

# 10-STORY **DETECTIVE** <sup>K</sup> MAGAZINE

JULY

ALL DIFFERENT!

10¢



**TERROR  
OF THE  
TALKING TREE**  
by Glenn Low

# LARRY SCORED A DOUBLE SCOOP WHEN ...

TELEVISION STATION WFFX IS GIVING ON-THE-SPOT COVERAGE OF A LARGE PIER FIRE THROUGH THE LATEST TYPE PORTABLE TELEVISION CAMERA...

AND NOW, LARRY RICHMOND, ACE REPORTER OF "THE PLANET", WHO'S BEEN COVERING THIS FIRE SINCE LAST NIGHT, WILL TELL US HOW IT STARTED ...



THAT'S MY BROTHER'S MISSING BOY! I'D KNOW HIM ANYWHERE.

GREAT SCOTT! AFTER A FIVE-YEAR SEARCH, GWEN, GET "THE PLANET" ON THE PHONE!

... AND AS THE REPORTER'S IMAGE APPEARS ON A DISTANT TELEVISION SCREEN, AN ELDERLY HOUSE-GUEST OF JUDGE MCGEE STARES IN WONDER

YES, MR. RICHMOND IS FROM CALIFORNIA ... ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO ... I'LL CALL HIM RIGHT IN

HE CAN COVER HIS OWN STORY!

I KNOW YOU'RE TIRED, BUT THIS STORY WILL GIVE YOU THE THRILL OF YOUR LIFE

WHEW! THAT'S "PLATINUM ROW" I'D BETTER CLEAN UP FIRST

THANKS FOR THE RAZOR, JOE. THIS BLADE'S A HONEY!

THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS LIKE THAT... PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

...AND TODAY, AT LONG LAST, WE FOUND THE MISSING HEIR. HIS NAME ... LARRY RICHMOND.

GREAT STORY ... WHY, THAT'S ME!

EXTRA! PLANET REPORTER MISSING HEIR!

THIS ALL SEEMS LIKE A WONDERFUL DREAM, MISS MORRIS

GWEN TO YOU ... AFTER ALL, WE'RE FOSTER-COUSINS

HE'S SO HANDSOME

EXTRA! THIN GILLETTE SHAVE SCORES AGAIN!

THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK IN THE PINK AND FEEL THAT WAY, TOO. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" ... PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

THIN Gillette BLADES 4 or 10

# 10-STORY DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

ALL STAR  
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. XIV

JULY, 1947

No. 3

- TERROR OF THE TALKING TREE (Novelet)** . . . . . **Glenn Low** 2  
At the farm of the terrible triplets, a weird voice calls the score of a madhouse chase.
- SPELLED GUILTY** . . . . . **Dave Grinnell** 20  
Though the rest of the force is baffled, Detective Corazel nabs the culprit without leaving his chair.
- WHISTLE WHILE YOU SLAY** . . . . . **Ric Hasse** 23  
Band Leader Lawson wields the baton for a homicide symphony.
- THE WHIP HAND** . . . . . **Neil Moran** 32  
It's too long a cry back to Victorian tricks for two of today's gunmen.
- THE SPECTRE ON THE LAKE** . . . . . **Joseph Commings** 35  
Senator Banner can pick a killer out of an empty pool.
- YOU CAN'T KILL ME TWICE** . . . . . **Davisson Lough** 41  
Though groggy, Detective Kedry makes a Police Positive recovery.
- PICKPOCKET PATRONAGE** . . . . . **Margaret Rice** 51  
Joe Holliday plays sandwich man for the morgue.
- SATAN ROLLS SEVENS** . . . . . **Morris Cooper** 57  
When gambling for blood money, keep an eye on the devil's dice.
- OPERATION SCAREHEAD** . . . . . **Edward William Murphy** 61  
Tom Brett's argument meets up with a fast .45 rejoinder.
- HEAD OFF TROUBLE ("Alvin Hinkey" Yarn)** . . . . . **Joe Archibald** 70  
When that Gotham gumshoe is on the case, it's the corpse that comes back to the scene of the killer.

*Cover by Norman Saunders*

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# Terror of the Talking



## Action-Packed Mystery Novelet

*At the farm of the terrible Greer triplets, Deputy Hank Crimm found himself playing hide-and-seek with an escaped convict—while a weird voice from a long dead tree kept calling off the murder score to Hank's madhouse chase.*

### CHAPTER I

SHERIFF'S DEPUTY HANK CRIMM blinked through the rain-plastered windshield as the power of his headlights faded. The storm had struck only a minute ago, just as he'd driven away from the Greer mink farm. Already the wind threatened to slam his coupé off the road and send it crashing into the narrow depths of Hungry Creek ravine.

The headlights flickered, dimmed to a

feeble glimmer, and Crimm pedaled the brakes. He was familiar enough with this unimproved mountain road to drive on into Harmarville, even with defective lights, if—

They went out! The lights on the instrument panel, too!

The solid blackness of the storm-ridden night wrapped around him like wet velvet. The coupé shuddered under a blast of wind as he brought it to a slow stop,

# Tree

By Glenn Low



feeling his way to the slope-sheltered side of the road.

He mumbled a disgusted oath, reached for his flashlight. It was gone. He remembered slipping it into the left-hand pocket of his leather windbreaker. It wasn't there. He tensed, thinking the sheriff should have sent two men to investigate the telephoned tip that the much-wanted Stan Gandy, escaped convict, was hiding out at an abandoned sawmill near the Greer mink farm.

He couldn't blame the sheriff too much, though. Like several others that had led nowhere, the tip had been phoned in anonymously. Gandy, who had been convicted of stealing twenty thousand dollars from his employers at the mink farm, had been jailed three weeks ago, and a week ago had escaped. The stolen money had-

n't turned up. It was believed Gandy had cached it in the vicinity of the mink farm and would return there for it.

Crimm nudged bone and muscle with the snout of his .45 service pistol, warned. "Better give back my flashlight, Gandy."

The convict shifted his massive body nervously. "I wonder if you had a flashlight? You got no handcuffs." He chuckled menacingly. "Maybe you even forgot to load your gun. A guy that would drive an old rattletrap like this—bad wiring, weak battery. Some deputy sheriff you are."

"You'd be wise to give back my light," Crimm said. "Also to confess everything, tell where you hid the money, and play the model prisoner when you're back in a cell. That way you might rate an early parole."

"I got nothing to confess," Gandy replied. "And I don't have your flashlight. I think you dropped it when you got in the car."

Crimm felt sure—he remembered shoving the flashlight into his pocket at the mink farm just after he'd gun-prodded Gandy into the car and after Reuben Greer had said the Maywaring girl had changed her mind about riding to town with him. Still, Gandy could be right; he might have dropped it. He was thinking it would be dangerous to search Gandy in the dark. Given the least opportunity the convict would grab or duck his gun, and then. . . . The fellow was a giant, not to be fooled with.

"Another thing," said Gandy, "if I'd tell you I didn't slug that prison guard when I escaped you wouldn't believe me."

"That's right, I wouldn't," replied Crimm.

The wind rose, rendering conversation impossible. When it calmed a little, Gandy said, "Who tipped you off I was taking a nap at the old sawmill?"

"The guy didn't give his name, but the sheriff traced the call. It came from out here, at the general store."

Gandy chuckled, mused, "Nobody would believe what happened to that prison guard. His name is Mike Willows, and is he a greedy devil!"

"Be thankful you didn't kill him," said Grimm. "Could be I'd be taking you in for murder."

**C**RIMM knew it was futile, but he was wishing he could trust his prisoner to help him get the lights in order. He sensed Gandy's desperation, could almost feel the brain beside him plotting the ways of escape, weighing the risks against the chances of coming off with a sound hide. For some reason the convict had failed to get his hands on the money he'd cached, the money he'd slugged two men to get.

"We going to park here all night, deputy?" Gandy suddenly asked.

Crimm firmed the .45 against heavily meated ribs. "Maybe."

Gandy sighed disgustedly, slumped

back. "I don't believe there ever was a robbery at the mink farm," he said. "Those Greer triplets are a goofy bunch, as crazy as the minks they raise. Bart Hummel's a nut, too, and dangerous. And the housekeeper, Old Woman Pashie, is a witch if there ever was one. The only decent person among them is Ellen Maywaring. A beautiful, intelligent girl. You acquainted with her, deputy?"

"No," said Crimm. "First time I ever saw her was this evening."

The wind was steadily rising, fiercely driving the rain. Crimm thought of the time, guessed it was around ten.

Gandy chuckled again, said, "I'm sure getting the breaks, deputy. How you going to work on the lights and hold a gun on me at the same time? You should have chained me to the seat with a log-chain like the Greers suggested."

"We're hoofing it back to Greer house," Crimm said. "The triplets will enjoy guarding you until I get the lights working again."

"Who'll guard the triplets, deputy?"

It was Crimm's turn to chuckle. "Afraid of them, Gandy?"

"Like anybody is of maniacs," said Gandy. "I told you, I told the court, the triplets are crazy, they've always been crazy. You leave me with them and they'll start working on me to make me tell where I hid their money—I didn't slug Bart Hummel."

"If you didn't, then give me another good reason why you came back here after you got away from the prison guard you say you didn't slug to sleep?"

Gandy was silent a minute, then said, "You know anything about mink, about fur?"

"Not much. Why?"

"Ever hear of mutation minks, such as Blufrosts, Silverblus, Ebonyblus? Some of them come high, deputy. Live Ebonyblus bring as much as fifteen hundred dollars a head. Stockers, I mean. Good ones."

"All of which doesn't get my flashlight back," said Crimm.

"I'm letting you in on something that will raise your hair," Gandy said.

He started to go on, Crimm interrupted, "Look, Gandy, if you think you can talk yourself out of a visit with the Greers you're—"

"Remember the geneticist, Dr. Fred Maywaring?" Gandy said, repaying the interruption.

"You mean Ellen Maywaring's father?"

"Yes. He lived with the Greers until about a year ago. He was a half-owning partner in their mink-raising business. Where is he now, deputy?"

"How should I know?" asked Crimm worriedly. "Why didn't you ask his daughter? You had plenty of time to talk with her while you worked at the mink farm."

"I did," replied the convict. "She doesn't know." The wind and rain beat out conversation for a minute. When it shortened off, Gandy continued, "That's why she left her boarding school and came here. She's looking for her father."

In spite of the fact that he was storm-bound and sitting in the dark beside an unmanacled criminal, the deputy was interested. "The Greers probably know where he is," he said.

"They say he just walked off, didn't say where he was going. That's what they said when I asked them. The next day I was framed for robbery."

Grimm said, "Maybe you know where Maywaring is?"

"I wish I did," said Gandy, and sounded as if he meant it. "I know he developed the most beautiful mutation mink in the world, managed it just a few days before he disappeared. He called it an Ebony Orchid. It's bringing the Greers plenty of cash right now—its offspring is, in stocker sales to raisers. I happen to know Dr. Maywaring developed it on his own, that he didn't intend to share proceeds from it with the Greers."

"Are you trying to tell me why you came back here?" Crimm asked.

"Yes," Gandy said determinedly, "I came back, first to prove I'm not a crook, next to try to get Ellen Maywaring away from Greer house, and lastly to prove Dr. Maywaring was murdered for possession of the genetical secret that was responsible for his Ebony Orchid mutation mink."

FOR a moment they were silent, then Crimm laughed. "Gandy, you sure got a gift of gab. You should be in brushes or real estate. You've been wasting your time selecting kits on a mink farm."

"I'm not going back to Greer house and let those little devils torture me," the convict said. "Think of something else, deputy."

Crimm said, prodding hard with the gun, "Get out of the car, Gandy."

"Look, deputy," Gandy's voice was suddenly pleading, "you got to hear this. I overheard Bart Hummel plotting with Reuben Greer to burn the mink pens—with the mink in them. And I know something else. The mink are insured to the limit. But only one of the triplets knows about it—the one who carries the insurance, Reuben. Another thing Hummel's got some incendiary bombs, homemade ones he rigged up himself. He's going to make sure the mink all burn. He and Reuben can't afford to have any of them saved. And I know why."

"Okay," said Crimm. "I'll let you talk to the fire marshal at the county jail. Get out of the car, Gandy."

"Wait, will you?" begged Gandy. "I'm giving you a real break, a chance to make a name for yourself, a lift that could ride you right into the sheriff's job come next election, and you don't appreciate it. Ellen told me not to tip the law off to anything, but I got to stay free to help her. See! I—we love each other, deputy. I—"

"So you and the Maywaring girl are in love?" said Crimm. "So you snitch twenty grand to give you and her a big honeymoon and set you up housekeeping?"

Gandy groaned. "Ah, cripes. Crimm! You make me sick!"

"Get out of the car, Gandy."

"Okay!" snorted the convict. "If I only knew where the rest of the Ebony Orchids are I wouldn't mind going back to jail. A lot of them were sold, but this season's herd isn't in the pens, deputy. It wasn't sold, because Ellen's been checking the sales. The mink in the pens might look like Ebony Orchids, but they're not. They're there as a plant to gyp the insurance company after the pens burn. I'm telling the truth, deputy, so help me!"

Crimm said, "You're not helping yourself trying to paint the Greer brothers black. Everybody knows they're eccentric, but they're not crooks and killers. You've been having bad dreams, Gandy. Get out of the car!"

Gandy twisted around, levered the door with his knee. "Why don't you look me in the turtleback?" the convict asked as Crimm moved the gun around his ribs and centered his back with it.

"Thanks, Gandy," Crimm said. "That's a nifty idea. You might kick your way out, but not quickly or quietly enough that I wouldn't be close by waiting for you."

"I'll behave," Gandy said. "Anything beats being left alone with those crazy triplets."

**C**RIMM dropped the lid after Gandy crawled into the turtleback, was reaching for the keys when the convict yelled.

"Somebody's in here! Open up, deputy! Open up!"

Crimm jabbed home the key, turned it. He didn't answer, only smiled, thinking what a fool Gandy was to think he'd invite a kick in the midriff by raising the turtleback lid. As far as he was concerned Stan Gandy was now where he'd be when they pulled up and parked in front of the county jail.

"Make it snappy, deputy!" Gandy shouted. "It's a girl in here!"

Crimm's smile broadened against the rain as he moved up along the car, feeling his way. He was thinking he could soak a handkerchief in motor oil, wrap it around a stick and light it. Maybe it would serve as a torch to see by while he worked on the lights. He hoped it would, because he didn't like the thought of gun-prodding Gandy back to Greer house, borrowing a flashlight, and leaving Gandy for the triplets to guard while he returned to work on the car.

The Greers were a queer, unpredictable lot, and plenty riled over losing twenty thousand dollars. It was entirely feasible they'd take drastic measures to force Gandy to tell where he'd hidden their money. Besides, thinking over what

Gandy had said and the manner in which he had said it, Crimm wasn't so sure the big fellow was guilty.

Suddenly the wind paused, leaving the rattle-splatter of the rain a small sound. In that moment the deputy heard the door click.

He stood still, gun tilted for a quick shot. It was inconceivable anyone would be out at this hour on this lonely road in such a storm. Yet, he was positive. A door on the coupé had clicked shut.

His heart began hammering in his ears. Hearing it he wondered at his sudden caution. Why did he hesitate to open a door, speak, strike a match? Surely no one was there to do him harm. It was foolish, this hesitant, questioning fear. What was he thinking of, anyhow?

*Of the three little Greer brothers, a voice in his mind seemed to say. Of the strangely missing Dr. Maywaring and his charming daughter, Ellen.*

He recalled the Maywaring girl as he'd seen her the past evening when he'd stopped at Greer House to inquire the way to the old sawmill. It was while Reuben Greer, small-bodied, sharp-featured, gimlet-eyed like his identical brothers, was telling him of the old logging road, pointing out the spot where it came close to the riverbank, that he'd seen the girl at a window in the ancient house looking out at him.

She'd raised the window as he was leaving and called to him, saying, "I want to make a train at Harmarville tonight. Will you let me ride there with you?"

"Yes . . . of course . . ." He'd been surprised.

"I'll be ready when you return from the sawmill," she'd said, slowly closing the window. She hadn't smiled, which seemed strange. Her beautiful, fragile face had appeared wistfully sad.

When he'd stopped, coming back, Reuben Greer had come out and told him she'd changed her mind about going into town. "There's a storm brewing," the little man had said. "Ellen is afraid of storms."

The storm had struck a minute later, and now that his lights had failed he was glad the girl wasn't along.



THE wind quieted, dying out on a hard sigh that promised its quick return. Gandy was quiet now. Crimm rid his mind of beautiful Ellen Maywaring and decided what to do about the sound of the closing door.

Gun poised for rapid action, he reached out, fingered glass, dropped his hand onto a door pull.

It seemed soundless, but that was because of the sudden whoop of the wind. There must have been a hard sputter with the first blinding flash. Crimm reeled back, lost footing, and smacked the mud with the flat of his back. By the time he scrambled to his feet his car was a trundling mass of flame.

Someone had set his car afire! And let it out of gear! And released the brakes!

Stan Gandy's first blood-freezing scream told him that he'd locked a man to a frying death.

"Let us out! For the sake of heaven! Deputy Crimm, let us out!"

Faster, faster moved the fiery mass. The hill was long and steep. Crimm, aghast, suffered the utter fury of helplessness. Horror and frustration had him cold, taut, trembling. He recalled that a bank at the left of the road let into a ravine—a seventy or eighty foot drop, and shuddered, quelling an impulse to race shouting after the rolling flames.

Wind, rising in a mad roar, whipped high the tongued fire, twisted it, flayed it, separated it until it danced like a pack of frenzied demons clothed in crimson shrouds, writhing grotesquely.

Seventy feet away the hop of holocaust ended as the flames seemed to become wings and the coupé swerved to the left and sailed out into black space.

## CHAPTER II

AGAIN, the wind died down. The rain came straight down. Crimm staggered into the road, dazed—wide awake the next instant with a sudden sound beside him.

Feet smacking, splashing. . . .

Crimm whirled, raced madly through

the soppy darkness at the sound, praying for a break. "If I can only run into 'im!" he muttered against the screaming wind.

The wind lost the sound to him, but he didn't stop. He was close to the fiend that set his car afire, fried his prisoner. Stan Gandy had done nothing to earn such a horrible death. Blindly racing on, he suddenly was aware of his great anger; its fierceness frightened him. "I'm hysterical," he whispered. "That's it—I'm hysterical."

Queer, but he didn't care if he were, didn't care if he were crazy. The terrible thing that had happened had charged him with a vengeful determination for justice unknown to him in the past.

The wind howled on, ripping rain at him. He told it, hoarsely whispering, "Whoever burned Stan Gandy must pay!"

The footing was treacherous. Once he ran off the road into a bramble patch, thorns tore his clothing, pierced his flesh. Later, when the first flash of lightning came, he almost shouted his thanks.

It came again in a few moments, nearer, a great jagged flash stabbing zenithward, limning the high ridge beyond the mink farm, throwing into silhouette a black fringe of waving hemlock.

"I've lost him!" Crimm groaned, seeing an empty road out ahead. He leaned on the wind to catch his breath. The lightning came again.

In the instant the land was pulsating brightness. The deputy saw, emerging from an alder thicket at the edge of the road, five swiftly moving figures. The vertical one was slender, willowy and of human shape.

The blackness dropped back. Crimm leapt straight ahead, running as he'd never run before. Forgotten was the storm, the dangerous footing, the gun in his hand. In the moment the lightning faded he'd seen four horizontal shapes disintegrate from the vertical ones, come tearing for him. Now death was on his trail, snuffing, whining death. In the next flash of light he steered his course for the house of the three little brothers. Behind him there rose a thin shout.

**W**AVERING lightning revealed a high iron gate set with a novelty latch of yellow brass that resembled an open hand. He lifted the latch and—though the storm made havoc in the giant yews overhead—heard the first *bong* of a bell that continued to toll.

He ran up a gravel walk, paused on stone stoops for a backward glance as lightning forked the darkness, breathed easier to see the walk and the road beyond free of moving forms. He crossed the Greers' front porch. Old Woman Pashie opened the door for him.

"You—deputy!" she croaked, peering around an oil-burner lamp she clutched in her skinny hands. "What brings you back? We saw a fire on Hungry Creek Hill. Did the lightning strike?"

"There was no lightning then," said Grimm, pushing past her into a lofty ceiling hall.

She closed and bolted the door. "Where's that thieving Stan Gandy?"

"Dead," said Crimm. "I want to use your phone."

"You'll have to ask the triplets," the old woman said. "You'll have to get permission from Simon, Reuben and John." She glared at him a moment, her blue-socketed eyes fiercely grieving, her leaden face twitching excitedly. "They'll likely have the dogs on you for coming back here tonight. If they ever find the dogs. They're three mad little men, upset the way they are over Miss Ellen. She's gone—gone away in this dreadful storm. The minks'll all die now that she's gone, and the dead honey locust tree won't talk—won't tell us what to do—won't even talk to me and it's always talked to me."

She whirled around suddenly and hobbled away down the hall, taking the lamp with her. The darkness wrapped in. Crimm stood still, remembering what Gandy had said concerning the people in this house, *as crazy as the minks they raise*.

He could believe it now, remembering strange tales he'd heard concerning them—their eccentricities, their great success in producing rare, fine fur, the ferocious dogs they kept as watchers at the mink pens. The old woman had spoken of a tree

that talked—poor crazy thing. Only in such wild and sparsely inhabited places as this would such people be allowed to run loose. He shrugged—a *tree that talked*. . . . He shrugged again, hoped the storm hadn't put the Greers' phone out of order. A moment later he heard the rap on the door.

He slipped the bolt. Whoever was there in the darkness pushed the door open and came inside. The rustle of a wet slicker, the *squeegie-squidgee* of sippy galoshes. . . .

Lightning flickered, showed Crimm a hulking form, bent at the shoulders, burdened. He heard a soft thud. Moved forward, gun pushed out. The door was jerked from him, slammed shut.

Darkness! It seemed he'd been fighting darkness for hundreds of hours! Listening for the lift and fall of breath, not hearing it, guessing whoever had come in had gone out again, he fumbled for the door. As he found it, slipped the bolt into place, a door opened down the hall and yellow light crept down along the darkness.

**A**T THE first touch of light he saw her, wet, disheveled, crumpled at his feet. He was kneeling beside her as Old Woman Pashie and two of the Greer triplets came up.

"Ellen!" the old woman cawed, almost dropping the lamp.

"Ellen!" echoed the two little men, crouching close over the girl, staring down with scared eyes.

"Someone came in the dark and left her here," said Crimm. "It was only a moment ago." He was fingering the girl's wrist, seeking the throb of life.

"I bolted the door, deputy!" cawed the old woman.

Crimm said, "Someone knocked; I opened it."

"Is she—dead?" whispered one of the little men.

"I don't know," the deputy said.

"Stan Gandy did it!" muttered the old woman. "He begged her to run away with him, marry him. It was before he stole the money. I heard him begging her. Ellen wouldn't listen. He got away from

you tonight, deputy, and came back. He loved Ellen dearly, and sometimes love will kill if it doesn't get its way."

"Did you let Gandy go for a share of the stolen money, deputy?" asked the closest triplet.

"I'll punch your face for saying that," said Crimm, glaring up. "Somebody set my car afire. Gandy was burned to death."

The triplet laughed bitterly, turned to eye his brother. "You hear him lie, John?"

"Yes, brother Simon," came the reply.

"It might have been Gandy's ghost we saw on the lawn a few minutes ago," said Simon Greer. "Who can tell? Who can tell?"

"One of you go to the phone, call the sheriff's office. When you get him I'll speak to him. Hustle!"

They both stared at Crimm a moment, both grinned loosely, both said, "The phone's out of order. Wind took the wires out." John became silent, but Simon went on:

"Besides, Hungry Creek's over the road at several places between here and Harmarville by now. So little good it'd do to call the sheriff or anybody else."

Crimm thought, *Maybe they did see Gandy. Maybe he kicked himself free of the turtleback. I hope he did!*

He gathered Ellen Maywaring up in his arms, glared at the triplets, "Lead me to her room, one of you."

"She's alive, ain't she?" croaked Old Woman Pashie.

"Are you sorry?" Crimm asked.

For a moment he thought the old woman might throw the lamp in his face. Her hot, dark eyes did it, crashed it over his head, but her skinny hands stayed put, twitching.

"Back this way and up the stairs," said Simon Greer.

"She probably fainted," Crimm said, feeling sorry he'd been mean with the old woman. "Being out in the kind of weather we've got tonight is enough to make anybody faint."

Going up the stairs, still carrying the girl, smelling the stench of smoke on wet clothing, the deputy was believing Gandy, believing the girl had been in the tur-

tleback. Now he knew it was she he'd seen at the alder thicket with the four monstrous dogs. He guessed he'd chased her and Gandy down the hill, that the Greer dogs had gone out to meet her. When he'd come along they'd made to jump him. He recalled the thin cry of command, and knew that had been Ellen calling off the dogs.

He guessed the girl hadn't changed her mind about going to Harmarville, that Reuben Greer had lied about her being afraid of storms. She must have slipped out in the dark and crawled into the turtleback while he was parked in front of the house.

He looked down at her beautifully fragile face, wondering if she were really in a faint. Her pulse was a mere whisper and slow.

**S**IMON GREER led the way into the girl's room, lit a chimney lamp. "Go fetch some brandy," he told the old woman.

Crimm put the girl on her bed, pulled a heavy comforter over her. "No chance of getting a doctor here tonight, eh?"

"No. No chance," Simon told him.

"Where's your brother Reuben?" Crimm asked suddenly, remembering what Gandy had said about Reuben and Bart Hummel's plot to burn the mink.

"Went to the mink pens," said Simon. "There's danger the pens will flood. He went to see if Hummel needed any help. Worst storm we've had in years."

"We warned him," said John. "He knows Stan Gandy's on the loose and might kill him."

"Kill him—why?" asked the deputy.

"Gandy's sore because we had him arrested," John replied.

"Who phoned the sheriff's office and reported Gandy was hiding at the sawmill?" Crimm asked.

"Hummel," said John. "We knew there was something up when Ellen took a walk over that way, so Simon followed her. He hid and watched. After Ellen came back here Gandy went to sleep. We had Hummel hustle over to the general store and call in."

"Why didn't he call from here?' Your phone was working then."

"Couldn't risk it; Ellen might have heard and warned Gandy somehow," said Simon.

"Have you heard from Ellen's father since he went away?" Crimm watched their faces closely. Simon's was indifferent, but John's eyes seemed to show sudden alarm.

"No," Simon said. "Maybe Dr. Fred is dead. Seems he'd have come back for a visit or written to us if he wasn't. Ellen is anxious to hear from him."

"How about his interests in the mink, the farm here?" Crimm asked, and sensed the little men become wary.

"He still owns half of everything," Simon replied. "But he won't own anything if he doesn't return soon to renew our contract."

"How soon?" Crimm was thinking what a fool he'd been not to listen to Gandy.

John answered, "By daybreak this morning. Our contract requires all parties to resign once each year. If any of us fails to sign at the designated time in the presence of all he automatically drops from the partnership, surrenders his holdings."

Crimm glanced at his watch, saw the time was a few minutes of one, said, "It may be Dr. Maywaring will show up in time to retain his."

"In this storm?" Simon asked almost joyfully. "With creeks all over banks, flooding the roads? With lightning ripping trees, the wind tearing them out by the roots?"

A pattern designed for murder, weird, ugly, tangled, began forming in the deputy's mind. He suddenly wanted to talk with the farm manager, Bart Hummel.

The old woman came in with the brandy, began dropping tiny drops of it on the unconscious girl's lips. Crimm stepped to a window, wondering if the storm was wearing itself out. He lifted a shade and stared grimly at the drenched blackness beyond the rain-sheeted glass.

"Ellen's coming to!" the old woman whispered softly.

Crimm thought, *The old crone loves the girl, but the triplets hate her.* He was

turning back from the window, hoping Ellen would have something to say that would lead him to the fiend that had tried to roast her and Gandy alive, when pulsing lightning lit the lawn below.

He gasped, ripped away the shade, hooked the gun from under his arm. The lightning brightened, forking the sky. He began slamming bullets through glass.

Simon and John scampered from the room, whimpering. Old Woman Pashie stayed indifferently by the bed, murmuring encouragement to the reviving girl. The lightning quit and night slapped the window black, shrouding Crimm's target. He whirled and ran into the hall feeding shells into his gun. He went down the stairs four at a clip, slipped the bolt on the front door, and stepped into the lash of the storm.

In the ensuing instant, waiting for lightning to show him down the stoops, he became aware of the dogs.

They were coming for him. In spite of the roar of the storm, here, close, were their growls, snarls. He whirled, dived back. The door was bolted. He hammered it with gun-filled fist. He cried out, and the wind whipped away the sound. In the awful blackness a wet, hairy bundle of bone, muscle and fury crashed his shoulder. Fangs gnashed close to his cheek.

