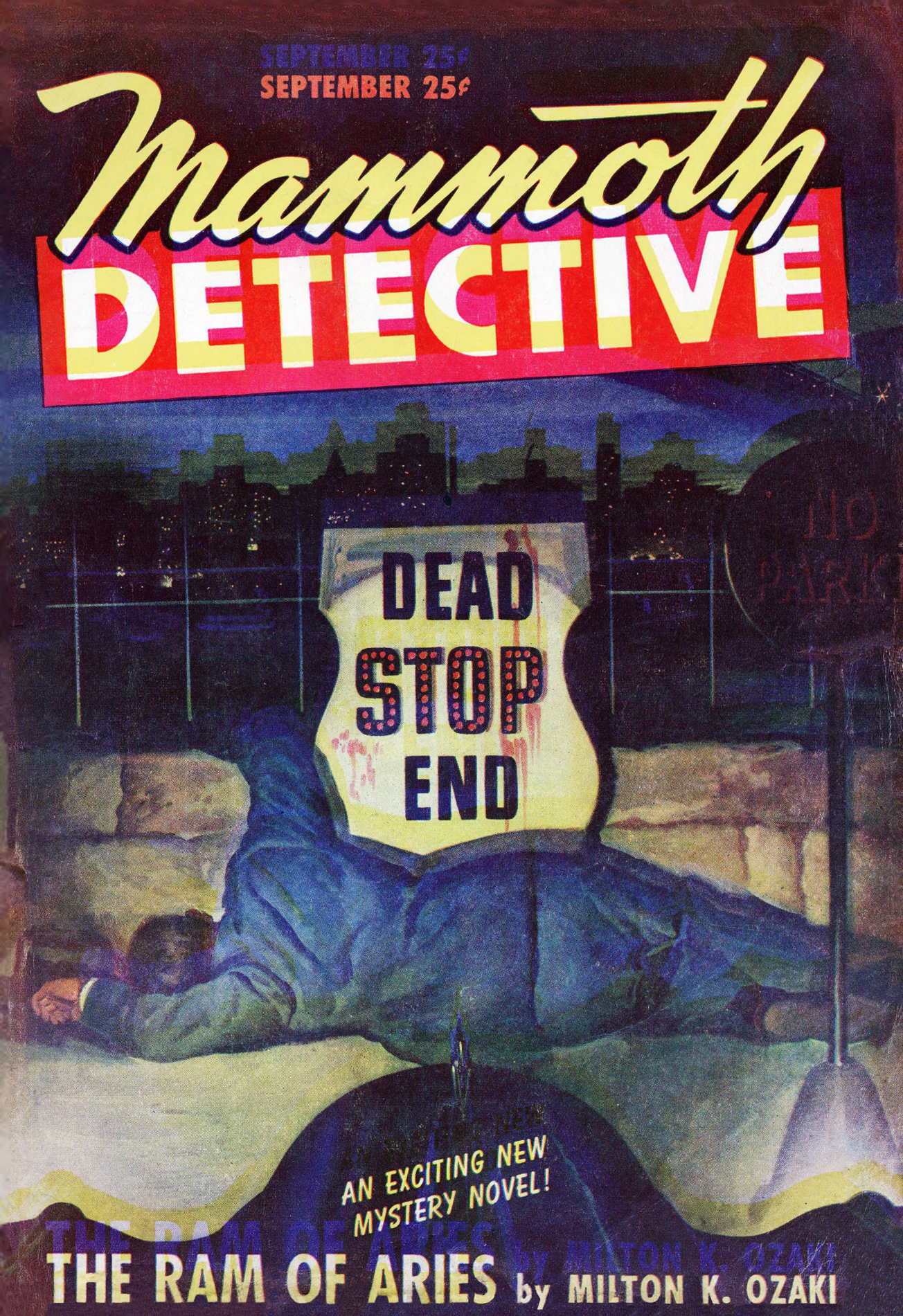


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Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 1, N. Y. Washington office, International Building, 1319 F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. In U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions, \$2.50 for twelve issues; in British Empire, \$3.50; all other foreign countries, \$4.50 for twelve issues. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

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How would a woman react upon learning that the man she married was not her husband?

TILL DEATH DO US PART (Novelette—10,000).....by Marianne Myers..... 48

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Not until after the victim was buried did the killer learn that her work was still undone.

DOUBLE X LEADS TO MURDER (Novelette—12,500).....by Berkeley Livingston..... 64

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He went blindly into the underworld, seeking a lost memory that would save him from the Chair.

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Little Mr. Wyman wasn't heroic; he was just mad and scared and completely without hope . . .

EVERYBODY HAS TO DIE (Short—6,500).....by William P. McGivern.... 158

Illustrated by Henry Sharp

The way he died was far more spectacular than his crime—and resulted in fewer tears shed.

Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn and based on the novel
"The Ram of Aries."

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OFF THE BLOTTER



WE GOT to thinking, a day or so ago, about the host of writers who got their start in the pages of our two detective magazines—*Mammoth Detective* and *Mammoth Mystery*—and how so many of them had gone on to bigger (but not better!) markets. By “gone on” we don’t mean that their work is no longer being offered to us; what we’re trying to say is that the slick-paper journals and the book publishing companies have discovered the merits of the work these writers are doing.

TO LIST a few of them: we’ll start by pointing out Roy Huggins, whose novel *The Double Take* first appeared in *Mammoth Mystery*, and then showed up in book form shortly thereafter. Roy has since sold two novelettes (originally intended for us!) and a serial to *The Saturday Evening Post*, plus a couple of movie scripts. *The Double Take*, incidentally, has already been filmed and will be released shortly.

OTHERS: Milton Ozaki, whose fine novel leads off this issue, has had two books published since his *The Cuckoo Clock* first appeared in *Mammoth Mystery*; H. Q. Masur, whose *Bury*

Me Deep will appear in book form this year; Wade Miller, with two novels; William Bogart with three; Bruno Fischer with six; and John Evans with two. And there are others who we would like to list but haven’t the space for . . . not to mention a flock of old hands at the game such as Stewart Sterling, Brett Halliday, Frank Gruber and others. It all adds up to quite a record—a record that no other pulp paper magazine since the old *Argosy* can approach.

SPEAKING of books, John Evans’ latest, *If You Have Tears*, is now on sale at booksellers everywhere; published by Mystery House. To those of our readers who enjoyed his *Halo In Blood*, we suggest you pick up this new one.

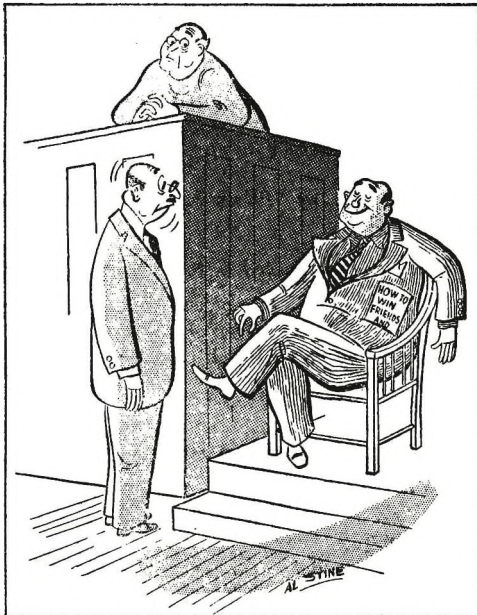
TURNING now to this issue of your favorite detective magazine, the lead novel, *The Ram of Aries*, fits right in with the tradition we’ve tried to establish. Sure; it’s another “private eye” yarn; but painstakingly plotted and written and filled with real-life characters and mile-a-second action. In it, the hero is hired to find a man who isn’t missing . . . but by the time he finishes, a lot of folks are missing—permanently! It’s one more that’s slated for book publication.

FOLLOWING the Ozaki novel is another story by our latest discovery. Yes, we mean Marianne Myers, whose first story, *Not Only Patients Die*, brought in a flood of praise. Here’s another one with a medical background and terrific human problems. Don’t miss it!

AFTER a long absence from these pages, Berkeley Livingston shows up again with a “knock-’em-down-and-drag-’em-out” novelette called *Double X Leads to Murder*. It’s about a newspaper man who does a spot of lying to keep the boss from firing him . . . then has to go out and stir up some trouble to make his story stick!

NEXT comes another of Paul W. Fairman’s inimitable shorts—this one about a quiet, inoffensive little man who almost anyone could pick on in safety. But when it was his wife who was being bothered . . . well somebody learned a lesson—the hard way!

THAT leaves only Bill McGivern’s story; and we don’t have to tell you it’s *good*—H.B.



CRIME AND BOOZE

MANY people conclude that drunkenness causes crime, but that idea is far from the truth. Psychologists who have made a study of the problem note the relationship between drinking and crime, but they would be the last to admit that drinking causes crime or that the opposite is true.

The truth of the matter is that the same trouble is at the root of both evils. Men and women who resort to drinking to remove themselves from the realities of life, to give themselves a false ego and courage which they can't muster up when sober, are mentally ill. Likewise, those people who have decided they cannot face the hardships of life and have sought the easy way out disregarding the rights and happiness of others, stealing rather than earning, are also mentally ill.

On the police records, however, crime and alcoholism is tightly linked. Crimes are performed by people in a state of complete or near drunkenness many times. Often drinking is a necessary prelude to the commission of a crime.

Criminologists are faced with a very complex task in trying to diagnose the problems of the criminals who are brought before them. They must search and probe into the patient's youth and infancy for the source of the trouble. Every case tells of great personal conflict. Often it is the family and early home life which is the cause of the trouble, terrible memories which

ache to be forgotten. Fighting parents, a broken home, professional failure, disappointed love,—all work to cripple personal morale. For the alcoholic, he achieves what is not his in real life through the emptying of a bottle. Inhibitions disappear, and what seemed impossible once now seems possible—between hangovers. Inadequacies, insecurities, anxieties all vanish and are replaced by illusions of ambition achieved, honor won, talent recognized, and worlds conquered.

Unfortunately, not enough people are aware of the fact that a chronic alcoholic is a psychological case. When the need is for treatment, for inquiry into causes, for care and understanding and an aid to readjustment, the drunk is led to the lockup. That night spent in jail is indelibly placed on record, and the alcoholic is plunged even deeper into trouble.

Alcohol is further tied to crime by its action just as a catalyst in a chemical reaction. By removing inhibitions it paves the way for crime. The man who would not think of taking a sock at his boss when sober, is very likely to do so when drunk. This action is what has encouraged the mistaken popular notion that alcohol breeds crime.

Chronic drinkers and criminals must be treated as ill persons. The root of each personal problem must be ferreted out, and tackled by competent psychiatrists.

—Lee Kaley.

YOUR FINGERPRINTS

LOOK at the tips of your fingers. Those ridges and whorls and loops which you see are different from those of anyone else. Crime detection experts have found that fact an invaluable aid. With the help of microscopes and other scientific equipment, and an elaborate system of classification, identification of those who participated in a crime is made quickly and positively.

Science still does not know why our fingers are ridged and furrowed in such a complicated way. It may be that this is important to our sense of touch; it may be necessary to help resist the exceptional friction to which this part of the body is subjected. Undoubtedly the formation is valuable to the cooling system of our body, since these ridges contain millions of tiny pores, which exude an oily, acid sweat, especially during excitement or nervousness. Thus, when a man is committing a crime his fingers are constantly pouring out acid perspiration. Unless he is unusually clever in avoiding it, he is sure to leave the imprint of his individuality, his fingerprints, somewhere about in a fine film of grease.

Again examine your own finger tip designs. They will fall into one of four main groups: arches, loops, whorls, or composites. These are the basic divisions made by Sir E. R. Henry,

Director of Scotland Yard, who organized the system which still works efficiently today. For each basic group, there are a great many subdivisions. The system also involves counting the ridges on each side of the core or center of the design, and doing this for each finger.

Whichever group you belong to, your fingertip designs tell nothing whatever about your character, intelligence, morality or social position. There are no racial tendencies. There is a trend towards the fingerprints of children resembling those of their parents, but not enough to prove relationship.

Fingertip designs do prove, however, that we are ourselves. They are the most permanent parts of our body. Although they grow in size as a child grows, the proportion and direction of the lines does not change. They are not altered by sickness or diet as are other parts of the body. Excessive use of the fingers only brings out the lines more clearly. Criminals, notably John Dillinger, have attempted to change the pattern on their fingers by the use of acid or surgery. As far as can be determined, all such attempts have been unsuccessful. Although scars may temporarily change the fingerprints, in time the ridges again show up in their natural formation.

—John Crail.

The RAM of ARIES

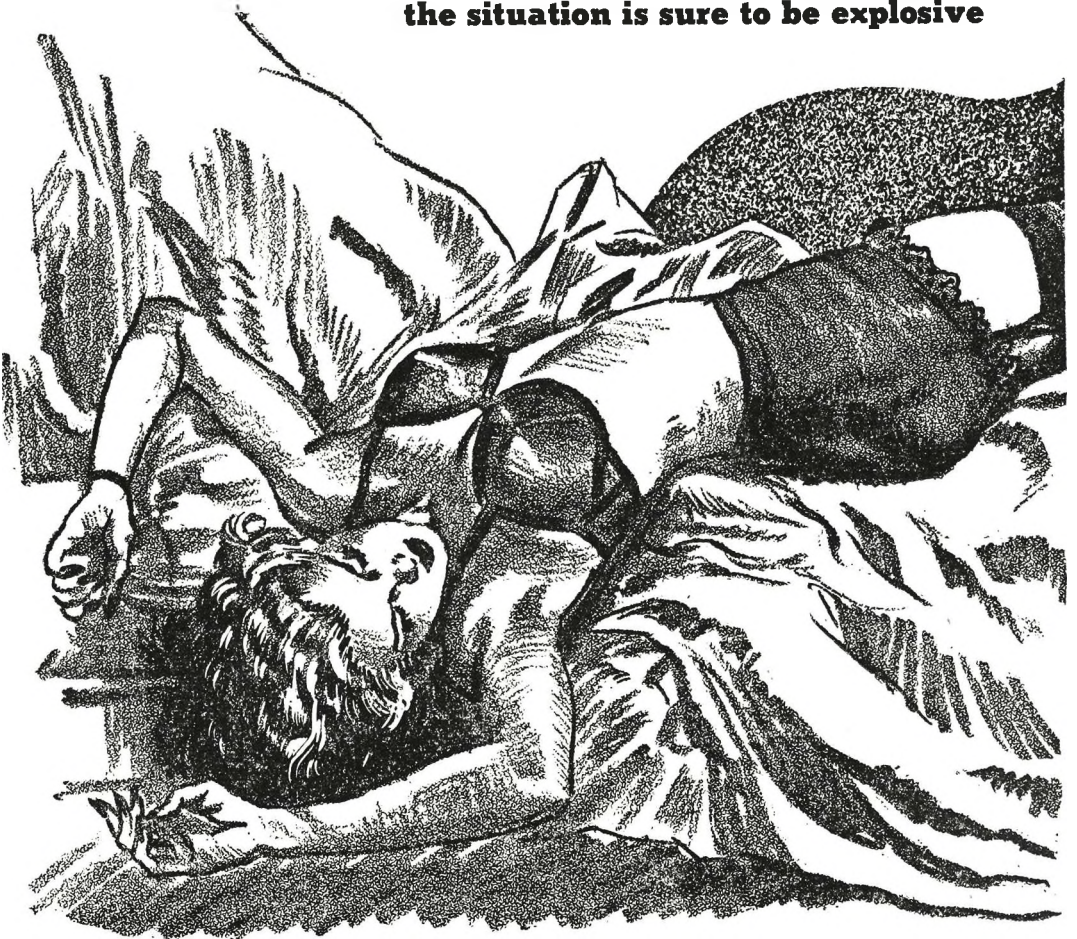
by MILTON K. OZAKI

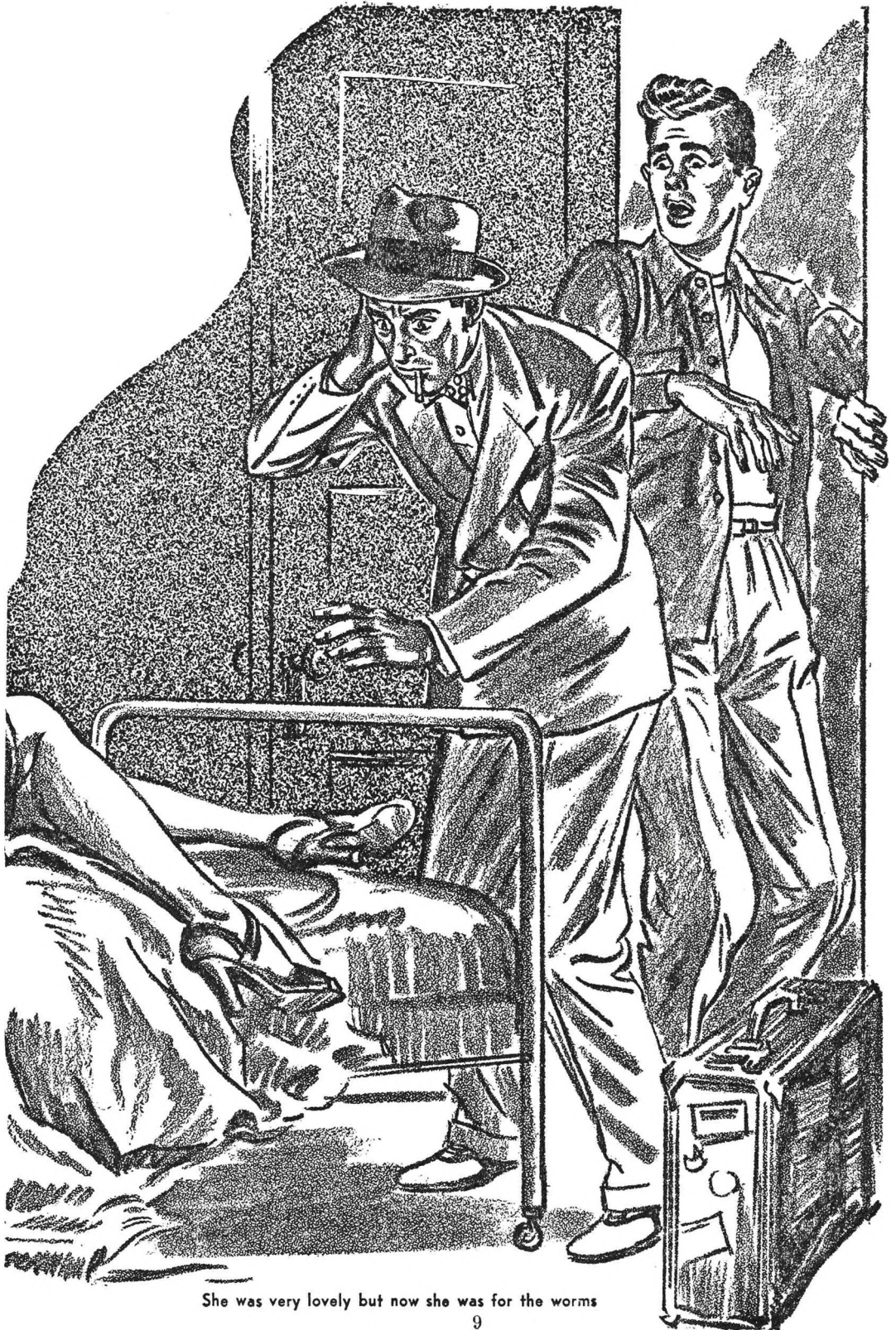
HE CAME into the office about two minutes to nine on a Tuesday morning, scarcely five minutes after I'd unlocked the door, picked up the mail, opened a window, and sat down at my desk. Helen Gates, my secretary, hadn't arrived yet, so he walked right through the outer reception room and into my small private

office.

He was rather tall, about five-eleven, slender, well-built, about fifty-five years old. His gray gabardine suit had been cut by a tailor who knew his business, and the neatly-knotted blue tie which he wore looked as though it had been selected with care from a Sulka display. I figured he ate regu-

When two men who have switched identities want to trade back again, the situation is sure to be explosive





She was very lovely but now she was for the worms

larly, had a good bank account, and didn't ride the streetcars much.

"Are you Robert Stille?"

His voice was brisk, controlled, and he clipped the words short like a man used to asking questions and getting answers. As he approached my desk, I got a good look at his face. It was long in proportion to its breadth. He had a good head of hair—short, light brown, a little gray at the sides. His eyes were steely-blue and set rather deeply in their sockets. At the moment, they were calm and inquiring, but I got the impression that, more often than not, they were haughty and commanding. Skin—slightly tanned and firm. Nose—not large, not small, a little uncompromising. Mouth—thin. Chin—sharp, prominent, definitely determined.

"Yes, I'm Robert Stille."

He nodded, crossed in front of the desk, and sat down in the client's chair. I noticed that his fingers were long, strong, well manicured.

"I understand you're a private investigator, Mr. Stille."

"That's what the sign on the door says."

"Yes." He cleared his throat impatiently. "Have you had any experience at locating missing persons?"

"Quite a bit. Tracing skips is an important part of any investigator's business."

"Of course." He hesitated a split second. "I want to engage your services, Mr. Stille."

"Who do you want to locate, Mr—?"

"My name is John Adams. I want you to find a man whose name is Frank Laughton."

I reached for a pad of paper and wrote down the two names. "How much does Laughton owe you?"

"He doesn't owe me anything. It is I who am indebted to him."

I LET my eyebrows rise and fall, but I didn't say anything. At least, I thought, there's a new angle to this one.

"You seem surprised, Mr. Stille."

"I am."

"May I ask why?"

"Frankly, Mr. Adams, you don't strike me as the sort of man who'd have a conscience."

"Why?"

"Well, you look and act like a successful businessman, a man who knows which is up and which is down. I may be wrong, of course, but in my experience the average successful businessman doesn't begin to be troubled with a conscience until he starts to deteriorate physically. You seem to be in good condition. You certainly aren't senile."

"Thanks." The thin lips tightened a little. "I heard you were shrewd, Mr. Stille, and that's why I came here." Reaching into an inside pocket, he produced a thin platinum case and held it toward me. I glanced at the cigarets—Virginia Rounds, cork tipped—and shook my head. He nodded, located a fancy platinum lighter, and touched his cigaret to the flame. "This time, though, you're a little off. I'm not trying to salve a guilty conscience." Sucking smoke into his lungs, he let it trickle from his nostrils. "I want to locate Frank Laughton because, quite a few years ago, he entrusted several items of property to me. I'm tired of acting as his trustee and I want to restore these items to him."

"I see. Precisely what are these items which you wish to restore to him?"

"They have nothing to do with your job, Mr. Stille. I want you to find Frank Laughton. I'll handle things from then on myself."

"I like to know as much as possible about the person I'm looking for, Mr.

Adams. It may not seem important to you, but the very fact that Laughton entrusted this property to you may make it possible for me—”

“The information would be of no use to you. Take my word for it.”

“Well—”

“How long will it take you to locate him?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“It depends on a lot of things—the amount of information available, how much time has elapsed since he was last seen, the amount of money you’re willing to spend, and how lucky I am. Sometimes it’s possible to locate a skip within a few hours—and sometimes it takes years.”

“I’m willing to spend all the money necessary, but I want him found at the earliest possible moment.”

“I’ll do the best I can, Mr. Adams, but I’m afraid that won’t be much unless you’re willing to tell me quite a bit about this. Tracing skips is principally a matter of—”

“I can give you a good description.”

“All right.” I wiggled the pencil. “Let’s have it.”

LAUGHTON is fifty-three years old. When I last saw him, he weighed one-forty-six. He is five feet ten inches tall and has blue eyes, light brown hair, a beard of the full bewber variety, and a small mustache. He dressed very carelessly, and—this may be particularly helpful—had a penchant for the company of artists, musicians, writers, and people of that ilk?”

“Why?”

“He considered himself an artist.”

“Was he?”

“Not if I know anything about art.”

“Hmm. Why did *he* think he was an artist?”

“Well, he liked to paint. He was

always making sketches of people’s faces, looking for landscapes to paint, and studying the works of the old masters. It was almost a mania with him. He felt that he was destined to paint great pictures.”

“Is that why he sought the company of other artists, musicians, and so on?”

“I suppose so. I imagine he felt more comfortable in their company than elsewhere.”

“That’s understandable. Have you a photograph of him?”

“Yes, but not with me. I’ll have one mailed to you this afternoon.”

“Good. When did you see him last?”

“Nine years ago—on April 5, 1938.”

“Was he married?”

“Yes.”

“Do you happen to know where his wife is?”

“She’s here in Chicago, but she won’t be able to give you any information. She hasn’t heard from him since the date I mentioned.”

“Well, give me her address anyway.”

“She’s living at 1424 Astor Street.”

“Does Laughton have any relatives?”

“None that are living.”

“Do you know where he was born?”

“What possible importance—”

“Sometimes men get homesick and return to the place they were born.”

“Oh. He was born in Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin.”

“What kind of work did he do?”

“At the time he disappeared, he was operating an exterminating business—The Triple D Chemical Company.”

“That name sounds familiar.”

“It’s a big company, Mr. Stille; one of the biggest in the business.”

“I think I remember—it’s out on the West Side, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Who owns it now?”

“Laughton does.”

"But he hasn't been near it for the past nine years?"

"That's right."

"Who's been operating it?"

"I have."

"What you're trying to tell me, then, is that Laughton went away nine years ago and left you in charge of his business. Is that the trusteeship of which you are now tired?"

"That's part of it."

"I SEE. Why can't you quit, simply turn things over to his wife?"

"There are quite a few complications. That's why I'm anxious to ascertain his whereabouts."

"Is his wife anxious to find him, too?"

"Well—no. At least, I don't think so."

"What has happened to the profits of the business since his absence?"

"Most of them have been reinvested in the company."

"Laughton, himself, hasn't gotten any of the money, say, in the form of an allowance, a regular remittance or something like that?"

"No. Neither his wife nor I knew where he was. Naturally—"

"Yeah. How much money did he have when he disappeared?"

"I have no idea. Not much, I'm sure."

"Why are you sure?"

"Well, Triple D was in its infancy at the time. It didn't reach its present size and value until after I took charge. Since he wasn't well off at the time, it seems logical to conclude that he didn't have much of a bankroll."

"Sounds reasonable. How did he happen to leave his wife and business—I snapped my fingers—"like that?"

"I don't think he cared much for his wife, and he was tired of operating the exterminating business. He wanted

to devote his life to painting."

"He must have been a screw-ball."

"I'm not so sure, Mr. Stille. I think he knew what he was doing."

"You do, eh?" I sat there and let the information trickle through my mind. It didn't sound like much of a job. If Laughton had retained the beard, tracing his movements would be comparatively easy. And, if he still had a penchant for the company of musicians and artists, locating him was almost a cinch. "Have you any idea where he may have gone, Mr. Adams?"

"I think he's still in Chicago."

"Yeah?" I gave him a quick glance. "What makes you think so?"

"Nothing definite. But I'm quite sure he hasn't left the city."

"DO YOU mean to say Laughton has been living here in the city for nine years—without either you or his wife knowing his whereabouts?"

"That's about it, Mr. Stille. You see, Laughton was very fond of Chicago. He thought it the greatest city in the world, and he wanted to paint a series of pictures depicting metropolitan life. I think he's been doing exactly that all these years."

"If that's actually the case, I'll have him for you in a hurry."

"Good. The sooner the better."

"I'll get started on it this afternoon. In the meantime—"

"The fee, of course." Adams smiled thinly.

"Yes. I charge twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses. In this particular case, I'd like a minimum guarantee of, say, two hundred dollars. In other words—"

"I understand perfectly." He reached inside his coat and produced a checkbook and fountain pen. Resting the checkbook on the edge of my desk, he leaned forward and rapidly filled in

a check. "Suppose I give you a thousand dollars—on account. Will that be sufficient?"

"That'll be fine." I took the check, glanced at the pretty numerals, and pushed it into my pocket. "Incidentally, Mr. Adams, have you contacted the police about Laughton's disappearance?"

"No. I didn't think it advisable."

"You want this kept quiet, then?"

"Very quiet."

"Where shall I send my reports?"

"You needn't report to me until you find him. When you do, phone me at my office. The number is Superior 8759."

"That's the number of the Triple D Chemical Company?"

"Yes."

"All right. Don't forget to mail me the photograph."

"I won't. Good day, Mr. Stille."

He stood up and strode toward the door. I sat there for a moment, listening to the measured click of his heels across the reception room linoleum, the sound of the door opening, and then the faint, hollow thud of leather on tile as he proceeded to the elevator. I shrugged and reached for the unopened mail.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Helen Gates arrived at nine-thirty, I'd read the mail, separated the bills from the circulars, and tossed the latter into the wastebasket. I was about to light a cigar when I heard the quick tap-tap of her heels in the reception room. A moment later she smiled in through the open door and said: "Good morning, Mr. Stille."

"Morning, Helen."

She hung her coat in the reception room closet and then came into my office, brandishing a paper bag. "I

stopped at the drug-store for a couple cartons of coffee. Want some?"

"You bet!"

"Also, two sweet-rolls."

"Helen, you'd make some boy a wonderful wife."

"You're just saying that because it's true."

We both laughed at the old gag as she sat down in the client's chair and opened the bag. She handed a carton of coffee to me, then unwrapped two sweet-rolls, spread a paper napkin on the desk in front of me, and put one of the rolls upon it. I grinned, picked it up with my fingers, and bit into it.

Helen Gates had told me when I hired her six months previously that she was twenty-one years old, ambitious, dependable and a graduate of Gregg College. She had proved to be all that. In addition, she had a quick, generous smile which illuminated her essentially plain oval face and brown eyes, a smile which brightened her whole person. Of medium height, she was slender and well-proportioned, and possessed of enormous energy which, somehow, seemed to go with the shoulder-length reddish hair which blazed about her face.

And she was thoughtful and considerate. She had noticed, for example, that I usually came directly to the office each morning, read my mail, then went downstairs to the drugstore and ate breakfast. After that, she made a point of bringing coffee and pastry up with her, an arrangement which, besides saving a half-hour of my time, was very pleasant.

"Finished, Mr. Stille?"

"Yes. Thanks."

She gathered the empty cartons and soiled napkins and pushed them into the bag, then dropped the bag into the wastebasket. Giving me a bright let's-get-down-to-business glance, she went

to her desk, got a notebook and several pencils, and came back. She sat down, flipped open the notebook, and looked expectant.

Frankly, I'm nothing for a girl to get bright-eyed about. Besides being thirty-eight years old, I'm getting thick around the middle. Too much bourbon and too little exercise, probably. I measure five-eight up-and-down, and I weight one-eighty-five, which is twenty, maybe twenty-five, pounds too much. My face is round and ordinary, eyes brown, hair black with quite a little gray around the temples, nose yes. The first time Helen Gates gave me that expectant look, I sighed a little regretfully and wished I were ten years younger. Nothing makes a man feel so old as the trusting, business-like look of a young, attractive woman. There ought to be a law against it.

"Were there any phone calls after I left yesterday, Helen?"

"Mrs. Clayton phoned shortly after lunch."

"The usual?"

"Yes. She was quite angry."

I GROANED. Mrs. Clayton had hired me to locate the blonde with whom, allegedly, her husband was conducting an affair. But, as far as I could find out, Mr. Clayton's life was as dull and uninspired as a monk's. "Phone Jack Pierce, explain the job to him, and ask him if he can lend a hand. These damned divorce cases are ruining my disposition."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"Mr. Goodman phoned. He said he liked the way you handled things for him and was mailing a check."

"Good."

"A Mr. Herman Reilly called, too. He wanted to know how much you charged per day for your personal serv-

ices."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Twenty dollars a day, plus expenses."

"After this, don't quote rates over the phone. Tell them my charges vary and invite them to come in for a conference. You see, it may be another agency prying into my business, trying to get a line on my fees and if it were a potential client, and if said client happened to have a lot of dough, I might want to quote a higher rate."

"Yes, sir." She nodded.

"Is that all?"

"That's all the calls. There are two checks and several letters for you to sign."

"I'll do that later." I pushed the bills which had come in the morning mail toward her. "Make out checks for these and I'll sign the whole bunch at once."

"Yes, sir."

"We have a new client, a Mr. John Adams."

"We have?"

"Yes. He was in to see me this morning before you arrived. It isn't much of a case, but you'd better make a folder on it, anyway. It's a skip, and I'll probably handle it myself."

"Yes, sir. Will you want me to make copies of the description?"

"I don't think so. Well, possibly. I'd better dictate that to you right now." I waited while she adjusted her notebook and selected a pencil. "We have been retained to establish the whereabouts of one Frank Laughton. Age—53. Height—5 feet, 10 inches. Weight—146." I continued, dictating from my penciled notes, until I'd given her the information John Adams had supplied. "Adams promised to mail me a photograph of Laughton. As soon as it arrives, put it on my desk, Helen."

"Of course."

"I quoted him the twenty-five-a-day rate. Two hundred dollar minimum." Taking Adams' check out of my pocket, I scribbled an endorsement across its back and pushed it toward her. "Enter this to his account and, when you go to the bank, deposit it."

"All right."

Helen picked up the check and smoothed it out. Her eyes narrowed a little and she began to check back through her shorthand notes. "Did you say you were retained by *John Adams*—and that the man to be located was *Frank Laughton*?"

"Yes."

"But—?" She stared at the check perplexedly.

"What's the matter?"

"This check was signed by Frank Laughton." She looked at me, her eyes puzzled. "Shouldn't it have been signed by John Adams?"

I REACHED over and plucked the check from her fingers. Across the top was printed: THE TRIPLE D CHEMICAL COMPANY, 1203 North Wells Street, Chicago. Then there was the usual pay-to-the-order business, ending with \$1000.00 in numerals and words. The signature, unquestionably, was "Frank Laughton."

"For Chrissake!"

"You must have twisted the names around, Mr. Stille."

"I did like hell!"

I sat there, staring at the check. There was no question about the legibility of the signature. It was a trifle small, but the penmanship was plain and clear. Furthermore, he'd written the check and signed it right in front of me. Unless the whole episode was a gag of some sort, the check should certainly have been signed "John Adams."

"Isn't the check any good, Mr. Stille?"

"I don't know—but I'll sure as hell find out in a hurry!"

If the floor had been dirty, I'd have thrown a cloud of dust as I circled the desk and headed for the door. Without waiting for an elevator, I flung myself down the four flights of stairs and sprinted the two blocks to the Amalgamated Trust & Savings Bank like a horse with his tail afire. When I trotted up to the cashier's cage, I was breathing heavily from the unaccustomed exertion.

"Would you mind certifying this check?" I gasped.

The thin, pimply-faced fellow behind the brass grille accepted the check and scrutinized it carefully. Then he left his cage and consulted several cards in a filing cabinet. When he returned, he seemed bored, but he made a record of the check in a large book, passed it through a machine which stamped an indelible certification upon it, and added his initials. Without a word, he handed it back to me.

When I got back to the office, Helen was still sitting in the chair beside my desk, studying her shorthand notes. She looked up as I came through the door. Grinning, I tossed the check into her lap.

"It's as good as gold—maybe better!"

"Then you *must* have confused the names, Mr. Stille."

"I'm positive that I didn't."

"But, according to the information you dictated, Frank Laughton is the man who's missing."

"That's right. There's something screwy, somewhere, but I didn't confuse those names. John Adams was the name given me by—"

"What did Mr. Adams look like?"

"Well—" I described John Adams.

"What I noticed particularly was his earnestness. He was definitely sincere and anxious—"

"But, Mr. Stille!"

"Yeah?"

"Except for the beard and clothes, your description of Mr. Adams sounds exactly like Mr. Laughton!"

"Well, for—!" I read through my notes again, and nodded. "You're right, Helen. I must have been half-asleep when he gave me that description."

"Maybe Laughton is Adams' twin brother."

"Male twins carry the same name."

"That's right." Helen pursed her lips thoughtfully, then shrugged. "I give up."

"Just for curiosity, I'm going to phone the Triple D Chemical Company and ask for John Adams." I swung around and reached for the phone. "What was the number he gave me?"

"Superior 8759."

I DIALED the number and waited a few seconds while the line went buzz-buzz. Then there was a click and a cheery, feminine voice said: "Good-morning. Triple D."

"Mr. John Adams, please."

"Mr. who?"

"John Adams. A-d-a-m-s."

"I'm sorry, sir. There's no one of that name here."

"Is there a Mr. Frank Laughton there?"

"Mr. Laughton? One moment, please."

There were several clicks, then another feminine voice announced: "Mr. Laughton's office."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Laughton."

"Mr. Laughton isn't in today. This is Miss Stewart, his secretary."

"Oh. Was he in yesterday?"

"Yes, he was. Would you like to have him call you?"

"No, I'll call him again tomorrow." I hesitated, then asked: "Perhaps you can tell me, Miss Stewart, where I can reach Mr. John Adams."

"Mr. Adams isn't in either, sir. If you'll leave your number, I'll have Mr. Laughton get in touch with you as soon as he comes in, though. May I have your name, please?"

"Never mind."

I hung up abruptly. "This is getting screwier by the minute! See if there's a Frank Laughton listed in the phone book, Helen."

"Yes, sir."

While Helen thumbed through the directory, I sat there and tried to get things straight. Adams said Laughton had been missing for nine years, and that he, Adams, had been in charge of the Triple D Company during that period. Yet their switchboard operator hadn't recognized his name. And, according to the second girl I'd talked to, Frank Laughton had been in his office no later than yesterday!

"It's still Delaware 8197, Mr. Stille."

"Thanks. Make a note of the address." I dialed the number, drumming my fingers impatiently on the desk as I waited. "Hello. Is this the Frank Laughton residence?"

A soft, pleasant, girlish voice said: "Yes, it is."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Laughton, please."

"Mr. Laughton isn't at home just now. This is Mrs. Laughton speaking." Her voice was warm, cordial.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Laughton. I wanted to speak to your husband about some company business."

"Oh. I'll tell him you called, Mr.—?"

"No, never mind. I'll call him at his office later. Thanks very much."

"I expect him home in about an

hour." Her voice was still warm, still friendly, but a little puzzled, as though she recognized my voice but couldn't recall my name. "Would you like him to call you?"

"It isn't that important. I'll wait and call him at his office."

"All right."

"Thank you, Mrs. Laughton. Good-bye." I swung around toward Helen. "Well!"

"Obviously, it isn't Mr. Laughton who is missing."

"Yeah."

"It's Mr. Adams." She sounded triumphant, as though she'd demonstrated the superior quality of female logic.

"Listen, Helen, I know you think I'm merely being stubborn, but I'm absolutely positive that the man who gave me that check said that he was John Adams and that the man to be located was Frank Laughton!"

"But—"

"But nothing. A guy named Adams hired me to find a man named Frank Laughton and that's what I'm going to do. Mrs. Laughton expects her husband home in about an hour. I intend to be there when he arrives, and, if Adams and Laughton are the one and same, I'm going to poke a finger at him and say: 'Mr. Adams, permit me to present Mr. Frank Laughton.' That'll end the monkey-business."

"But, Mr. Stille! What if he admits he's Frank Laughton and says he wanted you to find John Adams?" Helen giggled. "He won't think you're much of a detective if—"

"Forget it," I advised her shortly. "I may have been a little groggy when I talked to Adams, but I got those names down in the right order. Adams is the guy I'm doing business with, and Laughton is the guy who's missing. If I'm wrong, I'll blow you to the biggest

damn steak you ever ate!"

CHAPTER III

MRS. LAUGHTON'S address, according to John Adams, was 1424 Astor Street, and that checked with the telephone directory's listing of the Frank Laughton residence. I slowed the Ford as I passed Schiller Street and scanned the numbers until I came to a three-story, red-brick building bearing the numerals 1424. It was a classy, well-cared-for sort of place with white-trimmed windows, green flower boxes at the first-floor level, a brightly varnished door, and a fancy brass mail box. It wasn't the most expensive-looking house I'd ever seen, but it had cost plenty.

I pulled the Ford to the curb and snapped off the ignition. Then, sliding down in the seat, I pulled out a cigar, lit it, and prepared to wait. It wasn't long, maybe twenty minutes, before a dark blue Cadillac sedan turned in at the curb ahead of me, maneuvered a moment, then backed until its rear bumper was within a foot of the Ford. The man who got out wore a neat gray gabardine suit and a blue tie. He strode up the short walk, opened the door with a key, and went in.

I sat there a minute or two, thinking things over, then I climbed out of the Ford and walked up to the brightly varnished door. There was a bronze knocker in the center panel shaped like a mailed fist. I banged it briskly.

The door opened and Mr. John Adams, a look of polite inquiry on his face, confronted me.

I grinned. "Hello, Mr. Laughton."

The thin lips tightened slightly and his eyes became as cold and blue as a pair of frozen grapes.

"It's Mr. Stille, isn't it?" he asked.

"Right. May I come in?"

He hesitated a fraction of a second, then held the door open and nodded. "Certainly," he said, not too pleasantly.

I pushed past him and stepped into a broad hallway, the floor of which was carpeted with a deep-piled green broadloom. He closed the door after me, touched my arm, and indicated a doorway to the right. I nodded, let him step around me, then followed him into the room.

It was about twelve-by-twelve and high ceilinged, obviously used as a study. The furniture—consisting of a leather couch, a desk, a pair of occasional chairs, four movable bookcases, a Zenith radio-phonograph, and a cocktail table—was modern and functional in design. A pair of French windows led to a small terrace. The room was bright with sunlight and a little stuffy.

"Well, Mr. Stille?"

I eased into one of the occasional chairs and crossed my knees casually. "I think you owe me an explanation, Mr. . . . ah . . . Adams." I located a packet of matches and re-lit my cigar, blowing smoke toward the ceiling as I flicked the match out.

ADAMS crossed the room, adjusted the curtains of the French windows, then went to the door and made sure it was tightly closed. When he returned, he sat down at the desk and eyed me frostily. "Proceed, Mr. Stille."

"That's it. I think you owe me an explanation."

"Why?"

"This Adams-Laughton hocus-pocus. You said you name was John Adams. On inquiry, I find you're really Frank Laughton. Yet, you may recall, Frank Laughton is supposed to have disappeared about nine years ago."

"I see." He nodded irritably. "I

hoped to avoid a more complete explanation, Mr. Stille, but, I see now, it's inevitable that you learn the whole story." His long fingers picked up a small crystal paper-weight and squeezed it impotently. "I gave you an accurate statement of the facts this morning. I really am John Adams—and Frank Laughton *did* disappear at the time I stated."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It sounds incredible, of course, but it's absolutely true in every detail."

"It sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus to me, Mr. Adams. Why don't you start at the beginning and give me the whole story? According to the telephone directory—"

"All right."

He stood up suddenly, as though the inactivity of sitting was unbearable, and strode up and down the room.

"Nine years ago I was working as a counterman in a restaurant on West Madison Street for a dollar a day and my meals. You know the set-up. Getting a job was a tough proposition in those days, and I'd had a long stretch of bad luck. I felt pretty low, I guess, and I'm sure I'd have tackled any sort of a job for the sake of a few dollars. Anyway, Laughton was in the habit of stopping in the restaurant. I didn't know his name, of course. To me, he was just a guy who came in occasionally and spent a dime for a hamburger or a hot-dog. But one day when I wasn't busy, we got to talking. First he asked me where I was from, how long I'd been working there, whether I had a family—things like that. A few days later he asked me if I realized how much alike we looked."

"What was he doing on West Madison Street?"

"Sketching, I learned later. He used to wander up and down the street, making sketches of store-fronts, people,

signs, things like that.”

“Go on.”

“At first I thought he was kidding, but he pointed out that we were about the same height and build, had the same coloring, hair, shape of face, and were nearly the same age. I laughed and said that maybe we were twins. He was serious, though, and finally made a quick sketch of me—then added a beard like his. I could see, then, that we were actually as alike as two cigarettes from the same package. We joked about this for several days; then, one night, he waited until I finished work and asked me to go for a walk with him. Well, he asked me if I’d like to have a business of my own. I thought he was cracked, but I didn’t have anything to lose, so I listened. Anything was better than carrying dishes back and forth behind a dirty hash-house counter all day.”

“Naturally.”

“He told me he owned a small factory and was sick of being a businessman. Furthermore, he wasn’t getting along with his wife. He’d neglected the business and she’d been making his life a hell by insisting that he make more money and provide her with more of the comforts of life. He wanted to paint, but his business and wife kept interfering.”

“So he offered to trade places with you?”

“Yes.”

“Reminds me of a movie I saw. Go on.”

“I swear it’s the truth, Mr. Stille.”

“Don’t mind me. Continue.”

“WELL, I refused—at first. For one thing, I didn’t know anything about the exterminating business; for another, I didn’t like the idea of taking on another man’s wife. But the more he explained things to

me, the better his proposition sounded. Then he took me to his so-called factory one evening—it was nothing more than two bare rooms in an old warehouse—and showed me how he prepared his products. Actually, it was simple. He had a few formulae from which he compounded insecticides, and they were so elementary that anyone, whether they knew chemistry or not, could have followed them. After he explained things to me, I felt that I could not only operate his business—but could do a hell of a lot better job than he was doing.”

“Um-hmm.”

“So, finally, I quit my job and took over his business.”

“What about the beard?”

“It would have taken months to raise a beard like his, so that was out of the question. Laughton suggested that I simply say that I’d decided to get rid of it—his wife had asked him to shave it off a number of times—so that’s what I did. Whenever anyone asked about it, I laughed and said my wife had bought me a razor. No one made an issue of it, which was fortunate.”

“Did he make a formal transfer of the business to you?”

“If you mean did we draw up an agreement—no. I simply assumed the name Frank Laughton—and carried on from there.”

“How about his bank account?”

“It didn’t amount to much. Laughton signed a blank check and told me to do as I saw fit with it.”

“What did you do?”

“I withdrew his entire balance from the Clark National and opened a new account at the Amalgamated Trust & Savings Bank.”

“That was clever.”

“Expedient, Mr. Stille, not clever. It made it possible for me to sign Laughton’s name—without having the

signature questioned."

"What did you do about Laughton's wife?"

"At the time of the switch, Mrs. Laughton was away. He told me they'd had quite an argument a week or so before and she'd packed a suitcase and left. She didn't come back for nearly two months. By that time, of course, I was pretty well used to being Laughton.

"I'd gotten two large accounts on an annual contract basis, and I'd persuaded a drugstore chain to sell retail sizes of the insecticides on consignment. Laughton, not being business-minded, hadn't really promoted his products. I did, and, by the time his wife put in an appearance, I'd doubled—almost tripled—the company's gross sales. At that, I'd merely scratched the surface."

"You must have really worked at it."

"I did. It was a real break, and I was determined to make the most of it. I used to start out early in the morning, making deliveries, canvassing for new orders, buying materials, visiting every place I could think of where there might be a bedbug or a cockroach. Then I'd work at the warehouse most of the night, mixing the insecticides, putting them in cartons, labeling them, getting things ready for the next day. It wasn't easy, believe me."

"I can see that. What happened when Mrs. Laughton returned?"

"Well, I got a note from her one day, saying she was coming to get her clothes and things. I dreaded meeting her, but it was a lot easier than I'd expected. She was quite a bit younger than Laughton, and—well, very attractive."

"So you went on the make?"

TO PUT it crudely, yes. It seemed all right at the time. After all,

I had become Frank Laughton—and she was his wife. I'd promised to carry on in his stead. Even if she'd been old and ugly, I think I'd have kept my word—"

"But not so enthusiastically."

"I suppose not. Her youth and beauty certainly made things much easier for me."

"Didn't she suspect anything?"

"At first, she was bewildered at the change. But, since she'd been after Laughton for some time to get rid of his beard and settle down to business, I convinced her that, while she was away, I'd seen the light. I told her I loved her and had missed her, and that her leaving had been such a shock that I'd decided to try to be the kind of man she wanted. Needless to say, she liked the idea and changed her mind about leaving."

"You must have been very persuasive."

"I didn't have to be. It sounds incredible at first, but, when you rationalize it, you'll see that the entire change was simply something which she'd tried to effect for some time. When it suddenly materialized, it wasn't at all difficult to persuade her to believe that it was the result of her own action. She was actually convinced that I'd changed my way of life to please her."

"I still think you did a hell of a selling job."

"Think of it this way, Mr. Stille. She had been in love with Frank Laughton, but he hadn't measured up to her aspirations. He'd become obsessed with art, had neglected his business, his home, and his personal appearance. She tried to reform him, and, after the last flare-up, had decided to call it quits. Then, when she came back and found me, it looked as though her absence had accomplished what all

her arguments had failed to do. I'd thrown away my paints, shaved off my beard, settled down to business, and was beginning to make a good living. She convinced herself that the new Frank Laughton was different because she had wanted me to be different. She not only approved the change but was delighted by it."

"All right. I'll take your word for it."

"A few weeks later, we moved to a larger apartment. Business got better and better, and I bought this home two years ago. All in all, I've provided a very good living for her."

"So what's the pitch?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Why the sudden anxiety to find Laughton? You've had a good time sleeping with his wife and you've made a lot of money operating his business. Which are you tired of—the wife or the business?"

"Actually, both."

"Yeah?"

"At the moment, the Triple D Company is worth about a quarter million dollars. That's more than enough for both Laughton and me. I want to liquidate the business, but before I do that I want to find him and—well, arrange for a re-exchange of personalities."

"What about Mrs. Laughton?"

"Have you ever been married, Mr. Stille?"

"Once."

"Well, you probably know how it is. When a man meets a good-looking woman, he wants to sleep with her. Nothing else seems of any importance. After a while his physical appetite palls a bit and the importance of other things become apparent. At my age, Mr. Stille, there are a lot of intangible things which are of more importance than a woman's body."

"Such as?"

"IT'S hard to explain. I only know that, while Shirley Laughton is as attractive a woman, physically, as any man could hope for, she isn't the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. She's shallow, mentally, for one thing. The only things which really interest her are the superficial ones, such as clothes, furniture, perfumes and jewelry, the movies, and her silly hobbies. She collects tooth-pick holders and pictures of celebrities, for God's sake!"

"I can see where there's a conflict."

"Yes. I was a bum when Laughton found me, but I hadn't always been a bum. My father was a learned man, and my mother was a talented musician. They gave me a good education and taught me to appreciate fine things—good books, symphonic music, the better things of life. I want to spend the rest of my life with someone who's interests are more nearly like my own." Adams stopped his pacing abruptly and sat down in a chair facing me. "Do you understand how I feel, Mr. Stille?"

"In a way, yes. But I don't understand why you want to find Laughton. He didn't get along with his wife and he hated his business. If he didn't want them nine years ago, he won't want them now."

"He may have changed his mind."

"In that case, he'd have looked you up."

"Besides, I feel obligated to him. He gave me my first real chance of becoming a success. Everything I have really belongs to him. There's more than enough money for both of us, and I'll feel better about things if I can talk to him and make sure he hasn't any regrets."

"What if I can't locate him?"

"Well—" Adams' eyes narrowed as

though the possibility hadn't occurred to him before and he was considering it for the first time. He shook his head. "I don't know. You've got to find him."

"But *why*? If you've made up your mind to call the deal off and become John Adams again, all you have to do is walk out and not come back."

"It isn't that easy."

"Why not?"

"You don't know Shirley. She'd find out where I was, and she'd make my life a hell. Don't forget that I'm solidly established as Frank Laughton. Once a man accumulates a big bank account, he doesn't belong entirely to himself any more."

"How about explaining things to her, maybe splitting the dough?"

"I started to once, putting it to her in a purely hypothetical way. She wouldn't even listen to me; in fact, she accused me of coming home drunk. If she thought for a minute that I was serious, she'd say I was insane and slap me into some mental institution—and she'd grab all the money and property. That's one of the reasons I've got to find Laughton. I need him to prove who I really am."

"Are there any children?"

"No, thank God."

"I still think you could make a break without Laughton's help. Walk out and leave her. Find the woman you want, marry her, and settle down in some other city."

"It wouldn't work." Adams shook his head positively. "I don't want to live the life of a fugitive. Besides, I'm the one who really built up Triple D. I'm entitled to a half equity in it, at least, and I'm not going to leave the whole thing to her, which is what I'd have to do."

"Liquidate. Split the dough and put your share in another bank under your

real name. Then kiss her good-bye."

"IT SOUNDS easy, but a man can't transfer large sums of money without attracting attention—and that's what I've got to avoid."

"Yeah, I know that. I was just thinking aloud."

"I've thought about this for months, Mr. Stille. The only way I can make an honest break is by finding Frank Laughton. I'm sure he'll understand the way I feel and help me resume my original identity."

"Personally, I don't think he will." I stood up and stubbed out my cigar in an ash-tray. "My job is locating skips, and I'm willing to give value for money received, but my guess is that Laughton, when I do find him, will give you the merry laugh. He doesn't sound to me like the kind of guy who'll be impressed by a lot of money."

"But—"

"I said I'd do my best, and I will. But, in the meantime, I think you'd better begin planning some other way out—just in case Laughton still doesn't give a damn about his wife and bank account."

"But, Mr. Stille! There—"

"There are guys like that, believe it or not. The creative urge is a pretty powerful one, and a man like Laughton will probably think a piece of canvas with some paint on it a hell of a lot more important than a wad of bank-notes. He bought his freedom when he made that deal with you, and I think he'll want to keep it."

"But I have a right to *my* freedom—"

"Maybe," I shrugged. "Then again, maybe not. I'm not prepared to philosophize about it."

"Surely, Mr. Stille, you can see—"

"Frankly, Mr. Adams, I can't. If I were Laughton and really valued my

freedom I'd have a hell of a good laugh at your expense. You made the deal with your eyes open, didn't you?"

"Yes. Of course. But—"

"A deal is a deal. Which reminds me—do you have that photograph handy? If you have, I'll take it with me."

When I left, Adams' face seemed an inch or two longer than usual. His blue eyes were hard and cold, and he was tensing his fingers about the crystal paper-weight. I didn't wait to see where he threw it.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE way back to the Loop, I stopped at Forrest's Restaurant and had a sandwich, then drove to the office. Helen Gates was just slipping on her coat, preparatory to going to lunch.

"The letters and checks are on your desk, Mr. Stille."

"Good. Any calls?"

"No. At least, nothing important." She pushed her long red hair away from her collar and smiled. "I'm going to lunch now. Would you like me to bring back something for you?"

"Thanks, Helen, but I had a sandwich on my way back."

"Oh, Well, I won't be long."

I went in and sat down at my desk. Then I lit a cigar and puffed on it for a few minutes before unwrapping the picture Adams had given me. It was an eight-by-ten cabinet photograph and, except for the beard, was a spitting likeness of Adams, as he had probably looked ten years previously. The same long narrow face, close-set eyes, and thin lips. His chin was obscured by a full, luxuriant beard which reminded me of the Smith Brothers—the one on the left-hand side of the box.

I propped the picture against the

telephone and blew smoke-rings at it. Then I signed the checks and letters Helen Gates had prepared—and blew some more smoke at it. With a face like that, Frank Laughton had about as much chance of avoiding recognition as a one-legged midget on crutches. If he was still in Chicago, and if I had any luck at all, his address would be on my desk in three days—at the most. But, it seemed like a dirty trick. A dirty trick to Laughton, that is.

"I'm back, Mr. Stille."

"Good. Bring in your notebook, Helen."

She came in, an eager light in her brown eyes, and sat down in the client's chair. She opened her notebook and waited, pencil poised.

"Re: John Adams case—" I dictated a resume of the facts given me by Adams, quoting him as accurately as I could remember. "File that, Helen, and, as soon as possible, take this photograph upstairs to the Reo Photo Agency and ask them to rush through a half-dozen copies. Tell them to reduce it to a four-by-five."

"Yes, sir."

"Then get Jack Pierce and Allen Ross on the phone. Tell them I have a job waiting and want to see them. If Ross isn't at his hotel, try Chris' Bar on North State Street."

"I tried to get Mr. Pierce this morning—about the Clayton case, you know—but he wasn't at his hotel. The clerk said he'd have him phone when he came in."

"That's right. I'd forgotten about deciding to put him on the Clayton case. You'd better call Fred Matson, too. Maybe I'll put him to tailing Clayton."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's see—"

"Do you happen to know Mr. Adams' birthday, Mr. Stille?"

"No. Why?"

"I was just wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"WELL—" Helen colored a little.

"I was thinking that he sounded like an Aries type." She lifted her chin and said the sentence in a little rush, as though she knew she shouldn't but was going to anyway.

"What's an Aries type?"

"It's—well, it's the way a person is if he's born between March 21st and April 19th."

"Yeah?" I stared at her and her cheeks got redder and redder until they almost matched her hair. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"Aries is a sign of—" She paused, embarrassed. "You think it's *silly!*"

"How can I say? You haven't told me what it's all about yet."

"It's scientific, really it is, Mr. Stille! You'd be amazed at the really brilliant people who depend upon astrology when it comes to making even the simplest decisions. Why, until I started to study it, I thought it was something like—well, like fortune-telling. But it isn't at all. It's really an ancient science!"

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely. Anyone who studies its basic principles can tell marvelous things about people, because the sign a person is born under rules their appearance, their personality traits, their potentialities, their weakness—everything!"

"Tell me about the Aries business."

I grinned, amused at the serious expression on her small face and waited while she groped for words.

"Well, Aries is a sign of the Zodiac, and there are twelve signs altogether, one for each section of the astronomical heavens. People born between March 21st and April 19th are said to be born

under the sign of Aries, which, of course, is ruled by the planet Mars."

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

"You're laughing!" she accused.

"No, I'm not. I'm merely trying to find the connection between Aries and Mr. Adams."

"I have a book which gives the physical characteristics of each type, and, according to your description and the picture, Mr. Adams is a perfect Aries. The active type, I'd say, although if—"

"My mother was born on March 31st. She didn't resemble Mr. Adams in the least."

"Oh, that's different!" Helen exclaimed. "Women are of the passive type. Their skulls are more rounded, the nose is fleshier, the mouth fuller, the chin less pronounced, and the profile is quite like that of a sheep— Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Stille!"

"That's all right. As a matter of fact, she did look a little bit like a sheep. Especially after her hair turned white."

"I didn't mean—"

"Forget it. I'm the one who should apologize. I was teasing you."

"You mean you knew about Aries and—"

"Yeah."

"But don't you *believe* that—"

"I think it's a lot of crap."

"Mr. Stille!"

"SORRY, Helen, but that's what I think it is. It's okay for old ladies and weak-livered men, but a young, attractive girl like you ought to steer clear of it. Keep your mind on Helen Gates—and stop worrying about whether Jupiter is converging upon Saturn. What the stars are doing isn't going to make a damned bit of difference to you or me. They're up in the sky and we're down here. Most of

them are hundreds of light-years away." I gave her a stern, paternal glance and asked: "Do you know what a light-year is?"

"I—don't think so."

"It's the distance traveled by a beam of light in one year. Do you know how fast light travels?"

"N-no."

"It travels a little better than 186,000 miles per second. That's a hell of a lot of traveling, and it'd take a big sheet of paper and a lot of calculating to estimate the actual distance of the stars from us. Some of them are so far away that light given off by them a couple thousand years ago is just reaching us now. In view of that fact, how the hell can you believe that they exert an influence upon us, now, this minute, or tomorrow? It's so utterly ridiculous that—"

The phone rang and I reached for it.

"Hello."

"That you, Bob?"

"Yeah. Jack?"

"Yes. The clerk here says you phoned."

"Yeah. I have a job lined up. Can you come in?"

"Not today, Bob. I'm on another job which I expect to finish sometime this afternoon. How about the first thing tomorrow morning?"

"All right. Make it as soon as possible, will you?" I dropped the phone back on its cradle. "That was Pierce. I wish to hell I could afford to keep him working regularly. Whenever I want him, he's involved with some other agency. You'd better rush that photo upstairs, Helen, in case I need the prints in a hurry."

She reached for the photo in a blind sort of frenzy and dropped one of her pencils. I glanced at her face, realizing that something was the matter.

"Helen—"

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

"Forget the lecture. Everyone takes dope in one form or another. I don't suppose astrology is any worse than some of the other varieties."

She nodded, and, lips trembling, hurried out of the office as though pursued by a flock of giant Aoudads. I stared at the door as it closed after her, shrugged, and reached for the phone.

First I called an old friend, Howard Bear, who was connected with Dun & Bradstreet. I asked him to send me as complete a report on the Triple D Chemical Company as he could get in a hurry. Naturally, he wanted to know what was up. I gave him some guff about a client who was interested in buying into the company, and so forth. He finally agreed to supply the information, and, thanking him, I hung up.

Then I phoned Milton Kahl, my lawyer. Using fictitious names, I sketched the Adams situation to him. He said the courts would undoubtedly hold that the original Laughton was still owner of the business and of all its accumulated assets. Adams, he said, would be regarded as an agent who was entitled to compensation for services rendered. And Mrs. Laughton, of course, was still Mrs. Laughton, even if she had been living with Adams for nine years. I told him the information was worth a lunch. He said it was worth more than that. I agreed to throw in a couple of drinks and, with that, ended the conversation.

The phone buzzed. Helen, speaking from her instrument in the reception room, said she had located Allen Ross and he was coming down immediately. Reprints of the photograph would be ready in a half-hour and the studio would send them down. She'd also called Fred Matson and, according to his wife, he'd left and was on his

way to the office. Five minutes later, Fred walked in.

"What's cooking, Bob? Helen says you've been calling me."

"Yeah. Sit down."

FRED MATSON is a small, freckle-faced fellow with sandy hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and pale, almost colorless eyes. He looks like a simpleton, but isn't. At one time, he'd had his own agency but, having a fondness for bourbon and disliking continuous responsibility, he decided he was happier and better off financially as a freelance operative. He'd worked for me, off and on, for several years, and, because of his experience in the Chicago area, had proved particularly valuable when it came to ferreting out missing people, locating evidence, and getting hush-hush information.

"A curious case came into the office this morning, Fred. Strictly speaking, it's a skip, but it has a lot of interesting angles." I gave him a description of Frank Laughton's physical appearance and explained his interest in artists, musicians and the like. "The studio is sending down prints from a photograph taken about ten years ago. I want you to see what you can dig up. It shouldn't be difficult if he still has the beard."

"What do I do when I find him?"

"Find out where he's living—then phone me."

"That all?"

"I think so. Be careful not to let him get suspicious. I don't want him to know anyone is interested in him."

"Natch."

"He may be using the name John Adams. You might try some of the art supply stores. Ask them if the name is familiar. If he's been painting all these years, he's probably had a few things framed; in which case,

there'd be a record of his name and address."

"Is this a rush job?"

"The quicker the better."

"Okay. I'll get at it right away."

"Good. Helen'll have the pictures for you in a few minutes."

Fred nodded, winked one of his colorless eyes, and sauntered out, his hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of a nondescript brown coat. The door closed after him, then opened again almost immediately. Helen Gates, an odd look on her face, came in and closed the door.

"What's the matter?"

Helen touched her lips with a finger and tip-toed to the desk. With the grave expression of an arch-conspirator, she leaned toward me and whispered: "Mrs. Frank Laughton is waiting to see you!"

"What!"

"Mrs. Frank Laughton."

"For Chrissake! Are you sure?"

