

JULY



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## **MAGAZINE**

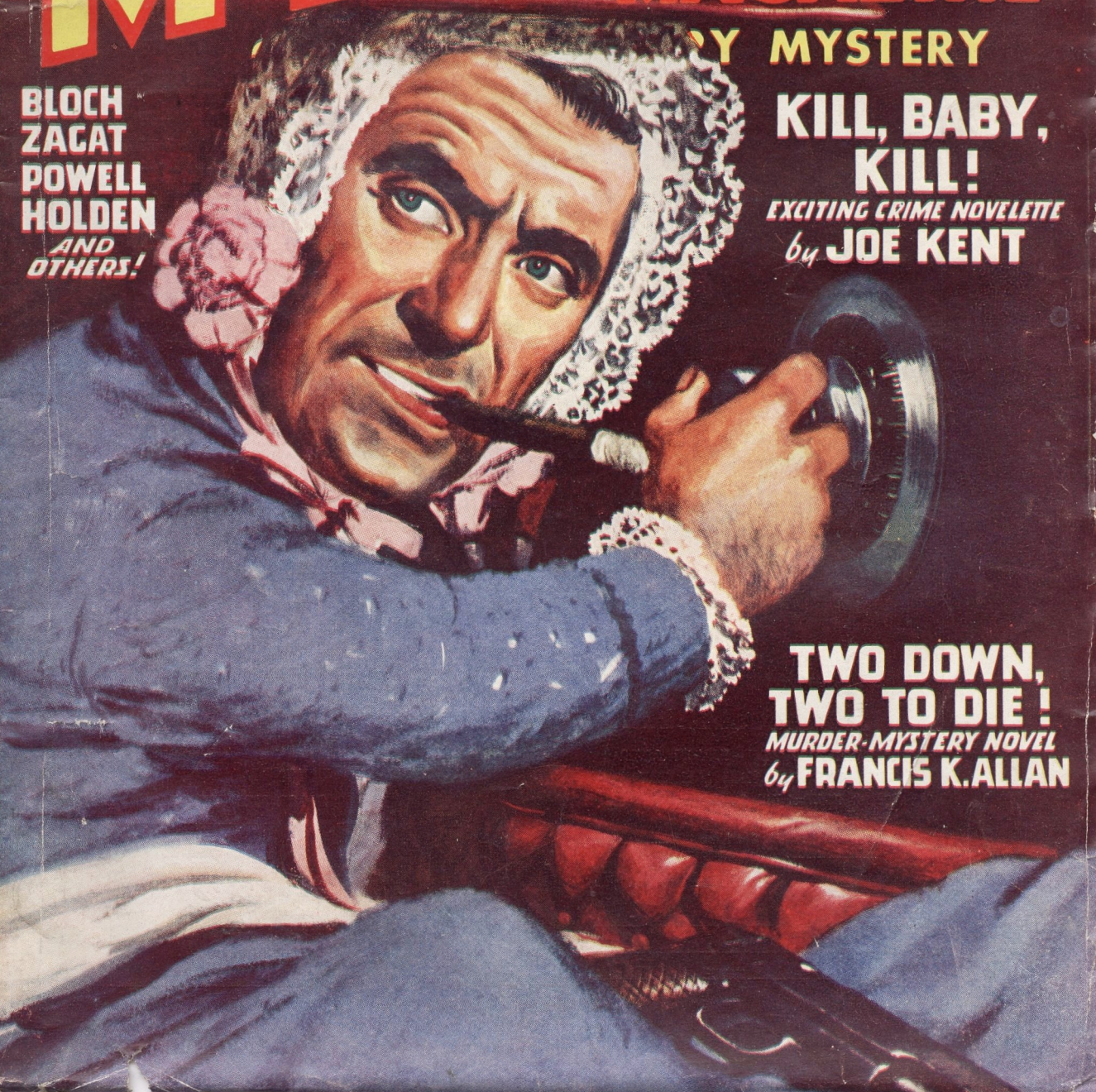
**BLOCH  
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AND  
OTHERS!**

**BY MYSTERY**

**KILL, BABY,  
KILL!**

*EXCITING CRIME NOVELETTE*

*by* **JOE KENT**



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TWO TO DIE!**  
*MURDER-MYSTERY NOVEL*  
*by* **FRANCIS K. ALLAN**

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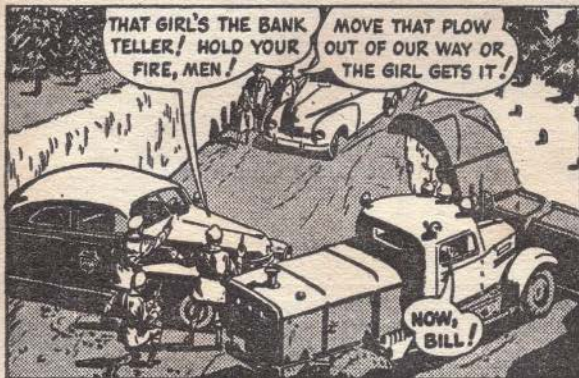
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SEPTEMBER ISSUE OUT JULY 3rd!

Volume 35

July, 1947

Number 1

**COMPELLING FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL**

**TWO DOWN, TWO TO DIE!**.....Francis K. Allan 6  
 In that headline-hungry world of roaring presses, newspaper tycoon Warren Grant would have sold the dead bodies of his daughters to the Devil—for a screaming, bloody banner!

**THREE POWERFUL CRIME-MYSTERY NOVELETTES**

**KILL, BABY, KILL!**.....Joe Kent 32  
 Somewhere in this mad, sky-piercing city of steel and concrete was that grinning incubus whose miniature arms delivered sudden death!

**A HEAD FOR HIS BIER!**.....Robert Bloch 52  
 "Think of it, Johnny. He's probably sitting in his room right now, admiring his collection. Bald, shriveled heads. . . Heads of young girls. . . The tiny heads of infants. . . All bobbing in their ghastly glass coffins. . ."

**RING AROUND ROSIE'S NECK.**.....Cyril Plunkett 82  
 How long could I keep my balance on that murderer's tightrope when I could feel those cold, dead fingers, dragging me to the killer's waiting hell?

**FOUR SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES**

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 Below the cliff the fat man lay, and Borden knew he must soon join him. . .

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 Every tick of his clock brought Pancho closer to the waiting reunion in terror!

—AND—

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**COVER—From a scene in "Kill, Baby, Kill!"**

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# TWO DOWN,

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

## CHAPTER ONE

### Picture Her Dead!

ONLY ONE more. One more for the road!" Chick said. "One more to the last day of freedom."

Joe tried to tell them no, but Jim was already filling the jiggers. One more for freedom, and one for the road. . . The words made a sing-song rhythm in his ears. He tried to see the clock at the far end of the bar. Six-twenty. But the clock was usually fifteen minutes fast. Make it six-five. Just one more. . .

He lifted his glass. Chick lifted his. And Webb, and gaunt-eyed Simmons. They drank to Joe's wedding tomorrow, and they drank to the days that were ending. For they *were* ending, Joe knew. He would still work at the *Star-Herald*. He would still come here with them. Somebody would tell about a blonde. Somebody would borrow three bucks. Somebody would load up on bourbon. And what the hell to tomorrow, I'll sell it for a dime.

All that was ending for him. Instead there would be Donna. There would somehow be the shadow of Donna's money, changing Joe. He knew the money was going to twist things. But not too much. Not with a girl like Donna, he thought swiftly. So here's to the road. . .

"I've got to go," he said. "I'll be too drunk to drive."

"Where are you driving?" Webb asked. Webb did the sports column.



# TWO TO DIE!



## Bizarre Murder- Mystery Novel

*From the roaring of the mighty presses in the basement, to the chrome-and-plush offices in the penthouse, was a headline-hungry world of power. . . . There, newspaper tycoon Warren Grant, would—and maybe did—sell the corpses of his daughters to the Devil, for a screaming bloody banner!*

The roar, the shattering of glass, and Donna's scream came all at once.

"Nowhere exactly. Upstate about thirty miles." Suddenly it seemed a little foolish. He didn't want to tell them, but Chick's blue eyes were sparkling at him.

"Got to tell another doll good-bye?" Chick was tough. He believed in nothing. Life was just a slow double-cross, he said. Spit in its eye, and make mine double-rye. "Another doll, Joe?" he asked again.

Joe would never have told them if he hadn't been drinking. "No, it's just . . . well, an idea of Donna's. I'm going up to the summer house they've got at Clearwood. It's closed, but I met Donna there. And Katherine, her sister, would have been married there if—" Joe stopped abruptly. His eyes darted to Simmons. The gaunt-faced man was staring at his empty glass.

"Go ahead, Joe," he said. "We all know. Kathy was murdered there the night before we were to be married. Keep talking."

"I—Sim, I swear I didn't think. She—It's just a kid-thing. Sentimental. Seems that one Christmas when the girls were little, they got to talking about when they would get married, and they made a promise to come back—tell each other about it—Oh, God, I didn't know how this was going to sound."

"Go on, Joe," Sim whispered. His face was gray. His lips were flat and bloodless. Joe was sweating and his throat felt thick.

"It's just this little-girl idea of Donna's. You know. Go up there to Kathy's old room tonight and . . . and tell her how happy she is and about her dress and ring and— I can't finish this," he choked.

Sim did not make a sound for almost a minute, then his hand opened and his glass crashed to the floor. He stared down, swallowed, then turned suddenly and stumbled out into the darkness of Third Avenue.

"God, I didn't think. Didn't remember when I started."

"Give me another drink, Jim," Chick said vacantly.

Joe mopped his lips. Everything was cold and ragged. Why didn't somebody say something?

**WEBB** STARTED to offer his glass, then drew it back. "Well, roses and kisses to you, kid," he said quietly. "I'm covering the Lakeside tournament tomorrow, so I won't be around to look ugly."

Then Joe was alone with Chick and they

were silent. "I guess I *will* have that last drink, Jim," Joe said. He felt sick inside at what he had done to Sim. Chick flexed his tough fingers, cracking his knuckles. Finally he shook his shoulders.

"Oh, bats. Sim would have made a lousy family-man, anyway. If he'd had any sense, he'd have committed suicide in grade school. I'm going to eat chop-suey and drink gin. Tell Donna good-bye for me. I looked at her twice myself, once." He squared his bow-tie and pulled down his broken hat. And that left Joe Marlin alone.

And he thought about it. Yes, after tonight he would always be alone in a way. Alone from Chick, the tough reporter. Alone from Webb, the dice-shooting sports writer. And from Sim, the best drunken crime reporter in New York. You couldn't marry the boss' daughter and play the same old games.

He looked at his lean face and black hair. His dark eyes were tired. He straightened his tie. "Good night, Jim."

Donna was waiting when he stopped the coupe in front of the Tower House on Park Avenue. The doorman smiled as he let her into the car, and Joe kissed her in the shadows. He kissed her again, and touched the soft gold of her hair. He wanted to hold her—hold her tightly against some fear that circled above in the night clouds.

"Oh, and somebody's been having a drink," Donna said. "And he didn't invite me."

"Just a couple with the boys. I . . . Charlie Simmons was there."

"Sim is so nice. I often— Oh." Just then she realized what Joe had not said. A moment of silence locked them; then swiftly she kissed him again. "I love you. So much I love you, Joe." It was as if she were clutching for something. Or hiding from something.

"I love you, darling." He started the car. The lights of Manhattan drifted off behind them. They followed the Hudson highway, and a quarter-moon climbed out of the dark horizon. Donna touched his hand.

"Thinking something you could tell me?"

"I was thinking." He took a deep breath. "Just thinking how I wish you were just like you are, but poor as Cinderella before the ball."

"I know how you feel. I know how Sim felt with Kathy. But Joe," she turned to



him swiftly, "remember the whole story. Dad isn't just a millionaire named Warren Grant, owner of the biggest-circulation tabloid newspaper in New York. He is also an ex-rewrite man. *He* married the boss' daughter, thirty years ago. He's hard and vindictive and sometimes I think he's brutal, but he's not phony. He'll give you a square deal. Or we can move along. You're marrying me, not the money."

"I know that," Joe admitted. He frowned. "I'm nervous tonight. I don't know why. Seeing Sim, maybe. I like Sim."

He turned the coupe through vine-covered stone pillars, and the headlamps glistened on the white gravel of the winding drive. Trees rose like grotesque skeletons to stand against the moon-lit sky, and finally the rambling red-brick mansion loomed beyond the shadows. It was a massive building. Almost, Joe thought, a temple that screamed its triumph of wealth from the humble ground. Warren Grant's temple. Self-made, self-governed, and perhaps self-hated. Grant with his three cardinal "S's" of tabloid circulation, Sex, Sin, and Suicide. Plus photographs. Always photos. A photo is worth five hundred words. For God's sake, where's the photo?

It was going to be nasty, being Grant's son-in-law.

Joe stopped the car suddenly. The branches of the tree ahead made a trembling wind-shaken cross against the moon. A fragile chill touched his spine. "Donna, let's don't do this. Let's go back to New York," he said quickly.

"But I want— Joe, what's the matter?"

"I don't know. I can't explain. It's just that I'm afraid. Maybe it was seeing Sim. Thinking what happened to Kathy here. Let's go back. Let's get a drink somewhere and be happy, Donna."

"But I *am* happy. Oh, I know it seems childish to you, but I want to do this. It'll take only a minute or two. Please, darling . . ."

"Okay. Sure. I'm going screwy." He locked the motor. Donna had bought a flashlight. He followed her across the long side porch to the French doors. Keys tinkled, then the light wandered restlessly over the gray carpeting of the study, over the massive stairway that curved away overhead. Donna was talking gaily, laughing, running ahead,

Joe didn't laugh. He walked softly, his mind crowded with a memory. Once, two years ago, he had been standing with Donna downstairs. One agony-choked scream had broken their kiss. He had raced up these same steps, into this same room where Donna was going. And he had found Kathy dying. One bullet, out of the night and through the window. And Sim's whispers echoed back over the years: "But why, why, *why*? Nobody hated her. She had no enemies! Who could have killed her?"

The question was still unanswered.

He stepped into the room that had once been Kathy's. Donna had propped the flashlight on the dusty dresser. Half in shadows and darkness she smiled at him softly. "Joe, really this isn't silly. I think Kathy would have done this same thing, if I had been—"

The roar, the shatter of window, and Donna's scream came all at once. And in the next instant, the round blur of red was filling and spreading at Donna's white temple. She was looking at him, as a child might look who was frightened and confused. She looked so small, so very much like a child in that moment, Joe thought weirdly. Her throat moved. A sound rattled and faded outside on the veranda.

"Joe— Oh, Joe . . . hurts," she sobbed.

"*Donna!*" He caught her, clasped her, tried to drag her back from a horrible inevitability. The perfume of her hair was a breath of lilacs in his nostrils. He could feel her struggling in her heart.

And he felt her die.

When her cheek was quiet on his shoulder and her hair was still at his lips, he knew that she had gone.

He left her on the bed. He could not move fast. No matter what his brain screamed, his muscles would not obey. He probed the darkness beyond the window with the flashlight, but only the trees trembled against the pale moon. He went down the hall. But the telephone was dead. He had to leave her alone while he drove into Clearwood, two miles back.

**T**HEY WOULD never be able to say that Warren Grant made it soft for himself. When he came, sending his Packard hurtling up the drive, he brought his best crime reporter with him—Sim. Five minutes later the *Star-Herald's* photographers un-

loaded from a station wagon. The deputies from Clearwood scurried frantically through the wooded estate, and someone got the lights connected. The mansion became a brilliant stack of doors and windows. Almost like a nightclub, Joe thought bitterly. Like a Hollywood gambling club.

"Tell me about it, Joe," Warren Grant said harshly. His egg-bald head shone. His eyes seemed to bite with black fangs. He looked like a huge wrestler misplaced into evening clothes and diamonds.

Joe told him and Grant listened while his eyes burned and his tongue licked wickedly at his hard lips. Then, when Joe was finished, Grant stared at the moon through the trees, and his club-like fists opened and closed.

"With Kathy I said it was a maniac," he spoke stonily. "But twice makes it too raw to swallow. Two maniacs, two years apart? No!" he grated. "And who would have known you and Donna were going to be out here? The house has been closed all winter." He stared at Joe squarely. "Four daughters to start with, and two are gone. Two down and two to die!"

And then, because beyond all he was a great reporter, Warren Grant repeated it softly. "*Two down and two to die.* That's the headline for the story."

"For God's sake, Grant, can't you—" Joe started.

"No. There's not any place for softness. Be sad, if you must, but never stop to cry. Remember that. And just to show you what I mean, take my car and get into town. I want you to get the background from my wife and Donna's sisters. They are at—"

"I'll be damned if I'll take any part of—" Joe started furiously.

"You will take it. *You will like it.*" Grant's eyes glittered. "Get Shaster to get the photos. My wife will be having hysterics. *Get that.* Margaret and Ann are dancing at the Sapphire Roof. I want a shot of their faces when they get the news. *Get it stark.* Get their first words. Get everything. I've been called everything for what I've spread on other people. Let them call me something on this!"

Joe took a soft breath and his right fist streaked through the moonlight to smash against Grant's hard lips. He felt a tooth break. Grant staggered back, and a thin vein of blood trailed down his chin and

dripped off, streaking his tuxedo front. Very slowly a smile crossed his crushed lips.

"You're young, Joe. But if the story is human and hot, you won't have to pay for my broken tooth. Otherwise, I'll sue you busted." Then his smile softened just a little. "It's not that I have a cheap heart, Joe, but I just don't have any cheap tears. Now, *get me a story.*"

Joe's fingers gnawed through the flesh of his palms. "I'll get you a story. And it'll be the last from me to you, Grant."

"Make it good. With photos." Then he turned away and blew his nose as he walked back into the house. Joe hurled himself into the Packard and kicked at the starter. For the next few hours, he would hate himself forever.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Nightmare Drums

JOE STOPPED on upper Broadway and called Shaster, the new lens-and-shutter boy. "Meet me in the lobby of the Sidingham Hotel as quick as you can. You're working tonight."

He would give Grant a story he could chew or choke, Joe promised himself bitterly. An ugly, glittering, naked story about a girl named Donna. A beautiful girl with gentle eyes. A girl who would have been Mrs. Joe Delancey Marlin. If she had lived. He would tell just how the bullet had whined, and just the way she had sobbed: ". . . hurts . . ." And then, when it was over and he was seven shades more filthy than Grant had ever been, he would walk in and break the rest of Grant's teeth.

But Donna would still be dead.

Joe's lips felt cold and crooked. His throat felt thick. He watched the lights of Broadway come pouring toward the car. Presently he turned east across town at Fifty-seventh and parked the Packard in front of the sedate Sidingham Hotel on Madison Avenue.

Shaster—a hungry-faced, tow-headed kid with nothing in his soul but cameras—was waiting at the elevators. Joe had it worked out in his mind already. He pulled Shaster off in a corner and talked straight.

"Donna Grant, the old man's daughter, was murdered tonight. Two of her sisters

are upstairs at the Sapphire Roof. They don't know, yet. I'll take care of the rope-boy. If the girls are dancing, lay away. Wait till they get settled at a table. I'll go first and you trail me. Keep your box low, out of sight as much as you can. Start sighting when I start talking to them. I'll get them together with me. When I look up at you, shoot and keep shooting. It'll warm your bleak little heart, the two sisters and the guy Donna would have married. Maybe you'll even get a raise. Come on," he said. Shaster's jaw sagged and his pale eyes began to shine behind their thick glasses.

The Sapphire roof was up twenty-nine floors. Jose Ludio was tilting his band around a fragile conga. The man at the velvet rope looked at Joe's worn suit and started a frown. Then he glanced in his palm and read the message of a twenty-dollar bill. He said, "Quite, sir." The rope came down.

"Both of us. Press," Joe said. He worked along the pine-panelled wall, searching through the blue veil of smoke until he saw Margaret, tall, creamy-skinned, autumn-haired, almost frigid in her classic beauty. She was the eldest of the Grant girls. The strange one, but the best gal reporter at the *Star-Herald*.

Then Joe saw Ann, the youngest. Slender, with hair as black as Donna's had been golden. Swift brown eyes. A low voice, a tough little chin. Tough, like her old man, but without his brutality. Hard and clear and beautiful as a diamond.

Joe nodded and Shaster nodded back. Joe worked his way around the wall. The conga ended. The floor cleared. Ann and Margaret returned to a table. Two men—they didn't matter—held their chairs for them, poured their wine for them, lit their cigarettes, and made two anxious smiles for them, the millionaire's daughters.

"Okay," Joe said to Shaster. He walked up behind them and put his arms around their shoulders. He glimpsed Shaster working fast and surely. Ann and Margaret turned to look at him. Surprise crossed their faces, then Ann's lighted with a smile.

"Oh, we didn't know you two were going to— But where's Donna?"

Speak very slowly, Joe told himself. Give Shaster time. Make the words clear. Spike

them in. "She is not coming. She will never be here again. We went to the summer house. She was keeping that Christmas promise to Kathy. She was standing in Kathy's room. She was shot to death. She was murdered two hours ago."

He looked up. Shaster shot. The flash left shimmering rings of rainbow colors floating in Joe's eyes. Shaster shot again. Joe felt Ann struggling to rise. He heard words breaking, getting tangled in her throat. Then she swore. He couldn't print that, he thought. Ann could swear like a cotton-boat cook. Margaret put long fingers to her pale throat, closed her eyes, and said it like a lady, "Oh, dear God."

"Keep shooting," Joe called 'as she fainted. Ann threw a glass of wine in his face and slapped him. That would make a good one, Joe thought.

"The Packard is downstairs," he said bluntly. "I'm taking both of you home." He picked Margaret up and hung her across his shoulder. Shaster's face was almost aflame with delight. The two men at the table made pigeon-like sounds and waved their damp hands.

"Sit down and pay the check," Joe snapped. "Good night."

Shaster danced behind him as he followed Ann from the room and toward the elevators.

Ann stared straight ahead at the unfolding lights of Park Avenue. Finally she said, "Can you *lend* me a cigarette on a short-term basis?" He tossed the pack in her lap. The match flame cast her reflection into the night beyond the windshield, and Joe saw the sparkle of tears on her lashes. He did not look again.

"I think I detect," she said, "the dung-and-dynamite technique of my father in this go-round."

"You should know. He's *your* father," Joe retorted stonily.

"I was too young to make my own decision, at the time." She hurled the cigarette away and grew smaller in the darkness. "No one knows who did it, I suppose."

"No. Through the window. One shot. Just as it was with Kathy. Same thing. Everything the same." He took a twisted breath. "I don't like this any more. I'm through," he said abruptly. "If—"

"Quitting is yellow. If you've got to be a rat, be one."

Margaret began to make sounds in the back seat as she came around. Joe stopped the Packard at the Tower House. He had to half-carry her through the austere lobby. "I suppose," Ann said, "dad wants a killer-diller of a picture of mother getting her micky?"

"Yeah." Joe nodded. Ann shrugged bleakly.

"I wouldn't stop you for the world. Want me to tear my hair for you?"

Joe looked at her dismally as the elevator crawled upward. "You don't have to do anything. Just go right on hating me. Makes it mutual."

"Oh, but I don't hate you. No more than I hate my father."

SHE TOOK out her key at the twelfth floor and unlocked the door. Beyond the reception hall loomed a broad, window-filled living room. Twin lamps at each side of a marble fireplace shed an ivory glow over an Oriental rug. Leather-tooled books crowded the cases. An immense ugly portrait of Warren Grant looked down, grasping the room in a gaze of ruthless content. It was ten o'clock.

"I'll bring mother in," Ann said. Margaret swayed and sank down on the couch. Joe looked at her silently. She opened and closed her fingers, stared at them fixedly. And it seemed to Joe, though he could not know, that a smile played beneath the frigid surface of Margaret's face.

But he was wrong. He knew he was wrong. But he could not stand the sight of her fingers. He walked away toward the windows, and Shaster's breathing was the only audible sound in the room. Then footsteps drew closer along a hall. Ann and her mother entered.

Elizabeth Grant was a tall woman of pure-white hair and a gentle face. A face whose beauty was drained and almost lost. Or perhaps not lost, Joe thought, but paid away as the price of living with Grant. And her eyes held the dark shadows of that same cost, too. Lonely eyes, and now they looked toward him with fear. For an instant he thought Ann had already told her.

Then Elizabeth Grant said softly, "Something's the matter. Something is wrong, Joe. Is it—Donna?"

"It—She—" He saw her fingers that held the robe at her throat. He saw her

frightened eyes. And a lonely face. And he knew he couldn't do it to her. He stepped between her and Shaster and walked over to take her cold wrists.

"The same thing that happened to Kathy. Donna is dead."

Shaster was cursing and trying to get an angle. For an instant Joe saw Ann's face. Her hatred had faded. There was something almost soft in her eyes, and almost like a grateful smile on her lips.

"I knew so surely. I felt so surely," Elizabeth Grant whispered. She did not break. She scarcely bent. She leaned back against the door, then she closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. "I'm not sorry for you," she said to Joe. "Help me." She turned, half-stumbling, back toward the hall. "No," she said to Ann, "I have something to say to Joe." He helped her toward a bed. For over a minute she lay there, shielding her eyes from the light, saying nothing.

"Where were the other girls?" she whispered finally.

"Dancing at the Sapphire Roof."

"Oh." She sighed. "And you *know* they were there?"

"Why, I— When I got back to town they were there." He leaned down. "Why? Why do you ask it in that way?" he whispered.

"I had to know," she sobbed. "Like a nightmare. It's been like a nightmare, these two years since Kathy—"

"What did you have to know?"

"Too ugly. Too ugly to think or speak, but now I know I was wrong." And then she began to cry, softly and horribly. Slowly Joe turned and went back to the living room. He jerked his head. Ann hurried down the hall. Margaret was cool, almost glacial, and lovely again. She came toward him, stopped, and looked deep into his eyes.

"Will you be home later tonight?" she whispered. And when he nodded, some message seemed to flow from her dark blue eyes. "I will be there when I can." Her voice trembled. "Wait for me. Don't tell." She went away down the hall.

"You played hell with my—" Shaster started angrily.

"I'll give you five counts to get out that door. You remind me too much of me." Joe started counting. Shaster grabbed his

camera box and bolted through the door.

Joe stood alone in the huge room, and he felt his eyes moving guardedly—as if he searched while the eyes of Grant's portrait watched from above the mantle.

He tried to understand what he was striving to think. It was as though some grotesque formula had been compounded here, made out of wealth, out of four beautiful girls, one lonely woman, and one brutal, brilliant man. But what was the reason?

Joe shook his head at last, and his mind focused on Margaret and Ann. *Two down, and two to die.* Ann, with her dark hard beauty, built on toughness and a man-like wisdom. And Margaret. More beautiful. Cold and still, yet burning in the depths. She would be a girl to know. To love and fear.

"I'm being a damned fool." So he walked out.

At three-thirty in the morning he climbed the stairs of his Greenwich Village walk-up, unlocked his two-room flat, and slammed the door behind him. He was more tired than he had ever been before. Tired in soul, heart, and body. He needed a shave and sleep. He drank straight from a bottle of rye whiskey. The train tickets for Miami were on the table. Honeymoon. He tore them into twelve pieces and watched them fall to the floor. He took another drink and a vague resolution formed in his brain. He would get drunk. Ten times drunker than he had ever been before. And then what would he do?

He took a third drink to think about it.

Maybe it was the sixth drink. Maybe the eighth. The footsteps came lightly up the uncarpeted stairs, hesitated at the turn of the hall, then came the gentle knocking. "Joe?"

It was Margaret. Margaret, sure. Remember? She said she'd be around, he reminded himself. He got up and swayed to the door. She came in quickly, a tired smile touching her lips. Her autumn-gold hair was wind-blown. She was alive, not cold now. She was still wearing the low-cut evening dress. It did things to her curves. It would do things to anybody.

ONE FOR me, too," she said quickly. She drank like Joe—from the bottle and without coughing. "People should get drunk before funerals," she said. She

stopped at the window and twisted her fingers together. "Was it a lulu, the story in the paper?"

"A lulu. The lousiest, dirtiest, cheapest lulu that ever drank ink. And I wrote it." He drank again and sat down. "What the hell do you want?"

She turned around. "Are you angry at me?"

"I'm angry at everybody. What do you want?"

"Don't snarl at me. I'm the old man's daughter, but nobody's put pillows under my job at the *Star-Herald*. I don't like—Joe, when you phoned him—phoned dad—where was he?" she stammered brokenly.

"He was—" Joe stopped abruptly. "Why, I suppose he was at the office. I didn't talk to him. I told McCormack to tell him to come to Clearwood immediately. Why?"

"Because he *wasn't* at the office. When I quit at five, I went downstairs to see him. He had gone for the night." She looked at him intensely. Joe blinked and ran his tongue across his lips.

"What are you trying to start, Margaret?" he asked slowly.

"I don't know. Oh, God, I *don't* know." She ran her fingers through her hair and walked up and down the room. "Joe, think of something. Think of this: who knew Donna would be at the summer house tonight? Only you and I and Ann. We were the four, Ann and I, with Kathy and Donna, who made that Christmas promise so long ago. So *we* knew. Dad knew. Mother knew. And in the whole world, no one else knew."

"Yes. No!" Joe corrected slowly. "I mentioned it in a bar just before I went to get Donna. Webb and Chick and Sim heard me."

"Oh, well, they don't count. What really counts is this: only you and I and Ann and Dad and mother *knew*. Mother can't drive a car. Ann and I were together dancing. *You* didn't kill Donna." She faced him again, her slender face pale and tormented. "How long did it take dad to get to Clearwood?"

"I don't know. What in God's name are you trying to say? That your dad killed Donna?" Joe shouted.

"I don't know. I'm too afraid to say. Too afraid to think. It's like a nightmare.

A horrible nightmare that—" Her voice broke. Suddenly she was on her knees before Joe's chair, clasping him like a frightened child, and she was crying. "I can't even think it aloud. And there's not any reason, not any motive if it *were* true. It's too insane for reason. Too insane—" And then she stopped and stared starkly into his eyes. "Unless— Joe, how far do you think someone might go, in order to make a sensational murder story?"

He started to laugh rawly. The laughter did not rise. He simply sat there, feeling thin and cold and strangely old. He stared at Margaret and for over a minute neither of them spoke. "I don't know," he said at last.

"If at least some clue. If there was only something."

"Oh, they found a clue. A terrific clue. A piece of gray tweed that was snagged in the bushes. The world is full of gray tweed."

Margaret did not move. Her eyes grew deeper and darker. "Gray tweed. I don't know. Can't remember," she whispered.

"Oh, this is insane!" Joe exclaimed. He got up and prowled the room. He took another drink. "Too damned insane. He wouldn't do it. No reason. Kill his own daughters to get murder stories? Hell, no!"

"No. No, of course not." Slowly Margaret got up. Then she just stood there, stared fixedly at the doorway through which she would have to leave. "But I'm afraid of something. It's like a silent drum-beat far away in the night. Warning me. Trying to tell me something. I— Oh, Joe," she turned desperately, "I'm *so* afraid and I don't know what to do."

In the next moment she was in his arms. She was trembling, trying like a child to hide her eyes from the lightning. Her bare shoulders shook. Bare warm shoulders beneath Joe's fingers. He scarcely realized. He kissed her shoulder, and she lifted her face to look at him with eyes that were like blue embers. In that moment her face was almost divine in its fear and loveliness. He kissed her lips. Her lips clung and searched. He had never known such a kiss could exist. He felt himself plunging away from all reality.

Then he was standing alone and Margaret was touching the door. "I must go,"

she said strangely. "Good night." And then, for some reason, she added, "Tomorrow . . ."

The door closed. Joe did not move. His arms hung at his sides until he touched his mouth. He closed his eyes and shook his head like a wounded animal. "What in God's name is happening to me?" he asked thickly. "What kind of a madman am I?"

He took the last drink from the bottle. He saw himself in the mirror. He turned out the light, crawled out of his clothes, and sank down on the bed with his head in his hands. "Oh, Donna, I'm *not* like this. I'm sorry. I'm ashamed. I can't understand."

He lay on his back and stared upward at the ceiling. The distant street light shone through the winter-bare branches of a little tree, and the silhouette trembled against the window. Joe closed his eyes. Half-sleeping, he dreamed that the day could become a clock whose hands he could turn backward. Or a stage whose curtain could fall.

Oh, let it fall and rise again at that moment when Chick was saying, "One more for the road. One more for the last day of freedom." They would lift their glasses again. The light would glisten on Chick's ring and twinkle on the pearly buttons of his gray tweed coat. And—

Joe sat bolt-upright in bed, sweat plunging through his pores.

"Tweed! *Gray tweed!* I know Chick was wearing gray tweed! And he couldn't be located for the job tonight!"

Joe leaped from bed and grabbed for his clothes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Kill for a Story!

IT WAS a yellow-brick building with a glassy trim around the door and Joe had climbed these same stairs countless times with Chick Potter. Now he climbed slowly, silently. A dirty dawn was staining the stairway windows. The halls were dark save for the wan fire-lights. He felt the slow drum of his pulses as he walked along the fourth floor. He heard himself swallow as he stopped at Chick's apartment.

And what was he going to do? He wondered. What would he say? He did not know. He simply looked at his knotted fist, then let it fall on the door. The door

moved slightly. It was unlocked, not even latched. He started to call softly, hesitated and stood there listening, staring through the gray-black crack of the door. Very slowly he opened the door.

Dawn was scarcely a blur at the windows, and the objects in the room were black and formless shadows. An alarm clock was hammering out its restless rhythm. He closed the door, then tripped the latch. Gradually his eyes consumed more dim details, and slowly the dawn-light cleared. There was the couch. There was the outline of a beer bottle on the window-sill. There was a chair. And there on the floor—

A blur of whiteness and darkness down there. A blur. But with a queer suggestion in its mass. The suggestion of a man. Suddenly Joe knelt down. He struck a match. A cry rushed through his throat. His stomach hardened. His fingers turned sticky. And he knelt there, looking.

Chick Potter lay on his stomach, face-down, but slightly turned. The back of his skull was crushed. His red hair was thick and ugly with another shade of red. His mouth was open. His eyes were open. His thick arms were stretched out above his head, just as he had fallen. And just as Joe's match gave its last flicker, he saw the gaping hole torn in the back of Chick's coat-sleeve. A triangle was missing. A triangle of gray tweed.

The match went out. Joe remembered to breathe. A bead of sweat tickled his cheek as it rolled down. He struck another match and peered around the room. The closet door was open. Empty coat-hangers hung from the rod. Three more coat-hangers lay on the floor outside the closet. Chick was packing, trying to make a getaway, Joe thought.

Something glistened on the floor inside the closet. He reached down. It was a pair of very dark smoked glasses. The match went out. A sound—tiny in its stealth—crunched out of the depth of the apartment. It came again, nearer. Joe turned cautiously. He could not see. He could hear nothing else. Abruptly he realized that he was standing where he would be silhouetted against the murky gray-black of the window. He started to tip-toe. Almost silently a rush of motion stirred the air in front of him. A blow exploded against his teeth,

hurling him back hard against the wall.

He rolled on his knees and dove from the floor. His shoulder smashed into bony legs and his arms wrapped around them. He flung his weight to the left and the struggling man came down with a crash, driving another blow against Joe's temple. Joe shifted his grip and slammed a knee into soft stomach. There was a gasping grunt. The man's steely fingers found Joe's throat, and suddenly they were locked in each other's grip—rolling, threshing, plunging around the floor in a savage embrace. Joe had a wild vision of them strangling each other, dying while still wordless and unknown to each other. He braced his feet against a wall and gave a powerful lurch. It sent them plunging across the rug, crashing against walls and furniture. A great tearing sound came from above. The unknown man cried out in pain, and then something heavy plunged into Joe's forehead. A wild pinwheel began to spin inside his skull, and his fingers turned to mush. He started falling—slowly, very sleepily, through clouds of gray-blue cotton.

At first the sound was like the rattle of a child's toy drum. Then it became an insistent hammering at the door. Voices shouted. Footsteps beat against the stairs. Joe struggled to his hands and knees and spit away the salty thickness of blood. Dawn was a full gray haze in the shambles of the room, now. There lay Chick Potter's body. All around Joe lay the debris of the tall bookcase, overturned in the struggle. But he lay *alone* in the wreckage.

The man, still unseen and unknown, was gone.

