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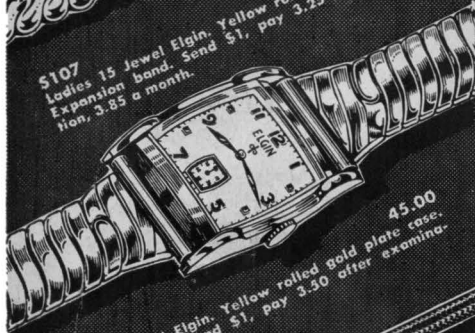
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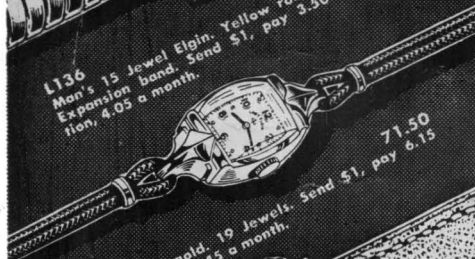
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HER FOOT'S CAUGHT!

KEEP THIS BOAT CLEAR! I'VE GOT TO CUT THAT LINE!



SHE'S OKAY, I THINK. JUST SWALLOWED SOME WATER

THANK HEAVENS! THAT WAS MIGHTY QUICK WORK ON YOUR PART



I'M KEEPING BLANE ABOARD FOR DRY CLOTHES AND A SNACK. WE'LL MEET YOU IN PORT

THIS WOULD BE THE DAY I DIDN'T SHAVE



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THANK YOU, SIR



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THIN GILLETTES MAKE SHORT WORK OF TOUGH WHISKERS. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



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EVERY STORY NEW — NO REPRINTS



Vol. 61

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Here's hoping you haven't been swindled out of your hard-earned cash by the eager cheaters who are always around, anxious to dispoil you of the fruits of your honest toil. Of course, we've all been suckers for chiselers' bait, at one time or another. But you can lower the boom on many of the schemers waiting to rob you—by knowing beforehand what to expect.

That's why this column is here—to prepare you for the smart alecks who want to prey on the average citizen's gullibility. For if you all keep up with the rackets and are aware of the current ruses being pulled—there'll be that much less chance that you'll be taken in by some sharp character's tricks.

In these pages you can read all about the new angles and the old gimmicks that are still being pulled. Thus, this column can help you safeguard yourself against being caught by the swindlers.

And more—you can help us all. Send us letters telling of your own true experiences with chiselers and racketeers of all kinds. We'll publicize the information you send us—and at the same time, we'll pay you \$5.00 for every letter we use.

Of course, you understand that we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letters—unless they are accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Remember, we'll withhold your name from print, if you wish.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Now, let's see what swindles we may be up against:

Carnival Cunning

Dear Sir:
 Hold your hats, fellows, and get ready for another round of fair swindles. There's one sharper in particular it pays you to steer clear of. I dropped thirty skins to this gent last year, in a matter of only about fifteen minutes. It looks easy, so easy.

A guy stands there with a dice box in his
 (Please continue on page 8)

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!



Thrilled by Playing

I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and others.

*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.



Wouldn't Take \$1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.

*D. E. G., Wausau, Wis.



Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.

*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.

*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear". We teach you easily and quickly to play real music, any music by standard notes—not by any trick or number system.

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<input type="checkbox"/> Hawaiian	<input type="checkbox"/> Reed Organ	<input type="checkbox"/> Flute	<input type="checkbox"/> Control
<input type="checkbox"/> Guitar	<input type="checkbox"/> Tenor Banjo	<input type="checkbox"/> Modern	<input type="checkbox"/> Piccolo
<input type="checkbox"/> Violin	<input type="checkbox"/> Ukulele	<input type="checkbox"/> Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/> Mandolin
<input type="checkbox"/> Piano Accordion		<input type="checkbox"/> Harmony	

Mr. _____ Have you
Miss. _____ Instrument?.....
Mrs. _____ (Please print)

Address.....

City..... State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c — STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

(Continued from page 6)

hand. It has about five ordinary marbles in it. On the counter is a board full of holes. Each hole has a number under it. The game is to get ten points. The sharper will call you in, telling you for advertising purposes he'll give you five points to start with. All you have to do is to get five more.

You slip him four bits and toss the marbles out of the dice box on the board. He totals the numbers below the holes they fall in, then looks on the chart. A certain total of points gives you so many points. Some totals give three points, some two, some one, some $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$. Some totals draw a blank—no points.

I slipped him the four bits and started off with only five points to go. My first throw brought me three more points. My next $\frac{1}{2}$ point.

The prize—if you won—was all the money you had put up, plus ten dollars more every time your marbles hit a certain total. I hit that total two times. I was entitled to all my losings plus twenty dollars—if I got that other half point.

Believe it or not, but I dropped thirty dollars and threw blank every time.

I watched for two hours and saw hundreds of dollars lost, and only one winner. It was a fixed board so the marbles would only fall in certain holes as soon as he turned on the current or something of the sort.

So fellows, if you want to enjoy your spending money, steer clear of this sharper.

Keith Williamson,
Economy, Indiana.

Quick Clean-up

Dear Sir:

One day while I was worrying about our septic tank, which seemed to be overflowing, two men stopped by and asked if they could take away my cans, garbage, and so forth. As I live outside of town, I told them they could and asked them if they knew anyone who would clean septic tanks. They said they could do it, that they'd do it for \$35.00.

I thought a minute, and the man said, "I'll tell you, I'll do it for \$30.00!"

I said, "When?"

He said he would do it the next day. He came and did it. I paid him, told him to come for my "trash" in a month, and supposed that incident was closed.

The following day after that the man came again. I went to the door and he began talking so fast I asked what he was talking about.

He said, "The truck that I used yesterday broke down, and after I'd paid the two men I have working with me, I didn't have enough money to pay for having my truck fixed. I need five dollars more, and I came to you because you know I'm an honest worker. I'd like five dollars, and I'll pay it back tomorrow."

I have been told I have a kind face—and I must have been wearing it that day, for I gave him \$5.00. That was two months ago. I've never seen the man or the \$5.00 since.

Mrs. M. A.
Oroville, Calif.

Put Through the Wringer

Dear Sir:

I was sitting in a bar on Michigan Avenue in Inkster, Michigan, a few months ago, talking to a very well-dressed man about fifty years of age.

In the course of our conversation, I remarked that I was looking for a washing-machine motor to replace our old one which had recently been damaged beyond repair. The man brightened perceptibly, showed great concern over my misfortune and asked me what make and model my machine was.

I told him. He smiled engagingly and said:

"I know just where you can get one. A good one too! My brother in Yipsilanti has one for sale. Wants fifteen dollars for it."

"In good condition?" I asked.

"The best. Almost brand new. He used it in the basement, tinkering with it until now the novelty has worn off and he wants to sell it."

"Is that right?" I gasped. "Let's go."

We went. Yipsilanti is a town almost fifteen miles from Inkster, but I thought nothing about driving that far because my wife is not strong, and we have four children—making six in the family to wash for. Needless to say, we really needed the motor.

The fellow talked constantly and seemed so upright and honest that it never entered my mind to doubt him. He directed me to a side street in the suburbs and appeared to know the place well. We stopped in front of a nice home set behind a picket fence.

"Here we are. You wait here. I'll go in and pay my brother and bring out the motor." He held out his hand and I, unsuspecting, placed a ten-and-a-five-dollar bill in it.

"Just keep your motor running because I'll be right back. I'll guarantee the washing-machine motor. There's nothing for you to worry about." And with that, he went through the gate and disappeared around the corner of the house, just like he was going to the basement entrance.

That was the last I ever saw of him, and, I might add, of my fifteen dollars! I waited about twenty minutes, then began to get suspicious. Shutting off the car motor, I went to the front door. At my knock a lady answered. "Yes?"

I explained my business and the lady was dumbfounded. She told me that her husband had no brother, or sister either for that matter, and that someone had taken me for a ride.

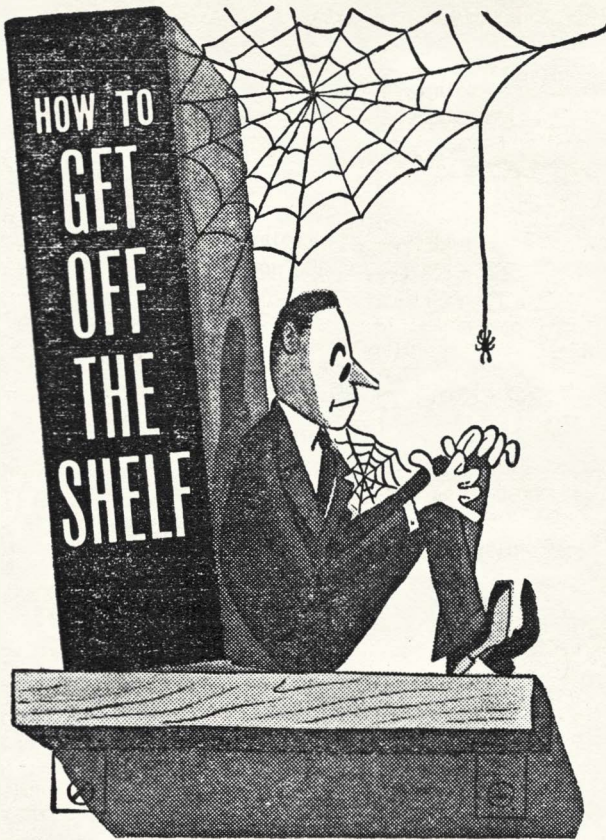
I had to let it go at that. I drove around aimlessly, trying to catch a glimpse of my swindler but I never did.

That experience has taught me a lesson I'll never forget.

G. T. Newton
Detroit, Michigan

That's the tipoff on the current rackets for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to write in and tell us about the crooked rackets you've come up against.

The Editor.



ONE or two promotions . . . several pay raises . . . and then that long, long stretch "on the shelf." You want to keep on climbing. You want to feel that you are getting somewhere. But how?

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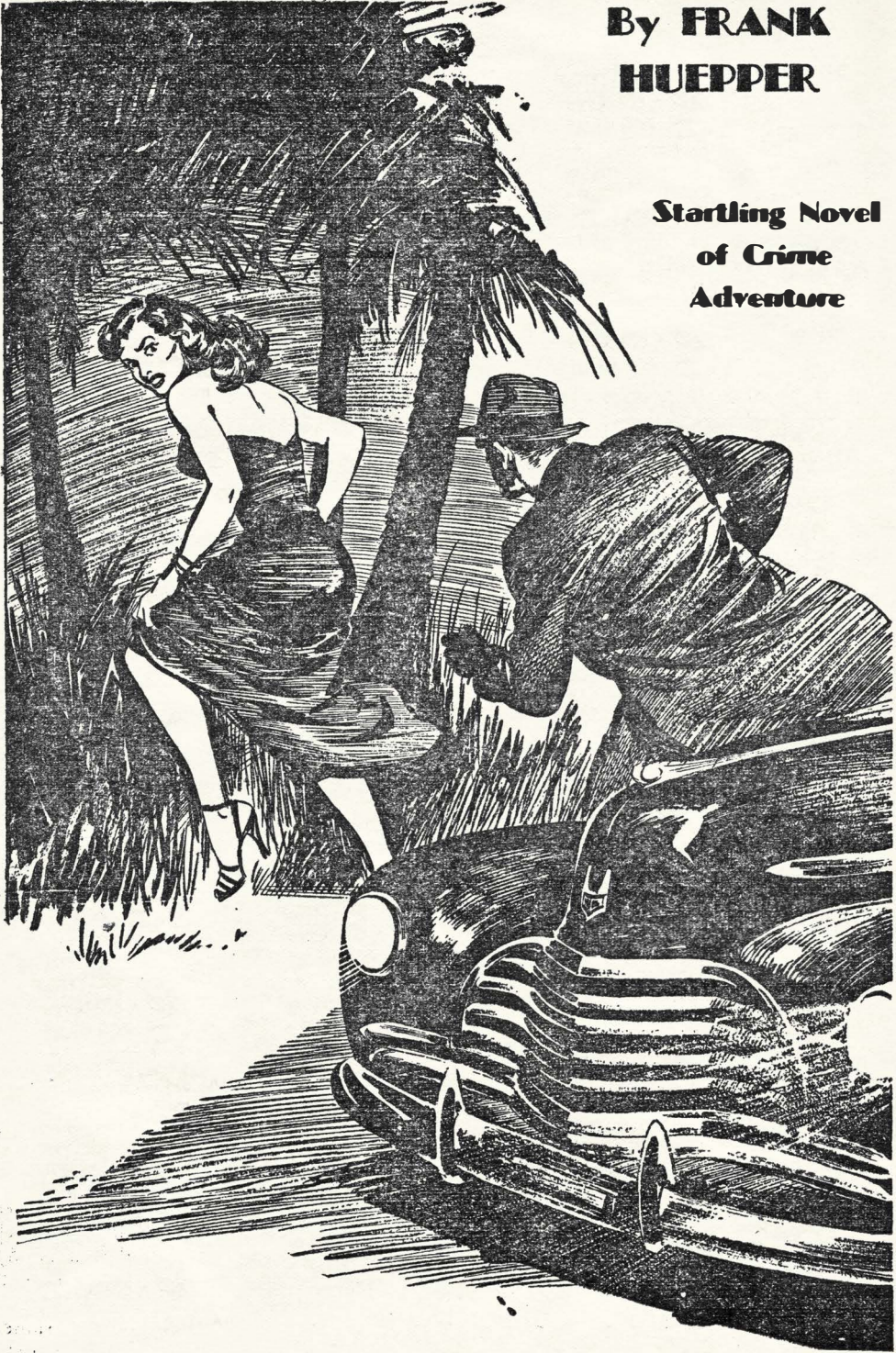
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By **FRANK
HUEPPER**

**Startling Novel
of Crime
Adventure**



HELLBENT for HOMICIDE

Newshawk McCarthy blundered into headlines and headstones . . .

when a babbling jockey disappeared—

and a hotspot canary started screaming bloody murder.

"Be smart, buddy," he drawled.
"Relax and you won't get hurt."



CHAPTER ONE

Kiss Your Informer Good-by

JOE ROXIE'S *El Rancho* is ten miles north of Hollywood on a turn-off from U.S. 101. It's tucked away in a little jungle of palms and pepper trees well beyond the beaten track. Plenty of fugitives from the Strip find it a handy spot to get lost. The architecture is a vulgarized Spanish.

The atmosphere is more of the same. The hat-check girl wears a Carmen get-

up. Gaucho suits make the waiters uncomfortable. There's a barbecue pit and bull-fighting murals. Once in a while, the band even plays a rhumba.

I had time left over when I got there. The dinner show was still rolling. The lights were down. The crowd was heavy. I left my hat with the mail-order Carmen and found the headwaiter. I told him somebody would be looking for me. Then I bought a table and sat down to wait.

The girl at the microphone made it painless. She was using the name Connie Clinton. I'd noticed a poster display with her picture on it out in the foyer when I came through. But the picture was only in two dimensions.

She had a shape that should have been posted with warning signs. It was showcased in a black velvet dinner dress . . . one of those strapless jobs that gave just enough away.

Her hair was long, lush and almost flame-red. Her face was fresh and well-chiseled. She had a full, round mouth with plenty of even white teeth. And not only that—she could sing.

She was working her way through a deep-down and dark-blue number that all but set off the sprinkler system. It would have wound up the show, but the people clapped her back for more when she finished. She wrapped it up with another low, slow, heat-treated job, part with the voice and part with the shape. Then she bowed out smoothly for the band.

When the lights came back up, I did a double take. For I didn't know how long, my cookie had been sitting there right at my table waiting. He was a little banty rooster of a man with scarce, sandy hair, small, bright eyes and a bent nose. The fresh white bandage he wore on one cheek didn't make him look any handsomer.

His voice; when he talked, was like a choir boy's. The same voice that phoned me anonymously an hour before and invited me out to Roxie's.

"The waiter fingered you for me, chum," he piped carefully. "You're Frank McCarthy, right?"

"That's how the mail comes."

"You do a sports column for the *Comus*, right?"

"The same guy."

He looked around the room like a pitch-

er with runners on all three bases. "I gotta be careful," he said. "That's why I didn't give you no name on the phone. You know who I am, McCarthy?"

I looked at him closer. He had jockey written all over him. I took a quick mental turn around the paddock and he suddenly fell into place. "Would I win a prize if I said Tommy Rich?"

He showed me a smug grin. "You might at that, chum."

Tommy Rich had been a top money rider once. Lately his weight and his age were showing. The racing commission didn't help, either. Just a month before they'd set him down for a healthy stretch on a foul at Santa Anita. For a special reason, I'd given it full play in the column. Tommy had been up on a three-year-old filly named Calico Queen.

By a not-so-strange coincidence, the filly was owned by Mona Meredith. The same Mona Meredith who's known herself as the Calico Queen in the movie magazines. Mona romps through a dozen Grade B westerns a year. Each one is cornier than the last. But just the same, her name is news.

I LOOKED at Tommy Rich now and started to smell fresh printer's ink. "Still sitting 'em out, Tommy?" I primed him.

"Yeah," he said sweetly. "Still sitting 'em out. It's just like you said it was gonna be in the paper. The layoff just about washed me up. I ain't gonna be able to make the weight no more . . . even if I could get the mounts."

"I'm sorry, Tommy," I told him and meant it. "This is one time I wish I'd called it wrong."

"Yeah, sure," he muttered sarcastically. "Don't knock yourself out for me though, McCarthy. I got some plans . . . over the border." He fingered the bandage on his cheek. "Before I pull out I just wanna pay off a coupla friends. *That's* what we're here to talk about chum. You remember what happened with Calico Queen?"

I still had a rough picture. The filly was odds-on favorite for a cheap stake. Tommy had brought her in, too. But there was no pay-off. He'd used his whip on another boy getting through at the turn. The

judges had caught it and ruled the foul.

"I remember what happened, Tommy," I told him. "You were trying a little too hard."

He grinned wisely and cased the room again. Then he leaned over close enough so I could smell the chewing gum on his breath.

"Supposin' I told you that race was set up . . . a hunnert-thousan'-dollar fix? You think it might make a good yarn, McCarthy? You think you might like to crack it open?"

I sat up straighter. It was better than hitting the daily double. "Stop teasing me Tommy," I told him fast. "We still have time to paste it all over the midnight edition."

It could have been *that* simple, too. Instead I heard the sound system snap on. One of the gauchos was standing beside the mike. He boomed into it:

"Telephone call for Mr. Rich. Mr. Tommy Rich, in the lobby, please."

Tommy bounced up like a jack-in-the-box. I stood up with him. A jittery look spread over his face. "I been tailed," he whispered. Then a new idea started to grow behind his little, shoe-button eyes. He seemed to like this one better.

He put his hand on my arm and motioned me back to my chair. "If you want the story, you wait right here, chum," he shot at me tensely. "Otherwise you'll mess me up good."

I wanted the story. So I sat down and watched him shove his way through the crowd out to the lobby. . . .

I stayed at the table and chewed my nails up to the armpit for a good ten or fifteen minutes. Then I couldn't hold out any longer. I got up and maneuvered carefully out to the lobby.

The only excitement I could see was the poster board with the picture of Connie Clinton. There were three public phone booths down at the far end. One had a miscellaneous woman in it. The other two were empty.

I walked over and said hello to Carmen in the cloak room. I gave her a bill and asked her if anyone Tommy's dimensions had bought back his hat from her lately.

She answered in pure Castilian dialect, "Whatta you fellas doin', honey, playin' tag? He said there might be somebuddy

ask. He said to say he'd phone ya at your place later on."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe ten, fifteen minits, honey. He seemed like he might be in a rush."

"Anyone with him?"

"Didn't notice nobody if there was." She primped her lips with the edge of her tongue and told me with the look in her eyes she was hard to coax as a sunburn at Malibu. "What's up anyhow, honey, trouble?"

"The mains are after the counter mains. That's all, darling," I told her glumly. With a page-one replate right under my nose, that *was* about all I'd come up with, too. I felt like a kid who just dropped his ice cream cone.

Tommy's bruised cheek, what he'd started to tell me, the phone call for him, and his fast exit all added up to one brilliant conclusion; people who fix a horse race don't like anyone advertising it. And the chances looked small that I'd get another crack at Tommy before the people did. Still, I had to get home and sweat out the phone.

AS I walked out of *El Rancho*, the night was really doing a job for the chamber of commerce. The moon was hanging down close to the ground. The stars were out in bunches. A soft breeze was rattling around in the palm fronds.

The parking lot looked big, lonesome and fast asleep. I stood there and listened a minute before I climbed into my coupe. All I could hear was the blare of the band from inside the club. I turned the motor over and jockeyed out to the road.

I drove for about five minutes, I guess, without even seeing another car. Then a pair of headlights showed in my mirror and started to grow. They came moving up fast, flooded the coupe, and then swung off to pass. I looked sideways and saw a long, low yellow convertible.

I could make out a man and a woman in the front seat, and another man in the back. I was turning my eyes to the road again when the woman, without any warning, suddenly lunged at the driver of the convertible.

The next split-second, metal exploded on metal. A solid sheet of shock shot up

from my toes to my teeth. I climbed on the brake by reflex. Rubber screamed on the macadam. The convertible went careening off my front fender and ground to a stop ten yards ahead. Its tag number became registered automatically on my mind.

I opened my door and stepped out to collect myself. But I didn't get very far with it. The woman was out of the other car and running toward me already. I saw her clearly, now, in the bright beam of my lights.

She was wearing a strapless black dinner dress. Her long, red hair was a little mussed, but I couldn't have missed her in a blackout. It was Connie Clinton, the singer I had admired before, back at *El Rancho*.

Her high heels clicked on the pavement like castanets. "Look out," she was screaming wildly. "They've got guns. There's a man in the trunk. They killed him."

She ran out of the light and off the road towards the foliage.

I kissed Tommy Rich good-by then and there and toed in for trouble.

I didn't see more than the coat tail of the man in the back seat. He angled right off after Connie. The driver came up to me through the light like a dancer. He was big, broad and good-looking with a head of beautiful blond hair as shaggy as a collie dog's.

He was sharply dressed, too, right down to the natty little sawed-off .32 in his left hand. He talked like somebody wrote the lines for him.

"Be smart, buddy," he drawled casually. "Relax and you won't get hurt. The dame is a little bit on the loaded side, that's all."

"Y-Yes sir," I stuttered, cute as could be. "I don't want any trouble." Then I dove for his gun arm. I got it, too, in both of my hands. I pulled the arm over my shoulder and tried to lever him into a ground loop. He stopped it with a knee in my back.

Still holding the arm, I slammed it down hard on my own knee like kindling wood. Blondie yelped with the pain. I even saw the gun drop. There was only one joker. Nobody told me about the sap he had in his other hand.

CHAPTER TWO

Thick as Thugs

WHEN I got up to the surface, all I could hear was acres and acres of quiet. All I could feel was the fifty-pound weight at the base of my skull. I was a little surprised to find myself any place at all. I was a lot more surprised to find myself sitting behind the wheel of the coupe in a clump of bushes just off the road.

I fingered my bump. It wasn't much bigger than a basketball. I fumbled the "cold-weather" bottle out of the glove compartment and took an uninhibited belt. Things picked up just a little.

Strangely enough, the tag number of the yellow convertible was still knocking around among the fireworks in my head. Before I did anything else, I wrote it down on the back of a match cover.

My watch was still going. It read just short of eleven o'clock. I must have been gone for a solid hour. I stumbled out to look over the grief. The left-front fender was well chewed up. The tire was flat. Outside of that, I was still a mobile unit.

By the time I got the spare on, the pounding upstairs had gentled off to a steady throb. I beat the bushes half-heartedly for a minute or two. Then I climbed into the coupe and flew it back to Joe Roxie's *El Rancho*. There was no other civilization between.

The parking lot was still fast asleep. Inside, all the fuss I could find was a drunk bothering Carmen. The headwaiter came up to me and went into his bowing and scraping routine.

"You're back again, Mister McCarthy," he told me, newsily.

It looked like whatever happened to Tommy Rich hadn't come off above a whisper. To involve Connie Clinton, it *couldn't* have been much more than an outfielder's throw from the club. I waved a press card under the table-shuffler's nose and told him to show me the head man fast.

Joe Roxie's office was up on the second floor. The walls were paneled in redwood. The chairs were covered in black-and-white cowhide with the hair still on it. Indirect lights fanned out of fancy, lon-

horn fixtures. There was a private horse-shoe bar and a block-long fireplace.

Roxie, himself, was a bad-mannered fat boy with too many chins, a bulby nose and bushy eyebrows. He had skin like a woman's and eyes that looked like they just stopped crying.

He stood up behind his big ebony desk. "All right, buster," he snarled at me warmly. "What kind of trouble are you peddling?"

"None but the best," I told him sweetly. "An hour ago a man was killed in your back yard and your red-headed singer was grabbed by the monkeys that did the job. That's all, Roxie. You might want to start getting into it while I call out the marines."

I reached for the phone, but I didn't quite make it. Roxie's big, pudgy paw closed over mine. "Hold it a minute, buster," he snapped with his watery eyes hard on my own. "You wouldn't be talking about Connie Clinton?"

"I wouldn't be talking about her Aunt Kate."

He sat down in his swivel chair again

and grinned at me like the villian throwing the switch at the saw mill. "Look, wise guy," he said. "Connie Clinton was in here no more than five minutes ago. If she had any trouble, she didn't think it was newsy enough to mention."

"You mean she's here *now*?" I said, goggle-eyed.

He flipped the hook of the audiphone on his desk. "Send Connie Clinton up right away," he growled into the thing. Then he turned back to me. "Now what's that part about somebody getting cooled?"

It was just a thought, but it suddenly crossed my mind that Roxie might better be telling *me* the answers. Making book on the side would cut a nice slice off his overhead on the club. And fixing a race or scratching a jockey seemed like just the kind of hobbies he's go for.

With my rubber legs and feathery head, though, I wasn't quite ready to take it to court. So I back-pedaled some and told Roxie only as much I thought he should know. The door to the room opened in on us before he had time to do much reacting.

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IT WAS Connie Cliton, all right, doing her best to make me sound like a hop-head. She looked as cool as a bisque tortoni and just about twice as good. There wasn't so much as a scratch or a bruise on all the lush acreage over her neckline. Not a hair on her head was out of place. She brushed over me calmly without a nod. Then she turned to Roxie.

"You want me, Joe?"

He sighed heavily and pointed his chins in my direction. "Buster here wants to mix you up in some trouble, Connie. I hope you're clean, kid. I ain't crazy about this kinda publicity."

She stared at me blankly. The chances were my profile didn't take out in the dark behind the headlights. "Don't look now, honey," I told her gently, "But I'm the chump you bit on the fender. The boy commando, remember?"

She gave me a look out of the deep-freeze compartment. "What is this?" she said calmly. "Some new kind of a shake-down?"

I told myself then and there that Connie Clinton was jumping through the hoop for Joe Roxie. While I turned that around, the room began to shake and grow fuzzy. It cleared in a second or two. But it helped me make up my mind that I'd better keep going along with the gag.

"Look, Connie," I said, half mugging and half meaning it. "I don't know what you're trying to cover. Whatever it is, though, you can't keep your skirt out of *this* puddle. There was a nasty man with a gun. You were screaming something about a murder. Murder is slightly against the law, honey."

"Ohhhhh," she said poisonously. "You'll have to prompt me. I forgot to study my lines."

It sounded to me like she knew them cold. "All right, Connie," I said patiently. "Let's try it the hard way, then. How would you like to tell the folks where you've been since the dinner show . . . and how many people saw you there?"

She swung back to Roxie. "Who is he, anyhow, Joe? Cops?"

"Worse than that, kid. Newspapers. You better tell him."

"Okay, then," she shot at me sweetly. "Why don't we say I drove over to U.C.L.A. to leave a dress with my kid

sister. She happens to be in school there. That would be right after I finished the dinner show. I stayed with her nearly an hour. Then I drove directly back to get fixed for the supper show. I got here just about ten minutes ago. Can you make any headlines out of that?"

"I might if your sister can't fib as fast as you can."

"Then why don't you phone her?" she snapped.

"I'll do better than that later on, Connie. It takes more than a phone call if you've got her all primed already."

Roxie looked smug. He got up and walked around to the front of the desk. "You know, buster," he told me too casually, "it looks to me like you might be a little bit off the track. I think maybe you better start in all over again . . . someplace else."

There must have been something about the way he put it. But, wobble-headed or not, I suddenly had to know if Roxie was really the heavy in the act. There was only one way to find out. I leaped way out to the end of the limb and said:

"Okay, Roxie. Just one more thing. Do you mind if I hold her hand alone for a minute?"

He surprised me. He studied me a few seconds. Then he walked over to the door. "All right, buster. But make it fast. And don't forget, I'll be right outside." He went out and closed the door behind him.

Connie Clinton just stood there and poisoned me with her eyes. "What happens now?" she snapped. "Do you stick a penknife under my fingernails?"

"Stop hamming and tell me one thing fast. Is it Roxie who's scaring you into the act?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Okay, Bernhardt, let's take the refresher course, then." I sighed, and started to improvise rapidly. "When you left here after the dinner show tonight you stumbled into trouble. You happened to walk across a couple of dead-end kids letting the air out of a jockey named Tommy Rich.

"They sort of resented the interruption. So they took you along for the ride. You sort of resented the ride. So you piled their yellow convertible into me. Later

on, it turns out to be a small world. It turns out your playmates are working for Roxie just like you, except in a different department. You put on the act to help keep it all one big, happy family. Especially since Papa Roxie will tear off your head if you talk out of turn."

She laughed in my face. "You're wasting your time on a newspaper, mister. You ought to be writing for pictures. Joe Roxie wouldn't hurt a sparrow."

"All right, then. Suppose I told you I had the number of the yellow convertible?"

"Bully for you. But I don't know a soul with a yellow convertible."

"You might change your mind after a couple of hours beneath a hot light, honey. The cops are so nosy. They eat little girls like you. And that story about your sister isn't going to hold water either. If you open up now, Connie, I'll carry you over the rough spots . . . whatever they are. That's a promise."

For just a second she seemed to look uncertain. Then she froze up again fast. She took a step towards me and patted me on the cheek. "Thanks," she said brightly, "but I think I'll just hobble along on my own. Right now I have to get fixed. I go on again in five minutes."

"Okay, precious." I sighed as she started for the door. "I'm the patsy for now. But don't get the idea it's *that* easy. I'll be on your back like a mustard plaster."

I no sooner said it than the room got the jitters again. Only this round it didn't stop dancing until I fell flat on my face one more time.

CHAPTER THREE

Sparring with Glamour-Puss

I WASN'T out for much of a count. When I opened my eyes again, though, the floor felt cozier than a featherbed. Connie was gone. Roxie was back in the room standing over me.

He turned out to be real accommodating. He poured me a shot of his private stock and helped me sit up to drink it. "Buster," he said, almost pleasantly, "You better get to a medico."

I wasn't in any mood to argue. He talked into the gadget on the desk again.

A minute later, one of his faithful old family retainers poked a lantern jaw through the doorway. Roxie motioned him over to me and said, "Drive his car where he wants to go, Charley."

I have a vague picture of lantern-jaw helping me down the back steps and out to the coupe like a casualty from the bar. I gave him the keys and told him to take me into Los Angeles.

On the way I blacked out a couple more times, but by the time we got there I was holding my own. I had Charley let me off, gave him a sawbuck and told him where to put the car. Then I went in, signed for a room and called the house doc.

The doc told me nothing was broken. It was only the swelling from the bump. When he left, I sat on the bed and tried to think above the noise of the band that was playing "Dixie" between my ears.

I still had plenty of reason to call the cops and let them follow through. But the minute they stepped into the picture the story stopped being a *Comus* exclusive.

For about the same reason, I didn't file anything at the night desk. With the little bit I was sure of, printing the story now would be like eating the olive and throwing the martini away.