"Yes. She came in right after Fred."

"Well, what the hell?" I shrugged. "Send her in."

CHAPTER V

SHIRLEY LAUGHTON reminded me of Sophie Tucker. She wore her bleached-blonde hair in a careless, fluffy version of an up-do, and her eyes, not quite blue, were large and lovely. Her face, a little too full to be pretty, was notable chiefly for its clear, smooth, delicately tinted skin. She was about thirty-two or three, I guessed, although if possession of a double-chin was any indication she could have been several years older. There wasn't anything wrong with her figure. The tailored sharkskin suit she wore clasped her curves, suggesting, optically, at least, that she had been built for pleasure.

"Mr. Stille?" she asked, hesitating in the doorway.

"Yes. Won't you come in and sit down?"

I stood up and gestured toward the client's chair. She parted her red lips in a dazzling smile, crossed in front of the desk, and, with a flash of sleek nylon-clad legs, sat down. I noticed, suddenly, that the room had become subtly scented with perfume.

"You're Mrs. Laughton—I believe my secretary said?"

"Yes. Surprised?"

I moved my eyebrows upward and looked blank. "Should I be?"

"Of course." She smiled again and, as she crossed her knees, gave a series of smoothing pats to her skirt.

"Why?"

"You're a private investigator, aren't you?"

"That's what—"

"I know"—she made a small moue—"that's what the sign on your door says. I'm not such a bad detective myself, am I?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's see." She bared a slender wrist and glanced at a jewelled baguette watch. "You called on my husband at a quarter to eleven. It's now one-thirty—and here I am. I think it's pretty clever of me."

"Look, Mrs. Laughton. As far as I know, I've never seen your husband. Furthermore—"

"Please, Mr. Stille. I know how you must feel. But I happened to be standing near a window and I distinctly saw you step out of your car. It's a black Ford sedan, license number A12-169. My husband took you into his study with him, and you were there for nearly an hour."

"Evidently you have a friend at the license bureau."

"Perhaps I have."

"Well, exactly what do you want?"

She leaned forward slightly and gave me the full benefit of her large, lovely eyes. "I want to know the nature of your business with my husband."

"I'm a *private* investigator, Mrs. Laughton."

"But I'm his wife, Mr. Stille. I have a right to—"

I SHOOK my head. "Sorry. I couldn't possibly discuss my conversation with your husband without his permission. Besides, I think you'd be disappointed. It was business, you know."

"Oh."

"Do you habitually take this sort of an interest in your husband's affairs?"

"Well, no. It's just that, lately, he's been acting rather strange." Her eyes stopped being charming, and, with an ease too facile not to have been practiced, became imploring. "I wondered if something was worrying him."

I smiled disarmingly. "I'd trade places with your husband any day, Mrs. Laughton. When a man has a lovely wife, plenty of money, a beautiful home—what in the world is there for him to worry about?"

"Thank you, Mr. Stille. You said that very nicely." Relaxing, she shifted her legs and searched through an expensive snake-skin purse for a cigaret. It was a large purse and she seemed to have enough accessories in it for an overnight trip. She finally found a package of Old Golds and offered it to me. I shook my head and held a match for her. She drew smoke into her lungs, arched her neck a little, and exhaled two thin threads of smoke from her nostrils. Then she gave me a frank, appraising glance.

"As I understand it, then, Mr. Stille, the relationship between you and your clients is entirely confidential?"

"That's right."

"Like, say, that between a lawyer and his client?"

"Exactly."

"And no one could make you break that confidence?"

"Not through any legal means, if that's what you mean. The courts have ruled that such communications are privileged."

"Umm-hmm." She nodded thoughtfully, drew deeply on the cigaret, then studied the furnishings of the office critically. I watched her eyes touch the green filing cabinet, the customer in the corner, the papers on my desk, the Varga calendar on the wall. She stubbed out the cigaret abruptly and, as though she had made an important decision, leaned toward me. "I want you to make an investigation for me, Mr. Stille. Will you?"

"I'll be very glad to, providing it isn't inimical to any of my present clients."

"Providing it isn't what?"

"I mean, I couldn't ethically undertake to do anything which might conflict with the interests of any of my other clients."

"Oh. I'm sure this couldn't. I want you to find someone for me."

"A man?"

"Yes." She hesitated, then rushed on. "His name is Berle Nathan. He used to be sort of an assistant to a lawyer named Nicholas Fenske."

"Where was Fenske located?"

"His office was in the old Capital Building. That was quite a few years ago, of course."

"Was Nathan a lawyer?"

"I don't think so. He was a clerk then. Maybe he's a lawyer now."

"When did you last see him?"

"It was"—she paused, bit her lip fleetingly—"a little over nine years ago."

"I see." I wrote the information

down. "How soon do you want this information, Mrs. Laughton?"

"As soon as you can get it."

"I'll do the best I can, but it may take several days. Incidentally, what was your maiden name?"

"Kelly. Why?"

"Just curiosity. I thought at least one of your parents was Irish."

"You did?"

"Yes. You have very lovely skin, you know. The Irish seem to be the only ones blessed with it."

"You're rather nice, Mr. Stille." Her smile was one of pleasure this time. "I'm glad I came to see you."

"I'm glad, too, Mrs. Laughton. And I'll do my best to locate Mr. Nathan. As soon as I learn something, I'll phone you."

"That'll be fine." She pushed around in her purse again and brought forth a checkbook and a small fountain pen. "I suppose one usually gives a—retainer, isn't it?"

"It would simplify our bookkeeping."

"How much shall I make the check for?"

"I charge twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses. The minimum charge is two-fifty."

SHE filled in the date and my name, then hesitated and looked up at me. "If I paid you twice as much, could you get the information for me in half the time?"

I blinked rapidly and said: "Possibly. At least, I could afford to use twice as many men."

"That's what I want you to do, then." The tip of her tongue moistened her lips fleetingly. "I'll make this out for a thousand dollars. That ought to be enough, don't you think?"

"I'm certain it will be—and I'll see that you get rapid action."

She dropped the check on the desk and, uncrossing her legs, stood up. Her voice was almost affectionate as she said she hoped she'd be hearing from me soon. I got up and walked to the door with her. As she left, she held out her hand and let me possess it for a moment. It wasn't the sort of clasp I expected from a lady.

Going back to my desk, I buzzed for Helen.

"Allen hasn't shown up yet, has he?"

"No, Mr. Stille."

"Did the prints arrive?"

"Yes. I gave one to Fred."

"Good. How did you like Mrs. Laughton?"

Helen sniffed. "She's a bleached blonde."

"Tsk-tsk!" I clicked my tongue.

"She's probably getting gray and—"

I shook a finger at her. "You are speaking about a client, Helen."

"Client—*she* is?"

"Yup." I nodded toward the check. "Another thousand bucks, believe it or not. Didn't you hear the cash register jingle?"

"But—isn't it unethical, or something, for you to—"

"Not in this case. She wants us to locate a former lawyer's clerk by the name of Berle Nathan." I grinned. "She didn't know it, of course, but, if this fellow is now a practicing attorney, she could have looked up his address as easy as one-two-three."

"She could? How?"

"By going to practically any library and consulting a legal directory. Suppose you run over to Kahl's office and see if Nathan is listed. Try the Sullivan and Gunthorp directories first. If he isn't in either of those, check the *United States Legal Register*. And, if he isn't listed *there*, see if you can find an address for a Nicholas Fenske. He's the guy Nathan used to work for."

"Do you want me to do that right now?"

"Yes. Pick up a couple cartons of coffee on the way back, will you?"

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

Allen Ross wandered in while Helen was out. He was almost too good-looking to be a detective. Tall, well-built, wide-shouldered, and with the boyish sort of expression which makes women forget they're married. His short, curly, black hair may have had something to do with that effect, but principally, I think, it was the way he used his brown-black eyes.

"Hiya Bob."

"Hello, Allen. Come in and sit down."

"What's up?"

"Job." I waited until he settled into the chair.

"I hope this isn't another one of those co-respondent things."

"IT ISN'T—at least, I don't think it is." I paused to sort things out in my own mind. "This is sort of a flyer. I don't know exactly what I want you to look for, but here's the set-up." I gave him the gist of the Adams-Laughton tangle. "Pick up everything you can about Mrs. Laughton. Her maiden name was Shirley Kelly. They may have a servant or two; if so, try to find out who her friends are, where they've lived in the past, where her parents live, things like that."

"Sounds interesting."

"Yeah. She walked out on Laughton about nine years ago. Stayed away a couple months, then came back. She evidently consulted a lawyer about that time, too. Fenske—used to be in the old Capital Building. Right now she's trying to locate one of Fenske's assistants. Something's in the wind, and I'd like to know what it is."

"What sort of babe is she?"

"A looker. See that you keep your nose clean."

"Sure." Allen gave me one of his innocent looks. "Don't I always?"

"Save it for the customers, Allen. I know you like I do the numbers on my watch."

"Okay." Allen grinned unabashedly. "Anything else?"

"That's enough to begin with. If I think of any other angles, I'll let you know. Until then, keep feeding the information to me as often as you can. If I'm not in, give it to Helen."

"Right. Can you spare a few bucks for expenses?"

"For Chrissake, are you broke again?"

"You know how it is."

"Well, ask Helen to advance you twenty-five. She'll be back in a minute."

"That's swell, Bob. Thanks."

"You needn't thank me. I'm expecting you to earn it."

"Sure. Be seeing you."

"Yeah."

While waiting for Helen to return, I phoned Mrs. Clayton and assured her that I was working thirty-five hours a day for her. She reminded me that she wasn't getting any younger and that, if I didn't hurry up and hang something on her husband, she stood to lose a very desirable connection. I told her a woman with her personality and figure was good for at least another fifteen years. It was damned lie, but it made her feel better.

By the time I'd finished bandying words with Mrs. Clayton, Helen had returned and, judging by the muffled reports which seeped in from the reception room, had doled out twenty-five bucks to Allen Ross. When he left, Helen came in with the two cartons of coffee.

"Any luck, Helen?"

"I think so. There were only three Nathans listed—and one is a Berle."

"Good work! Where's he located?"

"His office is in Oak Park—suite 14, Victor Building."

I NODDED. "I figured he was probably still in this vicinity. Lawyers don't migrate as often as men in other professions. I suppose Mrs. Laughton looked for his name in the metropolitan telephone directory, didn't find it, and was stumped." Helen de-capped a carton of coffee and handed it to me. "How about Fenske?"

"He isn't listed. Mr. Kahl remembered the name, though. He said Fenske died several years ago."

"Good enough. It explains why Mrs. Laughton wants to contact Nathan. He probably assisted Fenske with a case in which she's interested. Wonder what the hell it was about?"

"Mr. Stille—"

"Yeah?"

"Is this all the information you're going to get for Mrs. Laughton?"

"Sure. All she wants to know is where Nathan is located. Why?"

"But—you aren't going to charge her a *thousand dollars* for *that*, are you?"

"No, not exactly." I grinned at her over the edge of the coffee container. "I'll have to refund half of it as unearned."

"You're going to charge her *five hundred dollars*?"

"I earned it, didn't I?"

Helen seemed shocked. "Why, it didn't take me fifteen minutes—"

"Look, Helen." I leaned back in my chair and wagged a finger at her. "Don't ever make the mistake of trying to be a God-damned altruist. Either a man makes a living—or he doesn't. If he's smart, he makes it by acquiring a little chunk of specialized knowledge

and retailing that knowledge for all the traffic will bear. That's the easy, sensible thing to do, and it makes the world go round."

"But—"

"Listen. Looked at from the inside, it seems like an inequitable arrangement. But consider it from another angle. Think about it, say, from Mrs. Laughton's viewpoint. She wants a particular piece of information. She doesn't know where to get it. Therefore, she comes to me and hires me to get it for her. It's a cash-and-carry arrangement, strictly speaking, and the information she gets is *worth* \$500 to her—in fact, it obviously is worth more than that, for she gave me double that amount."

"But, gosh, Mr. Stille!"

"Suppose you have a bad skin infection, Helen. You go to a drugstore, buy a lot of salve, but the condition gets worse. The first thing you know, you're worried. You go to a dermatologist over on Michigan Avenue and ask his advice. What happens? He glances at the infected area, writes a few words on a piece of paper, advises you to apply a certain solution twice daily. And that's that. It takes him two or three minutes—and it costs you twenty bucks for the glance and five bucks for the prescription."

"But that's entirely different!"

"No, it isn't. He's selling part of a small chunk of specialized knowledge. If he could get \$500 for that glance, he'd charge it. Instead, he keeps retailing the same information over and over. And, if he has a busy office, he may be able to sell that same practiced glance seventy or eighty times in a day, which, believe me, adds up to a hell of a lot of dough. It adds up to so much dough that it makes me seem like a piker."

"But a *doctor*—"

"It doesn't make any difference what sort of a racket a fellow is in, all he actually does is retail little hunks of specialized information. Bricklayers, detectives, lawyers, doctors, pickpockets, dressmakers—they're all doing the same thing. Think about it a while, Helen, and you'll see what I mean."

"I still think \$500 is a lot of money just for looking up an address in a book!"

"You're right, it is a lot of money." I grinned at her and finished the coffee. "But, it isn't too much."

CHAPTER VI

FRED MATSON phoned at four-thirty.

"That you, Bob?"

"Yeah."

"I think I've located Laughton."

"Nice going. Where is he?"

"It's this way. I got a list of art supply stores and, at the third one I canvassed, a clerk recognized Laughton's photo. He said they just finished framing a lot of pictures for him."

"Did you get Laughton's address?"

"Sure thing. He's living in a South State Street hotel, near Harrison. The Baker Hotel is the name of the joint."

"Where are you now?"

"At the Esquire Theatre on Oak Street."

"Where?"

"The Esquire Theatre. You know, on Oak Street."

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"This is where Laughton's pictures are. You see, the clerk at the store couldn't find Adams' address—that's the name he's using—but he remembered that the pictures had been delivered to the theatre. So I grabbed a cab and came out."

"Keep talking."

"First, I talked to the manager. He

said they make a feature of displaying local artists' work, and he took me up to a small gallery they've got on the mezzanine floor. They're twenty of Adams' pictures hanging on the wall."

"For Chrissake!"

"Yeah. Not bad at all, either. Anyway, the manager gave me his address."

"Good."

"What do I do now?"

"Are you in a telephone booth?"

"Hell, no. I'm in the manager's office."

"Well, sit tight. I'll be there in about ten minutes."

When I got to the theatre, Fred Matson was pacing moodily back and forth across the lobby, a cigaret dangling from his lips. He jerked his head when he saw me and came forward.

"I want to see those pictures, Fred."

"That's what I figured. They're on the mezzanine."

He led me across a long, heavily-carpeted lobby, up a flight of wide stairs, into a tastefully decorated space where, on two walls, groups of oil paintings had been hung. A small sign, lettered in black and white, announced: CHICAGO SCENES BY JOHN ADAMS. At the other end of the chamber, another sign said: LADIES.

The pictures had been framed in natural wood, and, as Fred said, they weren't bad. In fact, I thought several of them excellent. Laughton's technique included a lavish use of color and an extreme simplicity of composition. The effect was striking. One, depicting a Maxwell Street hotdog vendor, push-cart and all, had been executed with such realism that I could almost smell mustard and pickles. Another, showing an old woman wearily cranking an ancient music-box beneath a Halsted-Van Buren street-sign, had been done with great sympathy and telling effect. The others were similar

in mood and treatment. Judging by the number of SOLD stickers, the exhibit was a financial success.

"What'd you tell the manager, Fred?" I asked.

"Not much. I told him I wanted to buy one of the pictures. That's why he gave me the address."

"That all?"

"Well, we talked a bit. He's a nice guy. Young, but obliging. He says there has been quite a lot of publicity about the exhibit."

"Yeah?"

"Funny thing, though. He said Laughton didn't show up last night—and hasn't come in today, yet, either."

"So what?"

"Nothing, except that the artist is supposed to hang around during the exhibit. You know, in case someone wants to talk price. He was here every afternoon and evening until last night. And the manager has tried to get him on the phone several times, but his hotel says he isn't in."

"That's odd."

"He's probably off on a binge. That's the way these artists are. They get a few bucks, and right away they've got to have a party. Laughton must have—"

I HAD a sudden feeling—call it a premonition, if you like—that something was wrong. "Be quiet, Fred," I said. He looked at me, jerked his shoulders negligently, and stuck another cigaret into the corner of his mouth. I strode across the gallery two or three times, staring at the pictures and trying to capture as many clues to the personality of Frank Laughton as possible. Several things were obvious: He was sympathetic toward the down-trodden. Poor people attracted him. In a way, he was a crusader, for all his pictures were potent indictments of a society

which permitted such conditions to exist. In none of his pictures was there reference to drunkards or drinking.

"Let's get out of here, Fred," I said, making up my mind.

"Okay. Where're we going?"

"We're going to look in at his hotel. Something may have happened to him."

The Baker Hotel was a gray, four-story building in a honky-tonk district on South State Street. A pawnshop, a cheap lunchroom and a penny arcade occupied the street level. We pushed through a pair of swinging doors and ascended to the second floor. What passed for a lobby was merely a large green-calcimined room containing a dozen wooden chairs. On one side, an office had been constructed, consisting of a brown barricade, a panel of varnished pigeon-hole mail boxes, and a rack of brass key hooks. An aged, wizened clerk eyed us skeptically through a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles as we approached.

"Hello, Dad." I leaned one arm on the wooden counter.

The clerk nodded.

"Have you a John Adams staying here?"

"Yeh."

"What room is he in?"

"Eh?"

"I said, what room is Adams in?"

"You wanta see him?"

"That's right."

"He ain't in."

"How do you know?"

"It's my business to know, ain't it?"

The clerk's voice rose scratchily.

"Sure it is." I reached into my pocket and casually extracted a five dollar bill. I laid the bill on the counter, picture side up, and gently rubbed Lincoln's nose with my thumb. "I'd like to make sure, though. We're friends of his."

The clerk eyed the bill, moistened

his colorless lips, then extended a wrinkled hand. The bill disappeared. "You shoulda said that to begin with, mister. What can I do for you?" He leaned both arms on the counter and gave me a shrewd look.

"I'd like you to make sure Mr. Adams isn't in."

"I'm sure he ain't. Couple other people phoned, asking for him, and I buzzed him hard. If he'd been in, he'd of answered."

"He may have come in since then."

"I'd of seen him."

"Is there a telephone in his room?"

"You think this is the Palmer House? We ain't got but one phone on each floor."

"I see. When you buzz his room, he has to get up and go to an instrument in the hall. Right?"

"Yeh."

"If he were ill, he wouldn't feel like doing that."

"Adams ain't sick. He ain't never sick."

"Drunk, maybe?"

"He ain't the drinking kind. I tell you, mister, when he don't answer his buzzer, he ain't in."

"I'd like to take a look, just to make sure."

"I ain't allowed—"

I RAISED my brows and the old man hesitated. His fingers drummed the counter indecisively.

"I'll bet you another five bucks he's in his room," I said.

"Well—" With a cautious glance around the empty lobby, the clerk produced a skeleton key. "I gotta stay here by the phone," he explained apologetically, pressing the key into my hand. "It's 105—half-way down that hall there."

"Thanks."

"He ain't in, but you better knock

first."

"Sure thing."

The bare, dimly-lighted corridor was lined with flimsy, ill-fitting doors, each bearing tin numerals. The door of 105 was exactly like the others. I pressed an ear against it and listened. Nothing. Keeping my ear against the door, I rapped gently. No response. Glancing at Fred, I rattled the handle, twisted it. The door swung open, squeaking slightly. It hadn't been locked.

The room was about six-by-eight. A single curtainless window, facing State Street, admitted a pale square of daylight. There was a chair, a chest of drawers, a mirror, an iron cot.

"Christ!" Fred muttered.

"Yeah," I agreed dully.

We stood there, staring at the girl who was stretched across the cot. A wispy black-lace pantie concealed her hips, but the rest of her smooth white body was as bare as an angleworm's. A black-lace brassiere dangled from the head of the cot, and, over the back of the chair, a white terry-cloth housecoat hung. It had been tossed toward the chair carelessly. One of its pockets, I noticed, was torn.

Her face was partially obscured by a mass of tousled blonde hair, which billowed about her head and shoulders in a way which reminded me, incongruously, of some railroad's sleeping-car ads. Her arms, slim and white, were relaxed and natural—one curved gracefully upward around her head, the other at her side. She could have been asleep, but I didn't think so.

I gave Fred a warning glance. He nodded, looked up and down the corridor.

I stepped cautiously into the room and bent over the cot. She wasn't breathing. A faint scent of perfume rose to my nostrils as I gently touched

her arm. The flesh was cold. I glanced at Fred. He looked up and down the corridor again, nodded reassuringly.

With one finger, I carefully pushed the blonde hair away from her face. She'd been young, rather lovely—blue eyes, pert nose, a fine brow. The wound was close to the hairline at her left temple: a bruised, burned perforation marking the entrance of a small caliber bullet. Beneath the perforation was a tiny circular abrasion, the sort produced by impact of an automatic's retractor spring rod when held in direct contact with flesh. There was very little blood.

Pushing the blonde hair gently back over the wound, I stood there and eyed her moodily for a minute. She was about five-two, maybe five-three.

I slid one hand around her right wrist and lifted her arm. It moved easily, without any stiffness at all. She'd been dead for quite a while.

EVERY nerve in my body was suddenly as tense as a violin's C-string. My feet were anxious to get the hell out of there, but I made them wait until I'd felt under the pillow, looked beneath the cot, examined the pockets of the terry-cloth housecoat. There was a crumpled handkerchief, a small fold of make-up tissue, a lipstick, and a half-package of Luckies. I glanced at the ash-tray on the bureau—no ashes, no butts.

The bureau drawers contained an assortment of men's shorts and underclothes—all soiled, inexpensive. The closet—a couple suits, a worn pair of shoes.

"Okay, Fred. Let's move."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"Murdered?"

"Yeah. Shot in left temple. Probably a .25 automatic."

"Gee, imagine shooting stuff like that!" Fred licked his lips, a little nervously.

"They have to die sometime."

I locked the door, wiped the knob with my handkerchief, and pushed Fred toward the lobby. The clerk was leaning on his counter, waiting.

"Wasn't in, was he?" he crowed eagerly.

"No, damn it." I tossed the key toward him. Then, scowling, I fluttered a five dollar bill toward his waiting hand. "I'd have sworn he was either sick or sleeping."

"Ha! Knew all the time he wasn't in!" The clerk chuckled so hard his steel-rimmed spectacles threatened to jiggle off his nose. "Guess I know what's going on!"

"You sure do, Dad. See you later."

"Sure. Any time!"

Fred plucked my arm as soon as we got to the street. His freckled face was tight and worried. "What're you going to do, Bob?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"You're going to report it, ain't you?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. First, we're going back to the office."

Helen's typewriter was clickity-clacking like mad when we entered the office. She looked up, smiled, continued to the end of a sentence.

"Any calls, Helen?" I asked automatically.

"No, Mr. Stille. But a messenger brought this for you." She handed me an envelope bearing the return address of Dun & Bradstreet.

"I want you to get John Adams on the phone, Helen. Tell him to come here immediately."

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

"If he wants to know why, tell him you don't know. Just tell him that I want to see him—immediately—and

that it's important."

"All right." She nodded and began to dial a number.

"Come in and close the door, Fred."

I went to my desk and sat down. There weren't any cigars in the desk drawers, but Fred passed me a cigaret. I don't like cigarets, but I lit it and sucked the smoke into my lungs.

"You're going to *have* to report it, Bob," Fred said after awhile.

"I suppose so." I smoked in silence, then, sighing, I reached for the phone. I dialed the detective bureau's number. "There's a dead woman in the Baker Hotel on South State Street," I said slowly, keeping my voice toneless. "She's in room 105."

"What? Say that again!"

"You heard me—Baker Hotel, Room one-oh-five."

AS I hung up, Fred tried to grin. He wasn't very successful. "That's that," he said.

"Yeah. Notice anything wrong with the room?"

"Well, it wasn't my idea of a bridal suite."

"Anything else?"

"It was fairly clean. All the other flophouse rooms I've seen—"

"Don't be afraid of straining yourself, Fred. Give it some thought. What was wrong?"

"Hell, I don't know. I was worried about someone coming and—"

"Worried, my eye. You were looking at the babe."

"Well, natch. Weren't you?"

"Laughton is an artist. Artists have to have easels, paint, brushes, all sorts of equipment. Get the idea?"

"There wasn't any of that in that room."

"Right. Odd, isn't it?"

"Maybe the clerk made a mistake. Maybe it wasn't the right room."

"No, I think it was Laughton's room, all right. At least, it wasn't *her* room. There weren't any knick-knacks around. Whoever lived there was a man, and the odds are in favor of the clerk's knowing what he was talking about."

"You're probably right, Bob. But—"

"I want you to find out where Laughton's studio is located, Fred. He must have another room someplace where he keeps all his paraphernalia and paints his pictures. Also, get a line on his friends, find out who he associates with—men and women. Get started right away."

"What about Laughton?"

"The cops will take charge—pronto. We needn't worry about him."

"I see what you mean. Okay, Bob, I'm on my way."

"Tell Helen to come in."

"Sure."

Fred hurried out and, a moment later, Helen entered, notebook in hand. "You wanted me, Mr. Stille?"

"Yes. Did you get hold of Laughton?"

Helen nodded. "He said he'd be here about five-thirty."

"Fine. I want you to go to the library."

"The public library?"

"Yes. Some of Laughton's pictures are being exhibited at the Esquire Theatre and I understand he's been getting quite a bit of publicity. He's using the name of John Adams. Look through the newspapers and see what you can find. Better take your notebook along so you can jot down dates and things. That clear?"

"I think so. Do I look through all the newspapers?"

"You can skip the *Times* and the *Herald-American*. They don't give much space to that sort of stuff. Stick to the *Tribune*, the *Sun*, and the *News*

—and check back at least two or three weeks. Keep an eye out for pictures."

"All right. I'll do that right away."

Tearing open the envelope Howard Bear had sent, I read through several pages of closely-typed statistics dealing with the rapid financial growth of the Triple D Chemical Company. Substantially, it confirmed Adams' statements. Until approximately nine years ago, the company had been a mere name with few assets. It had grown in leaps and bounds, and, at present, had an excellent credit rating. Property owned by the company included a modern five-story brick factory, a fleet of six trucks, and a smaller frame building used for storage purposes. The buildings and contents were insured for \$185,000. Frank Laughton, the report concluded, was sole proprietor.

CHAPTER VII

I COULD tell by Adams' face that he didn't like being summoned to my office. He stalked in, his blue eyes hard and cold.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Stille?"

"Sit down." I gestured toward the client's chair, but he continued to stand in front of the desk, his body stiff with irritation.

"I haven't much time, Mr. Stille, and I particularly want you to know that I resent the attitude manifested by your secretary. She refused to give me any enlightenment at all regarding the reason for—"

"I said sit down, Mr. Adams." I gave him a hard look and jerked my head toward the chair. "I told her to tell you that it was important. It is. She couldn't tell you more than that because that's all she knew."

"Well!" He stood there a moment,

glaring at me, then stepped stiffly around the desk and sat down. "I can't imagine anything so important as to necessitate your summoning me here in so dictatorial a fashion. I hired you to—"

"You hired me to locate a man who, you claim, is Frank Laughton. I undertook the job in good faith—and I intend to complete it. I'm sorry, of course, if my request that you come here immediately seemed rude or unnecessarily forceful, but several things happened this afternoon which I thought you should know about as soon as possible."

"Your secretary could have—"

"No, she couldn't. She did exactly what I told her to do. And I think you'll agree, in a moment, that my action was the only one possible under the circumstances."

"You've found Laughton, then?"

"In a way, yes. I know where he has been living."

"Where?"

"In a cheap hotel on South State Street. Specifically, in Room 105 of the Baker Hotel. He seems to be achieving fame as a painter. If you're interested, you can see some of his pictures at the Esquire Theatre. They're on exhibit there."

"That's good work, Mr. Stille. Naturally, I'm glad to get such prompt results. But I still don't see why you couldn't have given me this information on the phone."

"Because there's a complication."

"Yes?"

"I think Laughton will be spending the night in jail."

"For God's sake, why?"

"A girl was found in his room this afternoon. Murdered."

Adams' face changed color. "You mean—?"

"I mean that a girl, a pretty girl

wearing very little clothes, was found shot to death in Laughton's room. The police are certain to round him up, and, if he hasn't an air-tight alibi, he'll be locked up and charged with the girl's murder."

"Good God!"

"Yeah."

"But, Mr. Stille! Did he really . . . kill this . . . girl?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I don't even know who the girl is. All I know is that she's dead—and that she was in Laughton's room."

"But—"

"It complicates things, doesn't it?"

"YES. Certainly." Adams sat there, gnawing at his underlip, a bewildered expression on his long face. I gave him time to think things out. The more he thought, though, the more bewildered he became. "Isn't there *something* to be done?"

"Nothing I can think of. All we can do is sit around and wait for the newspapers to tell us what happens. If the police pick up Laughton and charge him with murder—well, he's liable to be tied up for some time. Even if they *don't* pick him up"—I jerked one shoulder—"I don't imagine you'll care to switch places with him."

"No. No, of course not!"

"Either way, it looks as though you're going to continue as Frank Laughton."

"But—good God!" Alarm filled his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"I've been counting on resuming my original identity. I've made . . . certain plans."

"You'll have to cancel them."

"But—I can't?"

"Why not?"

"I—" Adams swallowed painfully, then said: "I've arranged to get mar-

ried."

"Well, for—!" I stared at him incredulously. "You mean you *told* some woman you were going to marry her?"

"Yes. I know it sounds impetuous, Mr. Stille, but I'm very much in love with her—and I didn't want to put it off any longer."

"But you had no reason to think Laughton could be found quickly. Furthermore, you don't know whether he'd be willing to cooperate with you."

"I know." Adams raised and lowered his shoulders helplessly. "But I've made up my mind. I'm not getting any younger. I want to marry the woman I love before it's too late."

"Who is this woman?"

"She's—no matter. I'm sure—"

"Listen, Mr. Adams. You've told me everything else. You may as well give me the whole picture. If I'm to be of any use to you, I've got to know what's going on."

"I suppose you're right." Adams sighed. "Her name is Harriet Van Drew. She's a fine person. Good family."

"Is she a blond, about five feet two inches in height?"

"No. She's rather tall—and a brunette."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Why?"

"Never mind. It isn't anything important. When did you plan on marrying Miss Van Drew?"

"Shortly."

"How soon is that?"

"In a week or so."

"You really are in a hurry."

"Yes. I've been wanting to do this for quite awhile."

"Does she know about your role as Laughton?"

"No. As soon as I met her, I knew she was the woman I wanted. I gave her my real name—John Adams."

"She doesn't know about Laughton?"

"Nothing at all. She doesn't live in Chicago, and, as far as I know, hasn't ever heard his name."

"Where does she live?"

"In Milwaukee."

"How about Mrs. Laughton. Does she suspect that you're interested in another woman?"

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm sure she doesn't."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Well, she isn't the sort of woman who'd keep silent. She'd have said something."

"You must be very clever, Mr. Adams. I don't think I could successfully live with one woman and carry on an active romance with another. Not, that is, without one of them suspecting."

"MRS. LAUGHTON and I haven't been intimate for some time. She has her friends, and I have mine. Actually, I'm a source of income—and that's all. Since I make frequent business trips to Milwaukee—well, it hasn't been difficult."

"I see." I couldn't help grinning briefly. "Well, it looks to me as though your difficulties are about to begin."

"We've got to do something."

"There's one possibility that occurs to me. But that's about all it is—a possibility. The chances are several thousand to one against it."

"Mr. Stille, if it's anything that money—"

"Money might help, but it's a matter of luck more than anything else." I nodded thoughtfully. "If Laughton avoids being picked up by the police, and if, in the meantime, the police find the real murderer—assuming, of course, that *he isn't* the murderer—well, under those circumstances, you

might get him and persuade him to see things your way. I don't think there's much chance of things falling that way, though."

"Is that the *only* way?"

"I can't think of any other."

"Then that's what we've got to do!"

"Don't let your hopes rise, Mr. Adams. The police have a good organization. The chances are that he has already been picked up."

"The papers are full of cases where men have avoided the police for years. I'm sure—"

"They were experienced criminals. Laughton is not only inexperienced—he may not even know they're looking for him. And, with that beard, he's a marked man. He wouldn't be able to walk a block without some cop recognizing him."

"Then he must be warned. Get to him, Mr. Stille, and see that he remains under cover." Adams sprang to his feet and paced excitedly back and forth in front of the desk. "Explain things to him. I'm sure he'll understand and cooperate. In the meantime, find out who killed that girl. Find out if—well, if he's involved in any way. But warn him and convince him that he has got to avoid arrest."

"Sounds easy, doesn't it?"

"You know ways and means, Mr. Stille. I have the utmost confidence in you."

"I suppose you know that, if Laughton is a murderer, our conspiring to conceal him would make both of us criminals? We'd be accessories after the fact."

"Surely a man in your line of business is used to taking chances. You've bucked the law before, Mr. Stille, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have." I gave him a slow look. "But never without good reason. In this case, I think it'd be smarter to

sit back and see what happens. Before I stick my neck out, I'd like to know who was murdered, what she was doing in his room, and what Laughton's alibi is. I'd like to talk to him and find out how he feels about things. Then, if he says he isn't guilty, I might be willing to play ball. I might even be willing to cut corners and make faces at the cops." I smiled slightly and added: "I'd expect liberal compensation, of course."

"Naturally," Adams shook his head impatiently. "I told you that money was of no object. Find out if Laughton has been arrested. If he hasn't, find him before the police do—and reason with him."

"Then what?"

"Then find out who *did* murder the girl. Get the thing cleaned up as quickly as possible. Do whatever is necessary—and don't worry about expense."

WE KICKED the idea back and forth for another ten minutes, at the end of which time Adams had my promise to do everything humanely possible and I had another check, this one for \$5,000. When he left, I felt quite proud of myself.

I'd forgotten all about Helen. It was nearly six-thirty and I was sitting there smoking another cigar when the door banged open and Helen hurried in.

"Here—here they are, Mr. Stille!" She was breathing heavily, as though she'd been running, and her reddish hair glistened with tiny drops of rain.

"Good God, Helen, I didn't realize it was so late. You didn't have to bring that stuff back here. Why didn't you telephone?"

"I didn't stop to think. But it's all right, Mr. Stille." She dropped her notebook onto my desk and turned

back toward the door. "I—I'm supposed to meet a friend, and I'm already ten minutes late."

"Run along, then. And thanks a lot!"

"Good-night!"

She hurried out, pausing only to close the door quietly. Nice kid, I thought, reaching for the notebook. She had done a thorough job. The *Sun*, *Tribune* and *News* had each carried an item to the effect that an exhibit of modern paintings by a local artist, John Adams, was open to the public at The Little Gallery of the Esquire Theatre. Helen had copied the items in full, although they were very similar. None of the items mentioned Adams' address, and none of the papers had considered the occurrence important enough to warrant use of a photograph.

I was stubbing out my cigar, preparatory to calling it a day, when the phone rang. Picking up the receiver, I grunted a hello into it.

"Is that you, Bob?"

"This is Fred."

"What's up?"

"Have you heard the news?"

"Probably not. I've been sitting here ever since you left."

"That's what I thought. They've identified the girl."

"Yeah?"

"Her name was Vivian Boyd and she was a dancer. She lived at the hotel, in a room down the hall from Laughton."

"Where did she do her dancing?"

"At the burlesque theatre near Van Buren Street—The Paris."

"A stripper?"

"Yes. At least, that's what the report is."

"How about the gun. Did the cops find it?"

"Not yet."

"Did they nab our friend?"

"NO, BUT Lieutenant Farley has ordered him brought in for questioning. The room is sealed and a cop is warming a chair in the lobby, in case Laughton wanders in."

"You're sure they haven't picked up Laughton yet?"

"Positive. I talked to one of the sergeants, and he said Farley was raving because, apparently Laughton has never had a photograph taken. He ordered every tall, bearded man in the city stopped for identification."

"Was this dancer a friend of Laughton's?"

"I guess you might call her that. She stayed with him, off and on."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's kind of odd. According to one of the maids, this Boyd girl spent a lot of time with Laughton, but just now and then. She has a husband someplace—not in Chicago. Get the picture?"

"Go on."

"They were plenty thick, sometimes for as long as a week or two, then they wouldn't be seen together for several months. In other words, it wasn't anything serious or regular. It was a casual, come-and-go affair."

"I see. Is that all?"

"There's one more thing. Did you ever hear of Ada St. Claire?"

"Yeah. She's another stripper."

"She's more than that. She's the star of The Paris."

"So what?"

"According to a tip I just picked up, she's the woman in Laughton's life."

"How so?"

"He married her six months ago."

"Laughton married *Ada St. Clair*?"

"I thought that'd jolt you. I got it straight from a girl in her show. She said Ada St. Clair has been financing him for years, but it wasn't until about

six months ago that she got around to marrying him."

"But, Christ—he's got a wife!"

"He sure has, the lucky boy."

"You don't—" I remembered that Fred didn't know about Shirley Laugh-ton.

"What's that, Bob?"

"Skip it. Are you sure the girl knows what she's talking about?"

"I think so. She'd had a few drinks, but it sounded straight to me. Besides, there wasn't any reason for her to invent it."

"Yeah. Thanks for calling."

"Okay, Bob. See you in the morning."

"Yeah."

CHAPTER VIII

THE facade of the Paris Theatre was a riotous combination of blazing lights, splashes of color, and eye-bugging photographs which showed shapely girls in various and tantalizing stages of undress. A glittery sign proclaimed that Ada St. Clair, The Blond Bomber, was appearing for a limited time in the greatest road show ever to be presented—SCANDALOUS SCANTI-TIES. Lesser signs advised prospective customers that 20—BEAUTIFUL GIRLS—20 were appearing continuously. All seats—25c.

The old woman behind the ticket window clutched at my quarter and, hardly lifting her eyes from the pulp magazine she was reading, pushed a worn ticket toward me. A thin, shifty-eyed youth at the door accepted the ticket, unenthusiastically waved me inside. I couldn't find an aisle seat, so I climbed over someone's knees and sat down about eight rows from the stage.

A tinny orchestra was working determinedly toward a crescendo. The

piano, trumpet and drums meshed into a furious wave of sound which smashed against the walls and reverberated with deafening effect. A clarinet climbed raucously up—up—up, louder and faster, then plummeted only to rise higher and higher again. At the peak of its wail, the soiled blue curtains of the stage opened to reveal the swaying figure of a not-so-young girl. She wore a tight, curve-revealing gown of once-white satin, and she carried a white-fur muff which, with practiced ease, she flourished trickily. Her smile was cool and disinterested, but her voice, as she began to sing, was a well-modulated contralto.

"I'm just a dancing sweetheart,

That's all I seem to be,

While I dream of love and a real romance,

All they're thinking of is another dance. . . ."

The girl's body began to weave, and, as she came to the end of the stanza, she began to promenade the stage in a bouncing, exaggerated step which gave her well-padded hips a rhythmical, to-and-fro motion. Cheers and whistles burst from the audience as, raising one arm coyly and hiding her face behind the muff, she unfastened her gown and let it slip to the stage. The orchestra began to beat its brains out. Parading, she exhibited a spangled brassiere and a rhinestoned pantie, each of which cunningly accentuated the area they were supposed to conceal.

"Take 'em off!" a raucous, laughing voice shouted.

"Yeah! Take 'em off!" The cry rippled challengingly through the rows of seats.

THE girl wriggled her hips, shook her long, blond hair sensuously, and flashed her white legs. The blare of the orchestra increased, approaching

frenzy, as she paused, winked suggestively, and rotated her navelled belly toward the cash customers. The spangled brassiere fell away. The audience sighed disappointedly, for she wore another of some thin, mesh material. With a good-natured grimace, she unfastened the rhinestoned pantie, moved her hips voluptuously until it slipped and fell about her ankles. The audience moaned, frustrated by a narrow, jewelled G-string.

Concealing her breasts with a clever posturing of her arms, she sang the concluding lines of her theme song:

“‘Dearest, I love you’, they croon
in my ear,

It’s only the words of a tune that
they hear.

I’m just a dancing sweetheart,
And NOBODY cares for me. . . .”

Her voice quivered plaintively over the last words and, flinging away the mesh brassiere, she revealed for an instant the dark, pointed nipples of her breasts. Then, as though the revelation had been an accident, she whirled and fled behind the curtain. The applause which rolled through the theatre was tremendous. Blond Bomber, indeed, I thought.

The audience began to thin out, ignoring a pair of comedians who were desultorily trying to capture its attention. I climbed into the aisle and went backstage, where, in consideration of a dollar bill, a moronic-looking stagehand showed me the way to Ada St. Claire’s dressing room.

I knocked. An impatient, contralto voice called: “Come in, for God’s sake!”

Opening the door, I saw Ada St. Claire, still wearing the jewelled G-string but nothing else, sitting in front of a wide, messy dressing table. She was brushing her silvery blond hair with a rhythmical stroke which caused

her bare breasts to move provocatively. I gasped, I suppose, for she glanced toward the door, raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch, and said: “Well, who are you?”

“My name is Robert Stille.”

She looked away disinterestedly and concentrated on her hair. I pulled a chair near to her dresser and sat down. She wasn’t really pretty. She was closer to forty probably, than to thirty-five, but, even under the bright dressing-table lights, that was just a guess. The greasy make-up which covered her face was thick and expertly applied, concealing the paths which smiles leave when they go.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I’m a private investigator.”

“Oh?” She gave me another glance, this one a little more interested, then finished brushing her hair and reached for a thin cotton housecoat which pictured gaudy red flowers on a black background. She slipped it over her shoulders and fastened it carelessly. Then she said: “So what?”

“One of your friends was found dead this afternoon—at the Baker Hotel.”

“Vivian?” She reached for a crumpled nylon stocking and ran her arm into it, as though searching for a snag. “She wasn’t a friend. She just worked here.”

“You knew her pretty well, didn’t you?”

“Not very.” With a sudden, irritated gesture, she flung the stocking onto the dresser. “Mamie is the girl you want to see. She’s at the end of the hall.”

“I’d rather talk to you.”

“Mamie knows more about Vivian than I do. She was her best friend. They were always beating their gums to each other about something.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to her later. Right now, I’m interested in you.”

"Why?"

"Because the cops think your husband killed her."

I HADN'T intended to say it that way, but, as I said it, I expected her to be startled. She wasn't. All she did was twist her lips a little and ask: "How'd you know he's my husband?"

"That isn't important. I'm pretty sure it's true—and it'll save a lot of time if you'll simply admit it and let me go on from there."

She shrugged slightly. "It's true—but he didn't kill Vivian."

"How do you know?"

"He hasn't been near his room for two days. According to the cops, Vivian was killed last night."

"How do you know he wasn't there?"

Her lips smiled. "I know. Take my word for it."

"That's different." A sniff escaped her lips. "The hell with them. I don't give a damn what they think."

"Listen, Miss St. Claire. This is more important than you think. I'm not a cop. And I really don't give a damn who killed Vivian Boyd. I've been hired to protect your husband and I don't like this business of a dead girl being found in his bed. I especially don't like the way he has disappeared, because, to the police, it looks like an admission of guilt."

"The hell with the cops. John didn't do it."

"I'm glad to hear it, but I'd still like to know where he was at the time Vivian was killed. And I'd like to know where he is now."

"What do you mean—you've been hired to protect him?"

"Exactly that. I've been paid a large fee to see that nothing happens to him."

"Who's paying you?"

"I can't tell you that. All I can do is assure you that it's for your husband's best interests."

"None of John's friends have any money. They couldn't pay you a big fee."

"He has a wealthy friend whom you don't know about. This friend has been worried about him."

"That's news to me." The way she moved her lips, I knew she thought I was the biggest liar ever born. "I've known him nearly nine years, and he's never had a nickel of his own. Where the hell has he been keeping his wealthy friend?"

"Your husband didn't know about him; at least, I don't think he knew he was wealthy. You see—" I stopped, adding and subtracting the derisive way she was watching me. "You think I'm making this up as I go along, don't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"No. Look, do you know Milton Kahl, the lawyer? He represents a lot of show-people."

"Never heard of him."

"Do you know Manny Levinson, who owns the Globe Inn on Clark Street?"

"I know Manny."

"Good. Manny has the reputation of being a square-shooter. I wish you'd phone and ask him about me."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Robert Stille."

"All right. I'll call him." She opened a drawer and poked around in it. "I thought I put—"

"Here's a nickel, if that's what you're looking for."

"Thanks." She took the coin and, without bothering to fasten the housecoat properly, left the room. She was gone about five minutes.

"Did you get him?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say?"

She didn't look at me, but she smiled a little. "He said you were no good."

I GRINNED. "That's a recommendation, coming from Manny."

She sat down at the dressing table again and stared at herself for a moment. Then she gave me a level glance. "He said you were clever, that I should be careful."

"The guy must like me."

"He also said I could take your word, that anything you told me would be on the level."

"That ought to make you feel better."

"It does." Her smile was a little more relaxed as kicking off her shoes, she stretched her attractive legs and wriggled her red-tipped toes. I noticed, automatically, that the polish on both her great toes was chipped a little. Somehow, that killed the last shred of glamor about her.

"Well, let's start over, then," I said. "Where was he last night?"

"He was at his studio. Painting a picture."

"Were you with him?"

"No, but I know he was there."

"You can't be sure unless you were with him."

She shook her head. "You don't know John. When he's doing a picture, he doesn't let anyone or anything interfere. I know he was painting, and I know he didn't go near the hotel."

"But—"

"Let me tell you." She glanced into the mirror, frowned slightly at herself, then looked back at me. "Some of his pictures are being exhibited at the Esquire Theatre. I suppose you know that."

I nodded.

"He'd been out there every day for a week, and he was sick of sitting

around, talking to a lot of so-called art lovers, discussing prices, things like that. I knew it irritated him and, between shows yesterday afternoon, I went out to see him. He was feeling pretty low, so I persuaded him to come out and have some coffee. We went to a drugstore and sat in a booth."

"What time was that?"

"About quarter after five."

"All right. Go on."

"We sat there and talked for awhile, and he began to feel better. I guess that's why John has stuck with me all these years. I'm the only woman who has ever understood him, and, just by talking to him, I made him forget about the exhibit and the people who had been annoying him." She paused. "Did you ever sit in a drugstore booth and look at people sitting at the fountain?"

"Only a couple thousand times."

"It's really funny. I'd seen them hundreds of times, myself, but I hadn't really *looked* at them. We were sitting there, and suddenly I noticed John wasn't listening to me any more. He was staring at a group of girls at the fountain. I turned around and looked at them. They weren't anyone I knew—just five girls, drinking cokes, and eating sandwiches. Then, all of a sudden, I really *saw* them. They were all a little over-weight, and, sitting on the stools, they bulged too much in the wrong places. They had their legs twined around the bases of the stools, their elbows on the counter, and they were talking excitedly, the way girls do. One of the girls, I remember, had loosened a shoe and was dangling it on her toes."

"I think I know what you're going to say. He thought it'd make a good picture."

"Yes. Using the back of a menu, he began to sketch them. Just roughly, you know, but even that was pretty

good, I thought. He was so excited about it that he refused to go back to the theatre. He said he had to paint the picture right away, while everything was fresh in his mind, so we got a cab and I dropped him off at his studio."

"Did you go in with him?"

"No. When he's painting, he doesn't want anyone around. Besides, I had to get back here."

"How do you know he stayed there?"

"I KNOW John. When he gets an idea like that, he's like in a trance. He keeps at it until it's finished, no matter how long it takes. That's why I'm positive he hasn't been near the hotel. Everything he needed was at his studio, so that's where he stayed."

"Do you think he's still there?"

"He'll be there until the picture is finished."

"Have you talked to him today?"

"No. He wouldn't like being disturbed."

"You mean that, even after you learned Vivian had been found dead in his room, you didn't try to reach him, didn't send him a message?"

"I had no reason to. I know he didn't kill her, and I know he'd be upset if he were disturbed before he completed the picture."

"How long have you been married?"

"A little over six months."

"Are you living together?"

"Not exactly. I have an apartment on Lake Shore Drive, and, when he isn't painting, he spends a lot of time there. But he wanted to keep his hotel room."

"That's an odd arrangement, isn't it?"

"Some people might think so, but I understand John and it's all right with me. You see, Mr. Stille, John's an artist. A man of his temperament

shouldn't ever be tied to a woman. He has to have freedom to think, plan, sense things. If I made him live with me, he'd begin to feel cut off from the kind of people he loves. I wouldn't do that."

"Actually, then, he lives at the hotel and you live in an apartment of your own. At which place does he spend the more time?"

"He's at his studio, mostly. He sometimes doesn't leave it for a whole week. Then he either comes to my place, or he goes to the hotel, depending on how he feels."

"You're an unusual woman, Miss St. Claire. I can see you're well suited to each other."

"I hope so." She nodded. "I'm very fond of him. As a matter of fact, he's the only man I've ever met who wasn't gross, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"He says I'm the only woman he ever met who never tried to manage him, to make him into something he didn't want to be. It's a nice combination."

"Yes, I can see that." I nodded and asked: "Do you support him?"

"I suppose you'd call it that. I give him money for paints and materials, and I help him with his rent. Not that he's ever asked me for anything. He hasn't. Money doesn't mean a thing to him, so I just see to it that he has enough for his needs."

"How long have you been doing that?"

"For years. Ever since I saw him sitting in a chili parlor with a hungry look on his face." She smiled gently, remembering. "It was a little joint over on Harrison Street, and I was working down the street at The Star then. I went in for a cup of coffee and heard him asking the manager if there was anything he could do for a

little food. He looked about ready to collapse."

"Starved, I suppose."

"Yes. Anyway, I told the manager to give him a meal, and I sat there watching him shovel it down—ham butts and cabbage, I think it was. He ate everything in sight. Afterwards, I gave him a cigaret and talked to him. He told me about his painting. I always was a sucker for a touch, so I gave him a fiver before I left."

"That was the beginning, then?"

"Uh-huh. After that, I saw him around the neighborhood occasionally, and one day he asked me if I'd like to look at some of his pictures. I thought they were good. One was called *Hollow Thunder*. I bought it from him and had it framed."

"Did he tell you anything about his past?"

"NO. A girl in my business learns not to ask questions. Besides, I didn't give a damn. I liked him because he had ideals, because he was fighting for something beautiful. And because he didn't try to make me right away, the way most men do. You know, it was nearly two years before he got around to sleeping with me. And then—well, it was just one of those things."

"I see. How much of this did you tell the cops?"

"Are you kidding? I didn't tell them anything except that I didn't know where he was."

"Did you tell them you're his wife?"

"Christ, no! If they find out, I'll admit it. But I'm not going to volunteer any information, not to them."

"Incidentally, if I understand things right, you sort of drifted together at first. Then, after two years, you began to—"

"We started sleeping together."

"Yes. Well, you said you didn't get

married until about six months ago. Why didn't you do that years ago?"

"I didn't want to tie him down."

"Then why get married at all? Why didn't you continue—"

"You sound like a bright boy, Mr. Stille. You ought to be able to figure that out without me telling you. We wouldn't ever have bothered to go through a ceremony—except for one thing."

"What?"

"I wanted to have a baby."

"Oh. Yeah."

"I'm not getting any younger, you know. And I wanted to have a baby—*his* baby—before it was too late."

"You don't mean—"

"You guessed it. I'm quitting this racket in a few months; I'm going to see what it feels like to be a mother."

"For Chrissake!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I guess. Are you pregnant now?"

"Confidentially, yes. John doesn't know yet."

"Isn't that routine of yours a little strenuous for an expectant mother?"

"I'm as strong as a horse. I'll be all right for a few months."

"Won't being a father interfere with his freedom?"

"I don't think so. I've quite a bit of money saved, and, now that he's recognized as a painter, and is selling his pictures, it won't change anything. I'm sure of that."

"I just wondered." I sat there, thinking about what she'd said. She was a swell person, too swell to be hurt, but it made things as complicated as hell. I hadn't the heart to tell her about Shirley Laughton. Fortunately, she glanced at a clock and, with a little gasp, said it was almost time for her to do her act again.

"I'm greatly obliged to you," I said,

THE RAM OF ARIES

standing up. "There only one more thing: Where is his studio located?"

"I don't think he'd want me to tell you that, Mr. Stille. I've told you everything else, everything important. He'd resent—"

"I won't disturb him if he's painting. All I want to do is warn him before he makes the mistake of appearing in public. That beard of his makes him a marked man, you know."

"Well—"

"It's of the utmost importance, believe me. He wouldn't be able to do any painting in jail, which is where he's bound to land the minute a cop sets eye on him."

"All right. I'll tell you—but you've got to promise not to disturb him unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I give you my word."

"Do you know where Mandelbaum's hardware store is on West Madison Street?"

"Yeah."

"His studio is upstairs, on the third floor. There isn't any name on the door, but you can tell which one it is by a splotch of white near the floor. I dropped a jar of paint there one night."

"I'll find it."

"The door won't be locked. You can walk right in, if you like. But be quiet. If he's painting, he won't hear you."

"Okay. I'll make like a mouse."

She unfastened the gaudy housecoat and slipped out of it before I reached the door. As I turned to wave good-bye, she began powdering her breasts with a huge fluffy puff. The powder clouded about her body but it didn't obscure anything.

"Thanks," I said. "See you later."

"Oh, sure." She nodded casually and wielded the puff more briskly. "Any time."

(Continued on page 94)

JUSTICE FOR SWANS

ON MANY court calendars throughout the centuries there often appears strange, humorous oddities in the execution of justice. Such a case was that of Joseph Moses whose strange trial added a "lighter" touch to the notorious cases which annually appeared on the famous Newgate Court Calendar in England.

This case, innocently enough, involved the royal swans of the Serpentine River in exclusive Hyde Park. Early in January of the year 1811, the royal guards made the startling discovery that the royal swans were missing from the river and began their pursuit of the uncommon robber.

Not long afterwards, the guards traced the feathers to a dress shop owned by a Miss Ryder who shakingly confessed that her customer—Mr. Joseph Moses—had brought the feathers to her to be dressed as a decoration for his girlfriend's gown. With no time wasted, Moses was captured and committed for trial.

On April 5, 1811, the prisoner was finally brought up to the bar, charged with having received six swans' skins which, the irate judge persisted, Moses knew that he, himself, had stolen.

William Baker, the first witness, testified that he was the park-keeper at Hyde Park at the time of the "crime" and that he had discovered

the carcasses of four swans lying on the bank of the pond, with their skins having been stripped from them. Immediately after his discovery, Limerick, an officer on Bow Street in the vicinity of Hyde Park, brought six skins to Baker who, upon matching these to the carcasses, no longer doubted that they were the stolen skins.

Several other damaging witnesses to the defense followed in quick succession; Lack, another officer, related how he found the skins in Moses' possession; they were hanging in the prisoner's shop in Welbeck Street; a young woman-servant of Moses—Mary Bush—testified that her master arrived home one evening with a huge, bulky bundle beneath his arms. She further stated that she saw Moses take two skins out of the bundle and that he had received four more skins from a mysterious visitor the following night. Another witness—Hart—clinched the testimony when he swore that he saw the defendant near Hyde Park on numerous occasions and, suspiciously enough, always near the sacred swan ponds.

Although several persons took the stand in Moses' behalf, lauding the defendant's good character and reputation, and despite the numerous objections and pleas of the defense attorney, Moses received a large fine and imprisonment for six months.—*June Lurie.*



Till Death Do Us Part

by Marianne Myers

**When three women love the same man, it
must follow that Death will be at the wedding**

HE HAD stared at the circle of light so long the edges were beginning to blur. There was just he and the light, and all around them were the Voices. Voices that plead, bullied, challenged, and ripped his feeble defenses to shreds. Voices like jungle

beasts, crouching and waiting, and no lone man could stand for long against them. His eyes felt red-rimmed from the combination of sleeplessness and the glare of the light—it was incredible, that he, the eminent Dr. Robert Scott should be in this position. Unshaven,



As he jumped wildly to safety, the two cars crashed head-on, sending a shower of metal fragments cascading over the street

tired to the point of collapse—these were the things you read about in the papers . . . Police grill suspect . . . they couldn't be happening to him.

"I don't know . . . I don't know . . . I don't know . . ." The questions had been rolling over him like tidal

waves for hours; by now his answers were purely reflex. He must have dozed off, sitting in that straight-back chair, when he became aware of a new presence among the questioners. A smooth-easy going voice was saying:

"Here boy! This is no way to con-

duct this. Come on—switch off this spot—now we'll turn on the desk light. You can all go—Casey, you stay and take notes—Is this any better Dr. Scott?"

It took a full minute for Scotty's eyes to adjust. When the room gradually came into focus, he stared resignedly at his rescuer.

"I'm Inspector Regan—have a cigarette?"

Inspector Regan was so nondescript, he was almost outstanding. Sandy hair, average height, commonplace features, all combined to make a man you could lose in five seconds flat in a crowd. But his eyes were keen, cold and utterly merciless. Though his lips smiled, his voice joked, his eyes were always probing and ferreting. Scotty lit the cigarette, and gratefully relaxed.

"Now," Inspector Regan crossed his knees, and began companionably, "Let's have the straight story, Dr. Scott. Did you kill your wife?"

"Yes, I killed her." His voice was a monotone and not a flicker of expression crossed his features.

"Why? Go back to the beginning, and give it all to me."

The beginning . . . when does a murder begin, and when in the name of God does it end? There *was* one morning a month ago . . .

Everything was perfect. The ham still sizzled on the platter; the two eggs nestled side by side in soft contentment; yet Scotty couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. He flashed a clinical glance at his wife. Even as he did it, he wondered if he had ever looked at her except in a clinical way. Her hands were fluttering nervously over the tableware, her whole body drooped dispiritedly from the corners of her mouth to the slant of her shoulders. A casual observer would have guessed her to be fifty-four and thought

the guess a charitable one; actually she was twenty years younger.

"Amy," he suggested impulsively. "Isn't there something we could do? Maybe a vacation in California or how would you and Doris like to run up to New York and take in a few plays? I think it would do you a world of good to get away and have some fun for a while."

"Fun, ha!" The rasp in her voice had the same effect as fingernails drawn upward on a glass pane. A chill coursed his body and involuntarily his teeth set.

"You're the one that wants the fun. You'd like to see me in California, wouldn't you? I'm sick and not much good to you anymore—you wish I were dead, don't you, Robert? You wish it so much, it makes you sick just wishing, only you're too much of a coward to kill me. So you'll send me on a nice long trip, and you will have a wonderful time with all the pretty young girls." Her eyes assumed a shrewd expression.

"WHO is it this time, Robert? A nurse, or do you have a beautiful patient?" Her voice was falsely sweet. His face turned livid, and he stared at Amy until the whole background of the room turned red and her face alone resolved itself into a brilliant circle of white. Doris had risen from her chair and was gently pushing him back to a sitting position.

"Easy, Scotty!" You should know Amy by now. She's so jealous she can't help it—I'll ring for coffee."

. . . I'll ring for coffee . . . The words dully penetrated his consciousness until by sheer force of will, he tore his gaze away from his wife's face. With a start he realized that he had been clutching the table knife, clutching it so tightly his knuckles were white and his fingernails had bitten into his palm.

. . . My God, he thought a little

wildly . . . I might have killed her, if Doris hadn't been here. I would have killed her. I can't be alone with her any more.

Well, you fool, his common sense mocked him . . . what did you expect? You knew what she was when you married her; everybody warned you . . . Schizophrenia—split personality. She'll never be cured . . .

But . . . his thought rose up defensively . . . she was so little and helpless, and she did have periods when she was so wonderful. I thought perhaps kindness and understanding . . .

Common sense went relentlessly on . . . You were told—no cure . . . no cure, ever *ever* EVER . . .

He drew his thoughts up sharply. Amy was sitting silent—picking at her food, lost in the labyrinth of her own thoughts. The maid, her eyes rolling white against the black background of her face, was unobtrusively placing the cups of coffee. Scotty took a quick gulp of the scalding stuff, hoping the shock would divert his thoughts and enable him to pull himself together. If it wasn't a total success, it at least helped to the point where he could turn to Doris with a sheepish grin and remark:

"Forecast for today—still stormy."

Doris was thirty-six, dark and stocky. Probably no man had ever told her she was lovely, but she was so comforting. That's it, comforting, thought Scotty musingly. There's something about the way her eyes shine when she looks at you, and if sometimes her smile was a little too warm, and her touch a little too insistent—ignore it. After all, we all get lonely once in a while, and her life was no bed of roses smoothing out the rough spots in her sister's life . . .

SOMEHOW he had never thought of Doris as a woman, but only as a

sister-in-law—and if anyone had told him a month ago that Doris loved him, he would have laughed.

"There was, of course, another woman. Who was she, Dr. Scott?" Regan prompted.

"She had nothing to do with it—leave her name out of this!"

"Let's see," Inspector Regan made an elaborate pretense of consulting his notebook. "Her name is Karen Saunders, age twenty-two, and occupation, at the moment, waiting in the outer office to be questioned. Now, Dr. Scott, when did you become involved with Miss Saunders?"

It was a hard question to answer—because it is always hard to say exactly when a love affair starts. Some have their start in adolescent dreamings; some start . . .

The pencil had rolled under his desk, and he bent over to retrieve it. It was a yellow pencil—it's funny how your mind clings to such unimportant details. On a level with his eyes were the most beautiful pair of legs he had ever seen . . . and that claim is not lightly made by a woman's specialist. He lost a few minutes in sheer appreciation of Beauty and then came topside to get the complete picture. He had seen her a million times since, in every stage of dress and undress and every time he looked at her, the thrill was the same as the first time. Long and lithe, with tawny blonde hair that curled slightly at the edges. Her mouth was really too large for beauty, and her eyes were green and tilted slightly at the corners giving her a thoroughly diabolical air.

"Dr. Scott? I'm Karen Saunders. I've felt a little under the weather lately—I'm sure there's a lot you could do for me."

Her voice was husky and her intentions obvious. She hung her head slightly when she talked, and always

gave the impression she was looking up at him, even when he was seated. By a supreme effort of will-power, Dr. Scott managed to ignore the conversational overtones and retain his professional dignity. A routine examination had disclosed a slight case of influenza and he had hospitalized her for a few days. It was her fifth hospital day—five days of sparring with, and fleeing from, her frank pursuit . . .

As he walked thru the wide hospital doors, the antiseptic smell, mingling with the odors of breakfast—the excitement of doctors arriving, nurses bustling about with breakfast trays and the morning linen—internes stopping at the central desk—all contrived to banish instantly all memories of the early morning's unpleasantness. Amy and her eternal suspicioning—home was far away . . . maybe it never existed. Here was a new world; his world. He walked into the Doctors' room, shed his coat and hat and donned the grey smock staff men always wore when visiting their patients.