"Here they come! Here come the cops!" a voice in the hall cried.

Cops. Coming here into this room, after sounds of a fight, Joe's brain screamed to him. Chick. Dead. Nobody but me. They'll say I killed him. Say I did it because of Donna.

A new force began to slam at the door. Joe staggered to his feet and reeled across the room. He stumbled into the bedroom and stared dazedly at the fire escape.

This is the wrong way. This is a fall-guy's way. This won't get it, he thought with one corner of his brain. Yet another part—that part of instinct and fear—dragged him to the window. He crawled out and gripped the railing, nausea and

weakness shaking him like a giant's paw. He started down. As he passed the second floor, a shout echoed from above:

"There goes a man! Down there!"

Joe leaped the last half-flight of steps, ducked, and started to run. The gun roared above. The lean lonely whine of a bullet sang past his skull and stung the concrete angrily. One second more and he turned the corner. He thanked God it was still the hour of desolate winter dawn. He hurled himself into his car.

**THE SILENCE** of his small apartment was a taunting mockery. The torn-up honeymoon tickets still lay there on the floor. The empty bottle from which he had drunk with Margaret stood on the table. The covers of his bed were thrown back, and the pillow bore the impression of his head. He wanted to fall there and sleep forever, to wipe his memory clean in the oblivion of rest.

But that part of his brain that was fear kept driving him. He stripped off his blood-stained clothes and buried them deep in the laundry-hamper in the bathroom. He started a steaming shower and stood under it, first shaking with chill, then burning. At the mirror he inspected the ragged cut, just concealed beyond his dark hair-line. His lips were puffed and thick, too. There was a bruise at his left temple. His eyes were bloodshot. His entire body ached. He felt—

He heard the angry buzzing of his doorbell. His stomach caved. They had come so quickly—not giving him time to think.

The buzzing was joined by a hard knocking. He *had* to go and open the door, Joe knew. It was useless to hide. It had been futile to try to flee. He dragged in a weary breath, put on his robe, and walked to the front door.

"Get dressed! Fast! Hell has blown its damned top!" Warren Grant roared into the room. "Get moving! We're on the way to Headquarters!" He was unshaven, still dressed in wrinkled evening clothes and diamonds. His eyes were still like black fangs. He looked more like a masquerading gorilla than ever. "Don't gape like a half-headed dunce! Get dressed!"

"Why? I mean, Headquarters—why?" Joe heard himself asking in a thin dry voice.

"Chick Potter—slugged to death at his apartment! The neighbors heard a fight and called the cops. They broke in, Potter was dead. And Charlie Simmons was unconscious, bleeding like a slaughtered goat on the bathroom floor. They've got him at Head—"

"Sim? Sim!" Joe choked. "*They've got Sim!*"

"For murder. Get dressed!" Grant flung his dead cigar on the floor and paced the room like a tormented bull. "That gray tweed scrap, you remember? Well, get this! It came from the suit Chick Potter was wearing. *Potter* killed Donna—why I don't know. Anyway, Sim must have gotten the idea. If Potter killed Donna, he must have killed Kathy—at least that must have been Sim's figuring. Probably correct. He went to Potter's place. Confronted him, probably. There was a fight. Potter was killed and Sim is getting put back together. He—For God's sake, get dressed! This is the biggest crime load in thirty years! You're working today. You've got all your life to sleep! Hurry!"

Grant drove on the rim of manslaughter. Sleepy-eyed pedestrians leaped and sprawled for their lives. Cops screamed impotently. Grant gave a harsh laugh. "Another twenty-four hours, Joe, and the *Star-Herald* will have to use ghost reporters, huh?" He laughed again. "Thank hell they didn't kill Margaret. That gal—guts! Smart guts. She'd make an editor, you know. Best gal on the staff, now."

"Yes." For a moment Joe was thinking of her lips. The kiss that had been like a wild hungry storm. "Yes," he said again. The tires screamed to a stop. He followed Grant's barrel-like body up the steps.

The doctor was still working on Simmons' head, a sergeant said. Grant fumed. He thrust another cigar between his teeth. Joe lit a cigarette. His fingers were dancing. His stomach kept falling in. His head ached dismally. Reporters from other papers came pouring in. Photographers lugged their cases in and started asking, "Where?"

Grant got the sergeant aside and something green changed hands. "Now, he's my man," Grant explained in a hard whisper. "I think we've got first crack on him. Joe Marlin, here, is an old friend of his. Just give us the first session."



The sergeant looked at the green and understood perfectly, Mr. Grant.

It was nine o'clock when he motioned them through a side-door and whispered, "Captain DeForce's office. 305. Use the stairs."

Joe felt himself climbing forever. He closed his eyes. In his mind he could see Sim's haggard face, already. See the dull melancholy that would be there. Sim. Sim, a killer now.

Something in Joe strove to cry out. *It wasn't right!* Suppose Sim had killed Chick. Think what Chick had done.

He followed Grant into the gray-walled dusty office. DeForce stood up and stopped talking. He was a short wiry man with a sour face and cool eyes. In a chair across the desk from him sat Sim. His shoulders were bent. His hands were limp in his lap. Gauze concealed his hair and ears. He was just staring at the desk, his jaw-muscles working deliberately, and he wasn't saying anything.

"Well, boy, it's me," Grant erupted jovially. "And old Joe."

WITH DULL weariness Sim turned and stared stonily. Joe did not breathe. His fingers twitched. He waited, watching the gaunt eyes, searching for something in their depths.

Did Sim know? Did he know, had he seen? Before he had staggered away and passed-out, had he recognized Joe?

"Hello, Joe," he said emptily, yet with a broken dignity that would not crumble. But the voice told Joe nothing.

He tried to say something. He scarcely knew what it was.

Then Grant's tank-powerful voice was rumbling around the room. DeForce was answering in a nervous, irritable drone. Grant laid a massive paw on Sim's shoulder. "Now, boy, we're with you, but like I've always said, an open fight makes the best fight. All open and no holds barred. Now, you tell me what happened. Give it to me, boy."

Sim just looked at him and licked his lips in a motion of mute contempt. DeForce rattled his watch-chain impatiently.

"You say that you went to Potter's apartment after you remembered he was wearing a gray tweed suit. You found the door unlocked?"

"That's what I said," Sim answered DeForce.

"And you found Potter lying on the floor dead?"

"I told you that. Yes," Sim agreed drearly. Again he gazed at Joe.

"Now," DeForce said, "you contend that you heard a noise in the living room after you'd gone through the apartment in a search? And you saw the reflection of a match, of a flame. So. So you stole back toward the living room. The match had gone out. But you saw a form of a man. You attacked this man, thinking he was the killer. You struggled with this man. In the struggle, the bookcase was overturned. You were injured. You remember nothing else until the police found you. Is that your story, Simmons?"

"That's what I told you." Sim kept staring fixedly at Joe's face. Joe could not move. His throat was turning dry. Sweat moved down his cheek. An edge of deep-burning blackness moved through the depths of Sim's eyes—a gnawing gleam. Of realization? Joe wondered.

"What did this other man look like?" Grant demanded.

"It was too dark. I don't know," Sim said with a curious slowness.

"But you say you hit him in the mouth," DeForce put in.

Joe's fingers twitched suddenly. He felt his puffed lips turn. And he saw the dark light smoulder in Sim's eyes.

"Did I say mouth?" Sim asked deliberately. "Eyes. I hit him in the eyes, I think."

"But I clearly understood you to say mouth." DeForce frowned. The watch-chain rattled again. "It seems exceedingly odd, Simmons. The whole story is exceedingly odd. And not very convincing, I should warn you. You say you could not see the man *at all*. You say—"

"I said it. I'll say it again. I've got a headache and I'm tired as hell. Leave me alone," Sim said.

DeForce sighed. Grant turned on Joe. "Maybe you can get something out of him," he said quickly.

"Get out. Let me see him alone," Joe said.

DeForce shrugged. Grant followed him from the room. Joe wet his lips and walked toward the desk. Sim's eyes were burning

at him again. "Was he dead? Was he really dead when you got there?" Joe asked.

"He was dead," Sim said with utter flatness. "Your lips got mashed somewhere, Joe."

Joe opened and closed his sticky fingers. Sim's expression did not convey the slightest emotion. "Are you going to let me take this ride alone?" he asked listlessly.

"You know damned well I'm not! I'm trying to think. I can't. I feel like hell. Look, Sim," he leaned forward, whispering heavily. "I didn't kill Potter, either. I went there as you did, after I remembered the gray tweed."

"It doesn't matter. I half wish I *had* killed him."

Joe walked up and down the room. "Sim, I'm not trying to leave you in the fire alone. I swear to God I'm not. But look at it this way: You're tagged. I'm free to move, to hunt. Nothing would be gained by jumping into jail with you. And if we let you stay here, maybe the killer will get confident that he is safe. You understand what I'm suggesting?"

"And I'll have to trust you?" Sim wet his lips and stared. "Okay. Come see me, Joe," he said finally.

"I hope to God you believe me. I'm not leaving you to sink." He held out his hand. Sim's hand was cold and bony. His eyes had grown dull and listless again. It was the hardest thing Joe had ever done—walking out of the room and leaving Sim sitting there.

"Well, what did you get out of him?" Grant sputtered on the way down the stairs.

"He didn't kill Potter."

"Of course he killed him, you fool! DeForce was telling me. Potter was slugged with a bronze book-end. They've already found Sim's fingerprints on the damned thing. He *knew* Potter killed Kathy. And Sim is one of those smouldering melancholy birds. The perfect revenge-murder type. Of course he killed him," he repeated as they entered Grant's Packard. "Our job is to make a great show out of it. Understand?"

Joe turned and studied the granite face openly. "You know," he said carefully, "you could have remembered Potter's tweed suit, too. And you had a motive for

revenge-murder. I think you are a killer-type, Grant."

The black fangs of eyes licked at him and a crooked smile broke over the wide mouth. "That's a nice angle. Play it in your story, Joe. The Millionaire Revenge Slayer! Publisher Frames Murder On Reporter! Hell, yes! Give it a play. Anything to build a great story!" He slammed the wheel enthusiastically.

Joe did not take his eyes off the man as the car sped through Manhattan toward the *Star-Herald* building.

The Packard pulled up at the side entrance of the building. As Grant shifted his bulk to climb out, the seat-cushions parted under his weight. Joe saw a Kelly-green sweater that had slipped down behind the seat. Scarcely thinking, he pulled it out and started to toss it in the back seat. He stopped. It was a small sweater—a girl's sweater. And in the luxurious wool there were a few drops of crusted darkness.

A few drops of blood?

"Whose sweater?" he asked as he tossed it back.

"What? Oh, Ann's. Never know what you'll find in this car. Come on."

Ann's. . . Joe followed slowly, his brows drawn together. Empty coat hangers in Potter's closet. Someone moving clothes in a hurry, dropping coat hangers on the floor. And a pair of smoked glasses on the floor. Potter's glasses? Joe tried to remember; he'd never seen Potter wearing smoked glasses.

And smoked glasses in the winter. At night. Strange. Strange, unless someone had washed not to be recognized. . .

Clothes in a closet. Chick Potter, the handsome, cynical hell-boy. A girl could love that kind of guy, no matter what he was.

And a girl could kill him, too.

"I'll be upstairs in a minute," Joe said abruptly. He grabbed a telephone and called DeForce. "Were there any half-packed bags or luggage around Potter's apartment? Anything to suggest he might have been planning to clear-out?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Joe hung up and lit a cigarette. His thin face wore an almost gentle detachment. He dialed the phone again.

"Ann? This is Joe. I was wondering if

I could see you. Just talk and things. I feel shaky."

"I don't promise a big laugh," she said wearily.

"That isn't what I'm hunting. I'll be up."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Devil's Love Song

THE BUTLER dusted Joe into the Grant living room and moaned something about, "One minute, please." Joe lit a cigarette and ran his fingers through his hair. Stubble grated on his chin. He looked at himself in the mirror. "Hangover Harry," he muttered. He turned around as a gently weary voice said, "Hello, Joe. Don't mind if I look like the devil's wife, I hope?"

He had always thought of Ann as a pint-sized edition of her old man—tough, hard, and clear as a diamond. And yet, even at this moment when he was ready to call her killer, there was a quietness about her that he had never seen before. Her eyes told him she had cried last night. She wore a faded robe, and her dark eyes touched her shoulders. Somewhere, as he looked, he remembered that he was staring and something was probably in his eyes.

"I don't mind. I look like hell, myself. Could I have a drink?"

"We could have one," she modified. She told the butler. "I was up a long time with mother last night. I should be tough, like Margaret."

"I had a feeling you were tougher."

"That's just the way it looks from the outside. She's the tycoon. If dad would die tomorrow, she'd own half the papers in town by Tuesday. Nice, if you like it." She closed her eyes as she sat down. The drinks came. Joe sat down beside her on the couch and lit her cigarette.

"You heard about Chick Potter?" he wondered.

"Ann heard all about it," she said ironically. "Dad and Margaret took down the door, getting out of here this morning."

"They've got Sim nailed for the killing, or did you know?"

She turned quickly. "I *didn't* know. Sim— No, not Sim!"

"Sim," he said stonily. "He put a clue

together and got hot-headed, I suppose. Potter killed Donna and Kathy—that's almost certain."

Ann said nothing. She stared at her drink and her face was gray.

"Remember that Kelly-green sweater you used to wear?" Joe said idly. "I remember the way it changed the light in your eyes."

"Green? Oh. That. Yes. Strange, I hadn't thought of it in ages. Lost somewhere, I suppose." But her mind wasn't on the words, Joe knew. He looked at her stubbornly.

"You haven't seen it lately?"

"Not in two or three years. Not since Kathy . . . It doesn't matter."

Joe kept frowning. "I forgot to bring your dark glasses. I found them in the Packard."

She looked at him momentarily. "Dark glasses? I've never had any. I don't— Oh, those things of Margaret's. They're hers." She forgot it and looked at her drink again. "Sim couldn't kill *anyone*," she said abruptly. "Don't you know that? *Don't* you, Joe?"

Dark glasses for a masquerade. And someone else's clothes, Joe was thinking. He waked to Ann's words. "Yes, I know. I feel dirty from everything. I want to wash my face and hands. Excuse me." He left the room and hesitated in the hall. He heard no one nearby. He silently opened the door to the room he knew was Margaret's, then closed it behind him. He moved fast. First, the dresser drawers. Nothing there. Then the closet. Clothes, dresses, skirts neatly hung. But never a trace of blood. And in the bathroom, one blouse hanging to dry after a washing.

Joe tried to think: Would Ann wash a blouse today? *Normally?* Would Margaret wash a blouse before rushing to the paper to do the Sim murder-background? Would *anyone* in a millionaire's house wash a blouse?

He reached up to touch the blouse. Had there been blood—

"What *are* you doing, Joe?" Ann asked strangely from behind him. He turned. She was looking at him with a queer light of wonderment in her dark eyes. "I mean, I'm sorry, I just came to say that mother was ill and not to make noise, but— What *are* you doing?"

"Is this your blouse?" he asked.

"No. It's Margaret's. But *why*? I have never seen you act so curiously cool, almost fatalistic. What's the matter with you?"

"I was just." He stopped. His fingers opened and closed. "There is something, Ann. The way your eyes." He touched her cheeks. Slowly he bent down to kiss her, watching carefully. At the last moment she pulled away with a gasp.

"Are you *insane*, Joe?" she asked.

For the first time in years, it seemed to him, he laughed. "No, Ann. Not insane. But if you had let me kiss you, I would still have been afraid. If *you* had known Chick that well, a kiss would not have mattered."

"I simply don't understand anything you're saying," she said.

"But do you trust me?"

"I think, I don't know. Perhaps. Why?"

"Forget that I came here. Forget all of this. Don't mention it to anyone." He paused at the door, and as he looked at her again, he was sure at last. There was doubt and wonder in her eyes, but her eyes were clear and deep. The beauty of her face was pure. Now he *wanted* to kiss her. He said, "Good-bye." He closed the door and left her.

GRANT WAS like a half-slaughtered bull. "Where in hell and eternity have you been the last two hours?" he raged. "Where in—"

"I've been busy," Joe said bleakly. "Stop shouting at me." He walked away toward his desk, leaving Grant choking. There were piles of copy for rewrite. A rehash of the murder at Clearwood. The tie-in and build-up for the Potter death. A back-grounding on Potter. Picture captions. The follow-up at Headquarters. Proof against Sim.

Joe's head ached. His stomach kept crumbling. As soon as he finished the early edition spread, more color came in for the later editions. It was four-fifty when the door of city room opened and a flushed but beautiful Margaret came in. Her autumn hair was wind-blown. Her golden brown eyes danced. The curves of her body lifted as she moved, and when she smiled at Joe in that certain way, he knew her lips were feeling a kiss again. He smiled back. "Tough day, huh?"

"Lousy, darling. Tonight I want no more

of it." Her voice was low and meaningful.

"I could use a little rye-and-water in half an hour. At Joey's?"

Her eyes told him yes, and her smile told him many things. He watched her leave. "Finish this, Watts," he said abruptly. "One more word and I'm dead."

Joe sat alone in the shadowy booth and he could see that section of the bar where he had drunk with Chick, with Sim and Watts just twenty-four hours ago. It seemed more than years. More than time could measure. He ordered another whiskey.

"And one for me—make it double," Margaret said. She slipped into the opposite seat and ran her fingers through her hair.

"God, what a hell of a day." She smiled, and Joe knew without any reservation that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. The most beautiful he would ever see, no matter how long he lived.

They talked a while, and more whiskeys came and went. They said it was tough—yeah, damned tough about Sim. A nice guy. A quiet nice guy. You wouldn't think . . .

And in another corner of his brain, Joe was thinking. It had to be the lust for power. Only that. For she had money. But she wanted the paper—the power that it meant. That could be the only motive, if this thing were true.

"Let's get out of here," he said suddenly. "There are quieter places to get drunk."

"For instance?" Her eyes were like hungry coals, glowing.

"There's whiskey at my apartment," he said softly.

"Yes," she said after a long moment. "I seem to remember." She rose and rolled up her coat collar.

Joe mixed two drinks and handed one to Margaret. She gazed at him speculatively. "I thought I knew you, Joe," she said. "Since last night, I'm not sure."

"You mean I'm not the young-love-and-roses guy you figured me?" He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "I hope I'm not breaking your heart."

"What *are* you like?" she asked slowly. Joe frowned and looked at her steadily. "I wouldn't care to publish hidden pages from my soul—not for public consumption, anyway. There's nothing wrong with me. No more than was wrong with Chick."

"How do you mean that?" she asked even more slowly.

"I don't suppose you knew Chick very well. I think I did. He . . . Well, Chick was ambitious. Like myself. Ambitious for the things at the top, but not for the work it took to climb there."

"How well did you know Chick, Joe?" she asked.

Their eyes met and locked. "Very well," he said quietly. "I'll mix another drink." He took her empty glass. When he returned to the living room, Margaret was standing at the twilight window, her fingers clasped behind her. She looked at him and smiled.

"I don't think you would have rhymed with Donna too well, Joe." She tilted her glass and listened to the tinkling of the ice. "My own soul isn't too pretty. You got me thinking, talking about ambition. Dad's got this bum ticker, you know. One of these days he's going to be working under a full head of steam, and bango! That will be jerry. There's nothing sordid about understanding those facts. And when that day comes, what will happen to the *Star-Herald*?"

"You will run it. And Ann. The old man has shoved you through the grind for just that purpose, hasn't he?"

"Ann will do fairly well. She's hard. Donna? No. Donna was gentle. Kathy was gentle. They always hated the paper. Hated it for what it was. They would have changed it. I'll change it, too," she said vibrantly, "but not that way. You know what I'd like, Joe?" She walked up and down the room, and her voice was suddenly ringing with deep chords in her throat. "You know what I'd like?"

"What, Margaret?" he asked softly.

"I'd like to run that paper—just me. All alone. And make it so powerful it could make or break anybody. *Anybody!* I'd like to make people crawl up to me. I'd like to make big men live in the fear of my whim *night and day!* God, how I will love that power." She drained her drink. Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were flushed. She was radiant in violent beauty. "What are you thinking, Joe?" she asked suddenly.

"You inherited everything from your father—the lust for power, the razor-sharpness, the shrewdness. And you are harder than he could ever have been. You got no softness from your mother. It was a trick or freak of fate that all the hard things came to you. There are little ways in which he is soft; you have no softness."

"Do you mind if I'm that way?" she asked softly.

"No." He frowned and lit a cigarette. From here on, he knew, the ice was thin. But the whiskey was hot in her throat, too. "But sometimes you could use a man, don't you think?" He hesitated one long moment. "A man who was so captured by your beauty that he was nothing but a slave, a tool to your wishes. Whatever you asked him to do, it was done."

"Are there such men, Joe?" she asked with a soft laugh.

"You could make a lot of men that way. Perhaps I could be. Chick could have been that kind, I think."

HE SAW it—a flicker of something bright and brittle—streak through the depths of her eyes, and in that moment, *he knew*. Not a muscle moved in his face and his eyes kept smiling.

And then she smiled, ever so gently. "I could use a man. Sometimes. And even



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ☆

now, Joe." She lifted her lips. "Kiss me, Joe."

He took three steps and he touched her warm shoulders. Her lips were there, parted and waiting. Her kiss tore through his calm and swept him down the whirl-pool where Chick had gone before. Where any man might go. Again and again she kissed him.

"I think you understand me, Joe," she whispered softly. His cheek was against her. Some slight movement of her arm brushed his ribs. Something—like a silent drum-beat of warning—echoed behind her whisper. He opened his eyes. Her left arm was holding him tightly. And then he saw!

On the wall behind her hung the mirror, and in the mirror he saw Margaret's hand sliding out of her purse—the purse that lay on the table behind her. And in her hand was a gleaming small automatic. Her white fingers curled about it delicately. It moved out of sight.

*It was moving into his stomach, Joe realized.*

"I wondered how much you understood, Joe, darling," she whispered softly. "Kiss me one more time."

"Yes. One time. . . ." His lips started down. His heart was erupting against his ribs. He could not breathe. One more instant. . . .

He hurled her aside and grasped downward blindly. A roar blasted in the room. Something tinkled and broke. Then he had her wrist and was twisting. She screamed—not in pain—in a fury almost inhuman, and the beauty of her face was almost flaming. Then she screamed again. This time in pain as he twisted further. The gun clattered to the floor. He kicked it, and pushed her. She stumbled backward and half-fell against the wall. Then the gun was in his hand and she was staring at him with eyes that sparkled with hate. She whispered something ugly and cold.

"It doesn't matter, Margaret. Nothing you can say matters. Nothing any more. You—"

Footsteps clattered on the stairs. A staccato knocking came at the door. "Joe? Joe, are you in there?"

"Ann." Margaret breathed. Other footsteps, heavier, came rumbling along the hall. A fist shook the door.

"Joe! Joe Marlin! What's happening in there!" This time the voice was Warren Grant's.

Margaret's lips turned pale. Her fingers trembled as she looked agonizingly at Joe. Slowly she came toward him. Her beauty was almost hypnotic. His senses swam in the contemplation of it.

"Joe, please, listen to me," she breathed. "Let me go. Don't tell. You and I, together. So much for both of us. We're the right kind, us. Joe, please, look at me. I'm beautiful. I can give you everything. I swear, Joe. *Listen!*"

He *was* listening, and he felt time slide into nowhere. In that span of timeless eternity, he felt her kiss again. And yet he could think: She was the Devil's love-song. She was ambition, ruthless and devouring and endless. She was a murderess. Her brain dreamed in its nest of violence and power. She had used her beauty to drive Chick to Hell, seeking the will-o-the-wisp of her charms, and he had killed for her and her beauty. Then she, realizing the danger of the clue, had killed Chick. Someday she would kill again and he—Joe—could be the Chick of another day and time.

"Please, it's such a little thing, Joe," she begged. "Just a little lie, for so much. And think, Joe. Don't you love me? Don't you?"

"I do! *And I must not!*" he choked. There was not another instant for waiting, for watching, for listening. Like a man hurling himself from an embrace, he rushed toward the shaking door and pulled it open.

Ann and Warren Grant rushed in. "What is the—" Grant started.

"Mother heard you talking to me," Ann broke in breathlessly. "She told me something she's always feared and—Margaret!" she cried.

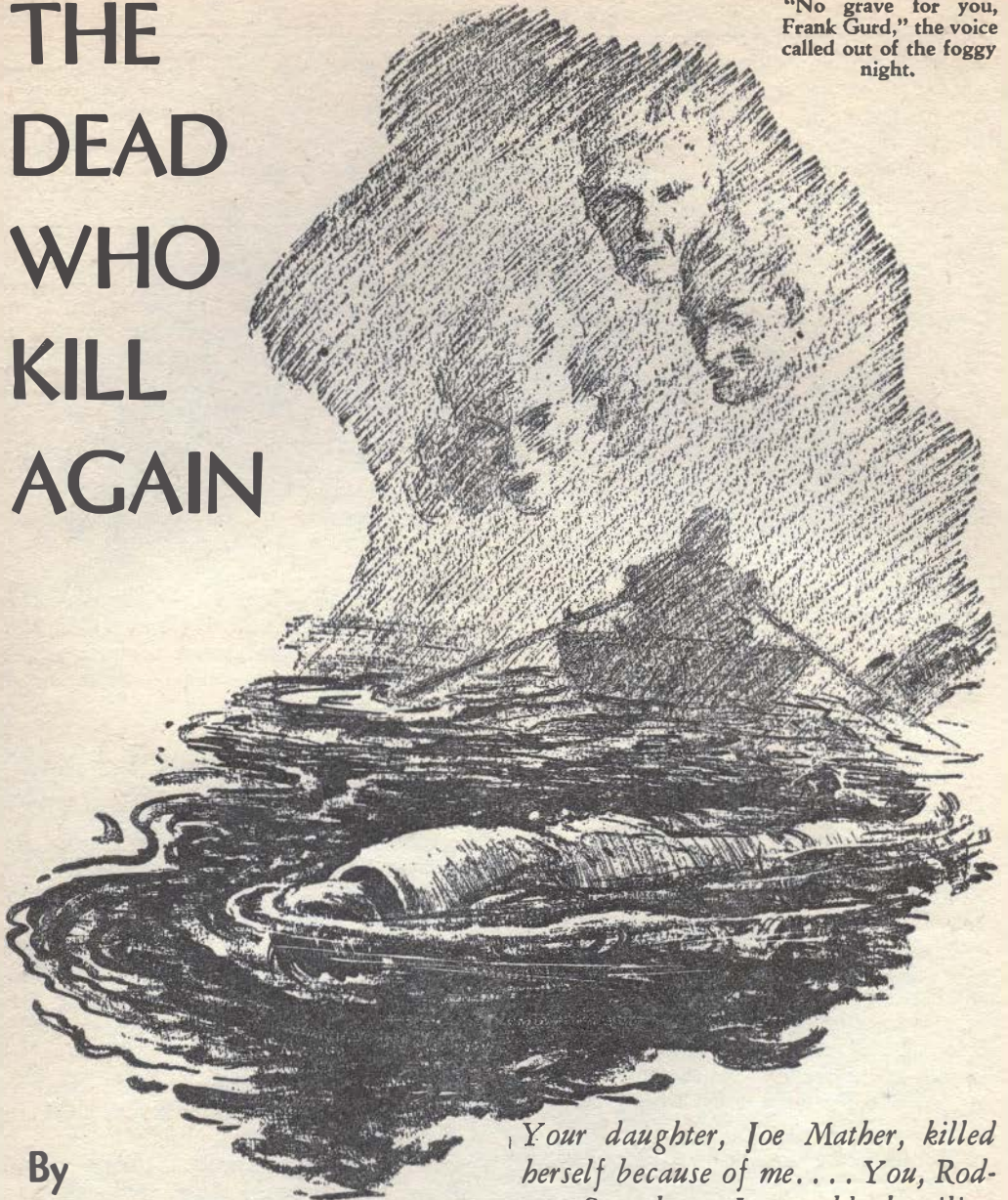
"Hello, darling. And what did mother tell you?"

Ann stared at her. Some glimpse of terrible realization seemed to creep through her eyes. "She said she had seen you once—choke a kitten because it wouldn't obey. And something, some premonition in her for years, as she watched you, told her your soul was evil. I didn't— Oh, Margaret, what is the matter? Tell me—"

*(Continued on page 96)*

# THE DEAD WHO KILL AGAIN

"No grave for you, Frank Gurd," the voice called out of the foggy night.



By  
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

THERE WERE no marks on the man's body, except for what the barnacled rocks had done to it. There was nothing to indicate violence and there had been no violence. Nevertheless, he had been murdered. . . .

\* \* \*

Some time before dawn, Friday, November fifteenth, the incurving tip of Fish

*Your daughter, Joe Mather, killed herself because of me. . . . You, Rodney Stoneham, I was blackmailing into disgrace. . . . Leila Mornay—your husband died because of me. . . . Tom Corbin, I left you a paralytic in a wheelchair. . . . And now, before the swirling black waters close over me, tell me—who was the fog-hidden figure who left me to the mercy of the night and the seething dark tide?*

Hook Spit will claw my drowned body out of the current that on the ebb tide sets southeastward across our bay. If it were not for that current, my body would be swept out to the Atlantic. That was what my murderer planned. He told me so.

He or she. Muffled and distorted by thick fog, the voice might well have been a woman's, deep-throated and husky. "No grave for you, Frank Gurd," it called out of the blind night. "You'll lie deep in the cold sea." And then I heard a thump of thole pins and a splash of oars rowing away.

From those words, from the clumsy handling of the oars, I knew my murderer is not one of our bay people. All of us know about the current. None of us would row so clumsily. Even after years inland I remembered the trick of it.

I remember much I'd forgotten. Do you also remember, Jed Mather, as you peer at my corpse drowned and caught in the hook of the spit, do you too remember that other dawn twenty years ago when we peered together at another corpse caught just so among the rocks?

You cannot remember, since you did not know, that I lied when I said I'd come to go with you on your round of lobster pots. I hadn't arrived around the curve of the bay from my house. I'd just slipped out of a back window of yours, at the head of the spit.

What your daughter Nancy had told me just as I was about to leave her had delayed me long enough so that I blundered into you. Because of what she told me, I left Bayton that same night and this was somewhat ironical because it was Nancy who'd kept me here long after I made up my mind to leave.

You stayed. Every dawn you've plodded out of your house and along Fish Hook Spit to where your dory is moored. Before you climb down into your dory you look into the hook of the spit to see what the current has brought you.

It has brought you three corpses. That unknown sailor's. Nancy's, a month after I left. And now mine. An accident. A suicide. Now a murder.

I was murdered. The murderer must not escape punishment.

*Who?*

The mistake about the current, the clumsy oars, mean that he—or she—is not one

of our bay people but someone out of my life since I left Bayton. Someone who knew I was coming here, when, and also that I would row out to the Black Rocks at night in the fog. Someone who knew that the Rocks are uncovered only at low tide, that at flood tide they are eight feet under.

I had to wait for the tide to be just right, low, and soon enough after dark so I could row the five miles to the Rocks and the five miles back and slip away without being seen. The first low tide in full dark would be that of the fourteenth, the last that was not too late, the seventeenth. That gave me four nights, Thursday through Sunday. The moon would be in her last quarter but the starshine is very bright on clear nights, so I must choose a foggy night.

So must the killer. It is obvious that as I planned for myself, I planned for him. Every move I made, made his task easier. If I recall my moves therefore, it should be possible to see how he fitted his moves into mine and so to trap him.

I left the city late Wednesday night. It was already dark when I turned off the parkway at Langdon Traffic Circle and no other car turned off behind mine. The back roads were almost deserted. I would have known if another car had followed. None did. I reached the road behind the house—I'd come back only once in twenty years—a little after midnight. I blacked-out my headlights as I turned into it. My motor runs too quietly to be heard even if anyone had been awake.

I drove down between the dunes and ran the car into the shack where my father used to stow his nets before he died. I carried into the empty house food enough for the four days, a little alcohol stove that would heat the food without smoke, and a half-dozen blankets. I found my rowboat safe under the rotting dock where I'd hidden it, and put it into the water to soak and tighten its seams. I went back to the house, made up a bed on the floor, removed only my overcoat and shoes and lay down to sleep.

Tired as I was, I could not sleep for thinking of what I would do with the money Rodney Stoneham was waiting to pay me.

*Rodney Stoneham?*



HE HATES ME enough to kill me. I've seen the black hate in his eyes every time he's paid me for silence.

I've hated him as much, and longer. I've hated him ever since he told me the company was sending me to the university for a four-year course, all expenses paid. "We're not being benevolent," he explained when I bristled. "You're a good mechanic but good mechanics are a dime a dozen. You've got something more, something the company needs if it is to live. We're building for the future. We're making an investment in your ability and your loyalty."

And to safeguard that investment he had me sign a contract that bound me to the company for ten years.

I wasn't twenty yet but that contract put me wise to Stoneham's little game. I played along with him, building for the future. My future. I graduated with honors. I was the best confidential assistant a tycoon ever had—till Stoneham made the slip I knew he'd make. Then he and his company were at my mercy.

A mercy with cash value.

But why should Stoneham kill me now when I'd at last agreed to sell him back the documents I took from his safe six years ago? If he's waited this long, why shouldn't he wait a week longer? To kill me before he got them would mean that someone else might find where I'd hidden them. Then the world would know that the company so highly praised for its war effort had actually defrauded the country in its hour of direst need!

He could not know how safely hidden they were, sealed in a waterproof pouch and buried under piled stones on the Black Rocks, far out in our bay.

Wednesday night I wasn't thinking of how Rodney Stoneham hated me or how I hated him. I was thinking how by Monday afternoon at the latest I'd be flying down to Rio. I was thinking of the swank apartment I'd rent in one of the tall houses that edge Copacabana Beach, of lazy afternoons at the Jockey Club, of gay nights on the Avenida Rio Branco. Best of all, I thought, in Rio I would never be cold.

That was why I had to cash in Stoneham's papers. Pneumonia had so ravaged my chest last winter that I can no longer endure cold. Even now the November chill

was seeping into the house and striking through the blankets I'd piled over me. The dull ache was starting in my chest.

I shivered. I was dead for sleep but the cold would not let me sleep.

I lit the alcohol stove. The blue flame warmed my hands but it could not warm the cavernous room. I looked longingly at the pale shape of the fireplace with its yawning black mouth. There was driftwood outside, enough for a hundred fires. But the light of a fire in here would be seen for miles.

Years ago, I remembered, September through May, there would be a fire in this room when I came to the head of the stairs, rubbing sleep out of my eyes. The whirr of mother's sewing machine would cut off and by the time I'd reached the bottom step she'd be in the kitchen and the smell of frying bacon would be trailing out to me.

The fire was only glowing embers the fall morning at four that I stole down those stairs for the last time, but the room was still warm. The loose brick from the hearth was warm as I lifted it to get at the money Mrs. Parsons had paid mother the night before for Jen's wedding dress. Outside the bleak chill struck through me as I stopped to lace on my shoes, but it didn't bother me then.

Now, on this Wednesday night—Thursday morning, really—the damp chill seeped deep into me and the pain grew sharper in my chest with each breath that wheezed in my throat. I coughed. I coughed again and again. I must get warm or the coughing would tear me to pieces.

Dunes mounded behind the house and on either side. The front windows looked out across the bay but who would be awake this time of night to see firelight in them? I could put out the fire as soon as the room was warmed, long before dawn.

Even with blankets wrapped awkwardly around me it took me only a few minutes to collect all the driftwood I'd need, and dry some seaweed for kindling, but I was dizzy with coughing when I staggered back in again. I shucked the blankets and draped them over the front windows to keep the firelight inside. Then lay down again close to the hearth.

The first leaping blaze died down to a dance of green and yellow and scarlet flames along charring wood. I recalled telling

Leila about the bright colors of a driftwood fire.

*Leila Mornay?*

Her voice is deep-throated, edged by a huskiness that tears the heart out of a man. Muffled by fog, it well might be the voice I heard out of the blind night.

I was still Rodney Stoneham's trusted assistant when I first heard it, saying, "I've been eager to meet you, Mr. Gurd. My husband, Jon Mornay, has told me so much about you."

Sure, I thought. He's told you I'm the guy who can swing that West Coast branch managership his way. And then I really saw the woman who'd come up to me in the hotel bar where I was fortifying myself against one of those dreary dinners Stoneham gives each year to the minor executives and their wives.

