't be in any worse shape than I am right now. That's simple and easy to understand, isn't it?" He put the automatic beside his empty plate. Carol looked at it and a greenish look crept up her cheeks. "So," Joe went on, "I'll untie the lollipop in your mouth. We'll talk quietly and politely, and if you yell, next time I won't slug. Clear?"

It was clear. Her eyes told him so. He took off the gag and she made a few cat-like spats. She didn't yell.

"First," said Joe, "about the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't flat in Brooklyn. Tell me all about it."

It took several false starts for Carol to get her throat in motion, but then she talked like a Boy Scout giving the pledge.

"Clay suspected that Leghorne was onto the deal. Clay knew it was time to quit. He changed the door-to-door route list at WITT, so you'd be working Gunley, then he fixed up the apartment. He had some of your furniture, so he shopped around and bought stuff just like it. Spilled the ink on the chair, too. Bought a recording of *Sad River Blues,* just like yours, and cracked it. He—"

"Let's stop while I guess a couple of times, now," Joe said. "The scene was just like the night my wife was killed: beer cans, potato chips. Nice psychology, yes. It stuck in my mind and called me back. *But,"* and Joe leaned forward, his dark eyes bright and hard, "how did Clay know the scene in my apartment that night, unless he saw it? And why did he see it? He saw it because he came there and killed my wife by throwing her out the window, didn't he?"

"I wasn't in that. I wasn't a part of it, I swear," Carol sobbed. She shook her head from side to side. She was sick of it all, and she was like a child, shaking her head and saying no. As if the saying would erase it all, and make tomorrow new.

"But Clay killed Lois," Joe persisted. "Say it! You know it!"

She nodded, but she wouldn't look at him. "He killed her," she whispered. "It was right after the Musical Bank program started, right after Clay did the first switch on the jars. Lois was in the studio audience, listening to you, and afterwards she went backstage to meet you and she saw him switching the jars, just in case. She liked Clay and didn't really understand what he was doing. She just thought it was strange and—and he begged her not to say anything about it until he could explain privately. She promised. She didn't realize what was actually happening, but Clay knew she'd catch on or say something some day to somebody who *would* catch on. So he decided—"

"I see." Joe had rolled his cigarettes into shreds between his fingers. "I see," he said again in a flat voice. "So that was that. And the flat in Brooklyn. You could call that nightmare psychology, I suppose."

"I suppose," Carol said wretchedly. "Clay wanted it fixed so you'd go back there. He knew the private detectives were trailing you. And he wanted your story to be so fantastic that, when you told it to the police, nobody would believe you. And

he'd planned to burn the house, anyway, so the police wouldn't find the stuff you'd tell about."

"So fantastic they wouldn't believe me," Joe repeated slowly. "Sometimes Clay is very smart, in a nasty little way, isn't he?" Carol only shook her head. She looked green, as if she were about to be sick Joe didn't care. "Tell me about Leghorne," he said.

"He must have decided to do some detective work, too. He put the Forgotten Tune music in the sealed safe and started waiting, hiding in the closet at his office. Clay didn't know. He went to open the seal, and Leghorne jumped out, calling him a scoundrel. Which was right but dumb, because Clay slugged him and choked him to death. Late that night he moved the body over to . . . Oh, God, I don't feel good," she gasped.

"Why should you?" Joe asked. "Keep talking. It'll make your soul feel good. What about Ammati?"

SHE swallowed heavily. "His name was really Carson. Used to be an actor, then a radio actor. Knew . . . how to do character parts. But Clay said he'd get drunk some day and tell. This was the last job. Clay said that . . . safest thing was to get rid of the partner and . . ." She stared at Joe and something happened in the depths of her eyes. Fear was clouded by agony. Sweat stood in beads on her temples. She tried to speak. "Get rid of partners," she whispered. "Clay said it, but I didn't believe he meant . . . I thought he loved me and . . ." She choked and began to tremble violently as she bent forward.

"Carol!" Joe leaped from his chair and gripped her shoulders. "Look at me! Is this an act, or . . ." He stopped. It wasn't an act. Her tongue was bleeding where she'd bit in agony. Her face was twisted in pain.

"Get rid of partner . . ." she whimpered. Her lips turned, as though they wanted to smile sardonically. But she couldn't smile. A spasm twisted her body, doubling her forward, and the strength of her agony was such that she split the towel that bound her wrists Joe caught her as she toppled off the couch. Her fingers drove straight into his flesh, bringing blood They froze there as she stiffened, and that was the way Carol Wayne died

Joe broke her death grip on his wrist and pushed her back on the couch. It had happened so quickly that he was stunned. He took minutes for his brain to grasp the full meaning of this deadly irony. She was dead. Poisoned, of course. Something Clay must have put in the highballs. But she was dead. She could talk no more. She couldn't tell. This was a trick of fate too grotesque to face. A minute ago she had been his salvation. He could have phoned the police and said, Here we are, come listen.
But now she was only another corpse, and he had enough of those to his credit already, he realized bleakly.

Panic crept up on him He walked the floor and damned Clay with a helpless venom. How would he ever be able to make Clay talk? It would be like asking Clay to sign his own death certificate. Oh, he could kill Clay, yes. He would love to kill him—slowly, watching it hurt But that wouldn't win the ribbons at headquarters.

Nightmare psychology! It flashed across his mind. He stood still, barely breathing "Nightmare psychology," he whispered. "Woudn't it be funny if two could play that game? With a different winner this time. . . ." He looked at Carol Wayne's body. He kept thinking: Clay must have fed her a mule-kick dose. Clay would be sure she was dead. . That was the starting point to think from.

Joe sat down and began to think. And then, in the dead silence of pre-dawn, he heard soft footsteps in the hall outside the door. Clay, he thought. Clay, coming back to see if the poison had worked.

The doorbell rang, and Joe's brain began to move. Silently he picked Carol up and carried her back to the bedroom. With frantic haste, he cleared away his dirty dish and beer can, then snapped out the lights as the bell rang again for a long time. He crept back to the bedroom and wedged himself in the closet, with the door an inch ajar. His fingers were hot and moist on the gun.

Clay would have a key. Oh, yes, please let Clay have a key, he prayed. He'd known little darling well enough to have her key.

Clay had the key. Joe heard it clicking. He heard the door close softly. "Carol?" Clay called gently. Then a light was turned on. Joe suddenly remembered he'd left the windows shut and the shades down. He hoped to hell Clay didn't notice. Carol wouldn't have done that.

Then he saw Clay as he tiptoed into the bedroom. His face was grey, his eyes intense. His tongue swept across his lips. "Carol?" he whispered gently. Then he reached her bed. The odor of his pipe tobacco thickened the hot room, but Clay was too interested in something else to worry about the heat.

He touched her arm, lifted it, then let it fall. Joe heard him exhale swiftly. Clay turned on the bedside lamp and drew the eyelids back from Carol's eyeballs.

"Good," Clay whispered half aloud. He turned out the light and finally Joe heard the front door closing. He began to breathe again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Voice From the Dead

WHEN morning came, Joe picked up the telephone. He called Helen Warren. It had surprised him how instinctively his mind had turned to her. She was, he realized for the first time, the one person in the world that he would trust.

Her voice was sleepy. "Helen, it's Joe,"

he said. She made a faint gasping sound, and the sleepy sound left her voice.

"Joe, you . . . Where . . ."

"I'm going to tell you after you answer one question: Do you think I did what they say I did?"

"No." It was as clear and final as the word could be. She meant it.

"Next," he said slowly, "I need help. It will be messy. It will also mean that you'll be tangled up with me, which is called being an accomplice or something, but I'll try to keep you out of—"

"Oh, stop being so damned fussy. I can take care of myself," she snapped.

"Thanks." Then he told her where he was. "Be careful. Don't be noticed when you come in here. Ring four times, then twice."

"Four and two," she agreed. That was that. Less than thirty minutes later, there she was, breathless and her eyes bright. "Oh, Joe, you—you damned fool," she said, half laughing, half sobbing. "I'm so glad to see you, I could hit you."

Joe did something he wanted very much to do. He kissed her. And that was just what she'd wanted him to do. She held to him. "Well, it took you a long time to do that," she said after a while. "I'm glad you thought of it."

Joe sat her down and started at the beginning: at that hot afternoon in Brooklyn when he'd reached for a doorbell and seen his zombie flat. He told it all, down to this moment. Helen simply listened, her eyes growing wide and dark.

"Clay," she whispered when he was done. "Isn't it funny. I remember about three weeks ago he came over and wanted to hear some music. He insisted on digging out that phonograph and playing *Sad River Blues*. He was so peculiar, studying the label on the record and smiling to himself that—that I had a feeling. I couldn't explain it, even to myself." Then her eyes moved around the apartment. "You say she—her body—"

"In there. You don't want to see it, do you?" Joe asked. Helen shook her head. Then Joe went on. "I don't have proof against Clay. But I was thinking. Nightmare psychology, see? It worked to suck me back to Brooklyn and damn near drive me crazy. I was wondering." He paused. "He thinks Carol is dead, you see." Helen stared at him, then a light came into her eyes. She almost winked.

"Oh, yes. Now I begin to see."

"First," said Joe, "we'll want you to practice a soft sexy voice, a little husky. That was Carol."

That was at nine in the morning. At noon Helen picked up the phone and called Clay. The plans were made. Joe was as nervous as a starved alley cat as he listened to Helen.

"Clay?" she murmured. Her voice was just right. "Guess who? Guess . . . Why, you sound so startled, darling. I'm only celebrating my—shall we say, recent tragedy." She laughed gently. "And one more thing, darling. The next time you stick your finger around my eye, for God's sake clean your fingernails. You got something in that stung like . . . Why, Clay, what language! I can hardly understand you, angel. But," and her voice grew lower, "I am about to tell you something that *you* will understand. You better, anyway, sweetheart."

Helen drew a long breath and winked at Joe. "First, Clay, I was pouring those highballs over the railing and down into the garden. I never forgot a little rule of yours: Get rid of the partners. . . . And I'm smarter than our Carson pal who burned in Brooklyn. I'm so smart, Clay, that a long time ago I bought a wire-recording machine. You and Carson did some interesting talking. Many people, the police included, would love to hear it. Joe Dulaney would simply love it. He . . . What did you say, Clay? You sound like a man trying to talk through a mouthful of old nails."

AGAIN Helen laughed, then her voice got cold. "Let's quit kidding, sweetheart. I love you like any sweet girl loves her ex-murderer, and what I want from you is a big hunk of four hundred grand. And fast. If I don't get it, the police get some wire recordings, plus any other little details I might recall in an anonymous letter. And don't leave town in doing it. Because, Clay, I'm going to call you at your apartment every time it crosses my mind that you might be taking a trip.

"Right now it's noon. Maybe it'll take you a little while to get three hundred of the four hundred grand together in cash, but I want . . . Yes, I said three hundred and I meant every penny of it! What do I care? I'm just a girl who doesn't like to get murdered. So start converting the assets to nice cash and packing it in a suitcase. I'll call you again at four this afternoon, and darling," she whispered, "this little corpse isn't kidding. 'Bye, now."

Helen hung up. Joe took her in his arms. "Honey, you are merely terrific."

"But was I sexy?" she wondered.

"Ummm," murmured Joe, and kissed her.

"Now, on your way," he said. He gave her a bundle of Carol's cash from the coffee can. "Buy the deluxe model recording machine. We want it to listen good. And before you come back, be sure and phone Clay so you'll know where he's sitting."

Helen nodded and hurried away. Joe worked fast after that. He was almost certain what Clay would do in the first frenzy of rage and fear. So Joe emptied the ice box. He removed and hid the shelves, then he did the job that was no fun at all. He fitted Carol's body inside the ice box. Then, just in case Clay wanted ice for a drink to soothe his nerves, Joe unscrewed the handle of the ice box and removed the lift-pin. He hid it in the stove and put the handle back on, strictly for looks.

Finally he inspected the apartment carefully, dusting, straightening. He reshaped the bulk of mattress and bed covers that was wedged in the closet of the rollaway bed in the living room. This was the best place to hide, he'd decided.

Then he waited. Time passed slowly. He turned the radio on and caught the one o'clock bulletins. The announcer said that police were intensifying their search for Joe Dulaney, wanted for questioning in the Quiz Show Murders.

At 1:15 Joe heard the cautious footsteps on the stairs. They stopped outside the door. He tiptoed to the rollaway bed closet and wedged himself back behind the mattress. The bell rang. A minute passed, then a key clicked in the lock and the door closed again.

"Carol?" Clay called in a harsh whisper. Joe heard him breathing fast. He heard him moving back toward the bedroom where Carol's body had been. Clay cursed—a thin, ragged sound. Then Joe heard him slamming doors, banging drawers; refusing to believe what he saw. Not really thinking, but wildly searching for a corpse he'd seen. Or had he? Joe smiled. This nightmare business was lovely, if somebody else was doing the dreaming. And if it worked, he thought coldly.

At last Clay came back into the living room. Joe heard him panting. The outside door closed and the apartment was silent again. Now, Joe thought with relief, Clay could stew in his own hell all afternoon and get ready to ante the three hundred grand. Helen would bring the recording machine and they'd conceal it in here. Then the payoff. One detective should be invited for the party. Call him on a phone, get him here and make him listen, even if it took a gun to do it. Later he wouldn't be sore. Not with a nice promotion.

JOE opened the door and stepped out into into the living room. Two things happened at the same time. A gun dug into his ribs and Clay said, "Keep your hands still, damn you." A third thing happened.

It happened in Joe's stomach, and it felt like a light globe breaking.

He looked at Clay and Clay looked at him. Clay's face was stained with a greyish pallor and his eyes were feverishly bright. It crossed Joe's brain: He's hurting, too. We're both hurting.

"You left your pocket knife on the kitchen cabinet, son," Clay said. "It has your initials. That wasn't smart, was it?"

"It wasn't like a genius, if that's important," Joe said more calmly than he felt. Over and over he was telling himself desperately: Don't go to pieces. This guy isn't sure what gives. He's hurting as much as you are. Kick it around, it might get somewhere.

"Where's Carol?" Clay asked.

"Buying a mink coat. She's going to Europe, you know She's going to take a trunkful of money and see Paris."

"You are so smart, Joe." Clay wanted to hit him. Joe could see it, but there were several other things Clay wanted, too. He frisked Joe and got the automatic. Joe regretted seeing it go, but he smiled.

"Free advice: Use it to shoot yourself, Clay."

"You tell me where Carol is," Clay demanded, getting ugly. "You tell me all about this."

"She's buying a black dress to wear to your funeral, sport. I told her she'd better hurry. She's a nice kid, isn't she? Sweet as they come, eager to talk to boys when they put a gun against her ear. Very, very friendly. She doesn't love you any more. You gave her indigestion last night."

Clay lost his temper then and slugged Joe. Joe went down on one knee and shook his head. He spat out a tooth.

"Three hundred and twenty grand," he said. "The price went up."

"How did you find your way in here?"

"Simple. You slugged me at Ammati's—real name, Carson. I smelled something. My old friend Clay and his pipe, I said. So the next day, after Carol is through beating tunes on my head, I wander around to your place. I stand outside, hopefully and politely. You take a walk over this way. I like walking this way, too. So after you leave I come up to say hello to your cutest girl. We bounce it around a while. By this time I am holding the automatic. Holding the automatic makes a great difference. So she tells me all about wire recording and how you tried to poison her and how she would love to see you in hell. So we give you a phone call and here you are. Clear?"

"Except for the first question: Where is Carol?" Clay demanded.

"Where is the three hundred grand?" Joe inquired He waited a long moment and took a big step out across empty space. "Look, Clay, certain facts of life are cloudy to you, maybe because you've been in the driver's seat lately. But you're not in the driver's seat today. The gun, for instance, means nothing. Times have changed."

"Uh," said Clay, "How?"

"You forget. I've had a long conference with Carol. Now I have wire recordings. They . . . No, not that dumb, sport. They aren't here, and you can shoot all week and you won't get them. They are where they will hurt, but quick, if anything should happen to me. In short: If I don't show up at a certain place, alive and happy, this evening, the cops get music for their ears. In fact, we even had the recorder taking down your talk with Carol this noon. So now you tell me: How can you win? Oh, yes, you wanted to know where Carol is. She's at the zoo feeding canary bird seed to the elephants. A twist, see?"

"Listen . . ." Clay began. The ringing of the phone stopped his words. He and Joe looked at each other in rigid silence, then Clay motioned with the gun. "If it's Carol, get her back up here. Make it good, or you'll be dead before you know it."

IT WAS just barely possible, Joe reflected, that Clay wasn't kidding. Joe felt like a very tired comedian, a sick clown

who has no more jokes to tell. His little act was coming down to the curtain. Well, it hadn't been such a great act anyway, maybe.

It was Helen, and she sounded uneasy. "Joe, I've got the recorder, but I can't get any answer at Clay's apartment. I've been trying—"

"Tell her I'm here with the money," Clay whispered harshly at Joe, banging the gun against his head. "Tell her you've got the gun on me, and to come split the money. Tell her that, or else!"

"Carol," Joe said very slowly. "You hear me, Carol?"

"Carol?" Helen echoed. "Are you . . . What is it, Joe?" she breathed.

"Carol, Clay and I have already made contact. He's here with the money, Carol. I've got a gun on him, and you can come count the cash. Is that clear, Carol?" Doesn't it tell you to bring the cops, he prayed.

After a long, long pause, she answered. "Yes, darling." The words stayed in his ears. Her voice and the way she'd said it were as nice as you'd want, if you had to pick your last words. He looked at Clay and Clay had made up his mind about something. It was bright and glinty in his eyes, warning Joe and frightening him.

"So I have got until evening before the recordings go to the cops," he said softly. "By evening, Joseph, I can be on the way to Mexico, with more money than you could feed a cow. I could do that, if the worse happened. But maybe it won't. Carol's on her way. This time I won't make a mistake. And maybe, for laughs, you may change your mind about saying where the recordings are. Then I'll just stay around little old New York. Am I right?"

It was terrifying to realize how right he was. "Clay," Joe began, his nerves anticipating what was to come. "Clay . . ."

Clay slugged him with the gun. Joe put

up his arm in time to glance the blow off. But it nicked his temple and it hurt. He tried to fall in close. Clay didn't want to shoot, he perceived. Clay didn't want the neighbors to complain. Clay wanted Carol to walk in quietly.

But most of all, Clay didn't want to kill him yet. That would be in order *after* Joe had given the address of the fictitious recordings.

He grabbed Clay's waist and tried to freeze the gun hand. But Clay brought it down again. This time it landed full and mellow and Joe felt the floorboards of his skull fall out. He went down to his knees moaning, and Clay kicked him backward. He lay there, seeing nothing at that moment, and being beyond the first slash of pain.

Next Clay was pouring water in his face. Joe saw his face in a mist and heard his words in a mist, too. "Where are they, son? The recordings? Where are they?" A long time passed. "I want to know before I count ten, Joe-Joe. I want to know, because I'm going to light this piece of paper. Then I'll put one end in your ear, Joe-Joe. *Where?*"

Joe clenched his teeth. Please, right now, let me simply pass out, he prayed. Like going to sleep, let it happen. Please. Now.

Clay was counting. Joe couldn't go to sleep. Where, Clay was saying.

Where. Nowhere, Joe was thinking. Where are the days of laughter and sunshine, the rides on the subway, the drinks in the bar. Where are the things of laughter.

But Clay had been only kidding about the burning paper. Instead he slugged Joe again and said, "Where, damn you, where?"

Joe was getting drowsy again. That was nice. Stay that way, Joe.

There was a distant ticking sound. Clay was standing up, turning toward the door. The ticking wasn't ticking at all. It was the ringing of the doorbell. This was Helen, Joe sensed. Helen with the cops, at last. She'd said she understood. She would have the cops, wouldn't she?

But if she hadn't exactly understood? If she were alone, then . . . Then he had invited her here merely to get murdered, Joe realized.

"Who is it?" Clay called softly.

"Carol." Just Helen's voice. No other sound. No one else. She was alone!

CLAY reached for the door. Joe crawled to his elbows, to hands and knees and began to crawl. The door started to open. He made a desperate flopping jump and grasped Clay's legs, trying weakly to drag him down.

"Run, run, Helen!" he cried. Clay twisted, cursing. He started to shoot Joe. The door flashed open. There was Helen, but she was behind three large and purposeful men, each of whom was behind a gun.

One of them said, "Stand still or we'll shoot!"

Clay made his mistake. He made it because it was too late to do anything else but try again. He tried to bring his gun around. They shot him. They were nice about it. They shot him where it would take a few hours to be final. Hours that could be—and were—devoted to heart-to-heart talking.

Joe didn't even look at him lying there. He had seen too much of Clay for one lifetime. And anyway, Helen was bending over him and calling him a wonderful beautiful fool.

It must have been love, considering the shape of Joe's beauty at that moment. But times change. You get a new tooth or so. You mend the holes in your head. You marry a redhead named Helen and break a record called *Sad River Blues* into a hundred pieces. You go back to being just an ordinary radio announcer. But not for a million bucks on velvet would you work a quiz show again. ♦ ♦ ♦

By
LARRY HOLDEN

"Gimme another five thousand," the beefy man said thickly. . . .

IF THE FRAME FITS—

They were figuring to pin the rap on an unprotesting corpse. . . . And who was a better candidate than a too-smart private eye, whose lease on life was measured by the length of his too-inquisitive nose?

THE prowl car picked me up in a little bar at the north end of Mt. Prospect Avenue—which turned out to be one of the quickest pickups in the history of the Newark Police Department. Frank Gurney hadn't been dead a half hour.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's the big idea?"

One of them growled, "Shut up," and that was the last word out of either of them, which, you must admit, is unusually untalkative, even for cops.

They took me straight to my office on Market Street, opposite the Paramount Theater. One flight up—Logan & Gurney, Private Investigations.

The hall was full of cops, and somewhere

a woman was crying. Hard, dry sobs. You could hear it through everything else. I was prodded up the stairs, then shoved against the wall. I tried to talk to one of the cops, but he turned his back on me. The door to the office was open, but I couldn't see what was going on in there because of the crowd in the hall. A photographer's flash bulb exploded in a white glare of light, then another and another. A big, sad-faced, hook-nosed man in a crumpled grey felt hat appeared briefly in the doorway and glanced out into the hall. He was Detective Sammy Halpern.

I cried, "Sammy . . ."

He looked in my direction, then crooked his finger at the two cops who had brought me. They gave me another shove.

I snapped, "Lay off me, I tell you!"

A voice said roughly, "Tough as ever, eh, Logan? Bring him in, boys."

That was an invitation to shove me around some more, and they would have, but Sammy Halpern took me by the arm and put himself between them and me.

"Come on, come on," he said. "The lieutenant wants to talk to you." He gave my arm a warning squeeze.

His boss was Lieutenant Arken, thin, grey, embittered. The oldest lieutenant on the force. Bring-'Em-Back-Dead Arken.

HIS pouchy eyes fairly glittered at me, but I gave him no more than a glance. From behind the desk at the window protruded a pair of feet, and Katie Rawls, our receptionist, was sobbing in a chair against the wall, her hands over her face. I looked down again at the pair of feet on the floor behind the desk. My mouth felt suddenly very dry.

I ignored Arken and said to Halpern, "What gives, Sammy?"

Arken barked, "That's Frank Gurney down there, Logan. With two bullets in him. What were you two battling about this afternoon?"

I just stood there with my mouth hanging open, and finally I managed to stammer, "You're nuts."

"Am I?" Arken turned to Katie. "Let's have that story again, Miss Rawls."

He had to repeat his request before she looked up, red-eyed, dull-faced. Sammy stood against the doorway, chewing his cigar, avoiding my glance.

"Come, come, Miss Rawls. We don't have all night," said Arken in a prompting voice. "Tell us about the fight Logan had with his partner."

"They had a fight," she said in a dreary, washed-out voice.

"What was it about, Miss Rawls?"

"What they always fought about—money."

A cold wind seemed to blow through the office. I gaped at her. Frank Gurney and I had never had a fight. We had never even argued.

I turned to Sammy. "She's lying," I said. His eyes dropped and he rolled his cigar to the opposite side of his mouth. "You're lying, Katie!"

I took a step toward her. She shrank back and whimpered. Arken caught my arm and twisted it up behind my back.

"None of that, Logan," he said sharply. "Kraus, McNulty, take Miss Rawls down to the Hall and get her statement. And you," he gave my arm a jerk, "behave yourself or you'll get what's coming to you."

Katie walked out between the two detectives, her head turned away from me. I followed her with my eyes, locked glances with Sammy at the door, and this time he returned my gaze woodenly. Arken released my arm.

"I don't suppose you have anything to tell us, eh, tough boy?" he said unpleasantly.

I kept looking at Sammy. "I didn't kill Frank," I said. There was fury boiling inside me, but I kept it bottled up. "Frank and I—"

"What was the fight about this after-

noon?" Arken interrupted persistently.

"There wasn't any fight. Frank and I never fought. You know that, Sammy."

"Never mind Sammy. You're talking to me, Logan. You got a job from a Mrs. Ruysdaal this afternoon. Right?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm glad you didn't try to deny that, Logan. We know all about it. Her husband's off on another one of his toots, and she wants you to find him. She gave you two hundred bucks."

I listened stonily. He had the facts. Mrs. Ruysdaal wanted us to find her husband before his toot went too far. His last toot had been three weeks long, and somewhere along the line he had dropped ten thousand dollars in a poker game. She didn't mind the money so much—the Ruysdaals had plenty—but he had spent the following six months in a high-class alcoholic ward, getting the snakes and pink elephants combed out of his brain. She didn't want that to happen again.

"She gave you two hundred bucks," Arken repeated significantly. "Cash."

"So what?" I said. He was getting under my skin finally.

"So you held out on Frank Gurney. He found out, and that's what the fight was about."

That was so damn silly that I couldn't help laughing—a harsh cackle of sound without mirth.

"Go ahead and laugh," Arken said angrily. "I'm betting it wasn't the first time you held out on Gurney. I'm betting that an investigation'll show you held out plenty—which was the real reason you knocked him off."

Except for poor Frank lying there dead on the floor, I would have laughed again. Instead, I said, "You knucklehead, you've been sold a bill of goods and you don't know it. You're going to look so silly—"

He slapped me, a hard backhand crack across the face. I growled and lunged at him, but Sammy grabbed my arms from behind and wrestled me across the office.

"Don't be a sap, Ben," he muttered in my ear. "He'd just love for you to take a poke at him."

ARKEN came skittering across the floor and slapped me again, velling for Sammy to let me go, but Sammy held on and I tucked my face behind a shoulder and took Arken's slaps on the top of my head. I didn't struggle Finally Arken stepped back. breathing heavily.

"Take him in," he snapped at Sammy. "I'll talk to him later."

"Want me to book him?" Sammy asked stolidly.

"Do as you're told, damn it! I'll take care of that myself. And if you let him get to a lawyer, I'll have your badge. Now get out of here." He turned away and started jerking open the drawers of my file cabinets.

Sammy took me downstairs and into his car at the curb. We drifted down Market Street toward Mulberry, just moving.

"Believe me, pal," said Sammy, "I never thought I'd get you out of there in one piece. He'd have killed you once he got started. He's crazy mean. He was passed over again for promotion last week."

"How'd he get as high as lieutenant in the first place? He's always got his fist in somebody's snoot. Bring-'Em-Back-Dead Arken."

Sammy didn't answer. He chewed his lip and stared straight ahead.

I said, "*You* don't believe I killed Frank, do you, Sammy?"

He grimaced. "That dame, Katie Rawls—what's she got against you?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. In fact, last year I lent her five hundred bucks to get a lawyer for her brother. He was up on a gambling rap."

"You weren't playing around with her, or anything like that, were you, Ben?"

"Hell, no!"

"Was Frank?"

"Use your head, Sammy. She's got broomstick legs and a washboard chest. I can't figure out why she lied like that, Sammy, unless—"

"There's no 'unless.' She didn't kill Frank. She was at a church bazaar, selling coffee and doughnuts, when he was shot. The minister himself alibied her from six o'clock on. By the way, how good is your alibi, Ben?" He shot me a sharp glance.

