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THRILLING

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

ANC

DETECTIVE

FEATURING

The WHISPERING REED

A PSYCHOLOGICAL
MURDER MYSTERY
By JOHN COLE

PIECES OF HATE

A NOVELET OF
DOPE AND DEATH
By STEWART STERLING





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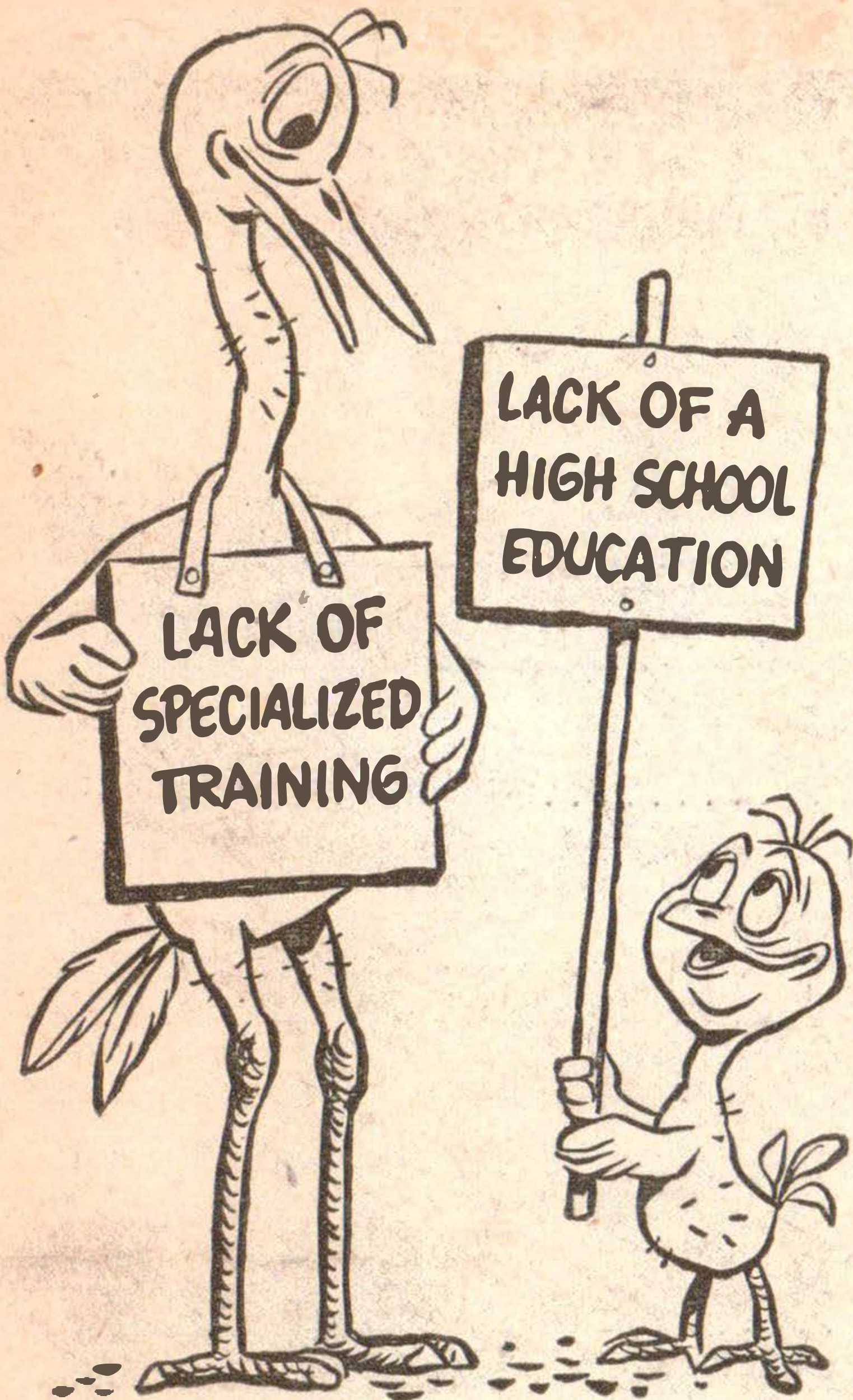
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Vol. LXIX, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1952

Featured Novel

- THE WHISPERING REED**.....John Cole 12
The psychiatrist's lips were sealed—but the secrets he knew crept out of hiding, erupting in a strange volcano of violence

Three Complete Novelets

- PIECES OF HATE**.....Stewart Sterling 50
It was firebug weather, and Marshal Pedley expected a blaze—but he didn't bargain for a holocaust of conspiracy and murder!
- THE GOLDEN FIX**.....Walt Sheldon 82
Maybe John Willard did take a bribe once—but that didn't stop him from moving in on racketeers who asked for trouble
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There was one condition under which convict Eric Vance could gain his freedom—by agreeing to kill a man!

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The Ratskin Cap

A True Story of the Canadian Mounties

By CARTER CRITZ

PERHAPS the best symbol of the traditional tenacity of the Canadian Mounties is a ratskin cap.

The ratskin cap was found one day, a number of decades ago now, on a snow-covered trail 10 miles to the east to Ponoka, Alberta. It was cut in one place and had bloodstains, so some one brought it into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police station.

The next day a Mountie set out for the vicinity where the article was found. He traveled up and down the icy wasteland for weeks but was unable to find anyone who could identify the ratskin cap. Nor did there seem to be anyone missing.

It Gathered Dust

So the ratskin cap was brought back to the station, where it gathered dust for two years. Then there came a routine order that the ratskin cap, along with some other things that had accumulated at the station, be destroyed. After all, the R. C. M. P. wasn't in the business of collecting odds and ends.

But the constable whose routine assignment it was to dispose of the ratskin cap couldn't bring himself to do it. The mystery attached to the cap had never been solved. So, instead of tossing it into the furnace, he put it away in the basement.

It was some months afterwards that the Mounties got word that a horse thief had been captured on a ranch far off in the wilds. Sgt. Nicholson set off to bring him back in.

A Shocking Discovery

The culprit turned out to be one William Oscar Koenig, a surly, beetle-browed, bow-legged character. The two, the Mountie and the horse thief, started the long trek back to civilization and retribution.

Along the way Koenig informed Sgt. Nichol-

son that he could show him an interesting sight. It had to do with something in an abandoned ranch house they were approaching. The sergeant decided to take a chance and they went inside. Koenig suggested he look inside the large stove there. He did, poked around in the ashes and came across the grisly remains of a body.

The shock and excitement of the discovery was what Koenig had been waiting for. With the sergeant's thoughts momentarily distracted, the bow-legged man made a break for freedom. He streaked through the doorway and flung himself on his horse, galloping off with the sergeant's steed as well.

It was a miserable, humiliated Mountie who started the long and lonely trek back to his post on foot.

For letting his prisoner get away from him, Nicholson was busted down to the rank of private. But when he begged for the assignment of trying to recapture Koenig he was given it.

A Perfect Fit!

It was a pretty tough order, though. Canada is quite a big expanse of territory. Koenig had vanished without leaving the hint of a clue behind him. Nor had there been any progress made in the attempt to identify the victim in the stove.

Months went by, without Nicholson seeming any closer to apprehending Koenig than the day he'd made his sprint for freedom. With each passing day, each unrewarding trip across some solitary region, the task seemed to become more hopeless.

And then one day something clicked inside Nicholson: The ratskin cap! He went down into the basement, got it and put it on the skull that had come from the kitchen stove. It was a perfect fit.

(Continued on page 8)



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—get across to him or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have

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THE RATSKIN CAP

(Continued from page 6)

At last—something. It was at least an indication that the murder might have occurred around Ponoka way. Some three years had gone by now since the discovery of the ratskin cap, a long time—besides, another Mountie had been on the trail of the cap over that territory before. But, doggedly, Nicholson went back over there.

This time he concentrated his inquiries on a bow-legged man.

There is one thing about sparsely-populated communities. Not much happens there and they remember little things. So, sure enough, the officer found several persons who remembered the bow-legged man. No one knew anything about him.

They just remembered that a certain man of his description, in company with another man, some three years ago had gone off somewhere on a dog sled. They also remembered that a few days later the bow-legged man had returned by himself and had sold the sled.

That is all the light the people around there could throw on the matter—except that the man who had bought the sled remembered that in the course of conversation with Koenig that Bemidji, Minn., seemed to have been mentioned.

The Man at the Table

So what did Nicholson do? Yes, disguised as a wheat trader, down to Bemidji he went. And, sure enough, he heard about a bow-legged man living around there. Warily—after obtaining proper permission from American authorities, of course—he approached the cabin. He inched up to the window and, glancing in, saw a man sitting by the table. He was bearded but Nicholson recognized him right away. There, at long last, was his quarry.

As Nicholson came into the cabin, Koenig recognized him too. He scowled and grabbed a butcher knife. But this time the Mountie was ready for his shenanigans.

Nicholson's gun went off, wounding Koenig in the leg.

Extradited to Canada, Koenig was tried for the murder of his companion down Ponoka way and found guilty.

And so Koenig was hanged for murder.

Nicholson, the Mountie who had fumbled but had finally got his man, was returned to the rank of sergeant.

The case of the ratskin cap was over.

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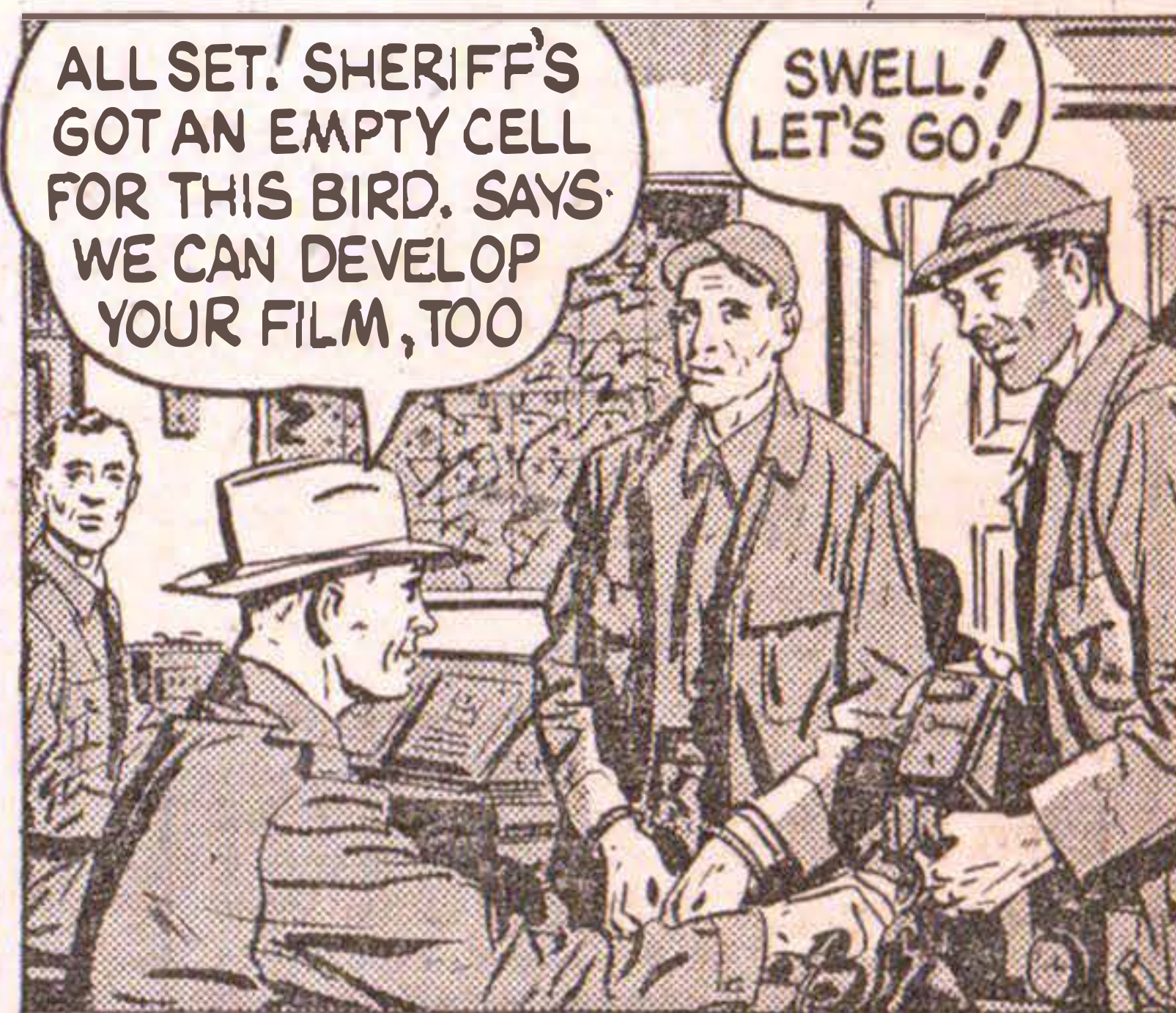
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LATER AT STATE PARK HEADQUARTERS



THREE HOURS PASS

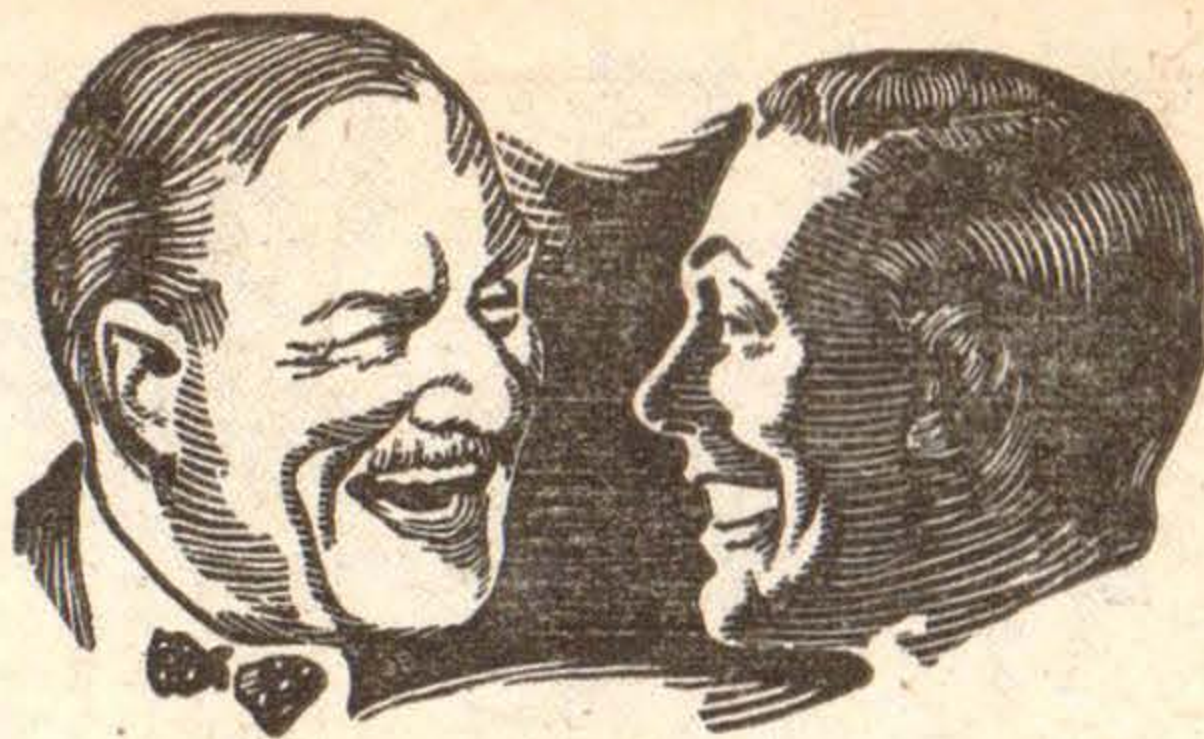


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CRIME CAPERS



THE CRIMINAL MIND is capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current crime news.

WASHINGTON, D. C., POLICE arrested a 14-year-old boy for the way he took it out on things after he had a tooth pulled at the dentist's. On the way home he pulled six false alarms!

NEPANEE, CANADA, POLICE have been looking with a vengeance for a thief who broke into a police station and stole two revolvers and some ammunition.

AT AGENCY, IA., Grocer Carl Swinney routed a gunman who sought to hold up his store by throwing boxes of cookies at him.

IN VILLE ST. LAURENT, CANADA, police are enforcing a new law against couples remaining in a parked car for longer than five minutes. And anybody caught kissing in Ville St. Laurent in public is fined \$2.

NOT WISHING TO BE IDENTIFIED and possibly harmed by criminals against whom she was testifying, a woman witness in a Maryland gambling case came into the courtroom wearing a wolf's mask.

PEKIN, ILL., FINALLY removed two old laws from its statute books—the one against whistling at pretty girls and the one against singing in a bathtub.

AFTER BROADCASTING a three-state alarm for a prisoner whose barracks bunk in the Indiana State Prison was found empty, prison officials discovered the missing convict asleep in another bunk in the same barracks.

THE PROPRIETOR of a Binghamton N. Y., camera shop was undaunted when his window was smashed open and two valuable cameras taken. He just put a sign in the shattered window reading: "Even thieves know good merchandise."

POLICE CHIEF RAY HINKLE, Bloomington, Ind., answered complaints by his patrolmen that living costs have gone sky-high by telling them they could accept part-time employment. But he made one exception—no policemen would be allowed to serve as tavern "bouncers."

GRABBED BY BISMARCK, N. D., police after he was observed carrying a live chicken under his coat, a man informed the officers that the chicken had got in his way as he was walking along and he'd picked it up so as not to stumble on it.

THE OTHER DAY a certain professor was the "best-dressed prof" on the College campus. But lately he's been the "best-dressed prof" in the Santa Barbara jail. This handsome 38-year-old bachelor was charged with spending his off-the-campus time burglarizing neighborhood homes. What subject did the professor teach? "Crime psychology."

ACCUSED OF SCULPTORING a nude statue, a London sculptor staunchly stated that all he'd done was make a mermaid—with legs. He elucidated, "Who is to say what a mermaid looks like? Who has ever seen one? That's the way I like to think of a mermaid. With legs."

ARRESTED ON SUSPICION of bootlegging when found with 19 cases of beer, a Hamilton, Canada, man said he was going on a fishing trip and just wanted to have a little refreshment along.

—Harold Helfer

THE WHISPERING



REED

A Novel by JOHN COLE

*The psychiatrist's lips were sealed—but the secrets he knew
crept out of hiding, erupting in a strange volcano of violence*

CHAPTER I

WOMAN IN TROUBLE

A MAN'S life, whether he knows it or not, is always dependent on a whim of chance. If I had had my car, none of it would have happened, at least not to me. The whole thing began one night and ended with the next.

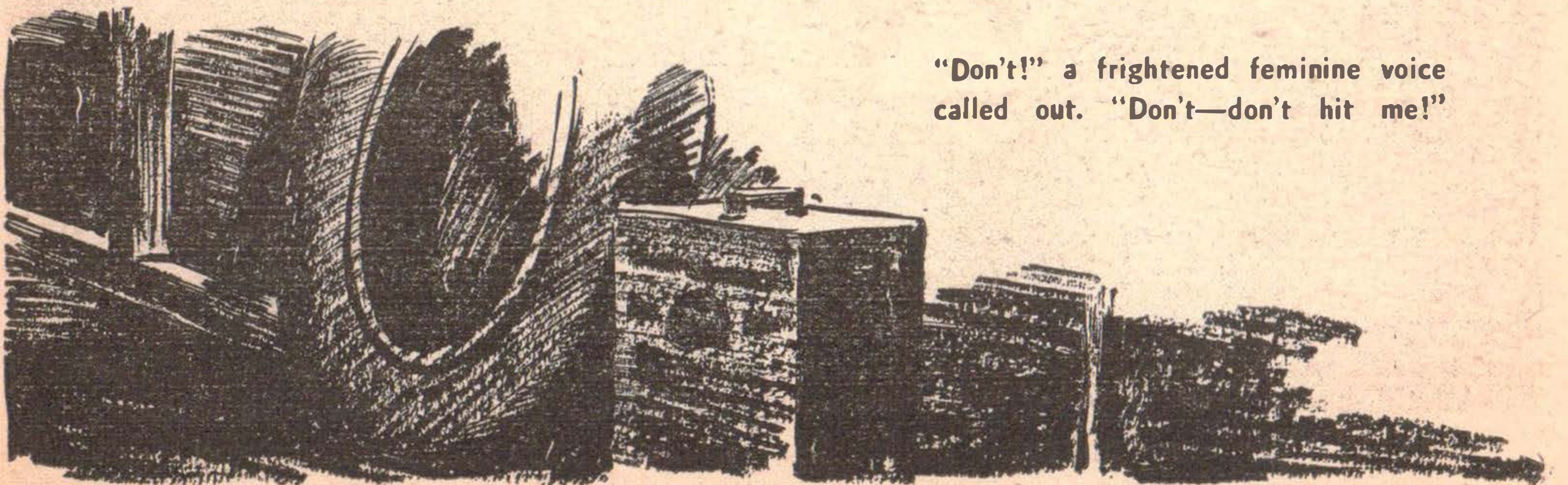
I had recently completed moving into the only available house within my price range in the suburban village of Ramskill. My medical equipment wasn't even installed. The house, or rather the half of it I rented, wasn't exactly a dream of the future. It was the original builder's solution for living under one roof with both wife and mother, two houses in one, with facilities duplicated and no communication except by means of iden-

tical front and back doors. The agent had been unable to rent both houses as a unit, but when they were offered singly I took one of them hoping the other would remain vacant.

I was not at all discouraged by the struggle that might lie ahead for a doctor just launching a general practice in a strange town. All I needed, as I saw it, was a motherly woman to "do" for me, answer the phone and pinch hit as receptionist when I had office hours. Beyond that, I was content, confident, appallingly sure of myself.

After all, the local county hospital was as good as they come, and Dr. Hammond who was a family friend and had always

"Don't!" a frightened feminine voice called out. "Don't—don't hit me!"



The Patient Had a Guilt Complex Which Couldn't

taken a paternal interest in me was arranging to get me on the staff with him. It was a break and I appreciated it. When Hammond called me that night, I was delighted to help him out. He was tied up at the hospital with an emergency and his office had just telephoned that a woman in town was expecting her first baby. The couple were strangers visiting relatives, they were poor, she had had no prenatal attention, the young husband was frantic. Would I? I would indeed.

Then I remembered that my car was in the town garage being repaired. True, the garage man had promised to lend me an old jalopy if professional need should arise. He had pointed the thing out with a ribald wink. Used to belong to a high school boy. Some kid!

I had looked at it and shuddered. It was a relic of past adolescent glories with traces of old slogans gleaming on its dented sides. "Hello Beautiful!" "You're the tops!" By now the kid was the middle-aged father of a family.

I looked again at the address Hammond had given me and reached for the telephone. His office nurse was very obliging. Yes, it was only a short distance from my house. I had plenty of time to walk. Pains were still half an hour apart. In a glow of gratitude I set out, bag in hand. I felt that it would have taken more fortitude than I possessed to drive in that Leaping Lena.

It was after one A.M. when I left my patient and I was dead tired, but almost as proud as the new father. I walked home slowly, taking an unfamiliar detour. I was happy, at peace with the world.

If I'd been driving I wouldn't have noticed the shadow moving near the window of the squat stucco house. I'd have whizzed by, secure and blissfully ignorant. But I did see it and, full of my own importance, I walked across the lawn to investigate.

IT WAS a dark silhouette in the night, black on black. But it was very definitely a female figure. I couldn't see her face, the

hat brim sheltered an oval of impenetrable blackness. As I came up she shrank away in fright.

"Don't be afraid," I said quickly. "I'm Doctor Crawley, Bruce Crawley, Twenty-four Forest Street. Is there anything I can do?"

Her long drawn-out sigh told me that she had been holding her breath, that my words had reassured her, and that there was indeed something that I could do.

"I find I've locked myself out. I don't want to wake the neighborhood. I was going to break the window, but I'm afraid I may cut myself."

She sounded adorable. I saw her clearly in my mind, dark brown hair, softly waved, pink cheeks, golden-brown eyes, a natural dainty-featured prettiness. Because of the hour her voice was a throbbing whisper, but I was quite sure that no matter what the circumstances, it would always be low and sweet. As I offered my services, I was quite sure of a lot of things.

"You don't happen to have a diamond on you?" I whispered.

"My ring?" She made a swift movement and pressed a tiny circlet into my hand. "It's small, but it is a diamond."

With the jewel I scored an oval on the pane of glass large enough to admit my arm. Returning the ring I groped in my bag for the reflex hammer. Its rubber head made very little sound as I tapped around the oval. There was a soft tinkle as the glass fell, then silence. I reached in and released the window catch.

As I was putting my foot over the sill and feeling that Sir Galahad and I had much in common, she spoke again.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could find your way to the door without turning on any lights? Could you use a match or something? I know it sounds silly, but my neighbor is a mean old maid. She spies on me all the time. She's a light sleeper and if she sees me coming home with a strange man at this

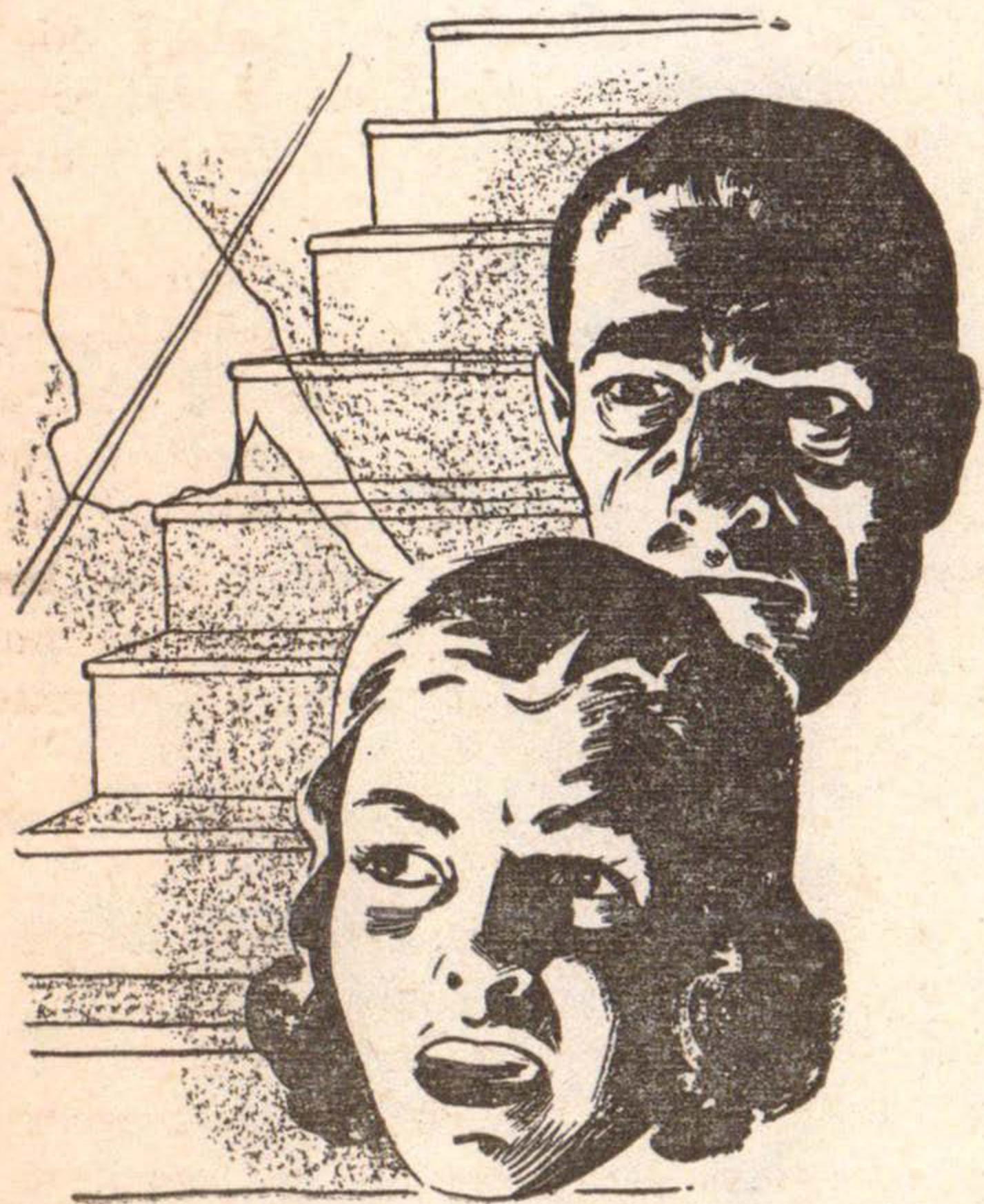
Be Helped by Mental Analysis—or Lead Pellets!

hour there'll be no end to her insinuations. Do you mind?"

Of course I didn't mind! I sheltered my match flame and picked my way around chairs and tables to the hall of the dark silent house.

"Enter, Madame!" Unfortunately it was too dark for her to appreciate the romantic flourish with which I opened the door.

And then somehow I was out on the doorstep and the door was closing gently



Dr. Crawley and Berenice

but firmly in my face. The words, "Thank you!" drifted back to me, faint and sweet as fading perfume.

I shrugged, ruefully aware that my disappointment was ridiculous. It was late. She didn't know me. What did I expect? A long conversation and a highball? And, after all, there *was* the nosey neighbor to think of.

The next morning after breakfast I decided to call on my patient immediately. I walked as before, bag in hand. The new citizen and his mother were thriving. I gave a few instructions to the female relative in attendance and walked home again, taking the detour of the previous night.

The squat stucco house in its square of lawn was unmistakable; also, there was a glazier fixing the window I had broken. As he put the finishing touches to the job the front door opened and a woman came out to pay him. I had been right about her height and shape, but that was all. About everything else it was extraordinary how completely wrong I had been. She was as metallic a blonde as I had ever seen. Her smart, coarse-featured beauty literally glittered! Few women could have carried the ultra-abstractionist print she was wearing, but strident colors suited her. She looked curiously out of place in front of that modest little house.

WHEN she spoke to the workman her voice had the ringing tones of a brass bell. I stood listening, fascinated.

"Wonder you didn't cut yourself," the man answered cheerfully. "That was a neat job though. I once knew a woman forgot her key, broke a window and cut an artery in—"

"Well, I was careful," the blonde said sharply. "I didn't cut anything. Thanks and good-by, Mr —" At that minute she saw me. I must have been gaping like the village half-wit, for one well-tweezed eyebrow flew up in an angry arch.

"Good morning!" I raised my hat and smiled. For this civility I received a blank stare.

The glazier went on his way and I tried again. "Remember me? I'm Dr. Crawley, Forest Street? I hope I didn't damage anything when I broke the window." That was pure politeness, of course. I knew I hadn't damaged anything.

I had been walking toward her and was close enough to see the brilliance of her gray-green eyes. I read recognition in her glance, but of a curious kind. If it were not obviously out of the question I would have said she hated me. Then I thought I understood. She was wearing a wedding band as well as an engagement diamond. A jealous husband might be in the offing. My visit was

indiscreet. I half turned away.

"You'd better come in!" she said quickly. It wasn't an invitation, it was an order. If I hadn't been curious to find out whether there wasn't a second woman in the house, a soft-voiced, dark-haired woman, I'd have left her standing there.

She seemed quite sure of me. She strode ahead and stopped at the living-room door, motioning me to go in. I wasn't invited to sit down and my hostess remained at the door as if guarding it. Her attention was fixed on something or someone out of sight in the rear of the hall. Once she made a brusque beckoning gesture.

"There's really no need—" I began hesitantly.

"You'll get your chance to talk!" It was hardly a commonplace remark and the animosity with which she uttered it was disturbing.

The small talk froze on my lips. This couldn't be the "voice" of the night before—but why then had she allowed the glazier to believe that she had broken the window?

I addressed her inattentive profile. "Pardone me, but are you the only woman living here?"

She obviously misunderstood me for she laughed, broke off angrily, and said, "Don't worry, I'm not alone. There's a man here who can handle you!"

"Wait a minute!" I said. "We're talking at cross purposes. May I point out that I did not force my company upon you!"

But she wasn't listening. She was talking to someone in the hall. I moved so that I could look through the doorway at a more oblique angle.

He was surprisingly like her, blond and hard with the same mouth and eyes. His frame was large and muscular like that of a football player in training. Looking at him you could feel the ruthless appetite, the animal energy. The only inharmonious note was his hands. They were powerful and slender with a look of professional deftness about them. I'd seen surgeons with hands like that.

The blonde talked about me as if she didn't care whether I heard or not. "A caller, Jerry. Says his name is Crawley, *Dr. Craw-*

ley. Came to apologize for breaking the window. I think he's another newspaper man."

"Not an honest newspaper man," he said. His voice was rich and deep with a trace of a chuckle in it, a throaty, self-satisfied sound that was anything but pleasant. "He wouldn't be here if he were honest; he'd be rushing his information to his editor. Perhaps he thinks we'll pay better!"

"Just a minute," I said. The thing had gone far enough; it was time to get things straight and pull out. "You're making a mistake. I *am* a doctor. When I entered this house last night it was to be helpful. You seem to consider my behavior criminal. I consider yours inexplicably offensive. I think I'd better leave now."

"Not a newspaper man," the big guy said. "So much dignity! Not tough enough. He wants to go home!" They continued to block the door.

"Wanted to be helpful!" The woman laughed as if the idea were not very funny.

I couldn't figure it out. Was she afraid that her husband would learn at what hour she had come home without her key? Had she made up some crazy story? But that was silly. The man was her brother, the resemblance was too close for any other relationship.

"Search his bag!" the man said. "He's too smart to bring the spool with him, but search it anyway."

I opened my mouth to protest and shut it immediately. I had not even seen his hand move, but now he was holding an automatic pistol, it was pointing right at my heart. I stared at it in a daze. It was a brutal looking weapon, and it was equipped with a silencer.

CHAPTER II

SHADOW OF DEATH



WITHOUT a word I handed over my bag. I had thought Ramskill a nice sleepy town, a little on the straight-laced side. There had been no room in my picture of it for sinister blondes with gun-toting brothers. Now it

seemed that under its placid exterior Ramskill was a den of iniquity! Had the whole business been staged? Had I been lured into breaking the window? Was it some kind of a shakedown? Had I unwittingly assisted a wandering lady burglar? I thought of that soft voice and shuddered at my gullibility. But no matter what *she* had been, these people were not just irate householders catching a thief. There was something more.

"Well, for God's sake!" The blonde sounded amazed.

"What is it?" Her brother spoke without taking his eyes off me.

"This is a doctor's bag! Here's his prescription pad. 'Bruce Crawley, M.D. Twenty-four Forest Street!'"

"Don't be a fool, Gilda! He may well be a physician, a friend of Berri's, very likely. But he doesn't live in Ramskill. There's no Crawley practicing here. As long as he's willing to do business, I don't care if he's a steam-fitter. I told you we should have erased the damned thing. There was no point in keeping it after the girl was dead."

His eyes, bright intelligent eyes, the eyes of a bandit fox, sought mine. "What's your price?" he snapped.

I couldn't trust myself to speak. My spine had suddenly gone numb, and my mouth tasted as if it were filled with sawdust. I was supposed to be a friend of Berri's, was I? There was only one Berri he could mean, a well-known muckraking journalist. And he was dead! He had been about to make a sensational exposure of a certain blackmailing Doctor X when he had been pushed in front of a subway train. The story was several weeks old, but the murderer was still at large. As a matter of fact, it hadn't been proved murder. But the police believed it was, and the public believed it was, and I accepted their belief. Berri as a person meant nothing to me, but I had followed his exposés with professional interest. I considered any work valuable that kept the public away from quacks.

"Well?" The deep voice sounded amused. "Don't be so reticent, Doctor. You must know what value to place on your prize?"

I groped for words. The name Berri revealed the extreme danger I was in, but it

told me nothing of what they were after. I knew too little to risk bluffing. The expression of blank innocence I gave them was not by any means the masterpiece of deception they evidently considered it.

At that moment a man appeared in the doorway, and my confusion was complete. I began to doubt my own reality. Was the whole episode an hallucination? *He* was real! And I had attended enough of his lectures to know him instantly! Had I suddenly gone insane? That would explain the meaningless nightmare. Why else would the famous psychoanalyst, dumpy little Otto Battlied, be peering at me through his heavy glasses?

There was no recognition in the glance he gave me, and no professional interest either. Clearly I was sane. If anyone was ill it was Battlied himself. His face was drawn, his eyes haunted and miserable.

The voice which I remembered as an electrifying staccato was now a rasping monotone. "What is going on here?" he said.

He listened to their explanations and peered into my bag, nodding wearily. "So you have stolen my whispering reed!" he said, sadly. "That was not what I kept it for. And what is your purpose? You wish it to whisper its secrets where they will do the most harm? Or is your morality less than your greed. Will you stop its whispers with money?"

He seemed to be mocking and reproaching me at the same time, but what he said was meaningless without the key to his symbols. It was like staring at a surrealist canvas without a knowledge of the theory of dreams that motivated the artist. He stared at me for a long moment, hands behind his back, and then he said:

"You should not be willing to sell back what you have so boldly wrenched from us. Do you understand? Where is your honor? It is unwise to trifle with them *after* you are in their power! Give it up without bargaining, promise to forget what you know and I shall do my best to protect you."

COMPLETELY exasperated, I blurted out the truth. "I have no intention of bargaining with, or selling anything to anybody. I have nothing to sell! I don't know

what you're talking about. I was just passing the house last night and—"

The blonde gave a hoot of laughter and said something about waiting for a street car. Battlied silenced her with a wave of his hand. He spread his palms in a gesture of modest pride. "You see? If a man *has* a sense of honor one has only to appeal to it. Now he will *not* sell!"

"Battlied!" I said. "What are you talking about? For God's sake who are these people?"

He flushed to the roots of his hair and gave me a sick grin. "Ah, you know me? This," he indicated the blonde with a short European bow, "is my wife. And this is her brother, Mr. Gerald Darrick, a gentleman of consequence, I assure you. If it were not for the fact that he was born without any moral sense whatsoever he would now be a brilliant colleague of ours, a surgeon. Unfortunately he never could distinguish what was ethical from what was criminal, with the result that he was thrown out of medical school."

"Shut up!" Darrick's voice cracked dangerously. He glared at Battlied like a bull about to charge. His sister grabbed his arm and shook it hard, but he ignored her. For an instant I was forgotten in the family tension.

The three of them were standing between me and the only door, so I edged closer to the window. It was shut. I didn't quite see how it would help me, but instinct pushed me to any opening on the normal world. It was as if I could confirm the fantasy of the scene within by looking out on the familiar suburban landscape.

Darrick relaxed suddenly, patted his sister's hand and turned toward me. "State your price and tell us where the spool is hidden. I'll send my sister to get it. You will, of course, remain here until she returns."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," I said, "and I have nothing to sell."

He shot a malevolent glance at Battlied as if blaming him for my obstinacy. "So you don't trust us," he said. "But why, if you have no faith in our promise to pay and release you, did you walk into our territory? That was the action of a fool! It must be obvious even to you that if you won't name

your conditions, we'll force the information we want from you, a painful business for us all and one that will bring you nothing but excruciating physical pain. In case you misunderstand, let me make it clear. I would kill you with as little concern as I would an insect."

I believed him. But I knew it was useless to tell my story now. They wouldn't believe it, and in any case they wouldn't free me. I had heard too much to be allowed to go. I clung to the cold comfort that as long as they thought I had the mysterious "spool" hidden somewhere they wouldn't shoot me.

I was about to hurl my bag at the gun in Darrick's hand and make a dash for the door when a flicker of movement drew my glance to the window. In a flash of hope so intense that I trembled, I saw a familiar gray-clad figure turn off the sidewalk and come toward the house. I threw myself forward, knocked on the pane, waved violently and smiled and nodded with such enthusiasm that the mailman stopped in his tracks and waited.

Darrick cursed angrily and I felt the hard mouth of the gun in my back.

"Too late!" I said. "The mailman has recognized me. If anything happens he will remember that I was last seen in this house. I'm going out that door now!"

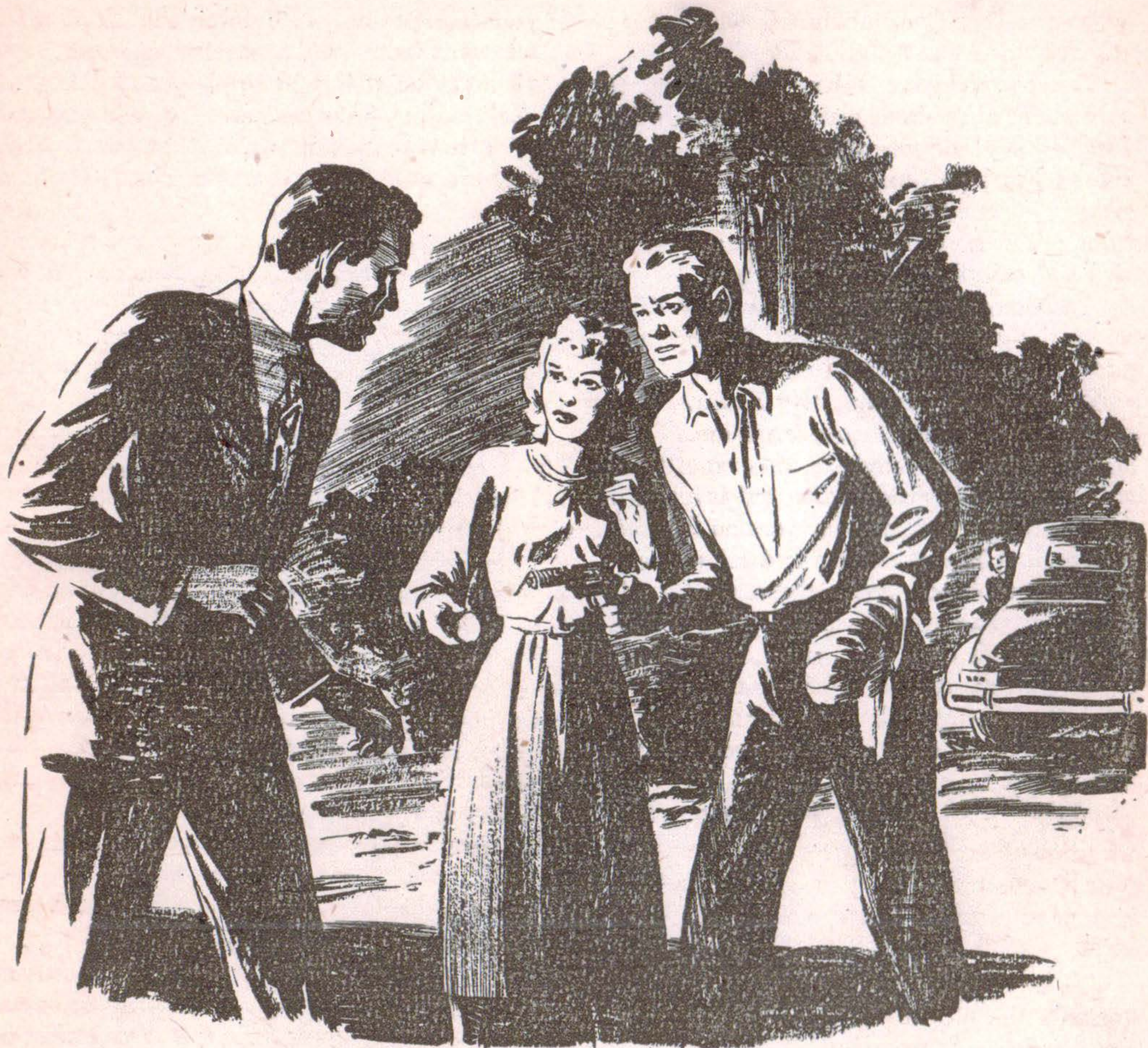
It worked. I picked up my bag as I crossed the room. Every square inch of my back was aware of the weapon behind it. But I kept on going.

As I opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight the mailman greeted me. "Hope the Darells aren't sick, Doctor."

"No," I said noting the name. "Nobody's sick, Jim, just a neighborly call."

I walked down the path but before I reached the road I stopped dead, my scalp prickling unpleasantly. A harsh burst of sound came from the house behind me. It was the laughter of Dr. Battlied!

I HURRIED on toward home. The first and quickest thing I could do was to telephone police headquarters at Alcott, the county seat. I dismissed as useless the solitary policeman who was all the local law that Ramskill provided. Battlied, his wife, and his brother-in-law were desperate and I had



"Keep your mouth shut," she said. "Get in back of the car!"

not convinced them that I did not have the spool they wanted. I rehearsed the phone call in my mind. The material was arresting but not very credible. Then I tried to remember all that I had heard or read about Dan Berri.

A series of his exposés on various phases of medical charlatanry had captured popular interest. Then he had published his mysterious WHO IS DR. X? which differed from the previous articles in one striking particular. According to Berri, Dr. X was not a charlatan, but an accredited M.D., a well-known psychiatrist who used the special information obtained in psychoanalytic sessions for blackmail purposes!

I had thought that this time Berri had got himself out on a limb. Such behavior was hardly credible on the part of a physician. And after telling so much, so specifically, Berri had withheld the Doctor's name. He apologized to his readers, swore he had proof of his assertions and promised to reveal X's identity the following week. The personal safety of a witness was involved. He requested the last victim of Dr. X to get in touch with him once more, if that were still possible.

This cryptic paragraph had convinced me that the whole business was distorted and colored to stimulate circulation. In my case my plans for removal to Ramskill completely ab-

sorbed me, and I had had little time to speculate on the integrity of a reporter I had never seen.

The day before Dan Berri was to name Dr. X, he was pushed in front of a subway train and killed. There were no clues.

I thought of Battled's eyes, miserable and frightened behind his thick glasses. But beyond a not very brilliant conclusion that he must be Dr. X, I made no headway.

And what was my role in the drama? Who was the lady for whom I had broken the window? What did Battled think I had taken? And why should they assume that having stolen it, I had called on them to sell it back. There was only one answer to that. The "spool" had market value only to them.

As I approached my house and turned up the walk I noticed that I had left the garage door unlocked. Since the car was still being repaired and there was nothing of value in the place, this didn't bother me. But I had been using it as an odd-job workshop and a few tools were there. It occurred to me that in my weaponless state a hammer was better than nothing.

After the bright sunlight I was practically blind in the cool darkness of the garage. I groped vaguely on the shelf until my hand closed on the hammer. In the car corner I could make out an oblong shadow, the broken-down mohair sofa left there by the last tenant. The side and back windows, small dusty panes, let in a watery yellow light. Slowly my eyes adjusted. I looked at the sofa again, and my knees shook with sudden weakness. Something had moved. I was sure of it. Something lumpy was lying on the couch. Something human.

I balanced the hammer and moved toward it, my blood throbbing in my ears sounded like a cardiac's heart under auscultation.

"Don't!" a frightened feminine voice cried. "Don't hit me! I didn't do any harm. I just slept here!"

"What?"

"I slept here last night. I didn't know what else to do."

She sat up out of the shadow and I saw her. She was pretty, with softly waved dark hair, pink cheeks, golden-brown eyes and a gentle voice.

"My God!" I said. "You're the thief I broke the window for!"

SHE COWERED on the sofa and I realized that I was still brandishing the hammer. My arm dropped to my side self-consciously.

"I went back there this morning and ran into a blonde and her homicidal family," I said angrily. "They think I stole something." I reached out and grabbed her arm. "You're coming into the house with me. I'll call the police and you can explain what this is all about."

She went docilely before me into the house. The droop of her shoulders made me feel as if I had kicked a kitten. Her hat was dangling by two streamers from a trailing hand, and under her other arm was a large pouchy purse. I wondered why small women always went in for out-size accessories.

I pushed her through the living-room into my office. Her velvety brown eyes were brimming with tears and while I glared at her they spilled over and coursed down her cheeks.

"I know I can trust you," she faltered. "I'm sure you're honest. You must help me!"

It was ridiculous how she made me feel in the wrong. I looked pointedly at the telephone.

She followed my glance. "I have no objection," she said. "I'll need the police soon, myself. But before you call them, please listen to me. You're in danger now, terrible danger, and it's all my fault. The least I can do is let you know what you have to fear."

"Sit down!" I said sternly. "Tell me the whole story. I suppose you are threatened by this same danger?"

She wiped her eyes with a square of lace and shook her head. "No, I'm sure that I'm safe. You see, they don't know that I even exist! You may have put them on my trail, of course, but I don't see how. From now on we must be very careful about that."

"Yes," I said with heavy irony that was completely lost on her, "we must be careful not to put them on your trail!"

She looked anxious. "You didn't tell them about me?"

"I didn't get a chance."

She sighed. "I knew you'd understand. You must realize that I never imagined this would happen when I asked you to break the window. But what could I do? There you were—and well—you would certainly have been awfully suspicious if I had told you anything else. If you hadn't gone back this morning, nobody would have known about you. That was very silly!"

"For Heaven's sake stop playing 'Hearts and Flowers,'" I said. "If you burgled the place, say so!"

She lowered her voice and her long lashes at the same time. The attitude of watchful demureness would have done credit to a Victorian heroine. "Do you know who that man is? The one in that house?"