### CHAPTER III

**T**HE beasts were upon him, snarling, snapping, pawing him down. He fought them hard, clubbing his gun, backing across the porch, trying a potshot. He went back into space like that, over the porch rail. Sippy, burry, a shrubby clump caught him. He crashed through, smacked wet earth with his back. The dogs came down on top of him.

Fierce little whines, hot breath in his face, reaching fangs. Darkness! Always the clammy darkness! Why in the name of heaven didn't it lightning!

He couldn't get away. Fear, helplessness, anger, blasted a hoarse shout from his aching throat. As if replying, lightning broke the blackness. He saw slaverling chaps, twitching snouts, gleaming fangs. He laughed weakly. In a moment

he fought his way up amongst the snapping beasts, kicking at them.

"Get back, you devils!" he shouted, slashing at them with his gun. His thoughts leapt back, then ahead. On the night-sheeted lawn somewhere in front of him lay a little man with a big knife in his back. He'd witnessed murder from the window above, had tried to shoot down the murderer and failed. Simon and John were right—Stan Gandy was here, roving the dark. Little Reuben Greer would have done wisely to remain behind locked windows and bolted doors.

Lunging, pawing, the dogs could only annoy him. He feared them no longer, since lightning had revealed webbed-steel muzzles strapped tightly over their murderous jaws.

He was moving ahead, kicking at them, when a fork of lightning let him see again the little man with the knife in his back.

He knelt, lifted Reuben Greer's head to his knee, put an ear to his lips, a hand over the heart region. The little man still lived. "It's Deputy Hank Crimm," he said. "I'm taking you to the house."

"No." The objection was a feeble whisper. "I'm dying. Stan Gandy stabbed me for the map."

"Map? What—"

"The honey locust tree talked again," said the triplet. "I—Hummel must know when I'm dead. He mustn't burn the—"

"You said Gandy stabbed you for a map?" the deputy interrupted.

"Yes, his map. He was looking at it in the feed room at the mink pens. I snatched it, tried to run, but—"

"You sure it was Gandy?"

"His hat, his slicker. I didn't get a good look at his face."

"What did you do to Dr. Maywaring? You're dying, Greer. Tell me while there is time!"

"Dr. Fred is—is—"

The little man shuddered, coughed, strangled, lost his breath and never got it back. The deputy pried a folded piece of paper from his hand.

The dogs had ceased troubling Crimm, were pressing against him. He guessed his treatment of their master had marked

him as a friend. He stood up and something hard bumped his back. A voice that could have been Gandy's, said, "Give me the paper!"

He didn't immediately obey. He was thinking, even if he twisted quickly, managed to miss being shot through, he was no match for Gandy in a rough-and-tumble. *Jump to the left and run!* his courage commanded. And he obeyed.

No gun blast. Thanks for that! Crimm prayed a clear way lay ahead and a moment later crashed into what he guessed was a fence. Feet whipped the wet sod behind him as he dropped to the ground and rolled forward. He came up with a hand clutching his collar, the dogs were there, yapping excitedly. The wind was up again, a mad roar! Something like a muddy fist opened an umbrella of fire in front of his eyes. The gun was jerked from his hand.

His wrist! A hand was twisting his hand off! Fingers clawed the paper from his palm. He went down when his foot struck something that rolled. He lay still, catching his breath, holding his throbbing face in both hands.

LATER, Crimm climbed to hands and knees and saw by a weak flash of lightning that he was in the road in front of the Greer house, that assailant and dogs were gone.

"Map?" he muttered confusedly. "Map of what? Why would Stan Gandy have a map?" He felt utterly futile, beaten, disgusted with himself, there on hands and knees in the slimy mud. "Let Bart Hummel burn the mink," he said. "See if I care! Let anything happen. See if I—"

Hummel? He didn't doubt that some kind of incendiary bomb had been set off to destroy his car. "Perhaps Hummel stole the twenty thousand?" he muttered.

If Hummel had stolen the money and Ellen had found it out, wouldn't he have reason to kill her? Perhaps he'd known she'd hidden in the turtleback, maybe he'd noticed when the lights failed on the coupé. He could easily have followed with one of the homemade fire bombs Gandy had mentioned. Twenty thousand dollars

was a lot of money to a man like Bart Hummel. Or perhaps the farm manager had found Gandy's cache and Ellen was wise. Either way he'd have reason to want her dead.

The deputy decided to go to Ellen. Maybe she'd talk, maybe it would be as simple at that—she'd tell what she knew and everything would be cleared up.

He wondered concerning the source of the hokum regarding the honey locust tree. A tree that was said to talk. "Poor superstitious devils," he mumbled, thinking of Reuben Greer and Old Woman Pashie. "They really believed a tree could talk."

He put out a hand to push himself up, touched something smooth and cold and cylindrical. He grasped it.

"My flashlight!" he gasped, and thumbed the latch.

Light streaked out.

"Aww!" he gulped, and began crawling toward a mud-caked body with a bloody face.

**S**TAN GANDY, minus hat and slicker, lay on his side in the ditch beside the road. A gash opened his forehead. He was unconscious but still breathing. His pulse was strong.

Crimm shook him, turned his head that the rain might wash away the blood and cleanse mud from the wound. He noticed that Gandy had been lying there long enough for rain to form puddles around him. "Hummel!" the deputy muttered through clenched teeth. "Bart Hummel is the guy I want!"

For anxious minutes he rubbed Gandy's wrists, his chest. Finally he had the big man half-conscious. "It's Crimm!" he said, lips close to Gandy's ear. "The deputy. Tell me what happened!"

"Where's—where's Ellen?"

"Safe. In her room with the old woman."

"I kicked the—the lid of the turtleback—we rolled out as the car went over the rim."

"I know. Who hit you? What put you here?"

"Ellen and I were by the honey locust tree waiting for it—to talk, and—"

"Be sensible!" snapped Crimm.

"Somebody sneaked up on us, lammed me over the head with a club, I think. I don't know what happened after that. You sure Ellen is okay?"

"Ellen's safe. Can you get up now?"

"Maybe. Deputy?"

"Yeah, Gandy."

"While I was in prison I drew a map that pointed out the spot where I was supposed to have hidden the money I was supposed to have stolen. I tried to tell you about it in the car, but you wouldn't listen."

"I know," said Crimm. "You'd buried the money in the earth where it would decay and be lost, so you drew a map and mailed it to Ellen so she could find it and have it for you when you got out."

"You're crazy!" Gandy blurted. "I told you—I didn't steal any money! I did not mail the map to Ellen! Or to anybody! I dropped it as if by accident while leaving my cell to go on special assignment under the prison guard they said I slugged. The map is a phony. See? Understand? I'm playing square with you! I always have been! Don't be a fool, Crimm!"

"Okay," Crimm said. "So the map is a phony. You didn't steal twenty thousand bucks from the Greers. So what?"

"He—"

Across the road a gun roared. Gandy jerked stiff, went limp, slumped back. Leaping straight over him, Crimm switched off the flashlight.

He knew Gandy was hit, thought he was done for. Over the road, across the lawn, light limped crazily from the paneless, shadeless window in Ellen Maywaring's room. It was the only light visible in the big house, and it gave Crimm his bearings. He ran as quietly as he could toward it. If he hoped to beat Hummel he must have a gun. If he was to have a gun he must get it from the house.

**T**HE wind was abating, occasionally lightning flared feebly on the distant ridges. Rain still fell in a hard drizzle, but the storm was over.

Halfway across the lawn Crimm ran smack into a tree.

"Did someone knock?" a sepulchral voice inquired.

Crimm held onto the tree. Seeming to vibrate from between his fingers, the voice continued, "Who is there? Give the signal, please."

"Of all the hocus-pocus . . ." the deputy muttered, and rapped the bole of the tree with the heel of his hand.

"You, Reuben?" came the voice.

Crimm decided a single rap identified the dead triplet and rapped again, once, good and hard.

The voice came, reverberantly intoning, "Reuben—Simon and John are going through with it. Reuben, you must stop them! Reuben, the stain of murder must not smirch the Greer name. Reuben, your brothers believe murder will save them, but it will not. Murder will ruin you all, Reuben. Bring them here. Let I, the dead honey locust tree, speak to them, warn them, advise them. Bring them here, Reuben."

*Transmitter up at the house, thought Crimm, and a speaker concealed inside the tree, buried wires. Enough to fool fools like the old woman and the triplets, but it shouldn't have deceived Ellen and Stan Gandy. Perhaps it hadn't. Perhaps they'd been wise to it, had been trying to check its source.*

"I am not Reuben Greer," the deputy said. "I am Hank Crimm, a deputy sheriff from Harmarville. Who is in danger of being killed?"

The voice kept on, and Crimm knew he hadn't been heard. "Don't permit Simon and John to do murder, Reuben. It will be the end of all of you if they do."

The rig-up was one-way. Crimm wanted to snick on his flash and investigate, but thinking Hummel might be out in the darkness waiting to do some more fancy shooting, curbed the desire. Plenty of time to dig up the wires, find the speaker, later. He glanced at the house, up at the lighted window in the girl's room. He stiffened, gasped.

A body, like a woman's, came tumbling from the window. Behind it, for a moment, limned against the light, were two heads, two sets of arms. It was only

a brief moment, then the window was empty again.

"Ellen!" the deputy gasped. "Hummel got to her! Hummel killed her and rolled her out of the window!"

But he'd seen two men behind the pitch—two persons, at least. It was incredible to think Old Woman Pashie had aided in Ellen's murder. As he raced for the spot where he expected to find Ellen Maywaring's broken body, he was guessing that Simon or John Greer had helped Hummel throw down the corpse. A moment later he was thinking if Hummel had slugged Gandy when Gandy and Ellen were together by the honey locust tree, why hadn't he slugged Ellen also? Why hadn't he murdered her then, instead of carrying her into the house after she'd fainted?

There was only one answer: Hummel had not attacked Gandy. It had been one of the triplets—Reuben. It had been Reuben who had carried Ellen into the house, presumably to save her from the rigors of the storm.

He recalled the hulking figure in the doorway when the lightning had leapt up behind it. No. No, that fellow was not Reuben. There was a mystery here. Perhaps he was wrong about Bart Hummel. After all, someone might have stolen one of Hummel's fire bombs.

**C**RIMM was close to the house when he snicked on his flashlight, risking a bullet in the back. He saw the lifeless bundle at once, and was soon kneeling beside it. A moment later he was up, moving back crazily. A rope was around his neck, another tangled over his arms, pinioning them at his sides. Something banged against his ankles and his feet were swept from beneath him.

He fell backwards. His light was snatched from his hand. After he lit and lay still, its beam was played over his face.

"You, deputy?" a familiar voice said. "The trap wasn't set for you. We'd hoped to catch Stan Gandy."

"Let me loose then," Crimm said angrily.

"Catch a weasel by mistake, best thing

to do is kill it," said Simon Greer.

"He's a partner with Gandy, so he is," said John Greer. "He let the thief go for a share of the stolen money."

Simon said, "We thought if we fixed some pillows for a body inside one of Ellen's old coats and pitched them through the window, Gandy would hustle up for a look. But we're not too sorry we caught you, Deputy Crimm."

"Gandy may be lurking nearby in the dark right now—with a gun," Crimm said, hoping to frighten them off.

"That he may," moaned John fearsomely. "It's a chance we must take."

"The honey locust tree wants to talk to you two," Crimm told them.

They laughed at him. "We're onto that trick, deputy," Simon said. "It had us fooled crazy for a long time, but we caught onto it tonight."

"Let's take him down to the cellar," said John. "Down there maybe he'll catch onto the trick, too."

Carrying Crimm around the house, they continued to jerk out nervous laughs. Once Simon said, "Brother Reuben's dead. Now John and I are running things around here."

John said, "Reuben and Bart Hummel were plotting to swindle us."

"How do you know?" inquired the deputy, thinking they may have been on the hill near enough his car to hear when Gandy told of Reuben and Hummel's plan to burn the mink. In that case it might have been they who burned his car.

"We overheard some talk," said Simon. "Reuben and Hummel were dyeing natural mink to resemble the more valuable mutations—to fool the insurance company. Reuben had insured the mutations without telling us. He and Hummel meant to burn the dyed naturals and pass their charred carcasses off for the mutations. It was a good scheme and would have got Reuben thousands of dollars for a few hundred dollars worth of cheap mink.

"But he and Hummel oughtn't to have lied to me and John and got us to hide the live mutations by telling us they knew a stupid fur-buyer they could swindle with the dyed naturals. No fur-buyer is so stupid he wouldn't know dyed pelts.

Reuben and Hummel thought we were stupid enough to believe them, though. That's where they made their mistake."

"You used one of Hummel's fire bombs to burn my car!" Crimm accused.

Neither of them replied.

The deputy went on, angrily, "You lied about the twenty thousand being stolen to get rid of Stan Gandy!"

"Hummel thought of it," said Simon quickly. "Gandy was snooping too much. We'd never have thought of harming Ellen, though, if she hadn't found out about her father."

"You murdered Dr. Fred Maywaring a year ago, because he'd developed a fine mutation mink and refused to share profits from it with you!" Crimm almost shouted.

"Oh, no!" denied John shakily. "We didn't murder him then. You'll soon see what we did to him."

"After you and the others are dead, deputy," said Simon, "we're going to tell that lightning struck the house and burned it."

"You mean you're going to burn your house?" Crimm asked, half wondering if he were conscious, if all this were truly happening to him. "But why? Why burn your house?"

"Better that than hang for murder, don't you think, Mr. Deputy?" asked John.

"But you haven't murdered anyone, you fools!"

Simon answered, his voice a cowardly whine, "Yes, we have! Cut a throat, is what we've done!"

Behind the ancient house they changed their course and carried Crimm down a musty cellar stairway. At its bottom Simon dropped the deputy's feet and patted ahead on wet stone. A moment later lock chains clanked and damp hinges squeaked as the first of the three doors was opened.

#### CHAPTER IV

**T**HEY carried Crimm down a lantern-lit passage, through another door, and deposited him on a plank floor in front of an iron door that let into a stone wall. Simon lifted the bar lock, pulled the



door open, and John shoved the deputy through it into black space.

The fall was short. Crimm lit on his shoulders, rolled over and saw the oblong of yellow light fade as the door closed. A moment later hands touched him, discovered his bonds and set about untying them.

"Who is it?" Crimm asked.

A gentle voice replied, "Dr. Fred Maywaring. Who are you?"

"Deputy Sheriff Hank Crimm. Where am I?"

"In a subcellar, twenty-by-twenty feet with an eight-foot ceiling. The only door is the stairless one they shoved you through. There are no windows."

Crimm sat up, rubbed his arms to get circulation going. "I thought they'd murdered you, Dr. Maywaring."

"Simon and John wanted to kill me," the doctor replied. But Reuben and Bart Hummel wouldn't hear of it. I was imprisoned here a year ago, shortly after I developed my beautiful Ebony Orchid mutation mink."

Crimm sensed the nearness of others in the dark, said, "Who else is here?"

"My daughter, Ellen, is beside me, unharmed. The housekeeper, Pashie, is here. Simon and John brought them just a few minutes ago. A short time before that they brought Reuben's corpse with a knife wound in its back. But they brought Hummel's body before the storm."

"Hummel—dead?" said the deputy, surprised.

"Yes. Simon murdered him, I think. His throat was cut. John doesn't have the heart for such work."

"Then Hummel couldn't have stabbed Reuben," Crimm said.

"No," replied the doctor. "Simon and John told us that Stan Gandy killed Reuben."

"But of course that isn't true," spoke up Ellen Maywaring, softly.

Crimm was remembering that Reuben, when dying, had named Stan Gandy as his attacker, also that the man on the lawn driving the knife in Reuben's back had looked like Gandy, had worn a slicker and hat like Gandy's. He was remembering, too, that Gandy had been without slicker

and hat when he'd found him unconscious at the roadside. Still, if Hummel had been murdered before the storm, then. . . .

"YOURS in the voice of the honey locust tree, isn't it, doctor?" asked Crimm, guessing.

"Yes. I tried the trick after I found an old drain pipe leading from this subcellar. One day I heard voices coming from it. They were faint, seemed far away. I reasoned the former owners here had installed the pipe before making the cellar walls waterproof, and guessed the triplets knew nothing of it. Knowing how insanely superstitious the triplets were, and thinking I just might gain my liberty by playing upon their belief in the supernatural, I shouted into the drainpipe, saying, "Who are you? Where are you?"

"I think I must have nearly scared Simon and John out of their wits, for a moment later I heard them yell. One of them said a locust tree had spoken to them. I knew then that the old drain ended beneath a locust tree, probably in a blocked cavity that had once been a cesspool. I think the tree must be hollow.

"I spoke in the pipe only when I thought some of the Greens or Pashie, the housekeeper, were near the tree. I was afraid if Hummel or Gandy heard my voice they'd start digging near the tree, find the pipe, and trace it here. I had the others fooled perfectly until tonight when Simon and John slipped up to the door and discovered me shouting into the pipe. I thought Reuben was at the tree, as I'd heard Simon and John talking in the cellar a few minutes before, so I took a chance and told Reuben not to let his brothers do murder. The storm prevented my hearing anything that might have been said at the tree."

"I was at the tree then," said Crimm. "I bumped into it in the dark and you began speaking, calling me Reuben and telling me not to let Simon and John kill someone—"

"I was speaking for my own safety," said the doctor. "They intend to kill me, I think. Now I believe they intend to kill

you, Ellen, their old housekeeper, and Stan Gandy, too, if they can find him."

**C**RIMM said, "Do you know why I came out here in the first place, Dr. Maywaring. About my car being burned?"

"Yes. Ellen told me," replied Maywaring.

"Do you know what has happened to Stan?" Ellen Maywaring asked. Before Crimm could reply she added, "We were near the honey locust tree. I'd just heard the voice for the first time and thought it was father's. Suddenly someone struck Stan—he fell—and—I'm afraid I fainted."

"Stan's attacker was kind enough to carry you into the house," said Crimm. "It was dark, though, and he wasn't seen."

"Perhaps it was not Stan's attackers," the girl replied. "Perhaps someone else found me on the lawn."

"I thought it was Hummel," said Crimm, wishing for a light, thinking he must get himself and the others out of the subcellar before Simon and John worked up enough nerve to do them harm.

"Hummel was dead when the storm struck," said the doctor.

The girl asked it again, "Do you know what has happened to Stan, Deputy Crimm?"

"No," he replied, reluctant to tell her that he believed Gandy was lying dead by the roadside.

"This dawn mine and the Greers' contract will expire if I am not in a position to sign it," said Maywaring, his voice bitter. "I will lose much—years of work with the mine, a heavy initial investment. I've been a prisoner here a year today."

"Have they treated you badly?" Crimm asked, sympathy and indignation mingling in his voice.

"I've been fed well, if that's what you mean," said Maywaring. "But the mental anxiety has been sheer torture. At times I thought I would lose my reason."

"One thing makes everything else a puzzle," said Crimm. "I got a glimpse of Reuben's killer. He was a big fellow. It wasn't John or Simon. If Hummel was

dead before the storm, it wasn't Hummel."

"It wasn't Stan!" said Ellen desperately.

Crimm went on, "Reuben snatched a map from the man who later killed him to get it back. It was a map Gandy made in prison, showing where he was supposed to have hidden the money he was supposed to have stolen from the Greers.

"Who told you about the map?" Ellen asked quickly.

"Gandy," Crimm told her.

"Then you talked with him after he was slugged!" exclaimed the girl. "Because a few minutes before he was slugged he told me he'd tried to tell you about the map and you wouldn't listen. The map was a phony. Stan made it and lost it to trick Mike Willows, a thug who somehow got to be a prison guard. See? It proves you talked with Stan after he was knocked out. Please, Deputy Crimm, tell me what happened to him!"

"I don't know," said Crimm, hating the business. "We were talking by the road, Gandy and I, and—there was a shot. My gun was taken from me by the man who took the map from me after I lifted it from Reuben's corpse. It was dark. I didn't see him. After the shot I started back to the house, hoping to borrow a gun from the Greers. On the way Simon and John roped me and brought me here."

"Then someone besides Stan and the Greers was afoot," said the girl. "Stan didn't take your gun, did he?"

"No," said Crimm. "He couldn't have. He was unconscious at the time. I thought it was Hummel, but—"

"Why would Stan kill Reuben for a map he'd made himself, a phony at that?" asked Ellen.

"It was a phony," Crimm said. "Simon and John told me the robbery charge was faked, that they framed Gandy to get rid of him because he was too snoopy."

"There is only one person who would kill for the map!" said Ellen.

"Who do you—" Crimm stopped. A moment later he murmured, "Yeah! I see. Dumb! Am I ever dumb!"

The door above opened and a body hurtled down. It struck the floor beside

Crimm. He guessed it was dead by the lumpy thud of it. Simon Greer craned his skinny neck over the subceller, said:

"There's Gandy to bake with the rest of you. We've soaked the floor here with oil and we've set a stump of a burning candle onto a head of straw. Five minutes from now the candle will gutter away and fire the straw. Then there'll be a merry time! The straw will carry the fire to the oil-soaked floor! The house will burn and you'll all roast in your own grease!"

John stuck his head alongside Simon's to say, "But you have time enough to pray, you unlucky people."

**T**HE Greers were closing the door. Ellen was beside the motionless Gandy, mumuring, "Stan! Stan! Oh, poor, dear Stan!"

Dr. Maywaring angrily mumbled, "Walls, solid stone! No way to escape! The little fiends! I hope they hang! I hope they hang!" Old Woman Pashie, wherever she hunkered in the dark, was silent.

Crimm, crouching at the edge of darkness, leapt just as the door was moving. His driving hand clamped Simon's ankle.

John pulled a gun, fired point-blank. The deputy tasted cordite. Smiled fiercely. John was fighting to close the door. Simon's leg was in the way. And that because Crimm's grip on his ankle held.

"You're breaking my leg!" Simon screamed. "Open the door, John! My leg's in it! The deputy has hold of my foot! Open the door and shoot him! Shoot him, John!"

John tried, but to open the door was to lose Simon completely. Clutching, clawing, Simon seized upon his brother's coat, and Crimm brought them down together.

John's gun and Simon's flashlight landed beside Crimm. As he scooped them up the door closed with a soft thud and the bar lock clanged loudly into place.

"We're locked in!" Dr. Maywaring cried. "There's no one to let us out!"

**W**ITH light and gun, Crimm had the little men helpless. "Go to the wall, you half-pint devils!"

They obeyed, whimpering, faces pale, lips jerking.

"Now to get out of here," the deputy said, playing the light upon the closed door.

"We never will," moaned Simon. "The bar fell. The door's locked. In five minutes this place will be an oven. We're all going to die."

"I might blast the lock with lead," the deputy murmured, and began smashing bullets at the bolt taps marking the lock's location. He emptied the gun, testing the lock after each shot. The door held.

"Looks like we're here to stay." He flicked the flash's beam upon the two little men. "You weren't kidding about the candle in the straw, eh?"

His answer was in their faces, screaming silently from their fear-sheathed eyes. "No. in about five minutes, then—" Simon groaned.

"You set my car afire!" said Crimm. "You wanted to kill Gandy because you feared he knew you'd imprisoned Dr. Maywaring. Perhaps you guessed Ellen was in the turtleback, too!"

John nodded. "We thought she was going to Harmarville to report us to the police. We thought Gandy had told her what we did to her father."

"When we saw the road go dark, guessed your lights had failed," said Simon, "we got one of Hummel's fire bombs and hurried up the hill."

"You already killed Hummel?"

"Yes," Simon told the deputy. "He was helping Reuben cheat us. We told you about how he and Reuben were dyeing the natural mink to resemble mutations—"

Behind Crimm, Ellen Maywaring said, "Stan's coming to. Will you turn your light this way, deputy. Father and I want to see how badly he's hurt."

Crimm turned the light. Gandy, his head pillowed in Ellen's arms, opened his eyes. "Better if you'd stayed blinky, old man," Crimm said.

Ellen whispered to Gandy, telling their plight, hastily explaining the circumstances.

"A bullet in his side under the ribs, a bad gash in his forehead," Dr. Maywar-

ing said, looking away from the wounded man, eyeing Crimm almost complacently. It was in the doctor's eyes that he'd resigned himself to fate.

"About that map, deputy," Gandy said huskily. "Before the fireworks pop I'd like to explain. I made it and lost it, accidentally on purpose, in my cell. I knew Mike Willows, the guard assigned to take me out on special detail, would pick it up. He did. When we were in the clear he propositioned me—"

"I'm wise," Crimm interrupted, seeing it was difficult for Gandy to talk. "I usually am, when it's too late. The guard thought he had written directions to lead him to the twenty thousand you were supposed to have stolen and cached. You promised not to squawk and he let you go, thinking he could get here ahead of you and dig up the twenty grand for himself. A slick way to break jail, I'll say."

"He bumped himself on the head after he told me to beat it, blamed me for slugging him and got the suspension he expected, then burned his heels getting down here." Gandy tried to grin.

**S**IMON GREER groaned, mumbled, "You fools jabber about nothing while death creeps in tallow and wick!"

Crimm said, "The prison guard slugged you tonight, Gandy, because he feared you'd beat him to the money. He carried Ellen to the house after she fainted, hoping to get on the good side of the Greers. He beat it when he met me in the dark hall, when lightning showed him the badge on my coat."

"I got it figured like that," Gandy said.

Grimm went on, "I think I got everything right now. Willows took your slicker and hat after he slugged you, so if he were seen by lightning flash he'd be mistaken for you. He dragged you across the road where you weren't likely to be found for some time, maybe thought you were dead. Later at the mink pens Reuben saw him studying the map, thought it was you, sneaked up and snatched the map. To get it back Willows stabbed Reuben. I turned up before he got it, took the map off Reuben, and Wil-

lows put a gun in my back. I jumped and ran, depending on the dark to save me. He caught me at the road fence, slammed me down and took the map, also my gun.

"He was still there when I crawled onto my flashlight and flicked light on you. He waited. When you revived he shot you. The dogs that were worrying me at the time switched over and started worrying him. Persistent devils, they're probably worrying him yet if he didn't kill them.

"But—do you think he's found the phony hiding place you marked on the map, Gandy? Do you think he's found it, knows he isn't going to get the money, cursed his luck, and skipped? Do you think he's gone, Gandy?"

Gandy wagged his head. "He's still around, and he knows where the hiding place is by now. With everybody sealed in down here he isn't going to have much trouble getting into it."

"You mean you marked an actual spot for the cache—a spot here on the farm?" Crimm was surprised. But not so surprised he forgot the candle guttering down to dry straw, fire spreading over oiled planks. He was wondering how everyone, including himself, would react when the heat came, when they started to shrivel and render?

"It was a place I wasn't sure existed at the time," Gandy said. "But I couldn't figure any other place the triplets could imprison Dr. Maywaring. You see, deputy, I'd heard the locust tree talk before."

For a moment there was complete silence. The flashlight in Crimm's hand didn't waver; its beam held steady on Ellen, Gandy, and Dr. Maywaring. Dr. Maywaring was the first to speak:

"You mean—here, Stan? Here in this subcellar is where the prison guard will have to look before he can be sure there is no hidden money?"

"Yeah," whispered Gandy.

They all heard it, the scrape of the bar lock. Crimm switched off his light. "Get back to the walls," he breathed. "He'll have a light. Get back where he can't reach you with its beam!"

They moved back, almost silently. All

except Gandy, who'd hesitated to whisper in Crimm's ear. "He's a big, tough lug, Hank. I'm afraid I can't be of much help. Can you take him?"

"I can take him!" Crimm replied, and in his soul he knew he could.

**MIKE WILLOWS** opened the door, angled the pit a moment with his light, then put a hand on the door ledge and leapt down.

Crimm took one short step forward and drove his right with everything he had—all the frustration, pain, hardship of the past awful hours went with his ripping knuckles. Willows grunted, dropped his light, weaved. Crimm took another short step and drove his left.

"Good enough!" shouted Gandy.

And Ellen began to cry.

They locked Willows, Simon and John in the subcellar. Dr. Maywaring wanted to question Simon concerning the missing mink, but Crimm insisted it would wait. "You can help the sheriff grill them, Doc," he said. "As for now, we're going to get some hot coffee and food inside us. And I'm going to get some clean, dry clothes on the outside of me if I have to settle

for one of Pashie's Mother Hubbards."

Treading the oiled planks almost noiselessly, they passed the heap of dry straw and Ellen said, "Nice of Mr. Willows, taking time to blow out the candle."

In an upper hall Crimm took hold of Maywaring's arm, nodding at a window. "It isn't daybreak yet, Doc. You're still in time to sign that crazy contract."

Maywaring nodded happily, excitedly, then suddenly stopped to stare at the deputy. "That shot of John's—for a moment I thought you were hit?"