"Just dandy," I said bitterly. "Since this afternoon I've been going from one bar to another, trying to find that lush Ruysdaal. Maybe a bartender'll remember me here or there, but I doubt it." Then, in a surge of fury, "But Arken isn't going to hang that killing on me!"

Sammy's hands tightened on the wheel and his big, sad face looked tormented. "But he will, Ben," he said in a low voice. "They passed him up for promotion, and he wants to show them. He wants something to fling in their faces—like cleaning this up in a hurry, for instance. You won't have a chance, pal. Not the way it stands now."

We stopped for the red light at Mulberry street, and he turned and looked me full in the face. "We've been friends, Ben, but I'm a cop and he's my boss. I have to do what I'm told."

The car stalled as the light turned green. He looked down at the floor, swore softly, then bent over as if reaching for the gas pedal. I slugged him, ripped open the door and darted out into the crowds of Market Street.

A HALF HOUR later I was sitting at the counter of a diner at the south end of Broad Street, rubbing my knuckles—rubbing them as if to rub out the shame of having slugged Sammy. Even though he had practically told me to hit him and get out while I still had a chance to clear myself.

Across the street was the dingy yellow-brick apartment house where Katie Rawls lived. I was waiting for them to bring her home from headquarters, where they were taking her statement. I just wanted five minutes with her, five minutes to find out why she had lied. I'd get it from her, too, but there wouldn't be any special triumph. She'd always been a timid, anemic rack of bones. I ordered another cup of coffee from the counterman and sat, glowering through the smudged windows at the entrance of the apartment across the street.

An hour later I was still sitting there, and still she hadn't shown up. I threw a quarter on the counter and was on my way out of the diner when a big man, with cop written all over him, pushed by me in the doorway and took the stool nearest the window. He settled his forearms on the counter and glued his eyes on the front door of Katie Rawls' apartment.

Outside the door, I turned north on Broad Street. I'd have been a damn fool to cross that lighted window with one of Arken's bloodhounds watching from inside. I walked slowly down the street, finding the shadow of the second stake-out in a shadowed doorway opposite me. Up to a point, the police are predictable.

It also told me something else. Katie wasn't in her apartment. Arken wouldn't be taking chances with his chief witness.

I thought briefly of Mrs. Ruysdaal, white and worried over her drunken husband's latest toot, relying on Frank Gurney and me to bring him safely home. A fat, homely little woman with unshed tears puffing her eyes. My feeling of impotent guilt was mixed with anger.

Two blocks down, I turned into a dreary, cluttered drug store, called headquarters and asked for Sammy Halpern. The desk sergeant said sleepily he wasn't there. Then, suspiciously, "Hey, who's this calling?"

"His brother Sid. Any idea where I can find him, Sergeant?"

"Oh. Sid. Yeah. He went home, Sid."

I said thanks, hung up, then called Sam-

my's place. The phone was picked up on the first ring, and it was Sammy who answered—almost as if he had been waiting for my call. He *must* have been sitting there. He had a wife and six kids, and it had always been seven to one against getting Sammy himself on the first ring.

I said, "Where's Katie Rawls, Sammy?"

"You fool!" His voice dropped into his lap and I could almost see him looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was listening. "You're still in Newark?"

"Where's Katie, Sammy? I've waited in front of her place for an hour and a half, and she hasn't showed. Has Arken got her stashed away some place?"

"How would I know? I'm on thirty days suspension as of an hour ago."

"Oh-oh," I said. "I'm sorry, Sammy."

"Forget it, pal. I may need a favor myself some day. I'll tell you what I know, which isn't much. When I got back to headquarters, Arken was already there. The Rawls girl was in his office, weeping and wailing, and Arken was sore as a boil."

"What was the matter?" I said sourly. "Was he trying to get her to say she saw me point the gun at Frank."

"Ben, let me give you a piece of advice. Get out of town. If Arken lays hands on you now, he'll crucify you. Just get out and I'll see what I can do at this end for you."

"I've got to talk to Katie, Sammy."

"I said I'll see what I can do, didn't I? I may be suspended, but I'm not dead. You're supposed to be looking for that rich lush Ruysdaal, aren't you? Well, go and look, and keep out of Arken's way for twenty-four hours."

"I've got to talk to Katie."

"Listen to me for a minute, bright boy. If she isn't home by now, it's a hundred to one Arken's locked her up as a material witness. Hell, with you loose and her the prime witness against you, it's the only thing he can—"

I hung up.

I took a few precious minutes to call Mrs. Ruysdaal, because I couldn't stand the thought of her sitting home alone on the verge of hysterics, waiting for word from us.

"Then he wasn't in the Oasis Club?" she said dully. "After I talked to you this afternoon I remembered it was one of his favorites and I . . . It's not his card playing I mind, Mr. Logan," she burst out. "It's his drinking. The doctor said something terrible is going to happen to his mind if he keeps it up. Please find him before it's too late, Mr. Logan. Please find him!"

I mumbled for her not to worry, and when I got outside the drug store and lit a cigarette, my hands were shaking. If I could have turned the job over to someone else, I would have done it then and there, but Seaboard Investigations was the only other agency in town I'd have trusted and Harry LaMott, who ran it, was in Philly.

IT WAS a little over a half mile to police headquarters from where I was. I got a cab and it let me off in front of City Hall. One block in from there was the green light over the doorway of headquarters, and across the street from there was a house with a high brownstone stoop. I sat halfway up and watched the door. I didn't think Arken would have his airedales looking for me that close to home—though watching the plainesclothesmen come and go gave me a funny feeling up and down the back of my neck.

The lights were on all over the second floor, where the detectives had their offices, and I tried to pick out Arken's, but the only window that showed any activity was the window of the press room at the back of the building.

I'd have given my last nickel to have been able to walk into headquarters and listen at Arken's door for just five minutes. Was he trying to get Katie to incriminate me further? Sammy had hinted that Arken would go to any lengths to make an arrest stick. Katie had lied once. Would she lie again just to escape a grilling? She didn't have the stuff to stand up against Arken if he really went after her.

I tried to switch my mind off that, because there was nothing in it for me but the creeping meemees. My hands were sweaty and I rubbed them down my thighs to dry them.

A car stopped in front of headquarters and a man got out. I sat upright. It was Sammy. He hesitated for a moment, then briskly trotted up the steps and went inside. My heart started to pound. Unless he had found out something new, he was sticking his neck out. He was inside for about fifteen minutes, then he came out, walking slowly, his hands dug into his pockets. He looked up and down the street, folded himself back into his car and came slowly in my direction. I licked my lips, went down the steps to the curb and called, "Sammy," when he came abreast of me. His car stopped as if he had jammed the brake to the floorboards. He stared at me in horrified disbelief. I went over to the door and leaned my head in his window.

"What's going on in there, Sammy?" I pleaded. "I've been eating my fingernails down to the knuckles."

His jaw moved wordlessly.

"Has he still got Katie in there or what? I'm half nuts wondering what's going on."

"Of all the crazy, stupid . . ." He took pity on me. "Yes, he's still got her up in his office. He's talking to her. Alone."

That could mean anything, or nothing. If he got tough with her, he wouldn't want witnesses. His getting tough was the one thing that had kept him from promotion. He didn't know when to stop.

"Did you find anything new, Sammy?"

He shook his head. "I just came down to see if he had gotten anything more out of the girl." He gave me an odd, clinical look, as if he hadn't quite made up his mind about me.

"She lied, Sammy," I said. "She lied straight across the board. How'd she act when you picked her up at the church bazaar? Jittery, scared, or what?"

He thought it over, casting back in his mind. "Jittery," he said finally. "Jittery as hell. But she's the jittery kind, isn't she? Maybe I broke it too soon to her that Frank had been knocked off. I mean, the minister had given her a clean bill and I didn't see any reason to suspect her. I told her about Frank so she wouldn't pull a wingding when she saw the body. She started to cry. Say," he scowled at me, "are you sure there wasn't anything between her and Frank? The way she busted out crying—"

"Forget that angle. Frank liked a handful when he grabbed a woman."

"Then I don't get it, pal," he said flatly. "Either you did have a scrap with Frank this afternoon and she's telling the truth, or she's got something against you and she's giving you the works."

"Why should she have anything against

me?" I said desperately. "We always got along in the office, and I told you I lent her five hundred bucks to help her brother buy his way out of a gambling rap."

"She pay you back?"

"Not yet, but I'm not worrying."

"Maybe you'd better start worrying, then. Maybe five hundred is a big chunk of dough to her. Maybe she got to thinking of all the stuff she could buy with five hundred. Maybe she got to thinking that if you were put away she wouldn't have to pay you back, and she could buy herself a fur coat or something. I've heard of guys being framed for a hell of a lot less than five hundred, pal."

"You're nuts," I said feebly.

"Dames like that, Ben—scrawny, no boy friends, lonely—think a fur coat is heaven itself. It takes the place of a lot of other things. In a fur coat, she's the Duchess of Windsor." His eyes gleamed and he smacked the steering wheel with his open hand. "If that's the angle, Ben, you could break her if it were put to her hard enough!"

I said, "Yeah," and we both fell silent, knowing that all our whistling in the dark wasn't going to change the fact that we were passing the cemetery.

"I suppose," he said finally, "I can't persuade you to get out of here?"

I shook my head.

"Then take care of yourself, Ben. Don't let Arken grab you. I'm going to tool along and see what I can pick up."

I watched him go, then went back to sitting on the stoop in the dark and watching the front door of headquarters. Never before had I wanted a cigarette so badly, but I didn't dare light one, because some nosy cop would surer than hell see it glowing in the dark and that would be that.

I MUST have sat there another hour, holding tight, when another car swooped to a stop in front of headquarters and Arken jumped out—coming back!

I stood up and grabbed the handrail of the stoop with both hands. *Coming back!* I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my stomach. All this waiting had been for nothing. There was a parking lot behind headquarters and I had forgotten about it. I had counted on being able to follow him when he came out with Katie and find out where he had stashed her I didn't think he'd just throw her into the coop. A smart cop wouldn't do that unless he wanted to make himself a hostile witness. I had counted on him hiding her away in one of the hotels around town I felt sick.

He was out of headquarters again in ten minutes. He passed me in his car not fifteen feet away and in the light of the dashboard, I could see him grinning, as if everything was going his way now. He turned left on Broad Street, going south, taking his time. I sprinted to the corner and flagged a cab. Even after all that, he was only a block and a half ahead, just drifting along. He stopped once at a delicatessen, came out with a paper bag full of something, then drifted south again.

Broad Street was pretty empty. Except for a few gin mills and a delicatessen, most of the neon signs were off. A few cars zipped north and south. I could have kept Arken in sight from the City Hall steps. He stopped before Katie Rawl's apartment, and I stopped my cab a block this side. I watched him walk into the apartment house, carrying his paper bag.

I paid off the cab and walked to the doorway of the house on the corner. Pretending to be fishing in my pocket for keys, I gave the block a quick casing. The diner had closed up for the night, and I couldn't see either of the two stake-outs who'd been there earlier in the evening. I stood in the doorway for a full ten minutes, and not once did I see the telltale glow of a cupped cigarette or the shift of a shadow. They had been called off, probably by Arken himself. Still, taking no chances, I walked around the block and came up behind the apart-

ment house, looking up and down the streets at the corner for a parked police car. There wasn't any car, and there were no stake-outs behind the apartment house, either. Arken had given up the idea that I'd been hanging around this end of town for this length of time.

I stood in the yard behind the apartment and looked up the dark wall. There was only one light on, the light in Katie's apartment. The fire escape zigzagged up the back of the building and opened, I knew, into Katie's bedroom. I'd been there a few times during the holidays for a drink and to say Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

I spat on my hands and leaped for the first rung of the hanging ladder. It came down with a screech of unoiled pulleys. I scampered up to the first landing and flattened against the wall in case someone above decided to look out the window and investigate. I didn't even have a gun on me. I didn't even have a set of brass knuckles. All I had was a prayer.

I made myself stand there five minutes without moving before I started up the rest of the fire escape. I breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving when I got to the top. Katie was a hygienic girl. She always left her bedroom window open to let the fresh air circulate. I slipped noiselessly into the room. The light from the living room showed in a bright pencil stripe across the bottom of the bedroom door. I jerked off my shoes and crossed the room.

I couldn't see much through the keyhole, but I did see Arken. A cigar plugged into the corner of his mouth, he was taking off his coat and loosening his tie. He threw the coat over the back of the sofa. Then he opened his paper bag and took out two bottles of whiskey. He stepped out of the orbit of the keyhole, and a few minutes later I heard water running in the kitchen and the unmistakable *clunk-clunk* of ice cubes dropping into the sink. I inched the door open, put my eye to the crack and looked down the room. I sucked in my breath and froze. For a minute I just couldn't think. I was stupefied.

Two men were playing poker at a card table. One of them was Katie's thin, narrow-faced brother. The other was a big, beefy man with the glazed look of advanced intoxication in his eyes.

Ruysdaal!

IT WAS a face I knew almost as well as the back of my hand—paunchy, dissipated, melancholy. I had a dozen photographs Mrs. Ruysdaal had given me. One of the bottles of whiskey Arken had brought was standing open at his right elbow. The hand ended as I watched, and Ruysdaal threw down his cards with a groan.

"Gimme another five thousand," he said thickly. He grabbed up the bottle from the table and took a long pull at it.

His eyes glittering, Rawls counted out a stack of chips, but before giving them to Ruysdaal, pushed a pen and a slip of paper across the table.

"Just sign this please, Mr. Ruysdaal," he said smoothly.

There was quite a stack of those slips of paper on the table before him, held down with a heavy stack of blue chips. Ruysdaal scribbled his signature.

Arken came in from the kitchen, carrying a tall glass in which ice tinkled. He stood to one side, grinning a little as Ruysdaal clumsily dealt out the cards.

The two of them, Rawls and Arken, were taking Ruysdaal for plenty, five thousand at a clip. Then it opened before me, just like opening a book—why Frank Gurney had been killed and who had done it.

And all I had was my bare hands. My eyes swept the half-dark of Katie's bedroom. I knew she didn't own a gun. She was afraid of them. There was no sound except the faint whirr of her electric alarm clock. The concentration in the other room was terrific. No one spoke, and I saw

Rawls look up sharply and scowl when Arken absently tinkled the ice in his glass in a nervous gesture.

The electric alarm clock purred in the dark. My eyes spread. It was as good as a gun. I tiptoed back and picked up the clock. I turned the set-alarm hand until I had it where it'd go off within a minute or two, then pulled out the little knob that freed the alarm.

I was back at the door when it went off. At the first tinkle of the bell, Rawls' hands twitched, but they were in the midst of the hand. The bell went on tinkling. He scowled at the bedroom door but immediately turned back to the game as Ruysdaal dribbled three red chips into the pot. The alarm stopped and Rawls visibly relaxed. The alarm was off for exactly thirty seconds, and then it really exploded. It was one of those jobs that they advertise: "First it whispers, then it shouts!"

The second alarm sounded like a roomful of raging hornets. Rawls actually jumped. He swore, slapped down his cards and strode for the bedroom. I let him get as far as the bed before I clipped him. He was supposed to fall into the bed and make no noise, but he didn't. He fell into the night table, knocking it and the lamp and the clock to the floor with a terrific crash. I leaped for him, scrabbling over his pockets for the gun I knew he carried. I had my hand around the butt of it when Arken loomed in the doorway.

I yelped, "Hold it, Arken, or I'll let you have it!" I tugged, but the gun stuck in the lining of Rawls' pocket. I kept yapping at Arken to keep him off-balance. "Leave your hands where they are, Arken. I've taken your pal, and I'll take you, too!"

He said incredulously, "Logan!" and grabbed for the gun in his back pocket.

I wrenched fiercely and half of Rawls' jacket came away with the gun. Arken's bullet tore into the wall over my head. My gun came up with part of the pocket dangling from it like a pennant. I shot him straight through his big, right shoulder.

Dragging Rawls after me, I backed Arken across the living room and into the sofa. Ruysdaal was snoring, sprawled across the

card table, oblivious to all these events.

I called Sammy's place and told his wife to send him to Katie's apartment the minute he came in. I wanted Sammy to get the glory out of this one. He had it coming. Arken watched me haggardly, the hope fading in his eyes.

"And to think," I said to him, "that you could have cleaned up this case in record time. You got Katie down at headquarters and went at her hammer and tongs. And she broke. She laid it in your lap. Right, Arken? Right?"

His head went down and he closed his eyes.

"I got the tipoff earlier from Mrs. Ruysdaal, only I didn't know it," I said. "She as good as told me she called my office to tell me the Oasis Club was one of her husband's favorite haunts. Katie took the call. Her brother was there, probably to mooch a fin from her as usual. He got the drift, that Ruysdaal was a rich lush who liked to gamble. What a chance for a cleanup! He rushed over to the Oasis Club to pick up Ruysdaal himself. But Frank had gone to the office and was at the club before him."

Arken's eyes opened. He looked at me. "You didn't figure that out," he said dully. "You found the girl in the club. She told you."

I could have laughed out loud, because that was just the confirmation I needed.

"Anyway," I went on, "Ruysdaal was so drunk he didn't know what was going on. Frank took him up to the office to clean him up and sober him up before taking him home. Frank was that kind of guy. Rawls saw a fortune slipping out of his hands. He rushed up to the office to get Ruysdaal away from Frank any way he could. He had to shoot him. It's my guess Katie didn't see the shooting, but walked in right after it. Rawls told her something like, say, he and Frank had a scrap and in the struggle the gun went off. Katie loved her brother, because she had no one else to love. She believed him, and when it came to the clutch, she told the cops that I'd had a scrap with Frank in the afternoon. But when it *really* came to the clutch, when she saw that you'd send *me* to the chair for the killing, she broke and told you it was her brother who had gunned Frank. But she also told you something else. One other little thing —that her brother was playing poker with Ruysdaal in her apartment. You knew the Ruysdaal story, and you saw a young fortune in it for yourself. But you had to string along with a murderer. So you strung along with him.

"Now tell me, Arken, tell me straight. How's it going to feel when you're strung up with him, too?" ♦ ♦ ♦

CASE OF THE NOISY CORPSE

PROBABLY THE LIVELIEST demise of any hoodlum in history was the reward of one Lucky Mahony, who flourished in England up to the latter part of the last century. Sentenced to be hanged for murder, Mahony and his friends plotted, and by dint of bribing the guards and causing a commotion at the then public hanging, the latter succeeded in propping up their chieftain while he dangled at the end of his rope, supposedly for the edification of all. The result was that Mahony passed out from suffocation, but did not die. His friends cut down the "corpse," revived him—and Mahony howled in glee.

Alarmed at the racket he was making, one of his pals clouted him with a stick—and Mahony died. His killer was hauled into court for murder, and the judge threw out the case.

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH MURDER!

By NELSON and GEER

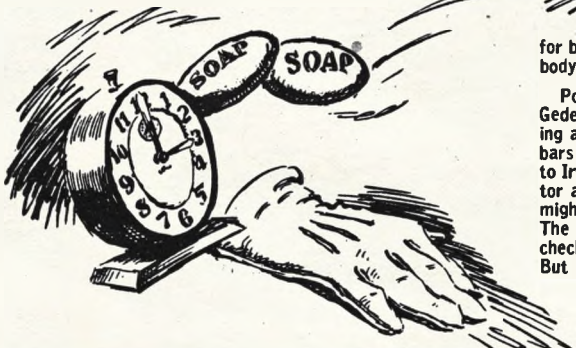
MODEL MURDER

It's hard enough to murder an unimportant person and get away with it. To kill one of New York's most beautiful models automatically puts a million unexpected sleuths on the murderer's trail. . .

While a roomer in the apartment of Mrs. Mary Gedeon, Bob Irwin, a talented young sculptor with decided neurotic tendencies, fell in love with his landlady's elder daughter When she spurned him, he left in a huff. On Easter eve, 1937. he returned to have it out with her—or else.

Mrs. Gedeon assured him the girl was now married and living elsewhere, but the love-smitten youth refused to believe her. Enraged when she ordered him out, he later confessed he struck her, then strangled her and pushed the body under the bed. Prowling the apartment, he found Frank Byrnes, a boarder, asleep in his room. Fearing that the man was shamming, Irwin plunged an ice-pick repeatedly into his head and chest.

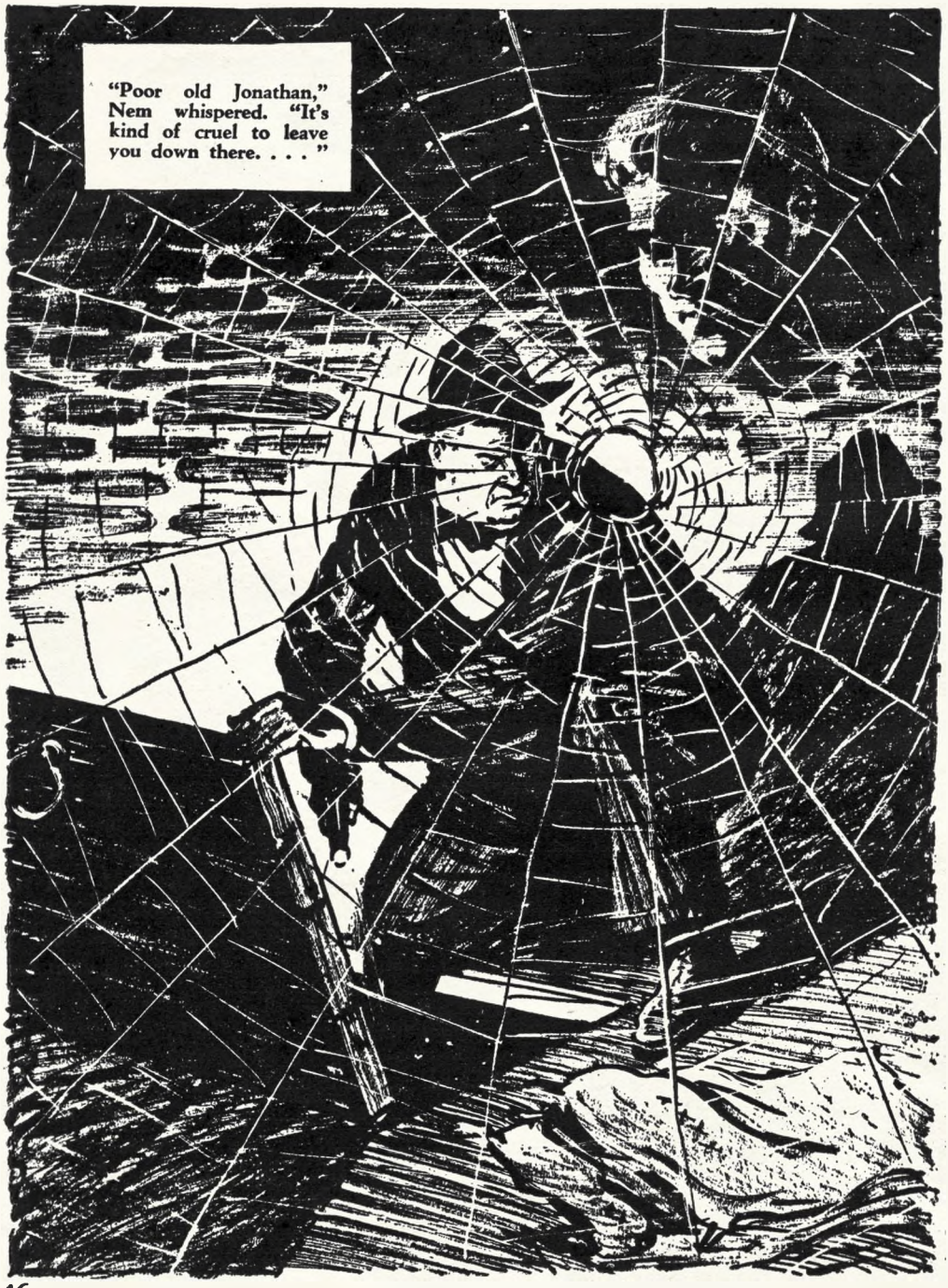
At 3 A.M. there was the sound of a key in the lock. But it was not the object of his affections. Instead, it was her younger sister, twenty-year-old Veronica, beautiful artists' model, returning from a date. Irwin waited, hidden, while she prepared for bed. Then he strangled her, stretched her nude body on the bed, picked up an alarm clock and left.

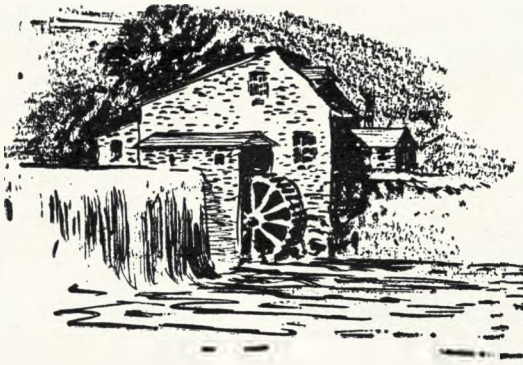


Police had as clues only the fact that Mrs. Gedeon's dog had not been heard to bark, the missing alarm clock, a man's grey suede glove and two bars of soap. Checking former boarders, they came to Irwin. He was known to the dog. He was a sculptor and the bars of soap were the kind a sculptor might carry in his pocket for modeling purposes. The glove was traced to him and in his bag, checked at Grand Central, was the alarm clock. But Irwin himself had vanished.

The sensational story was in every paper; detective magazines carried Irwin's picture, making every reader an unknowing sleuth. A waitress in a Cleveland hotel saw his picture and thought it resembled "Bob Murray," the new barboy. She asked him if he'd ever heard of Bob Irwin. "Murray" disappeared; but shortly, Irwin, knowing that every literate American was on his trail, surrendered. He eventually ended up, under a life sentence, in a New York state hospital for the criminally insane

Nem Parsons had a way with murderers: He'd let them spin their tangled webs . . . until they trapped themselves in their own bloody skeins.





THE CRIMSON WEB

By WINSTON BOUVÉ

CHAPTER ONE

Venomous Lady

THE long and lantern-jawed chief of police of the city of Bridgehaven drummed on his littered desk and suppressed an impatient yawn as he waited for Nem Parsons to speak.

The slow-moving nemesis of a hundred of Bridgehaven's criminals since his career as city detective had begun, Parsons sat opposite the chief and surveyed affectionately his white-stockinged feet, resting shoeless on the edge of his superior's desk.

One massive forefinger rested on the marked newspaper clipping that Chief O'Malley had thrust before him five min-

utes before. Nem's other hand was engaged in making sporadic passes with a very damp handkerchief across his pink, perspiring baldness.

His movements were deliberate and gentle, as if he did not care to frighten away the bluebottle fly that, droning in the heat of this late September afternoon, circled about Nem's head in quest of a resting place.

O'Malley bore the silence as long as he could, and then shattered it explosively.

"Since you can't catch that bluebottle fly, try turning your efforts to something nearly important!" he suggested. "You're better at catching crooks than horse flies!"

Nem Parsons thought over the recrimination at some length.

"Fly's got no brains, Tom," he said reproachfully. "You catch crooks because they've got brains. Yes, sir—because they know too much. I'll get that fly yet, though. Give him time enough, and security; he'll settle down, and then—"

THERE followed a quick flirt of the moistened handkerchief, sudden as the dart of a rattler, and the bluebottle fly had gone to meet his god.

"Now," said Parsons relievedly, "about that Swope business. Where'd Benny Price get hold of the dope he prints here in the *Journal*? Must've been quite a bit of talk about it, eh?"

Tom O'Malley sighed impatiently.

"That's what I called you in for. What d'you think about it?"

Nem picked up and read the clipping.

AGED RECLUSE VANISHES

It has come to the attention of the *Journal* that Jonathan Swope, known to Bridgehaven boys of three generations first as a miser and next as the irritable owner of the matchless swimming hole known as Swope's Mill Pond, has been missing from his usual haunts for five days.