"You mean Dr. Battlied?"

CHAPTER III

BLACKMAIL RACKET



SHE turned so pale I thought she was going to faint. Here was a clinging vine with a vengeance. I began to see what great-grandpa had to put up with.

She recovered quickly and backed away from me. "You're one of them!

How could you know his name? He doesn't use it here!" This was followed with agonized pleas that I should not kill her.

I shocked her into silence by yelling, "Shut up!" at the top of my lungs. I added coldly that my knowing Battlied wasn't a sign of nefarious conspiracy, that any number of young doctors trained in New York would recognize him.

"Oh, then you aren't—"

"No."

There was an awkward silence. Soon I tried again. "Let's go at this logically. They pulled a gun on me, which would be all right if they thought I was a thief, but it seems odd that they should offer to buy back whatever it is they think I've taken."

One small hand flew to her mouth. "Oh!

They think *you've* got it? You really are in danger!"

I was tempted to shake her. "But what am I supposed to have taken?"

She hesitated. "I can't tell you. I'm afraid." And then in a hurried whisper. "Do you know who Dan Berri was? Didn't you read his last article about Dr. X?"

I nodded.

"Dr. Battlied is Dr. X. And one of those three—the woman, I think—murdered Dan Berri."

I had already suspected as much. But to hear that rosebud mouth state the chilling fact so simply was as shocking as if she had casually drawn a cobra from her handbag.

The obvious objection occurred to me. "If you know Berri was murdered by Dr. X and also know who Dr. X is, why in God's name haven't you been to the police. They know it was murder; they're anxious for proof."

"That's it! That's what I went there for last night. That's what I got—proof!"

And so, finally, the story came tumbling out. Her name was Berenice Mundy and to my amazement she was a newspaper woman. She was, she said, an old pal of Berri's and the only living person in whom he had confided the details of the Dr. X exposé.

Berri had been struck by the fact that a disproportionate number of Battlied's patients killed themselves. Since he treated neurotics and even more seriously disturbed persons that wasn't particularly surprising. But a few of the angles made Berri suspicious. He wanted a story and kept digging. I gathered from Berenice's breathless description that Berri was a daredevil to whom a job without risks was dull. He climbed the fire-escape to Battlied's office one night, entered and searched the place.

I could see that Berenice was deeply moved. When she mentioned Berri her eyes burned and her breathing was unsteady. "He found a mike concealed in the couch where Battlied patients lay for analysis, and he traced the carefully concealed wire to a storeroom off the hall. The door was locked, but Berri crawled out one of the windows and along a narrow ledge outside the building until he came to the storeroom. The window was open. Among the filing cabinets and

odds and ends of photographic equipment was one of the new magnetic recording machines!

"All the cabinets and cupboards were metal, and locked. Berri wasted time trying to pick them open. He hoped to find a file of wire recordings of analytic sessions. All he discovered was a large empty envelope in the drawer on which the wire recorder stood. It was marked with the name Eva Clovelle. There were dates and, opposite each date, a large number. Berri was sure that this envelope had held a wire spool, that the numbers represented blackmail payments. Obviously the spool should have been locked up in one of the cabinets, and was not there—or the envelope would have been with it. Where was the spool?"

"Then he had a piece of unbelievable luck. He turned on the machine and the missing spool began to turn. He heard Eva Clovelle's voice. He played enough to realize that he had a lead for an article that would scandalize the city."

TO ME this was no conclusive evidence. "But that wasn't exactly proof," I objected. "One recording of an analytic session."

"Battlied's voice was on the spool too," Berenice reminded me. "But its real importance was that it led Dan to the blackmail victim, Eva Clovelle. She was his witness. There was a chance that Battlied might not miss the spool immediately, but Dan had to work fast. At first Eva Clovelle was terrified and refused to help him, but he coaxed and bribed and promised her protection. He pointed out that once Battlied was caught she'd be free of the terror of blackmail. And he added that refusing to help him wouldn't keep her out of it, because she'd be called as a witness whether she liked it or not. At last she gave in."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Why should a reputable psychiatrist like Battlied blackmail his patients. He had a large income. Why should he risk everything he had?"

"That worried Berri, too," Berenice said. "But he finally got the answer. Battlied himself is notoriously neurotic, about money. He had a miserably poor childhood, and after

struggling to the top he lost every cent in the market crash. It left him with a phobia about spending. He was ridiculously miserly. Nobody in his household could get hold of cash. He scrutinized his wife's bills, and spent hours over the domestic accounts. If a penny was missing or needlessly spent he was furious. He knew it was folly but he couldn't cure himself.

"This didn't keep him from being a conscientious physician. He worked hard to cure his patients and in many cases succeeded. But he simply couldn't accept the fact that once cured they would stop paying. He had all their shameful secrets. The temptation was too great, and he found it too easy to make them pay for his silence. Occasionally a desperate patient killed himself."

"It's fantastic," I said. But I was remembering the stories I heard about Battlied's parsimony. "What happened then?"

Berenice shook her head sadly. "Another tragedy. Eva Clovelle committed suicide. According to Berri, Battlied must have missed the spool, and forced the story out of her. She was terrified and hysterical and Battlied had blackmailed a fortune from her. They found a note in her apartment saying she was broke and couldn't face life any longer. She was going to swim out to sea until she drowned.

"At first Berri hoped the suicide was a fake, that she had left the note and disappeared to get away from Battlied. But a body was washed ashore that might have been hers. All her holdings in stocks and bonds had been sold, and there wasn't a penny left in her bank account. The records showed that she had been withdrawing large amounts of cash over a period of months.

"Naturally, without her confirmation the recording Berri had was much weaker evidence. He still didn't want to make the full disclosure in case she might be alive, so he published the facts withholding Dr. X's identity and begging her to get in touch with him secretly. Then her hotel manager identified the body as hers and Berri was out on a limb. He had to divulge the name as he had promised, but before he could write the final article, Battlied had him killed and got hold of the recording."

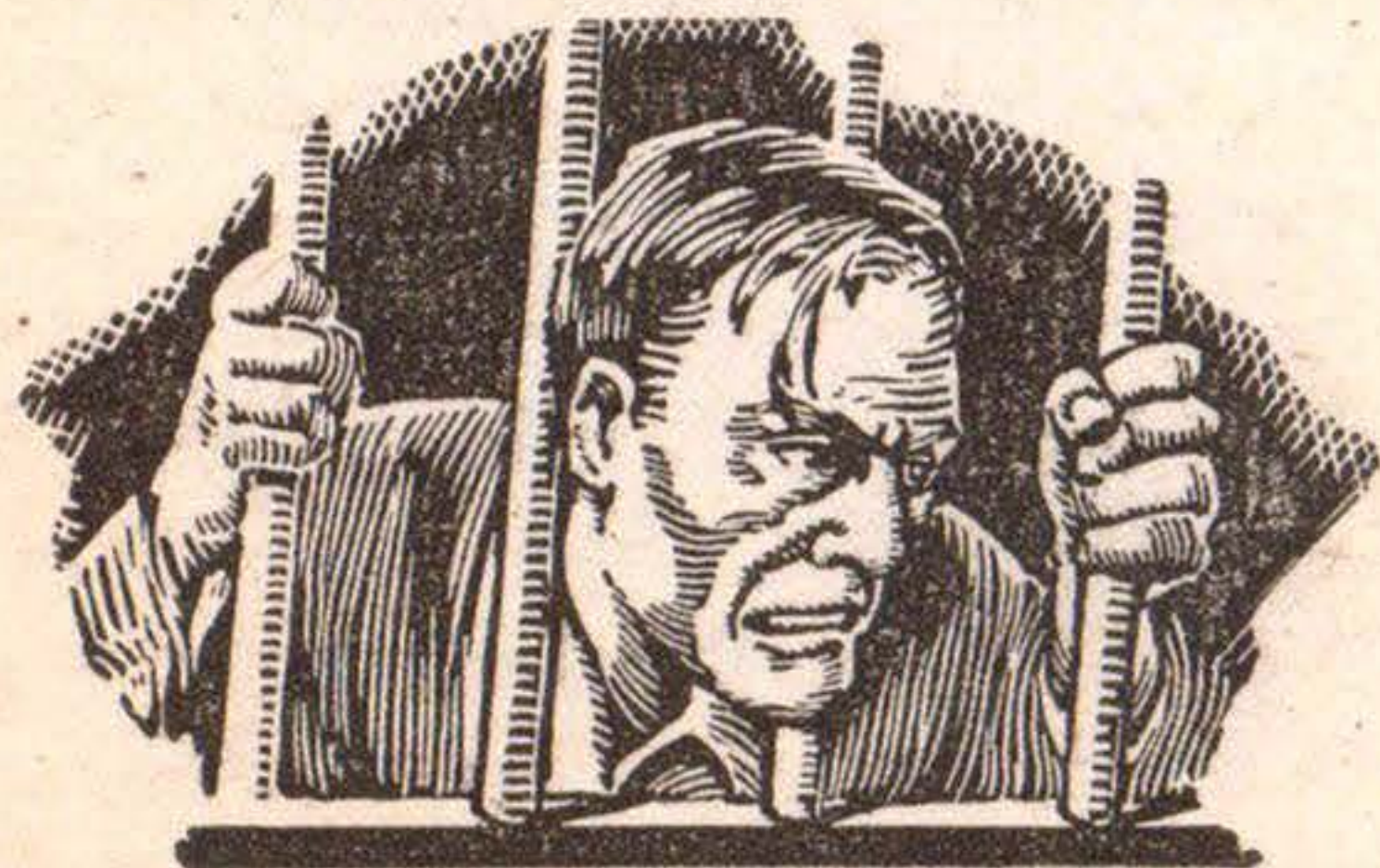
"Why does Battlied call the recording a

whispering reed?" I said.

She stared at me. "Does he? You must have misunderstood. I never heard it called that."

"And what's he doing in Ramskill?"

She shrugged. "Hiding, I guess. Shortly after Berri took the Eva Clovelle recording from his office, Battlied announced that he was giving up his practice because of ill



PRISON PATTERN

WHAT a prisoner can and cannot do depends entirely upon the place where he happens to be confined. In Haguenu, France, for example, it's not only perfectly all right for the women inmates to drink all the wine they can buy at the institution's canteen, but in addition the lifers get their liquor served to them at no charge whatsoever.

In over two-thirds of the local jails in our country, Kangaroo Courts are held to maintain discipline. This is a procedure whereby the tougher prisoners act as judge and jury at a mock trial with no interference whatsoever from the warden or guards. They judge a man innocent or guilty. Punishment for the latter consists either of a heavy fine or else the guilty-as-charged fellow is delegated to do a series of distasteful institutional jobs.

An English prisoner is permitted to do all the writing that he pleases, but the government draws a distinct line when it comes to his selling his work. This is definitely forbidden. Also, he may not take his literary property with him when his term is over, and cannot make a present of his labors to a relative or friend.

—Bess Ritter

health. Berri was watching and followed him here."

"And what's your part in all this? What are you trying to do?"

She smiled. "I have one advantage. They don't know that I exist. They don't know that Berri had a confidante he trusted with everything. They counted on the fact that a

cagey newspaperman wouldn't breathe a word of a sensational story before it was printed. I can't go to the police without some sort of proof. That would only warn Battlied and any evidence would be destroyed. I came here to get the recording they took from Dan Berri before they killed him."

"What makes you think the woman did the actual killing?"

SHE LIFTED her head proudly. "Berri wasn't a fool. A man couldn't have taken him off guard, but a woman— He was very chivalrous."

"You've got guts," I said inadequately.

She shivered. "No, I haven't. I'm a coward. Every step I take, I'm terrified. Night after night I waited for them to leave that house. In the day time I stayed at a hotel in Alcott and I walked here after dark. Darrick and his sister often went out but Battlied stayed in. At last I had to take the chance of entering the house when he was sleeping. I was petrified for fear he would wake up and catch me."

"But you got the spool?"

"Yes. The last train for the city had gone when I finally left the house with it. I couldn't walk around all night and I was afraid to be seen on the streets or going to the station after daylight. I found your garage and slept there. I intended to get up before morning and hide in the woods, stay there all day and get a train after dark, but I overslept."

"Why not go to the police?"

She raised troubled eyes to mine. "Chiefly because they don't know the case here. It sounds fantastic, but I'm afraid Battlied would just say I was a patient and irresponsible. While they were making up their minds he'd get away. In New York the police are already convinced that Berri was murdered, and they'd listen to me."

I thought she had something there. Even with the recording, she didn't have much in the way of evidence, but I didn't like to say so. "Do you know what Eva Clovelle has done? What was on the wire spool?"

She nodded. "I heard it once. And Berri told me what he had found out from Eva."

As Berenice talked I saw the victim clearly; the innocent whose weakness invites bru-

tality, the natural prey of the vicious, the eternal sufferer. Eva Clovelle had been orphaned at an early age and brought up by a wealthy great aunt who had seen that she earned her keep in the role of scapegoat companion. She was the classic poor relation and had to bear all the cruel whims of a vain, bored old woman. One day she lost her head. They were at the head of the stairs and the old woman said something particularly nasty. The girl gave her an angry push. She didn't mean to hurt her, but the old lady fell, broke her neck, and died instantly. Eva told the police that her aunt had tripped on a warped board."

"What made her go to Battlied?"

Eva shook her head. "It sounded silly to me, but Berri explained it. Eva inherited the old lady's money; in other words she benefited by the death she had caused. She began to suffer the symptoms of neurotic guilt. She couldn't sleep, was hysterical and fearful without reason, and was especially afraid of going downstairs. She went to Battlied for treatment. He got the whole story out of her. Then he began to convince her that it was murder, that she had *intended* to kill. He pointed out that she had lied to the police, which she wouldn't have done if she had felt innocent; that after keeping quiet so long and inheriting the money no one would believe she was not a murderess. Then he blackmailed her until she killed herself."

I remembered Battlied's miserable, haunted face in the doorway that morning and I reflected that even he had to live with his guilt. "You're right about the New York police," I said. "I'll put in a call to the city now."

"Wait! You can't! Not yet!"

I looked at her in amazement, she sounded as if she were going to burst into tears.

"I haven't got the spool," she blurted out.

"But I thought you said—"

"Yes, I had it. But when you came into the garage I thought you were after it, that you were going to hit me with the hammer. I stuck the recording into one of the holes in the sofa where the stuffing was coming out."

I DROPPED the handset into the cradle and swore.

"Well, how was I to know you weren't

after me?" she said defensively.

"Never mind the recording," I said. "It's safe enough in the sofa. It's the phone! It's dead!"

She stifled a scream. "They followed you back here! They've cut the wire. We'll never get out of here alive!"

"Now, take it easy!" I smiled stiffly, not convincing myself at all. "Maybe it's just out of order."

I took her hand and pulled her into the living-room. There was a window on the side that looked out directly opposite the one tiny pane in the wall of the garage. I waited. Then the back of a head, fair and masculine, was framed for an instant in the garage window and was gone.

"Stay back!" I pushed Berenice roughly. "If they don't know you exist, there's no sense informing them."

"Are they there?"

"In the garage. A perfect look-out post. One at the front can watch our front door. One at the little back window can watch the kitchen door. It covers our only two exits. Half a house is easier to watch, with only three sides. Nobody can see them. Our telephone is cut." She turned so white that I hurriedly added, "But as long as we stay inside with the doors locked we're all right."

I realized immediately that I shouldn't have added those stupid words of comfort, it only stressed the weakness of our position.

She got the point immediately. "But after dark—won't they try to break in?"

"I think so. There are four cellar windows they can enter with very little trouble. In the dark we'd have a hard time keeping track of their movements. But there are two of us and we've still got the hammer."

She looked bewildered. "But there's a whole day ahead. Somebody will surely come to see you? A delivery boy, a patient?"

I avoided her eyes.

"Surely you expect somebody?" Her voice rose in panic.

Then I told her. All of the utilities had been turned on. I wasn't expecting a delivery. There would be no patients, because I hadn't started to practice. People spoke to me in town and on the street but they wouldn't call until they knew I was ready. I

didn't expect a soul. If anyone came it was an outside chance.

She trembled violently. "It wouldn't matter anyway," she said. "Do you think they'd let anyone get near us? If they couldn't think up a good story to keep them from reaching the house, they'd kill them. They've already murdered a man. No, if they keep us here until tonight, they've won."

"Not necessarily. The darkness that will help them get in may just as well help us to get out. And remember they think they're dealing with one man alone."

"But we've got to get the recording out of the sofa," she objected. "They may search the garage and find it!"

"Have you any suggestion?" I'm afraid my tone was cold. I felt her criticism wasn't very constructive.

Surprisingly she had a suggestion. In all seriousness she said, "If you drew them away from the house, I could run over and get the spool."

I stared at her. "If I could draw them away from the house, as you put it, I might just as well go to the police and get help!"

She considered it and shook her head. "I don't think so. They'd shoot you first. But if you show no inclination to go near anyone, they'll just follow you hoping for a convenient spot. They don't want to kill you really; they want the recording. Nobody wants to shoot anybody in public if there's an alternative."

"But you admit there's a risk?"

She ignored that. "If you could just get them to follow you far enough away from the house, long enough to give me time, I'd get the spool and go to the police."

"Well—" I said.

"Do be careful, Bruce."

"Fortunately," I said dryly, "they don't know of *your* existence."

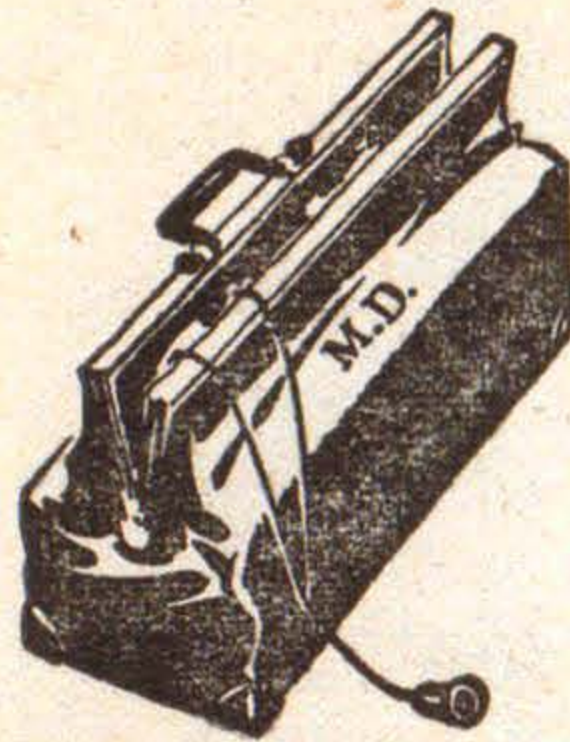
She flared up instantly. "I know I got you into this, there's no need to rub it in. It wouldn't help if I walked out there with you, would it? If you don't like my suggestion, don't act on it."

"I'm sorry, Berenice." I really was. I felt like a heel. "But I just can't take this thing seriously. It's like a practical joke gone sour."

"It's murder," she said soberly. "Try to get it through your head that they *will* kill us if there is no other way."

CHAPTER IV

BLOCKADED



BERENICE looked so helpless and yet so determined that without a word I went to the front door. Slowly I put my head out and awaited developments. The peace and quiet of the sunlit street was discouraging.

The houses—set far back from the road and separated from each other by hedges, walls, and what looked like acres of lawn—mocked me gently. Short of hanging myself from one of the trees or reeling home drunk and disorderly at 3 A.M. I could think of nothing that would lead my neighbors to intrude on my privacy.

I took three steps forward and waited anxiously. No bullet? I took a deep breath and went on, glancing back as I reached the sidewalk.

They were already out of the garage. The blonde, her abstractionist print hidden under a dark coat, her brother in sport jacket and slacks. They looked for all the world like a smart city couple looking for that "little house within commuting distance."

I turned quickly but before I had gone ten steps Darrick spoke.

"I'll give you a chance, Crawley. Give us the spool and we'll let you keep on walking."

I looked at him.

"All right," he went on. "Now you've had your chance. You can go back into the house or get shot right here."

He was smiling. His right hand was in his pocket and the pocket dragged heavily.

"Nothing doing," I said. "You'd prefer not to have my body lying on the street. I'll stand right here until you get back to the door of the garage. I'm not dumb enough to walk into your open arms."

They stepped back then, but I knew the gun was pointing unwaveringly in my direc-

tion. I went into the house and locked the door again.

Berenice was standing in the hall, clutching her handbag.

"A brave try," I said, "but it didn't work. They made me come back."

She looked ghastly and swayed toward me. "I feel sick. I was so afraid you wouldn't come back."

I dragged her into my office and poured her a drink.

"But this isn't medicine!" She was shocked.

"You don't need medicine," I said. "You need brandy. So do I."

"This is what they call Dutch courage, isn't it?" She was trying to sound bright and sophisticated, but she didn't quite make it.

"You *are* an old-fashioned girl!" I said. I intended it as a tribute but she looked hurt. "Now listen to me, Berenice. From now on we do this my way. We're going to eat something and then you're going upstairs for a nap."

She was wildly indignant. If I thought she would desert me, I had another trick coming. She wasn't going to sleep while her friends were murdered.

I had to bring her down to earth, so rather unkindly I said I wasn't interested in noble gestures, what I suggested was only common sense. "They won't move until dark. We'll have to be wide-awake and capable of staying that way all night if necessary. That garage couch couldn't have been very comfortable. I want to be sure you're rested. Don't worry. I'll keep my eye on the garage."

After a lunch of ham and eggs she went reluctantly upstairs.

"If you can't sleep, just lie quietly with your eyes closed," I called after her. "If they make a move, I'll call you."

The house settled into a heavy silence. I went into the living-room and drew a chair up to the side window. I had taken command in great style, but I had not an earthly notion of how to organize our defences.

The minutes dragged. My vigil began to be tiresome. My fear atrophied into a kind of mental paralysis. The stillness settled into something solid, it leaned on me and

breathed coldly down the back of my neck.

IT HAPPENED abruptly. One minute I was sitting there and the next I had thrown myself full length on the floor under the window. Something had whizzed by my cheek and hit the plaster with a hard little splat. The silencer was very efficient, the shot wasn't much louder than the explosion of a midget firecracker. I looked up at the neat little hole in the window above me. An inch one way or another made all the difference.

I realized I had been a fool. Knowing he had a silencer, I had sat there like an idiot, framed for his shot. I had been inviting him to shoot me and enter the house at his convenience. As my fear ebbed, my anger grew. I had shown myself a rank amateur, but even an amateur learns.

I crawled away from the window and went into my office. A black fury was mounting inside me. For the first time in my life I felt myself pushed by murderous rage. Yet I was calm, my hands were steady, I could plan with a clear mind. Coldly, methodically, I collected the things I wanted.

A tourniquet, a thin tube of live strong rubber—potential power; a handful of heavy bolts with which I was going to anchor some equipment to the floor—*missiles!* But the forceps weren't suitable, not for my purpose. I realized that immediately. The handles would give me only the one-handed pull of a regular sling-shot. I wanted something better.

Finally I decided to use the porcelain cabinet with its narrow metal bottle railing around three sides of the top. It was just above window height. I carried the whole business back to the living room.

Crouching below the window, I raised it as high as I could and pushed the cabinet into place. Then I tied both ends of the tourniquet onto the cabinet railing. Using both hands I pulled back the rubber into a long V, and put the bolt in place. I had my weapon and my ammunition—all I needed was the target.

Directly across from me the garage window was open. "Darrick!" I called. His face appeared at the window immediately. "Suppose I give you the spool? How can I be

sure you'll let me go?"

He chuckled, and it was almost a pleasant sound. I could read his mind easily. The shot had missed me, but that didn't matter. It had done its work, I had been frightened into submission. "I'm afraid I can't offer guarantees," he said smoothly. "You'll have to make concessions and trust to our good will."

While he was talking, I sighted with my improvised Goliath-killer. As a kid I'd gotten into plenty of trouble with similar devices

was a sound of ripping cloth. After a while he manfully rose to the occasion and answered me. "Only the left hand, Crawley; I shoot with the right!"

I felt good. In our encounter it was I, the unarmed man, who had inflicted damage. But it took only a few minutes for my self-satisfaction to be deflated. He had been careless because he was sure of himself. The next time he'd be harder to fool.

Again I waited. The garage was silent, the house was silent.

When Robert Shelley Enfield has his auto fenders smashed, he doesn't let mere killers and crooks stop him from pursuing the culprit!



SHOOT ME DEAD

A RACY NOVEL OF MADCAP MYSTERY

By VERNE CHUTE

●
COMING NEXT ISSUE!

because my aim was accurate. I prayed that time had not robbed me of my skill.

If the bolt had hit his temple it would have killed him, but as I let fly he raised his hand to his head.

His screech of surprise and pain was music in my ears; the window was suddenly empty. Then I heard him cursing. His hand, his hand! The bones were broken!

"Something to think about," I called, "and it doesn't need a silencer!"

There were more curses and I heard him directing his sister to bind up the hand. There

The afternoon slipped away with agonizing slowness.

Just before five Berenice came down. She said she had slept but she looked even more tired than before. I told her about my homemade weapon. "Unfortunately it's only good for defense," I hastened to add as I saw the hope in her eyes. "Useless without cover as long as he has a gun. But we can be absolutely sure he won't leave the garage as long as it's light outside."

Berenice looked worried. "You don't suppose he'd set the house on fire?"

"Good Lord, no! The spool might be destroyed. Don't forget he thinks we have it in the house."

"He wouldn't care; he'd destroy it himself if he had it."

"But he couldn't be sure of anything in the noise and glare of a fire," I said. "The neighbors would come, and we'd get away." I stopped and looked at her. "Hey! Why didn't they destroy the spool, or at least erase it when they took it from Berri? It only needs to be run through a machine."

Berenice shrugged. "They thought they were safe. Eva Clovelle was dead; Berri was dead; there was nobody left to fear." Her voice dropped to a husky whisper. "What are we going to do, Bruce? It will soon be twilight."

"I have an idea," I said. "But first how about some food?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't."

I knew how she felt. "All right. I'll make a pot of coffee."

While we were drinking it, hot and black, I told her what I had in mind.

"We ought to move before dark," I said. "They won't be prepared for any action on our part. And when we start running I want to know where they are. We'll have to try another trick."

"A trick?" She didn't sound very hopeful.

"Our one advantage," I went on, "as you frequently point out, is that they don't know you are here. Let's use that advantage. All I need is for you to get them *both* looking out of the back window of the garage for a few seconds."

"But I don't *want* them to know about me!"

"They won't. I'll give you one of my coats, one that looks like this gray one I'm wearing. Stick your arm in the sleeve and waggle it out of the kitchen window. They'll think they're watching me, it will bother them. The kitchen window is only visible to the watcher at the back. He'll naturally call the one at the front. . ."

"But suppose they see you? They'll shoot you."

"That's a risk we have to face. Now, look, I'll go down to the cellar and crawl out a

window. There's one with a bush in front. I'll squat behind it. Give me two minutes by your watch, then start waggling out that window."

I got the coat and left her staring at her watch.

CHAPTER V

ATTEMPT AT ESCAPE



IT TOOK me less than a minute to get behind the bush. Except for the usual insect noises there was no sound. I watched the second hand creep slowly a r o u n d my watch. Two minutes! Seconds passed, long weary seconds. Nothing

happened. And then inside the garage I heard the sound of hurrying footsteps. The blonde or her brother had left the post at the front door.

I scuttled across, hugging the ground, and looked in the door. They were at the back, both of them, peering through the little window. Darrick was sighting down the barrel of his gun, but he didn't seem anxious to use it. My slingshot seemed to have shaken his confidence, he was trying to figure the angles on this one. "He *can't* be signaling," I heard him mutter. "Not from that window!"

I had the doors almost closed before they realized that they had been tricked. The padlock snapped just as Darrick's weight thudded against the panels.

Berenice ran out the front door to meet me, bringing my medical bag and her own. "We may need it," she panted.

When we had turned the corner I took breath to speak. "This isn't much of a start! We'll have to move fast. Darrick can force the door or shoot the lock off."

"Where are we going?"

"To the police station at Alcott. We'll get a car at the garage and drive there."

"That's such a short distance. Suppose they get out of the garage? Suppose they follow us?"

I thought she was pointing out the obvious

and unavoidable danger.

"They're just as likely to be scared off and beat it themselves," I said.

"But if they do want to head us off before we get to Alcott, you admit they wouldn't have much trouble?"

She had something on her mind, that was evident. "All right," I said, "I'll buy it!"

"Why go to Alcott?"

I almost stopped running. "How's that again?"

"New York," she said, as if the advantages of that jumped to the eye. "Since they won't expect us to try for anything farther away than the county seat, the thing to do is to go where they won't expect us."

"That would be swell," I said, "if we could get the right car. But the little number I have in mind I'm not taking on any state highway."

"Better still. Dirt roads, back roads. They'd never think of that!"

She was right. The jalopy might be slow but it was reasonably sure; it would get us out of town on an unfrequented road; it might even get us to Harmon to catch the express. In any case it was a trail they wouldn't be likely to follow. If the car broke down, we could hike or hitch a ride.

I made a few flattering remarks to Berenice and she looked very proud of herself, but when we got to the garage and she saw the thing she had to ride in, she was frightened. "I'd rather have a horse and buggy," she said. "We'll never make it in time for the express."

She wasn't being funny, but the garage man roared his appreciation; he was a man with a sense of humor.

"And on bad roads!" she pleaded. "Hasn't he anything better than this?"

I drew her aside. "The main thing is to get away from here now," I reminded her. "Alcott or New York?"

"New York!" She made the decision and put her hand in mine. I hauled her up to the seat. With a gasp, a series of snorts and a steady rattle we shook ourselves out of town.

For a while we kept glancing back nervously, but there was no pursuit. The road was empty behind us.

We cut onto the back road as soon as pos-

sible. It was old, fairly smooth with occasional bad spots, and no traffic. We chugged along in the falling twilight. I began to feel better.

"See if the lights work," Berenice said gloomily, "we'll be needing them soon."

WHEN a pale little puddle of light showed on the road in front of us I had a sense of personal achievement. "This isn't so bad," I said. "Lots of time to take in the elegant scenery."

Berenice relaxed, but after a little silence she said, "I'm afraid you're over-confident. They could reason this out just as we did. And they have a fast car."

"You didn't think much of Alcott either," I reminded her stiffly. "And even if they figure it out, they'll certainly take a main road. They'd hardly expect us to loiter along in a thing like this."

She placed a hand over mine and gave it a shy squeeze. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'd have been helpless—completely helpless—without you."

Her admiration didn't give me a lift, but I responded as well as I could. "For a timid little girl," I said gallantly, "you don't do too badly yourself. You go pretty far to avenge a friend." A shadow passed over her face. "I'm sorry," I said. "Perhaps Berri wasn't just a friend. Were you engaged?"

"Please let's not talk about it." She looked drawn and tired.

Conversation languished. When she spoke again it was dark, not yet pitch black, but veiled and full of shadows. The shapes of trees and houses looked mysterious and unnatural in the distance. "You think the spool isn't enough, don't you?" She sounded subdued, defeated. "You think it isn't very strong evidence?"

I didn't like to say what I thought; it was like slapping a baby. "Excellent corroborative material," I said cautiously. "Eva Clovelle could have made it stick, of course, but now that she's dead. . . Wait a minute!" "I'd been a fool not to think of it before. "Maybe she didn't kill herself. Maybe they murdered her before they murdered Berri. Do you know what condition the body was in when it was found?"

I HEARD the quick intake of her breath. "It was badly battered by surf on the rocks."

"So that if she'd been hit over the head the blow wouldn't have been noticed!"

"But she was *drowned*. There was water in the lungs!"

"The blow wouldn't have had to kill her. They might have stunned her, taken her out in a boat and dumped her overboard."

She shook her head. "Berri didn't think so. The note was in her handwriting. It couldn't have been faked. She *had* been blackmailed steadily, she had no money left, she was afraid of exposure! Oh, please, let's not talk about it! It's such a dreadful thought, and it doesn't help me to be brave." She shivered violently.

"You're more afraid of words than you are of things," I said gently. "Why didn't you give up? Why didn't you just tell the police what you knew and let *them* worry? If you'd really been afraid, you would have stopped."

"But they murdered Berri!" she said, as if that explained everything. "Even if they kill me I have to— That doesn't mean I'm not afraid."

"Sounds like a compulsive neurosis," I said lightly.

"What's that? I thought you were just a medical doctor?" It was very dark now, but I could see the angry flash of her eyes, and sense the hardness of her mouth.

"A general practitioner," I admitted. "But anyone who can read print these days knows the jargon."

Still I felt her fear and lack of friendliness.

"I don't know anything about it," she said, as if she were thinking aloud. "You might have been left there to watch Battled's house last night, you might be. . ." Her voice faded away.

"If you think I sit at windows getting shot at, and chase madly across country in order to win your confidence so that I may betray it," I said angrily, "you're a fool. If I'd wanted to, I could have made mincemeat of you long ago."

She buried her face in her hands and cried softly. I found the swift changes in her mood bewildering and a little tiring. But before I

could say anything she apologized. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you're good. Life would be too terrible if a person like you were only pretending. But can't you understand?" There was an agony of doubt in her voice. "I can never be sure. It's terrible!"

I patted her hand. "Don't get worked up. The emotional tension has been too much for you. Relax. You're so tense you'd break in half if we hit a pebble."

She seemed to rest then and for a time we drove without talking. But again she began to fidget, several times she turned and looked behind us anxiously.

"What's the matter, Berenice?" I asked. She was getting on my nerves.

"There's a car behind us."

"I know. There's bound to be some traffic even on a road like this."

"It might be Darrick! I think he's following us."

"Now wait a minute!" I said. "Pull yourself together. There's no reason you should think that's Darrick. Anyway, we'll soon know. Anything on the road can catch this heap."

"Don't be a fool! That's Darrick's car. I can feel it!"

Hysteria is infectious, and there was a curious conviction in her tone.

"All right," I said. "I'll prove it isn't Darrick. We'll be coming to an old driveway soon. It runs through a deserted farm and bends back to the road. Nobody would follow us if they weren't after us."

I didn't believe the car was Darrick's. I was making a gesture to quiet her terror. But something began to happen in the distance behind us that made me feel like a jellyfish inside. The lights of the following car were zigzagging across the road. I tried to tell myself that it was a drunk, but there was nothing haphazard about that violent careening. Still, since it was too far back to touch us, it seemed a crazy maneuver. And then I got it. It was a warning signal from Darrick, "Stop, or we'll push that old wreck into the ditch!"

BERENICE got it too. She threw herself to the floor and crouched at my feet.

"Good idea!" I tried to sound reassuring.

"I'm sure this thing has no safety glass. So cover your face!"

"Never mind the glass," she said through clenched teeth. "They don't know I'm with you. They mustn't know. If they stop us, get out and go to meet them. Don't let them look in the car. I'll be able to get away and get help."

Even at such a moment I found time to be surprised at the combination of panic and common sense that comprised Berenice. Then I saw the old driveway, half obscured by weeds and ditch growth.

"I'm taking the turn anyway," I said, obeying a sudden impulse. "The drive is so badly rutted that the height of our wheel base may give us an advantage. I've seen new cars wrecked on roads like this. Too bad it isn't longer! There's plenty of cover. Keep your head down. They're increasing their speed. Try to get the license number. They'll cart me off somewhere. Get to a house and call the state troopers. Say I've been kidnaped."

The road shook us until our teeth rattled, but the car behind us didn't seem to mind the ruts. Steadily it gained on us.

"This damned car!" Berenice wailed.

CHAPTER VI

CROSS OFF TWO



OF COURSE machinery has no soul, but I must admit that it often behaves as if it possesses a perverse and spiteful intelligence. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than Lizzie gave one loud protesting cough and stopped dead! There was no escape now. We were speared like a moth on a pin by their headlights.

"You're covered!" It was Darrick's voice. I heard the car door slam and the sound of footsteps.

"Keep down," I whispered to the girl at my feet. I jumped out and walked to the side of the road. Darrick and his sister would follow me, and their backs would be to the stalled car long enough for Berenice to get

out and make for a tree.

I found myself at the edge of the glaring shaft of light that cut one portion of the road from the surrounding blackness. It was worth trying. I moved quickly into the dark field.

Immediately I was picked up by a flashlight beam, then the light was lowered so that I could see the gun in Darrick's hand. His left hand hung at his side wrapped in a torn, blood-stained cloth fragment. I didn't like that. Darrick wasn't going to be gentle with the guy who'd spoiled his beautiful hand. His sister, holding the flashlight, laughed softly.

"I haven't—" I began.

"Keep your mouth shut," she said. "Get into the back of the car. I'll drive. You get in with him, Jerry. Keep the gun on him."

"Do you want that spool?" I dangled the bait under their noses. I didn't want them driving off before Berenice could get the license number.

"Where is the spool?" Gerald's voice was venomously soft.

"I can take you to it," I offered, "if you're willing to talk money."

"I don't think so, Crawley," Darrick said. "Suppose we let you have your life—that must be sufficiently precious."

"We'll drive back to Ramskill," I said loudly. "It's hidden in my garage!"

His fury as he realized that I had locked him in with the thing he wanted gave me grim pleasure. "If you're lying," he said, "God help you!"

Now that Berenice knew where they were taking me, I didn't care how soon we started. I was in for a rough time and I wanted to get it over. Everything depended on her luck in getting to a phone. I could see the police bursting into the garage and catching Darrick red-handed as he was digging the spool out of the sofa. Then I saw another picture, not so pleasant, Berenice not finding a telephone in time, Berenice helpless on a dark country road, and Darrick finding the spool and quietly shooting me in my own garage.

He pushed me toward the car, into the glare of the headlights. I saw them clearly. Their eyes exactly alike, green and glistening like the eyes of wildcats.

And then noise split my eardrums and

reverberated. Darrick's eyes widened in ridiculous surprise, he rose on tip-toe, head up, proudly, like a ballet dancer. Something happened to the front of his shirt, there was a bright red spot there. Abruptly he toppled forward and lay at my feet.

I didn't have time to move before a second shot rang out. The force of the bullet spun Gilda around. She crumpled slowly, her mouth twisted in a grin of pain.

I stood there in a stupor, my ears ringing. Berenice's face appeared in the light, wrinkled like a crying child's. She was shaking all over, in her hand was a forty-five caliber revolver.

"I didn't kill them, did I?" She pleaded with me idiotically as if my word would erase the bodies in the dust. "My God! I didn't kill them!"

I heard my own voice, shaky but surprisingly normal. "It's all right, Berenice. They would have killed me. It's all right, I tell you. Pull yourself together, child!"

"But—I didn't—I only wanted to scare them. I was afraid they'd kill you, that I'd never get to a phone in time." She was sobbing, dry sobs, it hurt me to hear them.

"It's all right." I said again. Then I looked at the revolver she held. "Where did you get that?"

SHE looked at it as if she didn't know.

"Why didn't you give it to me when we were in the house. If I'd had it then we wouldn't have had to go through all this."

"It was Berri's," she said dreamily. "He gave it to me once, before they murdered him. I've had it in my bag ever since."

"But why didn't you give it to me?" I tried to be patient. I could see she was in no shape for any but the gentlest treatment.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't sure until the last minute that you weren't in with them. It was only when I heard Darrick talking to you that I knew."

"But why should you doubt me? After all we've been through—"

The tears began to flow then and it came out in an eager rush, a confession she was glad to make. "When I suggested that you leave the house to draw them away so that I could get the spool from the garage, I was

testing you. I thought nobody who wasn't on their side would take such a risk. Then when you came back so quickly I was sure you'd told them the spool was in the sofa. I thought you'd come back to kill me. I was terrified of the brandy you gave me. Then I thought this ride was a scheme to get me away and kill me somewhere else."

I was dumbfounded. "But when they followed us? Then you must have known that I hadn't told them where it was, since they were still after it."

She looked at me strangely, opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again. "I—"

"Well?"

"I had to be sure," she said. "Forgive me!"

"But you suggested going to New York. If you thought I was going to kill you, why did you suggest back roads and give me plenty of opportunity?"

She turned scarlet. "You had no gun," she said. "You'd have tried to hit me on the head, or strangle me. But I did have a gun and I was watching you every minute."

"Good Lord," I said. "You intended to shoot me!"

"Not if you didn't attack me first."

I couldn't very well say what I thought of her judgment. She had saved my life. "It's okay," I said wearily. "But for heaven's sake if you have any more suspicions state them now."

I dropped on my knees beside the bodies. They were dead, but I knelt there feeling automatically for their pulse beats.

"Hurry," Berenice said. "We'll take their car; it's faster."

I stared at Darrick's hand holding the gun. He was a blackmailer and a murderer, but he had the hand of a surgeon. It should have held a scalpel—not a pistol.

"Come!" Berenice was panicky again.

"Relax," I said. "Nobody's after us now. You saved my life with admirable efficiency by shooting two people. Try not to let it throw you. We can't leave two bodies in the middle of the road, even a neglected cart track like this. Get into the car. I'll drag them into the weeds."

"Of course," she said. "We don't want to leave them like that. But hurry. I have

a feeling that Battled knows where we are.”

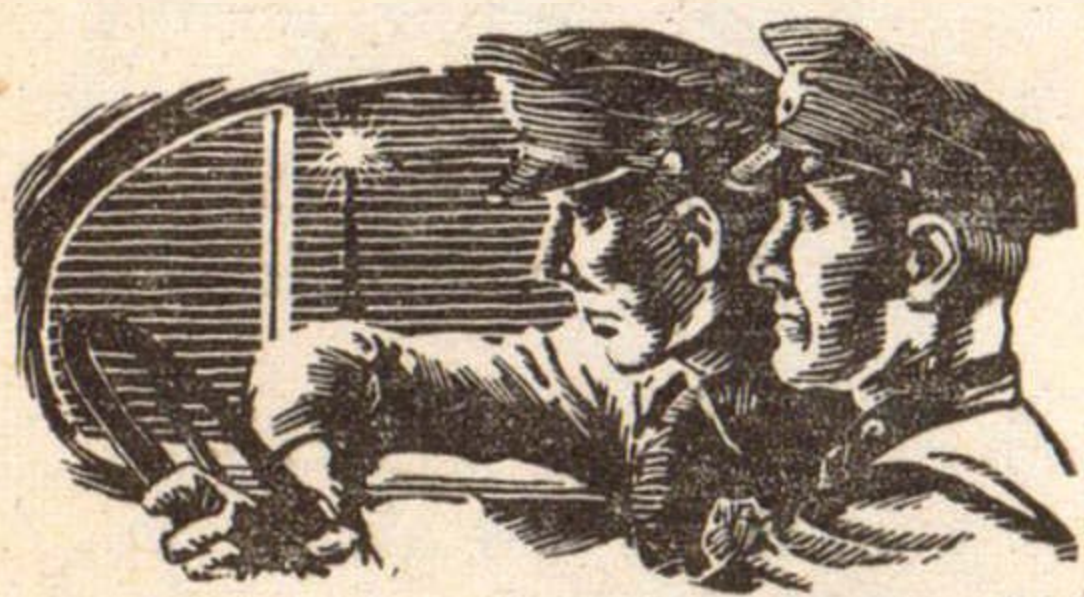
When we were under way again, I said, “You made a point there. They didn’t follow us out of town. They had to find out where we were heading and the kind of car we had or they never would have known they could overtake us.”

“But how could they?”

“You ought to know.”

“What do you mean?”

“They must have questioned the man at



IT'S THE LAW

WHEN Iowa legislators drew up Section 13467 of the Code, they certainly had law and order in mind, for it blandly permits any state citizen to make an arrest. The arrestor must escort his prisoner to an officer or magistrate, and be willing to swear himself in as a witness.

If there's a policeman on the scene who is having difficulty apprehending his man, the innocent bystander must, if called upon, aid the arm of the law. Refusing to do so is considered a misdemeanor and is punishable throughout the state by a fine.

Although the officer in question can use all necessary means to affect the arrest, he can't shoot at the tires of a speeding automobile. For speeding, in itself, is just a misdemeanor. The use of firearms comes under the heading of excessive force, and may be employed only in cases of felony.

—Mark Knight

the garage — said they needed me for an emergency. He told them they could catch us. After all he nearly split his sides guffawing at your horse and buggy line. He wasn't likely to forget that you mentioned bad roads and Harmon.”

She didn't say a word, but she looked desperately ashamed and unhappy. I felt like a brute again.

I REACHED over to take her hand and felt something hard and cold on the seat

beside me. It was the forty-five. It was her way of saying she had no further doubts, she trusted me with her weapon. I made a return gesture that fixed things up all around. Picking it up I laid it in her lap. “Thanks,” I said. “You're a good kid. Put it away. We won't need it now.”

She smiled, but she still looked sick.

“What's the matter?” I said.

“Nothing. Just that I'm not used to shooting people. I can't forget the way they fell.”

“Yes,” I said softly, “it wasn't pleasant, was it? It was right out of character for you, so far out that I'm not sure you could have brought yourself to pull the trigger just for my sake. I think you were in love with Berri, so much in love that it gave you the strength to kill his murderers. You couldn't have shot them in cold blood for revenge, and I don't think you could have shot them just to help me, but the combination of saving me and killing them was too good to miss. Besides, you were afraid the evidence on the spool wouldn't be enough to convict the two who actually did the killing. This way you paid them off, and it was self-defense.”

“If that were true,” she said quietly, “you wouldn't expect me to admit it, would you? But I'll be honest with you. If such thoughts were in my mind, they weren't conscious. I only had a few seconds. I was deathly afraid that I might not get to a phone in time for the police to save you. I'd been wrong about you. That would have made me responsible for your death. It was a simple choice. I'd rather be responsible for theirs.”

I stopped the car and put my arm around her shoulders. She drew back and I could feel the tension in her body. “I can't help it,” she whispered. “Please keep going. Battled might still be behind us.”

“But we've got a car this time,” I said. “Will you let me give you a hypo, so that you can really relax?”

“No, but I'll promise to be quiet if you keep driving.”

I started the car. “We may as well forget the express at Harmon. We don't need it now. And if the garage man did pass on that detail, I think that's where Battled

would be, waiting on the station platform!"

She slumped down on the seat and closed her eyes. The first chance I got I put the car on a good road and let it drive itself, it was that kind of car.

Twenty minutes later she sat up. "It's no use, I've got to tell you, Bruce."

"No time like the present," I was cheerful. Nothing had followed us when we left the back roads, and nothing was following us now. I told Berenice.

"Thank God!" It was really a prayer the way she said it.

"What do you have to tell me?"

Her hands clutched her bag until the knuckles were bloodless. "When you asked me if Darrick's following us didn't prove to me that you hadn't told him the spool was in the sofa, I couldn't answer you. It wouldn't have proved anything, Bruce. He could have searched the sofa and still come after us."

My hands tightened on the wheel. "Go on!"

She raised the handbag she was gripping. "The recording never was in the sofa. I've had it in my bag all along. I lied to you to gain a little time. Now that I know you were helping me, I feel ashamed."

"You should," I said. "I feel like wringing your lovely neck. I should have known a bag that size held more than a compact. But you came through when you saved my life, so I suppose I have to understand. All the same I feel it was a reflection on my honest face that you couldn't find it in your heart to trust me."

SHE shook her head. "But there were little things that made me suspicious, Bruce. You knew who Battlied was before I told you! You used an expression that made me think you might be working with him in psychiatry. I admit I didn't think things out too clearly, but I had to be careful, more careful than Berri had been."

READ

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"The past is past," I said nobly. "Besides, you've won. We've got the evidence and ourselves intact. All we have to do is deliver both to the police. I'd hate to have Battlied get away now the other two have paid."

"Thank you," she said. I could see her smile; it was very pretty. "You concentrate on getting us there and I'll talk about something else. Won't we be passing through Crestvue soon?"

"We'll touch the outskirts of it," I said. "Why?"

"Just making conversation. I have a summer cabin in the hills behind the town. I stay up there a lot. It's lonely but that's what I want. I can practice my singing there without worrying about disturbing the neighbors."

"Singing?" I said. "Singing? Do you realize how little I know about you. I didn't know you could sing. What else do you do?"

"Oh, I write a little. My job, of course. Whenever I can get away I come here and sing. I even got myself one of those wire recording machines so that I could hear myself. It was Berri's suggestion. I guess the Battlied business gave him the idea. It's a marvelous way to check your mistakes. I think every professional actress or singer could use one with profit."

"Not to speak of political speakers," I said. "We're very close to Crestvue," I went on. "Look out and see if you can tell me where your cabin is from here."

She looked out. "You'd have to take the next road on the left and then cut back to another country road that leads up into the hills."

"Do you mind showing it to me?" I swung the car off on the road she indicated.

"But—"

"It will only delay us about fifteen minutes, and I'd really like to hear the recording of Eva Clovelle's session with Battlied. I'd like to know how much we've got, before we get out on any official limbs."

"I don't know—" She was flustered. "I suppose it would be all right but—"

"There's no danger," I assured her. "Battlied isn't behind us. Nobody is."

"Very well." She said it shyly. "It isn't much of a place—but I'd be delighted."

CHAPTER VII

AN EAVESDROPPER



THE cabin was at the end of an overgrown track, possibly one of the trails of the original settlers. The ruts looked as if they'd been there for centuries. We had to get out and walk most of the way, and I almost sprained my ankle at one point.

