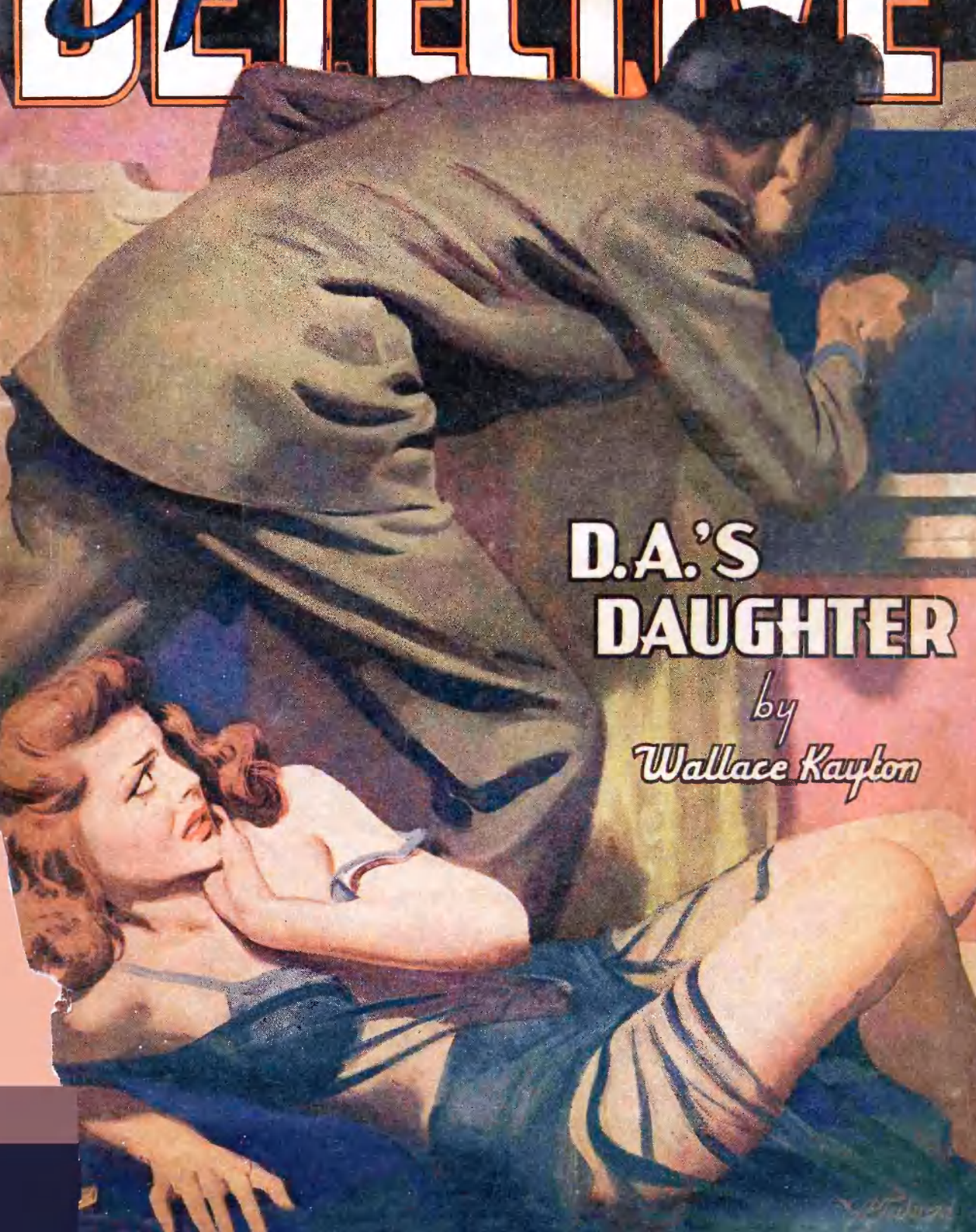


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D.A.'S DAUGHTER

by
Wallace Kayton

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SPICY · DETECTIVE · STORIES



December, 1941

Vol. 16, No. 2

CONTENTS

THE D.A.'S DAUGHTER!	6
<i>Wallace Kayton</i>	
CRIMSON COMEDY	18
<i>A Dan Turner Novelette by Robert Leslie Bellem</i>	
SALLY THE SLEUTH	38
<i>Barreaux</i>	
HOMICIDE IS HARD TO HIDE	42
<i>James A. Lawson</i>	
DEAD MAN'S GAME	54
<i>Stan Warner</i>	
STRAIGHT FROM THE FEED BOX	64
<i>Bob Leeson</i>	
SPOTS OF MURDER	72
<i>Clark Nelson</i>	
ODDS ON DEATH	80
<i>John Phillips</i>	

The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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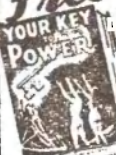


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The D.A.'S Daughter!

She was the loveliest burglar he had ever seen, and her story sounded plausible enough to make him willing to help her. A few minutes later he was cursing himself, cursing redheads, cursing everything and everybody. For a hard-boiled detective, he had certainly been the world's prize sap!

GREGORY was a light sleeper, and a cautious sleeper as well. Light by nature, cautious through necessity. For example, his front door bore a Yale lock, a heavy bolt, and a chain contraption. When he retired to his bedroom, the bedroom door was similarly fastened with lock, bolt, and chain. Gregory had lots of enemies and knew it.

He awakened, but he did not move. There was some one in the



By
**WALLACE
KAYTON**

*"I—I was just trying
to get some clothes,"
she stuttered.*



room with him, and there was only one means of entrance—through the open window. Tense and taut, he waited for another betraying sound, his right hand sliding beneath the pillow, his left reaching for the bed table. He heard the click of a doorknob, turning slowly, slowly, and tightened into action. Someone going into the closet, the last place he wanted any one!

His flash cut a silver swath in the darkness; he thrust out the Luger so it could be seen. He snarled, "Get the hell out of that closet, you're covered!" And inwardly he was cursing viciously. For what in the name of hell would he do with the guy? The guy was dangerous now. He'd known enough to go directly to the closet,



where the powerful induction coil was still attached to the wall, a set of headphones dangling from it!

The closet was the spot used by Gregory to listen in on occurrences in the adjoining apartment, inhabited by Fred Arthur, assistant district attorney.

"Im going to shoot, damn you," he grated. And the closet door swung slowly open.

It was hard to say who was the most embarrassed, Gregory or the woman who emerged. Gregory, because he'd expected a man. The woman because she wore a scanty pair of dark panties that looked as though they had been painted on her flaring hips. Only the panties, a brassiere, and nothing more.

She stuttered, "I—I—was just—trying—to get some clothes!"

A man might have counted thirty slowly before Gregory began to function normally again. He spent that interval looking her over, from slender, shoeless feet, silk stockinged legs, to the top of her auburn head. She was something to look at, worth more than a thirty count. But damn it, she began to cry.

Gruffly he said, "Grab the robe off the foot of the bed."

Thankfully she did, and immediately lost herself in it. Gregory was a big man. He crawled out of bed in his pajamas and turned on the room lights. Before speaking to her, he went to the open window and thrust out his head. There was no fire escape, but a ledge, some eighteen inches wide circled the apartment building. A little admiration appeared in his eyes—hell, this was the eleventh floor.

He lit a cigarette, went over to the liquor cabinet. "Drink?"

SHE said, "God knows I need it!" And taking it, she spilled Scotch on the front of the robe. But it perked her up. She said, "Really, I'm no robber. I—I—well, I went on a party next door and I must have drunk too much. It was that kind of party."

That much was right. Gregory had listened in on his induction coil until the party broke up around 2:30. His clock said 3:00 now.

"And I guess they played a joke on me. I woke up and they'd taken my clothes and locked me in the bedroom! I couldn't make anybody hear, and I just had to get out of there! My father—!"

He nodded. "Fred Arthur's making himself quite a reputation as an all around playboy, even if he's an assistant d.a. Your father wouldn't approve of your being there in the first place, and your staying out all night in the second, and—!"

"See! You're right. But I couldn't raise anyone, they've all gone out somewhere and left me. So I thought I'd come along the ledge and try to get someone to help me out."

"What's your name?"

When she crossed her legs, the robe fell apart. Her skin was white and satiny, shiny and smooth. She smiled coyly, enticingly, her eyes a promise. "Can I have another drink?" He gave her another drink. When she stood up, he laughed aloud, she looked so much like a midget in his robe.

She said, "You look like a nice fellow. I'll bet you could get my clothes for me. Then I'll tell you who I am and you can take me home." She put both hands on his shoulders and swayed against him. A wave of electricity ran over him.

He put his arm around her and said, "Hell, honey, I'm no burglar. Let's go in the other room, open the door a little bit, and wait for Arthur or someone else to come in."

"And I won't be home until daylight! Ooooooh! I couldn't do that!" Her red lips were pursed and inviting. So he kissed her. She had a smooth, pleasant way of kissing, with parted lips, and her fingers moving ever so gently at the base of his skull. . . .

HE KIDDED himself a little bit as he eased out into the hall, calling himself a fool for red-heads. But what the hell! A man lived only once. He glanced up the hall, found it vacant, and paused. What was that down by the stairs? Looked like an overnight bag. Hell, it was none of his business! He walked to Arthur's apartment, rang the bell long and loud. He waited, perhaps, three minutes, ringing intermittently. Though he heard no bell or buzzer, he knew it rang. The apartments were sound-proof.

He took a pair of small steels from the pocket of his second robe, one stiff, the other springy. This was going to be tough on a Yale lock. His hand touched the knob of the door and the knob twisted, the door gave. Suspicious as an

Indian, he stood there for a moment, peering into the darkened apartment. But drunks often forgot to leave the latch on their doors. He stepped in, closed the door softly behind him and called, "Hey, Arthur! Where are you, Arthur!" Just to make sure.

He turned on the foyer light, went on into the living room. The place was empty, the apartment was laid out just like his. Two bedrooms to the right, and the last would be the one in which the girl had been locked. He grinned to himself, remembering how she'd looked in that oversized robe, and the grin tightened as he remembered the promise in her eyes.

The place looked as if a party had been going on, all right. Empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. All the usual debris of a party. A spot on the solid grey rug where a drink had been upset, over by a screen that cut off a corner of the room. The long grey worm that once had been a cigarette, laying on the top of the piano. A pair of suspenders—and God only knew whose—hanging from the chandelier. But no clothing such as might belong to a little red headed gal who drank too much and passed out.

He looked hastily in the front bedroom, they were not there. He walked back to the back bedroom, opening onto the ledge, where the girl must have been. The key was on the hall side of the lock. The room showed no signs of occupancy. He leaned over the bed, which was in perfect order, sniffed the pillow. Hells bells, no dame had laid her head there.

Back through the place he went in long strides, his cheeks red with anger. What the hell kind of run-around was she giving him? For a minute he paused in the littered living room again, staring suspiciously about. The spot so close to the screen, where someone had evidently spilled a drink caught his eye again. He went over, ran a finger through it, and felt the hair beginning to prickle on the back of his neck. His finger was red—red with blood. He saw lighter lines in the grey of the rug, then, and realized a chair had been pulled backward behind the screen.

He made himself look behind that screen, forced himself to do it. Fred Arthur, the assistant d.a. was there. He was doubled up in a chair, his head literally on his knees. He was very, very dead, with a knife still sticking in his back. Gregory touched his cheek, found it still warm. The *drip-drip-drip* was blood, still coming from the guy's mouth.

Suddenly Arthur's right arm fell from the arm of the chair, swung like the pendulum of a clock for a moment. Something glossy and slick fell from the hand, lay on the floor. Swiftly Gregory stooped, noted the two photographs were still damp to the touch. The first made him angrier than ever. It was the redheaded dame, and the man was Fred Arthur!

She was sitting on his lap in an overstuffed chair. Her skirt was high above her knees, so that inches of white flesh were revealed above her sheer stockings. She was wearing an evening gown, one shoulder strap of which was down. And

Fred Arthur was kissing her, while her own arms were about his neck. It was a damned good angle, both parties were easy to recognize.

The second was worse. She wore the same skin tight panties he had seen her wearing a moment before. Again her arm was about Fred Arthur's neck, she seemed to be gazing up fondly at her lover as he held her in his arms. He seemed to be carrying her through a door—into a bedroom.

Again Gregory was impressed by the fresh dampness of the pictures. He turned slowly, saw the door to the right and opened it, careful to use a handkerchief. He switched on a light, was surprised to find that the globe was red. Then he recognized the converted closet for what it was—a developing room. A table held an enlarger, various chemicals sat around, pans for hypo and all the other apparatus of a candid camera fan. He pawed through a few negatives, and was surprised as hell to find the two from which the pictures in his hand were printed!

BACK through the place he went, turning out the lights. He wheeled quickly into his own apartment, back into the bedroom. His guest was gone—there was no red-head. He leaped for the closet, cursing himself, cursing redheads, cursing everything and everybody.

The closet was large, and he had installed a small desk for use in transcribing what he heard. He'd been so tired at 2:30 he'd left the steno's notebook there on the desk. It was gone, of course. The red-head, damn it!



*She fought like a wildcat,
but she was no match for
him.*

He went back into the hall, and looking to his left, noted that the overnight bag was gone! And down by the steps he found his dressing robe, neatly folded on the Cogswell chair. The whole damned thing had been a plant.

HE DRESSED quickly, packed his few belongings, including the induction coil, in his kitbags, and went down the steps as the

redhead had done. Gregory's jaw was set grimly, his eyes were slotted. He turned into the apartment garage, found his roadster,—there was no night attendant — and wheeled it out into the street. And turning south, he heard the scream of approaching sirens. Had it been possible, his jaw would have become harder! The redhead had not only snatched his notebook with four days records of Arthur's

transactions, but she'd evidently tried hard to trap him with a murdered man on his hands.

He rolled through town, out Brandywine to Anderson Avenue and on into Olmos Heights. He didn't drive fast, because he didn't want to attract any attention. It must have required thirty minutes on the winding roads and boulevards of the heights to arrive at his destination, a large Spanish type house of stucco set well back from the street. Straight up the graveled drive he sped, and beneath the big cottonwood that draped its leafy arms over the driveway itself. He parked directly behind a black coupe.

A sleepy butler in a hastily donned robe answered the bell after a long period of silence. Mr. Wimberley, he told Gregory, could not be disturbed at this hour. Gregory said, "The hell he can't. Tell him his friend from Kansas City is here and it's urgent. Just tell him that."

The butler still disapproved, but Gregory had his foot in the door. He waited in the hall while the butler waddled up the stairs. But it was Wimberley himself who came down in a few minutes, his eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Damn it, Gregory," he said, "you're doing us no good coming here. If they find out you're working for me—!"

"Arthur's dead," said Gregory bluntly. "Stabbed to death!"

Wimberley was around sixty years of age, a sportsman, whose tan was accented by his shock of silver hair. His eyes widened, he shook his head, he said, "Wait

now! What was that? Come in here!"

He poured a pair of drinks in the library, handed one to Gregory, tossed off the other himself. Gregory drank his own and repeated his information.

"Damn it," said Wimberley, "he was the only link I had into the thing! I didn't want you to—!"

Gregory said, coldly, "Don't get excited, Wimberley. I didn't kill him! You hired me to do a little under covering listening, not to commit murder. He had a party this evening—yesterday, rather. I had it all down, names and all, as much as I could get but—!"

The phone rang. Wimberley said, "Hello. Yes, this is the district attorney speaking. Who? Captain Hall?" He winced. "What's that you say? My assistant, Fred Arthur, murdered? My God! All right, all right, I'll be right over!"

He slammed down the phone, cursing. "And of all the homicide men to handle it, Stewart Hall has to get it dropped in his lap. I'll have to go down, of course. Coming?"

Gregory grinned. He said, "Hell no! The clerk will identify me as the guy next door. I've checked out of there, my friend. I was under a phoney name, anyway. I'm staying right here. Just leave the bottle and trot along."

Wimberley, the district attorney, trotted away, horror and disappointment and suspicion fighting for control of his face. Nick Gregory, agency detective, imported from Kansas City, poured himself another drink, tossed it off,

and sank down in a heavy leather chair. This, he told himself, was a hell of a set up.

BETTER than anyone else, Nick Gregory knew his success as a private investigator was due to two things besides a natural talent for work. Those two traits were suspicion and caution. Wimberley himself had come all the way to Kansas City—incognito—to hire Gregory. And Gregory's original answer had been that he'd have to have a few days to think it over. As a matter of fact, he had pulled all the wires available to check on the information given him by Wimberley.

Bayview, he had known already, was a wide open resort town, with lots of slot machines, gambling houses, bookies, and all that went with it to cater to the tourists. Recently, it seemed, the better element "up on the hill," had managed to elect itself a reform ticket, on which Wimberley was district attorney. This ticket had been in the saddle some four months, and the town and county continued to be as wide open as ever!

Two gentlemen named Duke Jordan and Joe McCormack continued to split the rackets as they had done in years past. The only conclusion being that the reform ticket was no better than the ticket they had superseded.

Wimberley, in Gregory's office, had been quite brutally frank about it. He had slapped the desk and said, "But by God, Gregory, I gave my oath that justice would be served, and it's going to be served in my office at least. The

police, led by Captain Hall, laugh at me openly. Hell, yes, they'll make arrests, and turn them over to me. And what happens? Witnesses disappear, evidence is missing! I can't make a move without the other side being forewarned and forearmed."

"What am I to do?" asked Gregory.

"Find the leak. I'm pretty sure it's young Fred Arthur. Hell, he's been an assistant district attorney for years on account of his father running the state political ring. No d.a. dares fire him. But if I can get evidence that he's actually doing business with McCormack and Jordan, I can fire him, and I *will* fire him!"

It had sounded so screwy to Gregory, a district attorney battling with an assistant and being unable to discharge him, that he had taken those few days to find out for himself. And Wimberley had proven right. The situation was exactly as he had outlined it.

Hence, Gregory had accepted the job, to pin something definite on Fred Arthur. He'd installed the locks on the apartment door because of that innate sense of caution and suspicion. And he'd been pretty successful with his induction coil, in one way, and in another he had not.

McCormack and Jordan, gang czars of Bayview, were not the gangsters of the prohibition type. Each had a front, McCormack presumably real estate, Jordan used cars. They were accepted almost anywhere in the city, they were people. It was necessary then, to get a clear record of *illegal* tran-

sactions with Arthur. He palled with them openly, as did so many others in the resort town. For example, both men had been at the party that broke up at two thirty in the morning. Sitting there in his closet, making a record of all that transpired in the next apartment, Gregory couldn't see that he had taken down anything incriminating at all. And yet the red-headed woman had been used to get his records, she'd come directly to him, and she'd made all preparations for flight after framing him—or trying to frame him—into a murder jam! •

For whom was she working, if Arthur was the victim? McCormick or Jordan was the only possible answer to that one.

WIMBERLEY, fully dressed, hurried back into the room. He snapped, "Do you think you left any prints in the apartment when you were there?"

"Hell, yes. I'm bound to have left some. But it's okay, for he had a party and at least forty people were there. Keep your eyes open and let me know everything, every little detail, when you get back. I'm waiting right here."

The door closed behind Wimberley, Gregory heard the roar of a motor, the sound of wheels on the gravel drive. And the sound of footsteps behind him.

"Dad. What's—oh!"

For he had arisen and stood facing her. It was the redhead who had come along the ledge and crawled into his bedroom. The redhead who had taken him for the ride.

"How do you do?" he smiled, and the smile wasn't nice. She was wearing a sheer black negligee now, through which her white skin gleamed and glowed. A breeze came in the open window and whipped the thin garment back against her. "I see," he said quite gravely, "that you didn't find any clothes, after all. Every time I see you, you're considerably undressed, Miss—you were going to tell me your name?"

She had guts, observed Gregory, again. For she drew herself up haughtily, said, "I'm Nadine Wimberley. And who might you be?"

"The man you robbed, and jobbed, next door to Fred Arthur's."

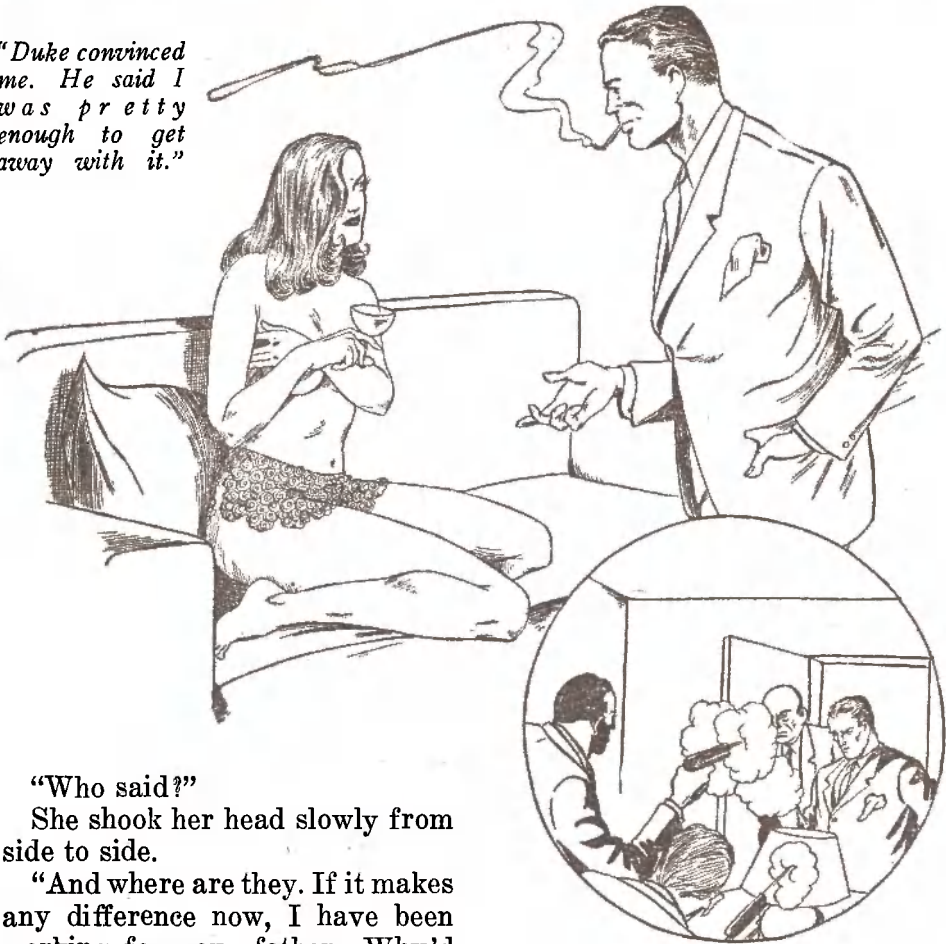
"You—ah—Fred Arthur? And who might that be?"

He crossed the room to her side in half a dozen long strides, his cheeks flushed with anger. He seized her slender shoulders, he shook her until her head threatened to bob off her shoulders, until the thin negligee fell on one side and the whiteness of a rounded breast slope was exposed. All he could think of was those pictures!

"Why don't you yell for the servants, Miss Wimberley?" he touted. And, "What will your father say when I tell him it was you who took what few records I had?"

Her eyes got big—and round. It seemed that for the first time she was fully understanding something or other, and it could be traced on her features. "You were taking those records for my father? I don't understand! I—he said—?"

"Duke convinced me. He said I was pretty enough to get away with it."



"Who said?"

She shook her head slowly from side to side.

"And where are they. If it makes any difference now, I have been working for your father. Why'd you kill Arthur?"

"Kill Arthur? Don't be ridiculous! He was—!"

IT TOOK him a full five minutes to convince her that Fred Arthur was dead, and even then she seemed half inclined to doubt. There was no color in her face except her mouth and the freckles which stood out, small and faint, across the bridge of her nose. And when Gregory had finished, she said, "Damn him, damn his soul to hell! Using me! I'll make him pay if it's the last thing I ever do!"

She crossed swiftly to the liquor

cabinet, poured a stiff drink, and tossed it off like a toper. She would have run from the room except that he caught her wrist. She fought like a wildcat, clawed at his face with the nails of her free hand, kicked at his shins. He was sweating and panting when the struggle was over, when she lay helpless in his arms, totally exhausted.

He said, "All right, somebody crossed you. Duke Jordan or Ike McCormick."

Her eyelids fluttered. She whispered, "Jordan, damn him! I've got to get dad out of this! They

mean to kill him! Joe McCormick is going to have him killed. They —” She began to cry again. “That’s what Duke said, and now I can’t believe him! Something is terribly wrong, what have I done, what have I done?”

Gregory had seen Duke Jordan. He was handsome as a college hero, looked much younger than he really was. He was cultured, he was well read, and he had a way with him. Hence, when the story came out, he wasn’t too much surprised. Just sorry it had to happen.

She hadn’t exactly fallen for Jordan, she explained haltingly, it was just that he seemed so nice, not at all like people said he was, mean and cold and cruel. She knew him, ran into him at the Country Club, and various other places frequented by local cafe society. And Jordan had convinced her that her father was in danger of losing his life! That McCormick was a killer, a man who would stop at nothing, and once let him learn that Wimberley was pulling something, and nothing at all would stand in the way!

“And he told you,” said Gregory bitterly, “that Arthur and your father were good friends and hand in glove—?”

She nodded, “And that McCormick had a man planted with some sort of listening-in device in the next apartment. He said that way McCormick could learn what my father and Fred Arthur were planning.”

All Gregory could think of yet was the pictures. He said, “You

were really in love with Fred Arthur, weren’t you?”

Her eyes became rounder than ever. “I hardly knew him,” she said simply. He told her to go on, saying to himself, liar, liar, liar!

“I went to the party tonight at Arthur’s house. He held them open, you know. Anybody could crash them. And it was the funniest thing—I had a couple of drinks—” She flushed. Damn it, thought Gregory, she’s too damned beautiful to—!—and passed out!”

“Who brought you around?”

“Duke Jordan. He said everyone had gone! I never even saw Arthur after that. And Duke said if I had guts enough to get those records, he’d tell me how to do it. I was supposed to awaken you.” She flushed again. “He said I was pretty enough to get away with it.” And Gregory, unwillingly, admitted that she damned well was. “And he met me downstairs and brought me home. I gave him the records!” She waited a minute, shuddering. “And to think, Arthur was behind that screen all the time! Do you think Duke—?”

HE WAS thinking fast, deep—and, he hoped, well. Damn, those pictures could have been taken while the kid, Nadine, was passed out. She could have been so arranged that it looked as if she were conscious. Arthur would have done it. He knew Wimberley was out for him, they’d argued openly. Such pictures would give him a hold on Wimberley. No father would want them in circulation, naturally. But who had snapped them?

He said, "You're sure Duke was the last one there—just you and Duke?"

"Damn him," she blazed. "And I gave him those records. I'll—"

"Never mind the records," he said. "Hell, there wasn't anything of importance in them. The Duke was just covering all the angles. It was the Duke, then, who reported the murder, and I thought it was you!"

Pictures, pictures! Over and over it went through his head like a refrain. He looked across at her again, and couldn't force himself to believe she was telling anything but the truth. There was something about her—!

She said, "I'm going to get even if it's the last thing I do!"

He picked up the phone book, leafed rapidly through it, dialed a number. "Let me speak to the district attorney," he said.

After a moment he got Wimberley. He asked a few brief questions, got answers that amazed him. "Listen," he said, when he was almost finished, "something is damned fishy. Get back here as soon as you can, I want to talk to you."

To Nadine, he said, "You're positive about the Duke?"

She nodded her head quickly, positively. She arose, said, "I think I'll go up and put on some clothes. I'll be right back down." And she was gone.

Gregory digested the information he had just received. The daughter had said Duke Jordan was the last man in the apartment where the murder was committed. And the father had said that every

clue pointed not to Jordan, but to his rival in Bayview racketdom, Joe McCormick. The very knife had been identified as belonging to McCormick. Two people had already testified that McCormick and Arthur had quarreled. And several others said McCormick was still in the apartment when the party broke up, that he, not Jordan, was the last man there!

Back and forth Gregory paced, back and forth, trying to put it together. And suddenly he leaped for the phone, dialed the same number, and seconds later was again talking to Wimberley.

"Is Captain Hall there, Wimberley, the man that hates your guts so much. He is, well, can you talk so he doesn't catch on?"

"He's busy in the other room."

"Listen closely, then. Did he act at all disappointed about anything, did he treat you like hell? And did he search the corpse and the apartment completely?"

"Search? My God, he tore the place up, went through it like a cyclone. And as for searching Fred Arthur, he literally took the poor fellow's clothes apart! The more he searched the madder he got and the angrier he glared at me. I commented on it to myself at the time. Hall is as crooked as the rest of these—!"

"Fine! Now you've got to throw some weight around, Wimberley. You say everything points to Joe McCormick. You're the d.a. here, you're going to see that no pickup is put on him for an hour or more. Do you think you can do that?"

There was a little hesitation.

