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ANC

DETECTIVE

MURDER Out of Hand

A Complete Novel
By **EDWARD
RONNS**

MAHATMA OF MAYHEM

*A Nick Ransom
Novelet*
By **ROBERT
LESLIE BELLEM**

15¢

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DETECTIVE

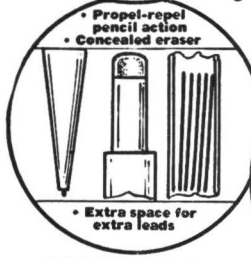
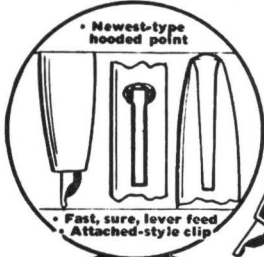
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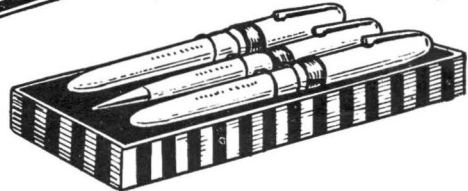
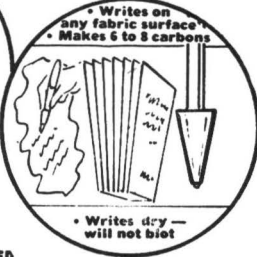
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXI, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

APRIL, 1948

A Complete Novel



MURDER OUT OF HAND

By EDWARD RONNS

Private eye Barney Forbes poses as a mining heir in order to clear up a grim mystery—and digs up plenty of precious clues that point to a solution! 13

Two Complete Novelets

MAHATMA OF MAYHEM Robert Leslie Bellem 60

Hollywood's dying Guru accuses screen star Lola Dulac of killing him, but Nick Ransom doesn't take anybody's word for anything—without proof!

HIGHWAY HOMICIDE Carl G. Hodges 76

The murder of Police Captain Ferguson baffled the law—but a routine news picture was enough to put Di and Gail Berke on the trail of a killer!

Short Stories

\$10,000 AN INCH Tedd Thomey 49

Gus Kessler plays uncle to a tall girl who is slated for death

DEAD MEN CAN'T SWIM Hal K. Wells 89

Murder and a stubborn mud cat disturb the waters of shanty-boat land

MURDER IN RED C. S. Montanye 96

Dave McClain almost gets his chips cashed in when death spins the wheel

and

HEADQUARTERS A Department 6

Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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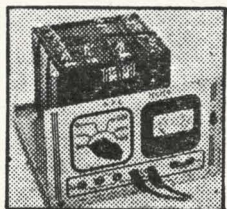
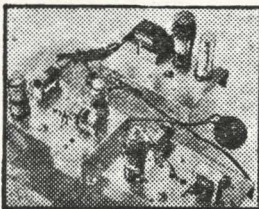
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NOT MY CORPSE

by
Carroll John Daly

Into Race Williams' office walks a very frightened Jake O'Hara, petty gangster and small-time crook. He lays two hundred-dollar bills on the detective's desk. O'Hara explains that he has received a printed card, just as the old "fence" Herman Rath received before they did him in. On the card are these words: FROM A DIRTY LITTLE MAN IN A DIRTY LITTLE ROOM.

Race Williams recalls the Rath case and several others. The private eye wants no part of Jake O'Hara and tells him so. He even accuses the gangster of being a dope peddler. As far as Race Williams is concerned, Jake O'Hara can get right out of the office and right now. Jake O'Hara departs, unceremoniously.

Curtains for O'Hara

Not very much later, it develops that O'Hara's fears were well founded. Somebody "got" O'Hara, right out in the street. Very prominently displayed, was another of the printed cards.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," thinks Williams. Of course, that's before he thinks of the girl.

It seems that you always think of a

girl when you think of Jake O'Hara. Even now, Williams is afraid he is too late. He runs his car to the uptown flat. He knows who the girl is of course, "Sissy" Pierson, who came from a very promising family before she took to "the needle." You could probably blame O'Hara for most of that.

There is no one to stop Williams' entry into the cheap little flat. The detective was right in assuming that he was too late. The former society girl is not only dead—she has been tortured in an effort to make her tell something.

In taking up the matter with the police, the worst thing that could happen to Race Williams, from his point of view, does happen. Inspector Nelson is called in to assist Sergeant O'Rourke. Nelson and Race Williams don't get along, as you doubtless remember. The question is—who killed Sissy? Was it O'Hara because he feared a rival? Or was it a rival who feared O'Hara?

Race Williams is almost afraid to look for the card; but there it is, stuck in the dead girl's blouse—"FROM A DIRTY LITTLE MAN IN A DIRTY LITTLE ROOM!"

Not too long later, Inspector Nelson, Sergeant O'Rourke and Race Williams have something else to think about. This time the body is found in an empty office loft. This time it is a girl even more prominent socially—none other than the daughter of the wealthy manufacturer Otis Ames—Elsa Ames. Yes, she also has been tortured and there is the same printed card!

All these killings are evidently part of

(Continued on page 8)

IMAGINE THEIR JOY WHEN THEY FOUND THEY COULD PLAY This easy as A.B.C. way!



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Lake View, Iowa



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*K.U., N.Y.

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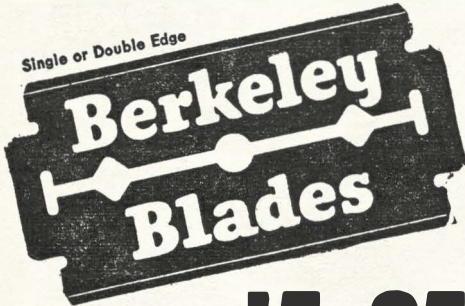
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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

a pattern. And Race Williams is sure he sees the ugly claws of the underworld reaching up for yet another victim!

So Race Williams gets busy in the way we know he can, or as he says about himself: "Action is my meat." Not My Corpse goes on from there with thrills in every paragraph—and there are a series of twists that will make your hair stand on end!

Next on the roster is an exciting complete novelet—

AN ORANGE FOR THE KILLER

by

J. Lane Linklater

"I understand he is due to arrive here in Galiota on the interurban at nine-five to-night. He'll go to his sister's no doubt. I want you to be there and keep an eye on him all night. I understand he figures on killing me."

This is the warning old Paul Jepson gives to Harry Masson, his confidential man who "looks after things" as a sort of private detective. It is through Harry Masson's eyes that we view this hum-dinger of a story.

You see, the person Jepson is referring to is Jack Sandor. Masson finds the instructions a bit complicated as the sister referred to is the girl he is engaged to—Nadine Sandor, the school-teacher. Jack Sandor left the little California town six years ago under considerable of a cloud.

It is quite a place that old Paul Pepson runs—170 acres of orange groves, with a packing-house of his own and several assorted buildings.

Masson keeps a lonely vigil at the little cottage on Mareno Avenue all night as per instructions. He is not sure, however, whether Sandor left the place by the back door or not. He could have, of course.

The next afternoon, Masson finds his employer, Paul Jepson, hale and hearty and ready for the annual fiesta to be held that night. Masson now begins to do a little snooping and questioning.

(Continued on page 10)

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

Orlo Draper, the packinghouse foreman, who has been with Jepson twenty years, says that someone has been looting the orange groves and quite a bit of evidence points toward Sandor.

Will Wren, who is foreman of the groves, advances the same theory. With Wren however, it is a matter of hearsay, as he has only been with the firm for two years. It is Tony Madrigal who gives Masson what seems to the detective to be a worth-while clue. Jack Sandor, before he went away, was sweet on a girl named Lorna. While he was gone and still under that cloud, Lorna married Dick Melton. Melton is Paul Jepson's private secretary. Could be a bit of a frame-up there!

Comes the gayety of the fiesta and Jepson seems to be enjoying every minute of it—until he disappears. When they find his body, deep in the grove, there is a single orange within reach of his hand. He has been shot several times.

What is the motive—vengeance, frustrated inheritance, greed—an old and secret love affair? You'll be utterly amazed at the clever way Harry Masson solves the slaying of his boss. You'll never guess the killer until the very last page. The story moves, too, with bullet-like force. Mr. Linklater has never done anything better for us and we realize that is going some!

Some authors in certain magazines become synonymous with certain characters. Right here in **THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine**, when you think of Johnny Castle, you cannot fail to call to mind the author who created the breezy sports writer on the *Orbit*. So for our next novelet we give you—

THIS MURDER'S ON ME

by
C. S. Montanye

Of course all the other characters Mr. Montanye has created for this series of stories, including Captain Fred Mullin and Lieutenant Larry Hartley of Homicide as well as Libby Hart, Johnny's

(Continued on page 111)



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... AND THEN DAN SAVED THE DAY



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LET'S GET OVER THERE. HE MAY BE HURT!

RIDING THEIR MOTORIZED-SLED, TWO STATE GAME WARDENS ARE RETURNING FROM A LONG WOODS PATROL WHEN ...



ARE YOU HURT, MISS?

NO, BUT I'M DARNED MAD. MY ENGINE CONKED OUT AND NOW I'LL MISS THE ICE CARNIVAL



IT'S JUST A FEW MILES TO HEADQUARTERS AND WE'LL RUSH YOU TO ORVILLE BY CAR

WONDERFUL! I'LL SEND A REPAIR CREW FOR THE PLANE TOMORROW



I DO HOPE WE'LL MAKE IT. MY APPEARANCE IS SET FOR EIGHT O'CLOCK

SAY! YOU MUST BE SANDY OLTNER, THE FLYING FIGURE SKATER!

AND I LOOK LIKE A TRAMP



REID'LL GET YOU THERE WITH TIME TO SPARE, MISS OLTNER. HOW ABOUT IT, DAN?

YES, SIR... I'LL EVEN HAVE TIME TO CLEAN UP HERE FIRST



BLADES? TRY THESE



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THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO ORDER FOR TOUGH-BEARDED GENTS



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THIS IS MY FIRST GOOD LOOK AT YOU, MISTER... YOU'RE WE-L-L... HANDSOME!

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MURDER OUT OF HAND

CHAPTER I

CHANGE OF IDENTITY

FROM New York to Sunfield, in the Pennsylvania coal hills, is three hours by train. Barney Forbes went there the long way, following Peabody's instructions. He locked his office and put a card in the door reading: BACK IN A WEEK—MAYBE, and forsook his private detective agency. Nobody would miss him. Business wasn't that good. Business wasn't good at all.

He took up the plane reservation to New Orleans under his own name. There he registered as James J. McClure, bought himself a new outfit, and took a train to El Paso. From there he boarded a bus to Galveston, on the Gulf of Mexico.

In Galveston, his instructions indicated a third-rate hotel near the waterfront. It was hot, dirty, and bug-ridden. The breeze from the Gulf didn't help much. It only served to remind Barney Forbes of the cool autumn weather he'd left behind in New York. But whoever Amos Peabody was, his expense account seemed unlimited, and his preparations methodical and painstaking. For Barney, the only problem was the method in the madness. This was a long way

a novel by EDWARD RONNS

Private eye Barney Forbes poses as a mining heir — and digs up plenty of precious clues in a grim mystery!



from Sunfield's coal mines, where Peabody waited for him.

The hotel was named the Galveston Star. The lobby was small and dingy, and the clerk behind the battered desk needed a night's sleep. He yawned into Barney's face and fingered a tattered register and stared at the blaze of sunlight beyond the lobby doors while Barney signed. He made a second change of identity here. He signed his new name with care, from much diligent practise with a new handwriting: Allan Andrews.

"Room Four-ten, Mr. Andrews. The boy will take your bag."

Barney followed the gangling bellhop into a stifling cage that creaked up to the fourth floor. The room was tiny, with a narrow window opening onto a blank brick wall. He could have touched the brick wall opposite without leaning too far out of the window. There was a wooden fan in the ceiling, revolving slowly, stirring the hot, humid air uselessly. It didn't help.

"Will that be all, Mr. Andrews?" the bellhop asked.

"I'm expecting a visitor," Barney said. "Let me know."

"Sure thing, Mr. Andrews."

BARNEY stripped off his hat, coat and tie and sat under the revolving fan. He took off his shirt and turned to the new suitcase he'd purchased in New Orleans, with the unfamiliar initials, A. A., stamped on it. He wondered who Allan Andrews really was, whether he was alive or dead. Whatever the answer was, he, Barney Forbes, was now Allan Andrews. He was not to forget it, Peabody had said.

Allan Andrews was supposed to look very much like himself, Peabody had said. Six feet two, and an even two hundred pounds. A lean brown face and calm, competent gray eyes. A mouth that had seen trouble and knew how to handle it. A physique that went with the face. An ex-cop, who'd been fired for insubordination, would wear the same expression Allan Andrews was expected to wear. That was all Barney Forbes knew. It was a job, it paid forty a day plus expenses. He was seeing the country, anyway.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the telephone rang. It was the sleepy desk clerk.

"Captain Swane is here to see you, Mr. Andrews."

"Send him up," Barney said. "Don't sleep on it."

He felt a little curl of anticipation in his stomach as he waited. Except for a brief half hour in New York with old Peabody, he had met no one connected with the case. He knew nothing of what he was supposed to do, except that he was to arrive in Sunfield on the twentieth; as Allen Andrews.

There was a gun in his suitcase, a Smith & Wesson .38. Barney took it out and checked the cylinder, then decided against it and put the gun away as someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," he said.

A squat, beefy man in a Merchant Marine uniform came into the room and mopped his face. His eyes were fleegreed with tiny red veins, and his visored cap was pushed back on a bald, sun-baked scalp. He smelled of the sea and the freight holds. He came all the way in and looked at Barney and said:

"Any likker?"

"I can send down for some." Barney said.

The Merchant Marine captain waved a horny hand. "Too much trouble, Mr. Andrews. I'm Swane. Likker in this weather will get you higher'n a goony bird. Especially the kind they serve here."

"If it's on your mind so much," Barney said, "I'll get the bellhop to dig up something."

"I'm not staying that long. The ship's just docked. I brought your the papers." He fumbled inside his blue jacket and tossed an envelope on the bed beside Barney. "They'll fix you up fine, Mr. Andrews."

"What do I owe you?"

"I've been paid. Forget it."

Barney picked up the envelope and fingered through the contents. They were the papers of Allan Andrews, able-bodied seaman, together with union cards and pay account, logged on the S. S. *Hooper Belle* at Merida, Mexico.

"It was a nice trip," Barney said.

"Glad you liked it, mister." The red-



"Dead," Berney said. "Look
for yourself (CHAP. V)

faced man stood up and mopped his freckled brown scalp. "That's all, I guess."

"Unless you'd like a drink," Barney said. He opened his suitcase and took out a bottle of Canadian Club. Captain Swane paused at the door, looked angry for a moment, then came back into the room and carefully took off his hat. Barney got two glasses and filled them.

"Happy days," he said.

The captain drank slowly. His eyes were just eyes, still bloodshot, still looking out at the Gulf of Mexico from the bridge of the *S. S. Hooper Belle*.

"Do you know Amos Peabody well?" Barney asked. "He's a lawyer from Sunfield, Pennsylvania."

"No."

"No, what?" Barney asked.

"I don't know him."

"Do you know Allan Andrews?"

Captain Swane looked at him. "Who are you kidding?"

"I wonder," Barney said. "You're an honest man. Would a few dollars loosen your memory?"

"No, it wouldn't, mister." Captain Swane looked angry again. He put down his glass and went to the door. "To blazes with you." He went out and closed the door behind him.

SLOWLY Barney finished his drink alone. The fan whined faintly overhead. The brick wall beyond the window looked hot. Barney wiped the back of his neck and put on his shirt again.

Someone tapped on the door and opened it and came in. It was the bellhop. His gilt collar button was open and his face was as shiny as melting wax.

"Everything satisfactory, Mr. Andrews?"

"Just fine," Barney said. "What's on your mind?"

"Something's come up," said the bellhop. "Maybe it could mean something to you."

Barney took five dollars from his wallet and dropped it on the bed. The breeze from the overhead fan didn't have enough energy to stir it. The bellhop picked up the bill delicately.

"Seems like somebody besides the captain is interested in you, Mr. Andrews. But he didn't want to come up

to see you. He came in just after you registered. Looked at your name in the book and asked Aggie about you. Aggie's the desk clerk. He didn't say anything." The bellhop hesitated and waved the five dollar bill. "I'll have to split with him on this."

"I've got another one like it for Aggie," Barney said. "What did the man look like?"

"Youngish. Like a college boy. He's no copper."

"Where is he now?"

"Readin' in the lobby. Wears a gray pinstripe and a good Panama. Looks like he's got plenty of time."

"All right," Barney said. "Thanks. I'll check out."

He rode down in the elevator ten minutes later, carrying his grip. His gun was now in his shoulder holster. The lobby was just a little dirtier and dingier than before.

A man was seated behind a wilted potted palm, across from the clerk's desk. He was reading a newspaper. Barney couldn't see his face. He had one foot crossed on his knee, and he was wearing braided moccasins over fine silk hose.

Barney paid for the room, added five dollars for the sleepy clerk, and taxied to the station.

So far as he knew, he wasn't followed.

CHAPTER II

SHOTS FROM THE TREES



HE CHANGED his mind in Memphis, and had it confirmed in St. Louis. Fancy Shoes followed him up the Mississippi. Not once did Barney get to see the other man's face. Registered as Allan Andrews, he blazed a trail through Terre Haute, Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, arriving in Sunfield on the twentieth of the month, as scheduled.

Thirty miles of jouncing in a local bus brought Barney high above sea level, into cool dry air colored by autumn leaves. The dense woods bordering the highway smelled of pine, and the bus

struggled upgrade along a crest that seemed the dividing line between heaven and hell. On one side, the rolling hills were quietly wooded, untouched; on the other stretched a valley of gray culm banks, ugly collieries, coal breakers and the sprawling, grimy mining town of Sunfield.

A universal grayness seemed to have dusted the valley, with here and there the black patches of pitheads scarring the slopes. The jewel-like greenery of lawns and estates in the far end of the cuplike depression only accented the dust and dirt of the rest of the clapboard town.

The bus made a hairpin turn around a pine grove and groaned to a halt beside a long, rambling roadhouse. A sign announced that this was the Crestline Inn. No one was in sight outside the place. The only other bus passengers were two sooty miners, a boy of ten, and two stout women. When the bus stopped, the tinkling of a little brook nearby sounded with unnatural loudness.

"You wanted off here, mister?" asked the driver.

Barney stood up. "How far is it to town?"

"Eight miles, mister."

Barney took his new suitcase and swung down out of the bus to stand in the road in front of the inn. The bus rolled off downhill, toward the valley. Sunlight made a bright pattern through the leaves. Barney was to arrive after dark, and he had at least an hour to spend. He picked up his bag and went into the roadhouse, through the copper-screened doors.

The place wasn't open yet for evening trade. Chairs were piled on the tables, and a lanky man in faded overalls was washing the big windows. Another man was behind the bar.

Barney straddled one of the stools and said, "Ale."

"We're closed," said the barman. He was young and stout, with tired, glittering eyes. "We open at seven. You didn't have to get off the bus here."

"Is there a law against it?"

"You don't want any ale," the barman said. He looked at the window-washer. "Does he, Willie?"

Willie said: "Shouldn't think so."

"You want something else here?" the barman asked.

"Just a look around. It's been a long time."

"Since when?"

"Since I left Sunfield," Barney said. "I used to live here. I'm Allan Andrews."

The barman brushed a wilted loop of hair from his forehead. Surprise stirred behind his tired eyes. Unpleasant surprise. He dropped his rag in a basin and grinned. An unpleasant grin.

"Did you hear that, Willie?" he asked the window-washer. "Allan Andrews. The little hot-shot."

"Little Allan," said Willie.

The barman said: "You owe us seventy bucks, Allan."

"Since when?"

"Since you left town."

"That was a long time ago," Barney said.

"Sure, ten years ago. You've changed some, Allan."

"Times change," said Barney. "So do people."

"Lots of people are goin' to be surprised to see you."

"That's all right. I'm surprised to be back."

"I hear you went all over the world. You mighty near busted your old man's heart, runnin' off like that. Don't know which was worse—carryin' on here like a rich man's kid, or leavin' him flat when you finished school."

"I guess you don't like me," Barney said.

"I hate your gizzard, Allan," the barman said. "So does everybody around here. How about that, Willie?"

The window-washer put down his pail and squeegee. "I'm going into town, Harvey. I'm through here."

"I'd like a lift, if you don't mind," Barney said. He added: "I'll pay in advance, don't worry."

Willie said: "Okay by me."

BARNEY picked up his bag and followed the lanky man outside. An old yellow Ford was parked in the shadowed inn driveway. Willie put his pail and brushes in the back seat and climbed morosely behind the wheel. Barney got in beside him. Willie eyed him with

careful eyes out of a yellowish, thin face.

"You sure changed," he said.

"I'm older," Barney said.

"You seem quieter, too."

"I haven't been sleeping on any beds of roses."

"I reckon not," Willie said. He backed the Ford into the highway, then pointed it toward the valley. The sun was down behind the hills, and the town far below was already shrouded in dusk. Lights were coming on in long, winking beads of yellow. Willie said: "You heard about your pop, old Jasper?"

"What about him?"

"Had a stroke. Peabody's running things for him, but it looks like Hank Creel will take over the mines. Hank wants those mines mighty bad. Got a reg'lar feud goin' since you left. I hope you ain't going to make trouble again, Allan. Jasper could sure use you now, with all his troubles."

"Maybe it's a good thing I came back," Barney said.

"Not so good. Creel will gun for you, too."

"To blazes with Creel," Barney said.

"Amen, said Willie. He gave Barney a hard, level look, and his yellow face cracked in a grin. "Maybe Harvey will eat his words, Allan. Don't be mad for what he said about you. You can't blame him, after all the shennanigans you used to pull around here."

"I'm not mad," Barney said.

He watched the road ahead. They were still in the pine belt, hairpinning down to the valley, deep in evening shadow. Except for the pounding motor, the woods were silent, waiting for the night.

The first shot went overhead like the angry whining of a bee. The report from the rifle came only a second later.

Barney glanced sideward at Willie's open mouth. Before he could say anything, a second shot whip-cracked out of the woods, and the windshield suddenly shattered to smithereens. Barney threw up an arm to protect his face, aware of Willie's sudden groan. Glass flew in wild, murderous fragments about them.

The Ford careened off the road, the front wheels hitting gravel. Barney

grabbed the wheel from Willie's groping hands. Blood was streaming down the other man's face. The Ford jounced crazily, hit the grass, and came to a snorting halt, rocking on its springs.

"You hit?" Barney rapped.

"Just glass," Willie mumbled. "What was it?"

"A rifle," Barney said grimly. "Somebody doesn't like me—"

A third shot cracked out from the wooded slope ahead. Barney hit the car door with his elbow and rolled out of the car, dragging at his gun. Willie fell flat on his face beside him.

This time Barney glimpsed a wink of metal among the dense trees. He raised the .38 and tried a random shot, and the roar of the gun echoed back and forth from the timbered slopes. Overhead, a squirrel chattered in fear. Barney watched a leaf flutter from a tall oak halfway to the point he had marked.

"Might kill somebody like that," Willie observed. He was wiping blood from a jagged cut on his forehead. "Cut it out."

Barney said angrily: "What do you think he's trying to do to me?"

"Don't necessarily follow. Could be a hunter."

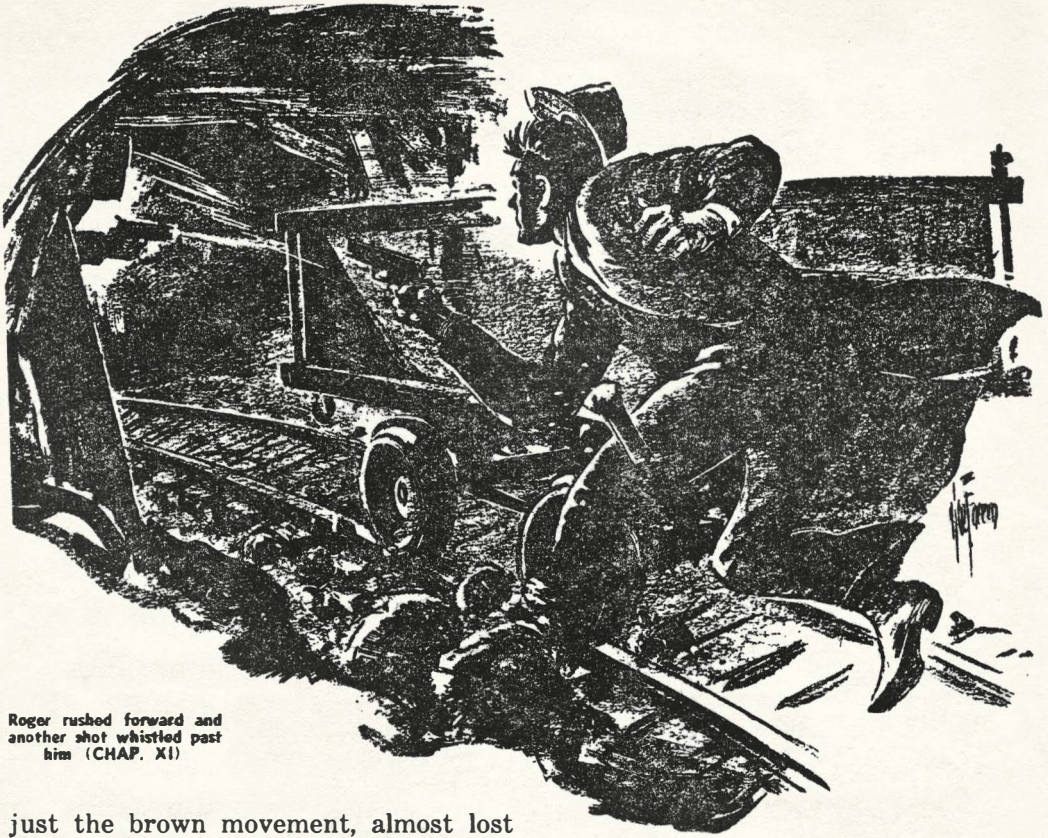
Barney jerked a thumb at the yellow Ford. "That doesn't look like a deer to me. I'm going up there."

"Suit yourself," Willie said. "I'll wait."

Barney picked himself up and ran across the open road to the woods ahead. The underbrush tore at his clothing, and his thrashing approach would have awakened a dead man. He paused, wishing for familiar New York streets, and then he listened.

ENTERING the woods was like being swallowed by some dank, shadowy cavern. The daylight was dead in here. High overhead, on the topmost point of a giant pine, a robin sang mournfully. There was no other sound. Then a twig cracked with a crystal-clear sound, up ahead.

Barney swung over the autumn grass, and clambered up over a ledge of granite. His gun was ready. Something brown moved quietly among the brambles above. He looked for a glint of metal from the man's rifle, but there was



Roger rushed forward and another shot whistled past him (CHAP. XI)

just the brown movement, almost lost in the riot of autumn colors. Barney gripped his gun tighter and took a step nearer. The movement of brown exploded into a bounding eruption of tiny hoofs. A bobbed white tail flickered for a moment among the underbrush and was gone with the dim thunder of a doe's bounding flight. Barney lowered his gun and muttered to himself.

Willie was waiting for him in the yellow Ford when he returned to the highway. The man's thin face was curious. A thin red welt marked the gash on his head where the glass had cut him.

"Call me Hiawatha," Barney said. "Let's get going."

The Peabody Building was on the western end of Main Street, beyond the crowded, gaudy business section that featured miners' haberdasheries, lunch counters, and glittering bars. It was a busy, bustling little town, with some of the primitive air of a western cowpuncher settlement. Peabody's place was a three-storied building with a side entrance and separate stairway to the up-

per floors. A copper-trimmed sign swung over the sidewalk, reading A. PEABODY, ATT'Y. The first floor was occupied by the offices of the North Valley Coal Company.

A light shone behind Peabody's pebbled glass door. Barney turned the knob and entered a reception room guarded by a bald octogenarian whose body trembled as if with the age. The old man moved his teeth around with his tongue and eyed Barney from behind tinted spectacles and leaned on the old rolltop desk that seemed to come with him. He was wearing a soup-stained vest and a heavy gold watch chain that lolloped across his rounded stomach.

"Yes, young man?"

"I want to see Amos Peabody," Barney said. "He's expecting me." He watched the old man fumble with his heavy gold watch chain, but he didn't produce a watch. "Don't you remember me?"

The old man said: "Ain't my business

to remember faces. Just the law, son."

"I'm Allan," Barney said. "Allan Andrews."

The old man nodded without surprise, wet his lips, and tottered toward an inner door. Barney said, "I'll announce myself," and crossed after him and went inside.

Musty air that seemed a century old filled the inner office. There was another rolltop desk, steel engravings of collieries on the wall, a heavy chunk of anthracite on the desk as a paperweight, a display of coals in a glass exhibit case, a lump of coal tied to the light chain. It seemed like a lot of coal.

Amos Peabody turned in his swivel chair and gave Barney a limp hand and a limp smile. His palm felt as dry and musty as the air in his office. His age was not quite that of the elderly retainer in the outer room, but he smelled of starch and camphor.

"Allan," he said. "On time, I see. I call you Allan, of course, for you are he during our association and as long as you remain in Sunfield. No doubt you have many questions to ask of me—why I hired you, why I instructed you to go down to Galveston and lay a trail across the country as Allan Andrews."

"Lots of questions," Barney nodded.

Peabody examined the lump of coal on his desk as if he had never seen it before.

"You will need an outline of your duties here in Sunfield, as Allan Andrews."

"You could have picked someone with a better reputation," Barney said. "Everybody seems to hate my insides."

PEABODY'S smile was as thin as a razor. "Allen left home ten years ago and all but broke his father's heart. Jasper Andrews is a very dear friend of mine. His grief and his troubles are shared by me. Young Allan had a regrettable disposition of—how shall we say—flaunting his father's wealth."

"Let's say he made a heel of himself," Barney suggested. "Where is Allan Andrews now?"

"I do not know."

"Is he dead?"

"It is impossible to say."

"Do you think I can pass myself off

as a reasonable facsimile of this missing heir?"

"That is why I hired you," Peabody nodded. Barney almost expected his parchment-like neck to creak as he moved his head. He had the unpleasant sensation of being in a mortuary instead of a legal office. "Physically, you fit Allan's description well enough. Your reputation as a private operative in New York seems to give you the proper temperament. Matters have reached a crisis in Jasper Andrews' affairs that made it vital for his son to reappear, but not knowing in which corner of the world he may be, I picked you."

"What's so urgent about it now, after ten years?"

Peabody's skeletal fingers kept caressing the chunk of coal on his desk as if it were a gold nugget. "Jasper had a stroke about two weeks ago—two days before I called on you. In his present condition, he may commit a monstrous folly and sell out his share in the North Star Collieries for a mere pittance. Mike Creel, his partner, wants Jasper's share in order to sell out to a New York syndicate. But Jasper is not responsible. I therefore thought that if Allan Andrews, his son, suddenly came home to his fireside, I might help to protect his interests."

"And Jasper might change his mind about selling?"

"Quite so," Peabody nodded. "You have no legal ground, as Allan Andrews, to prevent any deals with Creel. But with Jasper's long-lost heir returned home, he may see the folly of his move." Peabody paused significantly. "I must add that there are several people in the Andrews home who also want Jasper's ruin, if not death. I fear for my old friend's life. It will be up to you to stop their plans, whatever they may be."

"Are there any special rules by which I stop them?"

"Yes." Peabody's smile was as dry as dust. "You will be as objectionable and overbearing as the original Allan Andrews. Do the exact opposite of whatever is proposed to you. Whatever is suggested, you must object to it."

"And how long does this go on?"

Peabody shrugged. "Until Jasper recovers, or—"

"Or until somebody kills him?"

"I fear for my friend's life. It will be your primary duty to protect him, at all costs. You will be paid, of course, your daily rate, for as long as the arrangement must continue."

"Of course," Barney said.

CHAPTER III

UNPOPULAR PRODIGAL



PEABODY looked at Barney Forbes. His eyes were as dull and flat and black as his beloved chunk of anthracite.

"Is there something you would like to ask?"

"Who knew I was coming here?" Barney demanded.

"No one. Your arrival is a surprise to one and all."

"Not to all," Barney said. "Somebody knows it already."

"Indeed?"

"Somebody shot at me on my way up here."

"Impossible," Peabody said.

"Somebody also followed me from Galveston to Pittsburgh."

Nothing changed in Peabody's sooty eyes. He got up from his upholstered swivel chair and walked around it. He was exceedingly tall and gaunt, with stooped shoulders. His black suit was shiny with age. He turned cadaverous eyes toward Barney.

"This is most disturbing."

"It doesn't bother me," Barney said. "As long as I know what to look for."

"Your story is that you shipped on at Mexico in a sudden decision to come home. Your trail from Galveston to here will establish your identity beyond question. There is no reason for anyone to follow you. It must be a mistake."

"Like the hunter who took a Ford for a deer," Barney said.

Peabody sat down again. "If you wish to refuse the assignment, that is your privilege."

"No," said Barney. "I like to eat."

"There will be danger, you know."

"Danger is my business," Barney said. "And I can be as nasty as little Allan ever was. You don't know how nasty."

Without warning, Barney suddenly stood up, swung to the office door, and yanked it open. The aged clerk was there, his lips quavering, his head stooped.

"Did you hear everything you wanted?" Barney rapped.

"I—I dropped something. I wasn't listening—"

Amos Peabody said sharply, "That will be enough, Allan. Simon is completely trustworthy."

"Your office boy has big ears," Barney said.

"Simon Bray has been with me since I started my law practise. He knows nothing of this present arrangement." Peabody waved the old man back from the doorway. "If you will be seated, Allan, I will acquaint you with the people you will meet—those who seek your death as well as Jasper's."

Barney shook his head and reached for his hat.

"I prefer to form my own impressions. You'll be hearing from me."

He walked across town. The Andrews house was perched in stately grandeur on the northern slope. Barney trudged up the road with his suitcase, leaving the shabby company town behind in deepening darkness. Ahead, the cool serenity of green estates lifted in smug superiority from the grime that supported them.

There was a low fieldstone fence and two gate posts with an open iron gate between. Lights shone through shrubbery from the sprawling Victorian house, complicated with scrolled porches, random towers, and ugly gables.

The driveway made an ornate loop over the leafy lawn and ended under a porte-cochere before a garage that had once been the carriage house. A dim light under the porte cochere only emphasized the shadows beyond.

"Home," Barney said wryly.

The sound of a car coming up the road at a furious pace made him turn and stare back in the direction of town. The glow of headlights raced behind the fieldstone fence, then, with a scream of tires, a big car swung recklessly through the gates and up the drive.

The blazing headlights caught Barney frozen in the middle of the path. He just

had time to fling the suitcase aside, and himself after it, when the heavy car rammed past with a scatter of gravel, skidded on the curve, and came to a tortured halt under the porte-cochere.

BARNEY picked himself up and dusted autumn leaves from his coat. His face was dark with anger. Ignoring the suitcase, he walked with deliberate strides toward the parked car.

A man got out, slammed the door angrily, and stood swaying for a moment. The door lamp shone on his muscular figure in shaggy tweeds, his dark handsome face, full-lipped, and blank, wandering eyes. He gave no sign of awareness of Barney in the outer darkness.

The girl intruded on Barney's immediate plans. She came out wrathfully from the side door, her yellow hair swinging, her face pale as she confronted the tall man. She looked smart in a black and gray tailored suit.

"Roger, you fool! You've been warned before! If you carry on like this, you'll lose everything!"

The big man chuckled. "Why should you worry, Sheila?"

"I'm Miss McKay to your uncle, and to you, too, do you understand? I'm only trying to keep you out of trouble."

"It's my car," the big man said. "I'll drive as I please."

The girl said tightly: "It's not your car yet. You act as if Mr. Andrews were dead already!"

"I'm just anticipating a bit, that's all," the big man grinned. He swayed drunkenly. Abruptly his amusement vanished. "You give a lot of orders around here, Miss McKay. You better be nice to me now. Maybe I'll fire you when my turn comes. Or maybe I'll marry you. Or maybe I'll just—"

He kissed her, and the blond girl's hand slapped stingingly across his face. The big man grunted and lurched at her. Barney left his place of concealment behind the shrubbery and reached the big fellow with three strides. His hand closed on the other man's shoulder and twisted hard. Roger's dark, handsome face was stupid with surprise.

"Who are you?"

"I live here," Barney said grimly. "Get in and leave the lady alone."

"The devil you say!" The big man cursed. His voice was thick, coated with liquor. He twisted his tweed arm out of Barney's grip and swung clumsily. Barney countered with a sharp jab that caught him flush on the chin. The tall man staggered hard against the doorway and slumped to the flagstone walk. He didn't try to get up. A little trickle of blood came from his cut lip.

Barney turned to the girl. "Who is he?"

"Roger Sothern." Her voice was quiet, and she regarded him with gray eyes that held secrets. "Who are you, may I ask?"

Barney grinned. "I'm Allen, the prodigal son come home to roost."

Her eyes widened a little, and a smile played on her lips, touching them briefly and hurrying away, chased by something intangible. She wasn't too surprised. He wondered who she was, and then she answered his unspoken question.

"I'm Sheila McKay, your father's secretary. Roger didn't believe you were coming, but your father will be pleased. He needs help badly. The vultures are already picking at his bones."

"Including me?" Barney asked quietly.

"I'll reserve judgment," the girl said.

The side door opened suddenly and a fat mountain of feminine fury descended the steps, followed by a small man in a butler's outfit. The man's round face exhibited fluttering concern.

"Your Aunt Jane," Sheila murmured. "Roger's mother. And that's Tobias, worrying about her."

