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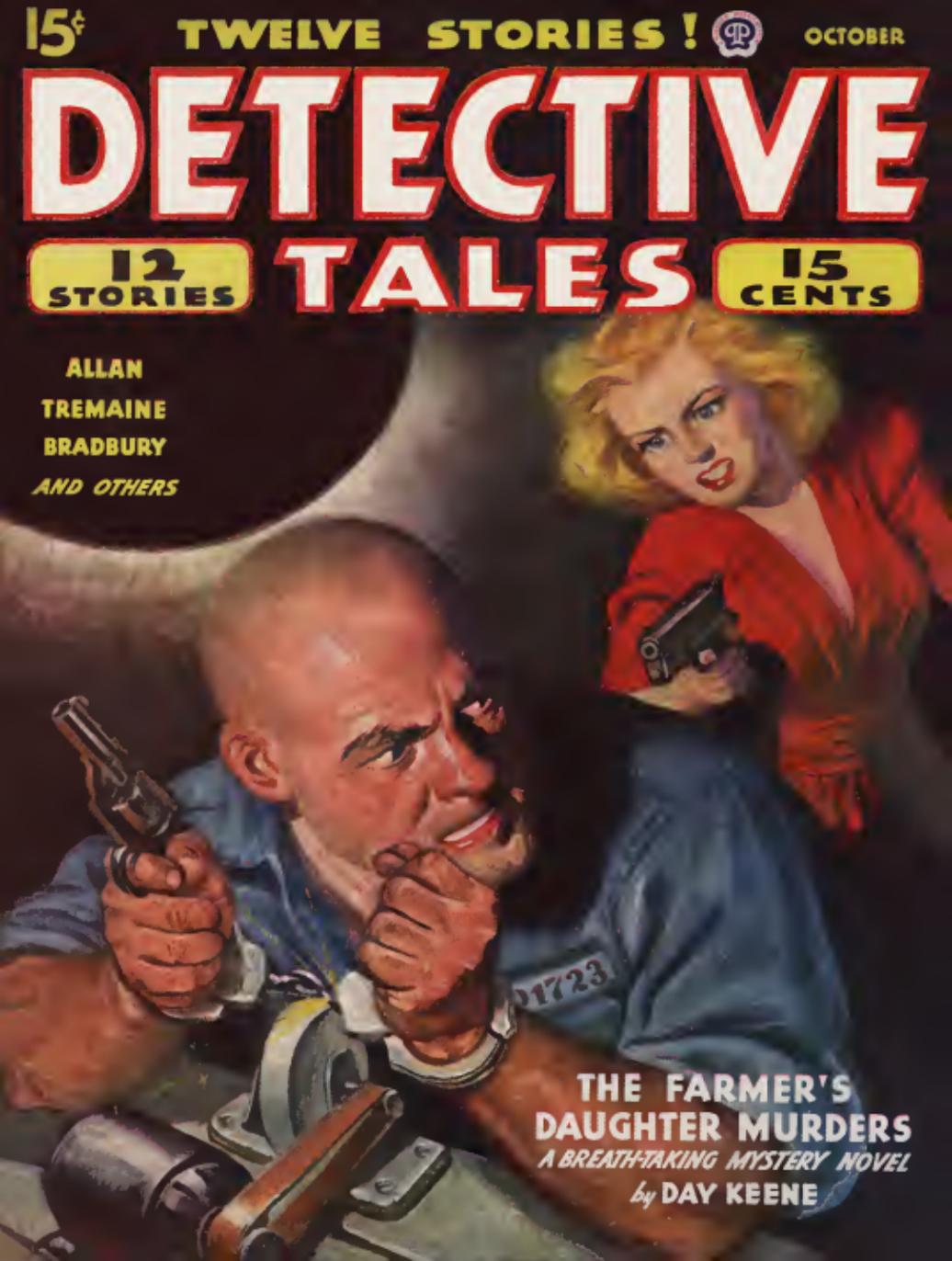
DETECTIVE

12
STORIES

TALES

15
CENTS

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Daughter Murders
A BREATHTAKING MYSTERY NOVEL
by DAY KEENE

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DETECTIVE TALES



November Issue
Published September 27th

VOL. TWENTY-EIGHT OCTOBER, 1944 NUMBER THREE

Fast-Action Mystery-Crime Novel

1. **THE FARMER'S DAUGHTER MURDERS**.....*Day Keene* 10
When Old McDonald dropped the case into Tom Doyle's lap, Tom would have gladly followed the advice of the stranger with the gun who said, "Leave it lay, chum!" But it was too late to turn back from the red-hot path to a fabulous fortune—and to some almighty sudden dying!

Two Spine-Tingling Novelettes

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The gentle art of cracking safes.

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THE CRIME CLINIC

MAYBE Wes should have been warned, because that night the entire routine of his unhappy life was changed.

It was like this: Instead of Edith starting to yap-yap about how her cousin Joe would buy his wife mink coats and Daché hats, she only ended up on that. That was after Wes had found the shoe-box packed with nice fresh hundred-dollar bills, hidden away in the closet. Of course, it belonged to *Cousin Joe!*

Edith's tinny laughter jarred his ear-drums. "Sure Joe comes here. He's my cousin, isn't he? He's got dough, hasn't he? You know—money, ducats, mazuma? But I forgot, you never heard of it. . . . Go out and get stinking on a couple of beers, then. Or pick up a girl who understands you, Wes!" And that really did make her laugh. . . .

The drinks hit him like a lead pipe, making him pleasantly numb. There was a nice-looking girl at the bar in a mink coat—the kind Joe would buy for his wife—who told him that her name was Sal. . . . and there were some more drinks. . . .

The cops were outside his door when he got home. Edith was inside waiting for him, but she'd do no more quarreling, no more taunting him about cousin Joe. She lay on the shabby living-room rug, and Wes's knife was still in her breast.

They were decent about it, but it must have sounded funny as hell. For Wes didn't know the name of the joint; he didn't know the name of the girl called Sal. And when he mentioned the shoe-box stuffed with bills, that was a laugh.

"I'll get it and show you," said Wes. "It belongs to Joe, my wife's cousin. . . ."

"Joe who?"

Then he remembered with a chill pricking along his spine, that he had never even heard Edith mention Joe's last name, where he lived, or anything about him. And the box was gone.

The plain-clothes man got up slowly. "All right, Robbins," he said to Wes. "Come along down to headquarters, and we'll go over it again."

That was when Wes got his break.

Wes barely glimpsed the men's shadows as they stepped out of the alleyway; barely heard the meaty crunch of the lead-weighted sap just above the detective's ear; barely felt the cold pressure of the hidden gun-muzzle in his back as he was prodded quickly into the waiting car.

"Now, bud, you're going to play pretty. What did you do with that hundred G's in the shoe-box?"

Wes's struggle against the hopeless odds of both the law and a ruthless murder-combine, who needed that missing hundred grand, makes one of the most colorfully dramatic and suspenseful stories we've ever printed.

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—THE EDITOR



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WHEN GANGDOM RULED

AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES by WINDAS

Pietro Lombardi, top tycoon of the traffic in drugs, counted his victims by the thousands and his gains by the millions. Those who served him and outlived their usefulness, were disposed of, as when pretty Marie Telegren was found in her Brooklyn apartment with a knife between her shoulder blades.



Of all the rackets, none was more vicious, none more contemptible, than Lombardi's. His empire of evil spread its blight over rich and poor alike. He lured wealthy Hollywood luminaries to nerve-wracked ruin; or reached out to shatter the lives of respectable though obscure citizens of every state in the Union.

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He was finally trapped by Marie Telegren's sister Lola. This young woman took a job as cigarette girl in one of Lombardi's many night clubs. She gathered information at great risk to her life and had the satisfaction of seeing Lombardi die in a blast of F.B.I. gunfire.

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- Industrial Management

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THE FARMER'S DAUGHTER MURDERS

Suspenseful Mystery Novel

By DAY KEENE

I flipped one between the rails.
He balanced for a moment, then
fell. . .



When Old McDonald slipped that sorely needed retainer into Detective Tom Doyle's hand, Tom didn't know that he was launched on a breath-taking and deadly tour of intrigue, double-cross and murder that made his service on Guadal seem like a Sunday-school picnic!

CHAPTER ONE

Invitation to Die

IT BEGAN as a missing heir case. I had just figured out my income tax and was wondering which cell in Alcatraz Uncle Sam would set aside for me if I couldn't raise the money to pay it when the hood came into my office.

He was young but he knew his business. The bulge in his side coat pocket was a gun. "You're Tom Doyle," he accused. "I pleaded guilty."

He drew the automatic from his pocket and weighed it in his palm. "They say, a word to the wise is sufficient. Lay off the McDonald

case. Don't take it. Tell the old man you wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. You understand?"

I didn't, but I told him that I did.

He slid the gun back in his pocket and grinned. "That's fine, just fine, pal," he assured me. "No hard feelings, understand? This is just a business deal."

There are two doors opening into my private office. He left by the one through which he had entered, the one leading into the hall. I seldom kept it locked. His appearance didn't make sense. I didn't know him. I didn't know any McDonald, except Jeanette. And I was certain she didn't know me.

I crossed to the door and locked it, flipped the switch on the inter-office annunciator. "I'm expecting a Mr. McDonald," I told Sue. "Send him in as soon as he gets here."

She gave me an argument. "There is no Mr. McDonald on the appointment book. No Mr. McDonald has phoned. What makes you think one will call?"

I told her, "I'm the seventh son of a seventh son. I have visitations."

"You're a son all right," she admitted. "But s-e-v-e-n wasn't the way they spelled it when I went to school."

I flipped the switch, took a gun from my top desk drawer and dropped it into my pocket. I don't know what I expected, but McDonald wasn't it.

SUE towed him in five minutes later. He was tall and angular with work-stooped shoulders and gnarled hands. His hair, what was left of it, was white. He carried a cane but didn't use it. His washed blue eyes were sunken deep into his skull, but friendly looking. I judged his age at eighty.

Sue gave me a dirty look. "Mr. McDonald, Mr. Doyle."

The old man offered me his hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you, son."

I said I was glad to meet him.

Sue got the old man a chair. "It seems that Mr. McDonald's grand-daughter is missing."

During my eleven years with Inter-Ocean, and six months on my own, I've handled a lot of cases. Most of them have been murder, grand larceny, and snatches. I thought of the hard-eyed young hood. "You mean that she's been kidnapped?"

McDonald shook his head. "No, just missing," he told me. I want to employ you to find her."

I sized up my fee by his clothes. He couldn't afford to pay much. "I'm afraid that I'm too busy at the moment to look for a missing child," I told him. "You go down to the Missing Persons Bureau and tell Sergeant Greely—"

The old man shook his head. "You don't understand," he explained. "She isn't a child. She's a woman." His deep voice dropped an octave. "I lost her thirty years ago."

Sue wrinkled her nose at me and left the office. I kept thinking of the hood.

"And if it's a matter of money," McDonald added, "I have plenty."

That was fine. I didn't. I got a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet and poured us both a drink. "Suppose you tell me the story," I suggested.

He told it, nursing his drink. The story wasn't pretty. He didn't try to spare himself. He told it as it had happened.

Thirty years before, he had been a pros-

perous truck farmer in Prairieville, south of the Chicago city limits. His daughter Mary, an only child, had kept house for him after his wife had died. He admitted ruling her with an iron hand.

"We thought it best in those days," he explained. "Girls didn't have much freedom."

Young, pretty, filled with a zest for life, she had rebelled at his narrow views and run away. The inevitable had happened. She returned and appealed to him for aid. In his stupid, holier-than-thou-pride, he had turned her from his door.

"She had her child in her arms," he told me. "I struck her with my fist. I called her a foul name, and barred my door against her. I—I thought I could play God."

I PUSHED the bottle toward him. He poured half a tumblerful and gulped it. With time, his anger and hurt pride had cooled. He realized what he had done. In an effort to atone, he sold his farm and engaged a firm of detectives to find her. They had taken his money, but had given him nothing in return. He had never seen, nor heard, directly, from the girl or her child again.

He took a small oil-skin wrapped packet from his pocket. It contained a marriage license issued to one J. C. McDonald and one Mary Phillips in 1889, a birth certificate of one Mary McDonald dated 1894, and a faded newspaper clipping.

I picked up the clipping first. It was the yellowed picture of a girl.

"That's my Mary," McDonald told me. His deep voice broke. "I killed her just as surely as if I'd shot her with a gun."

The clipping was dated October 7, 1918 and cut from the old Herald-Tribune. It wasn't much of a picture. I could tell that the girl had been pretty. The caption read:

Actress takes poison in Loop Hotel. Police blame clandestine love affair with prominent local business man.

"And there was no trace of the child?" I asked him.

He shook his head. The whole affair had been hushed. No one could, or would, tell him who the man had been, or what had happened to the child. McDonald had been shunted from one official to another. Someone had bought his detectives. Heartsick, he had given up and had retired to California. Now, in the shadow of the grave, he was making one last attempt to right the wrong he had done.

"Mary's child may be in need," he told me. "The least I can do is find her and will her what money I have."

I didn't like the case. It had too many messy angles. I believe in allowing sleeping

dogs to sleep. If it hadn't been for the hood who had warned me *not* to take it, I wouldn't have touched the thing with the ten foot pole that he suggested.

"Who might not want you to find your grand-daughter?" I asked him."

He told me that he knew of no one who might even be interested.

"And you've made what efforts to find the child—that is, recently?"

He named his lawyers, Bauers & Hanson, at 221 North LaSalle. "They have advertised in the papers for the past month," he admitted, "but so far it has brought no results. That's why I came to you."

I picked the morning paper from my desk and turned to the personal want ads. I didn't know the law firm, but their ad was standard. It read:

If the daughter of Mary McDonald, who died at the Great Northern Hotel in Chicago on October 6, 1918, will communicate with Bauers & Hanson, Attorneys' At Law, Suite 2031, 221 N. La Salle Street, she will learn something greatly to her advantage.

I asked McDonald, "How much to her advantage?"

The old man told me flatly, "I'm worth, perhaps, a quarter of a million dollars." His blue eyes hardened. "But don't think that you or anyone else can take me. Of whatever I die possessed I want to go to Mary's child." He took a check book from a pocket of his baggy coat and wrote laboriously. "I'll give you one thousand dollars now and four thousand more if you find the child. But I won't pay any expenses. And I won't pay a penny more."

I BLEW on the check. He gave me a few more details, left the oil-skin wrapped papers in my possession, after asking for a receipt, told me that he was staying at the Chalmers House, and stood up to leave.

"Don't sell me out, Doyle," he said in parting.

I promised him I wouldn't, let him out the private door, and asked Sue to get me Bauers and Hanson on the phone.

"This is Tom Doyle of the Doyle Agency," I told Bauers. "Old J. C. McDonald has just retained me to try and find his grand-daughter."

"That's fine, just fine, Mr. Doyle," Bauers said. "I'm glad to hear it. When he suggested going to you, we advised it warmly. We've been running an ad for a month, but so far with no results."

I put it on the line. "And the old man really has dough?"

The lawyer chuckled. "Don't be so suspicious, Doyle. We checked."

"And he has it?"

"He has. Made it in oil. When old Mr. McDonald returned to Chicago, he deposited two hundred thousand dollars in the First Security National Bank."

I thanked him and hung up. Sue pulled the plug from the board and came in. I could tell by the way she was grinning that she had heard the whole thing.

"This week, Way Down East," she grinned. "Next week, East Lynn or Madame X."

I told her I wasn't so certain. It was more likely to be Hearts And Flowers. The case had been lying dormant for years. Now, twenty-four years later, *someone still didn't want McDonald to find Mary McDonald's child.* They had known he was coming to me and had sent a hood to warn me off.

I had a hunch I'd earn my fee. It stood to reason. When a man digs into a grave, the chances are he'll find a corpse. . . .

PRAIRIEVIEW is twenty miles south of the Loop. It was dusk by the time I reached it. The houses were few and scattered. The owner of the small general store, a man by the name of Willem, remembered McDonald well.

"John was a good farmer, but a hard man," he told me. "He left here thirty years ago and went to California. Some say he died. Others say he struck it rich in oil. I wouldn't know. He hasn't been back here since he left."

I asked him if he had known McDonald's daughter, Mary.

He nodded. "Very well."

I showed him the yellowed clipping.

"That's Mary," he said smiling. He read the caption and the smile faded from his face. "McDonald was never the same after she ran away. Whatever happened to her baby?"

I told him that was what I was trying to find out and asked if she'd had a girl friend.

Willem thought a moment. "She did." He directed me to a Mrs. Jon Von Pieter. "You can't miss the place. Keep right on the way you're headed for another half a mile. It's a small red brick house with a big white barn on the right side of the road."

I found the house without trouble. A frowsy blonde answered the door. The place reeked of cooking cabbage. I told her who I was and what I wanted. "Willem said you were her friend. I'll pay well for information."

A heavy-set, flat-faced Dutchman got up from the kitchen table and came to the door smoking a foul-smelling pipe. He introduced himself as Von Pieter and wanted to know why I was asking questions concerning Mary McDonald's baby.

I told him that was my business, but it would be to the girl's advantage if she could be found.

The frowsy blonde laughed shrilly. "We don't know a thing. Mary has been dead for years. I think that her baby died, too." She sniffed self-righteously.

"I knew Mary well," Von Pieter told me. "Better as Nellie, here."

The woman said, sourly, "He *thought* that they were engaged. But Mary was too good to be a farmer's wife. She had to run away and get herself in trouble."

Von Pieter roared, "Silence, woman!" He told me, red-faced, "Whether the little girl is still alive or not, I do not know. But the papa's name was Herman or Sherman. Mary kept crying for him on the night McDonald drove her from his house." He glowered at his wife. His face grew even redder. "Und Mary was married to the papa. Mary was *goot girl*."

I offered him a folded bill. He shook his head. The blonde slammed the door in my face. I could hear them quarreling as I walked back to my car. I had known what I was getting into. Digging in graves isn't very pleasant.

THE night was warm for Spring. There was the smell of fresh turned loam in the air. I rolled my windows down. Half way back to Willem's store, my lights picked up a car, parked with the left hind wheel jacked up on the pavement. A man squatted in the middle of the road, banging at the wheel with a hammer. I slowed down to pass him and he hailed me.

"You wouldn't have a lug wrench, buddy?"

I braked and told him that I had.

"That's just fine," a voice approved in my left ear. "If you can't keep your nose clean, maybe we'll use it on you."

I knew I'd look into a gun before I turned. I didn't miss it. The man who had been banging at the tire yanked open the door on his side.

"Drag him out and let's make this snappy," he cautioned. "There's a car coming up the road."

I couldn't see either of their faces. I sat with my hands on the wheel.

"Get out!" the lad with the gun ordered.

"Nuts to you," I told him. "I'm comfortable right here."

He slashed at me with his gun barrel. I ducked, but not far enough. It caught me above the left temple and ripped open a gash to my cheek bone.

"Get out of the McDonald case, understand?" he ordered.

The man who had been pounding at the tire let me have it with the hammer. "This is just a warning. Get out and stay out—or it's curtains!"

I considered making a break for my gun,

but I was afraid that it would excite them. The lights from the oncoming car were growing brighter in my rear vision mirror. I even thought I could hear the motor.

"Yeah. Sure. I understand," I told them.

The lug on the left side of the car made another swipe at me with his gun barrel. "Just so you don't forget . . . *Verbum sat sapienti!*"

The blow caught me behind the ear. I nosed-dived into the wheel, smashing my lips on a spindle. When the pinwheels stopped spinning in my head, the tail light of their car was a dot of red down the road and an old farmer was shaking me and yelling, "It's all right now, son. Keep calm. Don't get excited."

I tried my fingers loose from the wheel and spat out a mouthful of blood. "I can't help it," I told him soberly. "Whenever I bleed, I see red."

CHAPTER TWO

Shot in the Dark

I DROVE on up to Willem's store. He had seen the car pass but had not paid much attention to it. I hadn't seen either man's face distinctly. I doubted I would know either man if I saw him again. The only clue to their identity was their interest in the McDonald case and the knowledge that one of them spoke Latin.

Willem called the local doctor, a young lad by the name of Foster, to sew up the gash on my cheek. I tried to remember the phrase that the hood who had slugged me had used. The 'sap' was the only part that stood out clearly.

Foster said his Latin was fresh in his mind.

"The first word was the name of a flower," I told him. "Verbena, or something like that. I don't remember the second word. The third word was sap something."

He threaded his needle with a length of cat gut. "It couldn't have been *verbum sat sapienti?*"

"It could and it was." I nodded.

"Then it was a warning," he told me. "That means, a word to the wise is sufficient."

I closed my eyes and printed a mental take of the young hood who had warned me not to take the McDonald case. He hadn't been one of the men. I doubted that he, or whoever he represented, had been behind the second warning. His kind didn't warn a second time. When they pointed a gun, they pulled the trigger.

Foster finished his needle work and stood admiring it. I looked in Willem's mirror. Except for the wisp of a mustache, that Sue had insisted that I grow after I had gotten

out of the Army—and the fact that we both have dark hair—I didn't look much like Clark Gable. My left eye was swollen almost shut. My lips stuck out Ubangi fashion. He had done a neat job on the gun-gash.

"I don't suppose," Foster said, "that it would do a bit of good to tell you that a few days in bed wouldn't harm you."

I admitted that it wouldn't, paid him for his hemstitching and pointed the nose of my car at the Loop. I wanted to see old McDonald. I didn't like this clay pigeon business. Either he knew more than he had told me, or someone just didn't like me. "Two someones," I reflected.

I CONSIDERED the known facts. McDonald had wronged his daughter. Now, in retribution, he wanted to will a quarter of a million dollars to his dead daughter's child, if said child, present identity and whereabouts unknown, could be found and identified. So far, fine. But either someone did not want me to find something in the grave into which I was digging, or they had other ideas regarding the disposition of the old man's money.

I mulled the names Herman and Sherman in my mind. Jon Von Pieter had sworn that Mary McDonald had told him that she was married and that a man named Herman or

Sherman was the father of her child. If that was true, it should show on the records. I made a mental note to ask Sue to check at the City Hall in the morning.

McDonald gaped at me open-mouthed when I walked into his room. "You're hurt, son. There's been an accident."

I told the old man that it hadn't been an accident, but not to let it bother him. I could stand a lot of pain for the fee that he was paying. He had been sitting reading a Bible, with a bottle of rye convenient to his elbow. I helped myself to a drink and asked him,

"Who doesn't like you? Or, let's put it this way. If I can't find Mary's daughter, who does your money go to?"

He named a half dozen well known charities. I couldn't imagine any of them hiring thugs to slug me on a lonely country road.

"How about after you left my office? Who did you tell that I had accepted the case?"

McDonald swore that he hadn't told a soul. "I swear on my Bible," he boomed. "After eating a bite of supper, I came straight to my room and I have been here ever since."

I considered the possibility of his granddaughter not wanting to be found. It seemed the best bet that I had. On the other hand, anyone silly enough to turn down a quarter of a million dollars because a misguided old

Your face looks swell, feels better yet
When you shave with a Thin Gillette.
This blade saves time and dough what's more—
For one dime buys a pack of four!



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

man had wronged her mother thirty years before, belonged in a mental institution.

"Okay," I told the old man in parting. "You've bought yourself a boy. This is my problem, not yours. You go on back to your Bible."

He was worried and he showed it. He stood in his doorway gaping after me vacuously. I felt like an idiot. The case was developing into a dilly. The deeper into it I got, the less sense it made.

THERE was a bar just off the lobby. I stopped in for a quick one while I debated my next move. Hymie Miller and Chuck Hovak were bellied to the bar. I hadn't seen either one in the four months that I'd been back. Both of them were as crooked as a Nazi plebiscite. But both of them were smooth. They didn't go in for rough stuff. Miller, a fat man in his middle fifties, had been a big-time con man and the head of a ducat mob for years. Hovak was his scratch man, and the best free-hand forger in the business.

Both of them almost shook my arm off. Miller insisted on buying my drink. "The town hasn't been the same without you," he assured me.

I asked him what jail he'd just gotten out of.

"San Quentin," Hovak told me promptly. "And it stinks."

On a hunch I described the gunman who had barged into my office. "You boys wouldn't know him, would you?"

Miller shook his head. "The description might fit any one of half a dozen lads I know." He studied my battered face shrewdly. "Why? Is he the lad who hung one on you?"

I told him no.

Miller let it go at that. "Times have changed," he told me. "It's not like the old days. Since you've been away, a new breed of punks has sprung up."

"College punks," Hovak assured me. "With no finesse. All they know how to do is slug."

I debated a moment and asked Hymie how long he had worked the Loop.

"Over thirty years," he told me proudly.

I took the clipping that old McDonald had given me from my wallet and spread it on the bar, keeping the caption covered with my hand. "Do you remember that girl?"

Both men studied the picture intently. "She looks rather familiar in a vague way," Miller admitted finally. "But I don't believe that I ever knew her. Why? Who is she?"

"She's been dead for twenty-five years," I told him. "But she was an alleged actress. And her first name was Mary."

Miller studied the picture again. "As I recall it," he mused, "there was a Mary Mc-

Donald who used to be leading lady in the stock company at the old Academy of Music."

I asked if she had a daughter.

"Hell. I wouldn't know that, Doyle," he chuckled. "I was just a punk in those days, stealing peanuts. Leading ladies were out of my class." He thought a moment, added, "But I tell you who might know. Why don't you go over and see old Frank Staunton at Walter's Hotel. If anyone knew her, he would. Frank was a local stock leading man for years."

I kicked myself for not having thought of Staunton before. Miller was right. If anyone knew her, he would.

A WIND had sprung up off the lake. I left my car in the parking lot and flagged a cab to take me to Walter's. In its day it had been a good hotel. Now, it wasn't much more than a flophouse, just over the river on Dearborn.

As I got out and paid the cabbie off, he asked, "You wouldn't be hot, would you, chum?"

I asked him why.

He told me, "There were a couple of guys giving you the double O through the windows of that bar."

I asked if he could describe them.

He shook his head. "Hell, no! I wouldn't know 'em from Adam. All I could see was that one of them was short and the other was a big guy."

I added a buck to the fare, walked into the lobby of the Walters, counted twenty and walked out on the sidewalk again. A lone Checker cab was rolling toward the Loop. An early drunk was cutting down Erie toward Clark. Two girls passed by, their heads bent low against the wind. I could see no trace of anyone tailing me.

I walked back into the hotel and up to the scabrous desk. The tile of the lobby was pitted. The paint was scaling from the walls. A half dozen elderly derelicts sat staring blankly into space.

A youthful clerk stopped picking his pimples and looked up from a Comics book. "Yeah? Wadda you want?" he demanded.

I told him I wanted to see Frank Staunton. He gave me his room number and returned to his magazine.

A broad stairway led to the second floor. The hallway was dimly lighted. The whole place smelled of dry rot and decay. The carpeting was scuffed and torn. In front of the fire-escape window an old fashioned radiator was banging noisily.

I recognized Staunton as soon as I saw him. He was a fragile looking old man with a slightly bulbous nose and silver hair. He was sitting on a sway-backed bed trying to read

a *Billboard* in the light of a small-watt globe. There being more heat in the hall than in his room, he had left his room door open.

"I am afraid," he smiled, as I knocked, "that you have the advantage of me. But please come in, sir."

I introduced myself.

"I've heard of you," he admitted. He offered a packet of crumpled cigarettes. I took one so as not to offend him. "This is a pleasure, Mr. Doyle."

I offered him a light and looked around the room. It held a bed, a chair, and his old-fashioned round-topped Triple X Taylor trunk. I only knew him by reputation, but I'd known dozens of his kind. Too old to work, too proud to go on relief or beg, they somehow managed to keep up a front and exist on the few days work they could pick up from time to time in revivals of plays they had once made famous—or by posing for various advertising firms as elderly multi-millionaires who could only drink a certain brand of coffee or eat Kracky-Krunchies for breakfast.

I CAME to the point directly. "This is a business call. I'm looking for certain information concerning a particular girl whom I think you might have known. And if you can give me that information, it's worth—" I started to say fifty, raised it to a hundred dollars.

His thin lips quivered slightly. "I—I'd be very pleased to earn a hundred dollars."

I walked to the door and looked out. There was no one in the dimly lighted hall. I walked back to the bed, took the clipping from my wallet, showed it to the aged actor. "Did you ever know this girl?"

He adjusted glasses on his nose and held the clipping to the light. "I did," he admitted, "quite well." He studied the picture a moment longer, added, "I believe that her first name was Mary, but her last name escapes me at the moment. I was trying to think of it just the other day."

"It wasn't McDonald?"

"That's it," he beamed. "That's it. Mary McDonald was her name."

"She was your leading lady?"

Stanton shook his head, smiled thinly. "No. If I recall her correctly, she was a talented little farm girl, rather gauche and naive, who played ingenues and general business with us for a season." He added, ruefully, "That was many years ago. Just what was it that you wanted to know about her?"

"I'm trying to find her daughter," I told him. "Do you remember the child?"

His tired eyes lighted. "Very distinctly. She was a sweet-faced little girl with golden curls, possibly three or four years of age. We used to call her *little Mary*."

"And *this* Mary McDonald was married?"

He thought a moment, told me, "I wouldn't swear, but I believe she was."

"Her husband's name was Herman or Sherman?"

He shook his head. "That I cannot tell you." He touched one eyebrow in a nervous gesture. "After all, I was the reigning matinee idol of those days. I had my own affairs d'amour. I really didn't pay much attention to the girl."

"Then why," I asked him coldly, "did you tell me that you were trying to think of Mary's name just the other day?"

The old man stared at me for a moment, puzzled, smiled, "Oh, yes. I remember now. I saw her picture in the paper."

I asked, incredulously, "*You saw Mary McDonald's picture in the paper?*"

STAUNTON laughed and crushed out his cigarette. "No, I mean I saw, or thought I saw, her *daughter's* picture. The young woman was twenty-nine or thirty and the resemblance to Mary was striking. It was like looking at a ghost." He tapped his forehead impatiently. "But McDonald wasn't the name on that picture."

I peeled five twenties off my roll and handed them to him. "You tell me what paper that was, and on what date," I told him, "and you can consider you've earned the money."

There were some newspapers stacked on his trunk. The old man stared at them, uncertainly. "It was only a few days ago," he mused. "The picture was in the rotogravure section." His face brightened. "Oh, yes. Now I know. It was in last—" He broke off, staring at the door.

I turned, one hand streaking for my gun. A gray-gloved hand was slipping around the door jamb, feeling for the switch.

I nailed it to the wall with a slug. But not before it had found the switch. Then a gun in the dark doorway blasted. Stanton screamed in fear, or pain, "No. No! You promised—"

The gun blasted a second time. I fired two quick shots at the flash and heard both of them smack into plaster. Then running feet pounded down the hall.

I raced for the door, threw myself flat on the carpet as someone loosed a clip at me from the far end of the hall. The slugs slapped into the radiator and ricocheted, screaming, off the walls. It almost made me palm-sick. It sounded like Guadacanal.

The only lights in the hall were the dim red bulbs at the exits. I blasted back at the stairhead and rushed it in a crouch. By the time I had reached the lobby, the pimply-faced clerk had vaulted his desk and was staring wide-eyed at a trail of blood that had dripped

across the tiles. "There were two of them!" he gasped. "A tall man and a short one. They had handkerchiefs over their noses."

I raced on out to the street. A quarter of a block away, a car was pulling from the curb. There was no cab in sight. It was too far away for me to catch the numbers on the license plates, and it was useless to pursue it. Once it had crossed the bridge it would be lost in the Loop traffic. I went back into the hotel and up to Staunton's room, accompanied by the clerk.

The old actor was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. There was a hole where his nose should have been. The bills that I had given him were still clutched in one hand.

"He's dead," the clerk whimpered.

I told him to call H.Q. "Ask for Lieutenant Harry Nobby. Tell him that you're calling for Tom Doyle and reporting a homicide."

Instead of moving, he goggled at me wide-eyed. "Doyle! You're Tom Doyle, the dick that used to be with Inter-Ocean. The dick that went into the Army and killed all those Japs single handed?"

I shook my head. "No. I had two hands," I told him. "Also a B.A.R. I wish that I had one a few minutes ago."

I wasn't kidding. I felt like hell. Staunton had trusted me and I'd got him killed. More, there was no keeping this quiet any longer. I'd handled missing heir cases before. Once this thing broke in the paper, there would be more missing grand-daughters, blondes, brunettes, and redheads, turn up to claim kinship to old J. C. McDonald's money than Adams off-ox had bullocks.

CHAPTER THREE

Practically Dead

AN East Chicago Avenue Station prowler car man, whose name turned out to be Ryan, picked the call out of the ether and got there before Lieutenant Nobby did. He caught me sorting the papers on Staunton's trunk, trying to find a picture of a girl who looked like the clipping that I had.

"Cut it, you," he insisted. "You're smart enough looking to know that it's against the law to touch anything in a room of death until the cops get there."

I could have quoted him chapter and verse. I didn't. Fiction and Grade B flickers notwithstanding, it isn't the wise-cracking private dicks having the crime-of-their-lives, thumbing their noses at the salaried men on the Force, who wear two-hundred dollar top-coats and ride in Cadillacs. Unless a private agency man stands in with the boys in blue, he can make more money hawking herrings.

I apologized instead and thanked him for reminding me. Besides, I'd been through all the papers and the picture wasn't there.

Harry Nobby came in, trailing a wreath of blue cigar smoke. The old man on the floor was just another stiff to him. "What! Only one corpse?" he kidded. "What's the matter, Tom? You're slipping." He got a good look at my face and laughed. "Holy smoke! Who hung one on you?"

The usual routine got under way. A bored pic man began to build up the old man's last press. A tech man scraped blood and flesh from the wall where I'd put one through the killer's hand. Another dug slugs from the floor. A young assistant, still imbued with rosy ideals, tiptoed into the room, took one look at the hole in Staunton's face, certified him as dead, tiptoed back out into the hall. The old man didn't look pretty.

As Nobby searched Staunton's pockets, I squatted down beside him and gave him what I knew.

"That isn't much to go on," he said sourly. "I hate these damn' thirty year later cases. There are always too many angles with ninetenths of the witnesses dead. Who knew that you were here?"

"A tall man and a short man," I told him. "Fine," he enthused. "Now all I have to do is to put out a pick-up on Mutt and Jeff. If only someone had noticed if one of them had B.O."

HE DUMPED the contents of Staunton's pockets on the dresser. There wasn't much. There was a letter post-marked San Diego from some lad named Cary Gibson saying that all was going well and he could expect to see him soon. Besides the letter there was a cheap pocket knife, an old fashioned watch fob, but no watch, a ten cent store note book filled with the names of advertising firms, and thirty cents in change.

Lieutenant Nobby grunted, "The poor devil was probably starving to death. Who claims the body?"

I called the Chalmer's House Bar. The barman said that Hymie Miller and Hovak were still there but fairly sloppy as they had been lapping it up without a break ever since I had left. I asked to talk to Miller, told him what had happened, and asked if he knew if the old man had any relatives.

He was shocked. "I don't think so, Doyle," he told me. "But who'd want to kill that old Gee? He didn't have an enemy in the world."

I pointed out he had one and hung up. Nobby paid Miller a tribute. "We could use that guy on the force," he admitted. "He's the smoothest con lad in the racket since Yellow Kid Weil's arteries began to harden. When he figures out a racket, it's perfect."

I told him no racket was ever perfect, but we were working on a murder case. He turned the body over to a couple of waiting wagon men and suggested that I ride back to H.Q. with him and take a look through the pic file of lads who had crawled out from under stones during the eighteen months I'd been away. He pointed out, "If we can finger the lad who warned you off the case, we'll at least have a starting point."

It sounded like a good idea. I remembered I was married and called Sue to tell her not to expect me until she saw me. The connection needed de-frosting.

"I don't care if I ever see you," she iced. "Marry a detective and see life. Yeah. The kind that you buy on a newsstand." She began to cry. "This one night at least you might have come home."

I wondered what night it was outside of Thursday, but I was afraid to ask.

"More," she continued coldly, "Bauers and Hanson, old Mr. McDonald's lawyers, have been calling every five minutes on the minute, for an hour." She gave me their phone number and broke off the connection before I could ask her what they wanted.

"Wife trouble?" Nobby grinned.

"No thank you," I told him. "I have some."

I called the old man's lawyers and got the same lad I had talked to before. He had a bad case of jitters. "Look, Doyle," he began without preamble. "Are you protected on this case?"

I asked him what he meant. He explained that he wanted to know if I had an agreement with McDonald to pay me a certain sum in the event his grand-daughter was found. I said that I had.

"I think we've found her," he exploded his bomb shell. "She walked into our office late this afternoon in response to our ad. We *think* that she's the girl. But as long as you are protected and won't cut in on our fee, we'd like another opinion before we contact Mr. McDonald."

I ASKED him to describe the girl. He said she was blonde, and tall, willowy and very pretty. She had formerly been an actress and a singer with a band. At present she was working in a munitions plant in Joliet. The only thing that bothered himself and his partner was the fact that while the girl claimed that her mother's maiden name was McDonald, she also insisted that her mother had been legally married to a young actor named James Sherman.

"I'll be right over," I told him.

Nobby regarded me sourly. "Now what?" he demanded.

"I've just made five G's," I told him. "That is, Bauers and Hanson made it for me.

They've just found old McDonald's daughter."

I could hear him swearing half way to the lobby. "I'm on the wrong side of the fence," he bellowed. "The crooks have all the fun. You private agency boys get all the dough. All that I get is corpses!"