(Continued on page 91)



CRIMSON COMEDY

A Dan Turner Novelette

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Dan never liked to poke around in other people's business, but this was once when he forgot his good resolutions. He started out to save a man from a beating and found himself involved in a series of the most brutal killings of his career

THEY wore masks made from handkerchiefs; they were four to one; and they were lambasting hell out of the little fat guy in the baggy tweeds. Nobody likes to watch a good fracas more than I do, but this was different. The odds were all wrong.

I copped an accidental gander at the brawl as I drove past Alta-

mount Alley on my way home from a midnight preview. Even before I ruddered my bucket to the curb I could hear the fat guy's moans, the dull thwack of fists kissing him on the features. The more he pleaded for mercy, the more those four blisters lowered the boom on him.

As a rule, I don't like to poke my



*"Lay off," I rasped,
"before I start spray-
ing poison from this
Flit gun."*

smeller in somebody else's personal business. Not without an invitation in the form of a cash retainer, anyhow. I've got enough enemies in Hollywood already, the same as any other private hawkshaw. But when I piped the terrific lacing those vermin were dishing out to the corpulent slob, I forgot my good resolutions. Especially when he went down and they began kicking him in the belly.

I cut my ignition, catapulted out of my jalopy and sprinted hellitylarrup toward the center of the festivities. Like a narrow black notch, the alley separated Altamount Studios from the back lot

of Super Pix next door. The only light came from a red bulb over an emergency fire exit far to the rear, just beyond where the trouble was taking place. And in the scarlet glow I saw I hadn't arrived any too damned soon.

The fat guy had quit struggling, quit trying to protect himself. He just quivered on the ground, a shapeless blob absorbing copious portions of shoeleather. "Please, boys . . ." he kept whimpering. "I'll pay Shanghai . . . I swear to God. . ."

But the four plug-uglies weren't listening to him. And they were so interested in their football practice that they didn't hear me coming. Which was a break for me. I goosed more speed out of my gams and yodeled: "Belay it, you louse-bound scum!" Then I belted the nearest rodent full in the mush.

I PACK a hundred and ninety pounds of solid heft on my six-foot-plus, and I poured every ounce of it into that roundhouse wallop; felt the satisfying jolt of it traveling up my arm. It was like smacking a ripe canteloupe with an axe. The masked guy's noggin rocked back and a blurt of ketchup spewed from his ruined kisser. He folded over, dripping teeth.

His three pals emitted an assortment of startled language, laid off booting the fat bozo and sailed at me. One of them dropped a black-jack out of his sleeve, tried to mace me over the conk with it. He swung like a gate.

I took the blow on my shoulder. It hurt to beat hell. Then it went numb. I growled: "You asked for this, cousin," and buried my left

duke south of his equator. Sure it was foul; you don't stop to consider Marquis of Queensbury rules when some sharp apple is trying to cave in your roof with a blunt instrument.

My punch ripped a yowl of agony out of him. He doubled up, holding himself. I pivoted to face the remaining pair. One of them nipped me a lucky poke on the button. Sparks erupted in front of my glims. I gave ground, fought for balance. Another bunch of fives tagged me. I felt my knees go rubbery.

I didn't dare take a count, though. I knew what would happen if I did. Those masked hombres would stomp on me until my kidneys whistled Old Black Joe. So I bought myself a breathing spell by tapping a trickle of claret out of the nearest trumpet. Then I dug for the short-barreled .32 automatic I always tote in a shoulder holster in case of necessity.

The way it turned out, I didn't need the rod after all. Yanking my coat open displayed the private tinware pinned to my vest. The guy with the leaking smeller panted: "Gawd, a copper! Let's get to hell out of here!" Then he and his chum took it on the lam, fast. The last I saw of them they were pelting out of the alley into the street with their hip pockets dipping sand.

The two they had left behind were stretched out cold; needed vulcanizing. But they could wait. The fat slug in the baggy tweeds came first.

He was flopping around on all fours, trying to shove himself upright. I helped him to his wobbly

pins, fastened the focus on him. His map was plenty messy in the red glow from the fire exit light, but I tabbed him in spite of that.

"Lumpy Valanno!" I said.

He tried to answer me; couldn't. He didn't have enough breath available. Not that he needed to tell me anything about himself. I already knew. During recent months he and his partner in slapstick, Beau Babbitt, had become household words.

ORIGINALLY the team of Babbitt and Valanno had been knockabout comedians in cheap burlesque. Then they had graduated into radio, clicked on the networks with their loony routines. As soon as their Crossley rating skyrocketed high enough, Hollywood had reached out and grabbed them.

First they'd been cast by Superb Pix in a low-budget opus—and the quickie hit the jackpot, coined a fortune. Whereupon Altamount chiseled them away by slipping them a long term starring contract at a staggering stipend. In a sense, it was a raw deal for Superb Pix—but those things happen all the time in the galloping snapshot racket. And now, after cavorting in a couple of lavish Altamount productions, Babbitt and Valanno were on top of the world.

But this didn't explain the assault and bashery just committed on Valanno's pudgy person. As far as I knew, no scandal had ever touched the fat little comic since his advent in Hollywood—no dames, no liquor, no rough stuff. He was just a respectable married guy who'd hit it lucky. Then why

the hell had those four masked weasels tried to render him useless?

Remembering something he'd bleated, I thought I might have the answer. I said: "Look, friend. I'm Dan Turner, private snoop. If you need a bodyguard, I'm for hire. Rates reasonable, time and a half for night work, no charge for wasted bullets—if any."

He trembled like a cat coughing lollypops. "No . . . oh, my God, it isn't . . . I can't have . . ."

"Okay, skip it," I shrugged. "At least let me see you home and slap a beefsteak on that shiner."

He sagged against the wall. "I can't go home now. I'm working late on some last-minute retakes for our new picture. I just stepped out in the alley for a breath of fresh air when those men jumped at—" All of a sudden he started to wheeze, deep in his gullet. His mitt clawed at his shirt-front.

I've been around long enough to tab cardiac symptoms when I see them. I plunged at him, propped him up. "Heart?"

He nodded, gasped. His lips were turning blue. "Side pocket—coat—quick!"

I dipped my duke in his duds, came out with a fragile glass ampule. I crushed the tiny thing with my fingers, held it under his battered beezee. He sucked in a deep whiff of the sharp medicinal fumes; a touch of color seeped back into his puss. "Thanks," he whispered hoarsely. "But for God's sake don't tell my wife—she mustn't know the shape I'm in! It would worry her. . . ."

"Sure, sure," I said. "Let's go indoors so you can sit down a

while." I steered him to that Altamount fire exit where the red bulb glowed, helped him over the threshold.

Just inside the big sound stage building I gandered a row of dressing rooms. One door had a star on it, with Valanno's name lettered underneath. I popped the portal open, dumped the beefy bozo on a chair—

Whammo! At first I thought we were having another earthquake. Something soft and fragrant and feminine flurried at me, tripped me to the floor, landed on top of me. Raking fingernails stabbed at my lamps and a voice throaty with hysteria yeped: "You dirty gambler's thug—I'll kill you if you've hurt him!"

I SQUIRMED under the chiffon-sheathed stems that straddled me. They were long and tapered and nifty to match the tall slenderness of the wren they belonged to. I said: "What the hell!"

She kept digging for my optics. She was a red-haired wildcat in a dress of clingy rayon that adhered to her delishful contours like sprayed emerald lacquer. Where the skirt had hiked northward, you could pipe creamy skin above the garter line, whiter than any shemale thighs I'd looked at in a month of Mondays. Over me, the surging buoyancy of her mounded breasts made my fingertips itch to go exploring; I couldn't help drawing a thump out of the intimate contact of her body on mine, in spite of her efforts to let the juice out of my eyeballs.

Thump or no thump, I couldn't lie there and let her rake her mono-

gram on my map. I rolled sideways; bucked like a bronco. She lost her scissors hold; went tumbling across the room. I scrambled to her, nailed her with my poundage. "Hold still, baby!" I panted. "Before I slap the bejaspers out of you!"

"You—you stinking hood!"

Over on the other side of the room, Valanno oozed his pudgy form up off the chair. "He's not a hood, Sandra. He's Dan Turner, private detective. He just saved my life, out in the alley." Then he told her what had happened, omitting only the heart-attack part of it. He ended up by saying to me: "Sandra is my wife, Mr. Turner."

I turned her loose and we both scrambled upright. She was a vast, lovely blush from her wavy titian hair to the deep-cut dip of her emerald frock. She pulled a shoulder strap back into place and faltered: "Can y-you ever forgive me? It was such a weird mistake . . . !"

"Not so weird," I said. I fished out a gasper, set fire to it. "Especially when you knew in advance that somebody had threatened to lump him up."

She jerked as if I'd jabbed her with a red hot awl. "I—why, I don't understand what you—" The words died on her gorgeous red kisser as the door opened and somebody ankled into the room.

I tabbed this newcomer right away. He was Beau Babbitt, tall, good looking straight-man in the comedy team of Babbitt and Valanno. He said: "Hey, the cameras are waiting . . . Migahd, Valanno, what happened to your face?"

"I got in a brawl," the fat guy

I was too late. The sharp prickle of the knife had sliced through my coat and was resting on my spine.



said. "It won't show if I use enough makeup." He dabbed grease paint on his mauled mush, covered it with powder. "Let's go. Sandra, I'll leave you here with Mr. Turner. I think he deserves an explanation." Then the two comedians hauled bunions.

I grinned at the red-haired chick. "You don't have to explain, baby," I said. "I think I'm hep. To begin with, while your hubby was being manhandled, he kept bleating a promise to pay Shanghai. Then, later, when you hopped me, you called me a gambler's thug. It stacks up to make sense."

"What k-kind of sense, Mr. Turner?"

I said: "The biggest gambling joint in Hollywood right now is Shanghai Mamie's place out on the Sunset Strip. Mamie's got a hard-

boiled rep where welchers are concerned. She gets her dough or she takes it out of their hides. The way I figure, your ever-loving spouse dropped a cargo of I.O.U.'s to this Shanghai Mamie at one of her games—and then refused to pay off. So she sent a strongarm squad to teach him a lesson."

SANDRA VALANNO drifted closer to me. Her glims looked scared. "Y-yes, Mr. Turner. You've got it right. Only it was a crooked dice game. That's why we didn't want to pay. And then they began sending threats . . . and we didn't know what to do. Before we could decide, th-this happened." She made a vague gesture in the general direction of the alley.

Which reminded me of the two rats I'd left out there. I said:

"Look. I'll toss that pair of vermin in the gow on an assault rap. That'll show Shanghai Mamie she can't—"

"No! Oh, no, Mr. Turner! You *mustn't!*" One jump put the red-haired mama up against me. She twined her arms around my neck and pasted her gorgeous curves to my brisket. "Please!" Then she fed me a sizzling kiss that blistered me to the insteps.

I gasped like a gaffed flounder. I hadn't expected any such ardent maneuver and it startled the curds out of me. I could feel the yielding surge of soft mounds on my chest; the languorous sway of her ripe hips. It was a hell of a swell sensation—but I didn't savvy the reason for it.

I unfastened myself from her leech-like hold and said: "Wait a minute. What cooks, sweet stuff? How come you don't want Shanghai Mamie's minions in the bastille?"

"Be-because then the newspapers would know about the gambling debt . . . the scandal . . ."

I said: "So what?"

"The t-team of Babbitt and Valanno would be washed up in the movies. At least the Valanno part would." She glued herself to me again; bribed me with her glims and kisser and contours. "It—it would be w-worth a lot to m-me if you'd forget the whole thing—pretend it n-never happened!"

That one maverick shoulder strap took another skid off first base; dropped low enough to show more firm, delicious roundness than was good for my hardened arteries. After all, I'm as human as the next lug—and Sandra Va-

lanno's charms were tempting as hell. I feasted my peepers; couldn't help remembering the thrill I'd got when she had me on the rug a while ago with her legs straddling me. . . .

. . . "Okay, hon," I said. "You win. I won't call copper. But I think we ought to render some patchwork on those guys out in the alley. I left them in bad shape."

She studied me curiously, her lamps shining. "You'd sooner look after them than stay here with me? You aren't going to insist on . . .?"

I said: "Listen, babe. When a wren loves her hubby as much as you do, so much that you'd be willing to pay off that way to keep him out of the grease—well, nuts! You're the sweetest dish I ever kissed but I've still got a shred of ethics. I'll keep my trap zippered about what happened tonight but I won't take a fee for it. Come on. let's glom a hinge at the alley."

She stood on her tiptoes, gave me a succulent kiss of gratitude. Then the door opened and a voice rumbled: "You filthy son of a witch!"

I WHIRLED; saw Beau Babbitt barging at me with his maulies doubled. "Making love to my partner's wife—!" he rasped.

Sandra blocked him. "You fool! I was j-just thanking him for his promise to keep quiet! He isn't going to tell about Shanghai Mamie, is all. Are you crazy, Beau?"

"Crazy where Lumpy Valanno's concerned, yes. He's my friend. I won't have his wife chiseling on him." His glims scorched her.

I said: "For crysakes, nobody's chiseling. Or would you care for

a good stiff swat on the prow?"

When he saw I was leveling, he lost some of his truculence. "Okay. So I was wrong. So I'm sorry." He went to the dresser and picked up his pudgy pal's makeup kit; ankled out.

I looked at the red-haired jenny. "Now that storm's over, how's for a gander at the alley?"

"I'm ready," she said. Her voice didn't even sound ruffled.

We went to the fire exit, opened it, stared outside. The two masked lugs were gone. Either they'd lammed under their own steam or their friends had come back for them. That was jake with me. It took a load off my conscience.

With Sandra hanging onto my arm, I drifted toward the brightly lighted set at the other end of the sound stage building where her porky hubby was working with Beau Babbitt in a retake scene. I wanted to let Valanno know everything was serene; all he had to do was send a check out to Shanghai Mamie's gambling hell and the incident would be washed up. But I never got to tell the little fat guy. He died too soon.

THE SET was dressed to represent an old time wild west bar-room somewhere in Arizona on the Fourth of July. According to the scenario, Lumpy Valanno was a low-comedy tenderfoot from the east while Babbitt played the role of a cowboy addicted to practical jokes. Watching from behind the camera lines, I saw Valanno pretending to doze in a rickety chair near the bar with his brogans resting on the rim of a big brass spittoon. The take was under way and

the porky guy was giving out with slapsticks snores for the benefit of the sound track.

An assortment of extras and bit players clustered in the background, going through the motions of swilling skee. Beau Babbitt was offstage, waiting for his cue. Presently the director signaled him.

In the shadowy gloom beyond the Kliegs, a prop man handed a small red cylinder to a jane with hair the color of mellow honey. She was the unit's script clerk—and I twitched a little when I tabbed her. Lisbeth Lennord and I had been on many a party in the old days; she was a cute chick and a hell of a good sport. But the last time I'd met her, she'd been a private secretary in the executive department of Superb Pix next door. It seemed funny for her to be clerking for an Altamount unit now. Quite a come-down, in fact. I'd always figured she was in solid as a rock with the big shots at Superb.

But maybe Babbitt and Valanno had brought her over to Altamount with them when they made the jump, I thought. Maybe they'd got acquainted with her, liked her and talked her into throwing in with them. Or it was possible that Superb had fired her and she'd grabbed the first handy berth. Anyhow, here she was on the Babbitt-Valanno set, trig and smart in white linen skirt and a sweater that would have thrown the Hays office censors into a panic. Just looking at the sweater and its alluring contents panicked my own blood pressure.

She accepted the prop man's little red cylinder, carried it over to

Bea Babbitt, gave it to him. He strode onto the set with it; and under the banked lights I saw it was a firecracker. Babbitt went through the pantomime of shushing the extras at the bar. Then he sneaked toward his snoring partner.

I tumbled to the gag. It was a primitive wild west version of the

band will go right on snoring—*aeiee-ee-eek!*”

HER scream was a thin thread of sound, almost drowned out by a sharp blast that rattled my eardrums, jarred my tripe. White-hot flames flashed like a miniature sheet before my glims, flame that erupted from the property fire-



hotfoot. Babbitt slipped the firecracker between Valanno's hoof and the cuspidor; wiped a match on his pants and touched fire to the fuse. He backed off to the far end of the stage, jammed his fingers in his ears, screwed his pan into a grimace.

Alongside me, Sandra Valanno whispered: "Watch this. There's a trick spout under that spittoon. When the firecracker goes off, water will spout up toward Babbitt and those others, drench them. It's a backfire gag, because my hus-

cracker. Only it wasn't a fire-cracker at all. It must have been loaded with a charge of dynamite.

The explosion was small, vicious, concentrated. I yelled: "What the hell—!" and felt a solid gush of air slamming me off-balance. All around me juicers, cameramen, sound technicians, and assistant directors were scrambling like eggs in an omelette; caterwauling their adenoids out. Dead ahead, the bar-room set was a chaotic uproar of overturned props and shouting extras. Lumpy Valanno had been

swivel at his feet and came damned near tossing my cookies. He didn't have any feet. They were mangled, shattered hunks of hamburger.

And now, for a single instant following the blast, there was a silence you could slice like cheese. Everybody was too stunned to say anything. I gulped, got control of my churning elly-bay and went hurtling toward the prone little fat guy; picked up his pudgy left wrist. It was limber in my grasp. I couldn't find a trace of pulse. His kisser was a nasty purple color.

"Get tourniquets!" somebody bleeped. "Bandage his ankles before he bleeds to death! Get a doc-



I looked up and found myself facing four varieties of trouble.

blown off his chair and was flat on his back, not moving. I copped a

tor!" Like a wave, people began surging forward.

I straightened up, waved them back. I said: "Tourniquets and doctors won't help. What we need is the homicide squad."

"Homicide—?"

"Yeah. Valanno's deader than fish on Friday. He was bumped."

The defunct guy's red-haired wife—his widow, now—clawed herself through the crush with Beau Babbitt beside her. "No! No!" she wailed. "I don't believe it!"

Babbitt held her. "Steady, Sandra. He's gone. Somebody tried to cripple him by substituting dynamite for my firecracker—and his bad heart couldn't stand the shock." Then the surviving partner stared at a chunky, ape-shouldered prop man on the fringe of the mob.

I looked too; felt my gullet tightening. That prop man was the one who'd first handled the doctored firecracker before it got to Babbitt—but there was something else about him I thought I recognized.

It was his sniffer. Trickle of claret were leaking out of it; the nostrils looked puffy, inflamed. His peepers seemed somehow familiar, too, as if maybe I'd tabbed them above a handkerchief mask not too long ago. All of a sudden I recalled that brawl in the alley; remembered tapping one masked rodent on the trumpet to give myself a breathing spell while reaching for my roscoe.

NOW I said: "Hey, you!" and I pointed a finger at him. "When did you get that smack on the smeller?"

He touched it, looked at his palm, saw the wet redness. He stiffened. "Why—why, I g-guess the concus-

sion did it when that thing exploded. My nose bleeds easily—"

I lunged at him. "Like hell. You were one of the four dastards that put the boots to Valanno in the alley a while back!"

He edged off. "What—?"

"Yeah!" I snarled. "You're one of Shanghai Mamie's triggers, bigahd! The one that piped my badge and lammed!" I flicked out my handcuffs, stabbed them at his mitts.

He ducked, swerved, came up with a rung of the chair that Valanno had been sitting on when the blast went off. It was hard and heavy. He balanced it like a baseball bat, swung it, wrapped it around my noggin.

Neon lights pinwheeled through my think-tank. I felt myself falling; couldn't keep the floor from drifting up at me, slugging me on the puss. I took a trip to dreamland.

I WOKE up with the raw taste of rye in my mouth. I hate rye. It's too damned peppery on your tonsils. "Scotch is my tippie," I gargled. Then I pried my fuzzy lamps open, stared up into the beefy lineaments of my friend Dave Donaldson, homicide lieutenant.

Dave's headquarters minions were all over the stage like a herd of termites. Evidently I'd remained under ether for quite a while after their advent, because Lumpy Valanno's remnants had already been carted off to the morgue and most of the extras and bit players dismissed. Now Donaldson pulled his flash away from my kisser and said: "I'll hand it to

you, Sherlock. You must have a cast iron skull."

I sat up, touched the sore place. There was a knot on my dome the size of an alarm clock. Over its dull throbbing I could hear a series of feminine whimpers, sobbing, muffled. That was Sandra Valanno on the other side of the stage, mournful as a red-haired Niobe, refusing to be comforted by Beau Babbitt's awkward efforts. She didn't even seem to realize he was trying.

Looking at his strained expression, I could guess how he was feeling. It must have been tough for him to know it was his match that had touched off the jazzed-up firecracker. I couldn't quite decide which one to be sorrier for: the jane because she had lost her hubby or Babbitt because he'd been the instrument of his partner's demise. I wound up by just feeling sorry for myself because my noggin hurt so bad.

I wobbled to my pins, fastened the foggy focus on Donaldson. "Did you nab the guy that maced me?"

"No. The dragnet's out for him, though. I got his name; Pete Hinshaw. They tell me you accused him of being a torpedo for Shanghai Mamie so I sent a squad out to her joint."

That scalded me. Anybody with an ounce of grey matter should know Shanghai Mamie's gambling dive was the last place on earth the ape-shouldered prop man would use for a hideout. It was too damned obvious. If he got any shelter from Mamie, it would be in a much safer place. Her private apartment, for instance. That was

in the Gayboy Arms on Wilshire and not many people knew about it.

I was one of the few—and I kept the information to myself. I had a personal score to settle with this Hinshaw louse. I owed him a lump on the crock like the one he'd dealt me; and I was in the right mood to deliver it. Later the cops could have him, but not until I got in my licks first.

So I told Dave Donaldson I felt terrible and wished to drag ankles. He tipped me the nod and I took a powder to my rambling wreck. But instead of heading for home I aimed my radiator toward Wilshire Boulevard and the Gayboy Arms.

It was a short haul. I parked, barged into the lobby, grabbed an automatic elevator and thumbed the pent-house button. Presently I was mauling my knuckles on the door of Shanghai Mamie's lavish private layout.

A YEAR had gone down the hatch since my last visit there, but Mamie still had the same cute little slant-eyed maid—a nifty Asiatic dish with white satin pajamas on her curves and drowsiness in her almond glims. "Why, Mr. Turner!" she said.

"Where's Mamie?"

"I—I'm not sure she—"

"Look," I said. I put my hands on the front of her pajama coat; pushed against softness. "You get Mamie for me or I'll pinch you full of abscesses."

Before she could say anything to that, a voice spoke up from inside. It was a husky voice, like the purr of a tabby-cat. "Let him in, Lotus.

Hello, gumshoe. Slumming?"

I drifted over the threshold, sank my tootsies heel deep in plush carpet. The maid lammed and I was all alone with Shanghai Mamie—which is the same as saying I was alone in a cage full of tigers. I broke open a fresh deck of pills, got one going.

"Hiya, Toots," I said through the smoke.

Mamie wasn't what you might have expected of a White Russian jane from the Orient. That description usually makes you picture a stately, regal-looking mama with a hardboiled puss and a shiv in her garter. But Mamie was just the opposite. She was tiny, like a fragile doll. Her hair was drawn back in a sleek midnight bun at the nape of her gorgeous neck; she didn't wear a speck of makeup on her Madonna map. A quilted Chinese robe draped her from throat to ankles, completely hiding her dainty curves. And yet, in spite of that, you knew the curves were there. You sensed them—along with the aura of danger that cloaked her like an invisible warning. She was dynamite.

She smiled at me—and I got goose pimples on my spine as big as jellybeans. Mamie was deadpan except when something annoyed her. That was the only time she ever smiled. She was smiling now. I had a sudden attack of jabberwockies.

She said: "It's been a long time, Hawkshaw. Have a drink?" She glided to a cellarette, produced a fifth of Vat 69. She had a damned good memory. She knew my preference.

"Thanks, no," I told her. "I'm

here on business. I want Pete Hinshaw."

"Hinshaw. Do I know him?"

I said: "Yeah. He's a prop man for Altamount. He's also one of your bully boys. Let's not horse, hon. You're hep to the score. This is murder you're fooling around with now."

She stretched out on a deep-cushioned divan and the quilted robe slid open just enough to show a hint of ivory gams, a peep at perfect little flesh-treasures nestling in a gossamer bandeau. "I don't know what you're talking about," she purred. "Come here. Sit by me. Tell me you're sorry you've neglected me so long."

I perched my heft on the divan's edge; got set to wrap my dukes around her lovely gullet if she tried anything funny. "You aren't kidding me, sweet stuff."

"Stop talking riddles. Be nice to me. Or have you forgotten how?"

"I never forget. I'm just not in the mood, is all. Hinshaw bent a chair rung around my conk a while ago. It drained me."

"Poor Dan." She touched my noggin. Then her arms tangled me and she draw me downward, pulled my mush toward hers. Her kisser was parted, red, moist. The quilted robe gave up the struggle and fluttered all the way open.

I gasped: "*Jeest—hey, damn you to hell!*" But I was too late. She had me. I was locked tight in a jiu-jitsu hold; felt the sharp prickle of a knife-point cutting through the back of my coat to rest against my spine. That was going to cost me a tailor's bill to get the hole sewed up.

Mamie's glims mocked me. She



*"Hold still, baby," I panted,
"before I slap you silly."*

raised her furry voice. "Pete. Come here. Bring your boys."

FOOTFALLS sounded behind me. Somebody yanked me off the divan, slammed me against the wall. I blinked and found myself facing four varieties of trouble.

Pete Hinshaw, the ape-shouldered prop man, was one. So I'd been right in thinking I'd find him here. It was small satisfaction, though. The three guys flanking him were the ones from the alley

back of Altamount Studios; the rats who'd pasted hell out of Lum-py Valanno. I tabbed two of them from the condition of their pans, the marks of my own dukes. Now, evidently, it was going to be their turn.

Hinshaw rubbed his inflamed smeller. "Hello, snoop."

"Hello, killer."

He scowled. "Don't call me that, wise guy. You did it once on the sound stage. You know what it bought you."

Shanghai Mamie glided forward. "You're an awful dope, Dan. First you butted into something that was none of your business—a little matter of teaching Valanno he shouldn't welch on his bets. And then later, when he happened to get chilled, you tried to pin it on an innocent man."

"So Hinshaw's innocent," I said. "Who told you?"

"He did. I believe him. Apparently you disagree. That's too bad, Dan. It's going to cost you a lot of trouble." She turned to Hinshaw and his buddies. "All right, boys. Let him have it. Keep remembering all he's done to you—and don't pull your punches." Her dark peepers were glowing and she raised her hands to her tiny breasts; pressed them flat as if to quiet the pulsations that made them surge against the brassiere.

I said: "You brazen little sadist!" and made a lunge at her. She side-stepped; and then a fist bounced off my whiskers, damned near caved in my bowsprit. That made another debt I owed to Pete Hinshaw.

But this was no time to think about paying it. I knew I was in for a larruping if I stayed on my feet. So I walled back my optics, let my gams sag. I hit the rug. I didn't move.

I heard Mamie saying: "You idiot. I wanted him mussed up, not cold-corked. No use kicking him. He wouldn't feel it. Get out."

"Out—?" That was Hinshaw sounding startled.

"Yes, out. For all we know, the cops may be following this bright boy. You mustn't be found here, any of you."

Hinshaw said: "So what if they do find us? I keep telling you I don't know anything about that dynamite firecracker. If there was a switch in my props, it happened while my back was turned. . . . Cripes! Wait a minute! I just thought of something!"

"You haven't got what it takes to think," Shanghai Mamie's voice sounded vicious with disappointment. My quick fold-up had frustrated her out of a cargo of thrills. "What is it you think you're thinking?"

"That honey-haired wren," Hinshaw said. "That script clerk. The one with the sweater full of oomph. Lisbeth Lennord, her name is."

"Well?"

"*She* could have switched that firecracker. I gave it to her first, then she passed it to Babbitt. Maybe she handed him a different one."

"Why?"

"Well, look. She used to be in thick with the biggies over at Superb. You know, where Babbitt and Valanno were before Altamount chiseled them away."

"And—?"

"Suppose those guys over at Superb were sore at losing their comedy gold mine. Suppose they planted this Lennord bim with Altamount for a revenge stunt? Like maybe crippling Valanno—so the team would be busted up. Only they didn't know the fat slob had a bum ticker, any more than we knew it when we belted him around."

"I think you're nuts," Mamie said. I wanted to shout agreement but I didn't dare. If I let them know I was conscious, they'd kick the bejoseph out of me. All the

same, I knew this Pete Hinshaw was just trying to rig a fall guy so he'd be out from under the murder rap himself. Only when he picked Lisbeth Lennord he was watering the wrong stump. I knew her too damned well to consider her as a suspect.

Hinshaw growled: "Okay, so I'm nuts. But suppose I drop in to see this Lennord jessie? Suppose I happen to find some left-over dynamite in her stash?"

"By planting it there?" Shanghai Mamie said.