I saw white shoulders rising out of a black froth of lace. I saw a neck too long, a face too broadly moulded for beauty. The half-parted lips were moistly red and the thin nostrils quivered. And the eyes, narrow, slumberous glowed with promise.

In the weeks and months that followed, I forgot Jon Mornay and the promotion he wanted. Leila forgot neither. The dark fire glowed always in her eyes but the promise remained only a promise, so Mornay got his promotion. But not to the West Coast. The head of our Far Eastern operations was getting jittery. We brought him and his family back to Los Angeles and offered *his* place to Mornay. "The way things are out there," Stoneham told him, "it would be unwise for you to take your wife along. As soon as conditions get back to normal, we'll send her out to you at company expense."

It was a chance that comes once in a lifetime. Mornay went out to Manila—alone. Conditions did not get back to normal and nearly two years later a nurse who'd escaped from Corregidor wrote Leila how Jon had died.

She showed me the letter. She said, "I'll never forgive myself for letting him go."

I said, "He wouldn't have gone if he really loved you."

She said, "I loved him." She said, "I'll never forgive the man who sent him out there."

I said, "I'm taking care of Rodney Stoneham for you. I'm putting the screws

on him, but good. Don't worry about *him*."

"What do you mean?"

I told her. I could tell her now what I'd planned to for months and hadn't dared. I could answer the question I'd read in her eyes from the time I resigned. I could tell her how I'd put it over on Stoneham the Magnificent because now she too hated him.

**O**R DID she suspect who'd persuaded Stoneham that Jon Mornay was the best of our young men for the Manila post? Why otherwise did she tell me that she was going away and promise to let me know where, then never let me hear from her again?

Even so, how could Leila Mornay know I'd agreed to sell Stoneham back his papers? How could she possibly know I was coming here to get them?

Remembering Leila, I must have drowsed off for abruptly the fire was almost dead and the windows were paling in the black sidewalls. I jumped up, raked out the smoking embers onto the hearth and stamped them out. Still cobweb-brained I stumbled to a window and looked out past the edge of the blanket I'd draped over it.

The sun hadn't yet risen but I could see the bay. Lead gray, heaving in long, smooth swells, it told me there was no wind. The tide was beginning to flood but the Black Rocks still humped up above the swell. Far out and beyond them, the horizon was hazed.

If this weather held I'd have my fog tonight.

The dark arms of the bay's shores almost enclosed its waters. At the incurving tip of the arm to my left a doll-sized man-shape, black against the brightening sky, plodded to the end of Fish Hook Spit. I knew it had to be Jed Mather.

You reached the end of the spit, Jed Mather, and stood there looking down to see what flotsam it had clawed for you out of the ebbing tide. A brilliant red spark broke from the horizon behind you and became the haze-reddened sun leaping out of the sea. The gray drained out of the bay and gave place to an angry red glow. You climbed wearily down into your dory and cast off.

It seemed to me that you turned and looked straight at me before you started to

row out to your lobster pots. But why should you? Why should you look toward a house that you thought had been empty since the spring of '30?

That was when I found in the Bayton Gazette the account of my mother's death. I wrote Lawyer Meldrum to sell everything in the house, deduct the funeral expenses and his fee and me what was left, if anything.

I don't know why I didn't tell him to sell the house and land too. I had no idea then that I'd ever come back here.

Mark Meldrum sent me all the sale brought. He explained that my mother had been buried "by those who loved her" (for some reason I recall his exact phrase), but he didn't say why he did not charge me for his own services.

The spit hid you from me. The tide was higher now on the Black Rocks. At the end of the bay's northwest arm, Bayton's roofs were bright in the climbing sun and smoke was beginning to crawl up from their chimneys. The white steeple of the church showed above the red slate roof of Bayton School. I could not see the playing field that stretches from the school to the highway but I remembered it. I remembered how I would stand at the edge of the field, watching the game from which I was barred because of my twisted back. I remembered the pity in the faces of my schoolmates and how I hated them because of it.

I'd twist away and hurry home only to see the same pity in the face of my mother. She who'd borne me twisted and different. I'd throw my books down, run to my boat and row out to the Black Rocks where there was no one to pity me for being fatherless and a cripple.

Your Nancy, Jed Mather, was the only one in whose face I read no pity—no sign of knowing that I was different.

I was rigid suddenly. Taut. I'd heard a sound behind me, a footfall in the empty room.

The sound didn't come again. I made myself turn. No one was in the room. The sound had been only a thud of ancient timbers expanding in the sun's warmth. I jerked the blankets from the windows and let sunlight flood the room. I folded the blankets and piled them for a seat, lit the little stove and put water on to heat. I measured into a canteen cup a teaspoon of

coffee powder, opened a box of crackers and a jar of cheese. As I waited for the water to boil, the emptiness of the house crowded in on me.

I wondered why the aloneness should bother me so. I've lived alone ever since Tom Corbin moved out of the flat we shared.

*Tom Corbin?*

Perhaps more than Rodney Stoneham, certainly more than Leila Mornay, Tom Corbin has reason to hate me.

Tom was a blue-eyed, mild-spoken blond from the Mid-West—captain of the company softball team, organizer of all the employees' outings. Friendly as a kitten and just as naive. Everyone from the porters to the department heads liked him and confided in him. Living with him, I kept my fingers on the pulse of the outfit and knew its secret undercurrents as Stoneham never could.

Tom was even more valuable to me after I left the company and he took my place. He didn't realize how much he told me, in careless words dropped without thought—in half-phrases meaningless to anyone who did not know the company's affairs as I did. When the Acme people suddenly tripled the price they'd asked for a plant the company needed to fulfill its Navy contracts, he was altogether honest in swearing that the leak had not been through him. But it couldn't have been through anyone else. Tom was discharged and, no longer essential to war industry, drafted.

Maybe he lost some of his wide-eyed naiveté in the Army. Maybe he got to remembering the words and half-phrases he'd dropped to me and the carefully contrived questions I'd asked. He had a lot of time to remember in the foxholes and hospitals.

But Tom Corbin is hopelessly paralyzed below the waist.

I finished my breakfast in the old house and cleaned up as best I could. I'd brought along a book about Rio, but I couldn't read. I still was dead for sleep but I couldn't sleep. I prowled, the echoes of my footfalls accompanying me, into the kitchen, into mother's room behind the stairs, up the stairs to my own attic room.

**T**HE ROOM that was once mine. It rejected me. The house rejected me. It would have driven me out if I'd not been

certain I should not need to stay in it another night.

All day, from the front window to which I returned again and again, I watched the bay heave in the long, smooth swells that meant there was no wind. As the afternoon wore on I watched the sky gray over with cloud and the bay grow leaden. And at last, as the light faded out of the sky, I watched the fog come rolling in from the sea.

It blotted out the horizon. It hid the Black Rocks which were just beginning to appear above the ebbing tide. It reached Fish Hook Spit and I waited for the light to come in in the windows of your house, Jed Mather, but before it did, the fog had rolled over your house and I could no longer see it.

I turned back into the darkening room to pack what I'd brought with me. I would not have to wait for full dark to take the stuff out to the car.

When I opened the door I heard, deep within the fog, the hollow hoot of Bargat Lightship's foghorn but I could not make out its beacon. Nothing was left of the bay save a narrow, hazing strip of water just off the edge of the shore, but the shack where my father used to stow his nets was still plain and I could discern the dunes beyond it, mounding down to the shore.

I had too much to carry to make it in one trip but I brought it all out and piled it on the sand. Once I was out of the house I didn't want to go back again.

I closed the door. I was rid of the house. The house was rid of me.

I carried the first load down to the shack, through the chill damp, and my chest started to ache before I'd stowed the load. I started back for the rest and stopped stockstill, my throat locking.

As I stepped out of the shack a dune suddenly changed form as though someone had pulled back behind it a split-second too late. "Who's there?" I whispered and then found my voice and called aloud, "Who's there?"

No answer. No sound except the sough of the tide and the wheeze of my own breath. And the hoot of the foghorn.

I could go and look for tracks but why should I? No one was there. What I'd seen was merely a swirl of the thickening fog. I got into motion again toward the pile of

stuff in front of the house. As I scooped up what I had left, I had the sensation of eyes watching me.

I know now that what I saw was no swirl of the fog. Someone watched me as I hurried back to the shack. Someone watched me hurry to the dock and squeeze between two dripping piles to the boat I'd hidden under the rotting boards.

The marks should be there by the dune west of the house. If they are a man's foot-prints it was Rodney Stoneham who watched me. If the impressions are absurdly small, the toes no wider than two of my fingers and the heels half-inch spikes, it was Leila Mornay. If there are no foot-prints but only two narrow ruts trailing across the sands from the road, it was Tom Corbin.

Yes, I know the bullet in Tom's spine has robbed him of the use of his legs but I've read how in the hospital they exercise arm and shoulder muscles till they are immensely strong. I've read how the government is giving to men like Tom cars specially equipped for them to drive. He could have driven down here in such a car. He could have lifted his wheelchair out of it, could have lifted himself into the chair and rolled it down between the dunes, the narrow tires soundless in the sand.

The watcher could be Tom Corbin or Leila or Stoneham. Whoever it was saw the fog light up with the glow of my flashlight as I looked to see how much water had leaked into the boat. He heard the thump of the can as I bailed out. He heard the keel scrape as I shoved the boat afloat and tumbled into it over the stern.

He did not hear my oars as I rowed out into the fog.

The night closed around me, blind and featureless. Even I who knew and remembered every ripple and eddy and current for our bay would have been utterly lost had it not been for the recurrent, melancholy hoot of the foghorn. Even so, I almost missed the Black Rocks, would have missed them if the current hadn't taken hold of my boat and nosed toward their dark loom, left of me as I faced the shore.

Left of me. The current set from the southeast so the tide already was flooding. I'd taken longer than I'd counted on. Nearly an hour longer—my watch said it was almost eight and dead low was at seven-five.

The bow thumped and grated. I scrambled overside onto a nearly flat rock, probed with my flash beam for a projection to which I could moor my boat and found a finger of stone that would serve. I made sure it was firm, bent a bowline on a bight around it. The hitch was tight and hard. The painter would not slip.

I stood still, bringing back to mind the lay of this pile of boulders which at low tide is a roughly oval island about ten yards across and at flood a drowned reef. Near the center a rock juts slantingly up like a giant's thumb. Beneath this, in the acute angle which its underside makes with its more nearly level neighbor, I'd jammed the oilsilk pouch in which were sealed papers I'd taken from Stoneham's safe. I'd heaped on the pouch a dozen small stones and atop these four or five heavier rocks as large as I could handle.

Abruptly I was trembling but not with the damp chill. I'd made that cairn as safe as I could but what if six years of winter storms had torn it apart? In a fever of haste I scrambled over the rocks, fell and nearly lost the flash, rasped hands on rough stones as I shoved erect again. I went more slowly, using the light and found the jutting rock. The cairn was still at its base but was it still as I had piled it? Down on my knees I pulled it apart with frantic haste, closed bleeding hands on the pouch and breathed again.

Here in my hands was Rio, lazy days, gay nights and eternal warmth to bake the ache from my chest.

I THRUST the sack deep in my overcoat pocket, pushed up and stumbled back across the rocks to their edge. My feet splashed into icy water and I coughed, but

that didn't matter. In another few seconds I'd be rowing back to shore again and the rowing would warm me. The fog swallowed my light beam only a foot or two from its lens but it found the stone finger around which I'd hitched the painter.

The stone was black-wet and it was bare of any rope. No boat's bow nosed the flat rock on which I'd landed.

My hitch could not possibly have slipped. I'd come to the wrong spot. These rocks are much alike and—I heard a laugh then, a mirthless, hoarse laugh from out there in the blind night. "Who's there?" I cried out. "Who is it?"

"No grave for you, Frank Gurd," I heard, the voice so muffled, so distorted by the thick fog that I could not tell even whether it was a man's or a woman's. "You'll lie deep in the cold sea."

And then the laugh again and thump of thole pins and a splash of clumsy oars rowing away. Then no sound.

No sound but the foghorn's hoot and the plash of the tide creeping up to drown the Rocks and the wheeze of breath in my tightening throat. I don't know if I could have gotten out a shout had I tried. I didn't try. No one but the owner of that voice would be out on the bay in this fog-filled lark and I would not beg him for mercy. That satisfaction I would not give him, to hear me beg for pity.

I knew it would be futile to try signalling to shore with my flashlight, the lightship's thousand-candle beacon had been invisible from shore so how could this small beam be seen across the five miles?

Time was I could have swum that distance and not felt it, but not now. The rising water washed only over my ankles and already pain flared in my chest. Already

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**3 TUNE IN... 2 NETWORK SHOWS!** "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sun. evenings, CBS Network, "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.

the coughing tore at my throat. A minute spent in the icy water and I would be blind and strengthless.

I retreated to the highest boulder of the Rocks, the same beneath which this pouch had lain safely hidden for six years. I could no longer see the water, but I knew it followed me relentlessly, knew it rose and would keep rising till it covered this boulder and swept me from it into the current. . .

I was done for. Whoever planned this had planned well. I could not escape. But I could make sure that he should not escape punishment.

*Which one?* Rodney Stoneham or Leila Mornay or Tom Corbin?

Of the three, only Stoneham knew I left the city Wednesday afternoon, and why, but I had given another birthplace when I first started to work for the company and never changed the record. Stoneham knows nothing about Bayton. Only Leila knows that. I let the name slip to her the night when, gazing into her fireplace, I told her about the green and yellow and scarlet flames of a driftwood fire.

Tom Corbin does not know about the papers or about Bayton, but I recall telling him how high the tide rises in the bay where I used to live and how the Black Rocks are above the ebb tide but eight feet under at the flood.

Yet no one followed me as I drove here to Bayton. Hence they must all three have had a part in my murder, all three must have come together and planned it: Rodney Stoneham who let me have a crumb from his over-abundant table and made sure that even for that crumb I should repay him. Leila Mornay who made me a promise and never kept it. Tom Corbin whose straight back reminded me morning and night, night and morning of how my own was twisted.

Standing on the highest boulder of the Black Rocks, clutching the oilskin pouch in my numbed hands, listening to the dark swash of the tide, I knew only that someone had marooned me there to die. I swore that he should not escape.

I had three hours to wait in this lightless void, to listen to the slow rise of the tide. . .

I had three hours to write on the backs of these papers, step by step, the moves that brought me here to die on the Black Rocks

and so reveal how the killer fitted his moves into mine, hence who he—or she—is.

*Stoneham!* Whoever executed me, it is evident that Stoneham called the three together to plan it and on Stoneham at least I am sure of my revenge for these papers will be found with my body and they will ruin him. Which of the other two carried out the plan—Go look, Jeff Mather. Go look at the sand dunes.

The tide has risen to my knees. I've just time to. . .

**T**HE DAWN sun burned red through thinning fog, Gaunt, his eyes black coals in the transparent gray of his face, Jed Mather sat in his dory reading the papers he'd taken out of the pouch that lay on the thwart beside him. The oilskin was wet but it had kept the papers dry and the scrawled penciling on them was clear enough for even his tired old eyes to read.

The papers rustled in his palsied hands. He tore them across and across and again across. He picked up the pouch, stuffed the torn bits into it and laid it down again on the thwart. He unshipped an oar, rose, prodded at the body around whose neck the pouch had been tied by its drawstring. The body came free of the barnacled rocks and Mather's oar guided it along the dory's side till it floated across the bow.

Jed Mather glanced across the bay to the house from whose chimney, yesterday dawn, he'd seen a wisp of smoke curl. The rowing became easier as the current took hold of boat and body. Mather rested his oars, picked up the oilskin sack and lets its contents dribble overside, then threw the pouch in after them.

Expressionless, he watched the white bits of paper trail after the dark body, watched the body drift out to sea on the current that with the flood sweeps northwestward across the bay but with the ebb sweeps relentlessly back again to Fish Hook Spit.

When he no longer could see the body, Jed Mather started rowing again. In the long and lonely years of waiting a man's wrists lose something of their strength if not their skill. He still could row silently when there was need but this morning there was no need. Mather's oars splashed as clumsily as any inlander's as he rowed out to his lobster pots.

# Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



Detective Arthur Posschl surveyed the shambles in Akron, Ohio's Hotel Mayflower's room 803. This dead girl was covered with knife wounds which could not have brought death instantly. Yet, in a crowded hotel she hadn't called for help or made any other commotion which might have saved her life. For a long while Posschl pondered on this—and when he finally understood what had happened, he didn't feel any better. The reason pretty Patricia Patrick had made no sound had to be because calling for help would have guided her killer more surely to her than assistance. . . His understanding of this fact enabled him to solve the case, and blind ex-convict George Younes is currently serving his second life term for murder!



When Louis Mory, a Frenchman, came home → from his office one evening, he found his youthful wife at the door—but not quite as usual. She was hanging there by the neck.

Police uncovered the granny of all mother-in-law problems, when they pinned the crime on wealthy Mme. Mory, Louis' mother, who once had disowned him because of his marriage. She still felt considerably put upon when sentenced to the guillotine!

← There were a lot of folks around in 1803, but we'll take a look at only three of them: George Foster, a convicted killer; one Professor Aldini, who claimed to have a formula for restoring to life victims of the hangrope; and an unnamed influential skeptic. Anyway, Foster was hanged and the skeptic arranged for the professor to work on him. He was sticking around for a laugh—when Foster surprised even the professor by sitting up and mumbling his thanks. Aldini survived the shock, but the skeptic died of heart-failure.



← A quarrel over the will of an aunt led Charles Russell Geary of Newark, N. J., to kill his brother and two uncles by marriage. Then he called the police. But, before they reached the house, Geary put a bullet through his own head. The dead men had named each other their respective heirs in their wills—and one of the weirdest legal battles in history ensued over the question of who had died first. After three years the courts gave up, handed Geary his ultimate defeat by naming the blood relatives of one of the uncles by marriage as the inheritors.





It was only a moment, of course, but it seemed forever. I heard voices calling, footsteps racing nearer, people coming.

# KILL, BABY, KILL!

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Long Sleep

I'D HAVE given a hundred dollars to keep from seeing Carl, but it had to be done. Lawyers have to do a lot of things. I fed myself three double scotches and walked out of Kerrin's Bar to a cab. It was just after six o'clock. Manhattan was

like an oven that had been working hot all day. My suit hung around me like a wet towel. I was tired and hot, with a piece of a headache playing around my skull. Furthermore I was angry. Not sharply or intensely. Just sore in a dull nagging way.



By  
JOE KENT



*Somewhere, in this mad, sky-piercing city of steel and concrete, lay the secret of Carl's death. And to save my own life I must seek it, though it meant staring in every baby carriage in town until I found that grinning incubus who wore a baby cap, and whose miniature arms delivered the sudden death that might be mine!*

**Gripping  
Murder-Mystery  
Novelette**

You see, Carl Ward was my cousin. I couldn't help it; nobody had asked me. I hadn't seen him in three years. Not since the time he was at my apartment with a girl named Molly. She was sweet, but also very young. I suppose that was the first time she'd ever touched a martini. Anyway, I broke Carl's jaw that night. I don't know what ever happened to Molly; she went away.

Carl was a painter. Sometimes he did magazine illustrations. Once in a while he did portraits. Usually, though, he just prowled along Third Avenue, down into the Bowery and around the Village, sketching the El, or a passed-out bum. His pictures were ugly; the heart and soul of them were ugly—just like Carl. You understand?

*I hated Carl. . .*

He lived in this lean old building on Third Avenue, a couple of blocks up from Forty-second Street. Old newspapers were stacked on the stairs, and somewhere a man was snoring as if he were too discouraged to ever awake. It was an ugly building. Like Carl.

And his apartment was dirty and ugly. Like Carl. He stood there after he'd opened the door and sort of grinned at me. His face was paste-white and bony. He was thin and sunken in body. He always reminded me of someone who had lived forever in a cavern underground.

He ran his fingers through his long black hair. "This is quite a pleasure, Joe," he said. There was a sardonic sing-song in everything he said. "Come into my little palace."

I went in. It smelled of dust, of whiskey and paints. I tossed my brief-case on the table and lit a cigarette.

"I've written you three times about Uncle Fredrick's will. Why don't you come to my office as I suggested?"

He smiled again. "I despise professional chambers, Joe. I knew you'd come here, finally, and anyway, I've been quite busy on a most fascinating project. It has absolutely nothing to do with painting. Or women," he added slyly. "How about a manhattan?"

"If you've got a clean glass." While he mixed it, I sorted the papers out of my brief-case. It was a raw cocktail, made with raw, hot whisky and almost no vermouth. I choked it down.

"Now sit down and listen," I said. "As my letters explained, you and I are the sole heirs of Uncle Frederick's estate. He made me sole executor before he died, because I'm a lawyer, I suppose. The net value of the estate will be about eighty thousand dollars, after taxes. That sum is to be divided between us. If either of us dies, the survivor receives the entire sum. Now, everything is ready—"

He twitched his lips. "Haven't you toyed with the happy issue that a taxi would kill me? Or that someone would murder me?"

Our eyes met over the flame of a match as he lit his pipe. "No," I said softly. "But you are thinking that now."

"You're so wonderfully calm, Joe." He took my glass and fixed more manhattans. I watched him and felt the smouldering hate get hot inside my ribs. He was so damned ugly. So dirty inside his head. He was so easy to hate.

I didn't realize, but suddenly my chest felt starved for air. My hands were hot and clenched on the chair. I was staring at his pale throat. *And I was thinking it.*

A cab rushing through the night. . . Dim lights. . . Carl. . . One desperate wail of brakes. Then a limp lean form on the concrete, and a broken neck. Dead and gone forever.

"No, Joe, not I. But *you*—you are thinking it. *You are, Joe,*" he whispered with a yellowed smile.

I choked and swallowed the drink fast. Suddenly the room seemed oven-hot and airless. It was almost dark. I could scarcely see Carl. I am drunk. I am getting very drunk, I thought strangely.

"Listen. Sign these papers. Turn on a light and sign these papers," I said thickly. "I've got to get out of here."

He took the pen and toyed with it. He snapped on the lamp and read the inventory, pausing to look at me and smile. "Joe, I enjoy this little visit. I like to look at you, just as you are now. I—Oh, there's no hurry. Here, Joe, let me mix you another drink."

"Sign those damned papers!" I choked. I was suddenly afraid: afraid of something fiery and dim inside me. I was afraid of this hour and this room. I was afraid of what was happening inside me.

He poured another drink into my glass. I didn't want it. I feared it. Yet, as

through a mist, I saw my shaking fingers climbing toward my lips and I tasted the hot brine of the drink. Suddenly I *knew*. This time the drink was *too raw*. Too overloaded with something!

I staggered up and tried to throw the glass. The room rolled over on its side and Carl was giving me a yellowed smile from the bottom of a burning well. I tried to choke, to get rid of the drinks. I felt the room roll over again and I pitched forward.

Carl's laughter, clammy and thin, trailed me down through miles of hot black clouds. Then everything was lost and gone.

**T**HE PIECES of sound filtered through the malaria-like fever under my skull. First it was the antique thundering of the El. It was the sick-weak crying of a baby somewhere. It was the blasting ache of my own head.

Everything was dark. I reached out blindly and felt woolly cloth. Shoes. Another piece of cloth. Then a wall, a door. Dimly I realized I must be in a closet—Carl's closet, for the clammy odor of his body swelled out of the clothes. I finally found the knob. When I got the door open, a gray dawn filled the window across the room.

I pulled myself up and stumbled onto into the dirty bedroom. A .32 pistol was on the dresser beside an empty gin bottle. I swallowed and tried to listen.

There was no sound within the apartment. My pulse kept blasting. My stomach felt like a sink-trap. When I tried to move, I staggered and reeled. I stumbled into the bathroom and held my head under the cold tap until some of the fever evaporated. I looked at myself in the mirror.

There was a long purple bruise across my temple and running up into my black hair. My black eyes were dead and faded. I needed a shave. Then I noticed that I was undressed except for my shorts. Even my shoes were gone. My watch. My ring.

The baby kept crying in the apartment below. I wanted to yell at it to shut up. I wanted to throw something at the floor. I was shot. It was like every hangover in history, piled up in my brain, all the way down to my stomach.

I guided myself by balancing against the wall as I stumbled down the long hall to the living room. The first thing I saw was the

alarm clock, barely visible in the dirty dawn. It was six-twenty. And then, while the odor of the stale-sweet manhattans poured up at me from the cocktail shaker, I saw Carl.

He was sitting on the couch, staring across the room toward the outside door. Yes, his eyes were open and dry. His mouth was open. His fingers were open, and in his lap was a cocktail glass with the cherry inside. And in Carl's white throat stood a knife, a short, heavy knife with a black bone handle, buried to the hilt.

I felt my knees fold and my lips suck open on a whimper. I felt myself staggering toward him, reaching out. And then I stopped and screamed a low sound, a sound that hurt my chest.

That same pale throat. The throat in my nightmare. The throat in my vision of the taxi, the screaming brakes. The broken throat that would mean another forty thousand to me.

*It was broken, now. The nightmare was now reality.*

I caught a chair as I went down and huddled there while the dawn turned to full hot morning. And I tried to remember.

The raw fire of that last cocktail. Then the sickness and the endless fall through the clouds into oblivion. And after that?

"And after that? After that, for God's sake, *what after that?*" I screamed against the wailing of the baby below. I'm no nervous-breakdown boy, but I'm not the original man-of-steel, either. Sweat filmed my face. My fingers hurt where I gripped the chair. I held my tongue between my teeth to keep from screaming. I tried like hell to remember that deathly interlude.

Yes, I had imagined him crumpled on the concrete. His neck limp and broken. I *had* imagined it. Perhaps I had mused a moment on the profit that would be mine. But after that?

Had I killed Carl? Much as I hated him, had I killed him?

Suddenly my nerves strummed. The footsteps in the hall stopped at the door, then the knock came. It was a man. He was whistling a song, a tango about a girl in Spain. It was such an easy rhythm; surely he wasn't hunting for a corpse.

It had to be done, I knew. The door had to be opened. Now or some day. Hiding was useless.

It took all I had to lift the stiff, light body and carry it back to the bedroom. I left it on the bed and it lay there stiff and angular. I dried my sweating hand and went back to the living room as the knock came again. I tried to yawn as I opened the door.

A freckled-faced kid—maybe he was twenty—was standing there in grease-stained coveralls. He grinned openly.

"Say, you didn't put anything on the buggy, huh? I checked it, coming up. The speedometer's still where she was."

"Uh," I said. "No, I—I changed my mind, that is."

"Too bad. That's just the one-night rent, then. Seven-fifty, Mr. Ward."

So he didn't know Carl by sight. I began to breathe again.

"Yes, I'll get the money. Just a minute." I closed the door and hunted for my pants. I finally found all my clothes—tied in a knot, with the cloth cut to shreds. The billfold was gone. I hunted through Carl's pocket and found a ten dollar bill.

"Look, do me a favor," I said to the kid. "You didn't deliver the car to me last night, I take it?" He shook his head. "Well, I hate to admit it, but I seem to have drunk too much. A good thing I didn't try to drive, but—when did I rent the car?"

He peered at a card. "It was delivered here at nine last night."

Nine. And I'd gotten here around six, I recalled. Between six and nine? Then the kid asked for the keys. I found them in Carl's pocket. When he was gone, I sat down to tremble again. Finally I dragged myself into the kitchen and started a silex of strong coffee.

My suit, my shirt, tie, all my clothes were cut into strips. Tied up in a ball. My watch and ring were gone. I had first been drugged with the cocktails. Then slugged in the head. And I had been put in the closet. Finally, Carl had ordered a rent car at nine last night.

He must have planned to kill me. He intended to dump my body somewhere. Probably in a river. He would destroy the clothes. That must have been it. But then what happened to him?

If I didn't kill him, I thought, the true answer to his death must be in this apartment somewhere. *And I have got to find it!* If I don't find it, I don't have the chance

of a fool. I was in this up to the neck.

I poured a cup of coffee and started with the living room. I opened every drawer, looked in every envelope, leafed through every book. I found a lot, but nothing that looked like dynamite. I found two shots of cocaine and a pack of fags that had that sweetness in them. There were letters from a girl named Kathy, and then a newspaper clipping telling that Katherine (Kathy) Hilton had killed herself. It was an ugly, dirty feeling to touch Carl's past.

But I couldn't find that unknown thing I was hunting.

In the kitchen I found seven hundred dollars in cash, stuck in a tin coffee can. In the bathroom I found dream-pills. Finally I had to tackle the bedroom. I tried not to look at the wax-like dummy that yesterday had been Carl.

In the bottom drawer of the dresser, under a thick bed-spread, I started finding things. First it was bullets for the .32. Next it was a big collection of keys of all kinds. Then a little ten-cent notebook. And finally—I couldn't believe what I saw at first.

It was a baby's cap. All trimmed with blue lace, and a bowknot of ribbon in front. But the damndest thing about it was the size. It was big enough to fit a basketball, almost. A tremendous cap. And next I noticed the inside of it. It was dirtier than a Bowery bum's old felt. There was a smearing of sticky oil and sweat on the silky material. There were a few strands of coarse black hair hanging around the ribbon, and the cap smelled like it had the mange.

I just stood there, trying to understand what kind of a baby would have worn this, or what Carl had hidden it for.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Pushed

**T**HAT WAS when the gentle knock echoed from the living room. I twisted around, stuffing the cap back into the drawer, and I heard the door open. It closed softly, and a nice voice—a girl's voice—called out: "Carl? I'm here, Carl. I—"

She stepped into the living room doorway and gazed down the dim hall. She saw me, and that was when she stopped.

I heard her give a slight gasp.

"Oh, I—I'm sorry, I didn't know that—"

Quickly I made a motion. I caught a worn blue bathrobe off the bed and closed the bedroom door behind me. I tried to dredge up a smile as I hurried toward her.

"Carl is—isn't here. In fact, he's out of town. I'm his cousin, Joe Macon."

"Oh. Oh, I think I've heard him mention you," she said in confusion. Her eyes were shy, and they were lovely, too. In fact, I thought, she was too lovely and clean for Carl to have known at all. They were dark, gentle eyes. Dark hair, with soft waves. She was slender, but only in the right places. And somehow, the way she hesitated and looked so shy, I knew she hadn't been in New York long. And she hadn't known Carl long.

"I'm Lynn Winters," she said. "Carl is teaching me to paint. This was my morning for a lesson. He didn't tell me he was leaving. I'm sorry that I—" The words hung in her throat and I saw her fingers jerk slightly.

I followed the trail of her eyes to the couch. And there, dull and dark on the upholstery, was the stain of Carl's blood.

"He left so suddenly. I'm sure he forgot to call you," I said desperately. "I feel sure he'll let you know as soon as—"

I stopped, because her eyes had crawled up to lock with mine. She was young, but there was a child-like wisdom in those dark eyes. She saw in my face the terror and the guilt. It frightened her, I saw. She touched her throat with one hand as she retreated, feeling out behind her for the door. And the color was gone from her cheeks.

"Yes, he—I'm sure he'll call me," she whispered. "Don't bother, please, and—"

"Wait, Lynn! Don't—I mean, please—" I stammered. I don't know what I meant to say. For an instant I thought she was going to scream. Then the knob was turning and the latch clicked open. And then I said the worst thing I could possibly have said. "Lynn, what are you going to do?" I breathed.

"You—your eyes—" she began. I must have reached out. Something frightened her. She gave a little cry and plunged into the hall. Her footsteps beat a swift staccato down the stairs. I slammed the door and

locked it, then leaned back and tried to think.

I knew she was going to tell. She would find a policeman and tell him something was wrong. And anyone would believe her eyes.

I had to get out. I had to get out fast!

I plunged back toward the bedroom. Suddenly I realized my suit was destroyed. There was nothing to do but wear something of Carl's. I found a worn tweed that made me look like a stark ostrich. I pulled on shoes without socks. I stopped, went back to the dresser, and got the baby cap. It meant something. I knew it *had* to mean something. Carl hated children. He wouldn't have kept it without purpose.

I crammed it in my pocket, then I stuffed the notebook in. I hesitated, then reached back and got the .32. I don't know why. I was doing everything wrong, I knew. And I couldn't stop. I couldn't stand still or stop trembling. It was a plunge, and I couldn't halt. And when I hurried through the kitchen, I made the crowning mistake.

I had no money. And there was the seven hundred in cash. So I raked it into my pocket and ran down the stairs.

People were walking normally in the sunlit world. The El thundered comfortably. A vegetable peddler cried his wares, and trucks lumbered on their way. And the eyes of people, no, they did not look at me. I wasn't different. I was just a man in an ill-fitting suit who hadn't shaved this morning. If I would walk calmly, look straight ahead, stop sweating and trembling, and somewhere find a nondescript hotel. . . If I could do those things, and then sit down to think. Or sleep. Oh God, how I wanted to hide my head and sleep forever. . .

**I**T WAS a four-story building without a name. There was only the sign: *Rooms—Day or Week*. And it was less than a block from Carl's apartment, across Third Avenue and up. As I gave the garlic-scented clerk a ten-dollar bill for a week, I remembered a story I'd read once. It was about a killer who couldn't leave the neighborhood where he'd committed the crime.

Was I a killer? And was it that same way with me, subconsciously? Had I killed Carl, and did I want to stay and watch?

I smiled when I found out the room was on the front on the third floor. It seemed to fit, somehow.

When the clerk shuffled away, I ran the bolt on the door and went to the window. Sure enough, I could see Carl's front living room window. The window of the death room. I could even see the greenish shade and the filthy lace drapes at the side. And it seemed so still and slumbering. And down the hall within, down that hall beyond the window, and on the bed at the back, a corpse slept on, ugly and lonely in death. I was going to spend a lot of time watching at this window. I knew that so terribly well.

My room was square and soiled. The bed sagged down. The plaster was cracked. There was a wash-bowl in the corner, and the water kept making a spaced sound: *plink . . . plink . . . plink*. Suddenly I grasped the faucet and tried to shut-off the sound.

I would never sleep with the sound of it around me, I knew.

I sat down at the window in a creaky straight chair. Now what could I do? I took out the baby-cap again. The oily vile odor inside it made me choke. I threw it on the bed. I took out the notebook and started to go through it.

The first twenty pages at the front were soiled and worn. Mainly they held names and addresses and most of the names were girls. Toward the last I found hers—Lynn Winters'. There was her address on East Thirty-Ninth Street, and the name of her hotel: *The Griffon*. I'd never heard of it.

I turned on through the pages. Suddenly I found the notes at the back, scribbled in Carl's tight handwriting. They were brief. The first one said: "Usually leaves watch shop about dark. Always being pushed by mole-chin. No regular routine."

On the next page was another note: "Left shop about 8:30. Pushed to fruit stand next door to Ajax Co. Then disappeared. Hadn't reappeared at midnight when stand closed."

And then, between the next pages, I found the short newspaper clipping, dated three weeks ago. The headline was: *Ajax Speedy Check-Cash Co. Robbed of Eighteen Thousand*.

The next note in Carl's handwrit-

ing: "Left shop about ten. Talked with kids on corner Third and 45th for maybe hour. Mole-chin pushed him toward river. Disappeared middle dark block. Waited. Saw him pushed home about four-thirty."

There was a clipping dated fifteen days ago. It said: "Blue Orient Cafe Loses Three Thousand in Safe-Fingering Job."

That was all. I just sat there awhile, reading and re-reading the notes. Dimly Carl's words came back to me, something he'd said about being busy on a fascinating project that had nothing to do with painting or women.

I read the notes for the tenth time, and then it hit me in the middle of the forehead. That word, reappearing time and again: "*pushed*" . . . "*pushed*" . . .

And who gets pushed? Usually?

I looked at the filthy baby cap, and for the first time in hours I felt something like hope inside my ribs. It was a start, a tiny hint of something somewhere.

Carl's project . . . Clippings of robberies . . . Carl dead with a knife in his throat. Motive?

Carl knew too much. He had watched too long, schemed too hard in his dirty brain. And someone—someone 'pushed'—had learned what Carl was doing. And Carl had died.

I studied the notes more carefully. Every street that was mentioned was nearby. That was logical, too. People didn't push carriages all over Manhattan, did they? Then I noticed that shop again. *Watch Shop*. And someone whom Carl had called *Mole-chin* did the pushing. So?

I just sat there a long time, staring out the window and thinking. I found myself trying to see moles on every chin. I stared at every baby carriage. I began to feel weak and loopy inside. I got up and tried to walk. I reeled. I washed my face. Whatever had been in Carl's Manhattans?

