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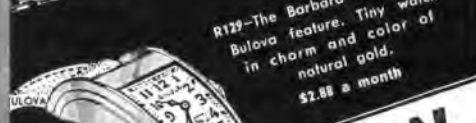
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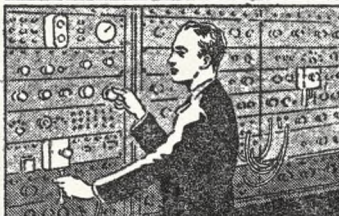
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DETECTIVE TALES



VOLUME TEN

NOVEMBER, 1938

NUMBER FOUR

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

- Long, Baffling Mystery-Detective Novel**
- 1. BLOOD FOR THE CHINA RABBIT.....Harry Lee Felling** 7
 Everything pointed to the murderer of "Holy Joe" McVey, but the Law said Hardcase Hardy, detective de luxe, was the killer! That put Hardy on a death-spot for he was not only the target of police guns; his life was sought by The Ear, trigger-itchy torpedo for the blood-thirsty gang that bore the stench of Kay Donner's mysterious disappearance!
- Three Dramatic Crime-Fighting Novelettes**
- 2. I DEAL WITH DEATH.....D. L. Champion** 42
 I showed my badge at Strickland's house in time to stop Ronny and Macon from starving him to death; I straightened them out and took up my vigil When Manning sneaked in to torture old man Strickland, I shot him dead; and everything was fine—until a guy I depended on made a horrible, ghastly mistake
- 3. WIDOW OF THE TALKING HEAD (A Seekay Story) . Paul Ernst** 62
 Death played a part in probating the fabulous estate of Palmer Richards, sportsman pilot who crashed in the jungles. It took the bizarre Seekay to solve the case, with the help of a girl bound for the insane asylum—and the testimony of Richards' severed head!
- 4. CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING.....Norvell W. Page** 92
 Anything can happen when a good kid like Mickie McGrue gets sick of being a sucker and goes hog-wild with a bunch of gunmen. Especially, when his new "friends" commission him to rub out the best cop on the force—the man who lifted Mickie from the gutter. That's when he learned that corpse fever is catching!
- Five Short Crime-Mystery Stories**
- 5. MURDER TAPS THE WIRES.....O. B. Myers** 27
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 Dorothy Drake didn't believe her husband's story when she found him standing over the body on the floor, a gun still smoking in his hand. After all, the corpse was her brother
- 7. AUTHORIZED JAIL-BREAK.....Charles Molyneux Brown** 55
 They might have never have been able to puncture Steve Tanner's jail-frame, if Kitty Tanner hadn't had a baby boy—and Jimmy Lee, a bright idea!
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 Detective Hal Moran didn't like stalking Death in a full-dress suit—until he met the tantalizing blonde at Le Chat Rouge. After that he figured his evening clothes were as good as anything else—to be buried in!
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- 10. BREAKFAST FOOD FOR KIDNAPPERS. . Robert Sidney Bowen** 75
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BLACKEST MOMENT OF DEATH-DEFYING CAREER



① "It was one of those days when you know something's going to happen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.

pen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.



② "The animals had been sullen during the matinee. They came tumbling into the big cage for the evening performance with that murderous 'jungle-fever' still in their eyes, squalling, spitting and making passes. If they once drew blood it would be just too bad!

"And then, with that cage full of mixed cats raging at me and each other ...the lights went out!

③ "In the flicker of an eyelash the huge, glaring big-top went dead black! In the dark the snarls of the beasts sounded twice as loud. Green eyes glowed. In an instant they would leap for me!

"I jumped back, pressed hard against the steel bars of the cage. I whipped out my flashlight, flung the beam square in the startled face of the nearest cat, then gave it to another and another.

④ "In a moment (a mighty long moment), the trouble was repaired, the lights flashed on again and a tremendous sigh rose from the crowd. I was still alive. The power of fresh DATED 'Ever-ready' batteries had held at bay the fury of the jungle!

(Signed) *Clyde Beatty*



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PICKING THE BEST

HAVE you ever stopped to think why one magazine on your newsstand is worth buying and the one in the rack next to it isn't worth the paper it's printed on? Probably you have—if you've ever handed over the price of that other magazine and taken it home, expecting to get a good evening's entertainment out of it. You've been disappointed, and the chances are that you've made a mental note never to buy another copy of that particular magazine.

There are a number of points of difference between *good* and *bad* in magazine publishing. It's not always easy to spot the magazines that will give you full value. But here's one sure way:

Pick one that is published *every month*, and you can't go wrong!

On the newsstands today only forty-one all-fiction magazines appear regularly every month. Against this number, crowding in from all sides, are one hundred and fifteen bi-monthlies, quarterlies, semi-annuals and "one-shots" (those fly-by-night publications that are so unsure of their reader appeal that they don't even hope to sell more than one issue).

Every one of those hundred and fifteen magazines would be published as monthlies, if enough readers would buy them. Publishers are in the business to make money, and twelve issues a year are going to bring in more money than six, four, two or one—if the reading public thinks the magazine is worth buying.

When you buy a copy of a monthly magazine, you are buying a sure, proved product. You are protecting yourself against speculators in the publishing business who are trying to palm off a second-rate article. You sit down to an evening of reading entertainment with the certainty that you will not be disappointed.

On the cover and contents page of this magazine, you see printed the word, "November." If it were dated "October-November" or "Fall Issue" or some such, you would know immediately that it was not a monthly—and you would know that you could find better fiction elsewhere.

An inside tip to the wise: Look twice before you buy—watch for the monthly dating . . . and you can be sure of fiction you *know* is good!

THE EDITORS.



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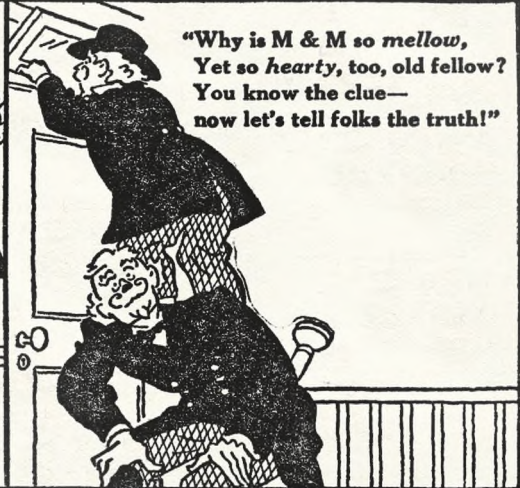
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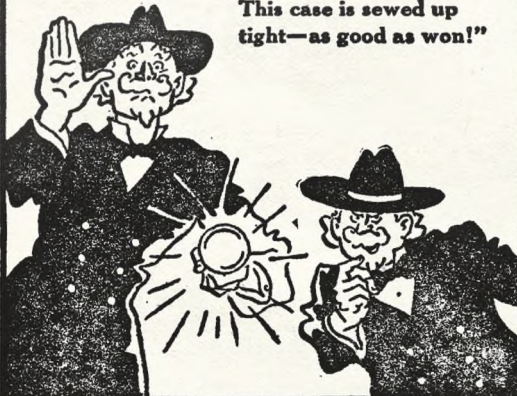
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Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Here's a mystery—and you're
a first-rate sleuth!"



"Why is M & M so mellow,
Yet so hearty, too, old fellow?
You know the clue—
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Blood For The China Rabbit

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Hardy's gun spat fire. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death Over the Waves

It was the murder of "Holy Joe" McVey that really put the spark to the powder barrel, but somehow, everything tied in with the mysterious disappearance of Kay Donner and her silver amphibian. Hard-case Hardy was on the spot himself, but this was the kind of a nut he liked to crack—a nut filled with the meat of dead men!

KAY DONNER'S alert little navigator touched her arm lightly and pointed downward to the heaving sea. "Fishing boat down there. In trouble," he said quietly.

Kay Donner's face showed immediate concern. Her calm eyes met those of the navigator, and she nodded. She put the silver amphibian in a long glide. To this girl who had soloed the Atlantic and who had crossed the western ocean twice, a distress signal was paramount to a com-

mand. Though, right now, Kay Donner was in a hurry—within the hour she had expected to meet the two men who were important in her life.

One of these was "Silver" Donner, the gallant old daddy whose past mining ventures had made it possible for her to indulge in her passion for making somewhat mad journeys in chromium-like airplanes.

The other man was just a cop. A young cop, and a darned good-looking one if you liked the big blond type; a detective, Johnny Dee.

The thought of Johnny Dee caused the blood to tingle pleasantly in Kay Donner's cheeks, caused her hand to stray from the wheel to pat a stray wisp of tawny hair into place. Kay was a bit taller than the average girl, and this, coupled with the feeling of security that wealth, education, and the plaudits of an admiring nation could impart, gave her a tremendous amount of poise. Her level, grey eyes bespoke a keen, native intelligence and a calm mind. She was very sure and very contented in her love for Johnny—had been ever since college days.

From a conventional standpoint it was a terrible flop. Johnny's monthly salary would possibly not have made a down payment on the flying togs Kay wore. Even Johnny Dee's job was not secure. Certain members of the *genus homo* who loved to write in to the newspapers had complained bitterly in the Vox-Pop Department about having an officer in the employ of their fair city whose brother was a wanted man.

"Hardcase" Hardy, the newspapers called Johnny's brother—or, rather, his half-brother. But Kay always referred to him as plain Case Hardy, the name his mother had given him. And old Silver Donner would just chuckle and say that anything was all right as long as Kay didn't marry into a family of milksops.

Kay's navigator said: "That fishing boat is hove to. There's black smoke coming out of the forward hatch."

The fishing boat seemed to be the only craft on that restless sea. Ahead, on the horizon, San Clemente Island was a misty grey shape.

"Maybe you better radio Dad, explain the delay."

"Been sending every half-hour," answered the navigator. "Told him we expected to stop to leeward of Clemente to check that oil pressure."

Kay nodded, kept her eyes on the craft below. The water, now that they were nearer, became a dirty grey, frothy. She could see two men stretched prone on the bright red decks of the fisherman. Like most flyers, Kay was superstitious up to a point. She touched her handbag and made a wish—more of a prayer—that she was not too late to give aid. Her luck was inside that handbag. She never flew without it.

The navigator watched her admiringly as she brought the plane to rest on the tossing water. She was as cool and efficient as a coast-guard skipper, he thought. He made ready to get a line to the distressed craft. Gasoline fire, maybe. Or maybe a faulty exhaust line and the old monoxide had got to the crew. Had to be careful of the old monoxide, especially in a tightly closed job as the fishing boat's cabin appeared to be.

The navigator, with sure steps, walked out on the wing. And then, as if by pre-arranged signal, the two men on deck sprung to their feet. With smooth efficiency each tossed a grapnel line over the fuselage of the plane. The sharp hooks bit into the shiny sides. An engine within the boat began to throb. The lines tautened, drew boat and plane together with crunching impact.

Outraged, suddenly angry, the navigator surged forward. Kay Donner came out on the wing behind him. The smoke had ceased to pour from the hatch. A man's head and shoulders emerged. Wind whipped the tousled hair about his face. He grinned fiendishly at the two people on the wing.

"Say, what's the idea?" demanded the spunky little navigator.

The man shot him neatly between the eyes with a black automatic.

Kay Donner screamed once as the navigator fell from the wing. She felt the quick stab of horror as the frothing waters swallowed his body. Then the daughter of old Silver Donner delved into her togs and jerked forth a tiny, pearl-handled gun.

But the big, black automatic spoke

again. It made a flat, smacking sound in the wind and a mighty blow whirled Kay Donner about. She felt herself falling. Darkness struck at her senses. It blacked out the tossing sea and the sky for Kay Donner, who had stopped on an errand of mercy. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Hand of Holy Joe

THE big sedan bumped along over the dark canyon road. Rain gushed from the roof-edge, ran down over the windows in thick, syrupy gout. Hardcase Hardy might as well have been in the Black Hole of Calcutta as far as seeing where the two guys were taking him was concerned.

He leaned back in the rear seat and studied the back of the driver's head. Being a fugitive from the law had embittered Hardy a little, but it didn't show in his face. The hard, clean jaw had a bit more set, maybe. A few cynical lines marred the generous mouth. The banter in his blue eyes had become tinged with mockery. But they could still twinkle with amusement. They did now as they surveyed the driver from under the brim of the snuff-colored hat.

The guy driving was minus an ear. Not that that alone was amusing, but the missing ear had been replaced by an artificial one. Not a bad-looking substitute, either, and clever, the way it fastened up under the man's harsh, black hair by almost invisible wires. That, then, explained the guy's moniker; he was known solely and simply as "The Ear."

The punk on the back seat with Hardy was called Bernie. Bernie was either very nervous or very quick. He kept his hand in his coat pocket and Hardy could feel the hard steel of the gun there every time the car swayed a little.

Hardy smiled grimly. Both of these punks were running around on borrowed time as far as the police were concerned. But then, so was Hardcase Hardy.

The sedan made a few hairpin turns, growled up a steeper grade and stopped with its headlamps shining against a white garage door. Somewhere in the hills behind Hollywood, Hardy guessed.

A hideout. Occasionally some crack-pot from the studios built a house on one of these isolated eagle-craggs. Probably a throw-back from their robber baron ancestors.

The garage door slid upward like the blade of a guillotine. It descended behind them and Bernie got out into the lighted garage. Hardy followed him.

The Ear stayed in the car.

"The boss is in there," said Bernie. He nudged Hardy with the gun, pointed to a door.

Hardy's eyes slapped down at Bernie. They got a little greener. "You wouldn't be pushing me around, would you?"

Bernie looked at the brown lapel of Hardy's coat. "The boss is in there," he said again.

"Because," said Hardy softly, "if you start pushing me around, I'll take that gun away from you and rub it across your teeth."

Bernie, who had very prominent teeth, did not lift his eyes. "Tell that to Skelton," he sneered. "He makes all the arrangements." His eyes were sullen.

THE movie star who had built the house had evidently gotten slightly off her orbit. The place was hacked up with clustered columns, foliated arches, and gilded lattices. A Byzantine dome soared above the living room. Meyer Skelton sat behind a desk that matched the room in gaudiness.

Hardy flipped a telegram down upon the desk. He didn't remove his snuff-colored hat. That would have taken his hands too far away from the guns in his shoulder clips. He said: "Lay it on the line, Skelton. What has happened to my brother?"

Skelton shooed Bernie out the door with a wave of his fat hand. He studied Hardy a moment with unblinking eyes, like wet, brown glass. A big man, Skelton. His body above the desk was meaty, bulgy under grey worsted sharkskin. The fat seemed to flow upward from his jowls until it crowded under his puffy eye sacs and about the base of his thick nose. Skelton had made his money out of the "Golden Camel," a hot-spot out Culver City way.

He seemed to be weighing Hardy. He said deliberately: "You seem to think a

lot of your brother. Or maybe I should say, your half brother."

"Skip the family history, Skelton. We had the same mother, Johnny and I, and I promised her I'd look after the kid."

He didn't tell Skelton how he had given the kid all the breaks after his mother's death; how he had schooled Johnny, put him through college. Few save Hardcase himself knew about that. But oddly enough he felt that Skelton did. It intensified his distrust of Skelton.

Skelton put his hand into a desk drawer, tossed a pungent daily before Hardy. A headline slapped out like a blow.

DETECTIVE FLEES ARREST

Johnny Dee, formally charged with the murder of "Holy Joe" McVey, reformer, dropped from sight mysteriously today. Johnny Dee, it will be remembered, is the half-brother of the famous Case Hardy, former private detective who is also a fugitive from the law. It is a significant fact, the district attorney's office points out, that "Holy Joe" McVey, the victim in this latest killing, was the complaining witness against Case Hardy in the vice probe of a year ago. The specific crime against Case Hardy was complicity in the killing of . . .

Dumbfounded, Hardy read on. The newspaper story blew up all the theories he had formed since Johnny's telegram had brought him speeding back to Los Angeles. It didn't hook up with the death of Kay Donner, bits of whose plane had been found floating in the vicinity of San Clemente Island two days ago. It didn't hook up with anything save that Johnny's career had been smashed, had ended in disgraceful flight just as his own had ended. Hardcase Hardy's world—what was left of it—seemed to crumble. In Johnny he had visualized all the things he, Case Hardy, had hoped to be. But Johnny had gone haywire, spurred on, no doubt by the death of Kay Donner.

Then, suspicion came. His eyes, hot with anger, blazed at Skelton. "Skelton," he rasped, "this thing stinks. It has all the earmarks! Johnny wouldn't murder Holy Joe!"

Skelton spread his hands depreciatingly. "But the papers liked it that way. The D. A. is asking, 'Did Johnny Dee kill Holy Joe to avenge his brother? . . . You see,'" finished Skelton, "Holy Joe

swings considerable weight, even after he is dead."

"But the kid—didn't he put up any defence?"

"He refused to open his mouth. Even under threat he wouldn't explain. They found he had been keeping tab on Holy Joe for several days before the reformer was killed. He'd been casing the place from a rented room across the street. He'd tapped Joe's wire."

"But hell, man, a dick doesn't do those things on his own. Somebody sent him there. His captain. . . ."

"That's what the D. A. thought. Then, when the cops absolutely denied that Johnny was detailed to spy on Holy Joe, it added up two ways: Either Johnny killed Holy Joe for revenge, or as part of a police plot to eliminate the reformer. Holy Joe had been putting the police on the pan, you know."

"It's the damn cops," gritted Hardcase Hardy. "They've pulled some boner and they're throwing the kid to the wolves!"

"Not to the wolves. To the D. A. The D. A. swears to convict him for murder."

"Murder?" said Hardy. "Good God!" Then, suddenly: "Does this tie up with the death of Kay Donner?"

FOR the fraction of a second, Skelton's lack-luster eyes looked at the top of the desk. "I wouldn't know about that."

"Then where do you fit in?"

Skelton leaned back in his chair, clasped his fat fingers across his paunch. "After Johnny dropped from sight, I got a message from him. He wanted me to meet you, to have you go to the home of Holy Joe and get something from the mantel over the fireplace there."

"What?"

"A china rabbit."

Hardy stared his surprise, waited for some explanation. None came.

"It doesn't make sense," he said.

Skelton's tone became grim. "It makes sense to this extent: either we produce the china rabbit, or the kid goes for the long ride."

"You mean it's a rub-out?"

"What would you think?" Skelton slipped a hand into the desk, brought out a photograph of Johnny. Some artist had done things to it with clever strokes of a

pen. Sketched around Johnny's form was the grim, bleak outlines of a burial casket. Johnny's face and neck showed through the opening. There was no mistaking the macabre significance, or the cold threat of the scrawl below: "*Deliver before eight o'clock Friday or we nail down the lid. Phone Seaside 9968.*"

Eight o'clock Friday the deadline. Hardy whirled on Skelton. "Who sent this?"

"It came by mail, postmarked *Wilmington.*"

"Waterfront." Hardy stared hostile-eyed at Skelton. "And you wouldn't know—"

Skelton, his eyes shot with a sullen light, spread his hands. "I've told you all I know. I guess somebody tipped the kid that the D. A. was going to put the heat on him for the murder rap. He took a powder. Somebody's put the squeeze on him. He wired you to contact me. Somebody wants that rabbit—badly. Evidence, maybe."

Hardy frowned. It meant trusting Skelton—And Hardy trusted Skelton about as far as he could stretch a pair of Little Giant handcuffs.

"Sounds simple," he snapped. "Too simple. I prowled Holy Joe's joint, get the rabbit. . . . Hell, any one of your mugs could prowled that joint!"

Skelton looked thoughtful. "Not so simple as that. This thing has the police in a ferment. Cops watch Holy Joe's place day and night. Last night they killed a marauder there. But the cops don't seem to know what the guy was after."

"The china rabbit?"

"Yes. Someone else wants it, and is trying to get it. So you see what you're up against."

"Practical suicide, huh?" Hardy's eyes looked weary.

"Well, a hundred-to-one shot, say. Frankly, you're the only guy I know who is smart enough to pull the trick; the only one with guts enough. You'll out-fox these—"

"How do I know this isn't some cheap frame to eliminate me?"

"Why should anyone bring you back here from a thousand miles away to kill you?"

"Because," said Hardy a bit wearily, "when I left here before, I was framed. Why? Because Holy Joe was a crook and I had the goods on him. Under the guise of piety, Holy Joe was spreading his rackets. He had the cops fooled, the D. A., the newspapers. Then Billy Betts, the reporter, was killed. I stuck my chin out for that rap. Before I knew it, three of Holy Joe's gorillas perjured themselves, hung a manslaughter rap on me. That's what I been doing ever since, dodging a manslaughter rap. As long as I could keep dodging I had 'em worried."

"Well," said Skelton, "it's *your* brother." He shrugged indifferently.

"Yeah," said Hardy tensely, "and I'll bring you your rabbit. But it'll be a trade, a trade for the kid. Before I deliver, I want to see the color of his eyes. You, Skelton, better see that I do."

"I! I don't see—"

"Don't stall, Skelton. You're not clean on this, not by a long shot. I don't get your angle on this, but I will. And when I do, you better have the right answers."

Maybe Hardy raised his voice a little, for Bernie and The Ear appeared in the doorway. Hardy shoved past them, then stopped in the dim hallway to light a cigarette. He wasn't in the mood for smoking, but the match flare allowed him to make a mental note of the number on the celluloid disk of the telephone there. He could locate Skelton's hideout by that if it became necessary. He had a hunch it would.

CROUCHED behind an iron fence directly across the street from Holy Joe's house, **Hardcase** Hardy shivered a little from his two-hour vigil in the clammy grass. Fog was gathering slowly, drifting up the hill in wispy, wraith-like clouds. Ever thickening, it spread upward from the lower part of the city, swallowing the street lamps as it advanced.

Patently Hardy lay there, an unmoving part of the thick shadow, watching the single orange light in Holy Joe's window. The house sat upon a terrace, well by itself. A police car, parked on the steep drive, held a uniformed copper who sat, seemingly dozing, in the front seat. But Hardy knew that the copper was wide awake and that somewhere nearby lurked another, seeing but unseen.

The fog wisps thickened, became a cloud. It swallowed the police car. It crawled along the pavement and blotted out the big house, closed thickly about the waiting Hardy. A stealthy, quick dash now. . . .

Crouching low, he bore through the fog. He gained the terrace, began crawling silently up the incline.

A slithering noise made him freeze, scarce daring to breathe. Something was creeping through the fog to the left of him. Others, Skelton had said, were after the china rabbit.

Nothing counted now but stealth. If only the fog would hold out. A treacherous thing, that fog. It might blanket his creeping form one moment, then thin suddenly, leave him exposed to those alert cops.

He lived an age during that slow advance to the rear of the house. A drain pipe and an ornamental cypress there gave him access to the balcony above. He picked the lock on a French door and entered an upstairs den. He stood listening, plucking cypress needles from his hair, breathing deeply. A staircase led down to the living room, dim in the glow of an orange lamp. Hardy's feet made no sound on the carpeted stairs as he inched down, blending with the shadows of the railing. Furniture loomed, rising from the shadows that gathered about them. His eyes found a dark void where a fireplace gaped beneath a mantel cluttered with candlesticks and bric-a-brac.

Back down the hall a floor-board creaked. Hardy sank noiselessly, melted into the darkness beside a padded chair.

The hall door opened slowly and a beam of light lanced the room. A uniformed copper stood there, bulking large as he probed with his torch. Its beam searched every nook, danced perilously close to Hardy's hiding place. It steadied there like a hand groping in the dark. Its silver disk crept closer. . . .

Then murder struck, unbelievably quick. The sheen of a knife rose from the darkness behind the cop. It fell. Hardy heard the soft *thud*, the hissing intake of breath as it struck.

It was as if the dead hand of Holy Joe had reached out into the room.

The cop lay dying. Dying silently with

no outcry; stretched there before Hardy. The flash and the gun lay beyond arms weakly outflung. Groping fingers dug feebly into the soft nap of the rug which had broken the noise of his fall.

The haft of a knife stuck upright from the broad, uniformed back; a clean, cunning kill by a master of the *shiv*.

CHAPTER THREE

Her Brother's Killer

HARDY, in that one streaking beam from the falling flash, caught shadowy movement as the killer darted back down the hall. The gun in his hand blasted twice, shattered the black quiet of the room. Missed, both shots. . . . Couldn't tell the killer from his flitting shadow in that eerie orange light. And would those shots raise hell!

"Hammerschmidt! Oh, Hammerschmidt!" It was the other copper calling from outside. Then, the beat of brogans pounding along toward the rear door.

The guy on the floor would be Hammerschmidt, the guy with the knife in his back. Just a big, dumb copper. Maybe a good-natured one with a friendly grin and a couple of kids at home. So, that's the way Skelton had framed it; a dead copper, and Hardy trapped in the house. And headquarters had been tipped, for Hardy could hear the singing of a siren cutting through the fog, like some charging wild thing.

Yet Johnny had said, trust Skelton. And others were after the china rabbit. The killer could be one of these. But the killer hadn't got it. No, for Hardy creeping swiftly to the mantel, saw it there now, a toy among other toys.

Holy Joe couldn't have selected a better hiding place: A simple china rabbit haunched there among its natural companion-pieces. A small one, nothing to excite the curiosity of the cops. Nothing that to them could be the missing piece in a puzzle of death and mystery.

Hardy dropped the china rabbit into his side pocket.

Some prearranged signal had given alarm. Sirens from the fog gave voice like the baying of hounds. Hardy could hear them racing through the mist.

At the back door a latch rattled. Hardy whirled to face the sound. Then a violent pounding, a heavy body barging against a closed door. Of course the killer had locked it to protect his back. But the big copper's lunges were cracking it.

Hardy's feet touched the stair carpet lightly. He gained the stair-head, looked back. He saw the killer now, a dark shadow creeping among other shadows. The man was heading for the mantel.

The back door crashed. The cop was charging rashly down the hall. The sound brought the killer about. The hand that had wielded the deadly knife now held a gun. His toll would be two coppers this night. . . .

"Drop it!" Hardy's voice, rasped from the stair-head.

The man was quick. Even against a gunman like Hardy his speed was evident. The gun in his hand budded pale flame. Sound rolled from it, rocked about the four walls. Hardy felt the tug of the bullet as it tore the hat from his head.

Then Hardy's bullet smashed the cop-killer back against the mantel. The snuff-colored hat was still rolling down the stairs as the knifer crumpled to the floor.

A bound took Hardy out the door, onto the balcony. He swung over the edge, hung a second, dropped. Shrubbery broke his fall. He crept along its concealment, reached the police car parked on the slanting drive.

He jerked the door open, crawled under the wheel with a rapid, sinuous movement.

In another moment he had the police car coasting down the hill, red lights ablaze. He dropped in the clutch, touched the ignition and was doing eighty when he hit the bottom of the grade.

He had their rabbit. He'd return it to them, demand the kid safe and sound. But he didn't intend to keep any perilous rendezvous by driving out Pacific Boulevard and chancing a trade as they had instructed when he called the number on the photograph. He'd check on Skelton's phone number instead, find the hide-out. He'd shove the muzzle of a gun in Skelton's teeth and demand a showdown. Skelton hadn't kidded him any about being an innocent go-between. Skelton knew precisely what had happened to

Johnny. *He* knew why men had died for seeking a simple china toy.

HARDY sent the stolen police car ahead, choosing the side streets, heading for a definite destination. He knew those streets, had learned them during the time his office door had borne the device: "Case Hardy, Investigations."

With his fingers about to snap on the radio switch he tensed suddenly, desisted. He leaned back in the seat again and his eyes darted to the rear view mirror. It revealed nothing, but the chill at his spine did not lessen.

From the back of the car his nostrils had caught the faint scent of perfume.

Cops, as a rule, do not use perfume. And this was no stale odor that had lingered from some past presence. His senses, keyed to highest tension, knew the nearness of some person, crouched, probably, directly behind his back.

His left hand strayed carefully to the gun under his arm pit. His right guided the car steadily onward.

A hard object jabbed against his spine. The husky voice of a girl said. "Don't do anything rash, Mister Hardcase Hardy."

Hardy scanned the mirror again, couldn't see her. "Well?" he asked.

"Straight ahead. I'll tell you when to turn."

For perhaps six blocks he drove savagely, the gun pressing against him.

"Now turn—left."

He swung the police car down a dark, tree-lined street, into a driveway that ran deep into a wooded lot. He drove through the open door of a garage that stood behind a rambling frame house, and stopped. Weathered papers in the driveway told of the owner's absence. She had evidently figured on that.

"Now," she said, "if you'll close the garage door, we can relax. The cops will be prowling tonight."

Surprise held Hardy quiet. She snapped on the dome light. He saw her squarely in the mirror then. Her oval face was framed there. Her dark, bobbed hair, curling down over her forehead, made her face appear whiter.

"You?" he said incredulously. But he didn't move—not yet.

She was Nancy Betts, reporter for the

Press, sister of the man he was supposed to have killed!

Tight-voiced he said: "How did you get here?"

She tried for lightness, but her voice held a tremor. "Why Mister Hardy, I was here all the time!"

"In this car?"

"Why not? Holy Joe's house is news. I was waiting for something to break. And Hammerschmidt is a friendly cop. He let me sit in the car."

Hammerschmidt! Hardy groaned inwardly. She didn't know. Try and explain. Just try. . . !

But he said: "Holy Joe is dead. What news could break there now?"

"Anything. The place has been broken into twice. And certain events indicate that Holy Joe was not the paragon of virtue he had led us to believe."

Her presence loosed the well of bitterness within him. "Holy Joe was a crook, the most dangerous kind of crook!" he charged. "Hiding behind a mask of piety. . . !"

Gravely she met his eyes. "Of course."

"Then, why don't you publish *that* in your paper?"

"No proof. And Holy Joe had friends, relatives. Didn't you ever hear of libel suits?"

"That's it!" he blurted savagely. "The papers are afraid to publish the truth!"

"Not the *Press*. The *Press*, believe it or not, has a heart and soul."

"And a mind of the Inquisition. . . . They sure as hell crucified me."

"You ran. You offered no defense, you hid. . . ."

"And dodged a nice murder-frame!"

"That's not the whole reason. Your brother was making something of himself. He was to marry Kay Donner. You left to keep from dragging his name into a cowardly killing. As long as you stayed away, the cops were satisfied. They did not fully understand the case. It was one of those things tacitly understood as 'dynamite.' The pursuit was luke-warm."

Hardy thought of Hammerschmidt. It wouldn't be luke-warm now. His hat, with its telltale prints was back there.

But he was puzzled at the attitude of the girl. It was as though she were defending him. He remembered her as she

had been more than a year ago when she had haunted his office in her tireless quest for news—criminal news. Sweet and smiling, but persistent. But always with some hidden anxiety lurking in her fine eyes. Fear, dread, it had been. He knew now she had been afraid for her brother, a reporter trying to delve into crime, to solve it instead of reporting its outcome. And he had delved deeply, this amateur detective brother; so deeply that the cops had found him on the floor of Hardcase Hardy's office, a bullet in his brain. Ballistics had said the bullet came from Hardy's gun. A nice coup on the part of Holy Joe, reformer, whose preachments over the radio had aligned a million gullible crusaders at his back.

NOW, Nancy Betts' face, in the dim glow of the dome light, held that same wistful, serious expression. Was it sincerity, or was it a pose? Had she plumbed the truth of her brother's killing or was she one of the sinister forces in the intricate pattern of crime Holy Joe seemed weaving with his dead hands? She had loosed no tirade upon him, had not reproached him for the death of Billy Betts. . . . A feeling of hope ran within Hardy, like a tide.

Now, under the spell of her lovely presence he became increasingly aware of that bond of affection that had pulled him toward her in other days. He had not recognized it for what it was then. He had been too busy to think of romance.

She leaned toward him, put a hand on his lapel. "I was glad when I saw you had come back. You are not afraid. You can accomplish things. The disappearance of your brother has just about disorganized the police. The D. A. is making the most of it. His accusations have made the people of the city lose confidence in the very cops they pay to protect them. Every officer is looked upon with suspicion, and that's a bad state of affairs. The crooks will profit."

Hardy's anger flared again. "So they put Johnny on the pan. They load the whole thing onto him. . . ."

"It's the D. A.," she cut in. "If Johnny had spoken just a few words in his own defense, if he had but made the *attempt* to explain his spying on Holy Joe, the

papers could have given both sides. Why didn't Johnny speak out?"

Hardy spoke bitterly from the depths of his own experience. "Who knows? And I'm not asking. The kid's in a jam. Right or wrong I'm getting him out of it. That's what brought me to your lousy, crime-ridden city. That alone."

"But that's not enough," she breathed. "That's selfish. There's a city of people to be served. Already the crooks from afar have scented the rich pickings, a law divided against itself, a city without protection. They're flocking in, the crooks. You know and I know that there are hundreds who will dream of stepping into the shoes of Holy Joe. They'll fight among themselves over the spoils. They'll steal and ravish and pillage. Decent people will not be safe from their rackets, for they will reach even into the homes. There's a principle involved, a city to be served. . . ."

"To hell with the city. They kicked me out once. It's my brother who interests me."

"No," she denied. "You haven't changed that much. You were always a great guy, Hardcase Hardy."

"Don't call me that!"

The corners of her mouth lifted just a little. "Just the old formula," she said. "If it's a hard case call Hardy." There was a little banter in her eyes now, a little challenge. Her face was close to his and he could see the gleam of her white, even teeth between her parted lips. A return of the old feeling gripped him to every fiber of his being. Then, as bitterness in his cup, came the thought: "She's overplaying her hand."

But he felt ashamed of his suspicions. He looked at her a long time, then he said: "Can you rent me a drive-it-yourself jalopy and meet me at the corner of Washington and B Street?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I guess I'm a pushover for a dame with blue eyes. I'm going to deliver something to a guy. I'm going to see something through, to find out things. I'm going to be a sucker for this public of yours."

"Do I go along?"

"And get yourself killed? I should say not!"

"And you—please be careful."

He paused, one foot on the running board. "Why?"

"Oh, just please."

"What difference would it make?"

"Maybe a lot."

He studied her face, almost put forth his hand. "You're kidding. You hardly know me."

"Yes I do. I've known you for a long time. But you never knew I was alive."

He put his other foot to the ground, walked toward the garage door and opened it. "Washington and B Street," he repeated.

She laughed, a queer little laugh. "Oh hell," she said. "Can't a gal have a hero?"

He walked well behind her, watched her turn the corner. Again that powerful yearning stirred in his breast. Again mistrust smothered it out.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Clue of the Poisoned Hand

THE car she brought him was a good one, a bronze coupé good for eighty, she had told him. But he didn't let it out. He didn't want to be picked up on a traffic charge. That he had saved a cop's life by leaving the knifer dead back there at Holy Joe's wouldn't help any. The dead guy couldn't do any explaining. The cops would just fingerprint Hardy's hat.

Heavy dread rode his chest like a stone pressing against his heart. Not about the cops, but about Johnny. He tried to figure how many snatches had been returned alive, and the percentage against Johnny was deadly. Maybe the kid was already stiff and stark, cold in death. Otherwise, why would he remain silent in the face of a rap he might beat? What powerful influence was sealing his lips, had sealed them from the very first? Had the death of Kay Donner developed some sinister angle?

Hardy blinked the beaded fog from his lashes. Wisps of it were driving inland making the blue lights of laden night-trucks appear like ghostly eyes in the veil. A police car wailed in the distance. He hugged the curb, held his breath until its siren blast died away. He was tense and alert, watching every trailing headlamp

in his mirror. Of course he'd be tailed.

At last he spotted it, by the peculiar quality of its persistent light beam, a Checker cab, flashing wetly in the brilliance of a passing truck.

That must be the contact car. Hardy had phoned the number as instructed on Johnny's gruesome photograph, had given a description of his coupé. Just keep driving, the voice had said. They'd make the switch somewhere along the road.

Hardy touched his side pocket, felt the reassuring hardness of the china rabbit. It was a small thing, much like the pig-banks he had known as a kid. It had a slot for the pennies, but as far as he could tell it was entirely empty. The gloss was worn from its fat sides and an ear was missing. Not much of a rabbit to be throwing its weight around in a deal like this.

Bright light flooded his coupé from close behind. Not the checker cab, but a black sedan crawled alongside and kept pace.

A window went up in the sedan and a voice from inside said: "Don't pull up, skipper. You're being tailed."

"Yeah, so what?" Hardy could not see the speaker, but in the dim light of the dash he made out the familiar outline of the man at the wheel. The Ear, Skelton's man. In a way, that made the sedan authentic.

The voice said, "Turn right at the next crossroad. A checker cab is in your wake."

The black sedan fell in behind, followed. Well, all right, if that was the way they wanted it. They hadn't tried to gun him down. That would have been just too bad for him, for he had seen the dim faces of a whole crew of them. Maybe they had Johnny, meant to trade fair, after all. It was oke by him. All he wanted was to have Johnny on the seat beside him; to slip Johnny one of his guns.

The sedan was forcing him to the side of the road. He slipped the china rabbit from his pocket, forced it deep into the upholstery between the seat and back. His hand went to the cool grip of a clipped gun as he stepped on the brake and cut the ignition. It was the guy on his own running board that Hardy didn't see. The hood must have climbed to his tire rack

while the cars were drifting side by side. He flashed the blinding light of a torch in Hardy's face. Another blinding beam smote his eyes from the sedan.

"Just being careful, pal. Have you got the rabbit?"

Hardy stalled, tried to pierce the flood of light with his eyes. "Maybe I wouldn't know about any rabbit—"

"Maybe you'd know about this!" rasped the voice. Hardy knew it was coming, but a guy can't duck two ways at once. Whatever they hit him with caught him with his gun half-raised. His skull seemed to explode with the blow. He didn't pass clear out but a sickening numbness washed through his muscles. He felt himself slumping down in the seat, but he couldn't do any thing about it.

He felt a hand jerking at his clothing and he opened his eyes and stared at it. It was an extraordinary hand, with fingers swollen and red like sausages. It stirred some cell in his brain, gave his memory something to struggle over. But a haze of pain kept pushing him toward the edge of oblivion and the red hand was like something in a dream. He must have dreamed he heard them mention the name of Kay Donner, too, for he could hear the thundering exhaust of an airplane motor throbbing in his brain.

He came half-awake with the stinging reek of burning rubber tearing at his throat and he discovered that it was his own motor throbbing. The hoods had tied him to the steering post. They had slipped the end of a rubber hose over the exhaust pipe and had let it into the cab of the coupé.

Carbon Monoxide! It was sort of an impersonal way to kill a guy. It didn't call for anyone to wield a knife or a gun and it didn't definitely stick the murder on any one man. Ironical, too, and the cops would get a laugh out of it.

They were hunting him for the Hamerschmidt kill, figuring him maybe as a candidate for the new lethal gas the state had adopted for murderers. But he wouldn't live to lay a cyanide egg in the death chamber at San Quentin, for the carbon monoxide was getting him now. A great pressure was on his chest. He felt like a man who had been buried alive, only to come awake in the grave.

THE checkered cab had passed on along the highway after Hardy turned in. A few yards beyond the side road it parked, as though the driver were undecided. Then it made a U-turn and cruised back slowly. It turned down the side road and when the driver sighted Hardy's coupé, it put on a spurt of speed and skidded to a stop alongside.

Nancy Betts scrambled from the cab. Nancy Betts had a little, nickled gun in her hand. She ran to the coupé and peered in.

"He's dead!" she wailed. "Oh, he's dead!"

The cabby, a red-faced man too fat for his uniform, ran up to her. His protuberant eyes bugged out fearfully and he carried a combination wrench, weapon-like, in his hand. He knocked the smoking hose from the exhaust, took his eyes from it to stare at Hardy's limp form against the steering wheel.

"That gas gits 'em!" he conceded huskily.

"Do something, you dolt!" Nancy Betts was plucking at the binding cords with shaking hands. She began to sob, a little wildly.

The cabby looked around into the darkness. Almost reluctantly he stuffed the wrench into his hip pocket. He fumbled for a knife, severed the cords. He laid Hardy's limp form full length in the road.

"Cryin' won't do no good, lady," he said in a soothing voice. He bent over the form in the road, and straightened suddenly. "Hey! Do you know who this is? It's that Hardcase Hardy, the guy all the cops are huntin'."

