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BLUE STARS FOR A DEAD LADY

by **JOHN D. MacDONALD**



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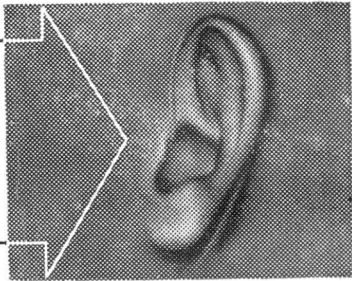
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WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER

COLD LOGIC

Ice packs bag a killer!

By

SKIPPY ADELMAN

FOR SIX consecutive days the chambermaid of a cheap hotel on New York's Thirtieth Street had passed Room 29 without opening its door. A "Do Not Disturb" sign had been placed on the knob and never removed. But on this seventh day she knew something was wrong. The most sickening of odors was seeping out of the locked, silent room. She used her key and swung open the door. What she saw caused her to cut loose with a scream that had both lungs behind it.

A detail from the Homicide Squad was there in twelve minutes. On the bed they found a dead woman, one of her stockings tightly knotted about her neck. It was mid-July, and a week in Manhattan's sweltering summer had so bloated and swollen the corpse that the woman's original features seemed irreparably lost. Recognition seemed impossible.

It was imperative the girl be identified; there would be no leads to her murderer without first knowing who she was. The body was rushed to the morgue. There, working in shifts, two detectives constantly applied fresh ice packs to the decaying body, hoping to reduce its swelling.

After four days of this messy work a good deal of the girl's dead tissue had fallen back into its original place, and her features were quite recognizable. A man was brought in to view the remains. He was able to identify the body as that of his niece, missing for the past two weeks.

The rest was easy. Questioning of the uncle brought out the fact that his niece had been a witness against her boy friend, who had been convicted of a stickup. A search of prison records showed the boy friend had been released two weeks earlier. He was picked up, confessed to the crime, and convicted of second-degree murder.

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**BLUE
STARS FOR
A DEAD
LADY**

*Dramatic
Murder Novel*

By
**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

April's Shower

I HAD remembered the broom closet in the upstairs hall. I had the key she had given me that time her dog was sick so that I could ram pills down the pooch's throat. Dan Robinot, my partner, and I had talked it over and we had decided that the best time to get the ring with the big blue sapphire was when April

Two-timing or no two-timing, George Belter or no George Belter, Brad Hume didn't kill her. Whatever the cops said. For two reasons: (1) He still loved her, and (2) He had a little motto: "Let George do it!"

Shaughnessy was in her shower. I knew that she took a shower each day as soon as she got home from work. Dan and I figured that the sound of the shower would cancel out any noise I might make.

I cut across the side yard, slipped into the downstairs hall, went up the stairs fast and shut myself in the broom closet. It was narrow. I leaned against the wall, hearing the sound of my own breathing, hearing the thud of my pulse in my ear. In twenty minutes or less she'd be home. That twenty minutes seemed like twenty hours.

The downstairs door opened and I

April was in there. She was taking a shower. A very unusual shower—for she was dead.



heard her husky, merry voice say, "I'll test you, George. We'll see if you can make a Martini."

Next I heard the quiet voice of Belter and the sound of two pairs of feet coming up the stairs. That ruined it, but good. I might still be able to sneak away, though.

Her key rattled in the lock eight feet away from me. I held my breath, the sweat running down my face. They went in and I heard the door close. I knew I should leave but the window of her living room looked directly down on the lawn near the side exit. If Belter happened to see me it would spoil my chances of getting the ring another day.

Not only was I a chump, but an unlucky chump at that. Big, husky red-headed Dan Robinot and I had gone way into hock after our discharge to buy the big new shiny gas station at a busy route intersection. April Shaughnessy had been his girl. We had known her from grade school up. We had seen her turn from a leggy knobby-kneed kid into something at once delicate and earthy. Dark page-boy hair, huge grey eyes and a sulky mouth. When I had fallen for April and she for me, it had nearly split Dan and me up. Nearly.

I had wanted to marry her. But she told me life held more beautiful vistas than what you could see through a spray of dishwasher and a drying diaper. I asked her to give it a trial run and wear a ring, though not in her nose. We had just finished paying for the main station. It was time to expand, to plow back earnings, to get the second station. But no, the firm of Robinot and Hume had to stand still for a while to give me, Brad Hume, a chance to make a sucker out of myself. I did it in a big way. Sixty-one hundred bucks that beautiful deep blue star sapphire cost me. One G down and a hundred a month until death do us part. She was to help a little on the payments. Even knowing the rough way she'd treated Dan, I had to be starry-eyed.

The usual happened then. I fell behind in a payment. We'd bought the ring from a svelte little shop named Greehan's, from Mr. Greehan himself, a man who looked like a Third Avenue bouncer and talked with an Oxford accent. Greehan

sent a collector around to see April. A collector about thirty-six, tanned, balding, hard—with a soft voice, a thin platinum wristwatch and washed-out blue eyes of the softness of flint.

I caught up on the payments, but April was different after that. Distant. And one night I sat in my car and watched that smooth bill collector, George Belter, go into a deluxe apartment hotel with April. I saw the lights click on and I saw them click off again, and April didn't come out. Something died hard inside me that night and it took three days for Dan to sober me up.

And April, who liked the good things of life, refused to return the ring, even after that. We needed the dough we could get for the ring for the overdue expansion of our gas business. Dan called me a chump. The lawyer said I couldn't get the ring. And so Dan and I planned it and I sweated in a broom closet while she entertained her new boy friend, wearing my ring.

It wasn't really stealing, I guess. I had planned to take it and then my story would be that she had given it back to me.

I couldn't really hate April. She was just a kid that was too greedy to taste all of life. I knew Dan didn't hate her, although he had hated me for a time. We both had lost her. And George Belter, as smooth-hard a character as I had seen in years, had her now. But I was determined he would have her without the ring.

WHILE I was wondering what to do, I heard the muted roar of her shower. It was a familiar sound because I had often waited in the small living room, knowing that when she was through, she would come out, the white terrycloth robe belted around her, her face flushed, radiant even without makeup. She would come out for a drink and a kiss, and then go back into the bedroom and dress for our date.

Now Belter was waiting as I had waited. I suddenly thought how pleasant it would be to kill him, and I whispered curses to myself.

Suddenly the door opened, and Belter's voice, so close and so loud that it startled me, yelled, "Phone me when you're

ready, sweet. I'll be in my apartment."

He shut the door. His steps went down the short hall, down the stairs, and I heard the outside door shut. I waited for several minutes. This was as good a chance as any. I knew that she loved to spend a long time in the shower, that her fifteen-minute showers had caused a few harsh words with the building superintendent. Maybe six minutes of her shower had gone by. I could depend on another five, anyway.

Stepping out of the broom closet, I softly tried the knob of her door. It had latched when Belter had shut it. I slipped the key into the lock, turned the knob and pushed the door open. On tiptoe I went across the living room, through the bedroom door, and paused outside the bathroom door. My heart was hammering. If she saw me, she would let out a scream that would shatter windows for blocks around.

I knew that there was no key for the lock on the bathroom door. The roar of the shower was loud. I pushed the door open.

April was in there. She was taking a shower. A very unusual shower. The green shower curtain was drawn aside. The bottom sill of the shower was six inches high. April lay on her back on the tiled floor, her head and shoulders propped against the shower wall. Her naked body was wet and glistening. A towel had accidentally fallen over her. The sill cut across her at the hips so that the lower part of her body was grotesquely elevated. The needle spray was hitting her, bouncing with tendrils of steam off her naked flesh.

I forgot about the ring. I forgot that I should hate her. I called her name, knelt by her, took her wet shoulders, shook her. Her grey eyes were open. They looked far beyond me into dark and secret places. Her jaw lolled loosely. On her naked breast was the imprint of the lug wrench that had been under her. The fragile bones of her right temple were crushed and the water had diluted the blood to a thin pink that stained half her face.

Memory of the next few minutes is very vague. I knew that I moved away from her and the acid of nausea filled my

throat. I was suddenly and violently ill, retching and gasping. I heard myself sob weakly, and then I looked around for the ring. Not that I wanted the ring. It was something to do. The ring was not on her finger, nor was it in the bathroom. More steam arose from the water. It was too hot to touch. But she didn't flinch away from it. The dead flinch from nothing.

I backed out into the bedroom, not realizing I was backing until the bed hit the backs of my legs. The roar of the shower seemed to fill the room and the whole world.

I left the doors open. I went down the stairs and walked numbly and steadily out to the sidewalk.

Suddenly, without knowing how I had arrived there, I was back at the station. Joey was on duty and he stared at me in an odd way. I sat at the table and put my head in my arms. I whispered her name over and over. And more than ever, I wanted to kill Belter.

Dan came on duty at six-thirty. He was surprised to see me there.

He clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Get it?"

I slowly lifted my head and looked at him. "What the hell happened?" he gasped. "What's wrong with you?"

"Belter killed her," I said.

"Have the cops got him?"

"Cops?" I muttered, frowning. "No cops. I'm going to see him myself." I stood up and Dan forced me back into the chair. Joey came in and Dan chased him back out.

Dan slapped me, forehand and backhand, making my ears ring. "Straighten out and tell me exactly what happened!" he demanded.

I told him, giving every detail. When I finished he looked at me in an odd way. "Did she see you when you walked into the bathroom, kid?"

I stared at him, my mouth open. I jumped up and said, "Dan! What the hell? I didn't kill her!"

Dan stared at me for endless moments. Then his face seemed to relax. "Okay, Brad," he said softly. "That's good enough for me. But if I was ready to grab at the idea you killed her, what do you expect the cops to do?"

Suddenly I saw what he meant. Motive, opportunity. The works. "Did you leave fingerprints around?" he asked.

"I—I don't know. Yes, I guess so."

"Did anybody see you come or go?"

"I don't think anybody noticed me arrive, Dan. But I don't know about when I left. I—I just walked out. I couldn't stop thinking of her . . . with the shower on. One foot . . . up against the far wall of the shower . . . the mark of that wrench against her . . ."

"Shut up!" he snapped. He smacked his big fist into his palm. "If I had only been on duty I could say you hadn't left here. We can't ring Joey in on this. He'd have no reason to lie for you. We're wasting time. Look, I'll take your car and take a run over there and find the body and call the cops. But before they get there, I'll wipe off everything you might have touched. Let me see. Knob of downstairs door. Apartment door. Broom closet knobs. Her doorknob. Bathroom door. Did you touch the wrench?"

"I can't let you do this, Dan."

"Shut up. Let me think. You stay right here. Don't move."

He went out the door fast, and I heard my car motor start, heard the tires squeal as he made a fast turn.

I sat, unable to think clearly.

In fifteen minutes the phone rang. I answered it. "Brad? This is Dan. Look, fella, by the time I arrived, the place was lousy with cops. The superintendent found her. He thought she was using too much water. They've got people around with cameras and everything. My hunch is that in about ten minutes they'll be coming to pick you up. Take everything but a couple of bucks out of the cash register and get the hell out as soon as you can."

"Where'll I go?"

He thought it over, then said, "I'll take the option on that piece of land we looked at. Remember the tool shed on it? It's padlocked. The key is in the top drawer of the table there by the phone. Nobody'll look for you there, Brad. You can cut through the brush so you won't be seen going to it. After dark I'll come around with some blankets and food and stuff."

"Maybe I ought to let them pick me up."

"Don't be a damn fool, Brad. Hell, you've got to stay loose and we'll have to see what we can do about pinning this where it belongs—on this Belter guy."

I lifted some of the dough out of the register and took off. I caught a bus two blocks from the station. Just as I sat down in the bus, I heard the whine of a siren and a prowler car whipped by, headed toward the station. It might be somebody else they were after, but the lump of ice in my gut told me it was Brad Hume they wanted.

I crouched, weary and sweating, in the brush near the tool shed. Two moronic little kids were running around in the lot, yelping at nothing at all. I waited and at last they went away. No one saw me open the tool shed door. There were no windows, a dirt floor.

I pulled the door shut, sat huddled in a corner and thought about April, about her laugh and the swing of her skirt and the way she walked and how her hands were always warm and dry, her eyes bright and gay.

CHAPTER TWO

The Raiders

A THOUSAND years later Dan arrived. He moved quietly and he startled me. The starlight shone through the top crack of the opening door and he said, "Dan?"

"Right here," I whispered. I heard him sigh with relief.

"Sorry I took so long, boy. I wanted to shake off anybody who might be tailing me. I brought a late edition. And here's some food and here are two blankets and a bottle of water."

"Thanks," I said numbly. "Who do they think did it?"

"Your picture is smeared all over the paper. You can read it in the morning. G.I. Slays Girl Friend. Citywide Search for Brutal Killer. Girl Dies In Shower. Oh, it's a dilly. Your name and description have gone out on all the tapes. They expect to pick you up in a matter of hours."

"Why did he kill her, Dan?" I asked.

He sighed. "Hell, I don't know. Maybe she was getting her hooks into him. Maybe he didn't like it. Maybe she found out something about him that she shouldn't have."

"Maybe I can get from here to him before I get picked up," I said.

"Don't be a damn fool!" he whispered. "What good would that do?"

"Dan, I can't get over the idea that there was something pretty fishy about Greehan, and about Belter, too. Bill collectors don't wear the kind of clothes that Belter wears. And they don't own platinum wrist watches with diamonds instead of numerals."

"What are you driving at, kid?" he asked.

"Dan, since I can't get out of here, you've got to see if you can pin some kind of a motive on Belter. See what you can find out about him. Will you do that?"

He didn't answer. I waited and waited. I asked him again.

"Oh, sure. I'll try. But I was thinking of something else. When I got back to the station I checked our lug wrenches. She was killed with the same make we use. None of ours seems to be missing, but I haven't got any inventory on them to make sure. I can't remember how many we bought. That makes it look bad."

I smiled bitterly in the darkness. "Could it be any worse?"

"Just a little bit worse, Brad. You could be lying to me."

"Just what the hell do you mean?" I demanded.

He handed me something in the darkness. I closed my hand around it. It was only vaguely warm but it seemed to burn my hand. I gasped aloud. It was the familiar shape of the star sapphire ring. The blue death stone.

"Where—where did this come from?" I asked weakly.

"It was on the floor next to the cigarette machine."

"He's trying to frame me!" I said.

"Shh! You mean he *has* framed you, kid. I talked to Joey. He was all alone. Business was heavy. He can't remember the cars that stopped, and he can't remember a bald-headed guy with a lean tan face like you described. But such a

guy could have stopped, could have gone into the station and could have tossed that ring in there."

"What—what'll I do with it?" I demanded.

He let out his breath in a long sigh. "Since that ring could hang you, Brad, I'd suggest that you bury it or something. Get rid of it. Hell, I was afraid I'd be stopped and searched or something and I was all set to heave it out into the brush somewhere. But then somebody'd find it."

He went to the door. "Look, kid. Lay low. Keep your head down. I'll do what I can for you and sneak back here with more food and stuff. Take it easy on the water, because it may be two nights from now before I can make it. Okay?"

"Thanks, Dan," I said.

I DIDN'T get a chance to read the papers until the early-morning light seeped through a couple of cracks in the walls near the flat roof. I was stiff from sleeping on the packed dirt. My picture stared out at me from a page-one box. Oh, they had made it juicy enough. It was the sort of murder the reporters can go to town on. And they had tried the case, weighed the evidence, convicted me and sentenced me to death as some sort of the foulest type of beast.

Though I had no hunger I ate some of the food, washed it down with a little of the water. For a long time I amused myself by trying to identify the morning sounds. I knew by the sound that Dan had snapped the padlock when he left. That gave me a certain feeling of safety. With a big nail I wedged a hole between two boards so that I could see out. When I got sick of looking at the traffic, at the kids going to school, at the workers waiting for the bus on the corner, I took out the star sapphire and looked at that for a while.

Dan had suggested that I bury it. With the same nail, I scratched a deep hole, shoved it down into the hole and stamped the dirt until it was smooth. But an hour later I dug it up again and held it so that the perfect star showed clearly.

After that I read every word in the paper. It was about noon when the tool shed began to get unbearably hot. I

stripped down to my shorts, and still the sweat poured off me. The shed had a tin roof and it operated on the same basis as an oven.

I sat on the blankets and read the paper all through again and tried not to think of April. After that I made paper hats out of the paper, and paper airplanes. Finally the heat began to diminish and the lot was full of little kids playing ball. I made a nail hole where I could watch home plate. One of the moppets was good. A nice swing. He belted the ball and it sailed out of my sight. I heard it thud on the ground quite near the shed, heard the pounding feet of the kid who ran after it, the muffled grunt as he threw it back toward home plate.

Then at last it was dark and I dressed again and watched the car lights on Western Avenue. I caught myself wondering how far I would get if I broke out—how close I would get to getting my fingers around George Belter's throat. I wanted to see those faded blue eyes glaze.

Without having done anything, I was exhausted. I stretched out on the blankets and the next thing I knew it was morning again. It was cold. When I moved my hand I saw that I had the ring on my little finger. Just part way. It wouldn't fit over the knuckle.

The star winked at me. Suddenly I hated the ring and all it stood for. I had seen two bricks back in the corner. I put the ring on one, and smacked it with the other brick. The setting bent badly but the stone didn't shatter the way I wanted it to.

With a lot more strength I hit it again. Something gave. I raised the brick to smack again, and paused. I had cracked the stone. But it looked odd. I picked it up. The setting was loose and pulled off easily, taking a thin slice of the stone with it. An oddly perfect slice.

The almost-round upper half was left. I looked at it. No star. Just a deep blue plain sapphire. I pried the thin slice loose from the setting, fitted the two parts together. The star appeared. On closer examination I saw that the thin slice had apparently been once a part of the stone, but it had been split off and three shallow holes ground in it. These holes had been touched with a white substance and then

the stone had been cleverly fitted back together along the original fracture line. Breathing hard, I picked some of the white stuff out of one of the holes, fitted the two parts back together. One of the lines in the star was distinctly lighter.

And that could be the motive.

I had bought a fake star. A manufactured star. Without the star, the stone was worth not more than seven or eight hundred dollars. Suppose that Belter had done some talking. Drunk, maybe. April was greedy. Once she found out what they were doing, she would enjoy trying to squeeze some money out of the firm. And, being that sort of a firm, they would be happy to get rid of her. The theory explained the hard look of both Belter and Greehan. And Belter's clothes. And the plush apartment on Montallan Drive.

APPARENTLY one of the two had developed the technique of turning plain sapphires and rubies into stars. That was why the stones were all mounted, so that the sucker couldn't possibly detect the fracture line. And the parts were so well fastened together, possibly with one of the new and powerful adhesives, that it took a mighty whack to separate them.

If I could just get a little further proof of what I suspected, I could pin the motive on Belter, tell my story and turn myself over to the police and hope that they wouldn't bash me around too much before seeing the light.

But there wasn't much I could do locked in a tool shed. I ate mechanically, thinking over the problem. The broken parts of the ring were in my shirt pocket. From time to time I put my hand on the pocket, felt the bulge through the fabric.

Over six thousand dollars worth of fake. A thousand percent profit. Not a bad business at all. I did some mental calculations. If they bought up sixteen hundred carats of plain sapphire, they'd pay about eighty thousand. After fixing each one up with a star, they'd have a product worth four hundred and eighty thousand. With a very small piece of that you could go around dressed in a platinum wristwatch.

There was no doubt that April would catch on quickly if given a hint.

But with April dead, they were so confident of their process that they were willing to plant the ring in the gas station. What they hadn't figured on was my getting crazy enough to try to smash the ring.

Toward noon the sky clouded over and later on it rained. I was grateful that I didn't have to live through another such day as the day before.

But what could I do while sitting in a shed? A locked shed?

There was no baseball game late in the afternoon. The tires of the cars made a slick, wet sound on the pavement. The rain pattered on the tin roof. Suddenly it occurred to me that if I should happen to look out one of the peep holes and see a mess of cops heading toward the shed, I wouldn't have a chance.

It gave me something to do. Figuring that the noise would be muffled by the rain, I went to work. At the end of two hours my hands were bleeding and my fingernails were painfully ripped, but I had a way out. A quick way. When danger approached, I would have to throw myself flat and roll against the low board at the back of the shed. The impact would pull free the last fractional inch of the nails, and I would be in the clear.

If there was time enough, I could jam the low board back and they'd spend a lot of time before they located the way I got out.

With an escape plan made, I was obsessed by the idea that the police were coming. I sat with my eye glued to the small hole, and at last the rain made pale circles around the street lamps.

They fooled me because I had been expecting sirens. All I saw was the glint of water-soaked rubber, saw the man make an arm signal and glance toward the shack. That was enough. He was putting out his people to circle the place. I knew because I had made the same arm signals in the islands when a pillbox was involved.

I rolled hard and hit the board, and then the rain was splattering against my face. I jammed the board back, crawled fast toward the line of brush. Twigs slapped my face, and then I was rolling down a muddy bank toward the railroad tracks. A quarter-mile away the semaphore signals glowed mistily.

I listened, heard a voice yell, "Okay, Hume. The shack is surrounded. We're coming in!"

CHAPTER THREE

Three Rough Citizens

I GAVE them twenty seconds to move in closer to the shack. Then I got my legs under me and went down the tracks, running on the roadbed, the gravel sliding under my feet. I ran until there was fur on my teeth and a hot pain in my side. Then I charged up the bank, rolled into a clump of brush in somebody's back yard, panting weakly. The rain pattered on the leaves and the ground smelled moist. With a grinding roar and a great sweep of headlight a fast passenger train went by, beginning to slow down audibly for the station a couple of miles ahead.

When I lifted my head, I saw that the house thirty feet away was dark. I calculated the risk. I knew that it was not yet nine o'clock. If the house was dark, it was a fair guess that it was empty. Maybe they had gone to the movies.

After straining my eyes, I saw that the dark windows were curtained. A furnished house meant clothes. My gas station uniform was a giveaway.

Lights streamed from the windows of the house next door. I kept in the shadow of the brush, went up onto the back porch. There was a mat there. I picked it up, patted the dark porch until my fingers closed on a key. Most people are stupid about keys. It squeaked in the lock, and when I stepped inside my nose told me that I was in a kitchen. I listened, hearing only the heavy thump of my heart. When my eyes got used to the lesser light, I found the stairs and went on up. The third closet I tried, shielding the match flame, showed me a row of men's suits. They looked almost big enough for me.

I stripped down, got into a dark one. The pants were just a shade short and a shade too loose around the waist. The coat was tight across the shoulders. I moved the stuff out of my pockets, bundled up the service station uniform, shoved it onto the back end of a high shelf. A dark topcoat was a better fit, and a grey

felt hat was a half size too big, but that was good because I could pull the brim down further.

Stepping into the bathroom I had noticed before, I scrubbed my face and hands. The water stung my torn hands. I fingered the thick beard on my chin. That wouldn't do at all. With a silent prayer that they were at a double feature, I hunted around with a match until I found shaving things. I shaved in the dark, measuring progress by my sense of touch.

Afterward I carefully put the things away, and when I left I locked the back door. No need to excite them any sooner than necessary. With luck they wouldn't notice anything until morning.

I cut toward the darkened house rather than toward the brightly lighted one. I stood in the narrow place between the two houses and listened. Boldly I walked out to the sidewalk and turned toward town. On a rainy night, my chances of being recognized were much less, as I had a legitimate excuse for wearing my hat-brim low, my collar turned up.

It was pointless to head for Greehan's Store. Obviously it would be equipped with all manner of burglar alarms and subject to constant inspection by the man on the beat. But there was another place I could go. A place to which I had followed April. A window in which I had watched the light go out.

But the apartment hotel was almost as bad as the store would have been. There was a man behind the desk just beyond the door. I could see that he was sitting there reading. Belter's window was dark. That meant he was out.

To try to force my way in would mean a lot of trouble. The name of the place was on a bronze plate near the door. Montallan Towers. Two blocks away was a drugstore. I looked up the number, then stood for a moment, nickel in hand, and tried to remember just how Belter's voice had sounded. Crisp and yet quiet. Maybe a shade higher than my voice.

"Montallan Towers," the voice said.

"This is George Belter. I wonder if you'd do me a favor?"

"Why certainly, Mr. Belter. Of course!"

"I'm sending a Mr. Johnston over and

it isn't convenient for me to lend him my key right now. I wonder if you'd please let him into my place. I'll be along in a little while. I've told him to give you a little something for your trouble."

"Glad to do it, sir. Will he be here soon?"

"He started about ten minutes ago. He ought to be there any minute."

I hung up, weak and shaking. Three minutes later I walked in and said, "My name is Johnston and . . ."

The man behind the desk smiled and said, "Yes, of course. Mr. Belter phoned about you not over a minute or two ago. Here's an extra key to 4-D. Take the self-service elevator up, get off at the fourth floor and turn right. Please leave the key off here when you come back down, Mr. Johnston."

MY HAND was sweating as I rode up clutching the key. So far, so good. There had to be some evidence in the apartment. Some scrap of tangible evidence. The key slipped smoothly into the oiled lock.

I opened the door and stepped in. There was no sound. I would have to risk the lights. If he came back unexpectedly, having the lights on wouldn't make it any worse.

The switch was soundless, a mercury switch. The room was small but beautifully furnished in Swedish modern. An arch led to a small den-library. Through another arch to the left was the bedroom, with a bath beyond it. The arch to the right led to a tiny kitchen and a breakfast booth. The whole place gave the impression of being transient quarters.

Working so fast that my hands trembled, I stripped off my coat and began to search the place. I ransacked drawers, worked my way into the bedroom, went through the closets. I stopped very still as I saw a filmy negligee on a padded hanger. It exuded a faint fragrance of perfume—April's perfume. I cursed and continued the search.

At last I stood in the middle of the room, defeated. It was as I took a last look around that I saw the edge of the flat trunk under the bed. I dropped to my knees and hauled it out. It was enormously heavy, and the lock was a better lock

than is usually seen on trunks. It was a heavy brass job.

I remembered the hammer I had seen in the kitchen on the windowsill. I ran and got it, got the claw part under an overlapping edge near the lock and pried down. It wasn't until I braced my foot on the hammer handle and forced down with all my weight that I heard the tiny snap of a metal part fracturing.

The lid lifted easily. When the lid lifted, the front portion dropped down. Inside was a tiny workbench with two jewelers vises, a tray of tools. In a drawer were some loose stones. Near one of the vises I saw a tiny stove, electric, with long cord. Apparently heat was used to dry the adhesive.

This was enough. This was all I needed. I pulled the front flap up and I was trying to get the lid to close properly when a cool voice ten feet behind me said, "Lie flat on the floor on your face."

I spun around. Belter stood in the arched doorway to the bedroom. A squat, heavy stranger stood directly behind him. Belter's eyes were like ice. Pale blue ice. The gun in his hand was aimed at my middle. I noted absently that if he fired it, it would do a lot of damage. It was a big, long-barreled .38 special.

I did as I was told. But when I did so, I stretched out over the hammer. It bit into my ribs, but it was oddly comforting.

"Who is he?" the stranger said.

"He's the one that knocked off the girl. The one with the picture in the papers," Belter said quietly.

My ankles were suddenly grabbed and I was pulled violently back away from the bed. The hammer spun free. It was picked up.

The trunk lid was lifted and the front dropped down. "This is too bad, Hume," Belter said. He turned to the other man. "Stess, you call the boss. Tell him to come over right away."

The bed creaked as he sat down. I heard Stess talking over the phone.

"That was a nice trick you pulled to get in here, Hume. Maybe if you'd remembered to give the desk clerk the little present you promised in my name, he wouldn't even have mentioned you and then we'd have made so much noise un-

locking the door you could have jumped us," Belter said.

Had he sounded excited or upset, I would have felt more at ease. But there was a coolness about him that chilled me. Stretched out on the floor, I felt singularly helpless.

I said, "If I could get my hands—"

"Shut up!" he said flatly. When Stess came back, Belter said, "See if he's got anything on him."

This was going to be a chance. Stess fumbled with the trouser pockets, pulled out the money and change. "Roll over," he said.

I did so. He patted the top suitcoat pocket, felt the lump of the broken ring. My arms were outstretched. He slipped his hand into the pocket. I brought both knees up hard and fast. He grunted as they thumped against his chest, and as he toppled, I fastened both hands onto his wrist, twisting around to keep him between me and Belter.

STESS was a short, wide man with iron-grey hair and a sallow, puffy face. He turned out to be made of India rubber and steel thongs. As I came up off the floor with him, he tore his wrist loose, lunged at me and fastened both chunky arms around my middle. I tried to beat him behind the ear with my fist but he was too close for me to get proper leverage. The arms slowly tightened down and the breath whooshed out of me and I began to listen for the crack of breaking ribs.

"Will you be good?" Belter asked.

"Yes," I gasped.

Stess pushed me away so suddenly that I stumbled and fell. "Stay right where you are, Hume," Belter said.

There was something tight, cool, competent and also casual about the two of them. Stess picked up the fragments of the ring, handed them to Belter. He glanced casually at them, said, "Reset and polish and it's as good as new."

I sat and glared at Belter. His faded blue eyes were remote. Stess picked up a magazine off the night table and wandered into the living room. Five minutes later Greehan arrived. He came in and glanced at me almost with indifference. His manner was the same as in the store,

and yet with a subtle difference. A certain air of subservience was entirely gone.

He rattled off an explosive string of foreign words at Belter. I frowned, trying to remember where I had heard language like that. Somewhere in the East. When Belter answered, he spoke more slowly and I picked out one familiar word.

"Singhalese!" I said aloud.

They both looked at me coldly. "You've been in Ceylon?" Belter asked.

"Army rest camp."

He turned to Greehan. Greehan said, "When he bought the stone he knew what to look for. I wondered if he'd been in sapphire country."

Greehan put his hands behind him and stared solemnly at me. "My boy, you constitute rather a grave problem. We've developed the technique of properly treating sapphires and rubies to create a perfect star. Our best chance of profit has been to set up our own retail distribution. Naturally, knowing what you do—and we credit you with certain intelligence—you have made yourself a definite nuisance. The police want you. Should we turn you over to the police, you will discuss our operations."

There was an implied question. "Of course," I said. "You people are my chance to beat a bum rap."

Greehan raised his eyebrows at Belter. Belter translated, "Bum rap—conviction for something he didn't do."

"I don't understand," Greehan said. "I don't see how we can help you beat this—ah—bum rap. Naturally we discussed the murder of Mr. Belter's friend. He told me that you two had been engaged until he came along. He was amused at her refusal to give up the engagement ring, thus forcing you to pay for a dead horse. I don't discourage Mr. Belter's amusements. I trust his discretion. Since you obviously committed the crime, I don't see how our operations in synthetic stars can enable you to avoid punishment."

My mouth sagged open. I looked at Belter's pale eyes. He seemed interested but not excited. I pointed at him and said, "Look, Greehan. I was going to steal back my ring. I hid in the broom closet. The girl came in with Belter. Belter left. I went in. She was dead in the shower.

I figure she got onto what you boys are doing and she wanted to be cut in and it was cheaper to kill her and frame me."

Greehan's smile was kin to a sneer. "Oh, come now!" he said.

Belter laughed as though it was a good joke. Stess, lounging in the doorway, said, "He attends cheap movies, I should say."

"What's wrong with that reasoning?" I demanded.

Greehan, as though explaining to a child, said, "Mr. Hume, should blackmail be attempted, we would merely pack our stock and move out without forwarding address. At our next stop we would set up again under other names, as we have before. Murder is rather a serious affair. We do not indulge."

His words carried cold conviction.

"But how well do you know what Belter would do? How do you know she didn't get him sore or something?"

"Sore enough to come armed with a wrench?" Belter asked. "Hume, she was a very amusing little article, and as greedy as a little pink pig."

"Who killed her?" I demanded.

GREEHAN looked at Belter. "You know, he may have a point. I don't mean that you killed her, but the papers say that Hume's reputation has been good. If it came to a jury choice as to whether a vendor of synthetic stones killed her, or Hume here, it might be difficult. You did go to her apartment. The police know that. They accepted your testimony that she was alive when you left. It will be your word against Hume's. Once he discloses our occupation, it might be a bit delicate, you know."

The three of them pursed their lips and looked at me in the same way that, after a party, a hostess would look at a hole burned in the rug.

"Logically," Stess said, "we either have to kill this boy or pack up and leave."

I shrugged. "You people have killed once. What difference does twice make?" I tried to say it calmly, but my heart climbed up into my throat and turned me into a contralto.

"If we leave," Greehan said, "Mr. Hume's statements will be given sufficient credence so that our customers will take

their purchases to reputable men for appraisal. The results may shake the case against Hume so badly that we will be wanted for murder."

"This is worse than I thought," Belter muttered.

"Could we arrange to have the police kill him while capturing him?" Stess asked. "That would be the ideal solution."

"Why not?" Belter said eagerly. "We could inform the police, hold Hume out in the hall, fire two harmless shots when they come off the elevator. Feeling runs so high that they'd kill him before he could surrender."

"I don't like it," Greehan said. "It's a fifty percent chance at best. The human body is extraordinarily difficult to kill, particularly with police knowledge of first aid. No, that's a poor plan. We've operated on the basis of better than a ninety percent chance so far. Why change?"

I had slowly figured them out. They weren't Americans, I knew. They were three quietly rough citizens from the Far East. Three careful and calculating

crooks who handled themselves as though they were in a legitimate business. Their manner of speaking was a giveaway. Belter was the closest to being Americanized.

It was unpleasant, to say the least, to be discussed as though I were the corpse in the parlor in a drawing room comedy.

"It's not fair play!" I said loudly.

All three jumped as though I had stuck pins in them. Greehan's face darkened in anger. I had picked the British colonial background correctly and had accused them of the most horrible crime they could think of.

"Just what do you mean?" Greehan said coldly.

"I mean that I think Belter killed her and Belter has you convinced that I killed her. Wouldn't it make sense to find out just who did? If Belter killed her, you'd like to know, wouldn't you? And since you people have logical minds, you've got to admit that he could have killed her, couldn't he?"

Stess and Greehan exchanged a long look. Then they both looked at Belter.

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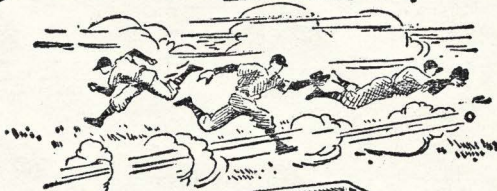
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"Speak up, George," Stess said softly.

"I'd just as soon be cleared of it," Belter said. "But just how do you expect to keep this person out of the hands of the police and conduct your own investigation at the same time? The spanner probably came from his petrol station. His fingerprints were all over her apartment. The newspapers say that a blurred thumb-print, but recognizable as his, was found on even the key that was in the door. He was seen leaving the apartment. He has run from the police and has hidden. He was infatuated with the little chippy. What more do you want?"

"I'll make a bargain with you," I said. "Clear me of this and I won't open my mouth about the fake stars. That is, if you get out of town afterward."

"That would be better than killing you," Greehan said calmly. "Less risk."

"And when you find out that your friend there did it, you'll turn him over to the police?"

Greehan gave Belter an odd look. "If we should find that it was George, we will decide what has to be done."

We were all quiet for a few seconds. Stess shifted in the doorway, said, "What do you plan to do?"

"Get up and sit over there, Hume. Make no sudden movements, please."

I sat on the small couch Greehan had indicated. Belter remained sitting on the bed. Greehan moved a straight chair closer to me and sat down. Greehan said, "And now you will give me your story, complete in every last detail."

"I first met April Shaughnessy when she was . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Paid in Full"

IT WAS nearly two o'clock. My mouth was dry. I had been through the story three times, and many times Greehan's gentle questions had brought other facts to mind. Stess prompted him a few times and so, to my surprise, did Belter.

Greehan put thick fingertips together and said, "The killer ripped the shower curtain aside and struck immediately. He backed away dropping the spanner. The girl slid down on her back in the shower

stall. That much we can assume." He turned to Belter and said, "Were Hume's prints found on the spanner?"

"There were no prints on the spanner."

"Thus, to convict Hume the prosecution would have to suppose that Hume entered the apartment carrying a glove and the spanner. In the bathroom he slipped the glove on, wiped his prints off the spanner, struck the girl, dropped the spanner and left. In no other way could they account for his prints on the door-knob being on top of the faint prints left by the victim. If a man were wearing a glove, were sufficiently conscious of fingerprints to bring a glove, surely he would put the glove on before entering the apartment."

I felt a surge of hope. It was the first break to come my way.

Greehan said coldly, "Your prints were not found there, George."

For the first time George looked nervous. He licked his lips and said, "She opened the door when we went in. It swung shut but did not latch. When I left, I pulled it open with my hand on the edge of the door. It's of rough wood. Probably wouldn't hold a print. Besides, wouldn't she wonder about my coming in with a wrench in my hand? It's not the sort of thing you can carry in your pocket."

"It's the sort of thing you could wedge under your belt," Stess said.

Once again Greehan slipped into Singhalese. I noticed that Stess seemed to follow it too. When Greehan finished, Stess talked rapidly in the same language, and the other two nodded. They all looked at me and when Greehan talked again, I knew by the intonation that it was a question. Both Stess and Belter shook their heads.

"Hume," Greehan said, "all the information that you have given us is not quite enough. We want a clearer picture of your movements. If you're being honest with us, you'll have no objection to our calling in your friend Robinot to substantiate certain of your statements."

"No objection at all. I can phone him. He'll come over right away, I'm sure."

Belter walked me to the phone, staying far enough back so that my chance of

grabbing the gun was reduced to nil. I counted eight rings before Dan's sleepy voice said, "Yeah? Who is it?" "Brad."

The phone was dead for a few moments. "Fella, I've been going nuts. What the hell happened? Somebody phoned the cops and tipped them that they'd heard noises in that shed. The whole town is jumpy with you loose. Where are you?"

"Look, do you remember when you sobered me up and I gave you the pitch on April?"

"Sure, kid."

"Remember where I said I parked across the street and watched the light in the window?"

"Right."

"Come to that same place right away. Come up to the fourth floor." I hung up.

Conversation between Greehan and Hume stopped the moment I got back into the room. I said, "He'll be along any minute."

"Good!" Greehan said, rubbing his palms together. "Excellent."

DAN came in scowling and his hands went up slowly as he saw the .38 pointed at his middle. Stess went carefully around the line of fire, slapped Dan's pockets, brought a small, unholstered Jap automatic out of Dan's side pocket.

"Who are you guys?" he demanded. "I've got a license for that thing."

"No doubt," Greehan said smoothly. "Mr. Robinot, if you would please sit right over there beside Mr. Hume. Splendid!"

He assumed the air of a lecturer. He said, "The four of us have been trying to settle a little problem, Mr. Robinot. We have been trying to determine whether the dead Miss Shaughnessy was placed in that condition by Mr. Belter over there or Mr. Hume. Mr. Hume has given us an account of his movements and since you are in the best position to substantiate them, we are imposing on you to do so. Would you please tell me exactly what you know about this thing."

Dan was sullen at first, but he gradually warmed up to the job, ending with his discovery that the shed had been broken into, and I was gone.

When he finished, Greehan rattled off some more of the Singhalese.

"Stick to English, you guys," Dan said, scowling.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Robinot. We sometimes forget. Now then, you don't mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Go right ahead. Your man knocked off the girl, not Brad here. You can bet on that. Brad's no killer."

Belter stood up lazily and strolled over close to where we were sitting. I wondered how good my chances were of grabbing the gun. He was just a shade too far away. I admired his iron nerve. It counted in his favor as far as steering Stess and Greehan off the wrong track was concerned.

"Mr. Robinot, you were against Mr. Hume's attempt to steal back the ring?"

"Yes, but he talked me into it. Besides, his having to pay the shot on it for four years was going to cut back our expansion program a hell of a lot."

"And Mr. Hume explained his plan, exactly when he was going to attempt the theft?"

"That's right. He didn't say anything



Greenhan

about slugging her. He was going to sneak in and sneak out again."

"He had a key to get into her place?"

"Sure. He showed it to me. He had it on his keyring."

"But I took it off and put it on the desk," I said.

"That's right," Dan said belligerently. "What has that got to do with the price of eggs?"

"Nothing, for the moment. Now then, Mr. Robinot, you recognized the wrench as being the same make used in your gas station?"

"Same brand. I couldn't tell from the stock records whether any of ours were missing. We don't have them on inventory."

Greehan nodded. "When you got back to the station, Hume was there and he was incoherent?"

"He was in bad shape. Real bad shape. The poor guy couldn't realize what a spot he was in."

"You encouraged him to hide out?" Greehan asked softly.

"What else could he do?"

"Hiding out was almost an admission of guilt, don't you think?"

"Not in a spot like he was in."

"If he were captured and convicted, Robinot, you would own the partnership. You would receive Hume's share."

Dan looked at Greehan, very puzzled, and then his face changed. "Say! What the hell are you trying to do? This is between Belter and Brad. I was helping Brad, you poor damn fool!"

Belter moved a shade closer. Greehan turned to me with a smile. "You see, Hume, the whole thing is remarkably obvious. Robinot hated April, and hated you for taking her away from him. With you out of the way, he'd be sitting pretty—I believe that's your expression. The key to her rooms stayed on the station desk all day. He could readily have gotten a duplicate made. All he had to do was go to her place before you did, and he knew your intention of hiding in the hall. He would hide *in* the apartment. He could kill her, take the ring, hide again. When you came in, you'd find her dead. Since both of you were wearing that grey station uniform, anyone seeing him leave—*after you left*—would think it was you, thus providing more witnesses to your presence. That will account for the ring being 'found' in the station, and for his urging you to run from the police. He probably tipped off the police as to your hiding place."

"That's silly!" I said.

DAN laughed heartily. "You guys have been reading books. Hell, man, we're partners. We went through the war in the same holes in the ground. You don't do that kind of thing to a buddy."

"You're on the wrong track!" I said.

Greehan merely smiled. He asked Dan, "They let you go up to her rooms when you went back, didn't they? To see the body?"

"Of course not!" Dan snorted. "The place was lousy with cops, like I told Brad. I couldn't go in there."

"At no time, Mr. Robinot, was the make of wrench indicated in the papers. Since George was concerned, we read the reports carefully. How on earth would you know the make of wrench if you didn't see it? There must be dozens of makes."

Something funny happened to Dan's face. It stopped being the face of somebody I knew and turned into the face of a stranger. The honest blue-eyed look of his faded away and there was something twisted and foul about his expression. I wondered why I had never noticed how oddly long and pointed and twisted his teeth were.

The look went away as quickly as it had come. "One of the cops told me," he said sullenly. But every one of us in the room was fairly certain that Dan had done it. And it was the last thing I had thought of. A third party. As soon as Belter had left, Dan must have known I would delay a few minutes. He went in fast, hit her, took the ring and moved away, probably into the back of her deep closet.

Like the release of a taut spring, Dan leaped at Belter. Belter had been standing too close. There was the smack of fist on flesh and Dan spun, the .38 firmly in his hand. He was in a half crouch and his eyes were blue slits, his mouth like a slash in a piece of leather.

"Against that wall, all of you!" he snapped, motioning with the gun.

Belter sat up, tenderly touching his jaw with his fingertips. He swayed as he stood up.

They lined up peacefully enough. "Palms flat against the wall," Dan ordered.

He grinned at me. "Okay, chump. I've hated your guts for three years. I wanted to see you hang, but this way is going to be just as good. I'll give you one in the guts for luck. That two-timing witch of yours died too easy."

My stomach knotted as he aimed. I

saw his big finger, hooked around the trigger. I saw it whiten as he put the pressure on, saw the trigger go back and the cylinder spin one notch under the double action.