"Hell. Maybe I wouldn't have to. Maybe I could twist a confession outa her."

MAMIE'S voice perked up. "That would be nice. You could bring her here so I'd be able to watch. I think I'd like that." Her tone dropped to a purr again. "But first there's another job."

"Yeah? What?"

"Go see Beau Babbitt and Mrs. Valanno. Tell them we want our money."

"But it was Valanno that owed us—"

"He is dead. They are alive. As far as I'm concerned, they're responsible for the debt. If necessary, we'll use . . . persuasion."

"Listen, Mamie. You know I'm red hot right now on account of Valanno getting chilled. I can't—"

"On your way. All of you. Get that money. Then see about this Lennord girl. Handle her properly and you won't be red hot with the cops. Move, now!"

I heard them pad-padding across the rug's deep piling; then a door opened, closed again. I took a chance, opened my windows, gave

forth with a hollow groan. I also bit a chunk out of the inside of my cheek so a worm of crimson would streak down over my chin. Shanghai Mamie was goofy over gore.

She came to me; dropped to her knees. I could smell the perfume of her hair, the warmth of her body. She was breathing fast. "Dan, honey . . ."

I said: "Aw, nuts!" made a loose fist and clipped her on the button. A dribble of froth came out of her mouth, like steam. She relaxed.

I jumped up, shivered and got the hell out of there.

MY HEAP can wind up eighty in an emergency. I souped it to ninety, going out Wilshire. Pete Hinshaw and his three henchmen had a ten-minute start on me already. If they got to Sandra Valanno and did anything dirty to her, I promised myself I'd take them apart inch by inch, strew them all over the precinct. I liked that red-haired wren; liked the memory of the pash-bribe she'd tried to give me in her hubby's dressing room to save him from scandal. Now that Valanno was deceased, she needed somebody to look after her. And I was the guy for the job.

There was another cutie involved: Lisbeth Lennord, the honey-haired script clerk with the sweater full of lure. I liked her, too. But she was second on Hinshaw's list of calls to be made tonight. She could wait. After all, I'm not twins.

The Valanno tepee was a fairly modest Spanish-modern layout just this side of Beverly. I made it without turning up any motorcycle

bulls, which was a miracle at the speed I was going. Every time I rounded a corner my tires sang soprano.

Pretty soon I tossed out my anchors, skidded to a shuddering stop. I slapped my brogans up a flight of terraced steps, gained the tiled front patio, leaned on the bell push.

Lights came on in the entrance hall. The door opened. Lumpy Valanno's widow stared at me. "Mr. Turner—!"

I said: "Thank God you're okay, kiddo."

Then I spotted Beau Babbitt standing behind the curvesome red-haired cupcake.

He scowled at me. "What made you think she might not be okay?" he wanted to know.

"Because a detachment of Shanghai Mamie's thugs are on their way here with malice aforethought," I said. "Mamie wants her dough. The geetus Valanno should have paid her."

Babbitt rubbed his cheek. It was fiery red; you could see the clear outlines of fingerprints against his shave. "Shanghai Mamie's men have already been here. They're gone."

I said: "What?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Turner," Sandra said dully. "They m-made threats. So we p-promised to send them the money."

"I promised," Babbitt corrected her gently. "I have enough annuities laid aside to take care of us the rest of our lives, even though I never make another picture." He started to slide an arm around the red-haired babe's slender waist, then seemed to reconsider it. I

guess he just remembered her hubby was fresh dead.

I peered at the fingermarks on his puss. "You get slugged a little, friend?"

"One of them hit me in the face, yes."

I said: "They play rough," and turned to Sandra; smiled into her tense expression. "Where's a phone? I've got to call the gendarmes."

She pointed. I picked the handset out of its cradle, dialed headquarters. I asked for homicide, got Dave Donaldson. I said: "Turner talking. Listen fast. I was right about that prop man being on Shanghai Mamie's payroll."

"Pete Hinshaw, you mean?"

"Yeah, Hinshaw. He and three sluggers are on their way right now to pull a snatch. A jenny named Lisbeth Lennord is their meat. She—"

"I know her. Script clerk on that Babbitt-Valanno unit. I interviewed her on the set, turned her loose."

I said: "For the love of What's-His-Name, will you quit interrupting me? Here's the lowdown. Lisbeth Lennord used to work for Superb Pix. Superb is the studio that lost Babbitt and Valanno to Altomount. Lisbeth is one of the people who handled that doctored firecracker tonight. So now this Pete Hinshaw is going to put the snatch on her, try to bop a confession out of her—make her admit Superb bribed her to plant the explosive."

"So that's it!" Dave roared. "I never thought of that angle! You think Hinshaw's right, Philo?"

I said: "How the hell should I



I clipped her on the buttock and a dribble of froth, like steam, came out of her mouth.

know? The point is, you can round up the whole damned works if you move fast. Otherwise the Lennord gal is liable to get her profile bashed. Know where she lives? Good. Meet me there—and get the lead out of your frame.” I rang off, made for Sandra Valanno’s front door.

Beau Babbitt blocked me. He looked grimmer than a carload of caskets. “I couldn’t help hearing what you said, Turner. And I’m going with you. If that Lennord witch killed my partner, I’m going to be on deck when she’s nailed to the cross.”

“Me too,” Sandra said quietly.

I told them that was okay with me. We bounced out to my bucket, piled in. I kicked my cylinders to life, stoked them up past the safety

zone. We went away from there in a shower of dust.

LISBETH LENNORD lived alone in a self-effacing bungalow near Yucca and Argyle. I blistered the asphalt, cut a screeching hole in the night. By the time we got to our destination my jalopy was bleeding steam from every pore.

When I parked I noticed another heap already at the curb, a black sedan that somehow reminded me of an undertaker’s hearse although it didn’t actually look like one except in my imagination. I guess it was my knowledge of the honey-haired script clerk’s jeopardy that gave me the impression. Anyhow I knew Pete Hinshaw and his pals were on the job, and got to the

Lennord frill's stash ahead of me. It wasn't just a hunch, either. I could hear a faint she-male yEEP from inside. It spelled trouble.

I slung myself to the pavement, raced for the porch. Beau Babbitt was on my heels but I said: "Get back. Take care of Sandra. There may be shooting—and these lads don't carry cap pistols." Then I hit Lisbeth Lennord's front portal with my hurtling beef.

It splintered inward. I yanked out my heater, thumbed off the safety catch. Then I went blamming into the living room. I rasped: "Lay off before I start spraying poison out of this Flit gun."

THE tableau in front of me was something to remember. Hinshaw, the ape-shouldered property man, had the Lennord quail up against a wall. He was backed by his three burly bullies—not that he needed them for what he was doing to the chick with the ripe honey hair. Hinshaw was the kind that could cop the duke over a woman any day in the week.

He had ripped Lisbeth's sweater open from neck to Nebraska, likewise snagging her brassiere in the process. Now that fragile embellishment hung in peek-a-boo tatters over skin that was like peaches and cream. There were bruises marring her snowy shoulders; her glims were deep azure pools of fear. Her unpent coiffure streamed like a golden waterfall around her white throat and down on her throbbing charms—and the vision of velvety epidermis peeping through a mist of yellow tresses thrilled me to the shoestrings.

But the bruises made me see eleven shades of red. I tapped a tattoo on Hinshaw's spine with my lift mitt, kept his three chums covered with the rod in my right. "Turn, bud," I said.

He let go of the wren, spun to face me. I corked him square on the sore nostrils with a left hook. Twin streams of gravy made a mess of his necktie. "Damn you to hell—!" he whined.

I said: "That's just interest on the debt I owe you, cousin. The worst is yet to come."

"You can't—"

I popped him again, just to show him how wrong he was. When his pals stirred I waved my gat at them. "Freeze, all of you. Unless you hanker to have yourselves air conditioned."

Hinshaw's cheeks twitched. "Listen, snooper. Let's talk this over."

"Talk won't help," I said. I flicked a glance at Lisbeth Lennord. "Go sit down, babe. Tell me how far these illegitimates went with you before I arrived."

She sank into a chair, tried to pull the sweater shut over her delicious breasts where they swelled ripely out of the torn place. "They j-just hit me, is all. And Hinshaw ripped m-my clothes. . . ."

"Nothing else?"

She blushed. "N-no. Except he—he accused me of switching that property firecracker for one with a charge of high explosive in it."

"Guilty or innocent, hon?"

"Innocent, of course! I wouldn't —"

FROM behind me a flat voice said: "Somebody did it. Somebody gave Beau Babbitt the one that

killed my husband." That was Sandra Valanno coming into the room. She had Babbitt with her. I suppose they'd got tired of waiting out in my coupe.

Pete Hinshaw copped a hinge at the hatred that glittered in the red-haired widow's peepers. "It wasn't me, lady!" he whined. "Honest to God it wasn't. Yeah, I admit me and the boys gave your old man a pasting. But that was something else. We didn't have a damned thing to do with that firecracker switch."

"You say," Beau Babbitt growled.

"I say. And I'm leveling. Why the hell do you think we came here to see this Lennord bim?"

"To frame her," I lifted a lip.

"Ix-nay, shamus. To make her yodel the truth. *She* handled the firecracker after I did. *She* gave it to Babbitt. Why, the filthy little slut's guilty as hell!"

I whopped him across the mouth. "Watch your language, punk. And if you've got any accusations to make, wait until the bulls get here. Make it official."

"Here—the bulls? God!" he cringed.

Beau Babbitt rasped: "Look, Turner. We're wasting a lot of time. Why don't you search the house, see if you find anything that might incriminate Miss Lennord?"

"You make the frisk." I said. "I'm busy keeping these guys covered."

Babbitt began like an amateur. Lisbeth Lennord crouched dully in a chair; watched him with apathetic lamps. Presently she choked: "Wh-what do you expect to find?"

He picked up her pocketbook

from a corner table, got it open, looked inside. Then his map contorted. He breathed: "By heaven, *this* is what I expected to find!" And he held up a small crimson cylinder. A firecracker.

For a split second everybody got so quiet you could hear a change in the climate. Then hell boiled over. Pete Hinshaw bellowed: "That's it! That's the original prop! Now I see what happened! I gave it to this Lennord broad and she switched it, put it in her purse, handed Babbitt a phoney charged with dynamite! Come on, boys—let's blow!"

And he splashed himself at the door with his three pals trailing him like tails to a comet.

I'd been so interested in the firecracker that the move almost caught me with my rompers at half mast. But not quite. I've got quick reflexes. I barreled across the room, body-blocked the prop man, fetched him a jolt on the haircut with the muzzle end of my cannon. That bashed him into his buddies and they all went down like a tangle of pretzels. One of them managed to pull his roscovitch. He aimed it at me.

From the doorway, Dave Donaldson's voice rumbled like thunder with sandpaper on it. "Target practice. Just what I've been needing." A service .38 yammered: "Ka-chow!" and the guy on the floor dropped his heater, fixed the stupid focus on his shattered wrist.

Then Dave and a handful of homicide heroes lumbered into the room.

I said: "Thanks, girls. You're just in time."

(Continued on page 88)

SALLY THE SLEUTH

by *[signature]*
BARREAU



SALLY AND THE CHIEF RUSH TO THE WEST FLORIDA COAST ON AN URGENT MISSION



FLOATING ISLAND IN BAY OVER THERE. LOOK LIKE FAKE.



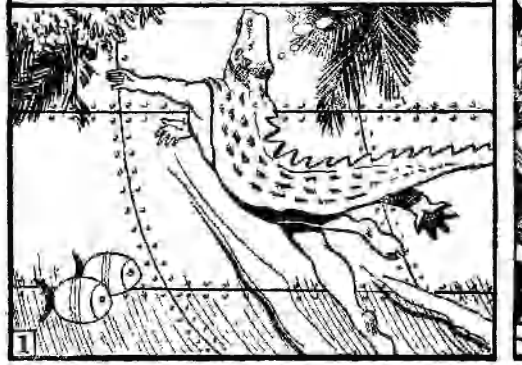
WE MUST GET CLOSE ENOUGH TO INVESTIGATE THIS "FLOATING ISLAND," SO WE'LL USE AN OLD TRICK OF THE SEMINOLES. HERE'S THE PLAN —



— WE'LL SWIM OUT UNDER THESE SKINS. A HERD OF ALLIGATORS WILL NOT AROUSE SUSPICION.



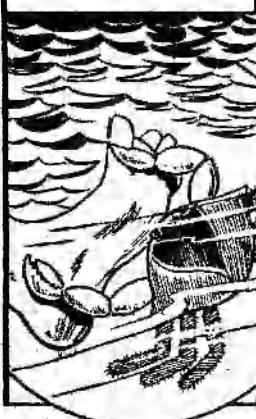
SOON THEY DISCOVER THE HULL OF A SUBMARINE UNDER THE FOLIAGE.



ACH! ALLIGATORS! THIS IS NO PLACE TO GO SCHWIMMING...



ALL GOES WELL EXCEPT FOR A PREDATORY CRAB.



THAT POOR GIRL - THE ALLIGATORS VILL EAT HER UP!



THERE - I SAFED YOU JUST IN TIME.



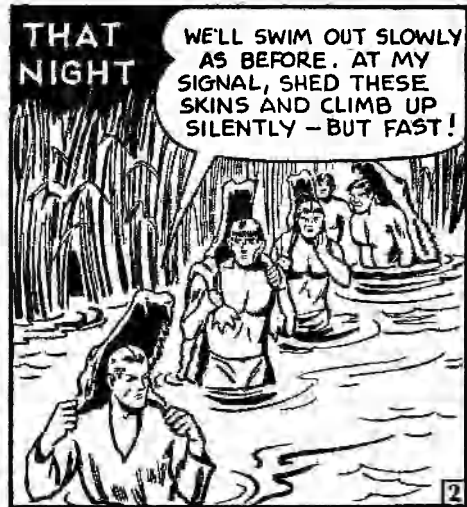
SHE WAS SCHWIMMING. THE ALLIGATORS NEARLY GOT HER.

YOU STUPID FOOL! NOW WE WILL HAVE TO KEEP HER HERE UNTIL WE LEAVE THIS HIDEOUT!



SALLY IS ON THE SUB BUT SHE WILL BE CLOSELY WATCHED. WE WILL HAVE TO CAPTURE THE SHIP BY SURPRISE.

WE HELP. WE NO LIKE FOREIGN BOAT TAKE PRETTY LADY AWAY.



THAT NIGHT

WE'LL SWIM OUT SLOWLY AS BEFORE. AT MY SIGNAL, SHED THESE SKINS AND CLIMB UP SILENTLY - BUT FAST!



AT THE PREARRANGED SIGNAL, THE BAND
SILENTLY SWARM UPON THE SUBMARINE.



SALLY SOLVES ANOTHER NATIONAL DEFENSE CASE NEXT MONTH

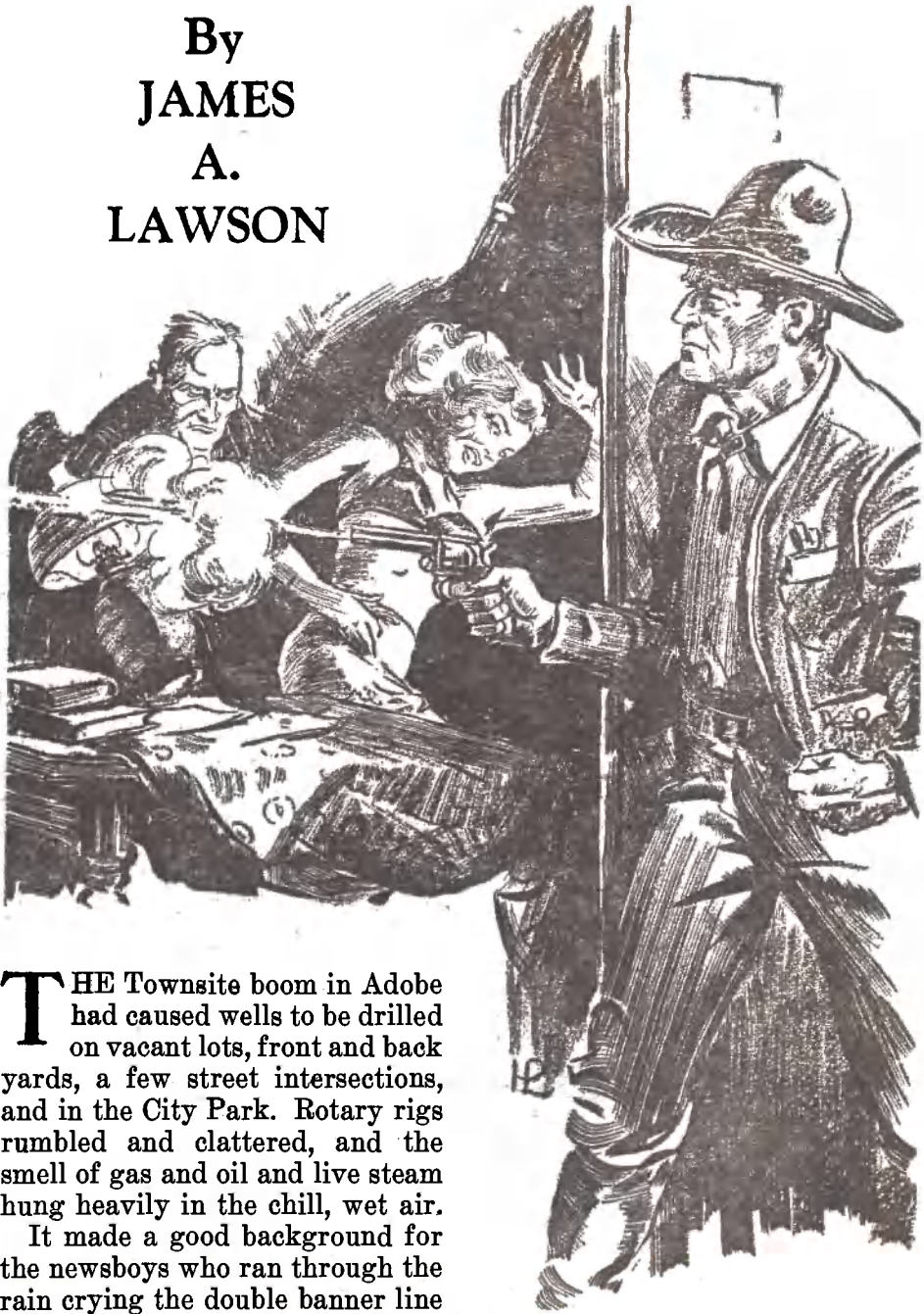
Adobe's political situation stank to high heaven when Hard Guy came into the picture. And then, to throw a monkey-wrench into the machinery, appeared Specs Norton with the only girl who ever saw anything worthwhile in his begoggled face!



*My first shot took him
right between the eyes.*

HOMICIDE IS HARD TO HIDE

By
JAMES
A.
LAWSON



THE Townsite boom in Adobe had caused wells to be drilled on vacant lots, front and back yards, a few street intersections, and in the City Park. Rotary rigs rumbled and clattered, and the smell of gas and oil and live steam hung heavily in the chill, wet air.

It made a good background for the newsboys who ran through the rain crying the double banner line of the *Adobe Advocate*:

**MAYOR ORDERS OUTSIDE
AUDIT OF CITY TREASURER'S
BOOKS!**

I went into Driller's Drugstore, told the girl at the fountain to fix me a coke, deluxe, and sat down in

a booth. She mixed a coke, added a big, illegal slug of whiskey, and brought it over.

"What's wrong, Hard Guy? The bad news get you where it hurt?" She nodded at the copy of the *Advocate* I'd tossed on the table.

"Look," I grunted. "As sure as my name's Dallas Duane, I don't give a damn what the mayor, Puffy Pete Houcke, does; I don't care what happens here. They yell and squawk this will be a city without taxes because of royalties from oil on city property. All right, where the hell've I come in? I'm an oil-field private dick, trouble-shooter and what the devil, and I haven't made a dime since I hit this sage-brush dump!"

SHE turned just as the front door opened, somebody ran in, then slid on the wet floor tiles and skidded into her. You guessed it: Specs Norton, that swack, wandering oil-field news correspondent!

Specs grabbed his horn-rimmed goggles with one hand, his hat with the other as the girl went down and skied on the dirty floor. She jumped up, twisted her chin over her shoulder and yanked up her skirt so she could see how much mud she'd mopped. She had nice legs and things and I didn't need Specs to tell me, "Look."

"You owl-faced freak, why the hell don't you watch yourself?" the girl screeched. Specs made a gurgling noise, and I looked back to find my glass empty and Specs wiping his lips.

"Got to run," he panted. I grabbed his coattail, and ordered another de luxe coke, warning him, "You'll pay for this one. You ain't in that big a hurry."

"Hell I ain't! You've seen the local paper? Well, I just got the inkle that Harry Spence, treasurer Mowron's auditor, bookkeeper and all of that, died of heart failure in his office. The county

bigwigs from Delcran City are on the way over. I want to get there."

I don't know what prompted me to say. "Pay for this—" I had my drink—"and I'll sashay along with you."

SINCE the boom, the old city hall wasn't half big enough. A barnlike building had been jerryed up behind the old brick, and the treasurer, among others, had his office here. There was a gal reporter from the *Advocate*; one of the few persons I ever saw who thought Specs was something. Adobe's few town clowns and a stupid deputy sheriff, Ed Pliney, milled around; Mowron was there when we went in.

He was a worried, bald little bird as he sat at his desk in a cubicle one removed from his hired hand Harry Spence. Mowron nodded at Specs and muttered, "Go on in." He peered at me, and Specs took time to tell him who I was.

"So? I've heard of you. Hmmn. Go have a look, then come back and talk to me."

I went into the room between his and Spence's. Jap Kane, who passed for police chief, was talking to a redheaded gal who looked good, even with her odd, golden eyes swollen from crying. Jap put his slanting eyes on me and growled, "Get the hell back out!"

"Mowron gave me leave," I jeered.

"Yeah? Well, he might need leave hisself, damn' quick!"

The old medical-examiner-corer, Deel, was talking to Specs and the gal scribe in one corner of the little cubby; a copper from Oklahoma, called Two-Gun Graw

because he packed a pair of pistols, stood by a window and yawned as he scratched his ribs. Then there was Harry Spence. The body was that of a man in mid-thirties, with a weak, worried face, with the mouth halfway open, and the eyes glazed and set. He sat in a swivel chair, fallen forward on his flat-topped desk. His arms and his left cheek rested on the *Advocate* headlines!

I didn't have time to ask questions. The door opened and in popped the county attorney, Burson, and the sheriff, Watts, from Delcran. Jap Kane heeled them in. I backed into a corner. Burson and Watts took a quick look at the body, and there was a hint of satisfaction in the glances they exchanged. . .

Since the boom, Adobe had started trying to get the county seat moved there from Delcran, or threatened to push through legislature making this end of the county another county altogether. So to Burton and Watts, if Adobe was in hot water, what the hell? and all the better.

"Shows all the signs of heart failure," Doc Deel told Burson. "I guess the liquor he's been drinking and his conscience got him when he found out the mayor'd ordered an outside auditor to check his books."

"I found a bottle half full of whiskey in his desk drawer," Jap Kane growled. "Deel says it's good whiskey. I tasted it. It is." He produced a pint bottle of the type that has a jigger screwed on the top. I noticed the jigger cap was missing. "Hey," I said, "where is the—?"

"Who in the hell are you, and who yanked your chain?" Watts, the sheriff, grunted. "Hard Guy, huh? Seems—yeah. A big rootin', shootin' trouble-shooter, ain'tcha. Get outta here!"

I scowled at Specs' jeering grin as I turned to the door, opened it and went into the other room. They were popping off behind me, and the gabble covered what sound I made, I guess. Anyhow, I froze in my brogans, looking toward the little closet built in a corner of the room. The door was halfway ajar, and the redheaded girl with the golden eyes stood in there, her skirt hiked clear up around her waist.

I BLINKED at her trim ankles and the purebred calves and had myself a look at white flesh above dark hosiery. She had on scanties that were little more than strap and girdle combined, and I thought if railroads streamlined their cabooses likewise, I'd ride freights forever!

She pulled the girdle away from a tummy that didn't need holding in, stuck something under it and let the curtain fall. As she turned, so did I, acting like I'd just backed from the other room and was closing the door. I looked startled when I turned back and faced her, and she seemed relieved, and tried to smile.

"What was that cheese of poul-tice storming you for, miss—?"

"Nora Brian," she supplied. "Oh, he was asking questions. I act as stenographer for Mowron and assisted and filed for Spence."

"If he starts riding you, call on Hard Guy—that's me," I told

her. "Were you crying about Spence, personally?" I'd noticed she hadn't called him Mr. Spence.

"Of course not!" she snapped. "Kane was getting my goat."

I told her to keep it tied up and went in to see Mowron. The treasurer motioned me to a chair. "Hard Guy, I have a hunch I'm going to need help," he mumbled. "More than a lawyer can give me. If anything shows up wrong, get to the bottom of it and I'll pay you well. You understand?"

"You think — or know — the books will show somebody's snatched the scratch, or a hunk of it, from the city's royalties, huh?"

"I'm not sure. I'm honest, always have been, and I've been set so Mayor Houcke hasn't dared work to kick me out. He and I've never gotten along. I don't like his type. I'm not trying to get covered beforehand because I'm guilty—but because I'm afraid."

"You've hired somebody," I told him. "It will look bad for you, seeing that you put Spence on, if the books are short?" I looked at him, hard, for a sign of guilt, and it didn't give. It was boots, boots, tramping up and down, then, and the back-room boys came in with Nora Brian along.

"Get your hat, Mowron," Burson ordered. "We're going to the mayor's office."

"I'm going along—" I sneered at Specs—"because I'm hired by Mowron to investigate."

"Feel striped sunlight already shining through bars?" Kane hooted as Mowron got up and reached for his hat. Mowron didn't answer.

I dropped back and shouldered Two-Gun Graw aside and fell in

beside Nora Brian, and it gave me a ticklish feeling when I helped her across curbs and puddles as we walked to the mayor's uptown office, Two-Gun making the threatening remarks behind us. We walked a flight and into the luxuriously appointed offices of Mayor Puffy Pete Houcke. Nora's body was warm and tense, I noticed, but not nervous or trembling.

PUFFY PETE HOUCKE surveyed us from far back of an acre of expensive executive's desk as we picked spots to sit or stand. He was a bloated bag of soft flesh that made him seem slower and shorter than he really was; his sly, indirect gaze came over bags that a Redcap should've carried. He scowled at Burson and Watts, and they grinned thinly back at him.

"Let's get down to cases." Puffy Pete's voice was wheezy and whispery. "I had Jap Kane and his officers investigate quietly. That dumb deputy of yours, Pliney, sure couldn't have."

"You fought us, yelled to hell with Delcran, told us to keep our county claws off Adobe? Remember?" Burson jeered.

"Which we might, until you have to yell for help," Watts said stubbornly, and Burson scowled like he didn't like that attitude. It seemed, though, it didn't displease Puffy Pete a bit.

"Anyhow," he whispered, "I find that Spence had a home too fine for a man on his salary. Mowron has a big home, servants, bank account, and *claims* he made most of it dealing in leases and royalties aside from his job. So I ordered an outside auditor in. He's having

a quick peek at the books in the other office now. About Spence?"

Kane thumbed at Nora and she moved forward. "I know Spence was keeping a bottle in his desk, but he rarely drank until just before going to lunch, and then in the afternoon. He seemed worried lately. Today, Mrs. Spence came in to go to lunch with him. She went in, and in a minute, I heard her scream something terrible. I ran in. Spence was lying over his desk, gasping. Mrs. Spence was

down on her hands and knees. I—uh—I suppose she'd almost fainted and fallen. The medical examiner, Mr. Deel, called another doctor and they took her home."

"I questioned her," Two-Gun grunted. "Much as I could. She says her husband told her he was makin' money like Mowron: dabblin' in oil on the side. I believe her, too."

"Why, so would I," Puffy Pete agreed. "Reava Spence worked in



*It was like wrestling
with a python.*

a law office I worked in, before I had sense enough to get out of Delcran and come here. . . Know anything else, Miss Brian? See anything funny around the office? Ever have anything to do with Spence?"

"I saw nothing funny, aside from Spence's drinking and being worried. Of course I had nothing to do with Spence outside the office!"

"Just the same, you be sure and stay in Adobe," Kane warned. "Catch you tryin' to leave, you make the can."

"For what?" I snorted. "There's nothing wrong, so far."

"I'm sorry, but there is." The mayor's auditor came in and laid a cash account on the desk. "It took me only two hours to find shortages amounting to forty thousand dollars. It won't surprise me if it runs into a hundred thousand when I really work the books."

Puffy Pete grinned wryly. "I had this warrant ready," he said, and tossed it to Kane. "Chief, I guess Mowron belongs in jail!"

THERE was a lot of confusion, and I hissed at Mowron, "Stay in jail. Don't try for bond. Bigod, this smells, and I'll wind it."