"Be careful," she warned with irritating post-facto wisdom. "If only you'd thought to pick up Gilda Battlied's flashlight."

"And Darrick's gun too; it was a shame to leave that with its silencer," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, that doesn't matter." She was being nice. "We're armed. Besides, when we have to report the shooting, the gun in his hand will prove I fired in self-defense. Look out! Here's where we take the path through the trees. Have you a match?"

I helped her find the path and we climbed to a little clearing in a ring of pines. Against the night sky a few stars glittered. There was no moon. I could see the dark bulk of a log cabin and its flight of porch steps.

Berenice ran up, fussed for a moment in her bag and turned the key in the lock. "It's hardly necessary to lock it," she said. "Nobody comes here, and an enterprising thief could get in through the window. I know now how simple that is."

She disappeared into the black rectangle of the open door and immediately the windows glowed in the dark walls like yellow eyes. It looked cosy and inviting. I followed her in.

THE ROOM was just what you'd expect of that kind of summer refuge,—large, rustic, with an impressive fieldstone fireplace. There was some furniture of wicker, and a few substantial oak pieces brought down from somebody's attic because they couldn't be chopped up or burned or given away. Piles of cushions and a throw camouflaged the day bed. The two unusual pieces were

the piano, a beautiful Steinway, and the wire recorder, compact and modern on a small table by itself.

There were two doors in the far wall. "Where do they go?" I asked.

Berenice had taken the spool out of her bag and was fixing it in place on the machine. She made awkward work of a simple job, and I reflected that a girl of her type couldn't ever feel at home with machinery. She answered my question absently.

"The bedroom and bath are on the right, the kitchen on the left."

"Did Berri ever come here with you?"

She stopped and looked at me. She was shocked. "Certainly not!" She blushed slowly. "May I offer you a drink?"

I grinned at her. "Glad you remember your manners."

She didn't smile; she was a serious hostess. "Port or Sherry?" There was something about the way she leaned forward to ask, something quaint and deferential.

"You have no whisky?"

"No." She sounded annoyed. "I don't entertain men here. I can recommend the Sherry; it is imported and very good, a rare vintage." She recited the words stiffly.

Very graciously she poured for me, and then a thimbleful for herself. It *was* good—nutty and dry, the best sherry I had ever tasted.

I helped myself to a wicker chair. "All right; turn the machine on."

"After our wine." She sniffed the liquid reverently. "A fine wine deserves respect!"

My eye was on a level with the top of the recorder. Something I saw there troubled me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I felt an unreasonable anxiety. A little red faceted glass button glowed brightly on its surface. What did that mean? That the thing was connected, ready? I tried to remember about the machine a student had used at the hospital for recording lectures. He had explained it at great length and bored me to death. "Red light when erasing, green when—" I jumped up. "Stop it!" I yelled at Berenice. "That machine is on!"

"But how could it be? It hasn't made a sound."

I pushed her aside as I flipped the switch.

"It's erasing, not playing back! God knows how much it has taken off! How long did this spool run originally?"

She stood with her hand over her mouth, pale and shaken. "Half an hour. We can't have lost more than a minute, Bruce. I put it on without looking. I'm so sorry! I should have been more careful."

"Let's hope the opening wasn't vital." I turned the machine on and twisted the knob for sound. The spool spun silently for a second or two and then a male voice filled the room. We had picked Battlied up right in the middle of a sentence.

"—can I help you if you continue to lie to me?" Another silence. "Why pay me to relieve you if you won't cooperate?"

A soft voice answered. "It's not my fault if I unconsciously resist treatment, Doctor."

There was an explosive sound of exasperation from Battlied. "Who are you deceiving, yourself or me? The ordinary neurotic patient whose trouble is buried in the depths can't help resisting. He doesn't even know he resists. This is not true of you. Most patients have to be relieved of guilt feelings that they bear *without being really guilty* in the social sense. Little things that go back to the exaggerated emotions of childhood. Not so with you. Your guilt is *merited*. You do not want to confess to the authorities and take your punishment, but your conscience will not let you go unpunished. You come to me for absolution. Very well. The first step is an old one, as old as the human heart—confess your crime! Tell me you are a murderer, that you deliberately killed your aunt . . ."

The feminine voice was strained and weary. "I can't! I didn't! It *was* an accident!"

"If you believed that you would not be here." Battlied returned to the attack. His line was always the same. She was guilty and would not be free until she accepted the punishment that her subconscious wished for.

MY EYES met those of Berenice. She swayed, white as death, and the wine glass fell from her hand and smashed on the floor.

In a rush of pity I turned off the machine. "I didn't need to hear her voice to know that you are Eva Clovelle," I said.

"Please!" She bent forward as if I had hurt her physically. "Please! That's the way he blackmailed me. He suggested that I was guilty. His voice was hypnotic, dreadful! It went on all the time. I half believed it, you see I did feel some guilt and—finally I wasn't even sure that I hadn't intended to kill her. Before that session I broke down and 'confessed.' That's what they killed Berri to get. You see why I had to steal it, why I wasn't brave as you thought?" Her voice was harsh and desperate. "I wish I *had* killed myself. I warned Berri not to attack Battlied publicly. He wouldn't listen; he'd be alive today if he had. I protected myself in the only way I could. I killed Eva Clovelle and became Berenice Mundy."

"Those withdrawals from the bank," I said. "They weren't all blackmail payments; some of them were in preparation for your new life. You came up here and lived in this cabin. But you must have planned the disappearance long before you met Berri."

"Yes. I didn't intend to let them blackmail me forever. I wasn't sure, of course, that they'd believe I was dead. But when the hotel manager identified some other girl's body as mine, I knew I was safe. It was like help from Heaven." She frowned as if something puzzled her. "How did you know I was Eva Clovelle?"

"I wasn't sure at first. But you just didn't fit my notion of a newspaper woman. You were what any young girl would be whose life and youth had been atrophied in the service of a tyrannical and embittered old woman whose ideas of living were still those of her own youth. At first I thought you were just a cunning female using the helpless romantic touches to get what you wanted. Then it struck me that *that* was the real you and that all the modern attitudes were the ones that were false. You had no time to acquire natural contemporary tastes of your own. She made you into a museum piece, crippled you. No wonder you felt guilt for her death—you must have often hoped for it. And then not having whisky because you don't entertain men! As if no

woman ever drinks a highball! Just Sherry and Port, the polite drinks for ladies! You wanted to be free and up-to-date, but you hadn't quite learned how."

"Excellently reasoned!"

We both jumped and stared at the machine, but it hadn't turned itself on again. The voice was Battlied's all right, but he was speaking from the bedroom door. "I am inclined to believe that you have attended some of my lectures, Dr. Crawley." He smiled sadly at Eva Clovelle, the look of a father who is about to say, "This hurts me more than it does you."

"You are without doubt the most difficult person I have ever handled; absolutely sane, of course, but very hard to help," he continued. "Here I am playing hide and seek with my ruthless brother-in-law because I am convinced that for the peace of your soul you must be made to give yourself up to the police!"

"Stop threatening me," Eva said quietly. "It won't work any more. I'm not afraid. Your brother-in-law is dead!"

He was unprepared for that. His face twitched as he looked at me.

"Yes," I told him, "we—"

"Not we!" Eva was standing on her own two feet now, she held her head proudly and looked straight at Battlied. "I! I shot him! With this!" She opened her bag, grabbed the forty-five and pointed it at him. "Darrick and your wife murdered Dan Berri. They deserved to die."

Battlied licked dry lips and stared at the weapon in her hand. "My wife?" he said.

"I shot them both. They were going to kill Dr. Crawley. I had no choice." She looked at me. There was power and pride in the look.

BATTLIED groped his way to a chair and sat down. "Gilda! Gilda!" he whispered the words, and I realized he was crying. And then instantly his face hardened as if he had wiped out sorrow mechanically. He turned to me. "My poor wife was totally under the influence of her brother. He made her his accomplice in blackmail and murder. From every civilized point of view it is better that she is dead. My love for her tells me that it

is better."

"An objective love," I said quietly.

"But I—I, too, am to blame. I am not guiltless." He offered this humbly. "It was in part my fault. I gave her no money to spend, and they were extravagant. Gerald was always after her for money. I was a fool! He taught her that an analyst's patients are a fruitful field for the blackmailer. I did not know about the recordings until I read Dan Berri's article. Gerald asked for the use of that empty room in my office for his photography. He kept it locked. I never went in. When I knew, I made them promise to stop blackmailing, and I gave up my practice. I did not dream they would—murder—but—"

"Don't listen to him!" Eva's voice shook with rage. "Now that they're dead he's blaming them for everything. Don't believe him!"

"It's all right," I assured her. "I just want to hear how he does it!"

Battlied jumped out of his chair. "But this woman is my patient, Doctor. I admit I was a fool, that I handled the case badly, but at the time I did not know they were blackmailing her. I know only that I must bring her to the realization that she will never be at peace until she confesses to the police that she murdered her aunt!"

"Oh!" It was a shrill scream of outrage. "He didn't know about the blackmail! But without using the words, he terrorized me in every session, just as he's doing now! Perhaps it was Darrick who actually took the money, but his was the lesser guilt. Bruce, erase that spool. If the evidence is gone I won't fear him."

"If I do, will you go to the police with me and tell them the whole story?"

"Of course." She was emphatic. "But I can't trust him. He frightens me. Tie him up. You don't know how clever he is." A tremor shook her and she looked at the psychiatrist with the mixture of awe and fear that a savage might feel for a witch doctor. "How did he learn about this cabin? We didn't know we were going to come here till a few minutes ago. How did he know? He's a devil!"

Battlied studied her through narrowed

eyes. "You forget, my dear, the secrets that you whispered into the hole in the ground. You threw back the earth of forgetfulness and thought they were buried. It was in one of our earliest sessions that you mentioned this cabin. I knew then, as you talked of it, that it was already being prepared in your mind as a refuge, an escape. But you cannot hide from your own desire for punishment."

It sounded like the phoniest kind of mysticism to me. "What hole in the ground?" I said. It was clear that Eva didn't know what he meant either.

"Have you forgotten your Ovid? That is," Battlied smiled, "if you ever knew it, modern education being what it is. But surely you read some version of the Greek myth of King Midas and his asses' ears in your childhood?"

"What has that to do with Eva Clovelle?"

"Please." He held up his hand as if addressing a class. "Let me refresh your memory. The king wore a turban to hide the ears of which he was so ashamed. Only the barber who came to cut his hair ever saw them and he was sworn to secrecy. But the poor man, being human, could not bear the weight of the secret. Day by day it grew heavier and at last in desperation he went out and dug a hole in the ground, and into it he whispered the secret of his royal master's ears. Then he covered the words with earth, burying the awful truth, and went off with a light heart. But the myth says that a growth of whispering reeds sprang out of

the earth where the secret was buried, and when they were tall the breeze passed through them and whispered the buried words so that the king's secret was carried by the wind to all who listened."

CHAPTER VIII

DEBT TO BE PAID



DR. OTTO BATTLELIED'S hands fell to his sides. Voice and gesture had been exploited with the dramatic emphasis of the born story-teller. Now the fairy tale was finished, the performance was over.

"You perceive the analogy, Doctor?" he said. "The analyst is like the hole in the ground. People seek relief from their burden of secret knowledge. They are willing to tell him their inmost thoughts, because their shames and fears are buried with him. But I had a whispering reed that I knew nothing of." He pointed to the machine. "The words of guilt poured into my ears were stored in that hidden ear and could be repeated at any time. I thought, when we discovered that the spool was missing this morning, that Eva had taken it. But when you turned up, Doctor Crawley, I thought you were yet another blackmailer, willing to bleed us as well as Eva. I came here because I knew it was her only hiding place. I find

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IT PACKS RIGHT



you in the somewhat quixotic role of knight errant. I warn you, you must let me deal with my patient in my own way."

"Yes," I said. "But if I were to hand that spool over to you, Dr. Battlied? I have an idea that you would be willing to forget about your patient's soul and her suffering conscience!"

"Bruce! You wouldn't!" Eva was hurt.

"You see, Battlied?" I said. "She won't let me, and after all she holds the gun. She wins."

"You're wrong." His voice shook. "She cannot escape her punishment, no matter what she does. In the end she will confess or go mad; she is weaker than she thinks."

"You'd better tie him up, Bruce," Eva said calmly. "I won't be able to think straight until I know he can't harm me."

"All right. Have you any rope?"

She looked anxiously around the room. "There should be some. I'll watch him. You look in the kitchen."

At the door I stopped. "Why shouldn't I give him a needle and put him out for eight hours?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. "Can you? Won't it harm him?"

I opened my bag and began filling a hypodermic from a small rubber-capped ten CC vial I carried.

"But how long will it be before it takes effect?" she persisted anxiously.

"It's something new," I said. "Absolutely non-toxic. He goes out like a light the

moment the injection is completed, in about eight hours he comes to. There are no ill effects."

I approached Battlied, syringe in hand. "Wait!" Eva came close to me. "He may fight. If you get between him and the gun I wouldn't dare shoot." She posted herself on the other side of Dr. Battlied and held the forty-five at his temple.

He said nothing. He didn't even raise his eyes when the needle went in. He might have been unconscious already. In thirty seconds he gave a convulsive shudder and slid forward in the chair. Then he crumpled to the floor. I picked up his hand and felt the pulse. "Helpless as a baby! Will you help me carry him out to the car? We may as well get our prisoner to the police."

"I don't think so." It was said in the same gentle tone, but the back of my neck felt suddenly as if I were in an icy draft. "I'll manage his body when the time comes. It's yours I have to dispose of now."

"If this is a joke," I said, "I don't like it."

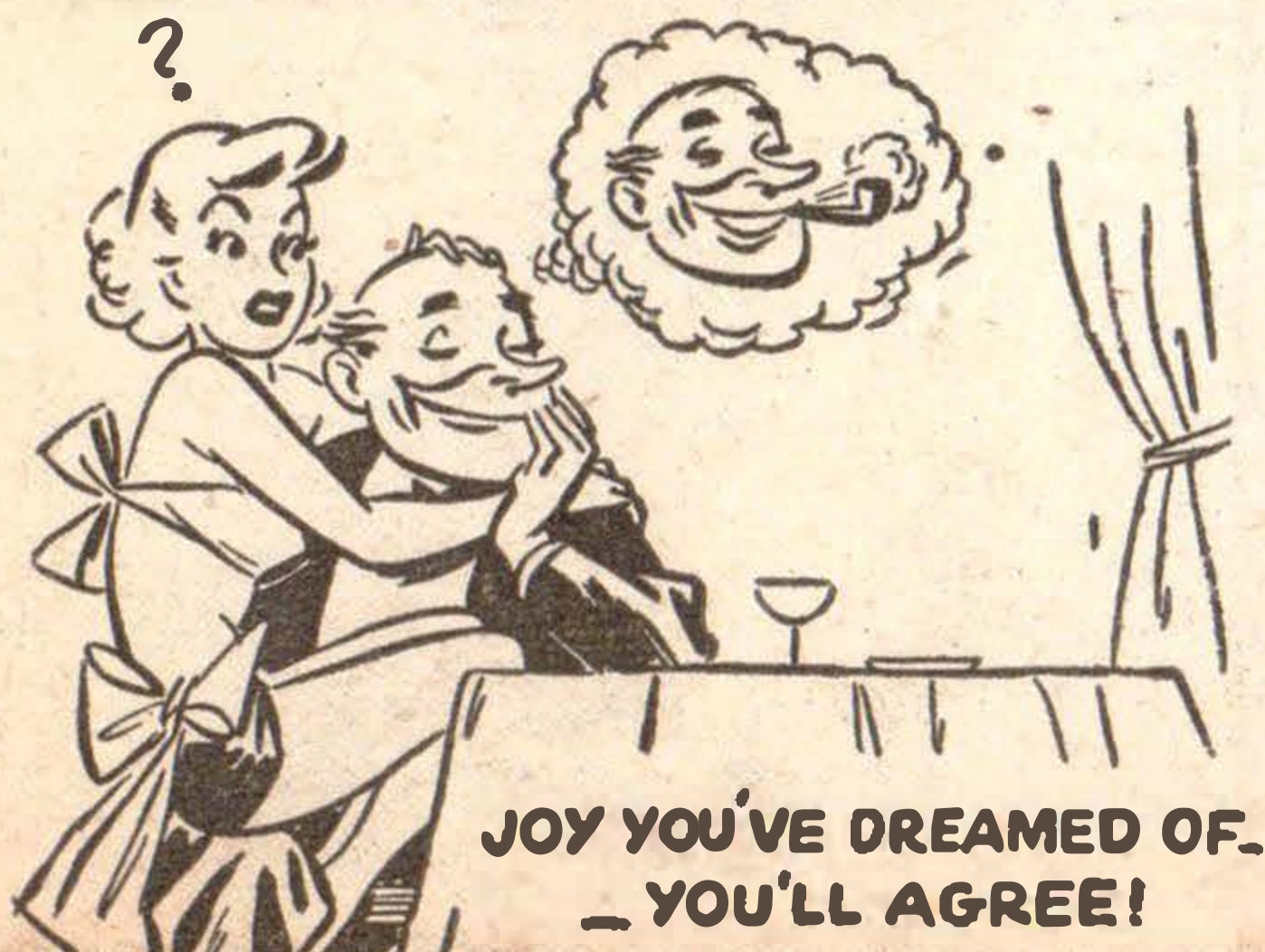
She shook her head. "You didn't really suppose I was going to let you go to the police and let them charge me with my aunt's murder?" She was the same pretty girl, but there was desperate purpose in her eyes, and a cruel smile at the corner of her mouth.

I let her have the punch I'd been saving. "And you don't suppose I give a damn about your aunt's murder, do you? It's Dan Berri

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.



It costs no more to get the best!

I'm thinking about. I don't like to know you pushed him under a subway train because he was doing an honest job."

HER EYES blazed in a dead-white face. I had shaken her, but the gun in her hand didn't waver. "I didn't kill him. Gilda Battlied—"

"No," I said. "It was a pretty good story; even Battlied believed it. Blackmail he could deal with, but he loved his wife and couldn't expose her to a murder charge. If he had been thinking, clearly he'd have seen that neither of them could have killed Berri."

"Why not?" I had all her interest, and her eyes didn't leave mine for a second.

"Because," I said. "They had the spool! There was no need to kill Berri. They must have stolen it before you called Berri up and made the appointment with him, telling him your suicide was a fake. Naturally he didn't tell you over the telephone that he no longer had the spool. You were his only witness, his only chance of making the exposé stick. When you met him, he told you that Darrick had taken the spool but that he intended to go on with his article, counting on you to support his story. You were frantic. You'd disappeared in the first place to stop him. You weren't going to risk being tried for murder to help a newspaper man. You gave yourself away when you said that only a woman could have got near enough to Berri to kill him. He had been your real threat all along. Paying blackmail wasn't as bad as exposure. It punished you a little, and you liked that for it made your guilt a little easier to bear. No, it was Berri you had to kill."

"But how did you know?"

"Don't you understand? Once they had the spool, Darrick and his sister had all they wanted. They believed his only witness had committed suicide. Without the spool he had nothing."

She wrinkled her brow as if unable to follow me. "But why didn't you believe that they had to kill him to get the spool away from him?"

"Because of the way he died. If you have to murder a man to get something away from him, you don't push him under a train! You

can hardly climb down on the tracks and search your victim's pockets! Darrick must have taken the spool from Berri's apartment at some earlier time. It was you Berri went to meet. Hadn't he appealed to you to get in touch with him in his articles?"

There was a silence. She seemed to be turning over what I had said in her mind. Then she gave a little sigh. "But what you know can't hurt me. When you're dead and Battlied is dead, no one alive will know about Eva Clovelle." Abruptly she stopped and said, "If you knew about me, why did you come here to the cabin? Why did you give me back my gun?"

"Oh, come," I said. "You offered me that gun because you knew such an offer would disarm me completely. And you wanted me to suggest coming here when you told me about your wire recorder. You'd feel safer killing me here. I made it easy for you because I wanted your confession."

She laughed harshly. "That's what Battlied wanted—and—" Sudden fear came into her eyes.

I couldn't afford to let her look behind her. "Eva," I yelled. I pulled the automatic I had taken from Darrick's dead hand out of my pocket. "We're both armed. You have only three shots left—mine are unlimited. Drop the gun!"

It was no use. She was past the point of reasonable appeal. "I have a new identity, I have peace, I have money, I'm safe," she repeated the words as if they were a magic charm.

"Don't be a fool, Eva!"

"This makes it a duel," she said softly. "I'd rather risk a bullet than face a trial." But I could see a mad conviction in her eyes. She didn't believe that she was going to be the one to die.

We watched each other's fingers on the trigger. The one who fired first by even a fraction of a second had the advantage. Her knuckles whitened and I felt my own hand begin to move. Then she screamed. The gun in her hand flew up and fired at the ceiling as she fell full length on the floor. But even then she fought with teeth and nails like an animal. Battlied, who had crawled along the floor and pulled her down, couldn't

hold her. I had to help him.

"Now," he grunted. "We can use an injection, Doctor. But not one of those miracle non-toxic jobs that only you know about."

LATER we removed the wire spool from the machine and carried the unconscious girl out to the car.

"Maybe we ought to telephone," I suggested. "It will be pretty late when we arrive."

"I've called the police already," Battlied said. "I came here to get my patient to make a voluntary confession, but I had determined to hand her over against her will if I failed."

"But your wife! When you called the police, you couldn't know she was dead. You still thought she was guilty of Berri's murder. Were you willing to give her up?"

"There comes a time in every man's life when he has to choose between the safety of society and his personal feelings," Battlied said quietly. "My original cowardice made matters worse, so I decided to do what I had to do."

I tried to comfort him. "At least," I said, "you have the satisfaction of knowing she didn't commit murder. Perhaps they wouldn't have killed me, either. If he'd been serious, he could have shot me there in the house—and he missed."

Battlied shook his head. "My wife was guilty of murder. Indirectly she was responsible for Berri's death. And what of those patients of mine that killed themselves? How many did she drive to their deaths? I am not really sorry that Eva Clovelle killed her; it was a kinder death than she merited."

"But ultimately Darrick was responsible for her guilt," I said. "It was his influence—"
He stopped me. "Yes. And I, too, with

my miserly habits — wasn't I responsible? Where would you stop if you traced guilt to its source? We are the products of our experiences, of our parents' failures, or society's pressures. But somewhere we have to stop excusing ourselves. The individual is responsible to society or society is meaningless. We cannot go back and execute the parents of murderers and then the grandparents *ad infinitum* until we reach Adam and Eve. We must bear our own guilt and pay for our own crimes."

What he said was unanswerable. After a while I said, "Why did Darrick keep the spool? Why didn't he destroy it?"

"That was my doing," Battlied admitted. "They believed Eva was dead, but I never did. I always thought she intended to take another identity. I persuaded them to keep it as insurance, in case she ever turned up and tried to make trouble. It was a weak reason, but they fell for it."

"But why did you want it?"

"Because," he said, "I am a doctor. I don't like to discover that my patients have been blackmailed; I don't like them to disappear with a problem that can only turn them into madwomen or criminals. I kept the spool as bait, in the desk drawer downstairs. I made it easy for her to come back to steal it. I wanted her to come for her own cure, for her own forgiveness."

"For her trial and execution, don't you mean?" I said bitterly.

"It is the same thing," he said sadly. "Eva Clovelle will be happier when sentence is pronounced on her than at any time since her aunt's death."

That, I thought, was a matter of opinion. But I knew better than to argue with a psychiatrist.

●
COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE LONG NIGHT

A Suspenseful Murder Mystery

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SOB SISTER



by T. T. FLYNN

The lady was dynamite—and Detective O'Conner carried a match

O'CONNOR heard the lieutenant wrong—or if he heard right, it didn't sound promising.

"I said, handsome," said Lieutenant Thatch, "how good are you with dames?"

O'Conner raked an involuntary sense of guilt over the past weeks. "Not so hot, sir," he denied warily.

Thatch, whose arches usually hurt, said, "So now we're modest? Listen, you better be good! Come with me."

In the long headquarters corridor, Thatch

explained, "This young lady, she's dynamite. So you handle her, seeing you were a close friend to George King. Give with the charm. Soft-soap her."

"What young lady, lieutenant?"

"Don't argue," said Thatch. "I got my orders too. You ever hear of the next election? This sister snooping for *The Star* ain't on our side."

"A newspaper dame? Look, lieutenant—"

"Insubordination gets you busted back to a rookie beat, O'Conner. All you got to do

is make sure she writes good about George King, and the rest of it. Now make like it's a pleasure. She's waiting in my office."

O'Conner, a big-boned young man with Irish-black hair, sat in the corner booth of Pete Pappas' Athens Cafe, opposite the gray stone pile of headquarters, and gave with the charm. Her name was Wendy Wilson, and behind his thick mug of coffee, O'Conner had the growing feeling he'd do better charming a rattler. A lithe, provocative young lady rattler, with long slim legs, slender ankles, tawny hair, slanting hazel eyes, and a capacity for indignation. Very decorative, but with fangs. Definitely fangs.

Wendy Wilson briskly interrupted the mellifluous flow of charm. "I know all that, Mr. O'Conner. But, actually, the facts are simple and sordid. Detective George King, investigating a hold-up of Gerlich's Jewelry Store, on Fourth Street, insisted on questioning this young man he found patronizing the Palace Bowling Alleys on Bay Road."

"Loafing there," corrected O'Conner. "That young hoodlum and his pals hung out at the Palace. George King knew where to find him. The cokey was lit up like a first-night marquee. George should have belted him down and frisked him. Instead, George took him out for a little quiet questioning—and got it fast from a thirty-two automatic."

WENDY WILSON'S tinted nails ran a little obbligato of indignation on the gray plastic table between them. "I'm speaking of facts, things that happened, Officer."

"The name is Mike O'Conner. Just use Mike."

"No one knows exactly what happened, Mike, except that an officer was shot, and a nineteen-year-old youth was accused."

"Banana Nose, they called him," said O'Conner. "Banana Nose Ryan. Wasn't a tougher mug along Bay Road than that young coke-head. He tried to get more cops when we cornered him in that garage on South Peach, his brother-in-law owned. One cop was all we could spare for the week, so he got blasted. The garage was a drop for hot cars. We cleaned that up, too."

"You've missed the point, Mike. I'm speaking for the mothers of this city."

Not even Lieutenant Thatch's arch-

nagged temper could have held O'Conner off that one. "How many children do you have, Miss Wilson?"

"That crack, O'Conner, was unnecessary. In due course I'll have four or five."

All with fangs, O'Conner thought.

"Speaking for motherhood," said Wendy Wilson coldly, "I intend to ask in my series *The Star* will feature, why mere boys can buy narcotics and firearms. If our brave police are able to slaughter them on suspicion, why can't the police do something about the men who sell them dope and guns? Every mother in the city will want to know why." Slanting hazel eyes challenged over lifted coffee mug. "And I intend to tell, without being sidetracked by Lieutenant Thatch's stooge."

Definitely, fangs. O'Conner's hot ears were blazoning the O'Conner temper, while his smile stayed pasted on.

"The government men, mostly, watch narcotics, Miss Wilson. They don't think any large drug ring is operating in the city now."

"No doubt little birds fly narcotics to our children."

"Buzzards," said O'Conner shortly. "This is a port city. Not even the Feds can stop a trickle of dope off the ships. We break it up all the time."

"Not all the time, obviously, O'Conner. The mothers of this city will not be satisfied with such excuses."

O'Conner had thought a lot of George King. His slap on the table made cups jump. "For mothers I'm respectful!" said O'Conner heatedly. "So why not get yourself some motherhood before talking like one? Hard-working cops get knocked off too often by bums like you're weeping about! We know a little junk is peddled in that end of town. Been workin' on it."

O'Conner made a guess on that, and he knew where temper was leading him. Out, far out, in the sticks, toward a nice new blue uniform. He carried on for the reputation of the force. "We were about ready to crack down," he asserted sweepingly.

She regarded him, lips pressed together. "I'll believe it when I see it. Meanwhile, I'm to do the whole series before publication. Your services won't be needed, Mr. O'Conner."

Pete Pappas was a friendly man with ample paunch and ingratiating interest in the boys across the street.

"You gotta new girl, Mike? Swell looker, too," Pete said, winking at Wendy Wilson as he punched the cash register. "Workin' across street?" he made friendly inquiry.

She could smile in sweet innocence. "I'm merely a future mother on the loose, Mr. Pappas."

They left Pete smiling foolishly. O'Conner sighed as they walked out. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You will be," promised Wendy Wilson crisply. "Good-by. Thanks for the laughs."

O'Conner was brooding over it at Broad and Tenth, busiest corner in town, when a thumb jabbed his short ribs. "It takes skirts," said Detective Dixon, "to make a man look so near jumpin' in front of a truck. If it's what I seen you takin' into the Greek's . . ."

O'Conner nodded. "Sam, you've been on temporary narcotic detail. What's the latest on who peddled junk to that young hood who killed George King?"

Sam Dixon, a solid young man with wide shoulders and round friendly face, admitted, "Seeing as the hood was buried before he talked, we know more than you think—which ain't anything. What you escorted to the Greek's, don't need seasoning with narcotics."

"That girl," O'Conner muttered, "has ruined me."

SAM, happily married and a father, scratched his chin dubiously. "You got the looks of it, at that. Won't she marry you now?"

"She's a sob-sister, workin' for *The Star*."

Sam Dixon listened to the details and clucked in sympathy. "A girl like that needs kids," Sam decided. "Three of four hardens 'em."

"I can't wait that long," O'Conner said dismally. "If she prints what she talks, Siberia is closer than the beat Thatch will find for me."

Shoulder to shoulder they stared at the traffic. Detective Dixon pronounced judgment. "You didn't give with the charm, and you climbed on a limb, promising arrests.

She will saw you off on that. Meanwhile you got free time to look into that junk peddling. You can't lose."

Detective Dixon sang a siren song, and promised to help.

George King had been killed on the fringe of St. Stephen's Parish, where George had lived, boy and man, and O'Conner still lived. The Palace Alleys, on Bay Road, were owned by "Sharps" Macnab, an unsavory character of middle-age, addicted to expensive convertibles, youthful custom clothes, pastel shirts, and choice young tomatoes who appreciated a sharp sport.

Macnab was interviewed on the parking lot behind his building, as he stepped out of his pale-pink and chromium dreamboat. He listened politely, not at all offended.

"I have talked to the whisker-boys and enough cops to fill a fly-trap. Do my customers tell me their business? Boys, believe me, I am still feeling bad over what happened. The joint is yours if you wanna look around."

They departed. "He is feeling bad," O'Conner muttered. "Bowling is healthful, but his joint ain't. Also, if every alley was deep in keglers around the clock, he wouldn't have the dough he blows. Sharps is in on the racket some way. If it ain't dope, what is it?"

"If it ain't anything else, it's dope," decided Sam Dixon.

They worked the area for two days. Nothing spectacular. Mostly casual questions, idle sounding talk. The third morning, at line-up, which O'Conner could not dodge, Lieutenant Thatch cornered him. "You got everything under control, O'Conner?"

"More or less, sir."

"What's that girl goin' write about us?"

"I haven't seen her copy yet," admitted O'Conner truthfully.

"You don't play with ideas about her? Maybe lettin' things out of control?"

"God forbid!" said O'Conner so fervently even Thatch was satisfied.

Soon the great awakening for Thatch. O'Conner reflected on it morbidly as he drove with Detective Dixon toward the Bay Road district once again. "Sam, we're not getting anywhere."

"Fast," agreed Dixon.

"Mothers have ideas what goes on in a family. When a young punk goes wrong, his mother is worried and snoops."

"Find us mothers to work on," Detective Dixon disposed of that idea.

"Father Witlowski, at St. Stephen's knows what the mothers are worrying about," O'Conner filled out his thought.

The buttressed stone of St. Stephen's Church rose in smoky-dingy medieval grace to cross-topped spires. O'Conner got out in front of the low stone parish house adjoining. Detective Dixon decided, "The padre might loosen up more to you alone, knowin' him like you do."

Father Witlowski, white hair close-cropped, cheeks pink, eyes wise and twinkling, opened the door himself. "Come in, Mike." As a young parish assistant, Father Witlowski had baptized an even younger Michael O'Conner. His hand was on O'Conner's shoulder in fatherly affection as they entered the study. "A surprise for you, Mike—my grandniece, Wendla."

O'Conner's reason faltered.

MISS WENDY WILSON, of *The Star*, stood with spurious smile and treacle in her greeting. "Why, Mr. O'Conner! Running errands again for the lieutenant?"

"I didn't—"

Father Witlowski was beaming at them. "You know each other? Good, good." To O'Conner, he explained, "Wendla moved here from Chicago. Now, at least, one of my own family is close." His hand returned to O'Conner's shoulder. "Wendla, this big young man used to be one of my small choir boys. He sang like an angel."

"He does have the look," said Wendy Wilson-Wendla Witlowski, admiringly. "Mr. O'Conner, you should sing even better for your supper downtown."

Father Witlowski was near-sighted, and too saintly a man to suspect infighting between his niece and a valued friend. O'Conner's grin was painful. "And how are you doing, Miss—uh—Witlowski?"

She said, "I know I'd enjoy your criticism of what I've written so far. And the mothers will be interested in what the head of St.

Stephen's Parish thinks of debauched youth and police complacency. Have the arrests you mentioned been made?"

"Not yet," admitted O'Conner. His ears were fiery again.

"I didn't think so. Uncle, I'll run along now, and let you two talk."

Father Witlowski returned smiling from the front door. "Michael, I am happy you two know each other. Our Wendla is a sweet girl, but a trifle shy in a new city, like this. She needs good friends."

"From what I've seen of her—" O'Conner choked up at thought of it. He took the comfortable leather chair beside the old-fashioned rolltop desk and got down to business.

Father Witlowski listened, motionless in the swivel chair, and then sat for some moments in thought. "I do hear things, Michael. It could be no more than gossip." Father Witlowski was troubled. "God forbid I repeat gossip. But all this troubles me." He sat motionless again, examining the ethics of the matter. "A certain girl, Michael—not a very good girl—is supposed to have said of George King's death, 'This is one for Willy King; he should get a laugh out of this. I shouldn't be surprised if he wasn't responsible.'" Father Witlowski spread his hands. "Michael, I don't understand. There is something there."

"Willy King?" repeated O'Conner thoughtfully. Many little bits began to click together in his mind. "The girl who said it—you know her name, Father?"

"I cannot tell, Michael, due to the circumstances under which I received her name. She has been close to Willy King—" Father Witlowski shook his head sadly.

"Willy," said O'Conner, "worked once at the Palace Alleys, I remember." He remembered many things about Willy King, none of them good. "Willy," he said, "has been working on ships for the last couple of years. Father, can I use your telephone?"

O'Conner called a number out of the directory, got his connection, asked one question. "When is the freighter *Black River* due back?" He hung up, a little grim.

More troubled, Father Witlowski asked, "You don't think Willy could have any—"

"Willy gets home tomorrow," said O'Conner, standing up. "We'll just ask Willy."

The stevedores opened the *S.S. Black River's* hatches before noon. Winches rumbled and cargo snaked ashore. People passed back and forth over the gangway. But not Willy King, age twenty-two, back from the West Coast of South America, via the Canal.

Several times Willy appeared at the shop's rail and carefully cased the pierside.

"Hard to believe it of him," Detective Dixon said doubtfully. "He ain't got the face."

Which was true. Under light brown hair, Willy King had the face of a choir boy. An angel face. Indeed, Willy had been a choir boy, briefly, under pressure. But never an angel. St. Stephen's choir, and Father Witowski, had never quite recovered from trying to lift Willy's heart heavenward.

GEORGE KING had needed one close friend to whom he could open his heart about Willy. O'Conner had been that friend, well knowing the cross big-hearted Georgie King bore in his younger brother. But George himself would have been here if duty had pointed.

Willy finally came ashore, after dark, jaunty in loose slacks and sport coat, yellow silk shirt and natty Panama hat. One of the cheap Panamas, off a bum-boat, probably, somewhere south of the Canal.

They let Willy get well into the dim cavernous piershed. O'Conner waited behind a tier of oil drums. Detective Dixon cut around through the stacking aisle between cliffs of boxed soap, and stepped out in front of Willy. O'Conner closed in from behind. They could see that Willy ditched nothing.

Willy glowered at them. "Can't a man walk ashore without cops pushing him around?"

"You don't make a man, Willy," said O'Conner bluntly. "Take your frisk easy, or get mussed, which I personally will like to do."

Willy stood sneering, elbows away from his body. Ship life had tanned him. Good-

looking, this Willy King, if you liked the type. O'Conner didn't. He frisked carefully, even under Willy's crotch, and down his calves to shoe tops. Willy was clean. Not a gun, knife or package.

Willy was sneering again. "You never liked me, O'Conner. What are you trying, a frame?"

"This," said O'Conner stolidly, "is strictly what-have-you-got-on-you."

"Nothing."

Detective Dixon's brown eyes went to O'Conner with the beginning of reproach. The wasted day would have been Sam's day off. O'Conner himself was beginning to taste the bitter cud of chagrin.

"I'd have sworn—" he muttered darkly, squinting at Willy. He squinted harder, and stepped back, casing Willy carefully. "Take off your pants," O'Conner ordered.

Detective Dixon nervously protested, "This ain't a place to strip."

O'Conner jerked a thumb for decency's sake. Behind them crates. Sam, look at him. Built like a stick of pepperoni. But the hips. Willy never fattened up that way, even on ship chow."

Willy began to curse, ripely. O'Conner, feeling better now, grinned broadly. "Shuck off. Make it snappy." And when Willy King was shirttail out, slacks down around his ankles, O'Conner lifted the yellow silk shirttail. "Ain't he beautiful," said O'Conner with a connoisseur's appreciation of crime.

Willy was not flattered. Beneath gaudy broadcloth shorts, Willy wore rubber shorts, flesh-colored, double-walled. Slap Willy's hips through his clothes and it felt like good soft flesh. The fit was perfect. When O'Conner poked a blunt forefinger, he dented powdery substance.

Pounds of it in Willy's rubber pants. Junk, of course—the "snow-bird's" dream. Pure uncut cocaine, worth a small fortune. Why, Willy's rubber pants could start a thousand poor devils on murderous jags. Detective Dixon was opening his pearl-handled pocket knife.

"O'Conner waved the knife back. "If we slit his pretties, which no doubt Willy is wearin' to reduce, a smart mouthpiece could

claim we put the stuff inside to frame him. An' there'll be a smart mouthpiece. Willy, wear your evidence in."

A man who had been beset almost beyond endurance, O'Conner stopped at a drug store and telephoned Miss Wilson. His airy announcement of the arrest brought suspicious reply. "This I must see."

"Do drop by, Miss Witlowski. Any time."

She hung up, hard. O'Conner was grinning happily as he drove on.

WENDY WILSON arrived at headquarters in haste. She was difficult to convince. But the charge was on the book and prisoner visibly awaiting interrogation. And when O'Conner, giving with smug charm, suggested coffee and sandwiches at the Greek's, she accepted.

In the same corner booth, she said, ruefully, "I can admit I was wrong." She traced a small erratic design on the gray plastic table, not really seeing it. "I think I'm a little sad, too," she confessed, looking up. "A St. Stephen's boy, and the brother of Detective King."

O'Conner nodded, not smiling about that. "George would have made the arrest himself. Willy never was any good. He seems not to have heard about George. We haven't told him. He's waiting for George to show up and help him."

"Would George have helped?"

"Within the limits of duty," O'Conner admitted. "Willy always knew George would be there to do what he could. Wasn't good for Willy, but what could George do?"

Smiling, Wendy Wilson studied him. "You have a heart, haven't you?"

O'Conner made a walnut-sized circle with thumb and forefinger. "That big."

Both were smiling as Detective Dixon appeared at their booth. "Thatch heard, and come in for the kill, Mike. He wants you." Sam was introduced and shook hands, admiring openly. "I hate to snatch him, Miss Wilson. But in every cop's life there are lieutenants."

"I," said Wendy Wilson, "have to tear up copy and rewrite half the night, because of all this. But when I'm wrong, I'm wrong."

Lieutenant Thatch sat at his desk, easing unrelenting arches, and gazing at a glass of water on his desk blotter.

"Getting indigestion over at the Greek's, making with that girl, O'Conner? Try some of this." Thatch held out the glass.

Touched by the solicitude, O'Conner said, "Nothing wrong with my stomach, lieutenant."

"Drink it!" snarled Thatch.

O'Conner drank, and spluttered: "Arr-g-h . . . *Bakin' soda!*"

"That," Thatch informed him, "was what the punk was wearing, you half-wit! Not dope! *Bakin' soda!* We haven't got a case! All we got is a horse-laugh, which even the mayor will get his share of, thanks to you and that Dixon. Horse-laughs never made votes. Guess what's going to happen to you both?"

O'Conner drank the rest of the water. He needed it now.

Willy King was pleased with himself. His sneering smile broadened when O'Conner and Dixon entered the bare white-walled room where Willy sat on a hard wooden chair.

"I won't ask who brought the stuff ashore after you baited us off with that kitchen powder," O'Conner said heavily. "I could slap you around, Willy, but it wouldn't do no good, would it?"

"Am I laughing?" said Willy, laughing. "Get George here, so he can yok too. I've been away, an' I'm in a hurry to celebrate. When do I start?"

"Any time," said O'Conner. "But Georgie won't be here. Banana Nose Ryan shot him the other day, outside Sharps Macnab's Alleys. Ryan was all coked up, Willy, probably on some of the stuff you helped run in last trip. How do you like that?"

Willy sneered. "Who you kidding!" A vague panic was stirring in Willy's eyes.

"Get out of here!" ordered O'Conner. "The punks over on Bay Road know the score. They can laugh with you. Already they're laughing at you. George is gone, and you know about the stuff that did it."

Willy said, "Not George dead!"

"Banana Nose was higher than the crosses on St. Stephen's, where the funeral was

held," said O'Conner. "Get out of here, Willy! You're on your own now! Georgie's gone!"

Willy said, "You're lying!" Willy turned in the doorway. "Am I laughing at you!" Willy slammed the door.

SOME minutes later, in the entrance corridor, Officer Gus Schneider, of majestic girth and dignity in these official halls he patrolled, withdrew an exploring toothpick from his dentures, and halted O'Conner and Dixon. "Maybe I am dumb tonight."

"There are others," O'Conner informed Officer Schneider.

"It ain't a disgrace, if a man knows it," counseled Officer Schneider. "He can still make a fine looking cop on a beat. But I am outside just now, dragging a quick smoke, when the little lady I see with you, O'Conner, comes from the Greek's. She sees this kid brother of George King, and they talk, and drive off in her car. Which I don't understand. Is she on special duty or something?"

O'Conner looked at Detective Dixon, who was already regarding him with quick apprehension. They reached the sidewalk together.

"She has collared that punk to fire up a nightmare," decided Dixon, aggrievedly. "His kisser will be laughing at us from the front pages!"

O'Conner did not speak until they were driving. "Willy will not be laughing tonight. Willy is scared. Always there has been George."

"How's that?"

"Willy never grew up, the way I make it," said O'Conner, clipping the red light, and driving faster. "Always there was George, growing up for him. He will shake this Miss Wilson and head for where this business pays off, to find out about George."

Bay Road was a wide street leading toward the waterfront, lively with trade and amusement until late each evening. Respectability was at home on Bay Road, but there were places like Sharps Macnab's, where a knowing cop looked closely. Not that decorum was neglected in the Palace Alleys. Muscle-bound bouncers were vigilant. But

the Palace was brightly-lighted, crowded, noisy, and a good hang-out.

Kegling was in full swing tonight. The rumble of balls, crash of flying pins, laughter, talk, blended in pleasant din. O'Conner, now a man of jaundiced suspicions, surveyed the scene, while Detective Dixon cased the street outside.

One of the bouncers, known unfavorably to O'Conner as "Fats" Roosma, came over. "You want an alley?" The jest was as heavy as the rolls of muscle and fat on Roosma's shoulders and neck.

"It could be I have got what I want," O'Conner said coldly, by way of softening up Roosma. "I will also let you tell me, Roosma, have you seen Willy King tonight?"

Fats Roosma looked around vaguely. "You are asking puzzles, O'Conner. Willy is clean, ain't he? Didn't they turn Willy loose tonight?"

"And now we will step outside, with my partner, Roosma, and hear how you know all this so quick."

Fats Roosma flinched. "I am answering your questions, O'Conner, without no rough stuff outside. Is it anything to me if Willy comes by with a new bonbon?"

Foreboding almost made O'Conner also flinch. "What kind of lady, did Willy bring in here? Where's Macnab?"

"She is a real doll," said Roosma, visibly perspiring now. "And if I was Willy, I would not put nothing like that upstairs in Sharps' office, if you know what I mean."

It was not jealousy, of course; which made O'Conner's ears fiery again. But Sharps' soundproofed office upstairs, was no place for a niece of Father Witlowski to be shut in with Sharps.

"I will give you the works if you try notice with me," O'Conner promised from the heart. "Come upstairs quietly."

In a small foyer upstairs, a solid cherry-wood door led into Sharps' office. Beyond the office was Sharps' luxurious private apartment, with back entrance also. O'Conner put an ear against the door.

A faint murmur of words inside clarified to a strained, lovely-sounding voice, pleading, "Please don't! Let's talk about it! I

won't scream, but please don't!"

O'Conner's unsteady hand cautiously tried the knob. The door was locked, of course. Fats Roosma was built like a bulldozer. "Break it in!" O'Conner ordered thickly.

ROOSMA eyed the service revolver O'Conner produced. He drew back like a perspiring bulldozer rocking into low gear, and launched forward, grunting loudly. . . .

The door, Roosma, and O'Conner, crashed into the office. "It's all right, sugar!" O'Conner yelled.

Then with some confusion, O'Conner saw that it was not all right. The mahogany desk faced them. To the right of the desk, Miss Wendy Wilson stood transfixed with astonishment. The frightened waxy-faced object sitting behind the desk with hands lifted was Sharps Macnab.

Willy King stood at the left front corner of the desk, menacing Sharps with a lethal automatic. Willy was not laughing. Willy was crying.

O'Conner followed a good cop's instinct and concentrated on the nearest gun. "Give me that heater, Willy!"

Sharps dived to the floor. Willy made a convulsive attempt to intercept him, struggling in O'Conner's grip. "I will get him for George!" Willy choked.

O'Conner uppercut with his bright nickled revolver barrel, and let Willy down on the floor. The sound he heard was not Willy's head thumping the floor.

Miss Wendy Wilson had caught a wooden duckpin off the desk, and brought it down with feminine recklessness as Sharps tried to open a door behind the desk and escape. There was no one to ease Sharps to the floor.

Wendy Wilson waved the duckpin uncertainly, and announced weakly, "I hit him."

O'Conner was gazing in fascination as an insecure little plug in the bottom of the duckpin finished slipping out. The tip of a powder-filled vial peeped shyly from the end of the hollowed-out wood.

O'Conner leaped for the duckpin. "That's where Sharps hides the stuff! In spare pins!"

While precinct and headquarters men still swarmed over the place, and a flash was out for one Herman Leach, who had brought the stuff ashore, Lieutenant Thatch stood proudly on his ailing arches and said it was detective work which could be praised.

"And this fine little lady of the press who helped . . ." That said, launching into praise of her.

The fine little lady listened with downcast eyes. She had, somewhat unnerved, unburdened herself to Sam Dixon and O'Conner, before the precinct men arrived to take over.

"When I saw Willy leave headquarters, I thought it was all a trick," she explained. "But Willy said he was going to see a man who would make a real story for me. When he stopped at a house, I didn't know he was getting a gun. In Macnab's office, all I could do was talk. Willy was excited and dangerous."

Sam Dixon had said, "Willy doing that beats me."

"Willy was trying to grow up," O'Conner had guessed. "Bumping off Sharps was all Willy could think of to do. Maybe after he's done his time, he'll become a decent citizen."

But when Miss Wendy Wilson started home, it was O'Conner who sternly halted her beside the cashier's deserted cage.

"I will not have any more of this poking into cop's business," O'Conner told her. "You will get hurt, Wendla. And the mothers of this city will not like a future mother on the loose in places like Sharps' office. I don't like it either."

"This I will believe when I hear it. Mike, are you kidding me?"

"I have been wrong on everything else," admitted O'Conner. "But I will leave it up to Father Witlowski. He knows me."

"Uncle Witlowski is not a future mother, Mike O'Conner, and you are not still a choir boy, running to him."

"What am I?" temporized O'Conner, in a last clutch at caution.