The gun snapped empty, and suddenly Stess was over by the arched doorway. Belter held his hand out and said, "Okay, killer. Give me the gun."

Dan snapped it twice at Belter's head and then threw it. Belter ducked easily, went in sleek and fast and hooked a left to Dan's middle that boomed like a big drum. Dan gasped and bent over, but managed to slip the second punch.

His clubbed fist flashed, smashed against Belter's jaw. Belter fell back into the straight chair, went crashing over with the chair. Robinot was like a big, maddened animal. He turned and charged blindly toward the door.

Stess calmly kicked him in the stomach. When Dan bent over in agony, Stess kicked him in the face. And that was all.

Greehan stared down at Dan, turned to Belter and said, "You almost gave it away when you moved in with that empty gun. You overdid it, and a smarter man would have caught on."

"He was going to kill me," I said, still weak from reaction.

"My boy, he was going to kill all of us," Greehan said.

TWENTY-FIVE minutes later Dan stood, tightly handcuffed, blinking sullenly into the flashes of the bulbs on the news cameras. Greehan, Stess and Belter gave on-the-spot testimony to the man with the notebook. I backed them up. With dull fury Dan admitted it again in front of the police and the newsmen. They took him away, triumphant sirens screaming, after the four of us promised to appear at ten the next morning at headquarters.

I was the only was who appeared. It put a crimp in the case, but not a serious one. Belter, Greehan and Stess had folded their tents during the night. Some cheap and bulky merchandise was left in the denuded store. There was just enough cash in their checking account to cover current bills. They had made consistent cash withdrawals.

I kept to my bargain. I did not talk. They were crooks, and smooth ones, but according to their lights they had been fair with me. In helping me out, they had merely been assuring their ability to operate in other places.

(Continued on page 127)



"The Red Caps are just out of luck when Elmer gets a Wheaties breakfast on the train."

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ESCAPE!

By
EARL PEIRCE

Only one thing was needed to make that macabre side-show exhibit complete—Fenska's dead body.



The gun exploded like a fragmentation bomb in the narrow space of the cab, as Fenska fired at the figure of the cop behind him.

IN THE thick, damp fog overhanging the marshes the wail of the prison siren carried only a few hundred feet. Fenska no longer feared the siren. But the sound he did fear was the eager baying of the bloodhounds. One moment they sounded far away. The next minute they seemed to be almost on top of him.

He spent a few minutes crouched behind a fallen tree, listening. His wet prison denims were plastered to his skin.

His face and hands were streaked with dirt. His shoes were caked with mud. The only clean thing about him was the gleaming .38 Special he had taken from the prison guard, ten miles back, on the other side of the lowlands.

For several minutes now the sound of the dogs had been softer, less ominous. But they weren't tiring; bloodhounds didn't tire so readily. Fenska judged that the posse had veered away from him, fol-

lowing the swamp down toward the river. He had been smart to avoid the river.

Cautiously he straightened up from his hiding place and looked around. The fog seemed thick enough to lodge a bullet. He couldn't see more than fifteen feet in any direction. Vision was almost useless now. He would have to trust his sheer instinct for survival to lead him to safety.

In Fenska the survival instinct was doubly strong. It had always been so, from his youthful days on the San Francisco waterfront, through half a dozen correctional institutions, until he had ended up in the death house of the Utah state prison. Here—a few hours before he was scheduled to enter the gas chamber—this instinct had reached the exploding point when he had slugged a guard and shot his way to freedom.

Freedom? Fenska's tight mouth curled with the word as he surveyed the prison of fog and swamp that surrounded him. Which way to go? He knew there was a road nearby, for he had heard, earlier, the staccato backfiring of a motorcycle moving at high speed. But would it be smart to trust himself on a road?

Still, roads led to towns. Towns were linked by railroads. Railroads cross the state line and eventually reached the border. He *had* to go by road.

Spurred by the desperate, simple logic of his instinct, he struck forward in the direction from which he had heard the motorcycle. After a dozen or more steps he felt himself on firmer ground. He stumbled over rocks and small shrubs, brushed an occasional tree. The ground was rising. In another moment he came upon the high mound of a roadbed, topped by a white wooden fence.

He climbed the mound warily, hugging the protection of some shrubbery. But he needn't have been so cautious. The two-lane macadam highway was deserted in both directions as far as he could see, and the wet air was silent except for the scuffing of his own shoes on the ground. Again he wondered which way to turn. One direction led straight back to the prison. But which one?

BEFORE he could make up his mind he once again heard the thin wail of a siren. He dropped to his knees and lay

tense, straining his ears to place the direction of the siren. It seemed, because of the fog, to be coming from all directions at once, growing steadily louder and louder.

Suddenly, down the road on his right, a yellow spot of light cut through the fog. The spot grew larger as it approached him. Then he saw another spot—fog lights—and into his ears droned the roar of motorcycles.

Hugging the ground like a lizard, Fenska watched and waited. The air throbbed with noise as the motorcade drew closer. The first motorcycle came abreast of him and roared down the road without pausing. Then came the second, and finally a third.

Behind the motorcycles streamed a line of trucks, about half a dozen, in all, with huge placards hanging on their sides. Fenska risked lifting his head for a better look at the placards. He finally pieced together the gaudy announcement:

Come One!	Come All!
JONES BROS CIRCUS	
Wild Animals	Freaks Girls

Beneath each placard fluttered a long streamer, blazoned with a bold-faced come-on: **NEXT STOP POKERVILLE, NEV.**

Fenska came back up to his knees just as the last truck swung across his line of vision. Pokerville, Nevada. That was across the state line. What was he waiting for?

Leaping to his feet, he scrambled up the embankment and climbed over the fence. The red taillight of the last truck was pulling away from him, about twenty feet distant. He could catch it easily, providing he could keep his feet on the slippery macadam.

But first he threw a quick backward glance over his shoulder to be sure no one was coming from behind. One glance was enough. Someone was coming! He wrenched himself sideways and fell to the ground alongside the fence. Only his eyes moved as the twin beams of headlights flashed overhead.

At first he didn't think it was one of the circus trucks. But as it rolled past his hiding place he saw the Jones Bros. plac-

ard, and in the light of the dashboard he saw the heads of the occupants—an old man and an old woman.

He didn't waste another moment. Leaping to his feet, he ran alongside the truck and banged his fist against the door. "Hey, stop! Stop!"

Brakes squealed as the truck jarred to a stop, and the old man's frightened face peered through the glass.

"Open up!" cried Fenska.

The window rolled open a few inches and both faces peered out at him. "What is it? What do you want?"

Fenska waved his gun. "I'm a deputy sheriff. Open up!"

"What do you want with us?"

Already the fugitive's hand clawed at the handle of the door. "Don't you know there's been a jailbreak? Open up. I'm taking over this truck in the name of the law!"

Wrenching the door open, Fenska climbed the running board and shoved his gun into the driver. "Pay attention! You won't get hurt if you just do as you're told."

For a moment the driver looked at him in silence. He was a thin, tired-looking man about sixty, with the indrawn hollows of his cheeks and eyes accentuated by the dim light of the dashboard. From under his plain black hat curled long-cut white hair. He looked like a frontier minister of a bygone era, although Fenska well knew that carnival people were queer to begin with. His companion was the same sort—a prim, elderly woman, wearing a black bonnet and steel-rimmed spectacles.

"How do we know you're a deputy sheriff?" asked the man.

Fenska cracked the revolver against the man's elbow. "Because I say so. Now move over!"

The man grimaced and clutched his injured elbow, but he made no move of obedience until his wife grasped his other arm. "Sylvian, do what the officer says."

"That's right," said Fenska, making room for himself behind the wheel. "Where a jailbreak's concerned, you gotta do like you're told. You people belong to that circus up ahead, don't you?"

"Yes," said the old woman. "Sylvian, are you hurt, dear?"

"He ain't hurt," said Fenska, slamming the door. "Not like he'll be if he don't do what he's told." Shifting his revolver to his left hand, Fenska pushed down the clutch, shifted gears and sent the truck rolling forward.

"How come you're so far behind them other trucks?" he asked.

"Engine trouble," said Sylvian crisply. "I had to stop and flush water from the carburetor. It works all right now."

"It better," rapped Fenska. He pushed down on the accelerator and felt the truck pick up momentum on the slippery road. Unable to control the heavy vehicle with one hand, he laid the revolver in his lap and gripped the wheel with both hands. But he was alert for any false move by either the old man or his wife.

His suspicion of them appeared to be groundless, however. They sat huddled together, holding hands, hardly daring to look sideways at him. Finally the old woman could no longer restrain herself. "Please don't drive so fast. The road is treacherous tonight."

"I'm driving all right," said Fenska. "I want to catch up with them other trucks." He reasoned that was his best move, to pull in line with the rest of the convoy, to actually cross the state line behind a police escort.

FOR SEVERAL minutes he drove in silence, with the speedometer wavering in the mid thirties. The fog was clearing somewhat, but the road was beginning to curve and he still hadn't caught up with the lights of the last truck in the line ahead. He kept his eyes steadily on the road, but occasionally he sensed that either Sylvian or his wife had sneaked a glance at him, and he knew they were silently taking stock of his wet denims and his mud-splattered face and hands.

"Been in the swamps," he explained after a moment. "We thought we'd located that escaped criminal, but we were wrong. I got separated from the men . . ."

They listened to him in silence, not even looking at each other. Fenska didn't know if they believed him or not. As long as they obeyed him and didn't cause any trouble, it didn't matter. And in a pinch he knew it would be easy enough to dump them both into the road.

He drove for another few miles, with the only sound in the truck the regular whir of the engine. Suddenly, as he rounded a curve in the road, he heard a different sound—a sort of groan. It didn't come from either of them. It came from *behind!*

In two instinctive jerks of movement he stopped the car and scooped up the gun. He felt the hair on his neck stiffen as he twisted around to cover them.

"What was that?"

The old woman's hand flew to her lips. "Please! It's the child. Don't wake him up!"

"Child!" Fenska rose halfway out of his seat for a better look behind. On the high, leather-padded ledge behind the seat a boy about five or six lay curled on his side, fast asleep, covered by a thick quilted blanket. Curly brown hair hung softly over features that were strikingly similar to the old man's.

"He's our grandson," came Sylvian's quick admission. "We're keeping him during the summer while his parents are on tour. You—you won't hurt him?"

Fenska threw a sharp glance at Sylvian. "Why should I hurt him?"

"I was afraid if you frightened him he would cry—and create a disturbance."

Fenska's mouth twisted at the corner, but without speaking he looked back at the boy. The child appeared to be sleeping soundly now, although he might be having a nightmare, to judge by the groaning. Better to let him sleep. But

with nerves already tensed and near the snapping point, Fenska was in no mood to risk another scare. He called the old man's attention to the rectangular wooden trapdoor connecting the cab of the truck with the main body, behind.

"Anyone else back there?"

"No," said Sylvian readily. "There's not a living thing back there."

The tone of the old man's voice sounded queer. Fenska reached over the boy's sleeping figure and pushed open the trapdoor with the tip of his revolver. It was dark inside.

"Can you turn on a light back there?"

"Yes, but I insist there's no one back there. It's just an exhibit for the side-show."

"Turn the light on!"

The old man hesitated another moment, exchanging a glance with his wife, and then he reached to the dashboard and pressed a switch. "Don't be startled by what you see," he warned.

But the warning didn't come soon enough. The instant the light went on within the truck Fenska's heart gave a lurch and his body recoiled as though shocked by an electric wire. Dropping his head, he thrust his revolver full length from his shoulder and fired pointblank at the figure of the policeman standing in the truck behind.

In the narrow space of the cab the gun exploded like a fragmentation bomb. Rocking with the shot, Fenska didn't see whether he'd hit the cop or not; and with-

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out waiting for the smoke to clear from his eyes he steadied his gun with both hands and started to fire again. But he was too late. The boy came awake with a scream and sat bolt upright, blocking the line of fire. Cursing, Fenska grabbed the boy to yank him down from the ledge, when the old woman, herself screaming, threw up her arms to protect him. At the same instant Sylvian made a frantic grasp at Fenska's arm.

"That's a dummy!" he cried. "It's not real. It's wax—they're all wax!"

"What's that?" Already Fenska's gun was cocked for his next shot, and he barely controlled his trigger finger. "*Wax?*"

USING the boy as a shield, Fenska thrust his weapon through the opening again and drew a bead on the upright figure of the policeman. But this time he held the shot. It was a wax dummy, unbelievably realistic, from the top of the capped head down to the brogans. And in the exact center of the blue tunic was the depression and hole caused by Fenska's bullet.

"Yeah . . . yeah!" Fenska's voice trembled with relief. "It's a dummy, all right. Good thing, ain't it? I'd a killed him!"

A nervous laugh burst through the fugitive's lips as he surveyed the rest of the figures within the truck. There were about half a dozen in all, each differently dressed, each in a different pose.

One bedraggled figure was sitting in what appeared to be an electric chair, his arms and legs straining against leather straps, his tensed face a ghastly mixture of blue and white.

Another hung limply by his neck from a rope, one side of his face limp, the other side wrenched out of shape by the violent pull of a fractured neck.

In a corner of the truck a third figure seemed to be kneeling in prayer—until Fenska looked up to see the blade of a guillotine suspended on a wrack above.

"What the hell kind of place is this?" he gasped. "What is it?" He spoke in a hoarse whisper, his words drowned out by the boy's incessant, hysterical bawling. In sudden rage Fenska caught the boy by the shoulder and yanked him from the ledge. "Shut him up, y'hear? Shut him up!"

Both Sylvan and his wife reached for the boy at once, each trying to soothe him, until finally the old woman managed to nestle him against her bosom and smother his cries. Tears were in both their eyes as they patted the child's head and shoulders.

Fenska slapped Sylvan across the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Answer me! What kind of exhibit is that, anyway?"

"Isn't it obvious?" questioned the old man patiently. "It's called 'Capital Punishment Around the World.' It shows the various methods of—of putting murderers to death."

"Did you make those dummies?"

"Yes. I made them, and my wife made their clothes. We—we've had this exhibit for many years."

"Lots of people pay good money to look at 'em, I suppose?"

"It's popular, yes."

"Why do you have an exhibit like that, anyway? You think it's funny, seein' things like that happen to people?"

Sylvan's tongue cut across his lips in a moment of hesitation. "I don't think it's funny. It's horrible. We made it deliberately horrible, to show people the consequences of crime. We think this exhibit may help people to become righteous."

"Ain't that cute?" snarled Fenska. "Yuo gotta guy in the gas chamber back there?"

"No."

"Why not? They use a gas chamber in some states. They sit you in a chair in a little room. They drop an egg into a bowl of acid and pretty soon the gas starts to curl up around the chair, blinding your eyes, digging into your nose and throat. . . . You know about that, Mr. Righteous?"

"No, I—I'm not familiar with that form of punishment."

For a long moment Fenska looked at Sylvian, trying to read his thoughts, trying to penetrate those deep-set, expressionless eyes. Finally he spoke in a voice barely heard above the boy's soft whimper.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You said you were a deputy sheriff," said the old man quietly.

"Yeah, that's right. I'm a sheriff. Now turn that light out, and you and the boy and the old woman be quiet. No matter what happens, be quiet and play smart.

Not even a whisper. You got me?"

A sound like a sigh came from Sylvian's mouth. "Yes, we both understand." He turned off the light in the back of the truck; then he edged over on the seat, slipping one arm around his wife's shoulders, laying the other protectively upon the youngster. "Shh, Dickie, shh," he murmured. "Mama, please rock him back to sleep. . . ."

Fenska didn't waste any more time on them. He had wasted enough time already for a man to whom each minute was priceless. Dropping back down in the seat, he laid the revolver across his lap and sent the big truck rolling forward again. The fog had almost lifted entirely, and on the straight stretches of road, between curves, he could make up for lost time. His only worry was catching up with the rest of the convoy before it crossed the state line.

HE DROVE for several miles without speaking, the only sounds in the cab the boy's soft sobbing and the occasional "shh, shh" of his grandparents. It appeared impossible to put him back to sleep, but as long as he didn't yell and attract attention Fenska wasn't worried. He didn't want to have to kill them. All he wanted was to make good his escape, and they and their exhibit and their damned righteousness could go to hell. . . .

Suddenly, rounding a curve, several houses came into view, and farther down the road were the scattered lights of a town. Fenska came up to the edge of his seat, scanning the road carefully, but he didn't slacken his speed. This was probably Ottawan, the last town before the state line. He remembered it because it was the last view of civilization he had had before going to the prison.

He rolled past the first few houses without seeing a moving thing, but as the truck entered the first block of the town he saw the taillights of an automobile cruising along the center of the road, and inadvertently he let up on the gas. The car was going at a snail's pace, and Fenska had to use his brake to keep from coming too close behind. He was only ten or fifteen feet behind when he saw the lettering beneath the sedan's license plate: POLICE.

A crucial moment of indecision held Fenska's next move. He didn't know

whether to tap his horn and pull around the police car, or to wait until the sedan moved over of its own accord and gave him room. But the decision wasn't left to him. The police car slowed down to a stop in the middle of the road, and a uniformed arm thrust out of the window and waved Fenska down.

He jammed on his brake, but before the truck jarred to a stop the revolver was already in his hand. He spoke from the side of his mouth as he watched the policeman climb out of the sedan.

"Don't either one of you say a word. Pretend you can't talk. I'll do the talking."

Sylvian and his wife both nodded, their faces streaked with anxiety. The old woman held the boy's head firmly against her bosom, covering him as much as possible. Her lips moved fervently, as though with a prayer.

With a barely audible click Fenska cocked the revolver and sat waiting for the policeman to come alongside. From the cut of the uniform, Fenska knew it wasn't a state cop and he surmised it was only a village officer who had been alerted by the jailbreak. Still, a cop was a cop.

"You're the third guy to stop me in an hour," he joked, as the officer came within earshot. "I'm trying to catch up with the rest of the trucks. How long ago did they come through?"

The officer didn't appear to hear all of the remark. He looked first at the Jones Bros. placard on the side of the truck, and then he put one foot on the running board and peered at the occupants. He was a middle-aged man with a ruddy face and a faint stubble of grey beard. The short stump of a cigar was clenched in his teeth, and he spoke around it.

"How come you're so far behind? Them others went through here fifteen minutes ago. You stop some place?"

"Motor trouble," said Fenska cheerfully. "I hadda stop and blow into the carburetor. Must've got water in it."

"How far back was that?"

"Three or four miles. What place is this?"

"This is Ottawan. I'm Chief Blanchard, town police. Who's them folks with you?"

"My old man and old lady, and that's

my kid. They're scared as hell from the excitement. Be glad to get to Pokerville and make camp. How far is it to Pokerville, anyway?"

"Nine miles to the state line, and then twenty-five, thirty miles beyond that." The chief shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth and chewed on it for a moment in silence.

"How'd you get that mud on your face, mister?"

"I told you, I was fixing the motor."

There was another moment of silence until Chief Blanchard removed the cigar from his lips and threw it on the ground. His eyes didn't leave Fenska's face for a moment.

"That looks like a swamp mud to me, mister."

This time Fenska didn't bother with an answer, except to begin raising the revolver slowly from his lap. He and Blanchard locked eyes, until Blanchard suddenly reached for the door with one hand and dropped the other hand to his gunbelt.

"Get your paws in sight and get down from that truck!" he ordered.

Fenska obeyed the first part of the command by bringing his hands into sight, but as the barrel of the revolver nosed over the top of the window he squeezed the trigger pointblank into Blanchard's face.

The chief was in motion an instant before the gun exploded, and the slug caught him edgewise across the cheek and hurled him backwards. As he staggered to a sitting position on the road, Fenska leaned over the window, took careful aim, and fired again. The slug caught the chief in the stomach, but already he had dragged out his .45, and as he rolled with the second slug he managed to squeeze off two quick shots of his own. Fenska grinned as he felt the bullets plough harmlessly into the underside of the truck, and with cool deliberation he centered his sights on the chief's bloody face and fired once more. From the wooden way Blanchard's head rolled, Fenska guessed he was already dead. . . .

KEEPING the gun in his hand, he shifted the truck into low, wrenched the wheel far to one side and slammed forward. His right bumper caught the

rear of the police car, but he ploughed free with a crunching of metal, righted the truck on the straightaway ahead, and shoved the gas straight down to the floor.

The boy was screaming again at the top of his voice, and the old people were clutched in each other's arms like a couple going down in the water together. Fenska didn't give them a second thought. With the speedometer climbing in the forties, he drove straight down the center of the highway, ready to crash or blast at anything that stood in his way.

But he wasn't fooling himself. He knew real trouble waited up ahead at the state line where there'd be a roadblock and perhaps a dozen or more state cops. His only hope of getting through that cordon lay in reaching the state line before word of Blanchard's killing got onto a teletype.

Nine miles to the state line, Blanchard had said. Fenska counted off seven miles by the dashboard indicator, and then he braked the truck to a sudden stop. The road ahead was still deserted, but behind the rise of some hills he could see the faint glow of lights which must mark the road block.

"Pay attention!" he rapped. "There won't be any more shooting if you do what you're told. Just keep that kid quiet, and pay attention to what I tell you. Your lives depend on it."

Their faces drained of blood, they looked at him. Their only sound was the old woman's incessant whisper to the child held fast in her arms.

"I'm gonna climb in back," explained Fenska. "The kid goes back on the ledge. You, grandpa, drive. When they stop you, you haven't seen anything, haven't heard anything. And it better be convincing. Because if they aren't convinced—if they start nosing in the truck—my first bullet goes for the kid. Clear enough?"

The old man's only response was to reach for his wife's hand and clutch it.

"Okay," grunted Fenska. "We understand each other." With a final glance up and down the road, he climbed to a sitting position on the ledge over the seat, poked his legs through the opening and lowered himself into the body of the truck. He held the trapdoor open with one hand, waving the gun at them.

"Put the kid back on the ledge."

They obeyed promptly and in silence. While the old woman covered the child with the quilt and tried to placate him, her husband slid behind the wheel and started the truck moving ahead.

For the next several minutes there was only silence, except for the placating whispers and the faint hiss of exhaust beneath the truck. Finally, as they rolled over the crest of a hill, the myriad lights of the roadblock blazed in front of them.

Fenska gave one last warning before he lowered the trapdoor back into place. "Remember, I'll hear everything you say. One wrong word and the kid gets it first!"

In the utter blackness of the truck he stood and waited. As he felt the truck lose momentum and come to a slow standstill his hear began to pound wildly and perspiration erupted like a cold blanket around his skin. He wished he had left a peephole, but it was too late now, for he heard the crunch of gravel as several men approached the truck.

"What's your name, mister?" demanded a voice.

"Sylvian Cargraves. This is my wife, and my grandson is sleeping on the ledge. We're trying to catch up with the rest of the circus trucks."

"Cargraves, eh? That's right, Ed. They said he'd be along. Everything okay, Cargraves?"

"Everything's fine, except we're pretty anxious to get to Pokerville."

"Didn't see anyone on the road, did you?"

"Not a soul."

Inside the truck Fenska waited for the officer's next question, hardly daring to

draw a breath. He heard the crunch of gravel again as one or more of the cops walked slowly around the truck. He followed the noise with his eyes and with the muzzle of the revolver until finally it swung around to the front of the truck again.

"Okay, Cargraves, get moving. You'll cross some railroad tracks about fifteen miles ahead. Turn right at the fork after that, and it'll take you straight to Pokerville."

Catching his breath again, holding it tight in his chest, Fenska waited what seemed a lifetime before the truck began to move again. Finally, when he felt the vibrations of gathering speed, he sank slowly down to the floor of the truck and wiped the sweat from his face. His heart felt as though it had collapsed from relief. It was all he could do to bang against the wall to call Cargrave's attention.

"Yes?" came the anxious reply.

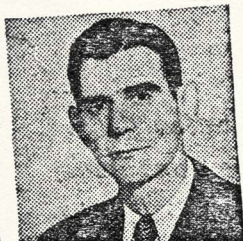
"Just keep driving," Fenska muttered. "I'll leave you and your wax dummies some place along the railroad track. I'll tell you when. Meanwhile just keep driving. . . ."

* * *

Pokerville, Nev. Flash to all news services!

The body of James Fenska, escaped murderer, was found early today in a truck owned by the Jones Bros. circus upon its arrival in Pokerville. Police believe that bullets fired into the truck caused the accidental leakage of exhaust fumes within the truck, for an autopsy revealed that Fenska met death because of carbon monoxide poisoning. Authorities are investigating. . . .

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



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Carl W. Rau Has
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ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

DEAD MAN'S SHOES



The shoes fit Old Man Zooker just right. "Elegant," he called them. And they would lead him, step by bloody step, along the same dark path they'd trod before. . . .

By **ALAN
RITNER
ANDERSON**



*Exciting Novelette
of the
Corpse That Talked*



Zooker was calm and tranquil. "I ain't afraid, ma'am," he said. "A man my age walks with death every day."

CHAPTER ONE

In the Dead Man's Footsteps

THE DEAD MAN had big feet. He was flat on his back in the shallow ditch between the gravel road and the south side of Hoskins' corn field. His face was pasty-white in the greyness of dawn and his eyes lay in their sockets like pale blue marbles. He wore a moss-green sport shirt and slacks the color of a bitter-sweet chocolate bar. His brown suede shoes had rawhide laces and crepe soles. They were fantastically large—like the

grotesque footwear of circus clowns.

The crows circled overhead with flapping wings and raucous caws. Old man Zooker reached the spot huffing and puffing. He was not sober. He stopped on the edge of the road and stuffed his mouth with scrap tobacco. He looked up at the crows with blood-shot grey eyes. "Shut up!" he bawled. "I heerd you. I'm here, ain't I?" The crows stopped their crazy cawing and flapped down to land clumsily on the cross arms of a telephone pole near the dead man. They viewed the scene with button-black eyes bright with interest. They knew old man Zooker well, and were fond of him.

Zooker looked at the dead man. The tire mark across the bosom of the green shirt was sharp and clear, a non-skid tread in a broad V pattern. "City feller," Zooker said. "One of them cottagers. Got yourself kilt, huh?" He turned his head and glanced at the cottage community crowding the shore of Lake Mingo a half-mile away. The sky was a pink haze and a silvery curtain of mist hovered above the water. He twisted his head around and looked at the village, five-eighths of a mile in the opposite direction. The gravel road was deserted.

The old man examined the corpse. He spotted the shoes and his eyes bugged. He sat on the edge of the road and studied the oxfords at close range. "Glory!" he said. "Golly Ned! Bet they'd fit me. I sure bet they'd fit me. Hell an' hardtack! A dead man's got no use for shoes. Why, a man's feet don't show when he's in his burial case." He looked up at the crows. A big black crow perched precariously atop a glass insulator closed his right eye in a solemn wink. The old man winked back, chortled in high glee. He twisted his head and spat over his right shoulder for luck. At seventy-three he had lost some of his spitting skill and he always dribbled a fine spray over his whiskers. The effect was not pretty. His spade-shaped beard terminated at his breast bone and was snow white except for a rich brown vertical stripe the width of his mouth.

He removed his work shoes. They were beyond repair and he had no others. His feet were so big his shoes had to be ordered from the factory, which took

time and cost money. He held his breath as he measured his right shoe against a thick crepe sole. The oxfords were a shade bigger than his own shoes! Experiencing the feverish excitement of a small child with a Christmas box, Zooker took the shoes off the big feet of the corpse. Breathing hard, he put them on and tied the rawhide laces.

He stood up. His face registered blissful ecstasy. "Glory!" he cried. "Man an' boy!" Never had he experienced such foot comfort. Why, it was like standing barefoot in the cool, oozy mud of a creek bottom. He paced to and fro. The crepe soles possessed a surprising springiness and he pranced back and forth like a frisky colt. He stopped and glanced at the corpse with affection. "Lucky for me you got kilt," he said. "These are sure elegant shoes. I'm obliged to you, young man!"

THE SUN topped the horizon, a fireball in a cloudless sky, and the sudden warmth at the back of Zooker's head swept the alcoholic fog from his brain. "Hell an' hardtack!" he grouched. "A dead man with no shoes will make trouble." It was a vexatious problem. He looked at the body and his eyes glinted with sudden cunning. "If no one was to find you," he said, "nobody'd know you didn't have no shoes on."

The old man was strong, the corpse small and scrawny. The body was limp except for a masklike stiffness of the face, an indication that rigor mortis had begun to set in. The old man carried the corpse into the unfenced corn field. He lowered the body between the eleventh and twelfth rows. The man rolled to his left side. There was a saucerlike indentation at the base of his skull.

Zooker went back to the road. He looked at the corn field and was moved to self-anger. "Hell an' hardtack!" he growled. "Ain't I the ninny! Look at them tracks. Every dratted soul in creation knows I got the biggest feet in the county. If I was to bury him, some nosy dog'd dig him up." He looked up at the cross arms of the pole for guidance. The crows had lost interest and gone. He felt deserted without the crows.

The old man picked up his work shoes, knotted the lace ends together and slung

them around his neck. He turned and walked to the lane, fifty feet away. that led to his property. The lot was deep and narrow and thickly timbered for four hundred feet back from the road. The house trailer had been a novelty when new. It perched atop a grassy knoll, a twenty-four-foot model with a chemical toilet. The undercarriage had been removed and it rested on a sturdy foundation of concrete blocks. The two-story barn behind the trailer looked ready to collapse from weariness. The back wall of the barn faced the edge of a deep gravel pit that had been worked to exhaustion long before. The excavation was strewn with tin cans and household trash.

Zooker went to the barn. Seventeen years before, he had arrived in the village towing the trailer with the same Model A roadster that now stood parked in the forepart of the barn. A fire had gutted the house on the property he now occupied, and he had bought the place dirt cheap. Where he had come from and what he had been remained an enigma. When primed with strong drink, he spun tall tales of the cattle country and high adventure on the seven seas. If half the village thought him crazy and the other half considered him queer, it was a type of insanity they envied, because the old man was supremely content.

The Model A roadster had been converted into a pickup truck by removing the rumble compartment and adding a box body of marine weldwood. The body was four feet square and five feet high. There was a two-foot opening between the top of the hinged tailgate and the roof. Zooker was the unofficial trash collector

of the village and did light hauling to and from the nearest express agency office seven miles away.

The old man always backed into the barn so he could make a fast exit if the fire siren blew. "Hell!" he said. "All I gotta do is haul the body up here and bury him in the gravel pit. Nosy dogs steer clear of the pit on account they cut their paws on them cans." Remembering the tracks he'd made, he got an old broom and tossed it into the truck. The crows were frolicking in the tree tops with noisy zest. He paused to listen, having a good working knowledge of crow talk. Because he had no crops to pilfer he had welcomed the crow colony when it settled in his stand of timber. There was no cause for alarm. The crows were engaged in some zany sport of their own invention.

The old shoes were still draped around his neck. He removed them distastefully and threw them into a far corner of the barn. The Model A, thanks to a recent overhaul, started right off. The motor purred like a jungle cat. Zooker smiled and bobbed his head with pleasure. "Sounds elegant," he said. "Just elegant." He drove down the lane, turned left and parked abreast of his tracks into the corn field.

THE BODY was just as he had left it. He carried the corpse to the outer row of corn, peeked out warily. The road was deserted. He hurried to the rear of the truck and loaded the body. He took the broom and pushed the dead man to the front of the body. The green shirt and brown slacks blended with the

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shadows. He hurried back into the field and backed out sweeping furiously. The results were passably good. He tossed the broom into the interior of the truck.

The urgency of the moment had passed, and he looked at the brown oxfords with vast satisfaction. The color was in jarring contrast to the cuffs of his faded blue jeans. He bent over and rolled down his trouser cuffs. Then he straightened up and just stood there savoring the comfort of the shoes.

The distant hum of tires on the gravel road stirred him into action. He leaped behind the wheel and drove away fast, headed toward the village and the car advancing his way. It was a red jeep. Zooker groaned. "Hell an' hardtack!" he cried. "That there big-mouthed lumber buyer. If he's on vacation at the village hotel, why don't he stop pesterin' me about them danged trees! I'll allow he's a handsome treater at the bar. But I ain't sellin' them trees nohow."

The driver of the advancing car recognized the Model A, honked vigorously and flagged his left arm up and down over the side of the jeep. Zooker stopped on the edge of the road and spat over the door.

The jeep stopped across the way. The driver climbed out with a grunt. He was a short-legged fat man and his bald skull glittered like pink marble in the hot sunlight. He waddled to the side of the Model A.

"Remember me, friend? I'm Hank Abernathy."

Zooker was provoked. Folks treated him as if he had the memory of an ninny. "I recollect," he said testily. "You an' me was drunk together at the tavern last night. Leastwise, I recollect some of it. You sure bought them drinks fast."

Abernathy laughed, a booming laugh. No matter what was said, he laughed at it. "Going to try my hand at early fishing," he explained. "I'm on vacation, friend, but like I said last night, I'm not one to pass up a good thing. You've got a fine stand of timber, friend."

"It ain't for sale," said Zooker.

"Now! Now! Think twice, friend. With prices—"

"I ain't sellin' at no price," Zooker cried. "I ain't sellin' nohow."

"But why not?"

"Them trees is pretty. I admire to look at them trees. Especial at sunset. The place'd be naked without them trees. And where'd them crows go to?"

Abernathy blinked and patted his stomach. Evidently the old man's sales resistance had taken an angle not covered by manuals on merchandising, for the lumber buyer was nonplussed. He rallied, said, "You could move."

"And leave home?" asked Zooker incredulously.

Hank Abernathy played his trump card. He reached in his hip pocket and pulled out a fifth of high-priced rye. The old man's mouth watered so violently he had to wipe his lips with the back of his hand. The butterflies began to fly around in his stomach and his throat burned.

"Got a chore in town," he admitted unhappily, thinking of the corpse in back.

"Tell you what, friend. It's going to be too hot to fish. I'll run up to your place and sit outside your trailer. You come back and we'll kill the bottle over a bull session."

Before Zooker could collect his wits, the fat man waddled back to his jeep and climbed aboard. He waved a cheery good-bye and drove away.

"Hell an' hardtack!" the old man groaned. "I can't bury the man in the gravel pit with that fat fool hangin' around."

There was nothing to do but drive to the village. Thanks to Abernathy's generosity the night before, Zooker had a dollar twenty in his jeans. Trouble was, the tavern didn't open until eleven. The pesky crows! If they hadn't awakened him, he could have slept until noon and not have a dead man to worry about.

There was a concrete watering trough in the center of the village square. Zooker parked beside it and climbed out. The water was cold. He scooped two handfuls to his feverish face. The shock set his teeth on edge. A drink. He needed a drink. Golly Ned, how he needed a drink.

He climbed back into the car. There was a thousand-to-one chance that one of the drinking villagers had left a few drops in a bottle put out for collection. The old man had no set schedule. House-

holders simply placed their trash by the garage and Zooker picked it up when he saw fit and charged what he thought the person would pay without protest. Because of his thirst, he usually saw fit every day.

There had been a beer party at his first stop. The results were zero. Mrs. Blair was one of those tidy housewives who washed all containers after they were emptied, and the old man hated her for it. He carried the empty beers cans to the truck and threw them in back. The dead man! He kept forgetting the dead man. The events at daybreak, performed when he was drunk with sleep and whiskey, now possessed a dreamlike, chimerical quality. But the shoes were real. He pranced up and down on them. "Elegant!" he said. "They sure are elegant."

He was driving past Steadman's when he braked to an abrupt stop. They were the richest people in town and spending the summer in Europe. They were a youngish couple, affable and gay, and entertained lavishly. Hazel Steadman had been sweet about leaving a hearty nip of liquor in every bottle she threw out. Zooker missed them sorely.

CHAPTER TWO

Meat for the Freezer

THE TWO-STORY red-brick house was situated at the rear of a deep lot. An untrimmed ten-foot hedge boxed the entire estate, and the entrance to the drive was marked by two concrete posts with hurricane lamps on top. The Steadmans had been big-city people originally and cherished privacy.

Zooker was tempted. If the Steadmans had been home, they would have gladly given him a drink when they saw his pitiful condition. He stuck his head out over the door and looked up and down the tree-lined street. It was far too early for anyone to be astir. The stores of the village conformed to the hours of the vacationers at the cottage colony and didn't open until ten. There was no sound save the whisper of wind in the trees and a dog barking in the distance.

The old man squinted his eyes and

looked at the red-brick house. He laid the foundation of a tidy rationalization. "Do I see a window open?" he muttered. "Danged if I don't. It's my Christian duty to investigate. Why, I might even flush out a robber."

He twisted the wheel and drove between the posts. The drive terminated between the back porch of the house and the four-car garage. Zooker switched off the motor and got a six-inch wrecking bar from under the front seat. There were no windows open. "A smart robber would close the window after he broke in," the old man said. What if Bob Yates, the township police chief and one-man force, should appear? Zooker said, "Seen a suspicious character lurkin' back here. This here crowbar is a handy weapon." He nodded. It made a fine story.

The window above the kitchen sink wasn't fully latched. It gave easily beneath the pressure of the wrecking bar. The old man climbed into the stuffy kitchen. He felt that his position was now more secure. "Seen a suspicious character in back," he said, rehearsing the speech, just in case. "Seen this here window open an' come in to investigate." It sounded good. After all, Zooker had a reputation for scrupulous honesty in all things non-alcoholic.

It occurred to the old man that he was now justified in searching the house. He'd been there before doing odd chores but had never been on the second floor. Could there be truth in the rumor that the Steadmans had three bathrooms? He scoffed at the notion, then went upstairs to prove his point. There were three baths! Staggered, Zooker tugged his beard. "Why?" he mumbled. "Why?"

The bath off the master bedroom was done in black-and-tan tile. The mirror of the medicine cabinet was big and clear. The old man examined his reflection. His great crest of snow-white hair, of which he was vain, was in disarray. He patted his pockets. No comb. He opened the medicine cabinet. It was filled with bottles, tubes and jars. No comb.

He was about to close the mirrored door when he spotted the big bottle of mouthwash. For some strange reason, the fine print at the bottom of the label leaped out at him. It was a modest announce-

ment that the alcoholic content was twenty-five percent by volume. "Why," he marveled, "that's a mite better'n wine, an' I get drunk as a goat on wine."

He sampled the mouthwash. It tasted like a hospital smelled, and he made a wry face. Then there was a tiny explosion of heat at the pit of his stomach. He emptied the big bottle in three gulps. A sparkle came to his grey eyes and his leathery cheeks ruddied. The amber-colored shaving lotion was in a fancy bottle and carried a 40% jolt. It was veritable firewater that left him gasping and gagging and snorting for air. His eyes watered and his throat blistered. "Elegant," he croaked. "Elegant."

The drinks kicked up the carry-over from the night before and he felt handsome. The Steadmans had a liquor cabinet in the basement, as he knew from carrying trash up from there. He walked downstairs, the thick crepe soles and the carpeting on the steps giving him a balloon-like buoyancy. Luckily, the wooden stairs to the basement had a hand rail.

The cabinet was bare! The effects of the mouthwash and shaving lotion enabled the old man to accept the disappointment with fortitude. He glanced around. Suddenly he stiffened and his eyes slitted. He was staring at the latest addition to the imposing array of home appliances Asa Steadman was always getting his wife: a home freezer. It was the talk of the town. It would hold over seven hundred pounds, and the Steadmans had made arrangements to buy a hog and a half of beef during the fall butchering. It was a beautiful white cabinet with two lids, one easily twice the size of the other. The accessories, metal partitions and baskets, were piled on a table nearby. Zooker opened the big lid. Empty! He stuck a hand down into the spacious storage space. Warm! But he saw that the cord was plugged into a wall outlet.

"Why, they'd turn off their juice," he said. "An' they ain't due back for a month."

THE FUSE BOX and circuit breaker were in a corner of the basement. The old man walked over there with a slight weave and stagger. The lever was down, so he flipped it up. He hurried back to the

big freezer. It was making a satisfactory hum.

As soon as he got outside, hot sunlight smote him mightily, and he went about his grisly chore in a trancelike stupor. Afterward, with the body in the freezer and the kitchen window closed, Zooker sat in the car, breathing hard. He had the creepy feeling that there had been no corpse, no trouble, and that he was imagining it all.

He turned the car around and drove out into the deserted street. There was no sound except the dog barking in the distance, excitedly now. Zooker nodded. "McCommon's basset, I bet," he said. "He's treed a cat." The car was headed toward the business district. The old man felt light-headed and giddy, and the street elongated fantastically, as if he were looking through the wrong end of a telescope. He angled right and the tires scuffed the curbing. He switched off the motor. "I'm drunk!" he marveled. He curled upon the seat with an ease born of long practice. He began to snore softly, and the barber-shop aroma carried half a block.

The wail of the siren jerked him awake. He sat up groggily. Noon. It was noon. Then it wasn't noon. The sound of the siren rose and fell, rose and fell, whereas at noon it climbed to a shrill crescendo then faded away. Zooker became electrically alert. A fire! Golly Ned, a fire! He trembled with excitement. The fire truck was manned by workers in nearby stores and the truck took off as soon as a full crew was aboard. But if you got there in time and there was room, you could hop a free ride. The old man loved to ride the fire truck. Fires were exciting.

He had to park half a block from the town hall. He got out and ran with surprising speed for a man in his early seventies. The crepe soles gave him a solid purchase on the sidewalk and he fairly flew. Zooker dashed into the garage. Some twenty men stood around the fire truck and more arrived every second. Bob Yates stood on the little platform in back of the driver's seat. His uniform was spotless. He wore blue trousers, a dark grey shirt, a visored hat, and his Sam Brown belt supported a holstered Police Positive. There was no fire. But there was some sort of an emergency.

Bob Yates was a good boy. He was twenty-nine, an orphan, and he had a burning ambition to be a F.B.I. agent. He had his future blueprinted. He'd been a city cop, was now a township police chief, and he had filed his application with the state police. Experience with the state police and courses at their schools would qualify him for his heart's desire—the F.B.I. He worked dreary hours for small pay, lived in the cell above the garage to economize, and spent his leisure hours in the adjoining office studying police science. He was firm without throwing his weight around, liked dogs and kids, was tolerant of human weaknesses, but gave known criminals a rough time.

The garage filled to overflowing, and men stood on the sidewalk. Bob studied his little book. Finally he reached over and blew the horn of the fire truck. The men became silent and expectant.

"Men," said Bob Yates, "a cottager is missing. He didn't come home last night. It's after eleven and his wife hasn't heard from him."

Somebody out on the sidewalk called, "Ned Jessop didn't show up for three days last month."

There was a chorus of laughs, and Zooker cackled along with the rest of the men. It was a shocking morsel of gossip. Ned had driven a prize steer to the city and sold it for a whopping price. He'd gone into a bar to look at a television receiver and had returned home penniless three days later. Nell Jessop hadn't shown her face in the village since.

"You've got a point there," said Bob when the room quieted. "This is different. This man, his name is Gerald Krill, owns

three night clubs back home. He had a long-distance phone call to make at nine this morning. If he didn't make the call, he stood to lose ten thousand dollars."

There was shocked silence. Bob Yates paused to let the statement sink in, then hurled his verbal bombshell. "Mrs. Krill is so worried," he said, "that she has offered a thousand dollars to the person who finds her husband."

The garage filled with the babble of excited voices and several men began to edge toward the street.

"Hold it!" Bob called. "Don't go off half-cocked. I want to ask a few questions. And you'll have to have a description of Gerald Krill first."