I tried to play chess for a little while with Tommy Rich and Joe Roxie . . . with Connie Clinton and her boy friends . . . and even with Mona Meredith. But the merry-go-round was going too fast. Throwing in the towel, I took a handfull of goof-balls the doc had left. Then I went to sleep on an icebag like a man without a sin.

The sun pried my eyes open bright and early . . . the next afternoon. By the time I climbed out of the shower, I didn't feel much worse than I used to the morning after a couple of halves with the Steelers.

I got delivery on a clean shirt, a razor, a platter of ham and eggs and the morning papers. The headlines helped wash away the guilty feeling I'd gotten up with. Nobody had stumbled over a murdered jockey while I was pounding the sack. I finished dressing in a hurry, checked out and drove down to the *Comus* building.

My office is a telephone, a typewriter and an unintentional antique desk in a

glassed-off corner of the city room. I can do what I like with my time as long as I turn in my regular sports piece for the day. Before the war, I'd pulled the police beat for the *Comus*. Nowadays, though, with my steady feature, page-one stuff like murder and mayhem is strictly extra-curricular.

For a starter, I phoned a contact at Motor Vehicles and gave her the number of the yellow convertible. She told me she'd call me back. Next, I had one of the copy boys bring me up what the news morgue had on Tommy Rich.

About all I could find worth looking into was his current address . . . a room at the Monterey Hotel out in San Fernando. I thought I might turn something up if I went through his stuff before the homicide cops had a chance to.

When I phoned, though, the desk clerk said Tommy had checked out the night before around dinner time. It was something I might have guessed. When I talked to Tommy Rich at *El Rancho*, he was all ready then to roll for the border.

That seemed to narrow the next step down to another waltz with Connie Clinton . . . this time minus the bells in my head.

I tried the directory for her number. She wasn't listed. U.C.L.A. was easy enough to find, though. So I reached for the phone with some games in mind for her baby sister.

The low buzzer signaled an incoming call just as I touched the handset. The sad voice at the other end was my check on the yellow convertible.

I made the girl say the name twice. Then I put Connie Clinton up on the shelf in a hurry. I forgot about her whole family. The murder car was registered in the name of Mona Meredith. The same Mona Meredith the fan magazines call the Calico Queen. The Calico Queen with the horse of the same name that Tommy Rich had fouled out of the money in his last race.

In trouble like *that* a Hollywood darling is harder to reach than Mars in a rowboat . . . unless you go through the right channels. So first and fast I went after Meredith's press agent on the phone. He's an ex-reporter named George St. John. I knew him enough to nod at on

sight and a whole lot better by reputation.

He's one of those guys who drinks his breakfast and gets all his exercise climbing out bedroom windows. When he's sober, though, he comes up with a good idea now and then. For instance, the tie-up between the horse and the lady was obviously a St. John stunt . . . and one worth plenty of press for his client.

There wasn't a sign of St. John at either his office or his apartment. The odds were even the press agent would be sleeping one off anywhere between Santa Barbara and Tijuana. So I dropped him and tried the direct approach after all.

The direct approach turned out to be a little *too* easy. When I dialed Mona Meredith's number, her own soprano crooned her name into the phone.

I keyed down my surprise. "Frank McCarthy," I told her the way the telephone company wants you to. "I write a sports column for the *Comus*. A while back I did a piece about you and the horse. If you're interested, I'd like to do a follow-up on it."

"Why, dahling, that's lovely," I heard her say. "I'll have George St. John get in touch with you right away. He handles my press, you know."

"You ought to buy him a time check," I said. "He's playing hookey today. That's the joker. I need the piece for tomorrow's paper. It means I'd have to get my dope right away. I thought that gave me a good excuse to come over and pick up your autograph."

It took her a couple of seconds to make up her mind I was kidding about the autograph. Then she said, "Would you happen to be good-looking, too, McCarthy?"

"Yeah, sure," I humored her. "In a broken-nosed sort of a way."

"How long will it take you to get here?" she crooned. "I'm right in between pictures and husbands with nothing but time on my hands."

A HALF HOUR and a ticket-for-passing-a-red-light later, I was braking the coupe outside la Meredith's humble little pile of stones in Westwood. To get there you wind around a palm-lined private drive long enough to rate a route marker. The house itself wasn't quite as

big as the average-sized hotel. I was glad I wasn't going in cold.

I pushed a button that touched off some carillon music. Then I waited. It must have been the butler's day out. Mona Meredith opened the door in person and knocked me groggy with her nationally-whistled-at shape.

She'd traded the usual calico dress and sunbonnet for a low-cut, powder-blue slack suit that clung to her willowy curves like a coat of paint. She had soft, ash-blond hair billowing down to her shoulders. Her face was finely proportioned and almost doll-like except for the eyes. They had that cat-like, come-and-get-it look that always brings down the house in her close-ups.

She stood there and gave me the once-over-frankly a minute. Then she cracked the big, prop-department smile. "The nose isn't bad at all, McCarthy," she said.

"It'll have to do," I told her. "Right now it's the only one I've got."

She laughed with music in it. Then she took me cozily by the arm and steered me through a foyer big as a skating rink to the library.

The decorator did a nice job . . . if you like it to shriek at you. The books were obviously bought by the yard. The walls were fire-chief red. The drapes were jade green. The furniture was black chinese modern and comfortable.

Mona waved me airily into a chair. Then she walked over and opened a press-book on the desk for effect. "You know, McCarthy," she pouted. "I didn't like that last piece you did about me. There was far too much on the horse."

"I'm a sportswriter, Mona," I told her. "The horse can run a little faster than you."

For some reason, that went over big. This time the smile almost looked real. She kept her eyes fixed on my own. "Actually, you don't look like a newspaper man at all, McCarthy," she finally said.

"Thanks," I told her. "Why not?"

"You seem to be sober for one thing. Your pants are pressed. You don't need a shave. But maybe that isn't fair. I guess I shouldn't judge *all* newspaper people by St. John."

"Maybe St. John is no boy scout," I admitted for him, "but he seems to get

your name in the paper. The horse for instance. Isn't that something St. John set up?"

She didn't bother to answer at all. Instead, she rippled over and pushed a knob that turned one of the bookshelves into a bar. She set out a cut-glass decanter with "Scotch" lettered on it and beckoned me over with her finger. Then she cuddled up on the black leather couch and studied me carefully while I played bartender.

When I gave her the drink, she didn't waste any more time being subtle. She took it with one hand and patted the cushion beside her with the other. "You know, McCarthy," she said slowly, "I like virile men. You look pretty virile yourself."

I sat down and said: "Don't go to any trouble for me, Mona. It wouldn't be worth it just for the local circulation I get."

She took a sip of her drink and waved her eyelashes at me over the top of her glass. "Maybe it wouldn't be any trouble at all."

"Let's get through with the horse, Mona. There's some angles involved. They might change your slant a little."

That didn't sit so good.

"LOOK," she said shortly. "I hate horses. I don't know the front end of one from the back. St. John bought that nag for me. St. John runs her for me. All I do is pay the bills and pose in jodhpurs for glossy prints. Any moron could figure that out."

She evened off a little and made with the cat's eyes again. "That doesn't mean you have to write it like that, though, does it, McCarthy?"

I made up my mind there wasn't much point in trying to be cagy with Mona Meredith. If she knew anything about Tommy Rich, she could put on an act I'd never be able to read through. So I plunged right on in.

"There's a little more to it than that," I told her. "You remember the last time the horse went out . . . when Tommy Rich was set down for the foul?"

"I'll say I remember," she snapped. "St. John told me she was a cinch to win. I lost my shirt on the beast. Not only that, I put all my friends on her, too."

In Mona's crowd it seemed like that might add up to a nice piece of change. "Do you and your friends place your bets at the track or through a book?"

She looked thoughtful a minute before she answered. "Through a bookie," she said questionably. "Arthur Caspian. Almost all the people out at the lot do business with him."

I'd heard the name Arthur Caspian before, but I couldn't tie it up with a face. He could be in business for himself, or he might be a front man—for Roxie, for instance. Either way, the big hunk of movie dough he'd covered on Calico Queen would be plenty of reason for the fix. I asked Mona;

"What do you know about Arthur Caspian."

"No more than I know about the mailman or the newspaper boy."

"He wouldn't be big, broad, blond and beautiful?" I asked her, thinking about my sparring partner the night before.

"He's small and dark," she said impatiently. "What are you driving at anyhow, McCarthy?"

"Would you be surprised if I told you the race we're talking about was fixed?"

She sat up straight. "Not so surprised," she said evenly, "but sore as hell. Where did you pick up *that* idea?"

"A little bird told me last night. A little bird by the name of Tommy Rich."

She didn't look impressed any more. "It sounds to me like an alibi for the foul he committed. Just how was the race supposed to be fixed?"

"That's something I'd like to know myself."

"Then why don't you ask Tommy Rich?"

"I would if I knew how to run a séance," I told her. "Tommy Rich was murdered last night."

She showed just the right amount of surprise. Then she swung her feet down off the divan onto the floor. "I might have known you didn't come here to do me any favors," she snapped. "What do you think you can find out from me?"

"For one thing, I thought I might find out how Tommy's body got into the trunk of your yellow convertible."

That stopped her cold. But not so cold that she couldn't handle it. "St. John,"

she stage-whispered half to herself and half to me. "He borrowed the yellow convertible yesterday afternoon. He told me he cracked up his own car."

She suddenly snapped herself out of the trance. "This is awful, McCarthy," she cracked. "Where's St. John now? What happened to the convertible? Why aren't the cops all over the place?"

I gave her a rapid run-down on what had happened out at *El Rancho*. She listened with plenty of gestures. But most of them seemed pretty pure. By the time I finished, she was up on her feet pacing the pile off the rug.

"This is awful, McCarthy," she told me again. "If I get the wrong break in the papers it could finish me in pictures for keeps." She turned to me sweetly. All was forgiven. "You've got to untangle this mess, McCarthy. You've got to break it before the cops do and slant the story for me."

SHE narrowed her eyes and looked thoughtful. "The man in the back seat of the car . . . the one you didn't see. That *must* have been George St. John. Do you think *he* killed Tommy Rich?"

"He'll do to start with. What time did he come here yesterday?"

"It was late in the afternoon. Near five-thirty I'd say."

"Did he come alone?"

"As far as I know. Probably in a cab."

"Did he happen to tell you where he was heading?"

"He mentioned a date with the publisher of a fan magazine. But that could have been just a gag to borrow the car."

"Does he borrow things from you often . . . things like money, for instance?"

"He's into me right now for plenty," she told me happily. "He lives way over his head. Outside of the bottle his favorite hobby is collecting expensive women."

It dawned on me that might possibly make a logical slot for Connie Clinton. If I could wrap her up with St. John and Caspian, it seemed like it might make a nice tight package. I asked Mona:

"Would you know offhand if St. John and Caspian do their drinking at the same bar?"

"They're as thick as thieves," she said anxiously. She paused for a second, then came over and sat down on the divan again. "It is St. John, then, isn't it, McCarthy? He and Caspian were in on the fix together. They paid Tommy Rich to commit that foul."

"Tommy didn't have to commit any foul to lose the race," I pointed out. "Rating his mount would have been a much cleaner way."

"But not near as convincing," Mona insisted. "After all, Calico Queen was the favorite. And Tommy wouldn't care about getting sent down if there was big enough money in it. He was just about washed up anyhow. You said so yourself in your column."

"Later on," she continued eagerly, "something happened to make Tommy Rich sore at St. John—sore enough so he was ready to spill the whole story to you. St. John had a lot more to lose than Tommy. So he killed him to keep him quiet."

For someone who didn't know the front end of a horse from the back, Mona Meredith was thinking a little too fast.

"It's a theory, all right," I told her. "In fact it might even be a good one—unless you have some special reason for trying to frame St. John."

It took her off guard, but she rolled with it nicely. "Even my script writers wouldn't get quite that corny, dahling. How could it possibly make any sense?"

"Right now I don't know, dahling. But it's one of the things I'm dying to ask St. John. And the sooner I find him, the sooner I get to it." I started to reach for my hat on the lamp table. But Mona wasn't quite ready to say good-by.

She was suddenly sitting as close to me as the other side of a dollar bill. The husky French perfume she wore really began to show its muscles. She rested her long, lovely hand on my arm and started to give it a Swedish massage.

"Let's understand each other," she murmured. "I need you on my side, McCarthy. There's a lot you can do for me." She paused and looked at me like I'd just caught the rustlers and paid off the mortgage on the homestead.

I'm not *that* hard to get. I did the polite thing. I kissed her. I got up fast while I still knew how to spell that powerful word, murder.

"Let's try that scene over, Mona," I heaved, "when I can get by on my charm alone."

"You'll get by all right," she whispered, taking a deep breath and patting the cushion again, urgently.

I grabbed for my hat instead.

She didn't like that, at all. "Afraid, McCarthy?" she flung at me angrily.

"Remember you said that when I come back," I told her and bee-lined for the door, expecting anything from a hunk of bric-a-brac in the head to a bullet between the shoulder blades.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Who's Eating Crow?

ON THE way out of Mona Meredith's pebble parkway, I roughed up a hasty program. Finding St. John was, of course the feature event. And it didn't look as though it was going to be any picnic, either. Not only that, I was eager to get a good look at *El Rancho* by daylight.

I was eager to get another good look at Connie Clinton, too, by any kind of light. If she really *was* cozy with St. John, the background I had now might be enough to break her down fast.

And, above all that, there was also the little matter of turning in my regular sports piece for the next day's paper . . . with a five o'clock deadline to beat for the midnight edition. It looked like it might be time to scream for some help before I threw the beat away for the *Comus*.

I decided to call the city desk and let the working press comb the hotels and auto courts for St. John. That way it would be fairly simple for me to handle the rest of the program.

My shack is just about halfway between Los Angeles and *El Rancho*. I could write my column at home on the portable, leave it there for a copy boy and head directly for Roxie's place with the least amount of back-tracking.

I made my call to the *Comus* from a drugstore in Westwood Village. It turned the city desk upside down. I got turned inside out, myself, for trying to carry the ball without any interference.

When I came out and started the coupe down the main drag, another car pulled out from the curb a block or so behind me. It stayed right with me when I gunned the engine. When I slowed down, it slowed down, too. It was a tail, all right. And whoever it was knew his stuff. He came right along with me to the edge of the town without giving so much as the make of the car away.

When we hit the highway, I stepped the needle up to seventy and kept it there for a mile or two. I had a well-populated side road picked out in my mind. When it came up, I suddenly swung off sharp and

hurriedly jammed on the brakes of my little coupe.

The other car started to make the turn, then saw me, stopped and veered out again without losing speed. I made the mistake of trying to pick out the two men in the front seat instead of the tag number. Result: I didn't see anything, except that the car itself was a late model, red sedan.

Still, if somebody wanted to lay a bet, I was ready to gamble that my shaggy-haired friend from the night before and his unidentified buddy had found themselves another car.

Whoever it was, they were out of sight by the time I got back on the highway. I poked along, giving them plenty of chance to pick me up again if they might be turned off some place. But it looked like they lost their enthusiasm.

My shack is a cozy, little, one-story bungalow buried far away in a canyon outside Santa Monica. I picked it especially for isolation to get the great American novel off my chest. In two-years time, I've already written the first four pages.

When I got there, I couldn't find so much as a single corpse in the bedroom, parlor or bath. I wasn't anxious to be the first one, either. So the next thing I did was go to the closet and get my G.I. .45 out of storage. I tried the action, shoved in a clip, and set the gun down on the typewriter table in the living room.

Then, feeling entitled to it, I uncorked a bottle of my very best bourbon and put it alongside the .45. I was ready for just about anything that happened to come down the pike.

For lack of anything better to write, I got started on a harmless, tongue-in-cheek piece about Mona Meredith and the horse. I was halfway through it when the company started to come.

It began with a long, impatient buzz on the bell. I picked up the .45, walked over and jerked open the door. I almost went into another tailspin.

Connie Clinton was standing there in a gorgeous, half-length ermine wrap that made her flowing red hair look like fire on snow. She gave the gun a casual glance. Then she said:

"That's not much of a way to greet a lady."

"Honey," I sighed, putting the .45 away

in my pocket, "how did *you* get to be a lady?"

She ignored it and walked right in past me without even waiting to be invited. "I've been phoning your office," she told me calmly. "They finally told me I could catch up with you here."

Connie took off the wrap and threw it on the studio couch. Her dress was a close-clinging green satin job that covered her up a little more than the night before. But it didn't disguise her basic talents at all. "Aren't you glad to see me?" she added.

"I'm working my way up to it slowly," I told her. "But I'd rather not let it go to my *head* again."

She smiled and settled down comfortably in the easy chair. "Don't be bitter, McCarthy," she said. "I'm really sorry about the beating you took last night. That's why I came here first instead of going to the cops. I thought it might help square things a little. I'm ready to tell my right name."

"Did you and St. John spend the morning rehearsing it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know any saints, McCarthy—especially any St. Johns."

"That sounds like the same song you were singing last night, Connie. Maybe you ought to get yourself a couple of new arrangements."

She tapped her foot a little impatiently. "Look, McCarthy," she told me. "I can see why you might not be ready to write me a character reference. But don't jump at too many conclusions. I think I've got a pretty good story. Do you want to listen or don't you?"

I lit her a cigarette, sat down on the divan and told her doubtfully, "Go ahead, lady. You're on the air."

She crossed her legs nicely, blew out a cloud of smoke and went right into her pitch.

"Actually," Connie began, "except for the part about Roxie, you weren't too far off the track with some of the guessing you did last night. I did *start out* to take my kid sister a dress, too, just as I told you and Roxie. She asked me to bring it over for a dance they're having at U.C.L.A. this weekend.

"I left the club shortly after the dinner show and headed out for my car. I leave

it at the far end of the lot because it's easier to get in and out when the crowd is heavy. When I got there, I noticed the yellow convertible parked right next to me.

"I didn't see the two men behind it, though, until I was practically in their laps. They didn't see me either, because I'd come up the path behind the trees. And, besides, they were much too busy—stashing your friend away in the trunk."

It didn't sound any more convincing than when I told it to *her* the night before. But I let her go right on talking.

"BEFORE I could stop to think," she continued, "I guess I let go with a scream or so. The next thing I knew, one of the boys was wrapping a hand around my mouth and dragging me into the front seat of the yellow convertible.

"You might as well get to know them formally," she branched off. "The one I'm talking about is Walter. I never did get his last name. But he's only the junior executive . . . the pretty boy with the shaggy head who took you apart later on. The other one is the master-mind. His name is Arthur Caspian."

That started to make it interesting. Arthur Caspian was the name Mora Meredith mentioned an hour before as the bookie who covered the movie money on Calico Queen, the guy she also told me rubbed noses with her press agent, St. John.

If Connie was telling a straight story and I could find out why shaggy-head was driving the yellow convertible instead of St. John, the whole thing would mesh like fluid drive. But I figured I'd better let Connie tell it her own way first.

"And how did you find out who Caspian was?" I asked her brightly. "Did he pass around calling cards?"

"He didn't have to," she threw back. "I knew who he was the minute I got a look at his face. He's Joe Roxie's bookie. I've seen him around the club a dozen times.

"Anyhow," she went on, "as Caspian was closing the lid on the trunk, he must have noticed somebody coming out of the club—probably you. He jumped in the back seat, waved a gun in my face and told me he'd pull down the shades for me

fast if I so much as breathed above a whisper. He had me convinced. I stopped kicking and kept still. We waited there for a couple of minutes with the lights out.

"Then he told Walter to drop us off at the 'farm.' The more I thought about that one, the surer I got it was going to be a one-way trip for little Connie. So, when we started to pass you on the road, I grabbed at the straw. I dove for the wheel and piled the convertible into you."

"Yeah," I said. "It all comes back to me now. Then, after Walter slugged me, you slapped him and Caspian down with your powder puff and hitch-hiked back to *El Rancho*."

"You're not exactly the gullible type, are you, McCarthy?" she said cutely. "You might remember, though, what I'm telling you doesn't cost a nickel. Actually, I was a little surprised myself when Caspian didn't knock me off as soon as he caught me. Instead, he just dragged me back to the car while Walter drove you off the road.

"Then Caspian and I just stayed in the back seat and fought until we got to the farm. It turned out to be only two or three miles away, just a little outside of Woodland Hills. I guess Caspian uses it for his horse room.

"After we pulled in, Walter drove off again with your friend still in the trunk. And Caspian took me inside. The minute we got into the living room, he threw away the baseball bat and put on his kid gloves. He sat me down, mixed me a drink and actually started to apologize.

"He told me that he and Walter really had nothing to do with the killing. He didn't go into detail. He just said somebody was trying to frame him, that he had to get rid of the body to keep his picture out of the papers and stay in business."

"And he had such an honest face," I broke in, "That you believed every word of it."

"Maybe I wanted pretty *bad* to believe it," she said shortly, "after the proposition he made me. Caspian knew who I was. He had brains enough to guess why I'd be killing my evenings doing two-a-night at a smoke-trap like *El Rancho*."

"You mean pictures?" I asked sweetly.

"I MEAN pictures," she shot back. "He told me he had contact with enough of the right people to get me a test at one of the top lots. Besides, while we were talking, he went through my purse and found a note my sister Cathy had written me with her U.C.L.A. address on it.

"So, on the negative side, he suggested a number of unpleasant things could happen to *both* me and Cathy—if I didn't forget about writing the evening up in my diary. I signed on the dotted line without even thinking twice.

"After that, he just took me back to *El Rancho* . . . in another car. When he dropped me off, he gave me the 'we-never-sleep' routine and added a few more 'or elsers.' So, when you showed up a little while later, I was still convinced I had some pretty good reasons for putting on an act."

"A little *too* good for the sudden switch, Connie," I told her. "When you woke up this morning and saw all the nasty dark gone, you made up your mind there was no such thing as a bogeyman, after all. Is that what you want me to believe?"

Her temper started to pick up momentum. "When I woke up this morning," she snapped, "the first thing I did was get Cathy at U.C.L.A. and drive her outside of Caspian's range. Then, I was sucker enough to come over here and shoot off my mouth at a two-bit hack who can't even see his hand in front of his face.

"I was stupid enough to stick out my chin a couple of yards and throw away the break of a lifetime—just because I felt sorry about the tap on the head you stopped last night." A five-alarm fire danced in her eyes. She hauled herself up and flung on her coat. "With a skull as thick as yours," she shot at me, "it's a wonder you even knew you were hit."

That did it for me. She *couldn't* get as sore as she was without really meaning it. What's more, it suddenly started to penetrate through the rocks in my head that her story was just a little too crazy *not* to be true.

I didn't have much time to apologize, though. It was just about then I heard something outside that sounded a lot like tires on gravel. I took hold of Connie's arm and looked out the picture window. Up at the far end of the driveway, I could

see the front end of a car backing in behind the landscaping. I turned back to Connie and told her quickly:

"Don't go away mad, honey. I'm the meanest man in the world. I'll eat all the crow you can cook later on. But right now we're having more company."

She saw the car and got the idea in a hurry. I steered her hastily towards the bedroom without any argument. "Lock it from inside," I told her, closing the door, "and get under the bed if you hear any trouble."

I slid the safety off the .45 in my pocket and left my finger inside the trigger guard. Then I moved into the corner of the room and stood there looking at the door. I heard footsteps coming up the flagstone path. Then a heavy knock.

"Push it," I said loudly. "It's open."

Sunlight splashed in an angular pattern on the rug and Arthur Caspian's buddy Walter carried his shaggy head in calmly, shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back from the Dead

WALTER looked even bigger and prettier than the night before. He had *his* hand in his coat pocket, too. "Go slow, McCarthy," he drawled through a big, self-confident grin. "I just came to be chummy. Don't get athletic again. You might not get off so easy this time."

"Look, junior," I told him lovingly. "This time you're a little outweighed. I'm holding a .45 on your stomach. It lifts you right up off your feet and scram-

bles your guts all over the floor. Turn around and start kissing the wall. Then take that peashooter out of your pocket and let it fall on the floor."

Walter had more starch than I thought. He looked impressed, but he didn't move. "No dice, McCarthy," he said slowly. "I can tag you at least one time with the peashooter. That makes it tough to handle the boss. He's right outside in the car—watching the road till I find out how much of a fever you're running."

The grin came back. "Why don't we just have us a nice little chat and let it go at that?"

"Chat fast, then, gorgeous," I hammed. "You haven't quite got me convinced."

"If I had *my* way," he said, still grinning, "I woulda knocked you off soon as we found out this morning you were a newshawk. The boss, he's a little more chickenhearted. He wants me to try and buy your typewriter first."

"The sentimental value's too much."

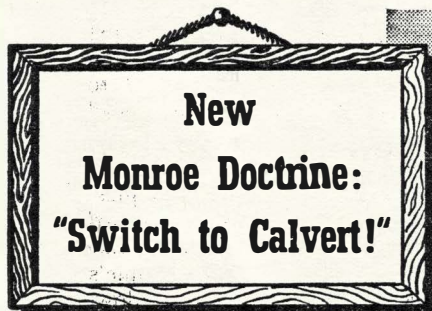
"High as maybe two grand?"

"Two grand is peanuts, junior."

"It's all how you look at it, McCarthy. Actually, it don't buy us quite so much as you think. You see we ain't really chilled nobody—yet. We were framed for that thing last night."

"Me and my nasty suspicious mind."

"Yeah, but we figure you ain't found out very much with it up to now, or it woulda been in the paper already. The boss don't like to take chances, though. So we tailed you this morning from your building. After your session with Meredith, we figure you might be getting warm enough to stumble on something you wouldn't see the right way."



NEW YORK, N. Y.—George H. Monroe, New York singer and entertainer, advises men of moderation: "Switch to Calvert Reserve—as I have. Calvert really is lighter, milder, finer. It always makes your occasional highball taste better."

"So you stopped by to straighten everything out for me."

"Yeah. When you got cute with the car outside of Westwood, we'd figured you were heading here anyway. We wouldn't have kept you waiting so long, except we had trouble finding your place. Now we're here, we want you should have the right dope for your story, McCarthy."

"We're giving you that for an extra bonus. The two grand is just for leaving out some of the background. You know how it is. The publicity might kinda kill our business. Then we'd have to kill you before we left town. And nobody wins but the undertaker."

I thought it all over in a hurry. What Walter mentioned about a frame wasn't much harder to swallow than cyanide. But he *was* confirming most of the things Connie Clinton had told me.

Then I thought of something that suddenly made me start to sweat. I didn't know then Connie was careful enough to park her car out of sight. I thought what might happen if Caspian saw it outside and recognized it. It seemed like I better make things start to happen smart and fast.

I tried to look all taken up with the proposition. "I'm shaking all over, junior," I told him, relaxing a little bit for his benefit. "But two grand still sounds like peanuts to me."

THAT made Walter unbend a little bit, too. "Maybe we're starting to get some place," he said, with the grin all over his face. "The boss might be willing to do a little horse-trading with you at that, McCarthy—so long as we're eye to eye on the main idea. You stay where you are. I'll wave him in." He backed towards the door and reached for the knob.

"Wait a minute." I stopped him quickly. "Don't get too hasty, junior. I suddenly have an idea."

"So—you suddenly got an idea."

"Ever think about going into business for yourself?"

He paused a few seconds and looked at me sharply. Then he shook his head sideways and grinned bigger than ever. "I ain't quite smart enough yet, McCarthy. But go ahead. I'll listen for laughs."

I let myself look more careless still and nodded pleasantly at the bourbon. "Let's

cut out the kid stuff," I told him. "Sit down and relax. Pour yourself a drink."

He gave the bottle a hungry look. Then he shook his head, still grinning, but warily. "Uh uh," he said without moving. "You pour it, McCarthy."

I shrugged my shoulders and turned my back to him. Then I took my hand out of my pocket and casually reached for the bottle. When nothing happened, I started to breathe again. I poured him a good stiff shot, and held it out to him chummily. When he reached for it, I gave it to him—quick, wet and 90-proof right in his big, brown eyes.

In about the same motion, I swung the bottle with all my beef. It took him dead on the side of his shaggy head. He went down like a dish rag and did a half roll. Then he sprawled out on the floor as still as a stone. The self-confident grin was finally missing.

Bending down hurriedly, I took off his belt and started to gift-wrap him with it. Almost as I finished, I heard a sudden noise behind me. I whirled with the .45 in my hand. It was Connie Clinton standing in the bedroom doorway, with a Mona Lisa smile on her face.

"You're improving a little over last night, McCarthy," she told me warmly. "What happened?"

"Walter's been hitting the bottle too hard," I said, wiping the bourbon off my sleeve. "But the party is just beginning," I fished Walter's pretty little snubnosed .32 out of his coat. Then I walked over and held it out to Connie. "Know what these things are for?"

"I saw one once in the movies."

"You push this. Then you pull this," I showed her. Then I gave her the .32 and helped her back into the bedroom with a gentle shove. "You give it a nice homey touch," I explained. "And this time stay in there until I call you."

To make sure she would, I locked the door behind her—from the outside. Then, clutching the .45 in my hot little hand, I walked through the hall and eased myself quietly out the kitchen door.

By then darkness was just beginning to sneak down among the hills. I heard a tree toad bleat in the distance. A light breeze blew a lone brown leaf across the back lawn. I rubbernecked around the

side of the house and got a full view of the red sedan.

The "boss" was sitting behind the wheel, shuttling his glance back and forth from the house to the road. Using the landscaping for a screen, I worked my way slowly towards the spot. In four or five stages, I finally made it up to the shrubs just in front of the car. Then, crouching down under Caspian's line of vision, I crept around to the driver's side of the car.

After that, it was simple. I just reached up, jerked open the door and let him look at the gun. He froze in the seat like a hound on point.

"Come on in and be sociable," I invited him. "Walter and I just ran out of conversation."

I didn't really get a good look at him until we got into the living room. I knew his face as soon as I did. I'd seen Arthur Caspian more than once before in the clubhouse at Santa Anita.

He had slick, black hair with a pencil-line mustache to match. He was medium-sized, middle-aged and dressed to kill in a pink windsor shirt and a black-knit tie. When he spotted Walter curled up on the rug, he thawed out fast and got talkative.

"You must be fast on your feet, McCarthy," he said, as suave as a funeral director. "Walter doesn't slip up very often."

"You've been giving him many pushovers, lately," I told him, bunting the door shut with my hip. "Why don't you just stretch out and relax, now, Caspian—with your face in the rug."

He looked crushed. "Don't be a fool," he scolded me. "You're not going to win any marbles that way, McCarthy. Nobody's got a thing on me. There's more to this mess than I think you gave Walter a chance to tell."

"I'm crazy to hear it, Caspian—as soon as I'm sure you won't get into the strawberry jam. Lie down on the floor and play dead, brother, while we're still only playing."

He wasn't ready to gamble on that. He got down and stretched out on the floor. I hoisted a business-like little blue automatic out of his shoulder holster and laid it down on the cocktail table. The place was beginning to look like an arsenal. I yanked the cord off the nearest Venetian blind.

Then I bent down and started to anchor his wrists behind him. He kept right on talking without even changing the tone of his voice.

"Look, McCarthy," he asked me patiently. "Did you let Walter get as far as a price?"

"Yeah. You're quite a piker, Caspian."

"You got me wrong, McCarthy," he said a little more anxiously now. "For that price I wasn't counting on buying a typewriter and a gun. They tell me you newspaper boys really sweat for your dough. If you had, say five grand, tucked away in the sugar bowl, you could take it easy a little while."

"Not very long, Caspian. I'd go through it fast—on crooked races." I put the finishing touches on the job and slipped the .45 back in my pocket. He got so eager raising the ante again, I didn't hear the front door open up one more time.

I didn't hear the door open up, but I heard the voice behind me all right. I heard the shrill, piping voice of a ghost.

"Reach up high and don't fool, chum," it shot at me tensely. I was too surprised to do anything else. I reached up high and I didn't fool.