"Raked my scalp," said Crimm.

"You sure that's all it did?"

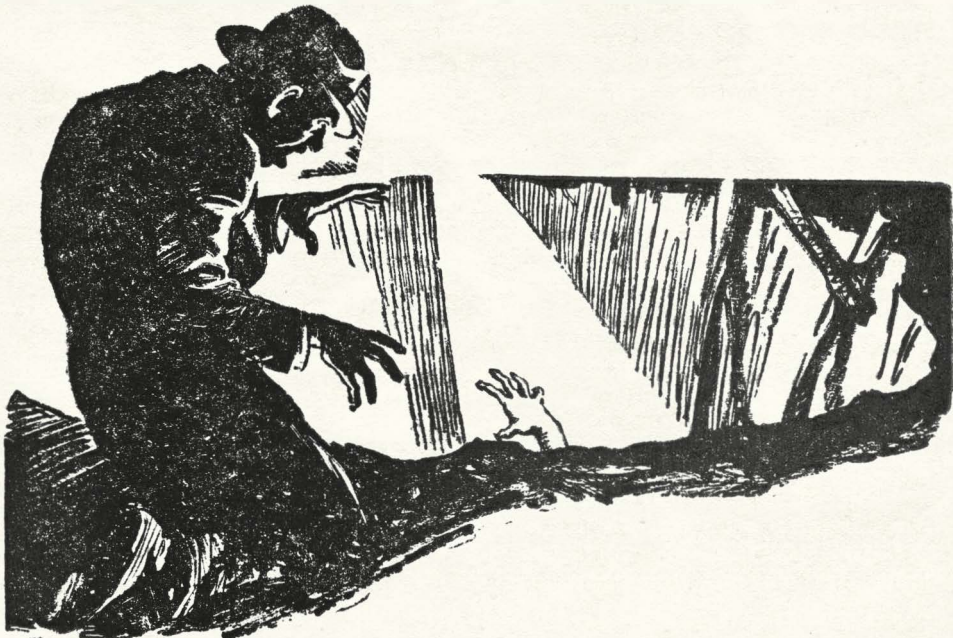
Crimm nodded, grinning, thinking he looked like a bedraggled old bum with mud in his eyebrows

Maywaring glanced back along the shadowy hall. His daughter and Stan Gandy weren't in sight. "Ellen!" he called. "Ellen, is everything all right?"

There was no reply, then there was.

The doctor looked at Crimm a bit sheepishly, a lot happy. "Was—did you hear a—kiss?" he whispered.

Crimm nodded, grinning. "Everything's all right," he said.



# Spelled Guilty

By Dave Grinnell

*Though the whole police force was baffled, this old sleuth didn't even have to leave his seat to nab the culprit.*



**Y**OU can't easily explain what makes the difference between just an average pavement-pounding cop and a first-class police officer. It's something

rather subtle, something you can't explain to those that aren't born with it. That's a mind for the unimportant detail, the trivia not related to anything that seems worth knowing. It's the man who has the kind of brain that gets a kick out of some extra bit of data, who sees the world as just more exciting just for the knowing of it; it's that kind of a man who gets himself a gold badge eventually and doesn't merely end up as he started, pounding some dull beat.

For instance, I have in mind the curious little extra bit of "useless" information that popped up recently in our own city. The old-timer with the keen-honed brain I'm talking about is Detective Lieutenant Corazel, William Corazel, attached to Central Headquarters permanently since his part in the recently headlined nab of a diamond thief. It concerns just that catch.

If you recall that case, it was only a couple months ago, the police had received a tip-off from the San Francisco department that this bird, known only as Diamond Bert, was in town, about to go into business among our own not-so-tiny jewelry manufacturing center. And, of course, the protective associations were immediately on the neck of our police department demanding help.

This Diamond Bert was a real king of his kind. Usually the insurance dicks have a fairly general idea of who the big gem-

snatchers are—they're internationally known, it being that kind of a trade. These jewel-robbers have to peddle their stuff somehow, and that always means they get known to fences and such. You can't arrest them unless you catch 'em with the goods—and there's the rub. For you can't keep a tail on every one of them every day of the year.

Of course, smart insurance dicks can usually spot who did a job by the technique. Just as often as not they'll try to strike a bargain directly with the crook in order to save the company at least some of the jack they'd have to pony up.

Now this Diamond Bert was that much better than the rest that no one knew who he was or what he looked like. They knew his technique, sure, but that never told them enough. They knew a few details of his background, too, but not enough to get a grip on. Vague as they were, these few details stopped some twenty years back. When he pulled a job, they could tell he'd done it by those little tell-tale marks of a good snatch well snatched. And that was all.

This tip-off was a real break, therefore. The first decent one that the cops ever had—and it wasn't much. It seems this Diamond Bert had been operating in California—they always knew where he'd been, after the act—and had attempted to transact certain business with a fence. Only he chose to deal through a girl, and this girl, for some entirely outside personal reason, had squawked to the cops.

She was quite unable to describe the bird—had her contact with him through a third party only, no less—but she did get the tip that Bert was lamming out of Frisco, heading East, and that she'd

actually caught the address he was heading to in our city. It was a men's residence club, bearing the name of the Rocky Mountain Club. Diamond Bert, who supposedly didn't know about the leak, should be staying there right now.

That had our department in an uproar, you can bet. But when our detectives sat down and started to figure out what to do about it, they were stumped. You see, there were maybe forty men living in that club. Nobody knew what Bert looked like or how to identify him. It's next to impossible to try to nab a clever gem crook with the goods—besides which he probably was clean, looking for work rather than peddling it.

Of course, they did the obvious things. By discreet questioning and checking, they squeezed the field down to six men, all newcomers. The rest were unquestionably in the city at the time Diamond Bert was definitely still in the West. All these six men came from the West, somewhere, like Bert; all were old enough to be Bert; all were apparently accredited businessmen, honest citizens.

**S**O THERE they sat, these city dicks, around the office of the Chief of Detectives, and stared at the list of six names—one of whom was Diamond Bert—with maybe a hundred thousand dollars in rewards out for him, from a half a dozen of the world's biggest insurance companies, not to mention a barrel of warrants. That was when William Corazel came in.

Corazel had interrupted his career a couple of years ago to do a policing hitch with the Army MP's in England, Italy, North Africa. He'd been back several months already. And so they showed him the list and he looked at it carefully, Corazel, the old-timer with his iron-gray hair, bland blue eyes, leathery skinned from patrolling long beats in his youth, with the quiet way about him.

He sat himself down and picked up the dossier on Diamond Bert and read that through. The salient details covered not much more than the first two paragraphs. That's about all they thought they knew about the man himself. It was thought

he'd been born in England and had come over here about the age of fourteen—somebody had gotten that info somehow. Maybe it was true, considering the smooth way he could ease into wealthy circles. Probably could still warble a British accent, if he had to. Another claim said he usually had a western drawl to his speech, and that seemed to be for certain, for several people had had occasion to speak to him by telephone. A few other odds and ends about as substantial as the above.

Corazel stared at the list of names, blinked a bit, and stared at it harder. A little smile flickered on his lips as if he'd had the ghost of an idea. Immediately the boys pounced on him, wanting to know if he'd seen something.

"No, not quite," Corazel smiled a bit, "but it's a wild idea that's just come to me. Might be worth a trial."

The Chief wanted him to explain. Corazel looked at the lists of suspects again. There were Ezra Searles and Dwight Hazlitt, Albert Benton and Joseph Azana, Zane Tuttle, and Albert Zimmermann. Corazel put a finger to his lips, slid into the Chief's seat and picked up a phone.

"Get me the Rocky Mountain Club," he asked the police switchboard. When the connection was made, Corazel asked the desk clerk at the little residential club if he would connect Corazel directly with the room phones of each of the six men as he asked for them.

The detectives stood around gaping at Corazel. Was the man trying to crack a case just by telephone? Without leaving the office? What had he seen that they had missed?

Corazel winked an eye as he got Ezra Searles on the wire. "Mr. Searles," he said, adopting a colorless, tired tone of voice, "this is the assistant manager of the club. We are checking the names on our register for our regular card file. Would you be so kind as to spell it correctly for us, for your convenience and ours?" Corazel listened, checked off the name on his list, thanked the man, and jiggled the wire to get the club's desk clerk back.

He asked for the next name on the list, repeated the process with him, and so on, getting each man to spell out his name. Fortunately every man was in, it being still too early in the morning for visitors to leave.

**F**INALLY Corazel hung up. The other men clustered around him, gasping for enlightenment. "Well," finally snapped the Chief, "what did you learn?"

"Only the name of our bird," said Corazel, leaning back in the Chief's chair and taking out his pipe.

"Yes, yes," snapped the Chief, "but who?"

Corazel picked up the list again. "The man we want," he said, "is Dwight Hazlitt."

"How do you know?" barked the Chief Chief right back.

"Well," said Corazel, leaning back and lighting his pipe, "when I was in England, I noticed a little thing that had not occurred to me before. Whenever an English clerk or cop had occasion to spell my name aloud, they said something that struck me as odd. Instead of pronouncing the 'z' in my name as if it were 'zee,' they always called that letter, 'zed.' It seems that in the alphabet as it is taught in Britain, *zed* is the name for the last letter in the alphabet."

He paused to puff reflectively on his pipe a while. "One of the things a man

never changes is the way he calls off his alphabet or counts his numbers. You take some old German, for instance, who's lived in this country maybe forty years and speaks like a native. Have him do a sum in arithmetic and he'll do it in German every time. And you ask a man raised in a British grammar school to spell out a word, he's going to do in British letters—and you won't know it until he touches that last letter, 'z.'

"The only thing we seemed to have on Diamond Bert is that he learned his ABC's in England. American ways, Western accent, and all, when I asked him his name, he spelled it with a *zed*."

"You see," Corazel leaned forward and picked up the sheet of names, "When I saw this list I noticed that, quite by accident, all the names but one had a 'z' in them. Of course, Diamond Bert may have been Albert Benton, but then we'd have known because all the others would have spelled their names in the American style. So you send some of the boys around and pick up this Dwight Hazlitt and go to work on him. He's got a fine Texas accent, but I think we can bring the true branding of this wild bull to the surface. eh?"

It really didn't take much sweating to prove old Corazel right. And the point that I'm trying to make is not that you can settle crimes without stirring from your soft seat, but that it pays to remember the unimportant trivia. Zee?





# Whistle While You Slay

By Ric Hasse



When the Grim Reaper started writing discords into his orchestrations, Band Leader Lad Lawson found himself wielding the baton for a homicide symphony.

I LEFT a call for one o'clock at the desk of my hotel and told the clerk not to wake me before that time unless the place was burning, and not then if the fire wasn't on my floor. I pulled my shades against the early morning sunlight, slipped my tired carcass between the sheets, and dreamed of a chorus of lovely, redheaded angels singing beautiful, soft lullabies.

The strident ringing of a bell smothered the angelic choir. I buried my head in the pillow, but the telephone was insistent. I rolled over and grabbed it.

"If this place isn't burning down," I yelled into the mouthpiece, "I'm gonna set fire to it myself—!"

"Lad? Don't be mad, Laddie. I made the clerk put the call through."

"Good grief, Terry," I groaned into the telephone. "It's all right for a bride to be too nervous to sleep on her wedding day, but I'm tired. I worked until four o'clock this mornig. Remember? If you want me to be at the church at two-thirty to be Eddie's best man, hang up and let me get some sleep!"

"But, Lad, I'm worried. What's the

matter with Eddie, can you tell me?"

The note of desperation in Theresa Taylor's voice made me sigh helplessly.

"Nothing's the matter with Eddie," I told her patiently. "I left him at his apartment not twenty minutes ago, and he was making with the music at his piano. He is very happy, as he should be, marrying the prettiest girl this side of heaven. Now can I go back to sleep?"

"But, Lad, Eddie just phoned me, and he was excited. He said not to worry if he doesn't get to the church on time. What did he mean?"

I struggled up into a sitting position. "What! Didn't he say what?"

"No. He just said that he had something hot, and not to worry if he was late. I'm terribly worried, Lad. Will you—darling, I *know* you're tired out, but will you run over and see what's the matter?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and looked at the ceiling for guidance, but I knew what the answer would be.

"Okay, sweet," I said in a voice full of exhaustion, so she'd know how I felt about it. "I'll go over. But if he's just got a good song title or something, I'm going to be awfully mad."

I hung up without giving her a chance to say anything more, and climbed under a cold shower, my whole body aching with fatigue.

**M**OST people think the life of an orchestra leader is the life of ease. Just stand there and wave a stick, while the musicians do all the work. Yeah? Try it some time!

It's tough enough at rehearsals, trying to keep twelve temperamental musicians happy, when each of them wants the breaks for his instrument on every song in the library. But the real work is in the side issues. Like making sure, when that two A.M. dead feeling starts coming, none of the boys hit the weed or the bottle. I don't mind a drink or two, but marijuana is completely taboo in my band.

And they all drop their personal troubles into my lap, from finance company blues to hangovers. I get 'em. But it's

worth it when you come out with a band like mine.

Not that I think my band, or any other, is all leader, though. Jack McIntyre, my agent, handles the business end for me. Then there's Eddie Vaughn, one of the sweetest pianists in the biz. It was Eddie who started me muting all my brass, and it's Eddie's arrangements that puts that extra color into the sound and phrasing of any song we play, that makes John Q. Public pack in to hear it and dance to it.

And there's a little hundred-pound package of curves and redheaded charm by the name of Theresa Taylor. She's small, but so's a skylark, and her voice is the kind that inspires romance. Terry is the daughter of Hal Taylor, the old tunesmith whose songs are all what we call "standard." That is, they're as popular now as they were twenty years ago.

Hal Taylor died of tuberculosis four years ago, after being in secluded retirement for five years before death stopped his suffering. He had left Terry enough money to finish college, but no more. The rest of his fortune, including the income from all his published songs, were willed to organizations fighting tuberculosis.

By the time I had struggled into my clothes and gotten down to the street, it was after eight o'clock and the morning taxi rush was on, so I hoofed it over to Eddie Vaughn's West 57th Street apartment.

I signalled the elevator down to the ground floor, but before I got in, I said, "Know if Eddie Vaughn's still upstairs?" to the kid running it.

"Naw," he said. "Eddie goes outta here about an hour ago like a bat outta-you-know-where."

"You wouldn't know where he went?" I felt an apprehensive feeling of urgency.

"Yeah," the kid said. "He says something about that he is going to see about a big rat. Then he says he's going to see Jack McIntyre. I never see Eddie burning like that before!"

I said, "Thanks," and tossed him half a buck.

I was lucky. When I hit the sidewalk, a cab was just discharging a passenger. I won the race with two old ladies by a nose, and directed the driver to Jack McIntyre's apartment on Riverside Drive, near 80th Street.

I could think of no reason why Eddie would blow his top, unless someone did something to hurt Terry, and Jack McIntyre would cut off his arm before he'd hurt that redhead.

Eddie Vaughn was an even-tempered kid, even shy. His wavy brown hair, generous mouth, and blue eyes that fairly beamed good humor, attracted plenty of women to him, but Eddie wouldn't fall.

Not till Terry Taylor came along about a year ago and knocked us all for a loop at her first try-out as vocalist. Her sweet, throbbing voice, and the sparkling clean freshness of her quiet, soft beauty, brought out the love light, not only in Eddie's eyes, but in the peepers of every other guy in the band, including mine. Especially mine.

But Terry's eyes saw only one guy from that day on, and that guy was Eddie. No one else was jealous, because the kind of love those two kids had is the sparkling, fresh kind that put a warm glow into everyone who knew them.

Eddie had been happy when I left him this morning. The music he'd been dragging out of that piano was sweet music, happy music, music with love in every chord. Yet, a few minutes later, he had rushed out in a blaze of anger. I couldn't figure it. That just wasn't Eddie.

**T**HE cab pulled into the curb. I paid it off and ran into the apartment building, rode the elevator to the fourth floor. There was a big uniform leaning against the wall by McIntyre's door. He blocked me with a massive arm, and a cold shiver ran over my skin.

"Who do you want, bub?" he asked.

"Jack McIntyre," I told him. "What's the trouble?"

He opened the door for me, and when I went in, he stuck his head in and called, "Lieutenant! Guy here came to see McIntyre."

The character that stepped out of the

bedroom was a short blockish figure with a square face centered on a nose that had evidently been broken twice, for it had an S curve in it. He held out a big knuckled hand and said, "I'm Lieutenant Brill. Homicide."

I took his hand and said that I was Lad Lawson.

"The orchestra leader," he asked with interest in his eyes. When I nodded, he told me he had some of our recordings at home. "You're a great favorite with my wife, especially that piano player, what's his name?"

"Eddie Vaughn," I told him.

"Yeah," he said. "What business do you have with McIntyre this early in the morning, Mr. Lawson?"

"I came over to see if—" Something he had said a moment before, finally penetrated. "What did you say your name was, Lieutenant?"

"Brill."

"Did you say homicide?"

"Yeah. Dead people and stuff. You were telling me what you came here for?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, trying to think fast. "I just came over to see if Jack would be able to make it to the wedding this afternoon. Eddie Vaughn and Terry Taylor are getting spliced."

"Run out of nickels," he asked innocently.

"Nickels? What do you mean?"

"The telephone. Saves a lot of time. A lot of people use it."

"Well, I couldn't sleep this morning," I lied through my teeth. "So I came over to see Jack, that's all."

"Well, come on in and have a look," Brill invited, and led me into the bedroom. It was a big room, and McIntyre had his desk in it. I took one look at the desk and tried to swallow my tongue.

**J**ACK MCINTYRE was kneeling in front of the desk in a white satin dressing gown. His forehead was leaning against the edge of the desk and his hands clutched the top. In the back of the white robe was a square pattern made by four black holes, each surrounded by a big splotch of crimson.

I felt sick. Brill said, "Here, take this," and handed me a shot of McIntyre's brandy. I swallowed it, but I didn't feel any better.

"When was the last time you heard from McIntyre?" Brill wanted to know.

"Last night about ten o'clock. At the Broken Mirror Room."

"What did he say?"

"To me? Nothing but hello. He came to see Eddie Vaughn; brought some music scripts, a couple of George Ashcroft's new tunes for a musical Ashcroft is doing. Eddie's writing the arrangements."

"Ashcroft owns the Broken Mirror Room, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. He owns three or four clubs, besides being a top song writer. He learned songwriting from Hal Taylor, and his tunes are almost as good as Taylor's."

"Does he own the band?"

"No, it's my band. We work there under contract. McIntyre arranged it. He worked for Ashcroft, too. Handled the rights for Ashcroft's songs."

Brill pulled a half-smoked stogie from his pocket and studied the end of it.

"When was the last time McIntyre called you on the phone?"

"I don't know. Four days, maybe three."

Brill said, "Ummm," and put the stogie back into his pocket. He walked over to the desk and picked up a flat, rectangular gadget.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, and extended the gadget so I could get a good look. It was one of these mechanical telephone number pads, with an alphabetical index down one side, and a marker that opened it at the initial it is set for. The marker was set at L. Brill pressed the release and the pad snapped open. There were three names listed under L; mine and those of two singers. Both the singers, according to a late issue of *Variety*, were playing out of town.

"What do you think?" Brill repeated. "He had this under his hand when he died."

I knew he was thinking that maybe

Jack had been trying to tip his killer's identity. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Looks like Jack tried to call me. But he didn't."

Brill said, "Ummm," and put the pad back on the desk. "Well, I guess that's all for now, Mr. Lawson," he said with an air of finality. "You've got a nice orchestra," he commented as he opened the door for me. "You organized it after the war, didn't you?"

"I reorganized it," I explained. "Most of the boys were with me before."

"Most of them in the service?"

"Every last man of them," I said proudly. "We were scattered all over the world."

"My son went through France and Germany," Bill said. "Any of your boys in those campaigns?"

"I was," I told him. "And Eddie Vaughn was. Joe Donnelly, my bass man, started, but he caught a couple on D-Day and spent the rest of the war in hospitals."

"No others?" Brill's voice turned sharp and there was a shrewd look under his bushy eyebrows.

"No," I told him. "Why?"

"Just wondered," Brill said, and reached into his coat pocket. "Ever see one of these?" He unwrapped the handkerchief from a Walther P-38 automatic, a German army pistol.

"Yeah," I said slowly. "I had one myself."

"Had?"

"I sent it to my kid brother out in Indiana for a souvenir," I said. "There's hundreds of those floating around."

"Yeah," Brill said. "Hundreds of them. Well, good-by, Mr. Lawson. I'll probably be seeing you around soon."

I said, "Yeah, you probably will." And left. I knew that one of the hundreds of P-38 pistols belonged to Eddie Vaughn. I didn't know whether he'd registered it or not.

**I** CAUGHT a cruising cab and told the driver to take me to the Broken Mirror Room. Then I had to tell him that I knew it was closed at this hour, but that I wanted to go there anyway.

Pierre, the headwaiter, whose real name is Pete Grogan, told me that George Ashcroft was in the office upstairs going over the week's receipts. I crossed the dance floor and circled the bandstand to the stairs behind the back curtains.

George Ashcroft looked up from the account books spread out before him and grinned at me. He was a slightly built man, wiry and nervous, with smooth, prematurely white hair.

"Hi, Lad! What are you doing here on your day off?" he greeted.

"McIntyre's dead," I said bluntly.

The grin disappeared slowly from Ashcroft's face. He always looked younger when he grinned, which is why he wore an almost perpetual grin.

"How?" he said. "When? Jack was all right yesterday evening."

"Maybe an hour or so," I told him. "Someone put four slugs into his back!"

Ashcroft wiped a hand over his face, pulled at his lower lip.

"I can't figure that," he said in a stunned voice. "Not to Jack McIntyre. Jack never did harm to anyone in his life."

"Well, if you know any answers, you'd better get them ready. A big homicide dick named Brill will probably be around to see you."

"Me? Why should he want to see me?"

"That's the usual routine, isn't it? The cops checking everyone a dead character knew?"

"Yeah, I guess so. But I don't know anything. Unless—"

"Unless, what?" I asked him anxiously.

"Oh, nothing. Rumors. I heard that McIntyre was doing business with Big Al Nye, and Big Al can be dangerous if he's crossed on anything."

"What kind of business?" I wanted to know.

"How should I know?" Ashcroft snapped irritably. "I told you it was only a rumor. Incidentally, though, I've seen Eddie Vaughn a couple of times with Art Sharkey, and Sharkey's the strong arm for Al Nye."

I puzzled my forehead with that one.

"Now what would Eddie be doing with Sharkey, a cheap hood?"

Ashcroft shrugged his thin shoulders. "Maybe he was just getting a tip on the ponies."

"No, Eddie doesn't gamble."

"Holy smoke!" Ashcroft slapped a hand against his forehead. "Jack McIntyre took three of my new tunes from my apartment last night! I've got to get those sheets back right away!"

"Relax," I told him. "He gave them to Eddie last night."

Ashcroft closed the books on his desk and got to his feet decisively.

"I'm going over and see Eddie right now. One of those songs is in the original manuscript. I'll feel a lot safer if I keep it and let Eddie work from a copy."

I walked out with him. Just as we reached the sidewalk, a big police sedan pulled up in front of the canopy. Lieutenant Brill poked his head through the window.

"Hi, there, Lawson!"

I stepped over to the car and introduced Ashcroft. "We were just going over to see Eddie Vaughn," I told him.

"Good. Climb in and we'll all go," Brill said pleasantly. We climbed into the back of the car with him. On the way, he asked Ashcroft about McIntyre and got the same answers I'd given.

**A**T EDDIE'S apartment we went straight up. In the corridor outside Eddie's door, a tired-looking man was lounging against the wall. Brill looked at him and the guy shook his head and fished a key from his vest pocket. Brill unlocked the door with the key.

Inside, Ashcroft went straight to the piano and thumbed quickly through the paper on the music ledge.

"It's gone!" he yelled, and his eyes darted around the room.

"What's gone?" Brill wanted to know.

"*Summer Love in Wintertime!* It's gone! The other two tunes are here, but that one's gone. And it's the only copy!"

"Is it valuable?" Brill asked innocently.

"Of course it's valuable," Ashcroft snapped. "It's a George Ashcroft song. All my tunes are best sellers."

"Oh, sure, I forgot," Brill said. "That's where you got the dough for your clubs and shows, isn't it? From your song hits."

I drifted over to the fireplace and took a cigarette from a box on the mantel-piece. Ashcroft was explaining how much he got in music royalties. I lifted the lid of the square lacquered box Eddie Vaughn had picked up in Paris, took a quick look and dropped the lid again. It was empty.

"Is that where he kept it?" Brill called across the room.

I turned around slowly. "Kept what?"

"The German Walther that killed Jack McIntyre," he grinned under his crooked nose. "It was registered."

"That means nothing," I told Brill. "A hundred people knew Eddie kept that gun there. He showed it off to everyone that came up here. Anyway, Eddie wouldn't shoot anyone with his own gun and then leave it there."

Ashcroft glanced from Brill's face to mine, puzzled.

"He might," Brill said. "He might do just that, if he were angry and excited."

I knew that the cop in the corridor must have questioned the elevator boy about Eddie by now. Brill stepped over close to me. He wasn't grinning now.

"And if Vaughn didn't do it, you might have made a sweet play just now putting your prints on that box. I've been checking a few angles, and I find that some people seem to think that you weren't too happy to see Eddie Vaughn getting married. Seems you had the same idea in mind for yourself. And the same girl!"

My arm and shoulder took a terrific jolt from the impact of my fist on Brill's hard, square jaw. He went crashing back against the piano. He got to his feet slowly, stood there for a minute rubbing his jaw, his eyes glittering.

"I'm going to forget that, Lawson. Now, get outta here! And don't leave any more prints around on your way!"

I FELT like getting cockeyed as I walked out, but I knew that wouldn't be smart. I paused uncertainly on the sidewalk outside the building, whistling a little tune, then headed for Babe Shane's Chop House on 51st Street.

The Babe was there himself, all three hundred pounds of him. He came over and leaned on the bar beside me. "Hiya, chum? The story goes that Jack McIntyre is no longer with us. Whattaya know, chum?"

"That's right," I said, and lifted my glass. "Seen Art Sharkey around, Babe?"

He screwed up his cherubic face in a sour grimace, then nodded his head toward the rear of the big, oak-paneled dining room.

"Sharkey isn't here, but Big Al Nye is back there. He can probably tell you."

I walked back, nodded to a few acquaintances, and sat down across from Big Al Nye in the leather upholstered booth.

Big Al Nye isn't big; he's called that because he's a big operator. He was wearing a gray suit, with a black shirt and yellow tie. His hawked nose and his gray, expressionless countenance always reminded me of a buzzard. And his frozen, gray eyes. Vulture's eyes.

"Hello, Al," I said, and he nodded and looked down at his racing form again. "Cops got around to you yet?" I said, and he looked up, sighed, and folded the paper into his coat pocket.

"Why should the cops get around to me?" He spaced his words with slow precision.

"They're talking to everyone that did business with Jack McIntyre," I said. "I heard that you were working up a deal with Jack."

"No deal," he shook his head slowly. "He couldn't see things my way."

"And now he's dead."

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, and he said, evenly, "I don't like such remarks, Lawson. You play nice music. I like to hear you play music. You should stick to playing music."

"Yeah," I said, ignoring the shiver that ran up my back. "Something in that."

Know where Art Sharkey is? I'd like to talk to him."

"What do you want from Art?" Nye said.

"I heard he was around with my boy, Eddie Vaughn. I was curious about what they might have in common."

"Oh, that. Eddie just wanted a couple of addresses out in Reno."

"Reno? Reno, Nevada?" I was frankly amazed.

"Yeah, Reno, Nevada. People gamble there. People get divorced there. Hal Taylor even died there."

"Yeah, I know. But what does Sharkey know about Reno?"

"That's his old stamping ground. Matter of fact, that's why he left. He stamped a couple of the wrong people."

"And that's all Eddie wanted from Sharkey?"

"That's all."

I said, "Thanks," and walked out of the place, whistling a snatch of a tune that was sticking in my mind. I took a cab over to Terry Taylor's apartment. I figured that if anyone was to help me find Eddie, it would be Terry. She knew him better than anyone else.

She opened the door when I buzzed, and threw herself into my arms. "Oh, Lad!" she sobbed. "What's Eddie done?"

I put my arms around her, stroked her soft red hair, and whispered, "Eddie hasn't done anything, baby. The kid might be in a jam, but you and I know he wouldn't do anything wrong, don't we?"

She pushed herself away and tried to smile. She reached up and took the handkerchief from my breast pocket and dried her big green eyes. I took her across the room and pulled her down beside me on her sofa.

"He—he called me, Lad," she said. I bounced off the sofa onto my feet again.

