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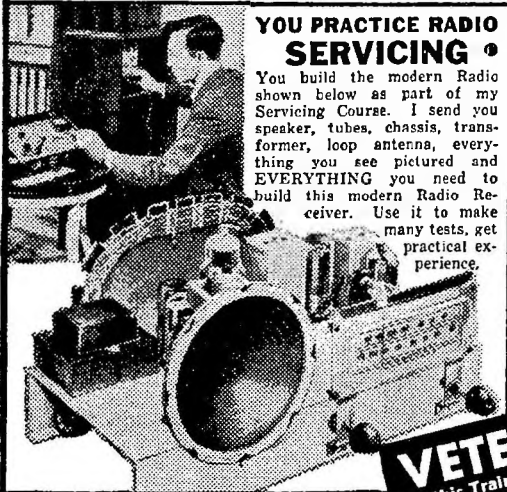
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How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

# Official BUSINESS



**A**S YOU'LL soon find out—if you haven't already—this is indeed an extra-special issue. In addition to our usual featured novelet, which in this case is an absorbing study of a man who apparently has just married a girl guilty of the mercy-slaying of her father, we're bringing you a 25,000 word preview of **MOST MEN DON'T KILL**, by David Alexander.

The full-length, regular edition of **MOST MEN DON'T KILL** will be published by Random House *after* its appearance on these pages and will sell for \$2.50!

We're indeed happy to score this scoop of bringing this unusual and slightly mad mystery to you in advance of regular publication. It's a book which seems headed for the bestseller lists.

And speaking of books, our congratulations to Stewart Sterling whose new novel **NIGHTMARE AT NOON** has just made its appearance. An orchid, too, to Dutton, publisher of this exciting mystery. As you'll see, Sterling has been busy at his typewriter for us also. Take a look at **BLUES IN THE NIGHT** in this issue. . . .

## Strange Guys And Dolls

Theatre people, be they in Hollywood or on Broadway, have more than their share of queer ways, and the messes they get into are a continuous source of redhot copy in the daily papers. People being pretty much the same the world round, it isn't surprising that the French theatre, too, crops up with some lulus in the way of characters.

Take the famed vaudeville performer Pierre Lutece of not so many years ago. Lutece had one of these encyclopediac minds. He knew something about everything. His act consisted of answering all manner of odd questions fired at him by his audience:

"How many rivets in the Eiffel Tower?" "Is there really such a thing as an aphrodisiac?" "Who was the ruler of Rome in 411 A.D.?" "In what way is beer different from ale?"

Mr. Lutece's brain appeared to be so phenomenal that a scientific organization offered him a very nice sum of money for the privilege of studying it after his death. Lutece agreed. When he died in 1935 and the directors of the outfit came to collect the brain they found they had company.

Representatives from fifty-two other groups were present on the same errand.

Lutece had sold the research rights to his brain after death to fifty-three different organizations for a total take of better than \$50,000.00!

So where theatre folk are concerned, you can be pretty sure that just as much is going on behind the scenes as in front of them.

## The Inside Story

What happens when a sex plus-plus-plus Hollywood actress breaks her film contract and goes to London to star in a play? The answer is murder plus-plus-plus, with the extra plus's indicating all the juicy behind-the-scenes details that are revealed as the story unfolds.

We're talking about **THE WHITE PRIORY MURDERS**, by Carter Dickson, featured book-length novel in our next issue, which takes up the intriguing story of this Hollywood glamor-puss, Marcia Tait, and the sweet messes she gets herself involved in.

**THE WHITE PRIORY MURDERS**, by Carter Dickson, heads the long list of outstanding crime-fare in our next issue! Look forward to it!

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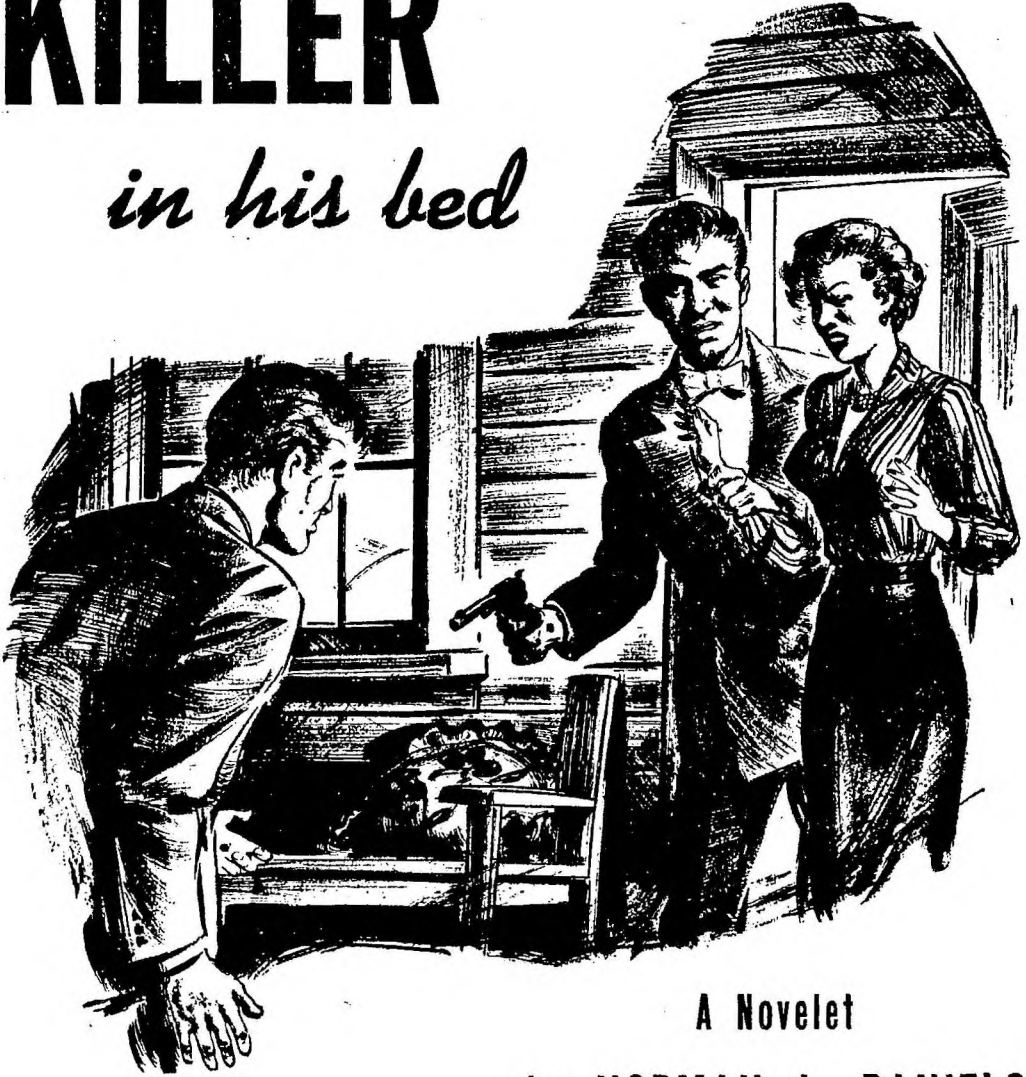
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# KILLER

*in his bed*



A Novelet

by **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

*When Jeff King learned the girl sharing his honeymoon had a reputation as a murderess, he took along a loaded gun. . . .*

CHAPTER I

STRANGE WELCOME

**I**T WAS odd, but Jeff King had never associated the fact that the name of the girl he was going to marry was the same as the town which she came from. But when he stepped off the train in the town of Wel-

den, the first thing he saw was the public library, a neat, ivy covered building bearing the name of THE THADDEUS WELDEN FOUNDATION.

Just about everything else in town bore

Any girl who had inherited a town like this would have to clothe herself with a certain aloofness. Not that she'd ever shown any of it to him.

He gravely saluted the bronze statue,



that same name. The Welden Metal Works sprawled over several acres of railroad siding. The largest bank had the inscription of the Welden Foundation on its window. There were big department stores with the name and even a pleasant public park with a bronze statue dominating it. Jeff King stood at the foot of that statue and looked up at the man who would have been his father-in-law if he had lived.

Jeff knew Grace Welden had money. It didn't make any difference because he wasn't exactly from Skid Row himself, but he realized now that she had never talked about this. About the fact that she owned practically everything in this good sized town.

Perhaps, he pondered, she wanted to surprise him. That must have been it because there was no deceit in Grace. She was a tall, willowy, brunette with passionate blue eyes. There was a certain reserve about her which had fooled him at first, but he believed now that it was merely a form of self protection.

picked up his suitcase and hiked to the modern hotel opposite the park. A desk clerk looked up as he entered and seemed eager to serve him. That was when Jeff King received the first inkling of what he was going to face.

The clerk said, "I can give you 508, sir. It's a two room suite in a quiet part of the house. How long will you be with us?"

"Just overnight," Jeff grinned. "I'm being married tomorrow."

He wrote his name on the registration card and the clerk glanced at it. Then he studied Jeff with a little more interest and

quite a bit of hostility. He frowned. "I made a mistake," he said. "That room was reserved. The only one I have left is 409. It'll have to do—if you're going to stay here."

The bellhop took the key from the clerk and they whispered for a second. The bellhop then led the way to the elevator



There were three men grouped around Jeff—one of them had a gun—another held a knife—and the third lovingly caressed a blackjack!

"Okay," Jeff shrugged. "So long as it has a shower and a bed. I don't care about anything else."

and brusquely elbowed Jeff aside to get into the car first. He walked ahead of him down the long corridor, unlocked 409. He dropped the suitcase in the middle of the floor, threw the key on the bed and walked out. Jeff stared at him, wondering what kind of a place this was.

He showered and dressed, then sat in an uncomfortable chair near a narrow window looking out into an airshaft. He didn't mind. Nothing could have made him sore tonight. He was half tempted to phone Grace, but she had given him explicit orders that he wasn't to contact her until she walked down the church aisle. Jeff didn't know why, but he gave in to the strange request, figuring that the combination of women and weddings were a trifle nuts anyway.

But he couldn't just sit there until the next day. After all, this might be his town from now on. Where he'd spend the rest of his life. It was wise to study it a bit more, see some of its people, know a few things about streets and stores.

Going down in the elevator he asked the operator if the hotel was busy.

"Busy?" the operator grunted. "Not this season of the year, sir. Half the rooms are empty."

The desk clerk became very occupied when Jeff walked through the lobby, wondering why he had been given that hole-in-the-wall room when he could have had almost any room or suite in the place. There was something wrong. He could almost feel it.

He strolled the streets for better than an hour and gradually his suspicions of the town disappeared. He found he liked the clean place. The cops were neat and polite. The streets were well kept up and tidy. One section was devoted to small cottages, every one with a spacious yard and possessing individuality—quite unlike projects which seemed to have every unit cut from the same pattern.

Then Jeff saw an imposing church and crossed the street toward it. His guess had been right. This was the church in which he would be married the following day. On impulse he walked up to the door. Lights shone through the stained glass windows. He pushed open the big bronze doors, stepped inside and gave a soft whistle.

Nobody was in the church, but it was banked with flowers. Thousands of them. Grace's friends were going to initiate her into marriage with the pomp and circumstance worthy of a queen.

Feeling a bit as if he had peeked into

something he wasn't supposed to see for some hours yet, Jeff slipped out of the church and resumed his walk to the center of town.

A glance at his watch gave him a surprise. It was much later than he believed. After midnight already. He began whistling as he increased his stride.

It was along one of the few sections where there seemed to be too many taverns that the three men blocked his way. Jeff slowed up, moved to the edge of the sidewalk and tried to get past the trio. One of them grabbed the lapel of his coat.

"Gimme a match," he ordered brusquely.

Jeff shook himself free of the man. He started to reach for his pocket and then hesitated.

"I'm damned if I will," he grunted. "If you want something from me, you can ask for it politely. And keep your hands off me."

The man gave a curt laugh. "Listen to him," he scoffed. "You know, I bet this punk thinks we're scared of him."

"Try me," Jeff said in a soft voice, "and see."

"Bust him one," another of the trio suggested amiably. "Let's see if he can take it."

The burly man made a wide swing. A clumsy windup preceded it and the laziest man on earth could have ducked the blow without too much waste of energy. Jeff merely leaned back a trifle and the fist lumbered past him. Then he crouched slightly and before the burly man could get his balance again, he drove a right deep into the pit of the man's stomach.

It brought forth a whoosh of surprise and pain. The man doubled up, groaning. His two pals started moving in.

Jeff knew he was no match for the three of them under present conditions. He looked around, saw an alley and figured that would be a good place to stand then, off. He had to get his back against something solid so that they all had to face him, had to come in toward him, not make a flank or rear attack which he couldn't fight off.

**H**E JABBED an elbow against the side of the one closest to him, shoved the man aside and spinted for the alley. He went down it fast with all three in pursuit. There

wasn't much light, but he saw that the alley ended in a blank, solid wall which was exactly to his liking.

He heard them yelling at him for being a coward and Jeff's temper started rising. This wasn't a very good reception to walk into, but he wasn't backing out. Maybe he'd wind up in the police station before morning, but he wasn't in a mood to stand there and let three men beat him up.

He reached the blank wall, whirled and put his back against it. The trio mistook that gesture. They thought he was merely at bay with nowhere to go, and only one of them came in to finish him off. The same man who had taken that wild swing.

He was more careful this time, jabbing with his left and socking his right for a quick one to Jeff's face. He started it all right, but the punch never landed because Jeff's fist crashed against the burly man's nose first. He flattened that nose, made it spurt crimson and followed it up with two sharp jabs above the man's heart. The attacker gave a bleat of pain and veered off.

The other two started wading in. Jeff studied the situation. The man he'd already socked was out of it for at least a minute or two. Jeff suddenly launched an attack of his own. He did it so fast that he caught the pair off balance. He rocked one of them with an uppercut that knocked him off his feet. Then he sailed into the third man.

Jeff was handing it out very neatly, chopping the man down, bloodying his face and giving him bruises that would make him groan when he got out of bed the next morning. Given half a chance he could have beaten all three of them. They were brawny, but they knew nothing about the art of fighting—and Jeff knew plenty.

He was measuring the third man for a haymaker and thoroughly enjoying himself when he felt the gun jabbed against his ribs. The burly man had recovered his wits and moved in from the side. He held a large and dangerous looking gun in his fat fist.

Jeff moved carefully back until he was against the wall once more. To charge those three now would have been foolish. While he couldn't see any of them well enough to make an identification, he knew they were

sore, frustrated and as dangerous as the gun.

The burly man said, "Pal, you lift your hands just once, and I'll plant a couple of slugs right smack in your guts. Okay—take him!"

The other two moved in warily and then, as one man, they started smashing him with their fists. In two minutes they had him on his knees. All the while that gun was pointed at him and he knew he'd be killed if he resisted. His only chance was to get the man with the gun—and if he did, Jeff vowed, he'd make them wish they'd never met him.

He let himself sag limply, as if he were almost done. The burly man with the gun called out a sharp command and the other two moved back. The gunman came closer. He was laughing, but there wasn't a semblance of mirth in the croaking noises he made.

JEFF was tense, ready to dive for the gun at the first opportunity. The burly man stopped about three feet away and then Jeff saw that his two companions had also drawn guns. He groaned, because he was finished now and he knew it. Maybe they'd even kill him.

The burly man said, "You're handy with your fists, wise guy, but it won't get you any place. Listen to this—you get on the two o'clock milk train. We'll be there to see that you do. And if it happens you don't, we'll pay you a little visit at your hotel and make you wish you'd never been born."

Suddenly Jeff knew this wasn't just a chance meeting with a trio of drunks on the prowl for trouble. This was a deliberate attempt to scare him into going away. Guns or no guns, he decided to do what damage he could. He tensed to make a lunge. That was when the burly man suddenly took two steps forward, brought up his foot and kicked Jeff under the jaw.

When he woke up, he was still in the alley, staring at the starlit sky and wondering how much of him was intact. He got to his feet, reeled dizzily out to the street and remembered where the police station was located.

This was something for them to handle.

## CHAPTER II

## THE GROOM WORE BANDAGES



THE DESK sergeant regarded him with professional interest. "What kind of a truck was it?" he asked.

Jeff had to grin, although his whole face ached when he did. "There were three men, all of them carrying guns," he explained. "For some reason I don't know, they were laying for me. I handed out a few licks myself until they pulled guns."

"Didn't they rifle your pockets?" the desk sergeant asked.

"They didn't take a thing, even though I was knocked out. But just before kicking me to sleep, one of them told me if I didn't get out of town on the two A.M. train, they'd repeat their treatment."

The desk sergeant began making notes. "Okay, mister," he said. "If they made a threat like that, there has to be a reason back of it. You're a stranger in town. At least I'm pretty sure you are."

"That's what makes this so puzzling," Jeff said. "How do they know who I am? Unless it was a case of mistaken identity. But wait—they knew I was staying in a hotel."

"Just who are you and what are you doing in town?" the sergeant asked.

"My name is Jeff King. I'm marrying Grace Welden tomorrow," Jeff explained.

The sergeant put down his pen. "Look, Mr. King, did anybody else see those guys and their guns?"

"No—there were no witnesses."

The sergeant picked up the card he'd been writing the report on and tore it into four pieces. "We can't act unless we have proof. If you want to push this any further, go see the Prosecuting Attorney in the morning. That's all."

Jeff's eyes narrowed a trifle. This was some more of that same weird brush-off. He didn't understand it, but he was getting fed up.

"Now wait a minute," he argued. "Take another look at me. I didn't beat myself

up. Never mind the gun part of it, just have those three hoodlums locked up."

"I said—that's all." The sergeant picked up a newspaper, leaned back and stuck the paper up before his face.

Jeff walked out. There wasn't anything he could do. Arguing with a desk sergeant wasn't wise—not if he wanted to get married in a church and not a jail cell the next day.

He calmed down some as he walked into the hotel. Let first things come first, and getting married was his primary purpose in coming here. Maybe Grace could offer some sort of an explanation. But no, he thought, that was a silly idea. How would she know why three bruisers wanted to beat him up and tell him to get out of town.

He reached his room, let himself in somewhat carefully for fear there might be another welcoming committee. He locked the door, shoved a chair under the knob and found a dented metal carafe which ought to make a fair weapon. He placed this near the bed.

Then he looked at himself in the mirror and groaned aloud. He was going to be a fine looking bridegroom. If Grace meant to surprise him with a formal, swanky wedding, he was going to give her something of a surprise too. It must have been close to dawn when he drifted off to sleep, for when his traveling alarm clock went off, he'd have sworn he hadn't slept more than an hour.

His bruises and bumps looked even worse by daylight and some of them had assumed rainbow hues. He did the best he could with after-shave powder. He hauled out the dress suit he'd brought along and put this on.

AS HE tied the white tie, he began to feel better. Of course everything that had happened the night before was some sort of a mistake. In a few minutes he'd really meet the town of Welden. If the citizens thought enough of Grace's father to erect a very expensive bronze statue of him in the park, they'd probably turn out en masse for the wedding.

But Jeff was again careful as he walked through the hotel lobby. Those three hoodlums had sounded as though they meant business. But he was unmolested. He hailed

a taxi, realizing he was something of a spectacle in full dress clothes in the early afternoon.

Grace had told him not to bring a best man, that she would take care of everything. He'd wondered about it at the time, but made no protest. So it was that he drove up to the church in solitary splendor. It lacked fifteen minutes of the time set for the ceremony.

There were no cars parked out front, though Jeff hardly noticed that, and it didn't register with him anyway. He was rapidly getting a case of bridegroom jitters with all the usual butterflies in his stomach.

He finally pushed open the door of the church and walked in. There were even more flowers than there had been the night before and the organ was playing softly. It looked like a good wedding except for one thing. There wasn't a single solitary spectator in the pews. The church was empty except for the hidden organist and the clergyman who stood before the altar rail, apparently waiting.

Jeff felt as self conscious as though a million people were watching him walk down that aisle. He reached a point three feet before the clergyman and stopped. He extended his hand and found it warmly grasped.

"We have but a short time to wait, Mr. King," the clergyman said. "I have arranged for the church janitor and his wife to be the witnesses. This should be a solemn, but joyous occasion. It is neither. People do not forgive, Mr. King, though I have preached a thousand sermons about forgiveness."

"Forgive who—what?" Jeff asked in complete bewilderment.

"Then you don't know?" The clergyman frowned. He seemed to find swallowing somewhat difficult. "I'm sorry. Please don't ask me for explanations. Grace will give you those. I—well, at least we shall have one member of the congregation in the pews."

Jeff turned around. A white haired, portly man was walking slowly down the aisle. Halfway to the altar, he entered one of the pews and sat down. Jeff faced the clergyman again.

As if he anticipated the question, the clergyman said, "That is Jim Shannon, one

of Thaddeus Welden's best friends and one of Grace's as well. You'll like Jim. He runs the mill for Grace."

"I see," Jeff murmured. "It's also come to my attention, by startling ways, that Grace Welden appears to own half this town. Or am I dreaming?"

"Then she didn't tell you she is one of the wealthiest young women in the country. Perhaps I should refrain from making any explanations, but I'm afraid you're in for a shock. Grace has so much money I doubt she knows exactly how much. Her father built this church. Grace maintains it. That is why she can have her wedding here, even though nobody in town except Jim Shannon would come to the ceremony."

Jeff asked, "What's wrong anyhow? Why won't they come?"

"I'm afraid Grace will have to tell you that, my son," the clergyman said. "And—she has just entered the church."

As Jeff turned, the organ burst into the wedding march. Grace, completely alone, walked with measured step along the aisle. Jeff thought he'd never seen her look as beautiful. Her gown was obviously an heirloom. Her head was high, her eyes bright. The empty church didn't seem to surprise her one bit, nor did she show any resentment at it.

**P**ASSING the pew where Jim Shannon sat, she turned her head slightly, smiled at him, her blue eyes bright, and bowed in thanks for his coming. Then she walked toward Jeff and as she neared him, she extended her slim, white hand. Jeff took it almost reverently.

She said, "Jeff darling, you can still back out."

He drew her closer. They turned to face the clergyman. Two people came from somewhere and stood beside them. The ceremony was brief. In three minutes' time, Jeff was having the delightful pleasure of kissing his wife. Only when she drew away did she, for the first time, notice the condition of his face.

She said, "Jeff—oh, Jeff, what did they do to you? It was a mistake. I shouldn't have made you come here."

"You couldn't have kept me away." Jeff grinned down at her. "Anyway, what's a beating the night before a man gets married? He's unconscious by that time. There's no pain. Shall we go?"

She nodded. "There's so much I have to tell you, Jeff. So much, I don't know where to begin."

"I do." He chuckled softly. He shook hands with the clergyman and the witnesses. He shook hands again with Jim Shannon and then he and his brand new bride walked out of church, down the steps to an imposing car manned by a uniformed chauffeur who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Did it hurt much, Miss Welden?" he asked.

Grace laughed. "Bill—this is Jeff. And you may call me Mrs. King from now on."

"Okay," Bill grunted. "Welden or King, you're still Grace to me. The same kid who used to tease the life out of me. I'm glad to know you—boss."

Jeff found that he liked this man, whom he now saw must have been deep in his fifties though at first glance he looked no more than thirty-five. They got into the car. Neither spoke until the car turned into the winding drive which led to a house that looked like a castle.

"Don't hold it against me, darling," Grace said. "Dad liked things on a grand scale. This shack has thirty-odd rooms. I haven't been in some of them in years."

"Hey," Jeff asked, "what did I marry—a mint?"

She smiled up at him. "I know you didn't marry me for my money—because you didn't know I had all this and it wouldn't have made any difference because you've got enough too. Jeff, I hope you won't be sorry."

He laughed. "Look, I went into this with my eyes wide open. I'm of age. I've been around. I don't what it's all about so far as the empty church or the beating I got is concerned. I want to know, but not until you're ready to tell me."

"I'll tell you, Jeff," she said slowly. "When we're in the house and you're seated below Dad's portrait. That's how I want it. I wouldn't tell you before because I was

afraid I'd lose you and I didn't want that to happen. Not even if I lost you later on. You see, I'm in love with you and I didn't play fair because I was scared, Jeff. Scared of losing you."

He broke into another laugh. "Say, Mrs. King, who did you murder anyhow?"

Her smile broke. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. She turned her face straight ahead and never looked at him again until they were in the house. And all the while Jeff's uneasiness grew stronger and stronger.

## CHAPTER III

### STORY OF MURDER



HE LOOKED up at the oil painting of her father. It was life size and he saw a man who was handsome and pleasant looking. Jeff realized he'd have liked knowing him. Grace sat down in a chair opposite the portrait.

She said "Jeff, when I finish, if you like you may not say a word. You may simply get up, walk out of here and out of my life. I won't contest an annulment. I took a chance that you would believe in me, but I warn you, only two other people ever have. Jim Shannon—and Bill, my chauffeur."

"It's got something to do with your father, hasn't it?" Jeff asked.

She nodded. "He built this town, Jeff. Built it with his own sweat and some of his blood too. Everything he did was for this town and its people. Especially after Mother died and he needed something to take her place. I was too small, so he lavished all his affection on a town, Jeff. As a result the people adored him."

"I gathered as much," Jeff said. "Keep talking."

"Two years ago Dad became ill. He went to Dr. Pulver, an old friend. There were X-rays and all sorts of clinical tests and when it all boiled down, Dad had an inoperable cancer and was going to die soon. He took that just as he took everything else—calmly."



"He would," Jeff said softly, "because he must have been a great deal like you."

"As he became weaker, the pain increased. He often begged Dr. Pulver to end it. He—he even asked me, several times. Then one night he died. They found he'd gotten hold of twenty sleeping pills. Very strong pills. They killed him—very quickly."

"And so?" Jeff prodded.

"They said I gave him those pills because I wanted the estate. I wanted to run this town."

"They—what?" Jeff gasped.

She nodded. "Jeff, you know so little about me. Remember, I was brought up unlike most girls. I had everything. I was a selfish little snob. A real down to earth stinker. I don't blame the people of this town for hating me. They hated me even before Dad died."

"Now look," Jeff said, "you didn't give your father those pills. Maybe he got them himself. Maybe Dr. Pulver took a chance. Any number of things could have happened. Grace, I don't go for this mercy killing stuff and I don't think you do either, but even so—how can people blame you this way?"

She looked straight at him. "Because when they performed an autopsy, they discovered that Dad didn't have a cancer at all. He had a serious case of ulcers which gave the same painful symptoms, but he could have been saved."

"But how was that your fault?" Jeff demanded. "Dr. Pulver took the X-rays, made the tests."

"Dr. Pulver died the same day as Dad. Only an hour after him. And his case his-

tory on Dad didn't show a thing about cancer. There were no X-ray plates, no record of any. That's why they say I did it. They say I talked Dr. Pulver into telling everyone Dad had a cancer. They think I let Dad die that way."

"But—but how can they even hazard a guess?" Jeff argued.

"Partly because Dr. Pulver took his own life. Out of remorse, everyone believes. Jeff, that's why I went away. That's why I couldn't tell you the truth. That's why you can get up and walk out of here right now and I won't blame you."

"Who said anything about walking out?" Jeff asked harshly. "I'm going to find out who is behind all this. Who this louse is who did all this to my wife. And when I find the answers, you can bet that whoever is responsible will look a lot worse than I do right now. All of which reminds me. We're married—and Grace, I've never been happier even if my face is too lopsided to show it."

"We'll go away," she said eagerly. "Far away. It won't matter, darling."

He shook his head. "No, Mrs. King. We'll spend our honeymoon right here and years before it's over—fifty years, I hope—I'll have the answer to this."

"But, Jeff," she sighed happily, "there is no answer."

"There has to be. And I'll find it. These things couldn't simply have happened. They were planned, all the way through, right up to last night when I was beaten up and warned to get out of town. We've got them worried already and we won't let up. Not for

[Turn page]

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one single moment. You've got help now. Something is going to be done."

**S**HE was smiling, as if the art of it had only just returned. "One thing about a Welden," she sighed, "they can sure pick their men."

He laughed for a moment and then sobered quickly. "Grace, it's clear that somebody didn't want me to marry you, and there can be only one reason. I'd fight back. Now, who would be afraid of me? Someone who might lose something if I moved in. Grace, who runs this town for you?"

"Why—no one person, Jeff. A law firm of old fogeys handles the legal end of it. Jim Shannon operates the mill and Walter Drake supervises things in general. It's a full time job handling the affairs of my estate."

"If I were to take over, if I refused to believe you killed your father and someone else may have, then Shannon might lose his job and Drake might lose his supervisory powers. Both these men could be responsible and the way Jim Shannon showed up for the wedding that everybody else boycotted, might mean he wanted me to like him. To accept him."

"But Jim and Dad were close friends," Grace argued.

"It would have to be a professed friend who did this. Why didn't Drake show up for the wedding?"

"It's not Walt," Grace said slowly. "It's his wife. Walt would have come gladly, in the face of the opposition from the whole town. But his wife—well, she was one of the first to accept the idea that I had killed Dad."

"I'm not going to like her," Jeff said. "You know what I think? I'm convinced that your father was murdered and that this Dr. Pulver had something to do with it."

"Jeff," she said slowly, "the police investigated Dad's death. They even sent crime specialists from the State Police to see what they could find. I was questioned for days. There isn't one iota of evidence that Dad was murdered."

"Then what do you think happened?"

"I think Dad somehow found the strength

to get out of bed and reach the bottle of pills I had hidden."

"Uh-huh," Jeff mused. "He killed himself. Maybe that's what happened. A man can stand so much pain and no more. But even if he took those pills of his own free will, it was still murder."

"But how, darling?" Grace asked.

"The diagnosis of your father's illness was deliberately wrong. He was told he had cancer and was going to die. An ulcer could have been operated on."

She shook her head slowly. "It won't work, Jeff. There's no evidence of murder."

"Maybe not so far as your father is concerned. But how did it happen that Dr. Pulver committed suicide right afterwards?"

Grace had an answer for that. "Jeff, he made a mistake. He killed Dad by a wrong diagnosis and he took his own life because of that."

"Did Dr. Pulver have any reason to hate your father?"

"None, Jeff. They were fast friends."

"Was Pulver a good doctor?"

"They said he was. That's why no one will believe that he made a mistake. That's why they say I made him give the wrong diagnosis."

"But you didn't," Jeff declared. "That means someone else did. Okay, we can't prove your father was murdered. It was too cleverly done. However, we might find some evidence that Dr. Pulver was the victim of murder. How did he die?"

"He hung himself."

Jeff grimaced. "Grace, he was a doctor. He had a dozen ways of killing himself easily and without pain. Why use a rope? And why a rope anyway? I'll tell you. There is no easier way to murder a man and make it look like suicide."

Grace opened her eyes wide. "What on earth did I marry, Jeff. A detective?"

**H**E CHUCKLED. "There are a few things I didn't tell you either. I was a major in Army Intelligence and I've had quite a lot of experience in these things. In fact, I was partly trained by the F.B.I. Keep that under your hat. I'd rather this town

thought I was a stumbling fool."

"But where can you begin," Grace asked.

"There are two threads which I might weave into something. Dr. Pulver's death and—the trio who beat me up last night and warned me to get out of town. I'll find them, somehow. They were local talent I'm sure."

Grace said, "Jeff, now that you put things this way, there's a matter I never paid any attention to. Jim Shannon did his very best to convince me not to get married. He said it might bring me only unhappiness after what's happened, but—but oh, no. What am I saying? Jim was Dad's best friend—and mine."

"We'll check Jim Shannon," Jeff vowed. "Now, is it possible that some of Dr. Pulver's records might be left? Was his practice turned over to another doctor? What about relatives?"

"He was a bachelor, Jeff. There were no records. When I insisted he had told Dad and me that it was cancer, the police looked. Dr. Pulver was a bit old-fashioned. He didn't keep any records except in his mind."

"But he had to have someone," Jeff said.

She brightened a bit. "There was a nurse. A girl as young as Dr. Pulver was old. Her name is Martha Cogan. I'm not sure where she lives, but Bill would know."

"Fine, Grace. I want to borrow that chauffeur of yours, and a car. If I may."

"They're yours, Jeff, as much as they are mine. But is this how we're to spend our honeymoon? Apart, while you try to track down a murderer?"

He held her very close for a moment, feeling the delightful softness of her body against his. "I'm afraid so, Grace. But when it's over and settled, then we'll have nothing more to fear. It has to be that way."

"You're right, Jeff. You're always right and I'm so glad I married you."

"That's the stuff." He grinned. "How do I get Bill in this castle? Ring bells, blow whistles or just yell?"

The chauffeur suddenly appeared in the doorway. "I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't eavesdropping, but I heard you ask for me. I'm always around. You can whistle if you like."

"See how informal we are?" Grace laughed, and Jeff suddenly realized it was

one of the few times he'd ever heard her laugh.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEATH IN HIS WAKE



**B**ILL, the chauffeur, headed north, saying nothing for a couple of miles. Then he turned his head to glance at Jeff seated beside him.

"Sir, I lied when I said I wasn't listening. I was. And I've got a good reason. I worked for Grace's father since before she was born. I told him I'd take care of her and—well, not knowing much about you and all—"

"Sure," Jeff said. "I understand. And now that you know me a little better, what's your opinion?"

"If you'd been here before it happened—it wouldn't have happened, sir. I got a feeling you're going to make somebody sweat blood."

"Thanks, Bill. My name is Jeff."

"Okay, Jeff," the chauffeur grinned.

Jeff said, "Tell me something about Doc Pulver."

"A drunken old fool," Bill said promptly. "But the old man had a lot of confidence in him."

"All right, Doc had a weak point then. I thought I might find one. Any alcoholic can be talked into things, Bill. Especially if he pulled something wrong at one time or another as most drunks do. Let's turn to Jim Shannon."

"Nice guy. The very best," Bill replied. "Ambitious, works his heart out to make the mill a success. Every employee would go to bat for him. He's single, just lives for the town and the factory."

"Okay, now what of Walter Drake?"

"He's rich. If the old man and the doc were murdered because somebody hoped to profit, you can count Drake out. He's already got enough for half a dozen men. He's married and his wife is a big pain in the neck. But Drake, himself, is okay."

"So where is our suspect and our motive?" Jeff asked. "There seems to be neither. But

they exist, Bill. I'm going to find them."

"If that job calls for help, I'm with you," Bill said quietly. "But if the old man was murdered, don't let me at the man who killed him because sure as shooting there'll be another murder. Well, Martha Cogan lives in that bungalow in the middle of that apple orchard. She's a young, very pretty girl—but they say she isn't very particular about the company she keeps, if you know what I mean."

Jeff nodded. He was already thinking of the best way to approach her. It was dusk now and there was a decided chill in the air. The apple trees were loaded with fruit. Jeff got out of the car, opened a white gate and walked up a winding path to the cottage.

Martha Cogan saw him coming. She had the door open as he stepped onto the porch. Jeff walked up to her—and he had to catch his breath, she was that striking. Her mouth was full and sensuous and there was a lazy tantalizing quality in her eyes.

"I'm Jeff King," he explained when he found his voice. "I married Grace Welden a little while ago."

"Congratulations, I'm sure," Martha said, her gaze traveling over him appraisingly. "Every man to his liking. Was there anything I could do for you?"

"Maybe," Jeff said. "May I come in?"

She was suddenly wary. "Why? What do you want?"

"You were Dr. Pulver's nurse. You know he diagnosed Thaddeus Welden's sickness as a cancer and he was all wrong."

"Anybody can make a mistake," Martha challenged, and Jeff was aware suddenly that there was a fibre and shrewdness in her that you missed at first glance.

"But not a doctor who has X-ray and clinical apparatus to help him. Not a mistake like that. What happened to the X-ray plates?"

"I never knew Dr. Pulver took any. He was old-fashioned and didn't believe in that stuff. Furthermore—"

"Now wait a minute," Jeff said. "The most backward doctor in practice uses X-ray. There had to be plates. Nobody ever found them so they were probably destroyed. Who had access to them?"

Her breath suddenly came quick. She stepped back and started to close the door. "You have no right to ask me a lot of fool questions."

Jeff stuck his foot in the door. "But I am asking them. Old as he was, you liked Dr. Pulver, didn't you?"

"Would I have worked for him if I hadn't?" she demanded.

"Then if the doctor didn't hang himself, but was murdered, you'd like to help find whoever did that, wouldn't you?"

"Mur—murdered?" she gasped.

"Yes, murdered. He didn't take his own life, any more than Thaddeus Welden did. I need your help. I want to avenge their deaths and clear my wife of this unholy suspicion that's fastened around her neck. You can help me if you want to."

**H**ER scarlet lips clamped grimly shut. "You're out of your mind," she snapped, all traces of the languorous seduction gone from her eyes and body, leaving only the wildcat. "Take your foot out of my door or I won't be responsible for what happens."

"So you were in on it too," Jeff said softly. "That's bad, because at your age, prison is ten times as tough. And that's where you're going, as soon as I tie you up with a pair of murders. If you change your mind, you know where to reach me, but don't take too long because I'm not waiting."

He turned on his heel and walked away. The dusk practically swallowed him up. He opened the gate, slammed it shut and then turned around. With an easy leap, he cleared the gate, dodged down between the trees and reached the side of the cottage. He risked a glance into one window, found that it looked into a dining room and kept going until he came to a living room window. Martha Cogan was in that room, talking briskly into a phone. He couldn't hear what she said, but it was obvious that she was frightened.

Jeff crept away from the place and returned to where Bill was waiting in the car. He opened the door. "Bill, drive this thing further down the road so it's out of sight. I threw a scare into Martha and she phoned"

someone. I've got an idea she may have a visitor and I'd certainly like to see what he looks like."

"Okay, Jeff. Say—you've made more progress in ten minutes than the cops did in a month. Yell if you need any help."

Jeff nodded, watched the car disappear in the darkening shadows and then found a place close by the gate where he could hide and wait. He squatted on the ground, wishing he dared smoke, and thinking back. He considered Jim Shannon and Walt Drake as suspects, wondered what a murderer had on Dr. Pulver which nobody else knew anything about, but which was serious enough to force Pulver's hand and make him deliver that fake diagnosis.

It occurred to him that not for a fraction of a second had he even considered Grace as the guilty person and that fact delighted him. There was nothing to show she could have been behind this except the accumulated suspicion of a whole city which hated her anyway. That mass suspicion could have been fostered, handled by the right person.

Maybe, he thought, Jim Shannon wanted the factory and believed he might take it over if Grace left town and never came back. Or Walt Drake wanted the same thing despite the fact that he was already wealthy. Some men never have enough money. Especially men with dominating wives who like the power and glory wealth can bring. Jeff decided he'd soon meet Walt Drake and his wife.

About half an hour went by before he heard a dry branch crash under the weight of a careless step. Someone was approaching, and not by way of the gate and the path. Jeff was instantly alert. He wished he had a gun. If murder had been done, the killer would be a desperate man.

Again the same sound reached him. He crawled forward a bit. His eyes were accustomed to the semi-darkness and he soon picked out the shadowy form which moved toward the cottage. Somehow the man seemed familiar and with a start Jeff realized this was one of the men who had attacked him the night before. He felt a lot better about things now.

The man drew closer to the cottage and

seemed intent upon reaching the only lighted window in the house. When he was a dozen yards away, he reached into his pocket and drew a gun. Jeff moved faster now. He was certain this man intended to kill Martha Cogan.

Suddenly Jeff raised himself and started running. The man heard him and whirled, but a trifle too late. As he brought up the gun, Jeff's outthrust arm hit the man's shoulder, throwing him off balance. He inserted a foot between the gunman's legs, neatly tripped him and then kicked the gun out of his hand. Jeff drew one foot back, aiming it at the man's jaw.

"Remember what your pal did to me last night?" he asked softly. "I can do a better job. I know how to break a man's jaw with a kick. Want yours broken?"

"Lemme up," the man snarled. "Okay, you got me. People say the babe's got dough. I was just sizin' the place up."

"Oh no," Jeff said. "You're not pulling that old one. You didn't come here to rob Martha Cogan. You came to gun her out because she knows too much and she telephoned somebody who sent you. Listen, I took a sound beating last night and you were responsible for one-third of it. You're going to talk, or wind up in a hospital, and you won't get out for weeks. When you do, your best pals won't recognize you."

The man sat up. "I wanted to get the girl's dough—"

Jeff kicked him prone and stood over him. "You'll talk," he said grimly. "But before I start this mayhem, maybe Martha better have a look at you while you still have your own face. Get up!"

**J**EFF scooped up the gun and held it on the man. He marched him onto the front porch and rapped on the door with his fist. Martha opened it in a big hurry.

Jeff grabbed her wrist and drew her roughly outside.

He said, "Martha, you made a mistake. You telephoned someone you trusted and this rat was sent here with a gun. I caught him sneaking up to your window and he was going to use that gun on you. Now are you satisfied I want to help you? Are you con-

vinced Dr. Pulver was murdered?"

She turned deathly pale, biting her scarlet underlip until Jeff figured he'd see blood running down her pretty chin. She stopped just short of that.

"I'll give you a few minutes to think it over," he said. "In the meantime, I'll take care of this punk. But I'll be back. And remember—so long as you keep secret whatever you know, your life is in danger. Once you have talked, killing you won't help anybody. Think it over, Martha."

Jeff grabbed his prisoner by the scruff of the neck, booted him off the porch and propelled him along the path. In a few moments he hurled the man into the car as Bill, grinning broadly, held the door open.

Jeff said, "This guy thinks he's pretty hot stuff. He was going to kill a helpless, foolish young girl. Watch him, Bill. There's one thing he can't stand—a kick in the face. If he tries anything, kick him."

"It'll be a pleasure," Bill grunted. "A real pleasure."

Jeff walked briskly back to the cottage. He had been gone not more than ten minutes, but when he knocked on the door there was no answer. He broke out in a cold sweat, ran to a window and tried to peer inside. The house was in total darkness. He bundled a fist in his felt hat, smashed the window and got it open. He turned on lights when he found the switch, moved down the small hallway and found Martha in the kitchen.

It gave him something of a wrench.

She sat at a white topped table on which was a glass, a bottle of brandy and a small vial marked with a red label that had a skull and cross bones on it. She was quite dead.

Jeff stepped to the kitchen door, which was ajar. Gun in hand, he stepped out onto the back porch and stood there listening intently. He couldn't hear a sound.

Returning to the house he hurried to the telephone in the living room. Checking the

phone book he dialed the number in Jim Shannon's name. There was no answer. He tried Walter Drake's number and a woman answered.

She said, "I'm sorry, but Mr. Drake cannot come to the phone at the moment."

"It's very important," Jeff said.

"Mr. Drake is under the shower. If you wish, I can have him call you in five or ten minutes."

"Are you Mrs. Drake?" Jeff asked.

"Yes. Who is this, please?"

"Tell Mr. Drake that Jeff King will be over to see him shortly. And he'd better be there."

Jeff hung up, put his finger in the slot to call the operator and decided he required a little more information. He had endured one experience with the local police department. Jeff hurried out of the house, broke into a run when he reached the road and raced toward the car which Bill had parked.

Nearing it, Jeff drew the gun he'd taken away from the thug. Nobody was near the car that he could see and the lights were out. He opened the back door. Bill half tumbled out. The gunman was gone.

It took Jeff a few moments to wake the chauffeur. Bill put his head between his hands when he came out of it, and groaned.

"This guy slugged me, Jeff. It was my fault because I turned my back on him. That's all I know."

"You can cry about it later," Jeff said. "Right now there's something more important. Martha is dead. It looks like suicide, but I won't believe that. I need the police. Who on the department would be the likeliest to work with me, not against me because I'm Grace's husband?"

"Lieutenant Sam Ferguson," Bill said promptly. "You can trust him."

"Okay. You'd better stay here so you won't be involved at all. I'll say that monkey got away from me. And, Bill, you wouldn't deliberately have let that guy sock you one?"

Bill looked aghast. "So help me, boss, you can have my heart if I did a thing like that."

"Okay. I just thought I'd mention it in passing. No hard feelings. I'll see you later."

MANY THINK

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## CHAPTER V

## POISON BOTTLE



LIEUTENANT Sam Ferguson was in charge of the detective bureau night shift and he arrived at Martha Cogan's house alone. Jeff had been purposely vague as to exactly what had happened there.

Ferguson was tall, young and dour. He said, "Look, it makes no difference to me if you married Grace Welden. You should have told me this was homicide."

"I know," Jeff said, "but I thought I could reason with one man while a dozen might not listen."

"Well, I'm here, so it'll have to be that way," Ferguson growled. "Do you know why Martha killed herself?"

"She didn't, Lieutenant. She was murdered. I came here to make her talk, but she was scared. I pretended to leave and she made a phone call. Pretty soon a goon comes prowling with a gun. I took him okay, but when I showed him to Martha her fear got ten times as bad. I tucked this guy away on ice, but he escaped."

"You don't mind my saying this sounds as fishy as a can of salmon," Ferguson grunted.

Jeff groaned aloud. "Am I going to have trouble with you, too, Lieutenant?"

"Look," Ferguson said, "I ought to hate your guts. You took Grace away from me."

"I—what?" Jeff gasped. "Grace never mentioned your name."

"Uh-huh. Maybe not. I guess she didn't know I fell for her. That was years ago—when we went to school together. I'm married now, happily too, but I've always carried a small torch for Grace."

"Do you think she killed her father?"

"No—and if you do, I'd advise you to get out of town before I go to work on you."

"That's okay with me," Jeff smiled. "I'm trying to prove she didn't have a thing to do with her father's death, but someone else did. It's about time someone checked all the facts. Martha might have told me, but she killed herself by making that phone call.

While I was taking care of that punk, somebody who came with him to stand by while the young nurse was shot, took care of her himself."

"From here," Ferguson said slowly, "it looks like suicide. That stuff she took is a caustic agent used by doctors. When Doc Pulver died, Martha here took all his drugs and stuff and kept them here in this house."

"Pulver's been dead more than two years," Jeff said. "Take another look at that bottle. It has a control number on it, as most drugs do these days. You can check when that stuff was made and marketed and I'm betting it was since Pulver died."