"Hi, Ed!" "Hello there, Scotty—how is your pneumothorax in 216?" The whole atmosphere of friendliness and interest rose up to engulf him. Even the maid mopping the corridor floor flashed him a smile bred in Erin. He caught himself whistling tunelessly as he walked into the chart room. His charts were laid on the desk. A very pretty nurse hovered about over-solicitously, but Dr. Scott never noticed. He was concentrating intently upon the records. A little more penicillin for 11—216 was doing O.K.; watch the temperature in 240, better give an intravenous there, but when he came to the chart for 218, he fingered it tentatively, snapped it shut without a glance, and started to make his rounds. An interne promptly attached himself, for which Scotty was profoundly grateful. He,

himself, lacked that human touch, that ready smile, the bright sayings internes always seemed to keep in stock supply.

Rounds were finally completed and he stood before 218. He hesitated a fraction of a second, cleared his throat and said to the interne:

"That will be all for today, thank you very much, Doctor," entered and the door swung shut behind him.

SHE looked just the same as yesterday, only more so, if possible. He didn't know exactly what change he had been prepared for—maybe it was just the drive of his subconscious clamoring for the enchantment to tarnish a little. God help both of them if it didn't. Tawny hair, perfect skin, and a figure created for Varga—but all those things were fairly commonplace. It was her three cornered grin and the way her eyes and her lips said:

"I love you, Scotty"; those were the things that had never happened to him before.

She must have sensed his attempt to regain his professional poise.

"Good morning, Dr. Scott," Her voice was husky with shades of laughter supplying the overtones. "You could kiss me good morning."

Her lips were moist and faintly parted. He sat on the edge of the bed, cast an apprehensive glance at the door, and kissed her. Kissing Karen was totally unlike anything he had ever known before. All the past and the future were obscure and unimportant—there was only this driving urgency and Karen—that was all that was important.

"You can go home today." He was pacing the room, fighting to regain his composure, and all the time he had the feeling she was laughing at him.

"That's great—simply great. I don't have any money and if I did have—I still wouldn't have any place to go. Do

you have any suggestions, Dr. Scott?"

"I have plenty of suggestions but I can't make them. You know I'm married, Karen. Even if she would divorce me, I couldn't risk a scandal in my professional life right now; and any divorce she dreamt up would be a muddy affair."

Her startling green eyes were fringed by black lashes as she looked up at him and said:

"I don't expect marriage, Scotty. I love you and I don't do anything half way—you name the time and the place and I'll be there."

SO, YOU see, Inspector Regan—that's how I became involved with Karen Saunders. We set up a small apartment near the hospital, and everything went fine for several months. Then one night, we'd been to a show; I was in my pajamas when the doorbell rang. I answered the door and there stood Doris. She didn't say a word—just stood and looked right through me for a minute, turned and walked down the stairs. I knew there would be hell to pay when I got home the next day and there was. I walked in about three-thirty the next afternoon, went directly to my study, and Amy followed me in.

"Well, it's about time you came home. What was it this time, Robert? Did a patient have twins or did you have to operate?"

I ignored her and concentrated on straightening my instruments. You probably remember that large instrument cabinet in my study. That is where I keep my reserve supply of instruments.

"Is Doris around?" I asked, almost too casually.

"No, Doris isn't around!" She was mocking every inflection, her voice falsetto. "But Doris was here, and she told me something I've suspected about

you for a long time, Robert. Since then, I've even found out her name—I know all about her," she ended on a high note of triumph.

"So?" I swung around and faced her. "What are you going to do about it, Amy?"

"She's a tramp." She continued as though she hadn't even heard the interruption. "No family background, no money, and not too much intelligence—but I've decided you can have your beautiful tramp—and I hope you'll be very happy."

This was too pat . . . but I couldn't figure the angle.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful, Amy—but what is the catch?"

Her calm deserted her and she was screaming.

"This is the catch—listen carefully to be sure you don't forget it. My divorce complaint is going to charge adultery, and I'm naming your precious Karen. It won't hurt her—she has no reputation to speak of, anyway. But it will drag you right down from your lofty pinnacle, Robert. You'll be the talk and the laughing stock of the hospital. It wouldn't surprise me if they even kicked you off the staff, by the time I get through with you. Years of work and talent will be wiped out in a fifteen minute court session, and you'll be right back at the bottom of the pile."

She paused for sheer lack of breath. My whole body was tense—my stomach was tied in knots. When, with that crafty gleam I had come to know so well . . .

"Of course, if you want to reconsider, and live here like a decent family man should—I could forget this whole ugly episode. I don't think Karen would love you quite so much if your position were gone, anyway. Think it over, Robert."

She turned to leave the room. In a

strangled voice I called.

"Wait, Amy. I have thought it over."

SHE walked back toward me, a smug, satisfied smile spreading over her face. I gripped the scalpel tightly behind me and as I drew near her whipped it out. She screamed.

"Robert! Don't for God's sake! You couldn't do this!" Her voice was hoarse from spent screaming. There was no turning back. I had to do it now. I picked out the jugular vein and sank the blade in up to the handle. The blood came out in a terrific spurt, completely covering the handle—I guess that's why you couldn't get any prints. I was lucky though; I didn't splatter blood on myself. I carefully wiped my hands with a handkerchief, which I later burned."

"And where did you go?" Inspector Regan lolled back in his chair, chewing an unlighted cigar, his eyes non-committal.

Dr. Scott passed his hand over his forehead.

"Then I went back to the hospital. That's when I noticed that my fraternity pin was missing. Amy must have caught at it when she was falling, but in all the excitement of the moment, I didn't notice. There was a small, jagged tear in my brown suit coat. I stopped in one of those Fix-em-while-you-wait places and got the coat fixed all right, but I couldn't risk going back to pick up the pin. I guess that's about all, Inspector."

"Yes, I guess that is about all." Inspector Regan sighed heavily. He pressed the buzzer and two armed guards promptly appeared to escort Scotty back to his cell. Regan scrutinized the copy of the confession carefully and pursed his lips.

"I'm probably being sappy, Cassidy . . . this confession is air-tight, but

there are a couple of things that just don't ring true to me. I've got a feeling he's covering for somebody. Have Miss Saunders come in."

He had purposely avoided looking at Karen for a few minutes after she entered. When he finally did, he found her regarding him speculatively, tamping a cigarette against the heel of her hand. He leaned forward on his desk, and assumed a genial, confidential air.

"Miss Saunders, Dr. Scott has just confessed to his wife's murder. You aren't in any way implicated, but I wondered if there was anything you would care to add—any small details you could fill in perhaps?" He smiled disarmingly.

VERY deliberately, Karen extracted a lighter from her suit pocket—the flare of light molded her features in planes of shadow and produced an illusion of utter softness and beauty. But when she raised her eyelids and looked directly at Inspector Regan, the illusion was promptly banished. Sophistication, and laughter too, were lurking behind those remarkable green eyes. Regan's smile was wearing thin, but by supreme effort he refrained from moving a muscle or in any way showing his mounting irritation.

"You've been remarkably patient, Inspector." Her voice was grave and husky, and still he couldn't rid himself of the idea that she was laughing at him.

"I don't know what Scotty has told you . . . but these are a few details he may have overlooked. You probably know all about my background. I don't amount to a damn and never have—the only reason I've been able to figure out for my existence, is that I've been around when Scotty needed me." She continued, almost as if talk-

ing to herself.

"A lot of men have loved me—Scotty is the first man I've ever loved. To see a man walking toward you down a long street; you keep thinking, 'It's him!' Your heart just about stops beating until he gets closer, and then the let-down feeling when you've been mistaken. I had my own idea of the type of woman who went in for that sort of emotionalism—I never thought it would happen to me."

"Anyway, by stages our love affair progressed until shortly, Scotty fixed up the apartment, and to put it mildly, we were extremely happy there. I suppose he told you about his sister-in-law's call Thursday night. Friday morning after Scotty left for the Hospital, the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Scott. She asked me to come to tea that afternoon at four. She said she had something she wanted to talk to me about, and that something was Dr. Scott.

"When I arrived at four there was no evidence of tea, instead she merely ushered me into a room, evidently Dr. Scott's study. . . ."

The late afternoon sun filtered thru the tilted venetian blinds, glinted on the instruments neatly arranged in the instrument cabinet, and warmly caressed the well-rubbed mahogany desk. It was the desk that most intrigued Karen. The haphazard way books and papers were scattered on it were so expressive of Scotty . . . and his pipe with the bowl cradled on the telephone. Karen walked slowly around the room, feeling very close to Scotty. Then pausing in front of the instrument cabinet, she turned and faced Mrs. Scott.

"You said you wanted to talk to me, Mrs. Scott. My time is limited—will you please proceed?"

It was her coolness and poise that rattled Amy. Here was she, the

wronged wife, and this brazen hussy was in complete control of the situation. She was suddenly conscious of the terrific contrasts in their appearances . . . Robert and this woman . . . Robert kissing her . . . Robert . . .

SHE folded her hands across her flat chest to hide their trembling, as livid with rage she retorted, "That will be a pleasure, Miss Saunders. I asked you here to congratulate you. You've broken my home, you've taken my husband; all with a minimum of effort. So, there's nothing left but for me to make you a present of him. But I'm terribly sorry that I'm going to have to strip him of his money first. Next, I shall have to take his exalted position away from him; and this house—which will leave you the proud possessor of a very broken man."

"Thanks," Karen replied drily.

"Oh, yes and my divorce grounds shall be adultery, naming you of course, my dear."

Karen eyed her speculatively. No doubt about it, she meant every word she was saying. Calmly she withdrew a razor sharp scalpel from the instrument cabinet, and almost regretfully said, "Well, Mrs. Scott—I often told Scotty there was nothing I wouldn't do for him—but when I said it I didn't realize that I would have to kill for him."

Mrs. Scott was backing against the wall, her eyes glazed with terror. She was too terrified to scream; her mouth drooled unheeded down her chin. Steadily and unhurriedly Karen advanced upon her, and plunged the blade in her throat until the handle stopped the force of the drive. Her eyes protruding, Amy fell to the floor, but as she fell her fingernails caught on the Fraternity pin which Scotty had

CHAPTER II

given Karen. Karen never noticed—she was too busy wiping the blood from her hands. It was much later she noticed the small tear in the lapel of her brown suit, and the full realization of how and where she lost the pin hit her. . . .

Inspector Regan read over the two confessions for the hundredth time. He had compared them, checked and double-checked them; and the impossible was true. They were both letter-perfect. Either one of them could have killed her—but it was a cinch that not both of them did. He had a number of equally fascinating possibilities to play with. Either they were each trying to cover the other and a third person committed the crime, or one of them was guilty, and the other, unaware, was trying mightily to assume the blame.

HE RAN his hand thru his graying hair, then settled back in his chair and lit a cigarette. Many times he had had difficulty in obtaining a confession; this was the first time he had ever had a surplus of them, and he was quite frankly at a loss.

“Regan,” he said to himself. “At the rate you’re going they should have made the retirement age 35. You must be getting old.”

If uneasy rests the head that wears the crown, uneasy lies the body that wears the badge. All night the Inspector tossed and turned, but when morning came he had made a decision. His first order of the day was, “Release Dr. Scott and Miss Saunders. Cassidy tail the Doctor—I, myself, will keep tab on Miss Saunders. Sooner or later one them is going to make a break. It may just be a minor incident, but I’ll be watching and then we will know who did kill Amy Scott.”

IT WAS raining—a driving, steady rain, that showed no signs of abating. The sidewalks were faintly steaming, and a brisk wind sent raindrops blithely skipping into puddles. Karen shivered slightly; Scotty placed his coat over her shoulders, protectively, and purely by instinct they walked toward the Coffee Shoppe that had been their earliest rendezvous.

Karen flashed a characteristic three cornered grin at Scotty. Everything was as it used to be. The checked tablecloth; the stodgy candles shedding their wax drippings; waltz recordings playing softly . . . only one thing was changed. Somewhere their love had been misplaced—the perfect love affair had been muddied and sullied until they themselves were in doubt of it. And too, they had always before been an intimate twosome—this time they had company. Death had pulled up a chair and refused to be ignored.

They tried desperately to keep up the pretense that everything was just the same, but always, and everywhere, Amy was there. A red dress, and it was Amy’s gashed throat; a movie emphasizing the triangle theme; a woman who walked like Amy; a sink draining was the blood gurgling in Amy’s throat. Dead, Amy wreaked more havoc than she could have alive.

A love affair breaking up is a pitiful thing. The only thing even comparable is a ship being battered to death by the sea against stony reefs. With every motion of the waves, more and more destruction is wrought. The timbers splinter and moan, and the whole ship fairly screams in agony. The human heart knows much the same agony as each meeting speeds the end of the love affair. Finally, Karen forced the issue.

"All right, Scotty, say it. Just where do we go from here? You're free—I'm free. Still we're getting no place so fast it makes me dizzy."

"I don't know," he turned on her in irritation. "You're getting to be as big a nag as Amy. Why can't women ever let a situation lie!" Then in repentance, he began devoting more time to her—they went on a dizzy whirl of the nightclubs—his love making was almost desperate. But the end was inevitable and they both knew it. Within a matter of months, they had reached such a state of affairs that he rarely came to the apartment—they blundered and stumbled until there were bitterness and quarrels and then he never went back.

CHAPTER III

THE night swam in blackness, broken only by periodic arcs of light cast by street lamps. There was a damp chill that penetrated even the thickness of Regan's regulation overcoat, but it was hard to say whether it was the silence of the night or the cold that was more chilling. It was as if all the world were dead and only he and the graceful figure a block ahead of him were alive. The snow squeaked protestingly as he left a line of grey footprints in his trail.

Karen hesitated for a moment, then squaring her shoulders resolutely turned and entered the apartment hotel. There was nothing distinctive about it. It was like hundreds of others lining Belmont Avenue off the Drive. A quick smile at the night clerk, and she disappeared up the winding stairs that led to her third floor apartment.

Minutes later, Regan kicked the loose snow from his shoes and followed her up the poorly lighted stairway. Reaching the top floor, he carefully extin-

guished the hall light, and settled back on the window sill to await developments. This nightly vigil was not only becoming disappointing; it was monotonous. From his vantage point he could hear her moving about; then the slit of light under her door disappeared and the entire third floor was cloaked in darkness. There was something menacing in the silence—nothing you could put your finger on; but it was there all the same. Inspector Regan hunched his overcoat on his shoulders, and patiently commenced his long night's vigil.

Regan awoke with a start. For a moment, he couldn't think what had startled him; then he heard it again. Someone was padding stealthily up the stairs. Noiselessly, he slipped from the ledge and crouched in the corner. Whoever it was, was breathing heavily by the time he reached the third floor. In the darkness it was impossible to tell if it were a man or a woman—it was merely a shadowy figure that brushed by him and paused before Karen's door. A faint jingle; the sound of a key grating in the lock, and then the door clicked shut behind the nocturnal caller.

Could she have slipped out while he was dozing . . . or was the Doctor back on her boudoir reception list? Baffled, Regan inched along the wall until he was standing beside her door. There wasn't a sound inside . . . he waited tensely . . . then a scream splintered the night . . . Regan didn't hesitate. Using his pass key, he swung open the door, and groped for the light switch. The light was dazzling. It took a full minute for his eyes to snap back into focus. Karen was clad in her nightgown backed against the opposite wall—stunned momentarily by the light was Doris. She was dressed in dark clothes and sneakers, and clutching an exceptionally vicious commando knife. In the split seconds that fol-

lowed, Doris regained her focus, and glanced around with the desperation of a cornered rat. Her eyes darted from door to window, desperately calculating her chances, while Regan moved in on her slowly, inexorably. Karen stopped at the corner of the bed and waited for her move—then he saw decision kindle in her eyes, her muscles tensed and dropping the knife, she made a dash for the door. As she rushed by Regan grabbed her arm just above the elbow, a sharp twist and there was the sickening snap of bone. Suddenly it was all over. Doris lay unconscious at his feet, Karen was in the corner, her teeth chattering nervously. Regan snapped the cuffs on Doris, and began a methodical search of her pockets. Abruptly he whistled,

“Well . . . Well, look what we have here!”

It was a neatly folded typewritten note, and he read it aloud to Karen.

To Whoever finds me:

I couldn't stand the strain any longer, and the coward's way out is still the easiest way out. I killed Scotty's wife, but it didn't get me a thing. Bob was just trying to protect me.

(signed) Karen Saunders

“SO THAT'S what she was trying to do. Make your murder look like a suicide—pin the murder rap on you—but what's the gimmick; what could she have hoped to get out of it?”

Karen answered slowly, almost sadly.

“She loved Scotty, too, in her own way. I think she must have loved him most of all. This the way I have it figured out. She killed her sister, but that removed only one obstacle, because half of her original plan miscarried. She had been sure I would be convicted and then Scotty would be all hers. It never dawned on her that Scotty himself

might be accused.”

“Yeah, I see!” Regan burst in enthusiastically. “There still remained the problem of disposing of you, and getting Bob out of the mess her scheming had gotten him into. Miss Saunders, we all owe you a big apology for even placing you under suspicion. But as for Doctor Scott, I believe it would be really better if you conveyed our apologies to him. I'll have a lot of detail work to clear up before I can bring Doris to trail. I'm afraid I won't have time to see him. Take care of it for me, will you?”

Karen looked up at him thru tangled lashes, and remarked drily, “Regan, as Cupid, you're as subtle as a bull at a tea but your intentions are undoubtedly dishonorable enough to make up for everything else.”

CHAPTER IV

THE courtroom was jammed with the morbidly curious. Hundreds of people who had never seen Amy Scott, and who would probably have hated her enough to kill her themselves, eyed Doris with the same stare they would have accorded a prehistoric monster. Now and then, above the murmur of voices, a sentence would stand out for a moment and then fade back into the babble.

“Would you ever have thought she done it?” “She don't look like no killer, does she?”

Doris wanted to stand up and lash back at all of them. To scream out, “What does a killer look like? A killer is merely you, with a reason. What I have done—you might have done—how DARE you judge me? How DARE YOU!” She tensed her lips choking back the words and the only outward sign of her turmoil was the thin trickle of blood inching down her palms . . .

fingernails biting into clenched fists.

The trial went on, for the most part merely dull. Coroners' reports, police reports, character witnesses, but she jerked to attention when Scotty took the stand. He looked at her only once, a glance so full of pity and tenderness, that for the first time since her arrest, tears sprang to her eyes. It seemed as if he actually understood what she had tried to do, and was trying earnestly to save her. But the evidence mounted higher and higher, until it was evident to the most simple minded spectator that only a miracle could turn the tide now.

"Karen Saunders—Miss Saunders. Please take the stand. Raise your right hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God."

Doris' stomach knotted in hate. She looked at Karen only once. There she was, dressed in a flame dress—vital, all the world at her fingertips, and Scotty too.

"If only I hadn't failed!" She sat in the prisoners' docket stabbing Karen again and again and again . . . the blood would gush—Karen would be dead and she would be free . . . she and Scotty, Scotty . . . Scotty. She heard someone calling her name from a distance and vaguely became aware that she was being called to the stand to testify in her own defense. Upon her words hung her life. Everything was so far away—she couldn't bring herself back to reality. She mumbled the oath, and in a daze took the stand.

She waded almost automatically thru the routine questions—birth, parents' name, etc. Her arm was throbbing in its cast and a sharp headache was driving behind her eyes.

"Would you tell the court in your own words . . ." her lawyer was coaching her with his eyes—imploring her to

wake up and live.

She was very slow in replying. Her eyes took in the entire courtroom, the judge, dust motes dancing in the wintry sunshine, and finally Scotty. He was sitting next to Karen, her arm was looped in his, but he was looking at Doris. They exchanged one long look, then she began, "Your honor. I wish to change my plea to guilty on all charges. I stabbed Amy, and deliberately framed Miss Saunders. I didn't realize I was implicating Dr. Scott also. I loved . . . love Dr. Scott, so it was necessary that I kill again. I took the key to Miss Saunders' apartment off his key-chain, planning to plant a suicide complete, with note and confession. That's all, I guess."

So it was done. She had gambled her life on a chance for happiness and lost. No one in that crowded courtroom could have guessed her emotions as sentence was passed. For there was no regret in her. Only a deep and somehow futile sense of fulfillment.

CHAPTER V

"TROUBLES?"

Karen's head was cradled on his knees, and her tawny hair glinted in the firelight. Her eyes mocked him tenderly under their level brows. Yes, it didn't make sense, but he did have troubles. Heaven was right in this room, with its gay informality, its reflection of the roistering, temperamental and fascinating Karen. He was relaxed and content but his soul paced the floor. He tried to explain, "Oh, not exactly troubled, honey. It's just that I can't get that trial off my mind. I know it sounds silly." He grinned apologetically.

Those amazing green eyes were looking right through him, stripping away pretenses, and he suddenly felt confused, and then angry because he was

confused. Damn it all anyway. How could you put feeling into words especially for a woman like Karen.

"Are you worried about Doris?" her voice was coolly incredulous.

"Not exactly. I don't know just how to explain it. I keep thinking of the way she looked at me before she shot everything to hell on the stand. It was like she was trying to tell me something."

"Your imagination is terrific, darling," she drawled.

"I still can't believe it. Doris and I . . . well, it's almost silly. There was absolutely nothing between us, and to think she loved me enough to murder twice for me—it's . . . it's just staggering."

"Do you really intend to sit here talking about Doris all night?" Karen was piqued, but he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice. She had risen and walked over to the fireplace, nerves taut to breaking.

"I keep wondering what she's doing and, above all, what she's thinking," he continued. "She has two more weeks to live in that death cell—if they would have just killed her right away, but the waiting day after day—God help her!"

"Yes, God help her." Karen was livid with fury. "God help her fat, smug, self-righteous little soul. So she made the supreme sacrifice. She said she killed for you, and forevermore she'll be enthroned on a shrine. You'll never really be mine again, because from now on you'll be measuring love. 'Does Karen love me enough to kill for me?' Everyday Doris will grow bigger, and more noble, and you will work with her memory instead of me." Her voice was controlled with a rawhide edge that he had never heard before.

"And you expect me to sit by and take that and say nothing, when all the time I know, that with all of Doris'

petty heroics, I KILLED AMY!"

Scotty's eyes narrowed incredulously.

"You killed Amy, but . . . that's impossible. Doris—her attack on you . . . that suicide note . . . you're just trying to steal the limelight . . . you don't realize what you're saying."

"You're almost as stupid as Doris," she cut in impatiently. "Get this straight—I eliminated your wife single-handed and unaided. The confession I made was true in every detail—it had to be, because I never saw Amy after she was dead. You could fake a confession—you were on the scene when her body was found—I had to be telling the truth. All I needed was a sucker to pin it on. And along came Doris. She thought you had done it, and I saw to it that she kept on thinking so. Gradually, by sheer suggestion, I implanted the idea in her mind that I was the person who should be disposed of. I loaned her books, we argued criminality, and I always stressed endings where the murderer committed suicide, left a self-implicating note, and everyone else lived happily ever after. In spite of herself, she started day-dreaming about the two of you together, and I just sat back and waited for her to make her move."

"But she might have killed you." Scotty's voice was very quiet.

"A SLIGHT risk, Watson. A very slight risk, because Regan was shadowing me day and night and so the sappy fly walked right into the spider's web. And now you get stubborn and won't live happily ever afterward. I've earned my right to happiness and I'm going to have it."

"Yes, little darling, you're going to have it." He rose and strode toward her. With his right hand he clutched the front of her negligee, and with all his strength smashed a shoulder-high

left into her face. His signet ring cut a deep gash in her cheek. She moaned and swayed, but he held her upright and again and again his fist smashed into her face until her whole face was a swollen mass of bloody, bruised pulp. Then he pushed her with all his might. She fell backward, striking her head against the coffee table. A dark red stain infiltrated into the bearskin rug, and the room was deathly still.

"You slimy rat! You'd have let Doris die—you'd have let her die and not lifted a finger." He was pacing furiously, muttering to himself. His knuckles were skinned and already badly discolored. He flopped exhausted into a chair. Every ounce of strength seemed drained from his body. After what seemed hours, he roused himself, walked over to Karen's still inert body and felt her pulse. He felt a wave of relief. Anyway she wasn't dead. He got a pitcher of cold water from the kitchen and sloshed it over her. She moaned softly and then raised stuporously up on one elbow. Her mouth was so swollen she could hardly talk.

"What are you going to do, Scotty?"

"Do? I don't know. I honestly don't know. I can't let Doris die for a crime she didn't commit—I'm going to try to figure out a way to clear this up without turning you in. If I can't . . . there's no help for it. I'll have to report you, Karen."

"Scotty, don't. For God's sake, don't turn me in, Scotty—they'll kill me. Scott, wait!"

But the door had slammed behind him and he was gone.

Slowly and painfully, she dragged herself to her feet, and inched her way down the stairs. When she reached the door, he was nowhere in sight. Her car was parked a few feet down the street, but the icy stretch of sidewalk was formidable in her present battered

condition. Like a woman driven, she started for the car, fell painfully, crawled a few inches, arose; fell again with a jar that just about snapped the thread of consciousness, and with a rally of almost superhuman strength gained the car.

THE motor was cold, but when she had about despaired of its ever starting, it turned over with a heart-warming throb. She had no difficulty picking out Scotty's tall athletic figure. She followed him slowly, occasionally swinging the headlights to be sure she was right in her identity. When she saw him turn down the street to the police station, she swerved the car around, and managed to park across from the station. She could see him walking toward her down the street.

"If he turns in the police station, I don't know what I'll do . . . but I'll do something . . . I'll do something."

Scotty swung along, lost in thought. He was upset, shaken physically and emotionally. His mind was racing.

"I'd better not do anything tonight—wait until morning and then I can think more clearly—damn it . . . I still love Karen . . . but there's Doris. Too bad you can't turn love on and off like a faucet," he mocked himself. "Too bad you can't love only the deserving."

He half-consciously noticed the car parked a half block away, with its lights off and motor running, as he crossed the street. He gained the opposite sidewalk when the parked car raced its motor and started out in high. To his horror, he saw it was heading straight for him. The glare of the lights blinded him before he could pick out a shelter, so he threw himself to one side and for the first time in years breathed a prayer.

A FEW feet from him, the car skidded on the ice—the lights flashed

wildly, highlighting streets, buildings—the driver was evidently desperate in his attempt to regain control, and then it was over. Glass was splintered for half a block, the car was a crumpled mass of scrap and a slow tongue of flame was licking from the motor. Men were pouring from the police station, Regan among them, but Scotty had already extricated Karen.

“Who’ve you got there? Oh, it’s you, Dr. Scott. Say that’s Karen.” Regan continued talking, but Scotty wasn’t listening.

He was cradling her like a baby. Regan indicated a stretcher and it was there Scotty made his examination.

By the time he had finished she was conscious.

“Well, Doctor,” there was just a trace

of that three-cornered grin. “Is your patient going to live? Don’t kid me, Scotty, I want to know.”

“This is it, Karen. How big a girl are you?”

“Big enough, Scotty. Kiss me good-bye just once, and then go, because I want to talk to Inspector Regan.”

Her lips . . . no matter how many women came after, he knew he would never forget them. For the first time there was no passion, no ardor—they were faintly tinged with blue, and already felt chilled with approaching death.

With tears glazing his eyes, he rose and abruptly walked away. Walked through and beyond the arc of the street light . . . walked utterly alone.

END

THE COUNTERFEITING QUARTET

THE black market was made many shades darker by the many criminals who were engaged in a vast counterfeiting racket during the war. The OPA and the Secret Service organizations joined forces in the fall of 1943 to break one of the war’s greatest conspiracies. Had these two great agencies failed in their work, the ring would have entirely destroyed the rationing system in the New England area with fraudulent shoe and food coupons.

E. J. Davidson, a New Haven printer, sparked the case when he told the Secret Service that a Frank Rowe, another printer in town, approached him with a strange proposition. Rowe asked Davidson if he wanted to make a huge sum of money by handling a job for him which was too big for his own plant to complete. Immediately after Davidson stalled Rowe, he reported this suspicious offer to the Secret Service which immediately transmitted the facts to J. Stephen Knight, chief OPA attorney in Hartford. No time was wasted before Knight and the government forces planned a united action to check the counterfeiters.

Howard Gamble and Charles Riordan, two inspectors from the Boston OPA office, were assigned to the case. They immediately took stock of their information and deduced that Rowe found his plant too small for the large scale printing which bogus stamps would require and that the criminal-printer must have many accomplices. This deduction proved to be correct when Rowe, never known to be a prosperous printer, approached Davidson with an offer of \$10,000 for his association. This tremendous sum indi-

cated the vast scope of operations which the counterfeiters had planned to accomplish.

After constant watch of Rowe’s home and shop failed to indicate any conspirators, it was decided that Davidson would be the best man to uncover the plotters by collaborating. He was given a plan by which he agreed to accept Rowe’s offer. Rowe was elated over the printer’s change of mind; however, Davidson insisted upon first meeting the “higher ups” so that he would be assured of the payment of the huge sum. Although a bit dubious about such a request, Rowe, nevertheless, phoned “the boss” while Davidson made mental notes of the clickings of the dial for future use. Davidson also managed to get Rowe to make the call by promising to get a friend, a New York engraver, to work with the counterfeiting clique. Rowe finally arranged to meet Davidson and his “friend-engraver” on a Sunday morning.

Immediately after this first meeting with Rowe, Davidson informed the OPA agents about the dial clicks and the agents finally determined the phone number. The call was traced to a local food importer, Angelo Orlo. Attorney Knight and the agents agreed that Gamble should pose as the engraver and on Sunday morning, Riordan, Knight, an OPA agent, two state troopers and a stenographer all met in the back of Davidson’s printing shop an hour before the scheduled meeting and placed themselves in strategic positions to listen to the conversations. The stenographer was to take down the entire meeting word for word, later to be used as evidence against the crafty counterfeiters.

GAMBLE, the "engraver," boarded a New Haven-bound train presumably coming from New York. After his arrival in the city, he immediately headed for the rendezvous in Davidson's shop. Promptly at eleven, the appointed hour of the meeting, Rowe arrived with a well-dressed mature man sporting a Van Dyke beard. The bearded man was introduced as Mr. Orlo, the suspected food importer. Orlo, commanding and smug, ordered the "engraver" and Davidson to make ration stamps as perfectly as possible.

At a prearranged signal, Knight and the state troopers hiding in the back room, burst in and made their arrests. Davidson and Gamble, still playing along in the ruse, continued to protest their innocence along with the guilty duet. The two agents were finally released at police headquarters, while Orlo and Rowe were subjected to a continuous barrage of questioning by Knight. Rowe was the first to crack. He described how Orlo approached him with an offer to have him join in the racket. Orlo still persisted in his innocence.

Meantime, the OPA and Secret Service agents who were making additional investigations tracked down another of the gang—John Anquillare who implicated Orlo and Vincent Todaro, a Newark contact man for the gang. It wasn't long before the New Jersey police captured Todaro. It now

seemed as if the gang was complete and all behind bars. A sudden twist in the case put the limelight on another character—Peter Kennedy.

While checking through some phone numbers in Orlo's book, Knight came upon the name of Kennedy. Such a revelation was astounding since Kennedy was a prominent real estate man, a vice-chairman of New Haven's Price and Ration Board, and one of the city's most important and respected citizens. Anquillare soon provided some information regarding the tie-up between Kennedy and the counterfeit gang. Kennedy was supposed to supply the gang with the stolen coupons, but an OPA directive which required that local boards were to forward all surplus ration stamps to Hartford for checking stifled such action. Thereafter, Kennedy was to assume another role—that of taking a more active part in the racket.

The quartet of counterfeiters all pleaded guilty to the government's charges of conspiring to counterfeit ration coupons. Each was sentenced to three months in jail. Later, Rowe's sentence was suspended, while Todaro heard Judge J. Joseph Smith sentence him to two years at Leavenworth Penitentiary on March 6, 1944. Todaro, however, appealed the sentence and was later released under bond.

—Stephen Blake.

MURDER BY MOLINEAUX

THE Molineaux Case, prominent in the criminal files of the New York Police Department, created more notoriety and excitement than the fashionable and dignified Knickerbocker Athletic Club at Madison Avenue and Forty-fifth Street ever enjoyed in its many social and athletic affairs.

Henry Crossman Barnet and Roland Burnham Molineaux, residents of the exclusive club, became the chief characters in the famous crime. Ostensibly, both men were fast friends, but more important to the case, they were also jealous friends, each trying against the other to win the affections of beautiful Blanche Chesebrough. This burning situation finally came to a head one day in 1899 when Barnet, complaining of a sore throat, took his favorite remedy—Kutnow's powder—which, ironically enough, he received through the mail as a sample. Suddenly, Barnet took a turn for worse and died a few days later.

Suspicious of the quick and mysterious death of its resident, the Club's manager summoned the police who discovered the odd package of Kutnow's powder and immediately sent it to the police laboratories for analysis. The police chemist reported that the powder contained mercury in the form of deadly cyanide of mercury. To better trick their criminal, the coroner filed a certificate stating that the victim had died from diphtheria. Molineaux was not present at Barnet's funeral service claiming he was not invited. Barely three weeks after his "friend's" death, he married

Blanche Chesebrough, a startling twist to the investigation. More strange actions began to take place.

Harry S. Cornish, director of the Club, related his quarrel with Molineaux to the police. One morning, Cornish discovered a bottle of Bromo-Seltzer on his desk which had come through the mail. Since he had never used the medicine, he passed it on to his landlady who complained of a headache and took some of the Seltzer. She suddenly became violently ill and a short time later, died. This clinched the police's suspicions and Molineaux was immediately arrested and put on trial for both murders.

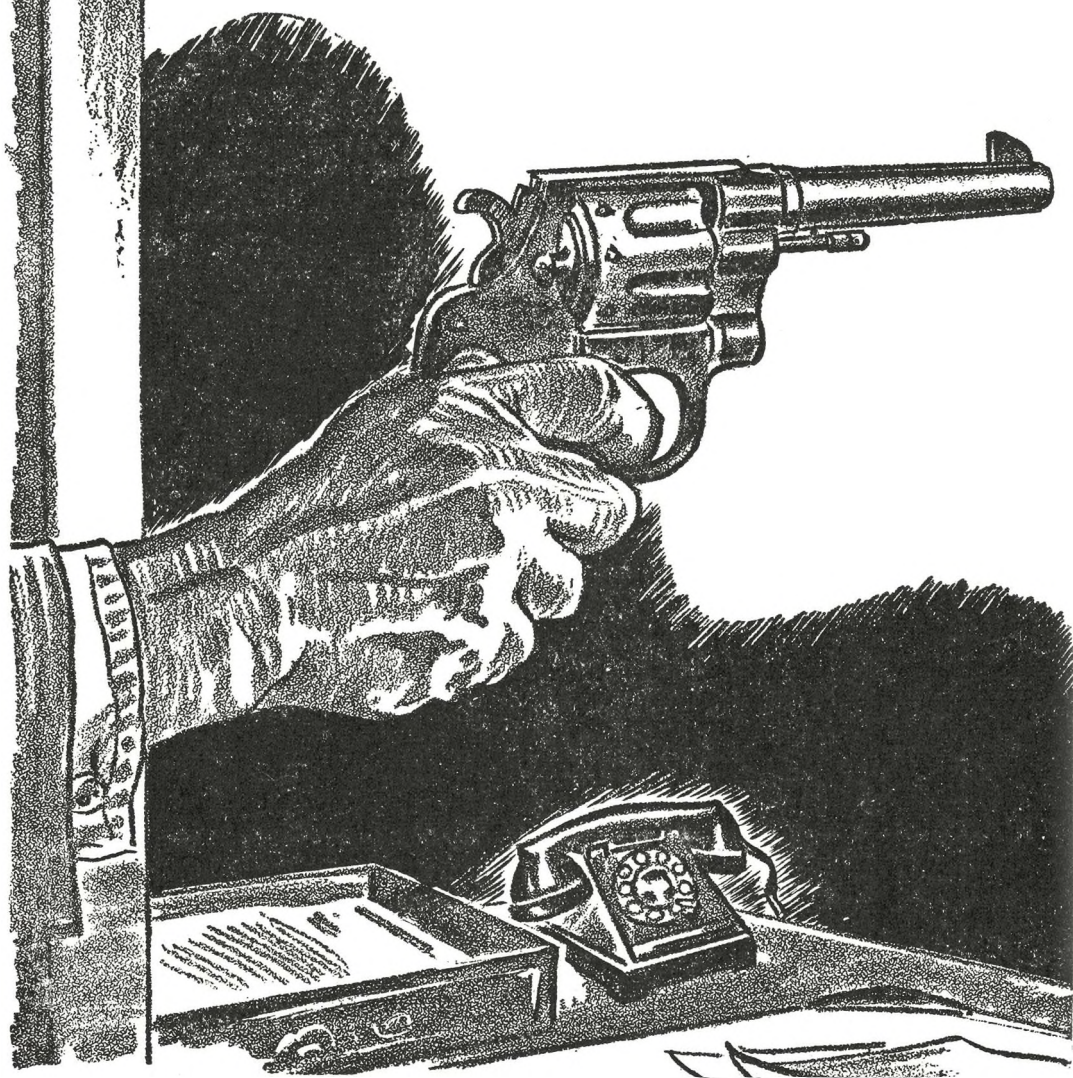
Handwriting experts testified that the handwriting on the mailed package sent to Cornish belonged to the defendant. The prosecution showed jealousy as the motive of Barnet's murder and revenge for the intended murder of Cornish. Molineaux had an easy access to the poisons as a superintendent of a chemical factory. On February 10, 1900, a jury found the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree but a court of appeals set aside the verdict soon afterwards and the following year, another jury acquitted the slayer. Soon afterwards, with his guilty mind plaguing his every thought and action, he lost his wife (by divorce) and his mind. Such was his degradation in following the life of crime in preference to life in a normal and happy society.

—A. Morris.

DOUBLE X LEADS TO MURDER

BY BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

When it comes to the point of losing your life to keep a job and the girl, it would seem the price is awfully steep . . .



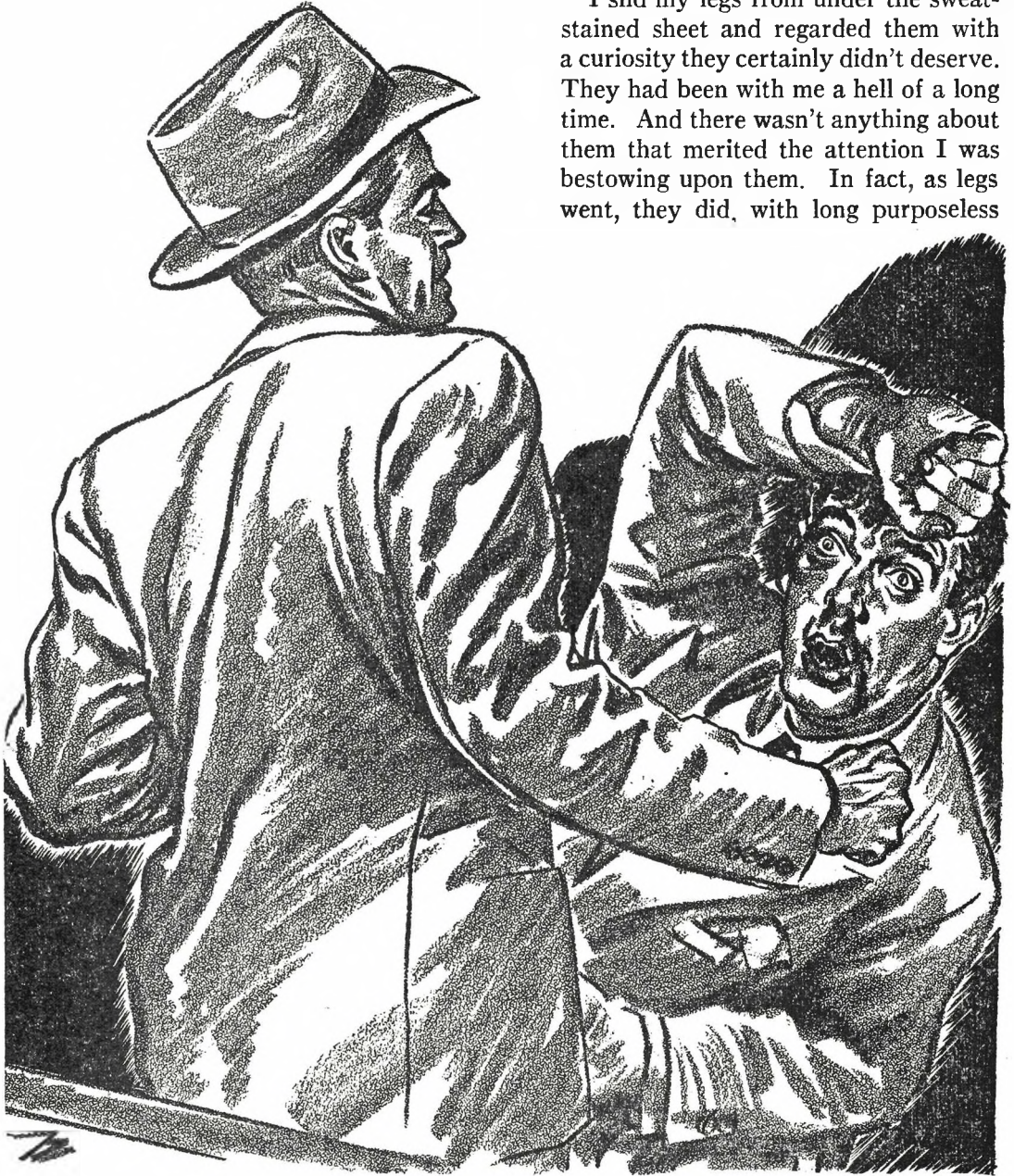
I SAT bolt upright. Then, slowly and with infinite care, lay back against the pillow once more. I looked through blurred eyes at the clothes strewn about the room. Warm, damp air leaked through the six-inch slot of open window. And a summer sun served as a reminder of another

day of heat.

My head ached intolerably! And the fingers of my hand trembled when I stretched them forth for my trousers, hanging limply over the back of the chair beside my bed.

"What a night," I thought. "What a drunken rout of a night!"

I slid my legs from under the sweat-stained sheet and regarded them with a curiosity they certainly didn't deserve. They had been with me a hell of a long time. And there wasn't anything about them that merited the attention I was bestowing upon them. In fact, as legs went, they did, with long purposeless



His eyes looked wildly past me, but I was too smart to fall for that trick

strides—skinny legs, hairy legs, long, shambling strides.

I yawned widely and the effort sent a throb of pain echoing in my brain. Also a reminder. The clock! It had gone off! Hurriedly, I turned to see what time it was.

"Aie!" A yelp of profound horror escaped me. Nine o'clock! It couldn't be! I had set it for eight . . . or had I? Now that I was awake, I couldn't remember. In any case, I was late. And Renfrew Willis, publisher and editor-in-chief of the daily I fondly thought of as my niche in the art of *belle lettres*, was a stickler for his help being down on the job on time.

A cab was just pulling away as I scurried through the double doors of my hotel. I hurtled the low hedge bordering the rectangle of sparse grass and set off after it. Luckily, Dearborn Street is a narrow thoroughfare and the driver had to go slowly for a bit until he got to the corner. We made it together. I flung the door open, slammed hard against the seat as he set it into speed and said:

"Don't spare the horses, bud! But get me to the Telegraph offices as fast as this thing can go!"

"S matter," he grumbled, half-turning an unshaven face in my direction, "Y'gotta date?"

"Never mind the cracks," I snarled. "Just play like you're color blind and green's your favorite color."

He mumbled something about "wise guys," as he turned away, but I only half heard him. My mind was on, of all things, the clock. I had turned the alarm off and noticed a peculiar thing. It *had* been set for eight! Yet it had rung at nine. Oh, well. There were more important things to think of.

We were lucky. Not a red light the whole way. The meter said half a buck as I twisted the door open and

piled through, headed for the side door.

"Hey! Your change!" he yelled.

"Keep it," I returned, twisting my head in his direction. And ploughed into something large, soft and explosive. I ricocheted off and heard a booming voice shout:

"Damn fool! Why the hell . . . Dalton! So-it's you!"

"Yes, boss," I said amiably. My feet were doing a skittish dance, trying to get me around the impressive bulk. He stopped me, but cold.

"Stand still, damn you."

I did. There was nothing else to do. He had me. Dead to rights. I knew what was coming. That big, fat, moustache-crowned mouth of his was going to open wide to show big, square, white, buckteeth and his bull-like bel-low would drown me in:

"Dalton! You're late. Confoundedly late. I ought to fire, no, that would be doing you a favor. I'm . . ."

I WAS right. Even to the break. Because I had interrupted him before he could finish.

"Take it easy, boss," I said. "I wasn't loafing on the job. Matter of fact, I got something so hot . . ." I sort of let the words trail off.

He fell, but all the way.

"Y'mean a story?"

"Hot as hell-fire," I said, moving past him slowly. I was almost through the side door, when he yelled:

"Better be good, Dalton. Or it's . . ."

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I was in the lobby and the door had cut off his words. Whew! That had been too close for comfort. The fact that the whole thing had been a fabrication of my nimble mind, didn't bother me. I knew by the time he got back, the whole incident would be forgotten. I hoped.

Margie, the information girl, noticed the grin I wore. She parked her cud

in the hole in her wisdom tooth and cracked:

"Well if it isn't Bright-Boy Dalton! 'S matter, keed, ya stop in for a short prayer?"

"Yeah! And the answer to it isn't you," I gave her the needle all the way. I knew she was sort of gone on me. Well, so were lots of 'em. But me, I had eyes for only one.

"And it isn't Joan, either," she said as I went by.

That was the one. Joan. Joan Hamilton. My eyes shot to the glass-fronted door of that ex-closet that was her office. It was closed. Instinctively, my feet moved tip-toe as I approached it. And the door opened, just as I was opposite.

"Hello, honey," I purred.

She paused for an instant in the doorway. That morning sun framed her there. Her honey-colored hair was sun-streaked with gold. Dark lashes made her blue eyes look black. A short, snub nose, the kind you always want to tweak, was a sort of pert exclamation point for the small, curving mouth. She looked sweet and demure. Until you saw that chin. Not that it was so large. Just hard. Hard and stubborn. With all the hardness and stubbornness of her mixed Scotch-Irish blood.

I looked at the rest of her and my gut got that hot, heavy feeling again. I got that way every time I saw her. I tried once more:

"Hello, honey."

Her eyes did go black! I saw her hand start for my face and braced myself for the blow. But she dropped it down to her side instead.

"Please!" she said. "Please, I don't want to say any . . ."

"Wait, Joan," I broke in, hastily. I got the hurt undertone in her voice. And knew the reason for it. Last night we had been out together and as usual

I got lit kind of early. I didn't remember too much of what happened. But then I never did. Only this time she had warned me. "Wait, Joan," I begged. My brain was hitting on all cylinders. I had to even myself out with her. "If it's about last night?"

"Please, Kent! I'd rather not talk about it," she said. And suddenly her eyes were moist.

I FELT, rather than saw or heard them. I looked around. Half the office were looking at us. And the other half were pretending other interests.

"Look. Meet me for lunch," I said hurriedly.

"Can't. The Kelson luncheon's this afternoon," she said, sidestepping me. I pivoted my body in front of her.

"Then dinner."

"No," her voice was a low murmur of denial.

"Okay! But maybe you're wrong, this once! Maybe I'm in the right?"

She started away from me, then stopped.

"Where?" she asked, without turning her head.

"The 'Hambra," I said.

"All right."

"See you there at seven," I said. And couldn't keep the grin from my lips. She didn't see it. She was already through the outer office.

That made two stories I had to improvise. The one for Willis and one for Joan. Well, the boss' could wait. I could give him herring and make *him* think it was sturgeon. But Joan . . . unh, unh. She was too smart, too shrewd a newspaper woman to fall for *any* malarkey. It had to be gold-plated for her.

The office door opened and a copy boy shoved an inter-office memo in my puss. I hated the damned pink slip. I never got one from anybody else but

Thorterson. This one was summons to the Almighty presence. I crumpled it up and tossed it into the wastebasket. Then I deliberately took my jacket off and hung it up. I knew how he hated the informality which was supposed to be a part of the newspaper business. Then I went to see him.

I didn't like Nels Thorterson and he didn't like me. And neither of us made any bones about it. He was the associate E in C. In reality he ran the paper. Willis liked to write an editorial once in a while and shoot off his mouth, but Thorterson was the boy who saw to it that the presses were rolling.

There was no questioning his capabilities. He had been the Washington correspondent for a syndicate for a long time. And before that an editor on one of our competitor sheets. Willis needed a "behind the scenes" man, and hired him.

Thorterson's door was open and I barged in.

He was sitting at his desk, peeling his nails as usual. He was a dried up little Swede, balding, and with a yellowish, liver-spotted skin. He gave me a sidelong look through his steel-rimmed glasses, when I plopped in the chair beside his desk.

For once he didn't remark on my jacketless attire.

"Dalton," he began in that word-masticating way of his, "Mister Willis called me a few minutes ago."

"So?"

The knife blade clicked as it went home in the slot. He put it back into the lower vest pocket. His thumbs smoothed the pared nails. All this without looking at me or saying anything further. It irritated me. And he knew it. He swiveled the chair around until we were facing each other.

"He told me you had a story; something hot, so you said. And he wants

me to okay it—first, after you get it off."

If he expected me to throw a fit he was disappointed. Not that I didn't feel like it. Of all the damn breaks. Now I really had to invent something super. As though he read my mind, he said:

"Let's hope it isn't another expose on city hall affairs."

The mealy-mouthed jerk! Throwing that in my face.

"You know," I jerked out in a stutter, "that, that, I had the facts, the facts—" I was so hot, I couldn't go on.

He leaned forward and his lips worked like he'd forgotten to put his false teeth in.

"You didn't have the facts," he said, coldly. "Riordan had them. You just made a lucky guess! And if he didn't show up at the last minute, the old man'd paid out plenty in libel."

I MADE like a clam then. What the hell was the use? As if my guessing had made any difference. I'd guessed right and that's what counted. How the hell was I to get the facts when I was on a bat for three days?

"But that's water under the bridge," he went on. "What is this thing you've got now?"

I got off the chair and made for the door. "What do you want to do, crab it for me?" I asked sourly, and closed the door . . . period.

I sat around for a while, fiddling with the typewriter, trying to get my brain to working on something. No soap. I was empty of ideas as a sieve is of water. I put my legs up on the desk and shoved my hands into my pockets. My fingers closed around the stub of a ticket. Presto. In a second the whole problem was solved for me.

It was one of those pasteboard tickets you get at the bookies, with a num-

ber on it and a little penciled notation. It had cost me two bucks. Now it was going to pay off even though the horse ran out of the money. But first I had to break the seven o'clock date with Joan. That wouldn't be hard once I explained I was on a story that could make my name a household word. Besides, we could meet later somewhere.

I typed out a note, walked into her office, stuck it up in her typewriter where she would be sure to see it and went out for lunch.

The lunch crowd had broken at Gus's. But the guy I wanted to see was still there.

"Hi there, Little Joe," I said slapping him on the back.

He lifted his head from the glass of beer and turned his head toward me. It was a thick neck. And a thick, muscular face, with broad-nostriled nose and a ridge of scar tissue across both eyebrows. He had been a pug years ago, a bad one with a penchant for dirty fighting and the inability to escape the other man's punches. As a result he had become a little punchy after a few years. He was one of the bouncer's at Gary's, the biggest book and crap joint in the city.

He mumbled a thick-voiced, "Hi," and brought his head back to the beer glass which he lifted only a few inches from the bar and sipped from it.

"Beer," I said to the bartender. "And fill Joe's." I waited a few seconds until he had finished his drink, then said casually, "Hear Scott Thomas's gonna leave town."

"Yeah," Joe said. "That's what I hear too."

"He's a wrong character, that guy," I said.

"He's got company," Joe said.

"Yeah. You're right, Joe. But not all of them are on the Anti-Crime board."

The heavy, muscularly-rounded shoulder twisted in a shrug.

I said, "Still on the books at Gary's, isn't he?"

"How the hell do I know?" Joe asked somewhat petulantly. "I don't keep 'em. What's more, I don't stick my nose in Al Gary's business."

"Don't get mad, Joe. What the hell. I know that you're Al's boy. And I just thought I'd give you a tip. Thomas is going to see the Governor about closing places like Gary's up."

THERE was a silence after my remark. Joe had his eyes screwed up as if he were falling asleep. Then he tossed the remains of the beer down his throat in a single gulp and slid from the stool.

"See ya later, chum," he said.

I grinned to myself in the mirror. Nosey reporters, like myself, very often get themselves a piece of news just by sticking their noses into things which don't concern them. And the debts of Al Gary didn't concern me. Except in this particular instance.

Scott Thomas was one of our great shysters, member of the Anti-Crime Commission, clubman de luxe, wealthy play boy and crap shooter without luck at Gary's. He owed Gary twenty grand. It was hell of a lot of dough to lose. Even at craps. I knew he owed it to him because I was in Gary's office and saw the slip with his name and the notation under it about the debt.

Reporters were always welcome at Thomas's. His secretary met me at the outer office with a news handout. He was a prissy guy, on the small side, well-dressed and with an air about him that always seemed to whisper of important things in the offing. He greeted me almost with affection:

"Hello there, Dalton. Glad to see you. Always glad to see the boys of

the press. Well . . . here's a little something Mister Thomas thought might interest you."

I looked at the press release and smiled. It was one of those form things, stereotyped and commonplace and to the effect that Thomas was going to the capitol to talk to the Governor about crime in the city. I tossed the slip on the desk and asked:

"Thomas in?"

"H'm, yes," he hedged slightly. "But he's busy. Something I can do?"

"Nope. Just wanta see him. Find out if he's gotta few minutes?"

The little guy re-appeared in a few seconds and silently motioned me into the inner office.

I just caught the closing of the door at the far end of the room. But I didn't see who had gone out. Then Scott Thomas was advancing with outstretched hand to greet me and I centered my attention on him. Reluctantly, I had to agree with the consensus of opinion that he was a, 'fine figure of a man.' Only I knew it was a stuffed figure. Behind that facade of handsome features and immaculate dress was a void. His lips could utter the commonest banalities as though they were gems of wisdom. But because he looked like a paragon of judicious learning, people didn't take those nothingnesses he uttered apart.

"Ah! Kent Dalton. Glad to see you, my boy. Always glad to see anyone from the Telegraph. Fine man, Willis. Matter of fact, saw him yesterday and said . . ."

"Yes sir," I said, breaking. "Mister Willis sure is a fine man. And that's why I came to see you. I know that you're one of his best friends. And," I hesitated and put on an act of biting my lips and showing nervousness.

"Go on, my boy," Thomas said. "If there is something wrong I'll be only

too glad to help you out."

"Well it's like this. You know that my boss is a man who has lots of principles. You know how many times he's said that in a matter of public welfare if his best friend did something that went against the common good, he'd see to it that the Telegraph would print it no matter how badly his friend would get hurt."

THE handsome mask sagged a little at the corners. And the unctious voice broke and hoarsened as he said:

"Yes! Yes! Go on. What are you trying to bring out?"

"Oh hell!" I said taking off all the stops in my dramatic act. "It's about Al Gary and you. Y'know how it is with us newsmen. Lots of times we get the lowdown on things and I, well," I hemmed, "well, I know about that deal Gary's got hanging over your head."

The crack in the handsome facade broke wide open. The eyes were no longer worried. They were harassed. And the mouth's full lips were screwed up in a tight, mean knot.

"What is this, Dalton?" he snarled. "Are you trying to pull a fast one on me? Or are you playing dumb? Or don't you know I saw you at the Mirro last night?"

That kind of set me back on my heels. Also gave me food for thought. So that's where I was last night, at the Mirro. But why the hell all the excitement? I'd been there before.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "At any rate whatever it is, I didn't come to see you about that. It's about that twenty grand deal you owe Gary," I said, letting him have it straight.

He sort of blinked his eyes. And to my surprise, resumed that damned smug mask again.

"What about it?" he asked.

"Just this. That Gary's sort of hot about it. And he's going to squawk to the right people about it."

"He's crazy," Thomas said softly. "That debt . . ." He stopped his mouth's babbling and just looked at me. And grinned broadly. "Tell me, Dalton," he asked unexpectedly, "who else knows what you do?"

Something ticked a message to my brain. Take it easy, the message said. Take it easy because this is something that's hotter than even you dreamed up. Little itching fingers of fear suddenly raced up and down my gut.

"Knows what I do about what?" I asked.

"That's right, play dumb," Thomas said. "It's the smart thing, for you. Only don't come to me with something as childish as this story about Gary and the twenty grand. He knows better than to say anything about it."

I gave myself a shake mentally and tried to straighten out the twisted threads of thought. Nothing. In the meantime Thomas was regarding me with a benign expression. He rubbed fat, white fingers together and rolled them around each other. They were like link sausages that had been peeled. I wanted to think this out. And not in this fat slob's presence.

I started for the door and he stopped me in the threshold.

"One more thing, Dalton. Y'know how Gary is with people who stick their noses into his business. Better keep yours clean."

I walked down Clark Street toward Randolph. I didn't know from in or out. The little plan I had thought up to build a story out of something had backfired. But how? It had started off all right. Little Joe was a cinch to take back . . . I stopped short and someone plowed into me from behind. I didn't bother to excuse myself. Little

Joe by this time was in that back room of Gary's and blowing his top on the tip I'd given him.

HELL! I had to stop the wheel's from turning before they turned me upside down with them.

"The Mirro," I said to the cab driver when I flagged him down in the middle of Clark Street. . . .

"Hello, Dalton."

As many times as I'd seen Al Gary he always gave me a start the next time I'd see him. I suppose he affected everybody the same. Here was a guy who had the biggest in in the city. Many an alderman, and bigger, owed their election to him. And he looked like some Bojunk as he sat there in his chair.

A cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth, the smoke curling up to his eyes so that they were half-closed against it. His shirt, collarless and tieless was unbuttoned almost to where it went into the pants. A half-dozen assorted stains could be seen on the not too clean front of the shirt. He was gray and balding and the few wisps of hair sort of straggled in an unkempt way over the shiny skull. I couldn't see his trousers as the desk concealed them but I knew I could wager that they were blue and uncreased and dirty. Maybe it was an act. Maybe it was sheer carelessness. Or maybe he just didn't give a damn. Certainly he didn't have to.

I knew his background. Or as much of it as was possible to know. Ex-gunsel, ex-parlor house man, ex-fence and Lord knows how many other shady things he had run, now he ran the biggest and most wide-open joint in the city. And no matter how much heat they gave, he stayed open.

"Hello, Al," I said.

He smiled, or rather it was an unfolding of the flesh in sections, until at the

end his lips parted. The whiteness of his teeth was startling. And one saw they were false. And badly made. For on the sibilants, he had to suck sharply inward to keep them from falling out.

"How are you today, boy?" he asked.

"Pretty good," I said.

The inch-long ash fell off the cigarette onto his belly. He didn't notice it. The smile grew more crooked.

"Why?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Just a little joke, boy. The old man likes his jokes. Can't blame him, can you?"

"Then they might not be so funny."

I chewed on that for a second. First Thomas, now Gary. I was certain that I was somehow connected with what he was trying to give out. I knew Gary. Sooner or later he would break it. And once again I got that tight feeling in my belly.

"By the way," I said cautiously, "seen Little Joe?"

"Everything's just fine, boy," Gary said. The cigarette had an inch or so of paper before the pale flesh of his mouth. "Don't worry about a thing. Nobody knows but us. Now ain't that the way things should be? Just your friends in on the real things."

I lost my temper then.

"Say! What the hell's going on, anyway. First Thomas. Now you. I don't get it."

"Of course not. Why should you? But Blane did."

I kept shut. Al Gary was going to break it to me.

"**R**EALLY, boy, you have too much temper for your own good. It wasn't any business of yours what Blane said."

I played along. "I forget. What did he say?"

"That the Telegraph and everybody

connected with it were crooks. No reason for you to lose your head. Lucky it was that the whole thing took place in my office."

"Lucky?"

He didn't answer. But his hand disappeared into a drawer and came out with a paper. It was an afternoon sheet. And it had big, black headlines. *Rance Blane Murdered!*

Gary folded the paper and began to read:

"Early this afternoon Cub Scout troop, 118, were returning from their hike to the forest preserve which lies just to the north of the city limits at the end of Milwaukee Ave. street car line. Little Billy Hanfeldt, ten years old, of 8459 Altgeld Ave. was in the lead.

"His eyes were busy searching out the wonders of the parkland in which he moved. And like the good scout he was, he noticed all the things the scout master had made a point to tell them to watch, the movements of birds, the kinds of trees, etc. So that when the big-winged bird suddenly flew up from the ground at the edge of the trail, Billy recognized it as a crow. And knowing the crow's habits, he surmised that there was some sort of carrion there.

"The whoop of joy with which he plunged into the undergrowth, changed to a shriek of fear and horror when he stumbled on what had interested the crow. For it was the body of a man. The crow had found the body long before Billy did. And had busied himself at the face, the only unclothed part of the dead man. It was not a pretty thing to see. Not even for the men of the Homicide Squad, who are used to such things.

"That was how and where Rance Blane was found. In a thicket in the forest preserve. With a bullet in the back of his skull and his face torn to

shreds from the beak of a crow!"

"Want me to go on?" he asked.

I shook my head, no. The vacuum that was my brain was now filled with a numbing horror. Like a flashback seen through the mist of a fog I saw in retrospect the night before. It wasn't all clear. Rather it came to me in segments, now a full scene, then a break and then another bit. In one of those bits I seemed to see Rance Blane, his face twisted in anger, his eyes peering from beneath the lids in that familiar strained look, and heard him say . . . what? I couldn't remember.

Gary dropped the paper and slipping a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his trouser pocket, drew one out. But his half-closed eyes never left my face.

"Just what are you trying to pull, boy?" he asked softly.

I shook my head hard. I could feel the drops of sweat stand out on my face like the heavy drops of rain in a summer shower. My voice panted an urgent answer to the question I asked:

"Why did you read that to me?"

"Because you killed Rance Blane?"

THAT'S why I didn't get what the hell you were driving at when you told Little Joe what you did," his voice came through to that part of me that was still alive. For surely the rest of me was dead. I couldn't feel anything. The room, the man sitting in the chair were all part of a blurred vagueness. And that fog took in my brain. So that it seemed all the senses except hearing were involved. Once more his words came past the wall of blankness, "You oughta know better than to say Thomas was trying to pull a double cross."

And the words came pouring out of me like water from the broken dam:

"What are you trying to pull, Gary? Are you nuts? Why I didn't know

Blane? How the hell . . . where . . . what happened that I killed . . . No! You're trying to frame me!"

"Take it easy, boy," he said easily. And his very manner warned me that he had something more definite than words with which to bind me. Once more his hand dipped into the drawer. This time it came out with a gun. A gun wrapped in a piece of cloth. But there was no mistaking the shape.

"Your prints are on this gun, boy. And when they take the slug out of Blane's skull they'll find the bullet that fits in one of these slots."

I staggered over to the chair in front of his desk and slumped into it. I buried my face in my hands. I didn't want him to see my face, because it didn't have the expression he would have supposed it would have. The fog had lifted as if by magic. I wasn't bound any more by words or fears. His words had dispelled them. Now I was alive in every faculty. I had committed murder. So he said.