"Of course," sobbed Nancy Betts. She was down beside Hardy now, supporting his head in her arm, dabbing at the blood on his face with a handkerchief. "Of course I k-know him. Do you think I'd be following him around if I didn't?"

"I dunno. You newspaper ladies do funny things."

"Oh!" said Nancy Betts, "His heart is beating!" She began to make little whimpering sounds, began to shake Hardy.

The cabby got down on his knees, stared at Hardy's face. "Maybe this is a very tough guy like they say. Maybe he is too tough for the old monoxide." He pulled a flask from his hip, poured about

half of the contents down Hardy's throat.

The whiskey made Hardy instantly and deathly sick. It should have come up immediately, but it didn't. It just stayed down, began poisoning him. He lurched to his feet, a dazed, staring expression in his eyes. He shoved Nancy Betts away from him. He reeled to the coupé, explored the cushions with his hand. "It's gone!" he snarled. "You let 'em get away with it! . . . Quit pounding me!" he yelled at Nancy, who was brushing dirt from his clothing.

He didn't look or act very sane. The cabby took up his wrench, stared at Hardy's flushed countenance. "You sure you're all right, chief?" he demanded.

Hardy snorted. He put his hand to his head. It threw him off balance and he reeled a little. His head ached and his stomach felt ready to turn inside out. He tried to focus his eyes on Nancy Betts, but she kept fading away.

"You!" he barked. "Is this the way you keep your word . . . following me around? You want to gum up everything?"

She stared at him in amazement. The cabby said, hoarsely, "Better keep away, lady. He's blew his top."

Nancy watched in dismay as Hardy lurched into the coupé, gunned the engine and sent the car into a vicious U-turn to go roaring away down the road.

HARDY'S brain was a spinning jumble of evasive ideas as he hurled the bronze coupé down the dark, wet boulevard toward the harbor. His foot was dead weight on the throttle, kept the needle jittering at eighty. He flashed by the belated traffic with the luck of a drunken driver. He *was* drunk.

The gas had left him semi-delirious. Nausea at his stomach. Ideas just peeped out at him, then fled.

But one picture persisted: The swollen hand. The bloated, poisoned hand with fingers like sausages. Fish-poisoning! Not many people knew about fish poisoning. But Hardy did. He knew a little about almost everything. A guy learns, knocking around. And Hardy knew there was just one likely place to find a guy with fish-poisoning.

Hardy had not lifted his foot from the

throttle. Like a squealing banshee the bronze coupé fled down the concrete ribbon that cut through the sand-flats of Terminal Island. He headed for the little hamlet of Fish Harbor, the port of fishermen. . . .

A tin sign before a dusty little office heralded the presence of "Doctor Clyde." The Doc was a roly-poly little guy with an expression of perpetual astonishment. Hardy figured it was the spectacles, for the doc peered at you over them and it made his mouth hang open. He sniffed the rank odor of whiskey on Hardy.

"Ah yes," he said, looking at Hardy's scalp. "Tsk, tsk! These automobiles . . . quite a bump. . . ."

"The car went off the road and slammed me into something sharp."

"Ah yes, something sharp," repeated Clyde. "Just hold still a moment." He put some liquid fire on the wound and swabbed it with a piece of cotton. "That bites a little, eh? Now just hold this end of the gauze and we'll have it wrapped up very nicely. Yes, very nicely. . . . You've a very durable head, young man."

"Yeah. It's lasted so far. Say Doc, do you treat many guys for red, swollen hands?"

"Ah yes, any number. . . . My heavens, you don't mean fish-poisoning, do you?"

"Yeah. Lots of it around here?"

"Quite common. Infection. Rotten fish. Chum bait."

Hardy's hopes fell. If every other ginzo in the port had it, it didn't mean a thing. Positively no help at all when it came to identifying the gang who had hijacked the china rabbit.

After he left the doc's office, Hardy went into a phone booth. He tried to call the home of Silver Donner. No one answered. The phone was dead, ominously quiet. It depressed Hardy, like a feeling of futility. It just about clinched the argument he was having with himself. He was just about to abandon the chase of the man with the swollen hand, locate Skelton by means of the phone number, and try to force the truth from him.

Then he saw the familiar checkered cab parked at the curb. A concealing truck drove away from before it and there it was; Nancy Betts' favorite cab, driver and all.

She would be somewhere near, had spotted his bronze coupé, maybe. He flashed a glance up and down the street. He did not see Nancy, but he saw a man half-hidden in a recessed doorway, watching the cab with rapt attention.

HE WAS a muscular little guy, thick-set. His blue shirt, open at the collar, showed a hard-meated chest sunburned to an angry red. The fingers of his right hand were red and swollen, like sausages.

His little, close-set eyes were very intent as he watched the checker cab. He saw Nancy Betts come around the corner about the same time Hardy did. The muscular little guy goggled as he stared, like a man who had made some startling discovery. He turned about, went into the store.

Hardy crossed the street, cut through a lot cluttered with fish-nets. He saw the watcher emerge from the rear of the store. Hardy followed him as he made for a faint path through the sand and started along it at a dog trot.

The man's course took him past a huge pile of lobster traps, shut him from Hardy's view. Hardy sprinted ahead, cut around the opposite end of the traps. Gun in hand, his eyes probed ahead, failed to see his quarry immediately.

Then Hardy stiffened. The guy had stopped, was peering around the end of the obstruction, watching his back trail.

"Lift 'em, brother!" Hardy rapped out.

The guy whirled. His little eyes narrowed and he licked his lips. Then he started violently.

"Yeah, I'm the guy," said Hardy coldly.

"I don't get you."

"Okay, you don't get me. Well, what's so interesting about the girl in the checkered cab?"

The man was recovering his nerve. He set his mouth defiantly, watched Hardy narrowly.

"You're going to talk. You're going to give, brother, if I have to beat it out of you!" said Hardy slowly.

The guy's mouth twisted in a mirthless grin. "You won't live that long, pal."

He boasted too quickly. Hardy read menace in the words. Hardy shrank back into a niche between two stacks of traps.

Not a second too soon. A bullet wafted from nowhere, seemingly. There was no report of gun, only the *thup* of sound as it smacked into the muscular man's forehead. The guy hunched his shoulders. He half-raised his clenched hands, tottered a moment, then fell face forward to the ground.

The fellow was dead. Hardy writhed deeper into his niche, tried to peer through the maze of traps. He could see the dusty alley and the backs of the row of stores—but no killer with a silenced gun.

He heard the hollow murmur of a gasoline motor. The checker cab was moving past his shelter, going down the road at a sedate pace. He could not see the occupant of the back seat, only the hackie with his grey cap tilted over one ear.

He watched the checker cab turn into a side road. The road was rutted, little used, probably, for he could see the cab jounce and sway as it wound its way along to disappear among the sand dunes. The road ran in the same general direction as the path the dead man had trod.

Hardy ventured a quick search through the dead man's pockets. They revealed nothing that would explain the riddle of the china rabbit; no clue as to the whereabouts of Johnny.

But the path the man had followed—that would lead to something. Hardy chanced the traverse. He kept the pile of lobster pots between him and the source of the death bullet. He trudged through a waste of shell-strewn sand. It was low tide, but over the brow of the shore line he saw the roof of a fishing boat's wheelhouse.

The clew of the poisoned hand was leading somewhere, after*all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red Coffin

THE fishing-boat was a smooth-planked forty-footer of the Mediterranean type. She had a low trunk cabin amidships. A raised house at the forward end of this gave glassed-in shelter to the pilot. She looked clean, well-cared for, and her decks were painted a bright red, the color of fish blood.

She was moored to a small wharf constructed of drift wood and a sign bore the scrawled warning: "*Keep off. This means you.*" The dead end of a rutted, little-used road showed the place to be accessible to automobiles.

Hardy leaped lightly to the red deck. A little dark guy emerged from the engine room. Some kind of a Spic, Hardy thought. He had a wrench in his hand and a short piece of iron pipe.

The Spic's face turned the color of greasy canvas when he saw Hardy. His mouth fell open and stayed that way, just as though Hardy had jumped out of a coffin to haunt him.

The Spic opened his hands and let pipe and wrench clatter to the deck. He produced a knife.

Hardy did a neat, quick job of pulling a gun. "Drop it," he said softly.

The Spic looked at the gun, then at Hardy's eyes. He dropped the knife. Hardy kicked it along the red deck, out of reach. He backed against the deck house where he could keep an eye on the companionway. He had an idea that the Spic was not alone.

"I'm looking for a cop," he said grimly. "A cop named Johnny."

The white heat of his anger must have showed very near the surface. It struck fear into the Spic. "No, no! I don't know hœem. I don' know thees Johnny!"

Some misgivings smote Hardy. The Spic's frantic manner bore the stamp of truth. "The china rabbit!" he snarled. "Where is *it*?"

The Spic's eyes darted to the companionway. Instinctively Hardy's gaze followed. He did not see the round glass port behind him swing open. He was unaware of the brawny, hairy arm that snaked out from it until a short-nosed gun ground against his spine.

"Drop the rod, mate. Nice and easy does it!"

Hardy hesitated a moment, then let his Luger fall to the deck. He still had another clipped under his coat and the guy had to emerge from the cabin.

The Spic darted forward, swooped up the fallen weapon. He held it at Hardy's belly. His eyes glittered in his swarthy face as he backed away slowly.

Abruptly the gun at Hardy's spine was

jerked away. It appeared almost immediately over the companion slide. The hairy arm followed it, and then a face, the knobby, scarred face of a fighter; the shoulders and torso of a heavyweight wrestler.

The garish pattern of tattooing that began at the bulging neck and filigreed the great drum of a chest told Hardy that he was looking at a very tough skipper; a very red-headed and drunken one whose brute strength had given him an overbearing manner and a nasty leer. He frisked Hardy, took his other gun.

The great red giant pocketed the guns. He sized up Hardy's whipcord body with a certain admiration, a scrapper's admiration for one of his kind. The tattooing on his torso writhed as he flexed his bunched muscles. With an incredibly quick move he smashed his fist to Hardy's face.

Hardy rode the punch, but at that, it almost knocked him through the deck-house wall. He spread his hands against the wall, held himself erect until his head cleared. His eyes watched Red.

The Spic put the Luger in his pocket. He picked up his knife and edged in.

"Better thees guy dead. I'm t'ink heeza come after thees gal!"

Red drove him back with a vicious kick. "Shut your mouth before I bash in your teeth!" He turned to Hardy. "You're supposed to be dead, mister. But I guess them guys bungled it. You're the guy who prowled Holy Joe's joint and got the rabbit. You give Heinie Blum a belly full of lead there. Heinie was after the rabbit, too. I know that because I sent him. But who sent you?"

HARDY caught a quick, deep breath. He wasn't thinking of Heinie Blum. He was thinking of the Spic's excited mouthings about a *girl*.

What girl? It couldn't be Nancy Betts! Before he began to add it up, he almost knew what the answer would be.

Kay Donner was alive, a prisoner on this very boat. She had been kidnapped!

But Red had angered, waiting for Hardy's answer. He launched another savage smash at Hardy's face. But Hardy wasn't there to stop it. His head had bobbed sideways with the smooth coordination of trained muscles.

Red's huge fist bludgeoned solidly against the cabin wall.

Red howled in pain. The howl ended in a grunt as Hardy slugged for that knobby face. Twice more he struck, with a quick one-two that sent Red tripping, heels up, over the anchor winch.

The Spic had darted in, steel bared. Hardy caught him in mid-stride with a punch that stopped him flat-footed. He hit him again, knocked him backwards, over the rail into the water.

But Red was up now, rushing forward like a charging ape. Teeth bared, he came on, swinging. A guy who loved to fight, out of the pure viciousness of his nature.

Hardy swung to meet him. He stepped on the short length of pipe. Before he could recover his balance Red closed in. They grappled, stood locked in a fighting embrace. They wrestled about the deck, snarling, each battling with deadly intent.

The checkered cab came bouncing and swaying down the rough road. It swung around, braked to a stop and stood with engine idling. Hardy ventured one quick glance, saw the white, scared face of Nancy Betts.

A man leaped from the cab, a tall cadaverous guy with hunched shoulders. It was The Ear. He ran toward them, swinging a pistol with a thick tubular silencer screwed to the muzzle of it. He leaped to the deck and slammed the silencer against Hardy's skull. Hardy slumped in Red's grasp.

A mental fog washed through Hardy's brain, lifted again. The Ear was straining forward, trying for another blow, but Red warded him off with an outthrust hand.

"I tell you we gotta finish this guy off—now!" panted The Ear.

"What's the hurry?" growled Red, suspiciously. "I got a better way than *that*."

The new, sharp danger of it cleared Hardy's brain. He weaved erect, snapped: "Hang on to him, Red. He's double-crossed you."

A furious light of suspicion grew in the tattooed giant's eyes. "Who's in that cab?" he demanded.

"A newspaper jane and a taxi guy," wheezed The Ear. "They been tailin' along after this guy. I got 'em tied up. The jane says Hardy here knows the whole play!"

Game little Nancy! Scared half to

death, she still had thrown a tremendous bluff at The Ear. Hardy pressed home the advantage. "The Ear has made a sucker out of you, Red. He and Skelton—"

"Who the hell is Skelton?" demanded Red.

"See!" cried The Ear desperately. "He's lyin'. Lemme finish the guy off!"

But Red held him easily. His eyes were sharp swords of suspicion, boring at The Ear. "Who's this guy Skelton?"

Hardy staked everything upon the theory he had formed. His play was to set Red and The Ear at each other's throats. "Skelton is the *other man* who is after the china rabbit! The Ear has sold you out to Skelton for a bigger cut."

THE look on the big tattooed man's battered face was terrible to see. "So *that's* why you arranged to be contact man! You collect the ransom, then you and this Skelton lam. You leave me here holding the bag. I can't put up a beef and I can't let the jane go. All I can do is to send her to Davy Jones' locker. Good thing I got the china rabbit—"

Red just *thought* he had the rabbit. The Ear writhed in his grasp, smashed him savagely with the silenced gun. Red's great bulk crashed down on top of Hardy. His hands clutched Hardy in blind, dazed fury.

The Ear darted down the companion-way, reappeared carrying a satchel.

"The rabbit!" croaked Red.

With a prayer against the little gods of weakness, Hardy tried for one of the guns in Red's pocket. Red saw a new danger in that. He cuffed at Hardy much as a great bear would strike, knocked him into the scuppers.

The Ear, satchel in hand, fled toward the taxicab in long-legged jumps.

Red was on his feet now, weaving, fumbling in his pocket for a gun. The Spic, who had been crouched on the bank waiting the outcome of the battle, now endeavored to cast his lot with the winning side. He leaped to the side of the cab, poised to throw his knife at Red. But Red's gun was out. It blasted once. The Spic folded his arms across his belly, screwed his face into an expression of pain, and crumpled to the ground. Red's second shot tore into the taxi-cab, but it was roaring away, bounding over the rutty road, throwing up a thick cloud of dust. The grey-clad form of the cab driver hurtled from its open door. The white face of Nancy Betts appeared at the rear window. Her scream was lost in the racking explosions as Red triggered the gun in berserk fury. The cab sped on.

Red whirled about to see Hardy crawling across the red deck, straining to reach the piece of iron pipe. Mouthing wild curses, Red kicked him down into the forepeak hatch. . . .

Hardy came awake retching to the thick, choking fumes of burning gasoline.



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A tight band of pain was threatening to crush his brain, the same sensation he had felt while being gassed in the bronze coupé. He opened agony-bleared eyes, saw the trussed-up form of Kay Donner in the forecastle bunk. He crawled toward the ladder, over the body of the dead Spic, over the unconscious form of the taxi-driver. He tried to lift himself erect, but the wild pitching of the boat hurled him headlong against the bulkhead.

He knew what had aroused him from his coma now: Gas! . . . Deadly monoxide! That's what the Spic had been doing with the pipe-fittings. Conveying the monoxide from the engine into that airtight crew's compartment. Silent death for Kay Donner!

The smashing assault of green water and the banging about of gear told him the fishing boat was headed seaward, boring into head-on seas. In a frenzy he searched about for the iron pipe that was pouring the deadly gas in upon them. He found it coming through the bulkhead where a patent heater had been installed. He gripped it. Its hot surface seared his hands. He could not move it for it had been screwed tightly into a T in the main exhaust pipe.

He knew big Red, his courage fortified with whiskey, was in the glass-tight pilot house above the engine room. Red was taking them to sea to sink them without trace after the deadly monoxide had got in its work. Red had to do it. He was on the spot. And Skelton had the rabbit.

CHAPTER SIX

Mr. Skelton Is So Sorry

MEYER Skelton sat at the ornate desk in the big house, fingering nervously some papers spread before him.

The phone shrilled. Skelton's pallid, pursy face relaxed. He went to the phone in the hallway, lifted the receiver. His glassy, black eyes smouldered as he listened.

It was The Ear. Skelton gave The Ear curt instructions, then he hung up and made his way to the basement. He stood there at the bottom of the steps looking across at a man who was chained to a water pipe with a pair of police hand-

cuffs. The pipe was worn shiny from friction and the man's wrists were raw and bleeding. His eyes held the light of a trapped animal, but even that and the stubble of beard did not hide the prisoner's resemblance to his brother, Hard-case Hardy.

Johnny's teeth gleamed in the feral grimace of a captive wolf as Skelton came toward him.

"Well, Johnny," said Skelton, almost regretfully, "in thirty minutes comes the pay-off. In thirty minutes you must die."

Johnny spoke one word, hungrily, fearfully. "Kay?"

"Kay Donner," said Skelton, "is now really dead. It will be no shock to the world, for they have already accepted her death as a fact. It is, however, very bitter news for you. It leaves you very little to live for."

"You're lying again, you—"

"The Ear just phoned me. In less than thirty minutes The Ear will play the last trick in my *coup*. He will collect fifty thousand dollars from Kay Donner's father. You understand it would be impossible to really return the girl."

Johnny fought down a flood of invective. His brain, almost drained of emotion, settled down to a machine-like coldness. A mental voice within kept crying: "You've got to get free of this. You've got to live to avenge Kay!"

"Due to the vagaries of circumstance," said Skelton, "your brother, Case Hardy, and an unfortunate taxicab driver shared the fate of Miss Donner.

"I had hoped," he continued, "that you would be my means to a totally bloodless victory. When The Ear first informed me that Holy Joe had kidnapped Kay Donner and had made it appear that she had been lost at sea, I naturally thought of you. I knew that Silver Donner had been warned that his daughter's life would be immediately forfeit if he notified the police. But I was certain he would tell *you*, Kay's fiancée. So, I had my man, Bernie, watch you closely.

"Holy Joe, The Ear informed me, had planned carefully. Afraid of being double-crossed by his accomplices, he had made it impossible for anyone but himself to collect that ransom. But I found the key to that plan: a china rabbit. I sent Bernie

to Holy Joe's home to steal the rabbit. But Bernie bungled it."

"So, it was Bernie who killed Holy Joe?" said Johnny bitterly. "And I get the ride for it. . . ."

"Yes. But my first plan was to imprison you here, then to put you in full possession of all the kidnapping facts. Then, I could have traded you alive to Holy Joe, under threat of releasing you with all the facts. I could have kept my identity secret. I could have emerged with clean hands—"

"And left it up to Holy Joe to bump me off," said Johnny, between clenched teeth.

"I," said Skelton, "am not a murderer, in the crude sense of the word. But due to Bernie's bungling, the death of Holy Joe compelled me to change my plan. I found that you had wired your brother Hardcase Hardy. It occurred to me that Hardcase Hardy could get the rabbit for me where others had failed. He suspected my motives, but he knew your life hung in the balance. That made him my man.

"You're quite a one for letting others pull your chestnuts out of the fire," commented Johnny coldly.

"Yes," agreed Skelton, unruffled. "I plan and execute very cleverly. I've never owned a gun, have never carried one."

As Skelton talked, a faintly disturbing sound beat in the air above the house. The sound rose, then fell again. Skelton paused. A line creased the placid smugness at each mouth corner, then smoothed away again. Occasionally aircraft from one of the many fields traversed that route.

Skelton said: "Now that your death becomes imperative, I find myself unable to order it. Although I set a trap for you, I really admire you. You are a young man of high character and intelligence. But you must die, so I have arranged that you may die by your own hand."

Johnny stared, waited. He knew he was dealing with a madman now.

Skelton massaged his fat fingers. The renewed fires of an inspiration were burning in his eyes. "The Ear," he said, "was compelled to seize the person of a young lady, a newspaper girl named Nancy

Betts. He has her in the cab now, will use her as a hostage in case Silver Donner should be foolish enough to essay a trap while paying the ransom on Kay. But after that, Nancy Betts must be put out of the way. When The Ear returns with the money, Bernie will bring Nancy Betts to this basement. Bernie will have a gun, will have orders to kill Nancy Betts while you, chained to this pipe, will look on. But *you* will kill Bernie."

"I?"

"Yes. You will kill Bernie, for you, too, will have a loaded revolver. Bernie himself will bring it to you in a package. He will think the package contains your food. You will not stand by and watch an illiterate thug murder a helpless girl. So you will kill Bernie, who is no longer useful to me."

"But suicide!" gasped Johnny. "You said suicide—"

"That little detail will take care of itself," answered Skelton gravely.

Then Johnny felt the lift of a wild hope; the drumming of the plane was insistent again over the house. Skelton heard it too. He called up the basement stairway to Bernie:

"Bernie, see why that airplane is flying about. It is very disturbing."

BERNIE came to the stair-head and looked down. His pinched face was screwed up into an uneasy expression. Bernie had been uneasy ever since Skelton had discovered that it was he who had killed Billy Betts, the reporter. That had made Bernie Skelton's man. And Skelton was nuts. Skelton had been some kind of sapper officer in the war. Blowing up whole companies of soldiers by digging tunnels and putting high-explosives under them. Skelton didn't know the war was over. He was nuts, all right, but Bernie was sticking until after this payoff. Then Bernie was putting distance between himself and Skelton.

So now, Bernie said from the stair-head: "All right, boss, I'll take a gander at the plane."

But Bernie didn't look into the plane business immediately. Instead, he got down a two gallon can of kerosene from a shelf and put it on the sink. He began to look about for the can opener.

Bernie lost some time hunting the can opener. Usually he was very prompt in carrying out Skelton's slightest order. Skelton had been pretty tough ever since The Ear had told him about Bernie bumping off Billy Betts. Holy Joe had paid Bernie a century note for that, but it had put Bernie in the grease with Holy Joe on one side and Skelton on the other. Then, Bernie had made it worse by shooting Holy Joe through the head on the night Skelton had forced him to go to Holy Joe's house to steal the china rabbit. Bumping Holy Joe had seemed a good idea at the time. It had eliminated one boss.

But for some reason it had burned Skelton up. He had called Bernie a bungling fool, had threatened to inform this Hardcase Hardy guy that Bernie had bumped Billy Betts so that Holy Joe could frame the kill on Hardy. That had put Bernie into another stew of fear. From all accounts this Hardcase Hardy was very tough and would not hesitate to use a rod on anyone who had framed him.

But now, Hardcase Hardy was dead. So Bernie finished getting the kerosene ready so they could burn the house and do a complete fadeout right after they had collected on the Donner snatch. That meant burning Johnny, the cop, alive, of course, and Bernie couldn't see any sense to that. Another screwy idea of Skelton's.

He went out through the garage and looked up at the plane. He knew it couldn't land nearby, for the place was a tumbled mass of brush-grown hills. But as he watched, something shot from the plane like a projectile. It blossomed into a white parachute with the body of a man swinging below it. It seemed a matter of seconds before it pendulumed to the ground, and came toward Bernie at a staggering run.

Mouth agape, Bernie stared at the brush-torn clothing of the man; at the blazing, greenish eyes. "Hardcase Hardy!" he yelled in sudden terror.

He ran into the garage. From behind Skelton's big sedan he loosed a shot at the apparition. But Hardcase Hardy's gun was out, too, blasting. It spat a slug that ripped along the metal body of the car and sent a shower of particles into Bernie's face, and then something hot

bored into Bernie's chest. It was numbing his body. A thick scum was forming over the morning sky and Bernie was still wondering how Hardcase Hardy had tricked him, when he died, sliding flat on his back, head first down the basement steps.

HARDY, a battered, disheveled figure of vengeance, stood a moment at the stair-head, peering down. He saw his brother chained to the iron pipe. He saw the unbelieving eyes of Meyer Skelton fixed on him in abject fear. Skelton's face was livid. His fat hands, half-raised, shook as though palsied.

Hardy came down the stairway slowly.

"Look out! The Ear!" The warning cry came from Johnny. Hardcase swung about to face the skeletal figure framed suddenly in the doorway above him. Not soon enough, it seemed. The Ear flung the satchel he carried straight at Hardy's face. It flew open, erupted bundles of worn, green money. The Ear jerked a gun, fired with the same hasty motion.

Hardy felt the breath of that bullet. But ducking the satchel saved him. He shot the tall man straight through the body, stood poised with ready gun as The Ear rolled down the steps to lie groaning beside the body of Bernie.

He strode over to Meyer Skelton. The sound was like the crushing of a green melon as he drove his fist into Skelton's contorted face. Skelton dropped.

Johnny grinned as though he enjoyed it. "Save the pieces," he cautioned. "Skelton can tell who killed Billy Betts."

Hardcase Hardy fished the handcuff keys from Skelton's pocket. He told Johnny: "When Red Coffin took us out to sea he ran the fishing boat into a stiff south-easter. Red, who was very drunk by then, had all he could do to handle the boat. He had us locked in the forepeak. I came to, deathly sick—not seasick, but from monoxide gas. You see, I'd been damn well gassed once before and I recognized the symptoms immediately.

"I hunted for the gadget. It was a pipe running from a T-coupling screwed into the engine manifold. I couldn't budge the thing. But this taxi guy had a habit of carrying a patent wrench around to do his

fighting with. It was in his pocket. I unscrewed the pipe from the engine and plugged the hole.

"That turned the trick against Red. The pilot house was directly over the engine space, and as Red had the windows tightly closed against the heavy seas, it wasn't long before he keeled over from the gas. As I said, Red was pretty drunk.

"We smashed out through the hatch, drove the fisherman to the nearest airport and Kay flew us here. She was game, flew the plane in spite of a bullet hole in her right arm. . . . Listen!"

Somewhere in the hills below sirens were sounding, nearing rapidly.

"The cops!" said Johnny eagerly. "And Kay will be with them!"

"Which reminds me, kid," said Hardcase Hardy, "The cops can make it damned awkward for me until you've cleared this all up. Well—happy landings."

A brief clasp. Their eyes met squarely, then Hardcase Hardy was running up the steps. He squirmed under the wheel of the taxicab, gunned the motor, and was away. He cut into the shelter of a side road just an eye-wink before the police cars came in sight. He braked the taxi to the roadside.

Suddenly he sniffed. Perfume!

He got out and lifted Nancy Betts from the back of the cab. He took the gag from

her mouth and he untied her. She leaned against him weakly.

"Tell me," she said in a muffled voice; "Kay and Johnny, are they dead?"

"Alive—and very happy, I'd bet," said Case Hardy.

The tremor of horror was still in Nancy's voice. "While I was a prisoner in the back of this cab, I was compelled to listen while Silver Donner paid over fifty grand for a girl I thought to be dead. All he got for his money was the promise of Kay's freedom and a china rabbit."

"The china rabbit," said Hardy, "was Kay's luck. Her talisman. It was a toy she had owned since babyhood. She carried it in her handbag, never made a flight without it. It was the one thing the kidnapers could show Silver Donner to prove positively that they had her captive. When Holy Joe first asked Silver Donner: 'What will convince you that we actually have your daughter?' Silver Donner replied, 'Send me the china rabbit from her purse. She keeps it by her always.'"

Nancy's arms tightened about Hardy. "Some girls are like that," she whispered; "like the china rabbit. They bring you luck if you keep them by you—always."

"Then you know—that everything is all right?"

"It's got to be all right!" she breathed fiercely. She kissed him on his battered lips.

THE END



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MURDER TAPS THE WIRES

by O. B. MYERS

Telephone operator Betty Wiley was accustomed to vignettes of romance and tragedy over the wire, but nothing had ever happened like the drama that unfolded the day Haley Foss was murdered on P-167, and wireman Burt Gunning, Betty's sweetheart, called a wrong number on two desperate killers!

SHE HAD wide blue eyes and a crimson mouth, and the wire clip that held the receiver against her left ear nestled snugly among her golden

curls. Her voice was as musical as a bell.

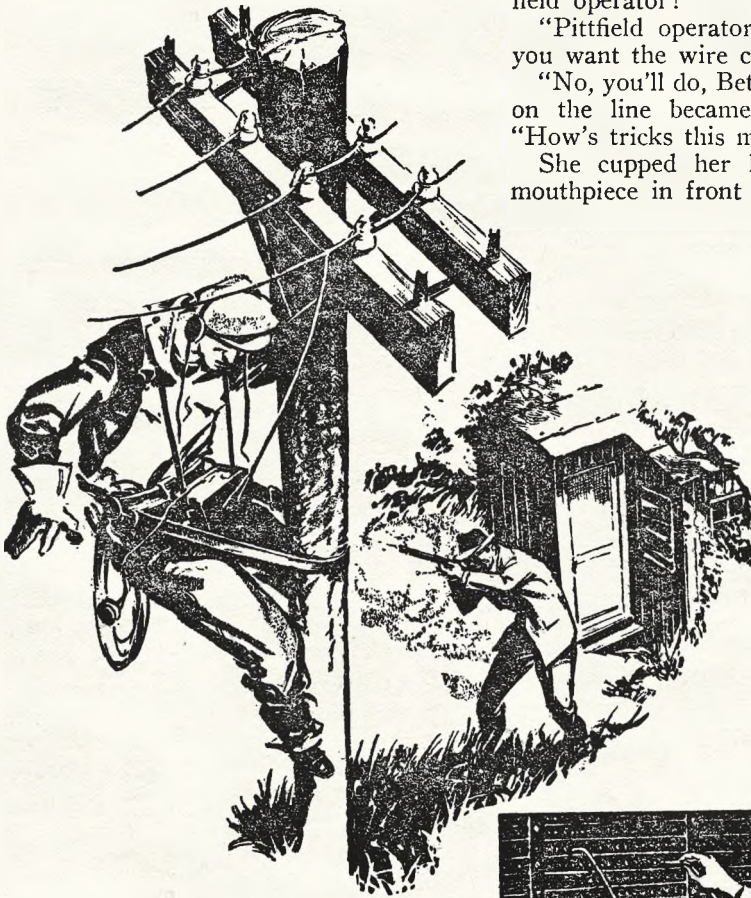
"Long distance . . . long distance?"

"Wireman working. Is this the Pittfield operator?"

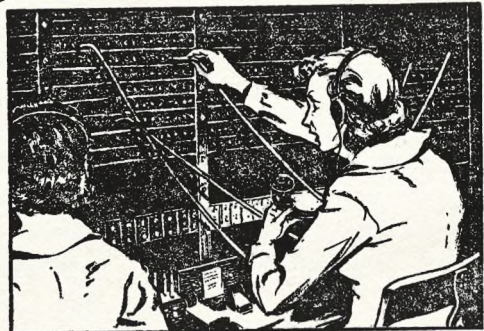
"Pittfield operator," she replied. "Do you want the wire chief?"

"No, you'll do, Betty." The man's voice on the line became suddenly personal. "How's tricks this morning?"

She cupped her left hand about the mouthpiece in front of her and her tone



The killer must have fired from near the house, with a rifle. . . .



likewise was intimate and very pleased.

"Hello, Burt. Where are you?"

"Up Wiston way. Hunting a noisy circuit, with Haley Foss. And wishin' I was up at Eagle Lake instead, with you."

"You shouldn't keep me out so late, Burt. The supervisor poked me twice to keep me awake today."

"You had a good time, didn't you? What's your kick?"

"Of course I did; marvelous. But—wait a minute." Her fingers flew from switch to button to cord. She spoke, touched a switch, listened a moment, said, "Go ahead, Staunton," and flicked another switch.

"What were you saying, Burt?"

"You were saying you liked to dance. Which I already—"

"Wireman working," cut in a harsh voice. "That you, Burt?"

"Yeah, I'm on here, Haley. Let's have it."

The blonde in the Pittfield exchange flicked herself off the circuit with a sigh, and dreamily watched the lights flash before her.

"Wait a sec, Burt . . . There you are. What do you show?"

After a pause Burt Gunning's voice said, "Bad as before. The loading is still off. Where are you now?"

"Pole P-72. I'll jump about a hundred, this time. A dime I'm on again before you are."

"I'll take you," said Burt, and with a click the circuit died.

It was dead for about fifteen minutes. When the light blinked again on the toll board, however, Betty was quick with her plug.

"Long distance, long distance, Pittfield."

"Wireman working. Leave this circuit open, will you, sister?"

She made a little pout of annoyance into the mouthpiece and lifted her finger. Why couldn't it have been Burt who came on first, for a few moments of personal conversation? She got so little chance to talk to Burt; starting tomorrow she would be on nights, and they couldn't see each other for two weeks.

She put through a call to New York, and then transferred a west-bound conversation to a different circuit when the

subscriber complained about a poor connection. Then she saw Circuit 433 flashing again; this time it might be Burt.

"Long distance, Pittfield?" she murmured hopefully.

It was Haley Foss again. "Wireman working. Listen, sister, stay on here. Get me the wire chief, will you?"

If there was anything she hated, it was to be called sister. She jammed in a plug and held her finger on a ringing button.

"He doesn't answer just now. He must have stepped out of his office. Will you try him a little later?"

"Later, my foot. Listen, sister. Maybe where you are it's nice and warm, but out here on Pole P-167 it's beginning to rain. And besides, I've got something important to tell him. Dig him up for me, will you?"

Holding that circuit open, she began ringing the various extensions around the building. "Is the wire chief there? Have you seen him?" . . . Is Mr. Graine there? . . . Have you seen the wire chief?"

It was a couple of minutes later when she happened to glance sideways and see the man she wanted crossing the passage at the end of the main board, with several tools in his hand.

"Oh, Mr. Graine! Please!" He came over to her side.

"What's the trouble?"

"There's something strange here, Mr. Graine. I don't know. A wireman was calling you; Haley Foss, I'm quite sure. He said it was important. But while I was trying to locate you, something happened to the circuit. He started to say something, and then—then I heard a queer noise. As if—as if he tried to cry out, but choked. And now I can't raise him on the line at all."

"Haley Foss? Yes, he was checking that trouble on 433, wasn't he? With Burt Gunning. Had they located it, do you know?"

"I don't think so. He said he was up on Pole P-167. But after he asked for you, in a hurry, he wouldn't go down and leave his hand-set on the circuit, would he?"

FARLEY GRAINE frowned anxiously. "Do you suppose he could have fallen?"

"That's what I wondered," said Betty breathlessly.

"Keep ringing on that circuit," ordered the wire chief curtly. "I'll hop in a car and run out there. P-167; that's about five miles out, on the old Wiston Turnpike. I'll call in from there."

Betty, a trifle pale, turned back to her mouthpiece and jabbed nervously at the ringing button. The wire chief, without pausing for his slicker or hat, ran down the stairs and jumped into one of the green service cars standing in the yard. He took the side streets out of Pittfield, and shortly was tooling along the old turnpike. This dirt road was very little used by traffic now, since the concrete cut-off had been spurred into Route 119. It ran in a straight line, up and down over rolling hills and through deeply wooded valleys, the company's pole line always on the left. He drove as fast as the road would let him, one eye on the stencilled numbers of the poles as they flashed past.

Topping a rise, he saw the wireman's service truck standing on the slope ahead, by the edge of the road. His foot sought the brake, and his gaze lifted. No, Haley Foss was not up the pole. Then, as he stopped, he saw the wireman. Huddled at the base of the fifty-foot staff, held close to it by the loop of his safety belt.

Graine's first act was to un-snap the buckle and straighten out the limp form on the grass. Foss had fallen, obviously. But when his spurs cut out of the wood, the belt had been in proper place, and had snubbed him against the pole, letting him slide at a moderate pace instead of falling free. If he was lucky, he wouldn't be hurt badly. The wire chief began to hunt for broken bones, but suddenly he drew back with an exclamation of dismay and astonishment.

Haley Foss was stone dead.

That fact was enough to shock him, but what stunned him with astonishment was the cause. Through the upper part of the wireman's chest was a clean, round hole which still oozed blood slowly; a hole that could have been made by nothing but a bullet. He had been shot while up at the top of the pole, and had probably been dead before he ever hit the ground.

The wire chief straightened up slowly

and looked about him. It was a wild, rugged section; not a single house in sight, no fields or fences, not even a side road. Nothing but the turnpike, winding over the next rise, and the woods on either side. In the hunting season there were men with rifles in those woods, perhaps; but Graine knew that there were no hunters at this time of year. There had been no helper on the truck. As far as he knew, Haley Foss, while not the best-liked man in the office, certainly had no mortal enemies. He was completely puzzled, at a loss for an explanation.

Glancing up, he saw that the wireman's hand-set was still up there on the pole, wedged on the first cross-arm; the ear-phones had evidently been jerked from Foss's head as he fell. Graine stepped to his own car and pulled out a pair of lineman's spurs. In a minute he was up the pole, spinning the crank of the hand-set. In Pittfield a light flashed.

"Long distance, Pittfield. . ."

"Wire chief, talking from a pole," said Graine curtly. "Is this Miss Wiley? Connect me to the local police, will you?"

Even while her fingers were darting to plug in a cord, she gasped, and repeated, "The local police?"

Graine's voice remained cool and business-like, though hurried.

"Police headquarters? This is Farley Graine, wire chief at the phone company. I'm out on the old turnpike about five miles. Either there has been a very strange accident, or else one of my wiremen has been murdered."

He could hear a faint cry of alarm; evidently the operator was still listening in. "Get off the wire, Miss Wiley." When he heard the click, he went on to explain to the desk sergeant exactly what he had found. "It's the damndest thing I ever saw. He's been shot clean through the chest, while he was up at the top of this pole, almost fifty feet off the ground. You know Haley Foss; he's a local lad, no bad associates, or anything like that. I can't imagine a motive. And I can't imagine where the bullet could have come from. There's no one around here, not a house in sight. And I didn't meet any car on the way . . . say, wait a minute."

"Are you sure it was a bullet, Graine?" asked the sergeant.

BUT the wire chief was peering down over his shoulder. He had discovered that there *was* a house in sight, now. Invisible from the road through the trees, it stood a hundred feet back in the woods, and from the top of the pole a man could look right down onto the narrow porch and into the front windows. It was a small summer bungalow, with a shingle roof and paint peeling from its outer walls.

"Say, there is a house here," he said into the hand-set, disregarding the last question. "I didn't see it before. Maybe there's someone there that heard the shot; I'll go and ask."

"Now don't get detectivitis," warned the sergeant importantly. "Better leave that to us; I'll get hold of the chief—he's over in the freight yards, I think—and he'll be out there pretty quick."

"All right, I'll wait here for him," replied Graine.

At her board Betty Wiley got the disconnect signal and pulled down the cord. Then she came in on Circuit 433 again, to listen. For a moment she heard nothing; then there was a snap, and a voice that she knew said, "Hello, Haley! You on here, Haley?"

"Oh, Burt!" she exclaimed, and for a moment could say nothing more.

"Betty?" He noticed something strange in her voice instantly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Burt, something awful has happened. Are you up on a pole, now? I wish you'd get right down on the ground, quick. Please!"

"What are you talkin about?"

"It's Haley Foss. He's dead—he's been killed."

"Haley's dead! Why, I was only just—for God's sake, what happened to him? Did he fall?"

"Yes. And if you're not careful, Burt Gunning!"

Twenty-five miles away, with his leg draped over a cross-arm, Burt felt a thrill of pleasure through his dismay. Never before had Betty shown quite so plainly how she felt about him; it could mean only one thing. But he was anxious to learn about Haley Foss.

"How the devil did you hear about it so quick?"

"Mr. Graine went out, and called in for the police."

"The police! What does he want the police for?"

"He said something about Haley Foss being shot. I don't know what he meant by that; I didn't hear the rest. I don't—wait a minute . . . Burt, I'm busy now. You'd better come on in to the office; by that time Mr. Graine will be back."

"I'll call in later," said Burt.

Circuit 433 clicked, and was dead.