Ferguson whistled softly. "Maybe you got something. Say—you don't happen to be a cop of some kind?"

"Nope. Closest I came to that was being a major in Army Intelligence."

"You don't say," Ferguson grunted. "That makes you twice my enemy. I was a second looney in the M.P.'s. Brother how we hated you brass."

"That war is over," Jeff said. "We have a few murders to solve. A present one and two in the past. Are you going to help me?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Ferguson said. "I'd have to be pretty doggone sure we'd make out. Because if I stuck my nose into that old affair, and I got nowhere, I'd be back walking a beat if I was lucky. The people I'd be investigating have influence."

"I see what you mean," Jeff scowled. "But they can't stop you from checking this homicide. Look for another bottle of the same kind of poison in the house. Martha wouldn't have two of them. The stuff is useless except in a doctor's office anyway."

"That I'll do," Ferguson nodded. "Let's see the gun you took away from that hood."

"You can have it," Jeff said and handed the gun over. "I don't want to be carrying around temptation. You know how rough this has been on Grace, and I might get to hate the guy responsible."

"Yeah." Ferguson turned the gun over. "Well, well. The butt is stamped, WELDEN ROLLING MILLS. This gat is carried by one of the plant guards. And you didn't notice it? Military Intelligence, huh? Well, well, we do get surprised."

**J**EFF laughed. "Look—I have things to do and so have you, but let's waste two minutes talking about Doc Pulver. Was it an out-and-out suicide?"

"Not by me it wasn't. Could have been suicide or murder. The Chief took one look and said suicide. Me, I'm a lieutenant and I like gold badges so it was suicide. There was a motive for Doc taking his own life. You know how he diagnosed Welden's illness."

"I know, and I'd like to know why he did that. It was no mistake, Lieutenant. Look, was Doc in any jams just before death? Any kind of trouble at all?"

Ferguson shrugged. "We tagged him twice for drunken driving. Let him go too. You know—influence again. Last time he came to the station somebody had swiped his car. Never did get it back and we wanted to—very badly."

"Why?" Jeff asked.

Ferguson stroked his chin. "Well, there was a man killed by a hit-and-run driver the night the car was stolen and we wondered if the thief had done that."

Jeff said, "Lieutenant, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Could be," Ferguson said slowly. "Never angled it this way before, but it makes sense after a fashion. I'll check it. You can beat it. I'm reporting that you came here to talk to Martha and scared her so much she knocked herself off. That'll make you stand in just fine with the citizens of Welden."

"I'm already blackballed," Jeff said. "It can't hurt much more."

"I know. But you'll still have a chance to keep busy and not be locked up on suspicion. Get going now. I'll have a hard enough time as it is explaining why I didn't hold you."

Jeff shook hands with the detective before he hurried back to where Bill waited with the car. The chauffeur was still bemoaning his stupidity in letting the gunman escape.

"Forget it," Jeff said. "Head for Walt Drake's place. And if Jim Shannon wasn't home at this hour, where would he likely be?"

"In his office at the plant. It's nothing for him to work around the clock," Bill said.

"Okay—but Drake first."

They didn't say much the first couple of miles. Then Jeff asked, "Bill, under whose jurisdiction would guards at the mill work?"

"Shannon's," Bill answered promptly.

"The man who got away had a mill guard's gun," Jeff explained. "Maybe stolen, maybe not."

Bill kept his eyes on the road. "Look, I'm not saying Shannon did this, but plenty of the guys at the mill would do anything he wanted them to. Up to and including murder, if they figured Shannon would be helped by it."

"That's what bothers me," Jeff said. "A man who can command such respect isn't the murdering type. We'll see, anyway."

Moments alter, Jeff was admitted to Walter Drake's imposing home. His wife came to the door, a short, fussy little woman decked out in diamonds and rubies. She was neither friendly nor cool, just a nice midway between both.

Drake turned out to be a big man, affable, with a hearty handshake and a booming voice. He was in a lounging robe and his hair was wet from the shower he'd been taking. Jeff held nothing back. He told the complete story up to this particular moment.

Drake shook his head slowly. "Mr. King, I can't account for it. As you say, it looks suspicious. Very much so, but who could be responsible for talking Pulver into a faulty diagnosis, murder him, kill Welden and now Martha Cogan? Murder needs a motive."

"I agree. Maybe there is one so big and close to us we can't see it," Jeff said. "For instance—Jim Shannon."

"Shannon? Oh no, not Jim. After all, he has everything he wants. He runs the plant as if he owned it. He makes a salary that's sufficient for all his needs—and more."

"You handle all the Welden enterprises," Jeff said. "How about you as a suspect?"

**D**RAKE laughed. "I don't blame you. Being a newcomer here, you have a fresh slant on things. But I assure you that if I ever did come into all the Welden holdings, they would do me no good. I'm worth a couple of million dollars now. What would



I want with more? Money buys only so much."

"Mum," Jeff grunted. "That's true, I suppose. But can't you offer any sort of advice?"

"I wish I could. I've often wondered about those deaths and now, with Martha dead, I'm puzzled all over again. It is possible that she did take her own life rather than testify against Pulver. Look here, could it be possible that Pulver was after something but when Welden died, the whole thing blew up in Pulver's face and he did kill himself? That Martha knew this and didn't want to talk about it?"

"Blaming a dead man is the last thing in my book," Jeff said. "Before I do that, I want to make sure the living aren't responsible. Thanks anyway."

As he got up to go, Mrs. Drake came into the room. "We're so happy to have you with us, Mr. King," she said. "I happen to know that you're acquainted with many of New York's most socially minded people. I hope you and Grace will come see us often. I can

tell you who our best people are. Whom you should know and whom to avoid."

"That is important," Jeff said. "I'll be sure to tell Grace."

He didn't talk much while Bill drove him to the mill. The car had to stop outside the closed gate and a man in a guard's uniform sauntered over.

Bill said, "I'm from Miss Welden. Is Jim in his office?"

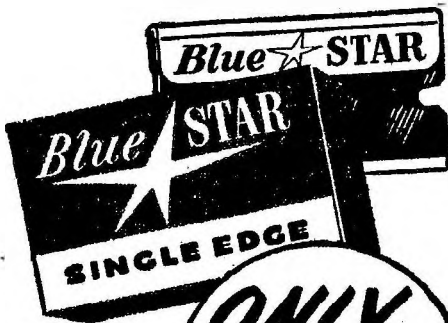
The guard said, "I'll phone in and see. Hold it a minute."

He walked away, entered a small office and as the light from it illuminated him, Jeff whistled between his teeth. He said, "Bill, that's one of the hot shots who took me over last night. I shouldn't do this, but I can't help myself. Be with you fast."

Jeff got out of the car, walked into the office and approached the guard who was bending over the phone. Apparently he had reached Jim Shannon. He hung up and Jeff tapped him sharply on the shoulder. The guard straightened, turned and let out a gasp of astonishment.

[Turn page]

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"Too bad," Jeff said, "that the rest of your gang isn't around."

He buried a fist into the pit of the guard's stomach. The man doubled up and Jeff clouted him with all the strength he could summon squarely on the back of the neck. The guard fell heavily and stayed on the floor.

Jeff walked away feeling good. Very, very good.

## CHAPTER VI

### TIME ELEMENT



IM SHANNON shook hands. "I'm glad you came, Jeff, though I didn't expect you to call on me so soon. After all, you were only married this afternoon."

"Certain things," Jeff said, "interfere with a man's married life and murder is one of them. Did you know that your factory guards walk around town beating up people and use factory guns to try and murder folks?"

Shannon sat down heavily. "I don't understand, Jeff. Tell me more."

Jeff did—in the fullest detail. Shannon went to an outer office, pulled open a filing cabinet and took out a score of cards, each with a photograph attached.

"Look them over, pick out the men you say beat you up and did all these other things. Leave the rest to me."

Jeff picked out the trio quickly. "One of them is wanted for attempted murder and I expect he's already put some distance between himself and Welden. Another should be holding his head about now and wondering how come he woke up on the floor of the gatehouse. I slugged him. The third is this gorilla. I'll prefer charges against all three."

"All right," Shannon said. "I'll take care of it. But, Jeff, you don't entertain any ideas that because they work for me, I ordered all this done?"

"I don't know what to think, Mr. Shannon," Jeff said. "To be frank, if you could drive Grace out of town, you might as well own this mill."

"No," Shannon said promptly. "I couldn't

control it any tighter if Grace were dead. She never interferes with me."

"Doesn't Drake? He's in charge of the estate and should have some say-so over the mill."

"He wouldn't dare, Jeff. Grace would jump smack down his throat."

Jeff said, "Jim, I've never asked this from Grace. But who was with her father just before he died. The last person to see him alive."

Shannon said, "Me, Jeff. I was there, and an hour after I left, Welden was dead."

"Do you think he knew he was going to die soon?"

"I'm sure of it. He sent for me and the way he talked, it was like an oral last will and testament. How I was to keep the mill in operation and let nothing change. Welden thought more of his employees than any man I know. He wanted me to handle them the same way."

Jeff said, "There must have been a bottle of powerful pills not far from the bedroom. Do you think Welden was so weak he couldn't have gone after them?"

Shannon sighed deeply. "Jeff, if Welden wanted those pills, he'd have gone for them. The man had more stamina than anyone gave him credit for. It's true that untended ulcer had weakened him to a point where he had to be fed. It's true that he was in great pain and more than once I heard him beg for permanent relief. I'll say this, if he took those pills voluntarily, he went after them."

"How did he regard Grace? Like a child he had little time for?"

"She was everything in the world to him, Jeff. He wouldn't have hurt her if it meant the loss of all he owned."

"Thanks," Jeff said quietly. "Because if he felt that way, he would never have allowed her to give him a lethal dose of pills no matter how much he wanted to die. But you'd think he would have left some kind of a letter or message—"

Jeff stopped abruptly and he grew dreamy eyed. Shannon watched him for a moment. "What's on your mind, Jeff? It's something big."

"Suppose Welden did write a note. Suppose someone saw him after you left, found

him dead and lifted the note so all this would happen. That note might still be in existence."

"Not if I found it," Shannon said promptly. "I'd have burned it."

"No you wouldn't, Jim. Because if you found Welden dead under those conditions, and you didn't report it, you'd be a fool not to believe that you might some day be accused of murdering him. Someone might have seen you. If there was a showdown, that note would save your life."

SHANNON pursed his lips. "Grace married a smart lad, Jeff. I was worried about who would finally land her because I'd be taking orders from him and things might not go so well. I'm not afraid any more."

Jeff got up. "I'm hoping, Jim, that I don't find out you're responsible for all this. I like you. I'd hate to have to turn you in."

"If I did this, you ought to kill me," Shannon said quietly. "That's what I'd do to the man responsible."

Jeff walked out of the office, through the stilled factory and down steps leading to the factory grounds. There Bill was waiting in the car. They stopped at the gatehouse and Jeff went inside. The guard he'd slugged was gone. On the floor, at the foot of a clothes locker, was the guard's uniform. There was no gun in the holster. Jeff returned to the car.

"Those gun slicks," he said, "have a habit of moving very fast. So we're going to step things up a bit too. Take me back to Walter Drake's house."

"Okay," Bill said. "I hope if it's either Drake or Shannon, you're jumping on Drake. I like Shannon better. A lot better."

"I'm about ready to jump on somebody," Jeff told him. "But there are things to prove first, strings to be tied together, a few more pieces of this puzzle to put into place. And when they all fit, Bill, we'll have us a killer who is primed to kill again."

Bill pulled up in front of Drake's estate some moments later. Jeff bent forward to study his wrist watch in the glow from the dash light.

"Aren't you going in?" Bill asked.

"No. Turn the car around, Bill. Then

streak for Martha Cogan's cottage. I want to see how fast you can make it."

"Okay, but I don't get the idea back of this," Bill said.

"You will. Skip lights, roll this bus as fast as it will travel."

Bill backed into the driveway, got the car poised and waited until Jeff gave the word. When he did, Bill settled down to do some very fast driving. It required exactly seventeen and a half minutes before he reached Martha Cogan's cottage. Several official cars were still parked in front of the cottage. At Jeff's orders, the chauffeur drove well past them before he stopped.

Jeff got out of the car, walked away from it for a distance of about a hundred yards and then returned. He climbed in beside Bill.

"There's another small house down the road. I never noticed it before. Must have been dark—no lights on. Drive there, Bill."

"Nobody's home," Bill said promptly.

"But how do you know?" Jeff asked.

"Because that's where I live," Bill replied. "Alone."

"I see," Jeff commented slowly. "Now, Bill, I'm going to tell you why I wanted to find out how long it would take someone to drive from Drake's house to Martha's cottage. As you know, the fastest possible time is seventeen minutes—slightly more. Okay, now I went to see Martha. We had a little talk. I left, but returned at once. She was telephoning. My talk with Martha took about eight minutes. Two or three more elapsed before I got back to the house and saw her phoning."

"That checks, I guess," Bill said.

"Good. Then I waited. In ten minutes this thug shows up. Now suppose Drake sent him, which I think he did. How could the man have reached this house ten minutes after Martha phoned Drake to tell him I'd been to see her? It took us seventeen."

"What are you getting at?" Bill asked.

"Don't you know? Before Martha phoned Drake, someone else had done the same thing and Drake had dispatched his killer. Whoever warned Drake, knew I was in the house. And who knew? Bill—I think I'm going to kill you!"

## - CHAPTER VII

## GUNS IN THE NIGHT



AT THIS unexpected threat, Bill cowered back. Jeff raised his hands, fingers outstretched. Suddenly the chauffeur reached a hand down beside him and yanked free a gun which had been jammed down behind the seat. He shoved it against Jeff's chest.

"Freeze," he said tartly.

Jeff dropped his arms and laughed in Bill Rowley's face. "So it was you. One of the few men Grace respects and trusts. A rat! If ever I saw one—a rat!"

"Shut up," Bill ordered. "This gun gives me a nice big whip to hold over you, Jeff. I'd hate to use it. You see, I got nothing against Grace or you. All I want is what I'm entitled to. You wouldn't understand, and don't ask any questions."

"I don't have to," Jeff said calmly.

"You're guessing," Bill accused. "You've no evidence against anyone. You trusted me too, and you told me everything you knew."

"Did I now?" Jeff asked. "Did I tell you that Dr. Pulver really was murdered? Did I tell you his car never had been stolen, but the worthy doctor got himself pickled one night and killed a man with the car? He ran for it, because he'd been up twice already for driving while woozy and a third time would have meant prison, because this time it was manslaughter."

"Nobody knew that," Bill declared. "I still say you're guessing. Now I'm going to get out of the car and you're going to sit tight until I get around the other side. Then you take the wheel and we'll settle this some place else."

"Forget it," Jeff said. "I can finish it right here. Somebody knew Doc Pulver was guilty of that hit-run case. He made Doc work on Thaddeus Welden, tell him he was dying of cancer and his case was hopeless. I even know why this party went to such extremes."

"You don't even know what you're talking about," Bill said. "Come on, before I change my mind and plug you here."

"And live the rest of your life wondering just how much I knew—and who I told it to? Not you, Bill. You're much too careful. It was Walter Drake who engineered that deal. Drake didn't want money. He had enough of that. There was something else. Once Grace was accused of helping her father die, if not actually killing him, Drake knew what public opinion would do. Eventually she'd get sick of it. Then he'd step up and offer to buy the estate."

"You make me sick," Bill half shouted. "It's all a pack of lies."

"Is it?" Jeff asked. "Drake wasn't buying just a piece of property, an investment in a factory, some stocks or bonds. He was buying a city. Buying this town and that meant he was buying power. That's what he wanted. Power! He and his socially minded wife. Drive Grace away, make her sell. Fools like Jim Shannon could be disposed of easily. So—it was done."

"Are you trying to tell me Drake murdered Thaddeus Welden?" Bill derided.

"No—I never said so. But he murdered Martha Cogan and he murdered Dr. Pulver. The old doc knuckled under. I presume he thought all Drake wanted to do was force Thaddeus Welden into retirement so he could take over. Doc knew Welden had all the money he wanted and it wouldn't make much difference to him while it meant Doc's skin. So he agreed. Martha Cogan knew all about it—and she telephoned Drake that I'd been to see her."

"Are you finished?" Bill asked.

"Not quite. When I found Martha dead, I telephoned Jim Shannon's home. He wasn't there. I called Drake's house and his wife told me he was under the shower. When I got to the house to see Drake, his hair was still wet. Good and wet, yet better than an hour had gone by since he was supposed to have been under the shower. Mr. Drake was trying to impress me with the fact that his wife had told the truth, while Drake himself was galling around here, turning into a killer."

Bill said, "I've had enough. Now do exactly as I say—"

"Oh, cut it out," Jeff reproved. "That gun is the one you took away from the gate

guard at the mill. The man you woke up so he could high tail it away. Just as you let the man Drake sent to kill Martha go free. You didn't think I fell for that, did you?"

"What difference does it make?" Bill asked.

"Well, in a way it makes a big difference. Because I suspected you. And when I knocked that gate guard cold, I took his gun out of its holster and removed the bullets. So you're holding an empty gun on me. And, Bill, I can take you with one hand tied behind my back."

Bill's eyes gave a single flash of horror. Jeff gave him no time to think.

He said, "Bill—you murdered Thaddeus

"It almost worked," he said. "And I've changed my mind. All I meant to do was knock you stiff. That's not enough."

"You mean murder?" Jeff asked. "That's taking a big risk. Of course, if you killed Thaddeus Welden, you haven't got a thing to lose."

"I didn't kill him. I told you the truth. Drake started those rumors about Grace killing her old man. I was waiting until he took over and then I was going to show him that note just before Grace was ready to sign away the town. Drake would have paid me anything for it."

"Then you're not a killer," Jeff said. "Why start now?"

"I don't have to start. In that little house

#### THEREBY HANGS A TAIL

One of the first lie detectors was invented by the Hindus. They exploited the popular superstition that if a guilty person grasped a sacred ass by the tail it would bray.

The suspect was therefore left alone in a test chamber with the animal. What the suspect didn't know was that lampblack had been brushed on the animal's tail. The innocent would come out of the chamber with soot-smearred hands. The guilty, naturally, wouldn't touch the tail for fear the animal would bray. So he would emerge with clean hands—and was thereby doomed!

Welden. You'll go to the chair for it. Somebody with free access to the house did it, and you're elected. You killed him!"

"He killed himself," Bill shouted. "He got out of bed and took those pills because he thought he was dying. He wrote a letter so nobody would be blamed. I've got the note. I can prove nobody murdered him. Not directly, and I had nothing to do with it."

"Hand me the gun, Bill," Jeff said. "Or I'll take it away from you."

Bill hesitated. "I think you're bluffing. Throwing a scare into me."

"You'd better be sure Bill. Mighty sure because I'm starting to get sore and when I get that way, I forget how much a man can take. I did pretty well against those three hoods Drake sent to beat me up. If I could handle them, don't you think I can handle you? Suppose the gun won't go off?"

**S**UDDENLY Bill moved the gun to the left and pressed the trigger. A bullet roared and smashed through the windshield. Bill's face was grim as he shoved the smoking muzzle of the gun against Jeff's stomach.

of mine are the three mugs who beat you up and they're very anxious to get their hands on you again. They'll do the killing. When it happens, I'll be alibied. Now get out of the car and start walking."

"Okay," Jeff said. "I still have a chance. Those three lugs can't fight."

"They can with guns and knives and they've got both," Bill snarled. "Get moving."

Jeff stepped out of the car and raised his arms as high as he could get them. He walked stiff-legged up the middle of the road. The headlights of the car shone on him and on Bill who marched behind, gun level. They turned into the path leading to the cottage where Bill lived.

Jeff said, "How'd it happen these three gorillas are holed up in your place?" he asked. "Why would they trust you, unless you showed your hand to Drake already?"

"I gave one of them a break, didn't I?" Bill asked. "Then I got the second one away. He contacted the third man and they're all hiding in the house right now. There's no use stalling."

"I guess not," Jeff said. "But I still

think you're not half bad, Bill. Besides, I don't want Drake to get clean away with this, so how would you like a little advice?"

"Not from you," Bill snapped. "There'd be a trick in it."

"Bill—after all, we've been friends," Jeff chided. "All you have to do is listen. Look, you've got that suicide note of Welden's hidden in your house. You wouldn't dare hide it anywhere else. Not in a safe deposit box, because Welden controls the banks and he could get at it. You're smart enough to realize that. But get it and don't let those monkeys know what it is."

"Up the porch steps and take it easy," Bill warned. "When you get on the porch, come to a dead stop while I sing out and tell the boys who we are. They're a bit trigger happy."

Jeff climbed the steps, stopped as ordered and Bill called out. A light was turned on, the door opened and one of the trio peered out. He saw Jeff and gave a yelp of delight.

Bill prodded Jeff with the gun. "Inside, boss. It's the last time I'll call you that."

Before Jeff was fully in the house, the three of them leaped at him. Bill shouted a warning as he slammed the door behind him.

"Hold it! Get away from him until I have a chance to clear out. I brought this guy to you. What you do with him is your business, but first I'm setting up my alibi."

"For a crack at this bird," one of the trio shouted, "I'd even pay dough. Go ahead and set your alibi. How much time do you need?"

"Ten minutes. First I'm going to one of the back rooms for some things. When I leave, time me. In ten minutes—he's yours."

Jeff was pushed into a chair. There wasn't much he could do now. One of the three had a gun, one held a knife and the other was lovingly caressing a blackjack. Jeff said nothing. In a few seconds Bill came out of the back bedroom. Apparently all he'd taken was the suicide note. He stopped and faced Jeff.

"We could have gotten along, Jeff. You're not such a bad guy at that, but you're too nose-y and you'd do anything for Grace. Not that I blame you, but you can see how I stand in this. I've got to get out from under.

So long—and it's a permanent so long. Boys, remember, ten minutes."

"Beat it," one of them snapped. "We're getting impatient."

**B**ILL opened the door, stepped out and closed it again quickly. They heard him run down the porch steps. Then the three closed in around Jeff. He looked up at them. "How will this be done?" he asked pleasantly. "First the sap, maybe. Then the knife and the gun does the finishing touches. Very artistic. Just stand back a little and let me breathe those ten minutes I've got left."

"You ain't got ten seconds," the burly member of the trio said harshly. "What do we care about that sap's alibi?"

"Drake won't like it," Jeff said. "That sap, as you call him, has got Drake over a barrel. If you fumble this one, Drake is the man who'll pay for your mistakes and if he pays, what happens to you goons?"

"Give him five minutes," one of them suggested.

The burly man shook his head. "We work on him now. It'll take a long time before he's finished. Step back a little while I start working this blackjack. Not hard at first, but in a little while I'll really start swinging. Wise guy, when I'm done, you'll be begging for a bullet."

Jeff crossed one leg over the other. "You boys have it wrong," he said. "You're the boys begging for a slug. When Bill left this house, he walked into the arms of a lot of cops. Ever since, the windows have been full of them. They've got guns too—all pointed right at you."

The burly man laughed and raised the sap. A window shattered and a gun barked. The burly man dropped the blackjack, screamed in pain and clapped a hand to his shoulder. He whirled around. His two mates had their hands very high. Somebody smashed in the door. It was Lieutenant Ferguson.

Some moments later the three thugs were handcuffed and well guarded. Bill Rowley was brought back into the house, dejected, disheveled and finished.

Jeff said, "Bill, you just don't have the brains to be a crook. I talked you into shoot-

ing that gun. If you hadn't, I'd probably have been finished. But when you did, Lieutenant Ferguson and all his boys heard the shot. They were in Martha's cottage. She'd only been killed a little while before and homicide men have a lot of work to do at the scene of the crime. You were so excited you forgot about all the police cars parked in front of the house."

"We heard the shot," Ferguson said. "We came out in time to see Bill holding a gun on you and marching you to his house. So we trailed along to find out what he was up to. Mr. King, we found Thaddeus Welden's suicide note in Bill's pocket. That clears your wife. And Bill talked. He talked his head off. I've sent men to pick up Drake."

"You see?" Jeff grinned. "It takes an ex-army intelligence officer to pull a stunt like this."

Ferguson laughed. "Take it easy, Mr. King. We did okay too. That bottle of poison, for instance. It was sold only a few days ago out of town and Martha couldn't have bought it because she hadn't left town. Also the man who forced that poison down

her throat, wiped the bottle nice and clean. He rubbed the stopper, the sides, wiped it as clean as a surgeon's scalpel. But he forgot the bottom of the bottle and there was enough of a print there to hang this on Drake. We haven't compared his prints with it yet, but I've an idea they'll check."

Jeff said, "Good—and I take back what I said about Intelligence being the cream of investigative units. Now, seeing Bill won't be needing the car, I think I'll go home."

When he pulled up in front of the big house, Grace was waiting on the porch. It seemed that Lieutenant Ferguson couldn't resist the impulse to tell her first.

They didn't speak for awhile and then Jeff held her at arm's length. He rapidly sketched in the details. "You need a new supervisor for your holdings, darling. You need a new chauffeur and there was something else. It seems to have slipped my mind. Just before all this began, we had plans. Just where were we?"

"On a honeymoon," she said softly. "The best honeymoon a girl could want. Because I'm free again, Jeff. And I have you."



*oh-oh, Dry Scalp!*

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



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TRADE MARK

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# *I'll* **DIE** FOR YOU, BABY

*—but I'll be damned if I compound  
a murder rap for your gun-totin'  
zoot-suit boy friend!*

I dragged him out of the car  
and we fought in the street



*by*  
**RAY GAULDEN**

**I** PULLED into Pineview around seven o'clock, got there about an hour after old Kepkee had been killed. But I wasn't thinking of murder as I left Denver and drove into the mountains, climbing steadily for two hours. What I was thinking was, *I'll give her the ring tonight. She's forgotten him by now and we can get married.*

It was dark when the familiar buildings of Pineview came in sight and I eased up on

the foot feed. Not much to brag about, this little mountain town. In the old days it had been a mining camp and you could still see the road bed where a narrow gauge track had wound down through the canyon. There was only one mine in operation now and most of the merchants had to make their



living off the tourists and slot machines.

A fellow I had gone to school with lifted his hand and I waved back, but I didn't stop. When you're on your way to your girl's house and you don't get a chance to see her except once a week, on Saturdays, you don't like to waste any time. So I drove on and was almost to the end of the street when I saw the crowd in front of Asa Kepkee's general store. There was something about the way they were standing there that made me wonder what had happened.

With an odd feeling inside me, I pulled into the curb and got out. Nobody paid any attention to me as I walked up to the door. I saw Constable Ed Hannibal standing inside, a strained look on his face, and something dark and cold crept into my stomach. Ed's eyes came to the doorway and found me.

He said, "Come on in, Joe, but it ain't a pretty sight."

I stepped inside and looked down at the floor and suddenly I began to feel sick. There was a dark stain there and I didn't need to be told it was blood. That wasn't what bothered me, though. It was the man lying in the middle of the wet place, huddled up as though he had gotten cold. It was Asa Kepkee and the back of his head wasn't very nice to look at.

Finally I lifted my eyes and looked at the constable. "What happened, Ed?"

Hannibal reached around on the counter and picked up a little tin box. "Ever see it before, Joe?"

I nodded. "It was what Asa kept his money in."

"Yeah," Ed said and his eyes were dark with worry. He wasn't used to a thing like this. Nothing ever happened in Pineview and being constable didn't take much of his time. Ed had lost some of his hair the last few years and he was starting to put on weight. "Somebody killed him to get the money," Ed was saying, "knocked him in the head with something so he wouldn't let out a yell. One of Tom Norton's boys came down to get a pound of butter and found him laying here."

Somebody in the crowd asked, "Who you figure did it, Ed?"

"I don't know," Ed said thoughtfully. "A

lot of folks around here knew Asa kept his money in that box."

WITHOUT looking down at the floor again, I turned and went outside. The fresh air felt good after being in there and I walked over and stood beside my car, but I couldn't get that picture of the old man out of my mind. When I was a kid I used to hang around the store a lot and Asa was always filling me up with candy. I remembered the soft way he spoke and the warmth in his eyes, and now he was dead, murdered for a lousy little bit of money. Maybe a couple of thousand bucks.

I was still standing in the same spot when Ed Hannibal came over. "How about riding down to Linda's with you, Joe?"

"Sure, Ed." I glanced at him, puzzled. "What do you expect to find at Linda's?"

"Thought maybe Ernie Bowen might be there, Joe."

"Ernie Bowen?" My mouth fell open and I stared at him with wide eyes.

Ed nodded slowly. "Ernie came back last Monday, Joe. Guess we all kind of hoped he wouldn't, but he finally did. Drove into town in a nice little convertible, and I guess you know the first place he headed for?"

That was something Ed didn't need to tell me. I stared down the dark street, the sickness growing and spreading through me, but I wasn't seeing anything. Finally I managed to get some words out.

"You think that Ernie pulled this job, Ed?"

"It looks kind of bad." The worry in Ed's eyes had deepened. "Ernie shows up and a few days later this happens. Anyway, let's get going."

My hand was trembling and I had trouble finding the door handle. Ed went around and crawled in on the other side. We drove down the street and my hands were tight on the steering wheel. Ed sat hunched on the seat beside me and he didn't say anything. I guess he could see that I didn't feel like talking. Ed knew how it was with Linda and me. Everybody in Pineview knew why I drove up from Denver at least once a week.

I had loved her ever since we were kids going to school together, but with Linda it was Ernie, right from the start. Maybe I

was a fool for waiting around when I knew I didn't stand much of a chance, but there would never be another girl for me. It was just one of those things that happen and you can't do anything about. I guess Linda couldn't help it, either.

Funny how a woman will fall for a guy like Ernie. He had always been a little wild and had spent most of his time around the pool hall. When he got a job, he never held it over a week. He had the looks, though, Ernie did, and I couldn't help liking him, except for his long hair. It was always growing down his neck and curling about his ears, thick and black and wavy. Ernie liked it that way, always said that on him it looked good. Of course, he was just a kid then and maybe five years had made a difference.

It wasn't far down to Linda's house, a modest little frame that her dad had built on the edge of town. Sam Holden was foreman at the one mine that was still running. He had buried Linda's mother in this town and he would never leave.

We parked and went up the walk and I stood there on the porch, feeling like somebody had kicked me hard in the stomach. Sam, a little man with tired eyes, answered Ed Hannibal's knock.

"Hello, Joe," Sam said, looking at me. Then he put his eyes on the constable. "What are you doing here, Ed?"

"Looking for Ernie Bowen, Sam."

Holden frowned. "What's up?"

"Asa Kepkee was murdered a little while ago."

"The hell you say." Sam glanced at me, then back to Ed.

Hannibal looked over Sam's shoulder, his eyes searching the front room. "Ernie's not here?"

"No, he and Linda just left a few minutes ago. Said they were going to a dance up at Twin Lakes."

"Well, I'll take a run up there," Ed said. "I want to have a little talk with Ernie."

"Want me to drive you, Ed?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's just a little ways down to my place and I can get my own jalopy. You better see if Sam ain't got a drink. You look like you could sure use one."

ED WAS gone then and I went inside. I sat down in an overstuffed chair and stared at the floor. I remembered the nights I had spent in this room with Linda, the plans we had made, and the hope I'd had that she was finally getting Ernie out of her mind. He had never written and he had been gone a long time, but now he was back.

Sam stood in the center of the room, looking at me. He said, "I haven't got a drink in the house, Joe."

"It's all right," I told him. "Whisky wouldn't help any."

"I could stand a big one myself," Sam said. "With Ernie hanging around here the past week, I've had a bad taste in my mouth. I don't know what Linda can see in him. Never been able to figure it out, but what can I do about it?"

"Nothing," I muttered. "Not a thing."

Sam shook his head and his eyes were troubled. "She should have married you and moved down to Denver. You've got a good job down there and you're on your way up. She'd have done it, too, if it hadn't been for him promising her he'd come back one of these days."

My head was whirling and I didn't say anything.

Sam was quiet for a moment, his eyes thoughtful. When he spoke again, his voice was bitter. "I hope he was the one that did it, and I hope Ed catches him and puts him away so he can't bother us any more."

"You shouldn't talk that way, Sam."

"The hell I shouldn't. Come on, Joe, let's you and me go down to the tavern and have a drink."

"You go ahead, Sam," I said heavily. "I'll stay here a while."

He shook his head sadly. "You're a funny guy, Joe."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I am."

Sam went out and it grew quiet in the room. I wondered why I sat there instead of getting in the car and going home. What was the use in sticking around and waiting. She had never really been mine and now I had lost her for good. A voice back in my head whispered, *You poor sucker*. I took the ring out, a bitter little laugh spilling from my lips as I stared at it.

Time meant nothing so I don't know how long it was before I heard the sound of the back door opening. Curious, I got up and started toward the kitchen. Then I drew up and the breath caught in my throat for Linda was stepping into the room. She had a frightened look on her face and I had never seen her so pale. Relief washed through her eyes at sight of me and she came running across the room.

"Oh, Joe! I was hoping you'd be here."

She was close to me and I lifted my arms, started to put them around her. Then I changed my mind and just stood there and stared at her, my mouth feeling like somebody had stuffed a ball of cotton into it.

"There's been some trouble, Linda," I said finally.

"I know, Joe. Ernie told me about it. Oh, it's terrible."

"Where is Ernie now?" I asked.

She put her hands on my arms, her eyes pleading. "He didn't do it, Joe. I know that's what you think. That's what they all think because they remember what he used to be like. But he didn't do it, Joe. We were here talking and he decided to go down and get us some ice cream."

"You went with him?"

"No, but he was only gone a little while. He heard about the murder and he came back, scared because he knew everybody would think he had done it."

I didn't say anything, but maybe I looked like I didn't believe it. She shook me a little and her eyes were desperate. "Joe, you've got to believe me. Ernie's changed. He's not like he used to be. He went back East and got a job and saved his money."

"And he came back to take you away with him. Is that it, Linda?" I felt numb and cold all over.

"Yes, Joe. He said I could have a church wedding and he already has the house picked out. Oh, I know how you feel about me, Joe, and you're a wonderful guy. I tried to forget Ernie, I really did, but it's something that I can't help."

"No, I guess not," I said dully.

**H**ER hands tightened on my arms. "Joe, you've got to help us."

"How, Linda?"

"Ernie's hiding in a cabin up the canyon, a place that's been closed for the winter. I drove him up there, but he can't stay long because they'll find him. I took the old road back so no one would see me and left his car across the creek where they're not likely to find it for a while."

I ran my tongue over dry lips. "If he's innocent, Linda, he hasn't anything to worry about."

"You know better than that, Joe." Her eyes stayed on my face. "Ed Hannibal will form a posse and there will be some tough men in it. Everyone thought a lot of Asa Kepkee, and they're apt to shoot Ernie on sight."

It was still in the room and I could hear the clock ticking. I stared at it, knowing she was right. I asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Drive us down to Denver in your car, Joe," she said swiftly. "You can get through without any trouble. In a few days, they'll find the real killer and everything will be all right."

A voice back in my head was screaming at me, *He just fed her a line and you know it. He's the same old Ernie and he'll never change. He got to thinking maybe you had married her and he came back to find out. He killed Kepkee because it seemed like an easy way to get a stake. You can see through it, Joe, even if she can't.*

Linda must have sensed the indecision in me. She said in a tight little voice, "I love him. I love him so much it hurts."

There was a deep sickness inside me, but I said, "Do you want to pack some things?"

"There's no time for that, Joe. We've got to hurry."

On leaden legs I walked out to the car, climbed in behind the wheel and Linda slid in beside me. It wasn't cold, but she was trembling and my lips twisted bitterly as we drove away into the darkness, heading up the canyon. We didn't talk much on the way. There wasn't anything to say.

I listened to the tires singing on the black top and I thought, *You think he's guilty because you want it to be that way. You hate him really. Hate him for coming back here*

*and taking her away from you. But he was her first sweetheart and she'll never love anybody else as long as he's alive. Maybe Linda's right. Maybe Ernie has changed. Just because he used to be bad doesn't mean that he couldn't straighten up.*

Linda sat with one hand on the door handle, gripping it hard. I could tell that fear was working on her and I swore under my breath. I turned the radio on and tried to find a newscast that would give us a report of the killing, but there was only music and I thought of the nights we had danced together and the fun we'd had while Ernie was away.

Finally Linda said, "I'm sorry it had to turn out this way, Joe, but I can't help it.

My throat was tight and hurting, but I managed to mutter, "Sure."

She shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and her fingers were trembling. Then she sat up straight, her eyes searching the darkness.

"There's a road up ahead, Joe. Turn right."

I took the turn onto a graveled road and we began to wind around the mountain, climbing steadily. And then the cabin was before us, dark and deserted looking in a small clearing surrounded by tall pine trees. I pulled in and shut off the motor while Linda jumped out and went running toward the cabin.

"It's all right, Ernie. It's me and Joe Lane."

He came out of the shadows and I held my breath as he stepped into a patch of moonlight. He had filled out a little since the last time I saw him. Our eyes met and he tried to show me a smile, but it didn't come off very well.

"Hello, Joe."

**I** DIDN'T offer to shake hands with him. I kept looking at his thin, handsome face. "It's been a long time, Ernie."

"Too long," he said and his eyes were on Linda. "We're going to be married, Joe. I've got a good job back in Chicago and I've been saving my money."

"I'm glad to hear that, Ernie. I really am."

"Kind of tough on you, Joe. But you'll get over it."

"Sure I will," I said. "Just so Linda's happy. That's all that counts."

Linda's voice was low with urgency. "We'd better be going."

Ernie turned toward the cabin. "I'll get my suitcase. Good thing I had it in the car."

He was back in a minute and he and Linda got into the rear of the car, so they could drop down out of sight in case we passed anybody. Turning around, I drove back the way we had come. In the rear-view mirror, I could see that Ernie was sitting on the edge of the seat, his eyes glued to the road and there was a little film of sweat across his forehead.

"Too bad that something like this had to happen," I said after we had gone a half mile. "Old man Kepkee was a good guy. Remember how he was always treating us to something?"

"Yeah," Ernie said. "I remember."

"Asa had a lot of faith in his fellow man," I said. "Kept his life's savings in that little tin box and he used to get it out and show it to us. Remember those old yellow bills he had, Confederate money that his dad had given him for a keepsake?"

"I'd forgotten about that," Ernie said, and a match flared as he lit a cigarette. "It's sure white of you, Joe, to do this for us, but I guess you'd do about anything for Linda."

"I guess I would," I muttered and glanced in the mirror again.

Her face was just a pale blur in the darkness and she sat there close to Ernie, her left hand in his right. I wondered what she was thinking. I wondered if they would try to stop me when I went through town. We were getting close and I could see the lights blinking up ahead. My hands were tight on the steering wheel and I took them off, one at a time, and wiped them on the legs of my trousers.

"We better get down on the floor," Ernie said. "So no one sees us going through town."

"I'm scared, Ernie," Linda whispered.

"There's nothing to be scared of, honey. Everybody knows Joe, and they aren't going

to try to stop him. In a little while, we'll be down in Denver, and we'll have some fun. I'll make up to you, honey, for all those years I been away."

"But, Ernie, it doesn't seem right to run away when you're innocent. We'll be hunted. We'll have to hide out, like—"

"Just for a few days," Ernie said patiently. "They'll find the real killer, but I wouldn't stand a chance if I gave myself up now. You know how folks in a little town like this can get worked up."

Linda said heavily, "I guess you're right, Ernie."

They were down on the floor of the car now and my heart started banging against my ribs as I pulled into town. I wondered what Ed Hannibal had done when he'd found out they weren't up at Twin Lakes. I wondered a lot of things, and my heart kept thumping harder and harder. Going down Main Street, I eased up a little on the foot feed. Most of the buildings were dark, but there was a tavern on the next corner, brightly lighted, and through the open door, I could hear the jukebox blaring. The tune started running through my head. *After you're gone. . . .*

With a dead feeling inside me, I pulled into the curb and turned off the switch.

Ernie kept out of sight, but he said, "What are you stopping for?"

I got out and opened the back door. "This is as far as we're going, Ernie."

He got up slowly and sat on the edge of the seat, Linda doing likewise. They stared at me like they couldn't believe it, and when I saw the anguish in Linda's eyes, I felt as if somebody had shoved a knife between my ribs.

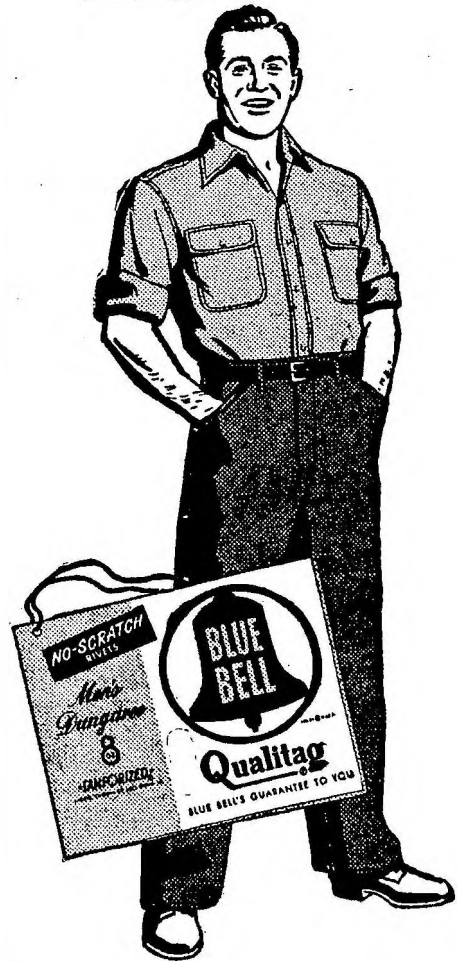
Ernie's eyes darted about the street. His mouth started jerking and the sweat ran down into his eyes. "You're not going to turn me over to them, Joe? You can't—"

"I'm sorry, Ernie. I was willing to help you get away for Linda's sake. She said you had changed and I thought maybe you had. But you're still the same kid that used to hang around the pool hall."

"You've got it wrong, Joe." Ernie's eyes were wild. "I've been going straight—"

[Turn page]

## How to buy better work clothes



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I shook my head. "If that was true, Ernie, you'd have started getting your hair cut. Remember how I used to kid you about looking like a big city zoot-suiter? Well, you're still wearing it down your neck, and your clothes are just as fancy as ever. No, you haven't changed, Ernie."

**L**INDA'S lips moved, but she didn't say anything. She just sat there and stared at me with a dead expression on her face.

"You're crazy, Joe," Ernie said desperately. "Don't go off half-cocked. Give me a break."

"All right, Ernie. Maybe I'm wrong. But let's settle it now. We'll go over and talk to Ed Hannibal, the constable. We'll let him take a peek inside that suitcase of yours and see if there isn't a lot of money in it, and maybe a few of those old Confederate bills that Asa kept around, too."

That did it. Ernie made an angry little sound in his throat. His hand jerked up, slid inside his coat, and came out clutching a gun.

He said between his teeth, "All right, wise guy. We'll see how smart you act with a slug in you."

Ernie's face was dark and twisted and the gun came in line with my chest. He was all set to pull the trigger, but there was one thing that neither of us had counted on. Linda. She had sat there as though she was frozen, but now she moved, a little cry breaking from her lips as she grabbed Ernie's arm and knocked it up.

The gun went off and a bullet ripped through the top of the car. Cursing, Ernie

hit Linda in the face and tried to get the gun back in line, but I was on him now, twisting the weapon out of his hand. I dragged him out of the car and we fought there in the street. The sound of voices reached me and I knew that the shot had drawn attention. People were running toward us and I heard their excited murmur.

But I kept my eyes on Ernie. I slammed my fist into his face and he went down, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. He sat up, threw a wild glance over his shoulder and saw Ed Hannibal coming on the run. With a curse, Ernie scrambled to his feet. He started to run down the street and the constable yelled for him to stop. Ernie kept going and I saw a gun flash in Ed Hannibal's hand. He fired once and Ernie stumbled and dropped to his knees. Then he fell forward on his face.

The money and the old Confederate bills were in the suitcase all right, but I didn't stick around to look at it. I wanted to get Linda away from there as quick as I could. On the way down to her house, we didn't talk. I guess we both felt pretty sick. When I let her out at the gate, she started up the walk, her shoulders slumped a little, and then she turned and came back to the car.

"I don't know what to say, Joe."

"Don't try to say anything right now," I answered.

She stood and looked at me and I felt her eyes moving over my face. "You've been waiting a long time, haven't you, Joe?"

"I can wait a while longer."

"Thanks, Joe," she said softly. "Thanks a lot."

