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NOV

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

**DEATH IN
ROUND NUMBERS**
A MARQUIS OF BROADWAY STORY
by **JOHN LAWRENCE**



**THE CORPSE
IN THE
DARKROOM**
by
WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES

**THE
TATTOOED
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A 'NEEDLE MIKE' NOVELETTE
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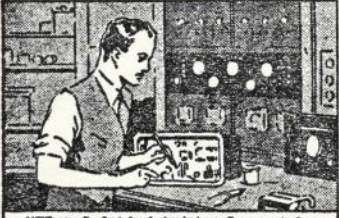
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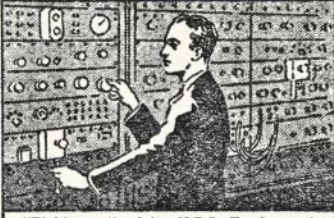
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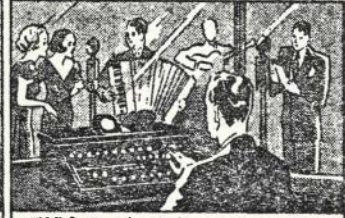
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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 28

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From *The Tattooed Combination*.

Watch for the December Issue On the Newsstands November 4th

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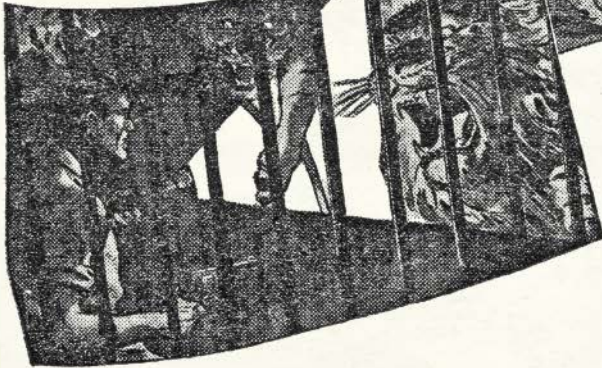
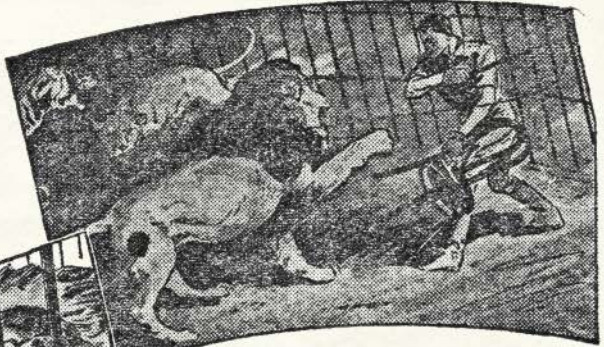
"MURDEROUS 'JUNGLE-FEVER' WAS IN THEIR EYES"

CLYDE BEATTY, CAGED WITH SNARLING JUNGLE CATS, FACES
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① "It was one of those days when you know something's going to happen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.

pen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.



② "The animals had been sullen during the matinee. They came tumbling into the big cage for the evening performance with that murderous 'jungle-fever' still in their eyes, squalling, spitting and making passes. If they once drew blood it would be just too bad!

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The December Thrill Docket

THE *Quick and the Dead*—that's the title of Carroll John Daly's new novel-length Race Williams action thriller in next month's DIME DETECTIVE. It concludes that hard-as-nails dick's adventures as emissary of *The People vs. Crime*.

Iris Parsons, alias Jane Blake—"Dirty" McGrath and his lovely daughter, Ione—Richard Daniel Havermore—Jerry—The Men in Black—and that none-such of crime-fiction, Race Williams himself, will all be back in this climactic complete midnight murder masterpiece.

If you don't agree, after you've read the yarn in the December issue, that we've managed to wind up the year by hitting a new high for excitement in a detective-story magazine, we miss our guess. The last chapter, in which the lights that never failed begin to flicker their doom messages to Race in time to let him start shooting the works on the kingpins of crimeland, is the fastest piece of action-writing we've spotted in years!

Then Frederick C. Davis brings back that sand-paper-voiced crime commentator of the kilocycles, Keyhole Kerry, in *The Ghoul Hangs High*. Radio's most popular broadcaster has harkened to the siren call of Hollywood and hied himself off to filmland to star in a talkie. Between doing his daily stint before the mike, and sweating for hours on a sound stage under a battery of Kleigs it's no wonder he has a nervous breakdown when murder hits the lot and a body-snatcher makes off with the corpse of the darling of the silver screen.

And D. L. Champion returns to *Lock the Death House Door* in another gripping novelette about Inspector Allhoff, the most hated copper on the police force.

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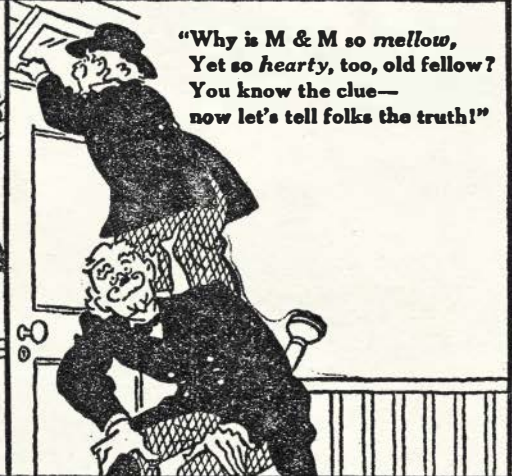
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DEATH IN ROUND NUMBERS

A Marquis of Broadway Story

By **John Lawrence**

Author of "Twelve Morticians Named Green,"
etc.

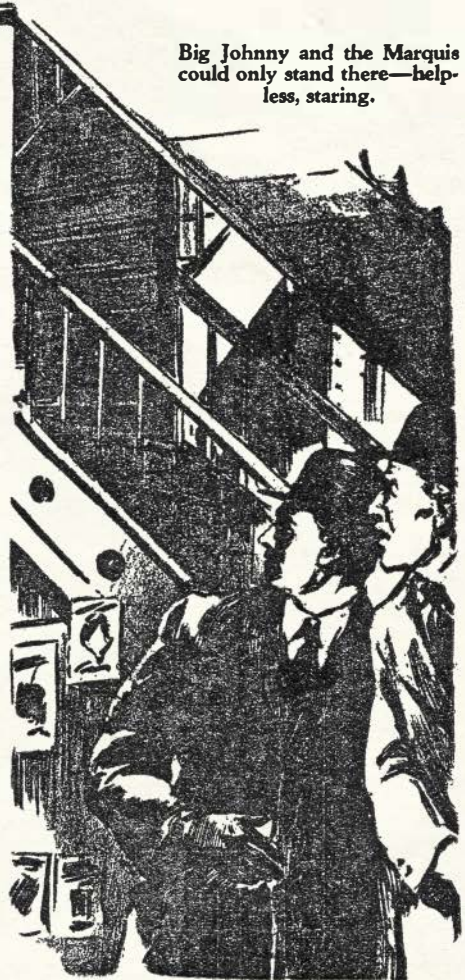
Big Johnny and the Marquis
could only stand there—help-
less, staring.

It was the first time in the career of the little czar of Manhattan's Main Stem that he'd had murder committed under his nose without being able to do a damn thing to prevent it. When those two thugs hoisted the old Englishman over the "El" platform-railing and popped him into the street below, Lieutenant Marquis could only stand and watch. It wasn't till the follow-up of the murder sequence that he was able to do his stuff—lift the lid off Broadway and clamp it down on Wall Street all in twenty-four short hours.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man in the Top Hat

HARRY DEROSIER saw the waiter bring the little envelope to the girl's table in the 44 Club. He was standing, staring, in the portiered



entrance to the glittering black-and-silver supper-room at about midnight, mentally humming accompaniment to the ultra-suave swing of the orchestra. He had been there upwards of fifteen minutes, his washed-out blue eyes intent in unstinted admiration of this same girl. If it had not been Derosier—if another member of the Broadway Squad rather than the stringy, sun-bleached-looking sergeant had been covering this part of the district—he would probably have been gone long before it happened. The call at the 44 Club was merely routine.

Others of the Marquis' Squad were wandering idly through other segments of the district according to custom, on no specific assignment. This went on all the time—the constant combing and re-combing of the section. A whisper of gossip, an incautious tongue loosened by liquor and enjoyment, a glimpsed conference between individuals otherwise never seen together, an angry gesture, a furtive hand-squeeze—obscure, fantastic little items of no apparent importance—any one might, months later, become a sharp little beam of light. By the incessant, painstaking, collecting of such wisps, by patiently and carefully filing them away in his squad's collective mind, the Marquis managed to keep tab on Manhattan's biggest potential trouble spot, maintain his iron rule over the Tenderloin.

The only pertinent fragments available to Derosier in the 44 Club were concerned with Jack Whitelaw—the Third, to give him his full name—who was with the girl. Another man sat at their table—a gray-haired, kindly, vaguely military-looking Englishman. They were all in full evening dress—tails. A casual question or two of Charlie Pian, manager of the club, had brought forth, first, that the blond, sullen Whitelaw had not been seen around Broadway for six months, was supposed to have reformed and gone to work in Wall Street. Second, that both

the girl and the fine-looking, clear-skinned, elderly Englishman were unknown in the club.

This was the type of data that Derosier had been sent out to glean. Jack Whitelaw III was an authentic millionaire's son, a lavish and regular—until six months ago—patron of Broadway establishments, and anything about him was of interest to the Broadway Squad. However, the susceptible sergeant had fully noted all this and should have been on about his business a full ten minutes before the episode of the note. He was, frankly, loitering, absorbed in watching the girl, unwilling to take his eyes from her really striking beauty.

SHE was small, demure, dainty, in a long black-velvet evening gown. Her jet-black hair was waved smoothly back to a crescent roll behind her small, poised head. Her midnight-blue eyes were long-lashed, sparkling, alive in a delicately smooth little face. Her skin was the color of milk. There was a rhinestone ornament against her onyx hair, matching the single strand of glittering stones that girdled her tiny waist and was the only ornament on the sweeping black gown. Her small arms and shoulders were smoothly rounded, and her breasts were two tight breath-taking curves under the tight bodice. Over it all, she had a vaguely little-girl look.

However, as the matter of the note came up, there was nothing little-girl about her perfect, calm poise.

A waiter—having literally circled the table awkwardly, twice—finally sidled up. There was no doubt that he knew he was committing an unforgivable bloomer. He almost prostrated himself, bowing again and again apologetically, before he eventually, hesitantly, proffered the small white envelope.

Derosier became a little more the observer, a little less the nostalgic watcher.

Openly sending notes to accompanied ladies in top-flight night clubs was the act of a fool. When the lady's escort was a millionaire's son, it was the act of a damn fool and an ignorant one. Millionaire's sons were a vanishing race; there were not enough of them left to go around. Those that did go around were—to club managers like Charlie Pian—to be cossetted, nurtured, indulged, even assisted should they care to take a few pokes at fellow-guests.

And judging by the dark flush on the blond youth's sullen face as he stumbled erect and snatched for the note, he was apt to care to.

It did not for a minute occur to Derosier that he should interfere. Cabaret brawls of this sort were far beneath the dignity of the Broadway Squad. He leaned a shoulder comfortably against the entrance-jamb, eyes bright, awaiting developments with interest. His only nebulous thought—if he had one—was the bright little hope that any ensuing mixup might possibly leave the girl without anyone in shape to take her home.

Unfortunately, he had the scenario completely wrong. Even as the tipsy blond youth ripped unsuccessfully at the envelope, the military, ruddy-faced, gray-haired Englishman reached over his shoulder and took it from his fumbling fingers, patting Whitelaw's shoulder reassuringly.

He stripped the envelope from a stiff white card swiftly, while the lobster-faced Whitelaw swayed, running a pudgy hand through his snaky blond curls.

Reading it, the elderly man smiled, showing white teeth.

Derosier felt vaguely disappointed. His interest, momentarily, began to wane.

The elderly man put an arm around the blond youth's shoulders, forced him back into his chair. He tapped his own shirt-front with a corner of the card, looked round for the long-vanished waiter.

He stood, half leaning over the table while he made some long explanation to the other two, laid his napkin down and made a little bow, pocketing the note. Then he stepped round the table, bowed again and turned and headed for the door where Derosier stood.

Derosier casually turned his back, idled over and leaned elbows on the checkroom counter. As the mutinous little red-headed checkroom girl started to say something he told her bluntly: "Shut up."

The military-looking man came out, hesitated a second, then turned down the hall. He had the note in his hand again and his head was bent. He walked more and more slowly, till he finally lagged to a stop facing the door at the far end of the hall.

Presently he raised his head, looked up, as though unsure of himself, turned to look along the L of the hall, a little frantically.

Derosier's curiosity rekindled. The old man's ruddy face had, in the moment that his back was turned, gone gray, strained. His brown eyes were hot, frightened. And even as he turned back to the door in front of him, he took a handkerchief from his sleeve, ran it with trembling fingers around his face and inside his collar.

A WAITER, laden with a tray, came suddenly out of the door and Derosier saw the kitchens beyond. The old man had to step back. Then, with a quick stiffening of his shoulders as though bracing himself, the Englishman strode through the door just before it swung closed.

For three minutes, Derosier tried blankly to figure out what it was all about. He had no luck.

Another waiter hurried out of the kitchen door. Derosier recognized him as the bearer of the note. He said, "Hey! You!" and started down the hall. The

weasel-faced waiter turned a frightened face, stopped, wiped the back of his hand across his lips.

Derosier pushed him down the arm of the hall and stood him against the wall. "What's the name of that girl you handed the note to?"

The waiter swallowed. "It—it wasn't for the girl, Sarge. I—the guy just told me to slip it to the party with Jack Whitelaw and I made a mistake."

"Where did you get the note?"

"I—it was a fellow in the alley. I was settin' out garbage for the chef and this guy was out there. He—he made me take it in."

"Made you? How?"

The waiter swallowed again. "He—he called me out. He knew my name, see? He showed me his rod in one hand, a saw-buck in the other."

"Who was he?"

"I—gosh, I dunno, Sarge. It was dark and I couldn't—"

Derosier's hands went up to the other's ears. There was no change in the rather stupid expression on his long, droopy face. He palmed the waiter's ears and wrenched. The waiter cried out in agony and fell to his knees.

"My God! Leggo, Sarge. Al—Al Corcoran."

Derosier cuffed him absently, let him scamper away.

He pulled thoughtfully at his chin for a second, then turned back and walked again to the checkroom, his eyes on the front door. He began to think he had something. Al Corcoran, a deadly little gunman, was news any time. He was one of the few of his type who were tough enough to play a lone hand—to be on hire for the proper people at the proper time but to belong to none of them.

HE pushed through the door, went down the steps under the club's red canopy, turned west and looked along at

the alley entrance, a black little slot, two houses away, that L'd around to the back door of the club.

Just beyond the alley, a thinnish, wiry dark man was walking quickly away. He had large bucket-ears and wore a long camel's-hair coat, belted and pleated, a green pork-pie hat, under which black hair showed. He had his hands in his pockets. He could have been Al Corcoran and he could have come out of the alley.

For a minute, Derosier could not decide if any action was called for. He stood fingering his close-clipped blond mustache, vaguely troubled, watching the camel's-hair coat disappear down the street.

The matter passed out of his hands there.

The doorman hurried out at the top of the 44 Club stairs and called down: "Sarge—oh, Sarge! You down there? Hey—phone! Lieutenant Marquis."

His forehead knotted, Derosier went back up. The elderly Englishman was standing by the checkroom now. He was just buttoning his black topcoat. His gloves, stick and opera hat were in one hand. He coughed apologetically and asked the headwaiter the location of the men's-room. He put on his opera hat as he went back up the hall and turned along the L-arm. Derosier, with his hand on the knob of the manager's office, watched him with uncertain eyes.

The Marquis' soft voice said over the phone: "Harry—they're raiding Goodman's on Fifty-second in fifteen minutes. I want you to go up there and hang around. See what happens. I don't want to show."

Derosier hesitated. "O. K., Marty, but I wish you'd send someone to take on what I've got. I've a hunch there's a damn funny one here."

After a minute, the Marquis said: "I'll come over."

FIVE minutes later the Marquis' dapper, blocky little black-clad figure came unhurriedly through the door. His small, black-gloved hands were flat in the pockets of his expensive Chesterfield coat. There was a black silk muffler tight at his throat. Under the brim of his imported hard hat, his round, weathered-pink cheeks and shaded, deep-set China-blue eyes were, as always, placid and deceptively cheerful-looking. Johnny Berthold, big, shaggy, his too-small hat on the back of his thick blond head, lumbered at the Marquis' heels.

Derosier unloaded his information and went out.

As the Marquis strolled over to the vantage spot in the portiered entrance foyer, Big Johnny growled: "So what? What are we supposed to do? Harry's getting dopey."

They almost collided with Jack Whitelaw and the vivid little brunette.

The playboy's irritated eyes glowered as all four came to a sudden halt. Then his blond face brightened. "Hey! Marty! Remember me? Jack Wh—"

The Marquis' vermilion lips smiled and he let his gloved hand be pumped. "How are you, Jack?"

"Hey—" Whitelaw pulled him around to face the girl. "Martha—meet Marty Marquis. Lieutenant Marty Marquis—the boss of Broadway. Marty—this is Miss Shaughnessey."

The Marquis uncovered his crisply curling, shiny black hair and bowed over his hat, mumbled his pleasure.

The girl spoke with a delightful, clipped British accent, said she was charmed.

The Marquis asked: "How's Wall Street, Jack?"

"Fine." The playboy was behind the girl. He put his hand up, spoke around the back of it in a confidential undertone. "Getting better right along. This is my partner's daughter. He never

peeped about her—and bang she arrives from England." He performed an athletic wink.

The pair got their clothes from the checkroom. Evidently they were not waiting for the elderly man, or thought he had left. They waved good-bye to the Marquis, went out, preceded by the doorman.

Big Johnny growled: "Well, let's get goin'. That damned Harry! He sees the little babe and right away tries to cook up a story that'll let him hang around her."

The Marquis did not move. "Take it easy. We might as well have a look at this Englishman. I suppose it's the girl's father."

"Aw now, Marty—surely you know Harry—"

"We haven't anything else to do."

After three minutes of waiting, Big Johnny rasped a thumb across his chin. "Hey—that Al Corcoran angle is kind of funny. I bet I know a canary that could tell me who he's mobbed up with if—"

The elderly, dignified man in opera hat and black coat was coming down the hall. He was stocky, but trim. His clear skin and face, a dignified mask, looked as though it might have seen much tropical sun.

They followed him with their eyes till he was out the door, then casually moved after him.

They paused at the top of the steps, long enough to see him make an impatient gesture as the doorman tried to hold open a cab door for him. He said, without any trace of accent, English or otherwise, "No thanks. I'll walk," and turned away.

They stood at the foot of the steps, watching him walk with leaden feet, eastward, toward Sixth Avenue.

"Where the hell's he going?" Big Johnny mumbled. "There's nothing over that way."

"We might as well see," the Marquis said. "What can we lose?"

THEY were forty or fifty yards behind the elderly man when he reached the corner of Sixth. He came to a stop, dug out his card again and scanned it in the light from the drug-store windows on the corner. Then he looked up at the elevated tracks that loomed high overhead. He looked slowly both ways, following the tracks with his eyes.

Presently, he turned south, walked slowly, dejectedly.

When they had followed him almost down to the corner of Forty-second, Big Johnny said, "Hey—he's going to take the elevated," and they slowed to a stop against the building fronts.

There was nothing wrong with Johnny's guess. The opera-hatted man turned up the long flight of stairs, climbed slowly. The stairs were open and they could watch him till he reached an elbow bend that turned him—still climbing—into the body of the structure.

The light was faint on the platform high above, but the opera hat was distinctive enough so that they spotted him as he emerged. He stood with his back to the railing, at a point directly above where the elbow of the open stairs stuck out.

The thunder of an approaching train began to shake the tracks.

Big Johnny said: "Well, so what?"

"Nothing, I guess."

They watched the train as it swept in sight. A few figures started to mill around on the platform above. Queerly, the Marquis was experiencing a sensation of relief. He had, somehow, been infected by the hunch that had worried Derosier. He had half expected the elderly man to disrupt the carefully preserved peace of his district.

As the thundering train shuddered to a grinding stop and the gates slammed open, he said: "Well, whatever he's going

to do, he's taking it out of the district, thank God. Let's go."

They had turned northward again, had taken one step, when the yell burst from Big Johnny. "My God—look!"

The Marquis' eyes whipped back up to where the top-hatted man had been standing.

He was still there—but he was not alone. He was between two wrestling, struggling figures. He had his back to the rail, and, even as they looked, he screamed hoarsely.

As though they were controlled by strings, the Marquis and Big Johnny swung back, took one step and stopped—helpless, staring.

For an instant, the whirling black blur of bodies above was indistinguishable—and then a white oval suddenly shot over the railing. Shaughnessey screamed again as he was thrown. The two dark blurs that were his assailants dived for the train. Shaughnessey got out one more strangled cry as he hurtled downwards, arms and legs flailing. By a seeming miracle, he dived straight downward at the elbow of the iron stairs, struck there. He seemed to hold the railing for a minute, then slowly slid off. He fell like a sack of meal the remaining thirty feet to the pavement below, slammed down with a horrible *thwack* and lay still.

CHAPTER TWO

Three-Hundred-Grand Guarantee

AS he raced toward the motionless blur on the sidewalk, cold fury swept the Marquis. With elections coming along he couldn't afford to have a major crime in his district. It was not till he was almost at the body that he had a sudden stabbing thought for the dainty little black-haired girl whom this would strike.

He rapped over his shoulder at Big Johnny: "Get into a phone booth fast and

hold that 'El' train at the next station."

Big Johnny flung one glance at the now racing train overhead, threw himself for the corner cigar store. Before he could dive inside, the Marquis had dropped down beside the motionless Shaughnessey, snatched at his pulse. He yelled at the big shaggy blond detective: "And get an ambulance! He's still alive!"

Miraculously, the man's pulse still was beating. The Marquis whipped his pencil flashlight from his inside pocket, sprayed light. The elderly man's face was scraped raw on one side. His shirt was a mass of blood. One arm was doubled under him in such a way that it had to be broken. One trouser leg hung open and raw, bruised flesh showed underneath. He was abraded horribly all over and blood oozed from a gash in his head. His ruddy face was the color of dough. Yet—he still lived.

The Marquis spotted the crumpled bit of white in his hand, the keycase lying beside it. Working swiftly, he snatched away the crushed, bloodstained card, was standing up, pocketing keycase and card, as the first of the streaming crowd arrived.

A patrolman on post was, fortunately, at the head of the racing mob. The Marquis rapped at him, "Keep the crowd back! He's alive—ambulance coming," and backed through the closing swarm of curious.

He spun and hastened to the cigar store, almost collided with Big Johnny. The blond detective wailed: "The fool didn't answer his phone—until it was too late. The crowd was already getting off when I got hold of him."

The Marquis cursed. "You got the ambulance?"

"Yes—it's on the way. How in God's name did he stay alive?"

The Marquis was examining the keycase. There were six keys, a celluloid marker asking the finder to return to

James Shaughnessey, care of Shaughnessey, Whitelaw & Company, Wall Street.

The crumpled card was typewritten and read—

I said midnight, big shot. My messenger is waiting in the alley outside the kitchen for the dough. Go out and see him—and God help both of you if you hand me another stall. If I'm going to have to sue, neither of you will be around to see it. I guarantee that.

There was no signature.

The Marquis' eyes were thin, shiny. He bit at Berthold: "Get hold of Asa McGuire and get him here in a prowler car, fast. He's just over at Times Square."

When Big Johnny had run in and phoned, come out again, the Marquis clipped orders. "Get hold of one of the other boys and have him catch up with young Jack Whitelaw."

"Pinch him?"

"Hell, no. Keep him from being murdered. This looks like the same party was after him, too. And get hot on that canary that knows who Al Corcoran is playing with, as soon as you get to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yeah. You're riding the ambulance with Shaughnessey."

So many sirens were knifing through the side streets by now that it was impossible to tell when Asa McGuire arrived, till the chubby red-headed detective ran over and snatched at the Marquis' arm.

The Marquis spun, handed him the keycase. "Get down there and see if you can find anything. It looks like Shaughnessey owed somebody money and wouldn't pay. It may not have anything to do with the firm, but the chances are that it has."

"Right."

Two white-coated internes were bend-

ing over the prone figure now, while the nightsticks of half a dozen patrolmen kept the crowd back. The Marquis elbowed his way in and asked: "What's his condition, doc?"

"Hello, Marty. We can't tell for sure. Concussion of the brain, maybe a fractured skull, arm broken in three places, half his skin scraped off, and maybe internal injuries."

"Will he live?"

The interne shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see how he lived this far. Depends on his skull and the internal injuries. Nothing else will kill him."

"One of my men will ride with you in case he gets conscious."

"He's not likely to, but fill your hat."

Alone, on a corner, the Marquis watched with smoldering eyes as the crowd cleared away behind the clanging ambulance. He spent three minutes in searching debate where to throw his own weight. Big Johnny Berthold, for all his apparent clumsiness, was a shrewd, quick-thinking detective. He could be trusted to handle the hospital end. If his stool-pigeon could divulge the name of Al Corcoran's current employer, the whole matter might reach a swift conclusion right there. Whoever Johnny picked out could be counted on to take every possible care of Jack Whitelaw. There were no duds among the Marquis' twenty-two handpicked, conscienceless men. He could never have kept the world's greatest thieves' paradise under control if there had been.

His shrewd analytical mind picked out two more lines to open up. He walked quickly across to the phone booth in the cigar store and called the radio-room at headquarters.

"I want Al Corcoran for questioning. He's got an Illinois record a mile long. You can get his description from the picture-gallery. Bear down on it, Mike."

He called the Alien Bureau and spoke

to Inspector Carideo. "A man named Shaughnessey is in business in Wall Street. I think he's an alien—or was. His firm name is Shaughnessey and Whitelaw—"

"Sure. I know who you mean. I looked him up for Whitelaw, Senior, a year ago, when the youngster was first going in business with him. I'll have to dig it out of the files."

"I'll be over later."

When he emerged from the cigar store, two white-wings, surrounded by a sprinkling of morbid loafers, were cleaning the sidewalk where Shaughnessey had lain. The Marquis decided to go down to the old man's offices in Wall Street. There might be something there to make the picture more clear.

FIFTEEN minutes later, a sleepy elevator operator deposited him on the thirtieth floor of the Security National Bank Building, far above the black, deserted canyon of Wall. He was facing the only lighted door in the darkened hall. Gold-leaf on its ground-glass said: *Shaughnessey & Whitelaw—Foreign & Obsolete Securities.*

When he knocked, Asa McGuire came to let him into the crisp, modern little honeycomb of blue, walnut, and cream—a suite of half a dozen offices.

"Anything?" the Marquis asked.

"Come here."

McGuire led him across the waiting-room, through a room with a tremendous flat desk and dozens of telephones, to a walnut door marked: *Mr. Shaughnessey.* It was a trim, blue-rugged little private office with a flat-topped, paper-littered walnut desk. The drawers of the desk hung open.

McGuire picked a letter from the top of a pile and handed it over. The Marquis read—

Dear Shaughnessey:

This is the last warning. You birds are

not going to get away with this. I don't know why you think you are. As a last resort, I can always go into court—and I can still collect if either or both of you are no longer in our midst. Get it? The deadline is tomorrow midnight. Three hundred and thirteen thousand dollars—cash or certified check—or by God, I'll take you to pieces.

The initials that signed it were illegible.

The Marquis said: "Get Alonzo of the Wall Street Squad over here as fast as you can." And, after the chubby red-head had phoned, "What's this thing all about? Are we into another of these crazy stock-market things?"

"Apparently. As near as I can make it, Shaughnessey pulled a bloomer in a deal. He bought four hundred bonds from a South American firm, sold them to somebody called the Peerless Trading Corporation—with a guarantee. The guarantee was that the firm here would buy back the bonds from this Peerless outfit at any time within a year, at the same price. About a month ago, Peerless started asking them to do it. They—Shaughnessey rather—wouldn't do it. This Peerless, whoever it is, sounds like he didn't want to go to court and was trying to scare it out of them."

"Why wouldn't they pay?"

They had to wait till the slight little Latin, Alonzo, arrived, for the answer to that question.

AFTER he'd looked over various letters, prowled the bookkeeping department of the firm, Alonzo said: "They wouldn't pay because they couldn't pay. There's apparently about fifty thousand dollars cash in the firm and that's all.

"They bought those bonds, by wire, from a house called Fay and Fernandez in Buenos Aires. Then sold them to the Peerless outfit. They guaranteed them, as McGuire says. They had no business

guaranteeing them. Their guarantee was worth nothing. And this Peerless Trading must be a fool. He should have investigated the guarantee when he made the deal. Whoever he is, he doesn't know anything about Wall Street."

After a minute, the Marquis said: "Is it crooked?"

"No—just dumb. This Shaughnessey and Whitelaw must be babes in the wood to pull one like this. They've made themselves liable—there's no possible question about that—for upwards of three hundred thousand dollars. They've got just under fifty thousand with which to meet it. They'll have to go bankrupt."

"There's no way they could go back and pry the money out of this Fay and Fernandez in Buenos Aires?"

"Don't be stupid. Fay and Fernandez didn't guarantee anything. Shaughnessey wired them a bid for the bonds—San Pedro Match 8s of 41—and they accepted it. A perfectly ordinary transaction. It was Shaughnessey and Whitelaw who took it on themselves to guarantee the bonds—probably overanxious to make the eleven-thousand profit. Besides, from this letter, Fay and Fernandez are no longer even in business down there."

The Marquis began to pace up and down.

After a minute he said: "A couple of sheep, trying to buck Wall Street. They wind up owing three hundred thousand and no way to pay. The party they owe it to doesn't know beans about Wall Street either, and doesn't believe they can't pay. Is that right?"

"In a nutshell."

One of the phones in the outer office rang. Asa McGuire jumped off the desk and went out to try and locate it.

The Marquis asked the Wall Street expert: "How would you find out who was behind this Peerless Trading Company?"

"Various ways. I'll handle it for you—

though it may take quite a little while.”

“Make it as fast as you can.”

Asa McGuire came back in. “For you, Marty. It’s Johnny, at the hospital.”

THE Marquis went quickly out to the phone on the little information desk in the waiting-room, picked up the instrument. Then a startled look came into his eyes and he laid it down softly. He turned back to the office he had just left and told Asa McGuire in an undertone: “Get on one of those other phones, Ace, and trace this call. Johnny doesn’t know I’m here—doesn’t know where I am. Nobody knows where I am.”

McGuire whistled, dived for one of the myriad phones in the trading-room.

The Marquis walked back out to the waiting-room and answered: “Hello.”

“Marty? This is Johnny.”

“Yeah, Johnny. Did he spill any more?”

The voice was a little surprised. “What? Who?”

“Shaughnessey. Did he babble any more about this Peerless Trading Corp. . . .”

There was a sudden catch of breath. The phone was hung up in his ear.

He walked back in and looked questioningly at Asa.

The red-head’s face was worried, irritated as he shook his head. “Couldn’t get action. Hey—who the hell do you suppose it was?”

The Marquis’ eyes were thin, swift thought running behind them. After another minute, he said: “Maybe we can find out.”

He picked up a phone and called Carideo at the Alien Bureau. “Did you locate that stuff on Shaughnessey for me, Joe?”

“Yeah. I can give you a carbon copy of the report.”

“Will you send somebody down to the front door with it? I’ll be passing by

there in a few minutes and I’m kind of moving fast.” He hung up.

“When we ride down in the elevator,” he told McGuire, “you stand behind the operator and don’t come out when I do. Let me get ahead of you a little, then you join the parade.”

“Parade? You mean—Good night! Is someone tailing you?”

“I can’t think of any other way anybody would know where I am.”

McGuire whistled.

The gloomy Alonzo, still huddled over the books and papers on the desk, said: “This is a mess. There’ll be hell to pay. It ought to be reported to the Securities Commission right away.”

“Go ahead and report it,” the Marquis said. “And leave word for me at McCreagh’s theater-ticket agency if you get a line on who is behind that Peerless. It may break a murder, so do what you can.”

“Yeah. O. K.”

As they rode down, the Marquis told the elevator operator what he was to do, and said to McGuire: “I don’t know why anybody would tail me, except to make sure that I’m keeping clear of something they don’t want me in. It’s a weak guess, but I can’t think of anything else. If it was the killer, he might have made a wild guess, but God knows why he’d call me. It’s a good bet that somebody’s watching me. If we can nab him, I’ll give him a course of sprouts that’ll make an oyster talk.

“I’ll walk over to headquarters from here. It isn’t far, but it ought to be far enough to let you spot him. And don’t be afraid to take a chance with your gun if you have to. We want this baby bad.”

When they rejoined finally on the steps of police headquarters, McGuire swore: “If there was anybody taking your dust, he’s a marvel. I didn’t catch a breath of him.”

The Marquis absently stuffed the Alien

Squad's report in his pocket, looked back at the towering, dark canyons he had traversed. "Well, we can't slow up on his account," he decided after a minute. "I just phoned Johnny at the hospital and I've got to get up there."

"Shaughnessey come to?"

"No. But young Whitelaw is there, and the girl. This picture isn't all clear yet and maybe they can fill me in. If there's anybody shadowing me, he'll have to wait, that's all."

On the way up, the Marquis read Shaughnessey's dossier.

The elderly, military-looking victim had been a lot of places, done a lot of things—yet there did not seem to be any place in his history where he would have picked up much Wall Street lore. He had been with the British army in Egypt, holding a captain's commission. That had held him for several years, till he finally resigned in Egypt. Since then he had been in East Africa, in India, in South America, acting as guide to safaris here and there, catching wild animals for a circue, performing in circuses. He had interested himself in real-estate ventures in various South American cities, including a gigantic scheme to build golf courses in and around Buenos Aires. The scheme had evidently fizzled out, but before it had, Shaughnessey apparently had been paid off.

Queerly, there was no mention of a daughter—or even of a wife.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunman's Alibi

WHEN the Marquis and McGuire walked into the towering Mercy Hospital, they were directed to the second floor. The minute they stepped from the elevator, Big Johnny Berthold spotted nem. He was on his way into one of the anterooms but swung back, came hurrying

toward them with a slip of paper in his hand.

"I got something," he greeted them. "I got hold of that pigeon. He swears he don't know who Al Corcoran is working for now, but he give me two or three names that he's done jobs for during the past couple of years. Is that worth anything?"

"It could be," the Marquis said and read the slip.

The names were not uninteresting. One was that of a parson who ran a Bowery mission, broadcasting appeals for funds over the radio. One was the owner of a string of small bars where pulchritude was the main commodity. One was a Greek curio dealer, who ran an exclusive Madison Avenue shop and who, to the Marquis' belief, had amassed a fortune in smuggling narcotics, and who now contented himself with acting as banker for various underworld enterprises.

"Where's young Whitelaw?" he asked Johnny as he pocketed the slip.

"Down there. There's two waiting-rooms on this floor. The girl's there, too."

"How's Shaughnessey?"

"No change. They think he's going to pull through."

The Marquis went into the waiting-room. Jack Whitelaw, his blond face damp and pasty, was standing. His eyes were red-rimmed, sobered now. The dark-haired girl was sitting on the edge of a chair, in an ermine cape, shredding a handkerchief between her palms. Her black eyes shone with fear in her starch-white face.

Jack Whitelaw blurted out: "Marty—Marty—what happened?"

"Your partner was thrown from an 'El' platform in an attempt to kill him."

"I know, I know—but why? Who—"

"I wish I knew. I will soon. It was one of your customers, I think."

"My God—who?"

"The Peerless Trading Company."

"Who—who are they?"

"Don't you know?"

The youngster patted his forehead with a handkerchief, said hoarsely: "No—no. My job was just to call on other brokers in the Street and get them to give us a chance on their foreign and obsolete—" He gulped. "I didn't know anything about the office. Lord, Marty—you can guess how little I knew."

The Marquis looked at the girl kindly. "Your dad's going to be all right, Miss Shaughnessey—and I can assure you that the persons who hurt him will wish they'd never been born."

She said, "Oh," and pressed the handkerchief to her mouth, dropped her eyes.

He turned back to Whitelaw. "You and Shaughnessey—you were equal partners?"

"We— Yes."

"You put up half the money and he the other?"

"I? My God, where would I get half of fifty thousand dollars? I haven't a penny. Dad cut me off, over a year ago—cut my allowance. You know him—you know he wouldn't put up a dime."

"The money was all Shaughnessey's then?"

"Yes. He—he only wanted me because I knew a lot of the fellows in the Street firms."

"You got on all right?"

"Got on? Good God, you don't mean—listen, Marty—I owed about four thousand dollars to Jake Hearn and Natural Blake—gambling debts. My father wouldn't let loose of a nickel to pay them. I was in plenty of grease. Shaughnessey advanced me the money before I'd been with him a week, and said it could come out of my end of the profits. He's a prince and a gentleman. How could I have trouble with a guy like that?"

"Go outside a minute like a good guy, Jack," the Marquis told him.

WHEN he had the girl alone, he said: "I hate to bother you, Miss Shaughnessey, but you seem quite a mystery in your father's life. You've been living in England?"

Her warm, charming little British voice said faintly: "Yes, I—my mother divorced my father when I was a year old. I—she died last month and I—I had nowhere to turn. Our solicitor found trace of my father and I cabled him to ask if I could come to him."

The Marquis said, "Thanks," and went to the door, re-admitted the worried Jack Whitelaw.

He had no more than closed it, when it burst open once more and a little man with a red monkey face hurried in. He had little puffs of white hair over his ears and on top of his head. There was white piping to the vest of his tan suit and he carried a fawn fedora which matched his spats. His blue eyes were flickering, wild with apprehension.

"Jack—Jack— What? They told me—"

"Mr. Shaughnessey had an accident. Fell off an elevated platform, and was seriously injured."

"Great Scott! He's insured, isn't he? I mean—you had partnership insurance and—"

Whitelaw almost snarled at his father: "Be human for once, will you? This is Miss Shaughnessey. My father, Miss Shaughnessey. And this is Lieutenant Marquis."

The monkey-faced little man's eyes flared to new heights of anxiety. "Lieutenant—you mean police? My God, what are the police—"

The Marquis said: "I'd like to speak to you a minute, Mr. Whitelaw, if I may—in private."

The other wrung his hands. "I—I am not concerned in this! I have no responsibility whatever for the firm! It is none of my business."

The Marquis said, "Excuse us," and

led the raving old man into an unoccupied room down the tiled hall.

"Has your son any money, Mr. Whitelaw?" the Marquis asked bluntly, when he had shut the door.

"Not a penny—except his interest in the firm with Mr. Shaughnessey."

"I undertsood you were a rich man."

"I am. Until recently I gave my son a liberal allowance—a very liberal allowance indeed. Unfortunately, he had not yet learned the value of money. He dissipated it—literally threw it away in night clubs, gambling hells—till I was forced to cut him off. It is essential that he learn the value of money—even if the process be painful."

"Then you hardly approved of this business venture with Mr. Shaughnessey?"

"What? Of course, I did."

"I understood Shaughnessey put up all the money involved—more or less gave your son an easy berth and paid his gambling debts."

"And why should I object to that? If he chose to throw his money away on my son's—"

"Skip it," the Marquis said. "Then you approved of Mr. Shaughnessey?"

"And why not? A splendid chap—with money of his own. An adventurer, maybe, as a younger man—been all over the world—but managed to collect a tidy bit of capital and wanted to establish himself in a conservative business. I admire the man."

"He did give your son a full partnership in the firm? There's no question about that?"

"None at all. He took a fancy—"

"If he had died, what would your son realize from the firm?"

"Why, one half its assets, of course—Look here, are you trying to insinuate that a Whitelaw would stoop—"

"Certainly not. Thank you very much."

THE Marquis walked out into the hall, leaving the door open. The elder Whitelaw hesitantly followed him out, and when confronted only with the Marquis' back, went on to the anteroom. The Marquis was making toward a corner niche where Big Johnny Berthold lounged with Grayson, the man assigned to bodyguard Jack Whitelaw.

He told Johnny: "Shaughnessey evidently was involved in a deal in Buenos Aires about three or four years ago, maybe longer, involving the building of golf courses. Get on the wire and get me full details of it—including how much he made and so forth."

"What's the point, chief?"

"I'm trying to see if he has any assets that weren't in the firm. That way, killing him might help certain people cash in. All a partner's outside assets go into the firm if they need it. That's the law they work under. If he has any money tucked away anywhere, his death might bring it out and so forth. Get me every detail."

He went downstairs and found Asa McGuire, still unsuccessfully trying to spot the Marquis' shadow.

"I swear the guy is a genius," the redhead said doggedly. "I can't find him."

"We're hung up," the Marquis said as they rode up to the Marquis' apartment to wait. "We've got to know who these Peerless people are. We're stuck there."

"Listen—how about this? This Peerless gent has the money coming. He knows neither Jack Whitelaw nor Shaughnessey has a cent and that he can't collect. He knocks off Shaughnessey to scare Whitelaw. The idea is Whitelaw's father will pay off to keep the kid safe."

"It would work with anybody but Whitelaw's father."

"Why not him?"

"He wouldn't give the kid money to pay dangerous gambling debts a year ago. He wouldn't give him a dime of allow-

ance. He sticks to his money like glue. Right now, all he's concerned about is making it clear to everybody that he's in no way concerned with the firm."

"Then why this kill?"

"Pure anger, as far as I can see. Or maybe they meant just to injure him—not quite kill him."

"You know how sappy that is."

"I guess so."