The stout woman descended on Roger Sothern's bedraggled figure with a swooping, solicitous rush. Her beaded dress rustled and quivered as she crooned over him.

"Roger! My dear boy! What happened to you?"

"I hit him," Barney said. "He was drunk." He looked at Tobias, the butler. The man's face was bland and serene. He had an enormous Colt's Frontiersman, pointed at Barney. Barney said: "Is that standard equipment for butlers these days?"

"No, sir. I didn't know what to expect, sir." The man's voice was as

smooth and fat as his face. "I'll pick up your bags. Welcome home, Mr. Allan."

AUNT JANE swung heavily to Barney and peered up at his face.

"Bad pennies always turn up! Why did you hit your cousin?"

"I felt like it," Barney said. He remembered Peabody's instructions to be as disagreeable as possible. "I'll do it again if he doesn't watch his step. Or maybe I'll throw you both out of the house, if you sponge too much. Remember that."

For a moment Aunt Jane's pudgy face contorted with acute hatred. Then her eyes filled with enormous, quivering tears.

"You still have your rotten disposition, haven't you?"

Roger was on his feet, mumbling apologies. A bruise already darkened his jaw where Barney had hit him. His dark eyes were annoyed with his mother, wary and cautious as they settled on Barney.

"I'm sorry, Allan. I didn't know it was you."

"Is that your car?" Barney asked.

"No. Uncle Jasper lets me use it occasionally."

Barney took out the ignition key and pocketed it.

"Your driving days are over, as far as I am concerned."

Aunt Jane gasped. "Of all the high-handed, impolite—"

"You haven't seen anything yet, Barney said with a grin.

Tobias came back from the lawn, carrying Barney's suitcase. He turned to Roger Sothern.

"Mr. Creel has been waiting for you since six o'clock, Mr. Roger. He's in the library."

"I'll see him," Barney said. "Sheila, you come with me."

The hallway was lined with somber oil paintings of Andrews ancestors back to the original Highland clans. Barney followed the girl's footsteps, admiring her proud posture, the lights in her long golden hair.

She stood aside at the library doors and smiled.

"Mr. Creel—Mr. Allan Andrews."

The big man, seated comfortably be-

fore the fireplace, didn't get up. He wasn't startled by Sheila's calm pronouncement. He occupied his big wing chair with a proprietary air, and seemed to fit, in bigness, the somberly paneled room with its tiers of books, its long library table with a brilliant Spanish scarf, and the mildly glistening, stubby suits of armor that flanked the doorway. Hank Creel inclined his iron-gray head in a brief nod.

"The long-lost son," he said heavily. "You have chosen a critical time to return to the family hearth."

"Maybe a lucky time for me," Barney said. He met Creel's cold blue stare, noted the man's expensive suit, London shoes, and the thick cigar he chewed with slow, methodical savagery in a corner of his wide, mercenary mouth. "I understand you wanted to see Roger Sothern. For your information, Roger will no longer be conducting my father's business. Whatever business you may have, will in the future go through me."

CREEL'S jaw knotted as he bit on his cigar.

He put his big white hands flat on his knees.

"As your father's partner, I have been trying to convince him to sell, or his mine holdings will soon be worthless."

"He won't sell," Barney said. "And neither will I."

"You're quick to make up your mind."

"I've learned a lot in ten years," Barney said.

"But hardly any better manners," Creel said quietly. He took the cigar from his mouth and ground it out in a crystal tray. "Perhaps after a few days, you will see reason, Allan." He inclined his head toward Sheila. "Good night, Miss McKay."

Sheila moved aside to let him leave the library. She turned to Barney with the beginning of a grin. "Nice going, Allan."

"The place seems to be crawling with vultures, all right."

"Maybe your return won't be as bad as people seem to think," she said. "You haven't a very good reputation in Sunfield."

"It won't be any better when I'm through," Barney said.

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT PROWLER



IT WENT easier than expected, this stepping into another man's shoes and playing out a blind hand. Except for assuming the disagreeable role of Allan, he began to enjoy himself. Although the house was big, the only servant seemed to be Tobias. Sheila McKay didn't fit into any particular category, so far as he could see.

Roger Sothern and his mother were obviously living on the gratuities of old Jasper, and were solely concerned with an imminent change in their status. At dinner, Aunt Jane went all-out to be charming. Barney answered in surly monosyllables and studied Sheila and Roger. It was obvious that Roger considered the girl as part of his future inheritance—or had, until "Allan" returned to mar the picture.

It was after ten o'clock before Barney explored the upper floors. The lofty ceilings and stone walls, decorated with Renaissance tapestries, reminded him of Grand Central station. The upper hall ended in a tall, stained-glass Palladian window. Doors paneled in rich walnut opened on either side, and the second one to his right opened wide as he reached the top of the stairs.

Sheila McKay stepped out. She was wearing a red housecoat, cut Russian style, and her long hair shimmered about her trim shoulders. She looked lovely—lovely and frightened. She stared at Barney and looked back in the room, then stood in a frozen attitude as he approached.

Roger Sothern was in the room she had just left. He was standing just behind the girl, his handsome face marred by a scowl.

"Tobias made your old room ready for you," the girl said.

"Where do you keep Jasper?" Barney demanded.

She stiffened. "In his den. Your room is next to it. Surely you're not going to disturb him now? He needs rest."

"He'll be glad to see me," Barney said roughly. "Most fathers are happy to

receive their prodigal sons."

Roger Sothern said bitterly: "Let him go. He'll tie his own noose, Sheila."

"Don't count on it, cousin," Barney said.

He went down the hall to the door the girl indicated. He heard her say something to the tall man, and his angry mutter drifted after him. Barney paused at the door and looked back. They were both watching him. Shrugging, he went inside.

The room was overpoweringly warm, with a cloying sick-room scent in the air. A night lamp cast a pink glow on one corner of the shadowed, paneled room, revealing a bed, a table with a decanter of brandy on it, and the man in the wheel-chair. A ghost of a man, a fragile wraith, a transparent death's-head that didn't move or tremor as Barney closed the door softly. Flat gray eyes stared straight ahead, unwinking, without recognition, without light of joy or cloud of disappointment in the flat, lizard-like stare.

"Tobias told you I was back," Barney began softly.

Jasper Andrews didn't move or answer.

"Or Peabody told you," Barney went on.

No answer. The man was wrapped in blankets like a cocoon. His hand rested on a push button, but Barney doubted his strength to use it. It was like talking to an image, or a corpse. Only the flickering, intelligent eyes told him the man was alive.

"You don't have to worry about me," Barney said. "No matter what you think."

The man's lips twisted and trembled in an agonized effort to form words. Barney understood.

"Get—out!"

"I just want you to know that I'm just doing a job," Barney went on. "Peabody pays me. A nice friend to have, Peabody. Your only friend, I guess. The trouble is, I may need some help and some information, and I was hoping you could give it to me."

Hatred glittered in Jasper Andrews' eyes.

Barney shrugged. "I guess not, then. Good night."

The hall was empty when he stepped out again. Roger's door was closed. He wondered about Sheila, and wished he could talk to her, but he had no idea which room was hers. He went into his own room, found the lamp on, the bed turned down, the window opened. He took off his shoes, loosened his tie, and slid the gun under the pillow, beneath his head. . . .

HE AWOKE all at once, aware of a scream still ringing in his ears. The lamp shone quietly on the table beside him. The gun was still under his pillow. Barney sat up abruptly. The house was quiet now. A cloisonné clock on the mantel chimed softly, eleven times. Outside, the lawn was dark, and a breeze rustled the trees beyond the windows.

The scream was repeated. It was Sheila's voice—high and shrill with unreasoning terror. It came from the lower part of the house. Without warning, the light went out. Barney cursed and groped into the hallway. The corridor was smothered in absolute darkness. He could see nothing. A door slammed up ahead, toward the stairs. Gun in hand, he moved swiftly through the unfamiliar gloom, slammed his thigh painfully against the sharp corner of a table, and paused.

"Sheila!" he called.

Urgent footsteps pattered past him. He thought he heard a low moan from downstairs. He started after the footsteps, more cautiously this time, limping a little. He found a light-switch at the head of the stairs and clicked it futilely. The sound of the switch snapped loudly through the blackness.

Another whisper of sound warned him, but too late. A man slammed into him violently and a fist snaked out of the darkness, cracked on his jaw. The other man grappled for Barney's gun. He reeled backward, clutched for the stair banister, and lost his footing. The gun slipped from his fingers as he toppled down the broad staircase. He managed to grab at the other, felt his fingers slide on silk, touched a muscled forearm. He yanked desperately, and the man came down with him in a headlong tumble down the inky stairs.

The man was big, possessed of furious strength. He landed on top of Barney, at the foot of the steps. Barney wriggled aside desperately, and a fist whistled past his head. The gun was lost. Their threshing bodies slammed into a table and a vase hit the floor with a tinkle of shattered porcelain. Barney whipped an armlock around the other man's neck and strained backward. Some of the fight went out of his opponent. His breathing rasped, his grip slackened. Barney yanked him to his feet and cursed into the darkness.

"Now, you skunk!"

The lights went on, like a soundless explosion. Tobias stood in the doorway, his face inscrutable as he looked first at Barney, then at the library arch to his right. Barney let go of the other man. It was Roger Sothern. The tall man's silk robe was ripped down one arm, and his breathing whistled as he leaned against the wall, watching Barney from beneath lowered lids.

"I thought you were a burglar," he whispered.

[Turn page]

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"Where's Sheila?" Barney rapped.

Tobias spoke in his butler's voice. "In the study, sir. She seems to have been injured."

Barney brushed them aside. A library lamp glowed on the long table, and the Spanish scarf lay in an embroidered heap on the dark carpet. Sheila was standing at the far end of the table. Her eyes were dazed. A brass-trimmed poker was in her hand. She was still wearing her red housecoat. The tall library windows were open, and a cold breeze that smelled of roses and collieries stirred her hair. She put a hand to her throat and looked at Barney.

"He went out the window," she whispered.

"Who was it?" Barney demanded.

"I don't know, Allan. It was dark. I couldn't see." The poker was trembling in her hand. She looked at it and smiled wryly and put it back behind the copper-screened fireplace. "I was taken by surprise," she said.

"Was it you who screamed?"

She nodded. "I heard someone prowling down here and came downstairs as quietly as I could. Then the lights went out—"

"The fuses were blown," Tobias offered.

"—and the man struck me. I screamed, but he knocked me down, and I picked up this poker, and—then he ran away, I guess."

"We've had trouble with burglars before," Roger said.

"Is anything missing?" Barney asked.

The girl's eyes flicked about the room. "Nothing that I can see. I suppose he was frightened off before he got anything."

"What would a burglar be looking for in here?"

"The usual things, I suppose. Jewelry, silver—anything."

SOMETHING was veiled behind her smoky eyes, some warning she was trying to get across to him. Aunt Jane came waddling into the library, her hair in pin curls, her face heavy with sleep.

"Children, children!"

Roger said solicitously: "It was just a burglar, Mother. He's gone. Please go back to sleep."

"You'd better all go upstairs," Barney said shortly. "All except Miss McKay. I want to talk to her."

Roger said bitterly: "You take an awful lot on yourself."

"That's my privilege, remember?"

"You don't let us forget it."

Aunt Jane's fat face quivered. "You horrible boy!"

"Scat," Barney said.

He watched them go without expression, first the stout woman, then her tall, somewhat battered son, and last, Tobias. Sheila remained in the library. The lamp made her face as soft and smooth as a fine Italian cameo. Her eyes regarded Barney quietly as he returned to her. Her fingers traced a design on the library table.

"Now," Barney said. "What is it?"

"In the foyer," she said. "Somebody left a note."

"A note," Barney repeated.

"On the mirror. You'd better have a look, Allan."

Barney swung on his heel, annoyed with her calm competence, and went out into the center hallway. No one was about. Opening the vestibule doors, he stood in a circular, marbled room that reminded him of a cool tomb.

Tall Florentine mirrors reflected dim light back at him. He didn't turn as the girl's housecoat rustled behind him. He felt stunned and angry and worried, all at once. Printed in clumsy block letters on one of the mirrors, in scarlet lipstick, was a message for him.

"YOU ARE NOT ALLEN ANDREWS. GET OUT—OR DIE!"

Barney felt the girl's quiet, accusing stare on his back. A muscle wriggled along the ridge of his jaw as he turned to face her.

"Did you write this?" he asked quietly.

"Of course not."

"It's written in lipstick."

"I know. But I didn't do it."

"Are you sure it was a man you caught down here?"

She opened her hand, held it palm up toward him, revealing a leather button and a scrap of tweed cloth. He took it from her.

"I managed to tear this off his cloth—"

ing before he got away through the window," she said quietly.

He looked at the message on the mirror.

"What do you think of that?"

Her red lips smiled, very faintly. "I think you'd better wipe it off, Allan Andrews. And then we'd better look in on Jasper."

CHAPTER V

LETHAL KNIFE



THE house was quiet again. Tobias had vanished to his quarters behind the kitchen, and from Aunt Jane's room came a muted sniffing and the low, irritated murmur of Roger's voice. Barney walked down the upper hall beside Sheila, trying to think beyond her enigmatic smile. She was Jasper's secretary, and the one who was really in charge of this crippled household.

There was a sophistication about her that didn't fit with Sunfield's coal mines. He wondered where she came from, and who she really worked for. She might conceivably be one of Creel's hired help, working against her employer. The idea was distasteful to him, and he pushed it aside. She was too beautiful for him to think objectively about her, and this upset him.

Her anxious whisper interrupted him. "Jasper's door is locked," she said.

"No one would lock an invalid in like that," Barney said.

"Of course not. Jasper specifically wants his door open at all times. He can hear and understand everything perfectly, you know. More than he pretends to do."

"I've already gathered that," Barney said drily. He tried the knob, but the heavy door wouldn't yield. Worry began to nag at him. It was useless to call out to the old man, for he didn't want Roger or Aunt Jane on the scene. He turned to the girl. "Have you a key?"

"The same key opens all the doors," she said. "We can use the one from your room."

She procured it in a moment and handed it to Barney. He snapped the latch

aside and pushed into the musty, sick-room. The girl was close behind him, and he halted so abruptly that she bumped into him as he blocked the doorway.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Barney surveyed Jasper's bedroom with bleak eyes. The night lamp still burned beside the canopied bed, and the wheelchair still stood alongside. But the room was not as cloyingly hot as it had been, and the breeze from the open window flapped the curtains inward. The window hadn't been open before. And this time, Jasper Andrews was not in his wheelchair.

His blankets were strewn in a bright, tangled twist of wool across the carpet, in a cone shape opening toward the fireplace. Jasper Andrews sprawled in the blankets across the room from the chair. His sunken face was quiet. His eyes stared back at Barney with the same lackluster expression as before.

But this time there was a difference. No life flickered in the invalid's flat, lizard eyes.

A hunting knife with an ornate hilt ending in a steel knob projected from the man's skinny chest. Light from the bed-lamp winked on the steel ornament and glistened wetly on the blood under the man.

Barney heard Sheila draw a deep, shuddering breath.

"Allan, is he——"

"Dead," Barney said bluntly. "Look for yourself."

His voice was low and harsh as he pulled her into the room. His eyes were cool as he watched her. She was reluctant to enter. Her face was filmed with horror as she studied the sprawled body. The curtains made dim, remote flapping sounds in the silent room. Beyond the windows, the trees rustled. It was very quiet, peaceful.

"But when?" she whispered. "How?"

"You tell me," he suggested.

"But I was downstairs, that man was there."

"And you drew everyone else downstairs, including me—and left Jasper alone up here."

Her eyes slowly dilated. "Surely you don't suggest that I arranged it for him to be alone? You can't think that!"

"I'll reserve judgment," he said quietly.

"It's your knife, Allan," she said flatly. "Did you know that?"

"My knife?"

"You'll find your name on it. Jasper always used it as a letter opener, after you ran away from home."

HER voice seemed remote, far away. Barney watched her warily. He had the sensation of being softly, quietly enclosed in a trap—a trap from which he couldn't escape. Somewhere, this girl with the shining hair and the face of a Helen of Troy formed a link in the net settling around him.

Anger darkened his eyes. If there really had been an intruder downstairs, then someone else had blown the lights and seized the opportunity to murder Jasper Andrews—to end an era and an empire of coal and make murder coincide with the return of the prodigal son.

"We'll have to call the police, Allan," the girl was saying.

"In a moment," he said. "Where was Roger and Aunt Jane while you were downstairs?"

"I don't know. Asleep, presumably. Aunt Jane was the last one down, but surely you don't think—" She paused, staring at him.

"The murderer must have been in this room when you screamed. He might have come out in the hallway and tangled with me."

"But that was Roger," Sheila protested.

"Exactly. Nobody here lost any love on Jasper."

Somewhere in the house, a telephone began to ring. Barney cut off the girl's answer and listened. The telephone rang downstairs, in long, patient trills, and then was abruptly cut off. Barney turned back to the door, closed it, and looked at the dead man sprawled before the fireplace. He pinched his chin angrily.

The girl said: "Allan, it doesn't look good for you. I don't think you did this, but it's your knife, and you came home suddenly after ten years and learned that Jasper was going to sell out to Creel and deprive you of your inheritance. You were quarrelsome, you looked for trouble." She paused, regarding him

soberly. "That's not what I think, Allan, but what the police will think."

"What about Creel?" Barney said. "What's his angle?"

"He claims the mine is played out. He offered blueprints to show the vein is ending. But Jasper charged the engineers' reports were falsified and produced his own blueprints to back him up."

"Where did Jasper keep these reports?"

The girl looked toward a paneled section of the wall over the fireplace. "In the safe there. But I don't think we should touch anything until the police arrive."

"Open it," Barney said.

She hesitated, then shrugged and pushed something on the wall, slid aside a panel and revealed a shining safe. It took only a moment to get the heavy little door open. Barney reached inside, fumbling among the envelopes, dumping them on the mantel beneath the safe. One packet was a thickly folded plate of engineering plans and blueprints. He pocketed them and turned back to the girl.

"What about Jasper's will?" he asked.

She looked shocked. "Allan, he's only been dead a few minutes, and you're already thinking—"

Barney was grateful for the sudden interruption at the door. Tobias, the butler, cleared his throat out in the hall.

"Mr. Andrews," he called softly.

The girl gave Barney a startled look. He walked quickly to the door, opened it only two inches, and met the fat butler's stare.

"What is it?"

"Telephone, sir. I had difficulty finding you. I thought perhaps you had gone outside to hunt for the burglar. Then I heard your voice in here. I trust all is well with Mr. Andrews?"

"He's quiet," Barney said grimly.

"You may take the call in your room, if you wish." Tobias coughed. "I also found your gun, sir."

"Thank you." Barney opened the door a little wider to let Sheila slip out, then followed, blocking Tobias' view into the room. He took the gun from the butler and waited until the man disappeared down the broad, curving staircase.

An extension phone was plugged into his bedroom. Sheila followed him, sitting anxiously on the edge of his bed. Barney picked up the telephone and said:

"Hello?"

The receiver crackled emptily for a moment. Then:

"It's about time. Is anything wrong there?"

"Who is this?" Barney rapped.

A DRY chuckle rattled in the receiver. The voice was a man's, a disguised whisper, sighing from a long distance over the wire.

"You can find out by meeting me, Mr. Forbes, right now—or shall I call you Allan Andrews?"

Barney didn't say anything. The receiver hummed. He looked across the room at the girl seated primly on the edge of his bed, and his face, reflected back from the gilt-framed mirror behind her, was that of a dark, sardonic satyr. The receiver chuckled.

"Surprised, Mr. Forbes?"

"Naturally," Barney said.

"Sensible. You having a little trouble up there?"

"A little."

"Maybe I can help," the whisper said. "Meet me at the Crown Hotel, south end of Main Street. Room Three-o-nine. Right now. Don't bother the desk on your way up."

"I'll be over," Barney said, and replaced the telephone.

The girl was silent when he looked at her. He reached for his coat and adjusted the gun in his underarm holster. He still looked like a satyr in the wall mirror. An unhappy one.

"Are you going out?" the girl asked.

"I must," he answered.

"Aren't you going to call the police?"

"You can call them."

"What shall I say?"

"Anything your little heart desires," Barney said, and went out.

The Crown Hotel was at the northeast corner of Main and Pinchot, and the other three corners were occupied by gaudily lighted bars. Although it was past midnight, the street was crowded with miners and stocky blond girls with too much lipstick on their willing

mouths. No one knew yet that the man who owned Sunfield was dead in his mansion with a knife through his tough old heart.

Barney parked Roger's sedan in front of a penny arcade and walked slowly into the Crown lobby. The clerk's desk was empty. He looked at the floor lamps spotted around among the easy chairs, and then at a pair of woven leather moccasins crossed comfortably behind a potted palm. Barney stood stock still. Street noises filtered quietly through the revolving lobby door and dusted the air. Somewhere a radio played softly. There came a crackle of newspapers and the fancy shoes shifted, the left crossing the right. Barney kept his hands quiet and turned away from the stairs and came around the potted palm and looked at Fancy Shoes.

"Hello, McClure," the man said, and smiled.

The trousers were plain tan gabardine, the socks woolly and ribbed, the shirt a pale green flannel, and the jacket a checked brown. The hat was a brown snap-brim. The face fitted the clothes—a clean young face with a hard jaw and eyes that didn't match the smile. A college boy. A smiling young man with fancy shoes who had followed him from Galveston to Sunfield.

"I'm Allan Andrews," Barney said. "What's the gift?"

Fancy Shoes folded his newspaper. "I know you are Andrews—the crown prince of Sunfield. But you registered in the Belle Lune Hotel in New Orleans as J. J. McClure. I guess this is better than being trusty in stir, isn't it?"

"Stir?" Barney asked quietly.

"You broke out of the Stillworth jail in Oklahoma a month ago. A three-state alarm is out for you, Allan—even though you never did tell that judge out West your real name."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Barney stated.

"Maybe you don't," Fancy Shoes said.

"Would you care to make it plainer?"

"Not just now. I'm having too much fun."

"What's funny?"

"Watching you play the crown prince," Fancy Shoes said. "A comic opera."

"How long have you been waiting here for me?"

"I'm not waiting," Fancy Shoes said. "But I've got time."

Barney tried to fit the young man's quiet voice with the whisper on the telephone that had called him here. It didn't fit. He thought of Room 309, upstairs. Fancy Shoes hadn't been waiting for him. It was a coincidence. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe he ought to get out of here, and fast. On the other hand, the cops would be back at the Andrews house. He tried to picture Fancy Shoes writing in lipstick on the foyer mirror, and that didn't fit, either. He thought of Peabody, and the name J. J. McClure, and anger stirred in him.

"I have a little business," he told Fancy Shoes. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I want to talk to you."

"I should think you would." The young man gave Barney the nice clean smile that didn't touch his eyes and rattled his newspaper. He crossed his legs again. "I'll be here. Waiting."

CHAPTER VI

STRONG-ARM TACTICS



MOVING ACROSS the lobby, he found that the antiquated bird cage which passed for an elevator was empty. Barney stepped in and operated it himself, rising slowly to the third floor. No one complained. The hotel was full of the usual midnight noises—the clink of glasses, the sound of running water, an argument, a woman's shrill laughter. A red exit sign glowed at the far end of the hall. Barney counted doors and stopped in front of Room 309. There was a party going on across the hall, but 309 was silent.

The door was ajar. Inside the room, a very dim light came from some indirect source. Barney toed the door open slowly, looked past a short corridor to a corner of a bed, a bureau and an empty chair. The bed was made, the bureau bare except for a Bible.

"Anybody home?" he called softly.

There was no answer. He moved on into the gloom, gun in hand. He looked

into the shower and bath, the bedroom, and the closet. There was no clothing, nothing to indicate the room was occupied. He went back and shut the hall door—and someone appeared out of thin air behind him and rammed a gun into his back.

"Stand still, slicker," someone said.

Barney stood still.

A hand snaked over his shoulder and took his gun. The man's breath cooled the back of Barney's neck.

"Thanks for coming. Turn around and have a seat."

He was just a shadow in the gloomy room. What light there was came from the connecting suite. The door was open there now. Barney mentally cursed his own carelessness.

He couldn't see into the next room. He couldn't see if anyone else was there. Very little of the other man was visible, except for a dim outline with broadish shoulders and a lean, alert head. Dim light ran an oily finger along the barrel of the gun, waving Barney to the armchair beside the bed. Barney sat down.

"All right," he said. "So I'm here."

The man's shadow stirred and put Barney's gun down.

"So you're Barney Forbes, the big city slicker."

"I'm Forbes," he nodded. "Also known as Allan Andrews."

"Yeah," said the big man.

Barney said nothing to that.

The big man said: "I called you because I want the answer to one question, that's all."

"Ask me," Barney said.

"I'm asking. Tell me who killed Jasper."

"I don't know."

"Did you do it?"

"No," Barney said. The man's voice was unfamiliar. His shape was just a dark outline against the dim doorway. Barney sat still in the armchair and said: "How did you know Jasper was killed?"

"I was there, gumshoe. You ought to know I was there."

"Was that your message on the mirror?"

"Sure."

"How do you know my name?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"I'm naturally curious," Barney said.

"Let me ask another. Did Peabody hire you?"

Barney didn't say anything. The man gestured with his gun.

"Susie hopes you aren't going to be stupid. Answer me."

"I'd like to know where you fit into this first."

The big man laughed. "I fit. Don't worry about that. The less you know about me, the happier you'll be. I just want to know what your game is. I can figure Jane and Roger—they're just chiselers waiting for the old man to kick off and leave them something permanent. They got their wish, anyway. Jasper was going to cut them off, I happen to know, if he ever got strength enough to change his will. I guess he didn't. They could've killed Jasper, easy."

"Then you ought to question Roger, not me," Barney said.

THE man shrugged. He was assured and insolent. "I can figure Boss Creel, too. He's got a cool million to gain, if he could get Jasper to give up his share of the collieries. The only way to get Jasper's share would be to kill him. Creel fits, all right. And that Sheila McKay—I figure she's one of Creel's people. I'm not worried about them. I just want to know where a private eye like you fits in."

"You've got the picture better than I," Barney answered. "You tell me. And why keep your pal down in the lobby all this time?"

The big man said: "What pal?"

"He wears fancy shoes," Barney said. "Very neat, very smart. He followed me from Galveston, Texas. He thinks I'm J. J. McClure, a con who busted out of stir lately."

"McClure?" the big man said quietly.

"That's the name."

"Is he a copper?"

"You tell me," Barney said again.

The big man's shoulders hunched forward a little. Dimly, from the corridor outside, came the sound of a breaking bottle, the raucous blare of a radio, the sound of drunken laughter.

The big man gestured with his gun. "Maybe Susie will tell you."

Barney listened to the sounds out in

the hotel corridor. Over the ordinary sounds came heavy footsteps and voices, proceeding down the hall toward Room 309. An argument was in process, and there came the distinct click of a safety being pulled off a revolver as the voices paused outside the door.

A voice Barney didn't recognize said excitedly. "Yes, I tell you it was Allan Andrews! I didn't know he shot his Paw! He come up here somewhere. Duke saw him."

A voice heavy with authority said: "All right. Bust in there, Sarge."

Barney started to rise from his chair. He glimpsed the other man's gun, descending in a flash arc, aimed at his head. He twisted away, falling sideways, and the heavy barrel crashed down on his head and shoulder. He sprawled headlong, sickened by pain. The big man cursed in a distant voice and turned, his feet jarring the floor where Barney lay. At the same time, a heavy fist pounded on the door and a voice bellowed for entry in the name of the law.

Barney got to hands and knees, shaking his head. Distantly he heard a window go up, and then a heavy shoulder smashed against the door and someone suggested getting a key from downstairs. Barney stood swaying, breathing heavily.

Blood trickled down his neck from a cut behind his ear. He dabbed at it absently, and picked up his gun from the bureau, where the other had left it. He followed the path the big man had taken, through the door to the connecting suite.

The only light came from the bathroom door, standing ajar, accounting for the dim illumination in 309. Barney closed the connecting door, turned the thumb latch, and faced the window. Alternate waves of red and yellow neon light came from signs at the end of the alley. The window was up, and the man who had slugged him had disappeared.

The window opened on a fire escape. The alley was narrow, and to the rooftop of the next house was a risky leap from the railing. The wind made a whistling sound as it scoured the alley.

Barney took the iron stairs going down, his shoes clattering on the rusty

steps. He didn't know how much time he had before the cops up there got the bright idea of looking out the window. He swung around the second-floor platform and came down to the last landing. The ladder ended here.

It was a ten-foot drop to the dark floor of the alley. Barney hesitated, pocketed his gun. The fire-escape railing had been dirty, and he looked at his hand, saw a smear of blue clay and coal dust across his palm. Then the window above shot up and a uniformed man leaned out, peering first across the rooftops, then down. A shout rose on the wind.

"There he is!"

BARNEY slid under the rail and dangled by his fingertips from the platform edge. More of the blue clay was smeared here. The wind whipped his topcoat around his legs and he kicked them free, then let go. The ground came up and exploded under his feet. He relaxed, rolled over on springy knees, and scrambled upright, knocking over an ashcan with an alarming clatter.

One end of the alley debouched on Main Street, with its crowds from surrounding coal patches and bright, enticing light. The other end was shrouded in gloom, relieved only by a solitary pool of light from an antiquated gas lamp. From up above came a sudden warning shot, sharp and explosive. The bullet spattered the paved alley ten feet away.

The girl decided him. Sheila McKay appeared suddenly in the dim light at the far end of the alley. Her face was anxious, her arm gesturing. Barney pounded the alley toward her. An angry shout rose from the fire escape, and then he was through the light and running with the girl on a narrow, dark street. His car, which he had parked two blocks away, was at the curb here, and the girl had the door open and the motor running.

"Quick, Allan!" she breathed.

He slid behind the wheel without question. Another shot cracked futilely from the hotel behind him. The girl got into the front seat and slammed the door.

"Straight ahead," she said.

The street was a drab, twisting lane of miner's shacks, surrounded by culm heaps that overflowed mountainously into the grimy back yards.

The car's headlights cut a brilliant swath along the cobblestones, swung out over a barren field, and touched the heavy, boxlike structure of a colliery. A wooden bridge took them across a blackened stream, and then they were free of Sunfield, racing along a winding road that paralleled the little river.

There was no sign of pursuit. The girl's face was pale and rigid in the reflected light of the dashboard. Barney spotted a side lane and slowed the heavy car, pulled into it, and jounced over ruts and mud holes to a safe distance from the road, then parked and snapped off the lights.

The sound of crickets and frogs came in the dark windows. Behind them was the glow and muted noise of Main Street.

"All right" Barney said heavily. "Let's have it. How did you happen to be at the hotel?"

She tossed her head. "I was looking for you. Allan. I called the police, as you told me to, and they immediately fixed on you as the killer. Roger and Aunt Jane didn't do much to help you out."

"What about you?"

"I don't believe you killed Jasper. I came looking for you as soon as I could. I saw all those police going into the hotel and when I found your car parked in the next block, I knew you were in there and they were after you. I knew you'd be coming out in a hurry, if you had half a chance."

"Did anyone come down the fire-escape ahead of me?"

"I didn't see anyone," she said. She looked at him with sober eyes. "I won't ask you what you were doing there, Allan. I don't know why I should trust you, but I do. All I want is to get out of this town and back to New York, where I belong. I couldn't leave before, while Jasper was ill. But now I just want to settle this business and quit, and wash the coal dust out of my hair."

Barney looked at the smear of clay and dirt on his hands.

"Maybe you can help me," he suggested.

"I'll do anything I can."

"Tell me where this blue clay comes from."

She frowned and looked at his hands and touched his palm with a thoughtful forefinger. Her gray eyes met his and she shrugged.

"There's some blue clay up along Culpepper Road, where the old pithead used to be. It's abandoned now, and even the coal bootleggers have deserted that patch."

"That's all I want to know," Barney said. He started the car again, backing swiftly toward the main road. The girl stared at him and protested:

"You can't show yourself, Allan. The police want you. They think you did it!"

"I know," Barney said.

"Then what are you going to do now?"

"See my lawyer," Barney said grimly turning onto the highway.

CHAPTER VII

HARVEY'S BLACKJACK



AMOS PEABODY'S house was a cozy little cottage on the fringe of the green north edge of town. It was one o'clock when Barney drove up the hedge-bordered lane and parked at the edge of the lawn. Moonlight revealed a dappled, English-type front, a flagstone walk, a recessed doorway. From behind tall curtains drawn over casement win-

dows came a telltale streak of yellow light.

Barney left the girl in the car and walked alone to the doorway. The house bore no relation whatever to the musty, dusty, dilapidated office where he had first seen the bony lawyer. He lifted the polished brass knocker and let it fall and waited. The door was opened almost immediately, as if he'd been expected, and light streamed out around the gaunt figure of the lawyer.

"Allan! Come in."

The man stood aside, and Barney entered a long, warm living room with a beamed oak ceiling, a white stone fireplace with a Gothic arch, and heavy, comfortable furniture. There was no dust, no coal. Amos Peabody's shoulders looked narrow in a velvet smoking jacket. His slippers were soundless as he followed Barney to the fireplace.

"You shouldn't have come here, Allan."

"Have you heard what happened?" Barney asked shortly.

"Yes. I know about it. Jasper is dead."

"He was murdered," Barney said. "I didn't do my job very well, did I?"

"You didn't have much time." Peabody inclined his bald head slightly. "Sit down. Would you like a drink?"

Barney sank into a barrel chair by the lighted fire and watched Peabody prepare a rye highball. A green ashtray stood beside the cut-glass decanter, and a half-smoked cigar still smoldered beside two glasses. There was a scent of cigar smoke in the air, mixed with the piny wood fire. The fire spit and

[Turn page]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills, (Adv.)

crackled behind the copper screen. Outside, the wind played in the shrubbery.

"It is difficult to realize that my boyhood friend is dead," Peabody sighed. "In a way, the fault is mine. I should have brought you to Sunfield sooner. I did not dream of a crisis so soon." He waved his paper-thin hand. "But you should not have come here."

"Why not?" Barney asked. "You hired me to protect Jasper. I failed in that. But I've been shot at and trailed halfway across the country. I've made myself universally unpopular, and I've been betrayed and framed for murder. The least I can do now is try to work clear of this mess."

"You are in no danger," Peabody said.

"The police think I did it," Barney went on. "And I don't blame them, considering how things happened the moment I arrived."

"The police have changed their minds about you. I have spoken to Chief Akerly. He is quite satisfied about it."

"How do you mean?"

"They have the man," Peabody said. "Who?"

"Roger Sothern." Peabody regarded him with unwinking eyes. "Subtly has been my weak point. As Jasper's legal counsel, I should have made a stiff stand against Creel's scheme to sell the mine for a pittance. I had Jasper's interests at heart. With your arrival as Allan Andrews, I thought things might take a different course. But I assure you, there is nothing for you to worry about."

"The police are still chasing me. And there's lots going on that I want answered." Barney briefly outlined the telephone call and his visit to the hotel. Peabody listened, nodding his thin, ghostly head, his eyes sober and serious. Barney looked at the cigar in the ashtray and said: "There's something else. Why didn't you tell me that Allan Andrews had been in stir all these years?"

"Stir?"

"Prison," Barney said patiently. "And he's hot. He broke out of Stillworth in Oklahoma a month ago, and he's wanted by the police in a tri-state alarm. Is that news to you?"

"It is," Peabody said stiffly.

"Then here is some more of the same. Your precious Allan went under the name of James J. McClure all those years. They don't know he's heir to a coal-mine fortune. You say it's news to you, but your instructions specifically required me to register in a New Orleans hotel as J. J. McClure, before going on to Galveston as Allan Andrews. Why did you do that to me?"

"I cannot explain that now," Peabody said quietly.

"You'll have to explain it," Barney said. "I don't like being doublecrossed."

PEABODY stared at Barney for several moments, his face unreadable. "You must have faith in me," he said at last. "I regret that things have turned out as they have, but there is nothing to do now but wait. Obviously, you cannot leave town now. You must remain as Allan Andrews until things settle a bit. I may have to use your signature, as the heir, on certain papers, but that can be arranged." Peabody's voice was bland. "It may not be quite legal, but I did not plan it this way, and the only approach to a satisfactory conclusion is to play it out to the end. Then you may disappear again, still as Allan Andrews, without arousing comment."

"No comment except that I came home to kill Jasper," Barney said. He picked up the cigar butt and pinched it. It was still warm. "Have you been entertaining Hank Creel?"

"Of course. I do not deny it."

"What did he want?"

"He came over as soon as he heard about Jasper's death. He was waiting for me when I returned from the house. He wanted to know who controls Jasper's share in the North Star Collieries now."

"And who does?" Barney asked.

"You do," Peabody said, and smiled.

"According to Jasper's will?"

"As Allan Andrews, you are now worth approximately thirteen million dollars. You must see how necessary it is, sir, to continue playing your part. I will see that you are adequately recompensed. For the time being, it will be best if I do not personally advance you any money. You will find an ade-

quate balance in your name in the Sunfield National Bank. You may draw on it freely, in lieu of direct payment from me for your services."

"No, thanks," Barney said. "I haven't done anything to get paid for yet, except spend a lot of time. You can pay me when and if I get Jasper's murderer."

"Very laudable," Peabody said. "Henceforth, then, we will meet only in the normal course of events. If I need you, you will be so informed."

Barney said: "I still would like to know how my secret arrival came to be known by the whole town, before I showed."

"That I cannot explain."

"And J. J. McClure?" Barney asked.