"What! When? Where is he?"

"He—he called about twenty minutes ago," she stammered. Her little face was more serious than I'd ever seen it before. "He said he was going to have to hide for a while, but not to worry."

"What else did he say?" I was puzzled.

"He said to tell you to come to Hop Jackson's. Make sure you're not followed, and come alone." She wrinkled her eyes up at me and asked, "Where is Hop Jackson's, Lad? I've never heard of it."

Neither had I. I shook my head, trying to concentrate. There might have been a Hop Jackson in the little colored jive combo that Eddie had tried some hot arrangement for a few years ago, when he was experimenting.

I snapped my fingers and went to the telephone. When I had the union headquarters, I identified myself and asked where Hop Jackson played last.

"Okay, baby," I told Terry. "It's a little spot out in Harlem. I'm on my way. I'll call you."

She ran over to a closet, grabbed a little beret and threw a gabardine coat across her shoulders.

"Hey, wait a minute, baby," I said. "Eddie said for me to come alone."

She clamped her teeth together, thrust out her red lower lip, and said, "I'm going, Lad. Don't try to stop me!"

I knew that look. Terry had a stubborn streak that not even Eddie could budge, so when that lower lip came out at me, I just shrugged and said, "Okay, baby. Let's go."

**WE** TOOK a cab to a subway station, rode an express to the 145th Street station and took another cab from there.

The address we were looking for was a little place below the street level. It didn't seem to have a name. Anyway, it had no sign. We went down the steps and paused just inside the door to accustom our eyes to the murky light of the place. A tall, thin man with coal-black skin stepped up in front of us.

"Somethin' I can do for you?" His voice was full of suspicion.

"I'm looking for Hop Jackson," I told him.

"Never heard of him," he said in a tone that implied that we would be more welcome elsewhere.

I felt frustrated. I didn't know what to do. Terry was clutching my arm with shaking hands that warned me she was

about ready for a nervous breakdown.

"Look," I told the thin man. "If Hop Jackson shows, tell him to call Lad Lawson right away. It's important."

A voice from a booth about three feet away said, "Right here, Mister Lawson. It's okay, Bo."

The thin man said, "Right, Hop, anything you say," and disappeared into the back.

Hop Jackson was a little man with thick lips and pearly white teeth. "Eddie said you would come alone," he said.

"This is Terry Taylor," I introduced. "She was going to marry Eddie this afternoon."

Terry clutched at his hand, and her voice trembled. "Where's Eddie? Please, is he all right?"

Jackson looked down at the table. "Eddie's hurt, Miss Taylor. Hurt bad." He looked up at me with wide eyes. "Eddie's got three bullets in him, an' he was bleedin' awful bad. I don't know how he made it here."

"Where is he?" I wanted to know.

"I can't tell you that, Mister Lawson. He's bein' well taken care of, though, don't you worry. After he call Miss Taylor he passed out. The doctor says it might be days before he's able to walk again, but he'll be all right."

I pounded a fist into the palm of my other hand. "Eddie'd be better off in a hospital," I said. "Even if the cops do get him."

Jackson shook his head. "That Eddie's a fine boy," he said stubbornly. "An' he's stayin' where he is. Ain't the cops he's afraid of."

"Take me to him," Terry pleaded. "I'll go crazy if you don't take me to him!"

Jackson looked at me and I nodded. "She'll do him no harm," I said. Terry looked at me gratefully with tear-filled eyes.

"All right," Jackson agreed. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out some folded papers. He slid them across the table to me.

"Eddie said give this to you. He said not to let anyone know you got it. It's worth a fortune, he said."

"Okay," I told him. "I'll take it to the Broken Mirror Room and have it locked up in the safe. Thanks for everything. Jackson. Terry, take care of Eddie, and if you need me call the Broken Mirror. I'll leave word there."

I SHOOK hands with Jackson and left.

I walked over to Lenox and took a cab downtown. I was whistling that persistent tune again when I pulled out the papers Jackson had given me, and examined them. There was a reddish, sticky spot on the outside fold, and I shuddered. Eddie Vaughn's blood.

It was a music script, with the title written across the top in a small precise handwriting that was familiar to me. I was still whistling, and I suddenly realized that I was no longer just whistling a tune stuck in my mind. I was whistling the notes written on the sheets.

I snapped my fingers in exasperation. Of course! That's where I'd picked up the tune. It was the music Eddie had been playing when I'd left him at his apartment this morning. I told the cab driver to pull in at a cigar store, where I called police headquarters and left a message for Lieutenant Brill.

His car was parked out in front of the club when I got there. George Ashcroft was sitting at the piano on the bandstand, running his fingers lightly across the keyboard, when I walked across the dance floor. The place looked dreary and hollow with most of the lights out and the chairs piled up on the tables.

Lieutenant Brill and another cop were sitting on band chairs. He came to his feet when he saw me.

"Where's Eddie Vaughn, Lawson!" he bellowed. "The man I had tailing you lost you in the subway, but I know you and that girl were going to meet Vaughn. Where is he?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant," I told him honestly. I turned to Ashcroft and pulled the music script from my pocket.

"I got your song back, George," I told him, and held it out so he could see it. "This is it, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, and an expression of



vast relief covered his face as he reached for it. I pulled it away from him.

"George," I said, smoothly. "You were Hal Taylor's last protégé, weren't you? You were with him those last years out near Reno."

"Sure, everybody knows that," he said. "Give me that music!"

"What is this?" Brill demanded, looking from me to Ashcroft. I paid no attention to the cop. I was watching the nervous face under the white hair.

"I didn't know it," I told him. "And Eddie Vaughn didn't know it until he checked up. Listen, George, listen."

I whistled the opening bars of the song I held in my hand. Ashcroft's knuckles were white as he gripped the edge of the keyboard.

I stopped whistling and said, "How does it go from there, George? Play it for Lieutenant Brill!"

"If you ever want to play in this town again, Lawson," Ashcroft said tensely. "You'll hand me that music right now!"

"Why don't you play it, Ashcroft!" I yelled it at him. "You wrote it, didn't you? The composer doesn't need the music to play it!"

"I got a bad memory," he snapped, and lunged off the piano bench. One hand dipped into his coat pocket and came out with a little revolver, and the other hand grabbed at the music sheets. I took a step backward and bumped into Brill, putting us both off balance.

**A**SHCROFT snatched the music, had it in his hand. But he was so intent on getting it that he ignored the detective with Brill. The cop stepped sideways behind Ashcroft, lifted a hand with a leather sap, and brought it down across the back of the white head.

Ashcroft folded into my arms. The gun in his hand spat once and tore splinters in the floor beside my foot.

Brill said, "Whew!" and mopped his forehead. "Do you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Sure," I said, and pulled the music sheets from Ashcroft's limp fingers; handed them to Brill. "This is what it's about."

"Hal Taylor was one of the best songwriters that ever lived," I explained. "Every Taylor song published brought thousands of dollars royalties. Even his first tunes are still paying off today.

"About nine years ago, Hal Taylor went to Nevada with tuberculosis. He was out there for five years before he died, but, so far as was known, he didn't write a note of music after he left New York. When he died, he willed his money and the income from his published songs to the tuberculosis institutes. That apparently left nothing at all to his daughter, Theresa."

"The light's beginning to dawn," Brill said. "If Hal Taylor was still writing music out west, those new songs would be worth a fortune."

"Even with someone else's name on them," I said. "Four years ago, Ashcroft started turning out three or four hits a year. Hal Taylor had taught some of the best of the songsmiths so the public took it for granted that Ashcroft's songs had all of Hal's style because of Taylor's influence on him. Actually, he had stolen the songs Hal Taylor wrote out west; the songs that were intended as Taylor's legacy for his daughter."

"How does McIntyre come in?" Brill asked.

"Ashcroft needed three songs for his new musical. He must have been copying from the originals last night when McIntyre picked them up to take to Eddie Vaughn for orchestra arrangements. Eddie was suspicious anyway, so when he was running over the new songs this morning and came to the original copy, he recognized the handwriting of the title right away. You can compare it with the inscription on her father's picture in Terry Taylor's dressing room."

"So Ashcroft had to get the original back," Brill sighed, and looked down at the little pseudo-songwriter. "And caught up with it when Vaughn took it to McIntyre."

"He shot Eddie, too," I said. "But Eddie got away with the music sheets." I yawned in the lieutenant's face. "Good-by, Brill. I've got to catch up on my bedtime."

# The Whip Hand

By Neil Moran

*It's too long a cry back to horse-and-buggy days, as those two New York gunmen learned when they crossed the route of Dan Malloy, the coachman of Central Park.*



DAN MALLOY saw the two men coming along with what seemed like a drunken man between them. They stopped. One of the men said, "Can you drive us through the park, cabby? We want to sober this guy up."

"Sure," said Dan. "Get in."

The two men got in with their burden. Dan touched the horse with the whip. The carriage rolled. Going through Central Park, it made a pretty picture to people sitting on park benches, the lamps dimly outlining the rotund figure on the driver's seat.

Dan made many trips like this for he had been driving this ancient victoria for years. All kinds of people he got, out-of-town people, old people remembering the past, giggling honeymooners, foreigners. But now he had a drunken man, whose companions wanted to sober him up. Well, it wasn't the first time that Dan had driven a drunken man in his long career as a coachman.

The carriage rolled along, and the old horse whinnied, and Dan touched him with the whip. This job was monotonous to Dan, but he loved it. Taking a fare or fares through the park, coming back, and taking others. His father had done the same kind of work before him, and Dan was wearing his father's high hat. Like the carriage and the horse, it had seen better days, but Dan was very proud of that hat, and he'd never part with it.

Yes, he thought, as the carriage rolled along, times weren't what they used to be. Outside of high prices and all that, every-

thing was different. Why, there was a day when many carriages rolled through the park, owned by wealthy people, before the automobile, and when the automobile was just an infant. But the automobile grew up, and the horse and carriage were slowly pushed out of the picture, except for the handful which were still taking people through the park.

Dan was thinking of his own immediate territory. Most of his life had been confined to a few square miles. Evening after evening, he went over the same route, sometimes dreaming of the past, on this seat, sometimes listening to the conversations behind him.

He had his ear cocked now. "Sure," one of the men was saying. "We can do it."

"Well, let's go."

Dan wondered where they would go to, for they were riding in the carriage. Suddenly, Dan looked around. To his amazement, the two men were gone!

"What is this?" said Dan, stopping the carriage that had been moving slowly. "They've left me with a drunken man!"

He got down off the seat, and shook the man's shoulder. "Wake up!" he said. "What is this? Why did those two fellows—"

The body didn't move, and Dan became suspicious. He placed a hand over the man's heart.

"Dead!" he said aloud. "Those two fellows—this is awful!"

Dan drove toward the park police station knowing how easy it was for the two men to have sprung out. One on either side, with the carriage moving slowly.

It was not that that concerned him now. He had a dead body back there, and he shivered. But people on the benches just

saw a carriage rolling through the night, its lamps dimly outlining the rotund figure on the driver's seat, making a pretty picture out of the Victorian past.

Dan stopped in front of the police station and went in. When the desk lieutenant heard what had happened, he jumped up. "This is something new," he said, "getting rid of a body that way. Give me a description of these men. Mahoney, you and Huston, go out and bring in that body, and see if there's any identification on it."

**T**WENTY minutes later, Dan was at his stand, at the park's entrance telling the other cab drivers about it. All the drivers were talking about it. The police found no identification on the body, and they were stumped.

Dan drove two more fares through the park and shivered. Well, at least, he was sure that there was no dead body behind him. But when he came back ten minutes later, he looked over his carriage. Maybe he'd find a clue. Secretly, Dan had always wanted to be a detective, but had always been a hack driver.

No, no clues. But wait—what was that protruding from a crack between the cushions? Something white against the black background.

Dan reached over, and pulled it out. He stared at it. It was small, and had a number on it. He turned it over, then his heart jumped. Why, this was a hat check of a night club, with the club's name on it!

One of those fellows must have dropped it, he thought. But how?

Two men walked up to him. "Oh," said one, "I see you found it, Pop. I was wondering. Lost it. Thought maybe it dropped in the carriage, when I pulled out my cigarettes. Hand it over, Pop."

Dan stared at him. They were back. The same two men. "I won't hand it over," said Dan. "What do you mean by leaving a dead man in my carriage. What about my fare?"

"You'll get plenty of fare," said the man, "if you keep on talking. Where you're going, you won't need any fare. Joe, we got to do something about this.

This guy has seen that check. He could identify us."

"Yeah," said Joe. "Let's take him for a ride."

"What!" said Dan.

"You heard me. Take you for a ride. Only you'll be taking us, if you know what I mean."

Dan shivered. He knew only too well. These men now wanted to take him through the park and 'l him.

"Oh, no!" he said, his knees knocking together.

"Oh, yes," said the shorter of the two men. "I got a gun in my pocket, Pop, and don't ask me to drop you right here. Get up on the seat and stop stalling."

"But you can't kill me in cold blood!" said Dan.

"Can't we? We killed one guy tonight. Because he knew too much. The same as you. He was goin' to talk. And our boss didn't like it. So he was conked over the head. We didn't mean to kill him—there. So we had to get him out, pretending he was drunk."

Oh, so that was it! Dan looked at them.

The taller man was grinning. "We'll make it easy for you," he said. "We'll let you know when we're going to fire the bullet."

"But look—" said Dan. He went to raise his voice, and the man grabbed him.

"Get up on the seat," he said, "or there'll be a dead body here."

There was nothing else for Dan to do, unless he wanted to yell. And that might endanger the lives of the other men.

No, he had to do what he was told. He got up on the seat, having stumbled once or twice, and took one last look around the Plaza, believing that he was seeing it for the last time.

**B**EADS of perspiration streamed down Dan's forehead. He pulled on the reins and the horse started. He didn't know what he was doing. It all seemed like a dream. But as the carriage rolled through the park, making that same Victorian picture in the night, he knew only too well what was going to happen to him.

He was taking his last ride, and seeing these trees for the last time. Those people

sitting on benches didn't know what was passing before them. All they saw was one of the quaint carriages rolling through the park, the rays of the lamp, outlining the driver, with two men sitting behind him.

There he sat, his hat tilted, the whip in his hand. Each step of the horse was taking him nearer to the dreaded moment. He closed his eyes. He was to go like this! He, an innocent man!

"It won't be long now, Pop," one of the men said. "You know that spot up there where you make the turn. It'll be short and sweet. We got to make the getaway."

He could talk like this! A fiend! Each moment, adding to a man's torture. Then the man got up. Dan knew that it would only be a few seconds now, before that bullet went through his heart. The men wanted to make sure of it. He didn't want any wounded man, who might live to tell his story. He wanted that bullet to go through the heart.

Then Dan saw him, saw Officer Terence O'Roarke, whom he knew well, standing there on a footpath near the road.

"Keep going past that cop," the man behind muttered.

But Dan didn't. Realizing that it was his only chance, he suddenly brought his buggy whip back over his shoulder and down on the man's head. He pulled on the reins, the carriage swerved. The man, taken unawares, lost his balance and fell over on the other man.

O'Roarke knew something was wrong. He drew his gun, rushed over. The two men had disengaged themselves. One sprang out of the carriage. O'Roarke fired, the man dropped.

But the other man had sprung up and fired at Dan. The bullet went through his

hat. Dan had stopped the carriage, and pedestrians and people on benches were thrown into a panic. The man turned and fired.

O'Roarke heard the bullet whistle past his ear. He had to be careful. He didn't want to hit any innocent person. But his marksmanship was perfect. He paused, drew a bead, and fired. A criminal dropped and rolled over. O'Roarke ran up. The man was dying.

"That old guy—" he said.

"Yeah, that old guy," O'Roarke said. "What is this?" But the man couldn't speak. He was dead.

When O'Roarke reached the carriage, there sat Dan, looking at the hole that the bullet had made in his hat. It was the hole now that seemed to be uppermost in Dan's mind.

"What was this, Dan?" said O'Roarke, as the crowd kept growing. "That other guy is dead. What about this one?"

"He's dead, too," said Dan. "But look at that hat! My father wore it—"

"Never mind the hat," said O'Roarke. "What is this?"

"Was I glad to see you!" said Dan. "I knew it was my only chance. The whip I'll always keep. The hat I'll always— Say, come to think of it, that hat is even better now. It's something worth—"

"But what happened?" shouted O'Roarke.

"Oh, well, you see, these two guys took a dead body for a ride. Then they took me for a ride. Or thought they were taking me for a ride. But you've got to say for me, Terence, that I never lost the whip hand—"

"O. K. O. K. But get back to what happened."



# The Spectre on the Lake

By Joseph Commings



*With nobody possible to do the killing, Senator Banner saw two men shot in the middle of an empty lake, Yet that puzzle-cracking legislator was still able to draw up a crime-bill to prosecute the impossible.*

SOMETHING perverse in the expansive nature of U.S. Senator Brooks U. Banner sent him to the seclusion of Mad Moon Lake in the Catskills. For the bluff old ex-infantry lieutenant, ex-furniture salesman, ex-auctioneer was contented only when posing before crowds as a Great White Father with an unlit corona cigar jutting from his humorous mouth. But if he had missed Mad Moon Lake he would have missed one of the most startling crimes of his riddle-unraveling career.

The Mad Moon Inn, open for business during the summer months only, was run by Mrs. Pichard, a buxom motherly

widow with smooth gray hair. She had a lavish hand. Nothing was too good for her guests—what few she had. This was her second season and she was seriously thinking of giving up the enterprise as a bad investment. She would say, "People don't want to come up this far. It's too lonely."

Her nineteen-year-old son, Kirby, did not mind the solitude. He had a small-gauge gun for small game, and his decoys for the duck-hunting season. Often in the fall he would use the deserted inn as a base of supplies for a mallard expedition.

Senator Banner had a body like a

hammer-thrower's gone to seed. It was the most restless body in New York City. Lately he felt he was running himself into the ground. Everyone he knew was going away for a rest. It was a novel notion, so it appealed to him.

He arrived at Mad Moon Inn carrying a single traveling bag. When he roughed it he could do without most creature comforts. Ma Pichard greeted him by hurrying from the kitchen, drying her hands on her checked apron.

"I'm Senator Banner," he said with his genial grin. "I want a room."

She was flustered. She had never entertained such an important personage before. She put her hand up to a cheek flushed from the heat of the kitchen. She brushed back a wisp of straying gray hair. "Oh, yes, Senator. Yes, to be sure. Let me have your bag."

"Not on your life, mother. I've hauled it all the way from the station I can haul it up those stairs."

She smiled thanks at him. Her eyes, behind her silver-rimmed glasses, were beginning to see him with the glory gilt off. He was tall and heavy, with a red beefy face. His thick white mop of hair and black eyebrows were sharp contrast. His hat and coat were off, carried in his left hand. His detachable collar was open. He wore a voluminous shirt striped like a peppermint stick, sleeves rolled up a turn, and red suspenders. His old gray britches were badly in need of pressing. The battered valise in his right hand looked as if it had been kicked all over Penn Station.

She led him upstairs.

"When do we eat, mother?" he said. "How's your coffee?"

She answered his questions by saying soon and good.

Banner came down again into what passed as the lobby. Already he was sorely in need of companionship. He saw a fair-haired young man idly stringing a tennis racquet by the window.

Striking up an acquaintance was the easiest thing in the world for Banner. He marched over holding out his big hand. "I'm Senator Banner. How dee do?"

The juggernaut approach startled the

young man for an instant. Then he grinned and shook the hand. "I'm a citizen myself," he said. "My name's Merle Bowen."

After a bit another young man, this one dark, came in escorting a pretty girl with fluffy brown hair and hazel eyes. Both wore riding togs. Hellos went around.

Banner eyed the girl keenly. He liked shapely young figures. She was not too self-conscious about displaying hers.

"Senator," said the fair young man with the racquet, "this is Vida, my wife. My best friend, Dean Racine."

"I'm sorry I haven't time to stop," said Vida with a little laugh. "If I do I'll have to eat supper in these clothes. Coming, Dean?"

Dean said he would be right along.

Banner, his eyebrows slightly raised, watched the pair skip off in hand. He had old-fashioned ideas about marriage, and today's young marrieds had him up a tree. He turned to Merle and noticed the wound in the husband's eyes, but the quick smile that appeared on Merle's lips was a balm for the wound. Banner began monopolizing the conversation again.

FULL of home-cooked victuals, Banner was in a mood for a night's session of hard play. A two-fisted game of deuces wild for high stakes would have suited him admirably. But Vida Bowen was with them as they sat around the blackened hearth and Banner did not want to suggest anything that would force her out. So he sat impatiently chewing his cigar down to a nub.

Mrs. Pichard's son, Kirby, drew an Adirondack chair up to the circle. He told them volubly about the fine hunting and fishing to be had at Mad Moon Lake.

"We're doing some fishing tomorrow," said Dean. "That's already been decided."

"Yes," said Merle, the husband. He lit a cigarette and tossed the match onto the fresh log that would not be lighted till the cool nights of autumn came.

Kirby was bubbling with youthful good fellowship. He seriously threatened

to edge Banner out of the running as storyteller. "Ever hear the legend of Mad Moon Lake?" he inquired enthusiastically. They all shook their heads. Banner sighed. A bore, he always thought, was someone who wouldn't let you talk.

"Well," said Kirby, "it's one of those things . . ."

"One of what things?" said Banner heavily.

"Sad and in some ways beautiful." Kirby looked embarrassed; mentioning the sad and the beautiful showed he had a softer side and he wanted to keep emotions hidden as much as possible.

"Tell it, younker, and we'll see," said Banner. "It's difference of opinion that makes horse thieves."

Kirby hurried on, "There was an Indian brave—I don't know what his name was—and his sweetheart—I don't know her name either. It doesn't matter one way or the other with the story. Anyway, they were lovers for a long time. Then something came between them."

"What, for instance?" interrupted Banner.

Kirby shot him a reproachful glare. He was sweating. Sentimental stories, he found, were always harder to get out than the coarser ones. He plugged on, "Another Indian brave!"

"Oh!" said Banner, as if this were a terrible letdown.

"The first brave couldn't take it, I guess," continued Kirby in haste. "He invited the Indian maid to a last canoe ride with him on the lake. When they got out there he strangled her with his bare hands. Then he tipped over the canoe and drowned himself."

Banner beamed at Vida. "Do you play cards, Mrs. Bowen?"

He saw that her face was pale and drawn. She jerked around at him. "What? I beg your pardon, Senator?"

"I asked if you played cards."

"No," she said.

"I was going to suggest a game," went on Banner doggedly.

"Dean plays," said Vida. "So does Merle. Why don't you men go ahead?"

She rose. She sliced a hidden glance at Kirby, who had drawn back. "Good night," she said abruptly, then fled.

Dean and Merle did not seem to attach much importance to her actions. Kirby went to fetch cards. "Get chips," Banner hollered after him. He smacked his lips as the first hand was dealt.

It was all over at three in the morning. Banner had dropped four hundred dollars and had drunk fourteen cups of black coffee. He went to bed grumbling like an old hound with a lot of painful bruises.

**M**IDMORNING the next day Banner, his good humor recovered, sat staring down into the empty rowboat at the end of the landing. Merle and Dean approached. They wore bathing trunks and rope sandals. They carried fishing tackle and an open-topped basket for their catch. Both were sun-browned and eager. As they got into the rowboat they waved at Vida Bowen on the verandah of the inn. Merle took the oars.

Banner got up and joined Vida. They sat and talked while the rowboat circled out to the center of the lake. It was a bright calm day. There was not a ripple on the water, reflecting mirrorlike the trees, hills, and blue sky. There was not another boat to be seen. Not a soul was swimming. Thus it remained for a half hour.

Banner, in the midst of some bright remark to Vida, was cut off by the sound of a shot coming from midlake. He jerked his eyes up.

The distance was too great to tell which was Dean and which was Merle. But Banner could see one man kneeling in the stern and in front of him in the middle of the boat the other man hunched over. The kneeling man had his hands raised behind him as if trying to push something away from the back of his neck. Then the kneeling man's arms dropped forward limply, he toppled, and a second shot was heard by those on the inn verandah.

"My gosh!" said Banner. He spun to face Vida for a moment. She was half out of her chair, her fingers dead white

where they gripped the chair arms. Her eyes were glued on the distant rowboat.

Banner's movements were incredibly swift. He was lumbering down the path toward the landing, yelling hoarsely for someone to go with him.

Kirby Pichard came running out of the bushes. He sprinted abreast of Banner. Together they arrived at the water's edge. "We can take the outboard motorboat," panted Kirby.

Banner hustled him into it. "Let's get this show on the road!"

The kneeling man had been the husband, Merle Bowen. They could see that now. Three feet in front of him on the forward seat was Dean. *Both men had been shot in the back of the head!*

Merle's hair was singed with burned powder. Dean had flecks of powder on the back of his neck.

"Shot at close range!" said Banner, studying the rowboat intently.

"Where's the gun?" Kirby jerked out of dry lips.

"There isn't any," said Banner sharply. "That's as plain as an old maid. *There never was a gun!*"

"Then how—" stammered Kirby.

"Don't know." Banner busily grasped the rowboat's painter and fastened it to a ring on the motorboat's stern. "Start 'er up again, sonny. We're towing this ashore."

**T**HE law at Mad Moon Lake was Sheriff Ed Damon. He was as dry and crusty as zwieback and he never took his chewing tobacco out of his mouth. Whenever he ate or drank he would shove the cud into the pocket of his cheek. He wore a sun-yellowed panama, a dirty bandanna tied around his stalklike throat and a khaki shirt with greasy pockets.

He kept all the facts in his head.

He fixed one of his red watery eyes on Banner. "Let me get this straight, Senator. You say there was no gun in the rowboat before these men got into it. They didn't bring no gun down to the boat with them. You could see that neither was packing concealed weapons 'cause all they wore was bathing tights

and all they carried was fishing tackle. That right?"

Banner nodded solemnly. "The fishing tackle consisted of a couple of rods and reels and two small long-handled nets for lifting the fish aboard. There was one basket, but it had no lid. I could look right into it. It was empty. You can take my word for that."

"Nobody's doubting your word, Senator," said Damon, chewing slowly. "We're certain that no gun was carried out onto the lake by them!"

"Dead certain."

"Once they were out there, both were shot in the back of the head at close range with a pistol. 'Pears like it would be a .32. Uh-huh. What articles did you see in that rowboat, Senator, when you drew 'longside?"

"Exactly what they brought out with them. There was no .32 or any other firearm in the boat."

In spite of his easygoing manner Damon was beginning to get confused. "Looky here. What're you trying to say? Someone had to carry a gun out there to shoot those two boys. The way you tell it a phantom killer with a phantom gun crossed all that water without making a splash, got into the boat, shot both men dead, then went off the same way it came. Somebody must've either rowed or swum out there!"

Banner chuckled unexpectedly. "'Fraid not, friend. I'll swear to it and so'll Mrs. Bowen. She saw it too. During the whole time there were only two men visible on the lake: Racine and Bowen! There was only one boat: theirs!"

Damon champed his cud wrathfully. "This ain't getting us zackly nowhere. Maybe you can tell me which man was shot first. Huh?"

Banner played back the picture clearly in his mind and he could hear the shots on his mental soundtrack. "After the first shot," he said slowly, "I saw Vida's husband pitch forward. He'd been on his knees with his arms lifted behind him protectively. Then as he fell I heard the second shot."

"Then Bowen, the husband, got it first," nodded Damon. "Racine was sit-



ting in front of Bowen. Their wounds show that Bowen was shot with the pistol held tight against his head. Racine was shot from a distance of about three feet. What's that add up to? This. The murderer stood right behind Bowen, finished him off, then shot over the first dead body at Racine. Then the murderer just sailed off into thin air! You *must* have seen something behind Bowen, Senator!" he pleaded.

"To my dying day I'll swear there was nothing behind Bowen!"

Damon took off his panama and mopped his creased brow with a second bandanna from his hip pocket. "Do you think Ma Pichard's got something to drink? Strong!"

**E**VERY bit of vitality had been drained out of Vida Bowen. She lay on her bed as white as the pillow slip. She was not crying or murmuring or tossing. She lay without moving, staring up at the ceiling. Ma Pichard had been attending her.

"I want to talk to her, mother," said Banner.

"Hard to say if she'll be herself," said Ma Pichard with firm lips. "But go ahead. Call me if she needs anything, poor child."

When Banner came into the bedroom Vida tried to sit up. Banner firmly pushed her back down again. He sat at the bedside like a homely old general practitioner, still in rolled-up shirt sleeves and gaudy suspenders.

"No nonsense now," he said kindly. "I'm not going to wear you out. But please talk."

"What do you want to know?" she murmured.

"About you and Merle and Dean."

He waited a long time after that. The warm summer afternoon lazed on outside the open windows. At last she said, "There's nothing to tell. Merle was my husband. Dean was our best friend."