A dozen reporters tried to stop me. I brushed them aside with, "no comment."

As I passed the desk, the pimply-faced clerk stopped me. "Here's a call for you, Mr. Doyle."

I thought it was Sue calling back. It wasn't.

"This is the lad who talked to you this afternoon," a crisp voice informed me coldly. "I thought that you promised to keep your nose clean."

I tipped the clerk to trace the call, "What makes you think I haven't?"

"You know damn' well you haven't," he said. "And I don't warn lads twice. You're practically dead right now." There was a soft click as he hung up.

The clerk reported, "The operator says that she can't trace the call. It came from a dial phone."

I considered telling Lieutenant Nobby, decided against it. I could tell him about it later. Right now, I wanted to see the girl in Bauers and Hanson's office. The case was consistent at least. It continued not to make sense.

On the short ride to the Loop, I mulled over the only known fact that I had concealed from Nobby. *Stanton had known, or had recognized the man who had killed him. He had screamed, "No. No! You promised!"*

No, no, what? No death? What the hell had the killer promised? There was something that I was missing, something that someone had told me that hadn't registered at the time. For the life of me, I couldn't think what it was. It damn' near cost me my life.

HANSON was waiting in the outer office of their suite. A big Swede youngster with a collie-dog smile, and a crew hair cut, he wrung my hand. "Boy, am I glad you came." He patted his forehead with a sodden handkerchief. "This is our first big case."

The girl was talking to Bauers. A heavy-set, broad-shouldered youth, he was sitting in back of an impressive looking desk, trying to overcome what he lacked in age and experience by making like Napoleon.

My first impression of the girl was good. Her clothes were inexpensive but well chosen. She knew how to distribute her makeup. Nature had done well by her chassis. Her eyes were a grayish green and clear. They met mine frankly. I asked if she would mind answering some questions. She told me that if I could think of any that Bauers and Han-

son hadn't asked her that she would be very pleased to.

I began, "Your name is Miss Sherman?"

"Mary Sherman," she nodded. Her voice was low and throaty.

"And you—are how old, Miss Sherman?"

"This had better be good," she grinned.

"This, whatever it is to my advantage—I'll be thirty, the fifteenth of this month."

That checked approximately with the dates that McDonald had given me. "And your mother's name was—?"

"Mary Sherman, nee Mary McDonald. She died when I was four."

"You know this how?"

She took a cigarette from her purse. I lighted it. "The people who raised me," she said, "my foster parents, told me."

I asked her where her foster parents lived. She said they were dead. That didn't sound so good. Further questioning brought the information that they had been a rep team playing the smaller tent circuits. They had died in Grand Island, Nebraska, the year she had been nineteen.

I looked at Bauers. "You've told her what she stands to gain?"

He shook his head. "We have not. This isn't our first *big* case," he admitted. "This is our *first* case. That's why we're being so careful. We don't want to begin our legal career by palming off an imposter."

The girl got up from her chair. "Don't you call me an imposter!"

I caught her arm. "Please, Miss Sherman.

There was no offense intended. It is just that we must be certain. Suppose you tell me in your own words as much as you can remember about your early childhood."

SHE sat back, mollified. "Well, it has always been theatre. Aunt Jennie, my foster mother, told me that I had been born in a dressing room. And I remember my own mother well." A half smile lighted her lips. "She used to call me Little Mary. She was tall, with golden hair, and I remember her spending hours doing my hair up into the curls that little girls wore those days." The smile faded from her lips. "But something went wrong when I was three. I don't remember what, I was too young to know, I guess. I do remember that mother and father fought dreadfully and that I used to hide and cry. Then father went away and another man began to call on mother. I didn't like him at all. Then finally he went away, too." Tears formed in her eyes. "And then one morning mother wouldn't wake up. I cried and some policemen came. Then Aunt Jennie came and got me, and told me that I wasn't little Mary anymore, that I was big Mary now, and big girls didn't cry."

"I'll buy it," I told Hanson.

"It sounds to me." He grinned. "After all, it's up to old McDonald.

Bauers suggested that I phone him and I did. The old man's voice was fogged with sleep, or religion, or whiskey. Over the phone, I couldn't tell which.

"This is Doyle again," I told him. "Hang onto something or sit down. I think we've found the girl. She walked into Bauers and Hanson's office in answer to that ad. We think that she's the McCoy, but we'd like to have you see her."

He wanted to know where I was calling from. I told him Bauers and Hanson's office.

"Just give me time to dress, son," he said simply. "I've been in bed. I'll expect you in fifteen minutes."

Hanson set out a bottle of whiskey. The girl refused a drink. "If you don't mind," she said crisply, "now that it seems to be decided that I'm not a crook, would some one *please* tell me what this McDonald is to me?"

I told her, "He's your grandfather. And the reason we've played it in the crimp is because if you are who you say you are, you are the old man's heir."

"Heir to how much?" she asked.

Hanson grinned, "A quarter of a million dollars."

She said, "Migawd!" and fainted.

I HAD three drinks while Hanson was bringing her to. The left side of my face was still numb and my head had begun to ache where it had been hammered.

"You and Hanson take her over," Bauers suggested.

That was all right with me. "Just two more questions," I told the girl. "Do you know an old actor named Staunton—Frank Staunton? He used to be the leading man of a stock company in which your mother worked."

She shook her head. "I've heard of him. That is, I've heard the name. But I don't know him. Why?"

"If you don't know him, it doesn't matter," I said. "Now, tell me this. *Who do you know, who knows that you are Mary McDonald's daughter, who hates you enough to commit murder to keep you from being identified by Frank Staunton, as Mary McDonald's child?*"

Her eyes grew wide. "I don't understand. Why—no one."

Both Bauers and Hanson looked puzzled. Bauers demanded, "What are you talking about?"

I said, "Murder," tapping the tape on my check. "How the hell do you think that I got this, boxing pixies?"

The girl's eyes grew even wider.

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M-G-M's

TWENTY YEARS OF
SCREEN LEADERSHIP

HURD HATFIELD · J. CARROL NAISH · AGNES MOOREHEAD · HENRY TRAVERS
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Hanson admitted, "I don't know what to think." His mind was on his fee. He helped Miss Sherman into her coat and opened the outer door. "Give it to me in the cab, Doyle. How does it affect—"

That was as far as he got. His face turned the color of chalk. His hands crawled to his shoulders, palm out. I looked past him into the hall. The slim, good looking, hood who had walked into my office that afternoon looked back over the barrel of a sub-machine gun.

"Pally, Pally, Pally," he reproved. "Don't say that I didn't warn you!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Mama

"NO!" Bauers screamed. "Don't shoot! We can explain!" He scrambled to his feet. He wasn't a hell of a lot taller standing up than sitting down. More, he had a glove on the left hand that he had kept stuffed under his coat lapel.

The hood loosed a tentative burst at me. "Freeze! Doyle is the lad we want."

His first burst damn' near had me. The only thing that saved me was the fact that Hanson and the girl were between us. By the time he had pushed them aside, I had my gun out and was shooting.

All of my slugs didn't miss. I heard him suck in his breath sharply just as someone killed the lights. A ribbon of tracers began to search me out. I hit the floor and rolled towards, not away from, the gun.

The girl had stopped screaming now. I didn't dare to blast again for fear of hitting her. The hood hadn't been alone. Hanson was slugging it with someone. The office was filled with moving figures, deeper blobs of black against the gray. On the floor below, someone frightened by the shooting had stuck his head out a window and was yelling for the cops. A distant police whistle answered.

On the far side of the office, a vaguely familiar voice rapped tersely, "Get him! Get Doyle! And let's get the hell out of here."

I fired at the voice and rolled—smack into trouble. The lad whose legs I had rolled, fell on me like a block buster. We exploded all over the floor. First I rode him. Then he rode me. It was the hood with the sub-machinegun. He was too mixed up in my arms and legs to shoot. He battered at my face with the drum of his gun instead, yelling for someone to help him. I poked my gun into his guts but couldn't pull the trigger. His weight was bending my wrist double.

He was a strong and clever fighter. He knew all the bar room tricks. He kneed and squirmed and arched, always battering at

my face. My left hand found his throat.

"Kill him! Kill him!" a voice screamed in my ear. "A squad car just braked in front!"

They were talking to the hood, not me. I pulled him down on top of me for cover. They got us the third try. I saw the flash and felt the hood go limp. Then the floor underneath me erupted and the whole room mushroomed into space and silence.

SOMEONE was driving a ten-penny spike into my right wrist. Whatever I was lying on was cold. My face was wet. I touched my lips with my tongue. They tasted salty. "Heaven's a hell of a place," I thought. Then someone kissed me, hard.

I opened my one good eye. "Oh," I said, "it's you."

Sue dried her eyes on a wisp of lace. "Who did you expect it to be?"

Lieutenant Nobby pushed his way through the group of internes, nurses, aides, orderlies who were clustered around the table admiring the shrapnel cicatrices that had earned me my C.D.D., and asked me how I felt.

I said that I felt swell.

Old Doc Hoffman who had been splinting my left wrist snorted, "They ought to call you Durable Doyle."

They'd stripped me to the waist. Sue rubbed my bare shoulder. "He wears well," she admitted.

I asked her how long I had been out. She looked at Lieutenant Nobby. He told me for over an hour. The squad who had found me had called him. He, in turn, had called Sue, thinking I might be injured internally.

I swung my legs off the table and sat up. I was in the County Emergency Ward. My head felt like an in-grown carbuncle, but outside of a few more contusions and abrasions, a broken wrist, and a rash of red spots on my chest, my anatomy seemed normal.

An intern brought me four fingers of rye and repeated Nobby's question. I repeated that I felt swell. After what I had seen boys go through in the Islands, what had happened to me was a pipe. "How about the lad," I asked Nobby, "with whom I was practising Judo."

He said that he was dead. "As nearly as we can figure it, he took a load of buckshot through the back that must have been intended for you. You got what was left, in the chest. You must have fainted when his dead weight broke your wrist."

"Also, someone kicked you in the head," Hoffman offered.

"This is a case of attrition," I told him. "I wear 'em down." I asked Nobby if the hood had been identified. He said that he had not, but that he wasn't a local boy. "And Bauers and Hanson and the girl—?" I asked.

He shook his head. "We don't know. By the time that the boys got there, there was only you and the dead lad. Whoever left you for dead must have snatched Bauers and the girl."

I THOUGHT of Bauers' left hand. The glove had been soggy with blood. When he had stood up behind his desk, he hadn't been much taller than he had been sitting down. "That's a lot of heifer dust," I told Nobby. "I don't know about the girl. But Bauers and Hanson weren't snatched. They went willingly. They are the tall and short lad who slugged me. And Bauers is the lad who shot Staunton."

He stared at me popeyed. "You're crazy. That doesn't make sense."

On a hunch, I asked if he'd traced Cary Gibson, the lad who had written to Staunton. He told me that he had. San Diego had reported that Gibson, an old legitimate actor, had died in a cheap boarding house six months ago.

"Or five months before he wrote that letter," I pointed out. "That doesn't make sense. More, Staunton knew the lad who shot him. He called out, *No. No! You promised!* A frog skin gets you twenty that he was tied in with Bauers and Hanson in an attempt to promote a phony heir to old McDonald's money."

Sue giggled, "Don't look now. But we have company."

I twisted on the table. States Attorney Beamer, followed by two reporters and three pic men, stalked stiff-legged across the operating room.

A little man with a pasty-complexion, Beamer is living proof of the old adage: *To make a friend of a man, let him do you a favor. To make an enemy, let him become indebted to you.*

Beamer had been grand about my license when I had first gotten out of the Army. But if I hadn't voted him into office, I had re-elected him when I cracked the Hartley-Corbin, First National Bank case, and let him claim all the credit. Everyone in town but the voting public knew the facts. He'd hated my long gut ever since.

"Hello, sad sack," I grinned. "What mag-gots are eating you?"

Tommy Hanlon of the Sun-Examiner whooped. Two or three flash bulbs popped.

Beamer exploded, for the record, "You kill-crazy veteran," he stormed. "What the hell goes on here? Two men have been killed, needlessly it seems. Your own life has been endangered. An old man whose only desire is to live his last years in peace, is forced to witness an orgy of blood shed, allegedly spilled in his behalf." He tapped my knee-

cap for emphasis. "I'm taking this case out of your hands."

I asked him by whose permission.

He smirked, "At Mr. McDonald's request."

I HADN'T seen the old man. He walked uncertainly up to the table. His face was gray. "I didn't want to start any trouble, son," he told me. "All that I wanted to do was find my Mary's child. But if there are going to be killings and murders—" He broke off, shuddering.

"If you had come to my office in the first place," Beamer told him, "all of this could have been avoided."

I said that I doubted that very much. It was clear in my mind that Bauers and Hanson had tried to promote a ringer.

Beamer scoffed. "You are being idiotic. Bauers, Hanson, and poor old McDonald's granddaughter have been kidnaped by persons, and for reasons, at present, unknown."

Hanlon asked if he could quote him. The State's Attorney said that he could and turned back to me. "You are through with this case, understand, Doyle. My office has taken it over. We intend to solve it." He looked at Lieutenant Nobby and colored. "In cooperation with Homicide, of course."

Sue looked at me, worried. I shook my head. "To hell with you," I told him. "I've been slugged, and kicked, and shot at. That makes it personal. No one does that to a Doyle!"

Old McDonald's voice had lost its boom. He quavered, "I'll pay the rest of the fee I promised." He tried to force a check into my hand. I didn't play coy. I took it. "But, please stay out of this, son. I didn't mean to be the cause of trouble. I'm just a lonely old man trying to right a wrong I did, not cause more suffering and heartache."

"Remember that," Beamer told me. "You've been paid off. You're through."

He stalked out, holding McDonald's arm and talking to him earnestly. Tommy Hanlon stayed behind. "How about it, Doyle?" he asked.

"I'll be in on the death," I told him. "That lug couldn't pull a chain and solve where the water went to."

He laughed and hurried after the others.

Sue was worried, "Your license," she began.

Nobby nodded agreement. "You'd better lay off, boy. Beamer has had it in for you for months. And ever since he got a conviction in the Countess Renfew case, his stock has been pretty high."

I nodded glumly. Beamer was a sad sack as a man, but a smart lawyer. The wise money had been ten to two that he couldn't convict thirty million dollars on circumstantial evi-

dence. He had outsmarted us all. He not only had convicted, he had asked for and gotten the chair for Barbara Renfew, accused of the torch murder of her admittedly worthless husband. The morning papers had carried a screamer that the Supreme Court had upheld the verdict. Public opinion seemed to be that the play-girl, and heir to the Meyer millions, had gone to the altar once too often.

"I'll keep in touch," Nobby told me, and hurried after the S.A.

SUE helped me off the table. I began to dress and Doc Hoffman stopped me. "X-rays yet, we have to take," he told me. "All night you will stay here."

I was too tired and mad to argue. I followed an intern down the hall, Sue's high heels clacking after me on the tile. She tried to walk quietly and couldn't.

"It's enough to wake the dead," she admitted. "I—"

"Hold it," I stopped her. *I had, or thought I had, the whole damn' thing.*

The intern opened the door of a room, and turned to face me, worried. "There's something wrong, Mr. Doyle. You're in pain?"

"I should be," I said, "I've been blind."

I fished my roll from my pocket with one hand and told him to peel off a ten. "Get me a pint of rye and all of the back papers that you can find in the boiler room," I told him.

He looked at Sue. She nodded, "Humor him." She added sarcastically, "If we can get him drunk enough maybe we can keep him in bed and save his license."

He grinned. "When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a private agency man."

Sue spoke from experience. "The only difference," she assured him, "between a cop and a private detective, is that a cop takes care of what trouble comes along, and private agency men go *looking* for it."

I sat down on the bed and mentally checked the known facts. The case was thirty years old. McDonald's daughter had been an actress. She had told Jon Von Pieter that she was married to a man named Herman or Sherman. She had taken her own life. The police had hushed the affair at the time, the assumption being to protect the name of a prominent local business man with whom she had become involved in a clandestine love affair. The child had disappeared. The detectives whom old man McDonald had hired at the time, had sold him out to a higher bidder. The case had pinched-out entirely. It all pointed to the one logical conclusion.

"What was the Countess Renfew, nee Arnold, nee Claxton, nee Arezzo, nee Phillips, nee Meyer's, father's first name?" I asked Sue. "You know, the old meat packer from whence all the money sprang."

"I don't know," she admitted. "And I don't give a hoot. If you cared two pins for me—"

I remembered that she was sore at me and started to ask why when the young intern came back, grinning. He was carrying a stack of papers a foot high and had a pint bottle tucked under his belt.

"I asked Hoffman if it was all right," he admitted. He added, cheerfully, "The old man said that he hoped it killed you. He says he's tired of sewing and patching you up."

I THANKED him for nothing, took a drink, and started on the papers. I found what I wanted in a brief resume in the second paper that I tried. The sub-head read:

HIGH COURT RULES THAT PACKER HEIRESS MUST DIE

The story began:

The last hope of Countess Barbara Renfew, the much married daughter of Herman Meyer, the late multi-millionaire meat packer, and heir to the Meyers' millions, vanished this morning when the Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the lower court that she die in the electric chair. Convicted of the ghastly torch murder of her fifth husband, Larry Arnold, a young seaman whom she met in Hawaii, and whom the State maintains she shot and burned to death on the palatial Meyer North Shore estate, the play-girl daughter of the deceased packer is scheduled to die in the electric chair at Stateville tomorrow night. Informed of the Supreme Court's ruling, Mrs., or Countess Renfew as she prefers to be called, reiterated her innocence, but said—

I tossed the paper to Sue. "There you are. That's it."

She skimmed through the story, then stared at the picture of the convicted woman. Barbara had what it took. More, she had it in the right places. How States Attorney Beamer had ever gotten a male jury to convict her on circumstantial evidence, let alone sentence her to die, was something I'll never know.

Sue shook her head. "What do you mean—that's it?"

I fished the yellowed clipping that old McDonald had given me from my wallet, unfolded it and put it beside the picture. Except for the difference in hair styling, it might have been the same girl.

Sue gasped.

I split the seam of my shirt sleeve so I could get the splint on my wrist through it. "You'll have to drive," I told her. "The countess Barbara Renfew is old man J. C. McDonald's grand-daughter. His daughter was married to a Herman, sure. But Herman was his first name. His last name was Meyer."

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Call

THE morning was cold for Spring. We fought a low-lying mist most of the way from Chicago. It was four when we reached the prison. On, beyond, the lights of Joliet cast an eerie glow against the sky. Here, all was silence and darkness except for the lights on the walls and in the towers. A hell of a place to live.

The redfaced head guard in the main gate office told me flatly, "Nothing doing. I don't care what your name is."

I crumpled a twenty from my roll, wadded it into a ball, and dropped it into his ash tray. "I didn't ask you to call the warden," I told him. "I asked you to call his secretary. Tell Johnny that Tom Doyle has to see him."

He retrieved the bill and made the call. Johnny Mack said that he would see me. I had known that he would. We ran with the same neighborhood gang as kids. Both of us had proven that the old under-privileged kid

"It's tonight," he corrected. "But I can't let you see her, Tom." I had to argue for ten minutes. In the end, he gave in, protesting, "Okay. But if anything goes sour, this is my job and you know it."

The halls were long and cold, and smelled of antiseptic. They had moved her to the death house and I had to cross the yard. I hadn't been in the place since the night Bruce Hartley burned.

Mack had arranged to let me see the girl in his office of the death house. A sour-faced matron brought her from her cell and sat scowling at us both.

The girl didn't look thirty years old. She looked like a big-eyed, frightened little kid who was being pushed around. She was wearing a gray prison gown and robe. Her long, golden hair hung down her back in two braids. The only makeup that she wore was a smear of crimson lipstick. Even so, she had what it took.

I introduced myself. She admitted having heard of me, and I put all of my cards on the table. "I'm working on another case," I ad-

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gag is hokey. His old man had been a ditch digger. Mine had carried a hod. There had been lots of times when his old man and mine hadn't had a dime for a growler between them—and them dying of thirst.

The guard waved me through the inner door. Sue started in with me and stopped. Prisons do something to her. She says that she can feel the walls move in around her. "If it's all right," she said, white-faced, "I'll wait here in the guard office."

I handed the guard another ten. "Watch her," I told him crisply. "It might just be that we were followed." The guard promised and I patted her shoulder.

A red haired little runt with an infectious smile, Johnny was waiting in the warden's office, wearing a dressing gown and slippers, and still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Of all the crazy Irishmen—what the hell this time of morning?" He looked at my face and grinned.

"Never mind who hung one on me," I beat him to the punch. "I want to see the little chickadee that you're frying tomorrow night."

mitted. "But it seems to lead to you. I don't know if I can help you. I'm not promising a thing. But would you be willing to answer some questions?"

She said that she would. "But let's get this straight before we start," she told me. "I didn't kill Larry Arnold. The State has proven I did, but I didn't. I don't even know who killed him."

SOMEHOW I believed her. She had been foolish, but she wasn't bad. A lot of lads have written her story. She was a poor little rich girl who had been raised to believe that money could buy the moon.

"Who gets your money?" I asked her. She shook her head. "I don't know. More, I don't give a damn. I haven't a living relative." She laughed nervously. It wasn't very successful. It was more of a sob than a laugh. "I—I guess I burn intestate."

I said that I doubted she'd burn. *I had the whole thing. I knew.* The problem was to prove it in the short time that I had left. "You knew your mother?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Father told me

she died when I was born." Her lips curled slightly. "You see, she was an actress or a waitress or something, and not good enough for father's people. They forced them to separate. It killed her. It ruined his life. It's ruined mine. He died a sour, bitter, old man. I had a governess instead of a mother." She shrugged. "And well, here I am."

"And your father never told you of your mother's people?"

"No. Not that I remember."

"But you have some memories of your childhood, let's say, before you were four?"

She thought a moment, smiled thinly, "No. I guess not. I used to think that I had, but I guess it was only wishful wishing." There was a far away look in her eyes. "I used to think I remembered a tall blonde woman with blue eyes, who always smelled of mignonette." Her voice grew throaty with emotion. "I used to dream she held me in her arms and called me her little Mary."

The matron didn't look so sour-faced.

Barbara wiped her eyes on her sleeve. The hard smile came back to her lips. "It must have been some sort of a Freudian mother-complex. Because you see, my name is Barbara. And my mother died when I was born."

I took the clipping from my wallet and handed it to her. "That was your mother," I told her. "You lived with her until you were four. As far as I can figure, she was people. But actresses weren't considered quite decent in those days. Undoubtedly your father's father threatened to disinherit him if he insisted on making his marriage to her known. So—she stepped out of the way—he took you—too late."

She sat staring at the picture, tears rolling down her cheeks. "My mother—and she loved me. It—it was she who held me in her arms."

THE matron was crying openly. I stood up to go. I knew all I needed to get from the girl. I could get the rest of it from the transcript of her trial. I asked her to describe Arnold. Outside of the matter of hair which was undoubtedly dyed, the description checked. "And you swear that you didn't kill him?"

She crossed her heart. She looked so little and white and frightened that it was all that I could do not to take her in my arms.

"I did not," she swore. "I knew I had made a mistake as soon as I married him. He—he was nothing but a pretty gunpunk turned seaman to evade the draft. All that he wanted from me was money. When I got tired of passing out, he beat me. Then one night he disappeared. A few days later they found his body in our boatshed. He had been shot with a gun of mine and someone had poured oil on him in an attempt to destroy the body." The tears in her eyes washed

over. "But I didn't do it. I swear. You—I—"

I couldn't help myself. I took her in my one good arm and kissed her. "I believe you," I told her. "And you keep the old chin up. I'm working on a brand new angle."

Johnny Mack was waiting in the office. "Well—?"

"It's one of those things," I told him. "That girl didn't kill Arnold." I tossed a ten on the desk. "And I'll bet you that, against permission to use the warden's phone, to call San Diego that I can tell you who did."

He said it was a bet. I got San Diego on the phone and asked the operator to get me Lieutenant Carny of their Homicide Detail. I caught him eating breakfast. He listened to what I had to say and promised that he would do what he could for me and would call Nobby at H.Q. as soon as he had the dope.

Mack's eyes were wide when I hung up. "You're crazy, Tom," he told me. "You'll never spring the girl. You'll never make that stick."

I told him that I wasn't trying to spring anyone. That was up to the law. All that I was doing was trying to find old J. C. McDonald's granddaughter and I knew damn' well I had found her.

I had to pass through three gates and four doors to get back to the main gate office. The guard was drowsing at his desk. Sue's gray squirrel coat was thrown over the back of a chair. "Okay. Let's go," I told her.

I was talking to myself. Sue wasn't in the chair. She wasn't in the gatehouse. I looked outside. The dawn was a misty red. My car was still standing in the drive. I couldn't see Sue anywhere.

I crossed to the guard's desk and shook him. "Hey! Wake up! Where's the girl who—"

His head lolled lifelessly. My hand came away from his shoulder wet. As I released him, he toppled to the floor and I could see the bone handle of a switch-blade knife protruding from his back. I reached across the body for the inter-prison phone. The wire was cut. There was a note on the blood-soaked blotter. Printed in block letters were the words:

Verbum sat sapientis!

CHAPTER SIX

Murder in Reverse

BEAMER was playing bigshot to a brace of reporters and pic men when I limped in to the morgue. The bodies of Bauers and Hanson were stretched out on twin slabs. Stripped ready for the cooler, they looked even younger than they were. Their first case had been their last one.

The S. A. stared at me, glassy-eyed. I was on the kill and he knew it. He knew how I felt about Sue. "You can't blame me," he cried. "I warned you out of the case. You have only yourself to blame."

I told him I wasn't blaming him.

Hanlon asked me, "You've found no trace of Sue?"

I lied. "Not yet."

Several pic men snapped my picture. I asked Beamer if I could see the alleged suicide note that Bauers and Hanson had left. Their bodies had been found in a cheap near-north side hotel room. Both men had been shot in the head. Guns had been found in their hands. They had left a complete confession. It alleged that they had been tempted by old McDonald's money had attempted to foist a ringer on him. They admitted that after learning he had engaged me, they had followed me to Prairieview and slugged me in an attempt to frighten me out of the case. Failing in that, they decided to cut me in. Unfortunately, meanwhile I had gotten on the trail of Staunton who might possibly know the real girl. They admitted following me to his hotel and shooting the old man. My phone call and their invitation to interview the girl whom they hoped to pass off as Mary McDonald had followed. Unfortunately, a gun pal of theirs (not named) had objected to cutting me in and had staged the shooting scene in their office. They had been forced to kill him and run. Further, still being afraid of me, they had waited outside the hospital and had followed me to Stateville, not knowing how much of their guilt I knew. In a panic they had killed the guard and kidnapped Sue.

Beamer asked me what I thought. I told him I thought that it was the damndest mixture of half truths and lies that I had ever read since reading a translation of one of Herr Hitler's speeches. "You are certain," I asked him, "that they didn't shoot Lincoln, too?"

The reporters whooped. The S. A.'s face turned red. "But why would they write such a thing and then take their own lives?"

I knew the answer to that one but I didn't bother to tell him. Instead, I asked the morgue attendant to show me the body of the hood. He pulled him out of the icebox and I fingered through his hair. It had been dyed. The roots of the hair were brown.

"Okay. Let's you and I take a walk," I told Beamer. "I want to shoot a man about a dog. And I want you with me just to make it legal."

He spluttered, "This is no joking matter."

I told him I wasn't joking. Hanlon had a morning paper. I glanced at the front page. There was a six-column cut of Beamer with him arm around old J. C. McDonald's shoulders. The caption read:

S. A. BEAMER PROMISES AGED MAN
TO FIND HIS DAUGHTER'S CHILD!

"You'd better come with me," I told Beamer, "or your face will be even redder than it is. I've seen a lot of sad sacks in my time, but you win the Royal Order Of The Rubber Plunger."

I let him feel the gun in my pocket. He gaped, but walked out of the morgue with me, trailing a tail of reporters. Lieutenant Nobby was waiting in front with a squad car and two State Patrol motorcycle men. I asked him

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if he had heard from San Diego. He said that he had. He had Mark Gold and Tommy Convers with him. I knew where we were going but I didn't know just what we might run into.

MOST crime follows a pattern. You can chart it on a graph. But when even a smart crook leaves his groove, anything can happen, and usually does. It's like a woman playing poker.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Beamer iced.

I told him that I did. "Stop at the Chalmers House first," I told Nobby. "I want to pick up old man McDonald. He's invested a lot of time and money and I think it only fair that we ring him in on this."

Gold helped me into the car just as two women passed. One of them tilted her nose, "A drunk," she told her companion.

I wasn't, but I wished I was. It was almost ten o'clock. Sue had been missing for five hours. I knew, or thought I knew, right where she was. I could have gone to her from Stateville. Only the thought of the girl who was scheduled to die in the chair had stopped me. *Knowing a thing was so wouldn't prove it to the governor. I had to have a confession.*

Nobby parked in front of the Chalmers House and sent Convers and Gold upstairs for the old man. They came back with him in five minutes. He was still wiping the egg off his chin.

"He was in the coffee shop," Gold said.

The old man stood on the curb, puzzled, peering into the squad car. The deep boom of his voice was gone. He was a frightened old man. "But I don't understand," he quavered. "What is the meaning of this?"

A few of the pic boys from the cars that had followed us from the morgue popped a few more pictures. "You can caption them the beginning of the end," I told them.

McDonald repeated that he didn't understand. I told him to get into the car. He hesitated, made out Beamer sulking in one corner and got in.

"This is an outrage," Beamer stormed. "And I won't be dictated to by any kill-crazy veteran. I was practically forced into this car at gunpoint." He appealed to Lieutenant Nobby to arrest me.

Nobby lighted a cigar. I had told him enough to intrigue him. And after he had talked to San Diego, he didn't need diagrams. He knew as much as I did. "I guess I'll string with Doyle," he said. "I'm a kill-crazy veteran, too. But I did my killing in the last war."

He meshed the big car into gear and swung east to the Outer Drive, the two State motorcycle boys clearing a way through traffic and a half dozen press cars clipping the red lights behind us.

"Stop at the Breakers just to make sure," I told him.

A swank hotel in the stretch of no-man's land between Evanston and Wilmette, the Breakers is patronized chiefly by the better class of get-rich-quick-boys, and con men, and their slightly soiled but beautiful lilies. I've often wished I had the dough to live there.

Gold went in alone this time and reported that the party he had asked for had not been in all night.

Nobby swung out of the drive and headed north again, pushing the gas to the floor board, the siren open wide.

McDonald appealed to Beamer. "But is this legal? You promised me that there would be no more trouble, no more shooting." His face was gray. "I am an old man. My heart—"

I SAID I doubted that he would die of heart failure. "Be cheerful," I told him. "Just think. I've found poor Mary McDonald's child. Now you can right the great wrong that you did."

For a moment I thought he would strike me. He didn't. He stared at me, puzzled, then lapsed into a sullen silence. Beamer grew more cheerful.

"You've found the girl?" he demanded. "We're on our way to her now?"

I shook my head. "No. Mary McDonald's daughter isn't within forty miles of here."

He lost his head and swore, "I'll get your license, Doyle, so help me, God, if it's the last thing that I ever do."

Nobby told him to pipe down. McDonald buried his head in his hands. I sat staring at the lake. It looked cold and gray. A north wind was whipping up white-caps. The beach was fringed with a lace of dirty spume. All I could think of was Sue. I was risking her life. I knew it. But a man is what he is. I wouldn't compromise with the Devil.

The main gates of the Meyer estate were locked. States Attorney Beamer looked out of the car, incredulous. "I could have told you that in Chicago," he smiled thinly. "Those gates have been locked and sealed for four months."

I asked one of the cycle boys if he knew of a side gate. He did. Nobby followed him down the road. The side gate wasn't locked. More, there were fresh tire tracks in the mud.

"Still want my license?" I asked Beamer.

We left the cars at the gate and went the rest of the way on foot. The house, a little gray-stone shack of forty or fifty rooms, had been built well back from the main highway on a bluff over-looking the lake. There was no car on the drive but there was mud on the cement and the doors of the garage were closed. Nobby pointed out the ruins of the

boat house where the State had claimed and proven, to a judge and jury's satisfaction, that Barbara Renfrew Arnold, nee Meyer, had shot and burned her husband.

"I don't understand," Beamer said. "No one except my office was supposed to have any keys to the gates or the house. How did whoever is here, get in?"

I told him that a dead man had unlocked the door. Nobby scattered his boys and the state police around the house in a loose circle. I walked up to the door and tried it. It was a heavy door with leaded glass panes, and locked. I kicked out a leaded panel and reached in and shot the bolt.

McDonald quavered, "I protest. I want no part of this. This is trespassing. We have no right—"

I walked on into the entrance hall. The tapestries on the walls had cost more than my whole apartment. Stairs led to the second floor where a semi-balcony ran the full length of the hallway.

A voice from the balcony cursed me, "Damn you, Doyle!"

A slug whistled by my ear. Another picked my hat from my head and sent it skidding across the waxed floor.

"You're shooting him, Chuck," I reproved him. "You weren't cut out for a gunman. You should have stuck to your racket."

I flipped one between the rails. There was a scream of pain that ended in a choked gurgle. I triggered another one just to make sure and Chuck Hovak leaned over the rail, a third eye in his forehead. He balanced a moment, then fell twenty feet on his head.

When the gun echoes had died away, I called, "This is it, Hymie. Come down."

There was a long moment of silence, then Miller poked his bald head over the rail and peered at us owlishly. "Thank Heaven you've come," he gasped. "Hovak was threatening to kill me." He appealed to Beamer. "You've got to believe me. I had no part in this. It was all Chuck's idea, his and those two crooked lawyers."

I said, "Nuts!" and limped up the stairs, followed by Nobby and Gold. Convers stayed with Beamer and McDonald.

"You'd better frisk him," Nobby suggested.

I ran my good hand over Miller's body. "Where is she?" I demanded. He hesitated and I slapped him with my gun barrel.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he whimpered. "Since those two crooked young lawyers left there's been no one here but myself and Hovak."

I put my gun to his temple and took up the slack.

"No. No! Don't shoot me," he screamed. "We've always been good friends, Tom."

"Where is she?" I repeated.



Barbara—or Mary?

THE fat con man collapsed like a punctured balloon and pointed to a door down the hallway. Sue and the girl who had claimed to be Mary Sherman lay cross-wise on a bed, their wrists and their ankles tied, and their mouths gagged tight with tape.

Sue was making a mewling noise. I cut the ropes on her wrists and ankles and eased the tape off her mouth. She was crying but her eyes were shining through her tears. "I knew that you'd find me," she sobbed.

I kissed her. "You're all right, honey." She nodded. "They were afraid of you."

Nobby was cutting the other girl loose. Beamer collapsed in a chair. "I don't understand," he repeated. "Hovak and Miller aren't gunmen. They're confidence men."

"And this was a con game," I told him. "Only it went sour."

There was a decanter of Scotch on the table. I poured a water glass full, offered a sip to Sue and gulped the rest. Now that the hype had worn off, fatigue was beginning to get me.

Convers had brought up McDonald. "The old man says he feels faint," he reported. "Is it all right if he goes out for some air?"

I advised him to stick around and pointed to the girl whom I had met in Bauers and Hanson's office. "Would you say that she was your granddaughter?"

The old man hemmed and hawed. "She—she looks a little like my Mary," he evaded.

I shook my head. "Either way, you're hooked. It was a damn clever scheme. It was the best lay that Hymie ever figured. But you might as well talk. It's gone sour."

Hymie Miller protested, "You have me wrong. I had nothing to do with this. It was all Chuck Hovak's idea."

"Don't try to blame it on the dead," I told him. "Chuck was nothing but a scratch man. It was you who gambled two hundred-thousand bucks against God knows how many millions."

Tommy Hanlon was the first to get it. "Reverse English, by God!" he swore. "*The Countess Barbara Renfrew Arnold is the old man's granddaughter. And he didn't give a damn about leaving her his money. He wanted to inherit hers!*"

I told him to go to the head of the class. Even Nobby stared at me popeyed. I told the story as I saw it. It had begun over six months before when the Countess Barbara Renfrew, nee Meyer, had married a punk named Arnold. He had thought he was set for life but her round heels hadn't extended to her check book. "A lot of this is guess work," I admitted. "But all of it can be checked. When the happy bridal pair returned to Chicago, Arnold read the handwriting on the wall. A petty hood at heart, he griped to Miller, whom he had known before, that he was about to lose an easy touch. About this same time Chuck Hovak, who had just finished a bit in San Quentin, bumped into Cary Gibson, an old legitimate actor with larceny in his heart. This Gibson had a piece of information that he didn't know how to handle, but knew should be worth some money to a con man. In the same boarding house in which he lived, or at the shuffle board court, or over a pinochle game, Gibson had met an old farmer who had confided to him that his granddaughter, whom he had never met, was one of the richest young women in the country. In other words, to wit, the Countess Barbara Renfrew Arnold, nee Meyer."

Old McDonald glowered at me. I poured another drink, continued:

"Hovak naturally told Miller. And Hymie figured out a natural. The poor little rich girl had no heirs. But she had quarreled bitterly with her husband. Perhaps she had even threatened to kill him."

BEAMER cut in, "She did. The threats that she had uttered were one of the most damning things against her at her trial."

"So there you are," I told him. "The setup was built to order. Hymie knew that if she should be accused of killing Arnold, the chances are she would be convicted. And if she was sentenced to die, and a long lost grandfather should appear, he would be her legal heir."