## THE LIARS' CLUB

*Conducted by Harold Helfer*

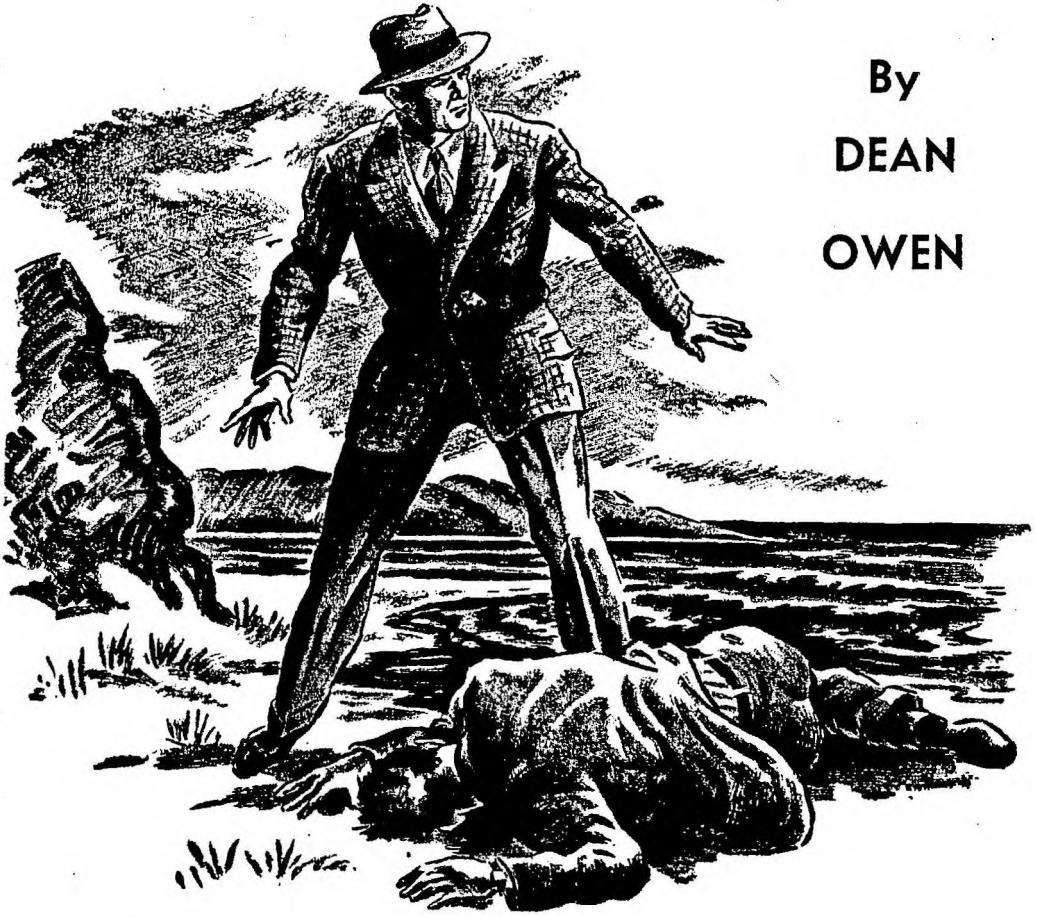
Arrested for driving off with a city garbage truck, a man in Brooklyn explained: "It was a nice day and I felt like taking a ride."

**When Berlin police arrested a nude couple as they emerged from a lake, they explained: "We meant to commit suicide together, but the water was too cold."**

A Sedalia, Mo., man admitted writing bogus checks, explaining he is subject to periodic spells of illness during which he loses all control of himself and writes checks left and right.

*(Meeting continued on page 65)*

By  
DEAN  
OWEN



*The tide was already worrying the corpse. By the time Rayborn could walk back to town, it would wash the body out to sea. Thus began that—*

## MORNING for TERROR

TEN MINUTES past three A.M. was no time to start a vacation, not in February at a summer resort like Palisade. But weather was the least of Con Rayborn's worries. He just wanted to drink himself out of focus so he wouldn't remember how Della had looked twelve hours before, when she showed him her splendid white teeth and plane tickets to Las Vegas for two.

By now Della would be on her honey-

moon. The envelope that had contained his ring and her crisp note still burned in the pocket of his damp tweed jacket.

Con Rayborn whipped his light coupe through the smoky fingers of fog that occasionally let him glimpse the double white line in the center of the Pacific Coast highway. The angular jaw of his rather long face moved in time with the windshield wipers. Herm had asked no questions when Con requested his vacation now, immediate-

ly. Herm had just squeezed his gray brows together and said it was okay.

This time of the year at Palisade there would be no girls on the beach with their gay sun-browned legs. This time of the year there would be nothing, which was what Con wanted most of all—silence, and a chance to get the spin out of his head. Just let him get out from behind this wheel and stick his nose in a lot of tall drinks. Della was going to be a hard one to drown. It would take a lot of drinks before Con wouldn't be able to see her tall, curved blondness in the bottom of a glass.

The coupe tires made a wet sound on the slick pavement as he hurled the car around a sweeping turn five miles from Palisade. It was then that his headlights picked up a glare of foggy aluminum that was a huge highway van. Parked dead ahead, the big truck was a menacing blot in the thick darkness.

Con swung the wheel instinctively. There was that empty moment when rear wheels lost their grip on the highway and the car started to slide, Con's right fender skating so close to the van's rear wheels he could almost read the tire brand.

When he had the car under control and stopped some fifty yards down the road, he angrily backed up to where two men in coveralls stood in the glare of his headlights in front of the truck, watching him warily. Beyond, Con could see the faint outlines of a heavy sedan.

Leaning across the seat, Con rolled the right window down, yelled, "Don't you know enough to set out flares when your truck's stalled?"

One of the men, short and chunky, started for Con's coupe with a belligerent swagger, but his heavy-shouldered companion grabbed his arm, saving to Con, "We'll get them flares out, Mister."

Con's anger ran out of him and he said, "Want me to send out a tow truck from Palisade?"

"We'll be fixed up in a minute," the tall, heavy-shouldered man said, and jerked his head at the dark sedan. He was big, the mark of the prize ring on his face with its mashed-in nose.

They stood there, watching while he put

the coupe in gear. All the way into Palisade Con felt a pin prick of suspicion run along his nerves. When he was on the point of turning back, he said aloud, "The hell with it! This is a vacation."

**B**Y THE time he got his room at the hotel, he had forgotten the incident. He began to work on Della. But either the liquor was too weak or Della's image too strong—he was inclined to think it was the latter—for when daylight showed through the Venetian blinds he shrugged into his coat and walked along the cold, wet sand, listening to the wash of breakers and trying to forget that he had met Della on this beach two summers before. In his moment of crisis he had instinctively been drawn back to Palisade.

As he kicked along the deserted beach it came to him that only one word described him—fool. A fool when she casually explained a broken date, a fool when he had found the cigar butt in her apartment and let her tell him it was her brother who had arrived unexpectedly from San Francisco.

He climbed over backbones of coral that sloped down from the high palisades, skirted wet rocks and ducked through natural archways. He wondered if Herm and the rest of the gang also thought he was a fool. It was highly probable, he reasoned.

The smell of kelp and the sea was cold in his nostrils. Thick fog laid a damp gray hand against his face, curling the ends of his short brown hair.

Every rock and angle of this beach screamed Della's name. Up ahead was where Della had almost fainted when a dead starfish came floating in with the tide to brush her ankle. Della, who never let the sun touch that luscious body because, she had explained, an artist's model can't show a ring of tan. Along with a lot of other things, Con could never quite get used to the idea that Della posed for a lot of guys with charcoal pencils and oil brushes.

He shivered in the damp cold. Was the sun this morning shining in Las Vegas? If the sun were shining in Palisade, he could turn around and be able to see Della's redwood summer cottage set high on a hillside. He wondered how Della's new husband



would enjoy the view. He wondered how he could forget Della's husband.

The thought had barely crossed his mind when his eyes caught the movement of a gray bundle at the surf edge up ahead. The suddenness of coming upon it was what startled him, for he was used to seeing dead bodies. He quickly covered the distance on his long legs and was bending down, seeing the incoming tide worry the corpse, turning it slightly at the shoulders. The features, of a man about fifty, were black and blue and swollen.

Con's sharp eyes caught the widely spaced footsteps that led across the sand from the cliff. The stranger, evidently mortally wounded, had gotten this far only to collapse and die.

A cold wet spot touched Con Rayborn's spine as he scanned the palisades with eyes that were trained for such things. But he saw no suspicious movement, no face suddenly jerked from sight behind a protruding rock.

A jagged gash showed redly through the dead man's thin hair. It was a shame, Con reflected, to let the sea have that two hundred dollar gray suit and the wrist watch with the diamonds on the face. For a long moment he stared at the second hand still making its smooth sweep.

With steady fingers he searched the pockets, finding only a key stamped "Palisade Hotel." If somebody had hit the stranger over the head, the motive had not been robbery. Not with that watch still on the wrist. Probably an accident, Con reasoned; the stranger had slipped off the cliff in the fog. Dazed, he had run a few steps, to fall dead.

The theory was all right, Con told himself, but how to account for the purple bruises on the swollen face?

By the time Con could walk the three miles to town and notify the police, the incoming tide would have washed the body out to sea. Seizing the corpse by the shoulders, he dragged it into a dry cave at the base of the cliff. It was then he noticed, with a shock, that the nails on the right-hand thumb and forefinger were missing. Con put his teeth together, hard. It wasn't the prettiest sight in the world.

AS CON moved swiftly back along the foggy beach a yellow light high on the rim of the palisades caught his eye, and he remembered from former years that a run-down auto court was in that approximate location. And he remembered the faded sign: "Stairway To The Beach."

Through the drifting fog he glimpsed the stairway that angled up the face of the cliff. The bottom third of it, washed away by winter tides, had never been rebuilt. A path zigzagged steeply up the rocks to the end of the stairway.

He climbed, his crepe-soled shoes clinging to the wet rocks. By the time he reached the first broken step he was perspiring. Anchored by rusted iron driven into the cliff, the stairway shivered violently when he tested it by throwing his weight against one railing. Satisfied it would hold him he waited until it quit swaying, then climbed onward.

When he reached the palisades rim he saw a faded sign: "Stairway Closed. Dangerous!" That, he decided grimly, was an understatement.

Lights burned from the lower floor windows of a building labeled "Manager." He headed that way, skirting a cluster of dark cabins.

When he laid his knuckles against the door panel he heard a small flurry of sound inside. When no one answered his knock, he rapped again. Finally a girl's voice said, "This place is closed. We have no cabins for rent."

Through the closed door, Con said, "I just want to use your phone." Under the pressure of his hand, the door swung open. Behind a short counter he saw the girl, her face ashen in the light of a single bulb that hung from the ceiling on a fly-specked cord.

He walked in, saying, "Where's the phone? I hate to bother you, but—"

"The phone's been disconnected."

He stiffened at the note of fright in her voice. She wore a red-and-white blouse and beige slacks. Her coppery hair fell curling to her square shoulders. His trained eyes took in the small office, the year-old calendar, the rusted punch bell on the counter. A ragged curtain covered a doorway behind the counter.

Irritation edged his voice when he said, "There's a dead man on the beach. I want to notify the police."

He watched the faint edge of terror widen across her gray eyes. It was then that he caught the strong odor of tobacco in the musty air.

"What is this?" he said. "A tobacco warehouse?"

Before she could answer a phone bell made a clanging sound that turned the girl white and rigid behind the counter. The curtain that covered the doorway was suddenly jerked aside and a tall, heavy-shouldered man with a mashed-in nose rested a cocked sawed-off shotgun on the counter.

"You know what this thing is," the man warned Con. "So don't do anything but breathe!"

The man snatched up an old-fashioned desk phone from beneath the counter, and keeping one eye on Con, growled a cautious hello into the mouthpiece. "This is Pete," he said, after a moment. "Yeah. Some guy found him on the beach. He's dead. Ain't that the luck? And the damn fool had to come here and report it! . . . Sure I got him covered. You think I'm crazy?"

Pete slammed down the phone and gestured with the shotgun to a chair in the corner. "Set there," he told Con. "And you," he warned the girl, "keep your mouth shut!"

The girl's lips trembled when she said, "You followed him down to the beach and killed him!"

"Shut up," Pete warned nervously.

**C**ON EASED himself into the chair, feeling the pulse in his temple begin to throb. To Pete, he said, "What happened to the coveralls?"

Pete glanced down at his pin-stripe suit as he kicked the door shut. "What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously. "What's coveralls got to do with it?"

Con forced a grin. "The last time I saw you was in front of a truck. You were with a short guy who acted like he wanted to punch me in the nose."

Pete inclined his face to stare at Con. Recognition flashed into his pale eyes. "You're the monkey who got nasty about

the flares. Is Bruno goin' to be glad to see you!"

Bruno, Con figured, was the short, chunky man.

Con swung his eyes to the girl, who stood unmoving behind the counter, her full lips bloodless. Then, to Pete, he said, "What did you use on the guy down on the beach? Looks like you beat him half to death before you killed him."

His lips tight, Pete said, "I never killed him." From behind the counter he lifted up a length of flexible brownish stuff as thick as a man's wrist. "Kelp," Pete said coldly. "It's better than a rubber hose. It'll make a man talk, usually." He thumped the kelp down on the counter. "You'll get some of the same if you don't talk up at the right time!"

"And then," Con said coldly, "you'll start working on my fingernails with a pair of pliers."

The girl suddenly screamed, "You fiend!" and clawed at Pete's shotgun, trying to wrest it from his hand.

Con, halfway across the room, felt his stomach lurch, knowing the distance was too great. Already Pete had slammed the sobbing girl against the wall with a backhand. He turned the shotgun muzzle full on Con's chest.

"Mister," Pete said, as Con came up short, "you come awful close to dyin' right then."

Legs trembling, Con backed up and sank down in the chair. "Don't ever," he told the girl, "jump a man with a shotgun. He could cut you in two."

The girl's eyes, red-streaked and angry, glared at him. "Maybe I don't happen to care very much," she said dismally.

Her cheek, where Pete's backhand had caught her, was beginning to swell. Con shrugged down his anger, forcing himself to think rationally. His brain had been fogged since he had received Della's letter and the ring and then punched her apartment buzzer to hear her say it in person. Sure, he told himself, it all added up—the truck parked by the highway, the heavy sedan, the strong odor of tobacco in this place.

"Cigarette hijackers," he said aloud, and saw Pete's mouth jerk and saw him look un-

certainly at the shotgun as if debating the wisdom of using it.

But the sound of auto tires in the gravel driveway settled the issue. Watching Con out of the tail of his eye, Pete opened the door a crack, glanced out and let in the short, chunky man, who now wore an Alpine hat, a loud sports jacket and brown slacks to match. At his heels trailed a handsome man in an expensive cowboy outfit.

Pete jerked a heavy thumb at Con. "The guy that give us the business about the flares, Bruno."

Bruno's bright eyes looked pleased. He snatched up the piece of kelp from the counter and started for Con. A diamond ring caught the overhead light as the man in the cowboy garb lifted a big hand to shove Bruno back.

"Save your temper," he warned. He leaned against the counter, began to rub his instep. "These damned boots," he muttered. "I look like a hick in this outfit."

"It's all right for Las Vegas," Pete said.

"But this isn't Las Vegas," the man snapped. "I'd be there now if you and Bruno hadn't bungled this. Steal a truck load of smokes and then run out of gas!" The eyes in his handsome face, yellow and ugly now, swung from Pete and Bruno. "Lucky I was close by, or you'd have been explaining yourselves out of a road block."

Con had been trying to place the cowboy. Now he had it. Photos in movie fan magazines with starlets on his arm. Randy DeLane at the opera opening, a mug in a white shirt and tails. Pictures with a number underneath. A very nasty man, Randy DeLane, with a past as dark as Black Monday.

**F**ROM the angry talk, Con learned that the dead man on the beach was one half of the firm of Darby & Artz, who owned a string of cigarette-vending machines up and down the coast. The partners had come here to buy the hijacked cigarettes for their vending machines, but had balked at the price. Pete and Bruno had worked them over to try and change their minds. Somehow Artz got loose and in the early-morning fog fell off the cliff.

"And while me and Bruno are chasing

around looking for Artz," DeLane said, "this guy finds him on the beach!"

While Pete kept the shotgun level, Bruno went through Con's pockets and laid the contents on the counter. In a leather folder was a piece of metal with a dull gold shine to it.

"A cop!" DeLane said, holding up the badge. "A detective sergeant, Los Angeles police. And too dumb even to wear a gun! That means you weren't looking for us or you'd have been heeled."

Con, nodding his head at the girl, said, "You're in this one pretty deep, DeLane. In this state you can get the gas chamber for kidnaping."

DeLane's eyebrows raised as he said mockingly, "Guess you two haven't met. Laura Darby. She keeps books for Darby & Artz and tries to keep her father from going back to San Quentin for parole violation." He put his eyes on the girl. "You haven't been kidnaped, have you, Laura?"

Laura Darby put a hand to her bruised cheek. "My father was blind to let his fear force him to deal with a man like you!"

DeLane was fingering a violet-colored envelope on the counter, where Bruno had placed it with Con's badge and wallet. DeLane's curiosity prompted him now to shake out a neat fold of violet-colored note paper. The ring in the envelope made a little clatter of sound as it rolled across the counter. DeLane began to read aloud:

"Dear Con: I guess you should know I could never marry a policeman. When you get this I'll be in Las Vegas on my honeymoon. Della."

DeLane lifted his eyes from the scented paper to put them hard against Con's tight face. Still watching Con, he turned to Pete, saying, "We've almost blown this job, but not quite. With Artz dead it will make it easy to do business with Darby, and we'll have an outlet for all the cigarettes we can hijack. The thing to do now is to find Artz's body before somebody else stumbles on it. We'll dispose of it, permanently."

"What about him?" Pete said, looking at Con.

"Didn't you hear?" DeLane said, a wicked smile on his lips. "He went walking along the beach this morning and fell off the cliff."

Laura Darby gasped. "That's murder!"

"And you keep your mouth shut!" DeLane snapped. "Because if we're ever nailed for it, you go right along with us. You can't prove you haven't been in this from the start."

"I don't care about myself," she said stoutly.

"Then think of your old man. He won't live very long if you get ideas about getting some cop's ear and telling the story."

DeLane started for the door, said, "When you find Artz, and take care of the other details, phone me. The number is six-four-two."

Bruno nodded and wrote the number down on the inside of a match cover.

With one hand on the doorknob, DeLane turned to Con, saying, "Wish me a happy honeymoon, policeman!"

His fist shot out to crash against Con's jaw, sending him to the floor in a sprawl.

Angrily Con lurched to his feet, but stood there rigid, feeling Pete's shotgun rammed against his back. Outside, there was the sudden roar of a powerful motor as a big car swung out of the driveway and onto the main road.

**T**HE ODOR of tobacco was stronger in the rear of the building, for here packing cases stamped with cigarette brand names were stacked ceiling high from the hijacked truck Con had seen stalled and out of gas on the outskirts of Palisade. The gang, he figured, had been using this place as a warehouse for some time.

A bony man in a wrinkled brown suit lay on an Army cot, his ankles and wrists tied with lengths of electric light cord. As they entered the back room, the man raised his head off the cot. His face was flushed and there was the shine of fever in his eyes.

"You should never have made him come here," Laura cried. "He's been ill! You can see that!"

"We didn't make him come," Pete told her gruffly.

She gave Pete a withering glance. "He had no choice. The parole board would have sent him back if they knew he was tied up in a thing like this."

"This isn't the first time he's done business with DeLane?" Con said.

Sam Darby answered for her, his voice thin and tired. "Artz got suspicious about these cigarettes I was buying. That's why I had to get him down here tonight. But he balked at anything crooked." He lay back on the cot. "I should have balked too, before it was too late."

"How about Laura?" Con asked. "Did she know what was going on?"

Darby shook his head. "She got suspicious and followed us down here. They found her outside the window—" He shrugged bony shoulders.

"Untie him," Laura Darby said. "Can't you see he's ill?"

The chunky Bruno had brought in the piece of kelp. He swung it viciously against Darby's face, the blow sounding like the slap of a dead fish against a dock piling. Darby's head snapped back. Laura screamed and tried to claw at Bruno's face, but he pushed her aside, laughing.

With Pete's shotgun against his spine, there was little help Con could offer. Darby looked sick and frightened. Bruno stood there with the thick piece of kelp hanging from his fist.

"It's your fault everything went wrong, damn you, Darby!" he cried.

Bruno seemed to debate a moment whether or not to strike the helpless man again. Then he tossed the kelp into the corner and took an automatic from his coat pocket.

"You watch Darby," he told Pete. "We don't want him gettin' away like Artz."

"You watch out for tricks, too," Pete said nervously.

"There won't be any tricks left in this boy," Bruno said. "If he tries anything, the girl will be the first one that gets hurt."

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside it was still gray and foggy. As they went down the rickety stairway, Con could feel Laura pressed against him, her hand occasionally brushing his shoulders as she fought for balance. Halfway down, Con halted and took the weight off his right foot.

"Keep moving," Bruno, a dim shape in the fog, yelled behind him.

"It's my trick ankle," Con said. "I twisted

it on the beach this morning. It'll be all right in a minute."

"Go on, and quit stallin'," Bruno snarled, brandishing his gun.

At the place where the stairway ended, Con took Laura's hand, feeling it cold in his own. Carefully he guided her down the slippery trail, while Bruno clambered in their wake. When he felt sand under his shoes, Con reached up and swung Laura down to the beach, noticing how light she was in his arms.

"I'll bet you'd never faint if you saw a dead starfish in the water," he said with a tight grin.

She stared at him quizzically for a moment.

Bruno snapped, "Show me the body! And hurry it up!"

Con led the way up the fog-shrouded beach a hundred yards and then halted as if to get his bearings. Methodically he tried to plan how to get the gun away from Bruno and at the same time keep Laura from getting hurt.

"Don't try to jump me in this fog," Bruno warned, "or you'll get a bullet in the knee."

He jerked Laura in front of him, using her as a shield for his chunky figure. Con saw Laura's frightened eyes and tried to reassure her with his own.

Farther up the beach, Con halted again, hearing the crunch of Bruno's footsteps and the girl's behind him in the sand. Hearing them stop, looking up, he half hoped Bruno might have taken his arm from around Laura's waist. But Bruno still held her, his gun against her back.

Con tilted his head at the sand. "This is where Artz was lying," he told Bruno. "But he must have regained consciousness and crawled away."

**F**OR THE first time, a note of fear edged Bruno's voice as he cried, "I thought you said Artz was dead!"

"He appeared to be," Con said.

"A detective," Bruno snapped, "and you can't tell if a guy is a corpse! I've met some stupid ones in my time, but you're the dumbest!"

The surf ran in at them, washing coldly over the tops of Con's shoes. A pile of

slimy kelp wriggled in the sand against the advancing tide. Spray dashed against their faces.

"The tide has washed out his tracks," Con said.

Bruno's voice rose. "Just a stupid cop, too dumb to even wear a gun!" His voice went up another notch in frenzy. "Look around for him, damn it!"

Con looked a bewildered brown-haired man in a rumpled tweed jacket. He began to rub his right ankle, while his eyes searched the sand as if for a trace of Artz. But his thoughts were flowing in a smooth pattern. If he got a break it would only be one, and he would have to make it count. Bruno, he knew, was the kind of gunman who would pump a bullet into a woman if panic laid its hold on him and she got in his way.

"Don't just stand there!" Bruno raged. He twisted his head, looking at the gray and lonely cliffs as if half expecting Artz to come walking out of the fog.

Suddenly Con snapped his fingers. "I remember now! I dragged him into a cave to keep the tide from getting at him. That one over there." And he pointed.

Bruno jerked his head for a fraction of a second while Con poised on the balls of his feet. Bruno took only long enough to glance at an opening in the cliff wall, barely visible through a veil of fog. Then he was facing Con again.

Con turned quickly on his right leg as if to stride toward the cave. With a groan the leg collapsed and he sank down in the sand.

"Get up," Bruno said suspiciously.

"My trick ankle," Con said through his teeth, as Laura watched him tensely. "Go ahead and see if Artz isn't in that cave."

Bruno shook his head. "You think I'm fool enough to turn my back on you? Think again, copper. You're comin' along."

It was getting lighter by the minute, and with the rising sun the fog belt might be burned through. Then they would be in plain sight of whoever might be prowling the beach—an early morning fisherman or one of Palisade's beachcombers looking for coins uncovered by the winter tides.

Bruno licked his lips when Con said, "Give me a hand up."

Bruno, so anxious to get this over with, instinctively stuck out his left hand to grab Con's wrist and pull him up. Even as he reached out he must have realized it was the wrong thing to do. Con came suddenly to life. Laura twisted herself free of Bruno's grasp. Bruno was screaming as Con dropped backward into the sand, clutching Bruno's wrist. Bruno went flying overhead. Con, instead of releasing Bruno's wrist, held his iron grip. As Bruno's body thudded to the wet sand there was the crack of broken bone. Bruno moaned.

Quickly Con got to his feet and picked up the automatic that had spun out of the gunman's hand. With his left hand he lifted a piece of heavy kelp, and said, "I ought to give you a little of this, fat boy."

But Bruno was out cold. Seizing Laura's arm, Con hurried her along the foggy beach. At the foot of the zigzag path they halted. She was suddenly against him, clutching his shoulders, her nails biting into the skin. Her coppery hair was wet against his cheek. In a moment the hysteria was gone and she stepped back, saying, "I—I never saw anything happen so quickly. One minute Bruno was there. The next—"

"A man like Bruno is so used to relying on a gun he forgets policemen sometimes learn Judo." When he said "policemen" he was thinking of Della. He blew sand out of the gun barrel and fired twice at the murky sky.

"I'm hoping this will bring Pete down," he said, and shoving Laura behind a rock, went swiftly up the steep trail.

At the foot of the stairway, with the salty wind tearing at his face, he saw Pete appear on the palisade rim high above.

"Bruno!" Pete yelled down into the fog. "What's the shooting? Is everything okay!"

No sound in answer, only the muffled roar of the surf coming to life in the gray morning.

**P**ETE scurried along the cliff edge, reached the stairway and yelled Bruno's name again, his voice a little frightened. He clutched the shotgun. A shadowy, nervous figure, he started cautiously down the stairway.

Con smiled coldly, and rising, grabbed the

end of the stairway and shook it violently. He heard Pete's frightened cry and the roar of both shotgun barrels being discharged simultaneously. Then the thump and bumping sound of Pete's body hurtling down the rotted steps.

Con found him huddled in a clump of bushes a little to the left of the stairway. He lifted Pete by one shoulder. Pete's head tilted at an odd angle.

Laura came scrambling up the trail to stare at Pete's body.

"Broken neck." Con told her. "We were luckier than we had a right to be."

"When I heard the shots," she said slowly, "I was afraid he had killed you."

"I didn't want to risk a fight up there because of your father," he told her. "That's why I did it this way. A man with a sawed-off shotgun is nobody to fool with. He can kill an awful lot of people without half trying."

He hurried her up the palisade steps and across to the cabin. Now that it was lighter, he saw the truck he had almost smashed into on the highway pulled up alongside the fence. Inside, he untied Laura's father. He put a hand on the old man's forehead, feeling the dry heat of fever.

Laura said, anxiously, "He had a bad cold. He never should have been here."

Con felt sorry for her. Sam Darby would have a lot of explaining to do to the law. He phoned for an ambulance.

"You'd better get him to a hospital," he said. "The rest can wait."

Laura's gray eyes widened. When he started for the door, she said, "Don't take any more chances."

"Just one more," Con told her. "It's slightly personal."

Driving a rig like this was somewhat different from handling the trucks he had wheeled one summer during college vacation, but Con found the right gear slots and soon had the big aluminum van moving along the back streets of Palisade.

At the crest of a hill, he left it in gear, killed the motor and set the brakes. A sedan was pulled into the drive that angled beside a redwood cottage. He crept to the big front windows that overlooked the town and the ocean far below. Della had never wanted

drapes for that "billion dollar view" as she called it.

Della, wearing a black dress that clung to her model's figure, was nervously biting her red nails. She sat stiffly on a studio couch, her shapely legs crossed.

Randy DeLane, in the act of pouring himself a drink, said, his voice muffled through the heavy window glass, "I'll get my call any minute now. Then we'll head back for town and catch the Las Vegas plane."

He went over to Della and she pulled away. "Just what kind of business are you in, anyway?" she demanded, looking up at him.

"What do you care," he told her over the rim of his glass. "Just as long as the money is fresh and regular."

"You're beginning to make my scalp twitch," she snapped. "I'm not so sure I want to go to Las Vegas with you, after all."

His face got hard when he said, "I told you once before I don't take no to anything!"

Then Della swung her eyes and Con, in the act of putting a hand on the knob of a glass-paned door, stiffened when she screamed.

Randy DeLane moved quickly, spinning to pull a snub-nosed .38 from his coat pocket. He kept right on spinning, the shock of Con Rayborn's slug in his left thigh knocking him in a sprawl on the carpeting.

Della, her blue eyes frightened, had jumped off the couch as Con entered the room to prod the moaning DeLane with his toe.

"Just because you're a cop," she cried, "you don't have to go around shooting my friends! I knew you were jealous, but—"

Con looked at her strangely for a moment, then a tight grin edged across his mouth as he picked up the phone. He identified himself to the Palisade police, explaining the whole setup quickly. Della's face was a starchy white.

"Con," she said, putting a hand tentatively on his arm, "I didn't know about Randy—" She bit a pale lip. "Maybe you and I could—"

"I'm still a policeman, remember?" he told her.

DeLane, moaning on the floor, looked up long enough to ask, "How in hell did you know where I'd be?"

Con said, "You told the boys to call you at six-four-two. After all," Con went on, "if a guy once had Della's phone number he wouldn't be likely to forget it in a hurry."

A siren began to wail from somewhere far down the hill.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Con reached the hospital Sam Darby was under an oxygen tent. Shock and pneumonia, the doctor said. Con was with Laura the next morning when Sam Darby's heart fluttered to a final halt.

She lowered her head, saying softly, "Now he doesn't have to worry any more."

"DeLane will take over in that department," Con told her gently. "He's got a lot of empty years for it. Bruno can help out."

She wanted to be alone then and he didn't blame her. He called Herm at Central Homicide in Los Angeles and explained that he was taking the rest of his vacation in the mountains. Herm understood how it was.

From a cabin deep in the snow of Lake Arrowhead, Con composed a letter to Laura, ending it with, "When things are settled, I'd like to see you again." He started to add, "unless you're the kind who wouldn't marry a policeman." But he didn't put that in. He didn't have to. He was remembering how she had looked at him that morning on the beach. That was enough.

When he tilted up a tall glass he saw nothing but ice cubes. Della's image was gone.

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Featured In Our Next Issue

## CARTER DICKSON'S THE WHITE PRIORY MURDERS

*A Book-length Novel of Sinners and Slayers*

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# BLUES IN

*On the pier, behind a stack of whisky cases, lay the corpse, a steel box-hook buried in his skull, and aboard Lt. Koski's police boat was the sexy number who knew the answers—too many of them!*





# THE NIGHT

A Steve Koski Novelet by STEWART STERLING

## CHAPTER I

### CORPSE ON PIER 19

**T**HE *Vigilant* ghosted silently past the Hudson wharves in a milk-thick February fog. The glow of brilliance from a docked Cunarder, the floodlights on a Norwegian freighter's loading derrick, the pink-neon of the waterfront bars bathed the Manhattan pierheads in a strange opalescence which distorted all shoreward outlines to the two men on the police boat.

The one in the cockpit called:

"Put the peek on Pier Nineteen, Sarge. Next to that Danish single stacker." The officer who spoke wore a peajacket over dungarees. His long-nosed, weather-lined face with its cold blue eyes and lean, hard-bitten jaw, might have been the model for a banks fisherman.

His bulky-shouldered companion in the pilothouse rubbed mist off the window, peered toward the berthed liners and the shed-covered wharves.

"Prob'ly the watchman, Lieutenant. Gettin' away from the stink of them green hides for a breath of air."

"Since when did they start hiring dames as night watchmen?" Lieutenant Steve Koski flicked beads of moisture off his eyebrows, stepped up on the port waterway to get a better look. "Bear in a bit, Joe."

"It could be a he, in one of them long overcoats." Sergeant Joe Mulcahey angled the black snout of the patrol-boat toward the pierheads.

"You better lay off those pickled eels they serve at the Beacon Light, Sarge. They're ruining your eyes. That's a girl. And she *hasn't* any coat on. Stand by with that searchlight."

Mulcahey's round, windburned Irish features in the dim glow spilling up from the binnacle were puckered with puzzlement.

"Not figuring this dock looting is the work of the shemale sex, are y' now?" he asked Koski.

"No. I'm figuring any dame alone on a pierhead on a night like this is considering a dive. There. She's climbed on the string-piece, see—" Koski shed his jacket quietly. "Fix your beam on her. It might stop her."

The white spear of light reached over the dark tidestream like a chalk mark across a blackboard. It touched the hesitant figure poised on the lip of the pier. The startled girl threw up a hand to protect herself from the glare.

Then she plunged toward the water, flinging both arms about her face as she went under.

Koski dived, felt a nylon leg, caught the ankle



**M**MULCAHEY swore, gunning the motor. The *Vigilant's* nose went up, her tail squatted, and she surged across the oily calm with a froth of foam at her stem.

"Easy, Sarge. The less wake, the easier it'll be to spot her. Bounce your beam off the water between us and the bulkhead. That's the idea." Koski straddled the gunwale, a boathook in his fist.

A tiny shoe bobbed to the surface a dozen yards upstream from where the girl had vanished. The lieutenant paid no attention to it. The shoe would have come off when she hit the river. Air in the toe would have brought it up, momentarily.

Something gray, which might have been a stick of driftwood, surfaced thirty feet beyond the shoe.

"There. Port a bit, Irish. Now. Come up. Steady. . . ."

Koski leaned far out, lunged with the boathook. The point caught in the air-bulged skirt. He twisted. He pulled gently. The girl's body came to the surface. The cloth ripped, tore loose.

"Line, Sarge." Koski let go the wooden pole, went over feet first, reached the pole as its hook end was dipping beneath the surface.

He dived, felt a nylon leg, caught the ankle. There was no time for regulation rescue procedure with the swirling water only a degree above freezing.

As he came up, a lead line swished over his head, the weighted end plopping into the water twenty feet beyond him. He grabbed the line with his free hand.

Mulcahey hauled them in. When Koski got a grip on the *Vigilant's* guard-rail, he looped the throw-line under the girl's armpits. The sarge hoisted her up to the coaming, down into the cockpit—a limp soggy-ness with a white face. Her hair was like wet copper wire in the luminous fog.

Koski waited for Mulcahey to give him a hand up to the cockpit. "Next time—" he spoke through his teeth to keep them from chattering—"some son-of-a-buck tells you what a swell job you got, getting paid for going motorboating every day, give him a free sock in the nose for me, will you!"

"Yeah, yeah." Mulcahey looked down at the girl. "This babe woulda froze t' death

before she drowned. She'll prob'ly get pneumonia, anyhow."

"That's right. Cheer her up."

Koski dug a blanket out of the starboard locker in the pilot-house, came back to the cockpit. The girl followed his movements with frightened eyes. She breathed noisily with a quick, hoarse, panting sound, but said nothing.

Koski unlashed the throw-line from her shoulders. "Feel different now about doing a dive?"

She shook her head.

Koski guessed her to be about twenty-two. She had a slim, but sexy build that must have made the satin evening gown look all right on her before one shoulder-strap had broken and the skirt had ripped off at one side of her waist. He threw the blanket over her.

"Get out of that dress. Wrap that wool around you."

"What's the use?" she asked, in a voice not much above a whisper. "I'm going to do it again, the minute you take your eyes off me."

The lieutenant wrung icy water out of the cuffs of his dungarees. "You might, at that." He called to Mulcahey. "Toss me that jewelry, Sarge."

**T**HE sergeant brought the outsize hand-cuffs. Koski clicked one on the girl's left ankle, the other onto a ring-bolt on the motor housing. "Just to play safe, sister: You don't look as if you could stand another polar bear bath."

"What's the difference?" She shrugged. "Is any one way worse than another?"

"Couldn't tell you for sure," Koski said easily. "No experience along that line. All seem hard to me. Now—what made you feel like making eel bait of yourself?"

"Just . . . blue," she said tensely.

"Trouble with your boy friend, maybe?" A girl dressed as expensively as this one wouldn't have been depressed because she was short of funds. Koski was fairly sure of that.

"That—" she admitted—"and other things."

"What's your name?"

"Alice—Alice Rorty." A shade too much hesitation.

"How'd you happen to be on the pier?"

She looked down at the handcuff, felt her ankle to see how tightly it held her. "Just walked on."

"Just like that? Watchman a friend of yours?"

"No!" The terror in her voice was matched by that in her eyes. "I—I slipped in. Past him."

"Sure." The lieutenant shouldered into his dry pea-jacket. "That's the way watchmen on these piers are, huh? Leave the door open so anybody can get in anytime." He called. "Joe, take her in to Nineteen."

The police boat circled, slid in under the shadow of the dock, nosed the pilings.

Koski went up on the foredeck, looped the bow-line over a bollard, pulled it tight. Mulcahey let the hundred and eighty horses idle, went aft for a stern line.

The lieutenant climbed to the roof of the pilohouse. "Going up to find out what makes, Irish," he called. "She left her coat and handbag up there somewhere. They always do before they take the jump."

The sergeant grunted. "I'll stick a pot of java on the gas to thaw you out when your pants begin to freeze on you."

Koski leaped to the stringpiece, swung his hand flash in concentric arcs. There was no sign of a handbag or a coat.

He called, "Hi."

There was no answer. A hundred yards eastward there was the steady, surf-like hum of traffic on the express highway. From the upper harbor came the mournful hoots of ferry boats in the fog. That was all.

He strolled down the pier to the side door of the big shed covering the dock. The door was open. The interior of the pierhouse was a gloomy cavern smelling of pine boxes, burlap, sawdust, paint, whisky, damp wool. The only light came from a long blue-violet tube high in the roof, halfway to the truck gates.

He called again: "Hey! Watchman!"

Before his voice had stopped echoing in the high vault of the shed, he knew there would be no answer. Twenty feet inside the door, beside a stack of Scotch whisky cases, lay a shiny-visored cap. On the floor beyond

the cap, partly hidden by the stack of pine cases, was a shock of white hair.

The watchman lay on his side, with his knees doubled up, his fingers half clenched, a heavy steel box-hook with its point still deep in the back of his skull.

On his mouth and beside it was something that looked like blood—but wasn't.

It was lipstick.

## CHAPTER II

### ALICE AIN'T



OSKI knelt by the dead man. The wrinkled, winter-apple face, with its red-button nose, was still warm. The .38 was still in the watchman's holster.

A couple of yards away, on a tier of three cases stenciled *I. MacLone, Purveyors to His Majesty, Aberdeen, Scotland*, a beaver coat was draped over a shiny russet handbag. A pair of girls' gloves, pigskin, lay on the floor beside the whisky cases.

Koski stalked to the pier door, called: "Sarge. Call in. A 37. Rush it."

On the foredeck, Mulcahey paused long enough to ask, "What gives?"

"Ed Weltz. Remember Ed? Ran that tow-tug, hauling gravel, out of Clason Point."

"Used to play the wheeze-box at those clam roasts. Many's the time I—what's he doin' here?"

"Night watchman, he was. Now he's taking a nap—with a crate hook in his skull. Get that shortwave going." Koski looked down at the white, upturned face of the girl huddled in the blanket. "Just felt low in your mind, did you, kid? Can't say I blame you."

She made no answer, but he could see her shiver and hunch her shoulders against the night chill.

He went back in the shadowless half gloom of the huge shed. As he strode past squat bales of green cowhides crusty with coarse salt, great coffin-like boxes labeled *Forrester Brothers, Fine Weavers, Kirkcaldy, Perth*, giant stackings of the MacLone

cases, the reek of whisky became stronger.

Always, in unloading cargo nets full of liquor, longshoremen managed to drop and smash a case enough for it to come under the "breakage in handling" clause in a shipping manifest. That might have happened here, with a ship in from Scotland with a few thousand cases of highland dew. On the other hand, a cargo like this was one of the favorite targets of the pier pirates who'd been getting away with everything but murder. And now . . . ? He wondered.

Fifty yards from the truck gates which opened onto the cobbled street, Koski could see the thick, iron latch-bar wasn't in its sockets at either side of the wide swinging doors. It wouldn't make much difference whether the watchman's cubby-hole office was guarded or not, as long as the street gates could be entered with a mere push.

Warm yellow light streamed out from the open office door—until Koski got within a dozen yards of it. Then it slammed shut.

He ran to it, twisting the knob, throwing his weight against the panel. It was locked.

Inside, a muffled voice cried, "One of 'em's tryin' to get in here, now!"

Koski went back two steps, came, booting hard. There was a flat, brittle cracking—a splintering of wood high up on the jamb. The guy inside was shooting at him through the door!

Koski's hand went to the butt of his own pistol, then he decided against it. He picked up a wooden wedge used for blocking trailer tires, ran to the truck gate, pulled one side open, slipped out into the street.

CAFE signs made a mock rainbow in the mist. The street was empty. No trucks or cars. The watchman's peephole window was dark. The man might have doused the office light before ducking out to the street himself. Koski crouched beneath the level of the peephole, hurled the wedge block.

Glass crashed. A gun answered. Koski didn't see the muzzle flare. He crashed shoulder-first into the watchman's street door. It banged back against the wall—and the Harbor Precinct's trouble-shooter was in his own rough-and-tumble element.

The man fired again. The bullet hit the metal sign stating that the premises were

protected by a nationally famous detective agency, whined into the ceiling.

Koski got fingers on the gun barrel. He could see it better than anything else in the murk. He got in a short, savage left, caught a knee in the groin, wrested the weapon away, clubbed it once, twice. The man in the dark fell against Ed Weltz's single-legged stool.

Koski put the hand flash on him. He was a thin, wiry specimen with a high, narrow head and a bony face, twenty-eight or thirty, maybe. Balding forehead—which added to the bony impression. Thin, pinched-in lips. He couldn't weigh more than a hundred and forty with rubber boots on. What he wore were thick longshore brogans, a pair of blue jeans and a turtle-neck sweater.

He was limp as an empty burlap bag when Koski clicked on the lone bulb and stretched him out on the floor. His pockets told only that he smoked a pipe, used *No Zleep* pills, had about ten dollars in his imitation alligator billfold, owed money to a loan company and carried a Social Security card made out to Harold F. Remsen.

He tried to sit up as Koski was stuffing the wallet back in his jeans. The lieutenant put a foot on his chest.

"I can hear you okay when you're flat on your back. What you doin' in Weltz's office?"

"Calling the cops." Remsen glared. "What the hell *you* doin' here?"

Koski took off his visored cap with the Marine Division insignia, held it where the other could see it. "I was answering your call. We don't generally have this much trouble with people who holler for help, though."

"I thought you were one them liquor thieves." Remsen scowled at the cap, rubbed his mouth where the gun sight had lacerated it. "They killed Cap Weltz."

"Did you see 'em do it?" Koski took his foot away.

"No. I was over at Gallattly's, havin' a san'wich an' a cup of coffee. I'm head checker on this pier. I been puttin' in over-time checkin' out that Glascow cargo that come in this mornin'. The ship's makin' a quickie turnaround an' starts loadin' again in the mornin'. Well, when I got back from

feedin' my face, Cap wasn't here, but the office door was open—so I smell a rat right off."

"But you didn't see any rats?" Koski hauled him to his feet.

"Wasn't a soul in the shed, officer." Remsen was sweating. "Thing I noticed first off, a couple hundred cases of whisky weren't in the stacks where I'd checked 'em off. If there'd only been a few missing, I might not've noticed. But that many—"

"Yeah." Koski locked the office door, unlocked the one to the pier. "So?" He pushed Remsen through into the dim-lit shed.

"I ran down to the end, yellin' like crazy for Cap, knowin' somethin' must've happened to him, an' I practically trip over him. He's lyin' back there with a grab-hook stuck in his head."

ORDINARILY, Steve Koski would have felt a little silly, striding along beside a skinny character like that while carrying a gun in each fist. But something about the sidelong glances Remsen sneaked at him while they trudged through the semi-darkness made the lieutenant wonder why the checker had been so quick on the trigger when he hadn't even hollered to find out who was on the other side of that door.

"Do you know a girl, name of Alice Rorty, Remsen?"

"Rorty? Never heard of her."

"Cap have any girl friend?"

"Nah. All he's interested in, he's got an a-cordeen, plays it sometimes nights when I'm workin'. It don't sound bad in a place big as this. I mean, it didn't."

"How long were you gone for eats?"

"Oh, you know. Half an hour. Maybe three-quarters. I signed out with Cap. I guess it's on his book when I left. Around ten o'clock, somewhere around that."

Koski looked at his wrist watch. If the

cold bath hadn't slowed it, it was now five minutes past eleven. Still, even an hour was a short time to put the snatch on three hundred cases of Scotch worth close to fifteen thousand bucks.

When they came to the watchman's body, Koski asked, "Did you move him, or touch him?"

"Cripes, no! I could see he was dead. I know better'n that. You ain't suppose to move a murdered person."

"That's right. But somebody did. Maybe the killer. He fell on his face when that hook caught him. See that smudge on his nose and chin?"

"Yuh." Remsen said nothing about the much more obvious smear of crimson lipstick by the dead man's mouth.

"Then somebody rolled him over on his side." Koski hooked an arm inside Remsen's, led him to the little door opening onto the river.

Remsen seemed scared at the sight of the police-boat with its square green flag fluttering damply in the mist. But when he saw the girl in the cockpit, he cried out:

"Ellen!"

She seemed to shrivel up inside the cocoon of blanket. She turned her face away, began to cry noiselessly.

Koski said, "Thought you didn't know her?"

The checker said fiercely, "Her name ain't Rorty! And you're damn right I know her! *She's my sister!*"

Koski cocked his head at the sound of sirens in the street he'd just left. "You noticed the lipstick on Wertz's face, didn't you?"

Remsen ignored him, fell to his knees on the stringpiece, leaning over to get his face as close to his sister's as possible. "Ellen! Ellen!"

She stared up dumbly, her eyes glassy with tears.

He clapped his hands to his head, swayed back and forth like a man in great pain. "Why'd you do it, Sis? Why'd you do it?"

She spoke then, thickly but distinctly, as a drunken person does when trying to enunciate clearly.

"You know why I did—what I had to, Hal."

NEWS about the best in crime fiction will be found on page 107 of this issue. —The Editor.

## CHAPTER III

## Two PLUS Two



THE checker stood up stiffly, his head bent forward as he kept his eyes on the girl. He held his arms out rigidly from his sides with the fingers extended.

"I give up," he muttered.

Mulcahey growled, "Black shame on ye, killin' an old codger like Ed."

Koski touched Remsen on the shoulder. "That wasn't a confession, was it?"

"Hell, no!" Remsen waggled his head in despair. "I only meant I can't understand why my sister'd do a thing like that." He stared at her, miserably. "If she *did*," he added.

"Jump down." Koski motioned. "Keep an eye on him, Joe." He waited until Remsen had landed on the pilothouse roof and Mulcahey was helping him down to the foredeck. Then the lieutenant went back into the pierhouse.