In the meantime the wire chief had swung himself down the pole to the ground. With his spurs clumping at his ankles, he walked up the road a few paces, and then veered off to the right. There was, he saw now, a lane here leading into the woods; it was so choked with grass and weeds that he had not noticed it before. He walked up the middle, between the parallel tracks; when it bent in a sharp curve, he could see the small dwelling.

It was dingy and weather-beaten, and some of the windows were broken. It didn't look as if it had been occupied for several years. He paused, called twice, and when he got no reply went on up to the porch to knock at the door. To his surprise he found the front door standing ajar. After waiting a minute, and calling again, he pushed it open and stepped in. It hardly seemed possible that he was going to find anyone here who had heard or seen the shot, but he was driven now by a keen and powerful curiosity.

There were only three rooms in the shack; the floors were deep in a layer of accumulated dust. So deep that the maze of footprints showed plainly, even to his inexperienced eye. Large footprints, larger than his own. And in the front room, small ones, such as might be made by a child of seven or eight wearing sneakers.

In the kitchen, on either side of the rickety table, stood boxes, and strewed about were traces of what those boxes had once contained. Empty tin cans, cardboard containers of cereals, milk bottles, and wrappers from packages of bread and crackers. In the old-fashioned stove smouldered a low fire, and about its base were scattered cigar and cigarette butts, a great many of them.

IN THE corner room there was an area next to the wall where the dust looked as if it had been swept over by a broom. A mattress, or a pile of blankets, might have laid there, and been gathered together, to leave such marks. Standing there with his face screwed up in puzzlement, his glance lifted through the window; he found himself gazing at the top of the telephone pole on the nearby road, clearly visible above the trees.

He stiffened as a sudden thought assailed his mind. His expression changed, and one hand clenched into a fist, which he moved before him in a gesture of comprehension. Striding toward the front door, he noticed the crumpled newspaper which lay behind it. Picking it up, he noted that it bore a date six days earlier. A few more steps carried him out into the weed-grown yard. The earth below was soft and damp; it was only a few moments before he found what he was looking for. The tracks of a car.

On the way out the lane he paused to crouch again once or twice. Now, when he emerged onto the dirt road, he could still follow those imprints in the moist soil. They curved right, and when he had traced them several paces farther, toward the pole, he came to an abrupt halt, staring up and down the road. They crossed *over* the tracks of Haley Foss's service truck!

He went up the pole this time like a cat. The hand-set was still clipped on to the same circuit; he spun the crank vigorously.

"Long distance . . . Pittfield?"

"Wire chief talking. Connect me to the police. Not the local police, the state barracks, at Staunton. And make it quick."

In the Pittfield office Betty's fingers flew nimbly.

"State police, Staunton," said a gruff voice.

"You're looking for the kidnapppers of the Garth boy, vanished last Thursday from his home in St. Louis, aren't you? Well, broadcast your radio cars immediately to block all roads leading into State Route 12 from the east between Staunton and Leeport."

"Who are you? What makes you think so?"

"This is Graine, wire chief of the phone

company in Pittfield. I'm on a pole five miles east of Pittfield now; one of my men was murdered here less than half an hour ago, because he looked in a window and saw too much. Some time *after* that, but before I arrived, a car drove away. I don't know what kind of a car, but it is equipped with Ajax button-tread tires on all four wheels. There would be at least two men in it; one smokes cigars, the other cigarettes. You seldom find the same man using both. And I'll bet my shirt the Garth boy will be with them."

"Just a minute, now," warned the gruff voice. "Why do you think it's headed for Route 12?"

"Because those tracks swing west, here on the old turnpike. It didn't turn toward Pittfield, or I'd have passed it. There's more than one road from here into the state highway, but if you blockade them all, you're bound to intercept it, if you act fast enough."

"Don't worry, brother, they're blocked already, or will be within a few seconds. Now don't get off this wire yet. . ."

The wire chief hooked his knee over a cross-arm, and let half his muscles relax. But they stiffened again when his glance dropped to the ground where the body of Haley Foss lay in a dark stain of his own blood. From the direction of Pittfield a car came humming; evidently the local police chief, come to lock the barn. Graine heard a click in his ear; he said, "Hello . . . Don't disconnect. Who's this?"

No one answered until after a moment the same voice from Staunton said, "All right, give me this whole thing again from the beginning, will you? Who's the murdered man?"

THAT click in the wire chief's ear had been the sound of Burt Gunning, twenty miles away, disconnecting the clips of his hand-set. He had come in on Circuit 433 just in time to overhear Farley Graine's report to the state police. A good deal of it was Greek to him; how the wire chief doped out that stuff about the Garth boy he couldn't imagine. He knew about the Garth kidnapping, of course; everybody who had read the papers in the last week was familiar with it. The abductors, lying securely hidden

somewhere, had been in touch with the wealthy father by telephone; he was reported about ready to accede to their demands for a \$100,000 ransom.

Whatever was going on, thought Burt as he swung himself down the pole, there was obviously going to be no more circuit testing for him that morning. He might as well drive back into Wiston, report to the local office, and await orders. He dropped his hand-set and testing layout in the back of the truck and climbed to the driver's seat.

The motor started, and he wheeled the light truck in a half circle across the roadway to turn around.

His hand was on the gear shift lever when he heard the sound of a motor from the direction of Pittfield. The car itself was still invisible over the crest of a rise when he acted on impulse. An impulse that might have been foolish, but which was stronger than fear. Without twisting the steering wheel, he gunned the motor and let in the clutch. When the truck was square across the narrow road, midway between the ditches on either side, he locked the brakes and cut the switch.

The car roared over the low rise at top speed, hardly a hundred yards away. Instantly the horn blared raucously, and the tires began to squawl as the brakes were applied. Burt sat in his place, outwardly calm, but inside his chest his heart was racing. He saw that it was a station wagon with all curtains drawn, and two men on the seat. As it ground to a stop less than ten feet from the stalled truck, he also noted in one quick glance that it was equipped with Ajax button-tread tires all around. Didn't he have the same kind on his own jallopy?

"Get the hell out of the way," growled the driver.

Burt grinned good-naturedly. "I'm in a jam here," he said quietly. "I'm afraid you'll have to lend me a hand with a push."

As if to prove his helplessness, he put his foot on the starter, which whirred futilely. But since he was careful not to turn the switch, the motor made no attempt to start. He heard the driver of the station wagon curse acidly under his

breath, and say something to his companion.

"Yeah, give him a shove, Pete," said the man on the right.

Burt could not see very plainly through the other windshield, which was misty with rain except where the single wiper had cleared it, but the last speaker leaned forward, as if holding something out of sight beneath the dash, and his soft hat was pulled low. Then the driver opened the door on his side and stepped out, and suddenly Burt knew that he was scared.

The man was short and stocky, and wore an old peaked cap that might once have belonged to a genuine chauffeur. But he was no chauffeur; nothing could disguise those sharp, cold eyes, the faint sneer of the lips, the shifty gait. He was a criminal, and a desperate one; Burt could almost smell the aura of evil that emanated from him.

"Come on, buddy, move this crate," he snapped curtly.

Burt slid out from under the wheel and stepped to the road on the opposite side. His senses were all sharpened, intensified by the knowledge that death lurked near.

HE HAD left the brake locked, but he put both hands against the fender, as if to simulate a shove. Just then a sound froze them all. At a distance, its direction uncertain in the foggy air, a police siren emitted one brief, nerve-tingling whine.

It was at least a mile away; the car that carried it might or might not have been coming that way. But the reaction of the two men to that sound betrayed instantly the state of their nerves. The driver stiffened, his face turning livid. From the seat of the station wagon his companion barked, "Get back in here, Pete—quick!"

Just what they would have done next, Burt didn't stop to surmise. He jumped to the rear corner of his truck and aimed a kick at the nearest wheel of the other car. There was an instantaneous explosion; the sharp point of his lineman's spur penetrated tire and tube simultaneously, and the tire went flat with a long drawn out hiss.

The driver, springing toward the open door, halted and turned with a vicious curse on his lips. He was tugging at something under his armpit as Burt leapt for him. For a fraction of a second it was touch and go. The man had his choice of warding off Burt's blow or trying to get his gun out first. He bet on being quicker, but he was wrong. Burt's fist crashed into his chin, and he went down without a whimper.

While he was still off balance Burt thought he was hearing another blowout. Then he realized that the fellow in the seat was shooting at him with a rifle, and his healthy, instinctive fear asserted itself. His own truck was ten feet away; a long distance when bullets are flying. He dove to the ground and wriggled under the station wagon.

For a moment he was safe, the body of the car hiding him and shielding him. But the moment wouldn't last long, and he knew it. Sprawled on his belly, he heard the springs creak as the man overhead shifted his position. Curling one knee up, Burt jerked at a buckle. The much-flexed leather slipped easily through his fingers, and he held in his hand, his one and only possible weapon. When the springs on the left sagged downward, Burt crept out on the right.

Had he been an instant sooner, or an instant later, he would never have lived—or had the second thug had an automatic. The rifle was difficult to reverse, inside the car. Burt jerked the door open and aimed one savage blow. The rifle banged, and the bullet plucked at Burt's jerkin.

But a lineman's spur has a shaft a foot long, and the sharp point on the end is a deadly tool. It sank through skull into brain with the sound of a booted foot crumpling a cardboard box.

Once more the call light flashed on Circuit 433.

"Long distance, Pittfield?"

"Right, Betty. Hook me up to the state police at Staunton, will you? . . . State police headquarters? Say, you fellows looking for the Garth snatchers? Well, they're here on Route 119, four miles out of Wiston. I'm afraid one of 'em is dead. The other is still up queer street, but he'll come around . . . Yeah, I'm watchin' him. The boy? Sure, he's here. He's playing with my test layout down there now, and if you birds don't get here pretty soon, he'll have it ruined. . . . No, this isn't Graine. It's one of his linemen; the name is Gunning. I'm on Pole W-92."

He listened for a moment, panting. "What's that? Split the reward with Graine? Oh, sure. . . . *How much did you say?*" His eyes bulged and his mouth dropped open.

"Say, get off the line a minute, will you? I want to talk to Pittfield." He spun the crank on his hand-set eagerly. "Hello. Pittfield! Operator! Hello, Betty! Come in on the line, will you? . . . Pittfield, long distance! I want the Pittfield operator! Hello!"

But he couldn't raise the Pittfield long distance operator, because she had fainted quite simply and completely in her chair, her blonde head toppling forward among the cords and buttons and winking lights.



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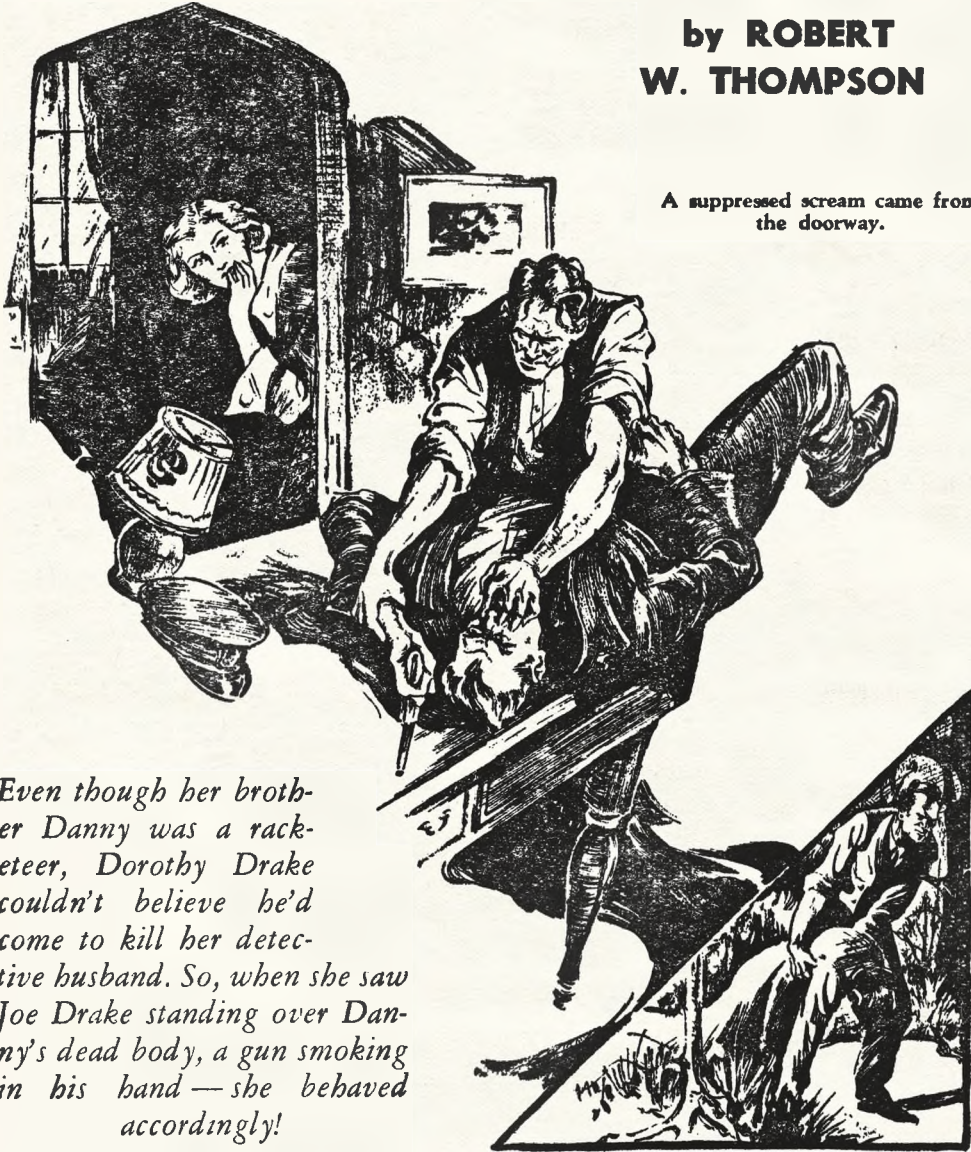
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A Matter of Death—and Faith

by ROBERT
W. THOMPSON



A suppressed scream came from
the doorway.

Even though her brother Danny was a racketeer, Dorothy Drake couldn't believe he'd come to kill her detective husband. So, when she saw Joe Drake standing over Danny's dead body, a gun smoking in his hand—she behaved accordingly!

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT JOE DRAKE was settling back in his favorite easy chair when the sharp rapping sounded at the bungalow's side door. He lifted his lean, compact body from the chair, glancing across the big living room to the clock above the fireplace. It was ten minutes past nine; too early for Dorothy to be coming home from that women's club meeting. He frowned, strode into the kitchen, hoping it wasn't Captain Leary about to take him out on some new murder case.

He snapped on the hall light, opened the outer door. The man standing on the porch was tall, slim, garbed in dark, neat clothes. His lean face, under the downturned hat brim, was pale and hard. The thin line of his lips twisted down at the corners. His eyes were like blue glass, without expression, narrowed. He said softly:

"Hello, Drake. I'd like to see you for a couple of minutes—inside."

Drake's bony, narrow face tightened. The color seeped out of his deeply tanned

cheeks. He stared into the man's lean hard face for seconds without speaking. Then he said, quietly:

"Come in, Fraser. You'll get your couple of minutes. But I don't know what you could want to talk to me about."

Fraser laughed shortly, stepped past him into the small white kitchen. "Can't a guy even talk to his brother-in-law once in a while?" He laughed again, asked: "Where's Dorothy, at that club meeting she goes to every Wednesday night?"

Drake nodded, facing him. "How come you know about that?"

"A guy's entitled to know what his own sister does, isn't he?"

Drake bit out: "A rat like you is not entitled to know anything. You don't even deserve to be alive."

"Still think I bumped that pal of yours, is that it?" Fraser asked softly.

"Think? I *know* you killed Tim Reagan." Drake's bony tanned features were drawn tightly, his lips thinned. . . . A little over a year ago, Detective Tim Reagan had been shot to death while collecting evidence against the slot-machine ring. Drake was positive young Danny Fraser, head of the racket, had personally attended to Reagan's removal. The only witness against Fraser, a night-club dancer, had "disappeared" before she could testify. Fraser had gone free, and Joe Drake gave his promise to the newspapers that he would get Fraser some day, that he would shoot him dead, if given the chance.

Lately, he'd been smashing the slot-machine racket, slowly, surely. He'd sent two or three of Fraser's strong-arm men to prison, confiscated dozens of the slot-machines. He was gathering evidence daily, threatening Fraser's freedom . . .

There was one disturbing element in his fight against Fraser, his fight to avenge the murder of Tim Reagan. That was the fact that Drake's wife, Dorothy, was the sister of Danny Fraser. Drake had known about Fraser three years ago when he'd married Dorothy; he'd known him as a rising young racket-hireling who was slated for the "big-time" in the underworld. Dorothy and her brother had been orphaned when the girl was sixteen; she'd worked in a factory, tried to put young Danny through school; and then she'd watched him get out her grasp and take

the twisted trail of the underworld.

Even now, after Tim Reagan's murder, Dorothy couldn't believe her brother was the killer. But her faith in Danny Fraser couldn't make Drake cease his steady campaign to put the young racket-king in the electric chair . . .

Drake looked into Fraser's hard lean face now and felt his lips tighten bitterly. Fraser glanced around at the closed door and the pulled-down shades. He slipped his right hand into the side pocket of his dark suit. The hand came out, and a flat, blue-black automatic jutted from his fist. He said very softly:

"I came around tonight on purpose. I knew Dorothy'd be out." His eyes, blue and hard and shining like polished glass, were narrowed, unblinkingly. "I never liked you, dick. You're getting in my hair."

"So?" Drake's lean jaw tightened. "So you come here to threaten me?"

"You've put three of my boys in the pen in the last year, dick. You're smashing up my slot-machines—"

"Slot-machines are illegal here, Fraser. You're working against the law. And the law's working against you. I'm going to keep right on until there isn't a slot-machine in the city."

"Yeah?" Fraser's blue eyes glittered coldly. "You're not getting the chance, dick. You're going out right here."

DRAKE'S compact, lean body stiffened. He felt the blood ebb from his cheeks. Fraser laughed, harshly, without mirth.

"You're going out, dick, just like that sap pal of yours went out. You're getting the same dose Reagan got."

"Why talk?" Drake's eyes mocked him. "Trying to talk yourself into it? Trying to work up the courage?"

"Nothing like that, dick." Fraser's tongue ran over his lips. "I want to see you squirm, see? I hate guys like you. A right guy, they call you. A guy who never took a crooked penny in his life. Well, the right guy gets paid for being 'right', now."

Drake was watching Fraser, hardly hearing him, his ears attuned to the slight noise from the front part of the house. The rasp of a key in the lock of the front door, the click of the tumbler. That would

be Dorothy, home early from the club, coming in the front way as she usually did, opening the door with her own key so as not to disturb him if he were reading. His eyes searched Fraser's face, saw no change of expression there. Fraser hadn't heard, then; he advanced, with the blue-black, flat automatic tilting upward slightly for Drake's chest.

"Nothing to it, dick," he said softly. "One shot, then beat it. A personal job on a guy I don't like, see? The cops won't trace the shot to me in a million years, and even if they could they wouldn't dare. I've got politics on my side, dick, see?"

He thrust the mouth of the automatic against Drake's chest, at the heart. His tongue slid over his lips, slowly; he was savoring the situation, enjoying Drake's slight wince at the feel of the gun, and the whiteness of his face under the tan.

There was the rattle of a doorknob from the front of the house, the click of a high heel on bare wood. Fraser heard the sounds, and his head bobbed halfway around, then bobbed back again.

But in the split-second he looked away, Drake acted. His right hand swept up on Fraser's gun wrist, gripped it, twisted it away from his body. Fraser cursed, brought his left fist up to crack against Drake's jaw. Drake's head snapped up, but he clung to the gun wrist with both hands. The gun muzzle turned in toward Fraser's stomach. His breath wheezed; sweat glistened on his forehead. The gun was in against his stomach now. Drake hardly realized that; he knew only that he was forcing the automatic away from his own body.

From the front part of the house, he heard high heels click across the parlor, then into the living room, approaching the kitchen . . . Fraser's finger contracted on the trigger under the pressure; the gun spat; he shuddered, clutched weakly at the cloth of his suit front. The automatic slipped into Drake's hand; he gripped it in his right fist, staring at Fraser. Slowly, with blood bubbling on his lips, Fraser staggered, then pitched forward, on his face. Drake stood above him, with the automatic tight in his fist.

It was the suppressed scream from the living room doorway that whirled him around. Dorothy was standing there, her

small figure taut, horror burning in her blue eyes. The slender oval of her face was drained white. Her parted lips were almost bloodless. She had taken off her hat, and she clutched it in her hand, fingers gripping it tightly. Her ash-blonde hair was straight and lustrous in the bright light.

"Joe! Joe! Good God, you—you've killed Danny!"

DRAKE'S lips pulled together in a taut, narrow line. He knelt, lifted Fraser's head, looked into the dead, staring eyes. He rose, placed the automatic on the table, caught his wife by the shoulders.

"No, Dorothy, no," he said huskily. "He tried to kill me. We fought for the gun. It turned in to his stomach. He pulled the trigger; couldn't help it under the pressure. He—Dorothy! You've got to believe me!"

She shuddered, turned the slender oval of her face upward to look into his eyes. "Joe, you swore you'd kill Danny. They even printed what you said in the papers. God, Joe you—"

"Listen, Dorothy. He was going to kill me. We fought for the gun. I twisted it away . . . Good Lord, can't you see? Can't you—believe me?"

She looked up at him with the horror burning slowly out of her eyes. She nodded uncertainly.

"I'll try, Joe. He tried to—kill you?"

Drake nodded, his gaze locked with hers. "Sooner or later, I'd have gotten him on Tim Reagan's murder, or some other murder. He had politics on his side, but he knew even that wouldn't save him. And even if I didn't get him on a murder rap, I'd break his racket, break him. He *had* to get me. Don't you see?"

"I—I think so."

"He had the gun on me when he turned away for a second; he heard you coming in. I grabbed his wrist, twisted the muzzle away from my chest. I wasn't thinking of what would happen to him if his finger tightened on the trigger. That's what—did happen."

She nodded, slowly. She didn't cry. Poverty and hard work had ingrained in her a certain sense of fatalism; she had learned long ago that tears were useless.

She said quietly, her eyes avoiding the body on the floor:

"I'll wait in the living room. I don't want to—look at Danny again tonight."

He went into the living room with her, one arm around her waist.

"How soon do you think the—police will be here?" she asked.

The police . . . Detective Sergeant Drake frowned at that, without answering. He wanted to think things out first, to prepare his story for Captain Leary and the others from headquarters. There were powerful political forces which would be happy to pounce upon any inconsistency and turn it to his disadvantage; without a doubt they would try to make it appear as though he had deliberately murdered Danny Fraser. Every move against the rackets in this crime-saddled city was a move against organized politics . . .

Drake sighed, turned into the kitchen again. He opened the rear door, went down the porch steps and along the walk to the front of the house. His glance swept the somnolent street. There were lights glowing in most of the neighboring houses, but there was no sign of excitement, no evidence that the shot had been heard. Fraser had said it was a personal job; hardly likely that he would have any of his mob with him, except perhaps Skip Gorin, his limping bodyguard. Drake's eyes searched the immediate vicinity for Gorin, or a car that might be Fraser's. But there was no car nearby, no person visible the length of the street. Drake's eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. Was it possible Fraser had come without a getaway car?

DRAKE returned to the kitchen, glanced down at the figure of Danny Fraser. There was a widening pool of blood staining the linoleum. Drake stepped around the body, strode into the living room. Dorothy was straight and rigid in the deep chair, hands clenched on her lap. She looked up at him with little spots of color creeping under the whiteness of her slender face.

"You didn't call the police?" she asked.

"No." Drake's bony tanned face was drawn, tight looking. "I'm not going to call headquarters in on this, Dorothy."

"Not going to—" Her eyes narrowed.

"You mean you—you're *afraid* to call in the police? Afraid they'll think you deliberately killed Danny?"

"Yes," Drake nodded soberly. "Captain Leary's a square-shooter, and most of the others are. Leary's always been behind me one hundred percent. But your brother had crooked, dirty politics behind him. If I report to headquarters, the political ring will *have* to get me, to protect its own hide. The politicians will spend thousands to make it look like a deliberate killing on my part; they'll bring in the revenge angle, circumstantial evidence—the fact that you saw me over the body with a gun in my hand. Everything and anything to make me guilty."

Drake shrugged wearily, his voice edged with bitterness. "If I went free—if my story were believed; hell, the newspapers and the public would be sore as a boil. They'd roast the politicians for letting the rackets go on, for making it possible for a racketeer to come to a detective's home and try to shoot him down without fear of being caught. Every crooked politician in the city would be out for life. You see, they'd *have* to get me."

"But what are you going to do with—"

"The body? I've got to get it out of here and leave it somewhere, make it look like a rival racketeer got him. Nobody heard the shot; the whole street's quiet. There's no car out front; your brother must have come without one so there'd be no chance of identifying him through it. That makes it all the easier for me; just the body to get rid of."

"And you want me to keep quiet," she said slowly, "to—protect you. Is that it?"

Drake drew in a sharp breath. He stood for a moment staring down at her with deep lines etched at his tight mouth. Then he dropped on one knee, tilted her head, looked straight into her eyes. He saw the bitterness and doubt mirrored there, and he said huskily:

"Dorothy, you've got to believe me! If my own wife thinks I might have deliberately killed him, what would the others think? I wouldn't have a chance!"

Her small, soft hands went up to his face, and her slender fingers stroked at his cheeks. She said softly, tautly:

"I want to believe you, Joe, I want to. But, God, my own brother—"

His lips touched her forehead, her cheek, then her mouth, and lingered there in a warm kiss. When he drew away, she whispered:

"I *have* to believe you, Joe. I'll—be upstairs. When you get back, come right up. I think I'm going to need you close to me tonight."

He gripped her hands for a moment, then swung out of the living room to the kitchen. He closed the connecting door, went out to the garage and backed his small sedan up close to the side porch. Then, inside the house again, he took the automatic from the table, dropped it into his pocket. For a moment he studied Danny Fraser's prone body, and the dark, glistening blood on the shiny linoleum.

He stooped at one side of the corpse, avoiding the blood, slid his hands under the chest at either side, and lifted. His breath made a strained, hissing sound between his teeth; his arm muscles bulged tautly under the tweed of his coat. The body seemed heavy as granite . . .

Then he had the body erect, the back to his front, his arms encircling the chest. He carried it out to the porch that way, shuffling slowly. He stood in the darkness of the porch, eyes roving the street. A car whirred smoothly by on the road and then there was no sound but the muffled murmur of the city—the distant *beep-beep* of a horn, the far-away rumble of a trolley, the faint squeal of tires on macadam.

Drake moved down the steps, slowly, pulled open the rear door of the car and dumped the body into the tonneau, face up. He slapped the door shut and stood there in the darkness, feeling the sweat on his face and palms. He twisted, went up the steps and entered the kitchen. In a minute, he was swabbing at the blood with old rags . . .

A half-hour later, Drake braked his car beside a small park midway along a quiet residential street in the suburbs. His eyes raked the street; no moving cars, no pedestrians. The park was silent, lightless, its flat grassy center ringed by tall trees and thick shrubbery. Drake slid from under the wheel, opened the rear door and slipped his arms under the arms of the corpse. He lifted the body, dragged it across the sidewalk, and then let it fall behind a rounded clump of shrubbery.

HE STARED into the darkness of the park, breath rasping in his throat. If a couple of petters had seen him. . . . But there was no movement, no sound, and he relaxed, wiping the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead. He strode swiftly out to the car, moved under the wheel and started the motor. The car rolled along the street, turned at a corner into a busier artery. He slumped behind the wheel, sweating. He'd experienced all the emotions of a murderer trying to hide his victim.

Later, he tossed the automatic and bullets into a small pond on the edge of a woods. The body would probably be found in the morning; the gun and bullets might never be found. In any case, there was nothing that would point to him. Earlier, after he'd scrubbed the kitchen floor, he'd covered the spot where the blood had been with a small casual mat. There would be blood on the rear floor of the car, of course, but he would attend to that back in his own garage. He drove in the direction of the bungalow, feeling safe from the crooked political machine that controlled the city. Nobody had seen him with the body, except Dorothy; and Dorothy, he was afraid, might grow to believe she was living with a murderer. Even when she'd said she believed him, he'd seen the uncertainty in her eyes. . . .

When he was in the living room again, he removed his coat and hat and settled back in his deep chair. He'd scrubbed the blood from the rear floor of the car; there had been very little. Tomorrow morning he could burn the rags he had used. He slumped in the chair now and lit a cigarette; after his smoke he'd go up and see Dorothy. He hated to face her, hated to see that look of doubt in her eyes.

He heard the click of high heels across a bare stretch of floor in the parlor. The door opened and Dorothy walked slowly across to him. Her slender oval face was pinched-looking, weary. She brushed at her smooth ash-blonde hair with a quick, nervous pat of her finger and said, without looking at him:

"I've been sitting in the parlor, in the dark, trying not to think about—about Danny."

Drake rose, crushed his cigarette in a table ashtray. He gripped her arms, said huskily:

"You've got to believe in me, Dorothy. You've got to believe everything happened just as I said it did."

"Joe, I—" She hesitated, bit her lower lip. "Joe, you know how I've always felt about Danny. I worked for him; I tried to push him through school. I loved him, Joe; I loved him as much as any sister could love a brother. And then he went out and got in with a tough gang, and he wouldn't go to school anymore, or do the things I wanted him to do. But Danny could never be like they say he was. He could never have killed Tim Reagan. I *knew* Danny, Joe. He wasn't that kind. I try to make myself believe he came here to kill you, Joe, but I can't, I *can't* . . ."

She looked up at him with pain stabbing the deep blue of her eyes. Drake's tanned, bony face whitened a little. He said quietly:

"You mean you *do* believe I deliberately killed him. Is that it?"

"I—I don't know what to believe. I only know I can't think of Danny coming here to—"

"Dorothy," Drake said tautly, "we've always played on the square with each other, always. You can't distrust me now. You can't break up things between us."

She stood there a moment close to him, with his lean brown hands gripping her arms, then she twisted away, pain and uncertainty in her eyes. Drake murmured:

"Dorothy, you—"

The telephone's clear burr cut across his words. He sighed, crossed to the phone stand and picked up the receiver. He said, tiredly: "Hello."

"Drake?" The voice was a deep-throated rumble. "This is Leary. I just got word Danny Fraser's been bumped . . . Yeah, a couple of kids looking for a petting spot found him out in Greenwood park. The boys in the cruiser car called me . . . just getting into bed, too, damn it. Why don't they pick out the daytime to bump off those rats? Good riddance, I say."

"Yes," said Drake. "Will you pick me up right away?"

"'Bout ten minutes or so. I've got to dress. Hell of a break for your wife, huh,

even though it's a good thing to get rid of the rat?"

"Yes, tough for her. See you later. . . ."

DRAKE turned around to face Dorothy with his face pale and set. "Captain Leary's coming around in ten minutes or so. They've found your brother already."

She stood facing him without saying anything, her lips a thin, bloodless slash in her white face. Drake said steadily:

"I'm going to tell Leary exactly what happened. If he wants to do anything about it, if he thinks I deliberately killed your brother, well—okay, I'll take what's coming to me. If he believes me, maybe he can convince you I'm telling the truth."

"Maybe—maybe that's the best thing to do," Dorothy said, and sat down in a straight-backed chair, stiffly, her eyes dark and brooding. Drake resumed his seat, his compact body slumped laxly. He knew now, deep within him, that Dorothy could never believe her brother had come here to kill him; she could never believe that Fraser had been killed in the struggle for the gun, that Drake hadn't murdered him. . . . Drake sucked in a soft breath. Dorothy had always been so loyal, loving him above everything else, believing in him as he believed in her. And now—Drake looked over at her, at the tenseness of her face and the brooding somberness of her eyes. . . .

Nearly ten minutes had passed when the bedroom door behind him opened. A little man in a shapeless brown suit and a battered brown hat stood in the opening. His face was dark and flat, with a broad, pushed-in nose and black eyes that were slitted and gleaming. A nicked revolver glinted in his fist. He said in a tight, shrill voice:

"Hold it, Sarge. Keep your noggin right back against the chair. And keep the mitts out where I can see 'em."

Drake didn't move. He sat with his head back against the chair, his eyes on Dorothy. She had half-risen, then dropped back into her seat, her hands gripping her thighs. The small, flat-faced man advanced to the center of the room. He walked with his right leg limping slightly. He stood where he could watch both Drake and Dorothy, swinging the revolver

to cover both of them. He said shrilly: "You done it, didn't you, Sarge? You got Danny before he could get you."

"I grabbed for the gun before he could shoot," Drake said. "The gun turned in toward his stomach and his finger stiffened on the trigger. And how did you know, Gorin?"

Skip Gorin's slitted black eyes glittered. "I came with Danny, Sarge. I waited outside in the car. Danny had to put the finger on you, and this was a swell spot. Only somethin' happened and Danny got it instead, huh?"

Dorothy was on the edge of her chair now, staring at Skip Gorin. She asked huskily:

"Danny came here to—to kill Joe?"

"Sure. The Sarge was bustin' the racket and he was liable to get Danny on a rub-out rap any time, see?"

"Good God," Dorothy whispered. "It was just like you said, Joe. And I thought—"

"Can it," Gorin snapped. "Listen, Sarge—"

"How'd you get in?" Drake asked quietly.

"The bedroom window was open, Sarge. I'm a little guy, but I'm good at climbin'." Gorin laughed shrilly. "Now, Sarge, what'd you do with Danny?"

"I dumped him out in little Greenwood Park. Now I'll ask one: Where'd you go after the shot?"

"Up the street, Sarge. I had the motor all tuned up, see? But when Danny didn't come out, I got leery and beat it up the street a ways. I didn't see no cops and I thinks you must have got Danny and was afraid to report on account of they'll think you bumped him because he rubbed out Reagan. So I stick around, and see you come out in your buggy. I figure you was gettin' rid of the body, see?"

"I see," Drake said. He was watching Dorothy. The slender oval of her face was strained, white. She didn't look at Gorin; she was staring at Drake with her blue eyes round and wondering. And there was a strange admixture of sadness and gladness in those eyes. Drake felt a warm rush of blood into his face. He asked: "Then what, Gorin?"

"I wait up the street till you come back. Then, when I see the coast is clear,

I come around back and climb in the bedroom window. Just like that."

"So?" Drake said quietly. "And Dorothy?"

"The wife?" Gorin's slitted black eyes seemed to flame, looking from one to the other. "She goes out too, Sarge. No witness, see?"

Drake stiffened in his chair. If only he could keep him from shooting until Captain Leary came, there might be a chance.

He laughed, harshly. "Fine way to avenge Fraser! You're going to kill the sister he was crazy about, and you call it paying up for him!"

GORIN touched his lips. "Okay, Sarge, call it what you like, but you're goin' out, see? I'll be takin' over the number one spot in the racket. I don't want you bustin' things up. Reason enough to bump you? And the wife has got to go out too so there won't be no witness, see?"

Little lines webbed around Drake's narrowed eyes. He bent forward in his chair, slowly. If he made any move to leap at Gorin, he knew Gorin would shoot Dorothy dead in the same split-second. The revolver swung up, for Dorothy's head.

She was rigid in the chair, terror widening her eyes. Drake could hear the quick, soft panting of her breath. The gun touched her head. Drake said hoarsely:

"Wait, Gorin. I'll give you my word I'll steer clear of the racket. I'll—"

Gorin's voice hissed between his teeth: "You'll do nothin', Sarge. This way's quick and sure."

Drake tensed for a desperate last-second lunge at Gorin.

Dorothy's scream started the same instant the front door buzzer sounded. Gorin whirled away from her, swinging the gun in a slow arc again to cover the two of them.

"Who is it? Somebody you expect?"

The sound of the buzzer died and Drake said in the sudden silence: "It's Captain Leary, Gorin. Captain Leary from headquarters. It won't do you any good to kill us. He and his men'll get you before you can get out of the house."

"Leary, huh?" Gorin's eyes roved to

the bedroom door. "I'll be inside the bedroom, Sarge. I'll have the door open a crack with the rod stickin' in my fist, You go out and answer the door and don't make any cracks. Talk loud so I can hear every word you say, see? The wife will stay right there in the chair where I can cover her. Any funny stuff and she goes out. Give Leary some excuse and get rid of him, see. And remember, I'll have the wife covered every second."

"I understand," Drake said. He rose, watched Skip Gorin back toward the bedroom. The gun came down a little, out of line with Dorothy. That was all Drake wanted. His compact, lean body plunged forward, smashed Gorin as the gun roared. There was a flash of flame in his face, the sting of cordite in his nostrils. He didn't know whether he was hit or not, for the moment. His plunge had cracked Gorin's small body against the door frame. Drake himself was sprawled at full length.

HE PUSHED his body erect, lunged forward, but Gorin had spun into the bedroom. The door slammed; the window beyond rattled, went up with a jangling crash. Drake palmed the knob, whipped the door back in time to see Gorin's head dip down under the window. There was a yell from the sidewalk. Gorin halted; his gun flamed.

There was an answering shot from the street, another, then a third. Gorin screamed and fell forward, on his face. Drake turned from the window and went back to the living room. Dorothy ran to him, kissed him, murmuring:

"Thank God you're all right, Joe!" She laughed, shakily. "The bullet just grazed

you and dug into your chair. Thank God!"

Drake ran his fingers through her hair, laughing a bit shakily himself. He strode out through the parlor, clicked on the porch light and opened the door. Big-bodied Captain Leary was standing there; he roared out:

"One of the boys just told me it was Skip Gorin. Gorin! What the hell was he doing here? I'll give odds he bumped Fraser to take over the racket, then tried to bump you to keep it going."

"That's a swell way of putting it," Drake said soberly. "What about Gorin? The boys get him?"

"They should have," Leary rumbled. "There were two of 'em waiting out there." He called out in a roaring voice: "How about it, boys? Did you get Gorin?"

A voice answered from the side of the house: "Dead as a dead rat can be, Cap. One shot in the belly, another above the heart."

"What the hell," Leary smiled broadly. "Even in the dark those boys of mine don't miss. Two rats gone tonight. If this keeps up, we'll clean up the town in a week. Two dead rats—Gorin and Fraser." He reddened suddenly. "Beg pardon, Mrs. Drake. I forgot you were Fraser's—"

"That's all right," Dorothy said. She had come out to the door and had an arm around Drake's waist now. She looked up at him with a warm, happy glow in her eyes. "We're going to forget Danny, aren't we, dear? We're going to forget he ever existed."

"That," Drake grinned, "is the kind of talk I've been waiting for all night."