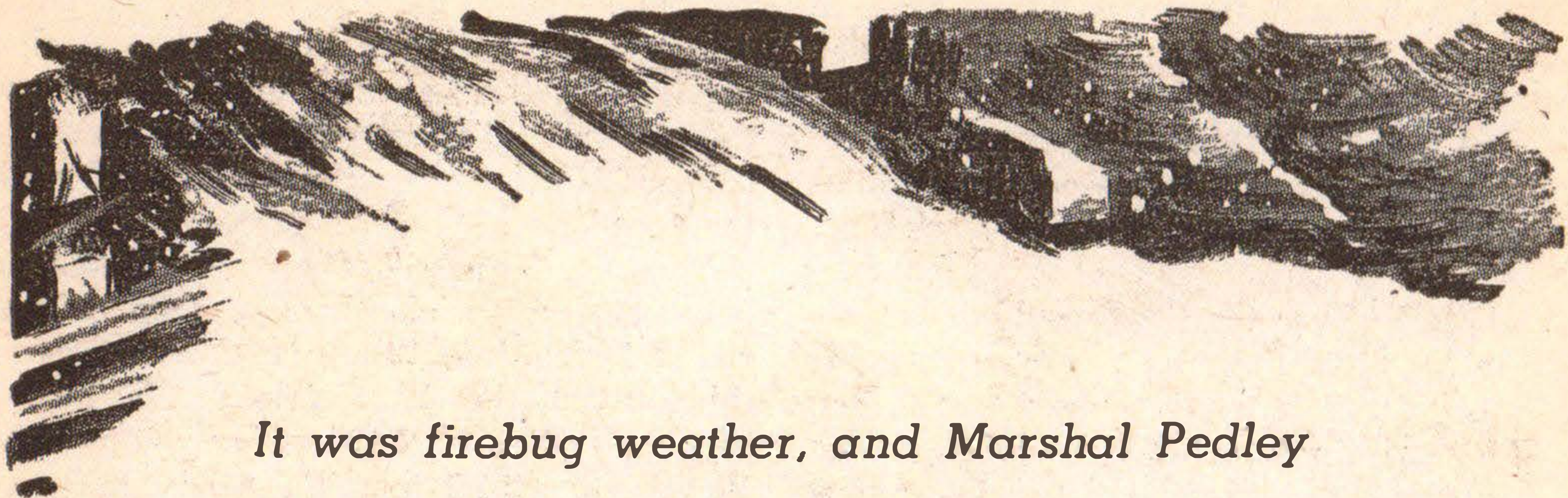
"You are a future father, like I suspected," decided Wendla Witlowski. "And you will get used to the idea. Take me to my car, Mike, and tell me about it." ● ● ●



Pedley bent to examine the corpse

PIECES of HATE

A Novelet by STEWART STERLING



*It was firebug weather, and Marshal Pedley
expected a blaze—but he didn't bargain for a raging
holocaust of conspiracy and murder!*

CHAPTER I

BODY IN THE BLAZE

THE STORM lashed the avenue with coiling whips of white. Gusts danced dizzily around street lamps like manic ghosts. The claret wedge of the red sedan's headlights cut through a mad swirl of pink confetti. For the wild beauty of all this the Chief Fire Marshal of the City of New York had no appreciation whatsoever.

He pushed the speedometer needle past seventy, kept his siren screeching, his Mars light weaving, cursed with a bitterness born of the memory of other blowy nights when drifts had blocked desperately needed apparatus, when pressure had failed at frozen hydrants and laddermen had slipped from precarious rungs when weighted down with icy spray. This was firebug weather!

Not that Marshal Pedley had any special reason for suspecting arson in connection with this two-alarmer to which he was speeding. But it was the kind of night a torch might choose if he wanted to be sure the evidence was destroyed before the crime could be discovered. Give a blaze a little head start—and with a wind like this the boys would have their hands full keeping it from spreading over the whole East Side. In Pedley's book, anyone who would set fire to a building on a night like this deserved to be wrapped tightly in dry hose and have the pressure turned on full force.

The panel on the dash repeated its zombie croak:

"On a second to Box Six-four-seven, Engine Fifty-one, Engine Thirty-eight, Truck Seven, Truck Nineteen, Rescue Five. At seven-oh-three peeyem authority Bureau of Fire Communications—"

A rescue company called out on a two-bagger? What could be on fire which might call for oxygen torches, giant jacks, stretchers and body bags?

Through the wiper-swept arcs of the marshal's windshield a loom of orange showed high in the north between canyon walls of loft buildings on either side of the avenue.

The hollow tone of the dispatcher began again:

"On a third to Box Six-seven, Engine Sixty-three, Tower Four, Engine Thirty-six, Truck Forty-seven." The sepulchral voice droned on.

The orange reflection of flames on the snow clouds dimmed as a dazzling spout of incandescence fountained across the street in the distance, accompanied by a shower of bright sparks floating slowly down like the final starts of a sky rocket.

With that flaring brilliance, a picture of the block up ahead flashed into the marshal's mind as a section of the Special Hazard

map which hung near the watch desk in every fire house; a purple rectangle which warned of stored chemicals. And, backed up against it along First Avenue, a row of five-story old-law tenements! Three to four hundred people crowded in that one block!

A FIRE where the boys wouldn't be able to smother the blaze with streams at pressure for fear of causing an explosion. A forty-mile gale roaring in off the East River, a crowded dwelling district! A nightmare for firemen, but probably nothing in the marshal's line. Still, it was after business hours, and nine out of ten incendiary fires were set when shops and warehouses were shut.

Pedley swerved around an ambulance, cut in behind a hook-and-ladder, slewed to the curb in front of an insurance patrol truck. Red-helmeted huskies shouldered huge bundles of tarpaulin, trudged off through smoke and snow.

The marshal stripped off his overcoat, grabbed gas mask and flashlight, picked his way over snaking canvas and spurting couplings.

The street throbbed with the big pumpers. Ladders latticed the front of the six-story building. Bilious yellow fumes oozed out of a central doorway, nearly obscuring the gold lettering between the first and second floors that said:

KERREN & EMMONS CORP.

WHOLESALE DRUGS AND CHEMICALS

A man in white helmet and black rubber raincoat bellowed through a megaphone at truckmen peering down over the cornice, silhouetted against spasmodic flashes of bluish-white from beyond the roof line.

Pedley touched the battalion chief's shoulder:

"All out, Mac?"

Jack MacKinnon shoved the white helmet back from a soot-smudged forehead.

"Cry-sake, I should hope so, Ben. Anyone in there'd be a cooked goose. I don't dare let the boys run lines beyond the second. Joint is loaded. Turps. Alcohol. Carbon disulphide. God knows what."

"Magnesium, for one thing." Pedley watched one of the dazzling sparks gyrating wildly down the street a dozen feet above the sidewalk. "These people supply college labs with stuff for experiments. What's with the sprinklers?"

"Frozen, I guess." The chief called to a lieutenant with icicles hanging from helmet rim and eyebrows. "Spray nozzles on everything above the first, Mike." He turned back to Pedley. "Nothing for you in this, Ben, but if it isn't more'n a headache for us before it's over, we're wearing longies made out of fur from rabbits' feet."

"Where'd she start?"

"Shipping room. Something let go before we got here, blew the freight doors right out. Cop on the beat heard the blast, pulled a box."

"Got any plan of the building, showing where they store charcoal, sulphur, so on?"

"There's one in the monthly inspection file. I sent back for it. But it don't mean a thing, Ben. They switch stuff around so much. Probably some record in their office—it's on the first floor next the shipping room—but we can't get near it. Carboy of nitric cracked open. Place is thicker with fumes than an execution chamber."

"Yeah. Mind if I use one of your two-inch lines?"

The chief seized the marshal's arm, craned his neck forward to squint at him. "Cry-sake! Say I do! Think I'd let any living being go *in* there?"

Pedley's eyes searched the street. "Don't see any Colmes Protective car, Mac. Could mean their district co-op is tied up somewhere else. But it might mean the burglar alarm was bugged so they didn't get any warning call. Take that, and the sprinkler not working—needs a little checkup, hah?"

MacKinnon scowled. "Even so, no dice on your trying for a posthumous citation, Ben." He pointed to an individual in civilian clothes kneeling by the curb on the opposite side of the street. Stretched on the sidewalk were two booted and rubber-coated figures. "Ask Doc. Marty Klein and Herb Jensen got enough to lay 'em out cold, and they were only in three minutes with a spinner pipe!"

The lieutenant returned on the run. "Wind's goin' to flash it right across that alley if we don't hang a curtain across there, Chief."

Pedley slid away, found a spare spray pipe in Nineteen's nozzle box, unscrewed the standard tip from a dry line, put the sprayer on, called for pressure.

THE STREET was a bedlam of apparent confusion—hosemen lugging canvas, additional apparatus thundering into action, policemen herding back the swiftly forming crowd. As Pedley dragged the hose into the smoke-dense alley beside the burning building, a masked figure emerged from the gloom, bumped into him.

Heavy books spilled from the oncoming man's grasp, splashed in a pool at his feet. He wore the red helmet of the patrolman; the right side of his face was greasy with heat blisters. He lifted his mask, stooped to retrieve his burden.

"What you got?" The marshal blocked his way.

The patrolman coughed up a thin trickle of smoke. "Ledgers, some kind. I went in to put a tarp over those apparatus counters, but one of our crew must of done it already. So I took mine in the office, to cover paper and file cabinets, see." He staggered to his feet, coughing again. "There was a big steel cabinet over on its side with its door busted open. These ledgers looked like they'd fallen out, and they wasn't no sense putting 'em back. They'd only get wetter, so I brought 'em along. We got orders to protect all business records."

Pedley read the typing on the sticker pasted on the corner of the top ledger in the patrolman's arms:

Sale of Narcotics—1950

"Bad in there, hah?" he asked.

"You can't get near the shippin' room. But the sales room, that's up front, it ain't so bad if you keep near the counters where they got all them beakers and graduates."

"Yeah. See that red sedan next your truck? Stick those ledgers in it, where they won't get soaked."

"Sure." The big patrolman eyed him curiously, slogged off through the puddles.

Pedley followed boa-constrictor lines to the alley door, slowly opened the spray nozzle, tilted it up at an angle until the cloud of mist enveloped him like a needle shower, and went into the building.

Plaster plopped from the ceiling into a couple of inches of water on the salesroom floor. The splashes stung the back of Pedley's nozzle hand. To his right a dull red glowed with sullen flickerings—the shipping room wall. Ahead, rivulets of violet light ran across the floor; burning alcohol or ether floating on the drip water.

His flashlight probed feebly through the enveloping spray to the rectangle of a smoldering door frame.

Heat struck at him with the solid force of a blow to the face. It made his throat ache below the protective line of his mask. His fingernails began to pain.

He poked the spray nozzle through the office door. Desks, files, tables, an old-fashioned safe with the door closed, a water cooler stand with the glass smashed, a great double-doored metal cabinet tilted forward from a sagging partition with its doors hanging loose from the hinges.

Halfway to it, the flashlight beam reflected momentarily on polished leather beneath a desk knee-hole. A shoe tip.

Carefully, keeping the life-saving screen of water around him, he knelt.

The man huddled in the cramped space beneath the desk-top hadn't been dead long enough for stiffening to set in. But his mouth was closed.

It had been the marshal's experience that people who'd been suffocated died with their mouths open.

Slowly, with an immense effort, still holding the spray nozzle uptilted, he managed to hoist the limp figure over his shoulder.

The rescue truck's Sperry beams weren't needed to light up the avenue. A lurid wall of flame south of the alley made it bright as noonday. The adjoining shirt factory had caught. The wind was tossing great batches of blazing fragments clear across to the western side of the street.

Pedley could hear apparatus responding to

the fifth alarm as it came up the Bowery and down from Harlem, miles away. Even with the added help, it was going to be touch and go whether the tenements could be saved.

Under the ruddy light the body on the sidewalk at the marshal's feet seemed curiously bloated, as if the heat had started some obscene internal swelling. The man's face was broad and doughy; his hair brown and thin; he would have been about forty years old.

SPARKS or acid spatter had eaten holes in the man's tweed topcoat. The back and shoulders of the expensive gray double-breasted suit coat were soggy with sooty water. But there was no sign of actual burning, nor any wound as far as the marshal could see. The guy might have died of heart failure—but it didn't seem likely, Pedley decided grimly.

The wallet in the soaking hip pocket was fat with damp bills. A driver's license was made out to Arthur M. Glebe, 460 East 54th St., New York City. An embossed card said A. M. Glebe was a dues-paid member of the Mortar and Pestle Club. Two envelopes in his breast pocket enclosed statements made out to the Riverview Pharmacy, 844 Second Ave., with the notation:

Kindly let us have an early check.

Pedley made a more thorough search. In the dead man's fob pocket, tucked beneath the point of his vest, were two metal aspirin boxes. The tablets in them were grayish, and smaller than the standard headache pills.

"Clear the street here!" Jack MacKinnon's bellowed order lifted over the pandemonium of the pumpers. "Jump!"

A NICKEL A NOVEL IN

FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS MAGAZINE

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CHAPTER II

Too HEROIC



THE marshal glanced up at tongues of flame licking out of the north windows of the shirt factory, at the black cauliflower of smoke sprouting above it. That wall was going, all right. He picked up the dead man, sloshed

up the block.

An interne in a read mackinaw with his white pants plastered to shivering legs, called:

"We've room for him, Marshal."

"Might get him later, for an autopsy."

"Oh." The medical man stared. "Was he asleep inside there or something?"

"Something."

Pedley looked across the street at the Department's surgeon, laboring with inhalators. There were six firemen stretched on the sidewalk now. More would be coming before this night's work would be done. If there were no more autopsies to be performed, it would be just this side of a miracle.

Pedley's lungs began to sting; his eyes streamed; his nose drooled. Some of those nitric acid fumes must have clung to the dead man's clothes, were getting in the marshal's breathing system. That wasn't all. The very fact this man Glebe was no longer alive burned the marshal more than anything. He had no faith in that ancient maxim that dead men will talk. It was hard to get them to answer questions, at any rate. And there were a lot to be answered.

It was all too neat and tidy—the way it looked on the surface. A druggist who might have done a little narcotic peddling on the side. A wholesale drug warehouse broken into, after the burglar alarm had been silenced. A cabinet in which cocaine and morphine had been stored smashed open. The warehouse set on fire to cover up the theft. The thief stunned by the explosion he had touched off, dead by the time he was found. Kind of story the tabloids would

wrap up in a one-page feature. Kind of set-up the marshal couldn't bring himself to buy.

He hailed the driver of a police emergency truck, parked at the anchor of the fire line, laid the corpse on the floor of the vehicle. The sergeant didn't recognize Pedley.

"Listen, mister. They got two ambulances here—"

"Not for this fellow. Tell your lieutenant that the marshal would like this truck to stay here until he gets back for this stiff. Might chuck a blanket over him. Right?"

"Yes, *sir!*" The sergeant apologized with a feeble jest. "I'll see he don't walk away on you."

Pedley rattled the pellets in the aspirin boxes as he stalked back to the congestion of apparatus being squeezed up the avenue in case of a wall collapse. The junk in these tins would be worth maybe fifty bucks. Even an addict badly in need of a shot would hesitate before breaking into a warehouse for that small amount.

High above his head the giant water tower lanced tons of water up onto the roof of the shirt factory. Half a dozen hose lines hurled their discharge above the alleyway through which he had brought out Glebe's body. A solid sheet of water separated the two buildings, cutting the fire in half. But the wind was still rising. It whipped a freezing shower back onto the nozzleman, coated the men at the deck pipes on the apparatus with a chilling glaze.

There was one man at the insurance patrol truck. He was bandaging his right hand, clumsily, with gauze out of a first-aid kit. Pedley took the strip of cotton, spiraled it deftly around the thumb and wrist, split it, tied it off.

"Thanks a lot, Marshal. Ceiling opened up on me, dumped boiling water on me. Hurts like a toothache."

"It'll quiet down, hour or so. Who's the big guy with the snub nose and the freckled puss, works with you?"

"Ken? Ken Lavoy. He's a good gutty gent to have around." The bandaged hand waved vaguely. "Last I saw he was knee-deep in that guk in the warehouse, lookin' for a cat somebody said was trapped in there.

You want me to call him?"

"He seems to know the layout of the building."

The patrolman showed his teeth. "He ought to. His girl works there. Hey! Here he comes."

THE freckled face which Pedley had last seen over a pile of ledgers was smudged with soot. The heat blisters on the jaw were a sullen red beneath the shininess. In his arms, Lavoy held a bedraggled tabby, its eyes frantic with terror.

Pedley said: "You're pretty good at rescuing things."

The snub-nosed man set the cat on the patrol truck's running board. "Nobody's going to save a whole lot out of that." He looked over his shoulder at the haze of smoke, snow and spray.

"No—not much," the marshal agreed. "Did you have your flash with you when you found those ledgers on the floor in the office?"

"How the hell you think I saw 'em?" With a seeing-eye dog?" Lavoy frowned.

"Wonder you didn't see the joe under the desk, same time."

"What joe?" The snub nose wrinkled, the agate-blue eyes puckered. "I didn't see a soul in there!"

"He couldn't have been a yard away from you. Under one of the desks."

"Under it? Who? Old man Bock?"

"Who's Bock?"

"Boss. Manager."

"What's he look like?"

"Short, thin, bald. Wears glasses. Mustache."

"Wasn't Bock." The marshal inclined his head to the north. "Come along and see if you can identify him."

"Jesus! Dead, y'mean?"

"Yeah." Pedley waited until they were out of range of the other patrolman. "Ever hear of an Arthur Glebe?"

Lavoy stopped, ignoring a deflected stream which drenched him like a garden hose. "What the hell was Glebe doing in there?"

"You tell me. You know him?"

"Cries, yes, I know him. He—" The big patrolman hesitated. "He's a friend of a

very good friend of mine."

Two men in raglan overcoats with bright scarves and soggy hats stood near the emergency truck talking to the sergeant who broke away from them as Pedley came up with Lavoy.

"Still keeping him nice and warm for you, Marshal."

"Yeah. Keep the papers away too, will you?" Pedley lifted the blanket so the patrolman could see the doughy features.

The raglans crowded close to the truck's rear step.

"Who's the deader, Marshal? Firebug, mayhap?"

"Hear you rate a medal, dragging him out, Ben."

The sergeant pleaded, "Wait, willya! Can't y'see the marshal's *busy*! Come around later, hah?"

The newspaperman ignored him. "Got a name for the stiff? Can we say you suspect arson?"

Pedley was brusque. "Nothing yet. Let you know when I know."

"Ah, c'mon, Ben. We know you frisked him."

"Do we have to give out with that mysterious individual mahaha?"

Lavoy muttered, "That's him, all right."

The sergeant got tough. "G'wan now, before you get me in trouble. Hear me? Move along, boys."

They made one more try. "If you haven't identified the body, how about shooting him to see if anyone recognizes his pix? How about that?"

Pedley shook his head, covered the corpse, nodded curtly to Lavoy.

When they got close enough to the pumpers so they couldn't be overheard, the marshal asked Lavoy:

"This friend of yours who works there. Her name?"

"Frances Martin." The patrolman felt his cheek tentatively. "She's Mr. Bock's secretary. Been with Kerren and Emmons three, four years I guess."

"What's with her and this Glebe?"

"She used to work for him. In his drug store. He—I guess he got her the job. He knows—he knew Bock pretty well."

"Where's Miss Martin live?"

"Knickerbocker Village. Downtown."

"Phone?"

"Sure. You want me to call her?"

"Don't call anybody. Don't go away, either. Stick right here. If your truck goes back, tell your lieutenant I want you detailed here to help me. Understand?"

"Not exactly." Lavoy's lower lip stuck out. "You figuring I had somep'n to do with Artie Glebe's being cold meat, because I didn't happen to trip over him in the office?"

Pedley eyed him bleakly. "When I get around to figuring, I'll let you know what the score is."

He got in his sedan, closed the door. The hullabaloo in the street made the car windows vibrate. He switched on the map light.

FIVE of the heavy, loose-leaf ledgers were piled on the front seat. He opened the top one.

The pages were filed chronologically and bore a printed sequence number in red. Each was a carbon copy of an individual sale made out on the official Harrison Law blanks. He leafed through until he found a page where the purchaser's signature was "Arthur Glebe, Prop."

The Riverview Pharmacy seemed to have been doing quite a business in diacetylmorphine, eighth-ounce vials. Order #M604 listed $\frac{3}{4}$ gross of heroin. Typed beneath that were notations of $\frac{1}{4}$ gross of the same quantities of cocaine hydrochloride and $\frac{1}{8}$ gross of codein sulphate. All the pages bore the green ink stamp of the Narcotic Division inspector for the Treasury Department.

Pedley thought the grayish pellets in the aspirin tins didn't look much like eighth-ounce vials. He wasn't up on the devious ways of junk dealers, but from what he'd noticed when handling pyros, those pills resembled adulterated opium more than they did the pure white crystals of heroin or coke.

He closed the ledger, laid it aside, checked on the two-way, pressed the "Talk" button on the mike handle.

"Car Fifty-four calling Bee Eff Eye. Back."

Barney's clipped voice came in almost immediately. "Bureau Fire Investigation. Malloy."

"Get this, Barney."

"'Kay, Skipper."

"Can you put the thumb on Ed Shaner?"

"Not without canvassing every bar on Chambers Street. But he's due for a call-in in five minutes."

"All right. Look in your phone books, try Manhattan first, then Brooklyn. Locate a Mr. Charles Bock."

"B as in burning?"

"Don't go corny on me. He's the head man of this Kerren and Enmons warehouse that's knocking our companies off like flies up here."

"Boca Grande Casino . . . Bocatelli . . . Bock . . . Bock. . . . Here he is. Charles, residence, Seventeen East Eighty-ninth, Regent seven—"

"Tell Ed not to use the phone number. I want him to go up and get this Bock, bring him here."

"Ocarina. Does Ed let on about the blaze?"

"Why not? They'll see it two miles away, even with the snow. But look, Barney—no strongarm. It'll probably be a shock to this gent to learn his business has blown to hell-angone."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. Check the Underwriters employée records, see what you can dig up on a Kenneth Lavoy. Patrolman on Four Truck, covering the lower East Side. I'll keep in touch."

"Okinawa, Boss. You want to watch yourself. You sound's if you was catching a cold."

"I've been keeping warm enough," Pedley said drily. "If you can't get Shaner, shag one of the other boys up there."

A thundering concussion jarred the car. Bits of brick rattled on the top and fenders. A crack appeared on the windshield. Fifty feet away the gleaming red of the apparatus was obscured by a black cloud roiling up from a mass of rubble in the street. The side wall of the shirt factory had gone.

Debris slid into the alley from the slanting floors. A machine toppled over the edge

of the third floor, crashed to the sidewalk, knocking a ladder away from the warehouse front. A gush of flame whooshed up and back over the row of tenements. There wouldn't be much chance to get through that alley door for a while. Pedley wanted another hour in that office badly, but he couldn't wait around until he got it.

He climbed out, splashed through the slush half a block south, found a police coop on the corner with one plainclothesman at the wheel.

"They got me surrounded up there," Pedley said. "I can't get out. I need a little taxi service."

"Hop in, Marshal." The plainclothesman swung the door. "Don't tell me all this—" he gestured at the volcano of smoke and flame—"was started down *your* alley!"

"Too soon to say. Signs point that way. Run me over to Eighty-fourty-four Second, hah?"

"Yowzah. What kind of a crud would build a bonfire on a night like this!"

THE marshal said nothing. What he thought was that a fitting punishment would be to turn the torch over to the men who were bracing themselves against the wrench of those nozzles, creeping along ice-sheathed ledges, using ceiling hooks beneath tons of falling plaster and breaking beams.

"Want me to wait for you, Marshal?" The detective slid in to the curb before crimson neons nervously stuttering:

RIVE VIEW

PHARMACY

DRUGS— ODA

"No, thanks. I'll grab a cab. Much obliged."

"Any time—"

Pedley went into the drugstore.

A fat youth was reading a comic book behind the soda fountain. A thin man with spectacles and a white goatee looked up inquiringly from the shelter of the medicine counter.

There was only one customer in the store—a dark-haired girl in a tawny cloth coat with a beaver collar. She was perched on a fountain stool, fiddling uneasily with a nearly empty coke glass.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL WHO KNEW



WHEN the marshal came in, stamping slush off his rubbers, the girl swung around quickly. Beneath the tan beret her eyes were sharp with concern, but the interest faded out of them as he sauntered down to the prescrip-

tion counter. She turned back to her empty glass, picked it up, stared into it gloomily.

Pedley nodded to the goateed clerk.

"Like to speak to the party in charge here."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Glebe isn't here."

"I know he isn't. I just saw him over at the fire."

"Oh!" It was the girl behind him. "We—we all heard the engines, but we didn't know what it was exactly—"

The soda jerker nodded sagely. "I told you it'd be all over before you could get to where it was." He leaned over the counter eagerly. "How did Mr. Glebe happen to be there, sir?"

Pedley said, "That's what I'm trying to find out. The fire's over at the Kerren and Emmons—"

The glass the girl had been holding smashed on the floor. She clawed feebly at the marble top of the fountain, sagged sideways, and slid off the stool in a heap on the broken glass.

In a few moments after they had reached her, the girl was stretched on the floor behind the toilet goods counter, her coat rolled up beneath her head as a pillow. Her skin was chalky; she seemed lifeless. She was not much more than twenty, slender and delicate, with features that would have been remarkably pretty if they had been relaxed instead of tightened into a half grimace.

The fat boy of the comic books offered advice over a display of hot water bottles, something about putting her feet higher than her head. The goateed pharmacist knelt beside her, murmuring: "Shut up, Pudge. Tend to the store." He broke an ampoule

between thumb and fingers, held it beneath the girl's nostrils.

Pedley caught a whiff of some fruity aromatic. "Know her, Doc?"

The spectacles peered up. "Quite well. She used to work here."

"Name of Martin?"

"Yes." The pharmacist massaged the back of her neck gently. "I'm afraid you gave her a shock about the fire. She's secretary to the manager over at Kerren and Emmons. If the fire's a bad one, she might be out of a job for a while."

"Not the sort of thing that would cause a person to keel over, is it?"

"You wouldn't think so, perhaps—" the pharmacist smiled slightly—"unless you worked in a drug store. I had a truck driver faint in here last week while I was putting antiseptic on his mashed thumb. Can't tell about people."

"No," the marshal agreed. "This girl, now. She knows Mr. Glebe pretty well?"

The girl's eyelids fluttered, opened. She stared up at the two men, frightened. The pharmacist bent, put his hand on her forehead.

"Take it easy a minute, Frances." He called to the fat boy, "Bring a cup of cocoa. Don't put any of that goo in it."

Frances caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I'm terribly sorry to cause all this fuss, Mr. Radee."

"No bother at all." The pharmacist straightened, moved away to wait on a customer.

The girl's dark eyes followed him for a minute, then switched back to the marshal, searching his long, homely, scarred horse-face fearfully. "The fire—was it very bad?"

"Was—" he nodded slowly, "is—probably will be."

"Not out yet?"

"No." He took the cup from the soda jerker, helped her to sit up. "I'm from the Bureau of Fire Investigation, Miss Martin. We think this blaze was set."

Her hand trembled, some of the cocoa slopped into the saucer. "Oh! No!" Her mouth remained in a rigid "O."

"Yeah. Hard to believe anybody'd pull anything as lousy as that." He kept his voice

low because a man buying razor blades two counters away kept glancing over curiously. But the words jolted the girl as much as if he'd been shouting. "Lot of people burned out of their homes. Couple dozen firemen on the hospital list. Some of 'em 'll be lucky if they live. Scummy business."

"I can't believe—" She caught hold of



Two Types of Arsonists

STATISTICS show that arsonists fall into two classifications—first, those who commit arson for hire, and second, those who do it because of mental unbalance and are emotionally stimulated by the sight of flames, the sound of fire apparatus responding to a fire, and the process of fighting a blaze.

This quirk on the part of thrill-arsonists usually results in their detection by alert fire investigators. Professional arsonists also betray their activities by establishing a particular pattern which soon becomes recorded in *modus operandi* files and makes subsequent capture and conviction much simpler.

—William Carter

the counter, pulled herself weakly to her feet. "You can't possibly think—"

HE TOOK the cup and saucer. "Who was in the building when you left tonight?"

"No one." He could barely make out the words.

"You closed up?"

"I almost always do."

"Everything locked up?"

"Of course." She shrank away from him, shivering, pulling her coat around her as if for protection.

Momentarily he was sorry for her. The poor kid was scared sick, looked as if she might fold up again any second. But one thing only mattered to him—his savage, grinding hatred for firebugs would allow nothing to deflect him from his job, neither pain, exhaustion, nor personal feelings. He

hammered at her mercilessly:

"Waiting here for someone, weren't you, Miss Martin?"

"For—Artie. Mr. Glebe."

"Business. Or pleasure?" If there was a sneer in his tone it was intentional.

She flushed. "I wanted to—I came over to pay back some money he'd loaned me." The dark eyes gazed at him with the numb fixity of a person hypnotized.

"All right." She might be too frightened to be talked to at the moment, but before this the marshal had used a method which sometimes loosened terrified tongues. "Suppose we go over and see him."

She braced herself as if getting set to plunge into cold water, but made no protest when he took her arm.

The pharmacist glanced up from the shaving cream he was wrapping. Light glinted on his spectacles as he turned, pursing his lips.

"Feel all right to go out, Frances?" he asked.

Pedley answered. "I'll take care of her."

Radee fingered his beard dubiously. "I hope things aren't too bad over at your firm, Frances. I'll tell Mr. Glebe you were in. Take care of yourself."

Out on the street with the storm flailing at them and no pedestrians or car lights anywhere in sight, the girl cried: "Am I under arrest?"

"Depends." Pedley steered her to the corner of the cross street.

"I don't understand," she protested.

"Depends on how much you decide to tell me."

"What *can* I tell you?"

"Whatever it is you're holding back." He pushed her out into the street to hail a cruising taxi. "Don't bother to stall around. You didn't pass out just now simply because you heard that a warehouse was on fire. You know something. Probably you'd try to hand me that guff about its being something personal, something that couldn't have anything to do with barbecuing a blockful of people, but you'll have to let me judge that. I don't care how personal it is or how embarrassed you are or one damn thing about it except this—I need what you know. I'd

rather get it the easy way. But I'm going to get it, one way or the other."

The cab slowed.

"I got a call, Cap," the taximan said.

Pedley held out something that glittered in the cab's fog-lights. "Official."

The taxi braked. The marshal stooped to look into the dark interior. It was empty.

"Didn't know you were an officer," the driver grumbled. "I got a call to Sutton Place."

"We won't hold you up long." Pedley helped the girl in, gave instructions.

The taxi plowed south. The neon signs paled in the fierce glow reflected from the snow clouds. The street became clogged with crowds. Old men in slippers and shabby overcoats. Women with shawls over their heads, babies in their arms. Children swathed in comforters.

The cab stopped. A hook and ladder truck blocked the way. "You want I should try the other street, Chief?"

"No." Pedley got out. "It'll be worse in the next block. They're clearing people out of all these tenements."

Frances Martin shuddered. "Is all this—on account of—Kerren and Emmons?"

"On account of some bastard who didn't mind burning up the whole neighborhood if it would cover up some crime." He gripped her arm tightly. "You ever in a hospital ward when they changed the bandages on a fireman with half the skin burned off his back?"

"N-no." Her teeth chattered. "You don't have to make it any worse. It's hideous enough." Her voice climbed hysterically.

"You'd remember his screams the rest of your life." He pushed through the crowd surging against the fire line, pulled her along behind him roughly.

A BLOCKY-SHOULDERED man in a beat-up fedora and a shapeless overcoat stood straddle-legged beside the emergency truck—Ed Shaner, Marshal Pedley's deputy, who had been sent to bring Bock to the scene. With him was a small man in an ulster that came so close to the ground that it gave him an oddly Napoleonic appearance. The ulster had an enormous astrakan collar out

of which stuck a thin neck and a large head surmounted by a velour hat with snow piled on the brim like icing on some bakery-window showpiece.

The stocky Shaner saw Pedley first.

"They told me you'd be coming back here to the truck, Coach. So I brung Mr. Bock along with me. This is Mr. Bock."

"Thanks, Ed."

Charles Bock scarcely glanced at the marshal. He gawked at Frances. His lips were drawn back against his teeth. His lower jaw hung slackly open as if he didn't have the strength to close it. He wagged his head so snow powdered down from the hat brim.

Frances spoke in a queerly strained voice. "Isn't it awful, Mr. Bock!"

He closed his mouth, opened it again to gasp, "I can't . . . can't take—take it in! My life—my whole life—going up—flames!"

Pedley growled, "Yours isn't the only life that went up." He lifted the blanket from the face of the corpse. "This fellow was on the floor in your office when I got in there."

Frances screamed, covered her eyes with her hands. "Artie!" Her shriek pierced high above the clamor of the crowd. "Oh-h-h! Artie!"

Bock recoiled from the dead man, shoulders hunching in horror. "In my office! That man?" He seized the marshal's sleeve. "You sure?"

"I dragged him out from under one of the desks."

The warehouse manager moaned, "It's my own fault. I was warned, and I paid no attention. All this—" he flapped a hand at the holocaust—"on account of this wretched rascal, this unspeakable—"

Hands came around Bock's shoulders, gripped his throat, throttling him, dragging him over backward.

A kid at the restraining rope yelled: "Lookit! They're fightin'!"

Pedley took a single swift step, got his right forearm beneath Ken Lavoy's jaw, clamped his left hand on his own right wrist, put his knee in the small of the patroler's back.

Lavoy didn't relax his grip on the manager's throat, though Pedley's muscles bunched at the leverage he had on the big

man's chin. Bock clawed feebly at the salvage man's hands. The girl flung herself at Lavoy, pleading:

"Ken! Ken! Stop it! Please! *Please!*"

Casually, Shaner put one gloved hand with the two first fingers stiffly outstretched to Lavoy's upturned face. The patroleo let go of Bock, snatched at Shaner's hand. Pedley gave Lavoy's chin one extra jolt for good measure, released him.

Lavoy dropped to his knees, pressing his palms to his eyes, moaning. Frances crouched beside him, holding his shoulders, begging:

"What did he do to you, Ken!"

"He put—my eyes out!"

CHAPTER IV

ELEVATOR ATTACK



PEDLEY caught Bock as the man in the ulster sagged to the snow. The manager's face was the color of week-old hamburger. He sucked in his breath with spasmodic gulplings. His eyes rolled up toward the top of his skull; the whites showed pinkly in the fire haze. When the marshal set the little man on the step of the E truck he was astonished at how little weight he was lifting. Without the overcoat Bock would have been lighter than a fifty-foot length of hose.

The crowd egged on the combatants noisily, more interested in the fracas close by than in the cataclysm which strewed the avenue with charred wood, shattered glass, blackened metal.

In contrast to the commotion around him, Pedley felt like a driver with his car stalled in a snow bank. He wanted desperately to get moving but everything seemed to block him. The converted stable next the shirt factory began to belch smoke from its cupolas; that meant there wouldn't be any chance of getting to that warehouse office for another half hour, at least. By then it might be too late. Whatever traces of the crime there might be still left would probably be obliterated.

He would have to work on what he had in hand. What he had in hand was Ken Lavoy. Ungently he hauled the patroleo to his feet. "Snap out of it. What was the idea of the guzzling?"

The salvage man groaned in agony. "I can't see! I'm blind! You put my eyes out!"

Shaner spat. "Ah! All I did was give you that Pier Six jab. Your glims'll ache for a few minutes, thasall."

The girl flared, "You had no right to hurt Ken like that!"

Pedley regarded her sourly. "If we hadn't stopped him, he'd be facing a homicide warrant right now."

Lavoy mumbled, "Never intended to kill him. But I sure hate his guts."

Frances cried, "You can't blame Ken! He just couldn't stand hearing Artie Glebe called names like that, now Artie can't answer back for himself. I couldn't, either! Maybe Mr. Bock didn't mean it the way it sounded, but if anyone had been as good to you as Arthur was to me, you wouldn't let anyone call him a stinker!"

If Bock heard, he gave no sign. He slumped against the brass hand-hold of the truck like a bundle of old clothing. Pedley didn't like the purplish blotches on his cheeks or that queer, gulby hiccupping. "Ed," he said curtly to Shaner, "ask one of the amby boys to hop up here."

Shaner departed hastily.

Pedley put his fist under Lavoy's chin, forced the big man's head up. "Talk, if you can't look. You liked Glebe. Miss Martin did. Mr. Bock didn't. Why?"

Lavoy blinked streaming eyes. "Ask Fran."

She didn't wait to be asked. "I don't know, for sure. It had to do with some of the—items—Artie'd bought from K and E."

"Items?" Pedley cocked a singed eyebrow. "Dope?"

"Medical narcotics, yes. An inspector from the Treasury Department came to ask Mr. Bock about the quantities he'd sold to Artie. The totals on our blanks didn't check with the amounts delivered to Riverview. I can't tell you exactly. I only overheard a little of what they were saying, but it was enough

to know Mr. Bock was terribly angry and upset. He seemed to think Artie'd been putting something over, and I just knew that wasn't so. Artie wasn't the kind to pull a dirty trick and leave someone else holding the bag for him."

Lavoy wiped his eyes with a smudged handkerchief. "Tell him about the quarrel, Fran."

"Oh!" She seemed flustered, but not as frightened as she had been in the drug store. "A little while after the inspector left the office, Artie came tearing in. He was sore, too. I don't know whether the Treasury man had been over to see him or not. But right away he and Mr. Bock began to squabble. They shouted at each other so I could hear them through the partition when I was out in the shipping room. Finally Artie said something that made Mr. Bock simply ferocious. I couldn't catch what it was, but Mr. Bock ordered him out of the building. Artie hollered louder than Mr. Bock, saying he'd go fast enough, but he'd be back, and Mr. Bock would remember it, when he came. Then he stamped out of the office and slammed the door. When I bent back in the office Mr. Bock was sitting bolt upright in his chair as if he'd had a paralytic shock. He kept muttering over and over, 'I don't understand—I simply do not understand.'"

BOCK made a retching sound. She whirled to face him.

"I don't care! I had to tell it just the way it happened, Mr. Bock. I think a lot of my job with K and E and you've been nice to me, but Artie Glebe was one of the best friends I ever had!" She stopped abruptly, tears glistening in her eyes.

The manager's head rolled weakly from side to side.

Shaner hurried back with the interne in the red mackinaw.

Deft fingers unbuttoned Bock's vest and shirt. A stethoscope probed his frail chest. The interne shook his head, listened again, dangled the ear-tubes with a worried frown. "Hard to tell, off the cuff like this, Marshal. But it sounds to me like myocarditis. This man ought to be in a hospital."

Bock uttered in a croak, "No hospital!—

Won't go! My own doctor!—Home!"

The interne shrugged. "Might be just as well. What he needs mainly is not to get excited."

Pedley slipped an arm around Bock's shoulders. "Can't guarantee that. But I'll take him home. Where's your coop, Ed?"

"Two blocks down," said Shaner.

"Bring it up here. I'll use it until they untangle some of the equipment from mine."

When his deputy brought the red coupé, Pedley helped him carry Bock to it. "Keep an eye on that pair, Ed," he said, indicating Lavoy and the girl. "I think we're monkeying with something the Homicide crew will get in on, sooner or later."

"No kid!" Shaner seemed pleased at the prospect. "My camera's in there. If you want me to take some color shots—"

"With fumes from a couple thousand different kinds of chemicals all mixed up together?" Pedley slid behind the wheel. "I wouldn't rule out the chance of some shots before this is wrapped up, though."

Seventeen East Eighty-nine was a small, dignified gray stone apartment house. The tiny lobby was empty when Pedley helped Bock stumble across to the automatic elevator.

"What floor?" he asked as he slid the bronze door shut.

"Fourth," wheezed the manager of K and E.

Pedley pushed the right button. A motor hummed. The car moved sedately upward.

The number "2" was just coming to a level with the marshal's eyes when a shattering detonation made the little car reverberate like an empty oil barrel. The instantaneous ring of metal, a silver splotch on the door sliding slowly downward before him told Pedley all he needed to know.

He slammed Bock back against the elevator's rear wall, flattened himself there beside him, looked up and behind him. A wisp of dirty gray smoke eddied down from the open grating above his head.

Feet pounded on the staircase which climbed upward around the elevator shaft.

The marshal reached for his service special, snapped off the safety, waited until the deliberate ascent of the car had brought it

almost to the level of the third floor. Then he put three shots as close together as he could in the direction of something dark moving along the stair well, keeping pace with the car.

The running feet halted, started again, more slowly. There was no answering bullet.

Bock had collapsed to the floor.

The car made clicking noises, hummed to a stop.

The door slid back to show a green metal inner door with "4" painted on it.

Pedley reached up, clouted the bulb in the car fixture with the barrel of his pistol, swung the door wide before the tinkling of broken glass had ceased.

On the landing, a yard away, was a hand gripping an automatic. But the muzzle was nosed down toward the floor.

The hand didn't move as Pedley came out, cautiously.

Doors burst open on the lower floors. A woman screamed. "That *was* shooting, Bill! I told you it was the other time!" A man yelled, "Call the cops, Hazel!" An elderly voice quavered, "What's the matter? What was that noise?"

Pedley kept his voice matter-of-fact. "Everything under control, folks. Just stay in your apartments."

THE man who had yelled for the police came partway up the stairs from the second floor. "Yeah? Says who!"

"Fire Department. You come on up here, mister."

A boy shouted, "Don't do it, Dad. You'll get shot!"

The man growled, "That'll be a two-way street, son. Go back with mommy." He came up the stairs, cautiously.

Pedley was kneeling by a man who was face-down on the rubber tiling of the landing. The fellow's mouth was twisted up at one side in a grimace. His left hand was bunched beneath him near his belt buckle. That sleeve of his tweed topcoat had soaked up quite a bit of blood from somewhere, for the dark stain extended almost to the elbow. His right fist was outflung at arms' length, still gripping his automatic and holding its

muzzle half an inch off the floor.

He would have been about forty. What the marshal could see of the deeply tanned face didn't look like that of the sort of individual who would be gunning for people in hallways. The marshal patted the pants pockets, half turned the body to get at the breast pocket of the coat. "Know this man?"

The man who had come up, a beefy, muscular and suspicious individual, clenched a nickel-plated .32 close to his ribs, the muzzle on the marshal.

"Migawd!" He gawked at the body, jerked his eyes back to Pedley. "The guy's dying!"

"Wrong tense. Seen him before?"

"No." The .32 and the muscular gent's chin were thrust forward simultaneously. "And you don't look like any fireman I ever saw before, either!"

Pedley drew out a long, thin alligator wallet from the pocket on the inside of the dead man's vest.

"Mr. Bock's in the elevator. Ask him who I am."

"Jeeze," the neighbor breathed. "You shoot Charley, too?"

"He's just out from shock. Get his keys. Open his door. Carry him in."

The marshal swore beneath his breath at what he saw inside the plastic glass window of the wallet. Up to that moment he couldn't have been sure that one of his bullets hadn't brought the fellow down. The man had only been dead a matter of minutes and certainly the party Pedley had been drilling at had run up these stairs.

But Special Agents of the Treasury Department don't lurk in dark stair wells to blast at people in elevators, and the photograph beside the "Merton Fosgrave, Narcotic Bureau Badge #67" on the identification card was a good likeness of the dead man.

There had been another person with a gun then. It was a reasonable assumption that this other person had shot and killed Fosgrave and was attempting to duplicate his performance on the marshal, or Charles Bock, or both.

Pedley stuck the wallet back in the dead man's overcoat. This made it tougher than ever. The murder would have to be reported

to the police, if it hadn't been already. Then the Homicide team would try to take over, searching for a killer.

Also, the Narcotic Bureau would get in on the thing—and presumably they'd throw around a lot of Washington weight, hunting for junk peddlers. The marshal was after a party who was, in his opinion, a hell of a lot more dangerous than a squad of killers and a platoon of drug-runners combined. Not many assassins knock out fifty people in one night. Seldom does a drug addict make five hundred homeless in an evening.

The person Pedley was out to get might or might not be the same one the Homicide experts and the Treasury agents would be trying to run down. Either way, he wanted to get his hand on the firebug first.

He had little time in which to get a head start. Maybe the fact that half the prowl cars in nearby precincts would be down at the fire might give him a few extra minutes.

CHAPTER V

HALF-HEARTED CONFESSION



BOCK'S neighbor was half lifting, half supporting the man to the door of Apartment 4B. The manager of the drug company fitted a key into the door, groaning:

"Oh-h-h! I need—a doctor! Allen—will you call Dr. Harrison—for me?"

"You hurt anywhere, Charley?" The beefy man led Bock through a small foyer into a large studio living room filled with too much antique furniture, too many heavily-shaded floor lamps.

"Hurt?" Bock fell onto a fragile gilt sofa. "I'm destroyed, Allen—utterly destroyed!" He closed his eyes, leaned back, gasping like an exhausted swimmer fighting for air.

Pedley carried the dead man in from the hall, laid him on the carpet in the foyer.

"Thanks for the lift, Mr.—"

"Winters. Al Winters."

"Much obliged. I won't hold you up any longer."

"But—" the beefy man scowled—"Charley wants me to call his doctor."

"I'll take care of it." Pedley went to the phone.

"That's what you say. There's something damn strange going on around here. I was up here tonight playing cribbage with Charley when some hardboiled lug comes in and says he's wanted downtown by the Fire Department. He wasn't wearing any uniform, either. Now you bring Charley back a wreck, there's a lot of gunplay out in the hall, and a dead man on the floor there! And *you* say *you're* a fireman. I figure on sticking around until I see some uniforms."

"You figure wrong, friend." Pedley held out the gold badge with the Maltese Cross. "You can wait outside in the hall until the prowl boys get here. They'll tell you you're wrong. I've some official business to take care of, so—" He nodded toward the door.

Bock said feebly, "It's all right, Al. My business burned down—building was set on fire. This gentleman is investigating. Don't worry about me."

"If you say so. I'll call the doctor anyway, on my phone. I'll be up later to see you." Winters went out.

The little man on the sofa wheezed. "Who was that—shooting? It wasn't—Mr. Fosgrave, was it?"

"No. He was on the receiving end. What was he doing up here?"

"I'd made an—appointment with him—for nine o'clock. He was to give me—a report on Arthur Glebe."

"Riverview Pharmacy doing a little off-the-record business in narcotics?"

"More than a little. And trying to falsify their records—so it would appear—Kerran and Emmons were the—culprits!" The manager leaned forward, his eyes bright and staring in the large head, one pulsing vein standing out on his bald head like a purple angleworm. "After thirty years—most scrupulous—" His head bent, its weight pulled him sideward off the couch to the carpet.

Pedley stretched him flat on his back, hunted around for a liquor decanter. There wasn't any in the living room.

There wasn't one in the kitchenette, either. He opened the refrigerator, found a

carafe of ice water, looked for a glass. In the cabinet he opened was some fine coffee china, a row of glasses, a couple of cans of grapefruit juice—and a covey of crawling, whiskered insects.

The bugs had been attracted by spilled juice. His hand brushed one of the cans as he reached for a tumbler. He set the tumbler down, picked up the can. It was empty. So was the other. But neither had been opened.

He turned the cans over, curiously. No mark of can opener or any puncture of icepick. How had the juice drained out of cans that weren't opened? He was still examining one when the sirens whined the street below.

He went quickly to the phone, called his office.

"Listen, Barney—"

"Pete's sake, Skipper, where are you?"

"Bock's apartment. Why?"

"I been trying to raise you on the short-wave to tell you about Ed."

"What's with Shaner?"

"He's in the hospital."

"*What?*"

"'Sright. They say it ain't likely to be so serious, only they'll have to keep him a day or so to find out. He's at Flower Memorial."

"How'd it happen?"

"From what the guy said—"

"*What* guy, for God's sake?"

"That patroleo you wanted me to check on—Kenneth Lavoy. He's from the West Street Corps all right—"

"Okay, okay. How'd Shaner get hurt?"

"Slipped on spray ice, banged his skull on the curb, got a concussion. So this Lavoy says."

"That's just too, too dandy. I had Ed watching this salvage boy, so now you'd better take over, Barney."

"Aw, coach, have a heart. I got a heavy date for eleven o'clock tonight. Undertook to squire my ever-lovin' to a nightclub."

"I've a little undertaking of my own to be looked after first. You fan your pants up to that five-alarmer."

The plainclothesmen hammered on the door. . . .

THE clock on the dash said 10:30 when Pedley nosed Shaner's coop in behind his own sedan. The wind had died down a little; the snow had almost stopped; the fire was under control. In the searchlights billows of smoke and steam swirled from the gutted buildings. Sparks winked constantly from the darkened interior of partly wrecked structures, but they were only the hand torches of the truckmen nipping away smoldering lath and glowing insulation. Along the street hosesmen were chipping knife-sharp slivers of ice from lengths of canvas.

The crowd had thinned, too, though there were still several hundred massed against the lines. The marshal wasted no time searching that throng for Lavoy and the Martin girl. He looked in his own car. The fat books weren't there.

He was not much surprised. The information on those ledgers had already caused a couple of murders, if he was right about Glebe's death, and had put many in the hospital. They might cause a number of grave-side ceremonies before the thing was done. No great wonder someone wanted those loose-leaf sheets out of the way.

It took minutes of precarious slipping and tripping over exposed pipes, floor beams, piles of wire mesh, before he picked his way through to the warehouse office. It seemed hopeless to hunt for any lead in such utter devastation. The place couldn't have been smashed more completely if another building had been dropped onto Kerren and Emmons from a mile up.

The shipping room, to the rear, was about as badly demolished. To an untrained eye, nothing could be seen except the blackened skeleton of steel studs sticking up from a shambles of plaster, metal window frames, light fixtures. But the marshal knew exactly what he was looking for.