"And if she had been acquitted?" Nobby asked.

I pointed out, "They couldn't lose either way, once the relationship had been established. So, the 'grandfather' came to Chicago in search of his daughter's child. He knew damn well where she was. She was in the death block at Stateville. But he couldn't just rush down and claim her after thirty years. He had to make it look good. So, he made his first mistake. He picked out a pair of young law-

yers to *advertise* for the girl. He picked them young and inexperienced deliberately. But he hooked himself right there. They were as crooked as Hymie. That alleged confession that Hovak forged after he and Hymie killed the boys was substantially correct. Bauers and Hanson wanted that quarter of a million. They figured old McDonald for a rube and started out to trim him by running in a ringer who had been coached in all the details of the story that McDonald had confided in them."

I asked the girl if that was correct. Sobbing, she told me it was. Her name was Jennie Warshinsky, and she had been promised ten-thousand dollars if she could make her story stick.

I continued. "Now, time was getting short. McDonald came to me next. My name and my word was good. As my client, I guaranteed him. They knew that with the setup as it was, I'd find the girl within hours. Stanton was a part of the plot. He had been promised a piece of change to point to Barbara's picture. I was to check with Stateville and the City Hall and the thing was in the bag. That kid down there is scared to death. She would have welcomed a grand-dad, or anyone who cared, with open arms. There would have been time for one fearful reconciliation. And with McDonald firmly established as her grandparent, and only living heir, a will forged by Chuck Hovak would have appeared the day after she burned. So the Appellate Court was suspicious. So what? They couldn't prove a thing. The girl would be in her grave and old McDonald would inherit."

Nobby nodded. "But Bauers and Hanson being crooked spoiled the set-up."

"It blew it to hell," I agreed. "But whether Hymie or Chuck killed them in a last attempt to wiggle clear is something for a jury to decide."

"You can't prove a thing," Miller swore. "I'm being framed."

Beamer came to, about then. "You mean," he gasped, pointing at the old man, "that he—" he winced, thinking of the picture in the paper—"that he is Barbara Renfrew Arnold's grandfather?"

Sue gasped. She had it now. "Hell no," I told Beamer, "he's Gibson. Old McDonald is dead. More, it seems that he was an air raid warden and he has been identified by the fingerprints on his Civilian Defense card." I grinned at Miller. "That's one place you slipped up, Hymie. You switched grandfathers on Barbara but you couldn't get rid of McDonald's corpse."

"Damn you, Doyle!" Miller swore. His hand streaked inside his coat and came out with a spitting gun. His first shot went into the ceiling. Mine gouged out his left eye.

"That was self-defense?" I asked Beamer.

Blood flooded back into his face. "It was you who searched Miller," he swore. "You deliberately overlooked that gun!"

I asked him if he thought he could prove it, and pointed my rod at Gibson who had been masquerading as McDonald.

"Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I'll confess. Old McDonald died a natural death. All I did was steal his papers."

Hanlon was taking notes as fast as he could write. "I've got most of it," he grinned. "But why send that hood to you, Doyle, if they wanted you to take the case?"

"That's elemental," I grinned. "They know that I'm bull-headed."

"And you first began to suspect Miller, when?"

I POINTED out, "no one knew that I was at the Walter's hotel except Miller. And right after I phoned him, the young hood called me back and laid down the law. The same thing happened with the alleged McDonald. I called him from Bauer's and Hanson's office. A few minutes later the boys showed up en masse to rub me out. The case had gotten out of hand and they wanted me out of the picture. They tried for me, and missed. So they did the next best thing. They shot Larry Arnold instead."

Beamer swore. "You're mad. Larry Arnold has been dead for six months. Barbara Renfew Arnold killed him!"

I almost felt sorry for the little man. "The hell she did," I grinned. "You check with the seaman's union, then check that black-haired corpse in the morgue. I don't know who got shot and burned in the boathouse, but it wasn't

Larry Arnold. He was the hood who threatened me. He and Miller shot and burned some bum so they could whack up the Meyer fortune once Barbara was out of the way."

Hanlon led the rest of the reporters whooping to find phones.

"That's it," Nobby grinned. "It's all over including the shooting. But what about your fee?"

Sue rubbed at a smudge on my cheek, suspicious. "That's lipstick, not blood," she accused.

I evaded the accusation by asking why she had been sore.

She fingered the tape on my cheek. There were tears in her eyes but she was smiling. "Because, you big dope," she told me, "it was our fourth anniversary."

"You been married four years?" Nobby gasped.

"Four months," I told him, grinning. "And don't worry about my fee. I imagine that the Countess Barbara Renfew will be grateful."

"I'll scratch her eyes out," Sue said. She plucked at my coat lapel. "And—and besides, I had something to tell you, something very important."

"Yeah?" I asked her, puzzled.

She nodded, smiling, "Mm-hmm. You know, like Blondie says to Dagwood."

I didn't get it even then. "Says what?" I demanded.

She buried her face on my shoulder, "Says, you are the papa bird now. You're going to have three mouths to feed."

I grinned. I grinned all over my puss. All right. Go on and tell me. What the hell would you have done?

THE END

THIS IS
HEAVENLY!

SHOULD BE -
I USE
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



VOICE OF THE DEAD

By
TED STRATTON



The Duke had his gun out. Bill hurtled himself forward.

●
A good detective, Bill Frane figured, is one who can spot a murderer by instinct . . . But sometimes a little instinct, like a little knowledge, can be not only dangerous, but downright deadly!

●

DRAWN shades darkened Room 327 of the Hotel Benson. Bill Frane, second grade detective, sat in a straight chair inside a door that fronted the corridor. Within easy reach lay his revolver.

Outside a door opened. Voices resounded in the corridor. Bill grabbed up his gun and stared through a peephole low down in the door. A second man who lay on the bed sat up abruptly. "This it?" he asked tensely and his fingers gripped a gun butt.

Silence, then a voice growled: "So long, boys."

Retreating steps along the corridor. Bill

Frane relaxed. "Velinski's hoods just left."

The man on the bed lay down again. Minutes passed. Then Duke DeRoche, first grade detective, said: "Someday you oughta run them hoods in, Bill."

But Bill Frane bent to the peephole. Another door had opened. There were no voices from the corridor, just the tap-tap of a pair of rubber heels on the bare floor of the corridor. The Duke asked: "What gives this time?"

"Teddy Rugg left Velinski in a hurry. That means that Velinski is alone now in 328."

The Duke sighed. "I don't like hanging around here within a whisker of that gang. They're killers. When is this case going to break?"

Bill Frane wondered too. He was a slender, alert man with wide forehead and quick blue eyes. You noticed the outthrust jaw. A solid jaw. The jaw of a man you'd like to have on your side if there was to be any shooting. But the Nocker Velinski case had Bill Frane stumped.

Velinski, an ex-rum runner during prohibition, operated a black market in meat, according to Captain Reddick at Headquarters. Room 328 in the Hotel Benson was the pay-off place. "Check who comes and goes from 328," Reddick had ordered.

Bill and the Duke had checked the traffic in and out of 328 on five different days. Each time they'd checked, it had been the same old story. Only three people ever visited Velinski. Teddy Rugg, a high school kid who kept the books, and the two hoods, the Patanelli twins. How come? Bill wondered.

Did the hotel dick tip Velinski off? Did Velinski still retain a pipe line or two into Headquarters? Could be, of course. But Bill knew that if the case was to break they'd have to uncover the names of the people who did business with Velinski. How could they get names if only Rugg and the Patanellis entered Room 328?

The broad-shouldered Duke yawned and sat up. He smoothed the crease of his immaculate trousers. He had black hair, neatly combed to cover a faint baldish spot in the middle of the top of his head. His dark face gave him a dashing appearance, despite a bulge at the waistline. The Duke glanced at a solid gold strap watch.

"Four-fifteen," the Duke observed. "I could eat."

"You ate at one o'clock," Bill said.

"Yeah, and I could eat again. Around the corner there's a joint. Frenchy's Presto Grille. Toasted sandwiches! Make mine ham-on-rye, Bill. And a quart of java."

"We got a job to do."

"Sure, sure, run along."

"Reddick said to stick here together."

"Reddick isn't here."

"I'm sticking."

The Duke said: "I want two ham-on-rye, toasted. And java."

"Phone the desk."

"Frenchy's, Bill, and make it snappy."

Bill asked carefully: "You're the boss here. Is that an order?"

The Duke shrugged broad shoulders carelessly. "Sure."

Without a word Bill Frane stood up, moved the chair back, opened the door and walked noiselessly along the corridor. Down two flights of stairs, out a side entrance, then along the street to the Presto Grille. "Frenchy" looked as if the last time he'd seen Paris was one dark night on a Hoboken pier.

"Two toasted ham-on-rye and java," Bill snapped. "To take a walk."

"Comin'-gup," Frenchy answered.

Bill thought: "Damn the Duke. Sometimes he thinks he's a lord and I'm a flunky. Nuts!" Abruptly he broke out a deck of cigarettes, lit one and puffed deeply while Frenchy loitered behind the counter.

Too monotonous, this Velinski case, Bill thought. A little dangerous, maybe, with those hoods across the hall. If Reddick would only say the word and send them across to take the gang in! Not that he'd get much help from the Duke. The Duke was the department's glamor boy. He could shoot well enough, but the Duke didn't like to get his neat clothes rumpled.

Frenchy squeaked: "Mustard?"

"Heavy," Bill said grimly. "Maybe the Duke will choke!"

Frenchy wrapped the snack. "Sixty cents." Bill counted change, picked up the packet and said: "Took you long enough."

Back in Room 327, the Duke ate rapidly. Bill eyed him glumly. No, the Duke wasn't going to choke. "Anything happen?" he asked.

The Duke mumbled: "Nocker's still there."

"He's leaving late today."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Finally the Duke finished. "I could eat two more!"

"Then you'll get 'em yourself!"

STEPS resounded from the corridor. The Duke slid past Bill and bent over the peephole. Bill picked up the notebook on the bed and idly noted the entries. 4:10, the Patanellis left. 4:14, Rugg left, Nocker alone.

"Bellhop," the Duke whispered. "He's—no, it's a she—she's going in 328."

Bill jotted the entry, noted the time at 4:44 P. M. A crash of breaking glass. A startled screech. The Duke yanked the door open. "Let's go!" he bellowed.

Hastily Bill tugged at his revolver, then followed the Duke into 328. They met a slim girl

dressed in a bellhop's uniform. She shrieked a second time, a thin note of terror.

"What gives?" the Duke asked.

"I—I came in," the girl moaned. "And—and—look!"

They looked. Nocker Velinski sat in a high-backed chair. The back of his head was against the chair-back. His feet were propped on the top of the desk. A white scar ran from one eye corner across a swarthy cheek. He had the blank eyes of a killer, a killer whose eyes seemed to ask one question. "Who's next?"

Weird, because Nocker Velinski would never speak those words again. Nocker was dead. Someone had cut his jugular vein neatly. Blood still dripped from the wound to his starched white shirt.

The Duke ordered: "Call Headquarters, Bill."

Bill obeyed mechanically and asked for the hotel dick to be sent to 328. The Duke was saying to the girl: "You're a cute trick. Why'd you come up here?"

"Bringing s-scotch and soda," she faltered. "How come?"

"Mr. Velinski ordered it sent at five o'clock, the desk clerk said. I—I came a little early."

The Duke repeated: "You're a cute trick. Now—"

Bill cut in: "You like new clothes and perfume and things to make you prettier, eh?"

The girl flushed. "I—I don't understand."

Bill said: "You could have tipped Nocker whenever we watched from 327."

Fear brightened her eyes. "Oh, I wouldn't do that!"

"It's been done before," Bill said.

A thickset man with sparse gray hair bustled into the room. He saw Nocker Velinski. "Cripes!"

"Hello, Sherlock," the Duke said.

Bill volunteered: "A nice clean murder, shamus."

The hotel detective muttered: "They got him this time."

"Who?" Bill asked sharply.

"Why—why the gang he liquidated a couple of years ago. I mean, a couple Nocker didn't kill! That scar—Nocker got that in the fight."

"You got all the answers," Bill snapped.

"I just thought—"

"Don't."

Bill Frane stepped close to the thickset man. Lean fingers shot out and gripped coat lapels. He shook the dick slowly and each time the man's head snapped back and forth. "You rat! You tipped Velinski when we watched this joint!"

The Duke patted the girl's shoulder. "I'll be seeing you later, honey. Run along."

The girl fled from the room.

Between jerks of his head, the hotel dick kept mumbling: "Not me—not me—I—"

"For money you'd do anything," Bill said.

"No—I—got—a job."

"You'd pocket Nocker's money!"

The Duke intervened. "Let the louse alone, Bill."

Bill relaxed his grip. "I'm going to turn this hotel inside out, shamus. If you've crossed us—"

The man mumbled: "I'm shooting square."

A siren wailed faintly from the street. The Duke whispered to Bill Frane: "We were together, Bill."

Bill nodded. They'd have to stick together on that point. The Duke continued: "Just so there's no comeback, you ditch the stuff from Frenchy's."

Bill crossed the corridor to 327 and closed the door. He tossed the coffee container and sandwich wrapper into an alley. His eyes searched the room. Everything in order. Quietly he opened the door.

There were two newcomers in Room 328. Bill knew them. They were the same build. They each wore pale gray suits, tight at the waist, and pale gray felt hats with dark green bands. Bill couldn't see their faces. He didn't have to. But they had expressionless eyes. The Patanelli twins. . . .

THE Duke stood stiffly by the desk, his face a mask. By his side was the hotel detective, hands raised above his head. Bill glided across the room, his footsteps muffled by the rug. He gripped his gun by the barrel. One of the twins said: "You killed Nocker."

The other twin turned toward Bill. Bill swung. The butt caught the twin alongside the temple. Blood spurted and the twin dropped to the floor. The other Patanelli snarled, started to turn.

Bill flipped his gun, catching the butt expertly and slid off the safety. Two guns spoke simultaneously. The twin collapsed, one leg twisted under his body. A drop of blood stained his lips. He breathed heavily. A single bloody bubble grew on his lips and when it broke, he died.

The bullet from Patanelli's gun had creased the back of Bill Frane's gun hand. He wiped it mechanically, then sheathed his gun. The Duke wiped perspiration from his forehead. "Right in the belly," he grunted.

Bill's eyes were cold. "That's the place to plug a rat."

"You're hard, Bill."

"Sure."

The room filled up with men. A trim man with sharp eyes—it was Captain Reddick, walked through the crowd.

"We got two, captain," the Duke said.

"Looks like an abattoir," Reddick grunted. "What happened?"

The Duke explained.

"Nice work," Reddick told Bill Frane, and added to the Duke: "Did you search Nocker yet?"

"Yes."

The Duke pointed to a pocketbook, gold watch and chain, a black notebook, and a handful of silver and several crumpled bills on the desk.

"Funny about Nocker's cash," the hotel detective said. "Nocker always carried a big roll."

Reddick faced him slowly. "How do you know?"

"Young Rugg told me."

"Rugg?"

"The kid what kept Nocker's books."

Bill said: "You know a hell of a lot about this case."

The dick shifted uneasily as if his feet hurt. "I'm trying to help you guys. I gotta know what goes on around here."

"Anything else?" Reddick prompted.

"Just that we don't like this any better than you, captain. Hurts our high class trade."

Bill growled: "He could have tipped Nocker off when we watched."

Reddick nodded. "You check him close, Frane. Who visited 328?"

"Rugg and the Patanelis," the Duke said.

"How's it look to you?"

"Like two and two, captain. We heard Nocker talking to the Patanelis when they left. Five minutes later when Rugg went, we didn't hear Nocker, did we, Bill?"

Bill nodded slowly. "That's right, and Rugg was in a hurry."

Open-and-shut, Bill thought. From the comfortable way that Nocker still sat in the high-backed chair, he knew that the killer had been in Nocker's confidence. Only a friend could outflank Nocker. Anybody could see that the evidence pointed at the kid. He was on Nocker's payroll and the last person to be in Room 328. Murder for plenty of cash, an open-and-shut case.

Reddick ordered: "Search the room."

No bankroll turned up. Reddick said: "Get out a teletype for Rugg. Description?"

The Duke whipped out a notebook and intoned slowly while a stenographer wrote down the description. "Five feet, seven inches. Weight, one-forty. Sleek black hair parted on the left. Dead white face. Light blue eyes. Blue suit, white shirt, white-striped blue tie, tan shoes, no hat. Shifty-eyed. Walks with a limp on the port side."

"Can you work?" Reddick asked Bill Frane.

"Sure, it's only a scratch."

"You and DeRoche check Rugg's house."

Bill drove the car and the Duke lounged in the front seat. At 318 Robinson Lane, they rang the bell. A wispy, elderly woman answered.

"Mrs. Rugg?" the Duke asked politely.

"Yes."

"Teddy in?"

She hesitated. "He's just left town."

"Know where?"

"A defense—" She stopped. "You're police?" she whispered.

The Duke's voice was casual. "Where to, Mrs. Rugg?"

One thin hand fumbled at the neck of her faded housedress. "I didn't want Teddy to work for that man," she faltered. "We needed the money until Teddy could get another job. Teddy hasn't done anything wrong!"

"Murder isn't Sunday School stuff," Bill said.

THE words hit the woman like blows. Without a sound she crumpled on the floor.

"Water!" the Duke yelled.

Bill brought a towel and basin of cold water from the kitchen. The woman lay on the divan. The Duke rubbed her wrists, then dipped the towel in the water and held it against the woman's eyes. "You're too blunt," he said reprovingly.

"I don't like a runaround from anybody."

"You're too hard. Hate to have you on my trail."

"Around the night clubs, Duke?"

Mrs. Rugg moaned and sat up. "Teddy wouldn't kill," she whispered. "He's a good boy."

The Duke said easily: "Tell us where he went."

There was strength and courage and stubbornness in her frail body. "Teddy's got a right to a new life! You can't hound him! He didn't kill anybody and that's the truth. I won't tell you anything."

"Nobody said he killed anybody," Bill said tonelessly. "Velinski is dead. He carried a wad of cash. The cash is gone. Teddy was the last person seen with Velinski. Running away only gets him in deeper."

The woman's eyes were circles of fear. "Velinski dead? Now I know Teddy didn't kill him! Teddy's afraid of blood. Ever since his own father cut his own throat—"

The Duke stood up. "Let's blow, Bill."

"An order?" Bill asked.

"Yes."

They left the house. In the car the Duke said: "Why hammer at a nice old woman like that? Just because her son's a murderer—"

Bill interrupted with, "How do I know she's so nice? That faint could have been a stall. How do I know for certain that anybody's okay? You can't tell what goes on inside a person by listening to them talk. All I know about this case for sure is what I think and I'm checking every angle! Besides, we'll get Rugg now."

"How?"

"Simple. She started to say 'defense job'. To get work in a defense plant Rugg would be fingerprinted and his prints filed with the F.B.I."

"That's right, Bill."

Later the Duke told Captain Reddick: "I got it figured where Rugg is. He blew town, but his mother let slip about a defense job. Rugg's been fingerprinted. You got his prints from 328 and we'll check through the F.B.I. to find him."

"Good stuff," Reddick said, adding: "Patanelli clamored up when he came to. We brought Velinski's wife in. Nocker had thirty-six grand cash when he left home this morning. Nothing on his mind, so she said. That leaves it squarely up to young Rugg. Go fetch the kid."

In normal times the F.B.I. moves entirely too fast for the average crook. After Pearl Harbor, it sprouted the wings of a P-38. Forty-eight hours after Velinski's murder, the Duke and Bill Frane arrived in Dogwood Valley, Connecticut, site of Whirlaway Motors sprawling plant. At 3:45 P. M. they picked up white-faced Teddy Rugg. On the return journey, the Duke drove and Bill sat on the rear seat with Rugg.

Bill suggested: "Come clean, kid. Where's Nocker's roll?"

"Y-you got nothing on me," Rugg mumbled.

"Only murder. You were alone with Nocker, then scrambled."

"The Patanellis hated Nocker. They killed him!"

"We'd have seen them enter 328."

Wildly, "They used the fire escape!"

"That's at the end of the corridor."

"They ran with the old Gleason gang! They hated Nocker and came back to kill him."

Bill yawned. "A bedtime story, kid."

Rugg wet his lips. "You're trying to frame me!"

"Cut the sob angle." Bill switched tactics. "Nocker carry much cash?"

"Over thirty thousand that day."

"Why?"

"Pay offs. Then he always collected the night before when he knew the cops were going to watch from Room 327."

"Nocker got tips?"

"Regular."

The sedan slowed and the Duke turned to watch Rugg. "Who tipped Nocker?"

"Nocker never said," Rugg answered tonelessly.

The sedan picked up speed. Tires hummed on the concrete. Snatches of bird song drifted through the open car windows. Bill spoke softly. "In a way we're glad Nocker is dead. Only when we find a corpse we got to know

how come. Come clean, kid. The D.A. will listen to reason. Or do you want the chair?"

Pause, then: "Kid, you clam up and you'll burn! You've heard about the chair. They fasten electrodes to your bare leg. They strap you fast and pull a hood over your face. Someone throws the switch. A rising roar of sound." A long, long pause. "Where's the cash?"

Suppressed sobs burst from the kid's lips. Deep sounds that came from the chest and sounded as if he'd been hurt badly. His body shook. His eyes were wild with fear. "For God's sake, I don't want to die! I don't want the chair!"

Above the purr of the motor and the whine of the tires, the Duke shouted: "Car's pulling, Bill! We got to stop and check."

THE sedan slowed to a stop. Bill got out and took a look. The rear tire was a white-wall, almost new. A telltale bulge showed where the tire rested on the graveled shoulder of the highway.

"Duck, Bill!" the Duke shouted, piling out of the car.

Bill crouched behind the car. The Duke followed, panted: "He grabbed my gun! The way you hammered at him he's berserk!"

Bill unsheathed his revolver. He worked around the car until he could see through the left side window. Rugg sat up straight, the Duke's gun clenched in both hands. The Duke urged: "Plug him!"

Rugg looked toward the left. He swung toward the right. Instantly Bill dropped his gun to the concrete highway and reached in through the window. He gripped Rugg's wrists, twisted. Rugg screamed and dropped the gun.

"Pick up your gun," Bill said.

The Duke obeyed. "You took a chance," he said.

"No chance. He hadn't taken the safety off."

"I didn't think he'd make a play," the Duke explained.

Bill picked up his own gun. "You never knows what goes on inside anybody."

Bill climbed in. The sedan gathered speed. The sun sank lower. Long shadows crept across the highway. At Stamford, the sedan crawled through heavy traffic, then re-entered the empty express highway.

The Duke suggested: "Let's eat. It's been six hours since lunch."

"Okay," Bill answered. He asked Rugg: "Hungry, kid?"

No answer. The Duke parked the sedan alongside a tavern. Bill snapped handcuffs on Rugg's wrists. "You'll behave now."

Suddenly young Rugg reached forward and clawed the rough tweed shoulders of the Duke's coat. "Don't let him frame me!" he pleaded.

"I didn't kill Velinski! I don't want the chair! Please help me!"

"Relax, kid," the Duke said easily. "I'm your friend."

Slowly Rugg relaxed. "You're a real guy, copper."

Bill said: "Get out."

They went inside, sat at a corner table by the rear door. After eating, the Duke stood up and stretched. "I'm a new man." He strolled to the lavatory and entered.

Rugg sat with downcast eyes at first, then asked: "You want me to—to burn?"

"I want you to tell the truth, kid."

"I didn't kill Nocker! The sight of blood makes me sick."

The Duke came back, said lightly: "Next."

Bill left the table. The lavatory was a cubicle, dimly lighted by the twilight streaming in through a half-opened window. He ran water until it flowed hot from the tap. Bill soaped his hands. A crash of broken glass from the direction of the dining room.

Bill swung toward the door. He tugged at the handle with soapy fingers. It wouldn't open. He heard the Duke shout: "Come back here, Rugg!"

A door slammed. Steps banged across the dining room floor. And finally Bill Frane got the door of the lavatory open. The table where they had sat was upturned. Water dripped to the floor. The back door stood open. Bill ran toward the door.

All the while he expected to hear the blast of Duke's gun as the kid legged for the safety of the nearby woods. One shot! Maybe the Duke was easy-going, but he could plug a tree at fifty yards! One shot, and Teddy Rugg would go back to the city feet first. They'd have the dickens of a job explaining that to Captain Reddick!

Bill burst into the yard behind the tavern. He saw Teddy Rugg forty feet away, stumbling toward the protection of the woods. He whirled to the left. The Duke stood near the building. He had his gun out, held it level.

One finger tightened on the trigger.

Bill hurled himself at the Duke, at the same time bringing up one fist sharply. The fist struck the Duke's gun hand just as the gun thundered. Bill ran toward Teddy Rugg, called: "Come back, kid! You can't get away!"

Within arm's reach of the sheltering trees, Rugg hesitated. Slowly he turned. Then he walked toward Bill Frane as if he were wading through deep treacherous waters. "I don't want the chair," he moaned through clenched teeth.

Bill turned toward the building. The Duke made a hopeless gesture with the gun. A curl of smoke sifted from the barrel, swirled upward. "It would have been easier shooting him," the Duke said. "Cripes, he flung the pitcher of water in my face! He thought he'd get away."

"He's going back and face the music."

A waiter watched from the rear door. "What gives?" he asked.

"We're police," Bill explained. He took Rugg by the arm and led him toward the sedan. When the Duke returned from the tavern after paying the bill, Bill and Rugg were already in the sedan.

The sedan sped across the lower end of Connecticut. The soft early night flowed about them. Gradually the glow over the dimmed out city brightened, turned reddish as night deepened. They booked Rugg at the desk in the precinct station, watched as a pot-bellied, elderly policeman led him away to a cell.

"You should have thought of the kid's mother," the Duke said.

"I did," Bill answered.

"Killing the kid could have been called an accident. That way there'd be no disgrace for the mother with her son dying in the chair."

Bill's eyes were hard. "Let's report and get it over."

IN REDDICK'S office, the Duke sat down in front of the desk. He crossed immacu-

SIGHT TESTER

THIRST BESTER

Guess which line is the longer—
but don't bet on it



ANSWER:
No feeling—measure them—
Both are the same—



lately creased trouser legs. Black silk socks with neat white clockwork gleamed above freshly shined oxfords. Always the Duke, Bill Frane thought, and listened to the explanation the Duke gave the captain.

"Then the case is almost closed," Reddick said. "We'll hand it to the D.A. in the morning."

"One thing," Bill Frane said. "So Rugg killed Nocker Velinski. Now who was the rat that kept tipping Nocker when we watched?"

"That's not important now," Reddick answered.

"Okay," Bill said, "but the D.A. won't like this case."

The Duke grinned easily. Reddick snorted. "Why not, Frane?"

"The kid's lawyer can do two things in court," Bill explained slowly. "Nocker is a rat. He's better off dead. So the lawyer builds the kid into a hero. You know the angle: *Youngster kills black marketeer . . . teen-age hero kills Velinski in patriotic gesture . . . when Rugg learned of Velinski's real character, he got a job in a defense plant . . . but first he killed the black marketeer . . .* That's a hot poker for any D.A. to handle. And he'll give us Hell."

Reddick leaned forward. "What's the other line for Rugg's lawyer?"

"Where's the thirty-six grand cash?" Bill took a slow deep breath. "So the kid tells the truth. He says Nocker was alive when he left 328. Maybe he can prove that. He'll tell about taking a job at Whirlaway Motors. He'll tell how we got him, brought him back. Then the defense lawyer will swear me in as a defense witness."

Reddick straightened. "You?"

"Sure. I'll have to tell how Rugg took the Duke's gun away in the car, how the Duke wanted me to shoot the kid. Then I'll tell about the kid's break from the tavern, how the Duke was going to shoot the kid and close the case. Sounds damned phoney, don't it?"

The Duke stood up. His face was white. "Could I help it if the kid tried to scam?"

"Sure, only you wanted the kid dead."

Ugly lines ridged the skin alongside the Duke's thin lips. "What you hinting at, Frane?"

Reddick ordered: "I want to hear this, Frane."

Bill nodded. "All along I figured this case was screwy. When Nocker was alone in Room 328, the Duke sent me out for sandwiches. That left the Duke alone across the corridor from Nocker. I didn't get that angle at first. I didn't figure that the Duke would play me

for a dope. When the bellhop came up for drinks and found Nocker dead, she screamed. The Duke don't like gun play. He likes me to barge into trouble first. But this time, he races into 328 in the lead. Damned uncharacteristic of him."

The Duke clenched both fists. "I oughta knock you cold, Frane."

Bill ignored him. His voice took on force and speed. "While I was out for sandwiches, the Duke went into 328. Nocker wasn't afraid of the Duke! It was the Duke who always phoned Nocker and tipped him off whenever we watched. It was easy for the Duke to slit Nocker's throat, steal the cash, and then frame Teddy Rugg."

Bill whirled on the Duke. "You dirty louse! With Nocker dead you had to phone the office to have scotch sent to 328 so I'd be with you when the girl found the corpse! That's where you slipped up. I checked that call with the desk clerk. The call went through at 4:19 P. M. What's more, that thirty-six grand made you excited. The clerk told me the liquor call was for Room 328, but that the call was made from our room, 327! That's how I knew you were in on it. You had to be the tipster. You had to be the killer!"

The towering Duke stood to the right of the captain's desk. His eyes were glazed with fright. He made a play swiftly. One hand shot inside his smartly tailored coat. A revolver butt showed inside his right hand. Bill Frane took two eager steps. His fist lashed out and caught the Duke on the point of the jaw. The Duke tottered, stumbled backward. Slowly he sagged to the floor.

Bill Frane stood over him. "Get up! Framing a kid! Get up!"

Reddick came around the desk, bent over the Duke. "Out cold," he said heavily. Suddenly his eyes were tired. "I—I trusted De-Roche. He made a mistake and phoned from 327."

Bill said: "No, he phoned from 328 all right. I tricked him, but he knew I had him hooked. He wanted me around when Nocker was found. That's why he phoned. Remember the call was made at 4:19 P. M.?"

Reddick's fist hit the desk viciously. "I get it! If Rugg had killed Nocker before Rugg left the room at 4:14, there'd have been no phone call for scotch."

Bill nodded. "It's quite a trick for a dead man to make phone calls." Bill stumbled toward the door. "You take over Captain. I got to make a phone call. That kid's mother—she'll be worried stiff."

"The voice of the dead," muttered Reddick.



HOW MANY CARDS FOR THE CORPSE?

By JOE KENT

Just a friendly little small-stakes game—with eight aces to the deck, the safety-catch off, and Jake all set to make the biggest killing of his life!

JAKE MITCHELL didn't go to Manny's much anymore. It was one of the things he'd promised Jean when they'd gotten married. Still, just once in a while, like today . . . when he was on the West Side anyway and it was two hours before he had to be home for dinner.

Manny's hadn't changed much; it would never change, he realized, as he climbed the dirty narrow stairs that led upwards over the Green Grill Bar. The odor of stale smoke and spilled beer was there to stay. He could hear the solid clinking of the pool-balls from the back room. He pushed open the door at the head of the stairs and blinked into the ever-present smoke-haze.

"Hell, I thought the door was locked," a dry voice said. From a round wooden table a fat bright-eyed man surveyed Jake impassively.

"Hello, Manny," Jake greeted. There was neither like nor dislike in Jake's voice. Jake despised the fat, shrewd little gambler and he half-guessed what Manny thought of him. He wondered why he ever came this way. Perhaps, Jake told himself, it was to see the place from which he had come. For he'd been born two doors down the street. He swiped fruit from the corner-stand. He'd sold papers along this way. He'd half-starved here. But he'd gotten away, he reminded himself.

"Want to take a hand?" Manny inquired mechanically. "We're breaking up in twenty minutes."

Jake did not answer at once. He looked at the other three men about the table. One was Red Shelly, a thin wiry book-maker from Broadway. Another was Charlie Broski, Manny's brother; dark faced, he always had money, but you never knew how. The third man was a little, lean-faced, bald-headed man that Jake had never seen before.

Jake shifted his eyes to their money. It was small-stakes. No one had more than a hundred dollars in front of him.

I haven't looked at a card in a year, Jake was telling himself. And I've got two hours until dinner.

"I'll take a hand," he decided. He sat down



and emptied seventy dollars from his bill-fold onto the table. He lit a cigarette and loosened his collar.

"Stud," Manny said flatly. He dealt. Jake waited until the third card, then dropped. He got himself a drink from the stand while the hand was finished.

"What're you doing now?" Charlie asked. His voice had the rumble of a husky drum. He was smoking a curved-stem pipe.

"I'm still at the Star—doing feature stuff for the Sunday supplement," Jake said.

"You got married, huh?" Red Shelly said softly as he dealt.

"I got married," Jake agreed. Shelly was another one that Jake could take or leave.

"It'll take jacks to open," Red said. Jake picked up his cards and spread them slowly, one corner at a time. He saw one ace; he saw a second. He saw a jack, a ten; and then he saw the third ace. He looked at his money, then loosened a five.

"I'll open," he said quietly. "Five dollars."

"Drop," said the lean-faced little stranger.

Manny tapped his fingers against the table. "Call . . . and raise. Fifteen dollars," he said very slowly, very deliberately.

"You can take my ante," Charlie said.

"I drop," Red said.

Manny looked at Jake. Jake studied Manny's round heavy-lined cheeks, his bright small eyes. At last he sifted out fifteen dollars. "I'll call you, Manny," he decided. "Two cards," he said to Red.

"I'll take two," Manny said.

Jake breathed a soft sigh. So Manny had three-of-a-kind, too! But Jake's were aces. He sweated his cards for half a minute, then looked. He saw his three aces. He saw a four. And then he saw the fourth ace.

He felt his fingers tremble slightly. He looked at his money, then at Manny. "I . . . I'll check to you," he said at last.

"Twenty dollars," Manny said very quietly.

Jake drew on his cigarette. He looked at the cards again. He counted his money. He had the twenty; and he had thirty dollars more. He smiled at Manny. "I'll call, and kick what I've got. Thirty dollars." He pushed it into the pot.

"You raise . . ." Manny murmured. Nothing in his expression changed. His left hand went into his coat-pocket and came out with a limp, fat bill-fold. He took out thirty dollars. And then he took out two hundred dollars. "I'll kick you that much, Jake."

There was a moment of silence. Jake swallowed. "I don't have it, Manny. I'm all in."

"You like your hand, don't you?" Manny asked gently. "And you can write a check, can't you? And you wouldn't give me a bad check, would you?" The tone was mincing, measured, yet steely.

"You know damn well my check would be good!" Jake snapped. He stared at his cards; there were still the four aces. He thought again; *Manny drew two . . . he must have had three-of-a-kind . . . I can beat any four-of-a-kind he's got . . . he wouldn't have kicked if he'd been drawing two cards to a straight-flush . . .*

"Or maybe you don't like your cards?" Manny murmured softly.

"I like 'em fine," Jake said flatly. "I'll call that two hundred. And I'll raise three hundred. I owe five hundred in the pot."

The brittle silence grew. No one moved; nothing moved but the smoke from Jake's cigarette. And then Manny lifted his bill-fold. "I'll try you, Jake. There's your three hundred. And here's just a little more. Eight hundred dollars more."

"Hell, Manny, I can't afford—" Jake stopped. He was staring at the round face; a bead of perspiration flecked Manny's lip. His eyes had narrowed into tiny marbles.

He's bluffing, Jake's mind raced. He couldn't have me beat . . . I know . . . He looked at the money. It was like a touch of raw hot wine in his veins. And it was his! His!

"I'll call, Manny," he said. His voice was thick. "I owe one thousand, three hundred dollars. What've you got?"

"Not much, Jackie . . . just these," Manny murmured. He laid them down. One ace . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . four aces . . .

"I . . . but you can't . . . I . . . what the hell is—"

"What have you got, Jackie?" Manny whispered.

JAKE'S cards slid to the table from his fingers. He saw his own four aces. He saw Manny's face: it turned from olive to dull red. The tiny eyes seemed to explode with tiny lights. Someone at the table gasped softly. A foot scraped. The silence was like an electric shock for an endless moment.

"Where did you get 'em, Jake?" Manny asked very, very softly.

"Get them? I . . . damn it, Red dealt them to me! Where do you think I got them?" he demanded furiously.

"That's what I'm wondering," Manny murmured. "Take a look at the backs . . . they're the same pattern of the old deck . . . but the borders are clean, see . . . fresh cards, Jake."

"I . . ." Jake looked. His aces were new. Not like the other cards of the deck. He stared at Manny, then glared at Red. "Where did you get those damned things! You dealt them to—"

"I wouldn't start too fast, guy," Red whispered. And his hand went slipping beneath the table. His face froze. Jake did not move.

A sudden wave of hard nausea grated in his stomach. He wanted to close his eyes . . . to open them . . . to see that it was a dream. . . .

"Maybe we better stand up, Jake," Manny said. His tone was flat and bleak now.

"What do you mean? What—" Then Jake knew what he meant. A wave of fury boiled into his throat. "Sure—sure!" he exploded. "I'll stand up! I'll empty my pockets! You can see that I—"

His words vanished. His fingers halted—too late. Already he had the contents of his coat pocket half-out . . . and there . . . there upon the table fell the deck of cards. A new deck, identical in pattern to the deck on the table!

"And the little aces? . . ." Manny whispered. His pudgy fingers pushed the deck apart. All the cards were there—all but the aces. . . .

"That wasn't smart," Manny murmured.