"I cannot help you there. It would be better if you did not know certain aspects of this affair. You must realize that with Jasper's death we both walk a tightrope. My reputation as well as your safety depends on your successful masquerade as Allan Andrews."

"You're not much help," Barney said. He put on his hat and buttoned his coat. The drink had made him feel better. At the door, he paused. "I'm still a little concerned about your clerk, Simon Bray. Where does he live?"

Peabody's voice grew stiff. "I do not want Simon annoyed or questioned. No leak could have come from him. He is my pet charity, if you must know—a helpless, doting old man who once did much to build up this community. I repeat, I do not want you to annoy him."

"You're the boss," Barney said with a shrug.

The door was closed with firm finality behind him. Barney turned up his coat collar against the bite of the wind and picked his way down the dark flagstones to the street. The light went out in Peabody's cottage, and the shadows crowded closer as he reached the rough sidewalk.

The Andrews sedan was nowhere in sight. Sheila was gone.

In place of the car was a familiar yellow Ford, parked under a chestnut tree, in deep shadow. Barney paused, too late. Shadows materialized on either side of him.

"Hello, Allan."

THERE was enough light to make them out. One was Willie, the lanky handyman from the Crestline Inn, where he had first stopped outside of Sunfield. The other was Ed Harvey, the fat and bitter barman. Their faces were shadowy. Willie's voice was sad and appealing.

"It took us a long time to catch up with you, Allan."

"Where is the girl?" Barney asked.

"She left," Harvey said. "She's not helping you, you bum!"

"The boss wants to see you," Willie added. "Mr. Creel."

"I didn't know he was your boss."

"He's boss in Sunfield now," Harvey said. "And he wants you."

"Tell him I'll be along later," Barney replied.

"He wants to see you now," Harvey insisted. His eyes were dangerous, his mouth trembled. He took his hand from his pocket and exhibited a heavy leather sap. Barney looked at Willie, and the thin man shook his head behind Harvey's back in a quick negative gesture. Barney said: "Suppose I don't want to go now?"

Harvey grinned. "That's all I want to hear. I owe you a lot, wise guy. You got a long time comin' to you."

Barney tried to duck the sudden, slashing blow of the sap. It whistled past his ear, connected with his cheekbone, and sent a sheet of flaming pain through his head. He felt his knuckles connect with Harvey's button nose, and went down to his knees on the dark, graveled street. A foot slammed into his ribs, a fist smashed down on the back of his neck. He tried to struggle up through soaring pain, and Harvey grated through the muffling curtains:

"I'll fix the snake."

Barney never felt the blow that finally knocked him out. . . .

He became conscious of cold and damp, the kind of damp that roosts in your bones as if forever. A dim rectangle of light shone down on him from about a mile high. Daylight. There was a smell of wine and dust and the humming of an electric motor somewhere in the next county.

Barney opened his eyes and found himself in a cellar lighted by a tiny

window a foot above his head. Through the window he could see a level field of stubble, a sloping hillside covered with autumn trees, and abandoned, narrow-gauge railroad tracks paralleling a rutted road. He looked back at the cellar and saw dim cases of food and tiers of wine bottles. The humming sound came from the furnace.

Willie was tilted in a chair against the whitewashed wall, watching him with objective eyes. The lanky man wore a leather windbreaker and a battered gray hat. There were sandwiches and a thermos bottle on a dusty table beside him, and a long-barreled target pistol rested beside the bottle.

Barney sat up, shaking his head. It ached with a thousand hammering demons pounding inside his skull. He squinted at his watch. It was two o'clock, which meant it was afternoon of the next day. The blow on the head had kept him more or less asleep for half a day.

"How do you feel, Allan?" Willie asked.

"Like a bundle of hay in a threshing machine. What is this?"

"Crestline Inn," Willie said. "You slept good after Harvey tapped you."

"That Harvey," Barney said.

"I don't go for rough stuff, myself," Willie said. "But Harvey sure hates your insides." He stood up and took the gun. "I'll get the boss. He's been pretty impatient."

Willie disappeared up a narrow flight of wooden stairs. Alone, Barney went to the window and reached up and tried to open it. The wood was swollen by damp, and stuck fast. The door behind the furnace was bolted on the other side. There was no other way out. He went to the coal bin and picked up a chunk of coal and started back to the window. A voice stopped him from the stairway.

"Take it easy, Andrews."

HANK CREEL entered, followed by Harvey and Willie. The big man was chewing angrily on a cigar stump. His florid face looked uncertain. He was wearing a black overcoat and a black homburg and a dazzling white shirt with a gray silk tie and an onyx stickpin

framed in silver. He was careful not to touch anything in the cellar.

Barney dropped the chunk of coal. Harvey grinned at him.

"How you feel, wise guy?"

"Shut up," Creel said. His eyes were fixed on Barney's tall, swaying figure. "I'm sorry about what happened. I don't believe in using violence where it is unnecessary."

"I guess it was necessary," Barney said. "I'm finicky about how I make my social calls—and with whom."

"All I wanted," Creel said, "was to discuss the situation with you, now that you are owner of the controlling shares in North Star. The whole town is buzzing over Jasper's murder—and over your return. They've been looking for you. Roger is no longer in custody."

"Who sprung him?" Barney asked.

"I did. I made the police chief what he is. I convinced him there wasn't enough evidence yet to convict Roger. As for you, Allan, I want to know what you came back to Sunfield for. You were always a trouble-maker, but this time, perhaps, you went too far. Who killed Jasper?"

"I don't know," Barney said. "Maybe Harvey did it."

Harvey gave a startled curse. Creel didn't look at him.

"I want an answer," Creel said.

"I don't know the answer," Barney said.

"What happened at the house last night?"

"I wish I knew. But you were there, yourself."

"I left before the murder. You know what happened."

"Ask Harvey," Barney said. "He's got all the answers in his war club."

Harvey said: "Let me slug him, boss."

"Shut up," Creel said again. "Who did you meet at the hotel, Allan? Who was the man in that room?"

"Don't you know?"

"I wouldn't waste valuable time, if I did."

Barney leaned against the cellar wall and didn't answer. The plaster felt cold through his topcoat. He felt sick and his legs were weak under him. He said: "Why not ask your chief of police?"

"I'm asking you," Creel regarded Barney with annoyed eyes. "We found Jasper's blueprints on you while you were unconscious last night. I destroyed them, of course. But I know you are aware now that the mine is not petering out, although I told Jasper so. It was an effort to make him see reason and sell out to friends of mine. If I can swing the deal, there's a pretty commission in it.

"As Jasper's heir, you should listen to some sense. You've been around, and I'm sure you owe no sentiment to Sunfield or the North Star. There will be enough money in it to keep you for life. And I'll see to it that you are kept in the clear where Jasper's death is concerned."

"Thanks for nothing," Barney said.

"I can't guarantee your safety if you persist in being stubborn."

"I persist in being honest. And you're a crook, Mr. Creel."

Harvey shambled forward, his mouth slack and wet and eager. He thumped his sap into the horny palm of his hand.

"Let me ask, Mr. Creel. Being polite to this guy never paid off. He'll cooperate any way you want, once I get through with him. He'll be glad to cooperate."

Creel ignored him, adjusted his hat. "Think about it, Allan. I'm sure you will see reason, after you stay here a while. I do not want your enmity. I want to work with you and for you."

Barney didn't say anything. He watched them go. On the stairs, Harvey turned and grinned at him.

"Try some funny stuff, Allan. I just wish you would."

Then he was alone again.

CHAPTER VIII

CORPSE IN A MINE



LOWLY Barney sank down in the chair and rested for long minutes. His knees were watery, and his hands trembled. There was crusted blood on the back of his head, and his stomach seemed full of butterflies. He tried some

of the coffee Willie had left in the thermos bottle. There was a sandwich in the paper bag, and he ate that. After a long time he began to feel better. He went to the tiny cellar window again and peered through.

The October sunlight was bright on the field, the road, the twisted iron tracks that disappeared in the wood. He stepped down and went back to the coal heap and picked up another chunk and went back to the window. He wondered how much noise the shattering glass would make. He thought of Harvey, and didn't like the thought.

He had the coal poised in his hand when Willie came down the cellar stairs again. He looked at Barney and said: "Hold it, Allan."

"I want out," Barney blurted. "Don't try to stop me."

"I don't like this any more than you do," Willie said. "It's not my line. But Harvey is out for blood. Your blood."

"To the devil with him," Barney said.

"I can't hold him much longer. I'm gonna let you go."

Barney watched the lanky man gather up the thermos bottle and the paper bag of sandwiches. He said: "What did I ever do to Harvey?"

"You used to come in and stand at the bar and insult him, in the old days. He had to take it. You used to throw drinks in his face. You took his girl out, once, and got her drunk in the hills, just to prove you could do it. He ain't forgot a bit of it. That's why he tried for you with the rifle that first day."

"That was Harvey?" Barney asked.

"Sure. I knew it was him. But I still don't like to let him do what he wants to do to you."

"Where is he now?"

"At the bar. If you bust that window, he'll come runnin'. You best come up through the kitchen and out the back door."

"What's that trail and old tracks up there?" Barney asked.

"Culpepper Road. Be a good idea for you to hit it. That goes up to the old bootleg pithead. You hit town the other side."

"All right," Barney said. "Let's go."

The roadhouse kitchen was empty. Willie waved toward the field opposite

the main highway and turned away. The sound of the juke box and clinking glassware came from the front of the inn. Barney stepped silently to the ground and started across the open field.

His shoulders crawled. He didn't like his back to the windows behind him. He expected a slug in his spine, any minute. Nothing happened. He reached the trees and plunged into them, circled back to the railroad spur as he clambered up the slope.

The afternoon air was clear and cold and still. Squirrels chattered at him from the tree tops as he trudged by. Once he glimpsed the valley and the town and the ugly collieries and culm banks beside the little river. It seemed a long way off.

Occasionally he paused and listened for pursuit, but there was only the loneliness of the mountain and the rustling of falling leaves, all around him. He felt cold and tired and very much alone. He wished he were back in New York again, with millions of people crowding around him. He walked on.

It was almost four in the afternoon when he reached the end of the railroad spur. The rusty tracks were swallowed in a hole in a rocky outcropping near the top of the slope, almost overgrown with vegetation since the pithead had been abandoned.

A car was parked near the dark mine entrance, an old coupe with a dust-stained chassis and signs of hard wear. The tire tracks were smooth in the blue clay that patched the withered grass. No one was around. Barney left the shelter of the wood and crossed the railroad ties to the rutted, desolate clearing, and paused beside the car, looked inside.

THERE was no dust on the cracked leather seats, no signs of abandoned weathering. The dash compartment was locked. He went around to the luggage compartment, and that was locked, too. He shrugged and watched a squirrel race along the feathery top of a tall pine. Woolly clouds were turning pink as the sun lowered toward the opposite range of hills. A hawk circled in wide, patient sings high in the deepening blue.

The pithead yawned ahead of him. Barney made a gesture of dismissal, then swung toward it, walking on the narrow-gauge ties under the crumbling wooden beam of the entrance. Inside, he paused, adjusting his eyes to the dim light.

Water trickled somewhere, echoing hollowly. Daylight crept in ahead of of him, urging him down the sloping tunnel entrance. With each step, the shades grew darker. He was about to retrace his steps when he noted a glimmer of yellow light from around the first bend in the shaft.

Barney listened, but there was nothing except the crystalline tinkle of dripping water. He went on.

The yellow light brightened as the waning daylight faded from the mine entrance. The bend in the tunnel turned out to be little more than a chamber hollowed out of the rock. A lighted oil lantern stood on an aged and crumbling table. There were blankets heaped in one corner, a kerosene stove stood in another, and some packing crates served as chairs. Nobody was in sight. A man's new pigskin bag stood on one of the packing boxes.

Barney looked at the flickering lantern and listened to the tinkling of the water. He started toward the pigskin bag, then paused suddenly, his back stiff, as he saw the feet thrust out from under the heap of blankets in the corner.

There was blue clay on the worn soles of the shoes, and a man's leg was partly visible, with brown tweed trousers. Barney fanned the air in an absent gesture. His face was stony. He went over to the blankets and picked up one corner and turned it aside.

The man who lay huddled in the corner stared back at him with dead, dull eyes.

The eyes were all that was left of his face. The rest of it had been shot away by several heavy caliber slugs that had torn off his jaw and blown out his brains through the back of his skull.

Barney made a sound deep in his throat and stood without moving, without touching the dead man. A leather button and a scrap of brown cloth had been torn from the dead man's tweed

coat. He was big, as big as Barney, and about thirty, although that was hard to judge.

It didn't make any difference now. It didn't mean anything to the dead man. He would be dead for a long time, long after the water stopped trickling in the mine, long after there wasn't any mine or mountain or town in the valley below. . . .

Barney turned and headed back the way he'd come.

The ignition key was in the car parked outside the pithead. Barney slid behind the wheel. The car worked fine. He backed it around to face down the rutted trail and drove slowly back to the highway.

He had to pass within fifty yards of the Crestline Inn at the road junction, but no one saw him and there was no alarm. The sun was already down when he reached Main Street. No one stopped him here, either.

The street was as gaudy and crowded as the night before. The traffic cop at the main intersection didn't look at him when he paused for the light. In ten minutes, Barney drove between the field-stone gates of the Andrews house.

He was moving fast now. A sense of urgency gave speed to his steps as he went in through the side door. There was no sign of the police. The house was quiet, hushed with mourning. The big center hallway stood in somber shadows, and then Tobias materialized out of the gloom.

"Mr. Allan?"

CALMLY the butler regarded him with bland eyes in his round face. Barney watched him as he worked his double chins in a nod.

"Welcome home again, Mr. Allan."

"Skip the comedy," Barney said. "Where is everybody?"

"Are you all right, sir?" Tobias asked. "May I fix you something to drink?"

"Are the police here?"

"No, sir. They took Mr. Andrews' body with them. To the county mortuary, I believe."

"Where is Miss McKay?"

"I do not know, sir. She has not been home since shortly after dinner. She left about an hour ago."

"Where is Roger?"

"He is not here, either, sir. His mother suffered a complete collapse last night. She is resting in her room now."

Barney turned and went up the steps two at a time. Voices came from Aunt Jane's room, on his left. Aunt Jane sounded querulous, hypochondriacal. Soon the man's annoyed voice was overwhelmed by a sudden rush of weeping. The man's voice was Creel's.

"I cannot allow another murder," he was saying. "I can keep the police in hand for just so long. But I cannot control public opinion. Roger must surely see the sense in that."

"None of you understand!" Aunt Jane shrilled. "You are all against my boy! You think he killed Jasper, don't you?"

"I didn't say that. I merely call for your aid in solving this problem, to our mutual benefit."

"Why not ask that horrible man who came here last night? I don't believe for one moment that he's my nephew! He couldn't be Jasper's boy and treat us all the way he has! Why don't you ask him what happened here last night?"

Creel's voice came patiently through the door. "He will give me the answers in due time. I guarantee that. In the meanwhile, I want to know where Roger is."

"I'm not sure," Aunt Jane said petulantly. "Miss McKay called Roger to accompany her somewhere."

"Where?"

"She said she was going to see a man named Simon."

Barney took his hand from the knob without turning it. Without a sound he drifted down the hall, down the stairs, and out toward the front door again. Aunt Jane's whining queries faded into the back part of the house.

Tobias appeared once more as Barney opened the front door.

"Will you return soon, sir? The police asked me to remind you that they are anxious to discuss last night with you."

"I don't know when I'll be back," Barney said. His voice was grim. "I'm trying to prevent another murder."

"Another murder, sir?"

"And I'm afraid I'm too late again."

CHAPTER IX

A BOTTLE OF RYE



KEEPING a sharp eye out, he stopped at the first drug store he came to and consulted the local telephone book. Simon Bray, the old clerk from Peabody's office, lived alone in a furnished room at the other end of town. Barney got there fifteen minutes later and parked the coupe across the street from a detached frame house set squarely in the center of a big, barren lawn. Main Street roared and sparkled two blocks away, but here there was deep, still shadow and only a few lighted windows in the old residential houses.

The front door wasn't locked. He pushed inside, into a Victorian hallway dimly lighted by a bronze nymph holding aloft a pink flame bulb on the newel post.

The smell of cooking came from the back of the house, and to the right, folding doors gave him a glimpse of an old-fashioned parlor. From a dining room farther down the hall came the sound of burly voices, a woman's giggle, and the clink and clatter of crockery.

Barney hesitated. A rosy-faced girl came out of the dining room carrying a tray of dishes. She saw him and looked his way, questioningly.

"I'm looking for Simon Bray," Barney said.

The girl came closer. She was plump and blond with wise eyes. She measured Barney's six feet and smiled.

"No one ever comes to see the old geezer," she said.

"There's always a first time," Barney said. "Is he in?"

"He's not at home," she answered. "It's strange, because he almost never misses supper. Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

"I hope not," Barney said. "Did he leave any message? Or has anyone else called for him?"

The girl shook her head. "I guess it will be all right if you want to wait for him in his room." She smiled again. Her dress was very tight on her plump figure. "I'll come up after chores and see

how you're making out."

"Fine," Barney said.

He waited until she was gone before turning upstairs. The room at the end of the hall showed no light under the door. The door wasn't locked. Barney had no intention of waiting long, for he knew the murderer wouldn't wait, either.

The need for haste made him shiver. Murder never stops, he reflected, as long as danger exists for the murderer. It was like an avalanche that goes on destroying, out of control, out of hand.

Someone spoke to him from out of the darkness of the room. A lamp bloomed explosively into existence.

"Shut the door, Mr. Forbes."

It was Fancy Shoes. He sprawled comfortably in an easy chair, his young face smiling, relaxed. The gun in his hand was aimed casually at Barney's middle. In his other hand, he was weighing a woman's black and gold compact.

Barney quietly closed the door.

"You've made progress," he said. "You know my real name."

The young man nodded. "I learn." He looked debonair in the quiet little room—an old man's room, with a narrow bed like an ironing board when Barney sank down on it. The second-hand bureau and the threadbare carpet gave mute testimony to the declining years of Peabody's faithful retainer. Barney looked at the black compact in Fancy Shoes' hand.

"What did you want of Bray?" Barney asked.

"The same as you. A few answers."

"If you know my name, you know I'm a private eye," Barney said, "I haven't much time. I'm trying to prevent another murder."

"Whose murder?"

"I'm not sure."

"Old man Bray's?"

"I think so."

"You didn't do so well with Jasper Andrews," Fancy Shoes said thoughtfully. He held the compact up for Barney to see the enameled initials. *S.McK.* Sheila McKay. "Is she the one?"

"Where did you find that?" Barney asked.

"Right here. The old man had a gun, too. It was in the bureau. It left some

gun oil on the paper lining. The rod isn't here now."

Barney said: "I've got to stop this—if it's not too late."

Fancy Shoes waved his gun. "You're not going anywhere, Forbes. I'm taking you in."

BARNEY was silent for a long minute. "So you're a copper?" he asked quietly.

"In a way. The name is Jenkins. I was a guard at Stillworth Prison. I got friendly with this Jimmy McClure. He seemed a nice guy, doing a tough stretch for some light burglary. Jimmy took advantage of me and escaped, and the warden figured I helped him. So I decided to bring Jimmy back."

"Quite an order," Barney said.

"Jimmy used to talk about his home town, a coal town, and about getting in touch with a legal gent named Peabody. I put two and two together and got Sunfield—the only coal town in the directories that had a lawyer named Peabody living in it.

"I wrote to Peabody, asking for any information he had on Jimmy McClure. He wrote back saying he had reason to believe Jimmy was in New Orleans. So I picked you up there. I didn't know anything about Allan Andrews—but I know you're not Jimmy McClure."

"I'm glad of that," Barney said.

"You ought to be," Jenkins agreed amicably, "But let's go see the local cops. Your story should be pretty interesting."

Barney said: "I won't have a chance to straighten this out if I go in with you now. Give me an hour."

"No can do," Jenkins said. He stood up. "Let's go."

Shrugging, Barney preceded him to the door, and Jenkins slid the gun in his pocket. Barney gave him no warning. His left shot out, the hard edge of his palm slamming like a knife against Jenkins' right arm. Hauling the startled man around, Barney crossed with a savage, desperate punch that cracked squarely on Jenkins' jaw.

Fancy Shoes was taken completely by surprise, just inside the threshold. Barney caught him before his limp body hit the floor, avoiding any noise that might alarm the guests downstairs. Placing him on the bed, Barney looked down at the unconscious man with troubled eyes, took his gun, turned out the light, and left Simon Bray's room. No one saw him as he drifted downstairs.

Outside, the wind was rising and a cold moon shone through the bare elms on the street. Barney drove away from there fast. . . .

Main Street was still crowded with miners from neighboring patches. He drove past the bright bars and turned north toward the Peabody Building. He was almost abreast of it when he slammed on the brakes. A blaze of lights came from the attorney's offices on the second floor.

Barney parked the car and crossed the street with long, impatient strides. Somewhere a radio was playing, and a few miners loitered on the sidewalk as he slapped open the door and went up the wooden steps. A shaft of light poured through the pebbled glass office door. The door wasn't locked. No one

[Turn page]

HER KISS WAS THE KISS OF DEATH!



WHAT happens when a decent, moral man falls under the baneful spell of a beautiful but thoroughly depraved woman? Top mystery writer William Irish, in his great novel, *WALTZ INTO DARKNESS*, traces the downward course of respectable Louis Durand as he tumbles to his ultimate degradation! An unforgettable novel of suspense, mystery and terror! Featured in the gala March issue

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was in Bray's outer office. He went through and paused in the doorway to Peabody's chambers.

"Hi, cousin," Roger Southern said, "join the party."

His voice was blurred by liquor. His big, handsome body sprawled with loose angles in Peabody's leather swivel chair. His face was flushed, his necktie loose. An empty bottle lay at his feet, and he clutched another, half full, to his chest. No one else was in the office. The place still smelled like a mortuary, with the added pungency of raw liquor in the air.

Barney put his hat down on the glass-topped exhibit case of anthracite and stared. Roger grinned loosely.

"I'm getting drunk, cousin."

"Alone?" Barney snapped. "You left the house with Sheila, some time ago. Where is she?"

Roger giggled into the bottle of rye clutched to his chest. "She's snooping. We're partners, see, and we're looking for the murderer of dear Uncle Jasper. Only thing is, I found this bottle and got delayed. Have a drink, Allan."

SLOWLY Barney took the bottle and rested it on the exhibit case. Against the opposite wall was a bank of filing cabinets. Most of the drawers were open and the paper jammed in awry.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

Roger shook his head. "Wouldn't know it if I did, I guess."

"Where did Sheila go? When did you split up?"

"She went to old man Bray's—'bout an hour ago. She wanted to ask him some questions, so I said I'd stay here while she went, and she's supposed to come back again, only she didn't, and I found the bottle." Roger smacked playfully at the chunk of coal dangling from the light chain. "Can't figure what's keeping her. You don't think old Simon is the killer, do you?"

"You're not drunk," Barney said flatly.

Another voice spoke from the doorway. "Drunk or not, what he says is important."

It was Amos Peabody. He looked tall and gaunt, his eyes snapping angrily. His shoulders were hunched in his overcoat.

"Someone telephoned me about the lights up here. I would like an explanation, Allan. Roger's condition is no surprise."

"Sheila went to Bray's room," Barney said. "I'm looking for her. I have an idea she thought old Simon is the killer."

"Ridiculous!" Peabody snapped.

"Ain't ridiculous," Roger said heavily.

"Sheila said she's going to the Old West pithead with him to investigate the mines herself. Said the answer to the murder is there." Roger giggled. "All she'll find is coal. Coal and more coal. Dirty stuff!"

Peabody's eyes were fixed on Barney's tall figure. "Your instructions were to stay out of trouble."

"Trouble comes to me," Barney said. "I can't sit by and let that girl be killed."

"Simon wouldn't do such thing." Peabody looked uncertain. "But they must be stopped. We'd better take Roger along with us."

"No mines for me," Roger said firmly. "Dirty holes in the ground." He clutched tightly at the bottle. "I'll wait for you."

Barney took the bottle and said: "Behave yourself and you can finish this on the way."

CHAPTER X

KILLER IN THE MINE



JUST TEN minutes later, Roger was sprawled, snoring, on the back seat of Peabody's sedan. Peabody was driving, taking them into the hills. Barney sat beside him and scanned the dark slopes anxiously. Self-reproach was bitter in his mouth. He had bungled everything. He was too late. Somewhere in the bowels of the earth a hideous nightmare was taking place. Sheila was dead or dying, and nothing he could do now would save her.

Barney looked at the dark surrounding hills, at the ribbon of road unwinding under the headlights.

"How much farther is it to this Old West pithead?" he asked.

"Two miles," Peabody said. "Why Miss McKay chose this place, I don't

know. She seemed such a sensible girl—" Peabody interrupted himself and chose his words with care. "I have come to a rather serious decision, Forbes. You must be reasonable, and realize that you have failed in your assignment. Although the original error was mine, I find it impossible to protect you, however awkward and dangerous it is for me. I must call a halt to our arrangement."

"I haven't finished the job," Barney said.

"Nevertheless, I withdraw my support. Chief Akerly has grown much too suspicious of you, and asked some pointed questions to confirm your identity. You must leave town immediately."

"And if I don't?" Barney asked.

"It is your word against mine," Peabody said grimly. "I would deny ever having seen you or hired you. I would not advise an antagonistic attitude, Mr. Forbes. It will be better all around to make the best of a bad bargain."

"You don't realize what you're asking," Barney said. "If I powder out now, I'm admitting guilt. I wouldn't have a chance."

Peabody shrugged. "You must not be caught."

Barney was silent. His eyes scanned the dark hills.

"Let's find Sheila first," he said quietly.

The pithead was like a giant black scar in the hillside when Peabody swung the car up to it and parked beside the rutted entrance. Unlike the mine on Culpepper Road, the Old West plunged two hundred feet straight down into the mountain to seek its veins. Peabody provided a flashlight as they stepped out on the deserted mountainside. Far below were the scattered lights of Sunfield. The hills all around them were silent and deserted.

"What about him?" Barney asked, jerking a thumb at Roger.

"He is drunk. Leave him in the car."

There was no sign of Sheila and Simon Bray. The wind whistled mournfully around the dilapidated mine entrance. Barney turned up his coat collar and stepped onto the wooden elevator platform. Peabody handed him a flashlight

and turned with familiarity to the hand ropes. The ground came up to eye level and vanished overhead. The damp walls of the shaft slipped upward as they jerked down.

"You've been here before, Amos," Barney said.

"All mines are more or less alike."

The rope creaked, the platform trembled underfoot as they dropped into the bowels of the mountain. Peabody stopped hauling on the pulley suddenly.

"Here is the first gangway."

The tunnel head was narrow, musty and cold, supported by rough-hewn beams resisting the pressure of the surrounding rock. Water tinkled, and the path underfoot was littered with debris. Walking was difficult along the cart tracks. Their footsteps echoed hollowly.

Barney now leaned forward a little, as if under the weight of the mountain overhead. It seemed a great way from the surface. He walked in front of Peabody, down the long gangway, walking into complete and unrelieved darkness.

"Sheila?" he called.

HIS voice sounded loud and hollow. There was no answer. Peabody's breathing was a whisper at the back of his neck. Walking became difficult, and Barney dug his heels into the debris between the track ties. The gangway seemed endless.

"Sheila?" he called again.

Peabody's shadow was long and gaunt in the glare of the flashlight. The walls of the mine pressed down with infinite weight.

"Listen," Barney said.

There was the tinkling of water, nothing else. Then, distinctly, came the sound of footsteps behind them. Cautious and slow, they followed, out of sight in the blackness.

"Roger isn't drunk any more," Barney said grimly. The footsteps paused abruptly. Barney watched Peabody dip into his coat and take out a gun. "Forget it," he said. "Let him follow."

Here and there they had to climb over heaps of rubble and fallen timbers, squeezing through narrow crevices in the rock that all but choked the tunnel. Another five hundred paces, and the tun-

nel forked into two branches, both plunging deeper into the heart of the mountain. The footsteps had faded behind them. Barney paused and leaned on an abandoned coal cart that stood on the rusted tracks.

"What do you suggest now?"

Peabody's face looked hollow in the oblique rays of the flashlight. "We should split up. But we have only one lamp."

"Sheila isn't here," Barney said. "You know that."

"I don't understand," Peabody said.

"There wasn't any car outside the mine entrance. There would have been one if she was in here. You know that."

"I didn't think of it," Peabody muttered.

"You thought of it," Barney said. "You've been thinking all this time, and so have I been thinking."

The tall man said: "Roger is somewhere back there."

"Forget about Roger. Maybe it isn't Roger at all," Barney said. "You started it with what you said in the car. About my leaving town."

"We can discuss that later."

"Isn't this why you took me to the wrong mine entrance? You want to discuss it now. You know you do."

"Do you think I brought you down here deliberately?"

"Didn't you?" Barney asked.

Peabody's eyes were black in the light of the torch. The light winked on the gun in the lawyer's hand. Barney's gun was still in his pocket. He regretted it. He wished he had a gun in his hand, too. He looked at Peabody's black eyes and at the gun and at the damp, crumbling walls of the gangway. He listened to water tinkling. He watched Peabody lick his lips.

"Very well," Peabody said. "Say your piece."

"It's very simple," Barney said. "I'm not leaving town."

"I hope you don't think you can go on as Allan Andrews. Has his thirteen million dollars gone to your head?"

"Not at all. It's just that I'm not going to be a fall guy for you, Amos—not any more."

Peabody looked down quickly at the gun in his hand.

"It is not my fault that things worked out wrong."

"On the contrary—they worked out exactly as you planned. And you planned for me to take the rap or take to the road as a fugitive. That's all you hired me for."

"Even if what you say is true," Peabody returned, "you have no choice. If you make a wrong move, I'll expose you as an impostor. I repeat, it is your word against mine. You will appear as an adventurer who didn't stop at murder to gain his ends."

"There's just one flaw in the story," Barney said quietly. "I know where the real Allan Andrews is. I know he is dead. And I know that you killed him."

PEABODY was dangerously silent. Barney went on:

"And you killed Jasper, too. To make your story stick now, you will have to kill me. As long as the real Allan's body was hidden, you were safe. But I found it up on Culpepper Road. So you haven't any hold on me after all. The shoe is on the other foot, Amos. Any charges you have against me will go up in smoke the moment the police get Allan's body. You have to kill me, too."

Peabody squinted into the light, then down at his gun.

"That can be arranged," he said softly.

The shot didn't come from Peabody's gun. It flared violently, without warning, from the dark tunnel behind them. Vicious flame spit at Barney. The flashlight was torn from his hand as if by a giant's blow. His arm went numb to the elbow. Sudden, smothering darkness swooped down into the mine tunnel.

Barney flung himself flat behind the rusty coal cart. Another shot slammed overhead. The explosion echoed back and forth down the long corridors of the mine.

Barney got the gun from his pocket. The movement dislodged a little trickle of cinders under the coal cart. Instantly a third shot slammed at him, flaring blindly out of the darkness. This one came from Peabody. The bullet struck a wheel of the cart with a metallic clamor and whined away down the tunnel. A shower of gravel poured down

on Barney's neck, and a timber creaked and groaned. Barney crouched against the wall, gun in hand, and waited.

There was dark silence.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DARKNESS



OUT OF THE silence came the familiar tinkling of water, nothing else. Not even the sound of his enemy's breathing. Barney stared with blind eyes up the gangway.

"Roger!" he called suddenly.

There was no sound from Peabody. Barney tried to picture the man stalking him through the blackness. It was a blind three-cornered fight. Roger held the exit corridor, Barney was in the lower fork of the tunnel, and Peabody must be in the other branch.

A chunk of coal came rattling and thumping down the grade, clanging on the rusty iron cart rails. Barney held his fire.

"Roger!" he called again.

"To blazes with you, Allan!" came Roger's voice.

"I'm not Allan!" Barney said. "I didn't kill Jasper! I don't have Sheila. Peabody is the man you want!"

There was no answer for a long time. When Roger spoke again, his voice seemed nearer in the darkness.

"You're not Allan?"

"I'm a private op," Barney answered. "Peabody hired me to pose as Allan Andrews. I didn't know what was in it."

"Where is the real Allan Andrews?"

"He's dead. Peabody killed him, too."

Roger's voice seemed still nearer. Barney dried his wet palms and held his gun tighter.

"Go ahead," Roger's voice came. "It listens good."

"Who stands to inherit Jasper's fortune if Allan is dead?" Barney asked the darkness.

In the darkness Roger answered: "His will left everything to Amos, if Allan failed to show up. Sheila got the will from the safe the night Jasper was killed. She showed it to me. That's why

we both went to work on it. Sheila thought Peabody fitted the picture pretty well, but we couldn't figure you."

"I told you, I'm a private operative," Barney said. His eyes ached with the impossible strain of trying to pierce the darkness. Somewhere nearby was Peabody, listening and waiting. "The real Allan Andrews was doing a stretch in Oklahoma under the name of James McClure, up to a month ago. He broke out and came here. When he showed, he saw Jasper secretly and told him he was wanted. Jasper had a stroke over it. Then Allan went to Peabody and Peabody saw his chance to get what he always wanted—the mine."

Gravel rattled up the tunnel ahead.

"Don't move!" Barney called.

"I'm not moving. Go on."

"Watch out for Peabody."

"I'm watching. Keep on talking."

Barney said: "With Allan a fugitive from justice, Peabody talked him into hiding out in the Culpepper mine. Then he hired me to pose as the heir. His object was to establish my identity beyond doubt, because he planned the real Allan's death as soon as it was convenient. He figured he couldn't control Allan, but he could frame me and make me jump through the hoop. He killed Jasper as soon as I arrived. But Allan turned up at the house that night, too. It had to be both of them; because you tangled with Allan downstairs, while Peabody was upstairs knifing Jasper.

"Allan left a message for me on the mirror and I met him later at the hotel and we talked it out a bit. Later that night, Peabody killed him, too. Then tonight Peabody pulled the pins out from under me to scare me out of town as a fugitive.

"Peabody counted on disfiguring Allan's body later and producing his corpse as if he'd died accidentally in the old mine. In that way, with Allan's death established, Peabody could legally inherit your uncle's fortune.

"But tonight you and Sheila started your own snooping. I don't know where Sheila and Bray are—probably in this mine or another. But they'll be all right. Bray knows I'm Barney Forbes and he'll talk when the time comes.

"Peabody is afraid of that. And since

I found Allan's body, Peabody has to wipe me out and Bray, too. Murder has a way of getting out of hand. He has to go on killing, whether he wants to or not.

"Now he's got to kill you and me and Sheila and Bray. Fingerprints will prove I'm not McClure or Allan. I guess Peabody forgot that Allan's fingerprints are on record. They won't check with mine. So he has to kill me—"

A FAINT creaking sound interrupted him. Iron screeched, and a rumbling filled the inky tunnel. Barney shifted on the damp floor and his leg came in contact with the track. He froze abruptly. The old iron rail was trembling. Somewhere up the steep corridor, the old cart was rumbling down toward him, plunging in runaway speed in his direction!

Barney flung himself violently aside, flattening against the sagging tunnel wall. A rush of stale, damp air puffed in his face. The screech of wheels grew louder, the tunnel floor trembled underfoot.

With a swoop of air and a shriek like a banshee, the invisible coal cart tore past him, careening around an invisible bend beyond and jumped the rail to smash into the tunnel wall. The shock made debris pour from the ceiling. Timbers creaked and splintered, and the air was filled with heavy, choking dust.

Barney ran blindly toward the upper fork in the corridor. He could see nothing. His lungs were full of the strangling dust. He was unprepared for the body that hurtled headlong into him.

He didn't know if it was Peabody or Roger Sothern. The man lashed at him with an insane strength. A fist cut across Barney's cheek and he dived into the darkness, his knuckles slamming into the other's body.

The man grunted and fell back, cursed. Barney lunged toward the sound and grappled with the dark figure. His gun gave him the advantage. He cut downward with it, felt the barrel slam hard on the man's head. The others' grip abruptly relaxed. A moan came out of the darkness.

"Roger?" Barney answered.

There was no answer. Barney dropped

beside the limp figure and felt thick, tangled hair, a man's face. He straightened and listened. He knew Peabody was there, waiting after his failure to crush him with the coal cart. Peabody blocked the way out.

The stillness was oppressive.

"Peabody!" he called.

His answer was a shot slamming out of the tunnel, a blind stab at the sound of his voice. In the momentary flare, Barney glimpsed the gaunt lawyer, his bald head lowered, his sharp eyes alight with insane hatred. He was half hidden behind a sagging post that leaned out across the tunnel.

The vibration loosened more gravel from the weak ceiling. Far up the tunnel came a rumbling thunder as a minor settling split the beams that supported the gangway. In the momentary confusion of noise, Barney ran toward the other man, stumbling over the debris on the tunnel floor.

A second shot whined viciously over his head, and again there came the muted rumbling, as if the mountain shook in response to the blast. Barney threw himself flat and snapped a single shot in answer.

The darkness was stifling. Dust sifted down the damp corridor. From behind him came a moaning cough as Roger recovered consciousness. Barney picked up a pebble and tossed it up the gangway ahead of him. Instantly Peabody's shot winged after the sound. And again the mountain shook itself.

Peabody's voice, harsh and strained, came out of the dark:

"Forbes!"

"I'm listening," Barney said.

"We must get out of here. It isn't safe."

"Stop shooting, then," Barney said.

"We can make some arrangement, Forbes. Nobody need know. You will have control over thirteen million dollars. There is everything to gain!"

"Is that what you promised Allan Andrews, before you killed him?"

"He was a wild, irresponsible hoodlum. I had to get him out of the way. But you and I can reach an understanding."