I knew I had to get some food. Also a shave.

I hid the .32 under the mattress. I put the notebook there, stuffed the baby-cap in my pocket, and shut the door behind me. I tried to walk easily when I reached the street. I found a grimy little barber shop up the block and leaned back for a shave. The guy had to wake me when he was through.

"You better grab something to eat, pal," he said. "I never heard a stomach yelling before like yours."

"Sure," I said. I wished he hadn't looked into my face so carefully, as though he were making up his mind about slipping me a buck. I went out. Too fast, I realized, because he watched me and turned to the other guy to say something and jerk his thumb toward the door.

I went into a bar-cafe where the lights were dim and there was only the bartender and a couple of tired-looking gals sipping their breakfast beers for lunch. I had the hot roast beef with mashed potatoes and salad. I damn near took a nap on the counter, so I tried one double-rye and water. It grabbed the sides of my stomach and hauled them together enough for me to get outside.

IT WAS two o'clock and hot as a baker's back room. The El beams shimmered and seemed to turn blue in the heat waves. People had stopped moving fast, and shirts were beginning to fold up. I thought a while about the cool walls in my downtown office. Of my desk and Nancy, the little typist who never understood jokes but laughed. I thought of— And I stopped flat-footed while my stomach fell apart again.

*My brief-case with the forty-grand murder motive was still in Carl's apartment!*

I dragged down a hard breath and started moving fast. I stopped across the street from Carl's house and started up at the greenish shade and filthy curtains. So very quiet. Not a motion up there.

I glanced up and down the street. An old man was walking a bulldog. The El rumbled by. I wet my lips and dried my palms against my coat. One minute to get up there, one minute to get down, and it would be over. Two minutes.

I stepped off the curb.

Inside the hall on the stairway, I sucked at another breath. The baby was still crying. A radio was spilling Hawaiian music into the dreariness. Finally I got to Carl's door. Nothing yet. I turned the knob. The room was very silent as I closed the door behind me. I took perhaps three steps into the room and reached toward the brief-case. My throat froze.

I was looking into the long mirror that

hung on the wall straight ahead of me. And from my left and behind me, this square-set guy in blue-black was closing in with his stick raised and his lips twitching. He didn't notice the mirror. He was just a cop, closing in.

I did about three things at once. I ducked and threw myself toward him, bringing up my knee and driving out with a right. The stick sang emptily through the air, and my knee and fist caught flesh. He grunted and rolled off to the left. He hit the floor hard and stayed.

"Hey, Nick! What's going?" called a voice from the bedroom. Footsteps started over the floor. It was too late, I knew, but I grabbed the brief-case anyway. Everything I had done was wrong: the money, touching too many things, getting caught by the garage kid and Lynn Winters. This was just one more thing.

As I slammed the door and streaked down the stairs, I heard a cursing roar swell out of Carl's apartment. The door was yanked open. "Stop, you—" Then the gun roared. The slug spanged into the door ahead of me, then the hot sunlight hit my face and I almost tripped over the guy with the bulldog. I ran all the way to Grand Central Station before I folded up in a waiting room.

I went into a newsreel movie for another dark two hours. It was getting dim-purple along Third Avenue when I returned. I tried to stand up straight and move like you and you. It is hard.

And this next hour or two could mean something. They were the hours I'd been waiting for. Always, it said in Carl's notes, this *he* had been pushed from the watch shop after dark. Pushed by Mole-chin.

And now it was dark, almost. Where was the watch shop?

I started at Forty-second and walked over to First Avenue. I came back along Forty-third and west to Lexington. I moved up to Forty-fourth and started east again. I found watch shops, yes. Three were closed. In one there was a girl laughing with a young man. I hesitated, then went on. It was almost eight. Then it was eight.

I passed the corner of Third and Forty-sixth, and two stoop-shouldered women were gossiping:

". . . the tall one, the painter. You

should ought to remember, Mrs. Kelly, And dead. Murdered. My husband hears it straight from Donnelley on the beat, yes."

I hurried on. I had gone about three doors beyond Third Avenue when I saw this big clock painted on the fly-specked window of a hole-in-the-wall shop called *Mrs. Goslin's Repairs, Loans*. I stopped and looked.

The name was arched over the painted clock in faded gilt lettering. Inside there was a shabby counter extending along one side to a beaver-board wall-off at the back, and there a doorway was draped with faded gingham cloth. Watches and rings shone in phony brilliance inside the counter-case, and at the back was a sort of caged-in repair booth. But the thing that hit me between the eyes was the massive baby carriage at the deep end of the shop. It was big, almost twice as big as any carriage I'd ever seen. Strong and dirty and scarred. There was a hood at the head of it, and a heap of soiled covers piled around the inside. And then—then I saw him as he lifted his immense head from the repair cage and looked up.

There was a baby's cap, lacy and dirty, on that oily black-haired head. The jowls of the face were bluish with the hint of beard. The features were sharp, a grotesque mixture of imbecility and ageless wisdom, salted down with a moist-lipped childishness and lispy look. And out of the moist baby lips stuck a thick cigar. When I saw him pull himself off his stool and clamber down, I knew I had reached the end of my searching. I knew it instinctively, and with a drench of fear.

For his arms were no longer than a beer bottle, and the fingers were dainty as an infant's. The legs, fragile as spun-glass, were scarcely as long as his arms. Yet the body was full-sized and thickly-muscled, powerful in shoulders and bull-like in hips. His head was the largest I had ever seen. Somehow, perhaps because of his deformity, it was starkly evil.

As I stood there, staring, a soggy-shaped woman of about fifty padded out of the gingham-draped doorway. Her chin was a fester of black-haired moles. And her voice carried through the door.

"I'm ready, Stumps," she said in a hoarse, evil voice.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Die, Baby, Die!

"YES, MOMMA," he lisped. Then he tilted his head and gave her a slant-eyed wink of cunning as he held up his beer-bottle arms. She gave him a lift into the carriage, where he arranged the dirty covers about his waist, flicked the ash off his cigar, adjusted his lacy cap, and winked again.

"Ready, momma." His voice was soft, like the rustle of a snake through brittle grass.

I stepped back from the window and moved twenty feet away. Momma rolled the carriage outside on the walk, slammed and locked the door, then they started moving casually toward Third Avenue.

At the corner a thin, aged woman paused. "And how does it go today, Mrs. Goslin? And how is it with Stumps?"

"Just fine, and thank you," they answered in unison. They moved on. When they stopped again, they were across the street from Carl's window. They just stood there, a glow of light from a window painting their faces with shadows, and then Stumps lifted one baby finger and pointed.

"They say a man was killed up there, momma."

"That's what they say." And they laughed. When I heard their laughter, I *knew*.

As they rolled on toward the next corner, three children came running out of a doorway, calling and laughing and scrambling to reach the carriage.

"Lo, Stumpy!"

"You got something for me, Stumpy?"

A paper sack rattled inside the carriage, then the children seized the all-day suckers that Stumps held out to them.

"Be good and come to see me," he called after them. They promised they would. As I trailed him past the corner, two women were talking sadly:

"Such a shame. Such a gentleman, so kind and tender. Alas, it is the curse of the Devil himself, Mrs. Tucker." And Mrs. Tucker sighed and said, "Indeed, indeed. A curse to bear."

They rolled on along the dark walk, and I followed about thirty feet behind. Suddenly I stopped. Across the street was



parked a blue-and-white prowler car. A bulky man was talking to a girl. Then he nodded, tipped his cap and got into the car. As he drove away, the girl turned and started across the street.

She was coming straight toward me, as though she wished to speak to me. At that moment, when we were still ten feet apart, a cab swung in from Forty-third, and the roaming lights played first on her face, then on mine.

It was Lynn Winters!

In that instant she looked up and recognized me. She stopped as though something had struck her and surprise flashed across her face. A hand leaped toward her throat, and I saw her lips part on a scream.

"Don't! Please, for God's—" I started. My words evaporated.

She was stumbling backward—away from me in fear. And from the left and behind her a truck was roaring through the massive darkness beneath the El. Roaring straight toward her while she backed into it, hypnotized by her fear of me.

I screamed. "That truck!" I shouted, waving my arm. And then I leaped. For one instant she seemed to realize. She turned her head to see the truck. I hurtled into her, snatched her arm, and we went down together, rolling into the gutter as the truck tires swished by.

It was only moments, of course, but it seemed forever. I heard voices calling, footsteps racing nearer, people coming!

I pulled myself up and shook my head. Lynn was sitting there on the concrete, the waves of her dark hair tumbled and a strange light of incredulity in her eyes.

It was too late to run. People were closing in from all sides. I bent over her.

"Would I have done that if I was the killer?" I whispered. "Believe me, for God's sake. I *didn't* kill him. Trust me for only a little while. Please."

"You hurt, miss? I never seen you but just before the last second!" It was the truck driver.

"I'm not—not hurt, thank you. It was my fault," Lynn stammered. She got up slowly and knocked the dust off her skirt. And then, after looking at me for one long moment, she smiled whitely at the gathering crowd. "It was my fault. I don't know what I was thinking. It's all right, now."

I breathed again. People began to melt away into darkness, and we were left there alone and looking into each other's eyes.

"Thanks. Thanks more than you know," I said. I saw Stumps and Momma staring at us from the corner. Momma shrugged and they started on down the street.

"I've got to go. I can't lose them. If—"

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

"After that woman and the man in that carriage. He killed Carl. I know he did, but I've got to prove it. Believe me, I'm not trying to run away. I've got to follow."

"I think— yes, I *do* believe you," she said abruptly. She fitted her arm through mine. "Wouldn't it look more natural? Less suspicious if we just walked along together?"

SO WE strolled along behind them, letting the distance widen, until they stopped and seemed to gaze at the night sky for over ten minutes. And then, so easily and effortlessly that it didn't seem to happen, they disappeared into a dark loading passage. Ten minutes passed.

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"I want to get a better look," I whispered. I cut across the street with Lynn behind me, and as I moved up the block I could get a better view of the black wedge of passage into which they had vanished. Next I studied the stores on either side. On the left was a wholesale paper company. On the right, the name barely visible on the dark window, was the Pronto Check Cashing Service.

I exhaled a long breath. "He specializes in those. Now if—" I stopped as Momma's bulky figure roamed out of the dark passage. She was alone. She just seemed to be gazing at the sky again, and wandering a few feet left and right. Just a tired woman, strolling on the walk.

"I've got to get into that passage quietly," I whispered. "If—"

"I know what. You cross the street and get close. I'll go down to the end of the block and saunter up. When I'm not far away, I'll scream and fake a faint," Lynn said. "The woman will at least stare at me a moment. You can slip in without her knowing."

Our fingers touched one moment, then we parted. I didn't get too close. Momma might recognize me from the truck incident and wonder. I watched Lynn coming closer from the other side. Then she screamed, a terrific scream. She staggered, stumbled and took a dive.

Momma jerked around to look. It was the moment I needed. And one moment later, I was deep in the end of the black passage and feeling along the grimy brick wall for a door that had to be there. I found it. It was unlocked.

I followed the wall along what seemed to be a hall. It made a turn. There, six feet ahead of me, was the tell-tale margin of light glowing under a closed door. I started wishing hard for Carl's .32. I felt around in the darkness until I found another door. Within this room I fumbled over a desk, a chair. Then something lean and curved. A man's walking stick!

I balanced it in a sweating hand, sucked in a raw breath, and tip-toed back to the margin of light. The knob turned silently. Inch by inch I edged the door until a small concrete-walled vault-room opened up before me. There was one high window, black with night. And across the room stood the baby carriage. In front of a safe.

Stumps was reaching out with his beer-bottle arms, his infant fingers delicately manipulating the dial. The cigar fumed in his wet lips, and upon the soiled covers of the carriage lay an automatic pistol.

He was calmly intent on his job, and a skeleton of smile flirted over his ugly face. He did not hear me as I edged around behind him and shifted my grip on the cane. Slowly I reached out with the hook-shaped handle—reaching toward his throat.

In the last moment the shadow crossed the wall in front of him. The fingers twitched. The cigar jerked, spilling ashes. The hand darted for the automatic as he grunted.

I hooked his neck hard and ripped his head back. There was a strangling wail. The automatic flew out of his fingers and skidded into the far corner. The carriage tilted as he writhed and I pulled. It went over with a crash, hurling his deformed body onto the concrete floor. The cane broke.

I dove for the automatic as Stumps scrambled on his tiny feet. Just as my fingers closed on the handle, a stinging fire cut through my palm. The automatic fell. I just stared down.

The short knife glistened in my palm and the blood poured down my fingers to the floor. For an instant I saw again the knife that had stood in Carl's throat. I lunged out with my left hand toward the automatic. There was a silken rush of splitting cloth and flesh, a searing pain in my left arm, and then the handle of a second knife grew quiet after its quivering.

I staggered back, nausea pouring into my throat. The grotesque mass of a man lurched across the room on the baby legs and seized the automatic. The immense face was livid with fury.

The automatic came swinging around on me. A scream tore out of the hall. "Stumps! Get out, Stumps! The police are coming!"

It was Momma's thick voice. The fury of the man's face boiled into a mixture of terror. The gun roared wildly and the slug spanked the concrete wall. Then he careened like a humpy-dumpty across the room, half-falling, half-rolling, half-crying in rage. He disappeared down the hall.

I felt my knees folding. I clenched my

*(Continued on page 98)*

# • RED NIGHTMARE •

By LARRY HOLDEN

*Before they came for me and wrapped me in a madman's jacket and my whole world came to an end, even though it killed me, I had to find that corpse. And I had to know whose blood was on my hands—and whose nightmare was I living?*

IT WAS an unfamiliar room. The wallpaper had a strong in-and-out pattern that hurt the eyes. The furniture was big, gawky and tasteless. My clothes were strewn messily over a chair beside the chest of drawers. A heavy man in shirt sleeves stood at the foot of the bed, smearing his face with a shaving brush.

"So you finally woke up," he said unpleasantly.

My head buzzed angrily. A chill shook me. "How did I get here?" I didn't care, but he seemed to expect me to say something.

"What difference does that make? Why don't you get your clothes on and go home?"

I pushed myself upright and swung my



He was crouched over that feebly moving, mud-caked figure, a gun in his hand.

legs over the side of the bed, but I didn't have the strength of a wet blotter and I leaned dizzily against the bed and closed my eyes.

"What's the matter with you now?" he demanded.

"I don't feel very well."

He laughed without amusement. "What did you expect, cousin, the way you tanked up last night?"

"I didn't tank up. I was sick."

My lagging voice must have convinced him, for he crossed to me and I felt his hand roughly flat against my forehead. He whistled, swore under his breath, strode to the door and yelled angrily, "Betty! Betty, come here!" Then a moment later, "Take a look at that prize package you insisted on dragging in last night. It's sick."

"I shouldn't wonder," she said coldly.

"I mean sick. Not hangover. Sick."

She put the back of her hand against my cheek and muttered, "My God, he's burnin' up!"

I looked up at her. "Where's my wife?"

"Your wife? Hell, I wouldn't worry about her if I was you. She certainly didn't worry about you after the party last night."

The man had disappeared from the doorway, and now he strode in carrying a water tumbler half full of amber liquid. He snapped at the woman, "Give me a hand with him." They pulled me upright and he held the glass to my lips. "Drink it up, cousin. It'll bring you back to the living." The whiskey was cheap and thorny, but there were sinews in it. I clasped the glass with both trembling hands and drained it.

But even before I finished, he was on his knees shoving on my socks and shoes. "Put his shirt on," he snarled at his wife. "I want to get him out of here before he collapses. If he's got something contagious, we're stuck with him. A prize package you picked!"

I muttered again, "My wife," but they paid no attention. They dressed me and hustled me out as if I were Typhoid Mary. He went as far as the car with me. They had forgotten to put on my tie. It was back there in the bedroom, hanging over the back of the chair. I said, "My tie?" and he said hurriedly, "Another time, cousin. Go home and get some sleep." He shoed me into the car, turned abruptly and walked back to the house. The woman watched

silently from the window as I drove off.

All the way home, I tried to put together pieces of last night but that's all they were—pieces. I remembered getting home from work around seven, feeling lousy, the way you do with flu coming on. Anna had said, "You'll feel better when you get out among people." But I hadn't. I had felt steadily worse. I was miserable at the Seeley's, and I sat out on the porch in the dark by myself in a feverish daze. After awhile Herb Seeley came out with a drink for me and said, "Aw, c'mon in, Joe, and have fun." He swayed and grasped at the door and said "Whoooooo!" in a surprised voice and staggered back into the house.

The party sounded like a machine shop in high gear. Things were very dim after that. Somebody woke me up and I remember Anna saying fuzzily, "C'mon, Joe, we're going over to the Brrwwr's." I drove. I remember somebody sitting beside me saying turn right here, turn left here, and then there was water and another house and I was asleep on another porch, away from the noise, wrapped in a blanket that smelled strong and funny. That was all. I didn't try to remember more.

Going into my driveway, I swerved to avoid a broken milk bottle and parked the car behind the house. As I got out, I noticed the wheels and mudguards were splashed heavily with red mud, but I certainly didn't remember that. I should have. We must have been up to the hubcaps in it.

The whiskey was wearing off and I felt foul again. In the kitchen was a bottle of cooking brandy Anna used for cakes and stuff, and I drank a glass of that. I called, "Anna!" a few times, and when she didn't answer, I shambled into the living room, tumbled on the sofa and fully dressed, fell asleep.

**I AWOKE**, bright with fever. I called Anna again, but the house had that quiet, empty sound. I looked at my watch. It was six-thirty. I went out into the kitchen and looked for a note she might have left, but there wasn't any. Mechanically I poured myself another drink of brandy, only because it was standing there. I washed my face, combed my hair and mistook the action of the brandy for bouncing health. I looked out the window. The car had a flat on the left front and I muttered, "Better change

that. "So, with the fever dancing in my brain and my arms and legs as light as bubbles, I went out to change a tire.

I opened the trunk to get the jack and stopped frozen, with my hand outstretched. There on the floor of the trunk was a muddy, crusty puddle of blood, and I stared at it with horror. In an instant, Anna's absence became more than plain odd. I slammed down the trunk, locked it and rushed into the house and called Herb Seeley. He had just gotten in from the office.

"Damn," he said. "My tongue feels as if I'd been up licking brass cuspidors. How do you feel?"

"Listen, Herb," I said urgently, "ask Madge if Anna's been there today."

"Good God, isn't she—"

"Go ask her, Herb. Please."

He paused. Then, "Okay, Joe. Just a minute."

I heard him go hallooming through the house, but when he came back he said soberly, "Hasn't been here, Joe. Didn't she get in last night?"

"No, and I'm worried. Where did we go after your place last night?"

"I've been trying to figure that out myself. You drove. Don't you know?"

"I was in a daze," I said wearily, "and anyway, somebody was giving me directions. Who was with us?"

He said doubtfully, "Guy and Betty Marshall?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm not sure of *anything* today, Joe."

"Wait a minute. Is he a heavy-set man, surly, lives on Palmer Place here in town?"

"That's the one. Guy Marshall. Bob Wallis was with us. I remember him for awhile. And I think Pat and Phoebe Burke. Give Bob Wallis a ring. He's a skirt-chaser and I know you don't like him, but he's got a memory like the *Congressional Record*, drunk or sober."

Bob Wallis was a dapper little man with hand trouble. He went after women like a beagle after rabbits. Anna couldn't stand him, and neither could I. He wasn't the type husbands take to.

"Doesn't Madge remember either?" I asked.

"She wasn't with us, and she's been giving me hell. But don't worry about Anna,

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Joe. She's probably staying with somebody."

That was pretty feeble and I just said, "Yeah." He didn't know about the blood in the back of the car. He must have been a little worried himself, because he went on, "Call me when you find her, will you, Joe?" I said sure and hung up.

I was beginning to chew my lips and fumble with my fingers. I was getting scared. It wasn't like Anna to stay away without phoning—and then there was the blood. I felt like sitting right down there and crying. The thought of Anna lying hurt someplace, in a stranger's house was anguish that burned hot and acrid. My hands fluttered as I flipped over the pages of the telephone book. The Marshalls had no phone, and I was unreasonably angry at that. I looked up Bob Wallis, but I hated to call him. I thought, if he makes any wisecracks or sounds as if he's grinning I'll go over there and beat it off his face. He wasn't home. I gritted my teeth, actually ground them from frustration, all the time trying to tell myself calmly that there was a logical, simple, every-day explanation. If I took it easy and didn't get excited. . . My mind was a see-saw of fever and panic.

The Burkes lived out of town. I knew where they lived. I knew the name of the place just as well as I knew my own, but I couldn't think of anything but Lyndhurst. I knew damned well it wasn't Lyndhurst. I didn't know anybody in Lyndhurst. I stamped out into the kitchen and poured myself another brandy. I knew what I was mad about, and I didn't want to face it. There was only one thing for me to do now, and that was go back to the Marshalls and see what they could remember. That was going to be unpleasant. Oh, Anna, I cried inside myself, Anna, Anna!

I went outside and started getting into the car, when I remembered. I got out so fast I almost tripped. I couldn't ride in it, not the way it was, not with that in the back. I took the Ford pick-up from the garage. I'm a building contractor and I keep the pick-up for odd jobs.

Mrs. Marshall answered the door after my ring. She was still dressed the way she had been that morning, in a wine-colored house coat with tired white rabbit fur down the front, pink mules stained at the toes, and her brittle blonde hair was still untidily

hairpinned together on top of her head.

"You again?" she said with dislike. "Why don't you stay home? You've got a fever. You should see yourself."

"I'm sorry to trouble you," I pleaded, "but my wife hasn't come home and I'm worried. I can't remember where we were last night. I thought maybe you might."

She leaned out of the doorway and looked up and down the street. She said crossly, "Well, come in. Guy's out getting groceries. He'll be sore as a boil when he finds you here again."

I FOLLOWED her into the living room and apologized again, but her mood had changed. "Let him *be* sore," she said sourly. "He was sore at me last night, he was sore at me this morning, and he's still sore. The hell with him." She flung herself morosely onto the sofa and lit a cigarette.

I didn't sit. I stood in the doorway, nervously fingering my hat. I said, "I just want to find out who we invited last night after the Seeley party."

"Damned if I know," she said carelessly. "Some friends of Herb Seeley. Never saw him before in my life. Why don't you ask *him*?"

"I did. He doesn't remember."

"He wouldn't, that jerk."

She looked up at me and her eyes suddenly softened. "You poor guy," she said sympathetically, "I feel sorry for you. I know just how you feel. I feel the same way when Guy goes out bouncin' and leaves me to worry and chew on fingers, even if he is a jealous jerk. Look. Why don't you go home and lay down and if she don't come in by tonight, call the cops and let them look for her. For one thing, there's more of them, and for another thing, you're in no shape to be out."

I was leaning against the door jamb, shaking worse than ever. "Gotta find her," I mumbled. "Gotta find her."

She gave me a steady, searching glance. Then without a word she got up and went out of the room, not even bothering to pull her housecoat around her, knowing I was too sick to take any interest in her puffy, white legs or lingerie. When she came back she had a glass of whisky and a glass of water.

"Drink this," she ordered. "But what you really need is quinine."

I shook my head. I didn't want any more to drink. But I stared at the water and something suddenly took shape in my mind. Water.

"Water!" I said eagerly. "I remember. Water! We crossed water last night."

She said, "So what? We went to Staten Island, didn't we?"

I said furiously, "Why didn't you say that before? Why did you keep me standing—"

Fright sharpened her face and she backed away from me. "You didn't ask."

"Can I use your phone?"

She pointed a shaking finger at the hall and kept backing away.

I dived for it. Staten Island! Nobody except maybe a Staten Islander had more than one friend in there. Herb would be sure to remember now. I almost dropped the phone in my haste.

But when I did get him, he didn't give me chance to get started before he said in a funny voice, "Wait a minute," and went away, leaving me snapping my fingers with impatience. He came back and said, "I had to see if they were gone. What have you been up to, you damn fool? The police were just here looking for you."

"For me?" I said idiotically. I couldn't conceive of anybody looking for me when it was Anna who was missing. "Why me?"

"Listen," he said swiftly. "It was Detective Fisher, and if it wasn't that we bowl together every Thursday, he wouldn't have told me a thing. It seems about a half-hour ago some garage mechanic called them and said he had noticed something that looked like blood in the trunk of your car. He got to thinking it over, and finally called the cops to get it off his mind. He gave them the number of your license, and they looked up your address, then went over and pried open your trunk and found blood. Fisher said they're having it tested and if it's human, you're in a jam. *Joe, what did you do to Anna last night?*"

That hit me so hard I was numb. I stammered, "I didn't see any garage mechanic. What garage mechanic?"

"Damn it, what difference does that make? Did you and Anna have a fight? She was sore because she thought you were sulking out on the porch and she said she was going to have it out with you. What happened, Joe?"

I began to sweat. "Nothing happened, Herb. Honest. I didn't have any fight with her. I'd surely remember that. Nothing happened. Why should I be looking for her now if something happened? That wouldn't make sense, would it?"

"Joe," he said fervently, "I hope you're right. But keep away from the cops. You're in a jam, boy."

I felt strangely calm. Perhaps that was still the numbness of shock, and the pain would come later. I said, "Do they know I'm out in the pick-up, Herb?"

"They didn't say, but why should they tell me?"

"I won't worry about it, Herb. But, Herb, I found out where we were last night. Staten Island, friends of yours. Remember now?"

"So that's where we were. At the Hamplings."

"How do I get there, Herb?"

He gave me the address, then added, "It's just outside Tottenville. Big white house, a chicken farm, green mailbox, you can't miss it." I thanked him and just before I hung up he said a little sadly, "Take care of yourself, Joe." Then I knew he didn't quite believe me, but I think he was willing to wait and see.

Mrs. Marshall was still standing in the middle of the living room holding the glass of whiskey. I smiled briefly, took the glass from her and drained it.

I said, "Thanks. I'm better now. I'm sorry if I scared you, but I'm really worried." I waited anxiously to see what she'd say, wondering how much of the conversation with Herb she had understood, wondering what I'd do if she screamed.

She relaxed, even smiled a little. She made a small, dismissing gesture with her hand. "Forget it." She looked down at the empty glass I had stood on the end table beside the sofa. "I'd better go wash that thing before Guy comes in, or he'll think I've been entertaining the Marines while he was out. The things that get in that man's mind!" She giggled.

IT TOOK me a half-hour to drive to Bayonne. If we had gone to Tottenville, Bayonne was the logical place to have taken the ferry. It must have been the ferry because I remembered the water. To me a bridge is a hanging piece of highway; we

hadn't taken the bridge. And I remembered the thumping rumble of cars on the runway to the slip; I remembered the ferryhouse odors; I remembered the jangle of bells. Little things.

I stopped at the cashier's booth, paid the toll, and about twenty feet beyond, a uniformed cop stepped in front of the car and held up his hand. My heart lurched and my hands tightened in a paralyzed grip on the wheel. I shook so badly the whole street blurred before me. I sat there like a rabbit in a hutch waiting for him to come up, grab me by the back of the neck and drag me out of the car. Instead, he looked back over his shoulder at the line of cars forming at the left slip, then waved me on. I fumbled with the gears and the car leaped like an antelope in six-foot bounds. He gave me a hard glance but didn't say anything. I stopped in line and dried my trembling hands in my handkerchief.

But you can be immersed just so long in fear, and after that your mind blacks out entirely or you build up an immunity. I sat there feeling faintly sick to my stomach, but the wild panic was gone. All that counted was getting to the Hamlings in Staten Island.

Around the right slip a large crowd had gathered, larger than the usual commuting crowd at this hour, larger and more excited, and something began to stir dimly in my memory. The man in the car ahead leaned out of his window and called to a small boy who was standing precariously on a water hydrant trying to see over the heads of the crowd.

"What's going on there, sonny?"

Even before the boy answered, remembrance came flooding back. I had been sitting outside on the top deck of the ferryboat in the darkness, away from the heat and oily stench, away from the pumping thud of the engines below. Somewhere out on the veiling waters another boat was hooting into the fog. I remembered that most clearly of all, probably because the hooting had annoyed me. Anna was nearby at the rail, saying something about the fog and the water. Anna liked the water. She had been born in Marblehead, Mass. Then, this was very dim, I heard someone quarrelling and Anna sniggered and said, "They're at it again." I didn't ask who. I didn't care. Suddenly there had been a thin scream, a

splash, then Anna's scream, cut off short as if her hand had gone instinctively to her mouth smothering it. That had aroused me, but very little. My only wish was that people would go away and stop making noise. I grumbled, "Somebody overboard?"

"No, no, Joe. Nothing happened. A piece of wood. Are you warm? How are you feeling?"

I grumbled and let it merge with my misery. After awhile it was forgotten. Why she covered that way, I don't know—unless she recognized the two who had been quarreling. But she had seen murder, and now she was missing. It was a cold and narrow thought, and I had to clench my teeth to keep from crying out. My eyes were stinging, and it could have been tears. If I knew Anna, she wouldn't have had the slightest hesitation about walking up to the murderer later, telling him what she had seen, demanding an explanation, giving him a fair chance for justification. Call her a damn fool if you want, but it wasn't that entirely. She had a hard, stony sense of justice, handed down from Pilgrim ancestors. It was her code, and it was unbending. Now she was missing.

The boy on the hydrant was shrilling in answer, "They pulled a guy outa the water. He was floating down there."

"Who was it, sonny?"

"They don't know, mister. He didn't have no pants on. They think he musta pulled them off trying to swim but got drowned. They're looking for the pants. The ambulance took the man away." He must have meant the morgue wagon.

I sank back into the meager cushions of the pick-up. Maybe, I thought desperately, it had been a total stranger, someone who could not possibly have had anything to do with Anna's disappearance. But Anna had said, *They're at it again*. She must have known them. I closed my eyes and fought back the gibbering thoughts that flooded me.

After what seemed another lifetime, the ferry came in and casually floated us across to Staten Island. I had the entire length of the island to drive before I reached Tottenville, but I saw nothing of it. It was a landscape filled with nudging dread, nibbling fears, and all those other nameless things you torture yourself with.

It was only when I neared Tottenville that I came alive again and drove slowly



along, picking out the mail boxes with the flashlight I had taken from the tool box under the seat. Dusk was creeping slowly down the trees. HAMLING stood out in white letters on a green box, and I swung the pick-up into the crushed-stone driveway and stamped on the gas. The drive ended abruptly about five yards this side of the house, and beyond that was a mud track that led to the chicken houses about a thousand feet behind the house. Between, in pasture, four horses stood silhouetted against the darkening sky.

I trudged up the flagstone walk, taking great care not to get my feet in the mud. The little things that keep you from thinking! I mounted the high porch and rang the bell. A light went on over my head and a pleasant-faced woman in a cotton house dress opened the door.

"Well!" she said in surprise, "Mr. Joe Stafford! How are you feeling today, Joe. I felt so sorry for you last night, sitting out there on the porch by yourself all the time you were here, wrapped in an old horse blanket. Come in. I was just listening to the radio. Mr. Hamling is out back."

I said, "My wife—is she here?" The words came tumbling.

"Your wife? Good heavens, didn't she leave with you last night?"

"No. I'm looking for her."

"Come in. It's damp and chilly. And you don't look at all well, Joe." Still talking, she led me into a small, warm room, in which the radio was dramatically declaiming to itself. "You know," she said with an attempt at comfort, "I'll just bet she's staying with friends—those nice Burke people who were here. They left a little before you in their car, and I'll just bet she went with them. I'll break Hamling's neck if ever he brings out that apple-brandy of his again. My, did we get high!" She laughed.

I didn't contradict her. There didn't seem to be any point to it. I said tightly, "Who was here last night, Mrs. Hamling?"

"Goodness, don't you know? But of course not. You were so sick. You still are, unless I can't tell fever when I see it. Well, you and your wife, of course. Then Mr. and Mrs. Burke, Herb Seeley and Mr. and Mrs. Marshall." She stopped.

I said slowly, "And a Bob Wallis? A short thin man with a black moustache?" I didn't think there would be a Bob Wallis. Bob Wallis had been thrashing in the foggy water at that time—or perhaps he had already drowned. But I had to ask.

She shook her head. "There wasn't any Mr. Wallis, unless he came in later."

The door opened and a shaggy man in overalls looked in and grinned at me. "Thought I heard voices," he said. "How're you feeling today, Mr. Stafford? You were pretty rocky last night. Sorry I can't stop to talk right now, but I'm all over mud." He showed his caked boots. "I really come for my shotgun. Hens were making a big commotion over in the far house and I saw a tramp dodging around in the reeds of the swamp and I aim to scare him off before he gets his hands on—"

His voice had begun to fade even before he stopped.

THE RADIO was saying, ". . . eph Stafford. I'll repeat the name. Joseph Stafford, aged thirty-five, medium height, dressed in a blue worsted suit, white shirt, dark red tie, believed to be driving a 1939 Ford pick-up. If you have any information regarding the whereabouts of Joseph Stafford, please communicate with the Newark police or your local department. Take no chances. Stafford is believed to be of unsound mind and dangerous. He is wanted for questioning in the suspicious disappearance of his wife, Anna. Also picked up for questioning, was Herbert Seeley of . . ."

Herb had talked! I looked at the Hamplings and stiffened. They regarded me with horror and hostility, and the man had his shotgun cradled in his arms, but the twin

The war against starvation and disease  
still goes on—

GIVE TO THE AMERICAN RED CROSS!

black muzzles were pointed stolidly at me. "I didn't—" I croaked. "I'm not of unsound mind. I'm looking for my wife. I got home and found blood in the back of the car and the wheels all covered with red mud and I—" I stopped with a gasp as my eyes fell to his muddy boots.

He said cautiously, "Now you just take it easy, Mr. Stafford, and you'll be all right. Better get some rope in case he cuts up," he told his wife. "No, Mr. Stafford," the gun came up peremptorily, "you stay right in that chair and don't move."

But I was on my feet, pointing at his boot. "Listen, damn it, listen. There's red mud all over my car. I didn't drive the car in any mud last night. Your wife will tell you I never left the porch. Ask her! For God's sake tell me, *where did that mud come from?*"

His glance wavered to his wife. She looked straight at me, made up her mind, and said, "Back of the chicken houses. We're digging a foundation for the creamery. It's clay up there. Down here the mud's yellow."

I leaped for the door, flinging Hamling to one side. He yelled "Hey!" and pounded after me. He caught up to me in the dark of the yard, but only because he knew the way and I didn't and I was blundering among the farming machinery heaped there.

"Hold on," he panted, "I'll point the way." We floundered through the mud of the yard. We climbed the fence of the pasture. In the springy grass the running was easier. As we neared the poultry houses, I could hear the chickens raising their clatter.

Hamling muttered, "Damn that tramp. Just a minute." He had a flashlight as long as his arm and the beam sprang into the darkness, lighting the end house and the high wire fence.

At the foot of the fence, a man was crouched over a feebly moving, mud-caked figure, tying something. As the light pinned him against the night, he looked up wildly, shouted, jumped to his feet and flung up his hand. It spurted fire, and was followed by a sound like a sudden handclap.

Hamling let out a surprised grunt and beside me his shotgun bellowed. The man at the fence clasped his stomach, took two dragging steps forward, then folded over his

arms as we ran up. He fell across the muddy figure. Hamling pulled him off and I went to my knees and gently lifted the moaning woman. The blood had caked down the side of her face and over her left eye—but it was Anna and she was alive. A muddy trail showed where she had dragged herself through the reeds of the swamp.

Hamling bent over the man. In an astonished voice, he said, "I'll be damned—it's Marshall!"

Marshall had struggled to a sitting position, his hands buried in the bend of his body, but blood was seeping through his fingers. His face was gray and twisted.

Hamling said hurriedly, "I'd better get a doctor." He turned and ran back toward the house.