He held his flash so the funnel of light lit up his head and cap. The two radio patrolmen, running toward him, slowed.

"What you got?" one of them called.

"Hijack?" asked the other.

Koski circled the beam on Ed Weltz. The uniformed men inspected the body with non-committal grunts.

"Might be the same crew who've been hoisting stuff along the waterfront for weeks. Or could be some amateurs who figure the professional pirates'll get blamed for whatever they do. Either way, there's a couple hundred cases of Scotch missing and this watchman knocked off. But there's a queer angle."

"What's that on his puss?" asked the older patrolman.

"Looks like lipstick," his partner suggested.

"It is, too." Koski explained about the girl's suicide attempt. "Her brother's head checker, here. He claims he was out grabbing a sandwich when all this happened, came back and heard me, put in a call for help."

The younger officer looked skeptical.

"Our shortwave reported the call was relayed from Launch Nine. Is that your boat?"

Koski nodded. "I've got the brother on board with her. She won't admit swinging that crate hook—but she doesn't deny it, either."

The elder patrolman smiled cynically with one corner of his mouth. "She'll prob'ly claim the old dodo was attacking her, and that she only bopped him in self-defense."

"Maybe." Koski didn't seem concerned. "I'll turn her over to you as a homicide suspect. I want to ask her brother a few things. He might give us a lead to these cargo thieves the commissioner's getting so burned up about."

The younger policeman squinted suspiciously. "We better take 'em both off your hands, Lieutenant. We got strict orders to bring everyone connected with these piracies straight to the Deputy Inspector."

Koski regarded him dourly. "Think you're in your own parish? You're in the Harbor Precinct, now—even if there's a yard of concrete between you and the river. You take orders from me. Understand?"

The senior patrolman apologized. "No harm meant, Lieutenant. It's only the Inspector's been needling us to get action on this business, an' Frank's kind of an eager beaver. We'll wait for the Hommy Detail—an' then book your cold-bath baby."

"Ask your captain—" Koski wasn't mollified—"to assign a spare man to fixed post here until morning. These snatch-boys have been known to strike twice in the same spot."

HE LED the younger officer to the bollard where the *Vigilant's* bowline stretched drum-tight in the flooding tide.

When Koski unlocked the ankle-cuff, he told the girl, "It'll make it a lot easier on yourself and on your brother if you tell us why you came to the pier tonight."

She tried dejectedly to make a skirt out of the thick blanket. "I often come to see my brother. It's the only chance I get—to talk to him."

"Doesn't he live at home? With you?" From the foredeck, Remsen snapped,

"You don't have to answer questions, Ellen. Wait until you get a lawyer. Don't tell them a thing. I'll get a lawyer for you. Just don't say anything."

Mulcahey grabbed the checker, muscled him against the visor of the pilothouse windows. "Just don't *you* say anything, bud. Or I'll wrap five around your whiskers!"

The girl put her hand gently on Koski's sleeve. "I ought to be grateful to you. But I can't tell you anything—nothing at all. You'll have to believe I'm grateful, and let it go at that. I'm really not worth risking your life for, am I?"

He found a length of quarter-inch rope, helped her make it into a temporary belt to hitch the blanket around her slim waist. "I don't know about that. Offhand, I'd say a girl who could commit a coldblooded murder wouldn't be the sort to get remorseful enough to walk to the exit the way you did."

She held her head high and looked over him at the bluecoat waiting on the pier above.

Koski helped her to the foredeck. "I wouldn't know what you're covering up, and you must think it's damn bad or you wouldn't have taken that dip. But keeping your mouth shut isn't going to fix anything. You think about it. I'll be around to see you in the morning."

"Don't bother," she said bitterly. "I don't know anything you couldn't tell from what you found—in there." She gestured toward the pier, held her hand up to the radio patrolman, was lifted up, disappeared into the great shed.

"Now then." Mulcahey shoved Remsen toward the cockpit. "Shoot off your face. You want to so bad!"

The checker applied his handkerchief to the cut lip. "I'll take my own advice and keep still. Anything I said, you'd twist it someway to go against my sister."

Koski said, "You seem all-fired sure she killed him."

Remsen studied the blood on his handkerchief.

"One thing I'm sure of—" the lieutenant poked his flashlight at the pilings alongside, where the sea-moss had been rubbed clean by something that left pearl-gray streaks—

"she didn't get away with those cases of whisky all by herself. It took three or four huskies to handle those boxes. Who else was in on it?"

Remsen cried resentfully. "Look. I didn't even know Ellen was down here, tonight. I thought she was working. I go out to get a bite, come back to find Ed stone dead and Ellen half drowned. That's absolutely all I know and all I'm going to tell you."

KOSKI grabbed a fistful of the turtle-neck sweater, pulled the checker toward him. "What's given you ideas it's smart to clam up on cops? Well, it's dumb to be dumb. Sooner or later you'll loosen up." He slammed the checker back against the bulkhead so hard Remsen grunted like a boxer socked hard in the belly. "Where does your sister work, wearing a satin evening gown? She doesn't look like a dance-hall dollie."

"She's a singer. Night club singer."

"Where?"

"Tahiti Tavern."

Mulcahey boomed, "Oh, ho. *That* joint!"

Koski said, "Phil Vann's place? Sheeps-head Bay?"

"Yes."

The Harbor Squad lieutenant considered: Tahiti Tavern. One of the biggest drink-dine-and-dance operations in the entire metropolitan area. Half a dozen dining rooms. Three bars and a cocktail lounge half the size of Grand Central. It served a couple of thousand people, weekend nights. Did a year-round business.

Phil Vann. The Seafood Sultan. Built his business on the slogan *From a Broiled Lobster to an International Institution*. A slick customer. There had been rumors of his rum-running connections back in the bootleg byegones, but he was supposed to be strictly legitimate, if a trifle on the sharp side, nowadays. Still, the Tavern's cafes and restaurants, its bars and lounge, could absorb a good many hundred cases of Scotch annually.

"Let's put it this way. Remsen. You work here at the pier. You know when a big shipment of whisky is due. You tell Ellen. She works for Vann. She tells him

about the liquor. Then the next thing we know—"

"You're putting it cockeyed," Remsen said shakily. "First place, I don't talk business, outside of business, to anybody. Including my sister. Second place, Phil Vann's no crook. He'd no more have a part of pirating stuff off a dock than—than I would."

The checker pulled his sweater down nervously.

"Now you're beginning to spill." Koski pushed the flat of his palm against the checker's wishbone. "Keep pouring. Who does she know over there? Who owns a gray motor boat?"

Remsen looked sick. He gulped. "I suppose that won't be any secret by tomorrow. Her husband."

"Oh?"

"Chuck Matless. Charley Matless."

"Who's he?"

"Runs one of the party boats for Phil Vann."

Mulcahey grunted. "Ahha! The *Vannity*, by any chance, now? A fifty-foot, beat-up old tub?"

"That's the one. He takes fishing parties out every morning, around five or six o'clock. Out around Ambrose Light. I went with him once."

The sergeant pursed his lips. "A tall, homely scut? Built thin as a pelican, with a beak big as a pelican's, too? A nose you could see miles on a clear day?"

"That's Chuck. But—"

Koski threw off the bow-line. "Turn her over, Sarge. I'll cast off." He asked Remsen. "Has he ever had that barge over here at Pier Nineteen?"

"Not that I know of," Remsen said, unhappily. "You don't suppose that he might have—"

"After you been chasing junk-boats and fishing for floaters and grappling for suicides for ten years around this harbor, you don't suppose anything." Koski coiled the stern line neatly over the cleat. "But you get so you can figure a little. Any party boat that will carry sixty-five people could handle three hundred cases of liquor all right."

## I HATE YOUR GUTS



MULCAHEY blew the compressed-air horn at a car-ferry. "If he's tryin' to make time with the *Vannity*, luggin' a load like that, he'd most likely go down Buttermilk Channel, wouldn't he, Steye?"

"Yeah." Koski drank steaming coffee out of a thick handleless mug. "Close in, Irish. There's a back eddy all along shore. It'd help him."

He estimated the party boat's top speed at twelve knots, loaded. The police launch could get up to thirty-five in a pinch. But you didn't run Buttermilk at full throttle in a fog. Too much chance of running down a skiff. Still, unless the *Vannity* had better than an hour's head start. Number Nine might catch her before she got through the Narrows.

He motioned toward the coffeepot. "Slug of that will warm you up, Remsen."

"I couldn't hold anything on my stomach," the checker answered sullenly. "I'm sick already. Just bein' on the water makes me sick."

Koski grunted. The black hull of the police patrol was rolling a little as it furrowed the full tide, but it was no worse than the Staten Island ferry in choppy water. The pierman must be a sensitive sucker.

"Your sister mentioned some trouble with her boy friend. Her husband. I suppose she meant, huh?"

Remsen clutched the engine housing to steady himself. "Guess so," he said shortly. "Chuck ain't much of a husband. He ain't home much, least not when she's home. He hasta get up at three to get the party boat stocked for the trip, an' sometimes Ellen ain't even back from the Tavern by then. He don't get back till late afternoon, an' by then she's ready to leave. Besides, he don't make enough to keep a cat in scraps."

"Doesn't Vann come up with good pay?" Koski wondered whether the cut on three hundred cases of Scotch might not provide a few T-bones, as well as scraps.



"I don't know. I guess so. He does all right by Ellen, what I hear." Remsen didn't want to discuss it. He didn't want to talk at all.

Coming past the end of Governor's Island, a diesel tug with three gravel barges in tow kicked up a swell. The *Vigilant* lay over on her beam ends, pendulumed over to the opposite rail. Remsen sank to his knees in the cockpit, groaning.

Koski finished his coffee, unracked the shortwave receiver, pushed the Talk button.

"Patrol Nine to Eee Pee Eee Eee . . . Okay?"

The metallic voice from the speaker answered instantly, "Come in, Nine."

"Alert all boats for party boat *Vannity*, out of Sheephead, last reported near Pier Nineteen, North River. Fifty-footer, pearl-gray, deckhouse forward, single mast aft the house. Hold and detain for investigation. Koski, Lieutenant. That is all."

The hollow tones repeated the message and added, "Want the Brooklyn patrol cars notified, Steve?"

"Might ask one to check at the Vann wharf in Sheephead. We're on our way there." He signed off again.

Mulcahey cut the wake of a Navy destroyer surging down the harbor so the police boat bucked like a rodeo bronc. The coffeepot banged against the guard-rail on the stove. Remsen swore feebly.

THE sergeant echoed the curse. "Sure, maybe you had a thing there, about them pickled eels, Steve. I must be seein' around corners, but ain't that the blinker buoy off Gowanus? Holy hat, no! 'Tis some fathead on shore, usin' a flash!"

"Slow her." Koski took the night glasses out of their leather case, peered at the dim spark that winked on and off through the milky mist. A long blink, a short. A pause. A long and a short again and immediately repeated.

"Beam, Irish."

The searchlight dazzled a pencil of illumination through the coiling vapor. A hundred yards inshore, the light was reflected from a hull that might have been white, or gray. It might have been a fifty-footer or a

seventy. The boat wasn't making headway.

"In, Sarge." Koski lifted the sub-machine gun from its rack, checked the load, the safety. "Circle back. Come in to her bow."

"If that ain't the *Vannity*," the big Irishman growled, "I'll eat a bushel of beer caps. She must have bust down."

"Run that beam along her cockpit. It's it all right." The lieutenant could see no stacked crates above the party boat's coaming, but the customs lettering K2074 and the name VANNITY were plain enough now that the police boat had cut the gap between them to thirty yards. Also, there was a man on the low foredeck, hanging on to the deck house with one hand, waving a flashlight frantically with the other.

Mulcahey let the police boat coast, throttled the motor to a purr.

Koski cupped a hand. "What's the trouble?"

The man on the party boat—a short, fat-tish individual in dark pants and a red mackinaw—hollered, "Ma-an . . . overboard!"

"Alongside, Irish." Koski couldn't see in the fishing boat's deckhouse because of the glare reflected by the *Vigilant's* searchlight. "Douse the beam. Get a gun."

The police patrol's nose nuzzled the party boat's starboard quarter. Mulcahey gave the wheel a half-spin to the right, kicked the propeller ahead a couple of seconds. The boats lay rail to rail.

"Catch." Koski heaved a short line.

The man on deck grabbed at it, snubbed it around a deck cleat.

"Just keep her steady, Irish. And cover me." The lieutenant stepped across to the party boat, the sub-machine cradled in his elbow. "Who'd you lose?"

"The cap' . . . Jeeps, I'm glad you guys got here. I been lookin' for him, last half hour." The man was breathless. "But I couldn' go for help. One of the lines got wrapped around the screw when we hit that scow."

"Who're you?"

"Olsan. Bernt Olsan. I was helpin' Chuck."

"Helpin' him what?" Koski felt a grittiness underfoot on the cockpit flooring, but

saw no sign of any liquor cases on board.

"We was tryin' out the new motor. Mister Vann—he owns the boat—he had a new motor put in, an' Chuck—that's Cap Matless—he didn't want to gamble takin' her offshore without givin' the new engine a break-in."

"Careful guy, hah? Not so careful you didn't hit something in the fog?"

"Scow. Sand scow." Unhappily, Olsan wiped his plump face on the inside of his mackinaw sleeve. "We was on our way back to Sheepshead, where we come from, an' all of a sudden *boom*, there's this thing smack in front of us. Chuck swings away, so's we won't crash head-on, then he yells to me to help hold her off. He comes out of the cabin there an' runs to the rail with a boat-hook he grabs up. But we sock into that barge like a truck smackin' a telegraph pole, an' he goes over."

"Boat hook and all?"

"Yep. I try to grab him, of course. But he must've gone under the scow because that's the last I see of him. If I could've seen him, I'd've jumped in after him. All I could do was holler my head off to get somebody on the scow t' help me, but it just keeps goin' along."

**KOSKI** stepped into the deckhouse.

"What'd you do?"

"Tried t' get the boat goin' so's I could chase after that scow an' the tugboat towin' her, but I don't know nothin' about motor boats."

"No? Why'd Matless want you along on a trial run, then?"

Olsan held out his hands, palms up. "Guess I was the only guy around, an' I could blow the fog horn, stuff like that. But I don't know a damn thing about what to do when a line gets tangled in the propeller like it did. So I just shut off the motor an' let her drift. Of course, I kept lookin' for Chuck."

"Why didn't you reverse the motor, unwind the line from the shaft?"

"Never thought of it." Olsan seemed genuinely surprised. "Jeeps, would that've freed it? Only shows a bartender ain't got no business on a boat."

"How'd you happen to think of using that flashlight?"

"Well, I been wavin' it for pretty near half an hour. I was about give it up. Nobody except you paid any attention."

Koski eyed the *Vannity's* chart case, its flag cabinet, its red can of flares, its ship-to-shore set.

"Trial run, hah? Go far up the river?"

Olsan grimaced. "How would I know. Even if we coulda seen anything, I wouldn't've known where we was."

"Didn't put in anywhere?" Koski came out of the deckhouse, leaned out to look at the party boat's hull.

"No, sir."

"Well, let's put in at Sheepshead now. I've had one cold bath tonight, or I'd go overside and free that screw. But we'll give you a tow." The lieutenant slipped the safety catch on the tommy gun. "Phil Vann know you were out on this joy ride?"

Olsan drew in his breath sharply. "I'll say he didn't. He'll prob'ly fire me."

"Yeah? Would he mind his captain takin' out the boat that much?"

From the police boat's cockpit, Remsen said sayagely, "Mind? Vann hated Chuck's guts. He wouldn't have kept him as long as he has—except for Ellen."

## CHAPTER V

### THE OLD SKIPOLA

**S**ERGEANT MULCAHEY took one step back out of the *Vigilant's* pilot house, whacked a hand like a baseball glove on Remsen's shoulder, hauled him back to the pilot house door.

"Stow that chatter, unless it's a new set 'f teeth ye're wantin'! Keep it stowed, understand?"

"I've said all I wanted to," Remsen muttered. "It's the God's truth."

On the party boat Koski paid out a two-inch anchor line to the towing bits of the police launch.

"Know that lad, Olsan?" he asked.

"I've seen him," Olsan answered. "At the Tavern. He's Chuck's brother-in-law."

What's he doing here?"

"Same thing we are. Hunting a couple hundred cases of Scotch. Any ideas about it?"

"Whisky? I could use a slug right now, that's all."

Koski gave the sergeant the take-it-away signal, crouched long enough over the blunt bow of the fishing boat to see the scarred paint where the *Vannity* had hit something hard. He came back to the deck house, appraising the plump Olsan thoughtfully.

"Now if all that hodelyo about rubber-hose work in the back room of police stations was on the up and up, it'd save a lot of time. Mister Olsan. I'd simply whale you over the kidneys until you said right out plain what you did with that liquor."

"You could knock my brains out and I couldn't tell you anything except what I did. You're a hell of a cop, not even botherin' to grapple for Chuck."

"Don't hand me any more of that guff, mister. Or I'll forget my badge and go to work on you just on general principles. We know how Matless learned about the shipment of Scotch. There's evidence at the pier to show this tub was tied up there to-night. It won't be hard to tie you in with the murder charge."

The bartender backed away. "Murder?" he whispered. "You're kiddin'." He gawked, open-mouthed. "You *ain't* kiddin'!"

Koski took out a brown-stained clay pipe, stuffed it with tobacco from an oilskin pouch. "Ed Wertz was killed during the commission of a robbery. Law says every person involved in that crime is guilty of murder, regardless of who it was killed him."

Olsan tried to smile with assurance. "You could prob'ly scare the pants off a lot of guys with that mahooly. But—"

"You're shiverin' in your shorts right now, then." Koski used two matches, heads together, to light his pipe. "I wouldn't say, offhand, you've got much sense. But I'll give you credit for having enough to look ahead. A week for the Grand Jury to indict. Two weeks to set trial. A week for conviction. Three months for your lawyer's appeal to be turned down. Say four months

at the outside. Brings it up to the third or fourth Thursday in July. You can have any kind of ice cream you want for supper the night before. What kind of ice cream you like?"

"I didn't even know there was a murder." Olsan spoke so indistinctly he was barely audible. "They couldn't send me to the chair, not even knowing—"

"The prosecutor sometimes makes a deal, mister, where it'll get a conviction and save the state a lot of expense. I'll make a deal—to save time and get a killer. But you'll have to come up with the straight, and do it now."

THE bartender swallowed hard. He looked sicker than Remsen had. "I don't know much."

"How much?"

"Chuck did know about a big load of liquor. He asked me to go along to help load it, if we could get into the pier. He said it was a perfect night for it, so foggy an' all. Only when we got there, somebody'd beat us to it."

"Cleaned out the whole shipment, hah?" Koski showed his teeth, humorlessly.

"No. They'd taken some, but there was plenty left. Only when we tied up at the wharf, I stayed here on the *Vannity* while Chuck climbed up to force the door. He got in, was inside only a minute when he came tearing out again."

"Didn't you hear any commotion up in the shed?"

"There wasn't any. Chuck just cast off the lines an' tumbled down on deck. 'Let's get the hell out of here', he said. 'Somebody's been here before us. There was a truck just rollin' out to the street. I don't know but what they saw me, as it is. Anyhow, there'll be an alarm out in no time'."

"So we ran the ol' tub full speed to get as far away as we could, in case the boat'd been spotted. That's why we hit that scow, runnin' so fast in the fog."

"You didn't even go up on the pier at all?"

"Never left the *Vannity* a minute."

"Hm." Koski went to the stern of the party boat. There was a bait tank just forward of the transom, and on either side of it

foot-long wooden cleats for the stern lines. The starboard line was in place neatly coiled around the cleat. The port line hung over-side, taut as a bowstring from its spliced loop around the cleat to the propeller shaft a yard beneath the surface.

"Could Matless swim?"

"Dunno. Never saw him. Never asked him. Lot of these watermen can't, I hear."

"That's one way of committing suicide."

The lieutenant went up to the bow. All along the floor boards on the port side, beneath the pipe rail over which hopeful fishermen had dangled so many lines, were grains of gritty yellow sand.

That checked with Olsan's version of the collision. Those barges in tow were usually piled so full that any boat coming alongside might well get a shower of sand.

The boathook was missing, too. It could have happened the way the bartender told it.

The *Vigilant's* red running light showed ahead. She was swinging in past the necklace of lights on the deserted boardwalk at Coney. In the mist they were a hazy blur against the glow of the Island itself.

When they pulled into the Vann wharf at Sheepshead, Koski made Olsan tie up the party boat, herded him onto the *Vigilant*.

"Call off that alert for the *Vannity*, Irish. Send in an alarm for Charles Matless. You can describe him close enough. I'm going to see what cooks at the Tavern besides lobster and French fries."

**A**LTHOUGH it was midwinter, the Tahiti Tavern was doing a booming business. Elbow room was scarce at the bars. The cocktail lounge was jammed. A trio of Cuban singers, in white camisoles and strumming guitars, were entertaining the patrons. There was a miniature piano on wheels, but it wasn't being used. Maybe, Koski thought, that might have been where Ellen Matless would have done her stuff.

He found Phil Vann in a large, dignified office on the second floor, above the main dining room. He proved to be a tall, spare, brown man—brown hair, spaniel eyes, a Miami winter tan—very spruce, very suave.

He denied knowing the *Vannity* had been away from her wharf, denied giving any-

body permission to take the boat out except for regular party trips.

He was flabbergasted when Koski repeated Olsan's story.

"I'll kill the cruddy bum, if he tried to get me mixed up in any hijacking. I'm a business man, not a mucking gangster," he said flatly. "As for that fattail Olsan, ask him to come in here to collect the pay that's coming to him. Just ask him to do that. I'll take care of *that* crumb."

Koski said it had gotten beyond that. He didn't mention the murder, merely inquired, "Did Matless ever use the *Vannity* for hauling stuff around the harbor before?"

"I'd've fried his fuzzers if he'd tried it. No. Once in a while—" the dapper proprietor admitted—"he'd ask for a day off, generally when the weather was so bad we'd have to cancel the trip out to the fishing grounds, anyway. I believe he used to do extra work on a tug those days to earn a dollar, but I don't know what tug or if that was just a line of chatter he put out."

"A tug boat?" Koski nodded. "Funny how many things you miss—on a foggy night. Come along."

They hurried back to the wharf, Vann getting angrier by the minute. Halfway to the *Vigilant*, pounding feet raced toward them. It was the sergeant, with drawn pistol.

"See him, Steve?" Mulcahey asked Koski.

"Who?"

"That Remsen scut. He asked to go in the head for a minute. He was sick as hell. After a bit I peek in there. The hatch is open. He's done a skipola!"

## CHAPTER VI

### AN INCH FROM HELL



**R**UNNING to the *Vigilant's* bowline, Koski shouted, "Never mind Remsen. Sarge. Shove off."

The sergeant was reluctant. "He'll not be far off, Steve."

"Cut the gab. Clutch in. Quick." Koski hastened to the stern line. "Climb aboard, Vann."

The restaurant owner came to the police

**YOU CAN'T KILL**

**THE THING**  
**from Another World!**

**WITH A GUN!!**

**HOWARD HAWKS' *Astonishing* MOVIE!**



boat's gunwale. "Where you going?"

"After that liquor." Koski grabbed Vann's arm. "That wasn't an invitation, mister." He hauled the tall man into the cockpit.

Olsan said, shamefaced, "We lost Chuck overboard, Mister Vann. We hit a barge."

Vann snarled, "Hell with Chuck. I hope the crabs go to work on him!" He flopped on the engine housing as Mulcahey gunned the motor and the patrol boat lurched toward the black channel marker. "What's with Hal Remsen, Officer?"

"Under arrest." Koski was brusque. "Watchman was killed during that whisky heist. Remsen's sister jumped in the river afterward."

"Ellen?" Vann said sharply. "You talking about Ellen Matless?"

"Yeah. One who works for you."

"What the hell was she doing at the pier?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Koski gave him a curt brushoff, went in the pilot-house. "Let her out all the way, Irish. And keep your whistle going." He put the short-

wave receiver to his ear. "Patrol Nine to Eee Pee Eee Eee. Set?"

The mechanical voice said, "Come in, Nine."

"Request Patrol Twelve, City Island, to intercept steam tug with three sand and gravel barges in tow. Probably bound to Throgs Neck. Warning. May be armed men aboard. Detain for investigation. Koski, Lieutenant."

After the acknowledgment, Mulcahey asked, "Them babies that rolled us, are they comin' through Butternilk?"

"Scotch could have been transferred from the party boat to one of the barges while they were in tow, Sarge."

"Holy hat! An' we've been within anchor's throw of 'em! But why you so sure they aren't heading up the Hudson?"

"If that tug had been out of Bayonne or Perth Amboy or Staten Island, it'd have been on its way by eight o'clock to take advantage of the tide, Joe. You know that. Costs too much coal to drag those barges against the current when you can go with it. If they'd started four hours ago, they'd be

past Yonkers by now. So—she's on a short haul. Say, from Gowanus to, well, Throg's Neck."

"We'll never catch them, Steve."

"Might. Nova Scotia steamer and those Fall River freighters come in through Hell Gate around midnight. The two might have to crawl past Mill Rock waitin' for the go-ahead from the bridge. Sock it to her."

"Yeah. But this fog's not thinnin'. If we hit a floatin' railroad tie or somethin'—"

"The boys at Randalls'll have some hull planking to fix, that's all. You get every knot you can out of her."

**M**ULCAHEY glanced at the whistling buoy off Coney. "We're doing thirty-four in flat water. With the push the tide's givin' us, we're doin' close to thirty-eight."

"Keep her kiting." Koski returned to the cockpit.

Vann slumped straddle-legged on the housing, bent over with his face in his hands. "She was worth all the rest of this garbage, Lieutenant. Her ratty husband. Her prissy brother. This putzface here." He indicated Olsan. "Her little finger was worth the whole lousy lot."

"Kind of had a yen for her, didn't you?"

"I'll say I did." Vann raised his head. "I've been trying for six months to get her to leave that stinkin' Matless. She wouldn't. She'd made her bargain. A rotten bargain. I might have known the only way she'd leave it was—the way she did."

Koski didn't enlighten him. He used the *Vigilant's* searchlight, peered at the wharves along the Brooklyn shore as they thundered through a wall of vapor past Gravesend, past Red Hook, into the East River. The tug might have sneaked in somewhere for a quick tie-up and a second transfer of the whisky.

He saw nothing until the police boat had roared under the Brooklyn and Williamsburg bridges, past Welfare Island, beneath the Fifty-ninth Street, the Triborough, the great arching span of Hell Gate itself.

Halfway to the powerful light on North Brother Island, Mulcahey shouted, "Barges ahead!"

Koski unracked the T-gun once more,

climbed on the foredeck. The stern of a red scow, high-banked with yellow gravel, was only a couple of hundred yards distant.

"Come right up astern, Irish," Koski called to Mulcahey.

"Can do."

The *Vigilant* slowed. Koski saw a long strip of gray tarp stretched along the starboard side of the nearest barge. That canvas could cover a lot of whisky cases.

No one was visible on the stern. A single yellow spark of light came from a kerosene riding light on that tail barge. Queer, there would be no one on that barge.

The police boat came within twenty yards. Ten. Five.

"Now!" Koski called. He jumped to the walk board beneath the gray tarpaulin.

Before his boots hit the planking, he saw the upswinging shovel. He couldn't dodge or duck. He was bringing the T-gun level when the shovel edge slashed down on his head, knocking him to his knees.

Instantly wet arms circled him, held him between the shovel-wielder and the *Vigilant*. In that brief glimpse, Koski dizzily recognized a huge, beak-like nose, a pair of sharp, narrow-set eyes.

Matless yelled, "Sheer off, you! Don't try any gun work either, unless you want a dead cop to go overboard." He brandished a forty-five.

Koski grappled with the soaking figure at his back, wrestled with him, shouting, "Hell with him, Sarge! *Come ahead!*"

Mulcahey came ahead.

**A**S THE police boat careened in against the stern of the scow, the shock of the smash brought sand avalanching down on the two men battling on the narrow walkway. It was at Koski's knees when he heard the glass in the *Vigilant's* pilot house break from Chuck Matless's bullet. It was at his waist as he struggled to pin the other's gun arm. The avalanche kept on.

Chuck screamed when the sliding sand pushed him off the walkway. He dropped his gun, clutched Koski's leg in desperation.

His weight was too much for the bracing Koski could give himself. They went over, down and under the water. The Harbor

## CHAPTER VII

## MOP-UP

Squad man brought his knee up to the pit of Chuck's stomach. Then he let his muscles relax until the force of the downplunge had been spent. No sense burning up that oxygen.

Chuck kept fighting even under water. He clawed at Koski's throat. The lieutenant made no attempt to break the grip. The party boat captain wouldn't have enough breath to hang on long—unless they surfaced quicker than Koski thought they would.

He felt the current pull at his legs as they began to come up. Chuck used one hand to thrash the water. Koski's head bumped hard into wood. The tide had swept them beneath the barge.

He had to grab Chuck then. The fool had gone panicky as soon as he realized they were trapped eight feet under water. He wrapped his arms around the lieutenant's legs in a death grip. Koski was lucky to break it.

Koski took two precious seconds to put one hand up, feel the caulking between the scow's bottom planks, to make sure he didn't try to swim the length of the scow. Even then it was a long chance. He might have been swirled around so, under water, that he'd lost his sense of direction. But he had to make a choice. He chose the side where the *hrrush* of water along the side of the barge sounded louder. He headed for it with all the power of his one free arm and his kicking legs.

Chuck was dead weight when Koski felt the turn of the scow's bilge above his hand. His own lungs were at the point of exploding. Streaking comets of light burst in front of his eyes. He did lose consciousness for the brief moment it took to bob to the surface.

But his lungs reacted with a reflex gasp. He gulped cold air that stung his lungs like hot needles, and was surprised to find his left hand in Chuck's collar. His arm felt paralyzed.

He shifted his grip to the chin, got the beaklike nose above water. The man was out, so helpless he'd have sunk in no time if Koski let go.

That made it tough.



FIFTY yards astern of the scow, Mulcahey was sweeping the water with the beam. A light ring flared ten yards nearer the tow. The sarge would have hurled that preserver over to mark the spot where Koski'd gone under.

If Chuck had been able to fend for himself, it would have been possible to swim back to that ring buoy, even exhausted as he was by that long immersion under the scow, dazed as he still was from that blow from the shovel. With Chuck to look out for, even sixty, seventy yards as it was now, with the tow drawing away for the *Vigilant*, even that was out of the question.

He overarmed back to the side of the scow, catching the rubrail a couple of feet above the loaded water line, with only a couple of yards to spare. While he rested there, hoping Chuck Matless would show signs of life, he watched the police boat's emerald running light dwindle to a small green spark, the searching sweep of the beam diminish to the wavering antenna of a waterbug.

Sand sifted down on him. He looked up at the side of the scow, six feet above him. Not much chance of pulling himself up there. No cleated steps. No convenient ring bolts. Sand scows weren't meant to be climbed on.

The sand was spilling down from a trough of the tarpaulin which had been carried over the side a foot or so. If he could get hold of that—but he couldn't. The other end probably wasn't pinned under the boxes tightly enough to hold anyway. Still—

He maneuvered one of Chuck's wind-breaker sleeves off, shoved his left arm through it, gripped the rub-rail with his left hand. One thing sure, if the party boat captain went under now, he wouldn't go alone.

Then he stripped off Chuck's belt. He lashed out with the belt buckle, managed to hit the tarp, but the buckle end was too light. It didn't pull at the canvas enough.

It wasn't until the red flare of the Hunts Point light made the oily surface of the channel look like roiled-up blood that he managed to work one of Chuck's shoes off, tie it clumsily to the buckle.

Even then, it took a long ten minutes, while the scow swam silently past the belching stacks of Port Morris and a trawler bound for Fulton Market, for Koski to whip at the canvas enough to get the eyelets tangled in a fold, pull the loose end down on him.

The testing was the dangerous part. If he trusted his weight, and Chuck's, to that ten-foot strip of tarpaulin and it came loose, that would be it. He waited until the tow was only a hundred yards from an anchored power boat on the Bronx shore. Then he began the climb, inching up, avoiding a sudden pull, dragging Chuck along after him.

He'd just gotten one arm safely up over the edge of the walkway, when a familiar roaring grew louder in the mist. He elbowed himself up, lifted Chuck, let him flop lifelessly on the walkway. By the time the *Vigilant's* white finger had touched the stern of the scow, Koski stood alone at the edge of the walkway waving.

**M**ULCAHEY was up on the walkway, scooping away sand to get a place to make the bow-line fast. Koski was down in the cockpit breaking open a case of I. MacLone's Finest. The police boat was being towed along with the scow. Apparently the tug's captain, up ahead, had noticed nothing in the fog.

Olsan pried off the top of the case. "We sure thought you was a dead duck, Lieutenant, goin' down with Chuck hangin' onto you."

"Yeah." Koski knocked the neck of the bottle off on the rail, poured half a coffee mug full, put it down the hatch. Maybe the whisky would warm him enough to start him shivering. Bad sign when you were so marrow-chilled you couldn't even shiver.

Vann said tightly. "Chuck go down?"

Koski burbled more liquor in the mug. "I had enough trouble saving myself. Tide carried me under the scow."

The restaurant man laughed harshly.

"You don't hear me moaning. One less murderer to worry about."

"Will be," Koski put the bottom up, "come July or so. Hah, Olsan?"

The bartender puckered his fat features. "But if it was Chuck—killed the watchman, I mean—while he was in the shed—"

"It wasn't. It was you. You used that hook on Cap Weltz."

"Hey, now!" the plump man protested. "You got no right or reason—"

"You killed him because he was in on the setup with you and you wanted to pocket the split he was supposed to get. So you waited until he'd helped you move the cases on a hand truck, until he'd unbarred the door so it would look as if somebody'd taken the stuff away on tires. Then you gave him his share—in steel."

"There ain't one word of truth in that."

"Shut your flabby face." Koski shoved him suddenly. Olsan fell down against the engine housing. "To make it look good, you'd probably have arranged with Weltz to have him tied up after the stuff was on board the party boat. That way he could holler 'hijack' and claim he'd been bound by the heisters. You did it quicker. Then you wanted to fix it to get Chuck's share, too."

Olsan whimpered, "You're crucifying me when I didn't have a thing to do with it."

"For a second time, you waited until one of your partners helped move those three hundred cases. Then after Chuck got the last case on the scow here, and covered with that tarp, you clouted him with a boathook and hoped to God he'd never come up. But he did, and he got aboard the scow again, somehow. Maybe the stern line from the *Vannity* did trail in the water and get cut by the screw. He could have climbed up the end that had been cleated to the scow."

"You're a liar!" Olsan howled.

Koski touched him with his toe. "I knew you were six kinds of a liar soon's you started to spill the guff about not knowing anything about boats. No-o-o. You talked about jumping in after Chuck when any ordinary jerk would have said 'dived' in. Only a waterman who knew how easy it is to brain yourself in floating debris would have talked about 'jumping'."



"Nuts! Try and call me a murderer just because of that!"

"No. You even used the NCU call for help with your flashlight, before you thought. Many a boyscout would have known about the SOS, but only a waterman would know that NCU distress signal the Cee Gee boys use all the time."

**O**LSAN whimpered with fear.

Vann bent over him. "Did this crud make Ellen kill herself, Lieutenant? I'll just save the state the trouble—"

"Sheer off, fella. Mrs. Matless is all right. She must have heard her husband, or maybe even futzface here, talking about the hijacking, decided to come to the pier herself to warn her brother about it. It happened Remsen was out when she got there, and so when she found Wultz dead, she thought her husband had done it."

Vann swore with relief.

Koski went on, "So, probably being pretty fed up with him anyway, and not valuing the kind of life she was living very much, but not wanting Chuck electrocuted for murder, she tried to make it seem as if she'd done the killing herself. Left her lipstick on Wultz's face, her coat and bag beside his body, then jumped into the river."

Mulcahey called from the scow, "This guy ain't hittin' on all eight cylinders, Steve, but his motor's turnin' over. What you want me to do with him?"

"Keep him there until we get to Clason Point. He'll be ready to give us all the corroboration we want on Olsan."

The sergeant came up to the *Vigilant's* bow. "You want to shortwave for Remsen?"

"No." Koski teeth began to chatter. Suddenly he felt very cold and tired. "He'll

probably be there waiting for the tow when we get in. I think he had it all figured out, except that he'd guessed his sister was in on the scheme, which she wasn't."

"He wasn't runnin' away, Steve?"

"Even money he's rounded up a revolver and aims to blast Chuck. He didn't seem to care a whole lot about his brother-in-law. And he'd have known Chuck used to come around to the pier with his sister once in a while. Must have met Cap Wultz one of those times. Chuck probably told Olsan about Wultz, and from the way that tug is nosing in now, I'd say one of the watchman's old buddies is at the helm up there, and likely getting well paid not to notice anything."

Mulcahey regarded his superior officer with a certain awe. "Did you figure all that out while you was under water, mayhap?"

"Didn't have my bathproof pen with me, Sarge."

"Want me to pick up Remsen, if he's on shore?"

"Better. Otherwise you might have another lifesaving job on your hands when he sees Chuck. Myself, I've done my rescuing chores for the day, and I'm going to climb into a warm bed with a good book—

"Or something." The sergeant chuckled.

"Be your age, Sarge. I have a date with a dame, but it's in the morning. She's the only one in this whole mess I'm really sorry for."

"You might give a thought to yourself once in a dog's age. You give me a bad hour, there, thinkin' you were gone."

"You ought to have known it's hard to keep a good man down, Irish."

The tug slacked on the towing hawser just then. . . .

## THE LIARS' CLUB

(Meeting continued from page 38)

Arrested for breaking nine traffic rules while trying to outrun a police car, a St. Louis man declared: "I've been dating another fellow's girl and I thought he was chasing me."

Although caught red-handed at the register of a cafe, a Vancouver, Canada, man stoutly maintained he was not a burglar, but explained the circumstances as follows: He had stumbled against the windows and smashed the two panes. So then he'd gone in to leave his name and address for the proprietor and was looking in the till for a pencil when police nabbed him.

# MOST MEN DON'T KILL



*"Most men haven't killed anybody  
but they have read obituaries with  
pleasure."*

—CLARENCE DARROW

## CHAPTER I

### UNEXPECTED VISITOR

I WALKED into my hotel room and the naked woman was sitting there in the only easy chair.

I stood for a moment with both the door and my mouth open. I'd been batting around Charley Frayne's bar all evening. Ginny had slapped my face, the side with the scar

on it, and the old aching had started in my head, so I'd thought I'd get a girl. Out of meanness, understand? One or two had taken a drink on me, but they'd discovered they had boy friends or husbands. So I'd come back to the hotel.

And there, waiting for me, was Eros' an-



I landed a haymaker on the jaw of the guy who paid Ginny for taking her clothes off in public

*In this slightly mad murder mystery, Terry Bob Rooke  
makes Skid Row his headquarters when he skids into  
the case of the naked lady who is out of this world!*

## **A Novel by DAVID ALEXANDER**

swer. Rubensque, the way I like them. Long bob over smooth shoulders. Brown eyes, looking kind of crazy. Lips, pouting, a little too red. Then I saw something else, and I closed the door.

There was a little stream, red-colored, running down from under her left breast across

her abdomen. Under the breast there was a hole, a little, oozing hole, like you might make by sticking an ice-pick into a hard-frozen block of raspberry sherbet.

I lit a cigarette and wondered why my hand wasn't shaky. Sometimes my hand got shaky when I tried to tie my shoes. You

can't get blown out of an M-4 tank without your hand getting shaky, the doctors told me.

I began to think about all the little islands in the Pacific which smelled of cordite and corpses. The hospitals that smelled of formaldehyde. Skid Row, with unwashed men. This dead woman, though, smelled of expensive perfume.

I knew I had to do something. I tried to think what. Then I knew. I began to search the room for her clothes. There wasn't even anything under the bed. She just didn't have any clothes.

This is the prize package, kid, I thought. This is the brass ring. Ginny slaps you in the puss, and now you get a naked dame sitting here with a hole in her heart.

**B**UT FIRST there'd been a lot of other things.

There'd been the war, with my 50-caliber blasting the little men in our path. There'd been the hospital and some guy with chickens on his shoulders tossing me a heart-shaped picture of George Washington hung on a purple ribbon because I'd forgot to duck. With that and a nickel, we used to say, you could buy a subway ride. Nowadays you need a dime in addition to the Purple Heart.

There'd been looking for a job after the war and not getting any. There'd been living in furnished rooms and having the old French key put on the door because I couldn't pay the rent. There'd been the 52-20 Club and some twerp I knocked off his stool at the unemployment office because he sassed me. I'd told him I was a newspaperman and wanted a job. He smirked at me and said I was a big, husky guy, so why didn't I try bricklaying.

I didn't go back for any veterans' unemployment compensation after that, though it had weeks to run. I hit Skid Row.

Some of the nicest guys I ever met outside my own tank battalion, which was blown to Kingdom Come, were on Skid Row. Three of them robbed me of dough that could have been my passport back to respectability, but there were some guys who would split their last buck and their last

crook of muscatel with you. You don't always find the real bohemians wearing berets in Greenwich Village.

The trouble with me was I'd got shell-shock, or combat fatigue, to use the Army euphemism, along with the crease in my face, that time the M-4 tank caught a Jap mortar lob head-on. They kept me in a hospital for a long time giving me Sitz baths and lessons in rug-weaving. They must not have cured me entirely. I was still edgy. I was impatient of the stupidity of city editors for not hiring me. I'd been free-lancing just before the war, so couldn't demand a job by virtue of the GI Bill of Rights.

So I made lushing a profession. At first it was bonded Bourbon. Then it was bar rye, then draft beer at a dime a copy. And finally sweet wine for anywhere from sixty-five cents to a dollar a bottle depending upon the location of the liquor store. I started lurching up and down Dream Street.

By the time the terminal leave pay came along I determined I was going to get new clothes and rent a clean room and start looking for a job again. The terminal leave pay amounted to quite a bundle. I'd been in nearly four years, most of them in the Pacific, where you didn't get furloughs.

Somebody I don't remember advised me to deposit the check, and draw out only what I needed for immediate use. But I had "Red Eye" and "Goosey George" and the "Canned Heat Kid" with me. We went to the bank and I took the cash. Then we went to the liquor store and we bought enough musky to float the Queen Elizabeth, and sat in a lot of doorways drinking. I woke up with five bucks in my pocket. They were good guys, all right. They left me five bucks out of several hundred.

I looked everywhere for the three good guys and I drank everywhere I looked. Then I woke. The little green men on my shoulder and I sat down in a lot of doorways.

**T**HEY sent me to another Government hospital and I had the old curriculum of Sitz baths and rug-weaving, plus shock treatments. There was a certain doctor there who helped get me a job with a research bureau. I got paid according to the

number of forms I filled out about people's preferences in olives or brassieres or other articles . . .

What the devil! Here I was looking at the naked woman with a hole in her heart, and thinking about all this! But I had to think about something, didn't I? So I went on—to the time I joined a veterans' organization and met Chet Lassiter. He'd been a captain of MPs and, believe it or not, some MPs were good guys. Chet was a good guy. He knew how to smile, the kind of smile that never mocked at people. Chet found a lot of things funny in life.

pear romantic.

It had been a silly quarrel. I'd said that now I had a regular job—it was with Chet Lassiter who had opened a private detective agency after the war—that we could get married and she could quit what she was doing. She'd said, well, we could get married all right, but she'd better keep on at the Triangle until our incomes were more stabilized. I'd said I didn't want a wife who showed everything—or almost everything, anyway—to Parada's drooling customers, even under a blue light, and if she wanted her own income, why didn't she get a job

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## CHARACTERS IN THIS NOVEL

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**Terry Bob Rooke**, a shell-shocked veteran with murder on his mind.

**Tommy Tuotoes**, a benevolent alcoholic and penguin-fancier.

**Chet Lassiter**, a private eye with hard knuckles and a winning smile.

**Gianny**, a luscious little bundle who could dance if they'd let her, but they pay her to strip.

**Polvo**, an organ grinder with a dead monkey and George Washington's teeth.

**Killer Carney**, a punch-drunk baby-sitter.

**Basserty**, a jockey with a beard.

**Knotty**, a dwarf who wears a monocle.

**The Professor**, a rum-dumb nuclear fission expert.

**Shakey**, a student of Shakespeare with a psychopathic hatred of cops.

**Ebony Black**, a one-eyed Colossus who might have been champ if they hadn't drawn the color line.

**Malcolm Little**, a wealthy, aging cuckold.

**Vince Parada**, a suave and handsome relic of the speakeasy era.

**Romano**, a homicide cop with a classic profile.

**Cleo**, a frustrated penguin.

—AND—

### A LADY WITHOUT ANY CLOTHES WHO IS VIOLENTLY DEAD

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Chet introduced me to Charley Frayne's place. He also introduced me to Ginny, who did a little drinking there to drown her sorrows. She'd spent a lot of money on dancing lessons and she could dance. But she worked in Vince Parada's Triangle Club and all Vince wanted her to do was strip for the customers. One look at Ginny and you knew why.

Gianny could be as stiff as an old-fashioned, whalebone corset, or as soft and pliable as an oil-bathed baby if she wanted to. I guess I was in love with Ginny. I guess Ginny didn't hate me too much, either. She'd been my girl for several months now. But that afternoon she'd slapped me—on the left cheek, where the flesh is dented in a little zigzag pattern. I'm sensitive about that scar, although I have been told it makes me ap-

just dancing?

She slapped my face. It was her sore point, and I'd hit it on purpose. I'd got to my feet, very dignified, and walked out on Ginny. And then, I'd tried to get myself a dame at Frayne's, but I hadn't got one. Certainly I hadn't got this dame in the chair. I never did go for dames who had holes in their hearts.