THEY were hung up all night, and until late the following afternoon. The radio cars reported no sign of the gunman, Al Corcoran. He had gone to earth. Nothing came back from the inquiries regarding the golf-course deal at Buenos Aires. Shaughnessey remained—under heavy guard—in a coma that was beginning to worry the doctors again. The Wall Street Squad had moved in bodily on the firm of Whitelaw and Shaughnessey, but didn't add anything to the knowledge the Marquis had already gleaned.

Jack Whitelaw—now under Harry Derosier's wing—stayed in his own apartment house. Several newspapers had found out—and printed—too much. The millionaire's son was always good for the first page. One tab printed a scared-looking picture of him with a question mark over his head, captioned—*Is he next?* The Marquis burned.

Then, at four in the afternoon, the dam went down.

Asa McGuire answered the phone in the Marquis' Central Park apartment. Alonzo of the Wall Street Squad had broken down the Peerless Trading Corporation. The red-headed detective yelled at the Marquis when he hung up: "Marty! It's cracked! The Peerless Trading Corporation is Armand Dahloute—the Greek curio dealer."

The Marquis swiftly shrugged into his coat, eyes afire. Hastily, he dug from his Chesterfield pocket the slip Big Johnny had given him—the list of erstwhile em-

ployers of the gunman, Al Corcoran. Dahloute was one of them—a deadly, ruthless operator.

McGuire said suddenly. "Hey! This doesn't make sense. Dahloute is no sucker! He wouldn't be sucked in on a guarantee that was worth nothing."

"Why not? He's exactly the type that would be. The smartest men in their own rackets are the biggest suckers when they go for the other guy's pitch."

The phone rang again. This time it was the I Bureau—with a message from Buenos Aires regarding the golf-course deal in which Shaughnessey had been interested. It had been a successful flotation, but badly managed and the whole thing had ultimately collapsed. To the best of the knowledge of the South American authorities, the promoters had made nothing at all—including Shaughnessey. The backer of the enterprise, they believed, was a New York resident who had South American connections, one Armand Dahloute.

The Marquis said, "Good grief! What the hell?" and hung up.

"What is it?" McGuire wanted to know.

The Marquis told him. "Come on, get your hat. We'll visit Dahloute."

They were at the door of the apartment when the phone rang again for the third time.

This time it was Big Johnny at the hospital. "Hey—here's a sour note. Al Corcoran just got off a train from Philadelphia. He has a cast-iron alibi for the time of the killing last night. He was just getting on a sleeper. He must have beat it like the wind from the time Harry saw him near the club, straight over to Grand Central. But he had nothing to do with the actual killing. Will we jug him?"

"No. Put a tail on him and turn him loose."

"It doesn't add up, does it?"

"Nothing adds up in this dizzy mess." He told Berthold where he was going, and hung up.

"Al Corcoran has an alibi," he told McGuire grimly as they went down in the elevator. "But we still call on Dahloute."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Greek Has a Word for It

IT WAS dark when they reached the Madison Avenue curio shop, but the place was still open. A courteous, dark-skinned clerk in morning clothes took the Marquis' card, and presently they were in a black-wood office, facing the short, fat, swarthy Greek across a marble-topped desk.

The minute the Marquis saw the bearded lawyer, Abramson, in the corner by the brightly burning fireplace, he knew what was coming.

The black eyes in the Greek's shiny plump face regarded him brightly. Small, plump olive hands turned a heavy damascened dagger-paperknife over and over.

The Marquis said: "So you were the Peerless Trading Corporation."

"Am," Dahloute corrected. "Not was—am."

The Marquis nodded at Abramson. "You need him here?"

"I think so," the Greek said. "Yes, I think so."

"Why?"

The Greek dug the point of the heavy dagger thoughtfully into the blotting pad. "I dealt with the firm of Shaughnessey and Whitelaw—to my sorrow. I had a sum of money due me from them, which they hesitated to pay. I wrote letters which might be regarded as threatening. Mr. Shaughnessey, of that firm, is murdered—or nearly murdered. Lieutenant Marquis of the Broadway Squad, known widely as a man who has much more respect for a blackjack than for duly constituted legal processes calls on me—the same lieutenant who not many years ago, practically accused me to my face of engineering the kidnaping of a certain gambler and his subsequent murder. Yes, I believe it best to have my lawyer present."

"He won't help you now."

"I believe he will. You see, I anticipated this little call. When I heard the terrible news, I at once realized how unfortunately I had laid myself open to suspicion. However, luckily I passed last evening in the company of Senator Lip-



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scomb, who will at least, vouch for my not being personally connected with this outrage. I have gone further. I have questioned very closely, every one of my employees, of my near acquaintances, and, fortunately, I can assure you that no one in any way connected with me—or that can in any way be connected with me—lacks an alibi for last night.”

“Including Al Corcoran?”

The black eyes did not change. The Greek frowned down at the desk, tapped the back of his hand thoughtfully against his purple lips.

“I don’t seem to recall anyone of that name.”

There was a second of silence.

“Are there any more questions? Or have I forestalled the things you had planned to ask me?”

“Pretty well,” the Marquis said. “Except how much money you lost in the golf-club deal in Buenos Aires.”

It took the leaden-faced Greek nearly a minute to reply to that one.

“Very little, as a matter of fact.”

He stood up. “And now—I am sure you are not going to submit me to the farce—the costly farce I might intimate—of an arrest. So will you be so kind as to leave me. I am a very busy man.”

“Uh-huh,” the Marquis said, “but the sum Shaughnessey mentioned didn’t sound like ‘very little’ to me.”

“Shaughnessey?”

“Uh-huh. He came to about an hour ago, and he seems to have a lot to tell us, as soon as the doctor’s will let him get down to it.”

“What—sum did Mr. Shaughnessey mention?”

The bell on the phone before the Greek tinkled softly. He looked down at it a moment, then answered.

A frown cut his forehead and he handed the instrument, blank-eyed to the Marquis.

Big Johnny said into the Marquis’ ear: “Get down here fast. Shaughnessey’s coming out of it.”

The Marquis handed back the phone. “Quite a figure. Yes, sir, quite a figure,” he repeated as he turned on his heel and walked out.

BIG JOHNNY almost overflowed with words as he met them at the elevator. “Shaughnessey came to and started asking for Whitelaw. Not the young one—the old gent, if you please. I got in and he said he didn’t know who pushed him over last night. He’s really only half conscious yet. I got old man Whitelaw over and he’s in with him now.”

“Nice going,” the Marquis said. “What does he want old Whitelaw for? Did he say?”

“No. He said he’d talk to me after he’d seen him.”

Jack Whitelaw’s worried face suddenly showed in the doorway of the anteroom down the hall. The Marquis nodded casually to him.

A worried-looking interne came down the hall, vanished into Shaughnessey’s room—only to reappear almost instantly with a crumpled envelope in his hand. He strode away, out of sight.

The Marquis chafed while a minute went by.

The interne reappeared, started in to Shaughnessey’s room—and was almost bowled over by the monkey-faced elder Whitelaw sailing out, a determined set to his red features.

He did not see the detectives, marched straight by them, and into a fortuitously opening elevator.

The Marquis looked after him musingly, then told Asa: “Better tag along and see where he’s going in such a hurry.”

When the red-head had caught another car, the Marquis moved on toward Shaughnessey’s door. In turn, he was blocked by the emerging interne.

The interne closed the door and shook his head. "Afraid you can't go in right now."

"Why not?"

"Some fool nurse left an envelope with his morphine tablets in reach. He just swallowed the grains. Said he was having terrible head pains and—"

The Marquis' temples were flushed. "Listen—I'm going in. There's murder going on—not only his but maybe other people's. He's got to talk."

The interne shrugged, opened the door and peered in. Then he held the door open wide so the Marquis could see into the room.

The bandaged Shaughnessey lay still, his one visible eye closed. The Marquis put his head in and said, "Mr. Shaughnessey!" but the man on the bed was oblivious.

The Marquis cursed softly, elaborately. Just before he stepped back, he noted the telephone on the unconscious man's night table.

He told the interne: "I'll only take about so much from you people."

The interne did not seem impressed. He pulled the door closed, shrugged, wandered away.

The Marquis caught just a glance of the blond Jack Whitelaw's face peering from the anteroom. It was quickly withdrawn.

The Marquis thought carefully, for forty seconds, eyes almost closed. Then he turned and walked down the hall, Big Johnny lumbering questioningly at his heels.

The Marquis led him into a niche. In an undertone, he told the big man: "When I tell you to go downstairs, pay no attention. It'll be an act. Instead, slip into some vacant room or something where you can watch the outside of Shaughnessey's door."

"But hey, chief—I'm supposed to be guarding Shaughn—"

"That's all right. I'll be inside his room."

"Oh."

"After I make my spiel, go to the elevator, ring the bell and duck—so it will sound like you'd gone down. You know what I mean."

"Sure. What are you—"

"I'm going to make a phony phone call. I have a hunch the killer might be right around here and listen in. Come on."

He led the way back to the unconscious man's door, looked along the hall. He opened the door, peeped in, drew it almost closed again.

To Johnny he said, in normal tones: "There's a phone in here. Shaughnessey's dead to the world. I'm going to make the call from here. You go down to the switchboard and make sure the operator doesn't listen in. This is important. If that stool-pigeon isn't lying, we ought to dynamite the whole job right here."

"Oh—O. K. boss."

THE Marquis waited where he was till Big Johnny had pretended to board the elevator but had actually catfooted back into a room almost opposite Shaughnessey's.

The Marquis went softly into the sick-room, leaving the door open a tiny crack. He crossed to the phone, picked it up, holding the hook down with his finger, went through the motions of mumbling a number into the mouthpiece.

After the proper interval, he said, "Hello. I want to speak to Fred. This is the guy he sent the message to," and waited again.

"Hello. Fred? Marty . . . Yeah . . . Yeah, I got it, but I don't quite understand it. Let me have the whole set-up again. Yeah . . . Who? Wait a minute. What Greek? . . . Oh . . . Sure . . . What? What gunman? Speak a little louder, can't you? The Greek has hired the gun-

man to knock off who? . . . His accomplice in what deal? . . . Hell, I don't know any deal Dahloute is working on . . . What? . . . Sure, I get that. Dahloute is sending some gunman to knock off his partner in some deal, to save the split, but who is the gunman? And who is he going to knock . . . What? Well, hell, go back and find out. I want names. Get me names and it's good stuff. And hurry it."

He hung up, stood fingering his chin a second, then moved toward the door. Four leisurely strides took him out into the hall.

Twenty yards from him, in the door of the anteroom, Jack Whitelaw's strolling back disappeared.

He schemed ahead carefully, closed Shaughnessey's door behind him, made a quick signal to inform Big Johnny to stay in his hiding-place. He walked unhurriedly to the elevator and rode down.

On the ground floor he stepped out and inquired his way to the switchboard, quickly walked to the back of the long, cavernous hall.

Two pert girls were idling in their chairs before the huge switchboard when the Marquis pushed through the brass-studded swinging doors, his gold badge cupped in his black-gloved hand.

"There may be a call from one of the rooms around Two-eleven," he said. "It's important that I hear what's said and who's called. There's a twenty in it for each of you."

The blond girl glanced at her half of the switchboard, dubiously. "We aren't allowed— Wait. There isn't any chance of this call coming *from* Two-eleven, is there?"

"There might be."

"Another police officer was in there, earlier. He told me to plug in a phone and leave it. Maybe I'd better disconnect—" She hesitated questioningly, fingers on the plug.

"Yes—quickly."

She half withdrew the plug. Red light sprang alive. She jabbed it back in, said breathlessly: "Somebody's already talking on it. They must have called their own number."

The Marquis whipped up a handset from the top of the board. "Cut me in."

Wires rattled in his ear. Then a hoarse voice said, "No. I don't want to speak to him. I just wanted to know if he was there. Good-by," and the connection was broken.

The Marquis swore under his breath, ripped bills from his wallet with one hand. "Ring Two-fifteen — quickly, please."

"But there's no one in—"

"One of my men is."

He groaned, as the girl rang the phone four separate times before it was answered.

Big Johnny's puzzled voice said, "Hello," as the Marquis clipped at him: "Did you see who just went into Shaughnessey's room to use the phone?"

"Eh, No, boss. I didn't notice no—"

"Well, watch who comes out. Somebody just made a call from there."

"Hold the wire, boss."

The Marquis chafed, while the silence held. After a minute, Big Johnny came back on the line. "I—I guess I muffed it," he said apologetically. "There's nobody in the room now."

The Marquis boiled under his breath. He thanked the girls, pushed out into the hall again.

ASA McGUIRE stood, loitering, half-way down the hall. The Marquis' forehead flushed. He strode hard-heeled toward the red-head. "What the hell is this? Didn't I tell you to tail old man Whitelaw?"

"Relax, chief. I am shadowing him. He's in one of those pay-phone booths over there. He started out like the wind

when we came down, but he didn't get to the door. He acted like he'd forgot something and turned back. He went over to the stairs and stood as though he was thinking of going back up them—then he made for the phone booths and he's been there ever since—Ixnay, here he comes."

They drew back into the shadow of the stairway. McGuire said in an undertone: "He's going across the waiting-room. He's—yeah, he's going out now. Will I—"

On sudden impulse the Marquis said: "We both will. I need to know something. And I've half a mind that this gent might lead us to it. I've some time to kill anyway."

They followed casually out the door.

The little red-faced Whitelaw was waving down a cab as they emerged onto the street.

Presently, they were sitting on the edge of the seat in a second cab, trailing the old man's vehicle, heading east and toward the heart of town.

For a moment, it looked as though the elder Whitelaw were heading directly for the curio shop of Arnold Dahloute, and the Marquis blinked. Then, two blocks above, the cab swung further east, rattled over to Lexington and, when they, in turn, rounded the corner, Whitelaw's cab was stopped, a half-block ahead of them, and the little millionaire was paying off on the curbstone.

By the time they rid themselves of their own cab, Whitelaw had disappeared into a narrow-fronted, very old, yet rather trim-looking small apartment house.

The Marquis stood staring at its little red-and-white vestibule, its general air of chipper prosperity. Asa made a move to ring a few bells, but the Marquis shook his head quickly.

Instead, he took a small leather case from his pocket and said, "Cover me,"

and went to work on the spring lock of the front door.

Presently it opened and Asa said: "That's all very well but there are twelve apartments in this joint—two to a floor. Do you know which he would be going to?"

One foot propping the door open, the Marquis' somber eyes ran over the cards inserted in the mailboxes.

Number 4-A bore the name, *James Shaughnessey*, and the Marquis' small, black-gloved finger pointed it out.

"Oh-oh," Asa McGuire said. "Now what?"

They were in a narrow hall with a winding, heavily carpeted staircase running up its middle. When a minute's careful listening brought no sound from above, the Marquis started silently up. They heard nothing to check them, till they were on the fourth floor, outside the cream door whose shining gold numerals said 4-A.

Standing with their heads against the panel, they could hear movement inside—rather indeterminate movement—and that was all.

Presently the movement ceased, and there was an interval of silence. A puzzled line began to cut the Marquis' forehead.

And then—plainly audible—came a sharp *thud!*

The thud was followed instantly by a queer, whining cry—and then they heard a soft cough.

Utter silence came then.

For a full minute, the Marquis wrestled with some vague, growing unease inside him. Then he mumbled, "I don't like this," and whipped out his keycase. With quick fingers, he tried various instruments, till the door finally burst open under his violent heave.

McGuire said, "Good God," as they both paused on the threshold. Then both ran across the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

One Less Millionaire

THEY were in a living-room the walls of which were cherry-tile wall board. Black-and-silver modernistic furniture stood on a black rug. The room was lighted by two cylindrical parchment lighting fixtures, overhead in the unusually high ceiling. Each cast a round circle of illumination straight down on the floor far beneath. One was at the end of the room, near the window. One was at the side, almost directly over a black, eccentric bookcase.

Whitelaw, senior lay on his face on the black rug, the beam of light from the long cylindrical shade centered squarely on the small of his back. His hat had rolled off and his monkey-red head with its little white tufts of hair was visible. But it was not red any more.

From the center of his back protruded the crude steel handle of a heavy one-piece throwing-knife.

They both dropped beside the old man at once. One arm lay outflung and McGuire snatched at the wrist.

"None," he croaked after a tense second. "He's dead."

The red-head leaped to his feet, yanked the gun from his hip, ran back toward closed doors in the rear of the apartment. The noise of his banging through them came vaguely to the Marquis.

The Marquis stayed on his knee. He took the flashlight from his pocket, bent even closer to the floor. It looked as though the dead man had been reaching under the bookcase for something.

The Marquis' powerful torch picked out the round, gleaming face of an open wall safe, almost against the baseboard. Both the outer combination door and the inner compartment door hung open.

An errant gleam caught his eye and he carefully reached in for it. He brought

out a thread-like copper wire, not more than four inches long.

Startled light jumped into his eyes and he scrambled quickly up. His glance ran up along the tile-faced panels of wall board, returned to the knife sunk in the dead man's back. He inspected it more closely.

Not too familiar with such things, he judged it to be some example of aboriginal handicraft. It seemed made of one solid piece of metal, and appeared almost heavy enough to slay an ox with a blow.

Asa McGuire shouted, deep within the nest of rooms—came running out.

"He got away through a window in the bedroom—down the fire-escape," McGuire rattled as he dived across the room toward the phone. "I'll have the prowlers throw a net around the block."

The Marquis' eyes burned. "No!" he said.

McGuire, bewildered, slowly turned from the phone. "Eh? Why—what's—"
"Be quiet," the Marquis snapped.

The silence held for forty heartbeats, while the Marquis' blue eyes darkened.

He said: "Get hold of Wally Sutherland, the reporter, at the *Clarion*—fast!"

"That rat! Hell, he's a feature-writer, not a reporter. What in the world do you want—"

"Get him—and move!"

The red-head snatched up the phone.

During the three minutes that it took McGuire to get the newspaperman on the wire, the Marquis was down again, peering under the bookcase. Carefully, he removed a few more particles of copper wire, stowing them after a moment, in his pocket.

"Here he is, Marty," the red-head said, and held out the receiver.

The Marquis said: "Hello, Sutherland. I was looking through my desk today and ran across that package of evidence against you and your missus. I figure you could

get about ten years apiece, and I could do with a good conviction right now."

For a long minute, there was silence on the wire, then a hoarse voice said: "What do you want me to do, Marty?"

The Marquis told him.

When he had hung up, Asa McGuire was bug-eyed. He stammered: "Wha—what—"

The Marquis looked at his watch and his lips moved.

"Eh?" McGuire said.

"I was saying it would take Sutherland about five minutes to get from where he is, to where— Come on, we're going upstairs. We'll just have time. Shut the door and keep quiet."

The Marquis led the way out into the hall, up another flight of the carpeted stairs.

McGuire ran up at his heels, and as the Marquis sorted his picklocks, the red-head laid his ear against the door.

"Don't bother," the Marquis said. "There won't be anyone home here—unless the sweetest guess I've made in years goes blooey."

When the Marquis finally got the door open, they stared into an apartment that was a facsimile of the one below save that bare plaster walls stared at them. The place was dusty, untenanted, unfurnished, save for one item—a compact mass of machinery, containing coils and wires and looking not unlike a dismantled radio set. From it, an extension cord was plugged into a reducing socket and from the reducing socket a thin copper wire disappeared at the very juncture of floor and wall, at a spot directly above the wall safe, below.

The Marquis mused: I can think, off-hand, of somebody in about every profession in this man's town—somebody that we have something on—except the one we need. I haven't got a thing on an electrician. And we need one."

"I can hang the bell-captain in the Ala-

meda. He used to be an electrician's helper."

"Good. Get him round here—in about an hour."

"Will I phone from here? The phone company might have a record and that would throw the time element all screwy on this killing."

"That would be all right."

"You're not going to report it?" the red-head said incredulously after he'd made his call.

"Oh, yes—in a couple of hours."

"But why? For God's sake, let me in on it. Am I supposed to do anything?"

"You are."

The Marquis told him what.

"It's impossible! This isn't happening!" McGuire choked when the Marquis had finished.

"It isn't even complicated, when you know the key," the Marquis assured him. "Have you any money?"

"Well, sure—a bit. But I saw plenty in your poke."

"Can you play billiards?"

"Eh? Sure."

"We'll go out and play a little billiards," the Marquis said.

THEY played billiards for half an hour, in a nearby hotel. Then the Marquis said: "Come on." They stopped at a writing-desk in the lobby long enough for the Marquis to scribble thirty lines of closely packed script. He blotted it, put it in his pocket and led the way out to a cab.

The foggy-eyed McGuire followed at his heels.

They drove the four short blocks to the still-lighted curio shop of Arnold Dahloute.

The same courteous assistant inquired their business and the Marquis said: "Is Mr. Dahloute back yet?"

The assistant blinked. "He hasn't been out, sir."

"Oh, yes he has. There's a back entrance from his office that you can't watch, isn't there?"

"Why—yes, sir, but there has been a representative of the press with Mr. Dahloute for the past half-hour or so—"

"Well, tell him we're here, anyway."

The Marquis got one break. Instead of the lawyer, Abramson, being in Dahloute's office, he was now accompanied by none other than the dark, bucket-eared, skinny gunman, Al Corcoran.

McGuire closed the door behind them and stood with his back against it. The olive-skinned, plump Dahloute sat behind his marble desk, toying again with the oversize damascened dagger. Firelight shone against one side of his face, from the leaping flames in the grate.

Dahloute's jet eyes were burning. He said: "I have phoned for my attorney. I will not discuss anything with you till he arrives."

The Marquis shrugged. He spotted a small, squat lamp on one end of the mantel, wandered over to it and turned it on.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I only came to bring you a little information."

He unrolled the closely written page he had prepared in the hotel lobby.

"This is a preliminary report, phoned me from Buenos Aires," he told them. "It seems to indicate that the firm of Fay and Fernandez—or maybe you don't recall Fay and Fernandez? They were the firm who sold Shaughnessey the bonds that he later sold to you with the guarantee."

"Oh, yes," the Greek said wearily.

"It begins to look like Fay and Fernandez were non-existent folk—or at best, stooges for someone else. You, for instance."

The Greek laid down the paper knife and stood up slowly. "Mr. Marquis, you seem singularly inept. If what you said were true—which it isn't—it would make no difference whatever. Fay and Fer-

andez sold the bonds at one price. I bought them at a higher price. If I were Fay and Fernandez, it would be reasonable to suppose I made the transaction—paying the firm their profit—for the assurance of their guarantee. It is, however, all ridiculous."

"The police report doesn't seem to think so."

"What else do they have to add?"

"You may see it," the Marquis said, "you and your hired thug—but not out of my hands." He stretched it tight, under the little mantel lamp.

Asa McGuire took out his handkerchief, mopped his forehead.

After a moment's hesitation, Dahloute and Corcoran came over to look at the paper. Asa McGuire sauntered over to the desk.

WHEN the Greek had finished, he stood up and his lip curled. "This is not only inept, it is positively childish, Mr. Marquis. I believe I have been overestimating you."

"Maybe so," the Marquis said, and re-pocketed the papers. He looked over at McGuire, back again at the door. "You'd better go and see if our friend has arrived yet, Ace."

When the door had closed behind the red-head, he looked curiously at Corcoran.

"You fellows certainly do things in great shape when you get started," he said admiringly. "Let's see—you hired Corcoran, making infinitely sure that we couldn't connect you with him. Then he hired the two stooges that tossed Shaughnessey over the railing. I bet you don't even know who they were, Dahloute."

"You are quite right. I haven't the slightest idea."

"A very subtle part you have," the Marquis said. "First you go to infinite pains to make yourself legally safe from all connection—and then deliberately invite suspicion. You go to a lot of trouble.

Not," he added as an afterthought, "that a quarter of a million dollars isn't worth it—to some folks."

The Greek's forehead was knotted in frank irritation. "Good Lord, Marquis, if you haven't anything better than these madman's ideas to retail to me, I really haven't time—"

There was a tap at the door. The bearded Abramson came in, closing the door behind him. To the Marquis, he said: "Your red-headed henchman seems to be in a hurry. He nearly knocked me down as he ran out."

"I guess one of our witnesses didn't show up," the Marquis said easily. "Well, now that you are here, Counsellor, we can get down to business."

Abramson looked questioningly at the Greek, who said testily: "I think he's gone mad, Solly. I wouldn't have called you, except that you'd built him up as such a terror. I—he's fumbling around with some wild idea that I'm a swindler or something."

Abramson's sharp little eyes were worried. "If he's got you thinking he's mad, you're probably in a hole," he said earnestly. "What is it, Marty?"

"Murder, Sol—murder, about forty minutes ago."

The lawyer blinked rapidly, his eyes jumping to the Greek's. The Greek looked only vaguely surprised. "And who am I supposed to have murdered this time?"

"Whitelaw, Senior—Jack Whitelaw's father—in Shaughnessey's apartment."

"When?"

The Marquis looked at his watch. "Just about forty minutes ago, more or less."

The Greek shrugged in frank disdain. "Pitiful, Marquis. I was right here in my office at that time—and for some time before and after. And I can prove it."

The Marquis looked obliquely at Al Corcoran. "I hope you don't expect to

alibi yourself with a bird with a record like Al's."

"That is as may be—"

"Because"—the Marquis crossed quickly to a door in the rear of the office, opened it onto a corridor leading toward the rear of the building—"hardly any jury would doubt me if I said you left Corcoran sitting here while you went out—it's only a four-minute walk, cutting through in back of buildings—and murdered Whitelaw. And certainly, none of them would put perjury beyond a rat with his record."

Abramson's sharp little eyes were beginning to be apprehensive.

The Greek said: "I've had enough of this. Either pinch me or get out."

"All right," the Marquis said, "I pinch you. You're under arrest for the murder of John Whitelaw, Senior."

"Good Lord!" Abramson burst out. "What is this, Arnold? Why—"

"He hasn't got a single thing in the world to go on," Dahloute said wildly.

"Haven't I?" the Marquis said. "How would you like to come and see what I've got?"

There was a moment of silence. Now bewildered worry was beginning to show in Dahloute's and Corcoran's eyes.

Abramson cleared his throat. "Just what is the purpose of this—exhibition? In what capacity are we to consider ourselves?"

"Whatever you like. After we visit this little scene, maybe Mr. Dahloute will wish to confide something to me—privately."

For a minute, they shot glances at one another. Then Dahloute shrugged. "What can we lose?" he asked. "And I'll ask you to note, Counsellor, that I'm under arrest. This man Marquis is supposed to have quite a bit of money. He'll have less when we get through with him."

"Let's go this way," the Marquis urged, and led them out the back way.

CHAPTER SIX

Silent Partner

IT WAS less than four minutes, walking through building corridors and the basements of apartment houses facing on Lexington, till they stood in front of the trim red-and-white vestibule of Shaughnessey's apartment house.

"Would you care to use your passkey?" the Marquis invited Dahloute, and when he got nothing but a scowl, "No? Then we will have to be a little unethical."

He quickly inserted the picklock but the door was opened from inside and the news-feature-writer, Sutherland, of the *Clarion* stood in the doorway. He said: "Hello, Marty."

"Wally," the Marquis said casually. "You know these gentlemen?"

The feature-writer laughed wryly. "I know Mr. Dahloute. He was supposed to give me an interview a little while ago, and walked out on me."

"What?" It crackled from Dahloute's lips.

"Sure," the news-writer looked at him curiously. "You invited me into your private office, sent this lug out and then excused yourself out the back door. I sat there for fifteen minutes, till you finally came back just when I was about to leave."

"You're a damned liar!" the Greek shouted. "I was there all the time—with you—talking to you!"

Abramson hastily thrust himself forward. "Please, Arnold—be quiet. After all, the unsupported word of one person doesn't mean anything."

"*Tsk! Tsk!*" the Marquis said. "But won't he be in a spot for an alibi witness now."

Before the sweating Greek could speak, Abramson said: "We have no reason so far to believe that Mr. Dahloute needs an alibi."

"Right," the Marquis said cheerfully.

On the second-floor landing, back among the dimness of the shadows, Asa McGuire was standing motionless with a pasty-faced, thin youth who carried a small, black satchel.

The Marquis nodded as he passed and said: "Presently."

Then they were again in front of Apartment 4-A and the Marquis again opened the spring lock. Before he let the door go open, however, he tucked the keycase away in his pocket and brought out his service revolver.

"Just to make everything perfectly clear," he said, "no one is to go in this room. You can look, and that is all. Understood?"

They nodded. The Greek blurted: "Get this farce over with."

The Marquis nodded wisely to Abramson. "He's been spoiled. He doesn't take punishment very well," and threw open the door.

The room was unchanged, save for one item. The heavy, aboriginal metal dagger was no longer in the wound in the dead man's back. Instead, the inlaid handle of Dahloute's big damascened dagger-paperknife protruded from the corpse's shoulders.

Dahloute gasped. "My paperknife!"

The Marquis nodded. "Yes, both Mr. McGuire and myself recognized it. We also recognized that it had not only been stuck in, but twisted around—a Greek trick, no? That was why we made that call at your office, just now, to make sure the knife was not there. We are both sure—and prepared to swear to it. Of course, you may have lost it somewhere else, and the one there before you may not have your fingerprints all over it. We will have to—"

Dahloute screamed: "You stole it—just now—that McGuire—I'm framed!" He made a moaning sound, tried to dive into the room. The Marquis' gun came

up, poked him in the neck and he staggered back, choking.

Abramson raved: "Arnold—for Heaven's sake—don't lose your head!"

The Marquis said: "He's lost it, Counsellor. Let me give you some advice. A felony is likely to be compounded here in the next couple of minutes. You'd better go downstairs."

"I shall do nothing of the k—"

The Marquis looked at Dahloute. "How about it, greaseball? You want to do a little trading—in exchange for that knife?"

The Greek's face shone like lead. His eyes were white-ringed. He croaked in a barely audible voice: "Yes."

Abramson threw up his hands.

"Wait downstairs, Counsellor," the Marquis called after him. "We may need you yet."

Then he turned on Dahloute. "All right, rat. I want, first, the written guarantee that the firm of Whitelaw and Shaughnessey gave you against loss on the bonds. I'm not sure that that will cover it, so in addition you will draw up a paper, acknowledging receipt of one dollar and other valuable consideration, for which you return the guarantee—release them from it."

"And?" the Greek croaked.

"I'll give you back your knife, and your alibi."

For a long minute, the Greek stared hollowly at the dead man. Then he licked his lips. "The—guarantee is in my office."

They filed out into the hall again and as they passed McGuire on the landing, the Marquis stopped and told him in a low voice: "Get the wiring ripped out behind that wall board and the base board so no one can tell it's been disturbed. Also where it enters the safe. What did you do with the big knife?"

"It's in the sewer. That thing weighed plenty."

"Naturally. Call me in about ten minutes at the Greek's."

He went downstairs, and out onto the street. "We'll take a cab, this time," the Marquis said. "I'm not keen on these backyard short-cuts."

They were climbing in when a prowler car, passing, suddenly checked with a wild squealing of brakes, whirled around on two wheels and came bumping up to stop.

The recorder called: "Lieutenant! Lieutenant Marquis!"

The Marquis cursed, stepped out. "Well?"

"Every prowler car has been looking for you for twenty minutes. A man named Shaughnessey—supposed to be nearly dead in the hospital—got some clothes out of a closet and got out the fire-escape. He's loose somewhere now."

The Marquis' eyes jumped. For a minute he stood rigid. Then he said, "Thanks," through tight teeth and climbed back into the cab.

The others—Corcoran and Dahloute—had not heard the message except in scraps.

Corcoran said: "What was that? Did he say something about Shaughnessey?"

"Only that they've got a full statement out of him at last."

Dahloute said through clenched teeth: "Hurry this cab up, will you?"

"When you're licked, you're licked all all over, aren't you, Arnold?" the Marquis said pleasantly.

BEHIND the marble desk in his office, Dahloute touched a spring. A secret drawer shot into view down by his knee. He fumbled with it, brought out legal documents.

He tossed the guarantee on the table, hastily dipped pen in ink and scribbled out the release the Marquis dictated.

The Marquis looked round the empty office. "Where is Corcoran?"

"I told him to wait in the store."

"Good." The Marquis' eyes were like agate. He folded the documents and put them away in his pocket. Dahloute sat humped over, hands hanging down, looking up at the Marquis like a poodle.

The Marquis picked up the phone in one hand, holding his gun ready in the other, and dialed a number.

When he got an answer, he said: "Homicide? Charlie? This is Marty Marquis. Go to — Lexington Avenue in twenty minutes—not any sooner. You'll find a dead man—stabbed to death with a knife belonging to Arnold Dahloute. There ought to be fingerprints on it. I've just checked and he has no alibi."

The Marquis didn't know that the Greek had somewhere procured a gun, nor did he know that the face of the marble desk was thin wood. He found out as the desk seemed to explode like a bursting bomb. A slug ticked the inside of his slightly spread legs six inches above the knee. Reflex action made him jump up in the air a little bit, so his own first bullet went alongside the Greek's neck, smashing him over sideways, chair and all, instead of into his chest.

The Greek screamed, "You dirty framing double-crosser. . . ." and closed his eyes, pumped slugs as fast as he could pull trigger. The Marquis flung himself wildly away, snapped two caps—and blew the top of the Greek's head into a bloody shambles.

He whirled just as the door came down. Al Corcoran burst in, shooting. He fired once and the Marquis ducked just in time, let go one thunderous report that sent the gunman flopping wildly into a corner, pitching squarely on his face.

The Marquis roared sharply, "Stay there—don't move!" but the gunman somehow twisted his wrist around under his body and the gun spat flame and

thunder. The Marquis' hard hat was whisked from his head. Deliberately, the Marquis pumped a shot, first into one of the gunman's shoulder-blades, then into the other, and Corcoran slumped with a groan.

The Marquis walked over and kicked him over on his back with a neat, shiny toe.

"Who were the stooges you hired, Al, to help Shaughnessey over the railing?"

The gunman, face dingy and dank from pain, screwed up into a terrible grimace, bit through clenched teeth: "You'll never know, copper. They're well out of the country by now."

The Marquis fingered his chin ruefully. "Well, guess they aren't much of a loss, at that. How much did Dahloute pay you for this job?"

"Dahloute?" Even in the pain-wracked eyes of the killer, a little astonishment became visible. "Dahloute? Oh, my God, you mean you think. . . . *ahhhh!*" and he lost consciousness, just as the phone on the desk began to peal.

McGuire's hoarse voice brooked no question when it clipped over the wire: "Get over here as fast as you can."

For just a second, the Marquis hesitated, then the receiver was hung up in his ear.

HE MET the first of the prowler-cops as they ran in and he ran out. He was almost shot in the dim store. He called out his name just in time and added as he ran past the startled patrolmen, "Two lugs back there—resisted arrest. I'll be back in a minute and give you the dope," and dived out to the street.

For a second he almost commandeered a prowler car, but a cab came along and whirled him round the few blocks to the trim red-and-white vestibuled apartment house.

There was a little knot around the vestibule now and he had to elbow his way

through a knot of curious spectators.

He came to a sudden halt in the hall inside, just as an ambulance screamed to a stop at the curb behind him.

McGuire jumped up and the Marquis could see what he had been bending over.

A man was kneeling, just inside the door, with his forehead to the carpeted floor. He had, obviously, slowly collapsed. There was blood everywhere. Red still drooled from a corner of the man's mouth. Through his shabby overcoat, the white of a hospital nightgown showed. The man was Shaughnessey.

McGuire said excitedly: "He came ringing the bell and ringing it! I beat it down—and there he was—hemorrhaging. What in God's name—"

Ambulance surgeons ran in, and the Marquis stepped away to let them get to the bleeding man.

One of them finally got up and said: "He's finished. He'll be dead in about a minute. We'll wait—I'm not going to load him till he's dead, or I'll have to buy drinks for the ward. On the level, Marty, he can't last two more minutes."

"Just as well," the Marquis said, and dropped down to the dying man's ear.

"Shaughnessey," he said. "This is Lieutenant Marquis. I've just recovered the guarantee, so there'll be the cash money that's in the firm free and clear for the girl. I did this because I wanted her to have a break. This is the end—there's no chance to pretend to dope yourself to avoid questioning. Now you've got to give me a break before you go—you're going fast."

He almost prayed. He had no way of knowing if the old man could even hear what he was telling him. He spoke as quickly as he could making each word distinct and trying to keep what he said out of earshot of the curious around the door.

He hurried on earnestly: "I know the whole game—how you met Dahloute in

South America. How he backed you in the golf-course deal and you wound up owing him money—how you concocted this scheme to pay it off—and how you got him to finance you to the extent of fifty thousand to put it over.

"I know you came here, found a rich man's son who didn't have a dime, got on the right side of him and got him into partnership with you. How you ran through a phony transaction that obligated the firm—and thus both of the partners personally—for three hundred thousand, if they had it.

"And I know—to keep yourself absolutely clear from suspicion—you tried that diving stunt, counting on your circus experience to get you off with slight injuries—well worth a gamble for a quarter of a million. But you miscalculated a little—got hurt worse than you expected to be.

"I know that when you were lying in the hospital, you sent for old man White-law and with some yarn, sent him to the death trap you had prepared in your apartment—then pulled that fake dope act—hoping to eliminate him, thus throwing his wealth to Jack, your partner. We found it all—the heavy dagger held up by the electro-magnet whose current was broken when the safe was opened. But what was the yarn? How in the world did you get the old man to go there and lie down to be killed that way?"

The Marquis held his breath, and then, in the huskiest of whispers—so feeble that he was not sure he was not imagining the words, Shaughnessey said: "I—told him I had money there—to pay off the liability under the guarantee."

The Marquis said: "Good Lord, I should have guessed that—nothing else would appeal to that tight-fisted old monomaniac."

The body of Shaughnessey suddenly slumped.

The Marquis stood up, as police sirens

started to sound from all directions. He looked at McGuire, looked upward questioningly. McGuire slid over and spoke rapidly in the Marquis' ear.

"It was a cinch. We just had to cover the connection in the safe and cart away the electro magnet. The wiring pulled out from behind the wall board—we didn't have to pry it up. It's all set now."

IN THE third-floor hotel room, the Marquis faced the blond playboy. The youngster's eyes were haggard, suddenly mature. He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking from the Marquis to the lean, washed-out, stringy Harry Derosier perched on the edge of the desk.

The Marquis said: "Well, your father's dead, and the men who tried to swindle him through you—and death—are dead. Before they died, I cleaned up that guarantee angle. Otherwise—even if you had all the proof of the swindle that we have now—you'd still have to pay the three hundred thousand, now that you own your father's estate. But, as I say, I have in my pocket, the release of that guarantee, so Dahrloute's estate cannot collect from you."

The boy said bewilderedly: "That—that's fine."

"I went to a lot of trouble to get it," the Marquis persisted. "I could have broken the case and saved a lot of death

and destruction, quite a while back—except that I wanted to clear up the financial end."

The badgered boy looked at him blankly. "I—it wasn't so important as all that," he said. "That much money doesn't mean a great deal to me now."

"Don't kid yourself any that I did it for you," the Marquis said. "Except that I figured if I handed you three hundred thousand you'd have the decency not to claim any of the money—the fifty thousand now free and clear in the firm of Whitelaw and Shaughnessey. After all, it never was yours—and Shaughnessey's daughter needs it now. It's absolutely all she's got."

The blond boy looked up suddenly. "What—how should I do it?"

"If I were you, I'd buy out her interest in the firm—and then scrap the firm—or carry it on, whatever you want. But give her the fifty grand."

"I—where could I find her?"

"You will do it?"

"My God," the boy burst out, "I'm not my father. Of course."

The Marquis said: "She's next door."

The stringy Derosier jumped up, fingering his tie. "If I might make a suggestion," he began brightly. "Suppose I go in and prepare the little lady—"

"Get back in your kennel," the Marquis snarled, and opened the door.



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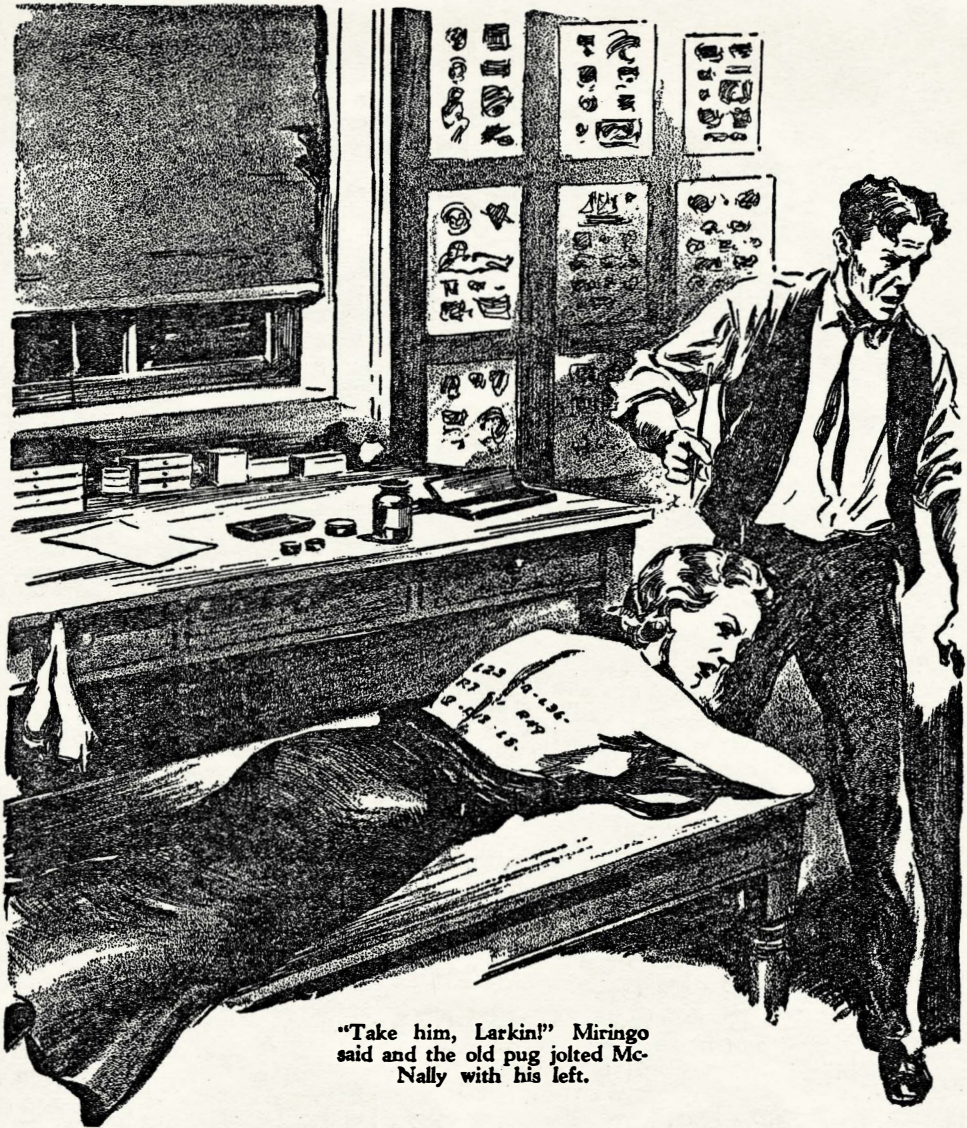


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"Take him, Larkin!" Miringo said and the old pug jolted McNally with his left.