"What about Roger?"

There was silence, then, "We must

leave him here."

"And Sheila? And Bray?"

"They can be handled. They know nothing."

BARNEY was silent. The darkness weighed down on him like a giant's hand. He wondered how it would feel to fill his lungs with crisp, clean air again. The surface seemed miles overhead.

"It's no deal, Amos," he said, "I'm coming after you."

Barney got to his feet. Before he could advance, someone came running up the tunnel behind him. A sudden flare of light dazzled him, blinding him as the darkness had blinded him before. Roger had found his flashlight.

The light flashed far up the tunnel, pinning Peabody to the wall in a blazing circle of radiance. The lawyer's face twisted convulsively. He turned and ran. Roger was already past Barney. The big man's gun roared.

Peabody paused and fired again, emptying his pistol at Roger.

Barney wasn't sure what happened then. The echo of the gunfire mingled with a greater sound, far more terrifying—a rumbling thunder that filled the universe with screaming echoes. As if in a nightmare, Barney saw the whole tunnel roof collapse over Peabody's fleeing figure. Timbers creaked and sagged, and an avalanche of rock poured down on the murderer. The air was filled with flying debris.

And somewhere in the thunder that filled Barney's ears was the sound of a scream—a woman's scream, Sheila's voice, from far behind him. Roger stood with mouth agape at the havoc wrought by Peabody's last shots, his flashlight piercing the murky air. There was nothing left of Peabody. The tunnel ahead was completely choked with debris.

Then the beam touched a twisted hand that protruded from the rock slide—Peabody's hand, gnarled and convulsed, closing around a chunk of coal in a death grip. Even as Barney watched, the hand slowly relaxed its hold on the chunk of black anthracite.

Silence drifted back to the tunnel. Roger was shivering.

"I didn't mean—I didn't want him to go like that!"

"He got his coal," Barney said grimly. "And he's got us."

"I thought I heard Sheila," Roger said dully.

"I did, too." Barney pocketed his gun. "She's somewhere farther in the mine. There must be another entrance, if she and Bray are here. Let's find them."

Even as he spoke, he heard the girl's voice calling to them from far down the twisted, dust-choked tunnel. . . .

It was almost dawn. The lights in the office of Chief of Police Akerly grew dim as the sun touched the valley of Sunfield. Outside, the whistles from the mines and collieries blasted through the clear, crisp October air, and the streets were busy with helmeted miners heading for the pitheads.

Chief Akerly was a stout, authoritative man with bright eyes that touched Barney's disheveled, grimed face and went on to examine Sheila and Simon Bray and Roger Sothern. Jenkins, the man from Oklahoma, sprawled easily in a chair behind the chief's desk. Barney's voice was quiet as he ended his recapitulation.

"Seems to me there's nothin' more to do," Chief Akerly said. "Roger's the new owner of the North Star now." He turned toward the big young man, who somehow had assumed a quiet strength apart from his querulous, nagging mother. "You goin' to sell to Creel?"

"I'll do what's best for Sunfield," Roger said firmly. "I don't think a New York syndicate would have Sunfield's best interests at heart. Things will go on as Uncle Jasper wanted them to."

The chief nodded, pleased. "Then I reckon there's no use holdin' this wake any longer. It's a job for the county courts. You'll all be notified when to appear, and if you just give me your New York address, Mr. Forbes, we can call you when we need you."

The air on the street was bracing, scented with mountain pine, when Barney, with Sheila and Roger, finally left the police station. Weariness lined Barney's face. Roger's voice was warm and friendly as he gestured toward his car.

"Take this back to New York with you," he said. "It's little enough to

repay you for what you've done for Sheila and me."

Barney looked a question at the tall girl. Her face was lovely in the dawn light. Somehow during the hectic hours just passed she had gotten the grime and dust of the mine out of her hair. She looked fresh and unspoiled, and her gray eyes were solemn as she glanced from Barney to Roger. Barney's heart stood still.

"I'm not staying in Sunfield, Roger," the girl said. "I'm sorry, but I never promised you I'd stay. I'm going back to New York, where I belong. I don't want to stay in Sunfield any longer. I hope you understand, Roger."

The big man looked crestfallen for only a moment.

"It's plain enough," he said with a grin.

An hour later, Barney and Sheila were alone in the car. The sign on the highway outside the cafe where they'd had breakfast indicated New York with a pointing hand, 120 miles away.

"It will be nice to see Fifth Avenue again," Sheila said. "This is good, driving back with you, Barney."

Barney grinned and thought of the route he had originally followed from New York to Sunfield.

"I know a long way around," he said.

"I've got time," the girl said.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

NOT MY CORPSE

A Complete Race Williams Novel

By CARROLL JOHN DALY

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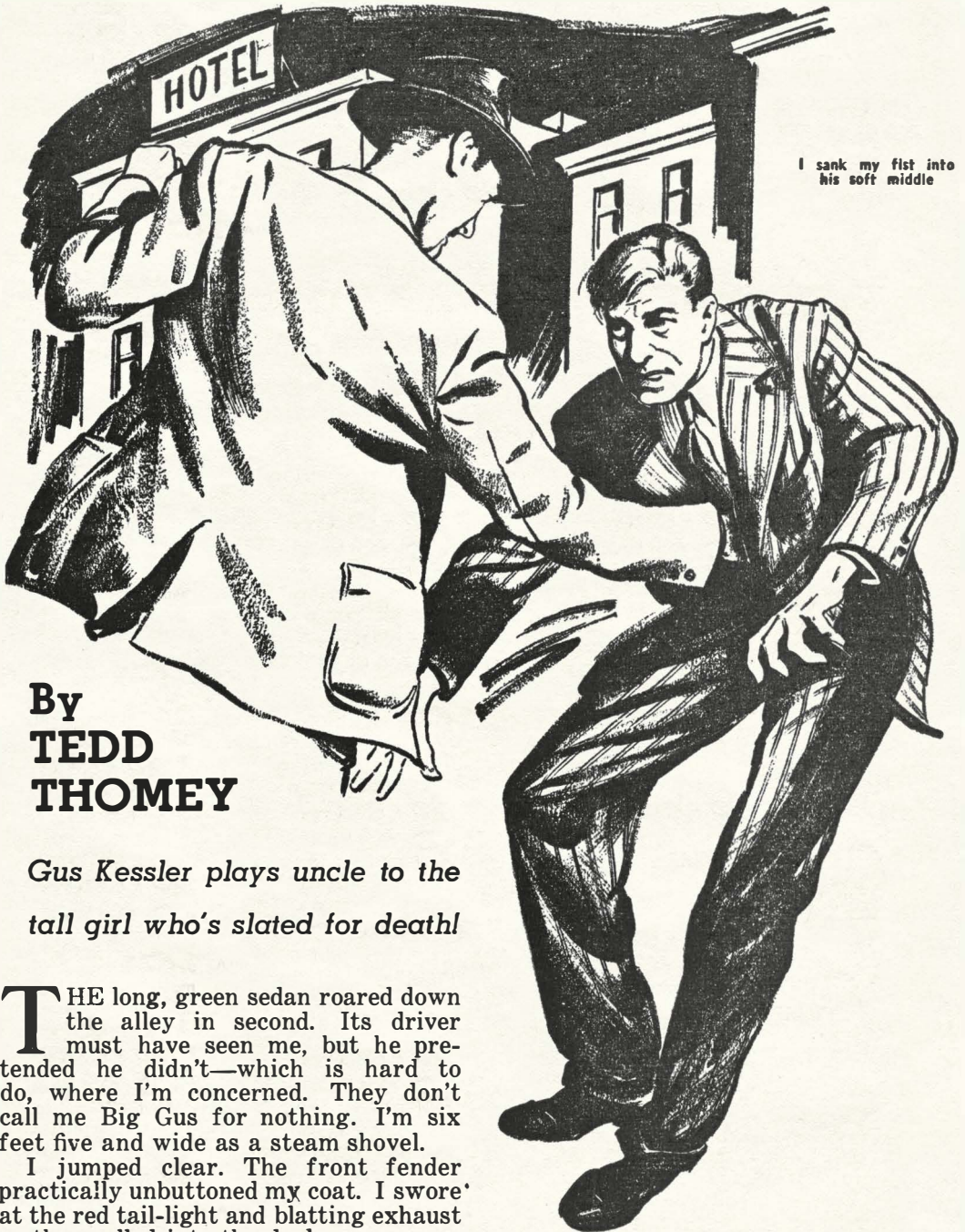


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By
**TEDD
THOMEY**

Gus Kessler plays uncle to the tall girl who's slated for death!

THE long, green sedan roared down the alley in second. Its driver must have seen me, but he pretended he didn't—which is hard to do, where I'm concerned. They don't call me Big Gus for nothing. I'm six feet five and wide as a steam shovel.

I jumped clear. The front fender practically unbuttoned my coat. I swore at the red tail-light and blatting exhaust as they rolled into the darkness.

The license number wouldn't be hard to remember—9H1402, only a few digits different than my own. I kept watching the sedan. When it had gone about half a block, a rear door opened. The car was near a yellow arc light, so I could see what happened.

A girl jumped out. She landed on her feet, but her knees buckled and she went sprawling on her stomach. She rolled over twice, long legs flying, her skirt tangled in her elbows.

I started running toward her. The sedan squealed to a stop and three guys piled out. The girl was on her feet, sprinting unevenly. She had lost a shoe and the remaining high heel was worse than running on one stilt.

I was still fifty yards away when the first guy caught her. He put a hand on her shoulder and dragged his feet. Her reaction must have surprised him. She stopped, whirled free of his grasp and slapped him so hard he staggered. It sounded like a shot.

The other two guys were closing in on her by the time I got there. I grabbed one by the shoulder and turned him around. He was a little fellow—only six feet. I sank my fist into his soft middle.

His eyes crossed and he had trouble with his breathing. He took a step backward, just far enough so I got a good swing on his chin. My knuckles burned and he decided to lie down.

The girl was doing fine. And why not? She was a good three inches taller than the other two guys. She was slapping one with both hands and he was yelling. His face was becoming a peculiar purple.

I recognized the other guy. Spoons Moran, a nasty little crook with blotches on his face. He pulled out a .45 and pointed it at my vest.

I did a foolish thing. According to the book, you should never try to take a gun away from a man unless you've got him covered or he's dead. But I grabbed for his gun wrist. And I caught it. He didn't even pull the trigger. I brought my other hand into play and twisted his wrist. Something snapped and the gun clattered to the pavement.

Spoons broke away and ran to the sedan. He was holding his broken wrist and whimpering.

"Scram!" he yelled at the other two: "Get the devil outa here!"

The man the girl had been slapping ran to the sedan. The one I had socked got up and rushed, somewhat drunkenly, to the rear door.

As he climbed in, I got out my service .38. I aimed at the tires and the bullet *bong-g-g-ed* off the roof. I aimed for the driver and missed the car completely. It gained speed and I fired once more—this time at the gas tank. I hit a garbage can.

WELL, that's the way it goes. I've been on the San Francisco force eight years now, ever since I was twenty-one. And I've never hit anybody with my gun—except the time I threw it at Little Kelly and knocked him out. I've only killed one man and that was accidental. He had kicked me below the belt. I got sore and smashed him in the jaw as hard as I could. He died of a broken neck.

The girl was breathing hard and staring down the alley after the sedan. Her skirt was split up the side, her long black hair was tangled and that brush with the pavement had covered her with grime. But she still would have rated a long, low whistle from Billy Rose. And a big guy like me appreciates a queen that tall even more.

I turned my back on her for a moment and wiped the tears from my eyes with a handkerchief.

She looked at me inquiringly. Then she said, "They were going to kill me." She shuddered and added, "How can I ever thank you?"

"Bah," I said. "You didn't need my help. Five minutes more and you'd have piled them up like firewood."

She smiled and I glanced down at the pavement. She certainly had long legs. The lithe, slender kind, developed by high board diving or six sets of tennis dally. The toenails on her bare foot were painted red.

"Where'd you lose your shoe?" I asked her.

She scanned the alley. "I had it when I jumped. Oh, there it is." She hobbled a few steps and picked up the shoe. Then she balanced neatly on one foot and slipped it on.

"Who were those three guys?" I inquired.

"That's just it!" she said. "I don't know them. I don't even know *why* they wanted to kill me."

That sounded a little wacky. "Are you sure?" I said.

"Of course, I'm sure," she cracked. "Usually, when people want to kill me, I at least know why."

I grinned and snapped down the brim on my hat. "Sounds mysterious," I said. "But let's not just stand here in the alley all night. How about telling me all about it over a cup of coffee and a sandwich?"

Her blue eyes grew wary. "Well—I don't know," she said.

"It's all right," I explained. I drew out my wallet and showed her the brass gimmick pinned to the leather. "Inspector Gus Kessler," I said.

"That's different. I'm starved. Those men kept me in their car all day and only gave me a hamburger."

My coupe—it's a police car without official markings—was parked a little further down the alley. I had been walking toward it when the sedan nearly knocked me down. We got in and I pulled the radio-phone from its rack under the dash. I gave headquarters the sedan's license number and asked them to put out a net for Spoons Moran.

It was midnight by the time we traveled the seven blocks to O'Looney's cafe on Haight street. On the way over, the girl drew a mirror from her shoulder-strap bag and fixed her lipstick and hair. When we got out she was as good as new, except for the split in her skirt, which gave her the daring look of an Apache dancer.

We sat in the beige, leather-and-wood booth in the rear and ordered liverwurst sandwiches. I highly recommend O'Looney's liverwurst sandwiches. They have personality.

"Now, then," I said to the girl. "How did you ever grow so tall without getting over-sized feet?"

"I'll ask you the same question," she smiled. "How did you?"

I stuck my shoes out in the aisle. "I didn't. Look. The navy used 'em for carriers during the Battle of Midway."

She laughed and two dimples ap-

peared out of nowhere.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Jackie Loring."

"Occupation?"

"Model."

I whistled a little. "I'd have guessed that. Phone number?"

She lifted a restraining hand. "Wait a minute," she said. "Let's not get carried away."

I dug inside my coat and pulled out my notebook. "For the record," I grinned. "I have to turn in a report."

She relented and gave me the number and her address. I copied them down and asked: "Now when did those men pick you up?"

She didn't get a chance to reply.

A gun exploded near the door. Two holes appeared in the wood near Jackie's head and chips flew into her dark curls.

LIKE a fool, I had sat with my back toward the door. I didn't even get to see the gunman. By the time I had drawn my revolver and started down the aisle, he was gone. I spent two or three useless minutes looking for him out on the street.

When I returned, O'Looney and his other four customers were jabbering like crows in a bean field. Jackie's face was white.

I finished wiping my eyes again and put the handkerchief away. Jackie was looking at me strangely and I knew why.

"Come on," I said, taking her wrist. "Let's get out of here. Let's talk in the car. It's harder to hit a moving target."

We drove up the bumpy Haight street hill behind a struggling streetcar. I turned right at Masonic and went into Golden Gate Park. According to the rear vision mirror, we were not being tailed.

"Those guys aren't playing tiddly winks," I said, turning into the park's main boulevard. "They're out to get you!"

"I know," Jackie said. Her words were strained. "I'm scared."

"And you don't even know why they're trying to kill you?" A note of incredulity sneaked into my voice. I couldn't help it. The thing sounded so unconvincing.

"It all started this morning," Jackie explained. "I was standing on a corner on Howard street waiting for one of the electric buses. Suddenly this sedan pulled up and two of the men jumped out. They grabbed my arms and hustled me into the car. I was so surprised I didn't even fight back. All day we drove around. One of the men, the one with blotches on his face, kept getting out every so often and making phone calls."

"That was Spoons Moran," I said. "The boys may pick him up. Any idea who he was phoning?"

"No. He seemed to be trying to get instructions from somebody. Around eleven-thirty tonight, we stopped in front of a bar on Mission street—I think it was McCarthy's Big Glass. He phoned again and I guess he found out what to do with me. He told the driver to head for the alley and he got out the gun. I couldn't believe he was going to shoot me. There was absolutely no reason.

"All day I had asked them why they were holding me and they wouldn't say. We came down the alley. I was so scared. He was really going to shoot me. And then we passed you. It was my only chance. I jumped out the door—I don't know why he didn't shoot then."

"Probably saw me," I said, "and didn't want a witness."

I turned the car around and headed back toward the business district. "They may try for you again," I said. "You need protection. Got an extra cot at your place?"

Jackie's mother and father had raised her well. She wasn't sure she wanted seventy-seven inches of cop in her apartment all night. But then she must've remembered that those two marks which had appeared in the woodwork near her head weren't worm holes. She also remembered that the apartment across from hers would be vacant a week. Two of her friends on vacation.

I went to sleep in the friends' apartment across the hall from Jackie's. I was close enough so I could hear her scream if anyone tried to get funny during the night.

The phone rang the next morning while Jackie and I were breakfasting in her little ivory-painted kitchen. I kept

on eating eggs and toast while she answered it.

She talked two or three minutes and wrote something on the note-pad beside the phone. When she got back to the table, her eyes were shining with excitement.

"It's so silly," she said.

"What is?"

"He said I've just inherited fifteen thousand dollars! Isn't that silly?"

"The devil it isn't. That's money. Very handy stuff."

"Yes," she said. "But I don't know the man who phoned. And I've never heard of the old lady who left me the fifteen thousand dollars, either!"

That gave the old brain a tickle. "I see what you mean," I said. "Who was the guy that phoned?"

Jackie consulted the note-pad. "David Jessop. He said his aunt left me the money. And he wants me to come out to—let's see—9660 Jackson Street, and sign some papers around eleven this morning."

I smelled a large and shaggy rat. "Great," I said. "You've just been appointed trigger-bait again. The idea is for you to hop out there so Spoons and his boys can continue where they left off last night. That fifteen thousand dollars is just a gag."

Jackie was disappointed. "It would have bought a lot of shoes and hats," she said. She pushed out her lower lip in a pretty pout. Then she added. "What do we do now?"

I didn't come up with the answer right away. After five or six minutes, I said, "We'll go out there at eleven and look over the set-up. If we play our cards right, maybe we can get to the bottom of the whole thing. Want to take the risk?"

Jackie did. She phoned her agency and said she would be away for the day. Then she cleared the dishes off the table. Because I insisted, she let me wash them. She dried. When we were nearly finished, she looked at me inquisitively.

"I've got about as much tact as a giraffe," she observed. "I'm just burning with curiosity. I know I shouldn't, but could I ask you something personal?"

"Sure," I said. I had a hunch that I

knew what was coming up.

"Well, twice last night you were crying. And I've been wondering why. Am I embarrassing you?"

My face felt a little hot. "No," I said. "Anyway, I wasn't crying. I just had tears in my eyes." That sounded a little contradictory. I hurried on: "It always happens after I've been through a little action. Last night, it was right after the fight in the alley. And after they fired at you at O'Looney's. It's nothing serious. My eyes just fill up, that's all."

She was still looking at me curiously. "I've been to a psychiatrist," I said. "He says it's easy to explain. It's perfectly normal—for me. Part of the let-down after a lot of excitement. Some guys' hands shake. Others twitch a little. Me—well, I get tears in my eyes."

Jackie was smiling. I guess I did look sort of funny trying to explain it. "It sure raises blue mud with me on the force," I added. "The men are always ribbing me."

"I think it's very nice," she said. "It shows you're a sensitive man. Besides, it's cute."

I didn't say anything more. Frankly, I've never been able to see anything cute about a guy six feet five bawling like a kid with a busted rattle.

WE DROVE out to Jackson Street in my coupe. On the way over I parked for a few minutes. Using the radio-phone, I called Captain Neeley at headquarters. I told him what I was working on and that I thought I might run into Spoons and his buddies. Then I asked for a squad car with four men to rendezvous with me at the Presidio's south gate. The gate is about six blocks from the Jackson Street address.

Neeley's a good man. In half an hour, I was working out a plan with four of the boys at the gate. We decided that I would park in front of the house and send Jackie in. The squad car would park a block away.

At the first sign of trouble, she was to holler for me. I would signal the squad car and go roaring in.

Jackson Street is in San Francisco's finest residential district. The address turned out to be a three-story brick house, covered with vines and overlook-

ing the blue bay. The lawn was smooth as a ping-pong table. I parked in front and Jackie got out.

"Remember," I cautioned. "If you weren't big enough to take care of yourself, I'd never let you go in alone. But don't try to handle it all by yourself. If you just so much as see Spoons, yell for me. And don't let them try to kid you with that fifteen thousand smacker routine."

"Yes, Uncle Gus," she said, sweetly. She straightened her coat collar and went up the brick path. I watched her go. It's something to see a girl that tall just walk. She moved like a model, all right—no extra wiggles.

I couldn't see who let her in. About ten minutes passed. I smoked a couple of cigarettes and kept shifting around in the seat. I cursed the department for giving me a car with so little leg room.

Suddenly, I heard two shots fired in rapid succession. I got out of the coupe, drew my gun and waved at the squad car. When I was halfway up the path, Jackie shouted: "Gus!" There was terror in her voice.

I flung open the front door and found myself in a hallway. On the left was a wide entrance-way and steps leading down to a drawing room. I bounded down them.

Jackie was standing in the center of the deep blue rug. She was holding an Army style .45 and looking down with trembling lower lip at a prostrate man. There were two red holes over the left pocket of his yellow sports shirt. I've had a lot of practise. I can usually tell whether a man's dying or dead. This one was gone.

The room was crowded and noisy. Besides the dead man, there were Jackie, myself, the four patrolmen and three other people—a grand total of ten. Plus four dogs.

I was relieved to see that Spoons and his boys hadn't been invited. But I didn't like that gun in Jackie's hand.

Everybody was yapping at once. A tall, gray-haired man pointed a slender finger at Jackie.

"She killed him!" he said. "She shot Mr. Jessop!"

"I didn't!" exclaimed Jackie. "I didn't!" She was scared stiff.

A woman of about fifty was on her knees beside the dead man. Tears were in her eyes and she was holding his head. "In cold blood," she kept repeating.

It took a few minutes to get order. They wouldn't shut up until I bellowed at them. I took the gun away from Jackie, covered it with my hankie and dropped it in my coat pocket. I told one of the patrolmen to phone for the coroner and the fingerprint squad and the photo boy. Then I started asking questions.

It took time—they were all so distraught—but I finally got the story.

The dead man was David Jessop, the man who had phoned Jackie and told her about the fifteen thousand dollars. He was about forty-five, tanned and lean, the outdoor type.

The tall man was Albert V. McVey, a lawyer. He had curly gray hair and a curly mustache. His hands were blue-veined and covered with brown spots. He wore a tight-fitting black coat and was every foot a gentleman.

The elderly woman beside the body was Miss Adele Rosemont, the dead man's cousin. She was rather skinny and wore a lacy dress with small flower prints. The four dogs, I learned, were hers. She was strictly the school teacher type. Her grief seemed genuine.

The other woman was the housekeeper. She was large-boned and had a heavy red face.

The house, it developed, was owned by the late Miss Bedelia Rosemont. She had died two or three months before of pneumonia. McVey was a long-time friend of the family and the executor of her will. The dead man, Jessop, and Miss Rosemont were her nephew and niece.

The lawyer, the niece and the housekeeper were certain that Jackie had killed Jessop. But—and this was important—none of them had actually seen the shooting. They had only heard it.

While I was questioning them, one of the patrolmen came out of the adjoining room. He handed me two cartridges.

"I found them in there," he said. "In the library. The shooting must've been done in there. Blood on the rug."

During all this time, Jackie had said

nothing. She was still nervous and excited, but the pink was returning to her cheeks. "Please, Inspector," she said, "could I talk to you alone? In there?" She motioned toward the library.

I nodded and we went in. I chased out a couple of dogs and closed the door. It was a large room with two entrances. Books of all sizes filled the walls from floor to ceiling. There was a little blood on the rug near the heavy oak table. We sat in two black leather chairs. Jackie crossed her long, nyloned legs. We didn't say anything for a minute or two.

I was thinking.

And I didn't like what I was thinking. The gun in Jackie's hand was too significant to be ignored—no matter how much I liked her. If she were the murderer, then her whole story had been lies. Maybe Spoons had a good reason for wanting to knock her off. Maybe she was a member of his gang and had double-crossed him. Maybe she had killed Jessop because he wouldn't come across with the fifteen thousand dollars. Frankly, I was bewildered.

And I felt like the very devil. For the first time in my life, I had met a great big beautiful girl—someone really my height—and she turns out to be—well, what? Sometimes this crazy job makes me so mad I feel like flinging my badge into the bay and getting a job driving a truck. It may be a lot harder on the posterior—but it's easier on the mind.

Jackie had been watching me. There was a hint of tears in her blue eyes. "I didn't kill him," she said. "I didn't—I never saw him before in my life."

I didn't want to, but I couldn't help thinking she was trying to double-talk me again. "What happened after you left me?" I said.

"Mr. Jessop let me in. He thanked me for coming. He told me again that his aunt had left me fifteen thousand dollars. I said I didn't even know his aunt. He said that was all right—she knew me. He was awfully excited. We talked for five or six minutes and it didn't make any sense at all. Once he said I would have to go away to New York or Pennsylvania."

"Where was all this?" I asked.

She pointed at the drawing room. "Out there. He said he wanted to get

the money and the paper for me to sign. So then he came in here."

"Did you follow?"

"No. I waited out there. Suddenly there were shots. It was awful. Somebody threw the gun through the door. I was scared. I thought maybe someone was going to try to kill me again like those men last night. I picked up the gun—to defend myself. And then Mr. Jessop came stumbling back through the door. And he fell—"

"When did you first see the lawyer and the cousin?" I asked. "And the housekeeper?"

"They came running in about the same time you and the other policemen did."

I began to feel a little better. Jackie's story was pretty thin—but if you examined it with the proper attitude it made sense. She had picked up the gun because she was scared. Under the circumstances, I think I would have done the same thing.

WE TALKED a little longer and Jackie began to be less frightened. Her eyes regained that clear, alert look and her red mouth was almost gay again.

"Oh," she said. "There's something I didn't want to tell you while we were in front of the others. Before Mr. Jessop died he said twice: 'It was Al—it was Al.'"

I didn't have to be smacked on the head with a mallet to get the point. "Sure," I said. "He meant McVey, the lawyer." I checked my notebook to make sure. "Yeah. *Albert V. McVey.*"

"Do you think he did it?"

"It's plenty reasonable. The old dame must have had money. He's been messing around with her will and probably fixed things to suit himself. A smart, crooked lawyer can make a fortune if the family trusts him—and they seem to trust this man."

"Why would he kill Mr. Jessop?"

"That's easy. Jessop found out he was juggling the will."

I rubbed my scalp meditatively with my fingertips. "What we've got to do," I said, "is trick McVey into revealing himself."

It took Jackie and me about five min-

utes to work out a little plan. I decided to arrest her for Jessop's murder. This, we hoped, might make McVey—if he were the murderer—feel safe and he might unwittingly tip his hand.

We went back out to the drawing room. It was like Market Street on New Year's Eve. The fingerprint and camera squads had arrived and were bustling around. Two boys from the coroner's office were loading Jessop onto a stretcher.

I placed Jackie in the custody of one of the patrolmen. Then I got McVey over in a corner. "How long have you known the tall girl?" I asked.

"I've known *about* her for several months," he said. "She's mentioned in Miss Rosemont's will. Today was the first time, though, that I met her."

"Hadn't you gotten in touch with her about her inheritance?"

"No. There was some delay in probating the will. It was Miss Rosemont's wish that the girl not be notified until the money could be presented."

Well, that part of his story could be true. I wondered how he would react to my next maneuver.

"I'm going to lock the girl up," I said. "Manslaughter. She'll probably get out on bail this afternoon."

I don't think he heard me. The slender little school-teacherish woman—the niece—came up to him just then. She complained of a headache and asked him to get her a glass of water and an aspirin.

McVey went upstairs. Which was just as well. I didn't want to bother baiting him then. Of course, I couldn't jail Jackie on manslaughter. That was just a gag to arouse the natural lawyer's suspicion in McVey. She'd have to be jailed for suspicion of murder—unless I could work out a deal with the Chief.

I turned the gun over to the fingerprint boys. They took Jackie's prints and then I drove her down to the Hall of Justice. We went in and talked to the Chief. He'd just had his lunch. He's always a reasonable man when his stomach's full, always willing to listen to a proposition.

He agreed with me that there was enough evidence to hold Jackie on suspicion. I think he liked Jackie's size or

the dimple in her chin or something. Anyway, I could see he thought there was a good chance she was innocent. I asked him to place her in my custody for a few days while I worked out a method to trap McVey.

After I told him about Jessop's dying, "It was Al" statement, he agreed. I don't know much about law, but I do know this. A dying man's last words are considered the truth in court—even if he says fire freezes.

Jackie and I went down to my office on the second floor. It's more of a joke than an office. I share an old wooden desk with six other lieutenants and inspectors down in one corner of the squad room. Rats, even the prisoners in the tank have more privacy.

We sat on the desk for a few minutes trying to dope up something. Jackie kept swinging her legs and I couldn't think of anything else but—Jackie.

Finally, I exercised my mind enough to call the Rosemont house and ask how the prints were coming. I wasn't too pleased to learn that the only prints on the gun were a single set of Jackie's. The gun had apparently been wiped clean before she picked it up. Suddenly, it occurred to me that—as a smart cover-up—she might have wiped it off herself and then replaced her prints. That would make it look like someone else had wiped it clean and then tossed it in the room. While I was mulling that over, Jackie invited me to lunch at her apartment.

I reacted to her invitation in two ways. The wolf in me thought it was a great idea. But the cop in me was suspicious. I suggested that she go home in a cab and fix lunch, while I went over to Probate Court to look up the old lady's will. As soon as she left, I told one of the plainclothes boys to tail her.

I got over to the court and read the public copy of Miss Rosemont's will. It surprised the daylighters out of me. I showed the old gent behind the counter my badge, jammed the copy in my pocket and left in a hurry.

While I was waiting for the signal to change at Howard and Tenth Streets, I began to worry about Jackie. The plainclothes man had instructions not to follow her into her apartment building and

someone could have been waiting for her inside.

I parked beside the fireplug in front of Edward's Drug and called her from the dial phone back of the glass prescription counter. The radio-phone takes longer and I was in a hurry.

"Hello?" Jackie said. Her phone voice is like Ann Sheridan's.

"You all right?" I said. "This's Gus."

"Sure."

"Good. Say, I got news for you. You ought to read the old gal's will!"

"Do I get the fifteen thousand dollars?" She sounded a little excited.

"It'll surprise you," I teased.

"Please," she said. "You're mean. If you want to torture people, get a thumbscrew or a rack or something. Come on, read it!"

"Okay," I said. I dug the papers out of my pocket and spread them on the counter. I began to read: "I, Bedelia Rosemont, the undersigned, being of sound mind and body, do this day, July 5th, execute this, my last will and testament. To my attorney and trusted friend, Albert V. McVey, I bequeath the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars; to my dearly beloved nephew, David Rosemont Jessop, I bequeath the sum of one hundred thousand dollars—"

"Good heavens!" Jackie interrupted. "No wonder he got killed!"

"Wait'll you hear the rest of it. . . . And to my beloved niece, Adele Rosemont, my darling El, I also bequeath the sum of one hundred thousand dollars. And to—"

I heard Jackie catch her breath. "Wait a minute!" she exclaimed. "What was that nickname she gave Adele?"

"El," I said. I spelled it out.

Jackie's voice climbed a few notes and she talked fast. "Why, that's what Mr. Jessop said just before he died. I thought he said Al because I've never heard of anyone being nicknamed El. Now I remember plain as day. He said 'It was El!'"

It was my turn to gasp. "Jumping Jupiter!" I said. "That means that skinny little niece killed him! And she had plenty of motive. The will says if one of the heirs dies his dough goes to the others. And that's why she—"

Jackie interrupted. Her voice was

taut. "Hold everything!" she said. "Someone's opening the door." There was a clatter as she dropped the receiver on the table. I heard footsteps—and then nothing.

I POUNDED out to the curb and into the coupe. I roared for a block in second. The transmission screamed so loud I must have scattered gear teeth all over Howard Street. I called myself assorted profanities for letting Jackie go home alone.

I parked on Lexington, the narrow side street on one side of Jackie's apartment building. I ran around to the front. The plainclothes man was standing in the doorway of a nearby barbershop. I told him to stay where he was and keep his eyes open.

Then I walked over to the row of buttons beside the apartment house door. Surprise was going to be my best weapon, so I didn't want to ring Jackie's bell.

I rang a Mrs. Flossie Kimball's bell and waited in a blue funk for her to press the button that would buzz open the door. Finally, I heard a woman's eager voice on the door phone. "Hello, George?" she said. "Come on up. He won't be back until six."

I said: "Swell!" The door buzzed and I went in. I decided against the elevator—too noisy. Drawing my revolver, I took the carpeted steps three at a time. Jackie's apartment was on the fourth floor. I tiptoed down the hall to her door—a tough thing for me to do. My toes just aren't made to carry 265 pounds.

I pushed the door open slowly and sent up a silent tribute to the man who oiled its hinges. Somebody was talking—it sounded like the niece. I peeked around the door into the living room. Nobody was there. That meant Jackie and the old gal were in the kitchen. So far as I could tell, Spoons Moran and his boys were sitting this one out.

My breathing was giving me a little trouble and I was sweating all over the gun handle. I took two careful steps across the hardwood floor and shut the door gently behind me. I took another step and a board squeaked. It sounded like a cat yowling at midnight.

The niece apparently hadn't heard it.

She was doing a lot of talking. "Don't you see?" she said. "I had to shoot David. He couldn't have taken care of his money any better than a mouse could. And I need it. I'm going to build the finest dog hospital San Francisco's ever had. It will cost a million dollars."

"But what's that got to do with me?" Jackie asked. Her voice was frightened.

"I'm sorry," said the niece. "After I shot David, I found the paper and the fifteen thousand dollar check he was going to give you. Poor David. He should have known that paper wouldn't stand up in court. So you see, I'll have to kill you, too. I should have known better than to trust that fool Moran. I should have done it myself the first time."

I had crossed the rug, taking one careful step after another. Finally, I was able to peer into the kitchen. Little Miss Rosemont's face was pinched and stern. She was pointing a pistol up at Jackie's heart. Jackie was at least twice as tall as the older woman.

Miss Rosemont would have had to turn her head slightly to see me. Jackie, however, saw me right away. I put a cautioning finger to me lips. What I did next wasn't the brightest thing in the world, but it worked.

I let out a yell. A terrific bellow, like a rhinoceros being speared to death. Miss Rosemont's head snapped in my direction. Jackie reacted immediately. She slapped the little lady so hard, she went flying backward, landing in an undignified heap under the orange breakfast table. The revolver skidded under the stove.

I picked Miss Rosemont up and set her on a chair. She didn't weigh much more than a rag doll. Her face was white, except for where Jackie had slapped her. There it was red and growing purple.

Jackie picked up the gun and handed it to me. "You okay?" I asked.

She daubed a dish towel at the perspiration on her forehead. Then she came over and wiped those blasted tears out of my eyes.

"I'm fine," she said. She smiled wryly. "But still scared. It was bad enough without you yelling like that."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to

shoot. I know I'd have missed—always do. And I didn't want to whop her on the head with the butt. She's so little, I'd have killed her sure." I shrugged. "See how it was?"

Jackie nodded. "I wasn't complaining," she said. "That's twice in two days you've kept me from getting shot. How am I ever going to repay you?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll think of a way."

AFTER I put the cuffs on Miss Rosemont, the three of us went down to the coupe. I sent the plainclothesman back to the station and we got in the car. Miss Rosemont sat in the middle. She didn't say a word. Jackie and I did all the talking.

"Well," said Jackie. "I can see why she would kill her cousin for one hundred thousand dollars. But why was she after me? That fifteen thousand smackers I was supposed to get was pretty small for that sort of thing."

"You weren't left fifteen thousand dollars," I said.

Jackie snapped her fingers. "That's the way it goes. One minute you've got it, the next you haven't. Anyway, why should a perfect stranger leave me any money?"

"No, you weren't left fifteen thousand dollars," I repeated. "That's what I was going to tell you on the phone. The old lady left you seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Jackie was so surprised I thought I heard her eyes pop. A truck passed us at the time so I'm not positive. She managed to gasp: "Why?"

"That's all explained in the will," I said. "It's really something. It seems the aunt was a woman about your size. Maybe not quite as tall, but more than six feet anyway. When she was in her teens, she got awful sensitive about her height. Developed some kind of a complex which even all her father's money couldn't cure. She stayed home all the time and wouldn't meet people. Thought they were sorry for her and figured she was a freak.

"Well, she inherited all her Dad's dough. He was Rosemont, the tea bag king, or something. And when she made out her will, she thought she'd do something worthwhile. She decided to give most of her money to the tallest and prettiest girl in town, a girl who wouldn't stay home like she did, but who would certainly get some fun out of the money."

"Really?" said Jackie. She was incredulous.

"Yeah. She wrote letters to all the girls' colleges and high schools in town and to the model agencies. To make a long story short, she finally decided to give you the seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars." I paused and did some calculating. "Let's see. You're six feet three—that's seventy-five inches. So you get about ten thousand dollars an inch. Not bad, huh?"

Jackie's face was flushed and her eyes glistened. "It'll be weeks before I really believe it," she said. "What a crazy two days these have been. The nightmare turned into a dream." She paused and then asked: "But why did Mr. Jessop say I had only inherited fifteen thousand dollars?"

I had been wondering about that, too. "The way I've got it figured," I said, "is that he had his own little plan to beat you out of the rest of your dough. I guess he didn't know about El's here. He was going to give you the fifteen thousand dollars and probably get you to sign a tricky paper giving up all your rights to the inheritance. He figured you'd be so happy to get the fifteen thousand dollars you'd sign anything."