Chet had become my only friend outside of a few of the so-called bums on the Bowery that I didn't see any more. Chet offered me the job, providing I'd take a token salary at first, plus a bonus for every case I worked on. For a long time there hadn't been any cases, then a couple of days before, when I'd come into the office, Chet said:

"A client left a two-hundred-dollar retainer. I'm turning the job over to you."

"What's the set-up?" I asked.

"The client's name is Little," Chet replied. "Malcolm Little. Owns an estate in Westchester. He's around sixty, probably. He's got a wife. Quite a dish. He thinks she's cheating, believes she'll meet a man in Room Six-seventeen of the Sheridan Towers Hotel at five o'clock on the afternoon of the twenty-first. I've already reserved Room Six-sixteen for the twentieth under the name of George Spelvin. That will give you a day to orient yourself."

I ALMOST laughed at the alias he'd chosen. George Spelvin is the name they use on theater programs when an actor doubles in brass.

Chet favored me with his winning smile. "I told the clerk over the phone I wanted that particular room because I admired the view from the window. You check in and get the layout of the place. We don't know anything about the man who will check into Six-seventeen the next day. Leave the door open on safety chain about a foot. Keep the lights off. Pull the blind down. Sit where you can get yourself a mental picture of any man who goes into Six-seventeen. I've got a picture of the dame."

He took a photograph of a chesty female out of an envelope. She was a dame you wouldn't be likely to forget.

He grinned the wide grin. "An old man's darling," he said.

I checked into the hotel, picking up George Spelvin's reservation. A bellhop took me up and commented upon the fact that I wore the Purple Heart. As soon as he was gone I tested the door chain. I could see Room 617 all right through the twelve-inch crack.

I had told the bellhop I was expecting a friend to check in who would want to be near me, and asked him about Room 617. He told me the room had been occupied for several days by a J. K. Provost and that the gentleman had signified no intention of checking out. The guy had probably just taken the love nest a few days in advance. Anyway the next day was the important one—Terry Bob Rooke's first case. I had to forget the spat I'd had with Ginny, when

I'd gone to Frayne's to see her that afternoon.

I went to Frayne's and had some dinner on the expense account, and when I came back to my room I'd found the naked woman.

I got the manila envelope, from a dresser drawer, took a photograph out of it.

There wasn't any doubt about it.

The naked woman sitting in the easy chair with a hole in her heart was Mrs. Malcolm Little, the dame I was supposed to tail!

I had to get out of there. I collected my belongings, stuffed them, with the photograph, into the pockets of my suit and trench coat. I hung the coat over my arm. I didn't want anybody coming into the room right after I'd left. They might be surprised to find it still occupied.

Before I even reached the elevator, I realized that I was some private eye, all right. I hadn't wiped my fingerprints off of anything. But somebody else's fingerprints must be in that room, too, and if I wiped them off I would be destroying the only evidence that could prove my own innocence.

It took courage to take me through that lobby with my clothes stuffed in my pockets and draped over my arm, and the little men with the hammers and anvils were playing an overture to madness inside my head. Finally, though, I was out in the brawling neon night of Broadway. I called Chet Lassiter's hotel. I told Chet I had to see him right away. Chet said he had a little pigeon coming up, and couldn't what I had to see him about wait. I said it couldn't. He said, okay, come on up, but not to stay long.

When I got to his room he said to make it short. So I made it short.

## CHAPTER II

### WHO'S WACKY NOW?



CHET stood there gaping at me, his mouth hanging loose.

"How much you been drinking?" he asked then.

"I had a couple," I said, "but I never see naked dames with holes in their hearts. I see little

green men with puce tophats."

Chet just stood looking at me, a curious expression on his face.

"Don't get sore, Terry," he said, "but, well, you've told me about the blackouts and about being in Bellevue and the Government psych wards and all. Are you sure you're all right, kid?"

"I've got a headache," I replied. "One that's knocking my ears off. But . . ." I fumbled in my pocket through the socks and shaving cream until I found the key to Room 616. I tossed it to him. "Drop up and say hello to her. I don't think she'll be going anywhere."

"I've got to believe you," Chet said. "But how the devil did a naked dame get into that room? And where are her clothes?"

"You tell me," I said. "You're a detective, aren't you? But maybe I can offer a couple of suggestions. Since it's the Little dame, maybe her clothes are in Six-seventeen. And maybe Old Man Little put a little hole in his everloving wife. Sometimes husbands get upset when their wives visit other guys in hotel rooms."

"Well," said Chet, "the best thing both of us can do is stay as far away from that room as possible, until we see which way the wind is blowing. Do you think anybody might identify you as the occupant of Room Six-seventeen?"

"There's a bellhop who saw my Purple Heart. With this scar on my face I'm not too hard to remember. And my fingerprints are around and about."

"It might be better, kid," said Chet, "for you to take it on the lammister. Look, you used to bum around the Bowery. The Bowery's a good place to get lost."

"I'm dressed pretty fancy for a Bowery flop," I said. "And it wouldn't be easy to get a Bowery wardrobe at this time of night. There's a hotel on Bleecker Street where I might stay tonight. A de luxe flophouse—six bits a night. The Hill, it's called."

"Go down there and lock yourself in," said Chet. "Where can I see you around noon tomorrow,"

"There's a gin mill just across the street from the hotel," I told him. "The Hill Tavern."

"See you there at noon," said Chet. "Go

on now. Get lost."

My room in the Hill wasn't quite as com-  
modious as the one I'd had at the Sheridan  
Towers. But it didn't have a naked dame  
with a hole in her heart sitting in the chair.

I took some codeine, went to bed and to  
sleep.

I wakened around seven and had a shower. I didn't shave because a stubble would be consistent with my rôle of Bowery wanderer. I ate breakfast in the hotel lunch room, and in a used clothing store that opened at eight o'clock—I had to be out of the hotel by nine—I bought a pair of pants and a coat that didn't match, a blue-dyed Army shirt, and a cap. Next door was an automatic laundry where I bought a bag, then went back to the Hill and changed my clothes. I stuffed everything but the suit and trench coat and hat into the laundry bag. I just left the hat in the locker. I had left the photograph with Chet. I wrapped the suit up in a newspaper, and hung the coat over my arm.

**I** TURNED my key in, went back to the  
laundromat and bought a ticket for a  
partial dry. I stuffed the clothes into the  
washing machine, left the place, and tore  
up the ticket.

Near Tenth, I found a pawnshop and  
got seven clams for the suit. I kept the trench  
coat. It was old and nondescript, but it was  
still water-repellent and when you're on the  
bum, on the Bowery, it's nice to have some-  
thing to keep you dry.

I tore up the pawn ticket, too. The only  
identification I had on me was my Social  
Security card and a Selective Service card  
stating that I was "1-C Disch." I bought  
an envelope and mailed my identification  
cards to Robert Lee Lincoln, General De-  
livery, 90 Church Street, New York City. I  
liked the name better than my own name  
of Terry Bob Rooke or my other names of  
George Spelvin and James Smith.

I had a lot of time to kill before meeting  
Chet at noon, so I walked up to Washington  
Square Park and watched gals in slacks and  
close-cropped hair walking dogs. I watched  
the parade of dowager-bosomed pigeons and  
thought how the verb "strut" must have  
been invented for pigeons and generals.

The Greenwich Village Outdoor Art Show was in progress and a little after eleven the painters began to hang their pictures up on buildings and fences that surrounded the park. I'm just an old art-lover, I guess. So being one, I went to look at the pictures. Some were simple enough for even a dumb guy like me to understand—things like dead fish on big platters. But some were pretty bewildering, like the one that had a lot of dislocated eyes and ears and tonsils floating around on a background of rusty nails, broken chamberpots and empty whisky bottles.

Toward noon, I walked back to the Hill Tavern. Chet hadn't arrived. I ordered a shell of beer and was working on my second when Chet came in.

I told Chet we could go in the back room and talk and the bartender said to switch on the light. The single, fly-specked bulb in the ceiling showed tables and chairs, a broken-down piano, and murals of naked women with wildly streaming red hair. The naked dames weren't sitting in chairs, though. They were dancing around like crazy, and since the plaster had begun to peel off some of them looked scaly and leprous.

We sat down and Chet said: "They haven't found the dame in Six-sixteen yet. Or if they have, they're keeping it quiet. The chambermaid will probably begin worrying about the linens this afternoon and start knocking. Then they'll open up with a passkey."

"What *did* you find out?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "when I saw you last night maybe I didn't get the timetable straight. You told me you left Ginny about four o'clock, then sat around the hotel awhile? What time did you leave the hotel again and go to Frayne's?"

"Why," I said, "it was about six. I might have fooled around for ten minutes or so, and it took maybe another ten minutes to walk to Frayne's."

"So you probably got to Frayne's between six-twenty and six-thirty, say?" said Chet.

"That's about right," I replied.

"And how long did you stay?" Chet asked.

"Three hours, at least. I looked at the clock when leaving. It was nine-thirty."

CHET sat looking at me in a funny sort of way, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Who served you your drinks, Terry?"

"What is this?" I asked. "Jerry served me before I had my dinner. After I ate, Charley Frayne himself set 'em up."

"Who waited on you at the table?"

"Mr. District Attorney himself, aren't you?" I said. "Ray waited on me. Ray, the horse player."

Chet picked up our glasses. He said, "I'll get us another drink."

He went to the bar. When he came back he set a whisky in front of me.

"I think maybe you're going to need a shot," he said. He leaned close to me. "I talked to Frayne and to Jerry and Ray. None of them saw you in the place last night!"

I gulped down the whisky before I tried to say anything. I shook my head.

"It just can't be," I said.

"But that's the way it is," said Chet. "If only one guy had said you weren't there, I'd think maybe he'd just forgotten. But three of 'em—"

What Chet had told me didn't make any sense. Three guys who knew me had seen me for three hours or more and had talked about head colds and my pal and my girl friend and racehorses, yet a couple of hours later they couldn't even remember seeing me.

I looked Chet in the eye and asked him, "Chet do you think I'm lying? Or do you think I'm just plain off the beam?"

He regarded me, as if he were trying to decide.

Then he said, "No, Terry. I don't think you're lying, and I don't believe you're off the beam. If you *were* lying, it would have been plain foolishness for you to lie about being in a place where you're as well known as you are in Frayne's. There's got to be an angle somewhere. But how Charley Frayne or his bartender or his waiter could have one is beyond me. How *all* of 'em could have the same angle in telling a bald lie about an inoffensive character like you makes it even more mysterious."

"Chet," I said, "either I'm lying, or three other guys are lying for no apparent reason whatsoever. Or maybe I just *think* I'm telling the truth. Maybe I'm a character who



blacks out and does things like making little holes in the hearts of naked women, and imagine I've been doing something different all the time."

"No," said Chet. "You don't believe that, and I wouldn't believe it even if you told me it was true. I *know* you were in Frayne's. I'm no psychiatrist, but I don't think you'd stick a sharp instrument into the heart of a naked dame, even if you were crazy." He took a sip of his drink. "I'm going to find out what angle Frayne and Jerry and Ray could possibly have. I'm going to investigate Mr. Malcolm Little, too, and find out something about his late wife's background. But there's not a thing we can do until they find her body. You stay lost."

"When will I see you again?" I asked.

Chet finished his drink. "I figure they'll find that body this afternoon," he said. "But I'm going to see if I can get a little advance dope, maybe. I'm going to call on my old pal, Lieutenant Romano of the Homicide Squad. If something's cooking, I'll get it out of him one way or another. Call me around six-thirty at the office. Say you're a client named Jones, just in case."

**A**FTER all, another alias didn't mean much in my young life.

Chet left, and I went to the bar and ordered another shot. Sipping it, I considered just how bad a spot I might be in. I knew what Chet meant when he said we couldn't do anything until they found the woman. Maybe they wouldn't find her. If I hadn't been in Frayne's, maybe I'd dreamed up the woman, too. Maybe I'd even imagined that Ginny had smacked my face.

I wanted to see Frayne, and Jerry, and Ray, and hear those guys say the same thing to my face. And I wanted to see Ginny, to find out about the face-slapping and ask her if I'd acted like one of those schizophrenics the day before. Everything considered, though, I thought it might be better if I postponed seeing her until I'd talked to Chet again, and pick her up outside Parada's club around three-thirty in the morning.

I headed for the Bowery because I had nothing better to do at the moment. It hadn't changed during my absence. The same cheap shops with the same guys in pink

shirts standing out in front of them. The same rusty garbage cans perfuming the streets. The same dark, sour-smelling saloons with neon beer signs winking through the crepuscular grime of their windows. The same pathetic, rum-dumb sad sacks, stumbling and lurching along.

I walked on down to Grogan's Elite Palace Café and Bar because I had to run into the old-timers who knew me, eventually, so it might as well be now. Because I had a scarred face from the war they called me "Soldier."

Grogan's was hardly a palace and it wasn't too elite. "Suds," the bartender, was as massive as the bar. With his big, ugly face he looked like a tough ex-pug, but he was actually a gentle, soft-hearted slob who mothered homeless kittens.

### CHAPTER III

#### BACK TO THE BOWERY



WENT up to the bar and ordered a beer.

"Hiya, Suds?" I said. "How's Portia facing life these days?"

He scrutinized me closely with his little pig eyes, then said heartily:

"Well, hiya, Soldier! Ain't been around for a spell. Jail or Bellevue?"

"Bellevue," I told him. "Any of the old gang around? The Canned Heat Kid? Or Goosey George and Red Eye?"

"Them characters," he said disapprovingly, "rolled some lush, I hear. Got a big stake. They faded."

"Nice guys," I said. "Maybe they're up in the Union League Club drinking Scotch, huh?"

"Trouble with these characters," said Suds, "they get too much gold, they go hog-wild. They drink too fast. So they get indigestion and you don't see no more of 'em account of they're dead."

Suds poured some milk in a saucer and placed it beside Portia, the kitten, sleeping behind the bar.

I put money on the bar and ordered another beer.

"Have one yourself," I invited.

Suds never drank alcoholic beverages, but on the rare occasions when a patron offered him a drink, he would pour milk from the cat's bottle and charge a dime for it. He always put the dime in his pocket instead of the cash register, to buy more milk for the cat.

"Don't mind a short one," he said. He poured out the milk and took my money. "Basserty the Beard's back. You know, the jock what goes on periodicals. He got ruled off again, down in Maryland this time. Got so drunk he fell off a horse right in the paddock. He's over there in the corner, helping some of the boys figure out a parlay."

Basserty had the dubious distinction of being the only jockey on the American turf who wore a beard. It was about the only distinction he did have, for he seldom rode a winner. He was nearing fifty, an ancient age for a jock. He weighed about a hundred and five pounds when he was soaking wet with sweet wine. He would ride wherever he could, and save his money for six months. For the next six months he'd hit Skid Row. When his money and his credit were gone, he'd return to the tracks and wheedle the stewards into reinstating him.

I stood around waiting for somebody to recognize me.

"I'm tellin' ya, they ain't gonna beat this horse Sober Sides," Basserty was saying. "I rode his daddy, Deacon Smith, and there was a horse that could really take it."

"Knotty," a dwarf who wore a monocle, peered at the scratch sheet.

"Naow, chums, naow," he said. "I definitely do not like the name of the bloomin' steed. Son of Deacon Smith, you sye? Knew a deacon's son in h'England once. Came to no good end. Hanged by the neck."

Knotty pretended not to regard himself as a misshapen accident of Nature. He said he came from a long line of dwarfs, all of whom had entertained the crowned heads of Europe. His accent was as phony as a seven-dollar banknote, but he swore he had been educated at Cambridge. His monocle, he believed, proved his British heritage beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Another of the engrossed handicappers,

"Killer" Carney, the punch-drunk baby-sitter, suddenly discovered my presence.

"Hey, guys!" he bellowed. "Hey! It's the Soljer! Hiya, Soljer? Where ya been, boy?"

"Hello, Killer," I said. "How's the baby-sitting business?"

"Aw," said the big goon with the fist-mangled features, "I got plenty of clients. But they ain't no future in it."

**T**HE KILLER worked at baby-sitting almost entirely as a labor of love. The broken-down old heavyweight's wife had died in childbirth and the baby had not lived. The Killer would even go without his vino to buy candy and bubble gum for the grimy youngsters who formed a vociferous cortege around him every time he walked down the street. When his presence as a baby-sitter was required the Killer never got drunk. He was conscientious about his baby-sitting.

"Never ask questions of a returning prodigal," Jockey Basserty admonished the Killer, and informed me: "We're figuring out a three-horse parlay. Maybe you'd like to declare in the pool."

Knotty adjusted the monocle and looked me over carefully. "What I sye is, let the Soldier pick the blawsted third beast for us. Fresh viewpoint, y'know."

He handed me the scratch sheet. One name leaped out at me. "*Unlucky Lady.*"

"Well," conceded Basserty grudgingly, "she's out of a good mare."

I tossed a dollar in the pool and the Killer clumped out to place our bet.

The boys appeared to have plunged all their capital on the parlay, so I bought them vino for the rest of the afternoon. I stuck to beer myself. I had things to do.

Two more stumblebums I knew came into the bar—the Professor and Shakey. They greeted me effusively.

The Professor was a harmless screwball, supposed to have been a professor of physics once. He always carried a battered old briefcase filled with scraps of paper on which he had computed endless rows of figures, and often tried to explain his "formulas" to the other boys.

Shakey didn't get his nickname because

he had a shaky hand. When he was in his cups, which was most of the time, he insisted upon quoting Shakespeare. Besides being a student of the Bard, Shakey was a cop-hater, wanted to destroy them all.

"Good morrow, sir!" cried Shakey. "You been away, Soljer, and you didn't hear the good news. You remember that cop, Turrone? He'd framed two fellows' sister on a street-walking charge, so they cut his ears off. 'Friend, Roman, countryman, lend me your ears,' they said to him."

"You shouldn't bear false witness like that, my friend," said the Professor. "Turrone was simply transferred to another precinct."

The Professor informed me he had just sold the formula for a synthetic atom bomb for a mere ten thousand dollars, which he had to collect that afternoon.

The Killer went to get the race results. He returned to say that Unlucky Lady was the only horse in our parlay that had won.

It was nearing five. I had to get to Frayne's. I rose and left the place.

I don't know why I noticed the truck parked outside Frayne's except it was a funny time of day to deliver ice. "Inter-City Ice Co." was painted on the truck.

**W**HEN I went inside the night shift had just come on. I saw Frayne frowning at me, and guessed he didn't want a guy dressed like I was at his bar. Finally he came up to me.

"What's the idea in coming in here in that get-up?" he asked unpleasantly.

"Because I want an answer," I said. "A straight one."

"I'm fresh out of answers," he growled. "Why don't you dust, like a good boy?"

"I want to know if you saw me in here last night," I said. "I want to know if Jerry and Ray saw me, too."

He looked me straight in the eye. "I didn't see you because you weren't in here. Jerry didn't see you. Neither did Ray. Satisfied?"

"No," I said. But there was nothing I could do about it.

"Look," said Frayne. "I don't know what trouble you're in, but I don't want any

part of it. Now get out."

I got out. I was punch-drunk, like Killer Carney, the baby-sitter. Why should those three guys lie in their teeth like that? Or if they weren't lying, and if the naked woman wasn't found, what did that make me?

I hadn't eaten since early breakfast, so I walked over to Ninth Avenue where they wouldn't mind my informal apparel and ate at a lunch counter. After that, I walked across and sat in Bryant Park until six-thirty when I called Chet.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Jones," said Chet. "I want to talk about that case with you, at the place we met this morning."

When I got to the Hill Tavern, Chet was standing outside the place, waiting for me. We got a couple of drinks at the bar, then went into the back room and sat down.

"Well," Chet said, "I paid that visit to Romano. The call came in while I was there. They found Mrs. Malcolm Little just after five o'clock this afternoon. Romano let me go along to the hotel with him."

"So they found her," I said dumbly.

"Yeah," replied Chet. "But she wasn't sitting in a chair. She was lying on the bed. And fully clothed, right down to her girdle. There was quite a lot of blood on the dress. Expensive dress. Hattie Carnegie label, Romano said."

"But Chet—"

"Yeah, I know," he said. "And there's more to it, so keep listening. Some of the clothes were hung up neatly in the closet of Room Six-sixteen. Others were in her suitcase and in the drawers. Another suitcase was empty. A plastic suitcase. The only good fingerprints they found were on the plastic suitcase."

Chet paused, and I tossed off my drink.

"They found out her identity easily enough," Chet continued, "from cards in her pocketbook. She was also identified as the dame who registered as Mrs. J. K. Provost in Six-seventeen that morning. J. K. Provost had flown the coop, bag and baggage. I hope Mr. Malcolm Little doesn't spill about hiring us to tail his wife. And there's one more thing. The medical examiner swore she'd been dead for at least twenty-four hours."

"But, Chet," I said, "that means she was dead by five o'clock yesterday afternoon! It means—"

"Yeah," said Chet. "It means you were sitting right there when the dame was killed."

**I**T WAS funny to be sitting there wondering if I was a murderer, while the peeling, naked, red-haired women danced all around me.

Finally I said to Chet, "Suppose I should go up to the Vets' Administration, see a doc I know. Suppose I should tell him just what I think I did and what actually happened? Have him get me hospitalized, put under observation."

"That would put you in the clear so far as the cops are concerned," Chet said. "But suppose they don't turn up anybody else who might have done the job? What would they do to you then?"

"Put me in a locked ward," I said. "Throw the key away."

He shook his head. "That wouldn't be nice," he said. "Let's look at it the other way, say that everything happened just the way you think it did. If you had blacked out and done a murder, maybe your subconscious would try to build up an alibi. But being at Frayne's wouldn't be any good because the dame was killed before you got there. And you were right in your room at the time she was being killed. You didn't know the woman. You were in the hotel solely because you were working on a case in which she was involved. She registered for Six-seventeen as Mrs. Provost. And there *was* a Mr. Provost, and he's lammed."

"I wonder how the guy got out of the hotel without his baggage?" I said.

"Probably traveling light," said Chet. "So we have the mysterious Mr. Provost as a suspect. And there's Mr. Little, jealous of his ever-loving wife, and suspicious. There might have been a lot of other men, too."

Chet ground his cigarette out in the ash-tray.

"I'm not even going to consider all the questions you want to ask," he said. "How did the dame get in your room in the first place? How did a dead woman get up off

a chair and lie down on a bed? How did a dead woman who was naked get herself fully clothed? How did her clothes and baggage get in your room? I can't answer right now. So it's up to me to make like a sleuth, and it's up to you to get lost on the Bowery. Don't try to get in touch with me. Is there any place I can reach you about this time tomorrow? A place I can phone you?"

I told him that Grogan's Elite Palace Café and Bar had a phone and he could call me there and ask for "Soldier." That they knew me by that name.

I was hardly conscious of my aching feet during the walk downtown. My brain was too busy, wondering if I were sane. I'd been angry at Ginny and the world at large. The doctors had warned me especially against becoming angry. Then I'd got the headache, a danger signal. Frankly, I didn't remember much of anything about that trip from Ginny's apartment to the hotel. I wondered if I had met the woman in the hotel hall and lured her into my room. Maybe I was some kind of sex maniac and sadist when spells came over me. Maybe I'd placed her on the bed because a bed is closely associated with the sex impulse.

But even looking at it the worst way, there were a lot of things that needed explaining. The absence of a weapon, for instance. And when I had searched the room there simply had been nothing there belonging to the woman.

By the time I hit the Bowery the morning tabs were out. It was there, all right, smack on Page One. I took the papers I bought into Grogan's Elite Palace Café and Bar to read all about it. But there was nothing I did not already know, except that robbery was not the motive, since valuable jewelry and a large amount of cash had been found in Mrs. Little's effects. And she had been a night club entertainer named Danise Darlan before she married Little who was very wealthy.

The bellhop had remembered my Purple heart, and my scar. So now I was a marked man in more ways than one. Old Scarface Spelvin! The boys on Skid Row sure didn't have anything on me!

CHAPTER IV

MURDER ON HIS MIND



SOMEbody brought me a goblet of muscatel instead of beer when I sat down at the table with the boys. I knew the stuff was poison to me, but I drank it anyway. It didn't seem to matter much. The boys wouldn't let me pay for any drinks. The bearded Basserty had picked a winner for them, so they were temporarily masters of their fate and businesses.

"You bought this afternoon," said Basserty, "and we got lucky after you left. Twenty to one."

"I said 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse,'" declared Shakey, "so old Basserty, he comes up with one."

It was a weird evening. Knotty and the Professor snored peacefully. Shakey muttered of the villainy of cops and quoted the Bard. The Killer punched his way through forgotten fights. Basserty rode down the stretch again on horses that had long been dead.

The night flowed swiftly on, until nearly three. I must leave. I must see Ginny. I got to my feet, walked toward the door. My legs felt numb and my head was spinning, but somehow I managed to get to Fourth Street, where Ginny peeled for Vince Parada's slumming customers.

Sweet wine does funny things to a man. All of a sudden I felt weak. I began shaking and jerking like a burleycue babe doing the bumps.

But just then I saw Ginny coming out of the club, and I wasn't weak any longer. I was angry again. Because Ginny wasn't alone. A big guy was with her. The guy was tall, dark and handsome, dressed in dinner clothes and a black felt hat. He and Ginny seemed to be on intimate terms. The guy was Vince Parada, who owned the club. Because thrill-seeking debutantes and bored society women go for racket guys like Parada, he had been a figure in several scandals and divorce suits.

This was the guy who paid Ginny a weekly salary to take her clothes off in public. I

walked slowly toward Ginny and the guy. When I was a few feet away I started a haymaker. Mr. Vincento Parada, pretty dinner jacket and all, lay down on the sidewalk.

Ginny recognized me and stifled the scream in her throat.

"Beat it," she said. "Quick. The apartment. I'll be there."

I came to my senses and started running to the Sheridan Square subway station. At that time of morning you wait a long time for a train, but a local finally roared along.

At Ginny's apartment house I tiptoed up two flights of stairs. When I tapped lightly on Ginny's door she opened it.

"You poor, jealous jerk," she said.

Inside, she handed me a big slug of whisky I drank down without a chaser. After a minute the shaking stopped.

"Aren't you in enough trouble?" Ginny asked. "Every cop in town is looking for a guy with a scar on his face. So you have to sock Vince Parada who knows them all."

"Did he recognize me?" I asked.

"No," replied Ginny. "He never knew what hit him. I told him it was some drunken bum. I guess I told the truth."

"What makes you think the cops are looking for me?" I asked.

"I read the papers," said Ginny. "So I gather that the cops want to talk to Mr. George Spelvin, Room Six-sixteen, the Sheridan Towers Hotel. Were you really shacking up with the dame? Did you kill her?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I think somebody was sticking a shiv in her about the same time you were slapping my face the other day."

"I'm sorry about slapping you," she said. "You shouldn't needle me about the way I earn a living. But I *do* like to eat."

SHE poured another drink and handed it to me.

"Tell me what really happened," she said.

I told her what I thought had happened, all the details I could remember. After I'd finished, she said; "It's funny, all right."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm laughing."

Wanting to kiss her made me jealous again.

"What were you letting that cheap mob-

ster maul you for?" I asked.

"He wasn't mauling me," said Ginny. "He was just telling me his troubles. He's got the same troubles you have—Mrs. Malcolm Little."

"What?" I roared.

"Keep your voice down," said Ginny. "When she was Danise Darlan she worked for him, and they were that way, it seems. He's all upset about them shoving her beautiful body in an ice box at the morgue. Vince is sensitive."

"Listen," I said. "Has Vince seemed to have something on his mind the past few days?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied. "He has been in Miami the past week."

"Did he bring back any palm trees to prove he'd been in Florida?" I asked.

"What are you getting at?" Ginny asked.

"Just this," I said. "Mrs. Malcolm Little, or Danise Darlan, registered for Room Six-seventeen at the Sheridan Towers as Mrs. J. K. Provost. A guy named J. K. Provost has been occupying the room for the past week."

"Maybe you've got something," she said. "Vince likes tools, carries a little case of miniature ones in his pocket. Some of them could make a nice hole in a woman's heart."

"Honey," I said, "I'm going to tell all this to Chet. He's got a line into Headquarters through a pal of his. He can get the Miami alibi checked. Play up to Vince yourself. He might spill something."

"I'll probably have to let him maul me if I do," she said. "I'm kind of particular about who I let maul me."

"How about me?" I asked.

"You can kiss me good night," she said. "Then go get some sleep. You look dead . . ."

It was after six o'clock in the morning when I reached the Bowery and got a room for a day and night in the Castle, a flop-house up the street from Grogan's, with a sense of well-being. I could see my way out of the mess now. Vince Parada and J. K. Provost were one and the same. Vince even carried the murder weapon around with him. All we had to do was prove he hadn't been in Miami.

When I awakened I didn't have too bad

a hangover. But I wanted a cigarette. I fumbled through my pockets on the off-chance I'd find a loose butt. My hand plunged through a big hole in the lining, came in contact with something that felt like a little wooden cylinder.

I fished the thing out. It was two half-cylinders screwed together, varnished bright yellow. The name "Inter-City Ice Co." was printed on it in red letters. Suddenly I remembered the ice truck outside Frayne's.

I unscrewed the thing. One half of the cylinder was the handle of an ice pick. The other was a sheath. The sharply pointed steel pick was stained with something brownish. Something kind of gummy.

Something like blood.

I SAT looking at the thing that might have been stuck in a woman's heart. I had no idea how it had got into the lining of my coat. Maybe someone had slipped the thing into my pocket while I was at Frayne's bar.

You had use for an ice pick only to crack ice. You cracked ice only if you had an old-fashioned ice box. Ginny had an old-fashioned ice box. I had cracked ice the afternoon that Ginny slapped me, with an ice pick exactly like the one in my hand. The afternoon the red haze swam in front of my eyes. The afternoon the woman was murdered.

I hurried into my clothes. I ran down the steps, found a phone and dialed Ginny's number. When she said "Hello" her voice sounded sleepy.

"It's me," I said. "The jealous jerk. Sorry to wake you up, but I've got to ask you something."

"I'd think you would be sorry," she said. "I haven't had enough sleep for a working girl."

"Listen, Ginny," I said. "You know that little ice pick you have in the kitchen? The one with the two wooden parts that screw together? I want to know where you got it."

"Let me think," she said. She sounded wide-awake now. "Oh, I got it at Frayne's. One day the ice man gave Frayne a whole handful of them, and I asked him for one."

"Have you got it now?" I asked.

"I—I think so. I keep it in the drawer of the kitchen table."

"Look and see if it's still there, Ginny."

She said, "Hold the phone."

Finally I heard her voice again. "Terry, it isn't there. I looked everywhere else it could have been, too. I just can't find it. What's this all about, Terry? Whatever it is, I know you didn't do anything wrong. I love you, darling. I want to help."

"There's nothing much you can do right now." I told her. "Except maybe make like a lady Sherlock with our friend Vince. 'Bye now, kitten. Don't let your G-string slip."

It was the first time that Ginny had said she loved me, right out like that. It made me feel good. But almost at once my feeling of elation changed to one of suspicion. Had Vince Parada been in her apartment during the time he was supposed to be in Florida? Ginny knew I was going to be in Room 616, and she might have told him and he figured out a way of making me the fall guy. But Vince Parada had had no opportunity whatsoever of putting the blood-stained ice pick in my pocket.

Unless—

And that possibility hit me below the belt. I'd been in Ginny's place last night. It would have been easy enough for her to slip the ice pick into the pocket of my coat.

Outside, Sanitation Department men were tossing the contents of waste cans into the maw of one of those big garbage-grinding trucks. I tossed the little ice pick into a garbage can and the grinder chewed it up with the other junk.

I bought the afternoon papers at a corner stand. The only thing new about the murder was that Mr. Malcolm Little had voluntarily surrendered to police. He had been staying at the Harvard Club because he said his wife had left for Boston on a visit and he had not wanted to remain at his country place alone. On the day of the murder he had remained in his office until three o'clock, then had walked all the way up to the Harvard Club and had gone to his room. He had not heard of the murder until he listened to a news broadcast. He had immediately telephoned his lawyer, who accompanied him to Police Headquarters. He had not been detained by the police.

**S**TROLLING around the streets with the other drifters, I saw the Professor and

Shakey sitting in a doorway. They looked terrible, had evidently spent all their winnings of the day before. I told them I'd take them over to the Palace and buy a fancy drink. At the saloon Basserty came in and asked me if I had the price of an Armstrong and a Form. I gave him money and when he went out the Killer came in, accompanied by Knotty, the dwarf. Knotty was almost in tears because he'd lost his monocle. I slipped him a buck to buy another.

## CHAPTER V

### FRAMED



WHEN Basserty returned with the racing papers, I glanced over the scratch sheet. My eye lit on a horse named Hidden Thing. I handed the Killer a couple of bucks and told him to go invest it on Hidden Thing. He said he'd wait at the pool room for the result.

When the Killer returned, his big, battered, silly face was one large grin.

"Hey, guys!" he bellowed. "That Hidden Thing wins and pays twelve-sixty. We got drinking money." He declared himself and the others in as a matter of course.

We sat down at a table and switched to wine. I went easy on the Sneaky Pete, though, because it made the red haze come in front of my eyes. Maybe it even made me stick ice picks in naked women.

I stayed in the Palace, because I had to stay somewhere away from the cops. My dinner consisted of a corned beef sandwich, the only thing on the menu of the Palace and which gave Grogan the excuse of calling his place a café as well as a bar. After Suds had gone off duty and "Sad Eyes," the night man had taken over, the telephone rang. I was sure it was Chet calling me, but Sad Eyes said that the Killer was wanted on the phone.

When he finished the conversation he was fairly blubbing with excitement.

"Hey, Sad Eyes! Sad Eyes," he called. "You got the special bottle?"

"What special bottle?" asked Sad Eyes sourly.

"Why, Tommy Twotoes' bottle," said the

Killer. "He's a-coming down tomorrow to see us. He just runged me up. He wants me to have the boys here."

The fabulous Tommy Twotoes was a Bowery god. When he was a punk kid, he'd played the Skid Rows from San Francisco to Boston. Now he was a retired millionaire. He had drunk so much during his long and fantastic career that he had become a bloated, crippled caricature of a man. He must have weighed around three hundred pounds, and was so bald that even his eyebrows had disappeared. Even at a short distance his face appeared to be a pallid blob except for the rose-tinted nose. He walked like a semi-paralytic, his head hunched down between his shoulders at a grotesque angle.

Tommy Twotoes made a point of visiting the vagrants of the Bowery periodically. He would set up drinks for all and sundry, stake the boys to a week's flop and drinking money and listen to their troubles.

The day I'd met Tommy Twotoes I was mean-drunk on sweet wine. I hated everybody. I looked upon the grotesque old man as an interloper, come to Skid Row to taunt and patronize its unfortunates. I'd sounded off so insultingly that his gigantic body servant, "Ebony" Black, would have lowered the boom on me if Tommy Twotoes had not intervened.

Tommy Twotoes' family had gone under the name of Tuthill for generations, but Tommy discovered that he had Indian blood and that the family name had originally derived from a brave called Two Toes. He promptly adopted Twotoes as his legal name.

He became the outstanding sports promoter of his day and branched out into the theatrical entertainment field. He had opened a racetrack in Mexico and had offered the Twotoes Stakes, the first \$100,000 race in the history of the world. He had owned theaters and night clubs and a motion picture studio and it was rumored, but never proved, that his was the capital and the brains behind the most successful ring of Prohibition rum-runners.

**T**HE Killer was still telling the boys of Tommy Twotoes' impending visit when the phone rang again. It was Chet.

He said, "Hello, is this Soldier?"

"This is George Spelvin Jones," I replied.

Before he could tell me of any developments, I admitted that I had visited Ginny and blurted out the story of Vince Parada, his connection with the murdered woman, and the fact that he had been away from his club for a week before the murder. I didn't tell Chet about having socked Parada. I didn't tell about finding the ice pick, either, and maybe that was wrong.

When I let him get a word in edgewise, Chet said he was glad we had another suspect because the cops were always inclined to handle a citizen of Mr. Malcolm Little's prominence with kid gloves. He said he'd have Parada's Miami alibi checked right away. Then he told me his own news. It wasn't good.

"Kid," he said, "the identification of your fingerprints came through from Washington this afternoon. The cops are looking for Terence R. Rooke, war veteran, former newspaperman who has been in Government hospitals. Of course, they know about the scar, so keep under cover. Stay lost."

Chet said that Little had no real alibi for the time of the murder, and that he might bust the case wide-open by telling Romano that the man knew of his wife's assignation at the Sheridan Towers and had hired a shamus to tail her. He said he didn't want to tell Romano that right away, though, because he was saving it for his ace in the hole.

Chet said he'd call me at the Palace at noon the next day.

The fact that the cops had already traced me back as far as my newspaper days showed that they were getting close. They must want me and want me bad. I wondered how long it would be before I was connected with Chet. Romano wouldn't like Chet then and we'd lose an invaluable contact at Headquarters. We'd lose it anyway if Chet told his story this late. Or if Mr. Little spilled about hiring Chet's agency to put the peek on his ever-loving wife and her mysterious boy-friend, Mr. J. K. Provost.

I went back to the table and sat down and drank for awhile. Then a Western Union messenger boy came into the saloon. He walked up to the bar and spoke to Sad Eyes.

"Hey, Soljer!" yelled Sad Eyes. "You gotta telegram! What happens next in this



Jernt? I'm a cussed social sekktetary."

The telegram addressed to "Soldier," read:

URGENT YOU MEET ME MY APARTMENT  
NINE-THIRTY. IN DANGER

GINNY

It was eighteen minutes to nine. I went into the phone booth, dialed the number of Ginny's apartment. There was no answer. I hung up, then called Vince Parada's Triangle Club and asked for Ginny.

"The dinner show's on," some mugg told me gruffly. "We can't call no performers to the phone now. Call after nine."

The dinner show ran until nine, but Ginny's turn was over before that time. Probably the danger she feared wouldn't arise before nine-thirty. I decided to hurry to the apartment. Outside I caught a cruising cab and arrived at Ginny's address in a little more than twenty minutes.

It was hardly possible that Ginny could have arrived home, but I raced up the two flights of stairs. I unlocked the door with the key she had given me. The apartment was dark. I reached for the light switch, flicked the button and nothing happened. The ceiling bulb must have been burnt out. I started to grope my way toward a table where I knew a fat-bellied lamp was standing.

**T**HE guy who dropped the atom bomb was an expert marksman. The missile hit me on the back of my head. I saw all the weird, unearthly swirling and billowing and brightly colored things that the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki must have seen the instant the big bombs fell. Then I hit the floor and I no longer saw anything . . .

When my mind clutched feebly toward returning consciousness, my head was a great bulge of pain. My neck felt as if it were broken.

Someone was bending over me, going through my pockets. I was too weak to resist. I thought, "I'm not just weak, I'm dead."

There was a nerve-rasping, screeching sound. It sliced like a sharp tool into the throbbing hurt of my head. A window in Ginny's apartment made that sound when

you raised it.

Somebody was lifting me up. Maybe more than one. I was being propped up against something. There was night air on my face. It revived me some. Below me there was a concrete areaway. Three stories below me.

Instinctively I fought for a foothold. I got my feet propped against a baseboard. I struck out blindly, using the side of my hand like the blade of a cleaver, a ju-jutsu blow they'd taught me in the Army.

Somebody grunted and stumbled. I lunged away from the open window, and fell flat on my face. A heavy shadow was coming toward me, slowly, carefully. I could hear breathing in the taut silence. I made a supreme effort and sprang toward the shadow. I missed. I was flat on my face again in the darkness.

The shadow fled across the room. A door opened and shut. I staggered to my feet, plunged out into the lighted hallway.

I could hear footsteps clattering down the stairs. Vertigo overcame me. I fell. I didn't stop rolling until I had tumbled half a flight.

There were no longer any clattering footsteps. I crawled back up the stairs. The door to Ginny's apartment was open. I went in, switched on the table lamp, and collapsed in a chair.

It was just nine-thirty-seven by Ginny's alarm clock. I laughed. Ginny hadn't planned to meet me at nine-thirty or nine-thirty-seven or any other time. She'd sent her boy friend instead. She'd told the suave, sleek Mr. Parada who caused the ladies' hearts to go pitty-pat, about my socking him, and suspecting him of the murder of Danise Little. Then he, or some of his boys, had formed a reception committee for me.

It didn't make sense, of course, Ginny turning suddenly on me like that. But figuring Mr. Parada and my ever-loving girl friend as confederates explained why Ginny had put that little ice pick in my pocket.

Whoever had clouted me and had tried to toss me out of a third-story window had been going through my pockets. I found my money intact. They hadn't been out to roll me. They had been out to murder me. In a pocket of my trench coat I felt a piece of paper. I thought at first it was the telegram from Ginny. But it wasn't. The telegram had

disappeared. It was a piece of paper on which was typed:

To Whom It May Concern:

I can't take it any longer. I murdered the Little woman in a fit of insanity. The war caused it all. My name is Terence Robert Rooke. I was George Spelvin, the man in 616 of the Sheridan Towers Hotel.

This touching little missive about explained everything, I thought. Ginny and Parada were in love. Parada's old girl friend and Ginny's boy friend had stood in their way. So they'd planned to get rid of them both. Parada had killed Danise and framed me for the murder. Then he was going to fake-my suicide!

**A**FTER I burned the suicide note I decided the safest place for me was bed. I went to the Castle again, got a room and stripped off my clothes. I flopped on the cot and before long I was dreaming that I was manning a 50-caliber in an M-4 tank that was chasing a bunch of naked women. Some of them looked like Mrs. Malcolm Little and the others looked like Ginny.

## CHAPTER VI

### EMPEROR OF SKID ROW



**TOMMY TWOTOES**, benefactor of the Bowery, didn't arrive at Grogan's Palace promptly at noon, but a telephone call did. When Suds summoned me to the phone and I recognized the woman's voice I was so dumb-struck I asked:

"Who is this?"

"It's Ginny, you idiot," the voice replied.

"How did you get this number?" I asked her.

"From Chet," she replied calmly. "He didn't want to give it to me, but something's come up."

The sheer, cold cheek of the girl who had lured me into a death-trap only a few hours before left me speechless. I hesitated.

"Something about Vince?"

"Maybe," she replied. "You remember that picture of you I had? The one in uni-

form? Well, it's gone. Vince Parada was up in the apartment yesterday afternoon with Gert, the torch singer at the Triangle. I missed it right after they left."

"Don't try calling me here again," I told her. "If the cops or the news hawks have my picture I'll have to get a new address."

When Ginny hung up I wondered if she was puzzled over my not coming right out about the telegram and the murderous attack on me.

About ten minutes later I had a call from Chet. I told him about the disappearing picture.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

"I make Parada," he replied. "The heat's on him. Romano questioned Vince and he's put on a twenty-four hour tail. Parada registered at a Miami Beach hotel, all right. He's never checked out. But he hasn't slept in the room since the nineteenth. That would give him plenty of time to fly back and chill the dame."

"Maybe we're getting somewhere," I said hopefully.

"Yeah, maybe," said Chet. "They found a plane ticket in the dame's bag. A ticket to Miami. She was supposed to leave yesterday. Only she couldn't on account of she was slightly dead. Vince could have flown back under pretext of taking her back with him, and killed her instead. Parada's a three-to-five shot in my book . . ."

Tommy Twotoes, the Bashaw of the Bowery, and his retinue made a grand entrance into Grogan's where the boys had been waiting around with repressed excitement. Killer Carney, posted as a lookout, came dashing into the place.

"He's a-comin'!" he yelled. "He's a-comin', fellows!"

Everybody dashed to the door, even leaving unfinished drinks on the bar and tables, unheard of on the Bowery.

A town car drew up to the curbing, a Rolls-Royce job at least twenty-five years old, but still plenty impressive, polished until it sparkled. The gigantic, one-eyed Negro, Ebony Black, was the chauffeur. He looked majestic in purple livery. He had been a heavyweight in Tommy Twotoes' stable of fighters and might have beaten 'em all if

the champions hadn't drawn the color line, because such contenders gave them the jitters.

Beside the giant chauffeur sat a runt named Polvo, in corduroy breeches, a checkered shirt, and gold earrings. The eminent Mr. Twotoe's footman.

Polvo was quite a character in his own right. He had been an organ grinder until his monkey, General Lafayette, up and died on him, and a fairly stable Bowery citizen, except for his sneaking suspicion he was a reincarnation of George Washington. Polvo even had a set of "sea horse ivory" dentures, like Washington wore. They were as ghastly as scrubbed tombstones and gave Polvo's dark, wrinkled face an eerie look. He took them out whenever the necessity of eating or talking arose.

**T**HE arrival of Tommy Twotoes' town car brought great agitation to the street. The hums were bent double in homage to the Great Personage.

Getting the crippled and bloated old man out of the car was a job. When Polvo began to crumple, Killer Carney went to his aid. Flanked and supported by the two old heavyweights, with little Polvo blazing a trail, Tommy Twotoes made his way into the saloon, nodding benignly and waving, an ancient potentate bestowing blessings.

Suds, who had tied a faded red ribbon around the kitten's neck, sang out:

"Welcome to Grogan's Elite Palace Cafe and Bar, Mr. Twotoes, sir! We have your special bottle ready."

Suds unlocked a cabinet and brought forth a squarish bottle of blue crockery. On the crock was printed:

SPECIAL RESERVE  
Marley-le-Duc, France  
M. TOMMY TWOTOES

"You'd better fetch a case of this from the car," Tommy told Ebony Black.

The two old fighters placed the three hundred flabby pounds of Mr. Twotoes in a chair at the biggest table in the room. The Killer crowded into a chair at the right and the cocky little Polvo took the chair to his

left. The Professor, Basserty, Shakey and Knotty also managed to acquire places of honor.

Tommy Twotoes signaled Suds for drinks all around and I'm blessed if some of those guys didn't prefer Sneaky Pete to the priceless brandy.

Tommy Twotoes spied me suddenly and beckoned. I went over to the table.

"Soldier," he greeted, "I am happy you could attend our little conference of untrammelled minds and limitless thirsts."