CHAPTER ONE

A Pair of Peeping Toms

THE tattooing shop was in the middle of the block, separated from the Greek shoe-shine parlor by the dark front of the locksmith shop, and well within the noise zone of the shooting gallery run by a hopeful Italian named Steve. Across the street there was a quick-and-dirty restaurant with a three-color neon sign and a flasher. With each click of the sign, reflected color splashed across the tattooer's window and bathed his sign—

SKEETER
TAT - 2 - ING DONE NEATLY
DAY OR NITE
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS
A SPECIALTY

Ken McNally stood with his athletic body blocking from passers-by a fine view of the stuffed pig in the restaurant window.

A strange restlessness had brought him down here to South Broadway and something stronger than restlessness held him. The very dust that blew from the pavement was loaded with memories. He

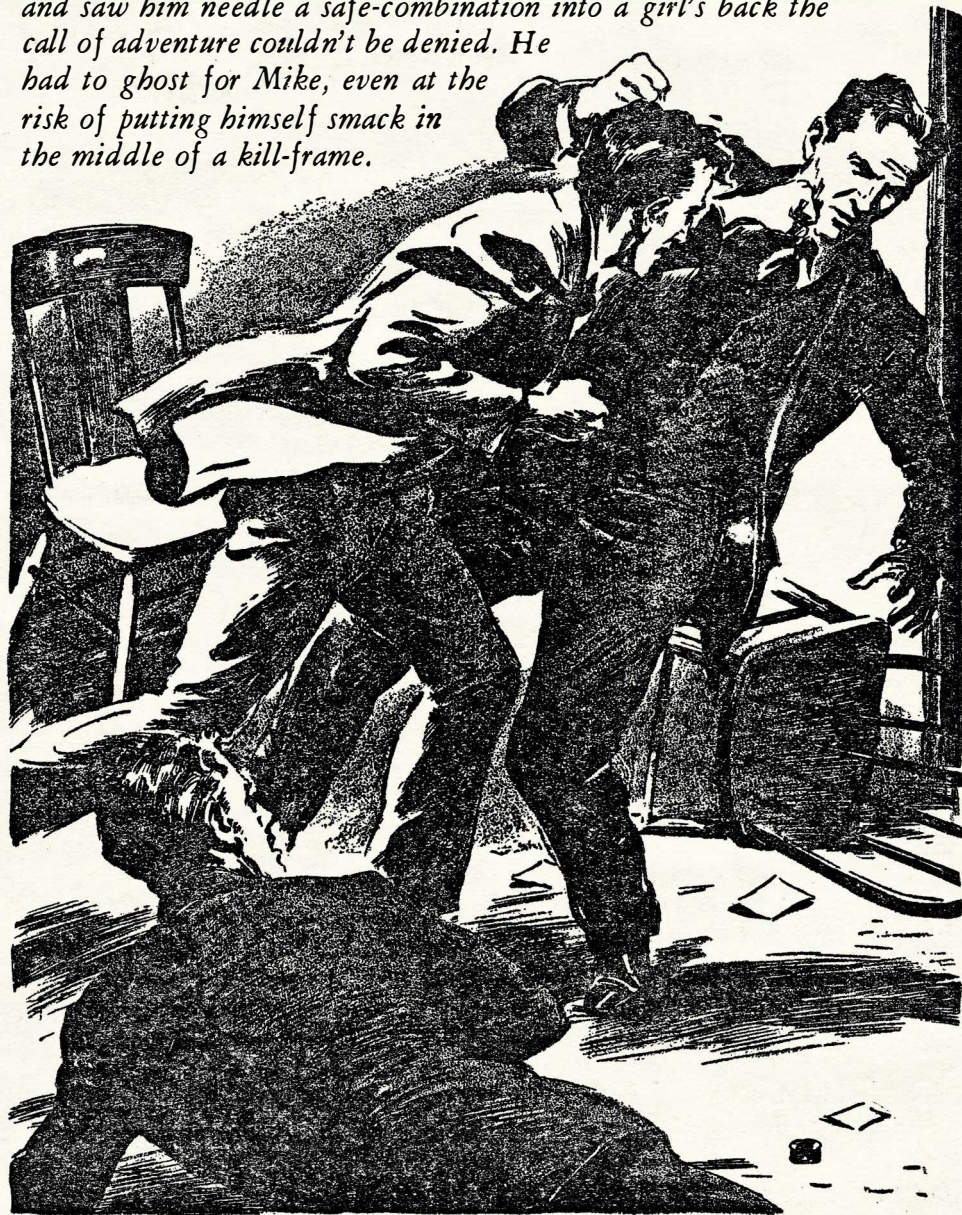
THE TATTOOED COMBINATION

A Needle Mike Novelette

By **William E. Barrett**

Author of "The Death of Needle Mike," etc.

McNally's other self, Needle Mike, had died under police guns, but that didn't stop him from haunting the tattoo shop where he'd once worked in ink and flesh. Or from being jealous of Skeeter who had taken over the business. The night he spied on his successor and saw him needle a safe-combination into a girl's back the call of adventure couldn't be denied. He had to ghost for Mike, even at the risk of putting himself smack in the middle of a kill-frame.



found it almost impossible to take his eyes from the sign on the window across the way. Once upon a time, not very long ago, it had read—

NEEDLE MIKE'S

A skillful sign painter had blotted that out and substituted the "Skeeter." At the same time, he had added the line about Social Security numbers. McNally made a wry face. Social Security numbers had been far from a specialty with him. He had hated them for the deadly routine they represented—the dull process of needling numbers into human hides at two dollars per hide. Skeeter's attitude, of course, would be different. Skeeter was a businessman.

M McNALLY caught glimpses of Skeeter from time to time behind the grimy window of the shop across the way. Business was not exactly booming and the erstwhile newsboy came to the door several times as though tempted to shut up shop.

A skinny youth with a lop-sided build and scrambled features, Skeeter had packed the wicked wisdom of two tough life-times into a little more than twenty years of one. He had lived a long time on the pavement with a hundred rackets for making money and the pretense of a newspaper corner to save him from being vagged. And now he had a tattooing business.

"I pity the poor devils that he needles. When he goes to work on them, he's guessing."

There was a trace of professional jealousy in McNally's mental comment. McNally was dressed in fashionable tweeds and his shirt had cost more than most suits along South Broadway, while Skeeter was dressed in whatever he happened to have left after the last crap game. But with his eyes on the sign, McNally admitted Skeeter to rivalry.

Once upon a time McNally had done all

of the tattooing for St. Louis and in those days, McNally was Needle Mike.

It had been the big adventure in the life of a rich man's son, the swift dip below the line to the gray fringe of the underworld. Ken McNally had taken it often. A touch of stain on his face, a few wads of paraffine along his gums, a false dental bridge, a chemical rinse through his dark hair and a stiff-legged limp—those were the things that had added twenty years to his age and made him the surly sailor whose very grouch disarmed suspicion and whose skill with the needles brought him in touch with adventure.

But that was all over now. Needle Mike was dead.

McNally reflected bitterly on that as he watched the sign. There had come a day when another man had donned the characteristic make-up of Needle Mike, and Needle Mike's name had been linked to murder—then the night McNally had sent the impersonator out to be killed by police guns. There could be no back-tracking on that. Needle Mike's double had died—and died dishonorably. The Needler's name and reputation had gone with a man unworthy of either and, in the going, something more had gone from Kenneth McNally. He'd had nearly four years of it and South Broadway was in his blood.

The sight of a familiar figure in the crowd of early-evening strollers across the street brought McNally back to the present with a jerk.

Pete Larkin, "Old Devil Mask" Larkin, was not only out with a girl but he seemed to be headed for Skeeter's. The girl was wearing a red hat and she seemed hesitant. As they neared the door of the tattoo shop she pulled back on Larkin's arm. Old Pete stopped and for a moment there was a whispered consultation which ended with Larkin patting the girl's shoulder awkwardly and shepherding her through the door.

McNally's forehead creased with per-

plexity. He knew Pete of old. A good club fighter, Larkin had fought every middleweight of consequence for over ten years. Sports writers called him "Old Devil Mask" because of the fierce scowl he cultivated to cover up his rather easy-going temperament. Larkin was one of those hard-bitten tattoo customers who added a new design every time he won a bout. McNally had needled some good ones for Pete on more than one occasion after he'd seen him fight at the Coliseum. For Larkin to go into a tattooing shop was nothing startling. To see him go in with a girl was news.

Before Skeeter's door had closed behind the two, a big car rolled to the curb in front of Steve's shooting gallery. Steve, who was standing in front of his place with a toothpick in his mouth, looked at the car indifferently. South Broadway shooting galleries did not attract the carriage trade and there was nothing in that car for Steve. McNally, however, moved away from the restaurant-front with the old drums of adventure beating in his blood.

"That fancy wagon was following Pete or I'm a Chinaman," he said softly.

The front door on the curb-side opened and a tall, broad-shouldered man with a cavalry roll to his walk got out of the car and headed for the alleyway which ran behind Skeeter's shop. Another man stayed behind the wheel but McNally, sticking to his own side of the street, was unable to see his face. He recognized the man who went into the alley, however—Dirk Miringo, who owned *L'Escargot d'Or*, and who prided himself on the fact that he could always hire people to do his dirty work.

"Pete must be getting important," McNally whispered, "or else he's got a girl who is."

The last possibility seemed more likely and McNally was definitely interested. He had had a positive rule against tattooing

women in his shop when he was Needle Mike, but Skeeter would have no such scruples about anything when cash was on the line. The girl in the red hat had not hung back and argued just because she did not want to see Pete Larkin get another tattoo added to his gallery. She was headed for needle work herself.

McNALLY reached the corner, crossed the street and entered an areaway that was out of range from the parked car. Some monitor in his brain warned him that he was barging into something that was none of his business, but he paid no attention. From the shadow of the buildings he could see the well remembered rear window of the tattooing shop.

The shade was down but the light behind it outlined the window—and Dirk Miringo down on one knee in the alley with his eyes riveted to the crack between shade and sill.

It was a challenging situation and McNally stayed motionless watching Miringo. At the end of perhaps a minute, the nightclub operator rose to his feet and cat-footed back to the mouth of the areaway which had admitted him.

McNally let him go, timing the interval that it would take him to reach his car by repeating its license number ten times.

"14X716. . . 14X716. . . 14X716. . ."

When he had counted the numbers off for the tenth time, McNally moved out of the shadows and approached the tattoo-shop window himself. He flushed slightly at the thought that he was a common eavesdropper and that he was doing exactly what Skeeter had so often done to him. It was none of his business what went on in that room, but he glued his eyes to the space between shade and sill and looked.

The girl was lying face down upon the long table with the cracked porcelain top that McNally had always used for long jobs. Her face was pillowed in the crook

of her arm and she had slipped her shoulder straps so that her back was bare. She was very young but the curls beneath the red hat were metallic blond and she was wearing heavy make-up which mocked her youth, shadowing her eyes and reshaping a mouth that needed no reshaping. For all of the dramatic chemistry, however, there was something soft and frightened about her.

Skeeter was gripping the hand needle with more determination than confidence. He had already swabbed the girl's back and was ready to begin. The face of Pete Larkin was a study in suffering. Hardened to the needle himself and used to absorbing unmerciful beatings in the ring, he was acutely tortured by the thought of this girl feeling the needle bite. Every line in his punch-drummed face told the story. He reached out clumsily and patted her.

"It ain't goin' to hurt, Gloria, honey," he said.

McNally blinked. It was difficult to reconcile such a speech with the battle-scarred bruiser who had uttered it. The girl lifted her left hand to grope for Larkin's fingers and the light reflected off the plain gold band on her third finger. The whole story was there. Tough or soft, men came to the day when there was one woman.

Skeeter stepped forward. "O.K.!" he said.

Pete Larkin reluctantly withdrew his hand and the girl tensed. McNally focussed his eyes upon Skeeter. There was a look of concentration on the narrow, rat-like face that was as foreign to it as the softness in Pete Larkin's. Concentration on work was far off Skeeter's beat. He was the invincible schemer of angles whose specialty was beating the other fellow to the thought. A tattoo needle seemed to make him another person.

He bent above the girl's white back and the needle bit.

"L," he said.

Pete Larkin cleared his throat and squinted at a paper in his hand. "Twenty-three," he said.

The girl lay quietly. She neither wiggled nor moaned as Skeeter went into his work.

"Twenty-three," Skeeter repeated.

"R," said old Pete.

McNALLY'S brow creased and he forgot that he was eavesdropping. The letters and symbols had nothing to do with Social Security and they did not make much sense. McNally's fingers were itching for the needle, too. It was hard to watch someone less skillful at the business of his old trade and to be unable to take a hand.

"Eighteen," said Pete. Then "L". Then "Thirty-six."

A clear light dawned in McNally's consciousness and he wondered how he could have been so dumb. There was only one thing that such a set of numbers could be—the combination of a safe! But why on a girl's back?

That one had him stopped. There was no place where you could take a girl's back that you couldn't take a memo on a piece of paper. No conceivable advantage to having a safe combination engraved upon a girl's skin in preference to some more usual surface.

The slight argument McNally had witnessed between the woman and Larkin in front of the shop seemed to indicate that the matter was of some importance. And Pete Larkin's strange tenderness showed that he consented to the tattoo reluctantly. He had not wanted the girl to be hurt—yet the numbers had to go on. Why?

For all his long experience with people who go in for tattooing, McNally could not come up with a single reasonable answer. He was still trying to puzzle it out when Skeeter stepped back and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"O.K.," he said.

The girl shivered and kept her head pillowed in her arms.

Pete Larkin rose and drew her dress over the tattooed area. Misery was still in his eyes for all the cheerfulness he strove to assume. "Wasn't bad, was it, Gloria honey? Just rest there a bit."

She shook her head, her teeth buried in her lower lip. Skeeter laid down the needle and a new expression crept over his face. To McNally he was the Skeeter of old as he looked now.

"They were careful not to show him the slip. Gave him the numbers one at a time—and he's memorizing them."

McNally grinned. It was the Skeeter touch. Skeeter probably knew no more about the purpose of the numbers or what safe they were the key to than McNally, but Skeeter overlooked no bets. And the very act of his memorizing the numbers emphasized the seeming absurdity of permanently engraving them on the girl's back. If Skeeter could commit the combination to memory, why couldn't she too carry those numbers just as well in her brain.

"You'll have to put salve on it tonight. It will be all clear in a week or so, see." Skeeter was parroting the words which Needle Mike had used hundreds of times.

Pete Larkin took out a thin sheaf of bills and counted out four fives. "Twenty bucks. Right?"

"Yep."

McNally suppressed a grunt. That, too, was the Skeeter touch. The price was a hundred percent too high. But that was the end of the business which Skeeter would naturally learn most easily.

It was time for McNally to go. He straightened from his cramped position and the ashes in the alley crunched under an incautious foot. He whirled toward the sound and the beam of a tiny flashlight stabbed him. A guarded voice behind the flash said: "Reach high and take it easy!"

McNally's hands went up slowly and his blood-beat quickened. The man who held the flash was Dirk Miringo—and Miringo was also holding a gun.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghost of Needle Mike

THE night-club operator swore softly under his breath as his flash moved slowly over McNally. "Just a damned Peeping Tom, huh?" he growled.

McNally did not answer. He was conscious of a noticeable relaxing in the tense attitude of Miringo. The man had been startled and, perhaps, a bit alarmed at finding an intruder in the alley. Evidently McNally's appearance disarmed suspicion. The men whom Miringo feared did not dress as McNally dressed nor look as he did.

Almost immediately on the heels of his assumption that McNally was a chance rubberneck, Dirk Miringo decided that his own role must change. He hunched his shoulders and his voice deepened.

"Fork over yer dough, guy!" he said gruffly.

The flash went out and Miringo stepped closer. McNally grinned. The cheap stick-up role was not a natural for Miringo and he was just a bit ham at it. It was merely an attempt to throw suspicion off the business which had brought him into the alley and his heart was not in it. Even the hand that held the gun was noticeably careless.

The gun wobbled as the flash went into Miringo's pocket—and McNally's hands moved. His open left slapped down hard on the loosely held gun and his right fist hooked to Miringo's jaw. He was stepping in before the gun hit the ground and while the big man was still reeling back under the impact of the blow. His left fist snapped to Miringo's waist line and his right boomed again to the chin.

Miringo never did regain his balance or get time to set himself for a blow. He was out on his feet before the third punch landed and McNally grabbed him as he started to sag, wrestling him backward toward the door of the tattooing shop. They crashed against the door hard and McNally banged Miringo against it three times in quick succession.

Behind the door there were sounds of alarm. A few seconds of indecision and then a quick jerk drew the door inward and precipitated the two men into the room. They hit the floor with McNally on top. He came to his feet almost instantly. Pete Larkin, who had opened the door, was standing clear. The girl was just about to get off the table, readjusting her dress. Skeeter was as far from the door as he could get and still remain in the room.

Miringo came slowly to his feet, shaking his head groggily as he rose. Larkin looked at him with startled eyes. "Dirk!" he said.

McNally squared his shoulders. "This cheap mugg tried to stick me up," he said.

The eyes of Dirk Miringo glared murder. His gun was in the alley somewhere, he had been efficiently slugged, and he had made an inglorious entrance into a room where people knew him.

"Take him, Larkin!" he said thickly.

McNally was startled at the speed of the command and he turned halfway toward the veteran pug only to find that he was late. Pete Larkin did not wait to ask questions or wrestle with doubts. He acted on the command as he would act at the clang of the bell which started a round in the ring. A short, swift shuffle carried him across the room and his left and right moved almost as one.

McNally felt the thud of the left but he did not feel the right at all. It jolted into him through a descending black curtain and the room dissolved in a flash of white flame that broke across his brain.

From far away he could hear the awed voice of Skeeter—"Geez, that's hittin' 'em."

FOR a few minutes after that McNally had the sensation of being pitched around in a frail rowboat on heavy seas. Then his head slowly cleared and he looked up into the face of Dirk Miringo. There was a blue mark under Miringo's right eye and a trickle of blood running from the man's mouth. Behind Miringo stood the faithful Pete Larkin who had done a magnificent job of clouting without asking the reason why.

McNally was efficiently trussed up with tough cord.

"Coming around, huh?" Miringo still looked murderous. "Well, you'll keep a while." He turned to Pete Larkin and his shrinking wife. "The guy was tailing you, Pete," he said, "and I don't know why. We'll keep him on ice till we know."

He rubbed his jaw and his cold eyes fixed on Skeeter. "You know who I am, don't you?" he said.

"I sure do."

"All right. You know better than to do any crossing up. See my friends out, lock the door after they go and put your lights out for the night. Understand!"

"Yeah. But—"

"Never mind the buts. Do what you're told and come back. You, Pete, go along. Everything is jake."

Pete Larkin scratched his head and looked briefly at his wife. She was trying to signal to him with her eyes and he, obviously, had something on his mind that he could not put in words. He gave it up as a bad job finally and turned toward the door to the front room.

McNally struggled against his bonds. He knew better than to protest against anything that happened but he had to put on a show to divert suspicion. If he could make them take him for a well-to-do young man who had just happened along,

he would fare better than if they considered him a possible spy.

Miringo had employed the same strategy himself to disarm these others of the notion that he was spying on them. He knew that McNally had not been trailing Larkin but it made a good story to feed Pete.

McNally raised his voice. "Hey!" he said. "I wasn't trailing anybody."

"Shut up!"

Miringo hurled the command at him, herded the others through the door into the front room and turned back. "I don't know who you are," he said, "and I don't give a damn. What do you think of that!"

Skeeter, in the other room, rammed home the bolts on the front door, turned out the lights and came back. "I'm losing a lot of business by closing up, guy," he said.

"O.K. I'll pay you. Two hundred and fifty bucks, kid, for sitting on your dead end and keeping your trap shut."

"Two hundred and fifty!" Skeeter's eyes opened momentarily, then narrowed. It was the first time that McNally had ever seen Skeeter take an offer without a demand to hike it. This one had taken him by surprise.

Miringo turned toward the alley door. "Wait a minute!" he said.

He stepped out into the alley and Skeeter deliberately refrained from looking at McNally while he was gone. There was a thoughtful expression on the face of this lad who knew all of the angles. McNally let him think. Thinking—along certain lines anyway—was Skeeter's game and he was good at it.

When Miringo returned he had his gun again. "Here, kid," he growled, "take this and keep an eye on this dude. Slap him over the konk with it if he gets loud and keep everybody else out of here."

He walked across to the window and jockeyed the shade down so that there was no longer a space between shade and sill.

"I'll be back in a few hours maybe and you'll be paid off—but don't get funny or I'll know where to find you when you get through laughing. Get it?"

"Sure." Skeeter wet his lips. He had had his share of dealing with hard guys who pay off in lead and he was no warrior.

Dirk Miringo bent over McNally, took his wallet from the inside pocket, transferred it to his own, shrugged and went out into the alley. There was a worried frown on his face for all his nonchalance and McNally knew that the man from *L'Escargot d'Or* would be a lot happier if there had been no McNally in the alley on that second check-up trip he had made.

McNALLY was uncomfortable but he neither struggled against his bonds nor protested against his fate. He kept his eyes on the ceiling and played the averages. Skeeter was a gregarious human and it was not his nature to stay cooped up with someone and not talk. He was as curious, too, as an alley cat and quite unlikely to stay near anything that he did not understand for long without sniffing for information.

After about ten minutes of staring at McNally, jiggling on his chair and circling the room, he broke. "What are you, a mummy?" he said. "Or did Dirk scare you to death?"

McNally turned his eyes on him. "Why talk to you?" he said coolly. "You're just the office boy."

Skeeter blinked, then his narrow mouth set. "Yeah? Well, have it your way."

It was hard for McNally to play a patient waiting game. Almost as hard as it was for Skeeter to remain quiet. There was in McNally a sense of urgency, a feeling that his own life and the lives of others depended upon what he did in the next few hours.

The pattern of death had been drawn in this room as clearly as he had ever seen it

drawn anywhere. Dirk Miringo was a figure below the line. McNally had never seen him in action but he knew him by reputation. A lone wolf, he seemed content to be the proprietor of a basement dine-and-dance spot rather than a gang leader, although it was well known that lawless elements worked on information which he supplied and cut him in on the profits. He did not make the mistake of growing too big in his game, but he had made himself a factor in the underworld.

Tonight he had chosen to prowl alleys and peek in windows himself.

It was plain, from all the facts, that there was a game under way which Miringo trusted to no hands but his own. Pete Larkin, somehow, was his pawn in the set-up—a rough, tough, unthinking man who was in love with a girl and who had passed his prime in the one game that he knew. Pete would never draw a big purse for a fight again. He was lucky if he got preliminaries. And in the clumsy tenderness that he showed in this room, Larkin betrayed the fact that he would go to any lengths for the bride he called “Gloria, honey.”

Dirk Miringo knew how to use tough men who needed money. And Dirk Miringo knew how to sidestep serious clashes with the law. That brought the drama up to the present. He was not going to come back to this room and turn a man loose who might be a substantial citizen and whose word would command police attention. Having trussed McNally up, he could not afford to release him.

And what of the girl? If the tattooed combination meant anything at all, then it meant danger to her once its purpose was served.

Skeeter wiggled on the chair for another minute or two, then let the chair legs down with a thud and got up. He moved restlessly into the other room and McNally tried his big experiment. He was dealing with a keyed-up, bewildered and

highly superstitious youth and he had set a good stage by high-hatting him. Now, while Skeeter stumbled around in the dark of the other room, McNally pitched his voice to the hoarse, husky whisper of Needle Mike.

“You double-crossing, chiseling bum!” he said. “You’ve missed a bet.”

The whisper hung in the hot stuffy air of the tattooing shop that had once been Needle Mike’s and the prowling in the other room stopped. There was a tense moment of silence and then Skeeter was back in the lighted rear room full tilt. His narrow face was white and there was perspiration on his forehead.

“What did you say?” he stammered.

McNally turned his head and looked at him with bored aloofness. “I said you’re only an office boy.”

“No. Not that. Just a minute ago. You called me something.”

“You’re crazy.”

McNALLY resumed his act of watching the ceiling. For a moment Skeeter stared at him and there was no conviction in Skeeter’s face. He did not believe that McNally had spoken. He knew the voice he had heard and Needle Mike was dead. The superstition in him came to the fore and he turned hesitantly back into the other room. In spite of Miringo’s instructions he turned on the light and looked around. He was trembling when he returned.

McNally turned his head again. “Your boss will slap your ears down for disobeying orders on the light,” he said contemptuously.

Skeeter cursed. “I haven’t got a boss. I run my own business, see.”

McNally laughed. “You take orders easily.”

“Sure. For two hundred and fifty bucks I’ll do an easy job like this any day in the week. And if you think you’re going to talk me out of it, you’re crazy.”

"O. K. If you think you'll get two hundred and fifty."

McNally resumed his study of the ceiling and let that soak in. Skeeter was nervous as a cat, not sure that he had heard anything except in his own mind, and a prey to indecision. An individualist par excellence, he worked best when he shot his own angles. For a few minutes he turned the angles over in his mind with a new doubt to muddle them.

"What do you mean *if* I get two hundred and fifty?"

"You're stupid to ask. It's too much money. He could have got you for less. When a man offers too much, he doesn't mean to pay."

There was silence—a long silence—then Skeeter jumped up from his chair as though it were hot. "Geez, guy," he said, "this is a spot. That bozo is going to rub us both out. We both know too much. That combination business is dynamite. I missed a bet."

He was quoting the ghost of Needle Mike on the last statement but he did not seem to realize it. He was a bundle of nervous energy seeking an outlet and he practically jiggled as he moved around the room.

"How much is it worth to you to get free, guy?" he said.

"Not a dime."

"Huh?"

"Not a dime. I wouldn't trust a man I had to buy. You're in as bad a spot as I am."

Skeeter stopped jiggling, then his eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "Get that idea out of your skull," he said. "I'm not tied up."

It was perfectly true and the last subtle touch in McNally's playing of a tough hand of cards. Skeeter was himself again and he was being permitted to win a trick to save his pride. McNally shifted his position. "I'll pay fifty dollars and throw in with you," he said.

"A hundred."

"Fifty, I said, and it's tops."

McNally's jaw was set hard and Skeeter studied that jaw line for a moment before he shrugged. "I'll take it, guy, if it's cash."

"It's cash."

"Oke."

Skeeter looked fearfully at the alley door, crossed the room to it and turned the key, then took a knife from the table-top and bent above McNally.

"It's not a copper deal," he said, "so don't figger that way. We don't go to the cops."

"Why?"

"Because that gets us rubbed out by other people. If we handle Dirk on our own, it's his tough luck."

McNally smiled grimly. He knew that code as well as Skeeter did. "All right," he said, "we'll handle him and no cops."

Skeeter nodded and cut the ropes. "Check," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Clip-Joint Lady

IT TOOK McNally several seconds to loosen up his cramped muscles after the binding cord had been cut. Skeeter had figured that time into his calculations and he made the most of it. He backed clear of any possible attack and his right hand closed around the gun in his side pocket. Guns were not Skeeter's game but a revolver in the present circumstances was too good a card to toss away.

"The fifty bucks!" he said.

McNally reached into his hip pocket. He had a habit of carrying a supply of folding money there and keeping only a few dollars in his wallet. He counted off fifty dollars and tossed the bills on the table-top. Skeeter eyed the money but there was a wrinkle of doubt on his forehead.

He had made a hasty alliance founded

on the sudden conviction that Dirk Miringo was no philanthropist and that it would be dangerous to sit around and wait for him while one had dangerous knowledge of his affairs. But once he had taken the first step, Skeeter was besieged with doubts. He worked best alone and he did not trust strangers. Like Dirk before him, he did not know what to do about McNally.

McNally, for his own part, did not know what to do about Skeeter. McNally, too, worked best alone.

The two men eyed each other appraisingly and Skeeter edged close to the table. He fingered the bills, added them up with one swift glance and backed away.

"We've got to—" he began.

A sudden knock on the alley door cut off the rest of his speech. His skinny body contracted into a half-crouch and froze. McNally, too, turned toward the door, his nerves taut. Casual customers did not come to the rear door. The person who knocked must be one of those who had left the room lately. McNally looked toward Skeeter and the knock sounded again.

"Open it, guy!" Skeeter's voice was hoarse.

MCNALLY crossed the room, shot the bolt, opened the door. Gloria took one frightened look at him, then squeezed through the partly open door and closed it behind her. She was breathing heavily like one who has run a long race.

"Oh, you're loose. I'm glad. I was worried—"

"What do you want?"

Skeeter's voice cut in on her and it was no longer the voice of a frightened man. Skeeter had anticipated the coming of Dirk Miringo and he had no answers for Miringo. He was not afraid of the girl. Gloria Larkin looked at him, then looked back to McNally.

"You've got to go," she said. "I don't

want anything to happen to you. I've been afraid."

"What did you think might happen to me?"

"I don't know. I was just afraid. You're a gentleman and Pete hit you and if anything happened to you, it would be Pete's fault. I don't want him mixed up in anything. I don't want him in trouble."

Again, the heavy make-up seemed incongruous. Gloria was very young and she was in over her depth with people who were beyond her understanding. Skeeter was eyeing her shrewdly, but he was a good listener when he saw a possible advantage in listening and said nothing.

McNally nodded reassuringly to the girl. "No hard feelings as far as Pete is concerned," he said. "But where is he?"

The girl trembled. "I don't know. He took me home. He told me to stay there and I was scared. I thought maybe if I got you away, you wouldn't make trouble for Pete—"

"What about those numbers on your back? What do they mean?"

Gloria shrank from the question, her thin shoulders pushed hard against the door panels. "I don't know. They didn't tell me. I don't know—"

McNally was watching the girl intently and he was paying no attention to Skeeter. Without a word or a bit of preliminary warning, Skeeter gathered his thin body and launched an attack. He hurled himself on McNally with his pipestem arms swinging. The first blow landed high on McNally's head. The girl screamed and McNally looked with amazement at the white, desperate face of the newsboy.

There was nothing to do but hit back and McNally whipped his left hand over. Skeeter pulled his head, took it on the temple and went clean across the room, taking the table down with him into a corner. The girl's mouth was open as though she felt the urge to scream, but no sound came.

For a long puzzled moment, McNally looked at the limp figure in the corner. One of Joe Louis' punches could hardly have knocked a man further, but the tribute was not to McNally's left hand—it was a tribute rather to Skeeter's skill as an amateur acrobat.

The boy had come in swinging while he carried a gun in his pocket, and that did not add up. Then, suddenly, it did add and McNally grinned. The Skeeter mentality had not worked in reverse. Quite the contrary it had worked with its usual clarity and precision. McNally was glad that it had.

He turned to the girl. "We're getting out kid, and fast," he said. "You've got to get—"

"But—"

Her eyes looked toward the silent Skeeter. McNally reached past her and opened the door. "He'll be all right," he said.

Gloria Larkin shuddered but she did not argue. She followed McNally out into the alley and he took her arm.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"I—I can't tell you. I—"

"You've got to. I'll take you that far and leave you."

There was no compromise in McNally's voice. More than ever now he was conscious of the pattern of death that had been drawn in the room he had just left.

The girl hesitated a moment. "I live just a few blocks away, but I wish—"

"Never mind the wish. You're in danger and so is Pete." McNally stopped her where the shadows were thickest. "That lad we just left is going to play both sides of the street and be safe. He let me go, but he is going to break his neck getting to *L'Escargot d'Or* so that he can leave a message for Miringo. He'll make Miringo believe that you came back and that he was attacked—and he'll try to find himself an out. He won't tell Miringo to his face but he'll leave a mes-

sage and he'll look very mussed up when he leaves it—"

Gloria's breath whistled through her lips. "I—I work for Mr. Miringo," she faltered.

"What do you do?"

"I sing. I sing at *L'Escargot d'Or*,"

She seemed frightened and McNally pushed his advantage. "It was Miringo's idea to have those numbers tattooed on you, wasn't it?"

"I—I don't know."

"Sure you do. Whose combination was it?"

She stared at him silently, her face white in the darkness for all the make-up.

McNally leaned his face close to hers. "You're liable to be in a jam and so is your husband. I'm not a cop. I'll try to help if you come clean. If you don't tell me the truth, you're apt to have to tell it to a cop."

She swallowed audibly. "I got that combination from a Frenchman who comes to the place. He spends money and gets drunk. Miringo makes me sit at tables and talk to fellows that are drunk. I find out things he wants to know. Mister, I don't like doing that but Pete and me, we're trying to get some money together."

McNally nodded. "Sure."

HE WAS conscious of a certain irony in it all. The girl talked about this clip-shop work as she would talk about any other job. Just a couple of poor folks trying to get a start! Yet, when you came right down to it, maybe it wasn't so silly. McNally didn't know. The kind of people who got drunk in *L'Escargot d'Or* were probably even less worthy of sympathy. Morals, down within smelling distance of the river, were likely to be a bit complicated.

The girl continued to talk in a husky whisper. "This Frenchman's name is Marcel. He works for a man named Cree. It's his safe."

"Cree's?"

"Sure. Marcel is just a French drunk. He hasn't got a safe."

McNally nodded. That sounded reasonable. "And how about the combination on your back. Why put it on your back?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Pete says we got to do it."

McNally grunted. "O. K., Mrs. Larkin, I'm heading you home."

He steered her out of the alley and she was silent as they walked down the quiet side street. Suddenly she looked up at him and there was a strange expression on her face.

"You called me Mrs. Larkin."

"I did. That's right, isn't it?"

"Sure. But nobody calls me that. Sometimes they call me Gloria, but mostly it's "Kid" like you called me first. I like to be called Mrs. Larkin."

McNally flushed. It was such a little thing and yet he had fallen into the common error. Because she was a humble kind of person and frightened and without poise or dignity, he had paid her scant courtesy. Calling a woman by her married name was the simplest of gestures and yet it meant a lot to Gloria Larkin. McNally got, unreasonably, an emotional tug in that.

They turned a corner to a street that paralleled the river and walked two more blocks. Before a dark three-story building she called a halt.

"This is it," she said. "We live here."

The mingled smells of the market a few blocks north and of the river a block east came up into this dark street, to the house that had probably been standing since shortly after the Civil War. An old abandoned warehouse on the south threw a shadow over it and there were no lights to symbolize human warmth or occupancy. To pay the rent on such corners, Pete Larkin got his ears slapped back in preliminary bouts and Gloria, who sang in a clip-joint, wormed information out of drunks.

McNally, who had all the money that he needed and a name that bore an honored history, did not pretend that he could weigh the merits or demerits of people like these. All that he knew was that the shadow of tragedy lay heavier upon them than did the shadow of the warehouse next door.

"Sit tight," he said, "and if you get in a jam of any kind before I see you again, I'll back you up."

He left her on that and hurried back along the way he had come to where he had parked his car near the tattooing shop. McNally had a hunch he was going to need a car. If a safe had not already been robbed, it was going to be—and Pete Larkin, who was mixed up in it, looked more like a sucker than a criminal.

McNally hoped that he was wrong.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder for Two

MAJOR STANLEY CREE had been a feature writer's hero for years. His career was spread all over the pages of American newspapers and it lost nothing in the telling. He had been a flyer with the French in the World War and he had gone to Morocco for service with the Sherifian Escadrille during the fuss with Abd-el-Krim. He had served under several of the Chinese war lords as pilot and as instructor, and he had been mixed up with public and private scandals in the United States. He was a legend and his presence in St. Louis was as mysterious as some of the stories of his past.

Rumor had it that he was connected in some way with one of the world's several undeclared wars, and on a buying mission in the United States. Nobody seemed to know.

McNally turned the facts, such of them as he knew, over in his brain as he drove toward South St. Louis. He remembered Marcel, too, from news stories. The man

was always featured as Cree's friend and companion as well as his servant. A tough little Frenchman who had been Cree's mechanic during the World War and who had followed him into every war since.

None of the accounts had said anything to indicate Marcel was "just a French drunk" and McNally frowned over the idea of a veteran soldier of fortune spilling safe combinations in clip-joints.

Still, there was Gloria and her tattoo—and there was Dirk Miringo who did not spend his life chasing rainbows.

McNally turned off near Shaw's Gardens and drove down a quiet residential street that had once been a haven for the leading families and was still a stronghold of solid bank accounts and social prestige. Major Cree lived in this block and only a fortunate sub-lease or an undercover connection could explain his presence there.

The house was gray stone and set far back from the street in magnificent and dignified isolation—a massive, brooding kind of house that admitted no neighbor to equality. There was light behind the glass of the front door but the rest of the house was wrapped in gloom. McNally parked his car and strode up the paved walk.

He was not going to find it easy to explain his presence or his mission if he encountered hostility or suspicion, but he had taken a load of responsibility on his shoulders when he started dipping into other people's business. He was not discounting the potentialities for danger,

Dirk Miringo had taken his wallet and Dirk Miringo knew who he was. It was fatal for men like Miringo to have people walking around who knew too much about them. And then there was Skeeter.

Skeeter, undoubtedly, was busy at the task of mending his fences, and Skeeter as a pretty good bet to take care of himself and of his own interests. But

even Skeeter could miss, and McNally did not want anything to happen to him. He had a soft spot in his heart for the little chiseler that dated far back of the night when Skeeter cried over the death of Needle Mike. Topping the list of his responsibilities was a girl named Gloria, Mrs. Pete Larkin.

McNally mounted the steps and rang the bell. Inside the house, the clang of his summons echoed hollowly, but there was no sound of a human footstep, no response after a long wait. McNally rang again and heard the echo die away in deeper silence.

McNally stood irresolute. He put his hand on the knob and it turned in his grip. The door opened into a stuffy little reception hall that widened to magnificent proportions within a few feet. A broad stairway rose from the hall. Light flowed from a huge hanging lantern.

For a moment McNally stood hesitant, then he moved forward. The door on his left was partly ajar and he considered it before he approached it. The feel of the house was wrong and the atmosphere was wrong and he could not forget that this place had been marked for robbery—that the robbing of a safe in this house was big enough game to bring Dirk Miringo out personally on a lone-wolf prowl, big enough to justify the elaborate hocus-pocus of tattooed numbers on a girl's back.

He opened the library door and the pale light from the hall spread over a body on the floor.

IT WAS too late to withdraw now. He had either to call for help and police or get still deeper into the hot water that was swirling around him. His right hand reached for the light-switch inside the door and he stiffened as the full light flooded the room.

There was not merely one dead body, but two.

Pete Larkin was seated near an open safe with his back against a chair and a knife buried hilt-deep in his chest, his glassy eyes staring sightlessly at the doorway where McNally stood. In the center of the room a swarthy little man lay in a sprawled heap with his life blood spread in a wide stain about him and a tattooing needle sunk in his heart.

"That would be Marcel."

McNally wet his lips. It is one thing to be prepared for tragedy and another to face the appalling reality. He took a step further into the room and stopped. His own wallet was gripped in the hand of Pete Larkin.

From the outset McNally had seen Pete and Gloria Larkin as small chips in a big game and he had made it his business to barge in and extricate them. He had been part of the life of South Broadway long enough to know that Pete Larkin was just exactly what he was billed to be—a journeyman prize-fighter, not a criminal. Pete's foot had slipped but there had been a hope in McNally's heart that he could rescue Pete from the consequences and save him from being made the catspaw of a greasy customer like Dirk Miringo. That he had been overoptimistic was proved by the body propped against the chair.

Treading carefully, McNally crossed the room. The safe was imbedded in the wall behind a bookcase which had been swung outward on a pivot. The safe door hung open and it had been stripped. The shelves and compartments gaped vacantly. On the floor beside it lay a pile of books and papers that had evidently meant nothing to the looters. McNally turned and looked at the bodies again.

The position of Larkin's wound bothered him. The man had been stabbed full in the chest. For a prize fighter not to have avoided a single thrust to a vital spot while facing his assailant seemed incredible.

Marcel, who lay only a few feet from Larkin, had also been stabbed in the chest and it seemed as though there might have been a mad duel in which each man got home with a thrust at the same moment. McNally shook his head.

"I don't believe it. The Frenchman wouldn't have had a chance."