ZOOKER stood with mouth agape. The reward money didn't move him one way or another. The few times in his life he had possessed any considerable amount of money, he had known unhappiness and heartache. He lived under the homy philosophy that true happiness came by being content with what you had. What dismayed him was the fact that thanks to the reward money his friends and neighbors would waste time and energy in a wild-goose chase. But how to stop it?

He became aware that someone was nudging him and saying, "Wake up, Zook!"

The old man snapped out of his reverie to find everyone watching him. Bob Yates was expectant, as if awaiting an answer. The old man said, "I wasn't payin' no heed."

Bob said, "Agnes said she saw your truck parked at the water trough right after sunup."



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Agnes was the short-order cook at the diner, and the window above her stove faced the public square. For the old man to be ramming around at odd hours wasn't unusual, so he offered no explanation, merely said, "Yep."

"Did you see anybody?" Bob asked.

"The lumber feller," Zooker admitted. Then the inspiration blossomed in his brain full grown and straining at the leash. Fate had given him an out on a silver platter. He lied glibly, said, "An' a girl in a big car picked a man up at the feed store. He was settin' on the bench outside. A red-haired girl in a big black car a block long. It had glass all around."

There was an expectant hush, and the silence was so complete that they could hear McCommon's basset hound bugling in the distance.

Bob Yates was tense. If the man picked up was Gerald Krill, he would be spared a lot of fuss and fury. Because Zooker's memory was notoriously faulty, he urged. "Think hard now, Zook! Take your time! What did the man look like?"

It was the jackpot question. The old man had become a person of importance. The men watching him were grave and solemn, where ordinarily they eyed him with either secret contempt or vast amusement. It was Zooker's moment of glory, and he knew it. He frowned fiercely, stared at the ceiling, then gave his beard a hard tug as if to jar his memory.

"Littlelike," he finally said.

Bob Yates's eyes displayed a quick glint of triumph, then his face went deadpan. He asked, "What was he wearing?"

Zooker decided to inject a note of humor. "Clothes," he said, then chortled. No one was amused, and he sobered instantly. "Why," he said, "he had on a green shirt and brown pants. They was shiny all over."

Bob Yates cried, "That's him, Zook! That's the man. What did the girl look like?"

"A redhead," said the old man. "She wore"—he hesitated a moment seeking desperately for another color, failed—"wore a red dress."

"What did she look like?"

"A looker!" cried the old man. "Man an' boy, a real looker. Like one of them girls in them beer posters."

There had been the bright promise of excitement, of a treasure hunt for a man worth a thousand dollars, an excuse to abandon the work-day routine, and the men were downcast and fretful. They remained, hoping Bob Yates might prove Zooker a liar or urge them to take up the search anyway.

Bob Yates sensed their misgivings, said, "That's all, men. Mrs. Krill gave me the description. I didn't tell a soul, nor did she."

Hopes spiked, the men turned and began to leave the garage. Yates hopped down and grabbed Zooker's right elbow. He said, "Go up to the office, Zook."

The old man felt trapped. "What for?" he asked. "I ain't feeling good."

"Go up!" Bob ordered. "Mrs. Krill's outside in her car. I'll bring her up. She'll want to talk to you, naturally."

Stricken, Zooker stood as if his shoes were glued to the floor. The shoes! The shoes! The woman would spot them instantly. The crowd had left and Bob Yates went out on the sidewalk where a farmer stopped him. There was a yellow convertible parked across the street. The woman behind the wheel was a striking brunette. Her black hair was done up in thick braids that crisscrossed the back of her head. Her oval face was sunburned to an oily bronze sheen, and her thick-lipped mouth was wetly red. The white jacket she wore highlighted her sultry good looks. She watched Bob Yates with angry brown eyes.

The old man found the power to move. Eyes frantic, he looked around for concealment, there being no rear exit. The fire truck! He ran around it back of it, dropped to hands and knees, then bellied down and wormed his way under the truck. He stopped when his head was under the crankcase of the motor.

Bob Yates was helping the woman out of the convertible. She wore white shorts and, oddly, high-heeled red slippers. Her tawny legs rated the front row of any chorus. The couple entered the garage. The woman's voice was edged with suppressed fury. "I don't care what that crazy rumpot said," she was saying. "Gerry Krill never cheated on me in his life. That nutty sot's a damn liar, and you can tell it around that the thousand dollars

reward money I offered still stands.”

“But he identified your husband,” Bob replied. “It could be business. Meeting a girl at the crack of dawn doesn’t sound like a romantic rendezvous.”

She didn’t reply. They walked to the spiral staircase at the rear of the garage, the woman’s high heels making a rhythmic click-click. Zooker pushed himself forward so that his head and shoulders stuck out under the front bumper. He placed his palms on the floor beside his armpits.

Their footsteps mounted the metal steps. As soon as Zooker heard the boom of heels on the wood floor above, he scrambled out from under the truck. He strolled across the street, but as soon as he was in the narrow space between the bakery and the appliance store, he sprinted into the back yard, circled the Methodist Church, and came out on a side street that joined the gravel road. He hoped against hope that Bob Yates would head for the tavern, then spot the Model A and await him there.

There was a flash of red far ahead. The old man groaned as Abernathy and his red jeep appeared. The fat man came around in a U-turn and stopped. “What’s up, friend?” he asked anxiously “Took a nap on your lawn. The siren woke me up. What’s up?”

“A danged fool got hisself lost,” Zooker explained. The sudden idea set his tongue to wagging in a hasty lie. “Made me late for a date, that dratted siren. I’d be mighty obliged if you’d run me to the creamery. It’s at the beginning of the gravel road. Back aways beside a creek. About three blocks from here.”

“Hop in, friend!” urged Abernathy cheerfully, patting the seat beside him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Widow in Green

ZOOKER hesitated. If he sat in front, the brown shoes would stand out like bench marks. He solved the problem by going to the back of the jeep, grabbing the spare tire, and vaulting over the rear seat with the agility of a man forty years younger. He sat on the left side of the seat and shoved his feet behind the star-

ted Abernathy. “Like it here,” said the old man. “Lots of air.”

The fat man laughed booming. “You can say that again, friend.”

As they drove away, Zooker heard the bottle roll around on the floor. His mouth watered and his throat began to burn. They reached the creamery drive in no time at all, and Hank Abernathy started to turn in.

“Hold it!” Zooker cried.

Abernathy stopped the jeep, cried jovially, “End of the line!”

The old man got out over the tailgate and went around to the right side of the car. He leaned against the windshield and stared at the uncorked bottle beside the gear box like a setter freezing on a covey of quail.

Zooker said pointedly, “Don’t reckon it’d spoil the view if you was to take a few prime trees here an’ there. Got a chore. Meet you at the barn in an hour or so.”

It was a frontal assault launched for possession of the bottle, and Abernathy was fighting a rear-guard action. “Why, could be done that way, friend.”

Said Zooker darkly, “I ain’t too keen on sellin’ even one prime tree.”

Abernathy had been backed into a cul-de-sac. If he didn’t surrender the bottle, the deal was spiked then and there. If he gave the old man the whiskey, they were right back on the merry-go-round. He picked up the bottle and handed it to Zooker. Then Abernathy perked up as he saw a way to rebait the trap. “Friend,” he said, “you’ll get two bottles like that when we sew up the tree deal.”

Two bottles in the future didn’t interest Zooker in the slightest. “Thank you kindly,” he said.

Abernathy waved and drove away toward the cottage colony. A yellow convertible flashed past the old man, overtook and passed the jeep. Mrs. Krill drove alone and handled the car with reckless fury.

Fearing that she might have seen him and come back, Zooker hurried away from the road, sneaked past the creamery, and stopped in a secluded clearing. He sampled the bottle. It was good stuff, mighty good stuff. He said, “The creek fetches around in back of the gravel pit. I best go home

this-away. It's twice as far, but that's a mean-tempered female in that car."

Because of trout fishermen, Zooker flanked the creek, staying a good hundred feet from the edge of the water. The richly watered lowlands were a profusion of bushes and ankle-deep crab grass. The terrain aided concealment but made for slow going. Zooker fueled his progress with sparing pokes from the bottle.

It took him an hour and eighteen fluid ounces of whisky to reach the gravel pit. His personality had split down the middle; one half was drunk, the other half sober. He walked with a weave, lurch and stagger. But his memory was razor sharp, and his misdeeds were coming back to haunt him, and remorse and regret shadowed his conscience.

He had to crawl up the slope of the gravel pit on hands and knees to reach the rear door of the barn. Once inside, he steadied somewhat and could stand solidly. The barn was cool and dark, quietly soothing. The feverish hotness left his body and his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. The sound of a rat in the hay-loft was soft and friendly.

"Somebody stole my car!" he whispered, then chuckled when he remembered that he had left it in town.

The double doors were open. He went to the front of the barn and peered out at the level area where he generally turned the car around so he could back into the garage.

The hair at the nape of his neck stiffened.

The tire track in soft dirt was sharp and clear—a broad V. Heart hammering, he remembered the tire imprint on the dead man's chest. A broad V. He looked at the ground again. The prints were identical.

He backed into the gloom of the barn. His flesh crawled and goosepimpled. "That there kill-car was here," he whispered. "The people who kilt that man was here looking for me."

The terrifying truth struck like a bolt of lightning, paralyzing every muscle in his body and robbing him of the power to move, to think, to feel. His teeth chattered. "No!" he finally croaked. "No! Please, God, no!" He took a drink, and the neck of the bottle beat a glass tattoo

against his teeth as fear took hold.

The tire with the broad V tread was his own!

HE LOOKED at the wall to make sure. The tire hanging from a rusty nail was worn smooth. It came to him, slowly and sickeningly. The V tire was army surplus. He'd bought it at a sale. A gas station attendant had put it on his front right wheel where it had been badly needed. It had been a week ago. A week was a long time to think back.

He moved forward a few steps and looked at the turn-about area. There was no mistake. He saw the V print at several spots. The smooth right rear tire had erased the tracks except where he had turned around.

He closed his eyes and tried to make his reeling mind backtrack over the past twenty-four hours, tried to remember. His head ached, and the pain was in bright flashes. He recalled joshing the new bartender Al Fenmeyer about keeping company with a diner waitress. He remembered Abernathy and his drink-buying. He remembered the crows and the pearl-grey velvet of the dawn. What had happened in between? There was nothing there but a blank wall, a black void.

He had killed a man! And unknowingly he had concealed the evidence of his crime.

Zooker opened his eyes.

The widow wore green. She wore jade-green slacks and a pea-green suede jacket. The jacket hung open. A green bra circled her torso and bared a bronzed midriff. Her dark eyes were dead. She held the .25 automatic like a veteran, pressed steadily against her right hip bone. The bra rose and fell with her labored breathing.

Zooker was suddenly calm and tranquil. He looked at the blue-black muzzle of the pistol. "Ma'am," he said, "a man my age walks with death every day."

His composure disturbed her, and she ran the tip of her tongue over the oval circuit of her parted lips. "Okay," she called loud and clear. "Okay."

The rear door creaked on rusty hinges. The old man twisted his head around. Hank Abernathy came in from the back

where he'd gone to cut off Zooker's escape. His round face was pale and sweaty. The right corner of his mouth twitched. He had the shakes, bad.

"Inez!" he said. "Look! I think I heard—"

"Shut up! Shut up, you lily-livered slob!" she said, her voice a whiplash. "As soon as you saw the body was gone, you should have known this old fool had it in his truck. Why didn't you follow him? Oh, no, you were too yellow. You had to run to me. You haven't the guts of a worm."

"Inez!" he whined.

"Shut up!" she snapped, glared at Zooker and said, "I suppose you're beginning to see the light?"

It was like the mystery books he had read. Once you knew the solution, you could thumb back and the clues stuck out like red lights.

"The fat man ain't no lumber buyer." he said. "He got me drunk a-purpose. He brung me home. He took my car an run over the man. He was to go fishin' early an' find the body before I was astir. I figger the man was dead when he was run over."

"He was dead," she admitted. "The back of his head was bashed in with the rounded end of a wooden mallet. We put a piece of leather over the mallet and banged your right front fender. They'll find blood and hairs on the fender."

"Who'd think pesky crows could be the instrument of the good Lord," he said, marveling.

"Don't preach!" she said. "We've had a lousy run of luck. But we've got an out. I want that hundred thousand insurance

money right away quick. I don't want to sweat out seven years waiting for it. I dreamed it up. I saw you driving the truck with the V-tread tire. You were stinking drunk. It rang a bell. I phoned Hank. I got the score on you. You were a natural for the fall guy. You still are."

Said Abernathy eagerly, "It's like it really happened, see! You killed a man driving while drunk. You lost your head and hid the body."

Zooker took a drink. His hand was steady, and the fact pleased him. He looked at the woman blandly. "Where?" he asked. "Where'd I hide the body at?"

"We'll sweat it out of you," she promised. "We can hurt like hell and not leave a mark."

Zooker said, "Why, it's plain you'll kill me after I tell where it's hid. The fat man will probably say I told him before I died." The old man sighed. He was getting glib at lying. "Why, ma'am, I got me a weak heart. It's apt to stop any time. You don't figger me right. I'm a stubborn man an' I ain't 'fraid to die. Why, a little hurt would be apt to kill me quick."

THE WORRY was in her eyes, deep and shadowy, and she tucked her lower lip under her upper teeth. She said plaintively, "Damn you, Hank, all you had to do was turn around and follow his truck." The teeth marks on her lower lip oozed blood.

The old man was magnificent. He straightened up ramrod stiff and straight, the picture of unruffled composure. He tucked the bottle under his left armpit. He looked at Inez Krill sorrowfully. She

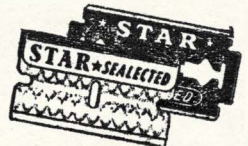
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was beginning to crack. Her eyes were tear brimmed, yet wild, and her subdued giggling was chilling.

Zooker said, "Kindly step aside, ma'am! If you aim to kill me, let it be out in the sun. When you're old an' got no kin, like me, ma'am, death is a welcome thing."

He marched out with his shoulders back and his head high. His step wavered a moment when he saw Bob Yates pressed against the side of the barn peering through a crack with his gun on the ready. Bob waved him the go-ahead, and he marched on.

He stopped when Abernathy screamed. "No!" he screamed. "No!"

The three close-spaced shots were sharp and flat, like the yap-yap-yap of an excited French poodle. The fourth shot was muffled.

The old man turned around. Bob Yates stood in the doorway. He holstered his unfired gun and walked down to Zooker, said, "Murder, suicide. It's best that way." His voice was firm but the corners of his mouth were white.

"Trailed me along the creek, huh?" Zooker said.

"No. Leaving the car in town fooled me. I thought you were lying at the fire house. A good-looking redhead would hardly risk wearing such an unflattering color as red. I was suspicious of Mrs. Krill. She was too positive that you were lying."

"You trailed her?"

Yates shifted uncomfortably. "No. I was on my way to see her. I was driving by when your crows set up a racket. I knew someone was trespassing. I sneaked in as the two of them came out of your trailer."

Zooker had a spit, took a drink. "It sure was clever," he said. "If you'd have seen that corpse an' the tire mark, it'd have been like the dead man sat up and told you who kilt him. Now, ain't that somethin'—the talkin' corpse! I'd a sure got the hot seat."

Yates admitted, "Zook, I'm flying in circles. I can't think."

Emotional shock had sharpened the old man's senses, and his mental processes were on the upsurge. "Why, son," he

said, "it's plain as if it was writ down. I knowed that fat man was a phony. I knowed he was gettin' me drunk a purpose. So I played possum. I seen them run over the dead man. But I couldn't prove it. So you said . . ."

"Wait a minute!"

" . . . that if I was to hide the body, they'd have to show their hand. It sure worked slick, didn't it, son? We sure outsmarted them city folks! By the way, the dead man is in Steadman's freeze box."

"Wait, Zook! We can't—"

"Hush up, boy! I figger this'll make the big-town papers. Hick cop outwits killers, or some such nonsense. Them state police big shots can read." Zooker sighed, looked at Yates reproachfully. "Guess I ought to be jugged for moving a body like I did, if you was to be legal-like."

"Technically—"

"I'm a free-born man, son," said the old man fiercely. "So I tell it around like I said. I got a big mouth, boy. You got nothin' to do but look modest. If you gotta talk, just change the subject. Now, that corpse ain't got on no shoes. You gotta gimme time to think of a likely story for stealin' a dead man's shoes. I'd admire to keep them, I sure would. They're elegant, simply elegant. I got a notion to get me a lawyer an' sue that dead woman for a thousand dollars. An' it seems to me that insurance company ought to be plumb grateful."

Bob Yates wore a dazed and befuddled look on his face.

Zooker was feeling handsome again. He drained the bottle in a long gurgling gulp, flipped it away, then started down the lane.

"Hey!" Bob called. "Where you going?"

"Why, son, I don't think Joe Hoskins was to mind if I snitched a few ears o' corn for them blessed crows."

He stepped out smartly, and his white hair swept back like charging battle flags. There should have been a band, loud and brassy, and a cannon booming a salute. He didn't do badly. An aerial convoy rose out of the tree tops in a black cloud, and the crows cawed like crazy.

THE END



Go back, his mind told him. Don't leave her just lying out here in the wet, black night!

By **TALMAGE POWELL**

MIDNIGHT PICK-UP

Les was so weary that when the blonde pick-up cultivated a hole in her pretty head, even the hot seat looked good!

THE NIGHT was enough to have the Florida Chamber of Commerce biting its nails, Les Bennett thought. He sat behind the wheel of his coupé, a car of rather ancient vintage that needed a mechanic's hand here and there, and squinted out into the black, wet night. He was tired and displeased. His nerves were frayed from the long drive, and Ellen stayed nostalgically in his mind.

A hard wind was bearing out of the south, causing the sheeting rain to smash

the windshield in heavy gusts. The coupé's tired, yellow lights threw only a little of the road ahead into visibility. Other than that, Les could see nothing. But he could sense the vast, flat, desolate acres stretching away on either side of the road.

A sign flashed past: **CRISPIN**, popu— The sign was gone in the night before Les could see how many souls Crispin was blessed with, but he didn't particularly care. He slowed as the narrow, wet-slick, swaybacked macadam road widened into

a village street. This would be Crispin.

Crispin didn't look like a hell of a lot. Les cruised past a dark filling station, a few deserted, dark, wooden-frame stores. Three or four street lights shone dimly, and that, Les thought wryly, was good. Without the lonely-looking street lights, he might have taken Crispin for one of those deserted ghost towns the first boom had produced here and there in Florida.

Then ahead he saw a small cement block building standing on a wide parking lot. The building was lighted behind its front windows, and near the curb hung a small neon that said: EATS.

A miracle, no less, Les decided. He turned the coupé in the parking lot, stopped it around the side of the building, up close. He ducked out, slammed the car door and clung to the shelter of the eaves as he hurried around the corner and inside the front door.

THE PLACE looked okay, a small, white lunchroom with a long row of booths, a gleaming white counter with stools and a lot of stainless-steel equipment behind the counter. A fat man in a white counterman's cap was behind the cash register on a stool, almost sound asleep.

The fat man opened one vast eye at the sound of Les' entry, wiped his nose with his forefinger and came awake with sounds that reminded Les faintly of a snuffling hound dog sick with distemper.

"What'll it be, friend? We got coffee, soft drinks, milk, short orders, cakes, pies, doughnuts. Take a load offa your feet. A bad night to be out."

The hound seemed to be recovering from its attack of distemper. Les sat down. The counterman looked bright and happy. He must have been lonely. He will very probably bend my ear, Les thought, now that he's got somebody to talk to. Les was in no mood to have his ear bent; he was more inclined to bend somebody's nose, anybody's nose, just to get a little of the tension and pain out of him. But the subject of nose-bending reminded him of Ellen. . . . "I know. Les—you were tight. But going to the party was your idea. And Mr. Clevenger was tight, too. He was only funning. I could have handled him. Did you just have to

break the party up. . . ? If it was just this one thing—but years of . . . Oh, why talk!"

"Coffee," Les said, sitting down at the counter.

The fat man drew coffee from the shining steel urn. "Kind of slow tonight. Usually have a few passing tourists drop in, some truckers. Don't make much staying open nights in a village like Crispin, but don't lose nothing, either, so the boss figures it good business."

"Does he?" Les stirred the coffee.

"You going far, mister?"

"Miami."

"Nice town."

"Is it?" Les said.

"In business there?"

"No, I'm going down to raise hell, while I let a lawyer divorce me from my wife."

The counterman's eyes danced; he licked his chops over this choice bit of conversation. Most men were usually eager to talk such things out of their systems. "I . . ." The counterman stopped, mouth open, as he saw the way Les was looking at him. "Bad night," the counterman said lamely. He swiped at the spotless counter with a rag and waddled down the duckboard to his stool where he retired with his full lips pouting. A lousy, wet, lonely night, and the one customer who might relieve the boredom for a few minutes . . .

A girl came in. She entered almost like a shadow, a slip of a girl with a few wisps of blonde hair showing around the damp kerchief on her head. She was wearing a trenchcoat belted tight about her small waist and carried a rather expensive small suitcase of calfskin. She sat down on the first stool, bit her lips and studied Les.

He paid her no attention. He caught a glimpse of himself in the long, narrow mirror behind the counter. Wide, tweedy shoulders. Utterly mad cravat tied in a Windsor knot. Lean, honest, boyish face. Sandy hair close-cropped, like a college boy's. "Les, I'm afraid you'll never get out of the Fraternity-Brother stage . . ." There was, however, a little grey at the temples. Ellen must have noticed it long ago, Les thought. She must have noticed the grey and compared it to his actions.

His jaw muscles knotted. He couldn't

look at the gun in the mirror any longer. Here you are, you sap, in the bottom of a black, wet night, going to cut the last string binding her to you. You've kicked a lot of good opportunities in the face because you had pride. You played and danced and laughed and she took it all like a trouper. Like the real article. You excused it when she had to go out and work. Yeah, you even made eyes at other women now and then. What do you see in that mirror, son? Remember the job with Mulligan Oil? You could have been their Southern representative. But he irked you, he galled, and when he cussed the hell out of you for a damn fool mistake, you told old man Mulligan where to take his oil company.

What could you expect her to do after that? There wasn't any money. You'd overreached yourself with the expensive apartment, and when you had to move out, you were both hurt. She went to her mother's until you could get another place, and you let her go. After that, you didn't see her much. Remember the final time you saw her? *"No, Les, don't try to talk me out of it. . . . No, I don't love Gustave Henlein the way I loved you, once. . . . But what is this treadmill I'm living, Les. . . ? Years since I've been alive, really alive. . . . It's better to break it off this way, for always, sharp and clean. . . . If only once you'd finish something you started, really play for keeps. . . ."*

Les sensed a movement beside him. He looked up. The blonde girl who'd entered was standing near his stool. She flushed and cleared her throat and said, "Pardon me—but is that your car on the lot outside?"

Les nodded.

"Do you happen to be going south?"

He nodded again, studying the girl's face. She was delicate and lovely. She was no tramp. He sensed this was not a common pickup, sensed that she wanted him to know that desperately. He felt a rush of warmth toward her, because there was pain in her eyes, stamped on her brow. Pain. That made them alike under the skin.

"My name is Winnie Holcomb," she said. "If you're going south, you must be heading cross-country, to hit Highway 1 north of Palm Beach. If you'd let me ride as far as Palm Beach, where I can get a bus. . . . You see, I missed the last bus tonight to pass through the village. There isn't another until morning—and Crispin isn't even on a railroad. So I—I would like to move on. There's no place I can wait in the rain. I saw your car, wondered if . . ." It was hard for her; she looked as if she regretted her impulsive action.

"Sure," Les said. "I'd be glad to give you a lift to Palm Beach."

"Well, I—I'll wait out in your car, if you don't mind."

"As you like."


"Don't hurry," she said. "Don't go to any extra bother on my account, please." She practically fled the place.

LES gave the counterman the eye. "How quick can I get a bacon and egg sandwich—don't want to keep the lady waiting too long."

The counterman waddled down to the grill, turned it up a notch and laid a strip of bacon on it.

Let George
Do It?
He's Already
Done It!

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn.
George Ploetz, barber shop
owner here, has not switched
to Calvert—he's always bought
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"You gonna take her with you, mister?"

"Why not?"

"She's Winnie Holcombe. Anthony Chalmers Holcombe's wife."

Les got that old jut to his jaw. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Nothing, mister—nothing at all! This Anthony Chalmers Holcombe is a young pup with too much money and not enough sense. His family owned practically the whole county, one of those old families that came in and homesteaded and held on to their land. Now the old man has died, young Anthony owns it. He spends his time water-skiing in Miami, playing the races and making life miserable for his wife. This is the third time she's left him. It always breaks him up. He chases her down, tells her he'll do better, and she weakens and comes back. If you're asking my opinion—"

"I'm not—let's just cook the bacon and egg, shall we?"

The counterman turned, finished making the sandwich and put it in front of Les. Les munched at it. He wouldn't keep the blonde girl waiting out in the coupé too long. But he was in no mood to crawl back under the wheel. He was tired, cramped. He'd swung off, coming downstate, onto the ridge route just for the hell of it. Now he had this stretch of swampland, of desolation, to cross; then Palm Beach, a hotel room. He'd limp into Miami in the asthmatic coupé eventually.

He finished the sandwich, decided to have a cigarette with another coffee. He was pushing his cup back when another customer walked in the lunchroom. It was a man this time. He was tall, built like an athlete, with a V-shaped face. He might have been a handsome man, except for the fact that his cold, grey eyes were slightly crossed.

The counterman said, "Hello, Mr. Odel."

Odel grunted. He gave Les the once-over as Les paused at the register to pay and walked to the door.

Les ducked against the rain. He clung to the wall, went around the building to the parking area and reached the coupé. He opened the door. The seat was empty. The blonde girl, Winnie Holcombe, wasn't in the car.

Les grimaced. He skirted the coupé, looking around the dark lot. He couldn't see much. Except for the light that spilled from the front windows of the lunchroom and the dim glow of the neon on over near the sidewalk, the parking area was totally dark.

He tried to search the deep black, wet shadows with his eyes. She didn't seem to be around.

"Mrs. Holcombe . . ." he said. He got no answer. He slipped in the coupé, wondering if there was an outside entrance to the ladies' room. She certainly had not reentered the lunchroom.

He waited several minutes. With a grunt of exasperation, he got out of the car again.

In the lunchroom, Odel was having coffee. Les said, "When you came in, did you see a blonde woman around my car out there?"

"Nah," Odel grunted, seeming to look at Les and the counterman both at the same time with those eyes of his. "I didn't even see your car."

Les went back out in the driving rain. He was getting dampish. He slammed his weight in the coupé, tapped the horn a couple of times.

She didn't show up. He gave her four or five minutes. Maybe she went back to her husband, he thought. She seemed a little leery of bumming a ride, anyway. Maybe she decided against it.

He started the coupé and pulled the car out on the road. The rain was worse, the wind harder. He skirted a chug-hole that had sunk in the thin paving of the road, where the rain had seeped in and undermined it. A lot of these Florida roads were that way, on roadbeds built up out of the swamps, soft, sandy beds that washed out.

The night was lonelier than ever when Crispin dropped behind. Les settled to the monotony of driving, senses lulled by the click of the windshield wiper. Five or six miles dropped behind. The road curved slightly, and halfway around the gentle bend a big washout leaped into Les's view. A big half moon had settled in the side of the road.

He wasn't driving fast. But when he twisted the wheel so abruptly, the coupé went into a skid on the treacherous

macadam. He spun the wheel back to right the car, and the off-side wheels hit the edge of a chug-hole. The coupé gave a leaping jounce, like a maddened rodeo horse. Les was tossed up against the roof, the wheel almost torn from his hand. The right rear tire exploded with a bang.

Les let the coupé roll to a stop, sat a moment in disgust. He hadn't figured on anything like this; his raincoat was still in his suitcase, back in the trunk compartment. Well, the spare was back there, too, if he remembered rightly. There *was* a spare, wasn't there? For a second he wasn't sure. He hadn't thought about that when he bought the flivver. The two or three flats he'd had, he'd rolled into a filling station and let somebody else fix them.

He grimaced, fumbled in the glove compartment, found the small flashlight. He got out in the wet, wet rain again, walked around the coupé.

THE RAIN hammered down on the road; wind stung the droplets in his face. On either side of the road there was nothing but a sea of wet blackness. He could hear the rain falling on more water out there. He wondered if he were beside a swamp.

With the light like a pitiful firefly in his hand, he grasped the handle of the turtleback, turned it and swung the lid up. The flashlight spilled wan light in the black void of the trunk—and Les Bennett felt cold shivers flow over his body. The sensation started right at the top of his head, ran down him in a rush, leaving his knees weak.

Winnie Holcombe had been riding with him the whole time. He looked at her there in the trunk compartment. She was doubled up, and the light hit her eyes, but she didn't blink. Her eyes were like chips of glass. There was an ugly sunken place in the side of her forehead.

Les heard his teeth chattering. This was fine. This was it. This was for keeps! While she'd been waiting outside someone had walked up to her and killed her, then put her body in the car trunk.

What would he tell them? Les thought numbly. The truth? That was a laugh. He knew what the cops would think about this sort of thing. He knew what tabloid

newspapers labeled it. The counterman had heard her ask him for a lift. The fact that he'd reentered the lunchroom and asked Odel if he'd seen her would cut no ice. The cops would easily dismiss that. They'd say he'd done it because he'd figured to make a play for the girl, figured to make witnesses think he hadn't left Crispin with her.

Odel could have killed her, couldn't he? And sure, most anybody else. But the cops would laugh. Who had been stirring on such a rainy night? Nobody but you, Bennett. Odel? We didn't find Odel with the corpse, did we? How many people a year do you suppose we find with a corpse, Bennett? You killed her and got cold feet and hollered cop, son, thinking we would fall for a fish story.

Les swallowed. He looked at her in the dark trunk and almost hated her. Go away! he wanted to shout. But that would never do. That would mean he was breaking.

Get her out of there. Get rid of her. Whoever put her in there didn't expect her to be found this quick. They figured he'd be in Miami before somebody, maybe a gas station attendant, as he put in gas, noticed the rising smell. . . .

Les was shaking so badly he had to stand yet another moment and get a hard, conscious grip on himself. He touched her, pulled her out of the trunk.

She was light in his arms. He still held the light, in the hand that was under the back of her knees, letting her knees dangle across his arm.

He shuffled over to the edge of the road. He could feel pulse hammering in his temples. He played the weak light ahead of him, started down the wet, rank-smelling roadbank.

Beyond the road, it wasn't swamp. It was a vast stretch of hip-high palmetto, like huge green hands with sharp-pointed fingers, gleaming when the light touched them.

He pushed into the thick vegetation. The palmetto fronds brushed against his thighs, and even wet as they were, they gave out a dry, thirsty rustling.

Water was standing here and there in the spongy earth, and he could feel it seeping into his shoes. The girl was heavier now. And the thought, the damned

crazy thought, was hammering bigger and bigger in his mind: Go back! Don't leave her just lying out here in the wet, black night like this! Go back and nose around a little, Les. For her. For yourself. For keeps. Are you going to let some joker do a trick like this to you and get away with it?

Off down the road he caught a flash out of the corner of his eyes. Headlights. He was a hundred yards away from the road now, but he ducked below the level of the palmetto, waiting for the car to pass.

He could tell by the sound of the motor that the car slowed on the bed, swinging out to avoid his coupé. He waited for long, long seconds, until the last hint of a light had gone and the rain had engulfed the fading sound of the passing car's motor.

CARRYING the girl, he came to a big pine tree. He set her down there, screened in the palmetto, and made his way back to the road.

He was pretty well soaked by now. But a soaking was the least of his worries, and not all of the moisture sticking his shirt to his back was rain.

He threw the light on the spare. It was coated with dust. He thumped it with a tire tool. It had been neglected in the trunk too long. My own sweet way of doing things, he thought. The spare was flat as last year's pancake. The air had long since seeped out. New butyl tubes or a pump would have been insurance against that. He had neither. He was stranded.

He let out a sigh as he crawled back in the coupé. His life was one procession of situations. There was only one difference now: He hadn't dragged Ellen into this one. He wondered what she was doing tonight. If she were dining somewhere safely and comfortably with Gustave Henlein . . .

He lighted a cigarette, needing it so badly his fingers trembled. He finished that one and burned another. He was throwing the second one away when he saw headlights coming toward him through the rain.

He got out of the coupé, began waving his arm at the oncoming car. It looked big, like a Caddy, as it slowed and stopped a few yards ahead of him. He stood

bathed in the headlights. Whoever was driving the car kept the motor turning at slightly faster than idling speed. Suspicious. Reluctant to stop on a deserted road when it was almost midnight. Ready to dash away and leave him if he made a single phony move.

A husky feminine voice came to him from the car. "What is it?"

"Lady, I got big troubles. Ruined a tire in this chug-hole. Spare's no good, and I'm stranded."

The woman in the Caddy was silent. Its motor kept up its steady hum. Les thought of his wet appearance. He said, "I've been trying to fix it, but it seems I'm out of luck. If you could just give me a lift back to Crispin . . ."

"There's no one in Crispin to fix it at this hour."

"But I could telephone, get a service car out from West Palm Beach or Lake Worth."

"They're quite a distance."

"Then maybe I could find a place in Crispin to spend the rest of the night. I don't want to just sit in the coupé!" His jaw was jutting.

He sensed that the woman in the Caddy was studying him, measuring the Joe College appearance, the lean, open, honest, carefree face.

"Are you going to leave me stand here all night?"

She laughed suddenly. It was a warm, deep sound, like Slavic laughter. "No, come on. I'll take you back to Crispin."

He got in the Caddy. He looked at her in the wan dashlight as she pulled the car away with a roar. She sat almost as tall in the seat as he. She had large, impelling hands on the wheel. Her face had prominent bone structure, very beautiful, with full, deep red lips; it was a face framed in hair blacker than the night.

"I'm Les Bennett," he said. "I'm afraid I'm ruining your upholstery."

"Not too badly. You've had quite a wetting; I hope you're immune to colds."

"I am," he said—and sneezed.

She laughed, and barriers fell. "There's a flask in the glove compartment. I think you need it!"

He agreed. Very much. He was still shaking inside, hard. He was still seeing Winnie Holcombe out in the wet night,

screened by the green palmetto. . . .

They rode in silence until they reached the outskirts of Crispin.

"I suppose you'll have to phone from my place," she said. "Of course you could go to the lunchroom in the village—I think there's a public phone there. But there'll probably be a fire in my cottage, and you might as well get some of the chill out of your marrow."

WITHOUT waiting for him to say yes or no, she swung off the highway on a narrow shell-surfaced road. She drove only a short distance before the Caddy's headlights revealed a ranch-style stucco bungalow. She ran the car in the car port, shut off the motor and lights, and he followed as she entered the house through the breezeway.

The living room was large, done in modernistic furniture. In the cream-colored fireplace a small log fire was burning low. The room was dimly lighted by a single lamp beside the big club chair near him.

"The phone?" he said.

She didn't reply. He turned to look at her, and his heart chilled. She had looked mysterious and beautiful. But she wasn't beautiful now. Her face was set in a horrible, frozen solidity, and her eyes glittered. She had her hand in her bag.

"Don't make a move," she said. She took her hand out of the bag. It held a gun, a small automatic.

"I don't get this," he said.

She didn't bother to explain. She lifted her voice and said, "Odel!"

A grunt came from the doorway across the room. Odel moved forward, his head

at an angle, favoring his crossed eyes. "Fancy seeing you again, son. What went wrong, Clarice?"

"Everything! The stupid fool blew a tire and found Winnie in the trunk. I told you it was risky, Odel! He's hidden her out there somewhere. When I drove past, I saw his open car trunk. He could have hidden her anywhere! Think we could find her in all those acres of wilderness—in a night like this?"

"So you brought him back," Odel said. "That's good."

"What else could I do? We've got to make him tell us what he did with Winnie! We've got to patch things up, make the scheme work! We can't fail—we've gone too far for that!"

Gone into murder, Les thought. No, they can't afford to fail, they can't back out now. . . .

He said, "I've got to have a drink."

They let him wobble over to the coffee table where a brandy decanter stood. He poured a stiff one, gulped it. The brandy flowed through him like electricity.

His gaze roved the room, came to a stop on a picture that graced a small table near him. The picture was of a weak-chinned, rather handsome young man with curly blond hair. It was inscribed: "To Clarice, my darling. Anthony."

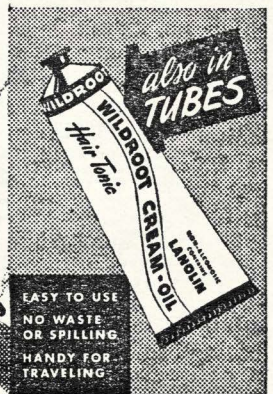
Switches whirred and clicked in Les's brain. "Would that be the mug of Anthony Chalmers Holcombe, weak scion of a rich family, married to Winnie Holcombe, until death did them part?"

"He would have married me if he hadn't met the little tramp!" Clarice said.

"I see. But you still hoped to get the Holcombe heir, the Holcombe money.

NO LUCK? - make a date with

**WILDROOT
CREAM
OIL**



Are you the reason he and Winnie fought? Are you the reason she left him? She'd leave, but he'd always beg her back, wouldn't he? It must have been very trying to you. This waiting and scheming and waiting—and watching her continue to stand between you and the Holcombe money. You knew she was leaving this time. You decided that this was one time she mustn't come back. You followed her, you and Odel. You saw her miss her bus, saw her get in my coupé, and tumbled to the fact that she'd hitched a ride.

"The parking area was dark, deserted. It was a simple matter to go over and speak to her—and suddenly, without warning, strike her down with a gun butt. Then you stuffed her in the turtleback of the coupé. A fall guy made to order. Your own necks would be safe—and Winnie would never be coming back. Anthony Chalmers Holcombe wouldn't get away from you this time. You'd marry all that money, pay Odel off, and you and Odel both would be very happy.

"You were playing it neat and smart. You weren't taking chances. You decided to trail me at a nice, safe distance to make sure I got well on my way to Miami with that corpse in the trunk of the car. It was your car that passed, going east toward highway one. You saw the coupé, the open trunk, knew I'd already found her. That must have given you a jolt. You went on down the highway, turned around when you decided I wasn't starting the coupé, came back toward Crispin and picked me up."

"Stand back, you punk!" Clarice said.

"It's going haywire on you," Les warned, wrenching a grin somewhere out of himself.

"Oh, no, it ain't," Odel snarled, moving across the room. "We're going to make you tell us where you put her body. Then—a wreck. An accident, see? A rainy night, bad road. A smashed coupé. A guy and a hitchhiking dame dead! And don't think I can't make you tell us where you hid her—I'm a very handy gent with the point of a hot knife blade!"

Les felt sweat stinging his forehead, flowing down to sting his eyes. He had to swallow again. This time it was no soap. Nothing could go through that tight thing

he called a throat. He raised the brandy, bent his head to it—and threw it quick and hard in Clarice's face.

She screamed. The gun made a popping sound. Les felt the bullet nip the flesh under his armpit. Then he had the barrel of the gun in his own fingers. It wouldn't fire again because, gripped like that, the automatic wouldn't cock.

He wrung the gun from her fingers, shoved her hard. She stumbled back, tripped and fell.

Les whirled to find Odel looming over him. There was no time for anything but to shift the gun and pull the trigger. He pulled it three times, and Odel took the bullets in the face.

THE SHERIFF'S name was Loudermilk. At dawn the next morning, Les was at the table in Loudermilk's big sprawling farmhouse, partaking of Mrs. Loudermilk's hot biscuits, country-cured ham, eggs, and a white, pasty concoction called hominy grits.

Between bites, Loudermilk explained to his wife, "So Odel was still alive when I got there. Lived just long enough to spill his brains. Looks bad for the girl."

After breakfast the sheriff followed Les outside. "I've sent a man out to fix your car. Hope that scratch under your arm doesn't bother you. I'm sure sorry your stay in our county had to be so unpleasant. I'll drive you out to your car, Mr. Bennett."

The morning was cool, and the coupé ran with new vigor, as if the night's rest had helped it. Les saw the white ribbon of concrete ahead that was Highway 1. He braked for the intersection. He sat a moment, thinking. For keeps. If he could see one thing through, why not others? If he worked hard, proved to her . . .

His heart was hammering as he pulled onto Highway 1 and made his turn.

He wondered what the counterman in the lunchroom would have said about the turn. The counterman certainly would have made a remark, because Les Bennett was going the wrong way. He hadn't turned toward Miami. He had turned north—and the old coupé rolled along like a hungry horse going home.



By NELSON and GEER

THE LETHAL AMATEUR

Professionals occasionally get away with murder, amateurs seldom.

The first that Lakehurst, N. J., knew about this ingenious try was very early one morning in 1922 when a piercing scream attracted passersby to the second-floor apartment of Mrs. William Giberson. They found the good lady in hysterics. Stout cord and a gag lay beside a chair. Bureau drawers in the bedroom had been ransacked, and on the double bed lay Mr. Giberson, shot behind the right ear, apparently with a .38 revolver.

Mrs. Giberson said she'd been awakened by a pair of burglars who bound her to the chair and gagged her, then shot her husband in his sleep, stole his purse and left. When she worked herself loose, she screamed.

The state of the bedroom, the bonds and gag, and the fact that a pair of burglars had been operating in the vicinity, binding and gagging victims who caught them at their piffling, bore out her story.

When she repeated it to astute old Ellis Parker, famed Burlington County detective, he asked just one question: "You were sleeping next the wall and climbed over your husband without waking him?"

"That's right," she replied.

Parker sent out an alarm for the burglars. He



also had Mrs. Giberson watched unobtrusively. His watchers reported that she made frequent trips to a shed in the backyard. When the funeral left the house, Parker hurried to the shed. In the dusty debris he noticed a pile of fresh litter. Beneath it he found a .38 revolver and a packet of love letters signed by a man not Mr. Giberson. Hidden in an overstuffed chair in the house he found Mr. Giberson's purse.

The lethal lady was tried, convicted and sentenced to life.

"She couldn't have climbed over her husband without waking him," Parker said afterwards. "That tipped me off that she shot him. Then she made every mistake in the book. In her excitement she even forgot to make up the bed in the other room where she'd actually slept. The whole thing was phony. These amateurs!"



KILLER-A-YEAR MAN!