Jake swallowed violently twice. "I . . . but I didn't! Those . . . they . . . I didn't have 'em! Somebody slipped them in my . . ." He choked again. He stared from face to face. Red was like an image of stone, his hand waiting. The little stranger was grey-faced and frozen, yet a deep, hot light of anger was blazing in his eyes. Jake knew he was dangerous. And Charlie Broski simply watched him—watched him with a flat and contemptuous stare.

Manny left one hand near his pocket. He leaned across the table until his breath was warm in Jake's face. "I said . . . it wasn't smart, Jake," he echoed mechanically.

"But . . . but, damn you, I swear . . . swear I never—"

"You owe me thirteen hundred dollars, Jake. I want it. I want it in three hours. And after I get it, I don't want to see your dirty little face around here again. And you're getting a break when I don't kill you!"

"You can't talk to—" Jake didn't finish. Even in his blind anger, he knew he was walking very close to death. He swallowed and felt a wet cold sweat pour from him. "But . . . I . . . thirteen hundred dollars . . . three hours . . . I—" he stammered.

"Yeah. It's five to five. You be in this room at eight tonight, Jake. You'll have it with you, or . . ." One more brittle moment of silence passed. "Now, get out and get the money!"

Jake tried to protest, but no word crossed his dry lips. He trembled, then twisted, stumbled toward the door, jerked it open, and plunged down the stairs—down and out into the clean free air of fading day. He was almost running. . . .

The shadows were lengthening from the buildings. A faintly purple haze was replacing the sunlight. The walks were crowded

with people — people going home — laughing, eager people.

On a corner, blocks from Manny's, Jake stopped, panting. He moved his hand across his eyes and stared dazedly about him.

"God, it . . . it didn't happen . . . it wasn't thirty minutes ago that I . . . I was just walking . . . not thinking . . . caring . . . just wasting a couple of hours . . . and now . . . I . . . got to have a drink," he gasped. He pushed into a dim-lit little bar and ordered a whiskey. He lit a cigarette. His fingers trembled violently. He drank swiftly.

He closed his eyes, trying to seek escape in blindness. Yet the torturing scene was burning in his mind: His cards . . . and Manny's cards . . . their faces—Charlie's . . . Red Shelly's . . . and the lean-faced little stranger . . . Manny. . . .

One of them . . . one of them did it! Jake raged weakly to himself. One of them dealt me those new aces! Slipped that new deck in my pocket! Red was dealing . . . Red! I know it was Red . . . but . . . what will I do? . . . Red will kill a man. They say he killed Nix Farron. If . . . Oh, God . . . what a hell to walk into . . . if I could only back up half an hour I'd go home and. . . .

He shook his head. But he couldn't shake it from his mind. *Jean . . . what will I tell her . . . and where can I get that much money . . . I've got to have it for him by eight . . . I know what he'll do if I don't get there with it when . . . I . . .* Abruptly Jake knocked away his glass and straightened. He threw a bill on the bar and stumbled out.

Home . . . home . . . his shattered mind kept echoing. He had to talk . . . to tell Jean. . . .

IT was six o'clock when he opened the door of the small apartment on 14th Street. "Jean! Jean!" he called.

There was no answer. He moved frantically through the three rooms. She was not there. Maybe she went to the store for something. She'd be back. He stopped before the desk and took out the check-book. He looked at their balance: Six hundred and eighteen dollars.

"Where . . . where can I get the rest . . . seven hundred dollars in two hours?" he breathed harshly. "I . . . Oh, God, why did I go there? Why did I do it? I'd promised . . . I hate them . . . I know what they are . . . why did I go there and—"

"Don't move, Jake," came a flat deep whisper from behind him.

Jake jerked. Instinctively he started to turn. "I said, *don't move!*" the voice snarled. "I never liked a guy to cheat me," came the deadly whisper.

"Man . . . Manny, listen . . . listen a minute

to . . ." Jake gasped. The words were never finished. One instant he was trying to speak. The next split-instant a shattering blow crashed against his skull. His eyes danced with a hail of blinding lights. His ears drummed and roared with sudden concussion. He felt his muscles loosen . . . felt himself twisting . . . sinking . . . falling. . . .

"Jake! Please wake up, Jake! Oh, please!" The distant frantic cries wore into his ears. He opened his eyes and stared blankly upward. Out of the stunned blindness, Jean's slender face, her dark curled hair took shape; her lips were begging him:

"Please! Oh, Jake, for God's sake, please!"

"Uh . . . huh?" He struggled to sit erect. His head ached; a salty thickness coated his tongue. He couldn't remember . . . and then he saw.

It lay just within the door from the bed room—still—crumpled in the dark stain that spread from beneath it and over the rug . . . the eyes, small and beady, were locked upon the ceiling. The lips were lax; they seemed, almost, to be smiling. And in the center of the forehead was one small hole; across the temple was a trail of now-dry blood.

"M—M—Manny!" Jake whispered. "Manny . . . you . . . he . . . dead!" he gasped. He twisted his eyes to Jean. "What . . . how did . . ."

"I don't know, I don't know," she sobbed half-hysterically. "I . . . I came back from the office where you called me and there . . . he was like that . . . just like that . . . and you . . . with that gun in your hand . . ." She choked and swallowed. Jake stared at the floor beside him. There was a small blunt automatic. Slowly his eyes widened. A cool frozen reality was replacing the dazed fog of his brain. "Jake . . ." Jean sobbed.

"What did you mean—where I called you at the office?" Jake interrupted suddenly.

"But you remember—you called me an hour—over an hour ago. You said you were at the office—that you had to see me there at once. You wouldn't say why, but . . . Jake! . . . It wasn't you!"

"No! Certainly it wasn't me!" He stumbled to his feet and stared down at the body.

"What does it mean . . . how did it happen and—" Jean stammered.

Jake shook his head. "I'll have to tell you all I know. I . . . I got in a poker game this afternoon, honey. I . . . lost. Thirteen hundred dollars." He swallowed as her cheeks turned pale. Quickly, then, he told her what had followed.

"I came home here. The next thing, Manny . . . I thought it was Manny—he told me to stand still. Then I got slugged. That's all I know. I . . . I swear it's all I know, Jean. You believe me? You believe—"

"Oh, Jake, of course I believe you, but . . . but who . . . why was he killed? And right in this room?"

"That's what I'm trying to understand. I . . . listen!" he exploded. "I think I see it: One of those men wanted to kill Manny; either it was Charlie Broski or Red Shelly or that stranger! But the killer needed a red-herring to pull across his trail. He'd planned to flush those crooked aces into the game, and when I sat down, he made me the sucker! I got 'em! So Manny caught me cheating! I owed Manny money, and we both hated each other because of the crooked deal! He figured the cops would believe I killed Manny! Wouldn't they! If Red and Charlie and the stranger told the story! And Manny's body was here in this room! I'd be holding the death gun! I—"

"But then . . . which one of them *did* do it?" Jean asked starkly. "And why did they want to kill him?"

"That's the hell of it!" Jake sighed empty. "You can't name a crooked guy on the West End that wouldn't have a reason for killing Manny! Maybe the killer owed Manny money from gambling at Manny's dice-table. Maybe the killer wanted to move into Manny's numbers-territory! Maybe he knew Manny had something on him that would make a blackmail axe—Manny's picked up a little at that before! It . . . it could be a thousand men. It could be one of those three, I know!"

"But then, what—" Jean stopped. Neither of them breathed. The heavy steps in the hall stopped. A knock came at the door.

"Martin! Martin!" a hard, deliberate voice called.

"Jean . . . that . . . that's the cops!" Jake choked. "If—"

"Get in the kitchen! Please hurry! I'll try to talk . . . tell them you aren't here! Keep them from coming in—"

THE knock came again. Jake cursed wildly. He cursed himself for having to leave Jean to face them. He stooped and pocketed the death-gun, then turned toward the kitchen. He turned the lock and leaned against the wall, his ear to the door-crack. He heard Jean open the front door. He heard a voice asking for Jake Martin. Then his nerves leaped. He heard Red Shelly's voice, piping:

"Maybe if he ain't here, you can tell us where Manny is?"

"Manny? Who is—" Jean started uneasily.

"My name is Detective Irwin, lady," another voice said. "You wouldn't mind if we just stepped inside and waited for Jake Martin?"

"But I . . . if you don't—" Jean began. Then Jake heard the heavy steps entering the apartment. His breath vanished. His fingers

tightened against his palms. And then the steps halted.

"Well, well, well!" said the hard voice of Irwin.

"Jeez, he . . . he's dead! Dead!" Shelly gasped wildly. "Listen, lemme tell you! I was there see, and this Jake Martin got hisself caught trying to run in four new aces! Manny caught him and rustled the new deck outta his pocket! So Martin owes Manny a grand and three hundred, and Manny says get it by eight o'clock! So this Martin screams out. Then about an hour ago when we're all still sitting at Manny's talking about what a cheat this Martin is, Manny gets a telephone call. It's from Martin, who says for Manny to get over here to this apartment and get the dough. Okay, says Manny. And he leaves to come over here—but first he says to me, 'If I don't run into no trouble, I'll be back in half an hour.' So when he don't come back, I get a funny feeling. That's why I give you a ring and bring you over here, see?"

"I see," Irwin agreed gently. Jake heard him striking a match. "Now, Mrs. Martin . . . you just start slow and tell me exactly what happened. And tell me where your husband is. It'll be a lot easier—"

"But I . . . I swear I don't know! He didn't do it, I know, but I don't know where he is or—"

"You didn't want to let us in . . . maybe . . ." And Irwin's steps moved about the room. Jake jerked back from the door. Wildly his eyes fled about the room, locked on the fire-escape. Swiftly he tip-toed across the floor and raised the window. The door knob rattled violently. Jake started out onto the steel landing of the fire-escape. His left foot, still on the kitchen floor, twisted beneath him, throwing him noisily against the window. He cursed frantically and looked down. His foot had turned on a small metal object.

Irwin shouted furiously. His fist hammered into the locked door. Then his weight crashed against it.

Jake dragged himself through the window and stumbled down the steel steps. He could hear the shouts above him, he could hear the crash of the kitchen door. He dropped into the service-alley as a voice shouted above him. He was fleeing about the corner into the street

when a gun roared above and a slug came whining down and spanged off the concrete. . . .

Time . . . time . . . Jake's confused mind was chanting anxiously. Time to think . . . I know it was Red Shelly . . . if I can only find something . . . some proof. . . .

Three blocks away, he wrenched open the door of a cab and slammed it behind him. "Times Square," he panted.

At Times Square he left the cab, entered the subway, and rode uptown. On 76th Street, he found a small nondescript hotel. He rolled up his collar, pulled down his hat, and entered. Minutes later he sank down in a chair behind the locked door of a small drab room and lit a cigarette.

"So many reasons why Red Shelly would want to kill Manny . . ." he whispered to himself. "Manny had a finger in so many dirty pies, I don't know where to start looking. He's pulled blackmail, protection, numbers, dice . . . he—" Jake stopped abruptly. "Damn! His private office and apartment in the Bronx! He kept his records there! If Shelly doesn't know about the place, maybe he hasn't been able to kick apart any evidence that Manny might have left . . . if I only knew where the damned apartment was! Manny kept it secret and—" Jake stopped again. His eyes narrowed, then lighted. "Delores! That little dancer! She would know if—"

Jake moved to the telephone and dialed the number of the Star Club. "Is Delores there?" he asked heavily. Then he waited. *If she hasn't heard*, he hoped anxiously. A sweet voice answered: "Yes? Who is it?"

"Honey? This is Manny. How's yourself?"

"Oh, Manny," she murmured intimately. "I'm all right. What—"

"Listen, honey, I've got to see you and quick. It's important. I want you to grab a taxi in ten minutes and meet me at the place in the Bronx. You know. I'll be waiting and—"

"But I . . . you *know* I've got to dance in forty minutes—"

"This is important, I said. I mean it, honey! Start from there in ten minutes—no sooner. You will, won't you, baby?"

"I . . . yeah, sure . . . if you say so, Manny."

To Our Subscribers:

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of wartime transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write to us complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

"Good." He hung up and hurried to the door. On the street he caught a cab and gave the address of the Star Club. It was almost eight now. New York was wrapped in the darkness of night. Almost eight, Jake thought again: *If it hadn't been for murder, what would I be doing now . . . meeting Manny telling him I couldn't pay and . . .*

He closed his eyes. While he moved in frantic reality, trying to think against the tightening mesh of time, he still felt the hollow emptiness of nightmare.

The cab approached the Star Club. "Park here," Jake told the driver. "We'll wait a few minutes." From the parking place, he could see the dimly lit entrance of the little club, four doors down the block. He looked at his watch. It was time. . . .

He leaned forward suddenly as the door of the Star opened. A slender girl with shining blonde hair crossed the walk and entered a cab. It was Delores. . . .

"Follow that cab pulling out," Jake ordered.

He kept leaning forward. Slowly, then swiftly the cabs moved. Twenty minutes later, at a small apartment house in the Bronx, the first cab stopped. Jake felt in his pocket. He had no money.

"You wait here," he told the driver. "I'll be about ten minutes."

He left the cab and followed Delores into the modernistic blue-and-brass lobby of the building. She was climbing the stairs when he entered. He waited at the foot of the steps, watching her slender white fingers move up the rail. They left the stairs at the third floor. Quickly and silently he followed. When he reached the third floor and peered into the corridor, the girl was fumbling into her purse for a key. She opened a door at the back of the building and disappeared. Quickly Jake tip-toed down the hall. He hesitated a moment. The building was silent. He drew the gun from his pocket, then knocked softly.

Steps sounded in the room. The lock turned and the slender arch-eyed little dancer smiled brightly. "Manny, I—" The smile evaporated. Her eyes widened as she saw the gun. Jake moved fast.

"Keep your mouth shut!" He pushed into the room and closed the door, tripping the lock. "Now, take it easy and you'll be okay. But don't make any noise!"

"You . . . what do you . . . that gun . . ." Delores cried.

"I said, keep still!" he whispered harshly. "Back over . . . in that corner . . . don't move!"

He glanced about the room. It was plain, modestly furnished. Two doors, closed, led into other rooms. Jake started to move. His steps halted. His eyes locked on an ash-tray.

In it lay a curve-stemmed pipe.

"A pipe . . . but Manny smoked cigars and . . . Charlie!" Jake gasped. "He's been here and . . . that thing I tripped on in my kitchen! That was a pipe-reamer! That means . . . Charlie was the man who slugged me and killed—"

"Yeah. Doesn't it?" a deep quiet voice said lazily. Jake jerked. His fingers pushed at the safety of his gun—too late.

IN the doorway of one of the other rooms was Charlie. His large round face was drawn into impassive deep lines. His eyes, behind their pillows of fat, burned intently. And the gun in his hand was levelled on Jake's head.

"Drop it, Jake. Drop it now," he said quietly.

Delores half-screamed, the sound small in her throat. Jake tried to speak, to think. There was nothing . . . he felt his fingers obeying . . . heard the gun thump on the floor. Charlie let a faint smile stray across his thick lips.

"You're making it a little hard on me, Jake. I never liked three corpses in one day."

"You . . . damn you . . . you can't get away with—"

"I think I can. I think I will," came the ironic answer. "It's worth eighty grand of the numbers pay-off that Manny's got stowed in the next room. And it's worth his slice of the club and the racket to me. A brother ought to move in when his brother gets killed, don't you think?—even when his brother was a tight rat like Manny, and was trying to freeze me out."

"You . . . you stacked that deck! You killed Manny! You called him on that fake-call and sent him to my place, then you slugged me and killed him! I know—"

"Yeah. You know. But knowing now is knowing too late, Jake," he murmured. He smiled again. "I never had anything against you. I guess it was kind of what you'd call fate . . . you coming in right when you did. It was all set for the slant-eyed little bookie named Red to catch the bad aces, but I couldn't pull the deck out of the game—it was too damned risky. You just sat down in the dead man's seat. Sorry. . . ."

"But . . . damn you, I . . . listen, Charlie, listen, I . . ." Jake swallowed. "You . . . can't kill us both! You know something will—"

"Why not?" Charlie wondered. "The cops will find the girl dead. So what? She was meeting Manny here when you walked in to raid Manny's cash-box. You plugged her to shut her mouth. But the neighbors heard the shot and came around. You got rattled and tried to scam down the fire-escape . . . And because you was so excited, your foot slipped

and damned if you didn't fall. It's three floors on the concrete. That ought to do the job."

Jake's lips sagged. He stared at the impassive face. "You couldn't do . . ." Then he stopped. He knew Charlie could do it. And he knew Charlie would. . . .

He felt a slow chill crawl upward along his spine. He moved his tongue thickly. "Charlie, for God's sake, you—"

He stopped. And across Charlie's face flashed a trace of bleak surprise. From the outside corridor came steps, and an excited voice exclaiming:

" . . . it was him! I know on account of I heard the police broadcast what gave his description! It was Martin, okay! But when he got in my cab, I knew damn well he was lugging a gun! I couldn't do nothing but drive where he said, and that was here, see? Then he came up here to this door and—"

"Damn, damn," Charlie Broski snarled savagely. His suddenly bright eyes raked the room as his body congealed into taut dynamite.

"Okay, Martin! Open it up!" a voice shouted. A fist cracked against the door. Jake began to sweat, his eyes jerking between Charlie's gun and the door. Delores was whimpering hysterically in the corner. Charlie was tip-toeing like a caged animal, to the window, across the room, to the doors . . . hunting, searching. . . .

Jake dragged in a hard breath. "If you shoot now," he said thickly, "you're nailed for murder, cold."

"But I can take you with me, Jake," came the harsh whisper. "You back this way . . . into this room—move!"

The hammering at the door was gone now. There was a moment of silence as Jake began to move. Then a gun roared. The door splintered at the lock.

"Hurry!" Charlie snarled. Again the gun roared into the lock. Bits of metal showered into the room. Jake felt salty perspiration touch his lips. He felt Charlie's gun settle against his spine.

"Back to this window . . . the fire-escape . . . you're covering me when we go down!" The window rasped up. Charlie crawled out, never letting his gun leave Jake's spine. A third time the gun blasted at the door—and Jake heard the crash as the door fell in.

"We're going down. You're staying straight up, between me and the window," Charlie breathed. "Start moving."

Jake moved. Yet as he moved he knew. He was going to die. It would be a shot from the window . . . or it would be later . . . some-

where . . . when Charlie pulled the trigger on his gun! It had to be sometime. . . .

He swallowed the sweat from his lips. He caught a glimpse of the dark concrete below. Through his mind went a picture of Jean . . . the memory of her hair . . . he saw the four aces again . . . he remembered a trip to Coney Island. . . .

This is what you think when you die, he told himself crazily. But when you die, it hurts just the same . . . one way or the other . . . If I die now, it won't hurt anymore . . .

Then a bullet sang past his head. The gun-blast followed, thundering from above him. One more time, he realized. . . .

He took his breath. He gathered his muscles. His fingers locked on the rail. Then he kicked his legs from beneath him! Kicked them backward toward Charlie . . . toward the gun against his spine—

There was a grunt, a scream, and then—a roar. A finger of cold fire drilled into his side. There was a scrambling scraping rasp of finger-nails on the steel railing . . . then there was a wilder, tortured scream that seemed to drop away. It ended in a sodden crush.

Jake was still clutching the railing as he sagged down. Yet he still could see. On the dark concrete below lay the formless, crumpled mass of flesh and bone that, but a few moments before, had been a killer.

"Don't . . . don't shoot him!" the girl's voice wailed from above. "Not that man . . . it was the other man . . . I heard them talking. . . ."

Jake almost smiled. There wouldn't be another shot from up there . . . yet, as he sank down on the steps, he thought of the irony. If Charlie hadn't framed him as the killer, the cabby wouldn't have brought the police . . . he wondered if Charlie had thought of that before he died. . . .

IT WAS cool and white in the room. Jake could hear the man speaking: ". . . quite all right to talk to him now. . . ."

And then, into the horizon of his vision came Jean. She smiled at him anxiously. "Jake . . . you're all right?"

He blinked. His lips felt funny—he felt funny all over . . . light and far from earth. "I . . . don't know," he experimented with his words. "You tell me."

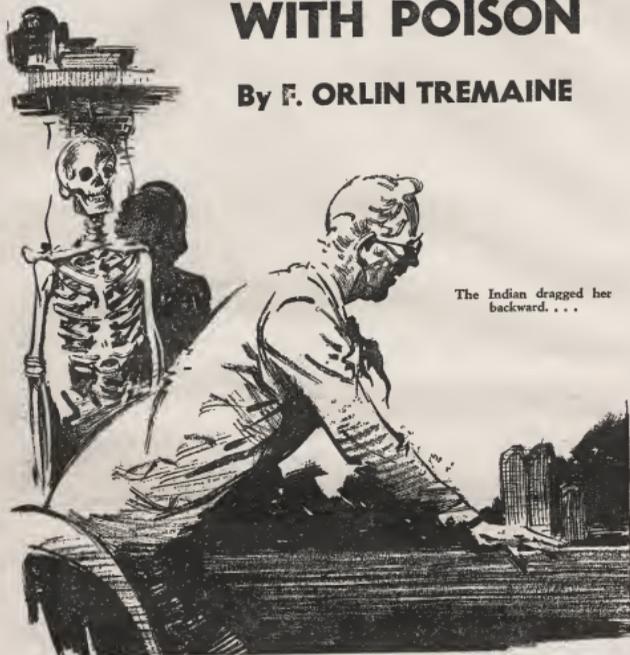
Then she grinned. "I'm going to. About playing poker anymore," she began. "Don't you think—"

"Honey," he said slowly, "I think the game is a little too fast for me. . . ."



PLAY THE GAME WITH POISON

By F. ORLIN TREMAINE



The Indian dragged her
backward. . . .

Five big men can die of a stroke within minutes of each other, and it could be coincidence, but Inspector Cardigan knew better. Yet he couldn't get much farther without the aid of the scintillating professor E. Z. Bari. "Easy" went the rest of the way—along a puzzling and deadly path that led straight to his own grave!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Strikes Again!

A MIDDLE-AGED MAN, healthy and well-to-do, dropped his safety razor in the Pullman dressing-room as the train drew into New York. For just a second he stared down at it blankly, making no move to pick it up. Then he moved woodenly across the room and dropped onto a seat. Fellow passengers noticed him and went over. He felt no pain, only extreme weariness. His hands and feet had become suddenly numb.



An Amazing "Easy Bari" Novelette

Within five short minutes he was dead.

The call reached the Homicide bureau at exactly 7:05 A. M. It might have been mere routine, except for one thing. The man was Holliston Barclay, the philanthropist. The call was switched to Inspector Brian Cardigan's home.

That was the beginning of events which would have shaken any man with less nerve control than Cardigan. He reached headquarters at 7:45, and at 7:52 the second call came through. Ira D. Stevens, industrial economist, had died with the knot in his four-in-

hand tie incomplete. Yet he had first managed to walk to his bed and lie down!

Conrad Turner, advertising executive, was next. He dropped his fork at the breakfast table, stared blankly at it for a minute and then looked helplessly across at his wife. Slowly he spread his hands on the table. The fingers were completely relaxed, completely paralyzed. He felt no pain but within three minutes he fell forward, dead. The call came through to Cardigan's desk at 8:34 A. M.

Eric Van Zandt, broker, died in a taxi on the way downtown. That report was phoned

in at 8:59 A. M. Then Death seemed to pause.

For a hardboiled police officer, Cardigan held on to his Irish instincts very well. There was no possible sign that any of these cases could be murder. Certainly no one man could have arranged them. And yet, Cardigan's instinctively sleuthing mind noted something exceedingly strange. All four were rich men, all were supposedly healthy, and all had died in exactly the same manner!

It was over an hour before the phone rang again. Another famous name came across the wire. Berthoud Anderson had been shot and killed on his own front steps. There was no clue to the murderer, or to the motive.

Cardigan got to his feet and took a quick turn around the room, head hunched between broad shoulders. Then he slumped back into his chair.

"Enough is enough!" he said with a resigned shrug. He picked up the phone.

"Get me Eddington 4-1000," he told the girl. Then he leaned back to stare at the ceiling.

PROFESSOR Everett Zebulon Bart glanced up as the tiny signal light above his mantel blinked insistently. One of the feet sprawled before the lounge chair moved slightly to depress a lever on the floor. A voice, hoarse with excitement, blasted the silence as if it roared from within the room itself.

Bart choked off the words of protest on his lips and sat bolt upright. His hands gripped the wide arms of the leather chair. The pupils of his eyes contracted quickly until they looked like those of a tiger on the prowl.

"What?" he snapped. "Four? Say that again."

Inspector Cardigan's voice was loud, too loud, from nervous tension that was not natural to him.

"All right, Easy. Here it is, slow. Take it down. You've got to do something—got to help. It's made to order for the tabloids if we don't solve it quick—and we've no proof that there's anything to solve."

Bart lost a second while he dove for the side wall of the room. A panel desk hinged down before him. His foot pressed another button, and Cardigan's voice resumed even as Bart steadied a pencil over the waiting notepaper.

"Berthoud Anderson, archeologist, anti-quarian, explorer, was shot through the temple just as he left his front door this morning. He was attached to the National Museum. Had traveled everywhere on earth where there are ancient ruins. Had an unsigned note in his hand when he died. Evidently stopped to read it. The envelope was beside his body. I'll send the text by teletype. It's in a Malayan dialect."

Bart's eyes glittered. They darted up, then

back to the notes, fast—the reflection of racing thoughts.

"Sounds like simple murder, Card. Why all the—?"

"Simple murder!" the inspector yelled hoarsely. "Four men, all prominent, all healthy, drop dead the same way within two hours. An hour later the fifth is shot as he leaves his front door. And you call it simple murder! I've got a hunch these tie together, Easy."

"Why?" But the same thought had been racing through Bart's brain. A note in Malayan dialect! It ought to fit, but it didn't match up.

"If I knew *why*," Cardigan snapped, "I wouldn't be wasting my time-calling you."

"I'll call back," Bart said shortly, and broke the connection. He heard the teletype clicking busily and crossed the room. Opening the hinged panel he pulled out the strip of paper, found and read the section giving the note Anderson was reading:

*Upas-pun t'ada bisa
Rachun-pun t'ada bisa
Ular gerang pun t'ada bisa
Iphoh Brunai pun t'ada bisa
Ah! Sakalian yang bisa t'ada bisa
Berkat aku memakai do'a guliga
kasakatan.*

Bart's eyes grew hard as agate while he was reading the note—hard, and cold as the glints of light on glacial ice. He dropped onto the arm of a big chair and read it over again slowly, aloud.

"Hmmm," he grunted, and again, "Hm-m-m-m!" Apparently lost in thought Easy moved to the nearest corner of the room and lighted the waiting cone of pungent incense in its wrought iron holder. He moved slowly along the wall to the second corner, holding the lighted match. The inset border of glass eyes four feet above the floor seemed to watch his moving figure as they reflected the tiny flame. He lighted the cone and turned toward the third corner of the room.

There was a sharp knock on the door.

"Come in, Ellen," Bart said, absently, and continued on to light the incense in the third and fourth corners.

Ellen Parr's blue eyes widened as she saw what Bart was doing. The door closed quickly behind her. Without a word she crossed the room and sat down in one of the two big easy chairs before the hearth. Her movements were lithe, easy, graceful. Her beauty was the sort that made men's heads turn after her on the street, but the professor gave no sign that he even recognized her presence after telling her to enter.

Bart finished lighting his cones and sat down. Wisp of acrid smoke began to drift

through the room, hovering like cloud-streamers just above the level of the chairs.

"A case, Easy?" Ellen asked softly. Bart raised his head and seemed to glare at her, so intense was his concentration.

"Oh!" he said finally, "Yes. I want you to hear my talk with Cardigan. This is probably the biggest, most dastardly plot we've ever faced. Listen closely."

Bart shifted his weight so that his foot rested on the floor lever. He spun a dial on the chair arm at the same time. The sound of the connection clicking through was clear and loud in the room.

"That you, Easy?" It was Cardigan's voice. "Any ideas?"

"Ideas?" Bart spouted. "Ideas! Listen, Irish, and don't interrupt. I need more time to think, but meantime you get busy. Probe that bullet from Anderson's head *quick*. Get it to the lab for analysis."

"Now what kind of foolishness is this, Easy? *Analyse* a bullet." Cardigan's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Sure and I thought you were going to help me out."

"*Zany pate piffle!*" Easy fairly roared his favorite epithet. "Keep still and listen, flat-foot. You're not supposed to think!" If I'm not mistaken you'll find that bullet is an amalgam of gold, silver and tin. Do you understand? *Gold, silver and tin.*"

"But—" Ellen and Cardigan spoke together. "*Quiet*, both of you!" Bart's tones clipped short. "I believe we'll find that those four men who dropped dead *are* tied into this. And there'll probably be more. Perhaps half a dozen more. Analyze that bullet and call me back in forty-five minutes."

THE fumes of the pungent incense were growing strong in the room as Easy broke the connection with headquarters. Ellen began to cough as the acrid smoke stung her throat.

"Check your gun and get ready," Easy told her quietly. "Get out our impervium capes. Make certain the cowls aren't cracked. If they are, patch them. Forty minutes, Ellen. Hurry."

"Yes, Easy." Ellen jumped to her feet. She held her hand over her mouth tight to stifle the cough as she ran for the door. But her eyes were shining in anticipation. Adventure was here again!

Bart flipped a lever with his foot as the door closed. Multi-colored tongues of flame licked at the artificial coals in the grate, then set them aglow. Minute after minute passed. The professor's eyes remained fixed on the dancing flames. He did not stir except to inhale deeply of the heady, pungent fumes of the incense. During the period of his concentration the pupils of Bart's eyes contracted until they were like pinpoints.

Thirty minutes later Easy roused himself into sudden, brisk action. He flipped the lever that controlled the air conditioning apparatus. The heavy fumes drifted away through the air vents. The room chilled rapidly. It became cold. The professor paced back and forth, alternately swinging his arms and cupping his hands over his ears. His breath formed in the air as it would on a cold winter morning. But his brain was clicking perfectly, clear as a bell.

Of medium height, trim figured, slightly stooped, Easy Bart would pass unnoticed in a crowd. At this moment, however, his whole body appeared to glow with a nervous, sinewy vitality—like a wildcat stalking its prey.

He flipped the air conditioner back to normal. The chill was slowly leaving the room when Ellen Parr knocked at the door. Bart spun around as though he'd been skewered on a pivot. Then he relaxed.

"Come in, Ellen," he said, and dropped again into the big chair.

Ellen caught something of Easy's tenseness as she entered the room with two translucent, grayish green, cowed slickers over her arm. Despite his position in the deep chair the professor looked as if he were sitting on a coiled spring ready to leap up.

"Is it really as bad as that?" she asked, pausing to let Bart catch the effect of her dress.

Easy's eyes swung appraisingly up and down the lines of her supple figure. A few months back Ellen would have blushed under his penetrating scrutiny. Now she ignored it. When Bart looked at her like that he was analyzing efficiency. He was hopeless!

"Let me see you draw," he said, ignoring her question.

Ellen's body seemed to sway lightly. One hand flashed downward and up again. Her

DON'T QUIT NOW!

Keep on buying those bonds! If you think this war is over, ask Mrs. Jones' little boy from across the street. He's up to here in European mud and Nazi hell-fire. Or the Smith kid that used to be around the corner and is now stalking the cornered rats from Nippon. Let them tell you if the war is over or not. Keep feeding them the stuff! **Keep on buying those bonds!**

little pearl-handled revolver nestled in it, finger on trigger.

"Good girl."

"Outfit okay?" She asked, pirouetting slowly. She was wearing a dark blue suit with a touch of red at cuffs, belt and lapels. It complemented her flawless complexion, blue eyes and dark hair perfectly. Foot high booties emphasized the trim lines of her legs. The skirt parted momentarily at the fold as she slid the little gun back into its garter holster.

A shadow of expression that might have been admiration flitted across Easy Bart's face. It was gone before Ellen could be sure she'd seen it, but her heartbeat speeded up just the same. She knew it was impossible for Bart to show a human reaction—and yet—

"Quite all right," he said coldly, "sit down. We have five minutes to wait for Cardigan's call. If my guess is right, you're about to go into the most sinister peril you have ever faced, Ellen. It's something you may not see, may not even feel. If it reaches you, you may have no realization of its presence until the instant death touches you."

The professor gazed at her closely, as though contemplating what he was about to say. His piercing brown eyes looked straight through her with an intensity that reflected the alert tension of his whole body.

"All in all, you have proven a very satisfactory assistant, Ellen. You disobeyed me once. Don't do it again. Obey my every order with minute exactness and we will pull through, with luck. Before we leave the house we will both don the impervium capes, and we will keep the cowls over our heads every instant until we are safely back again. It may be hours. It may be days. If you forget even for a minute you may die and, Ellen, you are too beautiful to die."

A slow flush crept up the back of Ellen's neck and burned at the lobes of her ears. She had tried consciencelessly for months to force a compliment from Easy Bart!

"Oh, I will obey, Easy," she assured him quickly, "and I'll be careful every minute."

The signal light above the hearth flashed determinedly. Bart's foot depressed the lever. "Bart speaking."

"Listen, Easy." Inspector Cardigan's voice was more excited than Ellen had ever heard it. "You were right! That damned bullet was an alloy of gold, silver and tin. What does it mean? What do we do next?"

"Calm down, Card, and listen. Set a twenty-four hour guard over Anderson's body. Then you keep away from it until I give you the word that all is clear. Got that?"

Cardigan was breathing hard. "It's being transcribed, Easy," he said heavily. "Go on."

"Murder is on the loose," the professor

continued. "No one can guess where it will strike next. Your first move is to try to find something in common between those four deaths this morning. I'll do the same. Clear Ellen and me wherever we may appear, alone or together. It's bad, Card, bad. Stay at headquarters, if possible, where we can reach you at any time. I've got to find proof that those four were murdered—and stop the massacre."

"What?" Cardigan seemed unable to believe his ears.

"That's what I said, Card. *Massacre*. I expect more deaths."

"But what about the bullet?" the inspector demanded. "How did you suspect?"

"The note told you, Inspector," Easy said slowly. "The man who killed Anderson suspected him of killing the other four."

"What? Why—" Cardigan was speechless for just a minute, long enough for Easy to break the connection.

ELLEN PARR presented her identification card to the curator of the National Museum and sat down. She kept her cowl tightly in place over her head. The long translucent cape was carefully fastened. It was a rainy day. Water dripped from her boots and from what appeared to be her raincoat.

The curator was a wizened little man who seemed to shrink down behind beetling brows beneath which his eyes appeared to dart out, then retreat. He examined her card carefully.

"Ah, yes," he said in a voice that rumbled up from deep in his chest. "Professor Bart. Brilliant criminologist, brilliant. Good scholar."

Those eyebrows seemed to rise and fall with each intonation. For no reason at all, Ellen shivered.

"I'm professor Bart's assistant, Ellen Parr, she said formally.

"But of course, Miss Parr. What can we do for you?" The eyebrows still kept time with the man's words. They were almost hypnotic in their fascination.

"The professor has asked me to get lists of all the groups of men who have contributed to Berthoud Anderson's expeditions during the last ten years," she told the man simply.

"Well—ah—now, Miss Parr, I don't know. These matters are confidential with the board, and—"

"Confidential?"

Something in Curator Alva Brown's voice piqued Ellen. Her impressions up to now had not been on the wholesome side. She got to her feet.

"Why—ah—yes," he said, "Confidential."

"If I call the police," she told him calmly, "we'll get the lists almost as quickly, and you,

Mr. Brown, will have considerable embarrassing publicity. Which will it be?"

Brown drummed his skinny fingers on the huge mahogany desk for a moment before he answered. Then his face wrinkled up in what was evidently intended to be a smile.

"Let me take your coat, Miss Parr," The curator almost purred. "I'll arrange a place for you to work, right here in my office."

"Thanks," said Ellen. "I'll keep the coat on—if you don't mind."

CHAPTER TWO

Hostage of the Killer

EASY BART looked like a round-shouldered grasshopper in his cowed cape as he left his house, hailed a cab and lolled impatiently enroute to the home of the late philanthropist Holliston Barclay. Easy used taxis as a safety measure. Men seeking his life couldn't easily plant time bombs in cabs, nor could they spot him by his car.

"The Bezoar Stone," he mumbled over and over again, probing for a connecting thought. "The Bezoar Stone. It should fit. Why doesn't it?"

Bart's stop at the Barclay home was brief. He introduced himself and was left alone with the body for five minutes. He checked the physician's report and departed.

Three more cabs. Three more brief examinations of the dead. The puzzled look on Bart's face settled into a scowl. The doctor's reports were identical. Apparently the men had been perfectly healthy. All four, at different times, and at widely separated places, had become suddenly helpless, then had simply stopped breathing. Easy stopped at a drug store to phone Cardigan.

"Hold careful autopsies, Card. Put the M. E. himself on all four. Permit no funeral plans to be made yet. I'll keep in touch."

"Wait a second, Easy," Card said. There was a moment's silence. Then, "Good God, Easy. A fifth man just dropped dead. Carlton Crane, 45 Huron Drive. Died on the bathroom floor."

Bart's reaction was electric. His voice showed agitation as he answered.

"You sit tight, Card. Send others. I'll hop over fast. I'm afraid there'll be still more. Meantime, collect every personal toilet article used by all five, including soaps, toothpaste, lotions, styptics, shaving creams, everything. Send them to your lab."

"Why? What?"—Cardigan was ready to explode again.

"Remember that bullet, Card, and do as I say," Easy told him and hung up.