CHAPTER SIX

Over His Depth

WHEN I turned around, it was Tommy Rich and nobody else. It was Tommy Rich back from the dead and holding a .45 like my own leveled steadily at my throat. When the first shock of seeing him drained off, the switch began to come into focus.

If the man in the trunk of the yellow convertible hadn't been Tommy Rich, there was only one other person it could be. Mona Meredith was going to be in the market for a new press agent. But, at the minute, that seemed like a minor problem.

Tommy's small bright eyes roved over the room and spotted Caspian's blue automatic on the cocktail table. He side-slipped over and gathered it in with his free hand. Then he looked at me wickedly.

"That does it, chum."

Caspian had swiveled around on the rug. His face was the color of cookie dough. "So you didn't go over the border," he

whispered, suddenly seeming very sick.

Tommy smiled like he was going to a pal's funeral. "Why should I let you and your punk scare *me* outta town," he flung at Caspian, "with the heat on *you* for killing St. John!" He turned his voice back to me with a squeaky little laugh. "That's the way I had it worked out, chum. Now you give it an even classier touch for me."

"Sure," I said doubtfully. "I'm your chum, remember? Put down the meat ax and let's have a drink."

He didn't think it was such a hot idea. "I told you last night I had a story for ya," he snapped. "I ain't a guy to welch. I'm tellin' it to ya now, McCarthy—for a sorta goin' away present." The look in his eyes got chillier. "You been movin' a little too fast for me, chum."

That brought it right out in black and white. And there wasn't much point in trying to play it dumb, either.

"Then *you* did the killing job on St. John," I flung at him. "Right after you left me last night. You were part of the fix all the way. St. John had the horse and the idea. Caspian handled the dough. And you threw the race away with a foul the judges couldn't miss."

"You catch on quick, all right, chum. We split the take three ways even. But I'm the guy who gets *all* the grief. I'm the guy gets called all the lousy names and takes all the smear. I got thinkin' maybe St. John might wanna help take the curse offa that with a little donation outta his share."

"So you tried to blackmail him," I filled in, "just before you called me last night. He wouldn't buy. He got nasty and hung the lump on your face instead. That made you sore. So sore you made up your mind to spill the whole story and then jump the country."

"You called it, chum," he said darkly. "Nobody shoves Tommy Rich around. After he hit me he musta got scared what I'd do. So he tailed me back to the hotel. He hung around while I checked out and phoned you. Then he picked me up again and follered me out to Roxie's. When he seen us together he knew what was up. So he phoned Caspian out at the farm and told him to come pull the fat outta the fire.

"After that, for a stall, he put in the phone call for me—to the booth right next

to the one he was standin' in. When I picked up the call, he said he was throwin' in the towel, he was ready to get up the dough. He told me to meet him out by the yella convertible and we'd talk it all over.

"When I got out there, the minute he opened his yap I could see he was only stallin'. I tried to beat it back inside. He slugged me again and started to kick me around. Oney this time, I was ready for him."

Tommy showed me the gold in his teeth and hefted the .45 proudly. "I let him have this—right in the guts. There was nobody there to watch it. Nobody heard it. The band in the club makes too much noise."

TOMMY let that hang in the room while I tried to figure if this was it. A clammy feeling crept around under the neckband of my shirt. He still had me cold. The .45 in my pocket was far away as next payday. The best I could do was keep him talking and gamble on more of an opening.

I asked him rapidly, "So what did you hang around for—the wake? You had plenty of chance to get into Mexico."

Tommy still had a little more bragging to do. "The way it works out, I don't hafta go no place," he gloated. "I'm set to start the minit I finish St. John. Then just as I get to my car, Caspian and his buddy come rollin' into the lot. So I keep my lights doused and lay low.

"When they find St. John by the yella convertible, they right away figger they're stepping into a frame. The cops tie St. John and Caspian up in no time. Caspian's horse room is too close to miss it. And even if Caspian don't take the rap for St. John, the headlines wipe out the book. That's the reason they wanna clean St. John off the lot inna hurry. Ain't that right, Caspian?"

Caspian found his tongue again. He sat up and started to beg. "That's only part of it, Tommy," he crawled. "We were covering up for you, too." He nodded his head affectionately in my direction. "Get rid of this hack and we're all set, Tommy. We'll work out a deal. You'll be in the clover from here on in."

"Yeah," Tommy cut him short. "I'll be in the clover . . . as soon as your pretty

boy gets a chance to plant me there.”

He swiveled his voice back to me and went on. “As long as Caspian is so set on takin’ over St. John, I figgered I’d let him—all the way. All I hafta do is find you again and finish the story I started to tell you, with a little fiction that hangs the whole thing right on Caspian.”

He paused again and looked pleased with himself. “The red-headed torch at *El Rancho* really puts it on ice for me. She came outta the club and caught ’em loading St. John in the yella convertible. When she starts to yell they pile her in, too, and take her along for the ride. They shoulda cooled her,” he added casually. “When they don’t, it means she backs up the story any way I tell it.”

Tommy needed some editing there, but I couldn’t very well offer it. The minute he knew Connie Clinton was on the other side of the door, she was just one more clay pigeon.

“That’s why I didn’t hafta go no place, McCarthy,” Tommy went hurrying on. “I been tryin’ to reach you all day to button the whole thing up. When I phoned your plant a half hour ago, they finally told me I’d make you here.

“Luck’y for me, I parked outta sight an’ came up to case the place first. When I seen Caspian’s car, I stayed in the bushes an’ watched. I watched you creep up an’ take him. Then I took a glim through the winder and seen you stopped Walter, too. That’s when I figgered you might be a little aheada me, chum.”

His eyes lit up like he had a winner going in under the wire. “An’ that’s when I got the *big* idea.”

“Spell it out for me, Tommy,” I stalled,

the beads on my brow beginning to grow. “I’ll show you how full of holes it is.”

“No holes in this one, McCarthy,” he gloated. He hefted the .45 again. “I knock you off with this—the same gun that got St. John. Then I use Caspian’s automatic on him an’ pretty boy. They find Caspian holdin’ the .45 in his fist, an’ you with the automatic. Even the cops can dope that one out.

“It’s all cut an’ dried. The newshawk cracks open a bookie killing. The book don’t want it to get inta print. They stop by to knock you off. But you’re good and you take ’em both with you.”

HIS button eyes narrowed to little slits. His knuckles grew whiter on the stock of the .45. “You’re gonna be the big hero, after all, chum,” he finished coldly.

The clock on the scoreboard was racing towards zero. Old Siwash was still a whole touchdown behind. Only one play left and the whole field to go. I looked down the barrel of Tommy’s gun and tensed myself for the old college try. But I never got to take off.

A sharp blue flame suddenly stabbed through the picture window. Glass shattered on the floor. The blue flame jumped into the room three more times. Tommy Rich never even got his gun arm around. He stumbled half a step forward. Then he pitched face first into the typewriter table with a soft little sigh. I think he was dead before he hit the floor.

Seconds later, Connie Clinton walked through the front door. Walter’s .32 in her hand was still streaming smoke. It was Connie’s big scene and I couldn’t blame her for trying to eorn it up a little. She

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lifted her skirt and showed me one of her beautiful legs.

"You owe me a new pair of stockings, McCarthy," she said in a low, even, dramatic-school voice. "I ruined 'em going over your window sill." She no sooner said it than stage fright set in and she started fainting.

* * *

The next few days took hardly any time at all. The cops were a little sore at first about the late invitation to the party. They got over it, though, when we gave the chief a couple of quotes in the follow-up stories.

They used a lighter to fish Mona Meredith's yellow convertible out of the beautiful blue Pacific. Walter had jockeyed it over a lonesome cliff into about twenty feet of water. They found St. John still in the trunk. The slugs they took out of him tied up easily with Tommy Rich's gun.

Caspian was so thankful to come through it alive, he's *still* talking down at the pound. With what they've collected on him and Walter, I won't have to pull

down my shades for another decade or so.

The *Comus* scored the beat all right, too. I phoned in the story even before I talked to the cops. We ripped out half the front page, set it over again, and still got out on the streets with the midnight edition right on time. The next day, the wire services picked up the same slant I gave the story and threw it across the country.

The slant I gave it was Connie Clinton all the way. For one thing, she certainly rated it. For another thing, I wanted to give her back what she threw away. It wasn't hard either. Since the story broke, she's had bids for a test from three major studios.

On the other hand, Mona Meredith didn't make out so badly either. In fact, they tell me her studio even plans to take a lot of her old stuff out of the cans and re-issue it to cash in on the publicity.

Mona was pretty grateful about it over the phone. She suggested she might do better though with an "in person" performance. Connie still thinks I did *her* a favor, too. But I haven't had time to give either one of 'em much of a tumble. Maybe that's pretty hard to believe. But, brother, so was Connie Clinton's kid sister.

THE END

TRIPPED AGAIN

When a young citizen of Mexico was arrested in Southern California in 1947 for illegal entry, he told immigration officers a doleful story:

"I had a tankful of gasoline in my car, and I thought I'd take a trip. I started out and just kept driving. When the tank ran dry, I found I was in the United States. I wanted to go home, but the tank was dry and I had no money, so I decided to go to work and see if I could make enough money to fill the tank. But you know how things are—I never could seem to make enough."

He was let off with an admonition, and escorted back to the border.

Early in 1948 he was picked up again.

"I had a tankful of gasoline in my car," he started to say, "and I thought I'd take a trip—"

The federal agents interrupted him.

"You've already told us that," they reminded him. "That was last year, remember? We're the same men who picked you up then."

The federal judge ordered him escorted back to the border again—after he has served a six-month jail term for falsely representing himself as an American citizen.

—Edward S. Sullivan

THE LADY FROM LIMBO

By RICHARD E.
GLENDINNING



Red lunged forward in a dive.

*The cool cookie said she'd been dead a month—
and would legal-light Laird please prove it!*

THE way my attractive, blonde client put it, her problem was just as simple as one, two, three. She was dead, had been dead for a month, and now she wanted me to prove it.

I got up from my desk and went to the smoking stand to stuff tobacco in my pipe while I studied her curiously from the corner of my eye. Her name was Dorothy

Graham—Mrs. Dorothy Graham, though she wore no ring—and she was the kind of stuff dreams are made of, turned to ice.

Chilly, gray eyes, an arrogant, disdainful mouth, an upturned nose which seemed constantly to be sniffing something unpleasant, a chin which, if on a man, would have been a standing invita-

tion for a punch. Those were the qualities which one first saw in her face; and yet, in some baffling way, she was beautiful. Her figure, expensively dressed in a suit of imported tweed, was out of this world.

"Well?" she asked when I returned to the desk.

"You must admit it's unusual," I said, choosing my words with care. The first rule in operating a detective agency is never to scare a client's money away.

"Mr. Laird, five hundred dollars should certainly take some of the oddity out of it."

"That's as odd as the rest of it. I would have settled for a hundred. All I have to do is prove—"

"It won't be easy."

"You look alive to me. A little cold but quite alive." I smiled as faint red spots appeared in her alabaster cheeks. "To whose satisfaction do I have to prove it?"

"To mine," she said stiffly. "Prove it to mine and I'll know how my husband was able to prove it to the police."

"You know for a fact that you're legally dead?"

"Naturally. The Bureau of Vital Statistics has me down as dead. There's a stone in the cemetery with my name on it, but—" she smiled for the first time—"I'm not there."

"I can see that."

"You don't understand," she said. "I phoned the undertaker who handled the funeral, according to the papers. His name is Bristing. He said I was cremated."

My eyebrows shot up. "And your ashes?"

"They're gone." Her face twisted into a scornful grimace. "Bob, my husband, has a quaint sense of humor. I used to spend quite a bit of time at the race track. He had my ashes sprinkled on the back stretch."

"We keep talking about your ashes," I said, "which they aren't, of course. Whose do you suppose they are?"

"I don't know, I don't care. All I want you to prove—"

"Yes, I know," I said uneasily, fingering the newspaper clipping she had given me when she first came into the office. "Tell me, Mrs. Graham, do you want to return to life?"

"No," she said flatly. "I want to stay dead, but I want to be sure I'm thoroughly dead. I don't want anything to come up later."

I sighed as the five-hundred-dollar fee sprouted wings and flew away. "Then I'm sorry, I can't handle it. Someone obviously died in this—" I flicked the clipping with a thumbnail—"auto accident and was cremated under your name. If I tried to cover that up, I'd lose my license but quick."

"A thousand dollars," she said.

"And I'd be sent to jail."

"Fifteen hundred."

"So could you."

"You're forgetting I'm dead," she said, indifferent to the threat of jail. "Fifteen hundred is as high as I'll go."

"Save it," I said, standing up. "A couple of guys in town would do it for fifty bucks." I went to the door and held it open for her.

She started to rise from her chair, then sat down again. "I've changed my mind. I'll come back to life—at the proper time."

"What changed it?"

"Death is the penalty for murder in this state. If my husband were to die legally, it would be better than my staying dead." She looked up at me and her fleeting smile was like a peek into a deep-freeze unit. "Isn't that so?"

"True enough," I said, shuddering, "as far as it goes. In the first place, the accident must have been on the level or Homicide would have been called in. In the second place, if your husband did kill someone and passed the body off as yours, he must have had good reason to believe you would never pop up to make a liar out of him. Obviously, he couldn't have—"

"Oh, yes he could have," she interrupted. "You see, Mr. Laird, I had gone away a month before, presumably to commit suicide."

"Good Lord!" I groaned, burying my face in my hands. "What is this? I looked up at her in complete bewilderment. "You mean you're dead twice. Once by suicide, once by murder—or so you think—but now you sit here waving five hundred dollars at me."

"You make it sound so complicated, but it should be quite obvious. My husband

refused to give me a divorce. After two years of begging, I decided to do something about it. I went through the motions of suicide and left him a note at our house on Hillside Drive."

"How were you supposed to have done it?"

"I was vague about that."

"Did you leave any clothes on bridges or anything like that?"

"I simply vanished." Eager to get on with her story, she waved away further questions. "My husband doesn't have a cent except for what he gets from me. I have quite a bit, left to me by my first husband. I also have a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy with a double-indemnity clause. Now do you see the light?"

"A flicker. You think your husband believed in your suicide but suppressed the note. Knowing how desperate you were for a divorce, he probably figured you cracked under the strain. A little later, when your body didn't turn up, he arranged an accident, cremated the corpse as yours and—"

"Will now collect two times fifty thousand."

"He would have had to explain your absence to the neighbors. Where would he have told them you were between the time of your, er, suicide and murder?"

"We weren't very friendly with the neighbors. I frequently made long trips, following the horses. I suppose Bob told people I was in Florida at the tracks."

"Where were you really?"

"In Florida at the tracks."

"Alone?"

"No, Mr. Laird, not exactly." Her

faint blush surprised me. "But his name can't come into it."

"I suppose he's dead, too—for the second or third time."

"He's very much alive."

"Mrs. Graham, you'll have to tell me everything connected with this case. The man's name, for instance."

She sighed. "He won't like it, but—Vic Jenner."

"Jenner!" I exclaimed, whistling softly. If Dorothy Graham had a fondness for the horses, she could have found no better companion to share her penchant than Vic Jenner, the biggest bookie in these parts. Jenner, who spent most of his idle moments avoiding brushes with the law, would certainly not want his name linked with a possible murder.

She took a checkbook from her purse and started to write out a check to Martin Laird. I stopped her. "Cash, please. You're dead. The bank would take a dim view of any check bearing your—"

"Of course," she said. She put away the checkbook and peeled five crisp one-hundred-dollar bills from a plump roll. "Will that be enough?"

"I heard fifteen hundred mentioned."

"Only mentioned," she said briskly. "Clear this up and we'll talk about the balance." She got up and left the office. Her legs were beautiful.

Ten minutes later, I was at the Bureau of Vital Statistics to verify her death. Any doubt I had that she was telling the truth was immediately quashed. Sure enough, she had been killed in an auto accident on Hillside Drive.

I thought a visit to the widower was in order, but first I was curious to know how



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the body had been identified. According to the newspaper clipping she had given me, her car had crashed through the guard rail on the steep, winding drive. It had turned over several times and had burst into flames at the bottom of a ravine, demolishing car and driver.

I DROPPED in at the morgue to see Link Stanton with whom I was friendly back in my salad days as a police reporter on the *Evening Star*.

"Hi, Marty," he said affably. "What brings you around?"

"Nothing much," I said casually.

"Liar." He swung his heels from the desk and grinned at me. "Which one do you want to see?"

"You remember an accident case about a month ago? A Dorothy Graham? She missed a sharp turn on Hillside Drive."

"Yeah. Messy. I hear her husband had her cremated. Heaven knows why. The job had already been done for him."

"How did they make the identification?"

Link rubbed his bald head thoughtfully. "Damned if I— Oh, yeah. Hillside Drive is a dead end, see? It doesn't go anywhere but to the houses on the hill. Well, this convertible smashed through about three-quarters of the way down, so the accident division figured it had come from one of the houses up above."

"Leg work," I said. "House to house."

"Right. Nobody was missing from any of the houses until the boys get to Robert Graham's place, the last one. Sure enough, his wife had left the house a little while before, driving a blue convertible."

"And it was the same car?"

"No question about it. Of course, it was pretty badly smashed up, but Graham identified it."

"What about the body?" I asked off-handedly.

"Graham said he *thought* it was his wife, but like I said, it was messy. You should have seen him when he came down here for a look. Broke down completely, cried like a baby."

"What clinched the identification?"

"Her pocketbook. It must have spilled out when the car rolled over. There were letters and things in it, enough to show it was the Graham woman. Her driver's

license iced it." Link yawned casually.

"Uh-huh," I said, standing up and yawning. "Cut and dried, hey?"

"Routine." Link looked at me suspiciously. "What's your angle?"

"I'm working with the insurance people. You know how it is."

"Yeah," Link said. He walked to the door with me. "Funny thing, there was a mugg in here the other day. He had a couple of questions about the wreck, too. I didn't tell him—"

"Who?" I asked sharply. "Who was it?"

"Red Brink. I've seen him around. He's one of Vic Jenner's hustlers." Link dropped a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Drop around for a game of gin someday, Marty. It gets lonely out here."

"I'll do that, boy." I left him and went out to my car. I sat behind the wheel for a moment, staring thoughtfully ahead. There were plenty of angles in this that I didn't like and chief among them was Vic Jenner's interest. Vic was a dapper lad who gave the appearance of being a respectable businessman, but behind his cold, black eyes, there was a hard and merciless mind.

And, if Robert Graham had indeed killed some unknown to pass off as his wife, I didn't like the way he had covered his tracks. Not only had the murder been overlooked by the law but the body had been legally cremated and the evidence was now thoroughly ground into the dirt of the back stretch at the race track.

But Robert Graham was in for a surprise if he believed his wife had committed suicide. On the other hand, her skirts were far from clean. The law frowned upon even simple suicides which failed in the attempt; it would be howlingly indignant at fraudulent suicide.

I started up the coupe and drove to Central Headquarters. I went into the Missing Persons Bureau and asked the police clerk for a list of women who had been reported missing in the past month and a half.

It was a routine request and the clerk gave it to me unquestioningly. I sat down in a chair against the wall to study the list.

I was particularly interested in tall blondes, about twenty-eight years old,

missing in the week before and the week after the accident on Hillside Drive. Blondes were a drug on the market. Thirteen of them had left for parts unknown in that two-week period. Perhaps one of them had her name in the paper as Mrs. Dorothy Graham—but which one?

A visit to Robert Graham was indicated.

Hillside Drive was a shelf carved from solid rock. It wound torturously up the hill and big, widely-spaced homes stuck out from the cliffs like open dresser drawers on stilts. The slope dropped away to the left of the road as my car labored to make the grade. I came to a stretch where the wooden guard rails had been replaced recently. I stopped the car and got out.

The drop from the road to the bottom of the ravine was about seventy-five feet. It was easy to see where the car had lunged down; uprooted scrub and snapped limbs marked the trail.

As I stood at the side of the road, a black sedan came down the hill, riding in second-gear. It came to the sharp turn immediately in front of me and took the turn cautiously. The woman at the wheel was an old hand at it. But, assuming that the dead driver of the blue convertible hadn't known the road well, she might have lost control on the turn. She would have made straight for the flimsy rail. Curtains.

I got into my car and drove to the Graham house on the summit. It was low and rambling with huge picture windows which took full advantage of the gorgeous view. It was the kind of place

that a household magazine would have loved to feature.

Robert Graham himself came to the door in answer to my ring. He was a tall man, immaculately turned out in a good gray flannel suit, and he must have been a handsome man at one time. But now his eyes were baggy, his face puffy and his coloring was an unhealthy pasty-white.

I explained my business. That is, I told him I was a reporter from the *Evening Star*, giving my right name.

He studied me for a moment. "Why is the *Star* interested in me?"

"We're campaigning for adequate guard rails on the drive," I said. "It takes tragedy to awaken the general public. We thought—well, it was our idea that—"

"I see," he said grimly. He ushered me into a tremendous living room and showed me to a chair. "What is it you want to know?"

"Would you begin by telling me about the accident?"

"It was horrible, perfectly horrible. Dorothy was an excellent driver."

"Strange that an expert driver— Do you suppose her brakes were defective?"

"Hardly likely. I'd been using the car that day myself. The brakes were in perfect order."

"Do you have a picture of Mrs. Graham?"

He pointed to the piano. There were a half-dozen pictures on it, three of which were women. Two of the women were blondes, the third was a brunette.

"Your wife is on the left, isn't she?" I asked, knowing that Dorothy Graham's picture was the one in the center. "The blonde?"

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"No, that's Jean Hysler, a friend of Dorothy's. Dorothy is the—"

"Oh, sure," I said. "I remember now. I saw her picture in our paper. She's on the right."

Graham glared at me. "If you will stop interrupting, Dorothy is the one in the center. The brunette on the right is another friend, Bernice Ramsey, the actress." He stood up and paced the floor. "Mr. Laird, I find this extremely distasteful. Please get on with it."

"One of your neighbors says Mrs. Graham had been out of town before the accident."

"I don't know who you talked to. We've lived here less than six months and had very little to do with the neighbors."

"The one down the road," I said vaguely.

"Dorothy went out of town frequently. I fail to see what that has to do with guard rails."

"You're positive her brakes were all right?"

"I'm not a mechanic." He put his hand in his pocket and, when it came out again, it held a gun. He pointed it at my chest. "And you, Mr. Laird, are not a reporter. I know you. You're a cheap private detective. Who sent you here? Did *he*?"

Having entered a private home under false pretenses, I was in no position to argue against a gun. "Who is *he*?"

"Jenner. He sent you here to spy on me. He thinks—" He stopped short.

"What does he think?"

"You know that as well as I do."

"**A**LL right, I know," I said. I had nothing to lose. "Jenner wonders about your wife. The police may be satisfied with that accident, but Jenner isn't." Crossing my fingers and hoping fervently that Graham honestly believed his wife to be a suicide, I continued, "Your wife was to meet Jenner about a month ago. She never showed up."

"So what's his theory?"

"That you kept her prisoner here. He doesn't think that wreck on the drive was accidental."

I thought I detected a faint flicker of relief in Graham's eyes, but he concealed it quickly and said, "That's what I thought. Well, it was an accident and no one can

prove otherwise. He relaxed a little.

"Jenner doesn't need proof," I said. "Guys like Jenner work on their hunches. He figures you killed your wife and that's enough for him."

"What does he intend to do about it?"

I smiled knowingly. "After his boys get through with you, you'll crawl to the police on your hands and knees for protection—even if it means a confession."

"I don't have anything to confess. I didn't kill her. It was an accident." He stared at me, read the doubt in my eyes and wailed, "I tell you I *didn't* kill Dorothy!"

Maybe not Dorothy, I thought, but he finished off someone else. My eyes strayed to the pictures of Jean Hysler and Bernice Ramsey on the piano. Neither was listed at the Bureau of Missing Persons.

"Mr. Graham," I asked calmly, trying to ignore the gun in his hand. "Where was your wife in the month before her death?"

"I—I don't know," he muttered. "She went away."

I laughed in his face and he jerked back his head as if I had slapped him. "Jenner doesn't believe that," I said. "Neither do I."

Graham took three hesitant steps toward where I sat, his gun held waveringly. "It's the truth! Tell him it's the truth. She went away."

I kept an eye on the gun and shifted my weight in the chair. "Did she leave a note?"

"No!" he cried. "She just left."

"You'll hit the jackpot on her insurance, won't you?"

I had him on the ropes. He was still looking directly at me but his eyes were glassy, almost blind. It was an effort for him to hold up the weight of the gun. I lunged from my chair in a crouch and dived for his legs. It was a perfect shoe-string tackle and he crashed heavily to the floor, twisting to get out from under me and to free his gun hand.

I straddled his chest and took the gun away from him. Then I hit him with a right, and jumped to my feet. I pulled him up and shoved him into a chair where he sat like a limp bag of laundry.

"Where was your wife?" I asked coldly. "Where did she spend that month?"

He stirred fitfully and gave me a fishy eye. "I don't know."

I leaned over him and shook him by the shoulders. "Give me the note she left."

"I tell you she didn't—"

"You're handling it all wrong, Laird," a silky voice said from the doorway. I looked up quickly and saw Vic Jenner coming across the room. He stopped in front of Graham and clucked his tongue admonishingly. "All wrong, Laird. Much too gentle."

Jenner's right hand was gloved and it held his left glove loosely. He smiled down at Graham, then, with the speed of a striking snake, the left glove lashed out and licked a stinging red welt across Graham's cheek. "Graham," Jenner said smoothly, "give Laird what he wants. The note."

"There wasn't any—"

Jenner silenced him with another slap. "You're a liar." Without seeming to raise his voice, Jenner called, "Red, come in here."

Red Brink, his gargoylish face twisted into an ugly grin, shuffled into the room from the hall. He was a huge man with long, apelike arms and broad shoulders which swelled beneath his plaid sport jacket.

Jenner smiled at him as one would smile at an obedient mongrel. "Go to work on him," he said.

His beady eyes gleaming, Red Brink snatched Robert Graham's wrist and began to twist it. Graham writhed in the chair and tears sprang to his eyes. He began to moan. I didn't want to see any more of it. I looked away and stared at the pictures on the piano.

I blinked my eyes and stared harder. The longer I looked at Bernice Ramsey's picture the stronger her resemblance to Dorothy Graham became. True, the Ramsey girl was a brunette but she had the same arrogant tilt to her chin, the same coldly disdainful eyes. I pulled my chin thoughtfully and went to the piano for a closer look.

"Hold it, Jenner," I said suddenly. "Call off your boy."

Puzzled, Jenner did as I asked. "What's the trouble?"

I walked past him and stooped over

Graham, who was rubbing his sore wrist. "Where is Bernice Ramsey?" I demanded.

His eyes were blank. "On the road somewhere. She's traveling with a troupe. She's an actress, you know."

I nodded, thinking that some actresses changed the color of their hair as frequently as they changed boy friends. "Who's her agent?"

"I don't— Wait a minute. Ben Tripp, I think."

Jenner scowled at me. "You all through, Laird?" I nodded and he turned to Red Brink. "Don't be so damned gentle. I want that note."

"Sure, Vic," Red said and he cuffed Graham on the side of the head.

I turned and crossed the room to the phone. I found Ben Tripp's number in the phone book and dialed it. When Tripp came on, I said, "Do you have Bernice Ramsey in your stable?"

"Sure," he said brightly.

"Is she available?" I hoped he would think I was interested in hiring her. He took the bait.

"She certainly is. You're lucky to catch her between shows. Great artist, that girl. She'll be a big name one of these—"

"Where can I get in touch with her?"

There was a long pause on his end of the line. "Well, you know how these actresses are."

"When did you see her last?"

"Oh, maybe a month or so ago, but," he added hastily, "I can get hold of her. Don't worry about that."

"Maybe she won't do for the part I have in mind. I need a blonde."

Tripp chuckled softly. "She's a blonde. Been a blonde a couple of months now."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll get in touch with you."

"Who is this call—"

I hung up and went back to the inquisition.

"I'd suggest," Jenner was murmuring, "you tell us about the note."

"All—all right," Graham gasped. "She did leave a note. She said she was going to kill herself."

"Where is the note?" Jenner asked.

"I tore it up."

Jenner's expressionless face suddenly

changed and became livid with rage. "You fool!" he shouted. "Why?"

Graham shook his head sullenly and refused to answer.

"What about it, Vic?" Brink asked.

"No. I know why he tore it up. He wanted her insurance, the double-indemnity." Jenner turned to me, his shoulders sagging. "Okay, sport, I guess that winds it up."

"I don't get it," I said, troubled.

"Call in the police," he said. "You've earned your fee."

"Why don't you call them?"

"Me? Don't be foolish. How much attention would the law pay to *me*?"

THIS I felt, was the easiest five-hundred bucks I'd ever picked up. I had earned it simply by standing around. "Sure," I said, "I call in the police—and tell them what?" I shook my head slowly. "So Graham's a murderer. Who did he kill?"

Jenner grinned stiffly. "Shall we give him the shocker?"

I returned the grin even more stiffly. "Yeah, it should be good for the laughs."

Jenner put a knuckle under Graham's chin and jerked his head up. "Dorothy killed herself, did she?"

"I—yes, she must have. She left the note."

"Which you no longer have."

"—and you haven't seen her."

"Which is a mistake. Dorothy is still alive, very much alive."

"And Bernice Ramsey is dead," I said softly, "very much dead. Missing Persons didn't have her listed, but that isn't surprising. Actresses float into town and out again. Maybe they're on the road with a show or on vacation. No one misses them until—"

"Where is Dorothy?" Graham said, coming slowly from his stunned silence.

"I thought she was ashes on the back stretch," Jenner sneered.

"She committed suicide!" Graham cried. "She must have!"

"But you let Bernice Ramsey die under your wife's name," I said disgustedly. "You knew all the time that—"

"*Dorothy!*" Graham screamed in panic, looking over my shoulder.

"Yes, Robert." Dorothy strolled into

the room as casually as if she were making an entrance at a cocktail party. "Surprise."

"Where have you been?"

"Away," she said pleasantly. "Imagine my surprise when I found out I was dead. Did you miss me, darling—or did you miss my money?"

"You took almost all of it," he said accusingly.

"Almost. Isn't it a pity you won't have my insurance? But you really wouldn't have been able to use it anyway, not where you're going."

I watched their faces intently, trying to make some sense out of all this. It was obvious that Robert Graham had honestly believed in Dorothy's suicide, but for good and sufficient reasons had suppressed the note, finally destroying it. He knew he would never collect on the double-indemnity clause if her suicide became known. All of which brought us back to Bernice Ramsey's death.

"Laird," Jenner said. "Are you going to call the police or not?"

"Oh, naturally," I said. I turned to Dorothy Graham. "It's a good thing for you your husband destroyed that note. It tidies up your skirts a bit."

"That's just fine," she said. She seemed far from delighted, however.

I went to the phone again, asked the operator for Central headquarters and was put through. "This is Marty Laird," I said. "I'm up at Graham's place on Hillside Drive. You'd better send—" I broke off and frowned thoughtfully. I replaced the phone in the cradle and took Robert Graham's gun from my pocket, weighing it in my right hand.

"What's the matter?" Jenner snapped impatiently. "You didn't—"

"Sh'h," I said. "I'm thinking."

"What about?" Dorothy Graham asked.

I smiled at her sadly. "About what a sap I've been. The word is sucker, maybe patsy."

"Stop playing with that gun," Jenner said, "and get the police again."

"I'm not playing with the gun," I replied. "I may need it." I jerked my chin at Robert Graham. "Frisk them, patsy face. Get their guns."

He stared at me in bewilderment for a moment, then scrambled to his feet and

gingerly tugged Red's gun from the shoulder holster. Jenner was clean. Dorothy, who carried no purse and whose dress was skin-tight, had no place to carry a weapon. Graham brought Red's cannon to me and stood to one side.

"What the hell is—" Jenner began.