Burson must have heard me. He turned, moved up. "All right, smart," he whispered. "You wind this so it runs toward my office, and there'll be a poke of pelf for you."

I nodded, looking over at Specs, who had his head against the gal reporter's. They came over and faced Nora Brian.

"You say you never had anything to do with Spence, outside the office, huh?"

"That's right," Nora told Specs. The news gal nodded at Specs and walked out of Sunday school. I should have been warned!

Well, I thought, after Mowron had been taken away and things were over in Puffy Pete's office, the *Adobe Advocate* can run an evening extra. I walked downstairs with Nora Brian and offered to see her home. She was sharp and pointed when she informed me I had better not bother myself.

She walked to the next corner and turned. I ran back, ran up an alley and fell in, tailing her a half block back. She went into a new, three-storied apartment building, and I found her name on the mailbox and took off up the stairs to the third floor. She had the west front corner. I knocked and answered her muffled query with a gruff imitation, "Open up, 's Graw."

When the bolt clicked, I shoved the door hard. She choked back a cry as she stumbled backward and flapped onto a divan. I shut the door and came on in. The place was expensively furnished and had at least three rooms, I reckoned. It was too damned swell for the innocent working girl!

"Nora," I told her as I walked over and looked down at her angry, upturned face, "do you dabble in leases and royalties, too? Are you and Mowron taking a poor sap for a sapping?"

"Hard Guy, don't be a fool! Get out of here."

"When you give me what you haven't had time to take out from under your girdle," I told her.

"You sneaking snoop!" she cried, and tried to leap up. I

pushed Miss Nora back. "Give or I'll get," I warned.

It was like wrestling a python in a whirlwind. She reared back and got her feet under my chin, her skirt falling back. I grabbed one ankle and dodged the other foot, and pushed that leg back until her knee was almost against her ear. The little sweater she wore worked up under her arms and bandeaued breasts bounced beautifully out from under. It wasn't all exertion that made me gasp and pant.

"Don't," she sobbed. "Don't." She fumbled under the girdle. "Here, take it—damn you, oh, damn you!"

I HELD her there while I looked at the jigger cap that had been missing from the whiskey bottle. It had been stepped on and was mashed almost flat. I stuck it in my pocket and looked down at Nora. Her red hair, her golden eyes and moist mouth bent me, and the splendid little figure the bandeau and the girdle graced so grudgingly broke me. I let go her ankle, put my hands on each side of her, leaned over her and kissed her. She surged up against me, then dropped back. Her eyes were tightly closed and all at once, her body stiffened. Her arms went around my neck and she kissed me back, her breath humming in her throat. As suddenly as that began, she started to sob and push me away.

"You heel!" She stood up and tugged at her clothes. "You sandridge heel, you. I'm human, and you take advantage of me!"

"How about me?" I croaked, trying to stop shaking and light a

cigarette. I pulled the cap out of my pocket and looked at it.

"Well?" I stared straight at her.

"Hard Guy, are you straight?" Her golden eyes bored me.

"With only the right turns."

"All right. I'll have to trust you—with some secrets."

"How about trusting me with you?"

"I wouldn't dare. Keep still, now, and listen."

"That cap came off the bottle Spence had when he came to work this morning. I saw him put it in his desk drawer. He always drank that brand whiskey and always from the cap—never the bottle. Well, when Mrs. Spence screamed—and she screamed too much, take it from another woman!—I ran in. She was down on the floor, as I testified; but she hadn't fainted. She was hunting something. This cap? The bottle was in the open desk drawer, like Spence had put it there after pouring his drink. I saw the cap under a chair in front of his desk, stepped on it, kicked it back, then grabbed it later. I had it in my handkerchief while Kane was barking at me. That's one reason I was nervous."

"Made you suspicious, all this, huh?" I muttered. "And why's it any your business, exactly?"

"Because the Municipal Offices Bonding Corporation has had experiences with oil booms and thieving city employees before. So they worked it to get me the job with Mowron so I could keep an eye on things."

"A lady richard!" I blurted.

"You don't like them?"

"I didn't—until now. I'm glad you resisted—"

"Never mind, Hard Guy!"

"Anyhow, what have you found out?" I asked.

"And have you chiseling in on me, hogging credit that will help me with my company—"

"The hell. You can have your credit, I'll take the cash. Maybe we couldn't work together on this!"

"No shooting? I've heard tell you settle too many things at it."

"No shooting unless I'm shot at first. Shoot."

"All I've been able to learn, so far, is that Spence took trips to Delcran pretty regularly. He kept his books locked up in his safe when not working on them. Mowron left most of the work to Spence—who got his job through a political job puller who is on the fence being friendly to both Mowron and Puffy Pete Houcke. I know Reava Spence is a peroxided, hard heel who didn't seem to give a damn about Spence, or anybody but herself."

"And she used to work in an office with Houcke," I said.

"Wise guy, Hard Guy." She grinned.

"You don't know if Mowron might be mixed up?"

"I doubt it. I've seen his wife and kids; you've seen Mowron."

"Did your company bond him, too?"

"Uh-huh. And we want that money—whatever amount it is—back. A hundred grand, perhaps, that auditor said. That's a bundle of kale!"

I WALKED over, tilted her head back and kissed her. Her golden

eyes glinted. "You've no right."

"Suppose I earn it?"

"When you do!" she hoorawed.

"Say, where you going?"

"I'm going to see a man about a cap. I'll let you know."

I took that mashed jigger cap out to the chemistry laboratory at the New World Refinery and got the head chemist off alone. I'd saved his neck back in the old Rag City boom, and he owed me for it.

"And no peeping, no matter what," I warned him.

"No peeping," he answered, sniffing the cap after he'd pried it open. He frowned as he fished around on a shelf full of bottles, then poured something from one bottle into the cap. He did a lot of other things and when he finally turned to me, he had a tight look around his eyes and mouth.

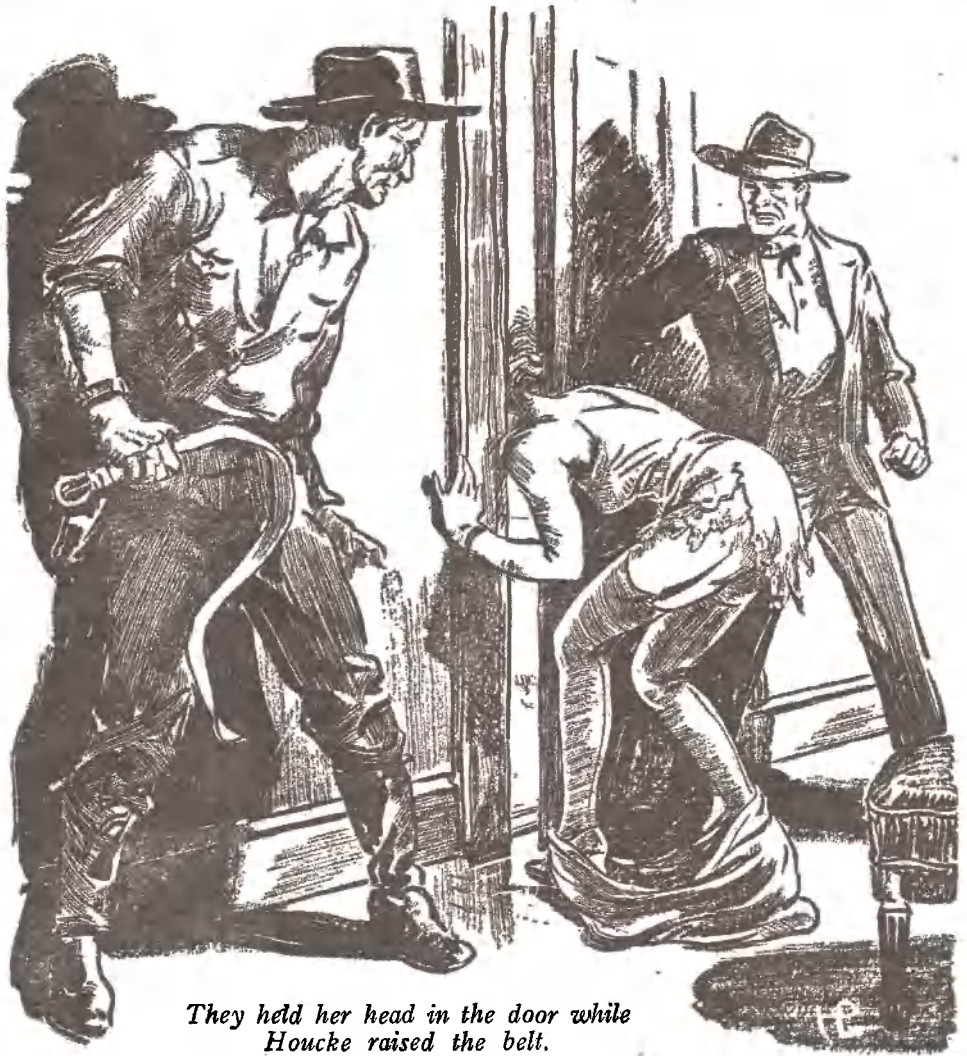
"I'm not peeping!" he swore. "Hard Guy, this cap had a rare poison in it. It's almost indetectable as to smell and taste, and a couple of drops, clinging to the metal and washed loose by alcohol, produces a suffocation of the heart!"

"Lock that cap up somewhere," I gobbled. "I'll see you later. I got plenty of things to do!"

BACK up town, I gave Nora a ring, and got a kick out of hearing her voice. "Honey," I said, "I want you to sit tight."

"Cling to my honeycomb, huh?" She got sarcastic. "Why?"

"Because," I told her, "homicide is hard to hide, and somebody is trying to hide it." I heard her long-drawn, "Ohhhh," as I hung up.



They held her head in the door while Houcke raised the belt.

Newsboys were telling the world around Adobe that Mowron was under arrest and the county had refused to cooperate, and that the city funds already known missing hit almost eighty grand. I went toward Driller's Drugstore, stepping through pools of light on the wet pavement. Specs and the news wench he now called Lou, were in cahoots in a booth. She simpered over a soda as I sat down and or-

dered what Specs was drinking: De luxe coke.

"Any news?" Specs wondered. "I saw you rubbing fur with that Brian dame." A certain look passed between Lou and Specs.

"Better be careful," I warned the home town gal.

"Oh, Specs is teaching me a lot about journalism."

"Uh-huh. He'll teach you a lotta other things, too."

"Just for that, you can go to hell!" Specs spat.

I finished my drink, but I didn't go to hell. I took a cab to Harry Spence's house. Light showed around drawn drapes as I rang the bell, bearing down on it. The door finally opened. A blond gal stood framed in the doorway, and I mean framed! She had on a fluffy thin sort of a something that was cut down to there in the front, a cord tied around her just under her well developed breasts giving a two-coconuts-stranded-on-an-island effect. It also held the garment together.

With the light behind her shining through, I didn't have to guess that she had a figure that would make a man fan himself. But her face was hard, calculating and wary.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"You Mrs. Spence? Well, I'm Hard Guy. I'm supposed to be working for Mowron. Mrs. Spence, you sure your husband died of heart failure?"

She sucked in her breath, then stepped back. "Come in," she muttered. I followed her into a living room that Spence's salary never could have furnished. She nodded at a chair and a bottle on a table and helped herself to a drink and a cigarette.

"What's this gab of yours?" She sat facing me, legs crossed, the negligee falling back off her halfway to her hips. Damned small grieving she seemed to be doing!

"I asked if *you* was sure you're husband's heart flip-flapped," I answered, trying to keep my eyes off her legs and my mind on the fact she was, maybe, a murderess.

"How else?" She blew smoke my direction.

"Look, babe," I said, "maybe you and I could get together. Did you know your old man was going south with city dough? All this stuff in the house—"

"He told me he was dealing in oil on the side," she snapped, her eyes mean enough to make a tiger blink. "If you're hinting that he was killed, you're crazy."

"What was it you were hunting, down on the floor in his office?"

She jumped up, the robe flying open, and the view sort of stopped me, but not her. "Get the hell out of here!" she squalled. "Get out before I call the cops." She swung at me. I ducked and grabbed her, then let go as the door slammed. I turned just in time to catch Two-Gun Graw's right on my jaw. I went backward over a chair and he kicked me when I got up. I made a paw for the gun in my shoulder holster and then laid off. He had a couple of .38 Positives trimmed on me.

"Get to hell out. If I catch you around here again, I'll blow your guts out!" he snarled. "I'm sent here by the mayor to see Mrs. Spence ain't worrit. I figger to stay here—mighty elose, too."

"Like hell you will." There was a worried note in Reava's voice.

"Wait an' see," Two-Gun grunted. He waved his rods at me.

"Get out, before I show you you ain't hard a-tall; yeah, you got the hell plumb out of town."

I SLAMMED the door as I went out, but not before the light from the house showed a tree in the front yard; a tree that moved

its trunk. Only, it wasn't the trunk. I made a couple of leaps and grabbed Nora Brian. She didn't try to get away as I held her and walked up to the nearest street light. She looked up at me and her expression was all twisted sideways.

"There was a window not quite blinded, around the house. You don't do so well when you aren't wrestling women, do you, Hard Guy?"

"What the hell you snooping around for?" I demanded. "This ain't no place for a woman. What was you doing there?"

"Well, I watched Two-Gun Graw come up in the mayor's car, and I think Puffy Pete was in it. Whatever else I do or know, you won't find out. You wouldn't cut me out of things, would you, Hard Guy?"

"I—hey!"

I gave Nora a shove into a hedge fence as a gun barked behind us. A bullet clanked off the iron light-post, missing me about an inch. I took myself a bath, too, and dived for another section of the hedge, lying flat on the wet ground. Another bullet sang past, and then there came three gunflashes from behind a telephone pole not quite opposite the Spence house. I didn't know who that was, so I shot blind at the night on my side of the street.

The shots ceased as suddenly as they'd began, and only the fall of rain sounded. I crawled along, and Nora sat up. "You hurt?" She sounded shaky.

"Not quite. Let's crawl around this hedge and run like hell. . . Wait."

We watched a man duck out

from behind the telephone pole and dash across the street toward us, a gun in his hand. I recognized Ed Pliney, the deputy sheriff. He got across without drawing a bullet and slammed into the hedge, showering more tons of water down.

"Hard Guy," he panted. "I been watchun that house. Burson's orders. I—uh—"

"You mean he said to hang around to spot me, I bet," I said.

"Well, an' everything else. Damn this mess—an' they called me no account. Bigod, I'll show 'em, I will. I wish I knew who shot at you from the dark down there; I don't think I hit him. What do we do—?"

Windows were being raised, some woman was squalling for the cops.

"I'm going home to bed. You might's well do the same," I told him. I helped Nora to her feet and ran her across yards to the next street. Nora didn't say anything until I stopped outside her door.

"Why would they want to kill you, Hard Guy?"

"Because I tried to catch Reava Spence off guard and asked her what she was hunting, down on that office floor; asked her if she was sure Harry Spence died from a heart gone bum with likker and shock. I didn't get far there, and not far enough away, back there, before she'd said something to Graw and he shot at me. It had to be him . . . She didn't seem to like the idea of Graw staying there."

"You're a damned fool," she mumbled.

"So're you. More than that, you

(Continued on page 94)

DEAD MAN'S

It was a clever scheme Jake worked out, spurred by hate and greed. But jealousy and the fight for a woman make a treacherous factor in any death plot

WHEN Red Hammacher was in whipcords and undershirt — as now — when he plunged his three-day's beard into a pan of cold water on the kitchen table—it was easily seen that both his arms had been taken off at the shoulders.

But when he started dressing in the living room of the shack, he got into his clothes almost as fast as his brother Jake, who worked with a pair of arms as long as an ape's.

"Hello, babe." Red grinned at the blonde girl pouring coffee. He didn't speak to Jake, lounging in the open doorway sucking at a cigarette.

"H'yuh, Red." Lora's voice was amiable but faintly rasping, and Red thought it probably got that way from saying *no* to so many oil field workers' propositions.

Red sat down on a plain wooden chair and pulled one rough woolen sock on with the toes of the other foot. He reversed, then jammed his feet one at a time into knee-high leather puttees, which he closed by the simple method of hooking the zipper on a nail in the wall and pushing his foot down.

By means of zipper-fastened trousers, a zipper shirt, and a

zipper leather jacket, Red was able to dress alone. Red therefore liked zippers, because they had ended the humiliation of the old days, when Jake always waited every morning until Red, dressing, was forced to ask for help. And asking anything of Jake before Lora—well, Red couldn't do it!

Red grinned again as he stood up and gave Lora a hearty smack on the corner of her mouth. "Coffee ready, sweetheart?"

"Yeah." Lora patted his ribs just below the shoulders. She didn't like to touch where his arms had been, even though she hadn't known him when he had them. Lora had cut off the sleeves and sewed up the shoulders of all his shirts and coats.

"All right there," she called, without much enthusiasm, to the figure in the doorway.

Jake flung away his cigarette. "Say it nice, baby," he advised casually. "I help pay for it, too." He flopped into a chair across from Red, and the girl sat down between them.

Jake dunked a piece of coffee cake. "Have my dough ready on time today, will you," he said. "I'm going to Dallas over the week-end."

"You'll get it," growled Red. He'd been timekeeper six years

GAME

By STAN
WARNER



Lora knew when to stop talking and act—and Jake wouldn't listen to talk.

now, since a careless derrick operator had lowered an eight inch casing on his arms at a truck loading. "You've always got it on time, haven't you? You taking the car?"

"Sure. *You* couldn't drive it, could you?" Jake's hard laugh

followed the joke he had forgotten to make on five or six separate days in as many years.

"No; but, Lora—"

"Lora, hell!" Jake said harshly. "No oil field dame is gonna drive any jitney *I* own part of!"

The blonde girl's face reddened.

She got up quickly to pour more coffee. But she didn't say anything.

Red, eating directly from his plate on a pile of books, raised his head. "You louse," he said levelly. "You know what I'd—"

"Oh, sure I do," Jake said wearily. "Haven't I been hearing every damn' day for five years what you'd do to me if you had your arms? Well, you haven't, and you can't, and you'd better by a damn' sight not try—see?"

"Some day—!" gritted Red.

"Yeah?" Jake gulped the second cup of coffee, cursed because it burned his mouth, and slammed out of the shack.

"Red—oh, darling?" Lora was beside him in an instant, in tears; her arms around him and her wet face against the roughness of his beard. "Why does he always have to—?" She sobbed. "Why don't you leave him and live by yourself?" she asked fiercely.

"Aw, listen, honey, I can't," Red said uncomfortably. "As long as we work at the same field, for the same company and with the same gang . . . well, we're brothers, ain't we? If we didn't get along together, we couldn't both work here."

BUT Red's excuses sounded feeble even to himself. To tell the truth he didn't know exactly why he had stuck with Jake. Oh, yes: at first he had depended on Jake, and then when Jake had grown to hate him—through some transformation neither understood perfectly—Red just hadn't got around to pulling stakes. Red had never been able to make up his

mind on important things; while Jake made his plans with nerve and carried them out aggressively.

But Lora wouldn't be put off. "If you don't leave him or kick him out," she stormed, "then I'm leaving." She broke loose and walked away from him, swinging her shapely form as if to emphasize what he would be missing if she left. She turned.

"I've only been here a week, but that's too damn' long—with a guy like that around."

"Has he . . . has he made any passes at you?" Red stood up and walked toward her. He swallowed. "Has he?"

"No," she said truthfully. "He hasn't—yet. But the way he looks at me sometimes when you're not watching. "Well, hell," she concluded with a shrug. "A guy can look, I guess."

Red stood close to her and kissed her. "Let's not think about it now," he urged. "While he's gone over the week-end we'll talk it over just you and me will be here alone for two days, anyway."

Lora brightened. "That'll be swell." She put her arms about him and hugged him tight while he kissed her. It had seemed funny at first—spooky, sort of—not to feel a man's arms while he kissed you and made love to you. But now she rather liked it.

As he took his mouth away, she caught his glance downward and laughed gently. She hugged herself closer to him so that he could feel the stimulating pressure of her soft-curved form.

It was funny, she thought, that two men could look enough alike to be twins and still be so different.

Of course, no arms made Red look a lot different, but except for that . . . Still, she thought, it was good. She'd hate to have Jake pawing her.

JAKE HAMMACHER'S week-end in Dallas was not given over solely to amusement. He went first of all to a barber shop, then to a hotel room, from which he sent out his suit to be pressed before putting it on. His tall lumberjack's body, he told himself, didn't look bad at all in good clothes. He combed back the slight curl in his fiery hair—just as red as his brother's and no redder. When he finally got around to fooling with Red's dame, it wouldn't take long; dames always fell hard for Jake. But they always *pitied* Red, and that made 'em soft.

Before picking up the phone, Jake straightened his tie and brushed his shoes, examining himself critically as if the phone could see.

Then, "Hello, doc?" He grinned into the mouthpiece at the confusion apparent in the other voice. "Yeah, I'm here for a couple of days and thought—I'd like to see you. . . . Gee, that's tough, doc." Then his voice changed with his expression. "Now, listen, you damn' dirty chiselin', girl-bumpin' punk, I'm gonna see you or else—get me? Three-thirty? Oke. And you better be there!"

Dr. Rollo Zabrisky was there. He didn't look happy, but then Jake didn't expect that. Jake knew several bits of early Zabriskyanna which the doctor wouldn't be too happy to have more widely known.

"It's all right, doc," said Jake,

swinging his leg from the edge of Zabrisky's desk. "Don't worry; I'm not here to shake you down for anything . . . Thing is, doc, I'm in the way of needing an operation soon, and it might be slightly illegal. You won't mind that?"

Zabrisky glared but did not answer.

Jake laughed. "All right, listen close: I've got a brother that looks exactly like me, see? Exactly like me—except he's got no arms. And I'm thinking of wanting to look like him to the hair in about three days. Get it, doc?" And Jake Hammacher laughed with raucous loudness.

Dr. Zabrisky shuddered.

"What I want you to do," Jake went on, "is to visit Porado for a few days. . . ."

LORA NEWSOME had a little shack of her own, across a little hollow from the Hammachers'. But though she had threatened to stay in it, all she did when she saw Jake take the car and disappear Saturday morning was to put on her bonnet—last spring's—and trip down the path. Both shacks were concealed from others nearby by trees on a rise of a little hill. You could see a hundred oil derricks just by looking over the trees.

Red knew she would come over soon—well, for one thing, to wash dishes for him. When she came in, he was smoking a cigarette. Red had insisted on a gas range with a pilot light, and he could light a fag by pressing his chin against the pilot light button.

"Hello, Red. He's gone; I saw him taking the car."

"We're all by ourselves, honey," Red said around the cigarette.

Lora threw off her bonnet and took the cigarette from his mouth for a couple of puffs herself. Then she kissed him and ran one hand through his red hair. "I love you this morning," she said softly. She laid her cheek against his and then rubbed her fingers in his beard as does a man who has hands.

"Monday?" she asked.

"I guess so." About once a week Red had one of the boys clip and shave his face. "What's the diff? You say you love me?" He winked.

She hugged him and flipped the cigarette butt out of the door. "Want me to prove it?"

She snuggled down closer in his lap, so that her dress slipped up above her knees. They were smooth and round, and Red's pulse began to hum. Her legs, too, were youthful and slim and Lora always seemed to have money for expensively sheer stockings, even when she wore cheap gingham dresses. Good sheer stockings that made her legs look like a million bucks and made him feel that way. He could just see a ruffle of blue lace above her stocking top.

She laughed, watching him, and Red swore inwardly. That was the hell of having no arms. He didn't mind taking a job like the one he had—riding a horse around to check the workers, and sitting beside a table while the boys took their pay, but when it came to a woman, why all he could do was feel like a sick man being nursed—or a baby being taken care of.

Lora was the only one who ever understood how he felt and tried to

make up for it. No pity from her! She lent him her strength in an embrace and loved it. She'd told him often that she'd rather be loved by him than by a man with two arms.

And Red believed her. That was especially easy to do when she was playing up to him like this. She ran her fingers, nimble and warm, over the thick muscles of his chest. She felt his heart jump and keep on jumping, and she laid her ear against his chest and then kissed him. Then she shrank close to him and let his hungry lips kiss her throat.

Watching his eyes and feeling his quick, uneven breathing, she knew that he was wishing he could embrace her. And she was so sorry he couldn't that she slipped her arms around him and hugged herself tightly to him . . . until he could feel against him again the enticing soft pressure of her young figure.

Red gasped, pushed himself against her and fastened his mouth on hers. Lora's dress slid up a little higher. When she began squirming, Red stood up, and the girl still clung with her arms around his neck and her toes resting lightly on the floor. . . .

WHEN Jake thumped up alongside the house in the jitney Monday morning, Red had already departed for work, and Lora was alone. She stopped her singing when Jake came in.

"Hello, there," she greeted him nervously. "You're late for work."

"Don't let *that* keep you awake nights, sweetheart," Jake urged. He patted her shoulder. When she



"You kicked her to death! What made you do it—revenge?"

didn't move, he slipped his arm around her waist and turned her to face him.

"You black-hearted baboon," Lora was thinking, "I'd like to slip this knife in your gizzard."

But she didn't say anything. And when he kissed her, she didn't draw away. Lora had decided that she didn't want to cause any trouble between Red and Jake; because soon she might, if she held her peace, persuade Red to break loose and take her with him. And Red was the one man she wanted. So Lora let Jake kiss her.

It was the first time Jake had touched her, and he liked it. Jake was feeling good anyway, because he had just reassured himself that the insurance he had taken out years ago, with Red as beneficiary, was still good. And because he had just made Dr. Rollo Zabrisky register at the only flop-house in town.

So Jake kissed Lora again. He

disengaged her hand from the carving knife and laid it on the table. He pulled her toward him and caused her to land on his lap as he fell back into a chair. Jake was slightly crooked; just enough to want Red's girl. And what the hell was the idea anyway, he asked himself, of a cute trick like Lora falling for Red and not for him?

"Baby," Jake breathed thickly, "do you know what you and me have been missing for a long, long time?"

When she didn't answer, he kissed her roughly on the neck and propounded this puzzle a second time, more loudly. He kissed her on the mouth, and Lora let him, but didn't respond.

Jake's face turned the color he wanted it to feel. He twisted her wrist.

"Kiss me, you cheap little bum!" he snarled. "Kiss me hard, or I'll knock that chin of yours through your eyes."

"Oh—quit—!" Lora winced.

"Oh, all right." She kissed him, and she made it good. Jake would probably sock her just as he promised, and she didn't want any bruises on her face for Red to see.

"That's the stuff, sweetheart!" Jake picked her up in his arms.

Lora started struggling. "Don't be a damn' fool, Jake," she gasped, trying to laugh but more frightened than she wanted to be. "You're all right—a good guy; but I don't like you that way."

Jake laughed and held her tight in his brawny arms. "Well, here's one thing, kid—I guess you know you could get away from *Red*, but you couldn't get away from me if you tried; but you're not trying very hard, are you, honey?"

Lora knew when it was useless to talk, and she knew when to act. As Jake's rough fingers began tightening, making her wince, she suddenly jabbed her forefinger into his eye.

Jake let out a roar and dropped her, but he still held onto her wrist with his left hand. "Why, you—"

Lora, sobbing, tried to pull away from him. She'd heard all those words before, but never applied to herself all in one breath.

"High-hat, are you?" jeered Jake. "Red's good enough for you, but I ain't, huh?"

Then he gave her a short poke in the jaw, and she collapsed limply in his arms. Jake rubbed his eye and swore. . . . But one thing he didn't mind. Conscious or unconscious. He kissed her again.

ABOUT half a minute after Lora came to, she realized in the same moment that she couldn't do a thing about it now, and that Red was standing in the doorway.

In the brief fight that followed, just before Jake took quick aim and laid Red out with a clean hard one to the chin, Lora thought she would probably faint. But she didn't.

Jake said, "I'd clear out of here, if I was you, sister." Then he went out the front door, leaving Red lying on the floor.

Lora's first impulse was to kneel beside Red and try to bring him to. Then her lips began quivering and she cried. She was really scared. She straightened her dress and picked up her bonnet. Then she hurried down the path leading to her own shack.

Jake had wanted—oh, how he had wanted!—to pound Red's mug into a bloody mess, but he had chosen a hard stiff blow that wasn't likely to leave a bruise. Because whatever bruises could be observed on Red, then Jake would have to acquire some like them. And Jake didn't relish the idea of punching himself in the face.

Before Red had lost his arms, people couldn't tell whether he was Jake or not. And if Jake suddenly howed up without arms after Red disappeared, nobody must be able to say, "How come you got over the black eye so quick, Red?"

No. Jake went directly to the local saloon, where Zabrisky had promised to meet him. The doctor was there, and he reiterated that he didn't like the whole business. And Jake surlily told him what to do if he didn't like it.