He focused his flash on the burned woodwork of the long shipping bench which extended along the entire partition, backing up to the office. Carefully he traced the fracture checks in the surface of the charred pine until he found the section of partition where the alligator-leather effect showed the largest markings.

This would be where the fire had been the least hot, where it had started, for as it spread the temperatures would have risen rapidly, the cracks in the burned planks would become closer and closer together.

He stood right at the end of the bench, next to the warped iron frame of an old-fashioned platform scale. A weight was hung over the lower bar at the ten-pound mark, but there was nothing on the iron platform of the scale. He ran his finger along the bar until he came to a three-inch section that felt gritty beneath his fingers.

Then he rummaged in the rubble of shattered glass and the furry black ashes of incinerated cartons until he found a piece of half-melted sheet metal which had once been a square-sided five-gallon container. He was on his way back to the scale when a clanking close by made him pause.

Someone was in the office, but there was no flicker of light through the partly consumed partition. So it wouldn't be one of the truckmen, soaking down. He doused his own flash, moved as quietly as he could through the litter on the floor, rounded the corner where the office door had been.

Light from the street outlined a helmeted figure with a long pole. The man was working at the tilted safe cabinet.

Pedley put the disk of his flashbeam on the man's head and shoulders. "Looking for those ledgers, Lavoy?"

The salvage man ducked, swung the pole. A six-inch steel point glittered briefly, arcing toward the marshal.

He slashed at it with the flashlight. The beam went out. But he got hold of the piercing pole at the base of the point, went along it hand over hand as the patrolman wrestled to get it free.

A heavy blow on the marshal's forearm loosened the holder's grip. Lavoy yanked the piercing pole back, lowered the point to lunge. Pedley swung the flashlight—and connected.

Lavoy slugged him again with the tool he had kept in his right hand. The marshal ducked, but the thing smashed his ear, deafened him with a Gargantuan explosion.

He plunged forward, got an arm around his assailant, fell forward on him. Lavoy

screached, writhed, then became a limp and silent form beneath him.

PEDLEY took the sprinkler wrench from Lavoy's relaxed fingers. Then he felt beneath the salvage man.

"My back," the patrolman whispered between his teeth. "It's broken!"

Pedley made no attempt to move the man. "Won't keep you from talking."

"Nothing to say." Lavoy breathed heavily.

"You'll think of something before we're through. How do you fit into this criss-cross?"

"What difference does it make? I'm—finished."

The marshal got hold of Lavoy's right wrist. "The racket is, anyhow," he growled. "Who thought up the scheme of cutting K and E's narcotics, selling the real stuff to the Riverview and adulterating the stuff that was left to make the quantities check on the books?"

Lavoy made an exclamation as the handcuffs clicked on his wrists.

"Scummy setup if I ever heard one." Pedley hoisted the patrolman up roughly, jerked away the sharp corner of the file drawer which had been driven through Lavoy's rubber coat by the force of his fall. "Doctors and druggists would get the cut narcotics, instead of the full strength stuff. Patients who needed something to put them out of their pain wouldn't get it—all because some louse schemed to make a rotten buck."

"It was Glebe," Lavoy gasped in relief, at finding he could stand up.

"Yeah? Who worked it at this end?"

"Fran. He suckered her into it." Words tumbled from the salvage man. "She'd have done anything for him. He saved her life one night when she'd taken too many sleeping pills. She was down on her luck and tried to kill herself. This was before I knew her. I don't know all of it yet. But Artie brought her through that and gave her a job, helped her make a comeback so she wanted to live. So I guess when he saw the chance for her to get a position with K and E, he recommended her with something like the drug

gyp already in his mind."

"Then the Federal men caught up with 'em?" Pedley sloshed beside him through the puddles.

"Yeah. He thought he saw a way out of it by busting in here after hours, burning the place up and destroying the dope records so there wouldn't be any evidence against him. He told Fran what he was going to do and she told me. Course I could see that would only get her in deeper than ever. So, soon as I found out about it I hustled over here, tried to stop him. But he was at the cabinet already. He came at me like crazy. I had to crown him. He fell against the safe and cracked his head open."

They reached the street but the marshal strode past his car and Shaner's. "All right. So you killed him. You might be able to claim self-defense or at least cop a manslaughter plea. I wouldn't stand in your way. But what about the fire?"

"I guess Artie set it. It must have been going before I followed him into the warehouse. I don't know how it happened."

"Horseshoes. You know. And I'll find out." Pedley marched his prisoner to the cross street, headed toward Second Avenue. "Murder isn't in my department. I've even known some cases where a murder timed just right was a pretty useful crime from the public's point of view. But arson is different. Any man who'd set a building on fire is a multiple murderer—and I'll tear the town apart to see him get what's coming to him."

"Sure," Lavoy muttered shakily. "Only he's got it already, hasn't he?"

"I don't think so," the marshal said. "But we'll try to take care of it right away."

CHAPTER VI

ELECTRIC TREATMENT FOR AN ADDICT



RIVERVIEW pharmacy was getting ready to close up. A shade was pulled halfway down the glass of the front door. The lights behind the bulbs of green and red solutions in the window had been turned off.

The fat boy was no longer in sight. But Frances Martin was there, sitting on the end stool, talking to the pharmacist with the white goatee. Mr. Radee had removed his white jacket, put on an overcoat. He started to shake his head as Pedley and his prisoner came in, then stared in surprise.

The girl tumbled off the stool in panic when she saw the handcuffs on Lavoy's wrists. "Ken!" She ran to him. "What on earth!"

"Nothing to get worried about," Lavoy reassured her. "I've admitted I fixed Artie's wagon, but it was self-defense. I couldn't help it. The marshal seems to think I set the fire too, but he wouldn't want to hold his breath until he proves it. I'll come out all right, Fran. Just let me do the talking."

"Somebody," Pedley growled, "better do some. Or I'm going to take you up to MacKinnon's station house and tell the boys you're the guy responsible for Marty Klein and Herb Jensen and a lot of others being on the critical list. They'd like nothing better'n to get their hands on you."

"No!" Frances burst out. "You can't do that! Ken didn't do it. He's lying!"

Pedley smiled wolfishly. "Thought perhaps he was."

She reached up quickly, put her hand over Lavoy's mouth to stop him from speaking. "I know you were doing it to save me, Ken, but I can't let you take the blame." She shook her head and the dark curls tossed beneath the beret. "I set the fire myself!"

"How?" asked the marshal.

"I threw a cigarette in the trash basket in the shipping room. There was a lot of excelsior in it."

"When was this?"

"Just—just before I quit work and locked up. About half-past five."

"And it took an hour and a half for the blaze to break out?" Pedley shook his head, showing his teeth in the lupine grin once more.

"It's the truth!"

"I don't like to call a lady a liar, but the warehouse was touched off by a time bomb. Set to go off while the torch was setting up an alibi."

None of the three said anything but they

all made small sounds of astonishment.

"A home-made gimmick," the marshal said, and nodded. "A five-gallon tin of something inflammable—probably alcohol—set on a Fairbanks scale. The scale was set to balance ten pounds. The five-gallon can would weigh a little over thirty pounds when it was full, and it was full when it was set on the scale. But after a while it wasn't,—because somebody'd made a small dent near the bottom of the container where the side seam is joined. Just a little dent that would hardly be noticed, but enough to let the liquid leak out slowly."

He demonstrated, using a can of lighter fluid he took from a rack on the cigar counter, knocking the side against the metal edge of a fountain stool until the tin began to drip. The three of them watched in fascination.

The pharmacist blew out his breath in a soft whistle. "Ingenious, I must say."

"Yeah. The bar weight was set for ten pounds. When enough alcohol in the can had leaked out so what was left weighed less than that—say a gallon and a half—the lever on the side tipped up, and the end rubbed against a bunch of blue-tip matches tied to the bar. The matches ignited, burned off, fell into the pool of alcohol on the floor. *Voom!*"

Frances Martin glanced fearfully at Lavoy. "I don't see how you can be so sure of all that," she said to Pedley. "You're making it up!!"

Pedley set the lighter fluid can on the counter. "I can make up a pretty good case for the prosecutor, anyhow. The scale's still over there with the burned sandpaper still on it. So is what's left of the five-gallon can. And the clincher is uptown at Bock's apartment."

"*Bock!*" The exclamation was a trio.

"He had to find out how long it took fluid to leak out of a can." Pedley licked the back of one hand where acid had spattered on it. "He didn't dare try it out in his office or anywhere in the warehouse because somebody might wonder what the hell he was doing and remember it, later. So the firebug experimented with some cans of grapefruit juice in Bock's kitchen, to time the leakage."

LAVOY exclaimed, "But Mr. Bock—he ran the whole business! Why would he—"

"To stop a Federal indictment for conspiracy to dispose of drugs illegally. As if you didn't know." The marshal held out his hand to the pharmacist. "Got some goozlum to neutralize nitric acid?"

Radee's spectacles reflected light as he bent to examine the burn. "I can wash it out with alkali. But you'd better have a physician for that." He ducked into his prescription cubby-hole. Pedley pushed Lavoy in ahead of him. The girl followed.

They crowded into the little room watching Radee dissolve white powder in a beaker. Pedley's face showed nothing while the pharmacist dabbed at the burn with a swab.

"Some of K and E's customers must have raised a holler because of the adulteration of narcotics they'd received from Bock's company," the marshal commented. "The morphine, codeine, so on, had been cut to a third or quarter strength. The balance had come here to Riverview to be sold off the record. To D.A.s."

Radee soaked cotton in the solution. "There must have been some basis for that suspicion," he said. "The investigator was here yesterday when Mr. Glebe was out. He asked me what I knew about such sales to addicts, but of course I couldn't help him much. If there was any non-prescription dispensing, it must have been done by the proprietor."

Frances' voice was sharp. "Don't you talk about Artie that way now! He can't defend himself!"

Pedley stopped her. "Little late in the day to think about defense. This Treasury man had all the facts. Where the junk came from. Where it went. Who sold it. That's why he was killed."

Again the trio: "Killed!"

"Up at Bock's. He'd made a date to discuss the thing with your boss, Miss Martin. Bock was all primed to pin the blame for the illicit deals on you and Glebe. He knew Glebe couldn't deny it. Glebe was a casket case. And he had another good patsy in you; you were fond of Glebe, you used to work for

him. Glebe helped you get the job with Kerren and Emmons. What was more likely than that you'd work with him to put the grab on valuable narcotics, split with him."

"I *didn't!*" she retorted furiously.

"The Treasury agent didn't think you did," Pedley agreed. "He knew it would take a competent pharmacist to handle that drug adulteration. You aren't a registered prescriptionist. Glebe wasn't either, was he?" He looked inquiringly at Radee.

"No," the pharmacist said.

"So the T-man figured out who could handle a tricky job like that, and arranged an appointment with Bock to discuss the matter. The killer got frightened, thinking Bock might turn Federal evidence, sell him out, let him take the rap. So he showed up ahead of time, gunned out the agent when he showed up. Then the murderer started downstairs from Bock's floor, he heard me come in with Bock. He watched us from the stairwell above the elevator and decided for sure, since Bock was with me, that the head of K and E meant to double-cross him to save his own skin. So the killer tried to gun us out. When he thought he had, he slid out before the shooting got everyone in the apartment house excited."

Radee was incredulous. "Did Mr. Bock tell you all this?"

"Part of it." The marshal patted the strip of adhesive the pharmacist had taped across the wad of cotton. "Part I go from memos in the T-man's wallet."

"That's going to come loose," Radee pulled open a drawer beneath the pill till. "I'll have to use a longer strip."

"But Bock did say you were up at his place last night fiddling with those grapefruit juice cans, showing him how easy it would be for both of you to have a good, prosecutor-proof alibi for the torch job."

Lavoy cursed in amazement. Frances huddled against him, shocked.

The pharmacist exclaimed, "Sir?" and allowed the round, black eye of a forty-five to peep over the edge of the drawer in the marshal's direction. "Kindly step back against the wall. All of you. And raise your hands. Quickly. So!"

Pedley put his hands up beside his shoulders, moved against the bottle-packed shelves of the room. "You don't suppose I'd come in here to beard you in your den without having told one of my deputies where I'd be?"

RADEE smiled politely. "He will have no difficulty finding you. You will be right here. On the other hand, I will not."

"What good will it do you?" The muzzle wasn't more than five feet from Pedley's short ribs. He had a wholesome fear of quiet little men with big guns. "I told my people how you'd got Glebe to go with you to the warehouse on the pretext of seeing Bock again to straighten out the quarrel Miss Martin had overheard in the office. They know Bock had gummed up the burglar alarm, shut off the sprinklers at the control valve, then had gone home to establish his alibi, while you knocked your boss out, lugged him in, put those phony opium pills in his pocket, stuck him under the desk and set your time fuse."

Radee backed to the narrow door. "I am sorry to cut short so interesting a recital, but I must bid you good-bye, sir." The blued barrel tilted slightly, the knuckle of the man's trigger finger whitened.

The thumb and forefinger of Pedley's right hand bent back, seized the wide neck of a reagent bottle, flipped it at the door.

Radee dodged. The gun spoke. The bottle exploded in mid-air. Slivers of glass cut Pedley's face. The pharmacist squealed in sudden agony. Blood trickled from his mouth.

Pedley had no trouble getting the gun away.

"You just patched me up, mister. Maybe I better fix that punctured lip of yours before I take you downtown. I wouldn't want anything to slow down your dictation. . . ."

The eighteenth floor office of the Bureau of Fire Investigation was quiet for the first time since midnight. The gray of false dawn made the lights of motor cars moving across Chambers Street look pale from the window behind the marshal's desk.

"It had to be someone at Riverview Pharmacy," he was saying. "That's where the

money was pulled in. Glebe was dead, but the someone was live enough to shoot Fosgrave. So it was either Radee or that fat lad behind the counter, and he didn't look as if he had sense enough to be in the dope business. Or you, Miss Martin." Pedley looked up from the stack of ledgers at the couple on the straight-back chairs. "Larry, you thought these would get your girl in trouble, so you stashed them where you thought I wouldn't find 'em. How would that go with your superiors over at the Salvage Corps?"

Frances put a hand on the patrolman's sleeve.

"You wouldn't make him lose his job, marshal. I know you wouldn't."

He grinned, but the wolfish quality wasn't quite so evident. "Maybe not. If I can get an answer to something that's been bothering me."

"What?" she asked.

"Why'd you leave Riverview to go with K and E, if you liked Glebe so much?"

She darted a glance at Lavoy and reddened. "Well—it was because of Mr. Radee."

"I wondered why you called Glebe by his first name but were so careful to 'mister' the other one."

"He—he used to make passes at me all the time, when I worked there. I didn't want to complain, make trouble for Mr. Glebe after he'd been so good to me. And I

couldn't have Ken beating Mr. Radee up or anything like that. So I told Artie I wanted to get out of the store. I think he knew why." She looked down at her lap. "I told Mr. Radee why—and I'm sure he hated me for it."

The marshal's eyebrows went up, the corners of his mouth went down. "That fits in. Bock claims the reason he went along with Radee's scheme for cutting the purity of his narcotics and boosting the take, was because Radee convinced him you and Glebe would be framed for it, if the Federals did become suspicious. Nice double-action setup—get hunk with you and make a dirty dollar while doing it."

Lavoy added, "Radee had it in for Artie Glebe, too, if you ask me. Everyone liked Artie, nobody got along with Radee. Naturally he resented that."

"They found out one thing when they booked him and Bock over at the precinct house." The marshal's tone became harsh with the recollection of other men who were stretched on hospital cots. "He's a DA himself. Begged for a shot so he could get some sleep before he's arraigned. He was pitiful. Know what I told him?"

They inquired.

"I said, 'Mr. Radee, don't you fret. They'll cure you of your addiction upriver. Electric treatment. Be the best thing ever happened to you.'"



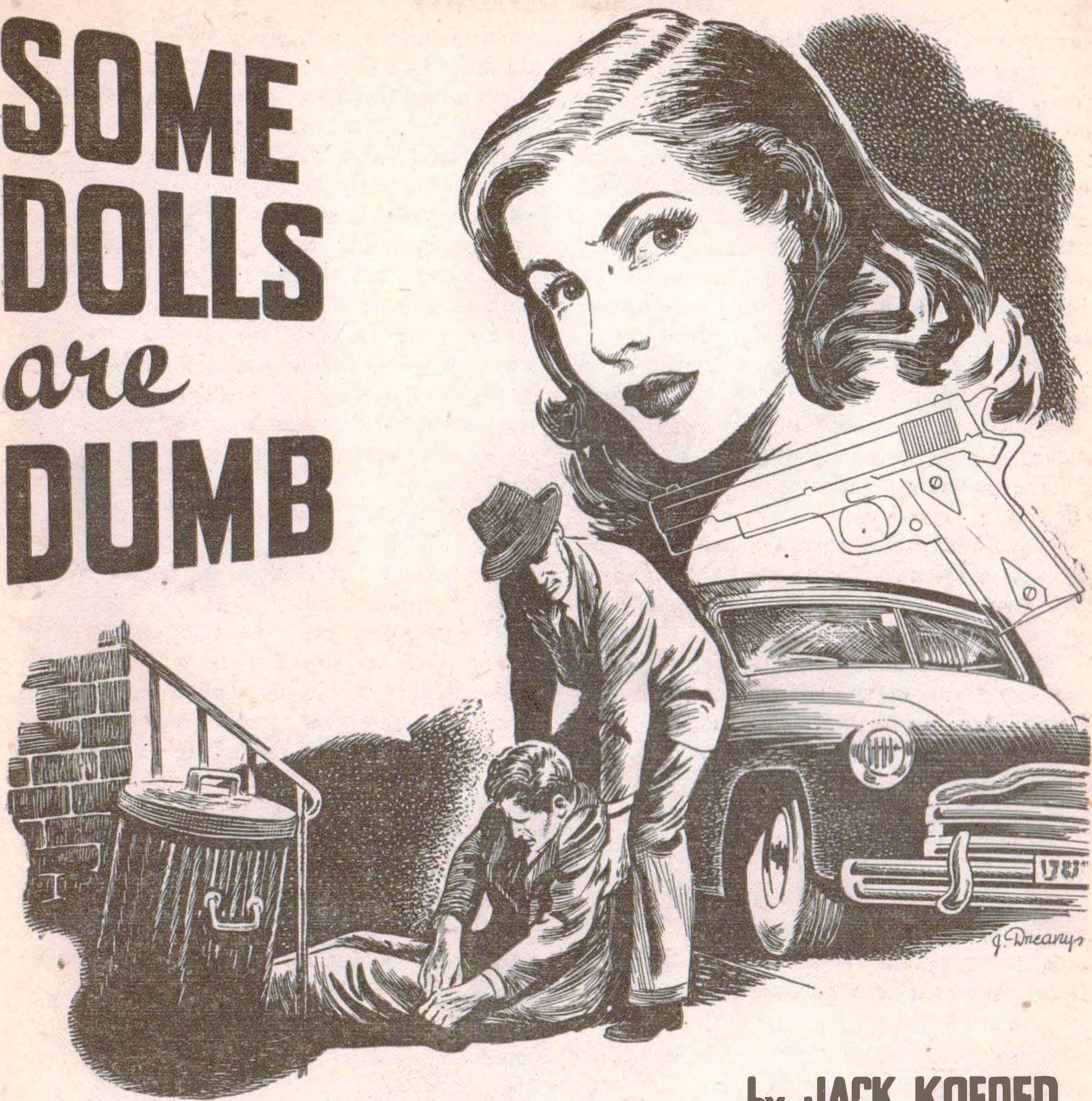
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SOME DOLLS *are* DUMB



by **JACK KOFOED**

SHE was a slim girl, with legs like Marlene Dietrich's and hair so black it seemed almost deep purple. In the dim light of the cocktail lounge, Maggy Wheeler was a picture to make a man's heart beat like a trip-hammer. She sat beside me on one of the chromium and red leather stools found wherever people with money gather to drink. The place was empty except for a martini-mixer at the other end of the bar.

When I was middleweight champion, they said I won as many fights out-thinking the other guys as I did out-punching them. But two hundred bouts do something to your mind. I wasn't smart any more. Just when it seemed I had the answer to a problem, it would slip away from me. Maybe that was why I was such a sucker for Maggy. She never made mistakes.

Maggy had been talking about Labe Cos-

Beautiful Maggy Wheeler Tried to Get Away With Murder

tigan before we fell silent. They had been married once, and he had given her a bad time. A small-time chiseler with the soul of a rat. That was Costigan. He was of no more use to the world than a member of the Comintern, but I couldn't get it through my head how Maggy could hate him with such acid bitterness.

"Joe," she said to me, "I've taken all I'm going to take from Labe. I'm full, 'way up to here. You've got to do something."

"What, for instance? I knocked a couple of his teeth out once, didn't I? What more do you want—murder?"

"Yes!" She said it coldly, and meant it as much as she ever meant anything in her life.

"Look, baby," I said, "you know I am allergic to electricity. Even the thought of the chair gives me a rash. Couldn't you think of an easier way?"

"No. I was married to the jerk once, remember? He ran me bowlegged, and now he's putting on a blackmail squeeze."

Labe had plenty on Maggy. What would you do in a spot like hers? Pay off until you're broke and have ulcers, beg, borrow, steal, and keep on paying? Or kill the guy? Maggy knew I wasn't the killing type, and being smart, she let the matter drop for a moment.

I HAD parked my car a few doors up the street while we sopped up our drinks. Maggy ordered another Scotch, and drank it too fast. That was a sign she was nervous. I didn't like her to get nervous, because no one could predict what she would do when the old nerves took over.

After a few minutes she said, "I left my lipstick on the front seat of the car."

"I'll get it for you." I started to rise.

"No. I want a sniff of fresh air. I'll be back in a minute."

That didn't ring true, because Maggy was not the kind to do anything herself if someone else would run her errands. She set down her empty glass, and walked toward the door with a slithering motion no other woman ever achieved. I thought of the song, "There's Nothing Like a Dame." There was nobody like Maggy.

But somehow or other, I had to break away. Being in love with her was like being on a perpetual drunk. You lost everything—ambition, self-respect, all but the feeling you couldn't get along without her.

I waited a couple of minutes. A blast of gunfire came from the street—five shots in quick succession. I tossed three bucks on the mahogany, and ran out. It was a cinch my girl had done the shooting.

There was a wet slap of rain in the air, and the sidewalk looked like glistening teak. I raced to the car. Maggy sat in the front seat, with the door open. My gun lay on the upholstery next to her. I picked it up. The barrel was hot.

I slammed the door shut. "Get this crate away from here. Somebody is likely to come around asking questions, and what answers have we got?"

She tramped on the starter. The engine caught, and we pulled away so fast the tires screeched. I told Maggy to slow down. She did.

"Costigan?" I asked.

"Who else? You're so yellow they ought to call you Little Buttercup. But I'm not. Labe got away, but next time I'll be luckier."

For once in my life I wasn't puzzled and fog-bound. Sharp moments come to everyone.

"Look," I said, "Costigan might be frightened enough to complain to the police, because plenty of people don't like him. In case he squawks, you've got to have an alibi." I looked at my wrist-watch. "It's ten to ten. Go to Grogan's bar. He keeps his clock fifteen minutes slow, so if there is a beef about selling after hours he can blame it on the ticker. Stick around. I'll stop in by eleven and pick you up."

I jumped out of the car as Maggy slowed down, and I walked away. Exactly at eleven I went to Grogan's. A detective named Anderson was talking with Maggy.

We knew each other. Knew each other? He had been a fighter when I was kingpin, and we had belted each other around in three of the roughest fights Madison Square Garden ever saw. The punching had never created any bad feeling between us. But Anderson was a stickler for duty. He would

run in his own father if he thought Pop had broken the law.

"Well, well, Joey," he said. "You're just the lad I want to see. An hour ago somebody called the station to say there had been a shooting, with Labe Costigan as the target. You kicked him around once, so I thought we better have a chat."

"You ought to know better, Pete," I told him. "I was a sharpshooter in the army. If I ever level down on Labe, you can bet a month's pay it won't be *attempted* murder. Frisk me. I'm clean as a whistle."

"Sure you are," the detective soothed, "but just the same, let's go down and talk with the old man."

Maggy said nothing. She might have come up with some defense for me, but she didn't. I began to wonder. If she ever did kill Labe Costigan, she might try to pin the blame on someone else, and where could she find a better candidate than me?

"You're wasting your time, Pete," I said.

"I'm loaded with time." Anderson yawned. "Let's go, huh?"

WE LEFT Maggy to finish her drink. She had parked my automobile a couple blocks away, because it had developed a flat tire. Anderson had a squad car waiting, and we used that. I wasn't worried. Not a soul had been in the street when I ran out, and nobody had shown up by the time we pulled away.

That's why Anderson's story about a telephoned report of the shooting bothered me. Who could have called the police? The finger pointed at Maggy, but even now I could not quite believe she would do a thing like that.

Anderson was right about plenty of time. They kept me waiting until next afternoon before the captain decided to talk to me. This was supposed to upset my nerves, which were all right. That is, they were until I began to think about Maggy, and then I really grew befuddled.

Captain Falkenberg was a glum man, with the long face of a collie and the sad eyes of a bloodhound. He had a habit of lolling back in his chair, cracking his knuckles while he asked questions. He asked a million.

"Look, Cap," I said, "this is your business, and a man has a right to run his business whatever way he wants. But I can't see why you're upset about somebody taking a shot at one of the biggest heels in New York. Nobody was hurt. Why the tears?"

The skipper cracked his knuckles again.

"I figure it's better to prevent a murder than solve one," he said. "The bad blood between you and Costigan shows like a careless lady's slip. Don't let the fact that we can't prove anything this time cheer you up. If Labe is hemstitched with bullets, we'll make a case against you, all right, and never forget it."

I knew they would, and that worried me. If Maggy tried once more, and hit the bull's eye, I would take the fall for her, and what a fall it would be!

"I didn't toss lead at Labe, and have no intention of trying to," I said. "That's the way it is, but you won't believe me."

"You can say that again," the captain snapped. "Beat it, and pray nothing happens to Costigan, because if it does we're going to burn a hole through the seat of your pants."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I flagged a cab and went to my apartment. Though I hadn't had any sleep, I did not feel tired. I lit a cigarette and phoned Maggy's place, but there was no answer.

I could hardly expect her to be in at that time of day, but just the same, a chill hit my spine. You never could be sure of what Maggy would be up to. Maybe a cup of coffee would straighten me out. I went into the kitchen—and lying there, with a puddle of blood clotted over the throw rug, was Labe Costigan!

I stood there shaking. The man was as dead as Judas Iscariot, and there was not a doubt in the world that Maggy had rubbed him out. There was no doubt in my mind, either, that she had arranged all details so an accusing finger would point straight at me.

I was like a sentry on outpost duty, cut off from his regiment, surrounded by enemies. I thought of the captain, leaning back in his chair, cracking his knuckles and grinning. He'd bust a gusset with happiness when he found this out.

I must get rid of the body. Standing there, feeling sick, was no help. Then I remembered Harry Harris, who lived in the next apartment. Harry had gone away for a couple of weeks, and left his key with me. If I could carry Costigan in there I would be safe until I figured what the next move would be.

There were two other apartments on the floor, and both occupants worked during the day. To make sure neither was home, I pushed their buzzers. No answer. The lobby door was curtained and locked. I went back to my place, and tied the rug around Costigan. It was thick and blood had not soaked through. I opened my door and Harris'. My flesh crawled when I took the dead man by the shoulders, pulled him into the other apartment, and locked him in. Still trembling, I came back and straightened things. I had no need to clean the kitchen. There was no sign murder had been committed there.

BACK in the living room, I sagged into a chair and lit a cigarette. I tried to think of some way out of the mess, but the more I mulled it over, the less I could see any opening in the trap. The Thinker! That's what they had called me and now, when more than at any other time in my life I needed to think clearly, I couldn't do it.

The silence was blasted into shreds by the ringing of the doorbell. I jumped with the shock of unexpected sound. It had to be Maggy.

I opened the door. Detective Pete Anderson was framed in the entrance, a half-smile on his thin lips.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "I thought I'd stop and ask a couple more questions."

Somehow I kept my voice under control.

"Even the captain admitted you had nothing on me. How long is this sort of thing going to keep up?"

"You've been around too long to get huffy. We have been friends for years, but I don't let friendship interfere with a job. What puzzles me is why you and Labe should be sore at each other over Maggy. You were glad to get her, and he was glad to get rid of her."

"Look." I said. "Costigan means noth-

ing to me. He could drop dead, and I wouldn't give him a second thought. It's a nice, bright day. Why don't you take a walk and get some sunshine?"

"Maybe a look around here would be better."

"There's nothing you would be interested in," I said. "If you have a search warrant, okay. If not, do me a favor and heat it."

The detective pried in his pocket for a cigar, brought it out, and with great deliberation chewed off the end.

"That's no way to talk. Joey," he said. "Cooperate. All I have to do is make a phone call, and wait till the boys bring a search warrant. You wouldn't make me go to all that trouble, would you?"

There was no use battling him, and I was about to say so when the doorbell jingled again.

"Sit still," said Anderson. "I'll get it."

He opened the door, and let Maggy in.

It should have been a shock to her, seeing Pete Anderson there, and not knowing I had been able to get the horror out of the kitchen. But either Maggy was a wonderful actress or the hardest woman in the world. She smiled and said hello.

"You're a great little guy for getting around, Pete," Maggy said. "What are you looking for, a kaffee klatch?"

"Your boy friend offered nothing but harsh words. He started yelling 'search warrant' so loud you could have heard him in Jersey City."

"Why didn't you knock him over the head with your blackjack? Then you could have had the place to yourself."

Anderson sighed and got heavily to his feet.

"Just so my visit shouldn't be a total loss, I'll take a look around and be on my way."

He went into the kitchen. Maggy took my hand, gripping it tightly. There was a strained look in her face now, and her breath came quickly. Anderson reappeared in a minute. He slapped on his hat.

"*Hasta mañana*," said Maggy Wheeler, and Pete banged the door as though he was mad right down to the soles of his feet.

We stood there for a moment saying nothing. The girl took out a compact, squinted

into the little mirror and began doing a repair job on her lips. She was waiting for me to say something, but by this time I had a tight enough hold on myself to outwait her.

It seemed impossible that she could have killed a man. You can't look at such a woman and believe anything like that, particularly when her blue-green eyes under sleepy lids are clear, and there is a little-girl droop to her mouth.

SHOOT a man in the back? Stand beside his body and watch him die? Maggy couldn't do it. But what was the use of kidding? She had done it, and I knew it as clearly as though I had seen her pull the trigger.

"It looks like you are a fast worker," she said. "Where did you stash Costigan?"

"In Harris'. How did you ever get Labe to come here with you?"

"Easy. The mugg gets up early. I went to his apartment at six o'clock this morning, just about the time sensible people are going to bed. Labe is so hungry for money he'll believe anything if you dangle lettuce in front of him. I told him you had a couple of grand hidden under the carpet. He tagged along like Mary's little lamb." Maggy's eyes lit as with a fine memory. "Nobody heard a thing, because I held a pillow over your gat, and if it's ever found, there won't be any fingerprints to pin the deal on me. I wore gloves."

"Where is the gun?"

She looked at me with those lazy eyes of hers. "Don't worry," she said. "We'll ditch it when we get rid of the body."

How could she talk so coldly? I thought of her soft and yielding in my arms, and of the murderess inside that wonderful body. I began to be afraid. Love dies hard, but mine was dying, shriveling like an autumn leaf in a bonfire.

"You've put me in a hell of a spot," I said. "If the police find out about Costigan, they'll have me dead to rights—and I mean dead."

Maggy's lips smiled, but her eyes did not.

"Of course they will," she said. "That's why you can't pull out. You must do exactly as I say."

I knew that as well as she did, and kept getting colder inside. I thought of the dead

man in the next apartment, and my flesh tingled at the thought of carrying him out, and driving through the night to whatever spot Maggy had picked for the climax to her killing.

"Give me the low-down, kid," I said. "You fixed it up for me to take the fall, didn't you?"

She smiled a Mona Lisa smile. "Sure. Last night when I shot off your gun in the car Labe wasn't anywhere around. I just wanted to stir things up, and I telephoned the police so they would have the old plat eye on you."

"Did you ever happen to think I might kill you for this?"

"You haven't the guts. Besides, if I stay alive you have better than an even chance. Nobody can be convicted of murder without a corpse. We can get rid of Labe, but you couldn't get rid of both of us. Do anything to me, and you buy a one-way ticket to the electric chair."

She had the answer all right. There wasn't anything for me to do. We just had to sit around and wait until nightfall.

The hours dragged. I chain-smoked cigarettes and wandered about restlessly. Nothing helped the slow motion of time. I wasn't a killer, but here I was as deep in the slime of a murder as the woman who had committed it. Maggy was neither bothered nor restless. She was even in the mood for loving, but it seemed to me her lips would taste of blood, and I couldn't stand it.

I tried to figure what I would tell the police if we were tripped. Motive? They figured I had plenty, what with taking Labe's girl, and giving him a thumping. Opportunity? A guy could always find that. The weapon? The pistol was registered as mine, and ballistics would show slugs from it had killed Costigan. Witnesses? If Maggy was implicated, she would swear to anything against me. What chance did I have? Not one in a million.

Maggy had worked out a plan. Harris' apartment was on the first floor, and its kitchen opened on an alley. When the coast was clear, I would drive the car back of the flat, and put Labe into it. Since rigor mortis would have set in, it would not be possible to

hide him in the trunk. We would place the body in the back seat, and cover it with blankets and empty suitcases.

INACTION was cutting me into shreds. Maggy urged me to take it easy. She had everything figured out. The chance of anything going wrong was one in a million.

"You're just an ex-pug," she said. "I know the answers—all of them. Do what I say, and in another hour you'll be as much in the clear as I am. I haven't missed a single trick." Her voice softened a little. "I'm not trying to railroad you, Joey. It's just that I think more of my skin than I do of yours."

That was sweet of her, wasn't it? I'll bet that just before she shot Labe Costigan she said, "This hurts me more than it does you."

It was nearly ten when we went into the hall, unlocked the Harris door and went in. We did not turn on the lights, and I stepped gingerly, for I was afraid of tripping over the body. While Maggy waited, I slipped into the alley, and around to where my automobile was parked. No one was in sight. Within a minute I had the car in the driveway.

"All right," said Maggy, her voice low and unexcited. "Let's step on it. If somebody shows up, this is something we can't laugh off." There could never have been another woman like her.

Handling Costigan wasn't difficult. He was small and scrawny, no more than one hundred and twenty pounds. It made me sick to touch him, but Maggy showed no concern, even though she had once promised to love, honor and obey this cadaver. Then we put the blankets and suitcases over him. A casual observer would think we were off on a vacation trip.

"I'll drive," Maggy said. "You're so nervous you'll probably run over the first cop you see. They don't make real men any more."

She pulled out of the alley with lights off, and flicked them on as we turned left into the street. Several cars were parked at the opposite curb, but not a living soul was in sight. The traffic light went red as we reached the corner, but Maggy raced through it.

"Take it easy," I cautioned. "Nobody will notice us if you don't break all the traffic

rules in the book."

"Don't worry so much," she answered.

"Why shouldn't I? If anybody takes a look under the blankets, I'll be the patsy, not you."

She turned and looked at me contemptuously.

I slid deeper into the cushions, feeling cold inside, and not being able to think at all. I couldn't kill her. I couldn't do anything but wait.

Maggy braked the car to a stop as another red light flared up in front of us. A police car pulled up beside us. A man leaped out, a service revolver in his hand, and over it I saw the face of Pete Anderson!

"Over to the curb," he said, "and don't make a sudden move. I'm a nervous guy, with most of the nerves in my trigger finger."

Maggy did as she was told. We got out, and stood under a street light. Anderson came toward us.

"Am I glad you're here!" my girl friend said in a tight voice. "Joe killed Costigan. You'll find Labe's body in the car, and the gun in the glove compartment. Joe made me go with him, and my life wouldn't have been worth a dime if you hadn't come along when you did."

"We just didn't *come* along," Anderson told her. "Even though I didn't find anything wrong in Joey's flat, I had a hunch, a great big hunch. So we staked out the place, and sure enough, the hunch was good."

He walked over to the car, pulled aside the blankets, turned very white and whistled long and low.

"You sure did a job this time, son," he said. "Call the office, Patterson," he added to his partner, "and stick around till the boys come. I'm sorry, Joe. When I knocked you down that night in the Garden, I never thought sometime I'd put the finger on you for murder. Maggy, you drive. I'll sit in the back with the boy."

Maggy followed instructions, and this time it didn't matter whether or not she went through red lights.

I was a dead man; just as dead as though the executioner had thrown the switch. There was no way out for me, no way on God's great green footstool. I couldn't see where Maggy had missed a thing.

HOW COULD a woman do this to a man, particularly to one who had held her in his arms and whispered of love? She was too smart to make mistakes. She'd had the finger pointed at me before the killing, pointed so straight and true that, when the murder occurred, I was already convicted in the eyes of the police.

Falkenburg was not on duty. Anderson had us booked and said, "Put 'em on ice until tomorrow. The captain would have my shield if I dealt him out of this round."

"Me, too?" Maggy asked. I looked at her—the lovely face, the slim straight figure, the Dietrich legs. "I didn't do anything. Joe would have killed me if I hadn't gone with him. Don't you understand that?"

"Sure, I understand," Anderson said, wiping a rim of sweat off his eyebrows. "But, sweetheart, you've been around long enough to know the score. You're a material witness. The courts won't let a material witness out on bail. We'll give you the best cell in the joint, and Cap Falkenburg will see you at eight in the morning."

"Why can't you get him here now?" Maggy asked. She smiled at Anderson, a warm, lovely smile.

Pete looked doubtful.

"This is Cap's canasta night, but—well, maybe he won't mind with a case like this. Put 'em on ice, Casey, until I see if the old man wants to come down."

I sat in a cell and waited until it must have been one o'clock; not thinking, just sitting. My brain felt the way it did the night Anderson knocked me down—fuzzy, staying in one place, a vacuum that wouldn't let me think. How could a dumb guy like me get out of a trap set by a doll, who hadn't made a single mistake?

Finally the turnkey took me up. Falkenberg was in his shirt sleeves, sad eyes fixed on the ceiling while he cracked his knuckles. Anderson held the shredded stump of a cigar in his mouth, and his eyes were heavy with sleep.

"We've finished with Maggy Wheeler, Joe," the captain said, "and there doesn't seem much more for you to add. Motive? You had enough. Ballistics shows the bullets taken from Costigan's head came from the

gun registered in your name. Our fingerprint men found his prints in your kitchen, where you said you found the body. Maggy told us you took a shot at Labe last night. I could add a few more incriminating bits, but the ones I've mentioned are enough to strap you in the hot seat."

I was listening with one-half of my mind, but the other half started coming to life. It was like that time Anderson had knocked me down in Madison Square Garden. When my knees hit the floor I couldn't see a thing. My brain stopped functioning. I was lost in a limitless fog. I had got up automatically, and Pete had hit me again. Queerly enough, that dissipated the fog and set me thinking.

When I found Labe Costigan's body, it was like the knockdown. It made me foggy, stopped me from thinking. Falkenberg's flat recital of the evidence he would use to send me to the chair was the second punch. I had been thinking all along that Maggy was too smart to make a mistake. Suddenly all the mistakes she had made became crystal clear.

I leaned forward in my chair, the sweat drying on my forehead. I talked at Pete, because he knew me, and would understand better.

"Remember when you flattened me in the Garden?" I asked. "I got up and knocked your bridgework out with four punches. Well, I can still throw a few."

Both men were watching me.

"First, I didn't shoot at anybody last night," I said. "All you have to do is check with Lopez, bartender at the Pelican Cocktail Lounge. I was at the bar when Maggy went out, and was still there when the shots were fired."

Anderson made a note in his little book.

"Maggy went to Labe's house to get him to come to my flat. He boarded with an old maid, who keeps the place locked up like Alcatraz. Costigan sleeps like a corpse under sod, so it's a cinch that when she rang the bell, Miss Bellows answered and woke Labe up. And they took a cab. They must have, because my car had a flat tire. It shouldn't be hard to check the taxi jockies."

FALKENBERG cracked his knuckles. "Okay," he said. "But all I can see is

that this only ties Maggy in with you as an accessory. You're just as deep as you ever were."

"Uh-uh," I said. "Have you got the autopsy report there?"

Falkenberg picked it up. "Sure, but I didn't have to read it."

"You'd better," I said. "What does it say was the estimated time of Costigan's death?"

The captain looked at the paper. "Between seven and nine in the morning."

"And where was I then?"

For a moment Falkenberg hesitated. Then

he burst into a laugh. "Why, we had you in the cooler, here in the station! You couldn't have killed Labe Costigan. Okay, Joe, beat it. But"—he must have seen me smiling—"don't feel so cocky. I would have found that out myself as soon as I had time to look at the autopsy report."

"Sure you would," said Anderson. He rose, yawned, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, kid. You're still on the ball. But stay smart and keep away from women. Next time you may not get a doll as dumb as Maggy."



Recent Court Rulings

By JOSEPH C. STACEY

If you put a nickel into a slot machine and fail to get any money back, you have *not* gambled.—*Justice G. P. Reddell, Texas City, Texas.*

*

When a man, with a pretty wife, refuses to hold her on his lap, that's grounds for divorce.—*Superior Judge Frank G. Swain, Chicago.*

*

A married woman is not responsible for a misdemeanor while acting on the command of her husband.—*Appellate Court of Los Angeles.*

*

A person cannot be legally arrested for "drunken driving" if and when that driving is done on private property.—*Traffic Judge George Murphy, Detroit.*

*

It is definitely illegal, constituting a "breach of orderly language," to belittle a woman's housekeeping.—*Judge Lyman K. Clark, Ayers, Massachusetts.*

*

There is no law to compel prompt service, or any service at all, for that matter, in a restaurant, cafe, or a lunchroom.—*Georgia State Court of Appeals.*

*

It is perfectly legal for a woman to search her husband's pockets.—*New Mexico State Court of Appeals.*

*

An engagement ring becomes a woman's property only *after* marriage. *Before* marriage, it is a symbol of troth—and if the troth is broken, the ring must be returned to the donor.—*Superior Judge Leo Freund, Los Angeles.*

*Fortune hunter
Blackmount se-
lects Hawaii as
an ideal—*



She was cringing
in the corner

LOCALE for MURDER

ALL THROUGH the ceremony of his marriage, Charles Blackmount was rehearsing his plan for killing Carol Evans who stood next to him reciting her vows of matrimony. He hadn't left out a detail and now as he slipped the wedding ring on her finger and the priest pronounced them man and wife, he knew it would only be a matter of time.

They had first met at a cocktail party in Brentwood. Charles, though lacking in money, was not lacking in friends. Young, handsome, he traveled in a wealthy circle. Carol Evans, widowed, middle-aged, and a lingering lust for affection after her husband's death, was deeply enhanced by Charles' charm.

Peter Evans left well over a quarter-of-a-million dollars to Carol when he died. It was when Charles learned this that a plan began scheming in his mind. He proposed marriage, knowing the exact manner he would do away with her and inherit the money.

Friends waited outside as they came out of the church. Carol beaming happily at

the good fortune of having such a young wonderful husband. Charles, forcing a smile appearing to be happy over his newly acquired bride.

It had taken him nearly a month to complete his plan. A trip to Mexico, hours at the library going through medical books, and then making the decision as to the locale of the murder. What would be a better place than Hawaii? Ideal for a honeymoon and a perfectly natural place for his plan. It took only the suggestion of spending the first two weeks of their marriage in Hawaii and Carol was thrilled.

Charles scooped his quarter-of-a-million dollars into his arms and carried her to the waiting Cadillac she had bought him two weeks previous. Well-wishers waved good-bye as he put the car in gear and headed for Highway 101 to San Francisco.

"Oh, Charles, I never knew I could be so happy," Carol sighed, stretching her arms into the open breeze and letting the wind blow through her hair. "If Hawaii is all they say it is, I won't care if I ever come back."

By ROBERT L. JOHNSTONE

CHARLES smiled to himself. He knew the truth in that statement. He knew she would never come back, alive. Her death would appear as an accident. He thought of other ways, but accidental death is always less conspicuous. Less investigation, less chance of getting caught in an interrogation. A medical doctor, maybe a coroner's inquest, that would be all. There wouldn't be any reason for homicide being called in.

They arrived in San Francisco that night and boarded the *Lurline* the next morning. She was a beautiful ship and Charles began thinking of the trips he would be making after this one. He relished the idea of living in luxury. To have his own parties such as the ones he had attended and could never retaliate because of the dismal little apartment he lived in. Yes, it was going to be all changed now.

Once the ship left San Francisco, Charles stayed pretty much in cabin and read. It made the time go faster. He had made the trip once before while he was in the army. He knew how boring it was to look at the water for five days. He had only been in Hawaii two days before he was shipped out, but it was the scare he got while he was there that lay in the back of his mind when he planned to kill Carol.

It was the second night out that Carol came into the cabin and said, "Darling, you haven't told me where we're going to stay when we get there. Did you make any arrangements in 'Frisco?"

In his suave, affectionate manner he said, "I thought it would be nice to get away from people. Most of the tourists stay at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki." He made a wry face. "Too commercialized. I thought, since it's our honeymoon, it would be nice to spend it alone on the other side of the island. There's a little town over there called Kailua. A wonderful spot to be alone. We can rent a place down by the water."

Carol kissed him tenderly on the cheek. Charles thought of everything. He wanted to be alone with her. For reasons other than she thought. It had to be an out-of-the-way place. It was Kailua where he nearly

met the similar fate he had in mind for her. Heavy foliage and plenty of shade. Preferably a damp place the medical book he had pored over said.

The boat pulled past Aloha Tower and tied up at its moorings. The usual fanfare of Hula Girls and Hawaiian chants, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, boarded the boat and Charles waited in bored repose as Carol watched with all the jubilation of a child at her first circus. Three hours later, they were in a taxi climbing the Pali and heading for the other side of the island.

In Kailua, they stopped at four rental agencies before Charles found the place he was looking for. It was a large house of wooden framework and siding situated deep in the green foliage Hawaii is noted for. When Carol complained about the dark, dampness of the house, Charles pointed out the advantage of being located right on the beach.

He slipped his arm around her and held her close. She smiled.

Everything was working according to plan. There was only one more step to be taken now and that would be the end. He thought of burying her and decided it best to ship the body back to the States. He supposed her sister would want it that way. It was a minor thing anyway.

IT WAS two days later that he knew he was ready. He had been down on the beach sunning himself while Carol was in the house fixing a bite of lunch. He heard a loud shrill scream from the house and ran into the kitchen shouting, "Carol! What is it?"

She was cringing in the corner too stupefied to speak. Her face was a sickly pallor as she pointed a shaky finger toward the wall beyond the stove. There it was! The thing he had been waiting to see. The key to a quarter-of-a-million dollars.

He watched its small segmented tail thrusting about as it tried to climb the wall, the elongated and hairy legs feeling along the plaster. There was no doubt about it. It was a scorpion and carried enough lethal toxin in its body to kill a person, quite by

accident if it fell on you during the night, when you were asleep.

QUICKLY, he picked up a newspaper and swatted it from the wall. He watched its legs with fascination as they kicked and then became quite still. "It won't harm you now," he assured Carol, still too frightened to move. Now he was ready, the place was infested.

It was after midnight when he was sure she was asleep that he got up and went into the other room. He opened his luggage and took out a hypodermic needle along with a vial of venom. It was the scorpion venom he had traveled to Mexico to get two weeks before his wedding. He filled the hypodermic and returned to the bedroom.

Without hesitation, he plunged the needle into her arm and stifled her screams with his hand. He let her struggle. The medical book said excitement would make the heart pump faster. It was a quicker death that way.

He straightened the sheets and laid her out as though she had been asleep. He put the swollen, infected arm on top of the blanket, making sure it was exposed.

In the morning, Dr. Vance came in answer to Charles' call. After making a routine examination, he frowned and said, "I'm afraid we'll have to perform an autopsy to determine the cause of death."

"Look at her arm," Charles shrieked, "It's a damn scorpion. The place is infested with them."

Dr. Vance glanced at Carol's arm. "It appears that she has been poisoned. I'll still have to perform an autopsy for my report."

After they took Carol's body away, Charles packed his clothes and moved back

across the island. Red tape. Autopsy. Just more routine to delay him getting out of the place. He knew what they would find. There wasn't a chance of his plan falling through. Vance never suspected him. He just wanted to find the type of poison. As soon as the autopsy was performed, he would make arrangements for shipping her body back and then leave by plane for home.

It was around six that night that he got a call from Dr. Vance. "Mr. Blackmount, you were quite right about the type of poison. It was scorpion poisoning. Your wife must have died immediately.

A smile of smug satisfaction broke out on Charles' face. It had worked. He thanked the doctor and walked out of the phone booth. He was met by a man near the door. He introduced himself by presenting his credentials and saying, "I'm Lieutenant Shaner of Homicide. You better get your hat and coat. I'm taking you in for the murder of your wife."

"But you must be mad," Charles gasped. "She died of scorpion poisoning. I just talked to the doctor who performed the autopsy. Call him yourself."

It was Dr. Vance who called us in on the case. Your wife died of scorpion poisoning. But it was poison you injected in her body."