CHAPTER ONE

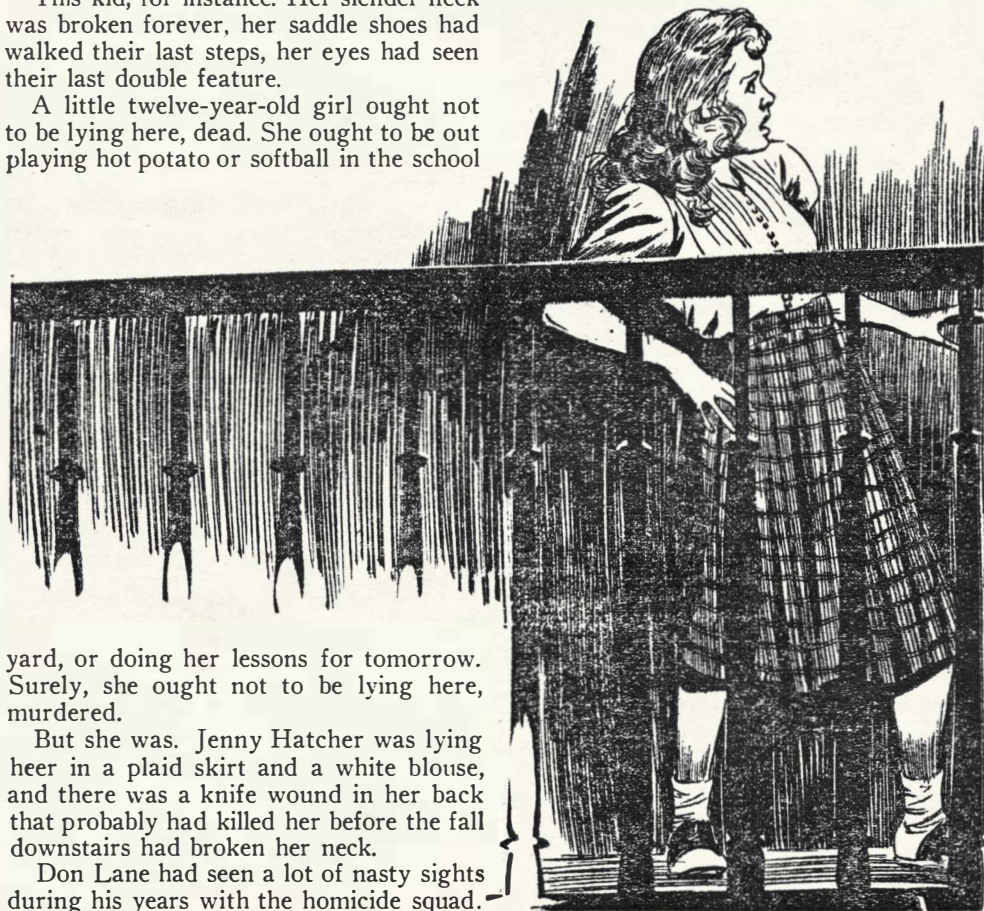
Body on the Staircase

MURDER is like nothing else in the world, thought Don Lane as he gazed at the young girl twisted in a heap at the foot of the rooming-house stairs. A thief can pay back what he's stolen. Almost any kind of crook can make things right again if he really wants to. Except a murderer. There's no reparation for killing, no way a murderer can ease his conscience afterward—if he has a conscience. Dead people stay dead.

This kid, for instance. Her slender neck was broken forever, her saddle shoes had walked their last steps, her eyes had seen their last double feature.

A little twelve-year-old girl ought not to be lying here, dead. She ought to be out playing hot potato or softball in the school

Who had killed Jenny Hatcher? That wasn't the problem. Captain Don Lane knew the answer to that. But between knowledge and proof lay a thousand miles of dusty road—and a woman who'd have to die—as bait for a killer.



yard, or doing her lessons for tomorrow. Surely, she ought not to be lying here, murdered.

But she was. Jenny Hatcher was lying here in a plaid skirt and a white blouse, and there was a knife wound in her back that probably had killed her before the fall downstairs had broken her neck.

Don Lane had seen a lot of nasty sights during his years with the homicide squad.

By DOROTHY DUNN

The woman cried, "For God's sake, Henry—you don't know what you're doing!"



Sights that had left him sick, until he'd washed them away with a beer or two and a good night's sleep. But this was different.

FOR one thing, it was close enough to his own back yard to worry him. Just three blocks up the street, past the school, past the bus line that he used every morning, was that big old-fashioned house that Don had been born in, had eventually inherited from his family—lock, stock and bad plumbing.

His wife wanted a newer place, sure. One with a stainless-steel kitchen and bright, newly painted walls. But with the housing shortage, it was impossible to make a sane move. So the two big Lanes and the one little Lane were waiting it out, consoling themselves with closets as big as most apartments, with pantries, high ceilings, and as many modern touches as Thelma could find in the decorators' magazines.

Having always lived there, Don was rather fond of the old house, but the murder of a child, just three blocks away, made him uncomfortable. He'd rather hole up in a cracker box than take a chance on anything happening to his son.

He was thinking of that as he looked at Jenny Hatcher. He was thinking of something else, too. She was more than a warning that the neighborhood wasn't good. She was the little girl he had met several months ago when Bobby had strayed from the yard and had headed for greener pastures.

He could still see the two of them coming up the street toward him, Bobby whimpering over a freshly skinned knee, between licks on a violently purple popsicle.

Jenny had been grown up at that moment.

"I hope it's all right for him to eat that. I had to promise him something to get him as far as the drugstore. I think he knows where he lives, but he wouldn't tell until I promised to buy him a popsicle."

Don had smiled at her earnestness, had thought her maternal attitude charming. Bobby had both arms around Don's leg by then, the popsicle resting on the crease of his trousers.

Don shoved the boy away gently.

"Where'd you find him?"

"On the playground. All the kids started going home, but Bobby wasn't in the mood." She ran her hand through his hair. "He's pretty c-u-t-e," she spelled out, a twinkle in her eye.

"You're c-r-a-z-y," said Don. "He's a bad boy and if he ever runs away again he may not be lucky enough to find a girl like you. Nobody ever brought *me* a purple popsicle. What's your name?"

"Jenny Hatcher. What's yours?"

"Don Lane. You like the circus, Jenny?"

"Of course."

She'd looked a little puzzled, but Don had wondered how he could pay her for that popsicle and get away with it. He was proud of his idea.

"Well, I'll tell you what. I'm connected with the police, and I've got a lot of free tickets for the police circus lying around on my desk. How many friends do you have?"

She'd hesitated, not wanting to take advantage, not knowing what to say.

"I'll bet you have at least six good ones," Don prompted.

"Oh, yes!"

"Great! I've been wishing I'd meet somebody who could use these tickets," said Don, hoping he'd be able to get them. They were standing at his bus stop, across the street from the drugstore. "How about meeting me here at eight-thirty Wednesday morning? I'll have them then."

"That'll be fine, but you know what?"

"What?"

"You're not dressed like a policeman."

"Well, I'm sort of a detective, Jenny. I don't have to wear a blue suit all the time."

"Gee, that's swell! I like all the detectives on the radio. Do you solve a lot of exciting cases?"

He'd laughed at that. "Not like the ones on the radio, Jenny. Wednesday morning. Don't forget. I've got to get this guy home before his mother sends someone out to look for *me*."

"I'll see you," said Jenny.

SHE WAS there to get the tickets, all right. A few mornings after that she was there again, with all five of her friends

to tell him how much they'd liked the circus. And for the last couple of months Jenny had always seemed to be around his bus stop in the morning. Not much conversation. Just "Hi, Mr. Lane!" Sometimes just a wave.

Personality can emerge out of meetings like that; a child can become a person, a friend.

Don thought of Jenny as a friend. That was why he was here now. That was why the captain of homicide and his best lieutenant were handling a case that would otherwise have been a switchboard call for anyone handy at the moment. Jenny wasn't just another dead kid. Jenny was Jenny.

He remembered Jenny's eyes. They had been blue and merry and bright. Her light, straw-colored hair was still curly from her last home permanent, and the clip, shaped like a spoon, was on the side of the head that was visible. Don knew that, holding the hair back on the side that was pressed into the rubber mat of the stairway, there would be a clip in the form of a knife or a fork.

He leaned closer at last, checking the position of the body, the marks on it. There weren't any marks, except the one made by the knife and the neck broken from the fall downstairs.

Straight murder, sensible murder.

Lieutenant Hodge spoke up then.

"Doesn't look like the usual kid murder, does it, Cap?"

"The usual?" asked Don, still thinking about Jenny as he had known her alive.

"Yeah, you know. Some nut with a yen for youngsters. I've seen that plenty. Doesn't look like hauling in all the known dopes in the neighborhood would do us much good on this one. This one looks quick and clean, like a kill with a motive."

"It does, at that," said Don. "And that means the murder must have seemed necessary to somebody's twisted mind. But it's going to take a lot of digging to find out how a child like Jenny could have been a threat to anybody. With adults, you figure maybe they did something to coax a knife into their backs."

The medical examiner arrived then, with the photographers and the fingerprint men.

Captain Lane and Lieutenant Hodge

went into the living room of the house to ask questions of the tenants they had herded there. Just questions. Just the first of weeks of questions that they hoped might lead them to the person who could kill a twelve-year-old girl in cold blood. Questions. Questions. Questions. If you keep asking, sometimes you uncover the remote secret, sometimes not. They'd have to start with Jenny and work backward, then forward. Nothing was too small to be considered, for Jenny herself was very small.

IT WAS Tuesday.

The teacher wrote the arithmetic assignment on the board for the next day, but before she finished, she heard a noise and turned around, chalk in hand.

"What's wrong, Jenny?" she asked.

"It's Tuesday!" wailed Jenny, and an echo arose in forty throats at her brave protest.

"So it's Tuesday," said the teacher. "What difference does that make?"

"Show night," said Jenny. "You said you wouldn't give homework on show night, remember?"

"So I did." The teacher erased the board. "Well, I guess we'll have to respect the call of the Bijou that gives away prizes on Tuesday."

Jenny was happy on the way home. They'd all meet inside the show, after each one had paid, but there would be a lot of seat changing and she knew she'd end up sitting by her classmate, Charley. That was worth going to the movies for.

Supper was late.

Mom was tired after the long hours at the factory and Daddy was tired, too. The three small furnished rooms didn't leave much space to retire into one's own happy world. Jenny got cross along with her parents, complaining that she didn't like hamburger unless all the red was cooked out of it, complaining that other children had things better than she did.

But she helped with the dishes. When the last fork was dried, she asked for show money.

Her mother said she couldn't go.

She cried, and Daddy finally came over to her daybed and stroked her straw-colored hair with his big hand.

"What's wrong, Jenny?"

"Everybody goes to the show on Tuesday! And you won't let me go! You just want to make me miserable!"

Daddy left her then and Jenny could hear him out in the kitchen, talking to her mother.

"Let's let her go," she heard him say. "It's been a tough day, Helen, and we owe ourselves something, too. We'll go down to Barney's for a while. What do you say? Let's drag the foot up from the grave for an hour."

Mom said, "Honestly, I think she's getting more spoiled every day." Then she hesitated. "I guess all her friends will be going. May as well let her go, too."

Jenny's tears vanished into a mist of sublime happiness when Daddy put the show money into her hand. Problem met and solved. She could go.

She washed her face, brushed her hair and anchored in the spoon clip and the fork on the other side. Charley had given them to her for Christmas when he'd traded after the drawing to get her name.

She sang with the radio as she changed into her plaid skirt and white blouse, which she had pressed ahead of time.

At seven, she kissed her father and gave her mother a quick peck on the cheek.

"Have a good time," Daddy said.

Her mother said, "Come right home after the first show. You be home by nine-thirty, Jenny."

"All right. Nine-thirty. 'Bye!"

JENNY did get home at nine-thirty. It had been a Western picture and she hated Westerns. The usher had put Charley out of the show early in the evening because he'd been too loud and had started throwing popcorn. It hadn't been a good evening at all and Jenny ran the whole block home.

She raced up the dark stairway and rapped her special rap on the door of their rooms.

No answer.

She rapped again.

It was impossible. Nine-thirty and nobody home? Where would they be? They'd both been so tired. They were usually ready for bed at this hour.

Finally, she reached down into her blouse for the key on a chain that she carried around her neck.

She let herself into the empty rooms and closed the door. Her hands were shaking as she switched on the lights, and she knew that was silly. But she'd never come home at night before when her parents weren't there, when the lights were off.

She sat in front of the radio, tuning it down low, as she'd been taught to do. But she couldn't get interested in tonight's program. She kept wondering where her mother and father were. She decided she'd have to do something about it if they weren't home by ten. She didn't know what. But she'd sure have to do something.

* * *

Don Lane started his questions with Mr. and Mrs. Hatcher. He hated it. Midnight seemed to have settled on their faces with the black veil of a timeless moment between the past and the future.

Jenny was dead. They kept telling each other that, as though nothing had ever happened before and nothing would ever happen again.

"Were you in the habit of leaving Jenny alone in the house?" he asked. He wanted to know if their breaths were always this heavy with beer, if Jenny had been allowed to run around loose while they sat in taverns.

"No," said Mr. Hatcher. "No. Tonight she teased to go to the show. We let her."

"What time does she get home from the show as a rule?" asked Don.

"Nine-thirty," said Mrs. Hatcher, her eyes desperate. "I told her nine-thirty. Jenny was a good child. She would have been here."

"But you weren't here," said Don curtly.

Mr. Hatcher came over to Don then and stood right in front of him, shaking, but looking very firm.

"Lay off the questions for now," he said, "and stop thinking what you're thinking. My wife and I always took good care of our daughter and the only reason we let time get away from us tonight was that we were talking about getting better jobs and getting out of this neighborhood. We've never been late getting home before, understand? Not a single time! And

when we got here, we found . . . we found. . .”

He broke down then and tears hit his cheeks.

Don moved on to the landlady and her husband, who sat as quiet and hard as stones on a ragged divan in the corner.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson. He wrote their names down.

They were an odd-looking pair. The man was the bull type. Thick neck, low brow, and a mat of hair showing over the neck of his T-shirt. His eyes were like little marbles, round and without expression. Low mentality, Don decided. The magnificent brute, or something like that.

The woman was older than her husband. She looked flabby and weak and dirty. There were stained creases in her neck, her legs were puffy, and her face was big. No doubt she took a lot of cuffing around from her husband. He looked the type who could dish it out and make them love it.

“You own this house, Mr. Thompson?”

Thompson, looking sullen, jerked a thumb toward his wife. “She does.”

“I see.”

Don thought he did see. Mrs. Thompson had probably gone through several marriages, ending up with a little money and this house. That would account for the acquisition of this man so much younger than herself. Some women didn't care.

“In what part of the house do you live?” asked Don.

Mrs. Thompson glanced at her husband helplessly. He gave her a scornful look in return.

“Answer his question, Sarah. Don't you know where you live?”

She hesitated, then said, “Second floor. Across the hall from the Hatchers.”

“Doesn't the landlady usually occupy quarters on the first floor?” asked Don. “All the business of taking care of the phone and the furnace and such things?”

Mrs. Thompson seemed at ease there, eager to explain.

“Yes, but in these times I could make more by renting out the big rooms and the full-sized kitchen. Henry and I take a lot of meals out, and we don't need much room for just the two of us.”

Thompson smirked at her possessive tone and Don could see that the man was living a life he hated in this house, with a woman he probably hated more.

Sarah and Henry Thompson. Man and wife. They fired the furnace, they collected the rent from the roomers. They didn't look like pleasant rent collectors. From the condition of the place, Don judged they gave as little as possible for the money received. The size of the dim bulb over the stairway was a tipoff.

Roach-infested rooms, with a public bath, rented for sixty and seventy a month. People in little jobs, running a race with their money from payday to payday, were the ones who really got stuck these days. Furnished rooms. People with nothing except suitcases and jobs were made for the Thompsons.

SUDDENLY, Don got anxious to finish up here, to turn in a report and get home to his wife and son. He was getting depressed and it was silly. He couldn't worry about the whole world. It was a lousy shame, but he couldn't help it if the little people had to pay sixty a month for a trap like this.

“Did you hear Jenny come in tonight?” he asked.

Henry Thompson took up the answer on that one.

“We didn't hear a thing. Our door was shut and we had the radio on. First thing we heard was the yelling from the folks downstairs that they'd just come in and found the kid.”

“What time was that?”

“Not long ago. About ten-thirty,” Thompson said.

“Were any of the other second-floor tenants at home?”

“Only him,” said Thompson, pointing to an old man sitting across the room. “Mr. Gordon.” Henry tapped his own thick skull and explained that Mr. Gordon didn't have all his marbles and was deaf, to boot.

They took Jenny away and the people who lived downstairs took Mrs. Hatcher in hand. She was hysterical now, and Mr. Hatcher wasn't in much better shape. Somebody had sense enough to call a doctor for sleeping pills. They'd need them.

Don gave brief instruction about the

inquest, collected Lieutenant Hodge who had been talking to the other tenants, and then he left the house.

"Looks like a tough one," said Hodge, as they drove toward headquarters. "Looks like some nut in the hall, or something. And nuts are hard to find. I can just see it marked 'unsolved' on the books."

"I'm not so sure," said Don. "That Thompson looks brutal enough to have done it."

"Hell," said Hodge, "I got a cousin looks more like an ape than Thompson, and he's a swell guy. Give you the shirt off his hairy chest."

"Maybe so," said Don. "But I have a funny feeling about Thompson."

"Well, don't get your hopes up," Hodge advised. "There's that little item known as evidence, and the way that kid died you're not likely to find same."

"I know," said Don. "But I'm promising myself something on this one. I'm not going to give up. I don't care how long it takes, what methods I have to use."

"Don't be silly, Cap. There'll be other business coming up. You can't take all your time just for one little one. The department wouldn't stand for it."

"Well," Don said, "this is one case that's going to be solved. So help me, it is, if it's the last thing I do."

CHAPTER TWO

The Shadow Kill

JENNY had the radio on and all the lights. But she was uneasy, she had a funny feeling.

The announcer gave the time. Ten o'clock. Bed time. Jenny got up and wandered about the room, wondering what she ought to do. She'd sat for thirty minutes, trying to tell herself that she was being silly. But she was worried now. Really worried. She knew that something had happened to her parents. They'd be here by now if something hadn't.

She decided she'd get ready for bed. But she'd take her time at it. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep as long as her parents were out. They'd never been out like this before. She'd go to the bathroom, and then she'd wash up and brush

her teeth. That would take ten or fifteen minutes, anyway.

She'd never minded walking down the dim hall to the bathroom before. She'd known Daddy was here and she could yell. She'd never felt danger in the house before. She'd always felt safe and sure that nothing could happen because Daddy was strong enough to lick anybody, even Mr. Thompson.

She made sure she had her key. She couldn't leave the door of the apartment open. Somebody might be hiding on the stairs and walk in.

She looked out into the hall. Nobody was in the bath. She could see a patch of light from the open door. It wasn't far. She took a deep breath and then scooted down the hall, slamming and locking the bathroom.

She took a long time washing her hands. She opened the medicine chest and looked inside to kill time. There were cans of cleanser for the tub and a safety razor that probably belonged to Mr. Thompson. None of the tenants was allowed to leave their stuff around.

She'd never really inspected the chest before. She noticed that there was a wide space between the wall and the back of the cabinet and she decided it would be a swell place to throw things you didn't want anybody to see. An opening between the walls like this would probably extend down to the basement and there'd be no way of anything being discovered except by the mice in the house.

The only trouble was, once a thing was dropped down between the walls, you couldn't get it back without tearing the house down. Oh, well, she didn't have anything to hide right now, anyway.

Back to the room. Maybe her folks would be home by now.

She made herself walk down the hall slowly. She was feeling much braver now. When she got to the room, she reached for her key.

She heard voices from the Thompsons' room. She heard *his* voice. Mr. Thompson's.

All at once, the words were clear out of the jumble, because he was speaking much louder. He was angry. She stood transfixed, not even putting the key into the lock.

"Shut up, Sarah! I tell you I took care of the guy! I took care of him good. You'll never see his face around here again. So stop asking questions."

Daddy! They had done something to her Daddy. *Never see his face around here again!*

She blurted out, "What did you do to my Daddy?" She screamed it. She hadn't meant to. She covered her mouth as soon as the words were out, the way she so often did at school after she had blurted.

The door across the hall was flung open and Mr. Thompson stood there, in just his trousers and T-shirt. His face was like an angry dark cloud and he grabbed her by the wrist after looking around the hall.

His hand went over her mouth and he jerked her into their room.

The landlady said, "Henry! For God's sake, Henry, you don't know what you're doing!"

He said, "Yeah? This brat must have heard everything we said. She was outside the door, listening. You and your big mouth, Sarah! Maybe this will teach you to keep quiet, that the walls have ears."

"Henry! Don't!"

HE DIDN'T pay any attention. He flicked open the top drawer of the bureau, the little drawer, and took out a knife with a red and black handle and a spring catch. Then he shoved Jenny to the top of the stairs. He stabbed her neatly, efficiently, the way an expert stabs, without any blood gushing. He watched her body go down the stairway, noting that it didn't make much noise. Not that it mattered. The people downstairs were out, the kid's folks weren't home, and old Mr. Gordon was so deaf he couldn't hear his own name, even if you shouted.

He walked back to the bath, dropped his spring knife down the crack behind the medicine chest and washed his hands.

Damn, meddling brat! Imagine her standing there in the hall, eavesdropping! Well, she'd never tell what she heard. Sarah had no business grilling him about old man Carter, anyway. It had been a neat job, the body well disposed of, the money in his own kick.

He'd told Sarah how he'd pulled it off. She'd kept at him with questions until he'd told her, and then she'd kept on ask-

ing questions until he'd got sore and shouted at her. The kid might have been listening to the whole thing. Well, she wouldn't ever tell. It was just luck that she'd blabbed out when she did. It wouldn't have been so good if she'd waited and told her old man what she'd heard. They wouldn't be able to prove anything about Carter, but Thompson didn't want an investigation, either. Not a soul suspected him of having had anything to do with the old man.

Sarah was whimpering when he got back to the room.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he asked, getting into pajamas and turning the radio on good and loud.

"Henry! You didn't have to do that! I never saw anything so cold-blooded. The other was different, he was an old man. But this one makes me afraid. You didn't even look angry or anything at the time. You just . . . did it. Just as if it was nothing."

"Get hold of yourself, Sarah," he said, lighting a cigarette. "The kid would have blabbed, that's all. I can't help it if she got nosy. It's just that I don't want anything to upset our plans. Not anything!"

Sarah was looking at him with a puzzled expression. Henry decided he'd have to calm her down, make her forget what she'd seen. He sat on the edge of the bed and touched her flabby face gently.

"You remember our plans, don't you, Baby? Florida and the sunshine? All Carter's money, plus what you get for the house? We'll just take it easy in some big hotel, with you the classiest dame in the joint. How can you forget so quick?"

Her eyes softened. He could always do that to her when he wanted to. He mashed out his cigarette and leaned down, his cheek against hers.

"I just did it for you, Sarah. I got to make good my promises to you. After all, you don't want to see me dragged in for questions, do you? That's what would have happened if the kid ever told how I got rid of Carter. It was you or the kid, Baby. Your dreams and mine against the whole world. You see that, don't you?"

She cradled his head in her hands, smiling happily, dumbly.

"I'm all right now," she said. "Don't worry. It was just watching you do it. I

guess, so cold and everything. But you're right. I can see you had to do it. We don't want anything spoiled by anybody. We'll have it grand in Florida, won't we?"

"We'll be on top of the heap, Baby! We'll really be sitting pretty."

SOMETIMES, without even knowing precisely why, a man feels impelled to raise a banner, join a crusade. The motivation behind such decisions lies buried somewhere in a past that held experience without knowledge, lies buried in years of thoughts that were not quite thoughts. Until, one day, a crystal forms that one can look into clearly. Until, one day, an individual sees himself and has sure knowledge of what he must do. That is the moment of the vow, the start of the action that will lead him where he knows he must go.

Change. A new and sudden vow brings about change that perplexes and disturbs those who don't understand, don't know.

Don Lane's wife knew that her husband was working on something with his whole heart and mind, but she'd never seen him so preoccupied in all her nine years of marriage to him. She worried about it.

He was home so seldom. He'd made two trips out of town, and she felt, somehow, that it wasn't police business in the regular channels. It was something else. Something that mattered to him very much, and something somehow connected with his job.

She had learned a long time ago that Don thought it bad policy to discuss department affairs at home. She prided herself on not asking him questions.

But, after eleven months of his odd behavior, she knew she couldn't stand it any longer.

She tried to get him to talk.

He wouldn't. He kissed her and gave her a tired smile and said he hoped it wouldn't be much longer, that he thought maybe he was getting somewhere.

"Be patient, darling," he advised.

"I have been, Don. For a whole year. I think it's time I knew more about this work that's taking so much out of you. If I've had to give my husband away to some cause, I ought to know who's benefiting."

"I'm sorry, Thelma," he said. "I guess I have been sort of a bust around home, but this was just something I had to do on my own. Don't ask me why. I'd never be able to explain. But it won't be for much longer. If I get just the average breaks, it won't be."

"Still evading the question," she said. "But I guess you know what you're doing. Skip it."

She seemed unhappy and resigned as she turned away. Don thought for one crazy moment what it would be like to lose her, to be without her love. He caught her by the shoulders and drew her back against him.

"I didn't want to talk about it," he whispered, "because the job seemed so impossible that it scared me. There's a man in town that I suspect of being a murderer. I had nothing to go on, actually no reason for my suspicion. Just a name and a brute image in my mind. I started with that name, dear, and worked up a three-dimensional picture of that man. I found out where he was born, where he grew up, and I went there. A little town in Kentucky. I asked questions until they were coming out my ears. I filled in the picture a little. I found out things he's probably forgotten about. It didn't mean much, but I felt that I was working. I kept hoping I'd stumble over something that would prove my suspicions. I got nibbles but no big bites. Here at home, I've watched him, kept track of all his movements. I've even spent some of our money."

Thelma turned around and put her arms around her husband's waist.

"Does he know you're after him, Don? Is it dangerous for you?"

Don smoothed her hair back. "He hasn't the faintest idea. This is a case the police have dropped, a case forgotten. Most cases like this one have to be dropped for lack of evidence and motive. He'd be very surprised to know that I'm still interested."

"Just why *are* you interested, Don?"

He didn't want to tell her. Their son was across the room, playing with a mechanical toy, and his son was somewhere at the heart of his interest, but wasn't all of his interest. There was Jenny flashing across his heart, too, like a streak

of sunshine. His wife didn't need to know about that. It was almost too personal to tell her.

"One of those things," he said, "like wanting to be a cop in the beginning. Something I want to do. Something that has to be done."

She didn't press the point. "How long will it take?" she asked wearily.

"Maybe not much longer. I have a feeling that something will break soon. He's having his car overhauled, and the mechanic told me it was for a trip to Florida. He sold his house last week, or, rather, his wife sold it. He's making a change, clearing out. And he doesn't know that I'll be right behind him to find out what he's going to do."

"Florida? You mean you might leave town again, Don?"

"If he does. After sticking this long, I can't let him go now. I'm not trying to prove any of the things I suspect him of having done. The only way to nab this one is to stay with him and catch him when he's unprepared. He doesn't leave clues. He's too cool, too much like an animal."

"Is he that much of a killer? You expect him to kill again?"

"If I'm right about him, he will. There was a girl when he was sixteen. Nothing was proved, but he was involved. There was a man here in town who was robbed and later disappeared. I found a remote connection there. No evidence. He doesn't leave evidence. That's why I want to stay with him until I find out what this trip is all about."

Thelma was shivering a little. "Forget it, Don! Can't you forget it? After all, you have a duty to me and Bobby. What would happen to us if anything should happen to you?"

"Nothing's going to happen to me, darling. I'm smarter than he is, at least. You should have seen his school records. And Hodge has agreed to go with me, if the trip has to be made. You can be sure we'll play it smart."

Don Lane grinned at his wife. She was being a good kid. She wasn't fussing about their own vacation plans, wasn't going to mention that. As soon as he nabbed Thompson, he'd make it up to her, he promised himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Picking the Spot

THE COUPLE in the green Oldsmobile sedan was traveling by a road map, charted just a few days before by the Automobile Club. They were proceeding with the latest information about detours and washed-out bridges. They were proceeding with a holiday air.

The top of the heap! This was the life, all right, thought Sarah. Money. All the money you need right with you, and nothing to do but ride along and enjoy yourself.

And Henry was such a careful driver that she always felt safe in the car with him. Henry was really showing her a time, just as he had promised. You could have knocked her over with a feather the day he took her into a department store in Indiana and bought her everything new, right from the skin out. He even bought her new cream, new powder, new comb-and-brush set. Everything. When they got back to the tourist cabin, he bundled up all of her old things, every single scrap, and said they'd celebrate her new personality by tossing the old one over the deepest ravine they crossed. He said he liked her fixed up different.

She wished the trip would never end, he'd been treating her so well.

She said as much to Henry, and his jawbone flicked a couple of times.

"Sure thing, Sarah. It's lots of fun, all right." They had just finished breakfast and were making the day's start early. "We'll be in Georgia tonight, won't we? How far is Rome, Baby?"

She leaned over the map, squinting her puffy eyes. "That must be a little town, Henry. What's it near?"

"About halfway between Chattanooga and Atlanta. Our route takes us to Atlanta, but I'd like to stop at this little place."

"Have you been there?" she asked.

"A long time ago. Red-clay roads then, but I guess they're better by now. Can you tell how far it is?"

She found it at last and placed a dirty finger on the map, checking the mileage scale.

"A little over seventy-five miles," she

told him. "Why do you want to stop there?"

He patted her knee. "You'll find out. Having fun?"

"You know it," she simpered. "I never enjoyed anything as much as this trip."

"Swell, Sarah. That's just swell. I'm glad you've liked it."

* * *

Lieutenant Hodge sloshed syrup over his buckwheat cakes and then shoved the pitcher back across the red-checked tablecloth toward his traveling companion.

"Look, Don. They just left. The green Olds is off on that Triple A routing. The honeymooners have hit the road again. Your 'beast' left his waitress a fifty-cent piece and a big smile. So help me, he doesn't act like a killer! And you said we'd never hit Florida. Looks to me as if we don't have far to go."

Don stirred his coffee absently, studying the road map that the clerk at Triple A had charted right after charting Henry Thompson's.

They'd be in Georgia that day, with Atlanta for the stop. Then Florida. Don had predicted action long before this. He'd thought the Smokies might have been a good spot, expected it on one of the lonely stretches in North Carolina.

Florida was too flat, too bare, too open to the sky. He'd been sure that Henry would pick a spot farther from his final destination.

Georgia had rural sections that even the United States mail had to skip. Don had driven through a couple of times, and now he thought of the lonely hills, the deep woods, the red-clay gullies.

"Don't get your hopes up, Hodge. I still say you may not get as far as the land of sunshine."

Hodge scooted his last bite of buckwheat around in the syrup on his plate.

"Look, sweetheart. The trip has been fun. I've loved every minute of your sparkling silence, every ratty tourist cabin we've stayed awake in, every memory of all the times we've lugged that flashbulb camera around in the dark, waiting for Henry to be a bad boy. I've enjoyed the long, hard shifts of driving, because it was making you happy. But I think you're on

a wild-goose chase. How about going home? My wife started giving me hell when I phoned her last night."

Don just grinned.

"Come on, Hodge. Bolt that coffee. I want to stay right on their tail today. I have a hunch he's not going to hit Atlanta. I think he's going to ignore that map tonight. I think this is going to be it."

"Yeah, just like a dozen other stops were going to be it. I never saw any cop so anxious for a crime to be committed. It ain't quite wholesome, Don! You're supposed to prevent crime, not stand around like a ghoul, waiting for it. Besides, he's been a regular boy scout all the way. Did it ever occur to you that he might be an all-right guy?"

"No, it hasn't. And he's been too much of a boy scout. It isn't natural, doesn't fit his personality. His road courtesy is sincere, but remember that his own skin is involved in his driving. Outside of that, he's off the beam with waitresses, clerks, and with his wife. I've been watching him for over a year, and I know!"

HODGE nodded, an unvoiced admiration in his eyes, along with something that looked like pity. You couldn't deny a man credit for a year of patient watching, but it would be a hell of a shame if the suspect had a change of heart, if it all came to nothing.

They shoved off in the black Buick, which was grey with road dust by this time. Thompson's car had been washed in Knoxville. They'd skipped the job on their own.

It was early and the roads were fairly clear. Don was driving and he made good time. After a couple of hundred miles they spotted the Olds in front of a drive-in. Lunch.

Don pulled up at a filling station farther along that had an annex for coffee and sandwiches. There hadn't been any cross road. They'd have to pass here.

"Curb that Great Dane appetite, Hodge," he advised. "We want to keep right behind them now."

He took his own thin boiled ham on rye outside and got a coke out of the box by the pumps. He stood there leaning against the Buick, watching the road.

Strange how his stomach quivered now.

Something like stage fright seemed to have taken possession of his nerves today.

He'd built himself up to this one hope, had risked so much time and money and energy on mere theory. Suppose Hodge was right. Suppose Thompson was really sincere about taking his ugly wife to Florida for a good time? Suppose it hadn't meant a thing, selling her house and leaving town with the cash? Suppose buying her all those new clothes in Indiana hadn't meant what he thought it meant?

But, no, that couldn't be. Don had watched Thompson pick up a blonde one night, had watched him drool over the lush young lady. Thompson knew what he wanted and it certainly wasn't Sarah. Don knew Thompson better than he knew his best friends. When you spy on a person for a year, you catch them off guard, learn to know the subtle workings of their personalities. When Thompson was too nice, he was up to no good, and he'd certainly been too nice on this trip.

The green Olds flashed by then, and Don honked for Hodge, who came out with a paper bag filled with sandwiches. They caught up and stayed fairly close.

"Aren't you leery of getting too near, Cap? After all, the guy talked to both of us the night the kid died."

"That was a year ago and the setting has changed. He's too far from home to expect to see anybody he knows. We're just another car on the road. In fact, he looked right at me in the last place and didn't tumble. Think of how many people you've met more than once and haven't recognized the second time. Don't worry about that. Just keep your eyes open and the camera on your lap."

"And the gun in my pocket and the handcuffs in the other pocket and the flashlight handy. Honestly, Don, I feel like Captain Midnight. Couldn't we have a secret code, too?"

"Sure. I'll work on one. Meanwhile, I think Thompson's going to turn at this junction coming up. He's pulling to the left. Isn't Atlanta straight ahead?"

Hodge looked at the map line pasted over the glove compartment. "Straight ahead."

"Good. Catch the names on the arrows if we turn."

"Then slow down to a full stop when you get there. You know how long it takes me to read those things."

Hodge picked one name out of several that were lettered on a row of white arrows.

"Rome! I always thought that was in Italy."

Don scanned the markers himself and drove on, keeping the green Olds in sight. It could be anywhere, any time now. He might drive the afternoon out and make a dinner stop first. That seemed logical. Murder went over better on a full stomach and in the dark. Or maybe he'd stop early to fix things, to get ready for the night's work. There wasn't any way of knowing. The trick now was to telescope all of their efforts into one great alert. The big watch. The death watch.

Don's hands began sweating on the wheel and he asked Hodge to take over the driving for a while.

THERE were several hours of nothing, hours of weaving in and out, of getting stuck behind some farmer's tin lizzie or some lumbering wagon. Hours of being right on the tail, then dropping back. Boring hours of afternoon driving, when the legs begin to get stiff, when ordinary tourists start playing "Cities" or "Twenty Questions."

The countryside was beautiful, if you were looking for beauty. Brooks, wild roses, forests climbing the slopes of hills, fire pinks growing out of rocks, and milkweed along the roadside.

But as they drove on into the sunset, the terrain began to change. There was more and more roughness to the woods, more of a red-clay shoulder beside the road, sticky and damp looking.

Don knew what it would be like, back in the dense foliage: rocks; rotten leaves and logs; insects droning in a quiet that would seem more quiet because of their droning; twisted twigs and tangled underbrush; lichens on tree trunks, and charred, split boughs, burned by lightning.

No people. Maybe a few tin cans, rusted into a lacy brown web to attest that a human being had once been here; maybe a red shotgun shell, washed out to a faint pink; maybe a pasteboard carton, waterlogged out of shape, swollen and ripe for

decomposition. That would be all.

Sure, people had been in these woods. But one could be certain that the visitors were infrequent, that they would never come after dark.

The Buick was keeping more distance now, because the traffic was very light, the sun almost down.

"I think he's going to stop," said Hodge. "What do you want me to do? He can see us if I stop here. It'll look funny."

"Go on past," said Don. "Act in a hurry. Then stop around the next curve, close enough for me to get back and see what he's up to."

Don took off the flashbulb attachment. It was still light enough to get a picture without it.

He got out of the car, crossed the shoulder and moved back to where he could see the Olds without being seen himself. He sighted the camera, half expecting Thompson to slug Sarah right then, or drag her into the woods for slugging.

But that didn't happen. Thompson climbed up the bank and disappeared into the foliage, leaving Sarah sitting in the car. Don snapped a picture of the car, hoping Sarah's face would show in the print. Then he slid a fresh plate into the camera.

Hodge was beside him by that time.

"Guess this isn't it, Cap. He wouldn't leave her in the car otherwise."

"I'd be willing to bet he's checking the ground for later," Don said. "If he is, it's a break for us."

"He's staying pretty long," admitted Hodge. "You going to snap him when he comes out?"

"Sure. Just for fun. There! See what I mean?"

Thompson had emerged and was tying a handkerchief around a bush near the road.

Don clicked the shutter and then they doubled back to the Buick, fast.

"Get us out of sight, Hodge!"

The motor was still running and Hodge shot down the road a way, putting distance between the cars.

At the first tourist court he pulled in and parked.

A little later the green Olds pulled in, too.

Thompson helped his wife out of the car. She was laughing at some joke he had made. Neither one of them glanced at the Buick or at any of the other cars that had pulled under the wooden arch to the gravel parking space.

There was the usual rustic dining room beside the building marked "Office." It was so brilliant with outer neon flicker that it was a sure guess it would be dingy within. Definitely a third-rate place. Not up to the standard of the other places Thompson had picked along the line.

The happy-looking couple walked into the office and came out with a key. Thompson took just Sarah's overnight case out of the car, and they rounded the corner of the building, leaving the Olds parked in front of the dining room.

"It's not for all night, Hodge," said Don quietly. "This is just a wash-up stop for Sarah, just a rest period, she thinks. They'll have dinner while Thompson waits for complete darkness. The old man in the office won't ask any questions. This looks like the kind of dive that gets rented several times a night."

"First time Thompson has picked one of these," said Hodge. "Maybe you're right, Don. Maybe this really is it. I'm beginning to think so. But what's our next move?"

Don looked at his watch. It was five-thirty. Henry would probably stay here until dark, at least another hour, maybe longer. That would give him time to see what had been marked off by the handkerchief and to check the scene while it was still daylight.

"You go into the dining room, Hodge, and pack away a steak. Keep your eye on them until I get back."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to that section of woods he marked. It's only about a ten-minute drive. I want to pick out a vantage point for us, so we won't get lost looking for him later. I'm sure there'll be time."

"Hope you're right, Cap. You don't think I ought to snoop around the cabin?"

"Definitely not! What do you want to do—tip him off?"

"No, but we're not going to stand around and let a lady get killed, are we? After all, you've got—"

Don interrupted. "What have I got?"

Not a thing! A picture of him tying a marker on a tree. That's no crime. Even if he's already dug the grave, that's no crime, either. He could make monkeys out of us if we don't play this exactly right, Hodge."

"Okay, Cap. This is your show. I'll wait in the dining room. But hurry back; I hate these swilly dives, with yokels hopping to a juke box."

"The more yokels in there, the more anonymous you'll be. Keep your eyes open."

"You bet."

Hodge got out of the car and walked toward the combination bar, dining room and dance hall. He looked like any other traveler, hitching up his trousers, trying to pat the wrinkles out of his coat, to stretch his cramped muscles.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Waiting Grave

THE HANDKERCHIEF waved at Don through the half-light of dusk. He found a safe place to pull off the road, then opened the trunk, smiling a little. Hodge had hit pretty close with that Captain Midnight crack. They were carrying everything for emergencies, except radar. Don selected a coil of wire, a powerful torch light with a handle like a lantern, and a camera that was worth almost as much as the car.

He walked back, stopping several yards before he got to the bush that Thompson had marked. The bank was steeper here, but if you weren't lugging a body, it was a cinch.

Once into the woods, he doubled over until he found Henry's trail of footprints on top of the soggy leaves. The prints stopped at a small cleared space, and Don stopped, too, an eerie feeling settling upon him.

There was a big rock here, jutting out of the ground, with smaller pieces scattered around it. Farther over he could see four twigs stuck into the ground, but nature hadn't arranged that pattern. The twigs marked off a square about six feet long and three feet wide!

Don moved back to the right, checking the thicket for the best place of concealment for Hodge and himself. It seemed

to be in back of a tree that had a growth of vines wound around the trunk. He sighted the flashlight toward the four twigs and then anchored it to a stump. He hid the camera beside the same stump. Last, he tied the wire to a young mountain laurel and played it out all the way to the road so they could get back in without following Thompson's path, without using a light when darkness settled down in earnest.

As he drove back to the tourist court, he thought about Mrs. Thompson. They ought to make an effort to save her life, he knew. The four twigs had stuck up like four black candles over the unmade grave, illuminating the horror of what would take place after her death. It wasn't pretty; it shouldn't happen.

But the rest of it shouldn't have happened, either. The young girl in Kentucky; old man Carter, whose body had never been found; little Jenny Hatcher. And God knows who else!

Jenny Hatcher. Plaid skirt, white blouse, spoon clip in her hair, all crumpled up at the bottom of the stairway. Mrs. Thompson must have known about that.

The four twigs didn't seem so important now. Don hadn't spent all this time just to prevent the murder of a woman who didn't know right from wrong. After all, he hadn't been assigned to any case, he wasn't responsible for anything that happened.

He thought about that, thought about the case as it would normally work out. Thompson would bury her in the woods. There was nothing left to identify her as Sarah Thompson and he would drive on to Florida or catch a plane if he wanted to sell his car. You can go anywhere on a plane, very quickly. A new name, a new life. A person unknown. A murderer who had got away with it again. No evidence. Leaves would fall over the grave and the rain would drip on the rocks beside it. No one would know.

Later there would be a girl in the picture. There was always a girl in the picture with men like Thompson. Perhaps this girl would marry Thompson and perhaps she would die.

Don Lane didn't know who this girl was, but he stacked her beside Sarah Thompson, and Sarah lost out.

The green Olds was still parked beside the dining room when Don got back. He had been gone a little over thirty minutes.

He wiped the mud off his shoes before he went inside.

LIEUTENANT HODGE was in a back booth, juggling a steak knife. He seemed very much absorbed in his dinner, quite disinterested in the noisy crowd.

Don Lane slid in opposite him and reached for the menu the girl held out.

"Steak good?" he asked Hodge. "I'm starved!"

"It's not bad. Get the car fixed?"

"Sure. Just a spark plug like I told you. We'll shove off right after we eat."

"Glad to hear it. My little woman's getting mighty anxious, if you know what I mean. Mighty anxious."

Hodge leered, and Don leered back.

"I know what you mean, chum."

The waitress was waiting for the order. She had other customers. She wished these salesmen would let up on the yakety-yak so she could get the order in.

"The steak?" she asked, bored with waiting.

A couple near the door was getting ready to leave. The man helped the woman on with her light coat, dropped some change on the table in addition to a couple of bills that covered his check. Then the door opened and closed and they were outside.

"Just coffee," said Don.

The waitress flounced off. All that talk about being starved, about how was the steak! When she came back, the coffee slurped over into the saucer, the two men were gone. She found a dollar tip, in addition to the price of one meal. Screwballs! The world was full of nutty characters and most of them came in here. She shrugged. There was a long shift ahead of her.

It wasn't quite seven o'clock, but the livid face of dusk was now discolored into the bruised countenance of night.

The tourist court floodlights made a white splash in the darkness, pointed up the blackness of the road and the woods around.

Sarah Thompson was sitting there in the car, waiting for Thompson to come back with her overnight case. She was

sitting there under an arc light, studying the map, and she was smiling. She didn't look up as the big black car slid out of its parking space and moved on down the road.

"She looked so happy!" said Hodge. "I almost told her that she ought to get the hell out, while she still can!"

"Jenny Hatcher looked happy, too," Don said.

"Wait a minute. Don. You're not actually going to let him kill her, are you? You're not just going to stand and *watch*, I hope! If that's the deal, count me out. Why, you'd be just as guilty—"

"Hold it, Hodge. I'm no crystal-gazer. How do I know if we can save her life and still put Thompson away? I don't know how he's going to murder her. I just know what he plans to do with her afterward. Our only move is to wait and see what the odds are."