He looked down at his own wallet gripped in Pete's dead hand. The presence of that wallet identified the other man who had been in the room, the man who escaped with the loot.

MIRINGO had been out here himself and he'd had some kind of wild idea in mind when he planted that wallet. He must have been able to tell from the membership cards in front-rank clubs and from other indicators that McNally was no friendless punk like Pete Larkin—and yet he had dared to plant evidence against McNally in this room.

McNally's eyes moved again to Marcel.

The Frenchman had been killed by a long, old-fashioned tattooing needle—one that had belonged to Needle Mike, that McNally had held often in his hands. If Miringo had some clue to the fact that McNally and Needle Mike were one and the same person, then it was all clear!

For a moment McNally held his breath on the thought, then he waved it away. Miringo couldn't know—and if he did, it would be worth more to him in blackmail than as a link in a murder. The tattooing needle, though, had not been chosen as a weapon by chance. It was brought out here for a purpose and it had been used as was intended.

McNally could almost hear Skeeter's startled ejaculation when he got the idea of a frame-up down in the shop.

"Geez, guy, this is a spot. That bozo is going to rub us both out. We both know too much."

McNally had planted that idea in Skeeter's head and Skeeter had act

on it—and it was still sound. Moreover, it explained many things. In his mind, McNally could see another room with a layout like this—the back room of the tattooing shop with Skeeter's body and his own in a sprawled tangle.

The police wouldn't ask very many questions if they found something like that. The wallet and the needle would give them a connecting link between the home of Major Cree and Skeeter's shop, and the deaths would seem to be the usual result of conspirators quarreling over loot.

"The stakes must be damned big," McNally muttered. "And why the needling on the girl's back?"

HE CROSSED the room again, careful not to touch anything. There was a telephone on the library desk and he looked at it, knowing that he should call the police—and knowing, too, that even with the odds of his name and position in his favor, he was in danger from the law at this stage of the game. He was tied in and his story was too wild to credit. In addition to that, he could purchase credence for his story only by tossing Gloria Larkin to the wolves. That tattooed back of hers made her an accessory and—

He stopped and snapped his fingers. For a moment he stood where he was then he approached the telephone. He did not call for the police but for the *Globe Democrat*, the St. Louis morning paper. He had a friend, Barney, on the city desk and there was a question in his mind that Barney could answer for him. When the newspaperman's voice came over the wire, he asked: "Barney, find something for me quick. Whose car has license number 14X716?"

"Right away."

In a moment Barney was back. There was a trace of eagerness in his voice. "14X716 is assigned to Major Stanley

Cree, Ken. What's on your mind? Cree is always copy if you've got something."

McNally's lips straightened. "I haven't got anything yet, but what's big-time about Cree?"

"Damned colorful copy." Barney acted surprised. "You must know about him, Ken. Professional hero. Been honoring our fair city for some time. Lying quiet but plenty of rumors—"

"What kind of rumors?"

"I'm not in a position to say, Ken. I might stretch a point and trade if you've got something."

McNally stared at the two bodies on the floor. He had more than Barney could guess. "I'll have to take an IOU but I think I have something good," he said, "so don't waste time. Tell me about him."

Barney cleared his throat. "The tip is that he's handling a lot of this Chinese money that is being raised, Ken. Using this town as a base to divert suspicion. Buying planes and scrap and so on for the bang-bang in China."

McNally drew a deep breath. "Swell," he said. "I'll give you a buzz, Barney."

He cradled the receiver thoughtfully. Beside the corpses that were piling high in the city streets of far Cathay, these two bodies in this room would not loom as important. Still, this was the United States.

He started to rise and the front door clicked. A heavy footstep sounded in the hall and a voice called: "Marcel, you rascal!" Then there was a big, florid-faced man looming large in the doorway, sharp eyes swinging from the carnage to McNally.

"What the ruddy hell is all this?" a booming voice demanded.

McNally stood behind the desk. "You," he said, "would be Major Stanley Cree."

Stanley Cree got one good look at the room in that first sweeping survey. His hand was in his pocket and the unmistakable outline of an automatic pistol

showed through the cloth. McNally had a good chance to size him up in that moment which reduced every action to slow motion.

The major was medium tall and powerfully built. His face was stained deeply by the suns of many lands and his eyes were brown, a rather muddy brown. He wore a short beard that was cut Van Dyke fashion and he affected tweeds which emphasized the power of his physique. He stood shock well.

"How about it, man?" he said. His free hand gestured to the room at large.

McNally shrugged. "I found it that way."

"You found it? And who are you? What business have you in my home?"

McNally gestured to the propped-up corpse of Pete Larkin. "That's my wallet he's holding."

Cree's face was set in a hard mold. He did not look toward the body. "Suppose we let the police ask the questions," he said grimly. "Stand away from the phone and keep your hands where I can see them!"

He was moving down on the desk as he spoke and he had drawn the automatic from his pocket. "If you don't know it," he said gruffly, "that lad on the floor means more to me than money. I'd shoot you as quick as look at you."

M McNALLY did not question that, but he did not want the police to take over yet. He was the only clay pigeon they had to shoot at and it wouldn't be a pleasant experience. And yet, it seemed folly to jump the gun of a professional soldier, a damning indication of guilt for him to attempt an escape.

"Cree," he said, "if this Frenchman means so much to you, you'd better wait about calling the cops."

Cree stopped with his left hand on the phone.

"Why?"

"He did a lot of talking in saloons before this happened to him."

"What do you know about talk in saloons?"

"That's why you were robbed."

"And who are you?"

"Just an innocent bystander."

Stanley Cree seemed to have lost his professed eagerness for the police. Behind his clipped conversation, McNally sensed a shrewd awareness, a calculating, measuring quality. McNally was doing a little calculating himself.

Cree pulled the phone toward him. "Marcel was close-mouthed even when drunk. I trusted him with everything."

McNally looked briefly toward the crumpled body of Marcel. The man had had narrow features and a tight mouth. He'd been no loud-mouth or saloon braggart. Cree should know. And Marcel had been with Stanley Cree in the tough places of the earth where an incautious man can seal his own death warrant with one foolish speech. Probable facts and apparent evidence were at odds.

McNally's hands were still shoulder high but his thighs were touching the desk. "You planned these murders yourself, Cree," he said softly.

He shoved against the desk as the major fired, felt the bullet pluck at the cloth of his coat as he hurled himself over the slick top of the desk. His left hand shoved the gun hand of Cree outward and up, his right fastened in the man's lapel. The momentum with which he slid across the desk did the rest.

The telephone spun to the floor and Cree went backward over the chair with McNally on top. The gun roared again as they went down, and then McNally had the gun hand pinned. He bent the major's fingers back and Cree made no particular effort to keep the gun.

The two shots had been enough to arouse any neighborhood and the major needed only to hold McNally now until

he received assistance. He had confidence enough in his physical bulk to play it that way.

Thus far the element of surprise had been McNally's. As with Dirk Miringo, he looked too meek to be dangerous, spoke too softly to be feared. And he had fired his charge of murder like a bomb shell. The major's reaction to that had been spontaneous and instinctive. It could have been either guilt or anger.

They wrestled now on the floor and the major was good at rough and tumble. McNally hit him twice with his right hand before Cree tied it up and Cree made effective use of his knees. McNally wiggled out of kneeling range.

"I'll fight till the cops come," he said. "My story is better than yours."

"You'll get a chance to tell it!"

Cree freed his right hand and hooked with it as he spoke. McNally pulled his head back with ludicrous ease and rammed the major's head to the floor with his own temporarily freed left. He felt the major's body jerk under him and go limp. He grunted and twisted free. The major's right hand would have done damage if it landed. It had been harder than the McNally left.

Even as that conclusion flashed through his brain, he was scooping the automatic from the floor. There seemed to be excitement in the street and he could hear people just outside the door, the inevitable stirred-up neighbors who will flock to the scene of trouble and hesitate to take risks. They were out there now deliberating as to whether they should go in and investigate the shots or wait for the police. McNally could not afford to wait on their decision.

He was making his way swiftly toward the back of the house. He knew practically everything that he wanted to know but he did not believe that knowledge is power unless the knowledge is backed by proof. He had to check up on Skeeter and his

activities, and he had to get Gloria Larkin to some safe place where she would not be able to talk others out of trouble and talk herself in.

In the meantime he was practically a fugitive from justice and it was a bad role. But the part of a captured suspect was certainly no better—and that was the role that he was leaving behind him.

He found the kitchen and the screened-in back porch in the dark, made his way across a grassy lawn to a paved alley. He followed the alley to a north-and-south street, walking south to the corner and east to his car. There was a police prowler car pulling into the curb before Stanley Cree's as he came up, and a little knot of people waiting to see some excitement. McNally stopped briefly on the edge of the crowd.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

A tall, thin man in a blue bathrobe turned to him. "Nobody seems to know. There's been shooting. Police going in now."

Both of the prowler coppers had left the car and were going up the steps. McNally shrugged. "Somebody probably didn't know it was loaded," he said.

He took out his keys and made his way to his own car without attracting any attention at all from the crowd. When he drove away, the on-lookers were still waiting without bulletins, and the police were still in the house.

"They'll have plenty of excitement in a few minutes," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Skeeter System

MCNALLY had only one definite plan in mind. He was going to see Gloria Larkin and ask her one question that he had neglected to ask her before. Then he was going to take her with him to Corbin of the Homicide Squad and lay his

cards on the table. As far as the police were concerned, he would put Skeeter in the clear, too. If Skeeter had got himself jammed up with Miringo or anyone else in the meantime, that was Skeeter's own mess and he would have to clean it up.

Skeeter had pulled a fast one when he staged his two-fisted attack, took a wound that he could show and let McNally make an exit after McNally's cooperation threatened to become a liability instead of an asset.

"It was pretty bright but I've seen Skeeter do better. He's playing with dynamite in Miringo."

McNally turned his car into the dark street that paralleled the river and it was consoling to feel the gun in his pocket. If Dirk Miringo had an immediate interest in the girl, even a simple program might not prove any too simple.

The house that the girl called home was dark from the outside but there was a dim light burning in the vestibule. Only one of the three brass mail boxes had a name card and the name was *Larkin*. The apartment was numbered 3. McNally went up.

The stairs creaked under him though he walked guardedly. Ahead there was only darkness and when he paused on the third-floor landing he had to strike a match in order to see the door. There was a big white 3 on it and he turned the knob, stepped into a dark room, his hand on the gun he had taken from Stanley Cree.

Nothing stirred in the darkness. After a five-second wait, he lighted a match and found the switch of the drop-light. It was a low-powered bulb and threw only a pale glow over a big, old-fashioned room in which the Larkins' few shabby sticks of furniture seemed lost. On the floor inside the door there was a white square of paper. McNally picked it up.

Dear friend,

If you come back, I couldn't stay like I promised. Pete is going to meet me in

another city and we will start over. I am writing this in the bathroom and will drop it as I go out. Thanks for being so kind.

Mrs. Larkin.

For a long moment McNally stood with the pitiful message in his hand, then he cursed wholeheartedly. There was so much between the lines of that message. Miringo, of course, had been waiting for her and that was the reason why she had to write the message in the bathroom. And Miringo was the one who brought her the supposed message from old Pete.

"The mugg probably told her that Pete had pulled a job and had to lam. And he probably gave her a hotel address in another town. She'll go there to meet Pete and instead she'll meet some of Miringo's breed."

McNally's jaw was grimly set. He had partially understood the reason for the tattoo on the girl's back once he worked around to the thought that it would involve her as an accessory in whatever happened at Cree's. This was another side to it. She could be scared out of town and she could be kept out of town—and once she had been in the hands of Miringo's friends for a while, she wouldn't care.

McNally swung on his heel and made his way down the stairs once more with no attempt at caution. "I'll wipe up the earth with that heel if it's the last thing I do," he growled. "And the most direct route to Miringo is Skeeter."

His rage carried him along at full momentum and he did not slow down until he turned into the alley behind the tattooing shop and saw the light which outlined the shaded window. Skeeter, evidently, was home and that was all to the good. McNally strode to the door and turned the knob.

THERE was a tensing in the room as the door swung in and a big man whom he had never seen before stuck a

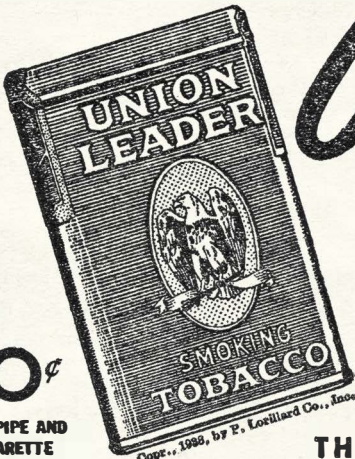
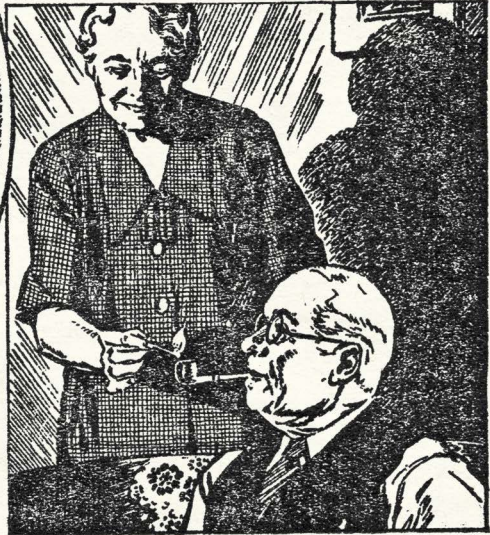
PALS

...through the years



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gun under his nose. Behind the big man he saw Gloria Larkin, Skeeter, and the trussed-up form of Dirk Miringo. His hands went slowly shoulder-high and Skeeter's voice cracked the silence.

"Get him, too," he said, "he's in it."

The big man grunted. "I got him," he said, "and don't ever think I haven't."

It took a few dazed seconds for McNally to absorb the details of the scene before him and to accommodate the thought that the much-feared Dirk Miringo was a prisoner of the lowly Skeeter. There was relief in the thought that the girl was safe but the stranger was a puzzling factor and there was no fitting him into the picture.

McNally grunted. "You'd better have a right to wave that gun around, cowboy," he said grimly, "because I'm getting damned tired of having guns poked at me."

"Never mind my right, guy. Get in here."

The big man backed up and McNally followed him. The man was red-faced, broad and squat, but decidedly a heavy-weight as far as poundage went. He had the cop look about him, but the cord that bound Miringo was the answer to that. Cops just naturally did not tie people up with a cord and keep them in back rooms.

FROM a corner a midget radio was blaring music. The tattooing shop had never owned a radio in the days of Needle Mike and McNally did not believe that Skeeter owned one. As a one-night innovation, it seemed to lack point.

Gloria Larkin was working a handkerchief back and forth between her fingers and her face was flushed under the make-up. She evidently had her heart set upon joining Pete in some other city and this hitch in plans was making her desperate. McNally ignored the others and tossed the question that he had been saving for her.

"Mrs. Larkin," he said, "did Marcel know Dirk Miringo real well or did he do all of his talking to you?"

"He just talked to me except hello to other people. He didn't know Mr. Miringo very well."

"And you were the one that got the combination?"

She looked around fearfully. "Ye-es."

"O. K." McNally's eyes were narrowed. Miringo had struggled slightly with the cord that bound him and his eyes glared at the girl but he did not attempt to speak although he was not gagged. Skeeter and the beefy man seemed inclined to favor the asking of questions, then suddenly the music stopped and an announcer started talking about face cream.

The chunky man raised his hand. "Shut up, everybody," he said.

The cold-cream voice trailed off and then a few bars of music came on the air followed by the voice of another announcer. "This is the Taylor Tobacco Crime Broadcast. All of the latest crime flashes brought to you by the Taylor Tobacco Sleuth. Light up your pipe with good old mellow blah-blah-blah—"

The announcer's voice ran on and out and a sharp excited voice was on the air in the Winchell manner. No one in the room needed the command to shut up now. The midget radio held its audience and the Tobacco Sleuth cracked his news.

"There was a double murder tonight and a two-hundred-thousand-dollar robbery at the home of Major Stanley Cree, world-famous soldier of fortune, who admitted reluctantly that the funds belonged to a Chinese tong which had commissioned him to buy airplanes and machine guns for the Chinese army. The body of Major Cree's faithful servant, Marcel LeMaitre, was found in front of the open safe where he had evidently discovered the robber at work. One of the robbers, tentatively identified as Pete Larkin, local heavy-weight boxer, was also killed—"

"No!" Gloria Larkin's scream rose high above the broadcast. She whirled around with her fists raised high and then the color washed out of her face. She staggered and went limp. McNally leaped forward and caught her as she fell. The heavy man took a step after him, covering him with the gun.

"Tie him up, Skeeter!" he said. "This is our deal all right."

There was an exultant note in his voice. Skeeter was chuckling. "Boy, I'll say! And was I kidding you, Stover? Two hundred grand! I knew it was big."

McNALLY eased the girl to the floor and turned. The gun was menacing him and Stover was tensely alert. Skeeter stepped in behind McNally with a roll of tough cord in his hands and the heavy man moved the gun slightly.

"Down on the floor, guy. Face first," he growled.

Slowly, reluctantly. McNally went down on the floor. With deft speed, Skeeter tied his hands behind his back, and for all of his skinny build, Skeeter got a lot of leverage and twist into the tying.

Gloria Larkin regained consciousness and sat up but the fight was temporarily out of her. She seemed dazed, unable to comprehend what was going on. After one glance, Stover paid no attention to her.

"Keep an eye on her," he told Skeeter. "I'll get these muggs out to the car."

He put his gun in his pocket and took out his pocket knife. He cut the cord that bound Miringo's ankles and stepped back. "Both of you guys walk ahead of me," he said, "and just one remark or one yell gets you a konk on the knob—and hard. Sabe?"

He stood back to let McNally and Miringo walk through the door ahead of him. Miringo was stiff and walking like a drunk. McNally frowned. He could not fit Stover into the picture, but the fact

that the man was an ally of Skeeter's meant one thing positively, there was money in the deal somewhere.

There was a car parked near the side-street areaway and not a person in sight. Stover bundled his two captives into the back of the car and Dirk Miringo cursed under his breath. In a few seconds Skeeter came out with the girl. Stover waved him into the front seat.

"Drive it, kid," he growled, "and keep the girl up there with you. I'm sitting with these bozos." He piled in.

Miringo swore again. "How's to make a cash deal, shamus?" he said.

The big man grunted. "Shut up!"

It was at once an answer and a threat. Miringo did not argue. He muttered something under his breath and drew far into his corner of the car. He did not stand up any better under a reversal than any of the rest of his breed. Where he couldn't command, bully, or buy, he was helpless. Skeeter slapped the car into gear and they rolled.

Their destination, of course, was practically pre-ordained and it was a short ride. In ten minutes they pulled into the curb behind the green lights of a police prowler car. Across the wide lawn, in the home of Major Stanley Cree, lights blazed. Stover grunted and heaved his heavy body out of the back seat. He managed a certain ponderous dignity when his feet touched pavement and saluted carelessly when a uniformed cop stopped him.

"Stover of the Five Star Agency," he said. "I've got a bunch of prisoners on this case. Corbin inside?"

The uniformed man looked at him doubtfully. "Yes, he's in there.

"Swell. Bring that bunch in, will you."

Stover was strutting and there was an air of authority about him. Skeeter got out with the girl and McNally set the example for Miringo by climbing clumsily from the tonneau. Miringo held back a moment, then came out because he had

no alternative. The copper didn't like the looks of the line-up and showed it, but he fell in behind the procession and they all moved up to the house.

DETEKTIVE- SERGEANT Corbin of Homicide met them just inside the big hall. He was a hard-boiled copper of the old school and he had never liked Needle Mike. McNally's memories of Corbin went back a long way.

The detective's eyes swept the group and he rumbled deep in his chest. "And who the hell ordered a parade?" he growled.

Stover's grin was wide. "This is the biggest case I ever cracked, Corbin," he said, "and I brought you the haul. This is your safe gang."

Corbin's eyes swept the group again and he looked longest at Dirk Miringo. "Bring 'em in," he said, "and I'll listen to what you've got."

Gloria Larkin shrank back but Skeeter took her arm and they all went into the library. The two bodies had already been removed and McNally was grateful for that. He had been shrinking inwardly at the thought of the girl walking in on what he had seen in this room. She looked dazed and there was possibly a merciful shock-anesthesia at work on her, but she would have awakened to hysteria if she had seen the body of Pete Larkin.

There were two plainclothesmen in the room and the soldierly looking Major Cręe was standing near the open safe. He stiffened at sight of McNally.

"That's the scoundrel!" he roared, "That's the man I found here."

Stover waved his hand. "See! What did I tell you, Corbin?"

"O. K. Speak your piece. Tie these people into the case and I'll listen to you."

The private dick rubbed his hands together. "The girl has the combination of the safe tattooed on her back."

That statement got them. There was

a tense silence in the room and even Corbin lost his air of aloofness. Gloria Larkin stood alone, center of a ring of staring eyes, as Skeeter stepped away. Corbin gestured to the man who was nearest to the safe. "Close it," he said, "and spin the combination." His eyes drilled Stover. "Now prove that last statement."

McNally's throat felt dry and he dreaded what he knew was coming, but there was no way of preventing it. He had discovered a little slack in Skeeter's hurriedly but tightly drawn loops and worked against that slack while the others concentrated their attention on the girl.

Stover reddened slightly but this was his show and he had an audience. "Slip that dress off your back, sister!" he said.

He waved Skeeter close as he spoke and Skeeter steered the girl over to the safe. She walked like an automaton.

"My work, kid," Skeeter whispered. "The tattoo. They've got to see it."

Gloria Larkin turned away from the eyes in the room and slipped her shoulder strap. The dress fell from her white back with its angry-looking sore spots.

Corbin swore softly.

Skeeter nodded to Stover. The private dick stepped forward. Gloria Larkin was swaying on her feet and her knees were turning to hinges again. Stover caught her by the wrists and held her. Skeeter went down on one knee before the safe, his eyes narrowing as he squinted at the numerals which his needle had made.

"L-twenty-three." He turned the knob of the safe. "R-eighteen. . . ."

It was quiet in the room save for Skeeter's whispered reading of the symbols and the soft metallic sound of the turning dial. Gloria Larkin was all but fainting and everyone in the room realized that with each turn of the dial, Skeeter was taking another step toward proving or disproving her connection with a two-hundred-grand robbery and two murders.

McNally was the one exception to that.

He saw no proof of anything on the girl's back nor in the turning dial. He had been working feverishly on his bonds and the last loop slipped just as Skeeter vented a sharp grunt and jerked the safe handle.

The door opened. Skeeter stood up.

Stover's eyes gleamed with triumph. "Did I tell you, Corbin," he said exultantly, "or did I kid you?"

McNally tossed his cords away. "You kidded him," he said.

A POLICE gun covered McNally and now he was in the spot that Gloria Larkin had occupied as target for staring eyes. He worked his fingers to restore circulation.

"If anybody can play detective on this case," he said, "with a department badge or without one, then I'm playing too. In the first place, Cree is a liar!"

The charge broke in the room like a pistol shot and blocked the words which were almost on the lips of Corbin.

The major stiffened and his red face darkened. "Why, you—you—"

McNally cut in sharply on his sputter. "Cree didn't have two hundred thousand in his safe." He turned his head sharply. "Did he, Miringo?"

Miringo glared at Cree. "He did not!" "How do you know?"

Corbin shot the question fast and Miringo looked wildly around. He had not spoken for a long while and he had been concentrated on the drama in the room. A quick question had caught him flat-footed, particularly since it seemed to be aimed to link somebody else to the robbery and murder. Too late, he realized how he had incriminated himself.

McNally looked at Cree who had taken a step forward only to be stopped by Corbin's outthrust arm. "Corbin," he said, "Miringo knows what was in the safe because Miringo got a sucker to open that safe. Miringo brought the sucker out to be killed. Pete Larkin thought that

Miringo was his pal but Miringo grabbed him and held him while the Frenchman, Marcel, stuck a knife in him. It had to be that way. Nobody could walk into a professional pug and stick a knife in him."

Stover had let go of Gloria Larkin when the safe-opening demonstration was completed. She came up off her knees before anyone in the room was aware of her and charged the bound Miringo like a wildcat, her fingers clawing for his eyes.

"He did! Oh, I know that he did!" Her voice climbed the scale. "That Frenchman told me the combination. He was drunk. I told Mr. Miringo. I had to. I worked for him—"

She was clawing at Miringo and it took two policemen to pull her off. Her voice rose and fell. "Miringo told me and Pete that he'd let us have some of the money, but he made me get that combination tattooed on my back to make sure that we wouldn't double-cross him. He didn't tell me that Pete was killed tonight. He tried to send me out of town—"

She was shrieking her charges and struggling hard against the police grip. Miringo, his face torn, shrank away from her. His game was up with this shouting, vindictive witness against him, with his own mistakes to tally and with, undoubtedly, the money from the safe some place where the police could find it. Blundering outsiders had thwarted him and tied him up or he would have had the girl on the train and the money hidden.

"I was double-crossed," he said. "The Frenchman and I—"

Major Cree fired through his pocket. There was a stabbing tongue of flame, a shattering roar and Miringo spun on his toes. Corbin was on the major while the echoes were still roaring. He slammed the man back against the wall and got his gun. Cree's face was a hard mask now.

"Sorry," he said, "but Marcel was my friend, my—"

"And you killed him!"

McNally was standing with his legs braced wide, staring straight into the hating eyes of the international hero. Behind McNally, a cop was on one knee beside Miringo. "Ambulance," he said tersely.

One of the other men went out fast. Corbin moved slightly back from Cree, covering him with his gun. McNally threw his accusation straight to Cree. "It was pretty deep," he said, "but Marcel wasn't the type that talks secrets and combinations when he is drunk. He talked deliberately when he talked—and he talked to head men. You knew he was talking. You framed it that way. But Miringo didn't know. He thought that Marcel was planning to rob you. And you needed suckers to play stooge. So Marcel goes through all of this stuff of confiding in the girl and Miringo drags in poor old Pete Larkin."

MCNALLY had the attention of the room now and Cree had retired behind the poker mask again. McNally drilled on. "You, Cree, wanted to keep that money that the Chinese were giving you for guns and planes. So you wanted a good-looking convincing robbery. You had Marcel arrange it. There had to be a sucker to be killed in the robbery. That was Larkin. There had to be somebody to escape and thus explain the missing money. That was Miringo. Miringo didn't know that you were in on it. He thought he was going to steal two hundred thousand dollars—"

"Lies!" Cree's voice was hoarse.

McNally ignored him. "You had it all arranged. Marcel would kill Miringo's sucker and be a hero. Miringo would get away with the few thousand you left in the safe and be charged up with taking two hundred thousand—"

Cree turned to Corbin. "It's ridiculous. Why listen to it? If that were true, Miringo could blackmail me all my life once I said I lost more than he took."

"That's right," McNally cut in relentlessly. "That's why you killed Marcel. You sacrificed him for safety. Miringo had a stupid idea for getting rid of Skeeter and he left that tattooing needle. Skeeter was going to be found dead so that would fix him as, perhaps, the man who got away. But you killed Marcel with it and Miringo couldn't blackmail you without linking himself to a robbery that ended in murder. You had all the money and nobody to take a cut—"

"You're guessing. Guessing wild—"

McNally spread his hands wide. "Miringo was riding in your car when I first saw him. Somebody else was in it. That gave me the hook-up between Marcel and Miringo. Then you were afraid to hold me for the police when you fought me in this room. You felt that you'd be safer if I ran and that I wouldn't dare open my mouth. You missed a punch deliberately and let me land one. That was a tip-off to me—"

McNally shrugged with disgust and turned to Corbin. "You will probably find a big chunk of money some place in the house. Cree never expected to be tripped up and—"

Stanley Cree sprang for the door in a lightning leap. Corbin's gun jumped into his hand. "Stop or. . ."

Cree did not stop, but he half turned in the doorway as Corbin's finger tightened on the trigger. The bullet took him in the chest and he went to his knees. His eyes were dazed and he made a pawing motion with his right hand. Then his lips twisted wryly.

"Thanks!" he said. "I had it coming to me—and I—didn't—want it—going—away."

He went forward on his face and, whatever he was, he died as soldiers die.

THE ambulance clanged up to the house and then there were men with stretchers in the room. McNally was talking to

a sobbing girl in the corner with the consciousness that talk could do her little good.

In another corner, Skeeter held a whispered consultation with the heavy-set man from the Five Star Detective Agency. Stover had been very quiet for a while but he was beginning to look important again.

Corbin crossed the room wearily. It is always a bad moment for a cop when he has to shoot to kill. "McNally," he said, "I'll get your story in full at the Hall. There's gaps."

"Of course." McNally smiled. It wasn't a pinch—not when they talked like that. He had built a good story out of watching little things as he went along—and he had made his story stand up. Of course, as in all tales of the double-cross, the trail had been pretty twisted. When double-crossers get together they inevitably work at their trade. In this case nobody had been shooting straight except a couple of suckers named Larkin.

Skeeter turned away from his conversation with Stover and he grinned when he saw McNally. "Nice figuring, guy," he said, "but you worked too hard."

McNally's brow creased. He remembered similar occasions when, as Needle Mike, he had listened to the same line. Skeeter at such times, inevitably came up with money.

"What did you do?" he asked.

The Skeeter grin broadened. "I went

to a private dick and I told him there was a safe robbery going to happen. I didn't know where and didn't want to know. I wasn't going to be an accessory, see? But it was a cinch to happen and I had a bunch of clues. All the dick and I had to do was sit down and wait till the broadcast told us that a safe had been cracked. After that, we'd get our clues together and collect a percentage for recovery of the dough. See. We rounded up Miringo and the girl so that we'd have something to start with, then you—"

"And now?"

"The Chinks pay. What'll you bet?"

McNally shook his head. When Skeeter was ready to bet, it was already in the bag. The one mistake that McNally had made in his whole line of reasoning concerned the man that he knew best. He had figured that Skeeter would throw in with Miringo.

"I should have known better," he said, "There wouldn't have been any money in that."

He bent over the girl who was crying softly into her handkerchief. "Let's go down to the Hall and have it over with," he said gently. His face was harder than his voice.

The Larkins had taken a tough rap but the survivor was his job. She wasn't going to do any time as an accessory while there were any good lawyers left in St. Louis, and any good McNally dollars in the bank.



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The tall man swung his fist and Marlowe crashed against a chair.



A MERE HALF MILLION

By James Duncan

When Lew Rigg disappeared from the S. S. Western Empress and turned up a few hours later on the pavement in front of the Morton Hotel, apparently a suicide, Marlowe, theater critic for the Globe, was the only one who knew the answer. He could spot a bad play from the first scene, and he knew this one had flopped, even though it was an off-stage murder drama.

CHAPTER ONE

The Lady Was a Bum

THE tug emitted a deep-throated, friendly blast. The *Western Empress*, pointing her sleek nose toward the bleak side of Gardiner's Is-

land, stood in for the channel and answered the salute with sonorous dignity. The tug jockeyed to port. From his vantage point on its low-built deck, Marlowe, dramatic critic of the *Globe*, watched the *Empress'* mountainous, white-painted side loom up like that of a docile

monster sidling forward with lugubrious good-nature to get its tremendous back scratched.

Distinctly, he could hear her navigation-bridge bells clanging musically. A moment later, she shivered, lost way and slowed perceptibly as speed was cut. North River tugs and waddling ferries took careful note of her probable direction and doggedly swung wide. Ahead lay the long line of V-roofed docks and behind them the mighty skyline—steel, stone and glass topped by a coronet of sunshine. It was a fine morning. A light warm breeze was blowing gently from the low-lying land to the east.

THE ship reporters had been passing a square bottle around. When it was finally and irretrievably empty, they passed it for the last time, then flung it into the channel. Half a dozen pairs of eyes regretfully watched it bob into the white-churned wake. Jacobsen, the theatrical producer, shook with noiseless laughter. This was the first time that he had ever gone out to meet an ocean liner in a mail tug and he was enjoying the experience thoroughly. He squeezed Marlowe's arm affectionately. He was a tall, heavy-shouldered man with hair gray at the temples, a somber chiseled face softened by warm, sympathetic eyes and a sensitive mouth. He wore a black Homburg and a tailored tweed coat.

He poked Marlowe in the shoulder, said: "All I need now to make my day perfect is Fran's fist on this contract." He tapped his breast pocket. "Things are breaking my way at last, huh? Listen. . . When Fran went abroad my luck went with her. All my shows flopped. Now she's back, I'm in, boy, I'm in!"

Marlowe eyed him with a vague smile. He shook his head. "You may be disappointed, my friend." Round-shouldered and hollow-chested, he looked pale and faded in his thread-bare ulster. His

fedora was shapeless, weatherbeaten but he wore it with a certain air. He added gently: "She won't sign."

Jacobsen's good humor moulted from him. He looked pained, hurt. "What do you mean, boy?"

"She won't sign."

This time Jacobsen purpled, spouted: "You're nuts! Whatta you mean she won't sign? She's coming back specially for my show. She cabled me. I sent her the dough. Get this, guy! I wouldn't sink fifty grand in a show—practically every cent I got in the world—without some kind of a guaran—" He broke off, his bright eyes darted about and then he caught Marlowe's arm. "Hey! Is this on the level? Have you heard something definite?"

The ship reporters, attracted by the sharpness of his voice, crowded closer. Marlowe disengaged his arm, said: "In a way." He drew forth a crumpled sheet of blue paper. "Radiogram from Francine Rice," he said. "Got it yesterday."

Jacobsen snatched it from him, spread it open.

CONGRATULATE ME, PAL. CAPTAIN MARRIED LITTLE ME AND LEW RIGG THIS A.M. REMEMBER LEW? WE MET IN CHERBOURG AND ROMANCE SWEEPED ME OFF MY FEET. I HAVE NOT LOST MY GRIP, I GUESS. OR IS CHARM THE WORD? PLEASE NO PUBLICITY. LEW SIMPLY ABHORS IT. ISN'T HE A DEAR? WHAT'S MORE, HE REFUSES TO PERMIT ME FURTHER STAGE CAREER. JUST AN OLD-FASHIONED HUSBAND. POOR JACOBSEN. I AM LETTING HIM DOWN BUT NO CAN HELP. HOME AND HUSBAND COME FIRST. AM I STILL A BUM?

FRAN.

The reporters had been reading over Jacobsen's shoulder. Levy, of the *Dispatch*, let out a whoop, rattled: "Lew Rigg! Lew Rigg, boss gambling racketeer,

fight fixer, horse dopester, returning home only because the Towner investigation has shut up shop and gone home. Lew Rigg and Francine Rice, darling of the stage and screen!"

"This is an outrage!" choked Jacobsen.

"Yeah. Tough on you," said Marlowe mildly.

"But what about Abe Coleman? Fran's married to Coleman—and—"

Marlowe waved his hand. "She got a Paris divorce a month ago. It was kept out of the papers. Coleman just found out about it yesterday."

"Hey!" puffed Dunne, of the *Star*. "Yesterday? Coleman got out of the pen yesterday, didn't he?"

The reporters chortled, the size of the story dawning on them. Levy wagged a finger. "What a girl! Say, kiddo, she must have plenty of what it takes. First a bozo like Abe Coleman, then a hot shot like Lew Rigg. She sure can pick herself some honeys!"

THE tug was nestling up against the side of the *Empress* now. As the jacob's-ladder was lowered, there was a wild scramble to be the first aboard. Passengers lined the rails, waved with homecoming enthusiasm. Marlowe let Jacobsen precede him. He was the last to step up on deck. Then he saw her.

The reporters had formed a tight ring about her, throwing questions. She was smiling and talking with that quiet ease and grace so characteristic of her. She knew how to use her violet eyes, half-veiled by curved lashes, not to dazzle but to charm. Her hair was red, but so dark that only the bright sun brought out the coppery glint. It was thick, piled high on her head in heavy coils. She wore no hat, and she was very beautiful. Her eyes were slightly slanted, full of mocking intelligence. She was of no particular age—perhaps twenty-five, perhaps thirty. Marlowe knew she was forty-two. He

was the only person in the world who did know.

He had long ago ceased to wonder about their liking for each other. He had decided once that it was based on mutual hate. They were old friends and deadly enemies. He called her a bum and hated what she stood for. She had caused the death of two men. She used H, consorted with men who were crooks and killers, ran with anyone who would pay the bills. She might have been a great actress but she was only a shocker, interested in nothing but tawdry, cheap plays. She had no real liking for the stage. He hated her—and yet they were friends.

Levy appeared, looking glum. He said: "I'm damned if anyone can find Lew Rigg."

Francine Rice detached herself from the reporters and moved toward Marlowe. Then she saw Jacobsen beside him and she stopped for a split second. She came on with an enigmatic smile lighting her face.

"Hello, Marlowe," she said. Her voice was deep, throaty. But she was looking at Jacobsen. She put a hand on his arm. "Jake, dear, I'm sorry. I know just how you feel. But there's nothing I can do about it. After all, a woman's heart is the—"

Jacobsen cut her with an icy stare. He said quietly: "Take your hand off me."

She dropped her hand to her side and stood still.

Jacobsen said: "I merely picked you out of the gutter and made a star of you and taught you all you know. I merely sent you five grand to get you back from Europe and I merely sunk fifty grand in a new show. I merely used up all the money I had and all I could borrow, beg or steal—"

Marlowe had never seen such passion and hatred in a man's face. Jacobsen looked as if he would strike her on the spot. His face was white-hot, eyes flam-

ing, his soft mouth savage and twisted. His fury was devouring him. He was shaking to contain himself.

"In view of all that, you won't sign the contract."

"But, Jake, dear, try to understand."

His voice was all the more deadly because it was quiet. "I understand you're a bum. But some day my turn will come." He turned and walked swiftly away.

There was a moment's silence. Then Dunne said pleadingly: "Now, Miss Rice, won't you tell us where Lew is?"

She was looking after Jacobsen's re-treating back. She looked up. "Lew? He's about somewhere. He was here a minute ago."

Levy said: "He must be bashful. The blushing bridegroom. How about a picture, Miss Rice?"

"Later, boys. Go away, I want to talk to Marlowe."

A slim, fair-haired man with a vaguely foreign air strode up. He was sleek, handsome—too handsome—well dressed.

"Later, Kurt," Francine Rice said quickly.

"But I must tell you—"

"Later, you fool!"

His face reddened. His eyes looked dull, smoldering. He clenched his hands. Then a smile touched his lips. He clicked his heels precisely, bowed and backed away.

Marlowe said: "So you still have him tagging around."

She slipped an arm through his. "Come to my cabin. I want to talk to you."

As they walked off, Marlowe heard Howard of the *Blade* say: "And who was that?"

Levy yawned. "Her man Friday."

Dunne chortled. "Man Friday? He's her every-day-of-the-week man. Kurt von Hoff, the most famous gigolo extant. Oo-la-la! I wonder how Lew Rigg stomachs him yapping around her heels.

That guy's been living off her for five years."

"He'll be looking for a new meal-ticket soon. Say, fellas, where is Lew?"

HER cabin was on A Deck, a luxurious-ly appointed room. Marlowe followed her in. A girl was seated in an easy chair, reading a book. She stood up as they entered. She was a brunette, her hair parted in the middle and boyishly brushed back over an intelligent forehead. She was very straight and slim with a sober but cheerful smile. Four trunks, all packed, stood to one side of the door. On top of them was an amazing variety of smaller handbags. She laid the book down on one of the trunks.

"Val," said Francine Rice, "this is my old friend Marlowe. Val is my secretary, you know. We got acquainted in London. Valentine Rain—Mike Marlowe."

"I've heard about you, Mr. Marlowe." She nodded her head to him, went out, with an air of self-effacing efficiency.

"Sit down," Francine Rice said. "Drink?"

He shook his head. "I saw Abe yesterday." He did not take a chair.

"Oh. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. How is he?"

"O. K. He was happy to hear about your coming home until I showed him your radiogram. Then he blew up. He's a trouble-maker, Fran. And he's still nuts about you."

She nodded, face expressionless. "I can handle him. Lew is all man. Abe knows better than to make trouble with Lew." She looked at him with a queer sort of smile. "How do you like my hair?"

"Huh?"

"My hair. I'm combing it in a new style. Do you like it?" The enigmatic smile that accompanied her words baffled him.

He contented himself with a shrug. "Your hair's swell. So what? I didn't

come here to talk about your hair." He walked to the porthole, looked out. "Are you on the level about Lew? I mean are you in love?"

She gave a low, warm laugh. "Would I marry him if I weren't?"

"Yes! You're a bum, Fran. You know it. I know it. You'd marry any man who had money enough. That's your trouble. You can't let men alone. I've told you a hundred times, you could be a great—a really great actress—if only you'd take your work seriously. You've got the talent, the looks, the—"

She said: "Mike, they made a mistake when they made you a critic. You should have stuck to your old job, police reporting." She was not angry but her voice was cold.

"You're through with the stage?"

She moved a shoulder. "Yes. Oh, what's the use of trying to explain things to you? I want to live quietly. I want money. I'm going to get those things," she added with quiet determination.

"With Lew?"

Her head moved defiantly but she did not speak. All at once he lost his patience, strode up to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her violently.

"Damn you! I don't know why I waste my breath on you."

"Mike! You're hurting!"

HE released her abruptly, turned on his heel with a muttered imprecation, stopped short. The door was open. Two men were framed in it and both had guns pointing at him. They were young men, opulently dressed. One was tall, stony-jawed but attractive in a masculine way. The other was a bit shorter, but broader of shoulder and thinner of waist. His nose was pushed in against his face like a crushed radish. His breathing was harshly audible. He looked like an ex-pug.