"You want to be ready tonight," he whispered savagely. "Now don't be a damn' fool and get tight, because if you don't do a good job, things about your past are going to get out. . . ."

Shortly afterward, Red Hamacher came in, walked straight past Jake without speaking, and ordered rye. He took two drinks, and after he'd gone, Jake had another word with Zabrisky and then followed Red.

Down the flat unpaved street to the end of town. Jake saw Red take the path to their shack and then, as if he had been debating, switch over and take the path to Lora's place. Jake saw him enter, caught a brief glimpse of Lora's form outlined by the light at her back.

Jake reflected; that was all right. Only thing was, he must watch Red carefully so that he, Jake, would know where he was supposed to have been all afternoon.

Jake lost sight of the late sun as he dipped down the path to their shanty. Without turning on the light, he sat before the window for nearly an hour, watching the light across in Lora's window grow brighter with the deepening dusk.

Finally, Jake stood up quickly and gripped the window sill; Red was emerging from Lora's shanty; had closed the door behind him. Even in the near darkness, Jake could discern the straight even stride — different without the swinging arms—of his brother.

Jake didn't want any noise. He'd already decided what to do. Had gone over it in his mind several times.

Once, for an exhibition after his



Lora realized she couldn't do anything about it now—and she saw suddenly that Red was standing in the doorway watching her and Jake.

brother had lost his arms, Jake had knocked a six-months' old calf so silly with one blow of his fist that it had to be killed. He thought of that calf now as he heard Red fumbling the latch string outside with his teeth. Then Red was stepping across the threshold in the semi-darkness, and Jake struck.

It was a straight hard right, blindly into the face, and then, not to take chances of noise, Jake had him by the throat and was pressing his thumbs in on each side of the jugular.

DED made slight sound. "A—h
U . . . Ugh!" he seemed to say, as if he were gagging on a foul-tasting pill. The noise died as Jake pinned down the feebly thrashing body and pressed so hard that the jugular cracked.

Jake in particular wanted hand-marks on his brother's throat. Then, when Jake, posing as Red, had no arms, he could say, "It takes two hands to choke a man . . . and two hands to chop him up with an axe."

But before doing any chopping, Jake stripped his brother. He took off all his own clothes and put on the zipper clothes of his brother. He was forced to leave the shirt and lumber jacket off, however, until he had hacked Red's body into a dozen pieces. He took care to shatter and mutilate the shoulders.

It was messy. Jake washed the blood off himself in the bathroom, finished dressing in Red's clothes—with his arms folded inside the shirt.

The light was still burning in Lora's window when Jake closed the door behind him and tested the latch string.

Grim thought! . . . he would really need the latch string when he came back. But for twenty thousand dollars insurance! He'd taken it out, with Red as beneficiary, in the old flush days when they were bosom pals; last year when Jake had wanted to drop it all, Red had agreed to pay the premiums to let it stand. "Damn if I'll pay it, to give you a pile of dough after I'm dead!" Jake had said. Red had not mentioned dropping his own reciprocal pol-

icy, however. . . .

Jake kept to the dark side of the street. Why the hell didn't they have a phone, so he could have had Zabrisky come to the shack. Hell, that was a good idea! He'd bring the doc back with him; make him perform the operation there. No—on the other hand, he didn't want Zabrisky to see Red's body.

So Zabrisky locked the door of his room in the flophouse, arranged the couch for an operating table; he placed a portable electric sterilizer close by with his tools. Then he amputated both Jake's arms at the shoulders. Local anesthetic—stiff. Jake wouldn't take a general; he had work to do.

"Tonight," he told Zabrisky coolly, while waiting for the anesthetic to take effect. "I've something to do tonight."

"In that case," Zabrisky shrugged, "I might as well amputate your head. You'll be too weak to move, and even if you could get up, you wouldn't last" — he snapped his finger—"that long."

Jake grabbed his wrist with fingers already growing numb. "You'll give me some dope—you hear? You'll fix me so I can walk around *tonight*. . . . If you can't, there's no use doing this."

The doctor looked at him a long moment. "If you don't care how long you live," he said slowly, "I can load you to the gills with dope—give you a double bang of M. & R., say; it'll dull the pain and make you feel peppy for a couple of hours or so. But you may keel over any minute."

"Then do it," snapped Jake. Anything. He'd gone too far to

back out, even if this killed him. "And for God's sake, hurry!"

"I'll work fast," Zabrisky said gloomily. "But you won't like it—later. You'll probably die of loss of blood, of poisoning, or some other complications, even if you live beyond tonight. You ask one man to do an operation which requires assistants. How do you—?"

"The hell with it! I don't want to listen!"

And—during what seemed hours—he tried not to listen to his own groans. When Jake was bandaged and dressed and too weak to move—almost unconscious—Zabrisky lifted his trouser leg and plunged a needle into the larger vein of his leg; shot home a grain of morphine; followed it with a grain of heroin.

WHEN Jake finally left, he was walking on air. His arms were off, but—what the hell! He felt like running . . . jumping!

But he descended the path to the shanty slowly. He still had sense enough to realize that it was false strength. He could move around; exhilaration flooded him, made him light-headed; but he knew he was draining every reserve of nerve and stamina in his normally iron constitution. If he could only carry on tonight, until he was in the clear, then he'd go back with Zabrisky and lie in a hospital.

But he had to go on now.

In a pail on the hook attached to Red's belt, Jake carried the hacked pieces of his own arms. He pulled the latch string with his teeth, half fell inside. He rested a second and then managed laboriously to dump the mess in the

bucket into the mess in the corner of the room. He left the bucket too; it would puzzle them, but prove nothing, since it belonged here.

As he started back toward town, he had half a mind to go over to Loras; but no—save that for when he was stronger; when she had learned that Jake Hammacher had been killed. She wouldn't give a damn, but that would make it sweeter than ever when he took Red's place. Could he do it? Perhaps, thought Jake, he shouldn't take chances, but should avoid her altogether.

In the saloon, he acknowledged greetings from a few unsuspecting drillers; smoking, playing cards, drinking. In the general hubbub, no one really bothered him. And inside of an hour, with a couple of whiskeys under his belt—but God! he'd almost forgotten he'd have to lift the glass with his teeth!—he felt better; stronger. But why didn't they hurry and discover the murder! He couldn't stick it out forever.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he nearly passed out despite the dope in him. But the voice was kind:

"Jeez! It's tough, Red. Listen, boy, your brother's been killed. You'd better not see him for a while . . ."

TWO hours . . . safety . . . Jake Hammacher's ruse had worked to a hair. No one in town even questioned that he was Red Hammacher.

"Listen, Red," the sheriff was saying sympathetically—

(Continued on page 103)

STRAIGHT FROM THE FEED BOX

GRAMERCY PARK is an exclusive residential section just off tree-studded Hollenbach Boulevard. In one of the palatial homes there Curtis Benson, a private detective, and Clayton Trowbridge, elderly recluse and owner of the estate, sat in conference.

There was a slightly sardonic twist about the detective's mouth. He was saying: "I'll have to know more, Mr. Trowbridge, before I can even consider taking the case. I don't work in the dark!"

Clayton Trowbridge was not young; the thin, blue-veined hands, skin the texture of parchment, and head of bushy white hair, all proclaimed an advanced age.

He coughed now, said nervously: "I want your services for protection, Mr. Benson." He paused a moment, then continued. "A few months ago an underworld character entered here and, after blowing my safe, escaped with a valuable diamond necklace. But the police, with my description to aid them, were able to apprehend the culprit. I testified against him as was natural. He was most vindictive. When sentenced, he threatened my life within twenty-four hours after his release from prison." Clayton Trowbridge paused again, then he added simply, "He is to be released tomorrow."

Benson expelled smoke from his

lungs and said slowly, "I don't get this. You testified to the loss of the necklace, of course. But you just said you testified *against* him. How come?"

The answer was prompt. "I saw him—saw his great hulking figure cross the lawn. I live alone here, other than for a housekeeper. A Miss Hopkins. The explosion had awakened me and, as I rose in bed, I saw his wild dash across the lawn from a window. The moon was full and very bright."

The private detective pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I remember the case. About six months ago—'Bull' Stroup was the lad, wasn't he?"

The other nodded. "Yes. And, I believe, he is a most vicious character. One quite capable of carrying out his threat. Frankly, Mr. Benson, I—I am afraid. And I am willing to pay you one hundred dollars a day until I am satisfied my life is no longer in danger."

Benson said: "Was the necklace recovered?"

Clayton Trowbridge shook his head sadly. "It was not. The police and I were of the opinion that though he was apprehended quickly he succeeded in disposing of it. I have retained several agencies in an attempt to recover it, but it seems useless."

Benson said: "He was an old hand at the racket. He probably knew of a dozen places where it

By BOB LEESON

Her come hither stuff was just an invitation to get bumped off. At least that was the detective's idea when he found killer's-drops in his drink

After one look, you could see that girl had plenty of what it takes.



could have been broken up and sold." He paused, then straightened to his feet. He said: "Okay, Mr. Trowbridge. There'll be a retaining fee of five hundred. Send a check to my office. Let's see; Stroup will be released tomorrow. I don't believe you'll have anything to fear before tomorrow night. We'll date the case from then. And you can expect me then, too."

Trowbridge let him out; Benson clamped on a well worn hat and cut across the spacious lawn to his roadster. He was wondering why Trowbridge hadn't called in the police and thus saved himself some dough. He wondered, too, if the necklace had been heavily insured. That was meat for thought all the way back downtown.

IT was early evening the following day when Benson swerved into the curb, stepped out on the sidewalk, and slammed the door of his roadster. There were grim little lines about his eyes as he took the steps to the lobby of the *Trevor Arms*. Getting into an elevator, he rode skyward six stories, swung out into a corridor. He stopped before number 604. The door was slightly ajar; he hesitated a bit, then walked inside.

June Martin had plenty of what it takes. She knew it—you knew it after one look. Negligee clothed, she was pirouetting before a full length mirror. Through the translucent garment the seductive lines of her slim figure caught his eyes. Delicately, she applied the glass stick of a perfume vial to the milky flesh. A heady, exotic odor faintly permeated the bedroom.

Leaning a wide shoulder against the door of the room, Curtis Benson said: "That stuff must retail for plenty the ounce."

A grin creased his craggy face as the girl whirled about from the mirror, alarm widening blue eyes into perfect circles.

She said: "Why, Curtis Benson! When did you come in?"

Benson fished out a smoke. "Just now. The apartment door was half open so I walked in. Just like that—" He made an airy gesture, snapped a match to flame with a thumb nail and set fire to the cigarette. His eyes were riveted to the lithe curves of her figure.

A delicate flush ran up from the V of June's neck, tinged her oval face nicely. Twenty-four hours before, Curtis Benson might have figured the flush the real McCoy. But now, it was something else again. She could probably turn that school-girl tint on and off as you would a faucet.

But she was laughing now, and was drawing the edges of the negligee together. She said: "I wasn't expecting you for awhile."

"I'm funny that way," Benson remarked dryly. Dropping the cigarette in a convenient tray, he now crossed to her and flattened out a hand in the curve of her back, forcing her body to him.

Taken by surprise, for a second, she relaxed in his arms. A moment later she was struggling, fighting frantically to break away. Her eyes wide, her hands flat against his chest, she strained away from him. But only for a moment. The wild light in her eyes softened; her tense muscles grew limp. With a little gasp she pressed herself against

him in complete surrender. Benson kissed moist parted lips—lips that had tasted of life and reveled in it. For a moment she returned his kiss ardently, then drew away, reluctantly this time.

She said unevenly: "You do things to me, Curtis."

DRAWING the negligee about her, she led the way into another room. Benson spotted a divan chair. Getting his weight into it, he lifted June to his lap. He was breathing a bit unsteadily and the warmth of feminine curves didn't seem to help him any.

The girl said: "How goes the private sleuthing?"

The proprietor of the investigation agency that bore his name got another cigarette to going. He said: "The sleuth, now that you're asking, is maybe cinching a play tonight that'll run him up into big dough."

"Tell me about it." It was only mild interest that the girl had displayed. But Benson felt the slight start that ran the length of her body. He caught that—caught the intense interest within slightly lidded eyes.

He laughed. "Sure—why not? But I've got something else on my one-track brain now."

She pouted full lips, but the detective kissed them back into shape again, tasting of their nectar. The negligee gaped a trifle and the satiny texture of milky skin delighted him. His arm tightened about her waist, and his breath was coming jerkily, when she slid from his lap and made a laughing pass at him with her fist. She smoothed the negligee.

She said: "I'll shake up a drink. So name yore pizen, podner!"

Benson said: "Make mine coffee."

She nodded and went off into the kitchen, snapping on a light that threw into shadowed outline the tapering length of slender legs.

"Mix me a Martini, Curtis," she called.

Benson said: "Sure—" got up on his feet and made for the liquor cabinet. A bit of time and he was back to the divan with the cocktail. Placing it on a table, he removed a small vial of fluid from his pocket. There were grim lines about his mouth as he poured the contents into the drink, and slushed it about some. He slipped the vial from sight in his coat and settled back.

The girl came in from the kitchen with a steaming hot cup of coffee, moved a chair over to the table. Benson took the proffered cup—took a cautious whiff of the stuff while he watched the girl lower the Martini.

Cerise lips were pursed distastefully. She said: "You make a bum Martini." But she finished off the drink and placed the glass on the table.

Benson set the coffee down without having swallowed a single drop of it. He said coldly: "Your coffee isn't so hot either, baby. But then, maybe it's the *killer's-drops* you put in it that makes for the bitter smell."

June Martin had been in the act of lighting a cigarette. But now she jarred back solidly in the chair, forgetting the smoke. Color came and went from her face; eyes ran the scale of emotions from bewil-

derment to fear, then became defiantly bright as she fixed Benson with their glance.

Benson said: "Last night out at the Show Boat Club you made a *too* obvious play for me. I wondered what the hell it was all about, so I played along with you to find out. I did. After I left you I went down to the lobby. A ten-spot, coupled with a little persuasion, got the night-clerk to give me a plug-in on your phone. It was only a hunch, of course, but it aced up nicely. That mean anything to you?"

When he paused with the question, June attempted a nonchalant manner in lighting her cigarette, but she failed to keep her hand from trembling.

She said curtly: "You're doing the talking—"

Benson shrugged. "Okay. You called a lad by the name of Zeke Ceress. You told him that I'd gone for you like a ton of something or other—told him that it would be a cinch to dope a drink for me when I came up tonight."

The girl's eyes had dulled somewhat now, and when she raised her head slowly, she had difficulty in holding it up. She said mechanically: "All right. I did this . . . I did that. I put knock-out drops in your drink. So now what?"

Benson stared at her. "Knock-out drops, hell! I know the odor of potassium cyanide when I whiff it. You mean *killer's drops*!"

THE sleep-potion that Benson had poured in the Martini was taking effect, yet now, she snapped out of the lethargy that was gripping her brain. Eyes glued to Benson's face—eyes that mirrored dis-

belief, then flared with startled fear.

"I . . . I didn't know," she cried. "He said . . . it would make you sleep. "I . . ."

That was that. She had slumped abruptly at the waist, was entirely oblivious that the negligee had now parted, half revealing audacious curves. She fell forward into his arms as he got across to her. Smiling grimly, Benson lifted the inert body, strode toward the bedroom.

Placing her gently on the bed, he paused a moment to drink in her loveliness before drawing a cover over her entrancing form. It wasn't easy to walk away, but walk he did. Out in the corridor before the door, he turned a key in the lock, then pocketed the key. His heels thudded solidly as he strode down the corridor. When an elevator had deposited him in the lobby, he went directly toward a bank of telephone booths. Parting with a coin, he dialed a number; waited.

A cool, and distant voice came along the line, saying: "Benson Agency." As Benson knew, it was Helen Irish, his secretary.

He said: "Hiya, Irish. That call come through from the Coast yet?"

The voice didn't change any; remained coldly impersonal. "I am sorry, but you'll have to see Mr. Benson tomorrow. He'll be in about ten o'clock.

Benson said: "What is this, Irish, a gag?" But his face screwed up thoughtfully. Hell! She knew his voice. Maybe—Suddenly placing his lips to the instrument, he whispered: "Irish, if it's trouble there in the office, cough twice."

For a time the line was silent. Then Irish was saying: "I am truly

sorry, of course, but I can do nothing. Mr. Benson will be in about ten." The voice faded away. But not before two distinct coughs came to Benson's ears. He pronged the receiver savagely, barged out of the booth.

IN the reception office of the Benson Investigation Agency, red-headed Helen Irish replaced the 'phone on the desk and then twisted about to face a particularly squat — particularly grim-visaged man who saw neither the lurking

smile about her mouth nor the light of anticipation within lidded black eyes.

He saw only the long, fine curve from thigh to slender ankle; the high, impudent curves that threatened to burst from the thin fabric of her waist.

He said: "That's playin' nice, red-head." The gun in his hand was resting carelessly on his knee; he was seated some feet from the desk.

Helen Irish said: "It was a guy who was getting ideas about his

Desperately she tried to elude his punishing fingers.



wife. He wanted Mr. Benson to stick a tail on her to find out things."

The visitor showed brown teeth in a grin, said: "Okay. Now, when this Benson calls, as you said he would, you tell him there's a client waitin' here for him. An' play it nice, baby, 'cause I wouldn't wanta spoil that lovely figure of yours by puttin' a couple holes in it."

Helen Irish didn't answer; merely stared high disdain. Her brain was racing madly. Curtis knew now but what would he do? He could only enter the office and, the second he did, Helen was positive that this man intended to kill him. If only she had had time to warn him. If only she—

Helen Irish now broke off her thoughts to make a wild dash for the corridor door. It seemed that she was destined for success; that the suddenness of her move was disconcerting enough to gain the door. But as she reached frantically for the knob, a rough hand twined fingers in the back of her dress and jerked back violently. A thick arm wrestled her twisting body around; the barrel of the gun dug unmercifully into the flesh of her stomach.

He snarled: "Try that again, Toots, an' people will be chiselin' things about you on a head-stone."

No mistake—he meant just what he was saying. Helen Irish shuddered; had a desperate try at getting away from the encircling arm.

The thin material of her waist had parted to the fingers; the ribbons of a net brassiere had barely held as he jerked. Now the frantic threshing of her hard, little body permitted the waist to drop to the

floor; only an inadequate brassiere covered her tumultuous breast.

The feminine fragrance of her incensed him. The fierce lunging of her body against his and the sight of the girl's white flesh put racing blood into his veins; incited his already inflamed emotion.

He whispered hoarsely: "By God! Why not . . ." It'll make waitin' pleasanter. "

Helen Irish screamed, but a hand had whipped over her lips, muffling the sound to a mere whisper. The hand was immediately replaced by thick, brutal lips that crushed hers fiercely.

Desperately, she attempted to elude punishing fingers that sank into her flesh; she flailed out wildly with tiny fists. She felt the leg behind her knees—knew that the shove was coming. Twisting about, she tried to avoid falling. It was useless. The leg behind her knees tripped her—she went down. The fall jarred breath from her body and she lay helpless and panting for air. Helen Irish closed her eyes—

Curtis Benson said: "Well . . . well . . ."

HIE stood just within the door.

HIE Now he took a single stride forward, kicked at the gun that had been dropped by the thug. Helen Irish opened her eyes in time to see his arm flash up. She saw metal gleaming in an arc—she heard the solid thud as Benson struck carefully with the gun in his hand. The body of the thug jerked once, rolled over. Helen Irish closed her eyes again, lost consciousness.

Five minutes later, when she

snapped out of it, she had a sense of weakness; a sense of safety. She was cuddled down on Benson's lap; long arms circling her body. But she made no protest.

Benson said: "All right, kid?" There was a world of solicitude in his voice and eyes.

Helen Irish smiled a bit. She said: "You're a hell of a hero. Another minute and it would have been too late."

Benson grinned happily at the flippant tone. He said: "Now, Irish."

Rising abruptly, he dropped her in the chair he quitted and crossed to the fallen thug. That individual was nursing his head; blood came from between his fingers. He stared balefully up at the lanky private detective.

There was plenty of hate and promise in his voice when he said: "Nobody smashes 'Gyp' Copetti over the conk with a rod and gets long livin' after. I'll get you . . . flat-foot! Wait!"

There was certainly no humor in the chuckle that came from Benson's tightened lips. Bending down, he fastened long fingers in Copetti's coat front, jerked violently upward. The squat body came up off the floor.

Benson said: "You're scum, Copetti. But I'm offering you a chance to walk out that door, free. Who sent you up here and why?"

Copetti locked red-rimmed eyes with Benson's. "You go to hell!" he snarled.

Benson said: "Answer up nice, and I'll let you go. Act stubborn, and I'm going to slap your puss all crooked, then walk you into a cell. Make your choice fast, rat."

Copetti licked his lips and looked away. He said: "You can still go to hell, shamus."

Benson turned sultry eyes over toward the girl, said unemotionally: "Cover your eyes, Irish. I'm going to make this lug over so even his own mother won't know him when I finish."

She said calmly: "Go ahead. I'd pay money to see you do that."

Benson held Copetti at arm's length for a moment, studied the face before him. He said softly: "One more chance, rat. I'm rough on guys like you."

Copetti tried to wrench from the sinewy fingers. His head was spinning; blood came down from the gash over his ear. He tasted it and he started to curse. Benson hit the side of his face. The blow was staggering, yet, it had been delivered with open palm. A fist sank into Copetti's stomach; he bent forward at the waist. Eyes rolled with agony as another slap rocked his head.

Copetti groaned. "All . . . all right."

Benson looked just a little disappointed. He said: "Spill it then."

Copetti clasped his head. "I don't know why I was sent up here—I only know who paid for the job. It was Zeke Ceress!"

Benson jarred, eyes going a bit dreamy. He murmured softly: "Zeke Ceress—again!" For a time he studied Copetti, then swinging abruptly, he made for the door. Opening it, he snapped: "Get out! And get out of town, too! I'll be looking for you. Scram!"

Copetti snarled curses in a foreign tongue, but he went out. Ben-

(Continued on page 104)

SPOTS of MURDER

By CLARK NELSON

*He was too interested in a pretty girl to see
a murder committed right before his eyes.
Then he swore to leave women alone. But
he couldn't do that and still solve this case!*

PETE KELLEY was tall enough to see over most of the persons jammed beside him in the subway. He glanced around and then his blue eyes went wide, his mouth puckered in a silent whistle. The dark haired girl standing a few feet distant was a honey. The way her figure was advertised by the tight yellow sweater she wore was startling.

The girl noticed his gaze and grinned. In the shuffle of passengers at Seventy-second Street she as brought close to him and unintentionally his hand pressed against her waist. She looked up at him, frowning with her mouth while her eyes smiled. Kelley said, "Excuse me," and left his hand where it was.

"I'll have to," she said. "In this five o'clock crowd I couldn't raise my hand to slap you."

"Get off at Ninety-Sixth Street with me and I'll buy you a drink. You can wait until the rush is

over." His hand pushed a little harder against her, feeling the warmth of sleek flesh through her dress. One of the advantages of being a plain clothes man was that you could make the best of little affairs like this one. Now if he was in his uniform, as he had been until a week ago, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"It is awfully crowded," the girl said.

The train jolted to a halt and with the girl following, Kelley began to force his way toward the door. Ahead of him a man was crowded in between persons on every side. He looked drunk. He was turned half sideways when he came to the exit, swayed, and went over on his face. "Wait a moment," Kelley said to the girl. "I'll drag him out of the crowd."

He reached the man and leaned over. Then suddenly, his body stiffened: his eyes turned brittle and his mouth jerked thin. There was a dark stain on the back of the



He dove at the man who had tried to kill him—and hit hard.

man's coat. When Kelley pulled up the coat, he saw the round hole in the shirt on the left side and over the third rib. From the hole came the sluggish flow of blood.

The man had been murdered within the last five minutes! Murdered on the subway with a thousand witnesses!

KELLEY leaped erect, spinning. But already the crowd was oozing through the turnstiles and going up the stair. Some stood curiously about, but most of them, with the aversion that New York crowds have for possible trouble, had scattered. The subway was lumbering north. The girl stood

to one side, her breasts lifted by quick breathing.

She caught Kelley by the arm. "Come on," he said. "We'll get in trouble if we stay here."

"I'm already in trouble," Kelley said. "I'm a detective."

She said, "Oh-h!" turned, and ran.

Ten minutes later the homicide squad stood around the body beside which the M. E. knelt. Sergeant Dan Murdock looked at Kelley and groaned. "What sort of a damned detective are you? You have a murder happen under your nose, and you don't know anything about it. What the hell were you doing?"

"I—I. . ."

"Talking to some damn' girl, weren't you, Handsome? I'll bet on it. I've told you to leave women alone and I've a damn' good mind to slap you back in a uniform. By God, I will!"

"Now listen, sergeant. . ."

"Shut up! You're going back to the beat!"

Kelley's eyes were ice blue now, his jaw set hard. He'd been proud of his promotion. He had worked hard for it and now he was going back without having a chance to prove himself. He said, "Let me work on this case, sergeant. I was sort of in on it at the start. Give me a chance."

Murdock spat against a sign which said NO SPITTING. "All right," he said. "Your first and last case—unless you make good."

The M. E. stood up. "He was shot with a gun pushed right against his shirt, under the coat. The bullet ranged upward and

probably into the heart. Death was immediate."

Murdock said, "Thanks, doc." He turned to Kelley, handed him a card from the man's wallet. "Here's the name and address. Oliver Burlington, over on the Drive. Money left on the body so robbery wasn't the motive. Now get over to his home and find out what you can. And if you don't make good, or if I catch you bothering with dames again. . ."

Kelley said, "I'll make good." He went up the stairs into the bright, long rays of the afternoon sunlight, turned west towards Riverside Drive. August heat simmered upward from the street.

THE Burlington apartment was an old, but swank building facing the Hudson. He pushed the bell, listened to shoes tap across the floor. Then the door opened.

"Mrs. Burlington?"

"Yes. I'm Kay Burlington."

"I'm Pete Kelley from headquarters."

The woman's eyes opened wide. "Yes?" she said.

Kelley studied her carefully as he followed her into the living room. She was worth studying. In her late twenties, though the blonde hair and satin whiteness of her flesh made her look younger. She was wearing a blue summer dress without sleeves and without much back or collar. It clung tight to the slim, seductive lines of her body, showing the smooth swelling of her hips, the alluring curves of her firm breasts. Kelley found it difficult to look at her face, and that was worth looking at too. The eyes were wide,

clear brown and level. The mouth firm but very kissable. He liked this woman, in more ways than one. But Murdock had warned him . . .

"From police headquarters?" Kay Burlington asked.

"Who is?" A sleek, handsome man with his black hair too perfectly in place came into the room.

The woman glanced at him, said, "This is Mr. Kelley, Harry. Harry Pointer, a cousin of my husband."

"What the hell have you and Oliver done now?" Pointer asked. He shook Kelley's hand languidly, flinching at the touch. "Burned my fingers lighting a cigarette," he said.

Kay Burlington watched, her face abnormally white, her breasts rising and falling. She's afraid, Kelley thought, though of what he couldn't be sure. Aloud he said, "I've got to tell you about your husband. He was murdered only a few minutes ago. On the subway."

Her lips parted in a quick gasp, but did not tremble. Her eyes widened slowly, her body tense and motionless.

Harry Pointer said huskily, "*Murdered?*" His voice changed into a snarl. "Why, damn Oliver, he would do something like that! And without leaving me a damn' nickel! It'll all come to you and it's not likely I'll get anything from you."

Kelley watched as the woman turned toward her cousin. "No," she said, "you'll never get anything from me. You can go to work now, Harry. Won't that be strange, working?"

Kelley said, "Just how much

money did Mr. Burlington leave and to whom?"

The woman said, "I don't know exactly, several hundred thousand dollars. It comes to me. Oliver has been giving Harry an allowance for several years, but he won't get it now."

"Damn you," Pointer said. "I always did hate your guts."

KELLEY'S eyes swept down over the curves of her ultra feminine figure and made the mental reservation that he differed with Pointer. Aloud he said, "There are some questions I'll have to ask, Mrs. Burlington. It's just routine. Where were you a half hour ago?"

She gasped and bit her lip. "Why I—I was here. I've been here all afternoon." She was rigid now, her hands clenched at her sides. Her face was turned away from Kelley and when he moved swiftly he saw the way Pointer was looking at her, a slow smile coming over his face.

Mrs. Burlington said, "Harry, I wish you would go—take care of the funeral arrangements. I would appreciate . . ."

"Certainly," Pointer said. "I'll be back later. I'd dropped in this afternoon to talk Oliver into giving me a bit more money. Maybe I can persuade you." He went toward the door.

"I might have some questions I want to ask you," Kelley said.

"Be glad to answer." He gave an address in the East Fifties. "Come over at any time. But don't try to hang this murder on me." He was grinning as he went out.