His voice was like a benediction, from a snake, "But like I said in the beginning, boy, no need to worry. They'll never know who did it. Unless, of course, you start shooting off your mouth. And there wouldn't be any sense to that, would there?"

No, I thought. There wouldn't be any sense to that. Because I didn't know what he meant by shooting off my mouth. It didn't have anything to do with Blane's killing. It had to be with something else. What else? Why had Blane come here last night? Those were things I had to know.

Once more the gentle venom eased its way into my ear:

"Now look, boy. Why don't you go home and sort of think this out? Come back here tomorrow and see me. Y'know, maybe we can work out a deal of some kind."

I LIFTED my head and looked at him, dumbly. Nothing had changed in his face. Yet I felt the dismissal. And when I got up I saw the thick-shouldered figure of Little Joe in the doorway. He looked at me blankly as I passed him. The street swallowed me. I turned down Huron and walked to Michigan. I stopped and looked at the display in one of the shops on the Avenue and saw the reflection of Little Joe behind me. It was only a glimpse. Because when I stopped he ducked into a doorway. But the glimpse was enough. Gary had set him to tail me. I grinned shallowly.

It wasn't hard losing him. I simply walked into one of the department stores on State Street, took the first elevator in the bank to the second floor, walked through until I hit the Wabash side. This store has an entrance to the El on the second floor. So that even if Little Joe played smart and came through the store anticipating my move, he couldn't know that I'd take the El. And even if he did, I'd see him. But the platform was almost empty. And I took the first train.

I got off at Lake and walked down the stairs to the street. The Telenews Theatre shows nothing but newsreels and short features. The show usually takes between an hour and an hour and a half. Enough so that I could keep my appointment with Joan. For I had written on the note for her to wait at the Alhambra for a half hour for me and if I didn't show up to presume that I was on the beat I had written of.

She was there. There was a salad before her so I knew she had just ordered. She smiled with both her eyes and mouth so I knew she was glad to see me. Of course that didn't mean she had forgiven me. Or that she was going to believe my story. But it was a step in the right direction. I found it odd

that at a time like this, I should worry about something so really immaterial as this.

"I ordered steak: enough for both of us. On the off-chance that you might get here," she said.

"And a good thing you did. I'm ravenous," I said. "Well, tell me, how did the luncheon go?"

"So-so. You know what those gatherings are. Or maybe you don't. Just a lot of talk. All the society crowd was there. The Kelson brat has her coming out affair this week. That was the reason for the luncheon." She stopped and a trickle of laughter escaped her. "It was really funny the way Edith Kelson tried to swing the conversation her way when, I forget who, brought the afternoon extra in. But the Blane murder took the center of the stage then."

"Blane murder?" I asked, playing dumb.

"Kent!" she exclaimed. "You mean you don't know? Where have you been? Why it's spread over the front sheets of every paper in town."

"Okay. Okay. So what? It's just another killing. No reason to get excited."

She was startled by my vehemence. Her eyes went wide, then narrowed in quick appraisal.

"No," she said. "There isn't any reason to get excited. So what makes you that way?"

I dropped the fork I was playing with. I wet my lips. I became aware that there was a tremble to my hands and I shoved them out of sight. The trouble was that I was too wrought up by the events of the last three hours. And she was not the sort of person who was blind to the small physical quirks that are a give-away to the emotions.

"Something's wrong, Kent. I felt it last night at the Mirro. Come on now, give out. And if you're worried that

"I'm still mad, forget it. I'm not."

The waiter appeared just then with our steaks. It gave me time to arrange my thoughts. I gulped my water hastily and looked at her over the edge of the glass. She was wearing a simple dress, chartreuse in color and without any frills. Her hair was piled high on her head. She liked it that way because it gave her height. She wore no jewelry other than a topaz ring and a watch fob. I'd given them both to her. She smiled into my eyes and said, "Spending the evening with that glass?"

I made up my mind to let her know what happened.

"I KILLED Rance Blane," I said softly, emotionlessly. It was a hell of a thing to do. But I wanted to get her reaction. This time it was she who dropped the fork. She recovered almost instantly. Casually retrieving it from the cloth, she stabbed daintily at the meat, her eyes engrossed in what she was doing.

She said, "That isn't funny." But her eyes didn't lift to meet mine.

"It wasn't meant to be," I said.

This time her eyes came up. We looked at each other in a silence for the longest minute I'd ever known. And when she spoke again, the gulf of my stupidity and ego had suddenly been filled. I could never again betray her in any way.

"Want to talk about it in here?" she asked.

"Might as well," I said. "With all this gabbing around, no one will notice us."

She listened to me with all her senses. I didn't leave out a thing. There wasn't a thing to be seen on her face that was a give-away to what she thought. But at the end, the smallest sigh escaped her.

"Why did you . . ."

I knew what she was going to ask. And answered before the question was complete:

"Because I'm a jerk. A wise guy who thinks he's got all the answers. Sure, I was going to build a story for both you and that little man in the front office. So I started the ball rolling by tipping off someone to something I'd made up. Well, it backfired. And how! Gary said I did it. And Thomas acted like it was true. But my nose tells me there's a smell from those wolves that shows they're eating carrion."

"Am I the only one you've spoken to about this, Kent?"

"Yes."

"H'm. Let me think for a minute. And you might as well eat that steak. No sense in drawing attention to us. It's all right for a woman not to eat. But a man . . . come on now," she commanded as I hesitated.

I'd take a mouthful and watch her. I almost finished the steak before she spoke again:

"Well. Let's tie some of those loose ends up, Kent. Check me and see if I've got them all. You remember nothing, that is nothing of importance of what happened last night, right?"

"Right. That is in the sense of actually remembering things all the way. I sort of get vague, uh, shadowy reminders of faces and voices. But nothing I can say is definite."

"When I'm through, we'll get back to that," she said. "But first, Thomas and Gary. When you opened up on Thomas he acted as though he thought you were going to talk of something else and that something he was frightened of."

I nodded in agreement.

"Now you know Gary pretty well. Did he act frightened also when you started to talk?"

"No." I was positive.

"So," she went on, "we have one man who's scared and one who's not. The one who's not *knows* that he's got something on you that will make you keep your mouth closed on whatever you know. Those little bits of hidden threats, though. He's not too sure. Yet he's got the evidence of your complicity. So what is he leery of?"

I just couldn't think. I could only nod stupidly.

"Let's get back to last night, Kent. Just how much of it do you remember?"

That wasn't hard to think of.

"I PICKED you up," I said, "at eight. We had dinner here. Then we went to a few spots around the Loop. I got to drinking heavy and somewhere around eleven, I suggested the Mirro. We went there. I wanted to shoot craps. You didn't want me to. I remember some sort of argument . . ."

"You told me to go to hell."

". . . What! I—couldn't have." She nodded and said, "Forget it. Go on."

". . . I watched you walk away . . . and that's all I remember"

She pondered on my words. Her eyes were on some place far from me. At last she sighed and said:

"It's no good, Kent. There's only one thing to do, ask ourselves the questions the police are going to ask."

"Yeah. Why? How? And where? Oh, I've thought it out, all right. Don't think I haven't. But there are too many holes I can't fill."

"Well, maybe between the two of us the holes can be filled."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Like this: what did Blane have to do with Gary? And what were Thomas' connections with the same party? And yours, for that matter?" she went on.

"That, Joan, goes back a couple of

years," I said. "Things were pretty hot here in town. The city hall boys weren't bothering taking graft on the sly. It was all done in the open. Then a Crime Commission was formed by a group of public-minded citizens.

"Thomas and Blane were two of the leading members. Thomas was just a figure head. Blane was the real brains of the outfit. He had been a contractor who had made a lot of dough when things were tight and the big boys were building public projects. Thomas was his lawyer. I still think that Blane engineered the whole thing . . . Thomas took the credit for the board's reports . . . at any rate they helped clean the city of certain unwelcome elements, so they said.

"But I know that the men they got out were for the most part labor leaders and union organizers. And the guy who was top dog, they forgot about altogether. I mean Al Gary."

Joan had been listened with an air of absorbed interest. Now she broke in:

"I've got the picture. The whole thing was a racket to clean out any opposition to Blane and whatever plan he had to control things, was that it?"

"Just about. But they did their job almost too well. The man who was elected as Mayor proved to be too much to handle. Blane lost his political connections. Then Gary got the bright idea that the city's graft was a piddling thing alongside the greater moola from the state.

"That's where I come in. The paper had wind of these things and since I was the feature man, I was given the assignment to get the inside dope on the whole thing. I knew the right people so I got it. Then I went on a bat for three days when the paper broke the story."

"I remember," she said. "I'd just

come to work as society editor. Didn't you claim that you knew but couldn't prove anything because it wasn't on paper?"

"THAT'S right. Riordan, my follow-up man, had somehow got the low-down. He saved the paper's hide when they took the case to court. But here's the funny thing. I gave all the facts to Thorterson about Blane and Thomas. In court, however, all the lesser lights were mentioned, but not those two. And when I asked why, Thorterson said that he couldn't take a chance. I didn't have the . . ."

"You didn't have the what?" Joan asked.

"Huh?"

"You started to tell me you didn't have the something or other, then your mouth hung open like your jaw got unclamped. What happened?"

It had suddenly come to me how I might know some of the missing details. Thomas' secretary, that prissy little character, was the guy whom I contacted on that other occasion. I still had the goods on him. There was the fly in the ointment, though. If they got wind of what I was doing, Gary would certainly go the cops with that bit of incriminating evidence, the gun. I was going to have to work fast.

"Look, baby," I said hurriedly. "I've got an idea." I looked at my watch. It was exactly eight. There was a chance he was in. "You go home," I said. "Wait for me, no matter how long it takes, and I haven't got the slightest idea how long that'll be. I'm going to see some guy who might be able to shed a little light on all this."

I paid the tab and, when we walked out into the lobby, suddenly turned her to face me and brought her up close to me. Her eyes met mine in startled wonder. Then our lips were meeting

and her kiss was as warm as mine. I released her after a second, whispered, "I love you," and saw the color come and go in her cheeks at the words. Then without a further word, I turned and melted into the night.

It was one of those seventeen story furnished room apartment hotels on North State Street. It was one of those places that catered to lonely women who liked to do their own cooking. Sometimes there was a man who lived with the woman. But nobody cared one way or the other. There was a kind of stealth to the way people came into the hotel. As though they weren't sure that it was the proper thing to do.

John Makin lived in one of the one and a half room cubicles they called an apartment in the State Manor.

I took the automatic elevator to the fourteenth floor. No one had seen me enter, the clerk at the desk was talking to some woman at the time. And no one had come into the elevator with me.

I started to knock and saw that the door was opened a crack. Fine. Maybe he wouldn't have wanted to see me. I shoved it open and walked in. Makin was seated at a desk, his back to me. The desk was to the right of one of the windows overlooking State Street. I could see the flash of a neon sign from somewhere on the street.

"Hello, Makin," I said.

HE WHIRLED on the seat and faced me with a look that was stark fear. His lip trembled and he brushed vaguely at his forehead with a trembling hand.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Why, I just thought I'd drop over. I've got some questions I'd like you to answer," I said.

He gave me a vacant-mouthed grin. There was an oily look to his face, as

though the pores of his skin weren't functioning too well, and the sweat couldn't come out normally.

Makin was scared. Of what, I don't know. But there was no mistaking it. The very room held an aura of fear. His trembling hand motioned vaguely in the direction of a chair. I pulled it up so that I could face him. My back was to the door.

I sat there and looked at him. He returned my look and grin. But on his mouth it didn't look good. The silence was deep enough to drown in. The minutes ran out and neither of us seemed to care. I heard him sigh, a soft expiration of breath. And his eyes fell at last before my stare.

"I—" he began. His voice broke and hoarsened. "Why do you stare at me like that? Why did you come here?"

"I told you," I said simply. "There are some questions I'd like answered. What the hell, Makin! You've answered them before. The other time they didn't concern me. This time they do. That's the only difference."

A tip of pink flesh came out from his lips and licked the pale, dry skin around his mouth.

"Why come to me?"

I got tired of that damned question. Where the hell did he think I was going to go? To Thomas? Or maybe to Blane!

"Listen you! Somebody's trying to hand me a murder rap. And from where I'm sitting, it's going to stick. That is unless you spill what's what. And' believe me, you're going to. I . . ."

I stood up fast, the chair skidding back to fall with a dull thud to the carpet. He shrank in his chair before the fury he saw in my face. His hands came up to ward off my blow. I came close, so close I could *smell* the fear in him. I started talking, fast.

"I want to know why Blane was knocked off. And by whom. I'm in no mood for stalling. The D. A. still has an open file on the Phillips contract. That'll mean twenty years for sure. And at your age, Makin, stir for twenty years would be digging your grave. So stop giving me that con."

His mouth fell open all the way. I could see the saliva collected under his tongue. He moved his lips painfully to form a plea:

"Dalton! That was six years ago. The statute of . . ."

I hit him then. He rocked back from the blow. A trickle of red seeped down his chin.

"I'm through talking!" I snarled. "I'll beat you to a bloody God-damned pulp, you louse. Come on, open!" I slapped him this time.

"Don't. Don't hit me! I'll tell. Only don't hit me again."

I stood over him, my fists clenched. They were aching to swing once more. But I held off, waiting for what he had to say.

He wiped his mouth free of blood with a bit of fine linen he took from his trouser pocket. He motioned with his head to something on the desk.

"I was going to mail you this, Dalton," he said softly. "It's on the desk. The whole thing. Why Blane was killed. Even who did it. I couldn't stand it any longer. This was murder and they were making me a part of it. The rest was bad enough. But not murder!"

I SAW what he had reference to. There was a typewriter on the desk. And stuck in the roller was a sheet of paper. And down at the very bottom was a signature, John Makin. I started to move around the man in the chair and stopped short. There was a funny look on his drawn-in features. He was

looking past me. And whatever he saw there filled his face with a greater fear than I had given him. Something made me duck. And the single bulb in the ceiling light went dark. There was the booming sound of gunfire. But even before that, Makin screamed once. Someone jolted into me. I was bent over, out of balance and the blow shoved me into the desk. Instinctively, I grabbed at whoever had shoved me. My hand slid over cloth. I felt a *switch* of sound. Something struck me a hammer-blow along the skull. I fell into a pit of darkness.

There was muted sound, as of the far-off booming of surf. I felt as though I was water borne. I kept sinking and rising as on the crest of a wave. Then someone pulled at my shoulder. And a voice said:

"He's coming out of it."

I opened my eyes. My hand came up and someone took hold of it and lifted me erect. The room swam suddenly as nausea gripped me. And when I swayed like a drunk, I could feel the blood running down the side of my face.

The room swam into focus. There was a copper at the door. Beyond him I could see the frightened faces of several women. There were two more cops in the room. I didn't have to see the badges of the two men holding me to know they were plainclothes cops. Nor did I have to search far in memory to tell me who the man before me was.

Mace Peters, head of Homicide. I'd known him since police-court days. He looked like a business man. Or an ultra-conservative churchman. There was nothing of the copper's look about Peters. He had neat features which blended into each other smoothly. There was no hardness in the flesh to mar the complacent and benign ex-

pression. Only the thick, darker-haired eyebrows had a habit of drawing down across the bridge of his nose now and then when he was puzzled or angry. Then his face was suddenly stern and no longer benign.

His nicely kept hands were folded across each other. And he was sitting in the chair that Makin had sat in. I swallowed painfully to keep my gorge from rising. For I had looked down and saw what had happened to Makin. The little man no longer had to worry whether his pants had the proper crease. Or whether his tie completed his shirt and suit. That tie was the same color now, red. The same color as the rest of him. He looked like he had taken a bath in blood. It didn't seem possible that such a small body could hold so much blood. Then I saw his face or rather what had been his face. It didn't make much difference to Makin that I puked all over him. He was dead.

"Better take him to the bathroom," Peters said in that soft voice of his.

The two dicks held me close and did as he said. I bowed my head over the washbowl. And as I put my hands on the edges of the bowl something clicked against the porcelain. Surreptitiously, I looked at what my fingers held. It was a small pen knife. I don't think they saw me place it carefully in my pocket.

I rinsed my mouth afterward. One of the dicks rummaged through the cabinet over the mirror and came up with some Sulfa tape. I yelped a little when he stuck it on over the torn flesh. Then they brought me back to Peters. The door was closed now. But the copper still stood guard.

Peters motioned to the same chair I had sat in before.

"All right, Dalton. Suppose you tell me what happened."

MY EYES unconsciously went to the typewriter. There wasn't any paper in there now.

"If you're worried about what was in there," Peters said, "I've got it."

He unfolded his crossed hands and held up a small triangle of torn paper.

I wet my lips. My fingers caressed the knife in my trouser pocket. There was a small bit of chain attached to it.

"Well. Let's have it," Peters said. The softness had disappeared from his voice.

"I came up here to see Makin on some business," I said. "We were talking, then, well, it all popped at once. The shot, Makin's scream and my getting slugged."

"Where was he?"

"Where you are now. I was sitting facing him. I got up from my chair to get something and saw the look of fright on his face. Before I could turn to see what had frightened him, the light went out, he screamed and boom! That's all I remember."

"Umh, hmm. And why did you come here to see him, Dalton?"

"Like I said. I had some private business with him."

Peters looked down at the piece of paper in his hand and read:

"Frame Dalton. —mas and Gary—Makin."

We looked at each other for the space of a few seconds and in each of our eyes was the same question. What did it mean?

He got up and silently motioned for me to follow. We walked to the elevator and got in. The two plain clothes men also got in. We rode down to the lobby and Peters sat on the couch that was there. He patted the seat near him and I sat beside him.

"Thomas'll be here in a few minutes. I sent for him. I want him to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yep. And while we're waiting, I'll tell you one of a couple of things. Whoever pulled that paper out of the typewriter forgot to look for something else. Y'see. Makin was one of these fussy guys. Everything had to be just so. That typing he did, for example. The first thing I looked at was the roller. There were type imprints on it. That meant he was a pounder not a touch system user. The ribbon was just about ready for the waste-basket. But Makin was in charge of Thomas' office. So he knew that for better results and longer wear he should have used two pieces of paper in the machine. One of my boys found the second piece of paper. It's down at the lab now being photographed under a high-power camera. Because the ribbon had so little ink, the type imprints are bound to show up. Right?"

"Right," I said.

"So you better give me the real reason for why you came to see him," Peters said with a smile.

I suddenly pounded my knees in excitement. I knew why Blane was killed. And who and why Makin was killed. But I didn't want Peters to take the credit away from me. I wanted a beat on it.

"Look, Inspector," I said, "Let me make a phone call. I promise that I'll have the case in a nice neat package for you in a little while."

He looked at me sharply. I gave him a grin that I hoped was as joyous as I felt.

He said, "After Thomas gets here."

AS THOUGH his words were a signal, the lobby door opened and Thomas, flanked by two detail men from Peters' office came through. There was a pale look around the shyster's mouth. He licked his lips with a pink-tipped tongue when he saw us. He walked hesitantly

to us, still flanked by the two dicks.

"All right, boys," Peters said.

The dicks went away. And Thomas was alone with us. His eyes were busy on the carpet. There was a few seconds silence while Thomas looked at the carpet and we looked at Thomas. Then Peters said:

"Makin was your secretary, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Thomas answered in a low voice.

"I would like to know what you may possibly know of this, Thomas. That's why I had my men pick you up."

Thomas' eyes lifted. "Oh." They fell to examining the carpet once more. "I thought that maybe . . ."

Peters' voice gave no hint of what he was thinking, "Of course it was a fortunate thing that you were found so quickly."

Thomas gave him a startled look.

"I had them phone me . . . from the Mirro . . . you'd been there for an hour. No I didn't think you killed him. But I do think you might know who did."

"Why?" Thomas asked, sharply.

"Because it isn't in the cards that anyone so inoffensive as Makin could have enemies who would go so far as murder. Unless he had information that, well, might incriminate them."

"How do you know how inoffensive Makin was?" Thomas asked.

I had to admit it was a proper question.

Peters answered it in a way that surprised me. "Because he and Rance Blane met in your office yesterday afternoon. And last night Blane was knocked off. Is that answer good enough?"

"Only if Blane came back from the dead," Thomas said with a smirk.

"Maybe he did," Peters replied.

"You mean there is a connection—

that the Blane murder and this were committed by the same man?"

"Might be. But not by the same gun. Let's get back to what you know about Makin."

There wasn't much that Thomas knew of his personal life. It boiled down to the fact that Makin's life after office hours was more or less of a mystery to Thomas. And who might have been responsible for this murder was a question Thomas couldn't answer.

There was the sound of a siren coming up the street. And a car came to a brake-squealing stop out front. The lobby doors swung open and a heavy-set man came through. He looked around and, spotting Peters, ran toward us. There was a cloth-wrapped package in one of his hands.

"Hey, chief," he called excitedly while he was still a few feet from us. "Look! The murder rod. On the Blane case."

Peters took it from him and fell to examining it.

"Where did you get it?" he asked. His eyes didn't come up from the gun.

"From Al Gary, at the Mirro," I said.

PETERS' eyebrows met at the bridge of his nose. "How do you know . . . is that right?" he asked the dick.

"Right, chief. I stayed on after the boys left with Thomas. And in a few minutes Gary calls me in his office and says, 'Here's the gun that knocked Blane off. If Peters wants to see me, I'll be here.'"

"Well, Dalton. Let's have it. How did you know Gary had the gun?"

"Because he showed it to me this afternoon and told me I killed Blane. And I've got an idea that the only prints on it will be mine. But don't ask me how they got there. I don't know," I said.

"We'll know soon enough," Peters said. "As soon as we get it down to the laboratory. As for you, Thomas. Stick around. I might want to ask you some more questions."

I fidgeted in the chair and waited for Peters to get back from the laboratory. The two dicks in the room with me eyed me now and then like they'd like nothing better than to go to work on me. Then the door opened and Peters came in. There was a worried look in his eyes.

"Damn that finicky Makin!" he said explosively. "The second sheet proved to be blank. He'd used it before and nothing came clear. The prints on the gun are yours, all right, Dalton. But the paraffin test showed a blank. I don't think you killed him anyway. Damn. How I hate this chasing around. Why don't killers make things easy for the police and leave the kind of clues . . . ah! There's no use crying about it, though. Well, let's go."

"Where to?" I asked.

"The Mirro," he said acidly.

So the tests they'd taken in the lab had proved to be in vain. At least the paraffin test which would have showed traces on my hand that I'd fired the gun had proved there were no marks to incriminate me. Oddly enough, I wasn't worried about the Blane business. If I could only get to a phone. But Peters had other ideas. He hustled me out of the room fast. Then we were in his car and the siren was clearing the street of traffic and in a short time the Mirro club skidded to a halt in front of us.

The crap table was empty of players. And the poker table held no cards on the baize cloth. The bird cage's chatter was stilled of the rattling dice. The Mirro wasn't open this night. We went straight to Gary's back room. He was still sitting at the desk. A cigarette still drooped from his mouth. And I thought

that his shirt had added another stain or two to those already there.

"Hello, Captain," Gary said through the smoke. Then his eyes shifted to mine. "Ah. And you've got Dalton with you. Sorry, boy," he said to me. "But I couldn't keep that rod any more. My conscience was botherin' me."

"Your conscience hasn't bothered you," I said, "since you were in diapers. That is if you ever wore them. I think you were born in those greasy pants and shirt."

The ash fell from the cigarette tip. He didn't pay any attention to it. I couldn't see his eyes behind the smoke. He shifted his head to face Peters.

"I'm gonna give it to you straight, Captain," he said. "Me, I'm the kinda character what knows from all kinds of things. But murder and me don't mix.

"DALTON knocked Blane off because he wouldn't cut him in on a deal. It's gonna come out in the wash anyway so I might as well sing. I was paying Blane off to keep my joint open. We had a deal a couple of years back when he was in big in the *hall* but things was gettin' hot lately. And Blane wanted to take things over downstate. I figured he wasn't big enough. He came here last night and began blowin' his top.

"Dalton came in there, drunk as a coot. None of us saw him . . ."

"None of you?" Peters asked. "Who else was here?"

"Blane, me and Thomas. Anyways, none of us see Dalton come in. Usually, I got a man at the door. He musta gone to the john when Dalton mooches in. First thing we know, he's got his yap going about what he knows. And that he's short and needs some dough. And that he's gonna get some from somebody. Blane blows his top and starts yelling about the Telegraph being run

by a bunch of crooks. Dalton hauls off and slugs him.

"I guess I'm to blame a little for what happens. Y'see Dalton's a nose Joe. He knows I got a rod in my desk. Maybe he went nuts from the yocky he drinks. But before any of us had any idea what he's up to, he gets behind me and grabs the gun in the drawer and gives it to Blane. In the back of the head."

The sweat was running down my face and neck by the time Gary got through hanging that sweet rap on me. If only I could get through to make that call. There was something in my room. It was only a piece of paper. But it might . . .

"I see," Peters said. "The floor looks mighty clean, Gary. What did you do to the blood? Hell. Blane was shot in the head. He musta bled like a stuck pig."

"He did. I had one of the boys mop it up. Y'gotta see my angle, Captain. The joint couldn't stand a murder rap. So I took the gun from Dalton . . . he passed out after the shootin' anyway . . . and we bundle the stiff in a car and take him down to the preserve. Dalton's still stiff when we get back. So I have one of the boys bring him home. Well, when Dalton tries to frame Thomas on something this afternoon and has the nerve to come here like he don't know from nuttin', then I figger it's time to sing."

Peters looks first to Gary, then to me. "Uh, huh," he says. Like something was bothering him. "And what do you say to that, Dalton?"

"Just this, Peters. Let me make a call. And I guarantee I'll have the murderer of both Blane and Makin for you."

And for the first time since I'd known Al Gary, the cigarette was taken from his mouth. He looked at the tip for a second, then dropped it to the floor.

"Go ahead," he said. "Use the phone."

I dialed Joan's number. And as I waited for her to answer, I looked at Gary. There was an odd look on his face. It was as if it was trying to break out in a grin. Then the phone gave an answer at the other end and Joan's voice was a quick blur of sound in my ear, asking how I was and where I was and what I wanted.

"Do you still have the key to my apartment?" I asked.

She said yes.

"Then get up there in a hurry," I said. "And get that piece of paper behind the . . ."

THE phone was grabbed out of my hand and Peters, his face clouded in anger, was shouting to me, "What the hell's the idea of that? Damn you, if you're trying to double-cross me . . ."

I grinned derisively into Gary's face. And said, "Let's go, Captain. Gary's got an extension on this phone. And the guy listening in on the other end'll beat us there if we don't hurry."

"Bastard!" Gary grunted as he started from his chair. And I did something I'd been wanting to do a long time, clip that greasy face of his. My fist caught him right on the button. He sagged back in the chair with a small sigh. My knuckles smarted satisfactorily. Peters told two of his men, "Watch that slug, till I get back." And he was leading the way to his car.

I was the first into the room. The lights were out but we heard the sound of a struggle going on. Even as Peters clicked the switch down, I was on top of the man struggling with Joan.

It was Thorterson.

"Okay, mister," Peters said grimly as we faced him.

He was sitting on the Pullman bed which he turned down. Joan and I sat

together on an armchair. Thorterson was standing in front of Peters, two dicks on either side.

"I'm not talking until I see my lawyer," Thorterson said.

"You don't have to," I said. "I can give you the whole thing. It all began a couple of years ago. Blane was running things in this town. But he was being bucked by one newspaper. The Telegraph. Willis, the owner, was the sort of guy who has certain notions of right and wrong. And the paper was getting hot on Blane and the rest of his friends, Gary and Thomas.

"Willis had just hired Thorterson. So Blane approached the new editor and suggested something or other to his advantage. Thorterson seemed to fall for the whole thing. He put me on the deal. The angle was to spotlight what was going on, but to Blane's advantage. I mooched around and got the the real low-down . . . from Makin. Seems that Makin got his fingers mixed up in contracting deal some time back and the contractor, Phillips by name, had evidence of Makin's collusion. Well, me, I never write things down. I think I've got a photographic memory. So a couple of days before we spill it in the paper, I get drunk. Now this is conjecture.

"But somewhere along the line, Thorterson was wised up to the fact that when I'm drunk, I lose my memory. And I must have spilled everything to him. Including the fact that I hadn't any real evidence except what Makin had told me.

"At the trial the paper went through on a libel count, the paper used Rior-dan who had collected enough evidence on the men we showed up to clear us. I didn't even get to go on the stand. So time passed.

"Now we come to last night. I went out with Joan, had a few drinks here and

there until I was well-polluted. Then we went to the Mirro. I wanted to play. Joan didn't want me to because I was broke. So I told her to go to hell! That I could get money. From where? From Al Gary. I always thought it funny that he came to me a few years back, right after the trial, and told me whenever I needed dough, why just come to him.

"I must have walked in on them in the middle of an argument. The wind-up of that argument was the killing of Blane. Am I right, Thorterson?"

He smiled at me. My shot hadn't taken him unawares.

"Still drunk, eh, Dalton?" he asked, sourly. His fingers reached for the pen-knife in his vest pocket. But instead of pulling it out, he fiddled with it a while and brought his hand up again.

"O.KAY," I continued. "I must have passed out. So they wiped the prints off the gun, and I'm not saying the shooting came off in there. Because if it did, someone must have heard the shots. At any rate, they plant my prints on the gun. Now they got a fall guy. But they still don't know how much I'd heard. When I come back this afternoon, they know that I didn't remember a thing. Everything is rosy now. And somebody remembers Makin. It must have been Thorterson. Because he was the only one who knows about Makin. So he foots it out to the State Manor. And finds me there. The rest you know, Peters."

"Pretty good," Peters said, grudgingly. "But how do you know it was Thorterson?"

"Because, I've got the evidence right here," I said, patting my trouser pocket. "When the killer hit me, I grabbed at him. And tore something from his pocket. Where's your pen knife, Thorterson?"

His re-action was all reflex. His fingers reached for the knife that wasn't there, before he could stay them. And I pulled the broken bit of chain with the knife attached, from my trouser pocket. He should have known better than to make the break he did. After all, it wasn't conclusive evidence. But he acted from instinct. He twisted away from the dicks and started for the door. I beat him to it. The skin broke on all of the knuckles on my right hand when I hit him.

He talked then. Gary killed Blane. They were going to put Thomas up for Governor in the next election. Blane wouldn't hold still and threatened to blow the lid off the deal and show how Gary, Thorterson, who by the way was

the real top of that outfit, and Thomas were running things. Thorterson, of course, was in the best spot for knocking off any opposition, through the newspaper. All he had to do was put the herring across Willis' path and the owner of the Telegraph gave him the go ahead signal. I walked in on the argument. Gary slugged Blane at the back of the head and they lugged him out to the forest preserve and killed him. I was still out when they got back, so I presented the perfect fall guy.

There isn't much else to tell. My wife says it doesn't look well for the new editor of the Telegraph to act like a lush. I have to admit that a guy can acquire a taste for coke. Especially when one's wife is as wonderful as Joan.

THE DRAFT-DODGING DOCTOR

ALTHOUGH 1940 was still a year of peace as far as the American people were concerned, Congress passed the country's first peacetime Selective Service Act in preparation for impending events which eventually drew the nation into the armed conflict. The F.B.I., now on a wartime footing, was alerted to investigate a new type of criminal—the draft dodger. Ferd A. Nauheim and a Dr. James S. Hens soon became the centers of attraction during this investigation.

When Nauheim, a 34 year old owner of a printing plant in Washington, D.C., registered for possible military service in October of 1940, little did he suspect that he would make nation-wide headlines and send a prominent physician to prison in addition to staying out of uniform himself. The facts of draft-dodging soon occupied the limelight and the F.B.I. files.

Nauheim, the father of two children, was given a high draft number when he first registered and so it was that not until 1943 was he called upon again to report for induction examination. His request for a pre-induction examination was granted and after passing from one doctor to another, he eventually reached Dr. James S. Hens, one of the induction center's psychiatrists.

After conversing with Nauheim, questioning him about his family, social life, and other matters which would indicate the inductee's emotional fitness for the Army, Dr. Hens changed his line of questioning and suddenly confronted Nauheim with the question: "How would you like to stay out of the Army?" Too startled to answer, Nauheim suspected some psychiatric trick to such a query; however, Hens informed him that it was

no such trick and continued to explain that for \$2,500 he could explain what should be done and said, when Nauheim came up for final examinations, so that he would be classed as a 4-F neurotic.

Unfortunately for the scheming psychiatrist, Nauheim was not the draft-dodging type and was soon telling his story to the F.B.I. The agents instructed him that he keep a pre-arranged rendezvous with Hens in Baltimore to discuss terms. At the interview, Hens demanded \$2,000 advance payment and \$500 after Nauheim was finally classified 4-F. Nauheim, following the F.B.I instruction to the letter, agreed to the doctor's every term and arranged another meeting at which he was to make his first payment. The Federal agents made up a dummy package containing paper instead of the money.

With the package in hand and two agents not far behind, Nauheim and Hens met in a restaurant in Baltimore's Pennsylvania Station. Hens immediately demanded the package which he assumed contained the stipulated amount. The psychiatrist then made a few notes, which, he was confident, would definitely make the final examiners think that Nauheim was a neurotic.

As the two were about to leave, the F.B.I. agents, who had viewed the entire meeting from an inconspicuous table in the restaurant, nabbed the psychiatrist, and informed him that he was under arrest. Hens, too startled to explain anything, merely denied any guilt and assumed an arrogant, insulted air when further questioned.

Finally brought before a Federal Court jury for one of the most despicable of charges, Hens pleaded guilty.—*Lee Sand.*



HE WAS a small, inoffensive, blonde man, and he walked in the night, under stars that were not large or beautiful, under a moon that was a sharp sickle in an unfriendly sky. He moved north, on Sheffield Avenue. He came to a gloomy building with a blue-globed light hanging over the door. He stared solemnly at the light for a few moments, and then went inside.

The room he entered was large, bare, and not unfamiliar. The man had been there before. He'd been there four times in the last six hours, and the boys in the Sheffield Avenue Police Station had gotten to know, and to dread him.

Connors was on the desk. Connors was a good cop. He'd been in the game quite a while and he was decent and honest and tried to do his job. He looked up as the little man came in. He knew what was going to happen. It did



NO HERO STUFF

BY PAUL W. FAIRMAN

If a meek little man grabs a gun and goes out to right a wrong—watch out, brother!

happen. The man stood before the desk looking tired and forlorn. He asked:

"Any word of my wife yet?"

Connors laid down the pencil he'd been using on the charge sheet. He braced his elbows on the desk and laced his fingers together making a bridge. He looked over the bridge at the small blonde man and said, softly:

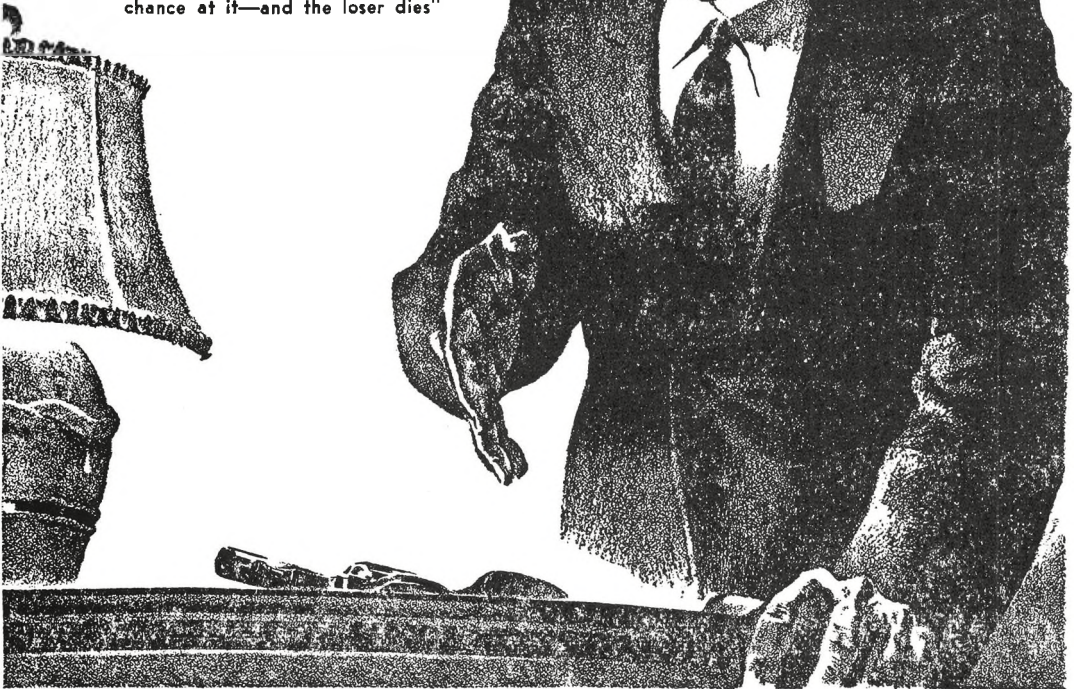
"Mr. Wyman, are you sure that your wife was kidnapped?"

Mr. Wyman regarded him solemnly—the same way he'd regarded the blue

light. "I'm sure," he said.

Connors wrinkled an already furrowed brow. "Are you sure that she hasn't taken a trip somewhere?" His tone wasn't tough or hard or hostile. He spoke as he'd speak to a bewildered

"There's the gun," Mr. Wyman said clearly. "I'll give you an equal chance at it—and the loser dies"



child because that was the way Mr. Wyman impressed him.

"Women are funny, sometimes," Connors went on. "They get fed up with the routine. They get tired of making beds and come to a point where they can't look a sinkful of dishes in the face. Then they do a run-out and after a while everything's all right again and they come back. Maybe your wife wanted a change of scenery." Connors stopped and looked at Mr. Wyman hopefully.

Mr. Wyman shook his head. "Helen was happy," he said, simply. "If she'd wanted to take a trip she'd have said so and we would have gone together. You see that's the way we always did things—together."

Connors sighed inwardly. This was exactly the way it had been the other four times.

"She was kidnapped," Mr. Wyman said. "Lew Maddern kidnapped her to try and make me sell my house to him."

Connors went on with the act. He knew it by heart now. "But what would a man like Maddern want with your house? It's only a small bungalow. It hasn't any great value. It couldn't possibly mean a thing to Lew Maddern."

"I don't know why he wants it," Mr. Wyman said. "I only know that he came over one night and offered to buy it and Helen and I said we didn't want to sell. He came again and raised his price and we let him know that it was our home and that he was wasting his time. Then he had that blonde girl meet me at the plant when I finished work."

"Oh yes," Connors sighed. "The blonde girl."

"She drove me home and got very loving. When I told her that it didn't mean anything—that I was married and didn't want to have any parties with her, she got mad and said something about there being other ways."

"She didn't say anything about kid-

napping your wife though."

Wyman shook his head. "No, she didn't say anything about that."

"Maddern didn't say anything about it either?"

"No."

CONNORS leaned forward and tried to drive home his point with a final question. "Then why tie your wife's disappearance with Maddern? Kidnapping is nasty, dangerous business. Maddern has never been in trouble before. He'd be afraid of abduction even if he thought it would help him."

The same monotonous shake of Wyman's head.

"He wasn't afraid because he didn't think I'd go to the police. He thought I'd be afraid to. Before long I'll get a note saying that Helen will be sent back if I sell him my house."

Connors rubbed his chin. "I don't think so," he said. "I think that before long your wife will come home of her own accord. Back to the dishes and the house cleaning. Maybe she's there already."

"The police aren't doing anything then?" Wyman asked, dully.

"The police *are* doing something," Connors answered, patiently. "We are making every effort to contact Maddern. He isn't in town and we believe he's fishing up in the Michigan woods. We'll know before long. We've looked very diligently for the blonde girl you described, named Loren Kain, and found no sign of her. We also have one of the most efficient, nation-wide crime detection organizations in the world searching for your wife. We think that we'll find her."

"The F. B. I.?" Wyman asked.

Connors nodded. "The F. B. I."

Wyman said, "Thank you very much. I'm sure you're doing all you can."

He turned and, for the fifth time that

night, he started toward the door; a quiet, lonely little man, going away without his wife.

Connors stared after him. Under his breath, Connors growled, "Oh hell!" Then he called, "Take it easy, Mr. Wyman, everything will work out." That was something to say, anyhow. He picked up the pencil and squeezed it.

"Thank you very much," Wyman repeated.

He left then.

GEORGE WYMAN kept on walking through the dark streets. He walked east, toward the lake, and his thoughts were cold, flat, dull. So this was how it felt to lose a part of you; this helplessness he'd never known before. The papers told of things like this and you read them and automatically felt sorry for whoever it was. But, regardless, they were only stories; stories of people you didn't know—people far from your kitchen, your parlor, your job. Then it happened to you, and you were cold and empty inside, walking alone, anywhere, because you didn't have a home to go to. Home didn't mean anything without that part of you. And you wondered if she were dead or alive. If she lived, were they treating her all right? You saw her tied, beaten, twisted, and all hell pitched inside of you and wouldn't come out. All you could do was walk—walk—walk—

Then you thought about being honest and decent—being that way, not because it paid off particularly, but because it was the way to be—the way that had been bred into you and yours and ninety-nine percent of everyone else, and you realized, vaguely, that honesty and decency were the main weapons of the lawless. They did what they did because of it.

Lew Maddern. He felt safe because he knew George Wyman was bound by

the rules he himself violated. Wyman wouldn't know how to reply in kind. Wyman was one of the decent people who lived by the rules; one of the people Maddern held only in contempt. The suckers. He'd figured Wyman would even be afraid to go to the police, for fear Maddern would break more rules. The helpless people.

George Wyman walked on. He reached the end of the street, looked out across the boulevard at the lake, and at the dark sky beyond. He turned south and it was then that something registered back in his mind.

A number. A street number on a block of cement at the curb. The number glittered in the yellow light from the street lamp. 2628. That was it and this was the street. The number and the street the blonde girl had mentioned. The place they could have their parties. Her apartment. He knew that his feet hadn't brought him here by chance. Some part of his mind had told them where to go.

The building was of red brick, neat and good looking—like the blonde girl. He looked at it. Then he realized that his being here didn't mean much. He'd given the police that part of it. The blonde girl wasn't here or they'd have found her. His feet took him up the walk and into the outer lobby. Names and numbers. 406. The name wasn't Kain. It was Lewis. The girl had probably been lying. She didn't have an apartment here.

He pushed the button anyway. Nothing happened. He left the building and retraced his steps toward the street.

Then he was looking at a blonde girl in a smart fur trimmed coat and saying, "Please. I'm George Wyman. I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

He was saying it politely, the way he always talked to women—with his hat in his hand.

She'd come hurrying up the walk, looking more backward than forward, and hadn't even noticed him. She looked at him, now, with a quick, ugly expression and pushed by. He didn't try to stop her. Instead he followed her to the door and repeated, "Just a few minutes. I have to talk to you."

The girl glanced nervously toward the street. She shrugged, her face tight and hardly pretty. She said, "All right. Come on up," and George Wyman could see that she was planning how to get rid of him quietly, without disturbance.

THEY went up to 406, a small, compact apartment that told of a female tenant, and George Wyman stood quietly inside the door, running fingers around the rim of his hat. The girl went directly to a sideboard and rummaged in a drawer, looking for whatever had brought her back. She found it. While she closed the drawer, George Wyman said:

"My wife is missing. I think Mr. Maddern is holding her. My wife means a great deal to me and I'd like your help."

That was all he could say. He could only tell her. He couldn't get tough and slap her, kick her around, beat the truth out of her. He had never hit a woman in his life. He didn't know how to hit a woman.

The girl gave him a brittle, cold smile. She picked up the bag she'd laid on a chair. She opened it. She took out a small pearl handled automatic and pointed it at George Wyman and said:

"Sit down over there, sap, while I tie you up. I've got to get out of here."

George Wyman went over and sat down. The girl looked around the room. Her eyes settled on the cords holding the drapes. She backed toward them.

George Wyman said, "I guess I made a mistake, thinking you'd help me."

She used the cold smile again. "I guess you did." She tore the ropes loose.

George Wyman turned his eyes away from her and looked at the wall. "If I could only have found the dark-haired girl. Maybe I could have made her understand." There was regret in his voice.

The blonde looked at him sharply. She jerked viciously at the rope.

"What the hell are you talking about? She frowned and moved toward the other drape.

"The dark-haired girl." He looked back at her, questioningly. "You must have known her. She came with Mr. Maddern the first time. Then she called up once, asking if I'd changed my mind. She didn't seem so hard, somehow."

The blonde girl dropped the rope she was holding and came over with long slow steps and stood in front of him. She had a beautiful body. Sex encased in bright steel. "A girl," she asked carefully, "came to your house with Lew Maddern?" She stared into his face.

He looked up with surprise. "Maddern introduced her as Doris Kennelley. I supposed you knew her. At first I thought she was his wife. But I guess I was wrong."

The girl who called herself Loren Kain knifed two gray eyes at George Wyman, trying desperately to cut through the honesty of his face and see what lay beneath. She cut deeply, but the honesty was too thick and too tough. It went clear in to the core. She couldn't bore deep enough to find anything behind it. Honesty was all there was.

"What did she look like?"

George Wyman described a pretty, dark girl. But there are a lot of pretty, dark girls. She could have been any one of a hundred thousand.

Loren Kain began cursing. She didn't scream or rant. She cursed softly, al-

most to herself, with an intensity that became monotonous; with a glittering hatred that seemed to charge the atmosphere of the small room and make it thick.

"That explains a lot of things," she told herself. "The filthy, rotten heel! The two-timing lizard!"

GEORGE WYMAN watched the girl silently, wondering if Lew Maddern *had* been cheating on her. Loren Kain's sudden and complete belief in his infidelity almost branded it with a stigmata of truth.

She whirled on George Wyman. Her voice rose now. "You want to know where the skunk is? *I'll* help you hang the bastard. There's an old deserted roadhouse out by the DesPlaines River. A white house near a jerk-water flying field about five miles south of the town. He's hiding his dirty yellow skin out there right now!

"And I'll tell you something else that a sucker like you wouldn't know. Your house is worth plenty because it's right in the middle of a block that an eastern syndicate wants to build an experimental laboratory on. I don't know why they have to have that one spot but they do. Yours is one of the three residences on that land and Maddern's already got the other two, together with the rest of the land. You're all that's in his way and, being a hog, he wants it all. That's the way he works—all or nothing. But that's the way I work too. He'll find that out, the heel."

She could have left it at that but she didn't. Her sadism, her cruelty had to be satisfied. Wyman had given her something that hurt. She turned viciously and gave it back:

"And your precious wife is dead! Maddern didn't expect you to yell copper. He didn't think you had the guts. He thought you'd give one yelp and

hand him your dump on a silver platter. That's what he gambled on.

"When you pussyfooted to the law, Maddern got scared and played it the long way. He split your wife's skull on the theory that dead bodies can't testify, and he's banking on his fairly clean reputation to pull him through."

She was screaming at the end. And she kept on screaming. She hurled the pistol past Wyman's head and yelled, "Get out of her you sneaking factory bum! Get the hell out of here!" Then she knelt down on the floor and began sobbing.

GEORGE WYMAN walked through the night again. The streets were quiet and empty, and the inside of him was cold and dead. He walked until he came to the house Lew Maddern had wanted so badly. He went into the house and to the bedroom. He opened a dresser drawer. He found a gun there. A .38 automatic. He'd owned it for a long time but he didn't know much about it. The bullets were in the butt there. That thing was the safety catch. You pushed it that way. Then, as long as you held the trigger back, it was supposed to keep on shooting. He wondered if it would shoot at all. He'd heard that guns were supposed to be cleaned and oiled often.

He left the house without looking right or left and went out into the street and walked until he met a cruising cab. He got in and told the driver where to go. Time passed; a lot of mileage spun from under the tires, and George Wyman stood alone near a lonely white house. The cab was a receding tail light, moving south.

Wyman moved up a curved driveway toward the silent house. There were no lights—no sounds. He went up on the rickety front porch and tried the door. It was locked. He retreated down the

steps. A grown-over walk skirted the house. Wyman followed it around toward the rear.

There was a man leaning against the wall beside the back door.

The man had evidently been half dozing. He moved when George Wyman was fifteen feet away. He was large—a towering thing there in the lemon colored light of the sickle moon. He turned, dropped into a crouch, his hand hanging just above his coat pocket.

George Wyman said, "If you move your hand any lower, I'll kill you. I want to see Lew Maddern. Take me to him."

The big man looked at the inoffensive little intruder and grinned. "So you'll kill me huh, punk? And how many men have you killed today?"

The big man kept on grinning. George Wyman watched the grin turn into a sneer as the big man dived a hand into the pocket. He looked at the big man with flat eyes. He took out the unoled .38 and pointed it at the man and pulled the trigger.

Before he could loosen his finger, two slugs had torn through the big man's heart.

The look of surprise was still on the big man's face as he lay with open eyes turned toward the sky. George Wyman stepped over him. He tried the door. It was open. He went inside.

Immediately there was the pounding of feet. The pounding grew louder. Another door was flung open. A man with a gun in his hand peered from a lighted room into the dark one. "You Al," he called. "What's wrong?"

"Al is dead," George Wyman told him. "I'm looking for Lew Maddern."

The man cursed and fired at Wyman's voice. He almost hit it before Wyman pointed the .38 again and pressed on the trigger. It was a well-trained .38. It knew where to put its

slugs. The man coughed and grabbed at his stomach and folded forward. He had stopped breathing when George Wyman stepped over him into the lighted room.

Lew Maddern stood hard against the far wall. He was a well-dressed, portly individual with a round face and blue, scared eyes. He stood with his arms hanging, his hands pressed to the wall.

George Wyman said, "Hello, Mr. Maddern."

"Wh-what happened?" Maddern faltered.

"Your two men are dead. They didn't leave me any choice. Now I've come to kill you."

MADDERN couldn't speak. He stood against the wall while his white face sagged and his flesh cringed. Wyman looked at him. He raised the gun and Maddern slipped to his knees. He lowered the gun.

There was something inside, something he hadn't known existed within him. He'd known it was there, of course, but this was the first time he had been called upon to name and define it. This he did, now, but that didn't help. Recognizing it didn't abolish it. It was a heritage from generations of decent people, that wouldn't let him shoot Lew Maddern in cold blood. A deep heritage. He was physically incapable of raising the gun and pulling the trigger.

A full minute of silence passed. Maddern's throat worked, but no words came out. Then Wyman moved toward a table in the center of the room.

He motioned with the gun. "Come over here."

He had to say it again before Maddern moved toward him, as though pushing against the current of a stream, and stood facing him across the table.

"I'll lay this gun there—in the middle," Wyman said. "I'll count three

and we'll both grab for it. That will be fair. You'll have a chance for your life."

He extended his hand, laid the gun down, drew back. He crouched, toed the floor like a cat. He said, "One—two—three." His hand snaked out and came back with the gun. But he didn't shoot.

Maddern hadn't moved.

"I'll put it out farther—there. Reach for it!"

Maddern croaked, "For Christ sake!"

Wyman picked up the gun and let it hang limply. "I should have known you wouldn't. You've got more to lose than I have. You've got money and a lot of things you want, including your life. Now that Helen's gone I haven't got anything. I'm not even gambling. All I've got in the pot is a plugged quarter."

Maddern's croak worked again. "You can have your wife. She's—in

there."

Wyman should have known it; that the blonde girl had merely been satisfying her cruelty; that Helen's murder was only a tentative plan. If Helen had already been killed, Maddern wouldn't have been in hiding. He'd have been somewhere in plain sight.

"Show me where she is."

When the shots brought neighboring farmers and finally the police, they found George Wyman holding his wife's hand, she was only frightened, and Lew Maddern sitting at the table with his head buried in his arms. There was a lot of excitement and noise and chatter. One cop observed: "Jesus! When they pick on these quiet little guys they're sometimes kickin' dynamite around."

The papers played it up big, but George Wyman finally sold his house and found a little spot in the country.

He hadn't wanted the hero stuff. He'd only wanted Helen.

A SUCKER IS BORN

WITH so much loose money in the country it is no wonder that the bunco and confidence game swindlers are busy again. The wonder is that they don't try something new. The boys in the confidence racket are using the same old come-on and hokum that worked in the lush days at the close of the first World War. They don't seem to understand that people get wiser as they grow older. Or do they?

A nationally known bonding concern estimated that the "take" from bunco and confidence schemes totaled one billion five hundred million dollars in 1920. For 1945, the same company expects the suckers to part with more than two billion.

But in a check with bunco and robbery squads in a dozen principal cities, I find no trace of imagination on the part of the swindlers. Like some Hollywood movie makers, they believe that if a gag worked once it will work again.

For instance: In San Diego a group of factory men chipped in to buy a 36-gallon barrel of ten-year-old Dewarr's finest whiskey. The cost was \$10 a gallon, \$360 for the keg. Cheap enough when you consider the product and the state of the whiskey market. The barrel was "straight from the warehouse."

One of the prospective purchasers was a wise-guy. "Take out the bung," he said to the salesman. "We'll sample it." The salesman cheerfully

removed the bung. By fitting four or five drinking straws together the wise guy made one straw long enough to go deep into the barrel. He inserted it through the bung hole and, finding no obstruction, sucked. "Ah!" he murmured, "Ah!" Using the straw as a pipette, he drew a sample for his friends. They sipped, rolled their eyes and kicked through with the cash.

They had bought 35 gallons and three quarts of San Diego city water, which isn't the best in the country by any means. The other quart was fine old whiskey trapped in a tube fixed to the bung hole.

Old? Sure it's old. General Pershing's merry men worked it on the French with English rum kegs, years and years ago. During prohibition in this country the gag was routine in every city in the land. Still it works.

But listen to this one: In the space of one month and in the cities of Chicago and Los Angeles, two suckers bought machines that took blank paper in at the top and popped ten-dollar bills out of the bottom. The Chicago man paid only \$250 for his lesson in Barnumology. But the Los Angeles fellow parted with \$5,000.

Recently, in a Boston newspaper, a female reporter claimed to have observed while riding with the police in a prowler car that scores of

(Continued on page 174)

The RAM of ARIES

by MILTON K. OZAKI

(Continued from page 47)

CHAPTER IX

THE stairway was bare, drafty, and dirty. Milk bottles on each landing reflected a dull, feeble glow from a thirty watt light bulb. The green walls were scarred and cracked, not having been washed or painted since the end of World War I—if then.

The climb didn't do me any good. When a man's body begins to go to flesh, climbing long flights of stairs ceases to be casual exercise. I was breathing heavily by the time I reached the fifth floor and my ankles were aching. I noticed that a door to the left had a spot of white near its base, and there was a larger splotch on the floor, worn thin by the scuffing of passing feet. Without knocking, I twisted the handle and walked in.

It was a studio, all right. There was a large easel in one corner, an old wooden table littered with bottles, tubes, cans, and brushes, a dirty mattress in one corner, and a half dozen wooden packing cases scattered here and there.

Before a large, colorful canvas on the easel, a tall, bearded man was crouched. He wore a tattered pair of cheap brown work-pants and a dirty grey sweat-shirt. Judging by the painstaking care with which he was wielding his brush, the detail he was working on required concentration. That was all I had time to notice. As I turned to close the door, a voice said: "Don't move."

I stood still, keeping my hands at my side, and slowly turned my head. He wasn't a big man, but he had a big gun. And the gun was pointed directly at me. "Well," I said, "hello—"

"Who're you?"

"My name is Robert Stille."

"Whadya want?"

"I want to see him." I nodded toward

the painter.

He moved away from behind the door, the better to see me. His nose was flat and thick, as though God had squashed a piece of putty in the center of his round face. His eyes were wary, and a little tired, but his lips were tightened determinedly.

"You do, do ya?" he growled.

His hand was very steady, a lot steadier than my stomach, as he raised the blunt barrel of the gun to a line directly parallel to my navel.

"Got a gun?" he demanded.

"No." I swallowed, then said, inanely but truthfully: "I'm afraid of guns."

"Hey, professor," he called softly, almost as though he were talking to himself. "See if he's got a gun."

A TALL, gaunt fellow detached himself from the shadow of an adjoining doorway and strode toward me. He was about forty-eight years old and looked as though he'd escaped from a backwoods pulpit. His eyes were grey and aloof, but his hands, patting my clothes, were rough and efficient. "The gentleman is not armed," he announced, stepping away from me.

"Okay," the one with the gun said. I could tell by the way he said it he thought I was lucky.

"I don't think he's a cop," the professor volunteered.

"Are you a cop?"

"No."

"What's the idea, coming in here?"

"I told you. I came to see him." I raised my arm casually and pointed at the painter. He was still crouched in front of the easel, his head bent close to the canvas, obviously oblivious to what was going on behind his back.

"Why didn'tcha knock?"

"I didn't want to disturb him in case he was painting."

"Yeah?" His tone was skeptical. "You been here before?"

"No."

"You a friend of his?"

"In a way, yes."

"Whadya mean, in a way?"

"He doesn't know me, but I came to help him. I don't know whether that makes me a friend of his or not, but it certainly doesn't make me an enemy."

"Who toldja he was here?"

"Ada St. Claire."

"Yeah?" Without taking his eyes from me, he asked: "Whadya think, professor?"

"The gentleman doesn't seem dangerous."

"Dangerous?" The gun shook as he laughed derisively. My stomach muscles quivered. "I could tie a knot in 'im with one hand!"

"In that case, the gun becomes superfluous," the professor pointed out, stroking his chin with long, slender fingers. "I suggest that we adjourn to the kitchen."

"Good idea, professor." The fellow with the squat nose pushed his gun into the waistband of a pair of baggy trousers. "In there, you." He indicated a doorway. "Don't do anything sudden, either."

The professor led the way, switching on a light. The room was small and unkempt. A rusted gas stove occupied one wall, and a wooden icebox, looking as though it hadn't been used in years, stood adjacent to the door. An ancient dinette table occupied the center of the room. There was an ashtray, overflowing with cigaret butts, several packets of matches, two bottles of beer, and a plate of corned beef and cabbage on the table. The professor indicated a packing case with an airy gesture and, choosing one for himself, sat down. I shrugged and did the same.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me what the pitch is," I suggested, feeling a lot better now that the gun was no longer aimed at my middle. "Do you always greet visitors this way?"

"I believe the gentleman deserves an ex-

planation," the professor agreed. "Perhaps you had better explain things, Pete."

PETE, still suspicious, leaned one of his thick shoulders against the door jamb, glanced into the other room, then eyed me skeptically. "Got any 'dentification on you, mister?"

"Naturally." I took out my wallet and handed it to him. He glanced at the identification cards, passed the wallet to the professor.

"Thought you said you weren't a cop?"

"I'm not. I'm a private investigator—which is a hell of a lot different."

"Yeah?" Pete seemed dubious. "What you want with Adams?"

"I have some business to discuss with him."

"What kinda business?"

"I don't see what difference it makes. It has nothing to do with you."

"Oh, no?"

"No."

"Perhaps I had better do the talking, Pete," the professor suggested. "We are friends of Mr. Adams. If our conduct seems presumptuous, Mr. Stille, it's because we have reason to believe that certain . . . ah . . . people would like to inconvenience our friend, and—"

"Look, professor—"

"My name is Armstrong. The title is purely honorary."

"All right, Mr. Armstrong. If my guess is correct, you think the police are going to attempt to arrest your friend for the murder of Vivian Boyd. Right?"

"You said it!" Pete grunted. He gave me a threatening look.

"What if I *had* been a policeman?"

"You wouldn't be sitting here!"

"Would you have shot me?"

"Well—no" Pete shuffled his feet. "We'd have tied ya up. We just don't want Adams disturbed, not for a while."

"You mean you want him to finish his picture without interruption?"

"Yeah."

"How long has he been working at it?"

"Since yesterday afternoon. He ain't even had anything to eat."

"Oh, I see." I eyed the plate of corned beef and cabbage. "Have you any idea how much longer it'll be before he's finished?"

"Christ, no! Sometimes it takes two or three days, sometimes more."

"I don't think it'll be long before the painting is completed," the professor put in. "He seems to be applying small, finishing strokes."

"How long have you two been here with him?" I asked.

"I been here all day," Pete growled. "The professor brought the Irish turkey a couple hours ago."

"Are you positive he's been painting here since yesterday afternoon?"

"Sure."

"Could you swear to it?"

"Not in court."

"Then why—"

"Once he starts to do a picture, he don't like to stop. I saw him come in yesterday afternoon, so I knew he was going to start a picture. Once he gets started, he never stops until he's through."

"I see. He could have gone out, then, without you seeing him—but you don't think so."

"That's about it."

"But, knowing that the cops were looking for him, you decided to prevent his arrest?"

"He was painting, wasn't he? We didn't want anyone to disturb him."

"You mean you were ready to knock down and tie up a cop just so he wouldn't be interrupted at his painting?"

"Yup."

"Do you know what the penalty for resisting an officer is?"

"Nope."

"Don't you care?"

"Not particularly. We'd do anything for Adams. He's a great artist, ain't he?"

"Maybe he is. I don't know. I do know that I'd think twice before sticking out my neck the way you did."

"Hell, a friend's a friend." Pete shrugged, as though that explained everything. The professor nodded.

A whoop sounded from the other room.

"Hey, Pete! Professor! Come here!"

"He's finished!" Pete and the professor gasped in unison. Without a glance at me, they rushed into the studio. I got up and followed them. When I got there, they were standing in front of the easel, slapping Laughton's back and shouting words of congratulation. Laughton was grinning and nodding his head like a pleased schoolboy. The picture was damned good. It depicted the drugstore scene described by Ada St. Claire, and it was a masterpiece of simplicity. The tall fountain stools, the gawky girls in their twisting figures, the cluttered fountain, even the crudely lettered signs—"Try Our Fresh Strawberry Sundae... 28c" and "Toasted Cheeseburger . . . 31c"—were all there, done with a simplicity of line and color which recreated the scene with striking realism.

IGNORING me entirely, Pete and the professor pulled Laughton toward the kitchen and made him sit down in front of the corned beef and cabbage. Pete uncapped both bottles of beer and poured one of them into a thick glass tumbler. Laughton protested good-naturedly but ate hungrily and emptied the glass of beer. Pete immediately grabbed the second bottle and refilled his glass.

Watching him eat, I wondered what sort of a chin he had underneath his unkempt beard, for, although his eyes seemed a little warmer, a little more alive, than Adams', without the beard he and Adams were as alike as two olives.

He finished eating finally and, tipping back his head, drained the rest of the beer. Some of it trickled down his beard as he drank, but he merely rubbed his mouth on a sleeve and belched contentedly. Grinning at the professor, he picked up the empty bottles and shook them. Then he held each bottle close to his left eye and pretended to peer into its neck.

"Empty!" he shouted. "And you only brought two bottles, Pete!" He shook his head despairingly. "I thought you were my friend!"

"Hell, John, we didn't know you had hollow legs!" Pete said. "Besides, the pro-

fessor had a tough day and we were a little short of dough."

Laughton laughed uproariously and slapped Pete's back. The professor chuckled.

"I could run to the corner and get a couple more," Pete said, "providing you got two-bits handy."