"And I would have," she said.

We stopped for the signal at Market and Kearny Streets. "What're you going to buy first?" I asked.

"A bed," she said. "A bed long enough so I won't have to sleep tied in a knot. And, on second thought, I think I'll buy two of them. One for you and one for me!"

My eyebrows were up under my hat somewhere. I wasn't exactly sure what she meant—but it sounded fine.

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A Nick Ransom Novelet

MAHATMA OF MAYHEM

CHAPTER I

MAN WITH A GUN

I WAS moving toward the Brown Derby for a snifter of Scotch and a bite of supper when an object much firmer than a banana dug into my spine and a masculine voice behind me said huskily: "Take it easy, brother, or I'll blast a cavity in you as big as the Holland Tunnel."

For an instant I thought it must be some dimwit's idea of a practical joke, for nobody but a shmoe would poke a

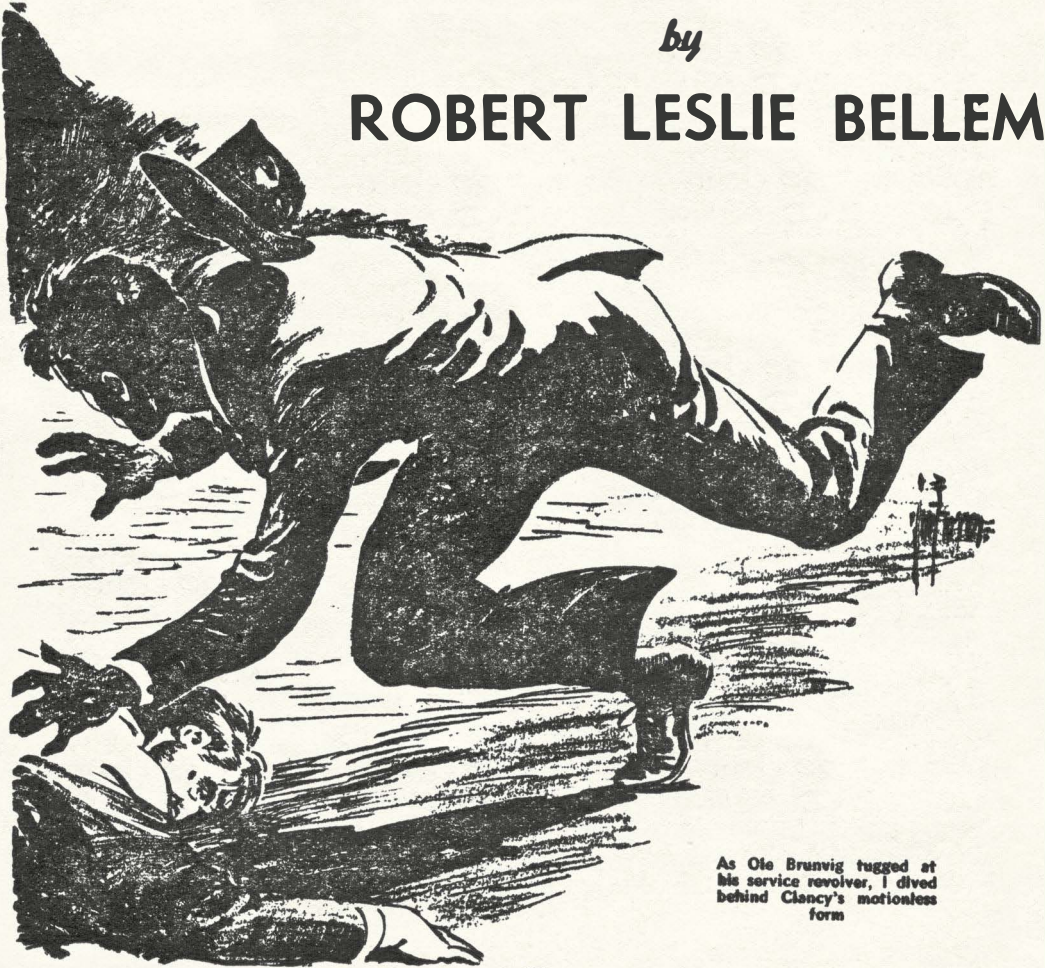
gat in your back on the corner of Hollywood and Vine at eight o'clock in the evening with the sidewalk full of witnesses. At least that was my first reaction, but I changed my mind when I caught the metallic click of a gun's hammer being cocked. Then I realized I was up against a bozo who meant business.

"I said take it easy," he repeated, breathing the words down my neck and emphasizing them with another jab of his roscoe. "Unless you want your tripes ventilated."

Since I didn't want to have my tripes ventilated on such an elegant California

by

ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



As Ole Brunvig tugged at his service revolver, I dived behind Clancy's motionless form

night, I slowed my pace to an easy stroll and presently drew to a halt at the curb; leaned indolently against a convenient lamp post and assumed an air of casual disinterest. I wanted to turn around and confront the character with the cannon, but I suppressed the impulse. He sounded like a man with an itchy trigger finger, and experience has taught me I'm far from bullet-proof.

"Okay, New York," I said over my shoulder. "I'm taking it easy, as requested. Now kindly tell me what this is all about."

"Where do you get that New York stuff?" the husky voice sharpened. "You don't know me. You ain't even copped a look at me yet. So what's with this New York routine?"

I said: "Elementary, pal, elementary. For purposes of comparison you mentioned the Holland Tunnel a moment ago. The Holland Tunnel is strictly New York. Nobody but a native of Gotham would speak of it so glibly, off the top of his mind. Therefore you're a New Yorker." I didn't bother to add that his accent reeked of the Bronx; that would be giving away trade secrets. And after all, does Gimbel tell Macy?

"Clever, ain't you?" the voice growled admiringly.

"Private dicks have to be clever to stay in business, and by a curious coincidence I'm a private dick." I made my tone mild, to lull him.

THEN I bunched my muscles and leaped straight up, grabbed at the lamp post and clasped it to my bosom the way a monkey climbs a coconut tree. Simultaneously I lashed back with my brogans—and had the satisfaction of feeling both heels slam into a flabby stomach. The impact was immediately rewarded by a moan and a sudden expulsion of breath, like the whoosh of air escaping from a punctured tire.

Releasing my grip, I dropped back to the sidewalk and swung around face to face with the Gotham gungel. As faces go, his looked pretty painful. His thin lips were twisted in a sickened grimace, his muddy brown eyes were as dull as tarnished pennies and he was doubled over like a case of ptomaine poisoning. With his left hand he was clutching at

his damaged midsection, while the nickel-plated rod in his right drooped forlornly and forgotten.

I swooped for the weapon, got it, stowed it in my pocket. Then I straightened him out of his cramped crouch and supported him with a counterfeit tenderness that was exclusively for the benefit of a few dozen assorted passers-by who had stopped to stare.

"One side, folks," I said pleasantly. "My chum, here, is very sick. We were rehearsing a movie routine that back-fired, so make way while I take him to first aid."

That's one nice feature about Hollywood—you can get away with almost anything if you say it's for pictures. The crowd opened up and I nudged my anguished captive around the corner where my coupe was parked. "In with you, bub," I said grimly. "Before you get hurt."

"I already got hurt," he whinnied, massaging his battered equator and crawling aboard my bucket. "Man, the way you can kick!"

I wedged myself under the steering wheel alongside him. "I've doubled for practically everything else," I said. "In case you aren't aware of it, my name is Nick Ranson."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'm a snooper."

"I know that, too."

"And before I went into the private eye racket, I was a stunt man in the galloping snapshots," I continued. "I ran a firm called Risks, Incorporated, specializing in spurious thrills at fifty bucks per broken neck. That's in case you're wondering how I was able to shinny up that lamp post and give your abdomen a helping of shoe leather."

He said bitterly: "Go ahead, boast. I deserve it. The Mahatma warned me you was a tough baby to handle. I should of knowed better than to get so close to you, but I was careless. Now I guess you'll be turning me over to the bulls, huh?"

"Not quite yet," I said, and set fire to a cigarette, blew smoke in his puss. "First we play a little game entitled questions and lumps. I ask you questions, and if you don't sing the correct answers you get lumps. Do I make my-

self clear to you?"

"Yeah." He shivered visibly, though the night was warm. "Too clear."

"Good," I said. "Now then, your name."

He made a sour mouth. "This will slay you. Reginald Percival Clancy. Now go ahead and laugh. Everybody always does."

I was in no mood for jokes. "Okay, Reginald," I said, without cracking a smile. "Next we take up the matter of this Mahatma you mentioned. You say he warned you I'd be tough to handle. That indicates you're working for him and he hired you to pull a stickup on me. Right?"

"Not a stickup. A snatch. You know, a kidnap caper, sort of. I tried to pick you up when you left your apartment a while ago but you drove off too fast and got away from me. So I tailed you in a taxi and caught up with you here. There wasn't no real harm in it, though. That is, I mean—"

"Whoa. Not so fast. Go back a little. Who is this Mahatma? What's his square monicker?"

REGINALD PERCIVAL CLANCY made a vague gesture. "Mahatma Guru is what he calls hisself. That's all I know. I only been working for him a few days."

"Oh, come now!" I said "Mahatma is Indian for instructor, and Guru means almost the same thing. Mahatma Guru? That's like saying Professor Teacher. Don't dish me that brand of double-talk, Reggie. It will only buy you bruises."

He sulked. "Look, it ain't my double talk, it's his. The Mahatma's I mean. I'm leveling with you, gumshoe. He calls hisself Mahatma Guru, and he reads horoscopes or something. Claims he can see the future."

In my business it pays to keep a line on all the phonies floating around, but Mahatma Guru I'd never heard of.

"He must be new out here," I said.

"Yeah, he just hit town this week and hired me to be his handy man. So tonight he tells me he wants you brang to him—"

"Oh, so?" I cut in. "Well, that's just dandy. He'll certainly get his wish. When I get through with him, he'll see

stars that aren't in the horoscope. What's the address?"

Reginald mumbled a number over on Van Ness, near the Paramount lot, and I tickled my starter, fed my coupe gas. Nine minutes later I dropped anchor near a bungalow with overhanging eaves and a wide, deep front porch—a relic of the good old days before architects brought modernism to the architecture of Southern California. It had probably been standing there for twenty or thirty years, and barring earthquakes and termites it would stand for twenty or thirty more. It was a modest house, substantial but self-effacing, and it didn't look at all like a joint where murder had just been committed.

Shoving Reginald P. Clancy ahead of me, I found the front portal unlocked and barged in without knocking. A moment later I was looking at a corpse.

CHAPTER II

POSTPONED DEATH



FOR A man who had just got established in Hollywood that week, Mahatma Guru had made plenty of progress—at least from the standpoint of interior decoration. My first impression was that I'd entered a sound stage by mis-

take and had stumbled onto a set dressed for a Boris Karloff production. The vestibule had been enlarged to make a waiting room, and its walls were draped in black cloth of a spongy texture, like graveyard moss.

Cabalistic signs of the zodiac were painted on the cloth and glowed against the black background like daubs of radium, a weird effect guaranteed to give you the horrors. A man with claustrophobia would have blown his wig the minute he walked in, and if he stayed very long you'd have had to tote him away in a straitjacket.

I've got steady nerves myself, but that black-draped outer chamber put goose pimples on me. Maybe it was the dead still air, the lack of ventilation. Or on the other hand, maybe my intuition was functioning overtime. Whatever it was, I had an abrupt hunch that

trouble loomed in the offing.

The hunch became a positive conviction when I stepped into Mahatma Guru's parlor. Here the ceiling had been swathed in folds of purple velvet that sagged down like the under side of a tired barrage balloon. Large tinfoil stars were attached to the massive wrinkles, while the room's walls and windows were masked by an array of Oriental silk screens, opulently decorated with embroidered dragons and werewolves. In one corner there was an open sarcophagus of early Egyptain vintage, occupied by a mummified tenant who had obviously become defunct around the time King Tut cashed in his royal chips.

It wasn't the mummy that flabbergasted me, however. In the middle of the room there was a circular table of clear plastic, the kind that bends light-rays. A full zodiac had been etched into the table-top, and concealed somewhere under the circular rim a fluorescent tube glowed brightly. Its light followed the etched design in the lucite and then sprayed upward, dramatically revealing a human face. At least I hoped it was human. For a brief instant I wasn't any too sure.

The head was engulfed in a turban of black satin, from which a red jewel glittered bloodily. Below this there were two dark eyes in hollow sockets, a nose like an eagle's beak, a saffron-sallow complexion and a beard. I've lamped a lot of facial foliage in my time, but this set of spinach took the prize. It was black and curly and parted in the middle, sweeping to east and west like a bifurcated broom.

"What the dickens," I said when I got my breath back. "A growth like that could send Gillette stock down six points."

The whiskers stirred in what might have been a faint smile—I wasn't positive. The one thing I could be certain of was that the hairy face was attached to a body. As my eyes grew accustomed to the subdued light I saw that the man was seated on a chair resembling a high-backed throne, upholstered in the kind of cloth they use for lining coffins.

He wore a single robe-like garment of purple to match the ceiling. and his

hands were folded on top of the lucite table. They were long-fingered hands, and at first I thought they were dirty. Then I realized the black smudges weren't dirt. They were tufts of hair. Each finger had as much as the average man uses for a mustache. In my disgust, I said something low but emphatic.

"Aw!" Reginald Percival Clancy protested. "You hadn't ought to talk to the Mahatma like that, Mister Ransom. It ain't respectful."

I said: "So this is the Mahatma, hey?" I pulled out the rod I had glommed from the New York torpedo and brandished it menacingly. "Okay, fortune teller, let's talk business."

THE whiskers moved again, and a voice came out of them: deep, resonant, profoundly soothing, almost hypnotic.

"Business. Ah yes. That is why I had you brought to me."

"Now just a minute," I snapped. "You didn't have me brought to you. I came under my own steam. To prove it, let me call your attention to this heater I'm holding. It formerly belonged to your stooge, here—Reginald. I took it away from him. If I had wanted to, I could have made him eat it. And unless you offer a plausible explanation of this whole screwy caper, I may make *you* eat it."

When the whiskers stirred this time it was a definite smile—benign, gentle and somehow patronizing. White, even teeth glistened in startling contrast to the black foliage, while the tip of a red tongue moistened equally red lips.

"Spoken bravely," Mahatma Guru intoned in that basso profundo voice. "And you are indeed entitled to a full explanation. This screwy caper, as you term it, was based upon my desire to hire you."

I blinked at him. "I don't get it."

"I shall try to make it plain. This morning I discovered that my life was in danger. There was murder in my horoscope—"

"Now cut that out!" I snarled. "Save your horoscope hogwash for the suckers. I'm not having any." All the same, his tone made the short hairs prickle at the nape of my neck.

He moved his hands on the lucite table top. "Please do not interrupt. As I say, I foresaw my own murder. But the stars merely incline; they do not compel. Warned in advance, there was a slim chance that I might avert this danger—if I could hire someone of dauntless courage to protect me."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," I said.

"I do not seek to flatter you. I had heard of your reputation for toughness, and frankly I doubted it. So I decided to test you. I sent Clancy with orders to bring you here at gun's point. If he had succeeded, it would have indicated that you were not as brave as you were supposed to be. In that case I planned to pay you for your inconvenience and dismiss you. But if you disarmed Clancy, I would know you were the kind of man I needed."

Wacky as this sounded, it still added up to make sense. When I analyzed it I could begin to understand why Reginald Clancy had turned so meek after I bested him. I'd measured up to qualifications, so naturally he had been only too eager to steer me to his boss. What Mahatma Guru wanted, apparently, was a detective who went around kicking people in the stomach.

That part was okay, but what I didn't swallow was the fortune telling routine—the horoscope warning of murder. I said so, very bluntly

"You'll have to do better than that stars-foretell-death stuff, chum." I leered at him. "If you're figuring on hiring me, be more specific. Who is it wants to kill you, and for what reason?"

"The planets do not name names," he said slowly. "When I sent Clancy out for you, I did not know who desired to murder me. I only knew that I was in great peril from an unrevealed source."

I said: "Now wait. Are you trying to say you want me to begin fine-combing Hollywood on a blind hunt for some character who may be gunning for you? Do you expect me to go through the directory, starting with the A's and working down the alphabet? That's ridiculous."

He nodded his black turban. "I agree. Such a search would be both foolish and fruitless. I would not even suggest it.

Moreover, it would be unnecessary—because, you see, within the past hour I have learned my enemy's identity."

"Yeah? Who?"

"She is a very lovely woman, and her name is Lola Dulac. She is my wife."

I GAZED at him, flabbergasted. Lola Dulac was one of Paratone Studio's brightest stars, a dainty and diminutive brunette who had skyrocketed to the top of the Hollywood heap within a period of three brief years. Starting out with bit parts in B pix, she had swiftly graduated to big-budget epics and leading roles. Now she was Paratone's biggest box office attraction and her annual income tax would have kept me in Cadillacs for the next decade. Calling her a potential murderess seemed as absurd as dunking your doughnuts in prussic acid.

And besides, the Dulac doll couldn't possibly be Mahatma Guru's wife. She was already married to Pete Hollister, a character hambo on the Paratone payroll. They'd got hitched in Nevada less than six months ago and they were reputed to be the happiest couple on the Coast.

I took a step toward the illuminated lucite table and favored the Mahatma with one of my best sneers—the kind I reserve for people I dislike.

"You're commencing to irritate me, pal," I said. "I happen to know Lola Dulac and her hubby. I knew them long before they got married. I've been to parties with Lola when she was single, and I've doubled for Pete Hollister in danger routines when I was a stunt man. They're both nice kids. Lola especially. Anybody that says she's the killer type is either insane or a liar. Furthermore—"

"Wait," he interrupted me. "Before you permit your misguided chivalry to make an idiot of you, let me tell you that Lola visited me while Clancy was out looking for you. In fact, she had left this house only a few minutes before you and Clancy came in. Having murdered me, she went away quickly."

I did a double take. "Having murdered you?"

"With a small automatic. Either a twenty-two or a twenty-five I think. Not

that the caliber matters. At such close range, any gun would have been quite effective. Clancy, the room lights, please."

Clancy sidled to the wall, flipped a switch. Bulbs glowed in an old-fashioned chandelier overhead, at the center of the droopy purple ceiling drapes. Then Mahatma Guru dramatically opened his robe, pushed the circular table away from him, stood up and intoned sepulchraly:

"I forced myself to live long enough to tell you what happened. Behold my death wounds." He sounded almost smug as he said it.

I took a petrified gander at the crimson rawness near his heart. Then he slowly toppled, and I leaped forward to catch him. I didn't quite make it.

He folded over, sank back in his throne and buried his whiskery map on the lucite table top, spang in the middle of the glowing zodiac. Clancy shoved me aside, rushed for his boss and then pulled back, shuddering.

"Jumpin' jitters!" he said soberly. "The Mahatma kicked the bucket!"

CHAPTER III

LAPSE OF MEMORY



RANTICALLY I hunted for a phone but there wasn't one. If I hankered to do any dialing, Reginald Percival Clancy informed me, I would have to go elsewhere. "The Mahatma ain't had time to get one put in," he said. "And besides, if you're thinking about calling a doctor it won't do no good. What the poor guy needs now is a undertaker."

"What he needs first is a flock of cops," I snarled. "Hold the fort." Then I went racing out to my coupe, swung it in a U-turn, and headed for Melrose Avenue. Melrose is a business thoroughfare and I was looking for a drug store or a beanery with a public phone booth.

I found a phone.

Two minutes and one nickel later I was talking to police headquarters, and another minute got me my friend Ole Brunvig of the homicide squad. "Nick Ransom talking," I said, and gave him

the Mahatma's address on Van Ness. "Better get out here fast, and bring the help with you. I've just stumbled into a murder, senior grade."

Brunvig sounded as though he might be having trouble with his ulcers. "Just my luck, Sherlock!" he complained fretfully. "Haven't you got anything better to do than hunt up homicides to dump in my lap?" Then, wearily, in a tone of embittered resignation: "Who's dead?"

"A star gazer, name of Mahatma Guru. He died of slugs in the chest. It seems he cast his own horoscope and discovered murder in it, so he tried to hire me for protection. Unfortunately I didn't reach him in time to do any good; he had already been shot when I arrived. He told me he was killed by—"

"Now wait!" Brunvig's infuriated bellow sliced across my monologue. "What kind of curves are you pitching at me? What's this about horoscopes and a dead man naming his murderer?" Suspicion came into his voice. "Listen, if you're drunk, I'm going to have your license withdrawn, friendship or no friendship. I mean that."

I told him to go climb a string. "It so happens I'm sober," I said. "This Guru guy had been shot a while before I arrived. His injury was fatal but lingering. He managed to stay alive until I showed up, so he could give me information. Then he joined his ancestors."

"Oh, yeah? Why didn't he phone some law? Why didn't he phone a doctor? Why didn't he—"

"His joint isn't wired for sound," I butted in. "Which is why I'm talking to you from a pay station. Now grab your car and get out here." I hung up before he could ask me any more childish questions, barged back to my bucket and started back for the Mahatma's place.

En route, it suddenly dawned on me that I'd neglected to tell Ole the essential ingredient of the story—the part about Guru naming Lola Dulac as the killer who'd shot him. That was the crux of the whole scenario. A dying man's testimony regarding his murderer is admissible as evidence in court, provided the victim knows he's dying and there are witnesses to his statement. Guru, by

saying Lola Dulac was the person who shot him, had handed her a one-way ticket to the gas chamber, and if I had remembered to mention it to Brunvig, he would have sent out a bevy of bulls to nab her, pronto.

As it was, she might even now be taking a powder for parts unknown, and if she succeeded in evading arrest, it would probably be my fault. I wondered if that, subconsciously, was the way I wanted it. Your mind pulls funny tricks on you sometimes, and I had always had a warm spot in my heart for Lola Duac. It was difficult for me to see her in a murder role—she wasn't the killer type. Maybe that was why I'd failed to put the finger on her. Maybe, without realizing it, I wanted her to beat the rap.

ON THE other hand, perhaps Ole Brunvig's crabbiness had caused me to skip mentioning Lola in connection with the kill. Maybe, away down deep, I'd hoped to make the case tougher for him. When I considered this, I knew I'd dumped myself in a jackpot. Any way you looked at it, I had withheld important information, and just as soon as Brunvig found it out he would blow up like Vesuvius. I had a dismal mental picture of myself shorn of my license and forced to go back to studio stunting.

"God forbid!" I whispered piously as I parked. Then I drifted into Mahatma Guru's implausible parlor, wondering if I might save face by leaving Reginald P. Clancy here to admit the cops while I sallied forth personally to pinch Lola. If I handed her to Brunvig on a silver platter, maybe he would overlook the boner I'd pulled.

I found Clancy walkly around disconsolately, biting his fingernails. He greeted me with a plaintive: "Aw, gumshoe, what kept you so long? I don't like this idea of having to stick around with a stiff. Gives me the willies."

"I'm not too fond of it myself," I said, and stole an unwilling glance at the Mahatma's body. He was still slumped in the throne-like chair and doubled over with his whiskers crinkled under his face on the lucite table. His black turban was askew and his short hairy hands groped stiffly at nothing-

ness as he slept the long sleep.

I moved toward him, thoughtfully. Clancy widened his peepers at me. "Hey, flatfoot, what you going to do?"

"A favor for the morgue orderlies," I said. "If we let this fellow stay in that position much longer, rigor mortis will harden him like a pretzel and they'll have to press him between the pages of a dictionary to straighten him out for the stretcher." I beckoned. "Here! Come help me put him on the floor before his joints get stubborn."

"Oh, no." Clancy's expression got mulish. "Not me, Hawkshaw. Somebody else, maybe, but not me."

"What's the matter? Scared?"

"Dead guys is out of my line. Besides, you ain't supposed to touch no corpse until the cops gets in their licks first. I seen that somewheres in a book."

Tentatively I flexed the murdered Mahatma's arm and it resisted me. "I guess you're right, Reggie," I said. "It's too late anyhow." It wasn't too late for me to rectify a blunder, though, and I made for the door. "When Lieutenant Brunvig gets here with his homicide henchmen, sing him the story and then tell him I've gone witch hunting."

"Huh?" he looked perplexed.

"It's self-defense," I explained. "I don't want my license yanked for a mistake I made, so I'm doing something about it."

"Mistake? What mistake?"

"I forgot to tell Brunvig about Lola Dulac."

He stiffened visibly. "You mean the dame who croaked the Mahatma? You forgot to put the heat on her?" A scowl darkened Reginald's face. "Say, listen here, you wouldn't be fronting for her, would you? I wouldn't like that. It wouldn't be fair to the Mahatma."

I said: "Your loyalty to him is very commendable indeed, considering that you've been working for him less than a week. Apparently you're a citizen who likes to see justice prevail."

"Yeah, is that bad?" he demanded righteously.

"Not at all, pal. I'm the same way myself. By the same token, if you think I'd front for a murderer you're as haywire as eleven to the dozen. Remember I'm a private dick, which makes me a

sworn arm of the law in a left-handed way. When they issued my tin they made me take an oath to uphold the statutes of California, including the ones applying to homicide."

HE PUSHED out a sullen lower lip. "Well, you told the Mahatma you was a friend of the Dulac jane, and—"

"Ah, step aside before I lose patience and kick out your front teeth. I said I was going out witch hunting, didn't I?"

"Oh," he relaxed. "Now I get it. You're going out to find the broad, eh?"

"That I am," I said, and took off for the Hollister home. But when I got there and told Lola's husband what had happened and what I wanted her for, Pete Hollister swung a roundhouse haymaker that was aimed full at my dewlaps. Had it landed it would have knocked me into the middle of next November.

It didn't land, which was a break for my insurance policy. An inch was all it missed me, but an inch is all you need when you've got fast reflexes. I stepped inside the punch and said softly:

"I hate to hurt you, Pete. Don't make me."

He was big and tough and full of fire. His tallness topped my six-feet-plus with a little to spare and he outweighed my hundred and ninety by a good ten pounds, maybe more. He didn't have much science, though, and besides, he'd telegraphed that blow before he threw it at me, so I let it zip around my neck. Then I rammed him backward and pinioned him firmly against his patio wall.

It was a modest patio with a modest swimming pool, behind an equally modest stucco wigwam. To get there you rolled up through Laurel Canyon almost to San Fernando Valley, then twisted to the left on a corkscrew cutoff that led into a tiny, boxed-in arroyo. Here Lola Dulac and the Hollister ham had built their nest after that Nevada wedding ceremony six months ago, and here I'd come to intrude upon their private paradise. In exchange for which I had almost got my block knocked off.

The drive from the Mahatma's stash on Van Ness had taken less than thirty minutes, whereupon I'd jingled the doorbell and been welcomed by Peter Hol-

lister in person. He was young and blond and vigorously muscular, with a theatrical voice and matinee idol mannerisms that would always keep him from being as big a star as his handsomeness would otherwise warrant.

In the pictures he always played second fiddle to his wife, who was a genuinely talented actress. Not that Pete seemed to mind this state of affairs. In the years I had known him he had grown accustomed to a minor spot on the screen, and if he ever had any ambition he had long since subordinated it to the meteoric climb of Lola's spectacular career. In brief, he was an incurable ham. He knew it, he couldn't do anything about it, and so what?

CHAPTER IV

INDIGNANT HUSBAND



YOU can't help liking a fellow who realizes his own limitations that way, particularly when he accepts it gracefully. As soon as I crossed his threshold he affably offered me a nip of Vat 69, which happens to be my favorite beverage. I took a rain check, however, because I had more important things on my mind.

"I'm looking for Lola," I told him.

"She's not here."

"This is important," I said. "Don't lie to me, Pete. Trot her forth."

He studied me. "Hold on, Sherlock. You're not acting like an old friend who sent us a wedding present—you're talking like a detective on the prowl. What's the idea?"

"I just told you. I want Lola."

"And I just told *you* she's not at home." He gave me a cynical grin. "Maybe you'd like to frisk the premises?"

"Thanks." I pretended not to realize he was being sarcastic and took a brisk stroll through the various rooms and even inspected the rear grounds, the garage and the patio. It was refreshing to see a movie star's home that wasn't dripping with opulence. Ordinarily, when an actress breaks into the upper brackets of Hollywood's financial

nobility, she surrounds herself with liveried lackeys, a mansion the size of Grauman's Chinese Theater, and three or four boudoirs finished with mink wallpaper.

But Lola Dulac had both dainty tooties on the ground, and if you believed the gossip along the Sunset Strip she was a mighty close cookie with a buck. It had probably hurt her all the way to her insteps to have extension phones put in the bedrooms. According to rumor, she held onto her money the way iron filings cling to a magnet. She was one star who wouldn't wind up rocking away her old age on the front porch of the motion picture academy home for indigents.

Also, she was a star I was unable to locate anywhere around her undistinguished shanty. "Sorry, Pete," I apologized to young Hollister after I'd strolled around the swimming pool and even peered down into the water. "It wasn't that I disbelieved you, but I had to make sure."

"So all right. So you made sure."

"Yeah. Where is she?"

"None of your business until you tell me what it's all about. I don't like mystification. I'm beginning not to like private detectives, especially a private detective named Nick Ranson, see?"

I lighted a cigarette. "Lots of folks don't like me. Look, Pete, is your marriage to Lola on the up and up?"

"I don't understand what you're driving at."

"Did she have another husband ahead of you?" I said. "One she neglected to divorce?"

"Now you're being fantastic, flat-foot."

"I'm in a fantastic racket, and answer my question. Did Lola ever mention being hooked up with a fortune teller calling himself Mahatma Guru?"

Hollister's jaw jutted and his kisser became an ugly thin red slit. "Who is Mahatma Guru?"

"A dead guy," I said. "A dead guy who used his last breath to name Lola as his killer."

That was when the Hollister hambo swung on me. "Don't you dare call my wife a murderess!" he yelled and came at me.

I ELUDED the poke and jammed him to the patio wall. "Quit acting like a sap," I said sternly as I kept his long, meaty fingers from wrapping themselves around my windpipe. "In the first place, I'm not here to make a pinch. I just want to see Lola before the cops get to her. I've got to hear her side of the story—if she has a story." Then I got his arm in a lock that would ruin him if I poured on the pressure. "Besides, I didn't call Lola a murderess. The Mahatma said it."

"You're a liar!"

"Maybe the Mahatma was, but I'm not. I heard him with my own little pink ears."

"Then you'll never repeat his testimony," Hollister said wildly, writhing in my clutch. "I'll see to that!"

I said: "Be yourself, Pete! I'm not the only one that heard it. There was another witness, a stooge named Reginald Percival Clancy, believe it or not. I left him to guard the corpse until the law arrived. By now he's told them the whole thing, with gestures. In fact, the cops are probably on their way here right now."

He stopped struggling and fixed a frightened gaze on me. "You mean they'll arrest Lola and maybe convict her?"

"There's very little maybe about it, junior."

"But—but—" he choked. "No! I can't let that happen, Ransom! I've got to do something—you've got to help me!" Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Don't blow a gasket," I said. "That won't help."

"But Nick, what are we going to do?"

I said: "That 'we' stuff sounds sort of foolish when you won't even tell me where to find her."

"Listen," he said. "If I tell you—if I take you to her—will you promise not to take her to jail or turn her over to the cops? Will you give her a chance?"

"You're asking a lot," I said. "You're asking me to betray my oath and jeopardize my license. What's in it for me?"

"What do you mean, what's in it for you? You're my friend and Lola's, aren't you?"

I lifted a lip. "Forget that. I'm in this business for the dough. I'm saving up a

retirement fund so I can quit before some wise disciple engraves my vital statistic with a bullet." I rubbed the ball of my thumb across my fingertips. "You know that folding stuff they put in banks?"

"You heel," he whispered, looking shocked. Then he said: "Okay, if that's how it's got to be. How much?"

"You're doing the buying. Make an offer.

"Fifty dollars?"

"Don't be parsimonious," I parried.

"All right, then, a hundred."

"A niggardly bid if I ever heard one."

"It's all I've got available. Every last dime."

"I've been known to accept checks."

He flushed. "Our account's in Lola's name. She'd have to make it out and sign it." He brightened. "Which she'll do. I know she will. She's got it to burn. She'll pay you any price you ask. Any amount you name—if you get her out of this murder mess."

"Better slip me that century you mentioned," I said. "Advance retainer, you know. Cash on the line before we start."

HE WAS in no position to argue. He got out his wallet, dredged up a thin sheaf of crisp green lettuce; mostly fives, tens and singles.

"Bloodsucker!" he called me bitterly.

I let him have that one—he was entitled to it. I said: "And remember, I guarantee nothing. If Lola's guilty, it's just too bad. But if she convinces me the Mahatma lied about her, I'll do everything possible." I tried to make this ambiguity sound sincere, but I had my mental fingers crossed.

Hollister swallowed the routine. "I know I can count on you—now that you've had your pound of flesh." He added sourly: "You're a chiseling creep, but you're tops in your line, and even if Lola killed that bearded skunk, I'll stand by her. I'll stick to her no matter what happens. Let's go to her."

We went out to my jalopy. "Where?" I said.

"Paratone. They're shooting some night retakes on her new picture. For heaven's sake, hurry!"

I didn't need him to tell me to hurry. Just as I swung out of his private drive-

way another car came rocketing toward us, barreling into the arroyo with its red spotlight cutting a gash in the velvet night and its siren shrieking banshee soprano to the echoing hills.

"Company coming!" I said. "Unless I miss my guess a mile and two-fifths that will be Ole Brunvig and his homicide heroes."

We were blocked. The arroyo road was a narrow blacktop ribbon barely wide enough to let two cars pass each other if they crawled in second gear. The way that prowl buggy was whamming toward us in the road's very center, there wasn't a chance in the world for us to squeeze by. Not unless we took off and flew.

Hollister moaned: "We're sunk! They'll nab us and run us downtown and leave men to wait here for Lola when she comes home, and they'll arrest her!"

"Quiet," I growled. "Hang onto your bridgework, bub. You paid me a century and you're about to get value received." I then put my lever in low, yanked the wheel around, gunned hard on the gas, and went straight up the side of the mountain.

CHAPTER V

FRIGHTENED STAR



MY REAR treads clawed at rocks and gravel and sagebrush, took a deep bite of traction. My front wheels bounced like dice in the bottom of a cement mixer, tried to twist the tiller out of my desperate fists. I hung on, torturing the machinery until it squealed for mercy, and we kept going up.

Far below, that cop sedan roared by with its exhaust spitting sparks. Presently you could hear its brakes screeching as it skidded to a stop on Pete Hollister's driveway. Then I bent my course downward again.

For an instant my coupe teetered and almost went over on its side, tugged by gravity's invisible ropes. I fought the wheel and got past the danger point, headed for the highway. We rocked and jounced like an idiot on a pogo stick, or

a mountain goat leaping across a drainage gully, and finally got some paving under us again. Heading buckety-blip for the Laurel Canyon highway, I remarked:

"Blamed good thing I took postgraduate work in movie stunt driving, eh? Now before our headquarters friends get turned around to trail us, we'll be long gone."

The Hollister ham mopped at his mush with a limp handkerchief and looked like a man who had just seen his guardian angel moult a quart of tail feathers. Shaken, he huddled beside me in a speechless condition, which suited me fine. I wasn't feeling very conversational anyhow. I settled deeper in the seat and aimed for the Paratone lot out in the valley near Warner Brothers.

At the main gate Hollister waved his employee's pass and an imitation cop on guard duty nodded us through. Parking the coupe away out back near the big open air scene dock, I hopped out.

"Come on, Pete, let's not waste time. Where's Lola working?"

"Stage Ten, she told me." He spurted ahead of me, his long ungainly legs working like scissors as he hurried by the scene dock and down a long, meagerly lighted studio street. I pelted in pursuit, past a row of gigantic sound stage buildings with roofs like magnified Quonset huts, dug in my heels where Hollister had halted before an oversized sliding steel door that had a black numeral "10" painted on it. The door was closed, and in a square box with a frosted glass window a red light glowed. Even as I looked, the red winked off and a green bulb lighted up.

When the red was on, it meant a scene was being shot inside and you didn't dare open the door for fear of spoiling a take. But as soon as the green showed, I knew the cameras had stopped rolling. I shouldered Hollister aside, applied my heft to the portal, slid it open along its overhead track.

Inside, on a lighted drawing room set, I buttonholed a cameraman. "Hey, pal, is Lola Dulac on deck?"

"Nope. We're holding the next scene for her. She was here when we started shooting after supper but she got a phone call and had to **scram** for a while.

We're waiting for her to come back now." He took a look at his strap watch. "Maybe she's in her dressing bungalow getting ready. Tried there?"

"I will," I said, and turned to Hollister. "Show me the way."

He nodded and again went ahead of me. We circled the writers' building and the studio commissary, both of them now dark and deserted, and presently came to a double row of miniature cottages not much bigger than automobile trailers but all fancied up with pastel paint, vine-covered trellises and halfpint porches. Each bungalow was just about large enough to accommodate a single dressing room and a shower, and lights gleamed in the one at the south end of the string.

"That's hers," Hollister said, and went into a sprint.

I kept pace, and we reached the tiny building in a dead heat. By stretching, I got the doorknob before he could seize it. I started to give it a twist.

He grabbed my arm. "Just a minute. Maybe she's undressed. I'll go first, if you please."

"At a time like this you worry about modesty?" I snapped. "Be your age! I've seen unclad cuties before, and I rarely cast glances at other men's wives—especially if there's killing involved." I wasn't taking any chance that he might go in and spirit Lola Dulac out a back door before I could talk to her. "Let go of me."