Bart skidded across the sidewalk to a standing cab. The steady drizzle rationalized his

cowed cape to some extent but kept the footing uncertain.

"Forty-five Huron Drive," he yelled, slamming the door," and it's worth ten dollars if you can make it legally in twenty minutes." The cab leapt ahead.

Crane's body had not been moved. His wife was kneeling beside it when Bart entered. She got to her feet and looked at him dully.

"I'm Professor E. Z. Bart, Mrs. Crane," he said quietly.

"Oh!" The word popped out before her hand clapped over her mouth. She shook her head dazedly. "You wouldn't be here—unless you thought—but no, professor. No one would, no one could—"

"I'm here as your friend," Easy said. "May I?" He knelt beside the body. It lay completely relaxed, not yet cold. Easy peered at the eyeballs.

Sirens sounded in the street, then voices and heavy feet on the stairs. Bart didn't move when the M. E. arrived. They talked in low tones across the body as the doctor opened his kit.

"It's not a strychnine drug, Bart," the examiner insisted. "Appears to be simple heart failure. But orders are orders and there'll be an autopsy."

"Take a drop of blood with you for analysis," Bart said, "and later be sure you check the lungs carefully."

The examiner leaned back on his heels as Bart got to his feet. "Are you nuts, professor?" he inquired.

"I'm not quite sure yet," Easy told him, and went downstairs. Unnoticed, Bart let himself out a side door and was on his way.

ELLEN PARR waited impatiently at a long table which stood against one wall of an old-fashioned office thirty feet square. The toe of one trim bootee tapped the floor with the rapidity of a nervous machine gun. Just why had Easy sent her on such a trivial errand? He probably knew the answers before he sent her and, if he didn't, he could have had her phone for them.

Dull light sifted into the room through high, dusty windows. The patter of the rain against the glass was depressing. Her eyes were drawn to an oblong glass case at the back of the table. It contained the desiccated remains of something that had once walked and breathed. For a moment she forgot her mission, wondering if that shrunken figure had been human.

Ellen's eye caught sudden movement in the long mirror that extended along the wall above the table. She glanced up, startled. A moccasined Indian stood beside her, his arms full of books.

The curator wandered in from somewhere

and made three sharp, clucking sounds with his lips. The Indian immediately dropped the books on the table, then disappeared as silently and mysteriously as he had come.

Ellen swung around in her chair. Mr. Brown was leaning down at the far side of the room, adjusting the kneecap of a human skeleton suspended from a jointed bracket on the far wall. Her eyes, becoming accustomed to the dim light, made out other objects they had missed at first glance. An opened mummy case leaned against the far wall, ancient wrappings clearly outlining the human figure standing erect within it. The whole atmosphere reminded her unpleasantly of a dissecting laboratory.

"Ar-r-rumph." The curator cleared his throat almost at Ellen's shoulder. She jumped like a frightened rabbit.

"Why! I didn't hear you at all, Mr. Brown," she said breathily. "I—I was looking at the skeleton, and the mummy, and—" she waved a hand inclusively. Speaking had helped to restore her poise.

"I hope you will find everything you wish in those books, Miss Parr," Brown said, bouncing his eyebrows perilously high. "If you don't, just let me know. Our records are sometimes cumbersome in their detail."

The curator bowed as he finished speaking and stepped backward as Ellen smiled and turned to the table. His foot touched the shaft of a tall spear that leaned carelessly against the nearby wall with other primitive weapons. The motion upset the mass of shafts and the spear fell forward. The sharpened tip jabbed hard into Ellen's shoulder.

"Ouch!" she yelled, jumping up and away.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Parr. I seem to be all feet." Brown made awkward apology. "I hope it did not cut you?"

The man was busy for the moment standing the spears upright again, apparently more concerned over his precious specimens than over possible injury to his guest.

"No," Ellen smiled as she saw that the impervious was not even scratched, "it didn't even break the surface of my coat."

"It didn't?" Brown seemed surprised. "Well, that's fine. Then there's no danger. Perhaps a bruise, but nothing else."

"That's all," she agreed, and remembered what Bart had said about not removing the cape. The garment was awkward and unnecessarily warm for indoors, but Ellen snugged it close about her and sat down again.

She opened the first book and turned to the list of the expedition's sponsors. Some movement made her look up at the mirror again. The stoic, inscrutable face of the Indian showed only a few feet away. One hand was moving slowly upward to his mouth. Ellen stared in the glass, silent, petrified by sudden

fear. Then the curator caught her eyes in the glass. She saw one of his hands move in a slight, negative motion. The Indian's hand dropped to his side. He moved across the room silently and fastened a safety strap around the spears to keep them from falling again. Then he was gone.

Ellen wrote swiftly—copying, copying. As the lists grew, so did her excitement. She had thought herself on a trivial errand! Now she was remembering Easy's careful warnings. *Deadly peril.* A slow smile spread over her face and her hand steadied. The professor was more amazing, more uncanny, in his deductive powers than even she had given him credit for being.

Brown disappeared in answer to some phone message and was gone for fifteen minutes. The Indian did not return either. The lists were nearing completion when the curator reappeared. He fiddled around the mummy case for a full five minutes, finally cutting and folding back the wrappings that hid the wrinkled face of the long dead.

"How are you making out, Miss Parr?" His voice rumbled over her shoulder with a slightly more human quality than before. His eyebrows didn't seem to bounce quite so high with each word either!

"All right I think," she answered. "This is what the professor asked for."

"Ah!" The curator's eyes focused on the list she had copied. "Crane, Barclay, Stevens, Van Zandt, Turner."

Ellen had heard enough. The names he mentioned were those of the men who had dropped dead—all but Crane!—unless Crane also had died!

Easy had said—The thought struck her like a thunder-clap. *There had been no news release about the four deaths!* How did Brown know those four names?

His hand brushed against her shoulder and Ellen was suddenly on her feet. Her hand flashed down, up, and the little gun was in that hand, finger on trigger.

"Put your hands up high, Mr. Brown, and keep them up," Ellen snapped.

The bushy eyebrows went into a double rhumba this time.

"But—but—"

Ellen backed slowly away toward the door. in a semi-circle, staying six feet from the man, watching him as she would a coiled rattlesnake.

"You'll go with me, Mr. Brown. How did you know those men were—?" She saw the startled look in the man's eyes too late. A lumpy brown hand clapped across her mouth. Another pinioned her arms suddenly to her sides with a grip of steel. She couldn't shoot but her brain clicked fast. She raised one leg as if straining, and the little revolver slid

into its garter holster. Then she kicked and fought, partly because of fear and partly to distract their thoughts from the gun.

The Indian dragged her backward to the door through which he had entered. One of her flailing feet caught the mummy case and tipped it sidewise.

She saw the curator dive for the case, strain, steady it, and stand it upright again before the door was kicked shut behind them by her captor.

The Indian was breathing hard and losing patience. He grabbed up a leather blackjack from a bench in the laboratory with the hand that had covered her mouth. Ellen was too startled, watching the blackjack descending, trying to roll her head with the blow, to scream. There was a burst of starry light, then blackout.

BOUNCING motion jarred Ellen back to her senses. She couldn't see. Was it night? She stifled an impulse to scream, pressed her legs tight to feel for the gun. It was safe! Her eyes focused. She was in the back seat of a dilapidated flivver driven by her friend, the Indian. She could see his eyes in the rear-view mirror. The dullness of the day had made her think at first that it was dark! She remembered not to move. Easy's steady training did that. She must think first, then move. She wondered where Bart was even as she made certain that the stupid Indian, thinking her unconscious, had not bothered to tie her.

When Ellen did move she was on her feet, her gun pressed against the Indian's temple, before he had time to do more than look startled.

"Keep right on driving, big boy," she said through gritted teeth, "the destination has changed. Turn left at the next corner."

The expression on the Indian's face didn't change. There wasn't any expression. He turned as directed. The fingers of his right hand loosened on the wheel, but as they did the gun pressed harder on his temple.

"Don't try it," she said. "I'd as soon shoot you as look at you. Now straight ahead seven blocks, then turn right."

Twenty minutes later Ellen ushered her erstwhile captor through the gate in the stone wall that surrounded Easy Bart's house. She steered him through the front door and into the living-room. The fellow stopped as ordered in the middle of the floor. Ellen pressed her shoulder against a spot on the wall and he was gone, down through the trapdoor into a concrete cell for safekeeping. She leaned against the wall as the trap clicked shut, and pressed one hand against her aching head.

"Very clever, Miss Parr." The voice rumbled up from deep in a man's chest. Ellen spun around, mouth wide open. Curator Alva

Brown stood facing her from the hallway at the foot of the stairs.

An icy chill settled around Ellen's heart. Easy! There was no sound, no sign that he was here.

"You." She said, and the loathing in her voice was unmistakable. "How did you get here?"

But she didn't wait for an answer. He was perfectly spotted. Again she pressed the wall with her shoulder, on a different place. A look of shocked surprise was on Brown's face as it disappeared through the floor.

Bart was not in the house. In the first flush of reaction tears came to Ellen's eyes. But after a minute the tears dried and a look came into them that was neither soft nor pleasant. She dropped into Easy's big, gadgeted chair in the den, spun the dial on its arm and depressed the floor lever. There was a loud clicking of connection, then Cardigan's voice came to her like a tower of strength.

"Oh, Card," she said, using the nickname unconsciously for the first time, "I'm scared—"

"Scared?" Cardigan's booming voice rang out in the room. "Are you now? I thought for a minute I was talking to Ellen Parr. But it can't be."

"It's Ellen, Inspector," she assured him, "but I'm not scared for myself. I'm frightened about Easy. Listen—"

CHAPTER THREE

The Bezoar Stone

TWO plainclothesmen followed Ellen and the inspector into the National Museum offices. They tiptoed, like kids playing Indian. There was no one in the curator's office. Ellen led them on through, still on tiptoe, to the laboratory beyond. She pointed out the mummy case, the skeleton, the table. Cardigan opened the door to the laboratory suddenly and bounced in.

Brown was there, bending over retorts and test-tubes as though nothing had ever happened outside the room. Ellen boiled. Her gun popped into her hand and she spoke through gritted teeth.

"I'll shoot you dead center between the eyes," she told him, "if you so much as turn your head. Who helped you get out of the dungeon in Bart's house? Answer me."

"Why—", the curator looked at her steady gun and made no move. Cardigan would have sworn that the man was completely surprised. If he hadn't known Ellen pretty well he would have doubted her story.

"—I don't know what you're talking about." Brown finished finally.

Ellen shrugged. "I guess it's your move,

inspector. You know where I left him."

The plainclothesmen took over. They herded the puzzled curator into his own office, and made him stand while Cardigan sat at his desk and phoned headquarters.

"What?" Cardigan yelled over the phone and sat up straight. "Say that again, slow. Take notes on this, Ellen. Carver Scott, of Novelty Toilet—no, of Scott Toilet Novelty Company. Finished shaving. Dropped dead within five minutes. Exactly 4:17 P. M. Is the Examiner on his way? Good. Send Captain Boyle. That's all."

Cardigan slumped down in the chair for just a moment. Easy Bart gone. Another death, and another, and another! Massacre, Bart had called it. Well, it was.

The curator was showing signs of increasing agitation. He fidgeted, first on one foot, then on the other. He looked from one detective to the other, then at Cardigan. Finally he turned and stared hard at the mummy case. Then he snapped his fingers.

"Zanygate piffle!" he yelled, "That's it, Card. Don't you see? That's the answer. All we need now is the details and I've already got some of them."

The room was suddenly silent as death. Cardigan's mouth was wide open. The two detectives stood like frozen statues. Ellen didn't even breathe for thirty seconds, but she was the first to recover.

"Easy Bart, you ought to be shot," she said. "Letting me think—letting that Indian—letting—"

"Quiet." Bart's owlish squint showed through the makeup. "I fixed it so you could take care of the Indian, didn't I? How else could I have done it—except like this? He nodded to one of the dicks. "Close the door, Sam."

Easy's fingers clawed the false eyebrows away from his own. His handkerchief mopped his face and he was himself again, although his features were streaked with makeup.

"Shaving, Card, shaving. Get it? Every one of these men had shaved within fifteen minutes of the time he died. Every one of them contacted the poison then. The speed of its action depended on the amount introduced in the blood stream. My hunch was right on the toilet stuff, but that isn't enough. Get on the phone, Card. Lean on it.

"Flash every name on this list. It's complete, Ellen?" Ellen nodded, and he went on. "Use patrol cars, radio, wires, anything and everything. Warn them all not to touch any familiar toilet article until we get your laboratory report. You'd think we were dealing with a madman, but we're not. Whoever it is, he's too damnably sane!"

Card blasted the air getting the warning out. He was excited and worried. But not

too worried to add the warning, "not a peep to the reporters until I give the word, if you value your jobs."

"Now, Ellen," Bart barked in turn, "get back to the house and help Brown out of that hole. He's a friend of mine and has been very helpful. Explain how it happened."

Ellen looked sheepish. "All right, Easy," she said, "but what about the Indian?"

"Let him stay on ice until we get back," Bart told her, "We may want to ask him a few questions."

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Mr. Brown," Ellen said as she helped the curator up a stepladder from his concrete cubicle under the hall floor. "The professor didn't give me the slightest inkling of what he was up to. I thought he was really you, naming the men who had dropped dead and trying to grab that list! There was only one man who could have known it so I tried to capture you. The Indian captured me, then I captured the Indian and put him away. That's when you spoke to me, here, and—" Her voice trailed off after rattling along on the uncomfortable explanation.

Brown smiled and wagged his eyebrows. "Quite understandable, I'm sure, Miss Parr. Your employer must be very trying at times. But let's sit down now, so I may nurse my bruises. I'm an old man to be doing tumbling acts, even though I did land on a mattress."

He limped toward the den with its two great comfortable chairs. Ellen felt deeply chagrined that she had judged this man by physical appearance alone, for that was a purely feminine trait. She tried to repay him somewhat by relating the latest news and Bart's deductions as to the toilet sets. Brown's lips clucked. His hands suddenly pounded the arms of the chair.

"Carver Scott," the curator said slowly, "is one of the twelve sponsors of Anderson's 1935 Expedition into Ecuador. All the names you mention are on that list." He paused, staring at the hearth.

Ellen moved her foot, pressed a button, and multi-colored flames licked at the coals.

"Scott," Brown continued, "owns the Scott Toilet Novelty Company. Every year he has sent a toilet kit to each of the men on that list. Also one to Anderson, to me, and to a few others, as a sort of memento of the trip. I received this year's kit less than a week ago. Haven't used it yet—"

"Wait," Ellen said, "let's try to get Inspector Cardigan in on this conversation." She spun the dial, depressed the lever, and Cardigan's voice boomed through.

"It's Ellen, Inspector. I think Curator Brown has hit on the probable solution to the whole mess. Will you join in."

"Go ahead," Cardigan directed, and listened carefully.

"—Scott is dead, you tell me," Brown concluded, "yet it's possible those kits—"

"Just a second," Cardigan interrupted. He paused. Paper rattled. "Here it is. The styptic pencils examined all contained a heavy saturate solution of Curarine, the base of Curare, the arrow-and-dart poison used by certain South American Indian tribes. Your logic is good, Mr. Brown. Excuse me and I'll check on Scott. Stay where you are."

The phone clicked off. Brown, still impressed by the ingenuity of the system which permitted them to sit in their chairs and converse with the apparently disembodied voice of some distant person, asked questions about it for five minutes.

When the signal light flashed Ellen's foot moved to the lever. Brown watched closely, fascinated.

"Ellen Parr speaking."

"Yes, Ellen. Cardigan. Can't locate Bart. Think we have the answer to the whole thing. Scott had heavy insurance, but with a suicide clause. Business is in bad shape financially. I'm arresting the widow as a material witness. I believe this solves the matter, don't you Mr. Curator?"

"Yes," Brown hesitated, "much as I hate to believe it."

"Of course," Ellen echoed, "But where's Easy? Can't we sit tight until we hear from him?"

AN HOUR passed before Easy Bart appeared with a bulky package containing various records, photographs and affidavits under his arm. Brown had been watching the amazing signal light record of Bart's progress through the grounds to the door. They did not hear him enter the den.

"Hello folks," Easy said lightly. "Hope you're comfortable. Sorry for the delay, Alva. Also for Ellen's boner. My fault, of course. Couldn't tell her our trick, or explain to Quonti. Cardigan and the Examiner are on their way up to tell us what they've learned. Should be here any minute. Inspector seemed cocky on the phone."

Brown smiled slowly. His eyebrows wagged.

A signal light flashed over the mantel. Easy dropped into the chair which Ellen had vacated to answer the door.

Cardigan, the examiner, and Ellen sat down a little behind the two big chairs. For some reason Ellen had donned her impervium cape and had the cowl over her head. Two detectives lounged by the door to the hall.

"You start, Alva," Easy said, leaning forward in his big chair. "I'll pick up where you stop."

"Well, it looks to me like a suicide," Brown said, "carefully planned by Scott to assure his business to his family. He was apparently willing to sacrifice a dozen lives to accomplish his purpose. Waited until five men were actually dead of 'heart failure' as the afternoon papers reported. Then he shaved, used his own poison styptic, and died. A very serious state of mind."

Brown paused and looked across at his friend. Cardigan kept still, watching the two closely.

"Good logic, Alva," Easy said nodding, "but what about Anderson?"

Brown shrugged. "That I can't answer. It doesn't fit."

"Well, then. I find your reconstruction accurate except for one unexpected happening. Scott completed an amalgamation yesterday, bringing ample new capital into his company. It is as sound as the Rock of Gibraltar. Therefore the reason for suicide was gone before Scott died. We must look farther—look forward—and back."

Bart glanced up at Cardigan. "You remember the last curator of the National Museum disappeared without a clue three years ago?"

He looked back at Brown. "I found him today, Alva. He never left his office. Somebody, with consummate skill, embalmed him with spices and dried the remains so they could pass for a mummy. Even the wrappings were perfectly aged. There are very few men who could have done that, Alva. I have one such person in mind."

"I'm listening closely, Easy," Brown said slowly, nodding.

"I don't know why," Bart continued, "but Anderson suspected. Hargrove had mentioned the fact that some man on this list had made a bequest of half a million dollars to be spent at the discretion of the curator. He never said which one. So—?"

"It was easy for a friend to get Scott to include the poisoned styptics in the kits, because the novelty company did not make this item. Naturally there was one for Scott, himself."

"It was a devilishly clever calculation, Alva. Deaths from heart failure. Different times. Even if poison were traced it would lead back to Scott, with a financial motive provided. And Scott would be dead!"

"But Anderson's death! That was a mistake. It was a logical error, except for the note. Someone had to tell Anderson—had to brag, to let him know why. It did throw me temporarily into the line of thought I was intended to follow."

"The man who killed Anderson was supposed to have suspected him of killing the others. Very clever, that Malayan charm."

*The Upas loses its venom
And poison loses its venom
And the sea snake loses its venom
And the poison tree of Borneo loses its
venom
Everything that is venomous loses its
venom
By virtue of my use of the prayer of the
Magic Bezoar Stone.*

"But why a *Malayan* charm against Curare? Don't the South American Indians have a charm?" Bart paused.

"I see your point, Easy," the curator said slowly. "It is well taken. Our man did not have sufficient experience with crime. He is definitely a novice, so to speak."

Brown leaned forward toward the grate. His sleeve brushed Easy's hand, and a sharp point of some sort scratched deep. Blood appeared instantly.

"Quick, Ellen," Bart said, as if he had been expecting this moment, "that bottle on the mantel. The hypodermic needle."

Ellen jumped, filled the needle quickly. Cardigan noticed that the cowl was up on her impervium cape.

Within ten seconds Bart had cut across the scratch, sucked the blood from the wound, and injected twenty-five cc's of the liquid into his bloodstream. Ellen bandaged the cut skillfully.

Bart leaned back. "Stay on the left side of my chair, Ellen, away from my friend. Card, I've just been poisoned. I will pass out, relaxed, inside of fifteen minutes. Don't touch me. I'll be all right because I had the antidote ready.

"Alva, that was a big mistake. I wasn't sure. I had no actual proof. I guessed about the mummy, about the metal and poison in the retorts. Now, I am the proof!

"CARD, I must talk fast. Traces of metal in retorts in the museum laboratory, I'm certain will prove to be gold, silver and tin. Also traces of a solution I'm sure will prove to be curarine ($C_8H_{11}NO_4$). Curare centers its action on the motor-end plates, dissociating the motor nerves from the muscles. It acts first on the fingers and toes, hands and feet. Its final act is on the lungs. The victim simply stops breathing. It is painless.

"Alva wanted that half million dollars. Anderson for some reason came to suspect the identity of the mummy. The Indian, obeying orders, shot him with a Bezoar Stone, which is either the gallstone of a goat or the amalgam of gold, silver and tin which makes a

perfect dum-dum bullet. The Indian always obeyed, even when I, posing as Brown, told him not to tie Ellen up in the car.

"Selfishness doesn't pay, Alva. The typewriter in your office wrote that note. That wasn't proof, but—"

Bart's words were coming more slowly. He was watching his hands. Ellen stood tensely behind him, pale, her fists clenched tight.

"I'm—sorry, Card. My good friend Alva Brown—is—guilty. Proof? My fingers have relaxed. See? My feet are numb."

Ellen moaned through tight pressed lips. "If—I were you—I'd let—Indian—plead to—manslaughter. Then—deport him—at end of term."

Bart leaned back as though very tired. He noted that Brown did the same.

"Thank you, Easy," Brown said, "You are kind. Quonti only obeyed."

There was a jagged scratch on Brown's cheek. He smiled when Bart noticed it.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Inspector," the curator continued, "but the demonstrations have proved the kindly effectiveness of Curare. I have had no antidote. Good-night and good-bye. Congratulations, Easy. Brilliant work. Right on all points. Sorry I felt it necessary to try to stop you."

Brown slumped in his chair. His eyes took on a more kindly light than had been there. The light faded slowly and he was gone. The M.E. checked him over carefully, then looked up at Cardigan and nodded.

"Case—closed," Bart said—and slumped down in his own chair, unconscious.

"Not quite closed, Bart," Cardigan spoke almost reverently, "There's still the poor Indian."

But Bart did not hear. Ellen dropped in a heap, her head on Bart's knee. Tears touched her cheeks as she fondled his inert hands. The medical examiner listened to his heart for a long time. Five minutes later he listened to it again, and still again in fifteen, and twenty minutes.

There was no animation in the body.

After half an hour of tense waiting the physician made a long, rigid checkup. Finally he smiled.

"You may put him to bed now," he said, "He'll regain consciousness by morning, and be up in a week or ten days. Funny stuff, Curare. Has therapeutic value, too, you know."

Ellen looked up at Cardigan and smiled.

"Damn him!" she said softly, "he'd let them kill him just to prove a point!"

THE END



ODDITIES IN CRIME

By
JON L.—
BLUMMER



Since that pioneer cracksman, Moore, in 1865 unlocked, after trying innumerable keys, and cleaned the Concord National Bank vault of \$350,000 in the first big-time bank robbery, there has been a constant battle between safe makers and safe breakers. Moore was also the first cracksman to use drills and explosives, but his shining light was soon overshadowed by that notorious trio, Hope, Shinburn and Lyons, whose jack-screw-and-wedge technique netted them a million and a quarter on one job, upset the saving citizenry no end. To this day, these gentlemen have done much to stimulate the use of case-hardened steel and time-locks by banks.



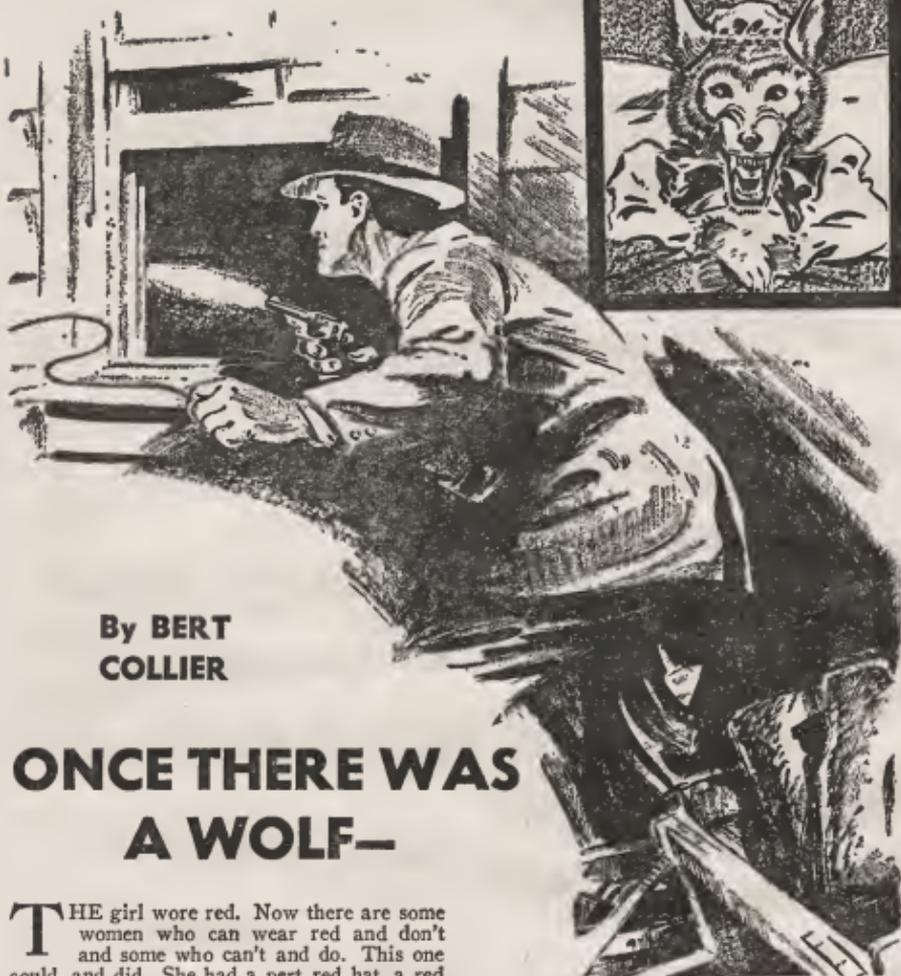
Powder and cold steel, or "puff and rod", safe crackers were superseded by the yeggs who began with dynamite and ended up, very often in fragments, with nitroglycerine or "soup", which, by the proper (or improper) use thereof, no safe could withstand prior to 1890. With the introduction of manganese steel and microscopically fitted screw-doors, the enterprising can-opener turned to the oxyacetylene torch which can eat through anything, except Donsteel. A real Jimmy Valentine in fact, in 1921, picked his way through four well-locked doors to open, solely with skillful fingers and keen ears, three heavy, triple-combination safe doors to relieve a large company of two hundred thousand dollars.

"What with Donsteel and concrete, time locks, tear-gas, also burglar alarms and bank guards and coppers, the safe way ain't the safe way to make a dishonest dollar any more," cracked the Crib Cracker, and he was correct! Let's cite the example of the vault of a New York bank erected in 1918 which had to be demolished by a certain date to make way for a new building. The wrecking company figured it might take them up to ten days with their up-to-the-minute torches, drills and blasting methods, and they agreed to pay a penalty of a thousand dollars a day for every day past the deadline. They paid twenty grand!



The bank janitor tried to sweep up, to no avail, an oily rag on the concrete floor next to the vault. Pulling the rag up by main strength he discovered it to be stuffed into a deep hole not much larger than a rat hole. It had been made with a steel "probe" by a gang who had rented a nearby vacant store and tunneled. Across the store front hung a banner reading, "Watch for the BIG Opening".





By **BERT
COLLIER**

ONCE THERE WAS A WOLF—

THE girl wore red. Now there are some women who can wear red and don't and some who can't and do. This one could, and did. She had a pert red hat, a red suit, and white shoes with slim red heels. She had everything that went with an outfit like that, including the cute little mole on her neck.

She looked at Jimmy Jamaica and flicked her eyelids, and Jimmy cut loose with his slow chuckle. "It's not often I have a client as pretty as you, Miss Perry."

Miss Perry's face curled in a grimace of apology. "You're going to hate me when I tell you I'm not a client," she murmured with just the right hint of regret. "I've come to ask you for a favor—a perfectly huge favor."

"If it's in my power," Jimmy told her gallantly, "consider it done."

She gave the impression of bowing her

The kid was safely on ice—a valuable property of the State, and on whose safety depended the lives of half a dozen people. That was just when Jimmy the Fixer sprung him, for the sake of the Girl in Red, and for the pleasure of the killer who might keep his freedom—if the kid's mouth was sealed in hot lead.

thanks. She said, oddly casual, "I want you to get the police to release Red Eckhart in your custody for about four hours."

Jimmy's face gave no clue to his astonishment, but the long, low whistle was expressive. "You don't want much, do you?" he grunted.

"Oh, Mr. Jamaica," she cried pleadingly, "let me tell you why, first."

"Go ahead, but make it good!"

She seemed helpless, yet her eyes were eloquent. "I'm a volunteer worker in a mission down on Bay street." Words tumbled out as she hurried to forestall his refusal. "Red Eckert's grandmother is one of our clients—we've been helping her with food and clothes, and a little rent money. You see, she's been sick and can't work and Red hasn't been a very good grandson. Runs around with a rough crowd—but she loves him, Mr. Jamaica. You know how grandmothers are."

"Sure," Jamaica grinned sardonically, "having been one for years."

She seemed close to tears. "Please don't make fun of me! Mrs. Eckhart had a stroke today, and she's begging for Red."

Jimmy's lips puckered in thought and his fingers drummed the desk. In his long fight upward from Jimmy the Fixer, ambulance chaser, to "Mr. James J. Jamaica, our leading attorney," as the newspapers called him now, he had learned to judge people, and this visitor inspired him with a mixture of interest and caution.

"Why don't you go to the police?" he asked softly.

"I did!" she cried with the same eagerness.

"I went right to Chief Gross. He only laughed and said even Jimmy the Fixer couldn't get that guy out of that jug!" She looked at Jimmy with a dismayed blush. "I'm sorry! I was only quoting his exact words."

Jimmy laughed. "No apologies, Miss Perry. I'm proud of that name. After all, that's why you came here, isn't it?"

The girl seemed embarrassed.

"Well, isn't it?"

She nodded, crimson. "I know you think I'm a stupid little fool, coming to you with a request like this, Mr. Jamaica, but, well—I think a lot of old Mrs. Eckhart and I'd feel terrible if she died without seeing her grandson. I tried to work it out with the police, but they just laughed. And then I remembered all the things I'd heard about you—how you like the hard jobs, and sort of make a hobby of helping people, and I thought—"

Jimmy detested praise or flattery. He demanded in harsh irritation:

"Do you know why Red Eckhart is in jail?"

"I heard it was some kind of a pistol charge," she replied in vague tones.

Jamaica laughed softly. "I'll tell you a little story, Miss Perry. There's a character around town named Carl Braniff. Know him?"

Her eyes widened. "A-a gambler, isn't he?"

"Carl's about the most vicious criminal we have," Jimmy went on. "He has, to coin a sparkling phrase, been getting away with murder. But no longer. Chief Gross and the District Attorney have got him at last—a nice little murder charge that will stick in court. The only trouble is, they can't locate Braniff."

"But what's that got to do with Red?"

"Red Eckhart," intoned Jamaica, "is the murder case!"

Miss Perry was startled. "Please don't think I'm an idiot—" she began.

"Red Eckhart is a material witness—the only material witness against Braniff. If Braniff could get rid of him the murder case would collapse. He's got to get Red, or go to the chair. Now, do you understand why the police are keeping Eckhart under cover?"

Miss Perry began to cry. There was no audible sound but the corners of her mouth twitched and when she blinked her eyes two large tears spilled over.

"They told me you could do it," she whispered. "They said you could—could do the impossible! Even Mrs. Eckhart had such faith in you. She looked so happy when I told her I was coming to see you. When I tell her you wouldn't, it will p-p-probably k-kill her. Can't you, Mr. Jamaica? Can't you?"

Jimmy Jamaica felt acutely uncomfortable, staring at the girl's bent shoulders as she ducked her head and dabbed at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. There was a long, anxious silence. He said suddenly:

"Okay, little Red Riding Hood. Meet me in front of the city jail in an hour."

Jimmy Jamaica was famous for acting on impulses.

POLICE Chief Gross' eyes seemed strangely blue in their deep sockets. He stared at Jimmy Jamaica. "Let me get it straight, Jimmy," he drawled in amazement. "You mean you want me to release Red Eckhart in your custody?"

"What's strange about that?"

"Are you kidding?" Gross growled suspiciously. "Red's vital to our case against Braniff and, until Braniff is under lock and key, we're going to keep Red that way."

"I'm giving you my word I'll get him back."

Gross seemed tired. He said somberly, "You would put it on that basis, Jimmy. I've known you for twenty years. I've seen you come up from nothing to the top. I know those so-called ethical boys look down on your methods, but break their necks to settle out of court when you're on the other side. You've

got where you are through two things—you're always willing to give the other guy a break, and you've never failed to keep your word. If you say you'll have Red here in four hours, he'll be here. But I can't do it, Jimmy."

"You think I'm sticking my neck out, don't you?"

"About three miles further than it's safe," Gross declared earnestly. "Braniff's desperate. We've got hooks in him and he knows it. He's got to shut Red's mouth, and it would just be an incident if he has to kill you, too. I can't afford to let Red go wandering around town, even for you."

"But it's not for me," Jimmy insisted. "It's for an old woman who may not live through the night—and a cute little trick in a red hat that cried on my shoulder," he added with an honest grin.

"Damn you!" Gross cried. "You can talk me out of more than my wife. Okay! I'll give you an escort of toughies with riot guns."

"And tell the whole town Red is out visiting? This job calls for quiet, Chief."

Gross shook his head. "I ought to kick you out, Jimmy, my boy. After all these years, you are a sucker for a red dress."

"You're too old to understand," Jimmy bantered.

"I'm old enough to know where it gets you," Gross pressed a button on the desk and told the young cop who responded to bring Red Eckhart. "And for God's sake be discreet!" he roared with a worried frown.

RED was not a bad-looking kid. He was fair, in keeping with his flaming thatch, and he walked with a swagger, as if he owned a good slice of the world. He had a friendly, cock grin.

"Hello, Mr. Jamaica," he greeted, shaking hands. "Don't tell me you're taking my case."

"You don't need a lawyer, son," Jimmy responded. "This is personal—a bit of bad news, I'm afraid. Your grandmother—"

"Don't tell me Carl Braniff—"

"No, no," Jimmy assured him. "Nothing like that. She's sick."

"Serious?"

Jimmy nodded almost imperceptibly. Red cried, "I can't believe it. I left her spy as a cricket."

"She's asking for Red. Do you want to go with me?"

Red whirled to Gross, his face lined with worry. "It's okay?" he demanded.

"Jamaica talked me into it," Gross muttered. "I'm letting you go if you promise not to get out of his sight. I'm holding him personally responsible for you, Red."

"Check!" Eckhart snapped. "Let's get going."

As they moved to the door Gross caught

Jimmy by the sleeve. "You got a gun?" he whispered.

Jimmy, shaking his head, smiled at the chief. "Watch your blood pressure," he breathed.

"You soft-hearted fool! You bring Red back here by 11 p. m. or—"

"Or what, my worried friend?"

"Or I'll probably be busted by the police commission for kicking away the star witness in the Braniff case," Gross ended ruefully.

Jimmy patted his shoulder.

Taking Eckhart by the arm, the lawyer led him into the street. The sun had vanished behind the tall buildings, leaving the dregs of radiance in pools among the dusky shadows. Crowds of clerks hurried toward the bus stops. Jimmy's eyes gleamed at the flash of scarlet and the tap of eager red heels clicking toward him. Miss Perry was radiant.

"Mr. Jamaica, you're wonderful!" she breathed. "How can I ever thank you?"

"By being as inconspicuous as possible until this business is over," Jimmy growled, glancing sharply over the hurrying traffic. "This is Miss Perry, a friend of your grandmother's, Red," he introduced. "Let's make a dash for my car."

Under the wheel, breasting the streams of vehicles, Jimmy studied his two silent passengers in the rear-view mirror. Red was worried and impatient, the girl as eager as a child. Which was exactly in character for both of them, under the circumstances, Jimmy thought. But he couldn't get rid of an uneasy feeling.

He had handled some unusual situations in his career. He realized he had acted on an impulse this time and had out talked Gross against the chief's better judgment.

If anything happened to Red the result would be disastrous. But, Jimmy told himself with an inward shrug, it was a hell of a time to be getting cold feet. He had made his decision back there in his office.

Watching Miss Perry narrowly, he asked, "Where to, Red?"

"North Pelham Street—127B—and step on it, Mr. Jamaica!"

The girl nodded confirmation and Jimmy began to look for openings in the traffic. It was almost impossible that Braniff knew Red was on the loose, but there was a chance he was watching the Eckhart flat. The best spot for a little hot lead would be on Pelham Street when they climbed out of the car. Still Jamaica drove a devious route, much to Red's annoyance. Miss Perry's only apparent emotion was a sort of glow, as if at the knowledge of a good deed done.

They reached Pelham and Jamaica eased into the block gingerly. There were no cars, moving or parked, but the sidewalks were

crowded in the early desk. Jamaica wondered why his heart beat tightly as the car scraped the curbing in front of a rambling, ancient building. He leaned across the girl to open the door.

Red was already out and moving toward the entrance. Jimmy choked back a warning yell, leaped out and caught him on the steps.

He said sharply, "As long as I'm responsible for you, let me poke my nose in places first!"