"Okay, Don. What do I do?"

"Just keep your shirt on and remember that it's Thompson we want."

Hodge noticed the hard edge to Don's voice, something he hadn't heard before.

"That must have been a longer year than I realized, Cap."

"Maybe so, but skip it. Now. We'll leave the car here and walk back. I've got a wire to guide us in. And just one more thing, Hodge. Don't get hurt. Don't be silly. Neither one of those lives is worth one of ours. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, I know. And the same to you, sweetheart. In fact, you might take that advice yourself."

"Don't worry, I have. I want him alive, but I'll kick him to death if I have to!"

They came to the wire and backed up into the bushes. The road was out there, but you couldn't see it. You couldn't see the handkerchief, either, until the car headlights stabbed the night and brought the marker jumping into view.

The Olds stopped and they heard Mrs. Thompson giggle. It sounded silly, almost indecent. They heard a deep, throaty chuckle. Then they heard the car door slam.

Hodge was tense, his hand over his gun. Don reached out and covered it. "Not now. Follow the wire back quickly. We have to get there before they do, have to get set with the camera."

THEY moved into the woods, still hearing the sound of voices. Off to the left, they could see flecks of light that meant Thompson was carrying a flashlight. Don hadn't thought about that, but Thompson would need it. You can't dig a grave in the dark. He'd probably be carrying a small spade, too, wrapped up to look like something else.

They got behind their thicket and waited. Don crouched at the camera. They couldn't talk now, couldn't move.

The voices got closer, finally came to the clearing, their feet showing in the little pool of light from the flash, the rocks briefly illuminated.

Thompson tossed a spade to the ground and lit a cigarette. His face glowed for an instant, like a disembodied face, the rest of him invisible. It was a calm face. It looked like the face of any man who is simply lighting a cigarette.

Then the face disappeared and there was nothing to see, except a red glow that moved in his hand.

Sarah's voice sounded out of place, too loud in the quiet of the woods. She was sitting on the big rock.

"You really think the rest of Carter's money is buried here?" she asked.

"That's what I heard," said Henry, "and I wouldn't doubt it. He was an awful miser and crazy as a loon. Anyway, it won't hurt to look."

Don's lips tightened.

So that's how he'd got her to walk in here with him! That's how he'd been able to carry a spade, right in front of her, without her catching on!

Thompson started to dig and she held the flashlight for him. Mounds of red

clay, looking dark brown in the faint light, began to pile up.

"Would it be in a box, Henry?"

He stuck the spade in the freshly turned earth and took a breather, walking over to sit beside her.

"Supposed to be. An iron strongbox, I think."

Don could imagine what was going on in Hodge's mind. *Poor Cap! No murder at all. Just a little hunt for buried treasure!* He was glad Hodge might be thinking that, because he didn't want any misplaced sympathy for Sarah to ruin his case.

He was sure that Mrs. Thompson had just now held the flashlight for the digging of her own grave. That would be a brutal thought to most people, but it wouldn't bother Thompson. Thompson had been born without a trace of imagination, and, lacking that quality, he was nerveless. That's why he hadn't been caught for his murders. He didn't fight demons within himself afterward, for there wasn't any inner man to feel guilt for his crimes. And, actually, it's a subconscious fear over what has been done that causes most killers to make mistakes.

Keeping Sarah alive until the last minute was a smart move. Even now, he was safe. If anybody came along, if Don snapped a picture right at this moment, what would they have him for? A man and his wife digging in the woods. So what? Sarah would be the first one to say he wasn't doing anything wrong!

Finally the black shadow that was Thompson leaned forward.

"Let me have the flash a minute, Baby. I want to take a good look over there before I dig too far."

Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS



You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families—that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least *one out of every three persons* examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy

is Jayne's P-W Vermifuge developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for P-W, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.

Just Remember:
P-W® for Pin-Worms



The light went out.

The next sound was a faint whoosh and a thin pop like a bubble breaking.

Don put his thumb against the nickel lever at the end of the cord, steadied the camera.

Then there was the sound of rocks being struck together.

Don pushed the lever and the flashbulb exploded with a blinding glare.

He reached up and snapped the switch on the torch light and Hodge moved over right beside him, his gun drawn.

Thompson stood there, frozen with surprise, a rock the size of a catcher's mitt in his right hand, a spring knife still in his left.

"My God!" muttered Hodge. "He was mashing her face to a pulp!"

"He knifed her first. I think I heard it." Don had his own gun out now. "Drop the rock and the knife, Thompson. We managed to pick up a little evidence on you this time."

Thompson didn't drop anything.

He made a wild leap toward them, like an animal facing something strange, and knowing by instinct it has to charge.

But he tripped. He tripped over the sprawling legs of his dead wife, whose head still rested on the big rock, already past identification.

Don used the butt of his gun on the nerve center behind the ear. Hodge snapped the bracelets on as Thompson sat up, groggy and confused.

All the light was shining in his face. "Who the hell are you?" he asked. "What kind of a deal . . .?"

"No deal," said Don, more controlled than he had expected to be. "We just wanted to get acquainted with one of those unknown persons. That's you, Thompson. You've been the unknown person several times. Remember little Jenny Hatcher?"

"That eavesdropping brat!" Thompson snarled.

"So that's why you killed her! I wondered about that. She heard something, didn't she?"

"Go to hell!"

"No, Thompson. That's for you. But I'd like you to know what you're going to burn for. Not Dolores Anson in Kentucky, not Carter, and not your wife here.

When they slit your pants leg and haul you to the hot seat, it'll be for that little twelve-year-old kid. Don't make any mistake about the one thing you're really wanted for!"

"They'll never get me!" Thompson roared, his lips drawn back in a line of insane fury. He wasn't cold now. It was his own skin for the first time, and it threw him off balance.

Hodge jerked the man roughly to his feet.

"What are you talking about, sweetheart? You've already been got! Let's go, Cap. No sense wasting time here—unless you want to kick him to death."

"No," said Don. "No, I don't want to do that, after all. I just want to get him jugged, but quick."

IT WASN'T very quick. It was two o'clock in the morning before they got through, and they decided to drive into Rome for the rest of the night.

They passed the tourist court on the way. The dining room was still sending brightly colored neon invitations flickering out to motorists. Steaks . . . Chops . . . Bar and Grill . . . Open All night. . . .

Don had forgotten. He clapped a hand to his stomach.

"Hodge! You big bread basket! I didn't have any dinner."

Hodge made the turn and parked the car.

"Well, bless its heart! Come on in and let me buy it a big, tough steak."

They sat in the same booth, got the same girl, looking sleepier than ever.

"How are the steaks?" asked Don. "Any good?"

"How are chances for a bottle of good twenty-five-year brandy and two glasses?" asked Hodge.

Oh, no! she thought. Not twice in the same night. Their little women couldn't have been so anxious after all. These salesmen!

"French fries," muttered Captain Don Lane.

"How are the shrimp?" asked Lieutenant Hodge.

The waitress scurried off. *Screwballs! Crazy people every day in the week, and they all had to come in here!*

THE END

LAST SUPPER

His last meal should have been poison to him. But after it, Sam Hagan went out—and lived!



Stoddard leaned back in his chair. "I hope your affairs are in order, Sam," he said.

By
RUSSELL BRANCH

THE CONDEMNED MAN, I thought, ate a hearty meal. . . . And what a meal, that last dinner of mine! It was enough to make Dr. Stoddard tear his handsome hair out by the roots. It was also enough to put me through the tortures of hell—except that I didn't intend to wait around for the reaction to begin.

"You'll have to watch your diet," the doctor had said.

Two Scotch mists to whet the appetite—straight Scotch over cracked ice. Crab cocktail with a nice hot sauce. Blood-rare filet with a garlic salad on the side, then apple pie with a nice sharp cheese and

finally, just to polish the whole thing off, a pony of Napoleon and a fat Perfecto.

I did all this at Dario's, and an unfortunate choice it was. Not because of the food; Dario's still had the best in the city.

But it also overlooked the bay. And even though I asked for a table in the rear, even though I tried to look the other way, my eyes kept straying out through the big windows. Out where the bridge, far in the distance, beckoned with its high-flung span of twinkling lights.

And finally the brandy was gone, the cigar was a stub, and the bridge still blinked patiently. I paid my check, left an extravagant tip and went out to my car.

The last mile, only Sam Hagan would ride in style.

But on the way I ran into trouble, and that was funny, too. Here I was, bound to end it all—and to get there I was going to have to fix a flat first! For the last gas station I had passed was closed, and what few cars zipped past me now obviously weren't going to stop at this hour on this lonely stretch of the bay causeway.

So I pulled my topcoat up around my neck, climbed out into the cold, foggy night and got to work. At best I'm none too good with my hands; tonight I was also as jittery as you'd expect a guy fifteen minutes away from the end of his life to be. When the jack handle slipped, it was adding injury to insult. Something like getting a hot-foot at your own funeral.

I stared for a moment at the blood running out of the gash on my wrist. Maybe I'd bleed to death before I ever got to that bridge!

But I wrapped my handkerchief tightly around my wrist and went back to work. Don't ask me why. It just seemed important to carry out things the way I'd planned, that's all.

THE TOLL STATION at the approach to the bridge provided another grim chuckle. There was one booth still open and a drowsy guard on duty. One ticket to hell: twenty-five cents, please.

A car pulled in behind me as I started away again. I slowed down, idling along until it had caught up and passed me. Its taillight winked and disappeared in the distance, and then I was all alone in the middle of the span.

The fog was settling down. Out in the straits a foghorn sounded its mournful dirge; overhead the bridge lights made amber pools in the mist, like flickering candles at a wake. And below, far, far below, the cold water seethed and sighed through the narrows in full ebb tide.

I was thinking of that long, cold drop as I pulled over by the rail and stopped the motor. I was thinking of other things, too. Forty-one years is a lot of life to toss away in a few seconds—a lot of hope, a lot of heartbreak. A lot of pain—and a share of joy. Water under the bridge, I told myself, just like that rushing tide waiting below.

I reached out and put my hand tentatively on the hard metal of the door handle. The same handle I had pushed hundreds, thousands, of times before . . . but now the last thing standing between me and my death. Once I pushed it, I knew, there could be no turning back.

Objectively, almost as if it had been amputated, I stared at that hand on the door handle, with its blood-soaked bandage. And then, just as objectively and remotely, I found me looking at myself.

Sam Hagan. Good old easy-going Sam Hagan. Comfortably stout, with a hearty meal under his belt. A man who liked the good things of life and should be hurrying home to his warm bed instead of tarrying here in the cold night.

Sure, he'd lost some weight, poor Sam, so that his suit hung a bit loosely. And those jolly lines in his face had sagged a bit recently with worry. But still . . . what was *he* doing here?

What drives any man to think of taking his own life?

Love? At forty-one? I'd had it once, and what if the years had turned it into a matter of habit, convenience, and the tolerance of letting Ellen live her own life?

Money? Not enough—who ever has enough? But enough to make life smooth and reasonably secure.

Health? All right, health.

For the first time in weeks, I felt swell. I had drunk, I had feasted, I had broken every rule in the doctor's book. And I still felt swell.

I stared out into the night, holding that thought as tenaciously as the fingers of fog prying at the car windows. And finally, chilled and cramped, I roused myself. My hand came off the door handle, my foot found the starter button.

Not tonight, I decided. Not tonight.

IHAD hoped that Ellen would be asleep, that I could crawl silently into my own bed with my guilt and my perplexity.

But light still showed under the door of our apartment, and as I eased the door open I heard her voice:

" . . . should have been home hours ago," she was saying to someone. Then, after a long silence: "Yes . . . yes, of course. I'm not exactly stupid, darling."

There was something in her voice, a

certain nervous tension—worry, maybe, with a shade of anticipation?

I rattled the knob noisily, pushed the door open the rest of the way. Ellen had hung up by the time I had crossed the living room; she met me at the bedroom door and stared at me silently.

I stared back at this slender, dark-haired woman, and back over the years. I knew her as well as any man ever knows any woman, yet for a second it seemed to me that I was looking at an utter stranger. That we were, in fact, two complete strangers sizing each other up like wary beasts met in some dark, unfriendly jungle.

But—well, this was my own warm, cozy apartment, and she was just the worried wife, and I was the thoughtless husband who had caused that anxiety.

“Sam! Where on earth . . . ?”

I shrugged my way out of my topcoat. “Car trouble. I got stuck with a flat. Besides, I told you I’d be working late tonight.”

She bit her lip, her features sharpening into a suspicious frown. “I called the office. It’s nearly one, now.”

The office? Maybe she had, earlier. But there was no one there now. And no one she would have called “darling,” no matter how casually she used that term.

“You’ve had something to eat, something sensible? And you didn’t forget your medicine?”

I nodded automatically, and saw her eyes on my hand.

“Just a cut. The jack handle slipped out while I was changing the tire, and I caught a sharp edge on the car. Made it take even longer.”

Slowly she raised her eyes, slowly and contemptuously, and the thought was plain in her face. She thought I had deliberately cut my wrist—and had failed.

“Nothing serious,” I said uneasily. “A little iodine will fix it up.”

She turned away abruptly, her long negligee swishing around as if it were hissing at me. “I’m going to bed. There’s iodine in the medicine chest—and I hope it stings!”

It did, but that wasn’t what kept me tossing and turning the rest of the night. Iodine couldn’t reach the ugly thing that was festering in my mind—the thought that perhaps Ellen hadn’t wanted me to

come back home, ever. I went over our whole conversation endlessly, worrying every little detail like a cat pawing a dead mouse.

When finally I slept, it was only to have the telephone sound off shrilly in my ear. Automatically I snatched it up so that a second ring wouldn’t wake Ellen.

“Hello.” My eyes went to the clock on the bedside table, while Ellen stirred restlessly.

“Hello!” I said it again, louder and more irritably, wondering who would be phoning at this early hour and why there was no answer.

“Sam?” The voice was casual, deliberately casual.

“Who the hell did you think it was?” I muttered. “It’s a bit early for phone calls, my friend.”

He chuckled apologetically. “Sorry, old man, but I’m still glad to hear your cheerful voice. Ellen phoned me late last night, all in a dither because you hadn’t showed up yet. She was afraid something might’ve happened to you. You know how women are.”

I said nothing, and there was an awkward pause.

“Well, old man, just wanted to check, that’s all. I told her that boys would be boys, and you’d probably turn up like the proverbial bad penny.”

“I did,” I answered ungraciously.

Another chuckle, rather uncertain. “Go on back to sleep, Grumpy. And by the way, speaking as your doctor, I wouldn’t advise too many of those late nights. If you have a moment to spare some time this week, I’d better have another look at you.”

I grunted non-committally and hung up. In the next bed Ellen turned restlessly once more, her face towards me. I knew now who “darling” was, as if I didn’t know before.

But that was hardly enough in itself to get bothered about, since almost anything in pants was “darling” to Ellen. I stared across at her, trying to read another answer in those lines which seemed so brittle and guarded even in sleep.

IT HAD been Ellen herself who had heckled me into going to a doctor in the first place. Just one of those typical hus-

band-wife exchanges—or had it been? Now that I thought about it, it hadn't been quite like Ellen. Not quite in character, for Ellen.

She had fixed me with one of those sharp, questioning looks, and I had groaned to myself. Now what? I had wondered.

"Sam, you aren't looking so well."

I had been surprised, a little touched, even. But I had reacted like any husband, impatiently. "Oh, I'm all right. Just a little tired, and this indigestion's been bothering me again."

I hadn't gone on to suggest that something besides canned food and delicatessen suppers might help, since I didn't want to start *that* argument again. Ellen's theory, backed by her nurse's training, was that I ate too heavily—a theory that fit in very well with her own dislike of cooking.

"How long's it been since you had a checkup?"

I shrugged. "Oh, nine, ten months ago. When I took out my last policy."

"Nonsense! That was a year and a half ago, at least."

She was right, of course; Ellen was always right about things like that. I looked it up in my office the next day. One year and seven months—seven months safely past the suicide clause, as I later came to figure it.

But not then. After all, who doesn't have a touch of indigestion once in a while? I promptly forgot the whole thing.

Ellen didn't. I found that out the very next Saturday morning, when I was trying to clean up my work in time for an afternoon of golf.

"Sam, I've made an appointment for you this afternoon with Doug Stoddard. You're to stop by his office on your way home. Any time after two, Doug says."

Even over the phone her voice had brooked no argument, and besides, my troubles had been getting steadily worse. "Okay, baby, if you insist. But why Stoddard? There's Delong in the building right next door here—the man we send all our applicants to."

"You know why," she told me reproachfully. "Doug's trying hard to get established, and every dollar counts. Besides, he's got time to be thorough, a lot more thorough than some older doctor

with more patients than he can handle. Particularly some old fossil who does routine insurance examinations."

I had thought to myself that a few million dollars' worth of life insurance had tested Dr. Delong's ability far beyond that of a youngster whom we only knew socially, but I didn't argue the point.

I knew she liked Stoddard, and maybe that was why I didn't argue with her. I knew how much she liked the handsome young doctor, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing my jealousy. Besides, there was nothing seriously wrong with me.

So that afternoon I stopped off at the smart, modern little medical center of our smart, modern little community. Douglas Ramford Stoddard, M.D., greeted me with a smile as fresh as the paint on his shingle, called me "Sam" on the basis of our country-club acquaintanceship—and proceeded to give me the works with the same breezy enthusiasm he used on golf balls and attractive country-club wives.

He seemed to find everything satisfactory until I casually mentioned my indigestion. That was all he needed to prove how really thorough he could be.

I finally made my escape with a prescription, a lot of earnest and disheartening advice on diet—and a feeling for the first time that possibly something was drastically wrong with me.

Doctor Stoddard was very definite on the point that I should see him again immediately if my discomfort persisted.

I SAW him again sooner than I had expected. Sunday evening, as a matter of fact. I had spent a healthy, lazy day at the club, and we had come home for one of Ellen's "sensible" suppers of tea and scrambled eggs, and then . . .

Well, I was feeling too weak and shaken even to be relieved when Stoddard finally got there, and his long face did nothing at all to cheer me up.

I don't know what he told Ellen—they closed the door behind them—but I did gather that he wanted to make a complete series of tests just as soon as I was up to it.

This time he really proved his thoroughness, with every form of torture and humility that the nearest hospital could

provide. The works. He didn't miss a trick.

The results were no more encouraging than the two days of tests. Dr. Stoddard frowned at the x-ray plates mysteriously and refused to give me his verdict. "I want a good specialist to look at these first," he said gloomily.

I went back to work the next morning, despite Ellen's protest, and I was beginning to feel like a human being again—until Stoddard's call came in the middle of the afternoon.

I thought that in itself was strange, since it was a toll call across the bay and he could have reached me at home that evening. His voice was even stranger.

"Your report has come back, old man, and—well, nothing conclusive, you understand, but I would like to see you this evening. No, let's make it my office, say seven-thirty."

He was wearing the same phony smile when I walked in this time, but it changed just as quickly into a medical frown as I sat down in the chair across his desk.

The frown was directed at a file folder open on the blotter before him. He avoided my eyes. "Sam, old man, to be quite frank I haven't had much experience at this sort of thing and . . ."

I grunted.

"Not the medical end, you understand," he went on hastily. "I'm thinking of the psychological aspects. I know what I'd want somebody to tell me, under the same circumstances, but . . ."

He paused again, and then stumbled on. "I may be wrong, but for the sake of discussion we'll call it a gastric ulcer."

"And it may be something worse than that?" I said. "Something . . . incurable?"

He was still staring down at that damned folder, tapping it with a nervous finger, and for a second I thought he hadn't heard me. Then he said softly, without looking up, "Doctors aren't supposed to use that word, old man, but as a friend . . . well, hell, we all have to go some time, and I hope your affairs are in order."

I managed a bitter grin. "I'm the guy who sells life insurance, remember?" Then I lost my temper. "Look, Doc, I'm an adult and I can take it as well as the next. Quit stalling. Just give it to me straight."

He wagged his head at me, with a grin as cheerful as a priest's final absolution. "It's still an ulcer, Sam, and that's the way we're going to treat it."

I glared back at him, and in that moment the phone rang. Stoddard reached absent-mindedly, hesitated, and then went out to take the call in his anteroom.

He wasn't gone long, only a few seconds. But long enough for me to take a quick look at that letter he had shoved hastily but not completely back into the folder. The last few sentences were enough, and the signature underneath. Benjamin Weisman, M.D., the specialist who had seen the x-rays.

I got up as Stoddard hurried back in, and I didn't feel anything yet. Only numb, like a man who has just read his own death warrant.

Stoddard tried to stop me, his eyes troubled. "Sam, you—uh, I mean chin up and all that sort of thing? You won't . . ."

I just grinned at him and walked on out. I knew what he was thinking of, what I was remembering now. My own words, come home to roost. Light words, thoughtless words, tossed off in a stupid discussion at a cocktail party several weeks before.

Somebody with more Martinis than sense had proposed that old one: "What would *you* do if you found out you had only six months to live?"

And my glib answer: "I know what *I'd* do, all right. None of this dying by inches for little Sammy. I'd have myself one grand fling—and then oblige everybody by flinging myself. Right off the Bay Bridge, period."

BUT I hadn't, of course.

And what *does* a man do when his time is running out?

He just goes on and on. He drives himself at the office, trying to get things lined up. He drives over that Bay Bridge in the morning on his way to work—and it's still waiting for him when he returns home at night.

He tries to hide his suffering and his fear from his wife. But if his wife had once been a nurse and knew all the answers . . .

Ellen knew, and her sudden, overwhelming solicitude was even harder to

take than her previous indifference. In fact, Ellen—I was ashamed of myself for thinking—lacked only one thing to make complete her role as the brave young widow: I hadn't died yet.

And to admit the brutal truth, I couldn't see her wasting many tears. Not while she was still young and attractive, not with Doug Stoddard around to comfort her, and a small fortune in life insurance. I realized only too well that my death was going to provide her with a degree of freedom and luxury such as I had never been able to furnish alive.

And what does a man do when he thinks his time is nearly up? He tries to tell himself it's all a mistake.

Yesterday I called Delong, our agency doctor. "A friend of mine," I said, and described all the symptoms. What did he think?

"I wouldn't pass him for insurance, that's certain. What'd this guy's own doctor tell him?"

"Gastric ulcer, or so he said. Gave him some stuff called Amphojel to take. Could that be causing it?"

Delong snorted. "Fine . . . for gastric ulcer. And sometimes, even when it *isn't* just an ulcer, it's better to kid the patient along. All depends."

"But wouldn't you—shouldn't he see a specialist?"

"Damn right, he should see a specialist! Didn't his doctor call in a gastro-enterologist?"

"Who would *you* recommend?"

"Weisman," the answer came back promptly. "Ben Weisman, the best man on the Coast."

Weisman was the man who had signed that letter.

* * *

So there had been my answer, and that dinner at Dario's last night was to have been my final fling. But here I was now, back in my own bed and remembering it all as a nightmare.

And had that look of disappointment, of frustrated anticipation, been only my imagination? Part of the same nightmare?

I glanced across at Ellen again, trying to read beneath the cold mask of her sleeping face. She opened her eyes suddenly,

blinking at me, and our looks froze together as if we were both thinking the same thought.

Then she raised up on one slender elbow, twisting around to look at clock on the bedside table. "Sam, it's nearly eight-thirty. Aren't you going to the office today?"

I shrugged and climbed slowly out of bed. I came back a moment later, holding a small bottle. Her eyes narrowed, then fastened on mine.

"Where did you find *that*?"

"In your cosmetics drawer. Hidden way back. While I was looking for the iodine last night. What is it, Ellen?"

Her eyes widened. "Can't you . . . guess?"

"Sure," I said wryly, and read the label. "Apomorphine."

"And you still don't know?"

Her dismay was obvious, quite openly obvious. I looked at the label again. Amphojel, the stuff I'd been taking, was sort of a white jelly. But this was Apomorphine, a white powder. Apo . . . of course! Morphine.

"Doug gave me that, Sam," she was saying quietly. "Just in case—well, in case the pain got too severe. You weren't supposed to find it, you know."

I turned away quickly, so that she wouldn't see the shame that showed in my face.

ONE thought kept gnawing at my mind, though. That dinner I'd eaten at Dario's—it should have been poison to me. But I felt fine. Better than I'd felt after any of Ellen's meals. So like a fool, hoping against hope, I went on pestering the doctors.

I phoned Dr. Weisman for an appointment this morning, and this afternoon I went to see him.

He was a stout, rumped-looking gentleman with an enormous bald head, and he must have known his stuff, because his reputation had withstood his personality. He made no effort to conceal the fact that I was wasting his valuable time.

"You didn't give the girl full information," he accused me. "You said you had never been here before, but—"

"I haven't. I just want—"

"Your name is in the file," he went on

gruffly. "Less than two weeks ago"—he glanced at the paper on his desk—"only two weeks ago, Dr. Stoddard referred your case to me. You had a complete examination, and I, personally, examined the plates."

"I saw your report, Doctor. Stoddard tried to kid me along, but—"

Weisman interrupted with a big hand. "Please, Mr. Hagan. I can only tell you what I wrote to Dr. Stoddard, and what he told you. The x-rays were negative."

"What!"

"Perhaps," said Weisman softly, "perhaps your trouble is not organic, Mr. Hagan. Perhaps a psychiatrist . . ."

"Psychiatrist, nuts!" I exploded. "Not after what I've been through. And I tell you, Doctor, I *saw* that letter you wrote."

"But that—that letter should have told you—"

"It told me, all right! Incurable cancer. Or the way you put it: 'gastric carcinoma, in my opinion, inoperable.' Signed: Benjamin Weisman, M.D. It told me, all right!"

Weisman had become a bit agitated himself. "Never, never, Mr. Hagan! You say things that aren't so. Here."

He shoved a carbon copy across his desk. To Dr. Douglas Stoddard. Re: Samuel Hagan. A lot of words I didn't understand, but enough of them that I did . . .

I read and re-read, and I heard Weisman's deep rumble, too. Something about another set of x-rays, another patient of Stoddard's.

Finally I looked up. It takes a while to cure a fear you've lived with for days. "But the symptoms, Doctor? The nausea, the pain?"

He shrugged. "I didn't see all the tests."

"And Stoddard himself gave me some stuff—amphojel—to take after every meal."

Again that shrug, in the cautious, we-boys-must-stick-together manner of doctors.

"Not only that, but he gave my wife some sort of drug for emergencies. Morphine."

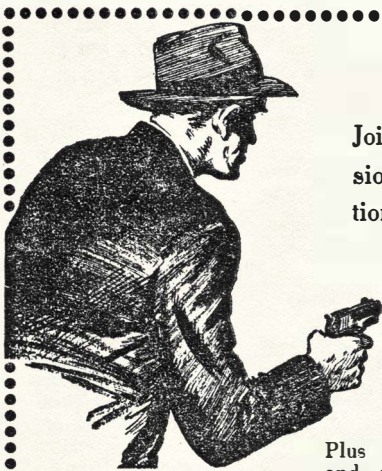
"Morphine?" Doctor Weisman's bushy brows hit highwater mark. "Morphine—and to your wife?"

"Apomorphine, to be exact. She used to be a nurse, so I guess . . ."

Weisman was already dismissing me with a tolerant smile. "You must be mistaken, Mr. Hagan. Apomorphine's not a sedative; in fact, it's a powerful emetic. Why—it would make you sick!"

He pushed a button on his desk. "I'm sure Dr. Stoddard can straighten you out."

(Continued on page 128)



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DEATH'S BRIGHT ANGEL

The Little Angel was the hottest thing in boxing since Dempsey. Maybe he'd have been Champ, too—if only he could have kept his hands off his wife's soft white throat!

CHAPTER ONE

Deadly Angel

THE KID would end it this round, Joe decided, and Joe was right. The kid came out smoothly, but his face was different. His blue eyes were brilliant. He was smiling, and it wasn't a pretty smile. He hit the bigger man with a left, then dropped him with a right. The kid didn't want to move. The referee shoved him back and the bigger man finally got up. He didn't really know he was getting up, Joe knew. One stubborn corner of his fighter's brain was pursuing the habit of vanished and happier years.



By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

But the kid was glad he'd gotten up. The kid wanted one more chance. He did it the mean way. With a left he snapped the bigger man's jaw around, then smashed it with a right. The sound of it, brutal and strong, went over Joe's head and into the darkness of the warm June night. Oddly, for a moment there was no roar. There was only a hypnotized fascination. Then the roar came. Joe watched the kid, and slowly the look of innocence came back across the blond face. The

eyes seemed to pity the unconscious man.

"You little angel," Joe murmured. "Won't they love you in New York!"

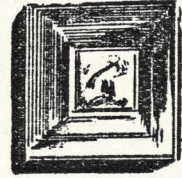
An hour later the kid came into the drab little office under the grandstand where Joe was smoking. "Did you like the fight, Mr. Macon?" His voice was almost timid. Joe shook his head.

"You should have won in the second."

"I could have. I could have won in the first. I just wanted to hit him."

Joe shook his head slowly. "Sorry.

*Gripping Novelette
of
Murder in the
Ring*



"No cause for alarm," Joe heard himself telling the desk clerk. "Not any more. She's dead."

It was still a bad fight. Maybe next year. Write me a letter telling me how you do." Joe stood up, and suddenly there were tears in the kid's eyes—tears of hate, and the same expression of momentary insanity. He wants to kill me, Joe thought.

"I'm ready now!" the kid raged. "Give me a chance! I'll show you!"

Joe shook his head. "Fifty grand is too much chance, Freddie. Some other time, maybe. Good luck, anyway."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Macon." He said

Mr., but what he meant was something far from that. Slowly he came across the little room. "All right, you can have my contract for nothing. You know I'll never get a chance unless I'm fighting for your outfit. You know it and I know it. Okay?"

"Freddie," Joe said quietly, "I know anything you could tell me, probably. I didn't ask you to be a fighter. My advice always is, get out of it."

"I don't like advice, Mr. Macon."

"And that's one more thing, Freddie.

When you work for us, you'll make money, but you'll also take advice."

AN HOUR after, Joe telephoned Nick Sain in New York at the Manhattan Sporting Club. "Well, I got him, and he'll be the cutest thing you've ever seen. They'll write books about this little angel. Little Angel, Nick, that's what you've got to name him."

"Sure, sure, but how much?" Nick asked impatiently.

"As I recall," Joe said comfortably from his hotel bed, "we spoke of a little bonus. Half of anything under a hundred grand was mine, yes?"

"Yes, Joey, always, but how much?" Nick asked nervously.

Joe laughed. "For free, Nick. For free and hate. I think I understand this little angel. I think I can play on him like a flute."

After a long time Nick said, "Yes, Joey. It is nice to hear from you."

Joe kept laughing after Nick had hung up. He wouldn't stick Nick for the whole bonus. It would hurt Nick's feelings. Just enough to make it a good day for a young man trying to get rich.

He walked over to the window and stared down at the traffic. Loneliness seized him as it always did when he left New York. He wondered what people did in towns like this—not much that was interesting, he decided. He thought of Freddie Ambler, but even his fascination with Freddie had vanished. Some day the kid would sink himself; Joe knew it, and probably the kid did. The kid was smart—strange-smart, but with something missing, maybe. Not that it mattered much.

* * *

At sundown the next day the plane drifted over Manhattan and sank down toward LaGuardia Field. Joe drew a deep breath, and a feeling of living came back to him. His dark eyes brightened. He was tall and lean and he walked swiftly from the plane to the cab stand in front of the terminal.

From his apartment on West Fortyninth Street, he called Sally. "Hello. I'm coming down," he said.

Her place was in the Village on Thirteenth. She'd left the door unlocked, and when he came in she called from the bedroom, "Just a second."

Joe sat down at the piano and played. He played with four fingers, and nothing but hymns that a Negro trainer had once taught him. Sally came in quietly and leaned over to kiss his neck. He finished the hymn with his eyes closed, then stood up and kissed her on the lips, hard, then softly. She was the most beautiful girl Joe had ever kissed. Her hair was the color of sunlight on copper. She was tall and curved and her eyes were dark brown. "How was it?" she asked. Her voice was unhurried.

"The kiss was fine. The trip was all right. I'm glad to be back."

"Want a Martini?"

"Yes." He leaned in the doorway of the kitchenette while she mixed them. "This kid is different. He'll be terrific unless something explodes inside him, and I don't mean in the ring. He's really not a kid. Twenty-five years old. Freddie Ambler's his name. He fought a little in college and gave it up. Went on and got a law degree, settled down in some town to practice. Then something must have happened—don't ask me what. He starts himself out on the tank circuit and murders everybody he catches. And he's being foxy all the time. He owns himself and manages himself. He's a lawyer, he says, so here he goes. Wanted fifty grand for himself to sign with us."

Sally looked up slowly. "Don't tell me. I'll guess. Zero."

Joe smiled. "It's quite interesting. I can *feel* him. I knew from the first he hated me, and it made everything simple."

"Joe," Sally said after a moment, "where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Where?" Then he stopped and frowned. "Do I have to decide tonight?"

"Oh, no. Just let me know, if you ever do. It intrigues me." She held out a Martini. "Welcome home, Joe. I'd like to see the lad some day."

"The day will come, Little Girl," Joe promised.

IT CAME two months later in a four-round prelim at the Stadium, when Little Angel Ambler met Tony Sands.

Joe took Sally. She'd seen no more than half a dozen fights in her life. "Will he win?" she asked innocently.

"It is not *will* he, but *how* will he," Joe said. "Sands is smart, but he was old when you were born."

"He looks it," Sally said. The bell rang.

The Angel came out as daintily as a debutante at the Ritz, and he was every bit as pretty. Sands was neither dainty nor pretty. He waited, looking the kid over. Then he moved out with a tentative left. It caught the kid as a handkerchief would catch on a violet, but no more. The mistake was the smile. Sands smiled at him. He must have said something, too, to the kid.

Freddie hit him with a right and Joe knew the fight had ended. He knew it as he watched Sands' bulk go lumbering backward to hang on the ropes. The brown eyes were lost. The flabby arms were down. But Freddie was still thinking of the smile. He followed the baggy figure into the ropes and propped it there with a left under the chin. Then the rights began to work. The crowd was screaming. The referee was screaming. Freddie was smiling. Sands had been unconscious from the first. At last the referee dragged Freddie away and Sands went down. Joe was standing on his chair, looking.

"That was fast," Sally said. "I see, now, what you mean."

Joe didn't hear her. He was watching Sands through the tangle of legs around him. Then they were carrying him out. Freddie had left the ring. The crowd was still howling when Joe got down off his chair, and Sally peered at him.

"What's the matter with your face?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"I don't know," he said. "Come on. You've seen the party." He took her hand and they pushed their way up the aisle. Joe turned toward Freddie's dressing room and met Nick Sain coming from another aisle. Nick was a scrawny, worn-faced little man, always in a bow-tie. At the moment he was sweating, and his three-dollar toupee was askew.

"It didn't look so nice, huh, Joe?" he whispered uneasily.

"It wasn't like a mother with her child,

no," Joe agreed. "I'll try to find out. Sally, you stay in here." He pushed her into a room whose odors were those of sweat, liniment and men. Nick followed. Forty minutes later Joe returned. He closed the door behind him and Nick got off a chair.

"Dead," Joe said. "Broken neck." He looked over Nick's shoulder. Sally was smoking a cigarette and sitting on a desk. Freddie was dressed in street clothes and eating an apple. He was saying something to her between mouthfuls, and Sally was smiling—the way you would smile at a cobra.

"Take a walk with Nick. I'll meet you outside," Joe told her. She looked at him and began walking. Freddie continued to eat the apple, but more slowly. Joe studied the tiny lines in the corners of his eyes. He looked at the mouth. He breathed softly and slowly. "You didn't need to kill the guy," he said quietly. "You had him and you knew it. You wanted to kill him, and by God, you did."

Freddie took another bite of apple. "When do I fight again, Mr. Macon?" he asked pleasantly.

"Get rid of that apple. Throw it away and answer me! Why did you kill him?" Joe demanded. The kid dropped the apple on the floor. He smiled and shrugged at Joe.

"You didn't like my last fight. I thought you'd like this one."

Joe cursed softly. "Pick up your damned apple and get out."

Slowly and insolently the kid picked up the sawdust-coated apple and took a bite. "You said I'd learn to take advice, Mr. Macon," he reminded Joe. He walked out and at last Joe managed to breathe again.

"I hate him, yes," he said to himself, "but brother, how he scares me."

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl from Memphis

BECAUSE Sands had been old and once had had a neck injury, the kid was given a clean bill finally. "This next time," Joe said to Nick, "let's give him a partner who wants to stay alive and knows how to do it."

Nick rubbed at his jaw. "I'm thinking of Jackie Stone." He studied Joe. If he'd thought Joe would be dismayed, he was wrong. Joe nodded.

"Jackie or better," he said. Jackie was the ex-champ of the weight above. He was hard, tough and mean.

Nick shoved some papers around on his desk. "It's strange, Joey, but inside me I wish it wasn't happening. Never had a feeling like this before. Always a fight is a fight, a fighter is just a name. This time . . ." He shook his head. "I don't sleep good, seeing his face, Joe."

"Interesting," Joe said drily. "You tell me your dreams, I'll tell you mine." He picked his coat up and went into his office where, technically, he functioned as the press agent of the Manhattan Sporting Club. Joe had once been a sports writer until Nick had claimed him. To his friends Nick had said this of Joe: "Smart. Like me, that is Joe." No higher praise could Nick give.

Joe was sitting there in the late afternoon of July at his desk. The building had grown quiet. The rustling of brooms sounded from the hall, and that was all until a janitor opened the door and said, "A lady looking for you, Mr. Macon."

She came in. When he saw her, Joe got up. She was a lady. Young and pretty in a shy way, with great brown eyes and a sweet mouth, and a look of clean wind and sunlight on her face. If she is over twenty-two, Joe thought, then I am Tut's great-uncle. "Hello," he said. "I'm Joe Macon. Sit down."

"I'm Joan West," she said. Her voice fitted. "You don't know me. I'm sorry to bother you. I read in the paper in Memphis—Memphis is home," she explained. "I read something you'd told the newspapers about a boxer who worked for you. His name is Freddie Ambler."

Something in that last second had told Joe that this was coming. He began to smile again and lit a cigarette. "Yes, I . . . You know him?"

"I was—used to be married to him for just a little while." She blushed. It was the nicest blush Joe had ever seen.

"Oh," he said. "I hadn't heard. West, didn't you say?"

She nodded. "I changed it back after—after everything. But that's why I had

to come up here and talk to somebody who would listen. I—Mr. Macon, please, I know this sounds silly, but Freddie isn't like other people these days. He mustn't fight! Something terrible will happen. I know it will, and . . ." Then she began to cry. Joe went around the desk and pulled out his handkerchief. He was standing there when the janitor opened the door.

"Mr. Macon," he said jerkily. "Something's happened. You better see."

Joe straightened and frowned, then followed the man into the corridor, closing the door. "Downstairs. Downstairs in the gym," the man said. "We just found it. You look."

Joe started to ask a question, then turned and strode down the hall, down the steps, and past the swinging doors into the low, long gym. Another janitor was standing near a far corner. Joe approached, and then he stopped. There lay Brownie, the huge brown mongrel dog that somehow, years before, had adopted the Club as his home. He had been tied to a radiator pipe. He had been beaten to death. There was blood on the walls around the corner, blood on the floor, blood on Brownie's chops and teeth.

Slowly Joe looked up at the janitor. "You just found it?" The man nodded. "Nobody was in here?" The man shook his head. "Everybody left when?" Joe asked with cold curiosity.

The man frowned. "Hour, maybe more, ago. Ambler, he left last."

"Did he?" Joe dropped his cigarette and rubbed his hand across his chin. Slowly he crossed the training gym to the locker room and opened Freddie's closet. There, hanging on a hook, were the blood-stained and tooth-shredded gloves that Freddie Ambler had worn when he had beaten the dog to death.

Joe felt a sickness at his stomach. It was worse, worse somehow, than if Brownie had been a man. He stood there swallowing a thick taste in his mouth. Then at last he took the gloves off their hook and moved them to his own locker and snapped the lock.

"Put the dog in the trash," he said to the janitor. "I wouldn't talk too much about it, either."

Joan West was still sitting in the chair

where Joe had left her. "I would like a drink, wouldn't you?" he said. "Let's get out of here."

IT WAS nine o'clock when they left Parlo's Restaurant and walked along Forty-sixth Street to Joan's hotel on Madison Avenue. The night was warm, and suddenly it seemed less like New York. For a moment Joe imagined that this was the way it would be in a thousand little towns when you walked your girl home from the show-and-soda.

"I think maybe Freddie better not know you're in New York," he said in the lobby. "You'll be here for a few days?"

"Yes. I've got to see it through. I keep thinking it's partly my fault."

"I wouldn't, if I were you. Stay away from the Club. This is something we'll have to think over. Good-night."

"Good-night," she said. Joe watched her going toward the elevator. And once she was married to Freddie, he thought. It made him want to be sick again. He took a cab up to Nick Sain's apartment on Central Park West and got the scrawny little man out of bed.

"Before starting, I'll say only this: I have not been drinking, and the girl who told me couldn't tell a lie if she had to. Sit down and listen to the facts of Freddie Ambler." Joe walked restlessly around Nick's living room as he talked. "This sweet child grew up with him, practically next door, in a little town outside of Memphis. This is in Tennessee, Nick. In those days he was the town darling—good in school, good in church, sweet to his mother, and he always did what his father told him. There was only one flaw in Freddie then: He was yellow and everybody knew it. He used to run and hide. He wasn't just scared—he used to go almost nutty when the big boys boxed him in. That was years ago, in short pants, Nick. Then he went to a little college—the same college Joan went to. He got there first, being older. All the time, she says, he was trying to beat the yellow streak. He told her about it, being in love, see? He wanted to be a great fighter to show 'em."

Nick said he guessed he saw. What else?

"He told her how he tried to beat it. He burned himself with matches; he stuck pins under his fingernails. He even played the old Russian roulette with a revolver. All that he could take, but when it came to something where he had to tangle with another guy, he screamed. She told him to forget it. Who needs to have big brave fights, anyway? But he couldn't chew that. By that time it was what he was living for. Finally, as you could guess, he had himself a good big breakdown and spent a while soaking up the sunshine on a farm. He came back quiet and dreamy. All over the old business; settled down, see. Then came the war. He didn't see too much of it. When he came back to finish college, he and Joan got married. He was very quiet, always, very calm. Never raised his voice. But always looking a little over his shoulder at something that wasn't there. Get the picture?"

"Yeah. What next?"

"This is where we get to the part that hurts," Joe said. "They had a baby. This was over two years ago. The kid yelled, the way kids do. Freddie didn't like it. One day Joan went shopping or something. When she came back and looked in the crib—guess what, Nick?"

Nick ran his tongue over his lip. "Not to a kid, Joe?" he whispered.

"To a kid four months old," Joe said quietly. "Dead. Freddie was sitting there like a guy in a trance. And he was saying, 'It wasn't hard. No, it wasn't hard. It was easy. I didn't need to be afraid so long. . . .'"

Joe lit another cigarette. "Well, so there was Joan. She could call the cops, but she didn't. A part of her still loved him, see, and she couldn't turn him in. She finally made up a story that she dropped the kid down the stairs. All this time Freddie was getting quieter and dreamier; he had found the key to the world—the answer to everything. He had a fight there, then another fight there. All his life he'd been taking fight lessons, but now for the first time he could make the wheels work. He was the guy. And Joan was going crazy. She was young and scared and, as I said, a part of her still loved him.