Kelley turned back to look at the

woman. "There's a bit of tar on your left shoe, Mrs. Burlington," he said. "It's just now getting stiff, although this is a nice, cool apartment. Now on the street, in the sunlight, it's mighty hot."

"What do you mean?" She was breathing quickly again, and Kelley liked to watch the way her bosom moved.

"Can I check on your elevator boys, your servants, even Mr. Pointer, to prove that you were here a half hour ago? It'll be much better if you tell me the truth. Otherwise Mr. Pointer is going to blackmail you."

She opened a silver box on the table and took out a cigarette. Kelley lighted it for her, his fingers touching hers. "I wasn't here," she said after a moment.

"Where were you?"

"I . . ." There was fear and pain in her face, but suddenly they were gone and she smiled at Kelley. "If I have to tell, you'll keep the secret, won't you. I can trust you."

KELLEY gulped, made a move toward her and checked himself. He was going to tell her how much she could trust him, and then he thought of Murdock's warning. He said, "I may have to report it. I'll be as quiet about it as I can."

"I was at a friend's apartment. A man's." He liked the level, frank way she said it.

"A lover?"

She looked away, smoking, "Perhaps," she said slowly. "I don't really love him, but my husband has been playing around for a long while. And, well . . ."

"Sure," Kelley said. He wanted

to say that if from now on she needed a real friend, he'd be glad to accommodate. Instead he remembered Murdock and said, "I'll have to know his name."

She got out of her chair and came to him quickly. "There's no need of telling his name," she said. "He's not connected with this murder."

"I'll have to know his name," Kelley said.

"I'm not going to tell you. You won't try to make me, will you?" She was very close now, almost against him. Her face was tilted backward, her shoulders back so that the curves of her figure molded the dress.

Kelley swallowed. He said, "Damn Murdock! Damn him!" and turning his back began to center his attention on the room. It was large and expensively furnished, with four big windows opening above the Drive. Through these sunlight streamed to make the wine colored rug almost blood red. Around the walls were several glass cases containing guns: a long muzzle-loading squirrel rifle, a triggerless revolver of frontier days, a beautiful, jeweled derringer that could be hidden in the palm of the hand, a big-muzzled blunderbus, and others.

Kelley stood there staring at the guns and cursing silently. He liked this woman; yet she seemed to be the only possible suspect and he had to solve this case to keep his job. The fortune came to her and she didn't want him to check on her whereabouts at the time of the murder. She admitted she was two-timing her husband. Now with



Kelley said, "You can't throw me out. I came to arrest you. For murder."

him out of the way . . . It all added up.

He turned slowly and looked at the woman. She stood in the middle of the room, watching him with level brown eyes that were strangely dark compared to her

blonde hair. Her hands were clasped over her breasts, as if to still their slight movement with each breath. "I'd certainly like that," he thought. And she liked him; he could tell it by the way she looked at him.

If he could save her from this murder rap, she'd like him even more. He thought of how it would feel to have his arms around her, her figure crushed close against him, her mouth tight against his.

She said, "What did you mean when you said, 'Damn Murdock'? Who's he?"

"A louse, but he's my sergeant. He swore that if I so much as looked at a woman connected with this case he'd put me back pound-ing a beat."

"But women like to be looked at. And with some men . . ." She left the sentence unfinished, but her eyes, warm on his, told him what she meant.

"And you?" He took a half step toward her. She waited, her hands still at her breast, her lips parted.

"Damn it!" Kelley said. He spun suddenly, went to the telephone and called headquarters.

"Learned anything?" he asked when Murdock was on the line.

"**C**OME back and get your uniform," Murdock told him, "We've settled the case. Got Burlington's business partner, Ben Heller, down here and he's told us that Burlington had been keeping some wench. He told Heller that he had an appointment with her this afternoon and was going to break the affair off. She'd threatened to kill him if he did—jealous. Also, he'd settled \$50,000 on her and told Heller he was going to try to get it back. He won't try now.

"We'll have the bullet in a little while and we'll have the girl, though Heller doesn't know her

name. But we'll get her—and you'll get back on a beat."

"Maybe," Kelley said, and hung up.

He turned to Kay Burlington, "Do you know this girl your husband was keeping?"

"I've never met her, but her name's Sheila Knight. At least that's the one she goes by. Her apartment's on Central Park West."

"Thanks," Kelley said. He stepped toward the woman, stopped himself. "I may have to come back."

She said, "Please do."

Kelley went out, cursing Murdock under his breath.

The whole case seemed simple enough now. Sheila Knight, about to lose her income from Burlington, as well as the fifty thousand he'd settled on her, had knocked him off. Probably the name wasn't her real one, and the cops would have some trouble locating her. If he got to her first and brought her to headquarters, perhaps Murdock would loosen up.

Still, Mrs. Burlington had an excellent reason of her own for murdering her husband. She didn't love him, and several hundred thousand dollars are worth while, particularly if she had another man spotted who could handle marital duties more satisfactorily. "I'd like to try my hand at keeping her pleased," Kelley thought.

He took a cab across town to Central Park West, then down to the Eighty-Second Street address Mrs. Burlington had given him. Four minutes later, he was ringing a doorbell on the eighteenth floor.

THERE was no sound of footsteps, no warning before the door swung open. Kelley choked. His heart stopped for a moment and his mouth hung wide as he stared at the girl who stood there. She was tall, majestic, with hair the color of red gold hanging in a heavy mass to her shoulders. A green silk wrap was practically her only garment, and against the lighted room her legs were limned alluringly.

The wrap was parted from the waist up, so that he could see sleek, satiny skin. Her figure was perfect—beautifully proportioned; and the sleazy wrap made a poor job of concealing her charms. Her face, framed by the red gold hair, was breathtakingly, sensuously lovely. Kay Burlington had been a beautiful woman, and a likable one; but this girl was femininity incarnate. She was every man's dream of woman.

Kelley kept staring at her, feeling the sudden quickening of his pulse. "Well," the girl said, "what are you looking at?" And then she smiled. Her eyes were green and there was knowledge—and an invitation—in them.

"Miss Sheila Knight?" Kelley's voice sounded strained.

"Yes." She kept smiling, but moved slightly so that the wrap opened a bit wider; her bosom quivered.

Kelley introduced himself, and followed her into the room. He told why he had come as she sat on a large green sofa, cross-legged, white skin visible above her knee. When he mentioned Burlington's murder, she stiffened, but only for a moment. "I'm

sorry he was killed," she said. "I liked him. But he and I were through."

"We know that," Kelly said. It was hard to keep his mind on the case when he was staring at this girl. And she didn't mind being stared at. She sank back in the corner of the sofa. Her green eyes watched Kelley with that faint promise and a smile hidden deep in them.

"At headquarters," Kelley said, "they want to ask you about his murder. He was going to try to get back fifty thousand dollars he'd settled on you. He won't try now."

She was erect suddenly, her eyes blazing, bosom quivering with the movement. "You mean you think I killed him! It's a lie! It's crazy!"

"I didn't say you killed him," Kelley said. "We want to find out who did. You could have."

She was breathing heavily, making her whole torso stir, holding his eyes magnetically. "What time was he killed?"

"About five-five, or five-ten. Within three or four minutes of that."

She sank back on the sofa, smiling again. "I left Oliver on Forty-second Street a little before five and went in the Astor Bar. I was in there until five-thirty, talking to a friend. His name's John Chambers and he didn't even know Oliver. You can call him, or you can call Charlie, the waiter. He'll remember me."

Kelley looked at the milk white flesh of her legs where the wrap had fallen to one side. "No man would forget you," he said.

(Continued on page 112)

ODDS ON DEATH

By JOHN PHILLIPS

WHERE the shoreline curved and the bluff dropped to the jagged rocks of the little cove below, Lane Sontag stopped. He laid his color case and pallet and maulstick on the short salt-grass and sat down.

Below him, the tide was going out, and his nostrils were filled with odors of seaweed and kelp. From his position near the edge of the bluff Sontag could see back up the beach. So far this morning, it was empty. He sighed with relief as he packed his pipe, his moody eyes on a destroyer, San Diego bound. A Navy plane zoomed high overhead.

He was glad of this respite from playing artist. He wanted to forget that hellion, the greased-illusion, Kiroe Mock, the Government so badly wanted.

He shrunk, then, into himself, picked glasses from a pocket of his loose coat and focused them on a form that had appeared on the sandy shoreline far up the beach. His lips drew back in a grin of pure appreciation, showing strong white teeth clamped about his pipestem.

He flattened on his stomach, watching the girl come on. The tight little trunks she wore were white, showing bronzed skin about

and below. The little bandeau barely covered her breasts. Between bandeau and trunks, an expanse of smooth, sun-browned stomach was teasingly visible.

He laid the glasses aside when she came almost below him and rounded a rocky point into a little cove.

Lance Sontag eased himself to the edge of the bluff and thrust his head over cautiously.

THE girl's auburn hair ruffled in the breeze as she bent, spread a blanket on the sand between two sheltering rocks. She looked this way and that, seemed satisfied. Nimble fingers loosened the strings of the bandeau but didn't quite remove it.

There was an ocean breeze, but it could not restrain the perspiration that came out on Sontag's face. His eyes devoured the firm, impertinent beauty of her.

"God!" he croaked.

The girl stood on her toes, arms high above her head. She was a statue, from head to toes, of perfect, deliciously-contoured young womanhood. She loved this morning, the sun, her freedom. She stood on her hands, bent, rolled. And then, with a gay little laugh,

He played at being an artist, though there were smugglers and murderers to be apprehended. The one question that worried him: Could he count on the girl who was posing for him? Was she friend or enemy?

He was laughing when he leaped and struck, but it didn't soften the blow.



she ran and dived into a little tide-pool between the rocks.

She swam furiously around the pool, then turned and floated on her back. The slender brown length of her lay on the water, little ripples breaking past and over her stomach.

Lance Sontag swallowed and inhaled a mighty breath.

He could stand it no longer. He turned over, chest heaving, and watched the cirrus clouds floating overhead. When he peeped again, the girl was drying herself with a rough towel. She lay on the blanket, spreading the towel over her.

"Lovable as hell!" Sontag assured himself fervently.

He stiffened then. A man came clambering over the rocks from the other direction of the cove. Startled, the girl jumped up. The towel she clutched at eluded her. Eyes rolling, tongue running snakelike from between his lips, the man paused, essayed a winning smile, brushed a hand over the thin hair on his head, and came to her.

The girl backed away. Grinning, he followed. Holding her hands in front of her, she backed against the rocks at the bottom of the bluff—and could go no farther.

"Listen, toots, why be afraid of me?" Ingratiatingly.

"Don't. Go away," she begged.

"Listen, kid, when I find a hot number on the beach, I'm copping her."

Sontag grabbed up his artist's paraphernalia and went hastily back down the sloping path. When he reached the sand, he dropped his burden and hurried around the rocky point into the cove. The girl

was down, her slender legs pushing, throwing up the sand. The man was twisting one of her arms back, kneeling beside her.

Sontag ran in, grabbed him by his thinning hair, jerked his head back, and swung one from the hip. The sodden sound of the blow, a grunt, and the other went onto his back. Sontag got him by an arm and leg, swung him easily, and sent him sailing into the tidepool.

Spluttering, he came up, crawled out, choked a stream of profanity, and disappeared around the point.

HUDDLED in a sitting position, **h** fingers busy re-tying the bandeau strings, the girl looked up at Sontag.

"Thanks," she gasped.

He dropped down beside her. "Glad to!" He meant it.

"I guess I really shouldn't—bathe and sun myself this way. But I love the sun."

"It's lovely," Sontag admired, his eyes devouring her.

She grew darker under her tan.

Neither knew how it happened. His arms were around her and he was pressing her back onto the sand. Her lips, moist and hot, were eager for his kisses. She moaned a faint, half-hearted "please" as his embrace grew in ardor.

"Darling!" Sontag exclaimed.

He was running a hand along the soft hollow of her back.

"No. Not now," she begged.

She wriggled away.

"That's . . . right," Sontag said hoarsely. He sat, pouring sand from one hand to the other, while she picked up her blanket and towel, and prepared to leave.

"I may be back here tomorrow.

My name is Rhea," she said.

"Rhea, what?"

"Just Rhea . . . but don't expect me to give another . . . show."

"My name," he supplied, "is Sontag. Just Sontag. I'll be looking for you tomorrow. I'm an artist. I'd like another show."

"I might pose for you." She fled toward the point. Her voice, floating back, echoed, "I might."

"Hot damn!" Sontag cried. Playing the part of an artist—and he *could* paint a little—wasn't going to be so bad, after all. He even looked forward to it.

BUT morning brought other things to Lance Sontag. His kit in hand, he hurried toward the bluff and the cove. As he neared, he could see the crowd of people on the beach; uniformed men, county detectives, police of the little vacation town of Lacove, running back and forth.

Sontag worked in to the inner portion of the gabbling mob. His breath whistled between his teeth, and his forehead wrinkled. A man lay high on the sand, where the incoming tide would get to him within a couple of hours. It was the man whom Sontag had socked the day before!

He looked around. Rhea—just Rhea—stood a few yards away. Sontag's gaze met hers, speculatively. She gazed back at him, and there was something odd, something pointedly uneasy in the way she acted.

Sontag looked away, past the body, to a Chris-Craft Cruiser that had been towed into the cove. He spotted a San Diego detective he knew, and caught his eye. He fol-

lowed Sontag over the rocks, out of the sight of the crowd.

"You still on the job, eh, Sontag?" he grunted. "Well, it looks like 'Uncle Whiskers' was right. Kiroe Mock ain't in this part of the world."

"I'm still working for the Government. Does that look like they think he isn't? Anyhow, that's beside the point. What have you got on that stiff down there?"

"He had cards on him. He's Malden Wyatt, jewelry buyer, lapidarist from Los Angeles. He was shot twice, through the back. That's his boat anchored in the cove. It was drifting past the kelp line, two miles out, when we picked it up.

"We found a wallet on him. A huge one. But it only had a few bucks in it."

"Have you inquired in all the houses around here?"

"Hell, you telling us how to run the law? Of course we did. Even barged into that big place up there."

He jerked his head in the direction of a huge Spanish-style house that sat fifty yards back up the slope above the bluff. A high, adobe-and-plaster wall surrounded the place; tropical shrubs, vines, flowers grew everywhere.

"A writer lives there. Goofy duck with whiskers and glasses and an idea he's John B. Stetson—I mean Shaw."

"Wrong on both names," Sontag grunted. "I assume no one saw a thing?" he added.

"Guy was killed last night. Tide running. You know the noise it makes. Couldn't hear shots, and there wasn't a moon."

"When you get those bullets, give me one. Let me know of anything you learn," Sontag instructed. "Hell! Don't be like that. You know you'll get the credit if I help you crack the case."

Mollified, the detective nodded. "Though it looks," he said, "like it was murder for diamonds, or money."

"Or for revenge," Sontag reluctantly told himself, when the dick had gone.

HE SAT there for a long time, **II** smoking, watching the pelicans that skimmed above the water, listening to the scream of gulls and the bark of sea lions. Finally, he arose and walked back to the cove. He jerked upright. Rhea was still there—though most of the others had gone with the removal of the lapidarist's body.

"It's rather terrible, isn't it?" Her deep, dark eyes probed him. As probing, he looked back. "Yes, rather bad—considering he was shot in the back."

He fell in step beside her as she swung off, with full, long strides, up the beach. For some reason, he could not hook her up to the killing—at least not alone. He wondered, tightening inside, if she might not hold the key to what he wished to know: The whereabouts of that killer, smuggler, racketeer, Kiroe Mock. He couldn't shake the idea, far-fetched as it seemed.

She was studying him from under her long lids. "I—I've my car. See that little cottage, the other side of the street that runs along the beach to town? It's there. That's where I'm staying.

I thought, if you'd like me to pose for you . . ."

She looked down at her feet.

She—did she suspect he suspected her? Could she know that he was a G-Man, a government agent? And it wasn't like her to offer voluntarily to pose for him.

"I'd be glad to," he said.

They climbed into her little car. She drove through the town, turned on an old highway, and finally stopped the car at the top of a high cliff. She led the way down a treacherous path, and along a narrow bit of beach. The cliff was broken, filled with little caves along the base.

"Very few people come here," she told him, smiling. "How do you want me to pose?"

All thoughts of her guilt fled Sontag's mind. He dropped his easel frame, picked it up. "The complete figure, if you please," he huskily replied.

She hesitated, nodded, ducked into a cave. When she came out, Sontag had his canvas, his paints ready. Slender, she came toward him, every movement of her body a separate poem. Sontag arose, went toward her.

"Like this—" he placed one of her arms—"and this."

"You mustn't. You do something to me," she whispered.

Sontag groaned and stepped away.

For more than an hour he worked. Worked furiously. And the start of the picture wasn't bad. While she dressed, he packed his things.

"Tomorrow?" he asked, helping her up the path.

She looked at him quickly, penetratingly. "Tomorrow."

IN THE two days that followed, Sontag tried to draw her out. Who she was, what her last name was, and what she was doing here. Her answers were evasive; as evasive as his own when she tried to question him.

She wasn't at her cottage the fourth day. In his own car, Sontag drove into San Diego and saw the detective he knew.

"The dead bozo, Malden Wyatt, was suspected of handling hot ice," was the information. "Went from L. A. to 'Diego, and to Ensenada in that boat of his. Here's one of the slugs. That's all we got, so far. Looks like all we *will* get, if you ask me."

Sontag drove back, put his car away, and walked down to the beach. He walked to the edge of the bluff and looked over. A pang of anger, of jealousy, assailed him. Rhea was sitting on the sand, very close to a man who wore an inverness cape—even on such a hot day. He affected a Latin Quarter beret, a mustache, and wore dark glasses. By the description, Sontag gathered this must be the eccentric writer who lived in the big house up the slope.

Seized by sudden impulse, he went down the path.

Rhea, an expression on her face that told she had expected Sontag to show up, smiled in a satisfied manner. "I'm sorry I was not home this morning," was her explanation. "I didn't feel like—working. Mr. Sontag, meet Rabon Tarrant. He's a celebrated writer, you know."

Sontag bowed. "You write under your own name?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Sometimes. That depends."

"Upon what?"

Sontag had the uneasy feeling that mocking eyes were looking at him from behind those dark glasses.

"Oh, many things," Tarrant said, waving one hand. "My mood, perhaps. Perhaps," he paused, "the typewriter I use."

Rhea was tense, looking from one man to the other. At last, she relaxed, seeming satisfied. Sontag stretched, yawned easily.

"If you'll come for dinner tonight," Rhea said, "I'll apologize at length."

"Fine," Sontag accepted.

He saw the quick, we've-got-secrets look that passed between the girl and Rabon Tarrant. A warning feeling made weight in the stomach of Lance Sontag.

HE ENTERED the cottage he had rented, going slowly, deep in thought. "The stiff, Wyatt, knew her," he muttered. "Wyatt ran from Ensenada, Chinks could be run in from there, and ice picked up. Suppose Wyatt, though, came down here to Lacove, to get a bunch of smuggled rocks. He waits around. That tiff with the girl . . . he didn't know who she was, I suppose.

"Someone around here, then, sells him the diamonds: His wallet was empty, almost, when he was found. When he casts off his boat, he is shot in the back, the diamonds recovered. . . .

"Hell! That's Kiroe Mock's exact way of doing things!"

He searched through a small file, got a picture of Kiroe Mock as last seen-to-be-known. That had been up north, along the Canadian line.

The G-Men wanted Mock; the Mounties wanted him. He'd killed coastguardsmen, custom border patrolmen, county and city police.

Kiroe Mock, the most elusive of them all, had no vulnerable spot, it seemed. He never worked with a big gang, but always with just two or three tried and trusted men.

Three or four of them, yet the amount of jewelry, the number of aliens they had smuggled in, the holdups they had perpetrated, ran far higher than the average gang-baron's take.

Sontag studied the picture before him. A lean, cynical face, high cheekbones, protruding under-lip. A cruel face, and a crafty one. He got oil paints, a brush. Deftly, whistling softly, he went to work. He drew a Latin Quarter hat on the picture; darkened the sandy hair, drew a black mustache and black glasses on it.

There was no excitement about him now. He knew who Rabon Tarrant was. And he was willing to bet Tarrant knew him. That Tarrant had set the girl on him to make sure.

Tarrant was Kiroe Mock!

He filled and lighted his pipe, his hands very steady. Then he got in his car, went to the telephone office, called Los Angeles. Returning, he mixed himself a highball, read awhile, dozed off.

His life, he knew, wasn't worth a cent if one slip were made tonight. As he shaved and dressed, a slow smile creased his lips.

Funny, how cases were cracked, he reflected. Odd events, accidents, the other side being too eager — these things counted most.

He walked along the rise of the beach, where it ran up to the street, toward Rhea's place. The sun was halfway beyond the rolling Pacific's horizon, sending splashes of crimson and purple to tinge the breakers that ran and broke against the rocks.

Within him, Sontag could not help but wish to hell the girl were not mixed up in this.

The sight of her did not tend to lessen this desire. In a low-cut, thin dress, she greeted him at the door. His arms went around her and he lifted her off her feet, crushing her to him almost brutally. She returned his kisses, squirmed, breathed hotly in his ear. He put her down.

"I can't stand too much," he warned. She laughed — and he thought it was a bit forced — gaily.

"I'm fixing the dinner myself," she said.

"Then, I'll help."

He went with her to the tiny kitchen, while she finished preparing the meal. And he watched every move she made. He helped her put the things on the little breakfast-nook table. She poured wine, and when she tasted hers first, then he tasted his. It was the same with everything.

Sontag was taking no chances on being poisoned or being doped.

AS THE evening wore on, her purpose in having him here became more and more obscure. They sat close together on the porch, watching the moon splash

silver on the sea; listening to the breakers roar. A mocking bird, up late, filled the night with song.

"I've a thirst," she said, breaking a long silence, "for beer. If you'll get your car and drive to the town and get some, I'll make sandwiches while you're gone."

This was it! Almost too readily, Sontag agreed to go.

As he swung off in the direction of his own cottage, he was well aware of two dark forms in a shelter house near the beach; at the next corner, a man tinkered with a seemingly stalled car, whistling tunelessly. Sontag gave no sign he knew they were here.

He cut abruptly into a vacant lot, across a neighborhood handball court, up an alley and came back to Rhea's place. He'd no more than gained it, when the lights flashed out. A dark wrap hugged about her, the girl came out, looked hastily up and down the deserted beach-side street.

Sontag, keeping to the deeper shadows, went after her. If he was aware the two men in the shelter house came out, crept after him, that the man with the stalled car did the same, he gave no sign.

The girl reached the end of the street, left the walk and cut across the salt-grass of the slope. She reached a high gate in the wall circling the big house, called softly. The gate opened and she passed through. There was the sound of a lock being clicked on the other side.

Sontag circled the wall. On the far side, where there was a space clear of vines, and no rustling sounds to betray him, he made his try. He gained the top of the wall

in a leap, poised momentarily, dropped over.

He wanted to curse his luck. Water splashed, soaking him to the skin. To hell with the designer who placed that fish-pool there!

In the darkness inside the wall, a darker shape came hurrying. "Damn' cat, after them goldfish again," the man grumbled.

Sontag bellied down in the pool.

"Scat, you son!" the man rasped.

Sontag leaped, his pistol flailing. A hoarse croak, the sodden crack of the pistol barrel on a bare head. And that was that. A patch of moonlight fingered over the wall. Sontag dragged the man into it, rolled him over.

"Limey Tate!" Sontag grunted. "Now, there's no doubt that Rabon Tarrant is Kiroe Mock!"

Shivering, his clothes plastered to him, he crossed the yard and tip-toed across a flagged patio. A doorway thrust itself darkly against the cream-colored stucco of the house. Carefully, Sontag tried an ornate knob.

"Yeah?" The sound came harsh, muffled from the other side.

"'S me—Limey," Sontag grunted.

The knob turned from inside. Sontag thrust with all his weight. The man on the other side of the door was flung back, the heavy door striking him on the nose. He gurgled, clapped a hand to his face, then toppled as Sontag struck.

Sontag caught him, eased him down. Moving carefully in the dark hallway, he felt his way along. He stiffened, then. From somewhere, deep in that maze of

(Continued on page 123)

CRIMSON COMEDY

(Continued from page 37)

DONALDSON beetled his brows. "In time for what?"

"The blowoff," I said. "This cleans up the Valanno kill."

Pete Hinshaw pushed himself off the rug. "You can't pin that on me! I'm just a prop man—"

"But you carry Shanghai Mamie's sideline," I told him. "Criminal assaults wrapped up to take home."

"That's not murder! I—"

I said: "Skip it." Then I looked at Lisbeth Lennord. "About that firecracker in your bag, hon."

"Dan . . . my God, please . . . you don't really believe I did that, surely. . . ? She trembled toward me, forgot to hold that torn sweater together. Her creamy, mounded breasts heaved up and down with her gasped breathing. Her puss was as pale as milk from an anemic cow.

I had a hell of an impulse to grab her, maul her quiet—but I don't always obey my impulses. I said: "Back off and pipe down, sis. I'll do the talking now."

Dave Donaldson grumbled: "Then do it. Before I blow my topper."

"Okay," I said. "Lumpy Valanno's croaking was premeditated—by somebody who knew he had a faulty pump. Understand, the doctored firecracker wasn't loaded heavily enough to blow Valanno dead. That would have endangered everybody else on the set. But it carried just enough of a charge to

shock the little fat guy's ticker out of action."

Donaldson gave me the fishy glimpse. "Come on, Sherlock. Pull your rabbit out of the hat."

I gave myself a gasper, set it afire. I said: "A short while ago I went over to the Altamount lot." This was a lie, but I had a damned good reason for it. "I had them run me a rush projection of the scene where Valanno was cooled. Just as I expected, the camera caught somebody in the act of turning away from the blast, ducking before it went off."

Sandra Valanno grabbed my arm. Her pinkies sank into me so hard I could hear my marrow squishing. She said: "But that—that would mean—"

"Yeah. This party knew what force to expect out of the explosion. And it was the same guy who planted the real firecracker in Lisbeth Lennord's purse just now—the original firecracker which he'd had in his pocket ever since he switched it for the doctored duplicate, back on the set. We'll prove that scientifically by microscope examination of the dust from his pocket. His will be the only duds to show gunpowder dust—hey, Dave! There he goes! *Nab Beau Babbitt!*"

THE tall and handsome straight man in the late lamented comedy team of Babbitt and Valanno was already on his way to the nearest window. When I yelled, he



*Her hair felt soft,
silky, smelled nice.*

wheeled. He had a gun in his mitt. He cut loose with it.

I cut loose with mine first; splintered his right kneecap. His chattering rod hosed slugs all over the room as he went down in a cursing heap.

Donaldson lunged at him, kicked the gun away. "That'll cost you, brother."

"You—damn you—you'll never prove—"

I said: "Maybe I couldn't have proved anything. But I ran a hell of a good bluff—and you gave yourself away. *Dead* away, if you

consider the gas chamber where you'll wind up," I added.

"You can't send me to the gas chamber for trying to shoot my way . . . out of a . . . lousy . . . frameup. . . !

"Not if your bullets had gone wild. But glom a gander. You just croaked two of Shanghai Mamie's hoods—including her pet crippler, Pete Hinshaw."

"God . . . oh, my God. . ."

I said: "Your scheme to brown Lumpy Valanno was plenty nifty. You figured nobody would suspect you of bumping your partner. In fact, people would be sorry for you because you'd been slipped a dynamite cracker causing his decease. That was nice thinking. But I began to get hep when I remembered a few things."

"Such . . . as . . . ?

"Your jealousy when you caught Valanno's wife dishing me a little kiss. That didn't register with me at first; but it jostled my think-tank later. When I called at Sandra's wikiup a while ago, you had red fingermarks on your mush. You said Shanghai Mamie's boys had bopped you. I know you were lying. Shanghai Mamie's hired hands never slap. They punch—with their fists."

"W-well. . . ?"

"You had been slapped, hard. Nobody was with you except Sandra herself. So I doped it out that you must have made a pass at her and got a stinger across the map."

The red-haired widow said: "You—you're right, Mr. Turner. He *did* try to m-make love to me!"

"So there was the motive," I concluded. I blew smoke in Babbitt's twisted kisser. "You were in love with your partner's wife. You wanted her so damned badly you were willing to cool him, put him out of the way for keeps. You admitted as much when you said you had enough annuity geetus stashed away to take care of Sandra and yourself even if you never made another pic. That proved you were hoping to marry her when things died down.

"So I set a little trap for you. I let you overhear my phone conversation with Lieutenant Donaldson concerning the possibility of Lisbeth Lennord's guilt. I knew you'd insist on coming here to her joint with me. I figured you'd try to plant the firecracker on her. And now your cook is goosed."

He stared past me; glued his glassy gaze on the voluptuous red-haired Valanno widow. "I did it . . . for you . . . I was crazy over you . . . I had to. . ."