"It's my house—and my old lady," Eckhart flared.

"But it's my funeral if anything happens," Jamaica muttered. He sent a swift glance along the street that seemed to probe every patch of shadow, then opened the door swiftly, shoved the pair through, and slammed it shut. He sighed gustily in the murky hallway.

"Which is your place, Red?"

"Second floor." Eckhart went up the stairs two at a time. Jimmy helped Miss Perry to follow. At the door she caught up with Red.

"Just a minute," she panted. "I'd better go in first and prepare her, Red. She's very low."

Before the boy could reply the girl shoved past him. Jamaica saw the dim light burning on a table by the bed and the huddled figure beneath the covers. Miss Perry murmured softly, "It's me, Granny Eckhart. I've brought Red." The huddled figure heaved and cried "Red! Red!" in a husky, strangled voice. Eckhart pulled away and ran into the room. Jamaica stepped inside and closed the door. The ceiling light clicked on.

Jimmy exploded, "Well, I'll be damned!"

THE figure in the bed was Carl Braniff. He sat up swiftly, throwing off the covers with an awkward gesture. Red's eyes became bleak. He stammered, "Wh-what?" and then went silent at the sight of the gun in Braniff's hand.

Jamaica looked at the girl. He seemed amused but a hard glitter spread over his features as she danced away from the light switch and stood defiantly by the bed. Their glances clashed. Jimmy said bitterly, "Thanks for a lesson in acting!" Then he seemed to forget her. He looked at Braniff.

"Oh, grandmother!" he muttered. "What great big teeth you have!"

Braniff slid his legs to the floor and stood up, the radiance glinting grotesquely from his bald head. He watched Jamaica. "Now Jimmy," he said in a whining voice, "I'm sorry I had to do this to you. You understand it was the only way I could pry Red loose."

"Don't waste time with that softie, Carl!" the girl cut in sharply. "Get it over with. He makes me nervous."

Jimmy scowled. "Little Red Riding Hood steps out of character."

"He even believes fairy stories," the girl scoffed.

"I believed yours."

"Shut up, you two!" Braniff snarled. "Get over by the door, Marge. Now, Jamaica, we're going out. I want your word you'll give us five minutes—"

Suddenly Jimmy shouted, "Take him, Red!" and tried to dive in under Braniff's gun. Carl sidestepped with a lithe motion and the pistol barrel whistled in a tight arc, exploding against Jamaica's temple. He pitched forward and thudded against the bed, pain-wracked. Twisting to protect his face he tried to crawl toward Carl's legs. The girl ran over and kicked him viciously under the chin.

"That's for trying to play God Almighty!" she screamed.

Jamaica felt a sudden paralysis like handcuffs on his arms and legs. He saw swift movement, squinted to focus his eyes, and made out Braniff prodding Red through the door. He tried to call out but words issued only as a faint moan.

Then he knew he couldn't give up. He had to get on his feet, to follow. Fighting against a horrible lassitude Jimmy pushed his body to a sitting position, groaning.

And then he heard a curious rasping noise that seemed to blend with the ringing in his ears. His head clearing, he traced the sound to the closet beyond the bed, crawled over and opened the door.

Eyes glared at him furiously. Jamaica saw a little old woman tied up like a sack, knees under her chin, arms behind her, one end of a towel stuffed in her mouth, the other wound around her neck. She made gasping sounds.

When Jimmy got the towel loose he was blasted by a stream of picturesque profanity, which deepened and broadened at his startled expression. "What are you goggling at, you dope? Get me out of here!"

Jimmy struggled with the knots. "Take it easy, Grandma," he soothed her.

"Take it easy?" she yelped. "They took you easy, didn't they? I reckon you're that fool, Jimmy Jamaica. I heard you were smart."

"Not so smart," Jimmy scowled. "But I'm not through yet. Do you know where they went, Mrs. Eckhart? You *are* Mrs. Eckhart?"

"Of course I am—but call me Granny," she snapped. "Everybody does. And you're damn right I know where they went. Those blasted fools forgot when they tied up my mouth they left my ears open. If you'll quit fumbling—"

The ropes fell away. Granny bounded up like a rubber ball and darted to a bureau against the wall. Jerking open a drawer, she took out a tiny pistol.

Jimmy's head still ached furiously. The agony was like a brake on his brain and he stifled a moan. The old woman's eyes went soft. She patted his arm.

"Don't mind me, Jimmy," she said. "I've got a tongue like a buzz-saw and right now I'm so hellish mad I could chew glass. I know you thought you were doing Red and me a favor. Thanks for your kindness." Her voice rose to a strident screech. "Now let's cut out the soft talk and get the hell out of here!"

Jimmy felt decidedly better. "Yes, ma'am!" he grinned.

They ran down the steps and Jamaica opened the car door, but Granny shoved him aside. "Over there," she said curtly. "I'm driving."

She beat his protests down. "You're still woopy, son. This trip is going to be fast. Got a cheroot on you?"

By the time Jimmy ran around the car she had the motor roaring. It jerked from the curb with a scream of rationed rubber and his head snapped back. The machine straightened out, rocking. Granny flung the pistol in his lap.

"Hold the hardware and look out for cops," she panted. "This is a private expedition."

JIMMY settled back. If it hadn't been for worry about Red he would be enjoying himself. Granny, having lit one of his cigarettes, was pushing the car like a fire truck. She was less than five feet tall, Jimmy judged, and her gray hair was cut short. Her hands gripped the wheel and she had to sit erect to see the street. The cigarette dangled rakishly from her lips.

Jimmy said, "I thought you were sick."

"You'll find out how sick I am!"

"Take it easy," he told her. "I'm not going to let you—"

"You're not going to let me!" she mimicked angrily. "You're going to listen, my boy. They're not going to kill my grandson. He's going to live to testify against Braniff. You sit still and take orders."

Jimmy laughed.

"I know what you're thinking," she stormed, never taking her eyes from the traffic. "That at my age I ought to be sitting in a rocker by the fire. That's not for me, Jimmy Jamaica! I fought the world to raise my son, and when he died I kept on fighting for Red. I've slung hash, worked in sweatshops and even scrubbed floors to raise that kid. He's not the man I am, but now that he's grown and I can relax and have some fun, I'm not losing him."

Beneath her defiance Jimmy sensed a gnawing anxiety. He said gently, "All right, Granny. You give the orders."

She dodged a lurching truck. "Get over on your side, you hog!" she shouted at the goggling driver. In the same breath she went on to Jimmy, "Now you're in the groove, Jay-Jay. I heard them talking. Braniff's got a hideout in the Madison section."

Jimmy Jamaica's eyes sparkled. "Do you always talk like that?" he asked.

"I'm a character," Granny laughed. "Shut up and listen. When we get where we're going, you lay low in the car while I case the joint—"

Jimmy was beyond being astonished by the extraordinary old woman but he started to object in a half-hearted way. She said decisively: "They'd spot you in a minute, but who'd worry about an old woman?"

The speed slackened. They were in a quiet neighborhood of small homes, golden lights gleaming from peaceful doors. With motor dead the car rolled against the curb and stopped. Granny said, "Now play dead and keep your eyes open, Jay-Jay, while I rumba around and take a gander."

She slid from the car and began to stroll along the dark sidewalk. Granny was right, of course. If Braniff spotted him it would be too bad. Jimmy jumped when the door beside him opened softly.

"Sh!" Granny warned.

He murmured, "Where did you come from?"

"I've been around in the rear," she whispered. "It's the second house up there—the one that sits back from the street. Braniff and the girl have got Red in the bedroom. There's a man watching just inside the front door, but the back door's not locked."

"You're a whiz, Granny!"

"Uh-huh," she wheezed. "Do we call the cops, Jay-Jay?"

Jimmy said grimly, "This is our problem."

"Good boy! I'll walk along in front and keep the lookout interested. You slip around the back and do your stuff."

Jamaica felt good now. He climbed from the car and flexed his legs. The last traces of pain dribbled from his frame with the prospect of action.

"Okay, Granny," he muttered. "You're calling the signals."

She clutched his sleeve for an instant. "If anything goes wrong I'll manage to let you know," she promised. She gave him terse directions to the rear of the house. "And for the Lord's sake hurry!" she finished anxiously. "My grandson's in there!"

Jamaica moved swiftly into the darkness. An alley bisected the block and he turned in. The ground was rutted like a country lane. Beyond the property line ending the street-front lots, in a jungle of fences, hedges and patches of victory gardens, he faced to the

left. Jimmy moved cautiously, Granny's pistol in his hand. The house was not just dark—from the rear it was wrapped in the blackness of abandonment. A single room—the kitchen, Jimmy judged—jutted from the rectangle of the main section and a dinky little porch led to the rear door. The kitchen had windows at two sides as well as at the back.

Jimmy moved soundlessly onto the porch and was reaching for the door when he jerked back. From the direction of the street came an explosion of sound, a hoarse maudlin song in a terrible falsetto.

Jimmy swore silently. The source of that bedlam was unmistakable. "Couldn't she think of some other way to keep the lookout occupied?" he thought in irritation and was reaching for the door again when the song changed.

"K-k-k-ka-ty—" Granny roared from the distant street.

Jimmy jerked back again. He huddled against the wall in puzzled concentration, listening. Granny bawled out the words in a perfect imitation of drunken glee. She was probably capering about in a weird dance. If that was her idea of giving him a break—

He followed the words of the old song he remembered from the last war.

"—waiting at the k-k-k-kitchen door!"

HE GRINNED then, and if Granny had been near he could have kissed her. He knew. Those last two words, not sung, but shouted. She was telling him of death that lurked on the other side of that door, if he barged in as he had planned. They had found out, somehow.

Jimmy realized he was squatting on a litter of junk and trash. His fumbling fingers made out a tangled mass of heavy twine. He held it for a second, planning, then crept like a cat toward the door, hugging the wall. He reached up, hooking an end of the twine over the knob. It took more than a minute to ease the knob just enough to free the catch. Then, holding the twine, he crawled around to the side of the projecting kitchen and crouched beneath a window that was a square of solid blackness just above his head.

Jimmy drew a deep breath, jerked the cord, and straightened up.

The door banged open. Jimmy stared into the well of ebony that was the window. He saw two spurts of orange flame as the hidden men fired at the entrance where he would have been standing.

He fired four careful shots, aiming just behind those flaring targets. Then he dived headlong through the window and fell sprawling into the floor.

There was no more shooting. One figure, only slightly blacker than the shadows, was

slumped in an awkward position against the wall. The other lay moaning on his face.

Jimmy went crab-wise across the floor, kicking pistols out of reach. The moaning man was Braniff, the other a huddled frame that had no more use for a name. Jimmy put down his pistol to rip up Braniff's shirt for bandages.

Without warning the light came on. Jimmy blinked painfully at the figure in the dining room.

"Little Red Riding Hood!"

Marge Perry still wore red, but now she stared at him with a tight bitterness in which there was little resemblance to the girl who had visited him in the office. She held a gun in her steady fist.

Jimmy watched her warily. While he held her glance she could still see Braniff lying so still in the spreading pool of crimson on the linoleum. She seemed to stiffen and grow white with frantic hysteria.

She screamed, "This is for Carl, you sanctimonious b—"

Jimmy tensed for a desperate leap.

"I'll take her," said a calm voice behind her, and Marge pivoted. In one motion Jimmy scooped up his gun and threw it. It hit Marge on the elbow. She yelped in sharp pain and her weapon clattered to the floor.

Granny Eckhart, with Freddy peering anxiously over her shoulder, marched resolutely into the kitchen.

"Stand back, Jay-Jay," she commanded. "I'll show you how to handle her." She reached up and slapped the girl. When Marge, wild with frustration, tried to fight back, Granny really went to work. In a few seconds the girl crouched against the wall, whimpering with fear. Granny snatched her upright. "Come on, you little painted Jezebel," she roared. "Jay-Jay, you and Red carry Braniff to your car. I'll handle the wench. We'll leave the stiff for the meat-wagon."

"Yes, ma'am," grinned Jimmy Jamaica.

She marched the terrified girl through the house and the two men lifted the groaning Braniff and followed.

Jimmy puffed, "Your grandmother, Red, is a remarkable woman."

"She's a character, all right," Red chuckled.

"For the Lord's sake, show some life," Granny yelled from the street. "You think we've got all night?"

Jimmy glanced at his watch. "Keep your shirt on," he shouted back. "I promised Gross we'd be back by eleven. We'll make it easy."

The old woman shook her indignant head. "You think I'm worrying about *your* affairs? I got problems of my own. I'm due on the graveyard shift at the bomber plant in half an hour!"

SAVE A GRAVE FOR ME!

By DANE GREGORY

You'll find her place about midway of the block.



She lives in the middle of the block, the little old lady to whom it is always summer of 1920. No winter can reach her there—not even the long winter of a killer's frozen heart. . . .

YOU GO six blocks south along Garfield Avenue and turn due west past the alkali tract, where they're collecting old scrap iron for the war effort. You'll find her place about midway of the block; it has a wrinkled rubberoid roof and a rosebush that will be scattering petals all over.

All the other houses in the block are vacant; people moved elsewhere after the epidemic, but the taxes still went on, of course, and no one ever came back. It's queer walking down that way at night—a whole block of houses with their windows caved in so you can look through and see the shadows floating across the walls. . . . Bull-bats, maybe.

Even with the annuity they'd already bought her, people around town all wanted to chip in and get Miss Morrow a nice little place somewhere out of that neighborhood. Or at least a housekeeper—a companion of some kind—and there were several who'd have been pleased to take the job. But she wouldn't hear of it.

Why on earth should she need a house-

keeper, she'd ask; and why should she leave the neighborhood when the fall term of school would be opening in only a few more days now? That was her story winter and summer, and nights she would get out her blue Webster speller and her arithmetic book and— It's a little on the pathetic side when you stop to think about it! She was still doing that, twenty years after the Denny Blaine tract had grown up to alkali weeds.

They tore the schoolhouse down, you know; put up a new brick building clear across town from the slough, though there isn't any slough now either. Anyway, she must have passed that vacant lot a hundred times on her way to the bank, but either she saw it as it had been or didn't see it at all.

And how do you suppose she accounted for the annuity checks? Would she have thought, say, that teachers were being provided for in the in-between months, nowadays?

The doctors had a phrase for it: psychic trauma. It was as if the clock had stopped in her head, so it would always keep on being that year for her—spring of 1920, it was—when the kids came down with the typhoid fever and she helped nurse them through it. Twenty-two hours at a stretch for weeks, and her so sick with the fever herself that afterwards people couldn't excuse themselves for not having known it from the first.

We always took as good care of her as she'd let us, you understand. When the boy from McNeff's brought the week's groceries, he'd make a careful check to see whether there was anything else she needed—coal for the cookstove or kerosene for the lamps. None of the houses roundabout were wired back in 1920.

Other people dropped in, too. They did their best. And they had a right to suppose she was safe there, wouldn't you say?

Even though it's an out-of-the-way neighborhood and it takes all kinds to make a world, who'd have imagined—why, it's still unthinkable that it could have happened.

You might write it up.

There was a little story in the city papers the year of the epidemic—about the annuity and all that. But this is something else again; and when you stop to think of it, almost like a story for a book.

If you could find any way to explain a man like that.

If you could make him come clearer in your mind, or anyone else's.

If you can believe, as some of us still can't, that anybody in *this* town could have wanted to murder Miss Morrow. . . .

HE HAD been afraid for weeks; but not quite like this. It had been a dull, cumulative fear that expressed itself in smaller

ways—too many cigarettes, too little sleep, a too critical inspection of what he said to others and what was said to him. The other day at the gun club, for instance, when Roy Basler made some inane remark about honor among thieves. It meant nothing at all; but to any kind of a psychologist his uncontrollable reaction would have meant everything.

Even Basler had been a little startled. "Watch where you're pointing that shotgun!" he'd said. "Anyone would think you'd never handled a gun before."

This was different. Walking down the icy hill, he had been able to repress his thoughts into casual patterns: One step here, one step there; something should have been done about this grade a long time ago. Or: Isn't it cold! But when he came to the street below, there were occasional lighted houses to pass, some of them set not far from the sidewalk in the manner of small-town houses. A short-wave addict in one; young shadows jiving across the blinds of another. . . . He had to run the lights like a Yaqui gauntlet, huddled into the heavy overcoat so his mind could no longer accept the premise that he really *was* on his way to the bank.

He had not, until then, been quite certain. Or at least had tried not to be. There had been nothing conclusive or binding about the preliminary steps to murder: selling his shotgun to Basler so he would not have one, getting out the little derringer which no one would remember he owned, pressing into its chambers the two shotgun shells no one would logically expect to have been discharged from a derringer. . . . He had been conscious of a certain icy progressiveness to the steps, as when he sent his wife out of town for the week-end and, later, dropped the derringer in his overcoat pocket. But even the act of leaving the house did not finally commit him—after all, he had some paper work to catch up at the bank.

This new kind of fear was the determining factor; as much so as if it were post fact guilt. It gathered the muscles of his stomach and thighs into a tension that meant *yes, anything, anything at all*. He knew he would turn before he did turn, walking not into the quiet town but south past Keilsmeier's weighing shed and the kids' natatorium. And the N. P. depot, shallowly lighted but just as empty.

In a way, he welcomed it. The decision: the clean break. Whatever he might be suffering from it now, it was at least caustic—it would burn out the prolonged, uncertain ache of the other. No more waiting for the examiners to come; with any luck at all, he would soon be able to look the world in the face.

If she's got the money, he thought.

Oh, she's got the money! he thought.

Rounding Old Church corner, he thought: *And tomorrow it will be as if it had never been.*

The thought kept him company all the way along Garfield Street, which was lightless but also treeless so that the surface of ice caught what starlight there was. At the Denny Blaine tract with its tower of piled junk, he traced the words instantly to their source. It was a childhood invocation, he remembered; one acquired from Miss Morrow the time old Dunlevy came smiling into the room with a doubled length of hose in one hand. And Miss Morrow had wept a little, still not believing he had stolen the fifty-cent piece.

"Say to yourself: Tomorrow it will be as if it had never been, George. Or better yet, say with Julius Caesar: Some day even this may be pleasant to remember."

He pressed his gloved hands to his eyes.

Men of my stamp, he thought as usual, don't do this. I'm respected, I'm respectable—president of a bank in my early thirties, which is not bad, hey, boy! Everyone ought to understand about the investment. I couldn't have foreseen what priorities would do to it.

He let his hands fall to his sides.

He put one of them in his right-hand pocket and went on as he had expected to, passing the windowless houses now and a fishbone of tacky fence paling. He heard the bats.

He looked at his watch.

It was later than he had thought.

THE HOUSE was low and ramshackle, recessed from the dead street. He walked past the bare rosebush and up to a front door mat that said: You Are Home. The windows were dark. He knocked.

She did not come. He struck again, harder.

When she appeared it was by gradual stages. The cretonne drapes at the glass panel were spread wide enough so that he could see it all: the light bursting somewhere over to his left—behind wallpaper-bead curtains, it seemed—and passing through them to draw the shapes of the room toward him. Bonheur's *Horse Fair* on the wall; a chair and sofa set that had forgotten it was plush; a table, a bookcase, a pot-bellied heater. And another picture he identified as a huge, frowning portrait of President Harding.

Miss Morrow followed the lamp so quietly he could not hear her progress. She was swathed to her ankles in a faded lavender bathrobe over what appeared to be many strata of sensible flannelette. Her feet were in carpet slippers lined with fleece.

She had her small, tranquil smile and the look of a Flemish doll that had never been new.

"You must be nearly frozen," she said. "Do come in."

If anything, it was colder inside. The temperature had congealed around the smells of plush and asafetida so that Miss Morrow's slender lamp seemed to have brought the first warmth in years to this room. She set it carefully on the frosty top of the heater. He shivered.

"Isn't it," she said, "the most inclement weather you ever saw? I suppose there is illness in the family, and indeed I don't wonder."

"Miss Morrow," he said.

"It will be a mercy if we don't all take down with something before school opens. I know what some of my good neighbors say: An open winter makes a fat cemetery. Still, if you'll excuse the quip, I'd much rather chance that than a summer as closed as this one."

He hadn't expected quite such fragility. Even back then, he remembered, the boys had called her Old Lady Morrow—though not without a certain fondness, as they referred to an agate taw with many moons in it. Now she was very old.

He said: "Miss Morrow."

"Of course. I shouldn't even try to cheer you up at such a time—I'll hurry right into something more appropriate. I do know a little about nursing, fortunately."

"No one is sick. Miss Morrow, don't you remember me?"

"I'm afraid I haven't met all the children's—"

The change in her face was instant. The smile closed into primness. She said: "I know you. Indeed I *do* know you. You are the gentleman at the bank, and may I ask, sir, why you have come here disturbing the honest people of this neighborhood?"

THERE had been an inflection on the adjective. He was sure of it. He took a step toward her that did not bring him any nearer; she had taken a step away.

"At the bank," he said jovially. "That's right. I know I ought to be kicked for getting you up at this hour, but I was just passing by and—Frankly, Miss Morrow, I'm sometimes a little concerned about you."

"Why?"

"We've been cashing a ninety-dollar check for you every month for years, and—"

"Oh, no. Not for years. Just this summer."

He was too hearty. He knew that; it was the shallow, booming voice that sometimes made even his wife look at him strangely. But he could seem to do nothing about it.

"Still, you must have accumulated quite a bit over the year—the summer. McNeff says you eat like a bird, and this is your own little

house now isn't it? Well we're a local institution. We pride ourselves on that, and it is a matter of some moment to us that we haven't had the honor of *your* account. . . . I could take—I would be delighted to—"

She backed another step from him. He took a forward step. They were like figures in a parlor game, the old lady and the man.

"Do you really want to know why?" she said.

"Yes," said the man.

"Because you are a scoundrel," she said.

He stopped quite still.

"A scoundrel. A scoundrel, Miss Morrow?"

"Of a very low order, I might add, and I do not believe I care to detain you any longer. I have never liked your face or manner, sir. I was saying to Mr. McNeff's employee only this morning: 'How could any man of such transparent men have been placed in a position of trust?'"

He was appalled. He had heard of the intuition of the mad; but he would never have believed it could strike through a surface that for the most part convinced even himself. He said frantically: "How many oth— What did *he* say?"

The wallpaper-bead portieres swished faintly from the motion of her body. She was still backing.

"As usual, something quite irrelevant. 'Oh, George Gholson is as honest as the day—he wouldn't take a cent of anyone's money.'"

He found that he could breathe again. "And then what did *you* say?"

She was almost beyond the circle of the lamp, but her face flowered suddenly in its own light.

"Why, naturally I told him I was speaking about the banker. Heavens, I know George is honest—the fifty-cent piece must have rolled into a crack somewhere. Principal Dunlevy was quite, quite wrong to give him such a dressing-down last semester."

WHAT had become of old Dunlevy, anyhow? he wondered. And the little china-eared Pritchard girl on whom he had spent the coin? He said huskily: "I'm George Gholson, Miss Morrow."

She laughed a ringing laugh.

"I was your favorite student, remember?—everybody said so. Rhetorical Day. Five dollars. Five— You gave me a five-dollar prize for reciting a poem by Tennyson."

Miss Morrow still laughed.

"Considering that there was an item in the *Democrat* about it last fall, you have a very poor memory indeed. George chose a sonnet by Wordsworth, and very nicely declaimed it was, too. With feeling. I believe I had to prompt him in the middle of the fourth line, but—"

He could not reach her. She was proof against moth, rust or thief. But his voice still quavered in his ears. He still pursued.

"... And you wouldn't really want me to go to the pen. Not me. I haven't deserved anything like that. . . . It was a good investment—quick turnover, safe. Should have made me rich. . . . I *am* George Gholson, Miss Morrow. You were—Miss Morrow, you were sick."

She smiled ironically. "You have changed greatly in the last few months, George. Suppose you tell me, then, sir, how the sonnet went?"

And the pity of it was: he could not remember. His mind rushed blindly into the past and returned only with a smutty limerick he had memorized not long ago for stag sessions.

"I think I do feel a little sorry for you, sir. Like Brutus the betrayer, you are obviously an ambitious man. But if you have taken something not your own, why can't you be at least honest enough to pay a thief's price for it?"

His fingers were gathering around the derringer. "Three thousand dollars, that's all," he said, "and you've got enough to cover. Somewhere. And what the hell does it mean to *you*?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's not that much. I've only been saving over the summer. But when I'm drawing my hundred a— It means a great deal."

"What? Tell me that, will you? What?"

The dry portieres were whispering against her shoulders. She said wearily: "I couldn't make you understand. Suppose you leave me now, sir. I sometimes feel a little more tired than a woman in her prime should feel."

"I'll make *you* understand," he said.

His shadow crossed President Harding's face and the shadow of the derringer with it. He had cleared the gap at a single bound so that now they stood quite close together, the little gun raised between them. It was as if he were offering her a forfeit at the end of the parlor game.

She was more frightened than he had expected her to be. The pallor coursed down from the roots of her white hair for all the world like a blush. It reached the hollow of her throat, where a vein fluttered softly.

He could press an advantage. "You see? You see now what will happen, don't you? No scream, though. Quiet."

"I never scream," she whispered. "The gun. Just don't make me look at it—don't touch me with it! Please. I can't stand any of them now. Not since last year."

He said: "Last year? What—"

The hunting accident at the Ridge, he remembered. The middle-aged Swede with the huge, awkward hands— Miss Morrow's young man, the town called him good-naturedly—who had tangled himself and his Winchester in a

barbed-wire fence and made a mess of himself.

"Well," he said, "I've tried to be gentle with you. Where is it, then? The money."

Her lips drew severely into the pallor. "I won't give it up, sir. Not ever."

HE TOUCHED her wrist with the muzzle of the derringer. Her throat contracted but she did not move. "I'll have to kill you, then," he said.

Miss Morrow's small laugh rippled again. "George Gholson, indeed! I don't believe you will kill me until you've found the money, and then you would do so anyway, would you not?"

"I'll find it," he said. "One way or another."

He brought his clasp-knife out into the lamplight, holding the derringer fixed on her while his free hand sprang the blade. Miss Morrow neither spoke nor moved. He struck suddenly at the wallpaper beads behind her.

They went pattering away into the shadows with a sound like tears. "See what I mean? You treasure these old things, don't you?"

"I shall," she said, "when they are old."

The plush armchair yielded rifles of pinkish cotton batting, surprisingly clean for its age. He gutted the plush sofa down to its springs and considered the soft buckskin cushion that had once said: St. Louis World's Fair, 1906. Miss Morrow made a stifled sound when the blade sank into it.

"I've got to look everywhere, you know," he said conversationally.

"I wonder if you will have time. I doubt very much, sir, that you are the kind of murderer who can work by daylight."

The upper shelves of the bookcase bulged with tier on tier of Ridpath's *History of the World*. Below were the literary accumulations of a lifetime: Plato in scuffed vellum, *Samantha at Saratoga*, the complete works of Mary J. Holmes. Stacks of textbooks he could not remember; *A Boy's Life of Roosevelt* he remembered well. She had read aloud from it.

He sliced deliberately into the open books, tearing when he did not slice. Miss Morrow said: "Is that necessary, sir? You know the money could not be in—"

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No."

A brown-backed grammar book fell apart at the leaf mark. He bent with an unaccountable curiosity to stare at the diagrammed sentence under the lamp. *The North Wind is full of courage*, it said, and *puts the stamina of life into a man*.

He gathered handfuls of the yellowed pages, feeling them dissolve in their own age. Afterwards Miss Morrow said: "I treasured that book, yes. The publishers wrote me last year that the plates have been destroyed, and I think in twenty years or so it would have been worth thousands."

A nerve twisted in the corner of his mouth. He said, "Thousands?"

"Though I would never have sold it, of course. Heavens, money can't be that important. But I think you understand now, do you not, that there is nothing to be gained from this malicious nonsense?"

"Yes," said Gholson.

He swung the lamp up from the floor and set it down on the gateleg table. The shadows jarred away to leave them standing together in the circle of light. His fingers dropped to her wrist.

"I had an idea," she said, "that this would come next."

"Do you think I want to do it? It's the last thing in the world I want."

"Except prison," she reminded him.

"All right! Except that!" The repressed nerve fluttered into his voice. "It can't mean anything to you. You've got enough to live on—plenty to live on! And you'll have to tell me sooner or later. Why not—Miss Morrow, I'll pay you back! Just in the nature of a loan, that's all. I—"

"You are going to kill me," she said. "We both know that."

His hand hardened around her wrist. He pressed her fingers slowly toward the open chimney of the lamp.

"In a way," she whispered moments later, "I can be almost glad. . . . I thought—there was once when I thought your eyes were a great deal like George's."

The nerve caught at his mouth again. "Be so easy! Just a word or two and— Will you tell? Will you tell?"

Her answer came to him across another interval of moments.

"I suppose I must," she said faintly. "I could never bear to see a man in such distress."

His fingers loosened. "Where?"

"The kitchen," said Miss Morrow.

IT WAS a small room hung with a frieze of old willow-ware and warmed faintly by the last embers of the cookstove. Above their heads a graying canary drowsed in a ruff of feathers. "You see," Miss Morrow explained cheerfully, "I do most of my living in this room. It's only proper, don't you think, that I should do my dying here, too?"

He set down the lamp. "The money," he said.

"I keep it under the old sacks in the flour bin. Shall I—"

"Oh, no, you don't! I'll get it."

He moved the derringer to his left hand and pressed down with the heel of his right one on the bin, topheavy from the weight of the two full sacks inside. He bent one knee

into the aperture underneath and scuffed his fingertips along the dark crevice where the empty sacks had accumulated. Something small and terrible sprang out of it to take his fingers in its teeth.

Gholson's knee lost its purchase in the slot and the ponderous bin went backward with him, pinning his right arm immovably to the cabinet frame.

The derringer had fallen somewhere under the skirts of his overcoat. His free fingers found it, and lost it again in the shadow that was taking shape on the worn linoleum—so clearly defined he had begun to scream before his head turned.

Miss Morrow stood quite close to him with a small Boy Scout hand-axe poised above his skull. Her eyes were wide and intent.

He cried out again. "Oh, no!"

The axe fell solidly.

He opened his unbelieving eyes and watched it revolve to a dead stop in the corner where Miss Morrow had flung it.

She was gone. He could hear the whisk of her flannelettes in the room beyond.

He brought up one heel and put his full weight to the bin, freeing the numbed arm an inch at a time. His overcoat sleeve had deadened the blow so that the muscles in it would still flex. He shook the little rat-trap from his fingers and caught up the derringer and the lamp.

The scattered pages of Miss Morrow's books were rattling in a draught from outside. Gholson put the lamp down hard and went through the open door.

She was midway of the icy street when he overtook her. She stopped among the dying echoes and faced him defiantly.

"You are an even worse rogue than I would have believed, sir."

He was panting with relief and fury. "Come on. We're going back."

"No."

"The gun," he reminded her.

She padded ahead of the derringer, her small shoulders squared with indignation. "Don't touch me with it! . . . Believe me, sir, you have had every chance. I could have killed you, you know—I fully intended to do so when we went out to the kitchen."

"Well, why didn't you, then?"

"You screamed," Miss Morrow said simply. "Death is a majestic thing, and it occurred to me then that you may not be an important enough man to die."

GHOLSON put his shoulders to the door and crossed over to the lamp. He gave the wick a full turn so that the barb of light rose high in the chimney. "I still want the money. I've still got to have it, can't you understand that?"

"The lamp again?"

"Until you tell."

She was crying so inaudibly that he did not know it until he stood over her and saw the tears. They fell like a faint mist, without convulsing her face.

"I would have to tell you sooner or later. I know that now—there would come a time when it seemed unimportant to me. . . . But no one could blame me, surely. Sometimes I don't even want it to be as much money as it sometimes seems."

Gholson boomed genially, "Just a few dollars. That's all it can be, you know."

"But I thought you would go away. I had a right to expect that much when I let you live."

He set his teeth again and took her wrist.

"The stove," she mourned. "The heater."

"Another lie! No one would be crazy enough to—"

But the room was very cold.

Miss Morrow said: "I never light a fire there in the summer, you see. I wouldn't want to be prodigal of fuel, no matter how inclement it grows." She smiled through the slow tears. "But as to its being an absurd hiding place, you would never have thought to look there, you know."

He was shaking so that the rusty catch resisted him on the first try. He put down the derringer. The isinglass-paneled door swung outward on infinitely weary hinges.

The nerve puckered his mouth again. "Kindlings in here!" he accused. "Newspapers. It's all laid for the morning fire."

"From last spring, I think," Miss Morrow said vaguely. "I haven't heated the sitting-room once this summer, sir."

"And I think you're lying to me! If—"

He would have turned, except that some quality in the texture of the newsprint held his eye. He crackled a page of it out between his fingers.

The headline said:

MISS MORROW SEES TYPHOID
BOGIE AT TOWN CONFERENCE
School Kids Endangered by Slough,
Scolds Kindly but Mistaken Pedant

It was laid for a fire of long ago. It had been an interminable summer.

The money was underneath.

EVEN so, it was hard for him to believe that she could have accumulated so much of it. Wherever his fingers groped they found it, in bills of all ages and denominations—at least a small fortune bedded away in the space between kindlings and grate. He could not imagine an existence so frugal. At the most generous estimate, he had expected to find only enough.

"But it isn't yours, you know," Miss Morrow said. "You must not take it."

He watched the mound of currency grow. "Nature of a loan," he said over his shoulder.

"Just like having it in the—"

"I only want you to go."

"Damn it, quit bothering me!"

"I won't even report you to the sheriff," she promised him. "I can find another hiding-place that will do until you are taken away to prison. . . . Just go, sir. I don't want to hurt you."

The color receded gradually from the hand spread over the bills. He straightened out of his crouch and turned to face her.

"I'll do that," he said boisterously. "Yes, sir—I'll go this minute! You just let me have my—"

"No."

"It's a kind of—kind of keepsake. I couldn't just—"

"It would be as easy for me to believe you George Gholson as to believe you a sentimental man."

She was standing close to the straight-backed chair on which he had laid the deringer. She looked from his face to the little gun, her lips white with revulsion.

He measured the distance between them. Three steps and a half at the outside. He took the first step.

"You won't pick it up," he said masterfully. "You're afraid of them, you know—don't forget that. . . . Swede Hansen. Remember how he looked after the hunting accident?"

He watched Miss Morrow recoil down to her carpet slippers. He took another step. It was the last and deadliest phase of the parlor game.

"I shall," she said. "I most certainly shall if—"

His mistake was that he took the step and a half too suddenly. He saw the error in the instant of motion, but Miss Morrow's startled hand had already convulsed around the gun.

He was sure she would drop it. She did not drop it. She brought it up level with his chest, her whole body shrinking back from the hand that held it.

Almost inaudibly she said, "Just go away."

Gholson looked at the leaning tower of currency. The muscles banded around his mouth and he was not afraid. He walked deliberately toward the gun.

Miss Morrow retreated from him step by step until her shoulders were to Bonheur's *Horse Fair*.

"Please," she said.

"If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it in the kitchen. And you wouldn't use a gun for it, either—remember Swede? How would you like to see another man look that

way and know you did it? I'll take the gun please. Hand it here."

She edged along the wall. She said, "But you don't understand. I've never wanted to hurt any living thing, great or small. . . . But the calendars come and they have the wrong date, and it seems like the longest summer vacation I've ever waited through. I have to have something. I have to plan. I have to keep my hands busy. I have—"

"Got to take it away from you, have I? Give it up, you crazy old—"

His fingertips were at her wrist when Miss Morrow fired the double load of buckshot into his chest.

Moments later he opened his eyes and felt her tears on his face. Miss Morrow said desolately: "You remembered the Wordsworth sonnet finally, George. *The World Is Too Much With Us*. I had to prompt you again on the fourth line—*We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.*"

There was something soft pillowed under his head. He touched it with a groping hand and found it was the carefully reassembled buckskin cushion. "Am I dying?" said Gholson.

"Yes."

"I don't feel anything. There isn't any pain. I—"

"Perhaps," she said, "because even unimportant men can sometimes die majestically."

He could not see her face. He could only feel the tears. "Oh, but you aren't!" Miss Morrow wept. "You can't be! There's some terrible mistake! If it's true, then everything else is true—that the school-house is gone and there are no windows in my neighbors' houses. The things people whisper behind my back—that I'm— But you aren't George Gholson. Are you, sir? Are you?"

"No," said Gholson painfully. "Just some damn' thing I heard him reciting last year at the schoolhouse."

In the last moment of clarity, he saw her shining face.

SHE'LL make you a cup of coffee. She makes good coffee. You go six blocks south along— Oh, I told you that.

You'd better drop in and talk to her a little just to get everything straight in your mind, but I wouldn't say anything about it being George Gholson she killed. She wouldn't believe you, and there's no use upsetting her.

You see, it's George Gholson she's been saving the money for all summer long. She hasn't anyone of her own, she says, and she wants him to have a college education when he gets out of high school. . . . That was the way of it. That was why she had to kill the banker—to give George his chance in life.

A DRINK FOR AUNT LOUISA

By

FRANCIS FREDRICKS

Arnold called the turn. . . . Aunt Louisa 'd have her soup first, then, as usual she'd make her tea. And—incidentally—make her nephew into a wealthy man, who would be very, very brave at her funeral. . . .

ARNOLD HEWES stared down into the garden. His hollow-cheeked face was white; his thin nostrils quivered slightly, Arnold's luminous, gray-green eyes glowed as they followed each movement of his Aunt Louisa.