In view of the rumor that Jonathan Swope has been hoarding treasure since he knew the difference between a cent and a dime, the *Journal* is compelled to wonder whether our esteemed neighbor and fellow citizen has surrendered at last to the repressed desires of seventy years and gone off to the big city on a protracted spree; and if so whether he took his reputed wealth with him.

Or has a crime been committed?

A frown settled upon Tom O'Malley's features.

"Quite a dig at the department, isn't it? And I've got to admit that this is the first time I've heard of Jonathan Swope's beating it for parts unknown."

Nem looked at the clipping again.

"Kinda sounds as if old Jonathan Swope was kickin' up his heels and rarin' a lot, for an old sucker like him. 'Tain't nice of the *Journal* to print such speculations about a church member." He chuckled. "Can't you picture old Swope down on Broadway, hittin' it up with flossy dames—"

O'Malley broke in impatiently.

"Show the sense you've got, Nem. I'm in dead earnest about the thing. Swope's got to be found!"

A rap on the outside of the chief's battered door made an ultimatum of his last words. The door opened then, and the patrolman from the outer office stepped in.

"Jonathan Swope's housekeeper wants to speak to you, Chief," he announced.

The two men at the desk exchanged glances. Out of Nem Parsons' eyes there darted an interested gleam.

"Bring her in."

Clara Cady appeared at once—a tall, gaunt woman with a colorless, pinched face and hair of streaked grey combed smooth and tight over her sunken temples and drawn into a knot at the nape of her neck.

Her crossed hands and dejected shoulders gave her an air of conscious rectitude, and her darting black eyes proclaimed her as being perpetually on guard against a predatory world.

"I want to see Chief O'Malley!" she demanded, glancing from one to the other.

Nem waved a vast paw toward his superior, and heaved himself up to place a chair

for her, so that she might sit facing them both.

"I'm Jonathan Swope's housekeeper," she began, and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I've come to see you because Mr. Swope's been away for five days now, and no one knows where he is."

One work-gnarled hand smoothed her alpaca-clad knee ceaselessly.

O'Malley was still smarting under the veiled censure of the item in the *Journal.*

"Why haven't you come in before?" he asked.

"I kept thinking he'd be back . . ."

"He's not in the habit of going away like this and staying, is he?" O'Malley wanted to know, with a mute signal to Nem to be on the watch.

NEM seemed not to see the signal of the chief.

"Can't ever tell what an old horse will do once he gets his bridle off, can you, Miss Cady?" Parsons asked in kindly fashion.

She gave him a grateful look.

"That's what I thought at first. So I didn't say anything, not wanting folks to start thinking things. And I kept expecting him back every day—and every day I've been minded to come and tell you, though I held off—"

"Until today," Nem said with a smile.

"Then this morning I says to myself that I've waited long enough and so I'm here."

She fidgeted more with her hands, folded them with an effort.

"Was it because you saw the piece in the *Journal*?" O'Malley barked at her. His tone must have angered the woman.

"What article? I never see the *Journal.* We take the *Clarion.*" Then, cautiously, she added, "What was there in the *Journal* about it?"

Nem handed her the clipping with ponderous politeness, and watched her glance through it in a trice.

"Other folks seem to be thinking the same thing," she remarked.

"That he's gone off on a little spree?" asked Nem meekly.

"No. That he's—oh, what's the use. I know what I think, and no one'll stop me thinking it!" she snapped, shoulders flung back in sudden decision. "Why ain't he back? Where did he go? Why did he stay so long, him just as friendless as an old cat—"

"When did you last see him?" O'Malley asked with his official air.

"Six nights ago. He left the house right after supper. He and Charley had an awful quarrel—worse than usual."

She had settled down into a sort of sullenness after her brief flare-up.

"Charley Swope, his nephew?" O'Malley supplied with awakened interest. "What did they quarrel about?"

"Money. Charley wants to marry that youngest Martin girl, and he hasn't a red cent, nor never will have—if he has to earn it! He asked his uncle for it, and they had words—some pretty bad ones." She let a flicker of grim humor touch her mouth. "Jonathan went out not saying where he was going, and Charley went out a little after that. That was the last I ever did see of him, for I went up to bed early—of Jonathan, I mean."

Her words had been tumbling out. Now they came with less certitude. "Not that I want to hint anything against Charley Swope. He's a fool, drinkin' as he does, and the most shiftless being that ever walked. But I like him, as every one does —except his uncle."

"Seen Charley since?" asked O'Malley.

"Charley, sure. He lives at the house—what little time he's home. No, Charley come back that same night—or the next morning. Drunk as a fool, and his clothes all covered with burdocks, but that ain't nothing new for him."

"Where's Charley now?" O'Malley asked.

Concern crept over her thin-featured face for an instant.

"The Lord knows. Somewhere around town. You don't think—"

"He might be in Mullaly's pool room," Nem suggested. "It won't hurt to try."

HIS great hand reached out, picked up the instrument on the chief's desk without awaiting permission from his superior. It was amazing how much he knew of the habits of every man in town. Clara Cady watched him alertly as he spoke.

"Hello, Mullaly? Nem Parsons talking. Charley Swope there? Much obliged—just have him step to the phone a minute, will you?" And then, after a long pause, Nem went on: "Hello, Charley—say, seen the article in the *Journal* this morning? No?

"It wasn't much, but it kind of set the chief on his ear, though it didn't mean anything to me. Wish you'd come down to the station and tell us what you know 'bout your uncle's movements, if anything. Sure, sure, come right along. Shucks, nobody suspects you of anything. Jest want a little friendly talk, that's all. . . ."

By the time he had finished speaking, Clara Cady had risen to her spare height.

"No use in my taking up your time any longer. I've told you all I know."

Nem waved her back into her chair.

"What's your hurry? Better wait till the cool of the day, and have Charley drive you back to the farm."

Her thin mouth tightened. But there was an undertone of authority in the detective's voice that kept her in her place, and reduced her from garrulity to silence. O'Malley sensed that his best man was directing a big scene, and offered neither aid nor cue.

Nem took pity on her grim discomfiture.

"Don't you be afraid of Charley, Miss Cady. You and he aren't the best of friends, are you?"

She nodded like an automaton.

"It'll just be an easy chat, you know. You set there and read the paper. He'll be here any minute now."

She didn't glance at the sheet he handed her. O'Malley puffed at a vile cigar, awaiting Nem's cue. Parsons reached over with a prodigious straining of his bulk and drew on his shoes out of belated deference to the occasion.

"My feet are kind of tender," he explained apologetically. "I like to rest 'em whenever I can." His grey eyes twinkled. "Not a bad idea, neither. When you can't use your feet much you begin to use your brains."

Charley Swope entered five minutes later, a powerfully built youngster in his early twenties. His freckled, pleasant face, marked by recent dissipation, wore a furtive, harried look, both men saw.

He was dressed in badly faded khaki trousers held up by a worn belt, straining shirt open at the throat, and a battered hat, which he dragged off as he entered to reveal a shock of russet hair.

But the removal of his hat was out of deference to the law rather than to Clara Cady. For as soon as he saw her, there came into his eyes a look of malign defiance.

Nem leaned forward and intercepted the glance that her black eyes darted back at the body. Venomous hate shot between the two.

Nem hadn't let himself more than play with the possibility of an ugly crime's having taken place, in spite of Miss Cady's unspoken fears, until that look of mutual loathing passed between the two.

He thought to himself that some dreadful happening must have evoked that suppressed violence. Somehow, between these two, hung an aura of evil.

"What are you here for?" Swope growled. "Trying to pin something on me?"

"Doing my duty," she snapped.

Nem leaned forward, still mild and indulgent.

"Why, Charley, what makes you think she's trying to pin anything on you?"

The tall shrunken woman in the chair

snorted. "Kind of ready to speak up before you've been accused of anything, ain't you, Charley?"

He glared at her, as Nem suppressed a sigh of regret that she, too, should have leaped at this demonstration of one of his soundest theories.

" 'Cause she's been naggin' at me long enough, practically accusin' me of killing Uncle John ever since that night. What if I did want some of his money? What if we did quarrel about it that night? Does that prove I murdered him?"

CHARLEY SWOPE'S voice was shrill with excitement.

"Steady," said Parsons. "Murder ain't even been mentioned yet."

The boy settled back in his chair with a certain relief.

"Oh. Well, that's what I've said all along. There's no reason to think Uncle John was murdered. He may be off on some business of his own—you can't prove murder till you find the body, can you?"

The boy leaned forward urgently.

"It would be pretty doubtful," Nem told them dryly.

Clara Cady fastened her eyes upon Nem. "You mean even when you're sure it's been done—that you can't do anything till you find the body?"

"The corpus delicti plays a pretty important part," Nem reminded her thoughtfully.

"There she is again, tryin' to pin it on me," cried Charley Swope. "Just because I wanted some of his old money! If I'd killed him, I'd have somethin' to show for it."

Clara Cady stood erect. With one work-worn hand she fumbled in a pocket of her voluminous alpaca skirt. A second sufficed to find what she sought. Parsons and the chief leaned forward as she drew out a bright coin and dropped it on the scarred desk.

It landed on edge, spun dizzily between the two men. The boy stared at it in fascination until it had spun its course and fallen to rest.

"If there hasn't been murder done," the women said in high, flat tones that betrayed her nervous strain, "how did this come to be under your bureau where I found it when I was cleaning?"

She turned like an elderly fury upon him.

"Charley, you got something to show for it, after all! And it ain't natural to suppose that old Swope'd ever leave go of a single piece of gold while there was breath in his body."

Nem Parsons picked up the coin carefully. It was a twenty-dollar gold piece dated 1916. Jonathan Swope must have had it hidden for a long time.

"Hmm," said Nem, and dropped the coin into an envelope.

"How come you didn't mention this before?" O'Malley asked dourly.

She turned on him bitterly.

"I didn't want to. Only—I want justice done."

"I kind of like to see it workin' out myself," Parsons told her. "That's why they call me Nemesis 'round here. I'll hold on to that coin and be up to the mill a little later, to look around." He heaved himself to his feet.

An infinite pity for the pale, twitching nephew of old Swope smote him as Charley wrenched at his hat.

"You ain't goin' to arrest me? That gold piece she found—I never seen it before. What does it prove, anyway?" he ended with a resumption of his sullen defiance.

"Not murder," Nem told him. "Now maybe you two had better run along and try to make it up between you. Might as well try to live peaceable. I'll find out what became of old Jonathan, ma'am. Unless he turns up before I do, of his own accord. Folks do that, you know. Give a calf rope enough and he'll hang himself, you know."

She cast a last venomous look at the boy, and followed him out.

"Well?" said Chief O'Malley.

Nem Parsons stuck his thick thumbs in the armholes of his vest and stared up at the ceiling meditatively.

"Kind of unfortunate figure of speech," he ruminated with some sadness. "That about the calf on the rope. Did you see the old lady look at Charley, Tom? She looked like it'd give her a deal of pleasure to see him get himself all tangled up in a length of hemp."

O'Malley shook himself into activity.

"Looks like she'll get her wish. Better get on up there and start something."

CHAPTER TWO

Dark Flood

LATER that same day Nem surveyed the rolling Connecticut country from the elevation of the Swope farmhouse and mill that, two hundred years before, had given grist to the countryside under an earlier Swope's direction.

A September haze enveloped the hills. Clumps of goldenrod made patches of sunlight against the dusty verdure; and blue asters, forerunners of autumn, put purplish shadows upon the fields.

The rays of the sinking sun slanted magically across the meadow lands. The brooding peace of a drowsy afternoon hung over everything.

"Mighty pretty," murmured Nem Parsons respectfully, and turned to the kitchen stoop to await admittance by the old woman who apparently managed the household as if her eccentric employer were not missing.

There was the flap of her carpet-slippers inside, and she opened the door cautiously to peer out.

Her thin old mouth, her incalculably hard and reticent gaze, stirred the big sleuth to a sort of pity; for Clara Cady was obviously afraid of the law, even though she had set its wheels in motion from some deep-rooted urge toward justice

"Come in."

She led him into the kitchen—by far the most livable room in the bleak old weather-beaten house—and motioned him to a chair as she wiped her thin, corded hands on her apron.

But he did not accept her awkward invitation to sit down.

"Just came up to take a look around. They put me in charge of the case, if it is a case, down to headquarters. Can I kinda stroll around the place?"

He had never been in Swope's house before. As he talked, his mild grey eyes roved about the intolerably clean kitchen. Through an open doorway, just beyond the pump, he glimpsed the lean-to shed.

Like all houses of its period and kind, the main sleeping rooms were apportioned to the main floor. A long-disused parlor, given over to the state occasions of christening and burial, led off to the right of the hall. Its gloom was maintained by drawn blinds and horsehair furniture.

Tufts of dried wheat emerging from bracketed vases of forgotten design stood in mute, dusty offering beneath enlarged tinted photographs of long dead Swopes.

Nem knew at a glance that neither Jonathan Swope nor any one else had set foot in the musty room for years. A fine grey film lay heavy upon mahogany and bric-a-brac. There was nothing to interest him here.

"Where do you sleep, Miss Cady—and young Charley?"

She nodded toward her room, close by the kitchen.

"Charley has the run of the attic, up them stairs." She snorted like an old warhorse. "That's one of his grievances against the old man. As if he earned decent keep."

The kitchen door was flung wide open at this point, and Nem Parsons saw Swope's renegade nephew sway slightly across the threshold.

He did not need to glimpse the protruding neck of the bottle in the youth's hip

pocket to know that Charley had been drinking again. The boy's eyes, bloodshot beneath sullen brows, roved from the detective to the housekeeper.

His intoxication gave him stolidness of a sort. Not a flicker of an eyelid betrayed any nervousness such as he had shown earlier in the day. Only defiance of them both lifted the corners of his mouth in a sneer as he crossed the room in front of them to the kitchen sink and, heaving a dipper of water from the pail, drank long and heartily.

Then, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he faced Nem.

"Come out to find the body of the murdered man?" he asked.

NEM received the sarcasm affably. "Just looking around, Charley."

"Look as much as you like." The weak mouth twitched as he nodded toward Clara Cady. "She's seen to it that you find him in a hurry—if he's dead. Cagey old girl, Clara."

She sucked in her breath venomously. "Listen to him, accusing me! Me, who came and told you what I feared for—"

Nem sensed that infinitely much depended on his next words. So young Charley was retaliating by an open accusation of his own!

"That'll do from both of you!" he rapped out. "Wait a minute, Charley!" It was a sharp command.

"Me?" glowered the boy from the threshold.

"The story goes," said Nem, equable as usual, now, "that your uncle was a pretty rich man. I've found that he didn't have a cent on deposit with any of the banks. Where did he keep his money?"

Charley shook his head.

"I dunno," he said sullenly. "Ask her, why don't you?"

Clara Cady showed her yellowish teeth. "I know? I should say not! And anyone who does know where he kept his old money knows by no honest means, and to no honest end!"

Nem fingered his hat. "Reckon we'll just have to look for it, then."

Charley flung back his head with a strident laugh. "Look as far as you like. If that's all you want of me, I'll be off."

Nem nodded to him pleasantly.

"Sure. Only don't go far, Charley." There was a wealth of kindly warning in his voice. "One thing I came up to tell you both was to stick around until this business is all cleared up."

Charley nodded and lurched off. They heard his heavy footsteps crunching down the gravel with needless violence.

"Whoso hardeneth his neck—" Clara Cady began in Biblical quotation, with venomous suggestion.

"Don't be too hard on the boy," Nem advised benignly. "He's kind of up against it, you know—more so'n ever if he killed his uncle."

She leveled unblinking black eyes upon him. "You think he did?"

He creaked about the kitchen in his soft congress shoes, and blandly ignored her query.

"Show me Charley's room, will you, where you found the gold eagle."

She led the way up dark, cobwebby stairs that rose out of the kitchen to a barren landing on the next floor, and up the steeper incline to the attic.

There was nothing remarkable about the room save its sordidness—a folding cot, a bare dresser, two chairs littered now with discarded clothes; window sills and bureau edge charred by forgotten cigarettes; an unkempt and dirty room intolerable to anyone but Charley Swope.

"Where did you say you found the coin—and when?" asked old Nem.

"Here. Right about here," she told him, leaning over to point behind the dresser.

"I was sweeping," she explained, "and—"

"This morning?"

She shook her head.

"Day before yesterday. The third day after Jonathan went away. The first two days Charley was in here with a hangover all day long, so I couldn't clean at all—"

"Not much use looking around here," Nem regretted, while he let no square inch of flooring or baseboard, or barren, decrepit furniture escape eye or hand. "If he's got the rest of it, he's got it in a safe place. He wouldn't be leaving it here. Now I'll take a look in Jonathan's room, and then—"

But he merely put his head inside the room she designated as the miser's.

Though he longed to muse over the missing man's belongings, putter about in that low, raftered chamber, he turned away. He preferred to search the house while Clara Cady was out. He pondered upon some means of getting rid of her.

What did she want? It disturbed him to sense her watchfulness. He was conscious of some compelling exertion of her will upon him.

"This your room?" He opened a door, peered into a more decent and comfortable room than either of the men of the house could boast.

"It's not very tidy."

"Looks fine." He let his eyes rove from couch bed to cushioned easy chair. A workbasket spilling undarned socks on the table, reminded him that Clara Cady was a woman after all.

She was so spare, so hard and sharp of physique and spirit, that one never thought of her as a feminine thing. He noticed, too, the big, worn Bible that showed constant use.

"Haven't seen a big old Bible like that since I was a child."

She smiled faintly.

"That was my father's. He was a great hand for reading a chapter in the evening."

A ZEALOUS reverence for the rusty book made her instinctively guard it from Nem's great hand. But he did not desecrate it. Instead, his hand awkwardly struck against the overflowing wicker workbasket and sent the socks and spools to the floor.

For all his apologies he was too ponderous a person to stoop down as swiftly as Clara Cady to retrieve her darning.

When they gathered up the last elusive spool he turned away. "Guess I've seen all I need to, for now. Thank you kindly."

She followed slowly downstairs, twisting her apron. When she spoke at last it was on an odd note.

"He never was much of a home body; used to spend most of his time in the old mill . . ." Her words trailed off.

But that prescience of old Nem's told him that she had accomplished some end of her own in a manner undecipherable to him for the moment.

He felt thoughtfully for matches and his pipe.

"Haven't been in the old mill since I was knee-high to a duck. I might take a look down there."

She hesitated. Then: "Mind if I come along? I don't much like to stay up here when Charley has a drunk mad on."

They could hear him sawing away at a wood pile.

"I know the mill better'n you do, too."

Nem looked at her in mild surprise. He really preferred to go alone; would, in fact, have denied her permission to accompany him except that she appeared to want to force herself upon him. For that she must have some definite reason.

That reason excited his curiosity and his interest. He must find out why it would be important to her to browse around the old mill with him. And that could only be achieved by letting her do it.

"Come along."

The pair of them walked down the grave path that Charley Swope had pounded in his sullen temper a little earlier, out through the old garden, overgrown now with burdocks and gaunt yellow mulleins, heavy

with the spicy sweetness of overripe grapes; along a sun-baked land hedged with choke cherry trees, and over the brow of the knoll.

The still waters of Swope's pond lay before them, with the mill at its head. Nem knew the mill well enough from his boyhood days, and even his phlegmatic nature had never been proof against its spell.

It was an uncanny place, with its hint of subterranean passageways, its aged, hand-hewn timbers, its wide, rattling clapboards, its two tiny windows darkened with the accretions of milling dust over generations, and the dark, swift-flowing flood of the mill race.

The best approach to it was over the spillway of the dam itself, across the bridge where the mill race tapped the dam, and underneath a row of great, drooping willows down into the declivity where the building stood.

Clara Cady led the way here. With surprising strength, she dragged back the rolling door and entered first into the dark, musty interior.

"If you're thinking of his hiding place for the money, I don't know where a more likely place would be," she told him. "I never did come up here much, with him hanging round all the time, and crabbed if you bothered him."

Presently Nem's eyes became accustomed to the gloom. In the center of the floor on which he stood were the two great, old-fashioned millstones, with their clumsy mechanical devices above; the chutes leading down from the grain bins overhead; the square, dust-encrusted carriers leading away from the bottom of the millstones.

A musty pile of corncobs was in a far corner, high enough to obscure the light filtering through one window.

Nem strayed toward it and peered into the little room beyond. As he stood there rubbing his clean-shaven chin he could hear the gurgle of water beneath his feet, and judged that the mill race must flow underneath.

Here he saw antiquated machinery for cleaning grain, festooned with matted cobwebs. An old-fashioned beam scales for weighing grain stood in one corner. This, too, was obviously no longer in service, for several of its weights were missing.

Then he saw something else that interested him intensely: a pile of old sacks pressed down into such shape as plainly indicated that a human form had long and often lain there. It was dark in this inner room, and as he trod ponderously he uttered a little yelp of dismay.

His tender toe had been stubbed against some unyielding substance. Nursing the injured member, he gave a little attention to Clara Cady's words: "Looks like old Jonathan must have napped here," she said, her eyes taking greater interest in the room they had just left. "Not that there's much use looking for his hiding place here, what with the water running under the floor."

NEM had a curious feeling that she was exerting some forceful will to attract him back into the first, larger room. Docilely he followed her back until she stood in the center of the desolate place gazing up at the maze of carriers obscured by dust and gloom and cobwebs.

"A man could hide anything in a place like this, and nobody would ever come on it, 'cepting by chance," she pronounced.

"What's on the floor above," Nem asked.

"I don't know. We'll go up, if you say. Want to look down here first?"

She began to walk with resolute litheness about the creaking floor. Nem walked more carefully, as if he feared that the ancient timbers might give way and project him to the floor beneath. He was in actuality surrendering himself to whatever plan or project she might be weaving.

He followed her gingerly as she circled one millstone completely, trying out each board as she walked. She seemed hardly conscious that he was following her lead.

"Look out," Nem said sharply.

They heard a faint tearing sound, and she turned with an exclamation to see that her too voluminous skirts had caught on a nail projecting from one side of the cylindrical drum that enclosed the largest set of millstones.

She reached down to loosen it, but Nem, chivalrously enough, hurried to her assistance.

"Don't tear the dress any more than you can help," she counseled him. "See if you can't pull the nail loose."

Nem obeyed. The nail came out easily—too easily. Instantly Nem realized that a segment of that cylindrical baseboard was loose from both the floor below and the drum above, so that it hinged outward like a gate.

Nem dropped to his knees and cautiously thrust his hand into the opening—cautiously because his knowledge of mill construction told him that the lower of the millstones should be housed in there. Yet his hand found nothing but emptiness. Away back in at arm's length he could feel the end of the upright shaft that had carried the millstone.

"What's the matter?" Clara Cady asked him. "What have you found?"

"Now who in Cain," Nem said to himself, ruminating, "would take away a lower millstone, and leave the upper one, unless he was looking for the safest hiding place—say, what's this?"

Nem withdrew his groping arm, black now with the dust of generations. Between thumb and forefinger he held up a silver coin.

"A silver dollar of 1912," he pronounced after swift inspection. "Say, Miss Cady, your catching your dress on that nail was the luckiest damage you ever did to yourself. This is it, all right."

"What is it?" she demanded, her voice trembling a little.

"This is where old Jonathan kept his money. Not a doubt. Why else should this old dollar be here? Why else should any one take away the lower millstone and leave the upper, except to mislead folks who would naturally look in from the top—and find the upper stone intact!"

"Are you sure? Look again. The rest must be there, unless—"

He knew her unspoken thought. Lighting a match, he peered once more into the narrow aperture, across its five-foot diameter and into its two-foot depth.

"Not a thing here," he pronounced. "Except—yes, there's another coin, away over where I can't reach it. And—and—"

"What've you got?"

"A little piece of cloth, hanging on a nail-end just inside the drum, probably where somebody's sleeve caught on and tore out. Looks like . . . What kind of goods is it, Miss Cady?"

She looked at the torn scrap casually, and then with startled fixation. A look of indescribably malign triumph came into her thin, hard face.

"It's khaki," she declared.

"Khaki? Who wears that kind of goods?"

She sucked back her breath.

"Nobody around here ever wore khaki but Charley Swope," she said slowly. "And if you'll come back to the house, I'll show you the sleeve that piece was tore out of. I've got the coat to mend in my room."

Nem got up from his knees, dusted his hands, and seated himself thoughtfully on the drum, stroking out the scrap of khaki that had been torn from Charley Swope's sleeve.

"So that's the way of it," he said softly, between his teeth. "Poor Charley!"

"I knew it!" she said shrilly. "But why poor Charley?"

He looked up at her with his mild eyes.

"Don't it seem to you like he's in a peck of trouble?"

She nodded.

"Will you do something for me? Right off, before he gets a chance to get rid of it? Go up to the house and bring down the coat this scrap was torn from. I'll wait for

you here. Kind of hurt my foot back there."

Meekly he read in her eyes a certain scorn of his softness—a flash that her lowered lids hid swiftly.

"Of course. I won't be long."

CHAPTER THREE

The Body in the Mill Race

THERE was a triumphant set to her thin, strong back as she marched away. Nem looked after her reflectively.

"Hard, hard," he said to himself, and sighed. "Poor Charley!"

Then alone, he rose, creaked back to the dark little room in which lay the pile of musty meal sacks. It was here that he had stubbed his toe on an unyielding ring of iron.

He stooped, breathing heavily, and thrust back the disordered sacks.

They covered a trapdoor. Nem tugged at the iron ring and lifted the square easily. The roar of the flood beneath sounded with increased volume in his ears. He had a flashlight in his pocket, small but powerful. His fingers trembling with eagerness, he pulled it out, directing its penetrating rays to the black, swollen current below.

The powerful white light pierced the troubled mill race and cleft the rushing waters. Nem gave vent to a long sigh.

There, held by the swift tide against the gate of the flume, kept submerged by one of the missing weights of the grain scales, lay huddled old Jonathan Swope.

He looked bleak and wet and pitiably forlorn. His dripping white face stared blindly up through the turgid flood, demanding just avengement. Its waxen pallor was disfigured by a dark discoloration that marred one sunken temple.

Such a discoloration, Nem knew, would be caused by a heavy blow. The blow that had killed him. Almost any sufficiently heavy blunt instrument could have caused that mark.

"Poor old Jonathan!" whispered Nem Parsons, staring down into the drowned eyes. "Kind of cruel to leave you there. But you'd rather stay a mite longer, I reckon. Till the one that put you there ties his own noose, hard and fast."

Gently he lowered the trapdoor and rearranged the pile of sacks over it.

When Clara Cady returned to the mill she found Nem sitting where she had left him, still nursing his injured toe.

She held out a soiled khaki coat, and into the jagged tear Nem reluctantly fitted the scrap he held for her to see.

For the first time she wavered.

"You're—you're sure, now?"

Nem's round grey eyes gave her mournful assent.

"Just as sure as if I'd found old Jonathan—'most as sure, anyway. Give me till tomorrow morning for that."

He saw a flicker of genuine emotion cross her hard face.

"Feel kind of bad, don't you?"

She was staring down at the patched and faded garment that mutely established Charley Swope's guilt.

"I mended that," she told Nem, touching a patch under the arm.

"You've been mendin' for him since he was a little shaver, haven't you? Guess you won't need to bother with Charley's clothes no more."

She hardened under his eyes. "No."

He folded the garment, tucked it under his arm.

"Better keep a close eye on Charley till tomorrow morning. I'll be ready then to clear things up. You've been real helpful."

He lumbered to the mill door with her, watched her gaunt, black-clad figure move across the creaking bridge, over the brow of the knoll, and vanish behind the overladen grapevines.

THE morning sun was just burning its upward path through the valley mists that clung wraith-like to slope and dale,

when Nem Parsons knocked again at the Swope door.

But the household was up long before, and the crisp odors of frying bacon and bubbling coffee greeted Nem as Clara Cady admitted him.

"Charley around?" he asked mildly.

"Just finishing his breakfast."

With some sense of the import of the impending drama, she led the way into the rarely used parlor, and stood with folded hands beneath a ghastly crayon portrait of some long-dead Swope wife.