"That's the spirit, Pete!" Laughton said, still laughing heartily. "We'll celebrate tonight, eh? Get a dozen bottles of Schlitz for you and me, and get a pint of the professor's favorite yakkidock." He reached into his slacks and found a soiled five dollar bill. "Hurry, Pete—my throat is as dry as an old rug." Then he noticed me. "Hey, who's your friend, Pete?"

Pete and the professor both looked at me. Pete said: "Gee, we forgot about 'im!"

"The gentleman's name is Robert Stille," the professor explained. "He's a detective—and he wants to talk to you."

"You want to see me?" Laughton spread his hands. "Well, here I am."

"I'd like to talk to you alone, if you don't mind."

"All right." He waved a hand at Pete and the professor. "Wait in the other room, eh?"

"Sure, John. I'll go get the beer," Pete said. I noticed that big revolver was no longer in the waistband of his trousers. Evidently he felt the crisis was past. He left the kitchen hurriedly, and, in a moment, I heard the outer door open and close. The professor went into the studio and sat down on a packing case near the easel.

"Well, Mr. Stille?"

"As the professor told you, I'm a private investigator." I paused and looked him in the eyes. "I'm afraid you're in a jam, Mr. Laughton."

His eyes narrowed. "My name is John Adams."

"No." I shook my head. "John Adams is the man who hired me to find Frank Laughton." I repeated the whole story, exactly the way Adams had told it to me. Laughton sat there, his fingers tightened on the edge of the table, his eyes staring

into mine.

When I finished, he sighed and shook his head. "It is all true, Mr. Stille. But I am John Adams—and *he* is Frank Laughton. That's the way we arranged it, and that's the way it has got to remain."

"I'm afraid it isn't that easy."

"Why not? We made a bargain, a contract. Why shouldn't he keep his end of it?"

"Do you remember your wife?"

He nodded. "A bitch. She made my life a hell."

"I don't know about that, but I do know that Adams is tired of her. He wants to marry someone else, and, since there's plenty of money for the both of you, he feels that—"

"The hell with him." He jabbed my arm with a forefinger. "Nothing is as valuable, Mr. Stille, as peace of mind. When I was Frank Laughton, my life was a hell. I hated every minute of it. Then, when I met Adams and persuaded him to take my place, it was like being born again. You can't imagine how wonderful it felt! For the first time in years, I was free! Free to go to sleep when I felt like sleeping, to eat when I felt like eating, to go walking when I felt like walking. I began to love life from that minute—and I intend to keep things that way."

"Unfortunately, in the eyes of the law, you are still Frank Laughton. You're the owner of the Triple D Chemical Company, and Shirley Laughton is your wife."

"Adams was a bum when I met him. I gave him everything I had, and he was damned glad to get them. As far as I'm concerned, they're his for keeps. He ought to be grateful."

I THINK he is. At least, he knows that you gave him his big chance. But the fact of the matter is that, legally, the business is still yours. I talked to my lawyer about it, this morning, and he said that Adams is your agent—that's all. He's entitled to compensation for services rendered, but he has no claim to any of the assets of the business. As for your wife, the law says she's living in open adultery

with Adams."

"Say that again." His beard creased in a grin.

"Adams is your agent, and—"

"Not that—the part about my wife."

"You're her legal husband; consequently, her life with Adams is one of open adultery."

"By Christ!" He began to laugh. "It'd almost be worth going back for!" His whole body shook. "The sanctimonious little bitch! Living in adultery! I never thought of that!"

I waited until he calmed down a little. "What's so funny about that?"

"What's funny? Haven't you met her?"

"Yes, briefly."

"Now that she's got money, I'll bet she's the best-dressed, best-smelling, most hip-wiggling woman in Chicago! Am I right?"

"She's a very good-looking woman."

"Sure. Why do you suppose I married her? She always did like to primp and fuss with herself. To look at her, you'd think she was the sexiest thing God ever put hair on, wouldn't you?"

"Well—"

"You don't have to answer. I know. She's got the God-damnedest voice—there's a come-and-take-me in practically every syllable. But it's propaganda, Mr. Stille. The whole damned build-up is propaganda! She doesn't mean a bit of it. In other words, she's strictly a teaser. I didn't get to sleep with her until I married her, and then I found her the coldest damned woman ever created. She looks and acts like hot stuff, but it doesn't mean a thing."

I didn't know exactly what to say, so I said: "I'll be damned!"

"You'll be damned? Think how I felt! But that isn't the worst of it. Besides being a nasty little teaser, she's one of these women who can't bear to see anyone else having fun. If one of her girl friends stepped out with someone else's husband, she'd run to the guy's wife and warn her. See what I mean? If she'd been born a couple thousand years ago, Christ wouldn't have had a chance!"

"An amateur reformer, eh?"

"No. Just a damned meddler, one of those better-than-thou people. When I walked out on her, I was so glad to get away that I never gave her another thought. I thought she had quit me for good. It certainly never occurred to me that she'd come back and accept Adams as a husband. But now that you mention it"—he paused to chuckle—"I can just imagine her face if she found out she'd been sleeping with the wrong man! My God, what a joke!"

"I can see how it'd be a shock."

"A shock? Believe me, Mr. Stille, she'd explode! I wouldn't want to be within a thousand miles of her when she found out." His eyes sobered, and he added: "But she mustn't find out, of course. I'm not going near her, and I'm sure Adams is smart enough to keep quiet."

"I'm not so sure of that. He's anxious to marry someone else, and, if you don't play ball, he's liable to walk out on her."

"I don't give a damn what he does. Besides, he'd have a hell of a time proving he isn't Frank Laughton. Shirley'll swear until she's black in the face that he's her husband—and so will I."

"How about Ada St. Claire?"

"What about her?"

"She thinks she's your wife."

"She is. When I became John Adams, I washed out the past and started life with a clean slate. A man has a right to be married to the woman he loves, and Ada is the only woman who ever suited me. That's why I married her."

"I know how you feel about it. In fact, my sympathy is entirely with your viewpoint. But the law will look at it differently. Ada St. Claire is not only not your legal wife—but the children which she bears you will be branded bastards."

"Who will do the branding?"

"Society—if and when your alter ego becomes revealed."

"The hell with society. I'm John Adams, and any children we happen to have will bear the name of Adams. I'm not ashamed of it. It's as good a name as Laughton, and I'd a thousand times rather have Ada bear me a bastard than have Shirley pre-

sent me with one of her kids.”

“Does Ada feel that way?”

“Why shouldn’t she? She’s a smart girl. She understands me.”

“PERHAPS I understand her better than you do. I think the only reason she bothered to go through a marriage ceremony with you was so any child she bore would have a valid name. After all, you’d lived together for years, didn’t you? Why else should she marry you?”

“Well—” He stroked his beard for a moment, then shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. But it isn’t anything to worry about now. Ada isn’t exactly a chicken, and her work is pretty strenuous. I’ll worry about that bridge when I come to it.”

“You don’t know it yet, but you’ve come to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I talked to Ada before I came here. She hasn’t told you, but you’re going to be a father.”

Laughton’s beard bristled. “Good God! Are you sure?”

“I’m not sure—but Ada seems to be.”

Laughton was disconcerted for a moment, but only for a moment. He began to grin, a little proudly. “Well, it’s okay with me. As far as the legality of our marriage is concerned, it’s legal until someone proves it isn’t. Only three people know about the switch, and I don’t think any of them is going to do any talking.”

“There are four.”

“Who’s the fourth?”

“My secretary.”

“Oh, sure.” He dismissed the difficulty with a negligent shake of his head. “Neither you nor she could prove a thing without the cooperation of Adams or myself. And if Adams tries to upset things, I’ll make him a bum again. If the lawyer you mentioned is correct, I have the power to do that.”

“He’d be entitled to compensation.”

“Yes, but I could tie things up so he’d have a hell of a time collecting it. Money doesn’t mean a thing to me, but I have a hunch it’s mighty important to him.”

“There’s another angle to this.”

“Listen, Mr. Stille. I can’t help but feel that you’re wasting your time. I’m John Adams now, and I’m going to continue being John Adams. That’s all there is to it. I’m living a quiet life and I like it. There’s no reason why Shirley should ever suspect anything. Chances are, even if she did she wouldn’t dare admit it. And Adams has got to stay right where he is. When he thinks things over, I think he’ll see that he’s stuck.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. You see, there’s Vivian Boyd.”

Laughton’s brows shot up. “What’s she got to do with this?”

“She’s a friend of yours, isn’t she?”

“I suppose so. But—”

“You’ve been playing with her, off and on, haven’t you?”

“Hell, you know how things like that are. She’s separated from her husband, and every so often she gets lonely. I don’t think she has favored me any more than she has a half-dozen other men. Anyway, so what?”

“She was killed last night.”

“She”—his eyes went wide with surprise—“*what?*”

“She was killed sometime last night.”

“Good God! Where?”

“In your room.”

“*In my room?*”

“She was found on your bed, minus most of her clothes, and with a bullet in her head. The cops think you did it.”

He sat there, staring at me, a look of utter incredulity on his long face. “But—I was *here*. I haven’t seen her for days!”

“Can you prove it?”

“Ada brought me here in a cab. Pete saw me. He was standing on the sidewalk—”

“He told me that. But that doesn’t prove that you stayed here. Maybe you changed your mind about painting . . . later.”

“I didn’t. I started right away, and I’ve been working at the picture constantly. My friends will tell you that, once I begin to develop an idea, I don’t even stop to eat or sleep.”

“They told me that, and I believe them.”

But you can see how things will look to the police. They not only won't believe you—they'll laugh at the whole idea."

"Yes. I suppose they will. But they can't prove that I was at the hotel, either."

"PROBABLY not. It still looks bad for you, though, because of your past intimacy with her. Here's the way the cops will reason: She was in Laughton's room. She was on his bed and had most of her clothes off. Whoever shot her held the gun right against her head—then pulled the trigger. They were getting ready to go to bed together. An argument started—and he shot her."

"But, for Christ's sake, Stille—"

"If you were a cop, wouldn't you think the same way?"

"Maybe. I don't know. All I know is that I was here, painting, when it must have happened. Hell, I didn't have any *reason* to kill her!"

"Did she know that you and Ada were married?"

"I guess so—I'm not sure."

"Well, there you are. The cops will figure that you got married to Ada without telling Vivian. She discovered it—maybe you told her, casually, yourself—and she threatened to go to Ada and tell her about your affair. To shut her up, you shot her—then beat it here and cooked up this alibi. Any way you look at it, it's a fair circumstantial case."

"Yes. I can see that." He shook his head hopelessly. "What shall I do?"

"How many people know you have a studio here?"

"Quite a few. I haven't made a secret of it."

"That's too bad. It's only a matter of time, then, before the cops break in. Funny they haven't gotten here already."

"I doubt if any of my friends would tell. They aren't the sort of people who give a damn about the police."

"You'd be safer somewhere else. Do you know anyone with a spare room?"

"You mean you want me to hide?"

"I think you'd better—for a few days, anyway." I deliberately eyed his beard.

"And, if I were you, I'd get rid of the chin foliage. You couldn't walk ten feet with that beard without getting picked up."

He touched his fingers to the beard, caressed it. "I don't like the idea of hiding, Mr. Stille. As for the beard, I've had it a long time. I wouldn't feel like *me* without it."

"You wouldn't look like you, either," I said, "and that's exactly the point. The cops haven't managed to get a photo of you, but they know you have a beard. That's what they'll be looking for."

"All right. If you think it's necessary, I'll shave it off."

"Good. You can always raise another, you know. Now, how about that room?"

Laughton heard the door open and close at that moment, and, raising his voice to a roar, he called: Pete! Come here!" Then he looked at me and said: "I suppose they both know about Vivian?"

"Yes. They were going to keep the cops out of here until you'd finished the picture."

"They're good friends." He nodded gravely. "The very best!"

Pete hurried in, his arms wrapped around a large bag of bottled beer. The professor followed him, carrying a pint flask of some gaudily-labeled liquor. At Laughton's request, I explained the situation to them. They not only approved the plan but suggested several refinements. When I left, Laughton was uncapping a bottle of beer, and Pete and the professor were arguing about who should have the honor of removing his beard.

CHAPTER X

I OVERSLEPT Wednesday morning. When I reached the office, Helen Gates had the mail sorted and was busy clicking her typewriter. She glanced up as I entered and said good-morning. I must have growled irritably in reply, for her eyebrows flew up and the smile slid from her face.

"Come in—and bring your notebook, Helen."

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

A carton of black coffee, flanked by two

doughnuts, was sitting on my desk. The coffee was lukewarm. I drank it anyway. Then I ate the doughnuts. After that, I felt better.

"Don't you feel well this morning, Mr. Stille?"

"I feel lousy—this morning and every morning, Helen. You ought to know that."

"You were born in the early part of June, weren't you?"

I gave her a warning look. "I'm a Gemini, but don't try to tell me that that has anything to do with the way I feel in the morning. I know why I always feel lousy, and there isn't anything to be done about it."

"There isn't? Why?"

"Because it's getting up that makes me feel so crummy—and there isn't any way of making a living which doesn't require it."

"Oh." She smiled hesitantly, then said: "You're just spoofing me, Mr. Stille."

"I am like hell," I assured her. "Did Allen Ross phone yet?"

"No, he hasn't."

"No calls at all?"

"Jack Pierce called. He said he'd be in about ten o'clock."

"Good. Maybe I'll have time to give you most of the dope on the Adams-Laughton situation." I began dictating and gave her a detailed memorandum covering the first day's developments. "When you finish typing that, Helen, put it in the safe and be sure it's locked."

"Yes, Mr. Stille. The check from Mr. Goodman came in. Shall I deposit it?"

"Yes. Incidentally, here's another check." I tossed her the \$5,000 check which John Adams had given me. "You'd better deposit that, too."

Her eyebrows did a little dance, and I could tell by the prim way she walked to the door that she didn't quite approve the way money was inundating the office. I didn't blame her. After all, seven thousand bucks is a lot of dough for a small detective agency to rake in—in one day. I was trying to figure out how much would be left after income taxes when the phone rang.

"This is Allen Ross, Bob."

"About time you phoned. How are things?"

"Not too hot, but I'm making progress. The Laughtons bought their Astor Street house two years ago. Before that they lived in an apartment on Delaware Place for about four years. I ran into a dead-end there, but it finally occurred to me to check with the telephone company. According to the old directories they have on file, the Laughtons were living at 1640 West Adams Street when they had their first phone installed. That was in 1935, and they lived there three years."

"Good work, Allen. Did you pick up anything on Mrs. Laughton?"

"A little. The landlady at the West Adams Street address remembered her. According to her, Mrs. Laughton was always talking about what a nice place her parents had in Lake Geneva."

"Wisconsin?"

"That's the one. It's mostly a summer resort, but the town has a year-around population of about thirty-two hundred. It's a little over an hour's ride from here—in case you want me to run up and check on her family."

"You'd better do that, but don't take all day. I may need you for something else."

"Okay, Bob. It shouldn't take me long to make contact in a town that size."

Jack Pierce came in promptly at ten o'clock, looking as though he hadn't been to bed for at least forty-eight hours.

He was a big man—about five-eleven in height and close to two-twenty in weight—and, if his hair were a little thinner on top, he'd have been a dead-ringer for Paul Whiteman. He had dull brown eyes, and a trick of letting his eyelids droop which gave his rather florid face a dull, stupid expression. But he was a good operative. He'd worked on several jobs with me during the past year, proving himself dependable and ambitious. If he had any fault at all, it was a curious tendency to be over-clever. Most of the work which comes to a private agency is nothing but dull, plodding, routine jobs which require

more persistence than genius, but Pierce seemed to consider each assignment an intellectual challenge. Part of this, I think, was due to having read a book called *Modern Criminal Investigation*, and part to his youth. He was about twenty-eight years old, and I was certain that a couple more years of chasing dead-beats would dampen most of his enthusiasm.

"You look like hell, Jack," I told him bluntly.

HE GROANED and sank wearily into the client's chair. "I feel like hell," he admitted. "I've been beating my brains out on a case."

"Who've you been working for—Pinkerton?"

"No. Keene & Cooper, the new outfit up the street. You haven't had enough to keep me busy, Bob, and I've got to make a living, you know."

"I know. Things are going to be different from now on, I hope."

One of the problems of a small agency is the matter of maintaining a staff of dependable operatives. When business is good, it pays to keep a string of good operatives on a regular salary basis. But, if business happens to take a nose-dive and the agency bank account isn't too healthy, a lot of salary commitments can drive an owner both crazy and bankrupt. Using free-lance operatives obviated the danger of any prolonged financial drain, but it was disadvantageous in that it sometimes made it impossible for the agency to get a good operative at the time his services were most needed. With money rolling in, one of my first thoughts was to hire a couple of good free-lancers on a guarantee basis.

"It'll be all right with me," Pierce sighed, closing his eyes wearily. "Although, frankly, I'm thinking of quitting the racket."

"Yeah? How come? I thought you got a kick out of being a big boy with a tin buzzer."

"That part's all right. I'm tired of beating my feet on sidewalks and parking outside of buildings. In other words, I'm bored. If something interesting doesn't happen soon, I'm going to kiss Chicago

good-bye and go back to dear old Kenosha. Christ!"

"This job may not be so dull, Jack. I'll admit I intended to put you to tailing someone, but I've changed my mind. Here's the pitch." I started in at the beginning and gave him an over-all picture of the Adams-Laughton situation.

"Who are we working for—Adams or Laughton?"

"Well, Adams hired me, but the check had Laughton's name on it—and, according to Milton Kahl, it's really Laughton's money. I haven't decided which way to figure it, but I personally like Laughton better than I do Adams."

"Allen Ross is checking on Mrs. Laughton, and Fred Matson is—doing what?"

"I had Fred tracing Laughton yesterday. He picked up a tip that Laughton and Ada St. Claire, the stripper, had gotten married. I carried on from there last night."

"Uh-huh." Pierce nodded thoughtfully. "What'll Fred be doing today?"

"I'm going to keep him on the Vivian Boyd angle. I'm positive Laughton didn't kill her, and, before anything definite can be done about the switch of identity, he'll have to be cleared."

"I've got an idea, Bob."

"What?"

"Find out where Mrs. Laughton was when the Boyd babe was killed."

"Why?"

"She may not be as dumb as she appears." Jack Pierce opened his eyes a little and wiggled a finger at me. "Suppose she caught on to the fact that something odd was going on. Adams told you he was afraid to tell her the truth because she'd think he was crazy. But he didn't say he never *tried* to tell her the truth. Did he?"

"He said he'd suggested it to her, using a hypothetical example, but—"

"Okay. He hinted around, then, trying to see what her reaction would be, and she got a little suspicious. That example he gave her may not have been quite as hypothetical as he thought, and—"

"Hell, Jack—"

"Or maybe she happened into the

Esquire Theater last week. If the gallery is on the mezzanine, it's probably near the ladies' can. She may have seen his pictures. She may even have recognized one or two of them. And, if he was hanging around most of the time, as you say he was, she may even have caught sight of him. See what I mean?"

"It's a possibility, but a damned small one. What possible motive could she have for killing the Boyd girl?"

"There are a lot of other detectives in Chicago, Bob. If Mrs. Laughton is a bright girl—and we'd be suckers not to figure on that right from the start—the first thing she'd do would be to slap a tail on him. Right away, she'd learn that he was living at the Baker Hotel and was involved with Ada St. Claire. She might not find out about his getting married to the St. Claire woman, but she'd certainly learn enough to get mad on."

"But why the hell should she get mad, Jack? Even if this far-fetched theory of yours happened to be right, it wouldn't be enough to motivate a murder. Don't forget that Adams has given her what she always wanted. When Laughton was around, she was always griping because he didn't make enough money. Now—"

LOOK, Bob. Women are women, and I admit that I don't know too much about them, but I do know that they don't need much motive for doing things. For instance—the discovery that she'd been tricked could have sent her scurrying for a gun. Or, for that matter, the discovery that she'd been sleeping with the wrong man. You said Laughton got a laugh out of the idea of her committing adultery—well, if that's the kind of small-minded woman she is, it wouldn't be funny to her."

"But this Vivian Boyd was—"

"I've got it!" Jack Pierce sat up straight and pointed a finger at me. "She's mad, see? She starts out for his hotel, intending to kill him. Well, when she gets there, she runs into the Boyd girl. She mistakes her for Ada St. Claire—you said they were both blondes, didn't you?—and, bang, she shoots her! Eight will get you five that

that's what happened."

"I'll buy sixteen bucks worth of that."

"It's a deal." Jack poked a big hand toward me. I shook it gravely. "Now that that's settled, what do you want me to do?"

"I left Laughton at his studio last night, with the two fellows I mentioned—Pete and the professor. The professor, incidentally, operates a medicine pitch. His real name is Armstrong and he has a small office on Ashland Avenue, just off Madison Street. Reducing preparations and stuff like that. Aside from the racket, he's quite a nice guy. He agreed to park Laughton in his room at the hotel as long as necessary."

"Is Laughton minus his beard now?"

"Pete was getting ready to shave it off when I left. I want you to go to Armstrong's hotel and keep an eye on Laughton. Don't let him know that he's being watched, though. See what he does, who comes to visit him, and, above all, let me know if anyone resembling a cop gets near him."

"What's the angle?"

"Adams doesn't want Laughton arrested. We're protecting him."

"Okay. What do I do if someone tries to grab him?"

"Use your own judgment, Jack. He represents a lot of dough to us."

"I get it." Jack Pierce nodded and pulled himself to his feet. "I think I'll get a room right next to his and go to sleep." He blinked, then added: "Relax. I'm kidding."

I grinned at him. "Get as much rest as you can, Jack, but keep track of him. If that theory of yours is correct, he's liable to be the next one knocked off."

"I'm thinking of that, Bob."

"Good. Tell Helen to come in."

Helen Gates, as she crossed the office and sat down beside the desk, gave me an oddly apprehensive glance. Her lips started to move, as though to ask me a question, but she thought better of it and just sat there staring at me.

"What's the matter, Helen?" I asked.

"Nothing, Mr. Stille."

"There's a funny look on your face. And you were about to ask me something."

"Well—" She diddled with the pencils in her hand and blushed a little. I noticed that she had a thick brown book in her lap. It looked like a textbook of some sort. "You'll think I'm silly."

"Maybe I will." I smiled. "Maybe I do all ready. In any case, it doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"I was going to ask you if you'd found out when Mr. Laughton was born."

"Good God! Are you still worrying about that astrology business?"

"It might be very important, Mr. Stille!"

"For Chrissake, why?"

"Because—well, if he's an Aries, as I think he is, he might . . . die suddenly."

"What?"

"I've been going to class twice a week—that's why I was in such a hurry last night—and we've been studying the Aries type. I brought my book to show you because, even if you don't believe it, it's something you ought to think about. And if Mr. Laughton *was* born between—"

"Let me see the book."

SHE opened the book, flipped several pages, pointed a finger at a marked paragraph. Then, a little timidly, she pushed it toward me. I read the paragraph indicated:

". . . Aries governs the head and face, and people born with this sign rising are liable to fevers, apoplexy, stomach trouble, headaches and violent diseases. . . . The nervous system is high-strung. . . . They die suddenly and are not likely to suffer from long or chronic illness. . . . They die, or they recover in a short space of time, because their constitution will not stand a long-continued strain. They are peculiarly liable to wounds and accidents because of the physical fearlessness they possess. . . ."

"You really believe that, Helen?"

"Yes, Mr. Stille. My teacher says—"

"Your teacher is an idiot. If there was any truth in it, insurance companies would levy a higher premium rate on people born between March 21 and April 19."

"Insurance companies don't know everything!"

"No, but they've investigated damned near everything influencing life and death. If there was anything to this astrology business, they'd know about it. That's for sure."

"I still think—"

"You have a right to think what you please, Helen," I said impatiently, "but you're making the mistake of trying to refute hard facts with an absolutely unprovable theory. A man in my business can't afford to tangle with these things like that. You ought to realize that."

"But—"

"You're a good-looking girl, Helen, and you show signs of being smart—except for this crazy astrology stuff. Now be a good girl and give this book back to the quack who sold it to you. We've got a lot of work to do today."

Her lips tightened stubbornly, but she took the book and laid it on the far corner of the desk. Then, keeping her eyes away from mine, she opened her notebook and poised a pencil.

"Draw a check to the order of Shirley Laughton for \$500.00. That's the amount I'm refunding to her as unearned."

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

"Fred Matson will be in sometime this morning. Tell him I want him to continue to operate in the South State Street area, and ask him to phone the office occasionally so I'll know where he is. You'd better read him the notes I gave you this morning—the part covering developments last night—so he'll know what's going on. If he needs any expense money, let him have twenty bucks."

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

"Go through our list of operatives available and see if you can find someone to handle the Clayton case. If so, give him the dope and tell him to get started. Dick Flaherty may be available. Try to get him."

"All right."

"Make that check right away, Helen. I'm going over to report to Mrs. Laughton, and I'll take it to her."

WHILE Helen was getting the check ready, I phoned the detective bureau and asked for my old friend, Sergeant Adolph Valentis. Luckily, he was in.

"This is Robert Stille, Sergeant."

"Hello, Stille. How's sleuthing?"

"Not good, not bad. How are you fixed for information?"

"It depends. What's on your mind?"

"I'm interested in the Boyd murder."

"Yeah?" Valentis' voice softened. I could almost see him cocking one eyebrow curiously.

"Purely curiosity, you know. What caliber was the gun?"

"Don't you read the papers?"

"Sure, but I like to get my information straight from headquarters."

"It was a .25 automatic."

"Probably a woman's gun, eh?"

"A lot of men like small guns." Valentis' voice was almost toneless.

"That's right. How about the time?"

"We traced her back to a restaurant where she had a light dinner at six o'clock. Adding that fact to the lab's analysis of her stomach contents, we figure she was killed about seven-thirty Monday evening."

I clucked my tongue sympathetically. "Too bad. I hear she was a pretty girl."

"Yeah." There was a pause, as though Valentis was pondering something. "You must have an angle, Stille. What is it?"

"I'm a mystery fan, Sergeant. Murders fascinate me. Maybe I should have been a cop."

"Maybe you should, at that."

"Any idea who the murderer is?"

"We've got several good clues."

"You have?"

"Yeah. One in particular is pretty hot. We haven't even given it to the papers."

"Oh? Could you—"

"Sure. But this is confidential, you understand."

"Naturally."

"About quarter after five yesterday a couple guys wandered into the Baker Hotel. One of them—a medium-sized fellow, about thirty-eight years old, kinda thick around the belly, and wearing a brown serge suit—gave the clerk a fast line and borrowed the

key to Adams' room. The other guy—small, freckle-faced, and wearing horn-rimmed glasses—trailed along with him. Funny, isn't it?"

"What's funny about it?"

"Well, they went to Adams' room, and when they came back they forgot to mention that there was a dead babe lying on his bed."

"You mean Vivian Boyd was in this Adams' room?" I asked carefully.

"Yeah. But that isn't what's so funny."

"Well—?"

"It just occurred to me that one of those guys looked a lot like you. And, now that I think of it, the other one sounds like a private eye who works out of your office once in a while. I forget his name right now, but you know who I mean."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sergeant. Why in God's name would I—"

"That's what I want to know, Stille. Do you want to come down here—or do I have to send over after you?"

"Hell, I thought you were a friend of mine! You know I'm on the level. I'm not the kind of guy who'd—"

"We'll talk about it when you get here." Valentis' voice changed subtly. It became firm, determined—definitely not friendly. "I'll send one of my squad cars over after you. Right away."

CHAPTER XI

I SAT there a long time—at least three seconds—then kicked back my chair and started out of the office.

"Got that check ready, Helen?"

"Yes, Mr. Stille." She slid the check toward me. I grabbed it, pushed it into a pocket.

"Now listen, Helen. Try to get this straight." I threw the works at her hurriedly. "I'm leaving the office. I haven't been here today and you don't know exactly when I'll be in. You haven't seen me or talked to me since yesterday. Understand?"

Helen gaped a little, but she nodded.

"There'll be a couple cops here in a minute or so. Try to act open and above-

board, but don't tell them anything you don't absolutely have to."

"B-but—"

"Try to reach Fred. Tell him to stay away from the office. He's probably already on his way down, but try to get him anyway. The cops are on his trail and I don't want him involved. Got that?"

"What do I—"

"Don't mention Adams or Laughton. You never heard of them, see?" An elevator door clanged open and I glanced nervously into the corridor. It was an old woman looking for a jewelry shop down the hall. "Pick up your notes and put them in the safe. Do that right away. I'll get in touch with you later, but, when I phone, make sure it's me you're talking to—if there's any doubt in your mind, play dumb until you *do* know to whom you're talking. Don't take any chances."

"But—"

"That's all. See you later."

Helen thought I'd lost my mind but there wasn't time for explanation. I sprinted for an elevator, rode to the second floor, got off, walked down two flights of stairs to the basement, where Jake, one of the janitors, obligingly showed me the way to an alley door.

I breathed easier as soon as I was in the Ford and on my way out of the Loop, but until I pulled up in front of the Laughton house on Astor Street my nerves weren't exactly normal.

Shirley Laughton seemed surprised when she opened the door, but she made with a smile and gestured me in. She had on a knock-out dress that was 25 per cent material and 75 per cent suggestion, consisting of a bare-shouldered blouse of yellow silk and a thin chartreuse skirt which fitted her smooth thighs like a sheath. The colors accentuated the bloneness of her hair, and her shoulders were nice. Very nice.

"I didn't expect to see you so soon, Mr. Stille." Her voice was low, a little husky, as she led me across the carpeted hallway into a large parlor. One of her hands touched my arm fleetingly and I got the idea that maybe we were more than business acquaintances.

"I'll get right to work, Mrs. Laughton," I began.

"That's fine, Mr. Stille." She gestured toward a couch. "Do sit down. I didn't expect to hear from you quite so soon."

"I thought you'd appreciate prompt service."

"I do. Did you—?" She let the question hang delicately and sank into a chair across from me. I pulled my eyes away from her legs and looked at the room. It was bright and colorful, furnished entirely with chairs, tables, and couches of the modern functional type. The rug was dark blue broadloom, covering the floor from wall to wall. Three of the walls had been recessed and fitted with narrow glass shelves, on which stood row after row of brass, china and glass "what-nots." The other wall, facing Astor Street, consisted of luxuriously draped French doors.

I answered her question: "Yes. I found Mr. Nathan."

"Where is he?"

"He's located in Oak Park—an office of his own."

"Practicing law?"

"Yes. He was probably studying law while working with Fenske. When Fenske died, he must have started out on his own. That's the way most lawyers get started."

"Yes." She nodded but didn't seem impressed by the information. "Did you have any trouble locating him?"

"Well, Fenske died some time ago, you know, and no one seemed to know what happened to Nathan. By luck more than anything else, one of my operatives managed to locate him."

"Whereabouts in Oak Park is he?"

"His office is in the Victor Building. It's that tall, new, white-stone building about a block south of the first El stop. You can't miss it because it's the only modern-looking structure in the business section."

"Oh." She gave me a small smile which said it really wasn't important after all. "You must have a very efficient organization, Mr. Stille. I'm awfully grateful to you."

"You needn't be, Mrs. Laughton. Business is business."

I reached into my pocket and produced the check. "Incidentally, you're entitled to a refund of \$500. I had my secretary draw you a check for that amount."

SHE gave it a brief glance and laid it on a nearby end-table. When she turned back to me, her lips were parted slightly, and her eyes were gently appealing. "You must think I'm an awfully silly woman, Mr. Stille."

"Why?"

"Well, because—"—she moved one shoulder helplessly—"because I—you know what I mean."

"I don't think I do, Mrs. Laughton. Anyway, what I think isn't important. My job is to oblige my clients and that keeps me too busy to worry about whether they're being silly or not. Practically everyone is foolish in one way or another, you know."

"Yes, I suppose so." She stood up suddenly and walked listlessly toward the French doors. I got up too, and stepping toward one of the glass-shelved walls, asked: "What are all these knick-knacks?"

She came toward me. "They're tooth-pick holders. I've been collecting them for years."

"Tooth-pick holders!"

"Yes." She stretched a slim arm toward one of the shelves and selected a small china cup. "I found this one in an antique store on Clark Street last week. It's an English coin imprint—very rare."

"Well, for—!"

"This is my favorite." She indicated one of bumpy glass. "It's hob-nail glass, you know. I had to do a lot of talking to get it, believe me."

The shelves were full of the silly things—pewter, jade, German brass, hand-painted china, cut-glass—every imaginable variety. She began to wax enthusiastic, handing them to me one after another, and babbling about methods of manufacture, sources, and values in a detail which amazed me. I knew a few stamp collectors who pored through catalogues, measured perforations, tested for watermarks, and spent most of their time pasting their

acquisitions in elaborate albums, but it had never occurred to me that anyone, particularly an attractive woman, could be nuts enough to go off the deep end for anything as prosaic as a toothpick holder. As for tracking them down, rummaging through dirty antique stores, investing a considerable amount of money in them, and cluttering up the living-room walls—hell, it was ridiculous!

"Seems to me you've forgotten one kind," I said at last.

"What kind is that?"

"The kind they use in the Thompson restaurants."

"Oh, you!" She flashed a tolerant smile at me and gave my arm a little slap.

There was a small *click* in the hallway, like the latch of the front door being thrown, and, a moment later, a muffled sound of footsteps crossing toward the stairs which led to the second floor. Shirley Laughton caught the sound the same instant I did. Her eyes widened and her smile froze apprehensively.

Her breath escaped in a faint hiss and she relaxed a little. "It must be Frank," she decided, nodding to herself. "I didn't expect him home again until evening. He must have forgotten something."

"I'd better scam."

"No." Her hand reached for my arm, tightened a little. "He could see you from the window."

"Suppose he comes in here?"

"He won't. He doesn't like this room. If we keep quiet, he'll leave in a minute."

"He may come in here, looking for you."

"I don't think so, although—"

"I'd better park in the kitchen. There isn't anyone there, is there?"

"Well, no—"

"All right. Which way do I go?"

She pointed. I tiptoed across a small dining room, pushed through a door, and stepped into a gleaming white kitchen. There was a chrome stool, a breakfast nook, an electric range, an extra-large refrigerator, plenty of cabinets, and a sink. I threw one leg over the stool and felt for a cigar. I started to light it, shook my head, put it back in my pocket. I strained

my ears, trying to catch the sound of movement upstairs, but all I could hear was the faint clicking of a red-and-white enameled clock over the sink. For the sake of doing something, I got up and tried the kitchen door. It was bolted from the inside. I peeked through the gay Mexican-motif curtains which covered its single pane of glass, and saw a small porch, a garbage can, a fair-sized yard containing green grass and an assortment of deck chairs. I went back to the stool and glanced impatiently at the clock. It was twelve minutes to eleven.

At five after eleven, Shirley Laughton opened the door from the dining room and said: "He's gone." There was a puzzled look on her face.

"Was it—?" I raised my brows questioningly.

SHE nodded. "Yes. He changed clothes." She sounded as though she couldn't quite believe it.

"Is that something unusual?"

"No." She shook her head quickly, bit her underlip in a way which showed her small, white teeth. "He often comes home to change suits, but the plaid suit he put on this morning had just come from the cleaners and it was a favorite of his. He must have had an accident of some sort."

"Because he changed suits?"

"Yes. He changed into his brown gabardine. It's a suit he hasn't ever exactly liked."

I shrugged. "Forget it. Maybe he dribbled some egg on his pants. Did he come into the parlor?"

"No. He stopped in the study for a few minutes, then left."

"Didn't look for you, eh?"

"No." She came close to me and looked into my eyes. Her lashes were long, and here eyes were bright and appealing. "Frankly, Mr. Stille, my husband and I haven't been very close lately."

"Really?" I said the word lightly, as though I didn't believe she was serious. "I can't imagine why not."

"I don't understand it." She seemed to be talking to herself, not to me. "He used to be so fond of me. Lately, all he thinks

or talks about is his business. Sometimes he acts as though I were nothing but . . . a piece of furniture."

I grinned. "But *very nice* furniture, Mrs. Laughton."

She smiled faintly and shook her head. "It's a funny feeling. Being a man, you can't understand it. A woman likes to be . . . well, she likes to feel that she's more important than anything to a man."

"You're a beautiful woman, Mrs. Laughton, and I understand it costs a lot of money to keep a woman like you in the kind of clothes and setting you deserve. Your husband probably feels that, in devoting himself to his business, he is indirectly devoting himself to you. That is, he's making the money necessary to keep you happy."

"No. I'm not that expensive. I'm sure he doesn't have to work that hard. In fact, I'm quite sure he doesn't have to work at all."

"He's pretty well heeled?"

"Yes. He's made a lot of money the last few years."

She was standing beside me, looking into my eyes, so close that the scent of her made my nostrils flare. She swayed a little and the bare skin of her shoulder touched my arm. I slipped my hand around her shoulder and caught her. That's all I intended to do, but her skin was warm and smooth and, as I caught her, her head tilted back and I noticed that her red lips were soft and moist. I tightened my arm and pulled her hard against me, then cupped the back of her head in the palm of my other hand and held it still. Her body stiffened and she tried to wriggle away. I thought she was kidding, giving me the usual token resistance, so I held her tighter and kissed her—twice. Her lips were cold, tight, unresponding.

"You can do better than that!" I growled, and I leaned to kiss her again. She jerked away suddenly and cut a stinging slap across my face.

"You bastard!" she gasped. She rubbed her lips furiously with the back of a hand and raised one arm to slap me again.

"For Chrissake!" I ducked my head,

caught the arm as it swung past my ear. "What the hell's the matter? You asked for it, didn't you?"

"You—you—!" Her face was white with anger.

"Wait a minute." I caught her other hand and shook her a little. "I'm sorry if I misunderstood you, but I got the impression that—"

"I don't want to hear your explanations!" She jerked impotently, then bent her neck and sank her teeth into my wrist. "You—you—*beast!*"

"Damn you!" I said, releasing her. She flung away and stood, panting, with her back against the sink. There was blood on my wrist where her teeth had cut the skin.

"Get out! Get out of my house!" she said tensely. "Don't ever come here again!"

I DABBED at my bleeding wrist with a handkerchief. "I don't get it," I said, staring at her as she jerked the chartreuse blouse back into the position from which it had slipped during the struggle. "If I ever saw a woman on the make—"

"You're nothing but a dirty, low, unprincipled—"

"Okay, okay," I agreed. "Maybe I am." Her face was tight with fury and, with one hand, she was rubbing the place where my finger had gripped her arm. "But that doesn't mean you aren't a little bitch," I said softly. "A teasing little bitch."

"Get out! You—!" Her eyes began to blaze furiously again.

"I'm going," I said. "If there's anything that makes me sick to my stomach, it's a teaser like you. No wonder your husband can't bear the sight of you. You're probably about as much use in bed as a copy of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary."

She sprang at me, but I pushed her away and walked to the door. I think she stumbled back against the stool and fell, but I didn't give a damn. I walked straight through the dining room into the parlor toward the front door. And, at the door, I didn't even pause to look cautiously

up and down the street before opening it. The hell with her, I thought, I don't care who sees me coming out!

I sat in the Ford for a few minutes, trying to figure out what had come over her. Then, shrugging, I leaned over and switched on the ignition. The card caught my eye as I revved the motor and prepared to pull away from the curb. It was propped against the windshield and bore the words: "Aren't you lost?" Frowning, I turned it over. Jack Pierce's name was printed on the other side. What the hell!

Making a U-turn, I headed toward Division Street, turned west, and pulled up in front of a Walgreen drugstore. I bought a couple phone slugs from a sleepy-eyed cashier at the cigar counter and went back to the rear of the store. First, I dialed the office. Helen Gates' bright voice said: "Mr. Stille's office."

"Hello, Helen. This is Bob Stille."

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Stille isn't in."

"I'm not, eh? What's the matter—have you got company?"

"Yes, I think so."

"The cops?"

"Yes. I'm expecting him almost any time."

"Did you get hold of Fred?"

"Of course, sir. I'll be very glad to have him call you." She paused a moment. "Did you say Harrison 0168?"

"Call him at Harrison 0168, eh? Okay. Anything further from Allen Ross or Jack Pierce?"

"Let me get this straight, sir. The Harrison number is your office?"

"Don't over-act this, Helen. Did you hear from them, or didn't you?"

"Yes. Your home phone, then, is Superior 1008. And the name is Jacques—J-a-c-q-u-e. All right, Mr. Jacques. I'll have Mr. Stille phone you as soon as he comes in."

"Okay, Helen. Nice work. I'll get in touch with you again later."

I dialed the Harrison number and asked for Fred Matson. Someone hollered: "Any you guys named Matson?" A moment later the receiver rattled and Fred's voice asked: "That you, Bob?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

"I'm in a cigar store at the corner of State and Van Buren."

"Good. Helen warned you in time, then."

"Right in the nick of, I guess. I was stepping into an elevator, on my way up, when the starter asked if my name was Matson. When I said it was, he slipped me a note telling me to stay away from the office. I came down here, phoned the office, and gave Helen this number. What's up?"

"Lieutenant Farley has a great desire to talk to us."

"He got our description from the clerk, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't want to tangle with him for a while, so keep in the background as much as possible. I want you to continue to pick up everything you can relating to Adams, Vivian Boyd, and Ada St. Claire—but don't get caught at it. Understand?"

"Sure. What if I want to get in touch with you?"

"You won't be able to for awhile. Suppose you try to be at this number again around five o'clock. I'll call you."

"Okay, Bob. I'll be careful."

"If you happen to get picked up, Fred, you don't know anything."

"Natch. Be seeing you."

I DIALED the Superior number and listened to the phone buzz ten or twelve times. Shrugging, I hung up and went back to the Ford, where I sat for ten minutes, trying to decide what to do next. I finally cruised west on Division Street past the Triple D Chemical Company. I was slowing down to park when I noticed a man lounging against a fence fifty feet from the building's entrance. Circling the block, I came back and took a good look at him. Stopping the car abruptly, I rolled down a window and leaned out.

"Hey, Pierce!"

Pierce glanced up from the paper he was pretending to read, blinked at the car, then strolled casually toward me.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jack?"

"You told me to keep track of the guy,

didn't you?" Pierce didn't seem too happy. "Well, that's what I'm doing. The bastard's been on the go all morning."

"Laughton has?"

"Yeah."

"Where is he?"

"Inside." Pierce jerked his head toward the long, low building occupied by the Triple D Chemical Company. "He went in about fifteen minutes ago."

"What the hell's the idea?"

"I don't know, Bob. All I know is that ever since I picked him up this morning he's been as busy as an ant in a new pair of pants."

"Did you put that card in my windshield this morning?"

"Yeah."

"What was the idea?"

"Thought I'd let you know I was in the neighborhood. You didn't happen to be visiting at 1424, did you?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. Why?"

"Didn't you see him?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Jack? I was in 1424, talking to Mrs. Laughton. Do you mean to say—"

"That's right. Ten minutes after I checked into that hotel where Armstrong had him parked, he gets a bee in his bonnet and starts going places. You said he'd be staying in his room, and I figured on getting some shut-eye, but—"

"Where'd he go?"

"First, he went in a drugstore and made a couple of phone calls. I didn't want to get too close to him, so I didn't catch the numbers. Anyway, he came out, got in a cab, and rode to Astor and Schiller. He had the cab wait at the corner while he walked the half-block to 1424 Astor. He went in and stayed about twenty minutes. It was while I was hanging around outside that I recognized your jalopy and—"

"For Chrissake! Are you sure it's Laughton you're tailing?"

"Look, Bob, I may be sleepy—but I'm not dumb. I checked on Armstrong. He's got an office where he pitches a concoction of iodine and water as a reducing elixir, and he lives in a room at the Hotel Martell.

I gave the clerk a couple bucks and got located in a room across the hall from his. Laughton was in Armstrong's room when I arrived. I had my door open and saw him come out—and I've been on his tail ever since."

"I don't get it."

"Ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die," Pierce quoted sarcastically.

"What was he wearing when he went into the house?"

"The same suit he wore when he left the hotel—a brown gabardine." Pierce paused, squinting his eyes. "Maybe, now that you mention it, it wasn't the same suit. But it was one exactly like it. Seems to me he looked a little neater when he came out than he did when he went in. Why?"

"I was in the parlor, talking to Shirley Laughton, when we heard the front door open and some one come in. I ducked into the kitchen. Later, Mrs. Laughton said her husband had gone upstairs, changed from a plaid suit into a brown gabardine, and left."

"She didn't see him come in, did she?"

"No. We were talking, and we weren't near the window."

"Well, I saw him go in—and he wasn't wearing a plaid suit."

"She was referring to Adams, of course. It must have been Laughton, then, all right."

"I told you, Bob, that—"

"Yeah. I'm trying to figure things out. Laughton must be nuts, doing a damned fool thing like that."

"Why? You said he and Adams were doubles, didn't you?"

"Sure, but what if they happened to run into each other?"

"Not much chance of that. He probably phoned ahead to make sure Adams was out."

"It was still risky. Mrs. Laughton might have been in the hall or upstairs. As it is, her busy little mind is wondering about the suit business. She thinks Adams changed clothes, so what is she going to think when he walks in later on in the same suit he left in this morning?"

Pierce shrugged. "Maybe she won't see him come in."

"It was a damned dumb thing for Laughton to do," I said, "and I'm anxious to know what he has in mind. I can't think of a single reason why—"

"Here he comes now, Bob," Pierce said suddenly.

I glanced toward the factory and saw a tall, brown-clad figure coming down the walk toward us. "Walk away from me, Jack," I directed, "and go back to the hotel. I'm going to pick him up and find out what's going on. As soon as I'm through, I'll drive him back to Armstrong's room—and you can carry on from there."

"Okay, Bob."

CHAPTER XII

HE CAME down the walk and stopped a few feet from the entrance. Then he stood there, whistling softly to himself and looking up and down Wells Street as though undecided which way to go. His suit was definitely brown gabardine, well-cut, expensive, fairly new. I waved an arm at him. His blue eyes flicked toward the car, looked at me, then recognized me. He nodded, opened the door, and climbed in.

"Hello, Stille."

"Hello yourself."

"Well, which am I—Laughton or Adams?"

"You look a hell of a lot like Adams—the real Adams."

"But I'm not?"

"I have some inside information which says you're Laughton. Otherwise, I'd say you were Adams in need of a shine."

He looked at his brown oxfords, which were scuffed around the toes and looked as though they hadn't been polished in months. "You're pretty observant. I don't think anybody's noticed the shoes."

"It's my business to notice things. You certainly look a lot different than you did last night. How does it feel to go around with your bare face hanging out?"

"It makes me feel a little undressed?"

"I can imagine. What's the idea, chas-

ing around town like this?"

"You didn't expect me to sit in that damned hotel all day, did you?"

"That's exactly where I did expect you to stay. It'd be a little inconvenient, you know, if you should run into an intimate friend of Adams' and not recognize him. A lot of complications would develop."

"They've already developed, as far as I'm concerned—and I don't like them. That's why I decided to do a little investigating of my own."

"Yeah?" I gave him a quick look. "What do you mean?"

He frowned a little and his blue eyes hardened. "Well, take Vivian Boyd. I'm sure Vivian Boyd's murder is connected with me in some way, but I can't imagine what that way could be. We had a lot of mutual friends, but they're all good-natured, easy-going people. I can't think of a one who might want to kill Vivian. She was just a good-looking girl with a lot of life in her blood. Everyone liked her."

He paused, staring straight ahead, while I angled the Ford around a streetcar and beat the red light at an intersection.

"The more I think about it, Mr. Stille, the more positive I am that she was killed simply because she happened to be in my room. Someone must have come to my room looking for me and found her there. They must have been afraid she'd seen them, and might describe them later, so they killed her. They may have come there to kill me."

"I'm listening."

"I couldn't sleep much last night, thinking about what must have happened, and I decided that the murderer had to be one of two people."

"Adams and who else? Your wife?"

"Yes." I felt him turn his head and look at me, but I kept my eyes on a truck which was trying to maneuver ahead of us. "How'd you know?"

"Just a guess. Go on."

"Well, the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that it had to be Shirley or Adams. They're the only ones with an understandable motive and—"

"Did she see you at the Esquire?" I

turned as I asked the question and caught the look of surprise which flickered across his face.

"You really are very shrewd, Mr. Stille. She did, and I don't see how you could know that."

JUST another guess. She lived on Astor Street, and most of the people in that neighborhood patronize it because it's the only really nice theatre in the vicinity."

"I see." He nodded. "She was at the theatre one evening last week—Wednesday or Thursday, I don't remember which—and I saw her stop and look at my pictures. She was with another girl, and I think they were on their way to the ladies' restroom which is to the right of the gallery. Anyway, they stopped, looked at the pictures, and I felt Shirley glance in my direction several times. It's possible that she recognized one of the paintings—or me. I tried to keep my back to her, and I did my best to hide my face in a magazine, but she may have recognized me anyway."

"Who was the girl with her?"

"I don't know. Probably some new friend of hers."

"Uh-huh. So you think she recognized you. That would have been quite a shock to her, don't you think?"

"Of course."

"So you think she made inquiries—maybe put a tail on you—and found out you were living at the Baker Hotel?"

"Yes."

"Then went there, with a gun tucked in her purse, to have things out with you? You really think that discovery of the deception would arouse her enough to commit murder?"

"You don't know her, Mr. Stille. I do. She seems soft and smooth and kittenish, but, beneath all that, she's a jealous and vindictive woman. If she discovered she'd been tricked into sleeping with a man who wasn't actually her husband, she'd be furious enough to commit a whole series of murders. Morally, she's small-minded. It's hard to understand, I know, but it's a fact."

"You honestly believe she'd come after

you with a gun?"

"I'm sure she would. She'd feel outraged, disgraced, cheapened. When a woman feels like that, she's liable to do anything—particularly a woman of Shirley's narrow type of character. She'd try to kill me before anyone else could discover the truth and point a finger at her."

"Maybe," I said thoughtfully. I touched the back of my left wrist. It wasn't bleeding any more, but it was plenty sore. "Maybe she would, at that."

"I'm sure she would. She's extremely narrow and self-centered in an ultra-moral way. Her mother was a strict, God-fearing woman, and she taught Shirley that purity of person was a ticket to Heaven. Personally, I like my women a little more broad-minded."

"Any idea what Vivian was doing in your room?"

"She must have borrowed it to accommodate some of her friends. I frequently slept at my studio, was sometimes away for days at a time, and I remember that two of her girl friends came into town once and weren't able to find hotel accommodations. When Vivian mentioned it to me, I told her to go ahead and use my room. The same sort of situation may have come up Monday."

"Sounds logical. I'll check and try to find out if someone else was sleeping in her room at the time. Did she have a key to your room?"

"I don't think so. She didn't need one, you know. Almost any key will open those old-fashioned locks. Besides, the maid knew we were friendly and might have opened the door for her."

"I think you've got something there. What was the number of her room?"

"She was in 146."

"That's on the same floor, isn't it?"

"Yes. Down the hall and a few doors to the right."

"The way you figure it, then, she traced you to the hotel and went there to confront you. She found Vivian in your room and using your bed—and she shot her because she thought Vivian was the woman who had supplanted her?"

"Well, yes." He hesitated, then said. "I think she came to kill me. She thought things over, decided the only way she could avert disgrace was by removing me—permanently. So she got a gun somewhere, walked into the hotel, and went to my room. Vivian was a light sleeper, and—"

YEAH. I get it. She probably knocked and Vivian opened the door. Shirley walked in, said she was a friend of yours, and gabbed a while. But realizing that, if anything happened to you, Vivian'd be sure to tell the police about her barging into your room, thereby directing suspicion on her. Her only alternative was to kill Vivian, so she did."

"I think it's a possibility—that's why I—"

"That's why you barged out to Astor Street."

"Yes. How'd you know?"

I grinned slightly. "I see all, hear all, know all."

"Oh." He moved his shoulders restlessly. "Well, I had to do something, so I looked up the address in a phone book and just walked in."

"What if your dear wife had been standing in the hallway?"

"I didn't stop to think about that. I suppose I'd have said, 'Hello, Shirley,' and walked right on upstairs. Anyway, I didn't run into her."

"What did you expect to accomplish?"

"I thought I might find the gun."

"Did you?"

"No. Knowing Shirley, I knew she wouldn't hide it among any of her own things, so I confined my search to Adams' room and study. I'm positive it isn't in either of those two rooms."

"So?"

"So I let it go at that. Incidentally, I switched suits with him. That's petty larceny, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, you switched suits?"

"While going through his closet, I came across this suit. It's exactly like the one I had on, only more expensive and in better condition. So I took my old suit

off and hung it up, then put this on. It fits as though it had been made for me."

"You shouldn't have done that. It was a mistake—and it may prove to be a serious one."

"What do you mean, Mr. Stille?"

"Well, when Adams left the house this morning he wore a plaid suit. Your wife was near a window when you walked out and she noticed that you were wearing brown gabardine. She thought, naturally, that you'd come home to change suits. What do you suppose she's going to think when Adams comes walking in later on wearing a plaid suit?"

"Christ! I—"

"Furthermore, you know how curious women are. She probably went upstairs after you left to find out why you'd changed, expecting to find the plaid suit splashed with mud, or something. When she doesn't find the other suit in the closet—"

"I never thought of that!"

"Well, it's too late now, but she's going to think it's damned odd, especially when she finds your old suit on one of Adams' hangers. You might as well have left a note for her."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stille. I should have thought of that. I can see that now. But I was thinking about the gun, and trying to figure out where she could have hidden it, and—"

"Skip it. It's water under the bridge now. Where did you go when you left the house?"

"I came out here."

"Why?"

"I thought I might as well do a good job and search Adams' office, too."

"For Chrissake! You might have run into him!"

"I phoned first. His secretary said he wouldn't be in today."

"So you walked right on in, I suppose, and acted as if you owned the place"—I grunted shortly—"which, of course, you do."

"THAT'S about it. I just walked around, nodding to people, until I found his

office. I told the girl in the outer office that I didn't want to be disturbed, and I went through his desk, files, everything."

"What'd you find?"

"I didn't find the gun, but I did discover something which may be important."

"Keep talking."

"The company has had an exterminating contract with the Baker Hotel for nearly six years."

"So what?"

"The company makes periodic inspections for bed-bugs and roaches, and, whenever necessary, fumigates the premises."

"A lot of use that information is! Unless—" I nodded thoughtfully. "If Adams has had a contract with the hotel for that long a time, he's thoroughly familiar with the premises. And he'd have access to the hotel at all times, wouldn't he?"

"Of course. Roaches and bedbugs breed rapidly, especially in that district, and he undoubtedly had to check conditions frequently."

"Would he do that himself—or would he have someone else handle the job?"

"He probably did it himself at first. I don't imagine he does now, though."

"That's right. Six years ago he was still getting started."

"Yes."

"That's interesting. Adams knew the layout, then, and if necessary, could have ascertained who was living in which room. He came to me Tuesday morning and hired me to locate you, but it's possible he already knew where you were. It's even possible that he knew Vivian was in your room—and dead."

"I thought of that, Mr. Stille."

"As a matter of fact," I went on, "he may have stumbled over your trail and decided your existence was dangerous to him. After all, you are the legal owner of the Triple D and have the right to take over again whenever you like. In spite of the story he handed me, he may be afraid you'll decide to do exactly that." I pursed my lips. "In that case, his coming to me was simply an attempt to build an alibi. I don't think I like that."

I found a parking space about half a block from the Hotel Martell and slid the Ford into it. I switched off the ignition and we sat there for a few minutes. Laughton finally broke the silence.

"Is it all right for me to see Ada, Mr. Stille?"

"Better not."

"It couldn't do any harm. I'd like, at least, to tell her where I am."

"I'll think about it. If I decide it's okay, I'll call her. Until I do, I want you to stay in your room and keep out of sight. There's no sense in looking for trouble."

"I'm anxious to have this mess cleared up, Mr. Stille. I want to get back to my painting. I'm—well, I'm not happy like this."

"I'm doing the best I can. If you prefer a cell to a hotel room, all you have to do is keep wandering around town like this. And, once the cops nab you, there'll be hell to pay—for both of us."

"I understand that, now. It's nerve-racking just to sit—and not be able to do anything. I don't think you realize how difficult it is for a man of my temperament. I like to be outdoors, walking around, talking to people. Hotel rooms depress me, somehow, and—"

"Get Pete or the professor to bring you some drawing materials. Tell them to buy it, though. Don't try to bring anything from the studio because the cops may have someone watching it. *And stay in your room.* Understand?"

"All right." Laughton sighed heavily. "I suppose you know what's best."

"You're damned right I do." I gripped his arm as he started to get out. "Remember this: If the person who killed Vivian Boyd really meant to kill you—well, they may decide to have another shot at it. And that isn't a pun."

"You think—"

"I think you're safe as long as no one knows where you are, and I want to keep you that way for a little while longer. If you'll co-operate, we may be able to wind this thing up in a hurry. If you don't co-operate, you may find yourself a permanent resident of Oak Lawn Cemetery."

"I'll follow instructions, Mr. Stille."

"Good. I'll try to drop in later this evening."

I WATCHED him as he got out of the car and walked toward the hotel. The sidewalk in front of the entrance was deserted. He pushed through the doors and went in. I sat there another five minutes, waiting to see if anybody'd cross the street and follow him. No one did. It was nearly noon and my stomach had a hollow feeling, so, with a final glance up and down the street, I started the engine and drove a couple of blocks east until I came to a fairly clean-looking hash-house near the corner of Des Plaines.

The booths were crowded. I sat on a stool at the rear end of the counter and ordered a ham-and-egg sandwich, a piece of apple pie, and a cup of coffee. As I munched on the sandwich, my mind kept juggling the names of Frank Laughton, John Adams, Vivian Boyd, and Shirley Laughton. By the time I got to the apple pie, I'd decided that Vivian Boyd's murder hadn't been planned. She'd been in Laughton's room, therefore she'd been killed—probably because the murderer didn't care to take a chance on her silence. Vivian had seen who entered the room and if she hadn't been killed, she'd certainly have told Laughton about his visitor. It sounded logical. The only nasty part about the conclusion was the fact that, if it were true, the murderer was someone who knew Adams was really Laughton—and had something to gain by his death. Was that person Shirley Laughton, driven to murder by a blind and overwhelming fury at the discovery that she'd been unwittingly plunged into a life of adultery? Or was that person John Adams, trying to guarantee his financial and social position by removing the only person who could challenge his success?

I lit a cigar and sat there, idly blowing smoke-rings over the neck of a catsup bottle. The waiter gave me a dirty look and asked if I wanted anything else. When I said no, he muttered something I couldn't hear and went clumping off toward the

kitchen. That earned him a dime tip instead of a quarter.

Sliding off the stool, I walked back toward the men's john and dropped a nickel into the telephone. When I got the dial tone, I carefully spun out the office number and waited for Helen to say: "Mr. Stille's office." The phone rang quite a while. I was about to hang up when, finally, the buzzing stopped and I recognized Helen's voice. She sounded a little breathless.

"This is Bob Stille, Helen."

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Stille hasn't come in yet."

"The cops still hanging around?"

"Yes."

"Any phone calls?"

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Laughton! I didn't recognize your voice."

"Who?"

"Your wife phoned a few minutes ago, Mr. Laughton. She's very anxious for you to call her."

"You must be nuts, Helen. We're through with Mrs. Laughton."

"That's what she said, Mr. Laughton. She said it was urgent and that, if you called, you were to phone her immediately."

"How long ago did she phone?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes ago."

"Okay. I'll give her a buzz. She probably wants to slit my throat. Anything else?"

"No, I don't know when Mr. Stille'll be in. I've been expecting him all morning."

"All right. Keep things rolling."

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye."

I SAT there, staring at the painted wall of the telephone booth for a minute, then dialed the Laughton number. Shirley Laughton answered so quickly that I decided she'd been sitting right beside the instrument.

"Hello, Mrs. Laughton. Feeling better?"

"Is this Mr. Stille?"

"Yeah. I hear you want to talk to me."

"Yes. I phoned your office." Her words came in a rush, excited and a little tense. "You've got to come here immediately. Something terrible has happened."

"What's the matter—did the laundryman try to kiss you?"

"Please, Mr. Stille! This is serious! You've got to come right away. I've been calling and calling, trying to get you."

"I'm pretty busy, Mrs. Laughton. What's on your mind?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. It's—it's something terrible!"

"For instance."

"There's a man upstairs!" She said the words so low I could hardly catch them.

"Did you call the cops?"

"No. I wanted to get in touch with you, first."

"You'd better call the cops, Mrs. Laughton. I'm afraid of guns and I'm no good when it comes to a knock-down, drag-out fight. The cops—"

"No-no-no! You've got to come, Mr. Stille! I—I need you!"

I realized suddenly that she was really frightened, that the husky catch in her voice was fear and not just a come-on. It also occurred to me that if there were a *live* man in her house, he'd have heard her telephoning and beat hell out of her.

"Listen, Mrs. Laughton. Try to calm down a minute. Did you shoot someone?"

"No. I went upstairs and there he was. He—he's all bloody."

"Sit tight. I'll be there in a few minutes."

I slammed the receiver back onto the hook and was halfway to the door before I noticed the black squad car beside the curb. Then I saw the two coppers, one standing at the entrance and one sitting casually at the end of the counter. They grinned at me, and one had the nerve to wiggle a finger coaxingly. "Come, come, Stille," he called. "We've got a nice car waiting outside."

"For Chrissake," I said. "I thought you guys spent your afternoons at the bookies."

"The fifth at Arlington took all our dough yesterday," the bigger of the two said, coming over and slipping his arm through mine. "So we decided to do a little work today. Sergeant Valentis thinks you're a very interesting guy. In fact, he can hardly wait to have a talk with you."

"Look, guys, give me a break. I'm on a

hot case and I only need an hour to tie a knot in it. I'll go down to the station and see Valentis within the hour."

"So you're on a hot case, eh?"

"Maybe he needs some help."

"Yeah. That's an idea. Maybe you need us to go along and help you, eh, Stille?"

"Christ, no! I'll do my own investigating. All I need is one hour, maybe less, then I'll report to Valentis."

"I don't think he wants our company, Max," the big cop decided, shaking his head. "What do you think?"

"I guess you're right, Joe. Maybe he thinks we ain't good enough to 'sociate with a high-class private eye like him."

"Cut the crap, fellows," I pleaded. "I give you my word of honor that I'll—"

"Hell, we don't want your word of honor," Max said. "We'd rather have your company."

"Yeah, we'd like to see how a high-class guy like you operates," Joe agreed ponderously. "So guess what? We're going to go right along with you."

"Aw, for Chrissake, guys! All I'm asking is a little break. You know—"

"Sure, sure. We know how you guys are. Always trying to grab the gravy. Don't even want Joe and me to see how you operate. If that's the way you feel, I guess we'd better go straight to the station. The Sarge ain't too pleasant when he has to wait for people."

"Okay, you win," I said. "I have to make a stop on Astor Street. You can come along if you like."

"Now that's really white, ain't it, Joe?" Max asked mockingly, gesturing me into the squad car. "He's going to let us come along. Just for that, we'll chauffeur you out there and see that you don't get lost."

"Yeah," Max chimed in, "I've been aching to see how a high-class private eye operates. If it weren't for that, we'd take you right down to the Sarge."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "The number is 1424."

to suit me. I climbed out and tried to slam the door shut. "I'll only be a minute," I said hopefully.