"Back up, you," the tall man said. He

was toying with the watch chain strung across his vest. A half dozen gold links, hanging down the middle, looked as if some sort of charm had been torn from them. He said to Fran: "We was passin' your door and heard this guy holler!"

Marlowe said: "With your ear against the keyhole, punk."

The tall man swung his fist. Marlowe crashed against a chair.

"Mike!" Fran cried out, stopping him. Instantly, she turned on the tall man. "Steve, you've made a stupid mistake. This is Mike Marlowe, the best friend I've got in the world. Now put your guns out of sight. You too, Matty."

Steve exchanged a glance with Matty. "O. K.," he said. "You write the ticket, ma'am." He was playing with the watch chain again.

"Steve," Fran said, "you've lost your good-luck charm."

"Ahhn," he growled, "I been lookin' all over for it."

"Steve's lost without that charm," Fran said goodhumoredly to Marlowe. "It was a pretty thing, too. A tiny gold pistol. We'll see you later."

Curtly dismissed, they moved to the door. But before it closed, Steve said: "Forget that bust on the jaw, mister. I guess I didn't think."

Fran took Marlowe's hand. "Did he hurt you, Mike?"

A slow smile touched his face as he rubbed the side of his jaw where the blow had landed. "I stuck out my neck for it." Then the smile faded. "Friends of yours?"

When she said nothing, he laughed outright. "They're Lew's cowboys, huh? Why not admit things frankly?"

"I'm not hiding it," she said tranquilly.

"You're a funny gal, Fran. But I hope they're around when Abe Coleman shows. Guys like that have their uses when they're as faithful to the mistress as to the master. You should feel pretty safe with two guns underfoot all the time. But

it must be awkward when you crave the privacy of a bath."

The deep-toned boom of the *Empress'* whistle vibrated through the room and Fran shivered.

WHEN Marlowe went up on deck, the ship was being made fast to her pier. He ran into Dunne and Levy. Levy said: "Hey, what do you think?"

"Yeah."

"Lew Rigg. He ain't on board."

Marlowe stared sharply at him.

Levy said: "We searched the ship from stem to stern, see? When we couldn't find him, I went to the captain. Well, they had every damned sailor looking for him. He just ain't."

"But what—"

"They think he fell or was tossed overboard before they got into the channel. Hell, they gotta think somethin'. It's a cinch he ain't where he should be."

Dunne began to run. "They're getting the gangplank up. Me for a telephone, baby!"

Someone was standing beside Marlowe. He turned. It was the girl, Valentine Rain. "Is anything the matter?" she said.

"Not sure yet."

"Well, this is my last day on the job," she said, sighing a little. "But it got me home."

He looked her over carefully. "You don't look like a private secretary."

"I'm not," she said frankly. "Oh, I can talk to you. Fran's told me all about you. I know you're her friend. In fact, she said you're her only friend in the world."

She produced an effect of valiant gaiety that attracted him. He regarded her with new interest.

"What exactly are you, then, Miss Rain?"

She laughed. "*Sh-h-h!* Private detective."

"What?"

"Isn't it silly? But you see I was

stranded in London and I took any job I could get. The Downey Protective Association had a call from Fran for a detective to travel with her. They sent me to see her and I landed the job."

His brow clouded. "But why should she want a detective?"

"Kurt von Hoff. For some reason she was afraid of him. Do you know him?"

"Know him? Kurt is an old blister on the community. But I thought he and she were—"

"I know. Like that. Well, they aren't. She threw him over in London. That was three months ago. He's been trailing after her ever since. She can't get rid of him and she was afraid he would try to harm her in some way. Hence, me."

"But Lew Rigg?" Marlowe scowled fiercely. "Didn't she tell him about Kurt?"

"Apparently not."

Marlowe pursed his lips. "Kurt's a pretty poisonous sort."

"I hate him!"

He looked at her. "Swell! It is on these similarities of taste in people that life-long attachments are built. Did you say you'd be out of a job, Miss Rain?"

"Well, I doubt if I'll be needed much longer."

"Come to see me. Marlowe, *Globe.*" He hesitated. "Maybe you ought to know about this. Lew Rigg is missing."

The suddenness with which he blurted out the information startled her. "Missing? What do you mean?"

"They've searched the ship high and low but he can't be found. There's a theory that he was thrown overboard."

She drew in a sharp breath. Then her eyes opened wide as if she had just recalled something. "That must mean the pearls!" she gasped.

Something jumped inside him. "What pearls?"

"I—I wouldn't mention them, but if he's missing, it's my duty."

"Go on," he said.

"I was standing on the deck outside Fran's room. That was last night. I didn't intend to eavesdrop but the porthole was open. Lew Rigg was with her. I heard her say, 'Don't take a chance, Lew. If Customs should find them, they'll take them away. You'll face jail.' Then he laughed at her. 'I'm not fool enough to declare a string of pearls worth five hundred grand. Baby, with the plan I've worked out, it's a cinch.'"

"You heard all that?"

"I'm not making it up!" she flared.

He looked at her. "No," he said, finally, "you aren't. I can tell when I'm being kidded and when not. You're O. K., angel."

"Thanks for the orchid."

He grinned, chucked her under the chin. "Did Rigg mention his plan?"

"No. And I didn't wait to hear any more, either. I moved away."

"Wait here."

MARLOWE walked swiftly down the length of the deck to Fran's room but it was empty and her baggage had been removed. When he got back to the rail, Valentine Rain said: "Fran's on the pier, getting her bags passed."

He saw her, speaking to a Customs man who was going through her baggage with the poking desultoriness of Customs men the world over. A ship's officer came up to her, doffed his cap, and spoke. Suddenly, she screamed piercingly, collapsed in a dead faint.

"Damn!" Marlowe ripped out. He raced to the gangplank, bowled over a hulking woman who got in his way, elbowed through to her. People were crowding around. "Keep back!" he growled. "She needs air. Officer, what's the trouble here? I'm a friend of hers."

"Her husband," said the unhappy man, "he's disappeared. She was waiting for him on the pier but I'm afraid he won't show up. We searched high and low. I

didn't mean to give her a shock but when I said we didn't know what had happened to him, she said, 'He's been killed!' and just keeled over."

Suddenly her eyes fluttered open and she gave Marlowe a warm, grateful glance. "Mike," she said faintly. "Oh. Mike."

He touched her arm. "I know, Fran. I've just heard."

She looked deep into his eyes. "Mike, he's been murdered. I know it. I'm positive!"

"Here, let me help you."

"Thanks, I'm all right—now."

"Great! We'll have to get you away from here. Officer, call a cab. What about the baggage, Customs, is it ready to go?"

"The hand luggage and one of the trunks is O. K., but there's three more trunks to be passed on."

"Then, hurry it up, like a good guy. Oh Lord, here come the damned news-hounds!"

"Mike," Fran said, "I couldn't face them now. Get me away."

"What about it, Customs? Does the lady get a break?"

"Well now, the regulations don't let—"

"Open the trunks for him, Mike! Hurry!"

Customs scratched his head. "Seein' as it's you, Miss Rice, I guess it'll be all right if I don't bother lookin'. Hell, we give them furrin ambassadors immunity from inspection, don't we? Lookin' inside is just routine, anyway. Go ahead, take 'em away."

"Oh, but I insist that you go through all the trunks!" said Fran.

"Will you, for Pete's sake, stop arguing!" Marlowe snapped. "If it's O. K. with Customs, it ought to be O. K. with you. Hell, get going!"

"Sure, sure," put in Customs, grinning. "I seen enough o' your luggage to know you ain't smuggling anything."

"No, no! Of course not!" But her eyes widened and there was a catch in her

voice that Marlowe did not fail to note.

She hurried on ahead to the cab while Mike superintended the moving of the luggage. But the reporters managed to catch up with her. Flashlights boomed; questions were flung at her. At length, she broke clear. "Later," she said. "I can't tell you a thing now. Please, let me by."

The two small trunks were stowed in beside the driver. The other two were strapped to the rack in the rear. The bags went inside with Fran. Marlowe stuck his head in as Fran, at last, settled on the cushions. He said quietly: "Only one thing's been left out. The pearls!"

She caught her breath, bolted upright. "The pearls! H-how—what—"

"I know. Isn't that enough? Was it because of the pearls that you wanted Customs to be sure to go through all your bags?"

She looked confused. "No. . . . Oh, yes, yes! I didn't want them to say afterward that I had anything to do with them. Oh, I knew something dreadful would happen. Only last night Lew was talking about them to me. I begged him to declare them, leave them in the ship's safe until we got ashore. But not Lew! He thought he was too smart to be honest. They're worth half a million dollars."

He said: "You think the pearls are the reason for his disappearance?"

She stared at him. Her face had drained so of color that her eyes seemed doubly dark. She struck a clenched hand on a knee rhythmically.

"I'm certain of it. He's been killed, Mike. You get a premonition like that sometimes. But how do you come to know about the pearls?"

"I keep an ear to the ground. Were the pearls on his person?"

There was a subdued fever in her eyes. "Really, I couldn't—"

"Now, Fran," he said grinning. "You know me."

She brought out a wispy handkerchief and touched her quivering nostrils. "Yes, he carried them in a money belt next to his skin."

He frowned. "I'm a sucker if that makes sense. That's one of the oldest gags. He couldn't have hoped to kid Customs with that!"

Her eyes were level with his. "Mike," she said earnestly, "I don't know what his plans were. I just don't. All I know is he's gone. They can't find him." Tears welled up in her eyes.

He smiled comfortingly. "You'd best get going. I'll get in touch with you."

"Mike, you're kind."

He walked slowly back to the boat, head down. Someone barred his way. He looked up. It was Valentine Rain. "I've got a hunch," she said. "Kurt von Hoff is somewhere behind this whole dreadful affair."

"That," said Marlowe deprecatingly, "is not a hunch but a certainty." His smile came back. "But tell me, if you're through being a detective—"

"Oh, but I'm not! This new situation is a natural for me. It may mean an excuse for prolonging my job with the agency and I need— Oh, I must be boring you talking about myself."

"On the contrary, you have stumbled on my favorite topic, Val. I trust I may call you that?"

Her laugh tinkled pleasantly. "Sure, Mike."

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Died Early

LEW RIGG did not turn up. Marlowe in his office at the *Globe* was absorbed in the four o'clock make-over. The story was splashed over the front page. The police were in charge of the case and had searched the *Empress* from end to end without uncovering a clue. There was a

spicy account of Rigg's connection with gambling rackets, his escape to Europe at the opening of the Towner investigation and his marriage to Francine Rice. There was a picture of Fran captioned, *She Lost Her Man*. No mention of pearls was made in the story.

At four twenty, Marlowe's phone rang. It was Fran.

"Mike, the police have been questioning me for hours. I'm frantic."

"Did you tell them about the pearls?"

"No! What good would that do? They'd simply drag me over the same ground and complicate things. Mike, I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

She said: "Talk to Abe. He's been hanging about my hotel, trying to see me. I'm at the Alden. Mike, I'm afraid of what he might do to me. Talk to him, Mike. He likes you. You've got to make him understand I'm through with him."

"I don't know if it'll do any good. Abe's pretty thick-headed."

"Mike, will you try? He's at the Hotel Morton. Promise me."

"O. K.," he said presently.

"Mike, you're my only friend. The only one in the world I can trust."

"Cut out the bouquets, Fran. You sound scared."

"No, I'm upset is all."

He frowned into the mouthpiece. "How are you fixed for money?"

A nervous, high-pitched laugh came over the wire. "I'm all right. I can always turn my looks into cash."

"Are you going to sign with Jacobsen?"

"N-no. That won't be necessary. There are other ways."

"Fran, Jacobsen is making a swell offer."

"I know, but I'm through with the stage. You know a hair-dresser once offered me five thousand dollars for my head of hair. Mike, don't you think my hair is beautiful?"

"Hey," he snapped, "are you high on H or just plain nuts?"

"Nuts, I guess. Mike, if anything should happen to me, you won't forget me, will you? You'll always remember me, my beautiful hair?"

"Fran, what is this?"

Her nervous laugh sounded again. "You won't forget about Abe?"

"I won't."

"See him right away, Mike. I'm worried."

"I'll take care of everything."

HE hung up, stared broodingly at his desk. A baffled grunt escaped him. He rose with sudden purpose, snatched hat and coat from the clothes-tree and breezed for the door. It opened before he got to it. Valentine Rain stood there. There was a flush in her cheeks which made her look prettier than ever.

"The office boy said I could go right in," she stammered. "I—I hope I'm not disturbing you."

He took her arm, steered her toward the elevator, saying: "Spill it, swell gal. What's on your mind?"

The elevator door slid open and they stepped in. She said nothing until they were down in the street. As Marlowe signaled a taxi to the curb, she said: "I trailed Kurt von Hoff!"

He looked at her in astonishment. "Hey, you're taking this thing seriously, aren't you? What was the idea? . . . Here, get in. Driver—Hotel Morton." He got in beside her. "Now let's have the whole sordid tale."

"Well, it's like this. I followed him from the ship. He took a cab and I took one. He drove halfway across town and then he stopped at a sporting-goods store and bought a gun."

Marlowe sat up.

"I knew you'd be interested," she said with quiet triumph. "From the sporting-goods store, he drove to a house on Sut-

ton Place. He was in there almost an hour. Then he went to the Vine Park, it's an apartment house, and engaged a furnished place."

"Um. What about the Sutton Place house? Did you happen to catch the name of the tenant?"

"I got it from a tradesman. One Albert Hoch lives there. He's a gentleman of about fifty, who lives alone, eats mutton chops twice each week and kidneys for breakfast—"

"Val," said Marlowe with conviction, "you've got something I think."

Her eyes danced with excitement. "Really? Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Plenty. Albert Hoch is many things to many men, but first and foremost he is a fence, receiver of stolen goods to you. His specialty is high-class jewelry."

"Ooh! That string of pearls!"

"The connection is obvious."

"Oh, Mike, what are we going to do?"

Before he could answer the cab stopped in front of a marquee of iron and glass. He got out, helped her out. "The citizenry is aroused over yonder," he observed.

POLICE cars were converging at break-neck speed from two sides. Down at the corner a huge crowd had gathered. An ambulance was clanging wildly a few blocks away. Cross traffic was paralyzed. Cops were pushing futilely against the crowd with their nightsticks, rumbling: "Now break it up, will yuh? Break it up!" But the crowd didn't budge.

Marlowe carried a police card in his wallet, though as theater critic he had little occasion to use it. He took it out and stuck it in the band of his fedora. It worked wonders. With Valentine clinging to him, he managed to worm his way through the mob into a side alley of the hotel. Here there was a cleared space, truculently held by three uniformed cops. At their feet lay a gruesome spectacle.

Marlowe looked at it for a long second. He said: "What hit him?"

"Nothin' less than the pavement," one of the cops said.

Marlowe looked up at the windows above. At the second story, a slanted roof flanged outward. "He fell out?" he asked.

"Or did the Dutch."

Marlowe was aware of Valentine's hand gripping his arm. He turned to her. She was a little white around the gills. "It's he!" she gasped. "Lew Rigg!"

He nodded. "Yeah." His eyes were brooding.

The crowd parted to admit the ambulance surgeon. There were more cops right behind. The doctor's examination was brief.

"Pounded to jelly," he said. "Funny, though, there's no blood spattered about. I remember a case when they had to shovel up the pieces. Well—"

A captain in plainclothes arrived to take charge. Marlowe knew him, drew him aside and spoke briefly. The captain's eyes widened. In a few minutes, Rigg's body was moved inside. The captain himself made the search. There was a money belt next to the dead man's skin but it was empty. The white-coated ambulance doctor was shaking his head.

"Cases like this, you gotta pick up the bits and this guy's all in one piece. Funny!"

The police had been making inquiries. Lew Rigg had not been registered at the hotel under his own or any other name. The room clerk was positive about that. Marlowe took the captain aside again, after which the room clerk was again questioned.

"Oh, yes," he said, "we have a Mr. Coleman. Room Ten-o-six."

"Mind if I come along?" asked Marlowe.

"That's O. K.," said the captain.

Riding up in the elevator, he studiously

ribbed his jaw. "What gets me is how this guy, Rigg, could be reported missin' aboard the *Empress* and then turn up here. Incidentally, what was supposed to be in that money belt?"

"Pearls."

"Huh?"

"Worth a mere half million. A string of 'em."

"And how in hell do you happen to know so much about 'em?"

Marlowe had to tell about Valentine Rain, adding that he'd vouch for her personally. "Well, here we are," he added when the elevator came to a stop.

The captain growled: "There's something damn fishy in the whole blamed set-up, including your part."

"Hell, cap, I'm just the innocent bystander."

Room Ten-o-six was locked but the captain had been provided with a key. He opened the door. No one was at home. Two bags lay at the foot of the bed and there was an assortment of toilet articles on the dresser. Marlowe wandered aimlessly around without touching anything. He stopped at one of the windows. A covered radiator was flush with the sill. It was all enclosed save for an outward-jutting pinch-valve.

A bit of cloth to which a button was still attached was jammed in between the valve and the side wall of the cover, as if the button had caught and had torn the cloth. Marlowe emitted a low whistle.

"What's up?"

Marlowe pointed. "Looks like it comes from the coat of the late Lew Rigg, or is my practiced eye deceiving me?"

The captain snorted. "Hell, no! There was a tear just the size of this in the guy's coat. I guess this clinches it, all right. The way I see it he was shoving him through the window. The button got caught and the cloth tore as he went through."

"Who shoved who?"

"Coleman, of course. He shoved Rigg. What else?" The captain's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You got any other ideas?"

"Not," said Marlowe, "to boast of. But it would behoove us to lend a thought to a problem or two. For instance, why should a guy go to the trouble of chucking a dead guy through a window?"

The captain goggled. "Hey, in about a minute I'm going to get sore."

"Don't get sore, pal. It beclouds the thinking processes."

"Listen, when I want fancy talk from you, I'll ask for it. Now what the hell are you driving at?"

"Just that Lew Rigg was a very, very dead man before he hit that pavement. You heard what the ambulance doctor had to say. In cases where guys hit pavements from any considerable height, there is usually need of a shovel. Lew Rigg was in one piece, somewhat bashed in, it's true, but still whole. There's the pay-off. Remember, there was not even any blood splattered around. And why? Because he'd been dead for a considerable time. His blood had—shall we say, congealed?"

"I don't get this."

"It's really quite simple. Rigg was flung out of a window to make people believe that he'd met death here and not on the ship."

"On the ship? Hell, do you mean—"

"*Sh-h!*"

The captain turned his head toward the door. A key was fumbling in the lock. When it turned and the door opened, the captain had his gun out.

ABE COLEMAN stood in the doorway. He was so preoccupied that he actually did not notice the presence of two men in his room. He banged the door shut. Then his eyes opened wide. He looked startled out of his wits.

"Hello, Abe," said Marlowe. "Do you men know each other? Captain Luther—Abe Coleman."

Coleman's mouth was slow in opening. His tongue seemed thick as if he had been drinking. But there was no odor of whiskey about him. Shock had deprived him of speech. He swallowed. "W-what's this?"

He sank down on the bed and stared at the floor, apparently uninterested in anything they might say. His eyes were dull, glazed, and he was breathing hard.

Luther and Marlowe exchanged puzzled glances. Then Marlowe went over and tapped him on the shoulder. "Er—Abe—Captain Luther would like to ask you some questions."

Coleman heaved a vast sigh, raised his head, looked from the captain to Marlowe with suddenly harried eyes. Luther walked over.

"Well, bozo, I'm cops. Maybe you didn't expect us this soon."

"No," he said. "No, I didn't." He blinked. There was an anguished look about his mouth. His hair was disheveled and his body trembled a bit. "How—how did you find out?"

"It was really simple. Your wife gave you the go-by. She married Rigg. You were sore. You had to get even."

Coleman grimaced and looked away. He tried to speak but the words caught in his throat. His Adam's apple worked up and down.

"We got the proof," Luther pursued relentlessly. "It's open and shut. You did it."

"Wh-what! No, no! You're wrong! Look, will you? You're wrong!"

"Am I, punk?" Luther's voice dripped nastiness. "Then how about that bit of cloth and button wedged in the radiator there? How are you going to explain that, huh?"

Coleman shook his head, drew a hand wearily over his forehead. "What are you saying?"

"Turn around and look for yourself. There!"

Luther grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him about. "See it?"

"What is this?" Coleman wagged his head from side to side, too bewildered apparently to understand. Then he looked at Marlowe as if seeing him for the first time. "Mike, what is this?"

Marlowe shrugged. "You and the captain don't talk the same language," he said.

"He'll talk mine," growled Luther, "before I'm through. He thinks he's slick, playin' the innocent! Now get this! You saw the crowd outside when you came in, didn't you?"

Coleman nodded. "Yeah, but—"

"Know why they're there? Because a guy was tossed out this window. A guy named Lew Rigg. And you did the tossing!"

Coleman stood bolt upright. "Rigg! Hey, you crazy?" he cried.

Luther's face became a dull brick-red. "For two cents I'd smack—"

"Wait," said Marlowe. He stepped forward between them.

"Get out of the way," said Luther, "I'm going to take this lug."

"Will you, for Pete's sake, shut up? Your you-done-it technique is bad enough without adding knock-down-and-drag-out methods." He turned to Coleman. "Now let's straighten this out. You look pretty surprised over Lew Rigg."

"Yeah," said Coleman. "Yeah, I'm plenty surprised."

"When you came in, you barely noticed us. Something seems to have handed you a mean jolt. If it wasn't Lew, then who or what is it?"

COLEMAN looked stupefied again. He sank to a sitting position on the bed, his head hanging, his body limp.

Luther went past Marlowe. "I'm fed up with this," he growled. He shook Coleman forcibly. "Out with it, guy. If you don't talk, I'll paste—"

Coleman stood up slowly, face working. He said: "Fran. Fran's been murdered. I—saw her. Then the cops came. They arrested Jacobsen."

Marlowe felt like a balloon suddenly deflated by a pin-prick. He opened his mouth to speak and couldn't get a word out. Finally he managed to gasp: "When did all this happen?"

Coleman's eyes looked tortured. "I just came from there. The cops weren't looking my way. I couldn't stand it any more. I slipped out."

"You slipped out? Who called the cops?"

"I did." He wagged his head hopelessly from side to side. "I went up there to kill her. I'll admit it. I wanted to see her suffer for the dirty deal she handed me but when I saw her lying there I—I went all to pieces. I forgot how I hated her." He covered his face with his hands.

"But where does Jacobsen come in?" Marlowe demanded.

"He was lying on the floor," Coleman said slowly. "It looked like she'd hit him after he'd stabbed her. He had a knife in his hand. He was unconscious. I called for the cops. But when they brought him to he said he didn't do it. He kept saying he didn't do it."

MARLOWE drew in a breath sharply, swiftly. He said: "Jacobsen's not a murderer." But even as he spoke he was remembering Jacobsen's face when he'd faced Fran on the *Empress* and his words—"Some day my turn will come."

There was quiet in the room for a long minute. Then Luther ground out: "By God, this is beginning to get my goat! But let's get one thing at a time. Now, this bird Rigg. What about him? Huh?"

Coleman looked at them unhappily. "I dunno a thing."

Luther extended a forefinger, sighted along it. "That's crap!" he said with finality. "Lew Rigg was tossed out of that

window there behind you. Marlowe"—Luther's voice became just a little less sure—"thinks he was dead before he was flung out. To hell with that. We can investigate later. Anyway, you killed Rigg and I'm here to—"

"No, no. I didn't kill Rigg. I didn't kill anyone. I—" Coleman stopped short, shook his head violently. "I didn't kill anyone."

Luther reached into a back pocket. "The cuffs for you, sweetheart."

Marlowe moved for the door. "I will see you anon, gentlemen."

Outside Valentine was pacing the corridor impatiently. She flew at Marlowe and caught his arm like a restless bird coming to perch. "You were in there for hours. Who was that man who went in—Coleman?"

"It was, my pet."

"Did he confess? Did he admit he killed Rigg?"

"On the contrary. Coleman claims he did not kill Rigg. But that is now almost beside the point. Something else has come up, a lot more important. Fran was stabbed to death."

"What!"

"Fran was murdered."

"Oh, Mike, how horrible!" She was silent a second. "She was a queer sort, not my kind. But I—I liked her."

"So did I."

"Are you going there now?"

"Yes."

"I'll go with you."

He shook his head. "You will not. Someone's got to stay here. And you're elected."

"What do you want me to do?"

He told her swiftly, incisively. "When you finish checking up," he concluded, "you can get me at Fran's suite at the Alden. If I'm not there phone me at the *Globe*."

He gave her cheek a tender pat and went out.

CHAPTER THREE

Pistol Whipping

THE Alden was an old-fashioned hotel that had housed two generations of theatrical people. It had a popular grill and cocktail bar. Its lobby was always full of queerly dressed people who talked about "the road" and "crashing the main stem." Many of them had never been further than ten blocks from the lobby in their lives.

It was dark when Marlowe arrived there. He went straight to the elevator. "Where the trouble is," he said in a stuffy, nasal voice.

The elevator man looked solemn. "Most of the cops is gone."

"That's O. K. I'm from the D. A.'s office."

The old open-work elevator bounced to a stop at the twelfth floor and Marlowe walked around a bend in the corridor, knocked on the door of 1230.

A uniformed cop stuck out his head. "Yeah?"

A precinct detective-sergeant named Kieran was visible beyond the door. Marlowe had known him back in his police-reporting days. Kieran waved at him, said: "He's O. K., Scotty, let him in."

There was no one else around. "Corpse still here?"

Kieran nodded. "Yeah. Say! She was a friend of yours, wasn't she?"

"Uh-huh. Where's Jacobsen?"

"They took him to the lock-up for grilling. Luther phoned a little while ago. He said he picked up Coleman and that you were there."

"That's right. What about Jacobsen—have you got the goods on him?"

"Well, it's mostly circumstantial, if you know what I mean. We found him lyin' on the floor in there and there was a knife in his hand. But the guy claims he just came up to speak to the dame about a contract. The door was open and no one

answered his knock so he waltzed in. She was lyin' on the floor, he said, and the knife was next to her. He bent down to pick it up and just then he was beaned. Anyway, that's his story. Don't sound like much, does it?"

"No," said Marlowe thoughtfully. "Is Coleman out?"

"Hell, no! He coulda killed his wife and then hit Jacobsen. I'm glad Luther picked him up. Say, what's this about Lew Rigg?"

Marlowe told him.

Kieran blew out his cheeks. "It's a mess. What do you think?"

"Me, I'm a critic of the drama, not a dick. Was there by chance a guy named Kurt von Hoff mixed up in any part of it?"

Kieran shot him a curious glance. "Never heard of him. Who is he?"

"Fran Rice's pet gigolo—a guy too handsome to be on the level. She ditched him in London but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He got so pestiferous she had to hire a woman companion to ward him off. Might be worth looking into. He lives at the Vine Park Apartments."

"Thanks. I'll look him up."

"Did a tornado go through this place?" Marlowe asked.

The room was a wreck. The carpets were thrown about. Stuffing had been slashed and pulled out of upholstered chairs.

"That's how we found it," said Kieran. "Wait until you see the other room, though. It's worse."

"Someone must've been lookin' for somethin', huh?"

Kieran led the way to the inner room. Marlowe stopped at the threshold. Fran Rice lay on the floor. Both her hands were pressed to her breast. There wasn't much blood. Though her face was a little contorted, it was still beautiful. Her hair was combed as he had last seen it, high on her head, in heavy, rope-like coils.

THE room was upside-down. Clothes lay on the floor. Drawers had been opened, their contents strewn pell-mell. Three steamer trunks at the side of the bed were open, their lining slashed into ribbons. Handbags had been similarly treated. The bed had been upset and the mattress treated in the same manner as the trunks and bags. Marlowe looked hard at the trunks and frowned.

Kieran said: "There's a fire-escape outside that window. Like to look, pal?"

"Yeah, why?"

Kieran drew up the window. "Because we found a heel print. Seems they painted the fire-escapes about a week ago, but the wet weather lately kept them from drying completely. Just slightly sticky, but enough to show a mark. See it?"

It was a faint mark, but nevertheless distinct. "A rubber heel," said Marlowe. "I can make out a 'C' and a small 'a.' What brand is it?"

"Case," said Kieran promptly.

Marlowe shrugged. "It may not mean much. They wash these windows, don't they? Maybe it's the window washer's heel mark. Or a dozen other guys'."

"I see you don't know a lot about modern police methods. Down at headquarters we got a complete list of every heel manufactured in the world, what they look like, how they wear and so on, whether rubber or not. We even got a list of those made in Europe."

"Is this one a European brand?"

"No. But it's rather unique. It's made by a factory out in Lansing and it's especially made for arch-supported shoes, for guys with weak feet. The rubber's tougher than most usual brands and the shape is odd, sort of has a tongue at the end of it so it extends a little under the arch."

"Did you check with the hotel employees?"

"All we could round up. None of 'em fitted it."

"What about Coleman?"

"Well, they were goin' to check on him as soon as Luther brought him in. By the by, Marlowe. What kind of heels do you wear?"

Marlowe laughed. "Leather." He lifted his foot. "You guys are funniest when you're most serious."

Kieran grinned sheepishly. "Well, you know how it is. Luther filled me with a lot of baloney of how funny you acted at the Rigg kill. He was worried about you. Say, is that stuff you handed him about pearls on the level?"

"Like a billiard table. Well, friend, I'll ankle along."

"Sure, sure. And thanks for the tip on the Von Hoff guy."

"Fran Rice was a friend of mine," said Marlowe. At the door he paused. "By the way, if an angel comes around asking for me, tell her I'll be at the *Globe*."

"O.K. Only I won't be here much longer myself. Scotty is holdin' down the place until the morgue wagon comes to cart her away. Them guys," said Kieran with a sense of grievance, "must be dead on their feet, they move so slow."

"An appropriate condition for morgue employees. Well, I'll float along." He took a last quick look at Fran and went out.

Downstairs, he wandered into the bar and had a Scotch. Then he had a double Scotch and sipped it like a liqueur for a long time. A lot of unpleasant thoughts were milling around in his brain and he was doing his best to straighten them out. But it was a hard job. His face was expressionless as a slab of granite. His eyes were half-lidded, his mouth slack and loose. Suddenly he heaved up from his chair, paid and sailed out.

Out in the lobby, he paused to settle his shoulders in his threadbare coat. A voice beside him, not unpleasant but tense, said: "Well, well. Fancy running into you."

At the same time something hard jabbed his ribs. Marlowe turned his head slowly, saw the tall, stony-jawed man called Steve.

He said: "I'm not pleased about it."

"About what?"

"Running into you. Where's Matty?"

"A little to the left and behind. We'd like a little talk with you."

"Would you mind," said Marlowe, "removing that obstruction from my ribs?"

"Yeah, bo, yeah. I mind."

"What if I run for the door? You wouldn't shoot, would you?"

The gun pushed harder. "Do you want to run?"

Marlowe glanced at his somber face. "No," he said.

"Then come along. I got a room upstairs. And walk as though we're pals, see?"

"I can walk, anyhow," said Marlowe.

MATTY with the pushed-in radish nose fell in on his left. They marched across the lobby without incident, got into the elevator and rode to the fifth floor. They went down the corridor and Matty opened a door. Steve pushed Marlowe in ahead. Matty went in and pulled the shades down. Then Steve went in and closed the door behind him. He walked up to Marlowe and patted his clothes for weapons. Satisfied there were none, he said: "Take a chair." When Marlowe did not move fast enough, he gave him a hard shove and Marlowe sat down abruptly.

Matty came over and stood over Marlowe. His breath came in puffing, rasping grunts like a bulldog's.

Steve said: "Maybe you got a notion what we want, Marlowe."

"To ask my opinion on the current drama? Well, boys, you came to the right guy. Not for nothing am I known in Manhattan and environs as 'The Critics' Critic.'"

"Cut. Better take this a little more serious, monkey."

"Never serious in my life. Tried it once with a dame and what happened? She damn near sued me for breach of promise. Only the—"

Matty's breathing became a snort. He knocked off Marlowe's hat and grabbed a clump of his hair, lifting the scalp almost an inch. Very methodically and thoroughly he banged Marlowe's skull resoundingly against the hard wood frame of the chair. Pain rocketed through Marlowe's head. His senses began to reel. He started to get up but Steve kicked him in the groin and he sat down again, paralyzed with excruciating pain. Then Matty released his hair, grunted: "That's for nothing."

Steve waited until Marlowe had caught his breath, said: "Cut the comics and we three will get along swell."

Marlowe's right hand held his stomach in but a peculiar shimmer of recklessness danced in his eyes. He said: "Correct me if I am wrong, but I seem to discern in your manner a sort of half-veiled annoyance. Perhaps my repartee doesn't go over."

"You catch on quick, brother. Matty and me—we got no time for comics. We're all business. Maybe some other time we'll sit around and swap bum cracks."

"I'll look forward to the occasion."

"Now about this little matter. I guess you know Fran Rice has stopped ticking."

"And you stopped her ticker," said Marlowe.

"Huh? Hey, you're nuts!"

"Ah! Tell me more."

"Sure, nitwit. We went into her suite, see? And there was this Jacobsen guy bending over her with a knife in his hand. So Matty conked him. But she was flat when we got in there, see?"

Marlowe's eyes told nothing, but his brain was racing. "I'm listening," he said. "But that doesn't mean I believe you."

"Ah, to hell with that! That's not the important thing now. We got something

else to worry about. Aboard the *Empress*, you and Fran Rice were having a comfy chat in her cabin. That was when Matty and me broke in on you. We want to know what you talked about and what she said."

"Oh, that. We chit-chatted about her stage career."

"And?"

"Nothing. That was all."

"I won't take any kidding," Steve said coldly.

Matty made a move. "I'll bang his head. He likes it."

Steve said, "Wait," and to Marlowe, "This is probably no news to you. Lew Rigg had a pearl necklace on him worth five hundred grand. Lew was brushed off. Now the only logical—"

"They found Lew."

Steve and Matty flicked glances at each other.

"He kissed the pavement outside the Morton. Someone flung him out of a window. Ponder on that one for a while."

THERE was silence for a minute. Then Steve said: "Where'd you get this?"

"Hell, I was there. Not when he fell but soon after. The cops think Abe Coleman did it."

Steve looked sharply at Marlowe. "How in hell did he get to the Morton?"

Marlowe shrugged. "That's the mystery. But if you don't believe me, phone the cops and check up."

"Was he searched?"

"Oh, sure. He had a money belt under his underwear but it was empty. The pearls weren't on him."

Steve walked away, moved stiff-legged around the room, apparently deep in thought. Presently he stopped in front of Marlowe and frowned seriously. "That don't change nothing," he said. "I still think the only logical place for the pearls is with Fran."

"Oh."

"Them pearls," added Steve, "were all

Lew had in the world. Except for them he was busted. And except for Fran and us, no one else knew he had them."

"Well, from what I understand, those pearls were to have been smuggled in, weren't they?"

"Oh, now you're asking questions!"

"The question is how."

Steve's curled lips relaxed and he quieted down. He said: "What do you mean?"

"I mean how was the smuggling going to be done?"

Again Steve and Matty exchanged glances. Then Steve said: "We don't know. Fran was to do the job. Lew told us that much but he didn't tell us how she planned to manage it."

"And when Lew disappeared aboard the boat, Fran didn't have the pearls, did she?"

Steve grimaced faintly. "That's about the size of it. At least that's what she told us. She said Lew was to have handed them to her just before the boat docked."

"O.K. But hadn't Lew given her an idea how the smuggling was to be done?"

Steve looked blank. "Hell, no! She said he was saving that until he was ready to give them to her. She said he had a plan but hadn't told her a word."

"I'm laughing."

"What at?"

"You, laddie."

Steve moved forward, balancing on the balls of his feet. Sparks smoldered deep in his eyes and a muscle at the side of his mouth began to twitch. He got his hand in Marlowe's collar, twisted it so that Marlowe's breath was cut off.

"I've taken about enough," he grated. "I'll tell you why we got you here with us. Because we know Fran was giving us a line. When you were in the cabin with her, she handed you the pearls. Everybody knows you and she were pals. She was always talkin' about what a great guy you were. You were the only guy

she could trust. You didn't want to take them and that's what you were fighting about when Matty and I busted in. You got them some place and we're going to shake it out of you." He flung Marlowe back, dusted off his hands. "Go to work, Matty."

Matty growled: "And about time, too." He brought his gun out with a preoccupied air. "This is gonna be good."

Marlowe was not frightened, but a cold sweat beaded his forehead. His stomach was tied up in an apprehensive knot. He had heard of people being pistol whipped. Matty hefted the weight of the weapon in his hand, closed fingers caressingly over the butt. Suddenly he brought it swishing through the air at Marlowe's lean jaw. There appeared a cut in the skin half an inch long where the gun sight had raked it.

With Marlowe's head still ringing, he brought the gun through the air to strike at the same spot. The cut widened and lengthened. Marlowe's head jerked, then lolled over toward his shoulder.

Steve caught him by his hair, pulled his head up, said: "Gonna talk now, fella?"

Marlowe gurgled unintelligibly.

Steve said: "Fran married Lew just to get her fingers on the pearls, didn't she? But she was afraid to take them in herself. So she gave them to you. That's the way it happened, didn't it?"

Blindly, Marlowe tore his head loose, leaving a handful of hair in Steve's fist. Blindly, he slammed his head against Steve's groin. Steve went back, grabbing at the pit of his belly with his hands. Marlowe fell out of the chair and landed on all fours on the floor. He couldn't see very clearly. His brain pinwheeled. He barely felt the kick Matty gave him but suddenly he was flat on his back looking up at the ceiling with mild astonishment. He knew blackness was cascading upon him.

FROM a great distance he heard Steve say: "Geez, we'll have to chill this guy before he'll talk." Then grudgingly, "He don't scare. Didja see him wallop me?"

"Aw, gimme a chance. I only got started on him. The next. . ." Matty stopped talking suddenly.

From somewhere Marlowe got the strength to lift his head. He was staring at the door. Someone was pounding on it with a fist.

Steve muttered uneasily: "What the hell!"

Matty shifted from foot to foot, his face faintly puzzled, disturbed. "Maybe it's the manager," he said. "Maybe we was making too much noise."

He yelped in true alarm suddenly, spun toward the window. Marlowe turned his head, too. A crazy grin made him look foolish, like a drunk who is happy but doesn't quite know why. The blind whirred up with a furious clatter. Then the window was open and a big man in a brown suit tumbled in over the sill. He held a gun in his fist.

Marlowe had never seen him before, but he let out a whoop. It was a weak whoop but a thoroughly enthusiastic one. Matty had taken a backward step in sheer reflex action. Steve was dragging at the gun in his pocket. The whole thing happened in split seconds, and Matty and Steve were unconsciously on the defensive now.

The room shook with an explosion and Steve slammed down as if his legs had been cut out from under him.

"Ah," said Marlowe, "that's my side."

The big man in the brown suit kept on coming. Matty fired at him, but the bullet went wide and a desk lamp on a table backflipped into the air and went to pieces.

Marlowe lunged like a swimmer battling surf. He grabbed at Matty's leg and with a feeling of intense satisfaction sank his teeth into an ankle. Matty yelped like

a stricken cur. In trying to kick loose, he lost his balance and came down hard. The gun flipped from his hand. That gave Marlowe an idea. He let go of Matty's ankle and snatched up the gun.

He stumbled and he was still dizzy but he moved with deliberation, his jaw set firmly. Marlowe was not the jaw-setting type. He moved generally with the current or with the breeze and never thought of himself as a man of action. But his jaws were sternly and purposefully rigid now. He raised the gun and brought it crashing down on top of Matty's head, said: "That's not for nothing."

The man in the brown suit grabbed his arm and wrenched the gun from him. "Here, here," he said. "This won't do."

"What do you mean, it won't?" panted Marlowe. "It's the best job I ever did in my life. But why should I bandy argument with you, my rescuer?" He swayed to his feet.

"Here, here," said the man. "You're hurt."

"I ache," said Marlowe, "in spots. Did you just happen to be passing by on your way down the fire-escape or what?"

"The young lady," said the man, "is still banging away at the door, I believe."

"The young lady? Ah, things get clearer."

Steve was muttering through set lips and still trying to drag forth his gun. Marlowe pushed his hand away and took the gun out, said: "You've had *your* fun, baby."

THE man in brown lumbered to the door and turned the key in the lock. It flung wide and Valentine Rain flew in. She saw Marlowe and gave a soft murmur of relief. Then her eyes jerked to his face.

"Oh, you're hurt!"

"I was getting a facial but the barber lost control." He looked at her with admiration. "You're stuck with me, angel.

You saved my life. I dog the footsteps of people who save my life."

"It's nothing," Val murmured. "I'd have done the same for anybody."

"I insist it was love. But how did you do it? And who is the large gent in brown?"

"He's the house detective." The laugh went out of her eyes. "I—I found out things at the Morton and I tried to call you here, but I couldn't convince the operator you were around. I called your office and you weren't there. So I took a cab here. When I came in the lobby, I saw Steve and Matty taking you into the elevator. I remembered them from the boat and I knew they were up to no good. So then I got hold of the house detective. I had to do something quickly."

"Val, you were marvelous. I'd kiss you if my lips didn't hurt so badly. On second thought I'll kiss you anyway."

"Don't be silly."

The man in brown said: "I got handcuffs on them. If you want to prefer charges, I'll call the cops."

"Charge 'em with everything in the book." Marlowe took his hand. "Friend, you were superb. What did you say your name was?"

"McGillicuddy."

"Mr. McGillicuddy, that was a nifty you pulled. Your entrance through the window was one of the dramatic moments of my life."

"I'll bet you tell that to all the boys. Now what the hell was all this about?"