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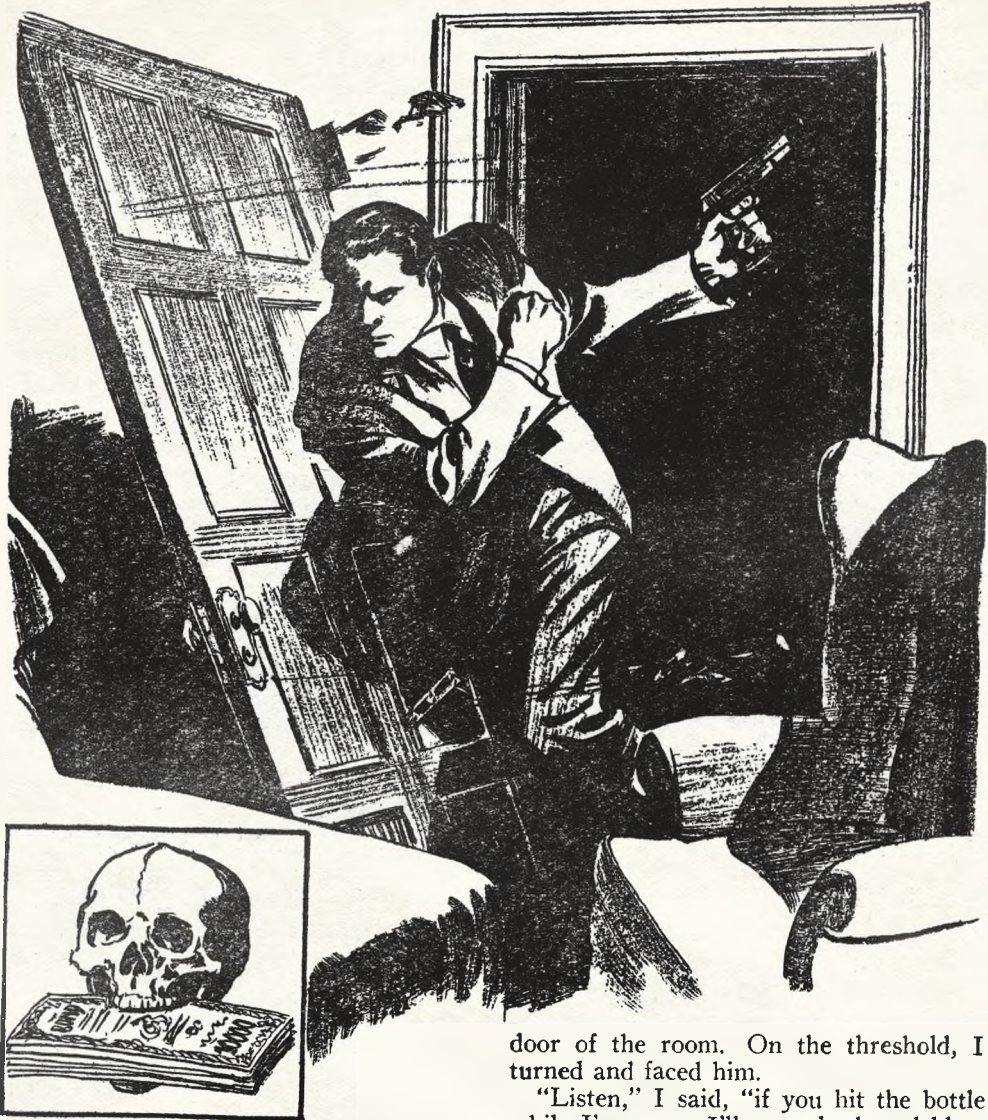


The old man moaned in pain. . . .

I DEAL WITH DEATH

by D. L. CHAMPION

All you need to do is to make one little mistake, and they hand you a one-way ticket to hell. Ronnie and Macon made theirs when they let old Strickland telephone Arkwright. Manning made his when he hadn't figured on me busting into the room at the wrong time. But they were just bums. My scheme was perfect; no loopholes, no chance of a slip-up. I'd thought of everything. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

I Meet Ronnie

I TOOK the whiskey bottle from the table. I walked into the bathroom and emptied its contents down the basin. A voice, high-pitched and tense, followed me.

"For the love of God," it said, "you don't expect me to stay here without a drink, do you? Maybe it'll be days, or weeks. You don't have to worry. I won't go overboard. I—"

I paid no attention to him. I came out of the bathroom. I put on my hat, threw my coat over my arm and walked to the

door of the room. On the threshold, I turned and faced him.

"Listen," I said, "if you hit the bottle while I'm away, I'll come back and blow your brains out. You've got it easy. I'll be out in the front line where the bullets are liable to break loose any minute. You sit here and keep sober. That's all you have to do. And remember, you white livered gorilla, if you slip off the wagon, I'll come back and blast you no matter what happens afterwards."

I slammed the door and went downstairs. I climbed into the red coupé at the curb and headed up toward Westchester.

It was a bright Spring morning, the car ran smoothly, and my spirits were high. My prospects had not been so good for a long time. The job on hand seemed simple enough now; and the pay was all

out of proportion to anything that I might have to do.

Fifteen miles above the Bronx, I turned the car into a gravel driveway. In the green distance I saw a rambling brick house. I braked to a stop before two huge Colonial pillars which framed the front door, then I walked up and rang the bell confidently.

As I waited, I noted an odd sort of silence about the place. It was as if the house were deserted, as if there was no life on the entire estate. Three minutes ticked past on my wrist watch. Then I rang the bell again. This time I kept my finger on the button until I heard footsteps in the hall beyond.

The door swung open. A hard, unpleasant voice said, "Well, what the devil do you want?"

I LOOKED him over. He was short with wide, powerful shoulders. His head was square, covered with sandy brown hair. His eyes were cold and his face was as hard as his tone. This, I figured, would be Macon.

"I want to see Sam Strickland," I said.

"You can't see him," he snapped. "No one can see him." His hand moved on the door knob.

I thrust my foot in the jamb. "Would you care to take three to one on that?" I asked politely.

There was a change in his expression then. His icy eyes narrowed; a flicker of suspicion crawled into them.

"Mr. Strickland's ill," he said rather less antagonistically. "He'll see no one at all."

"He'll see me," I said. "He sent for me."

His little Arctic eyes stared at me for a long appraising moment. "He sent for you?" he repeated slowly. "Who are you?"

"Sheldon is the name," I told him. "Sheldon of the Arkwright Detective Agency."

He inhaled sharply. An expression of anxious surprise crossed his face. "A dick," he murmured softly. "So he sent for a dick, eh? Well, copper, suppose I don't let you in?"

"If you can get my foot out of this door," I told him; "if, on top of that, you

can take my gun from the holster on my shoulder; if, in addition to that, you can duck the right I'm going to throw at your ugly jaw any minute—if you can do all these things, I'll go back to the office and resign. Does that answer the question?"

He stood back and held the door open. "Come in," he said sullenly.

I walked into a high-ceilinged foyer. At its right a wide sweeping staircase led into the upper reaches of the house.

"Now," I said, "if you'll tell me where Strickland is?"

He turned to the staircase. "I'll go up and tell him you're here."

Somehow I didn't like that arrangement. It seemed to me it would be better to keep Squarehead where I could see him.

"I'll come along," I said as I followed him up the stairs.

As we gained the upper hall I heard voices. One was loud and dominant; the other, whining, supplicant. My square-headed friend turned and faced me. He seemed a little nervous.

"Maybe you'd better wait here a minute," he said and there was a note of worry in his voice.

"It's not necessary," I told him. "I guess I can find Strickland myself at this point."

I walked to the third door of the corridor. It was the room from which the voices were coming. I stood there for a moment and listened. The whining querulous voice was speaking.

"For God's sake," it said, "I'm thirsty. You can't do this to an old man like me, Ronald. Give me my water. After all, boy, I'm your own flesh and blood. I'll die soon enough without—"

A harsh laugh interrupted him. "You'll get your water if you'll tell me where you've hidden that damned paper. We've ransacked the house for it. That flesh and blood business works both ways. Confide in your nephew and you'll get a drink. If you don't, you can rot of thirst in that bed."

MY HAND moved across my chest and touched the butt of my automatic. I kept my eyes on little Squarehead. Alarm and sweat were on his face. Then he suddenly opened his mouth and yelled at the

top of his voice, "Hey, Ronnie! Come out here a minute. It's important!"

Well, that settled that. I knew I would hear no more delightful conversation over the transom. I opened the door and went in. I met Ronnie two paces from the threshold.

He glared at me with blazing eyes. "Who the hell are you?" he snarled.

I didn't answer him. I looked around the room. There was a bed in its centre with a yellow face that looked like a saf-fron stain on the pillow. There were two haunted sunken eyes in that face and in their depths was an expression of tortured misery.

"Water," muttered old man Strickland. "For God's sake, give me water."

On a taboret some five feet from the bed stood a pitcher of water and a glass. I took a step toward it. Ronnie got in my way.

"What do you think you're going to do?" he demanded.

"I've got a big golden heart," I told him. "I don't like to see an old man dying of thirst." I pushed him aside and picked up the pitcher. From the corner of my eye I saw him start toward me. Then Squarehead spoke.

"Ronnie! He's a dick. A detective."

There was more astonishment than anything else in Ronnie's oath. I ignored him and went over to the old man. I lifted his head from the pillow and held the glass to his lips. He drank noisily and greedily. When I replaced the glass I observed that Ronnie and Squarehead were staring at me with vague anxiety. It was apparent that they were breaking out no bunting to celebrate my arrival.

"Listen," said Ronnie, "come downstairs to the library. I'd like to talk this thing over with you."

Old man Strickland looked at me with watery, appealing eyes. His clawlike hand reached up and touched my fingers. His flesh was cold and infirm. I shuddered at the contact.

"Don't go away," he said hoarsely. "Don't listen to Ronnie."

"I haven't the slightest intention of listening to Ronnie," I said. "Get out, the pair of you, and I if I get any wild psychic hunch that there's an ear at that keyhole, I'll shoot through the panel."

They got out, but I could see I hadn't made them feel any better.

CHAPTER TWO

The Time for Caution

OLD man Strickland breathed a sigh of relief when they were gone. His sunken dead eyes examined me.

"You're from Arkwright?" he said. "You, of course, have credentials?"

I took the neat silver badge of the Arkwright Detective Agency from my pocket and showed it to him. And then I gave him a look at the identification card in my wallet.

"There they are," I told him. "And the name's Sheldon."

The old man nodded. "I guess you'll do," he said slowly. "On the phone, Arkwright said you weren't so strong on brain, but tough with your fists. Tough and not afraid. That's the sort of a man I want."

Considering the layout, that was funny. But I didn't laugh. I sat down at the side of the bed and said, "Now exactly what's going on, Mr. Strickland?"

"Didn't Arkwright give you the details?"

"Some of them. But I'd like to get the story direct from you."

He shifted uneasily on the sheets, then propped himself up on one elbow.

"Sheldon," he said. "I'm dying. My heart is gone and this damned pernicious anemia has turned my blood to water. But I've got to live another week, at least. I've got to. They don't want me to."

Anger brought a little color to his cheeks. For the first time his dead eyes came to life.

"The jackals," he said. "They'd never have dared do this to me before. Now they no longer fear the dying lion. Damn them—"

"Steady," I said. "Steady." He was breathing fast like a spent runner.

I eased him back on the pillow and let him rest for a moment. He didn't have to pursue the subject to make his meaning clear to me. For the better part of fifty years, Strickland had been the toughest, most daring financial promoter in New York. He had made and lost sev-

eral fortunes in a score of varied enterprises. He was ruthless to the point of sadism. Given an advantage, he had never failed to beat an adversary to his knees. Men feared him, trembled before his power. But now that power was gone. It lay wracked and dying like the emaciated body on the bed.

"Listen, Sheldon," he said. "I've *got* to live for a little while longer. I'm an old and beaten man. My enemies have descended upon me. They have taken my property, my wealth. Now that I can no longer fight back, they have ruined me.

"But still, I have something left. Something beyond their reach. It is hidden in a safer place than a bank or a safety deposit box. I own a thousand acre estate in Michigan. Buried there is a half million dollars worth of negotiable securities. I cached them there years ago, in case of emergency. Only I know where the securities are concealed. Only my lawyer and myself know the location of the estate."

I nodded my head. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't know. Yet I found it interesting enough.

"Ronald is my nephew," he went on. "He's no good. Never has been any good. I threw him out of the house years ago. Now, that I'm dying, impotent, he's returned. Returned to worm or torture my secret from me."

"And Macon?" I said. "The square-head?"

"My secretary. He has hated me for years, and now he's gone over to Ronald. They have sent all the servants, save their own cook away. They've even got my doctor with them. They let me see no one. They lock me in my room at night. Last night, they had been drinking and forgot to lock me in. In was then I crept downstairs to the phone and called Arkwright. I don't want the police. I don't want a scandal. All I want is for you to keep them away, to keep me alive until the Bremen docks on Saturday."

HE BREATHED harshly for a moment. I lit a cigarette and leaned back in my chair. Thus far things were breaking extremely well.

"On the Bremen," he went on, "are Cummings, my lawyer and my daughter.

Only to her will I give the map which locates the remaining wealth of the Strickland family. To her and Cummings. He is the only man I ever trusted."

"I get it," I said. "I keep the jackals off until they get here. That's easy enough. Consider it done."

"That's not quite all," he said. "There is another man. He is far more dangerous than these two cowards. It is of him I am most afraid. Manning gets out of jail tomorrow."

"Manning?" I said, pretending I didn't know. "Who's Manning?"

He raised his eyebrows at that. "I thought Arkwright would tell you that. Well, Manning is no jackal. Rather he is a murderous ruthless wolf, who usually gets what he goes after. Manning is a professional criminal who learned of my buried fortune. He tried to take my map from me. He assaulted me, tortured me. My cries brought the police, and they sent him to prison. He has sworn revenge upon me. He has sworn to take my map when he comes out of prison. It is of him I am afraid."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll look after things for you."

He nodded his yellow head. "Good," he said. "See that all doors and windows are locked at night. Are you a light sleeper?"

"As a feather," I told him.

"Very well. Do not forget to report to Arkwright every eight hours by telephone. Give him every detail. He has promised me, if necessary, he will come out here himself. Remember, you are here because of your courage, your physical strength. Arkwright, himself, will furnish whatever brains we need."

I kept a straight face at that, and stood up.

"All right," I said. "You relax. I'll find myself a room and look the house over."

I left him then and wandered out into the hall. Puffing contentedly on my cigarette, I strolled down the stairs. In the foyer below Macon and Ronnie were waiting for me. I walked up to them.

"Get this," I said. "From now on, I'm in charge here. From now on the old man gets a glass of water when he wants it. He eats regularly. He sleeps regular-

ly. Neither of you mugs are ever to enter his room. Unless, of course, you think a broken nose might improve your appearances. Now, is it all clear?"

"Wait a minute," said Ronnie. "Would you be interested in five thousand dollars?"

"Anyone is interested in five thousand dollars," I admitted.

"All right," said Ronnie. "I can get you five grand in cash by tomorrow. All you have to do is give us a free hand with the old man."

"Is this a bribe?" I asked him.

"No matter what else you call it, it's still five thousand dollars."

I drew myself up and remembered a scene I once watched in a movie.

"You scum," I said, playing it to the hilt. "You dare offer five thousand dollars for my honor. You dare say this to me who, for years, has upheld the integrity of my profession. No, you rat, not for five million dollars."

I took a step toward him and crashed my right fist against his jaw. He reeled back against the wall and slid to the floor. I turned around and made my way up the stairs. My stomach muscles ached from the laughter I wanted to, but didn't dare to spill.

I FOUND a room in the second floor rear that had a dial telephone near the bed. I guessed it had belonged to the old man, but that Ronnie had moved him away because of the presence of the phone. However, it was ideal for me.

For the next twenty-four hours things were quiet enough. Macon and Ronnie had both kept away from the old man. On a couple of occasions I had come across them whispering in corners. But that caused me no worry. Manning was the man I was waiting for. And from what I knew of Manning, he should arrive shortly. Incidentally, I knew a hell of a lot about Manning.

On the evening of the second day at the house, I retired to my bedroom early and waited until the others had gone to sleep. A little after midnight, I crept down the stairs, unlocked the front door and left the house.

I got my car from the garage in the back, made certain that the tank was full,

and parked it in a clump of trees off the gravel drive that led to the main highway. Then I came back to the house. I did not lock the front door behind me. Moreover, I took the latches off the side and back doors and left them that way.

Then I went back upstairs, lay down, fully dressed and left my own door open. I remained there, awake and wide-eyed all night. To my intense disgust, nothing happened.

At six o'clock, I went outside again, returned the car to the garage and relocked all the doors. Then I slept until noon. I was nervous and keyed-up all afternoon, waiting for night to fall. When midnight came, I repeated my actions of the previous night. This time with infinitely more success.

The illuminated dial of my wrist watch indicated three-ten when I heard a faint click from the hall below. I sat up tensely and listened. Soft, almost noiseless footfalls padded on the carpet of the staircase. My fingers touched the butt of my gun. I could feel my heart pounding.

I sat there motionless, listening to those quiet footsteps. Then after an eternity, I heard a second click, the unmistakable sound of a carefully closed door. Then I breathed deeply and stood up.

I tiptoed down the hall with such caution that it took me ten minutes to negotiate twenty feet. I came to a halt before the door of Strickland's room. I knelt down, put my eye to the keyhole and cupped my right ear.

Manning sat in a chair at the side of the bed. His face was masked with a greyish prison pallor. Yet his eyes were burning with a hot and bitter flame. Old man Strickland stared at him in abject terror. His yellow features were a mask of blank despair. He shook his head slowly.

"It's no use, Manning," he was saying. "There have been two others before you. They did their worst and I did not give them what they wanted. My body may be wasted, but my will is still strong."

Manning laughed softly. It was not a pleasant laugh. It held no hint of mirth.

"Macon!" he said contemptuously. "Ronnie! Those punks. They haven't the guts to put real pressure on you." His voice rose slightly. "But I have, damn you. I have and you know it."

The old man tried to prop himself up on his elbow. His strength failed him and he fell back upon the pillow.

"Listen," he said and he was breathing hard. "Listen, Manning. I want her to have it. I want that more than I ever wanted anything else in my life. I—"

"Shut up," said Manning bitterly. "If you think the time I've just served has softened either my heart or my brain, you're crazy. Now, for the last time, I ask you: will you give that map to me?"

The old man licked dry lips. Cold fear was in his eyes. Yet he shook his head.

"No," he said in a voice that I could scarcely hear.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Visits an Old Man

I REMOVED my eye from the keyhole and stood up for a moment to stretch my cramped muscles. I was aware of a vast inner satisfaction. Thus far things were running to schedule; and knowing what I did of Manning, I had great confidence that he would do his part.

I knelt down again and glued my eye to the door. Now, Manning held a thirty-eight in his right hand. He had a huge cigar in his mouth. He scraped a match against his shoe. He held the flame to the cigar end and puffed great grey clouds of smoke.

The old man watched him, then in a quavering voice said, "Did you learn to smoke in prison, Manning? You never cared for cigars when I knew you."

Manning inhaled deeply. The tip of the cigar glowed red. "No," he said significantly, "I've never learned to smoke cigars. This is business, not pleasure."

He stood up. With a single gesture he ripped the blankets off the old man. He slid the thirty-eight into his coat pocket. The fingers of one hand encircled the old man's throat, held his windpipe tightly. He snatched the cigar from his mouth. He jammed its burning tip against the scrawny flesh of Strickland's chest. He held it there for a long, long, time.

A sickening stench of burning skin assailed my nostrils. I gagged for a moment then held my breath. Inside the room, Strickland's bony fingers clawed

futilely at Manning's wrist. His strangled cries of agony, cut off by Manning's brutal grip, came faintly to my ears.

Then, abruptly, Manning sat down again. He thrust the smoldering cigar back in his mouth and took the gun out of his pocket. The old man moaned in pain. Manning leaned over the bed.

"Well," he said, "do I get that map?"

Strickland lay back on his pillow and looking like Yellow Death, itself.

"Manning," he said. "For God's sake, Manning—"

"Listen," said Manning. "Your right eye goes next. Then your left. I'll burn them both out. I'll send you through a thousand years of hell in the next half-hour. Now will you give me that map?"

The old man lay back on his pillow. His lips moved slowly, convulsively, but no sound came. Manning leaned back in his chair, ostentatiously lighted his cigar again. Strickland shrank deeper into his pillow as he saw the match flame.

"Manning," he croaked, "for the love of Heaven, I—"

Manning leaned over and seized his throat again.

"The right eye," he said in a terrible voice. He held the cigar an inch from the old man's face. Strickland struggled violently beneath the iron hand that clutched his jugular. Then, with great effort he spoke, in a rasping strangled voice.

"All right," he said. "Let me go. I'll give it to you."

Manning breathed deeply. He released the old man and straightened up.

"All right," he said. "Where is it?"

The old man opened his mouth. His thin fingers touched the teeth of his upper jaw. There was a little clicking sound as he withdrew a plate. Stuck to the false palate was a folded piece of oiled paper. Strickland detached it. Manning snatched it from him.

"Neat," he said. "Very neat. Hidden between the false palate and the roof of your mouth all the time. No wonder those dumb punks couldn't find it."

Strickland lay back, groaning miserably. Manning unfolded the paper with trembling hands. He nodded his head slowly; and there was an expression of gloating triumph upon his face.

"That's it," he said. Then he laughed.

"The grave gives up its secret." He weighed the thirty-eight in his hand. "That leaves but one thing to do," he said.

HE WALKED some four feet away from the bed. He lifted his gun and drew a bead on the old man's heart. Strickland uttered a whimpering cry to terror.

"Manning," he said, "you're not going to kill me, too. You have what you want. Now let me die in peace. Let me live a little while longer—long enough to see her."

"Sure," said Manning. "Let you live. Let you live to call the cops. To have the whole damned country hunting me. Let you live so that you can tell the police so the whole damned army and navy'll be waiting for me when I get to Michigan. You're nearly dead now, Strickland. We'll both be better off with you in your grave. Well, happy to have known you, Mr. Strickland."

He raised the thirty-eight and looked along the sights. That was my cue.

I smashed the door open with my shoulder, came charging into the room with my automatic in my hand. Manning turned. His jaw fell in utter amazement as he recognized me. But he never had a chance. My first two bullets hammered into his brain. A third flew out the window as he fell.

Old man Strickland looked like a corpse snatched from the tomb. "Sheldon," he said hysterically. "Sheldon, you've saved my life. Thank God; thank God . . ."

He sobbed crazily against the pillow. I bent down and took the bloody piece of oiled paper from Manning's hands. Then as I straightened up, I heard footsteps out in the hall. I went to the door to see Ronnie and Macon, clad in their pajamas, showing white inquiring faces.

"What's wrong?" said Macon. "Is anything the matter?"

"Not now," I told them. "Another pal of the old man's tried to get that map from him. He's dead now."

"Dead?" said Ronnie. "How?"

"I killed him," I said. "Now get back to bed, the pair of you. You're not needed here."

I went back into the room and closed the door. Manning lay on the floor, two dribbles of blood staining the rug. Strickland's noisy breathing rasped against my ears.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a car coming up the drive. Then a pair of headlights threw twin beams of illumination through the window. I hastily considered this new angle, then decided that no matter what it was, I was still in the clear.

I went to the bedroom door and opened it again. I stood there on the threshold, my hand holding my gun in my coat pocket. Footsteps sounded below. The front door opened. The lights in the foyer switched on. A big, broad-shouldered guy rushed up the stairs.

"Strickland," he said to me as he came up. "Is he all right? Where is he?"

I jerked a thumb toward the bed. "He's there," I said. "And he's all right."

The big fellow strode into the room. I closed the door and stood there with my back to it. I still held on to the automatic. Strickland twisted his head around and stared at the newcomer.

"Arkwright!" he said. "How the devil did you get here?"

"That fool Sheldon," said Arkwright. "He missed a call. He was supposed to call me every eight hours, come hell or high water. When I didn't hear from him at midnight, I began to worry. Finally, I decided to come up myself and look around."

Strickland nodded his creaking head. "Everything's all right," he said. "Thanks to Sheldon. He just saved my life. Look!"

He pointed a quivering finger to Manning's inert figure. Arkwright bit his lip. "Manning, eh?" he said quietly. "What happened?"

"He broke into the house somehow about an hour ago," said Strickland. "Burned me with a cigar, threatened to burn my eyes out. Forced me to give him the map. Then he said he was going to kill me. Sheldon rushed in and shot him."

"Good work," said Arkwright, "but why didn't the dim-wit call me on schedule? Where is Sheldon now?"

Strickland's eyes wandered around the room, then came to rest on me standing against the door.

"Why," he said, "there's Sheldon over

there, Arkwright. I'll see that he gets a bonus for tonight's work. There's Sheldon, Arkwright. The best operative you've got."

ARKWRIGHT stood perfectly still. His keen dark eyes stared at me. He showed no surprise, no alarm. His voice held an admirable steadiness as he spoke.

"Strickland," he said quietly, as his eyes burned into mine, "that's not Sheldon."

"You're a bright boy, Arkwright," I told him, and my gun was in my hand. "Quite the detective. I'm not Sheldon."

There was a long taut silence in the room. Arkwright stood frozen to the spot where he stood. Strickland stared at me with slowly dawning horror in his face.

"But the map," he said. "Where's the map?"

"I've got it," I said. "What do you think I came up here for? The cuisine?"

Arkwright still had not spoken. There was a puzzled frown on his brow. I knew what was baffling him and I chuckled inwardly. "All right," he said at last. "What's the racket? What's it all about?"

"You're the detective," I told him. "You're supposed to supply the answers."

"The motive's clear enough," said Arkwright. "You came here to steal the map. You knew about Manning. You knew what sort of a ruthless crook he was. You waited for him to come and do the dirty work for you. Once he got the map you plugged him and cashed in on his cigar act."

"Correct enough," I said, "but elementary. There are other, more difficult angles to the case."

Arkwright nodded gravely. "There are," he agreed. "I haven't quite figured them yet."

"Don't let it bother you," I told him. "From now on I'll handle everything myself."

"Hey," yelled old man Strickland. "My map. You can't take my map!"

"The hell I can't," I said. "I've got it."

"You can't," he said again. He thought for a moment, then added, "It won't do you any good. Give it back to me and I'll pay you well. You can't use it."

"Why not?" I said.

"Because, we can notify the police as soon as you're gone. You'll be a hunted

man. When you get to Michigan the whole Army and Navy'll be waiting for you."

I laughed at that. "You stole that line from Manning," I said. "Besides, I'd already figured that angle. I figured it when I cooked up this scheme. You're the only guy who can give away the location of your property. Even Manning had that angle figured correctly. And he hadn't the brain that I have."

My meaning dawned on him slowly. He held his hands up against his chest and moaned frightfully.

"Arkwright," he shrieked, "he's going to kill me. Arkwright, stop him! For God's sake, stop him!"

"Now look here," said Arkwright, "you can't—"

"The hell I can't," I said. My finger touched the trigger lightly. There was a little crackling sound in the silence of the room. A thin trickle of blood stained old man Strickland's pillow. The muscles of his face relaxed. He lay back, motionless and inert upon his pillow.

Up till then I'd known nothing of Arkwright, save what I had heard. In that next instant, I learned, personally, that he had guts. Despite the fact of my drawn gun he went into action.

"You murdering rat," he said clearly and distinctly. And he reached for his hip.

I swung the automatic in his direction. But even as I fired, he knocked over the taboret which held the lamp. The bulb shattered with a bang and a score of tiny tinkles. Then I heard a nasty sharp explosion and a bullet went whining over my head.

I swung open the door and raced down the stairs. I reached the hall switch as Arkwright fired again from the stair head. I killed the lights with my left hand and sent two more slugs at Arkwright at the same time. Then I raced out the front door, fled like a frightened ghost along the gravel driveway toward the clump of maples where the coupé was parked.

I flung myself in behind the wheel and stepped on the accelerator. As I sped toward the main highway, Arkwright sent two more futile shots into the night behind me. I made the right turn onto the Post road. I raced back to town.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Numbers on the Dial

MY PULSE was up and there was a beating excitement within me as I drove. Yet beneath it all was a heady sense of complete triumph. The single unexpected event, the only thing upon which I had not figured, was Arkwright's unexpected arrival. And now I was clear of that.

I was sore, too. Sore at the stupid oversight which might well have ruined all my plans. But even that failed to annoy me a great deal. I'd been forced to kill two men, true. But I'd been playing for higher stakes than I'd ever played for, before. And, by God, I'd won.

Twenty-five minutes later, I parked the car before the cheap West Side hotel. I got out, strode into the building, and walked briskly up the stairs. I had a key already in my hand when I got to the door of the room. I unlocked it and went in. I saw precisely what I had expected to see.

There were two bottles of cheap blended whiskey on the table. One was empty, the other half-filled. The room reeked of alcohol. A huddled figure lay snoring on a rumpled bed. I took the automatic from my pocket, slammed the butt of it against the soles of his feet. He stirred and moaned. I banged him again.

I went into the bathroom and filled a glass with water. I returned and flung it into his face. He opened his eyes and stared vacantly at me for a long moment. Then slow recognition crawled into his glazed pupils.

"Bryan!" he said. "Good old Bryan. Bryan, the fearless gunman. Well, did we pull it off?"

"Sheldon," I said, "you are a dirty, damned, drunken bum. When you sober up, I'll beat you until you can't walk. If I wasn't going to need your help in Michigan, I'd kill you now. I'd blow your brains out. Now sober up, you sot. We've got work to do. We're getting out of here today."

"Sure," he said in a thick heavy voice. "Get out of here. That's right. But gotta have a drink first. Always have a drink first."

He picked the bottle up off the table. I smashed my gun against his knuckles. The bottle dropped to the floor, smashing into a hundred pieces and filling my nostrils with an acrid hospital smell.

"Bryan," he said, "that bottle cost two dollars. Bryan, you shouldn't break bottles. Bryan—"

"For the love of God, shut up!" I snapped. "Sober up, you fool. I—"

But by now he had wandered back to the bed. He had fallen on his face and a gentle snore floated through the room. I went over to him. I slapped him in the face with the flat of my hand. It left an ugly red welt on his cheek. But he did not stir. I swore, sat down and considered.

Sheldon was dead drunk. There was no doubt of that. Apparently he had been drinking ever since I last called him. He had missed Arkwright's call again. And from the looks of him he was good for a long day's sleep.

On second thought that wasn't so bad. It would be better to clear out of town under cover of night. I could lie low here all day while he slept it off. I left the bed to him and settled down in the arm-chair. I was weary and sleepy. I dozed off immediately.

I awoke at the sound of Sheldon moving about the room. I looked at my watch and saw that it was almost five o'clock. Dusk poured in through the open upper half of the window. Sheldon had deep pouches under his eyes. His face was red and bloated. He looked at me sheepishly. I got up and walked over to him.

"Sheldon," I said, "you're a worthless drunken bum."

"Gee, Bryan," he said. "I'm sorry. I only had a couple. I was going crazy here all alone, worrying. I just dozed off for a while. I didn't cause no trouble."

"No," I said. "You dozed off before you called Arkwright, didn't you? When he failed to hear from you, he came up to Westchester. He damned nearly ruined the works."

Sheldon bit his lips. "But it came out all right. Didn't it, Bryan? You ain't sore at me, are you?"

"I'm sore as hell at you," I said. "If it wasn't for the fact that I need a guy to help me dig and drive, I'd be on my way

now. I'd have left you here snoring on your drunken face to hold the bag."

"Gee, listen, Bryan—"

"Shut up," I said. "Get dressed. Have a cold shower. Then get your stuff together. We're leaving at once. I'll talk to you later."

HE SHUFFLED off to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. A moment later I heard the swish of the shower. I sat down and lit a cigarette. My nap had refreshed me. I felt ready for anything now. I could see a cold half-million not too far ahead of me. I smiled as I thought of Arkwright. At that moment I was sitting astride the universe. I had the world in the palm of my hands. I lost myself in a beautiful golden dream.

The door opened so softly that I did not hear it at first. Then a board creaked as if someone had stepped upon it. I swung my head around at that. Then I saw Detective Sergeant Mike Connelly. There was a police forty-five in his big right hand.

My stomach was suddenly empty. I felt the blood beat against my temples. Automatically I stood up. My hand moved uncertainly toward my holster.

"Don't do it, Bryan," said Connelly. "I've brought company."

I stared into the darkness of the hall. Three plainclothesmen walked in. Behind them came Arkwright. I felt sick and empty inside. There was a buzzing in my head that seemed to clog my thought processes. I rubbed a hand over my eyes as if to wipe out this awful, impossible illusion. When I took my hand away, the picture was still there.

"Those more difficult angles you mentioned," said Arkwright. "I finally figured them out."

He didn't have to tell me that. I didn't say anything. I was absolutely beyond words. One of Connelly's dicks rolled me and took my gun away. He wasn't particularly gentle about it.

"Of course," said Arkwright, "I realized this was a two-man-play. It had to be, when I knew damned well that it was Sheldon's voice that reported to me via the phone; when I found that the man up at Strickland's was not Sheldon. The pair of you must have agreed to pull a

stunt like this some time ago. You've just been waiting for Sheldon to get an assignment that could be played for big money."

"That's great," I said, desperately trying to get some of my old brisk sarcasm into my voice and failing miserably "Good old Sherlock Holmes Arkwright."

Arkwright continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"This Strickland affair was it. You took Sheldon's badge and credentials to Westchester. Of course, Sheldon couldn't have done it himself. He's not brainy enough. Besides he's not rat enough to commit cold-blooded murder. You knew that. You left him here. You phoned him every eight hours, before he phoned me. You told him what to say. You unlocked the doors at Strickland's place so that Manning would have no trouble entering."

He stopped speaking and glanced at the empty bottle on the table, at the fragments on the floor.

"It was Sheldon's affection for whiskey that licked you. He got drunk, probably went to sleep, failed to report to me. That's what ruined everything. If that hadn't happened, you could still have sent me those phoney reports until you were well out of the way."

I still couldn't talk. My assurance had oozed from me, leaving me with a strange sensation of emptiness. And back of it all was a pounding question in my brain. How, how had he traced me here? That was something I had to know. Yet, somehow, I could not give him the satisfaction of asking.

"Well," said Connelly, "where's that other mug? Let's get going."

I couldn't stand it any longer then.

"How did you find me?" I said. "What the hell brought you here?"

Connelly grinned. "A series of circumstances," he said. "A little luck; some pretty neat thinking on the part of Arkwright here; a spot of scientific research, and the fact, Bryan, that even an educated crook like yourself, overlooks things."

"No," I said, and I could not force the tremor from my voice. "No. I overlooked nothing. It was no fault of mine. It couldn't have been."

"Nevertheless," said Arkwright, "it

PALS

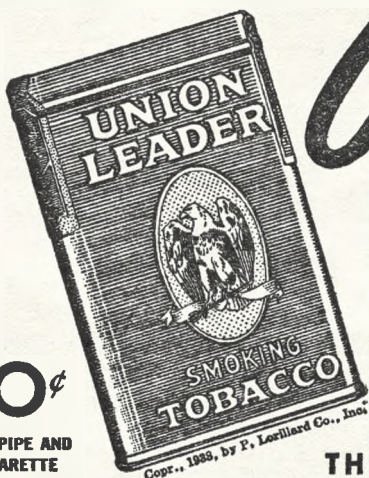
...through the years



IN 1907. . . "Meetin' the right pipe tobacco is pretty near as difficult (and important) for a man as courtin' the right girl. I didn't get hep to Union Leader until a travelin' man loaned me some about the time this picture was made. But I've had cause to thank that fellow ever since for my favorite smoke."



TODAY. . . "Here's the 'right gal, the right tobacco' and me, all pictured together. When a man, woman and tobacco get along good as us all these years they got to have something. Union Leader's got enough goodness to last a man all his life." C. S. Ross, Route 3, Farmington, Ia.



10¢
FOR PIPE AND
CIGARETTE

Union Leader

ALWAYS. . . Since it made its bow, over a third of a century ago, UNION LEADER has been a favorite of American smokers. This tobacco is flavor-filled Burley from the hill crops of Kentucky. Mellowed in oaken casks and specially processed to remove all trace of harshness or tongue-bite. It's the friendliest smoke a dime ever bought.

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

was. When I realized that you must have been in communication with Sheldon a couple of times a day, I went to work on the telephone in your room. I traced the calls."

"You're a liar," I said. "You can't trace the calls on a dial phone."

"TRUE enough," said Arkwright. "But remember this. That phone originally was Strickland's private wire. It had been in his bedroom. When Macon and Ronnie went to work on him they moved him to another room. That phone you used has not been in use for some time. The rest of the household used the downstairs wire. By examining the dial, we found out what number you had been calling. With that it was easy enough to find this place."

"You're still a liar," I cried. "You can't take fingerprints off a smooth plate like that. Furthermore, I never use my finger to dial a number."

"Quite right," said Arkwright. "If you had, we wouldn't be here now. The normal finger is too big to go entirely through the hole over the number plate. It would be impossible to leave a print anyway. No, you don't dial with your fingers, Bryan. You use a pencil, don't you? You use the eraser end of an ordinary pencil."

That staggered me because it was true. But I was eternally damned if I saw where he was heading.

"All right," I said. "Keep talking."

"When I realized that you were the single person who had used that phone in months, it occurred to me that you used it only to call *one* number. That gave me an idea. I cut the wires and took the instrument down to the F. B. I. laboratory. A microscopic examination showed tiny pieces of red rubber clinging to the dial. Naturally enough, when you first jammed your pencil into the hole you applied more pressure on it than when you were turning the dial around. Hence, the rubber deposits were more pronounced on the seven numbers which you dialed than anywhere else."

I blinked at that. It seemed logical enough. Then I did some mental arithmetic and shook my head.

"No," I said. "You're still lying. That

would make over five thousand combinations you would have to try. You haven't had time enough for that."

"That's true," said Arkwright. "We were pressed for time and we had to gamble. That's where the luck came in. We knew that Sheldon would not be hiding out on Park Avenue or in any other citadel of respectability. We elected four exchanges—exchanges filled with cheap rooming houses, cheap hotels. That left us only twenty-four number combinations for each exchange. Ninety-six in all. With five squad cars we checked those numbers. On the eighteenth try we nailed you here in the Chickering exchange."

How the hell Arkwright had ever thought of that baffled me. In a million years I would never have bothered to protect myself on an angle like that.

Then the bathroom door opened. Sheldon, a towel wrapped around him, walked out. He saw Arkwright and the coppers, blinked at them in stupefied amazement.

"My God, Bryan," he said. "My—"

I saw red. No matter what oversight I had committed, basically it went back to Sheldon.

Despite the threat of Connelly's gun, I walked over to Sheldon. I planted my right on his jaw with every ounce of strength I could muster. He fell like a stricken ox. I was kicking him in the face when they dragged me away.

I was raving when they took me down the stairs. It seemed as if there was a raging fire inside me that was bursting to break out. I kicked savagely at the copper who held me, and hardly felt the punch my skull took in return.

"Arkwright," I yelled as they flung me in a taxi, "I'll get you for this if it takes a hundred years. I'll—"

He grinned unpleasantly. "They keep you in hell longer than that, Bryan. 'You're going to burn this time. . . .'"

They gave Sheldon life. He's sitting over in the prison mess-hall at this moment, eating beans and drinking anemic coffee. And I envy him, envy him from the depths of my bitter, terrified heart.

As for me: they told me I can order anything I want for dinner tonight. But I am not hungry. I cannot eat. I know I shall never eat again before I die.

THE END

AUTHORIZED JAIL-BREAK

by CHARLES MOLYNEUX BROWN

THE afternoon session of police court was brief. Jimmy Lee only picked up a couple of human interest items that would do for his "Told The Judge" column which he ground out daily in addition to his regular job of covering police news for *The Morning Courier*.

Downstairs he poked his inquisitive nose into the back office which served as the home of the Burglary Division. Detective Sergeant Rusty Ware was in there

alone, his feet up on his desk, reading a letter.

"Hi-yah, Rusty," Jimmy Lee greeted morosely. "You wouldn't have anything up your sleeve that would make a story, would you?"

Had Steve Tanner been framed into the Big House? Reporter Jimmy Lee said yes. Detective Rusty Ware said no. . . . So they fixed it to test a guy's guts by letting him read a message spelling death for the guilty man. . . .



The machine started clattering. . . .

Rusty Ware shook his head. His eyes, under heavy red brows, were not as cold and hard as usual. Jimmy Lee thought. Rusty beckoned him over to the desk.

"You can read this if you want—but there's nothing in it for publication, understand?" he growled, handing over the letter.

The letter was written on official stationery and was signed by the warden of the State Penitentiary. Jimmy read the few lines quickly and his eyes sparkled.

"Say, that's pretty swell of them!" he exclaimed. "How did you manage it Rusty?"

"I wrote the warden and told him, the circumstances," the detective explained. "Then I got the commissioner and the D.A. to write, backing me up. Steve's been a model prisoner. They're letting him out for five days on honor parole. He's due in late this afternoon by bus."

"Gee, Kitty will be tickled!" Jimmy chuckled. "She doesn't know, I'll bet. How's she doing?"

"I'm not telling her," Rusty grinned. "The surprise of seeing Steve may hurry things up a day or so, but it won't hurt. She's been doing all right."

"Yeah," Jimmy said thoughtfully. "The hard part will be when he goes back. It's a shame he'll have to go, Rusty."

Rusty Ware's face stiffened. "It's tough, but you got to pay for breaking the law."

"You never did believe Steve's story, did you, Rusty?" Jimmy queried curiously.

"When you've been a cop as long as I have, you believe in evidence more than in what a guy says after he's pinched," Rusty said dryly, and turned to papers on his desk.

Ambling out of the office, Jimmy Lee strolled into the press room, nodding to the newshawks in a pitch game there, and went over to the corner where a table held the *Courier's* teletypewriter. He removed his coat and hung it on a chair back; sat down and spread his notes on the table.