"You're utterly mad," Charles protested. "There are a million of the things down here."

The Lieutenant shook his head in agreement. "You are right. We do have plenty of them but you overlooked one thing, Mr. Blackmount. There isn't a poison insect in all of Hawaii. You see it takes iron in the soil to make an insect toxic. That's one of the things Hawaii lacks, iron in the soil."



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THE GOLDEN FIX

CHAPTER I

SHAKE-UP

JOHN WILLARD didn't look any different. He saw himself in the glass doors as they left the building, and he still looked tall and big-shouldered and a bit clumsy. Like waking up on a birthday morning, he thought, and finding you haven't changed. He wore a suit now instead of a uniform, but basically—no different.

Harry Stein, his new lieutenant, was with him. They went down the marble steps to where one of the Department's plain gray Fords waited.

Stein said, "I hope this afternoon Master-son gives us an argument. I hope he gives us a hard time."

Willard laughed. "Feeling tough?"

"No. Just righteous. Righteous as hell."

That about said it. They all felt that way now. It was quite a feeling to know that these days the Department was maybe even as much as eighty per cent righteous. It had been a shake-up all right; it had raised eyebrows and it had unseated the mighty. A reform grand jury had got hot on the mayor's tail. The state party boss had quickly wangled a Federal appointment for the mayor, saving his face—and his tail, too. The new mayor had appointed Colonel Stanhope Police Commissioner. Stanhope had put every dick in the department back into

uniform—those who didn't quit. Surprise, surprise, surprise.

Willard still remembered that day he was called in from his beat. "You were high man last lieutenant's exam," Stanhope said, "and everybody says you're an honest cop. Hope you are."

After that he was Captain of Detectives John X. Willard.

And was he an honest cop? Was he a one hundred per cent fourteen carat virgin honest cop? There was the trouble. There had been a time, just one time—

"How's the wife?" said Stein. Stein was driving.

"She's fine. She's happy. She said this morning we never had it so good. She's right."

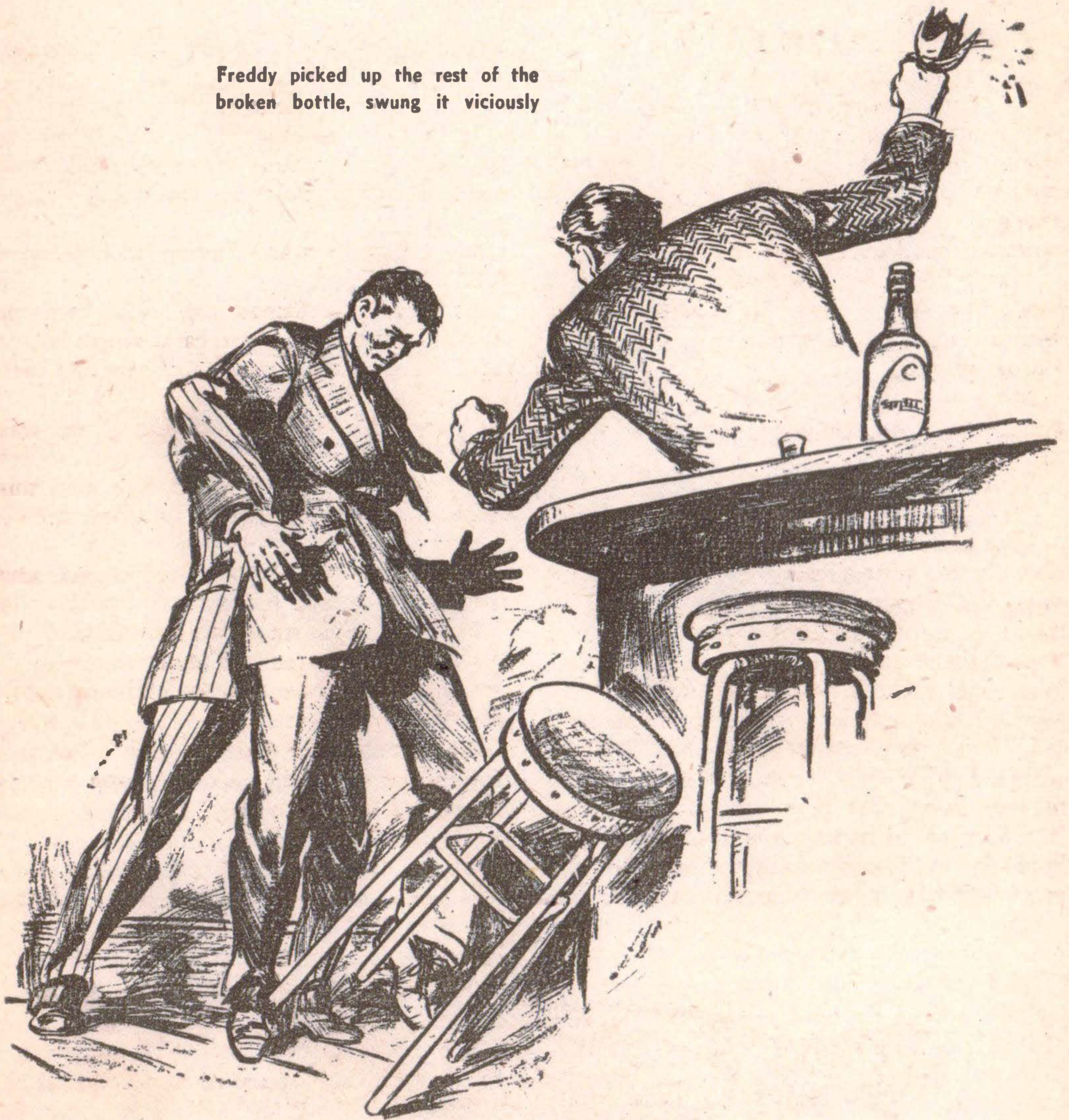
He thought of June, looking ahead, and grinning to himself just a little. He thought of her small, trim stance and the shiny darkness of her hair and the moist darkness of her eyes. She was as fragile as he was not—only that was camouflage. She was really indestructible. She'd had to be to last all those years when they had lived on a cop's salary, and a cop's salary alone.

HE WOULD see her this evening. They had a date to be foolish and spend



An Exciting Novelet by WALT SHELDON

Freddy picked up the rest of the broken bottle, swung it viciously



Maybe John Willard did take a bribe once . . . but that didn't stop him from moving in on racketeers who asked for trouble

twenty or thirty bucks they couldn't really afford. That would be kind of a gesture.

Around Willard now were the clean open streets and the date palms on the boulevard, and the newly sanded buildings and the benches with bright advertising at the bus stops. The salt breeze from the Pacific had already skimmed away the early fog. Ocean was his town. He had been born here—one of the few who hadn't come from Iowa or Pennsylvania or Texas—and he'd played in its streets as a kid and walked them as a man. Really walked them. A foot cop gets to know all the odd cracks in the sidewalks.

He didn't like to see his town dirty. He didn't like the idea of the crums making a living on its streets, the crums that were still around, and that he had learned about this morning.

It annoyed him a little, too, that the information had come from a stoolie. Marcus Jackson, the stoolie's name had been, and Willard remembered how he had bounced into the office as though he owned it, leaned way back in the chair, and waved foul cigar smoke all over the room. A little beady-eyed man, Jackson, with an over-eager way of shoving his head and neck forward out of his collar.

"I got a list, Captain," Jackson had said. "Every book and bank and slot machine and floating game still running."

Willard had taken the list and said, "What's your angle?"

Jackson had shrugged. "Some time maybe when I need friends, the Police Department is friendly, okay?"

Okay. That was the way you did it. You didn't pick the crum up by the seat and collar and Spanish-walk him out of the joint. You said okay. You played ball. You scratched his back and he scratched yours. You never really got away from that.

"Of course you understand you shouldn't let nobody know where you got this list," Jackson had said. "Not that I think the syndicate would really get tough any more. They're washed up here now. They're just keeping these small-time operators going kind of to have their foot in the door in case things change. Just the same I wouldn't want my name to be mentioned."

Willard had smiled and had said he wouldn't mention it. Then, when Jackson had left, he had called Stein and showed him the list, and it had been Stein's idea to go right to the top instead of picking up all the small fry one by one.

"Nick Masterson's still the syndicate's man here," Stein had said, "even if he runs just a club and no gambling. He's the one to see."

Now the car pulled into the big parking area that overlooked the beach and stopped right by the awninged entrance to Masterson's Club Caribe. Willard and Stein got out. As they started to go in a battered Plymouth, ten years old, pulled up behind them. A gray, grinning head looked out.

"Hello, Captain. Hello, Lieutenant. What's up?"

Willard and Stein traded looks. Then Willard said to the gray-head, "All right; Emmett, come along."

"You tail us down here?" asked Stein.

Emmett Cotten, getting out of the car, nodded. "I know when something's happening. I can smell it."

Cotten was the police reporter for the *Ocean Journal*. He remembered when the *Journal* had been a weekly, and the Detective Bureau consisted of a room and a desk. He was an odd, lonely, pixyish little man, always smiling or grinning, but somehow never quite friendly. No one ever felt he was being friendly.

That could have been because he worked for the *Journal*, and no one could really tell about the *Journal* either. The sheet seemed to support the shake-up and the new administration, but also seemed to be looking for a slip, just one little slip, so the staff could say, "You see? We told you so. The new bunch of crooks in office is just as bad as the old."

The three of them walked into the bar of the club. The big dining room with the dance floor and bandstand was quiet and empty now. So was the room beyond the bar where the gaming tables had once been. A white-coated bartender with a sour face was busy ignoring the well-dressed customers. Tweed jackets and talk of motor cruisers and investments and capital gains and trips to Mexico.

STEIN looked at Willard sideward. "Do we drink on duty?"

"Why not?" Willard smiled.

He ordered three Bourbons. He looked around and didn't see Masterson and supposed the man would be in his office, which was on the other side of the gaming room.

"Bascombe Gay used to come to this joint a lot," said Cotten quietly. He was twirling his shot glass on the bar, looking into it, and trying to be casual.

Willard got it, all right. Bascombe Gay had been Captain of Detectives before him. Bascombe Gay had come here, doubtless, to collect. Willard said, "This is strictly a social call today, Emmett."

"Uh-huh." The little gray reporter kept twirling the glass. "I would like to believe that."

"You'll have to believe it. I'm not going to try to prove it to you. I'm talking to Masterson alone. You and Harry can stay at the bar here."

Cotten looked at him and smiled a little. It was hard to tell whether there was a touch of sarcasm in that smile or not.

Stein touched Willard's arm. "You're sure it's okay? Going in there alone, John?"

Willard laughed and said, "Be your age, Harry."

He left the bar and sauntered on through the empty gaming room. Nick Masterson's office door was open and the man was in there behind his desk. Willard recognized the slim, boyish face and the well-kept crew cut. A crew cut like that and you had to go to the barber every day. Correction. If you were Nick Masterson, the barber came to you.

Nick got up when he saw Willard coming. "Well, well, our new captain. Congratulations, John, congratulations. Come on in." He crossed the room with his hand extended.

"Hello, Nick," said Willard, and then he saw who else was in the room.

The first man he saw was Freddy Took. Freddy had sometimes worked as a bouncer and general trouble shooter when the tables had been running. Freddy was huge and raw-boned and his drape obviously was tailor made, but still didn't seem to fit. His face looked like one of the stone faces on Easter Island. His eyes were razor nicks.

The other man was Willard's predecessor, the ex-Captain of Detectives, Bascombe Gay.

"Small world, huh?" said Willard and looked at Gay.

Gay said, "How's the crusader?" He grinned. He had a broad chest and a big belly and one of those fragile complexions with pursed, infantile lips. He had blue eyes, bright as an alcohol flame. His dimple showed when he smiled.

"Aren't you wasting your time around here these days, Bascombe?" asked Willard.

"Mr. Gay works for the Club Caribe now," said Masterson. "Special public relations counsel."

Willard said, "Oh, brother!" Public relations, was it? Well, maybe so. Gay still had contacts around. He had ropes and he knew them. But his working for Masterson meant one thing—the syndicate didn't intend just to fold up their crap tables and silently steal away.

Masterson said, "Sit down, John."

Willard shook his head. "I won't take long. I can say what I have to say in three words. Clean it up, Nick. I'll give you the whole week-end to clean it up."

"Clean what up?" Masterson looked surprised. Innocent. Close to him now, Willard could see the wrinkles around the eyes and the hard sagging of the cheeks that made his face look not so boyish any more.

"The small-time stuff," said Willard. "The operations still left. By Monday I don't want a bookie or a numbers runner or a stray hooker left in Ocean."

"Now, John," said Masterson. "I just run a bar and night club here. I'm not a private vice squad. Your imagination's working overtime, isn't it?"

Willard shook his head again. "I have a list, Nick. All the names and addresses on a list. I can go out and round them up, and then it'll cost a lot of lawyer's fees. Thought I'd save you the trouble."

MASTERSON ran his palm over his crew cut and brushed lint from his lapel. A cover-up gesture. Willard didn't catch the expression on his face that way. Masterson said, "You must have worked hard, making a list like that."

"It took time." Willard tried to say it casually, but he wasn't so sure he succeeded. It seemed to him that Masterson gave him a quick, sharp look. "Anyway, I want the boys to stop operating after Monday. You understand?"

Masterson went behind his desk again and sat down. "Now just supposing, John—this is hypothetical, you understand—just supposing I did have control over this thing. Suppose I could stop it and didn't. What then?"

"Does the Club Caribe make a profit?"

"It does all right."

"Be a shame then if all its licenses—retail, food, liquor and everything—suddenly got revoked, wouldn't it?"

"You couldn't do it."

"You know damn well I could, Nick. You know damn well there are so many ordinances that we'd find something."

Masterson looked at Freddy Took and Freddy Took didn't change expression. Then the night club owner looked at Gay, and Gay smiled a little. Masterson looked at Willard again. He said, "You know I wasn't exactly prepared for your call today."

"You weren't supposed to be."

"I mean if I could have had time to check with the—uh—stockholders, I might be able to make some arrangements with you."

Willard stared back blankly. He didn't want Masterson to see how he felt, and know of the memory that had suddenly come to him. This was the fix Masterson was talking about, the syndicate's big secret weapon, the fix. And there had been a time—one time—

CHAPTER II

ROOKIE'S MISTAKE



NEARLY two years ago that had been. On a west side beat, Patrolman John X. Willard had been taking the place of an officer who had just been made sergeant. Willard had known all about the place behind Loski's smart bowling alley, and

that it wasn't to be touched. Nobody had come right up to him and said, "Lay off Loski's—they're paying plenty to be left alone." It had just assumed that he would know, and of course he had.

It was assumed, too, that the new man on the beat would get a little present from Loski. A sign-on bonus. And it was generally supposed throughout the Department that John X. Willard, Johnny Bates and Honest John, wouldn't accept this. Some had grinned, some shaken their heads sadly.

Willard himself had had no intention of taking anything that day. He had kept telling himself that all afternoon as he started covering the beat. A raw, slightly chilly afternoon it was, almost Christmas, and a gray cloud over the city and the pale sun trying to seep through.

As he had walked toward Loski's he kept thinking about things at home. Seventy bucks rent coming up, and he hadn't had seventy bucks. He owed the Home Supermarket fourteen dollars. He was paying eight dollars a month on a small loan and the payment was due. His furniture installment had to be mailed on the twenty-first. He owed the doctor and he owed the dentist and he owed just about everybody, and June wanted a full-length mirror for Christmas.

He was going to put nickel candy bars under their table-size Christmas tree and make a big joke about it, so Christmas morning they could sit there and laugh and laugh and laugh.

So he'd walked along that day and thought of himself and the city. He'd come back from four years in the Shore Police to find the city what it was. You could do most anything in Ocean. You could make a bet or run a book. You could find a woman any hour of the day or night. You could batter the drag, shake fruit, bush parole, work the badger, bunk the dago or strip at high noon in the window of Benning's Department Store at the corner of Third and Windham. If you had the price of a fix, you could.

It was a right town and everything was lovely. And it crossed Willard's mind many times that he ought to play the game, that the others were getting theirs and that he ought to get his, too. It didn't really seem

that it would make much difference in the price of eggs one way or the other.

Why didn't he take his, then? He didn't know exactly. Not so he could put it into words and have it make sense. Maybe he liked the way June looked at him the way he was. Maybe he liked the way he could look at himself in the mirror when he shaved.

No, he wasn't going to take anything, not even a harmless little present that afternoon. He couldn't close Loski's book. He couldn't walk in there all my himself and smash the board and yank out the racing wires, but just the same he wasn't going to take anything.

Loski looked like a toad and smelled of shaving lotion. He had said to Willard, "You'll get along on this beat. This is a good beat for you. Let's start things off right."

He had handed Willard a hundred bucks—ten Alexander Hamiltons with a paper band around the middle to hold them together. There had been a small printed gold edge on the paper band. That had meant it was syndicate money. You got a sheaf of money with that gold band, and you had no doubt where it came from, or what it was for.

Willard had taken it.

He had bought June the full-length mirror for thirteen dollars and ninety-five cents and he told her it came from overtime. He dribbled the rest, little by little, into the checking account. And this was the thing in his craw now as he faced the Club Caribe owner.

To Masterson now he said, "I don't make arrangements. Get that in your head, Nick, I don't make arrangements." He was going to say that he never had, but caught himself in time.

MASTERSON'S eyes got hard. He looked a little weary. "John, there are a couple of mistaken ideas going around these days. One is that nobody tries rough stuff any more to protect his interests. Another is that cops are immune to all kinds of diseases. Fractures of the bone and lead poisoning and things like that."

"Can it, sonny." Willard grinned. "You wouldn't try it."

"No?" He glanced at Took and Gay again.

"Not if you were smart, you wouldn't."

"Maybe I'm not smart. Maybe I'm just ready to do the only thing that's left to do."

Willard looked at his watch. "It's late and I've got a date with my wife. Good-by."

Masterson didn't say anything.

Willard waved his hand easily and walked out.

Stein and little Emmett Cotten looked up when he came into the bar again. They looked at him with blank and silent questions in their eyes.

Willard said, "I don't know. We'll see what happens Monday."

"Or over the week-end," said Cotten, and finished his drink.

That night June looked wonderful. She had a new gabardine suit for the occasion. It was black, like her hair and eyes. "You look swell, Mrs. Copper," said Willard.

"Mrs. Captain," she corrected, laughing, her eyes glowing. "I have to keep up appearances now."

They went to Paul's. Paul's was a small place with just a few little rooms and just a few tables in each room. Never more than three or four things on the menu. Dinner for one was seven-fifty, whether you ordered the long French name or scrambled eggs. Willard ordered by pointing to the menu and told the waiter to pick out the wine himself.

Classical music came from a speaker. The candle on the table flickered evenly. Across the candle he saw June's face, dreamy and detached, her eyes just slightly moist with pleasure, and a little effortless smile on her lips. Their feet touched under the table and they both laughed.

"Is it all real?" said June. "Is it all really happening?"

"Sure. You bet."

"Will it stay real?"

"No reason why it shouldn't. Why shouldn't it?"

"I don't know." She frowned a little. "I keep thinking—well, if things change again, or get like they were, if you had to play along with somebody, for instance, and decided that you didn't want to do it that way—"

He laughed and patted her hand. "They can't kick the reform administration out now. Not unless it turns out that Stanhope really used to belong to the Capone outfit, or something."

"But that's it, in a way."

"That's what?"

"That's the sort of thing you never know about. You never really know what someone's done in the past, or when it's going to come out and spoil things."

Willard just laughed, and the waiter came then and he didn't have to say anything. That was lucky. June would have noticed something funny about his voice if he had said anything. She was sharp that way. Of course her remark didn't mean anything. She was just talking about things in general—or was she? Did she know about that mirror and those bank deposits, did she really know? Was she just trying to get him to tell her on his own?

He was tempted for a moment to do just that. Get it off his chest. But that would be admitting that it was important enough to get off his chest, and it wouldn't really stop it from bothering him. No, the only answer was to forget it, and get on with the job.

The food and wine were wonderful, and that helped him to forget it for a while. They laughed and talked and had a marvelous time. June didn't get serious again.

THEN, as they came out of Paul's, and waited at the curb for a taxi, Willard looked down the street and saw a dented, ten-year-old black Plymouth sedan.

"That's funny," he said.

"What?"

He pointed to it. "Emmett Cotten's car. Did you see him inside?"

"No."

"Maybe he's on a story or something around here. Only he doesn't work the night shift."

"Here's our taxi," said June.

They went to a hotel roof garden where a name band was playing. They drank and danced and felt like a couple of kids again. Maybe that's what they really were, Willard thought—kids, babes-in-the-woods, too

soft and wet behind the ears to fit into a tough and clever world.

Near midnight he looked up from the table and saw ex-Captain of Detectives Bascombe Gay standing there, smiling down at them.

"Hello, Gay," he said. "This is a legitimate joint. How did you get in?" He'd had a few drinks, or he wouldn't have bothered to wisecrack.

Gay just kept smiling, showing his dimple. "I dropped around," he said, "just to take in the band." He glanced at the empty chair, but Willard didn't invite him to sit down. "Matter of fact, I'm glad I ran into you, John. Nick said if I happened to run into you, I should give you a message."

June, sitting across from Willard, was switching her eyes back and forth between the two men.

"What is it, Gay?" said Willard. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Nick just wanted you to know he'd been in touch with the stockholders and he'd got some instructions."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Gay chuckled. His eyes were bright. "Nick figured before the evening was over you'd have a pretty good idea what it means."

"Gay, I don't know what you're talking about, and you're blocking my view. I'd like to watch the orchestra. How would you like to go have a drink—on yourself?"

"You're a tough man, aren't you, John? A big captain of detectives and a tough man. I ran into lots of tough men when I was a cop. You know something? No tough man is so smart."

"Go away, Gay. Beat it."

Gay's smile seemed frozen on his face. Willard realized now that Gay had been drinking, too, more than just a few. He could see the slight flush on his baby-smooth cheeks. He looked around, saw the people at their tables, saw the orchestra shuffling back on to the stand. "This wouldn't be a good place to have trouble, Gay. It wouldn't be nice."

Gay looked at June. "You're a lovely-looking dame, Mrs. Willard. I hope your husband gets smart pretty soon. A lovely-looking dame like you deserves a smart guy to

take care of her."

Willard knew that the thing which became hot and white in his skull then was primitive. He knew that perhaps Gay was right, and that perhaps he wasn't really so smart. He couldn't quite help himself. He hadn't liked Gay's words, his tone—he hadn't even liked him looking down at June like that.

He got up, stepped around the table, and swung at Gay. Gay blocked the blow, caught it, and tied him up. He pressed his bulk into Willard. The two of them staggered, Willard going backward. That crazy smile was still on Gay's face. He pushed Willard then, and as they broke apart Willard fell back into the table.

The table rocked, glasses and silverware and a vase of artificial flowers crashed to the floor. Willard got ice water down his back. Gay came at him, and he lifted his feet and caught Gay in the chest. Gay stumbled back. Willard swung from the table, following him.

IT WAS stopped, then. There were men all around them, most of them waiters, and there was a flood of talk, and gestures. Two men held Willard by the arms, but it wasn't necessary by that time. He had cooled down.

Something bright flashed for an instant. Willard swore. A picture. What a devil of a picture for him to be in! Stanhope would not be happy.

And then he was sitting down again and everybody all around the room was staring at him, and Gay was being hustled off to another part of the room, and the men with him were still talking and gesturing. The orchestra had started to play. A few people had started to dance again. Willard saw the manager, over by the bandstand, glaring at him, and he knew the manager hadn't asked him to leave simply because he was a captain of detectives.

He looked at June and said, "Sorry."

She said, "Let's get out of here."

"All right."

They started to rise. A little gray shadow moved in alongside of Willard and he looked down and saw Emmett Cotten.

Emmett wore the grin of a thousand wrin-

kles. "Some hassel, Captain," he said.

Willard said, "What are you doing, Emmett, following me?"

Emmett said, "Sure. I got a picture, too. That dame that takes pictures at the table. I grabbed the camera right out of her hand."

"Scoop, the demon reporter," Willard said. "You ought to get a medal."

"The bonus'll do. That'll make a lovely picture, you standing there all messed up, those guys holding your arms."

"You'll print it, eh?"

"Why not?"

June was touching his arm, but he scarcely felt it. He said, "I'll tell you why not. We're all trying to do a job on this sick, crooked town, and we need all the cooperation we can get. A thing like that can make it look bad, and you know damn well there was nothing bad about it. It was just one of those things."

Emmett stared back at him for a moment and then said, "You know, Captain, if I were a hundred per cent convinced about you I'd pull that negative right now. But I'm not a hundred per cent convinced."

June said, "Please, John—come on, now."

Her voice broke through to him. He turned away from Emmett Cotten, took her arm, and led her out of there.

Later, in bed, he heard June stir and then prop herself up on her elbow. He opened his eyes. There was enough moonlight so that he could see her face. She was looking at him intently.

He said, "What is it, Mrs. Copper?"

"John, do you have—well, anything you want to tell me?"

"Go to sleep, Mrs. Copper."

"You'll feel better, John. You'll feel better if you get whatever it is out of your system."

"There's nothing. Forget it. Go to sleep."

She kept looking at him. "Those days when we could hardly live on a cop's salary, John. When we ate crackers and canned beans to keep the weekly food bill down. When we owed everybody. Do you know something? I was happy then, John. I was happy just being with you because I believed in you, and you were strong."

"For God's sake, go to sleep and stop

needling me, will you?" He almost shouted it.

"All right, John," she said quietly.

He rolled over and closed his eyes. The alarm clock made a hollow ticking in the room. He could barely hear June's soft, sharp breathing. He drifted off to sleep, and in the halfway stage he thought surely he would dream, but he didn't.

CHAPTER III

WALLED IN



A RINGING, hard and raucous, woke Willard.

He thought at first it was the alarm clock, then when he blinked a few times he realized it was the telephone. He picked it up.

"Hello." His voice was too deep and too mushy.

"Cap'n Willard?"

"Yeah."

"This is Sergeant Valdez, on the desk. Inspector Welch said I should call you."

"Welch? He's not on the graveyard shift. He's on Homicide."

"Yes, sir, that's it. There's been a homicide. Welch told me to call you on it."

"What for? He can handle it."

"I don't know, sir. I just know he said to call you. He's out looking at the scatter now. Here—I got the address."

Willard scribbled it down. Waterfront, near the amusement section, with the merry-go-rounds and penny arcades and sailor traps called locally "The Promenade." He couldn't understand why the devil Welch needed him on one of those lousy sordid Promenade killings, but he couldn't quite resist going there to find out, either.

He turned on the bedside table light, hoping he wouldn't wake June, but he saw that she was already awake. "What is it, dear?"

"Some homicide. Welch wants me on it. Don't ask me why." He was reaching for his shoes and socks, and had already lit a cigarette.

June sat up. "John—"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful, John."

"Hm? Careful? I'm always careful."

"I mean, I don't like it. I have a funny feeling."

He laughed and turned around, patted her cheek, kissed her, and said, "Relax, Mrs. Copper. We never had it so good. Relax and enjoy yourself. Go back to sleep."

But it was funny, when he walked outside to the gray car that had pulled up and waited for him. He looked at the night and it was dark and the residential section was quiet, and it struck him as too quiet, and he kept thinking of what June had said.

The uniformed cop driving the car was tactful enough not to try conversation. Willard leaned far back in the seat and let his hat brim come over his eyes. Eyes half-closed, he watched the street lights and the all-night store lights blur past.

They pulled up to the now gloomy promenade, and he saw other cops and three men from the Bureau and only a small crowd gathered around something on the sidewalk, in front of a shuttered hot dog and malted stand. The ambulance from City Hospital was already there.

Welch met Willard as he stepped from the car. Welch was stocky and square-faced and held himself straight, probably to look taller. He tried to talk like a movie detective, usually.

"It's a two-eleven, all right," he said, talking somewhat from the side of his mouth. Two-eleven was Homicide in the Penal Code. "I just thought I'd better get you on account of the identity of the stiff. Knew you'd been dealing with him."

Willard pushed on past the detective, irritated, and not knowing quite why. They made way for him and he looked down at the little crumpled man on the sidewalk. There was not much blood. It looked as if the man had been beaten to death. One outflung arm was definitely broken and his face was black with bruises. Willard could still recognize him, though. It was Marcus Jackson, the little stoolie who had given him the list.

"Yeah," said Willard, staring down. "Yeah."

He was talking to himself. He was saying that he understood. He got it, all right. This was what Nick Masterson's message had meant. Nick had guessed that Marcus Jackson had given him the list, and these had been the instructions from the stockholders. It hadn't been necessary to get rough like this, either. They might have just slapped Jackson around a little. But this was for Willard's benefit, this was strictly a personal demonstration for him.

HE FELT sick and thought, "God, no, not in front of these men!"

Welch had come up beside him. "Think it was because he peeped?"

Willard nodded.

"Then that ought to give us a line on who did it, easy."

"We know where it came from, all right. Proving it's going to be something else again." The captain turned and looked at Welch. "I want you and your partner to drop everything and get after this one. Let the word get around we need information. I'll try to get some dough for it. Start in on the modus operandi file and put this through the sorting machine. Have the lab raise every print it can within fifty feet of here. The *Journal's* going to raise hell about our first little homicide, and this is one we can't let get away from us."

"Right, Chief," said Welch briskly, saluted with his finger, and irritated Willard all over again. . . .

As the week-end passed, Willard thought, "Be thankful for work. Be thankful for something to lose yourself in."

Welch and his partner Hurley had started right in on the Jackson case, but Willard hadn't had time to follow it along with them. His in-basket was full, incredibly full. This was because the Bureau was still reorganizing, and hadn't a man or a decent contact left from the old regime.

Willard plowed through the kicks and beefs and squawks and orders and letters and bulletins. The Home Reserve Police wanted somebody for a lecture. Troop 89, Boy Scouts of America, wanted to visit the criminalogical lab. State Parole Officer Carmody was taking custody of somebody in the tank

for violation. A former sex offender in to register under a two-ninety.

Over the week-end eight complaints, three burglaries, residential, five auto thefts, one plain assault and two A.D.W.'s, nine disorderly conducts, twelve drunks—the usual week-end.

The Monday morning paper, which came out Sunday evening, had the homicide splashed all over its front page. It even pushed the photo of the new captain of detectives brawling in a night club back to Page Two.

Commissioner Stanhope was out of town for the week-end. That, Willard was sure, was why he hadn't heard from him. But he knew Stanhope would be around shortly when he came in Monday morning.

Willard came in Monday morning at eight o'clock. He still didn't know what he was going to do about Masterson; he still hadn't figured it out. He had to do something, though, to let Masterson know that Jackson's death was not going to change things. Maybe the best move would be to go ahead and close up the Club Caribe, no matter what Masterson did about the syndicate men still operating.

As he walked into the Bureau he nodded to the desk sergeant and headed for his office. Some of the boys had already begun to drift in. Welch was by the water cooler telling O'Leary, of Armed Robbery, his latest dirty story. Lieutenant Stein was at the desk, draped over the morning's make-sheet, memorizing the names and records of the prisoners now in the tank.

They all waved or smiled or nodded and said good morning. Willard thought, "Well, they're with me, anyway. They have confidence in me." It made him feel a little warmer.

He went into his office. On his desk, topping the morning's mail, was a plain white envelope with a city postmark. It had been mailed Sunday evening. It was addressed to him and marked "Personal." He sat down and opened it, expecting nothing in particular.

There was a typewritten sheet, no signature, and at the top it said:

Dennis. First State Bank of Ocean

After that came dates and amounts. The amounts totaled eighty-six dollars and five cents. And then it said:

Purchase, one full-length mirror, Benning's Department Store, \$13.95

It gave the date for that, too. The grand total was a hundred dollars.

ALL in a rush, everything fell into place. Everything that had happened had an explanation now. Willard sat there and stared at the typewritten sheet.

Masterson had been laughing at him all the time. Gay must have provided the information, or maybe Loski himself, a long time ago. As for the syndicate's small-time operators, the list that Jackson had provided, that wasn't so much a foothold as a feeler, a test to see how far they'd be able to go with the new administration. Beating Jackson to death had been just for emphasis. They'd done it to show Willard what they *could* do. And now they had shown their hole card. An ace.

No, it wasn't really evidence, not court-of-law evidence to demonstrate merely that a hundred dollars had come from somewhere. A judge would throw it out. But the *Journal* wouldn't. It would look wonderful in the *Journal*. They could show how Loski's racing room had existed when Willard had walked that beat, and the public simply wouldn't understand how it had really been.

Willard, the honest cop, Honest John Willard—and he was getting his cut all the time, just like the rest.

That was how it would be if he didn't play ball.

As he sat there, staring, the phone rang. "Hello."

"Good morning, Captain," said Nick Masterson's voice, creamy with sarcasm.

"Oh, it's you."

"Were you expecting me to call?"

"Yes." He was trying hard to keep his voice even, emotionless.

"You've opened your mail this morning, then."

"Yes, I have."

"Wonder if you could drop out to see me at the Club Caribe some time today."

"Are you there now?"

"Yes, I am, as a matter of fact. Don't usually get here this early, but I thought you might want to drop around and get things over with."

"All right. I'll drop around."

"Make it soon, Captain. I'll have a drink ready for you."

Willard hung up. He sat there and stared at the typewritten sheet again. So it wasn't possible to be an honest cop, not once you slipped even a little bit. The old institution of the fix was self-perpetuating; it fed upon itself. And now, if he was to go on with the job, if he was to have only a partially honest set-up, which after all was better than nothing, he would have to play ball with the boys. There was no other way to do it.

His buzzer spoke suddenly and the desk sergeant said, "Commissioner Stanhope's out here to see you, sir."

"Show him right in," said Willard, and slid the typewritten sheet into the top drawer.

Commissioner Stanhope had been a colonel in the legal department in the last war, and he looked like a colonel, only from the cavalry, not the legal department. His gray mustache zoomed up at the ends. He had straight features, fine as porcelain. He was tall and straight-shouldered.

"Morning, Willard, glad to see you. Don't get up—just have a minute. Willard, I don't like the way things are going."

"Neither do I, sir."

Stanhope sat down and took out a blackened pipe and began to fill it from an ostrich-skin pouch. "This killing on the promenade—you couldn't help that. But why the devil did you have to get in a saloon brawl?"

"Not a saloon. It the roof garden at the—"

Stanhope waved his hand. "Whatever. Willard, I can't emphasize too much how we need support from all sides. We're just getting ready to roll. I'm fighting with the city council for appropriations for new cars, new office space, new equipment, and now's the time we can't afford to make mistakes. Even small ones."

"Yes, sir. I understand that."

"They'll bring it up in the council. They'll bring up this little barroom brawl of yours. They'll bring up anything to keep me from getting the dough I need. To keep me from

building up this department to where it should be."

"Yes, sir."

STANHOPE got up. He hadn't lit his pipe yet. It was in his mouth and as he talked little showers of tobacco flake flew out of it. "Keep yourself on the ball, Willard. Same with your men. Any little scandal right now could have this police department right back where it started."

Willard said, "Yes, sir," again, and Stanhope marched out.

Well, that was great, just great. Now he was walled in on both sides. He couldn't kick the syndicate out of Ocean, and he couldn't simply resign and let the *Journal* learn about that hundred-dollar bribe and howl its headlines off. He'd be hurting everybody, not just himself.

He keyed the buzzer and told the sergeant to have a car waiting for him downstairs, and never mind a driver.

He put his hat on and went into the outer office. Emmett Cotten had come up from the press room again and had his elbows on the desk.

Emmett showed his seedy grin. "Just saw the commissioner go out. What's doing, Captain?"

"Nothing," said Willard irritably. "Nothing at all."

"Don't give me that, Captain."

Willard whirled upon him. "Give you," he said. "I'll give you whatever I want. Or nothing, if I want. You and that crummy paper. Get out of my hair, Emmett, and stay out."

"Temper, Captain," said Emmett chidingly. His little gray eyes moved shrewdly back and forth over Willard's face. "Looks like you've got something on your mind this morning, huh?"

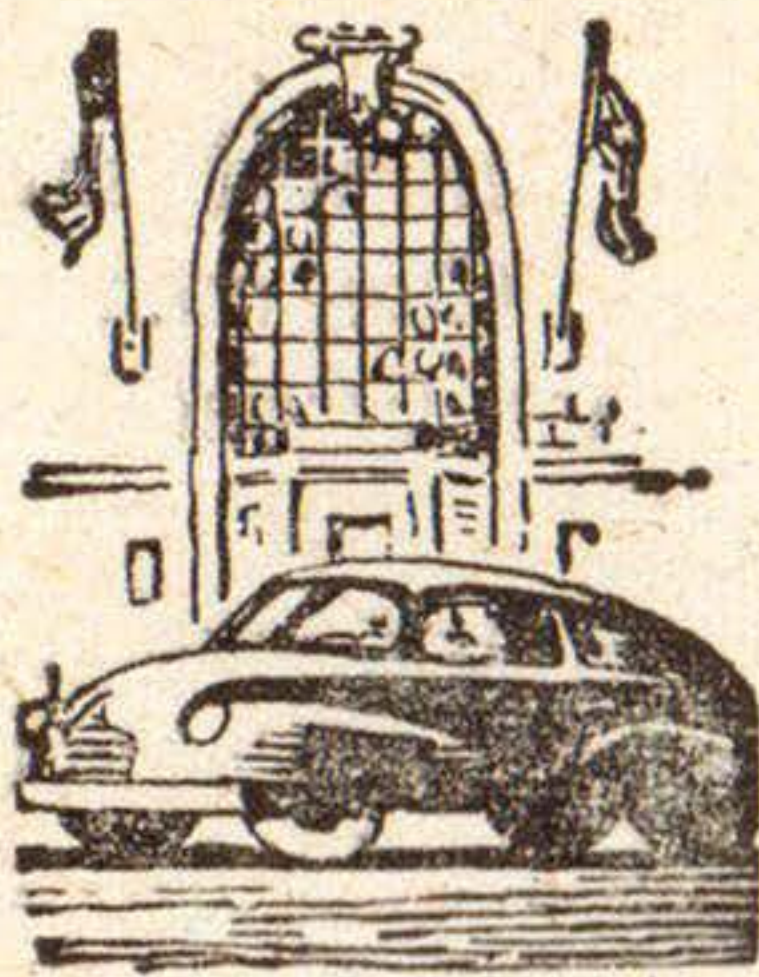
Willard glared for a moment, then his good sense found a foothold. He shut his mouth tightly, turned away, and headed for the door. Every inch of the way he fought back the hot words that rushed to his mouth.

"Hey—going some place, Captain?" Emmett called.

Willard didn't answer him. He descended the stairs at a trot.

CHAPTER IV

STILL THE HONEST COP



ON THE way out to the Club Caribe Willard turned the car's ventilator so that the breeze came in hard and cooled his face. Ocean was still cool from the night. There was no fog this morning and the sun was white and clean. There

was just the right breeze from the beach.

Willard drove slowly and thoughtfully after a while, like a man driving to a funeral. That was it, in a way. He was driving to his own funeral because John X. Willard, the honest cop, was about to die and a new John X. Willard was about to take his place. The new one would look and walk and talk exactly like the old one, but he wouldn't be the same person at all.

He looked back several times to see if Emmett's old black sedan was following, and apparently it wasn't.

He drove on and wished the Navy had made him a cook or a carpenter or something instead of a cop.

When he got to the Club Caribe the parking lot was empty, except for Masterson's big sea-green Cadillac by the entrance. There was no one around but a Japanese gardener working on the hedges. He took a deep breath and walked in.

Masterson was at the bar. So was Freddy Took and so was Bascombe Gay. Freddy was behind the bar making a drink of some kind. Masterson had what looked like a glass of plain orange juice in front of him.

"Hello, John," Masterson said. "You got here pretty quickly." His eyes were a little tired and red-rimmed, but otherwise he seemed fresh. His crew haircut was as trim as ever.

Willard just nodded. He wasn't sure about his voice yet.

"Freddy," said Masterson, "maybe the captain here would like a drink as long as you're mixing. How about it, John?"

"Sure," said Willard. "I might as well

drink your liquor, too. I might as well go all the way."

Masterson laughed. "That's the spirit. We're going to get along fine from now on, John. Bourbon?"

"Bourbon." Willard moved in and sat on a bar stool. Freddy passed Gay something in a whisky sour glass, then turned to get a drink for Willard.

Gay, beaming, lifted his drink and said to Willard, "On-the-rocks. Whisky and lemon and pernod. Best thing in the world for a hangover."

Friendly now, thought Willard. Not a word about our scrap Saturday night. Not even thinking about it, probably.

That was how it was then. You all got chummy when you were working together. You played ball and scratched each other's back.

Masterson lifted his orange juice when Willard's drink came. "Here's to cooperation," he said.

Willard drank, and the whisky was bitter. He turned to Masterson. "All right, Nick. Let's get it over with. Just what is it you want out of me?"

Masterson smiled and ran his hand over his cropped hair and said, "That should be obvious, shouldn't it?" We just want to go on operating the way we always have. Not just the Club Caribe, but all of the syndicate's places in town."

"But you haven't got just me to deal with," said Willard. "I only run the dick's Bureau. There are others."

"You leave that to us," said Masterson. "We'll take care of everybody. We just had to convince you first." He shifted on the bar stool. "You know, you bucked hard on this thing, but the fact is, you're lucky. You're getting a chance to do the smart thing in spite of yourself. And naturally, we'd rather have it this way. The rough stuff is always a nuisance."

"Like Marcus Jackson, eh? Taking care of him was a nuisance."

Masterson laughed and said, "Better ask Freddy."

Freddy grinned, narrowing his eyes even more and said, "It wasn't a nuisance. It was a pleasure. I don't like stoolies."

WILLARD fought the sudden urge to reach across the bar and grab Freddy by the lapels and pull him forward and take his chances with the big raw-boned gorilla. Might even be fun to see if he could take him.

Freddy just kept grinning at him.

"Well," said Masterson, "we might as well bind the contract. You'll be on the payroll as of now, John." He took an envelope out of his inside pocket and dropped it on the bar. "One grand. Call it a quarterly payment."

Willard opened the envelope. There were ten one-hundred dollar bills neatly wrapped in a gold-edged paper band. He stared at them, focused on the band. It was just like the last time, just like that hundred he'd taken from Loski.

In the first moment he felt confused. He wasn't sure just what he was thinking. There were a dozen ideas, none of them clear, whirlpooling in his brain.

The look of that dough—the gold-edged wrapper.

The way the bills were new and crisp.

Masterson, off to one side, beaming. A pleasure. A pleasure to make the fix, the golden fix. Loski had beamed like that.

They had to do it; they had to make the fix; they were trapped in the thing as much as he was. They had only that way to do it. Just threats weren't enough. A man might figure they wouldn't carry out a threat. He had to have something like this to keep him in line.

And it wasn't just here in Ocean. It stemmed out from the syndicate to every town, to every village, to every place where crooked men might take it, and where it might be just a little too much for essentially honest men to resist. But somebody had to start somewhere. Somewhere, sometime, somebody had to resist, and let the chips fall where they may.

That was the only way resistance to it would ever start. A drop in the bucket, sure, but most lives, most of the things men did were drops in the bucket compared to the bigger thing. Ocean and its Police Department was a drop in the bucket, too.

Willard knew suddenly that Masterson

had just outsmarted himself. Willard had come to this place ready to play ball, ready to avoid disgrace, ready—as he had told himself—to keep Stanhope and the others from being hurt.

But now it wasn't going to be that way. He felt light-headed, strong and light-headed, and it couldn't have been just that one drink.

He put the money down on the bar again.

"Nick—"

"Yes, John?"

"I am now going to have the great pleasure of smashing your pretty face in."

Masterson said, "What?"

Willard made it a short punch, about eight inches, and he put the force of his shoulder and back muscles behind it. He struck Masterson full in the face, and felt the bone and cartilage of the nose squash under his knuckles. Blood spurted all over Masterson's hand-painted flowered tie. He fell backward from the stool.

Willard turned quickly then to face Gay. He didn't complete his turn. Gay, for all his bulk, had moved quickly and had Willard by the elbows.

Willard wrenched to pull free. He saw Freddy Took, as a blur, moving off to his right, and he didn't suspect what Freddy was doing until the bottle crashed into the side of his head. It dazed him and it made his eyes rock, but it didn't knock him out. Through the first numbness he could begin to feel the blood streaming down his cheek, and the stinging whisky along with it.

GAY yanked him sideward from the bar stool. It surprised him to find that his knees were weak, that he tried to stand, but kept slipping and Gay kept holding him.

Freddy Took came around from behind the bar. He stepped over Masterson, who was writhing and groaning on the floor, to get to Willard.

"Lousy copper," he said. "Lousy, lousy copper." His face was still a hunk of distorted stone, but his eyes were bright. He swung his fist with all his raw strength and Willard never felt it hit. He saw only the exploding blackness. . . .

When he came to, Gay was still holding

him. He couldn't have been out more than a few seconds. Freddy Took was still in front of him, and Freddy looked blurred and seemed to be floating. They all seemed to be floating.

"Again, copper," said Freddy, and hit him again.

He didn't hit him as hard this time. He twisted his knuckles as they struck and burned some of the flesh of Willard's cheek away.

Willard shook his head bitterly, and tried to pull away from Gay's grip. He hadn't the strength of a baby.

Freddy moved in close and kneed him. The pain was almost unbearable. Willard didn't want to scream, but he heard himself doing it. He was hanging on Gay's forearms now. If Gay should let go he would fall.

"Keep holding him," said Freddy.

Freddy picked up something from the bar. It was the rest of the broken bottle, just the neck and some jagged edges. He swiped it viciously across Willard's face and Willard felt the flesh rip an instant before he felt the pain.

He groaned and tried to struggle. Gay let go of him and the floor came up and struck him in the chin. He was almost out now; he prayed to be out. He felt them kicking him, but he couldn't feel pain any more.

Funny, he could still hear their voices.

"Stinking, lousy copper," said Freddy Took.

"Sure, a tough guy," answered Gay.

Masterson's voice came from above. Masterson must have picked himself up. He was breathing hard. "All right, you crazy fools, don't kill him in here. This is a place of business."

"Where do you want him?" asked Gay.

"Get him in the car. We'll figure out a place from there."

Willard knew they were lifting him. He tried to struggle again, but he couldn't move this time. He couldn't even keep his head from rolling limply from side to side.

He felt the edge of the heavy darkness. The voices around him sounded far away now. Odd, but for a moment he thought he heard another voice chime in. Sounded

like Harry Stein's. Sounded as though he was telling them all to do something. But that was crazy. That was delirium. That was the wild dream just before oblivion. . . .

Hospital—he knew the smell. And the walls all around him were white. Somebody who had been bending over him moved up and away and a man's voice said, "He's coming out of it now."

A woman's voice said, "Thanks, Doctor." June's voice!

He strained several seconds to open his eyes before he remembered that they were already open. Things sharpened in his view. There was June's face, inches from his, and there were her moist dark eyes going back and forth across his face.

"Hello, Mrs. Copper," he said.

"Oh, darling, darling!" said June, and suddenly buried her face against him and began to sob.

He realized suddenly that his face was entirely covered with bandages and that was why June had put her head on his chest. He patted her back and said, "Hey, no bawling. Tell me what happened. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

SHE lifted her head and made herself smile. "Emmett Cotten followed you there. When he saw what they were doing he ran to a phone and called Harry Stein, quick. Harry got there just as they were carrying you out."

Willard wondered if his grimace showed through the bandage. "You know about it, then. You know about everything."

"I've known for a long time. I've known something else, too, John—that when it came to a showdown you'd do just what you did. I've known that all along."

LOOK FOR THE SLOGAN

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He nodded and then sighed. "Okay, Mrs. Copper. We'll make out somehow. We'll go back to beans and crackers, but we'll make out somehow."

Stanhope's brisk voice abruptly sounded, startling him. He turned his head and saw that Stanhope had been standing at one side all this time. He looked just a little foolish standing there stiffly with his mustache swashing upward. "Not beans and crackers, Willard!" he said. "Not by a damsite! Man who can admit his mistakes, man with the guts to do what you did, that's the kind of man I want!"

"But what about your city council? What about the public? The *Journal* must be having a field day. Emmett's bonus must be really fat this time."

Stanhope smiled. "There's a *Journal* on your table there. I thought you might want to see it."

He picked the paper up. He knew when he saw the headline that he must have been out long enough for the edition to be printed. It was the headline that really surprised him:

WILLARD HITS SYNDICATE HARD!
EXPOSES BRIBE DETAILS!

And the whole story was there, everything, how he'd walked into the Club Caribe and how they had offered to bribe him and how he had mixed it with them, barely escaping with his life. It told how he had once taken a bribe himself, too.

But what mattered was the way it was done. They way Emmett had worked it. It actually sounded sympathetic rather than damning. It ended up by saying that the *Journal* had long fought against corruption and crime in the community and would continue to cooperate with law enforcement quarters the way it had always done.

Stanhope kept smiling happily.

June's smile wasn't forced now.

Willard looked up and said, "Beat it, Commissioner, will you?"

Stanhope said, "Hm?" Then: "Oh. Of course. Certainly." He went out.

"Okay, Mrs. Copper," said Willard, finding he could stand the pain of grinning after all. "Let's see how good I can smooch you through these bandages."