HE LET go, and I put my weight to the woodwork. It gave, and before you could whistle Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto I inserted myself into the dressing bungalow.

Lola Dulac was there, sure enough, and she wasn't undraped—but her emotions were, through. She was as pallid as milk. Her lips were quivering out of control and there was fright in her eyes: stark, undiluted fear. Her small form was dressed in a low-cut evening gown of white satin that had probably cost Paratone several hundred dollars, and the way it set off her curves made it worth every dollar. But I had no time for art appreciation—I was too busy wondering what had shocked her into the obvious panic she was showing.

I said: "Hi, Lola! Pardon the haste, but I've got some questions that need answering—"

"I'll ask them," Pete Hollister said from behind me. "Lola, my darling, did you shoot a fortune teller named Mahatma Guru tonight as he sat at his horoscope table?"

She walled up her eyes and pitched forward in a swoon.

I caught her as she dropped. Her knees buckled and she collapsed in my clutch, whereupon I carried her to a tiny divan, stretched her on it.

"Water, Pete; quick!" I told him.

Hollister barged to the miniature bathroom, came back with a dripping towel and squished it on his wife's colorless face. Gasping, she snapped out of her faint.

"Wh-wha-what—where—"

"Better stay conscious, kitten," I advised her. "There's not much time left." Then I gave her the story, fast and complete. I told her how I'd been taken to the Mahatma's home, how he'd accused her of plugging him and then died. I ended with: "He claimed you were his wife."

She drew a ragged breath. "God help me—I was."

"Huh?"

"I was his wife."

Hollister's optics stood out like oysters on stalks. "Lola—you don't mean that."

"It was back East," she said in a voice suddenly drained dry of inflection. "Years ago. He didn't call himself Mahatma Guru in those days, he was billed as Wizardo. He had a magic act, and did fake mind reading. I was his assistant in the audience; we worked codes. Later I married him."

I said: "And divorced him subsequently, of course?"

"N-no. He got into the fake spiritualism racket and bilked a number of people. The police caught up with him and he was sent to prison. He escaped a few months after that, and then I—I got word he'd been killed in an automobile accident. I came out here to Hollywood thinking I was a widow, thinking I was free. I got a chance in pictures, and made good, and—" Brine coursed down her wan cheeks as she turned an appealing glance to Hollister. "I met you,

Pete, and we fell in love and got married, and I thought I'd finally found happiness. Then just a few nights ago he phoned me. At home. He wasn't dead. He was alive!"

"But not for long," I remarked. "What did he want?"

"He knew I had remarried. He threatened to expose me as a bigamist unless—unless I did what he wanted."

"The blackmail bite, eh?"

"N-not exactly. At first he demanded money, and I flatly refused. Then he said he would make a compromise. If I would send him a lot of clients—steer famous stars to him—he would let me alone." She dabbed at her moist eyes with a fragment of lace doing duty as a handkerchief. "So many movie people patronize astrologers and fortune tellers, you know. And Wizardo—Mahatma Guru now—said he could clean up if he had some big names on his clientele list. He gave me four days to make up my mind, and said if I didn't follow orders he would expose me and wreck my screen career."

I THOUGHT that over, keeping my eyes on her agitated face. Finally I said: "Quite a creep, the Mahatma. So then what?"

"I came here to the studio this evening for some retakes. He phoned me—"

"Himself, personally?"

"No, it was a man who called himself Clancy and said he worked for Mahatma Guru. Clancy told me Guru wanted to see me at once. Not at his home, but on the corner of Gower and Sunset across the street from the Columbia Broadcasting building. I went there. I waited, and waited."

"He didn't show up?" I prompted her.

"No. So then I drove by his house and there were police cars all around, and I heard somebody say a fortune teller had been murdered and they were looking for an actress who had killed him, and then somebody else mentioned my name. I was petrified!"

"You drove straight back here to Paratone?"

"Yes. Next you and Pete came in."

I said: "Of course you realize your alibi leaks like a sieve. You say you were at the corner of Sunset and Gower.

Any witnesses to back you up?"

"N-no. None. But I didn't kill him—I didn't!"

Hollister took her hands in his. "You mustn't lie to us, Lola. If you're guilty I'll stand by you. And Ransom, here, will do all he can. I've already retained him for cash."

"I'm not lying!" she whimpered. "I didn't kill him, I swear I didn't! If he accused me it was because he was vindictive. He was getting even with me because I'd remarried; because I was a movie star and he was jealous, envious. It's got to be that way, it *has* to be! Somebody else shot him, and he knew he was dying, and wanted to get me in t-trouble—"

As if on cue, her phone rang just when she said that last word: *trouble*. I uncradled the instrument. "Yeah?"

A male voice rumbled on the wire. I listened, then hung up in a hurry and faced them.

"That was the main gate. Brunvig of Homicide is on the lot and coming here with Clancy," I said.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER KILLING



COULDN'T have created more consternation if I'd announced a delegation of *boa* constrictors. Pete Hollister and his lovely but woebegone wife gulped with dismay. Then she moaned and asked what was she going to do, and he said he didn't know, but he would stick by her no matter what happened. It was all very touching.

It didn't solve any problems, though. And I wasn't quite ready to throw the brunette movie star into the arms of the law—not until I could do a little checking on Reginald Percival Clancy. When I threw my thinking machine into high gear I realized Clancy was the key to a lot of riddles.

Reviewing matters at a rapid velocity, I came to a hair-trigger conclusion and acted on it. I jumped to the wall switch, cut off the dressing bungalow's lights.

"Outside!" I yapped. Grabbing Lola I propelled her through the doorway.

"Make this fast, pet," I told her. "Know where the scene dock is?"

"Y-yes. On the back l-lot."

"My coupe's parked near there. Scram in that direction. You can sit in the car if it seems safe, but if you hear anybody coming, hide. Sneak in the scene dock and squeeze yourself beneath a property staircase or something. Go on, now. Blow."

She blew.

To Hollister I said: "You take the other way around and stand sentry duty so you can warn her in case of trouble. Savvy?"

"Right," he said, and hurried out.

I waited just long enough to scratch a match and light a cigarette. Then I loped toward the main gate and kept an eye peeled for callers. Sure enough, callers showed up in the form of Ole Brunvig and Reginald Clancy. Brunvig, beefy and looking dyspeptic, spied me and emitted a snort of rage.

"So here you are, are you? This Clancy character tells me you knew right along it was Lola Dulac who bumped the Mahatma but you deliberately clammed up on me."

"I forgot," I said meekly, casting a dark scowl at Clancy. "I had a lapse of memory."

Ole's neck swelled around the top of his collar and his complexion turned an apoplectic shade in the glow of a studio street lamp.

"Lapse of memory, hey? You'll have a lapse of license, big odd. I suppose you'll try to tell me it wasn't your coupe flying up the side of that mountain when I drove to the Dulac girl's house. I suppose you're going to say you didn't come here ahead of me so you could keep her from being arrested."

"Stop supplying me with dialogue," I said. "I'll furnish my own, and it won't be anything like what you're screeching. As a matter of cold fact—"

My cold fact was drowned by a gun shot. From somewhere close by in the surrounding shadows a *roscoe* roared: *Ka-Chow!* in spiteful accents. Hard on the heels of this flat, barking report, Reginald Percival Clancy dropped with a hole in the head. The bullet had drilled a hole through his noggin, and he was dead before he hit the ground.

He bounced once, and a macabre shudder twitched him. Then he lay still.

The unseen cannon spoke again. A tongue of orange yellow fire licked toward me, ribbonlike, and I felt a slight plucking at my right shoulder followed by a quick stinging burn, as if a bee had used me for a pincushion. I let out a yelp and dropped behind Clancy's motionless form.

OLE BRUNVIG stood there with his mouth hanging open and a look of blank stupefaction on his face. Suddenly he clawed for his service .38 in his back pants pocket and the gun stuck there. He began racing around in concentric circles, yelling in rage.

At last he gave a mighty tug and the rod came loose with a tearing noise, pocket and all. He stared at the cloth clinging to the gat and called tearfully upon heaven to witness that he had just ruined a brand new thirty-dollar suit, adding that it wasn't even paid for.

"Charge it to the city," I snarled. "Duck before you're a clay pigeon."

I started rolling frantically in the direction of a property rain barrel that somebody had left out in the open overnight, seeking its dubious protection before the next shot could nail me to the earth.

There was no next shot. An abrupt silence descended, so thick you could cut it like limburger cheese. Then footfalls sounded in the distance.

I leaped upright, fastened the clutch on Brunvig's arm.

"Come on, Ole. That was one homicide I didn't count on, and it's time for the payoff. Client or no client, we're going after Lola Dulac." I started to run toward the back lot.

Brunvig followed along in my wake. "I get it now! She killed Clancy and tried to kill you so neither of you could testify that you heard Mahatma Guru's dying accusation naming her as his murderer!"

Another voice chimed in from the darkness as a bulky shape detached itself from the vicinity of my coupe and dashed toward us. "Good grief! You mean Lola sneaked away from here and committed another killing?" It was Pete Hollister joining us. "That was what

those shots were I just heard? She murdered Clancy?"

"No," I said, and whisked out my pencil flashlight, drenched him in its narrow beam of brightness. "No, Lola didn't shoot the Clancy ginzo. You did." Then, to Brunvig: "Better put the cuffs on him, Ole. He's the guilty man!"

"Guilty?" Hollister strangled. "Me?"

I said: "Yeah, you. Guilty of double murder—because you're the guy who shot the Mahatma, too."

He flinched as if I'd slapped him across the face. "You're out of your senses, Ransom!" he yelled. "That's crazy talk!"

"Clues are never crazy when there's evidence to back them," I said. "And I found plenty of both. To start with, the Mahatma who apparently croaked before my eyes had long-fingered, hairy hands, but when I got back after phoning headquarters from a pay station the corpse had short, stubby fingers. Then I touched an arm. It resisted me. Rigor mortis. But that was too soon for rigor mortis to set in. Which meant a wight had been pulled while I was out phoning. The dead man was not the one I'd watched dying."

"You're insane!" Hollister sneered.

I said: "No, I'm just clever. This real corpse with stubby fingers was the genuine Mahatma, and he'd been bumped off quite a while earlier—long enough to stiffen. Therefore somebody else impersonated him when I first drifted into his parlor, somebody in an excellent make-up job, including red grease paint on his chest to look like a bullet wound. This impersonator had enacted a role for the sole and exclusive purpose of accusing Lola Dulac of the killing—an accusation which would legally stick because it came ostensibly from the murdered Mahatma's lips."

"Poppycock."

"The same to you," I responded, "with freckles on it." I tapped him on the chest. "Now this corpse-switching routine had been pulled in my absence, but in Reginald Clancy's presence. Therefore Clancy was in on the deal up to his tonsils. He was working in cahoots with the dead Mahatma's impersonator, the man who was trying to frame Lola Dulac for the job. I could have pinched

Clancy at once, but making him squeal was something else again, and my time was short. So I left, knowing the cops would hold him. Then I started out to locate Lola, ask her if she knew of any enemies who would want to push her into the gas chamber."

"Melodrama!" Hollister scoffed.

"Yeah? You're the ham with the melodrama, pal. Your voice is theatrical enough to fit that resonant basso-profundo routine you gave me when you were pretending to be the dying Mahatma. Moreover, your fingers are long and meaty—as I found out when you tried to throttle me when we were fighting on your patio. Finally, you gave yourself dead away in your conversation. You made some bad slips, without even realizing you'd made them."

"Such as?" he asked.

"First you said: If Lola killed that bearded skunk. Later you mentioned her shooting him as he sat at his horoscope table. But I hadn't told you those things, so how could you know unless you'd been there yourself? And if you'd been there, you were the man behind the plot. As soon as you got the real corpse in place, you stripped off your makeup and scrambled out to your home in Laurel Canyon. You were waiting for me when I showed up. You'd had plenty of time for the trip. And just now, you shot Clancy so he'd never be able to confess and implicate you. He'd given his testimony to the dicks, and his usefulness to you was finished. You erased him. The shot you fired at me, though, was just window dressing, an attempt to make things worse for your wife. Actually, anybody who'd put a bullet through Clancy's conk would be too good a marksman to miss me.

"A fat lot of proof you've got for all this!" He showed me his strong white teeth. "You haven't mentioned motive. Why should I frame my own wife?"

I flipped away my butt. "Jealousy, envy, greed, opportunism—those were your motives. I noticed extension phones in your joint. Bedroom extensions. I think you must have listened in, the night Mahatma Guru phoned Lola and put the blackmail bite on her. You realized she had another husband—in marrying you she'd committed unwit-

ting bigamy. I imagine that made you sore, being an egotist. Also, you were envious of her screen success because you were only a character ham with a flair for makeup and impersonation, whereas she was a top star. And finally, she held the purse strings, held them tight. I learned that by asking you to bribe me, and all you had was a paltry hundred clams to offer."

"So what?"

"So you kept yapping about how you would stick by Lola regardless of her guilt. I'm guessing now, but I think you hoped to profit by the publicity you'd get: Actor Husband Loyal To Movie Star Murderess. Shucks, some studio might slip you a starring role on the strength of the notoriety. But mainly you craved to croak the man who'd been your wife's first hubby, and you wanted your wife to take the rap. Then your vanity would be salvaged. You'd inherit Lola's estate, and perhaps be a famous movie actor. How'm I doing?"

"Rotten. You've got no proof."

I said: "A paraffin test of your mitts will show if you fired a rod recently. A microdermal inspection will indicate if you've been wearing Hindu makeup. Fingerprints will prove you were barging around the Mahatma's house. And—"

THAT was as far as I got. He jumped back and yelled: "You'll never put me in jail!" and started running.

Ole Brunvig raised his .38, triggered it and missed. Then Lola Dulac came blipping from behind some props.

"I heard it all!" she cried. "And I still love you, darling. Oh-h-h, Pete, I'll protect you!" She tried to reach him, shield him. Romance, it's wonderful!

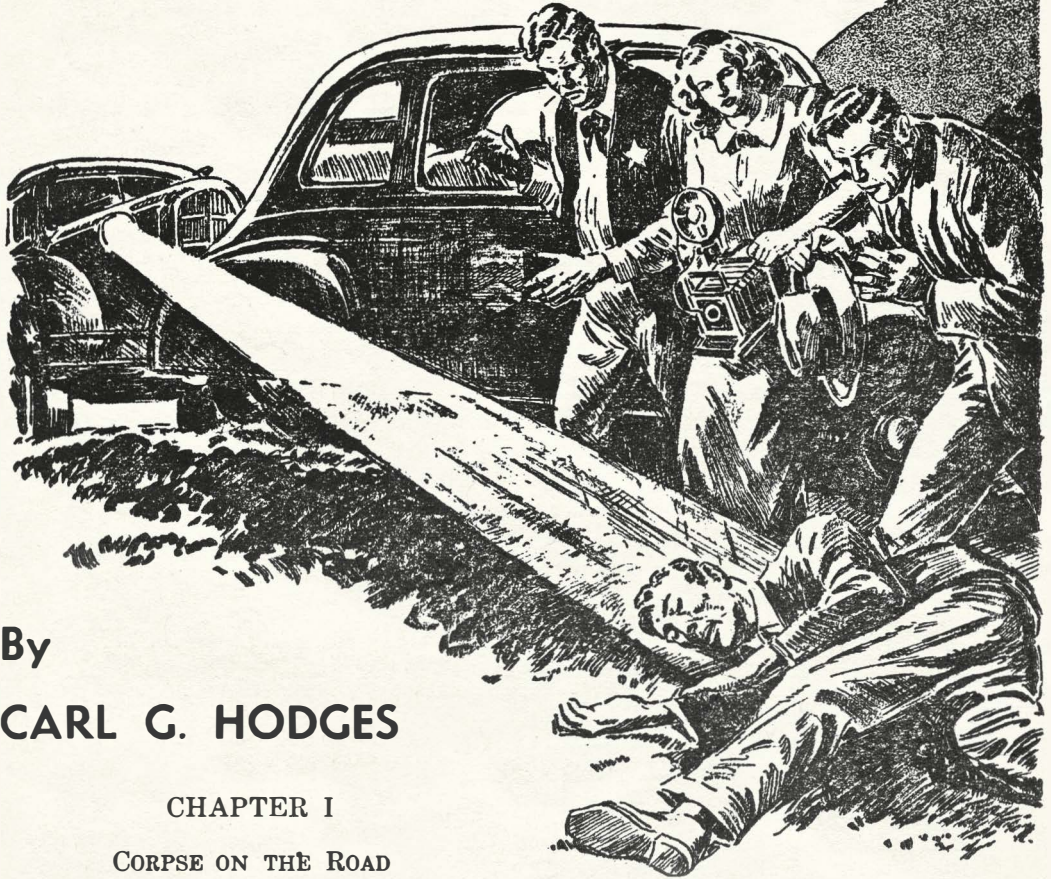
Only instead of shielding him she accidentally tripped him. He lurched, staggered, and came spang into Brunvig's line of fire. Brunvig's roscoe yammered: *Ka-Chee!* and the Hollister hambo bit the dust, deader than canceled postage.

"Well, what do you know!" Brunvig said. "I fogged him plumb through the spine. We save the trouble of a trial."

"Yeah," I growled, and went to the weeping Lola. I didn't intend to refund that hundred bucks, but I was ready to give her anything else, within reason.

A DWIGHT BERKE NOVELET

HIGHWAY HOMICIDE



By

CARL G. HODGES

CHAPTER I

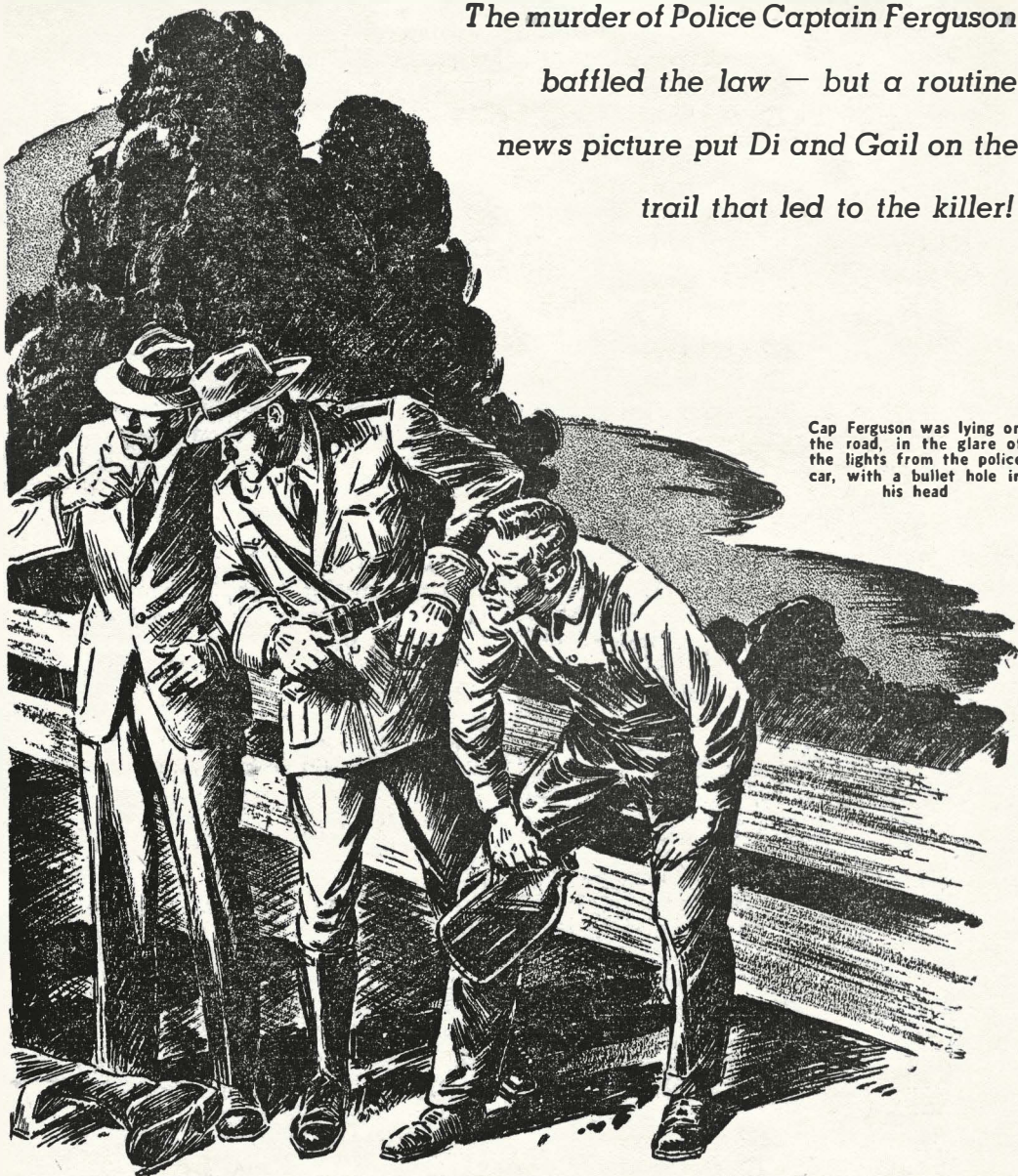
CORPSE ON THE ROAD

DWIGHT BERKE of the *Journal* sat up straight as he watched a state trooper leap suddenly through the side door of the Dalton Boys Tavern from the service station driveway outside. His eyes followed the natty khaki uniform as it raced through the dancing couples and disappeared into a telephone booth as the commotion of his entrance spread.

He watched a breathless farmer in overalls, carrying an empty glass jug, stumble into the room behind the trooper. The farmer's eyes were wide with excitement. He heard the staccato cry of "Murder!" from the farmer's lips and he grabbed his felt hat and jammed it down over his red hair as he got out of the booth. He nodded at his wife,

The murder of Police Captain Ferguson

baffled the law — but a routine news picture put Di and Gail on the trail that led to the killer!



Cap Ferguson was lying on the road, in the glare of the lights from the police car, with a bullet hole in his head

Gail, and Howard Coe, newscaster for WTAX.

"We can forget about the softball champs," he said. "We got a murder."

He leaped across the floor into the swelling group around the man with the jug. His wife, her four-by-five camera slung over her shoulder, was at his heels and Coe wasn't far behind.

Di grabbed the farmer's arm. "Did

you say murder?"

"Sure as blazes," the farmer said, and he went into a recital, like a ham actor in summer stock, milking the drama dry. "My name is Olaf Johnson. I live half a mile up on Route One Twenty-three, with my wife, Gladys. That's the black top. The road, not Gladys. I was walking down here to get my jug of beer. I was walking along the shoulder, swing-

ing my jug, payin' no never mind, when all of a sudden I stumbled—"

"Get to it, man! Get to it!" Berke snapped.

The farmer frowned but continued his starring role. "I stumbled. It was something soft. I lit a match. I only had one, and it blew out quick. But I knowed him. He didn't have his uniform on, but I knowed him right off. It was Cap Ferguson!"

Di whistled softly and looked at Gail. "Beth's boy friend goes through D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge and comes home with a mechanical leg and a gallon bucket full of medals and then cashes in his chips on a township road."

He looked sharply at the farmer. "In 'Forty-two Ferguson was Captain of the Homicide Detail at City Hall. When he got back from service with that artificial leg, he took over as captain of the traffic detail for the state police. He got out of service a little over a month ago. How come you recognized him so quick—out of uniform—on a township road at night in the light of one match that went out quick?"

Johnson flushed. "Couple days ago Ferguson gave me a ticket for speeding. Cost me eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents in J.P. court. I don't forget guys like that."

Di grinned. "How'd you know he was murdered? Maybe a car hit him?"

Johnson said, "It wasn't no car that hit him. It was a bullet, square between the eyes. And there wasn't no gun around. That makes it murder, don't it?"

Di said, drily, "You saw a surprising lot by the light of one match that went out quick."

GRADY DALTON broke into the group then. He was the surly, saturnine one of the two brothers who had run their Dalton Boys name and a modern version of a Western saloon into a fortune during the war years.

"Come on, break up this clambake! You're bothering the customers."

Di said, "There's been a murder, Grady. Cap Ferguson."

"Who?"

"Cap Ferguson. A man who fought in a motar battalion in France while you

and Bob stayed home and drew beer and got fat."

Dalton's lip curled. "So he was a hero. And now he's a croppie. We'll have one minute of silent prayer for the sap." His voice was raw. "I think he was a sap. I hated his gizzard. I'm tickled pink. Now clear the floor."

He rudely shoved men away with his brawny arms. His was a brute strength, even in a tailor-made tuxedo.

Di whispered to Gail, "Keep track of things here, Toots. I'm using the pay phone outside to call the *Journal*. Be ready to travel with that four-by-five." He left her and hurried to the telephone in the service station outside.

When he returned, the state trooper had completed his phone call and was talking to the farmer who had discovered Ferguson's body.

"How far away is the body?"

"Quarter of a mile," said Johnson. "Halfway between here and my place. I'll show you."

Berke butted in, with Gail at his side. "How's about riding along?"

The trooper said, "Who are you?"

Di grinned. "Dwight Berke of the *Journal*. This is my wife, Gail. She takes news pictures."

"Everytime anybody in Sangamon County gets bumped off, you and that wife of yours get there before the cops. How come you're Johnny-on-the-spot, here?"

"We covered the softball championship game at Municipal Stadium. Gail took the pictures and I wrote the story. After it was over, we ran into Howard Coe and he was so tickled about the WTAX team winning the State championship, he offered to buy us a drink." He turned to Coe with a grin under his laughing eyes. "You better pay that check or Dalton'll sue you."

Coe chuckled. "One on the house won't break him up."

The trooper said, "I'm Ed Lonergan. Cap was my boss. We ought to get the killer who bumped him off. But we're strictly traffic boys. I had to call Sheriff Couch. Cap was killed in the county, outside the city limits."

"Fine," said Di, "in a couple years more, Couch will find out that Cain killed Abel."

Howard Coe was suddenly at their heels as they climbed into the sleek police car with the proud state seal in gold leaf on the doors.

"I roomed at Beth Jasper's rooming house next to Ferguson. He was a good officer and a gentleman. I'd like to help in any way I can."

When they got to the scene of the crime, there wasn't much to see. Cap Ferguson, dressed in a lightweight brown garbardine, without a vest, was lying on his side on the shoulder of the black top road. His clothes weren't rumpled and his neatly knotted four-in-hand wasn't even awry, but he was dead all right. Lying there in the glare of the state police car and the sheriff's official car, he logically could have curled up for a nap and gone to sleep, except for the hole that pierced his forehead, between the eyes.

Fat Sheriff Bill Couch was strutting around officiously, squinting his heavy-lidded eyes in ostentatious concentration. He wasn't used to murder, but he tried to freeze a blase look on his beefy face.

While Gail's flash bulbs were popping, Di grinned at Couch. "What's your guess, Sheriff?"

Couch said, ponderously, "Ferguson was plugged by a man who knows how to shoot. Square between the eyes. But he wasn't killed here. He was bumped off some place else, brought in a car, and his body dumped in this place."

"How do you figure that?"

"Easy. Look at Ferguson's hands. Inside the palms. You can see black smudges, and tiny grains of that shiny white talc they coat new rubber auto floor mats with."

Di grinned. "Then we know that the man who bumped off Ferguson was driving a car with a new rubber floor mat. That your idea?"

"Yeah. But it could have been Ferguson's own car and the killer made his get away in it after he dumped Ferguson's body here."

The state trooper said, "He won't get far. We can trace Cap's car easy by the State seals on the doors and the special license plates."

Couch said, stiffly, "We don't even know, of course, that Ferguson came out

here in his own car."

Di said, "Cap had an artificial leg, Couch. He wouldn't walk all the way out to this spot. He'd be driving a car, all right."

The sheriff said, "We can figure the angles later. We've seen everything. We'll order the coroner to haul him in. Then we can go to work."

THE state trooper got into his car and Di and Gail and Coe and the farmer got in with him.

The trooper said, "I'll take a fast run out to the Y; maybe we can spot Cap's car."

Di said, "Then we can go back to the Dalton Boys. My coupe's parked by the softball park."

"Mine's parked at the service station," said Coe, the newscaster.

Di asked the trooper, "Loneran, how long do you figure Cap has been dead?"

"Not over an hour. I saw a few dead Krauts at Bastogne. I'd say he was bumped off about nine."

"I saw a few dead Japs. My guess is about the same."

"Aw-aw!" The trooper braked the speeding car as his headlights bathed a car parked a hundred feet short of the Y on the shoulder of the road. "That's Ferguson's car," he said, and pulled off the road and braked to a stop behind it.

Loneran got out and circled all around the car, his flashlight searching on the ground. Then he came back to the car.

"Ignition key in the dash. Cap didn't expect to be away long. Looks like he might have had a date with somebody to meet him here."

Di said, "Any tire tracks on the shoulder?"

"Only Ferguson's."

Di said, "Maybe you're right, Loneran. Maybe Ferguson had a date with somebody. Came out here and parked, and waited. Then somebody showed up, and killed him. But we got no way of telling whether the person who made the appointment killed him or whether it was somebody else. Only thing we do know is that the guy that bumped him off didn't want his body found here. Why? Maybe we better take a look."

They all piled out of the car and in-

spected the scene. And Gail caught her heel in a hole on the shoulder of the road and fell, her four by five nearly crashing to the ground before she grabbed it.

"Whew!" she said.

Di peered at the hole, about two inches square and a foot deep. "What's that for?"

Coe grinned. "It's a hole made by a surveyor's take, Di. There's been a contract let for resurfacing Route One Twenty-three and the highway engineers have been working here. I had that on my news broadcast on WTAX the other day."

Loneragan said, "Let's go. We'll head back to the Dalton Boys and I'll notify Couch that we've found Cap's car."

Olaf Johnson trudged away toward his home and the rest of them returned to the Dalton Boys. Loneragan drove his car up on the service station driveway, behind the service station office. They all got out and Howard Coe stopped beside his own coupe, parked behind the wash house. He opened the door, and turned to Di.

"If there's any way I can help, let me know."

Di had his foot on the bumper and he said to Gail, "I'll phone the story to the city desk while you pick up the coupe. Then we'll high-tail your pictures into the lab so we can make the deadline." He felt the heat of the radiator in the humid air and he moved away toward the tavern, mopping his face. Coe drove away.

Di phoned his story into rewrite. He gave only the meat. In answer to questions, he said, "Sure, there's plenty of guys would like to see Ferguson six feet under. Grady Dalton for one. He was a dick for Homicide before the war, till Ferguson kicked him off the squad for taking hush money. Then, there's Johnny Nick. He runs the service station right alongside the Dalton Boys Tavern. Ferguson sent him to the pen on a rap in '41. Nick won't mourn at Ferguson's funeral."

Rewrite said, "Cripes, that's two suspects already and the corpse ain't cold yet."

Di hung up the phone and walked outside. Gail hadn't shown up with the

coupe so he moved down the cinder path toward the darkened stadium where the softball championship had been played. He could see his coupe standing alone in the shadows under a huge Chinese elm tree.

Then, his heart flopped over. That feeling of nervous butterflies was in his stomach. He could see the coupe and he could see that the door on the driver's side was open.

A terrified scream rang in his ears and he saw a burly form leap across the green and slam a blow down on Gail's head. Gail's slender form fell to the grass and her shadowy assailant grabbed something near her body, slung it around in the air and dashed it on the ground.

Di began to run. His eyes strained in the dark as he raced toward the coupe. His breath burned his lungs as fear gave wings to his feet. The dread menace of death was in his brain.

CHAPTER II

STOLEN PICTURES



HEAD of Berke the shadowy form that had crushed Gail down turned crazily. He heard Di's pounding feet. He leaped away into the darkness and his form darted between a lane of trees.

Di fumbled at his armpit and his gun was in his hand. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the attacker's running form and he squeezed the trigger, praying the missile would find its mark. He cursed softly as the figure vanished. He halted and fired again. The roar of his gun echoed against the trees. The bullet missed.

He ran and knelt by Gail's quiet body and gathered her in his arms. Her eyes were closed and she was moaning softly. He rubbed her wrists and slapped her face tenderly. She stirred, gasped and tried to wrench away. Suddenly she was beating Di in the face with both fists, struggling to escape his embrace.

"Hold it, Toots! I'm on your side. Remember?"

She sat up, and her hand went to the mass of waves piled high on her head

and she winced when she felt the bump.

"Somebody slugged me, Di! Somebody slugged me in the dark."

"I know that," he said. "I'm wondering who, and why?"

"I can't help you there, Di. I didn't see his face."

She fumbled hastily for her four by five and the canvas bag in which she carried the exposed plates. Both were gone.

They found them ten feet away, lying on the grass. Both slides had been pulled out of each plate holder. Gail fumed, "The plates we took of Ferguson's body are ruined! Who on earth would slug me just to keep those pictures out of the paper?"

"Maybe somebody knows that something is in those pictures that will point to the killer." Di frowned. "This is getting nasty. From now on, Toots, you hang on to my coat tails. The man who plugged Ferguson will kill again."

The next morning, Gail was at her desk, inspecting the three-column cut on the sport page that showed the action around home plate in the fifth inning when Steve Duzak, of the WTAX team, had slid into home with the winning run and had broken his wrist. The picture showed most of the crowd in the home plate section and even the three-column cut showed myriad expressions of surprise, excitement, and shock on the spectators' faces, the they saw the play that scored the only run of the game and that clinched the softball championship for the radio-sponsored team.

Di came back from a trip to the sheriff's office. He shrugged. "If we'd sent those pictures of Ferguson's body in to the *Journal* by a cab driver like we did those of the softball game, we might have a worthwhile clue. The way it is, there's not much to go on."

"Couch find out anything?" Gail asked.

"The coroner got the slug out of Ferguson. It was a twenty-two bullet. The sheriff made a trip this morning out to the Y and he found the ejected cartridge. That proves it was an automatic. Couch figures that the gun used was a Colt Woodsman Sport Model. It's got a four-and-one-half-inch barrel instead of

a six-and-one-half, like the regular Woodsman. The Sport Model would be easier for a killer to carry."

"Isn't it unusual for a killer to use a twenty-two?"

Berke nodded. "Yeah. But the Woodsman is a real target job and the guys who use 'em can hit what they aim at. Ferguson's killer plugged him squarely between the eyes."

Gail frowned. "Wasn't there anything in Ferguson's pockets that would give a lead?"

"Not much. A wallet, keys, cigarettes, a few coins and a memorandum book that was brand new. Had one name written in it. 'J. Peter Baxter, Eight-five-oh.'"

"Who's he?" Gail asked.

"I don't know," Berke said. "Neither does Couch. But he figures that maybe this Baxter is the man Ferguson had the appointment with. Eight-fifty could be the time they were supposed to meet. Lonergan and I both think he was killed around nine o'clock.

"Can't we check on Baxter?" Gail suggested. "Phone book, city directory?"

"Couch did that. He even called the metropolitan papers. He figured if the guy was important he might be on one of the subscription lists. No soap."

"Anything else on Ferguson's body?"

"They cleaned out his pockets with a vacuum cleaner gadget," Berke answered. "About all they found was a bent second hand off an alarm clock and a one-inch patch of latex—sheet rubber. How anybody can make clues out of that, I'll never know."

BERKE suddenly looked at his own wrist watch and then pursed his lips in a soft whistle.

Gail smiled. "Sounds like an idea hit you right hard. What is it?"

"That eight-five-oh in the back of Baxter's memorandum book couldn't have been a reference to a meeting time."

"Why?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson. How could Ferguson make arrangements to meet anybody at eight-fifty? He didn't carry a watch and there isn't a clock on his car dash."

He started out of the office. Gail grabbed her four-by-five. "You've got that look in your eye, darling. When that happens, it's a good idea to have a camera handy."

The Springfield Target Club had basement meeting rooms and a target range in the basement of the Masonic Temple and it was here that Di and Gail entered just before noon. A sunbrowned youth in a canary-colored T shirt was at the reception desk, nonchalantly putting twenty-two cartridges in clips of ten.

Di said, "We're from the *Journal*. Do you have a membership list that I can look at?"

The youth pulled a black book out of a drawer and slid it across the desk. "You can look if you want, but who are you looking for? I can tell you whether they belong."

"Johnny Nick, the man that runs the service station next to the Dalton Boys Tavern."

"Yeah, he belongs. Fact is, he's inside now, on the target range. He ranks third on the targets in this man's town." He paused. "Second, since Cap Ferguson got bumped off."

"I'd like to talk to Nick. May I go in?"

"Sure. That door."

Di opened the door and ushered Gail into the long, narrow, low-ceiled room. Fifteen feet forward a low rail two feet high extended from wall to wall. In front of the rail was a plain table. At the end of the long room, under spotlights, two black and white bull's eye targets were fastened to the wall.

Two men stood at the rail, in firing position, legs apart with the right slightly in front, their bodies angled forward to the right facing the targets, their weapons extended at full arm's length, at eye level. They were firing rapid fire, their weapons barking with menacing spits of flame. One of the two target men was Howard Coe.

Gail said, surprised, "Howard, I didn't think you could hit a barn if you were inside it."

Coe turned around, shock on his handsome face. But he was careful to hold his gun on the target as he turned his body to stare at the unexpected visitors.

His companion was not so careful. He

whirled around. His Woodsman barked and spat a slug. The whistling lead sang past Di's head and ricocheted off the rough stone walls.

"Nick," snapped Coe, "you know the rules! Never turn a loaded gun off the target. You might have killed Di."

Nick was short, skinny and surly. "Heck, he hadn't ought to of brought a skirt down here. That's ag'in' the rules, too."

Coe placed his Woodsman carefully on the table by the rail and came forward to meet Di. "I'm sorry," he said. "That shot could have killed you. Nick should have been more careful."