When the *Courier* had moved uptown three years ago, they'd installed a teletypewriter hook-up between headquarters and the editorial offices. It saved a lot of phoning and chasing back and forth.

There still was plenty of time to get in his early stuff. Jimmy Lee sat there, thinking about the letter Rusty Ware had shown him, and mulling over recollections it had stirred. . . .

TWO years ago Kitty O'Hare had come to work as waitress and part-time cashier at Mike's Coffee Pot, a little eating joint popular with all types of citizens. Rusty Ware used to drop into the place frequently, as did Steve Tanner and a foxy lad named Eddie Yancey.

Jimmy Lee made Mike's nearly every night in those days, too, for a sandwich and coffee, and any news he might pick up. A little cynically, but with a lot of interest, he had watched the inevitable romance bud. Among those who fell for Kitty O'Hare's dark beauty, Rusty Ware, Steve Tanner and Eddie Yancey were hardest hit. Rusty and Steve wanted to marry Kitty; Eddie Yancey only wanted her.

Big, blond Steve Tanner, with his friendly grin and unflinching good nature, had the inside track from the first. At the time he was going around a lot with a gang of tough eggs. He wasn't vicious himself; he merely wasn't industrious. Kitty let him know she liked him a lot, but gave him to understand she didn't like his loafing or the company he kept.

She was pleasant to Rusty Ware, too, but he was ten years older than she and his work had made him pretty grim. Eddie Yancey she couldn't see at all, and was barely polite to him as a customer.

Steve got a truck driver's job and held it six months. Kitty married him, but it wasn't long until the job played out. Steve couldn't find another, and Kitty went back to the Coffee Pot for a while. Steve got pretty sick of being broke and dependent on her for cigarette money. Finally he managed to pick up a rickety old truck by promising to make monthly payments on it, and went into the hauling business. He found competition plentiful and payloads scanty.

One night Rusty Ware received an anonymous tip that he might find something of interest in the alley behind the Merchants' Tobacco Company warehouse. He wheeled down there in a department car with two cops.

The shipping-room door was open. Steve Tanner's truck was backed up to the platform, and Steve himself was standing by the open rear doors. There were about a dozen large cases of cigarettes loaded in his truck.

A little startled at the sudden intrusion of the cops, Steve explained to Rusty that the tobacco company's shipping clerk had called him at the truck stand, and said that they had a rush order to deliver and that all the company trucks were out on the road.

Steve had been tickled to get the business, he said.

The cigarettes in his truck had been waiting on the platform when he'd gotten there, and a man who said he was the shipping clerk had told him to load them up and wait for some more, and had gone inside about ten minutes back. Steve was waiting for the rest of the load, he explained, getting a little nervous telling it, when he saw the way the cops looked at him.

Leaving a cop with Steve, Rusty and the other uniformed man went inside the warehouse. They didn't find the shipping clerk, or anybody else except the warehouse watchman, unconscious and tied up, a nasty gash on the back of his head.

They also found a small door in the dark front of the warehouse that had been jimmed open. They figured that the tobacco mob had worked in that way, slugged the watchman from behind, and lammed by the same route as the squad car drove up.

After the watchman had been loaded out to the hospital and tobacco company officials notified that there had been a robbery, Steve Tanner drove his truck to the headquarter's garage with a cop on the seat beside him. Rusty Ware was waiting at the desk to book him for burglary.

There was a lot of talk afterward that Rusty went after Steve hard, because the dick was sore at losing Kitty. Rusty had made a grim witness on the stand, where the evidence that Steve had once chased with a tough bunch went against him as much as the facts of the pinch.

Steve drew a three-to-five year rap. He lost his head when the judge

pronounced sentence. He swore that he had been framed and that some day he'd even the score with the one who'd done it. He raved also that he'd get Rusty Ware for his part in it.

Jimmy Lee had been in court that day. Pretty hard-boiled himself, he'd turned his head away when Kitty had broken down. It was then that he had glimpsed Eddie Yancey in a corner of the court room. Eddie had been furtively licking his thin lips and his rat's eyes had gleamed when they dragged Steve back to his cell.

RECALLING that brief glimpse of Eddie Yancey made Jimmy Lee think of him now, and of some things that had happened after Steve Tanner had gone up to the Big House.

Jimmy Lee banged his fist loudly on the table before him and the other reporters looked up, startled, and asked him what the hell was the matter with him.

"Nothing," Jimmy said. "I just got an idea. Maybe I'll tell you about it later."

He switched on the teletypewriter then and started tapping out the stuff for his column, and what few items of news he had gleaned so far today.

That job done, he looked up Rusty Ware again, and had a long, earnest argument with the grim dick. In the end, Rusty Ware agreed to try the somewhat screwy scheme Jimmy broached to him. . . .

There were only about a dozen people in sight when Eddie Yancey stepped off the elevator into the big news room at the *Courier* plant about eight that evening, and they were all very busy and paid him no attention.

Eddie Yancey paused, staring around at unfamiliar surroundings for the sight of a familiar face. Narrow-set, mean little eyes gleamed a little with cautious suspicion. He wasn't very certain of his ground.

Eddie Yancey affected tailored clothes of a striking pattern. He hung around the big shots and managed to stay on good terms with most of them. He'd never been in any serious trouble with the law, and though he sometimes packed a heater under his arm, the cops had never re-

garded him as being particularly tough or dangerous. Most of the lugs Eddie tried to impress with his swagger knew the skinny little windbag was only a rat.

Eddie's questing eyes fell on Jimmy Lee, pounding a typewriter at a desk across the big room, where there was a row of partitioned-off offices. He hurried over there, grinning his relief at seeing someone he knew.

"Hey, Lee!" Eddie greeted. "Where do I find Bob Orcutt? He sent for me, see? Wants to get some first-hand underworld dope for a Sunday feature. Promised me a sawbuck if I'd slip him some real lowdown."

Jimmy Lee looked up, regarding the bat-eared little crook coldly.

"Orcutt's tied up in a conference with the boss," he said. "He asked me to watch out for you. I'll show you where to wait."

He got up and led the way into one of the small offices, Eddie tagging at his heels. There wasn't anything much in the untidy room but some old files, a chair, and a table holding a teletype printer, silent just then. Eddie regarded the cumbersome-looking machine curiously.

"What the hell is that thing?" he asked.

"A teletypewriter," Jimmy Lee explained shortly. "It's hooked up with police headquarters. We get news flashes and bulletins over it. Make yourself at home, Yancey. Orcutt will be along in a moment."

HE WENT out, closing the door behind him. Eddie Yancey lighted a cigarette and sat down in the one chair. He felt a little more confident, now that he knew there was no rib about Bob Orcutt's wanting to see him. He concentrated on thinking of what he might spill about underworld doings that would earn him the promised sawbuck, and still not be traced back to him and get him in bad with the big shots.

Without warning, the teletype printer began to whirr and clack. Eddie jumped, startled by the noise, and stared at the machine. He got it in a second that something was coming over the wire, and curiosity impelled him to go stand be-

fore the machine and watch its operation.

Under his rounded eyes the printer pounded out a bulletin. The first line was mostly symbols and had no meaning for him. Then came the message, following a date line from the capital city.

FLASH: SHORTLY AFTER NOON TODAY FOUR CONVICTS ESCAPED FROM THE STATE PENITENTIARY HERE. AT SEVEN-FORTY TONIGHT PRISON AUTHORITIES REPORTED ALL FOUR STILL AT LARGE.

THE BREAK WAS HEADED BY STEVE TANNER, A SHORT-TERMER SENT UP FROM RIVER CITY SIX MONTHS AGO. WARDEN THOMAS STATED THAT TANNER WAS REGARDED AS A MODEL PRISONER HERETOFORE. LARRY DEEMS, CLARENCE 'RED' DOWD AND FRANKIE PEARCE, ALL DANGEROUS CRIMINALS SERVING LONG TERMS, MADE THE BREAK WITH TANNER.

A STATEWIDE ALARM IS BEING SENT OUT WARNING ALL OFFICERS AND CITIZENS TO BE ON THE ALERT FOR SIGNS OF THESE MEN. 250 WORDS TO FOLLOW.

Standing there tensely before the clacking machine, Eddie Yancey had almost sucked the cigarette down his throat when the second paragraph of the bulletin spelled out under his popping eyes.

He had no desire to wait for the 250 words of detail to follow. He had lost interest in waiting to see Bob Orcutt and earn the promised sawbuck.

Terror had gripped him with icy fingers. Big Steve Tanner had crashed out of the big house—had been on the loose now for more than seven hours. He might even now be in River City. The very thought of that possibility chilled Eddie's blood, but it didn't paralyze his muscles.

He reached the door in three bounds, tore it open and scuttled across the news room. He didn't wait for an elevator, but took the descending stairs three treads at a leap. . . .

Jimmy Lee observed Eddie Yancey's flight with sardonically amused eyes. He went into the room which Eddie had so hastily vacated and tore the bulletin from the rolls of the now silent printer, stuffing the copy into a hip pocket. Then he picked up his hat and coat, and sat down at his desk for a brief moment to call a number on the telephone.

"Hello, Rusty!" he said, when a deep voice answered his call. "Our bird just left here like a bat out of hell, with Old Nick himself singeing his tail. He'll be showing up pretty quick. I'll be right down myself."

"Okay," Rusty Ware growled. "Everything's set. Herman will show you where to come. Make it snappy."

Jimmy Lee hustled downstairs then and out to the parking lot, climbing into his battered coupe. He drove, not hurriedly, the seven blocks to the Magnolia Hotel, and parked before the scabby-looking three-story place.

THE small lobby was frowsy, like the general character of the establishment and its patrons. Besides the uneasy-eyed clerk at the desk there was only one other man in the place. Jimmy Lee saw the thick legs and big stout shoes and went up to the man. Herman Krantz, one of Rusty Ware's squadmen, lowered the newspaper that had been hiding his face and upper body.

"Our party come in, Herman?" Jimmy Lee inquired softly.

"Yeah. On the gallop," Krantz grunted. "He looked like he was scared to death, and his knees knocked each other, scooting up the stairs."

"We'd better go up, I guess," Jimmy Lee grinned. "I want to be in on everything."

Krantz heaved up out of the chair and started for the dingy stairs. The reporter followed.

"Anything out of you that smells like a tip-off and you'll wish you never was born," Krantz growled at the clerk as they passed the desk. The man shook under the big fellow's scowl.

Jimmy Lee followed Krantz up to a musty, ill-lighted hallway, on the second floor. Krantz tapped softly on a door, and in a moment it was opened by Rusty Ware. He admitted them, nodding grimly to the reporter.

There were two other men in the room, one of them a headquarter's stenographer, who sat at a small table with dictagraph headphones on his ears, a notebook and pencils spread before him.

The other man, fidgeting in a chair, was big and muscularly lumpy in

wrinkled, shabby clothes. He got up when Jimmy Lee came in, and they shook hands warmly.

"How're you, Steve?" Jimmy Lee greeted cordially. "Glad to see you, feller."

"Hello, Jimmy. Say, it's swell of you and Rusty to be doing this for me," Steve Tanner said jerkily.

"Think nothing of it, Steve," Jimmy Lee said heartily. "All I'm hoping for is that my hunch is good. You got him drilled, Rusty?"

"Yes. Everything's set," Rusty Ware said soberly. "The bug is planted in that rat's room. It's on the third, right over this. We heard him come in a little bit ago. He's restless up there."

"From the way he looked when he was screaming from the office, I imagine he is," Jimmy Lee chuckled.

Rusty Ware turned to Steve Tanner. "It's up to you now, Steve," he warned. "The door will bust open at a healthy shove. We fixed the lock and the screws holding the bolt to come out easy. You want to watch him, and get close the first thing. He may try using his rod."

"I'm not afraid of his gun," he said thickly. "If you're right, you'll hear a rat squeal when I get my hands on his neck."

The stenographer looked up quickly. "Better shove off," he warned. "Sounds like maybe he was packing up."

Rusty Ware nodded, and clapped a hand on Steve's broad shoulders. "On your way," he clipped. "It's number thirty-eight, right over us. Good-luck, kid."

Steve Tanner passed swiftly through the door Herman Krantz held open for him.

EDDIE YANCEY was packing up his few belongings in a battered old suitcase. His eyes were feverishly bright from the whiskey he had swallowed when he'd first hit the room, and from a pinch of white powder he'd sniffed up his nostrils.

He'd been pretty nearly a wreck when he'd reached his room. For a little while all he could do was sit slumped in a chair and sweat, fighting the terror that gripped his mean little soul.

Eddie Yancey had his own ideas about

why Steve Tanner had taken the desperate chance of crashing out of stir. He thought he knew of two things Steve would try to accomplish before he let the law snag him again. He remembered, quaking, Steve's raving when they'd sentenced him.

The only thing for him to do was blow town, and blow quickly, before Steve Tanner started settling personal scores.

Eddie was cramming things from a dresser drawer into the suitcase when the door to his room burst open without warning. He whirled, with a squeal of panic, to stare with eyes bulging at the grimmest face he'd ever looked upon.

"S-Steve!" he gurgled. "Steve Tanner!"

The big figure came toward him in long strides, while Eddie still stood frozen, back to the dresser.

Steve didn't say anything for a moment. He only stared unwinkingly into Eddie Yancey's fear-blotched face.

"Yeah, it's me, Eddie," he said stonily. "It took me a little while to find where you were holing-up these days."

Eddie tried to get a grip on shattered nerves. "Gee, Steve," he gulped hastily, "I heard you'd crashed out. I guess you're looking for a place to hole-up yourself. I ain't got much jack, but you're welcome to what I got, if that'll help."

"I don't want anything you've got, rat, except your neck between my hands," Steve Tanner said grimly. "I've laid awake many a night, waiting for this."

"What do you mean?" Eddie chattered. "You ain't sore at me, are you, Steve? I never done nothing to you!"

"You're a liar, rat. You did plenty, and you tried to do more. I was plenty dumb while they was holding me in the can, awaiting trial, but I had lots of time to figure things out afterwards. You framed me, Eddie Yancey!"

"No, no!" Eddie denied shrilly. "You got me all wrong, Steve!"

"Shut up!" Steve Tanner rasped. "Lying won't help you. You framed me for a pinch. And I wasn't on the way to the Big House good before you were bothering Kitty. You figured that with me out of the way, you could have her. That's why you made the frame play, Eddie."

Eddie tried to say something in denial

but only dry, rasping sounds came from his throat. Slowly, though, his right hand edged into position for a lightening dive to his armpit.

"Rusty Ware caught you pestering Kitty and mauled you for it," Steve droned on omniously. "You found out Rusty took her into his home, where there was nobody but an old woman keeping house for him. Your nasty mind could only see that one way, rat, and you saw to it the news came over the grapevine to get to my ears, figuring it would make things more of a hell for me than they were. I got the word, all right, but by that time I knew something else."

STEVE leaned toward Eddie, his big hands waist high and fingers twitching.

"You thought you were wise, Eddie, but there were things you didn't know. You thought I hated Rusty Ware for doing a cop's duty, because I lost my head and went wild that day in court. You didn't know it, Eddie, but when I started for the Big House, I knew Kitty was going to have a kid. That was what made me so wild."

Eddie Yancey's strained stare turned a little bewildered and his hands stopped the inching creep for a second.

"Rusty found out about things, after he took Kitty into his home," Steve went on, speaking a little faster now. "The old woman's been like a mother to her, and Rusty like a daddy, because she didn't have nobody else. Kitty wrote me nearly every day. She told me how Rusty paid all the bills, and how he felt bad about jugging me, and was going to help me find a job when I come out. Rusty Ware is—" the thick tones shook a little—"a damn' swell guy, even if he is a dick."

Eddie Yancey cried shrilly, "Get back away from me! Get back, I tell you!"

Steve Tanner only pressed closer. "That's why I crashed out, rat. To be with Kitty when her time came—and to get you. But the town is lousy with cops looking for me. They're watching the house. I was lucky to be able to make it here. Kitty ain't strong, rat. It ain't going to help any knowing her kid's got a jailbird for a father."

Eddie made his play then. His right

streaked like a darting swallow to his armpit, but Steve Tanner's big hands were quicker. One of them closed on Eddie's wrist and wrenched. The automatic fell from Eddie's tortured fingers. His shriek of pain ended in a gurgle when steely fingers closed on his scrawny neck.

"About all I can do, rat, is square things with you," Steve said thickly, and raised Eddie clear of the floor by the neck grip alone, and shook him.

"Wait—don't!" Eddie panted, when breath gushed back into tortured lungs. "I'll fix it, Steve! I'll tell the cops I framed you. I'll tell 'em Greasy Meyers and Sol Bloom helped me on that warehouse heist! I'll fix everything all square, so's you'll get off the rest of the rap, if you promise not to kill me!"

Steve Tanner's blue eyes blazed triumphantly and with terrible hope. He kicked the automatic into a corner, supporting Eddie Yancey's nerveless body with those powerful hands.

"Say that again, rat!" he hissed. "How did you work it?"

"You didn't know Sol Bloom. He played shipping clerk and called you to bring your truck down, after we'd crashed in and slugged the watchman," Eddie Yancey explained frantically. "It's the God's truth, Steve! The cops can pick up Greasy and Sol and they'll spill that I paid 'em to help me."

STEVE TANNER released him and stepped back a pace. Eddie huddled limply over the dresser. Steve drew a long breath. His glance wandered about the room, and he amazed the shaking Eddie by saying, "Is that enough?" in a queer, strained tone.

Rusty Ware and Jimmy Lee came into the room, followed by Krantz. Eddie Yancey stared at them, dumbfounded.

"That's plenty, kid," Rusty Ware said. "We heard it from the hall, and Reynolds got it all down over the dictagraph. Look, you better chase on out to the hospital now. There may be news. We'll take care of this rat."

Steve Tanner bolted from the room, but there was a vastly different expression on his face than the one that had been there when he'd burst in.

"What's this? A frame?" Eddie Yancey found voice to demand shrilly.

"Just a little game to make you let down your hair and talk," Krantz said, slipping handcuffs over his wrists.

Jimmy Lee enjoyed immensely riding the squad car with Rusty Ware and Herman Krantz on the round up for Greasy Meyers and Sol Bloom. They were not hard to locate, but they were considerably surprised to be pinched and brought to headquarters. When they found out Eddie Yancey had spilled, no great amount of coaxing was needed to get confirming statements from them.

The whole business took up better than two hours' time, including routing out the D.A. and starting the wheels grinding to get Steve Tanner pardoned.

"He may have to go back for a few days," the D.A. assured Rusty and Jimmy Lee, when he'd heard how things were, "but it won't be for long."

Rusty Ware had been a little fidgety and impatient those last few minutes. When the D.A. left, Rusty said, "Let's wheel it out to the hospital. There ought to be news."

There was. A beaming, very proud Steve Tanner greeted them out there.

"It's a boy!" he informed them importantly. "Kitty's doing fine and so is the youngster. I've seen 'em both. And say, we've already decided on a name for the boy. It's Harold James Tanner."

Jimmie Lee had also been one of those lads who had frequented Mike's Place and fallen for Kitty O'Hare. He was glad that Steve and Kitty had given their son the 'James' part of that name. But the 'Harold' part! That puzzled him for a second until he happened to glance at Rusty Ware's very red face.

"Why, you hard-boiled son-of-a-gun!" Jimmy Lee exploded. "Who'd have ever thought that an old rhino like you had been tagged with a handle like that! No wonder you don't mind 'em calling you Rusty!"

"Yeah, and if it ever leaks out, or I ever catch you calling me 'Harold', I'll make hash of that monkey's face of yours!" Rusty Ware threatened sternly. "Let's go somewhere and drink to the health of my godson."

Widow of The Talking Head

A SEEKAY NOVELETTE by PAUL ERNST

Dead Men Tell No Tales, They Say—But the Severed Head Told an Astonishing One!



There stood Seekay—unharméd—his masked face relentlessly cold.

When sportsman pilot Palmer Richards crashed in the jungles, his million-dollar estate hung fire, until four tortured, escaped convicts brought indisputable proof of his death to Mrs. Richards—her husband's head! . . . But Seekay, bizarre, faceless investigator had his own ideas about the weird case, though Death must strike four times to prove him right!

CHAPTER ONE

The Thing in the Box

THE big coupe stopped at the curb on the quiet Chicago back-street. Out of it stepped a singularly beautiful girl, tall and lithe, with deep blue eyes and tawny hair. A man followed her from the driver's side of the car. Tall as she was, he loomed a full six inches over her; and the breadth of his shoulders dwarfed her.

He joined her at the curb, and then it could be seen that there was something odd about this man so smartly clad in

brown tweeds. Very swiftly, in the clear October morning air, the oddity defined itself.

It was his face. The eyes alone were alive, black and glittering, like living jet. The rest of the face was dead. His was not a face at all. It was a painted mask. For this was Seekay, bizarre detective, who had no face as far as the world knew.

"This is the address given over the phone?" Seekay asked Marian Ford, his secretary and able assistant.

The girl nodded, staring at the painted mask of a face, wondering as all the world wondered what lay behind that false artistry. The two started toward the iron-grilled entrance of the house.

The place before which they had stopped—a tall narrow house sandwiched in between two exclusive apartment buildings, looked like a bank vault. And the



The woman kicked over the box that held the candle. . . .

bank symbol was appropriate enough. The house belonged to Palmer Richards, millionaire sportsman and playboy. That same Richards who not quite a year ago had crashed a plane over the Brazilian jungles. That same Richards whom rumor would not allow to die; who was reported time and again to have been seen in the jungles by adventurers. Now it was said that he was held captive king by a savage tribe; now to be living a hermit's life alone; now to be imprisoned in an obscure Brazilian jail, by authorities who refused to believe in his identity. Dead, yet obstinately not dead, Richards was to the world at large. . . .

Marian suddenly laid her lovely hand on Seekay's powerful forearm.

"Look!"

She did not point. Only by the inclination of her sea-blue eyes did she indicate what Seekay was to look at. His jet black eyes followed hers.

He saw a face at a third floor window of the square, stone house. It was a girl's face, wildly lovely, with silky hair stringing around it; a face somehow out of a nightmare, with great dark eyes glaring in haunted, maniac fashion. Then, abruptly, the face was withdrawn and Marian Ford and Seekay stared at each other.

"Come," said Seekay, going on toward the door.

He pushed the bell. A discreet-looking butler opened the door. His eyes widened a bit at sight of Seekay's ghastly mask of a face, but the expression was instantly controlled.

"Tell Mrs. Richards that Mr. Seekay is here to see her," the faceless detective said quietly.

The butler nodded, bowed them to chairs in the wide front hall and padded noiselessly up an adjoining staircase.

From upstairs there was one sharp, short cry. It seemed human, yet you could not be sure. Seekay looked at Marian again, with the face of the girl at the window in mind, but said nothing. It was a curious house they'd come to; one to which few had been admitted since Palmer Richards left eleven months ago for the trip ending in the plane crash.

A woman came down the staircase. She was as tall as Marian Ford and almost as beautiful. But her hair was deep black as

were her eyes; and there was none of Marian Ford's warmth about her. She looked like a cold black panther, in her dark hostess dress. But she was cordial enough.

"Won't you come in here, please?"

SHE led the way toward a small den off the hall. As they entered, once again came that sharp wild cry from somewhere above. The stately tigress smiled thinly.

"It is one of my sister's bad days," she murmured. "She is. . ." She concluded by touching her forehead.

They sat down, with Mrs. Richards at the desk. There was a paper on it. Seekay saw something like a list of names on it, then saw they were all the same name. Mrs. Helen P. Richards, written over and over. She put it in the top desk drawer.

"You were told by your secretary why I called?" she said.

Seekay nodded, black eyes glittering through the eye-holes of his mask, while the painted lips smiled gently and unnaturally.

"You are expecting proof of your husband's death, Mrs. Richards. The bearer of the proof is a doubtful character. You wanted some one on hand to protect you—and to make sure the proof is genuine."

"That is right," Mrs. Richards replied, face almost as expressionless as a mask itself. "That is, the first part is right. I may need protection. As for the second part—no one on earth is in a better position to know if the proof is genuine than I myself."

Seekay stared at her. The room seemed suddenly very still.

"How is that, Mrs. Richards?" he said finally. "What is this proof?"

She looked first at him and then at Marian. Her red, too-thin lips jerked a little. Then she said: "The proof is—my husband's head."

A slight sound from Marian told of an exclamation checked. But there was no other indication of surprise or alarm from her. She had worked too long for Seekay to be too shocked, even by the most fantastic of things.

"Your husband's head?" the faceless detective repeated. "That should be proof enough of his death."

"Some such undeniable proof is needed," Mrs. Richards said evenly. "You know how it has been. Mr. Richards has an insurance policy for eight hundred thousand dollars, and an annuity policy reverting to me of another hundred thousand. Almost a million dollars. But the insurance companies won't pay it over because it isn't legally proved that Palmer died in that plane crash. Every time a claim is pushed, some other silly explorer comes to light with a sworn statement that he saw my husband alive in the jungles. But if the insurance people see his head—they can no longer doubt."

"How is it that such . . . unusual . . . proof of death is coming to you?"

Mrs. Richards, as coolly as though talking of the fall weather, took a cigarette from a casket and offered the casket to Seekay and Marian, who refused. Seekay couldn't have smoked anyhow, through his mask.

"It seems that four men were in jail in an Amazonian town. They broke out and fled into deep jungle to escape. They were captured by savages who mutilated and tortured them terribly, but from whom they eventually managed to break free. Before they got away, they saw the dried head of a white man in the chief's hut. They had seen accounts of the plane crash of Palmer Richards, with pictures, and they recognized the head as his. At least that is what they swear. They had sense enough to realize the value of it, so when they escaped, they took it with them. One of the four will be here any minute now with the head."

"Escaped prisoners," nodded Seekay. "I can see why you needed some one around."

"Yes. Apparently the four are the most desperate kind of cutthroats."

"You are paying handsomely for this . . . proof?"

MRS. RICHARDS opened a desk drawer and took out five slim bundles of currency in her white, graceful hands that were so subtly like a panther's talons.

"Fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Seekay—"

The butler appeared at the door. He had kept his face fairly controlled at sight of Seekay's waxen countenance; but now

it was agitated. Apparently he had just looked on something more disturbing than Seekay's facelessness.

"A man to see you, Mrs. Richards," he said, after moistening his lips. "He told me just to tell you he was from Brazil."

Mrs. Richards' white hands clenched, not in fear, but with a sort of animal wariness.

"Show him in."

Seekay studied her beautiful but glacial face. An odd woman. Any other, he would not have trusted to look upon so hideous a sight as her husband's severed head. Any other would be near to fainting. But Mrs. Palmer Richards, he was willing to wager, would exhibit no such signs of frailty.

A man crossed the threshold and stood a moment as the door behind him was closed by the butler. Then he walked toward where the three sat. Seekay's black eyes narrowed to jetty slits as he watched.

The man was of average height but more than average breadth. He walked with a limber, loose step hinting great physical power. And he kept his head down so that all they could see of his face was a glint of two pale eyes under the hat-brim.

"You are the man who got in touch with me yesterday?" Mrs. Richards said.

The man nodded. His left hand had been held a little behind him. He brought it forth now, and Marian bit her red lips. In that hand was a box about the size of those used to contain a standard-sized alarm clock. Three times too small for a human head. But its very smallness added horror.

"I have what you want," the man said, voice harsh and rusty as though long unused. "You have the money?"

Mrs. Richards pushed the piles of bills nearer to him on the desk top. The man set the box on his edge of the desk. It was tied with ordinary twine, which again somehow lent a note of horror to the thing. Instinctively you expected some container more elaborate than an ordinary cardboard box tied with ordinary cotton twine.

"Why is it that you don't take your hat off?" Mrs. Richards questioned sharply.

"Why don't you show your face?"

"Lady," the man said, voice rusty and grating, "when you've been held for three months by jungle savages, and treated as jungle savages treat a prisoner they want to kill as slowly as possible, you don't show your face any more than you can help. Or any other part of you, as far as that goes."

His fingers worked with the knot on the twine.

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. Richards, "We want to see your face. There is room for plenty of dishonesty in a transaction like this. I can't allow you simply to walk in, take up fifty thousand dollars, and walk out again—without even having seen your face for future identification."

The man kept his head down. He had the knot half untied. "Better skip it, lady," he said. "It ain't that I'm afraid of being identified in the future that I keep my face to myself."

"I insist."

The man swore. "All right—you asked for it!"

He swept his hat off.

THIS time Marian's slight exclamation did sound out. And even Seekay's hands tightened. Mrs. Richards' healthy pallor became an unhealthy one, and her hand went toward her throat in the first gesture of agitation Seekay had seen her display.

The man had had reason to hide his face—or the remnant of a face left him by Brazilian head-hunters.

He had no eyelids. His reddened, suffering eyes, like bloodshot glass, dripped constant moisture and were periodically hidden by a hideous grimace that drew folds of flesh over them in a slight momentary relief. He had no lips, but the absence did not leave an unclosable hole in his face because he had no teeth either, and toothless jaws met closely enough for flesh to touch flesh where lips should be. His nose. . . .

However, nothing would be served by listing the things that had been done to him in the jungle. It is enough to say that he had ample reason for keeping his hat on and holding the brim far down. Marian swallowed with difficulty—and

wondered if Seekay's face, under the constant mask, were like that.

"You may—put your hat back on," Mrs. Richards faltered.

The man laughed, hard and sharp. Recovering his head, he turned to the little box again. He got the twine undone.

"This ain't pretty," he said. "You sure you want to see it, lady?"

"I must see it, of course," shrugged Mrs. Richards.

The man lifted the lid of the small box. Marian's hands were tight on the arms of her chair. Seekay's black eyes were riveted on the box.

"Here it is—red hair and all," the man said, callously thrusting his hand into the container.

Seekay jerked out an exclamation and rose with his gun in his hand with magic swiftness. The bark of the gun and the scream of the man sounded almost together. Almost. But there was a tenth of a second delay between scream and gunshot. And in that fraction of time lay death.

The man staggered back from the desk, staring with terror at his hand, where two pin-pricks of blood appeared. On the desk writhed a small snake with coral-like markings. The snake was in two pieces, cut by Seekay's shot.

The box lay on its side, and it was empty. There had been no head in it—only the deadly coral-snake.

"Oh, my God!" screamed the man. And then he fell, and lay jerking and shuddering on the floor while the three watched in fascinated horror. In an incredibly short time the jerking and twitching stopped and the man lay still—and stark.

The telephone bell, a note eerie in its commonness, shrilled out. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Seekay's Diamond

"**T**ET me," said Seekay, as Mrs. Richards reached for the phone.

He took it up. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Palmer Richards' house?" came a voice. Its rusty grating was like that in the voice of the man now dead on the floor.

"Yes," said Seekay, voice as calm as

though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"You have just seen how a man dies when he thinks to cheat his pals," said the rusty, grating voice. "And you have also seen how an outsider, too, would die if he tried to play tricks on us. Does Mrs. Richards still want the proof of Palmer Richards' death?"

"Of course," said Seekay.

"Then she will be told tonight where to come and get it."

There was a click as the speaker hung up. And Seekay was halfway to the door before the phone had stopped swaying in its cradle. He raced down the hall and out the street door.

Whoever had called, must have been close to the house. Close enough to see the entrance of the man now dead. Otherwise he could not have timed his phone call so closely after tragedy had struck.

On the street, Seekay stared in both directions. A block and a half down was a drugstore. For speed, he jumped into his coupe and drove the short distance. But he did not get there in time to see any one leave, or to see anybody on the sidewalk nearby who looked in the least suspicious. He went into the store.

A clerk behind the soda fountain approached him, staring curiously at his painted mask of a face. There were no customers in the place.

"A man used your phone booth a minute ago," Seekay said, making it a statement instead of a question.

The clerk nodded, watchful, hand under the counter. Evidently he distrusted as well as feared Seekay's mask.

"What did he look like?"

"I wouldn't know," said the clerk. "He kept his head down so his face couldn't be seen. He was a big guy, kind of poorly dressed. That's all I can tell you. He left in a hurry. I was scared of him—I don't exactly know why."

Seekay slowly left, and rolled the coupe back to Mrs. Richards' house. He had been a little too late to catch a murderer who had slipped a venomous snake into the box a double-crossing pal had carried to Mrs. Richards in an effort to get the fifty thousand reward all for himself.

Re-entering the house without ringing,

simply letting himself in through a door he had left off the latch, he saw the butler struggling with a person at the head of the hall stairs. The person was the girl he had seen at the window—Mrs. Richards' sister.

"Let me go!" the girl was panting, hair stringing over her face. "Let me go—"

The butler saw Seekay standing by the outer door. With a powerful thrust of his arms, he got the girl back out of sight. There was the slam of a door, then the servant came downstairs. He nodded coolly to Seekay, and stepped to the door of the little den. At a motion of his head, Mrs. Richards came to him. Seekay heard a few words.

". . . worse all the time. Institution. . ."

"We'll speak of that later," Mrs. Richards said. She walked to Seekay. In a moment Marian Ford came from the den and approached too.

"What do you advise me to do now?" Mrs. Richards asked Seekay.

The faceless detective turned his mask toward her, black eyes glittering, painted lips smiling gently, unnaturally.

"There is nothing to do but wait," he said. "When you get word where we're to go tonight for . . . your husband's head, let me know. I will be at my home."

"And the dead man in my house?"

"I will notify the police. There will be questions, but I think I can avoid anything more serious than that, and I think I can keep the reporters away for a time. Till I hear from you this evening. . ."

HE went out with Marian, and the two drove to his own tall, narrow house on the near North Side of Chicago. An odd house; in some ways as fantastic as its master.

In the tile-paved vestibule, Seekay stood facing the door, which was electrically operated.

"Open," he said.

The door, which would have withstood the assaults of crowbar and acetylene torch for many minutes, opened to the precise inflection of his voice. The two walked into a dim, cool hall.

"I'll see you in the laboratory at seven-thirty," Seekay said. "See that dinner is brought to my office at half-past six."

With darkness falling outside, Marian

met Seekay in his laboratory at the appointed hour. The faceless detective had on the shield he wore in his own house, which was more comfortable than the exquisitely fashioned mask he wore outside. The shield was a plain celluloid sheet curving from below his chin to the line of his black hair.

Marian looked at him with a soft light in her blue eyes. She had passed some time ago from wondering what possibly grisly ruin lay under the mask, to a realization that she didn't really care. But Seekay seemed never to notice that look on her face which no other man had ever seen there before.

He stood a moment before a long table on which were many queer bits of laboratory apparatus. His eyes were wide in thought.

"You remember the circumstances of Mrs. Richards's marriage?" he asked at last.

Marian shook her head rather indifferently.

"I didn't, either," Seekay said. "I looked up as much as I could about it during the afternoon. It was a Cinderella tale, it seems. The woman, Helen Brant, was a Hollywood movie extra, with few friends and apparently without family. It wasn't even known that she had a sister—"

"She probably kept quiet about her sister because of her mental unbalance," Marian said.

"Perhaps," mused Seekay. "Anyhow, Palmer Richards married her and brought her here, where she didn't know a soul. And a week after the honeymoon he was off on one of his trips. So now he leaves a widow, who was only a bride of a month, to collect his fortune."

HE was moving now, as he spoke. He went to a tall cabinet in a corner and opened it. From it he took a package Marian recalled had been delivered late that afternoon. And this in turn yielded what looked like two pairs of extra heavy stockings. As she looked closer, she saw that they were fashioned of fine leather, feet and all, and were hip-length.

"Put these on over your bare legs," said Seekay, handing her the smaller pair of leather hose. "Then put your stockings

on over them. The leather is flesh-colored, so it would not show too much."

Marian raised her dress, slipped off her stockings, and slid on the long leather hose. Then she put her stockings back on. The faceless detective already had his leather hose on under his tweed trousers. Marian got shoes from a locker large enough to accommodate her feet in the leather hose, and stood before him. Her legs, no less lovely in curve than before, were slightly less slim, that was all. She asked no questions; she never asked questions of Seekay.

The faceless detective, eyes vital and alive in the eye-holes of his pink celluloid shield, was studying a picture from a year-old newspaper. Marian looked at it with him. Pretty clear for a newspaper reproduction, it showed the face of a youngish man with thick hair and a hawk nose. The eyes were arrogant and under them were premature little bags of flesh. Underneath was the caption, "Palmer Richards off for the wilds by plane—"

Seekay put it in his pocket as the phone rang.

He got to it in two lithe strides. "Hello. Seekay speaking."

"This is Mrs. Richards," came the cold, musical voice he had heard that afternoon. "The men you know of have just been in contact with me."

"Their message?" said Seekay.

"We are to go to thirty-three forty-eight South Wilton Place. We are to go alone and tell no one."

"I'll be at your home in ten minutes," Seekay said.

He flipped through a city directory on the telephone stand.

"Thirty-three forty-eight South Wilton Place," he murmured. "Belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Stone. . . . They're the department store owners. I know the place. It's a thirty-room mansion in what is now the negro belt, unused for years, up for sale but with no bidders. So that's where our cutthroats from Brazil have gone to ground!"

He slipped a ring from his little finger and gave it to Marian. A big diamond glittered evilly in the setting with the move.

"You'll know what to do with this. Follow me in the roadster. If you hear

a cry from me, let twenty minutes pass and then scream as loud as you can."

CHAPTER THREE

The Death Chamber

IT was a chill, dark night, with spats of rain presaging an all-night drizzle. There was no one in sight on the sidewalk when Seekay stopped his coupe at the small side entrance of what had once been one of Chicago's greatest mansions.

Seekay, with Mrs. Richards dark and cold and lovely by his side, hurried across the walk to the side door of the disused old residence. Not a light showed behind that door, or anywhere else in the great pile of reddish stone. But as the two approached the portal, it swung open to receive them, with ancient hinges grating creakily.

Seekay paused on the threshold. He could see no one in the Stygian gloom of the small hall into which the side door opened. He could hear no sound. It was as though the door had opened by itself. He wondered if Marian had succeeded in following the coupe from Mrs. Richards' home to this South Side house. If so, she had done such an excellent job of it that he himself could not tell of her presence. Frequent glances into his rear-view mirror had disclosed no following roadster.

"This—this is rather frightening," whispered Mrs. Richards. ". . . *frightening*," came a whispering echo as her voice went through the empty old stone-pile. "Should we—go in?"

". . . *go in?*" came the whispered echo. She drew close to the faceless detective's shoulder.

"Of course," Seekay said. ". . . *course*," came the echo.

He drew her forward. The door closed behind them like the jaw of some mysterious trap. Both turned. And now in the gloom Seekay could make out a moving form. It was that of a man, big, head held low so that no pale blotch of his face could show.

"Upstairs," the man said. ". . . *stairs*," came the echo.

Seekay walked toward a flight of steps more sensed than seen in the dimness.

The man walked behind them. The echo of their footsteps doubled their presence.

They went up. "To the right," said the man behind them, at the top of the flight. There was no echo now. His voice was harsh, rusty. It was as though the man who had died in the Richards home that morning had come alive and was guiding them.

They turned right. Near the back of the great house, a door stood open. From this came the first light they had seen in the place, flickering, uncertain.

"Go in there."

Seekay turned in, with the woman's hand tense on his arm. Two men were in a room barren of all furnishings save a rough box on which was a bottle with a candle in it. The men had been sitting on the floor.

The two turned to stare grinningly at the faceless detective and Mrs. Richards. And as the man behind came up and joined his pals, he too stared—grinningly. None of them could stare any other way. . . .

These three, in mutilation and horror, were indetical with the man who had been murdered that morning. They too were without eyelids, lips, teeth. Their faces, too, were things out of a nightmare. Thought of the tortures to which the four from the Brazilian jungle must have been submitted before they escaped, was a thing to make an observer's blood run cold.

Seekay stared around. Opened cans, crusts of bread, milk bottles, told that the men had camped in here for some days. The place was like some unclean animals' den, just as the occupants' faces were like those of animals rather than of men.

THE man who had guided them up the stairs seemed to be the leader. He was the biggest of the three. He leered with a lipless mouth while his lidless eyes dripped moisture.

"So you're Mrs. Richards," he grated to the woman.

"I am," she said.