"You and your lady friend knocked off Bernice," I said, "then you dragged me into it. I was to get the evidence that would hang Robert here. You couldn't do it yourself without attracting a lot of attention, but I was to give it a kind of semi-official, above-board twist when I took my information to the police."

"You remember," Dorothy said, "I didn't want you to go to the police. I wanted to stay dead."

"But you changed your mind," I reminded her. "That was a good act, really swell."

"You can't make this stick," Jenner said coldly. "When the cops find out that Graham thought Dorothy was dead and that he—"

"I wondered why you should be upset when he said he destroyed the note. You should have been happy. It kept attention away from Dorothy. But, no, you turned livid. It meant there was no further proof that Graham thought his wife was dead. Your frame hinged on that note."

"You believe I didn't kill anyone then?" Robert Graham exclaimed. He was drooling with joy as he picked at the sleeve of my coat. I pushed him away but he came back again, more cloying than ever. "You believe me?"

"I believe you would have killed Bernice Ramsey if you'd had the brains to think of it and the guts to do it. Get out

of my way." I shoved him aside roughly. He had covered up the note, had passed an innocent girl off as his wife and was about to collect a thumping wad of money. Graham was in up to his neck. I had no pity for him.

But Jenner and Dorothy were the ones I wanted to see behind bars. No one likes to be played for a sucker.

"You're all wrong, Mr. Laird," Dorothy said. "Vic and I didn't—"

"Save it for your attorney. Your husband wouldn't have killed Bernice. He had to be sure you were dead first and he couldn't be sure, despite your note. Potential suicides seldom clean out their bank accounts. As you said before, money doesn't buy anything where they're going."

I nodded to Graham but I held the gun on my trio. "The cops asked him to identify a corpse. He knew the car was yours and he was shown a pocketbook which had your driver's license in it. Chances are, he thought you had returned unexpectedly and that the body really was you. He—"

"That's what I thought," Graham babbled. "That's what I—"

"Shut up," I snapped. "Even if you knew it wasn't your wife, you would have said it was. You're rotten clear through." Far down the hill, a police siren was screaming, the wail growing louder as the squad car approached.

"The police!" Dorothy cried, her hands pressed to her cheeks.

Jenner glanced at me sharply, then, from the corner of his mouth, said, "Take him, Red."

"I'll shoot him," I said.

*Wolf Shows
He is
Smart as a Fox*





SEATTLE, Wash.—Robert Wolf, service station owner here, has switched to Calvert Reserve. "It's the smart switch for any man," he says. "Calvert's lighter, smoother, a better buy."

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"And I'll be on you before he drops," Jenner muttered.

Red crouched, his long arms swinging and he took a shuffling step toward me. "If he comes any closer, Jenner," I said, "the first shot is for you." I backed away, the gun leveled at Jenner's chest. "I mean it."

"Go ahead, Red," Jenner said. "He won't shoot."

Red lunged forward in a dive. I jumped to one side, took deliberate aim at Jenner's right shoulder and fired. The impact spun him crazily and he clutched his shoulder. He gasped, "Hold it, Red." But it was too late to help Red. I shifted the gun and brought the butt down on Red's thick skull. He went out as quick as that.

"You shouldn't have doubted me," I said. "A man doesn't like to be the patsy twice."

Brakes screeched outside the Graham house. In a moment, the door burst open and three cops stormed into the living room.

Bill Durkee of the riot squad said, "Laird, what's the—"

"Murder," I said, and pointed the gun at Jenner and Dorothy Graham.

Durkee looked at Dorothy and did a double-take. "You're—you're supposed to be dead."

"This is where I came in," I sighed. "Jenner and the woman went away together, cleaning out her account of all ready cash. She'd left a fake suicide note. They watched the papers, and when no mention of her suicide was made, they knew that Graham had suppressed the note."

"Yeah?" Durkee said stupidly. "Who died in the auto accident if this Graham dame didn't?"

"An actress named Bernice Ramsey, a friend—hah!—of Dorothy's. They looked enough alike to be sisters. Jenner and Dorothy came back to town, killed Bernice, put her in the car and ran the car off the cliff, then waited for the cops to tag Robert Graham."

"But nothing happened?"

"Nothing, so they dragged me into it. They wanted to frame the husband, of course. Dorothy has a quaint theory. She

figures an electrocuted husband is better than a divorced one. And either would be better than one who would force her and Jenner to stay in hiding all the time. Lovely lady."

Durkee spat on the broadloom and pushed Jenner and the Graham woman toward the door. He stopped on the threshold and looked back at me. "How did you spot it?"

"They were too anxious to get their hands on the note. You see, to make the frame fit they had to have proof that Graham believed his wife to be a suicide at the time he made identification at the morgue. Both women couldn't be his wife, that's a cinch."

"And that tied it up?"

"Not quite. Dorothy is a cold, business-like woman and an expert driver. The type who would never leave her driver's license lying around for a month while she went to Florida. So how would Dorothy's license get with Bernice's body unless Dorothy Graham herself put it there?"

Durkee nodded. "Right, Marty. Drop down at Central. We'll need a statement from you."

"I'll be there," I said and watched him take his prisoners out to the car. I turned back to the complacent Graham. "Get your hat."

He smiled confidently. "You cleared me and I owe you plenty. Here, let me—" He reached into his inner pocket for his wallet.

"Pull a gun on me, will you?" I rushed him and hit him with a left, then a right, slamming him into a niche formed by the fireplace and bookcase. Dusting my hands, I said, "Self defense. Now, get your hat. I'm taking you in."

"I haven't done—"

"I'll find something, dammit, I'll find something. You make my stomach crawl. Give me a good clean murderer to deal with any day."

Pushing him ahead of me into my coupe a few moments later, I thought of Dorothy Graham and I patted the pocket which held her five-hundred-dollar fee. I'd earned it. All I'd had to do was prove she was dead.

It wouldn't be long now.

FALL-GUY'S FEINT

The town's gunsels were already after his hide, when a redhead from Hades tried to give boxer Mulloy—a going-away shroud.



I started toward her—then both of her arms came up. . . .

By
**JOHN
BENDER**

THE cut lip wasn't giving me any trouble, but the taste of blood was still in my mouth. One ear rang like a cheap alarm clock, ragged but insistent. But, all things considered, I was in good shape, physically. Financially—well, I had the three hundred and the clothes on my back. And the car—or, at least, the use of it, until I could shake the dust of this burg and get to safer territory. Jarrett said I could leave the convertible with his sister in Greenwood when I was through with it.

We sat in this little joint on the edge of town, killing time at the bar, waiting for

the car to be fixed. The mechanics were working on it at the combination garage-bus stop-general store across the way. For at least the tenth time, Jarrett said,

"Of all the times for that water pump to go on the fritz!"

"Forget it," I said. "We're doing okay."

The drinks weren't that good, but they helped. With my skin still whole, I felt a sight better than I had an hour ago, back there at the ball park. It isn't every day you hit a town where you run into an old army pal. It isn't every night this same old army pal sticks his neck way out to here for you.

Jarrett was mumbling, "It's a hell of a note . . ." and I had a sudden memory of him, in uniform, saying the same thing. About a recon patrol or a jumpoff at night.

"Look," I said. "Your wife is probably wondering what the hell happened. You go to the fights with your army buddy and don't come back." I punched his shoulder playfully. "Take off. You've done more than you should. More than I expected. I'll be okay."

"Well," he said. He finished his drink, nodding. "I don't think they've covered this end of town. They didn't figure you'd have a car, so I don't think they'll check this far out. Good luck, Harry. Watch your step."

I tried a laugh. "The car's insured, ain't it?"

He grinned, and that was where we left it. I watched him go, his shoulders swinging in the tweed suit, a thin, easy-moving joe who made up, in his way, for the wrongos that you meet. Salt of the earth, grass-roots American—the whiskey had me mellow, all right—a guy who'd done his bit and come back to the same wife and the same kids and the same paycheck and the same bills on the first of the month. A dull life, maybe. But solid and clean. I ordered another drink.

In the small cone of light behind the gas pumps, the mechanics were legs-up in the convertible's motor. Ten, fifteen minutes at the most, I thought, and I'd be on my way. I sucked the sting in my cut lip and thought about a lot of things, most of which involved fist-slinging—my stock in trade.

In the mood I was in, nothing would have pleased me better than a few unscheduled rounds with Fenner and McAvoy, but the way things stood, they each had six good reasons—in pocket-size .38s—plus a half-dozen strongarms, similarly equipped, to keep me away. How far I was going to get depended on the time it took to fix a broken water pump.

I heard the door slam and looked up. I was jumpier than I had thought. But the juices stopped tingling in my stomach, because this was no gungel. No, indeed. It might have been your foxhole dream girl—the one you always imagined you might be lucky enough to find—if you liked them with dark red hair and soft, full lips. Tall, and not too thin, running to extra-length dark nylons. I noticed the suitcase, but the legs were much nicer to look at, as they came forward along the empty bar.

She took the stool one down from me, showing her knees beneath the tight suit skirt in the process of settling. I made a point of remembering that I didn't have much time, and the old saw about he who travels alone.

Making circles on the bar gave me a reason for studying my glass, but my eyes kept working up to the mirror. Top-side, she was a treat. And, apparently, there was no wall of ice around her. After she ordered a highball, she kept her face half-cocked in my direction, with an attitude that didn't say anything about being left alone.

She took a small sip of her drink, then shifted slightly on the stool in my direction. Her eyes were dark, almost black. She said, "I could make a routine out of this, I suppose, but I'd rather not. I saw you come in here. That's your car they're fixing out there, isn't it?"

Her voice was low, throaty yet not too deep; harder, full of more tension than I'd imagined it would be.

"What's the pitch?"

"No pitch," she answered, in a way that told me there sure as hell was. "I'm just asking."

I ran my hand along my chin, up to my battered ear. "It looks bad, but I don't have any trouble with my hearing."

"Which way are you going?"

"Does it matter?"

She blinked, more than was necessary. "I hoped you might be heading East. I could use a lift."

"I don't have a hacking license."

"You have a car. There aren't any busses out until morning," she said, making a wry face which was meant to be a friendly gesture. "I don't relish the thought of sitting in that flea trap over there all night."

Looking at her over the edge of the glass, she was as lovely a bundle as you'll come across, all right, but the muscles in her face were too flexible, too unused. She wasn't as old as she was acting.

"There's a fat stone building about ten miles away," I told her. "Run by the state. They have special rooms for dopes who take girls for long-distance automobile rides."

"I'm legal size." Her teeth were white, even, faintly luminous in the light of the bar. There was nothing accidental in the way she ran the tip of her tongue over them. "It can be a pretty dull trip—alone."

I looked over at the garage again. The hood of the car was in place.

First I picked up my change, then her suitcase. "Finish your drink," I said, "and let's get going."

WHILE I went inside to pay off the garage man, she excused herself to go powder her nose and wipe some of the invisible dust off her face. She was waiting for me in the car when I climbed in behind the wheel, her legs tucked up underneath her, the radio playing soft music. Very cozy. In the rearview mirror I could see the garage attendants smirk-

ing. You don't have to be a mind reader to know what they were thinking.

On the road, I let it purr along for a few minutes.

"The name is Harry," I said to the girl beside me. "Harry Mulloy."

It wasn't necessary—or it wasn't shrewd enough. There was no spark of reaction, just the lazy, studied smile on her face.

"Joan," she said, and the rest was lost in the exaggerated circle her lips formed over her startled, intaken breath. She rocked back on the cushions when I pushed the accelerator to the floor and shot the car's speed double. She looked with wide eyes at the needle creeping to seventy, then to the dark roadside zipping by.

"Why the rush?"

I didn't say anything. For maybe three or four miles I kept it burning all out, watching the road ahead. Finally I nosed the car toward a cutout and slammed it to a stop, dousing all but the parking lights.

"Okay, honey. This will do fine."

Her mask slipped. She wasn't acting this surprise, this concern which pulled at her lovely face. "What—what are you—"

"Out," I said. Sliding over from my side, I forced her toward the door. She grasped the handle, twisted, and swung those nice long legs to the ground.

I pointed. "Over there, near those trees." The moon was almost fully overhead, splashing the shrubbery in cold, gray light that held no warmth. She stumbled in her spike heels while her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. I followed her, the car keys in my hand, balled inside my fist.

"Here. Right here is good."

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She faced me, angrily. "What's the meaning of this?"

"You tell me. Like I say, my ears just look bad. I'm listening."

"But I don't know what you mean!" She was openly nervous, her breath harsh, her fingers clutching at her purse.

"Look," I said. "I never hit a woman in my life. But there's a first time for everything. Hitting people is my business. I'm real good at it. You know that."

"I—I don't know anything!"

She tried to break, but I caught her elbows and held them tightly against her sides, pinning her. "You don't know about the fight tonight, back at the ball park! You don't know Fenner and his pal, Mc-Avoy!"

I was shaking her hard, and she was sobbing behind teeth-clutched lips, her hair dancing in my face. But this had been boiling up all night inside of me, ever since Jarrett and I had made the break from the dressing rooms under the ball park. Beneath my street clothes, I still wore my fighting trunks.

Right now, I felt meaner than I had in the ring, when I stashed Fenner's boy in the second heat and upset the whole rotten apple cart. This doll was part of the mess, and she had to learn that when you play rough, you get hurt.

"My—my arms!" she gasped.

"Can it. What's the ticket on this ride? How were you going to set me up for them?"

"No, no. You're wrong. I don't know—"

Once, across the face, using my open palm. With the hand I'd released she instinctively grabbed her cheek.

"Don't tell me you weren't fingering me back there at the bar! That pickup was no girl-scout routine, honey. Who'd you phone when you went to powder your nose? Where are they supposed to grab me? Come on, dammit! Where?"

She saw my arm go up. She crouched, trying to twist away.

I pulled the dark red hair up until her face was close to mine. "Where?"

"Honest, honest, I don't know! I don't know anything about a fight or any men!"

I hit her again, flat-handed, behind the ear. She fell face down on the grass, trying to crawl away on her stomach, her suit

torn at the shoulder, her hair a tangled jungle. I remembered her as she had come into the bar, the graceful liteness of her going to powder her nose. . . . It occurred to me quite suddenly that she could not have phoned anyone in the brief space of time she'd been out of my sight. That's when I began to suspect my nerves and not this kid.

Maybe she was telling the truth.

She had pushed herself to a sitting position now, her legs awkwardly sprawled. I started toward her—then both of her arms came up, held stiffly together, the purse swinging open by its strap on her one arm.

There was a sudden flash, the stinging waves of rocking air against my face, and my shoulder twisting as if I'd been struck with an ax; and, finally, the sound of the shot.

The ground came up and slammed me in the back.

FOR a long while there was nothing but the silence. That was strange. No crowd noise swimming in the distance, pulling you alert; no burning lights forcing the red haze off your eyeballs. A three drop, I kept thinking. The automatic counting mechanism in my head began to work: *now four and . . . now five and . . . now six and—* while I rolled and bunched my knees beneath me, trying to come erect.

But this was grass, not canvas, and a gun had put me down, I remembered, not a head punch. I felt the pain throbbing through my shoulder, the blood coursing down my arm. My hand was thick with the sticky mess, and I rubbed my palm across the grass.

The girl was sitting as she'd been, but the gun lay carelessly in her lap, offering no danger. Her face was shell-white in the moonlight, her lips slack, trembling slightly. Her dark eyes were wide with a terrible, flat stare. Abruptly, she shoved the gun away and turned her body, so that her back was toward me when the trembling began to convulse her.

Against the chirp of the tree toads, the sound of the girl was a faint and alien night noise. She began to cry.

I got to my feet. How bad a wound I had in my shoulder, I didn't know. I'd taken a slug in the leg during the war, but

that had fractured a bone and I'd known it right away. I lifted my left arm slowly, then more quickly, flexing it. It pulsed, but there was no pain to speak of. The pulsing might have been shock, or an artery.

When I moved in her direction, the girl glanced up. The tears and the sickness had blotted her makeup, and she looked worn out.

"I didn't want to do it," she said. "I didn't want to do it." She shuddered, eyeing my shoulder, and I thought she was going to be sick again. She clenched her hands and ran her tongue over her lips, struggling to control herself. "When you fell . . . all that blood . . ."

Maybe she was as sorry and as helpless as she looked. I didn't know. You find the angle, and you can figure the score, most times. But this was different.

"You don't know Fenner," I said, "or McAvoy?"

She shook her head, and I believed her. It would have been a lot easier if there had been a connection, I thought.

I didn't put a thing like this past them, of course. They knew how to set you up, all right. Earlier tonight they'd bought out my manager and seconds, and arranged to slip me a mickey between rounds. All for a tidy penny that was going to be turned on the betting-hungry town. But I'd smelled a rat and lowered the boom on their plug-ugly—and that was one they hadn't figured.

It cost them a bundle, and they came looking for me in the dressing rooms, with their gunsels. Only Jarrett, who was there with me, said he knew a back way out of the ball park . . . and he had a car with him.

So I thought I was playing it smart when I let the red-haired girl pick me up in the bar. I was sure she was in on it, but that if I got the jump on her I could make her tell me what Fenner and his pals were figuring to do.

I began to laugh. Oh, I'd played it smart, for sure. Real smart. I'd wasted all this time—and taken a slug in the shoulder to boot. And I didn't know any more than when I'd started.

The girl got up, brushing the grass off her suit. "We've got to get out of here," she said. "Maybe I can find you a doctor."

It was an idea, but I'd lost too much time already. If I could manage it, the doc would have to wait until I was farther east than Greenwood.

"I can drive," I said. "But you're not going anywhere unless you hoof it. Maybe you can get back to the crossroads tonight."

"No!" Some of the animation leaped back into her eyes. "You have to take me with you. Please!" She caught at my arm. "You can't leave me here now!"

"I can try," I told her. "I don't know your racket, and I don't have time to find out. Let's just say it hasn't been a pleasure and let it go at that."

Stumbling in her high heels, she followed me to the car.

"Sure," she said, "I was trying to set you up. But I don't know those guys you were talking about. It was for Tandler. He broke out of prison this morning. He'll kill me if he finds me here. You've got to take me with you!"

She was sobbing now, leaning against the side of the car. "I was supposed to pick you up at the crossroads, take you a couple of miles down the road, and get you to park. Then Tandler was going to show up and take over."

"But why me? How do I fit into it?" I asked.

"You look like him. Same build, same color hair. I had to wait until I found somebody with a car who looked like him."

"Who the hell is Tandler?"

"A convict," she said flatly. "He was in prison with my brother Bob. He saw me a couple of times when I went to visit Bob. Tandler has a lot of weight inside. He could have things done to Bob, unless I'd do what Tandler wanted." Her eyes bored into mine. "They have ways inside. Bob told me they have all sorts of ways for a prisoner to be killed. So when Tandler called me tonight and told me what he wanted me to do, there wasn't any choice."

For a moment I said nothing. Then I got into the car and started the motor. She stood there in the road, clutching the open door on my side.

"You see why I had to pick up someone? Why you can't leave me here? Tandler will kill me."

She was scared, and I guess she had reason to be. Her story made some sort of sense—it gave a reason to the way she had acted. But it didn't make me feel any easier. Originally, there had been just Fenner and his boys after my hide. Now there was someone else.

"Won't you drop me off in Greenwood?" she asked.

"That's not going to help your brother."

"Nothing will, now."

"You can go to the cops and tell them where they can pick up this guy Tandler."

Her lusterless eyes told me how she felt about that. Like I had, back at the ball park. I should have hollered copper myself, instead of trying to play it my way, risking Jarrett's neck as well as my own. But you don't think that way when you've played things solo for a long as I had.

"What the hell," I said, pointing to the empty seat. "Come on, get in. It's your headache. I'll give you a ride to Greenwood."

SHE started around the front of the car to come in on the empty side. She'd got about half way when I saw her look up and frown. Headlights bounced along the highway and caught us in their brilliance. I heard the other car roar up, saw it nose in front of me.

I dove for the door, thinking, *Fenner and McAvoy*, and cursed the girl and myself and everything in general.

I heard the girl crying, "Tandler!" several times, as we both broke for the shrubbery, away from the car. Then a man's voice hollering for us to stop.

There was a chance I might have made it to the trees, or to the gun the girl had left lying in the grass, but the shots changed my mind. Two of them, quickly spaced, burned the air over my head and the man's voice boomed:

"Hold it, Jocko! Hold it right there." He grunted. "All right, come on back here, the pair of you, and let's see what this is all about."

We went back, the girl and I, making it in slow stages. He was silhouetted in the headlights of his car, a tall man, almost my height, but running thicker, softer in the chest and stomach. I saw the dark gray prison shirt, the shapeless gray

trousers—and the gun. His hand smothered most of it, but what was left pointed at my middle.

I stopped. The girl kept walking toward him and he waved her away with a flick of his gun hand.

"This don't stack up like I figured, Jo," he said to her. "You were supposed to rock him to sleep before I got here. Remember? Looks to me like you were fixing to powder out when I come up."

"Tandler, listen," she tried.

"Shut up," he said. "I told you how it was gonna be. I don't leave no strings for the coppers to tie up. All right, character," he told me. "Start shucking them clothes."

When I didn't move, he growled, "Come on, buster. Or do I put a hole in you?"

I shook my head. "You can't get away with it." But it was useless. Holding the gun carefully, he started switching clothes.

Jo had turned and her back was toward us. I got out of my gear and into the clothes that Tandler had worn, and he put on my things. Once, the girl started to say something but Tandler told her to be still.

"We pop this cookie like I said, and nothing happens to that brother of yours. You give me any trouble. . . ."

I stood there watching him in the headlights, figuring my chances. I said, "Now what?" and tried moving a little closer.

And he stepped back a few paces, nearer the road. "You getting ideas, strong boy? Or are you just impatient?" He smiled. "We drive down the road a couple miles. There's an embankment there. And that's where Mac Tandler, escaped con, gets killed. That's right. He crashes through the guard rail and the car he stole gets all smashed up, two hundred feet down. With him in it. Only it's you, strong boy, not him."

So that was it, Not very neat, but pretty simple.

"You think it'll fool the cops?" I asked. "We don't look alike enough to get by the prison records. It won't fool the doctors."

"How far you think the screws are gonna check? They got a body, wearing my clothes. What's left to identify fits close enough. They'll have their story for the papers and they'll go around taking pats on the back. Nobody'll give a good damn

whether they got the right stiff or not."

Tandler looked at the girl. "You gonna be a good girl and drive the convertible? We'll follow you in my car." He stepped forward suddenly and caught her arm, causing her to wince in his grasp. "Don't get no new ideas, Jo. If they don't get word back at the prison that Tandler's body has been found at the bottom of the embankment, you know what happens to your brother."

"I know, I know," she sobbed.

"So you're gonna be good, huh? That's fine."

For just a second she was between us, and it didn't take any courage on my part. Tandler was going to kill me, maybe now, maybe later, but kill me he would. That was all I thought as I leaped at the pair of them. My rush bowled the girl into him, and he cursed, trying to bring up the gun. I threw the both of them back against the fenders of the convertible and scurried around in front of the grill of Tandler's car, through the beams of its headlights and out on to the road.

One shot, then another, as I ran zig-zag across the macadam. I remembered a phrase from the Army: *If you can hear the shots, don't worry about them.* Then I was through the first screen of shrubbery, ploughing recklessly up the tangled growth of the incline.

I HEARD another shot. It whined past my head, and I stopped, trying to get my breath. Tandler was down on the road, following my progress and shooting at the sounds I made.

"Take it easy, strong boy," he called. "You ain't gonna get far."

I glanced through the thin cover of leaves. He was showing fresh shells into the gun, and I decided I'd have to risk the rocky rise behind me if I expected to get away. I had time then to realize that my shoulder was burning and to wonder about the blood I'd lost.

I told myself I'd count to three, then make the break. I had just said, "One," when I heard the car coming up the road. It was moving fast, but the brakes were on and the wheels were whining when it went past Tandler, almost hitting him. There was a final screech of rubber. The car—a dark sedan—rocked to a stop and backed very quickly.

"There's the pug!" someone yelled.

"That's Mulloy, all right!"

And the voices from the car were lost in the sudden thunder which erupted from its interior. I couldn't count the flashes that the guns made; there were too many of them.

Tandler screamed once, his gun answering futilely. He doubled, as if an invisible scythe had struck him just above the belt, then he pitched to the road and the dark sedan pulled away.

I didn't believe it, but it had happened. Fenner's gun goons had caught up with Harry Mulloy.

* * *

We got to the body about the same time, the girl and I.

"They killed him," she said, "because they thought it was you."

"That's right," I said. "They thought he was Harry Mulloy." I picked up Tandler's gun and shoved it in my pocket. It

Service Manager Does Himself Service

James M. Davis* switched to Calvert
—found today's best blend is also
today's very best buy!

*of Boise, Idaho

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN
NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., NEW YORK CITY



was an unnecessary gesture because I was, abruptly, safer than I had been all night. I felt the relief wash through me like a second wind. "The hired gunmen that Fenner sent looking for me had never seen me close up, so the general build and my clothes fooled them."

"You're lucky."

I nodded. "Now and then you get a break."

She shook her head. "So they tell me. I wouldn't know." Her bitterness was a shield, and it was cracking. The young and beaten girl was showing through again. Looking at the body, my thoughts went squirreling back over the night. I remembered something Tandler had said.

I told the girl, "We can't hang around here. That embankment he spoke of. Suppose we take him there. Do you think you could help me get him into his car?"

She looked up sharply.

"Suppose we work it the way Tandler planned. Only it's really his body, not mine."

Nodding, she pushed the straggling red strands of hair into place. "It might work."

"The word gets back to prison that Tandler is dead—the way he's supposed

to be, the way they're waiting to hear."

She began to laugh and to sob together, the sounds mixing strangely, rising higher as she saw the answer, too. "Bob will be safe, then. He'll be safe."

"Okay, okay," I said. "But we better get a move on."

The red-haired girl looked at me carefully. "If I should happen to forget to say thanks, Harry. Well, I mean—thanks. I don't know why you're doing this for me, but—" She looked away, then back again. "Thanks."

It was a good spot for a speech, about how one good break deserves another, how sometimes one good break is all you need, to make up for all the bad ones. Or I could have told her that my weakness has always been redheads.

But I said, "Forget it. Let's get this over with."

After all, there would be time for talking later on. When I wasn't standing in the middle of a road, in prison clothes, with a shoulder that was burning like hell and a corpse to get rid of.

Looking at the redhead, I thought there would be time, later on, for a lot of things there wasn't time for now. I'd make sure that there was time. . . .

BAD BREAKS

When a regiment of policemen had converged on New York's Woolworth Building—after receiving a report that a man was about to jump out of a forty-fifth-story window—the man standing up in an open window explained he was simply taking a sunbath.



A man indignantly entered the Oakland police station to ask for his auto which had been towed away for illegal parking. But it was rather meekly that he was led away to a cell. For some time the cops had been looking for him on lottery charges.



Ralph H. Kerr and Frank J. Haynes, Atlanta policemen, reported that they had disposed of a troublesome snake on their beat by tickling it to death.



A wide-eyed judge of Detroit, his eyes falling on the prisoner's bench, noticed that the clothes of a man who had fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette was on fire and quickly spread the alarm. The prisoner turned out to be awaiting trial on a charge of setting his hotel room on fire . . . by falling asleep with a lighted cigarette.



The Fulton County, Ga. jail has decided to put a music reproducer system in each of its cells.



Police Chief Edward Boyko of Passaic, N. J., announced that he wouldn't let his men work off-duty as bar-room bouncers because too many of them had been beaten up.

—Harold Helfer

WASHED UP

To Whom It May Concern:

To explain the act I must presently commit, and to establish my sanity, I feel I must set forth here some of my motives and my conclusions.

To begin with, District Attorney Folder is my personal enemy. Our mutual antagonism came to being during our courtship—mine successful—of Velma Raines who became Velma Bonner, my wife. It has been nurtured and fostered over the years by political disagreement.

As Editor of THE BLADE I have panned the D.A. unmercifully; he has retaliated in every possible way.

Upon an outstanding record of success with just such cases as mine—single missteps by ordinary citizens—Folder's present campaign for re-election is based. His ability as a prosecutor is unquestioned. Had he chosen to bring to trial those politically powerful gang leaders who infest our city, gangdom here must long ago have been wiped out.

But now all the influence of the machine, will be used to get rid of me.

You see, three hours ago I shot my wife, Velma, through the heart. Accidentally; I was cleaning and reloading an automatic pistol with the workings of which I am unfamiliar, and somehow succeeded in discharging the thing. There was no third party present, and only my word supports my story. I can picture Folder gloating as he tears it to shreds.

Velma and I quarreled bitterly this morning. We both said things of which we later were ashamed. I returned from the office at lunchtime with the express intent of making apology, to find Velma in an equally contrite mood.

At least two of our neighbors overheard us bandying unkind retorts at the apartment door as I left for the office. The sincere and unprejudiced testimony of these people would now be damning before a jury, with the D.A.'s clever, merciless tongue to drive it home.

Fortunately the pistol is of light caliber, and apparently no one heard the shot. I have spent three lonely terrible hours since Velma's death—after the first shock of horror and grief—in thinking over the situation.

My conclusions:

I feel that my trial for murder of my wife can have only one outcome: conviction.

In this state we have capital punishment in the grisly form of electrocution. Probably that would be my sentence; certainly nothing less than life imprisonment. In either case, my two small children must inherit a nauseous legacy.

Far better, then, that they endure only the less virulent stigma of suicide.

To those of you who will spurn my act as cowardice I make one suggestion: try it, with the thought that three hours ago I stood on the brink of success both worldly and spiritual, years of happiness and achievement ahead.

To you, Victor Aaronsen, my friend and colleague, I bequeath responsibility for my children's welfare along with all my worldly goods, which I request be used for the education and general furtherment of the two tots, Victor and Stella. They are visiting at the farm, Vic, with my Aunt Martha.

Also to you, Vic, friend and fellow-crusader, I bequeath responsibility for seeing that this document is printed in THE BLADE; it may help to soften the fact of my suicide.

Good-by, Vic, and heaven bless you.

Charles Bonner.

P.S. Vic, I am typing this on separate sheet for a reason you will understand. Please go to my desk and get the small envelope from under the blotter, and destroy it. It contains a plane ticket to Reno. The envelope is addressed in Folder's writing to Velma, but by some mistake was delivered at the office.

Charles.

By MARK LISH

DREAMER WITH

*Clay-pigeon for a woozie cutie's gun-pals,
dick Johnny Rock tried to turn the target practice—
into a free-for-all . . . Johnny Rock style!*



**High-Voltage
Detective
Novelette**

A GUN

By
MEL
COLTON



Just like that, he fired my
gun into Buck.

CHAPTER ONE

Cradle-Rocking Capes

I WAS letting the travel folder carry me to the sparkling white beaches and colorful historic cities of the fabulous Caribbean, with seven glorious days loafing around a coconut tree, when the door opened and she came in.

Her entrance was soft, refreshing to the staleness of my two-by-four office. I looked up into the nicest velvet-brown eyes—like two chocolate dips on marshmallows. Her nose was small, just right: her lips were a little heavy, red-bricked and tempting.

"Mr. Rock? Jimmy Rock?"

I said something like, "Yes, ma'am," then straightened out my manners and offered her a chair in front of my battered oak desk. She sat down, or rather cushioned down, crossed her legs and placed her purse on my desk. She lit a cigarette and puffed easily as though she had just

come calling at my office for cocktails.

Her voice was low, padded with training. "You're a detective, I assume."

I said she assumed right. I sat back, wrinkled my wide forehead with standard professional frown, and said: "If I can be of any help, Miss."

She hesitated. Then, "Yes," came suddenly as if she had just made up her mind. "You look the type. Mr. Rock. Will you act as a bodyguard? Or is that beneath your professional dignity?"

It might have been beneath my dignity, as she put it, but a bodyguard to this dame had glamour. I said, "Depends. Whom are you afraid of?" I used 'whom' in this case.

"It isn't for me." She smiled.