"The last time we met," I said, "I was out of line, I guess. I'm sorry. I was pretty drunk."

"I do not like apologies, Soldier," he said. "A man speaks his mind, whether he is drunk, demented, sober or senescent. However, I want to see you for an important reason. Later, and in private."

"There's no need for you to explain yourself to me," I told him.

"You accused me of patronizing men that I am proud to call my friends," he insisted. "Soldiers of misfortune, perhaps, but true bohemians, gallant dreamers, who find a Nirvana in gutters when a bottle's near. Patronize them, sir? By the belching Bacchus, never! I salute them. I try to help them in my own peculiar way."

"You helped that Polvo, all right," declared Knotty. "That Polvo was low as a bloomin' whale's droppin's when you picked him up."

"After General Lafayette died," Polvo apologized, "I was all broke up."

"You had become a mission stiff, Polvo," Tommy Twotoes declared. "You were on the very brink of being reformed. However, you have repaid me fully." He addressed his audience. "Polvo is an excellent chef. My late lamented chef died of drinking cooking sherry when the best liquors were available to him."

"I take good care of the penguins, too, I do," said Polvo.

"What?" I asked in surprise.

"Penguins," said Tommy Twotoes. "*Spheniscidae*. Some wealthy men cultivate blondes in penthouses. Others cultivate orchids in hothouses. I cultivate penguins in coldhouses. Penguins are delightful birds.

They exhibit all the more villainous *mores* of the human race. They are complete egoists and decidedly unchristian."

**S**UDS was kept busy refilling glasses and uncorking fresh bottles. After Tommy Twotoes had assured himself that all his guests were being served promptly, he turned to me again.

"I was saying," he said, "that I attempt to help my good friends here in my own peculiar way. In my estimation, true charity does not consist in giving a man what you believe he needs. It consists in giving him what he wants. Few of these men want soup, sandwiches and fumigated clothing. They do desperately want enough alcohol to keep them alive. This I try to supply them. I visit my friends and together we look upon the wine when it is red. Or I have the boys visit me at my estate, where we drink good liquor, eat good food and make good talk. It is the best I can offer."

"Maybe you don't like apologies," I said, "but, by the eternal I'm sorry for what I said to you. You are a man of noble impulses."

"Men of noble impulses are usually deadly bores, sir," he replied. Suddenly he turned to the boys and inquired: "Can any of you sing? I need a man to sing to my penguins. Perhaps good singing might encourage them to breed."

"I sing pretty good," said Killer Carney eagerly. "Mrs. Sapoloukos' little girl, Circe, likes the way I sing when I'm a baby-sitter for her."

"Fill the glasses, Suds!" called Tommy Twotoes. "The Killer is about to burst into song."

The glasses were refilled, and the Killer began to sing about a drunk who fell into a garbage can.

Tommy Twotoes shook his head sadly.

"No, Killer," he said. "Your talents lie in other directions, I fear. I'm afraid your singing would be most unfavorably received by my penguins."

"Maybe if they had some little penguins I could come up and baby-sit 'em for you," suggested the crestfallen Killer. He appeared very dejected.

"My penguins have refused to breed in captivity," said Tommy Twotoes. "But even if the birth rate should suddenly surpass that of the Lower East Side, I doubt they would require the services of a baby-sitter. They are fiercely maternal and paternal." He again turned his attention to me.

"Soldier," he said, "why don't you come up and sing to my penguins?"

"How do you know I can sing?" I inquired. I had sung a fair baritone with my college glee club.

"It's a Twotoes adaptation of the Lombroso theory," he explained. "Tenors and bassos are usually either squat, fat men or tall, broad-shouldered heavyweights. Baritonees are the rangy type, with determined chins."

I could hardly think of a more comfortable hideout than a millionaire's estate with a well-stocked cellar. However, within a few hours my picture might be plastered on Page One and I didn't imagine Mr. Twotoes would be willing to harbor a murder suspect, despite his unconventional outlook.

"Sorry," I told him. "I used to sing elegant soprano in a boys' choir, but my voice changed and I lost my religion when I couldn't earn a dollar every Sunday."

"Why don't you come up and visit me anyway?" he pressed. "My place would furnish an ideal retreat for you at the present time."

I regarded the gross, flabby man with suspicion.

"Later, Soldier, later," he said hastily.

**B**Y THE time the case of brandy from the car was exhausted, many of the boys had passed out cold. They were draped about in various grotesque poses.

Mr. Twotoes himself showed few effects of the liberal libations he had consumed. He looked at the Killer and Ebony Black. "Now, if you will assist me to my feet, gentlemen . . ."

They hoisted the heavy bulk and led Tommy Twotoes through the curtains of the back room. Ebony Black came back and spoke to me.

"The boss wants to see you." He spoke softly, but seemed to be saying that I could


go under my own power or be carried. I went to the back room.

Tommy Twotoes stood braced against a heavy table.

"Well, Terence R. Rooke," he said, "how does it feel to be a fugitive from justice?"

## CHAPTER VII

### URGENT INVITATION

OR a minute I just stood looking at Tommy Twotoes. Finally I said something original.

I said, "I don't know what you mean."

There wasn't even a flicker in the little eye-slits of his doughy face. "You know quite well what I mean, Terence," he said. "I never forget a face. I was on the sixth floor of the Sheridan Towers Hotel on the afternoon of the twentieth. I saw you. But the clothes you were wearing distracted me. Then I remembered—the man down here on Skid Row called Soldier, the one who had spoken his mind to me. I wanted to see you, to hear your story. Again I proffer my hospitality. Will you accept it, or shall I dispatch one of the boys for the police who might be interested in meeting George Spelvin, whose fingerprints have been identified as those of Terence Rooke."

I had no desire to tangle with Ebony Black, the one-eyed Colossus. I gave in.

"I accept the kind invitation of Mr. Tommy Twotoes with pleasure," I said . . .

A small truck that bore the name of one of the swankiest caterers in the city, pulled up at Grogan's door. Two supercilious waiters accompanied the truck. There was caviar, creme vichyssoise, lobster Newburg, broiled squab with wild rice, and asparagus Hollandaise. Tommy had ordered a ripe old cheese instead of dessert. The caterers also supplied the champagne, since Grogan's never had any calls for such a sissy drink. It was necessary for the haughty waiters to chill the bubbly in mop buckets.

It was a gala night, but finally even Tommy Twotoes' seemingly inexhaustible supply of blue-crooked brandy began to run low.

"It is growing late and I am growing old," said Tommy. "Polvo, do you have the satchel?"

"Right here," said Polvo eagerly. He inserted the George Washington teeth, so it was evident that he was about to act in an official capacity.

"Then we will proceed with the dispensation. Killer, you and Ebony Black will act as sergèants-at-arms."

A line began to form from the table out into the street. The slumberers awakened as though some psychic alarm clock had jangled in their sleep-sodden heads. Polvo opened a brief-case. It was filled with crisp new ten-dollar bills. As each of the boys passed by, he was handed one of the bills.

As Tommy Twotoes was assisted to his feet, Killer Carney jumped on the table and called: "Hey, fellas! Three cheers for Tommy Twotoes!"

A stranger cheer-leader never gesticulated in front of a more grotesque audience, though some of the cheers were little more than alcoholic croaks.

During the ride uptown in Tommy Twotoes' town car, I drowsily realized that my fate, which had rested with luck and Chet Lassiter, was now in the hands of the world's most eccentric millionaire, but the insistent voice of worry was stilled. I was content to sink down and let the pleasant torpor wash over me.

**T**HE car drew up to a curbing after a short drive.

"This is the Sheridan Towers!" I exclaimed.

"So it is," replied Tommy Twotoes calmly. "But there is no need for you to be nervous, Soldier. I have been accused of many things, but the police have never yet suspected me of harboring men wanted for murder. I am still registered at this hotel. Polvo and Ebony Black have gone inside to collect my baggage and to check me out."

At almost that exact moment someone opened the door and stuck his head inside the car.

"Well, Tommy!" said the man. "Knew it must be you when I saw the rig. Why don't you turn it in on a new bicycle?"

"If it isn't Lieutenant Romano of the

Homicide Squad!" said Tommy.

I faked a coughing fit so I would have an excuse for covering my face with a handkerchief.

"I see you're taking one of the boys home with you," said Romano.

"Yes," replied Tommy. "He is coming up to sing to my penguins."

"How are the penguins?" inquired Romano.

"They stubbornly refuse to propagate their kind," Tommy Twotoes answered. "We have tried hormones, vitamins and an assortment of nostrums, including Spanish fly. The males remain as impotent as the Nubian eunuchs of an ancient queen and the females as frigid as a statue of a spinster hewn in granite."

"You staying at this hotel, Tommy?" asked Romano.

"Lieutenant," Tommy Twotoes chuckled, "you doubtless know quite well that I've been staying here. On the sixth floor."

"Too bad about Danise," said Romano, unperturbed. "Old flame of yours, I remember."

"The last, and in many ways the most desirable, of an old man's darlings," said Tommy Twotoes. "And unless recollection fails me, she was also an acquaintance of yours, Lieutenant."

"Yeah, I knew her," Romano replied.

"As did every rugged and virile male of Broadway," said Tommy. "Danise, I fear, had a regrettable weakness for rugged and virile males."

"Yeah," said Romano. "Well, I gotta shove off."

Polvo and Ebony Black arrived with the baggage. While they were piling it in the luggage trunk I blurted, "What are you trying to do to me? *You* knew the murdered woman—well—from what that copper said. You were in the hotel when she was chilled. Maybe you killed her. Or maybe you had the big black or the little punk who wears George Washington's teeth stick an ice pick in her heart. It's going to be nice for you to have me around so you can produce me the minute the bloodhounds start yapping too close to *your* heels. I'm not having any, Mr. Twotoes. I'm leaving right now!"

I reached for the door handle, just as

Ebony Black started the car. I fell back, and Tommy Twotoes put a restraining hand on my knee.

"Don't be too hasty, Soldier," he said. "I don't think you'd get far if I set Ebony Black after you. You may have good reason to suspect I killed Danise, had her killed. But proof is lacking. And proof that you did *not* kill her is lacking, also. If I were responsible for Danise's death, it would be my nature to conceal my guilt, perhaps make someone else the scapegoat. But assume that I am not responsible, that I am an old man who treasures her memory, is shocked by her brutal murder, and determined to make the guilty person pay. That is why I wish to talk to you in private. Guilty or innocent, you must know many things I want to know. I intend to find them out."

**E**BONY BLACK drove up Riverside Drive, but I did not try to escape again. Up to now, Vince Parada had been Exhibit A in my mental Rogues' Gallery. But there was the woman's husband, who perhaps had the best motive of all and who had no witnesses as to his whereabouts at the time the murder was committed. There was the ghostly Mr. Provost, who had disappeared into thin air. And now there was Tommy Twotoes and his two ill-assorted henchmen.

Also, of course, there was myself, Terry Bob Rooke, a shell-shocked guy who got a red haze in front of his eyes at times and who could not account satisfactorily for his actions during the afternoon of the twentieth.

At length, Tommy Twotoes said: "I am known for my idiosyncracies, Soldier, but oftener than not there is a method in my madness. My methods may be highly unconventional, but they bring results. I suggest that despite your suspicions, you should trust me. We have a tedious drive before us. I won't allow Ebony to proceed at more than thirty miles an hour. Having thus far survived the ravages of a misspent life, I have no intention of being killed in a traffic accident. Try to sleep, Soldier, for I will keep you awake for most of the night after our arrival, regardless of your own desires. I feel it is my duty to protect you from

yourself—and, perhaps, from others.”

“What others?” I asked.

“It is fairly obvious that if you are guiltless,” he replied, “there must be certain well-directed forces working against you. The corpse was found in the room you were occupying. Your picture was sent to a newspaper from an anonymous source. There might be a parable for you in the unchristian lives led by penguins. The small Antarctic penguin, the breed in my rookeries, is a thorough-going villain, especially when his own safety is involved. When the penguin flock goes to bathe or to seek food, they try to persuade some weak-minded penguin to take the first dive. This expendable penguin thus becomes bait for any sea leopards, their hereditary enemies, in the vicinity. If the weak-minded penguin cannot be persuaded he is immediately shoved into the water. Often his mate and his friends are the ringleaders in forcing such foolhardy heroism upon him.”

I could feel the little slits of his eyes regarding me shrewdly.

“Your lecture seems to indicate it is dangerous to trust anyone else, although you have just suggested that I should place my trust in you,” I said.

Tommy Twotoes chuckled.

I dozed fitfully for the rest of the journey. When I awakened the car was on a road which wound up a bluff that overlooked the moon-silvered river. A towering structure loomed darkly against the sky, like some turreted castle of the Middle Ages. I thought this was Tommy Twotoes' home but soon learned that it was his penguin rookeries. The house itself was a low modernistic building that appeared insignificant beside the tiered rookeries where Tommy Twotoes' persistently sterile penguins dwelt.

Tommy Twotoes' house proved to be as extraordinary and contradictory as its incredible owner. The interior resembled a Sears-Roebuck catalogue with a lot of typographical errors.

The first thing I noticed was a totem pole that doubled as a hall tree.

Tommy Twotoes was saying, “I surround myself with things that mean some-

thing to me. That totem pole is a relic of my youth, when I panned for gold in Alaska. The second face from the top resembles my great uncle, a Baptist preacher.”

ON THE walls hung a pair of boxing gloves once worn by Sam Langford, a bat that had belonged to Ty Cobb, racing plates that had once been shod to the ground-devouring hoofs of Exterminator.

On another wall was an oil painting of heroic size depicting a family of the Victorian era. A young man wearing curly sideburns and a Prince Albert coat was surrounded by his adoring family. A brass plate proclaimed this work, “Reward of Virtue.” Beside this was a colorful lithograph of high-kicking, buxom ballerinas of the late Billy Watson's “Beef Trust.” The printed sign read, “The Reward of Vice.”

Tommy Twotoes saw me examining the Victorian family.

“I once played the piano in a Barbary Coast bawdy house,” he said. “The Madam was a sentimental lady. That painting hung in the parlor of her sporting house.”

I entered the living room, crossed a deep-piled Persian rug and ran an obstacle course of Early American cobbler's benches, Turkish ottomans, Victorian whatnots, Russian samovars and Japanese screens to find a seat in a Chinese throne chair inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and flanked by a Duncan Phyfe coffee table and a Biedermier hope chest. There also were Empire love seats, a Grand Rapids mission library table, zebra-wood credenzas, slim-legged gilt Regency occasional chairs, marble-topped brass stands, and a huge, overstuffed article that appeared to be the result of cross-breeding an easy chair and a divan, especially designed for the imposing bulk of Mr. Twotoes. The room was littered with every variety of bric-a-brac and busts, and the walls were covered from floor to ceiling with Aubusson tapestries and more weird collector's items in between, paintings by DaVinci, Delacroix and Dali.

I sank down in utter bewilderment.

“Don't make yourself too comfortable, Soldier,” said Tommy. “I wish to interview you in the study.”

Polvo touched an ornamental knob in the woodwork and a tapestry-covered panel opened silently.

Tommy said, "I always wanted to have a house with a secret door. Now I have one."

The study was by no means as startling as the living room. The walls were lined with books and hung with framed photographs, in all of which was a slim, fashionably dressed man with famous fighters, jockeys and theatrical figures.

"Yes, Soldier," Tommy said, "that was I. Before my long illness I was a beau in appearance as well as inclination."

Ebony Black placed a blue crock of the special brandy and glasses conveniently to hand. The two lackeys withdrew. Tommy Twotoes poured brandy, and the shrewd little slits of his eyes regarded me.

"I have found that the surest way to invite the truth from another," he said, "is to tell the whole truth yourself. Drink, Soldier. Prepare to listen to an old man's maunderings."

## CHAPTER VIII

### TRUE CONFESSIONS



**G**RIPPING the bulge-bellied brandy inhaler in his pudgy palm, heating the fluid and sniffing sensuously at the fragrance of distilled grape, Tommy Twotoes launched into his "maunderings."

"Danise Darlan," he said, "whose real name was Dottie Dorfman, was—shall we say?—a protégé of mine when I owned the Three Ring Circus."

"I thought Vince Parada had the Three Ring Circus," I interrupted.

"He was my front man," replied the old man. "I designed the Circus myself. It had three circular dance floors where circus acts were performed simultaneously—except for the star act, the Lady Godiva number. She rode into the center ring alone on a white horse, clad only in blue light and talcum powder. Danise Darlan appeared as Lady Godiva. She was not twenty then."

He paused, and added softly: "I was her lover once."

It was grotesque to think of this mountain of flabby flesh as the lover of that full-blown, rose-tinted siren.

He must have read my thoughts. "I was not young, even then, Soldier. But I was still vigorous. I was successful. I had money. Still this was no sordid mating of Beauty and the Beast. I was happy, although I did not delude myself. Only a fool can lay claim to sole possession of such a lush creature as Danise. But she always returned to me."

"What about Parada?" I inquired. "She had a ticket to Miami. He was in Miami. But he could have come back in time to kill her."

This seemed to shock the old man.

"So she was going to have a last fling with Parada!" He suddenly looked very old and tired. "I wondered why she insisted upon Florida instead of Nevada for her divorce. It is possible that Vince did murder her. He was on the sixth floor of the hotel that day."

"What?" I fairly bellowed.

Tommy Twotoes nodded. "About an hour or so after I saw you, I saw Vince examining the room numbers. He knocked on the door of Six-seventeen several times. It was not opened, so he left."

He gazed into the balloon inhaler as if it were a crystal ball. "While I was still recuperating in a wheel-chair," he said, "Danise wed Malcolm Little. He had social position—and a great deal of money."

Tommy Twotoes leaned forward and tapped me on the knee.

"Whenever Danise left me temporarily for younger and handsomer men," he said, "I did not fret too much. She was a magnificent, healthy animal. I could understand the impulse that prompted her. But I did bitterly resent Malcolm Little. He had nothing to offer her but wealth and social position. I felt that she had bartered her charms sordidly. I had idealized Danise as warm-fleshed, Eternal Woman, a proud pagan who could enslave a man or break him. The reclamation of Danise from the unfamiliar paths of homely virtue became an obsession



with me. I even insinuated an agent of my own into Malcolm Little's house as a private secretary. I soon learned that Danise was no longer true to her marriage vows. She may have renewed a former affair with Vince Parada, but there was one man in whom she was particularly interested. I think he was the man she went to the Sheridan Towers to meet. Was that man you, Soldier?"

"No," I told him. "I never saw her until after she was dead."

He shook his head. "Even the obtuse Mr. Little grew suspicious. The outraged husband had the phone in his wife's suite tapped. I saw the transcripts of her conversations. Danise had become Danise again."

**H**E PAUSED to refill our glasses. "Mr. Little is well named," he continued. "He became vengeful. He told his wife that he would not divorce her but that he was arranging a will through which most of his money would go to cultural projects. He had filed with his attorneys proof of her infidelities in case she attempted to break the will. Danise came to me for advice. I urged her to go to Nevada and rid herself of her inconvenient spouse without asking alimony. I offered her my support and protection. She agreed, but decided upon Florida instead of Nevada. I bought the plane ticket you mentioned. I was to join her in Miami after the divorce."

He again inhaled the fragrance of the brandy. At length he said: "Danise had a telephone call from New York, my agent told me. From the man in whom Danise had appeared most seriously interested. Danise asked him to return certain letters she had written him. He told her that the only possible way she could obtain the letters was to meet him in Room Six-seventeen of the Sheridan Towers. He was registered there as J. K. Provost. Danise agreed. I thought this man might be a blackmailer so I determined to discover his identity. That is why I was in the Sheridan Towers in a sixth floor suite."

He finished his brandy as a token that he had also finished his long dissertation.

He said: "I have bared my soul, or what's left of it, to you. It's your turn, Soldier. Give!"

I gave. Although I knew I was being a fool. I told him about the spells and the hospital and the drunkenness. I told him about Chet Lassiter and Ginny and Vince Parada and the naked woman with the hole in her heart. I even told him about finding the little, blood-crusted ice pick in my pocket, and about the telegram and the attempt to murder me.

From time to time he interrupted me to ask a question. When my true confession was ended, he advised me against making a phone call to Chet, said I should write him instead. Romano might already have this house under observation and the wires tapped, and I should not be seen any place where there was a public phone booth.

He asked me then to help him to his feet. He stood for a moment, leaning against the desk, his back to me.

He said, "Your recital was most interesting, Soldier. Most informative. I am now quite certain of the identity of the murderer."

"What!" I exclaimed.

"Only one person could possibly have committed the crime," he stated calmly.

I stood looking at his back, my mouth hanging open. At last I said:

"Meaning me?"

He turned and scrutinized me in silence. Then he said:

"Examine the evidence, Soldier. Then draw your own conclusions."

**W**E FOUND Ebony Black waiting for us in the hallway. Ebony relieved me of the old man, who pointed to a door and told me that was my room.

"We may know more by this time tomorrow," he said as he reached his own door. "I'm going to send for the boys to come up. I am going to have them shadow a certain person in the city. Polvo and Ebony Black can assist them."

I exploded with laughter. The thought of someone being tailed by a rum-dumb nuclear fission expert, a bearded jockey, a

punch-drunk baby-sitter, a tattered Shakespearean scholar, a dwarf with a monocle, an organ grinder with George Washington's false teeth, and a one-eyed black man as big as a house was too much for me.

"I told you I work in unconventional ways," Tommy Twotoes said. "No man would believe that such startlingly noticeable individuals would be set to spy upon him . . ."

When I awakened the sun was high. Somebody was twirling an egg-beater in my stomach and the taste of stewed rubber tires was in my mouth. The little green men in puce tophats were laughing shrilly while they tossed their small javelins through my skull. Then I realized that the discordant chorus wasn't inside my head at all, but somewhere outside. It must be the penguins.

Ebony Black knocked and entered, carrying a glass of dark amber fluid.

"Good morning, sir," he said politely. "How do you feel?"

"I feel like I had a mouthful of moulted penguin," I told him.

He handed me the glass. "Drink this," he said. "Mr. Twotoes recommends it for first thing in the morning."

I took the glass in a shaking hand, swallowed the stuff at a gulp. My tonsils burst into flame, my eyes swam with acid tears. Then all of a sudden I quit shaking and gasping and felt just fine. "What's the matter with those birds?" I asked.

"It's the Killer's fault," answered Ebony. "Polvo and I fatched him and the other boys up, only the boss sent the Professor back to do a job for him. Polvo told that Killer not to sing to the penguins, but he started anyway. We made him stop, but them penguins is still expressing their disapproval. Them penguins is funny birds. Polvo, he plays them records of Mr. Bing

Crosby singing and they love it. But let him put on a record of anybody else singing the same song and they'll holler worse than they did at the Killer."

Ebony had laid out a fresh wardrobe for me. Tommy Twotoes evidently kept clothing of assorted sizes for his guests.

While Polvo was serving my breakfast he suddenly slapped his hand to his mouth and flushed. He had forgotten to insert his unwieldy dentures.

"I must've left them down to the rookeries," he apologized, and hurried off in search of his teeth somewhere in the man-made cliffs and refrigerated glaciers of Mr. Twotoes' miniature Antarctic.

Ebony Black told me that Tommy Twotoes wished to see me in the study after I had eaten. I found him reading.

"Good morning, Soldier," he greeted me cheerfully. "Still troubled by guilt complexes?"

"Good morning," I said. "You think I'm guilty, don't you?"

**T**HE old man looked like an inscrutable Buddha.

"Open the window, will you, Soldier?" he asked. "The room is becoming stuffy."

I opened a window. That let in one awful racket. Tommy Twotoes rang for Ebony Black. "What has roused this raucousness in our aviaries, Ebony?" he asked. "Has the Killer burst into song again?"

"No, sir," said the Negro. "Cleo's acting up again."

"Cleo," explained Tommy, "is a frustrated penguin."

"Yes, sir," said Ebony Black. "Cleo's a lovin' girl-penguin and the boy-penguins won't do what she wants 'em to do. That Polvo, he left his false teeth down to the rookeries. Cleo, she's a-settin' on 'em, trying to hatch 'em. Just keeps a-screamin' and a-peckin' at that Polvo."

"This is a serious matter that calls for action," declared Tommy. "Those are no ordinary dentures. Polvo treasures them highly. We face a grave emergency. George Washington's teeth must be recovered from the maternal Cleo by some means. Gentlemen, assist me to my feet."

### Did You Know?

An unsuccessful suicide is attempted manslaughter and punishable as such.

Entry into another house to remove one's own property without permission is burglary.

An innocent witness to a murder which he fails to report at the earliest possible time is an accomplice.

CHAPTER IX

AMOROUS PENGUIN



BONY BLACK and I acted as derricks, and assisted Tommy Twotoes to the rookeries.

Polvo was pleading with Cleo to give him back his teeth, but the nesting penguin wasn't moved.

"This particular species of penguin, the *adelie*," said Tommy Twotoes, "have been known to try to hatch a hunk of ice . . . Soldier, Cleo is impressionable. Try singing to her. Something sentimental."

I burst into "The Dream Girl of Pi K A," my fraternity song. Cleo quit hatching George Washington's false teeth, and came over to rub caressingly against my leg.

"The eternal, fickle female," said Tommy Twotoes.

Polvo retrieved his half-hatched dentures and we left. As we neared the house, I felt Cleo rubbing against me again.

"How did *she* get out?" I asked.

"That Cleo's a smart cookie," said Polvo proudly. "She's learned how to unlatch the gate with her beak."

He dragged Cleo, squawking and ark-ing, back to the penguin corral. The other penguins began chattering. One, especially vociferous, took some vicious pecks at the errant lady.

"That's Cotton Mather," said Tommy Twotoes. "He's a hard-shelled puritan. I suspect that his preachments have had a great deal to do with the sterility of the flock."

Since I had just finished breakfast, while the others ate lunch I sat in the living room gazing at Delacroix's ample-bosomed houri and Dali's weird dream world of ladies with snakes for eyebrows and gentlemen with alarm clocks for stomachs, and I was thinking that Tommy Twotoes was convinced I had killed, and wondering why he was prolonging the comedy. I also wondered why I just sat there listlessly, content just to drink Tommy Twotoes' fine brandy and wait for the inevitable.

Knotty, Basserty, Killer Carney and I

helped Polvo carry bushel baskets of shrimp to the penguin pens. Then we assisted Tommy Twotoes to the rookeries.

Suddenly Polvo froze and looked worried. "We're one short!" he cried. "Cleo's got loose again!"

We formed a search party. We searched the house, the estate, we beat the surrounding woods. But we failed to find Cleo. Poor Polvo was inconsolable.

"Maybe it's a kidnaping," he said. "Maybe we should oughta call the FBI."

"I wouldn't worry too much, Polvo," Tommy Twotoes consoled him. "I knew another lady who had a habit of wandering off. But she always returned. Until the last time . . . Go start dinner. We will have your incomparable shish-kebab."

I took a nap in my chair. I was awakened from my troubled nap by the ark-ing of the penguin flock. The station wagon that Tommy Twotoes had ordered Ebony Black to drive to town was in the drive. I also saw a sporty convertible being parked. A man and a woman were in the convertible. I knew them both. The red haze clouded my eyes. I ran into the hallway, opened the front door.

Ginny came in. She looked surprised when she saw me. When Vince Parada followed her I swung with everything I had. Mr. Parada sat down on the floor, a glassy look in his eyes. Then he closed his eyes and lay down at full length.

Ebony Black looked at the boss for instructions.

"You crazy, jealous jerk!" Ginny screamed. "What are you doing up here?"

TOMMY TWOTOES shook his head sadly. "I find you guilty of a serious breach of hospitality, Soldier," he said, "but your left hook reminds me of Ebony Black in his prime. One of you look in the drawer of the table by the totem pole. You will find smelling salts."

Killer Carney found the smelling salts and began to work over Mr. Parada, holding the little bottle to his nostrils and slapping his face lightly. Eventually Vince began to come around. Then he saw me and glared.

"So it was you!" he said. "You're lucky I'm not packing a rod."

"Why don't you use the little pick?" I asked. "You killed Danise with it, didn't you? Or maybe you'd prefer to slug me with the blackjack again."

"This bum's crazy!" said Vince, getting to his feet with the assistance of the Killer. "I'll tell Romano where he can find George Spelvin as soon as I get out of here!"

"You will do no informing" said Tommy Twotoes. "You are not leaving here, Vincent, although your arrival is somewhat unexpected. I would have had to interview you, anyway. But having arrived unheralded, you must remain until I deem it meet for you to leave . . . See to it, Ebony."

"It's all my fault," sobbed Ginny. "I didn't know you had Terry up here. When Vince said those men told him you wanted me to come up, I thought you were after a girl to do a strip-tease at a stag, or something. I wouldn't come alone. So Vince agreed to drive me."

"That the Soldier is in my custody," said Tommy Twotoes, "must not be disclosed for awhile longer. I thought the presence of his charming lady friend would make him more content. Besides, I wished to talk to you."

Tommy introduced his ill-assorted guests. There was some attempt at desultory conversation as Ebony Black passed the drinks, but Ginny and Parada just sat and glared at me. I just kept filling my glass and emptying it again.

Tommy took Parada into the soundproof study and closed the door. So I had only Ginny to glare at me. After awhile Vince returned and glared at me while Ginny went into the study.

Finally Polvo came into the room, inserted George Washington's teeth, and announced that dinner was served.

Tommy Twotoes played the charming host. He had an inexhaustible fund of entertaining tales. The boys were enjoying themselves immensely, but Ginny, Vince and I remained silent.

It was well after midnight when we retired to our rooms. I left the door slightly open and sat waiting for Ginny to come

and make some phony explanation and beg my forgiveness. Finally I heard the light slap-slapping of footsteps in the carpeted hall. I bounded across the room.

It wasn't Ginny.

Cleo, the frustrated penguin, stood in the doorway, gazing up at me with adoring eyes.

She came into the room, ark-ed softly, and stood rubbing against my leg.

I hastily closed the door and locked it. I had to get Cleo out of there. If Ginny *should* come, and find me pitching woo with an amorous penguin, she'd be sure I was crazy.

I put on my shoes and threw the trench coat over my pajamas. I stroked Cleo's head, and I could have sworn she began cooing like a dove.

No one was in the hall, so I left the room, with Cleo paddling along beside me.

AS WE neared the rookeries, a great commotion arose. A gate banged and there were the running footsteps of a man. I ran to the rookeries, but the man was lost in the shadows by the time I arrived.

Then the floodlights of the rookeries, which were controlled by a switch in the house, blazed. The penguins were standing about something on the ground, chattering hysterically.

I was looking at the thing on the ground when Tommy Twotoes, supported by Ebony Black, and the others arrived. There was a penguin lying on the ground—the big elderly Cotton Mather.

He was dead, a little red hole pierced through his white ruff.

"Why you want to kill a poor ole harmless penguin, Mr. Soljer?" asked Ebony Black. He spoke softly, but I didn't like what he said.

Cleo ducked suddenly and picked up something off the ground. She paddled off to her nest, placed the thing she had picked up in the nest and squatted.

"Cleo's hatchin' something again," said Polvo.

"We have to get her off that nest," said Tommy Twotoes. "You had better sing, Soldier."

My rendition of "Snagtooth Sal" had the anticipated effect. Cleo left her nest to rub against my leg. The thing she had been hatching was a little ice-pick, crusted with blood.

On the wooden handle was printed "Inter-City Ice Co. . . ."

I awakened to come suddenly face to face with an ugly reality. They thought I was a murderer and they thought I was mad!

I had tried to tell them before about Cleo finding her way to my room, about returning her to the rookeries. I had tried to tell them of the shadow that banged the gate and then pounded into the dark woods. But all, including Ginny, had looked at me with incredulous eyes.

They thought I was a crazed murderer whose mad lust to kill had led him to stab a harmless bird to death, merely because life had pulsed warm in the creature.

I was a prisoner. And the eccentric old man who was my jailer would grow tired of the farce. Then the police would lay heavy hands on me.

And after that there would be the little room in which there was a grim, wooden chair, or, worse, there would be a little room with padded walls and stout bars on the windows, and men who screamed out the torment of their lunacy.

But the extraordinary household of Tommy Twotoes functioned as usual, even though the master must have believed there was a maniac beneath his roof. His "guests" made a show of welcoming me, but I disliked the look in their eyes.

"Good morning, Soldier," Tommy Twotoes said. "A letter came for you."

He handed me a long, white envelope, addressed "Soldier, Care Thos. Twotoes, Hudson Bluff Road, Tarrytown, N. Y." It had been postmarked the night before in Tarrytown.

The letter had been addressed on a typewriter with all caps and small caps, the same as that on Tommy Twotoes' gold-plated portable in his study. It read:

Dear Soldier:

Why don't you confess and throw yourself upon the mercy of the authorities? Unless you are restrained, you know that you will keep on killing. Ginny may be the next to die. Avoid further

tragedy. They will never execute you. After all, you have a record of insanity. Perhaps you can even be cured. There is nothing else for you do. This is your conscience speaking.

The typewritten signature read "Terry Bob Rooke."

Tommy Twotoes said softly, "May I see it, Soldier?"

"Haven't you seen it already?" I asked. "It seems to have been written on your typewriter."

Tommy Twotoes said, "I didn't write it, Soldier."

I HANDED him the letter. He read it twice, then handed it to Ebony Black.

"Lock this in the study safe," he said. He turned to me. "That is all we needed. The case is solved. There are only the formalities to dispense with."

"You think I wrote the letter?" I asked.

"Think it over, Soldier," Tommy Twotoes replied.

Shakey quoted *Macbeth*: "'And when we have our naked frailties hid, that suffer in exposure, let us meet and question this most bloody piece of work'."

Tommy shook his head. "There will be no questioning now," he said. "We will reserve that for a time when all involved are present and due process of law can be invoked. Relax, Soldier. The denouement is near. It is a matter of hours at most, if all goes well."

"I'm going to my room and think things over, like you said," I told Tommy.

## CHAPTER X

### SURPRISE PARTY



DRINK was what I wanted. I went to get a bottle. The living room was deserted, but I could hear Tommy Twotoes' voice in the study, talking on the telephone.

"Yes, Lieutenant Romano," I heard him say, "be here tonight at six. I will turn Danise's murderer over to you."

I grabbed a blue crock and went back to my room. One thing was clear. I had to get out of there as soon as it was dark.

Finally it was dark, and black skies spilled rain in a splashing torrent. I donned the trench coat and peaked cap, thrust the brandy bottle in a pocket, then slipped out the back door, and made for the woods.

It was a nightmare. I slipped in the viscous mud, stumbled over roots, catapulted into trees, fell into deep puddles. There was no world except one of rain and mud and utter darkness. But at last I saw a light, dim and far away. I plunged and slithered and stumbled toward it.

Then suddenly I stopped dead in my tracks. I heard familiar voices.

In the light that shone from Tommy Twotoes' house I could see the boys clustered about the rookeries. They were discussing my disappearance.

"His footprints lead into the woods, all right," said the Professor, bending down with a flashlight. "He can't have got far in those woods on a night like this."

"The boss say bring him back wherever he got," said Ebony Black.

"Maybe we oughta have a bloodhound," suggested Basserty.

"Maybe we got one!" exclaimed Polvo. "That Cleo tracked him right to his room last night, he said. Let's give her a whiff of them tracks."

I dropped on my hands and knees, creeping and crawling. Presently I heard the patter of little penguin feet in the squishy mud behind me, accompanied by a happy ark-ing.

I made my way carefully down an embankment, but Cleo, lacking an ice-bank, coasted down a mud-bank. She landed at my feet. I landed flat on my face.

"Ark," said Cleo happily.

The boys came thundering out of the woods. Ebony Black pulled me gently to my feet.

"You gotta come along, Mr. Soljer," he said. "Tommy Twotoes wants you."

When we arrived at the house, Ebony conducted me into the living room.

Suddenly I saw Chet Lassiter.

"Terry!" he said. "What have these goons been doing to you?"

Polvo conducted another person into the room, a small, gray, meek-looking man,

who wore eyeglasses.

"I believe you are acquainted with this gentleman," Tommy Twotoes said to Chet, nodding toward the stranger.

Chet looked blank. The small, gray man looked blank.

Tommy Twotoes said, "No? I was under the impression that Mr. Little was a client of yours, Lassiter."

Chet said, "Oh, Mr. Malcolm Little. No, we never met. His secretary made the arrangements."

"Neither my secretary nor any other employee of mine ever made any arrangements with you on my behalf, Mr. Lassiter," Malcolm Little said icily.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken out like that," Chet said smoothly.

"You did not foresee, of course, that you might be brought face to face with Malcolm Little," said Tommy Twotoes. "Your mistake, Lassiter."

"Just what is this?" demanded Chet. "I came up to help Terry."

"You nearly helped him into the electric chair, or a cell for the dangerously insane," said Tommy Twotoes calmly. "What is this, you ask, Lassiter? I'll tell you. The murder of Danise Darlan, Mrs. Malcolm Little. Once I had the facts, it was obvious you were the only person who *could* be guilty."

**W**HY, you—"

Chet moved menacingly toward the fat old man. Ebony Black moved faster. Chet was a big man, and strong, but he was helpless in the grip of the giant Negro.

"Search him, Ebony," said Tommy Twotoes. "If he is carrying a gun, remove it."

Ebony Black relieved Chet of a revolver.

"You may as well sit down," said Tommy Twotoes. "Polvo, pass the drinks."

Ebony Black shoved Chet into a chair and stood guard. He needed only a turban and a scimitar to resemble a eunuch at the harem portal.

"Some of this is conjecture," Tommy Twotoes said to Chet, "but most of it is demonstrable fact. Your affair with Danise began when you were a Broadway cop. Then you joined the Army and were sent

overseas. While you were away, she married."

Mr. Little winced.

"Pardon me, Malcolm," Tommy Twotoes said, "but by the time that Lassiter returned, Danise was chafing at her marital ties. She renewed her affair with this man." Again he addressed Chet. "Malcolm Little knew of your existence, but he did not know your identity."

Tommy Twotoes turned to Malcolm Little. "I'm sorry, but your private secretary was in my pay." Then he said to Chet:

"Danise planned to divorce her husband and again accept my support. She had written you letters. She thought I might withdraw my offer if they were shown to me. She asked you to return the letters. You refused. You knew instinctively they were the only hold you had over the woman you loved."

Tommy Twotoes shook his bald head.

"You planned to kill her rather than lose her to another man. Soldier was ideal for your purpose. He had been shell-shocked and treated for nervous instability. He was naive. You employed him with this murder specifically in mind."

Chet sneered. "I hope you think you can prove these absurd and outrageous statements."

Tommy Twotoes sipped his brandy and paid no attention. He continued:

"You called Danise, not knowing her phone was tapped. You told her the only way she could obtain the letters was to meet you in Room Six-seventeen of the Sheridan Towers Hotel on the twentieth. I saw the transcript of that phone call, but Malcolm Little did not. Mr. Little could not possibly have engaged your services, because he had no knowledge of the assignment.

"Danise met you. Toward noon, you left the room, probably telling her you were going to get the letters. Actually, you went to your office, to make sure that Soldier had left for the hotel at your orders, and to await a call from him.

"Danise put through a call to me—duly recorded by the hotel operator. I was on the same floor of the hotel as she was at the time. She couldn't leave the hotel, be-

cause she wanted those letters and had to wait. However, she wanted desperately to talk to someone. You had badly frightened her. She put through a long-distance call to Parada in Miami Beach. She had already arranged for a final fling with him while waiting for her divorce. Parada was alarmed. He took a plane at once. Arriving in New York he went directly to the Sheridan Towers. He knocked upon the door of Room Six-seventeen, but received no answer, because Danise lay dead, and you, Lassiter, had no desire to entertain guests."

**T**OMMY TWOTOES motioned for Polvo to refill the glasses.

"Lassiter," he said then, "you had told Soldier the woman was not expected at the hotel until the next day, so when you phoned him, after you had left the hotel ostensibly to get the letters for Danise, and he told you he was all ready to watch the quarry, you told him to take it easy and go see his girl. You returned to Room Six-seventeen and killed Danise with a small ice-pick.

"Then there was a nerve-wracking wait for the coast to be clear. About six o'clock you called Soldier's room—the only call made to that room all day—and there was no answer. So you crossed the hall when no one was in sight. You were a private detective who carried passkeys. You opened the door of Six-sixteen and left it slightly ajar.

"It was only a few steps from room to room, but dangerous for a man carrying a corpse. You made it. Then you began to put your plan for driving the Soldier insane into operation. You stripped Danise, sat her in a chair, and took her clothing back to Room Six-seventeen. You went home, certain that Soldier would call you as soon as he discovered the corpse.

"When Soldier saw you and told his story, you found the opportunity to slip the little ice-pick into the pocket of his coat. You could not foresee that it would slip down into the lining through a hole."

Tommy Twotoes motioned for more brandy and refilled his pipe.

"You told Soldier to disappear," he said. "You returned to the Sheridan Towers,

dressed Danise and moved her body to the bed, so that when it was found, Soldier would doubt his own senses. You put Danise's luggage in Soldier's room, and made off with your own. You went to Frayne's, told them of a quarrel between Soldier and Ginny, and said Soldier wanted them to deny he had been there, since he had been trying to pick up other women. To convince Soldier they could keep his secret, they denied his presence there even to his own face.

"You arranged to meet Ginny at her apartment, after her last show, telling her that Soldier was in trouble. You implored her to urge Soldier to tell the medics he might have killed a woman during one of his blackouts. Ginny refused, but agreed not to tell Soldier of your visit. You found another of Frayne's ice-picks in her apartment, and took it, to confuse Soldier even more. You also found Soldier's picture and turned the picture of 'George Spelvin' over to a newspaper, under the pledge of secrecy to you, a reputable private detective who had once been a cop."

Tommy Twotoes paused, but no one said anything. Chet's lips were curled, but he wasn't smiling.

"Ginny didn't want to tell you about the loss of the photograph," said Tommy, "because she resented your insistence upon Soldier's guilt. But she had to call you to get in touch with Soldier. You gave her the number of Grogan's saloon, but said Soldier would not be there until the next day. Then you told her you had to discuss important new developments with her and Parada, and for them to meet you at your hotel immediately after her show. They were to wait if you were not there when they arrived. That would assure Ginny's absence from her apartment, and if your plan went wrong, Ginny might be suspected. You sent the telegram, and entered Ginny's apartment with one of your trick keys. You typed a suicide note on her portable. You unscrewed the bulb from the ceiling light, waited in the darkness, and struck Soldier down."

**A** GAIN Tommy paused impressively. Then he said:

"You took the telegram from his pocket and replaced it with the suicide note. You attempted to throw the unconscious man out of the window, but he came to and resisted you. You were afraid he might land a lucky blow so, terrified of being recognized, you fled.

"You called Grogan's several times so the Soldier would believe you had been phoning him during the time he was attacked. Ginny and Parada were waiting for you in the hotel lobby. You told them some cock and bull story of Soldier planning to turn evidence against Parada over to the police—right there in the lobby, avoiding any chance of receiving a phone call from Soldier within their hearing. By now you were determined that Soldier *must* be eliminated either by being arrested or by being murdered."

"You learned through a letter he wrote you that he was up there. My men had you under observation by then. You visited agencies that rented typewriters until you found a machine with a type face like that of my portable. You wrote a letter to Soldier and typed his own name to it. When you drove to Tarrytown to mail it you were followed.

"Late at night you came up here. Probably you meant to kill Soldier and make it seem a suicide, which might have been confirmed by the strange letter. You could not reach the Soldier, so you committed an act meant to convince me my guest was mad. You stabbed a penguin to death, just as you had killed Danise."

Tommy Twotoes took an extra large sip from his glass.

"And then," he said, "I called you and told you Soldier was in trouble and to come up here . . . Ebony, assist me to my feet."

While Ebony Black was helping Tommy, Chet dashed over to the table and grabbed the antique six-gun the old man had laid there.

"Toss me back the gun you took from me, you!" Chet rasped at Ebony Black.

Ebony looked at Tommy Twotoes, who nodded. The big Negro tossed over the gun.

"I've got twelve shots in these two guns," Chet said. "There are just twelve of you



here and I could kill you all and make it look as if Terry were an insane mass murderer who also killed himself. But instead I'll just take your fast car, Parada—and Ginny as a hostage. If nobody tries to stop me within the next two hours, she will not be harmed."

I set myself for a flying tackle, a real suicide try. Then I saw something.

The secret door to the study back of Chet was open. Someone was standing there.

"Drop the artillery, honey boy," said Lieutenant Romano. "I've got a great big heater pointed right at your back."

Chet dropped the guns. Two more cops came out of the study. For once, Shakey didn't snarl. The cops put handcuffs on Chet and took him away.

Ginny slumped down in a chair, out cold. "Someone get the smelling salts," Tommy

Twotoes sighed.

Tommy sent Ginny and me back to town in the ancient Rolls Royce, with Ebony Black and Polvo as chauffeur and footman. I had Ginny in my arms all the way.

We told the gigantic, one-eyed black man and the little organ-grinder with George Washington's sea-horse teeth good night in front of Ginny's apartment house. I was inserting the key in the front door when Ebony Black shouted at us.

"Hey, Mr. Soljer! We forgot the present from Mr. Tommy."

He took a big case out of the car.

"Well, now," I said, "that's mighty nice. A case of his special brand."

There wasn't any brandy in the case Ebony Black handed me.

In the case was Cleo, the amorous penguin.

THE INSIDE OF DETECTIVE WORK

# VANISHING FINGERPRINTS



IN ORDER TO DEFEAT identification, wanted criminals often attempt to deface their fingerprints so that clear and legible prints cannot be taken. But these attempts end—more often than not—in failure.

The methods of defacement are numerous. For instance, one man arrested on a drunk charge rubbed and bruised his fingertips on the brick wall of his cell. However, his painful efforts were in vain, for prints were taken anyway and sent to Washington for comparison with prints in the FBI files. There they were definitely identified as those of a wanted criminal.