The old lady was on her knees, spading, turning over soil along a row of budding iris. A tight, cold smile pulled one side of Arnold's mouth. Drum-beats of thought pounded from the depths of his brain:

"Spade the soil well, Aunt Louisa, spade it well! In a few hours, spades will be turning up soil for your grave!"

Arnold's long body went taut. He drew back into the shadows. Aunt Louisa had suddenly gotten up. She stuffed her apron and started towards the house. She was coming in for lunch. Arnold looked at his watch. It was nearly two o'clock. He looked at his hands. They were white and thin and steady.

Only a few minutes more and those hands would do their work. Quickly and neatly. As neat as—as this room, Arnold thought, looking around. It was the best room of the house. It had been his brother's room. Always Walter had been given the best. The second best was for Arnold.

Arnold hated his aunt for it, ever since they, as orphans, had been adopted by her. She believed in the rights of the first-born. And so her will granted absolute control of the home to Walter, the properties and the securities. There was a cash settlement for Arnold. But there was a provision that if Walter died first, then absolute and final control of the estate would go to Arnold.



Her hysterical scream was muffled in her throat. . . .

Well, Walter was dead now—dead at thirty in a soldier's grave in Italy.

And he, Arnold, was alive and free. The army had found him psycho-neurotic.

A glance at his watch told him it was time. Silently, he went out of the room and along the still hallway. Vaguely, he heard the tick-tock of the hall clock, the groaning of the stairs at his descent. His mind prepared itself. He couldn't fail. Margaret, the cook, was having her day off. There was no one who could substantiate or refute his story.

Aunt Louisa had been ill. Walter's death had done little to improve her condition. Doctor Paine would testify that she'd been subject to fainting spells. The conclusion would be that Aunt Louisa had fainted suddenly while boiling water for her tea. The water had boiled over, extinguished the flame. Aunt Louisa was asphyxiated before she regained consciousness. An open and shut case of accidental death.

It was so simple. . . .

Arnold's long fingers turned the kitchen door knob. Aunt Louisa looked up from the table. She was in her late fifties, gray, with a gentle but firm set to her rather patrician features.

"Hello, Arnold. Going to have a little lunch with me?"

"No, Aunt Louisa," he said. "I'm not hungry. I've got to run the car over to the garage and have the ignition system checked. The motor misses."

"Oh, of course," said Aunt Louisa. She gave Arnold a little smile when he poured the steaming soup into her plate. He noticed there wasn't any teacup set out.

"No tea today, Aunt Louisa?"

"No, Arnold, I think I'll have some milk."

"Sure," he said, turning toward the refrigerator. Then he checked himself. Pouring out milk meant that he'd have to clean it up again. After he killed her, he could not waste any time there. He turned away from Aunt Louisa, went to the sink behind her, turned on the water.

"You and Walter were so unlike," Aunt Louisa commented, a sudden sorrowful look coming into her face. "Were he here, he'd put on coveralls, go out to the car and in no time at all have everything running fine. He was always tinkering and laughing. You've always been so quiet and thoughtful and brooding. At times I've never been quite able to understand you."

Arnold withdrew from his pocket a cotton pad and a small bottle of chloroform. He uncapped the bottle and saturated the pad.

"You haven't?" He stood behind her.

"No, Arnold."

"Then let me tell you," Arnold said. His hand moved around her face, pressed the pad to her nose. Aunt Louisa's spoon clattered to

the table. Her arms raised in mute protest.

"I'll tell you!" his voice hissed. "I hate you! -You've disgusted me as long as I've known you. And now I'm going to be rid of you—for good!"

Aunt Louisa's hands clawed Arnold's wrists. A hysterical scream was muffled in her throat. Then her hands relaxed. Her arms fell limp to her sides.

For a minute more, Arnold held tight. When he released her, her head lolled back. He rinsed out the saturated pad and emptied the bottle down the drain. He opened the faucet full and the cold water flushed any trace of chloroform from the sink. Following that, Arnold washed and dried Aunt Louisa's face to get rid of the fumes, faint as they were.

He worked hurriedly, setting out cup, saucer and tea bag. He filled the aluminum teapot with the running water, stepped over to the range and lit a burner. He watched the flames lick up. The teapot tilted. The flames hissed and died. Gas rushed through the open jets. Arnold pulled Aunt Louisa from the chair and sprawled her across the floor.

When he stood by the door for a last minute appraisal, his lips moved slightly. "Simple," he said. "Quite simple."

ARNOLD sat still and tense in the huge living room. A cold breeze moved the heavy blue drapes, touching his moist brow. He shivered. His hands clutched the arms of his chair.

"Come on," he said silently. "Get hold of yourself. In a few minutes they'll ask you routine questions. Then it'll be all over. Keep up the shocked attitude and the rest is a cinch."

There was the sound of a door opening, footsteps coming toward him.

"Will you come inside, Arnold? The police want to ask you a few questions. I've asked them to be brief. I know how you must feel."

Arnold gave Doctor Paine a grateful nod. He followed the gray-haired physician to the kitchen, where the police were.

Four men sat at separated points in the kitchen. Two were in uniform, two in street apparel. Aunt Louisa sprawled where he had left her, her face calm in death.

Lieutenant Hallard, who seemed to be in charge, stood close to Aunt Louisa. His right hand was propped on the range near the teapot. He was a medium sized man with a sandy complexion and steady blue eyes. Next to the teapot was a pan of water simmering over a slow flame. Arnold's eyes went to the pan of water, then to Lieutenant Hallard.

The detective's voice was casual and easy. "There are a few facts we've got to be certain of, Mr. Hewes. You're sure of the time you left for the garage?"

"Yes," Arnold said softly. "It was two-fifteen."

"And it is now three-fifteen." Hallard looked at the clock. "Fifty-eight minutes later. You say you drove to the garage and taxied back, getting here at about 2:45. Exactly what did you do then?"

Arnold took a slow breath. Shock showed on his face. "When I found her on the floor, I tried to feel her pulse but there was none. I called Dr. Paine. He told me to call the police and that he'd come right away." Arnold was silent for a moment. Suddenly a low moan came from his lips. "It's all my fault!" His voice broke huskily. "If only I'd done what she asked—"

"What do you mean, Arnold?" Dr. Paine broke in quickly.

"Aunt Louisa asked me to have lunch with her. But I said no. I wanted to get the car to the garage. If only I had said yes I'd have been here when she collapsed. The water wouldn't have boiled over!" Arnold's hands covered his eyes as though blotting out a horrible sight.

A peculiar sound came to Arnold's ears, putting an end to his burst of grief. Lieutenant Hallard looked at him as casually as ever. He was very still, except for his right hand. The fingers tapped slowly against the teapot.

"You say your aunt was having soup," Hallard said. He picked up the soup pan. "Which is true enough. The soup is still slightly warm."

Arnold nodded. What was the fool getting at, playing around with the soup pan? There was nothing in it but soup. Hallard's hands began to finger the teapot.

Then Arnold understood. A chilling fear rooted him to the floor.

"And now, Mr. Hewes, this water, which hardly more than a half hour ago was boiling over, is cold—quite cold! Yet, the soup is slightly warm. It doesn't seem to make sense, Mr. Hewes. I'm going to perform an experiment."

His hand turned up the gas under the pan of simmering water. "When this soup boils, I'm going to shut off the gas. If exactly fifty-eight minutes from then the soup is as cold as the water in the teapot, we'll close the case as accidental death. If the water is still warm, then I'm holding you for murder!"

Arnold's lips parted momentarily. With a shriek he whirled around, plunged toward the door, only to be spun back by a pair of blue-coated arms to face the gleaming tea pot. It squatted there still filled with water as cold as the moment he drew it from the faucet. As cold as death, itself.

"TAKE IT IN GOLD"

YOU rarely see a counterfeit bill these days.

The chances are you have lived your life and have never seen one. But there was a time in the history of our country when counterfeit money was so common it threatened to overthrow our whole money system. The printing presses in the back rooms worked overtime, turning out such a deluge of "pretty paper" that the banks couldn't keep track of it. The warnings sent out on one day would be worthless the next because a whole new crop of "trick money" would be in circulation. It got so bad that people started refusing to accept paper money.

In the Mississippi Valley the situation was particularly acute. There, in Abe Lincoln's time, farmers raised their crops and floated them down river on home-made flat boats to the markets at Natchez and New Orleans.

A farmer, entrusting his son with the precious cargo would give him a few words of parting advice:

"Sleep with your rifle acrost your knee, boy. Beware the snags and riffles where the river pirates might be hiding out. Watch out for tricks. Don't leave no stranger git aboard your boat on any pretext under the sun. And when you git to New Orleans, don't take the first offer that's made to you fer the cargo. Shop around fer the best bargain, and when you sell, *git gold!* Don't take no paper money. Things is gettin' bad as in the Revolution days, with paper money gettin' so it ain't worth a Continental. I don't know what the

country is acomin' to. Looks like the U. S. is goin' to be all washed up as a goin' concern, and it'll be every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost. *So you git gold.* That's somethin' a man can sink his teeth into."

It was also something a man could sink his robbing hands into. There was French and Spanish gold circulating in New Orleans. A trader could get gold, all right. But that was only the beginning of his troubles. He had to pack that gold on the long wilderness trip over the Natchez Trace to Nashville. Gold was a lot harder to hide than paper money would have been. Land pirates infested the wilderness trails, so that if a man escaped the river pirates on the trip down, and sold his cargo for gold, he stood a good chance of losing his gold—and his life—on the trip back.

But the U. S. has proved it is a going concern. The government beat the counterfeit money racket, just as it is now beating the ration ticket rackets.

Gas stamps, food stamps, credentials of various sorts—those are the things that are being counterfeited today. But not so much today as yesterday. The F. B. I. has been cracking down, and with the help of local enforcement officers and an enlightened public—a public that is increasingly aware that it's all for one and one for all in this war—the counterfeiter-saboteur is on the way out. He is being beaten the same way he was beaten in the paper money game.

—RYERSON JOHNSON



Joe pulled the trigger and thunder crashed in his mind.



When Joe got his honorable discharge from the Marines, he found that Nikki was the best reason in the world why he shouldn't become a—



HOME-FRONT TARGET

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

THEY walked a block or two from the restaurant, before parting. "I'll see the Skipper right away, this afternoon," Joe Jeremy promised the girl. "I'll say, 'Skipper, look, you got a spare minute for your future son-in-law?'"

Her hand was on his arm and squeezing it.

"Well," he thought, "I'll be a detective for a few more hours anyway. Joe Jeremy, thirty, late of the Marines—with a shield pinned to his vest again and back on the Force, doing the work and living the life that he liked. . . . But why kick the thing around?"

Nikki had said: "You want to marry me,

Joe, you say nuts to the force and resign!"

So—so this was goodbye to the life that he'd wanted.

"Look, Skipper," he would say to the captain. "There's no future with the cops."

That's what Nikki had really meant, of course. There had to be a core to all her arguments. Like lots of people she was only mixed up. She had to go and get the war, the peace, the glad days that were coming, all tangled in her mind. She had to make it sound—well, serious.

But what Nikki really meant was that the cops never would be big enough for him. Simple. What she really wanted was a future with him.

He walked straight to headquarters, as he'd promised he would do, as he'd promised Nikki. He walked up the stairs and into her father's office.

THE funny thing was, say *your* dad was a cop, a Captain of Detectives, a man the town and the state knew with respect and admiration—why, you'd understand the life, and be proud of him and the fine work he was doing. But. . .

Captain Gregory looked up from his desk as Joe Jeremy walked in. The phone rang. Gregory said, "Just a minute, Joe," and answered it.

Then Gregory cut the connection. He held the phone though as he said, "Why the frown, Joe? Something on your mind? Will it keep until tomorrow? I've been waiting for you. Remember that munitions ship that went sky high a few weeks ago and killed a dozen people?"

"Yes," Joe Jeremy said. He wet his lips. "I remember. Why?"

Gregory said, "Hoover's boys are in town. Looks like they've run down the guilty men—two hoods named Hedrich and Nate Kassive."

Joe Jeremy said: "They're here in town? The FBI found the men—here?"

"That's right." Gregory nodded. "Couple of hoods named Hedrich and Kassive. They're holed up on One-hundred-and-fifteenth Street. We've got a stake-out on the job, watching them. We're waiting for darkness. We want these men alive. The FBI wants to know if they're on their own or hooked up with a ring. Big stuff, Joe, important—and you're in. I knew you'd want it that way."

Jeremy walked to the window.

"So stick around for the show, Joe," Gregory said. Again he raised the phone.

Jeremy looked out of the window. . . .

She'd come into the restaurant this noon, at one o'clock, wearing black, and a little round hat on her blonde head. Her fine gray eyes had been strangely grave and her lips looked determined.

"A salad and a sandwich?" he'd suggested when she sat down.

But she said quickly, "I'll have coffee only."

They'd lunched together often since he'd come back from the South Pacific. He was living in a hotel downtown, and was far from strong yet. The scars from the Jap lead, and the malaria germs still sometimes bothered him. But other noons she hadn't been so—so grim.

Conversation hummed around them. Dishes clattered loudly somewhere near and there was music, trumpets and trombones, very hard and modern.

"Joe," she said, "I've got to get back to the office early."

"Early?" He'd phoned her not thirty minutes past. "Hon," he'd said, "I've found a house we can buy for a song!" He shook his head now, not dismayed at her tautness, but puzzled. Twice before he'd tried to get—involved. He'd even sounded out her father.

"Skipper, look," he'd said to the cap, "is it because I'm banged up? Is it the malaria?"

Funny, her hands were tying into fists. Her eyes, when at last she raised them to him, were anguished and afraid and pleading. "All I want, Nikki," he said, "is to know—"

"Joe—" she interrupted. And then the words poured out. "Remember, Joe, the big game? You know, Saturdays in college? The team on fighting edge and tuned to win, and the girls filled, too, with this same fine spirit. The girls cheering till their throats were dry and sore and hoarse. Remember, Joe, what happened when the whistle blew? The let-down, the feeling that it was over? Could one of us have gone back to empty stands that night and found the same fervor?"

"But Nikki—" he began, troubled and still puzzled. She didn't let him speak though.

Her hands quivered. He saw the tremor in her, as she whispered, "Remember, Joe, the day you came back from war? We met you at the station, mother, dad and I. Proud? Our hearts were singing! The bruises couldn't matter, not when the score was good. You'd come back, and everything was different, and life took on new meaning. But—"

She closed her eyes a moment and he held his breath then, and he shivered as she said, "Joe, remember how Dad was beaming? Remember what he said? 'How soon, Joe, before you'll want your shield again?' Oh, darling, I don't want you to pick up the old life, to return to dad's squad."

"Why?" he asked flatly.

Something happened to her eyes. They widened and they stripped themselves for him. "Isn't the game over, for you, for me? Am I supposed to cheer from empty stands for years—for life, Joe?"

He found a cigarette, lit it. He glanced

aside, around the restaurant, fumbled with the silverware. All the while he knew that she was watching, waiting, and all the while he wondered what to say. For now he knew the moving scheme of things.

"Our part in this fight, this war, is over . . ." She'd said that. "I mean you're back to stay, Joe—but there's never any peace for the police . . ." She'd said that.

"And once you feel the thrill of it again, once you figure in a chase, a raid, you'll be lost to me forever, because Joe, I—I want peace! I want the same as everyone else will have, someday. I won't have it as long as you wear a shield. That shield means you'll always be grim and at war. I can't live like that. I can't come back every night, every year, to empty stands to cheer you."

Yes, she'd said all that, and now with every passing minute those words rang louder in his mind until . . .

The squad was at last assembled. Gregory's boys. "The first team," as Gregory always called them. Captain Gregory introduced the FBI men, Agents Richards and Linver.

"A girl is fronting for these two crooks, Hedrich and Nate Kassive," Richards said. "We're counting on the girl going to the grocery store. According to our information she shows up at the store each night at seven. So say the trip back would take her twenty minutes. *H* hour then is seven-twenty."

Jeremy looked down at his clenched hands, shoved them in his pockets.

"We'll split at the alley," Richards said. "Linver and Captain Gregory will close in from the rear. Jeremy and I will take the front. I'll rap as the girl might rap upon returning." He gave each man a quick and searching glance. "All clear?"

"Clear," Captain Gregory said. He pulled the phone across his desk. He had an open wire to the stake-out on 115th Street.

"There's some activity in the apartment, Captain." The stake-out's voice sounded strange and far away, metallic in the office. "The girl's putting on her hat."

"Can you see Hedrich and Kassive?"

"Shades are partly drawn. . . ." The stake-out's voice faded on the phone, as though he'd stretched a bit to get a better look. "They're in their shirt sleeves, Skipper."

"Okay," Gregory said. "Get set for seven-twenty."

Gregory's eyes were gray and grim, deep-set behind dark brows. Jeremy saw this grimness and thought, *was that what Nikki meant?*

He could see Nikki in his mind's eye, standing on the curb this afternoon, saying goodbye to him, laughing, so happy. He could hear her saying, this afternoon, "I'll drive down for you and dad tonight, at eleven. We'll go home then. . . ."

"Had dinner, Jeremy?" Linver asked. The squad was going down the stairs.

"No," Jeremy said. "I hadn't thought of eating."

"We'll take on a steak afterwards," Richards cut in. He opened a package of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

"No, thanks," Jeremy said. "I just threw one away."

"I've met you before, Jeremy. Perry, wasn't it? Four-five years back?"

"Yes, before the war. Police school."

"That's it. I seldom forget a face." Richards chuckled and stopped to light his cigarette. "Hogan's alley and the Swede in the weeds. How'd you do on the running man?"

"I got a twenty-four."

"That's nice shooting," Richards said.

They went out the side door and Jeremy walked stiffly. He sat with Linver and Richards in the rear of the squad car, between them.

"We had quite a time finding Hedrich and Kassive." Richards stretched out his legs, leaned back comfortably. "We started with a cabbie's vague statement, a grease smear on a torn piece of dungarees that we picked up at the dock. The trail led us across four states, but the going got easier after we identified them—and after they got themselves a girl."

RICHARDS made small circling motions around the curling smoke of his cigarette. He was very calm, like a smart quarterback before a football game.

"They're tough babies," Richards went on conversationally. "The kind who can lose the war for us, at home."

Jeremy looked the other way. A girl was standing on a street corner. Other girls were holding their hats, turning quickly as cars raced by, and they could not be Nikki, not all of them, and yet—she'd held her hat this afternoon on the busy corner as they'd said goodbye. She'd reached quickly for her skirt, laughing at the wind that flirted boldly with the hemline. "Goodbye, Joe!" she'd said. "Darling! . . ."

They ran the last blocks cautiously. Cars pulled up in an alley then, off 115th Street. Gregory's men piled out and spread to cover roof and windows. There were only minutes now to 7:20.

Jeremy stood by, counting not time nor the odds, but the queerness of time tricking him. What was it he had planned to say? *Skipper, look. She wants me in another line, I guess. Keeping books or something. Skipper, you know how it is—I love her. . . .*

"Seven-eighteen," Richards said abruptly.

"All set, Joe?" Gregory said.

Jeremy fingered the butt of his service revolver. "All set."

"Luck!" Linver said. Then Linver and Gregory moved away and disappeared.

"The lower hall runs straight through the building, Jeremy." Richards was very calm and casual. "Our objective is the first floor apartment, right. We have two hall doors to cover."

Richards paused briefly. "Seven-nineteen. Ready, Jeremy?"

They walked into 115th Street, Jeremy and Richards. They left the alley and walked close to the building. They climbed four steps and Richards opened the front door. The light in the hall was lonely and dim and the floor was worn rough by many plodding feet. Gray-green were the walls. Plaster-scarred, Jeremy saw, and there was a stairway, a round smooth newel post, its shadow forboding.

Two doors, one front and one rear. Richards tiptoed to the front door, left hand raised to knock. But he didn't knock; he listened, and an ache was growing in Jeremy's neck and shoulders. The ache waned up to his brain. He saw Richards' lips forming a last word of caution. Then Richards knocked. But still another moment passed in silence.

A key turned in the lock suddenly. Jeremy jerked with the sound. Then the door opened and light sliced into the hallway.

Hedrich was there, crying, "Nate! It's the cops!"

Split seconds passed. Richards rammed the door with his shoulder and Jeremy was very cold in this instant. An Arctic wind seemed to come out that door, astride singing bullets, freezing him. This husk of Joe Jeremy stood aside, so it seemed, and he could look at himself, and speak to himself, not coldly but with words that were searing:

Joe, why do you wait? This is your job. God help you, Joe, if you should quit on it!

He raised his heavy right arm, the heaviness the weight of his gun—and then the rear door opened suddenly. Nate Kassive was coming into the hall. Kassive was screened by the door from the rear of the hallway. He was crouching and waving two black guns.

He saw Jeremy. His guns began cracking their muzzles spurring red flecks in the gloom. Joe Jeremy pulled the trigger and there was a crashing as of thunder, close, in his mind.

Nikki, her words, were a part of his mind: *Joe, one raid and you'll be lost to me. I won't*

be there, through the years, in empty stands to cheer you. . . .

They stood outside, afterward. Gregory's squad and the FBI men. Gregory said to Richards, "Good, eh? The boy's got plenty on the ball." He slapped Joe on the shoulder.

Richards grinned and said, "How about that steak now, Jeremy?" They walked back toward the car. "Cigarette, Jeremy?"

Richards stopped to strike a match but Jeremy walked on. Past the squad car, down the alley, on down the street. They were to have met at eleven, Joe Jeremy and Nikki. They were to have driven home, flushed and happy with their news, their plans, their laughing. . . .

Well, where are you going Joe? You've been walking hours. It's night. Where are you going, Joe?

He came to the last block, Nikki's street. Despite the night, the cold, she was sitting on the porch steps. She arose and he stopped, standing stiffly, startled to find her there. Slowly she came down the steps toward him. The darkness didn't let him see her tears. "Joe—" she said.

"She knew. She'd talked to Gregory.

He shook his head. The words were hard to say and clung to his lips and bruised them. "There is grimness in a cop's life, yes. But it's something bigger than you see. It's a grim awareness of a duty. Nikki, what I mean I want you now even more than before, but if you fight to win a war you've got to fight to keep the peace."

He paused. Her hands were reaching out to him. But he shook his head again.

"The roots are down. That's what I'm saying, Nikki. I belong to the team and I've got a job to do, and a fight, and that's what I'm saying Nikki. The roots are down—for life."

He heard her indrawn breath and thought she'd never speak. But then: "Is facing reality only for a man, Joe?" she said. "Is duty only for a man? Does a woman know her courage and the strength she has and how she'll meet her test—until she's been tried?"

Her fingers touched his arm and tightened there. "Joe, I've fought my fight tonight too, and I'm here. I'll always be here, cheering for you."

They stood very close together suddenly, and like the wind, their hearts were singing.

Join Jeffery Wren and Policewoman Zoe Osbourn in a "Sleight Case of Murder" in the October DIME DETECTIVE—a highly screwy kill sequence which all began with the paraffin hand Wren received by messenger one morning, and the terrified phone call from Mirand Lestrard who didn't know which way to turn for fear of stumbling over a corpse. . . . Read this wild, thrilling novel in the October DIME DETECTIVE—on sale September 1st!

FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

Thrilling Crime Novelle

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

His hand came up with a gun. Dave didn't hesitate.



CHAPTER ONE

Two Hundred Ninety-Eight Thousand

ACTUALLY, it began on a dark and snow-filled night in New York City. That was 1939. There was no dim-out then. Through the snow the lights of Broadway twinkled. On the windy corners the tired, padded figures of Santa Claus tolled their bells. It was two nights before Christmas. And at the quiet exclusive San Roman Hotel, the door onto East 53rd Street opened. A short, round little man in evening-dress moved toward his waiting car. He never reached that car. . . .

One blunt harsh thunder roared from the darkness near the door of the San Roman. The



If you saw three hundred grand kicking around in the gutter, wouldn't you pick it up? But this fat bunch of lettuce had a string attached to it—the kind of deadly string that would just fit around Dave Stone's neck!

little man's hands clutched frenziedly at his back. He tried to scream. He merely whimpered, trembled, and fell. He died, very likely, before he touched the concrete.

A cabby shouted. And from the darkness near the doorway, a blocky, darkly-dressed man sped forward. In one hand he held the death gun. He stopped beside the fallen man, reached into his pockets. He slipped out a small package, turned, and started to run. The figure of a cop plowed around the corner, his

whistle shrilling. The cabby jumped out, ran. The figure hesitated, turned—and found another cop behind him. He lifted his gun. A second deadly thunder rolled along the snow-filled street. The cop sagged forward into the gutter. The figure began to run, fleeing from the second cop.

The second cop's gun roared. The figure stumbled and coughed. He went to his knees, then dragged himself up. He staggered around the corner and collapsed against a dark sedan.

"Get me . . . in, Eddie," he whimpered heavily. "I . . . cop tagged me . . . hurts . . . but I got Van Ellban's stuff. . . ." An instant later the sedan roared away. The cop, his gun warm in his hand, cursed as he watched it vanishing.

"Simon Lons! I know that mug!" he whispered savagely. "It was Lons, and I hurt him plenty with that slug. . . ."

Two nights later, in a dim room on West 12th Street, Simon Lons lay on a cot. His face was splotted with red and pasty-white. His eyes were burning and glassy. His thick, spaced breathing was, for a time, the only sound in the room.

Beside the cot stood three men. Each stood very still; only their throats moved as they swallowed, and their fingers moved . . . nervously clenched . . . opened.

At last Simon Lons' burning eyes rolled slightly and settled. He gave a faint sigh. And no longer did his breathing rasp in the room.

"That's it," one man said slowly. It seemed a signal. Each turned. They lit cigarettes. And, as they looked at each other, in every eye was suspicion, distrust, smouldering hate.

"Okay," one said flatly. "Who lifted the stuff off Lons? He never was out of this room after he was shot. Nobody else was in here but us. And there ain't no dough on him now. Somebody's got it, and by damn, I'm getting my cut."

"Take it slow, French. Maybe you've had your cut—and mine too. You've talked a lot," another said. "And let your fingers stay away from your gun, Eddie," he snapped at the other man. "You drove the car. You had first shot at the dough. I'm shaking you *both* down. And if I don't find the dough, I'm going to cash some chips. I—"

"Wait, Duke! Don't pull that gun!" Eddie shouted hoarsely. "I didn't lift the money! I swear all I found on him was the ten bucks in the package! I'm not lying! I" He jerked backward. His fingers pawed frantically as Duke clicked the safety off his gun. He pawed too late. . . . Duke's gun coughed sharply, and then it coughed again. . . . Duke had never read the one about honor among thieves.

That was Christmas night of 1939. . . .

DAVE STONE was watching the clock on his desk with an expression of curious irony. It was ten to five on a spring afternoon. Ten minutes until Police Inspector Spain was due to enter the door. Dave wondered just how long Spain had spent priming himself to make the call; and he wondered why Spain was coming . . . to him. . . .

He shrugged and lit a cigarette. He ran his long fingers through his coal-black hair.

His sharp, quick eyes blinked under arched brows and he rubbed his faintly hawkish nose. And then the knock came.

"Come in," Dave called. The Inspector came in. He was a square-faced grey-haired man of about fifty. He was short and hard, in body and mind. He nodded jerkily, advanced straight to the desk, laid aside his hat, and sat down. He leaned forward and spoke firmly:

"You're wondering why an Inspector is here to see you, a private detective. You're wondering why I'm here to see *you*, particularly. Not because I suddenly love you," he said. "I don't and I never will. I'm here because you're a slim chance, and because I hope you might have a little streak of cooperation I've never seen."

Dave grinned. "That was pretty, Spain. Now what?"

"I know that you did a piece or two of work for Fredrick Van Ellban years ago before he was killed."

"I faded him on a blackmail attempt once. That's all."

"And you know plenty about his murder, four years ago."

"Nothing more than you know. Everyone in town knows Van Ellban was just a good-time fool who lived off his million-a-year inheritance. You know who killed him and why."

"I know Simon Lons killed him, sure. And I know he was killed for a three hundred grand roll he was carrying to Michael Amil. I want to know what happened to that three hundred grand."

Dave arched a brow. "So does everyone else. How many theories have been cooked up? How many columns have been written about that mystery? How many crooks would give an arm for a tip on that. . . ." He gestured impatiently. "I'm honest about it: I don't know where the money went."

"But you knew Duke Casell pretty well. You know he rubbed out Eddie Fair and Joe French in a fight over the split."

"Yeah. But knowing Duke doesn't tell me where the money was. Duke told me the night before he was sent to the chair that Lons killed Van Ellban that night and grabbed the roll from Van Ellban's pocket. Then Lons was tagged by the cop. He crawled into the car that Eddie Fair had waiting. Eddie drove straight to the warehouse hangout; I know that because Duke was trailing in his coupé. Nothing was thrown from the first car, and nobody got in or out. At the warehouse, they carried Lons to a room. No windows—nothing—only a door led out of that room."

"Duke, Eddie, and French watched each other like hawks. They searched Lons, who was unconscious at that time. The only roll they found was ten one-dollar bills wrapped

in brown paper. Immediately each one decided the others had picked Lons' pocket and gotten the dough in the few moments it took to carry him to the room. Then they decided Lons was holding out, and had hidden the roll in the car before he passed out. But they took the car apart. It wasn't there. They searched every step of the way they'd walked in the warehouse; still no money.

"Then they sat down to freeze each other out. They played the game of nerves for two days and nights. At last Lons died. He'd never moved off the bed; not a soul had entered that room, and none of the three had gone out. When he died, the other three were drawn into wires; they cracked under the strain of suspicion and fear and hate and lack of food. . . . Duke was fastest. He killed them. Then he tore up the place. He almost dissected the bodies; and Duke never found that money, I'll swear."

"But damn it, Lons got the money! We know this much: Van Ellban put almost three hundred grand in cash into the safe at the San Roman Hotel at noon that day. At nine that night he drew it out. Two assistant managers and a cashier were there to see him get it, count it, and wrap it in that brown paper. He started toward the door. One minute later he was killed! He didn't have time to hide the money, go to his room, or any of the other angles. . . . He walked out that door, straight as a die, and the managers saw him! So Lons got the money. And he didn't drop the money after he was hit. My boys covered every inch of that block immediately; they'd gotten the money-story from the hotel-managers."

"Okay," Dave said wearily, "there's your mystery: Van Ellban had the money. Lons killed him and got it. Lons died without having a chance to get rid of it. Three men, deadly with suspicion, checked each other; and they didn't get it. There wasn't another possible way for anyone to get into that warehouse unknown . . . yet the money wasn't found, and hasn't been found in four years. And," Dave added cynically, "probably never will be."

"And that's just why I came to see you," Inspector Spain said. "The trail is heating up."

"What do you mean?"

"A man was killed last night. A prosperous salesman, without enemies or criminal ties of any kind. He was—well, demolished—in an explosion in a fifth-rate hotel on Third Avenue. It might have been a gas-explosion—an accident of some kind—but I have a million-dollar hunch it was murder."

"What gave you the hunch, Inspector?" Dave wondered.

"When this man, Frank Martin, left home early last evening, he told his wife that he had

a tremendous secret! It must not be mentioned to anyone, he said. No one! But, he told her, 'I know where Van Ellban's three hundred thousand dollars is! I bought the knowledge today for ten grand! I'm going to bring it home!'"

Spain's eyes glinted. "That's what he told his wife. One hour later he was blown to pieces in a locked room . . . alone . . . unarmed. . . ."

Dave slowly lit a cigarette. "Tell me a little bit more."

CHAPTER TWO

The Finger Is on Dave Stone

"THERE isn't much more," Spain said wearily. "Martin lived in the exclusive Bellington Towers on East 81st. He left there at seven-thirty yesterday evening after the conversation with his wife . . . and that was all he told her—just what I told you. We know from investigation that he arrived at this flophouse, the Bagley, at eight. He asked to go to Leonard Vicatto's room."

"Who is Vicatto?" Dave asked curiously.

"That's something else! Nobody's ever seen Leonard Vicatto. I learned from the manager of the Bagley that a half-truck load of worthless furniture arrived at his place early yesterday morning; and the night before Vicatto had called by telephone and rented an unfurnished room; the money had been sent by messenger. The furniture was for Vicatto's room. Okay . . . it was put there and the truckmen left. So far as anyone knows, that room was not entered again until Martin arrived last evening with a sales-slip for the furniture. The manager saw Martin enter the room and heard him lock the door.

"Thirty minutes later the manager heard an explosion. He went up. He had to break down the door. When he got into the room, Martin was in pieces. That's all. . . ."

"Have you tried to find Leonard Vicatto? Have you traced the moving van that brought the stuff to the Bagley?"

"There's no Leonard Vicatto that we can locate and," Inspector Spain added sourly, "the van carried no name. There's nothing about the old furniture to suggest where it came from, or where Vicatto is."

Dave Stone frowned at the end of his cigarette. "And Martin told his wife that he'd 'bought' the three hundred grand for ten. That's a funny bargain."

"The damned funny thing is—Martin had gotten the straight dope. He said two hundred and ninety-eight thousand. That's the exact figure. If it was just a suck-in racket by someone who didn't know, they'd have picked any one of a dozen sums that have been talked

about. The exact amount that Van Ellban lost has never been correctly quoted; it's been called a round three hundred grand, or blown up to half a million, and a dozen other figures. But Martin got his dope from someone who *knew!* And that's what makes me say the trail is heating up again. Somebody's gotten on the right trail of that dough!"

"And so you want me . . . to do what?" Dave wondered.

"You're on the inside with every crook in town. You know more about the Van Ellban case than you ever told. Duke Caswell trusted you. He was the last survivor of the case; you talked to him last before he died. I want you to do some hard remembering. I . . ." Spain frowned. "Van Ellban's death caused a hell of a stink when we couldn't pull out the dough; people said we let somebody slip away. If it comes up again, I . . . oh, hell, you know what commissioners are like. . . ."

"Sure, I—" The telephone shrilled. Dave lifted the receiver. "Hello? Stone speaking. Who? Just a minute." He turned to Spain. "Captain Wicker wants to talk to you."

Spain took the receiver and grunted. He listened a few moments, then his square face corded abruptly with lines. A red flush mounted in his cheeks. "Where? . . . how long ago? . . . who knows? . . . Listen: Get out there! I'll meet you there!" He slapped down the telephone and grabbed for his hat.

"Wicker just got a call from a Doctor Walter Crager on East 79th! Crager's son left the house a few minutes ago, headed for a place called the Circle Inn—and he told the old man he was on his way to make two hundred and ninety-eight thousand dollars!" Spain was already moving toward the office door.

"Wait!" Dave snapped. He jerked open a desk-drawer, slid a thirty-eight into his pocket, slapped on a limp felt hat, and shrugged into a trench coat. "Now, let's go!"

"The damned place is somewhere on 125th Street," Spain muttered as he slammed the door of his car behind him and stomped on the starter. The heavy coupé's tires wailed away from the curb. The siren gurgled thickly, then began to scream. The streets flicked by. Dusk was gathering over Manhattan, and the search-light cut a blazing path through the dim street. Past Radio City the coupé sped, on up Fifth Avenue. Spain twisted the wheels into 125th.

"On a corner near Broadway, Wicker said . . . if . . . there it is!" The tires slid to a halt. Dave was just behind Spain as they sprinted toward the narrow door of a dirty three-story building.

"I'm looking for a man named James Crager," a voice was saying angrily as they entered the hall that served as the lobby.

THE speaker was Captain Wicker, standing at the door of the manager's office. Before him was a rotund, dark-skinned man who was gesturing violently. "But Crager I do not know! Never did I see him!" the little man was shouting.

Spain hurried forward. "What about it, Wicker?"

"This grease-ball won't talk—says he hasn't seen Crager. But old man Crager said his son was going after two hundred and ninety-eight thousand bucks. The old man's afraid the fool is walking into some kind of a racket and—"

"Let me talk," Spain said briefly. He turned to the little man. "Did anybody rent a room from you today, or yesterday?"

"Room? But yes! Yesterday a room was rented—"

"Who rented it? What was the name?" "The name was Leonard Vicatto, but him I did not see. Only did he telephone, and this morning did his furniture arrive—"

"Where is this room? Is Vicatto here now?" Spain exploded. "A gentleman went to the room twenty minutes ago and is still—"

"Show us that room—fast!" Spain snapped.

They were passing the second floor when they heard it—a dull thick roar. Its distant concussion sang against Dave's ears. The old walls of the building creaked. There was a half-choked scream . . . a thick liquid sob from the floor above . . . then, like the echo of music, fragments of sound faded into stillness.

"That . . . that was it!" Spain stammered. He leaped up the last flight of stairs and down the hall. Beneath one door a thin cloud of dust was sifting. Spain twisted the knob violently, cursed, and drew back. He and Dave hit the door together. The second drive crashed them into the room. A thick smoky haze filled their eyes. They coughed and staggered backward. Then, as the air from the hall cleaned out the haze, they saw . . .

One corner of the room was a shambles. An ancient dresser was splintered into bits. Bits of china, of cloth, of wood and metal were about the floor. The plaster of the ceiling was knocked down. The window was shattered.

On his hands and knees was a man. His face was a mass of bleeding flesh and bone. Smoke stained the wreck of his suit. The floor beneath him was covered with blood. He was whimpering with senseless animal sounds.

"Get an ambulance!" Spain shouted at Wicker. "Call Lucien and Red. You," he snapped at the manager of the building, "get me some clean cloths, a sheet or clean shirt! Dave . . . help me carry this guy downstairs!"