"Then one night he told her that, most of all, he wanted to kill *her*. He told her

in bed in the darkness—whispered it, like you would say, I love you, Baby. Then she felt his hands—cold—and he was starting to knead her throat very gently. It was a miracle; she slammed him with the bedside table lamp and left in her nightgown, hysterical, in the rain or snow, I forgot which. She took a trip to Reno, sort of mixing a divorce with a breakdown, see? She tried to remember things, and sometimes she wonders if *she* maybe wasn't the crazy one. But that was the end of the marriage and the last she saw of Freddie. But the other day she read about Freddie killing Sands, so here she is now. Twenty-one, a sweet, shy little girl who still has a corner of her heart where she remembers this guy, but she knows he's poison. That's all, Nick, except," Joe added, "Freddie had a little steam left over today, so he beat the brown dog to pieces in the gym."

Nick started out of his chair, then sank back. His withered little face was damp with sweat. "Joe," he said, "this is no good."

"Right," Joe agreed. "So it's okay with you to hand him to the boys in the white coats?"

"As fast as you can, Joe," Nick said uneasily. "Tonight. I'm going to take an aspirin and brandy."

"Take one for me," Joe said, and went downstairs to grab a cab.

ELLIS, the Assistant District Attorney, was a tall, grey, dour-faced man. "All we can do," he said finally, "is arrest him and reopen the Sands death investigation. Everything else is too old or happened somewhere else or couldn't be made to stick." He sighed gloomily. "Proving a man crazy is harder than people think. If every crazy man was in jail, who'd be the jailer?"

Joe didn't argue with him.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, a thick-shouldered man with a cigar arrived at Joe's office. He was Detective Marsalla, he revealed without particular enthusiasm. "Has this guy Freddie Ambler been around here this morning?"

"I haven't seen him. Haven't you found him yet?"

Marsalla shook his head. "He didn't spend the night in his hotel suite—or if

he did, he didn't sleep in the bed." Marsalla squinted. "Is he a playboy? Do his training in bars much?"

"No," said Joe, uneasiness wandering through him. "No, he's the sweetest little lad in the world about rules. And so I don't like it. Let's look downstairs."

But in the gym, no one had seen Freddie. Marsalla shrugged and said, "Let me know if he happens around." But something told Joe that Freddie wasn't going to happen around. He thought it over for a while.

Yesterday afternoon Freddie had been at the gym training late. Joan had come. Then there had been a blank in which Freddie had disappeared. Joe wondered if Freddie had caught a glimpse of the little girl he'd once wanted to kill.

Joe stopped thinking. The clerk at the hotel on Madison Avenue told him that her room was 1206. The cardboard sign was hanging on the knob: Do Not Disturb. Joe knocked. He knocked again. The door was locked. He kept knocking for five minutes. It didn't seem logical to him that she'd go off somewhere, leaving the sign out.

The assistant manager was a frail man with faded blond hair and an air of anxiety. He said it wasn't at all customary; he kept looking at Joe as if he could smell Joe, and not pleasantly. But finally he unlocked the door of 1206. He went in first. He was saying something about, "As you see, Mr. Macon, there is no cause for alarm in—" He stopped saying it. He stood very still, then stepped back with a sort of half grunt.

Joe moved him aside and walked past him into the room where it widened beyond the entry hall and closet. Sunlight came through the window. There was a mail-order portrait of some saint on the wall, and a flowery rug on the floor. And on the bed was Joan. She was dressed. Even her shoes were on. But she was dead. He could tell by the color of her throat.

"No," Joe heard himself saying to the frail man. "No cause for alarm. Not any more."

"Ghastly. Oh, how ghastly," whispered the frail man.

"Close your eyes." Joe picked up the telephone and dialed. "Is this Assistant

District Attorney Ellis?" he inquired. "The one who didn't have anything to stick Freddie Ambler with last night? Well, the room number is 1206, and my opinion is that you've got something now."

Joe didn't really feel that way. He felt worse than he had ever felt before. He didn't want to stay in the room. He pushed the frail man out and closed the door behind them. He lit a cigarette and, standing there, he could still remember her eyes and the words she'd spoken last night. He remembered the strange serenity as they'd walked back to this same hotel: *Just like in a little town, after the show-and-soda*, he was thinking. Except that in little towns, crazy killers weren't walking behind you.

CHAPTER THREE

Cornered

IT WAS nine o'clock that night. Sally opened her front door when Joe rang the third time. "Well, the wandering genius," she began. "How is . . . Joe, what's the matter with you?"

"How are your Martinis this evening?"

He sat down at the piano. It was as good a place as any to sit. Sally didn't say anything else. She made a pitcher of Martinis and brought them in. Joe was playing one of the hymns that the Negro trainer had taught him. He finished it before he took a drink. "I'm tired," he said.

"Do you want to tell me why?" she asked slowly. "That's why you came, isn't it?" It was, Joe knew. He wanted to tell—*had* to tell—someone, and Sally was the only one in New York or anywhere. It had been strange to realize it, an hour ago in a midtown bar. Sally was the only one in New York that he wanted to talk to.

So he told her about Joan and Freddie, and about Brownie, the dog; then he told her about today and about a room numbered 1206. He forgot to drink the Martinis. Sally didn't say anything, but her eyes never left his as he talked.

"And they haven't found him yet?" she asked finally.

"Not yet," Joe said. He rose and walked around. Then he started to laugh.

"And there's a terrific angle to it," he said. The laughter wasn't funny. "A doctor from the psychopathic ward was there. He listened and bounced his watch chain, then he gave with a theory. The theory," Joe said slowly, "is this: Now Freddie has killed Joan, the person he hated most, so he will transfer his murder-impulse to me, because he hates me and I will be tied up in his mind with his wife. We walked home last night, etc., etc. Don't ask me for pictures and floor plans. I'm only saying what they said." Again he began to laugh. "I must be careful and watch over my shoulder, it says, or the Little Angel will have me. I even have a plainclothes flat-foot behind me. If you don't believe me, step to the window and look at the sidewalk across the street." He smiled. "My dear Irish mother always said there would be days when nothing went right and—"

"Oh, shut up and stop acting like a damn fool!" Sally said. "It isn't funny."

"No," Joe said, "it isn't funny at all, is it?"

He sat down at the piano again and started to play. He was tired. Even his fingers felt tired.

She touched his shoulder. "For God's sake, quit playing those damned hymns!" she said. "Can't you tell when a girl wants kissing?"

* * *

There was a novelty, Joe admitted, in being guarded by a detective. There was a novelty of a sort in wondering if now, around this corner, behind this door, within this next instant, he would meet Freddie and Freddie would have a gun or a knife. A novelty, yes, but it faded after the second day.

The detective's name was Haymes. At night the detective's name was Peacock. They were bored, both of them. Once Joe asked Peacock to have a drink and go home for the day; nothing was going to happen. Peacock took the drink, but two hours later Joe noticed that he was still being followed by Peacock. The third day it began to get on his nerves. He started phoning Ellis three and four times a day, but there was never any news on Freddie. Nobody had seen him. It took time. Everything always took time.

That night Joe took Sally to a show.

She looked tired and when she laughed her laughter was faded. When he asked her, she said simply, "I'm afraid, that's all. I can still see him, and I'm afraid."

Peacock was following them that night, and Joe asked him to have another drink. It was raining and Peacock had a cold. His worn, round face was weary, and again Joe told him to go home and forget it.

"The creeps. It gives me the creeps," Sally said later when he kissed her at the door. She held to him and looked in his eyes. "Joe, have you ever thought of going away?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Somewhere where you don't have to be smarter than four other guys at the same time. Where you don't have to be in a hurry. Have you thought of it?"

"What would I do, sell candy and cakes?"

"Why not?" Then she shook her head. "No, don't answer. I know why not. It wouldn't be smarter than four other guys, and you'd never make a million. Good-night, Joe." She closed the door very quickly. Joe walked for many blocks, even though it was raining. It had been strange, the way Sally had picked tonight to bring it up. It stuck in his mind, and he remembered again the feeling of that night, walking to the hotel with Joan.

At the door of his apartment building, he looked back to wave good-night to Peacock. The usual answering wave wasn't there; Peacock wasn't there. He'd gone home, Joe decided, to fix the cold. Joe was glad.

THE RAIN beat softly against Joe's living-room window. The neon lights of Broadway spread a crimson glow against the moist sky. He was restless, and the silence nagged him. He was dissatisfied—not with just tonight or yesterday, but with the whole string of weeks and months, and with tomorrow and the weeks ahead.

He turned out the light and went to bed. He switched on the radio and caught Benny Twilight, the disc jockey. Joe lay there smoking, half listening to the radio and half listening to the rain. Then the telephone began to ring in the front room.

It was Ellis, and his voice was rusty-sounding. "Macon? Are you all right?" he wanted to know.

"Is anything the matter?" It was a foolish question. Joe knew something wasn't all right from the sound of Ellis' voice.

"Don't open your door tonight. Keep it locked. If you've got a fire escape window . . . Listen, I think you better move to a hotel tonight. You get moved to a hotel and call me, so I'll know. Listen, you wait and I'll send a car to see that you get where—"

"Quit telling me to listen, Ellis. What's wrong? Is . . . It isn't Peacock?"

"Yes. Half an hour ago they found him, not far off Fifth Avenue, on Thirteenth Street."

"Dead?" Joe asked. Peacock was dead. "Oh," Joe said slowly, thinking what a terrible cough Peacock had had, thinking how Peacock must have been following him with that terrible cough while he'd walked along Thirteenth from Fifth after leaving Sally's. Then Ellis was talking again: ". . . so you wait for the boys and then you move to a hotel. We ought to put the arm on this guy before long . . ."

"All right, all right," Joe said and hung up. He took a cigarette from the box on the coffee table, then rubbed his hand across the top of his head. Peacock, he kept thinking. It had been a mean cough, but it didn't matter now.

He walked back into the bedroom and pulled his suit out of the closet.

"Going somewhere?"

The voice was sweet and demure as a child's. Joe did not move. He stopped breathing for a while. He straightened slowly and turned, and Freddie was leaning against the wall by the window—the window with the fire escape, the one Ellis had been worrying about. His clothes were wet. His hair was wet, yellow, dripping. His eyes were very bright.

"Hello, Freddie," Joe said. "We've been hunting you lately."

"Why?"

"Just for a talk. Questions and answers, you know."

"She was pretty, wasn't she? Soft. Her neck was real soft down under, Mr. Macon. I always knew it would be soft underneath."

"That was pretty smart of you, Freddie."

"I've got a gun in my pocket, Mr. Macon," Freddie said gently. "You know why?"

"No. You tell me why, Freddie." The room was very small suddenly, very hot and muggy. The sound of the rain seemed to have vanished. Joe swallowed the lump in his throat.

Freddie began to laugh, softly and swiftly. "It was funny, the feeling it gave me. I stood there, watching you and Joan eating in that café, and she was talking. She was talking about me, I knew. I knew because a couple of times she cried. I used to watch her cry a lot, Mr. Macon. It was funny." Freddie stopped laughing. "But she didn't cry when I held her throat. She didn't make a sound. Wasn't that funny?"

"Very. Hilarious. It made you sore, didn't it?"

"A little. Then I got to thinking about you. I think you'll make a sound. Promise me." He smiled gently. "You'll make a sound for me, won't you?" he asked again.

"Sure. Any old sound. Want me to start now?" Joe wiped his wet palms against his pajama pants. "Maybe like a cat at first. Meow! Meow!" Joe kept grinning as he made sounds. There was going to be a hell of a difference in weight and condition in this bout, he thought wryly, not to mention a gun. And sometimes you didn't win the big ones, either, he thought even more wryly. "Meow!" he said again. Then he threw a right—a huge broad-axed right that sailed all around the room and wound up behind Joe's own left shoulder, leaving Freddie grinning at him. Meanwhile Freddie seemed to move his left wrist slightly. A bucket of lead seemed to crash into Joe's nose and he spun violently across the room.

He hit the wall and got up in a fog. He got up just in time to take another left that laid him across a chair. Oddly, it cleared his head with the clarity of desperation. He saw Freddie smiling and reaching for him, scorning the gun. Joe kicked and his bare feet caught Freddie's mouth. Then Joe rolled, hit the floor, and jerked at the bedside lamp cord. The

lamp shattered and darkness plowed through the room. Utter silence came, and then the darkness began to fade as the reflection of the neon lights began to filter through the window and outline the furniture.

Knives in the kitchenette, Joe thought coldly. No gun. Just good dull fifty-cent knives for slicing friendly bread and *salami*.

"Joe, I don't like for people to kick me." Freddie said. He was feeling his way through the darkness, his hand sliding along the wallpaper in search of the overhead light switch. He wasn't afraid, Joe realized. He didn't care whether Joe had a gun. Freddie wasn't afraid of things any more. Freddie was a crazy man with a gun.

Joe found the metal stand of the bedside lamp and his fingers closed over it. Freddie was beside the door now; the switch was beside the door. It snapped and Joe swung. He saw Freddie's lips bleeding, but still he didn't have the gun out. The lamp grazed Freddie's temple, ripped his ear and smashed solidly into his right shoulder with a brutally massive sound that told Joe that bones had broken. Joe swung again. Freddie stretched out his arm and broke the blow, then came in slowly. He was hurt, and his eyes showed it. His face showed it. There was a glaze over his skin, the glaze of sweat and anxiety.

Joe ran, slid away from a corner, then threw the lamp. It caught Freddie full in the face and stopped him. When the lamp fell away, Freddie's mouth was changed. The teeth were tangled with the lips and the blood. Joe slugged him wildly, twice, three times, again.

Freddie was trying to get out the gun, but his right hand was clumsy from the broken bones in the shoulder. And then Joe knew he was going to win this one. It struck him as he saw Freddie's tormented and strangely childish eyes, struggling, confused, and half bewildered at why this was happening, why Joe was here. Joe threw everything in his blows and Freddie began to give backward, stumbling helplessly.

Joe drove him to the window and Freddie clung to the wall. Suddenly he opened

(Continued on page 129)



CLAIRVOYANT CORPSE

It was worth a thousand dollars just for the confusion involved, Private Eye Harry Mills figured. For, on orders from a corpse who wasn't yet dead, he had to find a murderer—who hadn't yet killed!

CHAPTER ONE

The Corpse-To-Be

IT WAS A quiet place in Beverly Hills, a typical Spanish stucco job with roses along the walk and a sense of sunlight and neatness about it. I rang the bell and tipped my hat to the middle-aged woman who opened the door.

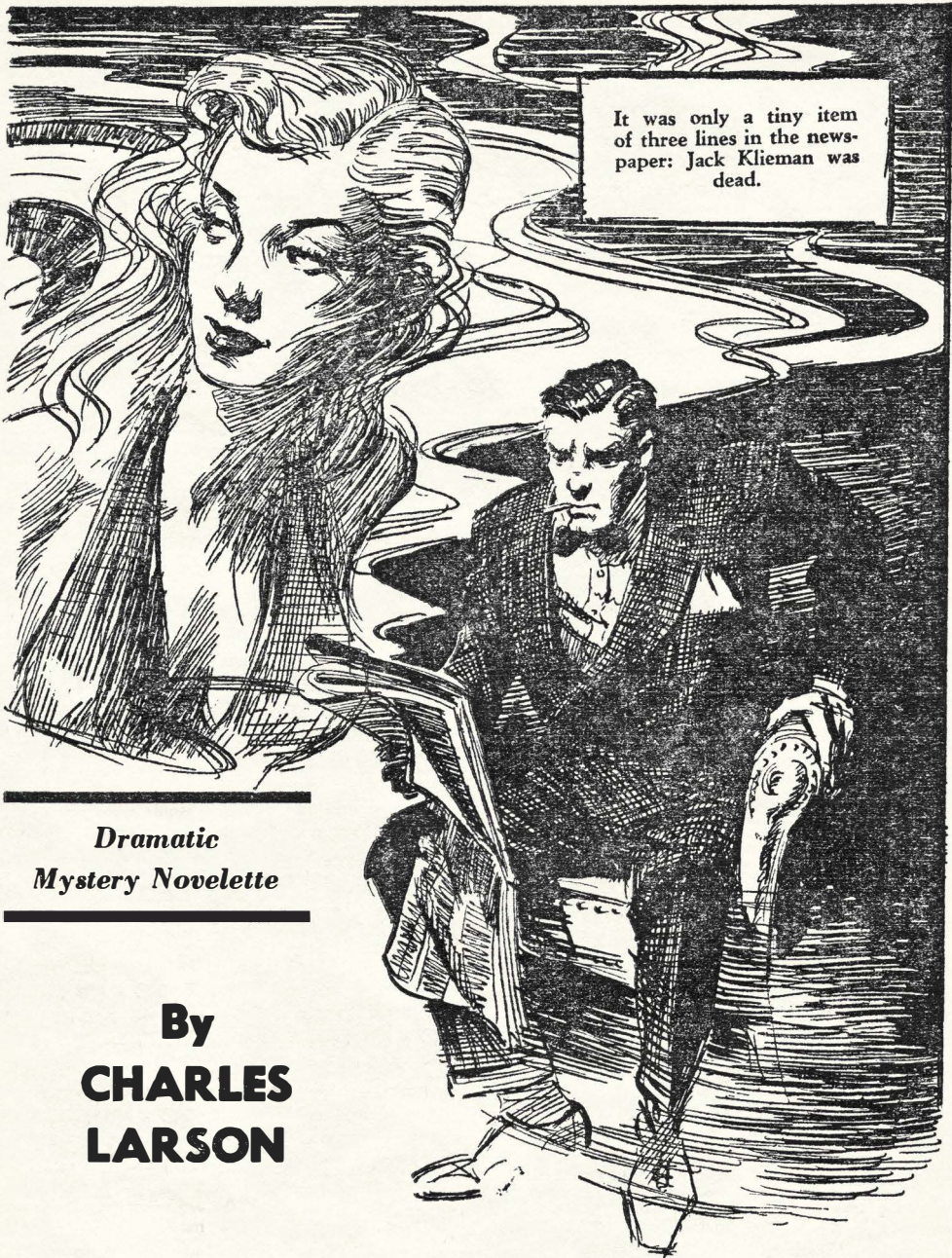
"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Klieman. Jack

Klieman. He lives here, doesn't he?"

In the background I could hear a piano. The touch was good. Not professional, but adequate.

The woman in the doorway smiled vaguely at me. She had one of those open, Midwestern faces you see so often in California. Friendly. Pleasant. She was



*Dramatic
Mystery Novelette*

By
**CHARLES
LARSON**

probably a good cook and a staunch Republican. "Well," she said, "I don't know. Was Mr. Klieman expecting you?"

"He called me this morning. Tell him Mr. Mills is here."

"Mr. Mills," the woman repeated. She continued to peer indecisively at a point just to the left of my nose.

"Look," I said. "If he's busy, I—" "You aren't selling anything, are you?"

I sighed and pushed my hat back on my head. "Lady," I began, "what do you want me to do? Promise I won't rob the house? If Mr. Klieman's in, I'd like to talk to him. If he isn't . . ."

I broke off as a girl in shorts came up

the walk behind me. Her hair was very blonde and her legs were very brown. I can't judge ages worth a damn, but twenty-two might have been about right for her. A tall character with a tennis racket bounded along beside her, looking strong and careless and gay as all get-out. The healthy type, who does hand-stands on the beach.

"Hi," the girl said. She kissed the woman on the cheek and looked curiously at me.

"Georgia," the woman said stiffly, "go see if Daddy's busy. Tell him that a very, very rude man is here to see him."

"The name," I said to the girl, "is Mills."

Puzzled, the girl raised her eyebrows and went on into the house. The tall character brushed by me and stood in the doorway. "Having any trouble with this gentleman, Helen?" he murmured. He tried to drawl his words, as though he'd seen too many Gary Cooper pictures.

"I can handle him," the woman said.

In the back of the house the piano playing stopped, and in a moment the girl returned. "Mr. Mills?" she said. "Will you come this way, please?"

I grinned at the tall character. When I walked by him, I was careful to let him see the butt of the gun beneath my arm. Dramatic, certainly, but worthwhile. It all but straightened the wave in his hair.

The girl led me through a plain, tasteful living room to a den at the rear. A man in his seventies, white haired, turned inquiringly when she opened the door.

"Daddy," the girl said, "this is Mr. Mills."

THE MAN at the piano, Jack Klieman, was big, rawboned, with a quiet smile and empty, blue, blind eyes. He rose and faced me. There was a massive, casual dignity about him, a touch of the Old Testament prophet, or of Samson, perhaps, in the temple. "How do you do, sir?" he said.

I took his outstretched hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Klieman."

Slowly Klieman turned toward the door. The girl had gone, but the door remained open. I went back to it, closed it so that it clicked audibly. Klieman was smiling a little when I returned to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Mills," he murmured. Then, remembering himself, he waved toward one of the chairs. "But sit down. Sit down. I'm not being a very good host, am I?"

It was something to watch him move around that room, as certain and sure of himself as a cat in the dark. Not one hesitating motion betrayed his blindness. He made his way to a portable bar at the back. Over his shoulder he said, "Perhaps you'd like a drink, Mr. Mills?"

It was a little early, but I was fascinated. There were half a dozen bottles before him. "Yeah," I said. "I think I would."

"Bourbon? Scotch?"

"Bourbon. And a little water."

He didn't spill a drop. While he was fixing his own, he said, "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

"Not a bit. But it was touch and go there for a while at the door."

"Eh?"

"The woman of the house didn't want any."

Klieman chuckled. "Oh yes. That was Helen. My wife. I forgot to tell her that you were coming." He handed me my drink and sat down in the chair across from me. He sipped pensively at his own highball and stared at the wall.

I waited. It does no good to hurry a client.

Finally Klieman sighed and set the drink down on a small table, next to an ancient, standard typewriter. "Well, Mr. Mills, you must be wondering why I called you."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose a private detective gets all kinds of odd cases?"

"I've had my share."

"And yet," Klieman murmured almost to himself, "I dare say you've never had one as strange as mine."

Again he fell silent. I got out a cigarette, lit it. Everybody thinks his own troubles are unique in the world. They never are, but you can't tell them that, of course.

Abruptly Klieman raised his head. "Mr. Mills," he said, "I want you to find a murderer for me."

I watched him carefully. "A murderer." I repeated.

"I want you to catch this murderer, and I want you to make him pay for his crime."

"I see." I tapped the edge of my glass against my lower lip. "Excuse me, Mr. Klieman," I said, "but isn't that a job for the police?"

"Not in this case. No."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Klieman reached once more for his glass—"the murder hasn't been committed yet."

I frowned. "But—"

"Oh, you'll have all the information. It won't be a difficult job."

"And just who is going to be murdered?"

He looked at me, his face sincerely surprised. "Haven't I told you?" Laughing, he shook his head, amused at his own forgetfulness. "Why, I am, Mr. Mills. I am."

There was no sound in the room for a long while. I could hear some kids playing outside, very far away. "When?" I asked softly.

"Quite soon. Within a few weeks, I should say."

He spoke as calmly as though we were discussing the weather. I wondered if he were insane. You never knew with these old ducks. "In other words," I said, "you want protection. A bodyguard."

"No, sir. I do not."

"Who's going to kill you, Mr. Klieman?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you just said . . ."

"Excuse me." He was chuckling again. "What I meant was . . . that I *won't* tell you."

I slapped my hat against my leg and stood up. "Well," I said, "it's been dandy knowing you. But I've got no time at all for games. I'll see you around." I started toward the door.

"Wait."

I stopped. He turned his back to me, reached into a drawer and pulled something out. With his other hand he drew his typewriter toward him. Carefully and surely his fingers moved across the keys. He removed the paper from the typewriter and held it out to me. "Mr. Mills," he said, "would you care to have me sign this?"

CURIOUSLY, I took the paper. It was a check. It was made out to me, and it was for one thousand dollars.

I whistled silently.

"Please sit down, Mr. Mills," he said. "And don't talk to me any more about games."

Without a word, I took my seat again. The check felt warm and comfortable in my hand.

"Now then . . ." Klieman said, smiling.

"You type awfully pretty." I said.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I know that I'm offering you a thousand dollars to put my killer in the gas chamber."

"But not," I said, "to protect you from this killer in the first place."

"No."

"Mr. Klieman," I said, "I'm thirty-four years old. I've been around. I've had my good days, and I've been so far down that I thought I'd never get up. But in all my life I've never wanted to stop fighting. Frankly, I don't understand you at all."

"Ah . . ." he replied softly, "but then you've never been seventy-four years old and blind. It's as simple as that." He swung his heavy head toward me, and his empty eyes were as innocent and as wise and as sad as a child's. "How on earth can I explain it to you? What can I say to help you understand? You're so very young, Mr. Mills. You and I cannot possibly agree—even on so simple a subject as dying." He leaned his head against the back of the chair. "Listen to me. For thousands of years novelists and old men have been trying to make the world believe that there's dignity in age. Never believe them. Age is a silly, foolish, embattled thing. You cannot gain anything with age; you can only lose. It's as though Life were a huge bank account. For years and years one does nothing but deposit. Experience. Knowledge. Pleasure. Love. And then, quite suddenly, one finds one's self forced to withdraw. A man finds that his body is wearing out, that his judgment is wavering, that his mind is no longer clear enough to give him pleasure. Resentment won't help. Arguing does no good. Finally, one frightful day, he awakens to find

that he is nearly bankrupt. One thing alone is left to him. The love—or at very least, the toleration—of his fellow men. If he loses that, he loses everything.” Klieman’s voice trailed away. He was still staring at the ceiling. It was as if he had forgotten my presence in the room. Almost to himself, he whispered, “That’s what happened to me, Mr. Mills. Someone hates me enough to want to kill me. Knowing that, how can I have any objection to dying? My account has been closed.”

I watched him silently, trying to figure him out. He hadn’t been kidding when he’d said I’d never had a case as strange as his. Still, there was the question of suicide.

That was when he scared me. Because he said, as casually as though he’d read my mind. “Are you wondering why I haven’t killed myself?”

I started. “Well, as a matter of fact . . .”

“Suicide, Mr. Mills, is a crime. I may be a fool, but I am not a criminal.”

I shook my head. Philosophy had never been my strong point. I decided to try another tack. “A while ago,” I said, “you told me that you knew who your murderer would be. Why won’t you give me his name?”

“Because I’m not quite certain. Perhaps I’ve been over dramatic. Nothing at all may work out the way I expect it to. If that turns out to be the case, I’d consider it a terrible thing—a terrible sin—to have accused someone without reason. I can’t help hoping that I’ve been wrong.”

“And if you’re right?”

“Then I’ll see to it that you get a message. Naturally, I suspect a certain person already. It will all be clarified very soon.”

“That’s all you’ll tell me?”

“That’s all.”

CHAPTER TWO

Man With a Glass Jaw

FOR a very long time we were both silent, thinking our own thoughts.

Then, quietly, Klieman said, “Well, Mr. Mills? Shall I sign the check?”

I wish I’d had the sense to say no. If I had had any idea of the way it was going to work out—but I didn’t. And I’ve got no excuses.

He took the piece of paper as I laid it against his open hand. Wordlessly he placed it within a celluloid rectangle, which had been made in the shape of a check, and which had an inch-high slit cut out directly over the signature line. He signed it and then passed it back to me.

I folded it, placed it in my pocket. “I’d like to ask one or two more questions,” I said.

“Certainly.”

“Have you any family—outside of your wife and daughter—living here in Los Angeles?”

“None.”

“How long have you and your wife been married?”

“Nearly ten years.”

“Ten?” My voice was surprised.

“Helen is my second wife. My daughter is adopted.”

“Oh, I see.”

Klieman smiled. “She was very pretty as a child. Very wilful, but very pretty. I think of her still as a child. I may be wrong in doing that.”

“Wrong? Why?”

“I—I’d rather not say.”

“Is your daughter married?”

Klieman’s face clouded momentarily and then quickly resumed its usual smile. “She is not. No.”

“Engaged?”

“Not really. She . . . There’s an understanding, I believe. I . . . really couldn’t say.”

“An understanding? With whom?”

“With a young man named Kipp. Wally Kipp. Very personable. You may have seen him. He’s nearly always around.” Klieman’s voice was dry. “A doctor. They tell me he’s quite good looking.”

“Yeah,” I said, almost as drily.

Klieman chuckled. “Any more questions?”

“One more. The big one.” I stabbed my cigarette out in the ashtray beside my chair. “Why me?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why should you have called me in?”

Frankly, it seems a lot simpler to send this message of yours to the police when the time comes. I still don't get it."

"Mr. Mills"—Klieman hitched himself up in his chair—"I admire the police tremendously. But they would have no reason on earth to bother particularly over a note sent by a wild-minded old man. I'm certain that they'd investigate. But I want more than an investigation. I want an employee, someone whose sole business it is to see that my wishes are carried out. I could hardly give the police a thousand-dollar retainer fee, now could I?"

"No." I murmured. "I guess you couldn't."

"Am I to assume, then, that everything's settled?"

Sighing, I got to my feet. "Yes, sir."

"You'll find an envelope on my desk. Address it for me. To yourself."

I did as he directed. Over my shoulder, I said, "And how do you expect to get this out of the house?"

"A dozen delivery boys call here every day, Mr. Mills. Any one of them would be glad to earn a dollar by mailing it for me."

I nodded, continued writing.

When I was through, Klieman said, "I'm afraid I can't go to the door with you. My world doesn't extend very far beyond this room."

"I can find my way."

"Good-day, Mr. Mills."

He was still sitting in his chair, staring blankly at the wall, when I left.

As I crossed the living room toward the front door, the girl, Georgia, came rushing out of a room to my right. We bumped full into each other—not, I must admit, an unpleasant sensation.

"Oh! Sorry," I said. "Clumsy of me. I didn't see—"

But she was already hurrying on. She had turned away from me immediately, but not before I had seen her tear-filled eyes. Her face was angry and upset. Puzzled, I glanced into the room from which she had come. The tall character, Kipp, stood by a fireplace, puffing rapidly on a cigarette and scowling at the floor. Mrs. Klieman sat in a chair next to him. Kipp glanced up suddenly, saw me and shoved the door shut with his foot.

No life like a private detective's, I thought. You meet such interesting people. I shook my head, put on my hat and left the house.

The sun shone kindly upon the green lawns and the comfortable homes of Beverly Hills. No hints here of violence, or unhappiness, or ugliness.

I breathed deeply, thinking of the check in my pocket and thanking the gods for all whimsical old men rich enough to indulge themselves in thousand-dollar pleasantries. The man was mad, but it was such a fine, lucrative madness. I laughed softly, got in my car and drove away.

Five days later Jack Klieman was dead.

I DON'T know. I wonder if I can make you understand how hard it hit me. I remember I got the news just after dinner, when I'd turned the radio on and kicked off my shoes and picked up the paper to see what was what with Blondie and Dagwood. And there it was, a tiny item of three lines half buried down with the fillers.

Simple. Short. Chilling.

Word was received today of the death of Jack Klieman, 74, retired Los Angeles realtor. Mr. Klieman is survived by his widow, Helen, and one daughter. Death was attributed to a heart condition, according to Dr. Wallace Kipp, family physician.

I read it through twice. Then I put down the paper very carefully, looked out the window and swore until the air was blue. I felt as though someone had just slugged me in the pit of the stomach with a baseball bat.

I suppose I'd never really thought the silly thing would come to a head. There was idiocy in it from beginning to end, and I hadn't the vaguest idea of what to do.

Look at my position; private detective on a murder case that might not have been murder, committed to investigate a crime which the victim had invited—and hired to do all of this by whom? The corpse!

What if I called the police, stirred up a mess, demanded an autopsy? If they believed my crazy story—and they probably wouldn't—they would most certainly hold *me* as an accomplice before the fact. If they refused to believe me, the fuss

involved would at least put the murderer, who had no idea that murder was even suspected, on guard. *If* there had been a murder. On the other hand, if the death had been natural, and I persisted in investigating, I could be sued from here to Christmas.

I had a third choice, too.

I could forget the whole thing. The only person who knew that I had been called in was dead. And yet—I'd already accepted a thousand dollars. Cute point of ethics there.

Klieman had depended upon me. And where, incidentally, was this ridiculous damned message of his? I'd received nothing.

Viciously, I kicked my comfortable footstool away, got my hat and coat, and headed for my car and for Beverly Hills.

* * *

Darkness had settled over Los Angeles by the time I reached Klieman's home. It was a wonder I ever made it. All the way over I'd been calling myself a fool for continuing to meddle, and even while I was rapping on the door I wasn't sure that I wanted to go on with it.

I was wavering uncertainly on the front steps when the door opened abruptly. After that I had very little heart for wavering. I was caught—hook, line and sinker.

Because the door had been opened by the girl, Georgia, and there was a look of such loss in her pretty eyes, a sense of such deep and absolute grief that I could not possibly have left without trying my best to help her.

She recognized me at once, which gave me a childish feeling of pleasure.

"Oh," she said softly. "Mr. Mills."

"I . . . read about it in the paper. I wondered if there was anything I could do."

"That's very kind of you."

Through the open door I noticed that there already were several people in the house. The inevitable neighbors. Dr. Kipp. I could see Mrs. Klieman lying listlessly on the sofa, staring at the ceiling. Kipp had obviously given her a sedative of some sort. Who but a madman would have looked for murder in that commonplace room?

The girl had followed my gaze and was watching the doleful neighbors distaste-

fully. Suddenly she turned back to me, her chin firm. "Mr. Mills," she said, "were you sincere when you asked me if there was anything you could do?"

"Of course."

"Then take me away from here."

I tried not to show the surprise I felt, but a good part of it must have come through.

The girl flushed, although she kept her eyes steadily on mine. "Unless," she said. "you have other plans . . .?"

"No. No, certainly not. No plans at all."

"I don't think I can stand it any longer. I get the craziest feeling that none of those people really cared about my father except me. I—I just want to get out."

I took her by the arm. "My car's right around the corner."

The girl nodded, half defiantly, half gratefully. She closed the door behind her, and we started down the walk.

Before we had even reached the street, the door was flung open again. Kipp stood in the doorway. "Georgia!" he called.

The girl stopped indecisively. Kipp came down toward us, his heels hitting hard on the concrete. His eyes glistened angrily in the dark as he faced the girl. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"Now wait a minute," I said.

But the girl was able, apparently, to take care of herself. She touched my hand to quiet me, and then turned to Kipp. "I don't see that it's any of your business, but I happened to want a breath of fresh air. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Everything's wrong with it," Kipp snapped. "Your mother has had a great shock. It seems to me that the least you could do would be to stay with her tonight. She might appreciate a little comfort."

"And it seems to me," Georgia flashed back, "that she's getting all the comfort she needs from you!"

Kipp turned white. He stepped angrily toward her. I thought it had gone on long enough. I pushed him back. Gently, of course.

He seemed to take it to heart. Swearing, he knocked my arm aside. That was a mistake.

Let us say only that Dr. Kipp had a

glass chin. I had merely meant to reprimand him, and besides, he ruined two fine rosebushes when he fell among them. I blew on my stinging knuckles and helped him up thoughtfully.

He went all to pieces then and insisted on using his knee. Sighing, I held him by his shirt front and chopped a very short right across his chin.

He was heavier than I thought. I let him down gently, until he was sitting on the walk, tailor fashion. The girl had neither moved nor said a word.

"Sorry," I murmured.

"Sorry?" she said harshly. She looked at Kipp in contempt. "For what? The rosebushes?"

She turned abruptly and continued down the lawn.

I followed her.

When we got in the car and drove away, Kipp was still sitting in the same place, staring idly at his toes.

IT WAS an excellent night, tender and clear and cool. The girl's action in coming with me may have been unorthodox and open to question by the Kipps of the world, but the ride served to relax her immeasurably. I could feel the tautness leaving her as we drove through the winding, small-town streets of Beverly Hills and headed toward Hollywood. My own reaction, on the other hand, smacked slightly of tension. I had not realized before just how lovely she was. She seemed very small, and very quiet, and very, very beautiful huddled in the seat beside me.

Her attitude toward Kipp had been extremely interesting. Klieman had indicated as clearly as possible that he feared a match between the handsome doctor and his daughter. Which meant that a match had certainly been in the offing. What, I wondered, had happened to that particular love affair? Why had she really come with me?

I hadn't long to wait for the answer.

We had just turned onto Sunset Boulevard when the girl said, without warning: "Mr. Mills, you're a private detective, aren't you?"

I stopped for a red light. It was a bit irritating to think that my profession might have been showing all this time. But I said calmly enough, "That's right."

She was silent for a long while, as though she were weighing her next words very carefully. Then, in a soft, hesitating rush of a sentence, she murmured, "Do you think that my father was murdered?"

I swore a little at the drivers behind me who had begun to honk the moment the light turned green. I hated all people at that moment who had nothing on their minds. I shot across the intersection and got myself in the outside lane. Then I said, "Murder's a pretty harsh word, Miss Klieman. The paper said he died of a heart attack."

"I don't care what the paper said. I want to know what *you* think."

"Why do you care?"

Again she seemed to pause, to measure her words in her mind before she allowed her tongue the use of them. "Because," she said finally, "my father was a very strange man. He—he imagined things. Mr. Mills. And I know that if he called you in, he might have tried to fill your mind with . . ."

It takes quite a kick in the face, usually, to make me lose my equilibrium. But this did it with no trouble at all. I glanced at her, my mouth half open. "Wait a minute," I said.

The girl swung her head toward me, frightened.

"Are you trying to tell me," I went on, "that your father *wasn't* murdered?"

"I *know* that he wasn't," she said. "He had a heart attack. His heart was very bad."

"But you seemed so upset. The way you talked . . ."

She put her hand on my arm. "I *was* upset. But it was because I knew what you were going to think. I wanted you to know the truth."

I saw suddenly that we were within a few blocks of my apartment. I had intended to make a circle through Hollywood and then drive the girl back to Beverly Hills. But all at once, I wanted to talk about these new developments, give myself a chance to come down to earth.

"Look," I said, "do you want to go back right away?"

"Well . . ." the girl hesitated.

"My apartment is just down the street. Maybe a drink would do us both good."

"Maybe it would," she said slowly.

"Fine." Definitely my kind of a girl, this one. I swung North on Vine and headed toward home.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Keys

AFTER getting the main door open, we had just started up the stairs to wards my room when I heard someone call, "Oh, Mr. Mills?"

I sighed and turned back. It was my landlady, a charming old rip with the eyes of an eagle and the ears of a cat. I knew damned well that I had paid my rent, but I knew, too, that whatever it was she had in mind usually boded no good.

"Yes, Mrs. Collins."

She had taken in Georgia with one glance, and her curiosity was something wonderful to see. She gave the impression that she was determined to be broad-minded as hell about a strange girl going to my apartment, and succeeded in embarrassing Georgia half to death.

Finally she remembered, apparently, what it was that had brought her out in the first place. Fluttering a little, she said, "I'm so sorry that I missed you this afternoon. You never know when these things are important."

"What things, Mrs. Collins?" I said.

"Well, if I've told that postman once, I've told him a thousand times. But he is so careless . . ."

"Postman?" I glanced quickly at Georgia, but the word meant nothing to her.

"You know how he is, Mr. Mills. Always getting letters in the wrong boxes. Well, this afternoon, I found a letter for you in my—"

"Where is it?" I interrupted.

I must have frightened her. Hurt and upset by my tone, Mrs. Collins fished the letter out of her dress and handed it to me without comment. Then, shocked to the eyeballs, she spun about and tramped back into her own apartment, slamming the door behind her.

I hardly heard her go. All of my attention was focused on that thin envelope—that crazy message from the dead. I think I had known it would be Klieman's

note almost as soon as Mrs. Collins had opened her wide mouth. The handwriting on the cover—my handwriting—merely provided the final clincher.

Georgia was looking at it, and at me, in a kind of interested speculation. "Something important?" she said.

"Yeah," I answered slowly. "Maybe." The light in the hallway was rotten. I stared at the letter silently, wishing at the same time that my heart would stop pounding. I didn't know whether I wanted to open the thing or not.

But I had gone too far to back out now.

Nodding toward my apartment, I said, "All right, we might as well go on. That drink appeals to me more and more all the time."

Georgia smiled and went up the stairs.

* * *

I got the girl settled as well as I could, and then I went on into the kitchen. The letter was burning a hole in my pocket, but it would do no good to pretend too great an interest in it. If the letter contained the answer I expected it to, I'd want to question Georgia quite a bit about our good friend Dr. Kipp, and I wanted her to be calm when I did so.

So I kept my hands off Klieman's envelope until I'd mixed our highballs and brought them back into the living room. Georgia had curled up in my easy chair. The radio was on, and she was listening dreamily to an old Gershwin hit. She smiled at me when I handed her the drink. "You have a wonderful place here, Mr. Mills," she said.

I dropped into a chair opposite her. "That mister business sounds awfully formal. Let's try Harry."

She grinned. "All right."

She'd never looked so lovely. It was all I could do to take my eyes off her. But the envelope was crying for attention. I got it out, turned it over in my hands and then slowly ripped open the flap. "Excuse me," I said.

"Of course." She stretched a little, like a kitten, and sighed. "You know, it's a silly thing, but I'm so glad I was able to talk to you before—oh, before you went on investigating. It would have hurt

Mom so, caused so much misunderstanding. You *have* forgotten about it, haven't you?"

I heard her. But the voice was miles and miles away. I couldn't answer. I could only hold that single sheet of paper in my hands, reading the cold, emotionless typewritten words over and over again. I wanted to tear my eyes away from them, and I could not.

The message was simple and to the point:

My dear Mr. Mills: It will happen much sooner than I had expected. I shall not bother to change my will. Now you may understand the depth of my loneliness. The murder will be committed by my daughter, Georgia.

I had not thought that my hands could be so steady. Very slowly I folded the paper and placed it back in its envelope.

"Bad news?" Georgia murmured sympathetically.

"No," I said. "Nothing important."

"Oh, I'm glad. You looked a little worried."

MY HAND finally began to tremble as I took a long sip at my highball. "Let's get back to you," I said. "Do you have any idea of the terms of your father's will?"

She glanced at me, surprised. "His will?"

"I wondered if you or your mother needed any help, financially."

"Oh." She smiled at me. "It's very good of you, but I'm sure we'll make out. My father was fairly well-to-do, you know. There are quite a few stocks and several thousand in cash."

"All left to your mother, I suppose?"

"Well . . . no." Uncomfortably, the girl looked at her fingernails. "As a matter of fact, I understand that almost everything was left to me. I don't think he thought much of Mother's abilities as far as handling money was concerned. He was funny that way. But of course I'll see that she has whatever she needs."

"Of course," I said.

My voice must have been harsher than I'd intended. She frowned at me, puzzled. "Naturally," she said, "the house is still hers. And all of Dad's personal

things. Mom was very good to him that way. She bought him a new radio just the other day, and a new portable typewriter, and all of his Braille library. I won't touch any of those things. As for the money, I don't even want that, really."

I was hardly listening to her. With the backing of Klieman's letter, I could get an autopsy performed immediately. But the question that hammered and hammered in my mind was whether or not, heaven help me, I wanted to go to the police after all.

How easy it would have been to tear up that letter, to let that exquisitely beautiful girl think that she had actually persuaded me to drop the case. Something had gone wrong between her and Kipp. There'd be no barrier there. The old man had almost wanted to die, anyway. Still if Kipp had testified that Klieman had died of a heart condition, he must certainly have been in on it somehow. He had known about it, and knowing . . .

And then, so suddenly that it left me weak and breathless, I saw the answer.

I slammed my drink down on the table, swearing. Startled, the girl stared at me.