Nem strolled restlessly to the window, raising the carefully lowered shade to peer out into the forlorn, overgrown garden.

At his nod to someone awaiting the summons, Clara Cady was at his elbow.

"Who's that?"

He looked at her in gentle surprise. "Coming up the walk? Officer Brennan. My job's 'bout over."

The old woman reminded him of a puppet moving on taut wires, so abrupt was every speech and gesture.

Now she cast a quick glance kitchenward, from which issued the small, intermittent noises of eating.

"Let him finish his breakfast," Nem said. "Time enough."

Miss Cady seated herself on the horsehair sofa, and with compressed lips and watchful eyes let Nem admit his associate by the little-used front door.

He returned at length, knowing that she despised him for his obvious reluctance to summon the sullen boy away from his breakfast.

But he could not stand fiddling with his watch chain long. His unpleasant duty had to be performed.

"Oh, Charley . . ."

The boy, unkempt, pale after two days' steady drinking, opened the kitchen door. His furtive blue eyes darted a quick, frightened glance at the blue-clad policeman in the front hall. There was the unattractive pathos of a cornered rabbit to him

"Come in here," Nem told him. "Got some news for you."

Without a glance at the old woman on the sofa, Charley sidled into the room.

Nem made his pockets jingle.

His ponderous, gentle deliberation drove the taut old woman to lean forward and speak, her worn hands straining tensely in her lap.

"I took him down to the mill yesterday . . ."

Nem stilled her with a look.

"That wasn't what I wanted to tell Charley, Miss Cady." His voice lost its gentleness. His eyes kept perpetual guard upon them both after he had brought Charley nearer to him by a commanding jerk of his head.

"Old Jonathan's found at last," he told them abruptly.

Charley Swope flung up his head with a startled look.

"Why couldn't you say so? Is he . . . dead?"

"Dead," said Nem.

There was a long silence in the unaired, formal room. But as Charley Swope brushed his arm across his forehead in a gesture of weary bewilderment, of dull acquiescence, Clara Cady rose to her spare height. Her shrill voice cracked as she pointed an accusing forefinger at the dogged figure of Jonathan's nephew.

"Don't stand there, you lout, as if you didn't know. Not after Nem Parsons found a piece of your khaki coat sleeve caught on a nail where the old man's money was hid. Not after he's found him in the mill race . . ." The rising tide of her denunciation drowned out the boy's protest.

"He knows it was you that struck him down, you—you—"

She made as if to sweep out of Nem Parsons' path. For at her smothered last words he pressed forward.

But he did not thrust past her to where the white-faced boy stood, weak jaws agape. It was her thin arm he grasped: her star-

tled, furious scream that shrilled through the house; her wrists that knew the icy clasp of steel.

It had not been silver he had been jangling in his pockets but a pair of steel bracelets.

"I arrest you, Clara Cady, for the willful murder of Jonathan Swope!" said old Nem. "Brennan—quick, she's a wildcat!"

WHEN her rage had been subdued and she cowered on the horsehair sofa, he turned to Charley Swope.

"Kind of lucky hunch I had, Charley, 'bouf the whole thing. Lucky for you. It looked bad, your quarreling with your uncle and all, but she made more'n one break. First she told about finding the gold piece when she was sweeping in your room. Your room obviously hadn't been swept in a long time.

"I was brought up careful, and I know when a room's been swept. Then she said she hadn't seen the *Journal,* when it was the piece in it that worried her into coming down to headquarters, and suggesting things to us!

"I began to wonder some when I found the *Journal* clipping in your Bible, Miss Cady. When I knocked your work basket over I peeped inside; you was so anxious for me not to touch that Bible, somehow. . . . Then, she was so durned anxious that I shouldn't miss the scrap of evidence against you, Charley.

"Smart of her to put the khaki torn from your coat right where your uncle had kept his money; smarter still to take me down there, and ease me along into finding it all by myself! She had to be awful sure I'd find the most damaging piece of evidence against you, Charley, before I found the body.

"It worked all right, that part of it. But when I sent her up to the house to bring me down the coat, just to see if the piece fitted, I opened up a trapdoor I'd stumbled against—and found old Jonathan weighted down against the flume gate.

"Even then I wasn't sure, dead sure. But I told myself that one of you had killed the old man, that one of you knew too much. An awful thing, guilty knowledge. It betrays you sooner or later. And I planned for it to betray one of you this morning, when I told you old Jonathan was found. It did.

"When Clara Cady turned on you—you standing blinking there, not knowing how or where your uncle was found—and cried out about his being in the mill race, I knew. I hadn't said a word about where I'd found him.

"But she forgot that in her anxiety to get the thing pinned on you then and there. She wanted to make it clear that it was you that had struck him down—and I hadn't mentioned the awful blow on the temple she gave him, there in the mill."

A long sigh escaped the woman's parted lips.

"What'd you do it for, Miss Cady? His money, of course. And this is where I fell down on the case; I ain't unearthed the money yet, Charley. She hid it good. Might as well tell us, Miss Cady."

She bent her grim grey head.

"Look in the kitchen range; it's in a big brown crock."

Parsons looked down at her in open admiration.

"Now, why didn't I think of that? 'Course, with an oil stove, you don't use the range this time of year!"

He sighed, lumbered to his feet.

"Smart of you, that was."

Clara Cady bit her thin lips.

"Fool!" she whispered, and struck her thin chest with her manacled hands.

He shook a reproachful head.

"Nope, you were real clever about it. Only—you knew too much. Ready, Brennan?"

They filed out of old Jonathan's front parlor. ◆ ◆ ◆

He already had two dead wives behind him. Was it just coincidence, now, that he took out a life-insurance policy on Helen?

He stood at the foot of the bed with two guns in his hands. . . .

Three Times And Out!

By
WALTER B. SUGRUE

HE MET her at the train, and at the first sight of him she was profoundly shocked. He was gaunt and haggard, and his eyes smoldered in the pits of their sockets. She had expected some change in him, of course, but nothing as bad

as this. Yet he had been eight months in prison, and then there had been the terrible strain of the trial on top of that. Her heart went out to him.

But all she said was, "I came the moment I got your telegram, Will."

"Thanks, Helen," he muttered, and scooped up her bags. "I got you a room in the Plaza."

He did not say a word in the cab He just sat in brooding silence. She could not take her eyes from his ravaged face. When she could stand his gnawing silence no longer, she put her hand on his arm and said gently, "It's all over now, Will Try to put it out of your mind. You were acquitted."

He clenched his hands. "I didn't kill my wife, Helen."

"Of course not. The jury said you weren't guilty."

"After forty-eight hours of thinking it over, they said I wasn't guilty," his voice was low and bitter. "Forty-eight hours. There's a lot of room for doubt in forty-eight hours. I was never acquitted. They released me, that's all. I'm still on trial. Every place I go, I'm on trial. They look at me as if they're saying to themselves, 'There goes Will Chandless. They said he killed his wife. Couldn't prove it, though.' Acquitted!"

She felt as if she were going to cry. The things they had done to him. She stroked his arm. She wanted to cry out that she loved him. She wanted to give him the comfort and strength of that—but it was the wrong time.

He was saying woodenly, "Not many men have two wives who die 'accidentally' within three years of each other. Now they're wondering if I killed your sister, too, Helen."

Her sister had been his first wife. She had died in a motor accident.

"Will, Will," she pleaded. "You're imagining things . . ."

"Am I? I overheard two cops talking, and one of them said, 'That makes two for this bird, don't it? Nice going.' "

"But nobody believes that!"

"If they don't believe it, they wonder."

And now the tears did come to her eyes. She said desperately, trying to show him a part of how she felt for him, "I followed your trial every day in the newspapers, Will No one who really followed it could ever believe you guilty. It was very plain that you were innocent. But I almost died when her brother was on the stand. His testimony was so bitter."

HE MADE a small gesture with his hand. "He was merely telling the truth Adele and I did fight all the time. Adele had too much money. She wanted to beat me down with it. Anyone who knew us could have given the same testimony." Then in anguish, "But when a man is your friend and lies about you! Al Moran didn't see me in the boat with Adele that night on the lake. He didn't. He lied!"

"He didn't say he saw *you*, Will. He said he saw a man in the rowboat with her."

"He didn't call me by name, but he described me."

"His description could have fit almost anyone, Will."

"It fit me. He knew it fit me. He intended it to fit me. Do you know how much money Adele left me? Almost two hundred thousand dollars. And when your sister died, I got ten thousand dollars insurance. They're saying I killed both of them for their money."

He didn't look at her He stared out the window. "That's what they're trying to make me live with from now on," he said heavily. "They're trying to make me go crazy. But I'm not going to do it. I'm going to fight them."

Helen could think of nothing to say. They had destroyed him, and she felt as if her heart were breaking. She had been in love with him since before he married her sister. Five years. Five years ago he had

been big and confident, and his grin had been slow warmth. Now there was grey in his unruly black hair, and suffering had gouged into his face. She took his bony hand in both of hers and fondled it while the tears whispered down her cheeks.

But when they got to the hotel, she was all right again. That is, she could hide it from him and show him a smiling face.

"Come up and we'll have a drink, Will," she said.

But from the way he gathered her bags and paid off the driver, she could see that he had intended to go up to her room with her all along. Upstairs, she opened her bag on the bed and brought out a bottle of Old Bushmill. She held it up, smiling.

"See?" she said. "I remembered."

He had never drunk anything but Old Bushmill.

Her little surprise went flat, for he had walked to the window and was standing with his back to her. His hands clenched, unclenched.

"I sent for you, Helen," he said harshly.

"Yes, Will. And I came."

"I want you to marry me."

Something icily constricted in her breast. He had thrown it at her like a slap, without any words of endearment.

"Why, Will?" she managed to say.

"And I don't want you to ask any questions, either." He took a breath and went on more calmly. "You can get a divorce afterward. I have lots of money. I'll send you to Reno. Or you can go to Mexico, if you want. Or Paris. I sent for you because you're the only one I can trust. But if you don't want to do it, I won't blame you. I mean, I'll understand. Then I'll try to get someone else."

If only he would look at her! She let the flooding questions go unasked. He needed her, she realized in a surge of tenderness. He needed her more than he thought. It would be cruel, she could see, to torment him with questions now. The questions would be answered when he was ready—and well enough—to answer them. But right now he needed someone to *give* him love.

"Of course I'll marry you, Will," she said.

He turned a little and looked at her over his shoulder. "Let me warn you," he said. "It won't be . . . pleasant. There'll be reporters and photographers and people looking at you . . ."

"We could go some place and be married quietly, Will."

"We'll be married right here in Newark," he said grimly. "Right here, right in the middle of it. That's why I warned you."

Why, why did he have to torment himself deliberately this way? What was he trying to prove? But now she was steadfastly sure that this was something that would pass.

"Suppose we have that drink now, Will," she smiled.

They did not kiss.

THE next three days were worse than she could have imagined. When they went to City Hall for the marriage license, the clerk's eyes spread when Will gave his name, then narrowed, and Helen realized with a shock that Will had been right. They did look at him with speculative accusation. Had he killed two wives for their money? It had never been proved, but—had he done it? And there was suspicion in their eyes when they looked at her, too. What had she had to do with it? Had she been part of the reason Will had killed his second wife? What did she know about it? Had she not locked herself safely inside her love for Will, she would have fled in horror.

And the reporters, tipped off by the clerk, were on them before they could leave the City Hall. Flashbulbs winked piercingly. Sharp, inquisitorial voices probed and probed and probed. There was hardly a moment in the next three days that they were without reporters. The reporters were

with them when Will bought the wedding ring. Pictures were taken of the ring. The reporters were with them when they went to Medical Center for their blood tests. Pictures were taken of the doctor handing them their reports. Reporters followed them into restaurants, into the movies, into the hotel.

Though this was bad enough, the worst came when Will took out the two insurance policies, each for twenty-five thousand dollars. One on her life, in which she named him beneficiary. And one on his own, in which she was beneficiary.

"Just in case," he said tonelessly.

The cold-eyed agent, who took the check for a year in advance on each policy, carefully and in detail explained the forfeit clauses. He could hardly have warned Will more plainly that the company had its eye on him this time, that the death of a third wife would be viewed with gravest suspicion.

Helen burst out fiercely, "You have no reason to say a thing like that!"

The agent merely raised his eyebrows, and there was a look of pity in his eyes.

They were married in the city clerk's office.

Reporters and photographers were at the airport when they boarded the Tampa plane.

"Just where in Florida do you plan to spend your honeymoon, Mr. Chandless?"

"Do you plan to return to Newark?"

Will answered no questions, and it was not until they were on the plane that Helen found out where they were going.

"Bird Key, just south of Sarasota," he said shortly. "Adele bought it to make a real estate subdivision, but she never got to it. There's only one house on it."

There were more reporters awaiting them in Tampa, but Will had bought a car by telegram, and he loaded their bags into it in silence. The newsmen clustered around the car, demanding to know where they were going.

"Fishing," said Will succinctly, and shoved the car into first gear.

They leaped out of the way, swearing. No one followed them out of Tampa.

It was a three-hour drive to Bird Key, and it was dusk when they arrived. They thundered over the rickety wooden bridge and lurched into the rutted sandy road. The house, a square cement-block cubicle, stood on a narrow dune that overlooked both the Bay and the Gulf. Behind the house was a dock to which was tied an old, soggy rowboat.

WHILE Will unpacked their bags, Helen went around opening windows, humming contentedly. Now that she had Will alone, she was going to do her best to make him forget the horror of the past eight months. She knew that love alone was not going to do it. She was going to have to work at it. She was going to have to be serene, and sooner or later her serenity would wash out the memories. She was going to have to be kind. Gradually he would become aware that she loved him. It would have to be gradual. She could not show him now, for in his fierce bitterness he would mistake it for pity.

As she passed the bedroom, where he was unpacking the bags, she turned to give him a smile. She caught her breath. He was standing at the foot of the bed with two ugly, shiny guns in his hands. He looked up.

"Do you know how to use one of these things?" he asked abruptly.

She shook her head.

"Then come here and I'll show you."

Reluctantly, she took the gun he held out. She didn't want to touch it. He showed her how to aim and squeeze the trigger. He showed her how to load it.

"And whatever you do," he said, "be careful that you don't get the barrel plugged up with sand or anything. It'll backfire and blow your head off. Now this is your gun. Keep it."

"But what do we want guns for, Will?" she cried.

He waved his hand vaguely. "Racoons, snakes. The mangrove is full of them."

For the first time, she didn't believe him. His eyes were narrow and hot when he looked at her.

The next morning he had to go into the village for groceries.

"I'll stay here and clean house while you're gone," she said cheerfully. "Everything's so musty."

"You'll come with me!" he snapped

She looked at him in surprise. His voice had been sharp and commanding. Then she remembered and said softly, "Of course, Will. I'd like to see the village, anyway."

They bought enough groceries to last two weeks, and Will also bought a small outboard motor for the rowboat, two fishing rods and tackle.

On the way back, he said to her, "Can you swim?"

She shook her head. "Not very well."

"Then stay out of the water. Don't even go wading unless I'm with you. Understand that?"

"But wh-why?" she stammered.

He clamped his lips together and finally said, "Sting rays. Down here they run from the size of a pancake to the size of a sewerplate. They're flat, and they have a poisoned tail. If one of them lashes you, you'll keel right over from the pain. So don't go fooling around the water unless I'm there. It only takes a foot of water to drown."

He was lying again. She could tell he was lying because he avoided her eyes. Something swift and cold shot up inside her. Not fear, exactly. Something else. The feeling that Will had married her for an ugly reason.

It was a feeling she could not shake off.

He scarcely spoke to her in the days that followed. He sat out on the beach, scanning the sparkling water through a pair of binoculars, or he took her out in the boat. They brought their rods, but they did not fish. They sat dangling their lines in the water, but all the while Will was watching the Bay, intently scrutinizing every boat that appeared.

When he did speak to her, it was to tell her sharply what she could do and what she could not do.

"Don't go into the mangrove. It's full of rattlesnakes and cottonmouths.

"Don't go out in the boat alone. You can't swim, remember that. Don't go anywhere alone."

And he watched her. Constantly he watched her. She was never out of his sight. If she happened to step around the back of the house, the next minute he would be striding around the corner, looking for her

And always he had the air of *waiting*

Boats passed constantly, both in the Bay and in the Gulf. As long as they remained in sight, Will stood in the shadow of the house and watched them through his binoculars.

But mostly he watched her until the constant strain of it frayed her nerve ends. His dark eyes never left her alone, stripped her of all privacy.

Except at night. She slept in the bedroom, and he slept on the studio couch in the tiny living room. But even then, the connecting door was always left open.

ON THE fifth day, at sunset, a grey cabin cruiser anchored about a half mile offshore in the Gulf. Will watched it through his binoculars until it was too dark to see.

Usually, after dinner, they took a walk on the beach, but this night they stayed in.

"Too many mosquitoes," said Will shortly.

Helen clenched her hands in her lap. There were mosquitoes every night, but they rubbed themselves with 6-12 and walked unmolested. She slept very badly that night. It was pitch dark when she

awakened, and instantly she knew that she was alone in the house, for she could not hear Will's heavy breathing from the next room.

In a spurt of terror, she cried, "Will, Will!"

He came running in from outside "What's the matter?" he demanded.

"N-Nothing . . ."

"Why'd you yell like that?"

"I . . . What were you doing outside, Will?"

He turned away from her. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. I felt restless and took a little walk."

Oh God, why did he have to lie! "Please don't lie to me, Will," she begged. "I love you, Will."

He said, *"What!"*

"Nothing, Will, nothing. How—how long are we going to stay in this awful place?"

He did not answer immediately. "Not much longer," he said slowly. "Not much longer. Now go back to sleep."

He went back into the living room and she heard the springs of the studio couch creak as he lay down on it. She was awake for the rest of the night, and she knew that he did not sleep either, for the tempo of his breathing was different when he slept.

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, he started a game of canasta with her that lasted all day. Not once did he step out of the house, and not once did he let her go out. But all day he kept peering through the window to see if the grey cabin cruiser were still anchored out there in the Gulf.

But after dinner, when it got dark, his mood changed abruptly. He became almost cheerful.

"How about a little fishing tonight, Helen?" His lift of mood sounded forced. "We can get some snook over there by the pilings of the bridge. Ever catch snook? A real fighting fish. We'll pack a little lunch and take it along. What do you say to that?"

She looked back steadily at him. Every day they had gone out in the boat, but never once had he shown any real interest in fishing.

"If you really want to go fishing, Will," she said, letting him know that she didn't believe him.

"Of course I want to go fishing. I'll get the things together while you make the lunch."

He turned on the porchlight, and started to gather their fishing equipment out there —the dip net, two rods, his tackle box, a big galvanized pail into which to put their catch. He went down to the beach to get some crabs for bait.

"Hey, Helen," he bellowed in a resounding voice, "better make about ten sandwiches. We might be out all night."

When he came back from the beach, he was carrying two little white crabs, squirming in his fingers. She watched him, and something heavy hung over her heart. Two little crabs for bait. Two. How long could you fish with two little crabs? Not all night, certainly.

She went to her room, got the gun Will had given her, and put it in the box with the sandwiches.

When she went down to the dock, Will was crouched over the stern of the boat, lashing the outboard motor so that its position was fixed and immovable. He had rigged a pole in the bow and the kerosene lantern hung from it, burning feebly. Their fishing equipment lay beside the dock. He gave her a quick, sidelong glance.

"Better try this motor," he muttered.

He gave the starting cord a yank. The motor coughed, then caught. Slowly the rowboat moved out into the darkness of the Bay, the kerosene lantern burning yellowly in the bow. Will did not try to stop it. He shot Helen another sidelong glance, then, unconvincingly, swore.

"But it's nothing to worry about," he said. "The way I've got that motor lashed,

she'll just make a big circle and come back."

HELEN sat in the darkness and listened to the sound of the motor go farther and farther away from the dock. It was not circling. It was moving straight up the open Bay.

Will nervously lit a cigarette, then suddenly threw it down in the water. He squatted on the dock beside her.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" he asked quietly.

Her heart beat a little faster. "Said what?" she asked, though she knew what he meant.

"You said you loved me."

"Yes, Will."

"I . . . wish you didn't."

"I know you don't love me, Will."

"But I do, I do!" he cried. His arm slipped around her and touched the soft hair that curled at the nape of her neck.

"Then why do you wish I didn't?" Helen asked a little breathlessly.

His hand tightened on her shoulder, then opened and lay there stiffly. He tried twice to say something. He jumped up and walked heavily to the end of the dock, where he stood in silence. At first he just stood there, slump-shouldered, but then, without her quite knowing when the transition took place, he was tense and there was that air of *waiting* about him again. He came back to her side, walking quickly.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the darkness up the path toward the house. Her breath kept catching in her throat, and finally she whispered, "I've got to know." She slipped off her shoes and ran noiselessly up the sandy path after him.

She saw his shoulders bulk against the sky just before he slid into the shadows of the house. She was right behind him, but it was dark, and she knew he could not see her in the deeper shadows of the mangrove and sea grape. He was standing in the middle of the living room, staring into her bedroom when she stepped through the doorway after him and flattened against the wall.

Then suddenly she realized that there was someone else in the house. In her bedroom. Will took his gun from his pocket and reached out slowly for the wall switch. Light seemed to explode into the room.

Helen had a confused glimpse of something crouched at the foot of her bed like a gigantic toad. Its hand shot up and a tongue of flame spurted from it. There was a sharp clap and something struck Helen on the arm. Will's gun coughed once and he dove into the room. Helen slid slowly down the wall and sat on the floor. Incredulously, she stared at the blood that steeped through her fingers where she held her arm. She saw two pairs of legs thrashing in the semi-darkness of her bedroom, and then there was silence. A few minutes later, Will walked out, breathing heavily and weaving a little. His eyes rounded when he saw her sitting there on the floor, and with a cry he went down on his knees beside her. He tore incoherently at the sleeve of her dress.

"I'm all right, Will." She managed a pallid smile. "It's just a scratch. I . . . *Who was that in my room?*"

Will jumped to his feet and ran into the kitchen. "Her brother," he said. "Where's the mercurochrome?"

She giggled. "The closet over the sink."

He came back and spilled the mercurochrome all over her arm, his hands were shaking so. He ripped up his shirt and bandaged her.

"Whose brother, Will?" she asked meekly.

"Adele's." He touched the bandage with the tips of his fingers. "How's that feel?"

"It burns. But . . . what was he doing here?"

Will said grimly, "Arranging the 'accidental' death of my third wife. Can you stand? I'll show you."

"Of course I can stand."

She stood. She swayed a little and quickly he put his arm around her. She looked into her room and cried out at what she saw there.

Lying on the floor, wired to the foot of her bed by a hole through its rattles, was a thick-bodied rattlesnake.

"He gave it just a little whiff of chloroform to make it easy to handle," said Will. "It'll come to in about an hour, I imagine, He killed Adele, of course. For her money, I'd say—because he'd get her money if I had been convicted of the murder."

"And you knew he'd come here, Will. You *knew!*"

"I had an idea somebody might come," said Will somberly. "When I was acquitted, the police immediately started looking for Adele's real murderer. That would always be hanging over him, the chance that they'd find him. Unless he could find a fall guy."

"And that's the reason you married me, Will."

THERE was no accusation in her voice, but he flushed.

"Yes," he said. "And I took out insurance on you, too. And brought you down here to Bird Key. *He* knew about this place. All Adele's friends knew about it. And he knew if you died 'accidentally' of snake bite, I'd never in the world be able to convince anybody that I hadn't arranged it. They'd call me a homicidal maniac and lock me away. And that would prove, to the police anyway, that I must also have murdered Adele. A man whose *three* wives died acidentally! I was a ready-made fall guy, wasn't I? That's how I tried to make it look, anyway. And that," he added bitterly, "is what I let you in for. Deliberately."

"That's all right, Will," she said very softly.

He stared at her. *"What?"*

"I said, it's all right. I wanted to help you because I loved you. And I was a help, wasn't I?"

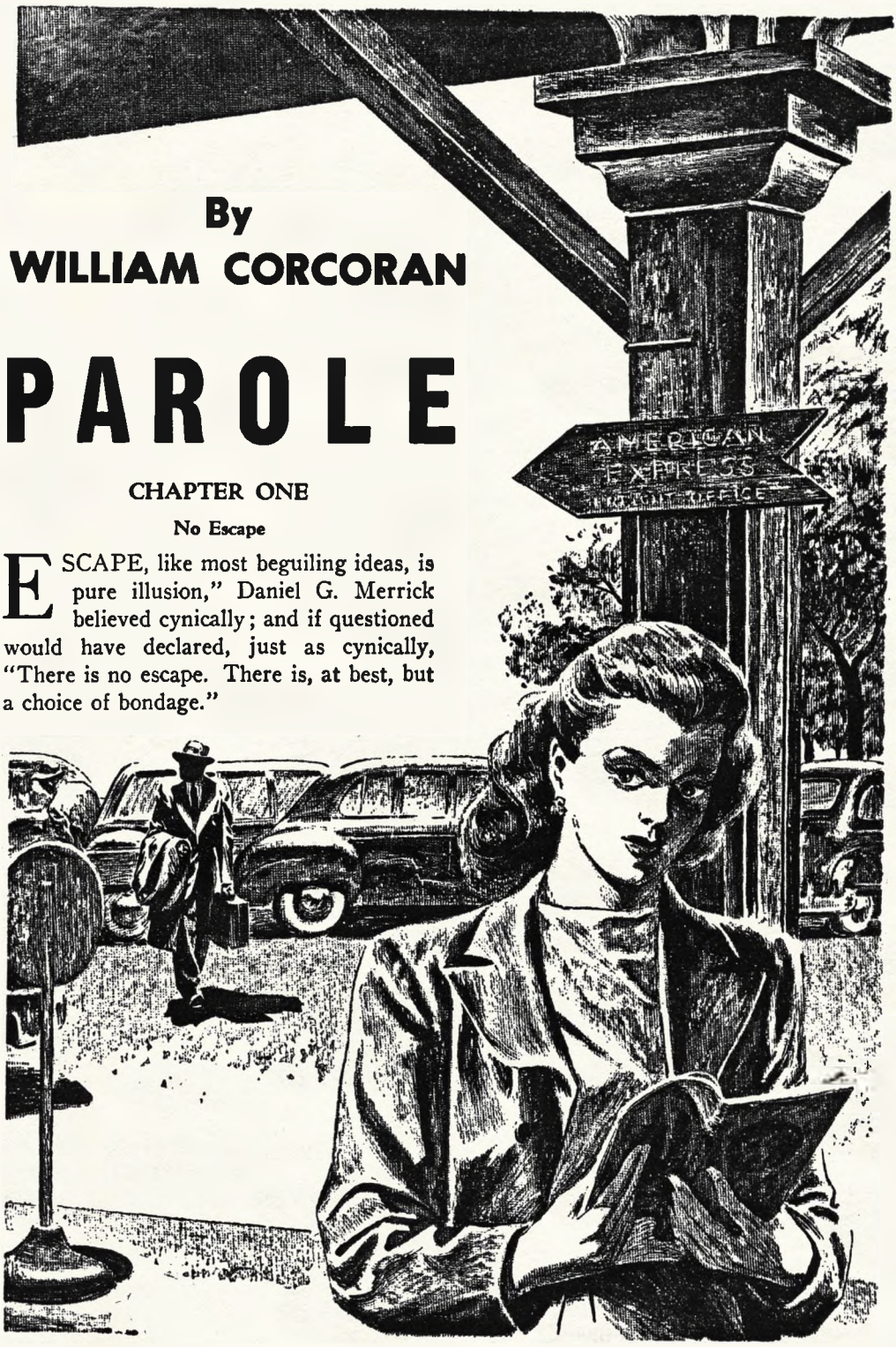
His eyes were incredulous. His arms tightened around her. "I'm crazy about you!" he cried. "I realized it this morning, but . . . Listen, you're going to marry me and I won't take no for an an . . ." He stopped, his jaw dropping. His laugh rang out, clear and true. "My God," he cried, "we *are* married!" ♦ ♦ ♦

What chance had Merrick against this quiet, smiling man . . . who was determined to carve out a future from Merrick's forgotten past?