Seekay stared at her, impressed once again by her stony self control. Prepared for the appearance of these men by what she had seen in her own house that morning, she looked at them as composedly as

though they'd been absolutely normal.

"So you're the one Pete thought he'd sell us out to," the man said. "Well, Pete got his. I saw him start to sneak out with the head, so I put one of our little coral pets in the box where his hands'd touch it. You got the money for us that you were going to pay him?"

Mrs. Richards nodded and opened her purse. She showed the bundles of currency. Seekay could feel the three men crowd a bit closer, eyes avidly on the cash. His hand crept just a little way toward his gun.

"Okay," the big fellow said. "I'll get what you want."

He chuckled, and stepped to a door in the side wall. It opened on a room hidden in blackness. The candle glow did not penetrate in there. He went in, and was gone a moment. Seekay looked around some more. He saw dirty blankets over the windows, so the light couldn't be seen on the street, and a low tin tray in a corner like that from which small animals might feed. The thought was carried further by the fact that a little milk was in the bottom of the pan.

The man came back from the next room, kicking the door shut after him. He crossed the threshold in a hasty leap, and was very swift to shut the door. It was as though he were jumping out of the den of some dangerous beast.

His bloodshot, moisture-dripping eyes were on the woman's face. In his right hand he held a dull wooden box with a lid tightly closed over it.

"Here it is, lady," he grated. "The thing you want so badly. The head of your husband. There ain't enough money in the whole world to really pay us back for what we went through to get it. We could have got away from that head-huntin' outfit in Brazil twice as easy, if we hadn't made up our minds to go into the chief's hut and get this head before we left. It meant maybe getting caught again. And if you knew what those jungle devils can do to a prisoner without lettin' him die. . ."

The man shuddered, then shrugged.

"But we made it. We got the head and got away too."

Mrs. Richards stared at the man's horror of a face. She shivered a little. But

the physical fear she palpably felt, was confined entirely to her shrinking body. Her eyes were as cool as black water; and so was her voice as she said:

"Let's see it. Naturally I'm handing this money over only after I see that the box has the proper contents."

"Yeah?" sneered the man.

"Yes. Once before, today, there was a box that was supposed to have Palmer Richards's head in it. And it contained something much different!"

"This has the head in it, all right." The man's fingers worked with the lid of the box, opened it. "And here you are."

In his gnarled, scarred hand, the man held a human head. He held it by the hair, which was sandy-red, so that it dangled down from it like a great bead from a mesh fastener.

THE head, hardly bigger than a large orange, was perfect. It was that of a man with a large, hawk nose, and an arrogant mouth. There were even traces of Palmer Richards's baggy flesh prematurely under his eyes. Marvelous primitive skill had crushed the bone of the skull and removed it, and had hollowed the remaining features and filled them. Even Seekay, who had seen Richards only as a newspaper picture, *knew* this was the man's dried head.

The two other mutilated men from the jungle stared first at the ghastly thing and then at the woman. Seekay looked at it with eyes of living jet through the eye-holes of his mask, while his painted lips gently smiled. The woman stared as though at some quite ordinary object. Nerves of steel, she seemed to have.

"Well?" grated the man who held the severed, dried head.

Mrs. Richards nodded, with a sigh.

"It is his head," she said.

The man with the grisly thing in his hand stepped a little nearer her. Almost imperceptibly, the other two jungle derelicts moved nearer Seekay.

"You are sure, Mrs. Richards?" purred the leader of the three.

"I am absolutely certain. So will the insurance people be, when they see it—"

The man dropped the head, which rolled heedlessly into a corner, and sprang. His misshapen hands clamped

over the woman's shoulders. As he moved, so did the other two. They got to Seekay with the swiftness of feral animals; and one pinioned his arms while the other jerked for the detective's gun.

It had all been so swiftly, that it seemed scarcely a full second was needed for the move. And then the two were prisoners.

"How dare you!" gasped the woman. "What is the meaning of this—"

Her words were cut short by the cackling laugh of the leader.

"All we wanted to know, lady," he said, "was whether that *is* the head of Palmer Richards. We thought it was, but we couldn't be *sure*. And we just naturally had to be sure."

Helen Richards' lips parted and her smooth throat swelled.

The man raised a fist like a battered mallet.

"Yell just once," he said, "and I'll make your face look something like ours!"

The woman remained still. The man grinned liplessly and shook her in his hard grasp.

"You think we meant to be satisfied with a lousy fifty thousand dollars for a thing like this? Don't you think we know what it means to you? Damn near a million. And yet you meant to buy it for fifty grand."

The woman stared at him. She was scared now, but she still had a fair control over herself. The man continued.

"You should go to the jungles sometime, lady. You should see what we went through there. You should know what it meant to take that damned head. Do you know what they thought of it there?"

His dripping eyes glared into hers.

"The natives worshiped that head, like it was a god. Every day the tribe squatted before it, and rubbed their foreheads in the dirt. It was supposed to guide them. Yeah, they thought the thing could talk—they thought it *did* talk, to the chief, in the night, telling him what was best for them to do. Why, it was like takin' an idol out of an Indian temple, or like stealin' an altar from a church, or like carryin' off the gold crosses from a monastery to yank that head out and get away with it.

Now we'll get a real payment for it. We'll take that insurance dough ourselves."

SEEKAY struggled in the grip of the other two. One of them raised his gun threateningly to bring it down on the detective's head, Seekay subsided.

"You're mad," whispered the woman. "How could you collect that money?"

The man's lipless grin broadened.

"Very simple, lady. You'll do it for us. You'll get it from the insurance companies, just like you planned, only you'll turn it over to us after you get it?"

"You wouldn't dare—"

"You don't know what we've already dared. It'll be like this: I'll go back to your house with you. We'll get in without even your servants seeing me. I'll stay out of sight till you give the servants their discharge, and after that just you and me will stay in the place like a couple of turtle-doves. But only for a couple days. It won't take long. You'll have the insurance boys out and you'll show 'em that head, and you'll get your dough. Fast. And I'll be right near you, in another room, with a gun on your pretty back through a crack in a door. When the insurance checks are cashed, I'll go. *Now* do you understand?"

"You'd never get away with it," panted the woman.

"We'll see."

Mrs. Richards glanced at Seekay, held immobile between the two hard-muscled men, with only his jet black eyes moving.

"How about him?" she said.

The leader laughed. It was a dreadful sound, coming from his lipless mouth. He jerked his head toward the closed door leading into the adjoining room.

"That's simple, too, lady. You saw the snake that came from the box this morning in your house? Well, there are more of those little coral darlings around. They're in that room. Nine of 'em. We brought them up to sell to zoos, but we found a better use for 'em. Your friend with the mask will go in that room. And speaking of the mask, I think I'll take that myself. It's a damn smart thing—I could go around like a human being again, with that over my face."

"You'll throw—that man—into a room

with nine deadly snakes running loose?"

"Yeah. And you too, beautiful, if you don't promise to do what we want."

The woman moistened her lips.

"I—all right. I'll do it."

"Okay." The leader released her and turned to the two who held Seekay.

"Right, boys. In with him."

A choked exclamation came from the lips under Seekay's gently smiling mask. He struggled again as the two dragged him toward the door.

One of them grasped the knob. He jerked the door open, and they catapulted Seekay into the dark room. Seekay's cry rang out then, with the swift slamming of the door on the crawling death shut in with him. He hammered at the door. The four in the room from which he had been thrown, could hear his feet wildly pounding the floor as he sought to kill the deadly coral lengths that he could not see.

"He'll get over that," said the leader. "He may get a couple. But nine? No chance."

The pounding on the floor and banging at the panels weakened. Seekay's cry came again, but not nearly so loud. There was a pause, a choking sound from the dark room, and then a crash.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Head Talks Back!

THE three men ringed around the shrinking, frightened woman. "How many servants have you at the house?" snapped the leader.

"Two," the woman said. "A houseman and a maid and cook."

"Any one else?"

"No one else—"

"Damn you—talk straight! We've watched your house for days. There is some one else there. Some other woman."

The woman cowered from him.

"There's only my sister. . ."

"Well, that's some one else, isn't it? Your sister! The devil! How can we handle that?"

"She—she's not right mentally. We've been keeping her in a locked room. I hated to send her to an institution. . ."

You could see the vast relief of the three men.

"Oh! That's all right, then. I thought for a minute there was somebody else we'd have to kill. . . . We'll simply keep her as she has been kept. And you will fake sickness or something, so the insurance people will come to you instead of having you go to them. They'll do that, all right, for Mrs. Palmer Richards—"

In the unclean room, like a beasts' den, a low voice suddenly said, "She is not."

For a moment the silence following was like that preceding a thunder-clap. Then a choked cry came from the leader.

"Who said that?"

The three stared around like animals. One leaped to the hall door, ripped it open, and stared out.

"Nobody out there," he said, coming back.

"It *must* have been from the hall!" the leader jerked out. "There's no other place it could have come from. Scatter through the house. Look in every spot where—"

"The voice came from that corner," said the other of the three. He inclined his head. "It didn't come from the hall or anywhere else. It came from that corner."

"What the hell? There's nothing there but that head—"

"I know," said the man in a low, strangled tone. "But it's that corner the words came from."

The woman's panted exclamation was loud in the eerie silence. The leader cursed blusteringly.

"Are you trying to say—that the head talked? The head of a man dead a year?"

THE three stared at each other. Then the leader went to the head and bent low over it. By a freak of chance it had come to rest on the stump of the neck and was right side up. It seemed to stare back from closed, eyeless hollows over which the eyelashes of the lids were like thread in two roughly sewn, short seams.

"Those imps of the devil in the jungle swore the head talked—knew all things and had power from the sky. They swore it talked. . ."

"Ask it," said one of the other men hoarsely. The woman was swaying on her feet, hands pressed to her throat, staring at the ghastly head.

"Ask it what?" snapped the leader.

"Ask it about the woman. Ask if she is Mrs. Palmer Richards."

"Of all the crazy questions—"

"What else could it have meant? 'Mrs. Palmer Richards,' we said, and it said, 'she is not.' So, ask the thing if she's who she pretends to be."

"You fool! How could she be anything else—"

"Ask the head."

The leader stared at the head again. The candlelight sent flickering, crawling shadows over the slightly withered face.

"Is this woman Mrs. Palmer Richards?"

And the head said, "*No.*"

"Blood of Satan!" whispered one of the men. "It does talk! The natives were right."

All three were shuddering like children now. The woman was glaring first at the head and then at them. "Oh, my God," she was gasping, over and over.

"This woman was not your wife while you were alive?"

"*No.*"

The leader whirled on the woman with his horrible face even more contorted.

"You liar! You're not Richards's widow! Are you? Answer! *Are you?*"

The woman sank to her knees, as her legs refused to support her.

"No," she whispered.

The man towered over her, insane with rage.

"Talk! Do you hear?"

"Palmer Richards's real wife is in his home, now. She is the girl I've been passing off as my sister. I kept her locked up, made her sign things, practised imitating her signature so that soon I could lock her in an asylum and go on for the rest of my life taking her place. To keep any one from suspecting, I said that she was mildly insane, so it would account for anything she might say to visitors, or for attempts to escape."

"How could you take her place with people who knew her?"

"No one knew her. She hasn't a friend in Chicago. And she hadn't been here long enough for any of Palmer's friends to get to know her well. I used to double for her out in Hollywood, in long shots. I knew her there. When Richards crashed, I came secretly to Chicago, with

this plan of getting the insurance money in mind, knowing I could do it, knowing I looked enough like her for casual acquaintances to be fooled into thinking I was the girl they might have met before Richards flew off to the jungle."

"Guess it's the truth this time, chief," one of the other men said, white face jerking. "So now what do we do? Our idea is out the window."

"Oh, no it's not!" said the leader. "We'll go right ahead. This jane, whoever she is, can collect just as she'd meant to before—and turn it over to us."

"It means we'll have to watch her closer," growled the other. "I wouldn't trust her with a broken beer bottle."

"Neither would I—"

ONCE more a voice, quiet and assured, sounded in the room. The three turned to stare at the head, and then as quickly whirled toward the door to the adjoining room. For it was not from the corner the unexpected voice had sounded this time, but from that door.

Seekay was crossing the threshold, walking easily, eyes alive in the deadness of his mask. He shut the door after him and stood there, with the candlelight playing eerily over him.

"Thank you for your frankness," he said to the cowering woman. "I suspected some such thing was the truth, the moment I saw the sheet on your desk where you'd been writing 'Helen P. Richards,' over and over again. That could only be the work of some one practising a signature. I thought my recent course of action might be the easiest way to hear of it from your own lips. And, it seems, it worked—"

The three men were out of their coma of surprise. They all leaped for the faceless detective.

"*Kill him!*"

The woman had her wits about her. Living as dangerously as she had for a year past, she was as cold and fast in brain as the men. She saw a chance to get away—and took it.

With one swift move she knocked the bottle holding the candle, off its box, plunging the room into darkness. Then she was at the door, and her scream came keening with despair as she found that

door locked. The man who had looked into the hall had locked the door again when he closed it. There was a more desperate scream from her as the key fell from the lock under the frantic fumbling of her fingers, and slid with a clatter somewhere along the floor. She had gambled and lost.

She had lost more than she knew when she knocked out the light. For the room was darkened just as the leader was flying toward the spot where Seekay had stood. He found no body there and in the blackness fell against the door.

The door to the next room flew open.

"God!" he yelled. "The snakes!"

They heard him slide on his shoulder far into the next room, and heard a scream like that of a mad animal.

"They've got me! One got me in the face!"

The other two men were at the hall door with the woman, trying as hard as she to get out of the place.

"Get out of here! They'll be crawling in here in a minute! Death for all of us!"

Seekay was feeling with his feet for the candle, not daring to put his bare hands down. One of the men screamed, "My ankle! *Help—*"

The other said no word. But when Seekay got the candle lit, he was writhing on the floor with his pal. And the woman stood paralyzed while a coral-snake crawled over her silken instep.

THERE was a pounding at the door. "Seekay!" came Marian Ford's wild voice. "Seekay—"

"All right," the detective called softly. "Be still out there. Just a minute."

He was moving slowly as he talked, toward the body of the man who had taken his gun. He got it. The snake was swaying uncertainly at the woman's feet, while four more struck venomously at Seekay's leather-protected legs.

He shot its head off with a bullet that gashed the woman's ankle. She fainted. Seekay stamped the life from the four serpents at his feet, shut the adjoining room door on whatever number of the reptiles might be left in there, and let Marian in.

She looked at the two men on the floor with great blue eyes, then caught at See-

kay's arm. He put his other arm around her as she reeled unsteadily.

"You're all right?" she said. "None—got you?"

"Not with the leather leggings," shrugged Seekay.

"I cut my way in after you through a downstairs window with your diamond, as you ordered," Marian said. "But before the twenty minutes were up and I was to scream and divert the men's attention downstairs—all this happened."

"I found a better diversion than your scream would have been," said Seekay. "A bit of ventriloquism, with Richard's head as a Charlie McCarthy. It was dark enough in the room, and the four in it were distracted enough, so that I could open that door a crack and throw my voice into the corner where the head is."

Marian sighed. She looked at the woman questioningly.

"Just fainted," said Seekay. "Not dying, as the men are."

"Then she'll live to get that insurance money—"

"She'll live to spend twenty years behind bars," Seekay interrupted harshly. "She isn't Mrs. Palmer Richards, as I suspected when she acted so inhumanly cold-blooded about a thing as fantastic as her husband's head!"

Marian gasped. "Why, then—That insane girl at her house!"

"Yes," nodded Seekay. "No more insane than you or I. The real Mrs. Richards, kept prisoner by that she-fiend. But she'll be released now, with a fortune to keep her contented."

Marian drew a deep breath. "So again you help out a fellow human from a desperate situation—just as you helped me when I first knew you. I wonder if you realize what a valuable person you are, Seekay?"

"Not valuable from a humanitarian standpoint," said the faceless detective. "Just trying to turn a wasted life into a fairly useful one, that's all."

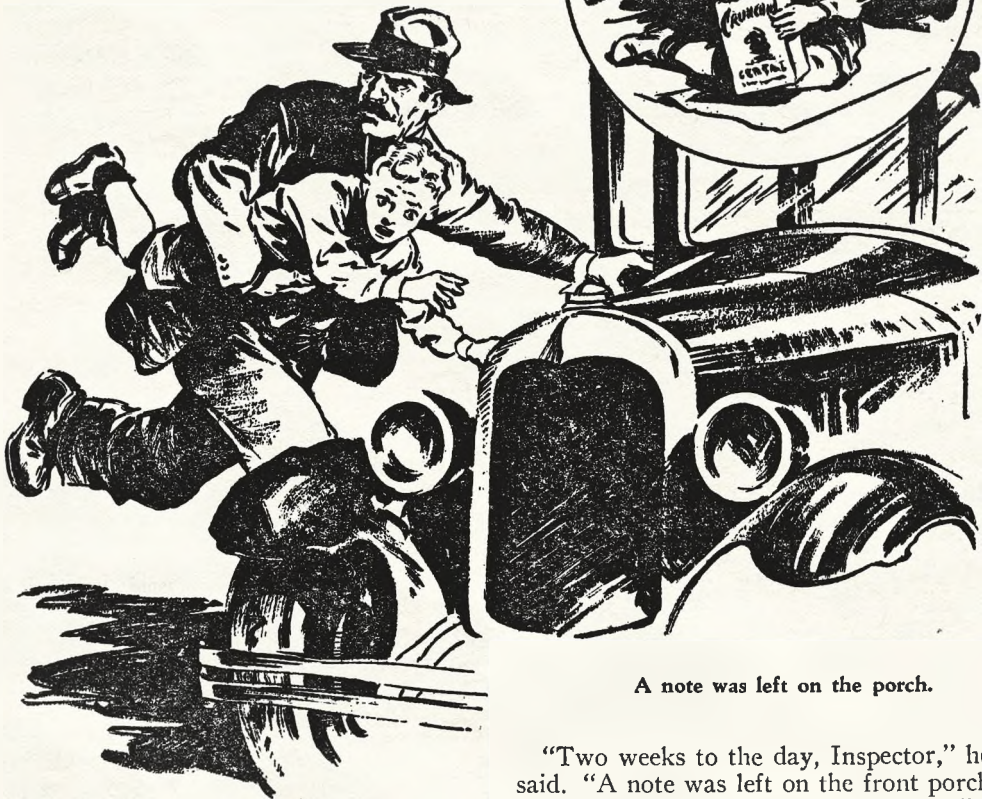
He picked up the unconscious woman and walked out, with Marian beside him. And she wondered what was the secret behind that amazing, inexplicable bitterness—and also the secret behind the mask. Wondered, and realized that she might never know. . . .

THE END

Breakfast Food for Kidnappers

by ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Could Inspector Rand find the kidnapers of little Jerry Baker—with nothing to lead him but the top of a cereal box? . . .



A note was left on the porch.

INSPECTOR RAND had built up an armor over fifteen years of police work that was impervious to all human emotions save one. The mental torture of a father and mother whose little one has been taken by the lowest form of criminal on the face of the earth, the kidnapper. And so, as he read the ransom note, he fought back the thoughts of what he would do to the abductors of little four-year-old Terry Baker when they were caught, and strived to regard the details of the situation in cold chronological order.

"Your son disappeared two weeks ago?" he asked.

Jerome T. Baker released the hand of his pale but beautiful wife and nodded.

"Two weeks to the day, Inspector," he said. "A note was left on the front porch—printed in cut out newspaper type, like the one you have there—stating that we would receive further word when they were assured we had made no appeal to the police. Then that note arrived to-night . . ."

"How, Mr. Baker?"

"The local postal clerk thought it looked rather strange, and he brought it over personally. Naturally, he must have heard that Jerry was . . . was missing."

A dry sob from his wife caused Baker to pause long enough to replace his hand on hers and press it in reassuring comfort.

"We decided to call you in, Inspector," he continued with an effort, "because of the demand in the note. I'm . . . I'm supposed to be a rich man, Inspector, but the

turn in the market this last year has made me practically penniless."

The father paused again to wave a hand in a gesture that included young Jerry's playroom, and the rest of the house.

"All this, and everything else I own, is tied up tight in loan collateral," he spoke again. "I couldn't raise ten cents on it even though it were a case of life or death. And so, Inspector, I can't put up fifty dollars—much less the fifty thousand they demand."

"So we have to come to you, Inspector," the mother whispered in a voice of pleading desperation. "I beg of you, find Terry and bring him back to us. I—you cannot understand how . . ."

The words refused to come, and quiet tears took their place. Rand did understand and he lowered his eyes to the note so that the hopelessness he felt at the moment would not be reflected in them. The cut-out newspaper letters pasted to the sheet of five-and-ten paper mocked his gaze, and read:

**YOUR KID IS SAFE AND WELL.
HAVE FIFTY THOUSAND IN SMALL
NOTES READY TO BE DELIVERED
WHEN FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS
ARE SENT YOU WITHIN A WEEK.
FAIL US AND YOU'LL NEVER SEE
YOUR KID AGAIN.**

"They are the ones who have our boy," Baker said. "I'm convinced of that. I . . . Where are you going, dear?"

The mother had risen and was walking out of the room. She turned and looked at her husband out of large sad eyes.

"It's six o'clock, John," she said, and left.

Baker stared fixedly at the floor, and Rand saw that the man was struggling hard to regain a firm grip on his emotions.

Presently the mother returned and placed a bowl of milk and a small box of cereal on a maple table in the corner. For a moment a smile flitted across her lovely face as she placed a hand on the back of the little chair. Then, a sob catching in her throat, she turned and hurried from the room. Baker saw the question in Rand's eyes and sighed heavily.

"She's been doing that at every meal-time since the boy disappeared," he said in a dead voice. "He'd never eat anything until he'd had his Crunchies, I think

they're called. A sort of game between him and his mother. If he ate all his food she'd give him the coupon that comes in each box. Expected to get an Indian suit with them, I believe. It . . . well, it helps her to keep up hope if she continues her part of the game. I hope you understand, Inspector. It's a living hell for her. And for me, too, for that matter. Promise me, you'll do everything?"

"Everything possible, Mr. Baker," Rand said.

For no other reason than to avoid the helpless pleading in the other's eyes, Rand got up and walked about the room. For a moment he stopped and idly inspected a tin soldiers' "fort" made out of empty cereal boxes. A few minutes later he took out the ransom note and read it again. Stuffing it back in his pocket he stared fixedly at the ceiling for a long time. Mrs. Baker returned and rejoined her husband, but Rand seemed not to notice her entry at all.

"I want to use your phone," he said suddenly, heading for the door.

"You've thought of something?" Baker cried eagerly.

Rand ignored the question, left the room.

"Don't ask me questions," he said, when he returned a few moments later. "And please try not to hope too much. That was just a routine call."

"Then you have got something?" the mother cried. "Oh I know you have! You've—you've got to have! Oh, Terry, Terry, my darling!"

Rand hated himself for the false hope his action had created despite his plea, for false hope it might certainly prove to be. Doubly harder than finding the needle in the haystack. Yet, cases had been solved as the result of a blind, crazy stab in the dark; a fly-by-night hunch that usually faded into the limbo of things ridiculous when put into spoken words. And still. . .

He turned his back on Baker trying to comfort his weeping wife and went over to a window and lighted a cigarette. At the end of two hours, twelve in his pack were gone. And at the end of three hours the pack was empty. A dozen times either Baker or his wife pleaded for some inkling of what he had done, what he was thinking. But he remained cold to their words; refused to say anything. It might

break the tiny thread of hope to which he was clinging.

Then suddenly all crushing thoughts were swept from his mind. The headlights of a police car came swinging up the Baker drive. He spun around, raced out of the room and down the stairs, the Bakers hurrying after at his heels. He jerked open the front door even as the bell jangled. A tow-headed youngster rushed past him to be engulfed in his mother's arms. Rand swallowed hard, and grinned at the big police sergeant.

"Much trouble, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Twelve places we tried, and it was the twelfth, Inspector," the sergeant said. "A couple of wops over River Street. Man and wife. We didn't have any trouble. They'd been tossed off relief and were

going nuts, the poor fools. Tim took them in. Oh yeah, the little tad raised merry Ned because he'd forgotten these. We had to go back and get 'em."

The sergeant pulled something from his pocket and handed it over. Inspector Rand turned to Baker who was standing like a man waiting for an explanation to an impossible miracle.

"Your son's demand for his special cereal at every meal, Mr. Baker," Rand smiled. "I had every store canvassed for customers who had purchased Crunchies in quantity during the last two weeks. Kidnappers usually stock up on foodstuffs before they go into hiding. These two did, anyway. Here are the box coupons they let your son save. I hope he likes his Indian suit, sir. Good night."



Death in Round Numbers—that's the title of the new Marquis of Broadway novelette by JOHN LAWRENCE. It opens with a waiter bringing a mysterious message to a luscious debutante's table at the 44 Club, swings in to

a crooked stock-market manipulation with a murder margin, then races through six smashing chapters to the most electric climax you'll encounter in a decade of detective-fiction reading. If you haven't met the Marquis, boss of Manhattan's Mazda Lane murder-beat, this is the time to get acquainted. And WILLIAM E. BARRETT crashes through with another gripping Needle Mike tattoo mystery, in which the old artist in ink and flesh unravels *The Tattooed Combination* to the murder riddle propounded when his chiseling sidekick, Skeeter, tries to substitute for him. And WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES returns with a gripping complete novelette, *The Corpse in the Dark-room*. The yarn is set on a trainful of candid-camera fiends cruising the West and has more thrills per paragraph than any Hayes yarn you've seen yet. Plus other exciting novelettes, short stories and features. You can't afford to miss this great issue!

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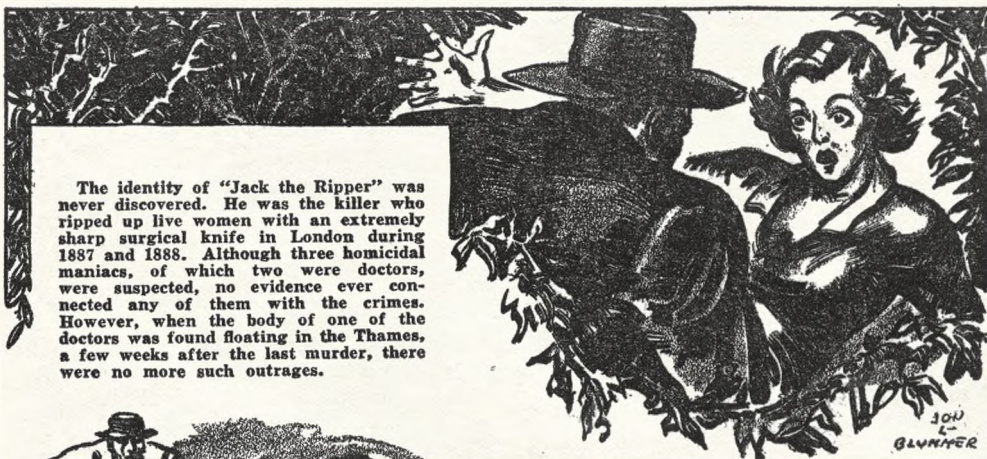


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The identity of "Jack the Ripper" was never discovered. He was the killer who ripped up live women with an extremely sharp surgical knife in London during 1887 and 1888. Although three homicidal maniacs, of which two were doctors, were suspected, no evidence ever connected any of them with the crimes. However, when the body of one of the doctors was found floating in the Thames, a few weeks after the last murder, there were no more such outrages.



Bloodhounds trailed a thief, making his get-away with a horse and buggy, 135 miles—and got their man!

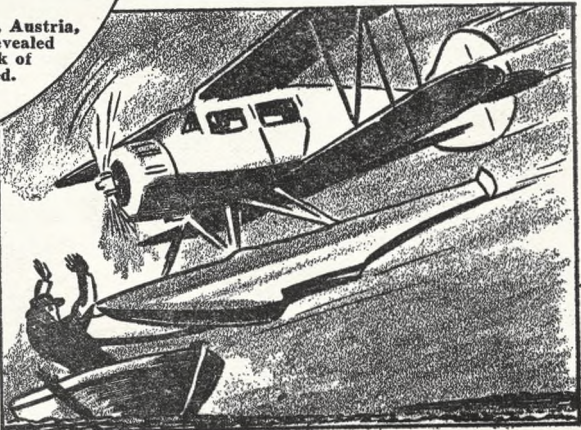


In 1903 Will West, a negro, was committed to Leavenworth prison. His photograph, measurements and name were found to duplicate a set already on record. The prisoner insisted he had never been committed to that prison before. Investigation proved that another negro identical in name, measurements and features had been committed there two years before and was still serving his term.



A murderer was caught in Vienna, Austria, when his fingerprints were revealed by a moulage cast of the neck of the woman he had strangled.

A seaplane, in landing, crashed into a rowboat and then flew away. An aerial hit and run, for it left behind an overturned rowboat and the occupant drowning. The only clue detectives had was a scrape of green paint on the boat. A search of nearby seaplane bases revealed a plane with a fresh scratch on one of its pontoons. A chemical analysis proved that the smear on the boat and the paint on the pontoon were identical.



DEADLINE FOR A KILLER

by CHARLES BOSWELL



Moran threw himself through the door. . . .

From the moment he first spoke to the mysterious, tantalizing blonde, Detective Hal Moran knew he was inviting a visit from Death—for the gang who killed Senator McCloud would stop at nothing now. . . .

DETEKTIVE HAL MORAN, his burly shoulders imprisoned in a dinner jacket of modish tightness, descended the stairs to Le Chat Rouge's

glittering dance floor. He felt out of place and disgusted with the whole business. For a month now he'd been doing the rounds like a damned Park Avenue playboy without discovering a thing.

A series of stick-ups, culminating in the murder of a prominent mid-Westerner, Senator Edward McCloud, had set the department on its ear, and he, Hal Moran, an honest homicide dick, had been elected the goat who was supposed to solve everything. He'd only just one thing to work on: the fact that all victims had been jumped while returning home from a

night club. That pointed to a single, well-organized and well-informed gang, either with headquarters or spotters located in some of the various clubs. That was something, but, hell, it left a lot of room for the imagination. . . .

Moran spotted a girl, one he'd noticed before. "Lady of Secrecy" she'd been dubbed by Percy Pagan, *Morning Observer* gossip columnist. Moran hadn't been able to find out anything about her except that she'd only been in town a short while, and had been seen in all the most expensive and hottest hot spots; always expensively clad, always came unescorted, though she rarely stayed that way long.

She was leaning against the bar ahead, wearing a gown of some silvery stuff, as bright and gleaming as her hair. An amber glass was tilted towards her lips. She was talking—as she'd always been whenever the detective had seen her—an inquisitive, almost frantic look of eagerness on her face. He thought her the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

A man was beside her, tall, dark, and sleek. Moran recognized him as being the gossip columnist. Aside from his comments concerning the girl, the detective had read other of Pagan's paragraphs. He didn't like the guy, but he had to admit he knew his business. Pagan'd been first with the news of each taxi hold-up, first with the headlines of Edward McCloud's killing.

The detective moved to the bar. He wanted to hear what the girl and Pagan were talking about, but he couldn't get close to them. So he ordered a rye and thought, not of the night at hand, but of several nights ago. . . .

EDWARD McCLOUD, middle-aged, father of grown children, and an important figure on the senate floor, was shot at 2:30 in the morning, as he alighted from a taxi outside the Hotel Bostwick Arms, where he was staying while in town. He'd been seeing night life with some blonde—identity as yet unknown—and someplace, apparently, had displayed a pocketbook so well filled as to cost him his life. The blonde had escaped unseen, and, apparently, unhurt.

She'd been the tip-off—so said the

headquarters back room experts—the gang's bait at which McCloud had nibbled. Percy Pagan, whose story was on the street at 3:15, held that the girl was just a chance pick-up who took it on the lam when the shooting started. But no one knew definitely who McCloud's girl friend was; nowhere had an accurate description of her been obtained. And the Senator, never regaining consciousness, had died with that mystery well behind his lips.

And now this night club girl! Moran had seen her in Le Chat Rouge, in the Golden Slipper, the Iron Rail. Lady of Mystery, all right—of Secrecy, as Pagan called her—who the hell was she? She was young, attractive, jewel-bedizened. She flitted from one club to another, from one group of pleasure seekers to the next, from one ringside table on around the circle. Outwardly calm, composed, she was inwardly nervous, excited. She seemed to be ever seeking new faces and, on meeting them, jabbing questions in their direction. Moran's thoughts halted short in their tracks. . . .

The girl mixed with wealthy people, fat-walleted men, jewel-sheathed women. She talked with them, questioned them, obtained pertinent facts. Where did this information go? Could she be a sort of society espionage agent, a dangerous provocateur of the taxi-pillaging night pirates? . . .

No, Moran decided, she didn't look the type. He attempted to dismiss the idea, but it stuck with the stubborn persistence of truth. At least, he told himself, the girl would bear watching. Certainly *all* the mystery about her was not glamour. . . .

Some people left and Moran slipped along the bar and stood near Pagan and the girl. He ordered himself another rye. Sipping the liquor, he listened to what they were saying. Above the reckless babble of voices in the room he heard:

"Newspapermen know everything, don't they, Mr. Pagan?"

"No. That is, not *all* newspapermen. . . ."

"But *you* know things you don't print?"

"Of course. . . ."

"Things that even the police don't know?"

The columnist faltered in his answer.

The girl went on: "Mr. Pagan, did you know Senator McCloud?"

Moran set his glass down on the bar with a jolt. The liquor splashed. Pagan, backing away from the girl, without answering her question, slid his elbow too close. Whiskey soaked it thoroughly . . .

A moment later, the detective was alone with the Lady of Secrecy. Pagan had moved off to dry his sopping coat. The detective's eye sought the girl's face, found that she was staring at him. He smiled, dropped his gaze to the pleasing curve of her shoulders, the fullness of her breasts.

The girl's hands caught at the low, open neck of her dress. She lifted the glittering pendant suspended there. "Like it?" she asked.

Moran regarded her strangely. "Sure," he said. "What will you have—rye?"

He ordered drinks. They talked. He told her his name. She did not volunteer hers. Suddenly she asked: "What's your business, Mr. Moran?"

SURPRISED by the abruptness of her question, he answered with the first thing that came into his mind, "I'm an aviator . . . Why?"

"No reason," she replied. "You were looking at this diamond. Thought perhaps you were a jewelry appraiser. It's quite valuable, you know."

What the devil was she getting at? Was she so naive as to tell everyone she met about the diamond? Or was she naive at all? Did she, by pretending to confide in people, hope to find whether they had anything worth stealing? It was an idea. . . .

Moran reached for his wallet to pay for the drinks. Holding it above the bar, his fingers made a subtle, apparently clumsy, slip. A thick sheaf of banknotes fell out. He made sure the girl saw them.

She said: "For an aviator you're pretty nervous!"

Moran's grin was sick, feignedly stupid. "Yeah," he replied.

So the girl was clever! Moran liked that. She saw through him—but what did she see? He knew that she was aware he'd never flown in his life. What did she take him for? . . . A bragging, pretending, small time, well-heeled, out-of-town guy? He hoped so!

And she—had he seen through her? . . .

Someone, he knew, close to the night habits of wealthy and socially prominent people secured the tips provoking taxi hold-ups. Descriptions, addresses, times and places of departure—these correlated facts were flashed to bandit hideouts; it was on the strength of them that the pirates acted . . . Such a tip sent Edward McCloud to his death! His description, the fact that he was with a blonde woman, was mysteriously telegraphed . . .

And *this* woman was a blonde!

She had questioned Percy Pagan about McCloud. Why? Was she trying to learn if she were suspected? . . . Moran pondered the question. His reasoning answered yes; an interest, personal, intimate, which he was beginning to have in the girl, shouted a defiant no . . .

"Mr. Moran," the girl questioned crisply, "Did you ever know McCloud?"

The inquiry startled him. "No," he answered. "I never had that pleasure. . . . Did you know him?"

The girl had no opportunity to reply. Her lips, half-open, snapped shut at the approach of a man. It was Pagan returned from drying his coat. He elbowed his way roughly to the bar, stood between the detective and the girl.

"If I'm seeing you home," Pagan told her, "it's about time we got started. It's a long cab ride from here to the Hotel Bostwick Arms!"

"If you were . . ." the girl retorted.

"Meaning I'm not?" the columnist interrupted. "A while ago I thought you said I might. Find someone you'd rather have around? . . ."

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Moran!"

The columnist turned and faced the detective. He smiled crookedly, sneeringly. He said derrisively: "The better man, eh?"

Moran had difficulty keeping himself under control. He wanted to smash the journalist's smooth jaw. "Yes," he said, bowing an acceptance of the girl's invitation. "The better man."

The girl went for her wraps and Moran faced Pagan at the bar.

"In my column," Pagan said smoothly, "I'm running a series about this girl, call her 'Lady of Secrecy'. Everything she

does, anybody she goes with is of interest. Who are you? What do you do?"

The detective regarded the journalist curiously. A moment ago the fellow had been full of snarls; now he was pleasant, agreeable, friendly.

"Hal Moran," he told him. "I'm an aviator."

Pagan jotted the information down on the back of an envelope. "Thanks," he said. "I've got to be going, got some paragraphs to write, got to make a deadline . . ."

MORAN'S wrist watch told him the time was 2 a. m. He glanced up from it to see the girl advancing towards him across the cabaret floor. In between the tables she came, her slim body twisting in and out. Here and there she greeted people, lightly, casually.

Once she seemed to pause momentarily at a table occupied by two grim-jawed men and to nod her head in his direction. But he might have been mistaken.

The men at the table gave no sign of knowing her. And then she was near him and smiling. She took his arm and together they walked up the stairs and to the street.

A minute later they were in a cab and headed for the Hotel Bostwick Arms. Strange, he thought, that the girl should be stopping at the same place as had the late Senator Edward McCloud! . . . Or was she really stopping there? Did she intend going any further than the sidewalk in front of the building?

Was she leading him to the pitfall to which Edward McCloud had been led?

He looked out the rear window of the taxi. There was a car behind them, a long, black touring car. He got a good look at the man at the wheel. He could have sworn it was the same face he'd seen sitting in Le Chat Rouge—the same man at whose side the Lady of Secrecy had momentarily paused.

The detective looked at her and found that she too had been peeking out the rear window . . . She was expecting this car to follow!

He decided on a bold move—to go, not directly to the hotel address she had given, but by a circuitous route. He would see what reaction this had on her.

"Before I take you home," he said, "I'd like to ride with you through the park. How about it?"

She looked at him strangely, nodded in agreement. She seemed more surprised than annoyed at his suggestion.

They rode and talked. He gave instructions to the driver to cut into the park at Columbus Circle. Just as they turned on to 59th Street Moran glanced out the rear window again. The black touring car was still behind and behind that another, a sedan, likewise dark.

"We were speaking of Senator Edward McCloud," the girl remarked. "I'd asked you if you'd known him and you'd said you hadn't had the pleasure. We were interrupted by that columnist Pagan . . ."

"That's true," Moran told her. "I'd like to know why you are interested."

"Anything connected with the night life of New York interests me!"

Moran laughed. "That's a pretty broad field. Come on, be specific. Why do you want to know about McCloud—his connection with after dark denizenry was brief . . ."

"Yes, I know. He was killed. In a taxicab—like we are—going home from a night club . . . Going to his hotel!"

"The same hotel," Moran said. "The Bostwick Arms!"

The girl had been sitting back in a corner of the cab and now she jerked forward in her seat. Moran could see that her lips were moving and that her fingers were clutching at a large beaded evening bag which she carried. She said nothing but it was obvious to Moran that she was seething with inner excitement.

The taxi had emerged from Central Park and was headed down on 72nd Street. A half-dozen more blocks and they would be at their destination. He looked at his watch. It showed 2:45.

The detective again looked behind the cab. The two cars had changed places but were both still trailing. Now the black sedan was directly behind the taxi and to the rear of that, a half-block back, was the lean touring car.

For the first time Moran got a good look at the sedan driver and it was one of recognition. The man at the wheel was Nick Perlone, a minor gangster from the Mulberry Bend section! The others in

the car must be members of Perlone's gang; Abruzzi, Correcio, "Mule Head" Joe Pulacci. One time or another Moran had rustled them all into headquarters. They were, in the jargon of the underworld, "punks" of small calibre. Perlone would never have the nerve or the brain to engineer a big-time racket like this. There must be a "brains" behind the outfit. . . . But who? He was sure the girl was not the big-shot, though unquestionably she was deeply involved.