"Take it easy, Stille," Max said. "How're we going to learn how you guys do things if we don't go along with you? Joe and me are gonna act like your assistants." He winked at the other cop. "Ain't that right, Joe?"

With Joe and Max close on my heels, I went up the walk and pressed the bell. Shirley Laughton, still wearing the bare-shouldered blouse and sheath skirt, opened the door instantly. Her face was white and scared and, when her eyes took in the two burly coppers behind me, she leaned weakly against the door jamb.

"Oh, Mr. Stille!" she moaned. "I'm so glad you got here!"

"I had to bring the police department along with me," I said. "As a matter of fact, it's probably just as well."

She nodded, gestured to us to enter.

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs."

"All right. You'd better stay down here."

I went up the stairs to the second floor with Max and Joe on my heels. There were four doors, two on each side. The second floor on the right side was open, so I walked up to it and looked in. I'd expected to find a dead man, but the sight which met my eyes was a shock.

"Well, for—!" Joe ejaculated, peering over my shoulder.

"Jesus Christ!" Max said.

The three of us stood there, staring at the room. It looked as though a small cyclone had torn through the place, leaving the floor littered with odd pieces of underclothes, shirts, sox, and neckties. The drawers of the dressers, dumped hastily, had been piled upside-down in one corner of the room. The bright afternoon sunlight which streaked in through a pair of open windows high-lighted a long, nude body stretched across the bed. Blood from an ugly knife wound in the man's chest had run in small rivers down his side, staining the pastel-blue of the bedspread a dark, ugly brown. The weapon—a long, narrow-

THE squad car rushed north, arriving in front of the Laughton house too fast

bladed knife with a thick wooden handle —was lying on the bed a few inches from the dead man's outstretched hand.

"Good God," I groaned, "It's John Adams!"

CHAPTER XIII

THINGS became pretty hectic. Max phoned the detective bureau, and a squad car loaded with photographers, a coroner's physician, and an assortment of technicians arrived in a hurry. A second squad car, containing Sergeant Valentis, Lieutenant Farley, and another cop, followed within minutes. They tramped upstairs, examined the body, popped flash bulbs, gave the whole second floor a thorough once-over. Sergeant Valentis, of course, was delighted to see me.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bob Stille!" His lips smiled but his eyes were frosty. "You and I are due to have a long talk."

"Sure, Sarge. Any time."

"Know the guy?"

"His name was John Adams."

"Adams—the guy who lived at the Baker Hotel?"

"Well, no. This is the real John Adams. The fellow at the Baker wasn't really named Adams."

"The hell he wasn't!"

"What's going on, Valentis?" Lieutenant Farley asked, coming up to us. His baggy tweed suit made him seem bigger than he really was, which was plenty big enough. No slouch when it came to taking beer and food aboard, he weighed close to two-fifty—considerably too much for his five feet eight inches. His brown hair was thin, giving a moon-like appearance to his full face. At the moment, his deep-set brown eyes were bright with interest.

"I've been chasing Stille all day," Valentis explained, "in connection with that Boyd killing. Max and Joe picked him up on West Madison Street about a half-hour ago. He gave them a song and dance about having to keep an important appointment with a client, so, to oblige him, they agreed to stop here. When they arrived, the stiff was upstairs. Stille says it's John Adams

—but not the John Adams in whose room the Boyd babe was found."

"Oh, yeah?" Lieutenant Farley frowned. "Bring Stille downstairs where it's a little quieter. We better get things straight." He turned to one of the detectives. "Hey, Tom. Get a notebook and come downstairs."

Valentis and I went downstairs, followed by Lieutenant Farley and the detective named Tom. When we got to the foot of the stairs, I turned into the parlor. As I expected, Shirley Laughton was sitting there on a couch, her face tight and her eyes red from crying.

"This is Mrs. Laughton," I said. "Lieutenant Farley. Sergeant Valentis. And Tom." They nodded at each other, a little stiffly, and sat down. Tom moved an end-table in front of a chair and put his notebook on it.

"Okay, Stille. Let's have it," Lieutenant Farley directed. He crossed his thick legs comfortably and narrowed his eyes a little.

"It's pretty complicated."

"Not to a smart private eye like you," Lieutenant Farley said. "Just start at the beginning and tell it to us in little words. We'll ask questions if we don't know what you mean."

I GLANCED at Shirley Laughton. She was busy blowing her nose into a frilly handkerchief. Valentis was staring at her smooth bare shoulders.

"I don't know where the hell to start," I admitted. "It's so damned complicated that—"

"Start by telling us who the guy upstairs is."

"His name is John Adams, as I said. Ostensibly he owned the Triple D Chemical Company and lived here."

"What do you mean—ostensibly?"

"That's what's complicated, Lieutenant. You see, he came to my office yesterday morning and—"

"Poor, poor Frank!" Shirley Laughton moaned. She dabbed at her eyes, shook her head weakly. Her shoulders trembled.

"Frank?" Lieutenant Farley gave her a sharp glance. "Frank who?"

"She means Frank Laughton, her husband," I explained.

"What's he got to do with this?"

"She thinks the man upstairs is her husband."

"Did she see him?"

"Naturally. She found him."

"She saw him, and she thinks he's her husband—Frank Laughton. But you think he's someone named John Adams." Lieutenant Farley turned it around in his mind carefully. "Hell, she oughta know, oughtn't she?"

"That's what's so complicated, Lieutenant. Adams came to see me yesterday morning, and, according to him, he's been using the name of Frank Laughton, and living here, but he really isn't Laughton."

Shirley's face jerked away from the handkerchief. Her eyes blazed wildly in my direction. "That's a lie! she gasped. "You're—*crazy!*" Something caught in her throat and she coughed hoarsely. "He's my husband . . . and now . . . he's dead!"

I sighed hopelessly and felt in my pockets for a cigar. Sergeant Valentis took his eyes off her shoulders long enough to give me a warning glare. The situation seemed more impossible than ever. They obviously thought I'd lost my mind, and, the more I tried to explain, the more likely my nomination for a broom-pushing job at Elgin.

"Tell me, Mrs. Laughton," Lieutenant Farley asked in a sympathetic tone, "did you get a good look at the . . . ah . . . body upstairs when you discovered it?"

She looked at him, nodded.

"And there's no question in your mind about it being your husband?"

"N-no!" Sob, sob.

"Tell us how you happened to find him."

"I . . . just . . . went . . . upstairs." She swallowed painfully, cleared her throat. "The door was open and . . . I looked in. He was on the bed!"

"Did you go into the room?"

"Y-yes. I didn't realize . . . at . . . first . . . what had happened. I went right up to the bed." She shuddered, remembering. "Then I knew . . . and I was sick."

"Go on, Mrs. Laughton."

"I ran to the bathroom, and I was there . . . a long time. I'm not sure how long. It felt like forever. Then, when I stopped being sick, I came downstairs and phoned Mr. Stille."

"Why didn't you notify the police?"

"I don't know. Mr. Stille had been here a little while before, and his number was on the pad beside the telephone. I kept thinking that he was a detective and would know what to do, so I kept trying to reach him. . . ."

Farley grunted and gave me a malevolent glance. I knew what he was thinking, and I shrugged helplessly.

"When you went upstairs, Mrs. Laughton, and realized that your husband was dead, did you touch anything?"

"I was sick—"

"Yes, but are you sure you didn't reach out, for instance, and pull the knife from his body?"

"Oh, no!" Her eyes widened with horror. "I—I never touched him."

"All right. I just wanted to be sure." Farley gnawed at his underlip reflectively. "You said that Stille was here to see you earlier in the day. Tell me about that."

"It wasn't anything . . . important." Shirley Laughton blew her nose again, rather nervously, and fixed her eyes plaintively on Farley's round face. "Mr. Stille had undertaken a small job for me, and had come to report. We just talked for awhile, and he gave me a check. Then—"

"Stille gave you a check?" Valentis interrupted, incredulously.

"It was a refund," I explained, "for advance fees which hadn't been earned."

"Yeah? How much was the check?"

"Five hundred dollars, I believe," Shirley Laughton told him.

"That's interesting. Got the check handy?"

"I think I put it on the desk." She tipped her blonde head toward a modernistic desk adjacent to the French windows.

SERGEANT VALENTIS got up, went over to the desk, and picked up a slip of blue paper. He glanced at it, turned it

over, shrugged, and put it back.

"What was the job Stille did for you?" he asked.

"It had nothing to do with the murder," I said irritably. "She doesn't have to tell you a damned thing about it—and I don't either."

"Murder, eh?" Farley raised his brows. "What makes you think it's murder, Stille?"

"I'm not a dope. Anybody with half an eye can see that he couldn't have killed himself."

"Yeah." Farley nodded, more to himself than to me. "What time did your husband come in, Mrs. Laughton?"

"I didn't see him. I didn't know he was here."

"You didn't?" Farley's eyebrows did a little dance. "When did you see him last?"

"It was while Mr. Stille was here. I don't know exactly what time it was."

"Did you see him, Stille?"

"No. I heard someone come in, but I didn't see him. Mrs. Laughton saw him leave. It was about eleven-fifteen."

"Where were you when he came in?"

"In here, talking to Mrs. Laughton."

"But you didn't see him?"

"No. I heard the door open and I heard someone go upstairs. And that's all I did hear."

"Did he come in alone?"

"I think so. I couldn't say for certain."

"How long did he stay upstairs?"

"About twenty minutes."

"You were watching, Mrs. Laughton, and saw him leave?"

"Yes."

"You're positive that the man you saw leaving was your husband?"

"I thought so. Now . . . I don't know."

"You think it might not have been your husband?"

"I thought it was Frank. When he left for his office this morning, he wore a plaid suit. I couldn't imagine what he'd come home for, but, when I saw him leave, I noticed he'd changed into a brown gabardine suit, and I decided he had soiled the plaid suit and come home to change. I

was sure it was him, but—"

"But what, Mrs. Laughton?"

"I was in this room all the time, and I'm positive no one came in after Mr. Stille left. Yet . . . my husband . . . upstairs—" She choked, began to sob again.

"She saw him leave. She didn't see him come back. Yet the guy upstairs is her husband." Valentis' lean face tightened shrewdly. "What she means is, the guy who left couldn't have been Frank Laughton. It must have been the murderer."

"Listen—" I began. I bit my lip, sank back.

"Yeah, Stille?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say something."

"Skip it."

"What were you going to say?" Farley persisted.

"Well, it occurred to me that he might have come back while Mrs. Laughton and I were out in the kitchen."

Farley's brows shot up. "Oh, so you were out in the kitchen, eh? How long were you out there?"

"I went there right after he came in, and I stayed there until Mrs. Laughton came out and told me he had left. We were in the kitchen for five or ten minutes, talking. It's possible that, having forgotten something, he came back without our hearing him."

"He'd have had to come back damned quietly, wouldn't he?"

"Well, yes."

Farley grunted noncommittally and stared at Shirley Laughton, who had quieted again. "Do you think he could have come back without you hearing him, Mrs. Laughton?"

"N-no." She shook her head. "I'm sure I'd have heard something."

"Well, we'll go into that in more detail later," Farley decided. "Suppose we start back at the beginning, Stille. You were telling me about a guy named John Adams."

"Forget it. You won't believe a word—and she'll swear it's nothing but a damned lie."

"Maybe so. I'd still like to hear it."

"OKAY. A man came into my office yesterday morning"—I gave a quick description of him—"and said his name was John Adams. He hired me to locate a fellow named Frank Laughton, and he gave me a check as a retainer. Later, after he left the office, I noticed that the check was drawn on the Triple D Chemical Company and was signed with the name of Frank Laughton. I took the check to the bank. A cashier certified it. Then I looked up Laughton's address in the phone book and came out here. The man who had called at my office—the one who gave me the name of Adams—was here and he told me that he'd been playing the role of Frank Laughton for nine years but that his real name was John Adams."

"It's a lie!" Shirley Laughton gasped. "He's—he's making that up!"

"He told me that the real Frank Laughton had hated his business and his wife, and, being an amateur painter, had wanted to get away so he could devote his time to art. Well, except for a heavy beard which Laughton wore, he and Adams were extremely similar in appearance, and Laughton persuaded Adams to step in and take over his business, name, and so forth. At the time, Mrs. Laughton was away—she'd gotten angry about something and left him, as I understand it—and Laughton didn't think she'd come back. By the time she did come back, a couple months later, Adams had taken over Laughton's business and was making a go of it."

"Wait a minute," Farley interrupted. "Laughton had a beard and Adams didn't. Right?"

"Yeah. When Mrs. Laughton walked in on him, Adams said he told her he'd decided to shave it off. She swallowed the story and, since it looked as though he'd really settled down to making a decent living, she made up with him and stayed. Since she was a good-looking girl, Adams made the most of it—as I don't blame him."

"He's—he's *insane!*" Shirley Laughton cried.

"Okay, I'm insane. Anyway, Adams built the business up into a quarter million

dollar outfit. Then he found a woman he liked better than Mrs. Laughton, and he decided he'd like to stop being Frank Laughton and become John Adams again. That's why he came to me. He wanted me to find Laughton so he could persuade him to come back and take over."

"Did you find Laughton?"

"Yes. He had taken the name of John Adams and become a painter. There's an exhibit of some of his pictures out at the Esquire Theatre."

"He's making it up! It's a . . . a fiendish lie!" Shirley Laughton cried. Her eyes, darting frantically from Valentis to Farley to me, definitely were not beautiful. "You *can't* believe that I'd—"

"Be quiet for just a minute, Mrs. Laughton," Farley said, a little brusquely. "Keep talking, Stille."

"That's about all. Laughton had a room at the Baker Hotel, under the name of Adams. I traced him there yesterday afternoon and found a dead girl stretched out on his bed." Valentis leaned forward and started to say something, but I motioned him quiet. "I'm the guy who phoned headquarters and tipped you off, so don't give me that old business about not reporting a crime."

"Where is Laughton now?" Farley demanded.

"I don't know," I said, acting very sincere, "but I'm convinced that he had nothing to do with the Boyd girl's death. At the time she was shot, he was in his studio on West Madison Street painting a picture. I talked to him last night, and a couple of his friends say he arrived about five o'clock Monday afternoon and had been there ever since."

"Has he still not the beard?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "No, he hasn't."

"What happened to it?"

"He shaved it off."

"When?"

"What difference does it make? He did have a beard, but—"

"I want to know if he got rid of it last night."

"Well, yes. When I left, one of his

friends was saying—”

“God damn you, Stille! Did you tell him to do that?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know exactly. When I left, they were talking about it, and I suppose—”

FARLEY’S face flushed angrily. His fingers tensed into fists and I thought for a moment he was going to lean forward and throw them at me. But he didn’t.

“When was the last time you saw Laughton?” he demanded.

“About fifteen minutes before your boys picked me up.”

“What?”

“You heard me. When I left Mrs. Laughton, I drove out to the Triple D Chemical Company and met him coming out of the office. We sat in my car and talked for a few minutes, then I drove him to the corner of Madison and Paulina. He got out—and I drove east. I’d stopped for a bite to eat when your bright-eyed boys spotted my car and invited me to take a ride.”

“Listen, Stille. I want the truth. You say you and Laughton sat in your car and talked. Did you ask him where he’d been all morning?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Well?”

“He said he’d come to this address and walked in. He said he’d gone upstairs and searched Adams’ room, then he came downstairs and searched the study. While he was upstairs, he put on one of Adams’ suits and left his own, which was a little dilapidated, hanging in the closet.”

“What else?”

“That’s all. He left here and went directly to the Triple D Chemical Company’s offices.”

“Why did he search Adams’ room?”

“Because he thought Mrs. Laughton may have been the person who shot Vivian Boyd—and, if she had, he thought she’d conceal the gun in Adams’ bedroom or study.”

“Yeah? Did he find it?”

“No. That’s why he went to the office.

He thought he might find something there.”

“You’re positive he didn’t mention the little matter of a dead man with a knife in his belly to you?”

“No, he didn’t. I feel absolutely certain that Adams was killed after Laughton searched the room.”

“Why are you so certain?”

“I can’t explain it, Lieutenant. It’s a guess, more or less, based on the way he talked and acted.”

“You say he searched Adams’ office. Didn’t anyone ask him what the hell he was doing there?”

“Why should they? They thought he owned the joint.”

“You mean he actually encountered some of the employees and they accepted him as Adams?”

“He met quite a few of the employees. He told me he had no idea where Adams’ office was and wandered through the building for several minutes before he located it. When he did, he simply walked in and told Adams’ secretary that he didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“This is the damnedest thing I ever heard of!” Farley turned angrily to Sergeant Valentis. “Phone the Triple D Company and talk to that secretary. Get the dope.” Turning back to me, he tightened his jaw and pointed a thick, warning finger at me. “By God, Stille, if she doesn’t verify this crazy story of yours—”

“She will,” I said. “In case she doesn’t, I know someone who can give an exact and detailed report on all of Laughton’s movements this morning.”

“Who?”

“I’ve had one of my operatives on Laughton’s tail since ten o’clock. He followed him here, saw him enter this house and leave. Then he trailed him out to Adams’ office. He was standing there, waiting for Laughton to come out, when I drove up.”

“Were you expecting something like this to happen?”

NO. I wanted to keep track of him in case he decided to leave town. He’s an artist, and he’s temperamental. It occurred to me that he might decide to say

to hell with everything, pack his paint brushes, and go some place where he wasn't known. I didn't want to have to chase around looking for him."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"You—" Farley colored unpleasantly. "Damn it to hell! You just got through saying you put a tail on him because—"

"I changed my mind. After talking to him this morning, I decided there was no necessity for watching him any more, so I sent my operative home. I drove him to Madison and Paulina, as I said, and I left him there."

"Didn't you ask him where he'd be, in case you wanted to get in touch with him?"

"No. I assumed he'd go back to his studio. He's probably there now."

"He is like hell. If he'd gone anywhere near that studio, I'd known about it."

I shrugged. "Too bad. I suppose I should have asked him for the addresses of all his friends, but—"

"Can it, Stille. You knew we wanted to talk to him, yet you deliberately aided and abetted him in escaping. I ought to—"

"Go ahead and see how much good it'll do you. I didn't know a damned thing except that some babe had been found shot in his hotel room and that he didn't have anything to do with it. I'm positive he didn't kill her, just as I'm positive that he couldn't have killed Adams. In fact, I think both jobs were framed. I think—"

"I'll do the thinking!" Farley snapped. "Valentis, did you get that secretary?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. She said Mr. Laughton was in his office for a few minutes shortly after nine this morning. She's quite sure he was wearing a plaid suit. When he left, he said he'd be gone the rest of the day, but he returned unexpectedly about eleven-thirty and was in his private office for fifteen or twenty minutes." Valentis paused. "The second time, he was wearing a brown gabardine suit."

"It's impossible!" Shirley Laughton cried. "He *couldn't* have been there! It was—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know," Lieutenant Farley growled irritably. He glared at me,

chewed at his underlip for a moment. Then he made up his mind: "Call headquarters, Valentis, and order a general alarm for Laughton. I want every hotel and rooming-house in that district turned inside-out." He jerked his head once in my direction. "As for you, Stille, I'm not satisfied with that story of yours."

CHAPTER XIV

AN AMBULANCE arrived and two men with a stretcher hurried in to remove the body. Shirley Laughton sobbed hysterically. Sergeant Valentis patted her bare shoulder sympathetically while I sat there and tried to decide whether I'd told Lieutenant Farley too much or too little. The boys upstairs packed their equipment and came down. To Farley's questions, they said there were fingerprints on everything in the room except the knife. Many of the prints matched the corpse's; the others were unidentified.

The medical examiner reported that death had resulted from a single knife thrust which entered the chest at a slight downward angle and penetrated the heart. The knife found on the bed fitted the wound and, undoubtedly, was the murder weapon. At a guess, death had occurred sometime between eleven and eleven-forty-five. The victim, of course, could not have inflicted the wound himself.

Then Farley went around and around with Shirley Laughton and me again, snapping questions at us rapidly and sharply in an attempt to confuse us. I insisted that, as far as I was concerned, the dead man was John Adams—and I offered to produce my office records by way of substantiating the truth of my story. Shirley Laughton kept repeating that I was utterly mad, simply and completely out of my mind, for the man was Frank Laughton, her husband, and, if any one knew, she ought to. I explained the switch a second time, and Shirley sobbed that, if her husband had actually come to my office and told me that kind of a story, he must have been out of his mind too. Judging by the look on Valentis' face, he thought I was babbling like

an idiot. As for Lieutenant Farley, he didn't think I was mad or stupid—he thought I was lying, which, of course, I was . . . a little.

"You know, Stille," Farley said at last, "I think you're giving me the run-around. I'm not saying I don't believe your story. As a matter of fact, I think you're too smart to concoct such a fantastic yarn without some sort of substantiation. For the moment, I'm willing to accept the idea that the man murdered was a John Adams, but"—he waved a fist threateningly—"I'm positive you're holding back important information! Don't forget that that makes you an accessory after the fact!"

"I've always been on the square with you, Lieutenant. Why the hell should I stick out my neck by lying? I've told you absolutely everything I know."

"I want to know where Laughton is."

"I left him at the corner of Madison and—"

"You've said that twenty times and I'm sick of hearing it! You know where he went. You probably told him where to go."

"Be reasonable, Lieutenant. I've betrayed the confidence of a client by telling you things which—"

"Crap! You told me everything you thought I'd find out sooner or later anyway, and the only reason you did is because you were afraid you'd get thrown in the can and charged with murder yourself."

"Me? How the hell—"

"You admit you were here about the time the murder was committed. If it weren't for this Laughton-Adams hocus-pocus, the two logical suspects would be you and Mrs. Laughton. Right?"

"Well, hell—!"

"It's obvious. And if I had to make a choice between the two of you, I'd pick you every time." Farley made an uncomplimentary sound with his lips. "In fact, I'm a little sorry it doesn't work out that way."

"Maybe Mrs. Laughton and I are in cahoots," I said sarcastically. "Maybe we figured out the deal together. We have a

plane waiting at the airport, and we're going to fly to South America. She's madly in love with me."

SHIRLEY LAUGHTON stared at me with tear-stained eyes and gaped incredulously. "He's mad! Absolutely mad!" she repeated. I was beginning to get tired of hearing her say the words.

"If you weren't such a paunchy, ugly, unattractive guy, Stille, I'd give the idea more than a moment's consideration," Farley said. "It occurred to me, but that's even more fantastic than the switch in identity angle." He glanced at Mrs. Laughton. "Besides, she looks like a woman who is fussy about her friends."

"Yeah," I put in, "she's damned fussy."

"Well, how about it, Stille? Where did Laughton go?"

"I don't know. The last I saw of him—"

"Okay. Maybe a few days in the can will bring back your memory. I've always wanted a chance to find out how tough you private eyes really are." Lieutenant Farley got slowly to his feet and gestured to Valentis. "I'll run Stille down to the station, Sergeant. I want you and Tom to stay here and take care of Mrs. Laughton. She's had a bad shock, you know, and had better not be left alone."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Shirley Laughton began, "but I'll be all right. You needn't—"

"Not at all, Mrs. Laughton. It's routine, entirely routine. It's possible that the murderer may come back, you know."

"Oh." She shivered a little. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"Sergeant Valentis will take care of you"—Lieutenant Farley managed what he probably thought was a grin—"if he doesn't, let me know."

"Look, Lieutenant," I began.

"Keep quiet, Stille. You had your chance to talk." He waved an arm at Mrs. Laughton, gave Valentis and Tom a stern glance, and started for the door. I shrugged and followed him out to the squad car. He made a U-turn and headed south to Division Street. He turned right, went west on Division past State, past Clark, past Wells.

"I thought you were taking me to the station."

"Don't be a dope," Farley said tersely. "Where'd you say your car was parked?"

"It's on Madison, near Des Plaines. You might tell me what the pitch is, you know."

"Well" — Farley pursed his thick lips thoughtfully—"I'm convinced you aren't a moron. No matter what I said in front of Mrs. Laughton, I don't think you're stupid enough to tangle on the wrong side of a murder. I'm positive you haven't been square with me—that is, not entirely—but I think you're more valuable to me loose than in jail."

"Then why all the dramatics? If you intended to send me on my way, why all the threats and crap in front of Mrs. Laughton?"

"I wanted to see what her reaction would be. It was rather interesting."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. I don't think she's very fond of you." Farley glanced sidewise at me. "Do you think she knocked the old boy off?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "When she called me, she sounded scared to death. The more I see of women, the less I understand them."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, take Mrs. Laughton. She looks like hot-stuff, sexy as hell. Even Valentis was beginning to drool a little. I suppose you noticed."

"Yeah. So what?"

"Well, it's all a come-on; it doesn't mean a damned thing. She's as cold as a bag of Birdseye peas." I told him what Adams and Laughton had said about her. "Adams told me they hadn't been getting along; yet, judging by the tears she squeezed out of that handkerchief, he was her little hot-water bottle. Or maybe I'm wrong."

"Maybe we both are," Farley admitted. "That's why I gave Valentis the nod. He and Tom'll keep a close eye on her, just in case."

"You're pretty smart for a cop."

"Don't be nasty, Stille. After all, I'm giving you a break. I expect you to co-operate."

"Naturally."

"Incidentally, what was the job you did for her?"

"SHE wanted the address of a fellow who used to work in a certain lawyer's office. The lawyer, his name was Nicholas Fenske, died a few years ago, and she didn't know how to locate the fellow who was his clerk. I checked his address and took it to her."

"That all?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Want to tell me Laughton's address now?"

"Cut it out. I told you I didn't know where he was."

"I thought you might remember." Farley grunted his disappointment and swung the squad car toward the curb, a few feet behind my Ford. "In case you do, give me a ring."

"Sure thing." I climbed out and slammed the door. "Thanks. If I pick up anything, I'll let you know."

"You'd better!"

It was nearly five o'clock when I walked into the office. Helen Gates was sitting at her desk, reading a book. She glanced up, slapped the book shut, and hurriedly slipped it into a drawer.

"Mr. Stille!" she gasped. Her face, startled at first, gradually relaxed into a smile. "I—I didn't expect you any more today."

"So I see." I walked past her and glanced into the inner office. "When did the cops leave?"

"About one-thirty. Someone phoned, and they just walked out."

"Any calls?"

"Yes, a few." She glanced rapidly through a page of notes. "Allen Ross phoned about Lake Geneva. He said he was catching the next train back and wanted you to wait here for him."

"What time did he call?"

"A quarter to four."

"He ought to be here pretty soon, then. Did he say why he wanted me to wait?"

"He said it was something important."

"All right. What else?"

"A Miss Patricia Patton was in. She

wanted to talk to you about locating some missing relatives. I told her you'd probably be in tomorrow, and she said she'd be in about one o'clock."

"Okay."

"I reached Dick Flaherty and gave him the details on the Clayton case. He said he'd start right away."

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, yes. A Miss St. Claire phoned. She seemed excited and wanted to see you right away. I told her you'd phone her as soon as you came in." Helen handed me a slip of paper. "This is the number."

"Ada St. Claire?"

"Yes, that's the one. That's all the calls, Mr. Stille. I have quite a few letters and checks for you to sign, though, and—"

"I'll take care of them later, Helen. Right now, I want to make a couple phone calls." I went into the private office and shut the door, then dialed the number of the cigar store at Van Buren and State Streets. It buzzed a half-dozen times before anyone answered.

"I'd like to speak to Fred Matson, please."

"This is Fred speaking. That you, Bob?"

"Yeah. Come to the office right away, Fred."

"Sure. Be there in a minute."

Then I called Ada St. Claire. A harsh, strident voice answered, maybe male and maybe female, and I asked for Miss St. Claire. The receiver clack-clacked in my ear and I caught the tinny sound of an orchestra. The voice said she couldn't talk to me. She was doing her act and who wanted her? I gave my number and hung up.

FRED MATSON strolled in a minute later, a cautious expression on his freckled face. "The heat off, Bob?" he asked, glancing around.

"Yeah. Sit down." I waited until he got settled in the client's chair. "Somebody slipped a knife into Adams this morning."

"No!" His pale eyes flickered for a moment. "So they *were* after him, then!"

"I mean the real Adams—the one who

was posing as Frank Laughton."

"Oh." Matson shrugged. "Who did it?"

"Hell, I don't know. The three most prominent suspects at the moment are Frank Laughton, Shirley Laughton, and yours truly. I know I didn't do it, so that leaves Shirley and Frank. Take your choice."

"Cherchez la femme," Fred cracked.

"That isn't funny. Fact is, I think she had something to do with it—and so does Lieutenant Farley. But I can't figure out a reason *why*. The logical guy for her to kill would be Laughton—not Adams."

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons. One"—I began counting on my fingers—"because Laughton engineered the switch. If she actually knew about it, which it seems she may have since she saw Laughton at the Esquire Theatre and might have recognized him, she'd be burned plenty. Two—Adams, so far as the world knew, was Frank Laughton and her husband. Killing him was tantamount to deliberately stripping away secrecy from that fact that she's been living with the wrong man. That'd be a pretty bitter pill for a woman of her narrow morals to swallow; in fact, I'm inclined to think it'd be too bitter a pill. Three—Adams was a businessman and Laughton isn't. She didn't get along with Laughton in the beginning, and there's no reason to think she'd be happier with him now—in spite of the improved financial resources." I sat there, staring at Fred, and repeated: "—improved financial resources. By God, maybe that's it!"

"Huh?"

"When Laughton walked out on her, he didn't have enough nickels and dimes to make a decent jingle. But Adams piled things up to the tune of a quarter million dollars—and Laughton is the legal owner of the whole kit and kaboodle!" I nodded. "That's got to be it. She consulted a lawyer and was told that title to everything remained with the real Laughton. Therefore—"

"But, if she was Laughton's wife, and he was killed, she'd get all the dough, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah." I grunted reluctantly. "I thought I had something there for a minute."

"Laughton must have done it, eh?"

"I don't think so. Laughton hadn't a reason in the world to kill Adams. He's leading a brand new life of his own, and I'm convinced he's perfectly happy just the way he is. As long as Adams was alive, he was free to do as he pleased. Now, with Adams dead, he'll have a hell of a time trying to re-adjust things."

"Well, so what?"

"Yeah. So what?" I agreed. "What'd you pick up today?"

"Not much. This Vivian Boyd was a screwball, sort of. She was born in Burlington, Iowa, and quit high school to take a job singing in a Detroit nightclub. She met a sax player there by the name of Walter Hordowitz, and married him. They came to Chicago, lived at the Wacker Hotel for eight months, then split. She did some singing at the Club Alabam for a few months, then, when the Star & Garter opened up, she got a job in the chorus. From there, she got promoted to The Paris."

"What happened to Hordowitz?"

"They're divorced. At least, that's what her friends say. Nobody knows what happened to him. Probably still blowing a sax somewhere—but not in Chicago. He hasn't been around for months."

"Anybody sleeping with her besides Laughton?"

"I couldn't get anything definite. Everybody liked the kid and no one wanted to discuss that angle. My guess is that she was no better and no worse than the usual. You know, maybe a friendly night with some guy once in awhile whenever the urge got too much for her. But nothing serious."

"Uh-huh. Just a good, clean girl." I nodded. "Laughton thinks she was sleeping in his room in order to let someone else use hers. What do you think of the idea?"

FRED snapped his fingers. "That's it! I was talking to a gal named Mabel something-or-other, she's a dancer at The Paris and was one of Vivian Boyd's best friends, and I asked her what the hell

Vivian could have been doing in Adams' room—they all know him as Adams, you know—and, as soon as I mentioned it, she clammed up tight. I'll bet a sawbuck this Mabel knows something. Maybe she was using it, herself."

"Mabel, eh? Seems to me Ada St. Claire mentioned her."

"Sure. She and Vivian were pals."

"I'll check on her. Anything else?"

"Nothing important, Bob. I picked up quite a few odds and ends which don't mean anything, but—"

"Such as?"

"Well, this Vivian went on an occasional drunk, see, and, as soon as she got good and polluted, what do you suppose she did?"

"Assaulted sailors and marines."

"No." Fred shook his head seriously. "She went in her room, locked the door, and started playing a portable phonograph she had there. That's all she did, sat there playing the same record, over and over. Sometimes she played it forty or fifty times."

"What record?"

"Something called *The Bolero*. Ever hear it?"

"Yeah. So she'd sit there and play that, eh? Well, there's nothing crazy about that. I've often thought it was a hell of a good piece to get drunk to."

"The people in the hotel didn't think so. They didn't say so in so many words, but I gathered that quite a few of them are glad she isn't going to be around to crank the phonograph." Fred blinked and added: "They liked her fine, see, but they didn't like that damned *Bolero*."

I grinned a little. "Okay. What else?"

"She did a lot of reading, mostly love story magazines. Pulp stuff. Her girl friend said she had boxes of the things under her bed. Back issues, you know. Seems she was nuts about a writer named Baker—Lucy Baker, or some such name—and bought every magazine she could find containing any of that author's stories. Mabel says Vivian seemed to have the idea that—"

Helen Gates opened the door and peeked

in. "Allen Ross is here, Mr. Stille," she announced.

"Thanks, Helen." I gave Fred a nod. "I want to talk to Ross right away, but stick around. I'm expecting a phone call and may need you."

"Is it okay if I get something to eat?"

"Sure. Where're you going?"

"This is the day they have sauerbraten at Berghoff's, and I was thinking—"

"Good. See if you can bring back a plate for me—with French fries." I tossed him a dollar bill. "And some coffee—black. No hurry."

Fred nodded and hurried out. I heard him exchange greetings with Allen Ross in the outer office, then Ross came on in. I took one look at Ross and said: "What's the matter, Allen? You look like hell. Had a tough day?"

"You can say that again," Ross groaned, sinking into the client's chair. "That damned bus between here and Lake Geneva is no joke. It was jammed tighter than a fat woman's girdle, and, to make matters worse, I got stuck next to an old woman who thought I looked like one of her nephews. She kept telling me about the guy, blowing her stinking breath into my face, clicking her damned false teeth, pushing snapshots in front of me, asking if—"

"I know. It's a tough life."

"You're damned right! In addition, there was a drunk who—"

"Forget it, for Chrissake. You got here, didn't you?"

"I damned near didn't. The old dame—"

"For God's sake, forget it, Allen! We've got a hell of a lot of work to do. What'd you pick up?"

Ross groaned again, then got down to business. "Well, I was lucky, Bob. I stopped in a restaurant for lunch and got to kidding with one of the waitresses. Good-looking girl—reddish hair, slim hips, nice pair of—"

"Allen."

ALL RIGHT. But she was a knock-out. That's how I happened to start talking to her. Anyway, this waitress knew Shirley Laughton back in the days when

she was Shirley Kelly. Went to the same school, chased the same guys; in fact, they used to be pretty good friends. Seems as though Shirley started high-hatting her a few years ago, and the idea didn't sit too well with this Helen Holtz—that's the waitress' name. When I asked her for the dirt, she rolled up her sleeves and dumped a whole truck-load in my lap. Is that a mixed metaphor?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, as far as family background goes, Shirley Laughton has nothing to brag about. Her father's name is Thomas Kelly and he owns an establishment called The Blinking Pup, which is a combination clip-joint and saloon. Helen didn't exactly say so, but I got the idea that Kelly has a few rooms upstairs of his joint which are used for gambling or worse. Her mother's name is now Lavinia Manthey. She divorced Kelly about ten years ago and moved to LaCrosse, where she married an old boy friend. Gossip has it that Kelly found her someplace she shouldn't have been one night—and beat the hell out of her. She left Lake Geneva the next day and hasn't been back since."

"Good for Kelly."

"That's what I thought. The kids, of course, stuck with the old man. Seems as though neither Shirley nor her brother ever cared particularly for their mother. The brother—his name is Edward Kelly—operates a motor launch concession on the bathing pier. You know, one of those fifty-cents-a-ride rackets for the resort guests."

"Yeah. Get back to Shirley."

"I'm trying to give you a complete picture, Bob. Her brother and the old man live in a small cottage there at the lake, and, whenever Shirley visits them, she stays at the cottage. And the cottage is right next to the place where this Helen Holtz lives. See?"

"So what?"

"So this Helen always knows when Shirley is in town."

I nodded. "Now you're getting somewhere."

"Not only that, this Helen keeps track of everybody Shirley meets and talks to

while she's in Lake Geneva. She's jealous, sort of, see?"

"For Chrissake, Allen, can't you—"

"All right." Allen Ross leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "Helen Holtz is positive that Shirley has never been in Lake Geneva for more than an occasional week-end since the day she married Frank Laughton, and"—Ross winked suggestively—"she says Shirley's got a boy friend, and is cheating on Laughton just like her mother cheated on Kelly."

"I don't believe it. What's this boy friend's name?"

"Helen didn't know. It isn't anyone from Lake Geneva. She described him as well-built, about thirty-seven years old, brown hair, usually well-dressed. The first time he was seen with her was about two years ago; since then, he's been out to the lake with her a number of times, but they stay in the cottage and never go anywhere together. That's what made Helen sure something was going on."

"Shirley Laughton is a goody-goody," I said flatly. "She's about as capable of carrying on an affair as I am of eating razor blades. The guy may be an old friend of hers, someone she knew before—"

"Don't forget, Bob, that Helen has known her from way back. She knows everybody Shirley knows."

"I still don't think she's the kind of woman who'd go for that sort of set-up. The fact that her mother was loose-moraled would tend to make her ultra-conscious of the proprieties. Besides, what about Kelly? If he kicked out her mother for cheating, he'd censure his daughter, too."

"I don't know, Bob. Women have a way of knowing about things like that. The way Helen talked, there wasn't any question but what this guy and Shirley were more than friends."

"I don't get it." I shook my head. "Laughton told me she was a woman of narrow morals. Adams told me virtually the same thing." I touched my sore wrist gently. "And there's other information to the same effect. It seems to me . . . wait a minute." I closed my eyes and tipped my chair against the wall. "If she didn't

spend the two months in Lake Geneva, where did she spend them?"

"It wasn't with her mother. She and her mother don't get along."

"Two months . . . Allen, I've got an idea."

"What?"

"I want you to go to Oak Park and look up a lawyer named Berle Nathan." I gave him the address. "I have a hunch that Mrs. Laughton, when she skipped out nine years ago, took a little trip to Reno—and got herself a divorce. Nicholas Fenske was her lawyer, but he's dead now. Nathan was a clerk in his office. Put some pressure on Nathan and see if he won't confirm it."

CHAPTER XV

I SAT and thought about Shirley Laughton for ten minutes after Allen Ross left. Then I had an inspiration.

"Helen!"

"Yes, Mr. Stille."

"Run over to Brentano's on Wabash Avenue and get me a copy of Freud. You know, Sigmund Freud, the great psychologist. I think the Modern Library puts out a one-volume edition of his complete works. Get a copy and hurry back."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah. But hurry, Helen. They're due to close in a few minutes."

While Helen was gone, Ada St. Claire called. She was calling from a phone backstage at the Paris Theatre. Her warm, husky voice was tense, frightened.

"This is Ada St. Claire, Mr. Stille."

"I recognized your voice, Miss St. Claire. I tried to get you a while ago. My secretary told me that—"

"Yes. I have to see you, Mr. Stille. It's important."

"What's the matter?"

"I can't tell you over the phone, but—I'm afraid. I think someone—" Her voice faded, as though she'd turned her head away from the transmitter to look around.

"I can't hear you. Can you speak more clearly?"

"Yes." Her voice grew stronger. "I've

got to see you. It's about . . . my husband."

"Oh." I imagined her standing in a drafty corner of the theatre, huddled over the telephone, with her gaudy cotton wrapper probably hanging open. "I don't suppose you're dressed. You just got off stage, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I was going to suggest that you come to my office, since I have some business to take care of during the next hour or so. Do you want to get dressed and do that—or can you wait until I come to the theatre?"

"Would it be very long—until you can come here, I mean?"

"It's a quarter after five now. I could be there by six-thirty, at the latest. Would that be all right?"

"I think so. Yes. That'd be better. You won't forget?"

"No. I'll be there."

"If you could come sooner—"

"All right. I'll come as soon as I can—possibly before six-thirty."

Her voice sounded relieved. "Thanks, Mr. Stille. I'll—I'll be looking for you."

I thumbed through the phone book until I found the number of the Hotel Martell. The clerk must have been asleep or out buying a beer. The phone rang and rang, at least twenty times, before anyone answered. I gave Jack Pierce's name and explained that I'd like to speak to him. Whoever answered growled in reply and banged the receiver down. I waited, listening to the silence at the other end, for a good five minutes. Then Jack Pierce's voice, fuzzy with sleep, came over the wire: "Hullo. . . ."

"This is Bob Stille, Jack."

"Yeah?"

"Is Laughton okay?"

"Yeah. He's in his room."

"Good. Can you hear me clearly?"

"Sure."

"Well, listen carefully. I don't want to have to go over this twice. Adams was killed this morning. He was found in the house on Astor Street with a knife in his ribs. The cops figure it happened around the time Laughton was there. I got in a

jam and had to give them the whole story about Adams, Laughton, and the switch—but I didn't tell them where he was staying. Understand?"

"Yeah. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to see that he stays under cover. Keep him in his room. If the cops search the place—which they're liable to do at any time—I want you to get him out. I don't care how you do it, as long as he isn't picked up. I want to keep him out of their hands as long as possible."

"Okay."

"You're sure you understand?"

"Yeah, sure, Bob."

"Okay. Phone me if anything develops."

"Sure thing."

HELEN GATES came back with a copy of *The Basic Works of Sigmund Freud*. I checked the table of contents and decided that Book One, devoted to the psychopathology of everyday life, wasn't what I wanted. Book Two seemed more promising, being concerned with the interpretation of dreams. I turned to a chapter titled "The Dream As Wish-Fulfillment," but drew a blank. The next chapter was "Distortion in Dreams," also a blank. Then "The Material and Sources of Dreams," which was a little warmer but not quite what I wanted. Under "The Dream-Work," in chapter five, I found what I'd been looking for:

". . . all elongated objects, sticks, tree-trunks, umbrellas, all sharp and elongated weapons, knives, daggers and pikes, represent the male member. A frequent, but not very intelligible symbol for the same is a nail-file (a reference to rubbing and scraping?). Small boxes, chests, cupboards, and ovens correspond to the female organ; also cavities, ships, and all kinds of vessels. A room . . . generally represents a woman; the description of its various entrances and exits is scarcely calculated to make us doubt this interpretation. The interest as to whether the room is 'open' or 'locked' will be readily understood in this connection. There is no need to be explicit as to

the sort of key that will unlock the room; the symbol of 'lock and key' has been gracefully if broadly employed by Uhland in his song of the Graf Eberstein. . . ."

The door banged open and Fred Matson walked in, carefully balancing a paper-covered plate and a tall carton of coffee. He set the plate on the desk and removed the paper, revealing two thick slices of sauerbraten, mashed potatoes, gravy, and a small heap of chopped carrots. It smelled wonderful.

"No French fries, Bob." Fred fumbled in his coat pocket and produced a knife, fork and spoon. "I had to leave a buck deposit for the equipment."

"That's all right. Helen'll reimburse you from petty cash."

I marked the page I'd been reading and closed the book. The sauerbraten was tender and delicious, and, though I ordinarily don't like carrots, I ate the carrots, potatoes, everything. By the time I finished the coffee, I felt fine. I found a cigar, burped gently, looked through a desk drawer for a packet of matches. I found one bearing the insignia of the Yacht Club and, as I lit a match and held it to the end of the cigar, I wondered where I'd picked it up.

"Fred," I said, exhaling a cloud of smoke, "bring another chair from the reception room and tell Helen to come in."

"Only one chair?"

"Yeah. Helen can use the one by my desk."

"Okay."

Fred brought in a straight-backed chair and set it in front of the desk. Helen, looking a little puzzled, followed him in and sat down in the client's chair. She had brought her notebook and two pencils.

"Relax, Helen," I said. "I'm not going to dictate. Put the notebook on the desk."

SHE nodded, smiled a little, and did as directed. Then she sank back into the chair and watched me curiously, as though she expected me to make an important announcement.

"Helen, I want you and Fred to do a

little imagining. I'm going to sketch a hypothetical situation and then I'm going to ask some questions. Concentrate and try to imagine that everything I say is absolutely true. Okay?"

Helen nodded. Fred shrugged, said: "Sure, Bob."

"Good." I paused, then began slowly: "You are Shirley Laughton. You are married to a man named Frank Laughton, with whom you aren't particularly happy. For one thing, your husband is an eccentric. Instead of working regularly and building up his business, he spends most of his time trying to paint pictures. You're the kind of woman who likes nice things, wants a nice apartment, good clothes, things like that. After a while you decide that your husband isn't ever going to amount to much, and you begin thinking about a divorce. There's an argument; you walk out on him. You visit a lawyer and learn that your best bet is a visit to Reno, where you can get the knot untied in six weeks. So, without further ado, you go to Nevada and get your decree."

I paused and gave them each an inquiring glance. They nodded to show that they followed.

"You're away from Chicago about two months, altogether, and, when you return, one of the first things you do is go to get the rest of your clothes and miscellaneous belongings. Maybe you also want to flaunt your decree in Laughton's face, but maybe not. Skip that. Anyway, when you get back, you discover that during your absence a hell of a change has come over Laughton. He has shaved off his beard, gotten rid of his paints and brushes, cleaned himself up, has actually settled down to business. At first, you can hardly believe it. But he gives you a sales talk and convinces you that it's all because he loves you and wants to be the sort of man you can admire and respect. Well, you decide to keep quiet about the divorce—and you move back in with him."

"But, Mr. Stille—?"

"Yes, Helen?"

"Do you mean I"—Helen colored a little—"go and live with him even though

were not married any more?"

I blew a smoke ring and watched it glide toward the surface of the desk top. "Yes. You admired your father, and he gave you a strait-laced set of morals, but you're essentially greedy—and security, when it comes to a test, means more to you than fulfillment of a social convention. You probably hesitated at the time. Tried to rationalize. The only ones who knew about the divorce were your lawyer, his clerk, and a couple people in Reno, Nevada. There wasn't anyway Laughton'd find out about it—so why not forget about it and pretend it hadn't happened? Maybe you tore up the decree of divorce, letting the action nullify the deed in your mind. Whatever it was you did, you knew you were legally divorced—but you went back to living as Mrs. Frank Laughton." I paused to think a moment, then nodded. "Yes. You knew all the time that you weren't really Laughton's wife. You realized that your life was an adulterous one. That fact conflicted with your moral training and resulted in a subconscious obsession which, by way of release, you expressed in the collection of tooth-pick holders."

"Are you kidding?" Fred asked.

"No, I'm not kidding. According to Sigmund Freud, people frequently dream, acquire habits, hobbies, and the like, all of which are unconscious expressions of an obsession. The desire to collect tooth-pick holders, I imagine, sprang from their symbolism—the holder proper representing the female organ, and the toothpicks being phallic objects. This, of course—"

"What does *phallic* mean, Mr. Stille?"

"If you don't know, Helen, you'd better ask your mother to explain it to you," I said. "I wouldn't know how to go about it."

"Oh." She blushed. "I'm not *that* young. Besides, that's what I thought it meant."

"Now you know. Okay. Where was I?" I shrugged. "Never mind. You went on living with Laughton for nine years, during which time he built up a quarter million dollar business. Then, one day, while attending a movie with a girl friend, you stumble over an exhibit of paintings which

remind you of the pictures your husband used to clutter up the apartment with. The name of the artist is John Adams. You make inquiries, perhaps you return to the exhibit a second time in order to see the artist, and you learn that he has a beard and bears striking resemblance to Frank Laughton—the way he looked before you made the trip to Reno. The more you think about it, the more startling the circumstance seems. Finally, in order to put your mind at rest, you hire a detective and ask him to get you the facts. When you put two and two together you realize that the man you've been living with not only isn't your husband—but isn't Frank Laughton, either."

MY CIGAR had gone out. I knocked the ash from it, tore another match from the packet, and took my time lighting it.

"All right. There you are. Frank Laughton, the man you married and divorced, is living in a South State Street hotel under the name of John Adams. The man you thought was Laughton, and with whom you've been living, is an imposter—but everyone thinks he's Laughton and he's the one who made money and provided you with the things you wanted. Legally, Laughton owns the business, your home, everything you possess." I pointed a finger at Helen Gates suddenly and said: "If you had to get rid of one of those men, which one would you kill?"

Helen jumped a little, then laughed nervously. "Gosh, Mr. Stille, I don't know!"

"Try to be objective about it, Helen. Here you are, confronted with the necessity of getting rid of one of these men, neither of which is really your husband. Which one would it be?"

"Well"—Helen hesitated—"if I *had* to do away with one of them, and wanted to be sure of getting some of the money, I think I'd kill Laughton—the real Laughton, that is."

"What about you, Fred?"

"I don't know, Bob." Fred shook his head slowly. "Seems to me it'd be smarter

to kill Adams, the imposter, and try to keep Laughton from finding out about the divorce."

"Why?"

"Well, you said everything actually belongs to Laughton. With Adams dead, Laughton would have to come back and take over, and, as long as he didn't know about the divorce, she'd be sure of getting her share. If she was a smart girl, she might even put on a big reconciliation act and persuade him to go through a second marriage ceremony, like these people who get themselves re-married every few years to show they still love each other. If she thought she could do that, Adams would be the guy to get rid of because she'd be killing two birds with one stone."

"That's a lousy pun."

"I mean, she'd cinch the dough—and ease her conscience."

"Uh-hum. Why did you pick Laughton, Helen?"

Helen shifted self-consciously, tossed her head in such a way that light from the desk-lamp caught the copper-red in her long hair, making it shine like a thick mass of golden filaments. "Because she'd been living with Adams. Everybody thought he was her husband and that made her the pseudo-Laughton's common law wife. By killing Laughton before anyone learned his true identity, she'd be strengthening her position. Adams would be the unchallenged owner of the business—and she'd be his common law wife."

"That's very clever, Helen. Where'd you pick up that 'common law wife' business?"

"I don't know. In the newspapers, I suppose."

"Unfortunately," I told her, "there's no such thing anymore."

"There isn't?"

"No. There hasn't been since 1905. I think Texas was the last state to declare them illegal. A lot of people continue to think there is such a status, but, legally, there isn't. If it weren't for that, I'd say your plan of action was brilliant."

"Is that a fact, Bob?" Fred Matson asked. "Seems to me I read about a common law marriage in the papers not long

ago." He wrinkled his forehead, thinking. "Some woman proved she had lived with a guy as his wife, and the court held she was entitled to share in his estate."

"It wasn't in the United States," I said positively. "I checked on that for another case about a month ago, and Milton Kahl said the status no longer existed. He's a lawyer—and ought to know."

"Okay, okay. I'm sure I read something like that, though."

"TAKE my word for it, Fred." I puffed silently on my cigar for a moment. "I think you've hit it, Fred. The chances are that Shirley Laughton reasoned the same way you did and decided to take a chance on effecting a reconciliation with Laughton and keeping him from learning about the divorce. If that's the way she figured, and if she *did* kill Adams—she's got a hell of a surprise coming."

"What?"

"If Shirley divorced Laughton, then Ada St. Claire is now the legal Mrs. Frank Laughton—and Shirley doesn't have a chance of effecting a reconciliation. She won't get a nickel."

"Say, that's right!" Fred Matson agreed. "Boy, is that a laugh!"

The phone started to buzz. I reached for it and said: "Hello. Stille speaking."

"This is Allen Ross, Bob."

"Yeah. Get the dope?"

"Sure. Shirley Laughton got a Reno divorce, just like you figured."

"Good. Have any trouble with Nathan?"

"No. I told him I was Frank Laughton and understood that my wife had divorced me. He said he hadn't handled it, but remembered Mrs. Laughton being a client of Mr. Fenske. He didn't have any of the records, of course, but he assured me that Fenske had handled such a divorce. I asked him why I hadn't been notified, but he talked around in a circle and evaded a definite answer. He admitted that a notice should have been sent to me, though. From the way he talked, I think finagling was done somewhere along the line."

"Did you ask him about the legality of the decree?"

"Not exactly. I pretended to be burned up about not having been notified, and I told him I intended to see my lawyer about having the divorce annulled. He didn't seem disturbed at the idea, maybe because Fenske is dead and I couldn't prove anything anyway. He offered to write and get the docket number, the exact date, and so on, if I wanted it, though. So I said thanks, and left. Okay?"

"Swell. That fits perfectly."

"What do I do now, Bob?"

"Go home and get some sleep. In the morning, I want you to try to get a line on Shirley Laughton's boy friend, the one the waitress told you about. As soon as you pick up something, let me know."

"I'll need some more dough."

"Stop at the office," I said shortly. "Helen'll advance you another two-bits." I hung up. "That clicks," I said to Fred and Helen. "Allen Ross just checked with a lawyer who remembers Mrs. Laughton's getting a Reno decree." I grunted, then added: "The God damned bitch."

"Mr. Stille?"

"Yeah?"

"If you don't need me any more—"
Helen began.

"What time is it?"

"It's five after six, and—"

"I didn't know it was so late, Helen. Go on, beat it."

Helen waved a quick good-night to Fred and me and hurried out. Fred's eyes followed her to the door.

"Nice looking kid," he said.

"She's too young for you, Fred," I said brusquely.

"I wasn't thinking of me," Fred retorted. "And she isn't too young."

BE QUIET a moment, I'm thinking." My cigar went out again. I stared at it disgustedly, hurled it across the room in the general direction of a wastebasket. "The more I think of it, the more reasonable it seems. If Mrs. Laughton learned about the switch and decided to take action, the logical person for her to kill was Adams—providing she didn't know that Laughton had remarried, which I don't

think she did. But, judging by the Baker Hotel episode, *she started after Laughton.*" I shook my head. "That doesn't add."

"Maybe she was just sore. Maybe she didn't stop to rationalize."

"Maybe. That's what I thought at first, but I'm beginning to think she's a clever, realistic woman. She probably hated Laughton's guts—but I don't think she'd take a chance on throwing the dough out the window. Hell, a woman who'll violate a fundamental moral concept for nine years for the sake of living an easy life will stop to think twice before pouring it down a drain."

"I guess you're right, Bob," I agreed.

"Damned right."

"So?"

"I can't figure it. She must have gone to the Baker Hotel to see him, maybe just to talk things over. She tangled with Vivian Boyd, shot her. Maybe Vivian asked her who she was and she made the mistake of saying she was his wife. Then, if Vivian laughed at her and told her Ada St. Claire was his wife, she may have . . . no, that doesn't make sense either. That wouldn't explain her turning around and knifing Adams."

"Maybe she thought she was knifing Laughton."

"No, it wasn't a mistake. As far as she knew, Laughton still had his beard. Whoever killed Adams knew that they were killing Adams."

"How about the boy friend you mentioned a while ago?"

"That's something else. Even if she is playing around on the side, it wouldn't effect the Adams-Laughton situation. Either way she could keep the boy friend. Her keeping the dough is the important angle, I think."

"Let's call it a day, Bob."

"You can run along if you like, Fred. I have to see Ada St. Claire."

"Want me to go along?"

"No. Go on home, but be here by ten tomorrow morning."

"Okay, Bob. Good-night."

I grunted in reply, my mind still trying to untangle the puzzling inconsistency of

the two murders. I gave up after a while, got up, started to turn off the lights. I looked at my watch as I locked the door. It was six-thirty-five.

CHAPTER XVI

I STOOD at the back of The Paris for a few minutes, watching the stage. A blue spot-light was following a thin, sleek, black-haired girl from side to side, and the orchestra was blaring frenziedly in an attempt to match the torturous twistings of her body. The girl half-walked, half-danced across stage with a weaving sort of motion, building skillfully toward the point where she unfastened the spangled brassiere which covered her full-blown breasts. The smile on her red lips was as forced as the song she chanted in a so-so voice. I couldn't catch the words, couldn't figure out the name of it.

My eyes dilated slowly, enabling me to make out the rows of seats, the aisle, the cloud of smoke drifting lethargically in the air, the door which led back-stage. A foul, sour smell touched my nostrils as I started toward the door. I decided without actually thinking about it, that at least one of the cash customers had taken his shoes off.

Backstage, the chorus was getting ready for the next act. The girls, in scanty tulip costumes, stood in a straggly line, perspiration dotting their powdered bodies, waiting for the stripper to finish. A bored electrician sat on a high stool, his hands poised on a switch. At the rear, toward the corridor which led to the dressing-rooms, a group of men knelt on the bare concrete floor, shooting dice in complete obliviousness to the activity about them.

The orchestra crashed to an end. With a grunt, the electrician threw his switch. The blue spot-light went out and curtains swished across stage. The thin, black-haired stripper, breathing heavily, ran off stage, almost colliding with a prop boy. "God damn you," she said tonelessly.

She was older than she had appeared from out front, and her naked breasts, seen close, weren't full-blown at all. They flopped a little as she walked, like two half-

filled rubber sacs. She'd probably forced her shoulders up and back while on stage, thereby giving them the semblance of youthful firmness.

The orchestra began a new number, *I'm in the Mood for Love*, and the chorus, coming to life reluctantly, began to tap-tap onto the stage. One of the crap-shooters glanced up, saw the stripper. Grinning, he sprang quickly to his feet and circled toward her as she started for the corridor. He flourished the dice, held them up so the others could see, and, as she turned, rubbed the cubes tentatively against her bare skin.

"For luck, Mamie!" he said, laughing.

She glanced at him, didn't bother to reply.

I let her precede me down the corridor and noticed which dressing room she entered. Then I went to the door of Ada St. Claire's room and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"It's Bob Stille, Miss St. Claire."

I heard the sound of her moving about. A bolt on the other side of the door clicked and the door opened a few inches. I pushed against it and started in—then I stopped. Ada St. Claire, wearing a gaudily flowered cotton wrapper, stood in the center of the room. She had a big revolver in her right hand—and it was pointed at me. By the look on her face, I knew she meant business.

"For Chrissake," I said.

"Come in and lock the door," she said.

WITHOUT taking my eyes from the gun, I pushed the door shut behind me and felt for the bolt. She sighed as the bolt clicked home and lowered the gun. I sighed, too.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked, walking casually toward her. She raised one arm, passed it weakly across her forehead, swayed a little, with the gun dangling loosely from her other hand. I caught her as she fell toward the dressing table. She was heavy, heavier than I'd expected, but I managed to drag her to a cot in a corner of the small room. I released the gun from her fingers, slipped it into my pocket.

I found a sink behind a curtain, filled a glass with cold water, splashed a little on her face. She sighed, murmured something unintelligible. I noticed that the water ran off the greasy make-up on her face, dripped onto her neck, ran in little rivulets toward the bare valley of her breasts, and, like a gentleman, I pulled the wrapper together and fastened it. The long blonde hair was crushed against her head like a silken cushion.

Her eyelids fluttered a little, then opened. She stared at me, frightened, then relaxed.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "Shall I get a doctor?"

"No." She reached one hand toward me and squeezed my arm. "I'll . . . be . . . all right in a minute." She shook her head, tried to sit up.

"Don't get up, Miss St. Claire. Take it easy for a while. There's no hurry."

"Thanks."

She relaxed again, obviously battling for strength to get up. I refilled the water glass and held it to her lips. She drank part of it, motioned the rest away. I put the glass on the sink, drew the curtain, walked curiously about the room. Things seemed pretty much the same as they'd been the other afternoon except for a partly eaten plate of chop suey which was on the dressing table. It was brown, thick, goey—one of the cheaper varieties—and looked as though it had hardly been touched. Then I noticed the cat. It was a skinny, gray-and-white alley cat, and it was stretched beneath the dresser like a long piece of worn fur. I made a clicking sound with my tongue and bent closer. It didn't move.

"That's Tabby," Ada St. Claire's voice said. I jumped a little and glanced up, then remembered that I had her gun in my pocket. "She's dead."

"She is?" I prodded the animal cautiously with one finger. It was stiff with rigor. "How come?"

"They meant to kill me."

"Yeah?" I straightened, walked to the cot, and sat down beside her. "What do mean?"

"That's why I called you." Her voice was low, almost a whimper, and I could feel her trembling. "I—I'm afraid."

"Try and tell me about it, Miss St. Claire, but take it easy. Start at the beginning."

SHE nodded, swallowed carefully, keeping her eyes on me all the time. "Someone sent me the chop suey. I don't know who. A boy handed it to one of the stagehands and told him it was for me. I was hungry, so I put it on a plate and set it on the dresser. It was time for the finale, and I intended to eat it as soon as I got back." She shuddered and her face began to work convulsively. I thought she was going to cry, but she didn't.

"Take it easy," I said. I took one of her hands and pressed it gently. It was hot and moist. She returned the pressure gratefully.

"I went on stage and was there for five or six minutes. When I got back, the door was open a little. I didn't think anything was wrong. Then I noticed Tabby laying under the dresser. I thought she had come in and gone to sleep, and I patted her with my toe. She was dead." Ada St. Claire's eyes widened with horror and, involuntarily, sought the plate of cold chop suey on the dresser. "She ate some . . . of that . . . while I was away!"

"Listen," I said. "Try to get a grip on yourself. Are you *sure* the cat ate some of that stuff?"

"Yes." Her blonde head jerked affirmatively. "There's a film of face powder on the dresser, and you can see paw-marks around the dish. But that isn't all."

"No?"

"Someone tried to shoot me this afternoon."

"Jesus Christ. Are you sure?"

The blonde head jerked again. "I didn't hear the shot, but—" Her lips trembled and she shrank back against the cot. "—I was carrying a prop muff. You know, holding it here and here"—she shrugged a little, gestured toward her breasts—"and I felt it jerk, almost like someone had tugged at it. I didn't think anything at the time, but,

after I got back here, I found a hole in it. Someone shot at me."

"Where'd you put it?"

"It's over there—under the dress."

I got the muff and examined it carefully. There was a small hole in it, drilled clean through one side to the other. It looked like a bullet-hole, all right. Small caliber. Probably a .25.

"Are you sure the hole wasn't there when you began your act?"

"I'm positive. Besides, I felt it jerk. I almost dropped it."

"What time did it happen?"

"I went on at three o'clock. It must have been six or seven minutes later, because—"

"I know. Is that when you first called me?"

"N-no. I didn't want to believe it. I thought I might have been mistaken. Then, when I found Tabby dead, I knew."

"What time did that chop suey arrive?"

"About half an hour later. Just before the grand finale. At the end of the show, you know, everybody goes on stage for a final review, before the movie comes on."

"And, when you got back, the cat had come in and eaten some of it?"

"Yes. I phoned you, right away."

"I'll be damned," I said. My speculations concerning Shirley Laughton collapsed. She'd been sitting in her parlor with Sergeant Valentis, Lieutenant Farley, and me until nearly four o'clock.

"I was scared to death!"

"Naturally. It was damned brave of you to go back and do another act—after that."

"You know the saying: The show must go on."

"It was still damned brave. Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No." She smiled hesitantly. "I was too afraid to talk to anyone. I got that gun—and just sat here, hoping you'd come."

"**P**OOOR kid." I stood up, paced across the room a couple times. "You'd better get dressed, Miss St. Claire," I decided. "The police had better be told about this."

"I'm due to go again in a few minutes."