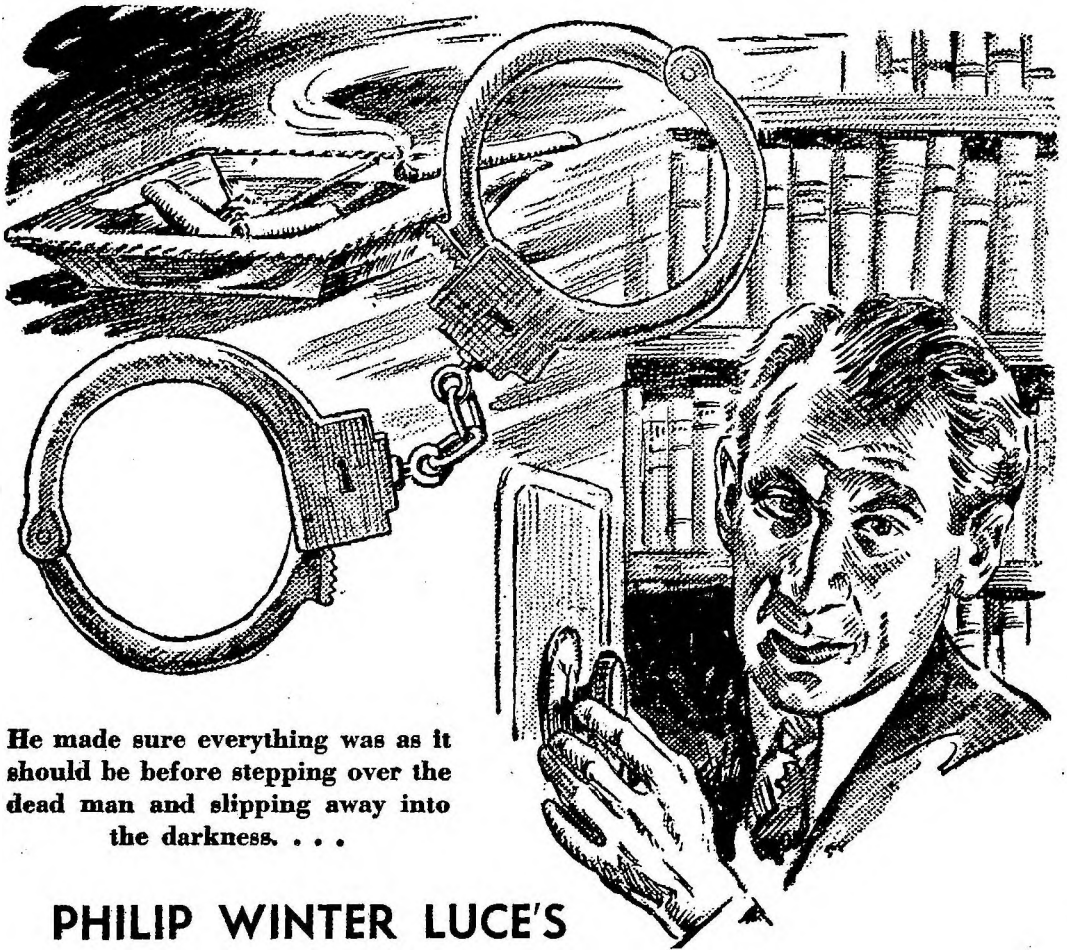
Fingerprints are difficult to destroy permanently. Though they sometimes may be worn smooth, they will grow back. For this reason, police sometimes put gloves on prisoners bent on defacing their prints—and then handcuff them so they can't get at anything to rub their fingerprints against.

Lloyd Dale, wanted for the killing of a Stockton, California, railroad policeman, was apprehended by the sheriff at Warren, Ohio, and remanded to the Stockton authorities. He vigorously denied his identity and, since he had systematically burned and cooked his fingertips over open fires while preparing meals in hobo jungles, felt quite secure.

The police, however, were not to be taken in. They hit on a novel solution to the problem. They thoroughly soaked Dale's fingers in a mixture of warm water and soft soap, repeating the process a week later. In this way, the dry and dead tissues were removed from the tips and the ridges restored to a marked degree.

His prints were then taken and he was positively identified as the killer of the railroad policeman!

—Norman Renard.



He made sure everything was as it should be before stepping over the dead man and slipping away into the darkness. . . .

PHILIP WINTER LUCE'S

## The CLUE in the ASHTRAY

**D**ETEKTIVE EDDIE WAYNE squinted at the silver ash tray on the edge of the desk for a long moment, and then straightened up with a smile on his face. He had learned five important facts.

"Why the grin?" inquired Sergeant Tom Blade. "You look as if you knew who'd committed this robbery and murder."

"I'm pretty sure of it," said Wayne. "The fellow practically left his signature in this ash tray."

"Three cigarette stubs and a match stick," mused the puzzled policeman. "What the

heck can anybody make out of that? It tells me the guy smokes, but that's all. I guess most safecrackers smoke when they're not in the pen. And, at that, those snipes could have been left there by the rich guy who was shot."

"They wouldn't be his brand," pointed out Eddie Wayne. "Not expensive enough. This ash tray doesn't fit the murdered man at all. It was used by a man in his forties, or older, who was right-handed and a chain-smoker. He was of careful and probably parsimonious habits, and must have had considerable experience in safecracking, for

he was a fast worker. You can see how that narrows down the field of suspects."

"If you're right, it narrows it down to one man," agreed Tom Blade, after a pause, "but I'm darned if I can follow your reasoning. How do you—?"

"I'll explain later," promised the detective. "Right now let's go out and make the pinch."

**H**ALF an hour later Bill Samson stared stupidly at the handcuffs that had just been slipped on his wrists. He had been arrested before, and the feel of steel was not new to him, but this time he feared it would mean more than a stretch in the Big House. It would most likely mean a stretch at the end of the hangman's rope.

The outlook was as unpleasant as it was unexpected. Bill Samson was sorely puzzled as to how the cops had got wise to him.

A few hours earlier the little safe cracker had found it advisable to dispose of John Hadley when the financier had surprised him in his study. One well-placed bullet had done the job with neatness and dispatch before the alarm could be raised.

Before pocketing his loot Bill Samson had glanced around the room to make sure he was leaving no telltale clues. He had a healthy respect for the painstaking work of the police, based on sad experiences of his early days, and he had grown cautious with the years. He made sure everything was as it should be before stepping over the dead man and slipping away into the darkness.

Yet, somehow, he must have left some clue behind. He racked his brains as he puzzled over what this could be. No one had seen him enter or leave the house. He had forgotten no tools, left no fingerprints. He had had no previous dealings with John Hadley. The loot had not been traced to him, though unfortunately it would be in a few hours, for he had not had time to dispose of it. And with the finding of the money and jewelry in his room, conviction was certain.

Bill Samson made a wry face. He realized this would be his last conviction, but he wasn't going to admit anything.

"What makes you think I had anything to do with this burglary and killing?" he

asked Eddie Wayne. "You pick on me because I've got a bit of a record, but you'd do better to hang it on somebody else. I'll have a perfect alibi for the judge."

"Sure, Bill," grinned Eddie Wayne, "but your alibi'll go up in smoke, just like those four cigarettes you had in John Hadley's study."

The little safecracker blinked, started to say something, then clamped his jaws. He wasn't going to be tricked into saying he had smoked only three cigarettes while on the job. He remembered the silver ash tray on the desk near the wall safe, and the stubs and the matchstick he had left in it, but surely there was nothing in this to put the noose around his neck.

"I'll get me a good lawyer," he snarled, as he was safely lodged in the cells on a charge of armed burglary and murder. . . .

"I don't know how you came to pick on him, Eddie," said Blade, when the door had clanged shut, "but I'll bet he's the right man. He looks too innocent not to be guilty. With his record he'd have been on the list of suspects anyway, but what was it in the ash tray that led you direct to Bill Samson?"

"What did you see?" countered Wayne.

"Of course I'm only a flatfoot and all I know about this business is what I read in detective stories," answered Blade. "In fiction the matchstick always bears the name of the night club patronized by the guilty man, and the cigarettes are of some rare brand supplied to him alone. There was no such help here. This was a wooden match, of which there are millions, all alike, and the cigarettes were Sweet Caps, sold by every cigar store in town. I don't see how Sherlock Holmes himself could have deduced anything from that."

"I'm not in the Sherlock Holmes class," smiled Eddie Wayne, modestly, "but that ash tray was easy to read. Only one match was used for three cigarettes, therefore the man was a chain-smoker. He was right-handed, for the match was on the right-hand side of the tray; it would require a very awkward twist of the wrist to put it in the opposite position. The stick was only half consumed, showing that the flame had been blown out, indicating a careful habit. Only

*(Concluded on page 130)*

*If you were a cop, would you let a killer go free just to save your chief from embarrassment—or would you do what Kelly did?*



# ANOTHER KIND of COP

By DUANE YARNELL

**T**HAT night, for the first time in seven long years, Mike Kelly came to work in a suit of gray herringbone instead of the blue uniform with the brass buttons. It was ten minutes of eight when he walked up the station-house steps.

Mike Kelly was a big man, thick shouldered, heavy boned. His movements were slow, almost to a point of laziness. But on

occasion he could move with amazing speed, as many a hoodlum could attest. He was a cop, and this deceptive slowness was a part of his stock in trade. Now, as he entered the doorway, a slow grin split his homely Irish face.

The desk sergeant looked up at him. "Congratulations, Mike. I saw your promotion order."

"Have a cigar," Mike said. "Hell, have two of 'em!"

"The promotion proves something," the sergeant said.

"Such as?"

"It proves the chief ain't a man to hold a grudge."

Mike's ruddy face clouded. "Yeah. I guess it does."

"Chief wants to see you, Mike," the sergeant said then.

"He busy now?"

"His door's open. You can go on in."

Chief Collins was sitting back of his desk, a small, Napoleonic little man in his sixties. Hatless, coatless, his shirt was undone at the collar, exposing a triangular patch of graying chest hair. He studied Mike and the scowl on his deeply lined face did not soften.

"There are two kinds of cops," Collins said, without preamble. The teamwork kind—and the glamour boys who like to see their pictures in the paper."

"Yes, sir," Mike said, reddening.

"Maybe both kinds are okay," the chief said. He picked up a cigar, stuck it between flat, bloodless lips, then turned his back on Mike and stared moodily through the window. "The way I look at it, a cop can have his picture spread over the papers just so many times. After that, every thug in town knows him by sight. You follow me?"

Mike Kelly squirmed. "I—think so, sir!"

"Maybe it's not your fault. Maybe, like you say, you couldn't have avoided that publicity. Point is, you got it!"

**C**OLLINS continued to stare through the window. Outside, night was spreading shadows across the nearby factory buildings, outlining the sharp, jutting cornices, the lofty smokestacks. When the chief did not speak again, Mike's discomfort grew.

Mike knew what Collins meant. As a rookie patrolman, Mike had once stopped in a beer parlor to buy a pack of cigarettes. There, he'd recognized a furtive-eyed customer as a gent currently the object of a nationwide manhunt. He'd tried to make a quiet arrest, but the hoodlum had come out shooting and Mike had killed him in self-defense. The papers had done the rest.

There had been other times, some of them equally bizarre. Mike had rounded up a bunch of safe-crackers, not because he'd wanted to do it solo but because he'd just happened by at the proper time.

Mike Kelly hadn't asked for all the publicity but he'd had far more than his share, and in having been elevated to the rank of detective, he realized it had been accomplished against his chief's better judgment.

Suddenly, Collins swung around, ground his cigar into a tray, fastened steady eyes on Mike. "You're on probation," he said. "Maybe you can cut the buck and maybe you can't."

"I'll do my best," Mike said.

"If there are any bows to be taken," the chief warned, "I'll take 'em myself. Not because I want publicity but because the more space the papers waste on me, the less space they can give my men. But we've been through all that before."

"I think I understand, sir," Mike said.

"Maybe you do and maybe you don't. Maybe you're the kind of cop I think you are—a glamour boy. But there's still a chance you can be my kind of cop. It's up to you to prove which kind."

The inter-com on the chief's desk erupted in a cacophony of sound. "Here's a report, Chief. Two guys been driving past a side-street liquor store for the past half hour. Could be it's the pair we're looking for."

"Why tell me?" Collins demanded. "Tell the cop on the beat."

"He's busy a few blocks up the street. A guy with an ax is trying to take over an apartment house."

"Then radio a prowler car."

"Ain't any in the district. There was a five-car smashup over on the causeway. They're all out there."

"Okay," the chief said wearily. "I'll handle it." His pale eyes swung upward and his mouth was tightly compressed. "Pick up the address of that liquor store," he told Mike. "Probably just a couple of college guys looking for a dame. But you never can tell."

As Mike Kelly sped toward the liquor store, he considered the possible implications of his assignment. During the past

six weeks there had been a series of hold-ups. In each case the pattern was the same. Always, the victim was tending store in an isolated spot. Each victim—five, now—had been murdered.

The papers were demanding arrests and the police, so far, had almost nothing to go on. Not a single person was alive who could be called a witness. The five victims were dead. A few persons had heard shots, a few had heard the getaway car roar away. And one man had seen two men leave the scene of a killing, but it had been dark and the man was too far away to establish any kind of identification.

So the town was up in arms and the police were working around the clock. But to date, they were looking for two very nebulous men, which meant they had almost exactly nothing.

As Mike eased his squad car into the side street, he saw the pale-blue glow of the neon above the liquor store. He saw the car parked across the street, an empty car with motor idling. He swung in behind it and parked. He was reaching for the door handle when he heard the shots. There were two of them, sharply echoing sounds from inside the little store across the street.

Kelly was clawing at his shoulder holster as his left foot hit the pavement. Before he had taken two steps, two men ran from the liquor store. They saw Mike before he could fire. Mike watched twin blobs of orange flame erupt almost in his face, heard the impact of lead against the car behind him.

Kelly whirled, tried to take cover behind the corner of his car. But his left heel struck a raised cobblestone and he went sprawling backward. His gun—he'd never really had a good grip on it—dropped from his fingers, slithered under the car.

**M**IKE lay there, and his instinct warned him that his only chance was to play dead. He played it for all he was worth. He lay there in a grotesque sprawl, eyes opened wide, jaw slack.

Footsteps stopped beside him. He could hear the heavy breathing of the man who was looking down at him through the dark-

ness. Then he saw the gun, saw the drawn, pinched face beyond the gunsights. He steeled himself, waited for the impact of the bullet that was sure to come. Then, nearby, a motor roared as a foot tramped down on the accelerator.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" a voice called.

"Okay! I just wanted to make sure we'd killed this guy!"

Mike lay there as footsteps raced away from him, and he tried to tell himself that the face he'd seen above him had not been that of a ghost. But it was no use. The disguise hadn't fooled him. He had seen beyond the dyed hair, the heavy glasses, the carefully cultivated mustache. A man could hardly change the shape of a face without resorting to surgery.

This had been "Lefty" Moretty's face—balding hair line, the shallow mouth, the receding chin. And since it had been Lefty Moretty, then there was something very, very wrong with the picture.

Kelly, conscious of the chief's no-publicity warning, was careful to keep his thoughts to himself as he held back the crowd until the homicide boys arrived to take over.

Inside the liquor store, a clerk lay dead. The cash drawer was empty and the totalizer on the register showed that more than seven hundred dollars had been taken. This much Mike knew, and after he reported briefly to the homicide boys, he climbed into his car and drove back to the station house.

When he walked into the chief's office, he found the old man pacing the floor. "Too bad," Collins said tiredly, "you didn't get there in time."

"I got there in time."

The chief swung around and there was an eagerness in his voice. "I hadn't counted on that. I got only a bare report—"

Mike gave Collins a quick fill-in, and he saw the excitement growing on the gray, lined face. "I didn't see the driver," he concluded, "but I got a good look at the other guy."

"Can you identify him?" Collins asked eagerly.

"I can. But you won't like it, Chief."

"I'd like it even if it turned out to be

my grandmother!"

"Okay. Brace yourself. It was Lefty Moretty!"

The chief's jaw went slack and his face crimsoned. And when he spoke, his voice was tinged with acid. "Lefty Moretty is dead! I made the identification myself."

"Then you were wrong. He isn't dead."

"Go over your story again." The voice was cold, remote.

Mike went over it again, then stood there waiting.

"It was a dark street," Collins scoffed, "yet you claim you still saw through his disguise. How long did it take you to figure that one out?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"Don't play dumb!" the chief thundered. "You know what happens if I give that identification to the papers? The picture boys swarm all over you. Why? Because Lefty Moretty has already been crossed off for dead! So, for a week, or until it all dies down, you're on the front pages again and I'm just a stupid cop who couldn't identify my own wife even if I branded her!"

Until now, Mike Kelly had never been able to make up his mind about the chief. He knew Collins to be a good cop, a brilliant one. That was the good side. But there was this other side—this refusal to believe in such simple things as the decency of another man's motives. Mike had walked a thin line for seven years, had withheld final judgment of the man. But he could hold off no longer. Suddenly, he hated this little man in front of him.

"You say Lefty Moretty is dead because you *want* him to be dead!" Mike accused.

"I identified his body!" Collins said.

"A body so charred by fire that you couldn't find fingerprints. The body you found was a plant. Lefty Moretty is making a monkey out of you!"

"Get out!" the chief screamed. "Get out and wait until I send for you!"

Mike got out. As he stepped into the hallway, he caught the flush of guilt on the desk sergeant's face and he knew the man had been listening over the inter-com.

"Some day, Sergeant, you'll get that big fat ear caught in a keyhole!" Mike grunted.

MIKE went into the squad room and sat down. His bitterness grew as he considered the seven years he'd spent reaching his present position. And for what? How could you concentrate on being a good cop when your own chief had you figured for a publicity hound?

Mike considered the situation of Lefty Moretty. Lefty had been a fly-boy for the Air Corps until he'd been thrown out for using crooked dice to trim his buddies. As a civilian, he'd hung around bars and pool halls and he'd always had plenty of money. But until that night three months ago, the cops hadn't been able to tie him with a charge that would stick.

Two cops had interrupted a holdup, and the man with the gun in his hand was Lefty Moretty. A cop had been killed and Lefty had escaped. But the manhunt was on, with Chief Collins working night and day to bring the cop-killer to justice. The chief's reason was a highly personal one: The dead officer had been the chief's son-in-law.

A few nights later, a man had parked his car in the gathering dusk of a small airport at the edge of town, had walked into the office. He'd pulled a gun on the only attendant.

"I'm Lefty Moretty," he'd said, "and I'm borrowing a plane."

He'd tied up the attendant. A few minutes later, a small, single-engined plane had roared down the dark runway. But before another three minutes had gone by, there was a loud explosion a few miles upriver, the exact location marked by a blazing fire where the plane had plowed into the ground.

The cops had plenty to go on: Lefty Moretty's fingerprints, taken from the stolen car beside the hangar. The positive identification by the airport attendant. A badly burned corpse, exactly Lefty's size. Lefty's gun in the wreckage, the same gun that had killed a cop. Lefty's engraved watch. And as a clincher, Lefty's false teeth, which had been identified by a dentist.

Collins himself had put his stamp of approval on the final identification, and the case of Lefty Moretty had been marked closed. But it wasn't closed now. Moretty was still on the prowl, still robbing, still

killing so that there would be no witnesses.

Mike sat in the squad room and fumed. Men came in and men left, but there was no assignment for Mike. Nothing but waiting. Waiting for what?

At midnight a detective brought a paper in, tossed it to Mike without comment. Mike studied the headline and his stomach tied itself into a hard, cold knot: KID DETECTIVE SAYS MORETTY ALIVE.

Mike read only a few lines. But it was enough. There had been a leak. The desk sergeant? Who else? Plenty of crime reporters were smart enough to keep big-eared cops on the payroll.

The inter-com crackled: "Kelly. Come in here."

Mike Kelly walked slowly into the chief's office. The late edition was spread across the battered walnut desk.

"You didn't waste any time, did you, Kelly?" Collins said.

"Why should I try to tell you what happened? You've made up your mind. You wouldn't believe it if—"

"You had to get your name on the front page again!"

"It's all a mistake, Chief!" Mike protested.

"With you, everything's always a mistake. I figured you were a glamour boy and now I'm sure!"

Mike could feel the pulse pounding at the base of his throat, the slow, rising anger. He forgot the seven years he'd given to the Force, forgot everything but his hatred for this little man before him.

"You said there were two kinds of cops," Mike said. "Your kind and my kind. Well, I'll take my kind. You're not a cop. You're an acid-tempered, petty little martinet. You're the untouchable, the guy who can't be wrong!"

"Shut up, Kelly!" the chief warned.

"You're dumb and you're stupid, but you know how to cover up. You smash away at a guy until you beat down his self respect, his pride. You keep men in fear of you, keep them afraid of their jobs. You—"

"You'll never wear a badge again, Kelly!" Collins snapped.

Mike took the gold badge from his pocket. He slammed it onto the desk, then turned

and walked out of there, glad that it was ended.

FOR A week after that, Mike Kelly sat in his room and brooded. There had been a brief flurry of publicity following Mike's tentative identification of Lefty Moretty. But the chief's story had prevailed and the name of Mike Kelly had been forgotten.

Finally, Mike knew that he'd never rest until he brought the chief to his senses. There was but a single requirement: Bring in Lefty Moretty alive.

But Mike didn't go looking for Lefty. He knew that by now, Lefty had had time to improve his disguise. Which left Mike with but a single slim lead: Lefty Moretty was working with a partner.

Mike could not forget how the getaway car had spurted away from the curb that night he'd been left lying in the street for dead. He could not forget the quiet hum of the carefully tuned motor. He could not forget the expert way in which the driver had turned into the cross street, accelerating all the way.

And finally, he could not forget that a thin, hawk-faced man, one "Bugs" Toncoff, had once been a stock-car race driver, and that Bugs had more recently married Lefty Moretty's sister, after graduating from a two-to-ten-year stretch for armed robbery.

It was thin, very thin. But it was Mike Kelly's only lead. So Mike let his whiskers grow, bought a pair of heavy glasses, put on a cheap suit that reeked of stale whisky.

Bugs Toncoff was an easy man to locate. He was still living in the same neighborhood, which was crowded Front Street. Mike found the pool hall where Bugs played nine ball. And for three weeks Mike was there every night, sitting with eyes half closed. Listening.

Bugs never made a move that looked wrong. But Mike began to notice one thing. At first, Bugs had been playing nine ball for twenty bucks a game. Then it was ten. Then five. And tonight, the stakes were a dollar a game.

Mike sat on the side line and watched Bugs chalk his cue. He watched the nervousness creep into the man. Between shots,



Bugs kept glancing at his watch. Finally he hung up his cue.

"You had enough, Bugs?" one of the players asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I gotta make a phone call, first."

The phone was in the rear of the room, two feet from the door of the washroom. Bugs went back, dropped a coin, dialed. But the coin dropped down, indicating a busy line. Bugs came back.

"Okay. I'll play one more quick one."

Mike Kelly got up slowly, drifted toward the washroom. He went inside and waited, and he wondered if Bugs had missed him. A few moments later he heard footsteps and he locked the door, pressed his ear against the thin panel. Again he heard a coin drop, then Bugs' voice.

"I got the car in shape. How about it?"

Mike strained, tried to hear the conversation from the other end. But it was hopeless. All he could hear was a muted rattle.

"Yeah, that bridge is the only weak spot. But it's worth the gamble. There ain't much traffic on it at ten. And we'll be off it again five minutes later. . . . Okay. I'll pick you up."

The receiver smashed down and when the footsteps had reached the front door of the pool hall, Mike Kelly stepped outside the washroom. By the time he made the front door, Bugs Toncoff was driving away in a cream-colored convertible. Frantically, Mike searched for a cab. But the street was empty. He watched Bugs turn the corner, disappear in the line of cross-street traffic.

Mike Kelly knew, now, that he'd guessed right. Bugs was broke and Bugs was going to pull off a job. It would be done soon, within less than an hour. For Bugs had mentioned ten o'clock and it was now past nine.

Mike tried to make sense out of the things Bugs had said. There was this business of crossing a bridge at ten o'clock, of being off the bridge five minutes later. But what bridge? The town had two dozen bridges.

**T**HEN, suddenly, the whole thing made sense. The town was divided by a river, and in the very center of town there was an

island of about thirty acres in size. The island was crowded with small factory buildings, some of them busy twenty-four hours a day. It was Friday, payday in a lot of factories, which made still more sense.

So now Mike understood the significance of the bridge. The little island was connected to the mainland by a single narrow bridge, thanks to a recent flood that had caused a second bridge to be condemned. The bridge would be relatively free of traffic at ten tonight, for it was the hour between factory shifts.

Mike knew why the bridge had been considered a factor. If something went wrong with the holdup scheme, the bridge could be blocked and the killers would be bottled up on the island. So there was that element of risk, but Bugs Toncoff and his partner had decided to take the gamble.

Mike began to walk. He came to a garage. He went inside, walked under the sign that advertised cars for rent. Mike looked like a bum. But he had his cash deposit and his driver's license. He climbed into the car, took off his coat so that his shoulder holster would be within easy reach.

He drove until he came to the bridge that connected with the island. Beyond the bridge, he could see tall chimneys rising from factory roofs, the solid banks of lighted windows. There was no traffic on the bridge as he crossed it. Mike reached the far end, turned his car around. He flipped off the lights, but left the motor running.

The other end of the bridge was well lighted. Now and then, a car moved across the bridge. But not often. None was a convertible. Mike began to squirm, began to wonder if he'd guessed wrong. It was now five until ten.

He watched the sweep second hand. Once, twice, three times it went around. He was breathing hard, now. Instinctively, he reached up under his arm, patted his gun.

At ten on the nose, he saw the convertible swing into the approach, just as Bugs Toncoff had promised. The car moved slowly, crept out onto the bridge. Mike waited until the car was three-quarters of the way across, then he flipped on his lights, eased his own car into second.

He drove in the very center of the double traffic lane. The convertible's lights blinked frantically, but Mike held his position, knowing there could be no room for the two cars to pass.

He was twenty feet away when he heard the squeal of brakes. Mike could see only the blinding headlights now, and he knew the convertible had stopped. He opened the left-hand door, vaulted lightly out, and a moment later his own car, still in second gear, smashed into the convertible.

For an instant after the crash there was silence. One headlight was still shining. Crazy. Eerily. Then both doors of the convertible burst open, and in the filtered light Mike Kelly recognized his man.

"You're covered, Lefty! Get 'em up!"

The little man stood blinking in the light, blood running from the cut where his forehead had smashed the windshield. He reeled around in the half light, dazed. But out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw Bugs Toncoff reach for his gun.

"Hold it, Bugs!"

There was a burst of flame. The bullet whined past Mike's ear and he dropped to one knee, sighted toward the running Bugs. He squeezed the trigger. Bugs screamed, then spun around, corkscrewed into the tar-and-gravel surface.

Mike pivoted, expecting trouble from Lefty Moretty. But Lefty was holding his hands high overhead, was crying, "Don't shoot, copper! I've got 'em up!"

Mike Kelly laughed hoarsely as he went over to take Lefty's gun. And a few minutes later, when he heard the whine of the siren, he was still laughing. . . .

**A**S HE stood in the chief's office, Mike was proud of himself for not having so much as opened his mouth. Not to the cops who had arrived to take over, not to the reporters who were swarming around the desk sergeant now, begging for a break. He had saved it and now as he looked at the chief's grim expression he knew that it had been worth it.

"You did a nice job," Chief Collins said.

*So that's how it will be, Mike thought bitterly. Let bygones be bygones. Forget the*

*whole business and start off again.*

"Tell me about it," Collins invited.

"I do my best work before an audience. Remember?"

The chief scowled. "Then what do you want?"

"Reporters," Mike said. "They're outside."

The chief shrugged, then turned toward his inter-com. He barked an order. An instant later the door opened and the room was boiling with reporters, with photographers popping flash bulbs.

"There's your audience," Collins said.

Mike Kelly faced the reporters. "The body they found in that plane crash was a phony," he said. "Some guy who wouldn't be missed, some guy Lefty probably dug up in Skid Row. A guy Lefty's size. A guy without teeth. Lefty was on a spot and he wanted off."

"It makes sense," a reporter said.

"All Lefty needed was a parachute—and a getaway car waiting to pick him up. It was a nice dodge. One that would work every time, assuming the cops were stupid enough to fall for it."

The chief said, "It was right clever of Lefty."

*Here we go again, Mike thought. Building himself up. Making himself look good in the face of what's coming. But it won't work, Chief. Not when I get through. . . .*

Mike was in no hurry. He stood there, eyes half closed, enjoying the triumph that was building up inside of him. Collins the Omnipotent, the gent who could do no wrong, was now waiting for the blow to fall. Mike had only to finish his story and the chief would be defenseless.

He turned very slowly, heart and mind filled with anticipation. He wanted one more look at Collins. He wanted to see that look of defeat. He wanted to watch the chief cringe. He wanted to—

But it wasn't that way. The acid expression was gone. The chief was smiling. It didn't make sense. Mike started to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Then he saw something else in the chief's eyes. Admiration. Admiration for him. For the kind of cop he'd been, although he'd been off the

**Force at the time.**

And then Mike Kelly began to understand a simple truth about this Napoleonic little man. Chief Collins was an honest cop, a cop who got more out of his men by rubbing their wounds with vinegar. But he could make mistakes. Beautiful mistakes. And now he was waiting for Mike to tell the boys just how bad a mistake this last one had been. And there was no animosity in him. He was going to take it, admit it, laugh about it.

"Go ahead, Mike. Tell 'em," the chief said.

Right then, Mike Kelly understood another simple truth. He could tell them, certainly. But for what purpose? How could you make a fool of a man who was willing to admit that he *had* been a fool?

Mike's face was flushed, hot. He said, "I—we—that is, the chief knew the burned body was a plant. But he let Lefty think he'd gotten away with it. Only, I almost blew the lid off when I identified Lefty that night. You see, the chief hadn't told me—"

"Are you kidding, Kelly?" a reporter said.

"I'm not kidding," Mike said. "I didn't get fired. That was just the chief's way of covering up. You see, he wanted Lefty

Moretty to get cocky enough to attempt another job. But tonight, we were ready for him."

The reporters made a rush for the door. The last one out slammed it. Mike and Collins were alone again. "Now, damn it, you've done it!" the chief said sourly.

Mike's anger came back again. "I took you off the hook. I could have—"

"Sure. You could have made a goat out of me. For five, six days the papers would have played it up. But that wasn't good enough for you. You had to go dramatic on me. So now your name will be in the paper again for weeks!"

Mike's fists were bunched at his sides and his mouth was working wordlessly. Then he saw the look in the chief's eyes. The softness. The twinkling fondness. It reminded him of the way his old man had looked at him when he was a boy.

"I never saw such a publicity hound," Collins said. "How the hell do you expect to be a good cop when every hoodlum knows you by your picture? Now beat it! Take a week off. Take two weeks off. Give 'em a chance to forget what you look like!"

"Yes, sir!" Mike said. And when he walked out of there he was grinning.

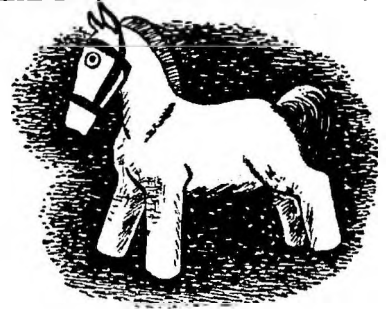
**MURDER WITH TRIMMINGS**

*A Guide to the Best in Current Crime Fiction*

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# Thieves' BLUEPRINT

On a Tijuana holiday, undercover man Steve Sheridan is thrust into an odd mystery involving a Nemesis in straw!



## CHAPTER I

### THREE SINISTER MEN

I WHISTLED as I opened the garage door. The tune was a snatch of Spanish, something I had heard in that Tijuana café last night, but would not have remembered if it were not for Sheila Feyne humming it on our way home.

Sheila Feyne. As I opened the coupé door, climbed in and pushed the key into the ignition, I had a picture of Sheila Feyne sitting there beside me—

This is not the story of my love-life. I was not really in love with a girl I had known less than three hours, and yet I knew it could end that way.

I started the motor and watched the oil gauge needle creep up. I disengaged the hand brake, stepped on the clutch and wristed the shift lever into reverse, still

thinking about the dish named Sheila Feyne.

The coupé went bumpy-clump backwards. I forgot all about Sheila Feyne as I swore, braked and hopped out. I crowded along the garage wall and stared at my front tires.

I had expected a flat, but not this!

Both front tires were ruined. They had been slashed to ribbons through the almost new, black rubber tread and fabric of the whitewall casings. They had been gashed, and mangled strips of bright red inner tube yawned through the ruined carcasses. Not only that, but they had been slashed again and again, as if in a rabid, ripper frenzy that had almost torn the rubber off the rims.

All this, too, with rubber harder to get than a transfusion of life-blood.

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## A Complete Novelet by DALE CLARK

I was not swearing now. I couldn't think of any words to say. I just stood there and stared at my butchered tires and felt the sweat sieving through the pores of my face. It seemed the filthiest trick anyone ever played on another human being. I went quietly, bitterly nuts. I was ripe for murder.

"Sheila Feyne," I muttered.

I didn't know how yet, but she was mixed

up in this some way. Sheila Feyne was the answer, all right.

Tijuana had been a mistake. I expected too much, had a tourist travelogue picture of Old Mexico in my brain, and the real thing was not that way at all. There weren't any balconies, or black-eyed *senoritas* with *mantillas*, or glimpses of Old World romance.



I had parked my coupé in the Foreign Club enclosure and walked around the streets for a while.

Tijuana consisted of false-front frame buildings and street bazaars and hippy American housewives in slacks hunting for bargains. In Tijuana, Mexican tots peddled nickel shoe shines and nickel packs of cigarettes that tasted as strong as a shanty Irishman's pipe. Tijuana was a trinket-town. Every bazaar and store window was crammed with five, ten, and fifteen-cent novelty souvenirs—toy whips, woven baskets, shoddy belts, sleazy carpet slippers called *huaraches*, and colored picture post-cards.

I bought a dozen postcards, addressed them to folks back in St. Louis, Mo.

"Join the Navy and see the world," I scribbled on the back of each card. But I wasn't really in the Navy. I was an operative of the F.B.I. assigned to undercover duty at the San Diego destroyer base.

I had been in San Diego three months, and I was still virtually without a genuine friend in town. The men at the base were older, married, family fellows. They were sociable enough, but I would have been just a fifth at their bridge parties, if I cared much about bridge parties, which I didn't. I had brought along a tennis racquet, and I took it to the public courts a few times.

But the California brand of tennis was faster than my style of play, so I didn't fit in there, either. As for dances, well, every unattached girl seemed to be in demand by half a dozen uniformed selectees, sailors, and marines.

**S**AN DIEGO was a boom town, overflowing, and I was part of the overflow. I had an ostensible work, too—a Civil Service clerical job to camouflage my real business, which was to keep an eye out for sabotage. Also I was boning up for a promotion. Once in a while I would get tired of work and study, and take a little run down to Mexico—a sort of vacation.

So this Sunday I had jumped into my coupé and driven down to the races at Caliente. On my way back I parked in the Foreign Club.

I had mailed my postcards, and felt tired

of walking around. I walked into the café and sat down and ordered a Mexican beer and a sandwich.

The café had a discouraged, unswept early evening atmosphere. Its long bar and lunch counter were deserted except for a couple of sleepy-eyed bartenders, a short-order cook and the solitary waiter. A three-piece marimba band at the back was playing softly, just strumming aimless chords, as if to entertain themselves.

Then the swinging doors yawned, and Sheila Feyne came in.

There was a man with her, a biggish, blond, blue-eyed man, almost handsome, and almost too gaudily dressed. He might have been down from Hollywood, as I tagged him at a glance.

But it was only a glance. Because really my eyes were all on Sheila Feyne.

"Some guys have all the luck," I thought, and wondered why he had the luck.

Something about Sheila Feyne put her completely out of his class. The freshness of her cameo-like face and the gaiety of her eyes didn't match up with the man's jaded sophistication.

Also, she was considerably younger than he—twelve or fifteen years younger.

I wondered what they had in common.

Strangely enough, with their entrance, the whole atmosphere of the place had changed and brightened. The lounging waiter snapped to respectful attention. The marimba trio hurried forward, gathered around to serenade the new arrivals. Even the bartenders began to smile. One could sense that this was really the beginning of the evening for the little café.

I decided on another beer. There was nothing in it for me, except the pleasure of an occasional glance in Sheila Feyne's direction.

She possessed more than beauty, I admitted to myself. Something haunting and provocative about her attracted me. She was dressed in gray, tailored stuff with a scarlet scarf at her slim throat. Her dark hair glinted and her eyes sparkled with fun.

She had propped a little straw man on a straw horse—a Tijuana souvenir—on the table in front of her. As she joked with the

## CHAPTER II

## THE LITTLE STRAW MAN

blond guy, she toyed with it, trying to straighten the man on the horse. She let the big blond fellow do all the talking while she listened.

The marimba band had moved on, and I caught a few snatches of what he was telling her.

"—worth coming down then," I heard him say. "When they had a hundred dollar limit at the Customs. The shops really carried expensive, imported merchandise in those days. And there was roulette at Caliente, where the army air school has been established."

"Out near the race track?" the girl asked.

"Yeah. Why, Rita Hayworth used to dance in the floor show there. Of course, she wasn't using a stage name then, and she wasn't much more than fifteen or sixteen at the time."

**HIS** voice died away. He looked up, as the swinging doors battled open and two men came in.

The girl did not notice.

"Rita Hayworth?" she said in pleased amazement. "Imagine that! Are you sure, Mr. Warren?"

The two men had posted themselves at the bar. I felt sure Warren knew them, and I didn't like the looks of his acquaintances. One was fortyish, with a reddish complexion and a long hawish face. He wore too-sporty clothes, and might have been a professional race track follower, a tout, perhaps, something like that.

The second man was older, smaller, shabbier. He had a dwarf's face, gnarled like a storybook picture of a gnome. The eyes peering under the brim of a derby were gimlet sharp. The weather did not justify the topcoat which bundled him from neck to knee, and which was too large for his shrunken, stooped form.

"A hawk and an ogre," I said to myself.

The big blond Warren murmured something to the girl. He stood up now, and walked toward the back of the café. In passing, he paused to speak to the waiter, who in turn nodded toward a door that was tagged *Hombres*.

Pale as a ghost, Warren disappeared through that door.



**T**HE three men had not exchanged a second glance, I was sure of that, but now the Hawk likewise lounged toward the rear of the café.

I sat and watched Sheila Feyne, though I did not know her name then. My glance strayed over toward the Ogre. He was drinking *tequila* in the approved Mexican fashion, with lemon and salt. I noticed he stood sidewise to the bar, and it struck me that he, too, was keeping an eye on Sheila Feyne.

Minutes crawled, five, ten, fifteen.

The girl was getting uneasy, getting tired of waiting. She had begun looking at her wrist-watch at frequent intervals. The color began to climb into her cheeks. Finally, she made up her mind. She signaled the waiter, opened her handbag, paid for the drinks—hers and Warren's both. Then she rose to her feet, tucked the straw horse under her arm, and walked out.

The Ogre turned from the bar, leaving an untasted *tequila* glass there.

The doors were still swinging when I battled through them. The girl was standing in front of me on the sidewalk, her eyes veering helplessly up and down the curb. A half dozen paces away the Ogre seemed to be excessively interested in a display of leather trinkets in the shop window next door.

It was none of my business, and I knew it. But I couldn't resist the girl's bewildered expression.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"My car's gone." She blurted it unbelievably.

"Gone?" I repeated.

"Yes. I parked it right here, and it's gone."

"You left it locked?"

"I locked the ignition. But the door lock sticks and it's so much trouble. I thought the ignition stunt would be enough."

"Maybe your boy-friend borrowed the bus for a few minutes," I suggested.

"He wouldn't," she said. "Besides, there's

only one ignition key," she added dazedly.

That settled it. We looked at each other. "You'd better call a cop," I said. "It looks as if the car's stolen."

She blushed. "He isn't really a friend. I just met Mr. Warren today. At the races."

**T**HIS proved she was a novice, all right. Then she spilled the whole story to me, standing on the sidewalk. Some friend of hers with a pass for the races had found she could not go and had handed it over. So this girl drove down there alone. Warren must have been a pretty smooth worker, because evidently he had no trouble picking her up in the club house enclosure at Caliente.

By a big-brotherly approach, explaining how the mutual betting operated and how the odds were figured, he broke the ice. Then he clinched things by helping her to dope the horses from the *Racing Form*. Just a boy scout at heart, so it seems. Sheila knew it was unconventional, all right. But what possible harm could come to her, in broad daylight, in a crowd of four or five thousand people?

Besides, by luck or otherwise, the guy actually succeeded in picking several winners, and it isn't in feminine nature to resist that. Most women are susceptible to a kind of bargain basement instinct.

Next it turned out Warren's party had left early, and he was going to catch a cab back to Tijuana. He offered to share the cab, and she explained she had her own car along. Naturally she wound up by driving him back to town. And finally, she had let herself be enticed into the café for a farewell drink.

"Yeah," I growled. "Blondie strung you along long enough for the rest of the gang to swipe your car."

I looked around, but the Ogre was not standing in front of the shop window now. He had melted away into the Tijuana shadows.

"We'll go back in the café and call a cop," I said grimly.

After only a quarter hour or so delay, two of the local gendarmeres appeared. Slender, brown-faced men in natty, semi-military uniforms, who bowed and acted polite. They copied down the facts in their notebooks.

Sheila Feyne's name, and mine, Steve Sheridan. Also our addresses as well as the license number of the stolen car, the engine number and so forth.

Mexicans are a helpful people. The waiter, the bartenders, the three marimba players all became so noisily helpful, in Spanish, that Sheila and I had hard work getting in a word edgewise. Maybe that was why the Tijuana policemen invited us to their station to make a fuller statement on the case.

More cops, more notebooks, more questions.

An hour later, while we were still chin deep in the formalities of Latin-American law, the station phone rang, and a smiling sergeant informed Sheila her car had been found. From all appearances the thief had slipped it through the Border Station even before she knew it was stolen. After driving fifteen miles north to San Diego, he had left the machine there within a block of Police Headquarters.

That seemed odd. Had Warren gone through all that build-up, if it had been Warren, merely to steal a fifteen mile drive?

But we were too much relieved to start figuring the angles right away.

"Come on," I said. "I'll get my car from the Foreign Club, and drive you home."

"I'll ask Pancho Villa's advice," Sheila Feyne smiled.

"Villa?"

She waggled the little straw horseman.

"Souvenir of Mr. Warren," she explained. "A reminder not to trust strange men with boy scout complexes."

Then she laughed at the expression on my face.

"Never mind," she said. "I'm sure you're not a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Don't be too sure of that!" I growled.

**T**HE way she mentioned Warren made me sore. She still seemed to have a soft spot for that blond guy. Nevertheless I took my coupé out from the Foreign Club parking lot, and we drove off. The customs inspector at the border required only a minute. I had not brought anything out of Mexico and Sheila had only Pancho Villa—they just waved me through. I suppose they have been at the game long enough to tell by the tone



of one's voice whether it is the truth or a lie.

The drive to San Diego did not take long, either. Not as long as I would have liked. I guess she put me on my honor with that wolf-in-sheep's clothing crack. I didn't want her to think I was getting fresh, or trying to dig up too much information about her. I let her take the lead in the conversation, and she did not give out much stuff that I wanted to know. And she was one girl that I wanted to know plenty about.

Mostly she leaned back in her corner of the seat and softly hummed part of a Spanish song.

More formalities were gone through at the San Diego police station. When we finally parted, two husky cops who stood listening on the curb, at my elbow, further cramped my style. So I just muttered good-bye, and watched her drive off. She was something to watch.

Afterward, when I pulled into the garage, I found she had left Pancho Villa in my coupé. Thoughtfully I picked up the little straw figure. Returning it might serve as an excuse for seeing Sheila Feyne again. But by the time I reached my front door in the apartment building, that didn't seem such a hot idea. The soft way she had mentioned that guy Warren's name still bothered me plenty.

The rubbish cans stood lined up in the areaway, waiting tomorrow's collection truck. I lifted the lid of one and crammed Pancho Villa inside before I went up to my apartment.

Next morning when I started to work I found my tires slashed.

"Sheila Feyne," I growled, angrily. She was mixed up in this some way. There seemed no conceivable reason why I should have been selected for this act of hoodlum spite. This was what happened to me for trying to be a Boy Scout.

There must be more to it than she had told me. Now, somehow, Sheila Feyne's story failed to jell. She had not told the whole truth, or even half of the truth.

Perhaps her story was just sucker bait, intended just for me. And I sure had fallen for it—like the prize sucker that I was getting to be.

## CHAPTER III

### DEATH IN THE KITCHEN



FOR a moment I raved, too sore to think. It took several moments to recall whether the garage had been padlocked. Then I remembered unlocking it myself upon entering. The door operated on an overhead track, and when it was pulled down the patent catch toothed around the steel support of the track-and-spring mechanism.

Then how had the vandal entered?

I swung around, stared at the window. But the window was a tiny affair, a nine-by-twelve inch single pane, set high up in the wall. The glass had been shattered to pieces. Yet not even a child could have crawled through that miniature opening.

True, the door had top and bottom vents as required by the building code. But the vents were even smaller and were covered with stout mesh wire. I checked up to make sure the wire had not been disturbed. This is routine stuff for an F.B.I. man. Then I opened the deck of the coupé and got out a hammer and experimented on the padlock. Sometimes cheap padlocks can be opened by a sharp hammer blow. This one couldn't.

BESIDES, the Agnews—they owned the building and lived in the first floor apartment—would have heard anyone trying to break into the garage that way. I headed around the garage annex to question Fred Agnew, and nearly tripped over an object lying in the grass.

It was a wooden pole, eighteen or twenty feet long. On one end it had a sharply whetted, curved steel blade not quite a foot long.

Fred Agnew was doing his morning chore of watering the greenery in the areaway.