"The dice are still rolling, sucker," Wool said, "and I'm doubling my bets!"

By
WILLIAM CORCORAN

PAROLE



CHAPTER ONE

No Escape

ESCAPE, like most beguiling ideas, is pure illusion," Daniel G. Merrick believed cynically; and if questioned would have declared, just as cynically, "There is no escape. There is, at best, but a choice of bondage."

This testament was neither profound nor daringly original, yet Merrick uttered it to impress no one but himself. Which he did at least once daily, usually at a certain moment shortly after his arrival at the Bank of Innisfail, where he was president—an amiable and wise despot.

Seated at his desk, mornings, after greeting the staff with a cheerful rumble and disposing of the stub of the day's initial cigar, Merrick was wont to cast an accustomed, slightly amused glance upward through the plate-glass front of the bank to a second-story window across the street. There, above another desk, invariably he met the gaze of Jonas Galt—Estates, Realty, Insurance—a gaze chronically suspicious and full of sour warnings, as if it saw deep into Merrick's soul.

But that was merely old Jonas Galt's way with all of Innisfail—familiar, and regarded indulgently by everyone he knew. To Merrick it was a symbol, as if Galt were principal keep in Merrick's chosen bondage. Merrick did not mind. A man wholly innocent and blameless and unafraid might have chafed under that sentinel-like scrutiny. Merrick did not mind. He merely smiled slightly, inscrutably, and turned comfortably to the morning mail, a very picture of executive competence and solidity as seen from the street—square, firm shoulders; affable, intelligent head and face; features a little solid with approaching middle years, yet brown and vigorous and alert with ageless health and force.

This morning, Merrick found an early visitor commanding his attention. The man was a stranger, a smallish, wiry man with a pugnacious mouth. Pale, cool eyes stared from a narrow, arrogant face. He looked obscure, yet self-important and confident.

"The name is Merrick? Daniel G. Merrick?" said the stranger.

"It is."

Inexplicably, this amused the man. He sat down unbidden. "I want to have a talk with you. I suppose this place is all right?"

Merrick smiled. "I've found it satisfactory for most of the business I do."

"This is not business," said the man, his eyes steady and a little sinister. "And I doubt you're going to find it very satisfactory."

The assumption was correct. A quiver of electric tension ran through Merrick's imperturbable frame as the man identified himself. The name was James Wool. The occupation, private detective. The errand, a certain delicate matter of the unmistakable resemblance between Daniel G. Merrick, capable president of the Bank of Innisfail, and one Sam Bodine, six years vanished from a certain Eastern city, following his indictment for the crime of conspiracy to defraud!

JAMES WOOL came grimly to his point. "Merrick, I know you are Sam Bodine. Naturally, I established that before coming here. I wasn't actually looking for you. I sort of stumbled across you by accident. But somebody was bound to. It's remarkable you've lasted this long. You've covered up pretty well. The last place to look for a crook would be in the president's chair of a bank. I had to look twice, myself!"

"Praise from Ceasar!" murmured Merrick. His composure was perfect, though his veins ran cold as ice. "Go right on."

"You seem to have made yourself pretty solid with this town," Wool said admiringly, even a little enviously. He began to relax. His pale eyes were narrowed a little, and covetous. "I delayed a couple of days, as a matter of fact, trying to figure it out, but it stopped me. How do you do it?"

"Do what?" There was a breath of mockery in the tone.

"What's the racket? Where are you cashing in? I don't see it. Pillar of respectability and all, and not a citizen wise to the angle?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Why not?" mocked Wool. "You're

washed up. The nippers are on. You might as well."

Merrick considered this. "Well, I might, but I doubt you'd understand. You've named the racket. It was a good one, and I'll miss it."

"I named it?" challenged Wool. "Named what?"

" 'Pillar of respectability,' " quoted Merrick. "That's all there ever was to it. It's still the best racket in the world. You're surprised? Doesn't it occur to you that my take, as president of the city's foremost bank, over a course of years, is several times that of any single haul I might make here?"

The other made a soft, scornful sound. "You? A crook?"

Merrick shrugged slightly. "I want all I can get in this world. I've found a way to get all that I want. It's as simple as that. But I doubt if you'd understand."

Wool grew suspicious, hostile.

"Off the cloud, pal—down to earth!" he snarled softly. "You're not going to soft-soap out of this rap. We're well on the road to Brandon Prison! Hand in hand. We might as well understand one another before we start."

"Certainly!" Merrick's calm decisive voice turned a shade harder. "And any understanding includes your unquestioning acceptance of the fact that not a single criminal act is hidden anywhere in my record in Innisfail!"

Wool looked more than incredulous; he looked puzzled. Then he looked a little annoyed. "What of it? Why try to impress me? An investigation will soon establish that one way or the other."

"There will be no investigation."

"Oh, no?" came the sinister drawl. "Why not?"

Merrick, for answer, reached over the desk and turned a framed portrait photograph about so that it faced his visitor. It pictured a pleasant, handsome woman and two beautiful small children. "That," said Merrick, "shows all the reason necessary."

Wool viewed the woman and the children unmoved. "Tough on them," he remarked. "But that was your lookout. What's it got to do with me?"

Merrick was sure of himself; he was a man of the quick hard decision, and he did not whine, ever.

He had gambled high, and lost. He was already deep into the next play, without quibble over the last.

"You're not taking me back east for nothing, Wool. There's a state fugitive-from-justice reward, I suppose. That was one of the things you'd look into. The surety people never give up; they still offer a sizable reward, doubtless. There's a nice slice of money—"

"Hold on!" Wool said suddenly. "I've heard all this before, you know. It's been set to music. There's a nice slice of money, but you'll pay me twice as much to drop the matter. The answer is no! I've seen that offer accepted—and somebody get railroaded or framed or bumped off."

"Don't interrupt me again," Merrick said quietly. "I'm making no offer. I'd be bled for the remainder of my life. What I was about to say is this: If you insist on publishing the details of this story so that it becomes known locally, I shall surrender to the chief of police, a man who is my friend, and we'll cut you out of the reward entirely."

"The hell you say!" Wool blustered.

MERRICK jerked open a desk drawer and reached a calm hand inside. With the other hand he drew a telephone toward him. "See the gun?" he said, nodding to the drawer. "Better sit quiet. And observe the telephone. Shall I call the chief?"

Wool sat very quiet. His gaze went calculatingly about the bank and out toward the street, then returned to Merrick. He licked his lips slightly. "I guess we can arrange things," he murmured.

"We can. I'm accepting the inevitable.

I'll go with you. But quietly. I intend merely to disappear from the town, and when Sam Bodine arrives east, Dan Merrick will have ceased forever to exist. Personally, I don't matter, but my family does—and the bank. I'd commit more than fraud to shield them. A blank mystery, without any visible scandal, will be far easier on them than an exposure of my past. When will you be ready to leave town?"

"I'll give you till tomorrow noon." Triumph suffused the sinister little man—a curious, half-suppressed kind of triumph. "And you won't try to get away meantime. It would be very dangerous!"

"I shan't." Merrick rose. On his forehead a vein stood out throbbingly. "We understand one another, I imagine. But you'd better stay out of my sight until tomorrow. There may be danger in that, too."

"Yeah?" drawled Wool. He laughed, rising leisurely.

"And now," said Merrick, "get out!"

"Okay," said Wool, and rose. "But I'll be back—soon!" There was a swagger in his jaunty, self-satisfied departure.

The teller in the nearest cage was watching, alert and curious, but quite uncomprehending, as Daniel Merrick sat down. Merrick closed the desk drawer, righted the framed photograph, replaced the telephone. He took out a cigar and lighted it.

"There is no escape," Merrick had told himself often. "Escape is pure illusion." He had schooled himself in that philosophy, yet the reckoning was hard. Six years of watchful, anxious labor; six years' rebuilding of a life—and a bird of passage drifting in the door one evil morning to demolish all the building in a breath!

Merrick was proud of those six years. He had served Innisfail well, he knew, guiding it firmly through tumult and disaster of the sort to test the mettle of a man; weighing his own strength, his judgment and his worth. Actually, it was the urgency of those years that had pushed him up so rapidly from wary obscurity; it was the crisis and the hour, seeking out the man big enough to cope with them. He had no regrets, nor had Innisfail.

He had done his best. Other hands must learn now to take his place. The pleasant woman in the photograph and those matchless babies—they would miss him more than he dared think. No one could replace him there.

It was good to know that they would not be entirely helpless. He would be leaving them some money, and the prestige of an untarnished name. Actually the name did not belong to him; it belonged to them all—to the three in the photo, to the bank, to the town depending on the bank. To injure it would be to strike at them all, in varying but terrible degrees. He could not let them down; he would bequeath them that much—a bulwark and a strength.

Then after that—other years, another name. He refrained from thinking of them too vividly. He would face them soon enough. They loomed inexorable and immense, and he was bowed before the prospect. There was no escape; there was but a choice of bondage. And Dan Merrick was making his choice.

CHAPTER TWO

Stolen Bonds

THE morning work was resumed, but automatically. Merrick moved in an accustomed aura of heartiness and well-being, but that was automatic, too. Much of life had long been automatic, for these tasks were no undue strain on his ample powers; and the trick of concealing well his personal emotions was one long mastered. The years had prepared him for this moment.

At noon, Merrick telephoned home that he would not drive out for lunch that day. He put on hat and coat and walked down

Market Street. He turned on Court Street for one block, and entered the Innisfail police station, back of City Hall.

The desk sergeant looked up, smiled affably and said, "He's in. I doubt he's busy right now. Go ahead up and see."

Merrick waved a general greeting around the station house, went up to the second floor like one very much at home, and entered the door marked "Chief of Police."

A bank president and a police chief have much in common, for all the disparity between their backgrounds and duties.

Between them, often enough, they can make or break a town. These two understood one another, appreciated one another, gave deference each to the other in his special field.

"Gabe," said Merrick as they both sat back and lighted cigars, "I've got a question to put to you. Not a very big one—call it irrelevant curiosity. But you can shed some light on it."

"It had better be a real small one, Dan'l," said Gabe Miller sardonically. "I'm a poor hand at big ones. Don't take my word for it! Read what the rip-snorting editor of our *Argus* has to say about me on his front page this morning."

Merrick smiled. "Not another crime wave, Gabe?"

"So help me, if so much as a hencoop is robbed tonight, I'll have a full-fledged crime wave to contend with tomorrow—at least in the columns of the *Argus*. Portugee Johnny Moline is in town. The *Argus* news man happened for once to be at the depot instead of draped over a beer bottle at Nell Seamn's place, and he saw Moline arrive. Seemingly, his arrival is entirely my fault."

"Moline?" said Merrick. "Moline? I've heard the name."

Miller gave him a look. "A security shark. Newcomer to these parts. Police record, but always escapes conviction. Killed two men. Dangerous." The chief's eyes kindled. "Met him yet? Tall, dark, good-looking fellow; thirty-five or so; smooth; clever; hard. Also hot-tempered, vengeful, kill-you-for-two-cents, and with half a reason. You might keep an eye open. He's a slippery one."

Merrick's eyebrows arched skeptically, but he said, "I'll remember."

"Well, I don't think he's here to make trouble," Miller conceded. "He'd never arrive so openly if he was. So long as he behaves himself, I've no call to bother him, editors or no editors!" he finished with a snort.

Merrick chuckled.

It was a political feud, almost comic because the issues really at stake were never in the least related to those raised, with such commotion, in the public eye.

"It's just a small question I want to ask you, Gabe," Merrick assured him, returning to his own affairs. "I merely want to learn something about police routine, in the identification of missing or unknown persons. To take a hypothetical case, suppose you found a stranger lying dead up an alley. How would you proceed?"

"You mean violence? Murder?"

"Possibly." Merrick was indifferent. "Find him alive, perhaps. Or starve him to death, if that'll help. I'm interested merely in the technique of identification."

THERE was keen conjecture in Miller's gaze, but Merrick was offering no explanations. The chief leaned back in his chair. "Criminal detection in real life is rarely a business of deduction, or what is called synthesis, Dan'l. The big detective in the stories is never a professional cop, you'll have noticed. There's a good reason. That kind of detective shines brilliantly in some hand-picked, isolated case where his guess is good as another's; but he'd likely bog down in a week on a routine police detail where the cases come in dozens. Police work is partly organization, partly slow elimination—and partly luck.

"Unknown persons are identified as

methodically as you fellows sort checks."

"All right, let's limit the hypothesis." Thoughtfully, Merrick suggested, "Suppose you picked me up and I couldn't—or wouldn't—tell who I was. You knew I was a fugitive, say, and you wanted to find out where I came from. What would you do?"

"Search you thoroughly, of course. That failing, inspect your clothes. The laundry marks, for instance. Every laundry in town registers its mark; unknowns we can broadcast to other cities—tailors' labels, cleaner's marks. Ever have that suit cleaned? You'll find date and data marked on the lining where you'd never suspect. Blood stains, for instance, get special notation.

"Then, if nothing comes of all that, physical detail. Photographs to be published.

"Inspection of the hands, indicating habits or trade. An autopsy, in murder cases, often develops dietetic clues and occupational peculiarities—metallic oxides in the organs and such. The dental work is another angle. As a last resort, we can even get experts who will reconstruct the features for photographing, even when they have been largely destroyed."

"Are photographs always published in these cases?"

"Most of them are. Sometimes, men who don't want to be identified do a home-made job on their own faces."

"How?"

"Acid burns, for one way. Carbolic solution. It's easily available; everybody has a bottle in his medicine cabinet. They're slow to heal, and they tide a man over the first crucial period when the alarm is fresh."

"Then it's pretty difficult for a person to disappear successfully?"

"Depends, Dan'l. Depends on conditions." Miller smiled a slight, fleeting smile, as if he'd just thought of something enlightening. "Last spring the New York police found a dead man in a gully on the outskirts of the city. Maybe you recall?

"What they found was pretty much a plain skeleton, carefully stripped of all identifying marks. They got to work on it. Inside of three days, they had the dead man identified as a Wall Street messenger, missing for months. He'd been kidnaped, robbed and murdered."

Merrick pondered. "I remember the case. But did that help to catch the criminals?"

"It did not. It merely means that they'll be sure to burn in the chair if they ever are caught. They've got the necessary corpus delicti." Miller sobered a little, watching the banker closely. "What is it, Dan'l. Anything on your mind you care to talk about?"

"Nothing!" Merrick smiled slowly and got up. "Nothing in your department, Gabe." He looked out of the window a moment, thinking. Then he asked, "What do you know about a man named James Wool—a private detective from out of town?"

"Not much," said Miller promptly. "He dropped by to introduce himself. They usually do. Said he was here on something unimportant—divorce work or some such."

"I see," said Merrick. He turned away from the window. "Well, I guess my irrelevant curiosity is sufficiently satisfied for today. If I need any more help, I'll let you know."

Miller rubbed his jaw. "You let me know. I'm a good hand at ways and means, Dan'l."

Merrick took his departure, and Gabe Miller watched him go. In the chief's eye was a light of mingled liking and shrewd surmise.

MERRICK walked back up Market Street to the Mercantile Garage, where he got his car and drove out to his home on the edge of town. He lived in a pleasant three-story brick Dutch colonial house, surrounded by shrubs and a fine lawn. His wife had gone somewhere with the children in the afternoon.

The domestic staff of two, foregathered

over a cup of tea in the kitchen, observed thereafter that although Merrick moved about much on the floor above, he moved quietly, like a man subdued and oppressed. Both women had been in the house since it was built, and a concern of the master's was a concern of theirs. They were deeply troubled. It was not normal for him to be home during the day; it was unnatural for his hearty presence to be so stilled.

Up above, Merrick worked slowly but steadily. His tasks were small but many. They must constitute a machinery that would function well hereafter, without his guiding hand. There was a vast litter of papers to be sorted, arranged, destroyed in part.

He ransacked the desk, and from a small wall safe nearby brought many other papers.

Once he got up after a moment of abstracted reflection and went to the bathroom medicine cabinet, where he took down a small bottle of household disinfectant of a carbolic acid base. He read the chemical formula on the label and the directions for use, including the warning to use with care. He studied the thing at some length. Then he took down a roll of absorbent cotton and tore a piece from the wadded roll.

He dipped a tip of the cotton in the small bottle and smeared the back of his hand with the dark brown fluid. It felt cool; that was all. But in a moment, as he waited, it began to sting with the bite of acid, a sting that grew increasingly. He wiped it off, and there was a sullen looking stain on the hand, from the color of the solution and the quick inflammation of the seared skin. A bit longer and the skin would be definitely burned, so that a film of scar tissue would inevitably form.

Looking into the mirror, Merrick ran one hand over his face. His skin was healthy and tough, but not tough enough to resist that solution. Inflammation and scar tissue would effectively destroy the familiar image reflected in the glass, and a considerable time would pass before new skin would restore the image. It should be sufficient time.

Recognition would be extremely difficult, in person or by any published photograph.

Merrick restored the things to the cabinet and went to work on his papers.

He was deeply immersed in this when the doorbell rang. He listened, unconsciously, and recognized, very consciously, the voice of the man named Wool. He sprang up immediately to direct that the visitor be shown upstairs.

Wool was wearing a strange expression; he eyed Merrick with the look of a crooked and unscrupulous Santa Claus, sinister yet benevolent.

"I thought you agreed to keep out of my way," Merrick said.

"That was this morning," Wool replied blandly. "You weren't in a mood to listen to reason then. You should be, by now."

Merrick stared. Then he said, "Come in here. Sit down. And don't raise your voice, or I'll give you reason to regret it."

Wool sat down a little jauntily. "You know, for a guy facing an old rap, you're pretty chesty, Merrick."

"Perhaps you'll realize," Merrick said, "that I am a desperate man, with few favors to ask."

Wool looked at him judiciously. He shrugged. "Maybe not so desperate as all that."

He watched the banker. Merrick waited, steadily meeting the gaze.

Wool said insinuatingly, "You'd like to skin out of it, wouldn't you?"

"No," said Merrick bluntly.

WOOL'S eyebrow's were skeptical. He drawled, "You certainly find a lot of fun springing surprises on me, Merrick! You've just spent hours searching for a way out. You can't find any, so you tell me no. That's dumb! I know a way out. I'm here to tell you about it."

Merrick grunted. "Go ahead."

Wool drew from an inside pocket an impressive-looking document. He opened it to show the "$1,000" engraved in an upper corner. It was a bond issued in that sum.

"Merrick, you run that bank of yours single-handed. Whether square or crooked, you've done a good job. From all I can find out, it's got plenty of money in it. The money is all in your hands, with nobody to interfere."

"The state sends around examiners to interfere quite regularly, in case you hadn't heard."

"To interfere with the hired help, should they try anything!" snapped Wool. "Not even the bank examiners could trip up a man in your position, as long as the bank is solvent. The cages, the ledgers, the vaults are all there under your thumb. It's been done before. Not often, but often enough. It can be done again."

"What can be done, specifically?"

Wool moistened his lips, smiling gently. "You see this? One grand, at par; gold backed. It's stuff that's quoted almost at par today. I know where there are one hundred of these tickets—one hundred thousand dollars! Almost cash in hand. Interested?"

"Go ahead."

"Now it happens, the stuff's hot. I'm not able to walk into just any bank that comes along and do business. Your bank is another matter. I might have asked for the sky, but I'm reasonable."

"You'd have got the sky, I suspect—all of it at once, on your head!"

Wool smiled confidently. "You've had time to think it over, Merrick. I know your kind; you're slow to come to reason, but you get there. I know my proposition, too. I've been working on it for days. I picked your bank from all the banks in this part of the state, because it's solid enough to swing the deal. I looked into every angle of it, and when I turned up that old rap of yours unexpectedly, it was like a plum falling into my lap."

"I see!" breathed Merrick.

The irony of it was exquisite. The very steadfast service he had rendered the Bank of Innisfail was the precise factor that marked it conspicuously for victimization by this weasel of a man. Still worse, that was what rendered him so helpless. There was the inevitability of an evil destiny about it.

"My proposition is this," said Wool. "If you take this stuff off my hands and give me eighty thousand in cash, or the equivalent of the stuff in good negotiable paper that I can peddle safely elsewhere, you and I and the old rap are quits!"

NEITHER said anything for a moment. Merrick's face was a little grey.

Wool added softly, "Are you interested —Sam Bodine?"

Curtly Merrick commanded, "Let me see the certificate."

Wool eyed him calculatingly, then handed over the document. Merrick opened the crisp, engraved certificate on the desk.

He examined it carefully. It was unquestionably authentic, as sound as government notes. Merrick frowned in deliberation, then picked up a newspaper. He consulted the financial page. Next he picked up a scratch pad and pencil.

What he wrote, out of Wool's line of vision, was:

> Stolen Bond—one of lot of one hundred of similar face value available, to or in possession of James Wool, alleged private detective in Innisfail this date. Prompt, suitable action will recover remainder in town, exact whereabouts unknown. Suspect cooperation of confederates.

Selecting a paper clip, Merrick attached the memorandum to the bond. He folded the document deliberately, got up, walked over to the wall and thrust it into the wall safe.

Wool sprang to his feet as the safe door clicked home. "Hold on, Merrick! Give that back here!"

"Too late." Merrick said imperturbably.

"Damn you—open that door!" Wool raged.

Merrick smiled a small, unpleasant smile as he returned to the desk. "I told you I was a desperate man, Wool."

Wool's eyes looked a little wild. He struck the desk a blow. "What are you trying to do, Merrick?"

"Demonstrate that I mean business. We're going east."

"You're a liar!"

Merrick drawled, "To prove my sincerity, we'll go down to the depot this instant and make our reservations. We leave tonight, on the midnight train."

Wool stared. He was utterly nonplussed. He said huskily, "You're worse. You're a sucker for punishment!"

"Since that seems to upset you more than it does me," Merrick said with grim amusement, "I feel well compensated."

And that, though Wool cursed and threatened, was an end of it. They were going east together.

CHAPTER THREE

The Double-Cross

MERRICK drove downtown with Wool in his car. He left the car on a side street and walked with Wool to the railroad station. Incessantly, almost with a touch of frenzy, the little man plied him with argument and persuasion. It had no effect. Merrick led the way to the ticket window inside the depot and made the reservations for the flyer passing through at midnight. His tone was steady and agreeable as he chatted with the agent at the window.

Outside the door, Merrick spoke to Wool. "You've said everything possible," he told him grimly. "Now shut up! We're taking the midnight. If you're not here when the train arrives, I'll turn over that bond to the chief of police. If you make any move to prevent this from going through, my wife will turn it over later, with full information. If you do as I say, she will have my instructions to place it in a plain envelope and mail it anonymously, in five days, to the governor of the New York Stock Exchange."

"You've double-crossed me!" said Wool. "I'll come back here afterward and spill every last detail of your record!"

"No, you won't, Wool. I may be in Brandon—but I'll still be able to talk! The Board of Governors of the Stock Exchange will have that bond for evidence, and I'm sure they'll willingly listen to my story as to how and why it came in with Innisfail postmark. When you and I head east, we're dropping every connection with this town. I'll be Sam Bodine, and you found me a thousand miles from here. That'll be the story, and you'll stick to it."

Wool groaned and swore simultaneously. "You fool! You sap! Asking for it—for a lousy small-town bank that's insured for a hundred grand, over and over!"

"Rather hard to understand, isn't it?" Merrick said. "I've allowed for that. However, the greatest asset in a bank is neither gold nor bonds, but confidence. No insurance covers that. By it I stand or fall; it's a thing greater than I am. My presence threatens it with destruction, so I'm going. But I'm leaving it intact. That's my bond and obligation with the bank, the town, my friends, and my life; and I'm paying the debt. So mark my words well! If that goes, it will be joined in the destruction by everything and everyone responsible!" Merrick took a deep breath and calmed his emotions. "I'll expect you then. At midnight. Be sure you're here!"

Abruptly, he left Detective James Wool standing there, a defeated, curiously frightened little man who had somehow wandered far beyond his depth.

Early that evening, Merrick paused long enough in his room at home to procure from the desk drawer a wicked-looking .38

automatic. Sliding the gun into an outer pocket, he went downtown.

He dropped into the Fort Standish Hotel, two blocks from the bank. Buying a cigar at the counter, he paused to look around. Among the loungers seated in the soft leather chairs was a placid, empty-eyed man whose very inconspicuousness seemed akin to the stolid, immobile, commonplace furniture.

Merrick walked back toward the dining room. On the way, he stopped a bellboy.

"Tell Ted Ruff I'm in the dining room. I want to see him."

Merrick waved away the waiter at the table and chewed on the cigar. In a moment the placid, empty-eyed man drifted into the room and sat down opposite. He still looked placid, but his eyes were no longer empty.

"Something, Merrick?"

"In a way, Ted. I'm following up a little matter. You know a man named Portugee Johnny Moline?"

"I do," Detective Ruff admitted. "I'm keeping an eye on him, after a fashion. He's right here."

"This moment?"

"I saw him go up in the elevator a few minutes ago."

"Good! And do you know a detective agency operative now in town named James Wool?"

"Wool? Heard of him at the station. Little punk from out of town. I wouldn't know him."

"You can't tell me, then, if Wool and Moline are acquainted?"

"Sorry. I wouldn't know."

Merrick grunted, brought up short by Ruff's reply. Then, "What is Moline's room number?"

"Room 500."

"Thanks," said Merrick. "I'll go up."

Ruff eyed him keenly. "Want me to go along?"

"I'd rather not."

Ruff shrugged, perfectly agreeable. "Have it your way. I'll be here if you need me."

UPSTAIRS, Merrick listened for an instant at the door of Room 500. There was no sound within. He knocked. Promptly the door was opened, but the occupant, as if expecting someone else, stopped still and stared.

"Mr. Moline?" said Merrick.

The man in the doorway was tall, well set, darkly handsome. "That's right," he said, eyes faintly hostile. "What can I do for you?"

Merrick returned the stare. "You can let me in, can't you?"

Moline was hesitant for a second, then he stepped aside. Merrick walked into the room. He did not remove his hat; his hands were deep in his coat pockets. He crossed the room, glanced quickly into the empty bathroom, and then faced his host. When he spoke now, his voice was hard.

"Where's Wool? Has he been here?"

Moline seemed to be at a loss. "No, he hasn't. He's—" But he caught himself. He became silkily angry. "Who's this Wool you're talking about? What's he to you?"

Merrick smiled. "You don't know me?"

"Naturally! And I don't know how you know me."

Merrick looked about the room with calm interest. "I've heard enough about you. You've certainly heard something about me."

Moline was overflowing with suspicion. "Look here, friend. If this is a game, let me in on the rules and I'll play you to a standstill. I think you got into the wrong room."

"No, I didn't." Merrick studied the tall man, sizing him up with impersonal appraisal. "This is the right room, though it may be the wrong moment. Unexpectedly, I seem to have the advantage. But that's all right—I know somebody who has the advantage on both of us!"

Moline's exasperation lessened slightly, and he walked over to the dresser to pull out a drawer.

Merrick said, "Don't touch it! I've got my own gun in this pocket." He added, "You're much too jumpy."

Moline stiffened, his hand in the drawer. Then, slowly, he withdrew it, a handkerchief in his grasp. He was smiling slightly as he unfolded the handkerchief, brushed his nostrils lightly, and thrust it into his breast pocket.

"I give you my word I don't know you, and haven't the least idea what this is all about," he said. "If we're to get anywhere, you'll have to explain."

"Sit down," Merrick commanded.

Moline gracefully obeyed, choosing a chair near the bed. Merrick kicked up another chair and also sat down.

"If it's up to me, we'll never get anywhere, Moline. I'm all out of explanations myself. I'd like very much to talk to the brains in this deal. Which is it—you or Wool?"

Moline moistened his lips and looked at his polished fingernails. "That's hard to answer, not knowing just what deal you have in mind."

"Then there are more than one?" Merrick returned mockingly. "I mean the bonds, the hot paper. Who does a man talk to?"