MIRACLE ON 9th STREET

*Two harness bulls had to face a
killer with a machine gun*



by
DAY KEENE

DEATH was kind to the girl on the bed. Her young face was still pretty. Her lips were parted in a smile. The ruffle of her cheap evening gown hid the small hole under one breast. At first glance she looked alive, a tired little taxi-dancer stretched out for forty winks before rising to go meet her lover after a tiresome evening

of allowing strange, amorous, males to embrace her around a floor, and call it dancing.

Tom Hart snuffed his cigarette in the well-filled ash tray on the dresser. "Just another little tramp who got tired of riding the pink horse." He looked at the small automatic on the floor beside the bed. "Funny she'd shoot herself, though. Most of them

take poison."

Painfully conscious the bottom of his pajamas were showing under his hastily pulled on uniform pants, Pete Hanson said, "It was suicide then?"

The dapper sergeant was patient with him. "That's right. You can get back to bed now, Pete. I'll take care of this." Hart turned to old man Kenny, the night clerk of the Ninth Street Hotel. "But the next time you come up with a stiff, call me. Understand?"

Old man Kenny swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. It was just on account of Pete being the cop on the beat—"

Hart tapped his chest with a stiff forefinger. "For drunks and lost kids, you call Hanson. For the dead ones, you call me."

"Yes, sergeant," the old man promised.

A big man in his early thirties, Pete Hanson scuffed his way down the stairs, through the small lobby, and across the street to the flat he shared with his sister, Dotty. Hart was right, of course. He usually was. The dead ones were Tom Hart's job. But Hart hadn't needed to rub it in. It was natural for old man Kenny to call him. Half of the neighborhood did that whenever anything went wrong.

Dotty was awake. "What was it, Pete?" she called.

"A suicide," he told her. "A girl shot herself."

"Tom said so?"

"He did."

"Then that's what it was." Dotty giggled. "That good looking devil is always right."

LONG after Dotty had gone to sleep, Hanson sat on the edge of his bed, smoking. Hart was smart. He was good looking. But Hart was also a devil. Hanson knew. He had seen Sergeant Hart in action. There was no tougher lad on the Force—when he was alone in the fish-bowl with a bleary-eyed stumble bum who had lost all ability, and desire, to defend himself.

"*Yeah. Sure. I done it,*" they'd say. Anything to get away from Hart and the flailing fists that were making mince meat of their kidneys.

But in clear thinking, clean living, First Grade Patrolman Pete Hanson's book, Hart

was also a coward and a chaser. Not that he could prove it. What complicated matters was the fact that Dotty was high-heels over hair-do in love with the good looking sergeant.

It was even worse than he thought. The next morning at breakfast Dotty told him, "I've got a big surprise, Pete. Tom and I are going to be married one week from this afternoon in The Church Of Our Blessed Lady."

The fried eggs were tasteless in Hanson's mouth. The cube steak was so much leather.

A tart note crept into Dotty's voice. "You don't seem very pleased."

"I was thinking of Joe," he admitted. "Joe is going to take this pretty hard."

Dotty shrugged her slim shoulders. "So what?" Joe was the boy with whom she had grown up, the boy who had carried her books home from school, the boy with whom she had been in love until she had met Tom Hart and he had rushed her off her feet. "I should marry a flat-foot. No thank you. One in the family is enough. Tom is going places."

That much, Hanson thought, was true. The question was, just where was Tom Hart going?

Dotty was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry, Pete. I didn't mean to low-rate you. No girl ever had a better brother." She brightened. "But don't you see? You'll be rid of me now. Now you and Cary can marry."

"That," Hanson admitted, "is an idea." Just as if he hadn't thought of it for a hundred sleepless nights.

Slipping into his uniform coat he made certain his book, his billy, his club, and his gun, were in place and walked down the shabby stair-well of the flat in which both he and Dotty had been born. In some ways he couldn't blame Dotty for wanting to get out of the old neighborhood. Ninth Street hadn't grown with the rest of the City. It was still the same slightly shabby mixed residential and business street it had always been.

But, for himself, he liked it. The walks in front of the small business houses were freshly swept. The windows of the stores

gleamed. So it was shabby. So were his favorite slippers. Ninth Street was clean and it was friendly. It was a nice place to live.

Cary stopped him in front of the bakery. "What's the idea, officer? Going to give me a pass this morning?"

Hanson pushed back his cap as he looked at her. He liked Cary better every time he saw her. She was blonde and solid and good, a walking advertisement for the excellence of the wares she sold over her spotless counters. More, Cary wasn't any of your slim modern snips without hips enough to hold up a pair of panties. Cary's hips were wide enough for the bearing of children.

The blond girl blushed under his scrutiny. "What's the idea, Pete?"

Hanson straightened his cap on his head. "I was just thinking how much I loved you, honey. And how, since Dotty told me this morning that she and Tom Hart are to be married next week and I won't have to support her any longer, maybe you and I can get married."

Cary's fingers bit into his arm. "I've been waiting a long time to hear you say that, Pete."

Hanson patted her hand. "I'll be up for coffee after the Legion tonight. Meanwhile you figure out a date."

HE WALKED on feeling fine until he thought of the dying red-head he and Joe had taken out of Mrs. Beven's boarding house. The red-headed girl had looked something like the little taxi-dancer who'd taken her life last night. And she had died in a charity bed at county, whispering Tom Hart's name.

And this was the man Dotty wanted to marry. This was the man Dotty intended to marry one week from today in The Church Of Our Blessed Lady.

Hanson looked at his watch as he passed the church. He still had ten minutes until roll call. He still had time for a few minutes in church. Turning in through the doorway he knelt on the prayer rail in a rear pew. He felt no embarrassment with his God. He'd talked to him many times, in Africa, in Italy, in Holland.

"Look," he began. "You know Dotty. Well, she wants to marry Tom Hart. I think he's a no good rat. But I can't prove it. Anything I say will just make a sorehead out of me because we went on the Force together and today he's a plainclothes sergeant and I'm still a harness bull. So look him over, will you, Heavenly Father? And if You don't think he's a right guy, if You think he's going to bust my kid sister's heart, do something about it, will Ya?"

Hanson considered putting in a plug for Joe and decided that Joe could do his own praying.

"Thank You. Amen," he concluded.

The rising sun was warmer than it had been. Joe Gilly was waiting for him outside the station. Hanson felt sorry for the former paratrooper. He liked Joe. He'd like to have him for a brother-in law.

"I hear Dotty's going to marry Hart," Joe said without preamble. Hanson asked him where he had heard and the big patrolman said, "Hart. He could hardly wait to tell me."

The shift bell cut short Hanson's answer and he and Joe walked in to stand roll call. It was the same thing every morning. It would still be the same, Hanson realized, twenty years from now when he was sweating out his pension. Some guys had what it took to climb into plainclothes. Joe was that kind of a guy. But he would probably always be a patrolman. Not that Cary was over-ambitious for him. As long as he didn't have to support Dotty, he and Cary could live fine on a patrolman's salary.

Hanson realized Captain Engles was still talking. "Just one more thing, men. The down-town boys are still looking for Sammy Guzic. He's still believed to have at least eight grand on his person. So if one of you boys should spot him, don't walk to the nearest call-box—run. My mortgage comes due next week."

Hanson laughed dutifully with his fellow patrolmen. Guzic was getting to be quite a gag around the station. Down-town had been looking for him for two weeks. Sammy had killed a man during his last stick-up. But Captain Engles was only kidding. Engles was a square cop.

When the formation broke up, out of idle curiosity, he asked Desk Sergeant Phillips what disposition had been made of the suicide at the Ninth Street Hotel.

"The usual," Phillips told him. "She's on ice down at the morgue. But Hart couldn't get a thing on her except she was registered as Gwen Jones and she'd told old man Kenny she taxi-danced at the Palais Royal. They didn't know her over there, though. Probably bury her as unidentified."

Hanson distinctly remembered seeing a letter on the dresser. And the name on it hadn't been Jones. It had been Stallis or Stellis. "Oh," he said. "I see."

Hart came out of Lieutenant Gunderson's office then. Pumping Hanson's hand he apologized for having been so curt the night before, then wanted to know if Dotty had told him the good news.

Hanson debated his answer. He could play up to Hart. With a smart plainclothes sergeant for a brother-in-law he could get out of a lot of nasty assignments. He might even make plainclothes. A lot of guys no smarter than he was were riding around in squad cars because they had a little pull. But if a man wanted to respect himself, he had to call his shots as he saw them.

"Yeah. Dotty told me," he admitted. "But I wouldn't call it good news."

Hart's smile faded. "Oh. It's going to be like that, eh?"

"It's the way I feel," Hanson said, and walked out of the station.

JOE WAS waiting on the walk. "I ought to pop the guy," he said.

Hanson was practical. "What good would that do? Besides, like Dotty told me this morning. Why should she marry a flat-foot? One in a family is enough. And Hart is going places."

Joe named one place he wished Hart would go.

There was nothing about the morning to distinguish it from any of the other mornings Hanson had spent patrolling Ninth Street, with two exceptions. One was the pellet from an air gun that was fired at him as he passed the Acme Used Car Lot. The pellet, fortunately, went wide of its mark

and he'd never have known he'd been shot at if the .22 dart hadn't starred the windshield of a 1938 Ford.

Turning, he looked across the street. The shot could have come from any of two dozen open windows. There was no second shot. He considered making an investigation but it would undoubtedly turn out to be some kid playing with an air gun he'd gotten for a birthday present. And that would make him look foolish.

"Yes, sir. Fearless Hanson," he could hear Tom Hart say. "He tracked the desperate ten-year-old desperado to his lair in the family parlor and spanked him with his Daisy."

Shrugging, Hanson walked on. Daisy or Buck Roger air guns didn't shoot .22 darts. Still no one that he knew of had any grudge against him. It probably had been some kid who wanted to boast to his gang he had taken a shot at a cop. By keeping his mouth shut and his eyes open, sooner or later he'd locate the kid and take his club to his bottom.

The second incident was Tony. In spite of all the times he had warned him, Tony was letting high school kids hang around his poolroom, and at nine o'clock in the morning. Their plea that they went to the second shift didn't make any impression on Hanson.

Booting them out of the poolroom, he told them, "Then get on home and study your algebra and history." He was tougher on Tony. He wrote out a summons for him.

The poolroom owner laughed in his face as he put the summons in his wallet. "Why don't you smart up, Pete? You're missing a lot of fives and tens that could go into your own pocket. Why try to buck a system that's older than both of us put together? Now take Tom Hart. There's a smart cop."

"Hart fixed that last summons eh?"

Tony's grin widened. "I ain't saying. But I hear it's all going to be in the family. A pretty kid, Dotty. Yes, sir. As pretty a kid as ever walked down Ninth Street."

"You keep my sister's name out of your dirty mouth," Hanson told him. "Or I'll drop in some night when I'm not in uniform."

"Go drop dead, copper," Tony said.

Hanson walked on, scowling. In every

barrel there had to be one bad apple. And Tony was Ninth Street's rotten pippin. Some day Tony, like Tom Hart, would go too far. But until then all Hanson could do was keep an eye on him.

Cary waved and smiled as he passed the bakery and Hanson's ill humor left him. It would be nice being married to Cary. They could take over Dotty's room and when the children came he would build a play-ground for them in the back yard that had one of the few trees that still grew on Ninth Street.

Preoccupied with his thoughts of the future he almost passed Jo Jo Olendorf's stripped-down hot-rod in the vacant lot between Mr. Kupplemeyer's grocery store and Charlie Stob's grill and bar. As Hanson stopped to watch him, Jo Jo fed gas to the hopped-up motor and the back-firing sounded like a General Patton tank going into action. Shaking his head, Jo Jo climbed out from in back of the wheel and made an intricate adjustment in the dual carburation.

"Can't get it to suit you, eh?" Hanson asked.

Jo Jo shook his head. "Naw."

Jo Jo wasn't quite bright but he was a good mechanic. He'd already won three hot-rod races on the salt flat west of the city and his one ambition was to own a racing car.

HANSON glanced at his watch and walked on. The Express Company Armored Truck was on time to the minute. Every Saturday morning at exactly ninety-fourty-five it delivered enough cash to enable Charlie Stob to cash the checks of the workers from the chair factory and the metal stamping plant. The guards on the truck knew him and waved a friendly greeting. A fresh white apron around his waist, Stob was standing in the doorway of his bar. "How's for a nice cold one, Pete?" he grinned.

It was a ritual between them. "You dog," Hanson grinned back. "I'll be around to take you up on that in exactly six hours and fifteen minutes from now."

He watched the money safely into the bar and the armored truck drive away before he resumed his tour. Money, he thought, was a funny thing. Men worked and fought and turned crooked and died to get it.

He'd almost reached the west end of his tour now and he could see Joe Gilly coming toward him carrying a chattering child of three who was rapidly adding the contents of a double-dip strawberry ice cream cone to the tear stains on her face. It was a shame that Dotty was passing a right guy like Joe by for a heel like Tom Hart.

They met in the middle of the alley separating the Ace Trucking Company from the A.B.C. Laundry and the child that Joe Gilly was carrying promptly offered Hanson a lick at her ice cream cone.

"You know her?" Gilly asked. "She'll tell me everything but her name and where she lives. She's got a doll named Molly and a dog she calls Sport. And her mother told her to stay in the yard, but she didn't."

Hanson thought of Tom Hart's wise crack, "For drunks and lost kids, you call Hanson," as he sorted through his file of familiar neighborhood faces. "Yeah. Off-hand I'd say she's a Fremac. But then she could be a Gillcuddy. What's your name, dear?"

The child shook her head. "I don't know."

"What does your daddy call your mama?"

"Gorgeous," the little girl said. She offered him her cone again and when he shook his head, she pressed it to Gilly's lips.

Wiping his lips, he asked, "Now what do I do?"

Pete Hanson laughed. "Try the Fremacs first. They live in that little yellow house over on—"

A block and a half back down the street, a burst of staccato sound in the general direction of Charlie Stob's broke into his instructions. As Joe Gilly instinctively reached for his gun, Hanson said, "That's just Jo Jo's hot-rod. He's working on it in the vacant lot next to Kupplemeyer's."

"The hell you say," Gilly said. He sat the little girl on a Help Keep The City Clean Box. "That wasn't any back-fire, Pete. That was an automatic rifle."

As Gilly spoke, Hanson turned and looked back down the street just in time to see a small man race through the swinging doors of Stob's bar and run, erratically, down the street. A second later Stob appeared in the doorway and took a pot shot at the running man with an old fashioned navy revolver.

As he did the running man stopped and, turning, sprayed the walk with a sub-machine gun.

Running now as fast as he could, Hanson turned to say something to Joe and saw the younger man was gone. Then he saw him on the jump step of a Parcel Delivery truck, his revolver in his hand as he urged the driver of the truck to even greater speed. I should have thought of that, Hanson thought. It was thinking of the right thing at the right time that got a man into plainclothes.

He ran on watching the truck pass the little man who was exchanging shots with Joe, himself protected by the line of cars along the curb. Now he and Joe had the man between them and Hanson recognized him. "It's Guzic," he called to Joe. "Let's take him, boy."

CAUGHT between the two patrolmen, Guzic flipped a burst at Hanson but shot too low and the lead ricocheted, screaming, off the walk to shatter Charlie Stob's window. Hanson threw himself back of a parked car and down the street, in front of the station, a squad car siren began to wail.

Panting behind his barricade, Hanson realized with a sick sinking of his stomach that Guzic had probably been holed up on his beat all the time, probably in Tony's living quarters. And he had stepped out for a last clean-up before blowing the city for good. This was a well-timed job. And someone had paid or threatened Jo Jo to get him to work on his car so any possible shots would be mistaken for back-fire.

Safe back of a car on his end of the trap, Joe Gilly called, "You haven't got a chance, Sammy. Better throw down that gun."

The trapped killer cursed him for answer. Then Hanson's heart stood still as Dotty came out on the walk to see what all the shooting was about. Before either he or Joe could call to her Guzic grabbed one of her arms and, swinging the screaming girl in front of him, used her as a shield as he backed slowly towards the stairwell she had just descended.

"Now come get me coppers," he taunted, and added a string of obscenities.

The little-man, Hanson realized, was

hopped up to the eyes. More, the stick-up of Stob's had gone sour. Guzic hadn't gotten a dime. He'd crawled out of his hole for nothing. Now, already wanted for murder, he hadn't a thing to lose.

The wailing squad car skidded to a stop and Captain Engles and Sergeant Hart got out. "What goes here?" Hart asked.

Hanson pointed to the now empty doorway. "It's Guzic. He tried to stick up Stob's. And when Gilly and I closed in on him he grabbed Dotty for a shield and forced her back up the stairs to our apartment."

Hart flipped his cigarette away with a theatrical gesture. "Well, what are you waiting for, Christmas?" He started for the stairwell and stopped as if he'd run into a stone wall as Joe Gilly said:

"He's got a Thompson sub-machine gun."

Hanson's grin was wry. "What's the matter, sergeant? For the dead ones, we call you. Or isn't he dead enough? There's quite a difference, isn't there, between a bum in a fish-bowl and a tough guy with a gun?"

The color drained slowly from Hart's face as the man's true character came out.

Then a burst of fire from the front windows of the second floor flat scattered policemen and spectators alike. "Come on and get me, you lousy coppers," Guzic screamed. "A push-over it will be, Tony tells me. There's only one big dumb Swede copper on the beat. And even if something should go wrong, Sergeant Hart will fix it for twenty per cent of your take." Spotting Hart behind a car, Guzic loosed a blast at him. "Okay, copper. Fix it."

"Oh, God," Tom Hart whimpered.

Hanson fired at the man in the window and missed as Guzic ducked out of sight.

Captain Engles wasn't a coward. Neither did he want to expend life needlessly. "We'll wait for down-town to help us take him. We'll need all the guys we can get."

Hanson reloaded his gun. "To hell with that, sir. Dotty is my sister! Crouched for his sprint across the walk, he thought he caught a glimpse of Cary's worried face. It would have been nice to marry Cary and have kids. Still, no one had asked him to be a cop. No one had thrown him down and pinned a badge on his chest. He'd asked

for this beat and he'd got it. And this was a part of his job.

He sprinted across the lead-sprayed walk and, somehow, made it safely. But he still had the top door to pass. He took the stairs two at a time then fell forward as a burst of shots filled the stairwell.

PETE HANSON wasn't consciously afraid of death. He did know a mild resentment. Joe might have offered to help him. Joe was supposed to be in love with Dotty. He was only a few feet now from the riddled door.

"Now!" Hanson sparked himself.

He burst through the door and fired, just as Joe Gilly did. Guzic dropped screaming in pain from wounds in his shoulder and thigh.

"And where in hell did you come from?" Hanson asked Joe Gilly.

Gilly grinned, white-faced, as he attempted to staunch the wound in his own shoulder. "I climbed up a tree in the back yard."

Then Ninth Street was filled with sirens and the apartment was suddenly filled with men. Tom Hart was the first through the door. Aiming his service gun at Guzic, he blustered, "I'll kill the son. I'll—"

Hanson twisted the gun from his hand and pushed him down on the sofa. "You'll sit down and keep still until it's time for you to talk. Then I want to know a lot of things. I want to know what punk you egged on to shoot at me with a compressed air gun because I dared to doubt the dame who died last night might not be one of the Jones' girls. I want to know why you got her on ice so quick after you destroyed all identification. In fact I'm beginning to think you killed her because she threatened to tell Dotty what a class A heel you are."

Captain Engles said, "Just leave all that to me, Pete. I want to know a few things myself."

Inspector Able patted Joe Gilly's sound shoulder at the same time he wrung Hanson's hand. "Damn nice guts. Damn nice shooting. And damn nice team-work, boys. I can use a pair of lads like you on the gravy squad. We'll talk about it later. But now, let's let a doc look at that shoulder."

DOTTY looked at Joe Gilly wide-eyed. "I've been such a fool, Joe," she said. "Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Joe Gilly held out his sound arm. "Well, I'll be happy to give it a try."

Embarrassed by the hand shakes and pats, Hanson slipped his gun back in its holster and wondered if he ought to resume his tour. He hadn't done anything but his job. Still Inspector Able had mentioned the gravy squad. And the gravy squad meant plain clothes and a nice boost in salary.

Then it all was suddenly very clear. Of course. He'd asked the Big Guy for help and he'd got it. If the little Fremac girl hadn't gotten lost, Joe would have been at the other end of his tour and he would have been two hundred yards down the alley, wedged in between solid brick walls. The shots would have come to him distantly and he would have passed them off as back-fire.

Everything would have remained just as it had that morning. Hart wouldn't have been exposed as both a crook and a coward and, possibly, woman killer. Joe and he wouldn't be heroes due for a boost up the ladder. And Dotty would never have realized how much she had lost until it was too late. It all was there in a perfectly definite pattern. Removing his cap, Hanson said, "Thanks, Father. Thanks a lot."

Then, somehow Cary was standing in front of him, her dear eyes filled with tears.

She touched his face with the tips of her fingers. "You were wonderful, Pete. And I'm so proud of you." A determined look replaced her tears. "But I can't take any more of this. You've got to stop thinking of Dotty and think of us for a while. What time do you get off duty?"

Captain Engles answered before Hanson could. "He's off duty as of now. He hasn't a thing to do for the rest of the day."

Cary corrected him with spirit. "Oh, yes he has. He's going right down to the license bureau."

Engles nudged Hanson with his elbow. "You can't win, eh, Pete?"

Hanson's grin spread all over his face as he took Cary in his arms. "In such a case I should want to?"

FREE TO MURDER

CHAPTER I

APPROACH TO LIBERTY

AFTER two and a half years, it still seemed like a nightmare to Eric Vance. These bars, steel doors, electric locking mechanisms, were all part of the dream. It was filled with nameless men who wore numbers on gray uniforms and were herded like cattle. It was a wild, crazy dream, dominated by dates, each one passing by with the speed of a moss-backed sloth and wearily reaching out for the ultimate goal, still three thousand six hundred and fifty days away.

Twelve years they'd given him. Twelve! The first two were gone by, and if the other ten were anything like it, Eric Vance was sure he'd be dead before any prison gates opened for his release. At twenty-six, ten more years to go is a lifetime.

And all because he'd driven a getaway car for a stickup gang. His first and last job, but there'd been some shooting and when he was caught they found that nickel-plated revolver on him. One little slip and he was

paying for it with the best part of his lifetime.

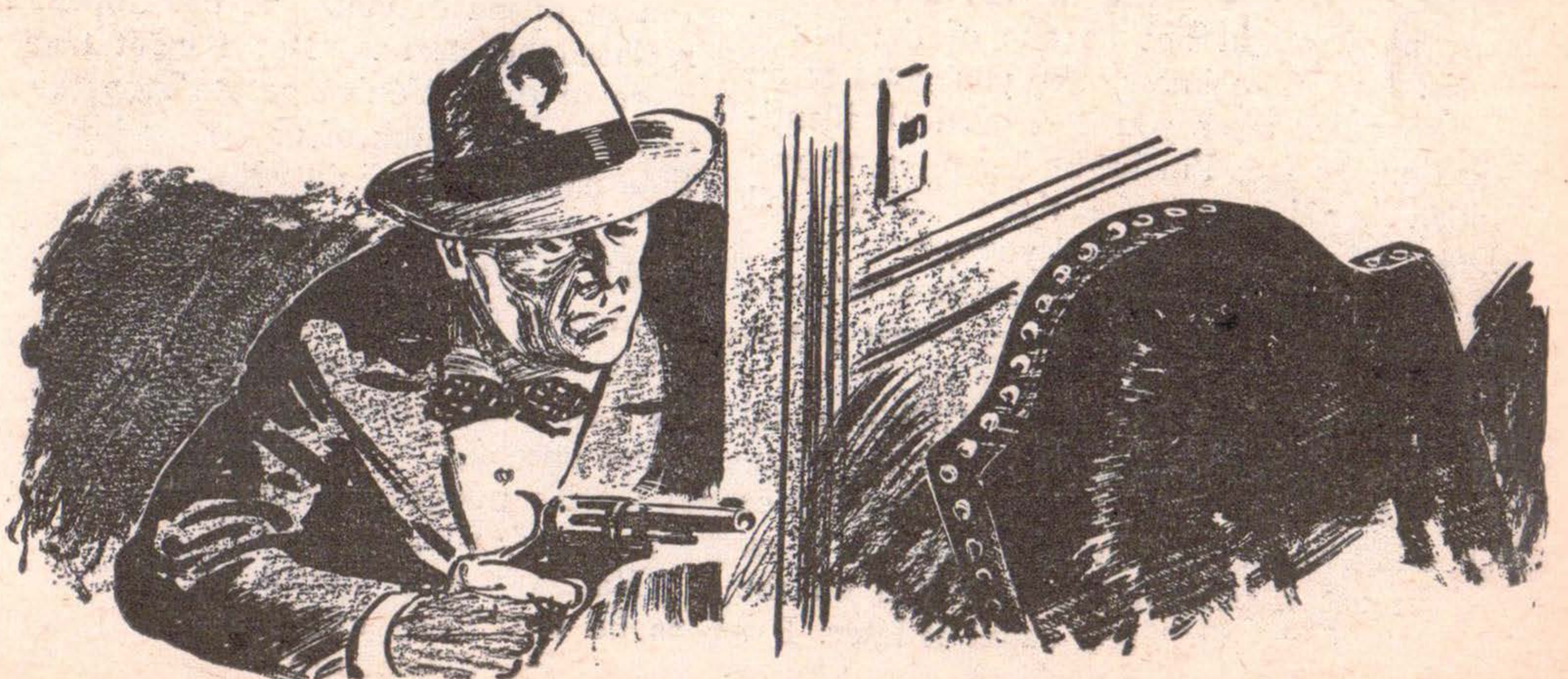
It made Vance sick whenever he thought about it and he was thinking about it now. He always did when they sent him to the solitary cells with food for the stupid or foolish or unlucky convicts who were being punished. He wondered if he'd become the same type before they let him out.

The guard at the solitary gate gave him a curt nod, unlocked it and let him in. He put down the big tray, picked up the bowls of gruel and started passing them through the slots in the door.

There was a newcomer among the prisoners here. Vance had often wondered why Luke Tover hadn't spent half his time in solitary. A big man with a little brain, he was dumb enough to be mean without reason. He was one of the few men in the prison whom Vance had never liked.

Tover peered at him through the little,

There was one condition under which convict Eric Vance could gain his freedom . . . by agreeing to kill a man!



A Novelet by NORMAN A. DANIELS

Kent pulled open a drawer
and took out an automatic



barred window. Vance shoved the bowl of food toward the slot. Tover took it and cursed.

"Same old stuff," he grumbled. "Listen, I'm going out of here. Understand me? I'm getting out."

"Sure," Vance said. "You and a thousand others."

Tover put his face closer to the grill. "I mean it—and I'll take you along. How's that?"

"Not me," Vance shook his head. "Not on your life."

"Listen, I know where there's a gun. Yeah—a good one and full of bullets."

VANCE started backing way. "Don't tell me about it," he said. "I don't want any part of the idea or you."

"Listen to me, will you?" Tover growled. "It don't cost anything to listen. You get the gun—"

"No," Vance whispered. The doorkeep was eying him suspiciously.

Tover's face turned grimmer. "You rat," he snarled.

"Nuts," Vance retorted. "You couldn't get out of here with a tommygun."

Tover's face was pressed against the grill now. "Vance," he said in a low voice, "either you get me that rod or—so help me—when they let me out of solitary, I'll kill you. That's a promise."

Vance turned away, fed the other men and walked out with the tray of empty dishes a little while later. He returned to the kitchen and sat down to think a bit. Tover was perfectly capable of killing him. He was doing life anyway, with never a chance of getting out and he was stupid enough so that he gave little thought to the electric chair. From here on, Vance realized, his life was going to be in danger.

Tover still had sixty days in solitary to do, so there was no immediate rush. But something would have to be done even if it meant telling the warden of the threat and what lay behind it. Vance had no wish to see a lot of guards killed by this crazy gunman.

Yet he also knew that if he squealed, he'd go on the blacklist of every convict in the place. It was a situation without solution.

He grew more and more nervous as the morning passed. Then, around two o'clock in the afternoon, came the biggest surprise since he'd been locked up. There was a visitor to see him.

In the two years he'd spent behind bars, this was his first visitor. Vance expected no one, didn't know a soul who'd spend the time to come and see him. It was just another twist in that continuing nightmare of his.

His parents were dead, he had no other relatives and his kind of friends became shadows when he was sent up. There must be a mistake of some kind. He was sure of it, but even talking to someone from the outside for a moment was worthwhile.

He entered the visitors' room and a guard pointed to a cubicle at the very end of the room. A slim man with an expressionless face sat on the other side of the table with a wall built up in the middle so that only his face could be seen.

Vance sat down and looked inquiringly at the man. His visitor's face cracked into something resembling a smile.

"How are you, Vance?" he asked.

"Then you did come here to see me," Vance said, and frowned. "But I don't know you."

"My name is Manning. I'm just an agent for somebody else. How'd you like to get out of here?"

"What?" Vance almost shouted.

"Take it easy." Manning grinned again. "It can be arranged."

"But who—why—?"

"Don't ask too many questions, my friend. This could fall through too, you know. Let's say somebody feels you got a bum break. The judge sentenced you on the basis of your pals' records, not yours."

"I always said that," Vance exclaimed.

"Sure. And your lawyer, Steve Kent, boshed up the whole case on you. He acted as if he didn't care if they gave you fifty years."

"I—couldn't pay him much." Vance shook his head slowly. "He wasn't interested in me."

"But he should have been. If Kent had been on his toes, you'd be eligible for parole by now. He put up the weakest defense I

ever heard and he practically asked the judge to put you away."

Vance said, "Never mind that now. We haven't much time left. You said I might get out of here."

"We can spring you in a month," Manning told him.

"But—but I still don't understand."

"All you have to do, pal, is kill a man for us." Manning said it as casually as if he were talking about a fishing trip.

CLOSING his eyes, Vance leaned back. "I thought there'd be a gimmick, but I didn't expect one like that," he said. "I won't do it."

"It's all set," Manning encouraged. "You won't even be suspected. Besides, you ought to hear the rest of it before you make up your mind. The guy you're to kill is no friend of yours."

"Who is he?" Vance asked.

"Steve Kent, the mouthpiece who let them put you on ice for twelve years."

Vance was thinking very fast. A few moments ago he'd been in a tough spot and if Tover got a chance to kill him, the big ape might do it. His life was hanging in the balance and it was up to him to seize any opportunity that came his way. And here was one dangling before him.

What if he did agree to murder Steve Kent? He didn't have to carry out his promise. Once free, they couldn't put him back.

He said, softly, "That makes it a little different. I been thinking plenty about Steve Kent since I been here. He just took my dough and didn't care what happened to me."

"He's a rat," Manning said. "That wasn't the first time he's jobbed a client, and it won't be the last unless you take care of him. A certain party, with a lot of influence hates Kent more than you do. He'll go to bat for you if you take care of Kent."

"It's a deal," Vance said quickly. "But I've got to have protection."

"You'll get more than that. We'll fix you up with an alibi that can't be broken. Nobody will even suspect you."

"Get things moving," Vance said tensely. "The sooner, the better."

Manning nodded. "There's just one more

thing, my friend, and you might as well know it now. If you welch, you'll wish you stayed in stir. Is that clear?"

"Get me out of here," Vance begged. "I'll do anything you say. And make it fast. I can't stand much more of this."

Manning arose. "We'll start the wheels turning tomorrow. This will take less time than you think."

"Who sent you?" Vance asked. "Why was I picked out?"

Manning smiled. "No questions, Vance. That's as important as doing what you're told. When the time comes, you'll learn enough for your purposes—and ours. Take things easy now. Don't break any rules and stay out of trouble or this won't work. We're springing you legally."

Vance went back to the kitchen. His work that afternoon was so poor it almost did get him into trouble. It was only with the greatest effort that he snapped out of it.

CHAPTER II

DEATH OF A STRANGER



IT WAS forty-five days later when the prison doors swung open for him. There'd been an appeal to the Board of Pardons; a lot of publicity about his unfair sentence and the fact that he'd had no past record. There'd been interviews, lectures from the warden and the parole officer, and a heart-to-heart talk with the Chaplain.

Vance almost told him the truth. He was that kind of a guy, but the danger that something might happen, held him back. He wanted to tell. The decision he'd made almost required a confidant. His mind had been made up long ago.

They would free him, as was happening at this moment. But he wouldn't feel obligated to pay back the favor with murder—not even the killing of Steve Kent, whom Vance had grown to hate. All he had to do was obtain his freedom, obey the parole rules but make certain nobody except the Parole Officer

could find him.

If that didn't work he could forget the parole, take his chances on going back, and run for it. Those men who planned murder and were going to use him as their instrument, wouldn't find him. Vance felt pretty good as the gate swung open. A guy had to make plans and if they were well made, he could carry them out.

Ten steps beyond the prison walls, Vance had his mind changed for him. A big car in the parking space, pulled out. Manning, the contact man who had made the arrangements with him, got out and extended his hand. Vance looked beyond Manning. There were two other men in the car and he had an idea that if he ran for it, he wouldn't get far.

There was only one thing to do—stall until he saw a chance to get away. Vance took Manning's hand and wrung it fervently.

Manning said, "You see, we know how to work things, kid. We got you out and we'll keep you out if you do as we say."

"I'll keep my end of the bargain," Vance told him with what he hoped sounded like sincerity. "I never thought this day would come."

Manning grinned. "Get in the car. We'll drive you to town and show you a swell time. Anything you want, kid."

"Thanks," Vance said. "When do I—that is, when are things planned to happen?"

"Tonight," Manning said.

"As soon as that?"

"Sure. It has to be done quick so we can rig your alibi. Nobody would expect a con just out of stir to pull a job like this. It's all set—we can't fail."

"Okay," Vance nodded. "Only I hope you know what you're doing."

"We've done pretty well so far or you wouldn't be here. I tell you there can't be a slip-up. But forget that now. We're going to show you what you've missed."

Two years made more of a difference than Vance realized. Being free again made him determined to stay free. He had never considered going back to crime. His first and only attempt at it had been a fluke and ended in disaster. He had enough of that, but before he'd take a human life, he knew he'd give all this up.

Manning went to all lengths regarding entertainment. There was lunch in a small, nice spot, then a long drive in the country. Finally there was a small but classy nightclub for dinner and some drinks. Vance realized that Manning was keeping to the darker corners wherever they went. He didn't want Vance recognized.

At eleven o'clock, the big car pulled up to the curb at a fashionable East Side section. Manning reached into his pocket and took out a black automatic pistol.

"Take it," he said. "This is where you pay off."

VANCE accepted the gun gingerly, but shoved it into his belt and buttoned his coat over it. Manning was giving him instructions and he tried to appear attentive.

"Steve Kent lives five blocks north of here. Along the river drive. He has a duplex apartment on the tenth and eleventh floors. You take the service stairs and use the service entrance. On the tenth floor you'll see the door to his apartment. It will be closed but not locked. Got it?"

"Sure, it sounds easy," Vance said.

"It is easy," Manning told him. "Walk in and you'll find yourself in a foyer. Pass through and you'll find Steve Kent in his living room— All alone and not expecting any company. Don't give him a chance. As soon as you open the door, drill him. Nobody will hear the shot because he occupies the whole floor and the one above. The people below are away."

"Sounds simple enough," Vance nodded. "What about the getaway?"

"It's all arranged. After you're sure he's dead, use the service stairway again. Don't run, take it easy. Outside the service entrance door, you'll find a car waiting. You'll be taken to wherever you're supposed to live under the terms of your parole. Every second of your time right up to then will be accounted for."

"Sure," Vance said. "I'm ready."

"Good. But get this—if there is a slip-up, that getaway car won't be there. You'll be on your own. That's why it's important to you that there is no slip."

"There won't be," Vance said. And he

meant it, because he was going to have no part in killing Steve Kent anyway. He patted the gun under his coat, gave Manning a knowing smile and got out.

They didn't follow him. In fact the car rolled on by and disappeared around a corner. Vance walked to River Drive, turned into it and headed uptown. He had no idea if he was being shadowed so, when he threw the gun into the river, it was done fast.

He had two ideas in mind. One was to go to the police with the whole story, but he made that his second alternative. They'd promptly lock him up. His parole might be considered violated because he'd given a promise to commit murder in order to get out of prison.

But if he went directly to Steve Kent and told him the story, that would be different. Maybe Kent hadn't been too interested in his case before but, if he saved Kent's life, the lawyer was bound to go to bat for him. It was the most effective way out of this mess.

Vance found the address quickly enough and took a long, careful look around the neighborhood. It was almost midnight when he ducked into the service entrance, found the stairway and climbed it to the tenth floor. He pushed the fire door open a crack and looked into a small lobby. It was empty. There was only one other door, just as Manning had told him.

Vance realized that, in the next few minutes, his freedom was at stake. He would have to convince Kent he was telling the truth, take Kent's advice and find the way out of this. He walked up to the door, grasped the knob and turned it. The door wasn't locked. Manning certainly knew how to set things up.

Vance pushed the door open and stepped inside. Then things happened so fast he had trouble remembering afterwards. First, a tall, good looking man sat in a chair propped against a door opposite the entrance. He had a revolver on his lap which he snatched up the moment Vance was inside.

Vance saw the gun level, knew this man wasn't going to listen to any explanations. He was going to shoot! Vance gave a bounding leap which carried him across the room and his fist was already on its way up. For

some reason the man with the gun didn't pull the trigger. At least no bullet blasted out to meet Vance.

THE UPPERCUT landed and there was all the steam Vance could muster behind it. The tall man's head snapped back. He hit the door and started falling. Vance seized him and let him down slowly so there'd be no crash. He picked up the gun which had fallen to the rug, and placed it on a small table. He didn't want a gun in his hand when he went in to see Kent.

Vance had no idea who the man he'd slugged could be, but it was apparent he'd been on guard duty and expected some kind of trouble. Vance opened the door and walked into Kent's study. It was empty. He went through the rest of the apartment on this floor and found no one. Then he climbed the stairs to the floor above which was also part of this same apartment. There were four bedrooms, all of them without an occupant. It was clear that Kent was not here.

Vance bit his lip. He had to do something and do it fast, before the tall man he'd knocked cold came out of it. Perhaps he'd listen to reason and help find Kent to warn him. Vance ran through the apartment, took the stairs in bounds and dashed across the lower floor.

The tall man still lay in that huddled heap. Vance bent over him and shook him. The man's head rolled to one side, his eyes were glassy. Vance gasped, picked up a limp wrist and vainly tried to find a pulse. There was none. In trying to prevent one murder, he had committed another — killed a man he didn't even know. In self-defense, perhaps, but who would believe that?

Panic struck him. All the emotions pent up inside him since the day when Manning had first appeared in prison, were now unloosened. He felt like screaming. Added to this wave of terror, the telephone started ringing. Over and over again it rang. He didn't dare answer it, but if the person who called decided to come over, it was time to leave.

The gun was still on the table. Hardly thinking of what he was about, Vance scooped it up. Things had changed—there

might be need for a gun now. With the phone still ringing, he fled from the apartment, down the ten flights of stairs and out onto the street.

He looked for the getaway car. Seeing only a row of empty cars at the curb, he started running toward the nearest avenue. After half a block of this he realized that he was only calling attention to himself so he slowed to a walk.

It was about the time that he crossed the avenue and headed for a subway station that he heard police sirens. They seemed to come from a dozen different directions. Squad cars with flashing red lights, swept in toward Attorney Kent's apartment house.

Vance shuddered and kept going. He knew exactly what he had to do.

CHAPTER III

AGENT OF THE LAW



NOT QUITE an hour later he was on the lower West Side looking for the rooming house where the Parole Officer had arranged for him to live. It was a pleasant enough brownstone place and looked clean. He rang

the bell and discovered that the landlady was inclined to be hostile.

"I been holding this room for you since this morning," she said tartly. "It's past one now and I don't mind telling you I don't like my roomers keeping all kinds of crazy hours—"

Vance nodded and forced a smile. "I forgot all about the time. You know I got out of prison this morning. Well, I came here right away, but everything was so interesting I just kept walking around and—and I forgot the time."

She gave him a key. "Ex-cons," she said, "are supposed to keep decent hours. That's all—and I expect my rent on time."

Vance walked to the fourth floor, let himself into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. This wasn't much different than being in prison, except that there a man was

protected. Vance tried to puzzle it out. Apparently he had killed a man, but it was both accidental and in self-defense. That guy had tried to shoot him down. . . . He remembered the gun and took it out of his pocket. The weapon was fully loaded.

He moved about the room quietly, looking for a place to hide the weapon and half wishing he hadn't taken it with him. He finally shoved it under the mattress until he could locate a better spot or get rid of the thing completely.

He remembered the ringing of that phone in Kent's apartment. The way it had kept ringing the caller certainly felt sure somebody was at home. Then the radio cars had arrived so fast. And where was Manning and the help he'd promised?

Vance finally fell asleep around dawn. When he awoke, the full realization of his position hit him hard. He couldn't sit here, just waiting. They were bound to question anybody who knew Kent and an ex-con who hated him would be among the first to be interviewed.

Vance dressed quickly. He didn't have to report to the job they'd obtained for him today. He walked quietly out of the house, went to a restaurant and ate something for breakfast—he wasn't sure what—because as he ate, he read the front page account of the murder in Attorney Kent's apartment.

It seemed that the victim was also a lawyer named Jeff Conway and he was a partner of Kent. The account stated that he had been struck a powerful blow and had died of a broken neck. The police admitted nothing had been stolen and discounted the murder as the work of burglars.

They also stated that Jeff Conway had been spending the night in Kent's apartment and may have been mistaken for Kent. There was a promise of a quick arrest.

Vance knew what that meant. They would be looking for enemies of Attorney Kent. The article was continued on another page and Vance turned to it. There he found a picture of the dead man and with him was a very pretty girl described as his sister.

Vance slid the newspaper into his pocket and walked rapidly back to his rooming house. As he neared it, he saw a car stop in

front and a slim, gray haired man got out. Vance had never seen him before, but he sensed that he was a cop.

The gun was in his pocket now and he didn't dare keep it, but throwing it away might be just as bad. Once it was found, turned in and identified as the dead man's, there might be a trail leading too close to home. Besides, Vance reflected somewhat grimly, with the new conditions he might require a gun.

He gave the man a few minutes, took the gun out of his pocket and placed it in the folds of his newspaper. Then he walked up the stairs of the house, let himself in and as he passed a hall table covered with magazines, he deftly slid the newspaper and the gun under them. Here in almost plain sight, it was less apt to attract any attention. All the roomers were at work anyway and, Vance had already discovered, the landlady rarely disturbed things.

VANCE ran lightly up the stairs without seeing anyone. He put his key in the door, opened it and came to a dead stop. The slim man was sitting in a chair beside the window.

Vance said, "What's the big idea?"

The man didn't arise. "I'm sorry," he said. "My name is Harvey. I'm a police lieutenant."

Vance nodded. "I guess it's okay. Fellows like me can't expect to have too much privacy."

Harvey laughed. "Get that chip off your shoulder, Vance. In my book you're okay until you pull something. Which brings us down to business."

Vance sat on the edge of the bed. "What business?" he asked.

Harvey said, "You got out of prison yesterday morning. Tell me where you spent every minute of your time up to now."

Vance sighed deeply. "You certainly don't give a man much peace, do you? I got out around eleven. It took me awhile to reach town by bus. I don't know how long because I just looked out of the window."

"I can appreciate that the scenery must have looked good," Harvey grunted. "Keep talking."

"Well, when I hit town, I got something

to eat. Then I walked around, mostly looking in store windows, until about five. I went to a movie then—on Alvord Street. When I came out, I had more to eat and walked some more."

"You seem to like walking," Harvey said.

"So would you, if there were walls holding you back for two years, Lieutenant."

"Did you meet anyone you knew, Vance?"

"No—mainly because I don't know a soul in town."

Harvey arose. "I'm going to give you a frisk, Vance, and then search your room. I've got to do it."

Vance didn't move. "Hey, do I have to be frisked and my room searched every once in awhile just because I'm an ex-con?"

"Well, no. You see, there was a murder last night—"

"Murder!" Vance exclaimed.

"Yes. Buy a newspaper and read about it. Man named Jeff Conway was killed."

"Conway? Jeff Conway?" Vance frowned.

"We think he was killed by mistake. The real victim was supposed to have been Steve Kent."

"Kent?" Vance almost shouted. "I get it. You think I tried to knock him off and got this guy—whatever his name was—by mistake."

"It's only a suspicion," Harvey said. "Stand up and let's get this over with."

Vance stood up and raised his hands while the detective rapidly searched him. "I guess I don't blame you much, Lieutenant. I sort of spoke up at the time I was sentenced. I said a lot of things I didn't mean."

Harvey motioned for him to relax and then started searching the room. It was an easy job. Vance had brought very little with him. Finally the detective shoved his hat to the back of his head and studied Vance a moment.

"I think I made a mistake," he said. "I'm going to apologize, Vance, because an ex-con has rights too. But take my advice, stay close to home."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Vance said. "You're a nice guy. I'm not going anywhere. I didn't plug anybody and even if I was sore at Kent, I'd never have tried to kill him."

"The victim wasn't plugged. Somebody

slugged him a terrific blow on the chin and then twisted his neck until it broke. See you around, Vance, and watch yourself."

Vance didn't move after the lieutenant closed the door behind him. Jeff Conway hadn't died from the haymaker to the jaw. Someone had twisted his neck. Now Vance thought he knew the truth. They had made a fall guy of him. Someone else had been sent to check and when Conway was found on the floor, this other intruder had finished him off. Possibly he thought it was Steve Kent he was killing.

BUT a murderer, unless he was some sort of a hired punk, would know the identity of his victim. That put a new light on the subject. Vance was wondering if the attack had been aimed at Conway all the time. The idea was at least worth an investigation and he decided the best place to start was with Conway's sister.

Without much money, Vance couldn't afford a taxi, so he used subways and buses and then hiked until he came to the suburban home of Conway. It was a better than average house on fairly spacious grounds—the kind of a place Vance had often dreamed about as being his ultimate goal. He figured he was further from it right now than ever before.

The door was opened for him by Conway's sister, Ellen, whom Vance instantly recognized from the newspaper photo. She had been crying and looked like she needed sleep, but she was prettier than the photo.

"I came about your brother," Vance said lamely.

"I see. You're from the Walker family then."

Vance hesitated. Telling her the truth seemed extremely difficult. He hedged, despite himself. "Well—I thought we could talk this over," he said.

She held the door wider. "Come in, please. And before you begin, be assured that the estate will lose nothing. I'll see to that."

Vance didn't know what this was all about. He sat down in the living room and felt uncomfortable. He had to tell her the truth and trust her to believe in him and to cooperate. He had to have information which

only she would possess.

"I'm afraid you're making a mistake," he said. "My name is Vance. You've never heard of me and neither did your brother, but—I was in Kent's apartment when your brother was murdered."

"You—were there?" she gasped.

Vance nodded. "As a matter of fact, I could very easily be convicted of killing your brother—but I didn't. Look, if I explain things, will you promise to hear me out and give me a break?"

"But I don't understand. . . ."

"I'm an ex-convict. I was released on parole only yesterday and someone with influence got me out—for a price. I was supposed to murder Attorney Kent in payment for my release."

She regarded Vance with open amazement, seemingly incapable of speech. He kept on talking, getting it off his chest.

"I hated Kent—or thought I did—because he helped put me away for a long prison term. But I didn't want to kill him. So I went to his apartment to tell him he was in danger. Your brother was there, sitting in the foyer with a gun in his hand."

"But—but Jeff knew nothing about guns," she protested.

"He certainly acted as if he did," Vance went on. "Anyway I had to slug him and he went down."

"Then you killed him!" she said accusingly, in a small, flat voice.

"No—no," he cried. "I only knocked him out and I had to do that or he'd have shot me. I went looking for Kent after that, but nobody was in the apartment. When I got back to your brother's side, he was dead. Somebody had slipped into the apartment and broken his neck."

She stared at him for a moment. "Do you expect me to believe that?" she asked.

"You must. My life depends on it, Miss Conway. And think of this—why should I have killed your brother? I never saw him before. I didn't know who he was until I read the morning newspapers. That's the truth. I swear it."

"I think," she said, "I had better call the police."

"I won't stop you," Vance said. "But I

won't be here when they arrive either. I'm an ex-con. Nobody will believe me, especially the only story I have to tell. It's fantastic."

THE GIRL stared at Vance. "Why did you come here?" she asked. "You must have known I'd go to the police."

"Yes, and I don't blame you. But I have an idea and I need your help. The way things look, this attack was meant for Kent. But what if it wasn't? What if the murderer really meant to kill your brother? Do you know of any reason why anyone should want him to die?"

"But I don't. Jeff had no enemies."

"Why was he spending the night at Kent's apartment then—with a gun in his hand?"

"I don't know. He merely told me he wouldn't be home all night and if I needed him, to call Kent."

"Did you call Kent's apartment?" Vance persisted.

"Why, no."

"Somebody did," Vance said. "And when there was no answer, he or she called the cops. At least, I'm pretty sure they did. There has to be an answer some place and if I don't find it, I'm liable to go back to prison for a short spell until they throw the switch on me."