Di said, grimly, "I'm not too sure it was an accident."

Nick growled. "It was an accident, wise guy. When I shot at something, I hit it."

"Cap Ferguson was killed with a twenty-two. It might be interesting to compare the slug they took out of Cap with one from your gun. You had plenty of reason to hate him, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. I hated him. He put me in stir." His smile was oily and ugly. "But if you start comparing bullets, mister, you're wasting your time. This ain't my gun. All the guns here belong to the Club and they're all alike. They're all Woodsmans."

COE interrupted the conversation. He glanced at Di and said, proudly: "Di, I'm no slouch with a twenty-two, myself. I could have killed Ferguson, if ability to fire a twenty-two is the only requirement for guilt."

Nick snickered evilly. "You? You rank Number One but you can't shoot man to man. You would owe me four bits on that last clip if you weren't too tight to bet."

Gail said, "We know that you didn't kill Ferguson. Howard, because you were at the soft ball game."

"Coe," Di said, "you're on the radio a lot. Does the name of J. Peter Baxter mean anything to you?"

"No. I don't think so. Should it?"

Di said, "Your frequency is eight hundred and fifty kilocycles, isn't it?"

"Yes. But what's that got to do with it?"

Nick broke in. "I remember the name."

He was some kind of a screwball attorney. He advertised on your program, Coe."

Coe paused. "Maybe a spot announcement. You see, Di, I don't have a regular sponsor. My half hour broadcast is broken up by spot announcements. I have hundreds of different ones every month. But I can check back and find out if I had any announcements by this—"

"Baxter," said Di, "J. Peter Baxter."

They went to radio station WTAX and Coe painstakingly searched through his files for copy on Baxter's announcements with no success. The program director, however, was able to furnish the information that single spot announcements of J. Peter Baxter had been used on the news broadcast for a week from June 8th to 15th, two months previously.

"How did Baxter pay for it? Cash or check?"

The program director referred Di to the business office of the station. Here he got the information that Baxter's copy and cash to pay for it had been received by mail. The address which had been given was:

J. Peter Baxter, Attorney at Law,
812 East Monroe, Centerville

Di took Gail by the arm. "Come on, Toots. We drive to Centerville and have a talk with J. Peter. Maybe we're getting warm."

Coe ushered them out into the station waiting room just as a pleasant, plump woman entered from the corridor. Her eyes were red and had a sober lifelessness to them.

Di said, quietly, "Gail and I offer our sympathy, Beth."

Beth Jasper smiled sadly. "Thank you both," she said. "You're very kind. But I feel empty—here. I can't help but think that Cap's only gone away on a trip, like when he left for service. It doesn't seem to me that he'll never—" Her eyes were dead-looking in her face.

And then she fought back her emotions and turned to Coe. "Howard," she said, "will you be kind enough to serve as a pall bearer?"

Coe took both her hands in his. "Kind, Beth?" he asked softly. "Honored is the

word. Certainly, I will."

Di and Gail left the building with Beth Jasper. Di said, "This is hardly the time, Beth, but I'm hunting an answer or two. You and Cap were going to be married? When?"

"I wanted to marry him before he went into service. He didn't want to, because he was afraid he might not come back."

"How about Coe? You had dates with him while Cap was gone?"

She smiled, tenderly. "Not dates, Di. We are all adults. Cap was gone, I was lonesome, Howard was kind. A show, a movie occasionally, that was all."

Di grinned. "Did Cap fancy himself as an amateur watchmaker?"

"No. But he was a confirmed tinkerer. He had a shop in the basement of the house." Her eyes were glistening with moisture. "He had a lathe and a drill press and a band saw rigged up. He was always making bookends and ash trays and what-nots for the house."

Beth left them to catch a bus back to her rooming house. Gail said. "Di, where'd you get the idea that Cap was an amateur watchmaker, Hawkshaw? Just because there was a bent second hand in his pocket?"

Di grinned mysteriously. "There's a little matter of timing mixed up in this murder, Toots, and that second hand might lead us to an answer or two. Maybe after we talk to J. Peter Baxter, we'll know those answers."

CHAPTER III

NARROW ESCAPE



CENTERVILLE was nearly eighty miles away. Number 812 East Monroe was a two story brick building, the ground floor of which was occupied by a cut-rate drug store and the upper floor was tenanted by dentists, insurance agents and others whose needs required only small, uppretentious suites.

They could not find J. Peter Baxter. They hunted up the rental agent at the local bank and made inquiries. The rental agent was cooperative.

"Baxter was a tenant at Eight-twelve

a month or so ago. He was an attorney. A patent attorney."

"A patent attorney?" Di's eyes widened and he winked at Gail. "Toots, maybe we've hit the jackpot." To the agent he said, "Did he leave a forwarding address?"

"No. He had very little business. And he didn't attend to that. He wouldn't even be in his office for days at a time. He'd come in occasionally to pick up his mail and then he'd be off again."

"What did Baxter look like?"

The rental agent grinned. "If you'll pardon me, I think Baxter was a little bit wacky. He looked like a ham actor, and not even a good ham actor. He wore spats and striped trousers and a fawn-colored vest. He had horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like an owl and a hat that was too small for him. Sat up on top of his head like a bump on a log. And he had a scar on his face. Ran from his right ear about half way down to the point of his chin."

Di said, "If you hear anything of his whereabouts, will you let me know?"

The rental agent agreed readily.

They started back to Springfield in the coupe. As they neared it, Gail turned on the car radio to catch the news broadcast over WTAX. And they looked at each other with shock as they heard Howard Coe's perfect voice boom in over the speaker:

Coe's voice said, "Sheriff's deputies, acting under instructions from Sheriff William Couch, have located the murder weapon used in the killing last night of Cap Ferguson. It is a Colt Woodsman Automatic Sport Model of twenty-two caliber. Ballistics experts of the State's mobile laboratory have testified that the bullet which killed Ferguson was fired from the gun found by the law officers."

Di fumed. "Cut out the drama, bub. Who did it?"

The radio went on. "The owner of the gun is named as John Nick, the operator of a service station adjacent to the Dalton Boys Tavern on the southern outskirts of the city, approximately a quarter of a mile from the spot where Ferguson's dead body was found at ten o'clock last night.

"Nick admits ownership of the murder weapon, but denies any connection

with the crime. Sheriff Couch is confident that the officials will eventually secure a full confession and he stated that Nick's motive might have been revenge for conviction of Nick by Ferguson on a burglary charge several years ago. Nick is being held in the county jail without bond."

Gail smiled, ruefully. "We go kiting off eighty miles looking for a Shakespearean nitwit with the impossible name of J. Peter Baxter while the real killer was right under our noses."

Di said, "Johnny Nick might be dumb, but he's not dumb enough to leave a murder weapon lying around loose for a dumb kluck like Couch to find."

"Of course, you'll swear that Nick is innocent. You and the cops never agree on a murder pinch."

"You said it, Toots. Nick wouldn't have nerve enough to commit murder."

"Maybe he had nerve enough to try to bump you off at the target range? Remember that slug? Remember my getting conked on the head and the pictures stolen? Nick could have done that."

Di pushed his hat back off his red hair. "He could, at that."

They turned off the hard road, then, and Di piloted his coupe down the black top road that paralleled the river. They sped past the cluster of hunting and fishing cottages along the river, maintained by Springfield outdoor enthusiasts and then angled off the black top toward the concrete highway into the city.

Gail's voice had an edge of fear. "Take it easy, darling. Pull over." She pointed through the windshield. "This driver thinks he's Barney Oldfield or Cannon-ball Baker."

DI LIFTED his foot off the gas and the coupe slowed as he watched the big black sedan tearing down the black top road toward them. The big car was traveling sixty and the black top wasn't wide enough for that kind of driving. Di slowed up more, and edged over toward the shoulder. He managed a meager S curve and straightened out.

And then he twisted the wheel viciously to the right. He went over the shoulder with his right wheels in desperation as the big sedan powered straight for

them. Di's breath stuck in his throat and his heart stopped beating. The black juggernaut was on them, wheels glinting.

A smash was imminent. Di went into the ditch, wheels bumping, canted crazily at a thirty degree angle. He had to fight to hold the steering wheel.

The big car's engine blasted power in his ears as it sped by. The whistle and swoosh of its tires was a symphony of death missed by a whisker.

Berke put the coupe back on the road. "That reckless fool! He was in an awful hurry to go some place."

Gail had a perpendicular pucker on her brow. "That 'he'," she said, "was Grady Dalton or I'll eat the steering wheel. And it looked to me as if he wasn't just going some place. He aimed that car at us just like he'd aim a gun."

Di said, "Why would Grady Dalton try to sideswipe us?"

"I don't know. But that was Grady Dalton. I got the last three numbers of his license, six-seven-three. It was a black Acme. We can check at City Hall."

"I'll do that little thing, too. And if it *was* Grady Dalton, I'll punch him in the nose."

They drove into Springfield by way of the street on which Beth Jasper's rooming house was situated. Di saw Ed Lonergan coming down the steps toward a State police car parked by the curb. He was carrying a metal box about a foot square and a foot deep by a metal handle.

Di pulled over to the curb and stopped. "It didn't take long for Couch to nab Ferguson's killer."

Lonergan grunted. "Couch went off half-cocked. I tested the slug they took out of Cap and the cartridge case found on the black top near Cap's car with the gun they found in Nick's office. The slug went through Cap's skull and wasn't definite evidence but the cartridge case tied up with Nick's gun."

"What more do you want?"

"A lot more. A devil of a lot more. Johnny Nick's got the best alibi I ever heard a killer have."

"For instance?"

"From eight to nine last night Johnny Nick was in the Target Club at the Masonic Temple. They had some kind

of a round-robin tournament and Nick was in charge of it. He never left the place for two hours. He's got twenty-five witnesses that prove he couldn't have killed Ferguson, including the Mayor, the Chief of Police, and the State's Attorney."

Di chuckled. "That ought to be iron-clad. Where's Nick now?"

"Couch had to let him go. Nick raised cain and wanted his gun back. Said he needed it for protection at his service station. He's open twenty-four hours a day. Couch is holding the gun as Exhibit A. The Target Club lent Nick a Woodsman till he gets his own gun back."

"Where will Couch turn now?"

"He's already turned. He's got a dragnet out for Grady Dalton."

"Dalton?"

"Yeah. Nick swears he sold Dalton a new rubber floor mat for his car two days ago. And Couch figures that Dalton could easily have found out where Nick keeps his gun and borrowed it long enough to kill Ferguson without Nick knowing anything about it."

"Where's Dalton?"

"On the lam, I guess. He was seen leaving town in his car a short time ago, and he hasn't been seen since. We put a call on the police broadcast and Coe put it on the air over WTAX. So far, it looks like Grady Dalton's gone into thin air."

WHEN Di asked about Dalton's license number, Lonergan consulted a memo book. "Illinois four-oh-eight-dash-six-seven-three, Black Acme sedan, 'Forty-one model. Why?"

"He tried to shove us off the road out by the hunting cottages along the river. Start from there." Di's eyes glinted. "What's in that box you're lugging, Lonergan? You a Fuller Brush man on the side?"

Lonergan's Irish smile widened. "Naw. This is a traffic counter that Cap was working on in his workroom. You've seen dozens like it out on the State highways. A flexible tube lies on the concrete and when a car runs over it, the force of the air operates a diaphragm that actuates a counting mechanism in the box. They are used to count the number of vehicles that pass

any given location in any given period of time."

Di showed interest. "This traffic counter—it doesn't happen to have a clock in it, does it?"

"Yeah. They all do. They're all about the same size and shape and work on the same principle but the old-fashioned kind work with a storage battery to furnish the power for the operating mechanism. That's where the one Cap was working on is different. He used the power of an alarm clock to run the mechanism. He hooked a rubber diaphragm up directly to the second-hand escapement. For every two clicks of the counter, the second hand counts one car. Cap's idea is sound. A storage battery runs down and the count isn't always accurate, where a clock runs for eight days and is accurate as all git out."

Di frowned. "How come the second hand only moves on every two clicks?"

Lonergeran grinned. "A car runs over the flexible tube on the pavement and the pressure of air operates the diaphragm. The reason they wait for two clicks to operate the counter is that the front wheels and the back wheels of any car operate the diaphragm. Two clicks mean that only one car has passed."

"This diaphragm? It's made of thin latex?"

"Right. That's how come Cap had that patch of latex in his coat pocket along with that old second hand. And that's why I came here to Miss Jasper's to see if the traffic counter he was working on was still in his workroom. I had a hunch that maybe his killer had lured him into bringing the traffic counter out on Route One-twenty-three last night. I was wrong. Beth Jasper says it's never been out of the house. Cap was pretty secretive about it."

Gail put in her two cents' worth. "What motive does Couch think Grady Dalton had for killing Ferguson? Because Cap had Dalton kicked off the force back in 'Forty-one?"

"That, and general cussedness on Grady's part. Couch found out that the bad blood between 'em got worse since Cap got back from service and took over the traffic detail. Cap got in the habit of using the Tavern phone to call in to headquarters. Grady kicked about it

and a couple weeks ago, they wound up in a fight. Grady got the worst of it and he let it be known he was going to cut Cap down to his size."

"Kind of a juvenile motive, don't you think?"

"Maybe. But Grady's a surly cuss. And he did fly the coop. Guys that got nothing to worry about, don't take it on the lam, do they?"

At four o'clock that afternoon, Di had a phone call from Lonergan.

"Newshound," the state trooper said, "thought I'd give you a ring. A car bearing Grady Dalton's license number was seen right after noon parked in front of his fishing lodge on the Sangamon River about eight miles from here. He is one of the owners, along with a half a dozen other fishing addicts from Springfield. We lost him, but we're a cinch to find him before long."

Di said, "There's something else I'd like to know, Lonergan. That traffic counter you toted away from Cap Ferguson's workshop. Was it really the same one that Cap Ferguson has been working on?"

Lonergeran hesitated. "How'd you figure that out? No, it wasn't. It was a regular traffic counter that works with a storage battery. I told you they all look alike. I didn't find out it wasn't Cap's until I took the lid off."

"Where's the one that Cap was working on, then?"

"I'll be hanged if I know."

CHAPTER IV

KILLER AT BAY



SOON Di and Gail left the office for a sandwich at the Wagon Wheel, a restaurant near the building in which the studios of WTAX were housed. As they came out of the air-conditioned coolness of the popular eating place,

they met Steve Duzak. Steve had his wrist in a plaster cast and his arm in a sling. It was the first time they had seen the softball star since the championship game.

Di said, "That's what happens when an irresistible softball player meets an immovable object. How long before

you'll be able to play again?"

Before Duzak could answer, Howard Coe joined them. He grinned. "Anything new on the murder, Di?"

Di shook his head. "Not a thing except guesses."

Steve Duzak grinned. "Fishing for news, Coe? I thought you were supposed to broadcast it."

Coe noticed Duzak for the first time. "What happened to you? Break your hand on somebody's jaw? Or run into a door?"

Steve was crudely facetious. "Naw. Steamboat ran over it."

At eight o'clock that night, after watching the teletype that was bringing in the stories on the major league ball games of the day, Di went back to Gail's desk and looked over the picture that she had taken at the softball game.

She said, "Why so interested in that thing? Looking for a clue?"

A queer look came over his face and he leaped to his feet. "Clue? Gail! It was right in my lap for the last four hours and I didn't have brains enough to tumble to it." He grabbed his hat and cried, "Come on! I'm playing a red-hot hunch."

Gail grabbed her four by five and was at his heels when he ran out of the office. "Where we headed for?"

"The Dalton Boys. And we better get there, pronto!"

Three State police cars were pulled up on the driveway in front of the Dalton Boys Tavern. The neat khaki uniforms of the highway cops were spotted at strategic spots on the driveway, keeping back a crowd of milling spectators.

Di leaped out of the coupe and Gail was at his heels. They headed for the Tavern entrance and they met Sheriff Couch coming out. Di took his arm.

"What's up?"

Couch growled. "Dalton! Grady Dalton! He's been shot dead—right between the eyes. Just like Ferguson."

Di groaned. "Oh-ho! I was afraid of that."

"Huh?" grumbled Couch. "What you talking about?"

Di talked to the sheriff briefly and then rejoined Gail. They entered the Tavern, while Couch disappeared down the driveway toward the service sta-

tion office of Johnny Nick, plastered against the side wall of the Tavern.

The inside of the Tavern was dimly lighted. It normally did not open until eight o'clock and none of the shaded booth lights had been turned on. Grady Dalton's body lay at the base of the platform on which the frontier orchestra performed. He had a hole in the middle of his forehead.

This murder was inside the city limits and because of that, Inspector Fleming Morf of the Homicide Detail was in charge, aided by two plainclothesmen. Morf was a bullet-headed egotist with a crew hair cut and a button nose that made him look like a Nazi sub commander. Bob Dalton, the dead man's brother, was talking to Howard Coe in a soft, grief-filled voice. Di greeted them.

Morf was always publicity hungry and he saw an opportunity. "Berke!" he said, pompously. "You can say that I am in charge of the investigation now and I'll have the killer within twenty-four hours."

"Why waste twenty-four hours," said Di, curtly, "I can name the killer now."

Morf's eyes squinted. "Don't keep us waiting, wise guy. We're trembling with anticipation for your revelations."

Di grinned. "Talking in here is like talking in a barn. Let's go somewhere."

Morf said, "If you've got to be cozy, we can use Johnny Nick's office." He led the way through a side door that opened into Johnny Nick's service station office and the rest followed him. Gail and Howard Coe, Bob Dalton and the two detectives.

When they had all crowded into the tiny office, Sheriff Couch barged in from outside.

"What is this, a convention?"

Morf grunted. "Draw up a chair and let your feet hang, Couch. The wise guy's gonna solve two murders by remote control."

HOWARD COE was standing by the counter on which Johnny Nick's cash register stood. His handsome face was alive with interest.

"Come on, Berke, and give. This will be rare material for my news broadcast on WTAX. Who is the murderer?"

Di dropped the name into a stunned silence.

"You! Howard Coe! You killed both Cap Ferguson and Grady Dalton!"

Coe's mouth dropped open with a vacuous expression. "Me? Are you completely crazy?" He put his back against the counter and his fingers moved nervously along the edge. "Why should I kill Ferguson or Grady? Why?"

"You killed Cap Ferguson to get his traffic counter. It is a brand new principle on a gadget that is used by the highway and traffic department of forty-eight states and hundreds of cities. A patent on it would be worth a million bucks. That's why you killed Ferguson."

He went on. "Then, somehow, Grady Dalton stumbled on to your secret and he went out to the fishing lodge on the Sangamon which you both happen to own shares in and found Cap's traffic counter that you had hidden there. Then he came back here and was putting the bite on you for his share of the dough you'd made when you took out the patent in your own name. You had to kill him, too."

"Tell me more," Coe said scornfully. "You amaze me. If you weren't so completely fantastic, you'd be funny." His lips curled. "How did I do all the dirty work, screwball?"

"You planned well. You knew Cap was secretive about the whole thing. So you created a mythical patent attorney by the name of J. Peter Baxter and opened an office in Centerville. You played the part of J. Peter Baxter in clothes you used in the amateur production of 'Get-Rich-Quick-Wallingford' last summer. You mailed advertising into WTAX for radio spot announcements which you read on the air."

Di Berke continued. "Cap Ferguson, owning an invention that he knew was worth a mint of money, listened to your suggestion that he tune in on Baxter on eight hundred and fifty kilocycles. He did that, and subsequently wrote to Baxter's office in Centerville. You got the letters and arranged a meeting with Ferguson where he could demonstrate this traffic counter to you. Then you killed him."

Coe laughed. "And then hauled the body a quarter of a mile in my car be-

fore I dumped him out, I suppose?"

"That's right. Because the black smudge on the palms of Cap's hands was from the flexible rubber hose of the traffic counter. You had to make it appear as if it came from the rubber floor mat of an automobile. And you had to get his body away from the hole left in the shoulder by the stake to which the traffic counter was locked—the hole you said was left by a surveyor's stake."

"Finish it up, Hawkshaw. Then what did clever little me do?"

"You drove back here to the Tavern. Next you went to the softball game—it wasn't over yet—and you used that as your alibi. You made sure that Gail and I saw you at the game. The next morning you took Cap's traffic counter out to the fishing lodge and cached it, and put an old-style counter in Cap's workroom in Beth Jasper's rooming house. But your alibi is no good, Coe."

"Why? I was at the softball game. You saw me there."

"You were at the softball game, yes. But only for a part of it. You didn't even know that Steve Duzak broke his wrist sliding into home plate in the fifth inning. If you had seen the game from the beginning, you'd have known that."

Morf broke in. "Go on, amateur. It sounds good so far. Maybe you've got something."

"I have," said Di. "Because Coe wasn't at the game and he knew that the pictures Gail took would prove that he wasn't. He slugged her and exposed all the plates. Luckily, we'd sent the baseball picture into the *Journal* by a cab driver and Coe spoiled only the picture Gail took of Ferguson's body."

Morf said, "But Ferguson was definitely killed with Johnny Nick's gun. How do you explain that?"

"Easy enough. Coe was a member of the Target Club and so was Johnny Nick. Coe hung around here a lot and it is only reasonable to believe that he could find out where Nick kept his gun. He used it to kill Ferguson and returned it to Nick's office when he came back here after the murder." He paused. "Here's more. After we all went to see Cap's body, we came back here. The radiator on Coe's car was still hot. If

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The heavy sinker caught Jerry squarely in the temple

Dead Men CAN'T Swim

By HAL K. WELLS

Murder makes common cause with a stubborn mud cat to disturb the peaceful waters of shanty-boat land

IT WAS hot, with the humid, drowsy heat of a late afternoon in July. Tiny sweat bees hovered tantalizingly in front of Chet Reese's face as he crouched in a clump of willows at the top of the high, steep river bank.

In the water at the foot of the bank a shanty-boat was moored next to the

mouth of a deep, still creek that emptied into the river. Bill Gorham and Jerry Reese stood talking on the afterdeck of the boat.

Bill was tall and slouch-shouldered, with a drooping white mustache that added a lugubrious touch to his long face. Jerry, Chet's cousin and owner of

the shanty-boat, was clean-shaven, with skin weathered to the texture of wrinkled leather, and a small, wiry body that was as gnarled and tough as a hickory knot.

Chet brushed an irritable hand at the hovering sweat bees as he stared down at the shanty-boat with hard, impatient eyes. Would the two doddering old fools ever get through their eternal bickering and leave the boat?

Big Ike Scanlon was waiting for him in the back room of the poolhall at the crossroads village two miles away, and Big Ike was not the sort of person it was safe to keep waiting too long. Chet's throat still ached from the crushing grip of Big Ike's thick fingers.

"Trying to go light in my game, huh?" Big Ike had bellowed. "You crummy, sneaking jail-bird! I'll give you till sundown to get back here with them fifteen bucks. If you ain't here by then, you know what'll happen!"

Chet knew what would happen. Big Ike would come after him, and Big Ike's method of treating stud poker welchers was both brutal and direct.

There was only one place where Chet could get the money. That was from one of the hidden caches of crumpled bills that old Jerry Reese had tucked away in various places on the shanty-boat. That was where the money had come from to get into Big Ike's game. Chet had dipped into the hidden caches several times during the past six weeks without arousing Jerry's suspicions. There was no reason why he couldn't sneak out another fifteen dollars.

It should have been easy. This time of day Jerry usually left the boat to have a horseshoe pitching bout with Bill Gorham at Bill's riverside shack just around the bend. But today the late afternoon shadows were steadily deepening in the woods along the river, and the two old men still lingered on the boat.

AS USUAL, they were arguing. They argued about everything from politics to cribbage, but their pet subject for argument was Old Goliath, the giant, cross-eyed catfish that was a legend along that stretch of river. Their high-pitched, age-thinned voices came clearly

to Chet Reese's impatiently listening ears.

"Usin' two hooks on a line now, are you?" Bill jeered. "Why don't you go after Old Goliath with a harpoon and a shotgun and be done with it?"

"There ain't no reason why I can't use an extra hook if I've got a mind to," Jerry retorted testily. "Two hooks on a handline is legal in this state, which is more'n you can say for that three-hook gang I saw hid out at your shack the other day."

"I wasn't fishin' for Goliath with that three-hook gang," Bill said defensively. "I was usin' it to snoodle some frogs over at the pond."

Jerry snorted. "Oh, yeah? And since when did you start snoodlin' frogs with a baited hook? There was hunks of dried night-crawler on all three points of that gang. Not that it makes any difference. Old Goliath is too smart to ever go for anything as common as night-crawlers. He's choosy in his eating, that fellow is. You've got to have something different."

"Like that mess you've got mixed up in that pan, I suppose!" Bill commented scathingly. "Clotted chicken blood and limburger cheese mixed up in sour dough. It'd turn the stummick of a self-respectin' goat!"

Jerry's leathery face creased in a complacent grin. "Old Goliath ain't a goat," he said. "He's a catfish, and catfish have got peculiar tastes in victuals."

Chet stifled a groan as the argument crackled interminably on. He listened to the words without really paying conscious attention to their meaning. He had heard them all too many times before.

Old Jerry and Bill were vociferous enough rivals in any kind of a contest, but in the matter of Goliath their rivalry was almost fanatical. Their bets were confined to a nickel a game in horseshoes and cribbage, but they had a spanking five-dollar bet as to which of them would be the one to land the big catfish.

They had plenty of outside competition in their quest. Goliath had been outsmarting and outfighting the county's best fishermen for years. The big mud-cat's wide, ugly head bore the scars

of a dozen different hooks. One of them under the left eye drew the optic down on a slant and gave the weird illusion that the doughty old warrior was cross-eyed.

Goliath was no giant when compared to the monstrous channel-cats that haunt deep pools of the Ohio and Mississippi, but in this small river he was a veritable colossus. Estimates of his exact size varied with the excitability and alcoholic content of the fisherman. Most conservative opinion placed the weight of his powerful, chunky body at around forty pounds.

Events on that shanty-boat drew Chet's attention sharply back to the scene below him. Bill Gorham was leaving, but he was leaving alone. He paused midway along the narrow gangplank for a final word.

"So you won't come over for horseshoes today, huh?"

"Can't do it today, I tell you," Jerry answered. "I've got to clean this mess of perch, then wait till a fellow comes by for 'em. And after that I've got some shirts and stuff to wash out. Just save your horseshoe nickels till after supper. I'll bring the cribbage board over then and take 'em away from you."

Bill snorted in disgust, and started up the steep path. He passed within twenty feet of where Chet crouched in the willows, and passed out of sight along the narrow path that led through the woods to his shack.

Blank consternation filled Chet's mind as he stared down at Jerry puttering around the shanty-boat. Nine days out of any ten the old fool would have gone with Bill. But on this one day, when it was so vitally important that he get away from the boat, he was sticking to the place like a wood-tick to a hound's hide.

Chet fidgeted for ten minutes while Jerry worked at cleaning the mess of perch he had caught earlier in the afternoon, and his panic grew with every passing minute. Finally, he dared wait no longer. He clambered out of the willows and went down the path to the landing.

There was nothing pretentious about the craft moored in the creek mouth. It was merely a sizeable flat-bottomed

scow, with generous deck space fore and aft, and a tarpaper-covered cabin amidships that served as living-room, sleeping quarters, and kitchen. Jerry was just cleaning the last of the fish on the afterdeck when Chet came around the cabin. He grunted a terse greeting and went on with his work.

"How come you're not over pitchin' shoes at Bill's as usual?" Chet asked in a voice he tried to keep casual.

JERRY wrapped the cleaned fish neatly in a newspaper. "Got to stay here till a fellow comes by for these perch," he said.

"I'll stick around till the fellow comes." Chet offered. "I got nothin' else to do. You go on over to Bill's if you want to."

"Not today," Jerry said, shaking his grizzled head. "I told Bill I had to do some washin', but I was just stallin' him. I got something better than washin' to do. I've seen Old Goliath two-three times this past week, playin' around out there in the crick mouth. This is about the time of day he ought to be feedin'. And I've got just the kind of bait I bet he'll go for."

He hauled out a small pan of unpleasantly mottled and incredibly malodorous dough from under the fish-cleaning bench, and took down a hand-line from a peg on the side of the cabin. It was a sixty-foot length of strong trotline with a two-ounce dipsey sinker at the end and two large hooks attached by shorter lengths of the same line at five-foot intervals.

Chet watched in numb despair as the old man settled himself in the narrow space between the cabin wall and the rail on the creek side of the boat and started moulding a ball of dough on the first hook. Once Jerry started fishing for Goliath, dynamite itself wouldn't get him off the boat before dark.

There was already a distinct threat of approaching twilight in the green dusk of the woodland shadows. It wouldn't be long now before Big Ike would be on his way. When Big Ike set sundown as a time limit, sundown was exactly what Big Ike meant.

Chet cringed, not only from the threatened physical beating, but from a

new and even more terrifying thought. With Jerry here when Big Ike arrived, the old man's suspicions could easily be aroused as to where Chet had got the money to get into Big Ike's game in the first place. Jerry knew that Chet had no funds of his own.

Chet chewed his lower lip in an agony of indecision, then made up his mind. Trying to dip into one of the money caches while Jerry was on the boat was taking a long chance, but there wasn't any help for it. It was a chance that had to be taken.

"I think I'll fix me some grub," Chet said.

"Go ahead," Jerry answered. "There's some bread in the tin and some new rat-trap cheese I got over at the store this noon."

Chet went into the cabin. There were no windows in the wall between him and Jerry, but the wall was thin enough to transmit sounds easily. Chet took down the bread-can, banging it on the table loudly enough for Jerry to hear, then waited, tensely listening.

A minute later, he heard the sound for which he was waiting—a small, chunking splash that indicated that Jerry had tossed the weighted hand-line out into the creek mouth. Chet quickly reached with trembling fingers for the spot in the rear corner of one of the food shelves where an old coffee can held one of Jerry's money caches.

His heart hammered suffocatingly against his ribs as he took the top off and fished three crumpled fives from the bills inside the can. He started to pocket the money, then froze in stricken shock.

"Caught you, didn't I?" Jerry's voice rasped angrily from the open door behind him. "You thievin', no-good scum!"

Chet turned. Jerry was standing on the deck just outside the door. In his hands he held the small rifle that he often used for shooting soft-shelled turtles along the banks of the creek. It was only a single-shot .22, but at that point-blank range its tiny slug could be as deadly as a larger caliber.

"Put that money back in the can!" Jerry ordered.

Dazedly Chet obeyed. His trapped brain groped frantically for some plausi-

ble excuse to hand the old man, but he had been caught too flagrantly red-handed. There was no excuse.

"Thought I wouldn't catch on to you sneakin' my money out a little at a time, didn't you?" Jerry's voice crackled with righteous indignation. "I've known what you were doin' for the last week. I was just waitin' to catch you dead to rights. Now I've caught you, you're goin' back where you belong. The fellow who's comin' for those perch is Walt Temple. When he comes, he can take you back with him."

The mention of Walt Temple snapped Chet's brain out of its daze like the jolting shock of an electric current. Temple was the deputy sheriff who had sent Chet up the first time. Chet's lips tightened to a thin, straight line. Fury smoldered red and ugly in his narrowed eyes. He had had one bitter dose of jail life. He wasn't going to take another one, gun or no gun.

"Listen, Jerry," he pleaded huskily, "I know it looks bad, but you don't understand! Let me explain."

As he spoke Chet moved slowly toward the door, with the coffee can still held carelessly in his left hand. Jerry took a single step backward, then stopped. The muzzle of the little rifle tilted menacingly upward.

"Don't you try to rush me, Chet!" he warned tautly. "You take one more step and I'll let you have it right between the eyes! You can't explain nothin', and you know it."

CHET stopped in the doorway. His right hand groped along a small wall-shelf at the right of the door. There was a litter of miscellaneous fishing equipment on the shelf. Chet's fingers closed over a five-ounce, pyramid-shaped lead sinker.

"What did you want to do a thing like that to me for, anyway, boy?" Jerry's voice softened, and his faded blue eyes were sad. "You're only a second cousin, but you're all the kin I got. When you come out of jail six weeks ago after servin' your time for that store robbery, I took you in, and fed you, and gave you a place to sleep. I thought you'd learned your lesson. But I guess you'll never learn. You're just plain no

account, I suppose!"

"Maybe you're right, Jerry," Chet mumbled. "I had no business touching this."

He started to raise the coffee can in his left hand. Then, as though by accident, he let it slip from his fingers. Jerry's eyes automatically dropped for a brief second to follow the falling can. Chet whipped his right hand from behind him and hurled the heavy sinker with all his strength. It caught Jerry squarely in the temple.

The .22 barked, but the bullet went harmlessly over the cabin and into the woods. Chet leaped forward and wrenched the rifle from Jerry's limp hands as the old man fell. Chet's teeth bared in a snarl like that of a rabid animal as he stared down at Jerry's huddled body.

"Try to send me back to jail, will you," he grated. "Turn me over to the sheriff for stealing a few measly dollars from you! All right! I'll give you something to squawk to the law about. I'll take every last dollar you've got, now! I'll—I'll—"

Chet's voice faltered into silence. There was something about the utter motionlessness of Jerry's body that sent sudden fear rippling icily along his nerves. He stooped over the old man for a swift examination, then rose slowly and shakily to his feet.

"No!" he moaned. "No, Jerry! I didn't mean to do that! I swear I didn't!"

Jerry didn't answer. One of the sharp corners of the heavy lead sinker had crumpled his temple as if it had been an egg shell. Jerry wouldn't answer anyone again, ever. Jerry Reese was dead!

There was only one thought hammering through Chet's panic-stricken brain. That thought was of flight, to get as far away as possible before Walt Temple came and found Jerry's body. He turned to go, then stopped.

Greed fought with panic, and greed won. In his terror over Jerry's death, he had forgotten the money. It was right here on the boat, several hundred dollars, and all his for the mere taking. It would take only a few minutes to get it. Then he could be on his way.

He picked up the coffee can and

stripped it of its roll of bills, then stepped inside the cabin. He knew the location of two other caches. He had tapped both of them on previous occasions. One of them was a tobacco tin tucked under the bedding of Jerry's bunk. He fished it out, looted it of its sheaf of folded bills, and crammed the money into his pocket.

The other cache was in a fruit jar in a wall niche behind a battered bureau. He started to move the bureau, then whirled in sudden alarm. Someone was coming through the woods at the top of the river bank.

He raced to the door and peered cautiously around the corner of the cabin. He caught a glimpse of two figures through the green foliage. The sound of their voices came clearly through the drowsy stillness of the summer air. One was Bill Gorham's twangy drawl. The other was the deep, booming voice of Deputy Sheriff Walt Temple.

Chet stared around him with frantic, swiftly searching eyes, then groaned as realization struck him. The few minutes that he had delayed to strip the money caches had robbed him of his last chance to escape. He was trapped as hopelessly as a spider in a corked jug.

It was too late to climb the path to the top of the bank without running squarely into the advancing men. On either side of the path, high banks rose sheer from the water's edge. Getting away by taking to the water was out of the question. Chet could not swim.

He glanced down at the rifle, then abandoned the fleeting thought of using it as a weapon. He had no stomach for a gun-fight that would pit a .22 against Temple's .45, even if the little rifle were loaded, which it wasn't. Its single shot had been fired and he had no time to search for spare ammunition.

THE voices of the approaching men came nearer. Chet stared desperately down at Jerry's body. He couldn't leave it where it was, yet there was no place to hide it. If he tried to cover it with bedclothes from one of the bunks, Bill Gorham was sure to investigate. Then sheer desperation showed Chet the only possible way out.

He couldn't leave the boat, but Jerry's

body could. There was fifteen feet of deep, still water under the shanty-boat.

Chet went to work with feverish haste. He was riverman enough to know better than merely to dump the body over the side and expect it to sink of its own weight. With the lungs full of air as they were, it would float for hours, barely awash, before finally sinking.

There was a ten-pound iron hitching weight against the cabin wall that Jerry sometimes used as a trotline anchor. Chet lashed the weight firmly to Jerry's ankles with several yards of heavy trotline.

Gorham and Temple were coming down the path to the landing, but the cabin hid him from their view as he slid Jerry's body over the low rail. It entered the water with barely a splash, and dropped swiftly out of sight. Chet snatched up the blood-stained sinker that had crumpled Jerry's skull and dropped it into the water. He propped the rifle against the cabin wall, and returned the pan of malodorous dough to its former place under the bench.

Now the two men were crossing the gangplank as Chet took a last hasty look around him to see if he had overlooked anything. He gulped, and for a moment his heart seemed to stop beating. There was a line over the side, entering the water directly at the spot where he had dumped Jerry's body!

He realized too late what had happened. Jerry must have drawn in his hand-line before he got the rifle and came to the cabin door. The line had been on the deck when Jerry fell. One of its hooks had caught in his clothing, and Chet had been too frantically hurried in his work to notice it. The free end of the line was tied firmly to one of several spikes that had been driven inside the rail for that purpose.

Chet fought his shaking nerves back to something near normal. After all, there was no reason for anyone to suspect that it was anything but a drop-line, put over the side for ordinary fishing purposes. He wiped his perspiring face with his shirt sleeve and turned to greet Gorham and Temple as they came around the cabin.

"Where's Jerry?" Bill Gorham demanded. "He told me he was goun' to

stay here and wash some things out after Walt came and got his fish."

"He changed his mind," Chet said. "When I told him I'd stick around till Walt came, Jerry decided to go over to the pond and snoodle some frogs for supper."

"Oh!" Bill said disappointedly. "Walt dropped by my place and I came along with him, thinkin' maybe I could talk Jerry into comin' over for some horse-shoes after all."