"A matter involving a couple of murders and a string of pearls worth a mere half million. In short, nothing of much consequence."

"Huh? Oh, sure. Watch him, miss. I gotta quiet that crowd out in the hall." He leaned confidentially toward Val. "A shot of whiskey ought to clear his head."

As he moved away, Val caught Marlowe's arm. "What did they want?" Her eyes swept Steve and Matty.

"Well, the monkeys thought I had the pearls. They thought Fran had taken them from Lew Rigg and given them to me."

She shivered. "I don't know what to think now myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I—I did what you told me. I had a little trouble with the desk clerk but finally I won him over. He gave me a pass-key. I found it in a room on the floor below Abe Coleman. It was standing there just as you said."

"Then why the blanket of doubt?"

"Oh, it doesn't seem possible."

Marlowe managed a battered grin.

"Maybe—"

"There's no maybe, lovely," Marlowe said. "Look, I suggest we percolate out of here. An idea has suddenly bloomed in my head."

McGillicuddy was dispersing the crowd in the hall. He looked questioningly at Marlowe, but Marlowe grinned again. "I'm going to buy up the stock of arnica in the drug store below. Be right back."

"See that you do," said McGillicuddy.

"I got to make a report on this to the reg-

ular cops. I'm not a regular cop, you know."

"You'll do until one comes along."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Print of a Heel

THEY did not go down, however, but rode up to the twelfth floor. Marlowe helped Val out of the elevator cage with a flourish and they walked down the corridor. Before the door of 1230, they paused and Marlowe leaned on the bell-pusher. A buzzer inside the suite echoed, but a full minute went by and the door did not open. Marlowe pressed the button again. He looked inquiringly at Val, then tried the knob. It turned and he pushed the door open. He had Steve's gun in his pocket. He let his hand rest on it easily. There was no sound from within.

He stepped in quickly and moved fast to his left. Val pushed in behind him. He could hear the rapid whisper of her breathing.

Scotty, the cop, was lying on the floor beside an overturned chair. His eyes were closed but his chest was rising and falling



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with each slow breath. Marlowe shut the door and let his eyes snap around the room. Scotty's visored cap lay on the floor, a few feet from him, the crown bashed in.

Marlowe said: "He was sitting in the chair, dozing maybe, and got conked from behind."

"But h-how could anyone get in?"

"The fire-escape," said Marlowe laconically, "is handy. It's in the next room. So is Fran's body."

Val gasped but she said: "You can't frighten me."

"No? Well, let's hope the conker has seen fit to depart."

"The conkee ought to have some attention."

Marlowe went over to the cop and felt his pulse. "He's not hurt badly." He straightened. "Well, here goes."

Nerves sprang taut through his body as he lunged through the doorway but nothing happened. The window was open, however. Fran's body did not look in the least disturbed. He crossed to the window, stuck out his head. He could see the night sky above him, some winking star fragments, but that was all. No lurking shadows. He pulled in his head.

Val said: "We ought to call the police at once."

Marlowe grinned mirthlessly. "That can wait. This is an unparalleled opportunity."

"For what?"

"To try an idea."

Her eyes widened as he knelt down beside the still form of Francine Rice.

"I can't say I'm enjoying this," he mumbled as he began fumbling with her hair. "But Fran hinted the best way she could. If anything happened to her, she wanted me to know where to look. Well, here goes."

He pulled out a number of pins, loosened the tight coils of hair. Long braids of it intertwined on the floor. Marlowe's

fingers explored over the scalp. "Um. Of course, I could be wrong. Wait a minute!"

He began unbraiding the rope-like coils. He was halfway through unraveling the first one when something dropped to the floor. An awed look came over his face.

"Well, my hunch was right!"

There they lay in the palm of his hand, round, white and shimmering. A string of nearly two hundred perfect specimens, perfectly graduated from barley to marble size and back again. They looked clean and innocent, a faint pinkish aura hanging over them, bright with that subdued inner glow that is their especial beauty. A mere half million. He held one end and let the whole rope of them swing. The room seemed brighter suddenly.

Val was shocked speechless. She gulped. "Mike! Oh, Mike!"

"They get you, eh, kid?"

"Th-they're so beautiful, I'm frightened."

"Yeah." He looked down at Fran. "Jewels in her hair. Some hair!"

"Hold up your hands!" a voice clipped behind him.

Val got white, began to tremble. Behind Marlowe, a door moved and a foot-step sounded. Marlowe stood utterly still for a split second, his face getting relaxed and sleepy. He turned his head slowly.

Kurt von Hoff stood before the open door of a closet. His mouth was twitching nervously and he licked dry lips with his tongue. Something horrible glittered in his eyes. They were not looking at Marlowe but at the pearls. The glitter was almost maniacal. The cheap nickeled gun in his hand was steady, however.

Marlowe actually arranged his face in a grin. "Ah, Kurt," he said. "I am so glad to see you."

"Yes?" Kurt von Hoff's English was precise, vaguely foreign. "I want those pearls."

"Come and get them."

"No, I—"

"They were slipping out of your fingers. You couldn't stand it, could you? You had to come out of the closet."

"I will not argue," said Von Hoff. "I will shoot the girl."

THEIR eyes locked. Marlowe muttered, as his eyes dropped. He knew he was beaten. "You won't get away with this," he said aloud.

"Drop the pearls to the floor and step back."

"Mike, don't!"

"Why not?" Marlowe said to Val. "The cops won't let a murderer get far. They'll catch up with him."

"You're crazy! I didn't murder anybody."

"Um. Did Fran do the Dutch?"

"I refuse to argue. Do as I say with the pearls."

"Oh, sure. You remember the catchline, 'Pearls before swine'."

Marlowe dropped them to the floor.

"Now step back," said Von Hoff.

He edged over step by step.

Val's eyes rolled. "Oh-h! I'm going to . . . faint . . . I can't. . . ."

Her body swayed, her eyes began to close. Suddenly she collapsed to the floor, arms outflung. Von Hoff leaped out of her way like a goat. But it gave Marlowe his chance.

His hand dived into his pocket, he dropped to one knee and out came the gun he had taken from Steve. He fired and Von Hoff shrieked although he was not hit. Marlowe fired again. His second shot jerked Von Hoff backward with a bullet in the hip. Marlowe held himself in readiness for a third shot. From the floor, Val's hand snaked out and closed on Von Hoff's injured leg. He came tumbling down on her, screaming.

Marlowe dived in and jerked at his gun, tore it from his grasp. Then he pushed him clear. Val popped to her feet, eyes flaming, hair disarrayed and panting.

Marlowe frowned at her. "Hey, I thought you'd pulled a maidenly faint."

"That," she said, "was just an act to let you get at your gun. And you claim to be a dramatic critic! If you can't recognize a stage faint—"

"Don't rub it in. That was a plucky thing to do, even if crazy.

"But I just couldn't see him get away with it."

"Well, pick up the marbles. We win."

She picked up the string of pearls from the floor, shuddered as her fingers came in contact with them.

"The cops might like to know about this," said Marlowe.

"I could bring that man to in there."

"No, call headquarters. Get Captain Luther. Then call the precinct and ask for Detective-sergeant Kieran."

Von Hoff was whimpering in an undertone. He raised pleading eyes. "Give me a chance to get out of this, Marlowe," he whined. "You got the pearls. That's all I—"

Marlowe shook his head. "You'll fry, brother. Murder's not a joke."

"No, no! What are you saying?"

Marlowe said: "Are your arches weak, gig? Don't you wear a special type of arch-supported shoe with a special type of heel? Ah, I see that you do. The brand name is Case. The coincidence is astounding. A heel print just like it was found out on the fire-escape landing there."

"No, I—Wh-what are you trying to tell me?"

"You murdered Fran, louse. That's what! You stuck a knife into her and turned these rooms upside down for the pearls. Then the doorbell rang. It was Jacobsen. You climbed out on the fire-escape to hide. The proof is there—in your heel. You won't get around that."

Von Hoff wilted abruptly, looked like a picture of hopeless despair. He said,

"You can't prove anything," but he said it to convince himself.

Marlowe grinned. "Jacobsen saw you. When Steve and Matty came in, he was staring toward the window through which you'd gone. They clipped him over the head. Jacobsen's testimony will clinch it."

"Damn you!" Von Hoff burst out in a fierce whisper. "All right. I did it. I hated her! It was I who first found out about the pearl necklace Lew Rigg carried. I told her about it. Together we planned to get it from him. Then she tried to throw me aside, cheat me out of my share. I warned her. But I killed her in self-defense. She tried to stab me. We struggled and the knife plunged into her."

"Sure," Marlowe said soothingly, "it was just an accident. Sure." he turned his head. "You heard him, Val?"

"Every last word." Round-eyed, she stared at Marlowe. "Jacobsen didn't really see him, did he?"

"Soap suds for my mouth. I fibbed to poor Mr. Von Hoff."

"B-but that still doesn't explain about Lew Rigg."

MARLOWE sighed. "That goes right to the front door of Fran Rice, I'm afraid. She wanted the pearls but not Lew. You said you found what I'd told you you'd find at the Morton."

"Yes. I found a room on the ninth floor that had been taken by a woman. There was a trunk in the room. I forced it open. There were bloodstains in it. And I knew the trunk. It was one of four owned by Francine Rice."

"Exactly." Marlowe nodded vigorously. "There are only three here now."

"But, Mike, I found something else."

"What?"

"This." She took a small object from the pocket of her coat. It was cleverly fashioned of gold, a replica of an automatic pistol. "It was inside the trunk."

"Ah!" His eyes lighted up warmly. "The missing watch charm."

"What do you mean?"

"This bauble belongs to our good friend, Steve."

"You mean Steve murdered Lew Rigg?"

"I'm afraid not, precious. But Fran planted the charm inside the trunk to make it look as if Steve had done the job."

"But why? Why?"

"The answer," said Marlowe, "is that Fran played a desperate, heady game, taking chances that would have stopped other people. But she had a flair for the dramatic. That's her stage training. Fran murdered Lew after he had given her the necklace. Then she wound it in her hair—a pretty clever stunt. But she couldn't just toss Lew overboard or leave him to be discovered somewhere on the boat dead. In such an instance, Matty and Steve would put two and two together and inevitably pin the kill on her, since no one else on the boat could conceivably have done the job. Does that make sense?"

"So far. What now?"

"Her idea was to pack Lew into one of her trunks, thus effecting his complete disappearance. Her next worry was getting the trunk past Customs. And this is where Steve's watch charm came in. You see, she never expected to get the trunk through. She counted on its being opened. Do you follow?" His voice dropped, became one-toned, incisive.

"With the murdered body discovered, she'd scream, faint and in general put on a first-class show. Then they'd find the watch charm. Steve's. Simple. Steve murdered Rigg, stowed the body in Fran's trunk, but missed up because the murdered man tore his charm from him in the death struggle. That's what the police would think. And Fran knew that even if suspicion did attach to her in any way, she could beat it. With her looks and legs,

she was a cinch to get by any jury. And think of the sob stuff the tabloids could've cooked up. Besides, they never, never would have found the necklace, not by searching her, they wouldn't.

"And if all that failed, there was still Matty to work on. Matty would believe that Steve was trying to double-cross him by murdering the boss and keeping the necklace for himself. Ah, just picture how the cops would've sweated Steve to make him cough up the pearls. It is quite likely that had events gone the way Fran had planned them, Matty would've knocked off Steve."

"But they didn't."

"There's the rub, they didn't. By a lot of luck, three of her trunks went through unopened. That handed her a jolt. She tried to insist on Customs opening them but I argued her out of it. I imagine she must have been pretty desperate. Then a new plan came to her mind. She knew Abe Coleman was at the Morton. And she was really afraid of him. So she decided to get rid of him and at the same time throw Steve and Matty off the scent. So she took that room in Abe's hotel and blithely tossed Rigg out of the window. Here again, she had that sense of the dramatic. But she forgot to remove the

watch charm from the trunk and when she planted a button and torn bit of cloth from Rigg's clothing in Coleman's room just to clinch matters, she missed up a second time.

Val's eyes grew rounder.

"The tear in Rigg's jacket was on the right side. The cloth and button, though, were wedged into the left side of the radiator. That told me Coleman was being framed. The only framer I could think of who could conceivably gain anything by the whole maneuver was Fran. That's why I set you to casing the hotel rooms. Things were beginning to connect."

Val shuddered, started to cry in her hands. He put his arms about her. "What's the matter, pet?"

"I—I was just thinking of Fran. The horror she went through just for a string of pearls." She looked up at him, starry-eyed. "I think I've changed my mind about being a detective. I n-never want to hear the word murder again."

"Hell, I was just going to ask you to come along with me to a first night. New show opening, called *Murder Every Minute*." He stood looking down at her with eyes in which tender mockery danced lightly. "It might be a good idea, at that. It will take your mind off the real thing."

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A voice from the window
said: "Hands behind your
back, and just drop your rod
on the way!"



A pension was the last thing old Sam Brockman wanted, even though his arthritis was killing him and his South Street beat seemed miles longer every time he patrolled it. He had to have full salary for a few years more and if liniment and an elastic ankle supporter wouldn't ease his feet sufficiently to keep him from being retired he'd try lead medicine instead.

IT ALL started because of a nail. Remember the classic example? For lack of a nail the shoe was lost. For lack of the shoe the horse was lost. . . . And so on to the battle, which was lost

too. Only a certain Mr. T. Jones had a nail in his shoe, and it made the kind of news you read about in your morning paper.

It made a lot of news you didn't read about, too. Concerning Patrolman Samuel Brockman. . . .

Sam took over the South Street beat daily at three o'clock.

This was a cold and dreary October afternoon. A thin rain, which had begun an hour earlier, showed every indication of lasting well into the night.

South Street looked like a woman with straggly hair, but Officer Brockman loved every wrinkle in its homely face. He'd tramped it more than twenty years. At first with spirit, as a stepping stone to bigger things. Then with despair, when promotion steadily passed him by. Finally, with a sort of grim devotion. It was like a friend who'd grown old with him.

Not that Officer Brockman was really old, but he was in the fifties, and that's old for a cop. The hair at his temples was already quite gray. His blue eyes had lost their sparkle, too, and he was a little heavier each year, but he was still wide-shouldered, square-jawed and friendly. He was "Sam" to hundreds.

The one thing no one knew about him was how he suffered from arthritis.

It began gradually, knuckles aching in the night. It went to his knees, his ankles, his feet—sheer torture he didn't dare so much as show. No city wants cops who have to limp, and there were reasons Sam had to keep his beat. So his jaw became squarer, his face more deeply wrinkled, and at eight thirty this October night, he slipped into Tremper's, a store on Fenwick Street, a hundred feet from South.

TREMPER'S was technically a newsstand, but it stocked a little of practically everything, from soft drinks to patent medicines. Brockman eased his two hundred pounds onto a stool at the soda fountain, and mentally groaned. It was places like this, where he could get a few minutes rest, that enabled him to get around his beat at all.

Ernie Williams grinned from behind the counter. Ernie was twenty-one, and blond. He lived in an apartment house around the corner and he knew everything and everybody.

Ernie said: "Coke?"

"Just a glass of water tonight," Sam sighed.

Ernie kept on grinning. He had brown eyes, and a cigarette was stuck behind one ear. "How's the bum ankle, Sam?"

"Eh?" Sam suddenly remembered he'd told Ernie recently that he'd twisted his ankle. "Touchy, Ernie. And pounding the pavement ain't likely to help it."

"You ought to rob a bank and retire," Ernie suggested. "Like those guys that took the First National truck last week."

Sam winced. That truck robbery was a sore point to the entire force. Four youthful gunmen had collared it on a side street, just as the doors had been opened for a cash delivery. They'd calmly burned down two armed guards. They'd lifted more than a hundred thousand, and got away. The clues had been one car, stolen—a piece of pocket torn from a coat—and a piece of paper which had been in that pocket. Plus fingerprints—but no record anywhere with which to check them.

"Or maybe if you played the ponies, you could retire and buy a farm," Ernie continued.

"Horse racing?" Sam sniffed. "A sucker game, Ernie."

"The hell it is! You know Sig Dewey?"

Brockman couldn't remember Sig Dewey at the moment.

"He lives with me now," Ernie went on. "Why, Sig's coining money on the nags. I'm going to quit me this job soon and throw in with him."

Sam shook his head. "Boy, you'd better—" He stopped, frowned. Had he heard gunshots? "You'd better—" He paused again, and again the muffled sounds came.

"Backfire," Ernie said.

"Sounds like it," Sam grunted. "I'd better be sure."

It took two attempts, plus pain like running fire to get off the stool. Sam

gritted his teeth and marched to the door. Once on the street, he caught his breath and tried to run. . . .

AT eight thirty this night, a block distant on South, Mr. T. Jones saw the traffic light ahead turn red. Mr. T. Jones, who never became more than that on the police record, was driving fast. He slammed on his brakes, gasped and twisted in his seat as a nail in his right shoe punctured flesh. There was a startled instant wherein the car swayed, tires skidding on the wet pavement. His fenders locked with a machine parked at the curb.

Mr. Jones got out. Three or four people drifted past in the rain, paused to offer comment. Mr. Jones said crossly: "I got to know whose car I damaged. Isn't there a policeman on this street?"

"Sure," a youth answered. "Old Sam Brockman. He'll be along maybe in a little while."

"I can't wait a little while," Mr. Jones snapped. He went into a grocery store, called police headquarters and a wrecker. Headquarters sent a radio flash to car 418. 418, with Officers Donney and Fitzgerald, rolled up behind the accident fifty seconds later.

There were six spectators around the wreck by this time. A girl who lived over the grocery store told Officer Donney the unknown owner of the parked car might be in the apartment building opposite.

"It's a young fellow—two young fellows. I guess they go with a couple of girls who live across the street."

Fitzgerald was taking Mr. Jones' name and address, so Donney went over to the apartment building. He consulted the cards in the mailboxes, read *Miss Jackie Colton and Miss Georgia Bliss, Apt. 19*. Donney climbed the stairs, to the third floor. Apartment 19 was halfway down the hall. When he rapped, a voice inside said quickly: "Who's there?"

"Police," Donney's deep, gruff voice replied. Perhaps it was instinct, perhaps it was the gasp that instantly answered him. Officer Donney frowned and put one hand on his gun butt. Simultaneously the door opened.

Two contorted faces appeared, eyes glittering. Two guns blazed before Donney could so much as draw his weapon. Donney spun, hit the farther wall, went to his knees. There was a scream inside the room, footsteps racing for the stairs. Donney began to drag himself toward the stairway, too.

Across the street, Fitzgerald's head jerked up at the first shot. He was on the apartment house sidewalk as the two gunmen still waving their weapons, appeared at the door. Fitzgerald's police positive barked twice. A fusillade answered as the gunmen retreated back into the apartment house, but the slugs didn't stop him. He reached the door, shooting, before he dropped.

From the top of the stairway, the injured Donney returned to the fray.

When Sam Brockman finally arrived, sirens were already wailing far down South Street. Fitzgerald, and one of his foes, were unconscious. The other stared, sightless, at the hallway ceiling. Donney was barely able to grin. All Sam had to do was wonder how this could have happened on his beat.

NORCROSS, the precinct captain, listened to Sam's story. "I was down Fenwick Street when I heard the shots," Sam repeated doggedly. "I came as quick as I could." Norcross nodded curtly and went over to talk to the headquarters men.

No one could identify the gunmen with a criminal past.

"We know their names, but that's all," Georgia Bliss sobbed.

Both she and Jackie Colton were blondes—bleached blondes.

"It's the truth!" Jackie Colton cried. "Heep and Redding were their names. We met them at a dance, and we only dated them. We don't even know where they lived. We were playing the radio, sitting around smoking—"

"Reefers," a headquarters dick cut in.

Jackie Colton blinked. "Smoking, and—and that policeman rapped. Heep pulled his gun, and then I screamed—"

The headquarters man grunted. "Guys don't start throwing slugs unless they're hot—marihuana or no marihuana. We'll take the girls in for a session, and maybe this guy, Heep, will live long enough to spill. Brockman, you keep your eyes and ears open around here."

"Yes, sir," Sam Brockman said. He went back to his beat, to thoughts of Donney and Fitzgerald, facing death because he'd had to rest his legs. He knew he should report his ailment. He knew he should take a leave of absence, or his pension, but there was Mamie, his wife, and the two kids, Tommy and Dot. Not kids, actually—both Tommy and Dot were married. Tommy even had another Tommy—but they were all back home. Times were tough. . . .

Sam's savings, dollars stuck away here and there over twenty years, had dwindled away. Bills for clothes and food and illness had come to take their place, until finally he realized he needed at least three thousand dollars to so much as break even.

Three thousand dollars. . . . The pension wouldn't be enough. Sam growled deep in his throat, whipped his flagging legs to a faster step, and told himself fiercely, he dared not admit defeat. Arthritis or no arthritis, he had to keep on working. Too, he had to cover this beat as spiritedly as the rankest rookie, because once his illness was suspected. . . .

Sam Brockman shivered. He had a troubled feeling that this night had somehow been a warning.

THE newspapers played up Donney's and Fitzgerald's heroism next day. The papers reported Heep had died without a return to consciousness. Police, therefore, admitted stalemate, but routine procedure was working toward identification.

Sam stopped into Tremper's.

"I tell you," Ernie said, "that mess was a shock to me. Me, living on the second floor of the same building, practically beneath them. Yeah, and just around the corner here, working at the time, and not knowing a thing of what was going on! Anything new on those two guys, Sam?"

Sam shook his head. The pain in his legs, tonight, was maddening.

"Those two dames," Ernie confided. "No brains. Girls will date anybody with a nickle these days. But they're O. K., Sam. Me and Sig's had 'em out already. I hear the cops turned 'em loose?"

"I guess they did, Ernie," Sam sighed.

"What's the matter?" Ernie asked, suspiciously. "The ankle?"

"I must have torn a ligament."

"You need medicine for it. We got some stuff here that would fix it up. Yes, sir," Ernie went on professionally, "liniment, and maybe an elastic supporter. We got them, too."

Sam said: "I'll have to do something if the pain don't ease up."

At eleven fifteen Sam checked in at the precinct house. Norcross had news.

"Headquarters took every robbery victim for months past around to the morgue—and these two gunmen were in the bank-truck holdup! A woman witness did the trick, and fingerprints from the stolen car, the armored truck, and the racing form that came along with that torn pocket all matched. The trouble is, these stiffs didn't leave any lead to their two partners or the money."

"By the way," Norcross said then, abruptly, "the commissioner has announced

a shake-up, too. Of course records of efficiency and accomplishment will enter into it, but a lot of the older boys are on the way out." Norcross began to grin. "You're not sixty-three, are you, Sam?"

"Me? A long way from it!"

"Sure, I know, but you might start inhaling a few extra vitamins for your examination."

"Examination?" Sam repeated, and wet his lips.

"Thorough physical, Sam. The commissioner plans a fancy wedding, and if a man has so much as an itching armpit—"

Sam didn't hear the rest. His heart was pounding. Routine examinations weren't unusual. The M. D. took your blood pressure, and listened to your heart and thumped your chest a couple of times and said, "O. K." But this one—designed to make way for new blood—

He turned away, head bent.

This, he knew at last, would be the end. It wasn't fair. But he remembered Fitzgerald and Donney, full of slugs that, had he been more alert, should have been his to stop, and he realized it was fair.

The last thing Sam muttered to himself that night was that he'd get the elastic supporter Ernie had suggested. And the liniment.

ERNIE said, the next night: "So they tagged those two gunmen. Those dumb bunnies, if they'd played their cards right, they'd have got away with it."

"You got the right idea, but the wrong slant," Sam sighed. "The cards are always stacked in crime, and you can't win with stacked cards. Ernie, about that elastic anklet and that liniment—I'd better try them."

"Swell! They'll fix you up all right," Ernie bragged.

Sam sighed again, paying out money he knew he couldn't afford, but there was the heavy cameo ring Mamie had given him years ago. Doomed to a pawnshop

now. He looked at it regretfully, doubled his big fist and grunted as he got off the stool. It was after ten. Another hour of misery—another damp and rainy night. He went up Fenwick, to South. Passed the apartment building where Jackie Colton and Georgia Bliss lived. He observed the headquarters dick in the shadows opposite. The two girls, whatever their story, were considered, hopefully, a link to recovery of the loot.

Sam continued on to the next corner, on along to the alley. Flush with the alley, Sam Brockman stopped. And suddenly he swerved off the street and into the alley. A frown tied his shaggy brows together as he came to the apartment's rear. Here, wooden steps ran a Z up the building. Sam climbed them laboriously to the second floor. The steps almost played him out.

He opened the rear door and, for a while, inside the darkened hallway, he stood still, listening. A radio played softly up front. The doors here, to the rear, were dark, silent. Sam chanced his flashlight then, read the name cards on the last two doors. The one to the right was the one he wanted. He found it locked.

A bare minute he pondered, but Norcross had said "record and accomplishment" would count in the weeding out, and Sam Brockman's lips set grimly. He had to stay on South Street. He had to draw full pay! Anklets and liniment might help, of course, but they wouldn't help "record." Sam retraced his steps outside, discovered he could reach a darkened window from the narrow porch. The window squealed, but it opened.

He groaned aloud, climbing in. Flashlight on once more, he saw a room none too clean, a bed unmade, a clothes closet.

There were a half dozen suits in the closet, but not the suit he'd hoped to find. In the dresser were shirts, socks, underwear, a plain cardboard box of cigarettes. Not just cigarettes. Sam's eyes turned

flinty. Reefers. And beneath them was a packet of clean new bills!

Almost at that instant footsteps came jauntily down the hall, stopped at this door. A key turned and the door opened. The room light flashed on and Sam Brockman, from behind the door, said softly: "Up with your hands, Dewey."

Sig Dewey gasped, turned around and raised his hands.

He was about twenty-three. He wore a plaid topcoat, and beneath it, suit trousers that did not match. But they boasted knife-like creases, and they looked new and expensive. His face was dark, sallow, eyes too pale a blue, too close together. He had a slit mouth, open now, dismayed.

"What the hell!" He kicked the door shut. "Brockman—I thought it was a stickup."

"You expected a stickup?"

"Hell, I got dough around this dump. The boys know the ponies pay me off. Brockman, put that cannon down!"

"Not so fast. We're going around and talk to the captain. Maybe you can tell him something about Heep and Redding."

"The two punks that got knocked off?" Sig Dewey laughed. "My roommate, Ernie, has been telling me you had a good head, Brockman, even if you were slow, but you're cockeyed this time. What am I supposed to know about those two yeggs?"

"You know their girl friends."

Dewey put his hands down comfortably on his ribs. "So do a hundred other guys. Those girls are sociable babies."

"You've got money, new money, in your bureau drawer."

"The bookies pay off in new money when the track's cleaned."

"You've got fingerprints," Sam whispered. "Prints that might tie up with a certain racing form. And reefers, if you want me to make a formal charge."

"I smoke 'em," Dewey snarled. "I

don't sell 'em. Put your popgun down and we'll make a deal."

"The station house, Dewey. Turn around. Hands behind your back."

"Sam," said a voice behind Brockman, at the open window, "that's a swell idea. Your hands, behind your back. And on the way, just drop your rod."

The voice was that of Ernie Williams.

SAM BROCKMAN took a deep breath. He saw the grin on Sig Dewey's sallow face, read its triumph. True, he didn't know if Ernie had a gun, but he did know that these two were Heep's and Redding's partners. Killers therefore. He dropped his gun and turned around. Ernie, leaning over the windowsill, had a gun all right, a flat .32 automatic. Ernie climbed in the window and pulled it shut, drew the shade. Sig Dewey had already picked up Brockman's gun.

"Sucker," Ernie jeered. "Don't you know the rear of Tremper's covers the back of this place? I watch this dump, and I saw you going up the steps. I could even hear you grunt."

"Sig, you'd better clean him."

Sig said: "Nice work, Ernie." He took the cocobolo billet from Brockman's belt, tossed it on a stand. He took the bottle of liniment and then the elastic bandage.

"He's got weak ankles," Ernie said.

Sig slapped Sam Brockman across the face with the anklet. It fell to the floor, and Sam's face flamed.

Sig said: "Sit down—that's right, right there on the bed."

"We got to blow," Ernie said.

"More than that." Sig's pale blue eyes looked bleak. "Kid, you shot off your mouth too much. We lost a racing form that day we took the bank truck, and you tell him later I live on the ponies."

"Sure—but how was I to know then Heep and Redding would finger this building with their screwy play!"

"I told you the cards were stacked in crime," Sam interrupted stiffly. "That's what I meant, Ernie. Crooks always do things they hadn't ought to. I only had to put the clues together to come out—"

"Behind the eight ball, Pops," Sig broke in. "Ernie, how do you stack up?" "Swell."

"Think you can hold this bull till I run upstairs and wise the girls?"

"Sure I can hold him, but why not bump him now?"

"And raise the roof with the shot before we're ready to blow! You'd better have a smoke, kid. We'll both have a smoke. We want steady nerves."

He went to the dresser and removed the cardboard box. He lit two of the cigarettes and handed one to Ernie.

"I'm due at my call box right now," Sam warned. "The force will be out looking."

"And they'll find you, copper! We'll even make you a dead hero, because when the girls come down we'll leave a nice little bonfire in their room. Sure they'll find you—burned to a crisp trying to save a lot of damn-fool tenants! Now you watch him, Ernie."

"I'll watch him," Ernie breathed.

SIG'S footsteps went confidently down the hall. Sam looked at Ernie Williams' too bright eyes, his too tight lips and shuddered. Taken, by these callow youngsters! The commissioner was right. It took youth to fight youth. Ernie's bullets would cut him down before his creaking joints permitted him to rise.

He studied the floor, vaguely picked up the fallen anklet, winced. A badge to his failure, a badge to his incompetence, his arthritis. And the only angles he could conceive from there on seemed singularly forlorn. By now Sig would have the girls packing. They were in their room all right, else the headquarters dick across the street wouldn't have been

watching.

The dick—a means to salvation? But the dick was watching the front. There was no way here, at the back, to warn him. Nothing to do, apparently, but sit and wait for death. His death—and perhaps the death of others in this building when the flames began to lick it up.

"Bum ankles won't bother you any more," Ernie chuckled.

"Kid, listen," Sam pleaded earnestly, "play the game right. You're young yet. You could come out straight in the end."

"Cut it! You thing I'm a sap? I'm not gonna tramp the street when I'm old enough for pasture. When Sig gets back, I'm going to start shooting, and I—"

Sam didn't hear the rest. He heard only his own mind, crying: *You can't wait any longer. You've got to go out trying.* His left hand drew back. There was a sudden startled yelp from Ernie Williams. Ernie's head jerked back, his gun hand flew up instinctively. By the time it came down again, leveling for a shot, Sam was in motion.

Somehow he grabbed up his police billet lying on the nearby stand. Sheer desperation gave one last burst of speed to his tortured arms and hands. The right caught Ernie's wrist; the left, clutching the sap, swung hard, twice. Ernie's wrist cracked loudly, broken, before he could pull the trigger.

Ernie was sobbing: "Damn you, copper, damn you!" Sam Brockman swung again, and Ernie's body crumpled.

Sam had the automatic then, and Sam forced his legs to run into the hall. At the stairway he thought he smelled smoke, was not sure. He did hear small, quick footsteps above, did see four silk-clad legs. The legs stopped. Sam cursed them, cursed the knowledge that he dared not shoot these girls, and started up the stairs.

With each step his bones groaned and tried to falter. But Sig would be just behind the girls. . . . Sig was just behind

them—gun blazing!

The first hot bullet almost slapped Sam Brockman back to the second floor. He swayed, caught himself, tried to leap ahead. The second slug tripped him, and vaguely he knew it had smashed his left knee. To hell with that knee! Sam kept on coming, crawling, until he topped the stairs. There was pain all over him now, but he could still raise his gun arm.

The girls darted one to either side. Sam saw that, saw Sig Dewey whirl, run five—ten steps. Sam Brockman shot three times, so fast the reports blurred together, and Sig Dewey stopped running.

NORCROSS told Sam days afterwards that the headquarters dick had arrived in time to check the fire. But Sam didn't remember anything about that.

"You know, Sam," Norcross added, "you did a fine piece of work. It's a shame you're done with South Street."

"You mean I—I won a promotion?" Sam asked eagerly from his hospital bed.

"No, Sam," Norcross said gravely, "I don't. It's tough to be in the thick of things, in the prime of life and have it end so abruptly, so soon, but—"

"Pension?" Sam whispered.

"I'm afraid that's it. Those bullets did things to your legs. You'll walk, Sam—but with a cane."

The tears came to Brockman's eyes.

He couldn't help them. A fine piece of work—he'd done everything the law asked of its men, and more. And he'd won the one thing he'd fought against and dreaded—pension. A check each month—but not enough to pay up the bills, not enough to save the house, the anguish he knew would come to his wife's eyes.

"I know how a cop feels about pensions," Norcross went on. "Anyway, Sam, Ernie and the girls confessed. Ernie says you weren't fair, you tricked him with your ring."

"He stacked his own cards—against himself," Sam answered soberly then. "He sold me an elastic contraption for—a for a twisted ankle. I had it in my hands and I had a heavy ring on my finger. So I slipped the ring into the anklet, used the anklet like a slingshot, and caught Ernie right between the eyes."

"Fine work," Norcross repeated grinning, "but then the pay's fine, too. Five thousand dollars."

"Five—say that again!"

"Sure. Reward from the bank."

Sam Brockman stretched himself a little. He even grunted, but contentedly. No more pavements. He could hold up his head, and pamper his feet, and if people said, "Poor old Sam—those gunmen ruined him!" let them think the gunmen had! Why confess that bullet wounds were only half of it?



AFRICA, where the drums beat and strange things happen around a fire at night—that's the setting for Gordon MacCreagh's fine novelette, "A Man to Kill." It's a powerful story about Kingi Bwana and the Hottentot, and the Dark Continent.



In the Same Issue—

A STORY of the Orinoco badlands, "Bull Head," by Arthur O. Friel; "Ten Day Stiff," by Robert E. Pinkerton, about the creed and the make-up of a hard rock miner; Bertrand W. Sinclair's "Seafaring Mr. McQuorkle," about the salmon fishers of Puget Sound; "Mountain Horse," a Western yarn by Barry Scobee; another installment of "Blackcock's Feather," by Maurice Walsh—

These, and other good stories and departments will be found in the November issue.

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THE CORPSE IN THE

By
**William
Edward
Hayes**

Author of "Death by Enlargement," etc.

Fred Gale had enough to do taking care of a trainful of candid-camera fiends on tour, without murder cropping up to cloud the picture. When a corpse appeared on the floor of the dark-room he knew he'd have to spot the killer in a hurry or lose his job, his girl and his mind all at one fell swoop.

CHAPTER ONE

Candid Camera Kill

FRED GALE heard the cries from farther down the lake shore, to his left, and straightened from his tripod. Three hundred dollars worth of precision camera pointed toward the yellow path the moonlight made on the water, its finely ground lens and its chromium trim picking up glints of light.

He turned inquiring eyes to the thin spinster at his side who also had set up her camera on a tripod.

Miss Louella Markum smiled briefly and said: "I think some of those girls do the most disgraceful things. Did you hear them?"

"The cries?" Fred asked, worried. He was in charge of this party, and the suc-



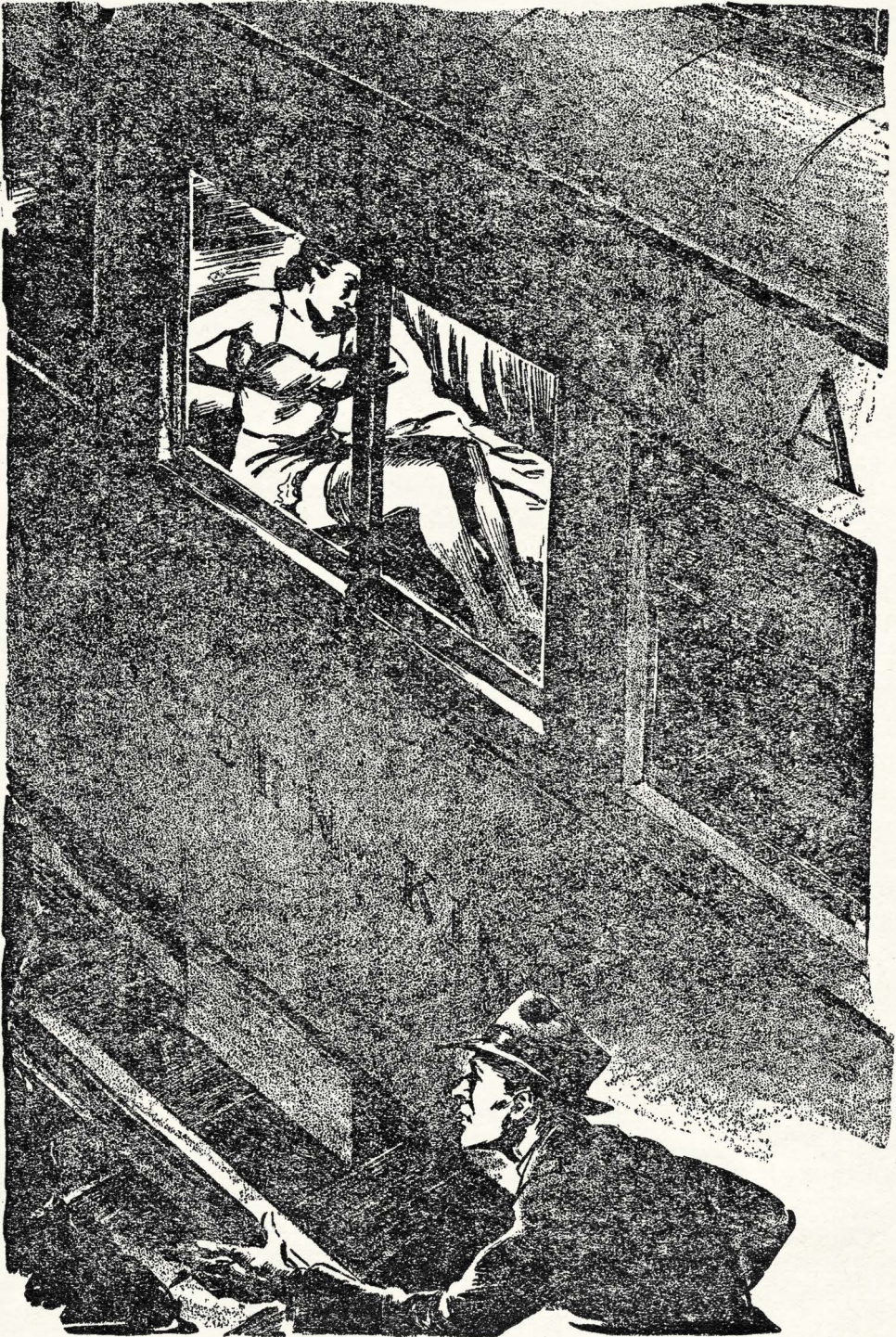
The man on the rock must have caught a spicy sequence of shots.

cess or failure of it was destined to mark his own personal success or failure.

"Perhaps I should have told you," Miss Markum, who hailed from a small city near Chicago, said confidentially. "I heard them talking just as we left the train. They even asked me to join them. The idea!"

JARKROOM

A Mystery
Novelette



"Talking about what?" Fred said. He glanced at the line of Pullmans on the railroad grade off to the right. The train was a camera tour—Fred's own idea. It was outfitted with two fully equipped darkrooms for the sixty-eight passengers it carried.

"They called it a moonlight skinny dip," Miss Markum confided. "Imagine that! Staging a nude swimming party. I never was so mortified—"

Fred smiled to himself, dismissed the thing from his mind. He changed the topic. "Now you wanted to get a moonlight picture, Miss Markum. Your lens is an F 2.8, an excellent one. Stop it down to your full aperture, give it two minutes, pointing just as it is. That'll register your full moon. Better do it now to beat those clouds. Then after the moon has risen out of the range of the lens open your shutter again and let it have about twenty minutes. With that film you're using you'll have a swell shot."

"Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Gale." Miss Markum set herself and opened her shutter.

"Look here, Gale," a deep, resonant voice called at Fred's back. He turned to see Doctor Chester Travis, M.A., Ph.D., L.L.D.

"Yes?" Fred said. Something about Travis annoyed him immensely.

"Always devoting your attention to the ladies," Travis said with a laugh. "I'm having trouble with this shutter. Seems to be sticking again. Can you do anything about it?"

Fred took the man's old-fashioned plate-and-film-pack job, held it up where the moonlight would give him the best view of it, pressed a thumb against the release lever and bent it slightly outward away from the U-frame

"No reason to stick," Fred said. "Now try it."

Doctor Travis tried it and it worked perfectly.

"I've had enough of this, Gale," Travis said. "Think I'll go on up to the train. Turn in early. Want to get up and see the sunrise over that old ghost town we've parked at."

Fred waved him on.

THE ghost town was called Painted Gulch. It was at the end of a rocky branch line that had been reconditioned to allow gasoline-powered motor coaches to come back up into the mountains for the benefit of tourists. Fred's camera train had arrived just before sunset, and his passengers had gone wild about the place. The old dance halls and saloons, the rotting meeting-house, the remnants of the frame cabins that had served for dwellings, the weather-beaten sign still over the door of the sheriff's office with bullet holes in the timbers to mark more than one gunfight in the street.

The itinerary called for two full days here so that the party could do a little mountain climbing and get some rare camera shots of wild life as well as scenery.

Miss Markum said: "Isn't Doctor Travis the sweetest thing? Oh, Mr. Gale, I think I vibrated my camera just a little. Do you suppose it'll hurt?"

"I wish I knew how to get just one good picture of the moon on that water."