I grabbed up the pole and shook it at him.

"What is this thing?" I asked Agnew.

He looked surprised. "It's my palm knife, Steve. Where'd you find it?"

"Your what?"

"Palm knife. You know, trimming the trees." He went through a pantomime of

showing me, arms overhead, how he used that pole to trim the palm trees he cultivated so proudly in front of the place. "I keep it up there under the garage eaves. It must have fallen down, huh?"

"Sure, it fell down. Like the rubbish cans took legs and walked over here." I pointed, showing him the twin circles pressed into the grass where somebody had stood on two of the cans, in order to reach through the little window and get at my tires with that palm knife. Then I showed him the tires.

Fred Agnew was shocked.

"That's a mean trick, Steve. A guy who'd do that is lower than a tire thief, and a tire thief is lower than a Tokyo rate."

I did not waste time agreeing with him. I went in and called the destroyer base and said I couldn't come to work this morning. They asked what ailed me.

"Snake-bite," said I, and dialed again, calling for a cab. Then I got in, giving the driver an address I heard given at the police station downtown.

It turned out to be Sheila Feyne's address all right.

The place she lived in was a walk-up apartment fronting Balboa Park. It had a foyer with mailboxes and push-buttons, but no desk, no clerk on duty. On one of the mailboxes I spotted her name. Her apartment was 4-b. Two girls coming out through the lobby saved me the trouble of ringing for admittance. I grabbed the inner door before it closed, and went on up the stairs to 4-b.

I knocked, the door opened, and Sheila Feyne, inside, gasped when she saw me. She stepped back, one hand hurriedly drawing a negligee robe closer around her slender figure.

"Why, Steve Sheridan. I thought you were Mayme, the girl next door."

She certainly acted as if she were on the level.

"Something happened last night, Sheila," I said.

"I'll say there did. Did they call you, too?"

"Nobody called me." I stared at her hard, trying to read her, estimate her. "Who called you, Sheila?"

"The police. They rang me about four a.m. A man called up and said they'd ar-

rested a man who might be Mr. Warren, and would I come right down and identify him, before his lawyer could bail him out of jail."

"Yeah?"

"So I went to Headquarters. And nobody there knew anything about it. They hadn't made an arrest, hadn't phoned me, at all. It seemed so strange." She puckered her brows. "What do you make of it, Steve?"

I DIDN'T know what to make of it. Again she had me puzzled. My game is a tough one and does not produce gullible operatives, yet—Here I had rushed over to this place intending to ask questions, and already was jarred off-balance.

I took a deep breath.

"I want to go over this whole thing with you, from the beginning," I said.

"Just a minute, Steve. Let me finish dressing."

She took longer than a minute before she let me in. She had pulled on a jersey dress, brushed her dark hair, and even put a dab of powder on her nose. Yet she looked just as pretty by broad daylight as she had been last night. Prettier, in fact, which is saying a lot.

"I'll percolate some coffee and start the toaster," she said. "We'll talk about it at breakfast. Must be at work by nine, you know."

As she spoke she pushed a door which led into the kitchenette.

The next instant she let out a scream.

I dived to the kitchenette doorway, too.

On the narrow strip of linoleum-covered floor was sprawled the big blond Warren. He wasn't the handsome fellow he had been yesterday. Far from it. The expression on his face registered surprise and blood dribbled from the open, sagging mouth. The blood was brownish, so he must have been dead for hours. His heavy chin had sagged down and his dull eyes were staring unseeingly at the ceiling.

"He's—dead." Sheila Feyne shuddered against my shoulder.

"Murdered," I said. I suppose there is not any word in the language that sounds more like what it means. Perhaps the matter-of-fact, hardboiled way I spoke did not help

matters any, either. Sheila Feyne stopped shuddering—she stiffened instead.

"How about telephoning the cops?" I said. "They like to know about these little affairs. Think fast, sister. Have you a good story ready? What are you going to tell them?"

Her eyes widened.

"I don't know," she gasped. "I can't tell them anything, except what I've already told you."

"Not good enough," I snapped. "Your story leaks like a sieve. Here a stranger, a guy you never saw before, picks you up at the race-course, walks out on you, and steals your car. Then my tires are slashed, and the stranger is killed in your apartment, of all places. And from his looks he's been dead quite a while." I grabbed her arms, both of them. "How did he get in here? Why did he come to this place. What are you holding back?"

"Steve, I can't answer. I swear I don't know."

I stared into her eyes.

"I'm a soft-hearted fool," I said. "I believe you. But dollars to dimes the cops won't."

"They'll have to. They know I went to Headquarters early this morning, and that must have been the time when Warren was killed. When I got back he must have been here, already dead. Of course I didn't know, for I had no occasion to go to the kitchenette."

**T**HAT explanation seemed reasonable enough and somehow or other I believed her again. She moved past me to the apartment telephone on the wall and lifted the receiver off the hook. I stepped across the room in two strides and seized her by the arm.

"Wait a minute," I said. "When you are talking to the police, leave me out of it. I wasn't here when you found the body and I'm still not here at the present moment."

My request startled her. I could read the disappointment in her eyes. She certainly took me for a yellow rat then, trying to dodge trouble, but being an F.B.I. man I had to leave things that way.

But just the same my collar felt sweaty

and too tight, all of a sudden. She hesitated.

The hum of the dial tone seemed to fill the room.

"Steve—?" Sheila Feyne said thinly.

"I'm trusting you, so you'll have to trust me," I said. "They'll hold you on suspicion, Sheila. They'll hold you for hours, questioning you, because your story won't strike the police as plausible. They're bound to think the phone story was an alibi you invented to clear yourself. But don't worry; I promise I won't let you come to real harm. Never mind how I'll do it, but I can't afford to waste a minute longer here. Neither can I tip off my hand yet. I must be somewhere else, free and untrammled, if my work is going to be of any help to you. Understand?"

She did not understand. But she was a brave kid, nevertheless, for she actually managed to smile and nod. Her eyes followed me to the door.

"But, Steve, why should the police think I did it?"

"It isn't just the cops," I said. "It's the killer who did this and may do more. You have been cleverly framed and, for the next few hours, the safest place you can be is in jail. That's one of the angles I've figured out."

I stepped out of the apartment and into the hall.

After pulling the door shut I took my handkerchief and wiped my fingerprints off the doorknob. I heard her voice inside.

"Operator, I want Police Headquarters. I want to report a murder."

Then I beat it.

There was a swell chance the police would look me up, anyway. They knew I had been with Sheila Feyne at Headquarters last night, and probably would make a routine check on me. If they started asking questions at the destroyer base, they might wonder why I hadn't reported for work this morning.

If they asked at the apartment, Fred Agnew would spill the works about my slashed tires. And then they would find out I had left in a cab and would trace the cab to Sheila's address. Oh, well. All that required time and during the period I would be working.

In the meantime I meant to keep track of

everything directly through my own office.

After all, I could save the day yet—save several precious days before they caught up with me. By checking myself in, under an assumed name, at one of the hotels for transients that dot the Market Street district, I would do all right.

I hailed a cruising cab and dismissed it a block from the Agnew apartments. Fred Agnew had left the water sprinkler to operate itself, so I slipped in unseen through the areaway entrance. All that remained now was to throw a few clothes into a suitcase and steal out by the same route.

Upstairs, I unlocked the apartment door, stepped inside. Something hard poked me in the back.

"Don't blow your top, kid," said a voice from behind the door. "Just keep your hands up high, and get 'em up quick."

Needless to say I lifted my hands like I had been instructed to do. At the same time I turned my head around and managed to get a squint at the man who had held me up.

**I**T WAS the Ogre, bundled in his oversized topcoat. The sleeves were too long, coming almost down to the knuckles of his hands.

In his hand he gripped an automatic pistol.

In almost the same instant, I got a glimpse of the Hawk framed in the clothes closet doorway. He also had a gun.

This was it, I thought.

I had a blazing mental picture of Warren crumpled on the kitchenette linoleum, something like a preview of my own fate.

My stomach went hollow, but I knew it wasn't for lack of breakfast. I didn't kid myself. I was scared all right and I had every reason to be. The Ogre had followed up, jamming his gun in my middle.

For a moment I dallied with a vague, crazy idea of tackling the Hawk's knees, knocking him back into the closet and twisting the gun out of his hand faster than the Ogre could shoot me. The only trouble with it was I knew it would not work.

Imagine trying to disarm two killers with guns in the fraction of a second before one of them could shoot? It just wouldn't work, that's all. No, desperate action would not

save the situation. If it could be done it would have to be by using my brains.

## CHAPTER IV

### TURNING THE TABLES



DEAS flitted through my mind. I never thought so fast in all my life. A drowning man does the same thing, they say, seeing things in a lightning-like, spinning review.

"I guess you guys must be from the Department of Justice," I said.

The Ogre and the Hawk G-Men? What a laugh. But the Hawk was the only one who laughed.

"By jinks, that's an—"

The Ogre cut him short.

"Shut your trap," he said to the Hawk. And then stared at me, his eyes unwinking as a reptile's under the derby brim. "Department of Justice, huh? How'd you guess it?"

I followed up the lead as a plan began to crystallize in my brain.

"Because I saw you shadowing Miss Feyne last night," I said, tossing him a suggestion, "and because I have awakened to the fact I've been tricked by one of the cleverest international spies in existence. That stolen car gag of hers was nifty, ha-ha. Of course, her car was never in Tijuana at all. The whole thing was just a piece of play-acting meant as an appeal to my sense of chivalry."

"You're clever at doping things out," said the Ogre in thoughtful tones. "Sounds screwy but you've got it all pat. Go on and talk."

Sure it sounded screwy, but I didn't expect him to believe it. My plan was to convince him that I believed it.

I hurried on.

"She knew I'd be sucker enough to escort a dame in distress home. She figured I wouldn't have any trouble at the Border, because I could show the Customs guards my Civil Service identification. Even if they searched the car, well, it was my car, not hers. And I'd be left holding the bag. They couldn't have proved anything against her, you see."

The one I nicknamed the Ogre hadn't taken his reptilian eyes off my face.

"Yeah?" he said. "And when did you figure all that out, sonny?"

"This morning. I found my tires slashed. They did that so I couldn't take my car to work and park it at the destroyer base. That was so they could break into my apartment during the day, find my spare padlock key, and get away with what they smuggled across the Border in my coupé last night."

"Yep, all that is plain enough," conceded the Ogre. "But where did you dig up the F.B.I. slant?"

"Because I worked out the puzzle that far, naturally I called up the F.B.I. and asked them to send some men over here," I answered with a smart Aleck grin. "So when I come back here from breakfast and find you in my apartment looking for clues, it was a cinch for me to guess who you were."

**T**HAT was what I had been working up to all along. If I told them straight out the G-men were coming, they would have known it was a bluff. But this way, it seemed as if they might swallow the bait.

They swallowed it, all right. The Ogre stared at me in total surprise.

And the Hawk jumped out into the middle of the room.

"Jimminy jeepers," he said to the Ogre. "Let's get out of here before—"

"Shut up," yelled the Ogre again. But his dwarfish face was twitching in a near approach to St. Vitus dance. He turned to me. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

He grabbed my coat lapel with his free hand, showing excitement.

"Listen, Sheridan, we're G-men," he said in anguished tones. "You know that. You can trust us. What'd you do with that straw horse the Feyne dame left in your car last night?"

A light seemed to break over me as I comprehended these strange events.

"Then there was some secret connected with the straw horse?" I asked.

"Sure, and you took the horse from the girl. You still have it—you must have it. We've looked everywhere else!"

Quick as a flash I answered that.

"No, I tossed it into a rubbish barrel before coming up here."

"Rubbish! Oh, my gosh. By now it's probably been burned up in the city incinerator." From the Ogre's face sweat dripped.

"No, the cans haven't been emptied," said the other man. "I noticed that when—" he stuttered and turned red, then finished lamely, "when we came up here."

When he stood on them to slash my tires, the Hawk should have said. But he had changed the sentence. He wheeled and bolted like a shot through the apartment door.

Mine was a second floor apartment overlooking the front areaway. The Ogre didn't follow him. Instead he jumped to the window and raised the sash. Apparently he was not willing to trust the Hawk with whatever the straw horse contained. He craned his head out the window.

I was right behind him. I grabbed the sash with both hands and slammed it down. There was nothing he could do about it, except try to jerk his head back inside. He was not quick enough.

I hauled his limp, stunned form back into the room. His hand was empty. His hands had been outside the window, too, and he'd dropped the gun into the pittosporum bushes Fred Agnew had planted between the foundations and the area walk.

My leap carried me into the upstairs hallway. I could hear the Hawk's feet pounding as he streaked along the passage below so I raced for the back service stairs. A narrow green-painted door at the rear let me out into the back yard, between the apartment and its garage annex. I did not spend half a minute there.

After that I peered around the corner into the areaway, just in time to see the Hawk burrow elbow deep in a rubbish can, and come up waving Pancho Villa.

Fortunately his back was toward me.

"Drop that, you tire butcher," I called out. "Make one move, and I'll cut off your hand."

**I**N MY hand was the twenty-foot length of palm knife and, as I spoke, I dropped the other end of it over his shoulder, so that its whetted steel blade curved snugly just under his chin. I really could have shaved off his head with one jerk of my arms.

He knew it. He fanned out his fingers and stood rock-still. Pancho Villa fell to the ground with a soft thud.

Then I walked him into the house before me and called the police on the pay telephone in the lower hall.

The police aided me in figuring out the rest of it. With what was inside that little straw horse, and with what they dug out of their Rogues Gallery things were pretty clear. The big, blond Warren, the Hawk, and the Ogre had been operating a jewel robbery racket in Mexico City. Warren was the contact man. He would strike up an acquaintance with wealthy women tourists, string them along until the time was ripe for his sidekicks to stage the robbery. Usually the victims were married women, and they would rather lose a few hundred dollars worth of trinkets than go to the police.

It was just a penny-ante tourist gyp game, until Warren chanced to pick up a wealthier victim than the others had been. This time they lifted a pearl necklace worth twenty thousand dollars, and Mexico City became too hot for them.

Somehow or other, they got as far as Tijuana, figuring to slip across the Border in the Sunday race track crowds.

"Warren doped out the way," I told the detective sergeant when I finished investigating the case. "It was simple. He planned to pick up an American girl at the track and give her some little, inexpensive Tijuana souvenir, with the pearls inside. The girl would bring the booty through the Customs, and afterwards, all he'd have to do would be to steal back his souvenir."

"Yeah, but why did he get bumped off?" asked the sergeant.

"He tried to double-cross his pals," I said. "He stole the necklace from them and fled to the Tijuana café. They caught up with him there. After ducking out of the café, he had to use Miss Feyne's car so he wired around the ignition and came to San Diego. The joke is that the Customs guards weren't especially watching for any of them. Also, he never figured Sheila Feyne wouldn't hang onto that straw horse."

"And he lost his life when he went to her apartment to steal it back," said the sergeant.

"He lost his life," I said, "because the

other two guessed what his next move would be. They assumed he'd try to steal it, so they trailed her when I brought her back across the Border and began to watch her apartment. You know what happened then. Warren put through his faked police phone call to get Miss Feyne out of the place while he went up and searched for the horse. His ex-cronies nabbed him, probably choked out a confession, and then murdered him."

"What about the slashed tires?" persisted the sergeant. This conversation was being held in the squad room of the precinct station house. The other detectives were standing around, listening to me open-mouthed. "You G-Men seem to be good, but I'll bet you haven't doped that out, Sheridan."

"If you laid a bet on that, you'd lose," I grinned back. "When Ogre and Hawk couldn't find the straw man in Sheila Feyne's apartment, my garage was the next place they were due to call. They tried to bust open the padlock but couldn't do it without too much noise. So they lost their tempers, happened to see the palm pruning knife and cut up the rubber as a sort of revenge stunt. Also they hoped when I spotted the ruined tires I'd rush out for the police without bothering to close the garage door. If I did that they planned to get the straw man. If not—there were other ways."

"What about the reward the insurance company has offered for the pearl necklace?" inquired one of the detectives.

"We split fifty-fifty," I suggested. "Does that strike you fair?"

It did. It struck them more than fair. I could sense that from their broad grins. "Now how about giving me a release on Sheila Feyne? I suppose you still have her back in the cells?"

"Nope," said the sergeant. "We put her in the matron's room, as you told us to do in your telephone message."

"Good," I said. "I sure was worried about that girl. I was afraid those thugs would get to her."

Sheila Feyne was safe, all right. And incidentally, was she glad to see me. It didn't take me long to fix things up with her, so that she would continue to be safe, as Mrs. Steve Sheridan. Right now she's taking care of things at my apartment. . . .

By CYRIL PLUNKETT



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and originally published in  
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*The killers scarcely had time to straighten from  
their work when in barged the man who was—*

## MURDER MARKED

**K**IMBERT, new manager of the Hotel Greystone, was idealistic. He had many theories about people and hotels, and just now he spoke lengthily about them all.

Tim Veneen sighed and settled his tall, lean body deeper in the chair. He wondered

if Kimbert really knew people—even the swanky Greystone's guests.

Mr. Kimbert cleared his throat and went on with forceful dignity.

"Moreover, my dear employees, I consider the presence of detectives in a hotel such as the Greystone an insult to our

patrons. We try to make this their home, you understand. It is inconceivable that they would employ detectives in their own home when the city affords ample police protection. Therefore, the house detective, the 'snoop' as I have heard him termed many times, will no longer be a part of our policy. I might add that this is in the nature of two weeks' notice to that department."

Tim Veneen had been bored, but now he was suddenly dazed. There was more, for Kimbert was a man of ideas, but Veneen didn't hear it. Canned! He wondered what Molly would say. They'd planned on marrying soon. They'd fought uphill for years, and then, when he had a job he loved, when he could look toward the future unafraid, he was suddenly fired.

Back in the glittering lobby finally, Veneen sat down. A snoop, eh? Yet he'd saved the Greystone trouble many times. He'd saved guests their pocketbooks. Twice he'd saved jewels, and without publicity. But that was seemingly forgotten. Now he was a snoop! His big hands tightened, and his square jaw jutted out pugnaciously. Mr. Kimbert was simply asking for a punch in the nose!

"It's a damned shame," said a voice beside him. Veneen raised gray eyes to look up at Jimmy Lehr, the bellhop, and he nodded wryly.

"This was a swell dump till Kimbert came," Jimmy went on. "Tim, by gosh I'd show that skunk!"

"Sure!" Veneen grunted. "Kill a guy and then pinch myself. I—wait a minute!"

**HIS** eyes narrowed, crinkling at the corners. There were always undercurrents in a hotel, things about to happen. There was always intrigue, and if a man were alert, he pounced on things before they happened. He still had two weeks to serve, and there was something on his mind.

He was facing the desk, and the man just hastening toward it stimulated his thoughts. Undercurrents? Here was one ready-made in the strange Mr. Bascom. Veneen had been interested in the activity of this queer gentleman.

The stocky Mr. Bascom was receiving a scented but unstamped letter.

"From Mrs. F. Bascom" was plainly inscribed in its upper left corner. Mr. Bascom removed a second letter from his pocket and handed it to the mail clerk. This one was addressed to Mrs. F. Bascom, and "Fred Bascom" appeared on its upper left corner. This letter, also, was unstamped.

Mr. Bascom thanked the clerk, glancing incuriously at the quietly dressed young man who had moved up beside him. Veneen, seemingly waiting for his mail, was acutely aware when the man turned again toward the street.

Leaning now on the desk, Veneen watched him go, frowning. For ten days the unusual exchange of letters had been going on. Mr. Fred Bascom was not a Greystone guest, although Mrs. Bascom occupied a regal suite. There was nothing wrong about a man coming to a hotel daily to claim a letter and leave one, but why didn't the Bascoms use the mail? Or why didn't Bascom go up and see his wife and be done with it? Veneen's Irish nose smelled intrigue, and for the next two weeks intrigue was going to be his dish.

"Is there more mail for Mrs. Bascom?" he asked the clerk abruptly.

"There was. She sent down for it a while ago."

"Slip me that letter," Veneen said. "I want to talk to this lady."

Mrs. Bascom's door, 1708, opened almost immediately to his knock. A young woman, severely garbed but physically desirable, looked at him questioningly.

"Mrs. Bascom?"

"I'm her secretary."

Veneen looked past her, beyond the tiny foyer. "I've a letter for Mrs. Bascom," he said dubiously.

"I'll take it," the woman smiled, reaching out a lovely hand.

The young detective shrugged mentally. That was that. He wouldn't see Mrs. Bascom after all.

"Joan," a voice called from the next room, "who is there?"

"It's just a letter, Mrs. Bascom," the secretary replied, and then Mrs. Bascom came into view.

She couldn't have been more than twenty-five or twenty-six, sensuously formed and



exciting. Her eyes were dark blue and looked worried; her hair was lustrous wheat-straw. She looked at Veneen appraisingly, curiously.

"Would you wait a moment, please? I'd like to talk to you. Joan, you may leave. I wonder, Mr.—"

"Veneen," the house detective said, and his heart jumped at the throb in her voice.

He came into the room and he was aware of her perfume. Mrs. Bascom waited until her secretary shut the door. Then she turned back to him. She was lovely from either view.

"You're connected with the hotel, of course?" Her words were clipped, nervous.

Veneen nodded. "I'm the house man."

"On duty now?"

"But not this evening, ma'am."

Her hands fluttered in evident agitation. Veneen watched the up and down movement of her breasts. She took a cigarette from a lacquered box, offered Veneen one which he refused.

"You look dependable. And you could be of tremendous help. If you knew something strange, something rather outside the law, was to take place, would you necessarily have to report it to the police?"

Veneen frowned in perplexity. "I don't quite understand, Mrs. Bascom. Discretion is part of the hotel's policy, if that's what you mean."

"Partly. Suppose I wished your presence—" She hesitated, then plunged on. "I must be at the Club Monaco at seven tonight to meet a person. This person, frankly, has a hold over me."

Veneen's lips set in a straight line. "Go on," he said quietly.

"I—I've never met this person—and, oh, it's so terribly involved. I daren't really explain. I'm alarmed—nearly frantic—and yet, there must not be police interference."

"Wouldn't it be best to consult a good lawyer?" suggested Veneen helpfully.

She shook her head. "There isn't time, and I was warned—" Her dark eyes pleaded for understanding.

The appeal in them cast a spell over Veneen. "Sure, I'll go along," he said slowly. "But I doubt if this party you fear will

make himself known if you aren't alone."

"I've thought of that," she admitted. "We can dine. Then, perhaps, you can leave me. But I'll have the comfort of knowing you are near. I'm willing to pay you well. Would a hundred dollars be all right?"

Veneen opened his lips to object to payment. "Quite all right," he said instead. With no job in the offing, a hundred was damned welcome!

She went to the desk and wrote out a check. Veneen's eyes, still thoughtful, did not leave her. He noticed she was left-handed.

"Engage a cab, please, and wait for me in the lobby, Mr. Veneen. About thirty minutes—and here's your check."

GOING back to the elevators, Veneen wondered frowningly why Alicia Bascom had not sought aid from the husband who wrote her so regularly. Again the peculiarity of that arrangement struck him. Downstairs, he hurried across the lobby and outside. It was already after six, the hour he was free, and early darkness shrouded the street, stabbed by the glitter of winking lights. At the taxi stand he surveyed the various drivers. His eyes lighted, and he approached a cab at the end of the waiting line.

"Just the guy I'm looking for! I need a close-mouthed friend, Corky. Want to earn twenty-five bucks?"

Corky, young and brawny, cap aslant on his head, looked his amazement.

"What'd you say, Mister?" he jeered.

"Listen," Veneen went on tersely. "I'm in on something big and I've got to be prepared." Hastily he sketched his movements for the immediate future. "Wait for us at the Monaco. We may be parted. If she leaves, follow her. Never mind me. If she's with anybody else, Corky, get a good description: Better yet, try to get their fare. And then let me know where they go. Right?"

"Right!" Corky said, all jest disappearing at Veneen's earnestness.

Presently Alicia Bascom appeared, fetchingly swathed in furs that did nothing to hide the plunging neckline of her dinner dress. The detective helped her into Corky's

cab, and ten minutes later they stopped before the pretentious Club Monaco.

Once inside and seated, Veneen found himself facing the room. He ordered, covertly watching Alicia as she turned and looked anxiously from table to table. His eyes followed hers and suddenly he started, sucking in his breath. Just arrived was the man who came regularly to the Greystone desk for letters—Mr. Fred Bascom. Amazingly, however, Alicia Bascom's troubled gaze swept over him without the slightest sign of recognition.

Unconsciously, Tim Veneen's fingers began tapping the table top. His first thought was that Bascom was the man whom she was to meet. And then he began to wonder. He tried to arrange this new development in orderly sequence with the others of the evening. Bascom's letter had come, as usual, just before six o'clock. Mrs. Bascom hadn't yet read Bascom's letter when she talked to Veneen. So Bascom's letter could have no direct bearing upon this prearranged meeting.

Yet why was the husband here? Why didn't she acknowledge him then? Or didn't she *dare* acknowledge him? It was all hopelessly muddled, and Veneen was debating whether or not to question her when she gasped. The crystal water glass had shattered in her hand and crimson stained her slender fingers.

"You're hurt!" he said.

She laughed nervously. "It's nothing—nothing."

"But you should have your fingers dressed." He caught her injured hand in his. She was cruelly cut.

"No—I daren't leave," she breathed. "If I may have your handkerchief—"

He helped her tie the improvised bandage. Her arm trembled, but she forced a smile. Veneen swore under his breath. This woman was badly frightened.

"Mr. Veneen, sir? You're wanted on the phone. A private message in the foyer."

Startled, the detective looked up at the waiter beside him. He excused himself and started for the foyer. Bascom, he noted, was busily engaged with his menu.

There was a double booth along on alcove

wall. A man lounged before one of the doors, hands in the pockets of his coat. Wondering why Corky, the only person who knew of his presence here, was trying to contact him by phone, and how the waiter had known him, Veneen reached for the free door. He was jostled suddenly from the back.

"Let out a peep and you're plugged," the man snarled, and Veneen whirled to see the outline of the gun in the coat pocket.

"Get your hat. Don't open your mouth."

"What's the idea?" Veneen asked quietly.

"I said don't talk, punk! We're going out—see?"

Veneen saw. He saw murder in the man's yellow eyes, in every line of that tense body. He shrugged, got his hat, and started for the door.

**P**ARKED down the street was Corky, but Corky was following orders, showing no interest in the detective. Veneen walked woodenly to the curb. There was a car waiting, a man behind the wheel.

"Back already, Jake?" he grinned.

Jake grunted and pushed Tim Veneen into the back seat. The motor whined. Jake pulled out his gun and held it ready on his knees.

"Joe, it's a cinch!" he gloated. "This lug don't even know he's gonna die!"

So death rode the car. Veneen became rigid, momentarily unable to believe his ears. Murder marked—but why? Because of Mrs. Bascom? It *had* to be Mrs. Bascom. He could think of no other reason.

He was surprised at his own coolness, his ability to think at all. But he found himself considering his every chance, every possible plan of action. Obviously, they wanted him out of the way in order to get at her.

The car was already leaving the downtown section, and once beyond it, he knew, opportunity to act would slide to zero. His body tightened as, suddenly, the car slowed. Traffic lights turned red ahead. Joe, the driver, swore.

Warily Jake brought up his gun. Veneen swayed toward him with the slowing car, swayed and kept on coming. His left hand shot out and caught the gun arm, his right

fist crashing into the man's jaw. Jake grunted, writhing to free himself, and Veneen swung again. He had a fleeting glance of Joe, heard him yell, sensed that the thug was squirming away from the wheel.

Joe had a gun out, and it swung past Veneen's head, missed as Tim dodged. He caught at the door, heard it unlatch with the *swish* of the gun falling again. The weapon hit him this time, a glancing blow, but he shook it off, his mind excited now with the assurance he had gambled on. They dared not shoot in the press of downtown traffic!

Stumbling to the street, he came up running. Jake's hoarse voice sounded once from behind, then was engulfed in the roar of traffic.

Veneen caught a cab at the corner, snapped the Monaco's address to the driver.

Scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed since he had received the fake telephone call at the Monaco, but it was plenty of time for something to have happened to Alicia, whom he had left there.

When they drew up before the Monaco, he tossed the driver a bill and ran through the foyer. He halted, abruptly, at the dining room entrance.

Alicia Bascom was not there. And neither was Bascom, the man who wrote her letters.

For a moment Veneen was undecided. He was already far beyond his expectations in the nest of intrigue he had uncovered. He had done more than duty to the Hotel Greystone demanded, but he owed service to Mrs. Bascom. Besides he had been marked for death—and Tim Veneen had an Irish temper. He knew he'd see the thing through now in spite of hell itself.

He had not seen Corky or his cab outside. The question was, had the two, Bascom and the luscious Mrs. Bascom, gone together? Had she been forced to leave? His thoughts were cut short by a reappearance of the waiter who had advised him of the phone call. This time he handed the detective a note. Veneen read:

In case you return, I am sorry, but I had to leave. But you have served your purpose. Thank you very much.

There was no signature, but Veneen's

eyes were quick to see the writing was identical with that on the letters Fred Bascom called for at the Greystone desk, and the check Mrs. Bascom had written earlier tonight. It had the same peculiar slant. It was written on a leaf of a note book such as women carry in their purses. And that, apparently, settled it. But Veneen's lips were tight, his eyes gleaming.

"Who did the lady leave with?" he asked the waiter. "And did *she* hand you this note?"

"I don't know, sir. The note was lying on her table with your name on it. So I held it for you."

VENEEN turned back to the street, to the Greystone this time. Joan, Mrs. Bascom's secretary, conceivably held the key to the situation. But deep within him, vaguely alarming, was a feeling he would be too late.

The seventeenth floor was quiet. Veneen tried the door to the Bascom suite. It was locked, but he still had keys and he opened it. The foyer was dark and still, and so were the rooms beyond. He groaned mentally at the thought that the secretary was gone, but he pressed the light switch.

She was "gone" all right, but not in the way he had anticipated. Her body lay sprawled on the floor. Blood stained the blouse, and protruding from the left breast was a knife.

She was dead—dead about an hour.

Veneen closed the corridor door, caught up the phone, asked for Kimbert's office. What he said to the smug manager was not pleasant.

"Veneen, you're crazy!" the manager gasped. "Not murder—*here!*"

Veneen cut the connection, called the switchboard back and requested Police Headquarters. He knew Sergeant Doyle, Homicide, and to Doyle he reported the murder. He'd barely finished when Kimbert burst into the room.

"Good God!" Kimbert cried, shuddering, and Veneen remembered grimly he'd promised himself he'd punch this jerk in the nose about two weeks hence.

"So the Greystone doesn't need detectives!" he said.

"But what are we going to *do*?"

"Do? Damn it, I've done plenty already."

Kimbert stared at him, and suddenly was chattering: "This unfavorable publicity may cost me my job. This—"

"Your job?" Veneen growled. "What about mine?"

Mr. Horace Kimbert wasn't dignified now. He didn't seem at all mighty in this crisis.

"Get out of my way," Veneen said. "I'll save both our jobs. I'll make the Greystone proud it still has a— a snoop on the premises. And you'll be damned glad I'm working here."

He strode to the corner desk. The Bascom letters were there, tied with ribbon. There was something else on top the desk. Scented notepaper with stilted writing. Veneen stared at it.

I can't go on. I'm frantic. I'm going to kill myself, and if anyone tries to stop me I'll kill them, too. Goodbye, Fred, and forgive me.

The signature was *Alicia Bascom*, and the detective corrugated his brows in thought. He was still thinking when the police arrived.

Sergeant Doyle said there wasn't any doubt. She'd obviously written the note, and her secretary had tried to stop her. She'd caught up the knife from the desk, struck down the other girl. Maybe she'd already had her gloves on, which would account for the absence of prints. She was going out, wasn't she?

"To the Monaco, with me," Veneen admitted.

He remembered her nervousness, the shattered glass. Her fear could have been for herself. Her story could have been fictitious. She could have ignored Fred Bascom, sitting in the Monaco, rather than identify him. Yes, all these things could be so—but why then would she have asked him, Tim Veneen, to dine with her? Why invite him into the case at all?

From there on, it didn't make sense. And the muddle was growing steadily worse.

"Plain as anything," Doyle was saying, looking up from the packet of letters. "She was on the outs with her husband. Wouldn't even see him, judging from these notes and

what the staff reports. We'll locate her, but I'm afraid it will be too late. When a dame's frantic, she don't wait long."

HE PICKED up a picture on a stand near the desk. Fred Bascom's picture, Veneen saw. And written in the lower corner was: To Alicia with love. Fred.

Frantic dames don't wait, Doyle had said. That worried Veneen. But those two thugs who had tried to abduct and kill him hadn't mentioned the Bascoms. Fred Bascom, there in the Monaco at the time, hadn't betrayed any interest in his, Veneen's, leaving the dining room. The hoods, Jake and Joe, were completely out of place in the picture. And yet they strangely dominated this picture, too.

"Is Mrs. Bascom wealthy?" Veneen asked suddenly.

"Her estate is reputed well over a million," Kimbert said.

Veneen lit a cigarette, inhaled carefully. On second thought he reached for the phone, called the doorman. But in answer to his question, he was told Corky's cab was nowhere in evidence outside the Greystone, nor had Corky returned and left a message.

He got out the check Alicia Bascom had given him and compared its signature with that of the suicide note. They matched. The writing on all three papers, including that from the Monaco, matched.

Doyle grinned. "Can't you take it, Tim?"

"Are you sure no one else entered *after* Mrs. Bascom had gone with me?" Veneen countered.

"Sure? We're never sure. But we can trace any suspicious people to this floor, can't we? They're all suites on this floor, and there usually aren't many visitors through a given hour. But the floor clerk, down around the corner, swore no one came up for this apartment."

"How about the stairs? Maybe the floor clerk left her desk momentarily?"

"She did not!" Kimbert interrupted stiffly. "I don't permit it, and, moreover, I asked her."

"It's okay. He's right," Doyle chuckled.

"But—the back stairs," Veneen said softly. "The emergency exit. Have you forgot-

ten that? Or suppose the murderer went up a floor or two above, and then walked down the emergency stairway. Nothing's impossible. Doyle, and I'm going to prove it."

The phone rang sharply. Veneen dived for it.

"He's there?" he said into the instrument. "Hold him!" Then: "Doyle, if I send up good word, for once give me the benefit of the doubt."

"Hey!" Doyle cried. "Hey, explain that!"

But Veneen was gone, racing for the elevators, chafing at the long drop to the street level. He crossed the lobby at a run, and to hell with amazed glances. Corky was parked on the other side of the street, motor still running.

"Did you get her?" he asked as he reached the cab.

"She came out with a guy and he had a car of his own," Corky wheezed. "But I tailed 'em."

"And they went where?"

"Out in the country, a big house on Devonshire Road, near the river. They went in, and a while later I hotshot back to the Monaco, only you wasn't there, so I came right over here."

"Who was the man she was with?" Veneen asked.

"I dunno. Stocky, dressed nice—"

"Bascom," Veneen said.

"Let me finish," Corky insisted, agrieved. "I parked the cab and sneaked up by the house. Couldn't see a thing, but just as I was leaving, another car drove in. It was those two hardcases you left the Monaco with."

Veneen sucked in his breath. It *did* connect—and he hadn't made an idle boast. He'd show Kimbert yet!

"Stay here, Corky. I'll be right back." He bounded across the street, to face Kimbert. "Get Sergeant Doyle on the seventeenth floor. Tell him to start for Devonshire Road pronto. He'll see Corky's cab and know where to stop. Got that?"

"But—"

"The hell with buts, do what I say. This is murder!"

[Turn page]

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CORKY, sensing action, had the cab going as Veneen stepped inside it.

"Back to that house!" Veneen directed.

"Okay, but what then?"

"How do I know. Fight, I guess. These men are murderers."

Corky whistled. "I'm with you! Fists or guns?"

"Have you got a gun?"

"Hell, no. Haven't *you*?"

Veneen groaned in answer, and the cab rolled on. They turned upon Devonshire Road finally, and Corky increased their speed.

"Right up ahead, Tim," he called suddenly. "What do I do?"

"Slow up. You stick here and flag the cops. I'm going in."

"Inside?"

"Sure."

"Then I'm coming with you," Corky grunted. "The cops'll see the cab all right." He reached down to the floor, his hand coming up with a heavy wrench.

They ran down the road. To one side, some distance back, the house was visible. It was dark now, but two cars stood before the door. Veneen stopped at the porch.

"Let's try the back."

They rounded the house, found a likely window, tested it. It opened. They slipped inside, to be met with silence. Treading warily through the kitchen, they went down a hall flanked on one side by a stairway. As they reached the steps, a thin scream came from above.

Veneen started up the stairs, two steps at a time, Corky crowding after him. There was a streak of light down the hall. Shoulder out, the detective struck the lighted door, felt it give. A fantastic scene met his eyes.

The room itself was empty, but beyond it was a bathroom, the tub visible through the open door. Jake was there, and his henchman Joe. Bascom crouched, facing the door, lips drawn in a snarl, hand streaking for his pocket and a gun. And, struggling desperately with his two hoods, eyes wide with terror, body already partially immersed in the water-filled tub, was Alicia Bascom!

In that one startled instant, Veneen understood. Alicia Bascom was to be drowned

—tossed afterward to the river, devoid of evidence which might point to murder. Suicide, the verdict. He knew this, knew what he must do to stay them in that second he was off balance after lunging into the room.

He knew, too, that hesitation now would end in death. Bascom's hand was already tugging at the gun butt, and Bascom's eyes were yellow with the lust to kill.

Veneen didn't stop. He came up from the half-crouch, driving like a torpedo, straight and true. Not running, not leaping, but diving across the room, sensing even in that dive that the element of surprise was with him. Jake and Joe were still bending awkwardly over the squirming Alicia Bascom.

He struck Bascom just as the gun came up. It exploded once, roaring in his ears, and the two went down together. Their bodies crashed against Jake, knocking him forward into the tub.

Veneen had Bascom's gun arm, twisting it, striving frantically not only to point the weapon away, but to cause it to fall. He heard Jake threshing, the other man shouting.

Bascom was screaming, "Get him, Joe. Shoot him! Club him!"

Joe's shouting took form. "I can't. You're in the way!"

Veneen's free arm, fist knotted, was pumping at Bascom's jaw. Bascom fought desperately, legs and feet failing.

Seconds only had passed when Bascom shuddered, loosened and slipped aside, folding up like an old suit of clothes. All the while Veneen wondered why Corky had not joined the fight. He heard himself yelling Corky's name despairingly as Joe's gun finally began to bark.

It spoke twice, and pain darted maddeningly through Tim Veneen's shoulder. But he was already twisting, reeling on his feet, dodging the dripping Jake's lunge for him, swaying toward Joe.

JOE stood crouched, gun muzzle level and looking big as a cannon. Veneen thought agonizingly that there was no chance to reach it before it could roar again. Joe's grimy finger tightened, and Veneen unconsciously tensed himself for the impact of the

bullet. Then, abruptly, his feet slid out beneath him as the gun blazed, the slug burning past his face as he dropped to the slippery floor. Before he could move, Jake had leaped him, was clubbing his head.

And then Corky came, wrench raised, arm swinging. Corky, yelling and indomitable. He caught the whirling Joe a solid blow, then threw himself at Jake. He missed as again the slippery floor took its toll, and crashed, swearing, against the tub. And all the while, Veneen tried fruitlessly to move. He felt his hands and legs were paralyzed.

Groaning, he watched Bascom scramble to his feet, tear the wrench from Corky's grasp, and swing it down before the cabbie could protect himself. Bascom swayed and shook his head. Jake was panting, muttering. Alicia Bascom, still partially immersed, pressed against the inner back wall of the tub, her breasts heaving. Veneen knew defeat, knew bitterly that he had failed.

"He got Joe," Jake wheezed. He kicked Corky's body in fury.

Bascom nodded, unable to speak.

"We can't kill 'em all," Jake went on, still wheezing.

"The hell we can't," Bascom snarled then. "We've gone too far to back out now. Get downstairs. Watch the doors. I'm going to blow these fools to hell!"

Alicia's voice came again in terrified protest. Bascom struck her. Corky moaned, his body shuddering with returning consciousness. Veneen felt agony in his shoulder, agony in his heart. He thought despairingly of his boast to Kimbert, his hopes and Molly's, the girl he loved and wanted, and the desperate danger to Alicia Bascom and Corky. His own death didn't seem very important right then.

The tingling seemed to be going. Warmth was spreading slowly through his arms and legs. Jake stumbled toward the door. Bascom, still panting savagely, was ready to kill.

Doyle no longer could come in time. Veneen didn't dare even wait until Jake had left the tiled room, for Bascom's finger twitched on the trigger. So he flexed his fingers desperately, and his legs shot out. The

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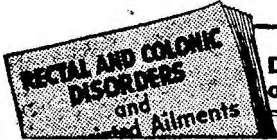


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slippery floor had saved him once before. He made it aid him once again.

Jake yelled, crumbled back toward Bascom as Veneen's right leg tripped him. Bascom tried to avoid Jake's falling figure and the detective's left leg but he could not in the small room. He did throw himself backward, but the wall brought him up, and Veneen's foot flashed between his legs, twisted and pulled back. The gun snarled, but the bullet went wild. And Veneen came to his feet as Bascom crashed to the tile floor.

Veneen never remembered how he got that gun, but he got it, and he was crouched against a tub, covering both men as a door splintered below and pounding feet came up the stairway. Doyle and his men broke into the room.

LATER, Corky, rubbing his head, called himself harsh names.

"Imagine," he wailed. "I was coming up the stairs behind you and I stumbled and fell all the way down-again. I'm a pal!"

Alicia Bascom, looking white but smiling, shivered in a blanket. Doyle had Bascom and his men handcuffed. He pumped Veneen's good arm.

"I'm proud of you, lad. It looked pat to me at the Greystone."

"You don't know undercurrents," Veneen chuckled. "They go in crazy directions, Doyle."

"I owe you everything, Mr. Veneen," Alicia Bascom murmured. "Thank God it was you I chose to help me."

"But you really didn't." Veneen chuckled again. "I chose you! How about telling us now the hold these men had over you?"

She nodded. "I think you have a right to know. I met and married my husband, Fred, in France. A wealthy man, he died there two years ago, under peculiar circumstances. The body was never found. There was a government inquiry, I was completely exonerated, but it was horrible nonetheless. Then this afternoon, I was told to go to the Monaco—Fred's death, a scandal in this country, was the threat. It was Lane Bascom, Fred's half-brother, who was after Fred's estate. I had never met him until he introduced himself after you had left my table."



Bascom muttered a curse and Alicia shuddered.

"He knew everything that had happened in France, but he claimed he could twist it to make me Fred's murderer! I had to go with him."

"Half-brother, eh," Veneen mused. "Now I get it. I suspected blackmail, but it was murder right from the start. They didn't want crumbs, but everything you had. And it might have worked. You, yourself, kept your husband's death quiet. To all purposes, you were only separated. No one but you in this country had even known Fred Bascom. So Lane Bascom cleverly established himself as your husband, planning the moment you were dead to claim your personal fortune."

He saw amazement on her face and on Doyle's.

"How could he do it?" Veneen smiled. "He wrote 'his wife' letters. He received letters from her. Everyone believed he was Fred Bascom, and doubtless he had other forged documents to bring forward, when the time came."

"But I didn't write any letters," Alicia said.

"I know you didn't," said Veneen. "And I knew you hadn't murdered Joan. Doyle was right. Frantic dames don't wait—but you did! Furthermore, you had your hand cut at the Monaco, the left, your writing hand as I saw when you wrote my check. So when I got the note at the club, I began to suspect it had been prepared earlier, the moment they knew I was going out with you, the moment they planned to get rid of me. Bascom or his men slipped up to your room without an instant's delay, set the stage, killed Joan. They weren't missing out on a single possibility."

"But how could they have known all those things so quickly?" Mrs. Bascom asked in a small voice.

"Joan, your secretary. She's the one who wrote the letters to Bascom—in a perfect copy of your handwriting. She cleverly saw that you didn't receive the letters Bascom sent. And she placed a picture of Lane Bascom on the stand *after* you left tonight. That

[Turn page]

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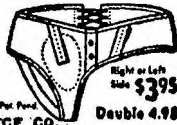
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picture hadn't been there when I first came to your suite—another thing which set me thinking.”

“Joan! I can't believe it of her!” exclaimed Alicia, shuddering.

Veneen went on softly, “But when she realized finally it was to be murder, she must have balked, and was killed. And the very suicide message they had just had her write would have served to clear Bascom of her murder and pin it on you. He had the brains, all right, but I got the breaks.”

“Yeah?” hooted Doyle. “You had it figured, didn't you? But that writing business at the Monaco was a long shot, a stab in the dark. After all, Mrs. Bascom could have written those few words in spite of her injured hand.”

“Hardly, Doyle. From the time she suffered her injury to the time she would have had to write the note, no cut that deep would have stopped bleeding. She could doubtless have written it in spite of the pain and bandage, truly enough, but certainly not duplicating her usual precise hand. And if she had taken off the bandage, the notepaper would have been stained with blood.”

“Anyway,” Doyle grunted, “you can write your own ticket at any hotel in town after tonight.”

“I think I'll stay at the Greystone,” Tim Veneen said, grinning. “Mr. Kimbert needs me, and besides—I still got to punch him in the nose sometime.”

### THE CLUE IN THE ASHTRAY

(Continued from page 99)

a skilled mechanic could have opened that safe in twenty minutes, the time it takes to smoke three cigarettes.”

“It seems simple enough now that you explain it,” agreed Bert Blade, “but why did you assume the man was middle-aged? That stumps me!”

“Oh, that!” grinned the detective. “Haven't you noticed that every young fellow carries an automatic lighter these days, and the young crooks invariably sport an expensive one, usually stolen. Only the middle-aged stick to the wooden matches. To me, the contents of that ash tray added up to just one man—Bill Samson!”