She arose slowly. "Mr. Vance, I may be a fool, but I don't intend to call the police. I'm not prepared to believe you, but I can't disbelieve you either and I won't be instrumental in having you arrested. That was how Jeff lived, and I intend to be the same as he was."

"Thanks," Vance said sincerely, "but I hoped you might help me discover the truth. I can't find a clue. The only man I came into contact with when this business was arranged, never told me where he lived. It would have been a lie anyway."

"But why did you accept such an offer?" she asked. "To murder a man in order to get out of prison."

"I had to. It was the only way. I still had ten years to do. Ten years! Besides, another prisoner hated me because I wouldn't help him break out and he was going to kill me—at least, that's what he said."

She sat down again with a sigh. "I wish I

could believe you," she said slowly. "Because there might be something in what you say. Yet I can't be sure. I don't know if you—you were sent here because—"

"I only came because I needed your help," Vance pleaded. "If you know anything, tell me."

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I can't help you. Would you mind leaving now, please? I—I can't go on talking about this."

Vance picked up his hat. "You do know something," he accused her. "I can sense it, but I can't force you to talk. Thanks anyway—for not calling the police."

She walked silently to the door and let him out. Vance went down the path to the street, turned north toward the nearest bus stop and tried to figure out Ellen Conway. What had she meant about the Walker estate—and her promise the estate would lose nothing?

Vance shrugged. It probably didn't mean anything and he was right back where he started from. Nobody had a reason for killing Conway. Therefore he must have been mistaken for Kent and that put an ex-con named Eric Vance right behind the same old eight-ball.

CHAPTER IV

PRISON WIDOW



THE trip back to the city was long and tiresome and Vance had never felt as discouraged in his life. There had to be an answer some place, but it didn't look as if he would ever find it. Sooner or later the frameup against him would be completed and every cop in the country would be hunting him. He was half inclined to go see Lieutenant Harvey and tell him the whole story. Harvey might give him a break.

But Harvey wouldn't believe him. Vance couldn't blame the man. He himself wouldn't have believed such a story. The frame was just about perfect and he saw now how badly he'd been mistaken in taking advantage of

Manning's offer for freedom.

Perhaps if that lifer, Tover, hadn't threatened him, he might not have accepted. And with that thought an idea hit Vance with so much force that he forgot to get off at his station.

What if Tover was in on the scheme? What if he was setting up the first stage of the frame? Frighten the victim so he'd grasp at any opportunity. It had to be that! Tover's blustering threat of murder because Vance refused to bring a gun to the solitary cell wasn't based on a sound foundation.

Tover wasn't a complete fool. A gun wouldn't have done him an iota of good in solitary. Sticking the gun under the nose of a guard would accomplish nothing. The guards didn't carry keys to the solitary cells and Tover knew it.

Therefore he must have been bluffing—using Vance's refusal to get the gun as an excuse to issue the threat. Vance got off at the next station stop and walked toward a drug store. One thing about Tover, he wouldn't have entered into a scheme like this unless there was something in it for him. And what could anybody do for a lifer with no hope of ever getting out? Nothing! But he might do something for Tover's wife. Vance had often heard the lifer talk about her.

That was it! It had to be. Spurred with renewed hope, Vance looked up Tover's wife in the phone book. The name was unusual enough so there wouldn't be many listed. There were, in fact, only two. And one of these was Vera Tover. Vance rapidly counted the small roll of bills he had and decided they'd do him little good if he went to a death cell. He hailed a taxi and was driven to the cheap apartment house where Vera Tover lived.

She turned out to be an overly painted woman of about forty-five who was trying, with complete failure, to look like someone twenty years younger. Looking past her through the open door, Vance saw several boxes from expensive department stores and Mrs. Tover was wearing a new dress and brand new shoes.

"Okay," she said. "After you get through staring, you might tell me what you want."

He came back to earth with a jolt and let a slow smile come over his face. "I guess I was staring," he admitted. "Because even though Luke said you were something special, I never thought you'd be quite like—this."

"Luke sent you?" she asked quickly. "Come on in. How is he? Why did he send you?"

She closed the door after Vance was inside. He swaggered over to a chair and gave one of the boxes a light shove.

"I guess I don't have to ask if everything is okay," he said. "That's what Luke wanted me to find out."

"You going to see him again soon?" she asked.

"Sure. I talked to him yesterday. He's in fine shape, but he was worried about a double-cross."

"Yeah? Well, there wasn't any. So you saw him yesterday."

"That's right, Vera. He knew I was being sprung and he asked me to come see you."

HER EYES were cold as ice. "Look, friend, could you smuggle a note in to him? If I was willing to pay you for it, maybe?"

"I'll take it for nothing," Vance said. "Luke and me are pals."

"Good. I'll write it now. You can read the newspaper or something. I won't take a minute."

Vance wanted to read the newspaper. There was still bold type over the story about the murder. He settled back and read that the police were more confident than ever of an early arrest. In fact, the quoted statement from the head of the Homicide Squad was so strong that Vance believed he was being sought right now.

It took Vera Tover much longer than one minute to compose the note to her husband, but she finally came out of a back room and handed Vance a sealed envelope.

"After you deliver this," she said, "come back and see me. I owe you something, my friend, and we'll go out on a little evening of fun if you like."

"Sure." Vance stowed the envelope in his pocket. "I'll look forward to it. Luke will

have this tomorrow. I know ways of getting stuff into the prison."

"Swell. Luke won't forget what you did for him—and me," she said. "So long, and don't forget to give me a ring."

He nodded, backed out of the apartment and hurried down the stairs. Tover had been in on the frame. It was obvious now that his wife had been paid off for his part. Vance felt that he was finally going places.

He reached the corner just as the car pulled in to the curb, stopped and a burly man got out. Vance came to a halt. The man advanced toward him, one hand under his coat and at his hip pocket.

"Stay as you are," the man warned. "This is a pinch, Vance."

Vance didn't resist when he was grabbed by the arm and propelled toward the car. Another man was behind the wheel. Vance got into the back seat and the burly man settled down beside him.

He said, "Did you think you'd get away with this, you jail bird?" he demanded.

"Look," Vance said, "I'm not talking except to one man. I want to talk to Lieutenant Harvey."

"You do, huh? What's Harvey know about this?"

"Nothing—yet. But he's going to find out plenty. And I'm not saying another word."

"Suit yourself," the detective grunted. "This is just another job to me."

The car turned into an avenue and picked up speed. Vance folded his arms across his chest and gently felt the hardness of the gun in his inside pocket. It was odd that he hadn't been frisked.

Then it occurred to him that there was another strange factor about this. How had these two detectives just happened to pick him up? He was comparatively unknown to local police and before he'd been sent up, he'd only been in town a few weeks. Yet, this detective had never even questioned his identity.

He thought back to Vera Tover and the letter she had written to her husband. She'd gone into a back room to write it, but a phone might have been there and somehow she might have been wise to him. But how? He'd been extremely careful not to give him-

self away. He started thinking over every word he'd told her.

Then he knew the answer. When he informed Mrs. Tover that he had seen her husband the day before, she knew he was probably a liar. Men in solitary are not allowed visitors and are prevented from mingling with other prisoners. She was wise in the ways of a prison and had instantly guessed why he had come. He had an idea she also knew just who he was.

He glanced at the impassive face of the man beside him. Apparently this pseudo-detective wasn't at all worried. Why should he be? His scheme was just about perfect.

VANCE wriggled his hand down under his coat and gently grasped the butt of the gun which Jeff Conway had tried to use on him. He glanced out of the car window and knew his guess was right. They weren't heading toward Police Headquarters and that's where ordinarily he would be taken. This was a ride into the country and when the right place was reached they would throw him out, probably full of holes.

If he was wrong about this, he'd be very, very sorry. Pulling a gun on a cop would send him back to finish the ten years with a few more added—if he was lucky. If he wasn't, he'd probably go straight into Death Row. Vance knew he was taking the most desperate chance of his life.

Vance suddenly slipped out the gun and shoved it against the side of the man who sat next to him. "Okay," he said, "start reaching. And tell your pal at the wheel that I can plug him faster than he can reach for a gun or ditch the car."

"Listen, you sap," the burly man shouted. "You'll get ten more years for this."

"Just keep 'em up," Vance said. He called orders to the driver. "Turn this car down the first side road you come to and stop."

The desperate quality in his voice indicated that he would shoot and his commands were quickly obeyed. When the car stopped, Vance got out first. Then he lined up the pair of them and ordered them to remove their shoes, coats and trousers.

"What's the idea?" the burly man grumbled. "You going to rob us too?"

"Maybe, but I'll kill you if those clothes aren't piled up on the ground in two minutes."

They stripped down. Vance gestured with the gun. "Good! Now start walking into the woods."

"Look! We ain't got shoes—"

"Hike!" Vance shouted.

CHAPTER V

GUILTY KNOWLEDGE



QUICKLY the pair started walking. Vance was suddenly in a hurry. He wanted them to move faster so he pointed the gun skyward and pressed the trigger. The hammer fell, but there was no explosion. He tried it again with the same result, but the pair whom he hoped were crooks and not detectives, knew nothing of this. They kept on going until the forest swallowed them up.

Vance quickly searched their clothes. He found no trace of a badge or or any other identification which would have proved them to be detectives. That made him feel a lot better. He got behind the wheel of the car, pulled away and headed upstate, toward the prison. He had something to do and it might furnish him with the one clue he needed. And he also knew just whom he could turn to up there.

One of the last things Chaplain Stanton had said was that he would always be available if Vance needed help. Now, in the chaplain's little house outside the prison walls, Vance told him the whole story from its very beginning.

Stanton listened intently, with an occasional nod. When Vance was finished, he leaned back. "Eric," he said, "that story is incredible enough so that I must believe it. I often wondered who really got you out of prison. Because I had approached the Parole Board about it twice and was turned down. Now it's quite clear that someone with influence put over what I couldn't do."

"But who, sir?" Vance asked. "That's

what worries me. I know Tover is in on it. Oh! The letter his wife gave me. Just a minute. . . ."

He found the letter in his pocket and quickly broke the seal. There was a single sheet of paper inside it—and the paper was absolutely blank.

"That proves it," Vance said. Vera phoned somebody and those crooks were sent to take me for a ride."

"It's obvious," the Chaplain admitted. "But what do you want me to do about this? Tover won't co-operate."

"One thing, sir," Vance said. "Just one simple thing that you can get away with and I can't. Tover must have been approached and I don't think it could have been done through another prisoner. Perhaps you could find out who visited him the last couple of times. . . ."

"That I can do," the Chaplain said. "And I will—right away. Wait here, Eric. I won't be long."

He returned in twenty minutes and sat down slowly. "You've been on the right track, Eric. Tover wasn't allowed any visiting privileges for the last two months but someone saw him."

"Attorney Kent," Vance almost yelled. "Only a lawyer could break the rules about visits."

"Yes, it was Kent. He saw Tover just before steps were taken to get you out. Everything ties up, Eric. Now you have only to go to the police, tell them the whole story—"

"I'm sorry," Vance said, "but it can't be handled that way. We've no proof—just a lot of suspicions which couldn't convict anyone, least of all a smart lawyer. Sure I think it was all a plot to get rid of Jeff Conway without the slightest suspicion falling on Kent. I was the goat, the fall guy."

"But the police can handle it," the Chaplain pleaded. "If you jump into this, you'll wind up back here, Eric."

Vance nodded. "Maybe. But if Kent is on the other end of the handcuffs, it won't be bad to take. Thanks very much for your help. I'm going back to town and make Kent confess."

Vance got away before the Chaplain's arguments could sway him. He drove back as

fast as he dared, but it was late evening before he pulled up near Kent's apartment house.

This time Vance went in the front door, took the regular elevator to the tenth floor and rang the bell of Kent's duplex suite. He was taking chances in a lot of ways and he knew it. Police might be planted here or Kent might have some of his unsavory pals to guard him.

BUT Kent opened the door. For one scant second no recognition showed in his face. Then he gave a shout and tried to slam the door. About that time, Vance hit it with his shoulder. Kent was thrown back, off balance and before he could recover, Vance had his arm cruelly twisted behind his back.

"We're having a little talk," he said. "And remember this, I'm no jury you can spell-bind. I know what this is all about and you're not getting away with it, Kent. Not entirely, you're not."

"Vance, you're crazy," Kent cried. "It wasn't my fault that you were given such a long term."

"Who cares about that now, Kent?" Vance flung him into a chair. "You put me in prison and you got me out. Putting me in was due to your carelessness and lack of interest in a punk kid who'd gone wrong, but getting me out was a carefully planned deal. You hoped I'd kill Jeff Conway."

Kent nursed the wrist Vance had twisted. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Then I'll tell you—and back it all up with facts. I'm not sure why you wanted Jeff Conway dead, but it may have something to do with the Walker estate."

The way Kent's eyes and mouth shot open was an excellent indication that Vance had struck something big. Vance went on.

"You got Conway to stay in your apartment. You told him I was loose and probably showed him a picture of me, or described me so well that when I walked in, Conway would shoot first and ask questions afterward. But it didn't work that way. I got to Conway before he could shoot and I knocked him out."

Kent glared at Vance but said nothing.

Vance could almost see that crafty brain behind the wrinkled forehead, working at top speed. Kent wasn't licked yet.

Vance said, "I wanted to do you a favor—tell you I'd been sent to kill you. What a joke, when you engineered the whole thing. Tover worked for you, so did this man who told me his name was Manning. So did a lot of other punks. One of them followed me into this apartment and finished off Conway. It was all nicely timed. You telephoned here, and I'll bet it was from a spot where plenty of people heard you. That would be a neat alibi. You got no answer so you said you were worried about Conway and you called the cops, hoping I'd walk out into their arms."

Kent's lips were tightly compressed until he spoke. "Suppose, Vance, that for the sake of getting this over with, I admit you happen to be right. What do you want?"

"A cut," Vance shouted. "Fifty-fifty, my friend, because I'll have to run for it and I'm not going flat broke. Furthermore, I want it now."

Kent nodded. "You're a pretty smart boy. I must have made a mistake two years ago when I let them send you up, but I doubted you were good material for the little group I was organizing. I'll pay you off. There's money in my desk."

Without waiting, Kent got up and walked behind the desk. Before he could open the drawer, Vance pulled the gun which Conway had held.

"Take it easy," Vance warned. "Step back from that desk. If there's dough in that drawer, I'll get it myself."

Kent was studying the gun in Vance's hand. Suddenly he gave a curt laugh. "So you're trying to chisel in, are you? Well, no small time rat can take me for a dime, Vance."

"I don't want a dime of your money," Vance said quietly. "All I wanted was a gesture of defeat from you. A confession—and you gave it to me. But I don't even need that. When I go to the cops with my story, they'll check. Manning will be found; Tover will talk. So will his wife and those two goons who tried to make me think they were detectives. You're all done, Kent."

Kent said, "I admit it, Vance. I would be all finished if you ever reached the cops. But you won't. Because I'm going to kill you. I'll be taking no risk. Right now the police believe you were after me and got Conway by mistake. So you came back to finish the job, but I got the drop on you. I fired to save my own life. Thanks for returning. I didn't dare hope you would."

VANCE laughed curtly. "You forgot one thing, Kent. How do you get around this gun in my fist?"

"The easiest problem of them all. It won't shoot, Vance. I gave Conway that gun when I told him you might come murder-bent to kill me. I didn't want him to shoot you. I wanted Conway dead and you blamed for it. Go on—pull the trigger. The firing pin is filed down so it doesn't quite hit the cartridge."

As he finished, Kent stepped up to the desk, pulled open the drawer and took out an automatic. He pointed this at Vance's chest.

"You may have the first shot," he laughed. "If you think I'm bluffing, try it. Go on—shoot!"

Vance dropped the gun. "I know it won't shoot, but I wanted to find out if you knew that too. You're all done, Kent. I told my story to someone who will take action if I'm killed. Know what's going to happen to you?"

"Maybe," Kent said harshly, "but I'm positive what's going to happen to you, Vance. And here it comes."

The automatic leveled. Kent squinted behind it, aiming carefully for the heart. His finger grew whiter and whiter on the trigger.

Behind Kent a voice spoke softly. "You're as close to being dead as any man ever was, Kent."

The lawyer turned quickly to meet the new threat. Lieutenant Harvey faced him, gun ready. Kent fired once. It was a wild shot. Harvey got him high in the left side and Kent gave a scream and staggered forward.

Harvey called, "Miss Conway, it's safe."

Ellen Conway came in fast. She hurried up to Vance and took both his hands in a tight grasp. Vance hoped she didn't notice how badly they shook.

"I knew you were telling the truth," she said. "And after you left, I went to see Lieutenant Harvey. I told him that Jeff was accused by the heirs of the Walker estate, of looting it. But Jeff wouldn't have touched a penny."

"She figured Kent was behind it," Harvey broke in. "Gave me good reasons for her suspicions too so I added them all up, figured in the story you told her—and which you should have told me. Kent had the answer so we came here to confront him. You were just going in so—we let you."

"Then you heard Kent admit he arranged it all?" Vance asked.

"You smashed the door open in his face and forgot to close it," Harvey said. "We just walked in and listened. It was very interesting. We'll have Manning, Mrs. Tover and all the others soon."

"Then I'm—not going to be arrested?"

Harvey shrugged. "You should be, son, but this was your fight all through and you did pretty well. You didn't hurt anybody and even if you did come here heeled, the gun wouldn't work. Thanks to Kent. Technically, I ought to haul you in—"

"But you won't, Lieutenant," Ellen Conway pleaded. "You can't. Eric Vance was only fighting to protect himself."

Harvey grinned. "I guess you could construe that harmless gun as evidence and not a lethal weapon. I'll favor you in my report, Vance. But I'd better get Kent to a hospital before he dies and cheats the chair."

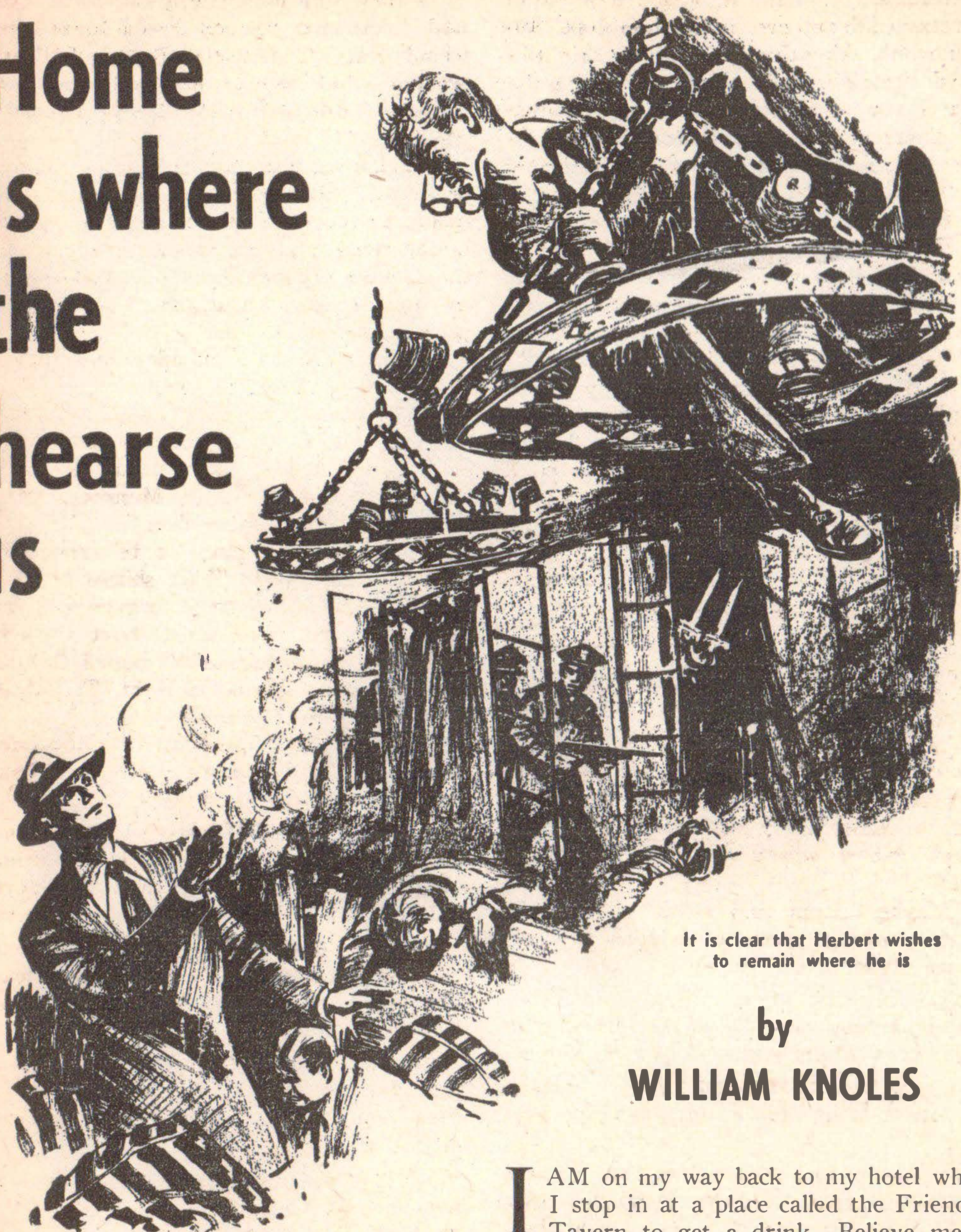
It was all over very fast. Vance wasn't taken away. And soon he and Ellen Conway were on the street.

She said, "Eric, Jeff would have liked you. And you did his memory a great favor. When—when everything is all over, will you come to see me?"

"Of course," Vance lied gracefully and hated himself for doing it. "First chance I get, Ellen. You know that."

He watched her walk down the street then and knew he'd never see her again. It occurred to him that serving two years in prison was only the beginning of his payment for a few moments of rashness. But it was comforting that she didn't regard him as the man who murdered her brother.

Home is where the hearse is



It is clear that Herbert wishes
to remain where he is

by

WILLIAM KNOLES

*Typhoon Townsend was the
big blow that brought
Herbert Hotspur home
in a breeze!*

I AM on my way back to my hotel when I stop in at a place called the Friendly Tavern to get a drink. Believe me I need one. Here I have driven five hundred miles into uncharted Northern California to dig up a publicity angle on Herbert Hotspur, Creepy Club's best selling mystery writer.

And what do I find? A high school botany instructor who looks like a high

school botany instructor. This I did not think possible. I am thinking that if all the Creepy Club authors are like him the Creepy Club Publishing Company will stay right behind the eight ball. Which is where they were before they hired me. Then I happen to glance at a copy of the local paper lying on the bar and right away the idea hits me.

"Hey, Mac," I call to the bartender.

He comes down the bar and gives me the once over. Though he tries to conceal his envy by grinning, I can see that he is impressed by my Hollywood sports clothes.

I poke the headline with my finger. "What's the angle on this local murder?"

"No angle," he says, "this guy Hinkle was found in a ditch with ninety-two slugs in him. The facts are in the paper."

Not for nothing have I seen all of Humphrey Bogart's movies. Right away I know my next move. I take out fifty cents and spread it on the bar in front of him. (It is in dimes.)

"I don't want the facts," I say, "I want the inside story." It has been my experience that bartenders usually know most of what goes on. In small towns they know all that goes on.

"Well," says Mac—that was really his name because it was inked on his shirt—"well, seeing as how you're a stranger, I guess I can talk freely." He pockets the fifty cents and then glances nervously up and down the bar. All this, you understand, is just to make me think I'm getting my money's worth. But I am patient and wait for him to go on.

"This Hinkle," Mac says, "was one of Juke Box Joe Denton's boys. Juke Box Joe is a big man in Santa Rosita. Owns every slot machine and juke box in town."

"He's the local crime king, huh?" I enquire.

MAC shakes his head. "No, I guess you'd call Big Jim Murphy that. Place a bet in Santa Rosita and you place it with Big Jim. Maybe you think it goes to a barber or a bell hop, but it gets back to Big Jim. You can call him top dog around here. But not in front of Juke Box Joe. They don't exactly get along.

"For a small town," I say, "you seem to be topeavy with low life."

Mac frowns. "Santa Rosita isn't such a small town. Twenty-two thousand. But I guess we do have more crooks than we need. If Juke Box and Big Jim don't get together they're going to give the town a bad name."

I pay Mac for the drinks and ask him the way to the *Clarion's* office. That is the name of the local paper. Here I spend a pleasant hour talking to the editor whose name is Fink or Finch. I do not quite catch it. I get back to my hotel around midnight and right away hit the sack. Believe me I am dead.

The next thing I know it is nine o'clock and the phone is ringing and someone is pounding on my door. I put the phone under my pillow but pretty soon the door bursts open and in rushes Herbert Hotspur. He is holding a newspaper in his hand and looks like he has been dead three days, what with being unshaven and having a funny glazed look in his eyes.

"Look!" he croaks, thrusting the paper at me. I look and right away I can see that this Finn fellow has done a good job. Smack on the first page is a box with the headline:

GANG WARFARE STILL RAGES.

An open letter to the police chief of Santa Rosita from Herbert Hotspur.

"Read it, Mr. Townsend," he says. That is my name—Townsend. He wipes his brow with a pale blue handkerchief. "Read what it says I said."

"I don't have to," I tell him, "I wrote it."

He pulls at his collar and stares at me kind of wild like. "Why?" he whispers, "why?" I can see there are drops of sweat on his face, which is strange as my room does not get the sun and consequently is not warm.

"Why?" I repeat. "Why because you are a public spirited citizen, aroused at the ineptitude of corrupt public officials, determined to rip the mask of evil from your home town. Singlehanded if necessary."

Much of this I am quoting from the open letter.

Hotspur looks a little sick. "But I don't know anything about crime or criminals," he says weakly.

"Mr. Hotspur," I say sternly, "all Creepy Club authors are experts in their chosen field. How can the author of *A Funeral Too Frequent* and *Gory Be* have no knowledge of crime?"

"But," says Hotspur, waving the paper in front of me, "what about right here where I call the mayor a pork barrel politician and the police chief a reputed crook?"

I put a hand on his shoulder in a brotherly fashion. "When you go racket busting in a big way, Herbert, someone is bound to get hurt. It's tough, but it's life."

Hotspur still looks unhappy. "It just isn't fair to say that 'one more hideous crime has been added to the growing list of unsolved murders in Santa Rosita.' Hinkle was the first murder we've had in forty-five years—and he was shot only two days ago."

"Herbert," I tell him, using his first name, "if you want to back down on this crusade, that's your affair. If you want to forsake the ideals your ancestors fought and died for, go right ahead. Turn your back on your city's hour of need, wash your hands of justice, clutch your thirty pieces of silver and go."

Herbert has a choking spell and I slap him fondly on the back. He is not a bad little guy even if he is kind of rabbity looking. "Mr. Townsend," he asks kind of feeble-like, "why do I have to be a remorseless man hunter like it says in the paper?"

"Herbert," I say, "look at it this way. Why do you go to a movie? Because it's good? No. Because it's had good publicity. Creepy Club Mysteries were in the red for years. Nobody buys mystery novels. They borrow them from their friends. And their friends borrow them from other friends. So what does Creepy Club do? They hire the best publicity man they can afford. Me." This is true. In Hollywood I am known as "Typhoon" Townsend, though my first name is really Tyrone.

[Turn page]

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I see I have Herbert's interest now, so I go on. "First I started a Find the Clue contest. Then I put whodunnit commercials on the radio and got testimonials from famous criminals, telling how they got helpful tips from Creepy Club mystery books. Now I am ready to start my most inspired campaign: glamorizing Creepy Club authors. You are the first. To the public you are now a dashing amateur criminologist putting his theories into blazing action."

Herbert is beginning to chew on his fingernails so I calm him by saying: "All you have to do, Herbert, is poke around town, ask a few people if they know who killed Hinkle. If you find out, wonderful. If you don't, the cops will most likely get his killers in a few days, and you'll get credit for goading them into action."

THE phone rings again which makes Herbert jump violently. It is possible he has been working too hard. I answer it and it is the local editor, Flynn. He says he's contacted the news services and they are giving Herbert's crime campaign full coverage. I tell him great and to come on up and we will discuss Herbert's next ultimatum to the police.

As soon as Herbert find out the press is coming he groans and bolts for the door. I do not stop him as I have to get dressed, and besides it is clear that Herbert is not going to be of much use in planning his campaign.

I order breakfast to be sent up and when Flint arrives we spend an hour or two making plans for Herbert. Then I call the L.A. representatives of a couple of picture magazines and they both say they will send photographers. After that Mr. Plunket, who is president of Creepy Club, calls and says he has read the news services reports and it is great stuff, great.

So what with one thing and another it is lunch time before I get around to remembering Herbert. Just then the phone rings again and who should be calling but Herbert himself. He starts right off calling me unpleasant names, which is unusual because Herbert is a very meek little man and aside from writing mystery novels has no vices.

After he calms down he says: "And then they shot at me."

"What!" I shout, moving the earpiece out a little so Flink can hear.

"Just as I was driving back to school," he goes on. "I'd already missed my nine o'clock class and was running past an open lot in back of the High School when bang! You should see the hole in my hat."

I am not certain but I think I can hear Herbert's teeth chattering. Fisk is making notes like mad on the back of an envelope.

"Now listen Herbert," I tell him, "go straight to the police. Demand protection. Tell them no citizen's life is safe when—"

"I did," Herbert says. "I'm phoning from outside the police station. They laughed at me. They thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. One of them gave me an apple to replace the hat. Said it made a better target. It was that bit in the open letter where I call them the scrapings of three states' underworld that annoyed them, I think."

I see Herbert has a point there so I tell him to go straight home and sit tight. He says he is going home to *get* tight, but I figure that is about the same thing so I hang up.

Fitch leaves to get an extra on his paper, but not before I give him a copy of Herbert's latest book, *Can't You Hear Me Killing Caroline?* He says he will run a review of it right away. Just in case he doesn't have time to have anyone read it, I give him a review which I have already written. It is a good one, though it is really only a review of the cover.

I have not yet had time to read the book itself.

I spend the afternoon pleasantly, visiting the local book stores and giving out posters. These are special composite jobs the art department of Creepy Club has worked up. They are big pictures of Herbert in a convict suit with a number hanging on his neck. Underneath in large black letters it says WANTED! Below this in very small print it explains that Herbert is America's Most Wanted Mystery Author and the number on his chest is the circulation of his last book. I figure it is a great idea and if it goes over

in his home town I will plaster the country with them.

By five o'clock I am really tired and stop in at the Friendly Tavern to get a beer. I stand Mac one and after a bit I say: "Mac, who does the smart money think killed Hinkle?"

Mac scratches his chin and thinks about it until I pull out another fifty cents. Then he says: "Well, some of the boys are saying that Harris was trying a little past posting for his boss, Juke Box Joe, and Big Jim got sore."

"You mean betting?" I ask. If I seem overly ignorant it is because long ago my mother told me never to smoke, drink, gamble or go out with fast women. Following her advice I have never gambled.

"Yeah," says Mac. "You see the direct wire service from the big Eastern race tracks doesn't come any farther west than Las Vegas. Now sometimes the actual post time isn't always the time in the papers. So all you have to do is have some guy in Vegas phone the results to you. Sometimes they come in a good ten minutes before listed post time in California. Then you trot round to the bookie and place your bet. It's been done every now and then ever since they stopped the race wire services in California. But you have to be careful. So maybe Hinkle wasn't careful."

"That's an angle, all right," I tell him. I pay him for my beer and go back to the hotel. The clerk tells me Herbert has been ringing all afternoon, so I call him. He is not there, but his landlady says he was in his room all day packing until the two police detectives came, and then he left with them.

I THINK there may be a police persecution angle on this so I call Filch. He acts kind of cagey on the phone until I mention the police detectives. Then I hear mumbling as if he is talking to someone in his office.

Then he says: "You're crazy, Typhoon"—we have become good friends by this time—"the chief of police is right here in my office and he says all his boys are attending a pistol shooting match."

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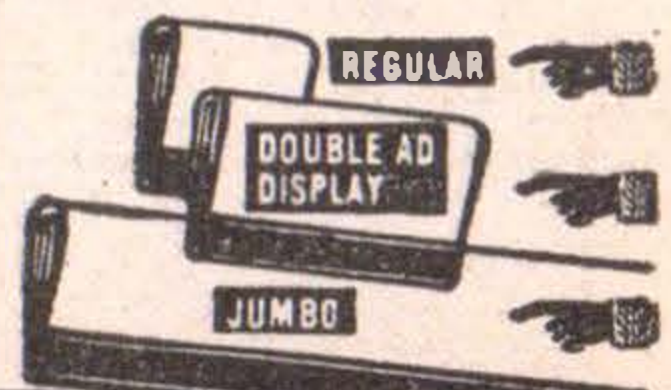
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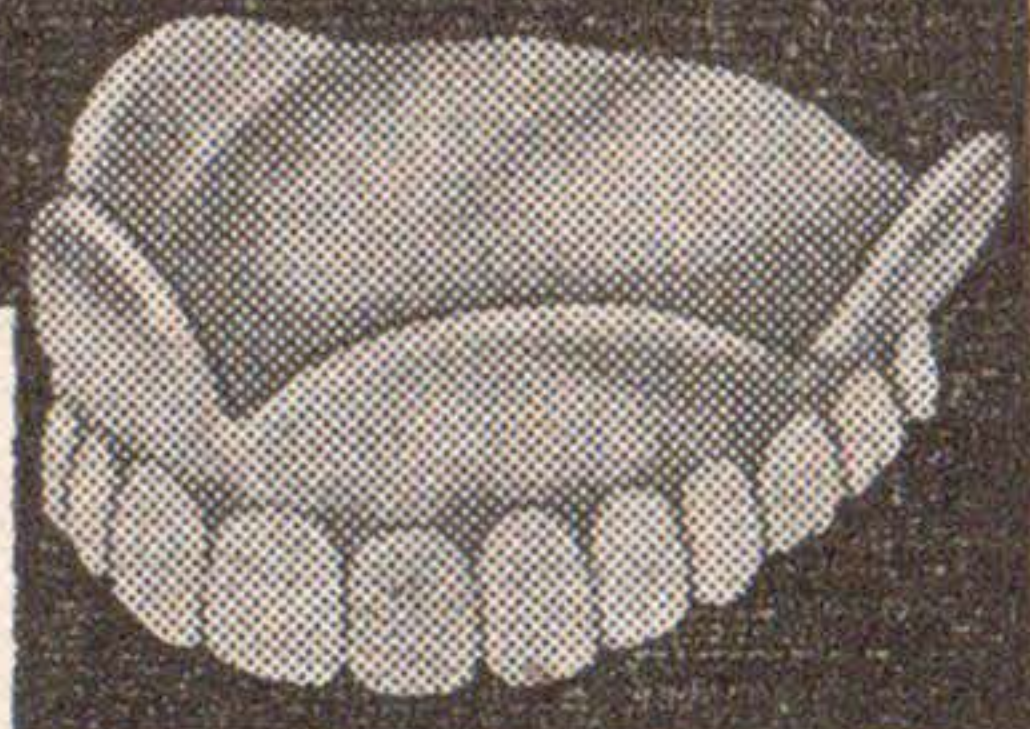
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There is silence for a minute while we listen to each other think. Then we yell together: "Kidnaped!" What an angle!

Flick hangs up so he can get another extra on the streets, and I call Mr. Plunket long distance. He gets really excited and says he will get the printers to work night and day so we will have enough copies of Herbert's books to meet the demand. He also says he will call the art department and get them to design a special dust cover with black borders in case Herbert makes the supreme sacrifice. He will then be eligible for the Creepy Club posthumous Medal of Honor.

As soon as Mr. Plunket hangs up I go back to the Friendly Tavern and hand Mac a dollar bill.

"Mac," I says, "things are reaching a climax. How can I get in touch with Juke Box Joe and Big Jim?"

Mac gives me fifty cents change and says: "Try the phone book."

This I do. I call the number listed for J. B. J. Denton and an uncultured voice answers and says: "Spit it out, pal."

"Let me speak to Herbert," I tell him.

"Hey, Al," I can hear the voice yelling, "anyone around here named Herbert?" I cannot hear what Al says but it must be "no" because the voice comes back and tells me to get lost. I hang up.

I then call Big Jim Murphy's number and again ask to speak to Herbert. This time a real cagey voice says: "Herbert? Herbert? What would a Herbert be doing here?"

This sounds suspicious to me so I say: "Don't kid me, friend, I want to speak to Herbert Hotspur right away."

"I'm afraid you have been misinformed," says the cagey voice. "Mr. Hotspur is not here."

"Hah!" I say, hanging up.

It is now obvious to me that they have put the snatch on Herbert. Otherwise why would they be so polite?

"Mac," I asks, "what would Big Jim want to kidnap Herbert for?"

Mac looks thoughtful. "Probably to bump him off," he says at last. "I guess he figures Herbert's putting the heat on him."

This I realize is serious. Herbert has a contract with Creepy Club for three more books. Right away I decide Herbert must be rescued.

I borrow another nickel from Mac and call the police department. "Listen," I tell them, "this is Herbert Hotspur's publicity agent." That is as far as I get. A snarling voice at the other end makes some untrue statements about my ancestry and then the line goes dead. I call twice more with the same result before I realize they do not want to cooperate. To say I am annoyed is to understate the matter. No public servant should use language like that to a taxpayer.

Then I get an idea, this time a real brain wave.

"Mac," I say, "where would Big Jim be likely to take Herbert?"

Mac ponders. "My guess would be they've already buried him," he says. "But if they wanted to work him over a little first, they'd most likely take him to Big Jim's roadhouse just out of town. They call it the Bon Repose."

I CANNOT help smiling at Mac's French accent, but this is the information I need and right away I call Juke Box Joe's number again.

"This is a stool pigeon," I say in a voice like George Raft, "lemme speak to Joe." In a minute or so Joe comes on the phone. "Listen J.B.J.," I tell him. "This is a hot tip. Herbert Hotspur has dug up enough evidence on you to send you up for fifty years. What's more he's right now over at Big Jim's selling you out."

"Thanks pal," Joe says, "my boys and I will attend to it right away." We both hang up.

It is hard to keep from chuckling out loud over the situation. I can imagine Big Jim's face when Juke Box Joe and his gang show up. Only Typhoon Townsend would think of having one crook rescue Herbert from another.

I tell Mac and he agrees it's pretty funny, except that now there are two gangs after Herbert's blood. I can see that he has

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found the weak link in my scheme.

I ring Fitts and he says I couldn't have called at a better time as some newsreel men have just arrived. He says they will leave immediately for the Bon Repose. I ask him to stop by for me and he says they will right after they stop at the drug store to buy some extra film for his photographer.

SURE enough in about five minutes Fipps drives up and we depart for the Bon Repose to record Herbert's last stand for posterity. It is true we do not make as good time as we might have, but as Fisch explains, there would be no point in being arrested for speeding, and besides the newsreel men are following in two other cars behind and might easily get lost.

When we near the roadhouse I am compelled to admire Big Jim's architectural taste. The Bon Repose is a rambling sort of building done in English Tudor style with California Mission type trimmings, except the front which is thatched with palm leaves South Sea fashion. The whole makes a very attractive picture what with flowers and such growing around and makes me realize more fully the beauty and tranquility to be found in the Golden State of California. I express such thoughts to Fills but his mind is elsewhere.

We park outside next to a marble statue of a Greek wood nymph and get out to consider the situation. It is clear all is not well within. In fact the noise coming from the Bon Repose resembles closely the sound of a cattle stampede through a bowling alley.

Pretty soon a chair comes flying through a window, followed by two men, followed by a small table. Chippendale.

The newsreel men set up their cameras, and the rest of us just sort of stand around and wait. Fitz says it isn't as if he could do anything, what with his football knee and all, and I cannot help but agree with him as my rheumatism would make me a great handicap to our side in a roughhouse. It is not really fair to ask the newsreel men to interfere in local matters, as one of them points out.

After half an hour or so, the noise begins to die down, with only an occasional thud or groan. It seems more than likely that the two gangs have fought each other to a standstill, if not a knockdown.

We cautiously advance through what had been the main entrance (the palm fronds unfortunately have collapsed), and such indeed proves to be the case. The whole place inside is a mess, what with unconscious bodies, broken tables and chairs and a general untidiness. All is reasonably quiet. It is true that under one pile of bodies a man is still cursing and snarling as he twists someone's foot, but as it is clearly his own foot it is safe to say that serious altercations have ended.

After the local photographer has taken his pictures we begin to search for Herbert. The newsreel men are not very cooperative in this, as they are trying to get some of the semiconscious combatants to renew hostilities outside, the light indoors being poor for motion picture work. After ten minutes searching it is hard not to assume that Herbert is missing.

Then I get another brainwave. Not for nothing do I patronize movies three times a week. Right away I turn on the light switch and look up. Sure enough, there is Herbert outlined against the chandelier.

"Come down Herbert," I call, "the news-
[Turn page]


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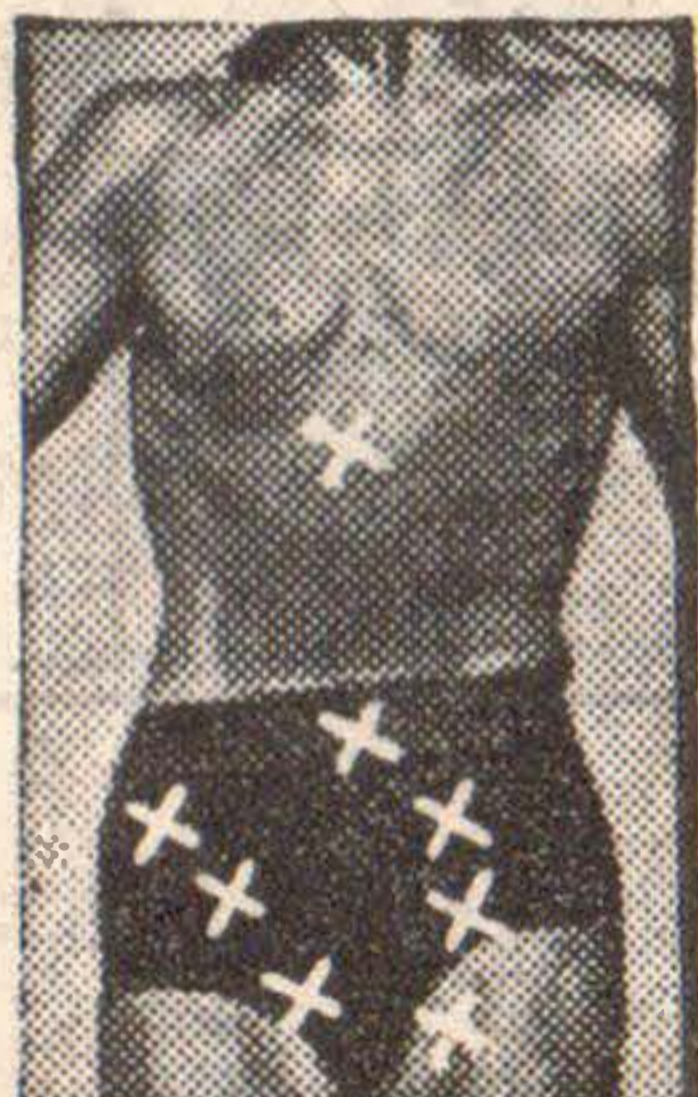


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reel men's time is very valuable."

It is clear however, that Herbert wishes to remain where he is. Fortunately the matter is solved by the chandelier's chain breaking suddenly. After Herbert is dusted off I am relieved to find he has only minor injuries.

However he seems to have caught a severe chill, as he is shaking violently.

LUCKILY the police riot squad arrives at this point, and we are able to borrow a tommy gun for Herbert to pose with. We take about a dozen shots of Herbert with his foot resting on both Big Jim and Juke Box Joe, as well as on three other unidentified gentlemen. If you have seen any copies of the photographs, you will be interested to know that I am the man looking over Herbert's left shoulder. Actually I am holding him up.

We leave the mopping up operations for the police and depart for town. I am still worried about what the two gangs will do to Creepy Club's star writer after they recover. Fish however, says that crime is through in Santa Rosita. Criminals can survive gang wars, he says, but they cannot stand being laughed at. And no one will take Big Jim or Juke Box Joe seriously after the results of Herbert's one-man crusade. As it turns out, he is right, and within a week both of them have left town for good. What is more, they leave together. This is another result of Herbert's campaign that I am proud of—bringing together two life-long enemies. As the poet says, blood is after all thicker than water.

I myself leave Santa Rosita as soon as Herbert is out of the hospital. Much though I would like to stay I must depart for Boston where Creepy Club's best selling female author—a sweet old lady of seventy-five—makes her home. I have a plan for pub-

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licizing her which is nothing short of hydro-atomic.

Just before my train is due to leave I call on Herbert, and what do you think I find? Herbert, hard at work on a new book. Such loyalty to Creepy Club is touching. He tells me it is a horror story, the first ten chapters telling how the victim was tortured to death, slowly. He is calling it *Death of a Book Salesman*. It is obvious he has a terrific idea, but I cannot say I think much of his title.

Not until I am half way to Boston do I remember that we have forgotten to solve the mystery of Hinkle's decease. However I do not let it prey on my mind as it is my personal theory that Hinkle committed suicide. And that, after all, is against the law. The people we must consider first are the respectable, law-abiding citizens. Such as myself.



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—Oscar Hammerstein

He has a right to criticize who has the heart to help.

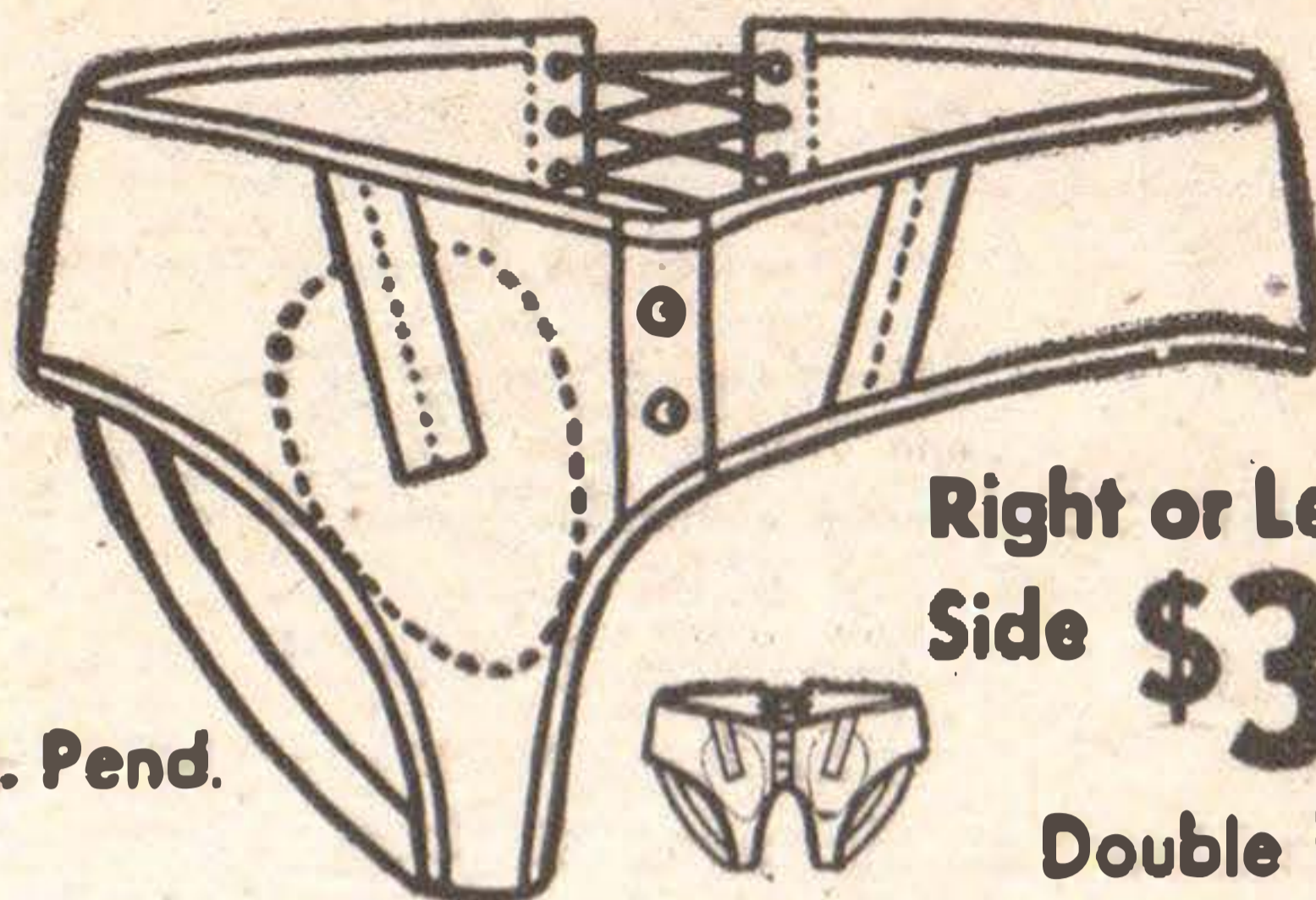
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