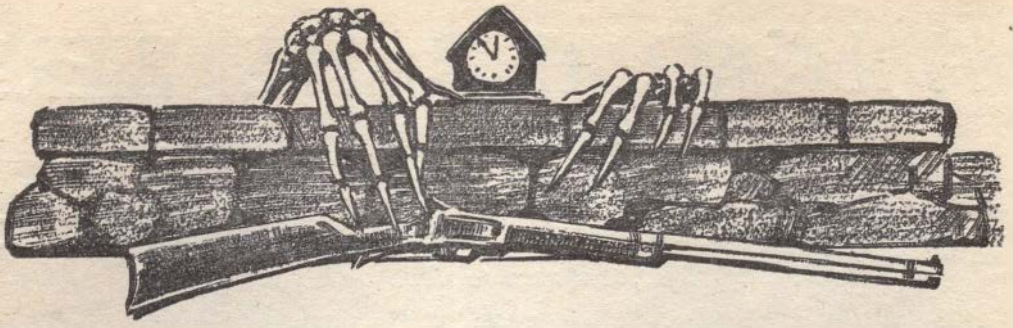
Marshall looked at me. "Sorry, Stafford," he said painfully. "Damn fool. Damn jealous fool. Went crazy."

I said savagely, "Shut up!" If I hadn't been working on the knots that bound Anna's hands together behind her back, I would have smashed his face with my fists, broken it as he had broken Anna's. But thank God she was breathing. Then in the light of the flash that Hamling had left propped against the fence, I saw what Marshall had tied her with—my tie, the tie I had left over the back of my chair in his house that morning. It was a tie Anna had made for my birthday, with my initials, JBS, appliqued. It would have tied me to the electric chair as securely as he had tied Anna's hands. That's what he had come back for—to leave that last, damning clue.

Out of his head with pain, he was babbling, "Forgive me, Stafford. Forgive me, forgive me! Lost my head. Forgive me. Wallis was fooling around my wife and I got crazy jealous. Didn't mean to kill your wife, but she saw me push Wallis over the rail, told me so, lost my head. Put her in your car, dumped her in the pit. She must have crawled out into the swamp. Can't find her. Can't find her! Can't have her alive. Gotta find her!" His voice rose to a shriek.

His eyes suddenly fixed wildly at something beyond in the darkness. He tried to say something but it was lost as the words bubbled in his mouth. He toppled sideways.

Anna stirred in my arms and I tenderly pushed back the muddy hair from her forehead. "Joe," she said feebly. "Joe. . ."



## MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS

**H**AVE YOU been getting any letters lately? Say, from a beautiful widow looking for a husband? The letter might read something like this:

To the Dearest Friend in the World: No woman in the world is happier than I am. I know that you are now to come to me and be my own. I can tell from your letters that you are the man I want. It does not take one long to tell when to like a person, and you I like better than anyone in the world, I know.

My heart beats in wild rapture for you. My \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in your own name), I love you. Come prepared to stay forever.

Pally, if you get a letter like this, *don't go!* Tie yourself down. Button your pajamas to the bed post and sling an anchor around your waist. But *don't go!* For, brother, you may be next in line. . . .

Andrew Helgelein of South Dakota got a letter like that and he went. "Come prepared to stay forever," the letter told him. He wasn't being kidded. He stayed forever.

Ole Budsberg of Wisconsin got an invitation, too. Ole isn't around anymore.

John Moo of Minnesota couldn't resist that coyly worded invitation. John Moo is dead now.

Olaf Lindblom came to visit, too. Poor Olaf!

Eric Gerhalt joined the parade. Eric is no more among the living.

The gal who started that conclave of corpses was a hefty woman named Belle Brynhilde Poulosatter Sorenson Gunness. She didn't get that line-up of names in a divorce court. Belle wasn't the kind of gal to leave things like that to a court. Her men just upped and died. It wasn't lucky, you might say, to be married to Belle B. P. S. Gunness.

It wasn't lucky either, to get a letter from Belle, as Messrs. Helgelein, Budsberg, Moo, Lindblom, Gerhalt and at least four other unidentified gentlemen found out—too late.

No one ever suspected anything like that of Belle. She was such an efficient farm woman. Such a fine house. Such a well-kept garden. Such a clean slaughter room in her cellar, where she used to cut up—pigs. Pigs and the Messrs. Helgelein, Budsberg, Moo, Lindblom, Gerhalt and the four other gentlemen.

All Belle wanted was enough money to lift the mortgage on her little farm. That and a little affection. Was that asking much? Just come down and see me at my farm in Indiana, she'd say. Come and stay forever.

They found Belle's body one day. At least, they said it was Belle's body. All the neighbors testified that Belle's biceps were at least 17 inches around, and this body was only 9 inches around the biceps. Belle had a 37-inch waistline and this body had a 26-inch waistline. But who can be bothered with details like that? When Belle's house burned down, there wasn't much left of the bodies. And no one has seen her since. No one who's able to report it, anyway.

Been getting any letters lately? Burn them, brother, burn them!

In fact, brother, if you're going to do *any* reading, better play it safe. Stick to what you know won't hurt you. Like good blood-chilling fiction of the sort you'll find on these pages. That's the place to get your murders, son.

The next issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE, featuring more of the bizarre, spine-tingling stories that send little goose pimples chasing each other up and down your vertebrae, will be published July 3rd.

—THE EDITOR

# A HEAD FOR HIS BIER!

*Down at Homicide, they said I had a good head on my shoulders. But I wasn't sure how long I could keep it there after I looked at that bobbing, nodding thing in the alcohol jar, that used to stand on Gustav Myers' neck!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Head Start

**T**HERE WERE three of us in the room: Tiny Tim, myself, and the guy without a head.

Tiny Tim talked, I listened, and the guy



We faced the door and watched it open—and saw it come into the room.

By  
**ROBERT BLOCH**



**Spine-Tingling  
Novelette of  
Metropolitan  
Head-Hunters!**

without a head just sort of took it slow and easy.

"Somewhere in this city," said Tiny Tim, "a man sits in a little room. It's a very private sort of a room, and the door is locked to visitors. Visitors just wouldn't understand about this room.

"They wouldn't understand about the man, either, because he's an unusual type. Odd. Secretive. Eccentric. A man with a hobby. You might call him a collector.

"It isn't stamps he collects, or antiques, or rare jewelry. He collects human heads!"

I opened my mouth, but before I could put my foot in it, Tiny Tim rattled on.

"Think of it, Johnny. He's probably sitting in his room right now, admiring his collection. Most likely he keeps them in jars lined along the walls—his specimens, I mean. Dozens of human heads, floating in alcohol. Bald, shrivelled heads of old

men. Heads of young girls, haloed by coils of golden hair. The tiny heads of infants in small jars.

"I can see them bobbing and nodding, see the sightless eyes peering out, bulging and distorted by the glass. I can see him gloating as he caresses his latest trophy, fondling it, feeling its contours before he places it in a jar to float forever in alcohol."

"You're floating in alcohol!" I snapped.

Tiny Timothy Higgins looked hurt. His small features twisted in confusion as he ran a hand through carrot hair.

"I'm only trying to help," he said. "I've got a theory."

"You've got a lot of things," I told the little man. "A persecution complex, a bad hangover, and no darn business in a room where a murder has been committed."

"Take it easy," Tiny Tim begged. "You know I'm not a lush. I wasn't bumped off Homicide for that. Captain Leeds just got a fool notion in his head that I'm too small to make a good detective. After six years on the force, this big ape has to take charge and bounce me out because of a whim."

"Sure, I know, you got a tough break," I agreed. "I was only needling you. And I'd like to help you out. But it's more than your size that's against you. Leeds knows about those wild ideas you get."

"Wild ideas?" Tim yelped. "Such as what?"

"Don't look so innocent," I told him. "Every time some Chinese got run over by a beer truck, you smelled a new Tong war. A dame got knocked off in a bathtub and you wanted to pin the crime on a sea serpent. No wonder you were kicked out. And if Leeds knew you sneaked up here on a case with me, he'd kick me out, too."

"I've got to work with you, Johnny," Tim protested. "Give me a break. Maybe if I can crack this case and you mention it, I can get back on the Department payroll."

I shrugged. "All right, I'm a sucker. Stick around, but don't let any of the other boys see you. And don't feed me those screwy theories. Now you're telling me there's a maniac loose in the city who cuts off human heads for his private collection."

Tiny Tim pointed at the floor. "What more proof do you need?" he asked.

The headless body of a man lay spread-eagled on the rug of the dingy little room. The cheap suit and the soiled carpeting beneath it were drenched with blood from the carotid artery.

"What else can you make of it?" Tim asked. "No friends. No enemies. No clues. No head. Only a mad killer would—"

"Stop that! You see too many movies!"

"All right, you reason it out," Tim suggested. "Here's a guy named Gustav Myers. He's middle-aged, lives all alone in this attic room, comes and goes without a word. Doesn't even speak to the landlord—unless the landlord's lying. No friends, no mail, no phone calls.

"You told me what happened. The landlord hadn't seen him around for a couple of days, the rent was overdue, and Myers didn't answer the door. So the landlord used his pass key and what did he find? Gustav Myers, lying here on the floor with his head chopped off, and taken away. Obviously the work of a fiend."

"Then I come along," I continued for him. "And before I as much as get into the house, you buttonhole me on the street, sneak in, and foul up the whole case with a loony hunch."

"All right," Tim muttered. "You'll see."

"I'm going to see, right now. I want to case this joint before the coroner and his little pals swarm all over the place. We have about five minutes left, and then you'll scam out of here. I don't want anyone else to spot you."

**I** BEGAN to move around the room, taking care not to stumble over the body and wreck my new shoe-shine. Tim sat down on the bed and regarded me glumly.

"Why look for anything?" he asked. "I already told you there's no clues. This guy Myers must have been a queer old duck. Did you notice how bare the room is? Not a magazine, or a newspaper, or a book in the place. No radio, no deck of cards, no tobacco, no collection of old string, no letters."

"Maybe somebody cleaned the joint out," I said.

"Would he take a pipe? Or cigarettes and ashtrays? Or magazines? No. The whole setup is screwy."

"You're right at that," I told him. "It certainly isn't natural for an old recluse to just sit in a room for two or three months with absolutely nothing around for amusement. Unless that's a clue in itself."

"Maybe the old boy was sick," suggested Tim. "You can tell from the way he's lying on the rug that he was in bed when when he got his. Tumbled right off and the cover is mussed where his body must have pressed on the mattress."

"Fine," I said. "Very fine! A mad fiend knocks on the door. Myers is in bed. 'Who's there?' he calls. 'It's only me, the mad fiend.' 'All right, I'll let you in.' So he gets up, lets the mad fiend in, then lies down on the bed again and waits for the killer to hit him with an axe. Oh, you've got a great theory there."

Tiny Tim looked hurt. He was good at that.

"Your five minutes are up," I said. "Get out of here."

"But Johnny—"

"You heard me. The coroner should arrive any minute now, and I've got work to do."

"Don't I get a look-in on the case at all?"

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "I'll phone you later."

"When?"

"About two weeks after I solve the case. Now beat it—you and your mad fiends!"

It was tough on the little guy but I had to do it. He straggled out forlornly and closed the door.

I took a fast case of the room, but it was absolutely barren of anything that might be considered a hint, let alone a clue.

There was another threadbare suit hanging in the closet, a battered hat, a pair of shoes. A few shirts and some underwear scarcely filled the top drawer of the old bureau. Otherwise the room was empty of personal possessions.

It didn't look lived in at all. With the body on the floor, it merely looked died-in.

"Let me see now," I muttered. "He must have been lying on the bed like this—"

I lay on the bed, like that.

The pillow was hard. Too hard. I took it away. I lifted the grimy sheet beneath.

A black and dog-eared old photograph album rested next to the mattress. I pulled

it out and opened the thick old covers.

It was empty. No pages. Maybe he just bought the cover and intended to purchase loose-leaf pages.

That was out, because the binding cords were cut. The pages of the photo album had been removed. Did the killer remove them? If so, why hadn't he carried the entire album away?

Then the realization hit me—the album covers were bulky. And the killer had another bulky burden to carry: His victim's head.

But why had he taken it? Tiny Tim thought he knew. Me, I wasn't so sure. The whole setup was screwy.

Perhaps I should have stayed in the room and kept Gustav Myers company until the coroner's squad arrived, but somehow I didn't feel very sociable.

I eased out and went downstairs to see the landlord. Mr. Rummell's apartment was on the first floor, rear, and I had no trouble finding it—merely followed my nose and allowed it to lead me to the source of one of the foulest odors I've ever sniffed.

Mr. Rummell was going to have boiled cabbage for dinner, and he probably had it for lunch, too. From the odor, he might have eaten it for breakfast, not only today, but every day for the past ten years.

The hallway stunk. His apartment stunk. Mr. Rummell stunk too. I'd like to say something kinder, but I can't.

Mr. Rummell answered the door, then stood aside and permitted me to enter. I managed to squeeze past his stomach and into the room.

"Now who'd you wondt, huh?" he asked. "More snoobing aroundt? You fellers give me a pain in the neck."

"Sorry, Mr. Rummell," I said. "Business, you know. And so far you haven't been of too much help. When you called, you merely said there was a body in your place. We've got to know more about it. Who was this man Myers? You say he came here about three months ago. Surely you found out something about him in all that time."

"I don't findt outt," Rummell said. "I run boardting house, see? I mindt mine businesses, boardtters mindt dere businesses, see? Dot's how it iss."

"Good idea," I told him. "Nice friendly

little setup. Is that why you keep a gun on the table all the time? Or were you planning to kill off some of the bedbugs in this dump with it?"

"I godt to prodict mineself," Rummell grumbled, hastily shoving the weapon into a drawer.

"From bedbugs, eh? Well, never mind that now. Let's play like I don't see the gun. Let's play like you're going to tell me all about your boarder, Gustav Myers."

"But I don't know," Rummell protested. "Nobody don't come in. Nobody don't go outt."

"He had no job," I persisted. "Where did his money come from? Did he pay you in cash? Did he get any checks?"

Rummell looked at me. Suddenly he began to sweat. It stopped me cold to see a big fat man perspire like that, over nothing at all. Or was there something?

Then I got it. Rummell was listening to a noise. A noise, coming from under our feet. It *thumped*. "What's that?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"That noise. It's coming from the cellar, isn't it?"

"I don't hear no—"

There were footsteps in the cellar. Rummell could play dumb if he wanted to. Let him sit here and sweat. I wanted to find out *something* on this case. Captain Leeds expected it. I made for the door.

"Here—where you t'ink you going?"

"You know where."

"Wait—come back. I tell you." He got up and tried to grab my shoulder. I wrenched free and bolted. The cellar door was under the hall steps. Down I went, expecting Rummell to follow. He didn't move. I looked over my shoulder once and saw him silhouetted in the doorway. His flabby mouth worked convulsively.

I couldn't find a light, so I took the steps in darkness. Darkness and silence. For as the cellar door clicked open under my hand, the noise ceased.

There was no thumping. There was only darkness, stillness, and a damp, musty odor of decay. It was worse than boiled cabbage.

At the foot of the stairs I groped again for a light switch. None met my fingers. I lit a match and examined the wall. The switch was off to one side. I clicked it. No

light. I clicked it again. Still no go.

Burned out? Or turned out? And if so, by whom? Who was thumping around down here? Cellar. Axe. Mad fiend—

Tiny Tim was crazy. Except that there *are* psychopathic murderers who lurk at the scene of the crime and await new victims.

I pulled out the gun, just for luck. Just for luck, I saw to it that it was loaded. Just for luck I groped my way into the blackness very quietly. All this I did for luck, and what did luck do for me? Absolutely nothing.

Because I hadn't taken ten steps when something came out of the darkness, something that howled and gibbered; howled and gibbered as it struck me over the head and sent me down into a private darkness of my own.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Headway

"**C**OLLINS—WAKE up! Come on, Johnny, snap out of it."

It was good advice, so I took it. I opened my eyes. The lights were on at last. Captain Leeds bent over me as a couple of the boys propped me up on the cellar steps.

"Lucky we got here," Leeds said. "Otherwise the young moron might have gotten away."

"What young moron?"

"The maniac."

I blinked and stood up, fast. "Maniac?"

"Of course. What other kind of a guy lurks around in dark cellars carrying a butcher knife? He must be the kid who did the job upstairs, too. We were just coming in when we heard the scuffle. We ran down here and found you. The kid was trying to beat it out the back after hitting you with this poker. When we cornered him he had a knife in his hand—must have been a foot long. Funny he hit you with a poker."

"Very funny," I said. "I got a big bang out of it." I rubbed the painful egg on the side of my skull.

"He's upstairs now," Leeds told me. "So far he hasn't admitted killing Myers, but he'll talk downtown."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"The landlord's son. Henry Rummell. Got his mug on file—broke out of reform



school last week. Sent up last year for using a knife in a brawl, but there's nothing in his record that would lead anyone to suspect he was a mental case. Still, you never know, do you?"

"Ouch," I remarked. The egg was still swelling.

"So that clears everything up," Leeds told me. "Coroner's upstairs. We'll take the kid downtown and get the confession."

"But why should he kill a harmless old man?"

"Moron," Leeds grumbled. "You don't understand psychology, do you, Collins? Come to think of it, you don't understand enough to keep out of a dark cellar. Didn't do so well on this case. Nearly muffed the whole thing. Maybe Tiny Tim isn't the only one who needs a little vacation from the Department. Remind me to see you later."

Still grumbling, Leeds marched upstairs. I followed, not too happily.

This time the hall was full of squad men. I spotted Henning. "Going back upstairs?" he asked.

I shook my head. It nearly came off. Something told me that the less Captain Leeds saw of me right now, the better it would be.

I headed for the front door. Fresh air helped. For a minute I stood on the stoop, eyeing the empty squad cars at the curb.

"Hey!" whispered a voice.

"What's that?" I looked around. There was no one behind me.

"Hey—down here!"

Peering through the grating under the stoop I gazed into the unlovely little face of Tiny Tim.

"It's me," he explained.

"I figured that out, thanks. But what are you doing under the porch?"

"Hiding. Do you think I wanted Leeds to spot me?"

"Didn't I tell you to clear out of here?" I snapped. "Look, go away. I'm in enough trouble already."

"Look. Come closer. I've found a clue for you."

"Keep it. According to Leeds, the case is solved already. They've found your mad fiend."

"But it wasn't a mad fiend," Tiny Tim said.

"It wasn't?"

"No. I just figured it out. You were right. A mad fiend would never surprise a man in bed with the door locked that way. It must have been somebody who knew Myers. Like the guy who wrote this letter."

"What letter?"

Tiny Tim smiled triumphantly and waved a white envelope under my nose.

"The clue," he announced. "I told you I had one."

"But where did you get it?"

"Just as I was coming out the door a while back, the mailman turned in here. And I had my hunch. I asked if there was anything for Gustav Myers. He gave me this."

I bent closer to the small face peering through the grating.

"Meant to bring it up, but then the boys arrived so I hid here. But I didn't open the letter yet. Saving it for you."

"OK, hand it over," I said. "Probably just an advertisement for trusses."

He extended the envelope. I took the oblong and examined it. No return address. Myer's name and address typed. Precancelled stamp. Mailed in town. I noted these facts and then slit the envelope open. A small sheet fluttered out between my fingers. I unfolded it and wrinkled my nose.

"Wasn't so far off at that," I sighed.

"Just a doctor bill."

"Doctor bill?"

"Sure. Ten dollars for treatments, August 4th and 7th. Doctor L. P. Klow. Banker's Building. Old boy probably had a goiter."

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Tiny Tim, climbing up and joining me. "This is a real break. Now we can find out something about our mysterious friend, the late Mr. Myers." He beckoned to me. "Come on."

"To see Dr. Klow?"

Tiny Tim nodded.

"Sorry, pal," I said. "You're not going."

"But it was my idea."

"I know. And I appreciate it. Only Captain Leeds wouldn't, if he found out about it. You'll have to keep out of sight."

"Don't you want to hear about my new theory?"

"Later," I nodded. "Why don't you call me up Tuesday. I'm going to Europe Monday."

It was the brushoff. I knew and Tim knew it; but there was no other way. The whole thing might be a wild goose chase. Leeds thought the landlord's son had done it. Then, again—

Then, again, I went to call on Dr. Klow.

HE HAD a nice layout in the Banker's Building, big offices filled with the most modern thing in decor. His tiles were glass, his mahogany was bleached, his venetians were blind. And his nurse was plenty fast on the curves.

When I finally looked at her face I discovered she had red hair, blue eyes, and a snub nose made for freckles.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

I said I wanted to see Dr. Klow.

"Have you an appointment?"

"Afraid not. I'm here on business."

"So sorry. You chose a bad time. Dr. Klow left about an hour ago on a month's vacation."

"Would I be able to catch him at his house?"

"That would be impossible. I called him myself just a few minutes ago, and he doesn't answer."

It sounded phony. How would any guy go on a month's vacation without taking a dish like this with him? I gave her about twenty six teeth in a smile.

"Well, perhaps you can help me then. I'm checking up on a patient of yours name of Gustav Myers."

"I'm not permitted to—"

I showed her the badge. With Leeds on the warpath I might not have it much longer, so I might as well use it now.

She nodded.

"Offhand I don't recall the name. But I can look it up for you in our files."

Her red head bent over the cabinet next to the desk. I sat there, staring at the door of the inner office. I wondered what lay behind those doors.

So I pulled the old gag. I raised my hand. Then I asked a personal question.

"It's in there," she told me. "Go right through the office. First door to your left."

Thanking her courteously, I bounded to my feet and entered the sacred portals.

Dr. Klow's private office was disappointing. No bodies lying around, no buckets of blood, no incriminating papers or mysterious notes scribbled in code.

But on top of his desk rested a large package. It was oval—about the size and shape of a human head . . .

I lifted it gingerly. It was heavy, quite heavy. The brown wrapper had a label attached, addressed to Klow. The printed return address bore the name of LELAND CHEMICAL SUPPLY COMPANY and the typed notation: *Contents—Plaster-of-Paris.*

Disappointed, I turned away. Then I realized there was something underneath the package on the desk. Papers, black papers. No, not papers. Pages from a photograph album. Gustav Myers' album!

I knew it had to be, just as I knew that the dime-store photographs so carefully pasted into place on the sheets were photographs of Gustav Myers.

For the first time I saw the man who had lost his head. He was gaunt, lantern-jawed, graying. Profile views showed a beak nose. Somehow, the pictures disappointed me. I'd expected an unusual countenance, but Myers seemed fairly ordinary. I registered the features in memory, replaced the pages and the package, and returned to the outer office.

"There you are. I think I've found the patient you refer to."

She read off a list of dates to me extending three or four months back.

"Thanks," I said. "Now tell me all about him."

"But there's nothing to tell."

"Don't you have a chart, a case history?"

"No. Dr. Klow must keep it in his private files at home. He sometimes takes cards with him for study and research."

"I see. Well, maybe you can tell me what you know about Myers personally. What does he look like? What kind of a guy is he?"

She shook her head, giving the effect of a small brush fire in action.

"Really, I can't help you. You see, I've never set eyes on the man. He came for his treatments at night when the doctor is here alone." She caught my expression and pouted. "There's nothing unusual in that, you know. Many patients work days and can only visit an office in the evening."

"I understand. It isn't important." I turned away. "Just one thing more. Do you happen to know what Myers was being treated for?"

"Yes, I do. Dr. Klow said he had am-

nesia. And that's all I know about it."

I blinked. Things were beginning to fit, now. A man with amnesia has no friends, no callers. He wouldn't be in a mental condition to enjoy books, newspapers or the radio. He wouldn't keep a lot of mementoes in his room, either. That was obvious.

But why should a man who loses his memory also lose his head?

I probably could have figured it out in about three years, but I never got the chance.

The door opened, and somebody came in, natch. Somebody was short, dark, ferret-faced. Somebody had a goatee. Somebody had a most peculiar Continental accent.

"Excuse, please. I have come for zee package. You have eet, no?"

"Oh, yes—the doctor told me. I believe it's on his desk in the other office."

Ferret-face gave her a smile, and me a blank look. Then he scuttled into the other room and emerged bearing the plaster-of-paris—and the black pages from the photo album.

"Zhank you so very much." He scuttled out.

A little birdie told me to scuttle after him. "Zhank you so very much," I murmured to the redhead, and left.

Ferret-face was waiting for the elevator, bulking his package under one arm and stroking his goatee with the free hand.

When he saw me, he gave a little jerk and nearly pulled the goatee off. Then the elevator arrived and we rode down together in silence. He was poised and ready when the door slid open. He slithered out and made for the exit. I had to move fast to catch a glimpse of him outside on the street.

There happened to be a big black sedan moored to the curbing. He headed for it at Constellation cruising speed. Then a tiny figure stepped out of a doorway and hailed the fugitive.

"Benny!" shrilled a familiar voice. "Long time no see!"

Ferret-face whirled. I was startled to see his free hand scrabble at his throat, then realized he was making the sign of the cross.

"Don't worry, it's only me!" exclaimed Tiny Tim.

A sickly smile spread across the face

of the man called Benny. It didn't even travel down as far as his beard. "Oh," he sighed. "Ow are you?"

"In the pink, chum. When'd they spring you?"

"Last week. But I am not wanted for anytheeng. You cannot touch me. So you weel please excuse now, I most go."

Benny turned away, but Tiny Tim blocked his path.

"That was a nice face-lifting job you did a couple years ago," he commented. "The one they sent you up for, I mean."

"I do not weesh to discuss the past," Benny told him. "I am now—how you say?—virtuous. So excuse—"

This was the signal for my majestic entrance. I emerged, giving Tiny Tim the office.

"Johnny!" he yelled. "This *is* a surprise! Say, I want you to meet a friend of mine from across the pond. This is Benny Konstantine, one of the best little—"

"Nots to you, copper!"

The pronunciation was bad, but the sentiment was there. Benny glared at me. "For why you follow me, copper?"

I played it straight. "Because I want to see Klów."

"Doctair Klów has gone away."

"Don't stall, Benny. I've got to see him, but fast. He tipped me off a while back that if it looked like a jam I should get in touch with him."

"He nevair mentioned thees to me." Benny was dubious.

I was convincing. "Lots of things he never told you," I said. "You've only been working with him a week. Who do you think he's been playing with before you came?"

It was a bluff, but I talked fast. Benny tried to figure it out. At last he shrugged.

"Very well. Come along. Bot no funny beezness!"

We walked over to the car. Tiny Tim trailed behind.

"You're not going," I told him. "The Doc doesn't know you. He'll blow his top if we show up with a stranger." I slipped him a wink and he nodded.

"All right, Johnny."

So we climbed in the car and Benny drove off, and I sparred around for an opening to pump him.

Benny turned down a side street and a

breeze hit us, and he asked me to please close the window.

So I turned around and started to pull down the window and Benny sapped me over the head.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Head Man

**WHEN YOU** get conked on the skull twice within four hours, you don't feel so good. First of all, it hurts. Secondly, you begin to wonder if you're not just a little bit of a sucker. Of course, nothing bothers you until you wake up, but then—

I woke up in an alley off Fourteenth Street. No bones broken, except possibly my entire skull. Everything was rosy. Not only rosy, but spinning around. And on top of that, somebody was hollering about a "mad fiend" in my ear.

At first I thought it was Tiny Tim. But he wasn't around. So it had to be a nightmare. That raucous voice, yelling about mad fiends and killing. The rosy spinning, the darkness, the screaming, all nightmare or concussion.

I got up. The voice wasn't yelling right next to me. It came from a distance. It guided me as I groped my way out of the alley, inhaling painfully until some of the rosy fog cleared away and the spinning stopped. But I could still hear the voice on the street.

"Extraaaa! Ree dalla boutit! Mad Fiend Slaying! Extraaa!"

I bought a paper and it plunged me right back into the nightmare again.

It was the Gustav Myers case, all right. I'd expected that. Apparently Captain Leeds hadn't solved it after all. According to the gentlemen of the press, he had taken landlord Rummell's son away and left the scene of the crime around four P.M.

Shortly thereafter a Mr. Hugo Rummell, landlord of the premises, was discovered in the basement. He had nothing to say for publication, owing to the fact that his throat had been cut.

The head hadn't been removed, but in spite of this mitigating circumstance the reported advanced the theory that the killing was the work of a "Mad Fiend".

I reread the hastily worded lines of the

story and it still didn't make sense. Was Tiny Tim right after all? Then where did Dr. Klow fit in? And Benny?

And for that matter, where did I fit in—just horsing around, playing for time until somebody wanted to bop me over the noggin again?

I found a phone booth and put through a fast call. I asked for Henning.

"Give it to me fast," I said. "I've got a date."

He gave it to me, but it didn't help much. There had been a man on the spot, naturally, but he was upstairs in Myers' room all the time. Rummell apparently was preparing to go down to the station and see his son. The man thought Rummell was in his room.

Around four he went down to check up and found the body. No weapon, no signs of struggle. Just a body in the blackness of the cellar.

The filling station attendant across the way said a black sedan had been cruising around the block about 3:30.

"That's enough!" I yelled, and hung up.

I came out of the phone-booth sweating with excitement. Sure, Benny had bumped the landlord just before he came down to the doctor's office. But why? That's what kept biting me. Why? I crumpled the paper and began to shred it. Then I stopped.

A photograph stared up at me from page 7. A very familiar face it was, too. The face of Gustav Myers!

But the story wasn't about Myers. I had to read it twice before the details sank in. It concerned one Randolph J. Edwards, missing heir to the Edwards estate. Edwards went to Europe in 1933 as a student, was caught in the Middle East in '44, but managed to sail on a Red Cross ship in '45 and landed in New York. There he disappeared and for the past two years his whereabouts remained unknown. An intensified search for Edwards was now under way, since he had just inherited the bulk of his father's estate—valued in excess of \$3,000,000. No other surviving relatives . . .

Now everything really began to fit! And I began to fit myself right back in the phone-booth. I got Henning again and asked him to put me through to Brophy—Missing Persons.

"See if the record shows anyone checking on Edwards—Randolph J. Edwards. He's been listed now about two years."

I waited patiently until Brophy returned to the phone.

"Only one inquiry."

"Who was it?" I asked.

"A Dr. L. P. Klow, M.D., 2611 Fairfax Boulevard."

"What did he want?"

"Just looked at the photograph on file. Then he said it was a mistake, not the party he was looking for."

"Good. Thanks, Brophy."

Now I had everything, including Klow's address. Everything, that is, except a case.

A doctor discovers a missing heir with amnesia. So he kills him. Why? And how could I prove it? And what was Benny doing in the picture? Why was the landlord knocked off?

I could call Captain Leeds and take a squad out to 2611 Fairfax, if the Doc was hiding out there—and it wouldn't mean a thing. Except that I would probably lose my job.

No. There was no alternative. I'd have to follow it up alone.

I TOOK a taxi, carefully sizing up the driver to see if he was likely to give me another rap on the skull. We bounced out through the twilight streets, up the winding hill of Fairfax and landed in front of 2611, a large, tree-shaded house set well back from the road on a hill of its own.

I paid the hackie and started up the path. The house was dark. The grounds were dark. I stumbled.

Something rustled in the bushes behind me as I turned towards the porch. Something slithered closer.

This time I was ready. I took one more step, wheeled, ducked. A flying figure hurtled against my shoulder and sprawled flat on the ground at my feet. I tackled the man, fast.

"All right," I gasped. "Drop it."

A blackjack dropped from limp fingers.

"Why does everybody try to conk me on the noggin today? I muttered.

"Johnny—it's you!"

Tiny Tim sat up and rubbed a bruised shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Rescuing you. After you drove off with Benny I figured he might steer you into a mess of trouble at the Doc's house. So I called Physician's Service Bureau and got the address and hotfooted it over. Never know what you'll run into with all these bad fiends lurking around."

"Shut up and listen to me."

I told him what had happened, every bit of it.

"There's your mad fiend theory knocked to bits," I concluded. "Klow isn't crazy. But I can't figure out why he did it, or what he's up to now."

"Benny knows."

"That's right. He must know. But he won't tell. If I go in there and poke a gun at the two of them, they'll laugh at me. They won't talk."

"Benny'll talk. He's dumb."

"Why should he?"

Tiny Tim's grin shone dimly in the darkness. "I'll tell you why, Johnny. I've got a theory."

He told me why.

"You're crazy," I sighed. "Even if it's true, I still can't make him admit anything."

"Yes you can."

And then Tiny Tim told me what to do. It was screwy. It was as whacky as any idea he'd ever had. It wasn't according to professional ethics. It was dangerous, too.

I should have forgotten the whole thing.

Maybe it was the sappings that made me lose my judgment. Maybe I realized there was no other way than this long chance. Maybe it was the idea of Tiny Tim begging me for the one opportunity he'd have to reinstate himself. Maybe I was just a screwball myself at heart. Anyhow—

I left Tiny Tim standing there in the shadows and walked up the drive. The car, Benny's black sedan, was parked next to the porch. He was there, all right, and the doctor must be inside, too. The absence of lights showing meant nothing.

But I didn't bother to knock on the door. I preferred to do things the hard way.

There was a nice shaky trellis against the side of the house. It had ivy on it, and might have stood the additional weight of a small mouse. I shinnied up it.

Halfway up, the thing began to crack and give. I climbed faster. There was a window ledge above me. If I could make it—

The wood splintered. It gave off a sound no louder than an atomic bomb explosion.

I wriggled up. The trellis began to bend outwards. I clawed air. It was no use. The frame tottered. It was falling. One more hoist, and the wood gave way.

My arms rose over my head. I stepped off, jumped. Then the trellis crashed to the ground, and I hung there, clinging with both hands to the window ledge above my head. I dangled, kicking both feet, striving for purchase, trying in vain to boost myself up.

No use. The ledge splintered my hands as my fingers slid off. I braced myself for the fall.

Then the window opened above me and two pairs of hands grasped my arms and hoisted me into the room.

I stood there and faced the three of them: Benny, Doctor Klow, and the revolver.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Man Without A Head

IT WAS good to feel something firm beneath my feet. It was good to realize that I wasn't going to be sapped again. It was good to see old Benny once more, and to meet Doctor Klow at last. But the revolver, that wasn't good.

Klow held it, and he knew just where to point it. I looked at it while Benny closed the window behind me, and then I turned my attention to my medical friend.

He was tall, thin, with graying hair and the usual rimless glasses sported by prominent M.D.s everywhere, in the best advertisements.

Doctor Klow in no way resembled a mad scientist. And yet the room in which I stood might have come straight off the Universal Pictures lot.

It was large, white-walled, brilliantly lighted by overhead arcs. Curtains and blinds concealed the windows completely now, and they too were white. I saw white cabinets, white tables, and a white leather-covered operating table. Both Benny and the doctor were dressed in keeping: white gowns. Here and there was a touch of silver to relieve the monotony. The revolver, for instance, and knives, scalpels, surgical trays. There were only two incongruous objects in the room.

The first was the plaster-of-paris, now removed from its package and resting on a long table next to the wall.

But it was the other object that sent my scalp crawling back into my spine, the object that was in the jar of alcohol. Directly before me on the table it rested, only it didn't rest, it bobbed and nodded, to and fro.

It was a severed human head. The head of Gustav Myers. The kind of a head Tiny Tim had whispered about.

All of this talk about mad fiends came echoing back to me as I stared at the rolled-back eyes, the gaping mouth, the hideous point where the head just—ended.

"That's heem!" Benny snapped, pointing at me.

Doctor Klow shrugged. "I thought as much," he said. "Go into the storeroom and get me a sack. One of the big white ones."

"Bot he eez a detective."

"I know what he is! You can rely on my medical knowledge when I say a detective dies as easily as anyone else. And if you'll get me that sack, I'm prepared to give you a demonstration."

"Not here, Doctair! Please. We cannot!"

"All right. In the woods, then. Near the stone quarry. But I'll need that sack."

Benny edged out of the room, his beady little eyes blinking in excitement. The doctor stared at me. I stared at the bobbing head in the jar.

Curiosity still kills cats. It led me into this mess, and it affected Doctor Klow, too. He broke first.

"Why did you come here?" he muttered. "How did you find out?"

"I didn't," I answered. "Not until I arrived and saw the head. I knew you killed Myers, of course, and that Benny must have killed the landlord. But until I saw this setup, I wasn't sure why."

"And now you're sure. Is that it?"

"Yes. It adds up. You get this guy Myers as a patient, suffering from amnesia. You treat him, and meanwhile you try to check up on him. You discover that he's really Randolph J. Edwards. But you don't tell him that, because you start thinking.

"Here's an unusual setup, a man missing so long that in all probability his own

father wouldn't recognize him. A man without friends or connections. A man, and this is the clincher, who will some day inherit a huge fortune.

"You saw the possibilities, didn't you? So you nursed him along. And when Edwards' father died and Benny showed up out of stir at the same time, the rest was obvious.