"Georgia," I said, "why did you break up with Kipp?"

"Why, I—"

"Why were you crying the day I came out of your father's den?"

"I wasn't!"

It didn't make any difference. I knew all I had to know. Jumping up, I said, "Come on. I'm taking you home."

"Home! But—"

"Kipp will be there, won't he?"

"Yes . . ."

"He wouldn't leave your mother. Would he?"

The girl's face turned crimson. Point one for the Mills theory.

I pulled her to her feet. "Georgia," I said, "damn your misguided sense of loyalty, and bless your chattering tongue." I laughed and kissed her on the tip of her surprised nose, and then I began to push her toward the door. "Let's go. I want to get this over with just as soon as I can."

She was too confused to protest.

In five minutes we had reached the car and were rolling toward Beverly Hills once more.

I MAY have been wrong in allowing Georgia to follow me into the Klieman house, but there was nothing I could do about it. And, in a sense, she had as much stake in the whole filthy business as I did. At any rate, we were together when we found Kipp and Mrs. Klieman in the living room. The neighbors who had been with them earlier in the evening had all left. As long as I live I think I'll never forget the look on the good doctor's face. He was holding the hand of a woman nearly twice his age and whispering sweet nothings in her ear when George and I came in.

"Good-evening," I said. "Are we interrupting?"

Kipp shot to his feet. "What the devil—"

"Or should we have knocked?"

I glanced at Mrs. Klieman. She was gasping in a monotonous, fish-out-of-the-water sort of way.

"What's the meaning of this?" Kipp shouted.

The iron seemed about as hot as it was likely to get. And so the time to strike, I decided, was now.

"Kipp," I said, "by tomorrow morning, I'll have an autopsy on Klieman's body. What kind of poison do you suppose we'll find?"

"Poison?" he gasped. "Poison?"

The effect couldn't have been better. But there was one more thing I had to find out. I dove right into it.

"Tell me, Kipp," I said, "what kind of a typewriter did Klieman have?"

Again I got the effect I was searching for. A negative one, this time. Kipp was sincerely puzzled by my question. I could see him tossing it frantically around in his mind. He had no idea of the answer, but because I had asked it, he assumed that it must be important. "Why . . . I don't know. An old-fashioned standard . . ."

I nodded. "That's all I wanted to know," I said.

"What in *hell* are you talking about?" Kipp demanded.

"I'm talking about the murder of Jack Klieman."

"Murder! And you're trying to accuse *me* of it?"

"No, Kipp," I said. "Not you."

I turned to the sofa, and to the aging woman who put such a premium on romance. "I'm accusing *you*, Mrs. Klieman."

Behind me, Georgia cried, "Mother? You must be insane!"

I said, "You're in love with Kipp, aren't you, Mrs. Klieman? And you think he loves you. Your husband knew about it, and he knew how much you wanted him out of the way. Even Georgia knew about it. And she was so ashamed of the fact that she tried to get me to stop investigating the case for fear I'd find out, too. Isn't that a laugh? Particularly when you tried to frame her for the murder yourself. It would have been easy to break your husband's will once Georgia was convicted of killing him, wouldn't it? You discovered that Klieman knew he was going to be murdered, and that he had promised to reveal the name of the killer in a note to me. And you expected that I'd go to the police with it. Stupid of you, Mrs. Klieman. Terribly stupid."

Both Kipp and Mrs. Klieman were staring at each other, white-faced.

"I suppose you told Kipp after the job was done. And Kipp, because he was so damned greedy, was willing to go along with that heart-trouble yarn in order to get you, and—with Georgia out of the way—the money, too. Is that right, Mrs. Klieman?"

"Mr. Mills," Georgia whispered. "What note are you talking about? What frame-up?"

I handed her Klieman's letter. Or rather, the letters Mrs. Klieman had sent in its place. She read it silently. At last she raised her head, her eyes dull. "So that's why you looked at me so oddly in your apartment. You thought I had . . ."

"That's it. I had no reason to doubt the damned thing until you happened to mention, out of a clear sky, that your father had been given a new typewriter recently."

"Well?"

"Don't you see it yet? You said your mother had given your father a new *portable*."

"That's right."

"But the typewriter he'd been using

(Continued on page 130)

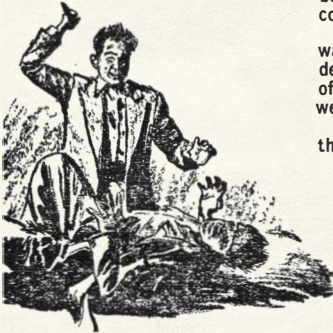
ODDITIES IN CRIME

By **MAYAN** and **JAKOBSSON**

There aren't many like him, but John Soini, an itinerant Finnish farm hand, is alive today—only because of a lynch mob. Wandering around, looking for a job in California, John was picked up by a posse, accused of being one John Brite, murderer.

He was convicted, locked up, and was facing execution when a lynch mob decided to take things into its own hands. He was standing under a convenient limb with a rope around his neck, when his composure vanished—and he began to babble in Finnish.

The mob listened spellbound, then, convinced of its error, took him back to jail. A subsequent investigation finally cleared him!



If your life depended on eye-witnesses and a jury, whom would you rather be judged by—some men off the street, or a select group of gentlemen, college-trained, mentally alert? Well, you're wrong.

In a psychology experiment conducted at Harvard, a surprise mock murder was enacted before the students and faculty, who were then asked for descriptions. Not one in six agreed on even the number of killers, the color of their hair, or the nature of their clothing. Descriptions of the murder weapon ranged from pen-knife to machete.

Not one, in that class of several hundred, reported the actual nature of the "murder" weapon—a long, ripe banana!



Recent published experiments by prison authorities suggested that sugar deficiency in the diet has something to do with crime—that a failure to finish that candy bar may some day cause you to wake up and find yourself a killer. The saga of Robert Bailey puts a slightly different but realistic twist on this theory. Bailey, hitchhiking, killed two young women who gave him a lift, got away in their car. Tracing him, police questioned a roadside soft drink stand proprietor, who remembered a nervous motorist who had not finished his soda pop. It was easy to pick out the half-emptied bottle from among the other empties—it had Bailey's fingerprints and was directly responsible for his capture!

The Better Business Bureau recently caused the prosecution of a phony charity in court. Before the case came to trial, in order to save one of the city's most prominent men some embarrassment, the Bureau advised the gentleman of its case against the fraudulent enterprise and suggested that the prominent man withdraw his sizable contribution.

He thanked them, promised to take steps. Later, in court, he announced proudly that he had torn up his check to the bogus charity—and sent them, instead, one for only half that amount!



"We don't have to worry about him," Willie heard the driver say. "We'll give him a working-over so he'll never talk no more."



Lawyer Willie Shingle was wrong about the no-payment angle in that charity case. But, somehow, Willie wasn't so anxious to collect anyhow. After all—what can you buy with hot lead slugs?

By
**RICHARD
W. BISHOP**

BLACK JACKPOT

"MR. SHINGLE!" Willie Shingle soft-shoed his number nines in the direction of the door and tried to wedge his lanky frame unobtrusively into a group of stampeding lawyers.

"Mr. Shingle!" The words rolled out over the clerk's head, over the prisoner's head, and ricocheted about the corners of the emptying courtroom. Willie pretended not to hear and let himself be swept along

with the rush. Maybe he could beat it out before . . .

"Mr. Shingle!"

The judge roared, and his exasperation tingled up and down Willie's back. Resignedly, the young lawyer turned and retraced his steps.

There was a reluctance in his tread that slowed his progress, for Willie knew in his heart why the courtroom exit was crowded and what was in store for him.

He was about to be hung with a charity case.

"Mr. Shingle," the judge repeated. Willie squinted at the floor in front of him and wondered if the judge's vocabulary was really as limited as his past performance indicated. "This defendant is unable to afford a lawyer. You are appointed to defend him."

"But, Your Honor . . ." Willie protested.

"Young man," the judge ran his fingers through an imaginary crop of bushy hair and nearly scraped the skin from his bald pate, "when you're appointed, you're appointed. Factum facit. The deed is done."

He rapped his gavel on the bench to make the pronouncement official and to cover any deficiencies in his Latin, however slight. "The case will proceed."

"Fine thing," Willie muttered to himself. Just when he was ready to quit his law practice and take on a nice secure position selling vacuum cleaners or silk stockings or something. Three cases in three months had netted him \$6.32, not including a dozen eggs—the fee on the case he'd finished this morning. If anyone needed charity it was Willie Shingle.

"What's he charged with?" Willie jerked his head toward the dock, taking in without interest the prisoner's boyish face with its sallow skin and two-day beard.

"Assault and battery." The clerk read the charge like a rumbling freight car running away over the ties where the rails used to be. Willie flapped both ears trying to get the details, but it was hopeless.

"The defendant pleads not guilty and moves for a continuance in order to prepare his case," Willie said.

"Motion denied. The state will proceed. . . ."

THE TRIAL was a fiasco, of course," Willie admitted grandiloquently at Kelly's Lunch and Hamburg Counter a half-hour later.

"Umm," his brother member of the bar agreed, his mouth full of Kelly's Business Man's Supper #2.

Willie was not to be put off. "Imagine trying a guy like that. With the geezer

he bopped still in the hospital unconscious. Guy by the name of Gusto, and not even able to testify." He scooped up a spoonful of sugar and managed to get some of it in a mug of dirty brown coffee.

"The guy wouldn't take the stand to help himself, either. Claims he wasn't even there, but he's got to cover a friend. What could I do?"

The other shook his head and continued to establish a beach-head on the Kelly No. 2.

"Not a thing. Why, if he'd taken the stand, I'd have busted that case wide open, like that!" Willie tried to snap his fingers, but the grease on Kelly's hamburger was not conducive to finger-snapping, so the sentence went unpunctuated.

Willie stirred his coffee thoughtfully, wondering how long he could stall the check, but a look at his friend led to no reasonable expectation of a free dinner, so he shrugged and dipped his hand into an unjingling pocket. Somewhere there was a quarter.

"Fifty dollars or fifty days, they gave him," Willie stormed. Reluctantly he placed the quarter on the green check and pushed them both forward. "So the poor son of a gun takes the fifty days because he can't raise a sou. For a fee I get a big 'thank you.' He meant it, though. I guess he expected to get a year."

The other's eyes arched upward, and for once his mouth wasn't full.

"His name Lemuel Shaw?"

Willie was surprised. "Yeah. Why?"

The other carefully wiped his lips with a paper napkin. "Shaw'll get more than fifty days. The Gusto guy kicked off. Came over the radio just before you came in."

The last words were wasted. Willie was on his way, and the revolving door got the biggest spin it had taken in years. To Willie it was a five-hundred-dollar spin. Imagine a charity case turning out like that! The state might not pay anything on a little assault case, but defense counsel in a murder rap got five hundred on the line. Five C's to Willie would be an oasis in the desert, a Valhalla, a Utopia on wheels.

"Lemuel Shaw," Willie told the jailer as soon as he'd recovered enough breath to make his voice sound authoritative.

The turnkey was unimpressed. "Who're you?"

"I'm his lawyer. The judge appointed me, and once you're appointed, you're appointed." He remembered something else the judge had said, and added, "Factum facit," slamming his fist on the rail. This was more like it.

The jailer was adamant. "No soap, son."

Again Willie dug into his memory. Ah! He'd pull a stunt just like Archibald Crane, in the Crane stories.

"Do you want me to tell the press," Willie hissed in his most sinister voice, "that you refused to let a prisoner confer with his counselor?"

The jailer shrugged, and field-stripped a piece of gum. "Tell 'em anything you want, son. But you can't see Shaw 'cause he ain't here. He paid his fine and has went." He motioned toward the open door and made like a bird flapping its wings.

WILLIE could hear the phone ringing even before he opened his office door. He fumbled with the key, then remembered he'd left the door open so the finance company could get their desk. The telephone was sitting in the middle of the floor ringing its fool head off. The echoes tangled with each other in the empty room.

"Office of William Shingle," Willie answered in a high-pitched voice. "Just a moment, I'll see if he's in. Who's calling? *Who?* Lemuel Shaw!" His tone dropped three octaves without missing a beat. He listened for a moment, then: "Stay right there. I'm on my way."

From a cab window Willie squinted through the gathering dusk at the street numbers and watched the houses grow bigger and farther apart as they passed out of the city into swank Oak Crest Park. It was the last possible place that Willie would have looked for his derelict client. In fact, he had a misgiving here and there. However, he urged the taxi driver on at such a rate that it skidded to a stop three doors beyond, just in time for the meter to get in its lick for another nickel.

Willie plunged his hand into his pocket. "Wait for me," he directed when it came out empty. He dashed up the walk and played a vociferous tic-tac with the brass knocker. The door swung in, with no one to help it along. Willie knew what Archi-

bald Crane would have done, and pushed his way in, then ogled at the size of the feet stretching from under an overturned chair. The toes pointed generally in the direction of the ceiling.

"Hsst!"

Willie jumped and turned in mid-air. A face leered from a dark corner of the big rectangular room, and all at once Willie realized that the curtains were drawn. Behind the face was Lemuel Shaw.

"He's dead," Lemuel told Willie.

"Who is he?"

"My friend, Larry Kosovich. The one who killed Gusto."

Willie shook his head. "It's no way to treat a friend." Vaguely he wondered if the state paid a cool thousand where there were two murders but only one defendant. That was something he'd have to look into.

Lem spoke with difficulty. "I didn't kill him."

"Who did?" Willie asked.

"I don't know. Somebody conked him while I was calling you."

Willie drew himself up and adopted his most professional attitude. "Let us examine the corpse," he announced as if he were making a proclamation. "Maybe there will be a clue."

Larry was a gory mess, what with the top of his head pushed down where his chin should have been. There was blood all over, especially on the heavy copper vase that had been the cause of Larry's sudden demise. A yellow chair was tipped over on top of him and it lay on him from his ankles to his chest. It was covered with ugly red splotches.

Willie forgot his professional attitude and was suddenly overcome with a desire to get out. "We will call the police," Willie said, staggering out to look for a phone. "You will give yourself up."

He waved aside Lem's quick protest and reached for the telephone in the hallway. "How else can you clear your name?"

Heavy footsteps on the front stoop made the floor tremble. Willie sighed and put the receiver down. The front door flew open and nearly off its hinges, and yards and yards of blue uniform marched in.

"Get 'em up, Shaw," the policeman in charge said. "You're under arrest for the murder of John Gusto."

Willie eyed the officer with distaste. "Better get up to date, Cassidy," he grunted. "You've got a double feature now." He stepped aside so Cassidy could see into the other room.

Cassidy stared popeyed at the fresher corpse. "Okay," he said when he had surveyed the scene to his satisfaction. "Come along, both of ye." His hand clamped heavy on Willie's shoulder.

"Me?" Willie was surprised. "You can't book me, Cassidy. I'm his lawyer."

"Sure, an' are ye now?" Cassidy wondered, his hand holding firm.

"Have you ever heard of false imprisonment?" Willie shouted indignantly.

"That I have. And I've heard of murder, and breakin' and enterin', and accessory after the fact, and a lot of things. I think we'll be goin' now."

THE CITY JAIL had only a half-dozen vermin-infested cells. Willie found himself in the rat's nest next to his client. "No use arguing with a thick flatfoot," he said to Shaw by way of justification. "And anyhow, it'll give us a chance to talk this over and plan our defense."

Shaw nodded. "I can talk now that Larry is gone," he said. "There was a girl . . ."

"There always is."

"She was different, though," Shaw said dreamily. "She's a sort of an actress, you see."

"Uh-huh. Which chorus?"

"At the Silver Slipper. But she wasn't really a chorus girl . . ."

"They never are," Willie murmured in the same tone. He sank back on the straw mattress to hear the story.

Willie's relaxation was short-lived. He sighed as the turnkey creaked open the door.

"You're sprung," he said to the lawyer.

"Just when I was beginning to like it here," Willie objected. But he followed the jailer docilely to the front office.

The cab driver Willie had left sitting on Oak Crest Park scowled darkly. The chief intercepted the look. "Your cab driver has bailed you out," he told Willie.

"That's decent of him," Willie said, looking for the catch.

"I don't mean he actually bailed you out. I mean he gave you an alibi. Not

much of a one, but it'll hold for a while. He saw someone coming out of the house where Kosovich got it just as you drove up."

"And he came here to tell you about it?" Willie was amazed.

"Hell, no. We got it out of him when he followed us to collect his fare."

"Oh, that." There was a catch after all.

"Yeah, that." the cabbie burst out. "Two-forty for the ride out, two bucks for waiting, and two-forty for the ride back. Six-eighty."

Willie passed him his card. "If you'll just drop around to the office in the morning . . ."

The cab driver pocketed the card but made no move to leave.

Willie turned to the police chief. "Are you releasing Shaw, too, or do I have to get a habeas corpus?" That was about what Archibald Crane would have said, he figured.

"Release nothing," the chief snorted. "He didn't ride out with you. He was there when Kosovich bit the dust, right behind a copper vase."

"But the other guy. What was he doing?"

"We don't know yet. But he must have seen Shaw give Kosovich the business. The police—"

"Yeah." Willie said, crushing his hat down on his head. "The police are investigating and may be quoted as saying they expect startling developments within twenty-four hours."

The cool night air felt good to Willie when he got outside, and he stepped along the pavement with a jaunty stride. This was better. His client was in jail where he should be, nice and safe. And he was outside. Now he could investigate the crime in the best Crane manner and come up with a mystifying but indisputable solution that would force the police back to the wall until their tongues drooped in their mouths and they panted for breath. Too late, he remembered that he had forgotten to ask the cabby for a description of the man who left the Oak Crest house—the man Willie had failed to see; the man the police were looking for as a witness; the man Willie was sure had done the killing.

He turned sharply and nearly knocked

over a red-faced, beefy person who was directly behind him. Willie murmured an apology to a series of grunts and cut down the side alley toward the police station. Maybe the cab driver would still be there.

FOR a while it seemed as if he were floating in mid-air. Suspended, perhaps, on wires like a marionette. He skipped and jumped, and became aware of an aching throb in his temples where the wires were attached.

"She'll be here any minute," a voice said.

"Yeah, if she comes at all," another replied.

Who'd be here, Willie wondered. Oh well, why bother with that? How peaceful everything would be if only they'd take off those wires. He tried to raise his hand, but found he couldn't move it. Maybe there was no wire attached to that one.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes. Everything was black. "I'm blind," he thought. "Lord, what did I have to drink?"

It came back to him then. The beefy man who had followed him so closely. The alleyway. The sudden oblivion.

Carefully, he tried to explore his position with his bound hands. He could move them only slightly, but from the feeling that was returning to them he could guess where he was. On the floor in the back of a car. There was no motion. In the front seat there were at least two persons. He didn't wonder that they paid no attention to him. He was so securely trussed up that he could scarcely move. A pillow was tied about his mouth and neck, and came up loosely over his eyes. There was no light from outside.

There was a long wait, and Willie used the time to work his hands back and forth. At the expense of some skin he found that he could wriggle them a little.

After twenty minutes or more, the started turned the motor over, and it coughed, then purred. From the shifting of his body, Willie could tell they were making a wide turn.

"We'll try the club, Jad," one said. "See if the guy's okay."

Willie could feel someone turning in the seat, so he lay quietly. There was a pause.

"Sleeping like a babe," Jad said.

"Is he . . .?"

"Naw. He's breathing."

Willie thought there was disappointment in the latter's voice. The car bumped and scraped over rough cobblestones now, and Willie figured they were on the outskirts, near Bowdoin Square, maybe. There were plenty of cobbles there. And a night club or two.

"We can't be wrong again," Jad said a moment later. "It wouldn't be lucky. Granger wouldn't like it."

"The boss? He wouldn't like it now, if he knew."

There was another period of silence.

"Gloria will know if this is Rodman."

"Yeah."

Willie felt around to see if he had company on the floor of the back seat. There was no one there. These gees must have picked him up for someone else, then. Someone named Rodman. Maybe he should tell them. They wouldn't believe him, though. No, he'd better make like a clam and see what developed.

The car ground to a stop. One of the men got out and slammed the door. The pillow had slipped enough so that Willie could see a glow of light, and he guessed that the other was lighting a cigarette. He could have used one himself.

It wasn't a long wait. Willie heard the door open, the back door this time, and could smell the fragrance of cheap perfume. A hand reached in and pulled the pillow entirely away from his closed eyes. It was an effort to keep them still.

"Roddy," a voice screamed, and there was a rustling sound as if a girl in a taffeta costume had fainted to the ground.

"It's him, all right," Jad said in a satisfied way. There was a little commotion outside. Then: "This may be our third strike, but we're not out."

The car started again, and the smell of perfume faded, as much as that kind of perfume fades, and Willie was again occupied with getting his hands free. He wasn't going to be a guy named Rodman without a fight, particularly when Rodman had the finger already on him.

With a contortionist's twist, Willie worked one hand free. He slid his arm under him, and with difficulty got a pen knife from his back pocket. It was stiff and wouldn't open. He always had been

going to oil the darned thing. Crane would have had a little sheath knife strapped to his leg.

His teeth did the trick finally. It was an easy job to cut the ropes around his feet and around the pillow that had been thrust back over his face. Never having been used before, the knife was sharp. As sharp even as Crane's would have been. It slipped and cut a slit in the pillow. Willie got feathers in his mouth. He grabbed a corner of the torn pillow with his other hand to hold the feathers in.

"The boss'll take care of Rodman himself," Jad was saying.

"Yeah. How d'ya suppose he'll do it?"

"He's got the bat Johnny was killed with. He'll use that."

Willie could feel the shudder right through the seat.

"Funny, isn't it? Rodman gets blamed for bumping Gusto when it was us that did it?"

"Shh, Jad. Don't ever say that again. If Granger ever knew we'd knocked off his brother Johnny . . .

"It's awful hard to bump the right guy when you've never seen him," Jad whined. "Like tonight. When Granger told us where to find Rodman, I barge in and conk the wrong guy again."

"Forget it," the other said abruptly. "When you got there you found him dead. Rodman did it and beat it. You got out just before the cops."

"Your calling the cops nearly loused it up," Jad objected.

The tires hummed a whistling tune on the smooth country road beneath them. From its twists and turns Willie guessed they were headed out on the back road toward Concord. He remained quiet and tried to figure out what Archibald Crane would do next.

"But this guy'll talk to Granger," Jad said nervously. "He may tell the boss he

didn't kill Johnny Gusto, and that we did."

"Don't be silly," the driver jeered. "We'll give him a working-over so he'll never talk no more."

"You mean before the boss . . ."

"Yeah. Before the boss sees him. He put up a fight, see? It was the only way we could take him."

Willie had heard enough. Archibald Crane, with all his astuteness, need have heard no more. These thugs, henchmen to the bad man number one of Chelsea, Charlestown and Boston, had committed murder twice, trying to get Rodman. This would be their third mistake, and Willie wanted no part of it.

He could see street lights again. They were passing through a town.

Willie rose up in the back of the car and with a windup worthy of Ty Cobb, he let the pillow go. He held fast to one end of it.

Feathers flew through the slit at the end. Duck feathers, chicken feathers, turkey feathers. Feather quills, feather dust. It snowed, rained and hailed feathers. Willie flayed the air between the two on the front seat with the empty pillow case and stirred up more feathers.

The driver cursed and jammed at the brakes. Jad cursed, too, and lunged at Willie, but was seized midway with a gurgling fit of choking.

The car jolted over a curbstone and came to an abrupt stop against a telephone pole. The two in front jarred against the windshield. Willie, protected by the back seat, gagged as his wind left him, but quickly sucked it in again.

With the length of rope that had been around his legs, he encircled the heads of Jad and the driver. It was satisfying to Willie's soul to hear the thud of their craniums coming together as he drew the rope tight. He twisted the ends with his hands and was holding the struggling men when the patrolman opened the rear door

Save *Now* . . .



. . . for the Future!

of the car. "You again!" he said to Willie.

"I STILL don't understand it," Lem Shaw said, shaking his head dubiously. He looked at Willie over a couple of shots at the Silver Slipper.

"It's like it says in the confession," Willie confided. "When you got mixed up with Gloria, you got mixed up with dynamite. She was no ordinary girl. She was John Gusto's girl, and he was Granger's brother."

"I know," Shaw said impatiently. "But—"

"But you thought you were safe as long as you paid Larry Kosovich to keep an eye on Gusto for you, and as long as you went around under the name of Rodman. But you weren't. Gusto wised up, not only to you, but to Kosovich. He paid his brother's hatchet men to take care of you. Without his brother knowing it, of course, because as tough as Granger was, he didn't like to see his kid brother going around bumping people off. He sort of reserved that privilege to himself. Besides, he was sort of proud of the kid brother in his own way."

Willie paused and drew deeply from the glass in front of him. He made a face, smacked his lips and then went on: "Jad called you on the phone and used Kosovich's name, telling you to get out on the Dover Road to meet him. You fell for it and went. But Gusto wanted to be on hand to see the innocent fun, and he got there first. In the darkness, Jad and his pal sneaked up behind Gusto, thinking it was you, and beat the poor jerk's brains out."

"And when I got there and found Gusto, I thought Larry Kosovich had done it."

"So you called the cops and took the rap. You didn't know then that Gusto would die in the hospital and that the fifty-buck assault rap would turn into a murder charge."

Shaw nodded. "After I'd bailed myself out, I called Kosovich to get the details. He told me Gusto had passed out, but claimed he didn't do it."

"So you went out to meet him. But by this time Granger was on the trail of Kosovich, too. Only Granger didn't sus-

pect Kosovich of having killed his brother, because his own men had told him that you had done it in a scrap over Gloria."

"So Jad and his friend went out to Oak Crest looking for me," Shaw completed, "and they bungled again. Boy, they deserved to be caught."

"Of course, it wasn't as easy to catch them as one might think." Willie put in hastily, remembering Archibald Crane.

The lights dimmed, and a master of ceremonies soft-pedaled his way to the center of the floor, fussing with a portable microphone as he walked.

"It's a rough way to teach a guy a lesson," Shaw said. "I can't see what I ever saw in Gloria."

Willie grinned ruefully. "She was ready to throw me to the wolves," he said. "When she called me Roddy, it was like putting her signature on my death certificate. She was trying to save your life all the while."

Shaw nodded. "If she'd been thinking of me instead of my money I could understand it. But the way she faded when I told her we'd be broke when we married . . ."

Willie chuckled. "When she heard your father would cut you off, she nearly knocked Cassidy down trying to get out of the police station. That I'd have enjoyed."

Shaw was listening. He motioned the waiter for another round. "We should discuss your fee, Mr. Shingle. Would a thousand dollars be adequate for clearing me of murder?"

Willie's eyes widened, and he gulped his drink.

"And then, of course, you saved me from Gloria. That's worth another thousand."

The master of ceremonies had finished his patter and the show was starting. Gloria looked at their table and quickly averted her eyes.

"See, I can laugh at her," Shaw grinned. "How I could ever have fallen for her I don't know. Why there are plenty right there now, much better than she is. Look at that little blonde on the other end . . ."

"Humph," Willie grunted. "You'd better write that check, Lemuel. Before your father cuts off your account again."



GENTS, it looks as though the ladies have us. For a long time, now, they've been waging war on the male sex, claiming that the bearded half of the human race is responsible for most of the wars and troubles that have beset mankind. Let us take over, the ladies say, and we'll show you how to run the world.

Well, if you judge character and responsibility by the statistics set forth in the *World Almanac* for 1949, it appears as though the so-called weaker sex has a good case.

Not only have they not started any wars and other such international pestilences, but they commit only about an eighth as many murders as men, about a twentieth as many robberies, about a tenth as many assaults, and they violate the narcotic laws only about a tenth as often as we males. In fact, in practically all crimes, they fall behind their brothers and husbands. Even in that special branch of masculine pride, driving a car, they appear to outshine the gentlemen. In 1947, ninety-five men were arrested for parking violations. You know how many women were arrested for the same crime? Not one. Not a single, solitary one.

In fact, in out of about two dozen offenses listed in the *World Almanac*, the ladies outnumber the men in only one—and that particular department is one in which the gentlemen cannot be expected to compete. It concerns the "oldest profession in the world."

The totals show that, in 1947, 658,650 men were arrested, as against only 75,391 women. That makes about nine times as many male criminals as females.

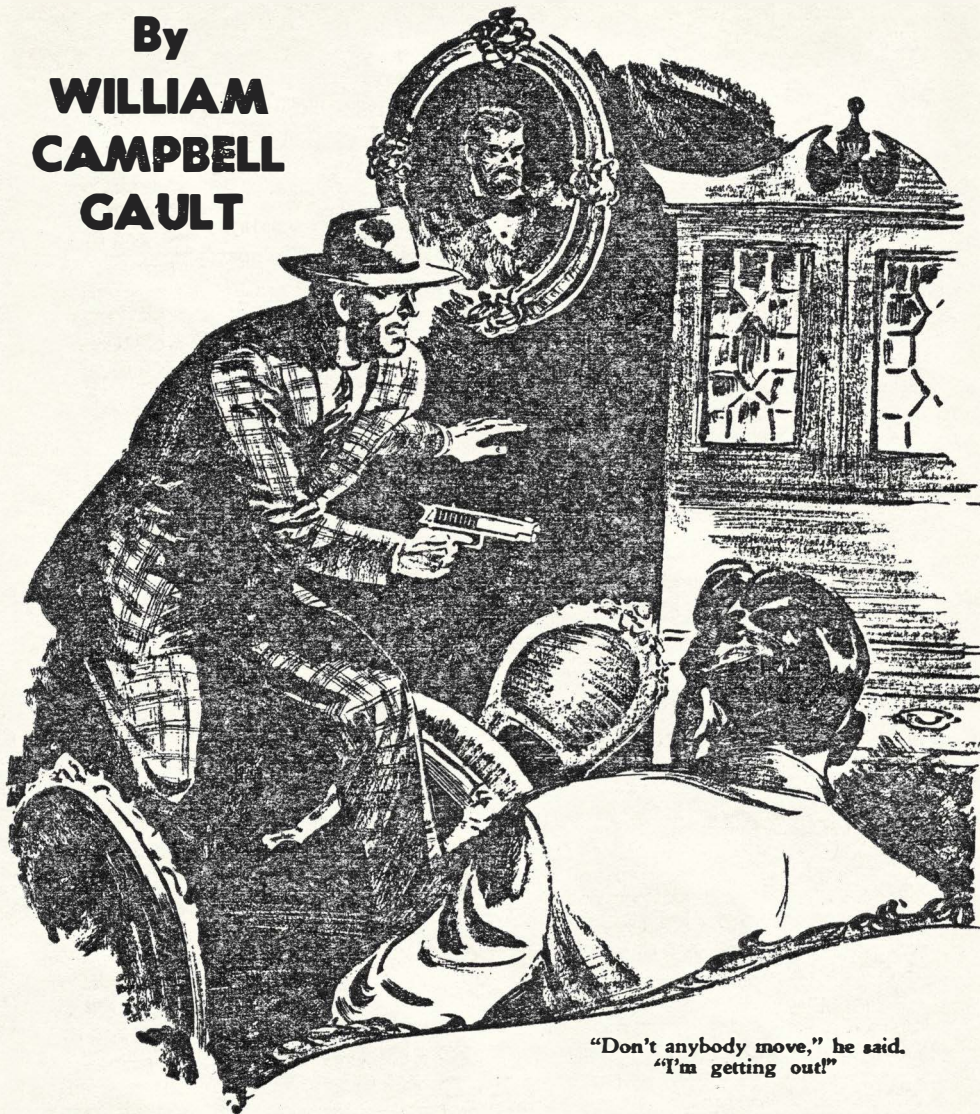
Do we hear a shout from the back of the gallery that maybe women get away with crimes more often than men because of their—well, feminine wiles? Maybe so, men, maybe so. But don't forget this: If a woman gets away with some misdeed because she smiled real pretty at the arresting officer—that just means that the policeman is himself a criminal for aiding and abetting a criminal in escaping justice. And that goes for all the motorcycle cops who let themselves be talked out of a ticket by some silky siren.

The only wonder about the whole thing is how the girls have managed to stay as pure as they evidently are, surrounded by so many criminal males. It just goes to show that, apparently, just the fact of being a woman will preserve her from breaking the law. At least, that's the way we've got it figured out.

Well, in view of all this, the editors of *DETECTIVE TALES* are inclined to grant the ladies their heart's desire. We're willing to let them take over the world. Of course, it may not be as much fun as they imagine. There's the budget to balance, and a lot of folks don't have adequate housing yet, and the landlords are wanting some more rent raises again, and there are the usual treason and perjury trials

(Continued on page 126)

By
**WILLIAM
CAMPBELL
GAULT**



"Don't anybody move," he said.
"I'm getting out!"

CHAPTER ONE

Big-Town Exile

WITHOUT mentioning any names let me say it's one of the big towns in this country, one of the really big ones, and not much more corrupt than any town that size is apt to be.

It wasn't the corruption that sent me to the suburbs, it was Chief of Police Harry Shellvane. We didn't see eye to eye, as the phrase goes, though I'd worked for Harry about seven years. Then I uncovered some evidence Harry didn't want

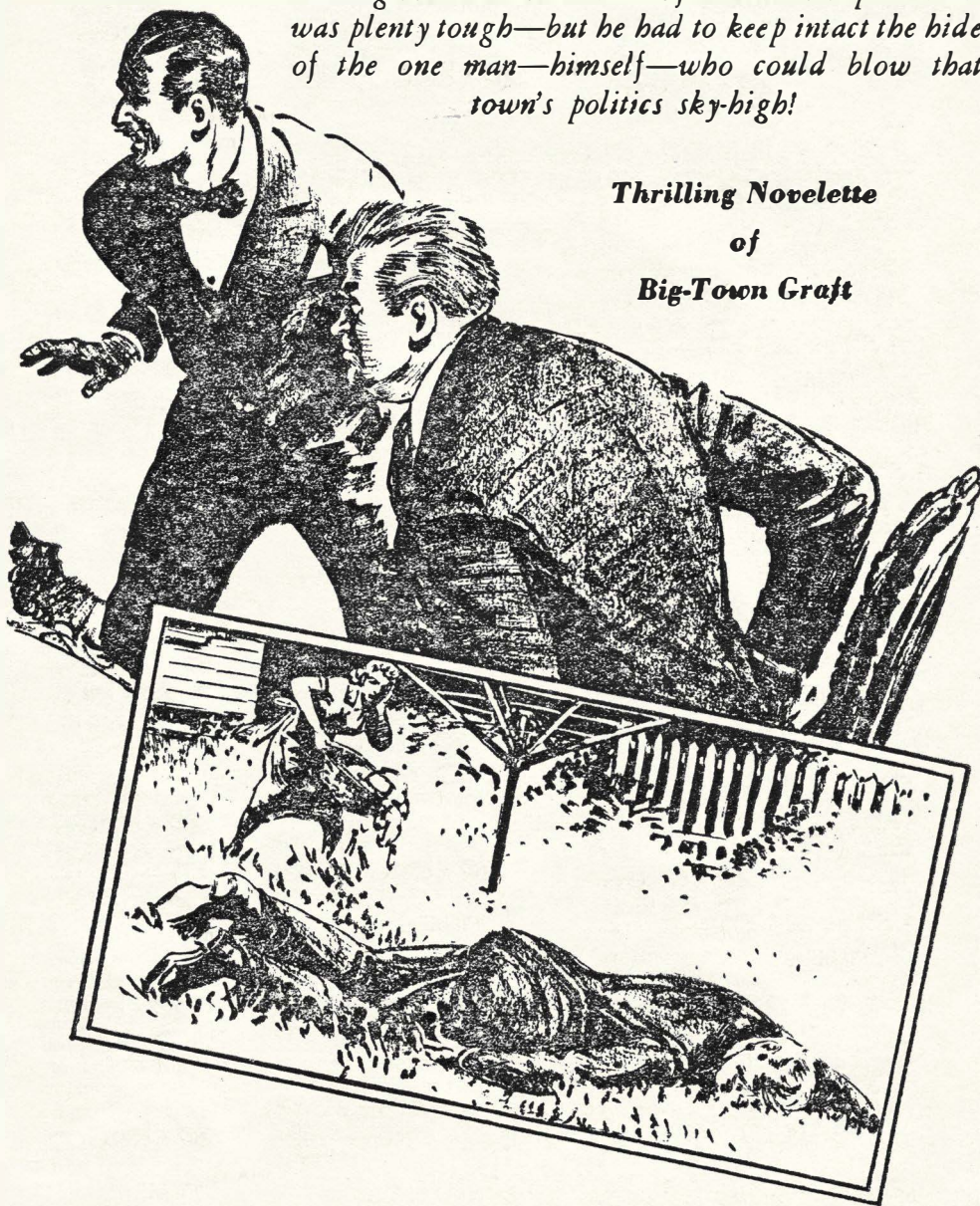
uncovered, though the D.A. did. The evidence didn't lose Harry his job, though it should have. But it made my working for Harry very unpleasant.

I went out to this suburb I'll call Ridgely and set up my office there. Neat little office, over a flower shop. Just one wide window on which was lettered STEVE BISHOP—INVESTIGATIONS. Nothing showy, but clean and warm and bright, and a fine place to work out crossword

ALL THAT MURDER CAN BUY!

Maybe it was too tough for one man to handle. For Private Eye Steve Bishop not only had to find a missing man and clear him of a murder rap—which was plenty tough—but he had to keep intact the hide of the one man—himself—who could blow that town's politics sky-high!

**Thrilling Novelette
of
Big-Town Graft**



puzzles and catch up on my reading.

It was about all I did, except to read the papers and yawn.

I'd chosen Ridgely because the local chief of police had also worked under Harry and had the same success with him. I figured I wouldn't be bothered in Ridgely.

I didn't figure the citizens would be so trouble-free. I started out with the determination to have nothing to do with divorce cases or labor trouble, and wound up having nothing to do.

With the exception of the crossword puzzles. Nobody came in except the cleaning woman and, once in a while, Joe Lawlor. Joe's the local chief of police I mentioned earlier, and he wanted me to work for him. At two hundred and thirty a month, and a cost-of-living bonus. I was holding out against him, for no reason I can think of.

March went by and April came, but no customers. April and May went, and Joe's offer was looking better to me. On June seventeenth she walked in, my first customer.

IF YOU see many movies, you'll know that women who have anything to do with private operatives are always glamorous, rich, immoral and generously curved in all the proper places.

This girl wasn't glamorous and she didn't look immoral. She had no prominent curves, though her figure was fine enough, slim and straight and firm. She had a thin, interesting face and a beautiful, warm voice.

She smiled rather self-consciously as she came into the office. She said her name was Valerie Williams and she didn't know how to begin.

I held her chair in the approved manner, and she seated herself and took one of the cigarettes from the box on my desk.

"Just assume I'm your attorney," I told her, "and remember that no matter what your case might be, I've heard it before."

"I suppose that's true," she said, and smiled wanly. "It's my . . . father . . ." She stopped, and chewed her lower lip. She was frowning. Then she faced me squarely. "He hasn't been home for two days."

"He hasn't stayed away like that be-

fore—left you for a few days at a time?"

She shook her head. "Never. It's not only . . . I mean, we had an argument, and I wondered if that might be the reason."

"It's possible," I said, "and it's why you didn't go to the police. Is that right?"

"That's right. It's about a—a woman, a woman Dad's been seeing a lot. If he's there with her, it would almost be a relief. I want you to find out if he's with her."

"You don't want to phone her?"

Her young face was grim. "No."

"She lives out here?"

"No. In the city."

"Your mother . . ." I said.

"Is dead," she finished for me. "Dad was perfectly happy with me for five years since that time. And then . . ."

And then this woman, I thought, this temptress. I said, "If you'll give me her name and address, and a picture of your dad, I'll get right to work on it, Miss Williams."

"I haven't a picture with me," she said, "but I'll send one right over." She gave me the name and address. Rising, she said, "You will want a retainer, of course?" She had her purse open.

Music, those words. I said a retainer was customary, and wrote out a receipt for the money. She left.

OUTSIDE, it was a cool day for June, damp and gusty. At the curb, Valerie Williams was climbing into a big club coupé, and I wondered if I hadn't been too modest with my rates. It was something I'd have to learn, this business of rates.

It was time for lunch, and I ate at the counter spot right across the street, where I could keep an eye open for the messenger. I didn't particularly notice the gent who came into the place and took the seat next to mine. I did notice he was dressed a little flashily for Ridgely, which is a conservative town.

He was fairly wide and not too tall. I didn't hear his order, but I noticed the Midwestern nasal in his voice.

I was just finishing my pie when I saw the messenger's bike stop across the street. I went to the door and called to him and he brought the picture over.

It wasn't wrapped, but it was in a folder and I didn't open it there. I went back to drink my coffee.

The man at the next seat coughed, and I looked over to find his eyes on me.

He was smiling. "Steve Bishop, right?"

"That's it," I agreed, and tried to place him.

"Used to work for the department, in town?"

"Up until February. I don't seem to place you."

"It doesn't matter," he said. He got up and put a bill on the counter. "Nice, quiet town. Healthy out here. Much better than downtown." And now he paused. "Especially for you." He started to walk out.

"Just a minute," I said, and he turned.

He stood there, saying nothing, still smiling.

"You weren't threatening me, by any chance?" I said.

"Me? Hell, no. Just a word of advice, word to the wise."

He didn't seem belligerent, as he stood there. Nor, on the other hand, did he seem frightened. He turned again and walked out.

The counterman said, "Rough customer. Friend of yours, Steve?"

"Not that I know of," I said.

"He came in right after that girl went up to your office, that Williams girl," the counterman went on. "Kept looking over that way from time to time."

Everybody knew my business, it seemed. I paid for my meal and went over to the office.

This Calvin Williams wasn't a bad-looking gent, unless the camera was lying. One of those guys who could be sixty or forty, with a well-modeled face and short, thick hair. I put the photo away after a while and decided to go into town.

There wasn't any reason to take the Police Positive along, but the incident in the restaurant had rather unsettled me.

The Chev hummed all the way in, and I made time. There was a big Buick that followed me most of the way. It never got close enough for me to identify the driver.

The address Valerie had given me was an apartment house, one of those U-shaped affairs of red brick, three stories high. Miss Brenda Collier, I learned in the lobby, lived on the second floor in 2-D.

I didn't ring the bell downstairs. I went up through the open door and climbed the one flight to her floor. 2-D was in the front of the building, in the left wing.

I heard the door chime on the inside, and no other sound. I waited a few minutes, rang again with the same result. I went out again, to the car.

The Buick was parked up the street, or another one just like it. I climbed into the Chev and lighted a cigarette.

There was somebody in the Buick; I could make out that much from this distance, and no more. He sat and I sat, and I got tired of sitting.

I got out and walked down that way. When I was close enough to read the license number, I memorized it. When I was even with the driver's seat, I turned and faced him.

It was my boy, all right, the man who'd warned me in the restaurant. I went over and opened the door on the curb side.

"You haunting me?" I asked him.

HE LOOKED at me with what seemed to be his standard gaze, a deep unconcern. He said, "I'm trying to protect you, Bishop. I've been in this business a lot longer than you have."

He pulled out a wallet, opened it and displayed a private operative's license. He snapped it shut and said, "Happy, now?"

The name I'd read was Warren Einar. I said, "You're from town, here, Einar?"

"That's right. In the Equity Building."

"I don't remember you," I said. "I thought I knew most of the private operatives in town." I climbed in and sat next to him. "You happen to know where Williams is?"

He shook his head. The unconcern was replaced by a frown now.

I said, "Business must be good. This Buick's a lot of automobile."