Moline thought hard, looking nonplussed. "Bonds? I'm not sure. What bonds?"

Merrick got up, kicked the chair back. "Well, that simplifies it anyway. Sorry. My error!" He made for the door.

HE WAS in the corridor when Moline's voice halted him. "One minute, friend. Don't be so hasty. Let a guy think a little."

Merrick looked back, re-entered the room. "You have no need to think anything out. I'm referring to Consolidated bonds, 1960's. A hundred thousand worth. Is that plain?"

"Very!" murmured Moline. "Come in and shut the door. You've probably come to the right place. But for Pete's sake, what's it all about?"

"Is Jim Wool coming here tonight?" Merrick demanded.

"No, I don't expect him."

"Do you know what he's done?"

"I have a fair idea. He's had a free hand."

"A free hand?" said Merrick. "He's sold you out!"

Interest kindled in Moline's eyes. Merrick's moment had come.

"Sit down," said Merrick. "Jim Wool came to me with a proposition. I'm on the inside in this town, and I had the necessary angle. I can forget a lot when I see the color of important money. I've got a man here in Innisfail—a big shot in the town—on a hot spot, and I know where to apply the screws and promote the deal. We made our terms."

Moline listened, watching steadily, his face expressionless.

"Now comes the payoff," said Merrick. "That chisler's not playing through! I've got my own sources of information, and I've found that out. He's stacking both ends against the middle. While we're writing ourselves a commitment to stir, he plans to cop the paper, collect the reward and leave us head first in the bag."

"So far, all I've heard is you shooting off your mouth!"—Moline snarled. "Is that all there is to this?"

"By no means!" said Merrick. He sat back, smiling. "Tell me this. Has Wool all the bonds in his possession?"

"All?"

"I'm just asking leading questions. I know he hasn't got them all. You see, he turned over one certificate to the police this afternoon."

"That's a lie!" Moline said angrily, springing to his feet.

"Is it?" Merrick said. "Well, don't take my word for it. Ask Wool himself. Ask

him for that bond. And when he can't produce it, try and make him account for it."

Moline stood thinking, weighing that challenge. Merrick eyed the telephone, nodded toward it, and said pleasantly, "Give him a ring and ask him up here. We're all friends together. He might explain to us also why he bought a reservation out of Innisfail on the midnight train tonight."

"He did that? You know that?"

"Certainly I know it!" snapped Merrick. "You wanted facts. Now you've got a couple!" He paused. "What kind of a sucker play did you think you were making anyway, Moline? Why didn't you make it your business to get in touch direct with the man in this case? What do you know about him? What has Wool told you?"

Moline sat down again and an icy veil seemed to enclose him.

"The man in the case—all these things—are no concern of mine," he said. "I'm here in town for my health. I don't know anything; I've got nothing to say. Whatever Wool has in hand is his own private angle, and the cops on my tail and tapping my line haven't a thing to show for their trouble. The subject of bonds was one which you brought up yourself. That's about all I'll have to say for a while this evening."

Merrick studied the man, then shrugged in hopeless disdain. "Have it your way. I thought we could do business. Naturally, I'm cutting my way out of this right now. I'm not going to worry about anybody who's left behind."

Moline moistened his lips. "Suppose," he said, "you come back here and have a talk again before you do anything?"

"When?"

"Tonight. A little past twelve. After the midnight train is gone."

"Suits me! Half-past twelve. Time enough."

"And what," purred Moline, "did you say the name was? I guess I missed it."

"Remember it," said Merrick from the door. "The name is—Smith!"

He departed, closing the door. He was smiling a small, hard smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chosen Bondage

THE HOUSE was quiet when Merrick returned home and let himself in. He listened for an instant. The children would be in bed at this hour, and his wife, he knew, was spending the evening visiting friends.

Upstairs, he ransacked his wardrobe for old clothes—garments chiefly cherished for the cheerful let-down of fishing excursions. He selected an adequate outfit, and set to work on them with a razor blade, stripping them of every mark he could discover. Merrick could not be sure now of what avail these things might be. Time and events were marching—both beyond any man's control.

One fact was certain, established beyond question, within this very hour. Moline knew no facts about the man who was Sam Bodine. Only Wool, in all Innisfail, knew. Only Wool, with whom he was shortly to travel.

Assuredly, the night and its undetermined destiny were unknowable; but if they left Innisfail together at midnight, these two, only one man would complete the grim and desperate journey.

Merrick laid aside the clothes and went to the desk. The night was his own, for he had successfully concealed all knowledge of these things even from his observant wife, who knew him so well.

Merrick sat down, took pen and paper and began to write. The first words were:

You may never see me again. . .

It was a calm document he prepared. Only beneath the quiet words was it im-

passioned; she would appreciate the restraint, and the reason in it. He told her in full of those days seven and more years gone, when boundless ambition and forceful, overreaching talent had led him so rapidly upward to meteoric success. Too swiftly for stability—but he had been young.

He had been, he admitted, credulous, rash, overtrusting. He disclaimed no responsibility, yet the fact remained—he had been a simple victim for the shrewd, unscrupulous brains that had made such devastating use of him. There was an investment organization, ostensibly sound. There was a junior partnership for him, involving him in deep responsibility for all that followed. There were vast schemes and promotions—booming, lavish days and nights. He had accepted all these unquestioningly. There were guileful divisions of labor, secret frauds, and finally a morning of reckoning that blinded him with the sudden stark light of realization.

Merrick protested that he had been unable to believe it. He stuck by his guns—by all their guns. He incriminated himself immeasurably and irreparably, unaware of the havoc he was wreaking upon himself. He had not believed it until the incredible day when a grand jury returned indictments for him, along with the others, specifying a joint felony for which he must inevitably be convicted and imprisoned. He was suddenly seeing clearly, but it was too late.

He did not, he repeated, disclaim the responsibility. He should have known, he should have guarded with fiercer vigilance, the interests of all those who had relied on his integrity and who had lost so much. He was punished, ruined, cleaned — but he had evaded the hand of the law and fled penniless and nameless, with his own conscience squared. He had committed no crime. Imprisonment was a superfluous lesson, after the worst was already done. He was a fugitive; he had chosen a bondage without release.

Thereafter, life had taken him in hand. His new success, his marriage, his happiness — for the most part, these things had happened to him. They had hardly been of his own seeking. Life had needed him, it seemed, and had taken him, brooking no denial.

> . . . I shall be completely vanished. Don't look for me. I leave you everything. Secure your freedom as quickly as possible, and, for the sake of the children, disclaim any knowledge of me or where I've gone. . . . In the wall safe you will find a bond certificate; take it to Gabe Miller in a day or two, and make him promise that he will not reveal where he got it. . . . That is all. It is the end.

It was a cool, almost grim document, and only his wife would be able to read between the lines.

WHEN he had finished, Merrick placed the folded letter in a square envelope — an aristocratic-looking envelope of crisp, heavy paper, deckle-edged. He sealed it, and on the face he wrote his wife's name, with the injunction that it was not to be opened until noon of the following day.

He propped the envelope against the inkwell on the desk and left it there. Then he went and got his automatic from the dresser and dropped it in a pocket of the old tweed coat he had selected. He went into his bathroom, and from the medicine cabinet he took a supply of absorbent cotton and a small bottle of powerful household disinfectant with a carbolic acid base. These went in another pocket. He then changed clothes completely, donning an old cloth cap and drawing it low over his eyes. Stealthily he made his way down the stairs and out of the house.

He set out downtown, walking at a steady, unhurried pace. The hour was still early.

There were not many people at the depot, close to midnight. Late restaurants and a few window displays along Market Street were still alight, but the station, withdrawn from the street, and on railroad property,

was mostly hidden in gloomy shadows.

At a corner of the building, where a watch could be kept on the street, a slight figure waited. It was Wool. He stared keenly at Merrick as Merrick halted before him. "Ready?" Merrick asked him.

Suspicion flickered over Wool's narrow face. There was arrogance there, too, a renewal of self-importance. "What's the idea of the get-up? You look like a bum."

"Roughly," admitted Merrick, "that was my intent."

"I see. You're going through with it?"

"It was your idea, Wool."

Wool rocked a little, sidling from one foot to the other in resentment and malice, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched a little.

"All right, Merrick. You're doing the insisting. I'll take you back, and I'll pick up what I can for it. But that won't be the end, for I'm coming back here."

"You haven't forgotten the bond in my safe?"

"Listen, pal," Wool said venomously, "I'm a licensed detective. I've got privileges beyond any John Citizen. If there's a squawk about that bond, my license is my alibi, see? I'm an undercover man, and I'm after the crooks all the time, understand? In a pinch, all I need to do is nab them. What could be simpler? I picked this racket for a living because it's surefire, either way — and no small-town character has outsmarted me yet!"

"Then you propose to tell my story here?"

"Think it over!" Wool grinned unpleasantly. "The dice are still rolling, sucker, and I'm doubling my bets."

Merrick nodded, inscrutable and bland. "We'll take the train," he said.

The blood was pounding in his brain. The night was marching fast.

A car rolled into the depot plaza off Market Street, circling slowly about in the spacious driveway. It was a convertible, with the top up. It coasted past the rear of the building, close to the curb on which Merrick and Wool waited, and calmly came to a stop beside the little man. The night was very still.

A window of the car suddenly rolled down.

A hand with a gun appeared, and the night rocked abruptly with flame and thunder.

Wool screamed. He stared into the flame, and into the face over the gunsights. He turned to run. It was as if a rope drew taut in his path; he took two steps and tripped headlong, sprawling limply on the brick paving.

The thunder continued. Merrick tore the automatic from his pocket. The scorching fire from the car was being turned upon him now. Merrick fired pointblank into it.

The convertible gave a sudden leap, its motor racing, and sped across the drive for Market Street. Without a turn to right or left, it shot straight across, climbed the sidewalk and piled into the front of a barber shop, to stop abruptly in a shower of shattered glass.

MERRICK set out at a run for the wrecked car. The street and the depot plaza were suddenly overrun with men who seemingly sprang from nowhere. One shouted at him. He cursed in reply, running. Another, nearer, caught at him, brought him to a halt. Merrick was on the point of swinging on the man with his gun butt, when he recognized the police uniform.

These men were all police, springing out from hiding. A trap had been set and sprung! Merrick stared, limp, stunned, firmly in the grasp of his captor, paying no heed to the threatening demands for an explanation.

Chief Gabe Miller himself relieved the situation. Miller came charging across the open space to peer into Merrick's face and utter a grunt of satisfaction.

"Fine work, Dan'l!" he said inexplicably.

"Leave off, O'Brien — this is President Merrick!"

Merrick managed to say, "Gabe, what are your men doing here?"

"Lending a hand, Dan'l, lending a hand!" Miller said grimly. "You stay right close by me and answer nobody's questions till I talk to you privately."

He led the way quickly over to the crumpled convertible, into which a group of police were already morbidly delving. Merrick followed, wordless. The night was marching on apace.

They found Portugee Johnny Moline, security shark and killer, stone dead in the wreckage. He had been shot through the head. That final race of the car across the plaza had been pure reflex action. They found also, on the floor of the roadster, a small satchel containing a bulky wad of bond certificates — Consolidated 1960's, ninety-nine in number.

On the depot platform, at the same moment, they were finding one James Wool, private detective, bullet-ridden and dead where he fell.

It was a harvest for the Innisfail morgue, so long in the doldrums. In fact, it was a memorable time for all Innisfail, and for the *Argus* in particular. Communication was immediately made with New York, and certain facts were established; and then there occurred a number of highly logical and incontrovertible conclusions which may be here recorded.

The man Moline, long suspected back east of complicity in the murder of the kidnapped messenger, was finally adjudged guilty of the crime, chiefly on the overwhelming grounds of possession of stolen bonds. There were other things, of course, but that was what clinched the case. For months he had been under observation, a fact of which he had been nervously well aware.

A long-distance telephone call a few days previous to the final dramatic climax was traced to Moline on the far end, and James Wool on the local end. Wool had summoned Moline to Innisfail, where James Wool appeared to have found some means of liquidating the loot. Moline had then slipped out of town and joined him.

The nefarious plans of the pair, the *Argus* was able to announce with authority, had been frustrated by the shrewd and courageous action of one of Innisfail's foremost citizens, the president of the Bank of Innisfail. The *Argus* seized the opportunity to point out that a private citizen, working with his intelligence and nerve alone, had single-handedly succeeded where the entire police force of the town had abjectly failed.

But that all came out in the course of time. A very short while after the violent drama on the depot plaza — within the half-hour, in fact — Chief Gabe Miller led Merrick into his private office at the station house and firmly closed the door. He bade the banker sit down, then he opened a box of cigars, lighted one carefully before he spoke.

"I warned you to silence, Dan'l, because I thought it better for you to take a little time and prepare a watertight story for yourself before talking to that *Argus* man."

MERRICK watched the chief. He had obeyed the injunction. He dared not talk now. He had meddled with the ways of fate, and the fates were out of hand. He merely wondered. He could not fathom what was going on behind Gabe Miller's affable but pugnacious face. Within himself there was a cold, cold feeling—a gathering together for the final, irrevocable catastrophe.

He said slowly, "I'm not sure I'll care to have anything to say, Gabe."

"Yes, you will," assured Miller. "You won't get off that easy. This night is yours entirely."

Merrick sat forward in the chair a little tensely. "What happened tonight?" he demanded. "What brought you to the depot?"

Miller chuckled. "You know Jonas Galt, your neighbor across the street? He came to us today and told us all his suspicions of current date. He said you had talked with a stranger this morning — and later on, you went with that suspicious-looking individual to the railroad station. Galt had seen you flash a gun on the man in the morning, and he made it his business to go and question the ticket agent, after you and the man made your visit. Then he came to us with the warning that our leading banker was leaving town between days, which he thought should warrant investigation in any man's town!"

Merrick smiled, more out of politeness than amusement. "I guess he's right."

Miller blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling and reached into his pocket for a letter. The envelope was torn across the top.

"Jonas Galt's information wasn't all, naturally," he went on. "I'd have ignored it. But Moline disappeared from our scrutiny tonight. We'd kept an eye on him, you know. He worried me some. I knew you were following an angle of your own, and it was dangerous. Your 'irrelevant curiosity' didn't fool me for a minute, Dan'l. Tonight, it looked as if something important was in the wind. I had to find out. I tried to get in touch with you — that was fairly late — but you weren't at home. Couldn't find you anywhere by phone, so I took a run out to your house."

Merrick watched the letter in the chief's hands. It was in a square envelope — an aristocratic-looking envelope of wavy paper, deckle-edged — and there was writing on the face but no stamp.

"You had gone, and your wife didn't know where. You were gone when she came home she said. She looked, and said all your usual clothes were left behind. But your gun was gone. She was alarmed, and so was I. I even had her open your wall safe. I had to find something, and I found that bond. I knew then that action was coming quickly. You had plans for the depot at midnight, by Galt's information. Precisely what you were doing I couldn't figure out, but I made similar plans on the instant, and placed a cordon around the station plaza, to be ready for whatever came. Then I let you play your hand."

Merrick said, "were you satisfied?"

"Completely! I can well understand now — well, enough!" Miller tossed the envelope across the desk. He said gruffly, "I found that thing at the house. Fortunately, your wife overlooked it. If I were you, now, I'd burn it quickly."

Merrick sat stiffly, uncomprehending.

"You read that letter?"

"Certainly I read that letter. Policemen have no compunctions about such things. I thought to find some information of bearing." He returned Merrick's stare, and his eyes were cunning and wise and kindly. He growled, "There wasn't a scrap of help in the letter anyway."

MILLER came around the desk. He gripped Merrick's shoulder. Gruffly he said, "I knew everything in that letter a long time ago, Dan'l. I'm a little more attentive to my job than the editor of the *Argus* has any idea."

"And you let the matter ride?"

"And I let the matter ride."

"That's stretching friendship a lot farther than I dreamed could be done, Gabe."

"Friendship!" snorted Miller. He was indignant. "Friendship my eye! I made up my mind for a sensible reason. I let it ride for the sake of the town of Innisfail!"

"For Innisfail!" echoed Merrick.

Suddenly the night ceased marching. The unknowable was gone, and there were familiar things again — things that were the real things of life and living.

"I've made note," said Chief of Police Miller significantly, "that within eight months' time, the legal seven years allowed by the statute of limitations will outlaw that old indictment. You will be beyond its

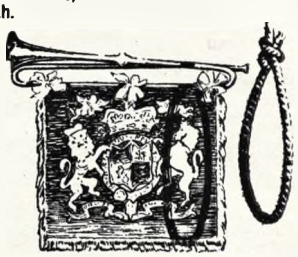
(Continued on page 113)

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By JAKOBSSON and STONE

Cecil Yankey of Ohio could never leave well enough alone. In 1947 he killed an aged and dying neighbor with a crowbar, instead of letting time take its natural, fatal course. The man, he said in court, was a menace to him, hadn't liked him. Cecil was sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime. He should have thanked his lucky stars. Instead, he spent the next three years studying law, and against all professional advice, demanded a new trial.

He got it, too. They sentenced him, this time, to death.



In British criminal law there are peculiar clauses. The Duke of Atholl—should he ever be sentenced to death by hanging—will not dangle from a common scaffold. By law, his gallows must be thirty feet higher than anyone else's.

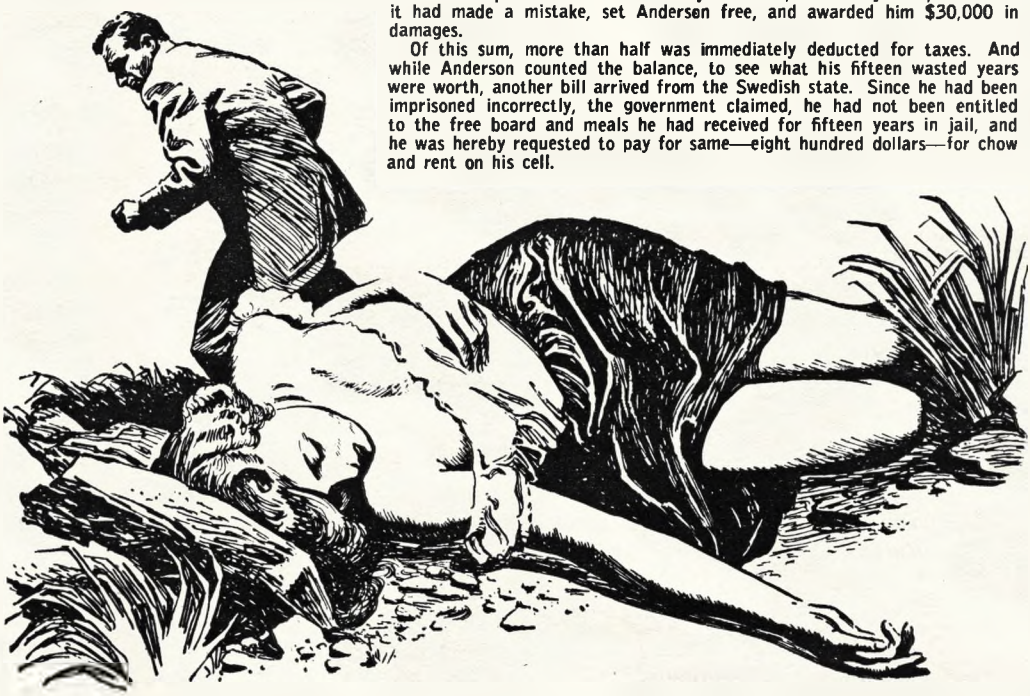
This privilege goes with the title, and has been handed down for centuries. So far, no Atholl has availed himself of the high honor.

In Oklahoma City lives a man who makes a hobby out of crime. Police never bother him, however.

All year, Dan Vinson corresponds with known criminals, in every jail in the country—murderers, thieves, embezzlers, all the sad calendar of sin. All he wants to know is, have they any children at home . . . and what do the kids want for Christmas. He likes to send the presents to Pop in jail, whoever Pop may be, so that the convict can forward them from there to his own home, leaving Vinson's name out of it. He figures he has been the Santa Claus behind a million presents. His reason: It's fun.

Nils Anderson of Stockholm was convicted of killing his wife, in 1935, and sent to prison for life. Fifteen years later, Swedish justice, convinced it had made a mistake, set Andersen free, and awarded him $30,000 in damages.

Of this sum, more than half was immediately deducted for taxes. And while Anderson counted the balance, to see what his fifteen wasted years were worth, another bill arrived from the Swedish state. Since he had been imprisoned incorrectly, the government claimed, he had not been entitled to the free board and meals he had received for fifteen years in jail, and he was hereby requested to pay for same—eight hundred dollars—for chow and rent on his cell.



An uneven series of staccato roars filled the car. . . .

HOT WIRE

By DAVID CREWE

Slade would have sold out his job a thousand times for Mollie. But the stranger didn't ask for that. All he wanted was just to have him sell it—and himself—once.

BOB SLADE, manager of the local office of the Coastal Telegraph, regarded with distaste the rambling scrawl in his hands, as though he half expected it to explode. "Good God, man," he said irritably, "you can't use words like this in a telegram!"

Across the oaken counter a flabby form was draped in alcoholic abandon. Two bloodshot eyes widened at Slade's words; a husky voice echoed with shocked protest. "Aw, feller, thish is special. Y'see"—he leaned confidentially toward Slade—"I got a dame in Wash-Washington. Come Sat-

urday night I gotta give her lil' pep talk or else some traveling man'll make me a wronged hus-band!"

Under normal occasions Slade would have humored the drunk, but tonight was different. He returned a disgusted glare to the vacant cameraderie that was wafted across the counter to him on the wings of a whiskey breath. "Look here, sir, I'm a busy man. I don't care what you may feel like calling this person, but you'll have to say it in halfway respectable words."

The prospective customer regarded him solemnly. "Do you mean," he waved a fat finger in dignified horror, "I can't call her a cheating little tart?"

"Not over these wires, you can't," Slade firmly announced.

The rummy sighed. He shrugged his shoulders. "Okay—I'll write 'nother. Gimme." He grasped the pencil and pad and hunched over the counter.

Slade shrugged. Damned old soak. He'd been in for the last three eevnings, pulled the same line each time. H'd cogitate an hour or more over his little message, if past performances were any criterion, and then shuffle out of the office without sending any wire. Well, every man to his fancy. He dismissed the drunk from his mind, and as he did so the lines of worry intensified on his forehead and between his clear brown eyes.

A WEEK before, Bob Slade would have considered himself a lucky man, all things considered. A good steady job, a nice house in the suburbs—these things were not to be sneezed at. And when in addition a fellow could go home at night to the best girl you could find anywhere—well, as has been said, a week before Slade would have considered himself fortunate indeed.

A lot of things can happen in a week, however. There had been the matter of his note. How easy it had seemed three years back to send Mollie west, that summer she had been ill. Jocelyn at the First National had radiated smiles and cooperation. Just the formality of a small note, and as for renewals—his airy gesture had waved such trivialities away. But now, three years later, Jocelyn no longer radiated friendship. There had been too many renewals of that note.

The friendly Jocelyn had been replaced by a cold Jocelyn who wanted his money, a Jocelyn who wanted his money—or else.

What a damnable fool he had made of himself, Slade thought. Mollie was a girl who'd take a wallop from fate and come up smiling and helpful; he should have paid her the deserved compliment of letting her take it on the chin with him; together they would have found a way out—they always had. Instead, he had nursed this worry alone, found petty solace in grouchy snarling criticisms that hurt him as much as they did Mollie, and Mollie had been hurt badly. She didn't say much; she wasn't that sort.-Just took it in a surprised, hurt silence—for three days and nights and part of the fourth. But when Bob Slade came home that evening, a little sheepish and with a two-pound box of her favorite cherry nougats under his arm, Mollie was gone. Where, he did not know. He did know, however, that without her to come home to at night the daily grind was no longer a glorious adventure, that somehow he *had* to find her and square himself.

Such was the state of affairs this evening, when the worried manager dismissed the rummy from his mind and hunched in weary solitude over the long grind of dispatching the late press flashes to the Boston dailies. It was tedious work at best; tonight it was unbearably dull. Slade found it difficult to focus his mind on the mechanics of transmitting the seemingly interminable array of local politics and obituaries which optimistic local correspondents had padded with customary optimism. Ah, well—best get the blasted garbage into the mill. With a determined effort he forced his thoughts

into the necessary channels to do his work.

It was hard at first; later, habit came to his aid and it was easier. So much easier that when he at last finished and blinked up at the clock near the light, he discovered with no little surprise that not only had the rummy departed but a stranger was sitting on the edge of the counter, swinging one elegantly tailored leg in aimless arcs, and watching him with a queer grimace that might have been a smile, had any vestige of mirth or even friendliness backed it up. As it was, the immobility of the smiling white face, the steady scrutiny of the unsmiling dark eyes was incongruous, subtly disturbing. Slade pushed his chair back, rose to his feet. As he did so, the stranger indolently followed his example. "Closing time?" the latter remarked.

Slade nodded. The other man's eyes shifted to the dispatches that lay in the thin steel shelf of the teletype. "Late press flashes, eh? Well, friend"—his eyes surveyed the room in a swift glance—"I'll not keep you long. I just saw you send a story to the Beacon Corporation about the Parkin's oil test—I think you had better wire Boston to hold it up for verification. It's wrong."

"Sorry—that's not my affair," Slade said. "And, frankly, I don't think it's yours either. That's Roger Parkin's grief, if grief it is. He's the bird who phoned it."

"Hmm." The visitor moved, and the light from the desk caught his features, threw them into sharp relief. He had a curious manner of speaking through thin lips that barely moved. For a moment the dark eyes roved boldly through and around the telegraph operator, then he spoke. "I get you. Your job is to shoot these messages out as is. But"—he moved a few paces closer—"supposin' I had papers in my pocket here that'd prove you're wrong, would you do your friend Parkin a favor and mebbe yourself?"

Slade scratched his head. "That's a new one." He hesitated. "I might stop the wire if Parkin pulled a boner—he's a friend of mine—yes. Let's see those papers."

The other man smiled. "Ah, now you're talking sense. I think I can show you you're right. He fumbled in his breast pocket, drew out a sealed manila envelope, threw it on the table. Bob picked it up, broke the seal, and gasped. There were twenty hundred-dollar bills in the envelope.

A violent anger surged through Slade. His fists clenched and came up—and then ceased moving.

The other man had withdrawn a pace and was patting, significantly, a bulge in the pocket of his overcoat. A sick sensation grabbed at Slade's midsection. He stared.

THE visitor grunted in sardonic satisfaction. "That's being smart," he observed. "Now"— he made a menacing little movement of his coat flap—"lock that door, punk. Jump!" He watched the bewildered manager click the latch. Then he motioned him to the desk so that the two men were screened by an overhanging chart from the street. "Sit down," he snarled Slade obeyed.

"It seems my little message wasn't good enough for you," he continued. "Well, wise guy, you had your chance for some easy dough, and you muffed it." Suddenly he started. "Say, how long before that message will be delivered?"

Slade grinned. "About five minutes, maybe less—and by God, you can't stop it if you cut me in little pieces!"

The gunman leaned forward. "No, I can't, smart guy, but you will, or that wife of yours'll do a lot more yelling than she's doing right now—I'll see to that personally!"

As Slade stared incredulously, the other man tossed a rumpled ball across into his lap. It was Mollie's handkerchief—part of the set he had given her on her birthday, with her neat *M.S.* worked in the corner. The color drained from his face.

"How about it, pal?" the gunman said.

"I'd hate to leave *my* girl long with the gorilla who's got her now."

Slade groaned, moved like a man in a daze to the teletype Three bells. "Bos OK"—his finger formed the familiar code on the keys. Mollie—his Mollie—frightened, a prisoner! She *had* stayed by him. He might have known she would! One bell "G. A. Salem—G. A. Salem. How's biz—" The tape clicked in brief jerks. That would be Al Sault high up over Congress Street in Boston—he always tagged snatches of wise cracks at the end of his code. Mollie must be crazy with terror by now. Slade hunched over the keys. "Hold wire from Parkin's oil for confirmation—hold Parkin's wire—verify and repeat."