"Forget it. You're through stripping. You aren't safe here and the sooner you get out the better."

"But—"

"Listen." I went back and sat down beside her. "I didn't tell you this the other day because I didn't know exactly what was going to develop, but I think you've a right to know the truth now. To begin with, your husband is worth about a quarter of a million dollars, so the dough you get here is nothing but peanuts." I told her the whole story, as quickly as I could. "If you get plugged with a bullet, you can't be a damned bit of use to anyone. And, don't forget, you're going to be a mother. You haven't any right to take chances with the kid."

She stared at me as I talked. When I finished, she shook her head speechlessly and pressed my hand.

"I'm telling you the truth. You believe me, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Okay. Now pull yourself together and get some clothes on. I'll wait for you out in the corridor." I started to get up but she clutched my arm and pulled me back.

"No! Don't leave me here."

"All right. I'll try not to watch."

She smiled a little at that. "It wouldn't make any difference, Mr. Stille. I'm used to being watched by men. I'll feel better if you stayed right here."

"All right."

She got slowly to her feet and, trembling a little, crossed to the dressing table. I went ahead and removed the plate of chop suey. She reached for a brush and began to stroke her long blonde hair with it. I watched her for a minute, then got up and went to the door. "I'll be back in one second," I said before she could protest, and, going to the end of the corridor, I knocked on the door I'd seen Mamie enter. When the thin, black-haired stripper opened the door, I said: "Miss St. Claire wants to see you a minute." She started to say something, but I added brusquely: "It's important. Hurry up." And, turning abruptly, I walked away from her.

Mamie came into Ada St. Claire's dressing room with a stubborn, resentful look on her narrow, pointed face. She was wearing a soiled brown-wool bathrobe, battered slippers, no stockings. I noticed that her slender legs were just about due for a shave.

"What d'ya want, Ada?"

Ada glanced at her, then looked at me. I went to the door, bolted it, sat down at the cot. "Come over here and sit down, Mamie," I said. "I'm the one who wants to talk to you."

"Yeah? Who're you?" Her narrow chin rose challengingly and her dark eyes scanned me suspiciously.

"He's okay," Ada said tonelessly. "You can trust him, Mamie."

Mamie's nostrils dilated skeptically, but she came over and sat down on the edge of the cot.

"My name is Bob Stille and I'm a private investigator, Mamie. I'm not a copper, and, as Ada told you, I'm playing your side of the game. It's important that you believe that."

"So what?"

"Several people—one of them a friend of yours—have been murdered in the last few days. This afternoon someone tried to kill Ada."

"Yeah?" She drawled the word suspiciously but with interest.

"I understand you were Vivian Boyd's best friend, and I'm pretty sure the same person who killed her is the one who is trying to kill Ada. Anyway, I need your help. I think you may know something important."

"Such as?"

"Well . . . such as what Vivian was doing in Adams' room. She had a room of her own. Why wasn't she using it?"

Mamie sniffed. "Hell, mister, how would I know?"

"You were a pal of hers."

"Sure, I was her pal. So what? I don't know nothing, see?"

"You don't want her murderer to go unpunished, do you?"

"The kid's dead." Mamie crossed her legs carelessly. "Got a cigarette?"

I GOT up and walked to the dressing table, shook a Camel from an almost empty pack, and handed it to her. She stuck it between her lips, waited for me to light it for her.

"Someone tried to shoot Ada during her act this afternoon. Then they tried to poison her. You don't want Ada to get killed, do you?"

"Listen, mister, I been in the racket long enough to mind my own business." Mamie tapped my knee with a carmined fingernail for emphasis. "Ada's okay, but her problems ain't my problems. I got worries of my own." She inhaled deeply on the cigarette and blew the smoke out in a gusty cloud.

"Suppose we make a bargain."

"What kinda bargain?"

"Well, I saw your act a little while ago—and you aren't so hot. But, if you'll play ball with me, maybe you could get Ada's spot in the show. You'd like number one billing, wouldn't you?"

She stared at me narrowly. "Ada'd have something to say about that. I'd have been star of this joint a year ago if it hadn't been for her."

"That's what I thought. If she quits, you'd get her place, wouldn't you?"

"Sure. Only Ada isn't quitting." She tossed a glance toward Ada, who was slowly applying make-up to her face. "Are you, Ada?" she asked.

"Never mind Ada," I said. "I'm the guy to do business with."

"How about it, Ada?" Mamie insisted. "What kinda crap is this guy handing me?"

"He's okay," Ada said. "He's talking straight, Mamie."

"That's right," I said. "Play ball, Mamie—and I'll fix things your way."

"Hell—" She sucked at her cigarette, jiggled one foot while she considered. "What do you wanta know?"

"I told you. Why was Vivian in Adams' room Monday evening?"

"Suppose she was accommodating a friend?"

"That'd be all right. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what she was doing, but I have to be certain about it."

"Well, that's what she was doing." Mamie watched me, still cautious, and knocked the ash from her cigarette onto the floor.

"This friend, then, was using Vivian Boyd's room?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who was the friend?"

"Suppose it was me?"

"Was it?"

"Suppose it was. So what?"

"This is just between you and me, Mamie. I'm not going to blab to the cops, so you needn't be afraid to talk. If you were using her room, it's okay with me. I just want to be sure that that's the way it was."

"I was using her room."

"Good. How come?"

"That's my business, mister."

"For God's sake!" Ada said suddenly. "He doesn't think you're a virgin, Mamie. If you and Jim were using it so you could sleep together, why don't you say so and have done with it?"

"Was that it, Mamie?"

"So what? My boy friend and I gotta right to be together. We—"

"I don't give a damn about that. All I want to know is the facts. Is that what happened?"

"Yeah." She flashed me a defiant look. "My friend lives with his parents. We wanted to be together."

"Mamie lives at a girls' club," Ada explained.

"Oh. So Vivian loaned you her room, and she went to sleep in Adams'. Is that right?"

"Yeah. How'd we know she was going to get shot? We didn't—"

"I know, Mamie. You and Jim, then, were using her room. I suppose you got up and left before the cops arrived. Who else knows about this?"

"No one. And if you shoot off your mouth to the cops—"

"I'm not going to. What time did she go to Adams' room?"

"About four o'clock."

"Alone?"

"Sure. She didn't have a boy friend,

just then."

"Uh-hmm. That's fine, Mamie. I think that'll help a lot."

"That what you wanted?"

"Yes."

"How about the rest of the deal, then?"

I gave her a nod. "Ada's quitting the racket. As soon as she gets dressed, I'm taking her out of here. You can spread the news if you like."

"Honest to God?" She opened her lip-sticked mouth, stared from me to Ada. "That on the square, Ada?"

"I guess so, Mamie." Ada reached for a dress, gave her a weary smile. "I'm going to have a baby soon, anyway. Tell Solly, will you?"

"God, a baby! I can't believe it!"

"It's true, Mamie. When I take off my clothes from now on, it's going to be for just one man. You'll know what I mean some day."

"Well, Jesus, Ada! This is a break! You're sure—"

"I'm sure, Mamie. Good luck to you."

"God! Thanks, Ada. And you, too, mister! I gotta tell the gang right away."

Mamie's brown-wool bathrobe swirled against her bare legs as she started for the door. She clawed at the bolt, got it open, shot us both a fleeting smile as she pulled at the knob. I sighed as it slammed shut after her.

"Ready, Ada?"

"Almost." Ada smoothed the skirt of plain blue dress, straightened the seam in one stocking. Then she picked up a square overnight bag and began to put jars and bottles into it.

"Leave that crap here," I said. "You aren't going to need it any more."

"I forgot." She stared around the small dressing room, then, with a shrug, said: "I guess I'm ready."

"Parting is such sweet sorrow . . . like hell," I muttered. She slid her hand through my arm as we went out the door.

CHAPTER XVII

I GOT the Ford and drove Ada to the Detective Bureau at 1121 South State

Street. Lieutenant Farley wasn't in but Sergeant Valentis located him at his home and asked him to come down. It was seven-fifteen when he strode into his office.

"This better be important, Stille," he warned.

"It is, Lieutenant." I gave him the whole story. He listened quietly until I finished, then he started asking questions. Where was the cat? the chop suey? Did we bring the bullet-punctured muff? When I told him they were still in Ada's dressing room, he ordered a squad car sent to The Paris to pick them up. He also directed Valentis to hurry up and find out where the blank-blank chop suey came from.

After that, he settled down to straight questioning. He started at the beginning and shot question after question at Ada, trying to find loop-holes and contradictions in her story. She answered his questions patiently, trying not to break down, even when he demanded answers to intimate questions concerning her life with the man she knew as John Adams. She came through the inquisition with flying colors.

Then he turned to me—and gave me the works. I had to start with the visit of John Adams to my office and retrace each step of my relationship with Adams and Laughton. He crisscrossed my answers with more questions in an attempt to trap me, then led me back over the same ground to see if my memory would falter over details I'd previously remembered. I told him the truth, the straight truth, about everything except the whereabouts of Laughton. He pounded away at that for fifteen minutes, trying to make me admit that I knew where he was hiding. I swore I hadn't the slightest idea.

"I suppose you realize, Stille, that Laughton is almost certainly the murderer? The shooting and attempted poisoning of Miss St. Claire eliminates Shirley Laughton as a suspect for she was under surveillance at the time. That leaves Laughton. He lacks an alibi for the time the Boyd girl was killed, and you admit that he was actually in the house where Adams was knifed—at the right time, too. Less evidence than that has damned many

a man, and—"

"Why the hell should Laughton try to kill Miss St. Claire? She's his wife. She's about to become the mother of his child. There's not the slightest reason why—"

"A quarter million bucks can make a lot of difference in a man's attitude," Lieutenant Farley said stolidly. "When he was struggling along as a penniless artist, he may have been satisfied with . . . ah . . . things. But, when he found out that Adams had accumulated a big bank-roll—"

"Are you suggesting that Laughton's the kind of guy who'd be ashamed of a woman like Miss St. Claire?"

"Of course not." Farley kept his eyes on me. "I haven't met Laughton, and Miss St. Claire obviously is a lovely person."

"You're damned right she is!" I snapped. "But it sounds to me as though you think Laughton is trying to get rid of her, that he might be ashamed of her because she has made an honest living as a stripper. I know a lot of girls in burlesque who are a hell of a lot more clean and decent than—"

"Calm down, Stille," Lieutenant Farley said. He kept a grip on his voice, but the muscles of his round face were strained. "I didn't mean that at all. I simply said that large sums of money have a tendency to change people's perspectives. After all, Laughton doesn't know that his first wife divorced him, does he?"

"No, but—"

"Well, that fact may have some bearing on the case. You'll have to admit that, from the evidence available, Laughton looks guilty as hell." Farley's control cracked for a moment. He pounded the desk with his fist and shouted: "And I want him brought here where I can question him, God damn it!"

"All you have to do is find him. If I had the slightest idea where he was, I'd—"

YOU wouldn't do a damned thing, Stille, except try to keep me off his trail! I know how that thing you call a brain operates. You don't give a damn about Justice. The only thing that interests you is the Almighty Buck—and you and I both know it!"

"You're being unfair, Lieutenant. I've always co-operated with you. If I had—"

"For God's sake shut up," Farley shouted, "—and get out of here! Another minute of this—and I'll slap you in the can for aiding and abetting!"

"How about Miss St. Claire? I think you ought to assign someone to protect her tonight."

"Oh, you do, do you, Stille? Well, let me tell you—" He clenched his fists impotently, glared at me, managed to get a grip on his rage. When he spoke, his voice was angry—but controlled. "I'm going to give you a chance, Stille. I think you know where Laughton is—and I want to talk to him. I'm going to give you until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon to produce him. If he isn't here then, I'm going to order you picked up and held—and I mean held. Understand?"

"Of course, Lieutenant. But I don't think—"

"I don't give a damn what you think! I want Laughton—here—in this office—by three o'clock tomorrow . . . or else. I'm sick of tangling with private eyes who think they can diddle the police department!"

"I'll do the best I can, but—"

"That's all, Stille, absolutely all. I've listened to enough from you and I've said all I'm going to say. I'll send Miss St. Claire home in a squad car. Bert Ewald will keep an eye on her apartment tonight."

"I'd rather have Mr. Stille drive me home," Ada said in a small voice.

"Didn't you hear him say twenty times that he doesn't know where your husband is?" Lieutenant Farley demanded nastily.

Ada colored, practically admitting that he'd guessed her thought correctly, but she managed to say: "I . . . don't like squad cars. That's the only reason. It's just—"

"All right. Ride with Stille, if you like. I don't give a damn. Ewald will be at your place in ten or fifteen minutes."

Farley stood up abruptly and strode from the room, putting a definite end to the interview.

"Well, that's that," I said. "Let's go." I drove north on Wabash to Rush Street.

It was nearly ten o'clock and it occurred to me that she must be hungry.

"How about a plate of barbecued ribs?" I asked, glancing at the small huddle she made on the seat beside me.

"I *am* a little hungry." She said it as though she were surprised, as though she hadn't thought about eating for a long time.

"How about the Singapore?"

"Fine."

I pulled the Ford into a narrow parking space, maneuvered to avoid denting the right fender. I made it, finally, and helped her out. The restaurant was crowded but I saw Sam Otto, the owner, sitting in a back booth with his good-looking wife and little blonde-haired daughter. I guided Ada toward them.

"Hello, Sam. Hi, Pat. How are you, Princess?" I patted the child on the head. "This is Mrs. Frank Laughton," I said, introducing Ada, "formerly known as Ada St. Claire, the Blonde Bomber."

"Blonde Bomber, eh?" Sam grinned. "That's good. Glad to meet you."

"Right now she's too hungry to do any bombing. How about some food?"

THEY invited us to sit with them, as I knew they would, and, after Ada and I had both tucked away a huge slab of excellent ribs, Sam insisted on buying us a drink. Ada protested that she ought to go right home, but I convinced her it was bad luck to turn down free liquor. After the one drink, though, Ada insisted on leaving, so I matched Sam for the ribs, won, and drove her to the corner of Schiller and Lake Shore Drive.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Stille?" she asked as I swung the Ford to the curb.

"I'm going to go home and crawl into bed."

"I mean about John."

"His name is Frank—and your name is now Laughton. Remember?"

"I keep forgetting. What are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided. Lieutenant Farley is getting tough—and, what's worse, he means it. I'd intended to see Laughton to-

night, but now I think I'll let it slide until morning. I'll let you know."

"Couldn't I see him . . . tonight?"

"No. Definitely. Wait until morning. Maybe I'll think of something by then."

"All right." She touched my arm hesitantly. "Thanks a lot for everything, Mr. Stille. I appreciate it."

"I haven't done a damned thing," I assured her frankly, "except try to make a buck. That's one of the things Lieutenant Farley was absolutely right about."

She smiled, shook her head. "I don't believe it. Manny Levinson had you right. You're a conniver, I suppose, but you're a good guy at heart." She climbed out, started to close the door. "If you see him before I do, tell him I'm waiting—and everything's okay."

"I'll do that. Good-night."

She nodded and slammed the door. I watched her swing up the short walk which led to the limestone apartment building, saw her tug at the heavy grilled door, open it, go in. As the door closed after her, I slipped the Ford into gear and started toward home. I didn't feel like going to bed, but I didn't feel like going anywhere else, either.

I compromised by undressing, taking a shower, then mixing a weak bourbon and soda for myself. There wasn't anything entertaining on the radio, so I thumbed through an old issue of *American Magazine* until I found a story I hadn't read. My mind kept wandering. Shirley Laughton kept pushing her face between the lines . . . then Ada St. Claire . . . then John Adams. I threw the magazine on the floor, walked around, searched for a cigar. There wasn't any. So I kept walking, back and forth, up and down, trying to figure a link between Vivian Boyd and Adams. There usually was too many suspects; in this case, there wasn't enough. No matter how I figured, I ended up with Shirley Laughton or Frank Laughton—and neither fitted.

I threw myself into a chair, finally, and reached for the phone. The line to the Hotel Matell was busy. I waited five minutes, dialed the number again. This time

the phone went buzz-buzz-buzz and no one answered. I cursed, jammed the receiver against my ear, determined to sit there for an hour unless someone answered. In three minutes—which seemed like fifteen—someone did.

I asked for Jake Pierce. Two or three minutes later I was informed, rather brusquely, that Pierce wasn't in. I asked for Mr. Armstrong. Another wait. Armstrong wasn't in either. I put the receiver back and just sat there, staring at first the instrument and then the wall. What the hell! Had the cops caught up with Laughton?

The phone rang abruptly and I grabbed for it before it could ring a second time: "Hello!"

"Bob? This is Jack Pierce."

"Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the Henrotin hospital."

"Where?"

"Henrotin hospital. You know, the place on La Salle Street near—"

"For Christ sake! What the hell are you doing there? I told you to—"

"There's been a little trouble, Bob."

"Yeah? Listen, Pierce, if you—"

"It was something I couldn't help. You see, the cops went through the joint about seven-thirty, looked in his room, passed him okay. Then this Armstrong came up and brought him something to eat. I thought everything was all right. Then Armstrong went out and was gone about half-an-hour. I couldn't hear what he told Laughton when he came back, but, whatever it was, it was something that got Laughton excited. He came rushing out of the room and tried to leave. Well, hell, Bob, I was on the spot. You told me to keep him in his room, yet—"

"God damn it, Pierce, get to the point!"

"I'M TRYING to. Laughton was determined to get out, but you'd told me to keep him in his room—so I went after him. He wouldn't stop, wouldn't let me reason with him. I grabbed his arm, and he swung at me. I've got a hell of a bruise where—"

"Go on, go on!"

"Well, to make a long story short, while trying to subdue him I got a grip on his wrist, and I guess I leaned on it too hard. It broke his arm. Armstrong called a doctor, and the doc said the break had to be set as soon as possible. That's why we're here. I think he's as safe here as he'd be in the hotel, Bob, and—"

"God damn!" That was all I could think of. "God damn!"

"He's been cussing a little, but, aside from that, he's okay. That's the truth, Bob. The doc's putting a cast on it and, in a couple weeks, he'll be as good as new. Are you there, Bob?"

"I'm here," I snapped, "—and I wish to hell you were!"

"Why?"

"I'd like to wring your neck. I told you to protect him, to keep him safe, and now you've gone and—"

"But, Bob, he's as safe here as he'd be in the hotel. Safer, maybe. I didn't give the doc his real name. They think his name is John Strauss."

"It's still damned dangerous. Starting a wrestling match like that was the stupidest thing you could have done. Suppose somebody phoned for the cops—and you were both hauled to the can? Where the hell would I be then?"

"I know that, Bob. I should have known better. I'll admit that. But everything happened so fast I didn't have time to think. Anyway, things are okay now."

I sighed helplessly. "All right, forget it. Did you find out what put ants in his pants?"

"Yeah. Armstrong says Laughton asked him to phone his wife—Ada St. Claire, the dancer, that is—and tell her he was all right. So Armstrong went out and phoned the theatre. One of the girls told him Ada had gone out with some stranger—and hadn't come back. And a lot of cops had been around asking questions about poison, bullet shots, and a dead cat. The girl didn't know exactly what had happened, but she was sure Ada had left suddenly."

"I should have thought of that."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"That's all. When Armstrong came back and told Laughton about it, Laughton jumped up and started for the door. He said he was going to find her and make sure she was all right."

"A hell of a note!"

"I can't hear you, Bob. What'd you say?"

"It wasn't important. You'd better have the hospital put him in a room for tonight. Do you think they have a vacant bed?"

"I've already asked. They have."

"Good. See that he's safely bedded, then tell him that Ada's all right. I'm the guy who went to the theatre and took her away. Someone tried to poison her this afternoon. They also tried to shoot her. Right now, she's safe in her own apartment, and there's a cop outside keeping an eye on things. She's absolutely safe and there isn't anything he can do for her. Make him understand that."

"Okay, Bob. That's all?"

"No. I want you to stay right there—all night. They probably won't let you remain in his room, but they'll let you sit in the lobby where you can keep an eye on everybody coming in and going out. Sit there—and see that you don't go to sleep."

"Aw, Bob—"

"Don't give me any of that crap, Pierce. This is strictly your fault, and I want to make sure nothing happens to him before morning. Keep him there until you hear from me."

"Couldn't I get one of the nurses to—"

"You heard what I said. Now follow instructions, God damn it!"

"All right, Bob. Is that all?"

"Yeah, that's all." I slammed the receiver onto its cradle.

CHAPTER XVIII

I DIDN'T sleep well. I twisted and turned most of the night, trying to figure an out for Laughton, wondering what small detail I'd overlooked, plucking ineffectually at the tangled web of motive and opportunity which complicated things. No matter how I figured, the fact was that at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon I'd have

to surrender Laughton to Lieutenant Farley—and the odds were heavily against him. Yet, according to Pierce, Laughton had been in Armstrong's room all afternoon, which ruled out the possibility that he had fired the shot at Ada. However, if I permitted Pierce to testify to that effect, Farley would learn that Pierce was in my employ and that I had known, all along, where Laughton was. And that, so far as my career as a professional investigator was concerned, would be suicide.

My reasoning was made more difficult by a vague sense of ethics, a drilled-in feeling of social responsibility, a reluctance to jeopardize the dough I'd accepted as a retainer, as well as the certainty that I *did* like Laughton and Ada St. Claire and *didn't* like Shirley Laughton and John Adams. Vivian Boyd didn't mean much one way or the other to me. Maybe she'd been a good kid; maybe she hadn't. I hadn't known her and I wouldn't miss her. I didn't think I'd miss John Adams, either.

But Frank Laughton was different. He was likeable, talented, sensitive—and he'd had the gumption to walk out of a life he hadn't liked and to build a new way of living which was more to his liking. Ninety per cent of the men I knew were unhappy and had neither the sense nor the courage to do something about it. Laughton had, and I admired him for it.

But trying to untangle him from the mess was like trying to unkink a copper pot scraper. I'd push the facts around in my mind, force them into an explanation which absolved Laughton, then some overlooked detail would trip things completely and I'd go plunging toward the horrible thought that *maybe he was the guy after all*. . . .

The alarm clock began to bang. Eight-fifteen. I groaned, untangled the sheet from around my legs, sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed my sleep-hungry eyes. I yawned continuously as I shaved, cutting my chin and Adam's apple in three places. One of the cuts was minor; the other two spouted red corpuscles all over the wash-basin. The styptic pencil fell on the floor and rolled under the bathtub. I cursed it

and put patches of toilet tissue on the cuts. They stopped bleeding, finally, but when I got to the office at nine-ten I not only felt like hell—I looked like it.

The mail was the usual combination of bills and circulars: The Book-of-the-Month Club thought I'd enjoy being a member. The Illinois Bell Telephone Company figured I owed them \$8.19. *Time Magazine* promised to keep my finger on the pulse of international affairs for 52 weeks upon receipt of enclosed postage-paid subscription form. The Blind Association sent four nickel lead pencils and a pamphlet, describing its work and requesting a contribution. The Division of Unemployment Compensation wanted to know how many employees I had.

Helen Gates arrived at nine-twenty, her face glowing with youth and eagerness, her smile bright, her voice clear and cheery. "Good-morning, Mr. Stille!" she called.

"What's good about it?" I growled.

"Why, it's a *beautiful* day!" she said merrily, practically bubbling with *joie de vivre*. She came on into my private office, stared at me a moment, then laughed gaily at the sleepy scowl on my face. "You'll feel better after you've had your coffee!"

I NOTICED then that, in addition to the usual bag of sweet rolls and coffee, she was carrying a bulky red-and-black plaid blanket and a long cylindrical package. She laid the package on the desk, draped the blanket over a chair, and began to distribute the coffee and pastry.

"Somebody going to bed around here?" I asked pointedly.

"Hmm?" She gave me a questioning look, then followed my eyes to the blanket. "Oh, that. Our astrology class is going to meet on Oak Street Beach this evening. I thought the blanket would be nice to sit on."

"On the beach? For God's sake, why?"

"So we can study the stars. I brought a telescope, too."

She stripped the wrapping from the cylindrical package to reveal an ancient, high-powered telescope, the sort used by ship captains to verify landmarks. Ex-

tending it to its full length, she squinted into the eyepiece and leveled it at me. "Oh, are you *enormous!*"

"You're looking at my belly," I growled. "Sit down and stop playing Magellan."

She bubbled some more, then put the instrument on the desk and sat down in the client's chair. I drank half my coffee, ate the sweet roll, gave her a mildly resentful glare. Her eyes were alert and happy, and her copper-red hair gleamed against the plain collar of her white rayon blouse as though it had been brushed for hours. Her youth and good health were so vibrant that they imparted a sort of beauty to her rather plain face, making it vivid and distracting.

"How can you feel so good this early in the morning?" I asked.

"I live right." She gave me a quick glance, chuckled at the expression on my face. "Besides, I was born under the sign of—"

"Please." I stopped her. "I feel bad enough without discussing that."

"But, Mr. Stille!" she protested. "I told you Mr. Adams was an Aries and would die suddenly—and look what happened! You can't deny that."

"He was murdered, and the stars didn't have a damned thing to do with it. Besides, you don't know that he was an Aries."

"Yes, I do. I asked."

"Who?"

"His wife. When she called yesterday, and you weren't in, I asked her if she knew the date of his birth. She said he was born on April 2nd, 1894—and that's definitely Aries, like I guessed."

"She must have thought you were nuts."

"I don't think so. I told her we needed it for the records."

I grunted shortly. "Nevertheless, it doesn't prove a damned thing. It's a coincidence, and you're a sucker if you think—"

"I don't care. It's interesting."

"Nuts."

I reached for the telescope and squinted through it, aiming it at various objects in the room. Then I got up and went to the

window. In the Lincoln Tower building a few blocks north, two men were leaning against a green office filing cabinet and talking animatedly. The glass brought them so close I could almost make out the lettering on one of the men's lapel button. Two floors above, a crew of gum-chewing girls were pounding dissipatedly at typewriters. One of the girls was talking on a telephone, pushing at her hair with one hand as she talked. Next door, an old geezer with a florid face was reading a newspaper. He may have been reading a sport column but his eyes seemed focused on *Terry and The Pirates*. Grinning a little, I moved the telescope in an arc, looking for something more interesting. A surprising number of offices seemed vacant; no one was doing anything she shouldn't.

"It's F minutes after M," I said.

"You're looking at the Monarch Company's clock," Helen guessed. "It's silly, using letters instead of numbers, like that, isn't it?"

"They figure it might sell a few cases of beans. If it does, it isn't silly—it's merely a nuisance." I laid the telescope on the desk and sat down, watching her gather up the empty cartons and soiled napkins.

"Shall I get my notebook now?"

"I suppose."

WHILE she went to her desk for notebook and pencils, I remembered the gun I'd taken away from Ada St. Claire. It was still in my coat pocket. I got it, checked to see if it was fully loaded, made sure the safety catch was in place, then laid it on the desk. It was a .38 Colt revolver, the same kind Laughton's friend Pete had pointed at me when I'd walked into the studio. It wasn't the same gun, though; Pete's looked as though it had seen more use.

I dictated replies to four letters before Fred Matson arrived at ten o'clock. I nodded to him, gestured toward a chair, and continued dictating, giving Helen a concise resume of developments in the Laughton case. Fred sat there, his pale

eyes blank, listening. When I finished, he waited until Helen closed her notebook, went to her own office, closed the door. Then he said: "Tough going, Bob."

"Yeah."

"What's next?"

"I don't know."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes, eyeing the room and each other, and pondering the set-up. Finally I said: "You'd better run out to Henrotin Hospital in my car, Fred, and get Laughton and Pierce. Helen'll give you money for the hospital and doctor bill. Bring Laughton here—and be sure you don't get picked up."

"What name's he under?"

"Laughton's registered as John Strauss. Pierce'll be in the lobby. You'd better give him the money and let him take care of getting Laughton released."

"Okay, Bob."

"Listen. After you get Laughton and let him off downstairs, go to 1424 Astor Street and pick up Shirley Laughton. Tell her I want to see her and bring her back with you. Don't tell her Laughton's here. In fact, don't tell her anything except that something important has happened and I want to see her. Understand?"

"Sure. I'll get them, Bob."

"Good." I told him where the Ford was and gave him the keys. "Try to make it snappy, Fred. There isn't a hell of a lot of time left."

Then I sent Helen out for some more coffee and began turning the facts around and around again. There had to be a pattern into which everything fitted. There had to be—only I couldn't figure it. I called the detective bureau, asked for Sergeant Valentis. He was in and didn't mind talking to me, but he couldn't see why he should supply me with information when obviously I was holding out on him. We argued about it for a minute or two, during which period Valentis was absolutely adamant. I reminded him of Lieutenant Farley's threat and swore that I was doing everything humanly possible and a couple things which might be considered inhuman. I promised, at his

request, to come clean with everything at three o'clock, and, a little grudgingly, he passed on a few items of information which, at best, weren't worth the conversation involved.

"Hell, Sarge," I protested, "you *must* have picked up more than that! What the hell have you got a crime lab for?"

Valentis insisted he wasn't keeping anything back. The chop suey had come from a small joint on Clark Street. The Chinese waiter remembered taking and putting up the order, but he couldn't describe the man who bought it. The lab report showed that it contained enough potassium cyanide to kill a couple dozen people. They'd found the bullet which penetrated Ada's muff. It was from a .25 caliber gun, but it had struck the brick wall of the stage and flattened itself, making comparison with the slug which killed Vivian Boyd impossible. Ada was still being guarded, but Farley had ordered the search for Laughton halted.

"He's positive you know where Laughton is," Valentis explained, "and he's going to nail you if you don't produce him."

"I'm doing my best."

"That won't be good enough, Stille, unless you uncover Laughton."

"Hell, I'm trying to locate him. Whether I can do it by three o'clock, though, I don't know."

"You'd better, unless you want to go through the wringer. Farley isn't kidding." Valentis' voice faded, then he said: "Incidentally, here's a curious fact which maybe you can make something of."

"Yeah?"

"According to the fingerprints we've picked up, Laughton went through Adams' bedroom, study, and office—like you said. But Adams did some investigating, too. We found his prints in Laughton's room at the Baker Hotel—and also throughout Laughton's studio. Farley thinks that proves something."

"Say that again."

Valentis repeated the statement slowly.

"That's interesting," I admitted.

"You're damned right it is," Valentis agreed, a little sarcastically. "It proves

that Adams knew where Laughton was before he hired you. And that, in turn, proves that—”

“It proves that Adams may have been the one who killed Vivian Boyd,” I interrupted. “It leaves a reasonable doubt for the assumption that—”

“Reasonable, my eye,” Valentis retorted. “That isn’t the way Lieutenant Farley figures. I can hardly wait until you hear his conclusions.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me neither.”

WHEN Valentis hung up, I sighed and lit a cigar. Helen Gates brought in a carton of black coffee, and I sat there with my chair tipped against the wall, smoking and sipping the strong hot brew. It was nearly eleven o’clock, and I’d almost finished my cigar, when the door banged open and Jack Pierce and Laughton arrived.

Pierce had dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep, and he and Laughton both needed a shave. Laughton looked the worse of the two. His right arm hung from a sling in a white plaster cast, and the brown gabardine suit looked as though he’d slept in it. Aside from that, he seemed in good condition.

“How’re you feeling, Laughton?” I asked.

“Not very happy.” He attempted a smile, didn’t do a very good job of it. “This . . . this fool—!” He jerked his shoulders toward Pierce. “I may be like this for weeks! I don’t see why—”

“I didn’t plan it that way,” I told him. “I told Pierce to keep you in your room and he was following my orders. It didn’t occur to me he’d end up breaking your arm.”

“Is Ada all right? You’re sure that—”

“She’s fine. What’s more, the odds are that she’ll live a lot longer than you do.”

“What do you mean?”

I told him in detail what had happened yesterday afternoon and evening. Pierce leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes while I talked, but Laughton kept his blue eyes fixed on mine with such intentness that I began to feel like a hypnotist’s

stooge. He sat on the edge of the client’s chair, his long face grave and hard, as I described the attempted poisoning and shooting. When I finished stating Lieutenant Farley’s threat, he stood up and began to pace nervously back and forth between the filing cabinet and desk.

“I don’t like that, Stille! I don’t like that at all.”

“Who do you think does?”

“I resent being treated like an escaped convict, and I refuse to be surrendered like a . . . like a . . .”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“You’re supposed to be a detective, Mr. Stille. I’m counting on you to protect me from the police. Find the murderer. That’s what you should be doing!”

“How? I’ve already done everything I can think of.”

“I don’t know. I’m an artist.” The statement reminded him of his injury, for he stopped his pacing and shook his left arm at me. “My right arm is broken. I won’t be able to paint for weeks! That’s bad enough, but”—he glared at Jack Pierce, who shrugged and stared back at him sleepily—“now you want me to go to the police, permit them to lock me up, charge me with all sorts of incredible things! What sort of a detective are you?”

“I’m a damned good detective, but—”

“Then why haven’t you—”

“Will you keep quiet a minute and listen to me?”

He subsided, and, carefully, I explained the paucity of suspects, the details we’d uncovered and verified, the things I thought may have happened but couldn’t prove, how unrelated and contradictory the murders seemed to be. He listened impatiently while I talked, obviously bored with my excuses and anxious to leave the office. Unconsciously, I began to direct my remarks to Pierce, who nodded from time to time but didn’t comment. I discussed at length the way Lieutenant Farley probably reasoned and the neat way the facts seemed to bear out his conclusions. While I was doing this, Laughton leaned toward the desk and picked up

Helen's telescope. He examined it curiously and, manipulating it as well as he could with one hand, held the smaller end to his right eye and squinted through it toward the window. I kept on talking, only half watching him, when suddenly I stopped in the middle of a sentence and stared at him. He was standing there, the telescope glued tightly against his right eye, peering through the window.

"For Chrissake!" I whispered.

"You were saying—" Jack Pierce began.

"Skip it."

"What's the matter, Bob? You look as if—"

"Jack, take this gun"—I pushed Ada's gun across the desk—"and keep it pointed at him." I jerked a quick nod toward the tall, brown-suited man who was peering through the telescope. "He isn't Laughton—he's John Adams! And, by God, that makes him the murderer!"

CHAPTER XIX

JOHN ADAMS turned toward me and lowered the telescope. His steely-blue eyes blazed first at me, then at Jack Pierce, who had obediently taken the revolver and leveled it at him.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"It means the movie's over," I told him. "You aren't Frank Laughton. You're Adams, the man who came here Tuesday morning and hired me to find a man whose whereabouts you already knew. You're—"

"You're insane."

"No, I'm not, Adams. If anyone is insane, it's you. You must have realized Laughton wouldn't have anything to do with your proposition, so you decided to take things into your own hands. When you came to see me, you were trying to construct a phony alibi. You—"

"You're mad, absolutely mad, Stille. I'm Frank Laughton—and I can prove it."

"That's bluff, nothing but bluff. You're quite an actor, Adams—but you aren't quite good enough. You see, you made one mistake: You let me meet the real Laughton. If it hadn't been for that, you

might have gotten away with your scheme."

"Stop this nonsense, Stille," Adams snapped. He stepped toward me. "If you think this is funny—"

"I don't. It isn't a damned bit funny. Keep that gun on him, Jack." Pierce backed away from Adams, keeping the revolver trained at him. Adams stopped, shook his left arm angrily. "Sit down, Adams," I ordered. "You might make Jack nervous. I'd hate to see a guy like you cheat the electric chair."

His long face tight with anger, Adams sat stiffly on the chair Pierce had been occupying. "Suppose you tell me," he asked coldly, "exactly what this is all about."

"When I met you coming out of the Triple D's office building, you looked like Laughton and you acted like Laughton. You even sounded like him. Enough, anyway, to convince me. You must have been in the house when Laughton arrived. In fact, you must have been hiding upstairs when I arrived to talk to Shirley." I paused, thinking rapidly. "Hell, why didn't I think of that. The two of you have been working hand-in-glove! She knew you were upstairs. She knew you planned to kill him and to take his place!" I nodded as the details began to click into place. "That line you handed me about not getting along with her was a lot of crap. You planned it together. One of you discovered—it had to be you, Adams, not Shirley—you discovered that, as long as Laughton was alive, there was danger of his coming back and claiming the business, house, money, everything. It worried you and you began to plan a way to protect yourself."

I leaned back, felt for a cigar, stalling for time to think things through.

"Shirley must have suspected something wasn't quite right. Maybe you dropped one too many hints, trying to sound her out. No. It wasn't that way." I shook my head and started over. "Shirley discovered you were an imposter the night she went to the Esquire Theatre and saw Laughton and his paintings. She accused

you of being a fraud, and you, realizing that the truth couldn't be concealed from her any longer, decided to make a clean breast of things and get her to play things your way. You explained the situation, convinced her that it was to her financial advantage to cooperate.

"There wasn't much she could do but play your game. She'd made the mistake of getting a Reno divorce from Laughton when she walked out on him, and she knew she had no legal claim to anything. Besides, she wanted to avoid scandal. Also, you'd convinced her you were the better man of the two. The way you'd operated the business and made money seemed proof of that. So she said okay."

"My wife has never—"

"Shut up. You hired investigators to get you information about Laughton's habits, his activities, the location of his room and studio, and you learned that he was living at the Baker Hotel and had married a blonde stripper named Ada St. Claire. So you went to the Baker Hotel, intending to kill Laughton, and found a blonde girl asleep in his bed. You thought she was Ada St. Claire, the girl he'd married, so you shot her to forestall any claim she might have in the event his true identity accidentally came to light. The girl you killed was really Vivian Boyd, of course."

"I didn't!" Adams, his long face white with fury and desperation, sprang forward. "You're trying to frame—"

HIS words were drowned out by the sudden crash of the revolver in Jack Pierce's hand. Adams halted, his left arm raised in mid-air, then crumbled against the desk. The cast on his broken arm made a hollow thump as it struck heavily against the desk's edge, and his left arm, clutching for support, pulled the desk lamp to the floor as he fell. The office was suddenly filled with the acrid smell and pale blue smoke of cordite.

Pierce stood there, as though surprised, with the still-smoking revolver in his hand, his eyes fixed on Adams' crumpled body. I was too astonished to say anything for

a minute.

"God!" Pierce muttered.

Helen Gates flung the door open, stood in the doorway. She started to come in, to ask a question, then saw the sprawled figure on the floor and pressed a fist hard against her mouth. Part of the scream which rose to her lips was suppressed, but part of it escaped in a gurgling squeal.

"God damn it, Pierce!" I managed to say.

"I thought he was going after you," Pierce said hoarsely. "I must have tightened my finger. The gun went off before —"

"Is he dead?"

"I guess so." Pierce knelt beside Adams and pulled him over onto his back. He felt for a pulse, shook his head. Then he slipped a hand beneath Adams' shirt, felt for a sign of breathing. "He's dead, Bob."

"You damned fool!" I said. "You God damned fool!"

"He sprang toward you so sudden, Bob, that—"

"I know. But you didn't have to shoot him. What the hell harm could he do with one arm?"

"I didn't think. I was standing there, holding the gun on him, and—"

"Skip it. You were probably sound asleep."

"What are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do?" I sighed and motioned to Helen Gates. "Phone the cops, Helen. Ask for Lieutenant Farley and tell him there's a dead man on the floor of my office." I walked around the body, stared at it. "A hell of a mess! Farley's going to raise hell with us, Pierce."

"It was an accident, Bob; you know it was. If he hadn't jumped the way he—"

"Sure. It was an accident. That part's okay," I agreed. "But Farley isn't going to like it. The whole story has got to come out now, and you and I are both going to be in a jam." I shook my head. "But there isn't a damned thing we can do about it. Not a thing."

Pierce laid the revolver on the desk, shrugged, sank wearily into a chair.

"You could have winged him," I went on, my anger rising again. "You didn't need to drill him through the head!"

Pierce jerked his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Bob. I didn't even aim. It went off before—"

Fred Matson arrived with Shirley Laughton. Fred's eyes bulged as they took in Adams' body. Shirley didn't see it at first. She was wearing a pearl-gray suit which clasped her slim body as though it loved it, and she came into the office with her chin high, her blue eyes flashing indignantly.

"What is the meaning of this—" she began angrily.

"Be careful," I said. "Don't disturb the body."

She saw it then, and, with a shocked gasp, her anger collapsed. She shrank back, retreated toward the door. "Who—who is it?"

"His name is John Adams."

"Is . . . is . . .?"

"Yeah. He's dead."

Helen Gates put an arm around her, steadied her as she swayed. I thought she was going to faint, but she didn't. Helen helped her to a chair, got her a glass of water. She whispered her thanks and sat there, her eyes wide and frightened, trying to avoid looking at the body.

THERE was a sound of footsteps and gruff voices, and Lieutenant Farley and Sergeant Valentis, flanked by the usual assortment of homicide technicians, crowded into the office. Farley stared at the limp figure in front of my desk, began giving crisp orders. Then, his thick lips set in a hard line, he turned to me.

"All right, Stille. What happened?"

I described the shooting episode in detail. When I finished, Farley nodded shortly, directed that Adams be removed to the morgue. He slipped a pencil through the revolver's trigger guard, lifted it from the desk, passed it to one of the technicians. A stretcher arrived and all the officials except Farley and Valentis left.

"Now," Lieutenant Farley said in a patient, hard voice, "let's hear the rest

of the story."

"It's like I told you, Lieutenant—"

"I mean *all* the rest of the story, Stille."

"All right." I got a cigar out of my pocket and lit it. They were all staring at me—Lieutenant Farley, Sergeant Valentis, Shirley Laughton, Jack Pierce, Fred Matson, Helen Gates. I tipped my head toward Helen, and said: "Get a notebook, Helen. We may as well make a record of this."

She nodded and went to her desk. Valentis brought in a couple more chairs from the reception room and put them in front of the desk. I felt like a teacher in a little red school house, with Pierce sprawled in the client's chair at my right, Farley, Matson, and Valentis in front of me, Shirley Laughton between Farley and Pierce, and Helen to my left. Clearing my throat, I began:

"One of my operatives, Jack Pierce, located a man whom we thought was Frank Laughton. He was hiding in a room at the Hotel Martell on West Madison Street. I instructed Pierce to keep an eye on him, so Pierce rented a room directly across from his and stood guard there all day yesterday. After our conversation last evening, Lieutenant, I decided to turn him over to you, but, when I phoned Pierce to give him instructions to that effect, I learned that Laughton, having heard about the attempt on Ada St. Claire's life, had tried to get away. Pierce tried to stop him, and, during the struggle, broke his arm. A doctor was called, and Laughton was taken to Henriotin Hospital. I decided it was useless to do anything further until morning, so I instructed Pierce to remain at the hospital all night and see that Laughton didn't escape. This morning I sent Fred Matson there in my car. I told him to bring Laughton and Pierce here, and then to go and get Shirley Laughton. I intended to have a brief conference with them—and then to phone your office."

"Is this a straight story, Stille?" Farley demanded.

"Yes. Pierce and Matson will verify it." I looked at them and they nodded.

"As soon as Laughton and Pierce arrived, I explained the situation in detail and advised Laughton that he had no alternative but to surrender. While we were talking, I noticed something which convinced me that the man in my office was really John Adams—not Frank Laughton. I accused—"

"What did you notice, Bob?" Pierce asked.

"I never did explain that, did I? Well, the first time I met the real Laughton, he was at his studio. He drank a couple bottles of beer, and, when he finished, he peered into the bottles by holding them to his *left* eye. Adams, when he picked up the telescope, held it to his *right* eye. As soon as I noticed that, I realized that he was an imposter."

"But—"

"People don't realize it, but everyone favors either his left or right eye. One eye is usually stronger than the other, and ophthalmologists call it the *leading* eye. If a person's left eye is the leading one, he will always favor it—and vice versa. It's absolutely unconscious and no one realizes what he's doing. Therefore, remembering that Laughton's leading eye was his left, I knew as soon as I saw Adams put the telescope to his right eye that he was an imposter."

"Is that a scientific fact?" Valentis asked.

"**Y**ES. It's only a fifty-fifty shot, though, and wouldn't be of any use in picking an individual from a group. In this case, it worked perfectly. As soon as it hit me, I handed Pierce the gun and told him to cover Adams. Then I accused Adams of murdering Frank Laughton and Vivian Boyd. He denied it. Then I accused him of conspiring with Shirley Laughton, and I began to describe the pattern they must have followed. That got him, I guess, because he lunged toward me. Pierce was startled into action—and shot him."

"Are you accusing me—" Shirley Laughton began.

I looked at her and nodded. "Yes, I

am."

She looked at Lieutenant Farley and widened her eyes incredulously. "This is ridiculous!"

"You're a beautiful woman, Mrs. Laughton," I said, "but you aren't as clever as you are beautiful. Your first mistake was in divorcing Frank Laughton." I nodded at the startled look which sprang to her eyes. "Yes, I know all about it, and what I don't know Berle Nathan will be able to supply."

"What's this about a divorce?" Farley asked.

"She walked out on Frank Laughton nine years ago and got a Reno divorce. When she got back, Adams was running things and she decided to stay. Whether she actually believed Adams was Laughton or not, she's been living with him for nine years—without benefit of wedlock."

"Is that true?" Farley demanded.

Shirley Laughton buried her face in her hands and began to sob. Her shoulders shook pitifully.

"Nicholas Fenske was her lawyer," I explained. "He's been dead for several years, but Berle Nathan, who was a clerk in his office at the time, remembers the case. You can check with him at your convenience."

"All right. Continue, Stille. You think she and Adams put their heads together and planned the murders?"

"Not exactly. Several other things have just occurred to me." I paused long enough to strike a match and hold it to the end of my cigar. "I think that, in the beginning, she accepted Adams as Laughton. Whether she loved him as a man, I don't know, but she liked the money he earned and was afraid he'd find out about the divorce. Living with a man to whom she wasn't married was contrary to her religious and moral training, and it bothered her psychologically, but it wasn't as strong as her desire to have nice things, to live a luxurious life. See what I mean?"

Farley nodded. "Go on."

"Well, Adams did all right. He made a lot of dough and she had everything

she wanted. Then she noticed that Adams wasn't as attentive as he used to be. Let's see . . . that'd be about two years ago. It was about that time that she was first seen in company with another man, and —"

"He's mad!" Shirley gasped.

"Just a minute," Sergeant Valentis interrupted. "How about the Ada St. Claire business? Mrs. Laughton couldn't have had anything to do with either the shooting or poisoning, and Adams, according to what you said a little while ago, was hiding in a room at the Hotel Martell. I personally think that incident ties in with the other murders, and, if you're going to prove that they killed Vivian Boyd and Frank Laughton, you'll have to show how one of them could have been in two places at the same time."

"Did I say Mrs. Laughton had committed murder?"

"You inferred that—"

"No, I didn't. I accused her of conspiracy to commit murder."

"One's as bad as the other. It doesn't make any difference which one pulled the trigger or drove home the knife," Valentis pointed out, "because if they planned it together they're equally guilty."

"I understand that," I said. "Let's get this straight. I think Shirley Laughton and John Adams planned Frank Laughton's death. I think they were building up to it for a long time—but I *don't think they planned it together.*"

"What?" Lieutenant Farley straightened angrily. "What the hell is this, Stille? If you're—"

"I'm not. I'm simply saying that there's a third party involved—and that third party is the actual murderer. Shirley Laughton and John Adams were both working along with him, not realizing that he was playing both ends against the middle."

Shirley Laughton raised her tear-stained face and stared at me unbelievably. Lieutenant Farley's round face flushed a little, as though his impatience was rapidly turning to anger. Sergeant Valentis seemed puzzled; his lean face was drawn and his brow was puckered thoughtfully. Fred

Matson was shifting nervously on his straight-backed chair. Jack Pierce, his eyes not quite so sleepy, lounged against the curving back of the client's chair, his eyes on mine.

"Who the hell is this third party?" Farley demanded.

"The murderer," I said slowly, "can be only one person—Jack Pierce."

CHAPTER XX

SERGEANT VALENTIS, Lieutenant Farley and Jack Pierce reacted as though I'd exploded a bomb beneath them. They kicked back their chairs and leaped to their feet, facing each other.

"Stand back," Pierce ordered in a quiet, deadly voice. "Raise your hands high, coppers."

Valentis started to reach toward a shoulder holster, stopped abruptly when he saw the shiny automatic in Pierce's hand. He stood there, slowly raised his hands, while Pierce stepped around his chair to a position where he could menace everyone in the room with his gun.

"All right, smart guys," Pierce said. "Go ahead, try to hang it on me! You know damned well Adams killed Laughton and Vivian Boyd—but you aren't satisfied with that. You think you've got to have a victim to crow over in court. You want pictures and publicity in the papers. Well, to hell with you! I'm not being framed as easy as that." Without shifting his eyes, he snapped. "Shirley, relieve the gentlemen of their guns. Be careful not to cross in front of me. One of those bastards might grab you."

Shirley Laughton, a little fearfully, did as he commanded.

"Jack, you'll never get away with this," I said. "That's the trouble with you. You're too clever, too quick. You had a chance to talk your way out a minute ago. Now, you're sunk."

"I am like hell!" Pierce snapped. "You don't know a damned thing. All I want is a chance to explain things—and I don't want to do the explaining from a cell. I know too damned much about cops to go for anything like that. I want to

be proved guilty, fair and square—not beaten into an admission by a crew of dumb flatfeet.”

“I can prove you guilty, Jack,” I said.

“The hell you can. You can’t prove I’m guilty any more than you can prove that Adams is Adams or Laughton is Laughton. There isn’t any proof, and you know it.”

“I can prove,” I said slowly, “that you’ve been seeing Mrs. Laughton, off and on, for over a year. Allen Ross found a witness who saw you with her in Lake Geneva—and she’ll identify you.”

“So what? That doesn’t mean a damned thing.”

“I think I can prove,” I continued, “that, before you became acquainted with Mrs. Laughton, you were hired as a freelance operative by another agency to locate Frank Laughton. The man who investigated and paid for the investigation was John Adams. You found Laughton and you learned what the set-up was. That, of course, gave you the idea of cutting in on Adams. What did you do, Jack—threaten to expose him?”

“Figure it out. You’re the brainy guy, Bob.”

“Okay. My guess is that you went to Adams, tried to nick him for some dough. He came across, and that gave you further ideas. You did some investigating of your own, and, the next time you saw Adams, you made him a proposition. Something like this: ‘How much would it be worth to you, Mr. Adams, if Laughton were to disappear—permanently?’ Am I right, Jack?”

“Hell, no. It was *Adams* who propositioned *me!*”

“Well, either way, the two of you got your heads together and began to plan ways of getting rid of Laughton. You were both clever, so you had to figure out a clever, smooth way of handling it. Then, about the time you had things set, Laughton married Ada St. Claire. I imagine that sort of upset your plans. After all, even if you did remove Laughton, his widow would still be in the picture. So you had to figure out a whole new method of procedure. Right?”

“Think you’re smart, Bob, don’t you?” Pierce sneered. “Think you’re right on the beam!”

“**Y**ES, I think I’m right. I’m sure I’m right.” I nodded, as calmly as I could, and sucked a little smoke into my lungs. “About that time you met Mrs. Laughton. You went for her in a pretty big way—after all, she looks like quite a dish. Maybe she went for you, too. Somehow, you found out that she’d gotten a Reno divorce from Laughton and wasn’t actually married to either Laughton or Adams. That’s where you began to play both ends against the middle.”

“Why are you letting him talk like that, Jack? Make him shut up!” Shirley Laughton cried hoarsely. She had dried her eyes, but she seemed scared to death at the rapid turn of events.

“Let him talk!” Pierce growled. “He’s just talking his way into the ground.”

“But he’s going to—”

“Let him. I want to see how much he knows.” Pierce jerked his automatic a little. “Keep banging your gums, Bob. I haven’t got all day.”

“Well, that’s when you started being too clever. If you’d played along with Adams, things might eventually have worked out the way you planned. But you started figuring a way to get the money *and the blonde*—and the job was a little too big for you. You began to realize that yesterday, but, up until a few minutes ago, you decided to play your luck out. Now you don’t know what to do. You’d like to shoot me, but you’re afraid to—because I may know something you ought to know. That’s it, isn’t it, Jack? You’re thinking fast, as fast as you can, and you’re beginning to realize that you’ve got to kill everyone in this room—and even if you do you won’t get a dime. All you’ll get is Shirley—and maybe you’re beginning to realize that without the money she won’t be a bargain.”

“Jack! Don’t let him—”

“Keep out of this, Shirley. I want to hear the plan. What was the plan, Bob?”

“The plan was complicated. That was the fault of it. It was too complicated.”

First, you went to the Baker Hotel, entered Laughton's room, shot the girl who you thought was Ada St. Claire, his wife. Second, you persuaded Adams to come to my office and hire me to locate Laughton, hoping thereby to establish a lack of knowledge on Adams' part and to give yourself a chance to work on the case officially, for you knew I'd need an operative and would phone you for assistance. That was smart, very smart. Third, you convinced Adams that it'd be smart to expose the switch in identity, then get rid of Laughton and take his place—in other words, do a double switch. That's the part that was too clever. It required too much preparation, too much attention to detail—although I'll admit it almost worked. Incidentally, that's why you broke his arm, isn't it? You knew Adams couldn't paint, so you worked up a fake struggle and deliberately broke it for him, thinking that, as Laughton, he might be able to claim permanent injury and thereby get away from the necessity of living up to his artistic reputation."

"Hurry up, Bob. I'm beginning to get bored."

"Oh, yes. The way you killed Laughton. That took quite a bit of engineering. You knew you had to get Laughton's fingerprints onto things at the Triple D's office and also around the house on Astor Street, because you wanted Adams' prints to be mistaken for Laughton's—and vice versa. Therefore, you approached Laughton in the room where he was hiding at the Hotel Martell, and told him you were my representative. You convinced him that either Adams or Shirley was the murderer—and that proof might be found at the house or the office. Laughton believed you, and, on your suggestion, he went to the office of the Triple D Company and made a search. While he was there, you went to Adams' home, warned Shirley to keep out of the way, and arranged for Adams to be hiding in one of the upstairs rooms. When I arrived—that was a little disconcerting, wasn't it?—you and Adams were already upstairs. Laughton walked in, went upstairs as you'd suggested he do—and either you or Adams

knifed him. I suppose you'd have shot him, but I was downstairs and you were afraid I'd hear the explosion. Am I right, Jack?"

"You're doing fine, Bob. You're practically dead right now."

"GOOD. Well, the rest was simple. Adams put on a different suit, stripped Laughton's clothes from him, and the two of you tore up the room. No. I forgot about the fingerprints. You let Laughton make his search first, in order to get his prints on things. He was responsible for the mess we found. When he finished his search, you did your knife-work. Then Adams changed into a brown gabardine suit and went to his office, which is where I happened to pick the two of you up. I imagine that was another surprise—or did you want me to happen on you like that?"

"You're doing the figuring, Bob."

"Why the suit changing?" Sergeant Valentis asked, lowering his arms slightly.

"Keep out of this, copper!" Pierce ordered. "And keep reaching. You might make me nervous."

"The suit changing was a typical Pierce touch. He was being clever, all along the line, and he wanted to be sure someone—Adams' secretary, at least—would notice and comment on the change. The fact that Laughton had been wearing a brown suit may have had something to do with it, but, essentially, it was a detail perfected by Pierce's complicated engineering. Shirley noticed the change when Adams left the house, and it puzzled her—because she thought, for a few minutes at least, that Pierce may have tricked her, that maybe he had killed Adams instead of Laughton." I looked at Shirley and asked, as casually as I could: "You didn't really trust Pierce, did you? You knew Adams was up to something, and it occurred to you that Pierce might be Adams' man and not yours. That's why you came here, hired me to locate Berle Nathan, isn't it?"

Shirley Laughton's face paled a little but her glance was coolly contemptuous. "I haven't done a thing wrong. You'll never prove that I did, either."

"See what I mean, Jack? She's all for herself. She's going to take care of Shirley, no matter what. You don't think she's going to stick with you now, do you? Hell, she's going to let you shoot her way out of here—because she thinks she's got a good chance of ending up with the dough."

"Don't believe him, Jack! He's saying that because—"

"Because it's true," I interrupted softly. "The only person you've ever loved, Shirley, is your father's only daughter—yourself. You've always played hard-to-get, and you've played it so straight that no one's ever gotten beneath that painted, scented veneer you call flesh. No one ever will either—not even Pierce!"

"Just a minute, Bob." Pierce's voice was dangerously cold. "Tell me how you figure that. What makes you think she's double-dealing me?"

"Well, isn't she? I haven't heard her say a word in your defense. The only times she has objected to my accusations is when I've smeared her. She wants to get out of this with her own skirts clean—and she doesn't give a damn what happens to you." I grinned at Pierce, winked knowingly. "I'll bet she's teased you on ever since the day you met her. I'll bet she hasn't been woman enough to meet you all the way. Be honest, Jack—has she?"

"It's a lie, Jack! Don't—"

"Shut up, Shirley." Pierce's eyes flickered almost imperceptibly. "I'll take care of her, Bob. She isn't going to get away with anything. I'll see to that."

"It's too late, Jack. She has you where the hair is short. You murdered Adams, you couldn't resist the chance of killing him because you thought I'd go to bat for you—and now she's got you where she can do as she pleases. You can't do a damned thing without her, but she can do plenty without you. What makes you think she'll stick with a guy like you? Hell, if she can keep that Reno divorce from public knowledge, she'll have a quarter of a million bucks to play around with! She can get herself a good-looking gigolo with dough like that."

"I know about the divorce," Pierce said slowly. "She wouldn't dare cross me."

"Your knowledge of it wouldn't do you any good if you were dead, Jack. She crossed Laughton, and she crossed Adams—what makes you think she wouldn't, say, sweeten your coffee with arsenic? She's the type who'd do it."

"Don't listen to him, Jack! You know —"

"Shut up." Pierce backed away from her a little, bringing her within range of the automatic. "Some of the crap makes sense. How *do* I know you'll play ball?"

"Jack! He's poisoning your mind! He's trying to turn you against me! Please, let's—"

PIERCE'S eyes flickered toward her and, in that instant, Valentis swept his left arm down in a swift arc toward the gun. The gun exploded twice, but the bullets drilled into the desk, missing Valentis' side by inches. What happened then was too fast for the eye to record. The gun exploded once again, sending a bullet crashing into the ceiling, and then Pierce was on his back, whimpering like a wounded animal, and Valentis was standing over him with the automatic pointed at his head. Lieutenant Farley had catapulted toward Shirley Laughton, throwing his big arms about her before she could use the revolver she'd taken from Valentis.

"Christ!" I said. "I thought you were never going to get the idea, Sergeant!"

"I had the idea a long time ago," Valentis said, breathing heavily from the struggle, "but I had to wait until he had the gun in a handy spot."

Farley forced Shirley Laughton into a chair, skillfully handcuffed her to it. "That was nice talking, Stille," he grunted. "I never thought I'd live to hear a private eye gab so much—and enjoy it."

"I think most of what I said is the truth—and can be proved," I told him, "but I'll admit that I improvised things here and there. I was afraid he'd bang that gun at me, like he did to Adams."

"You figure he deliberately killed Adams?"

"Sure. He could see Adams was scared,

and he was afraid Adams would give him away. So he shot him, thinking I'd back him up and swear he'd fired to protect me."

"You bastard!" Pierce moaned. "You broke my arms!"

"You had it coming," Sergeant Valentis said. "You're lucky I didn't break your neck."

"Helen," I said, "as soon as you get around to closing your pretty mouth"—she was gaping like a farmer in town for the first time—"go out and phone police headquarters. Tell them Lieutenant Farley has rounded up a couple gangsters—and to send the wagon." I looked at Farley. "Right, Lieutenant?"

"Right," Farley agreed.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN everyone finally cleared out of the office, I eyed my cigar distastefully and threw it toward the wastebasket. "What time is it, Helen?"

"Ten to one, Mr. Stille."

"Is that all? It seems like it ought to be six o'clock. How about running out and getting us something to eat?"

Helen nodded, gave me an odd look. "Mr. Stille?"

"Yeah?"

"Are . . . are things like that liable to happen . . . very frequently?"

"I hope not. Why?"

"It scared me out of a year's growth. My stomach is still sort of jumpy."

"It scared the hell out of me, too, Helen." I raised one eyebrow and gave her an appreciative glance. "You don't need to worry about growing, Helen. You're man-size right now."

Helen tossed her head, not coyly but in a way which made her copper-red hair shimmer pleasantly. "Do you think they'll send Pierce and Mrs. Laughton to the electric chair?"

"Pierce'll get the chair, without question. Mrs. Laughton may get off with life imprisonment, but her worst punishment will be the newspaper publicity. That'll hurt her more than the death penalty would."

"But Pierce—they'll electrocute him, won't they?"

"Positively. He's guilty as hell, and I'm pretty sure the automatic he had was the one he used to kill Vivian Boyd. Besides, once Mrs. Laughton finds herself actually behind bars, she'll do her damndest to pin everything on him. It'll serve him right."

"Sometimes, when talking about women, you sound bitter, Mr. Stille."

"I'm not bitter, but I've seen too many men make asses of themselves over a pretty face and a wriggling hip. If Pierce had kept his mind off Shirley, he might have slickered Adams and Laughton the way he started out to do." I grunted disgustedly, reached for another cigar. "Let it be a lesson to you, Helen. Don't ever try to mix business and pleasure—it doesn't work."

"Yes, Mr. Stille." She started toward the door, then hesitated and came back. "Was it Pierce, then, who tried to poison Miss St. Claire?"

"Yeah. He skipped out and left Adams at the Hotel Martell, went to The Paris and tried to kill Ada. He took a shot at her, was probably afraid to try a second time for fear someone near him would notice, so he got an order of chop suey, poisoned it, and sent it to her, hoping she'd eat it."

"Gosh," Helen said softly, "I feel sorry for Miss St. Claire!"

"So do I." I sat there a moment, then frowned. "I'd forgotten about her, Helen. She's probably sitting in her apartment now, wondering why she hasn't heard from Laughton."

"You ought to call her, Mr. Stille."

"Yeah." I groaned and reached for the phone. "She's a swell person. I hate to do this." I dialed Ada's number and, while listening to the phone ring, added: "Maybe the fact that she's acquired a quarter million bucks will help make things easier for her—but I don't think so."

Helen turned suddenly and hurried out of the office. I knew how she felt. I could have spouted a tear or two myself without half-trying . . .

THE END

THE GREAT DECEIVER

By
GREGORY KENT

CRIMINAL files are dotted with stories of attempts to perpetrate literary and artistic hoaxes. Desires for fame and profits goaded these men on to pose as someone else. No case is as strange or fabulous as that of George Pasalmanazar. His skill and daring as a deceiver seems unbelievable. Stranger still, is the course which his hoax took, and the fact that no one ever discovered why this man started on his path of deceit.

Little is known about Pasalmanazar's early life. His name was fictitious. His true name was never revealed, or where he came from and who his parents were. He was born in France in about 1679. He is believed to have been educated in a free school and later at a Jesuit college. After finishing his education, he became a tutor to the son of a wealthy French noble. Here he was thought of as a modest and unassuming young man, quite unlike the type that would perpetrate one of the most audacious hoaxes in history.