THE situation did not make sense but it was nevertheless a situation. In all his years on the force, the detective had seen strange combinations and partnerships, but never a stranger one than what confronted him—a blonde mysterious girl with more poise and culture than he'd ever seen in a woman before, allied with a gang of cheap stick-up artists! . . .

The girl spoke again. "I've been lying to you," she said. "My interest in Edward McCloud is more than general, more than superficial . . . It is deep seated, intimate . . .

"I'm stopping at the Bostwick Arms on purpose. I'm stopping there because he stopped there. I'm going to night clubs because he went to them, especially to Le Chat Rouge . . ."

The cab was nearing the hotel, only a block away now. Moran got himself ready for a brawl. He figured that he would take care of the girl first. She should be easy . . .

A twist of his head and he saw that the sedan was nearer now, directly back of the cab. It was running without lights. . . . He could not see the touring car, though he did not doubt it was somewhere about. He had a gang to contend with, right enough, the detective breathed to himself, a big gang!

The girl was bent back from him, her eyes wide open. She was fumbling with the latch of her handbag. She said: "I'm interested in Edward McCloud and what happened to him because I—I'm—I was in the cab with him the night he was killed!"

The taxi's brakes screamed a halt in front of the hotel. Moran's hand went beneath his coat for his gun. A doorman came out from the hotel entrance towards

the taxi, stopped in his tracks, and then hurriedly retreated.

Moran heard a voice, the girl's, high but steady. "Don't move!" she said. "If I'm touched you'll be the first I shoot!"

The detective looked at her. She was gripping a small revolver, a taut finger against its trigger. Her face was white, tense, serious.

What did she mean? She was running the show—or was she? However, there was no time to figure that out. . . .

The cab door opened. A dark head was stuck inside. A low, smooth voice said: "This is a hold-up! Your wallet, and jewelry, please!"

Moran jerked at his gun.

"No funny stuff," the voice said. A dark hand reached for the girl's throat, for the diamond pendant.

Crack! A pistol exploded. It was the girl's. She shot from beneath her handbag. Smoke rose from her lap. The man fell backwards out of the taxi, screaming, bleeding.

And then hell broke loose! Dark figures dashed out of the shadows of surrounding buildings, ran down the street towards the taxi. Sallow-faced men poured out of the sedan and swarmed around. The block was filled with gunfire, shouts, curses, screams, pleas for mercy. The steady rattle of a Tommy-gun churned the uproar.

Moran expected every moment to be his last, the car to be raked with bullets, the glass windows to shatter before the impact of lead. Well, he'd get a couple before they got him. It was damned strange none of the shots seemed to be hitting the car! He reached for his holster.

"Drop that gun!" the girl snapped. "I'll shoot!" Her trigger finger tightened.

This was no time to argue. Moran slashed out with his left hand, swept the gun aside. "Who are you?" he shouted above the din. "What the hell is going on?"

Another dark head came through the cab door, a fist, a gun. It was aimed at the girl. She saw, grew tense with horror . . .

MORAN reared up from the cab seat, threw himself at the figure in the door. A heavy pistol cracked. A searing

pain ripped through his shoulder. He stumbled out, turned, fired point-blank into an ugly face. Half his head blown off, his opponent went down. The detective saw that it was Nick Perlone . . .

There was fighting on both sides of the street, shots whining across. Perlone's gang were on the hotel side, the others across the way. . . . At a glance Moran took in the situation. The two gangs were fighting one another!

'Mule Head' Joe Pulacci's shoulders showed over a cement stoop. Moran aimed from his hip, fired, saw the big gangster keel over. Then, in rapid succession, he emptied his revolver at Abruzzi, Correcio, and others who had appeared on the scene. Their camp quieted. Re-loading, he turned his attention across the pavement . . .

But they were on him, trim-looking, quick-moving men. The one in the lead had a Tommy-gun, was raising it to his shoulder. The detective's revolver chamber stuck, failed to close. He saw the Tommy-gun barrel at a level with his eyes.

"Don't shoot him!" The girl was out of the cab, behind him, now in front of him shielding him from the oncomers. "He saved my life!" she continued. "He's a friend!"

He pushed the girl aside. The men were at him. A pair of handcuffs whipped out. "You're under arrest, fellow," a stern voice said. "We're Federal officers! . . ."

AT A CORNER newsstand they figured it out—Special Agent John Michaels of the F. B. I. and Detective Hal Moran of the New York Police Department's homicide bureau! And the girl—the Lady of Secrecy—Marian McCloud, daughter of the late Senator Edward McCloud!

The girl cleared it up for all of them. "He's a detective and I thought he was a gangster," she said, indicating Moran with a smile. "I thought he was leading me into a hold-up trap because of the diamond pendant I was wearing. It wasn't until he jumped the gangster who was going to shoot me that I knew differently—then I didn't know what to think . . ."

"And I," Moran broke in, "thought you were a gangster queen. I thought, because of the full wallet I let you see, that you were getting me into a stick-up snare. It was only when you shot that mug who stuck his nose in the cab that I figured you were O. K. You'd told me you were in the cab with Senator McCloud the night he was killed. I couldn't make that out!"

"As his daughter I had a right to be," the girl said. "He had an important conference at Le Chat Rouge that evening. I'd just gotten in town. He picked me up afterwards . . ."

"But why didn't you report having been with your father to the authorities?"

"I did. To the F. B. I. Not to the New York police. I couldn't—not under the circumstances . . ."

The Fed spoke up: "Miss McCloud did the right thing," he told the detective. "At the time it was most important that the Senator's conference of that evening be kept an absolute secret—and there are leaks in any municipal law enforcement agency, you know . . . Furthermore, when Miss McCloud fled from her father's cab, she took with her his papers. Those would have been dangerous had they fallen in any but the Federal Government's hands . . . We, the F. B. I., knowing all the facts, took it upon ourselves to investigate the Senator's murder. Miss McCloud, out of a desire for personal vengeance, wanted to assist. Her plans were so good that her aid was allowed. She visited night clubs, sought out information as to possible pirate agents, attempted to make herself a dupe for the gang . . ."

The Fed looked at the girl admiringly. "Through her efforts," he went on, "We killed and captured some ten gangsters. One of them ought to turn out to be her father's murderer! . . ."

Moran snorted, "Actual trigger man, yes—but not the real head of the ring. We've got him to get—yet!"

A newspaper truck rolled up, stopped briefly at the news stand, tossed off a bundle of freshly inked editions. Moran looked at his watch. It was 3:15.

The newsdealer picked up the bundle, untied them, hoisted them to his stand. They were copies of the *Morning Ob-*

server. Moran stepped over and bought one. Something on the front page struck him between the eyes.

In the center of the page, just below the headlines, in a black bordered box, he read: "NIGHT CLUB SPECIAL BY PERCY PAGAN—A few moments before we go to press our ace cabaret-covering commentator reports that another taxi hold-up has taken place. A girl, previously referred to in these pages as "Lady of Secrecy", together with her escort, one Hal Moran, an aviator, were made the victims of a daring robbery in front of the Hotel Bostwick Arms. This hostelry, it is to be remembered, was the scene of the robbing and killing of Senator Edward McCloud. The girl lost a diamond pendant and other jewelry. Mr. Moran lost his wallet. The bandits, as usual, were not apprehended. We, the editors of this newspaper, want to know what's wrong with our police department? Why should this sort of thing be allowed to go on? . . ."

Moran looked up from the paper, passed it to the girl. "Yes," he said, "And I, a member of the New York police department, want to know what's wrong with the *Morning Observer's* cabaret covering commentator Percy Pagan!"

He turned to the F. B. I. man. "We've work to do," he said.

A HALF hour later it was all over. Percy Pagan was picked up in the Iron Rail. Confronted by one of the

squealing members of the Mulberry Bend gang, he was made to confess—in full—everything. It was he who had engineered all the taxi piracies! It was he who was responsible for the death of Senator McCloud! He was forced to admit that through his advantageous position of gossip columnist he gleaned information which he not only published but information aside from that . . . He learned who wore jewels, carried fat bank rolls. He learned their names, addresses, when and how they were going home. He noted descriptions of such people. All this he turned over to a criminal band which he captained! . . .

"But how," asked Marian McCloud as they were leaving police headquarters, "did you guess it was Pagan?"

"Guess?" Moran said. "I didn't guess. I knew. You see for a long time I've been amazed at Pagan's ability to get information. Never until tonight did I think that he had an in on criminal happenings before they happened. In other words he knew of the hold-ups before they occurred. As a consequence they were an easy scoop. Usually they took place before his paper's deadline—about 2:50, I think—but tonight this one didn't. He published the story of a crime before it took place with the words that I put in his mouth! And do you know what's responsible for it?"

"No," the girl answered smiling.

"Our ride in the park . . . Let's go for another."

"Let's," she said.



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December Issue—

On Sale October 25th!

JUDY AND THE STRANGLER

by RAY CUMMINGS

Criminologist Melvin Cone listened to a sergeant of police, a detective, a screwball tutor, a husband, and a despondent lover. But he couldn't tell who had tried to strangle pretty Madeline Valentine—until her twelve-year-old daughter spoke from the bottom of her heart.



Judy asked levelly, "Mr. Cone, are you trying to help my mother—or not?"

"LOOKS like I don't need you," Sergeant Dugan said. "Sorry."
"Oh, it's quite all right, Sergeant."

Melvin Cone, Consulting Criminologist, was a man of wealth. Well known to the police, he maintained a private laboratory in New York, devoted to the scientific tracking of criminals. He was always

ready to cooperate with the police; and his success had been so marked that they frequently called upon him. He was sitting now on an edge of the foyer table, one foot on the floor, the other long lean leg swaying as he dangled it. He was a tall man of forty-odd; distinguished-looking with a mop of unruly black hair which had turned white at the temples.

"You mean you've got this case solved, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Yeah. Seems open an' shut now. By what the husband says—an' he's got a corroborating witness—it ain't hard to guess who this strangler is. It's the woman's lover—young chap named Will Rankin. My men are after him now. I expect we'll round him up any minute."

"Good," Cone said. "No other suspects "

"No. There's a tutor for the kid—the woman has a twelve-year-old girl. But the tutor's the wrong type. By what my witnesses say—Well, come on in. I'll let you meet 'em. They're right here in the living room."

It was two A.M., a sultry overcast summer night. Melvin Cone, with Detective Sergeant Dugan of the Maple Grove Police, stood in the foyer of the cottage of Madeline Brown Valentine. Estranged from her husband of a year, she lived here alone with her twelve-year-old daughter, Judy, her child by a former marriage. Tonight, at about one A.M., the woman had telephoned a faint call for help. She was recovering consciousness after having been strangled by an unknown fiend who had appeared in her bedroom, attacked her and doubtless left her for dead.

"The woman has recovered now?" Cone asked.

"Yeah. The doctor's been here an' gone. She's in bed upstairs. The kid's with her. She'll be all right, but it was a narrow squeak. If he'd hung onto her throat another half a minute—"

"I like to catch that type of criminal particularly," Cone said grimly.

"Yeah. Well it's her lover, young Will Rankin. She says, in the darkness of her bedroom, she don't know who it was, what with the crack he gave her to keep her quiet. But that's a lot of hooley. Women are queer when they get sex-crazy, like she is over this Rankin chap."

They went into the living room. "This is Archibald Valentine, the husband," Dugan said. "And this is Detective Will Feeney, of Feeney's Private Detective Agency. They damn near witnessed the attack."

"How do you do?" Cone said. "Sit down, gentlemen. You almost witnessed

this thing? Too bad it has to be almost. Tell me about it."

"I—I want to be very careful what I say," young Valentine responded slowly. "This is a serious charge—" He was a slim, rather handsome young fellow in his late twenties. "I married Madeline Brown a year ago," he said. "We separated in a few months—"

"Why?" Cone asked.

Valentine was silent. Detective Feeney said, "This is no time for that, Mr. Valentine. It's serious like you say." The head of Feeney's Private Detective Agency was a thin, alert-eyed little man of perhaps forty. "I was hired by Mr. Valentine to help him get divorce evidence," Feeney added. "I spotted this fellow Rankin pretty quick. So tonight—it was just at midnight—I brought Mr. Valentine. We watched her bedroom window, an' believe me we saw plenty!"

"But you didn't see who the man was?" Cone asked.

He was seated with apparent nonchalance in a big easy chair, his knees crossed, with one of his feet dangling. His chin was raised, so that his face was uptilted as from under partly lowered lids he gazed at the men before him. It was an unusual mannerism—but it was studied rather than instinctive. It squinted his handsome face; masked his expression. And from under those partly lowered lids, one might not readily discern upon what his intent gaze was focussed.

"You didn't see who the man was?" he repeated.

Feeney hesitated. "Well, I—"

"We didn't," young Valentine insisted. "We didn't need positive identification of the man—didn't try to get it. We'd seen enough. But—well—evidently after we left, it turned into a lover's quarrel. Then a man going mad—becoming a fiend. It's understandable, of course. Lord knows it happens often enough. But it's too damn serious—I don't want to make any mistake of identification—"

A COMMOTION in the hall interrupted him. One of Dugan's men burst into the living room.

"Got 'em both, Sarge! An' neither one's got any alibi. Both were in their homes—in bed since eleven o'clock. But

no way to prove it. They each had a chance to be out—no witnesses to that. Take your choice, Sarge.”

Cone followed the excited Dugan into the hall. Will Rankin, tall powerful, handsome fellow of thirty-odd, with crisp, curly brown hair, stood flushed, staring blankly.

“You mean I’m accused of—of attacking Madeline?” he was demanding. “Is she—is she all right now? I want to see her.” He shoved at one of Dugan’s men. “Get out of my way—you can’t stop me from seeing her.”

The tutor—his name was J. Rollins Rolf—was a cadaverous, saturnine man of about forty; brown haired, with thin, sharply austere features. He stood against the wall, docile between two of Dugan’s men.

“This is absurd,” he said. “I was here this afternoon, giving Miss Judy her lesson. I haven’t been here since. I don’t—attack women.”

For a moment, unnoticed, Cone stood in the doorway, listening, watching with keen appraising eyes. Young Rankin, excited, belligerent, seemed only anxious to get upstairs to Mrs. Valentine. The saturnine tutor said almost nothing; he was nervous, tense; his dark eyes shifted from one to the other of the men.

Presently Cone went back to the living room.

Valentine, the husband, and Feeney were on their feet, excitedly listening to the commotion in the hall.

“Sit down,” Cone said. He closed the hall door. “I can understand, Mr. Valentine, your natural reluctance—”

“I suppose it’s one of them,” Valentine said. “But—”

“Which one?” Cone finished. “Well, I’ve seen them now. I’ll do the guessing—I want your exact details of what you did actually see through the bedroom window.”

They regarded each other. “Well,” Feeney put in, “this is no time to mince words. She was undressing. She was standing up—” Feeney licked his thin lips. “She was undressing—sort of dancing like she was teasing him.”

“The man,” young Valentine said, “was seated in a chair to one side. His back was to us—”

“You never saw his face?” Cone asked.

“No.”

“He was brown-haired,” Feeney put in. “It could have been Will Rankin. Probably was—”

“His hands,” Cone said. “Hands are as individual as faces. Did you see his hands?”

Feeney’s tongue licked his lips again. “Well, he reached for her pretty often. When she was naked—”

“Can you describe his hands?” Cone demanded.

“No,” Valentine said. “That would be idiotic. We were quite far away. They had a dim light in the bedroom—”

“Electric light?”

Cone’s chin went up. Again he was gazing from under half dropped lids. “Electric light?” he repeated.

“Yes,” Valentine agreed. “A shaded lamp on the table. Sort of a rose-colored light—”

“All such kind of women use that,” Feeney said. “She was standing naked, and he—”

“And then you left?” Cone asked.

“Yes,” Valentine agreed. “Just about then. A storm had come up. It was raining like the devil. Lightning struck not so far from us.”

CONE stood up. “Too bad you didn’t see more,” he commented. “Mr. Feeney would have liked it. I’ll go up and talk to the woman. I imagine we won’t need you any more. Not tonight, anyway. But you’d better wait here for Sergeant Dugan.”

“Hope we helped you,” Feeney said.

“I believe you did,” Cone agreed gravely. Again he stood in the hall, where Sergeant Dugan was still trying to browbeat young Will Rankin; and the cadaverous tutor was watching.

Then Cone went upstairs. Madeline Valentine lay on her dainty bed. She was a small, slim, exceedingly beautiful woman despite her twelve-year-old daughter. She was only thirty-one. Her face was pale and drawn; her big luminous dark eyes still seemed to have horror in them from the terrible experience she had undergone. The reality of it was unquestionable. Her forehead was bruised where the

attacker's fist had struck; and the skin of her slender white throat showed the contusions of his strangling hands. She was clad now in a lacy negligee; but on the floor beside the bed—evidence which Dugan had ordered to remain—lay the filmy nightgrobe. In ribbons where the fiendish ravisher had nearly torn it from her.

Gravely Cone introduced himself. Beside the bed the child sat, clad in a dressing gown, with her blonde hair braided in pigtailed that dangled down her back. She was holding her mother's hand, a solemn-faced child, wide-eyed with wonderment and terror.

"Well," Cone said. "And who are you?"

"I'm Judy Brown." Her big eyes appraised him.

"Tell me what happened," Cone said to the mother. "Would you rather the child left the room?"

"I'm not going," June said.

Madeline Valentine smiled wanly. "I guess she's heard it all by now. I had to tell those policemen—"

"All right," Cone agreed. "First—I'd like to ask you a few questions. You positively can't identify your attacker?"

"No," she said. "I was asleep—awakened by—by finding him in the room. There was no light. He didn't speak, he simply attacked me."

"And Judy heard nothing?"

"Her door was closed. A child sleeps soundly."

"You're in love with this young Will Rankin," Cone said. "That's true, isn't it?"

Terror leaped into her eyes. "I heard that Sergeant Dugan is trying to prove that Will did this to me. That's absurd. He—why he loves me. He loves Judy. I'll admit it—we hoped some day I might get a divorce and marry him."

"I thought you might be shielding him," Cone said.

"Why—why would I do that?"

"Women do queer things when they're in love. So do men, for that matter."

"But it couldn't have been Will, I tell you. He was here tonight, but he left at ten o'clock. He never came upstairs."

"Then some other man came," Cone said, "after Judy went to bed? Judy, if you'll go outside now for a minute—"

"I'm not going," the child said. She clung to her mother's hand.

"I—I haven't got anything to hide," the mother protested. "Not from Judy, nor Will, nor anyone."

"I see." Cone sat pondering.

"Are you trying to help my mother, or not?" Judy demanded abruptly.

CONE smiled. "Why, I hadn't thought about that, Judy. I'm trying to figure out who hurt your mother. Does she need help now?"

"I heard what my step-father and that horrible man with him were saying about my mother," the child declared.

"Oh, dear me," Cone said. "Well, you shouldn't listen like that, Judy."

"I heard them telling that policeman, Dugan, before you came," the little girl insisted. "And it's a lie. My mother isn't a bad woman. I heard Uncle Will leave here about ten o'clock. I was in bed, but my door was open then. Mother didn't close it until later, when she came up and told me to go to sleep."

"I understand," Cone said. "Thank you, Judy."

The child still eyed him, as he smiled at her gently. And then suddenly she reached out and touched his arm.

"Are you a lawyer?" she demanded.

"Well no, not exactly."

"I don't want my mother to be made out to be a bad woman, because she isn't."

"Judy!" Madeline Valentine was suddenly sobbing. "Don't you worry, Judy."

"I don't believe she is," Cone said abruptly.

"But everybody else will believe she is," the child declared. "It'll get in all the papers. Couldn't you help me prove she isn't bad?"

Cone stared. "I came here," he said finally, "to find the man who attacked your mother."

"Well, if you do that," the child broke in breathlessly, "I guess you'll be able to prove my mother isn't a bad woman."

For another moment Cone stared into the little girl's eager eyes. Then he said suddenly. "I'll try, Judy."

He went to the hall, called Sergeant Dugan. "Will you bring your suspects

and witnesses up here, Sergeant? This child and I think we've got the answer to this thing."

He stood very calmly regarding the men as the sergeant brought them in: Valentine, the husband, with Feeney; young Will Rankin, and the cadaverous tutor.

"Quiet, please," Cone said sharply. Will Rankin, with a cry had tried to rush forward, but Dugan stopped him; Valentine moved unobtrusively to the wall, nervously embarrassed as the wife he had spared upon gazed at him calmly.

"I think," Cone added, "I may be able to shed some light on this thing. It's a queer mixture of human emotions, isn't it? All of us here—loving, hating." Cone was puttering at Mrs. Valentine's dressing table.

"You use lots of cosmetics, don't you, Mrs. Valentine?" he commented suddenly, as he turned.

"Why—" she stammered. "Why, what—" He was moving swiftly toward her bed, and she stared at him with startled eyes.

"You wouldn't try to fool me, would you, Mrs. Valentine?" Cone said. "When you went to bed tonight, you had on a lot of lip rouge. You have very little now. You wiped it off, let's say when you had recovered a bit and the doctor came. Ashamed of it, Mrs. Valentine?" He stooped beside the bed. "You needn't answer me—here's the evidence." He displayed a square of crumpled white tissue from the floor. A crimson smear was on it. "Looks like blood," Cone said. "But it's rouge from your lips."

A blank electric silence was in the room as he strode abruptly to the door. "I want to telephone," he said. "I'll be back in a moment. Sergeant Dugan, I don't want anyone here to speak."

CERTAINLY no one tried to speak. In blank, awed silence they listened. The telephone was in the upper hall, and they could hear Cone calling the local Light and Power Company—the night manager. Cone spoke very softly, but fragments were audible:

"Yes . . . Ten Meadowbrook Avenue, midnight on. . . Oh . . . all this section. . . Well, that's fine. Heavens, yes of

course I'm pleased. A bit of luck—but it occurred to me when I heard about a lightning bolt. I noticed your transformer, here near the corner. Your men were working on it as I came past."

He hung up. His mouth was grimly set, his eyes flashing as he strode back into the room. Young Rankin and the tutor shifted aside as he passed them.

"The first flash of lightning in tonight's storm," Cone said, "hit the transformer at the corner, at eleven fifty-five. Electric current was off until one-eight." Cone was confronting Valentine and Feeney.

"You didn't see anything, really, did you?" Cone added. "A frame-up, to get divorce evidence is nasty business, Mr. Feeney."

The little, weasel-faced Feeney was shaking, terrified as Cone towered over him. "I've heard of your concern," Cone said. Disgust was in his voice. "The Human Bloodhounds—that's your professional slogan. Bloodhounds—making it your business to trail unfortunate women—besmirch them by fair means, or foul. You like to smear them with crimson, don't you?"

As Cone gripped him by the coat lapels, Feeney suddenly broke.

"All right—I'll tell you the truth. We didn't see anything."

"Shut up," Valentine growled.

"I won't," Feeney fairly shouted. "You got me into this mess. My Gawd, Mr. Cone, we didn't have any idea it was going to run into any criminal assault business—the police an' everything—with a woman damn near murdered! Valentine was payin' me well. I met him tonight in Breen's Cafe. We had it all doped out. I'd signed the report blank an' given it to him. My Gawd, I had to go through with it, even when the police arrived at Breen's lookin' for the woman's husband to tell him she'd been assaulted."

"That's all true?" Cone demanded of the pallid Valentine.

"Well—yes it is," Valentine admitted sullenly. "Feeney had tried—he couldn't seem to get legitimate evidence. But I was worried over this child—over Judy—living here. I was morally sure that Madeline and this fellow Rankin—"

"You lie," Rankin shouted. "I'll tell you why he wants to divorce her, Mr.

Cone. Judy inherited—just this year—nearly half a million dollars from an aunt. Her mother is Judy's guardian. With mud thrown on her like this, Valentine could apply to the courts and get the child and her maintenance income, and maybe control of the capital."

"I don't doubt it," Cone said. He stared intently at the sullen Valentine; and then at the tense, awe-struck tutor who was gazing with cadaverous, dropped jaw. Then Cone swung to the bed.

"This attacker struck you with his fist," Cone said to the woman. "Then he gripped you. I suppose you tried to scream, Mrs. Valentine?"

"Yes," she murmured. "But he—"

"Clapped his hand over your mouth?" Cone said. "Well, that was reasonable. And then as you struggled, he held you—like this?"

HE STOOPED. His left arm hooked around the woman's neck, raising her head. As she gasped, he pressed his hand across her mouth. It smothered her startled gasp. Then suddenly he laughed ironically and dropped her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Valentine," he said. "I just wanted to be sure it was the natural action."

"He did hold me like that," the woman murmured. "I—I was trying to cry out."

"He held her like that?" Sergeant Dugan prompted tensely. "Well, what does that show?"

"It had to be like that," Cone said, "because her mouth was pressed into the palm of his hand. You can see where—"

Cone had darted past the staring tutor, and was gripping Valentine. "See it, here?" Cone said. "It isn't blood, it's rouge—matching her lipstick on the dresser there."

His fingers clutched Valentine's wrist, turning it to show the crimson smear of lip rouge on his hand.

"Got him! Well I'll be damned," Dugan exclaimed. He jammed the terrified Valentine against the wall. "Come on you, out with it now."

"You let me alone! Let me alone, I say. I—I didn't want to divorce her—" He checked himself.

"Of course you didn't," Cone said.

"Your frame-up with Feeney was to give you an alibi, so you could never be suspected of the murder. Just revenge, anger and lust—"

"All right," Valentine gasped suddenly. "You've got me—got the evidence—damn you. She—she threw me out. She wouldn't live with me because she was afraid to have Judy near me. Well, damn her, she had good cause to be afraid—"

"Take him away," Cone said. "Good God, get him out of here."

When the room had quieted and the half-hysterical Valentine had been dragged off, Cone said:

"Mr. Feeney's lascivious details somehow didn't ring true. It sounded as though he'd gotten his experience mainly from watching burlesque shows. Particularly, he described the lady nude—and here we have the tangible evidence of her night-robe, torn into shreds."

Cone was smiling ironically. "I figured it was all a frame-up. I saw that if Valentine were plotting murder, such a frame-up would provide him with a very neat alibi. Fortunately I was able to break it. He mentioned the lightning—it recalled to me that I had seen men working on the transformer. So naturally I checked on it."

"But what made you suspect him of the murder?" Dugan demanded. "It could have been a frame-up just to divorce her."

"Yes," Cone agreed. His ironic smile broadened. "I saw his hands, Sergeant—the palms of the hands—sometimes one doesn't notice them. I realized that Valentine had gone directly from here to the Cafe to meet Feeney. He wouldn't have thought of his hands—there was no blood involved in this thing, and he wouldn't have considered anything else. He didn't notice the red of her lip rouge on his palm—but I did. Just a redness, blurred by the perspiration. But it told me what I wanted to know."

Cone was standing over the bed now. "I'm awfully glad I could help you, Mrs. Valentine," he said. "I had to do my best." He was smiling quizzically at the child; and big-eyed, she stared and smiled back at him. "You see," Cone added, "little Judy here had sort of retained me. And I never like to disappoint a client."

CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING

A Human, Moving Novelette
by NORVELL W. PAGE

Kicked around by crooked cops all his life, young Mickie McGrue decided to take the murder path to easy dough, even though his guardian was old Mark Hewitt, the straightest cop of the force! There was only one way Mark could change the kid's mind—and in that way, more than one must die!

Mickie dived on Borgum, driving with both fists. . . .



A Guy Can Be a Sucker, but That's No Sign He's Not a Real Man Inside!

CHAPTER ONE

A Sucker's Game

... But Ricco's gun was blasting from across the room!

MICKIE McGRUE took the steps of the walk-up apartment in long bounds. He fumbled his key into the lock, shoved open the door. The lights were on and, over by the window, a grey-headed man, suspenders slipped off his shoulders, rested his sock feet on the sill.

Mickie said uneasily, "Hello, Mark. Didn't know you were off duty tonight."

He entered into his own room and be-



gan to yank open bureau drawers until he found a blackjack. He slipped its thong over his wrist, slapped it against his palm solidly and his eyes were wide, brightly alive. He smiled slightly, shoved the blackjack into his pocket and started out.

Mark Hewitt, suspenders still dangling, stood in the doorway tamping tobacco into a short-stemmed pipe. He said, slowly, "That's a sucker's game, Mickie."

Mickie's jaw set defiantly, "I'm being played for a sucker, so why not?"

"By Frances?"

"By Frankie and that crooked louse, Eddie Ricco."

Mark Hewitt shook his head. "You can't buck Ricco and the rest of Hal Tracy's punks with a blackjack, Mickie." He spoke calmly between puffs as he lighted the pipe, but his direct blue eyes were worried. "You won't get Frances away from him that way either. More apt to get a belly full of lead. Better if you give Frances her head. She'll pass Ricco up soon. She's just young, and Ricco's got money. But she's all right."

Mickie McGrue shook his head vehemently. It was a hard head, well shaped under cropped blond hair. His face had the shrewd look of a gamin's.

"Ricco took her to Marlano's!" he exclaimed heatedly.

"Marlano's!" Mark Hewitt repeated quietly. He hooked an arm under his suspenders, slid them into place. "Maybe I can do something then! You leave Ricco to the law."

"Damn the law!" Mickie cried, his breath quick. "I don't mean you, Mark. You know that. But you're the only decent cop I ever knew. They've been pushing me around ever since I ran away from the orphan asylum and tried to make a living peddling papers. They shoved me off a corner I'd fought for because the other guy knew somebody. Chasing me off good stands with the cab because another driver slips them a buck once in a while. And tonight. You know what happened tonight?"

"Look, I try to stop Frankie from going out with Ricco and she gives me the high hat. I follow them, and when I find they're going into Marlano's, I try to stop Frankie and tell her what kind of dump it is. And Ricco calls a cop—that grafter, Mullarkey!

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ricco," says Mullarkey. "This bum annoying you? Shove off before I run you in! He knows if I get pinched for something like that I lose my hack license. The law will take care of Ricco, all right. Even if the law has to throw me into the can to do it!"

Mickie was almost as broad in the shoulders as Hewitt and a little taller. When his anger got him, his head came up and his body was stiff and straight as a soldier's.

Hewitt eyed him and thought for the hundredth time how fine he'd look in police blue. Mark Hewitt sucked in a slow breath, shook his head. It was crooks like Mullarkey who gave the force a bad name, and made kids like Mickie think the law was rotten.

"Don't worry about Frankie," he tried again. "She's probably just trying to make you jealous."

"Yeah? She slapped me in the mouth! Said why didn't I try to be a gentleman—like Ricco! Like *Mr.* Ricco!"

MARK HEWITT was grunting over the effort of pulling on his broad-toed shoes and his eyes, hidden under heavy brows now, were pained. Mickie was heading straight for serious trouble. "Maybe I can do something," he muttered again.

Mickie McGrue threw back his head and laughed. His neck was full, powerfully thewed. "Listen, Mark, cops can't do anything to Ricco. Not even cops with pull. And you ain't got an ounce. You never played along with the political crowd. If you had, you'd be a sergeant now. Maybe a lieutenant. Instead of pounding a beat after fifteen years!"

Mark Hewitt straightened stiffly and looked steadily into the boy's flushed face. Out in the street, kids were yelling under the corner lights. Roller skates whirred on the heat-softened asphalt. Street kids like Mickie; like Frankie. Only Mickie, with his parents dead in a tenement fire, shipped off to an asylum, hadn't had even these kids' chances. Cops would have shipped him off to a reformatory for running away from the asylum if Mark Hewitt hadn't taken him in five years before.

Hewitt said slowly, "Ricco looks pretty prosperous, Mickie, I know. He's got influence with the politicians like all Hal Tracy's mob. He's got a lot of things you'd like to have; things you'd like to give Frankie."

"He sent her orchids!"

"Orchids? Yes, well. It's like this, Mickie. A man has to do what's right inside of him. Maybe I'd like a little more money. A better job. I could get them. But it isn't what a man tells himself he'd like to do, it's what he *has* to do that makes a man what he is."

"It sounds swell, just swell!" Mickie was shouting, his face flushed. "Ricco has to pull robberies. You got to pound a beat. Ricco is on top with all the influence there is. You're still pounding the pavements. And me, I got to drive a taxi and be a sucker. . . . To hell with it. I been a sucker long enough!"

He went out, slamming the door. Hewitt called after him sharply, but the boy's feet rattled down the steps. His cab door slammed and the taxi got under way with a snarl of gears. Mark Hewitt, leaning out the window, saw Mickie foreshort-

ened, looking very small and young. He watched the cab swoop around the next corner against the traffic light. Deliberately he knocked out his pipe on the window sill.

Mark Hewitt's shoulders were a little weary as he turned toward the closet, but when he punched into his blue tunic, he straightened up. He settled his cap into the groove long wear had pressed into his grey hair and, out of habit, glanced at himself in the mirror over the bureau. Absently, he brushed a cuff across the bright face of his shield, patted hip and side for manacles and gun. His feet hit the floor in slow, deliberate time toward the door.

MICKIE McGRUE drove his cab with an angry contempt, his eyes glinting under puckered lids. What he wanted to do was to break into those little private dining rooms on the upper floors of Marlano's, each with its couch-bed. He wasn't afraid of Ricco's gun or of any of Ricco's crooked crowd, including the boss, Hal Tracy. It didn't much matter if he got shot, Mickie told himself bitterly. Frankie giving him the air for Ricco!

Mickie skidded the cab to the curb before Marlano's discreet neon glow. The bar, with its few booths, was visible through the window, practically deserted. That wasn't where Marlano did his profitable business. Mickie tossed his cap to the floor of the cab, unpinned the license badge from his lapel. When he put that in his pocket, he felt the weight of the blackjack and his smile was reckless. Just let somebody try to keep him out of Marlano's. He swaggered into the bar.

"Beer!" he ordered gruffly. In the mirror, he inspected the place swiftly. A short hallway led to the garden dining room. A few people were in there, but no sight of Frankie's scarlet coat with those damned orchids on it. A waiter with bottles and glasses on a tray swung up carpeted stairs. Maybe that was going up now to Ricco and—and Frankie. Mark Hewitt could say all he liked about Frankie being all right, but she didn't know her way around. Just eighteen! She'd drink and think it was smart. Knockout drops . . . Ricco would pull that sort of trick, damn his yellow skin, and

get away with it—through influence!

Mickie took his beer to a table where he could watch the steps. A heavily built man in tuxedo glanced at him from the garden room and came forward slowly—the official bouncer. To hell with him! Let him try to start something!

Now that he was inside, Mickie knew he couldn't crash into those private rooms upstairs and hunt for Ricco. A mob of waiters would smack him down before he even got started. He wasn't afraid, but being knocked out wouldn't help Frankie. The bouncer strolled past him toward the front door, came back presently to bend over Mickie's table. His eyes were dull, oppressive, watchful.

"Cop out front says move your cab or you'll get a ticket," said the bouncer.

"To hell with Mullarkey!" Mickie said roughly. He eased to his feet and his hand slid into his coat pocket.

The bouncer said, without interest. "Don't try anything, buddy. You want I should tell Mullarkey what you say?"

White lines rimmed Mickie's lips. He could take this bouncer, but what the hell would it get him? Mullarkey would jerk him to the can. License gone. . . . And still no chance to help Frankie.

"I'll tell him myself!" Mickie shouldered past the bouncer. The man moved quickly out of his path. There was still no expression on his face, but his hands swung, loosely ready, at his sides. Mickie strode out of Marlano's, swearing under his breath. Cops always pushing a guy around. Mullarkey taking money from Marlano to let him run a crooked house; hustling Mickie out because he looked like trouble. . . .

"Listen, McGrue!" Mullarkey tapped Mickie on the chest with a stiff forefinger. "Don't think because Mark Hewitt goes to bat for you that you can run the town. He's not so much!"

Mickie's jaw thrust out, "Keep your lip off Mark!" he snapped.

MULLARKEY gripped his nightstick, blustering. "Listen, McGrue, if I catch you around this neighborhood again, I'm going to run you in. Get me?"

Mickie glared, then swung angrily toward his cab. He moved stiffly, fighting his anger. He couldn't afford to get ar-

rested. That's what you got for being a sucker. Ricco was the smart lad . . . in the money and with the cops on his side. But, damn it, Frankie. . . . Mickie was climbing into the cab when he saw two big cars round the distant corner, one behind the other. He had seen official police cars too often not to recognize them. What the hell was the idea? Was this something Mark Hewitt had cooked up? Abruptly, Mickie ran toward Mullarkey. The cop jerked up the nightstick in a tight fist. . . .

"Hold it, you fool!" Mickie whispered urgently. "It's a raid. A raid on Marlano's! I'll go tell them. The cops have seen you by now." Mickie was frantic, but there was a gleam of hope in his eyes. This would give him a chance to get inside.

If he could save Frankie from the raid, maybe she'd see what kind of man he was; see what Ricco had led her into!

Mullarkey's eyes whipped toward the two big cars. "Cripes!" he muttered. "You're right, McGrue. Go ahead in. Tell them I sent you."

The bouncer stepped into Mickie's path in the hall.

"A raid!" Mickie whispered. "Cops already in the street. Mullarkey said to tell you!"

The bouncer seemed sluggish but his hand whipped to a medallion in the woodwork, and upstairs a dozen buzzers sounded. He turned into the bar and Mickie leaped up the stairs. Waiters were running along the upper hallway, popping their heads into doors, whispering warnings. Mickie heard a woman squeal in fright, but it wasn't Frankie.

Mickie grabbed a waiter by the shoulder.

"Ricco! Where is he? The cops are after him!"

"Seventeen!" The waiter raced on.

Mickie ran down the hallway, glancing at numbers on doors. *Seventeen*. He jerked to a halt. His right hand slid into his pocket and he put the blackjack thong around his wrist. His chin pulled in. There was a taut smile about his lips when he went into the room.

"Raid," he said curtly. "Come on, Frankie. Fast. Before the cops catch you here with this crook."

FRANKIE jerked to her feet and a wine glass spilled across the table. Her scarlet jacket, with the orchids on the lapel, was spread upon the couch like another, brighter stain.

"Mickie McGrue!" she cried, shrilly. "What do you mean by busting . . . by *breaking* in here like this!"

Mickie's eyes swung from her flushed, pert face to Ricco. The man was on his feet, suave face dark with anger.

"Get out," Ricco ordered flatly.

"I tell you it's a raid!" Mickie cried. "For heaven's sake, Frankie, get out of here!"

Men and women were running noisily through the halls. Ricco's eyes flicked past Mickie toward them, then he shrugged elaborately. His suit was green, padded at the shoulders, perfectly fitted. He made Mickie feel shabby.

"You do not think a little thing like a raid bothers me?" Ricco asked. His voice was smooth, a smile about his full mouth. "I'll tell you once more to get out, and then . . ." He shrugged once more. "Are you going?"

"Go to hell!" Mickie shouted at him. he wanted to smack Ricco down, but it was more important to get Frankie out. He sprang toward her, whipped her scarlet coat up from the couch. His hand crushed the orchids and he laughed. Frankie's bright face, framed by the square cut columns of her black hair, was frightened now.

"Mr. Ricco will take care of me," she stammered.

Mickie's eyes puckered up. "*Mr. Ricco*," he jeered. He heard a quick light footstep behind him and ducked. Ricco's clubbed revolver glanced off his shoulder, clipped his ear. It hurt like hell. Mickie laughed, and the blackjack came out of his pocket.

"You asked for it!" he cried.

With a quick swipe of his left hand he batted the gun aside. The blackjack flicked over and Ricco's smooth hair was suddenly awry, straggling down over his pale forehead. He pitched sideways across the couch, bounced to the floor. Mickie spun back to Frankie.

"Oh, Mickie!" she gasped. "You oughtn't to have done that. You'll get in trouble!" Her dark eyes were anxious on

his face, then they went beyond him toward the door. Mickie pivoted, the blackjack ready. Two cops filled the doorway, nightsticks in their fists. One whipped up a revolver.

"That will be enough, punk," he said. "I guess we came just in time. Assault with deadly weapons will get you a nice little five year stretch up the river!"

CHAPTER TWO

Sucker McGrue

MICKIE McGRUE escaped five years in prison only because Mark Hewitt got up in court and pleaded for him, and featured his fifteen year record of honest service in a newspaper campaign against a harsh sentence. Mickie got two months in the city penitentiary. Eddie Ricco wasn't even arrested. Frankie Farrar's name was not mentioned.