"I get by," he said.

I didn't think any private eye got by that well, but I didn't voice the thought. I said, "How about the rest of the business; you know anything about that?"

"I'm looking for Williams," he said, "for a client. What business do you mean?"

"Whatever business it is that keeps you sitting here, waiting."

"I was following you," he said. "I fig-

ured Miss Williams gave you a message for her dad, and you were on your way to deliver it."

"For a professional," I said, "you're a bad liar."

He turned toward me in the seat, and now there was belligerence in his face. "Careful, Bishop," he said.

"You don't scare me," I said, "and I'm getting sick of the sight of you. I don't know who's behind you, but I've messed around in too many deals to be scared by anybody in this town."

I got out and slammed the door.

He was glaring at me through the glass. His poise was gone, and I had a feeling for a moment that he was going into action. A few seconds passed, and he hadn't moved. I went to the Chev.

I sat there for another two hours. The Buick left after a half-hour, but I sat there and when two hours were up, I went in to try the door again.

There was still no answer.

I went down to the Arkham House, a hotel a block down, and put in a phone call to Miss Williams, in Ridgely.

A maid answered, and then Miss Williams, on what must have been an extension. I told her of my lack of success so far.

"I wish you'd wait a while," she said. "I'm sure she'd have news about Dad."

I said, "You don't, by any chance, know of a Warren Einar, do you?"

A pause, and then, "No, I don't. Has he something to do with Dad's disappearance?"

"I don't know."

Another pause, a little longer this time. "Wait another hour or so, and when you come back to Ridgely, stop in here, will you?"

I said I would. I waited an hour and a half more outside the Collier woman's apartment building and then drove back to Ridgely. That was at five o'clock, and it had started to rain.

Valerie Williams was wearing a skirt and sweater, and doing the sweater no harm. Her manner was composed enough, but her voice was tight. "Nothing, Mr. Bishop?"

"Nothing," I said.

She led the way into the living room, a low-ceilinged, comfortable room with a set

of French doors that led out to a side patio.

In here, she said, "Tell me about this Warren Einar."

I told her all about it.

She took a breath and looked away from me. When she looked back she had evidently made up her mind about something. "I think my father is involved in something—well, illegal."

I said nothing.

"For the past six months he's been getting mysterious phone calls. He never uses the man's name, which would be normal in the usual conversation, and he has taken a lot of hurried trips to town." She paused. "This is, of course, confidential."

I nodded. "What is your father's business, Miss Williams?"

"He's retired." Her chin lifted. "He formerly sold stocks and bonds; he was a partner in Williams and Quirck."

"Have you talked to Mr. Quirck about this—this absence of your father's?"

She shook her head. "I didn't want to reveal what might turn out to be just a family spat."

"I can't see it that way," I said. "Your father's an adult, and certainly not motivated by anything as trivial as a quarrel. Of course, I don't know him, but—"

She interrupted me. "I wonder, with that woman gone and everything, do you think they may have taken a trip?" She was blushing faintly.

"I've no idea," I said. "How about my seeing this Quirck, on my own? He wouldn't need to know you were paying me."

"You'll be very tactful?"

"Of course. I won't identify myself as a private investigator. I can pretend it's his credit I'm checking."

CHAPTER TWO

A Corpse in Her Back Yard

I LEFT the Williams home then and drove down to the local police station. The rain was still falling, a light rain, but heavy enough to be miserable.

Joe Lawlor hadn't gone home yet. He was in his small office off the head of the corridor.

"Come in to sign up?" he asked me.

"Hell, no," I said. "I've just landed

my first client." I told him what I wanted.

He looked at his watch. "If they're still open." He picked up his phone and put in a call to the city.

When the connection was made, he said, "Gus? This is Joe Lawlor, Gus, and I'd like you to check a number." He gave him the license number I'd memorized.

A pause, then he was scribbling something on a note pad on his desk. He hung up, and handed me the top sheet.

"Warren Einar," it read, and the address.

"He wasn't lying." I said it aloud to myself.

"Good operative," Joe said. "Remember him, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"Used to do some work for the D.A. once in a while," Joe said. "Shellvane wasn't detailing any of *his* men to that office, and the D.A. was kind of understaffed." Joe smiled. "You're not having any trouble with Warren, are you?"

"Not yet," I said, "though it was close."

"I wouldn't, not if you're working in town," Joe said. "Because Warren gets along with the D.A. and Shellvane, too. That makes him kind of unique. And we don't want any trouble with Shellvane, do we, Steve?"

"He can't touch you out here, can he?"

"Maybe not. But he works with the sheriff's department, and I work with some of his departments, once in a while, I wouldn't want a no-cooperation order to go out."

"Okay," I said, "I'll be careful."

"Sure," Joe said, and leaned back in his chair. "How's Miss Williams?"

I stared at him. For a *confidential* operative, I wasn't doing very well.

"Stopped in at your office this afternoon," Joe went on, "and you weren't there. Stopped across the street for a piece of pie, and the counterman told me all about it."

"Oh," I said. "Miss Williams is alive and healthy."

"And the Uranium Development Company?"

"Never heard of it," I said.

"It's her papa's company, his latest. The rumor is he's making a mint on it."

"I thought he was retired."

"Let's say he's retired from *legitimate* business," Joe said. "He's a very smooth operator, and I hope I can nail him some day." He leaned forward to pull an ashtray closer. When he looked up, he said, "That isn't why you're working for Williams, Steve? You're not trying to square some beef a customer's made?"

"I didn't even know his business," I said.

His phone rang just then, and he answered it. I rose as he finished the conversation, which was short. His face was tense as he replaced the phone on its cradle.

"That was Miss Williams," he said. "You'd better come along."

"What's happened?"

"There's a man in her back yard," he said. "A dead man."

VALERIE WILLIAMS was upstairs, and the doctor was still with her. The corpse had been identified as Carl Quirck, Williams' former partner. They were taking the body out to a rented ambulance now, as Joe and I talked to the Williams' maid in the living room.

She'd heard no shot, seen no one, had not had occasion to go into the back yard for the past two days. She was a young girl, but composed, and spoke evenly. She knew nothing.

The slug was still in the body; Carl Quirck had bled profusely.

Joe sighed and said, "That will be all for now. I'll call you if I want to question you further."

She left, and he rose and went over to the window. They were sliding the stretcher into the ambulance. The rain had stopped.

A uniformed man came into the room, and Joe told him, "Go along to the mortuary with them. Get the slug."

The man nodded and left. Joe turned back to the window. "You want to tell me about your business with Miss Williams *now*, Steve?"

I considered for only a second before saying, "I was looking for her dad. He's been away from home for a couple days."

Joe started to turn toward me, and then he turned back. "I'll be damned," he said. "What the hell is *he* doing here?"

He was looking out onto the porch. The

front bell rang, and Joe went into the hall to open the door.

I heard voices, and then they came into the living room. It was our contemporary to the south, our former boss, Police Chief Harry Shellvane.

He's a big man, and a loud one, and he was a wrathful one at the moment. "What's going on out here?" he said. He looked at me, then back at Joe.

"Nothing that should concern you," Joe said. "A murder. You're off your beat a little, aren't you, Harry?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Not if the murdered man is Carl Quirck."

Joe looked at me. Then he said to Harry, "He is."

"He was killed in his home," Harry said. "His blood's all over his living-room rug. How the hell did he get out here?"

Joe said, "How do you know where he was killed?"

"Got a phone call. Somebody had heard a shot and seen a man run from his house. I had it investigated. All they found was the blood." His glance went back and forth between us. "I phoned your station, and they told me what had happened. I wanted a check on this Williams. This is his house, huh?"

Joe nodded.

"Is he here now?"

Joe shook his head.

"Where is he?"

I said, "Nobody seems to know. His daughter hired me to find out."

"I wasn't talking to you," Shellvane said.

I looked at Joe and shook my head.

Joe said, "Harry, remember where you are. If you want to talk to either of us, talk respectfully. I've the authority in this town, and you'd look awful silly sitting in our clink. I'm willing to work with you all the way on this. But I spent too much time at it to work *under* you, any more."

That was a long speech for Joe. Shellvane's broad face went from pink to crimson and he was having trouble getting his breath.

Finally he said, "Where's the daughter?"

"Upstairs," Joe said. "In her room. Her physician is with her. She's suffering from shock." He paused. "She discovered the body. With her father missing,

the way he is, it was too much for her."

"I'd like to talk to her," Shellvane said.

"As soon as her doctor comes down, I'll ask him," Joe said. "She might not be in condition for a questioning."

Shellvane's eyebrows went up, and his smile was cynical. "That's the suburban treatment, huh? Courtesy, even in murders."

The doctor came down the steps then. In a moment he appeared in the archway to the hall. He said to Joe, "I think it will be all right to question her now. But try not to disturb her any more than necessary."

Shellvane went upstairs with Joe. I stayed in the living room with the doctor.

"She kept asking for her father," he said. "Is there any way you know I could get in touch with him?"

I told him there wasn't, and he left.

The uniformed man came back with the slug carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. "They really had to dig to get it out of him," he said. "I wouldn't want a job like that."

I LOOKED at the slug and saw it must have hit something pretty solid in the way of bone. It was badly flattened. I wondered if Joe was going to give it to Shellvane. We had no ballistics section here.

They came down the steps then, and the officer took the slug over to Joe. Joe looked at it and at Shellvane.

Shellvane said, "I'll take it along. You can drop in tomorrow, if you want, for the report." His voice was civil for a change.

Joe gave it to him, and Shellvane left without so much as a glance at me. My buddy. Joe went over to look out the window again.

He had his back to me. "The slob," he said. "The loud-mouthed, no-good slob."

The uniformed man looked at me, started to smile, and didn't.

"How's Miss Williams, Joe?" I asked.

He turned. "Coming out of it pretty well." He expelled his breath gustily. "That Shellvane knows I need him too often. He knows there's a limit as to how independent I can get."

"He can't live forever," I said. "Maybe he'll get run over by a truck some

day. We can always hope, anyway.”

Joe looked weary. He looked beaten. “Steve, if you know anything I don’t, now would be the right time to tell it.” His eyes were steady on mine.

“This morning,” I said, “Miss Williams came in and hired me to find her dad. I checked on an apartment in town, his girl friend’s place, for almost four hours and found nothing. I came back and told her that, and then I went to your office. You know the rest.”

“Okay. What’s this woman’s name?”

“Brenda Collier,” I said, “and she wasn’t home. I wonder if Miss Williams wants me to continue.”

Joe shrugged. “She wants to talk to you, she said. Go up and ask her.” Then, when I’d started from the room: “Oh, yes, what about this Warren Einar?”

I told him all there was to tell about that.

“Working for the D.A., I’ll bet,” Joe said thoughtfully. “On that Uranium deal. Maybe this Quirck was going to throw a wrench into the machinery, and Williams . . .” His voice trailed off.

“We don’t know *anything*, yet, Joe,” I said, and went out into the hall and up the stairs.

Valerie Williams’ face was pale, and the pallor seemed to accentuate the fineness of her thin face. Her eyes seemed bigger in that wan face, and they followed me as I came into the room. The room was dim and quiet.

The maid was standing near the window, and she turned as I came in. Miss Williams told her, “I’d like some broth, Evelyn, please.”

When the maid had left, she indicated a chair near her bed, and I sat down.

“They think Dad did it, don’t they?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Her voice was low. “They never got along. Dad and Mr. Quirck. Dad was too—too progressive for him, and Mr. Quirck thought him dishonest, but Dad wasn’t—*isn’t*. He’s just . . . optimistic.”

“Did you know anything about this Uranium Development Company?”

She stared at me and shook her head. “One of Dad’s. . . ?”

I nodded. “A new one, I guess.”

“I don’t know anything about it. But I want you to continue, Mr. Bishop. I

want you to find my dad, and then I want you to prove he had nothing to do with—with what happened.”

“I’ll continue,” I said. “Try and get some rest, Miss Williams.”

Her smile was weak. “I will. You keep working, Mr. Bishop.”

The maid came in with the broth, and I went out and down the stairs.

The uniformed man was gone. Joe was waiting in the hall, at the foot of the stairs.

“Well?” he said.

“I’m still on it.”

“Good.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Be careful, though, in town, won’t you, Steve? Don’t let your temper take over.”

I said I’d be careful, and we went out to the car. We rode to the station in silence, and I left him there. It had been a misty day, but the night was surprisingly clear.

I drove right back to town and ate there, at the Arkham House. I kept thinking about Valerie Williams and her faith. I wondered how much her faith would suffer, if and when this murder was cleaned up. She’d looked so lady-like and lovely in that dim room, in that big bed. But she was old enough to know at least a few facts of life.

CHAPTER THREE

The Man in the Booth

THERE was a light on in the apartment building, in the room I’d identified as 2-D.

This time the door opened almost immediately after my ring. The woman who stood there had a little too much bluntness in her features to qualify as beautiful. But the body made you forget the face, if you’re so inclined.

“Miss Collier?” I said.

“Mrs. Collier,” she corrected me. “Are you from the police?”

“Should I be?”

“They’ve been here,” she said, “and I wondered.”

“I’m not from the police,” I said. “My name is Steve Bishop, Mrs. Collier, and I was retained by Valerie Williams to find her dad.”

She stared at me for what seemed like

a long time. Then she said, "Come in, Mr. Bishop."

The apartment was standard, furnished in middle-class mahogany and heavily framed pictures. She sat near the front windows in a deep chair, and I sat on the davenport.

"Valerie's worried?" she said.

I nodded.

"She has the most unreasonable aversion for me. I simply don't understand the girl." She paused. "You've some identification on you, Mr. Bishop?"

I showed her my credentials.

She still seemed hesitant. "You, of course, work *with* the police?"

I shook my head. "I work for my client. Of course, I can't work *against* the police."

She was still doubtful. She said nothing for seconds, studying her hands in her lap. Then she looked up and said, "I've already told the police I don't know where Mr. Williams is."

"You were lying?"

"Not completely. He's going to get in touch with me later. I don't know where he is *now*."

"You know what happened. You know he's being sought by the police as a suspect in the murder of his former partner?"

She nodded, her dark eyes thoughtful. "He's innocent of that. He was . . . with me for the past two days. We were out of town."

Valerie had been right about that. Valerie could blush when she suggested it; this woman didn't blush when she admitted it. I wondered how long it had been since she'd blushed.

I said, "I can tell Miss Williams her father's safe and in good health then. That's really all I've been retained to find out. But maybe you'd let me talk to him when he phones you?"

"He isn't going to phone," she said, and paused, regarding me quietly. "I'm going to meet him." Another pause, and then she said, "You can come along. I'd like it, if you went along."

"Maybe *he* won't like it," I said.

"I don't care whether he does or not," she said. "I'm worried about him. I don't know what kind of business he's mixed up in this time, but it's making a nervous

wreck out of me." Her chin lifted and her voice was defiant. "I don't care what Valerie thinks, or anyone else. I love him, and I'd love him if he didn't have a dime."

It would be hard to doubt her sincerity. I didn't.

She seemed to rouse herself, as though her last words had been part of a confession and she was feeling better now. "I'd like a drink," she said. "How about you?"

"I guess," I said.

"Of course you would," she said. "All private detectives drink and talk tough. I know. I've seen a lot of movies."

I had some Scotch. She had some sherry. She lighted a cigarette and said, "I feel better. I don't know why you should do that to me, only you're something like a policeman, aren't you?"

"You like policemen?" I asked.

"I like what they represent," she said. "I like the order and the security. I didn't like the representative. He gave me the shivers."

"He?"

"Shellvane. his name was. A big, coarse, loud man."

"Chief of police," I said. "You should know that."

"I should know who our senators are from this state, too, but I don't. Does the chief of police investigate all murders personally?"

"Not in a town this size. He must have some personal reason, in this case." I studied my drink. "Were you and Mr. Williams very far on the trip?"

SHE SMILED at me. "Far enough. You can't stop being a detective, can you?"

I didn't answer.

"We were in Canada," she said. "Any more questions?"

Canada had a connotation too strong to resist, for me. "Looking for uranium?" I asked.

She set her drink down and crushed out her cigarette. She said, "Looking over some property Mr. Williams owns. Or, rather, that the corporation owns. Mr. Williams is president of the corporation."

"And chief stockholder?"

"I don't know," she said. "I can't see

how it would be any of your business. I thought we were going to get along, Mr. Bishop."

"I thought so, too," I said. "I thought we understood each other and that you looked on me as a friend. I'm working to save Mr. Williams' neck. I'm being paid by his daughter to work on it."

"And that's why you make cynical remarks about the Uranium Development Company?"

"I didn't mean it that way. But it's got a Buck Rogers touch, hasn't it? If a person didn't know—"

"He shouldn't have an opinion," she finished for me. "Mr. Williams is completely serious about this business. He's all wrapped up in it, and if he doesn't raise the money to develop it properly he's going to lose what he has in it. Which would be considerable. Which might break him."

"He has his *own* money in it?"

"That's right. Would you like another drink now?"

I said I would. I considered all she'd told me and tried to guess how much of it was the truth. It had all seemed truthful.

I said, "I've a hunch the D.A. is investigating Mr. Williams, too. One of his stooges has been living in my hair."

"The district attorney, you mean?"

I nodded. "Wilson."

"He's satisfied with the Uranium Development Company. Mr. Williams talked to him over a month ago. He was satisfied then that everything was what the prospectus claimed."

"He must have changed his mind," I said. "What time are we going to meet Mr. Williams?"

"In about fifteen minutes." She handed me my drink. "You've a car?"

"I have. And after we meet him, couldn't we take a run out to Ridgely? I'm sure Valerie would want to see him."

"We'll let him decide that." Her face was in partial shadow, but I could see she was displeased. She had a strong face, vital and mobile.

I could believe that her affection for Williams was strong and faithful, matching Valerie's faith in him. But some men have the faculty for hoodwinking women, and he could be one. It might have ac-

counted for his success as a broker.

We finished the second drink without much dialogue. She turned the radio on, hoping for a news report, but there was none being broadcast at the moment.

She got a coat, and we went down to the car. "Know where Baker Boulevard is?" she asked me.

I said I did.

"The corner of Baker and Nintii," she said. "There's a small drive-in restaurant there called Fedor's."

I knew the place. I'd had their barbecued spareribs and wasn't likely to forget them. As we climbed into the Chev I thought I saw a Buick down the block, but there are a lot of Buicks.

Fedor's wasn't too large a spot, but the neon would lead you to believe it was something special. We parked in the back and walked in the side door.

There was a man sitting in a booth near the door, all by himself. He must have been there for some time because there were quite a few people waiting for inside service. He looked enough like his picture for me to recognize him. He didn't look happy to see me.

Brenda Collier introduced us and explained about Valerie. He ordered the drinks, and I said, "I'm sure it would do Valerie a lot of good to talk to you. She's had a bad day."

He looked at Brenda Collier as though seeking her reaction to that.

"I could stay in the car," she said.

"And another thing," I put in, "you know the police are looking for you. You'd be wise to report to them right now. If you've a sound alibi—"

He waved that away. "I'm not worried. I'm not worried about the district attorney or any of the others who used to badger me." He smiled at Mrs. Collier. "I'm not even worried about additional capital now. I've talked to Zerbe. He'll put up all I'll need. I'm in the clear, honey."

"Calvin," she said, and her hand covered his on the table.

Our drinks came, and he lifted his high. "To success," he said.

We lifted ours and drank. Far be it from me to spoil his mood.

"And now," I said, "in deference to those who are waiting for a table, and out

of concern for your daughter, who is also waiting, let's get going."

We went.

VALERIE, the maid informed us, was still resting upstairs, so Mrs. Collier came in. She and I waited in the living room while Williams went up to talk to his daughter.

When he came down again he looked ten years younger. He said to Brenda Collier, "I think I'll stay here tonight. She's still a little shaken."

The woman smiled. "Of course. And don't worry, will you? You've worried too much these past months."

"I'm not worrying any more," he said. "I'll have nothing to worry about."

We left, and I drove her back to town. The Chev had traveled that road enough today to know it without my help, I reflected. And I'd spent a full day for one day's wages. But the stars were out, and I'd completed my mission, and everybody seemed happy. So I turned on the car radio and listened to some music, coming back, and felt at peace with the world.

It wasn't quite ten o'clock when I came into my apartment. My phone was ringing. It was Joe Lawlor.

"I've got a gent in the clink here, Steve who wants to see you."

"Me? Who is it?"

"Calvin Williams. You should have told me you'd found him, Steve."

"It wasn't my business," I said. "I was hired to locate him for his daughter, which I did. Besides, he's got an alibi for the last couple days. He was out of the country."

"Not your business? You knew we wanted him. Come on down."

"Joe," I said, "stop making a noise like a cop. Why are you holding him?"

"I'm holding him for Shellvane. He said it was his case, and I phoned him. He can have the whole mess."

"I'll be right down," I said.

Joe was waiting in his office when I got there. I said, "Joe, Williams has a sick daughter at home, about ready for a breakdown. He wasn't going any place. You could have waited."

"Could I? You seem to show a hell of a lot of unconcern for a man who's up to his hips in a murder case. His rec-

ord isn't so good he's untouchable, you know. And Quirck was his partner."

"Does Williams look like a murderer to you?"

"I didn't know there was a type. And you should know there isn't. Is it the daughter who's turned you soft?"

There wasn't any percentage in arguing with him in his present mood. I said, "Where's Williams?"

"First cell. I want to know anything and everything he tells you. You got that, Steve?"

"I didn't miss a word," I said, and went down the corridor to the first cell.

Calvin Williams was standing near the front of his cell, looking out into the corridor. He greeted me with, "What the hell goes on here?"

"I warned you about reporting to the police," I said. "The chief from town, Shellvane, wants you held."

He looked at me queerly. "What's he got to do with what happened to Quirck? Wasn't Quirck killed here?"

"It hasn't been established yet," I said. "He might have been shot at home, and then his body dumped out here. That's what they think now."

"I haven't seen Quirck for six months," he said. "Of all the damned fool . . ." He shook his head. "If I were going to kill him, would I put him in my own back yard after he was dead?"

"Shellvane isn't a man to be disturbed by logic," I said. "He'll probably just take you downtown and get a statement from you and then release you."

Then Shellvane and Joe were coming down the corridor. They stopped in front of the cell while Joe selected a key and unlocked the door.

Shellvane said, "I won't take much of your time, Mr. Williams, if you're innocent. I'll get a statement from you down at headquarters, and that should about do it. I understand from Mrs. Collier that you've been in Canada the past few days."

"That's right." Williams met Shellvane's gaze squarely. "This is a lot of damned nonsense, I hope you realize."

"Chief Lawlor phoned me," Harry said, "and I thought it best to get it over with tonight."

This wasn't the Shellvane we knew and Joe looked at me queerly. Of course, Wil-

liams had money, or gave the appearance of having money. Joe and I went into the front room with them where Shellvane signed for the broker's release.

When they left, Joe said, "That Valerie Williams phoned. She wanted to talk to you. Not her father—to you."

I called her from Joe's office.

She asked, "What's happened? Is my father still there?"

"No," I said. "But he's going to be all right. He'll be home tonight, I'm sure."

A long pause. I thought for a moment that the line was dead. Then she said, "Whether he's home tonight or not, Mr. Bishop, I want you to find out who killed Carl Quirck. I want to know."

"I'm sure your father is in the clear," I assured her.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I want to know all about it. You'll work on it, Mr. Bishop?"

"I'll work on it," I said and hung up.

Joe was sitting behind his desk. "That Shellvane," he said. "You hear him pass the buck to me when Williams squeaked? You hear him explain how I'd phoned him?"

"Didn't you?"

"Sure, but because he'd asked me to hold Williams, if he came home. I've had a man on it since." He stood up and reached for his hat. "What's new with the lady?"

"She wants me to find out who killed Quirck."

"Well, good hunting. I'm washed up with the whole mess." He had a cynical smile on his face. "I'm not getting paid to find out."

"Yes, you are, Joe," I said. "The taxpayers are footing the bill. Only you're afraid of Shellvane. I'm not."

I started to walk out, and he said, "Just a minute, Steve," and I turned back.

His face was tight, his voice hard. "What the hell did you want me to do? The taxpayers are footing the bill, you say. And they are. They expect protection. I need the city's cooperation for that. They've got the organization."

"And they've got Shellvane," I said. "And I'd hate to rely on him for either protection or cooperation."

He swore. He said, "For God's sake, let's face reality, Steve. Don't get so

damned noble at your age. What do you want me to do?"

I told him what I wanted him to do, and when. Then I went home to bed. I slept well, considering everything. I felt I'd earned a good sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Washed Up

THE MORNING headline read: DISCOVERY OF URANIUM STARTS CLAIM RUSH NORTH OF SAULT. It went on to explain about a find of "very high quality" pitchblende in the Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, area. The find, it said, had been verified by leading Canadian geologists. There was another Klondike in the making. The Geiger counter had replaced the washpan.

I phoned the Williams home, and Valerie answered. I asked if her dad had been released yet.

"No," she said, "but she phoned and told me not to worry. He was in the clear, he said."

"So . . ."

"Go right ahead with your investigation, Mr. Bishop. All I want is the truth, no matter *who's* involved."

Miss Williams, I guessed, was coming of age.

Williams had mentioned a Zerbe, and the name had stayed with me through the night. There was only one I'd heard of who could be classified as an investor. He'd been a big real estate man in town and had made money in the city's expansion. He'd backed a lot of ventures with that money, including a couple of Broadway shows. He'd picked, I knew, more winners than lemons.

His office was in the section of town closest to Ridgely. I was there at nine o'clock. For a big man he was an easy man to see. I was facing him across his desk five minutes later.

I told him who I was, and where I was from, and why I was here.

His broad face went slack. "I've heard a lot of propositions in this office, Mr. Bishop, but it's the first time I've been questioned about a murder."

"I'm sure you have no connection with that," I said, "unless it's through the

new Uranium Development Company."

He looked at me and then at the top of his desk. "Quirck . . . Quirck . . . He was Williams' partner at one time, wasn't he?"

"That's right. You've probably read all about it in the papers."

He shook his head. "The financial pages are the extent of my newspaper reading, Mr. Bishop. But I knew Quirck, all right. He was an amazingly honest man, Carl Quirck was. When was he killed?"

"Within the past twenty-four hours. He was found in Williams' back yard."

Something like anticipation in his face. "They suspect Williams?"

"I'm quite sure he's in the clear and will be released."

Was there regret in that broad face? I said, "You don't look happy about that, Mr. Zerbe."

His laugh was short. "I was thinking that if Calvin went to the clink I could probably get control of the company. Not very nice, am I?"

I couldn't answer that tactfully. I asked, "This company must be important, then, to you?"

He settled back in his chair, looking smug. "If you've read the morning papers, you should be able to guess. It's going to be the biggest deal I've even been in. You see, Calvin Williams was a little ahead of those boys who are staking their claims in that area now. He went up there a month ago and took options on acres and acres of that land, all that was privately owned and that he could talk the owners into optioning to him. There was a joker in the deck, however." Zerbe paused, looking more smug than ever. "Calvin didn't have the money to *buy*, when the options were up. That's where I came in."

"Then *you* have control of the Uranium Development Company?"

"I should have, shouldn't I? But there were investors in it before me, and Calvin's no man to be panicked into selling his future, just because he's fighting with his back to the wall. He's been in too many deals, that boy." He laughed. "And this one was legitimate, which was his ace. I made the best deal I could. You see, it's like buying into a gold mine, only there's probably going to be a hell of a bigger profit in this. The atomic age, you know."

"Legitimate," I said. "I wonder if the

D. A. thinks so. He had a man watching Williams."

"Habit," Zerbe said, and laughed again. I thought him a little old to be the Laughing Boy, but it was a part of his personality. "I wouldn't be surprised at all," he went on, "if Williams originally went into this deal as another promotion venture and sold the stock with—well, maybe dishonesty is too rough a word. Let's say with an idea to appeal to the larceny in all of us. There was some reason for him to suspect the presence of uranium there, and if it didn't measure up to what the investors hoped for, there wouldn't be grounds for fraud, because he *did* have the land and the Geiger counter showed the presence of uranium. The rest was his salesmanship, and you can't pinch a man for being a super-salesman. At least, not yet."

"It's like selling gold bricks," I said, "and then, after they're all sold, finding out that they were really gold."

HE NODDED, grinning. "But Calvin's bricks *weren't* all sold. They weren't even bought, until I gave him the money." He examined his nails. "You're sure they can't prove that murder charge against him?"

"The district attorney will certainly try," I said. "He's been after Williams for years." Then, "Do you know who any of the other investors are?"

He shook his head. "Calvin's being very cute about it all. I imagine the D. A. could demand the books, though. You think he might if I put a bug in his ear? I know Wilson pretty well."

I started to say something, but he motioned me to silence. He picked up a phone on his desk and asked the outer office operator to get Wilson for him.

I lighted a cigarette and sat, trying to digest what I'd learned this morning, trying to make something logical out of it along with what I'd known before.

Then Zerbe's voice: "Wilson? This is Walter Zerbe, Hank. I hear you've been checking my partner. Or didn't you know Williams is my partner now, Hank? That should make him an honest man, you know."

The buzz of Wilson's voice, and Zerbe looked over at me. "He says he gave up

on Williams six months ago. He says he knows when he's licked."

I smiled. I said, "Ask him about Warren Einar, then. Ask him why Einar was looking for Williams."

"How about Einar?" Zerbe asked him. "He's been looking for Williams."

A pause. Then, "Oh? You mean that, Wilson? I wouldn't want to be tied up with a criminal, not unless it paid off." He laughed and hung up.

He looked at me. "Wilson hasn't used Einar for months, whoever Einar is. The way he sounded when I mentioned the name, he isn't likely ever to use him again."

The pattern was forming in my mind. I rose and said, "Thank you a lot, Mr. Zerbe. You've been a great help."

"Glad of it," he said. "Think I gave you enough to put that rascal, Williams, behind the bars?"

"I think," I said, "that Quirck was trying to do that. And you know what happened to Quirck."

He was laughing as I left. With his money, I'd do a lot of laughing, too.

I went down to headquarters, and Mike Hansen, who's the entire ballistics department there, told me the slug was a .38, otherwise unidentified.

I asked him, "The chief around?"

Mike shook his head. "He said we could get him at home. He took that Williams with him. What goes on, Steve?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I said. "I'm just a hick private eye from Ridgely."

From the pay phones in the courthouse lobby I phoned Joe Lawlor and told him what I wanted.

He said, "All right, Steve. But we're playing with dynamite."

"Think of the publicity," I said. "You'll be chief out there until you retire. You could even run for congress."

The last few words were spoken into a dead line. He'd hung up.

THE SHELLVANE home wasn't the biggest house in town by a long shot, but it was big enough for any man in public service. Einar's Buick was in the side drive. I went up onto the porch and rang the bell.

There were no servants evidently. It

was Warren Einar who came to the door.

"You," he said, and shook his head.

"Persistent," I said. "I must annoy you plenty. Is Shellvane here?"

"It shouldn't matter to you," he said. "He's busy."

"With Williams?"

"Look, Nosy . . ." he said.

Then a voice behind him, Shellvane's voice, said, "Who is it, Warren?"

"Steve Bishop," Einar called back. "I'll dump him any place you want, Chief."

"Like you did Quirck?" I said quietly.

He froze right there. His eyes looked into mine, and I saw the pupils dilate and his mouth harden.

"Maybe you'd better come in," he said.

He gestured for me to enter. It was a stiff and jerky gesture, and I had the feeling he was ready to do something violent. But he didn't.

I went through an entrance hall and into a living room, a low, wide and fairly dim room furnished in turn-of-the-century Grand Rapids.

I sat on a mohair couch. Williams and Shellvane sat in mohair chairs across the room from me. Einar took a seat at the other end of the couch, watching me all the time.

"What's on your mind?" Shellvane asked.

"Murder," I said. "I kept figuring Einar as working for the D. A. and that's what threw me off. I knew the D. A. was on the up-and-up. I should have realized he was working for you, on business a little outside of department duties."

"Like . . .?"

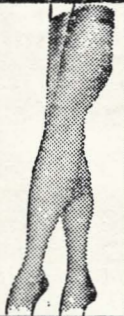
"Like the Uranium Development Company. I'm dumb, or I'd have realized you had a finger in that pie. You wouldn't be so interested in Williams as a murderer; you've got homicide men for that. You had too much interest in him, as a chief. Did Quick come to you, first? Is that how you got onto the Uranium Development Company?"

Shellvane didn't answer. My glance went over to cover Calvin Williams, and he was a pitiable thing to see. He was completely dominated by fear at the moment, trembling, white faced, almost craven.

"Quirck should have gone to the D. A.," I said, "but he probably came to you, and

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DETECTIVE TALES

you told him to keep mum until you had time to investigate. And Williams got you all stirred up about the possibilities of the deal, and you put some money into it. Einar, too, probably. Then, when he saw that he really did have something, Williams wanted it for himself. But if Quirck finally took his story to the D. A., with whatever he had on Williams, your promoter would go to jail, and nobody would put in the extra money you needed. You killed two birds with one stone, or one .38 slug. With Quirck dead, he couldn't talk. With Quirck's body in Williams' back yard, you had a sword to hold over Williams, to protect your investment. You could always railroad him if he didn't play ball. How am I doing?"

Shellvane looked at Einar, and his eyes were stone. He looked back at me.

Williams said, "He can't prove . . . It's all guesswork. . . ."

Shellvane expelled his breath and stirred in his chair. "You've done pretty well. Only, when I sent Warren to Quirck, I sent him with a message. I didn't expect him to carry a gun."

"Chief," Nels protested, "don't forget this guy's got Lawlor behind him, and Lawlor's so honest it hurts. Don't say anything you're going to regret later."

The chief looked at him blankly, then back at me. "I guess you might say I'm an accessory after the fact, because a guy would have to be damned dumb not to know it was Einar who killed Quirck. I sent him over to try and persuade Quirck that it would be to everybody's interest to hold off. If Williams made a killing in this deal, as he was bound to, everybody he'd ever robbed would get paid off. I'd see to that."

Einar said, "You're cutting your own throat, Chief. You'll go to the clink with me. And so will Williams. We can handle him." He jerked a thumb in my general direction.

Again Shellvane sent that blank look toward Einar. Then he faced me. "Any politician is subject to a certain amount of corruption. In my case, I guarantee you it will stop short of murder, or covering up a murderer."

Now he was looking full at Einar.

Williams said, "I won't have anything to do with murder, either. I . . ." He rose from his chair.

Einar took two steps, and his right hand went smashing into Williams' mouth. The promoter stumbled back into the chair and slumped there.

Einar faced Shellvane. "How do you think you can get out of it? You're in it, and if you use your head you'll stay in it. You think Wilson won't throw everything in the book at you? You think you'll go free?"

"I didn't order murder," Shellvane said.

"So I lost my head. But the louse would have talked, no matter how foolish it was for everybody. He's one of those holy guys, like Wilson. He had to go. And it won't be any harder to get rid of this jerk." Again the thumbed gesture.

"It would be murder," Shellvane said. "I'm telling you, Warren, you're washed up." He took a deep breath. "And so am I."

"Maybe *you* are," Einar said, "But don't try and decide for me."

There was a gun in his hand now. He took a backward step; we were both covered.

I said, "Wilson and Lawlor are on the way here. They should be here now."

"Don't anybody move," Einar said. His eyes were slitted.

"You won't get far," Shellvane said. "The chair's waiting for you, Warren."

Neither of us moved. Einar was back toward the door now, his gun trained on Shellvane for the moment. I could see the trigger finger tightening, and I knew I should go for my own gun after Shellvane's confession. He had that much protection coming. In that moment of indecision, it was Williams who acted. He was moving in his chair.

Now he rose unsteadily, and his voice was hoarse. "No more murder, Warren. I said no more murder . . ."

His thin body was between Shellvane and the gun, and I saw Shellvane's hand reaching, just as I reached for my own.

There was the roar of a shot, and Williams went hurtling backward toward the wall. My own gun was out, and I was



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DETECTIVE TALES

aiming for Einar's knee, where it would hurt.

I didn't miss. I saw him go down, screaming, as the front door burst open, and there were Joe Lawlor and Wilson, like the Marines, only a little late.

THE SLUG they'd dug out of Quirck matched Einar's gun, which he'd been dumb enough to hang onto. He had relied too much on Shellvane, I guess, to play it smart.

Shellvane's testimony didn't spare himself, but there wasn't any way even Wilson could nail him with more than a couple years. He'd redeemed himself partially by his support of me in his living room. For my money he'd redeemed himself all the way, but it's my life and I might be prejudiced.

I talked to Valerie before the funeral, and she listened to every word.

When I'd finished, she said, "Well, he died a hero. He really saved your life, didn't he? And Mr. Shellvane's?"

"He certainly did," I agreed.

She started to cry, and I left, not knowing what else to do.

That damned Zerbe sent me a check for five thousand dollars, believe it or not, and I sent it back, believe it or not.

THE END

THE CRIME CLINIC

(Continued from page 109)

going on, and God knows what all else needs working out. All this we're willing to hand over to the girls. Give them a crack at it, we say.

Before all of us males quit our jobs and take off for the north woods to go fishing, however, we might just as well let you in on the line-up for next month's DETECTIVE TALES. We're going to have some of your regular favorites appearing, among them Day Keene, Larry Holden and Johanas L. Bouma, and of course there'll be the features you tell us in your letters you're so fond of: "You Can't Get Away With Murder!" and "Oddities in Crime."

Well, unless the girls take over sooner than we expect, including the editorship of DETECTIVE TALES, we'll see you next month on September 28th.—*The Editor.*

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 79)

Tonight I'm working late again, for the last time.

I've gone over it a hundred times, but the picture always comes out the same:

Douglas Ramford Stoddard, M.D., smiling that smooth ingratiating smirk: "But I *didn't* tell Mr. Hagan he had an incurable condition; in fact I tried to convince him of the very opposite. I even referred him to a specialist to erase any doubt. Here's the report. Dr. Benjamin Weisman, the best on the Coast."

And Ellen, looking sad and shocked: "Did you say . . . *Apomorphine*? Wherever did he get that silly notion? After all, I *am* a graduate nurse, and . . .

So there you have it. What would you do?

Tonight, late tonight after the traffic stops, I'm going to drive my car out on the bridge again. They'll find it there in the morning, standing empty and deserted. They'll also find lying nearby—just to complicate matters—a blood-stained jack handle.

But before I go, two phone calls to make. To Ellen the glad news that Weisman gave me a clean bill of health, that it was all in my mind. And that now I'm out with my good old pal, *our* dear old pal, getting drunk as a lord. . . . Wanna say hello to Ellen, Doug?

To Douglas Stoddard, I'll say much the same. Weisman showed me his report, assured me that any apprehensions I had were entirely unjustified—and that now Ellen and I are out having ourselves a celebration. Dear li'l Ellen, who says to say hello. . . .

And they'll both shrug tonight, figuring nothing gained, but nothing lost. But tomorrow when the car is found with the bloody jack handle, and every tomorrow after that, with each of them convinced the other saw me last . . .

Well, I wish them happiness.

My only regret is that I won't be around to see Ellen's face when she learns that I've been busy this past week in selling out my share of the agency—and that I've also cashed in all my life insurance as well.

DEATH'S BRIGHT ANGEL

(Continued from page 89)

his broken lips and screamed. "Joan! Joan! Help me, help me!"

Joe stopped, stunned by the hysterical wail. It was not Freddie's softly taunting voice—it was the voice of a child, a frightened yellow kid, cowering, covering his eyes.

"Joan! They're after me, they're after me!" he screamed.

Joe panted and wiped his mouth. He reached out and got the gun from Freddie's pocket. He stood there and finally Freddie lowered his hands and stared at him. His features were loose and shapeless and grey with terror.

"I won't tell. I didn't do anything. I won't tell on you," he whimpered. "Let me go home, let me go home."

Someone was knocking hard on the front door. At last Joe turned and went to open it. Two cops came crowding in. "Something we heard . . ." they began. They stopped. Freddie was struggling to crawl through the window onto the fire escape. One cop hauled urgently at his gun.

Joe stopped him. "You won't need that. He just wants to go home."

"Huh?" The cop didn't understand. Joe didn't blame him.

"Just take him out of here, but take him quick," Joe said thickly. "And don't let me see him again."

They dragged him out while Freddie kept trying to tell them, "Just let me go home." Joe knew he would never forget those words or the sound of them, no matter how long he lived.

IT WAS early evening. Sally said, "Be there in a second," from the bedroom. Joe sat down and began to play one of the hymns. She came up behind him quietly and kissed his neck. "Hello, Lucky," she said. "Lucky Joe."

He stood up. "Don't say that to me," he said quietly. She looked from one of his eyes to the other carefully. "Well?" he wondered slowly.

"Don't tell me. Something's happened to you. And I'm glad," she said. "Kiss me, Joe. Kiss me hello, as if we'd never met before."

THE END

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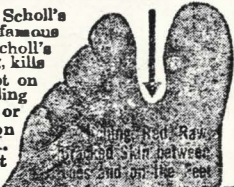


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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 100)

had been an old-fashioned standard model. Take a good look at the difference in keyboards sometime. It's not great. The letters are always in the same order. But the old-fashioned standard will have *more* keys, to take care of the quotes and figures and what-not that the portable merely squeezes in elsewhere. It doesn't take long to get used to the difference—if you can see the difference. Your father could type wonderfully well on the typewriter he'd grown used to. But your father was blind. He could not possibly have typed the note I received without making a great many errors, because he was typing by habit, not sight. Since Kipp didn't know there'd been a change of machines when I asked him, that left your mother pretty well holding the bag. You were the only other one who knew about the change, and since the note named you, you certainly weren't guilty."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Kipp moving.

"Look out!" the girl screamed. "Look out!"

I swung around—and stepped full into one of the nastiest haymakers you'd ever want to see. It caught me along the side of the head like a dozen piledrivers, and I dropped like a poled ox. Instinctively I rolled away, feeling my scalp tingle as Kipp kicked at my head, and missed. I grabbed frantically at his foot, caught it, and jerked with all my strength. There was a scream from Mrs. Klieman as Kipp crashed to the floor.

I sprang on top of him . . . but after that it was only a matter of mopping up. The fall had taken most of the spine out of him. Mrs. Klieman had collapsed on the sofa and was sobbing hysterically and helplessly.

While I sat on Kipp's chest, trying to get my breath, I noticed Georgia standing by the telephone in the hallway. She was already calling the police.

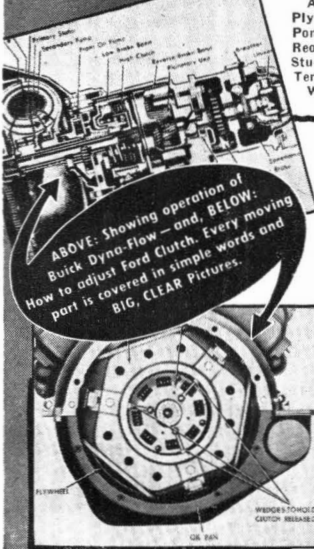
I couldn't help thinking what an asset she'd be to anyone's business—particularly a private detective's. I'd have to see what I could do along those lines.

Definitely my kind of a girl, that Georgia.

THE END

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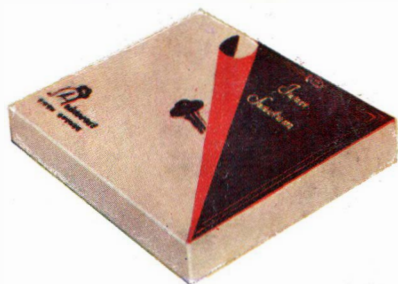
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