"What else" he said obstinately.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Nothing matters now, does it? Both are lost. I wanted to keep them always."

"You loved your husband?"

"I—I still like him."

"You loved Dean Racine?"

"Yes," she said after a pause.

"What about Merle? Did he know?"

"Yes. He knew. We couldn't keep that from him. Merle wanted me to be happy. He was going to step aside for Dean. They both loved me," she finished in anguish.

Banner slapped his hands on his knees and got up. He left Vida burying her face in her pillow.

Coming down the verandah steps Banner met Damon. "I been talking to Ma and Kirby," said Damon. "Both said they heard the two shots. Ma was fixing lunch in the kitchen. Kirby was just wandering through the woods along the shore. Neither saw nothing."

"I'm going for a long walk around the lake," said Banner. "Helps my thinking. Wanna come?"

Damon gazed woefully at his bent legs. "Not on these," he snorted. Banner tramped off by himself.

**T**HE gentle lapping of water had washed it up on the shallow pebbly beach. Banner stooped with a big man's grunt and picked it up. It was a large rubber decoy duck. There was a valve in its tail for inflating it with a small bicycle pump. Its belly had been ripped open.

Staring at it, Banner turned it over and over. He was thinking, *Kirby Pichard has about a dozen of these rubber ducks. I saw them yesterday in his store-room.* He nodded. *Yep. Yep. This's the connecting link.* With the flabby duck dangling in his hand he plodded back to the inn.

"Sometimes," said Banner to Sheriff Damon, "a lot of goeey sentiment makes a deep impression on immature minds." He gnawed his corona viciously. "I mean that old wives' tale about the Indian brave and the moon-eyed maiden he couldn't give up, only to death. We were all exposed to that the night before the murder. Now," he said pointedly, "I'm going to tell you who killed Merle and Dean and how they were killed. There's

nothing spectacular about it; just the product of romantic ideas . . .

"Vida's husband killed Dean Racine, then shot himself!

"Whoa, Jenny! I know what's got you all hitched up, Sheriff. You'll say that according to my own evidence Bowen never brought a gun out there with him, and if he had, he managed to get rid of it after his own death. He didn't bring one out. It was already out there waiting for him in the center of the lake!"

Damon snorted. "This's worse! You'll be telling me next that a loaded pistol can float!"

"This one did!" said Banner grimly. "It was floating inside a rubber duck! Bowen had taken one of Kirby's decoys, torn the belly open, shoved the light-weight .32 inside, rubber-patched the belly again, then pumped it up. In that way it could float!

"Early in the morning after we'd finished playing poker Merle rowed out by himself and merely set the duck afloat in the middle of the lake. There it was for either of them to see. What's so sinister about a decoy duck? What's more natural than to come close and pick it up, knowing that it belonged to Kirby? Merle made sure he was the one who fished it out with his net.

"When Dean turned his back, Merle

tore open the duck and drew out the weapon. He tossed the ruptured duck overboard. He tied a line and sinker to the trigger guard of the gun, then shot Dean and himself. When the gun was released from his limp fingers it was dragged out of the boat, down to the bottom of the lake by the lead weight."

Damon whistled. "It all fits. All but one thing! You told me that Merle was shot first! You heard the second shot after he started to fall forward."

Banner grinned sheepishly. "There was one factor I didn't take into consideration, mate. The effect of distance on sound. We could see the effect of the shots before we could hear the report. The first shot was when Merle killed Dean. We didn't hear it till a second or two later, and by that time Merle was putting the muzzle of the pistol to the back of his own head. I saw his hands up there! It's easy enough to shoot yourself that way, pulling the trigger with your thumb instead of your forefinger. Then we heard the delayed report of the second shot after Merle pitched forward.

"Pity young life had to be forfeit. Merle was losing Vida to Dean, but he loved her so much that if he couldn't have her neither could his best friend. Sheriff, Mad Moon Lake's just acquired a new legend."



# You Can't Kill Me Twice

By *Davisson Lough*



*Johnny Kedry's sanity took a knockout wallop from the news of his wife's killing. Yet though his senses were still wavering, a hint of her killer brought Kedry to a Police Positive recovery.*

**D**R. RALPH BURTON walked with Johnny Kedry down the hospital steps and around to the parking lot. He held Kedry's arm, spoke in soft

tones. "Forget revenge, Mr. Kedry," he cautioned. "You're unfit for any emotional ordeal. It will be at least a year before you should engage in exciting work. Your chief understands your condition. I've advised him to transfer you from the homicide squad."

Silent, Kedry listened. He hadn't told Dr. Burton about it, but mostly he was concerned with a strange sensation that only half his brain was recording the incidents of this afternoon. The other half,

a part far back that seemed a black pocket, was permitting him to experience, over and over, the horrifying events of a day three months gone.

A day when a morbid crowd and wailing police sirens had supplied background and sound effects for the tragedy that had killed the gladness of his life and filled his soul with the withering, noxious fury of despair.

The black pocket had opened in his brain then, when he'd fought his way through that stunned mob of thrill-seekers and found at its center, huddled on the blood-spattered brick of City Zoo Avenue, the bullet-blighted body of Lannie, his young wife.

A moment before the paralyzing impact of the tragedy had blanked his mind, he'd seen those things which he must always see, all his life long: two purple-lipped holes in a white throat, a trickle of bright blood zigzagging across a blanched cheek, small soft hands cushioned on a bodice of snow-white taffeta, and two exquisitely white gardenias forlornly trailing from pale, delicate fingers.

That duo of dew-fed flowers had seemed to grow and change into double discs, circular rip-saws, as he stared at it, to leap up and whirl into his flesh, slashing a burning gash across his heart. Two tiny buds, a sparse bouquet of fragrant beauty to symbolize the purity and gentleness of the tender life that a murderer's slugs had sapped from the lovely hands that had chosen them from the treasures of the florist. Two white gardenias, when there should have been three, that tradition had prompted her to buy because it was his birthday.

He recalled strong hands reaching for him. In that last rational moment he'd heard Inspector Blake Marrison say, "For gosh sake, Johnny, don't let it get you!" Then the black pocket had appeared, widened and swallowed his soul.

Days and days, half dream, half sleep, and the black pocket had grown smaller and smaller. Light, white and sparkling, had crept in at its edges. Slowly, painfully, he'd crawled back from the poison pitch of stark madness.

NOW he was discharged from the hospital and was going home to his baby girl, little Lannie. He was to drive his own car, alone. He was cured. Dr. Burton had said so. Now the good doctor was saying, "Take things easy, Mr. Kedry. But *do* go back to your work. Association with the fellows at headquarters is just what you need."

He heard his voice say, "Thank you, Dr. Burton. I'll take things easy, don't worry."

He drove his coupé uptown. It was good, at first, to be driving again. He'd driven a little lately, but never alone.

Now he was alone. His awareness of it swept in suddenly. Alone! Lannie was dead and he was alone. . . . Without Lannie he'd be alone forever. Lannie's soft, sweet smile was coldly stiff and Lannie's star-sprung eyes were death-blotted.

Thought of her—grave-clad, lifeless, cold—clawed at the edges of the black pocket, sent a vicious, whirling darkness before his eyes. He shook his head to clear it of the sudden, nervous fog; fought with all his might the queer terror that he recognized as rising hysteria, clenched his lip with jouncing teeth and tasted blood. A moment later he gasped, jerked the steering wheel to the left as he almost smashed into an old man hobbling toward a safety island.

They'd made a mistake releasing him from the hospital so soon, turning a madman loose in the streets. Such were his thoughts while he drove the next few blocks, battling for self-control. He tried to soothe his jagged nerves by thinking of his baby girl, of his work, his friends. It helped a little, but now a haggard-faced demon had crawled from inside the black pocket and was dancing up and down inside his skull, shouting, *Lannie's dead! Lannie's dead! Lannie's dead!*

He clutched the wheel desperately, praying for brain calm, blinking hard at the panic-spread web before his eyes, grappling with the awful wave of hopelessness that threatened to again submerge his reason.

At last a familiar corner! The dirty brick front of the building that housed Central Detective Headquarters. A traf-

fic light winking *Stop*. The raucous voice of good old Mike MacClanahan, the traffic cop. A slim girl on the curb, calling his name:

"Johnny! Johnny, wait!"

**S**HE swung in beside him as the light signaled *Go*. Out of breath, her face was scared, her lips parted slightly, dry as with a fever. She turned him a queer look. "You—you—"

"I didn't escape the nut cage," he said, his lips trembling like a frightened child's. "I was discharged a few minutes ago from St. John's by the estimable Dr. Burton. He gave me a clean bill of health—maybe he doesn't know his stuff, eh?"

"You're so—so pale, Johnny," she murmured, alarm cooling in her voice. "You're shaking, too."

"It'll pass," he said. "Why'd you notice me? It's been three months—you wouldn't come to see me after Lannie was shot."

"I couldn't, Johnny," she said. "They said you were delirious and blaming me for Lannie's death. They told me when you were out of your head you accused me of—of framing Lannie, of having her murdered so I'd get all of Uncle Pete's money. When I mentioned going to see you, people said seeing me would make you worse. I didn't want to make you worse, Johnny."

"I was nuts," he mumbled. "Maybe still am. When I got better I wanted you to come and see me so I could thank you for getting one of the thugs that got Lannie. It was brave of you to stick by her, snatch the gun from the closest stickup's hand and turn it on him. Not one girl in a million would have fought a pair of masked hoodlums like you did. You were always clever, Maggie. Clever, strong and smart. So I'm thanking you now, thanking you for trying to save Lannie."

"You're more millions welcome than you'll ever know, Johnny," she replied. "Lannie had the money for your birthday present in her purse, and I couldn't stand the thought of those thugs taking it. We'd just left the florist's, where Lannie bought the gardenias; it happened in the next block. Two guys passed us, then turned at our backs. One of them spoke.

When we looked back they both held guns. One of them wore glasses—"

She paused, feeling his eyes beat upon her face fiercely. She gave him a searching look, thinking, perhaps, that she'd best not go on. He said, "I've heard it from others, but you were an eye-witness. Go on, Maggie. Tell it all."

"The one without glasses asked for our purses," the girl said, her voice jerking strange. "The one that wore glasses stepped close and took mine. I was looking at his eyes, and I noticed when my breath struck his glasses and misted the lenses. It was a chance, and I took it. The mist on his glasses had blinded him for a moment. I grabbed his gun. It was an automatic. The safety was off. I shot at the other one, but missed. He tried to get me, but got Lannie instead."

"The one who wore glasses grabbed me, fought for his gun. I began shooting, then all at once he let go of me and fell. The other one ran. And that's how it happened, Johnny. Lannie's murderer is still on the loose."

**K**EDRY pulled to the curb and parked in front of Sandy's Lunchroom. Detective Sergeant Joe Pillson, an old squad buddy, was inside at Sandy's, staring out at them, nodding to Kedry. Sight of the big fellow made Kedry feel more at home in a topsy-turvy world. Only yesterday Jillson had phoned the hospital from his fishing lodge out on Gamble River to inquire after Kedry's health. "Tell the big lug my vacation ends today," he'd told the nurse, "so I'll drop in tomorrow and spin him some real fish yarns."

Pillson was making for the lunchroom door now, but his face wasn't right. It was grim, excited, when it should have been wreathed in glad smiles.

Maggie suddenly clutched Kedry's arm. "That copper, Johnny!" she gasped. "Let's get out of here! Please, Johnny! Quick!"

Fear burning in Maggie's eyes, stark desperation in her voice, drove Kedry to unreasoning action. He shot the car off the curb, not knowing exactly why, and didn't slow down when Pillson yelled:

"Wait, Johnny! That dame's a—" The

traffic ate away the sergeant's words.

"I killed a man—by mistake," Maggie murmured, still clutching Kedry's arm.

"I'm still on Homicide, Maggie."

"I know." She jerked a nod, watching the rear vision mirror tensely. "The big copper's stopped a cab. He's coming after me, Johnny."

As the cab drew alongside, Pillson pushed his head out a window. "Look, Johnny!" he bawled angrily. "That dame's a killer! Pull up, you hear!"

Kedry was rolling down a glass. He said, "I'm driving her over to the bureau, Joe. Follow us in."

Pillson nodded, his face going satisfied. The cab dropped behind, stayed close.

"Your quick temper and handiness with a gun get you in a jam, Maggie?" Kedry asked.

The girl shook her head, her lips colorless, dry, her dark blue eyes wide with fear. "They said you'd be sick when you came from the hospital," she said. "Maybe I oughtn't to tell you. I don't want to make things tougher for you, Johnny. But—but I don't want to burn just because there was an accident while I was trying to get Lannie's killer."

"Lannie's killer?" Kedry's hands stiffened on the wheel. His heart seemed to leap high, right to the middle of his forehead, and pound there against his brain.

He'd known Maggie before he'd met Lannie. Once he'd believed himself in love with her. It had been she who had introduced him to Lannie. He was remembering how much it had hurt Maggie when he and Lannie were married. He was remembering other things, too—a quarrel Maggie and Lannie had had over him, Maggie's hot words that anger and a broken heart had wrung from her.

"Okay, Lan, you've got Johnny wild about you. You're going to marry him. And it's something I can't do much about. Hurting you won't make Johnny love me. But you're not going to get Uncle Pete's money, not any of it!"

Uncle Pete Bridgeley was dead. Lannie had been killed a few days before she and Maggie were to receive equal shares of his forty-two thousand dollars. Now Maggie had it all.

Strong motives for murder that forty-two thousand and the fact that Maggie had been plenty hurt when Lannie had won him away from her.

Yet the gun Maggie had grabbed from the stickup was a .32, and the bullets taken from Lannie were .45's. Maggie had killed the stickup who wore glasses. The other one . . .

"I SAW Lannie's killer climbing into a car over on Grandview about ten minutes ago," Maggie said, watching Pillson's cab in the rear-vision mirror, her face strained with fear, her voice thin. "Since Lannie was killed I've been carrying a gun in my purse. I've got a permit. So I shot at him, Johnny. I think I planted a slug in his shoulder. I shot twice, once as he was driving away. Can I help it if the bullet that missed him slammed a little fellow across the street between the eyes?"

"You mean you clipped a bystander, then ran when the cops made for you?"

"Yes."

"Why did you run?"

"I—I became frightened," she said limply. "I began asking myself if the cops would believe I'd seen Lannie's killer and tried to stop him. I guess I decided they'd not believe me—because—"

After a moment of silence, he said, "Because why?"

"Well, the little guy I accidentally shot was—his name was Manny Snider. I guess you know him, Johnny?"

"You mean Lieutenant Manny Snider?" said Johnny, shock twisting his face. "You mean—"

"Yes," Maggie said.

"Why, Manny was a good guy, a great little guy, a top-notch detective. He—he was my friend, Maggie, if—"

"Don't forget, it was an accident, Johnny," Maggie interrupted. "I didn't mean to shoot the little guy. I didn't even see him standing there."

**K**EDRY maneuvered the car into a side street that led into the parking space at the rear of Central Detective Headquarters. Sergeant Pillson's cab was close behind. Finally, braking down speed,

he said, his voice husky, "It's going to be tough on you, Maggie. A permit to carry a gun doesn't license anyone to start shooting on a crowded avenue. Manny Snider was a valuable police officer."

Maggie said, "I know where to find Lannie's murderer, Johnny. Right now I know exactly where to put the finger on him."

His teeth found his lower lip, clawed at it until the pain stabbed his face to immobility. "That's swell, Maggie. Swell! I'll go after him as soon as I turn you over to Inspector Marrison."

"No, you won't, Johnny."

"No? Why not? It's something I've dreamed about; it's something that kept me alive when everything else made me want to die—the hope that someday I'd come face to face with the rat that killed my wife."

"Only one way you'll get that pleasure, Johnny," murmured the girl, moving her eyes off the rear-vision mirror to his pale, strained face.

"Only one way, eh?" he said, and his mind saw the lips of the black pocket open inside his brain. The haggard-faced demon was there again, behind his eyes, leaping up and down, shouting over and over that Lannie was dead. "One way's enough," he said. "Tell me the score, Maggie."

"You got to get me out of here," she said huskily, clutching his arm again. "Keep the cops off me, and I'll take you to him. Otherwise—"

He ground his teeth, stared straight ahead, listening for her next words.

"Get me away from the cops and I'll give you the revenge that you raved about for weeks while you were wild with delirium," she said. "Otherwise, Lannie's killer can go free for all I care."

His big hands went rigid on the steering wheel. He didn't look at her, now that he understood the deal she wanted to make. The cab was right on his tail. He said, his voice small and dry, "You killed Manny Snider because you wanted to kill him. It's the only reason you'd want to get away."

"No," Maggie said quickly, holding onto his arm. They were nearing the parking

space now. A uniformed patrolman had just walked from behind a cruiser car at the end of the openway, glanced at them. "You get me away from here, give me a chance to skip the cops, and I take you to Lannie's killer. Is it a deal, Johnny?"

He knew her well, and he believed she was telling him the truth about Lannie's killer. If he turned her over to the police she'd clam up. She was stubborn, spiteful, when she failed to get her own way. The most important thing in the world to him was that he find Lannie's murderer. His place on Homicide, his future, even the future of his baby girl, became insignificant when compared to finding the man who had killed his wife. The black pocket was wide open now, the haggard-faced demon dancing and screaming like a mad dervish. He said:

"It's a deal. It'll ruin my chances of ever wearing a badge again. If you're lying, I'll—"

"I'm not lying, Johnny! So help me, I'm not!"

They were at the parkway. He mashed the gas pedal to the floor boards. The coupé roared on past, dipped onto the next street, whipped through a line of traffic, split a traffic light. But the cab never lost it. Glancing back, Kedry saw a glimmer of bright gray in Sergeant Joe Pillson's right hand.

IT WAS up to him to lose the cab, and he knew he didn't have a chance—not in the swarming five o'clock traffic, not with shrewd Joe Pillson on his tail. "You got a gun, Maggie?" he asked.

"Yes." She took an automatic from her purse, and he saw the roll of bills. A hundred-dollar note wrapped a wrist-sized package of green. She saw his eyes sweep over the money and snapped shut the purse. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to use it on you," she said, giving him the gun reluctantly.

"You'd have done that?" he asked, whipping the coupé to the curb in a no-parking zone.

"I'm not going to let the cops grab me, Johnny."

Pillson's cab shot in behind them. The

big sergeant scrambled out, came up running, cursing. "Look, Johnny, you—"

"Get in with us, Joe," ordered Kedry, lifting the gun above his knee. "I'd hate to have to slip a couple of brass-jackets into your hide, but—"

"They said you'd cracked up again," blurted the confused sergeant, blinking at the gun. "They said you'd been playing pretty hell up on the avenue, trying to run over an old man. The cops are after you."

"Get in!" snapped Kedry.

Pillson, his face like a dirty rag, got in beside Maggie. He gave over his gun when Kedry asked for it. "You don't know what you're doing, Johnny," he mumbled. "This girl shot Manny Snider, murdered him because a big bozo had told him a tale on her. You're aiding a killer to escape the law, Johnny. This big bozo was blackmailing Maggie here. When she didn't pay off he rattled his tongue to Snider. Snider was going to pinch her and she shot him."

"Is that the truth, Maggie?" Kedry said, slowing down.

"It's a lie," said the girl softly. "I shot at Lannie's killer, Johnny, and the detective happened to be in the line of fire. I didn't mean to kill the detective."

"Manny lived long enough to say a few words," said Pillson, glaring at the girl. "After Maggie killed him she yelled at the big bozo as he drove away, told him she'd listen to reason. It was a promise she'd pay off. You know me, Johnny. You know I never made a practice of lying, and—"

"Shut up, Joe," snarled Kedry. He was remembering the big roll of bills in Maggie's purse. The black pocket in his brain was closed, tight. His head felt cool and good. He almost trembled with the knowledge that he was clicking again for the first time since he'd looked on Lannie's broken body.

He let the coupé away from the curb, made sure the cab driver wasn't following, then said, "Maybe it'll all come out so it'll make sense, Joe. Maybe in the end you and the department won't hate me too much for what I got to do." He drove fast, with one hand, holding the gun of his knee.

TEN miles from town, three miles off the highway on a little-traveled country road, he stopped and told Pillson to get out.

This was a lonely spot by a twisting little river. There was not a house in sight, only a low-roofed shack with windows boarded over, standing back from the road in a clump of trees.

Pillson got out, mumbling curses. They drove away, left him standing in a rut shaking his fists after them.

"My gun, Johnny," Maggie said, smiling with relief.

He had Pillson's .45, so he returned her gun. "Where to?" he asked.

"To the Old Lane Apartments on Canal Street," she told him. "The guy you crave to kill is waiting there."

He gave her a stony look that held neither doubt nor belief.

"The sergeant's story was partly true," she said, touching his hand. "He had things twisted a little, the wrong way around."

"You mean Lannie's killer wants to pay you hush money?" Kedry's voice was suddenly almost wheedling.

"You're a ripe guesser, Johnny." Maggie's voice and expression oozed with admiration. "His name's Cal Saunders. You ever hear of him?"

Kedry shook his head negatively.

"He says he wants a chance to go straight; says he's got a little business of his own now. He said he'd pay me nice dough if I'd come to his room in the Old Lane Apartments tonight. After that he slapped my gun to the street and raced his car away from the curb. I got my gun, sent a couple of slugs after him.

"The little detective got in the way of my second bullet. Which made things tough. It frightened me when he fell, Johnny. Somebody yelled he was dead, and a couple of guys started after me. I was running away when I saw you. Now I can't let them get me. A cop-killer's chances are too slim."

"You try to pot the rat as he beats it, and you still think he'll be waiting for you in his room, anxious to slip you ten grand. What makes you think he's such a fool, Maggie?"



"He knows I shot a cop," Maggie replied. "He'll guess I'm desperate and want to get out of town. He'll be waiting for me. You'll see."

"Woman's intuition?"

"Partly. Mostly it's because I think he intends to kill me. A guy that would shoot a sweet kid like Lannie down when a purse-snatching stunt went haywire won't hesitate to bump off a girl that can jam him up for murder. What do you think, Johnny?"

"I think you might have something there," he said. "Does he wear glasses, Maggie?"

She gave him a startled look, her eyes going suddenly sharp. They reminded him of the eyes of a trapped fox. "Yes. Yes, he does wear glasses," she said speculatively. "The night he shot Lannie he didn't have them on. His chum—the man I killed—wore them that night. That's why I didn't recognize Saunders, I guess. Besides he had his hat pulled low and his coat collar turned high."

"But you recognized him today?"

"Yes. He was getting in his car, and suddenly I knew he was Lannie's killer."

"I understand," said Kedry slowly. "You never looked at the man you shot dead during the struggle for the gun that night, did you, Maggie?"

"No. I was happy not to have to. I left with the police after you came and they moved Lannie's body."

"And you didn't see the dead stickup at the morgue or at the funeral home, did you?"

"No," Maggie said inquiringly. "Why do you ask?"

"You never saw his face after you breathed him blind by fogging up his glasses and sent a couple slugs into him?"

"I told you no."

"But you know his name now? It was in the newspapers after the police identified him."

"Yes," she said worriedly, studying Kedry's face, toying with the gun in her lap.

"It's hard to believe you, Maggie," he said, grinning wryly. "But I'm going to make myself believe you. I'm going to make myself believe the rat that killed

Lannie is waiting for you in his room right now. You were always a good pal to Lannie and me."

Maggie's fingers went motionless on the gun. She exhaled her breath slowly, glancing at Kedry speculatively. "I've been thinking about us lots lately, Johnny. You and me. Maybe we could take up where we left off. You did care for me once, Johnny."

"Sure," he said. "Once I did."

"And little Lannie needs somebody—somebody besides just a father."

"Sure, she does," he said.

"And when you square things for Lannie—when you get Cal Saunders—"

"The future can't mean a thing," he said. "They'll stick me in jail or in the nuthouse after I square things with Saunders. I don't expect anything else. Look at the way I treated Pillson. Don't forget, Maggie, you killed Manny Snider. Accident or not, that'll cost you something."

"We can go away, Johnny, far away, you and I and little Lannie."

She touched his arm, let her fingers stray down his sleeve to caress his hand.

**D**ARKNESS was minutes old, rain was beginning to drizzle in the heavy blackness, Canal Street was naked of life, as Kedry parked his coupé beside a trash-littered sidewalk. He pulled the key from the ignition, glanced back surprised to find no moving car behind them, said, "The Old Lane Apartments are in the next block, right?"

"Right," Maggie said softly, shoving the automatic into her purse as he got out of the car.

A minute later, walking close at his side, holding onto his arm, she warned, "Don't take any chances, Johnny. I'll rap on his door. When he opens up, let him have plenty of hot lead."

He thought, *She thinks I'll shoot him without giving him a chance to talk. She really believes I believe what she told me. She thinks I'm still crazy.*

"He didn't give Lannie a chance," Maggie whispered. "Keep thinking about that—he didn't give your wife a chance. He murdered her on your birthday, Johnny."

Made you a birthday present of the corpse of the woman you loved."

A dim light burned at the hallway's blind end. The place reeked with dust and soot and held-over garbage. Away off, muffled by a dozen doors, a radio was going.

"The last door back," Maggie whispered. She let go his arm reluctantly, moved ahead with nervous steps. A light brightened the crack beneath the door. Maggie glanced back, eyes strangely bright in a pale, tight face, lifted her hand and rapped lightly.

Kedry balanced Pillson's service pistol, waited. For a long moment, only quiet. Then, as Maggie raised her hand to repeat the rap, the door opened. A fat-chested, flabby-faced man with a gun in his hand blinked out at her through heavy-lensed glasses. He didn't see Kedry. His chuckle rattled on the dead quiet of the hall.

"Come in baby," he said. His voice drummed.

Maggie took a backward step, and Saunders saw Kedry, saw the gun in Kedry's fist.

A smile flattened Maggie's lips to the thinness of tissue. Her small, sharp teeth made menace in the dirty light, gleamed like honed steel.

"You poor fool!" grunted Saunders, shoving his gun at Maggie's neck. Kedry leapt forward, striking out with Pillson's pistol. His aim and timing were good. The gun crashed from Saunders' fingers.

"Kill him, Johnny!" Maggie whispered hoarsely.

Saunders blinked at Kedry. "Johnny," he mumbled. "Johnny, eh?"

"John Kedry," said the detective. "Ever hear of me?"

Saunders' eyes seemed to awake in front of a new thought. His lips quivered to a bitter twist. "So that's the trick?" he said, glaring at Maggie.

He was going to say more, but Maggie's hand flicked to her purse. "If you won't kill the rat, Johnny, I will!" she squealed, whipping up her gun.

Kedry grabbed her wrist, twisted it sharply. She gasped with pain, dropped

her little gun. Kedry kicked it out of reach.

Saunders chose that moment to lunge forward, driving his right. Kedry took the blow going away. He whirled on, falling. Pillson's gun bounced from his fingers as he struck the floor.

"Out like a light," grunted Saunders, chuckling triumphantly. Glaring at Maggie, his eyes daring her to move, he leaned over and scooped up his gun. "Grab onto his feet," he growled. "Help me get him inside the room."

**M**AGGIE held her purse in her teeth, stooped and clutched Kedry's ankles. Saunders took his shoulders. They moved him inside the room and Saunders closed the door.

"What are you going to do with him?" Maggie asked huskily.

"Let you kill him, baby," Saunders muttered.

"I—I have the money." Maggie stared at him, a beaten look in her eyes, her lips trembling.

"You had it today. You could have given it to me then, only you thought you could pull a fast one. So you ended up by having to kill a cop."

"Why does Johnny have to die?" she whined.

"You think I want him on my tail for the rest of my life?" Saunders shoved out a hand. "Give me the dough."

"Okay," she said weakly, handing him the money. "But I won't kill Johnny."

"No?" Saunders mocked her with a low chuckle. "I made you kill Manny Snider, didn't I? I told you I'd tell him who murdered this copper's—"

"Don't!" Maggie's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Here," Saunders said, chuckling. He handed her a two foot length of lead pipe that had been lying on a table. "You beat his brains out with this. When you're finished and he's dead I'll give you back a grand of your dead uncle's money and you can get out."

She took the pipe and moved uncertainly toward Kedry, closely watching the gun in Saunders' hand.

"Everything has gone wrong!" she

moaned. "Everything. I had things planned so perfectly. I—I can't understand how—" A sob caught deep in her throat.

"You queered your play when you figured me for a fall guy," Saunders mocked. "You wanted to buy a stickup. Remember? So I sold you one for two hundred bucks. You said you wanted some letters a Mrs. John Kedry had in her purse. Lucky for me I found out she was your cousin and you didn't want any letters, but were craving her share of your uncle's forty-two thousand smacks."

Maggie looked down at Kedry, sobbing bitterly.