We can only speculate about the circumstances which brought about the change in Pasalmanazar from a somber tutor to a wanderer, thief, and then an outcast. Overnight, he quit his employment, and set out upon a life of adventure. As a vagabond he covered the greater part of Europe, earning his living by the use of his nimble wits. If his tutoring talents were not needed, he was willing to serve in a kitchen. If there were no employment to be had, he was ready to steal.

In this way, Pasalmanazar drifted as far east as the island of Formosa. It was here that he received the basic information around which he was to weave a wonderful fiction. The island made a great impression upon him. When he returned to Europe, he was filled with tales of the wonders he had witnessed. Little was known about Formosa at that time, so his stories were eagerly accepted.

One day in his travels Pasalmanazar fell in with a Mr. Innes. Mr. Innes was the chaplain of a Scottish regiment and a man of considerable education. Innes listened to the tales of the young man and was struck with his extensive knowledge. He decided to bring Pasalmanazar over to England. Pasalmanazar fell in with the plan enthusiastically. He became the protégé of the chaplain. He made it known that he had travelled in Formosa for many years and had made a close study of the people.

Soon his fame spread. Pasalmanazar became

the guest of honour of the Bishop of London himself, and every evening he was the center of attraction at the gatherings of the learned men of the time. His small deceit began to expand. He was not content merely to describe things he had not seen and invent adventures he had not experienced. He passed from describing the fictitious habits, manners, and customs of the people of Formosa to actually inventing a language. Since this was done under the eyes of the most intelligent English scholars at the time, it required great skill. To delude the type of man that Pasalmanazar deluded it was necessary to write down and memorize thousands of words, to invent inflections, conjugations, tenses, participles and all the other minute details which only an unusual mind could accomplish. Yet, Pasalmanazar did this successfully. People remarked on the beauty of the language, and the subtle shades of meaning which could be expressed by it.

ENCOURAGED by his success, Pasalmanazar went on to embellish his story. He spoke of the religion of the people, creating out of his fertile imagination a whole body of creed and rites. He declared that the people of Formosa have a calendar in which there are twenty months. Bit by bit he filled in every minute aspect of the life on the island.

In those days, when many reaches of the world were still largely unexplored, the explorer and the pioneer was looked upon with great respect and admiration in his own land. Pasalmanazar's friendship was sought after by the most famous scientists and dignitaries of the Church. His name became a pass-word in London society. Then, as suddenly as he had embarked on his life of wandering, Pasalmanazar underwent another metamorphosis. Perhaps it was the religious atmosphere in which he lived which finally brought him to see the extent of his offense. A wave of remorse swept him and he announced his misdeeds to a startled world. The remarkable bubble which he had blown by himself was exploded with a bang.

Pasalmanazar took all the condemnation heaped upon him with surprising meekness. Once more he wore the cloak of personality of his youth. He gave up inventing languages and describing imaginary adventures, and gave himself over to writing history and volumes on Scriptural subjects. He had lived his moment in the zenith; he died in obscurity, one of the most amazing tellers of lies.



Everybody Has to Die

**A newspaper columnist lives on the hot
tips he gets . . . and he can die the same way!**

THERE wasn't much going on in the city room. Two rewrite men were talking at the water cooler, the night city editor was reading a pulp magazine and I was trying to tack a neat end to my column. I just about had it when the phone on my desk began to ring.

I picked it up and said, "Yes?"

"Mr. Blake, this is Tony. At the

Frolics."

"How's the boy? What have you got?"

"Maybe something you can use. Can you take it now?"

"Yeah, just a second."

I got a pad of paper and a pencil. Tony was the Headwaiter at the *Frolics*, one of Chicago's big night joints. I'd known him for years and when he saw

The gun was big enough to kill; and his face showed he could pull the trigger



by
**William P.
McGivern**

or heard something my column might use he passed it along. In addition to being a good guy he was reliable.

"All right. Shoot."

"Jerry Glendenning and his wife just left. They had a big battle in the alcove beside the hat check concession. A real Donneybrook."

I wrote that down. Jerry Glendenning was a young guy around town with

more money than sense. The money he got from his father who had piled up fantastic heaps of it in solid things like steel and coal, then died of ulcers. The lack of sense Young Glendenning supplied for himself. He had gotten married about a year ago to a young gal who evidently looked at his dough and overlooked his screwiness. But everything had run in the hearts and flowers department, much to everyone's surprise. He'd settled down, cut out a lot of his foolishness and they seemed very happy. If their bright song was going sour now it was news.

"Did anybody else see the brawl, Tony?" I said.

"No, I was the only one around."

That was fine. "What was it about?"

"I didn't get it all. She said something about not putting up with that sort of thing, then he told her to shut up. She said she'd walk out on him and start talking. He grabbed her by the shoulders and said something I couldn't get. Then they saw me, so I had to move along."

"How long ago was this?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I stopped on the way back to the dining room to give you the dope."

"That's fine. Thanks a lot."

"It's all right. When you coming out to the house for a spaghetti dinner?"

"Sounds like a good idea. Make it Saturday and I'll bring the wine."

"Okay, Mr. Blake."

I hung up and looked at the notes I'd made. They didn't add up to a story yet, but with a little checking around I figured I had a good item. I filed them away and went back to my column.

The clock said twelve thirty and the city room was starting to come back to life. We had an edition at one thirty, with a one o'clock deadline. The re-

write men were back at their phones taking stories from reporters; the night city editor was looking busy and the men at the circular copy desk were working.

I finished my column, sent it to the desk and then walked over to the water cooler to get a drink. I had the drink, smoked a cigarette and then went over to a rewrite desk to see what was coming in from the street.

There wasn't much. Jim Nelson, a grey-haired man of about forty-five, was doing a story about some politician who thought it would be a good idea if everyone in the world were more "American."

When he finished the story he took off the earphones and lit a cigarette. "Quiet tonight," he said. He was taking the second drag from his smoke when his phone jangled. He put a sheet of paper in his typewriter and put on the earphones.

"Okay," he said.

HE LISTENED for a minute to the reporter who was phoning in the story, then started typing notes. I looked over his shoulder and read.

"Tony Paletti, headwaiter at the *Frolics*, murdered twelve thirty-five."

Nelson stopped typing and said, "All right, I'll take the details now."

I grabbed another phone and heard the reporter's voice.

"Paletti went out for a smoke or something and some guy shot him twice with a thirty-eight. It happened right in front of the club. Whoever did it got away without being identified very well. The doorman of the club said he was a big guy in a dark coat. But a woman on the other side of the street said she saw the shooting and that the guy who did it was wearing a light camel hair topcoat."

Nelson's typewriter was clattering

like a machine gun. Finally he said. "Okay, keep going."

"Paletti was forty-five," the reporter said. "Married, had two kids, both teen-age girls. The *Frolics* is owned by Nate Lewis. He doesn't know of any reason for Tony getting shot. Tony worked there for nine years. The police are doing their best and so forth."

Nelson said, "Nothing definite, then, on who did it or why?"

"No, they don't know anything."

"Okay," Nelson said. "Let me have anything else you get."

He took off the earphones and put clean paper in his typewriter. "Things are picking up," he said.

I was thinking of Tony Paletti. A good guy I'd known for years. A guy I liked to eat spaghetti and drink wine with. A nice guy.

"Yeah, they're picking up," I said.

The *Frolics* is west of the Loop on Madison avenue. When I got there a uniformed cop I knew was standing out in front. His name was Cassidy. I asked him what was going on.

"They took him down to the morgue," Cassidy said. He was a big man who looked vaguely disgusted most of the time. "The wagon just left. Lieutenant Logan is inside. Want to go in?"

I went inside. The hat check girls were busy getting things for a line of nervous customers. I went on to the main dining room, which also had a dance floor and an orchestra. The place was still crowded and the music was loud. I saw Lieutenant Logan talking to a couple of guys over near one of the serving tables.

Logan was about as inconspicuous as a baby in a handbook. He was a big guy with a hard, sullen face and he dressed like he was trying to imitate the movie's idea of a copper. He had a gray, unpressed suit, heavy black

shoes and a gray hat set squarely on his head. Against the background of rhumba music, soft lights and well-dressed night clubbers he was quite a sight. I went over to where he was standing and said hello.

He looked at me and grunted something in response.

"Any information?" I asked.

"Nothing much." He jerked his head at a small dark man he'd been talking with. "Know Nate Lewis, the owner?"

I said no and shook hands with him.

Lewis had a nice easy smile and teeth that were about as perfect as any I'd ever seen. "I read your column, Blake," he said.

"So you're the guy that reads it," Logan said with ponderous sarcasm.

"Ha, ha," I said. "What gives here? I want a story on the shooting."

"I'll give you what I've got. It ain't much. Paletti was down by the hat check stand at around twelve thirty. The girl seen him head for the dining room. A waiter saw him stop to use the pay phone at the head of the stairs. He talked to somebody. When he came out one of the customers asked him to step outside and see if his wife was out there. She was expected, I guess. This guy wanted Paletti to check on it. Paletti went outside and that's when he got himself shot."

"Who was this customer?"

"Henry Dixon." He grinned. "Know him?"

I knew Henry Dixon. So did everyone who read the papers. He was an industrialist, had made a big name during the war turning out heavy equipment. He was considered to be a king-sized miracle in his league.

"Where's Dixon now?" I asked.

NATE LEWIS answered. "He went on home. He seemed upset by what happened. He felt maybe that

he sent Tony out to his death, or something like that."

"Something like that is right," I said. I looked at Logan. "Got any ideas about it?"

"Nothing. We're working on it, is about all."

"He was a fine man," Nate Lewis said. "Everybody liked him. He did a fine job for me."

"Yeah, he was okay," I said.

There wasn't any point in loitering around the *Frolics*, so I said goodbye to them and went outside. On the street there was a crowd of curious people moving around with that half-eager, half-furtive look that human beings get when they're close to someone else's tragedy. The doorman was a big guy in a blue overcoat with gold epaulets on the shoulder. He saw me and put his whistle to his lips.

"Never mind," I said. "I don't want a cab. I'm in the street-car class, myself. Do you know Jerry Glendenning and his wife?"

"Sure. They're regulars here."

"Do you remember when they left tonight?"

"Yeah, I remember. They left just a few minutes before Tony got shot. You from the cops?"

"Nope. I'm a newspaperman. I knew Tony pretty well and I'd like to find out who shot him. He was a good guy."

"He was a good guy," the doorman repeated slowly. "I'd like to find the guy that shot him, too."

"Well, back to the Glendennings. Did you get them a cab?"

He nodded. "I got 'em a cab, all right. But she got in it and left alone."

"How about him?"

"Well, he looked after the cab for a second then he said goodnight to me and walked off."

"Which way?"

"He went right. I had to take a load of people that pulled up so I don't know whether he turned in somewhere or just kept walking."

"I see. How did the Glendennings get along? Did they seem friendly?"

He shrugged and looked sour. "How would I know how they get along? I'm a doorman. They don't tell me their problems. Generally they laughed a lot and seemed to get along okay. But a lot of people go around laughing with their wives and then take 'em home and beat hell out of 'em. Or go laughing around with some floosie the first chance they get. But the Glendennings seemed like they got along all right. As far as I could tell," he concluded cautiously.

"How about Henry Dixon?"

"He's a nice guy. Tips me a buck coming and going. Pats me on the back but he don't do it to be democratic. He's just a nice guy. But you can't tell about anybody. Maybe he's a heel with other people. But he's a nice guy to me."

"You're as cautious as a UN delegate," I said. "How about giving me an idea of what happened when Tony got it?"

"TONY came out while I was unloading a cabful of luses. The Glendennings had been gone a few minutes. Tony says to me, 'Has Mrs. Dixon showed up yet?' I tell him I haven't seen her and he moves off to the side and steps into the street, looking to see if the Dixon car was parked along there, I guess. Anyway just as he steps into the street a shot sounded. I looked over at Tony and he was holding his stomach and bending over. I ran over to him but he went down before I got to him. I think he was gone in a second. He didn't say nothing, just laid there holding his stomach and that's how he

died."

"Could you tell where the shot came from?"

"Yeah. It came from the other side of the street. I could tell that much. I looked over there right after the shot sounded and I saw a big guy in a dark overcoat putting a gun in his pocket."

"Did you see his face?"

He shook his head. "No, it was too dark. He was just a big black shadow. He turned and ran down the street before I could do anything about it. I told the cops about that and they been looking around. They ain't found anybody I, guess."

"I guess you're right," I said.

I thanked him and went down the block to an all night drug store. From a pay phone I called the home of Henry Dixon. A snooty voice answered.

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Dixon," I said.

"I don't think Mr. Dixon is in."

"You'd better think again. This is Central station. Police."

". . . Oh. One moment, sir."

There was a pause of several seconds, then Dixon was on the phone. He had a hard, aggressive voice.

"This is Dixon. Who am I talking with?"

"Steve Blake of the *Express*," I said.

"I just wanted—"

"So that police business was a gag, eh? Well I haven't anything to say Blake."

"Just a minute. You were the last person to talk to Tony Paletti. I thought there might be a feature angle in it."

"That's fine. So you call me in the middle of the night impersonating a police officer. I think your managing editor should be told how you operate."

I let that one slide. I had him talking and that was what mattered. "I'm sorry, but I thought it was a good idea.

You asked Tony to go outside and see if your wife had arrived. Wasn't that it?"

"Yes. I've explained that to the police in detail. Now what the hell else do you want?"

"Wasn't that an unusual request to make of a headwaiter?"

"What do you mean?"

"A headwaiter is a pretty big man by night club standards," I said. "He doesn't run errands for customers. They've got pages, waiters, doormen and stewards for things like that."

"He worked there, didn't he?" Dixon said. "It didn't occur to me that night clubs had an inside social register. When I want something I grab the nearest man. I'd have sent Nate Lewis out to get my wife if he'd been around. And I think you've taken enough of my time with this nonsense. I—"

"One more thing," I said. "When you see my managing editor tell him I told you to go soak your head."

I HUNG up and walked out on the street feeling childishly pleased with myself.

There wasn't anything else to do that night so I turned into a bar and had a couple of drinks. I thought about Tony's call to me and I tried to remember the inflection and expression in his voice with what he'd said. That didn't do me much good but it killed time until I felt I could go home and sleep. . . .

The next morning I got the paper's society editor on the phone.

"Where are the Glendennings living?" I asked her.

She was a middle-aged woman who thought working on a paper was just too utterly utter. She also loved the subjects of her columns in a humble sort of way that I found depressing.

"Oh? Are you finally getting interested in the upper classes?" she trilled.

"Yes. I'm doing a story on moron types. Now let's not be bright and newspaperish this morning. I'm in a hurry. Where do they live?"

"They are staying at the Drake. Their home in Glencoe is being redecorated and they moved into town for the month. They planned originally to go to Florida, but this is the party season, you know, so they—"

I didn't get the rest of it. I was heading for a cab about that point. The Drake is a swank hotel just north of Chicago's Loop. The lobby is full of florist and men's furnishings shops where you can buy an orchid and a white shirt—but not on what I make in a week.

I called the Glendenning suite on one of the house phones. A woman with a young voice answered the phone.

"This is Steve Blake of the *Express*. I'd like to speak to Mrs. Glendenning, please."

"This is she speaking."

"I'd like to talk to you and your husband for a minute, if I may. Could I come up?"

She hesitated, then said: "Just a minute, please." She apparently checked it with her husband or looked in a crystal ball, because she was back in a little while and said, "Yes, please come up."

She opened the door in answer to my ring and said hello in friendly way. She was about twenty four, with good clean features, soft brown hair and eyes that were direct and honest. I liked her looks.

She led me into the living room which was big enough to put in a bid for the Rose Bowl game. It was done in light gray, with a lot of good furniture and view of the lake through a window which took up a complete wall. I sat down and she asked me if I'd like a cup of coffee. I said no thanks and lit a cigarette.

WHILE we were talking about how pretty the lake looked young Glendenning came in. He was big—bigger than I am—with wavy blond hair and nice white teeth. Except for his chin which could have been harder he looked like an idealized composite of the type turned out by an Ivy League educational background plus a AA Dun-Bradstreet rating. He was wearing slacks and a white silk shirt under a flamboyant red dressing gown.

His wife, whose name was Carol, introduced us. We shook hands and he seated himself on the arm of her chair.

"Well what can we do for you?" he asked.

"I just want to check on a rumor that's floating around town," I said. I smiled to win their love. "The report is that you two are splitting up. Anything to it?"

He looked surprised for a minute and then he laughed and patted his wife's shoulder. He looked down at her grinning.

"Have you been spreading stories, honey?"

She had gotten white and one of her hands was working nervously along the seam of her chair. But she smiled back at him. Not quite as good a job, but it was okay. "I didn't tell anyone but Winchell," she said. "You don't suppose he'd pass it along, do you?"

Glendenning looked back at me, still smiling. "I'm afraid you've gotten hold of a bad item. Carol and I are happy. We expect to stay that way for at least forty or fifty more years. Is that definite enough?"

"That's fine. You can understand why I checked it. We get a lot of reports like this. Sometimes they mean something, other times they're just wind. I like to make sure of my stuff so it doesn't embarrass anyone."

I got up, smiled at both of them and

started for the door. Glendenning came with me. "By the way," he said, "where did you get this report that we were splitting up?"

"A friend of mine," I said. I smiled at him and put my hand on the knob.

"Well, can't you be more definite?"

"I guess I can. It doesn't make much difference to my friend now. I got the report from Tony Paletti, the headwaiter at the *Frolics* who was shot last night. He told me he heard an argument between you and your wife."

"That's very strange," Glendenning said slowly. He looked at his wife. "Did you hear that, honey?"

"Yes, I heard it," she said. Her hand I noticed was working along the chair seam again.

"Did he mention what the argument was supposed to be about?" Glendenning asked me.

"Nope," I said. "He just passed along what I told you. I guess he got it mixed up."

"He certainly did. We didn't have any argument that I remember." He smiled again at his wife. "How about you? Do you remember having any battle with me last night?"

"No," she said quietly.

"Thanks for your time," I said.

This time I turned the knob and went into the corridor. I took an elevator down to the lobby and walked to the house phones. I called the Glendenning suite. She answered the phone.

"This is Blake again," I said. "I just wanted to thank you for being so cooperative."

"Don't mention it," he said.

"COVER up now, baby. Smile into the phone and say something every little bit. You and your husband did have a battle last night. And you're a worried little girl. Want to talk to me about it, or let me get the story

somewhere else?"

". . . Thank you for checking with us on that silly report, Mr. Blake. That could have been embarrassing."

"Will you meet me tonight at six o'clock? Can you get away?"

"I don't think so."

"One more chance, honey. Six o'clock at Nick's bar on Rush street. Okay?"

The phone clicked in my ear. . . .

I went back to the office and learned the managing editor wanted to see me. I stopped at his office and found him in a gloomy mood.

"I understand you're bothering some of our best people," he said.

"Who's crying?"

"Dixon is crying at the top of his loud, influential and unpleasant voice. He cried so loud that the old man heard him. The old man is unhappy about you."

"Does he want me to lay off?"

"That's the general impression."

"What do you think?" I asked.

"You'll stop when you want to," he muttered. "But take a tip. The old boy is hot. Dixon put some heavy heat on him. That business about telling him go soak his head made him very angry."

"Big men never have a sense of humor."

"Just take it easy," he said.

I spent the rest of that day checking what I could find on Dixon and Glendenning. From the Stock Exchange where I had a friend or two I learned a few interesting facts. From a friend who covers the Capitol beat I learned a few more things. When I got to Nick's at six o'clock I had a neat theory cooked up. It explained everything. The only trouble was it didn't make much sense.

Nick's is a newspaper hangout that has a nice restful atmosphere. There is

a bar which looks like a place to drink whisky instead of the front of a juke box; there are brown wooden booths along one wall, faded wall paper and plenty of cigarette butts on the floor. There is no music and you can get a roast beef sandwich with meat in it.

I got a bottle of beer at the bar and then took a seat in a booth where I could watch the front door. I was banking a lot on Carol Glendenning. She looked honest and she had looked worried. She had lied about not having an argument with her husband and she was the kind lying would bother. At least that was my idea. If something phony was going on she wouldn't be a part of it. Not willingly, anyway. That might make her want to play ball with me. And then there was the angle of curiosity. She might show up to find out if I wanted to make a pass at her.

At six ten I had another beer and decided she hadn't looked too honest. At six twenty I figured she wasn't the curious type. At six thirty the door opened and she walked in.

I GOT up out of the booth and went to meet her. She looked nervous and uncertain, but she smiled at me and let me get her a drink. When I was sitting opposite her in the booth and we both had cigarettes going, I said, "I was pretty sure you'd come."

"This is silly," she said. "I—I don't have any reason to be here."

"I think you do. You lied to me this morning. Maybe that's why you came. To tell me the truth."

"You mean about the argument? That was just a silly thing."

"Well, there was an argument."

"Yes, but it didn't mean anything."

"Paletti called me right after he heard the argument. He said you threatened to walk out on your husband and start talking. Doesn't that

mean anything?"

She was pale now. The fingers of one hand were drumming a nervous tattoo on the table top and she kept her eyes lowered.

I said, "I want you to talk. Otherwise I'm going to get the story my way. I've already got a nice start. Your husband and Henry Dixon are in business together. They're about ready to go broke. They've pulled some fast stuff. The Senate committee on war frauds is interested in them. Dixon and your husband need a pile of dough in a hurry."

I waved for another beer. "See how well I'm doing. I got all that from a couple of guys at the Stock Exchange and a guy who works in Washington. Tomorrow I may have more. If there's any point of view you want presented better trot it out. After tonight you'll get it right in the teeth."

She looked up at me and her eyes were miserable. "We had a fight. You know everything, I guess. Jerry and Henry Dixon need money. They were going to get it by dumping a load of decent stock on the market in such a lump that it would knock the price off. Then they intended to buy back."

"Not original, but tried and true," I said. "All the little widows and orphans sell out in a panic. The big boys buy it back and make a killing."

"I overheard enough last night to give me an idea of what they were planning. I told Jerry I wouldn't stand being married to a thief. That's what caused the argument."

"But you're going to stick with him anyway?"

She looked down at the top of the table and made a little circle on it with the tip of her finger. "He said he wouldn't go through with it. I don't know whether to believe him or not. He's lied to me about a lot of things.

I've stuck along this far because I thought he was simply immature. I've been waiting for him to grow up ever since we were married. First it was too much liquor and an occasional girl here and there. Then it was horses. Now it's this thing."

I didn't know what to say. I'm not very good with advice. I always figure if I'm smart enough to straighten out other peoples' troubles I shouldn't have trouble with my own. But I do. So I worry about them and let other people take care of their own. Maybe it's not a chivalrous attitude, but it's honest.

"It's a tough shake," I said.

I HADN'T heard the door open. I hadn't seen him come in. Neither had she. The first we knew he was standing beside our booth, grinning down at us. He looked big and there was something in his eyes I didn't like.

"My wife has such peculiar tastes in people," he said.

She looked at up at him and said, "Jerry!" in a sharp, surprised voice.

"Your wife and I were talking about the stock market," I said.

"You interested in the market?"

"Sure. I'm interested in anything Glendenning and Dixon do. They're very cute operators."

"Get up. Both of you."

He said that in the same light voice he'd been using but the funny light in his eyes seemed brighter now. And I noticed that one hand was buried deep in his overcoat pocket.

He caught my look. "Yes, friend, it's a gun. So behave. Get up both of you and walk straight through the door. My car is parked in front."

I picked up my cigarettes and rose slowly. I was thinking about the odds of trying to surprise him, or of yelling for help. A dozen guys I knew were

at the bar. He'd never get out. But if I did that I might never get my story.

I said to her, "Your husband craves our company. Let's not disappoint him."

We went out the door and stopped at his car. He was right behind us.

"Get in back, Carol," he said. "You get in with me."

He was right in back of me and I could feel the gun against my spine. Carol climbed into the back. Glendenning slid across the front seat and got behind the wheel. I got in beside him and closed the door.

He switched on the ignition with his left hand, gunned the motor and let out the clutch. We got away from the curb fast. He drove with one hand and the other was in the right pocket of his overcoat. He was grinning a little.

I said, "Now what? Do we drive around until the gas is gone?"

"I really don't know," he said, grinning. "That, as Carol could tell you, has always been my trouble. I don't know when to stop. Very childish of me, I know."

"You're going to stop pretty soon," I said. "Or somebody is going to stop you. You're in deep on all sides, Glendenning, and there's no way out."

"I've got to keep going though," he said, and he sounded childishly beligerent.

"You're heading for a brick wall, sonny boy. Things are catching up with you. A lot of people know all about your cute little stunts. You can't kill them all like you did Tony Paletti."

I heard his wife take a sharp, short breath; and she seemed to be holding it, waiting for his denial.

But he just shook his head slowly. "I was worried about that," he said. He was almost talking to himself. "I

didn't know how much Tony had overheard. I told Dixon about it and he said he'd send Tony outside. He told me to take care of him. It seemed like the only thing to do."

"Tony hadn't heard anything important," I said. "You wasted a bullet on him. Anyway a lot of people know about that rigged stock deal that you're planning. It's just not going to work."

"It's got to," he said desperately.

HE SWUNG the car onto Michigan Boulevard and started for the Loop. Most of the traffic was heading the other way so we had the lane to ourselves.

I looked around and saw that Carol was sitting stiffly on the seat, her hands locked tightly in her lap. Her face looked frozen and pinched.

"You're through, Glendenning," I said. "The time has come for you to act like a big boy. You've been a little kid all your life but you're big enough to hang. You'd be surprised what a maturing sensation that is."

"No," he said. That was all. Just the one word and then he swung the car over to the curb, jammed on the brakes.

I got out fast. He was ready to fly apart now and I didn't want to get hit by the pieces. She opened the back door and got out beside me. Her face was empty and dead.

"Goodby, Jerry," she said.

He grinned at us and then let the clutch out with a snap. The car jumped like a frightened rabbit, then gathered speed with a rush. It went down the drive, the right side doors swinging open, and was hitting sixty inside a block.

We stood on the curb and watched. He tore through a red light at the first intersection, still gunning the car. At the second crossing it happened.

The car swerved with a shriek that we could hear two blocks away. It careened wildly for a second, then plowed into a concrete safety island. The crash was like two tanks coming together at top speed.

The car bounced into the air and started a crazy somersault. It landed before it could complete the acrobatics. It landed on end, stood weirdly upright for a second, then toppled over on its back.

It was burning in a matter of seconds. Nobody came out of that twisted oven.

I took Carol's arm and held it tightly. She watched the car burning without expression; then she put both hands against her face. But she didn't cry.

There were a couple of cops on the scene and the traffic was being rerouted. A crowd of several hundred

people had gathered. I think crowds like that must wait in the sewers for something to happen so they can pop up on the scene.

"I'll take care of Dixon," I said.

She took her hands down from her face and looked at me and nodded. "Yes, I wish you would." There was no expression in her voice or face.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

"No, I'd rather you wouldn't."

She turned from me and walked away slowly. I watched her until she turned a corner, then I started in the other direction. I pulled my collar up and put my hands deep in my pockets, but I was cold all over.

I had a story to write and a guy named Dixon to nail to the cross. But I wanted a drink first.

THE END

MONEY-MAD MICHAEL

By

JACK WEST

MEMBERS of the clergy are naturally kindly people, and no one will deny that theirs is a life of making things easier for those who come to them with their troubles. Yet, even the stoutest of clergymen must sometimes refuse a request. Such a refusal became the task of a Catholic priest back in 1940. He refused to conduct burial services for a man who'd led such a rotten life that even the church could not afford to blotch its record by officiating at this man's funeral.

The man was Michael Carrozzo, a Chicago crook who, at one time, could be considered one of the most powerful of union racketeers. Carrozzo's life led a trail of bribery, corruption and graft that bulged his pockets with \$250,000 every year up until the very day of his death.

As bad as Mike was his friends knew him as a rather naive little boy who loved to play the role of a big-shot. He long dreamed of becoming a member of upper society and spent millions trying to get himself accepted by the blue-bloods who thought him amusing but distasteful.

Mike spent most of his life and his money trying to become "a high class guy." It must have been a challenge to him and his money, because even his funeral was a counterfeit affair. His wife

vainly tried to get a Catholic priest to officiate at his funeral, but wound up with a fake priest—a worn-out and frayed ham-actor—who finally put Mike to rest.

The blistering-hot August day in 1940 when Michael Carrozzo was solemnly lowered into his last resting place to this day represents the end of one of the most odious chapters in gangster history. Had Mike been a shrewd man or, to use gangster parlance, a slick operator, you could have understood his amazing success. But Mike was none of these. Instead he was a simple bum, a chunky little fool and a dimwit.

How such a man came into power and money is a story of America during the wild twenties following World War I. That period chronicled a page in American history when all Americans seemed to have the King Midas touch, and Michael Carrozzo was one who'd learned the touch in a masterly manner. Young Mike landed in New York at the age of 11. He was a dark, brown-eyed tough, fresh from Italy. In that year of 1906 New York was bulging with immigrants and it was natural that Mike's parents should locate in the Italian district.

Mike tried school for a while, but found running around with New York's tough kid-gangs

more to his liking. At the age of 14, he organized a gang of his own and led his mob of cutthroats on a spree of well-planned mayhem in which store windows were smashed and merchandise ruined. Mike followed his destructive blitz with smooth talk that guaranteed the enraged merchants protection. It was the old shakedown and little Mike liked the feel of green folding stuff in his pocket.

Mike was learning a technique—the technique of easy money. But he forgot a little detail. He forgot to pay off his buddies.

For this sin he was taken for a “ride,” beat up to within an inch of his life, and dumped unceremoniously outside of New York’s city limits. His buddies bluntly told him to “get out and stay out of New York.” And to his dying day Mike was never very happy about going to New York.

From this early schooling Mike learned a valuable lesson: He learned he had to pay off and pay off in crisp, cold cash. Mike learned his lesson well because his Chicago pals always spoke of him as a “most generous guy.”

Carrozzo’s rise to fame and fortune has been the envy of all aspiring crooks and gangsters throughout the country. He has virtually proved himself to be gangsterdom’s Horatio Alger. Starting as a lowly slugger for Vice Monger “Big Jim” Colosemo, who ruled Chicago’s red light district, he worked hard and conscientiously to be promoted to the same job working for the notorious Alphonse (Scarface Al) Capone. But in the end Mike Carrozzo, the pupil, outdid those who taught him the tricks of the trade, for he went from crime to crime and each year stuffed \$250,000 in his pocket without so much as a wrist slap from the law.

THE secret of Mike’s success was his control of unions essential to the welfare of the city. It was his ace card, and he pulled it out of his sleeve every time the minions of the law tried to close his handbooks or wreck his gambling joints. In effect, he simply said to the city fathers, “You wreck my joints and I call a strike of my garbage handlers’ union!” And the timid city fathers almost always backed down.

Carrozzo’s power over 15,000 Chicagoans, who belonged to 25 different unions including those of street sweepers and hod carriers, was absolute. He ruled with an iron hand, using his men as pawns in a game of chess that netted him money and power. Anyone who worked on a Chicago street—garbage collectors, street cleaners, sewer cleaners, water pipe workers—all worked or remained idle according to Carrozzo’s whims. He determined who would work on paving jobs and the sort of work that would be done by each man.

In the winter of 1933, Carrozzo blocked the removal of snow from Chicago’s streets until 600 of his men were paid \$5.50 a day for the job. The city wanted to use relief workers, who were ready for the job. But at Carrozzo’s word the

reliefers remained idle.

A short time later Carrozzo closed the city dumps because relief workers were used at them. His foes charged that he feared the loss of union dues. The relief workers were dropped from the city pay roll and replaced by Carrozzo workers who contributed so well to Mike’s welfare.

However, to fully understand the strategy behind “Dago” Mike’s strikes, you must understand the workings of his union and some of his financial interests. Carrozzo collected some \$250,000 a year from laborers who thought themselves lucky if they made \$1,200 a year.

The method was simple. Carrozzo kept the city supplied with his most inefficient workers, many of them carefully trained in the art of trouble making. Naturally, the trouble makers would see to it that the inefficient men would get fired and have to be replaced with other Carrozzo men. Then meant that city workers were constantly being changed, and this meant more cash in Mike Carrozzo’s pocket.

To get into Carrozzo’s union would cost you \$56, a \$50 uniform fee and three months’ dues in advance. If you would complete this payment, you would be a bona fide member, and Carrozzo would be forced to pay a regular fee to the international headquarters. But suppose you did not pay all of your initial fee, then what?

In that case Carrozzo would pay nothing to the international union. Furthermore, if you paid as much as two-thirds of your fee to Carrozzo, and then dropped out of the union, you’d have to start paying all over again when Mike got you another job so that you could start paying him again. And with this setup it didn’t take Chicago aldermen long to discover why so many street workers turned out to be “inefficient.” This demands the changing of men quite often—often enough to keep them from ever becoming full fledged union members—and often enough to keep them paying their initiation fee over and over again. And where did the money go? What’s your guess?

But if you are by any chance thinking that Mike made most of his money from unions, you are sadly mistaken. Nor did he make his dough from handbooks or joints alone. He had a much better method—a method that was safe and sure. He sold the city the very materials they needed to keep the members of his unions busy. He sold the city the asphalt that his own union men pounded and rolled into miles of city streets. It was simple as pie; if the city didn’t like his bids, he’d call his workers out on strike. He once boasted, “Either the city buys from me, or there ain’t gonna be no streets!”

AS A RESULT Chicago street workers were called out on many “mysterious” strikes, half the time the workers themselves didn’t know why they were striking. However, it was always strangely coincidental that these strikes were called when one of Carrozzo’s asphalt companies failed

to come through on a city bid. Graft and pollution in the City of Chicago hit a new high of some kind when you find out that the city paid just exactly twice as much for Carrozos' asphalt as the ordinary product. But the pay-off is that Carrozzo's firm had put in the lowest bid!

Such a break isn't a coincidence. Nor is it coincidence that Carrozzo's "secretaries," many of whom signed their name with an "X," got a one per cent cut on any contract on which they had used their "persuasive" powers. These delightful little boys, who carried guns instead of pencils, would get the recalcitrant contractor locked in a hotel room and give him a little sales talk, getting him to keep his bid nice and high—high enough, at least, so that Mike's outfit could get the contract thumbs down.

To this day no one seems to know whether the movie gangster came first or whether it was Carrozzo. If you would see Carrozzo and talk to him, you would think you were talking to Edward G. Robinson; but then Carrozzo started playing gangster roles long before Edward G. ever thought of becoming a screen rat. And beady-eyed Mike even went further; he started directing gangster scenes long before Hollywood directors got wise and stole his stuff.

Whenever it looked like a few contractors weren't going to play ball, Mike would call his boys together and, pacing the room, furiously smoking a stogy the size of a baseball bat, he would say out of the corner of his mouth, "Listen, you mugs, we got work to do, yah see!" He'd pause significantly. "I want you guys to give these bums the works, see! I don't want nobody to get hurt, but be tough—plenty tough. Now, let's see the rehearsal . . ."

In a hotel room the next day sat three men, one of them fat, bald, obviously nervous, frequently mopping his perspiring brow and tugging with a collar that suddenly feels too tight. The fat and bald man is a contractor and he is facing two men—two suddenly sinister men. One calmly smokes a cigarette and, as he talks, he examines it critically. The other man leans significantly against the door and keeps polishing his fingernails against his sleeve and brushing imaginary specks off his lapel—just like in the movies.

Nine chances out of ten the contractor would value his health enough to be pretty agreeable, but if the contractor was just a wee bit stubborn, the boys would go into their second act. One of the boys would grab the contractor by the collar and vigorously shake him while the other would calmly take out his gun, pretending to examine it to see if it was in good working order. Then, if all of these sales presentations failed to get results, in a few days the contractor would see Carrozzo's men go into action. His construction gangs suddenly had a lot of accidents; truck drivers got strangely careless, ran into cement mixers, smashing them. He lost thousands of dollars and realized he couldn't fight a hoodlum like Carrozzo and win.

Carrozzo was a man who loved to do things grand-eloquently. He rose from the poor and it is probable that at least some of his 1,200 countrymen who voted him into power felt that they had been sorely gypped. As these men swept and paved city streets during cold winter months they read of their boss strutting on Florida beaches. He was frequently seen walking nattily attired in white flannels, white shoes, a dark blue coat, and bright tie—always a part of his costume—and a straw hat tilted rakishly forward.

He walked proudly because he knew that he was a select member of that inner circle whose income was under the scrutiny of federal agents. To Mike this was a distinct honor. "I'm a smart guy. Some government fellas wants to know how I got so much dough. My lawyer, he'll tell 'em Mike's honest," he said. However, he didn't give his union members a great deal of confidence when, a few days later, he chartered a plane all to himself and rode home on what amounted to a \$1,900 ticket.

Mike was never one to hoard his dough. One night he gave a red-hot horse tip to a group of chorus girls and then proceeded to give the girls the money for their bets. He urged them to bet on his horse, Bayou Cook, the next day; and told them to bet on it only to place—that is to finish first or second in the race. It ran second, paying \$12 for each \$2 bet on it to place. One girl collected \$500!

Mike smoked cigars all of ten inches long that cost him 32 cents apiece. They were La Corona Coronas and Mike bought them in boxes of 100—price, \$32. His usual tip for manicure girls was \$5, and he liked to bandy about \$1,000 bills with the carefree attitude of a man playing with stage money. When he decided to become a gentleman farmer and buy a farm, he dropped in at the home of a farmer who was offering for \$170,000 a 320-acre tract that had three residences on it and a number of barns. The farmer and Mike haggled back and forth for hours as Mike paced the floor puffing viciously at his long stogy, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets.

AT LAST he grew impatient, whirled swiftly, reached into his coat pocket and whipped out an elegant tan leather wallet. Nonchalantly he walked over to a nearby table, paused dramatically for an instant, then flipped open his wallet and started counting money as he deftly laid it on the table. "You want \$170,000, my fran. Here are 145 \$1,000 bills. Is it a deal?" It was.

Mike's supercharged wallet was the consternation of more than one judge who tried to hold him at least in temporary custody. The usual procedure was for the judge to pronounce the bail and for Mike to step forward and nonchalantly flip the money under the judge's nose. He once counted out \$5,000 in \$1,000 bills, saying, "Here's your dough, judge."

Whenever Mike went to American Federation

of Labor conventions, he'd swagger into the swankiest hotel in town and demand an entire floor. Then he'd stock the rooms with the best of liquors, foods, girls and hold open house to all labor delegates.

It was a bleak wintry evening in 1920 when a large, heavy-set man guided his car to the curb in front of his \$50,000 residence. He started to reach for the emergency brake when he was suddenly conscious of a large curtained automobile on his left. Swiftly a feeling of foreboding passed over him. Curtained autos aren't unusual to ordinary persons, but to gangsters they usually mean only one thing . . . He, Maurice "Mossy" Enright, was a big-league labor boss, bossing men like Timothy (Big Tim) Murphy and Mike Carrozzo—always a dangerous thing to do.

Mossy Enright reached for his gun, his hand closed on the butt as he saw a shotgun barrel protrude from the curtains. He caught a glimpse of a man's face. He tried to get his gun out. There was a flash, another flash and something burned a path through his chest. Quickly, automatically he stumbled out of the car. He saw his wife running. She had him in her arms. He looked up at her and tried to talk. He must hurry, her face was fading. Then he gasped, "Wifey . . . Oh, Wifey!" and died.

A few hours later Mike Carrozzo and Big Tim Murphy were in jail—charged with the murder of Mossy Enright. Mike was being questioned as he paced the floor, smoking one of his big cigars. When asked if he killed Mossy Enright, he nervously replied, "What for would I kill Mossy. Every time I see him he say, 'Hello, Mike, how are you? Goodbye,' and gave me a cigar. He was my fran."

Besides Mike was ethical. He wouldn't murder for money, but only if somebody was "monkeying" with him. Said he, flipping his fingers from the armpits of his vest, "Sure, anybody monkeying with me, maybe. But I wouldn't murder for money."

And then he added naively, "I would never sell myself for money."

"This murder," he continued, almost professionally, "looks to me like some union trouble. Some Irishman done it, likely but no dago. But it's funny I'm arrested just because I'm partners with Murphy and a sawed-off shotgun was used. That's the limit."

Later Carrozzo was released from jail because the state lacked sufficient evidence to prosecute. It seems that two key witnesses mysteriously disappeared before the trial. Still many believe that Mike committed the murder and they point out that a woman phoned the police shortly after the murder and claimed Carrozzo was the man. She had seen the killing and identified Mike from a newspaper photo. However, the woman never revealed her identity and Carrozzo's lawyer claimed it a frame-up.

The night Mike and Big Tim were released from jail they threw a big party and pronounced them-

selves bosom buddies. But within the year Mike and Big Tim Murphy had quarreled and Carrozzo took over complete control of the street sweepers. From that time on Mike got to be known as a Big Operator. And Big Tim? Oh, yes, a few years later he was found full of slugs on his front lawn, a very, very dead guy.

As a big operator, Mike had some difficulty keeping his union elections democratic. Every time an election would come around there would be some difficulty to find anyone who would run against Mike. There'd be an election and the members would remember that some one ran against Mike, but Mike would always win by a unanimous choice.

It's only natural that Mike had many enemies—that is why Mike carried a gun; was frequently hauled into court, and charged with carrying concealed weapon. Once he won a discharge by proving he was a state highway policeman. When this was officially denied at the state capital, Mike turned up with a game warden's commission—you just couldn't stop the guy.

Another time he convinced the municipal court that he was a deputy game warden employed by the state and was on his way to inspect some fish when arrested and searched. "We can't have unsanitary fishes in this here city," he told the judge.

WHEN Mike saw that he was at last a big time guy, he decided that he liked this country pretty well and took steps to become an American citizen. He'd come to this country from Italy in 1906, at the age of 11, and applied for his citizenship papers on Nov. 17, 1926—a mere twenty years later. His application gave his address as the swanky Drake Hotel, where the police later found a sawed-off shotgun in his room. This embarrassed Mike a little, so he temporarily withdrew his application. He filed another in 1928, and again the request was withdrawn.

Mike knew that his reputation was pretty bad and he decided to lay low for awhile and get some culture. He also knew that in a few years people would forget—forget things like the time he was arrested for a train robbery in 1921, in which \$320,000 was stolen from the Dearborn Street Station. At the time the postmaster respected Carrozzo and his gang so much that he asked for the use of a full battalion of troops under the command of a major to safeguard the mails.

"I think it will take four full companies of 250 men each to guard the Chicago mails as they should be guarded," said the postmaster. Meanwhile, from his cell, Carrozzo was saying, "You cops is always picking on me. Why don'tcha catch a guy what's dishonest?" And sure enough, Mike was turned loose when others confessed to the robberies.

Mike began to feel the blue blood in his veins running a little thin. Culture was what he needed. In 1937—after 31 years of residence in the United States—his papers were accepted and he became an American citizen. However, a few years later

government officials began to feel that he was a somewhat undesirable character and sought a way to cancel his citizenship and deport him. Had he lived long enough, he might have paid Mussolini a rather permanent visit.

Mike's rise from a slugger to a self-proclaimed "big shot" failed to give him a niche in the society world; and he was irritated by the fact that his neighbors regarded him as a Capone gangster and shunned him. His answer was a culture campaign that got him his American citizenship, a new wife, and a couple of farms, and some horses. At the start of his "reform movement" he said, "I'll show them lousy blue bloods a thing or two!"

Mike started reforming with a marital housecleaning. He got rid of his old wife and got a new one—one who had "class." Mike had been married twice before and all had not gone so well. Of course, it was not Mike's fault that both of his wives had to show up at court when he was being held for the murder of Mossy Enright. Mike had introduced two Mrs. Carrozzos; one, a Mrs. Mary Carrozzo, and the other, a Mrs. Helen Carrozzo. Mike introduced Mrs. Helen Carrozzo as his wife. The two women met for the first time in court and the judge asked Mrs. Mary Carrozzo if she had met Mike's wife, Helen.

"Wife!" exclaimed Mrs. Mary Carrozzo. "I am his wife!"

"It's a lie!" declared Mrs. Helen Carrozzo evenly. "We were married at Crown Point, Indiana, eight months ago."

"And I was married to him," snapped Mrs. Mary Carrozzo, "in the County building eight years ago!"

Carrozzo settled the argument by defying either of them to produce a marriage certificate, but he admitted having consorted with both. Later he said to reporters, "Put it in the paper I love Helen; my first wife is bugs!" Apparently, then, Mike did need a marital housecleaning.

At any rate, in 1927 Mike took his third wife. She is the former Juliana Tucker of Keokuk, Iowa; and she gave him a boost up the social ladder that didn't last very long. In 1934 Mike started on a home-buying spree by buying a \$75,000 home in Long Beach, Indiana, on Lake Michigan. He surrounded his new home with a sturdy fence, and moved in with his wife and two children. There is a private beach and, one recent Christmas, two brilliantly lighted trees twinkled on the lawn.

Mike felt like a king, and said so to one of his friends. The friend jokingly asked him where his escutcheon was. "I'll have one of them things made first thing tomorrow," was his sincere reply. Two weeks later workmen hung the Carrozzo coat of arms on the front gate of his estate. This racketeer's name-plate consists of a huge shield with the words "villa C" in cream on a red background. In the upper left hand corner is a smaller shield with two lions, rampant and snarling, and two bundles of twigs through which protrudes the head of an ax, like on the dime you

carry in your pocket. Perhaps Mike intended his escutcheon to represent the old Roman fasces, the badge of magisterial authority, and to serve as a reminder that Carrozzo, too, comes from the land of Caesars, which, like Carrozzo, didn't do so well in the long run.

BUT the blue bloods turned their noses even higher on the street sweepers' chieftain. They were determined that escutcheons and private beaches would not mean a ticket into their inner circles—especially a ticket held by a man who made part of his money by charging relief workers a dollar a month for the privilege of working on Chicago's streets.

Mike began to wonder if he hadn't strayed just a little too far outside his bailiwick. Money, to Mike, was something that he used to protect what he had. His bodyguards cost him \$20,000 a month and most of his expenses were in the form of bribes or bail bonds. He had to admit to himself that it was fun to live well—that is if you could associate with others who lived well. Mike couldn't, and he often felt sorry for himself.

"I was a much happier guy when I had no money," he told one of his street workers one day. "Remember those days on Twenty-second Street? I had maybe \$10 in my pocket and got along as best I could. I was like you are today. What good is money?"

The street worker looked at Mike's \$100 suit and his bright \$5 tie and sighed, "I haven't even a ten. . . ." Mike smiled, patted him on the back, handed him a \$20 bill and walked away.

However, Mike's longing for the good old days remained in the dream stage, because his wife, Julie, still had society page aspirations. Mike must become a gentleman farmer, ride in horse shows and judge cattle. And all of that led to an 805-acre estate near Hobart, Indiana.

To this small town of 5,787 persons came strange doings one May day in 1938. Rumors spread like water gushing from a broken dam, and soon residents were cautiously eyeing every stranger from behind drawn curtains and tightly locked doors.

Mike Carrozzo, the terrible labor racketeer and one-time Al Capone gunman, was coming to town! He was buying property with \$1,000 bills and the town gossips had it that he was building a haven for Scarface Al, who was about to be released from Alcatraz.

Mike spent almost \$400,000 on land and buildings, and if the completed farm didn't make Mike a gentleman farmer, it did make him the owner of the largest barn in the central west. All the buildings were painted a dazzling white, including the barn. It is 300 feet long, large enough to house a baby blimp, and has three enormous silos. Mike stocked his new farm with hundreds of head of Hereford cattle, prize winning swine and draft horses, and a generous supply of race horses that worked out over his private half-mile race track. He was a proud man—especially so when he made the society columns

of the local Long Beach Billows with:

"Mr. Michael J. Carrozzo's new stable in Lake County took more blue ribbons than any other stable entered in the Lake County fair horse show last week. Superior King, ridden by Douglas Robb, Jr., won the champion pony class, and Prince Charming, ridden by Mrs. Carrozzo, won the three-gaited open class."

When Mike's farm was completed, he dubbed it "Superior Farms" and gazed contentedly on his prize cattle and his rambling home. He felt a new sense of security, because he knew that he was standing inside of what amounted to a fort. Wired for electricity and topped with barbed wire, six-foot cyclone fences enclosed Superior Farm's acres, giving the place a prison-like appearance. A fortified empire had been created in the heart of Lake County—the notorious John Dillinger's favorite stamping ground. Mike had taken extraordinary precautions. No trees remained for one to take cover, there were plenty of "No Trespassing" signs, and the grounds could be flooded with glaring light at the push of a single switch.

As Mike roamed about his estate he could look with confidence at many mugs, the kind of mugs with hard faces, square jaws, and determined shifty eyes—guys sometimes politely called bodyguards. These efficient fellows seemed to infest whatever territory Mike would occupy. They would peep out from behind bushes, doorways, transoms, and were even known to have practiced camouflage in an attempt to make things more "natural."

MIKE'S Hoosier neighbors became curious when they saw his militia, and Mike gave his usual explanation. "Them guys is my secretaries," said he. But the local Hoosiers noted what others before them had noted: Mike's "secretaries" were surprisingly well armed and most of them couldn't speak a word of English. Mike's explanation of this was simple: "Refugees from a terror-stricken Italy—that's what them guys is."

Still the natives steered clear of Mike's Superior Acres, and the chief of the hod carriers again felt the bitter sting of ostracism. "I'm a farmer now," he said to a neighbor. "I got some of the best dairy cows in Indiana. No fooling. Let some lug try to tell me I ain't!" Mike was desperate and Mike was mad. "I spend thousands of bucks, and not even a damn farmer talks to me," he raged privately to his gang.


But Mike didn't do all his raving privately. He let the public in on some of his ravings. The wine of power had gone to his head and he became careless. When he emerged from a conference with the commissioner of public works in which he tried to get a pay boost for his pet street sweepers and failed, he sneered, "What this country needs is a Hitler or Mussolini!"

If the former gangland bodyguard had ever shown signs of slipping, he did so only after he

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made that statement. Papers gave his utterance wide publicity and the public's wrath was aroused. The government took note and started investigating Mike's fabulous income to find that he had evaded his tax in 1937 and 1938. By the middle of April, 1940, things began to look pretty hot for the immigrant racketeer. Weary lines began to appear on his face and his old kidney ailment started bothering him again. He had the skids under him and he was slipping fast.

And on July 27, 1940, he entered the hospital. A few days later an emergency operation was performed and Mike showed signs of recovery; but a relapse followed and he slipped into unconsciousness. Six hours later, at 7:45 o'clock in the morning, Mike Carozzo died. He died quietly. He didn't look up at his wife and smile. He didn't raise himself up on his elbow and hurl nasty epithets at his enemies. For the first time in his whole life he did something without the fanfare of trumpets—he just plain died, an old man at 45.

The next day Mike made his last attempt at the social graces that eluded him in life. Mike himself would have said that his body was "laid out ritzy." He wore a spotless white gabardine suit, double-breasted and adorned with pearl but-

tons; white silk shirt with black tie; white socks, also silk; and white sport shoes, with brown tips. And in the hand that once had fired a gun was a string of rosary beads.

But even after death Mike's attempt to gain social recognition was frustrated. The church not only refused to allow any of their clergy to conduct services over his body, but also rejected even the thought of burying him in consecrated ground. However, gangsters must have funerals, and they must be big, glorious funerals; so Mike's henchmen hired a fake priest and decided to put on a show of their own.

Thousands of street sweepers, hod carriers, sewer cleaners, asphalt workers, and concrete laborers came to pay "tribute" to their leader. With them they brought floral offerings that filled what space was left in the funeral parlor after some 200 "privileged" mourners were seated, and overflowed onto the sidewalk and into the rear garage.

After the services, Mike's body, encased in a solid copper \$10,000 casket, lined with white satin, was driven away to the cemetery, followed by 11 carloads of flowers and several hundred "mourners" in a long auto cortege—truly an incongruous conclusion to the life of a man who took so much from America and gave so little.

A SUCKER IS BORN

(Continued from page 93)

soldiers, sailors and marines in town for a spree were being rolled of their cash by he-devils and she-devils who dropped goof-balls (knockout drops in polite society) into their victims' drinks. The female observer wrote rather hysterically and one was left with the impression that she had just got her first sniff at "the underworld." You don't need a goof-ball to roll a drunk.

But even if this Boston observer did get her information from the day nurseries, there is plenty of evidence that soldiers, sailors and marines are still being "rolled" by a gag that is as old as the United States Army. They are being married by happy-go-lucky little ladies who are already collecting government allotments from half a dozen others. And any bright girl knows that you don't need a goof-ball to get away with that.

All you need is a sucker and a justice of the peace.

EVERYBODY is familiar with the soft-eyed, be-spangled Gypsy lady who offers to "double your money" if you'll just wrap four bits in a handkerchief and let her touch the handkerchief. She does it a couple of times to prove her power over petty pelf. That's fun! But who is going to fall for a suggestion from the Gypsy lady that he take a good-sized wad from his bank, bury it in the basement, allow it to ripen for a week, then dig it up—doubled? Yet that works, too. The other day in Butte, Montana, a woman buried \$7,600 in the basement at the behest of a smiling Romany. And a week later dug up a bundle of

old rags.

You wouldn't buy a gold brick these days. No? There is a fellow on the Mexican border who will sell you one. His brick weighs one full pound. You take it to your own assayer. It is genuine. The story, that it is part of the loot from a famous American-owned mine in Mexico, sounds true. The rest of the story, that the thieves have hidden their loot in a cave and daren't move it in any appreciable quantity but must dribble it across the border a brick at a time, sounds ironic. You get a mental picture of a bunch of wild-looking bandits sitting on bars of gold like so many brooding hens. Croesuses on a desert island. Of course you buy the brick. The assayer was an honest man; he said it was genuine, wrote the top price per ounce, and you are getting it at half that figure. Sleight of hand turns you into a sucker, though. The brick you take home is gilded lead.

Older even than the gold brick is that other slick maneuver, the "long change racket." The operator gives a salesgirl a \$20 bill for a small purchase. (He doesn't have to look far for a dumb girl in these days of labor shortage.) He gets his change, holds it in one hand and discovers he had the exact amount for the purchase in another pocket. He apologizes and asks for the twenty back. The girl hands it to him. Then he discovers that he was wrong; he is still short a few cents. He gives the girl one of her own dollars and so harasses and confuses her that when he departs he has the original twenty and most of the change she first gave him. The long changer

has been the most active and persistent cheat in the forty-eight states for half a century and he gets away with it now as readily as ever.

And the store cash clerk who palms quarters and half dollars one after the other during rush hours has been with us as long as careless women have been buying assembly-line groceries. This chap rings up the correct amount, extracts the correct change from the till, then palms a coin while counting the change back to the customer. Eight persons in ten don't count their change. The clerk quickly learns to spot the other two.

But all these old bunco and confidence games are not aimed at small change. No matter how much a man has he is usually willing to grab at "money for nothing." This bit of human nature alone is what makes it unnecessary for swindlers to think up new stunts. And that is why all the patterns in use today for obtaining the confidence of a rich sucker are so worn and wide open that, but for this element of blind greed, they could be seen through by anyone old enough to be out of a baby buggy.

One case, picked almost at random from the Federal Bureau of Identification files, is typical: There is no point in hurting the sucker further by naming him. He is a nice, aging gentleman, an American horticulturalist, retired. He is of Scandinavian birth. While wintering in Miami he made the acquaintance of a friendly chap named Albert Blatt. One day Blatt pointed out an opulent looking individual who was riding behind a liveried chauffeur in a limousine. "There's Charlie Phillips back in town," quoth Blatt. "Luckiest chap I've ever known. Quite a gambler, but he never loses a bet."

Blatt referred frequently to Phillips and the latter's wealth in the next few days. Then one warm afternoon he introduced the Scandinavian gentleman to the fabulous Phillips whom they had met strolling on the beach. All three became cronies, meeting often on the beach and occasionally going to Phillips' rich apartment for a spot of rare old brandy and cigars.

SURELY the nice old Scandinavian horticulturalist could tell that this was a build-up. But no! His need for companionship had been measured by the swindlers. They had pruned his loneliness and budded it with friendship. Confidence had already sprouted.

One day when he and Blatt visited Phillips, the latter was busy making bets on the horse races. Phillips sent his chauffeur out with \$25,000 to place a bet. The goggle-eyed Scandinavian gentleman tried not to look too much interested. The chauffeur came back with a bundle of money supposedly containing \$100,000.

"Place it all on Lucky-Chance 'to win'," said Phillips, waving the chauffeur away. Then he seemed to forget the matter and turned all his attention to his guests.

In due time the chauffeur returned and announced that the \$100,000 had won \$300,000.

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Phillips and Blatt took the news without a quiver, but the Scandinavian gentleman almost blew a gasket.

There was a spot of trouble, the chauffeur reported. The three hundred thousand was being held at the betting exchange because Mr. Phillips' bond there had not been signed by the betting exchange proprietor's partner who was out of town. Only small bets could be accepted from Mr. Phillips until this detail was straightened up.

Mr. Phillips brushed this aside. When the partner came back, the bond would be properly signed and the winnings transferred to Mr. Phillips bank. It was nothing to bother about. He was through betting for the time being anyhow.

And here the gentleman of Scandinavian extraction piped up. "How," he asked breathlessly, "could he make bets at this betting exchange? Would Mr. Phillips guide him?"

Mr. Phillips was quite willing. There was the little matter of the bond at the betting exchange . . . it would be best to arrange that properly. "I'll tell you what I'll do," said Phillips. "I'll bond you up to thirty thousand in cash."

Blatt also agreed to post a bond of thirty thousand at the betting exchange in the name of his old friend, the Scandinavian gentleman.

"And with a sixty thousand bond you can use an equal sum of your money to bet with," explained Phillips. "Of course the races are all fixed. I'll arrange your bets."

Confidence burst into full bloom. The Scandinavian gentleman obtained \$6,500 from his bank for running expenses. He also took from a safety deposit box his Swedish banking records showing an account in Stockholm which exceeded \$70,000.

But Mr. Phillips declined to accept the records. "Go to Sweden and get your money," he said. "The betting exchange will still be here when you get back. I'll still be here. There's no hurry."

And the sucker actually went to Sweden. The year was 1937. Messrs. Phillips and Blatt were in Miami when he got back. So was the betting exchange and so were the horses.

Blatt did the betting in the absence of the chauffeur. And, of course, the Scandinavian gentleman lost the works. Then Phillips and Blatt did quite the usual thing for confidence men. They gave the old gentleman \$500 and told him to go to Paris and they would meet him there in time for important horse races at which he could not lose. Naturally they wanted him as far away from the American police as they could get him.

And the old gentleman went to Paris. Even when he returned to America after failing to find his friends in France, the sucker still had absolute confidence in the men who had bilked him. But the FBI had been working on Phillips and Blatt and had run into that international exchange of heavy money. They visited the Scandinavian gentleman at his home in Massachusetts. Even then, the records show, they had difficulty convincing him that he had been in the hands of confidence game swindlers.

PHILLIPS and **Blatt**, both of whom had police records a foot long, went to jail on several counts each. Not until he saw them sentenced was their victim willing to admit that they were crooks.

It is this absolute confidence that suckers retain for the men who bilk them that constantly puzzles the police. Some times confidence is gained by allowing the victim to find a purse containing considerable money, important papers and the calling cards of an individual "highly important in the stock exchange." There is always a confederate along to recognize the name in the purse and explain the owner's importance. The pattern then follows that of Phillips and Blatt, substituting a fictitious stock exchange pit with tickers and customers' men for the horse race betting exchange.

Confidence men have found that the best place to plant a pocketbook is in a post office. With the feeling that Uncle Sam is breathing on the back of his neck, a man will become very honest and return a pocketbook found in a Federal building even with no one to guide him. The first "confidence" is then established when the owner of the pocketbook offers to reward the finder with a tip on the races or the market. All of which is formula. It is in use today as it was yesterday and fifty years ago.

The variation of these confidence games is the "inside information" stunt which has been worked to the limit. However, it still goes on with dreary regularity. Confidence is secured, the sucker is told that his new friends have a "wire tap" into the offices of a successful broker or that of the crooked owner of race horses. Usually he is only too willing to let the swindlers invest his money on the strength of this "inside dope." Why any fish would rise to a fly like that is a question the police are always asking themselves. Barnum, of course, had the answer.

THERE is one swindle, however, that differs from all the others in its sheer callousness. It was worked in California just before gasoline rationing came in and, fortunately, the three swindlers went to jail.

It will be worked again as soon as the crooks can travel far and wide without ration tickets, for there are at least two gangs in the country still at large.

This is the way it goes: A "finder" for the swindlers goes out into the rural districts and locates a man or woman who is blind or nearly so. The sucker selected must, of course, own the farm or be in a position otherwise to raise quick money.

One day an impressive looking car stops near the farmhouse. A uniformed chauffeur trudges from the road up to the back door and asks to use the telephone to call a mechanic from the town. The motor has gone wrong or a tire is flat. The chauffeur gets into the house and is soon in conversation with the person whose eyesight is failing. There is quite a delay before the mechanic

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can come from town and the chauffeur looks much disturbed.

"May I ask the doctor to come in?" he says. "It's hot out there in the car. He's got a lot of operations to do in the city. Delicate ones, too. Eyes."

Naturally the pathetic sufferer leaps at that. "Is he an eye doctor?"

The chauffeur explains that he is driver for the most eminent eye specialist in the United States. He names him. Suddenly he discovers that his host's eyes are far from normal.

"Look," says the chauffeur. "I'll ask the doctor to come in. Don't let on I told you who he is. Offer him a cool glass of milk and just kind of casually mention your eyes and see what he does."

The pitiable sucker is sold an "eye operation" in his own kitchen. He parts with every dollar he has in the house or can quickly raise at the village bank. He is left with his eyes wadded with bandages, the eyelids having been first nicked with a lance to create impressive pain.

No, that isn't new either. But it is probably the cruelest of them all.—*Sam Gross.*

FIRST ELECTROCUTION

IN 1887, New York State wanted to abolish hanging, so a committee was appointed consisting of the members of the New York City Medico-Legal Society to determine how electricity could be utilized to inflict the death penalty. Some suggested an electric table to which a condemned man would be strapped, death to come by current passing through the head and leg electrodes. But the majority supported the idea of an electric chair to function on the same principle, and the legislature took their advice.

So electrocution took the place of hanging in 1889 and electric chairs were installed in all the state prisons. The first execution by this presumably more humane method was held at Auburn Prison in 1890. There, William Kemmler not only atoned for his crime but became a human guinea pig to test the efficiency of the new process.

This experiment almost brought about the end of the use of the electric chair, because Kemmler died in horrible agony. The executioner knew so little about his job that he forgot to put wet sponges beneath the electrodes, and as the current swept through the body of the condemned man, the sickening odor of smoldering flesh filled the execution chamber, nauseating the officials and witnesses. The grisly business went on for twenty minutes before the man died. His body was charred black. He was literally "burned."

After the publicity given Kemmler's ordeal, many clamored for the reinstatement of hanging, but public opinion wasn't organized enough to force the repeal of the new method. The opposition died down and this type of execution became permanent.—*C. Logan.*

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