Something cold prodded at the nape of his neck as he waited. The other man leaned over him to watch the tape. "It better be right, pal!" The machine clicked and both men watched tensely.

"Salem OK—Salem OK—Parkin's wire held up—You're slipping—Boston."

Slade sighed, relaxed and just then something hit him once, twice, behind the ear and the lights and the machine and reality disappeared into dark oblivion.

SLADE opened one eye with an effort, wearily let the heavy lid close. From the back of his skull sharp barbs of pain jabbed in agonizing rhythm to the periodic joltings of his body. Weakly he attempted to explore the tender spot, but his arm refused to move. Queer, that. He blinked both eyes this time, twisted his head with an effort. As if by magic, the pain disappeared into a dull ache. He was lying flat on his back in the rear of a touring car, and his arms and legs were securely bound.

The act of moving his head, in addition to relieving the pain, changed the panorama from star-speckled darkness to less poetic reality, in the form of a big hard shoe against which his chin persisted in bumping. After a series of trying acrobatics, he managed to extend his field of vision to a point some four feet higher, where the fitful glow of a cigar threw brief flashes of visibility on a face he had never seen before. While he watched, the cigar disappeared to the side and the man who was holding the cigar spoke.

"Hey, Terry," he said, "this guy's beginning to move."

Slade promptly abandoned further movement. A voice from the front seat, which he recognized as belonging to his late visitor, shouted back, "Never mind that. When I tie 'em they stay put. If he gets funny, kick him in the face."

The rode along after that in a silence broken only by the occasional squeal of the brakes, or the roar of the night wind as it whined above the motor Suddenly, however, the shoe under Slade's face moved as his unknown companion whirled around to look behind him down the road.

"What the hell, Terry. Either I'm getting jumpy or there's a car sticking on our heels."

"We'll soon see," Terry grunted, and simultaneously the engine's indolent rhythm reached a sharp whining crescendo. For perhaps a mile the race lasted. Then from behind them somewhere in the blackness came a steady hum that gradually grew in intensity. The man over Slade swore as the first pale flickers of the other car's headlight flashed through the windows.

DOWN on the floor, Slade felt his pulse quicken. The thing had begun to assume more and more the aspect of a nightmare. Having been unconscious when he left Salem, he had of course no inkling of the details encompassing his abduction, but no one would miss him or give the alarm at home if he failed to put in an appearance. No one but Mollie. And Mollie was God knew where—perhaps dead.

The man above him crouched tensely in his seat, feet braced against the back of the front seat. Suddenly there came from his direction an uneven series of staccato roars.

From the front Terry laughed harshly. "They're crying for it, Al. Give it to 'em hot!" Simultaneously brakes squealed resentfully as the pursued car veered sharply sideways. Above Bob's head came again the staccato bark and the leg muscles braced across his line of vision vibrated with the volley. For perhaps ten seconds the leaden hail continued. In the silent seconds that followed, Slade heard the man above him snarl, "A short trip to hell to you, sucker!" —and then the car in which Slade was lying swerved crazily off the smooth macadam and lurched to a stop, even as something hurtled past them and crashed with sickening finality and exploded into flame.

The squat man and Terry jumped from the car and their heavy footsteps crunched towards the blaze. Slade strained every aching sinew to gain a sitting position, but the knots had been drawn with cruel force, and the effort was futile. As he eased his tortured body down again, returning footsteps sounded. They were slower, jerkier, this time and as they drew closer they were punctuated with gasps as though Terry and his playmate were bearing a heavy burden.

The voices were engaged in loud dispute. "Tossed twenty feet outa the car. Dead, I guess. Why the devil can't we toss him into the bonfire!" one of them remonstrated between stentorian wheezes. Another voice, Terry's, cut in with chill finality.

"I'm doing the thinking here, fathead! Chuck him in the car—we may be able to get the lowdown on this double-cross. If he comes to, he'll talk—you know me, pal." The two men laughed, and the laugh sent Slade's stock of reserve courage down several notches below collar level.

The crunching noise was right under his face now, and Slade had a confused flash of something blotting out the flames and the stars, a fraction of a second before a heavy limp weight crashed full on his chest and rolled to the floor beside him.

The two men leaped into the front seat. Slade could sense rather than hear the tug of the engine, as the powerful car, now minus lights, plunged roaring into the black night.

The short period that ensued was perhaps the most hideous that Slade had ever experienced. The limp form of the other prisoner half crushed him as it slithered crazily back and forth within the narrow confines. Once the movement of the car brought the unconscious man's head in contact with Slade's hand, and when the head had jolted away, something warm and sticky ran between his fingers. He drew his hand back, shuddering.

He had a sudden panicky desire to call to Terry, beg him to take this creature away before he went mad. Then reason returned. After all, this man, if he was dead, had died in a gallant attempt to rescue him. Besides, he had a sudden premonition that the less attention he called to himself the better. For the men in the front seat were talking; he could hear snatches of their conversation—and death seemed to be the general theme.

A third man, whom they designated as "the boss," seemed to occupy a prominent place in their conversation. He was with Mollie somewhere, if the big oaf beside Terry had meant Mollie when he shouted something about a "dumb yelling blond dame," and there seemed to be some conflict of opinion as to whether he, Slade, should be bumped off before "the boss" could see him. They seemed to regard this third person with a strange mixture of awe and contempt. One minute Terry had referred to him as a big shot; not long afterwards he announced that in his opinion the guy was lousy with yellowness. They talked over the matter of Slade's demise loudly and in great detail, and the fact that the helpless telegraph operator might be conscious and listening was apparently of small concern. It all seemed to hinge on the idea that maybe "the boss" might raise hell if Slade saw him. On the other hand, they agreed that no time should be lost in getting to the hideaway.

AT LENGTH Terry compromised grandly with his companion, who seemed to be all for killing Slade now. "Leave him be for now," Terry had ruled. "The boss may want to question him first. We gotta pull this off right. Afterwards . . ." And he said something that the wind and the night blotted out, but that caused his companion to grunt with satisfaction.

Somehow, Slade was glad he didn't hear that unfinished sentence. He felt his tongue go dry around the roots. Whatever happened, he was to die.

For a short interval he almost wished he were the crushed and battered thing that rode beside him. The thing had horrible wet hands, too. One finger brushed the nape of his neck, and he ducked his head away with a shudder. As the car lurched, the hand seemed to follow him with malicious perversity, to grope along his head, and weakly, lightly, tap that same spot just above his collar. He broke out in a cold sweat. Even as he did so, however, some tiny corner of his mind seemed to be striving to tell him that somewhere, somehow, he had gone through part of this ghastly game of hide and seek before, only it hadn't been terrible then, only monotonous. It was crazy, yet the idea persisted. Suddenly he knew. The fingers were tapping Morse code! Slade blessed his thorough training, which had included that subject.

"Turn over—I'll loosen the knots." Then the man could not be as badly hurt as the gunman had believed. Slade managed to squirm his body part way around. The fingers left his neck, fumbled and tugged for an interminable period with the cords that bit into his wrists and ankles. At last came the blessed excruciating agony of sensation to the numbed limbs. For a long interval he clenched and unclenched his fingers, felt the blood force its way through starved veins. The fingers found his neck again. "Shall we try a break now?"

Slade strove to move his own hands against the man, found that he could not reach the other, and rotated his foot against the other's leg. "They've got my wife somewhere," the foot spelled out, and there was a short interval.

Then: "OK. I'm with you. Pull your arms free when the time comes."

At about that moment the car, which had left the main road some time previously, came to a halt. Terry's companion pulled Slade out upon the ground by one foot, and he felt himself being slung dizzily over a burly shoulder like an old sack.

They were deep in the woods somewhere, and yet from the blackness came the unmistakable tang of the salt sea. The Essex marshlands, probably. Certainly the hut they were entering was of a piece with similar hunting camps that dotted that particular section of the North Shore.

Terry followed, bearing the other prisoner, whose eyes were closed and whose face was covered with grease and blood. As the gruesome face bobbed limply over Terry's shoulder, though, Slade could just see one eye open warily, focus for an instant on Slade's. The eye winked!

WITHIN the shack were a man and a girl. The girl was trussed like a mummy, and what had been her dress was ripped into grimy pennants which flopped loosely as she strained at her bonds. But the eyes were Mollie's. Slade could see them widen in horror as they found him, and then they closed, as the form went slack in insensibility. He groaned. The poor kid—if only his bonds had been loosened altogether! He strained, felt the knots loosen some more.

The boss watched Mollie nervously. Slade stared. For he had played golf with that man, had drunk with him, gone to lodge in his car. It was Roger Parkin, general manager of the Beacon Oil Company. And the wire that Terry had forced him to stop had ben signed by Parkin. It didn't seem to make sense, somehow. If Terry

wanted the wire stopped, why should Parkin, who sent it, be sitting in on the deal?

Parkin wheeled on Terry now, and his pursy little face mirrored anxiety and vexation. "You dumb ape," he shouted, 'why in hell did you bring that man here? He knows me, I tell you!" His little eyes met Slade's, and were swiftly averted again.

Terry laughed. "And what if he does," he snarled. "He ain't going any place—ever."

Parkin shivered. "God, man, that's too cold-blooded for me! I wish I'd never got into this mess."

Over Terry's face crept a subtle undercurrent of disgust—and something more. He sneered. "Peel the hide off'n a big shot and you'll always find plenty of yellow underneath." Parkin kept a diplomatic silence. "Well, you *are* in this mess, pal, and when the payoff comes, I don't intend to have this wise guy around to tell his story to the judge. And," he prodded Parkin roughly, "I'm not planning to decorate the hot seat, even if you are! This smart aleck and his woman have got to go!"

Parkin spread his hands helplessly, as though in appeal to Slade. Then he turned away. "All right, but get it over with. I can't stand any more." He looked at Slade again and the cold fury in the latter's eyes caused him to withdraw his gaze in some haste.

In the dingy half light of the far corner, the other prisoner sprawled helplessly. As the men argued, however, the form seemed to move ever so slightly. Slade blinked, watched steadily. With a series of barely discernible movements, the body had hunched an inch along the rough boards. Then another, and all the time his mouth hung slack in a startling parody of death. Slade felt the pulse of suspense tighten about his throat. It was mad. A single betraying gesture would bring this deadly pack snarling at their throats. Then he saw what the other man was trying to do.

About a foot from the bloodstained hand, the light socket protruded from the wall. One foot—and it might as well have been a mile. For Terry's restless scrutiny had stopped abruptly,, suspiciously, at the sight of a twitching hand which had not relaxed quite soon enough. He squinted, strode softly across the room.

Slade started to leap, then stiffened. Better to divert Terry's attention for a moment from that stealthy parade. He cleared his throat. "Hey, Terry." The three men started, and Terry looked annoyed. "Don't kill us," Slade screamed. "Let Mollie go—I'll tear you apart if I ever get my hands free." He shuffled his feet, felt the rope fall free behind him.

Terry sprang toward him with a snarl, and as he did so the room was plunged into darkness. Slade, purely by instinct, rolled directly toward the center of the room, felt a heavy foot stumble across his whirling hips and a man trip over him and fall with a grunt on the spot he had just vacated. A split second afterwards Terry's gun roared, and behind him a man screamed. Terry's gun thudded to the floor as Slade got to his feet and suddenly there came a sharp crack, as though a dry twig had snapped in the woods. Another man screamed then, and the voice was that of Terry.

Slade ran in the general direction of the light socket, careened heavily against a wiry form that exploded in a sound halfway between a grunt and a sob.

Then the other man was upon him with knees and clawing hands, gouging and tearing like a maddened animal. Slade felt the exquisite joy of action blot out the pain. Death might come soon, but this was the present. And for the present, he must avenge Mollie, strike and break this yelling thing that kept him from her side. He felt the blood pour down his chin and his teeth cut through his battered lower lip, and not until later did he know that it was *his* blood. Now he knew only that his hands were squeezing, tearing into something that writhed and swelled beneath his fingers,

and that the blows raining in his face were slackening. Finally they ceased.

Slowly, as though awakening from a nightmare, Slade loosed his grasp, and the body slid to the floor. Then he ran once more to the light socket, pressed the prongs home, and light bathed the room.

The place was a shambles. Over where he had been lying, the body of Terry's erstwhile playmate sprawled, killed by the bullets intended for Slade. In the center of the room lay Roger Parkin, his face a blue swollen mask through which his blue tongue protruded. Around his neck were red weals which bore a startling likeness to fingerprints. In the far corner, near Mollie, Terry was temporarily absent, and in his place was a whimpering creature whose right elbow was bent an an angle at which no elbow was designed to bend. Beside him, kneeling as though to protect Mollie from the inferno, was the other man. He turned his head as Slade reached his side, and his white teeth showed through the blood and the grease. "Your wife's okay," he said, and for the second time that night Slade lost all interest in things.

WITH dogged stubbornness Slade climbed back a painful uphill road to consciousness. It was getting to be a habit, this awakening to the purr of a motor, and the sweep of the wind. Every muscle in his body ached, and he had a foolish desire to blubber. Then he became aware of two soft arms, pillowing his racked head from the bumps, and a husky voice, which was whispering in his ear that everything was all right.

Slade sat up then and began to take an interest in things. They *were* returning over the Essex road, in Terry's car, only the man who guided the wheel wasn't Terry, but a decidedly battered individual whose face was vaguely familiar. The man turned, and Slade recognized the erstwhile corpse, minus the gore and the blank expression and the sticky fingers. Detective Wallace Austin, he introduced himself, and he forthwith proceeded to explain.

"You see," Austin commented, above the sweep of the wind, "Parkin's outfit was a subsidiary of the Rolph Oil interests, and had been a sort of a white elephant on their hands for years. And so, when out of a clear sky another combine offered Rolph two million dollars for Parkin's outfit, Rolph lost no time in arranging a conference to close the deal.

"That wire," said Austin, "was to Rolph from Parkin, as you may recall. It stated that their research department had just discovered a new refining process which would just about revolutionize the industry, and that Parkin's subsidiary would shift overnight from a liability to a decided asset."

Slade grunted. "I guess I'm dumb. If Parkin sent the wire, why was he in league with Terry, who had it stopped?"

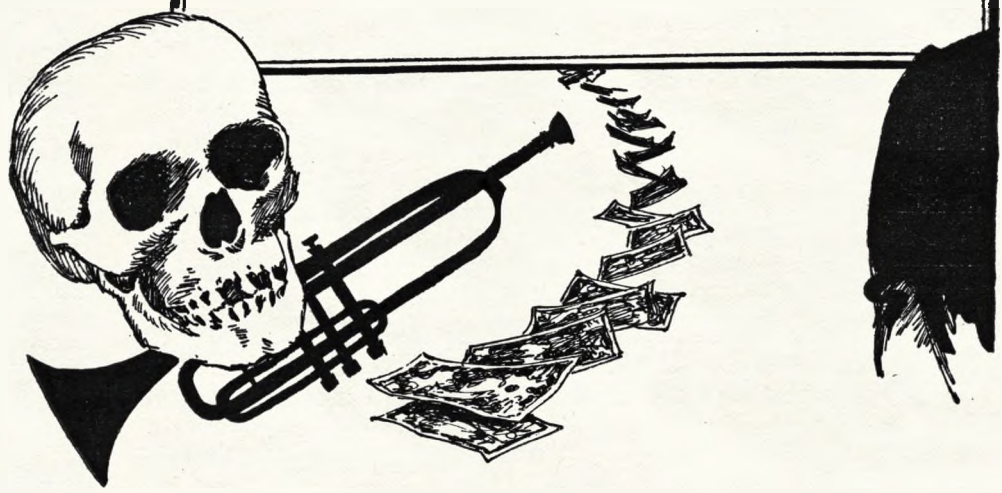
"It's almost incredible," admitted Austin, "yet true. Parkin, you see, was playing both ends against the middle. He was crooked, but he was careful. He had been promised a high executive job by the purchasers if the sale went through, but if anything went sour along the line, he wanted to be cleared. Don't you see—if things began to get hot, he *had* tried to warn his company of the new developments, only someone, namely Bob Slade, had held up the wire."

"Say," he demanded, "how could you have heard of Terry's proposition? No one was in the office but me and—"

Austin smiled. "You should know me by this time, Slade. I've hung around your place plenty this past week. I'll see if I can refresh your memory a bit." He stopped the car under an arc light, draped his form over the wheel as though he had suddenly felt the effects of too much liquor.

"Yeah," he said, nudging Slade slyly in the ribs. "I got a dame in Wash-Washington. Jus' lil' pep talk over the wiresh, I wanna send her—so nasty traveling man won' cheat on me!" ◆ ◆ ◆

A Little Murder Music, Professor!



CHAPTER ONE

Easy Money

HE WAS just a fair trumpet in a crummy combo and she was a sweet kid with an indifferent voice. But they had it bad. You wouldn't think two kids could reach their twenties in a city as rough as theirs and still be as naive as they were.

They played a string of wallboard joints from Mason to Monroe and even the tone deaf in these dungeons knew she had no voice. But they liked her. They liked her fresh, clean gravity and the simplicity of her gowns and delivery.

She was what kept the combo working. She was loyal to her boy and the boy was loyal to the gang. They'd never get rich, but they ate.

They worked Maxie's and the Eight Ball and Kell's Korner. In September, after a summer of jobbing around, they went into Willie King's Carnival Room.

That didn't make the faintest kind of sense. That was for top-drawer outfits, for famous names with deserved reputations.

When Jack told Ellen about the booking, she stared at him, not believing.

He shrugged. "I can't figure it, either. I'm probably the second-worst trumpet in

Daring
Crime Novelette

●

It was a world of easy money and easy dames. The little band played hot and sweet, and Ellen sang, but it was still no good. Because it was a world of easy death, too.

●

"I'm not afraid of him," Ellen said. "I'll testify. . . ."

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

the world, but even that's a cut above the rest of the gang. Not that they aren't good guys, understand, but . . ."

Ellen said, "Maybe we've got something they noticed."

"Maybe we've got something Willie King noticed." He paused. "You." His eyes were thoughtful.

"Me?" she said. "Come alive, Jack. I'm no prize."

"You are to me, and lots of guys who have watched you. Willie King once backed a Broadway turkey, a show that had turkey engraved on it—just to get the ingenue."

"Oh, Jack," she said. "That's really reaching. Me—for heaven's sake!"

"You're so modest," he kidded her. "Let's get to rehearsal."

There was a new man at the rehearsal, an arranger. Joe Feldt, one of the big-money boys.

Barn said, "Willie King sent him over. At *his* expense."

Barn was the head man, more or less, the piano player. He was a big, bony gent addicted to rum and older blondes.

"What does it mean?" Ellen asked him. "What's the angle?"

"I'm just a country boy," Barn said. "One of his gags, probably, the whole deal. He can afford them. Why, one time he backed a show that smelled to—"

"I know," Ellen said. "Jack told me. Is the man crazy?"

"He knows what he wants, that's for sure. He's got what most of us want—money."

"Isn't he some kind of—of racketeer or something?"

Barn smiled. "Why, Ellen, what a horrible thought. Yes."

She turned to Jack. "Honey, I don't like it. I don't know why, but I'm awfully scared."

"We want to get married, don't we? What's kept us from it, so far?"

"Money."

"Okay, this is our chance."

THEY opened the fall season at the Carnival Room, and the surprising thing is that they weren't at all bad. Joe Feldt was a minor genius; he knew their limits and he kept the scores as simple as possible, simple and clean as Ellen's delivery, and it was a change for a lot of customers.

All through the practice sessions, Ellen never did get to see the infamous Willie King. Opening night, he had a ringside table for a party of eight.

She was sitting next to Barn, at the piano, and Barn whispered, "The blond guy at the head of the table. Looks like a kid, doesn't he?"

Ellen glanced that way. Willie King was slim and looked young, as Barn had said. But it was a physical youth, not spiritual. He was a poised, perfectly tailored lad who obviously took fine care of his health and his complexion.

"Thirty-seven," Barn said quietly. "Does he look it? Worth a couple million, probably."

Ellen didn't have time to answer. She was up and walking toward the microphone to give them a chorus of *Night and Day*.

She saw Willie King's eyes turn her way as soon as she got up. She was wearing a strapless tulle gown of mist green and her chestnut hair was short and she looked about seventeen, herself.

He gave her his complete attention all through the number. At his right side, the red-head who seemed to be his for the night also looked at Ellen. In a disturbed and calculating way.

She sat down to a good hand.

At 12:30, the King party left. At one, the place closed and at 1:05, as they were lighting up cigarettes, Barn said, "The King invites us to his apartment. Little shindig. We won't be playing, but I imagine it's an order, practically."

Tub Kress said, "It wouldn't be good politics to say no, I suppose."

"I suppose it wouldn't," Barn agreed.

"We'd better all go," Jack said.

"No," Ellen said.

Jack looked at her. They all looked at her. Barn was smiling, but the others weren't.

Jack said, "Baby, what's eating you?"

"I don't know. I don't want to go." She looked at Jack. He had a kind of lopsided face and short hair and a too-big mouth, but she liked what she saw. "Jack, honey, no . . ."

"Look," he said patiently. "It's not something we can afford to miss. He's the boss, and if we don't show he might not like it."

Ellen took a deep breath and looked at all of them, as though seeking support.

Only Barn gave it to her. He said, "You don't have to go, if you don't want to, Ellen. Nobody's that important."

"He is to me," Jack said. "And he is to Ellen, whether she knows it or not."

"All right," Ellen said. "A-llll *right!*"

IT WAS one of the new apartment buildings out on Diversey Drive and they went in two cars. Jack, Tub and Ellen rode in Barn's clanking club; the others went with Pat Guest.

It was a first-floor apartment. It was, as a matter of fact almost half the first floor of the building, with a rear promenade overlooking the river.

Ellen didn't know exactly what kind of people would come to a racketeer's party. She was surprised at their elegance. It was mostly a stiff-shirt-and-evening-gown assemblage and there was no crap game in sight.

Barn and Tub headed for the bar near the open French doors of the mammoth living room. Ellen stuck very close to Jack.

Jack said, "I suppose we'd better get a drink. Maybe we'd kind of loosen up with a drink."

"Maybe we'd even come apart," Ellen said. "But I'm game."

They were on the way to the bar when somebody intercepted them. It was Joe Feldt, the demon arranger. And with him was a slim, smiling, poised man who looked younger than he undoubtedly was, Willie King.

Joe said, "The boss, kids. Ellen may I present Willie King? And this, Willie, is Jack Elder."

The boss smiled at Ellen, and shook hands with Jack. He said, "I certainly appreciate your showing up, tonight." And then he looked directly at Ellen. "But I had to brighten the party, somehow."

"Glad to be here," Jack said, and Ellen nodded and hoped her smile didn't look forced.

Willie said, "Have fun, won't you?" and left them with another smile.

"Great guy, huh?" Joe said.

"I think I'd like a drink," Ellen said.

At the bar, Barn slid over to give them room. He said, "They've even got rum. I see his highness had a word for you."

Ellen nodded. "He told us to have fun. Is that rum very strong, Barn?"

"Real drinkers use it for a wash. Try it, kid."

It went down all right. It had a reassuring molasses flavor and eased her tension immediately. Jack had Scotch. Ellen knew he didn't like it, but it was supposed to be for cultivated tastes.

They stood there together, the three of them, only Barn was really at ease, though the rum was helping. Then, suddenly, there was a fourth.

Barn said, "Hellll-oooo," in a tone he usually reserved for beat-up blondes, and the redhead joined the group, the girl who'd been with Willie tonight.

"Welcome to the King zoo," she said. "Having fun, kids?"

"We are now," Barn said gallantly. "This one's on me."

She was slightly over the edge, already. She looked at Ellen openly and appraisingly, and back at Barn. "I've heard worse

pianos than yours, handsome, but I've forgotten where. What *could* you have that attracts Willie?"

The bartender said evenly, "What'll it be, Miss Sloan?"

He was a bulky man of middle height, with a broken nose and small brown eyes. His voice had been too level.

"Rye," she said. And when he went to get it, "The very walls have ears." Again she looked at Ellen. "I see you've met the boss."

Ellen nodded. Jack said, "Real people, isn't he?"

The redhead didn't answer. She looked at Barn. "What's your opinion?"

"He serves fine rum," Barn said. "What's gnawing you, Red?"

"Maybe I'm jealous, and maybe it's the rye, but it could be . . ."

The bartender interrupted with, "Here's your drink, Miss Sloan." He set it on the bar and didn't move away.

There was a silence, broken by Barn. He said, "Sloan, Sloan . . . Sheila Sloan—you were the ingenue in *Shark Island.*"

"I was. Don't tell me you saw it—a show that ran two nights."

"I read about it," Barn said. "What's your next, Miss Sloan?"

"My next is another rye," she answered. "What's yours?"

Barn sighed. "More rum. It's a hell of a world, isn't it, Red?"

"It was all right up to *Shark Island,*" she said bitterly, and now she glared at the bartender. "Why don't you get your ugly face out of my sight?"

"I thought you might want another drink, Miss Sloan." His voice was heavy with contempt. He went down to the other end of the bar.

Ellen said, "I want to go home, Jack. Now."

He'd had a pair of double scotches by then, and it might have been that. Anyway, he said, "Don't be silly. I'm just starting to enjoy myself."

"I'll go alone then," Ellen said.

"Oh, cut it out," Jack said. "You're acting like a baby."

Barn smiled. Barn said, "I brung ya and you're my responsibility. I'll take her home and come back for the others, Jack."

"If she wants to," Jack said. "It's up to her."

Red said, "Take good care of her, handsome. I'll keep this one from getting maudlin."

"I can take care of myself," Jack said.

Red chuckled and shook her head.

In the car, Ellen started to cry. Barn said nothing. He pulled away from the curb and continued in a U-turn. They went clanking down Diversey, her quiet sobs drowned by the motor.

About halfway home, Ellen said, "Have you got a handkerchief?"

Barn handed her his. His eyes were on the road ahead. "What got to you, Ellen? What's wrong with that, back there?"

"It's . . . I don't know. I was scared, that's all. Did you ever hear Jack talk like that to me before?"

"He had a couple drinks, kid. He's not a drinking man."

"All right. I know you men stick together. Keep an eye on him when you get back, won't you, Barn?"

"I'll do my best," he said, "though that Sheila might be keeping me busy."

In the third-floor, one-room apartment, Ellen soaked her face in cold water, after removing her makeup. There wasn't any point in crying; it didn't solve a thing. She made a cup of tea and sat near the front window, getting control of herself. Then she turned in and cried herself to sleep.

IT WAS about ten when she woke up. It was ten-thirty when the doorbell rang.

She pressed the buzzer and waited at her door. It was Jack, looking worn out but happy.

"Honey," she said. "Darling," and she was in his arms.

"Well, well," he said. "What's all this, because a guy drops in for breakfast?"

"You couldn't sleep, either. You . . ." Then she pulled clear. "Jack, you've been up all night!"

He grinned at her. "Playing poker. Made a wad, kid. Four hundred fish!"

She was staring at him. Where had she read *"The Devil doesn't need murder, if cards will do it"?*

"Poker?" she said. "For what kind of money? Where, Jack?"

"At the party. At Willie's. He sat in himself for a while. Dropped a couple grand without a murmur. What a guy!" He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his wallet. He put it in her hand and folded the other hand over it. "For our future, kid."

She took a deep breath. She said, "That almost makes it all right. Come on, the coffee's perking."

Scrambled eggs and toast with lots of butter. Jack was a butter lover. Coffee and, "Did any of the other boys play in the game?"

"From the band? Not for long. Barn dropped twenty bucks and quit. I was never out."

"Oh." She faced him gravely. "How much do you love me, Jack?"

He looked up, grinning, and then the grin faded at her gravity. "What a question! As much as a man can love. There's never been anybody in my life but you, kid. You've—you're—everything."

"Would you think I was unreasonable if I asked you never to play poker again for those kind of stakes?"

"Look," he said. "The chances are I never will get into that kind of game again. But I don't want to promise. I don't want to promise anything to anybody. I don't want to live like that."