Saunders laughed softly. "You know now you was dealing with a smooth guy—me! See? You gave me two hundred to stage a holdup, and I pass on half of it to a guy I know who needs a stake, and I loan him my hat and glasses. So he pulls the stickup to get Mrs. Kedry's letters for you. So you give him a big hunk of hot lead in the face, thinking he was me. Then you—"

"Don't!" gasped Maggie. "If it had only been you, I'd have had the money and Johnny—"

"He move?" whispered Saunders suddenly, cutting in on her.

Her sobs stopped abruptly. "I—don't think so." She stared down at Kedry through tear-smear, slitted lids.

"Slam his head in!" gritted Saunders.

The sob rattled anew in Maggie's throat, her breath came in tight, hard jerks, as she lifted high the slim, deadly finger of lead. "Good-by, Johnny—"

She whirled around, flung the pipe at Saunders' mocking face with all her strength. He tipped his head an inch, and it crashed harmlessly by. He dropped his gun and grabbed her throat. She squealed like a pain-torn, trapped panther.

"I'll choke you . . . and choke you . . . and—"

**S**AUNDERS jerked stiff, astonished fear washed his flabby face white. Something hard had punched deep into his fat back.

"Go to the wall!"

Saunders did, pushing his heels, staring blankly at Maggie.

"Johnny!" the girl gasped, holding her throat.

"I was here all the time, Maggie," Kedry said.

"You heard?"

"I was here all the time, Maggie."

"Johnny—I—"

He said, evenly, a cheerless grin tickling the square corners of his thin lips, "You still want me to kill Lannie's killer?"

Hysteria was a flag in her purple eyes. He thought she was going to crack up.

"I guessed it after I saw the wad of cash in your purse, after you fumbled in telling how you came to shoot Manny Snider," he said. "When I asked if Saunders wore glasses, murder guilt was strong in your eyes. I knew then you'd let Saunders down on a hush-hush pay-off and he'd blabbed to Manny that you'd killed my wife. If you'd have shot Manny accidentally, he'd have said so. Pillson told us he spoke a few words. Remember? Well, Manny would have used those last words to clear you if you'd been innocent. He was a square, clean little cop."

Maggie slashed at Kedry with a hoarse whisper. "I wish I'd killed you!"

"You did, Maggie, when you killed Lannie. I died with Lannie and I've come back to life for Lannie. You can't kill me twice."

Saunders moved against the wall. Kedry eyed him with disgust. "You'll feed the frying pan along with her, Saunders," he said. "The law'll place you as an accomplice. It's two for Lannie—two doggish yaps—and the deal cheats Lannie."

Saunders edged a step from the wall. Kedry's gun hand steadied. "You stay put, or—"

Maggie screamed, dived, clawing wildly for Kedry's arm. She got his gun hand, swung on it.

Saunders streaked out from the wall, smashing down with both fists. Kedry fought to free his hand, but failed to shake Maggie. Saunders' hammer work was ineffective. He glanced wildly about, saw the lead pipe, scooped it up and came

boring in. He missed his first try for Kedry's head by an inch, was ready to come again, his flabby face quivering fiendishly, when a gun roared from the doorway.

"Break it up!" Inspector Blake Marrison's voice thundered an accompaniment to the gun's blast. His shot had sent a bullet ceilingward, but one look at him told that his next one would be for business. He came in, his Police Positive steady in a blocky fist.

**S**AUNDERS lifted his hands, blinking in dumb surprise. Maggie broke and began to cry loosely. Kedry said, "How'd you ever lose us, Chief?"

"Fuel pump pegged out over on Grandview," said Marrison. "We were held up a couple of minutes. After that we had the devil's own luck locating your parked car." He glanced at Maggie and Saunders as his three plainclothes men swarmed over them, clicking home the handcuffs, then continued:

"Pillson phoned in as soon as you and Maggie drove away. He said you knew about the phone at his fishing lodge, and that was why you took him out there. So we drove out and waited for you and Maggie where the dirt road joins the highway this side of Pillson's place. We tailed you in from there."

"Maggie murdered my wife, Chief," Kedry said limply. "Motive as old as hate and greed—money and jealousy. The stickup was a fake. Maggie arranged it. There *were* two thugs but only one of them was present—the one Maggie killed before she got his gun and turned it on Lannie."

Marrison nodded bleakly. "Manny Snider told it all, just like Saunders told it to him. Manny thought Maggie had refused to pay Saunders blackmail, and I guess he was right. Manny's seriously hurt. For a time we thought he was dead. He's a tough little nut to crack, Johnny. It's my money he'll pull through."

"He deserves the breaks," said Kedry gladly.

"Then I—I didn't have a chance," Maggie whispered hopelessly. She looked straight at Kedry, her eyes bitter with

fear, her mouth a nervous twist of hate.

"She tried to play me for a fall guy," mumbled Saunders thickly. "She hired me to hold up her and Mrs. Kedry, but I sublet the job. I ain't killed nobody. She shot Snider when he started to pinch her.

"The law says your play and Maggie's is the same game, Saunders," Marrison said grimly. "Murder." He motioned for his men to take them away.

"Maggie was playing me hard against Saunders, Chief," Kedry said, as he and Marrison rode over to headquarters. "She thought she could rush me into killing him by telling me he had killed my wife. A few days ago she might have worked it, but today everything changed for me. Guessing that Maggie was Lannie's murderer put me on the beam, somehow."

"Pillson realized you wanted a free hand in trapping her, Johnny," Marrison said. "When you drove him to his fishing lodge and let him out he knew you were asking him to telephone us to spot you a tail. He said you knew about his phone because he called you from there yesterday. So Joe's not sore at you, son, and neither am I. I'm not forgetting that you're still on Homicide."

"Thanks, Chief," Kedry said.

"But, Johnny," Marrison went on, "with the strain what it's been, don't you think you'd better stop in at the hospital on your way home and ask for a check-up?"

Kedry shook his head. "I'm okay now, Chief." He paused, drew a long breath that sounded of worry or weariness.

"About that suggestion Dr. Burton made to you, about transferring me from Homicide, I'd pass out from boredom if I had to go on Missing Persons, and on Loft and Safe I'd die with the jeemies. Don't you think, Chief, I'm able to—"

"Never mind, son," Marrison said warmly. "The docs have their kind of medicine and we have our kind. You've just had a big dose of our kind. I can see that it's done you a world of good."

Kedry thought of Lannie then, and with a cool head. He knew everything was going to be all right, all right until the day when he'd be with Lannie. It was all he was asking of life.

# Pickpocket Patronage

By Margaret Rice

*Because it was hard to make a living, Detective Joe Holliday snapped up a case from a pickpocket client. And found himself playing sandwich man for the morgue's biggest booster.*

**Q**UIETLY, Joe Holliday slipped the gun out of the desk drawer. Again there was a slight sound in the hall. Rats weren't tall enough to fool expertly with door knobs. The detective was cautious—that's why he stayed half-healthy. He shot across the floor and jerked open the office door. A slight middle-aged character nosedived into the room.

"Willie the Dip!" exclaimed Joe. The smile didn't belong on his cast-iron features. He still looked as though fortune had gyped him. But his gray eyes were shrewd in the lean hawk face. Holliday dripped no tears.

"I didn't want to interrupt payin' customers," explained Willie. He got to his feet and brushed his baggy black overcoat. He picked up his shabby gray hat and hid most of his hairless head.

"Very thoughtful of you," dryly observed Joe. He wondered what Los Angeles' most versatile pickpocket wanted. Joe was a cordial guy and it made for friends. People like Willie were handy with tips.

The thief had a chalky face, pale shifty blue eyes, and a rat nose. He slid into the chair and studied his long nimble fingers. "I found a wallet this afternoon," he said, "and it got me worried."

"Think of that," mildly remarked Joe.



He wondered why Willie wasn't jailed on general appearances.

"I got a conscience," blurted Willie, "I never get stuff from dead guys or the near-dead. Well, I run across this wallet, see? The chump was from the neck up in a racin' sheet. There was somethin' besides dough, somethin' bad." Willie leaned forward, his eyes distressed blots. Perspiration thickened on the high white forehead.

"Yeah?" prompted the detective.

"There was a note sayin' the guy was dyin' tonight. Maybe he didn't have no chance to see it. Somebody could have slipped it into the wallet and maybe he didn't know it yet." Willie thrust forward a soiled sheet of cheap notepaper.

*You Die Tonight at Nine o'Clock* was penciled in crude block letters. The note had probably been pawed a hundred times by Willie during the throes of his conscience struggle. Useful fingerprints had been obliterated. A handwriting expert wouldn't be able to identify the lettering. It smelled as a clue.

"You want me to return the wallet and point out the note?" assumed Joe.

"Yeah, yeah," Willie voiced relief, "That's it. I pay you good. I don't want no dead blood on me."

"Skip it. This is on the house. It interests me."

Willie got righteously indignant with, "Naw, I'm a customer. That premiere crowd the other night—"

"Nope," insisted Joe, "maybe I can sell protection."

Willie exhaled a weird sound of mental relief. "That's swell," he stated. "The guy is Morgan Jones accordin' to his identification card. He's a fat, flourishin' party and looks heeled with the chips. Here's the wallet with its fifty bucks. I ain't no grave-robber." Willie got up, waved a hand and added, "See you around. If you should want me, try George Winters, 1069 Curtis Street. That name and address ain't for public. Thanks, chum." He eased out as though he were moving in for a purse.

**T**HOUGHTFULLY the detective studied the wallet. It was handmade of expensive tan leather. Morgan Jones should make a fat fee. It was now 7:30 P.M.—one hour and a half before the death knell tolled. Sometimes murder wouldn't wait.

Carefully Joe straightened his tie. Westwood was a fancy neighborhood and he liked to appear respectable. It had been so long since he had been a strictly respectable guy that it was hard. Anyway, he looked capable.

It was 8:00 P.M. when he arrived at

the same address he obtained from the wallet. Morgan Jones had a nice Spanish bungalow that indicated prosperity. The glowing lamps in the window made Joe envious of guys who had houses in which to live. He parked the Ford near the garage that was built on the sidewalk edge. He hurried up the winding stone steps and gave the bell a healthy push.

The girl was worth waiting for. She belonged in a bathing beauty contest but she needed happiness in her face. She was a small slender girl with soft red hair, brown eyes, and a mouth that men liked. Her white silk slack suit was very appropriate to her curves. Joe filed her as a nice cute kid with troubles. She looked plenty concerned about something.

"Does Morgan Jones live here?" asked Joe. "I found his wallet."

"Yes, he does." She seemed preoccupied. "Won't you come in?" She opened the screen door. The detective followed her through a pleasant hall into a large living room. Joe cased the chintz, comfortable chairs, and soft lamps. If a guy were sentimental, the place would get him.

"Please sit down," she invited. "I'll call my cousin." Before she left, she took some papers off the desk. Joe caught the name on the envelopes, Miss Sheila Jones. She had many bills. Maybe she was worried about her budget. Joe sympathized with her.

"A draft!" came a sour, complaining voice, "Why did Sheila open the door?"

"Probably to let me in," said Joe. "Is that a mistake?" Politely he added, "Are you Morgan Jones?"

The fat crochety character in the doorway snapped, "Do I look like a fool? It's bad enough to be his third cousin." The man had a big red nose, black eyes that were inquisitive in hunks of fat, and a bald pink head. His wide lips quivered with pettishness. A plaid shawl was draped around his shoulders and he depended on a cane.

"My name is Howard Jones," whined the old man. "Haw, so you want to see Morgan. Bill collector, I bet. He and Sheila got fooled—figured to inherit heavily from our uncle. But Pete died and

left us a thousand apiece. Hah, they counted their chickens before they hatched. Well, I won't lend them anything. They're lucky to be my heirs." Gingerly he poked at the rocking chair, then slowly lowered his bulky body into it. "Arthritis, heart trouble, and jaundice," he remarked with pleasure.

"So you don't feel well," commented Joe. Immediately he saw his error. The unholy light of the hypochondriac lit the black eyes. "I haven't been well for sixty-five years," was the statement. "Know how old I am?"

Joe shook his head.

"Sixty-five years old," was the healthy bellow. "I'm likely to die any minute."

Joe was interested. "Any special reason to think that?"

"Symptoms!"

"Anything to indicate poison?"

"I've been poisoned for sixty-five years—bad cooks. Murder a man's insides, they would. Doctors too, every one a potential killer wanting to stick a knife into you. I came here yesterday to settle my uncle's estate—he died from diabetes but I say it was gall bladder. Did you notice Sheila—perfect consumptive type? Wait until you see Morgan. I'm lucky never to have seen him until yesterday. He's a mess. Hmm, you look pale, young man. Probably the wild life you lead. Drive a car?"

"Yes!" Joe smashed into the monologue.

"Hah! I thought so. That mechanical apparatus tears out a man's insides. I have five cars, but never learned to drive—pay a fool to do it for me. Came up here from Palm Springs by plane." Howard Jones' complaining voice stopped abruptly as he checked his watch. "Eighty-three!" he exclaimed, "time for the blue pills." Then he raised horror-stricken eyes as he said, "I'm out of them. The doctor says I haven't heart trouble but I know better. Got to have them right away!"

**H**OWARD JONES almost tripped getting out of the chair. Joe, glancing at the open arched doorway, saw something protruding beneath the hem of the

drapes—a pair of very large white ox-fords. He wondered how long and why the man had been listening. As Howard moved toward the door, the shoes vanished. Joe got interested.

Then the man appeared. If Howard had been fat, this fellow was tremendous. The giant was padded with flesh that climaxed in a huge stomach. There was enough body for three fat guys. It made Joe rather sick. The flashy green sport suit and yellow muffler didn't have a slenderizing effect. Mild blue eyes looked questioningly. The guy had a pleasant, placid bovine face. His paws played with a big gold watch hanging across his vest.

"I'm Morgan Jones," came a high, friendly voice. "You found my wallet?" He started waddling carefully across the carpet.

"I think so," acknowledged Joe. "Will you please identify the contents?"

"Fifty dollars, an identification card, and that's all." He got his bulk onto the sofa.

"Somebody wrote you a note," informed Joe. "It isn't very pleasant." He arose and placed it in the fleshy paws.

Morgan Jones read the note. After a long, serious silence he said, "I don't understand this. I haven't looked into my wallet since last night. Who put it there and why?"

"I'm a private detective," said Joe. "Would you like to have this investigated?"

The pale eyes, suddenly filled with anger, sank back into the fat. "It's a cheap trick to drum up business," was the shrill reply. "You can't scare me. I bet you picked my pocket in the first place." He added triumphantly, "Very considerate to make change. I had five ten dollar bills and now there is one fifty. Explain that!"

"Okay," coldly answered Joe, "Your wallet came to my attention through a source I can't reveal. But you can check with Detective Elsing of police headquarters as to my reliability."

Morgan Jones gave a nasty neigh. "You get out of here, you cheap chiseler," he ordered. "You probably read that my uncle's estate is being settled and figured

I had money. You're wasting my time. I've got to be at a meeting by nine-fifteen. Get out. I won't even give you a reward"

Then Holliday got mad. The hawk features darkened as he arose and walked close to Fat Face. "Listen, you hunk of suet," he said, "keep your two-bits. I just want to warn you. Take the message seriously."

"I can take care of myself," was the snappy reply, "Leave this house, do you hear, you lousy crook?"

"Better start telling your friends what kinds of flowers you like," said Joe. Getting madder he added, "If you have any friends."

Fat man got up. It took effort and grunting but he made it. "That's my risk," he answered. "I can protect myself. I have a gun and know how to use it. Now get out."

"With delight," thundered Joe. He marched to the door and tossed back, "My name is Fagan and I've got a gang of three-year-old kids swiping wallets for me." Then quietly he added, "Mr. Morgan, take my advice and be very careful." He swung into the hall and bumped into Sheila who was still clutching her bills.

"He's awfully mean," she whispered, "don't pay any attention to him. He's been mad ever since the will was read yesterday."

Joe, recalling Cousin Howard's gossip, said, "Uncle cut you off, too. Is that why you're worried?"

The pink was pretty as it raced through her cheeks. "Maybe he did," she snapped. "What business is it of yours?"

"None," admitted Joe opening the door, "but tell Cousin Morgan to watch his health."

"I overheard everything," she said, following him onto the porch, "and he was threatened yesterday by some race-track gambler. I'm upset about him."

"Don't bother," said Joe. "He wouldn't like it."

"Well," she concluded, "he has a gun and I'll see he carries it." One of the bills slipped off the pile. Joe noticed *One mink coat—\$2,000*. "Honey," he said, "you got your own troubles."

Her eyes flashed fury as she banged the door. Joe got into the car thinking that bad temper ran rampant in the Jones family.

**JONES MURDERED IN BOMB BLAST** was the morning paper headline. So it had happened. It would take a bomb to move that big ape. But Joe felt bad. A human being had been hideously destroyed by willful murder.

Then Joe's eyes dropped to the main story. He got a shock. *Howard*, not Morgan, had been killed. At 8:50 P.M. Howard had borrowed his cousin's car. The starter had been wired and there had been a tremendous explosion. Sheila had been in her room since 8:40. Morgan claimed he had been shaving when the blast occurred. Due to an unexpected visitor Morgan was late for a club meeting. He had not driven his cousin on the errand, as Howard insisted on leaving immediately but had promised to be back by the time Morgan needed the car.

Apparently, due to an alleged threatening note, Morgan Jones was the intended victim. It was his known habit to drive from home to club Tuesday evenings at nine o'clock. Through bare chance he had escaped death. Police were searching for the nameless star witness who could substantiate the killer's note.

Joe leaned back in his chair. He wished his stomach would stop jumping. It was quite obvious who had killed Howard and why. It would be a hell of a thing to prove. The police might get it through grilling, but if the killer had a good lawyer, it would be a drawn-out affair.

Twenty minutes later Joe arrived at police headquarters. He made directly to the local lions' den run by a fox-eyed cop named *Elsing*. The carrotty haired cop with the taciturn face was occupied with paper work.

"Hi, Holliday," was the greeting. "Have a chair. I hope this isn't just a friendly visit—that would be damned boring and you've never made one yet."

Joe sat down. He knew better than to reach for *Elsing's* cigars, they were terrible. "Okay," he said. "Roll out the



red rug and I give you the Jones case star witness."

"You make me happy. Some day I expect a rabbit to pull you out of a hat. Who's the guy?"

"Me," said Joe, "the best I can do. Times are hard."

"Plenty hard," Elsing shot. "Stop being cute. You're working for one of the Joneses?"

"If I were, I wouldn't be here. No, the note is on the level. But there are things to do. I want you to grill Sheila Jones."

"I have," was the not-so-gentle answer. "I talk to everyone; especially those concerned with murder cases. Why don't you punch our time clock, Holliday? We would use even you in the department."

"Freedom," pointed Joe. "Now let us return to murder."

"You like the lone wolf stuff?"

"Make it a hawk," suggested Joe. "Too many wolves around my door. Let us skip my jaded career. I can also produce the killer but I need a trap."

Elsing's scowl started and got down to his mouth where it twisted darkly. He arose and walked around the desk. His palm beach suit hung big and wrinkled on his plump frame. The fox eyes were determined. "I got six boys downstairs," he said. "Let's have a talk, huh?" His smart face came close and Joe got a whiff of cigars.

The detective stood up. "Come, save ourselves time. Get those boys checking dope. Find out how much Howard left and to whom. Find out how much Morgan dropped on the races and how Sheila is paying for her mink coat."

"That has been done," was the answer. "Howard left \$500,000. Morgan owes officially ten grand. Sheila has a job at \$40 per week. What is your plot to trap the killer?"

Joe beamed. "You give Sheila the works about the coat. By the way, is Morgan scared?"

"Maybe he has reason to be. He is using his permit to pack a gun."

"Yeah, I bet he's scared," was the comment. "Well, I'll see you in an hour at the Jones house. Grill the girl and keep Morgan in the room." Then in more de-

tail he outlined most of his plot. There were a few things he didn't tell.

**J**OE did some fancy driving to a certain address. He figured Elsing would paste a shadow on him. At 1069 Curtis Street there was a very seedy apartment house.

Willie the Dip had a drab hole overlooking the alley. At least, there were no bars on the window. "Yeah," greeted Willie, peeking through the door crack. "Glad to see you. Bring in the body and have a drink."

"I'll just bring in the body," said Joe entering. "Is it hard to get a favor done?"

"I'm the guy that does it," was the cheerful answer. "Only I don't touch heavy stuff."

"Cops will be around," informed Joe, "but I can slip you in as my friend."

Willie scratched his long chin and said, "Okay, but I hope it ain't jewels. Watches, too, get me in trouble. Got an awful weakness for watches. They pawn swell but get traced easy."

So Joe explained what it was that had to be done. The job was tricky for even a fast man like Willie. "Okay," agreed the pickpocket, "but this is nuts helpin' cops. What did they ever do for me?" Joe didn't argue that point.

Willie dressed in a gray overcoat and a tan hat that he pulled well down on his eyes. "I gotta keep on my lid," he warned, "my head might get too remembered on account of me not havin' much hair."

"You'll be Mr. Bradley of the press," replied Joe. "That should keep you covered." Willie in his drab clothing looked like the man who wouldn't be remembered. Appearing strictly insignificant was his good fortune.

When they reached the Jones house, Joe was amazed at the bomb-blast damage. The whole cement garage had been caved in and the ruins were blackened with fire. *Howard must have fried fast*, thought the detective as he hurried up the stone steps.

As they entered the hall they could hear Elsing's sarcastic twang. Sheila Jones was expressing the family ire. "Sure, I have a mink coat," she was say-

ing, "and how else would I get it if I didn't pay for it—grow it?"

"Good afternoon," interrupted Joe. "The cop at the door told me to come in."

Morgan Jones' big face broadened with a great smile. He lumbered to his feet and cried, "This man will substantiate the note." Happy, he played with the big watch that hung across his stomach.

"Well, where do you come in?" yapped Elsing with a mean look.

"I have stepped forward to give testimony," returned Joe with a hellishly righteous expression.

Casually, Willie drifted into the room. "My friend, Bradley of the *Daily Sheet*," he added. Mr. Bradley nodded vaguely.

"This is cozy," announced the policeman, "but Miss Jones is accompanying me to headquarters."

Sheila Jones cried, "Is it a crime to have a mink coat?" She went storming out.

"I want to shake your hand," said Morgan coming toward Joe. Mr. Bradley stepped forward and shook hands.

"No, not you," cried Morgan.

"He's just a friendly guy," explained Joe.

"You're a decent fellow," continued Jones, "to come here after what I said last night."

"It is only my duty as a citizen," protested Joe. Somehow Mr. Bradley brushed again against the fat man. "My friend must leave now," said the detective. "He must make a deadline." The legman touched his fingers to his hat and vanished into the hall.

**M**ORGAN JONES settled himself on the sofa and stated, "I wish to compensate you. One hundred dollars could hardly express my apologies. Do you recall my cousin mentioning needing the blue pills? You see, sir, I am a very busy man and cannot be tied up in court."

"I recall the complete conversation," replied Joe. "Therefore, I refuse."

"And why?" asked the fat man leaning forward.

"Because you murdered your cousin," softly answered Joe.

The house was very silent. The sunlight was warm and soft on the carpet. Far off an automobile horn sounded.

"Howard was the intended victim from the start," said Joe. "The note was for him, but you lost it before you could plant it. Maybe you wanted to scare him into a heart attack. You didn't know then that his heart was okay. But you lost the wallet. When it was returned with the note pointed out as evidently for you, you saw a beautiful chance to strengthen your position. You could easily make it appear that you were the intended victim."

"Pray proceed," urged Morgan Jones.

"So," obliged Joe, "you mined your car, slugged Howard and stuck him inside. Then you set off the bomb by a hook-up to the starter. You insulted me fast to get rid of me. You wanted the murder time to coincide with the note."

Mr. Morgan had his usual trouble reaching his feet. Then he walked slowly forward, not ominously but nearly that. "My motive?" he asked.

"Try this for size," suggested Joe. "You've been losing heavily on the races. Your uncle cut you off. You needed big dough and that was the kind you'd inherit from Cousin Howard."

Perspiration slid down his forehead.

"You made a mistake," answered Joe. "Although Howard was your cousin, you didn't know him well—he couldn't drive a car. So, I knew you lied."

The room was so stuff that Joe wanted to jerk his shirt collar. Then Morgan Jones turned jelly. He whipped out a gun and quivering, held it. "Yes," cried the huge man, "I killed my cousin. I'll kill you, too. Get up, I say, get up."

Joe obeyed. There was a hollow click. Mr. Bradley had done a good job of swiping the gun, unloading and returning it.

Later Morgan Jones turned into a howling monster. The doomed man wanted special things—he wanted his watch. He claimed someone had stolen it. Elsing recalled he had noticed it on Jones before leaving that fatal afternoon. In fact, Elsing even searched the living room. Joe went along, but didn't work too hard. He kept thinking about Mr. Bradley.

# Satan Rolls Sevens

By Morris Cooper



**T**HE night Joey was eighteen, he killed a man. Joey was a wiseguy. His nimble fingers could make a pair of dice talk in six different languages. Nail-marking a deck of cards right under a sucker's eyes was a cinch for him. Even a hairpin in his fingers could do a lot of things besides the job it was intended for.

Of course, there were a lot of things an average eighteen year old knew that Joey didn't. The truant officer hadn't had much luck in catching up with him after the fourth grade in school. But Joey didn't care. The things that were important, he knew; the things that would keep him in cake and coffee money. He could read well enough to figure out a racing form, and write well enough to cash his weekly pay check.

That job was a laugh. Old man Carson liked to give kids in reform school a break by offering them a job. Even wiseguys like Joey, who had spent almost as much of their lives under the discipline of stern-faced guards as they had spent on the outside of reform school walls.

Joey didn't begrudge the time he had spent as a non-paying guest of the state. There were lots of guys there who were in the know, and Joey was an eager and adept pupil. He learned the mistakes he had made in the last robbery that had brought him to the reform school.

You gotta be smart, the boys told him. Figure all the angles. Case the job. And always be careful and never go off half-cocked. That's the way the big boys worked it. Sure, sometimes you were

caught, but what's the difference. A couple of years, and you were out again—with a lot of new angles to work on, if you kept your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut.

This book stuff was a lot of malarkey. What good could a guy get out of them? Maybe if your ambition was to be a big time conman, they were all right. But not for a guy who just wanted to make a nice comfortable buck—without working too much or too hard.

There was one more important thing to remember. When you pulled off a job that might put a little too much of the green stuff in your pocket, always have an alibi for carrying that much cash around. You could never tell when a cop might pull you in if you had a record. The wise guy always had a good story ready.

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*When gambling for blood money, keep an eye out for Satan's loaded dice.*

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**J**OEY worked in the stockroom of old man Carson's store for eight months and kept his nose clean and out of trouble.

The morning he was eighteen, he got up feeling like a new man. No more probation, no more checking by the juvenile court, no more watching his step to see that he didn't go back to reform school to finish his time.

Carson got him on the phone just as he was leaving the rooming house. "Congratulations, Joey."

"For what?"

"Your birthday, Joey, your birthday." Joey said, "Thanks," and thought, *You old goat, I suppose you think I ought to be spouting gratitude all over the joint.*

"Take the day off, Joey. Tomorrow I'll put you on the floor and you can start

learning how to become a salesman."

Great, reflected Joey on his way to breakfast, great. So tomorrow he was going to learn how to be a salesman? Carson must think he was a chump. What he was going to do was blow the dust of this hick town, but fast.

When he walked through the pool-room, the old buzzard who ran it called to him angrily. "What the hell you tryin' to do, get me locked up?"

"Relax." Joey laughed and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. "I'm a big boy now. Parole's over."

He watched the crap game in the back room; not much action and not too much dough. After a while Joey decided there wasn't even an amateur artist around the green-covered table.

When the guy next to him dropped out, Joey dropped a ten dollar bill on the cloth.

It was just like finding money in the street, Joey reflected. He didn't even have to be careful when he switched dice. None of these chumps had eyes that could spot him.

The game was good for a couple of hundred bucks. Joey felt like a million when he left the pool hall. He knew he'd never get away with raw stuff like that on the big boys, but there were always a lot of suckers on the loose. Suckers with a few bucks in their pockets who liked to see if the little spots would add up to seven or eleven on their first roll.

That was an idea, Joey thought. Drift around from town to town, playing these small games. There were lots of them—with guys who liked to take a little whirl now and then. It would be a pushover.

First he'd lose a little—not much, but enough to make the boys think he was playing in hard luck. Then he'd stick out a bet big enough to cover his losses, and let it ride three or four times. The suckers would never tumble to his dice switch, and when the ivories smiled for him, they'd just figure his luck had changed. He could clear up maybe two or three hundred in a game like that, and with two or three of them a week—

Joey tried another small game that afternoon. When he was finished, he had a

little over five hundred dollars in his pocket. He didn't try to find any more games. Word could get around pretty fast. Some of the suckers might start adding two and two and come up with the right answer.