"You killed Myers and cut off his head. Probably set the deal by giving him sedatives to take, so he'd be drugged when you arrived. Somehow the landlord either saw you or had his suspicions. So you sent Benny back to kill the landlord. And then you were ready to go to work."

"Was I?" Klow smiled pensively. He looked like a little boy with his hand caught in a cookie jar. Only little boys don't point revolvers at you.

"Of course. You rigged up your yarn about taking a month's vacation. Actually, you planned to spend the month here and never show up again. Not as Doctor Klow.

"Because Benny is a plastic surgeon. A good one, with European training. That's what he was sent up for, wasn't it—for remodelling gangster's faces?

"Now he's out and you're all set to give him a refresher course. Using Myer's head for a model and your face for the surgery. In a month, according to the plan, you'd emerge with the face of Randolph J. Edwards and claim the estate. You could

back it up with all the information he'd given you while under treatment. And with his face instead of your own."

"Sounds logical," Klow commented. "As a matter of fact, that's just what I'm going to do."

**B**ENNY scurried back into the room dragging a large sack. It looked like a laundry bag but I didn't like the material, or the idea of being taken to the cleaners in it.

Nobody asked me if I liked it. Klow just held the revolver in line with my chest and grinned. "All right," he said. "Climb into the sack."

Benny sidled up. He was sweating. "Yess. Hurry opp, no sense makeeng thobble, eh?"

I stared at the head of Gustav Myers. This was it. I gulped. Then I faced them. I kept talking to Klow, but Benny heard me.

"Listen to me," I said. "Do you think I'd pull a foolish stunt like this unless I had a reason?"

"What do you mean?" Benny asked.

"I wouldn't come here alone and walk into a trap unless I knew it was necessary. I came here to tell you this before it's too late—give yourselves up. I'm warning you!"

"Warneeng?" Benny whispered.

"Sure. Klow didn't tell you *that*, did he?"



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Don't look now but there's—

## A WINDOW IN MY COFFIN

*H. H. Stinson's Gripping New Novel*

I didn't mind impersonating a liquidated hitch-hiker—for a G.I. buddy, a luscious blonde and a cool five yards—just so I didn't have to take the rap for my own murder!

and

**DEATH—ON THE HOUSE** by Peter Paige

**DIME  
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I suppose he just offered you a split to do this job. He let you think Gustav Myers was just an ordinary man—that he's really dead."

"He ees dead. Hees head ees there, een the jar." Benny scowled. "What you call that, eh?"

"He's waiting," I whispered.

"Waiting?"

Yes. Waiting for his body to come and claim it again."

Klow gestured with the revolver. "Stop that nonsense," he commanded. "Into the sack or I shoot."

"Wait!" Benny stepped forward. I had him, now.

"Never mind," I told him. "You won't listen. Klow won't let me talk, anyway. He's afraid. He knows you wouldn't touch this deal if you know what Myers really was—what he really *is*—that he cannot die—"

"You are lunatic, no?"

"Read the papers," I said, wearily. "It's in the late extra. We lost the body, Benny. Get that? We *lost* the body?"

"How do you mean?"

"Remember, I discovered it. I saw them carry it into the meat-wagon. Only it never arrived at the morgue. All we got is the driver, strapped up in the psycho ward, raving about the headless body that got out of the wagon and *walked away!*"

Benny crossed himself. Klow grunted, but Benny shook his head. "Yes," he said.

"Klow was stringing you." I talked fast, desperately. "Edwards didn't have amnesia. He spent 15 years in Europe and came home under an assumed name because the police were after him there. In Hungary. Transylvania.

"You know what comes from Transylvania, don't you, Benny? Vampires. The undead. The blood drinkers who can't be killed. Edwards was bitten in Europe and became one of them. Klow wasn't treating him for amnesia. He was treating him for vampirism!"

"Don't listen to the fool! He's tricking you!"

But Benny was listening, eyes goggled.

"That's all, Benny. Klow has this scheme going and he cut off Edwards' head and brought it here. But he didn't kill Edwards. You know that. You can't kill a vampire except with a stake through the

heart, or a silver bullet. The body is still alive. Deathless, eternal. And it's seeking its head, now.

"It will find the head, Benny. It will come here, thirsting for vengeance. I'm warning you. Give yourself up before that thing comes to claim its own."

Klow had enough. He threw Benny aside, then clubbed his revolver, ready to swing it against my skull for the third rap of the day.

Then we heard it.

Glass splintered far away, downstairs. Klow wheeled. Benny's mouth gaped open.

"You're a lunatic," he whined. But he wasn't speaking to me. He was trying to convince himself. Trying to fight against the heritage of centuries of superstition. Trying to fight against the sound we all heard . . .

The sound of heavy footsteps, slowly clumping up the stairs. The sound of footsteps, groping, feeling their way, through the hall.

We faced the door. We all saw the knob turn. And we all saw the door open.

Then *it* came into the room, walking slowly towards us.

*It* was tall and gaunt, gaunt as Death. *It* wore a faded black overcoat, and arms protruded from the ragged sleeves, outstretched to paw at nothingness. *It* walked towards us, slowly, blindly.

*It* had no head.

The high, upturned collar of the coat ended in nothingness. *It* was just a walking, headless corpse, bony fingers scrabbling towards the missing head that bobbed in the jar.

*It* was the walking dead, the vampire. Klow wheeled, desperately levelling the revolver.

"Don't!" screamed Benny. "You can't kill it!"

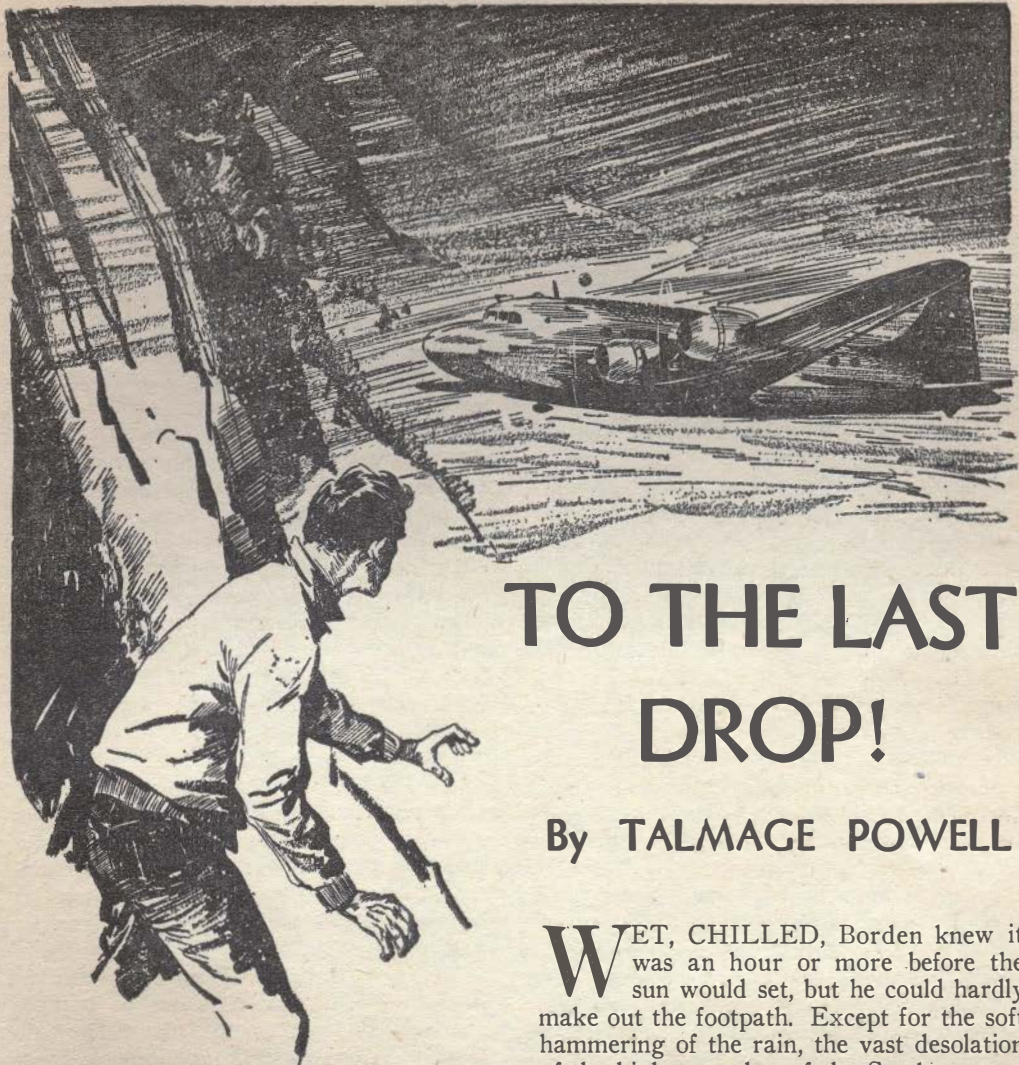
Klow threw him aside as the figure loomed.

It was only a gesture, but the interval was all I needed. I lunged, catching up the laundry bag as I moved. Klow turned towards me, aimed and fired.

The shot went wild. But the sack descended squarely over his shoulders, and I bore him to the floor. Benny didn't bother about us. He had troubles of his own. As the headless corpse bore down upon him

(Continued on page 97)





# TO THE LAST DROP!

By TALMAGE POWELL

Without realizing it, he was mumbling frozen words, his throat tight, his heart hammering. "Not that way! You're veering right into Needle Peak!"

*Far down under the cliff, the fat man lay like a shapeless bean bag, his sightless eyes staring up. . . . And Borden knew that he must join him, tasting the last full measure of terror before his past and future merged. . .*

**W**ET, CHILLED, Borden knew it was an hour or more before the sun would set, but he could hardly make out the footpath. Except for the soft hammering of the rain, the vast desolation of the higher reaches of the Smoky mountains were silent. About him Borden could see trees, giant oaks, maples, poplars, tall pines. They were strange looking things with fog and cloud twining about them, making their trunks glisten.

He pushed his way on, picking his steps along the dim footpath, his feet slippery on the deep carpet of fallen, wet leaves. After a few minutes, he paused. He should have come to the cave by now. He looked up. There was no sun, not even the hint of a sun showing through those heavy cloud layers. He looked out and down. But there was no mountainside falling away. There were only the lonely trees close to him, then a vast sea of dense gray fog that looked depthless. He was in a tiny world a few

feet in diameter, a world only as large as his gaze could make it. He was the only creature of the hills moving, only he and the rain.

He walked on. Then suddenly he was at the cave, like coming upon it in a nightmare. It was a huge, natural hole in the mountainside, formed by a rock formation. Fog and cloud had writhed in the entrance, giving it a gray, wet, and repelling appearance.

Borden entered the cave, a strapping young man with a serious, almost stern, face. His shoulders were wide beneath his wet leather jacket, and his legs, in rain-streaked blue jeans, had the appearance of being long and wiry.

In the crook of his arm he carried a carbine; about his middle a revolver was strapped. Other than that he had nothing. He was on foot, without provisions, thirty miles or more from the nearest human habitation. He was buried in the wet clouds, the silent eternity of the hills. His bedding had gone down in the swirling currents of Little Hickory River with his horse when Hake Cole had shot the animal from beneath him from ambush. Borden's face tightened as he reminded himself that Cole was still out there, somewhere roaming like a madman. He could never rest as long as Cole was alive.

But being buried in the hills hadn't in itself worried him any of the time, and now that he had found the cave, he decided he had a lot to be thankful for. He wouldn't have to sleep tonight propped against a tree trunk in the wet, and a man, he believed, should have sense enough to know when he could be worse off.

He wiped the carbine with a bandanna and explored the cave. At the mouth of it were the ashes of a long dead fire. Against one stone wall of the cave was a small pile of wood. Borden muttered a thanks to the long-gone hunter or hill renegade who'd left it there. It was moist, but not too wet, and he set about building a fire.

He had whittled shavings, stacked wood and struck a match to light the fire when he heard the first high, keening sound. It made him rigid with attention. The match burned and flickered out as he jerked to his feet. The approaching roar in the space of a heartbeat had swollen in volume until the very mountains seemed to shudder with it. It had to be a plane, a big plane to roar

like that—the Atlanta to Washington airliner.

He was out of the cave, rain beating into his upturned face. He could see nothing, but the roaring of the plane's motors was crashing from peak to peak, as if the plane were right in his face.

He raced along the footpath and reached a stone knoll that jutted out from the mountain. The whole cloud-smothered afternoon was shaking and quaking with discordant thunder. Then he saw the plane. At first as a dim shadow. Then in a split second he had a glimpse of it, like a huge, confused silver bird, gleaming wet, so close to him that he threw his body down a little. Then it was swallowed in the gray mass of cloud and fog, reeling off to the left—below the level where he stood.

Without realizing it, he was mumbling frozen words, his throat tight, his heart hammering: "Not that way! You're veering right into Needle Peak! Not that—"

*Whooom!* Then silence. Borden stood for a moment, numb. Rain pattered down about him, the only sound breaking the awful silence that had rolled back over the hills. He knew the plane had hit Needle Peak and that he had a hard half-mile trip ahead of him. As he pushed off down the path, he wondered if this was why Hake Cole's bullet had got his horse, to put him here when that plane passed. He was of a nature to believe that was so. If he hadn't been here, that plane might never be found. Still he couldn't help resenting the fact that the hills had thrust this upon him, this wreckage and carnage he knew he must view. This loss of time in attending to Hake Cole. He muttered a curse under his breath.

AS HE crossed the barren, stony ridge that angled upward to form Needle Peak, Borden smelled the stench of smoke. Not the ripe, clean smoke of burning wood. But the acrid smoke of scorched metal, mingled with the odor of burning gasoline. The taste of the smoke mixed heavier in the fog as he pushed on. It put ridges of ice down his back. Maybe there were none left. Maybe they had all burned to death.

He came to a short clay bank, slid down the mire, and started up a small concavity in the side of Needle Peak. He was straining his eyes to see the flames of the burn-

ing plane when he heard footsteps and saw the moving shadow. He said, "Howdy, there."

The shadow stopped, stood until he drew closer. It was a man, grimy, with a cut on his narrow, dark face. He was very tall and wore a suit of lime-colored flannel with extreme shoulders and pinched waist that arrested Borden's attention for an instant. The suit must have been very natty until the crash, until mud got on it. The remains of a white flower were still in the left lapel which had been ripped half away from the coat.

"By hell!" the man was mumbling. "A farmer, by hell! Did you hear the plane crash?"

Borden ignored the question. "Anybody else alive out of that plane?"

"The girl and the fat man. They've over there in that clearing. He was trying to crawl away from the plane. We dragged him clear."

"He's hurt, then."

"Yeah," the man said, "he's busted up some." Something in the way he said it caused Borden to look at him. Borden saw that the eyes in the dark, narrow face were like black beads, darting, burning; the man was unconsciously touching his tongue to his thin lips, and for no reason at all Borden was suddenly aware of the weight of the gun hanging at his side.

He could hear the sound of blubbing sobs when he reached the edge of the clearing. A few more steps, the lime-colored suit close behind him, and Borden saw the man and the girl. The girl was kneeling beside the big, blubbing mound that lay on its back. She was working over the fat man. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Borden. "Where'd you come from?" she asked.

"Around the mountain. I heard the plane hit. Anybody else—"

"No," the girl said, her voice quick, as if she didn't want to say it. "We're the only ones got clear. The three of us. The plane burst into flames when it hit."

Borden said nothing. He dropped to one knee beside her. He wanted very much to look at her, but he looked at the fat man first. He had a huge, quivering face. He was wheezing breath in and out. Rain and sweat stood in little droplets on his bald head.

"Who is it?" the fat man said hoarsely. "Has somebody found us?"

"Yes," the girl said. "We've been found. We'll be all right now. I won't have to try to take you out, guiding us down a stream until it leads to people."

Borden cut a glance at her, but she was turned with her back to him, wiping a handkerchief over the fat man oily face.

"Where is he?" the fat man sobbed. "I can't see him. *I can't see a thing, I tell you!*" Sobs wracked him.

He had large, jutting eyes, red-veined. He was staring directly up into the girl's face, but Borden could tell by the glassy stare that the man wasn't seeing her. It sent a shiver rippling down his back.

"Hell," said the lime-colored suit, standing behind Borden, "you can see. You were seeing well enough when you got on the plane, goggling over a magazine of pin-up girls!"

The fat man lay wheezing, jutting eyes staring, saying nothing. He seemed to be sweating oil.

"Why don't you shut up, Mr. Harriman?" the girl said to the lime-colored suit. He chuckled. It reminded Borden of the way Hake Cole chuckled. But he ignored Mr. Harriman and his remarks as his fingers explored the fat man's torso. The gray suit was of rich material. His tie was maroon silk, mud-spotted, awry. A big diamond stick pin was in the tie.

Borden touched the huge, blubbery left side and the fat man screamed.

"Looks to me like some stove-in ribs and shock," Borden stood up. "We'll cut a couple of poles, use our coats to make a litter. I'm in a kind of mess, myself. My horse was—my horse ran off with my grub and bedding. Best I can offer you is a cave I know the location of. But tomorrow morning, the weather ought to be cleared. We can get some wild game. There's always good spring water in the hills. I can get you out of here."

"A cave?" Mr. Harriman said. "A cave and no food? Now ain't that just too damn dandy! I'm kicking my heels!"

"Somebody should have put arsenic in his milk when he was a baby," the girl muttered under her breath. She stood up and Borden got his first really good look at her. She was tall and slim, wearing a black dress that would have caused most of

the old maids in any hill village to sniff, look down their noses, and try to run her out of town. Before the crash and rain had spoiled it, she'd had a lot of make-up on, a wide slash of red for a mouth, very brave, rouged cheeks, and painted eyes. Her rain-bedraggled blonde hair must have looked nice, tumbling about her shoulders, even though it was faintly darker at the roots. She smiled, and Borden looked beneath the make-up, met her steady gaze, and told himself she was a nice girl.

"I'll cut those poles," he said. "It'll take me a little time to whittle down a couple of saplings. I only got a barlow."

The fat man was crying again. The girl dropped beside him, wiping rain from his face.

"Mr. Harriman," Borden said. "How far is the plane from here?"

"Just around the hillside."

"How about you taking a look at it? We want to be sure there's nothing or nobody we can get out of the plane."

"Now listen, bub, there's nothing left but a burned-out hulk. I don't feel so good, see? My shoes are full of this stinking mountain mud."

"You take a look at the plane," Borden said quietly. "A little walk in the mud ain't going to hurt you, considering the walking you got ahead of you."

He turned his back on Mr. Harriman. After a moment, Harriman chuckled, and Borden heard him move off. He'd start trouble, Borden decided, if he was not so afraid of the hills.

He snapped the barlow open, bent a tough sapling over, and slashed at it with the knife.

"As long as we're going to be together," the girl said, "we might as well get acquainted."

"I reckon so. You can call me Borden."

"I'm Evie Iverson," the girl said. "I looked at the fat man's wallet. According to a New Jersey driver's license he's a Mr. Justin Lade."

"And Mr. Harriman?"

"He said his name was Felix, Felix Harriman," the girl's voice sounded cloudy. "I—I'm glad you came along. I've seen men like Felix Harriman around places where I work."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Would you mind me asking where you

work? Not that it's any of my business."

"I'm in show business," the girl said. "On my way from Atlanta to Washington. Night club work. I dance," she said tiredly.

The sapling made cracking sounds as he pressed it down with his foot. "And what kind of man would you say Harriman is?"

"Maybe I'd better not say it. Maybe I'm wrong about him I hope so. But the way he carries himself, the look on his face, in his eyes . . ."

"I reckon I see what you mean," Borden said.

AS THE night grew older, some of the fog dissipated. The rain stopped. But there were no stars, no moon, and from the mouth of the cave the night was thick, black and opaque. The hills lay saturated in the black ocean of night, the deep silence broken by the indistinct sounds of water gathering and dropping from leaves. The moist air was heady with the strong smell of damp vegetation.

But the cave was warm. A fire crackled in the mouth of it. About the fire fresh wood, for which Borden had foraged, was drying. Borden stood at the cave entrance, staring out in the night. The trip back from the plane had been unpleasant with Felix Harriman's curses. Justin Lade had been little trouble. He had screamed and fainted when they'd laid him on the litter. It was going to be hell, getting the fat man out of here, Borden thought. But maybe tomorrow he'd be better. Tomorrow was always another day.

He listened to their breathing behind him. He'd bedded them down in the pile of leaves and old boughs which had filled the back of the cave, left, Borden knew, by somebody who'd used it in the past. The leaves and branches had been wet until Borden had dried them about the fire.

The fat man was moaning softly now and then in his sleep. Felix Harriman breathed shallowly, like a man ready to awaken in the next instant. The girl was very quiet.

Then he heard the rustle of leaves, a soft step, and knew she was awake, coming toward him. His pulse raced.

He turned and looked at her as she moved up beside him. She was bundled in his leather jacket and it was very large on her. The firelight lent a soft, pale rose glow to her face.

"You ought to be asleep."

"I know. But I couldn't."

The fire at his back warmed him. It popped softly. He was suddenly glad that he was alive. "A cave ain't such a nice place to sleep at night," he said.

"It's not the cave. I could sleep in a cave all right. It's just that I was thinking."

"You don't want to let your mind dwell on the crash and the other people. There's no helping them now. Pray God to rest their souls."

"It wasn't the crash, either, keeping me awake. Well, it was, but not exactly in that way. Say, you got a cigarette?"

"In my jacket pocket."

She reached in his jacket and pulled out a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers. He took them from her and rolled two cigarettes, not quite finishing hers. "Lick your own," he grinned.

She finished the cigarette and he lighted them with a glowing splinter from the fire. He was content just to stand there beside her. Then he said, "You didn't tell me why you wasn't sleeping."

She pulled on the cigarette before she answered. "It may sound silly, but in the moment of the crash I had more time to think than I'd ever had before." She looked at him, only the glow of the fire between them. "A thing like that makes you realize things," she said. "You're crashing, and suddenly you can see things in their right light, as if you were a million miles away looking at them. You can see the value of people, the value of the way you've lived. The value, I guess, of—things."

"Things?"

"Then make it a thing," she said. "A fur coat, for instance."

"A fur coat honestly come by is a mighty nice thing."

"That's what I mean."

He tossed his cigarette away. It spewed out in a little black pool of water in front of the mouth of the cave. "That's funny talk, coming from a woman. And there when I first saw you, you told the fat man that now you wouldn't have to try to guide them out, taking them downstream until you found people. A girl like you, how'd you know that in the hills a stream always leads to people? What kind of girl are you?"

For a long moment she stood quite still and he was sorry that he had spoken. Look-

ing out into the night, she said, "Have you ever been in Macklin County?"

"No, but I know where it is."

"I was born there."

The statement jerked his head around, focusing his attention on her. She said, "I was born there in a cabin my grandfather had built when he was a very young man with a very young bride. I know all about it. I know what the winters are, and I know how the hills bloom in summer. I know what it's like to tramp two miles down the valley to school. I know the taste of chinkapins right out of the burr and how the air smells when hickory smoke is curing hams in the smokehouse. I hated it."

He didn't say anything, waiting for her to go on.

"I hated the thought of growing old the way my mother had," she said. "I hated to think that I was going to miss all the things a person can have in life. I hated it so much I finally went away."

"Just like that?"

"No, my mother helped me. She had a little money. She understood. My father was a big, roaring man, but my mother knew how to handle him without him ever realizing it. Still it wasn't easy. It was harder than I'd ever pictured it in my dreams."

"It's always like that," he said. "But it ought to be better now, with this new job in the place in Washington."

"Yes," her laugh was soft, bitter. "A girl certainly ought to be able to pick up a fur coat in Washington!"

She turned and went back in the huge cave, leaving him staring out in the night. He felt as if he had knives in his chest.

As a new day neared, the black sky became clear, brittle and colder. Borden felt fatigue gnawing away at his reserves. His eyelids felt like sandpaper; he could feel the tired laboring of his heart; he knew he was going to have to have sleep. He'd slept little last night. He'd traveled today afoot. He'd been ready for sleep at nightfall, but he'd reminded himself that Hake Cole was still out there. There was a chance Cole might see the fire and investigate.

**B**ORDEN rose from his sitting position. He'd been leaning back against the wall of the cave, and only the dropping of

his head had snapped him out of it, waking him. He was stiff, with little aches in his knee joints. The fire had burned low.

He fed it more wood and moved back in the depths of the cave. The cavern back here was vast, a great, solid stone hole in the mountain. Borden could barely make out the sleeping forms. The fat man, up nearest the fire, and far back in the rounded corners of the cave the girl and Felix Harriman.

He walked over to Harriman, laid his hand lightly on his shoulder, and Harriman jerked awake, sitting up.

"Easy," Borden said. "It's me. I'm tuckered."

"Then why in hell don't you hit the sack?" Harriman started to lie back down on the ground.

"Somebody needs to keep watch," Borden said.

"And I'm elected?"

"I reckon you are."

"Ye gods!" Harriman said.

"I'm mighty sorry to ask a favor of a man like you," Borden said with gravel in his throat. "But you keep the fire going and your eyes open, understand?"

He heard the sneering chuckle in Harriman's throat. "Okay," Harriman said. "Okay, bub. It's your show."

Harriman stood up and slouched toward the mouth of the cave. Borden stared after him a moment, than lay down. The moment his eyes closed his senses went swirling down in a black void of sleep.

Borden came awake like an animal of the hills in its lair. It was daylight; a huge red rim of sun showed over the peaks in the east, visible from the cave. But something was wrong: the cave was cold. The fire had died to a few glowing embers.

He strode down the stone floor of the cave. Felix Harriman was sleeping in a slouched position against the wall near the fire. His lime-colored suit was a mess of wrinkles. His oily hair was tangled, falling in his eyes.

Borden shook him. Harriman stirred, opened his eyes; they were burning when he looked at Borden. "What the hell is it now, farmer?"

"Where's the fat man?"

"Justin Lade? Isn't he—" Harriman stood up. The sentence trickled off in his throat as he saw that the fat man was not

lying where he'd gone to sleep last night. The girl was still sleeping far back in the cave. But the fat man was nowhere in evidence.

Borden gripped the front of Harriman's begrimed silk shirt and shook. "Where'd he go?"

Harriman slapped away his hand. "How should I know? Was I supposed to play nurse maid to Lade?"

"You were supposed to stay awake. How long have you been asleep?"

"Maybe an hour or more. But listen, farmer, if the fat man can't take care of himself, that's just too damn bad. You said yesterday we had over thirty miles to cover. Think we'd ever have made it carrying him?"

"I didn't give the ifs and ands much thought," Borden said. "I just reckoned we'd carry him—and make it, and that's all. Come on. We'll see if we can find him."

"He must have got delirious and woke up and wandered out," Harriman said. "If the fat punk had to get himself hurt, he shoulda made a good job of it."

"Mr. Harriman," Borden said, "I guess I'm going to have to keep your company until I get you down to Acton City. That being the case, we might as well get along, and we can do that if you keep your mouth shut."

"You don't like the way I talk?"

"I don't like your attitude about things," Borden said. "I'll wake the girl and tell her we're going out. Wouldn't want her to wake and find the cave empty."

Borden led the way. There were smeared footprints going up the path leading away from the cave. But they might have been his own, made last night when he'd foraged for wood. He worked his way along. The sun was getting brighter. The woods began to burst with songs of wild birds. The earth felt very clean and fresh after its bath.

Ten minutes passed. The path angled up. Harriman, trailing behind, was breathing hard, muttering under his breath. They reached the edge of the timber line. Here the path skirted the rim of a sheer cliff. It was two hundred feet or more down into the abyss, the cliff dropping away dizzily. The view was sweeping with trees and bramble fields off down yonder and a racing stream at the cliff base glinted faintly.

Borden heard Felix Harriman's sharply drawn breath and turned. Harriman was standing at the edge of the cliff leaning forward, looking down. A clammy cold sheeted down Borden's back. He knew before he looked down what he would see.

The fat man looked like a shadow upon the rock down there, lying beside the racing stream.

"Let's go back," Harriman said.

"No, we're going down."

"Nuts to that! Ain't you satisfied. You can see him from here. Nobody could live through a fall to those rocks! You think I'm a human fly to pick my way down the cliffs?"

"It won't be that hard. There's a ledge angling down the cliff, almost to the base."

"Yeah, I see it. Just wide enough to slip off and break our own necks! It's clear enough what happened. He woke up delirious, wandered out here, and fell."

"Anyhow, we got to go down," Borden said. "His folks might want to send up here for his remains. Unless we cover the body with stones, there won't be any remains by nightfall."

Harriman cursed and started down.

It was a slow, agonized trip down, Borden picking his way, calling back instructions to Harriman. They reached the racing stream and made their way over boulders to Justin Lade's side. Borden rolled the fat man half over.

"Look at his face!" Harriman said.

"Yeah." Borden let the body slump back. "We'll pile the bigger stones first, all around him."

**T**WENTY minutes later, they were crawling their way back up the cliff. The sun was hotter now. Harriman, up ahead of Borden, was cursing the fat man steadily for the trouble his death had caused.

They reached the rim of the cliff. Harriman jerked a handkerchief from his pocket to mop his face. Something that gleamed fell upon the flat strata of stone on which

they were standing. For an instant, Harriman stood frozen, his jaw dropped, his eyes wide, like a man who has made a horrible mistake.

Borden stared at the gleaming object which had fallen. It was a diamond stickpin.

"The fat man's!" Borden said. "He was wearing that stickpin! You couldn't have lifted it from him just now. I was there beside him, placing the stones as you handed them to me to keep them from crushing his body too bad. It must mean—"

With a cry, Harriman sprang back. Before Borden could close in, a small, flat automatic had jumped into Harriman's hand from his hip pocket. "You nosy farmer! I thought that if you saw his body down there you'd be satisfied and we'd go on back. Then when you were bent on going down, I had to go too. I had to be sure there was nothing down there that would tip you off."

"You killed him. You were going through his pockets, Harriman. He woke. To keep him from calling out you slammed his head against the stone floor of the cave. You carried him out, thinking to hide his body. You came to the cliff here and saw something better—dropped him over to make it appear accidental."

"You're a bright boy, ain't you, farmer?"

"I never thought about it much. What are you planning to do with me?"

"The cliff," Harriman said.

"You think I'll just up and jump?"

"I might have to shoot you first."

Beads of sweat stung Borden's forehead. He looked at the gun in Harriman's hand, at the black beads that were Harriman's eyes. "How about Evie Iverson?"

Harriman chuckled. "The cliff ain't going nowhere. But you ain't as bright as you think you are, farmer. There might have been something in this for you. Justin Lade was a fat, filthy con man. He was wearing a money belt loaded with crooked dough."

*Three dollars will get you four, if you*  
**BUY U. S. SAVINGS BONDS!**

"And you found out? Followed him on the plane?"

"You ain't bright at all. Hell, he was my partner. Why carry his fat, whining bulk out of here? Why split the take with him? It was easy."

"You'll still have to get out of here," Borden said.

"Thirty miles? A matter of a day and half at most. I can do without eats that long, considering what I'm going to eat later. And a stream, remember? There's one handy—right at the base of the cliff. I'll follow it. Eventually it'll lead me to people and—"

The sentence was left unfinished as Felix Harriman twisted about. A twig had snapped behind him. The girl was standing there just at the edge of the timber line. She screamed and dropped low as Harriman fired. It was almost pure reflex on his part, and the shot was wild.

Borden lunged. Harriman sensed it, sensed that he had spun his back on his greatest danger. He twisted about. Borden was almost upon him. Harriman danced back, bringing the gun up. But he didn't fire. The gun kept going up and up as if he were trying to throw it at the sky. He worked his arms wildly as the edge of rotten shale on the cliff's edge crumpled beneath his heels.

For a moment Harriman hung there, suspended against the early morning. Borden grabbed at him, missed. Harriman screamed. He screamed all the way down, until the rocks far below silenced him, and even then the mountains kept throwing back the sound.

Borden stood hunkered at the cliff's edge. Then he was able to move again. He walked like a wooden man toward the girl, still hearing Harriman's scream. The girl was sobbing half hysterically, holding her hands tight against her ears.

Borden cradled her in the crook of his arm. After a moment, she quieted.

"It was awful!" she said.

"Yes."

"It was cold and lonely in the cave. I followed you."

Borden said, "I'll have to go back down the cliff and cover Harriman, I guess. Maybe he's got relatives too somewhere that'll want his body. No matter what a man is or

does, somewhere there's a life or two tangled up with his own."

"And how about you, Borden?"

"Me? Well, a ma and pa, two sisters and two living brothers. No wife, though."

"But up here. So far from nowhere. A hill man doesn't just let his horse run off with his bed-roll and grub the way you said."

"The horse was shot out from under me. A man named Hake Cole did it. I came into the hills hunting him. He killed my brother in a rage over a sixteen-dollar poker pot. I was going to kill Cole."

"And now?"

His gaze found its way to the spot where the rotten shale had crumpled. He trembled a little, in his mind hearing Harriman's scream all over again.

"Now," he said, "I'm going home. I reckon the hills will attend to Hake Cole, sometime, some way. Maybe another renegade will do it. The hills have got a way of working of their own, of putting people in places where things will happen the way natural law says they should. I don't know. I just know that it wouldn't be right for me to have Cole's blood on my hands. I'd be like him, then. Like the fat man. Like Harriman. It's taken a good bit to show me that. And knowing a girl like you—I wouldn't want to be like the fat man or Harriman or Cole."

Now that the words had been spoken he looked out over the mountains, vast and terrible, but home to a man who knew and loved them. The girl didn't speak. He said, "I—I'll go on down and cover Harriman, and get you to Acton City quick as I can. You can get a train to Washington from there."

Still she didn't speak. But he felt her hand sliding into his, and he looked at her. His heart leaped, hammered. His breath caught up in his throat as wild hope surged through him.

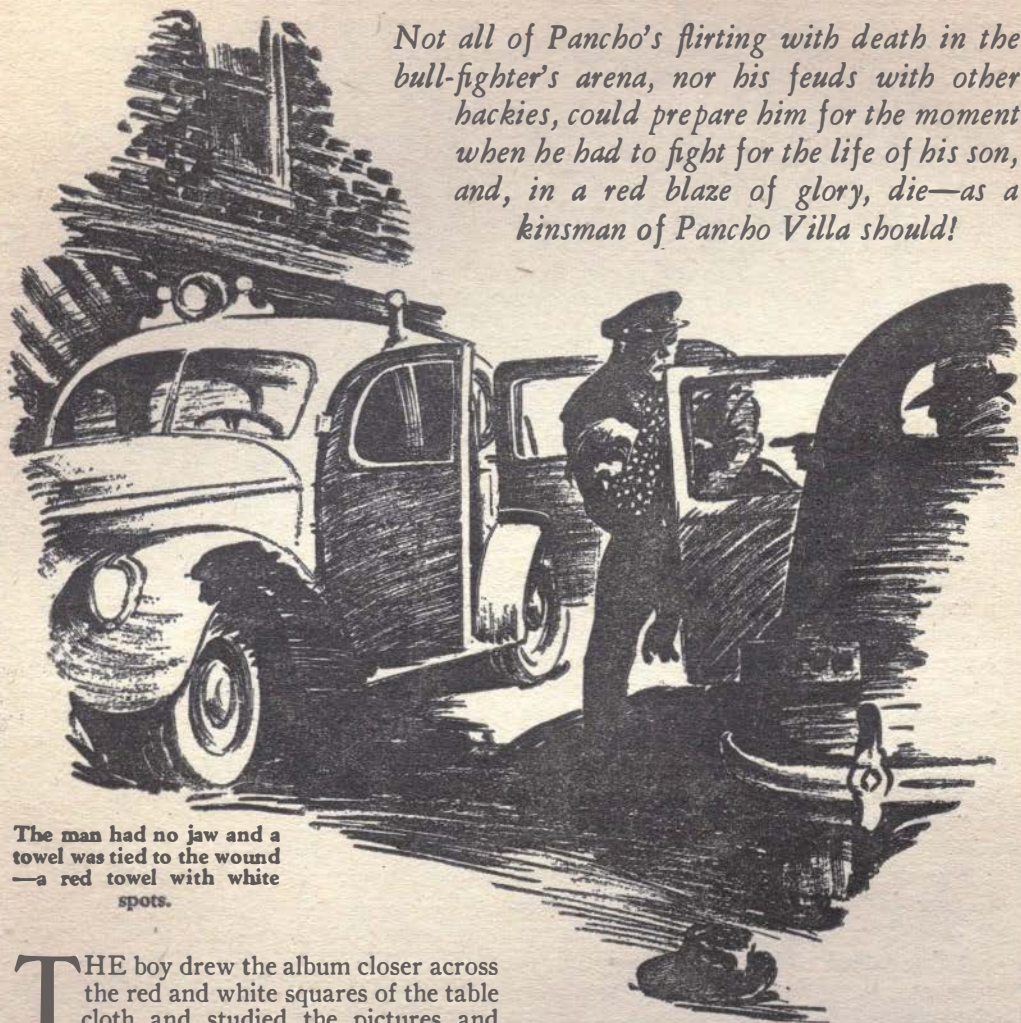
It was there in her face, in her eyes as she looked out over the hills, at the blue, deep sky. It was in the singing of the birds about them and the way her whole being trembled as she drank in the fresh, sweet morning air. She had been born in the hills, and it had taken a long time, but now it was there, now—

*She was falling in love with the hills!*



# MAKE ROOM FOR THE CORPSE!

*Not all of Pancho's flirting with death in the bull-fighter's arena, nor his feuds with other hackies, could prepare him for the moment when he had to fight for the life of his son, and, in a red blaze of glory, die—as a kinsman of Pancho Villa should!*



The man had no jaw and a towel was tied to the wound—a red towel with white spots.