"Oh," with a decided drop in tone.

"Linda Mae, Mr. Rock, is a very foolish, headstrong girl. She has too much money to spend and unfortunately she—" there was hesitation—"likes men too well."

I gave my eyebrows the proper amount of arch. "So?"

"So I want you to watch out for her, without her actually knowing it."

I fumbled with that statement for the correct period of time, then leaned back, churched my fingers and said, "And what is your interest in the affair, Miss—"

"Miss Jerry Rolan. And my interest, Mr. Rock? I'm her sister. There are just the two of us. Our parents are dead. Is that sufficient?" Her eyes darkened into a deep mahogany.

"I guess it is, Miss Rolan. Now, let's get down to business. Who's the man you don't particularly like?"

She pinched those nice lips. "Buck Bennington."

It was my turn to pinch lip. I said, "Trouble, sister. Buck Bennington's trouble. No want. Foul ball. Uh-uh."

She handed me a look designating me as the lowest, most cowardly, insignificant worm in the world. She snapped: "Then you refuse to help me?"

I nodded.

She jumped to her feet and mashed her cigarette under her foot. As she swayed her figure, all wrapped up in a tailored tweed suit, I felt that I was crazy to refuse this gal anything.

Her words came fast, accelerated with

fury. "And I was told you were rough and tough and a real man. A two-fisted hell in leather. Well!" She turned for the door.

I said, "Look, lady—Jerry. Look, I—"

She turned back. I noticed that her sunshine hair was real curly and crisp and bordered a face that you only see in the best places. Then she smiled a small, apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rock, for losing my temper. Of course you have your ideas and your safety. I'm sorry."

I knew she was playing with me, using that age-old charm-school approach, but I'm human. It got me.

"Okay, Miss Rolan, let's talk it over."

She came back and sat down and said, "You called me Jerry before. Call me Jerry. I like it."

Something inside me said, "*Be careful, chum,*" but I smiled, churched my fingers again and asked for the story involving Linda Mae, the gal who liked men too well.

Her story went like this: Linda Mae, the younger sister, blonde and anxious, was gambling her fool head off at Buck Bennington's club called the Chance-It. Besides being involved with the town's most notorious gambler and political fixer, she was also in debt to him for some fifty grand. Jerry was willing to pay it if Buck would lay off her sister. But upon advice from an uncle, a William Carlton Shane—a local banker and executor of the girls' estate—a different approach was to be used.

According to Shane, once you paid off Buck, there still was no guarantee he would actually forget the foolish Linda Mae. Linda Mae wanted to marry Buck. Buck saw a million bucks in the marriage. It was as simple as that. Nothing unusual about the setup except. . . .

"And there's fifty dollars a day and five thousand in it if you get rid of Buck Bennington," she concluded. It was kind of cold-blooded the way she said, "Get rid of Buck Bennington." Just get rid of the most powerful fixer in the town's gambling-racket fraternity.

I said, "Maybe you've made a mistake, Jerry. I'm a private eye. A shamus. Just an ordinary guy, a former cop, trying to keep the shoe strings tied so my shoes stay on. I'm not a rod-man."

She laid a soft, slim gloved hand on my arm as she leaned over. A tang of perfume slapped my nose and danced gingerly in my nostrils. I liked it . . . too much.

"Please, Jimmy, I didn't mean you should shoot him. I mean—well, watch out for Linda. Maybe she'll fall for you and . . ."

"Thanks."

"Please. You said you were a detective. There must be something you could scare Buck with—besides a gun. Some information . . . there must be."

I allowed silence to play my part.

She looked at me again with those velvet eyes. Two invitations to disaster. "You'll help me, Jimmy?"

I'm crazy. I said I'd try and see how tight the rope was. Then she wrote out a check for five thousand dollars and said sweetly over my surprised look, "You'll succeed, Jimmy. I like your type."

When she left, I pulled my eyes from her trim ankles and put them on the check. If I was smart, I told myself, I would take out all my savings, take that seven glorious days around a cocoanut tree and then look for a job hustling Iguana for chicken.

THE croupier, at Buck Bennington's Chance-It Club, standing stiff as starch and with a cemetery air, said, "Twenty-six and red."

There were two neatly stacked piles on red. One stack came my way; the other went to a small blonde cutie all messed up in a mink coat and loose-fitting evening gown. Name: Linda Mae Rolan.

She had been following my bets and giving me the fluttery eye all evening. Excitement, sophistication all rolled up in one beautiful bundle—she thought.

I thought she looked about twenty-two or so. Her pale blue baby eyes and petulant lips affected me about as much as a small beer. Her shallow smile looked like the prelude to an opening gambit. Sure enough, she said:

"You always this lucky, handsome? You don't mind my playing your bets, do you?"

I said I didn't mind.

Her mink coat dripped money and an extensive assortment of diamond gewgaws reinforced the advertisement. These

kewpie-doll dames were all the same, I decided, taking in her one-carat earrings.

A tall dark greaseball with the usual patent-leather hair popped up at her side, and she unhooked her eyes from me. She dug up a pout.

"Go away, Nicky. Don't bust Mama's luck."

This Nicky threw a scowl at me, muttered something definitely abusive but carefully unintelligible and rewarded his way. He had nice, soft, doggy eyes. One of Buck Bennington's new puppets.

I went to the bar. The mink coat trailed me and informed me it wanted a straight scotch. Her scotch beat my run to the bar and with a grandiose air, she shot the whiskey down her throat without touching a tonsil. She frowned when I failed to jump up, click my heels and applaud her ability to drink.

She slapped the bar for another scotch and drank that down. This time she coughed some back up. She was beginning to show wear. She moved close to me. She shoved her chin up and tried a coo. "I'm a very dangerous woman to be seen with."

I was getting sick of this cradle rocking, so I said, "That's just fine, honey. Try me again in about five years."

She thought that funny. She went into a short hysterical laugh as I walked away and into the restaurant part of the club. I met some race touts and talked horses for about an hour or so. Then I left, went around to the parking lot, where I had noticed the mink coat again. It was staggering and swaying in the arms of this Nicky. He practically carried her into a long convertible and dumped her in the front seat.

It was early morning, one-ten by my watch, when I stepped into my own heap.

Nicky gunned the convertible and kicked up gravel as he blew out of the lot. I followed. I was working on my first fifty bucks for Jerry Rolan.

It was a wild chase. Just this side of Ocean Cove, on the outskirts of the town, he made a sharp, hairpin turn and skidded to a stop under a stucco arch which had a neon flickering the name: *Rest-In Motel*.

I figured that. Nicky got out, registered at the office—and carried the blonde into a cabin. Suddenly her voice again.

There was no mistaking that hysterical laugh. The mumbled phrases that followed brought me out of my car.

The cabin door slammed back and high heels were crunching the gravel. She was climbing back into the convertible when Nicky came up from behind and grabbed her. She turned and slapped his face. He cursed and made an effort to pull her out of the car.

By this time I had walked over and reached up for Nicky's collar. I spun him around.

"Maybe the lady wants to go home, Casonova." I heard a short sob from inside the car.

Nicky swung from my grip. "Mind your own business, chump. Scram before you get hurt."

"You show me how."

She was gnashing the gears and racing the motor. Nicky leaped at me.

"I'll show you h—"

His words climbed all over each other as my right fist hit his teeth. They chattered in his mouth as he went sprawling against a tree.

I tapped my knuckles lightly as I watched him rise to his feet. As he got up he saw the lights of the convertible get swallowed up in the night. He came forward slowly and peered into my face. He wanted to look at me. He wanted to remember me, good.

So I hit him again. This time he stayed down against the tree. I got back into my car, made a U-turn and headed back for town. I had just earned my first fifty bucks.

CHAPTER TWO

Stoolie with An Angle

JERRY ROLAN was waiting for me in my office when I got there the next day. She was upset and nervous. Those nice brown eyes were worried and looked like cocoa spilt over a white tablecloth. She came right to the point.

"Where is she?"

I said, "If you mean Linda Mae, I've made fifty bucks." I told her what happened the night previous.

"You're a fine bodyguard. So pleased with your fists that you failed to follow

Linda." She straightened up. "Linda is missing, Mr. Rock."

I chewed on that. "I assume then, Linda hasn't been home so far."

"You assume right."

I patted her shoulders, fatherly. It was a nice gesture. I liked patting her shoulders, fatherly or not. I said, "Look, she was upset. Maybe she holed up in a hotel. She was kinda soused. Take it easy and let me work it out. Okay?"

She nodded okay, but she didn't seem too pleased with me when she left.

A few minutes later the room filled up again. There were two pushed-in faces; one stayed by the door, the other slumped against one of my two file cases. The third member was Buck Bennington. He was medium height, dark and dapper, with shiny black hair graying at the temples.

As he sat down in the visitor's chair, his five-hundred-dollar green suit glistened like a new paint job and diamond cuff links winked at me from French linen cuffs. He had the percentage take on his wheels fixed just right—for Buck Bennington.

Nobody said anything. I fumbled with the travel folder. It seemed to lose color.

Finally: "Rock, as a cop you were too damn nosy. As a shamus, you're falling into the same rut."

I said, "I did something wrong?"

He glanced at his newly manicured fingernails. He spoke without looking up. His words came softly, blanketed with a cold, raw inference. "You killed my man, Nicky Costino."

The room seemed to close in on me, inch by inch. The two hoods swayed a little my way. Buck leaned back, looking at his fingers, turning them over and over in the light. The cuff links threw bright sparklets against the ceiling.

Bennington again, "You're a well-built joe, Rock, with big fists. You'd kinda look silly in a wheel chair—or the hot seat. I can get both for you."

I was supposed to think that over. I did. I didn't like the taste of it.

His eyes hooded. "Listen, shamus," he continued, forgetting his fingernails and looking at me for a change. "The cops got you three ways. One—you had a fight with Nicky at the Rest-In Motel. Two—someone in the cabins saw the fight and

got your license number. Three—the beach patrol found Nicky's body in a ditch with a .45 through his noggin." He shifted in his chair.

"Now, that's what the cops want to see you about. I want to know—" his eyes were slits now as muscles bunched about his lean jaw—"where's the blonde, Linda Mae?"

I rocked back in my chair, hinged my knees as I placed my insteps against the edge of my desk. I said, "I wouldn't know, Buck. She took off during the fight."

Buck sneered. "What are you, a guardian angel?"

"I just happened to be there. Damsel in distress."

He had an insulting laugh. "Quit kibitzing, Rock. Where's Linda?"

I gave him the same answer. He didn't like that answer. He moved his head a fraction. A signal. The two hoods came forward, at me. The old work-em-over deal. I kept my legs hinged, leaned back, then sprung my legs, sending the desk tumbling at the hoods, catching them halfway. I was on my feet, pushed the surprised Buck from his chair. He went sprawling on the dirty floor with his nice new suit. I was through the door and out.

I knew that I had to find Linda Mae and quickly. One—to satisfy the cops that I had no reason to bump off Nicky. Two—to satisfy Buck that I wasn't jumping any of his female claims. I had to sort of satisfy myself too.

Which reminded me of Jerry Rolan. I took out her check, noticed her name, address and phone number on the upper-left hand corner of the check, so went to a drug store and dialed her number. Nobody home. Then the name, William Carlton Shane, came to me. An uncle. I decided to pay him a call.

I LOCATED William Shane at the American-Security Bank. He was tall and lithe and had a fine face. A face that was tanned by the sun and athletic endeavor. A kind of face that goes with a pipe.

He was smoking a pipe, a large bowl, metallic-stemmed affair that pushed smoke like a steam engine. He would look good with a highball in his hand and a row of

brightly bound books as a background.

His eyes were gray and misty. His hair was getting scarce. A small tricky gray mustache spread thinly above his upper lip, high enough to escape soup. Strictly the lawn-and-terrace type.

We found ourselves in his private office. I sat down. He went behind his desk, let the Venetian blinds down, then took a seat and folded his arms.

He took his pipe from his mouth, leaned back and cast a heavy eye on me. "Now, just what does my niece have in mind that calls for your services, Mr. Rock?"

"Linda Mae has disappeared."

His two eyebrows came together and clashed at the bridge. "Linda Mae disappeared? Come now, what makes Jerry so sure? Linda has gone away from home before. Linda is a very attractive young lady and likes excitement. Just what is your duty, Mr. Rock? To find Linda Mae?"

I threw in a high, fast one. "To keep her from Buck Bennington."

The pipe puffed bluish streams of smoke and his hand came up and massaged the stem. One eyebrow lifted slightly. In that instant, Mr. Shane, had covered my whole body in appraisal.

He said, "I see. That's a big job."

"Yeah—especially when I got a murder rap to beat to boot."

His eyes opened. "You killed a man?"

"No, Mr. Shane, I didn't. But I had a fight with him, and he was with Linda Mae just before she disappeared. Why should he get knocked off? One of Buck Bennington's men?"

Shane tapped his pipe ashes into a copper receptacle. He studied the inside of the bowl.

"Rock, I do not understand this questioning at all. Your questions are all ambiguous. When men are murdered, I believe it is a matter for the proper authorities."

"You don't happen to know where Linda might be?" I slipped in.

He paid little attention to me. He watched his pipe again as he began to stuff tobacco into the bowl. When he looked up, his face was mobile.

"And if I did, Rock?"

"You wouldn't tell me."

"Right. If as you say, Linda was with

this man that was later killed, even if I did know where she was, I certainly wouldn't expose her to the questioning of the police. Would I?"

I got up. "That covers the bill. Thanks for your time."

He nodded slightly.

I turned at the door. He glanced up. I said, "You wouldn't want to pay Buck Bennington that fifty grand Linda owes, would you?"

His lips pressed together, then sagged, especially the lower one. His eyes misted and his pipe drooled smoke.

I closed the door softly. One doesn't bang things in a bank. One pays homage to the deity, silence. I tiptoed out.

As I gulped a hamburger in a three-stool emporium near the bank's generous parking lot, this Shane kept bobbing up and down in my mind like a stubborn cork. Somehow he didn't fit into the picture. Then again, he was the type of guy that comes stalking onto the scene, gun in hand and blows the house to bits. I guess I was seeing too many movies. They go in for that character with the grayish head, the sophisticated mien and the smoke-curling rod. They called it consolidated drama. I had another word for it.

I finished eating, walked over to the parking lot, handed the attendant my check and went for the car myself. I have respect for my car's fenders. In the front seat leisurely sat a man smoking a small cigar.

I didn't know him from Adam. I said, "Dust, buddy. Get moving. Sleep some other place."

He handed me a blank face with pimples. He smiled. It was a stupid smile, but he probably thought it looked real smart.

He didn't show a gun. His hands were clean and empty. He was about thirty-five or thereabouts with nothing to recommend him except a loud tie and a collar that needed cleaning. His face was pasty, his eyes were dull and his lips were small, tight and sullen.

I frowned. "You heard me."

He didn't scare easily. He handed me that face again and threw in a tiny voice for size. "I got information," he muttered.

"What's the pitch?"

"Linda Mae Rolan."

I felt myself tie up inside like a sow-bug, but all I said was:

"What about it?"

"You're lookin' for her, ain't ya?"

"Who told you that?"

"A bird. A little bird."

My lips curled. "Tell your little bird to feather its nest somewhere else."

He became leechy. "Five C does it. It's worth it."

I grabbed his wrist and squeezed it. "You're new in town. You carry a lot. Where is she?" I tightened the wrist grip by pressing my fingers into his veins so the blood circulation stopped.

He paled. "Five C," he stammered. "Force ain't gettin' you nowheres."

"She alive?"

He tried to break the grip. He needed stronger parents for that. "Sure, sure." He went squeamish. "Why shouldn't she be?"

I released the grip and threw him out of the car. "Don't play around, cheesehead," I snapped. "Why did you put the finger on me?"

He rubbed his wrist. He didn't care for my kind of treatment. He leered at me. It wasn't good at all. It didn't even muss my hair.

"Go climb a thumb," he rasped, turned and dashed between the other parked cars and disappeared. He was screwy, but dangerous. I was left holding nothing more than a handful of perspiration. But as I looked at my hand long enough, I got an idea.

CHAPTER THREE

Stabbed in the Back

THE check said that Jerry Rolan lived at the Chateau Bonita out on Westline Boulevard. I headed that way. Out toward the ocean on Westline, newly constructed apartment buildings made their garish appearances. The Chateau Bonita was one of the larger variety.

I parked and walked the half-circle driveway to the entrance. The lobby of the Bonita was as decorative as a theatre palace, with plush carpets and statues of diving cherubs and unconcerned Grecians draped with leaves and lyres.

I followed the springy carpet to a gilded bird cage for an elevator. A snappy peroxide blonde, with too much mascara and in a creased blue uniform with gold epaulets, played peek-a-boo with me from behind the opened doors.

I entered, got a whiff of drugstore perfume, and said, "Miss Rolan's apartment, please."

A push button named six was daintily pressed and we had a pleasant one-second zoom. The doors slid back on cushions. I was in a hallway, with the feeling that the management was run on tiptoes and sly nods.

The elevator doll pointed to the door on my left. I thanked her with the best smile I had in stock and rang a half-moon shaped bell.

The door opened. Jerry Rolan, all wrapped up in an eye-ful of a dressing gown, took one look and her eyes narrowed. Her lips turned down at the ends. She was annoyed.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped. "Our transactions will be held at your office, Mr. Rock."

"May I come in?"

She hesitated, then opened the door wider. I followed her into a room that was large and airy and feminine. Rich and cool and silky, a white curlicue rug swept to the walls while blue-green walls carried the subdued tones up to the cream-colored ceiling. The whole room was doaded with lace trimmings, French period furniture, delicate tables and frilly lamps. Nice setup.

Jerry turned. "Yes, Mr. Rock?" There was more than a hint of impatience in her tone.

"Look, Jerry, you want me to help or play ice-box freeze with you."

She relaxed a little, not much. "You might as well know I'm not too pleased with your help so far."

"Neither am I. I ran into a murder rap in the bargain, and your uncle isn't very cooperative."

She stiffened. "You had no right to see uncle. I told you it was just between you and me."

I didn't remember that statement but I let it pass. I said dryly, "Anyway, I've heard from Linda Mae."

I started for the door, when there was

a sudden release of rustled energy. Her body was already blocking the door, her eyes raised in rapt attention. She started to climb all over my lapels with her fingernails.

"What did you hear from her?" she cried. "Tell me!"

Her lips were tempting and quivering. It was too good a chance to pass up. So I put my hand gently to her chin, lifted it and kissed her. She didn't resist, but it was like kissing a wet towel.

She whispered, "What have you heard? From who?"

I pinched her chin. "You'd like to know. You'd like to know a lot of things, honey. So would I." I started for the door, moving her aside as I made the movement.

But she held. "Just what is your game, Jimmy Rock?"

"A little fair play. Maybe a straight answer."

"You wouldn't know a straight answer if it hit you in the face."

I grinned. "Like a murder rap for Nicky Costino, a Buck Bennington rat. I'm not only working for you, Miss Jerry, I'm finding Linda Mae for my own protection."

She dropped her hands to her sides. She got smart, looked me over coolly and impersonally, trying to judge what part to cut out first. Then I guess she figured she had the answer.

"Quite a tricky guy, you," she decided. "You know nothing about Linda Mae. Not a thing!"

I sighed. "You're so right, honey. I don't know a thing. I just know she's safe and sending out feelers for around five C's."

I tapped her chin a few gentle reminders and left. When her door closed I waited and leaned against the door. I thought she was using a phone.

OUTSIDE, I drove my car out of sight and parked it on a side street, where I could watch the Bonita entrance without being seen. Something was bound to happen—if I was thinking right—and fifteen minutes later it did.

It came in the person of Jerry Rolan, dressed in street wear, and in a plenty damned hurry. She spoke to the doorman,

waited, looked around suspiciously, then got into a blue coupé when it was driven up for her. She nearly tore the fenders off in an effort to get going. I waited, then caught her rear license plate two signals down, headed oceanward.

She drove like a taxi on a short haul. She whirled through traffic, heading west, hitting about sixty. I laid behind, for on Westline Boulevard you can tail without making all the lights.

Out toward the ocean she began to push the floorboard, and I had a time keeping from getting a ticket. She hit First Street, then went down an incline—which takes one from the city road down to the beach highway—about a hundred-yard drop, and sped northward.

I figured to be in on some enlightening facts if I didn't lose her, but luck was against me. I got stopped by a red light, placed by a city father who must have run the gas concession, and two truck and trailer combinations in front of me had trouble starting.

By the time I swerved around them and cleared, the blue coupé was out of sight. But the road was continuous all the way with no intersections, so I hoped with a little speed I'd catch up.

After a few miles of racing and straining my eyes for the coupé, I quit. She had been swallowed up as surely as if she had turned left into the ocean.

Whittling my speed down to a slow gallop, I turned on the car radio, got boom-boom music, and tried to think. Even a put-put lifted its nose and passed me by.

I thought of a lot of things, and the thoughts were not comforting. I found myself in the middle of a double-cross game—like a ball player caught between the bases; the harder you try to make it, the easier you get tagged.

A slight fog began to roll in and mist the windshield. I pushed the wiper button and got half circles. It was five-twenty and headlights were blooming, with additional fog lights clutching at the ground like famished reapers. I kept going north.

Suddenly I swerved off the road and coasted to a stop near a hot-dog stand. The blue coupé! It was parked twenty yards behind me, on the other side of the street in front of a beach house. I backed up. I noticed its radiator was still steam-

ing from the rough ride she had given it.

Then I pulled to the hot-dog stand and parked around the back in a gravel space. I got out, crossed the road and made my way back to the blue coupé.

The fog was heavier. It was coming in heavy curtains of vapor, slapping hard against your face and leaving your nose cold and wet. It was still high, but there was enough of it to cover my actions from the beach house.

The beach house was a two-level affair, as all of them are in this section. The garage set on the road level, with the cottage proper on the second level. Steps wound around the garage and the house and ended down by the ocean front.

I poked my head into the coupé and read the registration slip. It belonged to Jerry Rolan. That wasn't news. Then I went into the garage. The door was open and a convertible was inside. It was dark and so I lighted a match and looked at the slip. Things were picking up. The registration slip was made out to Linda Mae Rolan.

A shuffle of feet came from the cottage. I left the garage and hid behind a parked car some yards away. A man came up and appeared by the garage. He glanced around. He had a pipe in his mouth and I could see small sparks fly into the fog. He seemed cautious.

It was William Carlton Shane!

When he retreated back into the cottage I hit across the street, got into my car, rolled it around and came back. I parked it facing in the same direction as the blue coupé—in case there was more tailing to do. The fog was blanket enough now.

Seconds passed disguised as hours.

THEN blurred figures came from the cottage and I heard the coupé doors open. They were making a getaway. Hearing their engine turn over, I hunched down to release my emergency brake. That action saved my life! For in that split second a shadow had filled the right front window of my car and three sharp orange flashes roared through the glass and splintered against the window above me.

I slumped down to the floorboard and stayed put. A cordite smell loaded the car. The shadow disappeared and I stretched an arm out, opened the glove

compartment and grabbed my .38 special.

I opened the car door by the driver's seat and crawled out, hitting the street on hands and knees. I took a deep breath. The fog was thick now and the cars coming down the road were creeping and feeling their way at about two miles an hour. The faded headlights and amber fogs cut into the night's pitch for about a yard or so.

On all fours, I went around the back of the car, traversed the road bank and was by the garage. It was pea soup all the way. So William Shane liked to shoot guns off in the fog, did he? I placed the gun in my pocket and felt for the garage.

I fingered along it and came to the end of the convertible. It was still resting. A dark figure came around from the other side of the rear fender and we bumped each other.

It was a shadow moving quickly, one arm already in his pocket. I didn't wait to copy his movement. I lunged with a football block, caught him on the tilt and down we bounced to the cold, damp ground.

Fists swiped the air. I twisted and slammed his face with the heel of my palm. He squeaked. His hand came up and his fingers clawed my neck. It felt seared with hot irons. I grabbed his head, snapped it and turned his face into the ground and rubbed it with a washboard treatment.

I brought my knee up, but he beat me to it. He wiggled his head clear, swung his hip against my shoulder as I tried to rise with him, and dropped me.

He was small and wiry and hopped-up like a doped horse. He was muttering curses in spasmodic breaths. He reached his feet. I clamped onto his ankle, turned it, spun him around completely and down he came again.

I had to keep in back of him. He was close to his gun. I was lying on mine. Then, his arm flashed in and out; his arm raised. He got up quickly, stepped back and turned to face me—to gain precious distance—to finish what he had started back in my car.

That brought me to my knees. I moved in fast, closed up that gap, hit him again with a power dive, as I had reached my feet. He screamed. He lost his balance, bounced against the corner of the garage

and stumbled down the stairs, backwards. I heard the sound of a human body, like a loaded beer barrel, bump down the wooden steps.

I lay quietly in the sand and gravel. My cheeks were on fire and my lips twinged. My second breath came. I took my .38 and crept slowly, wary, taking no chances.

He was laying for me. I had to come on him fast. The odds were even. It is hard for a man to have position in a fog. I banked on that.

Crouching low, I continued toward the cottage. I was at the end of the garage, feeling the railing with one hand, fanning the thick air with my gun with the other.

Then . . . a whine; a short trembling vibration gulped up almost immediately by the heavy deafness of the fog. A door hinge rubbed the air the wrong way. A door shut against the damp wood that cushioned the noise. There were footsteps, heels hitting the board steps—going away toward the beach, and not up to me.

My breath poured into the dampness like hot lead into a bottomless vat. Whose steps were they? Had my man taken off or was he still waiting . . . waiting for my move . . . wondering like I was what would come out of the night? The steps stopped. They had reached the soft sand.

Silence.

A wet, cold, unnatural silence that sticks and cloys with the all-devouring fog and could mean anything. I continued to go down.

I brushed against a bough-arch that acted as the cottage entrance. I waited against the doorframe. It was my breath I was hearing. I pushed the door slightly and it gave and creaked. I cursed under my breath. I stepped back, but no streaks of fire came from within to answer my challenge.

For the first time I heard the defiant roar of the ocean waves pounding upon the sands; groveling up to the tide mark, then receding under protest. It probably had been pitching that way for hours but I just heard it.

The cottage was dark. I slipped inside and tripped. I landed on my shoulders and sprawled. I rolled quickly into a jackknife position and held my breath. My fingers tightened around the gun butt. I was waiting the next move.

None came.

I waited and waited. Sweat came through my clothes, gobbled up my arm-pits and soaked my collar. Then I realized the truth. I hadn't been tripped! I had fallen over a body—a dead body—probably William Shane's.

I got to my feet by easy stages, reached for a match and struck it. I was bending over a body. A doubled-up, knee-crooked body that had a gravel-smearred face, a soft lip, two patches of brown dirt for eyes, and pimples. His tongue was out and his hands clenched, nails digging into the flooring.

It was my information boy, my potential killer. A stiletto-shaped knife handle stuck out from his back like a sign post in a mound of discarded debris. He had been stabbed from behind—four times!

Whatever he knew about Linda Mae and other points of interest he was trying to sell to Satan now. And I doubted if the devil would go five C's for it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bloody Squeeze Play

A BEAM of light splashed the spot, looping me in the middle. I brought up my gun, released the safety catch, but wasn't too hopeful.

It was a nice tableau.

A harsh voice broke through. "Don't move, shamus. You're covered. Drop the rod."

I dropped the gun and stood still. The flashlight played around my face, then circled the prone figure.

Another voice whistled. "Nice job. Where're the lights?"

A different flashlight climbed the walls, located the switch. The room took on light. Two hoods, Bennington's boys, stood gaping at me with eyes trying to get used to the light. Both had guns drawn and were wobbling them.

Then Buck Bennington came in, all dressed up in a midnight-blue suit, dapper as ever. He bent down and examined the knife with greedy eyes. Then those eyes turned and saw my gun on the floor. He looked up and tried a grin. He wasn't prepared to laugh.

"What a gift," he commented. "Gun,

knife—everything. Where's the pickaxe?"

He wasn't funny. I said, "All right if I sit down? I'm pooped."

Bennington looked me over. It didn't take a lie-detector to figure me out. He said, "Take a chair over there. Don't play smart."

I thanked him and I wasn't feeling very smart. I swept the room in one glance. The body was by the door. The walls were wooden and bare of decoration, except the wall facing me. It had a fireplace with a burnt log, still smouldering, with rows of jacket-covered books running the entire length on either side.

There was a full-sized window facing the ocean with a long, old-fashioned library table set in front of it, holding with a phone and a small statue of a springing leopard. A few chairs, a coffee table made of plank wood and a small radio were in the corner. Nothing else of interest, although the chandelier was an old cart wheel which hung from the rafters with drooping, leaf-shaped metal covers for the bulbs.

A door next to the window led out to what I suspected was a kitchen and possible exit down to the beach. I figured the murderer took off via that method. That man had to be William Shane; and I was doing a lot of figuring.

I glanced up, to find Bennington eyeing me with much speculation. He said, "You're getting messed up more and more, Rock. You're beginning to interest me. What's this bum's name?"

I said that I didn't know. He asked me again, throwing in a growl. He got the same answer. He straightened up.

"Seems to me you don't know much for a shamus that keeps dead men company."

I said, "Let me ask you a question, Buck. How come you're out here?"

"Tailing you, shamus. I knew you had something hot. Where's Linda Mae?"

"She was here, Buck, but she left before the shooting. Listen, Buck, this joe took about three pot shots at me in the fog out there and we had a squabble up on the road. I bounced him down to the cottage, and when I followed up I tripped over his body. That's all."

Buck was by the fireplace leaning against the ledge. He showed me some teeth with a smile wound around them.

He said, "I'm supposed to swallow that?"

I said I didn't care whether he swallowed it or choked on it. Before Buck and I had a chance to glare at each other, another hood came in with a .45 and handed it to Buck, saying, "I found this revolver in the grass, boss."

"There should be three fresh shells out," I said. "He took three at me."

Buck looked at the gun, massaged his chin. "There are," he admitted.

"And if you want to know who knocked off Nicky Costino, Buck, have the cops check that .45 with the bullet in the skull of Nicky."

Buck's eyes closed, then gradually opened as he pressed his lips. He decided, "Maybe you and me better have a talk, before we get some law on this." He waved his hoods out. "Get upstairs and see we ain't disturbed." They left. Buck took out a gun and laid it on the floor in front of his feet. We were starting off even.

"Okay, Shamus. Give."

I stretched my feet and got comfortable. "I see it this way, Buck. That bullet in Nicky's skull was meant for you. This joe here's a hired killer. Been brought in from out of town. So he mistakes Nicky for you. You're both dark, same size, black hair. Only Nicky makes the mistake of trying to see Linda when you weren't around."

Buck's face hardened. "That means whoever hired the killer wanted me out of the way because of Linda Mae."

"You're getting smarter by the minute."

"Where do you fit into the picture?"

"Frame. I was to take the killer rap, in case there was any rap to take. Only this killer makes a mistake and gets Nicky instead. And you think I did the dirty work. So Linda Mae disappears and you and I get into a fight maybe and maybe we knock each other off. Perfect little plan."

I stopped. My ears were accustomed to the ocean roll and the back door swinging on its cushioned air hinge. I thought I heard it again.

Buck said. "And maybe you got ideas who this guy is?"

"Maybe I have."

"Give."

A voice interrupted from the library table. "That won't be necessary, gentlemen." The voice had gloves on and an automatic in his right hand. The bluish steel on the barrel was in perfect harmony with the gray hair. Shane didn't have a hunting jacket on but his lapels had been cut by a dramatist.

Buck lifted his head slowly. I lifted an eyebrow. That was all I dared lift. Any move on my part would have been disastrous. I wasn't in the mood, anyway.

"Suppose we all sit down," Shane said with a friendly smile, "and listen to Mr. Rock's great deductions." Then he came forward, picked up my gun and Buck's and placed them by his side. He was loaded. He was a small-sized revolution all wrapped up in a gray tweed suit.