There was a weakness in her, but she fought it. She said calmly, "Do you think I'd ask it if it was just the money? It's more than that, Jack. I can't believe you'd win—in that kind of company. *Not unless they wanted you to.*"

"Ellen, you're seeing ghosts. For heaven's sake—what would their angle be?"

"I don't know," she said. "How about that Sheila Sloan?"

For a second his face seemed frozen. "How about her? What do you mean?"

"Look what Willie King has done to her. With his money and his power and his smoothness. She was supposed to be somebody on the way up. Do you think she still is?"

"I don't know. I never even heard of her until last night. You're making an awful lot out of a poker game. And especially a game where I won."

She said nothing. She tossed him his wallet.

He looked at it, and back at her. "What does that mean?"

"We can't build a future on that kind of money."

He picked it up and put it in his pocket. "You're being awful childish, Ellen." He stood up. "I've got to get some sleep and a shower. See you tonight."

She didn't look at him. She heard the door close and wanted to run after him, but she didn't. She washed the dishes and cleaned up the apartment and showered. At one, she went to the hairdresser's; at 2:30 she was back at the apartment.

She felt lost. She had a sense of complete futility, like a mouse in a maze, though her trouble wasn't that tangible. Perhaps her trouble didn't even exist. Perhaps, as Jack had said, she was seeing ghosts, seeing a pattern where there was none.

CHAPTER TWO

Too Late for Tears

THEY played for the dinner crowd from eight o'clock on. At five minutes to eight, Jack still hadn't made an appearance at the Carnival Room.

Barn asked her, "Have you seen him today?"

"This morning. He played poker all night. He said he was going to—"

It was then he came.

Barn said, "You had us scared, Dorsey. Remember my heart."

"You don't have to worry about me," Jack said.

Barn's voice was cool. "Worrying about you, Junior, is one job I couldn't handle. Let's go." The last two words were sharp.

They were a dead gang that night. There wasn't much trade, luckily, and no Willie King.

At closing, Barn said, "Rehearsal tomorrow. Joe's got some new orchestrations. Two o'clock, in the Egyptian Room on the fifth floor. On time."

Ellen waited for Jack to say something about taking her home, about going out for a drink, a sandwich, anything.

Jack said, "I'll see you tomorrow, kid. Not still angry, are you?"

She shook her head. She started to say something, and realized there was nothing to say.

Barn said, "Want a lift, Ellen? I'm going that way."

Ellen said, "You don't live that way. Why would you go that way?"

He grinned. "Because you live that way. I'm sure Jack wouldn't mind."

They left the deserted room together and walked down to Barn's jalopy in the parking lot. He held the door open for her.

"No tears tonight?"

"Oh, Barn."

"I'm sorry. Try to remember the kid's young. He's still got a little hay in his hair. He'll snap out of it."

She got in, and stared through the windshield at the lights of the city. Barn climbed in behind the wheel and ground the starter.

"Where do you think he's going tonight?"

"I don't know, Ellen."

"Yes, you do. Who suggested that poker game last night?"

"I don't know. It was too rough for me, the stakes and the players. Your boy was lucky."

"Maybe they wanted him to be lucky."

"I don't know. I'm kind of a rube myself. I don't understand all these big city shenanigans."

"I'll bet you don't," she said bitterly. "Covering for him, aren't you? Men . . ."

It was a restless night, but dry-eyed. She slept late and ate lunch at a drug store. She got to the rehearsal at 1:45. Everybody was there but Jack.

They worked some number without him. He came at 2:30, and Barn left the piano to meet him at the door. Barn wasn't a man who needed an audience for his beefs.

Jack's end of the conversation was audible from where they sat.

Jack said, "So I'm late. So I sat up all night and made three thousand dollars. Three grand, and in cash. Ever see that much in one wad? Here." He had his wallet in his hand now, and he pulled out a sheaf of bills. "Hundreds, all hundreds. And you fret because I'm a half hour late for this lousy rehearsal."

Next to Ellen, Tub Kress said quietly, "The boy Midas. When's the wedding?"

Ellen didn't answer. She was trying to catch Barn's words. She didn't, but she saw Jack turn and walk out of the room. Barn came back to the stand.

He said, "It looks like we'll need a new trumpet. You've got Al Spooner's telephone number, haven't you, Tub?"

Tub nodded. "Want me to give him a buzz?"

"Yup. He's got to get here right away, though. This is a hell of a mess."

Tub left for a phone, and Barn looked at Ellen. "Well, kid?"

She said nothing.

"You'll stick, Ellen?"

"Of course. What's . . . How . . . Has he gone mad, Barn?"

"Money," he said wryly, "is a great corrupting influence, I've heard. It's the lack of it that's kept me so clean."

"Three thousand dollars," she said quietly. "We could . . . Why, it's . . ." She had no words for it.

AL SPOONER got there at a little after three; they worked until five. From her apartment, Ellen phoned Jack, but the landlady told her he hadn't come home from the rehearsal.

At seven she was dressed and on her way to the door when the bell rang. Her boy, her boy . . . Her finger trembled on the button. She heard the door buzz and open and she went out into the hall.

It was Willie King.

He wasn't smiling, for a change. He said, "Going by, and I thought you might like transportation. What's happened to our trumpet?"

"Don't you know?"

He frowned. "Should I? Made some money last night, I hear. Is he going to make this gambling his profession?"

"I don't know. They're your friends, aren't they?"

"Not the people he played with last night. They'd be very put out if you called them that. Racketeers is what they are. He's playing a dangerous game, Ellen."

His eyes met hers honestly, his voice was sincere. She studied him.

He asked, "Can't you do something about it? I'd hate to think I gave him the taste for it with those few hundred he won at my place. Couldn't you talk to him? Would it help if I did?"

"It might," she said finally. "He's just a—a child, really. He's never had any money."

"I'll talk to him," he said. "I'll straighten him out. And Ellen, I wish you'd do me one favor. I wish you wouldn't believe everything you might hear or read about me."

After that, he drove her to work. In a dignified, black Caddy sedan. He drove smoothly and efficiently, his eyes on the road ahead, without conversation.

He was making himself a difficult man to dislike.

Al Spooner was a better horn than Jack. Al seemed to sharpen the others by his presence. They played the orchestrations the way they were written, and Barn's piano worked with Tub's bass and there were no flourishes there. But it was all seemingly solid, just the same.

On *I Walk Alone,* one of their better oldies, Ellen had the customers looking up from their soup. It fitted her mood and she'd given it a certain overtone, in her clear, grave manner.

When she sat down again, Barn murmured, "Birth of an artist."

At the intermission, they went out into the lobby for a cigarette. Barn said, "We sound better than ever. If that's treason—"

"We do," she said. "You used to play with Len Harvey, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

"That's . . . up there."

"I'm usually as good as my company. Now, among female blondes, you see, I . . ."

She didn't listen. She was thinking of Jack and remembering a thousand hours, and Barn's light touch wasn't any help to her—yet.

He took her home again that night. On the way, he told her, "You could go a long way, kid, with a good band behind you."

"Barn, I've no voice."

"I know. But I've heard worse, at three grand a week. Don't think your destiny is necessarily tied up in Jack."

"It is," she said. "We won't talk about it."

He dropped her off, and she faced the dark front of her apartment building with a sudden, unreasonable fear. Nothing moved; there were no lights and no shadows and no reason for fear, but she felt it.

She went up the steps and into the lobby,

and through that to the first floor. There was a dim light on here, and she stopped at sight of the man standing near the elevators.

He was a broad man of medium height with a quiet, appraising gaze. "Miss Ellen Jerome?" he asked.

She nodded. "Detective Luke Sunday, out of Central Homicide, Miss Jerome." He displayed a badge. "My partner went over to the Carnival Room, but he must have missed you. He'll be back."

"A detective?" she said. "What—"

"A friend of yours has been hurt. He asked for you. We'd better go outside and wait. There's no time to lose."

"A friend? Not . . . Jack . . ."

He nodded. "Jack Elder. You expected something like this, Miss Jerome?"

"Something like—what?" She swayed, and felt the pressure of his hand on her shoulder.

THERE was a dizzy nausea in her and her pulse hammered in her throat. She reached out blindly and grasped the detective's free arm.

He said, "Let's get outside. The air will help."

She kept her hand on his arm as they went through the door. Outside, she took a deep breath of the night air and asked quietly, "What happened?"

"He was beat up. Badly beaten. He was found in Steller Park, near the bandstand, a big wad of money in his hand. He's conscious now, but we'll have to hurry. I wonder where . . . Oh, here he comes."

A department car came around the corner, its red light swinging. Its headlights picked them up as they came down the steps.

Detective Sunday helped her into the rear compartment and said to the driver, "Don't spare the horses, Andy. We could be too late, already."

"Too late!" The dizziness grew and the car seemed to sway.

"He's in bad shape, Miss Jerome. In awful bad shape."

She closed her eyes and clenched her fists and forced her back deeply into the cushions behind her. She was having difficulty getting her breath.

The car swung onto Burlingame and picked up speed.

The detective said, "Tell us what you can, Miss Jerome. It will help us."

She told him, in a quiet, dead voice, the story of Jack's gambling from that night at Willie King's apartment to his dialogue with Barn at the rehearsal.

From the front seat, the other detective said, "Willie King, and he'll be clear and clean when we get to him. Luke, I'm thinking it's a dead end."

Ellen said, "Do you think he . . . But these men Jack was gambling with now weren't friends of Mr. King's. Why should he . . . ?"

"I could give you one reason," the driver said. "That little—"

"Shut up, Andy," Luke said. "We don't know anything yet."

They swung around a big semi-trailer and cut over to Palisade Drive, jumping the light. There was no sound now, but the hum of the motor and the singing tires. *That little . . . what?*

She thought of Barn and wished he were here. She thought of Willie King and then her thoughts went to Jack. What had Tub called him? The boy Midas. And he'd been found with a handful of money, in that quiet, quaint little park near the bay.

The bright light over the posts that flanked the driveway flashed on the sign "St. Joseph's Hospital." Gravel crunched under the tires and the car slowed to a halt before the wide entrance.

Detective Sunday helped her out, and the other detective flanked her as they went up the two low steps to the entrance and through it.

The sister behind the small desk in the huge lobby looked up as they entered, then

rose and came out forward to meet them.

She looked hesitantly at Ellen, and then at Luke Sunday. She said quietly, "I'm afraid you're too late. He died soon after you left, Detective Sunday."

The quiet lobby seemed to roar and Ellen had a whirling glimpse of three faces turned toward hers—just before she toppled. . . .

BARN came through the door with a look of such complete concern on his sardonic face that Ellen managed to smile. She was dressed, and sitting on the bed of the room they'd put her in last night.

"Better?" he asked.

"Some." She stood up. "I guess I was hysterical, wasn't I, last night?"

"You asked for me," he said. "You must have been. Ellen . . ." Then he closed his mouth firmly.

"Say it," she said. "Whatever you were going to say, say it."

"Not now. Not for some time. How would you like to go out for some coffee and watch me eat a big breakfast? I'm starved."

"I could eat something, too," she agreed. "I wasn't very hungry at breakfast time." She paused. "Do they know who . . . Have they any idea?"

He shook his head. "There was talk about some mugs from Detroit, but nobody seems to *know* anything."

They went down the single flight of steps to the lobby without further dialogue. At the desk, the sister said there would be no charge, and they walked out into the morning sunlight.

"I can't understand about the money," Ellen said. "Why would he have the money in his hand?"

"It was counterfeit money. Very fine work, but still phony. The cops didn't know it last night, it was that good."

"Counterfeit? You mean Jack was mixed up with counterfeiting? That was a lie, about the poker?"

"I don't know about the poker, at least about the three-thousand-dollar game. I don't think he was mixed up in counterfeiting, but I knew less about him than you do, Ellen. We'll have to wait until we learn what the police find out." He held the car door open for her. "I suppose we'd better get another vocalist for a while?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to work. I'm going to keep busy."

She kept busy. The funeral was on a Thursday, and there were no relatives. Jack, like Ellen, had no close relatives. The band was there, and some of the other boys he'd jobbed around with.

And, surprisingly, Detective Luke Sunday. He drove her back home from the cemetery. He told her, "We know he was playing with some rough lads, a couple of them from Detroit. That much we've learned from pigeons. Both the boys left town the next day. They'd been here six months, but they left the day after the game."

"And you can't get them back?"

"If they show anywhere, including Detroit, we'll get them back."

"And the counterfeit money?"

"I don't know. He must have taken it into the game, and been caught with it there. I think they wanted to teach him a lesson, and went too far. I don't think they expected to kill him. But a guy who brings three thousand of funny money into a game like that is—"

"Three thousand?" Ellen stared at the detective. "That's what he won the night before. That's it. That's where he got it."

The detective returned her stare. "And do you know who he was playing with the night before?"

"No. No, I don't. But Willie — Mr. King — does. He told me about it. He told me they were no friends of his."

Sunday smiled. "Well, and again well. I must look up Mr. Willie King." He paused and added, "Again."

And I must, too, Ellen thought. I'm not going to work for a murderer.

CHAPTER THREE

Too Smooth

SHE didn't need to look Willie King up. He came to pick her up, that evening.

"Nice girl," he said smilingly, "fingering me to Detective Sunday. You didn't expect me to stool for him, did you?"

"I don't understand."

"I'm one of a dozen people who know about the game where Jack won the three thousand. He can ask the other eleven, but I don't furnish information to the police."

"Why not?"

"Because I gamble myself. It would be kind of hypocritical to tell the police about other games, wouldn't it?"

"Even if they gambled with counterfeit money?"

"Even if they gambled with potato chips." He paused to study her. "Ellen, don't get yourself mixed up in this business. You're a young lady with a future. There's nothing you can do about what's happened. Try and forget it."

He dropped her off at the club without coming in.

She was early. She was in the foyer, talking to Al Spooner when Barn arrived. He didn't arrive alone. Sheila Sloan was with him. There wasn't any reason why that should annoy Ellen, but it did.

Perhaps it was their gayety. This light touch could be overdone.

Only one other incident marked the evening. About ten-thirty, Detective Luke Sunday dropped in. He didn't sit down, but stood for almost twenty minutes along the wall near the bandstand.

When they went out for the eleven o'clock intermission, he was in the lobby, talking to Willie King.

At closing time, Barn said, "Sheila and I are going to see what makes the town tick, kid. I don't suppose you'd like to trail along?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, we'll drop you off first, then."

"That won't be necessary," she said. "I can get home."

"Sure she can," a voice said. "It will be an honor."

It was Luke Sunday. He looked weary and annoyed and his voice had sounded somehow dead.

Barn shrugged and walked away.

Sunday said, "Talking to your boss is a frustrating job. You got a coat or something?"

She nodded. "I'll get it."

In the car, he said, "Both games were held in hotels, and there's always a bell captain or clerk or assistant manager who'll talk, in that kind of a deal. So far as I've learned, there were only two men who were in both games. One was Jack and the other was a gent named Sam Newcomb. 'Big Sam,' he's called. He banked both games."

"You think he—"

"Let me finish. If he banked both, he could have fed Jack the funny money in the first one, and called attention to it in the second. One of the lads who sat in that second game is Turk Andrian. About all he's noted for is his temper. You see the pattern?"

"You mean this — this 'Big Sam' knew Jack was going to get into the second game, knew that Andrian would be there, and wanted Jack killed? Wouldn't Jack point out that this Sam had given him the money?"

"He would. But it would be a question of his word against Sam's. And Turk didn't know Jack. He'd take Sam's word."

"But why all this . . . manipulating? What would Sam have against Jack?"

"That's what I don't know. This much I can safely guess. Sam was a stooge for somebody. Turk was a stooge for somebody. There's no sign of Sam in town since it happened."

Ellen said nothing, staring through the

windshield at the light traffic passing by.

The detective said, "I would bet on Andrian as the killer. I would bet it wouldn't be his first, though he's never been convicted of even robbing a gum machine. But the why of it's got me. Who's working the strings?"

"We both know," Ellen said softly.

"Willie King? Maybe. But *why?*"

"Jack and I were in love. Some of the band think Willie was interested in me."

"That's pretty farfetched. He's got enough to interest him in the redhead. And if it's Willie, he's covered. Neither of the games had anything to do with him. Though he and Sam have been thick enough, at times."

ELLEN'S voice was bitter. "What you're saying is you can handle a brute animal like Turk Andrian, but Willie King's too smooth for you."

"That," he said, "isn't something I like to admit, but it hits awful close to home."

They were stopped in front of her apartment now, and he turned toward her. "There's only so many hours in a day and I've been using most of them, Miss Jerome. I'll stay with it as long as the chief thinks it's worthwhile. But don't expect miracles."

She got out and said, "Thanks for the ride. I don't expect anything from anybody."

He drove off and again she had that sudden, unreasonable fear. His headlights swept around the corner and were gone as she went up the steps to the dark lobby. Behind it, she could see the dimly lighted first-floor hall, but the small cubicle was black.

She was trembling as she groped in her bag for her key. She walked quickly through the dark area, up the three steps to the hall door, and found it open.

She pushed through, and another man stood there.

He was immense across the shoulders, tall, and with a dark, almost round face. He wore no hat, his blue-black hair was curled close to his cabbage head. His eyes were a flinty brown, specked with gold.

She opened her mouth—and he said, "Don't scream."

There was no gun in his hand, but the threat of a weapon was there. "My name is Turk Andrian. I'm not going to hurt you. I want to know some things."

"There's nothing I know," she said. "You—you killed Jack. You're . . ."

"Simmer down. I'm a guy doesn't like to be pushed around. I'm a guy doesn't play with marked cards or run funny money on friends, or take any man's sass. But you ain't going to get hurt if you use your head. Let's go upstairs."

Ellen put a hand on the banister. "There's nothing I know. There's nothing I can help you with."

"Maybe you can, and you don't even know it. Sister, what are we yakking about? Since the game the other night, I've heard a word here and there. It looks like I might have been a patsy. Let's get where we can talk."

She stared at the strange brown eyes and preceded him up the steps. She opened her door without any trembling and preceded him into the living room.

He stood near the door he'd closed behind him. He said, "That was a cop brought you home. Who, and what did he think?"

"Detective Luke Sunday and I don't know what he thinks."

"He maybe mentioned some names?"

"He mentioned yours."

"Sure, Sure. Don't they always? And some others?"

"A Sam. I've forgotten his last name. A man called 'Big Sam,' who was the banker in both games."

Andrian stared at her. "They *know*

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

that?" His eyes went past her. "So the kid wasn't lying." This last in almost a whisper.

"You killed him," she said. "You—"

"Shut up!"

She froze, her eyes wide, her mouth partially open.

"The kid's dead. There's *nothing* can be done about that. But Sam Newcomb — you're sure about him? Real sure?"

"Detective Sunday is. And Newcomb's not to be found."

"He'll be found. What'd Sam have against your boy friend?"

"Nothing, I'm sure. I never even heard of him until tonight."

"That don't make sense, sister."

"I don't care if it makes sense or not," she said. "If I had a gun I'd kill you."

"Sure, but you haven't got a gun. And if you start screaming, I'll bust you wide open. Now, what else do you know?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing . . ." She was breathing hard. "Get out of here."

He grinned at her. "Wildcat, aren't you? I'll go. I might be back. After I find Sam."

He went out the door. She heard him going down the steps as she went to the phone.

SHE didn't get Luke Sunday at the station, but she did at home. She told him everything that had happened.

He said, "I'll have the department put a man outside your door. I'll drop by in the morning."

She didn't fall asleep till nearly five.

At ten-thirty, Luke Sunday was there, his face grey with fatigue.

"We couldn't find Big Sam," he said quietly. "But somebody did. About six o'clock this morning. I've just come from the morgue."

"He's . . ." She didn't finish.

"He was killed, in bed in a cheap hotel on the west side. Strangled. Strangling

Sam would take some doing. He's a big man."

"This Turk Andrian is immense."

"It was Turk, all right. We're almost sure. But where's Turk?"

"He — he said he might see me again — after he saw Sam. Did he mean—"

"I don't know what he meant," Sunday said wearily. "With a maniac like Turk, it could mean anything or nothing. We'll keep the place under guard, though."

"He's the one who killed Jack, isn't he?"

"It seems almost certain. He didn't deny it last night, did he? He wouldn't admit it, of course, but he didn't deny it."

"He practically admitted it. Does that end the case, if you get this . . . monster?"

"Shouldn't it? I'd like to have them all that clean."

"And the man who promoted it all, the puppet-master . . .?"

Sunday shrugged.

"And the counterfeit money? Couldn't that be traced?"

"The Feds are working on it, this minute. Look, Miss Jerome, if I nail Turk Andrian, I've got a double killer. That's a pretty good job of work. We can't straighten out everything in this town, not the Homicide Section. We take care of our own business."

"And whose business would a man like Willie King be?"

"The people who made him, the people who gamble. And the people who work for him. He isn't Homicide's."

"I see. An innocent boy is killed. Maybe Willie King manipulated it, and maybe he didn't. But it's no longer your business. You've got a stooge."

He looked at her bleakly. "Stop making noises like an indignant taxpayer. *You're* still working for him."

"Maybe you are, too."

His face was slate. "I'll take that because you've just buried a boy friend. But I wouldn't have figured it from you."

He turned and went out.

It had been unfair, of course. He'd worked hard and well and because he couldn't get to the moneyed Mr. King, she'd accused him of dishonesty. And she *was* still working for him.

At five, Barn came. He looked very fine in a new suit.

"For the redhead?" she asked him.

He grinned at her. "I must be crazy. You sounded jealous. No, not for the redhead. For your personal admiration."

"It's very nice. Sets you up very well."

"Thanks. I thought we could have supper together, before going to work. I've some things to say, but I want some time to word them." He sat on the davenport.

SHE told him about last night's visit, about Turk Andrian, about Big Sam's death, and what she'd said to Luke Sunday.

"That was rotten of me, telling him that, wasn't it?"

"Cops don't expect to be loved. Look, Ellen, I've learned some things, too. And I don't know whether to tell them to you or not."

"Why shouldn't you tell me?"

"They're about Jack."

"If they're true, I want to hear them."

"All right. I knew Jack was spending some time with the redhead to begin with. He has been, for months."

"You knew that?"

"Everybody seems to know it but you and the law. How do you think we got into the Carnival Room? Sheila worked that, and that's what aroused Willie's suspicion. He's screwy for her, completely and utterly. She's crazy for his money — and no more. That much I knew before. What I learned since is this—King bought up the business about the poker games. He arranged that in Sheila's apartment and she was there. But she won't testify to it. She's scared silly of him, and I don't blame her."

"I'm not afraid of him. I'll testify."

"She won't back you up."

There was a knock at the door.

Ellen said, "It's probably the policeman who's watching the place." She rose.

"Policeman?" Barn said. "There was no cop around when I came."

She was already at the door turning the knob. She turned at his words, but too late.

The door was being opened from the outside now.

Barn rose, and Ellen stepped back.

Turk Andrian came through it quickly, and closed it quickly and silently. He kept his back to it.

"The cop left twenty minutes ago," he said. "I told you I'd be back. Who's this guy?" The eyes seemed more yellow than brown now.

"Royal Stoutfellow of the Canadian Mounted," Barn said. "And who the hell are you?"

"Funny guy," Turk said. He looked at Ellen. "Get over next to him. I still haven't got the story. Somebody put me way out on a limb, and I don't think I got him, yet."

"It's Turk Andrian, Barn," Ellen said quietly. "It's the — the murderer."

"Willie King's puppet," Barn said.

Andrian's round head swiveled slowly and his gaze was steady on Barn. "Willie King? Is that snake in this?"

"Up to his ears," Barn said. "Jack was playing around with Willie's girl friend, and Willie engineered the whole deal. He knew you were in town, and when you were going to play. He knew Sam would be in the game and Sam *always* works with Willie. They're great buddies. Sam got scared, though, after Jack died. I don't think either Sam or Willie figured Jack was going to die. They just wanted to teach him a lesson. They underestimated your strength. Sam got scared and hid. Willie didn't get scared. His tracks were covered, and he's a big man in this town. Too big for any Detroit gun to frighten. Anyway,

that's his attitude. If you don't think that's straight, you could call Detective Luke Sunday of Homicide. He's got most of it. But what can he do? Willie's too big for him, too."

Andrian's cabbage-head was tilted sideways. "You almost make sense, ladder-legs. You talked pretty fast, though. Some peeve you've got with Willie King?"

Barn shrugged. "I kind of like his girl, too. But you've got enough friends on that side of the fence to know if I'm making this up. Or you could ask Willie. He's not so big, you couldn't ask him. Ask him where he got the three grand in bad money."

"And have you phone the law the minute I leave? How dumb do you think I am?"

"I don't know. I'm going to phone the law about Willie, anyway. I'd like to see him out of the way. And, incidentally, so would his girl friend." Barn laughed. "Willie's got her scared; he's talking marriage."

ANDRIAN said nothing for a few seconds. Then, "I'm going to ride with that. Don't phone the law, ladder-legs, until you hear from me. That is, if you got any regard for your neck. I'm going to talk this over with Willie."

"I'll be waiting for your call," Barn said. "Good luck."

"Sure." Andrian looked at both of them, and he turned and went quietly down.

Barn sat down and rubbed his eyes with both hands. He looked at Ellen. "Wow!" he said, and expelled his breath. "I'm scared."

"You were magnificent. Barn, you're going to phone the police, aren't you?"

"Why? Is Willie a friend of yours?"

"Barn, for heaven's sakes, that man's a murderer! He'll kill him! He's not rational." She started for the phone.

"There's no need," Barn said quietly. "Sunday's waiting on that end. He'll give Turk a little time with Willie, just enough

to soften him up. Why do you think they took the cop from the door, Ellen?"

"You mean the whole thing was planned? You worked with Detective Sunday on this?"

"More or less. You don't think I really sailed for that redhead, do you? With somebody like you right in sight all the time? No, but you see Luke can't use that strong-arm stuff any more, and so he's got to work the best way he can. One way is to catch Turk in the act, and at the same time, have the kind of Willie King he can handle. I think everything's going to be just fine."

Ellen sat down, staring at the floor. "And you knew about Jack all the time?"

"Yup. Can't we forget about Jack and Willie and Sheila and that cabbage-headed moron who was just here? Can't we just think about us and our doubtful but undoubtedly interesting future?"

"I think we can," Ellen said, and looked up. "Let's have some supper and talk it over." ♦ ♦ ♦

PAROLE

(Continued from page 84)

reach forever. On the night of that date, I want to have dinner with you. We'll be alone, and then you can tell me all about it and I'll be glad to listen. Right now I want you to get back home to your wife."

Little by little Merrick began to grin. "Escape!" he said, and chuckled. "Gabe, he began, "there is no such thing as escape—"

"There isn't," agreed Gabe Miller. "But there is such a thing as parole!" And as he was pushing Merrick through the office door, Miller added emphatically, "And on the way, when that *Argus* man crosses your path, you might take time to tell him and all Innisfail that its chief of police still knows best how to take care of his town!"

Dan Merrick laughed. Then he went down the stairs and back to his chosen bondage. ♦ ♦ ♦

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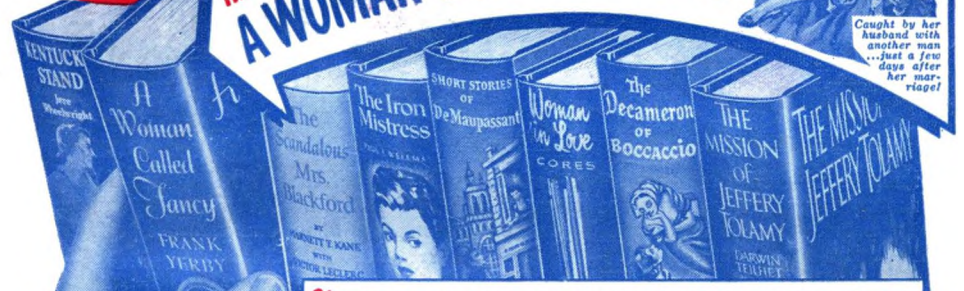

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