THE boy drew the album closer across the red and white squares of the table cloth and studied the pictures and news clippings. The man watched, smiling. In the silence a cheap alarm clock ticked loudly. The boy was puzzled.

"But, Pop, the school books don't say it like you do. They say General Villa was a bum and a killer. They called out the Army to run him down."

The man considered this. His shoulders were wide, so wide they seemed to fill the end of the small kitchen. Even sitting down, he showed his height. Hands as large as steaks did not seem too large because they were his. His soft brown eyes had an

expression of almost bovine simplicity, yet they glowed with tenderness as they touched the young face.

"So. . . And did this army catch him?"

"No. They chased him a while and quit."

"What do I tell you! The General was smarter than the whole United States Army! That proves it, no? And as for killing—it is not good but lots of good men have killed. There are times—"

"I don't know, Pop. You know about it, I guess. But these books!"

The man smiled warmly, white teeth

• • By ERIC A. PROVOST • •

flashing in his large dark face. "Pedro, listen, small one. The *Estados Unidos* is a big strong country. A wonderful country. Also they write their own school books. So in those books they put what they want. They do not like it that the General is smarter than the U.S. Army. So they put it in the books that he was no good. It was not really so. I could tell you."

The alarm clock clanged sharply. The man rose, switched off the bell. "Enough for tonight. To bed with you. I have work to do."

AN HOUR later a battered black and yellow taxi parked in a hackstand outside a side-street saloon. It was just ten o'clock and the night was getting underway. The throngs were growing, jostling and elbowing each other, each group bent on its particular form of relaxation.

The dark-hued man at the wheel of the cab settled himself looking something like a father in a child's toy car. He lit a cigarette with a flourish and viewed the scene with quiet expectation. It was like gambling, this taxi driving. One never knew what would happen next. The cigarette was half smoked when a blue-coated figure stopped by the cab, the whirling nightstick on the thong flipping up in a figure eight.

"Hey Stupe! How's Pancho Arango tonight?"

The driver looked up and there was no change in his expression of quiet ease. "'Allo Sergeant."

"Come twelve o'clock, I'll be wanting a ride out to my sister's place. I could take the subway but I know you wouldn't want me to do that, you hackin' off my beat and all. Won't take you over half an hour. Okay?"

"Okay."

The driver watched the sergeant stroll away, nightstick swinging jauntily. He hadn't missed the touch of mockery in the sergeant's tone. Neither had he missed the name "Stupe". These Yankees wrote their own books and it amused the big man to play along.

Once in the past he had refused to ride Sergeant Thompson around with the flag up and the next day he was the recipient of three traffic tickets, none of them, however, given by Thompson. But he'd learned that lesson and added it to the store of

knowledge he had accumulated about this strange, wonderful city. Indeed a man supposed to be stupid could learn many things if he kept his eyes open.

Three laughing girls jumped into the back and wanted to go across town to a chop suey palace. He drove them, listening, watching the flow of traffic, handling the old cab expertly as though it were a toy. He was in the city but not of it. He felt that Yankee ways were not his ways, that they were no concern of his. He missed little of what went on around him but, feeling himself apart, he seldom talked and that added to his reputation for stupidity.

He'd arrived in the city a bashful, wide-eyed youngster of nineteen with a carload of cattle from El Paso. He'd been impressed with the vastness, the eternal excitement so different from his native Mexico. He'd stayed, finding employment first as a car washer. Then he'd met, loved and married a blue-eyed Irish girl who passed away when their boy Pedro was four.

Pancho lavished on the boy all the hungry emotion he'd felt for the mother, determined that Pedro should have every advantage possible. By staying here the boy would be educated. American schools were better than Mexican. His boy should not be a menial. He'd be a lawyer or something as fine.

As the years passed he taught the boy something of the wisdom of the old ones which this racing hectic country had no time to understand. Working at night, sleeping in the morning, left his afternoons free for his son. Then, while Pedro slept, he drove the cab and watched the life he never could feel a part of.

He left the laughing girls at the chop suey palace and cruised slowly back toward his stand, on the lookout for customers. He was slowing to pull into his space at the curb when a woman screamed. The sound cut out through the night like a machete. Pancho let his eyes drift toward the sound without moving his head. This was one of the things it did not pay to know too much about. He saw a slight figure race from the alley, slip into the passing crowd then disappear into a corner drugstore.

A moment later, as he braked his cab to a stop, a woman came to the alley mouth, clothing torn and hat awry. "Police!" she

screamed. "Somebody call a cop quick!"

As the woman explained hysterically to the gathering crowd that her boy friend had been slugged and rolled and was lying unconscious in the alley, Sergeant Thompson arrived, breathless. He took charge and called Bellevue for an ambulance.

"All right, what did this guy look like?" he asked the woman. "The one who slugged your boy friend?"

"Tall, I think, and big, Officer. But I didn't see him very good. Ask the cabby there. He stopped just as the guy ran out."

"How about it, Pancho?" Thompson demanded.

Pancho was all wide-eyed confusion.

"Me!" His hand, fingers spread, was on his chest.

"Me—I see nothing."

"But this dame says the guy ran right past you. Didn't you look? Didn't you hear her yell?"

"I hear her yell, sure! But I get mixed up and look the other way. Then I have to watch where I am driving. Fenders, even for such an old taxi, are expensive. By the time I see where I am going and stop my cab I see nobody."

Sergeant Thompson swallowed an oath. "How you get around this town beats me. What a stupe!"

IT WAS an hour later when a huge man with hat-brim pulled low jumped into the rear of the cab. "Take off," he ordered. "Around the block, but go slow."

Pancho was accustomed to taking orders. He knew the figure, the voice of the man in back. It was Big Ed McCloud, the head man of a smart mob. As the cab circled the block, the big man leaned forward.

"I hear your eyes are bad, Pancho."

Pancho recognized the tone. Cold but friendly, with just the hint of a threat. "How is that?" he asked.

"When the cop asked you what you saw a while back you said 'nothing.' Now what I want to know is—is that so? Are you *sure* tomorrow morning you won't remember something you saw and go yapping to some flatfoot?"

"I see nobody," Pancho said blandly. "All the time things are happening around me. If I try to watch everything I smash up my taxi and then where would I be with no taxi? Hacking is my business.

That is what I watch first, you see?"

"Okay. That's how it should be. I'll leave a reminder on the seat, just so you won't think you saw something you didn't! Pull up now."

Big Ed left the cab. Pancho clambered out awkwardly and his hand ran over the back seat. He felt a crisp new bill. Under the dash lamp it proved to be of hundred-dollar value. He folded it and placed it deep in his old wallet. The ways of these Yankees were strange. It was best to see much, yet take no part in what happened . . .

At midnight sharp, Sergeant Thompson piled into the rear of the cab. "Let's go, Pancho! My feet are killing me."

Thirty minutes, and by Pancho's estimate three dollars later, the sergeant got out. In his hand was a package containing an unmistakable bottle. Pancho knew the liquor store it came from and made himself a wager that Thompson hadn't paid for it. The policeman waved a hand as he walked jauntily across the sidewalk. There was nothing wrong with his feet now, Pancho saw.

Aloud he said, "Good-night, Sergeant," and in an undertone, "Cops!"

It was an hour later when, through another cab driver, he learned what had happened earlier that evening, and why Ed McCloud was so anxious to cover it up. Ed's mob was strictly a big-time fur outfit. They cased fur warehouses all over town, took one from time to time, and were known to have made insurance deals to return the hot furs if the price was right. Such an outfit did not roll drunks. But it seemed that Ed McCloud had a kid brother who was hot-tempered and liked a certain girl. A guy came down from the Bronx and gave the wren a play. The McCloud kid burned. He trailed the Bronx boy, sapped him plenty to teach him a lesson, then rolled him for his wad to give the cops a bum steer.

Big Ed gave the kid a going-over about taking chances on dumb plays, then went out to make sure the kid was covered.

Pancho listened intently. That was another thing he'd learned. If you listened much and talked little, people told you things that otherwise wild horses could not have dragged from them. He filed the tale in his memory and went on hacking until dawn paled the sky in the east.

That afternoon he and Pedro saw a ball game in Brooklyn. There was much yelling and excitement and general foolishness which Pedro enjoyed hugely but which left Pancho undisturbed. After the game, in their small walk-up room, Pancho dug out an old scrapbook and opened it.

"It is well that you understand the pastimes of the Yankees, my son, but do not overlook the sport of the *Mexicano* where a man takes his life in his fingers and spits in the devil's eye! There is in this baseball nothing to the thrill of a good matador! The grace—the light foot. The lightning-like stroke! Here—look at these pictures."

The two head bent low. The boy looked up after a moment. "But they tell me the bull has no chance, pop! It ain't a sport unless there is a chance"

"No chance! Has a ten-ton truck no chance against a man on a bicycle! The slightest wrong move and the matador is ripped to pieces. The bull has no chance! The man who said that has never fight the bull!"

"You ever fight a bull, Pop?"

Pancho paused a long moment as he lit a cigarette. His eyes glowed with reminiscence. Then, "I tell you something. For many years I trained to be a matador. For years I practised how to sidestep at the last instant, to pass the bull to one side with the cape, to let the horns even graze the cloth of my clothing without flinching, to strike the death blow cleanly and quickly. Most people laugh at me. They say 'How can this mountain hope to move like a tiger—it is impossible.' But I would have showed them, I think. But then—" there was humor rather than bitterness in his voice "—then I come to New York with some cattle and learn to drive a taxi. Enough! To bed with you. Tomorrow is another day!"

For an hour after Pedro went to sleep his father gave himself up to reverie, dreaming of the days he trained and worked and slaved to become a famous matador, and of the trick of fate which brought him to New York and the Irish girl with the quick smile which took the past away . . . He lifted the checkered table cloth from the table and made a few flourishes, as though passing a charging bull, first to one side, then on the other. Simply at first, then with more elaborate movements, imagining the

roars of approval from the crowd as he allowed the needle-pointed horns to come closer and closer until the moment for the *coup-de-grace*.

Eyes shining, he snatched a heavy butcher knife from a drawer, the broad flat blade something like the *estoque* of a matador, and stepped forward, flipping the cloth outward in a grand gesture. But a hole in the cloth caught on a drawer knob. The drawer came out, crashed on the floor with a jumble of dime store cutlery.

"Enough!" he said. "More of that and I will be as foolish as these Yankees think me!" He replaced the table cloth carefully, gathered the cutlery and pushed the drawer in position . . .

HE WAS nearing his customary parking place when a shrill whistle sounded. Instinctively Pancho braked. A stooped figure ducked into the cab. It was Ed McCloud's brother.

"Hold it!" the boy snapped. "I ain't going nowhere." He leaned forward, ferret-like eyes studying the big driver. Suddenly—"You ain't such a jerk, at that! You're reg'lar. You done me a favor. Maybe, just maybe, see—I could return it. Can you use some dough?"

"Always I can use money," Pancho said. "Everything is so expensive!"

"Okay. Wednesday night. Be here at one o'clock. I'll meet you. You'll pick up a couple of C's, maybe more." The boy grinned, then sobered. "But don't talk, savvy?"

"I *sabe*, sure."

The boy left. Pancho sat quite still, thinking. Of such small occurrences were life's patterns made. So far in this wonderful mad city he had avoided trouble. Also, he had avoided making very much money. The papers were filled each day with stories of men who made money, who were smart. What could he do for Pedro if he continued barely making ends meet. No—the gambler's chance was here. Pancho was through being a "stupe" while the Sergeant Thompsons and the Ed McClouds fattened and lived richly.

He drove abstractedly all night, thinking, and when Sergeant Thompson asked for a free ride, Pancho's smile was wider than ever . . .

Wednesday night came, and eventually

one o'clock. Pancho was at the appointed place waiting, excitement boiling inside. A figure slipped up to him. It was the boy.

"Go to Twenty-second, east of Fourth. Park about fifty feet from the corner. Wait for a crate with Jersey plates. It should be along in about an hour. Get rolling."

Pancho got rolling, as tingles of excitement chased up his spine. This was life. This was adventure. This was being smart. He parked in the prescribed spot and waited. A million pictures passed before his mind's eye. He recalled the gangster movies he had seen where cars tore around corners on two wheels and machine guns sprayed death. He smiled. That was in the movies! That was foolishness, for children. Smart men like Ed McCloud did not operate like that. With them everything moved like clockwork.

Suddenly a car raced toward him, going the wrong way on the one way street. Pancho smiled, then stiffened as the car swerved toward him and he saw the Jersey license. The car squealed to a stop.

"Pancho! Here!" McCloud's voice.

Pancho jumped out of the cab. They placed a man in his arms. The man had no jaw and a towel was tied to the wound—a red towel with white spots. Pancho carried the man to his cab. In seconds, three other men were in the back. Pancho gunned his motor and the cab jumped.

As they approached the intersection a small police coupe swerved into the street with screeching tires. In the rear view mirror Pancho saw that his customers were on the floor out of sight. He watched the police car in his mirror as it halted by the abandoned car, then swung his cab to the right.

"Hey! Where you going?" McCloud snapped.

"I think it is better if we lose those cops, no?" Pancho suggested.

He swung the next turn to the left as McCloud said, "Right! Lose 'em quick!" To his companions, "This guy's okay. We're out of it now!"

The Mexican heard whispered comment. "He better be okay! You ain't forgetting what we left back there!"

But Pancho's mind was on his driving as he swung corner after corner. To outwit the police would be a source of satisfaction.

Within ten minutes McCloud ordered him to stop. "We're borrowing your cab, Pancho. It'll be by your garage in half an hour."

He ordered a companion to wear Pancho's cap and they left him on the sidewalk as the old cab churned away.

Pancho shrugged philosophically. The ways of these Yankees were indeed strange. He wondered what would happen to the man with the missing jaw and where the furs were. It never occurred to him to doubt that McCloud would return the cab. He walked, dropping into a bar for a quick one while excitement still boiled in his veins. He wondered what his share in the night's work would be.

Forty minutes later Pancho found the cab near the garage where he kept it. He drove inside and cleaned the back thoroughly. There was no trace of blood when he was through. Then he drove to his stand. A sudden departure from habit would attract attention.

At the familiar stand Pancho thought things over. In his notebook he entered a trip northward, giving a Bronx address. It was well to be prepared, he thought. Then he left the cab and had two quick drinks. In the bar a radio was playing softly. The music faded suddenly and an announcer's voice snapped out:

"News bulletin! Police are still searching for the men who broke into the Atlas Fur Company loft on lower Manhattan less than two hours ago. The Atlas watchman has died. One of two passers-by shot down by the gunmen as they fled has also succumbed. However, the watchman sounded the alarm as the men left and it is believed that no furs were stolen. No description of the killers is yet available. Keep tuned to this station for additional developments." The voice ceased and music swelled in the speaker.

A hubbub of voices broke out in the bar room. "God, two killings" the bartender said, puzzled. "Those mobs don't go in for murder. They're supposed to be smart. Something must have slipped!"

Pancho swallowed the lump in his throat. Helping out a man the cops wanted was one thing, but he knew enough of law to be sure that helping escaping murderers was a different brand of chili. He ordered another drink, wondered why no mention

had been made of a taxi. Could it be that the police thought the men had escaped by going through a nearby building? Considering the stupidity of police in general, and Sergeant Thompson in particular, he thought it quite possible and breathed easier.

He was sitting outside in the cab twenty minutes later when the door opened and two men climbed in. Pancho half turned.

"Yes, where to?"

"Precinct headquarters. Leave the flag up."

Inwardly he froze, but there was no outward sign of his emotion. He noted that one man was examining the rear seat with the aid of a flash. Going cross-town methodically he was half panicked for a moment by the sudden realization that Pedro would have no one to care for him if anything happened to him. Pedro, with the laughing smile, the trusting nature . . .

**T**HERE WAS nothing to do now but bluff it out. The police could prove nothing if he held his tongue. If he talked he would be sent away and Pedro would be alone. His pulse stopped for an instant as he thought of another possibility, indeed a probability. He would be sent away if he was tried, but he would never come to trial because some McCloud underling would see to that. McCloud would never let him spill his story to a court . . . No, there was nothing to do but deny everything and stick to his story, no matter what they did to him.

At headquarters he was led inside, a man in plain clothes at each side. They pushed open a door labeled "Homicide" and shoved him into a straight-backed chair before a wooden desk. The chair creaked with Pancho's weight. A sharp-eyed man was sitting on the other side.

"Let's see your trip book, hackie. Where did you take those guys?"

Thanking all the saints he knew of, Pancho recalled his Bronx entry. He showed his book.

The Homicide man looked skeptical. "You trying to tell me you didn't pick up four hoods on Twenty-second Street? We know you did, so don't lie."

Pancho assumed his usual smile of bewilderment. There was no indication of the ball of ice he felt inside as he spread

his hands palm up and gave his answer.

"The lieutenant makes jokes? I do not understand."

"You better understand quick. You picked up four hoods tonight, downtown. You hauled 'em somewhere! If it hadn't been for you we would have had 'em! The gas tank was shot out of their car. Where did you take 'em! Talk!"

"Four hoods? Downtown?" Pancho "But no, señor."

The policeman rattled off a number. "That's yours," he said. "You picked up those guys."

Pancho repressed a shudder. He'd forgotten his license plate and that the police were behind him where his tail-light would illuminate it clearly! "That is my number," he admitted. "But I was not there. How could anyone make that mistake?"

The lieutenant eyed him skeptically. To an aide he snapped, "Get me the lowdown on this guy. Bring in the cop on the beat!"

Within fifteen minutes Sergeant Thompson stood at the desk. The lieutenant explained, finished brusquely. "What's his reputation? Is he a smart guy? Does he play with mobs?"

"Sir," Thompson said, "I know him well. He is a stupe. We even call him 'Stupe'. If he says he was in the Bronx he probably was. He ain't got brains enough to lie that good. Maybe one of the cops misread one digit—"

"I didn't ask your opinion of what happened, only what this man's reputation is. That's all, Sergeant."

They sweated Pancho for another hour, but he stuck to his story with a simple sincerity that was unshakable. He knew the importance of this lie. Not his life alone, but Pedro's depended on it. They tried to trick him by asking exactly what route he'd driven, then claiming that one of the streets was closed. A less simple man than Pancho would have been thrown off but he shrugged, smiled, and admitted that they might be right but he was sure he went that way. At the hour's end they let him go with a warning not to leave town, that they'd be watching him.

Driving away from headquarters Pancho saw the car swing out and follow him. His heart was pounding. For once he was grateful for Thompson's contempt.

Pancho had no heart for further hacking.

He drove to his garage and laid up for the night, then walked the three blocks to his walk-up home. As he climbed the stairs his heart was heavy. It seemed that this smart life he aspired to could have its drawbacks. But when McCloud paid him off all that would be forgotten . . .

He unlocked the door, tiptoed into the kitchen. The familiar red-and-white checked table cloth was there; he heard the noisy ticking of the old alarm clock, and the door to Pedro's door was open. He turned away, intending to lie down and think a while. Then he saw the note on the stove.

Pop, two men have come for me. They say you are in trouble and that I must stay with them for a few days. I am writing this so you will understand, if you do come back tonight.

Chin up, Pop.

Pedro

It stunned him. Unbelieving, he read it again. Pedro . . .

He sank into a chair to overcome the weakness in his knees. So Big Ed McCloud knew the cops took him in, and were now holding Pedro as a hostage. The fools! Did they not realize that he would not talk as long as Pedro was unharmed, but that he would turn hell itself over, stone by stone, to protect his boy—or avenge him!

The police—he'd go at once and confess the whole story. They would know where to find Big Ed, and they would rescue Pedro. But he couldn't! He had already told one story, to admit it was a lie would mean jail for him, leaving Pedro unprotected. Worse yet, the police would laugh at him, disbelieve his story. For they were no better than the thieves they pretended to harass. He recalled the many small chiseling tricks he had seen Sergeant Thompson perform—and if the police did not approve of such conduct how could such a man become a sergeant!

**HIS** NUMBED mind groped for a way out. He did not know where to begin. He had not the faintest idea of Big Ed's hangout, except that it must be in the vicinity of his regular cab stand, because Big Ed and his boys were often in the neighborhood.

There was something else. He tried to concentrate, forcing his mind to work. He felt there was some little thing—one of the

horde of trivialities he'd filed away, all the while pretending not to notice. On several occasions he'd seen McCloud's brother visit a delicatessen and leave with a large bag of supplies. The boy was too lazy to carry the bag far, so the headquarters was within a block or so of the corner. But where? In which direction? His mind had nothing to offer on that score. Knowing only that he must try, he stumbled from the apartment and down the stairs.

Outside he retraced his course to the garage and a moment later he was driving his old cab through the familiar streets, driving mechanically.

At his accustomed place he parked and entered the bar.

"So they didn't hold you?"

He turned. The youth before him was Big Ed McCloud's young brother.

"Have you been home yet?" the boy demanded capgily.

Pancho nodded.

"Then you know," the boy said, low-voiced. "We just wanted some insurance. The kid'll be okay—if you act smart."

*Act smart.* There was irony in the phrase



Sergeant Thompson

to Pancho. It was his desire to be clever—*smart*—that had led him into this.

The taxi driver's hand gripped the boy's wrist. There was a swirl of motion and the boy piled up in the corner, screaming with the pain of a broken arm. With no outward emotion Pancho slipped out through the door.

In the shadow of the corner drugstore he waited. Within a matter of minutes the boy came half-running down the sidewalk.

"To draw a wolf into the open," mused Pancho, "injure a whelp."

He watched the passing figure, then slipped out after him. It apparently never occurred to the boy that he would be trailed, for he never glanced backward, seemed intent only on reaching his lair and reporting his injury.

It was a conventional three-story brown-stone front into which he turned. He had trouble fumbling for his key to the street-level door, and in three long jumps Pancho was upon him, a ham-like fist clubbing to the base of the skull. The boy sank limply, and Pancho found the key case.

It took a moment more to select the proper key and let himself inside. He stood in a dark corridor, trying to sense the position of the stairs. He found them and crept upward in the darkness, his pulse pounding in his ears like a rhythmic drum.

On the third floor there was a crack of light under a door. He bent, listening. A murmur of voices came to him, indistinguishable as to identity. He threw back the door and lunged inside. Three men faced him over a small table. There was Big Ed and two others who had been in the cab. There was no sign of the injured man. But in the corner beyond, Pedro lay spread-eagled on a bed, tied hand and foot.

An automatic came up in Big Ed's hand and flame lanced out at Pancho. But by then he was going forward in a long dive, hands outstretched for the weapon. The sheer daring of the move was disconcerting and a second later Pancho wrenched the gun free. He slashed it out in a raking swing for Big Ed's head, heard the crunch of breaking bone as the weapon hit.

Flame came at him from two points and he felt the shock of bullets. At that range they could not miss. He clubbed the gun, kicked the deal table over at one man to distract him and struck at the other as hard as he could. Again flame struck at him, and there was the shock of impact.

Disregarding it, he moved in, smashing with his clubbed weapon. It seemed that his anger gave him the strength of many men, and his disregard for personal injury filled him with a reckless jubilation. Just what happened then he did not know but suddenly all three men were down and Pedro was crying on the bed and feet were

pounding on the stairs. The door burst open and two cops stood there with leveled guns.

"God in heaven," one said in awe. "A massacre!"

Some minutes later Pancho was explaining everything to the homicide lieutenant while a police doctor dressed his wounds.

"Until they took my Pedro from me," Pancho said, "I did not consider this my personal business. After all, I am a foreigner. And I have no great love for your police who ride in taxis without paying. But when they take my boy, it become very much my business. I do not want to kill these coyotes, because killing is very bad, no? So I do the next best thing. How is it that you arrive in the so nick of time?"

"We hung a tail on you," the lieutenant said. "When you jumped the kid and came in here he telephoned me."

Pancho said, "What happen now I do not care so long as you let me take Pedro home."

"And Thompson called you a stupe!" the lieutenant said. "He should have your brains. The way you got the boy to lead you here was bright." He paused, then—"So Thompson rides your cab deadhead. I'll transfer him to where there are no taxis!"

"How this man stands up I'll never know," the doctor interjected. "He was as full of lead as a target! Five bullets I've taken out and he must have lost a quart of blood, yet he acts like it's no more than a scratch. You're a fighting man, my friend."

"Does his name mean nothing to you, senior?" Pedro broke in, voice quivering with pride. "Pancho Arango was the real name of the one you called Pancho Villa. It is the blood of the great General that flows in my father! Through marriage between the General's father and my great aunt once removed!"

The homicide lieutenant appeared to choke. Pedro glared at him indignantly.

"You should not have said that, small one," Pancho said reproachfully. "I am a stupid taxi driver, getting more stupid every day. Only one thing I have learned in watching these so clever people—the smart die young!"



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# RING AROUND ROSIE'S NECK

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

## CHAPTER ONE

### Ten Steps to Hell!

SHE WAS tall, compact, beautiful and rounded. Rose—Rose Gorgi. She was emotional and greedy. And she was found—but never mind that. I'll tell you something about Rose after a while. You've heard the phrase, "like falling off a log?" It was just that easy.

But forget Rose for a while. Madalyn came first in sequence anyway. I married Madalyn. She had two million dollars. So I married her and lived with her five years. The end of the rainbow, I'd thought. *Two million dollars*. But problems are like weeds. The seeds need only fall.

There was still another one. Rhonna.

Rhonna tied me into knots. She backed me in a corner. She began by saying, "Danny, isn't there any other way?"

"Like what?"

"Well, divorce, maybe?"

Oh-ho. As though I hadn't thought of that. "You think we'd ever get a judge to give *me* alimony?"

"But how much would we need?"

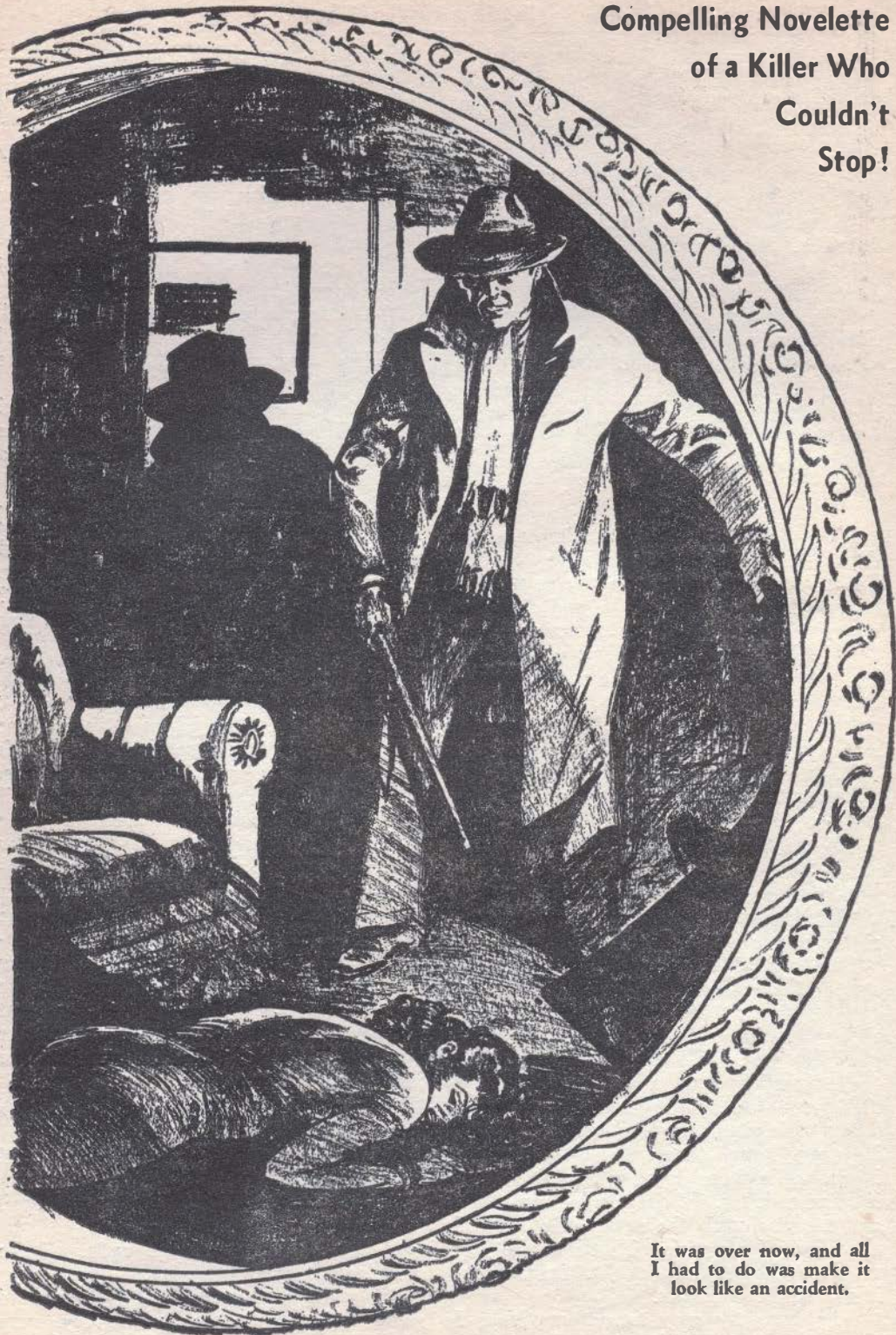
"Hon, look. Here, in my wallet. Five hundred lousy dollars. That's every cent

---

*The grey, uncertain light of dawn picked up highlights along her dead, childlike body, and I could see my fate stretching out before me like the murderer's tightrope I had so long trod, writhing and coiling into a hangman's noose!*



Compelling Novelette  
of a Killer Who  
Couldn't  
Stop!



It was over now, and all  
I had to do was make it  
look like an accident.

I've got. It wouldn't last us two weeks."

Her eyes were green, the pupils very large and black, as though each day she put belladonna drops in them. She was tawny and not too tall. She was nectar any man would want to sip—and sometimes she was gall.

"I hate her!" she would say. "Danny, I hate her. I hate her!"

"Okay, baby, I get it," I said. "You hate her."

"Two million dollars. All that money. She doesn't even know what to do with it! Oh Danny, if we only had just half."

"Sure. If we only had the secret of the atomic bomb. While we're at it, why not wish for something really good, the moon."

"But Danny, you don't understand. I love you. It's something I can't fight. Isn't there *any* other way?"

She was at me like that almost every day. I mean every time we were together. Sometimes we would take a ride up the river, maybe on a dark night, and then she would whisper, "Suppose something happened to the car? Danny, suppose a steering bolt would break, or something vital like that?"

"Then we'd go in a ditch."

"I mean, Danny, on *her* car."

"Then she'd go into a ditch, very likely."

"People get killed, going into ditches, Danny, don't they?"

I chuckled and answered, "It's happened."

"Oh, you're so damned bland about it!"

"Well, what do you want me to do? Go right home tonight and kill her?"

Two million dollars. Funny. A guy starts a little business, we'll say. He makes cans. For a while he makes *g*bod cans; they sell and he's safe so long as he doesn't get ideas. He's safe so long as he doesn't try producing cans with false bottoms. And yet—one time I'd wanted a horse. 'Way back when I was a kid. That's all I'd wanted one whole summer—me, mowing lawns in those days for two bits, lucky if I had a dollar. I bought a bit one week, and a curry comb the next; then I saved two weeks for a whip. That was the way to get my horse. I'd thought. Start working around the fringes.

*That was the way to get anything, I thought. Start working around the fringes . . .*

So I bought a wedding ring for Rhonna. I bought it on impulse, in a pawnshop, in July. It was the first, the inevitable step, and I knew it. I didn't know, or foresee, that Madalyn would find the ring in my pocket.

Essentially, of course, it should not have been in my pocket. I should have hidden it immediately. I should have put it anywhere but in my coat. Yet Madalyn had never before looked in my pockets.

"I—I was going downtown, darling," she said, puzzled at the ring, my scowl, and speaking very swiftly. "I needed some change—"

She held the ring in her fingers, looked at it. There were petals engraved on the band. In the center of each flower was a brilliant blue-white diamond.

"It's such a beautiful ring," she said. Then she looked at me. Her blue eyes were aslant and she was blonde and slim and twenty-five and lovely. A picture like that, two million dollars, and I wasn't satisfied? You don't get it. She was sweet. She was tender.

**WE'D MET** six years back, in Hong Kong. I'd had a job of sorts in those days. Nothing very special but enough to play with glamour, round the fringes. We lived until the war in Singapore. All through the war, once we'd returned to the States, it was China Relief and rallies for bonds. One day she discovered that people wanted to read about what she had been through, and in quick succession she wrote two fine books. So we met important people. I can meet important people, but they bore me. Maybe it's in my mind. Maybe what I see is jagged lines instead of straight ones. Maybe what I like is tension, She was like starlight; she wasn't like the jungle and hot sun.

"For me?" she said now, at last, looking at me from the ring.

I got control of myself. "Why else would I buy a wedding ring?"

"Oh, Danny, and I had to go and spoil the surprise."

"You always have to go and spoil the surprise," I said.

She glanced down again at the ring, and suddenly her blue eyes were very, very wide. "Danny, there's a Chinese character engraved inside. Danny, it reads

'death'! That's an odd thing, isn't it?"

"Well, what do you want," I said irritably, "moonlight and roses? If you look closely you'll see the faint outline of another character. Obviously the inscription was meant to read 'until death'. The ring's not new. I never said it was. I got it in a pawnshop. My God, you're never satisfied with anything I buy, or with anything I do. The first part of the inscription has been worn off and that's all there is to it."

"Death," she repeated queerly.

She put the ring down on her dressing table. The phone rang; her car was ready, downstairs. She kissed me and ran, but still I stared at the ring. *Death* engraved in the band.

"Darling, she's gone," someone said from the hall.

I looked around. Madalyn's secretary stood in the bedroom doorway. Rose Gorgi.

The trouble is, you start taking steps and you're bound to come to a corner. Then you can't stand there forever. You've either got to turn it or go back. Sometimes you can't go back; the wind, perhaps, the pressure. Sometimes there just is no way back, even if you want it.

Rose, as I've said, was Madalyn's secretary. From Capri. Her eyes were dark, her hair like night, but in the distant past a forebear had come down from Norway. So her skin was very smooth and white. One night, long back, I'd driven her home. She lived on a little side street, a dead end, and it was very dark that night when we parked.

A walk ran up from the curb, just to her door. She had a private entrance.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Quell?" she said.

I examined her lips and her eyes. Her eyes had dancing lights in them, and her lips were moist and parted.

"Red wine," she whispered, "a big glassful?"

She had a throaty voice; it was like her eyes, she could make it dance. Her fingertips reached out for my wrist, and they were cool and soft. So I went in. I looked around. No starlight here. Never starlight for Rose Gorgi.

"I've often wondered and never had the nerve to ask," she said. "Were you in the war?"

She was busy stripping off her gloves,

then an Eton jacket. She wore a full-sleeved silky blouse, and I was a sucker for them. She was busy with her hands, loosening her hair. It was long. It fell to her shoulders. But she was looking at me all the while from a wide blue mirror. She was tall from where I sat, she had on spike heels.