He was confident, although he kept his eyes away from the dead body with the four stiletto pokes. He hooked his eyes on me. They were dull eyes with no feeling, no sense of refraction—just circles—perfect strangers to the slow smile settling on his lips.

Buck edged in. "Don't be a heel, Bill.

FIRST AID

COLD DISCOMFORTS

HEADACHES

ACID INDIGESTION

MUSCULAR PAINS

Alka-Seltzer

ALL DRUG STORES
U.S. AND CANADA

Now you're messing this whole deal up."

Shane laid a sorrowful look upon Buck Bennington.

"You mean you've already messed it up. I told you to take it easy with Linda Mae. Now you've got Jerry suspicious and she hired this shamus."

Buck said, "So we get rid of the shamus."

I took a deep breath. If it was to be my last one, I might as well make it a good one. A draft hit my head but it was just my blood changing from warm to cold. Sweat lay like icicles on my face.

Words came out of my mouth. It was beyond me and I was amazed at their strength and calmness.

"You boys are cute. But haven't you forgotten one thing? Who hired this poor guy on the floor to kill who?"

Buck's eyes hooded as they turned slowly at Shane. Shane held his gun a little tighter. I was getting some action. It was beginning to build up, a little.

I kept talking. I had the ball, I was going to try and score with it. I said, "When Jerry hired me she told me Linda Mae owed Buck around fifty grand and that her uncle, that's you Shane, said not to pay the debt, but try other methods. I suspected uncle as being either in cahoots with Buck or trying to get rid of Buck to get himself in the clear. Maybe the uncle needed money to cover his bank debts. Could be anything.

"So I have a talk with you, Shane, and I worry you enough to make you sic this hired killer on me. Only, he double-crossed you when he tried to hit me for five C's for information. You found this out when I told Jerry about Linda Mae sending out feelers for five C. Jerry took it the wrong way. She thought Linda Mae was in danger, so she phoned you—Uncle—the protector. You scam down to the beach and tell this killer to meet you there, alone."

"But I followed Jerry down to the beach and played right into your hands," I continued. "Two birds with the same stone. The killer and I get it, like you intended for Buck to get his."

Buck jumped to his feet, started for Shane. But Shane quickly pushed his gun at Buck and stopped his advance.

"You dirty welcher," Buck snarled.

"You hand me the girl to cover your own losses, and then want to cover me up—"

Shane calmly reached down and picked up my gun in his right hand and Buck's in his left. I knew that trick. It had whiskeys. His gun went back into his pocket.

Shane chuckled. His gray eyes were meaningless. They weren't eyes at all, but specks of gray. "Your gun, Rock. Appreciate the finesse?"

I knew what he was going to do. It was an old gag, but it was a tricky one. You had to remember things . . . about guns.

Buck stood rooted to the spot.

And just like that, he fired my gun into Buck. Buck made frenzied stabs at his stomach, doubled up and rolled down and over. My turn next, as he shifted Buck's gun into his right hand and threw my gun on the floor. The old shoot-each-other gag.

The shot brought footsteps from outside. His finger closed around that trigger. I had my only chance. I took it. A hundred-to-one odds.

I went for Shane.

There was a click. No more. We crashed down and over Buck's body. I squirmed and twisted and tore at his arm; caught the gun and flung it away.

Now the odds were even.

Shane fought and bit and kicked. I worked with all three methods. He wasn't strong, but he was trapped. His energy came in spasms of fear.

I tried to get up and pick him with me. He grabbed my ankles and hugged them. I snatched at that lovely gray hair and pulled up. His hold broke immediately. He rolled over to reach for his pocketed gun.

A sharp crack stopped him. His eyes widened, then glassed as he sputtered and lay still. I turned to see a smoking barrel held in one of Bennington's boys hand.

I explained to them what happened. They weren't too smart, but they helped clean up whatever had to be cleaned up for the authorities' sake. Then I looked at Buck Bennington and thanked him quietly for saving my life.

He had left the safety catch on his gun.

And I thanked Shane, too, for forgetting about it in his hurry to kill me. . . .

The papers the next day packaged it

very successfully as a front-page headline:

PROMINENT BANKER TRAPPED
BETWEEN GUNMEN BULLETS!

It sounded respectable and that's all that really matters. And I was facing Jerry once again in her apartment. She was over by the drapes; sweeping satin drapes that bowed over the windows, then bunched up at the ends, with an artistic gesture, then fell to the floor with yards to spare.

Jerry stared at me quietly, as empty as death itself. Her lips trembled and her fingernails were digging ridges into her arms. Brown was splashed all over the pupils. A muddy brown. It didn't fade well with her navy blue moiré suit, the drained face and the white drapes. Airplane luggage was stacked by the door, ready for travel.

She said bravely, "So that's the way it was?"

"That's the way it was, Jerry. I think if you'll take time to check up, you'll find uncle was clipping the estate for plenty. And as far as Buck Bennington's concerned—" I reached into my pocket and pulled out her check written to me for five thousand—"your uncle got rid of him, not me."

I handed the check to her. She gazed at it, then waved it. "It's yours. I'm not an Indian giver."

I came toward her, patted her shoulders again. "Listen, honey, just make out a check for fifty bucks. I earned that. What followed was too messy for me to take money. I don't want to feel that I was bought off. Get it?"

She did. She seemed to melt into the drapes. But she said: "What do you mean—bought off?"

I grinned. "Legally, honey, you're free as a bird. The cops are satisfied. But all I want to know, to clear my own conscience is—was it self defense?"

She faced me. Her features were sharp and drawn fine; her lips moved in half-hearted attempts to be brave. A soft, "Yes," came through.

I felt better. I said: "I figured Shane all the way on the murder-go-round, until he came back to the cottage. That busted that balloon, but made everything else

fit as far as the dead imported killer was concerned. Those four frantic stabs in his back, when one would have finished him, bothered me. I couldn't place Shane in that. Nor could I figure Shane coming back after he had just killed a man. What would he come back for?"

The room seemed to just hang heavy. Jerry was breathing a little fast, breathing hard under her suit. Her arms hung limply to her sides and her shoulders hunched. There wasn't much fight left in her as she stood, huddled forlornly back against the satin drapes.

I continued, "When a man stabs, he does so with a straight powerful stroke. He knows he has the strength. When a woman, whether in fright or not, stabs, she does so in quick hurried stabs, more than one strike.

"Why? I guess she instinctively realizes a physical weakness and must strike more than once to accomplish. So you see, Jerry, those four strikes in the back kept bothering me, kept me thinking of a woman in the case—you or Linda Mae and I figured would be waiting Linda Mae in the car."

Jerry said, "When you called on uncle, he became upset and called me. You worried him. Uncle, knowing about the murder at Ocean Cove, took Linda Mae away from unnecessary questioning. Then when you told me about Linda Mae sending out feelers, I became frantic.

"I phoned uncle. It was then he told me he knew the killer of this Nicky Costino, and that I was to get out to the cottage and pick up Linda Mae and get her away from the beach—that she was in danger."

Jerry stopped, took another breath, then continued, "At the cottage it was foggy and I was the last to leave. Uncle had taken Linda Mae up the steps and I was about to follow when I heard shots. I thought the killer had shot uncle. Then I heard a scuffle and ran back into the cottage.

"I was very frightened and helpless. I saw a blurred figure coming for the cottage . . . stumbling, breathing hard, cursing. I knew it wasn't uncle . . . it was the killer.

"I backed up against the fireplace. My

(Please continue on page 97)

WHY STOOLIES GET STIFF

• *Getting in with the mob was tough enough—
without Moppy talking Willie into mayhem.* •



"Hey, you!" yelled Moppy.
"What the hell you doin'?"

By **BURT
STYLER**

WILLIE was standing under the street light in front of Meyerson's candy store over on Second Avenue about 5:30 Tuesday night, when they approached him about the job.

The way the light fell on his face and his army overcoat and made shadows on him, he looked worse than he usually did. He was actually only thirty-one, but nobody believed it. Maybe because all his front teeth were missing; from fights, and

sometimes they just rotted and got so loose they fell out.

He had his hands shoved deep into the overcoat pockets, the way he always did, and there was a big torn scarf around his neck. He had just decided to go in for a coke and was heading into Meyerson's when they stopped him.

When he turned around and saw them, he smiled his big toothless grin. "Hia, fellas. Hia, Barney. You got something to talk to me about?"

Barney, who was the heavier of the two men, said, "Yeah, Willie. Let's walk and talk."

Barney's friend, who Willie didn't know, dropped in behind Willie and Barney as they turned the corner on Second Avenue and started down Twelfth Street. Barney didn't say anything for a time, walking easily along and not being in a hurry. Willie was smart enough not to ask questions.

Finally Barney said without looking at Willie, staring straight ahead at a car that narrowly missed hitting a delivery truck, "You feel like driving tonight?"

I'm back with the guys, Willie thought. They're using me again. Fifty bucks. Fifty bucks for an hour's work. No more soup and potatoes. He'd call up Estelle and they'd go uptown. And he'd send his mother five. It had been how long? A month and a half since he'd had a job. I'll be good and they'll know they can trust me and they'll use me again. Real money again.

"Sure, I feel like it, Barney. I sure do."

Barney's friend walked a little faster now until he was even with Barney and Willie. He said to Barney, hooking a finger at Willie, "Tell him where the garage is."

"Oh, yeah," said Barney. "The car'll be at Neil's place. You know where it is."

"I know," said Willie.

Barney's friend was staring at Willie now, sizing up the scarf and the army overcoat. Willie didn't like it and tried to stare back, but the other man's glare was too harsh. Willie coughed, sucked his lip and looked in front of him. He was not liking the guy.

He had never seen him around and his voice wasn't from the East. He had a hard "r" and pronounced his "a's" like

"eh's." It was a Western accent. Chicago. He was from Chicago. Willie looked back at him now and let his eyes run over the trench coat which was open in the front and showed a brown sharkskin suit.

A sharpie from Chicago, thought Willie. A tough baby, he thinks.

The tough baby turned to Barney and said, "You trust this guy?"

"I trust him," said Barney.

"On a job like this? With Joe!"

"Shut your mouth!" yelled Barney. He wheeled on the tough baby. "Why'n'tcha call up the papers an' get it printed?"

"Mistake . . . mistake," said the Chicagoan. He smiled and they walked on without speaking.

After they went two blocks, Barney turned to Willie and said, "I'll call you at 10:30 at Meyerson's."

"Okay, Barney."

The two men walked off, leaving Willie standing there.

As they had walked that last two blocks, Willie's mind had been jumping from one face to another. The tough baby had let it slip that tonight's job would involve Joe somebody. Barney had shut him up before he got the last name out. Willie was trying to think of which Joe.

Joe Reilly? No, he was doing thirty days for drunk driving.

Joe Escrovitch? Couldn't be. He was still laying low from the vice squad.

Joe Blake? Never. He was dumb. They wouldn't use him for any job.

Joe Nelson? That's a laugh. Nelson was working with Rocky Zito now and if they caught him, they'd kill him.

Joe Madden?

Joe Madden!

Back from Chicago?

It figured. This bird with the sharkskin suit, Chicago. It was Joe Madden, of all people.

Willie was kind of proud of himself for figuring out it was Joe Madden. And he was kind of proud that they had asked him to drive for Joe. They didn't use just anybody when Joe was doing a job.

He walked back to Meyerson's and had his coke.

"What's new, Willie?" asked Liz, as he sipped his drink with his elbows on the counter. "I heard you had the grippe."

"It was jus' a cold," said Willie and he

dropped his nickel and walked out fast.

AS HE started down the avenue toward his room, he felt excited and awake and kind of like he was going on a mission the way they did in the air corps. He had never been in the army, but the overcoat gave him the feeling he had seen service and he sometimes told the little kids that were too young to argue all about life in the front lines.

He was wondering where he would have to drive Joe tonight, and he found himself wishing he had a watch and then being glad he didn't have one because he would be looking at it every minute from now till 10:30.

He wanted to kill the five hours he had on his hands. He went over to the movies and paid sixty-five cents—he could spare it now—to see a double-feature. One of the pictures was about a newspaperman and a rich man's daughter. When he saw it, he wished he was a newspaperman and while he was watching the action, he mouthed little words of encouragement to the hero, so he would get the girl okay. He did get her and Willie felt all right at the end.

He got out about 8:30 but he wasn't hungry, so he forgot about going over to Casey's for dinner. He just sort of walked along and wished time would pass faster.

"Hey, Willie! Wait up!"

Willie turned around slowly.

"Din'tcha hear me callin' ya?" Moppy Haines was panting when he reached Willie. "Don'tcha stop when a guy calls ya?"

Willie looked at Moppy carefully. "I didn't hear ya."

"Guess what, Willie? I jus' won sixty-three bucks. Sixty-three. We was playing table stakes over at Manny's. I ain't won in a year."

Willie eyed Moppy suspiciously. They had been friends. They had roomed together two years ago and they got along fine till Moppy took his girl. Even though Moppy had said honest, he didn't really want her if that's the way Willie felt, Willie had moved out. And then he heard that Moppy was working for Rocky Zito.

They hadn't been real buddies in over a year. They said hello, but that's all. Willie had felt all the time that Moppy was sorry

about what happened. But Willie felt sorry for himself, too. He wanted to be friends, but he wouldn't let himself. Especially when he heard Moppy was with Rocky Zito. In fact, he shouldn't even be talking to him now.

"So ya won sixty-three bucks," said Willie.

"Look," said Moppy. "I wanta talk to ya."

"It ain't what you want all the time," said Willie, meaning the remark two ways. Moppy got it.

"Have a beer with me."

"I gotta meet a guy."

"You can have one beer."

"I never have one beer."

"So have two beers."

"I gotta meet a guy."

"Willie!" Moppy was looking him straight in the eye and Willie felt ashamed. He loved Moppy and he hated himself for it. "Willie," repeated Moppy. "I want to be your friend."

"You ain't my enemy."

"I don' mean like that. You know, like when we had the place."

"One beer."

Moppy smiled and Willie couldn't help smiling back and they went off with Moppy's arm around Willie to Casey's for the beer.

On the sixth beer, Moppy was telling Willie that he had a girl that would be just right for him. "This dame is built!" said Moppy. From his description, Willie was wishing he would meet her already for Pete's sake.

They sat in the back at one of the tables because Moppy wanted to do it right and wouldn't have Willie standing over the bar. No sir, when he got a streak, his best friend had to get some of it.

On the ninth beer, Moppy was slapping Willie on the back and telling him about what happened the time the landlady tried to lock him out and how he got in through the girl's apartment next door and how he almost fell off the fire escape when he tried it again the next night.

On the twelfth beer, Willie was saying, sure, why shouldn't they have the apartment together and have it like it was in the old days. He would have some money soon, 'cause of course he wouldn't go in with Moppy unless he could pay for his

half. But he was going on a job and he could pay. Maybe even Friday he would move in.

It was a quarter to ten all of a sudden and Willie remembered he had to be someplace—Meyerson's. He told Moppy that he would be over at Casey's for breakfast around eleven tomorrow and they would talk some more.

"Good-by, friend," said Moppy.

"So long, Moppy," said Willie. He steadied himself against the bar as he made his way out.

Back at Meyerson's, Liz was feeding him more black coffee. "Get sober, already," she said. She felt like a big mother for the whole neighborhood.

"I'm sober," said Willie.

"Whatcha go an' get full of beer for?" asked Liz.

"I met a friend," said Willie.

"What friend?"

"Moppy."

"You kiddin'?"

"Whatayamean, kiddin'?"

"He works for Rocky."

"I don't believe it."

"If you're doin' business with Barney, you better believe it. Don't let him know you was out with Moppy."

"He's my friend."

"You'll find out, friend."

"How do you know he works for Rocky?"

"I know. Don't ask me how I know. Are you sober?"

"Yeah."

WILLIE started wondering. Then he started worrying. He was worrying because the only thing he could think about was Joe Madden and if he had said anything about it to Moppy. . . .

He tried to go over everything he and Moppy had talked about from the first beer on. He knew he was all right up to the time they had started talking about having the place together. That was when he began to get friendly and the whole being mad at each other was past.

Moppy had told him about Helen losing her shoe in the balcony of the movies. Then he had told Moppy about how he worked out a new system for figuring the horses and he had it worked out that Laughing Boy stood as good a chance as

Quick Diver. He bet on Quick Diver because he was 17 to 1 and, sure as hell, Quick Diver came in.

Then they had gone on to talk about how much Moppy was working these days. But Moppy didn't tell him what he was doing and Willie didn't ask, but Willie tried to make him talk by hinting that he was still with the same mob and he was working off and on.

Then he remembered he had told Moppy that he was working tonight. Dammit, if he didn't. What a monster-head!

One of Rocky Zito's boys!

Joe Madden. If he mentioned Joe Madden. . . . It came back to Willie that that's why they had to send Joe to Chicago. It wasn't only the cops. Rocky was after him.

And he told!

They'd kill him, sure. Kill him. He'd be dead. He wouldn't be nothing. Just dead. Maybe they'd shoot him but chances are they'd knife him or use a razor. The East River for him. He'd suffer a lot. He'd look down and see his own blood coming out of him and that would be the end right there; only he'd hang on a few hours, maybe all day, maybe even the cops would pick up his body before he died.

They'd make him sign papers that would get the rest of the boys and he'd have to sign because he'd be so doped up, he wouldn't know what he was doing. And then every time they mentioned his name in the neighborhood, everybody would spit and say that he should have been knocked off ten years ago.

Liz was wiping a soda glass and saying, "Where you goin'?"

"I'll be back at 10:30," said Willie. He walked out fast and pulled the scarf tighter around his neck.

The first place he ran to was Casey's.

"Yeah," said Casey. "Moppy run out of here a coupla minutes after you left." Willie didn't even say things like he usually did, but turned around and spun out. Casey scratched his bald spot and said to one of the customers, "I wonder what crawled up his hide."

Willie made it fast to the poolroom. If only, he thought, he hadn't gotten to any of the guys yet. If only he could cut him off. Willie wasn't running now, but it was

almost a run. He dashed up to Cap who was bent over the table ready to make his shot.

"Cap, was Moppy here?"

Cap stood up straight, sore because he had the shot lined up and now he didn't know whether he would make it. "Yeah—yeah!"

"Where is he?"

"I seen him go in the back."

Willie ran to the rear of the pool hall and opened the door to the back room. He looked inside. Empty. He came back to Cap who had missed the shot.

"Did he leave with anybody? Moppy, I mean."

"You come in here to bust up my game?"

"I gotta find Moppy," Willie said, already out the door.

Gotta find him, gotta find him, Willie kept saying to himself. I was his friend. I get drunk with him and I trust him and the little yella dog is doing this to me. He'll get me killed.

No, he won't. I won't let him. I'll find him. But where is he? Where does Moppy hang out?

Dolores's. Sometimes the guys got together at Dolores's.

He ran half a block down Second Avenue and up the four stone steps and rang the bell. He waited, thinking: *If he's in there with Rocky's guys, how am I going to get him away from them? Why don't she answer that bell?*

The door opened. Dolores was in the old kimona.

"Willie! For Pete's sake, whattaya want? I'm busy."

"Is Moppy in there?"

"Moppy don't come here no more. I got somebody waiting. You ought to know better'n to come over without calling."

"I gotta find Moppy."

"I ain't his mother." As Willie was hurrying down the street, she yelled: "An' tell that chiseler he still owes me four dollas!"

Where, where is he?

The apartment!

There was just a chance. He might've called up the guys and said he had something to tell them and they said wait for us in the apartment. He just might be in the apartment.

As Willie ran up the steps, two at a time, he was thinking about their apartment. All the laughs they used to have. How they used to stay up all night sometimes, him on his couch and Moppy three feet away on his couch and the two of them with millions of things that happened to them that night to talk about.

They really had a lot of fun. They'd try to get each other's girls, and tell each other the best angle because the babes really meant nothing to what they meant to each other. Then came Betty. Willie got serious and damn if Moppy didn't act like she was just any girl and go and make a play for her. And she liked Moppy better and that was the end of the two of them.

He should have thought of that tonight when he was in Casey's with Moppy, and he should have known that any guy who would steal a girl you was in love with, would do anything to you. And Moppy was doing it.

AT THE sixth floor landing, he stopped and got his wind back. He leaned against the bannister and waited till he was all right again, then he walked toward 618 and let his hand touch his right-hand pocket to make sure his knife was still there.

He knocked.

He waited.

He knocked again.

Footsteps.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Moppy. Willie."

"Oh, for Pete's sake." Moppy opened the door. "What's up?"

"Nothin's up. I figure we're friends. I wanta visit a friend, it's okay."

"Sure, it's okay."

Moppy stepped aside and Willie walked in. He was looking the room over, remembering it when they had it together and at the same time looking to see if anybody was around. He didn't see anybody.

"Sit down," said Moppy. "Take the good chair. You remember which one is the good chair."

"Sure," said Willie.

"You want a beer? I got a half a bottle in the ice box?"

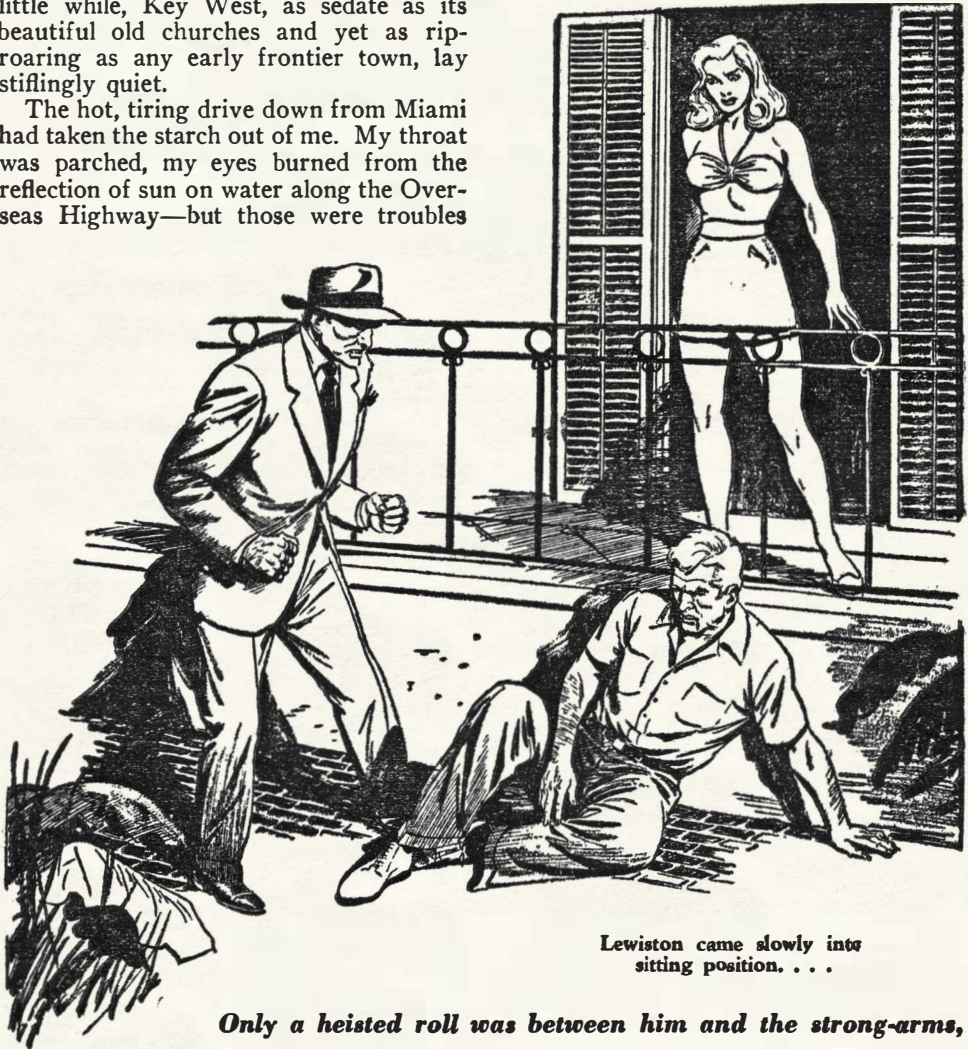
"Nah. I jus' come up for a coupla minutes. You expecting company?"

THOSE STICKY, STICKY FINGERS

By **MARK
WILSON**

I DROVE into Key West a few minutes past Saturday noon. Heat waves quivered over the pavement of Duval Street and only a few white-topped liberty hounds from the Navy base braved the mid-day furnace of August. For just a little while, Key West, as sedate as its beautiful old churches and yet as rip-roaring as any early frontier town, lay stiflingly quiet.

The hot, tiring drive down from Miami had taken the starch out of me. My throat was parched, my eyes burned from the reflection of sun on water along the Overseas Highway—but those were troubles



Lewiston came slowly into sitting position. . . .

Only a heisted roll was between him and the strong-arms, but the tarnished copper was happy—until the blonde started weeping.

that a tall, cold drink in a dimly-lighted bar could cure. My other problems were a lot harder to solve.

I pulled to the curb in front of an old, sun-faded building, whose architecture had come straight from the West Indies, and rolled up the windows in the car. The electric-blue sky was clear but storms came up out of nowhere in that latitude. I walked back three doors to a glittery, glass-bricked, neon-tubed bar and paused a moment to read the sign on the door.

Bolita. Club rooms to the rear.

Club rooms meant roulette, blackjack, craps, horses. Bolita was policy with a Latin accent. Illegal, sure, but this was Key West.

I stepped up to the bar and ordered a beer and a ham on rye. Then I perched on a red leatherette stool and looked around the room. There were perhaps a dozen other patrons in the place, not counting the sports in the club rooms where little white balls and bounding cubes were clicking merrily. All the men I could see were wearing short-sleeved sport shirts. I felt out of place in a light-weight suit, but still I kept my coat on.

When my beer came, I drank it down and called for another.

It was then that I heard the girl humming in a low, melancholy voice. She had come in to sit next to me at the bar while my back was turned. I glanced down and saw a shapely, tanned leg close to mine. She was obviously humming for no one's benefit but her own—and I had a plane to catch in three hours. I lifted my eyes and fixed them on the mirror behind the bar.

I knew that if I took my eyes from the mirror, I would look at the girl. I couldn't afford to strike up a barroom acquaintance. I was carrying a little better than ten thousand in my pockets. Less than a hundred of it was mine.

But the humming persisted. A bare arm moved out to pick up a pack of cigarettes from the bar. The arm pulled back. But it was beginning to get me.

My eyes shifted in the mirror and I whistled softly to myself. The girl was wearing a white halter and her face and shoulders were copper-bronze. Her head was cocked to the right and long, golden hair fell in a wave over her right shoulder. Her blue eyes met mine in the mirror.

Self-consciously, I looked away.

"What's the trouble?" she asked quietly.

I pretended not to hear. She repeated the question.

"No trouble," I said uneasily, turning halfway toward her. She was wearing white linen shorts with blue piping at the seams. "What makes you think—"

"Your eyes," she said.

I looked at my brown, deep-set eyes, in the mirror. They weren't pretty. They were red and puffy—but that could have been from the strain of the long drive against headlights at night and a blazing sun by day. I had left Mattsburg at exactly five yesterday afternoon, hit Miami about nine this morning and made the run to Key West in three hours. I needed a bath and shave, I needed sleep, but those things were not yet for me. What I needed most was time, time to get away.

"If you don't like the way I look," I said to the girl, "beat it." I turned my back to her before she could fire questions.

"Don't talk to the lady like that," the bartender said, a chewed toothpick drooping from his mouth.

I snorted. "Pickup, B-girl. Why do you dirty up your place with—"

"I like that!" the girl exclaimed indignantly. She threw silver on the bar to pay for her drink and then her heels clicked sharply on the floor as she walked away.

I looked at the bartender. "That's one way to get rid of them."

He wasn't amused. "You're a nice hospitable guy, ain't you?"

"I don't have time for doxies."

"That's Dot Lewiston," he said. "She's no doxy. She never makes trouble and she never in her life tried to pick up a punk in a bar or anyplace else."

I didn't like that crack about punks but I had to let it pass. I didn't want trouble now. In three hours, a plane would make that twenty-minute flight to Havana and I meant to be aboard. I *had* to be aboard. Storm warnings were going up along the coast. There was a good chance that mine would be the last flight for a couple of days. I had already missed the boat and the next one would be too late.

"She's a sweet kid," I said. "I don't like to be bothered."

"Her family's one of the oldest and best around, and she's got every guy in the county nuts about her."

The bartender's voice seemed to leave something unfinished. I raised my eyebrows. "But?"

"Gambling. It gets in the blood."

"Hers?"

"Her father's. As nice a guy as you'd ever hope to meet, but the boys are into him for plenty. He keeps on playing. You know how it is. The next play is always going to be the big one but it never is. So now a mob from the north's trying to get hooks into him."

I finished the sandwich and stood up. "So his daughter comes in to drink over her troubles."

"Nah. To find her old man."

I dug into my side pocket and threw a dollar on the bar. "Where's a place I can wash up?"

"The Keyside, two doors down the street. Lousy place to sleep but it's all right for a bath."

OUTSIDE, I took my two suitcases from the car and walked to the Keyside Hotel. A listless clerk gave me the key to a second-floor room and I went up. The room was at the rear and it was small and drab but it had a good view of a private courtyard across the alley.

The patio was a riotous blaze of tropical blooms. The orange-red of the jacaranda tree was a flaming torch. The heavily-laden branches of a royal poinciana spread cool shade over a tinkling fountain and the waxed-brick paving.

Bougainvillea, fragipanni, seagrapes and exotic fruit trees grew together in utter abandon, and yet the plantings had been laid out to blend with the comfortable, two-story home which closed in the patio on three sides. The view was all very nice but I had other things on my mind.

I emptied my pockets on the bed. Ten thousand dollars in soiled bills. I tossed my wallet on the bed, knowing without looking that it held but eighty legally-earned dollars.

The wallet flipped open and my picture and identification looked up at me through the pane of isinglass. Robert Hiller, detective second-grade. My badge slipped from the wallet and bounced on the bed

to come to rest next to the ten thousand. I wondered why I hadn't thrown the badge out along the road as I had intended. Sunlight danced on its polished face and it cursed me.

It called me a cheap, crooked cop.

I ripped off my tie and shirt and threw them over the badge, but I couldn't cover the money. A circus tent couldn't have covered what the money symbolized.

After a shower, I toweled myself briskly. Then I went to the phone and called the air terminal.

"This is Robert Hicks," I said to the pleasant, efficient voice which answered. I had chosen the name Hicks to conform with the *H* on my luggage. "I wired from Miami for reservations to Havana."

"Yes, Mr. Hicks. We've got you aboard."

"Then the flight is still on?"

"Your flight is, but it will be the last until after the storm."

"Hurricane?"

The reservation clerk paused momentarily. "Well," he said, "there *is* one shaping up in the Doldrums, but at this season of the year, there's no such thing as a light storm over the Keys."

"Thanks," I said.

"Get here about fifteen minutes early for weighing in. And Mr. Hicks—don't worry. There's nothing to be alarmed about."

"I'm not worried," I said grimly. I hung up and threw myself on the bed to stare up at the pattern of reflected sunlight on the ceiling. In twenty hours, I had come a long way. The nine-hundred-mile drive south was the least of it.

You follow the straight way for a long time and then suddenly you come to a place where the road forks. Maybe you're going pretty fast and you have to reach a quick decision. Which road? And if you make the wrong turn—if, even as you're making it, you know it's wrong—it's too late to slow down and change your course.

That's how it happened to me.

Five years of dogged plugging and keeping my nose clean on the force; five years of pretending not to see some of the others rake in the graft and pack it away in their little tin boxes. Cops are people, and in every line of business, there are

always people who are susceptible to temptation. The bank teller absconds with funds, the officeboy pilfers stamps, the industrial tycoon foists a stock swindle off on gullible investors, the secretary gets to the office at nine-thirty and calls it nine.