Tomorrow he would leave town, and from then on there'd be a lot of chumps working to make life sweet and easy for Joey.

**O**F COURSE, it would be better if he had a roll that was a little bigger. You could never tell what would happen—he might run into a game where he couldn't pull a fast one, and maybe have to drop a few bucks the hard way. In which case a reserve would be a nice thing.

Then Joey remembered that night, a couple of weeks after he had gone to work for Carson. He'd had to stay late at the store. Carson had left word for him to come to his house when he was finished working.

Old man Carson had a money belt in his hand when Joey looked in through the porch window. He saw a flash of green just before the old man finished closing it.

Carson still had the belt in his hands when Joey walked in. It looked fat and comfortable.

"Sit down, Joey, while I lock this away." He walked over to a wall safe. Joey eyed it and smiled to himself. A wise guy could open that gadget with a nail file.

"Sorry I can't offer you anything," Carson said after he finished locking the safe. "My housekeeper has gone for the night, and I'm not much of a hand in the kitchen."

Joey mumbled something and kept looking at the safe.

"Thinking of the money belt I put in there?" Joey started at the sound of Carson's question. But the old man went right on talking. "It's unlucky money, Joey. That's why I got a money belt today to put it in. Got tired of looking at it every time I opened the safe. Don't know why I didn't burn it years ago."

Joey stared at the old man. Carson had

a far away look in his eyes and seemed to be talking to himself. "Won it in a poker game a year before I was married. A thousand dollars." He laughed softly, but there was no mirth in his voice. "The fellow that lost it committed suicide the next day. All I could find out was that he'd intended to use it to start a small business. Tried for years to find out who his heirs were so I could return it, but no luck."

He sat there silently for a long moment. "I've never gambled since, Joey. I wouldn't spend a dime of that money if I was starving . . . now, how do you like your job?"

Joey bought a money belt that looked like the one Carson had put in his safe, and a thick manila envelope. Then he went up to his room.

He took five hundred dollars of the money he had won, put it into the envelope, and addressed it to Alfred Morgan, General Delivery, Los Angeles. When it was dark, he went out and bought some stamps at a drug-store vending machine. Then he mailed the envelope.

Joey had a sweet deal this time. Even if the cops questioned him and found the dough, he had an out. The money he had won at dice that afternoon. None of the players knew exactly how much he had won, but the roll of bills he had gathered in looked large enough to be a thousand dollars. And that was the amount old man Carson had said was in the money belt.

With that thousand, and the five hundred he'd picked up in Los Angeles, he would be all set to ride the gravy train. It was a smart move, Joey reflected, to send the money to Los Angeles. That way, if he did get picked up, he wouldn't have too large a roll on him.

He dropped the money belt he had purchased down a sewer where no one would ever find it. No chance now of being picked up with two money belts, yet he could always prove he had bought one, if need be.

**I**T TOOK Joey ten minutes to open the safe. He flicked his cigarette lighter, but there wasn't anything in the safe ex-

cept the money belt and a lot of papers. He lifted a corner of the money belt pocket and risked his lighter again long enough to see the crumpled corners of paper money.

The lights in the room flashed on just as Joey finished tucking his shirt in after strapping the belt around his waist. Old man Carson stood there, looking at him, and there was a sadness on his face.

"You shouldn't have taken the money, Joey," he said. "You shouldn't have taken it."

He walked over to the phone. Joey tried to keep calm. "What are you going to do?"

"Call the police," answered the old man. "I see now that I was mistaken in you."

Joey looked around the room, wildly, while Carson was dialing. He saw the heavy brass smokestand, and swung it at the old man's head just as he opened his mouth to speak.

It took him seconds to wipe his prints from the safe and from the smokestand. When he cradled the phone, he tried not to look at the bashed-in head of the corpse that lay on the floor, open eyes staring at him.

Joey walked home slowly, to let the feeling of excitement within him die down. Several times he felt the bulge of the money belt, but he didn't stop to open it. The street was no place for that. Besides, Carson had said it contained a thousand dollars, and the old man never lied.

**T**HERE were a couple of detectives waiting in his room when he came home. Joey recognized them.

"Don't you guys know this is my birthday?" he asked.

The taller one got up and walked over to the door, leaned his back against it. He nodded toward the packed suitcase next to the bed. "Planning on going somewhere?" he asked.

"What if I am? You guys can't stop me now."

"Maybe not. Did you know Mr. Carson was murdered about half an hour ago?"

"Murdered?" Joey tried to put surprise in his voice.

"That's right." The tall detective kept looking at Joey. "He just finished dialing headquarters on the phone, when someone bashed his head in. No trouble for our switchboard to trace the call."

"Why bother me?" demanded Joey.

"Just checking. You don't mind if we search you?"

Joey laughed. "Go ahead." He opened his shirt and unfastened the money belt. "You can start with that. And before you coppers get any phony ideas, I won a lot of dough playing craps today. Sort of a birthday present."

The second detective got up from his seat and took the money belt. "Witnesses, I suppose?"

"Sure," said Joey. "The guys who lost the dough."

The second detective opened the belt and took the money out.

"Won this today?" he asked.

"Sure," said Joey.

"Positive?"

"Say, what is this?" Joey's eyes narrowed. "I suppose you guys are going to lock me up for gambling just because I done time."

"Look at the money, Joey."

Joey stared, and his eyes got bigger. His throat felt dry and he tried to swallow. "The bills—they're kind of funny-looking."

"Yeah," said the first detective. "A lot of people knew about Mr. Carson's 'blood gambling money,' as he used to call it."

"He won that money a long time ago, long before you were ever born." The detective looked at him. "Didn't you ever read, Joey, that Uncle Sam's paper money used to be bigger than it is now? King size."



# Operation Scarehead

By Edward William Murphy



*When a wiseguy columnist put the bee on private peeps, Tom Brett set out to give that scribe the lie. But the would-be debate boomeranged when Brett met up with a fast .45 rejoinder.*

**T**HINGS weren't looking very bright for me in the private-detective business until the night I was murdered; after that, everything was rosy. By rosy, of course, I mean I began to get action in large doses and also a little money, two things on which I thrive.

It was around midnight when Sam Peters called. I put the gun I was cleaning on the rickety box which served me

for a desk. My office furniture was still "on its way" to quote the dealer I had ordered it from. I picked up the phone.

"Hello, Thomas Brett Agency."

"Hello, Brett? That you? I didn't think you'd be fooling around the office at this time of night, but decided to try anyway. This is Sam Peters."

"How's things, Sam?" I asked. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Not today," Sam said, "but I can do something for you. Have you seen the *Clarion*?"

"Nope, why?" I asked in return.

"Look it up, Britt," Sam said, "Slade's column. Boy, has he murdered you!"

"Thanks, Sam," I said, "I'll pick up a copy on my way home. I'm leaving now. S'long."

"S'long," he said.

I locked the office from force of habit—there wasn't anything worth stealing in the place—and left the building.

On the way down, the elevator operator said, "Gosh, Mr. Brett, have you see Slade's column in the *Clarion*. He has really slaughtered you! It's murder, that it is!"

"I haven't read it yet, George, but I've heard about it," I told him.

I stopped at the newsstand on the corner. "Good evening, Mr. Brett," the newsie said. He handed me a copy of the *Clarion*. "Read Slade's column," he said. "It's murder!"

I was getting a little tired of people telling me about my being murdered that night. I opened the tabloid to Slade's column.

Robert Slade had come out of the war with the Congressional Medal of Honor. Since then, he felt it necessary to show people how brave he could be by attacking various gentlemen in and out of the underworld. The public's response was, "How courageous," and the *Clarion's* circulation jumped. Slade's last big crusade resulted in a con, named Mike Carney, going up for a ten to twenty year stretch.

Tonight I had been selected for honor mention in Robert Slade's gossip column. I read:

The time has come for the police commissioner to make an investi-

gation of the small shyster private detectives who infest this city. Many of these "private eyes" are in league with the underworld.

I have in my hand information which can send at least five of these "private eyes" to prison, if it is used. . . . The commissioner has this information also. I demand that he use it. Let us run the Private Rats out of this city! While on the subject of "private eyes" I must mention the activities of Thomas Brett who has recently resumed his agency after his return from the Army.

This Brett was notorious before the war for the flagrant way in which he used his authority to thwart justice. He has often withheld evidence from the police, and in general, operated with a light disregard for the laws of this city.

Why, Mr. Commissioner, was Brett given a license to resume his practice?

This should be investigated . . . and now!

So, Slade wanted to play rough. Well, I'm the guy to get rough with. I figured I'd drop up to see Mr. Slade and talk things over with him.

I CALLED a cab and gave the driver the *Clarion's* address. "Step on it," I told him, "I got a little matter to take up with a punk up there."

"Sure, Boss," he said, and almost broke my neck making a fast getaway.

The *Clarion* receptionist was a gum-chewing, slick-haired young man. He had seen too many newspaper pictures. He was sitting with his feet up on the desk, and his hat far back on his head. A cigarette bobbed in the corner of his mouth.

"Slade," he snapped in what he thought was crisp reporter style, "ain't here, don't know when he'll be back."

"Wait a minute, kid," I told him, "don't give me that stuff. I know he's here."

"Okay, so you know. Then why ask me?" he sneered.

I resisted the impulse to push his face into the wall, and breezed past him into the city room.

One of the reporters told me where I could find Slade's cubicle. It was off down a long corridor that wasn't too brightly lit.

I found it at last, but Slade wasn't at



home and from the look of things, I doubted whether he'd be back that night. Figuring it would be a waste of time to look around anymore, I jotted a note on some copy paper.

*Look, Punk, I wrote, you've asked for trouble and I'm going to give it to you. Brett.* I stabbed it onto the spindle on the desk, and left.

Shanahan's Bar was hardly doing a roaring business when I stepped in. A drunk and a bored bartender were the only people in the place. I ordered a rye and ginger ale.

I was about halfway down in the glass when the girl oozed in. I spotted her in the mirror and turned to see better.

She was anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five, with honey-blonde hair that cascaded down to her shoulders, milk-white skin and crimson lips. Her lush body strained at a black satin dress, cut down to about here.

"Hi, Beautiful," I said.

She looked right past me.

"Rum and coke," she told the bartender, who seemed to be having trouble getting his eyeballs back in their sockets. He quickly mixed her drink and watched her drink it.

She settled herself on a bar stool and toyed with the empty glass on the bar; she looked as though she was staying awhile.

"Bartender, another rye and ginger—and a rum and coke for the lady," I smiled dentally at her.

"Thank you," she murmured. She gave me an eighth of an inch of smile. But I was watching her eyes. I don't need engraved invitations; I moved over to where she sat.

**T**HE bartender slapped the drink on the bar with a scowl. He grabbed the five I laid down and gave the cash register a whack when he made change. He didn't like my moving in, I guess.

When he put the change on the bar in front of me and moved away, I said, "The name is Brady, Matt Brady." I don't use my own name on pickups. I'm cautious.

"Pleased, I'm sure," she said. I liked the voice; it was low and soft, the kind

of voice you associate with a boudoir.

I grinned, "And yours?" I prompted.

"You can call me Mavis Richards," she said. "That's as phony as the tag you gave me."

"You win," I said. "Mavis, not a bad choice. Here's to you."

"Same," she said and tossed rum and coke into that red-lipped sensuous mouth.

I looked closely at her. In a year or so, her face and body would start to fall apart, but now, they were at their prime. She had everything and in generous portions.

We had a few more drinks, then I took her home. We crowded into the tiny entranceway and I waited while she fumbled in her purse for keys. She found the key, slipped it into the lock, and opened the door.

"Well, this is good night," she said.

"What d'ya mean good night?" I demanded.

"Just that," she said, and quickly slipped through the door and closed it in my face.

I could hear her tripping up the steps. Kicking a door down in the middle of the night makes a terrific amount of noise, so I decided not to do it. Instead I struck a match and looked at the names under the doorbells. One of them read, *Mavis Richards*. I'd see her again.

**I** HAD taken a shower, mixed a drink, and made up the couch I sleep on in my one-room apartment, when I heard the knock on the door.

I opened the door slightly. Three men were standing in the hall. "Open up, Brett," one of the men growled. I recognized them—Conaghan, Cory, and Balogh were attached to the Homicide Squad. From the look on their faces, they weren't making a social call. I opened the door.

"Enter, gentlemen," I said, bowing from the hips. "The Brett Mansion is yours."

They tramped in. Cory closed the door, and leaned against it.

Conaghan flopped on my bed with a grunt. Balogh dropped into an easy chair and thrust his long legs out. The three of them glared at me in silence.

I felt silly in my yellow polka-dotted pajamas. "Well, gents, what's the big occasion, or do you usually make your Christmas calls early?" I said with a forced grin.

"Don't get funny, Brett," Cory said. He shook a cigarette from a plastic case and lit it with a big lighter that flared up like a flame-thrower.

"Watch out you don't set fire to your eyebrows, Cory," I said just to needle him.

Conaghan said, "Okay, Brett, cut the bright remarks. Let's see your gun!"

Ordinarily, I'd give him an argument, but I figured I had nothing to hide, so I went over to my bureau and took out my .38. I handed it to him, butt first.

He flipped open the cylinder and checked the bullets. Then he smelled the muzzle. He grunted and fished a white handkerchief out of his back pocket. He poked one end of it into the barrel with a pencil.

"This thing has just been cleaned!" he said to the room at large.

The other two nodded wisely, as though they had been expecting something like that. I began to wonder what it was all about. I didn't wonder long.

Conaghan flipped the cylinder back into the frame. "Okay, Brett," he said, "let's have your story. Make it short and snappy. We ain't got all night!"

"What story do you mean, Conaghan?" I asked him.

"You know what he's talking about, Sonny. Now speak your piece before we work over you," Cory growled.

I sized him up. Cory had run to fat in the last couple of years, but he still was quite a boy. Six three, I guess, and about two twenty-five in weight. I might have tangled with him alone, but I wasn't fool enough to ask for it with Conaghan and Balogh in the room. Balogh wasn't much physically, but he had a quick and accurate way of pumping his revolver. Conaghan was the man I'd go out of my way to avoid any day including Sunday. As tall as Cory, but broader of shoulder and narrower of waist, he was the force

strongman. They made a combination all right.

"Conaghan," I said, "you know me long enough to know that I don't stall around. If I have something to say, I say it. Now what do you say we cut out the run-around—what's on your mind?"

Conaghan sighed deeply. "Okay, Slade was killed about an hour ago. You seem elected for the hot squat for that little bit of work."

"Wait a minute," I cut in, "who says I killed him? I haven't even seen the bum?"

"Maybe you didn't go up to the *Clarion* tonight looking for him?" Cory piped up.

"And maybe you didn't leave a note saying you were going to rub him out?" Balogh said.

"Sure, I went up there," I said, "and I did leave a note, but it didn't say I was going to kill him," I said. "I was just going to square things with him." I was on the defensive and I didn't like it.

"Look, let's cut out the chatter," Conaghan said. "You get your clothes on, Brett; we can talk this over on the way downtown."

I started to dress. "I didn't have anything to do with this job, Conaghan," I told him. "I've got a darn good alibi for my time this evening. I was out with a girl, picked her up in a bar over near the *Clarion* Building. I didn't see this guy, Slade. He was out when I went up there. What time was he killed anyway?"

"Don't ask so many questions and get dressed," Cory snapped, "we ain't got all night."

"Look, Conaghan, give me a break. Let's go over to this babe's apartment, she can clear me," I said.

"Okay, we'll check it!" he said. "You ready to go now?"

CORY jabbed a thick, blunt finger against the bell marked *Mavis Richards*. After a while the electric trip on the door buzzed and we pushed through into the lobby.

The girl had her door open on a chain. "What's the big idea? What do you guys want?" Her voice was acid.

"Homicide, Lady," Conaghan said. He

showed her his badge. "We want to ask you a few questions. Sorry to bother you at this time of night."

Mavis unhooked the chain and let us into her apartment. "All right, shoot," she said.

"Do you recognize this man?" Conaghan asked.

"Who, the tall redhead? No, I never saw him before in my life. Why, am I supposed to know him? What's he done, bumped somebody?" she asked brightly.

"You little skunk, I picked you up in a bar about 12:30. I just dropped you here about a half hour ago. What do you mean you never saw me before?" I snapped at her.

She looked at the big cop. "Do I have to stand for that?" she asked him. "I never saw him before. I did meet a man tonight, but not him. What's this man's name?"

"Tom Brett," Conaghan said.

"The man I met was named Matt Brady. You can check it with the bartender, if you care to," she said.

"You little—" I started to say, but Cory's big hand knocked the side of my head in, or so it felt at the time. I was beginning to hate Cory.

"Let's go, Brett, your alibi is shot now," Conaghan said. His voice was hard now. "Don't try any funny stuff."

I had a quick mental picture of Balogh knocking down tin cans with that .38 of his. I was a lot bigger than a tin can—I decided not to try any funny stuff.

We went downstairs and climbed into the squad car.

As we pulled away from the curb, the driver said, "A call just came through a minute ago. They picked up the cab driver who drove this character up to the *Clarion*. The driver says this guy was saying some pretty harsh things about Slade."

Cory rubbed his hands. "This is going to be quick. You think we'll get a big spread in the paper. The *Clarion* ought to toss a reward our way."

"Could be," Balogh said. "Remember the time Sparling got five grand from the *Clarion* for breaking up that circulation gang?"

"They've always been pretty free with the cash up there. Maybe they'll give us a nice chunk," Cory repeated.

I was squeezed between Cory and Balogh; Conaghan was riding in front with the driver. It looked as though the fair-haired boy had grabbed a hot one. Thomas Brett, Esquire, was being measured for the electric roaster up the river. My only chance was to get away and track down Slade's murderer myself.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. "Have they checked the ballistics on the death bullet yet? That will clear me."

"Sorry, Brett, that one won't work this time. Slade was shot in his office. Shot through the head. The bullet went out through the window! Unless we find it, there won't be any comparison made," Conaghan said.

Things were looking a mite dark from my position. I could feel the gray hair sprouting on my head. I had to get clear of these men, and soon!

I glanced out at a lighted street sign. We weren't far from the police station where they would book me.

Balogh said, "Pull over to that newsstand, will you, John? I want to get a paper."

The driver swung to the curb. The newsie passed papers into the interior of the car. I could see the headline. *Robert Slade Murdered*, it screamed. *Private Detective Suspected*.

Cory shook open one paper and Balogh the other. Cory fished out his plastic cigarette case with one hand, holding his paper with the other. I watched him. He got a cigarette into his mouth and fished out his lighter. He worked the wheel with his thumb until it flamed up. All this while he was busily reading his paper.

I struck the lighter. It leaped out of his hand against his suit. I smelled burning cloth. I jumped over him against the door and swung it open. I hit the road running. Luckily, I kept my feet and ducked into a side street, running fast.

**B**EHIND me I heard the car screech to a stop, then roar into reverse. I leaped into a doorway, ran through a dank hall and got out into the backyard.

I had to get out of the neighborhood fast. Even now, that two-way radio was summoning extra men to throw a cordon about the block.

I hoisted myself over a rotting fence and dropped into a heap of garbage. Tin cans clattered and rang. I cursed bitterly. My foot was wedged in a rusted can. I kicked it free with another curse and got out of that yard into the next, which brought me up against a building.

I passed through a passageway that led to the street. Garbage cans masked the street exit. I peered between the cans. The squad car was parked at the intersection fifty feet away.

The street light at the corner sprayed a cone of yellow light over the car. I held my breath, watching it from my hiding place behind the garbage cans. The smell of decayed fruit was sickening.

I heard the pound of running feet. It was Balogh. He yelled to the driver of the car, "We think we got him! C'mon!" He jumped on the running board of the car. I could see the flash of light on the gun he had in his fist. I waited for shots, but none came.

The car roared off down the street that I had made my break on. I didn't wait. I charged across the street and through an alley that I had spotted before.

Behind me, I heard shots. I stepped up my pace, expecting a bullet to pump into my back any second. I heard more shots, this time fainter than before. Evidently they were shooting at some other guy. I didn't go back to explain their error to them.

The alley led to a fence. I scaled it, and found myself in the courtyard of a block of apartments. I pounded through the yard and out the ornate entranceway.

A cab was parked at the curb. I jumped in. "City Hospital, quick," I snapped at the sleepy driver. "It's a matter of life and death." I didn't add, my life or my death.

He kicked the starter and we roared off. He was doing forty before he shifted to high.

We made the hospital in less than twenty minutes; normally, it was a forty-minute run. I should guess. I flung money

at the driver and raced into the hospital. Behind me, I heard him yell, "Hope you make it, Bud." I hoped so myself.

Inside the hospital, I killed a few seconds until I heard him drive away. Then I cut right out again and caught another cab to the subway.

I had to move fast, but, at the same time, I had to cover my tracks. The girl was my only lead. She had some reason for pulling that trick. It was up to me to find out what that reason was.

FOR the third time that night, I looked at the bell marked *Mavis Richards*. I twisted the door knob as far as it would go and then strong-armed the door hard. Just as I had thought, the automatic door lock was worn; it gave with a snap and the door was open.

A slit of light showed under the girl's door. I knocked softly. "Darling, it's me, open up," I said, muffling my voice.

I heard rapid footsteps and rattle of the chain. The door opened. "Darling—" she started. Then she saw me. She tried to slam the door shut, but I had a couple of hundred pounds of me in by then.

"You!" she breathed. Her eyes were terrified. She was flat against the wall. "You—" she repeated.

"That's right, me!" I said. "Come to have a little pow-wow with you, Toots. Let's go in and bare our souls to each other." I grabbed her arm and hustled her into the room.

I looked the place over. A suitcase was opened on the unmade bed; it was heaped with lingerie and other feminine frills. On a vanity table, a picture inscribed, *With all my love—Mike*, was set against a background of jars, bottles, boxes, and tins of cosmetics.

"Leaving us so soon?" I asked sarcastically.

She didn't say anything. I let go of her arm and pushed her into a chair.

"Okay, Babe, let's run through this just for the books. What's the story on this fast deal you handed me tonight?"

She still said nothing. She was stalling for time. I knew I was on a spot. I had to get her to talk, but sooner or later

Conaghan was going to hit for this room and the girl.

"Get your coat on, kid," I told her, "we're moving." I pulled the light coat from the closet and checked it. Finding nothing in the pockets, I handed it to her. She slipped it on.

She smoothed the black satin dress and looked at the seams in her stockings.

"Come on, move!" I snapped.

She bent over and straightened one stocking, then she straightened the other.

She came up fast, but I was a little faster. I'm not as stupid as I look; I've encountered garter holsters before. I twisted her arm. The tiny gun clattered to the linoleum that covered the floor.

I flung her on the bed and scooped up the gun—it was a tiny woman's automatic. It probably wouldn't kill except at contact range. But it could make a nasty little hole in a guy.

I slipped the gun into my jacket pocket. "Let's go," I said. "Another move like that and I'll treat you to a dish of knuckle pie."

**I** HUSTLED her out of the room. Something had changed in the hall. The overhead bulb was out. The only light came from the room behind us. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of swift motion. I went limp and started to fall. I wasn't quite fast enough, for a white light cracked into my eyeballs. I felt a pain stab into my head. I went down hard.

The blow didn't knock me out completely. I was still vaguely aware of what was happening, but my body was cast in lead. I couldn't move a muscle.

The girl and the man who had slugged me were gray shadows. "Lucky I got here when I did," I heard him say.

"I thought he was you. Let's get out of here." She stepped over me into the room. In a moment, she was out again. I felt her high heel stab the small of my back, but forced myself to lie still.

"He dead?" she asked.

"I didn't look," he said, "I'm afraid to. I don't like this stuff. I didn't expect anything like this," he whined.

"Look, you're in now and that's that!"

she snapped. "Here carry this bag."

They ran down the stairs. I remained on the floor, feeling the cool tile on my cheek; it smelled of disinfectant.

I listened to a long wailing sound that jarred my eardrums. Suddenly I knew what it was—a siren! I forced myself up onto my knees. The effort caused jabs of pain to sear my brain.

I picked up my hat and set it on my head. It hurt. Up until now I'd only been using my head for a hatrack; now it wasn't even good for that.

I struggled to my feet. Rasping sound near my ear caused me to jump. The buzzer was located next to the apartment door frame. Somebody was thumbing the button in the vestibule below. I carefully closed the door, and started climbing stairs. I got to the roof before I heard the vestibule door open.

The cool air washed the cobwebs out of my head. I went over to the parapet that ran around the roof, and looked down to the street. Below I saw a big car that was familiar. The apartment door opened and the heavy figure of the detective, Cory, waddled flatfooted over to the car. He spoke to the driver for a moment, then turned and re-entered the building. They were sending for reserves again.

I scurried across tarpapered roofs. When I got to the end building on the block, I found the fire escape and lightly ran down the iron steps. I had to drop about ten feet into a concrete-paved court. The jolt sent pain stabbing through my head again, but I was getting used to that by now.

I emerged onto an avenue that was brightly lighted but deserted. I couldn't stay on it long without being spotted. In the distance I heard the ululation of sirens, crying like manhunting animals on a scent.

I crossed the avenue and tried some doors on the other side. On the third try, my strongarming of the door caused the door to snap open. I went through the lobby and out through a window into the rear court. I was getting a Cook's tour of backyards and fences all right. I got out of the neighborhood in nothing flat.

THE sky was a muddy gray over in the east. The dawn was near. The night had been rough on me. I needed a cup of coffee badly. I spotted an all-night joint and went in.

The pimply faced, heavy-lidded kid who was reading the morning paper looked at me with annoyance.

"Coffee and a double order of ham and eggs," I told him. "Bring the coffee first."

"Tough night, Red?" he asked indifferently, as he slapped the heavy mug down on the marble counter.

"Tough enough," I said noncommittally. "Mind if I see your paper while you're frying eggs?"

"Nope," he said, and handed the paper to me. It was the *Clarion*. The front page had been remade since the first edition. Pictures of the murdered man splashed over it. Slade's body was sprawled face down on the office floor. A dark stain leaked over the floor beneath his head.

I turned the page. A four-column box was set in the center of the second page. *Ten Thousand Dollars Reward*, it screamed. *The Clarion will pay ten thousand dollars to the person or persons who aid in apprehending the murderer of Robert Slade.*

I skipped the small print and looked at the story on page three.

At 12:35 A. M. this morning, Robert Slade, 35, the famed crusading columnist of the *Clarion* was shot to death while preparing his column in the *Clarion* office.

Slade, hated by the underworld for his fearless exposés of crime and vice in this city, was killed to seal his lips. Police are seeking Thomas Brett, a private detective, for questioning.

Slade's latest crusade was directed against shady private detectives and agencies.

The pimply faced counterman slid a plate of ham and eggs under my nose. "Done with the paper?" he asked.

I handed it to him and began to snap at the food in front of me. I hadn't known I was so hungry. I slobbered scalding coffee into me and felt it sear the roof of my mouth and burn its way down. It made me feel good when it got inside.

I slid the empty cup across the marble counter. "Another coffee," I told the counterman.

He set the paper down on the counter and took my cup.

I looked at the paper. It was opened to the center fold. I saw a face I recognized. The caption read, *Clarion man, Sam Ford, who identified photos of Brett, alleged murderer of Robert Slade.* The picture was of the slicked-haired, wise Joe, the receptionist who had tried to fast-talk me earlier in the evening.

The counterman slapped the coffee mug down and grabbed his paper.

"I've done some low things in my time," I told him, "but stealing papers isn't one of them." He didn't reply.

I gulped down the second cup of coffee, flung change on the counter and left. It was light in the street. Morning, my last morning of freedom unless I nailed the killer, I thought.

Even now, I knew, the dragnet was out. It would only be a question of time before they picked me up. I had to work fast if I was to escape the chair. I wasn't worried though—I had a lead which looked good—darned good.

I found a phone booth and made a quick telephone call. The place I wanted, I learned, was in the West Seventies.

THE building was a converted brownstone house. It was now divided into one-room apartments. The room I wanted was on the second floor. I climbed creaky stairs and found the door marked 2C.

I pressed my ear against the panel and heard voices. I tried the door knob, but the door was locked. I knocked loudly. "Electrician," I called sharply through the panel.

The door opened. I threw my shoulder against it, knocking the man into the room. I followed him in, moving fast. The girl screamed. I swung, caught the man in the chest. He crashed back into the girl who was seated in a chair putting stockings on her long legs. The chair went over backwards, spilling them both on to the floor.

I stood with my feet wide apart in

front of the door, watching them scrambling up from the floor.