"My leg?" I asked then, to her question. I liked my limp and had never tried to overcome it. Dash was what I liked. A lot of fine young men were limping these days. And then I could carry a cane. I liked to carry a cane. Danny Quell, married to two million dollars—get it?

"It's Jap lead," I said. "When the Japs came down we made a run for it. From Singapore to Java. The ship was machine-gunned. We got to Java, and then to Australia and finally home. That's all there was to it."

"How old are you, Danny?" she said.

Danny, eh? The decanter and glasses sat on a small table before me. I filled them. "Nearly forty. Why?"

"You don't look it."

She turned from the mirror and came forward for her glass. She took it in her hand and held it halfway to her lips.

All right. For a few weeks she amused me. Did I care if she'd looked into the well, leaned out too far and fallen in? For a few weeks she amused me, until she made demands. Until I'd met Rhonna. Then Rose was in the way. An interlude was over.

The trouble was she didn't agree. "Darling—" Rose Gorgi said that day in the bedroom doorway. Remember how I'd looked up from the ring?

Rose Gorgi didn't come to work the next Monday morning.

Of course Madalyn was upset. She'd begun a new book, she'd planned new chapter. It seemed each Monday was an event. She prepared for them. Work was laid out with the utmost care each Sunday evening. She never went out on a Sunday evening.

"Where could Rose be?" she'd ask, over and over.

We had two daytime servants six days a week; we never kept them Sundays. Now, at ten, the maid had just brought my breakfast.

"Hasn't she a phone?"

"Oh Danny, I've tried! It rings and

rings and she simply doesn't answer."

"Perhaps—" I buttered toast, then broke it. "Perhaps she was on a binge last night."

"Danny!"

"Oh, no life of her own, eh?"

"I didn't say that. But not Rose, Danny. She doesn't even have a boy friend. At least I never heard her say she had one." Madalyn looked beyond me. "No, Danny, not Rose Gorgi."

"Okay." I shrugged. "I was merely trying to be helpful."

"If you were helpful," she flared, "you'd drive over there for me and see what is the matter."

It was a drab street by day. It was lonely in the sunlight, mean. It was filled with odors, pushcarts and kids. I tried Rose Gorgi's door. It was locked. But the lights were on in her apartment.

I limped on around the building. An Amazon was busy in the backyard, bent across a tub and bobbing up and down.

"*Uno momento*," she said.

I was in no hurry. I could take all day. She took more than a moment though, to hang up a dress and an apron.

"*Signore Quell?*" No, she had not heard of me. She knew Rosa worked for Mrs. Quell, however. Not Rose—Rosa. Rosa who would sometimes mind her babies. The *bambinos*, *Signore*. Uh-huh. Brats. Rosa who would sometimes share her wine. Rosa with the quick, glad laughter; and sometimes with the temper, too.

She was the janitress, this broad-hipped woman, and she had the keys to all the doors in the building. But her hands were wet and the keys were in her apron pocket; she wiped her hands with care, unhurried, on the only dry spot, near the hem.

I found Rose Gorgi. The janitress just took one quick look and ran outside, screaming. Rose Gorgi was dead. She wore a stocking round her neck, and almost nothing else. A slip knot on her neck, the hard knot tied above, on the short arm of the shower.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ring Around the Murder!

"I CAME," I said again, to Lieutenant McCain, later, long after the police had arrived, "to see what was the matter. Miss

Gorgi was supposed to be at work today. She worked for my wife. When she didn't answer her phone, my wife asked me to run over."

Homicide had taken over. I'd always felt a certain dread at mention of that word. The storm would come, the wind would blow; you'd hear thunder and see lightning. But these were plain men. They were men who minded summer heat, tight shoes, aching feet. They would even cut themselves while shaving.

The medical examiner put on his coat then, reached for his bag, and McCain said.

"Don't run away yet, Mr. Quell. I want to ask you a few more questions. Incidentally, is this Miss Gorgi's handwriting?"

I read the unsigned note a second time. Typical note. Chaotic. *All I wanted was a home some day, and children. There's nothing left in life for me, except—* It was I who'd found it. I turned it over to McCain.

"Yes, I think it's her writing," I said slowly.

"You're not sure?"

"No. You don't understand. I've had very little contact with Miss Gorgi. She was my wife's secretary, not mine. She was almost never with us evenings."

"Then presumably your wife could identify the writing?"

"Yes, I think Madalyn would know. I've phoned her, by the way. I called her right after I called you, Lieutenant."

"Is she coming over?"

"No. She's on the fine edge and not too strong. She went through hell, the Japanese affair, you know, and it left its marks. I told her not to come over."

McCain looked once more around the room. He looked once more at the body. Then he inclined his head to the hall. There were two small chairs in the hall, one on either side the telephone table.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks, Lieutenant, but I have my own."

"Care to voice an opinion?"

I said with complete surprise, "I thought the police never wanted outside opinions?"

"Maybe I'm different."

I tapped the cigarette and smiled at him.

"Yes, I have an opinion. The empty wine jug—clearly that started it. Then there's a bottle of tablets lying spilled on the bedside table. It bears a familiar label, a hypnotic, a sleeping potion. She discarded that way, or else she tried it and it failed her. The hanging itself—about that I would not know."

"Incomplete suspension," McCain said.  
"Her feet?"

"Yes, her feet were touching the shower stall floor."

The cigarette halfway to my lips, I hesitated. "Would that bear out the suicide theory?"

"It could."

"Then I suppose the answer is obvious."

"Oh, no." McCain shook his shaggy head. "Not yet. Suppose the sleeping potion didn't fail? Suppose she went out like a light, and then someone tied her to the shower? Spring lock on the door. Anyone could have slammed the door and left it locked behind him."

McCain got up abruptly. "I'd like to talk to your wife."

"Certainly."

"Now."

"Fine." I said. "Except that first I'd like to know about the ring."

"What ring?"

"On Miss Gorgi's finger. Didn't you notice, Lieutenant? The wedding ring? You see, it belongs to us, to my wife."

"Then how did she get it?"

"Rose?" I lit the cigarette, held the first puff, then let it slowly out. "Borrowed it, I presume. Or possibly Madalyn loaned it to her."

Miss Gorgi went out at that moment, in a wicker basket. *Uno momento* was outside. A lot of women were outside, all quick to cross themselves. The brats were outside, wide-eyed in the street. The smells were outside—you can't hush up garlic.

Ring around the Rosie, I thought. Ring on Rosie's finger. No bells on her toes though. Toll would be the right word. Now the bells would toll for her.

The trouble with McCain was edge. He hadn't kept the blade sharpened. So his edge was gone, he was tired. I suppose a man can see too little of life and much too much of death.

He was about thirty-five. Brown. Brown shoes and brown hair. Brown double-breasted suit that needed pressing. Brown stain on his fingers, nicotine. For twenty years he said he'd fought life toe to toe. That's right. Riding home with him, I asked him. At twenty-two he'd pounded a beat. The sap was proud of it. At twenty-five he'd traded harness for plain clothes. My, my, a promotion! At thirty he was in the Army. Asked for it. Enlisted. So for thirteen years he'd walked alone, with death always just behind it.

We went up to Madalyn's fine and large front room, to flowers in profusion, tall vases filled with roses. She liked roses. You know what she liked. Honeysuckle on the vine, and Easter eggs, and tinsel on a tree at Christmas.

I offered McCain a drink, then called from the staircase, "Will you come down a moment, darling?"

"Who it is?" Madalyn asked.

"A policeman."

She came down. She wore a pale blue housecoat. Her eyes were just a little red. She gave her slim hand to McCain. She came to his shoulder.

"It's about the ring," I said. "The lotus ring, Madalyn—remember? Rose was wearing it."

Her eyes opened wide. "But how—"

"That's why the lieutenant is here, dear. We don't know how she got it."

"Then you didn't give the ring to her, Mrs. Quell?" McCain asked.

"I?" Again her eyes were widening. Then they closed and she trembled a little as she said, "Oh, no. Oh, no."

"Aren't your jewels under lock and key?"

"Yes, but—"

She looked at me.

"She knew where the key was kept?"

"Yes, but—"

She looked at me.

"She could have borrowed the ring?"

"LIEUTENANT, the ring wasn't in in my jewel box. It was out, lying on my dressing table, in plain view."

"When last?"

She looked at me, shivered, answered, "I'm trying to remember. I—I don't know."

"You see, Lieutenant," I interrupted,

"there is rather a peculiar story to that ring. I mean an angle. But it's between my wife and me, and I won't bore you with it. It's sufficient to say it was a gift to Madalyn and she never liked it. As a matter of fact, the ring was lying on the dressing table because I intended to dispose of it."

I scowled at my glass. "Lieutenant, the way I see the thing, the ring enters into the Gorgi case psychologically. I mean according to her note she'd run into some block to a natural outlet, marriage. We, of course, don't know what the block was, whether it was real or simply imagined. But we do know she must have brooded over it. Marriage or death. It boiled down to that, don't you suppose? The ring was unusual and lovely to her, a symbol. She saw it lying on the dressing table and couldn't resist taking and wearing it."

McCain remembered his drink. The glass was in his hand; he barely touched it to his lips and then put it down abruptly. "And is that your opinion also, Mrs. Quell?"

"Yes-s. It seems logical, doesn't it?"

"Understand, Mrs. Quell, I'm trying to get a fix on this thing. A hold. A beginning. Would you say she'd seemed depressed recently?"

Madalyn crossed the room, stood with her back to the room, looking straight out from the high window. "I—I've felt that something was wrong. I don't believe it was depression though. Perhaps fear."

"Did she mention it, this fear?"

"Oh no."

McCain frowned at her lack. "Fear of what, would you say?"

"I couldn't possibly say."

"Did she ever hint there was someone in her life?"

"I knew almost nothing of her life, Lieutenant. No."

"This note, Mrs. Quell." McCain produced it. "Will you look at it, please?"

She faced us again; her cheeks wore two red spots as she examined the note.

"Did Rose Gorgi write it?" McCain said.

Still she stared at the note. Then: "I don't know, Lieutenant. It could be her writing. It—it's vaguely familiar. Yes, it could have been scrawled, un'er stress."

He came back, McCain did, the next day and the next.

"But I thought," she said, "the case was closed? Lieutenant, I thought the verdict was suicide?"

McCain's voice rumbled as he answered, "They can have it. Maybe that's the way it comes out, I don't know. All I know, Mrs. Quell, we got one thing in common. With you, you seem to—to feel things. That's the way I get you. Sensitive, or psychic. With me, I call it hunch, I admit I got no leg to stand on."

"Then why are you—here?"

"Once," McCain said, "a guy stopped to scratch a match on a lamp post. Then this guy crossed the street, went inside a building and committed murder. That was all we had, no real description, but he'd scratched a match on a lamp post."

"And you found him?" she whispered.

"I found him, after a whole year."

"But, McCain, still I fail to understand it. *Here?*"

"Maybe," said McCain. "I'm hoping for a meeting of two minds."

They were still for a moment, very still.

"Maybe," said McCain, "you'll feel it again, what you said the first time, what intrigued me—fear."

"But McCain—" She laughed in sheer surprise. "That's nonsense! I'll be quite all right."

*She'd* be all right? I lost my balance and my breath. I almost grabbed the knob to keep from tipping over. *She'd* be all right? It had a glassy sheen, but the damn fool missed it. He missed it! He didn't say, "So I was right. It's in your head, and you don't see it yet, but that's what I mean." Oh, the precious, stupid clod, he'd missed it!

"Well, let's go back once more," McCain was saying in a flat voice. "Something you've not told me?"

"There's nothing I know. Absolutely nothing."

"Look here, Mrs. Quell. I hate to say it, but how about your husband and Rose Gorgi?"

She gasped. "Lieutenant, that's utterly insane!"

"I know, I know." McCain's voice came from way down in his chest, a growl. "Just angles I'm exploring. No interest in each other?"



"Of course not!"

"Last Sunday night?"

"My husband and I? We went to bed at eleven."

"Sleep all night?"

"McCain, you're being silly! Of course I did. I slept like a top."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Ride a Horse to Death!

NOW THE ocean was there, all around me. Drive straight down the dark road and dive in. That's what I had done, dived in. It was sink now or keep going.

On Monday Rose Gorgi was found. I couldn't call Rhonna till Tuesday.

"The bar," I said. "You know the place. Marco's, the last booth. Make it around two."

"There's something on your mind," she said.

"Uh-huh. You."

"No, something bad," she said.

"Okay. Read the papers. There may be a shadow."

"My God, Danny!"

"Don't worry." I looked around. I was phoning from a drugstore. There was a girl at one counter, and a man buying cigarettes. "Just make the booth and stick until I show. Marco's, around two."

She was there. She looked very young, and very, very worried. She wasn't really worried. She thought I wanted her to look worried. You could count on Rhonna; whatever it was you needed, she had it.

I slid inside the booth and sat with one eye on the door. But nothing happened, no one followed me in. It was dim and cool now and the fans were humming.

"Clear, Danny?"

"I think so."

"I've ordered a drink for you."

I found her hand. Her fingers were long and cool. They returned my pressure.

"Okay," I said. "Fire away."

"With what?"

"Questions. I'm ready for them."

She smiled a little. She wasn't even friendly at this moment. She was like a woman who'd discovered that some knives cut both ways. Her smile was hard, her voice hard as she said, "You're clever, Danny. Did you love her?"

"Rose?" I took the drink she'd ordered

for me and sipped. "That never was important, and it's over."

She smiled again. She relaxed a little. "The next one's harder, Danny."

"Okay."

"Right from the shoulder."

"I can take it."

She wet her lips before she said, "Then why did you kill her?"

I put the glass down. Carefully. Very carefully, on its own moist ring. The green was wholly gone from her eyes; they were two black pools, unblinking as she watched me. She had cigarettes. I took one and used her lighter. "Suppose I had to?"

"Did *she* have two million dollars?"

"Suppose she stood between us and our plans?"

Her breath caught. Then suddenly she was breathing swiftly. "Will you get away with it?"

We were back to normal. No wailing wall, no dirges. We were back on common ground. I snapped the lighter two or three times. "Hon, it's this way. Look, I've got to make this visit fast. In for a drink, two drinks, and then out again in case there's a shadow. But the preliminaries are over. The big bout's coming up. Get that in your head, the big bout's coming up. All we need now is a little time and patience. All we need—you know shorthand, don't you, typing?"

She just stared.

"Come on, baby, I'm serious. Could you manage?"

"Do I have to?"

I glanced once more at the door. No one had come in; then I leaned across the table. "She's on edge, baby. Madalyn. That's the big thing, she doesn't know it yet, but she's troubled. She's got a funny feeling, she's right on the brink. The smallest mistake—*wham*. She'd start putting the pieces together."

"Rose?"

"Pieces," I said. "You. A lot of pieces. It's like a jigsaw puzzle. If she ever gets it together she won't like the picture. Then what?"

"Two million dollars is a lot of money," she said slowly.

"And you like ermine, don't you?"

"Yes, a lot of money," she said slowly.

"All right! Say the cops do put a tag on me. Maybe it's for a month. Maybe I lead

them to you. Then Madalyn learns about you."

She nodded. "Divorce."

"Now you're doing some nice thinking," I told her.

The color swept out of her face. "Danny, she mustn't get a divorce!"

I looked straight at her. "Think you could manage as Madalyn's secretary?"

Someone put a nickel in the juke box. Saxophones, trumpets that were muted—right through one whole chorus. She took so long my heart began to climb up in my throat.

"I could manage," she said finally. "But what will it get us?"

"To begin with, a clear deck. A legitimate meeting."

"I think you're crazy!"

"Oh, no, I'm not."

"Another one? After Rose Gorgi? Danny, you spoiled it!"

"Oh no I didn't. Not the way I'm playing."

Her foot touched mine beneath the table. She didn't jerk it away. She leaned back, showing all her throat. It was white. Her face was white. Then her eyes shut. I waited, but they didn't open.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I need another drink. One more drink, Danny. A big one."

She opened her eyes. She looked straight at me. "And Danny," she said. Her tongue circled her lips, just the small, pink tip. "Danny you're going to be awfully surprised if ever it comes my turn."

"SHE'S SWEET," said Madalyn. "She's like a little girl, Danny, isn't she? Like a Cinderella from a Lord and Taylor window."

But she didn't seem to believe it. She seemed puzzled. Little girls were never quite so tall. And little girls were never quite so well developed. Little girls did not wear sheer hose and infiltrate every room like something from a fancy bottle labeled *Torrid*.

"How soon?" Rhonna would say. "I'm dreaming of it. Nights I wake up scared. Danny, you don't tell me what you're going to do, and I'm tying up inside. How soon, Danny? I can't wait forever."

Not too soon. Not too long either. It must turn as on a jewel tick off like a watch.

Everything depended on the timing. October was the month. A good month, when the fields died and the leaves fell. Death would like October.

Three full months from July.

"Kitten," Rhonna would say. "She's nice and soft and rounded. She looks at me. She likes me. She purrs. Kitten. Danny, I hate her!"

"Easy, baby."

"But I can't help it. I tremble when I think—"

"Sort of like me, don't you?"

"I'd kill you in a minute, Danny, if I thought—"

"But I get in your hair."

"Well, you don't tell me what you're going to do, and you're so *sure*. Suppose a jury gets it?"

Okay. I'd allowed for expansion. If nothing else, Rhonna would take care of the jury. In a pure white blouse, not a V-neck, but a Peter Pan, a round neck. Juries didn't fall for stuff like that? Men ceased to be men when they put their right hand on a Bible?

"It's almost time now, baby. Next Sunday night, just a few more days. There's a back elevator, all ours, all Madalyn's. She wanted privacy and she had the money to get it. So I can go in or out, unseen, anytime I wish. I proved it—that's the way I did it last July. Then we've got you installed across town. I'll be with *you* that night, in your apartment Sunday night. No question. We'll prove it."

"You're t-telling me, Danny," she chattered.

"Easy. Every Sunday night's the same with her. It's a routine. So we set the time. One o'clock on the button, Monday morning. About twelve-forty that night, across town, you'll send out for food. Two orders. I'll know, of course, precisely what you order. Then the waiter brings it. He brings it *into* the front room."

"Joe?"

"That's the one. That's the waiter. You'll ask for Joe just as we've been doing. Joe wants it because he always gets a two-buck tip. Joe knows me. He's seen me with you, in your room. Okay, *this* night I'm *not* in the room. Only my coat is there, on a chair by the table."

"But he won't know it's your coat. Danny it's thin!"

"Wait. We're going to make a record. Ten-inch disk, set to run three minutes. The record is on a phonograph we'll have placed in the bathroom. When Joe knocks, *before* he comes in, you start the record playing. I'm humming on it. The tap's running, too. I'm washing my hands, it seems, and the bathroom door is ajar and Joe hears me. Joe hears my *voice*, on the record.

"'Hello, Joe,' I say.

"The poor sap answers, 'Hello, Mr. Quell.'

"'Baby,' I say, 'my wallet is in my coat, on the chair. Slip Joe a couple of bucks.' Still the water is running. Still I'm humming—but you've become suddenly embarrassed, see? You smile and close the bathroom door—three minutes, just before the record runs down. Joe *knows* I'm there. He's seen my coat, my wallet, and he's talked to me."

"But suppose—"

"Baby, you're cold!"

"I can't help it, Danny. I—"

"Look, hon. It's not new. I know it. But it's good. So take it easy. Pay attention, and don't scare. I won't risk trying to get out and back to you. I'll sit it out with her, with Madalyn, all night. You'll simply lock your door after Joe has gone, you'll dispose of the record and get rid of the food. Then you'll hang my coat in your closet. It will stand. We've set it up that way, my clothes in your closet. So all you've got to do is sit tight until morning. And remember I can't phone you. Not then anymore I can't. Don't get worried and try to call me. I won't answer. All we care is that our stories jibe. I was with you in your apartment until almost morning."

She was moaning.

"Snap it up, hon!"

"But Danny, she's—just like a—kitten. I mean, Danny, suppose she's got claws?"

"Want to back out now?"

"Oh, Danny, you know me, you know me."

"All *right*. Sunday night. That's our big day, V-day."

**I**T RAINED. The pavements glistened with it, satin black. It started with a drizzle Sunday noon. The sky was low and gray and ugly.

"Madalyn?"

"Sorry, Danny. Working."

"Oh, another Sunday?"

"Darling, I'm afraid so."

"Hey, there's something in your voice!"

"My voice, Danny?" she said.

Only five now? Hell, had something happened to the time? Eight more hours, eight more little years till one o'clock? Eight hundred times to check and recheck details. Funny about details. Mere shadows in noon sun that could bloat and grow until they became monsters.

Suppose the waiter, Joe, had come up with a cold tonight? Flu perhaps, or pneumonia. Suppose he walked into a car tonight, on his way to work? Or later, when Rhonna phoned the order, suppose Joe up and said, "Sorry, Miss, we don't have the pickled tongue this evening." One small detail like that could go wrong and thus completely change things.

Eight hundred little details marching in my mind. A squad, a company, a battalion. *One*, two, three, four; *one*, two, three, four—

Madalyn must be in bed tonight at one o'clock.

She must be asleep, drugged.

The thermos and her glass must be washed, then refilled; with no trace of the hypnotic.

The ring must be found on her finger.

Then what? Damn it, then what? *One*, two, three, four; *one*, two, three, four—Oh, the bedlamp with a broken chain switch.

The slipper, of course. Lovely, exciting, fragile little thing, a woman's satin slipper. Made to enhance an arch, an ankle, toes, for admiration; women never really got their feet down on the ground.

With a four-inch heel. The heel, they'd say, turned beneath her, tripped her—

The chair was a detail. The chair would do the trick. Obviously you couldn't see a chair in the darkness. So she fell against the chair. A little scratch, a little varnish underneath her nails—easy. Nice thing to have around, a chair, to sit in between times when you're not using it to explain murder?

I dined in a restaurant, alone. You get the picture, don't you? Madalyn busy at her desk? Danny Quell left to his own devices every Sunday? Madalyn certain to drink from the thermos some time in the evening? And then nodding . . . nodding . . .

"A liqueur, Monsieur?"

"I'll have brandy."

"*Oui*, Monsieur. At once."

"Make it a double brandy."

"*Oui*, Monsieur."

The cabbie was a detail. And important, for the cabbie was to be the one who would tell McCain, "Sure I picked him up. Nine o'clock about, at whatchermacallit, the restaurant. Sure, he carried a cane. I remember. I know him."

"The dopes," said the cabbie, "can have their thirty bucks a week. I'm no hacker. With me the cab's a business. I'm behind the wheel to play the angles. Say you're Whosis from Peoria, and no room to be had in town. Well, you slip me two bucks and I'll get you settled. You don't even care that I nick you twice, that I jack up the meter. Then the hotel kicks in with four bits—you get it?"

Uh-huh. Simple mathematics. You play for two-bucks-fifty or two million.

I got out at the corner, Rhonna's corner, and it looked nice across the street, upstairs. Lights behind drawn shades, upstairs. Rhonna there, upstairs. I was "there" tonight, upstairs. Too bad there was work to do, but business first, eh honey?

I tucked the cane inside my coat, hid it, started back. The long walk through the shadows, back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Hello, Death!*

**S**HE WASN'T in bed. For a moment crazy thoughts ran through my head. Madalyn! I almost called her. Madalyn! I almost turned on the lights. I drew in a deep breath, stood holding to the bed; and gradually, the pressure lessened. I could breathe normally again, think normally. She'd be sitting at her desk, nodding, or curled up with a book, on the divan.

The divan. She lay in the next dark room, her study, on the divan. Better than the bed. One *would* be confused, waking in the middle of the night. One *would* fail to find a light, and rise, and stumble.

I tiptoed in. One blow with the cane, hard across the throat—I gripped the cane tight, raised it—

*Hello, Joe.*

*Hello, Mr. Quell.*

*Hi-de-ho, pickled tongue and beer this evening? Baby, my wallet's in my coat, on the chair. Slip Joe a couple of bucks.*

Cheap . . .

\* \* \*

*Well, you've done it, Danny.*

That's right. It was over. Bedroom slippers were her pumps now, pulled off her feet and planted on the floor, just so. Now her body lay before the divan, crumbled on the floor, just so. Everything arranged, the room still and dark and shocked, just so.

She was dead.

They'd never prove it was the cane.

No, she fell. The room was dark and she got off the divan, stumbled. It was an accident. Her throat struck against the hard back of the chair. She strangled—due to fracture of the cartilages of the larynx. Wasn't that the way they'd say it?

It was over. But there had to be a link, a thread.

I looked back into the dark room once, from the doorway. On the floor, before the divan, a dark blot. Bones, hair, flesh destined soon to rot. Okay, I was through with it. I went back downstairs, and my hand, holding the cane, was shaking violently now. The cane fell to the floor. My breath was coming in gasps.

It passed in a while. Then I got a cigarette between my lips and they were sore. Bruised. I'd bitten them. They hurt. The smoke burned in my throat, clear down into my chest.

"O, come in, McCain," I'd say. I knew what I'd say. And what I'd do, and how I'd look—I knew just the tone of voice to use this time. Different from the last time, from Rose Gorgi. Dazed, grateful to sit down again, my face in both my hands a moment—a gesture like that always was effective. "I called you right away, of course, McCain, the minute that I found her."

He would scowl. What else could he do but scowl and growl, the few props that he had and used instead of brains? He'd paw brusquely through his notebook, looking for a clean new page, lick his thumb—they all did.

"Twice now in three months." His lips would wear a thin, satiric line, and his eyes would shimmer. Kingpin, for the moment. Big guy, Johnny Law. He would go on coldly, "Well, what's the story this time?"

## RING AROUND ROSIE'S NECK

This time?

I walked around the room. How much longer. Hours? This chair was too hard; and this one much too soft. It would never do for me to fall asleep and miss the crack of morning.

"It started with the ring, Lieutenant," I would say. "You remember, don't you? The wedding ring you found on Rose? Rose Gorgi? The ring with 'death' engraved inside the band? Well, I bought the ring in Singapore, years back, for Madalyn. Just a ring, I thought, until she tried it on. She exclaimed, breathed in much too quickly—I don't know what, but she choked. It was a terrible fit and she almost died in it.

"Lieutenant, you remember last July? I told you then there was something queer about that ring. Madalyn felt it that day too, I know she did. All these years she'd kept the ring aside, had a *feeling* that she didn't like it, never wore it. But Rose Gorgi wore it and she died. Don't you see, Lieutenant? She *choked*, she strangled and died."

"She wouldn't put the ring on, Quell."

"Oh no? Morbid fascination?"

"She wouldn't fall asleep."

"Madalyn? McCain, she'd been working! When she was tense at night she always took sedatives. The bottle's in the bathroom. I don't know what it was, but you can call her doctor—"

"If she'd worried over the ring, then why didn't she mention it?" McCain might interrupt.

*Ah! Mac, old boy, old boy, you grabbed the bait. Mac, you're in it, and it's like quicksand or a swamp; no half measures. One step and you're lost, you're in it.*

"Would she?" I would answer quickly. "Can you say, McCain, what went on in her mind? Wouldn't apprehension over such a thing, the supernatural, have seemed silly to her? Did she have proof of it anyway, any more than did I? Was her fear something one *could* discuss?"

"You're discussing it," McCain might point out sharply.

"Damn it, Lieutenant, I've got to! Go on up. Look at her. The ring is on her finger!"

**T**WO PEAS in a pod. Two plums on a tree. Tramp you'll call her—Rhonna. Oh no, not to me. Remember what she'd said once? "Danny, you don't understand,



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I love you." I suppose from us, from her, you'll think that funny.

The horse I'd wanted one time. You remember. All one summer just to see a picture of a horse and I'd begin to tremble. But you know how a thrill starts. As well turn back the tide, or make the rain fall up; you can't legislate against emotion. So maybe it's like—like perfume or an old tune; to you, perhaps, it's just perfume or an old tune.

Drugs aren't pretty, but some people need and take them.

Rhonna.

Oh yes, it was almost morning. Dawn of the big day. And to what do you attribute your success, Mr. Quell? Let's see, to fringes. Fringes did you say, sir? Uh-huh. Lashes on her eyes; they were fringes. Spires, with the sun about to rise behind them; they were fringes. But to what do you attribute your success, Mr. Quell?

To cleverness. To Patience. To having reached with firm hands for the rainbow, Rhonna and two million dollars.

Morning. Time to call McCain now.

The note was there, beside the phone. Had been, all these hours. I found it when I went to phone:

You're clever, aren't you, Danny? Poor McCain, though. And poor me. He knows the answer and can't use it. And I know why I slept so deeply that night last July. But can a wife testify against her husband? Even if first she divorces him? It doesn't really matter, although I shall get a divorce. No, it doesn't matter because the court will not admit as evidence a headache; I can't prove that I was drugged that night and woke up the next morning with a headache.

Yes, you're clever, Danny. McCain will never quit, but you know when to laugh, and when to cry—and lie. You know how to walk life on tip-toe, every move to make, I guess—do you mind if I phone Rhonna? After all, Danny, I'm human. I'd like to have the last word. I would like to tell her, "I'm finished with him, Rhonna, darling, as I sit here, writing this. So you can have what's left."

You and I, Danny? Just this note. No goodbye because—I can't risk a last scene, face to face. I'm afraid of you now, Danny. You see I've watched your eyes this week; they've danced. All week your voice was twangy-tight, too high with emotion. I wonder if you haven't telegraphed your plan this time, Danny? Or perhaps it's only because this time I'm forwarned. I've had the queerest premonition, the queerest feeling that tonight was to have been the night. Was it to be tonight, Danny?

## RING AROUND ROSIE'S NECK

Well, at any rate I shall walk the tightrope this time. I shan't sit here waiting. I'm phoning Rhonna and then leaving, Danny. I'm getting a divorce. I'm leaving, Danny, because at last I know you—and I don't want to die. . . .

I dropped the note, whirled and ran for the stairs. The endless frantic stairs. *Madalyn had phoned Rhonna.* It had to be that way. The note proved it. *Madalyn had phoned Rhonna, right after I'd left—* And then?

Just then the dawn broke, the first crescent of a bloody sun beyond the fringe of spires.

"Danny, one more drink, a big one. . ." Rhonna. Oh God, she'd said that. "Danny,



"McCain'll never quit, Danny," the note said.

you don't tell me what you're going to do, how you're going to kill her?"

Madalyn had walked out early. She'd phoned Rhonna, early; she'd calmly walked away and Rhonna had come over. In no other way could she have reached me, to tell me we had failed. Yes, Rhonna had come over, and sitting, waiting, in the dusky study, not knowing all my plans, she'd taken a drink from the thermos!

I stood swaying at the door. The slipper lay there on the floor, tip-tilted, drunk, drugged with its importance. Now, by daylight, I could see that it was Rhonna's slipper. Now, by daylight, I could see who it was I'd hit with the cane.

Oh, hello, Mr. Quell. Sure, you know me! Joe, the waiter? What's it going to be—you want the pickled tongue this morning? An alibi this morning? Oh, you got no alibi—I'll tell you what you want, you bloody clever beggar, a horse that you can ride—to death!

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# Adventure

25c

(Continued from page 22)

"Nothing at all. Not since Sir Galahad opened the door," Margaret said with a deadly bitterness. "I still think I'd have made a good editor. Good-bye, little innocent."

"Margaret—" Warren Grant roared. Joe turned quickly. Ann screamed. Grant leaped forward. Too late.

Margaret leaned out and released her grip on the window. Without a sound she vanished into space. Grant choked and leaped to the window. Joe closed his eyes and felt something crack and die inside him.

At last Grant sighed and turned from the window. His diamonds glistened. Moisture filmed the black coals of his eyes, and his lips twitched. "My smartest girl," he said heavily. Then he blew his nose and his eyes began to glitter. His fists tightened.

"Call Shaster! Get that picture. This is the story! *This is it!*" His face blazed. "What were the last words she spoke to you when she begged? She begged, didn't she? And what did she say?"

Joe looked at him and wet his dry lips. "I wouldn't know her last words, Grant," he said softly. "Perhaps she said, 'Kiss me.' Or maybe she said, 'Just a little lie for so much. . .'"

"Terrific! Lead the story with those words! Ann, get on that phone! Joe, get downstairs and start—"

"No, Grant. This is it, the last from me to you." Joe hit him squarely in the mouth and Grant went down. "Good-bye." He opened the door.

"Wait, Joe. Wait," Ann cried. "You can drop me off somewhere, but I'm going out, too. Forever."

He didn't know where he was going, or where he would stop or what he would find. Some day, he thought dimly, there would be a girl for him—like Ann, perhaps. Another time and place. But now. . .

He knew this much, even now: Beyond all the days of tomorrow, and beyond the kisses still unfound, he would never forget the lips of Margaret, and he would never forget her eyes. And whatever love he might find would always bear some-part of her image—golden and hot and singing the Devil's love song. . .

THE END



## A HEAD FOR HIS BIER!

(Continued from page 64)

he screamed again and raced out of the room.

I sat down hard, using Klow for a sofa. The air was knocked out of him and he didn't make a very good seat, but I needed a rest.

There was no reason to chase after Benny. Voices in the hall below proclaimed that he had run smack into the boys from the squad who were waiting—the boys I had Tiny Tim call for me.

I turned towards the headless man, just in time to see him reach up, unbutton the overcoat, and allow his face to protrude at shoulder level. Tiny Tim's grin emerged triumphantly.

"You see?" he crowed. "Benny's dumb. I told you he'd fall for that gag. The Doc would never have admitted a thing, but Benny will babble the whole story to the boys downstairs right now. Full confession. It worked out like I said it would. I scared him silly."

"Right," I admitted. "You almost had me going for a minute."

"Be sure to tell Captain Leeds," Tiny Tim reminded me. "Tell him this was one case where a short guy really came in handy."

"I will. And I guess we owe you an apology about your crazy theories, too. They cracked the case."

The headless man sat down in the chair. Tiny Tim scowled out at me from under the overcoat.

"What do you mean, crazy theories?" he complained. "Can't you see—all I was doing was using my head!"

THE END

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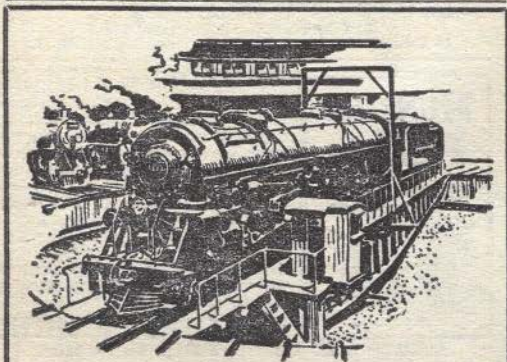


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## RAILROAD MAGAZINE

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## JOE KENT

(Continued from page 42)

teeth against the nausea and reeled after him, my arms hanging useless and dripping their crimson trails. By the time I reached the outside passage, guns seemed to be roaring from one end of Third Avenue to the other.

OUT ON the sidewalk, straight ahead at the end of the passage, Stumps and Momma were standing back-to-back and firing in opposite directions. It was like something out of a cocaine nightmare: that flabby huge woman, backed up to the deformity of dwarf-giant, and each with a flaming automatic.

Suddenly Momma staggered as though an axe had burst through her skull. She gave a burbling yell. Her automatic spilled from her fingers and she crumpled forward on the walk. As she hit, her scalp seemed to roll off into the gutter. It was a wig. She lay there, her egg-bald head glistening, and as she died her face became the face of a man. She *was* a man . . .

Stumps waddled backward desperately, huddling inside the passage and firing around the corner. Somewhere I heard a man's scream answer one of Stumps' shots.

My hands were no good. I could stand for a minute longer before I passed out. I hauled down a breath and started forward, trying to run. I reeled and gathered a drunken momentum. Six feet behind him, I started falling forward.

I smashed into him as I went down, and I heard his breath explode. I saw the gun fly out into the street and his weird body went flopping across the walk, the beer-bottle arms and legs beating helplessly at empty air. He hit on his back and churned there, like a bug or a turtle. He screamed in helpless rage. I heard three guns answer his scream. I saw him twitch and his limbs grow slowly quiet.

I must have smiled. I tried to. Then I stretched out on the concrete to go to sleep. Then I heard her calling my name. I opened my eyes and saw her, running toward me with her dark eyes glowing.

Running toward me. Not afraid and turning away. That was what went through my mind, and it seemed to make everything all right.

THE END



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