Fred turned to face the speaker. He was Boyd Anderson, a partially bald little man with very thick glasses.

"I'll show you," Fred said obligingly. He was a camera expert as well as a traffic officer of the railroad.

"It won't do any good," another male voice offered. The speaker was Richard Grove, a young attorney who, everybody said, was a dead ringer for Randolph Scott, the motion-picture actor. Grove, like most of those on the trip, was from Chicago. "I've tried to help him. He has an excellent camera in the Pullman, a fine Leica, but he insists on carrying this

eight-dollar-and-a-half thing around with him."

"It's on account of my vision," Boyd Anderson said petulantly. "I can't sight well through the eye-level finder on the Leica. I can look into the brilliant finder on this one without too much trouble."

"Oh, Mr. Gale! Those clouds!"

Fred glanced up at Miss Markum's cry. The clouds suddenly had obliterated the moon. The night was very still, very hot for these mountains. Other clouds seemed banking up from the southeast.

FRED suddenly felt a tug at his sleeve. He turned to see Bea Wallace, a willowy, leggy young lady who was an interior decorator with her own exclusive shop on Chicago's fashionable North Side. "If you can break away for a minute," Bea whispered. Her eyes did things to Fred. Just then Miss Markum engaged the attention of Richard Grove and the near-sighted Boyd, and Fred turned swiftly. Something about Bea Wallace's expression had caused his nerves to tighten.

"It's happened again," Bea said under her breath. "I thought I ought to tell you. Especially after what happened up there in the ghost town at sunset."

"I don't get it," Fred said. But he knew very well what Bea referred to—the quite indecent advantage one Gerald Lovick had taken of her as she had stepped from the rear platform of the train to the rock adjoining the track. The worm's-eye view of her legs that Lovick's Contax camera had recorded at that second.

"Somebody just shot a flash bulb from the bushes near the lake edge where several of us—" She broke off and frowned.

"Were swimming in the raw?" Fred asked bluntly.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if we'd been swimming," Bea said. "We were standing on the beach. Three of us were already stripped, two of us still had some

small garments on. You must have heard the cries."

"I did," Fred answered. He glanced hurriedly about him. He was hunting for the man who had signed the tour book as *Gerald Lovick, salesman, 44, unmarried*. He didn't see Lovick about.

"Perhaps we shouldn't have done it," Bea said. "It was Edith Spencer's idea. She and some girls from the car ahead of ours agreed that the opportunity was too perfect. The water was warm, the night hot, the undergrowth a good screen. We—well, we thought it would be a lark."

"And now somebody's got a flash shot of you," Fred said. "If I were sure it was Lovick—" His lips compressed. Suddenly he straightened. "Leave it to me," he said. "I'll keep an eye out. There won't be any print made from that negative if I can help it."

"You're a dear." She squeezed his hand impulsively.

The clouds were getting denser. Somebody said: "Well, good-night, moon!"

"Here's hoping the clouds'll be gone by sunrise," chimed in another voice.

Edith Spencer, the ultra-feminine blonde, daughter of a Moline manufacturer, and a Junior Leaguer, came up from behind breathlessly. "Did you tell Mr. Gale?" she asked Bea.

"And he didn't say a word about our being indiscreet," Bea said.

"I'd give a pretty penny to know who shot that," Edith whispered. "Bea and I were—well, if you find out, Mr. Gale, please destroy the film before it can even be developed. Won't you?"

"If I can find out," Fred said. "If it was Lovick—"

"I'd rather suspect Boyd Anderson," Edith Spencer said. "Something very queer about that man. I don't know what it is. I know when Bea and I were over in the Latchstring Saloon just before sunset, getting some shots with that funny-looking guide standing behind the bar in

his buckskin vest, this Anderson hardly left our heels."

"And speaking of those shots," Bea said, "I do hope they came out well. I'm almost afraid to develop my negatives. The old guide, with his handle-bar mustaches was so perfect standing there. We got Mr. Anderson to pose with his foot on the brass rail. Then Edith got a bottle from the shelf and put it on a table and had Mr. Anderson sit there with his head bent over on his arms like he'd passed out. I'm afraid I underexposed, though the sun was coming right in across the bar."

They were trudging up the hill toward the distant train now. The night had become black with the moon gone.

Edith Spencer said: "Do try, Mr. Gale, to trace down that flash shot."

"I'll do my best," Fred promised.

THE night was stifling. In each Pullman section, each compartment, electric fans were whirring and windows were open although there was no breeze to stray in. Fred was restless. He walked over to the old depot that had been reconed sufficiently to allow Tolliver Potts, the guide, comfortable living quarters.

Fred inquired for any telephone messages that might have come but the guide shook his head.

"Right queer party yuh got aboard, Mr. Gale," Tolliver Potts opined with a nasal twang. "Never seen so many kodaks in my life. Bet I posed for dozen pitchers for two women in that saloon almost before the train got stopped here. Them gals was liberal though." He smacked his lips, jingled coins in his pocket. "I give 'em a good yarn of the time when the West was young an' raw"

"You get the dance halls and saloons swept out?" Fred asked.

"I sure did. I got your message an' I didn't lose no time. If they want pictures I guess we can give 'em to 'em."

Fred left the guide to himself, stepped

out into the night again wishing his unpleasant task was over.

He didn't like the idea of going right to Lovick and saying, in so many words, that Lovick had some negatives that he, Fred Gale wanted. After all Lovick was a patron of the tour. And it was an expensive tour. The people aboard this train had money. Their cameras and equipment bespoke wealth. And if Lovick had taken some shots that no gentleman would take—

Fred shook his head. He was in a spot. This tour had to go off successfully. If it didn't it meant Fred's job. He had worked his way up on this railroad from an office boy to special passenger traffic representative. More than once his impulsiveness had got him into difficulties with his immediate superior who, for a long time, had been watching for an opportunity to fire Fred. When Fred had taken this camera-train idea to him he'd pooh-poohed it. Then, in a bold stroke, he had gone over his immediate superior's head, and the chief traffic officer had thought it a million-dollar brainstorm. Now it had to go off smoothly with everybody satisfied.

Fred picked his way along the train. Most of the Pullman windows were dark now, though it wasn't yet ten o'clock. You couldn't see an arm's length in front of you—

The breath stilled in Fred's throat as he halted suddenly. He was near the next-to-last car in the train, glancing ahead at something queer at one of the windows from which a light shone. For a moment he couldn't make it out. Though he knew that peculiar rock formations hugged the track closely at three or four different places, this didn't look—

Now he saw what it was. A camera was being held at that Pullman window on which the shade was not fully drawn. A dim figure crouched there in the shadows. *Click!*

There were more *clicks* in rapid succession as a shutter snapped almost soundlessly in the hot thick night.

Fred's lips drew into a thin line, his fingers stiffened. He took a quick step forward, stumbled, kicked up gravel and cinders, caught himself in time to see the figure vanish from the rock.

He recovered his balance, sprang up on the rock, went to the lighted window.

Edith Spencer, clad in a filmy, revealing nightgown, and without so much as a sheet drawn over her, was opening a book to read. The strong light which bathed her was perfectly suited to give a man with an f 1.5 high-speed lens a chance to make a spicy sequence of shots of the young lady getting out of her clothing and into her gown. Obviously that was exactly what had happened.

Fred left the rock, walked to the rear vestibule, climbed up. The doors on both sides of the train were open. On the platform he saw Doctor Chester Travis lazily lighting a cigarette. Fred gulped. Gale knew of three cameras on the train that were equipped with 1.5 lenses and Travis owned one.

Fred glanced at the tall thin man appraisingly. There was no sign of a camera on his person.

"Pardon me, Doctor," Fred said. "Did anybody enter this car just now?"

"Just now? No, I'm sure I haven't seen a soul," the Ph.D. answered with a drawl. "No one except you, that is."

"Me?"

"Weren't you just outside there on a rock, looking into somebody's window?" Doctor Travis' eye held a sly, knowing twinkle.

Fred felt the red spots in his cheeks. "You're sure no one just got on this car?"

Travis shook his head.

Fred turned and plunged into the corridor that ran beside the forward compartments. At one door he stopped and rapped. He'd settle this thing right now.

THE door opened and Gerald Lovick peered out. Fred pushed his way in. The first thing he saw was the Contax with the 1.5 lens on the bed.

"Isn't it rather late for a call, Mr. Gale?" Gerald Lovick asked quizzically.

Fred didn't answer. He picked up the camera, saw the counter indicator, noted that it pointed to 24. Twenty-four shots had been made on this thirty-six-exposure film.

"I think you've got a negative I want," Fred said. He held the camera up.

Lovick arched his heavy brows. There was a glitter in his dark eyes. He reached out a hand and grabbed his camera before Fred knew what he was doing.

"A negative?" Lovick smiled. "A negative rather than a print? I'm sure you've photographed everything on this trip that I have, Mr. Gale."

"With a few exceptions," Fred said evenly.

"Inferring what?"

"The shot you made from beneath that rock at the rear of the train, just before sunset, when Miss Wallace stepped from the train to the rock. That's being specific."

"I'll let you see it when it's developed," Lovick answered with a slight contempt in his tone. "If you'd like an eleven-by-fourteen print—"

"And the negative you made by the lake shore an hour or so back," Fred went on, accusing directly.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Gale, you're overstepping yourself and your authority." Lovick held the door back.

The near-sighted Boyd Anderson stood there on the threshold, a lean and bony little man in a shapeless tweed suit. Lovick said: "Oh, come in, Anderson. Mr. Gale is just leaving. And I've got a film to develop in a few minutes, but if there's something I can do for you—"

Anderson smiled and came in with his chin forward. He stepped on Fred's toe

then bowed and apologized profusely.

Then Fred Gale was in the corridor and the door was shut, and somehow he knew that Lovick was laughing contemptuously to himself.

Fred moved into the Pullman-section aisle. A pair of green curtains farther along in the dimness, closed suddenly as if someone about to emerge had thought better of it.

Conductor Moreland, in his faded blue uniform, came from the men's dressing-room carrying his cap.

"What these nuts wanna come to a place like this for," the weary Mr. Moreland growled, "I don't know. Thought the rails'd never hold us gettin' up here, an' when we start back—"

"I wouldn't worry about that now," Fred said. "Meanwhile there's your lower, all made up for you. You've got nothing to kick about."

The conductor crawled in between the curtains and Fred turned on his heel and strode toward the rear. He passed the compartment doors crossed the vestibules into the rear car which was a combination darkroom and lounge. This car, under Fred's supervision, had been converted from an old diner, its kitchen section enlarged to provide every darkroom facility. The darkroom was entered by a door at the forward end of the narrow corridor that passed on back to the lounge. Here the wall space had been arranged to allow passengers to exhibit their prints.

FRED dropped to a deep leather chair. A cigarette still sent up a spiral of smoke from the ashtray at his elbow, but the car was deserted. Fred crushed out the cigarette, lit one of his own, leaned back and tried to find relaxation. He should have known better than to go into a passenger's compartment that way and virtually accuse—

The rear door was open and night bugs beat themselves savagely against the

screen. A faint wind, came up that stirred the leaves of a magazine on the table beside him. Fred glanced at it—one of the newer photographic journals with a swell cover in color. That chromotone process with which he'd so often wanted to experiment. Pretty expensive unless you were expert at it. Likely to ruin three or four prints to get one in natural color by the collodion stripping method.

He opened the magazine and scanned the table of contents. There might be something there to take his mind off his worries, enable him to—

There was a sudden, chilling scream! Muffled and cut short—but near!

Fred's fingers gripped the chair arm. The magazine fell at his feet. For the moment he was paralyzed, his throat constricted.

Then the cry came again and this time it sounded from the corridor. With it he heard running feet. Fred hurled himself from the chair, charged toward the corridor, and halted breathlessly.

Bea Wallace, fully dressed, confronted him. Her lips were parted as if another scream were on its way, but no sound came. Her eyes were wide with a kind of staring horror. Abruptly her hands came up, her fingers clasped the lapels of Fred's coat. Then her head fell against his chest and her body quivered.

Fred tried to shake her, tried to hold her erect. "What—what in the name of God—" He couldn't get out the question, she trembled so.

Then she spoke in a queer tense voice. "Don't—don't ask me to look—at it—again."

"At what?" He held her so that he could get one palm under her chin, raise her face and see into her eyes.

"In there—" She choked off and turned to stare at the corridor. "I was talking to him when—" She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

Fred whirled, grasped her wrist and

hurried, half dragging her, down the corridor. She held back at the darkroom door and Fred turned to her again.

"Who is it?" he cried. "Tell me—"

"Gerald Lovick," she managed to get out tightly. "He—"

Then Fred noticed the blood on the front of her dress. He saw that there was blood on his gray suit, too.

"Stay—no come with me." He pulled her into the darkroom. There was a heavy velvet curtain inside the door which protected the room from any outside light when the door was opened, either night or day. The room was inky dark now, redolent with smell of chemicals familiar in photographic practice.

Fred fumbled for the light switch, pressed the button.

Then he saw the thing on the floor—the crumpled form of a man, the pool of blood, the splattered crimson on front of the work bench, on the white trays. Beside the body was a long thin knife with blood still wet on the glittering blade.

Lovick lay half on his side, his features distorted, his fingers bent into claws. Blood still oozed from the wound in his breast with a small sickening pulsation that was getting weaker and weaker.

Fred Gale looked up just in time to see Bea Wallace clutch at the velvet curtain. Then she slumped down, ghastly white, in a dead faint.

CHAPTER TWO

Print for Print

FRED GALE, avoiding the blood and the lifeless figure, went over and soaked his handkerchief in cold water from the tap. When he sponged her forehead Bea's eyes snapped open, then closed again wearily.

"I—I didn't mean to be a sissy," she said getting her voice under control. "Only—it's too horrible. I mean—"

"Don't look at it," Fred said hurriedly. "But tell me all you can, quickly. We're miles from civilization. Nobody can escape from here. But if we hurry we may be able to catch the killer before he can cover himself up completely."

"I—it all happened so quickly—"

"Start at the beginning," Fred urged. "It's ten thirty now. Maybe if you can get it in order, tell me what time you came into the darkroom—"

"I don't know what time it was. I didn't look at my watch. I only—well, I followed him back here. I—I thought I might talk to him and get him to give me those negatives before he—well, he was the type who would show pictures like that to his friends and make remarks and—"

"You followed him," Fred said, taking her hand. "How do you mean?"

"I was close to the door," Bea answered, "when you were in his compartment. I heard what he said to you just before that Mr. Anderson came up. I heard him say he would have to develop his film in order to give you a print. That burned me up."

"How long was Anderson in that compartment with him, Bea?"

"Two minutes. No more than that. Anderson came out and went toward the front of the train. You'd finished talking to the conductor and were starting for the rear. Lovick saw you and waited until you'd passed through the vestibule door."

"Where were you all this time?" Fred demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"There's an empty compartment next to Lovick's" she answered, her voice much steadier, though she held it to almost a whisper. "I was just inside the door. I watched him, determined to get that film. Not because I'm a prude, but—well, maybe you can understand."

"I understand," Fred said quietly.

"He went into the darkroom and I followed right behind him. He didn't turn

on any lights. I spoke to him so he would know he wasn't alone, and when he answered I moved over toward him. I told him what I wanted. He—well, he got a little vicious. He made a pass at me and grabbed me. I picked up something and tried to hit him with it. I was plenty frightened."

"What was it you picked up?" Fred asked, glancing about the bench.

He saw a contact printing frame with a shattered glass near the wall. Her eyes traveled to it.

"My fingerprints will be on it," she said.

"Did you hit him?"

"I broke his hold. He stepped back away from me. Then something brushed past my shoulder and I heard Lovick cry out."

"What?"

"He called me a vile name. He said, 'Why you dirty—' I can't bring myself to say it. He made a funny noise in his throat, then crashed against me, clawing at me. He went down at my feet and I sensed something was—well, I don't know what it was. I mean there was that noise in his throat, and a kind of flopping about on the floor. I backed away then and found the light button and switched the light on. He lay there bleeding. I screamed, I guess, and turned the light off, and ran into the corridor. I saw you—" She broke off and shuddered.

"And you didn't hear the door to the corridor open or close after you followed Lovick in here?"

"No Good Lord!" She put the back of one hand to her lips as if to stifle a cry. She pressed the tips of her fingers to her temple. "They—they'll say I did it! I can't prove—"

"But you didn't do it," Fred said tersely.

"No! Oh, God, no!"

Fred glanced at the bench and saw Lovick's camera. There was a small film tank for 35 mm. strip film beside it. The

top was off the tank. And the back of the camera was open and the film gone! There were some square prints in a washing vat.

Fred touched nothing. He tiptoed around the body, came back to Bea with thoughtful eyes.

"What shall we do?" Bea cried. She clutched at his arm. "I mean if it's murder—"

"It's murder," Fred broke in. "And we've got to think fast. The killer either followed you and Lovick back here, or was already in the room when you two entered. You didn't hear anybody come in and you were too wrought up to hear anybody leave. All you can remember was something brushing past your shoulder in the dark. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Nothing else that you can remember?"

"Nothing else."

"You say this Anderson left the compartment— Lovick's compartment— and headed toward the front of the train?"

"Yes."

"Anderson knew, however," Fred said hurriedly, "that Lovick was going to develop films tonight. I knew it. And you knew it because you overheard Lovick tell me. Three of us who could have killed him if we include you in it."

"Fred, please!" It was the first time she had used his given name.

He caught her arm. "You'd better go to your section," he said gently. "I'll go with you. Then I'll tell the skipper. We'll get word down to Silver Creek to the county authorities. God, what a mess!"

FRED locked the darkroom door, pocketed the key. He got the badly shaken young woman to her sleeping section, then charged forward and found the mournful Mr. Moreland, the train conductor.

Moreland listened to Fred's hurried recital without emotion. Gale kept the girl's name out of it. He merely said that he

had gone in the darkroom, switched on the light, and had seen the thing on the floor.

Conductor Moreland said: "Ain't no jury'd convict anyone for shootin' one of them camera fiends. Or stabbin' 'em, either. I got a brakeman that's got a camera. If you could see the picture he got of me cleanin' my false teeth— Well, we better go get the watchman up and use the company telephone. Maybe we're gonna spend a nice quiet time in these hills while the sheriff has fun."

Fred did the telephoning while Tolliver Potts, the lone male resident of Painted Gulch, looked on and chewed his mustaches. Fred told the Silver Creek station agent thirty-eight miles away the barest details.

"Yuh sure it's a out an' out killin'?" Potts asked as Fred finished telephoning.

"And a messy one," Fred snapped.

"I gotta take a look," the conductor mumbled.

"Ain't been a good killin' here since the Bennett gang shot up the bank back in nineteen two," Potts said. "I recollect—"

"You do your recollecting for these tourists tomorrow," Fred snapped. "Stay close to the telephone. There might be some message for me."

Fred charged back toward the train, outdistancing the elderly Moreland. Sooner or later the whole camera train would know about this thing, would be crowding back to that rear car for a glimpse of the grewsome mess. And take pictures of it if they could get them. There was much to be done before that stampede took place.

There were sixty-eight people in the party exclusive of the train crew and the usual porters and dining-car employees. One of those sixty-eight—

Fred brought up to a sharp stop.

"I'm a hell of a detective," he said aloud. His mouth hardened. A flush burned his lean cheeks.

This Boyd Anderson, the near-sighted guy with the thick lenses in his specks. Hadn't Bea Wallace told Fred that Anderson had left the dead man's compartment and started toward the forward end of the train? Which meant that Anderson would have had to pass the point where Fred had been talking to Conductor Moreland. And Anderson had not come down the car's aisle!

Anderson had started forward from Lovick's compartment, then had disappeared. Had he entered his own section to retire? Fred admitted that that was logical. Anderson's section was just in front of the compartments, and Fred and Moreland had been near a vacant section about the middle of the car—a section that the porter had not made up.

He loped on. Plenty of time to see Anderson. But there wasn't plenty of time in which to accomplish something else.

FRED climbed the rear vestibule of Lovick's car, paused on the platform to listen. The mountain stillness was broken by no sound save that of the summer insects that use the dark for conversation.

Fred advanced along the narrow corridor toward Lovick's compartment door. In that small neat room might be the clue to this murder—might be the key to other things.

The dim light at the end of the corridor glowed faintly as Fred's fingers closed over the knob, and again he paused to listen. Very quickly, then, he twisted the knob, shoved the metal door inward and stepped into the room.

As he shut the door quietly, perspiration welled under his collar. He reached behind him in the stifling blackness to feel for the light switch—and the blood froze in his veins. His fingers became electric. For the split-second duration of a fast shutter's click those fingers had touched cloth over human flesh.

Even as he tried to cry out, get his hands into action, do something, anything, there was a quick numbing blow against the side of his skull. Then a moment of blinding pain, of piercing light in an engulfing void—and complete oblivion.

FRED GALE was cold and cramped when he recovered consciousness. He stared above him and saw stars. Mental numbness gave way to sharp focus and suddenly, as the events of the night took shape, he jerked upward and groaned. His head pounded, queer lights burned in his eyes. He closed his eyes, opened them again, and suddenly realized that he rested on damp earth. He took a long moment to rise finally, then staggered heavily and almost lost balance. A tree saved him from going over. He seemed to be on a steep slope.

He listened to the night noises and tried to get his bearings. He couldn't be far from the train. He had been to Painted Gulch only once before—when the railroad had first decided to reopen it for tourists, and aside from the dusty main street, the broken buildings, the graveyard by the old church, he could remember little. Certainly there had been no deep woods, but this seemed to be almost forest. His assailant couldn't have carried him out to some outlying territory. There must be some other explanation.

He took another step forward, crashed heavily into brush, halted as a light flashed not ten yards away from him. A blinding bull's-eye swept over the trees. Another light glimmered out of the darkness, and all at once a broad beam covered him and a hoarse voice cried: "There he is! Shoot if you have to!"

Fred stared into the light. "No! Don't shoot! I—"

"That's him, men," another voice shouted. "You're covered podner. Covered plenty. Keep them hands up—high! We're closin' in."

It couldn't be a posse. That was preposterous. But then who else—

Suddenly a man was standing in front of him, shoving a gun into his ribs and running hard hands over his coat and hip pockets.

"Listen," Fred cried, "if you're the sheriff—"

"I ain't the sheriff," the searcher snapped, "but he's wantin' to see you, mister. You turn an' march. Keep yore hands high. Try to duck an' we'll let you have it."

Fred knew it was useless to argue with them. The light pointed ahead of him and he picked his way up the steep slope. There was no path. He had to find footing between clumps of rank shrubs and undergrowth.

His heart was pounding heavily and his breath was almost gone when finally he stood on level ground and saw the dark train just ahead of him, only a few steps away.

He remembered now—the gulch—the steep descent into the ravine from which the old ghost town had gotten its name. His assailant in the dark compartment had simply tumbled him out of the car, over the brink of the gulch, and let him roll.

"What you waitin' for?" The voice was behind Fred and a gun prodded him.

Fred advanced on bruised legs and mounted the vestibule steps of the car in which the dead man had ridden.

"Into that rear car," the voice ordered gruffly.

The lounge was ablaze with lights and the shades were tightly drawn. The occupants of the Lovick Pullman had all been routed out. They sat grouped around two men in dark clothes. All turned toward the corridor when Fred entered.

Bea Wallace rose from her chair took a step forward, clutched Fred's sleeve. "They've—hurt you," she said under her breath. "Fred, this is terrible."

EDITH SPENCER, the completely feminine blonde, stared at Fred wide-eyed. Mrs. Spencer, her mother, tall, erect and militant, was indignant. Boyd Anderson, in a dressing-gown, peered owlishly behind his thick lenses. Chester Travis, the Ph. D., very tall and thin, sat slumped down in bizarre striped pajamas, visible under his old-fashioned quilted robe. Miss Markum, the spinster school ma'am, was still prim and precise but her eyes sparkled with excitement. Richard Grove, the handsome young attorney, was even more handsome with his tousled hair, and green belted robe.

"Where'd you find him?" the thick-set man in the black suit asked of the man at Fred's back.

"Tryin' to get down the gulch. Tryin' to make his getaway."

"Don't you know that gulch is a dangerous place for a city feller to go wanderin' around at night?" the thick-set man asked kindly.

Fred met his eyes and liked them. He tried to smile. "I think you can look at me, Sheriff—"

"Fanning—Jep Fanning."

—"and tell that it wasn't an attempt at a getaway."

"What was it?"

"I telephoned for the authorities," Fred answered levelly. "Then I thought I'd better get over to the train and make sure that nothing in the dead man's compartment was touched. Apparently I was much too late. I opened the door, went in, reached for the light button, and touched somebody standing there instead. Then I got it over the head. If you don't believe it, you can feel the spot—"

"I can see the blood," the sheriff said. "You got some on your coat. You say you went into the compartment an' it was dark, an' somebody socked you?"

"Yes."

"An' woke up in the gulch with your clothes all torn that way an'—"

"These men threw a light on me, Sheriff Fanning."

"When you touched somebody in the dark what'd it feel like?" the sheriff asked, still with that kindly inquiring tone. "The cloth, I mean. Like silk or cotton or wool?"

"I don't know. It happened too suddenly. It startled me."

"Whoever it was didn't say nothin'?"

"Nothing at all."

"What time was that?" Fanning urged.

"Twenty to ten, perhaps."

"It's almost one A.M. now," the sheriff said. "Sit down there. I don't want to keep you folks up later'n I have to."

"I think it's perfectly ridiculous to keep us up at all," Mrs. Spencer declared vehemently. "As if any of us could do a thing like this. There are a great many more people on this train, Mr. Sheriff—"

"Nobody from the part of the train ahead of Lovick's Pullman came back into that Pullman or into this lounge after ten o'clock," the sheriff said. "We know that. We got the word of two porters an' the Pullman conductor. All three men were in a position to know that, an' see what went on up forward. Nobody from the head part of the train could come back without bein' seen."

"Which means, I suppose," Richard Grove drawled, "that you have, in this group about you, a murderer."

"I ain't sayin' that, my friend," the sheriff answered steadily. "There could've been somebody hid in that darkroom for hours, waitin' for Lovick to enter."

"This is just perfectly terrible," the spinster Miss Markum protested. "Poor Mr. Lovick. He was such an attentive man. So gallant and—"

"Any of you people in that darkroom after supper tonight?" Fanning asked.

There was a pregnant silence. People glanced at each other.

"Not I," the professorial Mr. Travis said at length.

Fred stiffened, shot a quick glance at the tall stooped man. Travis was lying and Fred knew it. Travis' eyes met Fred's for an instant and something like a cloud passed over them. Suddenly Fred wondered how much Fanning had gotten out of Bea.

As if to answer his unspoken question, Fanning turned suddenly to Fred. "You found the body, I believe you told the conductor?"

"Yes," Fred answered leaping at the chance. He didn't look at Bea. No use involving her, poor kid—

"Tell me how."

Fred wet his lips. "Well, I merely glanced in the darkroom as soon as I got ready to turn in. I said, 'Hello,' or something like that, then when no one answered I turned on the light. You've already looked at exactly what I saw."

"We've looked at what's in there now," the man sitting beside the sheriff said suddenly. He hadn't spoken up till now. "I've taken fingerprints. Yours, Gale, are on that knife, on the handle. Are you sure you touched nothing?"

"I'm sure I didn't touch the knife," Fred answered, but the shock of the man's information left him cold. His fingerprints!

The sheriff and the other man held a whispered conference. Then Fanning said to him: "Any questions, Mr. Heath?"

Heath stared at first one and then another as if trying to read their thoughts. He was thin and wiry, and his face was sharply chiseled. He gave the appearance of a weary business man, yet there was something disturbingly vital about his eyes.

"I'll start with you, Anderson," Heath said, leaning forward. "You're from Chicago. Did you know Lovick before you boarded this train?"

"No," the near-sighted man answered.

Heath went from one to the other. With the exception of Miss Markum, the

spinster, and Mrs. Spencer and her daughter, Edith, they all lived in Chicago. None admitted knowing Lovick there. None had any reason to suspect that Lovick had any enemies aboard. They were all very righteous, very sympathetic toward the deceased gentleman, sorry about his death, and quite at a loss as to who could possibly have any motive for the killing.

Finally Heath rose and studied them as a group. Then he turned toward the sheriff. "They might as well retire. The doctor is finished in the darkroom and I think we can accomplish more after these people have some rest. If you want to go back to Silver Creek with the body. I'll stay on. Or a couple of the boys can stay."

"Either way is O.K. with me," Sheriff Fanning replied.

CHAPTER THREE

A Question of Identity

WHEN the group broke up, Bea Wallace waited until all the others had gone out. When she left finally, Fred followed her into the vestibule. He gave her a sign to go ahead. It would be dangerous to talk here. They entered the corridor of their own Pullman and approached the door of the dead man's compartment.

As they did so there was a light step behind Fred.

"In here, you two," Heath said. His voice was low and compelling.

Bea sucked in breath. Fred turned and Heath held open the compartment door.

The light was on and Fred saw that the place had been combed. Bea was very lovely in her pale-blue satin robe, but her eyes were frightened.

Heath shut the door, stood with his back against it, wary and tense. "All right, you two," he said. "Talk and talk

fast. And make it good. You, Miss Wallace, had good reason to want to kill that man."

"I?" She stared at him wide-eyed.

"You must have since you followed him to that darkroom. I said talk!"

Heath listened without comment as Bea Wallace told her story straightforwardly. She held nothing back. When she had finished Heath turned to Fred.

"Your turn."

Fred likewise, didn't hedge. He told of the shadowy figure at Edith Spencer's window, of the flash shot at the lake, the worm's-eye view Lovick had snapped of Bea Wallace as she stepped from the train platform to the rock.

"I knew she couldn't have killed him," Fred said. "I didn't see any reason why she should be brought into this."

"The layman doesn't see a lot of things a trained detective might," Heath said. "You came back to this compartment then to search Lovick's belongings?"

"Yes."

"If the person who slugged you had made any more thorough job of it, Gale, we wouldn't have found even so much as the dead man's shirts."

"You mean, then, that the room was cleaned before you got here?"

"If Lovick had so much as a roll of films about him it's gone now," Heath said.

"No prints of any of the shots he's made on the trip?" Fred asked incredulously. "Why he—"

"Not a print," Heath said. "Nothing to give us a line on the man. No letters, cards or other means of identification. And so far as we've learned up to now, you two are the number-one suspects. There's motive—a little thin, maybe, but still motive. You, Gale, don't have a leg to stand on. Nobody saw you on the observation platform. Miss Wallace can't swear that you didn't come into that room in the dark, thrust the knife, rush

out and be ready to give her a shoulder to cry on."

"But that's ridiculous."

"Nothing, young lady, is ridiculous in a case like this. Good-night."

He left them as suddenly as he had appeared behind them.

BEA stared at Fred for a long moment. Her eyes clouded. Fred put his fingers to his lips, reached over, grasped the knob and opened the door suddenly. The professorial Travis glanced at them in vast surprise.

Travis peered over his glasses. "I beg your pardon," he said slowly. "I'd just paused to wonder about this thing, about the man who'd occupied this room. Terrible, isn't it?"

"Worse than that," Fred answered. "And by the way, you must've gone back in the darkroom to get your prints out of that wash tray before the sheriff got here, Doctor Travis. But I heard you mention that you hadn't been in the darkroom all evening."

"My prints?"

"About four inches square," Fred said steadily. "No other camera aboard makes prints like that. Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me—"

"I don't mind at all," Travis said kindly. "I'm forgetful, in a way. I did go into the darkroom and make those contact prints right after dinner. I remember now. I put them into wash. They must still be there. I assure you that the first I heard of this thing was when the conductor came through the car rousing us all and telling us to be on hand in the lounge."

"Then somebody else removed your prints from the wash," Fred said. "Otherwise the sheriff would have seen them and would've asked about them. I saw them when I was looking over the body but thought nothing of them at the time."

"Well, think nothing of it now. If the

sheriff asks me again I shall very soon tell him. It had slipped my mind. That's all."

He turned and left them, peering studiously over his glasses, his old-fashioned robe hanging on him like a sack on a scarecrow.

Bea said: "And he's just that way, too, Fred. The absent-minded professor. He's wasted yards of film on his trip by forgetting to wind after making a shot. I've seen him chuckle over his double exposures."

FRED took Bea to her section, saw that she was safely behind the curtains. Then he returned to the smoking compartment for a cigarette. First, however, he washed the dirt from his head and hands, wincing as the warm water stung the open cut where the weapon had landed on him.

Who had slugged him in the dark? What had Lovick photographed on this trip that somebody wanted badly enough to commit murder for? And had the murderer succeeded in finding what he wanted?

Fred pondered these questions through the length of a cigarette and then lit another from the glowing tip of the first. Was Doctor Travis lying about forgetting that he'd been in the darkroom? Why should he lie? And what about this man Anderson? Always Fred's reasoning went back to the short man with the near-sighted eyes. Anderson might be able to tell a lot.

Abruptly Fred sat erect. The majestic figure of Mrs. Sarah Spencer moved through his mind. Had Lovick perhaps tried to blackmail that imposing Amazon with the sequence of shots he'd made of her daughter disrobing in her Pullman section?

A woman, just as well as a man, could have thrust that knife. A woman, however, wouldn't likely have slugged Fred

in the dark and tumbled him down that hill. Not that Fred was any heavy-weight. Come to think of it, Mrs. Spencer probably could have handled his limp body easily.

He shook his head savagely, dropped his cigarette into the cuspidor at his feet, rose and stretched. Tomorrow the sheriff would be back, and there would be more questions, and maybe they'd find that the killer wasn't anybody in this car at all, but somebody from some other part of the train who had hidden himself and waited for the moment to strike.

Fred went to his own compartment in the forward end of the car. He would have to make some kind of report about this thing tomorrow, would have to wire it to headquarters, and he hated to think about what his immediate superior would reply.

He lay for a long time turning the strange problem over in his mind. Once he thought he heard a scuffling noise outside his window, but decided it was just nerves. Finally, after a long struggle, sleep came.

He dreamed of cameras and shutters clicking, and Amazonian women in cotton robes who had claws instead of fingers.

He woke with a start to find a hand clutching his shoulder and shaking him. He sprang back with his heart bounding up in his throat. Then he saw the mournful face of Conductor Moreland and swallowed.

"Don't tell me it's time to get up." Fred grumbled. His head throbbed.

"It's seven o'clock," the skipper answered. "And I'm in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"With the law," Moreland groaned. "It's got me in a spot."

"Out with it, Cap. You look like you'd lost your last friend."

"The sheriff," Moreland explained. "He kinda left it up to me to see that everything was all right durin' the night."

"You mean he took his crew back to Silver Creek?" Fred asked, sitting up.

"He left a coupla men to keep an eye out," the conductor went on miserably. "Him an' Heath an' the rest went back to Silver Creek on the motor. Heath said he had telegrams to send an' other things to do that he couldn't do here."

"Well, what's happened to the sheriff's men?" Fred demanded.

Moreland stared disconsolately down at his hands. "One of 'em got slugged."

"Slugged?" Fred reached for his socks. "Good Lord, Cap—"

"We better call on the Lord. We better call on somebody. This deputy got konked back there in the lounge an' then trussed up with wire. They throwed him in the darkroom an' locked him there."

"Who?" Fred feverishly began to pull on his clothes.

"How the hell do I know?" the conductor retorted. "I just found him five minutes ago. He's gone fumin' over to the telephone to call up an' report."

"How about the other deputy?"

"The two of 'em's gone together," Moreland moaned.

"Was anything disturbed in the darkroom, or in the lounge?" Fred asked as he got into his trousers.

"Nothin' as I could see. Nothin' touched in the darkroom. But somethin's happened in this car. I feel it in my bones. This feller with the glasses—"

"Anderson?" Fred fumbled for the buttons on his shirt.

"Him," Moreland responded. "He's gone out. His berth's empty. I've looked all over hell for him, but he ain't on the train."

"Do the deputies know that?"

"I didn't find it out till they left to go phone." Conductor Moreland brushed a gnarled hand over his wrinkled brow. "I wouldn't a known it now only I come down the aisle an' brushed by his section an' the curtain parted an' he wasn't there.

Neither was his clothes. Right away I had a feelin'. So I got the porters an' the brakemen an' we started a search. He ain't in any washrooms or nowheres else on the train."

Fred stuffed his shirt-tail into his pants, rapidly knotted a tie around his neck, hurried out, getting into his coat.

"What we gonna do?" Moreland asked. "I got a feelin'—"

"Stall those deputies off," Fred whispered, "until I get a look at that guy's luggage. That is, if he hasn't taken that, too."

THE morning was dark with the threat of storm. Low clouds obscured the lofty peaks, pressed the ceiling down close on the valley. No air stirred, everything was sticky. The slightest physical effort brought perspiration.

The Pullman aisle was in deep shadow. Somebody snored behind the green curtains. No one stirred save Fred and the conductor.

Boyd Anderson's section, just ahead of the compartments, and toward the rear of the car, showed nothing out of the ordinary. It was evident that its occupant had dressed and left it without leaving behind any evidence of hurry or stress. There was a hand satchel on the foot of the bunk. It contained a toilet kit and immediately under that there were some shirts and underthings.

Fred thrust a hand along the inner lining of the bag and found the usual pocket. His fingers gripped some papers. The conductor stood nervously behind Fred, his worried eyes on the dark aisle.

"You better not do nothing," the skipper moaned in warning. "I don't like this. If them deputies come back an' find you—"

Fred jerked the papers out. There was only one letter—in a long envelope with an Indianapolis postmark. It had been mailed about a week before and was ad-

dressed in care of a national park at which the tour had stopped a few days back. He started to withdraw the enclosure when Moreland's hand jerked at his elbow.

"We got to get out of this," the conductor whispered urgently.

Fred hastily replaced the other papers, shoved the letter into his pocket and retreated to his own compartment. He could hear the deputies back in the corridor, fuming over the indignities one had suffered and threatening to clean up the whole train if necessary to find "that guy that done 'em dirty thataway."

Fred leaned against the inside of his door, took out the letter with trembling fingers and read the letterhead. It was neatly typed on stationery of a fiber-box manufacturer near Indianapolis, and the signature was in a bold scrawl—*Elwood P. Worthing, President.*

Dear Mr. Anderson:

I was glad to have your report of progress, but I must insist on concrete evidence. Especially since the demands have been so heavy and the health of two people so impaired. I realize that Lawton keeps himself well covered, and I appreciate the difficulties which surround you. Don't fail to telegraph if need be.

Fred's mouth was grim. He got out his passenger list from his file case and turned to the occupants of car CF-5—the Pullman in which he now was.

"Anderson, Boyd," he read hurriedly. "Age thirty-one, occupation architect." Fred frowned, he thought he knew now why Anderson merely carried his expensive camera and used a cheap fixed-focus thing. Anderson wasn't interested in cameras vocationally, as a hobby or otherwise.

Rapidly Fred's eyes went over the list. Grove, Lovick, Travis, Miss Markum, the others. Which was Lawton? What did the writer of that letter mean by "de-

mands," and what did he mean by "evidence?" What kind of evidence? He thought of the people who occupied the other cars—men in all types of activity. One was a doctor named Lawson, a rather queer individual who used an old-time view camera. But a man traveling under an alias would never make the phony name so close to his real one.

Then Fred suddenly stood erect. Boyd Anderson had followed this man Travis around pretty closely, had been friendly with both Travis and Lovick. Fred remembered the professorial Travis in the vestibule last night, just after he'd startled the shadowy photographer away from Edith Spencer's window. And Anderson had been near-by, too. He remembered how Anderson had appeared at the door while he, Fred, had been accusing Lovick in the latter's compartment.

He heaved a sigh. As soon as the sheriff came back Fred would tell him about this letter and—

The inward thrust on Fred's door almost knocked him into his berth. He whirled, stuffing the purloined letter into his coat pocket. One of the deputies confronted him with an angry gleam in his eyes.

"So here ya are!" The deputy dropped a heavy hand on Fred's shoulder.

"Where else did you think I'd be?" Fred snapped.

"With your girl friend," the deputy said nastily. "We got her. We been lookin—"

"Got who? Bea Wallace?" Fred had to swallow on that one.

"Red-handed," the deputy gloated. "Runnin' away from the scene of the crime. The dead man in the saloon sittin' at the table, an' her—"

"What man? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Anderson," the deputy said and drew a thumb across his throat. "Come along."

CHAPTER FOUR

Double Exposure

THE man who'd called himself Boyd Anderson, and who'd worn such thick lenses over his eyes, sat at a dusty table in the Latchstring Saloon. He sat on a broken chair with his body slumped over as if he were asleep. But the pool of blood on the table, the stark stillness of the arm that dangled down at his side, the grotesque position of the feet indicated violent death.

Sheriff Fanning turned slowly from the dead man to the staring group around him. Rain drove now against the rotten roof of the tumbling frame structure. Ever-deepening rumbles of thunder rolled out. At the door of the old saloon two deputies held back the curious rabble from the camera train.

The huddle about the dead man included Bea Wallace, the conductor, Fred Gale and Doctor Travis. The sheriff, returning early to resume his investigation into the death of Gerald Lovick, had arrived just as the deputies were dragging Bea to the train.

"Seems mighty peculiar, Miss Wallace," the sheriff said worriedly, "that you've got to be the one that finds all these dead men."

"I was with Mr. Potts, the guide," Bea answered with some heat. "I couldn't sleep. I got up early and thought I'd look this ghost town over. Mr. Potts was standing near the train and I asked him if he was a guide. I told him I was ready to see the sights."

"That's jes' what she said," the guide agreed, chewing at the ends of his mustache.

"And you, Gale." The sheriff turned to Fred. "You were asleep in your car. You didn't hear anything, didn't know anything about this until the deputy came after you?"