Sandra Valanno cleared her throat. She dredged up a chunk of phlegm. She spat it in his face.

Then she turned around and walked out.

AFTER the prisoners and cops and corpses were gone, I found myself alone with Lisbeth Lennord. She said: "Dan . . . oh-h-h, Dan, how can I ever thank you enough? How can I p-pay you?"

I ran my fingers through her mellow-honey colored hair. It felt soft, silky; smelled nice. "I've got special fees for script clerks, kiddo," I said.

THE D.A.'S DAUGHTER!

(Continued from page 17)

"Give me that much time and I think I can clean up your damned town—and incidentally save you a lot of personal care and trouble. Take my word for it, you've got to do it! Got to!"

And at last Wimberley said he'd do it, somehow and someway.

Gregory slammed down the phone, listened to the sound of a car diminishing in the distance and took out the two pictures again. He actually flushed, looking at them, and realizing how they were meant to be used, the flush deepened into the red of anger. He wondered if Nadine would be disappointed when she came downstairs to find him gone, and hoped like hell she would. Backing his car out of the drive he noted almost absently that someone had evidently put the little black coupe in the garage.

JOE McCORMICK reminded Gregory of a fat pig, scraped pink and ready to be baked with an apple in its mouth. But there was nothing soft about the blue eyes that glared at Gregory. McCormick was wearing a suit of bright blue pajamas, sitting in the middle of his immense bed, his bodyguard still leaning suspiciously against the door.

"All right," said Gregory, "by God I'll prove it to you. I'm telling you that in an hour's time there'll be a pickup out for you for killing Fred Arthur. Witnesses have been fixed to swear you

argued with him, and to swear you were the last man at the party."

"He wouldn't have the guts," swore McCormick. "I think you're a damned crook with an axe to grind yourself!"

Gregory reached down and opened the kitbag at his feet, the body guard tensing toward his shoulder holster. "This," said Gregory, "is an induction coil. You clamp it against a wall with these suction discs, put on the earphones and you can hear what is going on next door. The batteries are here in the kitbag. I'm going to Duke Jordan's apartment right now. You and the mug come along and listen outside. I'll prove to you that I'm right."

It pleased him immensely when McCormick's eyes glowed so viciously. But he wasn't so pleased when he parked in front of the Vallambrosa Apartments to find the small black coupe already there. Damn! That redhead! She'd come to take Duke Jordan to an accounting herself!

He waited until McCormick's big sedan pushed its nose into sight, then went boldly into the apartment and paused at the desk. "Mr. Jordan, please. And tell him the name is Gregory, recently connected with the district attorney's office."

The clerk disappeared for a moment, came back to say that Mr. Jordan said come up, and that the number was 1214. A few moments later he tapped on the door. The

man that admitted him looked like Lon Chaney, of the old silent pictures, only tougher.

He said. "Come in, dick. The boss is tickled to death. But just a minute."

He fanned Gregory, found no gun, and marveled at it.

Duke Jordan, dressed in a business suit, came out of a bedroom and said, "Hello, Gregory."

"Morning, Duke. Miss Wimberley in the bedroom?"

"Yep," answered the Duke, grinning like a college boy and running his fingers through his curly hair. The raising of his arm revealed the gun in its holster. This, too, pleased Gregory.

"I've come to take her home," said Gregory, smiling, "And, "Nice pictures, weren't they, Duke? Arthur was the photography fan, though, wasn't he? Hell, you didn't even have sense enough to take the negatives!"

"Don't underrate me, my friend. You have those pictures, haven't you? To hell with the negatives, two will be plenty. Let me show them to old Wimberley and he'll kick in so fast his head will swim." He fumbled for a cigarette, lit it. "You don't know how much family pride that old guy has got."

"Kick in! Hell, I did underrate you. I figured all you wanted was his resignation. Two birds with one stone, hanh?"

"Three," said the Duke, calmly.

Gregory said, "I get you, of course. You're not very afraid of talking to me, are you?"

"Why should I be? You won't talk!" There was something cold and deadly about those words.

Gregory hoped like hell that McCormick was listening outside with that induction coil!

"The way you jazzed up that little gal was pretty clever. Gave her a Mickey Finn then took the pictures, making Arthur think it give *him* a hold!"

"Right you are. Arthur is all washed up, has been for months. I'm taking over completely now, Gregory. Hell, nothing happens in this town I don't know about. I knew when Wimberley went to Kansas City, had a man on his tail when he contacted you. I knew when you made your inquiries concerning the local setup. Nope, I'm too clever for the average run, so I might as well be tops. All by myself! The fat slob goes."

"You mean McCormick?"

"Who else? I get three birds with one stone. I frame this murder on McCormick; I get rid of Wimberley, the only honest official; and I make payoff dough from him as well."

"Hell, no. The pictures were supposed to have been discovered by your pal, Hall, clutched in Arthur's hand. And they weren't!"

"What's the difference? You got the pictures and I got you. The cops will have the fat slob before long, and the way I have it fixed all hell won't get him off—!"

THE doorbell chimed. Lon Chaney looked at Duke. Duke got to his feet, his hand going to his gun. He nodded. Chaney disappeared. He backed into the room a moment later, his hands in the air, and the portly body of McCormick was partially shielded by him. Mc-

Cormick said. "Don't move, Jordan." And to Gregory, "That's quite a gadget. I heard every word this doublecrosser said. So I'm a fat slob, eh, Jordan. You're killing three birds with one stone. And the police will be after me and get me any minute, eh? Why, damn your soul, you won't live to—!"

Gregory's foot was hooked beneath a low footstool. Suddenly he kicked it across the room at McCormick. At the same time he yelled, "Duke!" and dove for the shelter of a divan. He heard the roar of guns, actually heard lead crashing into the body of Lon Chaney. He heard the gun of McCormick's own bodyguard, the gun of Duke Jordan! Then—silence.

He peered cautiously about the end of the davenport. Duke Jordan lay face downward on the floor. Two others lay motionless. McCormick on his hands and knees was crawling toward the door.

Fascinated, Gregory watched the fat man. One arm collapsed. The other followed. He laid his cheek against the coolness of the hardwood and was very still.

A great pounding came from the bedroom. Gregory grinned. He could tell Wimberley now that he was at least making progress. He wouldn't have to attempt to get anything on McCormick or Jordan again, all because of an induction coil and a set of headphones. The pounding increased. He took a pair of glossy prints and two negatives from his pocket, applied a lighter to them and burned them to ash over a stand. Then he broke the ashes to smaller bits, until they were pulverized. No one would have to know about those pictures, either.

Then he walked toward the door, feeling very very happy about the past—but happier about the future.

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HOMICIDE IS HARD TO HIDE

(Continued from page 53)

don't stay inside your den."

IT WAS still raining when I went after my drink, late the next morning. I moseyed down to the jail. Mowron wasn't the sort to do a tower in the pokey, and he showed it. He grabbed the bars and shoved his face up against them. "Do something!" he begged.

"I am," I answered. "But if I did it too quick, you might have a murder rap, then a rope, wound around your neck. I'm going down to your office and look around."

I left him before he could start yapping a lot of questions.

Specs and Jap Kane were lounging in Mowron's office when I showed up. Specs eyed me sourly. "Fine pal, you. I understand that Ed Pliney kept you from getting aired last night—you and that Brian dame. Better wait till the papers come from the city tonight, then see if you want to play dolls with that baby."

"You're getting scummier all the time, Specs." I glanced at Kane. "As for you," I told him, "you better be careful about orders."

"I never gave any orders. Get to hell out of here."

"When I get what Mowron sent me for." I walked into the next office. The outside auditor looked up from some books and answered my question. "Checks close to ninety thousand now," he told me.

I walked on into Spence's office. Things didn't look the same. The place looked like it had been gone over from top to bottom. Had

they been hunting that jigger cap? Kane walked up and stood in the doorway. "Get whatever it is and dust it." He glared at me. "And don't go yelling any more killing hints, or you might find a kill you can't crawk about."

I looked around. There was an umbrella standing in a corner. Kane grabbed it before I could. He halfway opened it and shook it as though hoping something would fall out. It didn't. "This's Spence's bumbershoot," he reared.

"Mowron loaned it to him," I lied.

"Mowron ain't needing a bumbershoot."

"His wife is—and that's what I came for." I had to have something to lug away, after I said Mowron had sent me.

Kane jabbed the umbrella at me, stepped back, then followed me as far as the door. I didn't have to look back; I could feel him looking suspicion-near-murder at my back. I went back to Driller's for another drink, and while it was coming up, I telephoned Nora.

No answer, so I went to the booth. I sat there trying to get a line snubbed tight on my thoughts, idly picking up the umbrella and jabbing at a butt on the floor. There were little rings, like wear or dirt around it, like it had leaned against something so-high, then, at other times, against something a bit higher and higher. I opened it, and the rings broke and made streaks, one above the other.

The fountain girl howled at me to shut the damn' thing, because it was bad luck to raise an umbrella inside a place. I snapped it closed and tossed it to her. "Souvenir from a dead man—Spence—for a drink on the house."

Her eyes got big, she hugged the umbrella to her, then mixed me a slug that was de luxe: whiskey with a small, legal shot of coke.

I CALLED Nora three more times within the next two hours, went out for a walk, came back to Driller's and drank again, and called some more. It was getting pretty close to dark when I finally got Nora on the line.

"Where you been?" I griped.

"Hush. We're not married!" she sassed back. "I've been over in Delcran. I found out Spence had a safety deposit box over there. I hadn't waited more than an hour when I walked Reava Spence and Two-Gun Graw. She looked like she'd had a bad night. They went into the vault, and came out a minute later, empty handed. Reava didn't seem to want to get back into the car with Graw."

"Anything else?"

"Why don't you do your own work? Yes, something else. A man answering Puffy Pete Houcke's description—only wearing glasses and a cap, which could be a cheap disguise—has the box right next to Spence's. He came to it just before the bank closed yesterday . . . and don't ask me how I found out."

"Keep your skirt pulled down," I warned her. "What does that spell? Nothing, that's what. You stay there. I'll be up later."

I didn't give her time to answer. I hung up and walked out and hoofed the blocks to the Spence house. It was dark when I got there. I circled the house, went to the back again. I didn't see any lights, and the garage was locked. Standing there, I thought I heard a faint scream from somewhere inside.

I found a broken window in a well and wedged down into the basement, struck a match and found the stairs and tiptoed up. The door gave when I turned the knob and I eased into the cold kitchen. I stood listening to the drip of a leaky faucet, then almost jumped out of my hide.

"Oh, damn you, don't!" I heard Reava Spence wail. I went out into a hall, followed sobs, pleading and curses, went into a dark bedroom and saw a ray of light under the bathroom door. I could hear plenty now, and it came from Reava in the bathroom; I could hear a man's voice in the opposite connecting bedroom, too.

"Let me get my head loose, I'm choking," Reava yelled. I knelt and peeped through the keyhole. Hell. Some mug had stuck her head inside the bathroom and shut the door on her neck, evidently wedging it so she couldn't get away.

"Yank that skirt off her," a whispery voice, Puffy Pete Houcke's voice, commanded.

"Off she is," Two-Gun Graw answered. "Take my belt to her!"

I heard a sharp leather against skin sound, and saw Reava's face contort. She twisted her head, she screamed and cursed and then

began to beg as the belt played a tune on her stern.

"Where is it?" Houcke hissed. "There was sixty grand in that box of mine, and it's empty. You took Spence's keys out of his pockets in the office. That girl saw you down after them when you dropped them. You don't—give it to her, Graw."

"No! Please," Reava wailed. "I did intend to go to our bank box this morning. Well, Graw saw that the box was empty."

"Then how in hell did Spence get into my box?" Houcke raged. "Talk, or I'll have you skinned alive."

"I—well, Spence found out you'd worked to get him on with Mowron, and he knew how it used to be between you and me. He said he didn't want to be a goat for nothing—or the small cut he was getting for your protection, and him taking all the money. I—he made me get a wax impression of your safety deposit key, one night when you were here. He rented a box next to yours.

"He went to his box, one day, and spilled it. The vault keeper got down to help Harry pick up a bunch of stuff, and Harry managed to get the bank's key for that row of boxes and get an impression of it, too; so he had the two keys necessary to get into your box."

"Where's that dough? Hit her a few, Graw."

Graw laid it on hard. Reava quivered and groaned.

"I don't know," she sobbed. "I don't. I never intended to double cross you; you'd better—let me go!" Her voice rose. "You killed Harry. You must have doped his

whiskey when you came here the night before he died."

"Bust her until she tells," Houcke ordered. "She and Spence aimed to grab that money and blow."

"Wait," Graw snapped. "The door in front."

THREE loud raps, a pause, two raps sounded on the front door. "It's Kane," Houcke hissed. "Let him in."

I drew my .45 and waited. I heard Graw open the front door, heard him exclaim, "Hell, Kane, where'd you get her?"

"Hiding in the shadows outside. Pliney was out there, too. I let him have a gunbarrel over his stupid head. Get along, you."

I went hot and then cold all over when I heard Nora Brian protest, "Stop shoving me around!"

They passed the dark bedroom where I was and went on to the one opposite the bath. "Kane, you idiot!" Houcke began swearing.

"Hold it, Houcke," Kane rapped. "Here. Take a look at this newspaper. It's the *Delcran Eagle*. There's a story by that Norton pest on the front page. See. It's what they call a scoop, I guess. Even on us. This dame here, according to that story, was seen, a couple of times, in that corn joint outside of town—with Harry Spence!"

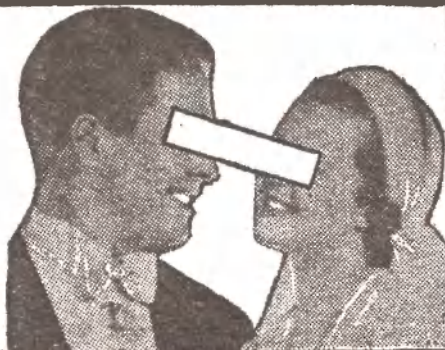
"Damn her, let me loose and at her," Reava yapped. "That's where the money is; she and Harry were aiming to blow with it. I bet she's got the dough he took out of your box, Pete."

Houcke said something, and the door was pulled off Reava's neck.



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The whole bunch passed up the hall into the living room. I went to the bedroom door, but couldn't hear much, crept into the hall and into the dining room and put my eye to a space between the sliding, double doors into the living room.

Nora stood beside a table, her face white, but chin up. Graw was holding onto Reava. Boy! The thin silk scanties they'd not torn off her, hadn't been protection against a belting. Reava's legs and shoulders and rear were raw and welted and swollen.

"You were out with Spence?" Houcke snapped. "Don't lie."

"I was. Twice. I guess that girl reporter from the *Advocate* saw me there. I went with Spence, trying to get information."

"About what?"

"The city's finances, the books. Houcke, you might as well give it up. I'm with the bonding company—"

Oh, the little fool! As I thought that, Kane grabbed her. Nora tried to jerk away. He slapped her half cuckoo, jerked her out of her raincoat and jacket, ripped her sweater off, and finally got a hammerlock on her.

"You found the cap off a whiskey bottle in there, then?" Kane snarled. "What'd you do with it? Bigod, talk or I'll break it off."

"Break it, damn you!" Nora cried.

"No," I disagreed, giving one door a yank and sliding it back. "Getcha damn' hands off her and up—up, all of you!"

THE room was still as a cross-roads on Sunday. Nora sobbed jerkily, Reava turned half toward

me. Houcke's hands pushed upward and his face was chalky and funny looking. Graw hesitated, raised his hands shoulder high. Kane moved as if to let go of Nora.

"That whiskey cap—the one Houcke poisoned here and put on the bottle Spence took to work—has been tested and is safe," I said. "Yeah, Reava, Spence was poisoned. Mayor Houcke fixed it that way, had the auditor in and the news hit the paper. Spence got the *Advocate* before lunch time—when he usually started drinking. See how it fitted in? You and your hubby were readying to blow, huh? You really didn't love him, but you didn't trust Houcke much, either. It shocked you to find Harry dead—but not enough so that you never thought of his keys, and dropped them when you frisked him. Nora thought you were hunting that whiskey cap. You wanted keys to the money you thought was in the box."

Houcke swayed and groaned, gasped and sank toward a chair. The damn' hellion. He flung himself behind it, snatching at a gun in his pocket. At the same time, Kane gave Nora a shove toward me and Graw flashed both hands toward both his guns.

Nora dropped flat and my gun raised hell. The first shot took Kane right between the eyes and he hit the floor stone dead. I slid on a rug and went to one knee and Graw's two shots heated my scalp. Houcke fired from around the chair. Reava screamed and heaved a bottle at Graw and he missed again and I let go two shots through the chair. Springs *punged*



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and filling flew. Houcke bounced up, screaming like an insane woman.

I gave him one more dose of lead pill and he spun halfway across the room before he fell. Graw was moving around for another shot. I fired, broke the window back of him and rolled away. His bullet dug the floor and splinters dug into my face. I rolled again and got on my feet, only to have them fly from under me. I sat down on the floor right on the end of my spine.

Graw raised one gun and took careful aim, just for the hell of it. I felt empty inside and my head buzzed, but all I could do was sit there, paralyzed for the time being, and watch it come. I tried to close my eyes and couldn't.

"Back, you two!" Graw raised his other gun at the women. "An' you, Hard Guy—"

GLASS crashed and tinkled from a long front window. Graw's head jerked back and he took a step forward. Pained astonishment smeared his empty-looking puss. Two more shots drilled from the window into Graw's back, and another ripped into his side as he folded up and fell.

"Wasn't pretty shootin'," Ed Pliney panted, climbing in the window, a smoking gun in one hand. He rubbed an egg-sized lump on his hatless head and looked down at Graw. "But it was mighty final," Pliney said . . . "Call me a fool, huh? Yeah!"

It was Pliney who called Delcran, and the ambulance for Houcke. I was getting a drink

from Nora and the dead-headedness was going out of my dead end. Somehow, in the deal, Reava Spencer went to get dressed—and kept on going.

"There goes your money," Puffy Pete croaked at me as they lifted him on a stretcher—the first lap toward the chair. Pliney had a few cuss words to say about that, too.

"You let her go deliberately, Hard Guy," Nora accused. "Now my company will blame me because the money isn't recovered."

"Keep that raincoat over you," I grunted. "I guess we could catch her if we had to, but I don't think we'll have to. After all, she wasn't in on the kill—"

I turned to Burson and Watts as they came boiling in. We argued a while, drank some, talked some more. "So your office gets the credit for what happened here," I said at last. "I get the poke of pelf you promised, Burson. Miss Brian here, of course, gets credit for finding the money."

"Found it? I thought it was missing," Burson bleated. "How much?"

"I don't know yet," I answered. I could see into the little entryway by the front door. There was a stoneware umbrella stand there. I walked over and picked it up and brought it back and I said a prayer as I turned it upside down. Hay—straw—I mean, *Excelsior!*

The metal drain plate clanked to the floor, and then out fell banded packets of big-figured folding money. Burson dropped to his knees and pawed the lettuce. "Eighty-five grand!" he gasped. "The dough Houcke had buried,

and Spence's, too. How'd you find it? How'd you figure this?"

"Well," I said, hifaluting like, "I figured Spence knew his run was about up. With so many con-ning in-this, he aimed to skip and leave Houcke, Reava, and the whole mess up a tree with empty bags.

"I knew it was in the umbrella stand because I looked at Spence's umbrella. It had rings around it, one after another, like the bottom of the stand had been raised a couple times and the umbrella got dirt off the rim of the stand, there. Two times—once when Spence hid his own money, next, when he added Houcke's. It's brainwork, Burson!"

IF ONLY Burson could've known I'd got that wild idea when I saw that umbrella stand only a little while before!

It was pretty late when Nora and I turned into Driller's on the way to her apartment. Specs and Lou were in the booth. I ordered two de luxes and Nora and I stood while we waited.

"Fine guy. Never even give me a call. Now, the *Advocate* will run the story before the city papers I write for get here," Specs sniffed.

"Fine guy you are," I filed back. "You find out from Lou about Nora being seen with Spence; that's what you two had your heads together for, that day in Houcke's office. You get a beat—and Nora damn' near gets killed. I ought to sock you."

"Come on, Lou. Let's go home." Specs gave me a superior look.

"Uh-huh, Specs." The little fool

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had fallen. She turned to me. "Don't be mad at Specs. I helped on that story."

"Yeah. But did you get part of the by-line? Can't you see how he suckered you?"

I saw a light of dawning intelligence gleam in her eyes. She swung without warning and slapped Specs halfway to the fountain. "You damned bum!" she screamed and took out through the door.

I grinned at Specs, put my arm around Nora, and kissed her. She kissed right back. "Come on, Nora, sweetheart," I said. "Let's go home."

Specs was cussing miserably when we went out. His night was ended. As I shut the door of Nora's apartment, helped her out of the raincoat that covered her bare shoulders and took her in my arms, I knew that my night was just beginning. . . .

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DEAD MAN'S GAME

(Continued from page 63)

were in the back room of the saloon—"Red, of course we know *you* didn't do it. Somebody with two strong arms killed Jake. But, matter of form, you know; and it might help us; where were you all day?"

Calmly, with clear headed nerve borrowed from the drug, Jake described every spot Red had visited that afternoon—hadn't he followed for this very purpose? He ended by mentioning hesitantly that he had visited Lora Newsome. It wouldn't do to leave that out.

"I see . . ." The sheriff was looking at Jake's shoes. "I know *you* didn't kill your brother, Red. But do you think *Lora* might have."

"By God!" Jake caught at the idea. "I know she hated his guts."

"And you know damn' well she killed him—or helped!" barked the sheriff. He asked slowly, cruelly: "Was it revenge then?"

"Wh-what d'ya mean, revenge?" Jake faltered, his voice dry and hoarse.

"Revenge *that you killed Lora*—that you kicked her to death as only a man with no arms would—that you bashed in her head with those heavy boots of yours!" He jerked out a revolver and stuck it into Jake Hammacher's belly as the man would have arisen.

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"Naw—stay awhile, Red. You've got time—plenty! You admitted you visited Lora Newsome and no one has seen her since . . ."

Jake was thinking dully: "Red must have killed her because he saw us today—because he thought she was two-timing him. . . ."

". . . And you didn't even have brains," the sheriff was finishing, "to wipe the blood and hair from her head off your shoes. Come on—get goin'!"

And they took Jake away; he couldn't say anything, because he was walking a tight rope with a noose at each end of it. But there was one consolation: the dope was wearing off, and his shoulders felt like two balls of fire rolling in toward his laboring heart. And the exertion had been too much for him—even doped as he was. Jake knew he was about to pass out; and he had an idea that he might not wake up. . . .

STRAIGHT FROM THE FEED BOX

(Continued from page 71)

son laughed—a mirthless sound; came away from the door.

HTELEN IRISH said: "He'll only go back to that Zeke Cerness, then have another try for you."

Benson laughed grimly. Not that bird. If Cerness is the kind of a lad that pays murder money, he'll be the kind that won't care for failures. Copetti will know that—he'll take to cover or skip town."

"This thing is all screwy, Curtis. Who is this Zeke guy, anyhow?" she complained and asked.

Benson grinned at the red-head and got a cigarette to burning. He said: "He's a lawyer, sweet, and I've been learning things about him. He's smart as hell and probably just as crooked. Two years ago he defended 'Bull' Stroup in court and got him off with a light rap for illegal entry and robbery. That isn't so funny, but this is; six months ago he was Clayton Trowbridge's counselor at the same time

he defended Stroup on a charge of robbing Trowbridge."

The girl's eyes widened and she stared. "That is funny! Seems to me there's something smelly in the woodpile."

Benson said softly: "I think it's the twenty-five grand paid Trowbridge by an insurance company for the loss of the necklace."

Silently, the private detective watched as Helen got up from the chair, and adjusted her torn clothing. She blushed rosily as he stood enchanted by the lithe movement of her body.

He said, grinning: "Cover thyself, Lady Charming. You'd give a stone image ideas."

IT was nearing ten o'clock that night when Curtis Benson swung his roadster over from Hollenbach Boulevard into the confines of Gramercy Park. He sped by carefully clipped hedges, vast rolling lawns and tree shrouded



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houses. Braking the car within the shadow of a willow tree, he stepped out. So deep and opaque was the shadow the car could not be seen from a distance of fifty feet.

His heels made clicking sounds as he strode up the walk toward Clayton Trowbridge's house. Banging hard knuckles against the door, he whistled a couple bars of a song, then banged again.

A woman's voice called through the wood; "Who . . . who is it, please?"

Benson called out his name and waited. He smiled a bit grimly when the sound of a chain rattling against the door came to him. Light streamed out then, bathing his tall figure. He stepped inside and stood with his hat crumpled in his hand, looking at the woman who had just admitted him. It was, as he believed, Miss Hopkins, the housekeeper.

She was a woman of about thirty, he figured, and though she wasn't beautiful as the word is interpreted, there was a compelling attractiveness about her composed, white face; the midnight eyes almost on a level with his own. He sensed, rather than saw, the perfection of her figure enhanced by the severe black dress she wore. He *saw*, rather than *sensed*, the low cut bodice; the gentle slope of soft white skin above her bosom.

When he reluctantly raised his eyes, he saw the sardonic smile on her lips. She said: "Mr. Trowbridge will be glad of your arrival. They are waiting for you in the study."

Benson raised his brows. He said: "They?"

She nodded. "Mr. Trowbridge and . . . Mr. Ceress."

Benson's face did not betray the start the name Ceress had given him, but he did say a bit emphatically, "It'll give me a lot of pleasure to talk with Mr. Ceress!"

The woman raised her eyes inquiringly, then turning about, she led him along the wide hall, swung left into the study. Benson followed closely, admiring the deliberately sensuous sway of her body as she walked.

Clayton Trowbridge was sitting at a desk when they entered the room. He was listening attentively to the slender man whose voice was quivering with rage. Zeke Ceress! A tiny fist was gesturing wildly toward Trowbridge. Neither were apparently aware that Benson and the housekeeper had entered.

Benson said: "Rehearsing a play, folks?"

Trowbridge raised his eyes; Ceress spun a small, nattily attired body about. His face was mottled; thin lips were drawn to a white line. So blonde was his hair that his small ferret eyes seemed to be without brows or lashes.

Trowbridge said quaveringly: "I'm glad you've arrived, Mr. Benson. Mr. Ceress was . . . was becoming objectionable."

Benson's narrowed eyes locked with Ceress's. He said coldly: "Mr. Ceress is objectionable in many ways, I've found."

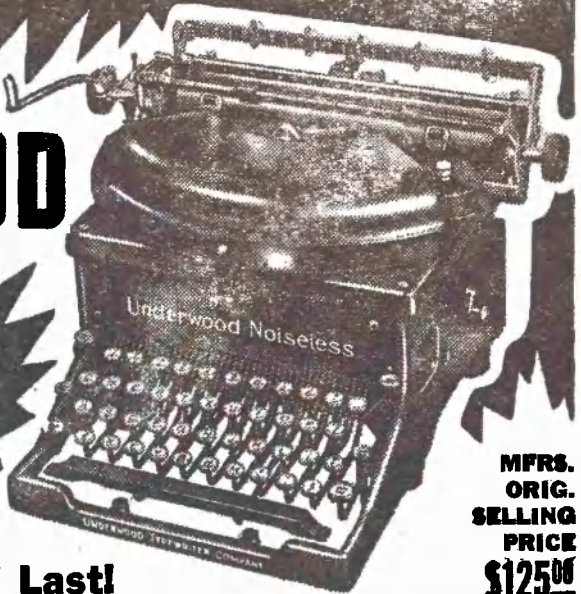
The dapper little lawyer started, his eyes leaving the private detective to follow the form of Miss Hopkins leaving the study. Trowbridge got to his feet, thin hands gestured.

He said: "I neglected to send

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you your check, Mr. Benson. I have the cash in my safe. I'll get it for you. Excuse me for a moment." He went away through a door that evidently connected with another room.

Benson's bleak stare clung to Ceress. He said: "You had two strikes, Ceress. One more and you're out."

CERESS' tongue licked across his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about." His body was braced against the wide desk; nervous hands were toying with objects. He seemed about to say more, but suddenly a book shot from his hand, made a smashing, direct hit against the one overhead light that was illuminating the room. The study was plunged into darkness.

Benson let out a curse, dropped to the floor. He shouted: "You . . . you, Ceress, stand where you are!" As he dropped, a hand raced beneath his arm-pit, jerked out with a gun. He closed his eyes for an instant, trying to accustom them to the darkness. As he opened them, the thunder of a shot reverberated within the room; the sound of sucked-in breath came to him. He cursed some more under his breath, rolled over three times, then came to his feet as a scream of terror rent the silence. The housekeeper—

A shout coming from the room which Trowbridge had entered. "It's . . . it's him! Stroup! God! Don't. . . ." The voice was quivering . . . ridden with the fear of death. The sound of feet beating the floor; the crackle of breaking glass.