But I had always thought I was temptation-proof. I had had plenty of chances to line my pockets on the vice squad but I had turned down every opportunity and had slapped attempted-bribery charges on the petty grifters and big-time hoodlums who had tried to buy me.

So what happened? The charges were dismissed. Worse, some of the less scrupulous boys on the squad began to move up while I stayed right where I was. That hurt.

It was a little thing like my annual vacation which finally did it. I had never been to New York and I wanted to go, but an honest cop's bank account is remarkably small, even when he has no wife or family to support. One of my sidekicks on the squad, supposedly drawing down the same pay I was, had taken his family on a jaunt to Mexico; another had made a European pilgrimage. But I didn't have enough money to make a faint, echoing noise in New York.

My vacation started yesterday evening at five o'clock. About three, a bootblack on Grant Street phoned me a tip. He was an honest lad who kept his eyes open. He trusted me.

"Nick Ramus'll be at the Sportsman's Club in a half an hour for a poker game," he said hoarsely. "Get me?"

Nick Ramus was a bank-drop for the numbers racket in Mattsburg. The runners made their collections at cigar stores, filling stations, office buildings, newstands, wherever numbers were sold, and turned the take over to drops who then gave it to Red Vanessi's first lieutenants. Vanessi was top man in the syndicate.

"Heavy?" I asked.

"Maybe ten thousand."

"Thanks, Shorty." This was what I had been waiting for. It was easy enough to catch the peddlers and runners, but the drops and top men were something else again. If I could nab Nick Ramus with slips and money in his pockets, I had him cold. "I'll remember you."

"Better if you forgot me, Hiller,"

Shorty replied. "Word gets around that I tipped you and I'll be out of business with a cut throat." He hung up.

The Sportsman's Club was in the middle of the block on a side street off Grant and its rear entrance, used by its shyer customers, opened on a lateral alley. Nick Ramus, carrying a day's take, would be shy.

There was just one thing about the setup that didn't make sense: Ramus had no business sitting in on a poker game with his pockets stuffed with the syndicate's money. Red Vanessi wouldn't like that.

I waited a half-hour, then strolled over to the alley behind the club. I didn't tell anyone in the office where I was going. I wanted to grab Ramus with the evidence and I knew that a couple of my cronies were on the syndicate's payroll; they'd tip Nick before I could get him.

I stepped into the alley just as Nick Ramus appeared at the far end. We took a dozen steps toward each other. Suddenly, all hell broke loose at his end. A battered black sedan jammed to a stop behind him and blocked the alley entrance. Nick turned quickly at the sound of the screeching brakes. He raised his right hand as if to signal.

"Okay, it's—" He started to say. He spoke no more. Two shots smashed him to the pavement and a third stopped him cold as he tried to crawl away.

"Come on," someone in the car said. The rear door opened and a long, thin man in a tan suit started to get out, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Back!" the driver warned. "Somebody coming!"

He meant me, but I was a good five-hundred feet away, too far to be recognized.

The tall man cursed and scrambled back into the car. The nondescript heap shot away in a roar of exhaust.

SILENCE fell over the alley. If people out on the street had heard the shots, they had probably chalked them up to backfires; and if those in the Sportsman's Club had heard, they knew better than to rush out into someone else's shooting.

I ran down the alley and crouched over Ramus. He was dead with his pockets

stuffed with money. Instinctively, I knew why he was dead. It was the triple-cross. Nick had intentionally taken his roll to the club instead of turning it over to Vanessi. In the alley, he was to stand still while his buddies went through the motions of a stickup and then he was to get his cut later. But it hadn't worked that way. The heisters had wanted all of it and had gunned Nick down. I turned up before the money could change hands.

Nick's pockets bulged. Money. Lots of it. Enough to make the squad's eyes pop when I turned it in, enough to make the newspapers sit up and take notice, enough to get me the promotion I thought I had coming to me.

But it was also enough to raise a lot of commotion in New York.

Right then, I came to the fork of the road and was moving fast. Less than a minute had passed since the shooting; someone would come along any minute and find me with Nick Ramus' riddled body.

I reasoned this way. What assurance did I have that the money would ever get through some of the sticky fingers at headquarters? And how did I know it wouldn't be returned to the syndicate? More important, I doubted that I would ever get the credit. I would stay right where I was—honest Robert Hiller, detective second-grade.

This was all unmarked money poured through the illegal funnel of the numbers racket. Vanessi's syndicate wouldn't dare cry *Thief!* It would carry on its own quiet investigation, then it would speak just as quietly to friends at headquarters. It would take a day or two to tie me up with it, depending upon how long it took Shorty, his trust in me completely shattered, to get word around that I had been up the alley about the same time Nick Ramus was.

Working swiftly, I shifted the money from Nick's pockets to my own. I tugged Nick to the side of the alley and wedged him behind a couple of trash barrels. Then I legged it for headquarters. I had made the turn.

At five, I said good-by to the gang in the office, cracked a couple of jokes about the lousy time I expected to have in New York on *my* pay, and got in my car to

head south for Key West—and eventual safety in Havana where I planned to pick up a banana boat and hole up on one of the islands.

By now, Nick's body had been found and things were popping in Mattsburg. I stood to be the heavy loser. The syndicate had guns, but if it didn't choose to use them, there was always the law. I was sitting in a tailor-made frame, and Havana was my only chance for safety.

I got off the bed and paced the floor restlessly. Only two hours to go before that plane left. Time crawled by on hands and knees. I went to the window and looked out upon the peaceful patio.

There was life in it now. A slim girl in white shorts and halter was sitting on a wicker chaise lounge. She was holding a book on her lap but she wasn't reading. Her somber eyes were fixed vacantly on the wall in an expression of complete helplessness. It was the girl I had insulted in the bar—Dot Lewiston. She was having her troubles, but everyone has them. I was too intent upon mine to care about hers.

Her eyes lifted a trifle and she saw me in the window. She frowned. "You were wrong, you know," she said. "I'm not what you—"

"So I hear," I interrupted coldly. I started to leave the window.

"Wait a minute," she called.

I hesitated. "What do you want?"

"Come down." It was a command, not an invitation.

"I've got a plane to catch."

"Not for two hours, Mr. Hiller."

Hiller! My breath caught painfully and my heart thumped against my ribs. "I—I'll be right down."

She smiled coldly. "I thought you would."

I pulled on a Palm Beach suit and stuffed money into all pockets. I raced down the stairs and cut through the rear entrance of the hotel into the alley. The girl was standing directly opposite me, holding open the grilled gate in the patio wall. I stepped in and she closed the gate and followed me to the center of the patio, where the fountain peacefully bubbled.

"Sit down, Mr. Hiller." She pointed to a white wrought-iron chair.

I sat on the edge of the seat and glared

at her. "How did you know that my—"

"Simple." She settled herself on the lounge. "You were rude and I wondered who you were. I had seen you park, so when I left, I looked in your car. You should never leave the keys in your car, Mr. Hiller. Your name was on the key case."

The play was hers. I gripped my knees and said nothing.

"You're registered at the hotel as Hicks," she said. "Andy—the clerk—is a friend of mine."

"It's dangerous," I said slowly, "to be so nosy."

Her blue eyes looked at me frigidly, distastefully. "What do you want in Key West? Don't tell me it's none of my business. I'm making it my business."

"Why?"

Her face took on a slightly puzzled expression. I had seen the same expression on hunch-bettors at the race tracks. They have what they consider to be perfectly logical reasons for betting thus-and-so but they aren't sure their reasons will hold up under questioning.

Dot Lewiston was playing a hunch. "Key West is a hospitable place. The people who come here, with a few exceptions, come for a holiday and to relax. They welcome conversation with the natives. But not you. You were nasty. You're one of the exceptions."

"Who are these exceptions?"

"Hard-eyed men from the North. Men who gave phony names. Men who wear coats."

I stood up abruptly. "Honey, you've been seeing too many movies." I walked toward the gate. Halfway there, I turned, curious. "What do coats have to do with it?"

"Most men in Key West wear sport shirts in August, but you can't hide a gun under a sport shirt, can you?"

Who are the men in coats?"

"Northern gamblers," she said flatly.

"I suppose—" I sneered—"there wouldn't be gambling in Key West if it weren't for the Yankees."

She smiled remotely. "There's been gambling here ever since the pirates, but until now, the money had always stayed in Key West. Northern gangsters are trying to change that."

"So I'm a Northern strongarm because I wear a coat? Maybe it's just the gentleman coming out in me."

She laughed scornfully and it blistered me. I strode back to her and removed my coat. "See anything?"

"No."

I put my coat on again and thanked heaven that my gun and shoulder holster were in one of my suitcases.

DOT LEWISTON came out of her seat jerkily and stood before me. She was almost as tall as I was, but she looked taller when she drew herself up in angry defiance. "That doesn't mean anything," she said coldly. "I know who you are and what you want. Go back and tell your boss he won't get it."

"Lady, I'm just a boy on his way to Havana for a vacation."

Her icy reserve broke suddenly and she became just a frightened, tense girl who had jumped into something over her head and had tried to bluff it through with a peck of courage. She slumped down on the chaise lounge and buried her lovely face in her hands. She wept convulsively, but a torrent of long-dammed words came with her tears and I was able to make out enough of them to piece together a story.

Her father, Henry Lewiston, was apparently a pleasant sort of fellow whose only weakness was gambling. He must have had the notion that gamblers were only in business to help him recoup a considerable family fortune which had dwindled through the years to little more than this comfortable, old house. Eventually, he discovered that there was no such thing as an altruistic gambler and he was twenty thousand dollars in the hole.

Even then, he might have gotten the break that few suckers get if he had stayed with the local interests. Lewiston was a respected name in Key West and the gamblers who held his I.O.U.'s were willing to wait. But, no, the old man had to get mixed up with strong boys from the North who were impatient to crack into the lush Key West field. As I understood it from the girl, the men in coats offered to pay off Henry Lewiston's debts in return for which he was to deed them this house.

Dot Lewiston looked up at me through spread fingers. "This house! One of the oldest in Key West! Lewistons have lived here for almost two hundred years."

I could guess at the interior of the house. Solid mahogany and teak. Beautiful satiny furniture lovingly fashioned by the craftsmen of England and France and Spain and Italy. Silver plate and delicate china. Rugs for the Kings of Persia. Family heirlooms handed down from generation to generation, brought to Key West in the sailing ships which had made this a booming seaport, the trade center of the Carriibbean. The looted treasure of the pirates who prowled these seas; the wealth which angry waves had tossed upon the beaches while mighty vessels smashed to bits upon the jagged coral reefs.

This house represented the history and pageantry of a tiny island where, today, jook organs and jive bands blared against a background of quiet verandahs and sweet jasmine and coconut palms. I could understand the girl's feelings.

"Why do they want the house?" I asked.

"As if you didn't know. Make a gambling house out of it. Call it Lewiston House." Her fingers clenched and unclenched. "I'll set fire to it before I'll let any of your gang get it."

"I told you before that I'm not a—"

"I don't believe you." She glared at me and stood up suddenly and turned to walk toward the house.

"Where are you going?"

"To call the sheriff. We don't want your kind in Key West."

"Wait a second," I said, going to her. "You'll be making a mistake."

"I'll let the sheriff decide that. Your name is Hiller but you call yourself Hicks. Men don't use assumed names unless they've got something to hide."

She had me over a barrel. The last thing I wanted was to have a sheriff asking me questions. He'd wire Mattsburg and he'd hold me, pending a reply. I'd miss my plane and, far worse, Vanessi's mob and the police would know where I was.

The police, I thought, and suddenly I had my out. I took my wallet from my pocket and flipped it open. "Maybe this

will change your mind." I let her see my badge and credentials.

She stared blankly at first, then her expression changed and she looked up at me with apology in her eyes. "I—I'm sorry," she said lamely. "You see, I don't know who to trust and . . ."

"Sure," I said. I patted her smooth arm reassuringly. "Do me a favor. Don't tell anyone about this. I'm working under cover."

"I won't tell." She looked at me as if I had sprouted wings and were wearing a tight halo. "That explains why you were so rude in the bar."

"That's right," I said roughly, fidgeting nervously at the gratitude and trust in her eyes.

"Did you come for Vanessi?"

It was like a punch in the stomach. "Vanessi?" I asked sharply. I recovered myself with great effort. "Oh, sure, Vanessi. When's he supposed to get his answer about the house?"

"That's why I asked you if—Today. He's flying down."

My mind was spinning like a top and my body was bathed in clammy sweat. I had fled Mattsburg and had driven nine hundred miles to rush right into Red Vanessi's arms. I glanced at my watch. Flight to Havana was still an hour away and Vanessi was due here this afternoon. Due any minute, and he wouldn't come alone.

"Listen," I said, my voice choked with desperation. "I've got a couple of angles to follow up. I've got to get moving. I—"

I started for the gate, but she stopped me with a light touch on the arm and smiled at me hopefully. "Just knowing you're around makes me feel better," she said softly. "What shall I do about Vanessi?"

"Stall him off. Keep him guessing."

"Shall I send for the sheriff?"

"No!" I cried tensely. Then, to explain the outburst, I moderated my voice and said, "The sheriff can't do anything. Vanessi will be clean. He'll make like a guy down here for some tarpon fishing. See what I mean?"

"Whatever you say," she murmured. "But—"

"Just take my word. I'll be back."

She gripped my arms and went up on her toes and she kissed me lightly on the lips. I broke away and ran for the gate.

IN MY room, I snatched up the phone and called the terminal. The flight was still on. I had forty-five minutes to go. I dug into one of the suitcases and came up with my gun and holster. I took off my coat, strapped on the holster and eased the gun into it. Then I put on my coat and pulled a chair to the window to wait as the minutes crept by.

The patio across the alley was deserted and the palm fronds rustled gently. Then, an elderly man came out of the house and crossed the patio to stare somberly at the tinkling fountain. He was tall, erect, white-maned, and he shook his big head perplexedly. He looked up as Dot Lewiston came out on the balcony.

"Father," she called. "Have you taken your pill?"

He smiled wanly. "Yes, my dear."

She came down and stood in front of him. "Everything's going to be all right." It seemed to me that she glanced quickly toward my window for assurance.

Somewhere a clock struck the hour. I had only thirty minutes to wait now. Twenty minutes really. I had to figure on a couple of minutes to check out,

grab a cab and get out to the terminal to be weighed in. I stood up, threw the soiled clothes into one of the bags and closed it.

Fifteen minutes . . . ten . . .

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lewiston," a smooth voice said in the patio across the way. I would have known that smug voice anywhere. Red Vanessi's. He was hoodlum who hadn't been able to pass the fifth grade in school but had showed an early genius for turning a dishonest buck.

I moved quickly to the window and looked through the thin curtains. Red's thin gray face was wreathed in an oily grin. He stood in front of Henry Lewiston and his thumbs were caught nonchalantly in the corners of his coat.

He had brought two of his strongarms with him. They wore coats, too. I went into a double-take as I stared at the gungel to Vanessi's right. He was tall and thin; he wore a tan suit; he was the hood who had shot Nick Ramus. I whistled softly to myself, wondering what Red would do if he discovered that one of his own trusted bodyguards had worked out a deal with Nick Ramus.

"Have you reached a decision, Mr. Lewiston?" Vanessi asked quietly, rubbing the side of his sharp nose.

"We're going to think it over another day," Dot said abruptly.

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Vanessi threw a look at her which was supposed to cut her down but she glared back at him defiantly.

"I've thought it over long enough," Henry Lewiston said.

"Splendid," said Vanessi. He took papers from an inner pocket and tapped them thoughtfully. "These are your I.O.U.'s, Mr. Lewiston. Now, if you will give me the deed . . ."

"Don't do it, Father!" Dot begged.

"Go into the house, Dorothy," her father said with stiff formality. He turned to look at Vanessi.

I glanced at my watch. Two minutes. Time to get moving, but I couldn't pull myself from the window.

"Vanessi," Lewiston said coldly, "I won't trade."

That was that, I thought. The deal was off—that phase of the deal, anyway, but Vanessi had other, more pointed ways of doing business. When he held a man's tabs, he never failed to collect. Sometimes, his collections were non-negotiable. Sometimes, there was spilled blood or a beaten body, but Vanessi always collected.

I blew an insolent kiss at the patio and picked up my suitcases. I strode swiftly out of the room and went down to the desk to pay my bill. I went out on the sidewalk and looked for a cab. There was a hack stand a few doors down the street, just beyond the head of the alley, and I walked toward it swiftly, my mind on the clock.

I jerked open the door of the cab and threw my bags inside. "Plane for Havana," I snapped, started to get in.

Something stopped me. Maybe a kiss. Maybe a brave old man who had said no to Vanessi. Maybe Vanessi himself. Or maybe a badge I hadn't been able to throw away.

"The hell with it," I told the bewildered cabby and I took my bags out. I dropped them on the sidewalk and broke into a run as I turned into the alley. I slowed down as I came to the patio gate and I looked in at the tableau around the fountain.

Vanessi stood over Lewiston who lay on the bricks. Sunlight glistened on the brass knuckles on Vanessi's right fist. Blood oozed from the corner of Lewis-

ton's gaping mouth. Dot Lewiston was on the balcony, her mouth open in a frozen scream, her hands rigid at her sides. Vanessi's two men stood like marble statues and impassively watched Lewiston.

The tableau began to move. Lewiston came slowly to a sitting position, his head between his knees, but my eyes were on his right hand. It was creeping slowly down the inside of his leg to the cuff of his trousers. He touched the cuff, pulled it up a little.

Vanessi and his boys either didn't notice or didn't think anything of it, but I knew what that furtive movement meant. A leg strap. A knife in a sheath. But what good was a knife against guns?

The cuff was up several inches above the ankle now. Lewiston was cooked. One quick movement and Vanessi's guns would blast him.

I jammed my shoulder against the gate and jumped into the patio, gun out. The long, lean hood — Ramus' killer — saw me first and grabbed for his gun. I fired and he dropped. His gun clattered on the bricks and skipped away from his grasping fingers. I fired again and he lay still.

I swung the gun back to Vanessi. I was in a tight spot, thanks to Lewiston's dumb play, and it was just my gun to argue against Vanessi's and his remaining gunman's. The hood took cover behind a column under the balcony and Vanessi dropped behind the raised base of the fountain. I was a shooting duck in bold relief against the garden wall. Vanessi laughed coldly.

"Take him, Vic," he ordered.

"A pleasure." The hood's right hand and gun were a small target as he took aim at me around the column.

I pressed against the wall as if to find cover in a fissure between the bricks. A shot boomed out and I thought I could feel the tear of steel in flesh, could taste my blood, but I was all right. He missed, I thought, and even as I waited for his second shot, the gunman slid out from behind the column and sprawled on his face.

I glanced quickly to the right. Henry Lewiston was holding a smoking gun in

(Please continue on page 98)

THRILL

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DOCKET



102 pounds of determined female barged into George Morgan's life. The honey-bun was Jacoba O'Day, sole mourner for rooming-house suicide Sally Finch.



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While he trailed her secret visitor. . . . Read the suspense-tense novel by John D. MacDonald—"Swing and Slay"—in the January issue . . . published December 2nd.

● *Hotsy Andra was pulling him into a cell* ●
for a slander-doc's stabbing—
● *but Tommy wouldn't get wise. . . .* ●

TAKE A POWDER, GALAHAD!

"Andra, honey!" he said.
"What's this all about?"



Mystery Novelette of a Trouble-Making Blonde

By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

Run, Tommy, Run

SHE had said it to him in all the places where they had been alone, the only places where they could be alone—the dark balcony at the Empire, the park bench, the gravel path by the river. Inadequate places.

She had said, "Give it up, Tommy. Run while you can. You want no part of me."



But he had seen how she was two people. Clearest when she walked toward him and before she saw him. A heads-up little blonde—Andra Carse—with hair that had the faint harshness of one retouch job too many, eyes with the circles of weariness, hard set to her mouth. A heads-up, hands-off blonde. That for the world.

Another Andra for Tommy . . . sometimes. Hair soft in the nightlight, eyes deep and sad and wise and true, lips warm with a tenderness that made Tommy Bowers want to cry.

Funny way to meet. Right there on Quinby Street at high noon. Mr Zarrik had given him deliveries to make in the truck. He liked to get out of the store and Zarrik knew it. A good guy, Paul Zarrik. He knew how you'd get sick of hearing, "Two pounds of brads. Two pints of quick-drying enamel. Apple green, please. Is that the best hammer you got?"

The truck was around the corner and he remembered he was whistling. Not at the gal ahead of him, really, even though with the coat pulled around her that way and the silly little hat, she was whistle-bait.

He saw it fall and roll to the grating and she stopped so fast he almost ran into her. "Damn," she said softly. The ring dropped through the grating, giving one last wink at the sun as it fell into darkness. The grating was in front of a padlocked store.

They both looked down. "That's it," he said. "Right over there. By the gum paper."

"That makes it handy," she said bitterly.

"Kids go around looking for change down these things," he said. "Stand right there and keep watching it. I'll be back in ten seconds."

He took the stick out of the truck and brought the pack of gum in the drug store on the other side of the street. He chomped three sticks of the gum as he hurried back to her. He winked at her, wedged the gum on the end of the stick and went after the ring. He got the ring, the gum paper, a cigarette butt and some miscellaneous unidentifiable junk. But he got the ring.

She handed him a tissue and he pried the ring off, wrapped it up. "Better dunk it in alcohol when you get home," he said. "Germs down there, I think. Certainly looks germy."

He was wearing the coveralls that said Zarrik on the pocket. She gave him a level look. "That's a good ring, mister. I thank you. Now I'm in one of those spots I always get into. Do I or don't I give out a reward?"

It always made him angry to blush. "Reward? Sure. The store is around the corner and I'm going to take the coveralls off. Honest to Pete, I got a suit on under-

neath. I might even comb my hair. And then the reward is to let me buy you a lunch. You do eat, don't you?"

Starting there. Right there. For laughs. Just laughs. Honest to Pete, nothing else. Believe me, Andra.

"Sure, Tommy. Sure."

She worked for a doctor, she said, and lived in one of those no-men-allowed places. She wouldn't let him come for her there. She always met him someplace. The park for example.

And then, in the park dusk, grabbing her wrist and spinning her into his arms. Then, "Don't ever kiss me, Tommy. Ever again."

But he did and she did.

Maybe you slap people's faces to get to know them. She slapped him once and told him she wouldn't see him again. Two weeks later, on the bench in the park at noon, she cried in his arms, startling an old man who was feeding popcorn to the pigeons.

It was then that he began to know how scared she was. And he didn't know what she was scared of.

She said she'd tell him when she could quit her job. Then they'd never come back. Never come back to this city. Oh, Andra, of warmth and hardness, of lips that can tremble and then part for the words that shouldn't be said. . . .

But now there was too much time to think about Andra. Too much time to think about everything. He took the tin cup over to the cell door and rattled it across the bars. The big guy was humming as he shoved the long-handled brush down the corridor between the two rows of cells. He stopped humming and sweeping and gave Tommy an amused look, saying softly, "Man, you sure got ants. What you want now?"

"I want to know why the hell I'm in here."

"What they tell you?"

"Material witness."

"Man, just like me. That's what I got too. They let me sweep because I sweep good."

"How long have you been in here?"

"Six weeks, about. Comes from not minding my own business. I hear that old screaming and I go out of my room and there across the hall is a woman who got

herself all cut up. Don't know who did it. Me, I go down to the corner and phone. Cops come. She's dead. Six weeks here now. Just rest easy, man."

Tommy said desperately, "A man is supposed to have a lawyer. In school they said they got to tell you what they're holding you for."

The big guy laughed softly. "They told you, man. Material witness."

Tommy went back and sat on the cot. The cot overhead had been folded back against the wall, like an upper berth. The cell was clean, whitewashed. There was a sink in the far corner, a heavy table and chair bolted to the floor, a barred window eight feet off the floor.

He could hear a traffic buzz outside and sometimes people talking. That was one of the bad parts. People keep on walking and talking and working. The world is just the same place as before . . . without Tommy Bowers.

There was a place they had eaten together. She was the one that said it had to be dutch. He was mad at first but she made him understand. He always got there first and waited, nursing a beer in the bar near the front entrance. At three she phoned him at the store and said she could make it. At six he was at the restaurant. He stayed there until quarter of midnight and he didn't eat and you can't nurse a beer that long, so he was dulled with anger and drink when he left. A standup job.

So he walked to his room. Eighteen blocks. A little more, letting the night air work on the fumes, but it didn't work so good. A little room on the top of a garage that adjoined the old frame house. The room was an afterthought, built on to hike the rent income. He kept it clean himself and the entrance was private, an open wooden staircase spiked onto the brick half-wall of the frame house.

HE REMEMBERED how he came along the street and there were two of them sitting on the second step from the bottom. Big men in dark topcoats. One sucked on a cigarette as he stood up. The flame showed he had a face that looked like an Indian chief. He snapped the cigarette out into the quiet street and said in a husky-soft voice:

"Hello, Tommy."

He stopped. "Who are you?"

"Had a nice evening, Tommy?"

"What the hell is it to you?"

The other man was thin and he had a dark shadow of beard on his chin and lean jaw. "He's talking to you nice, Tommy. Real nice. Gentlemanlike, eh?"

"Who are you guys? Just get off my steps and let me go to bed."

The Indian-looking one leaned close. "You got yourself a load, Tommy."

There was hurt at what Andra had done, the recklessness of being slightly drunk, fury at this aimless irritating conversation. Tommy used his big shoulders and thick wrists. The looping right hit empty air. The thin one grabbed his wrist and twisted hard. The wrist ended in the small of Tommy's back. The Indian-looking one hit him twice, then cuffed him casually across the face, forehead and backhand. He flipped open the black wallet and Tommy saw the gleam of gold.

They walked him down to the sedan and shoved him in the back. Tommy realized that he should have seen the sedan, black and white, department seal on the trunk compartment.

He sucked air until his breathing was all right. The sedan rolled smoothly along the night streets. He made his voice calm. "I didn't know you guys were cops. I thought you were just being wise. What do you want with me?"

"We want to know what you did tonight, Tommy. Have a good time?"

"I had a date but she didn't show. I was supposed to meet her at six at a place called Brennon's. She called me at three at the store where I work. Zarrik's Hardware Mart . . . but she never showed. I waited until nearly midnight, I guess it was, and I walked back here. Now what laws have I broken?"

"You keep trying to get hard, Tommy. Now we don't like that. You were in Brennon's every minute?"

"Yes. No. No, I wasn't."

"Make up your mind, kid."

"I was sore. Couple of times I started to walk home and then I gave it up and went back."

"Know the times?"

"Oh, once around eight, I guess and then again about ten. I'd get about a

dozen blocks away and then I'd think maybe she'd come and I'd go back. Lots of people saw me there. After the first walk and I came back and she wasn't there, I switched from beer to whiskey."

Hard fingers clamped his wrist, held his hand, knuckles up, so that the street-light glow touched it. "Have a little scrap tonight, kid?"

Tommy flushed. "I was sore. I took a punch at a telephone pole. . . ."

The sedan stopped in front of a small stone house cramped between a chrome-stripped office building and a blond apartment hotel. There was another sedan there, a uniformed policeman yawning on the top step near the doorway. Lights shown from every window.

"What's this place?" Tommy asked.

Al said in a tired voice, "Please, kid. Not that line."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't even know where she works?"

They took him inside. It was all very plush. Paneled entryway, small office off to the left with a secretarial desk. He had seen the bronze plaque on the door. *'Dr. Melvin Thorne—Psychoanalytic Consultant.'*

The wedge of wood on the corner of the secretarial desk stopped him. *'Miss Carse,'* it said.

From the entryway he could see through the open door into the private office beyond. Dark thick rug, green leather furniture, student lamps.

"Where is she?" Tommy demanded.

"Patience, kid," the thin one said. "Just be patient. First you got to look at the boss."

There was a small sitting room at the end of the entryway. To the right the stairs led upward. A stocky man, half bald, with a frayed dead cigar clamped between his teeth, came over to the three of them and addressed himself to the thin one.

"The boys finished and I sent 'em home, Lieutenant. The basket boys want to know when they can pick up and leave. They're getting impatient."

"Tell them in five minutes, Frenchy."

Tommy stopped dead as he saw what was in front of him. Even flat on his back the man looked big. He had a sunlamp

tan, showing on his hollow-cheeked face, on the broad tanned chest where the maroon jacket with silk lapels had parted. He wore faun-colored slacks and bare feet in loafers. Death had sagged his under-lip showing even white teeth. The mustache was a thin line, carefully trimmed. The hair was chestnut colored and wavy. He could have been close to forty. One eye was closed as though he were sleeping. Socketed in the other eye was a plastic handle in Chinese red.

"Meet Doc Thorne, Tommy," the lieutenant said softly.

Al pushed Tommy, very gently, two steps closer to the body. He saw the quick movement, looked to his right.

ANDRA CARSE sat in one half of an S-shaped love seat. She had told him she was twenty-eight, two years older than Tommy's twenty-six. She looked thirty-eight. Her face was haggard and she stared at Tommy with a hard, uncompromising glare in her gray-blue eyes.

"Andra, honey!" he said. "What's this all about?"

She turned her glance toward the lieutenant. Her voice was flat. "I told you it was no use bringing him around. He's just a punk I've dated a few times. I stood him up tonight."

Tommy turned to the lieutenant. "She's lying. I don't know why. We had it all planned to get married when she could quit her job."

"Tommy!" she said softly. "Tommy, you damn fool! I tried to declare you out."

The thin lieutenant hung a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and shoved his gray hat back off his bony forehead. "He just isn't out, sister. When you lied about the store phone number written on the front of the phone book, I knew he figured to be in somehow. And Zarrik told us this kid was talking about quitting and give us his address. It figures good. He's got no alibi for the time of death. You stand him up. He comes here and finds a little party going on. Boom, he slugs the doc. Maybe he does the icpick job and maybe you do. Anyway, the doc was slugged. You can see the mark on him. And the kid has skinned knuckles."

"I told you about that!" Tommy said.

"They'll all cross you if they can," Andra said. "Watch him, Tommy."

The lieutenant gave her a look of disgust. He said, "Go climb out of that hostess gown, blondie, and put on something to wear to a cell."

Andra got up and left the room. As she passed Tommy, he reached for her. She pulled away and he heard her go up the stairs. The lieutenant nodded to the two men by the windows. They put the metal mesh basket beside the body, spread a tarp across it, lifted the body in, strapped the tarp down. They grunted as they hoisted him and filed out.

"Sit down, kid," the lieutenant said. Tommy sat where Andra had been sitting. Suddenly the lieutenant snapped his fingers and stepped to the door. "Frenchy! You got a matron up there with her?"

"Sure," Frenchy said wearily.

The lieutenant relaxed. He stood in front of Tommy. "Kid, that body didn't bother you much."

Tommy shrugged. "I was on a DE in Naha Bay when a Kami-crazy hit us amidships. The doctor is a nice-looking corpse."

All came in and sat down across the room. He took out a trick gadget and began clipping his fingernails with little snapping sounds.

"Kid," the lieutenant said. "I like your looks. Where do you come from?"

"A little town in Idaho. You wouldn't know it if I told you the name."

"I see lots of kids come to the city, Tommy. Most of 'em don't stay single long. They find some nice little gal and start living. That's what a guy needs. Wife and kids. I got three. Oldest one's nine now. Husky, too. Not a string-bean like his old man. Yeah, Tommy, I like your looks. You look like a nice quiet guy. The kind we never have any trouble with. We don't want any trouble with you now."

"I don't see as how I'm in any trouble, Lieutenant."

"Call me Bob, Tommy. I want to be your friend. And only a friend can give you advice in a personal thing. Kid, this Carse dame, she's rugged. You should ought to be able to see that. No smart kid born in this town would go for her type."

"You don't know her!" Tommy said hotly.

"Don't know her? Why, Tommy, I know five hundred Andra Carses. Maybe not exactly the same name, but the same look around the eyes and the mouth. Angle gals, every one of them. Out for sucker blood.