Walt Temple jerked a heavy thumb toward the rifle leaning against the cabin wall.

"Thought we heard a .22 pop as we were coming along," he said.

"That was me," Chet answered. "I took a shot at a big turtle over there on the bank, but it was too far away. I missed clean."

He picked up the packaged fish from the bench.

"Here's your perch, Walt. Jerry forgot to tell me how much to charge you."

"Tell him I'll pay him next time I see him," Walt said.

The deputy sheriff tucked the fish under his arm and turned to go. Chet's tightly knotted nerves began to relax. Then Bill Gorham's excited voice broke in.

"Hey, Chet! You got somethin' on that drop-line!"

Chet turned, and stark, gibbering horror flooded his brain. Something was happening that couldn't possibly happen. The thing resting on the bottom, deep down in fifteen feet of water, was dead—and a dead man can't swim. Yet the line was moving in swift strong surges that rapidly took up the loosely coiled slack!

"What's the matter, Chet?" There was sudden suspicion in Walt Temple's hard voice. "You look like you're seeing a ghost."

The next minute the line went taut and Chet did see a ghost, a grisly, dead thing whose head and shoulders rose stiffly erect above the water twenty feet from the boat. For a long and horror-laden moment, Jerry's eyes stared blankly from his blood-streaked face. Then the thing sank again, and in the water beyond it there was a flash

of black-brown back and yellowish underbelly as a monster mud-cat broke the surface.

Chet realized then what had happened. In blind panic he whirled to make a break for it. He took only one step, before Walt Temple's big fist crashed into his jaw and blasted him into instant and utter oblivion.

WALT handcuffed Chet's unconscious figure, then grabbed a boat-hook from a peg on the cabin wall and went to help Bill haul the line in. It was a ticklish job, but the strong trotline held its double burden without breaking.

They brought Jerry's body in over the low rail, and with it came Goliath's chunky, powerfully fighting figure, with its great, ugly head and grotesquely cross-eyed face. Walt impatiently smashed the butt of his gun into the big mud-cat's forehead, stunning it so that they could cut Jerry's body free. The shattered temple beneath Jerry's grizzled hair told its own grim story.

"Chet must've killed him just before we came." Walt's rumbling voice was bitter, for Jerry Reese had been an old and well loved friend.

"Chet dumped the body overside to keep us from seeing it." Walt went on. "Some way one of the two hooks on the line caught in Jerry's clothes. The commotion and the blood attracted Goliath. He grabbed for the bait on the free hook, and when he ran for it the line brought Jerry's body to the top."

There was the slap of a heavy tail on the deck behind them and the peculiar

croaking, grunting sound that a catfish sometimes makes when out of water. They turned. It took more than the butt of a .45 to put Goliath out of action for long. His ugly jaws were opening and closing spasmodically, and there was baleful belligerence in his weirdly mismated eyes.

Bill knelt over the big catfish. His hands were oddly gentle as he worked the hook loose from one of the leather-tough cheeks. He lifted Goliath carefully over the rail and eased him into the water.

Walt Temple scratched his head.

"What are you doing, Bill?" he asked wonderingly. "I know it was a terrible way to catch him, but after all he was caught. And you were the one that finally landed him."

"I didn't catch him, Walt," Bill answered. "It was Jerry that caught him."

He watched while Goliath circled groggily for a moment. Strength flowed swiftly back into the mud-cat's blocky body. He tossed his battle-scarred head in a final gesture of cocky arrogance, then dove for deep water in a mighty surge of foam-flecked ripples.

Bill turned. His eyes were somber as he stared down at Jerry's body. He thought of horseshoes, and of cribbage, and of endless arguments that were as much a game as the cards and the shoes. The taste of sorrow was dark and bitter in Bill's mouth.

"I had to let him go, Walt," he said slowly. "He earned it. I don't—I don't think I'll ever be fishin' for Old Goliath again."



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THIS MURDER'S ON ME

A Johnny Castle Novelet by C. S. MONTANYE



Powerful, steel-like hands
were digging into Mac's
windpipe

MURDER IN RED

By C. S. MONTANYE

Big Dave McClain of Homicide almost gets his own chips cashed in when death spins the wheel for lovely Linda!

THE radio cruiser in which big Dave McClain, the Homicide dick rode, sired along the twisting, rutted trail that led down to the lower level of the steep embankment rising from the shore of the Hudson and the tracks of the New York Central Railroad.

Mac, chewing on his usual torpedo-

shaped cigar, squinted through the brilliant morning sunshine. Down there, in a clearing, he saw the dump-truck, a little knot of people. He shifted the cheroot from one side of his face to the other and grunted.

"Ought to be a law against citizens getting harps in places like this."

Pat Hurley, at the wheel of the police car, nodded.

"That's the way some folks are—no consideration. Always thinking of themselves. It's just as easy to work out a murder in an air-conditioned bar as out here in the tangle."

As a matter of fact the twisted, rutted road was only a few minutes from upper Broadway and the Dyckman section of Manhattan. But to Mac and Hurley, who rarely got above Columbus Circle, the district seemed as remote as Owl's Head. McClain shoved his cramped, long legs further under the cowl and took a drag on his smoke.

The call was hot. Not more than twenty minutes old. A driver on one of the dump-trucks used for fill on the other side of the tracks, had found the body on his way to the job. He had called Headquarters from a switch tower, half a mile up the line.

Mullin, chief of Homicide, had tossed it over to Mac. The big dick felt like a milk shake when the radio cruiser finally got off the corduroy road and rolled out on the flat floor of the clearing.

A short, stocky man in overalls and a mackinaw was on the running-board before Hurley cut the motor.

"My name's Ackerman. I'm the party who telephoned. Over this way, officer." He pointed.

Mac sighed and opened the door. He got one leg out at a time, shivered slightly in the cold morning air and threw the remnants of his cigar away.

"Ought to be a law," he said under his breath.

Ackerman led the way, past his empty dump-truck, around the small group of men, all in work clothes, and up to a screen of dry-brown shrubbery.

"There!" he announced, using a thumb.

McClain took a few steps forward. Nobody could miss the body. A flash of bright red, through the scrubby underbrush, was like a beckoning beacon.

He narrowed his eyes, leaning forward.

A girl lay huddled there. A girl in a black dress with long, golden-brown hair that shimmered in the sun. A girl in a short, lipstick-red coat that gaped open, showing a leopard lining. A girl, Mac's trained eye observed, who hadn't been dead very long.

Expensive lizard slippers with platform

soles and absurdly high heels were on her tiny feet. McClain noticed the heels were free from scratches or mud. Which meant that she hadn't been dragged across the cleared space to the shrubbery. His more interested gaze moved to nylon-swathed, shapely legs—to the slimness of the figure in the black dress—the ring glinting on one crooked finger. He looked at that quizzically.

At least a couple of carats, maybe more. In a platinum set-off. Worth, he estimated, more than a grand. There was a diamond clip on the black dress, too. He saw that when he bent over the body, bringing his glance to focus fully on her face.

THE girl was a beauty—or had been. Even in the dark valley she traversed, the radiance of her loveliness lingered. Her skin had been flawless. In death it looked like marble, an accent for the raspberry tint of her lipstick, the very light touch of artificial color on her cheeks. Her eyes were closed, but he imagined they were deep violet, possibly a purplish blue.

A blue, McClain thought, about the same shade as the ugly marks along her throat. She had been strangled to death—gripped by strong hands that had broken into the modified upper part of the trachea, probably dislocating the larynx and ravaging the small bones and muscles of the windpipe.

Nobody said anything. Mac turned to Ackerman.

"That your truck?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did a good job of rubbing out tire marks," Mac said.

"There weren't none. I thought of that." Ackerman shook his head. "It rained early this morning. Must have flattened them."

McClain's next look-around confirmed what Ackerman said. It had showered toward five that morning. And the red coat, when he touched it, was slightly damp.

Something else caught his attention.

Off to the left, where the stunted shrubbery grew thickly, he saw a cardcase. A pinseal thing, with gold corners. He picked it up with a handkerchief, slipped it in his pocket and searched for a means of identification.

There were two pockets in the red coat. One held a crumpled package of cigarettes. The other a pair of doeskin gloves. Mac examined the coat. It wouldn't be hard tracing the girl down—if he could find the label.

Coats of that type were expensive. There weren't too many around. The label was that of Jaeger, a Fifth Avenue shop, small but exclusive.

Hurley wandered over and joined him.

"Get anything, Mac?"

"Cardcase." McClain shrugged. "Better buzz the captain and get the boys up. I'd like to hit this while it's oven-fresh."

He asked Ackerman a few routine questions, gave the area around the girl's body a more thorough examination, found nothing further and, back in his seat in the comparative warmth of the police car, took out the handkerchief-wrapped cardcase.

He rifled its twin compartments, lighting a fresh cigar to help him think. There were a few cards in it, a couple of tickets for Friday night's performance at the Ballet Theater and an I.O.U. for six hundred dollars, initialed L.T.W. . . .

Identification, as Mac suspected, wasn't too difficult. Jaeger, himself, a gray haired little man with an accent and gestures, listened and cooperated.

"Red coat. Leopard lining. What kind of buttons?"

"Leopard covered."

"I'll have it in five minutes."

Jaeger went upstairs to his balcony office. Mac spread himself out on a brocaded lounge and looked at the dress models on plastic forms. None of them, he thought, were as attractively streamlined as the huddled figure in the shrubbery above the railroad tracks.

"We sold that coat to Miss Linda Mitchell," Jaeger announced, when the five minutes were up. "On the twelfth of last month. I remember it perfectly. She came in with a tall, blond-haired young man. He paid for it."

Jaeger handed over a scribbled name. On it was an address and telephone number. McClain thanked him and went out.

HIS next stop was a half dozen blocks east of the avenue and north. His felt hat pulled down over his thinning hair, Mac shoved up the brim when he

walked into the lobby of the Maragate Apartments.

The lobby was done in stained oak, with leaded windows and slab-glass lamps. A thick Oriental rug was chained to the tiled floor. A hallman in livery argued with a delivery boy who had tried to come in the front way. Mac steered a course toward a small telephone switchboard around the bulge of an enclosed elevator shaft.

A fat girl with dark hair and glasses was listening in on some conversation. She seemed annoyed at McClain's presence, put down the key she had half lifted and took off headphones.

"You wouldn't know if Mr. Hardeen's upstairs in his apartment?"

"Sure he's upstairs," the girl said. "He never goes out until after one o'clock. Who will I say is calling?"

"McClain, Headquarters."

The eyes behind the lenses of her glasses widened. It took her a minute to make sure he wasn't gagging. She put a plug in one of the round holes of the board, pressed a button and repeated what McClain had said.

An elevator shot him up to the eleventh floor. Mac heard a door opening down the corridor. A tall, blond young man in a dark green gown and patent leather slippers was waiting for him when Mac reached the door.

McClain displayed his badge briefly. The young man opened the door wider and Mac went into a small lounge room. It was nicely done in tobacco-brown and harvest yellow. A comfortable room with a wall of books. With windows that gave a view of the park beyond.

"You'll excuse my appearance." Hardeen waved his visitor into a chair. "I don't usually entertain the Police Department so early."

"This yours?"

Mac took out the cardcase, still in the handkerchief. Hardeen stared down at it.

"Yes, that's mine. Where did you get it?"

"Found it up the line. In some shrubbery—a few feet away from a body."

"A body?" Hardeen's head jerked up. Gray eyes peered questioningly at the big dick. "I don't understand."

"Me, neither. That's why I stopped in." Mac's tone was quietly friendly. "Why

don't you ask me whose body it was?"

"All right, I will. Whose?"

"A girl named Linda Mitchell. Mean anything to you?"

Hardeen laughed.

"What is this—some kind of a practical joke?"

McClain shook his head.

"Maybe in your set strangling somebody to death comes under that general heading. I wouldn't know. But I'm going to find out when you saw her last and—"

He broke off. Hardeen's expression had changed. What Mac said had finally hit him. And with devastating effect.

He dropped down on a leather sofa, his mouth twisting and his eyes suddenly full of a strange emptiness. Mac saw his hands tighten on the sash of the green robe. Tighten and grow white at the knuckles.

"Linda—dead!" Hardeen said huskily.

"When did you see her last?"

Hardeen didn't answer for a long, tense minute. He was breathing harder, deeper, through his mouth. Mac waited until he got a grip on himself. If it were an act it was pretty good. Emotionally convincing.

"I had dinner with her last night. We finished about nine o'clock. Linda left to stop and see a friend of hers. I put her in a cab outside of Whitman's."

"What friend?"

"A Dorothy Kelsey. She was Linda's best friend. They'd known each other for years."

Mac went on with his questions. He switched around so he could get the girl's background. He wanted all the information on Linda Mitchell he could dig. And this Christopher Hardeen was able to supply it.

The facts began to come through.

LINDA MITCHELL belonged to that strata of society whose day began at twilight and ended with the dawn. Whose world was the entertainment sphere of night club, drawing room, theater, penthouse and all the other places where what McClain called "cafe society" met and congregated.

She had, the previous year, been a Paul Dumas model. She and her friend Dorothy Kelsey. But Linda Mitchell had given it up. For months she had had no

employment of any kind. And she had lived, Hardeen said, in an apartment off Lexington Avenue in the Fifties.

Mac got all that down and swung around to his ace in the hole again.

"Thanks. That's pretty complete. Now tell me about your cardcase."

"I lost it a week ago."

"Where?"

Hardeen hesitated.

"I'm not quite certain. It could have been at any of three places. At the Belgrave on Park where I had dinner that night. In the cab I took over to Sidney Wilner's place. Or at Jack Leighton's house where I went for a nightcap."

"Wilner?" Mac frowned. "The initials on the I.O.U. are L.T.W. Who's that?"

Hardeen seemed to sink into himself.

"Do you have to know?" He took a deeper breath. "I lent Leslie some money—to make up some card losses she had. She's Sid's wife."

McClain looked at his old fashioned, hunting-cased watch.

"Were you in love with the Mitchell girl?"

"I was awfully fond of her," Hardeen said, his mouth twisting again, his hands tightening.

"Okay." Mac got up. "I guess that's about all for me. Get dressed and we'll go down to Centre Street. You can talk to Captain Mullin. He's a great little listener."

"But—" Hardeen began to shake.

"You see," McClain told him, "right now—at this minute—you're Suspect Number One in the Mitchell gal's murder. Maybe Mullin will stop with you. Figure you used the hand clasp on her throat and tossed her into the shrubbery up there. Maybe he won't take any stock in the notion that somebody swiped, or found your cardcase, and used it as a tie-in—to pin it on you. Either way, straight talk, on the level, is your best bet. C'mon, reach for your threads and let's get out of here." . . .

It was nearly two o'clock when Mac, in another apartment building similar to the Maragate, got off at the fifth floor. This time there was no open door, no one waiting. Only a small brunette with tear-red eyes who came to answer his steady ring.

The suite, like Hardeen's, had been lavishly interior-decorated. Laid on, Mac

saw, with a colorful shovel. Bizarre grays and greens—too much of a rainbow effect. He told himself he never did like white carpets and black glass.

He turned his attention to the Kelsey girl, Linda Mitchell's best friend. He liked the way she wore her dark hair, in a single linked braid over her small, well-shaped head. Her brows were thin as pencil lines, her eyes dusky pools with the longest lashes he'd ever seen. They didn't look real, but they were real because they stayed on despite the tears wetting them.

She was about five feet five, more or less, a perfect advertisement for any bra outfit, with slender hips and the same kind of symmetrical, nyloned legs the dead Mitchell girl had. Even in skirt and high-necked white blouse, Dorothy Kelsey's charms were obvious.

McClain tried to put her at ease. Hardeen's shock might have been faked, but the grief this frail was displaying was as genuine as a sock on the jaw. She had gotten the news over the radio—had been slapped in the face by a newscaster on a noon program.

"I won't harry you too much," Mac began. "Naturally you want us to find the party who thumbed and fingered your pal. And because you do you're going to answer a few questions that'll make the finding easier—I hope." He smiled reassuringly. "Right?"

She nodded, dabbed at her tip-tilted nose with a damp, crushed square of linen.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know—anything!"

"Lead off with last night. What time did Miss Mitchell get here, how long did she stay, what did she have to say, where did she go when she left, who went with her or who was she meeting? That ought to do for a starter. Take it easy and if you remember anything else you think is important drop it in as you go along."

But her story was disappointing.

AS HARDEEN had said, Linda had mentioned dining with him at Whitman's. She hadn't stayed long at Dorothy Kelsey's apartment—only long enough to get back an article of apparel she had left there the previous Sunday night. She hadn't mentioned where she was going when she left. The Kelsey girl had thought she was going home.

"What time did she leave?" Mac inquired.

"Couldn't have been later than a quarter to ten."

"Tell me about this Chris Hardeen."

"We've known him for about a year. He's been awfully nice. Linda liked him. So did I. I'm sure he didn't—couldn't—"

"Who else liked her?" McClain asked it casually, but his gaze was bright and anticipative.

"Nearly everybody. She didn't have an enemy in the world. Not one. Though—"

Dorothy Kelsey stopped as if suddenly remembering something. Mac waited but it didn't come. A trifle brusquely, he said:

"Though—what? C'mon, Miss Kelsey," he prodded, when still she didn't answer. "Give out. You said you were going to help. Somebody didn't like Linda Mitchell. Who was it?"

She looked directly at him.

"Leslie Wilner," she said. "She was jealous of Linda."

"On account of her husband?" McClain's tone stayed casual.

The girl nodded and Mac got up. He asked a couple more questions, got a couple of addresses and ambled downtown to Centre Street.

Because the murder of Linda Mitchell had all the angles a morbid-minded public liked—with a dash of sensationalism stirred in to make it spicy—the press had its best men on the story. Mac shook his head as he pushed through the writing brigade, avid for any scraps of information, and flatfooted into Mullin's office.

Sucking on an unlighted stogie, he draped himself in a chair opposite his chief's desk and waited.

"Here's the M.E.'s report." Mullin shoved a typewritten paper across. "Bagley said she was killed around eleven o'clock, maybe a half hour either way. We tried to get a moulage of a clear tire. No good. Wheeler went through the dame's apartment. Nothing there either. How about you?"

"Got a couple of leads."

McClain removed the cigar and looked at it fondly. It was a straight ten-cent smoke. He had intended to hold it for an after dinner puff, but the temptation to get it smoldering was overpowering.

[Turn to page 102]



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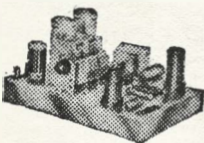
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He struck a match, took a long inward pull and blew a fragrant cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"How about Hardeen?"

Mullin shook his head.

"I don't think he did it. He hasn't any alibi. Says that after he put her in a cab, and saw her for the last time, he dropped in a movie house on Lexington. Got out of there around eleven-thirty and went back to his apartment."

"That would have given him a chance." Mac balanced the cigar between his fingers, frowning. "It would cut it close, but it could be done. How about his car?"

"He hasn't any." Mullin's fishy eyes narrowed: "I don't think he did it. He was too crazy about the doll. You don't knock 'em off when you're in love."

"Or do you?" Mac spilled ashes on his vest, brushed them away and looked at his watch. "Got a couple of routine calls. Maybe I'll come up with something."

"Yeah—that I'd like," Mullin told him.

OUTSIDE, it was getting colder. McClain, who never rode taxis when there was a subway handy, headed for the upper East Fifties again. This time he was aiming at the Wilner menage. He had learned that Sidney Wilner did something in Wall Street, that his wife was a top bridge player and between the two they were doing all right. Hardeen's I.O.U. to the contrary.

He found Sid Wilner was a slim, dapper man in the middle thirties, shrewd, slightly dissipated, with a high polish and a genial personality. His wife was a different story. A medium brunette with odd, amber eyes and a certain coldness that made McClain want to turn up his coat collar. She puzzled him.

Her answers were frank enough, but there was something about her that made him do a lot of thinking. Both had alibis for the previous night, blanketing them from dusk until three A.M. Both had been with a big party at the Palais Promenade and then, later, had finished the night off at a card club on Sutton Place.

Mac was disappointed. He had expected something better. When he finished and left he walked two blocks up Park Avenue, slowly, thoughtfully. It began to look as if the Mitchell girl's murder wouldn't break as easily as he had imag-

ined. The case, apparently soft on top, had a tough shell once you got deep into it.

Mac thought about Hardeen. No alibi. In love. Maybe jealous on account of Sid Wilner's yen for the ex-model. Jealous as Leslie Wilner. Hardeen's six-hundred buck loan to the dame with the amber eyes and the frosty exterior. Did that mean anything—other than just a help-out?

The big dick shook his head. It was plenty tangled. Usually, he had to reach out for motives. Now they were as thick as pickpockets at a parade. But which was the right one? Who had the best reason to go after Linda Mitchell?

His walk brought him, after another block and a turn around a corner, to a tall, narrow apartment building. It was on a par with those he had already visited. Livered hall men gave his unpressed suit a supercilious glance when Mac shuffled in.

"Leighton," he said to the elevator operator, giving him a flash of his badge. The cage didn't stop until it reached the roof. Mac got out in a closet-sized vestibule. A couple of potted plants flanked a dark green doorway. The elevator operator, his mouth open at the idea of a cop's call, wanted to linger and see what it was all about.

"That's all, Otis," McClain said over his shoulder. "Going down." The lift door slid reluctantly shut. Mac thumbed a bell and the door was opened by a Filipino houseboy.

"Who did you wish to see?"

"How many wishes are you allowed?" Mac buttoned his coat and pushed past the boy. "Pardon my humor, son. Where'll I find your boss?"

"You will tell me your name, sir?"

Mac did and a few minutes later he was led through a sumptuously furnished room, up some stairs and into what, by day, was probably the sun room of the penthouse set-up.

There were glass walls all around. The type of glass that let in helpful rays of the sun. Open doors at one end led out to an awninged terrace, a ledge that jutted into space. The wind blew around it, flapping the awning and rustling the tubs of shrubbery.

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There was a light on against the fast deepening twilight. It stood beside a low, cushion-filled, pickled-pine chair with a foot rest. Deep in it, a highball glass convenient to his reach, a man looked up from his evening newspaper as McClain went through the doorway.

"Mr. Leighton?"

The paper went down.

"That's right. You're from Headquarters. What do you want to see me about?"

"A cardcase, principally."

Leighton pulled himself further up in the chair, but didn't get out of it. He was a big man, nearly as tall as Mac, with a square face from which the summer's tan hadn't faded. Or maybe he used a lamp to keep it that way.

He was about twenty-six or so. His gray flannel suit was perfectly tailored. He wore woolen socks, garterless, and custom-built shoes. His shirt was soft and white with a long pointed collar over an expensive foulard tie. Wavy hair was brushed back, cut short at the rear and over the ears. There was just a touch of gray at the temples.

One of those young men, powdered prematurely with hair he shouldn't have until he was in the forties. He didn't ask Mac to sit down or have a drink. He sat looking at him quizzically.

"Cardcase?"

"Chris Hardeen said he lost his here a week ago. What do you know about it—if anything?"

"He told you that?" Leighton laughed. "He's lying. He never lost anything here except money at cards." Leighton's quizzical gaze wandered over his visitor. "You're working on Linda's murder?"

"That's right. What do you know about it?"

"Not too much."

"When did you see her last?"

"When? About seven o'clock last night.

She was at Tony's for a quickie. She told me she had a dinner date with Hardeen at Whitman's. I sat at the bar with her for about thirty minutes. I remember she looked lovelier than usual. Black and red. Like a roulette wheel and just as fascinating. She always did things to my imagination. Wonderful girl."

For a long minute Dave McClain didn't say anything. He let his eyes wander to the pinpoint lights of the city, the golden

threads of the avenues and streets so far below. Then he brought them back to the man in the pickled-pine chair. The man with the young face and the aging hair.

"Who do you think strangled Miss Mitchell?"

Leighton shrugged.

"That's your department, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But I like outside opinions. I seem to think Hardeen's to-day's one best bet. You know something about the bunch he chases around with. Wilner and the others."

"I should." Leighton smiled. "They're friends of mine."

"Boozin' friends. I mark it this way." Mac held up a finger. "Chris Hardeen was in love with Linda Mitchell. So was Sid Wilner. Wilner's wife, smart gal, watched it flame. Now, either Leslie Wilner hired somebody to put a pair of thumbs against Miss Mitchell's windpipe or—Hardeen, jealous because of Wilner's interest in his heart, did it himself. What's your honest idea?"

Again Leighton shrugged.

"Why didn't Sid do it?"

"Because," Mac answered, "both the Wilners have alibis. I haven't checked them, but I believe they'll stand up. Hardeen hasn't any."

"Then why don't you arrest Chris and wrap it up?" Leighton sampled his high-ball.

His tone and attitude were slightly bored. As if he didn't understand why he was being quizzed when his caller had a definite idea of the crime's solution.

"Because," McClain said slowly, "Chris Hardeen didn't do the job."

Leighton put his glass down and turned all the way around in his chair.

"No?"

"No," Mac said quietly, "You did!"

LEIGHTON got up slowly. He was laughing under his breath. Laughing as he might at a child who had asked some foolish question. Or at a mildly funny gag. He put his hands in his pocket and the amusement blotted out of his face.

"What do you mean by making a crack like that?" he demanded.

"Don't soldier up on me," McClain said. "I'm weaving it together. You wanted

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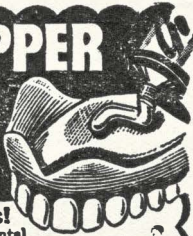


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"Dreamer." Leighton laughed harshly.

"Where's your proof?"

"You've got a car?"

Mac made it sound like a statement rather than the question it was.

"So have eight million other people."

"The difference being," McClain told him in the same slow, studied tone, "I've gone over yours with a fine comb. You thought you cleaned it up pretty well but you forgot some of Linda's face powder on the front seat—sifted down under the cushion. And the tire moulage we took up by the shrubbery where you tossed her early this morning. A perfect fit, tread cuts and all. Proof? You'd better get your hat and—"

Leighton hit him then. His left curved out like a flash of light. Mac forgot to duck and the blow sent him careening back into the potted plants. It was a choppy sock, with a world of power behind it. It rattled his fillings, sprayed along his nerves like a numbing anesthetic. He tried to reach for his gun, cursing his own stupidity, but the man in the gray suit was cashing in on his advantage.

Leighton grabbed him by the throat. Powerful, steel-like hands with thumbs that dug into Mac's windpipe—as they had into Linda Mitchell's soft, white neck—shut off his breath. Leighton hauled him out of the plants and forced him across to the railing at the edge of the terrace.

Above him, Mac saw wheeling stars. The rail was bronze piping, ornamental but none too secure. And the street was very far below.

Leighton jammed a knee in his stomach and forced him back over the railing. It suddenly dawned on McClain that he was practically dead. Defunct, crushed and mangled, with a perfect out for his killer. Mullin would rake Jake Leighton over,

but there wasn't anybody to say he had deliberately tossed the Homicide man off his balcony. And Mullin would never know what he knew about Leighton—how in one tense, revealing instant Leighton had given himself away.

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Those thoughts went through the big dick's mind while he grappled with the killer. Mac was husky. He had brawled his way through hundreds of knockdown, bare knuckle affairs. But he wasn't twenty-six or seven. He didn't have his old power, his old steam. He was over-matched and still groggy from the effect of the clout on the jaw.

Dimly, he felt the railing begin to give. One foot went up off the stone flooring. He tried to get it down, to plant it solidly, but the terrible pressure around his larynx was closing like a vise. Black specks that weren't part of the night's darkness swirled before his distended eyes. He knew he didn't have a chance. His number was up and he was going down—and out!

He tried to remember a prayer. It was necessary to say a prayer when you were making a final exit and knew about it. If you didn't, St. Peter would slam the heavenly gates in your pan. You wouldn't have a chance to get inside!

Mac began to gurgle. He'd stopped breathing. The irony of it was, that his own police gun, in its holster, was pressed so hard against him it was cracking a rib. A fine thing for a copper—armed and nonchalant and then cut down by an amateur killer who practised on dames!

Suddenly all the lights in the world went out. . . .

Mac felt the fiery whip of alcohol in his mouth. It trickled down his throat, stinging all the way. It trickled off his chin. It had a bite and a lash and the

[Turn page]

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magic of making him jerk his eyes open abruptly and all at once.

He wasn't dead. He was in the depths of the pickled-pine chair. The same chair where Leighton had lounged. And Leighton, his slowly clearing eyes showed him, was ungracefully stretched out on the stone flagging, bleeding from a head wound.

McClain stared. He guessed it did pay to live right. He moved his eyes to the doors, feeling his throat to see if it were still with him.

"Thanks, son," he said. "It sure was a long way to the street and I do like elevators to take me down."

The Filipino boy showed white teeth in a wide grin.

"Once he got drunk and grabbed me by the throat. I came in the other room. I see him with you and I picked up—"

IT WAS still a perfectly good Bacardi bottle. But there was a lot of blood on the dimpled-in base of it—wet and sticky.

"I hope you didn't kill him," Mac said. "I wouldn't want to miss out hearing this luggie get booked for the Death House!"

But Leighton came around after a brisk young ambulance doctor did come crocheting on his scalp. McClain had a big drink and then another and rode down to Centre Street with Mullin.

"So you thought you'd play it smart," his chief grunted. "Sit in my office and act dumbed up when all the time you had Leighton ripe for the squeeze."

"Wrong." Mac struck a match for the cigar the Captain gifted him with. His hand was steady again. He filled his mouth with mediocre Key West tobacco smoke. A cheap weed but it had an Olympian taste to Mac. "Wrong, skipper."

"I'm listening," Mullin said.

"It was like I told Leighton. You heard

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what he said when you locked the cuffs on him. No Mitchell gal for Hardeen—and he did plant the lost cardcase near the body. I told him a phony story about investigating his car and that cracked him wide open—and nearly put flowers at my head and feet.”

“Sure, sure,” Mullin grunted again. “But how did you pin it on him? What was the giveaway?”

“When he said she looked like a roulette wheel. Black and red. Murder in red!” McClain murmured. “In a red coat with a leopard lining. That was all I needed after Leighton said the last time he’d seen Miss Mitchell was at seven o’clock last night.”

They were nearly down to Headquarters. Mac was burning the cigar in large clouds of smoke. Mullin wound down a window, did some coughing and shook his head.

“I still don’t get it. You say Leighton saw her at seven o’clock last night in a black dress and a red coat. So what?”

McClain eased his big frame back against the upholstery and shoved out his long legs.

“Nothing,” he said, “except that when Hardeen put her in a cab the Mitchell rib went up to her girl friend’s flat to get a piece of clothing she had left there the previous Sunday night—a red coat with a leopard lining. She didn’t put it on until a quarter to ten when she left Dorothy Kelsey’s place. So naturally Leighton hadn’t seen her at seven in black and red—then. Looks like the roulette wheel dropped the marble in the wrong slot—for him!”

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HIGHWAY HOMICIDE

(Continued from page 88)

he had been at the softball game from the beginning, that wouldn't have been true."

"Where does Dalton come in?"

"Just like I said. Somehow he got wise to the fact that Coe had killed Ferguson to get the traffic counter. He suspected that Coe had hidden it at the fishing lodge of which they were both members. He found the traffic counter and then he came back here and put the bite on Coe. Coe put on his disguise of J. Peter Baxter and killed him. He didn't want to share a million bucks with anybody."

BY NOW Howard Coe's face had gone as white as milk. His right hand slipped under the counter and it came up with a Woodsman Sport Model. He leveled it, his face evil. Gone was the handsomeness. In its place was criminal ugliness.

"I'll use Nick's gun again! Get out of my way or somebody will get hurt! Don't move! I'll kill again!"

Coe backed away from the counter toward the door, the Woodsman unwavering in his hand. His left hand reached behind him for the door knob and pulled it open.

Ed Lonergan was standing there. The state trooper wasted no time. He grabbed his forty-five out of his holster. He banged the heavy butt down on top of Coe's head. Coe didn't even open his mouth. His knees sagged under him and he slumped forward on the floor, dead to the world.

Lonergan's Irish smile was focused on Di. "That traffic counter of Ferguson's was cached out at the fishing lodge just like you said. I got it in the back seat of my car."

Fleming Morf scowled as he bent over and snapped a pair of cuffs on Coe while Gail's flash bulbs popped. Then he barked at Di. "You're plenty smart, Berke, but you're mighty careless with other people's lives. Coe might have plugged some of us."

"Not with that gun." Di was grinning. "I had Sheriff Couch take the clip out of it."

HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 10)

throb, will be back with us once more.

Mrs. Stanfield Haviland, the obese old dowager, is giving a charity dance for her pet project, a home for aged and destitute musicians. Well does Johnny Castle remember Mrs. Haviland, especially from the time she turned his newspaper upside down concerning the theft of jewelry belonging to her amounting to over eighty grand. Said jewels were never retrieved.

While dancing with Libby, who is doing the publicity for the affair, Johnny calls her attention to the fact that everybody who is anybody is present. This applies not only to society, but the underworld as well.

Libby goes to the foyer of the Drury-Plaza to get her check. Suddenly there is a shot—and Libby screams. Johnny runs to the foyer and finds Mrs. Haviland dead on the floor.

"So it's you, Castle," Captain Mullin says when he arrives. "It's gotten so that every time there's a murder in this town, you're in on it, grinning like a jack—jack—"

"Jackal!" Johnny pipes.

"I can't take it!" Mullin roars. "I'm going to complain to the Commissioner. You're in my hair and under my feet—"

Of course you know friends, that this has been going on for years. It goes on because we like it and like Johnny with his Broadway wisecracks. If you haven't been riding on the Johnny Castle bandwagon, it's high time you got on board. There's always room for those who want to be thrilled as well as entertained.

To round out a splendid issue, friends, we will have a swell collection of short stories. Be on hand for a grand reading feast.

OUR MAIL BOX

WELL, by golly—we thought we were all through with writing inside the egg proposition which we covered at length in our issue for February. But the letters still keep coming in. One very polite and comprehensive missive from Mr. John Lee Clarke of Cos Cob,

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Conn., was especially interesting. Thanks to all of you for your informative letters on this subject.

Here's a gentleman who doesn't seem to care too much for the hard-boiled type of detective:

Your gallery of knock-down-and-drag-out heroes grows apace. You know who they are so why should I mention them? Your latest, Mr. Race Williams, is a little too sure of himself—a little too "cocky." If you will recall what were probably the greatest detective stories ever written—the Sherlock Holmes series, while there was plenty of action, it was action of the mind and suspense. There wasn't so much slugging. But—in spite of this, I must confess that I like **THRILLING DETECTIVE**—but as for these bang-bang sleuths, how about a happy medium?—*Arthur Traynor, Bronx, N. Y., N. Y.*

This is essentially an age of speed, Arthur—speed that is reflected in many of our yarns and in many of the most popular detective heroes of today. Yours was one of only a very few letters that were in the least critical of Race Williams.

Incidentally, we strive for variety of in our magazine—and in addition to the "knock-down-and-drag-out" heroes you mention, we do publish stories of the reflective, quiet type of sleuth.

While the Conan Doyle stories are certainly immortal—and far be it from us to take away one whit of the aura of nostalgia which seems to hang over the rugged head of the twice-deceased Mr. Holmes of Baker Street—you must admit that you'd get just a wee bit tired of us if we continually echoed Sherlock and Dr. Watson. We think our policy of variety in mood and pace is in tune with the times and best suited to meet our reader's tastes—come on, everybody, let's know what you think!

Here's the other side of the picture:

Three cheers for Race Williams—one of the finest characters in detective fiction today! I'm glad we're getting stories about him in **THRILLING DETECTIVE**—it helps to make your superb magazine even better.—*John Bradley, Boston, Mass.*

And talking of our penchant for variety, listen to this:

What I like about **THRILLING DETECTIVE** is the fact that no two stories are ever alike. Your magazine is filled with welcome

surprises, always something fresh and up-to-the-minute.—*Thomas V. Hoffmann, Seattle, Wash.*

A few words of praise from a very beautiful town:

I like your **THRILLING DETECTIVE** magazine very much. It helps to while away many lonely hours. Keep up the good work and may your shadow never grow less.—*Mrs. Hazel K. Morrison, Tucson, Ariz.*

Much obliged, Hazel. You seem to think in terms of sunshine down there, where you have plenty of it. Here's another nice pat on the back:

THRILLING DETECTIVE magazine is the best buy on the market to-day. I never tire of reading your swell stories. I do not like stories that are too long. Yours are just the right length.—*George F. Benson, Chicago, Ill.*

Thank you George—and thank all you kind folks who have written in. Your letters tell us whether or not we're pleasing you and help us improve the magazine. If you haven't time to write a letter, a postcard will do just as well.

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—THE EDITOR.

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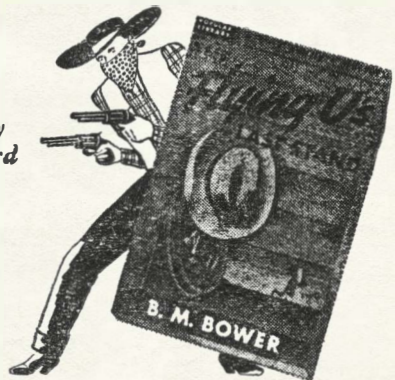


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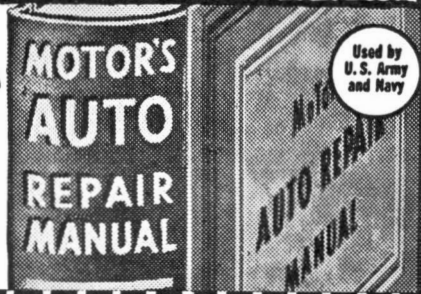
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