Benson was across to the connecting door in two great leaps; he lunged into the room, eyes desperately attempting to probe the blackness. A body, vibrant and pulsing crashed into him. He let the hundred and eighty pounds of him carry the body to the floor, arms locked cleverly about it. A panting voice muttered unintelligible words. Benson raised the gun for a blow; his hand encountered bare flesh. The housekeeper!

Swiftly, Benson's hand ripped a tiny gun from her grasp. A knee came up toward his groin, but Benson rolled with the up-thrust, and slapped savagely with open palm.

Pressing his lips to her ear, he whispered; "Cut it, Miss Hopkins! It's Benson!"

From across the room the sound of dragging feet came to him then. He rose to a knee, gun pointed unwaveringly toward the sound. Light flooded the room suddenly, bringing with it a temporary blindness. Batting his eyes rapidly, Benson straightened to his feet.

CLAYTON TROWBRIDGE was standing by a wall switch—stood upon crouching, unsteady legs that threatened to fail him any moment. Terror-widened eyes were searching the room wildly and he weaved drunkenly now from side to side. His clothing was disheveled and torn; a livid bruise lay upon one wrinkled cheek. As Benson got nearer, he saw the marks of fingers on the other's neck.

He said soothingly: "Take it easy, Trowbridge."

Trowbridge's voice came. He cried: "I saw him . . . as I came

in. The window there . . . he looked like a gigantic shadow! It was terrible!"

Benson said: "You gave a good account of yourself with that cane, Mr. Trowbridge."

The other lowered his eyes to the black, Malacca cane in his hand as though he was just aware that he was gripping it. He said: "I guess I must have . . . or he would have finished choking me. He shot . . . I grabbed the cane. I called . . . and he must have become frightened thinking someone else was in the house. He escaped by the window. Thank God, he's gone!"

Benson nodded, crossed to the window and looked out. Beneath the window he saw rose bushes that were trampled and crushed down as though a heavy body had struck them. Light streamed out of the window.

A voice, devoid of emotion, spoke from behind him. "Mr. Cerness is dead. Shot through the eye."

Turning, Benson stared into the eyes of the housekeeper. She had risen—had gone into the study and was now standing in the doorway.

Trowbridge's voice almost broke with excitement. "He shot and missed! But his bullet found . . . Cerness!"

Benson said: "Yes . . . yes, that was it. Now then, Mr. Trowbridge, you'll have to take it easy. You'll do a collapse on us in a moment. Here, take that chair."

Crossing the room, he held out an assisting arm. There came the snap of steel; a thrashing of bodies and a curse. About Trowbridge's wrists handcuffs glinted now in the light.

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Benson said coldly: "You're under arrest for murder, Trowbridge!"

Manacled hands raised the cane and struck viciously with it. But Benson had stepped back, tearing the cane from clutching fingers.

"You . . . what do you mean?"

Benson said: "The play was very good—your acting was good. But it just didn't tie in with everything, Trowbridge. I might have fallen for the Stroup story if I hadn't learned a few things that made it impossible. Somehow, you found out that Stroup was to be released today. But what you *didn't* find out was that he contracted double-pneumonia yesterday and died at four o'clock this afternoon. That lets him out, I think."

There was no unsteadiness about Trowbridge now; he stood firmly, eyes seemingly fascinated by the 'cuffs about his wrists.

Benson continued: "That was one mistake—this was another. You trusted Ceress too much. It figures this way—You undoubtedly told him of hiring me. He was afraid of what I might learn and he knew that my entry in the play would spoil his plans. It'll be news to you that he hired two murderers on me, Trowbridge."

The other raised his eyes, stared at Benson. He said: "You mean he attempted to have you murdered?"

Benson nodded. "That's tabbing it. He didn't want me in the play and especially he didn't want me *here* tonight. He planned to murder you tonight, placing the blame on Stroup. Just as you planned to murder him and place the blame on Stroup. He failed; you didn't."

Trowbridge raised burning eyes. He said: "Young man, you're having hallucinations. Why should he or I murder each other?"

BENSON laughed shortly. "That isn't difficult. You have the necklace that was supposedly stolen from you by Stroup. He knew it and Stroup knew it. It was a three-way play from the very beginning. Stroup agreed to take a light rap for a share; Lawyer Zeke Ceress agreed to get him that light rap for his split. The plan, no doubt, was to cash in on the insurance and split three ways. But you had to get hoggish and fit up a double-double cross. Kill Ceress and get Stroup burned for the murder.

"What difference if Stroup did squeal? Who would believe the word of an ex-convict against that of a supposedly respectable man like you? Besides, you had me here to sort of lend authenticity to your story."

Clayton Trowbridge's face was haggard. He cried: "I tell you you're crazy, man! There's no necklace here! He shot . . ."

The housekeeper said: "If it was he, and not Stroup, there must be a gun here." She came forward across to Benson, seemed oblivious that glimpses of milk-white skin peeped through her torn bodice.

Benson said: "Right! There's a gun. This is it." He held up the cane for her staring inspection. A jerk at the handle brought the wood into separate parts.

She cried: "A gun cane!"

Benson grinned at her. "Right, the first guess, Sarah Reynolds!"

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- Chapter 3—Scientific Sex Program in Marriage
Marriage based on mutual love and co-operation—instructions for performing and following marriage sex program—chart of safe periods—normal frequency of relations.
- Chapter 4—Functions of Sex Organs
The purpose of sex—functions of the male organs—female organs and work—how conception takes place—secondary stimuli zones—high theta, neck—manner of arousing desire—attaining highest pitch in compatibility.
- Chapter 5—The Art of Married Love
The importance of preparation—first act the courtship or love-making—second part of the Coitus—many positions possible—anal act or climax—half hour all too short for courtship—develop mutual sexual rhythm—reaching a climax together—women often unsatisfied—problems of physical mismatching—overcome these difficulties.
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Is it wise to pet to be popular?—Embracing bodies and kissing lip dangerous—yearning desires difficult to control.
- Chapter 8—Choosing a Mate
Why children resemble ancestors—importance of selecting proper life's partner—choose a mate for more than physical reasons.
- Chapter 9—Birth Control
A moral issue long debated—arguments in favor and against—limitation of children—mechanical contraindication—against law—various methods used—no method ideal.
- Chapter 10—What is sterilization
Many misinformed on subject—advantage to individual—advantage to society—sterilization simplified today.
- Chapter 11—Fertilization
Why children should be had early in marriage—superstitions regarding pregnancy—how fertilization accomplished in sex union—how to assist fertilization under normal conditions—causes of infertility.
- Chapter 12—Pregnancy
Changes following fertilization—first indications of pregnancy—care of prospective mother—abortions and miscarriages—dangers of pregnancy—preparations for birth—pregnancy 280 days approximately.
- Chapter 13—New Tests for Pregnancy
Need for prompt diagnosis in many cases—how test is made—combination tests valuable.
- Chapter 14—Can Sex of Unborn Child be Chosen
Science investigating various theories—no certain methods.
- Chapter 15—Motherhood
Actual process of childbirth—follow doctor's instructions—cesarian operations—puerperal fever—summary for prospective mothers.
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She jarred, eyes fixed to Benson. She said: "You knew?"

Benson widened his grin. "When your insurance company found I was interested in the case, they told me that one of their women investigators was on the job as a housekeeper. Your company never believed Trowbridge's story of the robbery. They put a Sarah Reynolds on the case. I guess you're her."

She laughed; saying: "Grammatically, you're wrong. But actually, you're right. I'm *her*."

Clayton Trowbridge's face mottled hideously. He shouted: "You . . . you rat! You'll never get the necklace!"

Sarah Reynolds' eyes grew som-

ber. She said: "I've searched the place over. It *must* be here."

Benson said: "It is here. See—" He took the crook of the cane now between his hands and wrenched. It broke apart. He said: "I noticed that the handle was of different wood and it rattled in my hands. Trowbridge must have fashioned a new handle for the thing, leaving it hollow. There—" He tilted the crook and poured a scintillating stream of diamonds into her palm.

She cried: "I'll see that you get a reward."

Benson leaned forward and slid an arm around her waist. He said: "I'm going to enjoy *your* reward."

Their eyes met and clung.

SPOTS OF MURDER

(Continued from page 79)

On the telephone, he checked the bar and the friend with whom she had been. Her story clicked.

"Well, do you still think I'm guilty?" when he turned to look at her, she was lying on the sofa, her head propped at one end, the red gold hair forming a pillow. The loose wrap uncovered glimpses of the white skin of her body; one slim leg was bared far above her knee. "Sit down," she said. "Why do policemen have to be so hard-boiled?"

KELLEY thought of Murdock, but his knees felt too weak to hold him. He sat down beside her. And then, without knowing when

he first moved he was kissing her. Her lips were warm, hungry, glued to his. His arms were around her, holding her against him; he felt her hair, soft, scented against his face. Through the cloth of his shirt he could feel the soft warmth of her against him.

She moved her head a little and pushed him away gently. "You're awfully sudden. Should you. . . ?" Her voice stopped in a gasp as his face came down to hers, his eager lips seeking the soft hollows of her throat.

A moment later Kelley said huskily, "Damn Murdock. To hell with him." After that he did not talk for some time.

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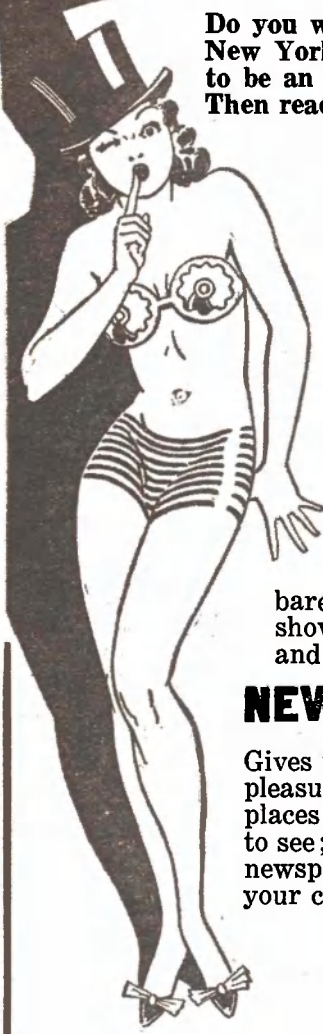
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When answering advertisements please mention **SMCY DETECTIVE STORIES**

LATER, Kelley lifted the phone and got Murdock on the line. "Your idea's all shot, sergeant," he said. "I found the girl all right. You know, the one nobody at headquarters could find. But she's got an air-tight alibi for the time of the murder."

Murdock expressed a fluent opinion of Kelley and of the girl. "If you let her slide anything over on you, I'll kick you off the force. You're a sucker for women."

"She hasn't pulled a thing," Kelley said. "But I'll be here for fifteen minutes or so to make sure."

"If you start making a play for that dame . . ." Murdock was explicit about what he would do. "And we got the bullet," he added. "It was one looked like a marble. It must have been shot out of an old fashioned derringer of a kind there ain't many."

Kelley said, "Okay." As his hand hooked the receiver, something clicked in his mind. He was back in Kay Burlington's apartment staring at the guncase, at a small, jeweled derringer that could be hidden in the palm of his hand. Just the gun a woman would use! One shot to get a fortune and get rid of the annoying husband!

She had played him for an idiot!

He turned, and with a savage fury began getting into his coat. "You don't have to go in such a hurry," Sheila Knight told him. "You told the sergeant you'd be here for fifteen minutes."

"I've got work to do," Kelley said.

"I never knew before how nice policemen were. You'll come back?"

"With you waiting for me," he

said, and patted her, "it'd be impossible to keep me away."

EARLY night lay gray blue over the park as he went out of the building. A half moon hung over the city, pale above the light of Radio City and the uptown hotels which glowed off to his right. Across the street a low wall bordered the park where trees showed dusky in the gloom.

A taxi was coming up the street and, as Kelley turned to hail it, he saw the figure loom above the wall across the street, saw light glint on steel. With the speed of a flickering motion picture he twisted. Fire slashed from above the park wall, there was the roar of an automatic, the *spat* of a bullet striking the building behind him. Kelley went over backward, pawing for his gun from his shoulder holster, rolling for the protection of the steps.

Across the street the gun blasted again and a bullet knicked the pavement beside Kelley's cheek. Then he was half hidden by the low step of the building, the gun in his hand.

Kelley saw a shadow flicker beyond the wall. The man was running away. Kelley's gun swung up, stopped as an automobile crossed his line of fire. Then Kelley was racing across the street, ducking cars. He hit the park wall, leaped to the top of it. The man was passing under a street light, running hard. Kelley got a clear glimpse of his lean gray face even as his own gun swung up and steadied. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Something smashed into his

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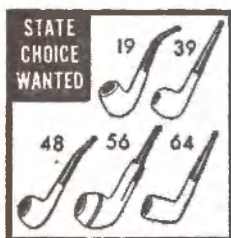


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arm, hurling him sideways. He twisted, checked himself as his gun almost exploded in the face of a man wearing a taxi driver's cap. The cab was pulled up against the curb. "You fool," Kelley said. "I'm a cop!"

The man gulped, turned white. "All right," Kelley said. "You didn't know. But let's get going. Ninety-sixth Street and Riverside Drive and a damn' big hurry."

IN THE lobby of the Burlington Apartment house Kelley colared the switchboard and elevator operators. "If a man comes here within the next few minutes asking if anyone is in the Burlington apartment beside Mrs. Burlington, you say no. And don't muff it." He showed his badge, pushed the elevator boy into the lift ahead of him.

He didn't bother to ring the door bell but twisted the knob and went in. And for the second time that night he stopped, gasping.

Kay Burlington, covered by a bath towel with which she was drying her body, stood frozen in the doorway across the room. Her blonde hair was damp, her arms and shoulders glistened with water as though she had just stepped from the shower. Evidently she had been going from the bath to her bedroom when she heard the door open and paused. For a long second she and Kelley stared at one another. She said, "Oh!" and turned and ran.

Kelley cursed softly. He liked this woman more each time he saw her. But the murdering type wasn't the right kind to like and he was sure that Key Burlington had

either murdered her husband or had it done.

He stepped to the gun case, looked in it. His mouth twisted in a scowl. The jeweled derringer was gone!

That was the way it worked huh? The man who had tried to kill him in Central Park had had some reason. And the only thing which Kelley knew about which the other police did not was the derringer. So the gun had been hidden, and Kelley was to be knocked off. He spun on his heel, plunged back into Mrs. Burlington's bedroom.

She had pulled on a thin negligee and was holding it around her waist with both hands. Through it he could sense the straight clean sweep of her legs, the rise of her breast. Her lips trembled slightly but her level brown eyes looked straight into his. "What do you want?"

"That derringer. What'd you do with it?"

"I—I . . ." And then the front door opened. Kelley was in the living room with one bound, his hand pawing for his gun. Just inside the door stood the man who had tried to murder him! He saw Kelley and his hand flashed for his pocket.

THE detective's gun hung in the holster, slipped, caught at his coat, but he did not stop moving. He saw the man's automatic clear his pocket, and Kelley dived. He smashed into the fellow, banging him back against the door. The gun clunked on the floor and with one movement Kelley picked it up, spun, and covered him.

ALL- STAR

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"All right," Kelley said. "You come on too, Mrs. Burlington. Let's all hear the story. You can begin with your name."

For a moment the lean, gray-eyed man glared defiance. Then he wilted. He stumbled to a chair and sank in it. "You think I killed him," he said. "I didn't. I'm Ben Heller, his business associate. You'll think I killed him to get the business. But I didn't."

"Very few rats confess," Kelley said. "You shot at me just for the practice, huh?"

Kay Burlington made a choked cry, then put her hands over her mouth. Heller said, "You knew about the pistol here. Kay told me you saw it. It was at Police Headquarters when the sergeant phoned you the type of gun that had been used. I heard a more exact report, even saw the bullet. I've done a little amateur work in ballistics and I knew the gun that had fired it. But Kay didn't kill Oliver. Someone is framing her. I wanted to save her, save me too. That's why . . ."

"You shot at him?" The girl's voice was thin.

"You're damn' right," Kelley said. He looked at Heller. "And how did you know Mrs. Burlington didn't kill her husband. Did you?"

The man's face was gray. "No. But . . ."

"Tell him," she said.

Heller swallowed. "She was at my apartment when he was killed. But there's no proof of it, except my word. And I told the police I was at the office. They will swear we did it together. You see, Kay and I . . ."

"Yeah," Kelley said. "I know."

He glanced at the girl and cursed silently. He could understand how a man would fight and kill for a girl like that. But she didn't look like a murderess. Still, he had the case in his hands. There was evidence enough now to convict, or at least to make it hot for them. What he *should* do was call Murdock and tell him to come and get them.

"You don't think I killed him?" Key Burlington came to Kelley's side and put her hands on his arm. "You think . . .?" The negligee fell open at the top and he could see an expanse of delectable white skin—gleaming skin that sloped smoothly to pulsing, trembling curves below. It was hard for him to think at all.

He stepped backward, breathing heavily. Still holding the gun he fished a cigarette from his pocket, flicked the match with his thumb nail. The match sputtered.

Abruptly he looked down at it, his whole face changing, pulling tight, his eyes narrowing. Then he spun to the telephone.

THE apartment was in the East Fifties. Pete Kelley rang the bell and waited. A moment later the door swung open. "Hello, Mr. Pointer," Kelley said. He pushed the sleek, blackhaired man out of the way and entered. "Hello!" he said again. Sheila Knight was standing in a far door which led to a bedroom. She was still wearing that green robe. "You travel in that?" Kelley asked.

Pointer's handsome face was twisted with fury. "What the hell are you doing here?" he snarled. "Get out of here before I throw you out."

"Don't try it," Kelley said. "I came to arrest you for murder. For killing Oliver Burlington."

The man made a snarling sound that drifted into nothing. "You're insane," he said. "Why should I kill him?"

"To save Miss Knight her fifty thousand. You couldn't keep a place like this on what Burlington was giving you, and you don't work. She was bleeding him, and keeping you on the side. Then it looked like you were both going to lose out. You got on the subway with him — disguised, probably. You had taken Mrs. Burlington's gun. My bet is you had your hand wrapped up like it was hurt and the gun was inside the bandage to muffle the sound. With the muzzle pushed against him and the noise of the subway nobody heard. But that gun was so small it would reach beyond your fingertips—I tried it—and your fingers got powder burned.

"We can prove those are powder burns all right, and I'll swear that I recognized you. I was on the train when you killed him. It was a good idea using Mrs. Burlington's gun, because that was sure to involve her. If she got convicted, part of Burlington's estate would come to you as one of his nearest relatives. Even if she wasn't convicted, she'd be in no position to contest the money he'd left for Miss Knight.

"It was good all the way around, but it's what trapped you. You had to put the pistol back, and that's when I learned about your burned finger."

"You're smart," Pointer said. "Too damned smart. His face was

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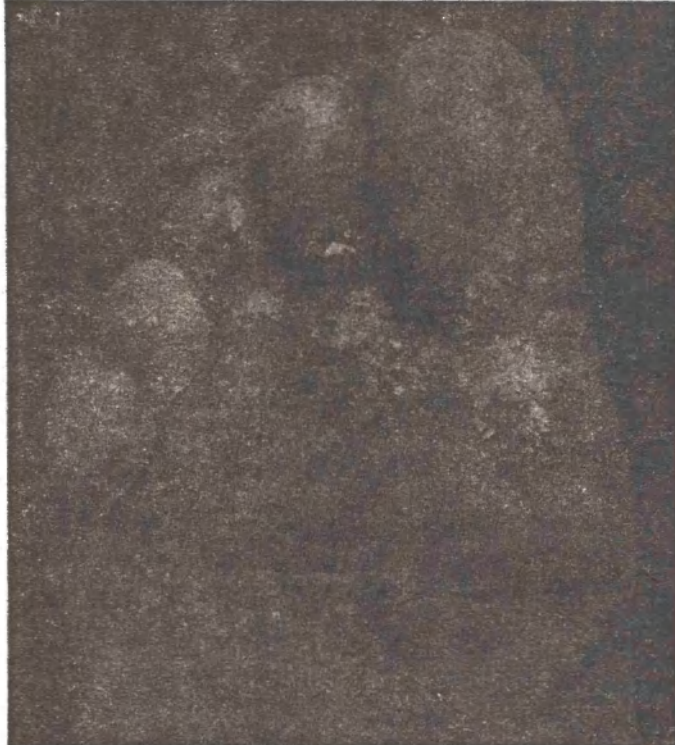
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white now and he was panting like an animal, his nostrils flared.

Without warning his hand flashed under his coat, and came out. There was the blur of an automatic swinging, the crash of gunfire. But Pete Kelley's gun had not stuck the second time.

Pointer twisted under the impact of the bullet. His gun slid from his fingers, while his left hand came up to push high against his right shoulder. Blood oozed through the fingers. "It's not bad," Kelley said. "But it will hold you."

He turned to the girl in the doorway. "Get some clothes on, baby. Jail is going to be mighty tough on you. I hate to do this, but it's all in the day's work. And you'll be glad to know that I'm collecting a reward from Kay Burlington for getting her out of this mess."

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ODDS ON DEATH

— (Continued from page 87) —

rooms, came a shrill scream, an oath, another wailing sound.

RHEA, passing through the gate, was met by Kiroe Mock. He took her arm, escorted her through the hall, through a library, into a room in the middle of the house. He was thankful to the owners from whom he'd leased the place, for this almost soundproof room.

He shut the door, turned to Rhea.

"And now, Miss Grier," he jeered, "we'll have a little party of our own."

The girl, despite her tan, turned almost pale.

"Hell, yes," Mock laughed. "I know you. Just the same as you have guessed who I am. When you caught me with my glasses off this morning, on the beach, you really knew, eh?"

"From mannerisms ascribed to you, also. And by the fact I looked through book catalogues. There are no books written by Rabon Tarrant."

"That was a weak point," he admitted. "But now, that I've got Wyatt's money, and then got the diamonds back *too*, I can move, get another identity. By the time your dumb, G-Man friend wakes up, you and I will be gone. But first, I'm going to see if you are worth taking along, or not."

She backed slowly away. "G-Man?" she echoed.

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"Why, surely; your Mr. Lance Sontag, the supposed artist."

Dazed, Rhea Grier shook her head. She had thought Sontag one of Mock's men; had gotten him to the house, then sent him to town, that he might not recognize her, be here when she came!

"You . . ."

He foretold the question. "When your brother, Customs Border Patrolman Ed Grier, had the temerity to try to stop us at the Arizona border, a year ago, we were bringing back yellow cargo. Naturally, we couldn't let him hold us up. So we simply shot him.

"It's a good thing to know who you shoot, so we searched him. There was a letter in his pocket, and a picture. 'From Rhea, Your Loving Sister', it said on the picture. Naturally I knew you the first time I saw you on the beach, after I came here."

"That's fine," Rhea Grier almost screamed. "And now—"

She reached under her wrap. Kiroe Mock, laughing, leaped and struck. The girl hit the floor heavily, the little gun she'd grabbed for, falling away from her. Still laughing, with an insane sound to it, Mock stooped, grabbed a handful of her clothing, jerked with all his strength.

The girl cried out, tried to crawl toward the door.

Mock grabbed her, lifted her and held her, as easily as he would have held a child. While she fought, he slowly ripped her dress. His fingers, hot, wriggling like snakes, tore the thin material to shreds. Then gripping her skirt, he held it while he flung her half

across the room onto the Monterey couch against the wall.

He held the bit of silk aloft, like a flag of victory, flung it from him and came crouching, moving slowly toward her. She leaped, tried to slip past him.

A hoarse growl breaking past his lips, he picked her up and threw her back. His hands . . . steely, surprising in their terrible strength, played over her arms, ran down to her waist. He grasped one of her ankles, bent her leg up and thrust the knee hard onto her own stomach.

His breath was hot, foul in her face and he leaned above her . . . She screamed her terror.

"I'm sorry for you, Mock, you forgot to lock the door!"

MOCK stiffened. Slowly, slowly, ~~he~~ he released Rhea; slowly, his breath loud in the now silent room, he turned.

"Damn you—Sontag," he groaned.

His hands wavered upward under the threat of Sontag's gun.

"Move over here," Sontag snarled. Slowly, Mock sidled toward him.

"He hurt you, Rhea?" Sontag grated, still not understanding her part in this.

"N-no," she whispered, pulling a Navajo rug around her like a sarong.

"Not like *you'll* be hurt. Drop that gat, you nose-bustin' louse!"

Sontag winced against the press of a gun muzzle against his spine. His hand opened, his gun dropped to the floor. Slowly, carefully, he turned, to stare into the

bloody, swollen face of the man he'd left lying in the hall.

"Hold him, Ivor," Mock ordered unnecessarily, retrieving his own gun. "When I get through with the dame, I'll turn her over to you."

He cocked the gun, carelessly swinging it arm's length before him. It came level with Sontag's face. Crouched against the wall, Rhea Grier trembled and shut her eyes.

"Step back, Ivor," Mock growled.

Huge, battered, the man called Ivor stepped back into the open doorway.

"Got anything to say, Sontag?" Mock snarled. "I had you guessing this morning, didn't I? Fool! Wouldn't have shown to you at all, only I'm ready to pull out. We'll take a load of Chinks to Los Angeles, and go on east. Some diamonds, too."

"I'm glad—" Sontag turned his head toward the girl—"I felt it wasn't you killed Wyatt." He looked back at Mock.

"Well?"

Cold sweat ran off Sontag. Bells rang in his ears, and the muzzle of that gun seemed like the Cascade Bore. He focused his eyes on Mock's trigger finger.

"Huh!" Mock snapped. The finger tightened. Sontag fairly flung himself off his feet. The bullet aimed at his head, sped over him. That had been Mock's mistake.

Again the gun sound roared and rocked the room. A bullet smashed into the floor as Sontag rolled, reaching for his fallen weapon. Another gun thumped and added concussion to the din.

Ivor came stumbling into the room, tripped over Sontag, took

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the next bullet Mock had intended for him. Something warm and red sprayed Sontag as Ivor fell beside him.

Sontag's gun was under his hand. He twisted around, shot, shot again. His second bullet caught Mock beneath the chin, ranging upward. . . .

Squatting still, Sontag turned toward the door; to the two men who'd been in the shelter house; the one with the supposedly stalled car.

"You mugs come all the way from Los Angeles, to help me, and damned near got here too late!" he snapped.

"We got that monkey," one of them said, aiming a toe at Ivor. "And there's another one we found sneaking into the house. He wouldn't fight." Regretfully. "We got him handcuffed to a stone bench in the patio."

Three pairs of eyes turned toward Rhea Grier.

"Never mind!" Sontag snapped. "Search the place."

THEY went away. Sontag, mopping his hands and face with a wet handkerchief, to remove red, sticky spots, sat down beside the girl.

"Explain it," he gruffly commanded.

"Simple," she quavered. "My brother, Ed Grier, was killed on the border. He was a customs man. I studied pictures, records of Kiroe Mock, after it was ascertained he had killed Ed. The bullet—"

"I know. I got one that come out of Wyatt. Fired from the pet pistol Mock always used."

"Well, when I learned Mock was supposed to be in these parts, I—"

"Hunted the beach. You met me, there was a fight, and later a killing. You suspected I'd be in with Mock, so you tried to pump me. Wanted me to be away from here tonight. Well, I suspected you. But I didn't want to—"

"Neither did I want to suspect you," she said in a small voice.

The three government agents came back.

"There's a safe in there. Have to get a man to open it. Guess those rocks will be in there. And there's ten Chinks in the cellar."

"Take care of things," Sontag ordered.

Rhea clutched her blanket around her. Sontag led her from the room.

"Lucky stiff!" one man exclaimed.

As they walked across the yard and toward the beach, Sontag said: "Then your posing for me, all of it was just to pump me for information—you thinking I was with Mock?"

"Not all of it was that. But you, you just wanted me to pose because you thought I helped kill Wyatt—"

"Look at the moon on the ocean," Sontag interrupted.

They sat down in the warm sand.

"I feel dirty. A swim would help me," he offered.

"Let's." Her eyes were starry.

They swam, side-by-side, far beyond the cove. They came back, lay in the moonlight, side-by-side. One of her little hands came over, nestled in his.

"Y-you're strong," she offered.

He reached over, gathered her to him.

The waves lapped the beach; a nightbird flapped overhead. The moon seemed to smile. There were, then, no other sounds. Save, just once. A girl's gasping voice named Lance Sontag then.

"Gee, man!" she sighed.

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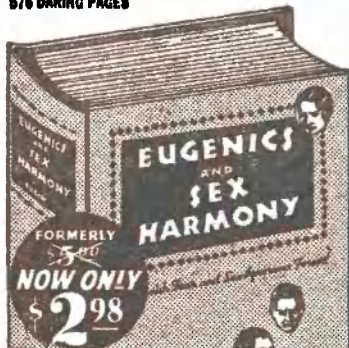
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