Wicker's feet drummed down the stairs. The little man wheezed nervously in the hall. Dave and Spain carefully lifted the bleeding and in-

jured man. Slowly they moved toward the steps.

"He's going to die," Dave said simply. "Our only chance is to get him to talk."

"I know, I know," Spain said shortly. The little man led the way into his office on the ground floor. They laid Crager out on the floor. Dave watched Spain stripping a sheet that the manager brought. He hesitated a moment, then returned to the wrecked room.

He could still smell the odor of burnt flesh and hair. He picked his way through the litter toward the corner. The window, he noticed, did not open onto a fire-escape. He studied the splintered dresser; it was, or had been massive and very old. Parts of the drawers that remained were still packed with clothes, with a few dishes, some sheets and blankets. On the floor were shattered bits of heavy china. There was a worn and dirty chair, a knocked-down bed, a table, and an assortment of lamps, bookcases, and smaller chairs. Everything seemed just as though it had been dumped by careless hands. Dave heard the wail of a siren in the distance. He took a last look about the room and then turned back toward the stairs.

He was just starting to open the door into the manager's office when Wicker hurried in. "The boys are here. Let's get Crager started to the hospital." He pushed past Dave and opened the door. "Everything's ready to . . . my . . . God!" he whispered. He froze on the threshold. Dave peered over his shoulder.

Crager was just as they had left him on the floor. And Inspector Spain was beside him. Very still Spain was; nothing about him moved. His fingers were loose and open on the rug. He lay on his face with his eyes closed, and the hilt of a long kitchen-knife stood erect between his shoulder-blades.

"Spain!" Dave said thinly. "Spain. . . ." He raised his eyes to Wicker.

"Yeah. Yeah," the man said. His narrowed green eyes glistened at Dave. "And who would know better than you?" he whispered. Dave took a short breath.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked slowly.

"I'm just thinking . . . you saw Duke alive for the last time. Now if Duke had told you where the money was . . . maybe. . ."

"That's what I thought you meant," Dave said.

CHAPTER THREE

Meet Mister Vicatto

IT WAS long after midnight when Dave Stone closed the door of his office behind him, turned on the light, and shrugged wearily out of his coat. His slender face was lined

and bleak, his eyes tired and restless. He crossed the room to the huge steel filing-cabinet and unlocked the lower section. From his files he took a manila envelope on the Van Ellban Case. He returned to the desk and sat down to light a cigarette. He opened the envelope and fingered the contents. He found a newspaper clipping and read it as he waited. The clipping was two years old:

VAN ELLBAN CASE BURIED IN MYSTERY AS CASELL DIES!

At one minute past midnight last night Duke Casell, last of the quartet who plotted the half-million dollar murder of Fredrick Ellban, died in the electric-chair. When he died his lips were as tightly closed as when he was arrested. He left no clue, no hint, as to the hiding place of the fortune for which he had killed, not once but twice. And so today police are putting the case away—an enigma without parallel in the criminal history of New York.

It was not the complexity of the case. It was its very simplicity—a simplicity without answer. Two years ago, almost to the hour, Fredrick Van Ellban, wealthy international playboy, left his suite at the exclusive San Roman Hotel. He was on his way to the elite gambling club, *Chez Bleu*. He stopped at the cashier's office of the San Roman to withdraw the large sum of money he had deposited there at noon of that day. In the presense of three hotel officials he wrapped the money in heavy paper, put it carefully in his pocket, and walked out of the office, out of the hotel, and into death.

Four men plotted to kill him. The actual killer, Simon Lons, died two days later in a warehouse. Five minutes later Duke Casell shot and killed his remaining confederates, Eddie Fair and Joe French—killed them because he suspected them of stealing the loot from Lons. Yet, even as he died for his murders, Duke Casell proclaimed that he had never found the money. And no one else has ever found it. Tonight, after two years, the case must close—unanswered in death.

Van Ellban is dead. Duke Casell is dead. Eddie Fair and Joe French are dead. Lons is dead. And Ben Lorien, owner of the *Chez Bleu* and the man for whom the money was intended? Seven months ago Lorien was killed in the crash of his car with a train in New Jersey. It is rumored that Lorien spent over fifty thousand dollars in trying to trace the money which was to have covered Van Ellban's gambling bill at the *Chez Bleu*. Lorien died broke. . . . And so, at least this once, it can be truly said that crime brought no profit—

"Hello," a dry voice spoke into Dave's consciousness, "what was the hurry-up phone call about?" Dave looked up at Link Gibbs—a thin sallow-faced little man of fifty who had never been further West than the last dice-table in the Bronx.

"You owe me fifty dollars," Dave said without preamble. "This time you're going to pay me." Link's face assumed an expression of mild horror. "You're going to work. You've lived in every flop-house in town. I want you to pick out the best known. Get yourself a taxi and start making the rounds. This is what I want: Sometime soon somebody's going to rent a vacant room in one of those joints; it'll probably be done over the telephone, and the room may be rented under the name of Leonard Vicatto. . . . Anyway, the tip-off is what happens afterwards: a load of old furniture will be sent around to that room. Now I want you to slide a five-dollar bill into the pocket of every manager you visit. Leave my name and number. When a vacant room is rented and a load of furniture is sent to that room, I want a call at once. Tell the hotel-managers that there is a C-note for the guy who lets me know. Got it?"

"Yeah, I—but what a waste of time, Dave! Now, if you'd just lend me a C for an hour, I—"

"No." Dave peeled off twenty fives. "Spend 'em like I told you, Link. I want you back in this office by eight o'clock in the morning. And Link . . . keep your mouth shut except when you're talking to the dump-keepers. Clear?"

Link sighed, fondled the money lovingly, and departed.

Ten minutes later the door opened again and a slender dark haired girl entered. One arched brow showed she was annoyed; her dark blue eyes showed she was curious.

"Hello, Helen," he said briefly.

"You woke me up," she said softly, "so it had better be important. Secretaries are hard to get these days. . . ."

"It is," he said flatly. He lit a cigarette. "Listen to a funny story about two corpses." He told her of Inspector Spain's visit, of the call to the Circle Inn. "And," he concluded, "while Spain is alone with Crager in the manager's apartment, somebody puts a carving knife between his shoulders and leaves very quietly. On top of that the unknown visitor slugs Crager a last time with a bronze book-end, and Crager is dead when we get there. The manager is a little guy named Arlio, and he swears he was in the back room of his apartment hunting clean rags for Spain; he heard nothing, he says.

"But Charlie Wicker is there with all the answers! According to Charlie, this is what happened: Duke Casell told me where the money was before he died. I got it. Now, having spent it, I'm working some murder-racket—Charlie's not ready to say just what. However, according to Charlie, I planned the murder of Martin. I also planned Crager's murder. When Crager didn't die immediately, I

got frightened; I was afraid Crager would talk on me. So I slipped Spain the knife, and gave Crager the last slug. Then I looked innocent by leaving the room and waiting until Wicker was ready to enter."

"But you . . . you don't know where the money is, Dave! You—"

"Certainly I don't, but try to make Wicker believe that. I've been on the pan for three hours, and I have a hunch that a dick's following me right now. Charlie Wicker can't prove anything now, but he's not above twisting the tail of a clue if he finds one. I have an uneasy feeling that things aren't going to get any better quick."

"So?" Helen wondered. "What do I do?"

"You stay in this office tonight. Link Gibbs may find what we're looking for—an unexploded trap. If you get a call, take the address and name; I'll keep calling you back every half-hour."

"Where are you going?"

"Places," he said vaguely. "Tomorrow morning I might shop around for second-hand furniture." He grinned, ruffled her black hair, and put on his coat and hat. "I'm sorry about keeping you up all night."

"So am I," she announced briskly. "I didn't have this in mind when I left Springfield. I wanted glamor, lights, money, and—"

DAVE quietly closed the door. On dark West 34th Street he caught a cab and gave the address of the Morning Star-Herald. Twenty minutes later he walked into a small cubby-hole office on the fifth floor of the Star-Herald Building. A round-faced little man blinked up from behind a frayed cigar. He grunted. Dave sat down.

"How's the crime-reporting business?" he wondered.

"Terrible." The little man, Smitty Cobb, removed the cigar. "I hear Wicker invited you down to Headquarters tonight."

"We couldn't agree on who killed Inspector Spain." Dave leaned forward seriously. "Tell me something, Smitty—how many of these flop-house explosion-deaths have you heard about lately?"

Smitty returned the cigar to his mouth, opened a desk drawer, and pulled out a battered black notebook. "Crager—you know about him. Do you know about a guy named Frank Martin who died at—"

"I know about those two. What else?"

Smitty frowned at the book. "Three nights ago a man was killed at the Redman Rooms on Avenue A; it looks a little like the Crager and Martin cases. . . . the guy was Louis Payne—a lawyer from East 80th Street. He lived alone, had no relatives, was respectable and all that," Smitty said dryly. "Anyway, Payne was instantly killed when an explosion

tore up a room at the Redman—a simple flop-house. I couldn't get all the dope on it, it seems the death room had just been rented. Then . . ." Smitty frowned again. "I don't think there's anything else like—"

"What street did Payne live on?" Dave interrupted suddenly.

"East 80th. In Apartment 49." He gave the address.

"Listen! Martin lived on East 81st! Crager lived on East 79th! See? All the victims are coming from a certain section of the city—a close section, a rich section! There's something that ties them together! I've got a hunch. Something in that neighborhood that . . ." Dave stopped speaking. His eyes narrowed slowly. The faintest hint of a gleam came into their depths. He lifted Smitty's telephone and dialed his office. If Payne lived alone, he thought. . . .

"Helen? . . . any news on Link? . . . well, I'll keep calling. . . ."

He hung up, rose, and nodded to Smitty. "Thanks. And forget I came around." He hurried out. On the street he found a dozing cabby. He gave the address of Payne's apartment on East 80th.

It was almost three in the morning when Dave walked slowly into the silent lobby of the apartment house. The elevators were closed; only one small light burned at the entrance. He tip-toed across the deep rug, climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, and stopped before apartment 49. Throughout the building he heard no sound. Silently he drew a heavy ring of keys from his pocket and tested the lock. On the fifth fitting, the lock turned.

Softly he closed the door of the apartment behind him. He struck a match and found his way to a lamp. He snapped it on after lowering the window shade. He listened for a full minute; still there was no sound. He edged open one of two other doors; it opened into a small kitchenette that was empty. The other door opened into a bed room; that too was empty.

Dave drew a deep breath of relief. He glanced about the living room; his eyes settled on an expensive oak desk. He opened the top drawer. There was a large check-pad. He turned the pages to the stub of the last check that had been written. It showed the check had been for fifteen thousand dollars, and made to Cash. It was dated four days before.

"The day before Payne was killed," Dave mused softly. He opened the other drawers. Nothing was there but paper, envelopes, stamps, and a file of old contracts. He closed the drawers. He leaned over and poked into the contents of a waste-basket. He found a receipt for four dollars and ten cents from the Marcus Tailor and Cleaning Shop on East 79th Street. He found a crumpled sheet from

a menu of The French Grill on Lexington Avenue. And at the bottom of the waste-basket, shredded into many pieces, was a sheet of coarse cheap paper.

Dave lifted a few of the scraps and sifted them in his hand. Words or parts of words were on some of the scraps: ". . . it . . . hidden . . . he died . . . for you . . . box . . . the money. . . ." He began to frown intently. Carefully he gathered all the bits of paper from the basket and spread them onto the desk. He moved them about, trying to fit the jig-saw pattern. Almost an hour later it was complete. He read a crudely written note:

Dear Verdi,

The damn doctor says I am going to die. I don't believe him, but I am writing this letter anyway.

If I do cash in, you're the only one I will sing to. You have been a lousy bet for a brother, with all your ideas about going straight. But you are still my brother, and I know you will never have a dime unless somebody helps you get it. And that is what I am writing for, see?

If you ever read the paper, you heard about a guy named Van Ellban getting knocked off for some money about four years ago. Maybe you know that dough was never located. The reason it wasn't located is because I've always had it and Lons never got it at all.

I was in the alcove of that door at the San Roman Hotel that night, out of sight of the desk. When Van Ellban started through there, I put my gun in his stomach. I took the roll, all but the paper and ten bucks else that he was carrying. Then I told him to walk on out that door. I was just watching him walk when Simon Lons plugged him. I faded back through the lobby.

I had to take it easy on spending the dough because Ben Lorie had private dicks trying to trace the stuff, and Lorie knew I'd heard about the payment Van Ellban was going to make that night. I couldn't do much till Lorie was killed. Then I got this damned cancer and that nailed me down, so the dough is about like it was when I got it.

If you get this letter, it'll be because I'm dead. The thing for you to do is get the old man's stuff from where he stored it before he died. The money is in the top drawer of the dresser, in the tin candy-box. Just in case this letter gets opened and read before you get it, I'm leaving it to you to remember where the old man's stuff was stored. Maybe I better tell you it would be a good idea to keep your mouth shut about the dough. You was always so damned dumb about certain things.

Leonard.

DAVE'S fingers tightened. "Damn . . . this means . . . what?" he whispered softly. "If this Leonard is Leonard Vicatto and he died, then if I could find Verdi Vicatto I . . . but where did Payne get this letter? Steal it? What did—"

Dave stopped sharply. He listened. From somewhere in the silent building came the most gentle of rasping sounds. Then it ended. Yet it had been close . . . in the next room, Dave realized sharply! He started to reach for his gun too late. The bed room door swung open.

In the doorway stood a short fat man of about fifty. His face was round and very dark. His lips were thick. His eyes were round and piercingly black. He wore a neat well-pressed grey suit, a hat was drawn low across his forehead, and a short heavy automatic glistened in his hand. His thick lips formed a smile.

"Hello, Dave. I haven't seen you in a long time. Until tonight," he added. His voice was low and husky; to Dave there was a note of faint yet certain familiarity in its tone. "Please don't try to draw that gun," the man requested, almost apologetically.

"You—who the hell are you?" Dave exploded.

"Why, don't you remember me? We knew each other very well, once. But that was many months ago." Again he smiled as he closed the door behind him and advanced across the room. There was something in his face that Dave could barely recall, something elusive—just a hint, a trace of something he once had known. And in the man's slow, almost mechanical shuffle, there was a dummy-like strangeness; he was somewhat like a robot, jerking in silent steps as he came near.

Instinctively Dave retreated, feeling a slow repulsion, a fear rise in him. He tried to understand the unseen deformity that the shuffling figure suggested. He could not. . . .

"Please be seated, Dave. We must discuss the subject of murder," the man said gently.

CHAPTER FOUR

Another Use for the Telephone

"WHAT are you trying to say? Where have you known me?"

"The past is best forgotten," the man said. "If you wish to know who I am, call me Leonard Vicatto. I have many names—many names for many purposes."

"And right now your purpose is murder?" Dave supplied.

"Certainly. And your purpose—?" He gestured vaguely. "I observed that you summoned Link Gibbs to your office after you were released at Headquarters tonight. Then you visited your friend, Smitty Cobb. And now you are here." The man hesitated a moment. "Don't you feel, as I do, that you are being over-curious?"



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FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

"Quit talking around the barn! What's the pay-off?"

"You are so blunt, Dave," he said regretfully. Then the round dark face congealed into flat inscrutability and the eyes turned bleak and remote. The gun seemed to freeze into a living thing.

"I will say just this, Dave Stone: Leave my business to me. Forget the mystery of Van Ellban's fortune. Make no further investigations. Leave the case entirely alone—and you will be safe. Continue to follow the trail of Van Ellban's money, and you will most surely be charged with murder! And," he said very softly, "you know well enough that life is cheap in a game of death. . . ."

"You . . . you're saying that I might be killed?"

"I am saying just that," the man agreed flatly. "I urge you to believe me. I will give you no second warning. I shall know just what you are doing. Is that clear?"

"Yeah." Dave's fingers dug into his palms. His eyes shifted from the round face to the gun, then back to the face. *Here he is, within six feet of me, Dave was thinking. I know him, and yet I don't! I searched for him, yet he found me! I'm helpless! I—*

"Turn around," the man ordered. Dave did not move for a long moment. He kept staring at the face, trying to grasp the forgotten hint of familiarity. Still it evaded him.

Slowly he turned. He was thinking: If I can shield my right arm, I might risk a draw after—

The thought was never completed. He never heard the faint rustle in the air. Paralyzing pain crashed about his skull. His eyes seemed to leap with blazing fire. He felt his muscles loosen. He felt himself twisting, falling, sinking into blackness. . . .

THE bright sun of morning shone through the drawn shade of the window, casting an olive-green haze through the silent room. Dave groaned and stirred on the floor. Slowly his eyes opened. He stared at the strange ceiling. He kept looking, blankly. He tried to remember. . . .

Fragments came swimming back to his memory. He remembered the Circle Inn, the death of Inspector Spain. Then he remembered: Payne's apartment . . . a brown-faced man who called himself Leonard Vicatto. . . .

"Crazy . . . crazy . . . all of it crazy. . . ." Dave whispered thickly. He pushed himself into a sitting position. He saw the stain of his own blood on the rug; he felt the dulled throb of his head. He pulled himself up and swayed toward the bath room. He washed his face and bathed his cut head.

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He moved back to the living room and looked about him. Nothing seemed changed. "Why the devil did he slug me?" Dave wondered. "If he just wanted a chance to fade without being followed, he could have locked me in a closet. He could. . . ." Then Dave saw that the scraps of the letter were gone from the desk.

He moved closer. They were not in the waste-basket. The waste-basket was completely empty. He frowned and felt into his pocket for a cigarette. He touched a cigar and pulled it out.

"When did I ever buy a cig—damn!" he interrupted himself. His eyes roamed down over the bagging tweed suit he wore. It was not his. Nor had he ever seen it before. The pin-striped blue shirt was not his. Only the shoes were his own!

"The damned fool! Why did he steal my clothes! Why did he plant these things out—"

His words stilled as he heard the step in the hall. It stopped at the door and the knob turned testingly. Then came the knock, loud and imperative.

"Stone! Stone! Open up!" It was the voice of Captain Wicker. Instinctively Dave started toward the door. Then something stilled his motion. Some premonition warned him. It was too neat . . . something was too nicely timed . . . what? He didn't know. He only knew that Wicker shouldn't know he was there. . . .

His steps searched backward silently as the knock came again. The knob rattled violently. Dave edged into the bed room and toward the window. He raised it slowly and peered out. There was the fire-escape—the same method that Vicatto had used to enter.

Dave slipped out onto the steel landing and moved slowly, past the living room window, on to the flight that led down. Two floors below he raised a window into a corridor and dropped back into the building. He found the emergency-stairs at the rear of the building and left by the service-alley.

Twenty minutes later, at ten o'clock, he entered his office and locked the door behind him. A sleepy-eyed and angry Helen regarded him a silent moment. "I know. You've been busy. You . . . what happened to you, Dave?" Her tone changed abruptly as she saw his head, the expression on his face. "You've been—"

"Slugged," he supplied tersely. "Furthermore, these aren't my clothes."

"But where have you been? What happened to—"

"It seems there have been at least three explosion-murders, all of them tied into the Van Ellban money-mystery. One victim was

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FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

a lawyer named Payne; he lived alone. I took a long-shot chance that his apartment hadn't been cleaned out since his death. I dropped in. I found a note. I. . . Has Link Gibbs called yet? Or anybody from a flop-house?" he wondered suddenly.

"No calls, Dave. Nothing has. . ." Her words drained into silence as he gestured abruptly. He moved to the window. The last note of a siren choked into stillness on the street below. Dave saw a tall figure leave the squad-car and enter the building. His brows arched slowly. He turned.

"Captain Wicker," he said briefly. "He's been behind me since I left that apartment. I guess I'll have to see him sometime. If he should ask you, I've been here for an hour—in this office. Otherwise, you know nothing."

Helen's face turned smooth and expressionless as she lifted a dictation-pad and began to transcribe shorthand. Dave sat down behind his desk, lit a cigarette, and closed his eyes. One minute later there was a knock, then the door opened and Captain Wicker came in slowly. He looked steadily at Dave, glanced at Helen, and then approached the desk idly. His hands stayed in his pockets and his eyes stayed narrow and cool.

"Been working hard this morning, Dave?" he wondered softly.

"Oh, usual. Why? Need anything?"

"I could use a killer." Wicker leaned forward. "By the way, when did you last see Link Gibbs?"

"The little dice-hound? Why, he was around here yesterday. He touched me for a C. Why?"

"He won't be touching you again, Dave. He was killed. It wasn't more than an hour ago."

"Killed. . ." Dave let the word slip slowly from his tongue. He watched Wicker's face.

"Link Gibbs was killed in the apartment of a Mr. Louis Payne on East 80th. And, by a funny trick of fate, Mr. Payne was killed four nights ago. In a flop-house! Like Crager was killed! Murdered!" Wicker bit the short sentences out like the fire of a barking rifle.

DAVE scarcely breathed. He could feel the pupils of his eyes grow slowly large. He heard Helen cease breathing. He picked the next words carefully: "You don't know . . . who did it?"

"I'll tell you what I know. You can pick the killer." Wicker wet his lips. "An hour ago Link called me. He told me he'd found out who had Van Eliban's money; he said he was meeting you at Payne's apartment immediately. He said he wanted me along. He asked me to meet him there."

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"Link told you that?" Dave echoed strangely.

"That's what I said," Wicker's tone was straight and hard. "I beat it to Payne's apartment. And then things began to get funny: Nobody answered the door. And while I was knocking, somebody crawled out the fire-escape—the guy was seen. When I got into the apartment, I found Link's body in the bedroom closet. He'd been shot once through the head; I found another gun on the floor with blood-stains and hair on the butt, like . . . like Link had slugged someone on the head," Wicker murmured. His eyes lifted just an instant to Dave's head. Dave swallowed.

"Was there anything else?" he said stiffly. "Just a little bit, Dave . . . the killer apparently got blood on his clothes—or maybe they were torn up in his fight with Link. Anyway, the killer burned his suit and shirt in the bath-tub. He washed almost everything down the drain. But just a little piece of a shirt got lodged. A shirt with the initials still on the breast-pocket . . . do you want to know the initials, Dave?"

Dave's lips turned dryly. "I . . . what?" "The initials were . . . D. S."

The room was still. No one moved. No one breathed. *It's perfect! A dead-perfect frame,* Dave was thinking furiously.

The fragile silence was shattered by the shrill ring of the telephone. Instinctively, mechanically Dave reached forward and lifted the receiver.

"Hello . . . Stone speaking." His voice seemed dry and flat.

"Mr. Stone? You are the man who wished to know when the moving van brought the furniture?" a piping voice demanded. "You are the man who sent Mr. Gibbs last night to inquire—"

"Yes! What about it?"

"I am Joseph Hopkins at the Blue Star Hotel on Ninth Avenue. The furniture has come for the vacant room that the gentleman rented yesterday by telephone. And another gentleman has called, asking to inspect that room. I remembered that you offered a hundred dollars for information—"

"I did! I'll come to—" Dave stopped abruptly. His eyes half shifted to Wicker. A sense of blunt frustration filled him. He glanced at the lump of hand within the coat pocket—a hand that was holding a gun, he knew . . . if there was only something . . . some way for another hour of freedom.

He gripped the telephone hard. His mind was darting frantically against the walls of the impossible, like a bird trapped in a cage. *Just some way, he kept thinking . . . just one more hour, maybe . . .*

FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

"What was that?" Dave exploded loudly into the telephone. "He confessed? Confessed that he killed Gibbs, you say?"

Wicker grunted sharply. "What the hell was that?" And through the wire Dave heard the startled Joseph Hopkins gasp. He plowed on anxiously, loudly. "You say you've got the killer now? Where is he? What—"

"Let me have that damned telephone!" Wicker snarled. He reached forward swiftly. It was the moment, the chance Dave had gambled for. As Wicker's hands came forward, Dave shifted his grip on the receiver. Then he drove it toward the detective's temple!

"You—don't try—" Wicker shouted, too late. The blow, crisp and perfectly aimed, cracked against his temple. Without a sound Wicker crumpled across the desk and slid to the floor. Dave leaped from his chair, pawed into the man's pocket, and took the gun. He started toward the door.

"Dave!" Helen gasped. "What . . . where . . . what are you—"

"No time to explain. Tell Wicker I'm sorry. I'll explain later." He slammed the door behind him and hurried down the stairs. He caught a cab and gave the name, Blue Star Hotel. "Make it fast," he ordered.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ben Lorien Gets Paid Off

IT WAS a four-story building of red and ancient brick, set midway in a block of warehouses. Dave left his cab and hurried into the small, stale-smelling lobby. He saw the door marked Manager. He turned the knob and entered the room. A frail, shabbily-dressed man looked up from his newspaper.

"I'm Dave Stone. Are you Hopkins?" Dave snapped.

"That's right. Say . . . what was all that you were saying on that telephone when—"

"Forget it. I'm in a hurry. Which room did the furniture go to? Has anyone come to look at it yet?"

Hopkins nodded. "Gentleman named Weatherby went up there about ten minutes ago. It's number 360. I—"

Dave didn't wait for the rest. He left the office and took the steps in long leaps. Down the third floor corridor he found room 360. He knocked and rattled the knob.

"Weatherby! Let me in! Leave that stuff alone! Let me in!"

He heard a slight sound within the room—then silence.

"Weatherby! Damn you, let me in, you fool! Let me in!"

Still silence was his answer.



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"Open this damned—" Dave choked. He drew back and hurled himself into the old door. He felt the shoulder fire with pain. He felt the ancient hinges creak. Again he drew back. Again he slammed himself into the door. There was a sharp splintering of wood, then the door sagged open. He plunged into a small, dim-lighted room and stopped. He stared at a tall well-dressed man in the far corner beside a heavy chest-of-drawers. The man was staring back at him with a mixture of anger, fear, and surprise.

"What—what do you mean?" he demanded hotly. "This is none of your business! Get out and leave me alone! I—"

"Yeah. You're about to find two hundred and ninety-eight grand! Only you're going to find yourself getting blown to hell! Get away from that drawer!"

"What do you mean? Who are you? What right have you to—"

"Plenty. Move," Dave snapped. He shouldered the suspicious man aside. Carefully he probed into the heavy dresser. He found an old tin candy box. Cautiously he lifted it from the pile of old clothes, rags, and china that was in the drawer. It was heavy and solid. He set it gingerly on the dresser.

"If you'd found that and lifted the lid, you wouldn't be alive now," Dave said flatly. "Now, start telling me things. I'm a private-detective and you've been played for a murder. I know some of the details: You paid somebody some money for this room of junk, didn't you? You bought it because you'd learned that Van Ellban's money was supposed to be hidden here, didn't you? But who did you pay? How did you find out?"

Weatherby blinked at Dave blankly. "But I . . . I *did* do that," he gasped. "I paid for it. The blind man sold it to—" Again he stopped, biting off the swift sentence. Dave stared.

"What blind man, Weatherby? How—"

Perhaps it was the faintest sound in the hall behind him; perhaps it was the expression of frightened surprise that flashed across Weatherby's face that stopped his words. Instinctively he started to turn. Then it came—the blunt roaring thunder of a gun.

Weatherby screamed, high. In mid-scream the sound choked to a thick sob. Weatherby lurched forward, grasped at the dresser, and crumpled to the floor. Dave pawed for his gun. The second roar hammered into the room. A needle of hot pain pierced his shoulder and gnawed at his ribs. The force of the slug knocked him off-balance and back against the wall. He caught himself on the dresser and tried to straighten. The pain in his shoulder swept into a chilling nausea. He coughed.

FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

Slowly he sagged down into a sitting position. Dumbly, helplessly he stared at the round-faced, dark-skinned little man who stood in the doorway.

"YOU shouldn't have come here, Dave," he said quietly. An instant later he vanished down the hall. Moments later Hopkins rushed down the hall. Dave was striving to pull himself erect. The sickening pain was fading to a constant deep ache. His muscles and nerves were gathering themselves from the shock. He stared down at his blood-stained sleeve, at his stained coat.

"My . . . God!" Hopkins gasped. "What happened to—"

"Get . . . get police," Dave whispered. "Hurry . . . police. . . ." His mind was starting to work again. *If he could get rid of Hopkins for a minute*, he thought. . . . Hopkins took a last look at the dead Weatherby and plunged back down the hall. Dave heard his steps clattering down the stairs.

He stumbled toward Weatherby and knelt over the crumpled figure. He fumbled into the pockets, hoping. . . he found money, keys, a couple of receipts, cigarettes, and matches. There was no note, no letter, no clue to the identity of the dark-skinned man. Dave sighed and coughed heavily.

"About—run my—string out—now—" he panted to himself. "This was—last chance to—" He stopped. He stared at one of the receipts. It was for payment of Mr. Jay Weatherby's cleaning bill. It was issued from the Marcus Tailor and Cleaning Shop on East 79th Street. Dave kept staring at it a long moment more.

"Payne . . . he had one too . . . from this same place . . . now this man . . . and that little killer stole the cleaning receipt from Payne's waste-basket after he slugged me!" Dave realized. "That basket was empty when I looked later! Why would anyone take a cleaning receipt unless . . . unless . . ."

He heard Hopkins' steps returning up the stairs. Swiftly he straightened. He stumbled unsteadily down the hall. He passed the stairs and drew back into an alcove further down the hall. Hopkins moved toward the death-room. Quickly Dave gripped the stair-rail. He tried to move swiftly. Down he staggered. As he crossed the lobby, he tried to turn his arm to hide the blood-stain on his sleeve. He stumbled across the street, along another side-street, and at last into a parked cab.

"Take me to—" his mind stalled. "Where?" he whispered silently. "Take me to Adkins Street, 439," he ordered. He hoped Wicker would have too many other things on his mind to think of searching Helen's apartment. . . .

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IT WAS after two o'clock when he let himself into the front room of the small apartment in Brooklyn. He locked the door again and walked through the silence toward the bathroom. Carefully he bathed and dressed the hole that ranged downward from his shoulder. He regarded himself in the mirror.

"It's been a damned hard day," he told himself ironically. He moved back to the living room and sat down. He tried to plan: The Marcus Shop was the only thing he had left. He knew he couldn't risk any movement during daylight. A sense of impatient helplessness boiled inside him. Nervously he smoked. He walked the room. He tuned in the radio, then snapped it off. An hour passed. The solitary ticking of the clock began to explode against his frayed nerves. Suddenly, furiously he cursed.

"I can't wait . . . stand it . . . all day . . ." Dave choked. "I've got to know . . . now . . . quick!" He moved into the bed room. In the closet he found an old over-size raincoat that would cover his blood-stained clothes. He put it on, pulled down his hat, and slipped from the apartment. His fingers stayed on the gun in his pocket as he walked down the street, hunting a cab.

He asked to be taken to East 79th Street.

SLOWLY he walked down the street. Across the street he saw the sign: MARCUS TAILOR and CLEANING SHOP. It was a small, neat place. One light burned unpretentiously within. A well-dressed man was entering.

Dave returned to the end of the block, then circled the block completely. He found a service-alley that might lead to the rear of the shop. Slowly, cautiously he entered the alley. He passed the steaming pipe of the shop; he found a screen door. He peered in. He was looking into a back-room.

Dave tested the door. It opened quietly. He could hear muted voices speaking in the front room. Dave slipped out his gun.

Slowly he moved toward the door to the front office. A bolt held the door; he slid it silently out of place and edged the door open slightly. His heart gave a sharp leap. . . .

At the counter, bending humbly before the well-dressed customer, was the dark-skinned little killer. Now he wore a tailor's smock, and over his eyes were a pair of very dark glasses. He was speaking in the soft lisp of a servant.

" . . . it came this morning from my brother. I hesitate to ask favors, Mr. Carlisle, but you are a fine man and I can trust you. May I ask you to read the letter to your blind tailor?"

"Sure, Marcus. I'll read it to you." Carlisle was flattered, condescending.

FOUR MERCHANTS OF MENACE

"It is so difficult to find some one to trust when you are blind and helpless," the little killer lisped. Then he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket. "If you will, please. . ."

Carlisle took the paper and began to read: "Dear Verdi, The damn doctor says I am going to die. I—"

"The same gag," Dave breathed. He listened. Carlisle continued to read evenly for a few moments. Then he stopped abruptly.

"What is it, sir?" the little killer asked.

"It's hard to make out right here," Carlisle said. "He's telling you something about furniture that's stored somewhere—he doesn't say where. Or maybe it's your father's furniture. I . . . strange, he doesn't say where the furniture is."

"Oh, I know where it is. My father stored it in a small hotel room before he died. He was a poor man. You know," the little man said, "I always loved the old furniture. I remember it so well. I was not blind then. The furniture was brought by my grandfather from Europe—antique, it is. Perhaps it may be valuable now. But . . . I am old and blind. I shall sell it, I suppose."

"Er . . . I . . ." Carlisle hesitated. "My wife likes antiques. I might be interested in buying. If I could look the stuff over—"

"Oh, no, no!" The little killer laughed. "You are too fine, too rich a man! You would not care for my poor things. Although," he said faintly, "I recall that my father was once offered a great deal for certain pieces. And now that I remember, my brother said a very strange thing to me, the last time I saw him—over a year ago. My brother, as you can see, was not always an upright man. That is why I have assumed the name of Marcus. It was once Vicatto, but . . . as I was saying, my brother told me that there were certain things about my father's furniture that made it extremely valuable. I don't know what—"

"Perhaps you would consider a thousand dollars, in cash?" Carlisle offered suddenly.

"Oh, suppose we have the stuff examined and estimated. We—"

"But I would like to close the deal as soon as—"

Dave took a deep breath. Now he saw it all: Marcus would drive Carlisle's price as high as possible, then sell for cash. He'd send Carlisle to a new death-room. Carlisle would die. . .

DAVE pushed the door open. He started toward Marcus. Carlisle looked up to see him, and a frown crossed the man's face. Marcus heard his steps and turned—turned mechanically as a blind man might. And it was then that Dave realized! It was that mechanical pattern of blind-action, memorized

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by Marcus, that had given him the hint of deformity in Payne's apartment.

The dark glasses turned to Dave's face. The little figure froze.

"Get up your damned hands!" Dave ordered flatly.

A silent moment passed. "Ah . . . Dave . . . and I thought you were dying when I left you at the Blue Star," he whispered.

"What's going on here?" Carlisle demanded. "We were talking—"

"Talking about your own murder," Dave said. "And you weren't talking to a blind man. He reached forward and jerked the glasses from the round face, leaving the eyes black and naked with fury.

"Call Police Headquarters, Carlisle. Ask for Wicker. Tell him to get out here in a hurry," Dave ordered. He looked back to Marcus. The little man's voice was faintly regretful. "Then I suppose I have lost. You were always rather clever, Dave. I should have killed you, instead of merely framing you for—"

"Don't reach for that gun!" Dave shouted. Marcus, without changing his tone, had let his hand slide beneath the counter. The hand came up with a gun. Dave didn't hesitate.

The gun-blast roared in the room. Carlisle shouted harshly. Marcus gave a shrill scream. An instant later it was over; Marcus' hand was a mass of torn flesh and bone. He looked at it, and a spasm of pain trembled through his body. His tortured, fevered eyes raised themselves to Dave's face. His lips twisted on words:

"I did . . . make a mistake when I didn't . . . kill you," he whispered. "And my plan . . . was all so perfect. They were willing to pay me for a chance to die . . . human nature never changes . . . it always wants money . . . the rich men . . . would lie to a blind man!"

"And you were always around to kill them if the box failed, as it did with Crager, weren't you?" Dave supplied acidly.

"I was always . . . around," Marcus whis-

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pered. The blood kept dropping from his mangled hand. He half-swayed and straightened. "I suppose you are wondering who I really am?"

"I . . . yes. I can almost remember. Who are you?"

"Ben Lorien—the man to whom Van Ellban was bringing the money that night he was killed. And my face has been altered—"

"You . . . Ben! But how . . . what . . ."

"I may as well tell you now. . . I heard that an attempt was to be made to rob or kill Van Ellban. I met him in the doorway of the San Roman. He paid me then before he departed. I warned him, but he was a defiant, headstrong fool. He walked out that door to prove I was wrong. He was killed. . . I faded back through the lobby and no one ever knew I got the money. I never told. If I had, I'd have had to split with the backers of my game. Everything was all right until—until I had to kill a man."

"Why?"

"He learned that our dice-table was crooked. He would have talked and ruined me. I killed him, but I was seen. . . I was blackmailed for over a year. At last I . . . I couldn't pay any more."

"Then you thought up the idea of having yourself killed in that automobile accident."

"Yes. . . I needed only a corpse. Perhaps you remember Eddie Michaels? . . . I never liked him anyway. And the body was mangled beyond recognition; I needed only to plant my ring, watch, and wallet on him." His tortured lips made a crooked smile.

A siren wailed into the street. Wicker and a cop plowed into the shop.

"Get up your hands, Stone! Get—"

"No, Captain," Ben Lorien said quietly. "Not Stone. I'm afraid it will have to be me."

"What do you mean? Who are you? What—"

"I am Ben Lorien. Dave can tell you everything. I . . . I think I'll throw in my cards."

"What are—Lorien!" Dave shouted. He saw the man's good left hand reaching . . . reaching toward a small table upon which sat a metal box.

"Don't touch that damned—" Dave shouted.

It was no use. He saw the deliberate fatality on Lorien's face, the resignation and pain in the man's dark eyes. Before he could move, Lorien had the box. He was clutching it against his chest. Dave stumbled backward, throwing his arm across his eyes.

The next instant it came—a dull, gusty explosion that threw him against the wall. Then something soft and heavy hit the floor. . .

Dave turned. "That's it, Wicker," he said.

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