"Look at the neat setup here. The laws aren't written right in this state. A smooth operator like Thorne goes into business. So long as nobody checks on his handle and he doesn't perscribe any medication, he's safe. Most people don't know enough to make sure he's really got a diploma from a university.

"He's safe to clip frustrated housewives twenty-five bucks a crack for forty minutes of telling their troubles to nice Doctor Thorne. A come-on blonde behind the reception desk."

Tommy came up fast, but the lieutenant caught the blow in the palm of his hand and shoved Tommy on the chest. Tommy sat down.

"I'll forgive you that one, kid. This is kind of a shock to you, isn't it? I'm trying to give you advice, kid. Women like a nice big clean-looking kid like you. But she'd laugh herself to death before she'd marry you. Get that straight once and for all. Now, Tommy, I want you to tell me what happened.

"You waited a couple of hours and then you came here to find out what the hell was going on. Maybe they were having a scrap when you came in. You can tell from that bottle over there that it wasn't a sober party. You're a strong kid. You slugged him and left him on the floor and went out to get good and stinko. She was drunk and still sore. After you left she got that sticker from the kitchen, drove it into his brain.

"Give us the statement, all the facts, Tommy, and you're clear. You can walk out of here and take a good bath and then find yourself a clean little gal more your style."

Tommy let the seconds add up. Then he looked up at the lieutenant and said two words.

The lieutenant turned white. Without moving his lips he said, "Al, take this punk down to the jailhouse and throw him in."

CHAPTER TWO

Slab-Happy Honey

THEY woke him at dawn to tell him that Andra had confessed and that in her confession she told how Tommy had slugged Thorne. Tommy laughed in Al's face. . . . At noon of the first day in the jail, the lieutenant brought him a paper, one of the tabloids. He had a sour grin. "Just to show you that you should have listened to me last night, kid."

They had photographed Andra in a harsh, unflattering light. The heads and sub-heads were lush.

EX-CONVICT, MASQUERADING AS
PSYCHOANALYST, SLAIN. OFFICE
GIRL SUSPECT. ICE PICK BURIED
IN BRAIN.

He found his own name in a paragraph on page three, the last paragraph of the story.

"Also held for questioning at this time is Thomas M. Bowers, local hardware store clerk believed to have made an appointment with Miss Carse on the evening of the murder."

And this was the second day in jail. The second afternoon. He had sweat with fear and frustration and his clothes had a sour smell. The stubble of beard on his face itched. The big guy sang softly, making long sweeping motions with the hammer-headed broom. At noon they had let the drunks out of the tank at the end of the corridor. There was still the sour smell of sickness along the corridor.

The one called Al came and stood at the cell door, looking in at Tommy. The Indian lines of his face had sagged in two days. He was red-eyed with weariness. Tommy glanced at him and then looked away.

"Smile, kid," Al said.

"Ha, ha," Tommy said softly.

At Al's gesture the man at the end of the corridor eased out from behind the paper work on his desk and unlocked the cell door. Tommy stood there uncertainly.

"You're out, kid," Al said. He stood with his thumbs hooked into the bottom pockets of his vest. He was a big-barreled man, standing square and heavy on his feet. They went upstairs and out toward the front. Tommy signed the slip and got a brown paper bag with his things in it,

his name pencilled roughly on the front.

"Better check it," Al said. "Cops, you know."

Everything was there. Wallet with twenty-two dollars, driver's license, mechanical pencil, two-bladed knife, necktie and tie clip, belt, shoe-laces, keys, small change. "You haven't got much to say, kid," Al said.

"You want me to say thanks?"

"Our public relations department stinks, I guess. Don't try to look so tough, Tommy. You got no police record. Yet."

Tommy stood up. "Where's Andra Carse?"

"Across town in our chrome-plated guest suite. Pining away for you."

"I want to see her."

"We don't want you to see her, kid. From now on this is the D.A.'s party. They think we give them enough for the case. They've got your statement. Odds are the prosecutor won't want you. Maybe the defense will. Can't say. Just stay in the city, kid."

He walked, blinking, out into the sunlight. He took a cab to his room. The bath on the second floor of the main house was in use. He sat in his robe and waited. After a hot tub and a shave, he dressed in fresh clothes and went to the store. He got there ten minutes before closing time.

Lew and Archie, the other clerks, gave him the ride as he went through to Paul Zarrik's office. "Fix your tie, Lew, we got important company. The big operator." Tommy ignored them.

The office door was ajar. Mr. Zarrik looked up and said, "Well! Well, Tommy." His voice was soft.

Tommy sat down. "They found me through you."

"Now don't say it that way, Tommy. I couldn't help it. They tricked me. I didn't know what it was about."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Mr. Zarrik. I'm sorry this happened."

"We'll forget it, Tommy. You're lucky she didn't get you into more trouble than she did. You're a good worker. You can report tomorrow morning and we won't talk about it again. I won't dock you for the lost days. When you got mixed up with her, I guess you had no way of knowing what she was."

"You too," Tommy said.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I can't come back until it's over. Until she's cleared. I'm sorry. That's the way it is."

Zarrik said, "Tommy, I'll talk to you like a father—"

"Knock it off!" Tommy said harshly, standing up.

The lines of Zarrik's face slowly firmed. "Wait outside the office," he said. "I'll compute your pay and give you your check. You're due two weeks pay plus back pay."

Tommy waited. Zarrik came out and handed him the check. Tommy turned and left the store. Lew was gone. Archie was waiting to lock up.

He heard Archie say, "Hey, wait a sec—" He didn't look back. . . .

After he looked up some phone numbers, he picked a name that looked all right to him—not too expensive. Arden Rourke. In the front of the book the phone number was the same for residence and office. A woman with a tired voice answered the phone.

"No, he isn't here. If you could leave a message . . ." After telling her three times that it was important, she tentatively gave him two places to try. Cramer's Tavern and the Gray Lounge, both in the eleven hundred block on South. He took one of the buses that ran down South toward the wire mills. No dice in Cramer's.

At the Gray Lounge, the bartender jerked a thumb toward a man who stood at the far corner of the bar, a small man with a thin high-colored face, incongruous bushy blond eyebrows, like ripe wheat. He was standing talking to a fat girl with blue-black hair who slumped on a high stool, her elbows on the bar, her face as expressionless as suet.

Tommy went over to him and said, "Mr. Rourke?"

"Hello, there, lad," Rourke said, as though greeting an old friend. "I don't think you've met Doris. She holds the wine-cooler record for the eleven hundred block. Doris, meet my pal."

"Hello, pal," Doris said. She had an amazingly deep voice. Johnny saw that they were both close to being drunk.

"Can I talk to you, Mr. Rourke? Business."

Rourke made a low bow to Doris. "Professional demands, my dear." He took Tommy's arm and steered him toward the men's room. "My office. After you, sir."

"Mr. Rourke, my name is Thomas Bowers and—"

"Wait a minute, lad. W-a-i-t a minute. Bowers. Bowers. Of course! The Thorne murder. So they let you go, eh? No case?"

"No case. Look, Mr. Rourke. I know that Miss Carse didn't kill him. I haven't got proof, you understand."

Rourke bent over the sink and splashed his face with cold water. He dried it on paper towels. Suddenly he seemed sober. "And so, lad, you have come to Arden Rourke because you go to too many movies. Is that it?"

"I don't understand."

"You picked me out of the phone book, I imagine. And here I am. No tall brutal-looking young man with wicked eyes and a blonde on my arm, picking my teeth with a .38. Just a weary little guy with a beer breath, eh? Not quite the knight to go charging in and swoop up the innocent damosel."

"What are you trying to say?"

"If you want me to quote find the real killer end quote—save your money, lad. Not only is she guilty as hell, but the extent of my activities of late have been shadowing him when he goes to see her. And vice versa."

Tommy moved a step closer to Rourke. He said, through his teeth, "The next guy tells me she's guilty, I'm busting his head against the nearest wall. If you want the job, okay. If you don't want it, okay."

"If you force it on me, lad, the fee is twenty-five a day plus expenses and no guarantee of satisfaction."

Tommy turned away. "Nobody's forcing you."

Rourke caught him at the street door and led him back to a table. "Simmer down a minute. My poverty is due to an unfortunate inability to take advantage of the young. You'll find a sharpie who will slicker you out of every dime. By the way, what does every dime add up to?"

"About three hundred in the bank and about seven hundred of war bonds."

"Are you working?"

"I quit."

Rourke sighed. "Tell me your angles,

lad, and maybe I'll give you some free advice."

"ALL right. She was scared. I didn't know it until I knew her for a while. She isn't like the papers say. Sure she can look hard, but underneath she isn't. She told me I was a damn fool to want to marry her, but if I gave her enough time she'd be a good wife. I know she'll be a good wife. And we decided on a small town someplace. Anyplace. She said she couldn't come back here. She wouldn't tell me why. So now I know she was scared of him, of Thorne. That's why she never told me the truth about where she lived, and why all she'd tell me about her job was that she worked for a doctor.

"I had a date with her for six. She was going to meet me. She confirmed it at three. Something happened so she couldn't leave. They won't let me see her. I know how she is. She has a lot of pride. I know as sure as I'm breathing that she won't even tell those cops the right time. She'll sit tight and take it. She wants me out of it. That's all. I don't think she cares what happens to herself. If she won't tell the cops what happened, I want to find out what happened."

"Don't you think they're trying to find out?"

"Sure they are, but I have something they don't have. One Sunday afternoon I was asking her questions about her job. She wouldn't tell me much. Then she said that it was a funny kind of doctor, because it cost the patients more to stop seeing him than it did to start. I asked her why and she said the patients talked too much. Then she laughed and it wasn't a nice kind of laugh. She said some day a patient would find a new way to pay him off. She said that she would if she had the guts. And then she wouldn't talk any more. It didn't mean much at the time, but now I've been thinking."

"So!" Rourke said softly. "That is a glove-like fit." His voice deepened. "My dear woman, you have a guilt complex. You can help alleviate it by telling me all . . . Let me think, lad. Shakedown needs proof. Yes, I think I would make records of said confessions, records I could play back. But here's a hitch, lad. Maybe she found the guts for the payoff."

"And maybe somebody else did it, too. But what stacks high in my mind, Mr. Rourke, is that what she said means that he had some hold over her. If she talks to the cops, it just gives her a stronger motive. Maybe she knows where he hid his evidence. But if she tells them, they'll find the stuff Thorne was using against her too."

Rourke nodded. "She hasn't made any statement, according to the papers." He continued, "So the idea of blackmail hasn't hit our minions of the law yet. And it probably won't, so long as the Carse girl keeps her mouth shut. My boy, you show elements of rudimentary intelligence. Now you want to hire somebody to break open the blackmail aspects of the case, eh?"

"You understand, of course, that maybe she knows best. You understand that by meddling you may uncover what will electrocute her for sure. Motive seems to be the weakest aspect of the case, from what I read."

"That's a chance I'll take."

Rourke gave him a long, long look. "You have hired yourself a tanglefoot named Rourke, lad. I will go as easy on the fee as I can. Unfortunate habit of mine. You will want to make your money stretch as far as possible. Assuming the girl didn't kill Thorne, someone else is full of fear and trembling. We must flush him or her out of the brush. The odds against their having recovered the item forcing the payoff is slim. Men like Thorne keep their golden geese well hidden. One person is afraid of paying for murder. A whole group is afraid of Thorne's evidence falling into the hands of some other greedy person.

"You are not working. You can do some of the legwork. We must discover what means were used. Wire recorders need wire. Other types use little phonograph records, or black cylinders. Dress as well as you can and tomorrow visit all local agencies of home and office reproducing equipment. Say you're working on the liquidation of Thorne's estate, checking outstanding bills payable. When you hit paydirt, phone me. Now trot along. Doris is due for another cooler."

At four o'clock the following afternoon, the bookkeeper for Central Radio, a thin

girl with a yellow pencil shoved into mouse-colored hair, said, examining the visible file card:

"Dr. Thorne bought our Ajax Model K. The reels can be used over and over again, you know, once you run them through the magnetic eraser, but I guess he used them for permanent record. No, there's no account outstanding, Mr. Smith. But he did buy quite a few reels."

"May I see one? I'm just curious."

She returned his smile. "Of course. I'll get one out of stock." She brought it back, a black metal spool larger than the spool for a typewriter ribbon, wound tightly with thin shining wire. He hefted it in his palm. It was quite heavy.

"Words on this stuff will last?"

"Forever, I guess, if you keep it away from any magnetism. That will blurr the sound, I believe." She sighed. "Wasn't it horrible about Dr. Thorne? Such a nice man! It's hard to believe that he ever spent five years in prison. Such kind eyes." Her voice hardened. "I hope they don't go soft and let that woman off. It wouldn't be right, would it?"

"A murderer ought to pay," he said.

He thanked her, left and phoned Rourke. Rourke had quiet elation in his tone.

"So we get somewhere, eh? Nice work, kid. Now we know what to find. A cinch they're not at the office. And I've got a hunch a guy like Thorne wouldn't be fond of safety deposit boxes. Our chance is getting to the girl and getting her to talk. She might know."

"They won't let me see her."

"Get hold of a nice crisp fifty, lad. Fold it small, so that the amount shows. There's a matron named Cowan works over there where they've got her. Cowan's got expensive tastes. Go over about seven in the morning. Cowan ought to be on then. Tell her you have a mutual friend named Arden Rourke and let her see the fifty in the palm of your hand. Tell her you'd appreciate it if she'd fix it so that you don't have to sign the book."

* * *

Cowan was a big woman with a white face, pebbled like fieldstone. Keys were hooked over her belt. She had a cup of

black coffee in front of her, breakfast.

There was no change of expression, just a faint narrowing of her eyes as she saw the fifty. She looked down the corridor quickly, then reached out her hand. The folded bill disappeared.

"Come on," she said. "You got no more than fifteen minutes."

"Can we be left alone?"

"What the hell you think you're paying for?"

Tommy went by the tank, following the big woman. There was a chorus of whistles from the girls in the tank. "Why'nt you coming in to see me, honey?"

"Ignore them monkeys," Cowan said stolidly.

"Visitor," Cowan announced flatly as she yanked the lock open. Andra sat on her bed. Johnny stepped in and the door banged shut behind him. Cowan's heavy footsteps receded down the corridor. The cell was dim, with a concession to transient femininity—curtains and even a tired bedspread.

She looked at him and he heard the small sound of the sharp intake of breath. They had her in a gray cotton dress, flat shoes, no makeup. She had tied her hair with a strip of green ribbon.

"No, Tommy," she said, almost as though talking to herself. "No."

"Don't make me waste the time fighting with you. Don't keep telling me no."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because you're supposed to be bad for a nice clean-cut boy like me. You're supposed to be a murderess. Is that enough?"

"They don't want you, Tommy. They don't need you. I don't either. Go away. Run, Tommy, like I told you in the beginning."

He bent over her and picked up her slack hands from her lap. They were cool, and as lifeless as the hands of a corpse. He stood up and squeezed them hard. "Shut up, honey," he said. "Just keep your face shut until spoken to."

"You haven't got a chance of my telling you anything, Tommy."

"Tough kid, aren't you, Andy? Like nails yet. And with rocks in your head. Tell me you killed him. Say it with words. Look at me and tell me you killed the guy."

She shook her head and the tears stood in her eyes.

"So if you didn't, Andy, somebody did. I'm not asking you what happened. If you want to keep it to yourself, that's your business. Did Thorne keep another place? An apartment? Another house? A camp?"

She didn't answer. He took her shoulders and shook her. "Did he? Answer me?"

"I won't tell you anything, Tommy. Stay out of this."

His voice was husky. "You're writing your own ticket then. But I can do one thing. I can tell them just how I stabbed him while he lay there after I knocked him down. I can tell them that."

Her lips were bloodless. "Lance Lake. Stanley Krebb. That was the name he used there."

Cowan unlocked the door. "Better run, mister," she said.

At the door he looked back at Andra. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her hands. They rested on her knees, palms up, fingers slightly curled.

CHAPTER THREE

Joker's Jackpot

ROURKE pulled on the parking brake. "Better leave the heap here and walk it." It was a hundred feet farther down the winding path. Vertical pine siding, dark stained. Nestled in a natural hollow, the lake just beyond. Their footsteps echoed on the porch. Birds chattered at them. A chipmunk ran down a trunk and across to a bigger tree. A distant kicker-boat clattered its harsh sound against the far slope of wooded mountains.

"Nice," Rourke said softly. "Real, real nice. Mr. Stanley Krebb lived good, didn't he?"

Tommy cut the screen with the blade of his pocket knife. Rourke broke a window pane, opened the catch, slid the window up. Rourke was the one who found the city newspaper.

"What do you know? Up here the day he was knocked off. Take the upstairs, lad. Don't overlook a bet. And, if we find anything, unless I'm missing a bet,

that thing there is the gizmo we can play them on. That is, if we can figure out how to work it."

It was an hour, a hopeless, futile hour before Tommy heard Arden Rourke's yell. He raced down the stairs, stumbling, nearly falling in his haste. Arden stood in front of the fireplace. He was pointing.

"See what I see, lad?"

"No."

"Take a good look."

"Oh, I see it. That stone there, you mean. The others are cemented in."

Rourke knelt in the wood ashes. He got a purchase on the edge of the stone and lifted it out, set it aside. The metal box was set back behind a small square of asbestos. Rourke grinned as he lifted the box out. He handed it to Tommy, bent and dusted off his knees. Tommy opened it on the table. Sixteen black spools, all wound with wire.

"Jackpot!" Rourke said heartily. "Maybe I should have looked into the more interesting angles of this business I'm in. The spools there will tell the story, lad. They have to."

Together they puzzled over the recorder. The switch was turned on 'Record' and the spool already threaded gave them a clue as to how to get the others started. Cryptic directions were printed on a slip of paper glued to the base. There were three positions for the master switch. Record, repeat and erase.

Rourke found a secondary control, which would wind up the spool already on the machine. Tommy had natural aptitude for mechanical things. It was he who got the first spool, selected at random, fitted properly.

At first there was a scratching noise, and then a man's deep, mellow voice, with undertones of kindness and patience.

"Now then, Mrs. Rillerton, you keep avoiding the truth, but it's at the bottom of this new hyper-sensitivity you have developed. Just close your eyes and let the words come."

A woman's voice, thin and doubtful. *"But I don't know whether . . . I mean, it doesn't seem to me to be that important. You made me admit that—I'd made a mistake, but . . . I just can't believe that would . . ."*

"Please, I'm only trying to help you."

Take a Powder, Galahad!

"Well . . . all right, then. But I've never told this to a soul. It was when we'd been married three years. George had to go to a convention in Denver. We quarreled before he left. That was before we had any children. I was feeling . . . oh, reckless, I guess. The people next door were named Braythone. We used to golf with them. Mrs. Braythone, quite a pretty little thing, she'd gone to visit her mother.

"I always liked Bill Braythone. Anyway, it was a warm afternoon and I was bored and so I phoned him and asked him if he'd like a quiet drink with a widow. I'd seen him come home early from the office. Do I have to go through all this?"

"With every detail, Mrs. Rillerton. I'll question you if you go too fast."

The shining wire ran through the machine and the inexorable words continued. After the details were over there was the sound of a woman weeping. Thorne cleverly worked her name and address into his comments before the wire went dead.

"Clever," Rourke said harshly. "What a racket!"

The next case started. Much the same thing, only the incident had been only a week before, not years before. The woman did more weeping. And then another. Three cases on a reel. Tommy examined the reels. Each had a tiny strip of adhesive on the side with cryptic numbers written neatly in ink. Some reels had two numbers, most of them three, a few had four. All paying clients.

Tommy could visualize the delicate sales approach. "Why, of course I made a recording of your statements, Mrs. Rillerton! And I insist that Mr. Rillerton listen to it. It will be a complete purging of your guilt complex, once he knows. Of course, if you insist that I keep it from him, the treatments I will be forced to use will be considerably more expensive. Considerably. Shall we say one half-hour appointment each week at—ah—two hundred dollars? Please don't use harsh words, Mrs. Rillerton. They don't become you. Cash, of course."

The next spool was put on. The shining wire spun a net of filth in the room. Rourke cursed softly.

Tommy stood with his back to the room, looking out at the clean water of the lake.

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John D. MacDonald

wondering that a thing like this could have existed in the world. Some of the clients were men. Rourke sat with pencil and paper, noting names.

He had lost track of the reels. One stained story ended. A new one started. The first sound of Andra's voice, taut with emotion, brought him spinning around.

"So what if I know you're a phony?"

"I picked you, Andra," the silky voice said, "because I sized you up as a competent person. Very competent."

"You'd better get to the point, Doctor Thorne."

Rourke reached out a quick hand and turned off the machine. Tommy stepped toward him. "What'd you do that for?"

"Lad, go take a walk. Go down and sit on the shore. Just get out for a little while. I'll call you when it's over."

Tommy saw the unexpected look of kindness and understanding on Rourke's face. He went to the door without a word. He went down to the edge of the lake and skipped flat stones out across the water with all the strength of his arm. The minutes dragged by. Rourke called him, and he went back up the path. Rourke was smiling.

HE CLAPPED Tommy's shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "I can run it through again, but it's quicker to tell you. Thorne steamed open some of Andra's mail. He was a guy to do a trick like that. He caught on to the fact that Andra has a sister, a younger sister named Laura.

"A year and a half ago Laura got into a nasty jam and drew a two-to-five in state prison. Both the girls were sending money home to support their old lady. They've got her in a nursing home in Cleveland. Bad heart. Anyway, the girls managed to keep it from the old lady. Laura sends letters down from the jug and Andra was re-addressing them to the old lady. It looks as though Laura's learned her lesson. But if the old lady finds out and the shock killed her, as Thorne points out on the wire there, it will probably shove the kid sister way down the road.

"That Thorne was a cold operator. He even found out that Andra's co-called big love had married the other girl after the Laura episode scared him off. Honest, lad,

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Thorne wasn't the kind of guy to rest a minute. He had to find some lever to squeeze people with. And that was the lever he used on Andra—the threat of smashing the only two people Andra had left in the world."

Tommy smacked a big fist into his palm. "If somebody hadn't beaten me to it—"

Rourke went on. "And it explains other things. He just ran that wire off to get the facts down. That's why she could know about this place. She couldn't help herself, like the others could, by destroying evidence. It also explains why they decided to go ahead back in town on such a weak case. One little hint to the jury of where the sister is and striking it from the records wouldn't remove that sort of impression."

"Run through the rest of them, Mr. Rourke."

Darkness came before the reels were completed. And they had nothing to go on. Many of the incidents reported in that consulting room were worth murder to hush the mouth of one who would inform.

Rourke turned off the machine. He sighed and said, "I'll never feel quite clean again, lad. Not all the way through. This has been a liberal education."

Tommy fingered the reels scattered on the table. He looked at the dark lake. "Got all the names, Mr. Rourke?" Rourke nodded.

"Then," Tommy said, throwing one spool up and catching it, "want to see the arm on the best center fielder Woodrow High School ever had?"

They took the box out into the dark porch. As Tommy wound up, Rourke caught his arm. "No, lad. I was doing some bad thinking for a few minutes. We've got the nearly hopeless job of finding out which one of these people did it. We'll need the evidence to crack them open, nasty as it may sound. We'll take the spools back to town with us."

Tommy went in to turn off the lights. As he reached for the switch he saw the spool that had been on the machine when they had arrived. He took it off the lamp table and threaded it on the machine.

Rourke came in. "Haven't you had enough of that?"

"There might be something on the be-



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ginning of this one. We didn't try it."

That silky voice. "To whom it may concern. If I should die, someone else will play this back. Today is the second day of October. One of my patients has grown too restless. I am, I confess, a bit frightened of him. Possibly I have pushed him too far. Possibly he needs someone with talent more—ah—professional than mine. He intends to arrive at eight. He says he has news for me. I told him that I expected him to bring an overdue payment. I shall advise him that Miss Carse is upstairs.

"And I shall have a gun, just in case. Reason and quiet conversation will be my best weapons. Thus, if I should happen to die, sooner or later someone will come on this place. Possibly Miss Carse will inform them. Her recent sad news that her mother cannot possibly last more than another month or two will soon put her out of my reach. It has been entertaining to watch her in the throes of love—some sort of grocery clerk she's fallen for. But enough of that.

"For complete information on my murderer, if such he turn out to be, remove loose fireplace stone, take out the box therein and find the wire spool numbered 23-40-54. He is the second case on that spool. I beseech you to listen to all of the other cases also. They provide a liberal education in the social habits of the better classes. This is Stanley Krebb—or should I say Dr. Melvin Thorne—preparing to leave, with a certain amount of confessed trepidation, for an appointment with either death or profit. Quien sabe?"

The sound stopped. They listened for a few moments more and then, as the wire continued in silence, Tommy turned off the recorder.

Rourke ran his thumb down the list of names. He said, "Forty seems to be a Mr. Lewis Jannison. No address. Remember him? The guy who confessed to Thorne about the murder of the little fourth-grade teacher in Wisconsin? No statute of limitations on murder, you know."

Tommy remembered Jannison's halting heavy voice, the dull emphasis on the words as the man had said, "She didn't know what I was going to do until she saw

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my face. Her back was to the cliff. She screamed once before I pushed her and once while she was in the air. It was eighty feet down to the dry creek bed. I didn't even look over."

"From the spools," Rourke said, "he was my favorite fall guy. Murder comes easier the second time, they tell me . . ."

TOMMY was looking out the window and saw her get out of the cab. A little blonde with a hands-off, heads-up look, with hardness around her mouth, with stilt heels and a whistle-bait walk. He watched her come across the sidewalk.

He wanted to take her in his arms. She held her hand out. She didn't move toward a chair. Her hand was cool in his.

"I came to thank you, Tommy."

"Okay, you've thanked me. Sit down, Andy."

"No, Tommy. I haven't time. I'm catching a train. To Cleveland." Her face twisted. "I understand you know everything. It wasn't pretty, was it?"

"Not pretty, Andy. Not any of it. Those two guys, Al and the lieutenant, they're okay. I didn't think so before. They just do a job. They kept Jannison's spool and they didn't get rough when I told them that we'd heaved the other ones into the lake. They went after Jannison. Thorne had sucked the man dry. He'd lost his home and his business and his wife had left him. You didn't see him?"

"No. I waited for word from Thorne. He wouldn't let me keep my date with you and he wouldn't let me phone.

"But I didn't hear anything. When I went down at nine o'clock, Thorne was on the floor the way you saw him. I had no way to prove that anybody had come. What's the use of talking about it any more? Mr. Jannison confessed."

"He confessed. The clincher was finding Thorne's gun in Jannison's rooms. So we don't talk about it any more. I—I thought that—well, I laid in a bottle of wine. The guy said it was good wine."

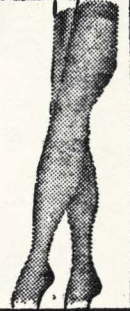
"No, Tommy. No wine with you. No nothing with you. All through, Tommy. This is good-by and thanks again. Good luck to you in whatever you do, Tommy."

"Look, we're all right now."

"No dice. I'm not for you. You know

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what I am now. Do you think I could be a gingham-aproned wife?"

She stood with her chin lifted and her eyes hard. She had used the lipstick a bit too thickly.

He smiled at her. "Andy, you can always say you tried. You can always say you gave me the chance to run."

"Stop kidding yourself, handsome boy."

He said, half to himself, "So it has to be the hard way." His jaw hardened. He cracked his hand against her cheek.

"Get this straight!" he said. "It's you. Don't you think I know what you are? How really good and strong and honest you are?" He shook her until her teeth chattered. "Don't fool with me, honey. I'm marrying you. Do I have to half kill you to get that through your dumb blonde skull!"

He had hit harder than he planned. Her underlip began to puff up. She gave him a long, dazed look, and then came blindly into his arms. He sat in the big chair and held her until the great tearing sobs ended. Then he kissed her gently.

"Now say yes," he said.

"Yes, Tommy," she said, low.

"Marriage will be boring?"

"Never, never, never."

He looked at her. No hardness in the mouth. No sardonic glint in the gray-blue eyes. "Gingham-apron type?"

"I—I think so. I never tried."

"Then we better check the trains. We'll have to get a ticket for me, too. I want your old lady to get a look so she can congratulate you."

"I want to be a real wife, Tommy. Where's your suitcase?"

Tommy slouched in the chair and grinned. "Back part of the closet."

She lugged the suitcase out and blew the dust off it. A strand of the blonde hair was across her forehead. She opened the suitcase on the floor and knelt by it as she neatly stacked the shirts in it.

"All packed," she said at last.

She stepped out of the high-heeled shoes and came back and threw herself into his lap, driving the wind out of him. She held him with her arms tightly around his neck and said, her lips touching his ear, "Darling, no more running."

THE END

Dreamer With a Gun

(Continued from page 63)

hand accidentally felt a sheaf with a knife in it. It was light and thin and I took out the knife. When he entered, he heard me and rushed in my direction. Luckily he misjudged and went passed me . . . and it was then I—I just struck and struck—I then ran down the steps to the beach."

Jerry looked up. Her eyes were two brown circles sinking in water. The color had left her lips and the lipstick stuck on like a decal. Jerry slipped a hand on my arm and turned to me, appealing. "What are you going to do about it?"

"You mean about the beach affair? Nothing. The cops think it was a gun squabble. So it was. The hired killer should have been taken out of society a long time ago. But there are angles to everything. It usually adds up right in the end."

Jerry started twisting the ends of her coat jacket. I offered her a smoke and she eased up.

"I met uncle down on the beach," she muttered through the smoke. "He had started to drive away, heard the shots and realized I was still in the cottage, so he went down to the beach and was working his way back. I told him and he had me go back up to the car to wait.

She was recovering her composure and I liked it that way.

"He intended to work his way back," I added. "Because he figured the killer was squealing on him for five C's. So he made plans to get the killer out at the beach, but I busted it up for him. Your uncle was no rosebud, Jerry. Don't forget that."

Jerry moved in and laid her head on my shoulder. She purred, "I knew I'd like your type, Jimmy. You know all the angles, don't you?"

I didn't reply. I knew there were a lot of angles to this living and let live deal, but I wasn't going to grow old trying to figure them out. Instead I bent down and kissed her, and to hell with the idea that this dame in my arms had probably hired me as lead-bait for her sister's wildness.

THE END



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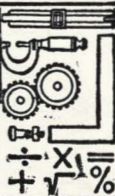
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Mark Wilson

Continued from page 78)

his hand. A man with trousers didn't have to wear a coat to hide a gun.

Vanessi was trapped between Lewiston and me. He came to his feet in a crouch and darted for the protection of a column. I shot him in the left leg and he went down on his hands and knees and crawled. I shot him in the left shoulder and he tried to wiggle on his belly. Lewiston shot him in the back of the head and Vanessi no longer cared about escape.

Only the tinkling fountain's uninterrupted melody broke the silence of the patio. Then I heard another sound, roaring and pulsating, coming closer and closer, and I looked up. A huge plane flew low overhead, gaining altitude. The plane for Havana. I followed it with my eyes until it vanished toward the horizon where the black clouds of the coming storm were gathered.

Dot Lewiston came down from the balcony and wiped the blood from her father's lips. She smiled at him proudly, then came to me.

"I suppose you'll go back now."

I looked at her blankly for a moment. "Yes, I'll go back. I hope it isn't too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To turn. If I get the breaks, I may be able to square myself. What happened today should help. And if things don't work out, maybe I don't deserve—"

"I don't understand."

I didn't try to explain. I held her arms tightly and said, "Listen. Planes should be flying north. If I leave right away, I could be in Mattsburg sometime tonight."

Her face fell disappointedly. "I was hoping you'd stick around for a few—"

"But I'll be back. I'm on a two-week vacation."

"Hurry," she whispered. She kissed me for the second time, lingeringly.

"Don't worry." I turned and walked away quickly.

I had a hunch that everything was going to turn out all right. But even if I lost, I knew one thing—there would be no more turns in the path I meant to follow from now on.

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