Mark Hewitt was waiting the noon that Mickie left prison. He felt a little strange in civilian clothes, even though they were the same dark blue of the uniform he had worn so many years. He thought it would be better that way, though.

"Let's get some lunch," he said.

Mickie's head was up, too high, the way he carried it when he was angry, and little ripple of muscles kept playing along the ridge of his jaw.

"All right, Mark," he agreed, but there was a repression on his voice.

The two big men didn't say anything more. Mark hailed a taxi to take them across the long bridge. Mickie's lips pulled down at the corner and Mark Hewitt felt his own eyes tighten a little, in pain. Hewitt had seen so many faces wear that look; that sneering, brittle, contemptuous look. If there was a "criminal face", this was it. Hewitt cursed himself for calling a taxi. It would only remind Mickie that his own license would be lost to him now. Men with criminal records aren't licensed. Criminal. . . .

Mark cleared his throat. "Frances made a date with us for today—two months ago. But she said you had a little spat."

Mickie barked out a laugh. "We had a row! She came over to the prison to gloat over me. Did I tell her off! Try-

ing to crawl around me after Ricco threw her over."

Hewitt opened his lips and closed them again. They made a straight unrelenting line across his face, even when in repose. Not because Hewitt was a hard man. His mouth had been pressed into that mold through years of walking the beat, when he dared not let his face show too much of the kindness that flowed through him always.

Lunch was a gloomy business. Mickie kept his eyes on his plate mostly. Once a police siren screeched through the street outside. Mickie looked up then, his eyes puckered and glittering.

Hewitt picked up his hat, then laughed and reached into his breast pocket. "So used to carrying things in my cap," he said. He was fishing out a card from a stuffed wallet, his fingers strangely awkward. "Here's a guy will give you a job, Mickie."

"Doing what?" Mickie's face was drawn down again in those sneering lines.

"Fellow runs a line of trucks down into Jersey," Hewitt said. "Needs a good driver like you."

Mickie grunted, "How much?"

Hewitt could see suspicion in Mickie's eyes and he shook his head slowly. "Fifteen a week."

"Peanuts!" Mickie's face was flushing again. "Because I do time, he thinks he can get me for nothing. Playing me for a sucker. Sucker McGrue! What's being a sucker ever got me?"

Hewitt said, "Take it easy, Mickie."

Mickie slammed down knife and fork. "To hell with it!"

HEWITT didn't say anything. He drank his coffee noisily. Mickie glared at him.

"I'm sorry, Mark," he said, in a sullen tone.

Hewitt said, "Sure."

They went out into the street, "I don't go on duty until eight, Mickie. Anything you'd like to do?"

Mickie McGrue jerked his head in a curt affirmative. "Yeah! But I do it alone!"

Hewitt glanced at him out of his eye corners. "All right, Mickie." He slid a hand into Mickie's coat pocket and left a

ten dollar bill there. "All right, Mickie. I'll have some supper at home about seven, if you want to come."

The two men paused, facing each other on the corner. Hewitt's lips were shut in that straight line that kept back words. He wanted to say a dozen things, but Mickie was wild. Shame and defiance both were there. That was what put the sneer on Mickie's mouth. Flushed up now over that ten dollars in his coat pocket. Mickie put his hand in and took out the money.

"I don't need this," he said stiffly. "Don't wait supper for me."

Hewitt nodded and took the money. "Sure, kid. Thought you might be short. Well. . ."

Mickie jerked his head in a curt nod and strode off across the traffic. A traffic cop yelled at him, "Cut out that jay walking!"

Hewitt saw Mickie's head snap around like an angry dog's, then a subway kiosk swallowed him. Hewitt turned up the street, his feet slow and steady on the pavement. Policemen's feet . . . His lips were shut hard, his eyes squinted a little in pain.

THE Dutchman's place had lived through a varied career as saloon and speakeasy. It was licensed as a bar now, with a cocktail lounge in chromium and scarlet leather. The back rooms were still there, easy of access to those who knew the way. Mickie McGrue had learned the way in prison.

He went through the men's room and up to the wide-shouldered attendant, for whom there seemed no real work here.

"I want Borgum," Mickie said curtly.

The man looked at him, blinked and didn't say anything.

"Whitey Lane sent me."

The man heaved his hips off a tall stool and opened a door that looked like a porter's closet, but it was kept locked. There was a room beyond where four men lounged over a card game.

"Friend of Whitey's to see Borgum," the attendant said and jerked a thumb to send Mickie inside. Mickie's eyes flicked over the four men. He waited until the door closed behind him.

"It ain't Borgum I want to see," he

said, biting off his words short. "I'm looking for Ricco."

The man who was dealing cards glanced up with pale, glistening eyes. "Ricco'll be sorry he missed you," he said, his voice deep, harsh. "Ricco's taking a health tour up-state. He's suffering from corpse fever."

Mickie laughed, jeeringly. "Okay. You tell him I'm looking for him. You tell him when he comes back, I'll be around. The name's McGrue."

He pivoted on his heel toward the door and the man who had spoken said, lazily, "Wait a minute, buddy. What's your hurry?"

Mickie spun around, his shoulders tensing, "What's it to you?"

The man smiled, showing teeth rimmed in gold. "My name's Borgum," he said. "Have a seat, McGrue."

Mickie's eyes flicked over the four men again. They were looking at him impassively, but there was no threat in their manner. His tautness relaxed a little, but his eyes were hostile, wary.

"I got things to do," he said.

BORGUM laughed, "Sure you have. Sure you have. You figure you can whittle Ricco down, do you?"

"That's my business, Borgum!"

"Sure, sure, McGrue." Borgum waved a hand and a big diamond sparkled on his little finger. "Only some of us would like to see Ricco whittled down, too. He's getting important. Maybe a little too important, see?"

"So?" Mickie eyed Borgum narrowly, trying to fathom the man. The pale eyes, the smiling lips told him nothing.

"Have a seat," Borgum repeated.

"I'll speak my piece standing," Mickie said curtly. "If you got anything to say, spill it."

Borgum wagged his head, "I like to hear a man stand right up for himself like that. Truth is, I've had my eye on you for quite a while, haven't I, boys?"

There were nods, an affirmative grunt from the others. Their faces still told Mickie nothing.

"A tough man like you," Borgum went on, "there's always a place for him in Hal Tracy's outfit. I know you, know all about you. Mark Hewitt's a good guy,

but he's been a sucker all his life. You going to be a sucker, too?"

Mickie McGrue shifted his feet restlessly and a flush stole up over his jaws. "Any man that calls me a sucker," he said hoarsely, "is going to get his ears batted down!"

"I said he was smart!" Borgum beamed on the other men about the table. "You drop around about nine o'clock tonight. I'll talk to Tracy, but I know what he'll say. Maybe we can cut you in on some easy money."

Mickie sliced the air with the edge of his hand, his face puckered, shrewd. "What's the gag? Smart guys like you don't take in new men except to take the rap. I'm not biting!"

Borgum nodded, flashing his gold teeth. "Smart! Well, it's like this, McGrue. You hate Ricco. Ricco has been throwing his weight around, see? Now I can get rid of him easy enough, but it would mean a rub-out, and I can still use Ricco. I'd rather work it another way. I'd rather play you against him. Of course, if you're afraid of Ricco. . ."

Mickie McGrue smiled. He threw back his head and laughed. "I'll be back at nine o'clock!" He flung that over his shoulder as he went out.

Borgum, still smiling, kept on dealing the cards. One of his men swore. "What the hell's the idea? That punk will spill his guts to Hewitt?"

Borgum chuckled, "Do I look as dumb as that? McGrue won't know anything to spill. You know those two jobs we've been casing on Hewitt's beat? We'll pull one of them tonight, right under Hewitt's nose—with the kid as lookout! Get it?"

"You mean the kid takes the rap?"

Borgum shrugged. "If we have any trouble, he does. We just let Hewitt know that, and Hewitt won't open his trap! We'll have Hewitt right where we want him!"

MARK HEWITT sat stiffly at the window, thick forearms on the sill. His pipe was dead between his teeth. The kids were scrambling and brawling on the sidewalks, dodging across in front of traffic. A hell of a place to raise kids. Hewitt lifted a thick hand and dragged it down over his eyes. He shook his head

and looked out again, keeping watch. It was seven-thirty, and he was due at the station house at eight. He heaved himself to his feet and took one last look up the street. Then he smiled, rapped the pipe empty with firm strokes. Mickie was coming after all . . . For a few moments, Hewitt watched Mickie's long-striding approach, then he padded across to the kitchenette and lit the gas under a coffee pot.

When Mickie came in, he was pulling on his shoes. Mickie stopped in the doorway.

"Hello, Mark. Thought you'd be gone."

"Just going," Hewitt said. "Supper's on the stove."

Mickie started toward his room, stopped in the doorway and turned reluctantly. "I'm moving out, Mark," he said.

Mark Hewitt's head pulled up sharply, then he bent and finished tying his shoes. "Are you, Mickie?"

Mickie McGrue stood in the doorway and watched while Hewitt crossed to the closet for his tunic; watched his shoulders straighten as he buttoned it. Their eyes met and held.

"I don't get it, Mickie," Hewitt said quietly. "You're a free agent, of course. I . . . I thought. . ." He paused with a hesitancy rare in his deliberate speech. "I like having you here, Mickie."

Mickie's lips twisted. "A jail bird in your house won't help you get ahead!"

A smile tugged at the corner's of Hewitt's mouth. "Now, Mickie," he said, crossing toward him, "you don't want to feel that way. You made a mistake, sure. All of us do. You got a bad break, too, bucking a bunch like Tracy's mob. Don't let it get you down. What a man's got down inside. . ."

"Aw, stop preaching!"

Hewitt stopped, "I don't mean it like that, Mickie. Listen, do me a favor, Mickie. Wait until we have a chance to talk this over tomorrow."

MICKIE sliced the air with his stiffened hand. "To hell with it. I'm tired of being a sucker and being tied up with a sucker. I'm shoving off. This whole damned town is crooked and the

only way to get anywhere in it is to play along." He stopped then. He hadn't intended to say so much. Defiance goaded him on. "All right, it's out, and to hell with it! From now on, I'm stepping high and wide and the suckers can foot the bill. I'm through!"

"Mickie!" Mark Hewitt caught him by the shoulders. "Mickie, stop this foolishness! It's all right to talk that way. It sounds smart. But you can't do things like that. You can't go crooked. A man can't go against what's inside him. And I know you. You're straight, Mickie. You—"

Mickie wrenched free with a violence that was almost a blow. He glared angrily into Mark Hewitt's alarmed face.

"Skip it, flattie," he said. He laughed loudly. "Once a sucker, always a sucker. That's you, Mark. But it's not me! From now on, I play it smart!"

Hewitt looked at him through a long moment without speech. He turned away heavily and took down his uniform cap from the shelf of the closet, settled it into its accustomed groove. Absently, he patted gun and manacles, glanced at himself in the mirror. His hand lifted to the shield. . . .

"It's five minutes of eight," Mickie jeered at him.

Mark Hewitt didn't look at him. He was staring at himself in the mirror, at the heavy line of his own jaw, the gash of his mouth; the eyes under the heavy brows. He lifted a hand uncertainly toward his eyes. They burned a little. He'd been straining them.

He moved toward the door with his deliberate stride, paused with his hand on the knob.

"Mickie," he cleared his throat. "Mickie, I've never tried to order you around. Maybe it was a mistake, but I can't change it now. I, well, I'll be around if . . . you want to see me."

He went out and his feet clumped steadily down the steps. On the walk outside, they quickened. He'd have to hurry . . . Mickie McGrue watched him from the window. There was a tightness in his throat. He jerked back and strode toward his own room, stopped when he glimpsed himself in the mirror.

"To hell with it!" Mickie McGrue

cried hoarsely. "I'm tired of being a sucker!"

CHAPTER THREE

Smart Guy—McGrue

MARK HEWITT just reached the station house in time, marched silently out to take his nightly patrol. His pace was a little slow tonight as he went his rounds, trying the doors of shops along Washington Avenue. He always felt a little lift of pride at the fashionable Gardon Jewelry Company. Only once during his years on the beat had any one attempted to rob it. Hewitt's gun had prevented that.

He had a good clean beat. He might not get promotion, but he had the pride of knowing he was doing his job well. He blew out a breath that was almost a sigh as he moved on. If only he had done as good a job of training Mickie. . . .

It was about half-past nine when a voice speaking his name startled him out of his reverie. He turned and his lips curved in a smile.

"Frances!" he said. "I'm glad to see you!"

"Mr. Hewitt, how is Mickie?" Her voice was quick, eager. "I saw him a little while ago and called to him, but he . . . he didn't see me, I guess."

Mark Hewitt said slowly, "He's pretty bitter, Frankie. He's . . . moving out." Hewitt was used to keeping his own counsel, but tonight doubt was torturing him; doubt of himself. And Frances loved Mickie. She was the right kind. He found himself pouring out the whole story of it. Frankie's hand lifted slowly toward the throat of her scarlet jacket.

"Oh," she whispered. "Oh, Mr. Hewitt, he was with. . . I don't know who. But he was in an auto with some men. We've got to do something."

Mark Hewitt's hand closed firmly about the worn grip of his nightstick. Do something. Yes, but what? It was what had been torturing him. His shoulders felt . . . heavy.

"I'm afraid it's gone beyond me, Frances. Unless you and I together. . . . Why didn't you explain to Mickie about Ricco, Frances?"

"I *tried* to!" the girl cried. Her eyes were wide, anxious. "Oh, I did try. I told him I'd thrown Ricco over, and . . . he didn't believe me, Mr. Hewitt. He was pretty nasty. You see, I thought I was being very smart. I wanted money and pretty things. But when Ricco . . . well, I didn't want them that bad. You understand."

Mark Hewitt said slowly, "You're all right, Frances. I always knew it. So is Mickie, but he doesn't know it, yet. I hope he finds it out in time. If I can show him . . . It's time for me to ring in, Frances. If you can do anything. . ."

"Oh, I will! I will!"

She was still standing there when Mark Hewitt paced on. She looked down the street toward Washington Avenue, the way Mickie had gone with those men . . . There was a vertical crease between Mark Hewitt's brows as he neared the police phone box. Mickie, in a car, with other men. Coupled with what Mickie had told him, that could mean only that they were bent on some crookedness—a holdup or a burglary. Hewitt's mind flinched from acceptance of the fact, but there was no other explanation. The pressure of his lips whitened them. He opened the box, rang in at headquarters.

When the signal buzzed back, he said, "Officer Hewitt, Three-sixty-four. I—" He hesitated, "Any orders?"

He hung up and stood staring at the phone. He took off his cap and mopped his forehead, went slowly on about his rounds. Abruptly, he halted, staring blankly ahead of him. Why should any mob take on a green man like Mickie McGrue, unless he had some special value to them? And Frances had seen him in this neighborhood; on Mark Hewitt's beat . . . *The Gardon Jewelry Shop!*

Mark Hewitt swung toward the police phone. He gripped the knob, and hesitated. . . . Good God, *Mickie*. . . !

MICKIE McGRUE turned violently to Borgum as the car slowed to a halt. "But, damn it, this is Mark Hewitt's beat!"

Borgum looked worried, "Is it? That's too bad, McGrue, but we can't turn back now. It would disappoint the chief and he wouldn't like it. I'll tell you what we

will do, McGrue. You stand up at that corner there, and if Mark Hewitt comes along, you talk to him. That will keep him from getting hurt. But don't let him come near the shop, get me?"

Mickie's face went pale behind his freckles. "Damn it, Borgum—"

"You're not trying to back out now, are you, McGrue?" Borgum was still smiling, but his pale eyes had hot lights in them. "You'll really be doing Hewitt a favor to keep him out of the way. These boys are—tough."

Mickie climbed out of the car. "All right. All right," he said. "I made the deal and I'll stick to it, but make it fast."

"Sure," Borgum said softly. "Sure we'll make it fast, McGrue, just for you."

Mickie McGrue took up his stand on the corner and started lighting cigarettes. If he saw a cop, he was supposed to snap one out into the middle of Washington Avenue as a signal. He hadn't known when he got those orders that it would be Mark he was watching for. Mark . . . Mickie swore under his breath. It was a damned dirty trick to play on him. The robbery would earn Mark a call-down. He might even be shipped to the sticks. Hell, if they found out Mickie was involved, Mark might even be arrested! God, there he was now!

Nervously, Mickie flipped a cigarette out into the middle of the street and set about lighting another. He could see Mark's silhouette swinging steadily along the sidewalk toward him; seemed to be walking faster than usual. Hell, that was just his imagination, that was all. No need to get nervous. He'd just stand here and talk to Mark . . . but it was a dirty trick to play.

Mark Hewitt stopped and smiled at Mickie McGrue.

"Just saw Frankie a little while ago," he said. "She's mighty anxious to see you, Mickie."

Mickie swallowed, tried to recapture his belligerent mood toward her. "Sure," he said. "Sure, why wouldn't she? Ricco threw her over. Now she wants me back again."

Hewitt shook his head. His glance shifted up the street toward the front of the Gardon Jewelry shop. Its light shone as usual, dimly. No car was parked near,

but it would be around the corner.

"You're wrong about that, Mickie," he said slowly. "She threw Ricco over. She wouldn't play the game the way he wanted her to. You see, it's like I told you. She's all right. Just as fine as you are, Mickie. You might try to go crooked, but you couldn't. A man. . ."

"Yeah, I know!" Mickie said sharply. "Once a sucker, always a sucker."

Hewitt nodded slowly. "Yes, Mickie. Well, I've got to get on."

"Wait a minute, Mark!"

HEWITT turned back, his face grave. His mouth had a harder line than usual. He didn't speak. "Yes, Mickie?"

Mickie began to talk excitedly, "Look, Mark, I've been thinking over what you said, and . . . to hell with it! Pinch me if you want to, but you're not walking up this street."

Mark Hewitt's breath gusted out. "For God's sake, Mickie. I hoped . . . you get out of this. Run, damn it! I'll wait two minutes and then. . ."

Mickie stepped close, and abruptly gun metal glinted in Mickie's hand. "You're not going to do it, Mark. They'll kill you! They're waiting in there and they'll shoot!"

Mark Hewitt looked down at the gun in Mickie's hand and then up into Mickie's eyes. "It's been tried before, son," he said quietly. "Give me that gun."

Mickie took a step backward. "No, damn it, Mark. I tell you they'll kill you. They. . ."

Mark Hewitt had turned his broad back and was stalking away from him toward the jewelry shop. Mickie started after him, stopped. He pointed the gun at Mark's leg. His hand was shaking. His whole body was shaking.

"God!" he sobbed. He pointed the gun straight up in the air and fired three shots. He opened his eyes . . . and his breath stopped in his lungs. Mark was on his face on the pavement!

"Mark!" Mickie shouted. He started forward and a hand clamped down on his shoulder, whirled him around. Borgum's hand snapped down on the gun, twisted it out of his hand.

"Nice work, kid," he said. "Get in the car, quick!"

"Damn you to hell!" Mickie cried. "I didn't shoot him! I—"

Borgum's hand flicked toward Mickie's head and Mickie tried to dodge. A blackjack seemed to burst his skull apart. He felt himself falling. Guns were crashing somewhere near.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once a Sucker—

MICKIE McGRUE came back to consciousness fighting. That was not because some one was slapping his face with hard stinging blows. He was trying to reach Mark Hewitt. When he reared up from the floor, it was moments before he realized he was in the back room at the Dutchman's place with Borgum showing his white, gold-rimmed teeth in a smile.

"Wake up, McGrue," he said. "Time to get your cut."

Mickie wavered dizzily on his feet. "Hewitt," he said. "Mark. I didn't shoot him. I swear I didn't."

Borgum laughed in the queer silent way he had. "Take it easy, McGrue. Hewitt wasn't shot. He took a dive like the wise sucker he is. Maybe his scalp got creased a little, that's all." He held out a thick wad of bills. "Two grand is your cut. Not bad for a few minutes' work, eh?"

Mickie looked down at the money, then up into Borgum's pale, cold eyes. "I didn't shoot him, damn it."

Borgum shrugged. "Have it your way. You didn't shoot him. You want this dough? I'm tired of holding it out."

Mickie took the money and tossed it into the jackpot on the table where the men sat at their perpetual cards. "That won't do any of us any good. If Mark Hewitt can walk, he'll be around to take this place apart. Mark Hewitt may be a sucker, but he deals them off the top of the deck every time. If you figure he'll keep quiet because I was in on this, you're crazy."

Borgum still smiled. "Maybe. Maybe I'm crazy. I hope I'm not." He said it pleasantly, and yet Mickie felt a coldness contract along his spine. There was something damned menacing about this easy-smiling, soft-talking Borgum. Mickie's

(Continued on page 104)

THE CRIME CLINIC



OF ALL the jobs connected with organized crime-fighting, one of the most difficult—and perhaps the most thankless—is that of the parole officer. His duties consist particularly of protection, but his “saving” runs in more than one direction.

First of all, he must protect the populace from certain of his parolees, because he is aware of the fact that politics at times make it possible for hard-shelled killers to be free. On the other hand, he must “save” the parolee from himself as well as the “system,” for if an ex-convict hasn’t made up his mind to go back to his old ways of life long before leaving the pen, it is more than likely that he will be again driven to crime because society seldom has a job for a jail-bird.

The parole officer, therefore, finds himself in the role of protector and even “father confessor.” A good parole officer suffers the torments of the damned in trying to help his worthy charges to better themselves—and some of his charges are certainly worthy. Human understand-

ing and faith in mankind are two of the parole officer’s most valuable assets, for without these attributes he is powerless to delve into the heart of the law-breaker who requires little more than kindness to set his feet on the straight and narrow.

At the same time, a parole officer is virtually useless without that quality so vital to the success of all law officers—courage. Many a parolee has sought to intimidate the officer to whom he was assigned, and in more cases than one, it is said, parole officers have met sudden, ugly death at the hands of vicious, kill-crazy parolees.

The fact that a high percentage of murders are committed by parolees, signifies that the officers whose duty it is to watch over them must be prepared to deal with desperate, conscienceless men—many of them congenital killers.

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THE EDITOR

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 102)

thoughts were a little mixed up, and not because of the blow that had knocked him kicking. He figured he was a wise guy and was going to take wise money, but when they handed it to him he threw it away. Like a sucker. Nuts! It wasn't because of that. It was just that he wasn't going to take money that had been stolen through Mark being hurt. Mark might be a sucker, but he had been white to Mickie through five long years. Mark would figure him for an out-and-out traitor.

The night dragged on and newspapers were brought in. Borgum made telephone calls from time to time, but there was nothing to indicate that Mark Hewitt had told what he had seen; nothing to show that the heat was on for Mickie McGrue.

"Looks like you had Hewitt figured wrong, McGrue," Borgum nodded over the open newspaper. "I think he's a right guy."

Mickie laughed. "You don't know Mark. He'll want to do this himself. The way Mark's built, he couldn't do anything else."

The night wore out and the men slept on couches in adjoining rooms, holing up until they knew what Hewitt would do. Only Mickie sat at the table and dealt endless hands of solitaire and Borgum sat smiling in his chair. . . .

It was two o'clock the next afternoon, when the guard at the door poked his head in. "Hey, Hewitt's coming down the block."

Mickie jumped to his feet, the sleep cleared from his brain in an instant. He felt queer. He was actually proud that Mark was coming as he had predicted, but he was frightened, too. By God, they'd better not try to shoot Mark! Not that Mickie McGrue was going soft. He was in the smart game to stay. He hated all cops . . . all cops but Mark.

"Alone?" Borgum asked, his voice easy but with a curious lift and sharpness in it.

"Alone—and he ain't in uniform."

Borgum nodded gently. "Let him come in." He winked at Mickie. "Hewitt's a right guy," he said. "I can pick them. Maybe he's tired of being a sucker, too. Like you."

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CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING

MICKIE laughed, the sneer back on his mouth again, but made no other answer. He was sitting back in a corner, the chair tipped back when Mark Hewitt came through the door with the same deliberate pace he always used. He nodded. "Hello, Mickie. 'Lo Borgum."

Mickie didn't speak. His jaw was hard, set. He hadn't shot Mark and Mark must know that. As for the rest of it. . . . Hell, he'd told Mark he was tired of being a sucker.

Borgum flashed his smile. "Have a seat, Hewitt. What you drinking?"

Hewitt said, "Beer will do." He sat down, straight-backed as always. His blue serge was as close to uniform cut as civilian clothes could be. His dark felt didn't rest quite in the same groove of his grey hair, but that was because of the bandage. His blue eyes turned steadily to Mickie, back to Borgum. He said slowly, "I kept my trap shut, Borgum. After that haul you made, it ought to be worth ten grand."

Mickie's chair legs hit the floor hard. He was on his feet without meaning to stand up at all. "Mark, you. . . ."

Mark Hewitt turned his eyes on Mickie and his mouth was twisted, too, into a sneer. "I'm getting old, son," he said flatly. "Think I'm going to be a sucker all my life?"

Borgum nodded, "I knew you were a right guy, Hewitt. I'll tell you what. I think we can go to ten grand for you. But there'll be a string tied to it. We've got another job cased in your territory. . . ."

Mickie came toward the table uncertainly, "Mark, for God's sake—"

Hewitt said wearily to Borgum, "Do I have to listen to that? I like the kid. You got me when you dragged him into this mess. But so help me God, I'll send him up with the rest of you if I don't get that ten grand."

Borgum was nodding, smiling. Mickie
(Continued on page 106)

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 105)

stared from one man to the other and couldn't get out words. He went backwards to his chair and sat down heavily. He tried to tell himself this was all right. He tried to tell himself this was all right. Mark was just playing smart after years of being a sucker. Just like Mickie had. Damn fool to think that the same rule wouldn't work for both of them. But

Mark. . . . Borgum dismissed Mark Hewitt presently. "Come back around eleven," he ordered. "I'll tell you the plans then. And I'll have half of the ten grand on tap for you."

Hewitt said, "Thanks, Borgum. So long, Mickie. See you later." He walked toward the door, putting his broad-toed shoes down in precise rhythm. Mickie began to laugh.

"Borgum, you win," he said. "Where's my two grand?"

Mickie tried to tell himself it was all right. He threw himself down to sleep at last. But, despite his dragging weariness, he couldn't. Somehow, it was all right for him to turn smart, but Mark. . . . Anyway you figured, it was wrong for Mark, after all these years of being a straight cop, to turn crooked. It was Mickie's fault. Nobody else's.

The thoughts milled around in his brain and wouldn't let him sleep. When finally he did drop off, he thought he heard Ricco's voice, taunting him. He sat bolt upright on the bed and he still heard Ricco. But he was awake. He knew he was. He crossed, fumblingly, to the door. He opened it. Borgum was at the table and across from it—damn it, was Ricco!

MICKIE went down the hall. Ricco slid easily to his feet and Borgum let his chuckle sound. "You boys know each other I think," he said. "If you want to fight, put it off until after tonight. By God, we got a great team. McGrue, Ricco and Hewitt."

Ricco's full lips never moved enough to show his teeth. His voice was smooth. "So far as I'm concerned, the fight is over. McGrue socked me. I sent him up for two months. How about it, McGrue?"

Mickie looked from Ricco to Borgum, and the words rang over in his brain:

CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING

"McGrue, Ricco and Hewitt." Something had happened while he slept, it seemed. He saw everything in a different light. Borgum had lied about wanting somebody to fight Ricco. He had lied about everything. It was merely that Borgum wanted to knock over two places on Hewitt's beat, and Mickie had given them the hold over Mark that they needed. It was as simple as that. And he had thought he was smart!

Mickie said slowly, very much in the tones Mark Hewitt might have used. "Ricco is a lousy crook. I'm not working with him and neither is Mark Hewitt. The deal is off."

Borgum's head jerked about in a way that made his neck seem curiously long and vulturine. "Now you boys don't want to fight," he chuckled.

"Maybe you didn't get me," Mickie said flatly. "Ricco's got nothing to do with it. I said the deal is off."

Borgum kept his head twisted like that for a moment longer, then he faced front. Ricco stood clear of the table and carelessly gripped the lapels of his tailored green suit.

"You're wrong, McGrue," Ricco said smoothly. "In a little while Hewitt will be here. You'll play along . . . or Hewitt will get it through the back. He'll be found with our money in his pockets—money from the Gardon shop."

Mickie felt the blood creep up his throat, felt his temples begin to throb. He held on to himself very tightly. "If you're worrying about me, don't," he said. "I'll go through with my part of it, but Hewitt is dealt out."

Borgum pivoted his chair about on one leg. His pale eyes rested wholly on Mickie's flushed face. "You're a little late, McGrue. Just a little. We can send you up the river for good. No? That doesn't worry you? And you don't care about Hewitt being shot, eh?"

"Hewitt's just stringing you along," Mickie said hoarsely. "When I tell him I'm through, he'll deal himself out."

"But you won't do that, McGrue," Ricco's smile barely moved his lips. "I'll show you why." He crossed to a phone on the wall, and dialed a number. "Hello, Frankie," he said presently, in an al-

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

tered voice. "Mickie can't get to a phone and he's in trouble. He wants you to meet him at the corner of Polk and Harrison in half an hour. Yeah."

Mickie started forward with his chin pulled in, his eyes puckered and glittering, but he ran into Borgum's suddenly leveled revolver. Ricco hung up and faced him, "We have a few friends on the force," he said. "Not many, but a few. After the job tonight, we'll just tip them that Frankie acted as lookout. We don't have to call them, of course. It all depends on you."

Mickie McGrue said dully, "All right, you win. But this is my last job. Get me?"

"Sure," Borgum said, showing his teeth. "Sure, this is your last job." He laughed. Ricco's full lips were curved a very little. "Yeah," he said.

MARK HEWITT came for his eleven o'clock appointment as punctually as if he were reporting for duty at the station house. Mickie still sat in his corner in the chair. Ricco and Borgum were at the table.

"This will have to be fast," Hewitt said steadily. "I can't stay off the beat long."

"Sure not," Borgum agreed. "Sure not." He shoved a sheaf of green bills across the table and Hewitt took them up and put some in the crown of his visored cap, some in an inner pocket of his tunic.

"What's the orders?" he asked.

Borgum said easily, "Just keep your eyes closed for a few hours, Hewitt. It's the easiest money you ever made."

Hewitt said easily, "Sure, I been a sucker too long."

Mickie got lumberingly to his feet. Ricco's eyes flicked toward him and his hand slid under his coat lapel.

But Mickie only laughed harshly, "Sure, Mark," he said. "Sure, that's it. We've been suckers too long. Remember you said, 'Once a sucker, always a sucker?' That was screwy, wasn't it, Mark?"

Mark Hewitt's eyes swung toward Mickie. They were still the steady, direct eyes Mickie knew.

"It seems that way," he said.

"Yeah," said Mickie. "We've been

CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING

suckers too long, you and me."

It was a feeble device, but it was the best Mickie could think of. Mark had always been quick to catch hidden meanings in words and he dared not stress them too heavily. "Once a sucker, always a sucker . . . We've been suckers too long . . . to change now!" But he couldn't say that last phrase, not with Ricco ready to shoot Mark through the back; not with Frankie waiting soon on that corner. If Mark understood that he had changed his viewpoint, surely he wouldn't go through with this bribery business. Not Mark. . . .

Mickie moved over to the table, standing beside Borgum, across the table from Ricco. Hewitt nodded, set the money-filled cap back on his head.

"The other five grand tomorrow?"

"That's it, Hewitt."

Hewitt nodded, pivoted and moved steadily toward the door.

"I'll be seeing you, Mark," Mickie called.

Hewitt went out and the door closed and Ricco's hard black eyes rested on Mickie. "I think," he said. "I'm not sure, but I think, McGrue, that you were trying to pull something then."

"Not me," Mickie said, and he sounded anxious. "Honest, I wasn't. I'm nervous, sure. A guy gets that way when he's new to the racket."

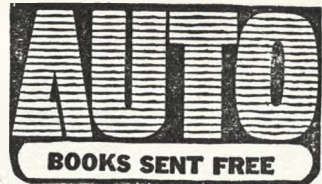
Ricco said slowly, "No, I was never nervous over a little thing like a job. And I am not convinced, McGrue. You were trying to get away with something."

Borgum chuckled, "Now boys, don't get excited. After all, McGrue is just going to do one more job. Hewitt took our money. He's not the kind to double-cross. Even if he dared to."

Two minutes. Were they passed yet? Mickie didn't know whether it was two minutes or thirty seconds—or two hours! He saw Ricco start to push back his chair. He couldn't wait any longer.

Mickie did two things at once. He jerked up a knee and spilled the table over into Ricco's lap. He swung his right in a savage, chopping blow at Borgum's jaw. Ricco cursed. Caught off balance, he dropped down on his knees. His hand clawed under his coat lapel. Borgum was

(Continued on page 110)



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 109)

quicker. He ducked his head and Mickie's fist glanced across his skull.

Mickie felt that miss like a blow in the stomach. He felt coldness race up his spine. But he couldn't stop now. He threw himself sideways at Borgum, ducking out of the chair, and carried the gang leader to the floor. There was a savage violence that blurred Mickie's vision. He went down hitting with both fists, with his knees, butting with his head. He fell half across Borgum. A leg of the overturned table glanced across Mickie's temple. It tore flesh. He scarcely felt it. He couldn't set himself for a solid blow. Borgum was writhing beneath him.

He was frantic with haste. On the other side of that table, Ricco was cursing with violence. Mickie saw Ricco's head come up above the table. His greas-smooth hair was straggling over his pale forehead and there were red lights in his black eyes. His gun came up, too.

Desperately, Mickie flung himself off Borgum, drove his shoulder against the table. It moved under the impact of his two hundred pounds. Ricco's voice rose in a shrill cry. Other shouts sounded in Mickie's ears. God, he was going to fail! He tried to pick himself up. He twisted his head around. Borgum's white face, just lifted from the floor, was smeared with blood. His gold-rimmed teeth were bared in a snarl and he had a gun in his hand. He lifted the muzzle.

MICKIE did the only thing he could. He drove his heels straight into Borgum's teeth. The gun crashed and pain ripped up Mickie's chest. He felt numb, shattered. But he knew his heels had smashed home. He pushed with his arms and they seemed without power. He twisted about, rolled. Borgum was face down again, the gun under his relaxed hand. Mickie got hold of it just as the door to the back rooms crashed open.

On his hands and knees, gripping the gun, Mickie turned his head with a stiffness that seemed to take minutes. Ricco had his shoulders against the far wall. His revolver was falling into line. Without aiming, Mickie squeezed the trigger; did it again. Something kicked him in the side and drove him over on top of

CORPSE FEVER IS CATCHING

Borgum. The room was swimming before his eyes, and men swam around with it. Then everything turned into darkness.

Mickie didn't want that darkness to fade, but it did presently, to give way to a white expanse that presently became a ceiling . . . the ceiling of a hospital room. He rolled his head and Mark Hewitt's face was close to his.

"Listen, Mickie boy," he whispered, "and listen hard. The commissioner will be here in a few minutes. I told him you did this job for me. You were just pretending to go in with the crooks, see? I told him you wanted to get into the force and figured you had to do something big after having served that time. Get it?"

Mickie McGrue nodded his head fuzily. Sure, that was all right. Anything Mark wanted him to say. His voice came out, stronger than he thought.

"No, I'm damned if it's all right. What about that five grand you took?"

Mark Hewitt's face split in a big grin. He threw back his head and laughter boomed out. "Swell, Mickie. Swell!" he said. "It was a little trick, Mickie, to get evidence on the Gardon case. We didn't have a bit and I knew they'd plant crooked money on me if they could. The boys were outside, only you cleaned up on things before we got in.

"Mickie, I had to do what I did, the way I did it. To make you understand. You remember what I told you . . . It's what a man *has* to do."

It wasn't very clear to Mickie, but it would be all right. He knew that now. Mark Hewitt wouldn't be a crook. He couldn't. And Mickie himself . . . Mickie laughed, weakly. He held up two fingers, very close together, and he was a little surprised to find them shaking.

"Once a sucker, always a sucker, Mark," he whispered. "You and me, Mark. You and me. . ."

He hadn't known Frankie was there until she spoke, her pert little face smiling. "And me, too, Mickie. Three suckers together . . . forever."

THE END

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You will receive the Buick 8 Sedan, and if prompt, \$1,250.00 cash besides, or if all cash is preferred, you get \$2,500.00 if you win first prize. As President of this big company, I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THAT EACH AND EVERY PRIZE WILL BE PAID PROMPTLY AND HONESTLY. I have paid out thousands of dollars in my recent prize distribution. NOW, OVER \$5,000.00 MORE IN CASH IS WAITING IN THE BANK FOR NEW WINNERS. Why not make up your mind to win a big cash prize from my company?

SEND YOUR ANSWER QUICK!

Oh boy, what you could do with \$2,500.00 cash all at one time. Think of the joy of having the money to provide the better things of life. Nothing hard to do now but act quick.

Just mail the coupon quick with MAGIC NUMBERS if you find them. Wouldn't you like the opportunity to win \$2,500.00? And remember, there are over 100 Grand Prizes. Hurry! **GLENN TATE, President** No. 66

730 North Franklin Street, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

\$1,250.00 CASH

Send your answer quick and
will tell you how she!

FOR PROMPTNESS

	7	
1		9
	3	

FILL IN THE MAGIC NUMBERS—DON'T DELAY—MAIL TODAY
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Name _____
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OWN A ROYAL PORTABLE ON YOUR OWN TERMS!



**HELPS
A LOT...
GIVES ME
MORE
SPARE TIME**

"A Royal Portable helps me with my school work. And, I'm practicing reading, that job, Dad has promised me."



**TRIED ALL...
PREFERS
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"Most of my courses at college are typewritten work. That's why I made the family give me a Royal Portable."



**PLANS
TO BE
AUTHOR...**

"All my life I've wanted to write! Now I'm finding time. I'm am not, with my Royal, but with his home work—helping him make more money."



**MAKES
MORE
MONEY...**

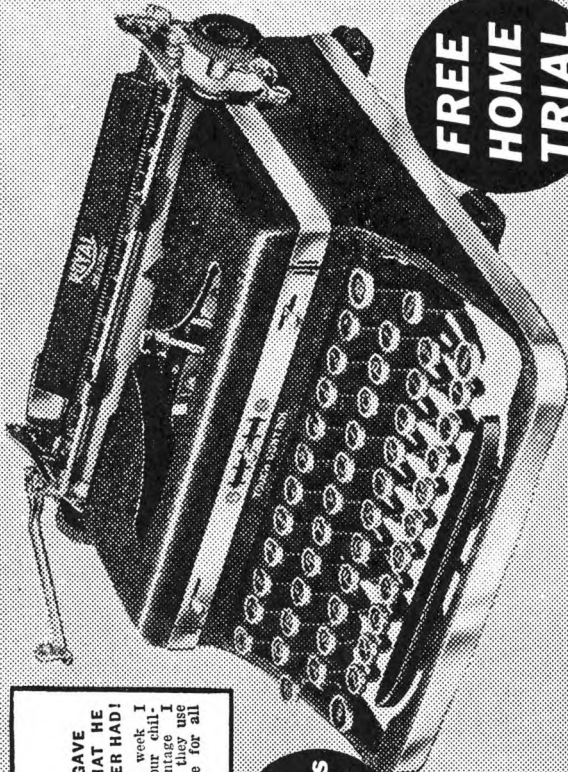
"Where I work, it's as count—but only when they're typing. Since I got a Royal, I'm making much faster progress."



**GAVE
WHAT HE
NEVER HAD!**

"Last week I gave our child an advance on his new hat. Now he uses a Royal Portable for all their writing."

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A DAY**



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This coupon brings complete up-to-minute information on interesting new typewriters. No obligation.

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2 Park Avenue, New York City, N. Y.
Please tell me how I can buy a latest model,
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Name
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Serial No.
Will you allow me CASH payment on a New Royal?

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Free Home Trial for every member of the family! Without risking a single penny—prove that a Royal Portable will help the students in your family to write easier, faster—do more! Prove that it will help you get your ideas and reports down on paper in a modern, intelligent manner. Prove that Mother can take care of her social correspondence easier with a Royal.

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