The girl's face was hard, the man's white and terrified. He was beginning to crack. I started for him. A few clouts and he'd spill his brains all over the place. When I was close enough, I let loose a short right to the plexus. He grunted and doubled over. I hit him again, a sledgehammer blow to the side of the head. He grunted again. I could see tears spill down his face. He didn't move to lift his hands. He leaned against a bureau and moaned.

The girl leaped at me, her fingers raked at my eyes. I felt blood on my cheek. I moved in to her and smothered her in my arms. She fought viciously. I lifted her and flung her on the bed. She screamed curses at me and buried her head in the bedclothes.

I pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at the side of my face. It felt as though four iron brands had been laid there. Even as she moved, I knew I had made a mistake. She came up with a gun. I should have checked that pillow when I saw her burrowing under it.

"Okay, long nose," she said acidly, "you asked for it." She fired.

Her aim was bad. I heard a vase shatter behind me, but didn't pay any attention to it. I was in motion from the instant I had seen the gun in her hand. I pulled the man in front of me. He was like a sack of meal, without any resistance.

The second shot jarred us. I flung him into the gun muzzle, and dove after him. The bed collapsed under our weight. I got my fingers on the gun and twisted it out of the girl's hand.

I thought I had her, but I hadn't—not yet. Hands pulled me from her. A white light burst in my eyes. I felt myself falling.

When I opened my left eye, my right was swollen shut. I saw Cory standing over me.

"Get up, you bum," he said.

I'm no dope; I stayed where I was.

Conaghan said, "Let him alone, Cory, but get cuffs on him this time. If you'd 'a' done that last night, he wouldn't have gotten away."

I got up. Cory fastened the cuffs on my wrist. He twisted them until the circulation in my hand was just about cut off. "Trying to twist my hand off?" I asked him.

CONAGHAN was leaning over the wreckage of the bed, examining the man. I saw red stain on the sheets. He straightened. "He ain't dead, not yet, but he will be if we don't get an ambulance quick. Balogh, find a phone and get a doctor here, quick!"

The girl was watching up from slitted eyes. "He did it," she said, "just like he killed Slade."

I laughed. "Neat try, lady," I said, "but it won't work, will it, Conaghan?"

"This babe, Mavis Richards, and that kid on the bed, Sam Ford, killed Slade. Am I right?"

"Keep talking," he said noncommittally.

"Okay, I'll take it from the beginning. Mavis was down on Slade for sending her boy friend to jail. I saw his picture on her dresser last night. It was Mike Carney, you must have seen it, too."

He nodded, and I went on. "She figured she could get close to Slade through someone in the *Clarion* office. So she got friendly with Ford, over there.

"She must have arrived at the *Clarion* right after I had left last night. She saw the possibilities right off the bat. She talked the kid into killing Slade, while she went to the bar and let me pick her up. She knew that her denial would kill my alibi. Does all this add up, Conaghan?"

"Sounds good," he said. "As a matter of fact, we've been looking for her since I quizzed the bartender over at Shanahan's. He said the guy who picked up the girl in his bar had a long nose and red hair. If you hadn't pulled that fast one last night, you'd have saved yourself a black eye and a slashed face."

"I suppose," I said, "but I can take a couple of clouts for the kind of money the *Clarion* has up for the reward. I figure on a four-way split. That okay with you and the boys?"

For the first time that night, Cory had a smile on his fat face.

# Head Off Trouble

*"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn*



*By Joe Archibald*

|| *It's usually the murderer who returns to the crime. But when  
Gumshoe Hinkey is on the case, it was bound to be the corpse  
that came back to the scene of the killer instead.* || P

Sgt. Louie Garfinkle,  
APO 870 c/o Postmaster,  
San Francisco, Cal.

**D**EAR LOUIE: Me and Hambone read in the paper where a brass hat got nabbed for lifting hot ice from a Jap bank. It says he might have an accomplice which me and Hambone think is you as our letters got returned. Either you are missing in inaction, got discharged, or are in an army clink. Speaking of crooks, me and Hambone Noonan got mixed up in the most bizarre murder case you ever heard of, and it is hard for us to believe it yet.

One day me and Hambone are sent up-

town to investigate a corpse which is found in the apartment of a prominent character by the name of Armitage Cleft. Armitage is wearing maroon pajamas and dressing gown to match when we arrive and is holding a stiff snort to his lips. On the floor is the cadaver and it has been ventilated in the region of the ticker. A Roscoe is reposing on the divan.

"I am sure glad you come," Armitage says and drains his glass. "If Scotch wasn't so scarce I'd ask you to have one. This was a close shave, boys."

"You knocked him off," Hambone says. "Why?"

"It was self-defense and I can prove



it," Cleft says. "You ask any gin mill journalists if this citizen didn't threaten to fix my wagon for keeps more than once. Well, Lushmore come here over an hour ago wavin' the gun. I tried to talk him out of it. He says I have busted up his home and alienated his wife's affections. I see my chance and rush him. We grapple. I try to twist the Betsy out of his hand. *Bango!* He falls down dead. I take a stiff hooker, then call the cops. I take another drink—another—"

"A likely story," Hambone says. Cleft picks up a tabloid and hands it to me. I see it is turned to the page featuring a Broadway column by Eddie Knickerbocker. I read aloud.

A certain insurance company is fretting. A character they have underwritten is asking for it. A well-known husband of a certain blonde crooner says the explorer and playboy will get it but good if he doesn't take his wolf cry elsewhere. Recently, at the Chez Wen, the belligerent broker slapped the itinerant interloper on the chops and made it quite plain that the gent, if he did not desist with his dilly-dallying, would soon be laid out under glass for all to see.

The wolf in question has created quite a furore in the flaming fifties. Grills have had to be put up for the protection of hat check cuties, and whenever the prowler enters a bistro, the dolls yell "Timber!"

I toss the tabloid aside and eye Cleft quite askance.

"They exaggerate," Cleft sniffs.

"Well, if the prints of both the quick an' the dead is on the Roscoe, Alvin," Hambone says. "He has quite a case here."

"Yeah. So the defunct came in stormin' and wavin' a baby howitzer, hah?" I says sourly. "Then who was havin' a Scotch with you. Li'l Bo Peep?"

"What's that?" Armitage Cleft looks a little worried, Louie.

"Two glasses have been used," I says.

"I was goin' to mention that myself, Alvin," Noonan says. "Only at the philosophical moment. Now you have spoiled everything."

"Oh, I guess I was a little excited myself when you got here," Cleft says. "I

told him to sit down an' calm himself with a snort. But he hadn't more than downed it when he unlimbered the artillery. Let's get it over with, shall we? Take me to the D. A. and let's get the questioning over with. Of course, I realize there are certain formalities—"

"Yeah," Hambone says. "I'll wrap the gat up careful, Alvin. Hurry up an' dress. Mr. Cleft. Oh, there's the doorbell. It must be the medical examiner, We'll have to wait until he briefs the remains."

**I** PICK up a book, Louie. It is by Armitage Cleft and is called, *Operation Inca*. I turn to a chapter entitled, *Jivaro Jive*, and to another labeled, *Tragedy in the Jungle*. Cleft says, "Maybe you boys would like to see my den with the trophies an' all. That book sold half a million copies, yeah."

We go into the miniature museum while the cadaver appraiser does his stint. There are stuffed heads of animals on the wall, strange-looking shivs, and a collection of Roscoes. "That head there," Cleft says, pointing, "is a llama."

Hambone sniffs. "Don't kid me. Cleft. A llama is a monk at Shangri-La. Well, Alvin, he must be tellin' the truth and that Betsy out there belongs to Lushmore, as look at all the artillery he has here himself."

I begin to remember something, Louie. "Didn't you find some lost treasure once, Cleft?" I ask.

"I did. It belonged to the Incas."

"I hope you gave it to the rightful owners as long as you knew their names." Noonan says.

Cleft looks at Hambone as if he can't believe it. "Ha, what do you think explorers live on, Noonan, if not what they find? Well, let's get going, shall we?"

The medico says it looks like self-defense to him and Hambone Noonan nods. Louie, I try to think so, too, but I do not like Armitage Cleft's pan. "It is up to the grand jury an' the D. A.," I says.

Downtown we grill Cleft. The cops pick up Lushmore's widow and bring her down to tell what she knows. Lupine Lushmore is a babe who rates a double whistle anywhere. She is tall and sinuous and her

clothes take the curves very nicely. She turns her limpid peepers on the D. A. as she sits close to Armitage and pats him sweetly on the arm. I am sure I heard her purr.

"Is that your ex-husband's gun?" Hambone Noonan says, pointing.

Lupine takes a gander at the expunger, then nods. Armitage Cleft smiles quite smugly and sneers at me. "Will that be all?" he asked the D. A.

"Keep your monogrammed shirt on," the D. A. snaps. "Mrs. Lushmore, did your husband mention he was going to call on Cleft?"

"In a roundabout way," Lupine says. "All day yesterday he was burnin' when he found out I'd seen Armitage again. 'I'm goin' to see that jerk,' he said. 'Once an' for all I'll settle this.'"

"Plain enough to me," Hambone says. "Cleft was threatened. The papers said so, D. A."

"Shut up, Noonan. It is plain to me that you are not mourning over much, Mrs. Lushmore," the D. A. says icily. "It is even plainer that you are as overboard for this clothes-horse as Priscilla was over John Alden. Like Hinkey points out, you gave the deceased a hooker of Scotch on arrival. Now the way Scotch is nowadays—I am holding you for the grand jury, Cleft. If you can convince the foreman of that august body that the Roscoe there is not yours, all well and good."

Lupine Lushmore bites off a painted talon. She glares at the D. A. Armitage is very indignant and asks huffily about bail.

"It will be approximately twenty-five grand," the D. A. says.

"Chicken feed," Cleft sneers. "An' I'll bet you as much lettuce again you won't never bring me to trial, D. A."

"Cleft," the D. A. says. "Cleft, I wish I could think of something I can't. Mrs. Lushmore, you will be called as a witness so be sure you're available."

"My telephone number is—"

The D. A. snaps his fingers and it looks like he has thought of something, Louie. He looks hard at Armitage Cleft. "I am no explorer an' never found buried treasure, Mister, but I will bet you a C note

you won't get off all the way."

"You've got a bet," Cleft snorts and grins at Lupine Lushmore. "No wonder crime pays in this town, Baby."

**W**ELL, to make a long story end on time, they bring Armitage Cleft before the grand jury. The D. A. points out that Cuthbert Lushmore was an officer in the Marines and taught Judo to leather-necks, so how could a character like Cleft win out in any sort of tussle. The talesmen are impressed and Armitage sweats a little.

"He could slip, couldn't he?" he asks.

"If anybody slipped, I believe it was you," I says. The D. A. says for me to shut up and if he wants me to say anything he will let me know soon enough.

Cleft dares everybody present to prove the gun belonged to anybody but Lushmore, and reminds them at the same time of the threats made against his life, such as it is. The upshot of it all is that they bring in a true bill which means that Cleft has beat a murder rap but has to face trial for manslaughter in the second degree. Bail is reduced to less than ten grand.

A few minutes later Cleft asks the D. A. would he like to raise the bet he made, and the blonde widow laughs. "Noonan." I says to Hambone, "Cuthbert Lushmore is hardly cold yet. You would think she just lost a fountain pen that writes under water. Somebody is gettin' away with murder."

"Is comic books all you read, Alvin?" the lemonhead asks me. "Lushmore went there in a rage an' forgot what he knew about Judo he was so mad. Don't tell me you think Cleft invited him there to get shot."

"I certainly do, Hambone," I snap. "If anybody ever proves the gat wasn't Lushmore's, then Cleft will fry."

"He is only up for manslaughter now," Hambone says. "I am losin' patience with you, Alvin. Why don't you quit this business an' try somethin' your few brains can handle."

"Because with mental deficientes like you on the force, somebody has to help

protect the public from hardened criminals, Noonan."

"If I thought you meant that, Alvin—"

"Bring me a Bible and I will say it once more," I yelp at him.

"Awright, that does it, Alvin," Hambone growls. "You go your way and I will mine. I won't work on no more cases with you and I will tell the D. A. that right to his face."

**J**UST as Hambone Noonan leaves in a huff, a taxi draws up at the curb. "Hey, Buster," the driver says to me, "come 'ere."

"The name is Alvin to you," I says haughtily.

"Okay, who cares," the uncouth hackie sniffs. "I got a passenger wants to talk to you."

I look in the cab, Louie. There is a very comely brunette sitting there, and she has a veil on with spots all over it. She gives off with a very intoxicating perfume. "I guess you got the wrong party," I says, but hope not.

"Are you a detective?"

"Look, lady," the cappy says. "Just because he come out of police headquarters don't mean—once I saw an airedale come out of a bank—"

"You keep out of this," the doll says to the driver.

"I am a detective," I admit.

"Then please come with me. Something awful has happened."

"Well, I dunno, lady," I says, "this only happens in movies an' on the radio. Most every time it does, there is a rub-out an—"

"Oh, get in here, Mister. Stop being silly."

"If you ast me, lady, that won't be easy for him," the driver of the hack sniffs insolently.

I get in, Louie. "I am Mrs. Fordyce Dreen," the doll says. "I am a widow."

"I am Alvin Hinkey, and all I seem to meet lately is widows," I reciprocate.

"And you will meet more, I am sure," Mrs. Dreen says, "if somebody doesn't put a stop to it."

"Huh?" I choke out.

"You have heard about murderers re-

turning to the scene of the crime, haven't you, Mr. Hinkey? But have you heard of the corpse or part of it returning to try and trip up the murderer?"

"If you don't mind, I wish you would stop this taxi and let me out, Bud," I yelp at the driver.

"I am as sane as you, Mr. Hinkey, believe me," the dame snaps.

"That shouldn't make him feel no easier, lady," the cabby tosses back.

"You mind your own business," Mrs. Dreen says to the guy. "Now, Mr. Hinkey, please stop imaginin' things."

"I'll try," I says in a very faint voice. "But Peter Lorre should be here, not me."

The cab pulls up in front of an apartment house on West Ninety-ninth. Mrs. Dreen pays the tariff and says this is where she lives.

"Shall I wait or come back for what is left of him later, Ma'am?" the swindle-jalopy character asks.

"Don't bother," Mrs. Dreen says. "He will be here quite some time."

I wish I had read the papers that morning, Louie, so I would have known who escaped from Bellevue or worse during the past twenty-four hours. "Look, I have a very important case I'm workin' on, Mrs. Dreen. The Lushmore rub-out, so—"

"You're not kiddin', Hinkey. Follow me."

"What was that you said?"

"I'll tell you later," the babe says, and we go into the foyer and into a self-service elevator. Two minutes later we are in a very chic little flat and she is pouring me out a belt of rye. She has one herself, then goes over and pulls down the shades.

"Now, see here," I says, "You let me out of h—"

She looks at me, then bursts out laughing, Louie. "Look around, Hinkey. Do you see any etchin's? Did you ever look in a mirror? So relax. Take another hooker because you're going to need it."

She goes into the next room and comes out with a shoebox and sets it down on the coffee table in front of the divan. She is as pale as a shark's vest. The cigarette between her lips begins to shake like a plucked harp string.

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"Hinkey, I was window shopping on the Avenue of the Americas this morning," Mrs. Dreen says. "Look at that photograph on the mantel there. Look at it good before I say anythin' else."

**I**T IS a picture of a square-faced blond male of about thirty summers and his eyes are wider apart than those of most human beings. I look at it for nearly a minute. Mrs. Dreen says, "My ex-husband. Like I said I am out shopping. I stop in front of a curio and second-hand store and there he is in the window looking right out at me."

"Who?"

"Fordyce, my husband," the dame says.

"Give me my hat, please," I ask pleadingly.

"Hinkey, let me show you something."

She picks up the shoebox, lifts the cover, and says for me to look. I do and wish I hadn't as it took five years off my life. There is a head in the shoebox about the size of a regulation softball. It is the color of a kippered herring and has long blond hair. It has a square face and eyes spaced far apart. It is the dried noggin of Fordyce Dreen.

I look at the photo of the deceased husband once more and then at Mrs. Dreen. She nods. "So you recognize it, too, Hinkey?"

I ask for another stiff hooker and get it. The dame joins me.

"Somebody bought it down in South America," Mrs. Dreen says as I try to ward off a faint. "They brought it up here and sold it. My poor husband."

"How did he get down there?" I ask her.

"He went with Armitage Cleft."

"Wh-a-a-t?" The room spins around. Sun spots appear in front of my eyes, and it is drizzling outside.

"I'll get a book," Mrs. Dreen says. She takes it off a shelf and hands it to me. I take a gander at the cover and read the title aloud, "Operation Inca."

"Ever read it, Mr. Hinkey?"

"Nope," I says. "I don't want to."

"Then I will," Mrs. Dreen says, and takes it out of my hand and turns the leaves to a marked page.

Little did we know that tragedy was in the offing as we made our way up the trail from the camp the next evening. The jungle was filled with little bird and animal cries and the sickening musky smell of tropical blooms crept into our nostrils. We were in the land of the headhunters, we knew full well, but up to now the Jivaros had been avoiding us. Suddenly, Fordy, walking about fifteen feet in front of me, threw up his hands and uttered a startled painful cry—then fell forward on his face. I hurried to his side and called his name.

Fordy did not answer. Already he was dead. I examined him swiftly, soon found the poison dart protruding from his neck close to his right shoulder. The deadly curare, the poison of the Jivaros, had done its work. I buried Fordy that night. . . .

"Awright," I says, my teeth clicking like castanets. "So what? I can't go and arrest no Jivaros, Ma'am."

**T**HE dame picks the dried noggin of the late Fordyce Dreen out of the shoebox. I recoil as she thrusts it close to my pan. "Sure, Hinkey, the book says Fordyce was killed by a poison dart, but why is there a bullet hole in the back of his head? Take a good look! The Jivaros never lose a single thing when they dry their heads. Not even moles, scars, or bullet holes."

Louie, there is a plugged-up hole in the back of the smoke-cured noggin.

"Cleft came back alone with emeralds and other precious stones worth half a million dollars, Hinkey!" Mrs. Dreen says as I try and gather up all my marbles. "He didn't want to cut the take two ways, so he shot Fordyce from behind."

"We can't never prove it," I gulp.

"We can if the Jivaros left that bullet inside dear Fordyce's head," the dame says. "Cleft has a collection of about fifty guns. Maybe one of them was the one fired the bullet. If we can get it—"

"Yeah," I says in a fog, "he says right in his book that Dreen was knocked off by a poison dart and that he buried him. He didn't mention nobody shootin' him, because how could he when he must of done it himself? But maybe we're wrong; maybe the Jivaros had to put a hole in his

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"I need it," I says.

When the widow is fortified she says we should call up the D. A. and while he is on the way uptown we should probe her ex-husband's coco with an icepick.

"No, we got to keep it all legal," I says. "We have got to take the noggin downtown just as it is and open it up for inspection in front of the law, Ma'am. Imagine it, right in his own book that fiend confesses he is a cold-blooded murderer."

"It is hard to believe, isn't it, Hinkey?"

Mrs. Dreen says. "Poor Fordyce. And poor Mr. Lushmore. I will bet the mink coats I am going to get that Cleft shot him in cold blood, too. Manslaughter, Phooey. Fordyce coming back to put the fingers on his assassin."

"Hardly the finger," I says all of a tremble. "Let's git organized. We want the book, the dried noggin, and the Betsy. The D. A. has the weapon. I'll call him up right now and tell him to have the lab boys ready."

I call the D. A., Louie. I says, "Mr. Kelpspringer there? Oh, this is you, D. A. This is Alvin Hinkey. I think me and another widow Armitage Cleft made can prove he is a murderer. We are bringin' exhibits B and C down there right away. You'll never believe this."

"I don't, Alvin."

"It is really out of a book, D. A.," I say. "And I really mean out of a book. Have you ever seen a dried head?"

"What's Noonan got to do with this? Look, Hinkey, I have no time for gags or visitin' on a telephone."

"I'm comin' right down with the widow," I says. "Her husband went to South America to hunt for Inca jewelry with Cleft. He never come back. It says in the book—"

"I'll be here," the D. A. says and hangs up.

Mrs. Dreen puts on a leopard coat, tucks the shoebox and a photo under one arm and says for me to carry the book. "We will certainly throw that at him," I says.

**WE ARRIVE** at headquarters. The D. A. has Hambone Noonan with him. Hambone is saying, "Too bad about your C note, Mr. Kelspringer, but you got no chance. I talked to Cleft awhile ago an' he convinced me more'n ever that—why, Alvin, where did you get what is with you?"

"This is Mrs. Dreen," I says to the D. A. and ignore Noonan. "She was the number one widow made by Armitage Cleft and wishes to prove it. Look, where we marked a pencil on this page is where you start readin'. Then we will show you what came back to the scene of the murderer."

Hambone says, "You been smokin' reefers, Alvin?"

The D. A. reads the two paragraphs. When he is finished, Mrs. Dreen shows him the photo of Fordyce Dreen. "Take a good look, Mr. District Attorney," she advises. "Then I'll let you see what is here in the shoebox."

Kelspringer takes a long comprehensive gander at the picture. Then he asks Mrs. Dreen to open up the shoebox which she does. The D. A.'s hair stands on end and he utters a strangled cry like they do in the whodunits. "It is him!" he says. "Shrunk down to—"

"Yeah," I says. "A bullet hole filled up back of his noggin, D. A. In the book it says Dreen was killed by a dart out of the darkness. We brought the head here so's the boys in the lab can look inside it and see if there is a bullet still there."

Hambone makes funny little noises deep in his throat. "A dried head," he gulps.

"And it has more in it now than yours," I says.

We go to the lab. The technical boys go to work with the noggin, the details of which are too gruesome to put down at length, Louie. Some dried leaves, dust, and mold are removed. Then a lab technician shakes the noggin like it was a dice box and we hear something rattle. I grab hold of the D. A. A bullet drops out of the dried head of Fordyce Dreen and rolls across the table.

I pounce on it. "Right away we will see if it come out of the Betsy used on Lush-

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more. Where is the ballistics prof?"

The D. A. says for everybody to work fast. An hour later, after a citizen has fired the murder Betsy off into a can of waste, we know that Armitage Cleft is a double assassin. "Go and pick him up, boys," Kelpspringer says. "Hinkey, this is possibly the most ingenious piece of crime detection I ever heard of."

"It is a lie," Hambone Noonan gulps.

"You can read the book," I says.

I got out in the corridor where Mrs. Dreen is waiting. "It is right," I says. "The bullet that was in Mr. Lushmore has the same marks on it as the one come out of the dried noodle. They are out to apprehend Armitage."

"Oh, I can't wait to see that jerk get the works, Mr. Hinkey. And to get my share of half a million bucks."

"The widow's mite, huh?" I sniff. "Yeah, they might do anythin' and it looks like you did plenty. I can't wait neither. I wonder is Armitage out with Lupine Lushmore?"

"If she is a dame, he is," the widow says.

JUST two hours later, two big cops usher Armitage Cleft into the D. A.'s office. The exploring character seems to get a jolt when he recognizes the widow of his old fellow traveler. "Well, what is this?" he asks.

The D. A. shows the unlawful citizen what is in a shoebox. It has been glued together by the lab boys. Cleft sags at the knees, slides a partial plate back in place, and drops into a chair. "Some g-gag," he says. "Where did you—?"

"He turned up in a window on the Avenue of the Americas, Mr. Cleft," Mrs. Dreen snaps. "Imagine my surprise."

Cleft licks his lips, steels his chops, and laughs weakly. "What a ghastly coincidence! The Jivaros stumbled over where I buried him and took his head. People buy them as souvenirs—"

"Yeah, ha, ha," Kelpspringer says. "So he was knocked off by a poison dart, was he?"

"He was. I said so in my book," Armitage says defiantly.

The D. A. picks up the envelope marked



Exhibit B and dumps a slug out of it. "If you will look at the dried head of your victim, Cleft, you will see there was a hole in the back of it. The Jivaros keep all their specimens natural, huh? That is the bullet came out with the preservatives."

"Look, what are you tryin' to tell me?" Cleft yelps.

"Just that it matches the bullet that was shot out of the Roscoe that killed the late Mr. Lushmore," the D. A. says. "In other words, that gat belonged to you. You smeared Lushmore's prints on it to back up your story you had a slight rhu-barb with him before the gun went off."

"This is incred—it is an outrage!" Armitage says. "You can't prove I shot Fordy from behind—"

"Oh, you admit it," I says coldly.

"Yeah, Cleft," the D. A. says. "In the book Mrs. Dreen brought along it shows Fordyce died from gettin' nicked by a Jivaro needle. You had that Betsy with you on that treasure hunt. We have proven it and will again to a jury. We have you ready for the rotisserie up the Hudson for at least one of the rub-outs. It does nobody any good to roast a murderer twice. It will now be murder in the first degree and you can't have any bail. What you say will be used against you."

"So, you swine!" Mrs. Dreen yips at the deflated world traveler "Fordyce came back to accuse you to your face. Half the treasure you got is mine, see?"

"Correction," I says. "Soon it will be all yours as Mr. Cleft is well on his way to explorin' some brimstone ovens and boillin' springs. On a one-way ticket, Ma'am. It's lucky you picked me out of all the detectives in town. Why?"

"You were the only one that looked like you would believe such a story," the widow says.

"Thanks," I says, beaming.

**A**RMITAGE CLEFT breaks like a worn violin string when he takes a second gander at the dried noggin of Fordyce Dreen. "It is no use, D. A. I got to confess. This could only happen to a dog. I bury the guy in the jungle under stones. Here is his head an' they never lost none

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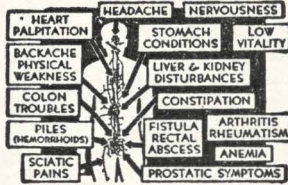
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of his likeness when they corned it or whatever they do. Just like this picture, ugh! Yeah, I got greedy, so I let him get just ahead of me, then knocked him off with that thirty-eight.

"Sure, I rubbed out Lushmore. I sent for him sayin' I wanted to clear things up. Me an' Lupine were goin' to team up. Put that head out of sight, will you? I can't stand it no more. Look at him leer at me! One of his eyes just opened a s-slit. Take me away!"

"Can do," the D. A. says. "Lock him up, boys. Wait a second. Hand over a C note, Cleft."

I involuntarily start whistling, Louie. It is an old song called, *I Ain't Got No Body*. Kelpspringer says not to be so cold-blooded. "Well," I quip, "Armitage also lost his head over a doll, huh?"

Hambone groans and feels of his noodle to see if he still has it. What is inside of it, however, isn't working too good. "He is knocked off in South America—his head shows up in a window and his widow recognizes him an' takes him outa hock—there is a hole in his head—"

"So is one in yours, Hambone," I says. "There is no use tryin' to figure this one out. I am wonderin' how it will look in the papers. Yeah, if detectives can't use their heads, use somebody else's, huh?"

"You'd better take him home, Hinky," the D. A. says.

The next day the tabloids call the rhu-barb, *The Travelin' Head Murder*. There is a pitcher on the front page of one that burns me up plenty. I am standin' next to a table on which is Fordyce Dreen's dried noggin. A caption says I am the one on the left.

Well, Louie, I hope if you got away with those Nip diamonds, you can bring them in without the customary inspectors nailing you. Which reminds me I am takin' your old doll, Katie Kerprofmitzer, to a play tonight. One thing I am sure of, Louie, I will never buy anythin' that is smoked again, never! Never write a book that the law can throw at you along with the one it wrote, which is the moral of this story.

Your pal,  
**ALVIN**

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\*J. T. Mancelona, Mich.



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\*D. E. G., Wansan, Wis.



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\*C. S., Lucien, Okla.



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\*E. T. Pritchard, Ala.

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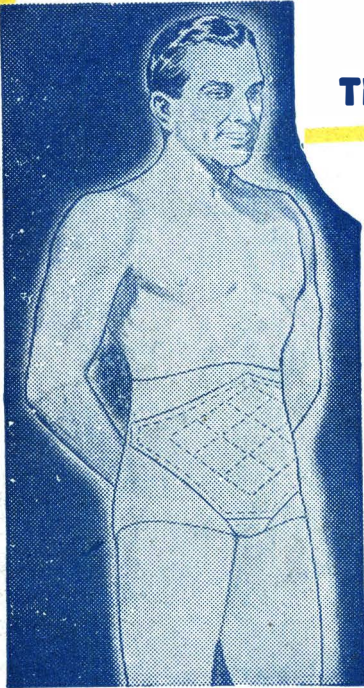
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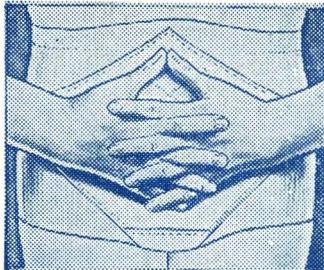
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F. N.  
Fort Knox, Ky.

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