"I knew nothing about it," Fred answered. There was nothing kindly about this sheriff this morning. Something hard and relentless was in his stare now.

Fred thought suddenly of the letter in his pocket—the letter he had removed from the murder victim's luggage such a short time ago. How would he explain this to the sheriff, to that other man, Heath, who had not yet come back to the scene of the crimes?

If they found that letter on him, took him in, even as a suspect, it would be good-by to his job, the end of everything he had been trying to build.

He'd have to get that letter back into the murdered man's luggage somehow, as soon as possible, and let the sheriff discover it there. Then the sheriff could do as he pleased about it.

"How do I know that you and Miss Wallace ain't lying to me now?" the sheriff demanded suddenly, taking a step closer to Fred. "You lied last night. Lied about how you happened to find this Lovick's body. Lied—"

"We explained the circumstances to Heath—"

"Maybe you lied again," the sheriff said sharply. "We'll find out." he turned to the medical examiner who was just rising from beside the dead man.

"When'd it happen, doc?"

"Between two and three o'clock this morning," the medico answered promptly.

"Two and three?" The sheriff's small eyes widened. "Not long after Heath and I went back to town—back to Silver Creek. That deputy that was slugged in the lounge—he said he'd looked at his watch about a quarter to three. He said it must have been just a few minutes later that he got it on the head. He was sitting with his back to the darkroom corridor. He didn't hear nobody approach."

"Might possibly have been the murderer who cracked him," the doctor ad-

mitted. "Might very well have been right before this man's throat was cut or right after."

Fred felt his pulses pound as an idea began to take form. He opened his mouth to voice the beginning of it to the sheriff, then closed his lips before he spoke—closed his lips and narrowed his eyes and glanced down at the thing on the floor—the small convex strip that looked like celluloid. But it wasn't celluloid. It was close to the table-leg, close to where he himself stood. He could reach it with his foot. He could stoop over and pick it up. If it happened to be what he thought it was—

He picked it up when the sheriff turned to confer again with the doctor, and nobody noticed his movement. His fingers closed over the scrap of broken fingernail, felt the sharp irregular edge on one side. With fingers trembling violently he thrust it into his pocket and kept his hand there. His thoughts by now were seething.

As soon as Heath, the weary-looking detective, came back from the county seat Fred would mention this matter, bring it up in such a way that it wouldn't involve him. First, however, he had to get the dead man's letter back in that bag.

A DEPUTY came in just then with a sheaf of papers in his hands and Fred's heart sank. He recognized the papers that had been in Anderson's bag.

"We turned his section inside out," the deputy said hurriedly. "Nothin' but these things an' they ain't worth much. Some figgers on the back of a time-table that might mean anything. A hotel folder, an' a coupla booklets he musta picked up at places where the train stopped. No letters or personal papers."

"And nothing in his wallet," the sheriff grumbled, "but his railroad ticket. A few bills. No cards, no nothing." The sheriff pursed his lips, expelled air sharp-

ly, turned again to Fred. "What dope have you got on him?"

"You mean—"

"I mean just what I said," the sheriff snapped. "You got his address, or anything about him on file—"

"His address, his occupation," Fred retorted. "He gave that as architect. How a man with lenses as thick as that—"

"Hey! Look here!" The doctor came over to the sheriff with Anderson's glasses in his fingers.

"What?" the sheriff bawled.

Bea pressed closer to Fred as they stared.

"Fake," the doctor crowed. "Look!" He put the glasses on. "The way you look at me it looks like I was nearsighted too. Only the way I look at you—I can see perfectly as long as I look right through the center of the lenses. If I turn my eyes to look sideways—"

"That's—that's why Mr. Anderson always looked like he had a stiff neck," Bea Wallace said suddenly. She turned to Fred. "Remember? When he looked at you he always turned so he faced you fully."

"I remember," Fred said.

"Did you just happen to think of that, Miss Wallace?" the sheriff asked. "Or did you know?"

"What do you mean?" Bea asked indignantly.

"You heard my question."

"I knew nothing about this man except he was very awkward with a camera, and asked a lot of annoying questions about exposure meters and other things. He seemed to be friendly with Mr. Lick. More than that I can't tell you."

"You mean you can but you won't." The sheriff turned his back on her and Fred saw the red spots burn in her cheeks, the flame suddenly come up and then die down in her eyes.

Doctor Travis turned to them and shook his head. The sheriff seemed sud-

denly to remember the professor's presence.

"You, Travis," the sheriff snapped. "Your section is across the aisle from this man's in that Pullman."

"Yes."

"Did you ever notice anything peculiar about Anderson?"

"No."

"When'd you last see him? Last night—or this morning?"

"When you told us to retire. It must've been close to two. We'd all been in the lounge answering questions."

"Did this Anderson retire when you did?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say. He crawled in between his curtains. He said good-night to me. I lay down after I undressed—or rather got my robe off—and tried to sleep. I couldn't. So I read a little."

"You didn't hear Anderson get up or go out?"

"No, indeed. I was asleep in a very little while."

"Go back to the train. The lot of you." The sheriff was restless, ill at ease. "And don't leave it unless—"

"Sheriff," Fred said suddenly, "I'd like permission to telephone. After all I'm an officer of this railroad. I have a report to make. If you'll allow me."

"Go telephone," the sheriff snapped. "And be on that car when I want you. I'm going to sift this thing out and I'm going to make quick business of it."

Fred didn't hurry. He looked over this great bare room with its old broken tables and the faded mirror back of the bar. That mirror had witnessed a murder. There were empty bottles of three generations ago neatly placed on the bar, giving it a semblance of reality. A muslin banner above the bar advertising a beer brand that no one in this age ever heard of. The old cigar case. The whole place looked as if only yesterday the mechanical piano in the back might have

been playing, dance-hall gals in their billowing, below-the-knee furbelows doing their stuff, and the miners coming up from the gulch to get drunk.

Fred photographed the scene of this startling development in his mind as he might have photographed it on a film.

"Are you gonna go an' get out of here?"

It was the sheriff who spurred him to action. He hurried to the depot with lead in his heart and that stolen letter burning in his pocket.

THE railroad telephone, while a company circuit, was arranged so that at Silver Creek, the county seat down on the main line, it could be plugged into the commercial line and give a continuous connection.

The instrument was in a booth, and Fred crouched over the mouthpiece and closed the door. He glanced furtively behind him as he got the long-distance operator and requested a rush call to that fiber-box factory near Indianapolis. He demanded Mr. Elwood P. Worthing in person.

It took five minutes. His heart was pounding at his ribs and his throat was incredibly dry. He swallowed and found it difficult. Then a pleasant voice was saying: "Here's your party, Mr. Gale. Go ahead, please."

Fred quickly told the distant voice who he was and where he was and Mr. Worthing distantly said: "Yes?"

"A Mr. Boyd Anderson," Fred rushed on, "a passenger, has been murdered. The only thing on his person was a letter from you. I assume he was a detective—"

"Murdered, did you say?" The voice seemed to break.

"Yes."

"It was Lawton," the voice cried sharply. "It must have been."

"We have nobody by that name. Can

you give me a description of him?"

"Man about forty-five," the voice answered. "Pleasant appearance. Like a successful salesman. Slender, well-dressed."

"Would he be likely to travel under the name of Lovick?" Fred asked breathlessly. The palms of his hands oozed perspiration as he pressed the receiver to his ear.

"I don't know. He would likely be around any wealthy young women you might have aboard."

"He's dead, too," Fred snapped. "Knifed last night about ten."

"Thank God." The voice breathed it like a prayer.

"What about him? Who is he?" Fred felt as if he would suffocate in this cramped and airless booth. The perspiration ran down his face.

"A blackmailer of the worst kind," the voice replied. "Got pictures of women nude or half nude. Had cameramen planted around where compromising pictures might be shot of wealthy young women or old women who might be indiscreet at a drinking party or something like that. He made up licentious picture layouts then gave the husband or father, who couldn't afford scandal, a chance to buy the negatives which he said he could sell to customers—to private collectors. My daughter was caught on a theatrical crowd's beach party. She'd had a little too much to drink. The pictures—well, I paid twenty thousand for them. Then I hired a private detective named Harold Boyd—your Boyd Anderson—to track this man down and nail him. Now you say he's dead—"

Fred was suddenly aware of someone standing outside the booth. A glance over his shoulder and he saw a deputy gazing in at him.

"I'll call you later with any information I have," Fred said lowering his voice. "Thanks for the help."

He hung up and went out, wringing wet with sweat, under the suspicious eyes of the deputy.

CHAPTER FIVE

End of the Roll

FRED'S first opportunity to be alone with Bea Wallace didn't come until long after luncheon was served on the diner. From the moment he left the telephone booth until lunch was over his mind had been milling over the information the strange voice from Indianapolis had given him. He had sought Bea at once only to find that the sheriff had her closeted in a compartment.

Twice during the morning Fred had been tempted to go to the sheriff with his information about the two dead men, and each time fear of what the sheriff would do to him deterred him. He was too heavily under suspicion himself.

There was something that, sooner or later, he wanted to tell Bea Wallace. But a man couldn't say things like that to a woman under such parlous circumstances.

Fred felt he had the inside track to a solution of the crimes, but what to do was a puzzle. Suppose he told the sheriff of his discoveries only to find that the person who killed Lovick was some respectable passenger who was being blackmailed and had every right to kill him?

And what about the man who called himself Anderson? There was the snag. It was conceivable that Mrs. Spencer, whose very lovely and attractive daughter undoubtedly had been photographed disrobing in her Pullman section, could have stabbed Lovick to prevent him from bleeding her as he had bled this fiber-box manufacturer. But why should Mrs. Spencer want to kill Anderson, too? Anderson, of course, might have been a confederate, could very easily have been working with Lovick all the time, selling his client out.

Then this quiet, scholarly professor, Doctor Travis. According to the information Fred had, Travis was married. Whether he had children, Fred didn't know. Travis might very well be a victim. Certainly Travis had been in the darkroom sometime before Lovick was murdered. Was it possible that Lovick had arranged to meet Travis in that darkroom to bleed him, only to have Travis poised and ready, waiting for him?

Bea Wallace—the thought caused a tremor to run through him. A successful young interior decorator with a select clientele among Chicago's upper crust, it was perfectly possible she was one of Lovick's victims.

After luncheon when he stopped her near his own section in the ill-fated car, Bea said: "We'd better not—talk, Fred. That deputy behind us. He's watching every move I make. And they're watching you, too."

"But I've got to talk," Fred almost whispered. "I've got to talk to you—"

"I can't take much more of this, Fred. For two hours they had me in that hot, stuffy compartment. They tried everything in their power to make me admit that Lovick made a pass at me, that you were jealous and took that knife—"

"It's about Lovick that I want to ask you, too."

"I don't want to hear his name."

"But you've got to listen, Bea—"

"I tell you I can't stand it! They even had it all written out for me to sign. But I stuck to my guns. And I did find out a couple of things from what the deputies and the sheriff said to each other."

"What?"

"That they haven't been able to find out anything about Lovick. They wired Chicago, evidently to trace relatives, and there wasn't anybody at the address you had on your records named Lovick."

"Bea, listen! Did Lovick ever really make any passes at you?"

She met his eyes steadily. "Aside from begging me to pose in the nude for him, no."

"When did he make this suggestion?" Fred pressed hurriedly.

"At the first national park we stopped in. He paired off with me, got to talking about beauty in photography, steered me into a secluded dell and suggested I'd make a wonderful subject. I laughed at him."

"That's all?"

"What's the trouble, Fred. You act like—"

"Bea, Lovick was a criminal of the most dangerous type," Fred said under his breath. The deputy was approaching them. "I know who he was. He got a couple pictures of you that we both know about. I hope there weren't any others—"

"Fred, are you inferring that I might have posed—"

"My God, no." Then with a surprising change in his tone, "Maybe they'll let us take this train back to the main line at Silver Creek by tomorrow."

"I'd like to get away from here." Bea picked up the cue. The deputy was at her shoulder blade, ears cocked, eyes suspicious.

FRED found an opportunity to get back to the telephone later and called the Silver Creek station agent.

"What you fellers got up there at the ghost town, anyhow?" the agent asked. "Must be carryin' a lot of people that ain't what they seem."

"How's that?" Fred queried casually, but his heart was pumping again.

"Got a wire here from Chicago authorities that they can't find trace of anybody by the name of Lovick, or Boyd Anderson, or Doctor Travis. Ain't even any such college as the one they gave in the telegram they sent to Chicago."

"Maybe it's like some people who go to hotels and don't give their right names,"

Fred said. "You sure about the professor?"

"Dead sure. The sheriff was just in here an' got the telegram an' now he's tryin' to get hold of Heath."

"Where is Heath?"

"Went to the state capital first thing this morning on Number Seven. Said he'd be back on Eighteen, but he ain't back, an' now there ain't another train until seven twenty tonight."

"Who is this Heath? Some local dick?"

Fred's voice remained casual.

"Local? Hell, no. We don't have any dicks here. I got a hunch he's a federal man. Listen, I got a wire here from your chief."

"Good Lord!" Fred breathed.

"He apparently's read the papers. The sheriff's given out a hot yarn here. Your boss says—"

"Don't tell me," Fred blurted. "I can't take it."

"It's your job—not mine," the agent answered.

FRED thrust his fingers into his pocket found that broken fingernail. He pulled it out and looked at it. All afternoon he'd been trying to study fingerails of various passengers and had had no opportunity.

He went back to the train, returned to his own car. The first person he saw was Travis.

He shot a quick glance at Travis' nails and sucked in breath. Two on the right hand were shorter than the others and there was a scratch on the third finger. Travis had applied a bit of iodine to it.

"Haven't we had just about enough of this?" Travis asked wearily. "Two murders—" He shrugged his shoulders.

The porter appeared at the curtained doorway of the smoking-room and beckoned to Fred. He got up and went over.

"Miss Wallace, suh," the porter whispered very confidentially. "She say tell

you please come to de dahkroom, suh?"

Fred nodded and hurried toward the rear. It was the dinner hour, and passengers were beginning to go to the diner.

From the corridor as he entered the hind car, Fred could see a grim deputy planted in a deep leather chair engrossed in a book of photographic nudes. Fred let himself into the darkroom without disturbing the deputy's meditations.

Bea was alone under the ruby lamp at the far end, over a tray of prints. Her eyes were accustomed to the gloom, and when she turned she saw Fred approach.

"Maybe," she whispered, "we'll be safe here for a moment. There was one more thing I had to tell you, Fred. Something I picked up from that inquisition they put me through."

"What's that?" He felt his pulses pound again. She was very close to him, looking up at him.

"They're trying their best to get us both. That knife in here with your fingerprints, and then the razor they found—"

"Razor?" Fred swallowed.

"Used on Anderson," Bea said.

"Don't tell me it was mine," Fred whispered hoarsely.

"No. Doctor Travis's, but they think you—we used it."

Fred's fingers closed around her wrists. "I've seen that razor—the old-fashioned kind—"

"The sheriff knows—or rather somebody told him—you were peeping in windows last night, Fred."

"Travis," Fred breathed. "He saw—I wasn't peeping. He must—"

Fred broke off. He was standing now so that he looked over Bea's shoulder, looked down on that tray of prints. Prints of the shots she'd made inside the Latch-string Saloon shortly after the train's arrival the afternoon of the day before.

That picture there of the bar with Tolver Potts in his ten-gallon hat standing up under the muslin beer sign.

His heart turned over. Without knowing it he pushed Bea Wallace aside, bent over the tray picked up one of the prints. There was a burst of light in his mind. That sign above the bar! He closed his eyes and could see exactly how that sign had hung over the mirror this morning, after the discovery of the dead man. And the mirror had reflected the scene of the murder—even in the darkness—

"What is it?" Bea asked anxiously, peering down at the print he held.

"Nothing," he choked. "Listen, Bea. I've got to get to the diner. Do me a favor if you can. Corral those deputies or get them into a conversation or do something to keep them busy for the half-hour or so after dinner. Will you?"

"Why, Fred?"

"I want to find out something," was all he would trust himself to tell her.

THREE deputies guarded the train, kept an eye on the passengers although they knew that escape was impossible. Fred had taken a vacant place at the table with Mrs. Spencer, her daughter Edith and Richard Grove.

The meal had seemed endless, the courses dragged, even though Grove, an exceptional conversationalist, did his best to make Mrs. Spencer forget the indignities which she seemed so much to resent.

"Holding us here as if we were criminals! The idea! They've no right, have they, Mr. Grove? You're an attorney. You ought to tell them the law."

"Criminals? There must be one aboard, Mrs. Spencer. Wouldn't you think so, Mr. Gale? Especially since two of our company no longer sit at the festive board. Queer how those two sat together at that little table over there. An odd pair, I often remarked. Poor little Anderson with his awkwardness and his annoying questions about cameras and shots and angles and apertures."

Fred glanced at the empty table and

then at the various groups about him and at fingernails galore. The rain had stopped but fog pressed down heavily over the ghost town and the murder train.

Finally there was coffee and desert, then, the three deputies came filing in for their food, with Bea Wallace leading them. Fred's fingers trembled as he left the diner, walked back to his own car.

With approaching twilight in this high country, and the fog becoming more and more impenetrable, it was fairly easy for Fred to drop unobserved from the open vestibule of his own car and be immediately swallowed up in that gray shroud.

He couldn't see six yards in any direction as he proceeded slowly, groping for the rotten wooden sidewalk that led along that old main street and those tumbling store fronts.

Suddenly he stopped and his heart seemed to stop with him. He held his breath and listened. There had been some indefinable sound behind him. He waited for a long moment. It was getting darker. He could see nothing. And he could hear nothing now but the drip of water from some nearby eave.

He moved a head a few paces, stopped again, retraced his steps. Damn the fog! He was jittery. But within five minutes he would be back on the train, never having been missed, with what he hoped would be full evidence to present to Heath and Sheriff Fanning—the things that had been taken from Gerald Lovick's compartment.

In that old saloon, somewhere close by, somewhere handy, were the prints and perhaps papers that the killer had removed from Gerald Lovick's compartment. Fearing that the train might be searched the killer had watched his opportunity to get the incriminating stuff out of the car, and Boyd Anderson had followed him. And Anderson had died horribly.

The thought of it stopped Fred in his tracks. A queer chill constricted his

throat. Once more he listened and peered into the fog at his back. And then he was at the door of the Latchstring, and going inside.

The darkness was thick. There was a drip of water somewhere near the bar. He could see only vague shapes that were tables and chairs and the bar itself. But in his mind he was seeing something else—the picture Bea Wallace's lens had recorded of this place late the previous afternoon with Tolliver Potts at the bar and the sign above his head. And he was seeing the picture as his mind had photographed it this morning.

His fingers were working feverishly as he felt for a chair and then groped his way behind the bar. Fred clicked alight a small pocket torch. The chair wobbled with him as he raised himself. He stepped up on the back-bar with its rows of bottles. The beer sign, smelling of dust, brushed his chin. The dust got into his nostrils and he sneezed.

He reached a cautious hand up under the sign. Another hand—the killer's—had gone up here before him, in the black hours of the morning, and had pulled the center tack loose that had held the old muslin sign to the fancy scroll work above the bar.

In Bea Wallace's print that sign had been neatly in place, well secured along the top with thumb tacks, but this morning the sign appeared to have been mussed up and that missing central tack had let it sag. A little thing to notice, maybe, but—

A PIECE of the carving moved under Fred's touch. It was loose on its supporting base. It almost fell and in grabbing for it another thumbtack popped out.

Fred held on to it and explored the dusty space back of the scroll that formed the overhang above the mirror.

His fingers touched stiff paper—a

manila envelope. He drew it toward him, standing almost on tiptoe. Only a tall man could ever have managed to reach this place.

The envelope was well stuffed. Feverishly his fingers pried open the little metal catch. Photographic prints—many of them—and rolls of film. He could feel the bulk of them.

He had to get to the telephone first, call the sheriff, then back to the train to sit on this stuff until—

Fred stifled an involuntary cry. His flash beam, tilting down, glinted on polished steel—the blade of an old-fashioned razor held firmly in strong fingers. Doctor Travis' razor and—

Suddenly a dim shape charged toward him and Fred knew that death was close—a horrible bleeding death from a slashed throat.

The flashlight fell to the floor and died from a broken bulb as Fred, with a cry, twisted backward desperately and toppled from the backbar. He plunged in close against his assailant's ankles, head down, breath stilled.

The killer, caught by surprise, fell heavily and Fred squirmed quickly out from under the threshing figure. The blade, still set for deadly action, was clenched in the hand of the man as he came up snarling.

Fred knew close fighting would give all the odds to the unknown. He reached for an empty bottle and hurled it. It was too dark now to see distinctly. The bottle missed and somewhere window glass shattered and then the killer plunged in again.

Fred got his head out of the way and the slashing razor ripped his coat, stung into his flesh. He kicked viciously at the man's shins, tried to find the groin, broke away again and once more reached out for a bottle.

Then his foot caught onto something and he fell with one leg twisted back under

him. A loose board tipped up and prodded his back, and the killer drove a knee into Fred's stomach. With his left hand Fred reached for and got the other's wrist and closed his fingers over it while he fought to recover the wind that knee had driven from him. The loose board that had tripped him, cut into his side and he squirmed away from it, closed his right hand over it.

The killer was clawing at his throat when Fred set himself to swing. The air in his windpipe was cut off. Strange things danced before his eyes. All strength was going from him. The board weighed a ton and he couldn't lift it, and the killer's razor hand was twisting out of his grip.

Sweat from the killer's face dripped down on his own.

He clenched his teeth, tried to suck in air and couldn't. He heaved and swung and somehow got the broken board around. And suddenly there wasn't any grip on his throat and the hand he'd been gripping tore free. That meant the razor would be swinging in a slashing downward arc—

He closed his eyes and there was an explosion that seemed to shake the room. A weight closed down on his chest.

Someone was crying brokenly: "Fred! Oh, Fred—"

He had just enough consciousness left to know that he was being kissed. So he didn't move. He just lay there wondering. He didn't move until someone dashed a tub full of water over him.

He didn't mind that now. He felt pretty swell.

THEY carried him over to the Pullman. The pain in that leg that he'd turned under him was pretty terrific. He heard Heath saying: "I don't think he broke it. Just a sprain. You deputies look after that other man. He's just winged. I'll talk to him first then I'll be in and see Gale."

Fred passed out before they reached the train and when he began to recognize things again Bea Wallace sat by the berth in the empty compartment that they'd fixed for him, and Heath frowned down at him.

The doctor who was a passenger in one of the forward cars said: "He'll be all right now. He'll have to stay off that leg and have good care—"

Bea said, "He'll get good care all right," and smiled and nodded at Heath.

"Are you still going to hold out on me?" Heath said.

"I wasn't holding out. In fact I was on my way to telephone you when—when he jumped me," Fred said.

"Well, he almost finished you, and if he had done so it would have been your own fault. I got what I wanted out of him. He's pretty badly wounded, too. So now maybe you'll tell me things."

Fred told about the letter he'd found in Anderson's bag, his telephone call to Indianapolis, the broken fingernail. "At first," he said, "I thought it was Anderson and Lovick working together. Then I started looking at fingernails to see where the broken one might match. It was a man's nail with a slight ridge in it. I didn't pass up anybody but the porter. But there were too many freshly filed nails to indicate anything definite.

"I knew that whoever knifed Lovick, or Lawton, or whatever his name was, rolled me down that gulch and slit Anderson's throat. He had plenty to hide. Anderson was a private dick, trailing Lovick for blackmail evidence. Anderson knew that Lovick had certain photographic prints that couldn't be just hidden away somewhere or burned conveniently. Certainly they couldn't be hidden on the train, and the killer had to have those prints because there was something in them that would incriminate him. Anderson watched to see who would leave the car after the

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inquiry there in the lounge. Prior to that time Richard Grove had had no chance. The body had been discovered immediately.

"Anderson saw the killer leave, followed to see what he would do. He discovered the secret of that niche behind the bar mirror and failed to live to tell of it.

"If Grove hadn't been in such a hurry and had put that sign back like he found it—

"The knife used on Lovick, of course, was the paperknife used in the darkroom to open the sealed sensitized paper, and to cut strips. My fingerprints were on it, naturally, as I had used it often. Just why Grove had to kill Lovick—well, I'm afraid that's something you'll have to explain to me."

Heath smiled widely. "Simple. Grove was Lovick's partner in this blackmailing venture. They knew that a train of this kind, a tour of this kind, would attract only very wealthy people. It was a rare chance to get an exceptional lot of material. They got some choice things all right. The best shots were those of the Spencer girl undressing. No strip-tease act in burlesque was ever more perfect. The only trouble was that Grove fell for the Spencer girl and he and Lovick had a disagreement about it. Grove was determined that the Spencer girl be left out, and Lovick had things fixed so that he could expose Grove without running any danger to himself.

"Grove decided to wipe Lovick out, bury all evidence, until things blew over. Only—well, you know what happened. Now, young man, you look pretty tired. And the doctor said you had to have excellent care." He smiled at Bea. "I think you've got it now, all right."

Fred Gale didn't have to think anything about it.

He knew it.

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Pick one that is published *every month*, and you can't go wrong!

On the newsstands today only forty-one all-fiction magazines appear regularly every month. Against this number, crowding in from all sides, are one hundred and fifteen bi-monthlies, quarterlies, semi-annuals and "one-shots" (those fly-by-night publications that are so unsure of their reader appeal that they don't even hope to sell more than one issue).

Every one of those hundred and fifteen magazines would be published as monthlies, if enough readers would buy them. Publishers are in the business to make money, and twelve issues a year are going to bring in more money than six, four, two or one—if the reading public thinks the magazine is worth buying.

When you buy a copy of a monthly magazine, you are buying a sure, proved product. You are protecting yourself against speculators in the publishing business who are trying to palm off a second-rate article. You sit down to an evening of reading entertainment with the certainty that you will not be disappointed.

On the cover and contents page of this magazine, you see printed the word, "November." If it were dated "October-November" or "Fall Issue" or some such, you would know immediately that it was not a monthly—and you would know that you could find better fiction elsewhere.

An inside tip to the wise: Look twice before you buy—watch for the monthly dating . . . and you can be sure of fiction you *know* is good!

THE EDITOR.

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IT'S been a profitable summer for the great fraternity of those who live by their wits—and a costly one for the rest of us, the lambs who got sheared by the wolves at our doors—if the flood of mail that's been descending on this department the last few weeks is any indication.

The saddest part of it all lies in the countless "repeats", tales of petty swindles and rackets that are worked over and over again, many of which have been exposed in these pages. If there is room in the next issue we plan to run a brief index of the various chisel games that we have mentioned during the past year, with a brief descriptive sentence sufficient to identify it and serve as a warning. It'll be worth while to keep it handily on file—for your protection and as a reference when you feel prompted to write us about some racket in order that you won't duplicate one that has already been printed.

Here's one we haven't exposed before. You don't have to be a cashier in a store or restaurant to be caught by it, though such folk are more apt to be signaled out for an easy-money artist's attention.

Pittsburgh, Pa.

Things had been breaking pretty tough for a friend of mine a short time back. He just couldn't seem to connect with a position of any kind. He had saved a few dollars but did not like the idea of being idle. So a couple of us boys induced him to open a small cafe in the neighbourhood.

I usually stopped in of a Saturday morning to spend an hour or so and maybe a few nickels just to keep him company. The last time I was there a peculiar situation arose.

My friend, taking some bills out of the register to pay for an order which had just

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Ready for the Rackets

arrived, was straightening the money out face up (like they do in the bank before they count it) and there right before our eyes is a trick bill. Good United States money but not true, for on one side it reads *Ten Dollars*, then contradicts itself. On the other side there is just a good old *One Dollar* sign on all four corners, facsimile of which you have right in your pocket at the present time—if you are lucky. And if you look carefully I'll bet it reads the same on both sides.

Odd for a while till we see on one corner where the "Face" is slipping away from the "Back". Then it comes to us. The "Money Maker" split a one dollar bill right in two. Same with a ten. Sticking the face of one bill to the back of the other and vice versa, he has two bills, each reading ten dollars on one side and one dollar on the other side. He shoves the bill over the counter with the ten-dollar side up and gets change for ten. In this manner he gets twenty dollars where he had only eleven before. This stunt is probably worked more with a five instead of a ten as people are less suspicious about a smaller bill, and in the smaller business houses where the person behind the counter is not quite so alert.

It is surprising to note how many people put bills in their cash register without turning them over.

Yours very truly,
Police Reporter.

Our correspondent sent us a sample corner of a one-dollar bill, neatly peeled into two parts, just to prove how feasible the trick is. Form the habit of looking at both sides of folding-money. It only takes a second to turn a bill over and you may be glad you took the trouble.

AND this one, particularly interesting to small-town businessmen, though we have heard of exactly the same scheme being worked on a large New York wholesale house which was up for sale. The only difference was that the supplementary trimmings were more elaborate in the latter case with several slick crooks handling the deal for the prospective "purchaser" and with a much larger stake at hand.

Mount Vernon, Ill.

In a small city of 14,000 my photographic and gift shop was not making the money it should. Another better proposition presented itself so I tried to find a cash buyer.

I had finally given up the idea I would

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ever find a buyer when, miraculously, came what seemed to be the answer to all my hopes. One morning while I was very busy, a very impressive, but not blustering, gentleman asked to see me.

He introduced himself as an agent for the "Blaine Co., Chicago, Ill., Dealers in businesses of all types". This heading was on embossed pamphlets and contract sheets which he extracted from his brief case, and these few sheets of business-like printed matter side-tracked any wariness I might have developed.

His company, he explained, would guarantee to sell my business at my price within 60 days for a fee of \$40. If at the end of that time they had found a buyer, I was to pay them \$40. But if they failed to sell the business for me they would charge nothing. Of course, he explained, as a guarantee of my good faith and a guarantee that his company would be the only agency allowed to complete a sale within the 60 days, I would be required to let them hold my check for \$40, which would be returned if they failed. This was all properly included in the printed contract. On first thought I could lose nothing—their selling fee could be included in the sale price.

In my haste to return to my unfinished work, I hurriedly wrote a check and signed the contracts, one of which I kept. Returning to my work, I had time to ponder the details. Suddenly I put on my hat and coat and hurried to the bank, two blocks away.

"Did anyone cash a check on me for \$40?" I asked the cashier.

"Why, yes, about a half hour ago. Anything wrong?"

"Oh, no," I replied, "I was just wondering."

And for the first time I wondered how he found out I was trying to sell. As it was too late to do anything about it at the bank, I didn't want to advertise my foolishness. But, out of curiosity, I did write in to the "Blaine Company" and, of course, my letter was returned, marked *No such addressee*. And, so, another slap in the face had to be charged up to an oily tongue, some impressive papers, and experience.

Sincerely yours,
L. P.

Haste almost invariably makes waste in any transaction where money changes hands. It always pays to read contracts before signing or have them gone over by a competent lawyer. Don't try to be your own attorney. You're very apt to be sorry.

THE following swindle seems to have moved East from Colorado. We heard of its being perpetrated in Iowa last

Ready for the Rackets

month. No doubt some smart-money lad will take it South for the winter season. Better watch out for it in the winter resort centers after the first of the year.

Denver, Colo.

If there were thought up as many honest ways of getting money as there are dishonest ones what a jolly old world this would be. At least that is the opinion of the Denver Police, who have incarcerated a man who posed as an "eye witness" to accidents, made fake affidavits, collected fees in the shape of donations to cover the expense to which he was put to appear at trial, and then vanished into thin air.

Reading the newspapers to obtain names and addresses of people involved in accidents, this man, dubbed the "phantom witness", would go to these people and claim to have been an eye witness to what had occurred. He would offer to appear as a witness in their behalf at trial, would make any required affidavit. He did not wish to be paid, he said, but would point out that to appear for the trial would cost him something as he lived out of town.

This "line" never failed. The persons involved in the accidents, believing him to be a legitimate witness whose account in court would help their case, would fork over money in amounts from one to five dollars. If these people sent him to their attorneys he usually got more. Lawyers, the perpetrator of this unique racket claimed, were easy marks.

He worked "both sides of the street", visiting both parties to the accidents he claimed to have witnessed, and according to the story he told the police, when he was finally arrested, he averaged six of these touches per day.

It is estimated that in the five months the phantom witness worked this racket he took in several thousand dollars.

Be on the lookout for repetitions of this racket in your city!

Very truly yours,
Nemo Nier.

We wouldn't feel so badly if it were only ambulance-chasing lawyers who fell for it but we're amazed that reputable attorneys fail to check unsolicited witnesses in such a foolhardy manner.

KITING checks from bank to bank is a racket so old it has whiskers but the following situation exhibits a new twist that bank clerks and tellers ought to watch for carefully.



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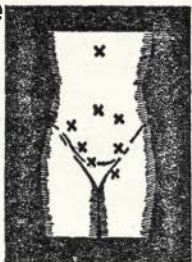
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Dime Detective Magazine

Vancouver, B. C. Canada.

I was paying teller at the Canadian Bank of Commerce at Toronto for several years, until I became incapacitated through an automobile accident. We had—as all banks do—suffered from the activities of crooks, but usually for comparatively small sums. However we occasionally would be victimized for a considerable amount.

I was pretty careful, knew most of the tricks tried on banks. But one fellow got under my guard by using a method that would catch most cashiers. We used to handle the payroll for quite a number of firms. One of these accounts was that of a small manufacturer—rather that was what his information card stated. He carried a small balance, and had only been with us a short time.

We knew nothing about him, as he hadn't approached us for any accommodation—so we had no occasion to get a rating on him.

Every bank has a number of accounts on which they lose money, the balance carried being so small as to be of no value, while they have to do the bookkeeping for nothing.

A bank, to make money has to have money to loan, as well as people to lend it to. Well! This alleged manufacturer was apparently financing himself . . . as all we did was to cash his cheques. His payroll amounted to about \$2500.00 every two weeks. I had got to know him as a customer by seeing him in the bank every day or so—as he generally came to my cage.

This chap, who went by the name of Clayton, used to draw money every other Saturday to pay his help—as was assumed—and would write a cheque for the amount required. He would then take it over to the ledger-keeper, get it marked, and present it for payment. He would, as is customary in such cases, have a notation on the back indicating how he wanted it.

The day he worked his stunt on me he came in shortly after we opened and followed his usual procedure—fell in behind the line which already stretched halfway to the door, this being the fifteenth of the month—always a busy day with us.

"Clayton," like many other people was careless in the manner in which he wrote his cheques, filling in the body of the cheque by starting at the left side—as is correct—but neglecting to draw a line through the balance of the blank space. This is quite safe, when cashing your own cheque at the bank, but is decidedly unwise if it should fall into the hands of an unscrupulous party.

It is not the business of the bank to point this out, as we have only to be concerned with the date—the amount shown—that the figures and the body of the cheque correspond, and of course that there are sufficient funds in the account.

Ready for the Rackets

I examined the cheque carefully. The date was correct. It called for \$2500.00. It was made payable to cash—with Clayton's signature at the bottom, and stamped *accepted*. It looked perfectly all right. I turned it over. He wanted it in—75 twenties—50 tens—200 fives—100 twos—100 ones—and the balance in silver.

I made up the amount called for as he wanted it, pushed the money through the wicket—stamped the cheque paid. And that was that! Just a detail in a busy morning.

At twelve forty-five the blow fell. The ledger-keeper concerned called me over.

"What do you know about this?" He had Clayton's cheque in his hand. Pointing to the account he said: "I certified a cheque on this account this morning for ten dollars, leaving a credit balance of seven dollars. How come \$2500.00?"

There was nothing for it but to see the manager. He examined the cheque with a magnifying glass, but could see nothing wrong with it. He reached for the telephone.

The police secured all the information in our possession—which wasn't much. While we were in the manager's office the telephone rang. It was the Royal Bank. They wanted to know if we knew anything about a man named Clayton. Our manager replied, "Yes about \$2500.00." "Same here!" answered the Royal. Inside of half an hour we heard that the Montreal and the Imperial Banks had been hooked as well.

It was five o'clock that night, before we got the complete lowdown. Clayton had opened accounts with the four banks within a week, drawing from one bank to deposit with the others, keeping the accounts active, and using the same tactics in each bank.

The day before the raid he had drawn and had certified four cheques for \$25.00 each, one on each bank in which he carried an account. He then raised the cheques to \$2500.00 each. On the Saturday he visited each bank, (he must have been kept on the jump), he wrote a cheque for ten dollars made payable to F. R. Ferguson, having it certified. Right there is where we fell down! He must then have switched the cheques, presenting the raised one to the respective paying tellers—with the notations on the back as was his custom.

The police went to the address given by him. He had rented a small building, had a telephone installed—a desk worth about two dollars, but there was no sign of machinery, workmen, or anything else. They traced him to his room. He had flown of course. A search of his room revealed nothing but a note addressed to the chief of police which read, *Have gone fishing*.

Yours truly,
V. H. Johnson.

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29x4.00-20	\$2.13	30x3.50-18	\$1.92	30x3.50-18	\$1.92	30x3.50-18	\$1.92
30x4.00-21	\$2.40	30x3.50-17	\$1.92	30x3.50-17	\$1.92	30x3.50-17	\$1.92
30x4.00-20	\$2.40	30x3.50-16	\$1.92	30x3.50-16	\$1.92	30x3.50-16	\$1.92
30x4.00-19	\$2.40	30x3.50-15	\$1.92	30x3.50-15	\$1.92	30x3.50-15	\$1.92
30x4.00-18	\$2.40	30x3.50-14	\$1.92	30x3.50-14	\$1.92	30x3.50-14	\$1.92
30x4.00-17	\$2.40	30x3.50-13	\$1.92	30x3.50-13	\$1.92	30x3.50-13	\$1.92
30x4.00-16	\$2.40	30x3.50-12	\$1.92	30x3.50-12	\$1.92	30x3.50-12	\$1.92
30x4.00-15	\$2.40	30x3.50-11	\$1.92	30x3.50-11	\$1.92	30x3.50-11	\$1.92
30x4.00-14	\$2.40	30x3.50-10	\$1.92	30x3.50-10	\$1.92	30x3.50-10	\$1.92
30x4.00-13	\$2.40	30x3.50-9	\$1.92	30x3.50-9	\$1.92	30x3.50-9	\$1.92
30x4.00-12	\$2.40	30x3.50-8	\$1.92	30x3.50-8	\$1.92	30x3.50-8	\$1.92
30x4.00-11	\$2.40	30x3.50-7	\$1.92	30x3.50-7	\$1.92	30x3.50-7	\$1.92
30x4.00-10	\$2.40	30x3.50-6	\$1.92	30x3.50-6	\$1.92	30x3.50-6	\$1.92
30x4.00-9	\$2.40	30x3.50-5	\$1.92	30x3.50-5	\$1.92	30x3.50-5	\$1.92
30x4.00-8	\$2.40	30x3.50-4	\$1.92	30x3.50-4	\$1.92	30x3.50-4	\$1.92
30x4.00-7	\$2.40	30x3.50-3	\$1.92	30x3.50-3	\$1.92	30x3.50-3	\$1.92
30x4.00-6	\$2.40	30x3.50-2	\$1.92	30x3.50-2	\$1.92	30x3.50-2	\$1.92
30x4.00-5	\$2.40	30x3.50-1	\$1.92	30x3.50-1	\$1.92	30x3.50-1	\$1.92

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Price	Size	Price
30x4.00-19	\$4.25	30x4.00-18	\$4.25
30x4.00-18	\$4.25	30x4.00-17	\$4.25
30x4.00-17	\$4.25	30x4.00-16	\$4.25
30x4.00-16	\$4.25	30x4.00-15	\$4.25
30x4.00-15	\$4.25	30x4.00-14	\$4.25
30x4.00-14	\$4.25	30x4.00-13	\$4.25
30x4.00-13	\$4.25	30x4.00-12	\$4.25
30x4.00-12	\$4.25	30x4.00-11	\$4.25
30x4.00-11	\$4.25	30x4.00-10	\$4.25
30x4.00-10	\$4.25	30x4.00-9	\$4.25
30x4.00-9	\$4.25	30x4.00-8	\$4.25
30x4.00-8	\$4.25	30x4.00-7	\$4.25
30x4.00-7	\$4.25	30x4.00-6	\$4.25
30x4.00-6	\$4.25	30x4.00-5	\$4.25
30x4.00-5	\$4.25	30x4.00-4	\$4.25
30x4.00-4	\$4.25	30x4.00-3	\$4.25
30x4.00-3	\$4.25	30x4.00-2	\$4.25
30x4.00-2	\$4.25	30x4.00-1	\$4.25

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Price	Size	Price
30x4.00-19	\$4.25	30x4.00-18	\$4.25
30x4.00-18	\$4.25	30x4.00-17	\$4.25
30x4.00-17	\$4.25	30x4.00-16	\$4.25
30x4.00-16	\$4.25	30x4.00-15	\$4.25
30x4.00-15	\$4.25	30x4.00-14	\$4.25
30x4.00-14	\$4.25	30x4.00-13	\$4.25
30x4.00-13	\$4.25	30x4.00-12	\$4.25
30x4.00-12	\$4.25	30x4.00-11	\$4.25
30x4.00-11	\$4.25	30x4.00-10	\$4.25
30x4.00-10	\$4.25	30x4.00-9	\$4.25
30x4.00-9	\$4.25	30x4.00-8	\$4.25
30x4.00-8	\$4.25	30x4.00-7	\$4.25
30x4.00-7	\$4.25	30x4.00-6	\$4.25
30x4.00-6	\$4.25	30x4.00-5	\$4.25
30x4.00-5	\$4.25	30x4.00-4	\$4.25
30x4.00-4	\$4.25	30x4.00-3	\$4.25
30x4.00-3	\$4.25	30x4.00-2	\$4.25
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