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A THRILLING
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DETECTIVE

FEATURING

**DEAD MEN
DON'T NEED BAIL**

a mystery novelet by

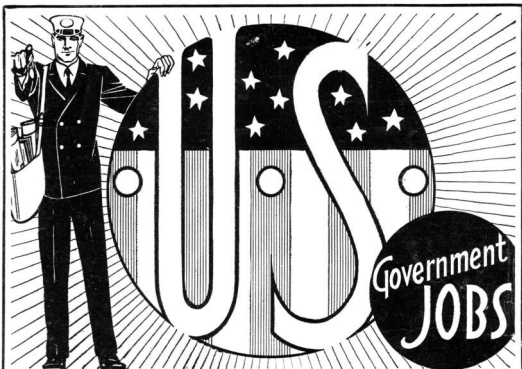
BURT SIMS

**THE BUTCHER
ALWAYS SMILES**

a Don Marko novelet by

STEWART STERLING





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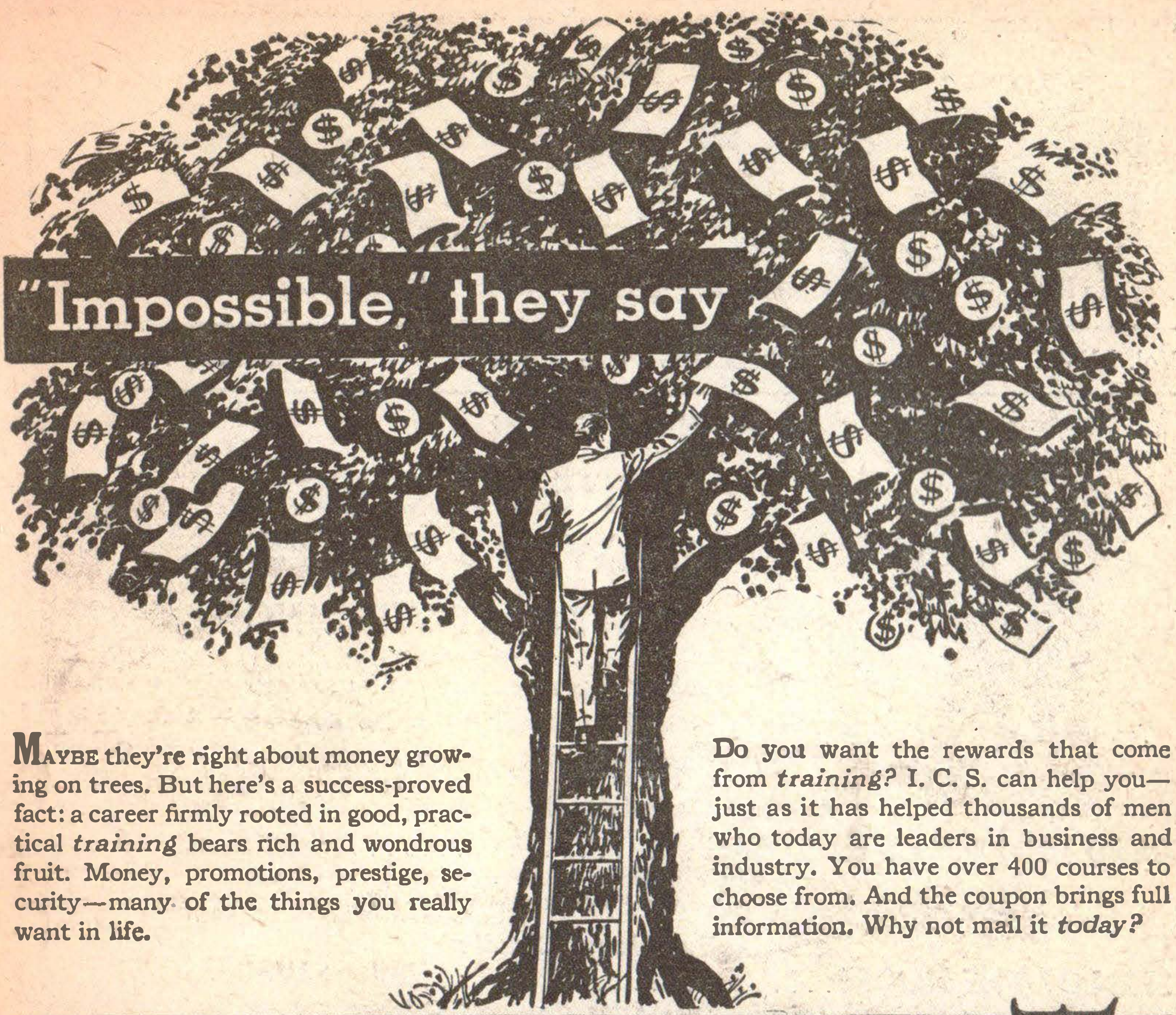
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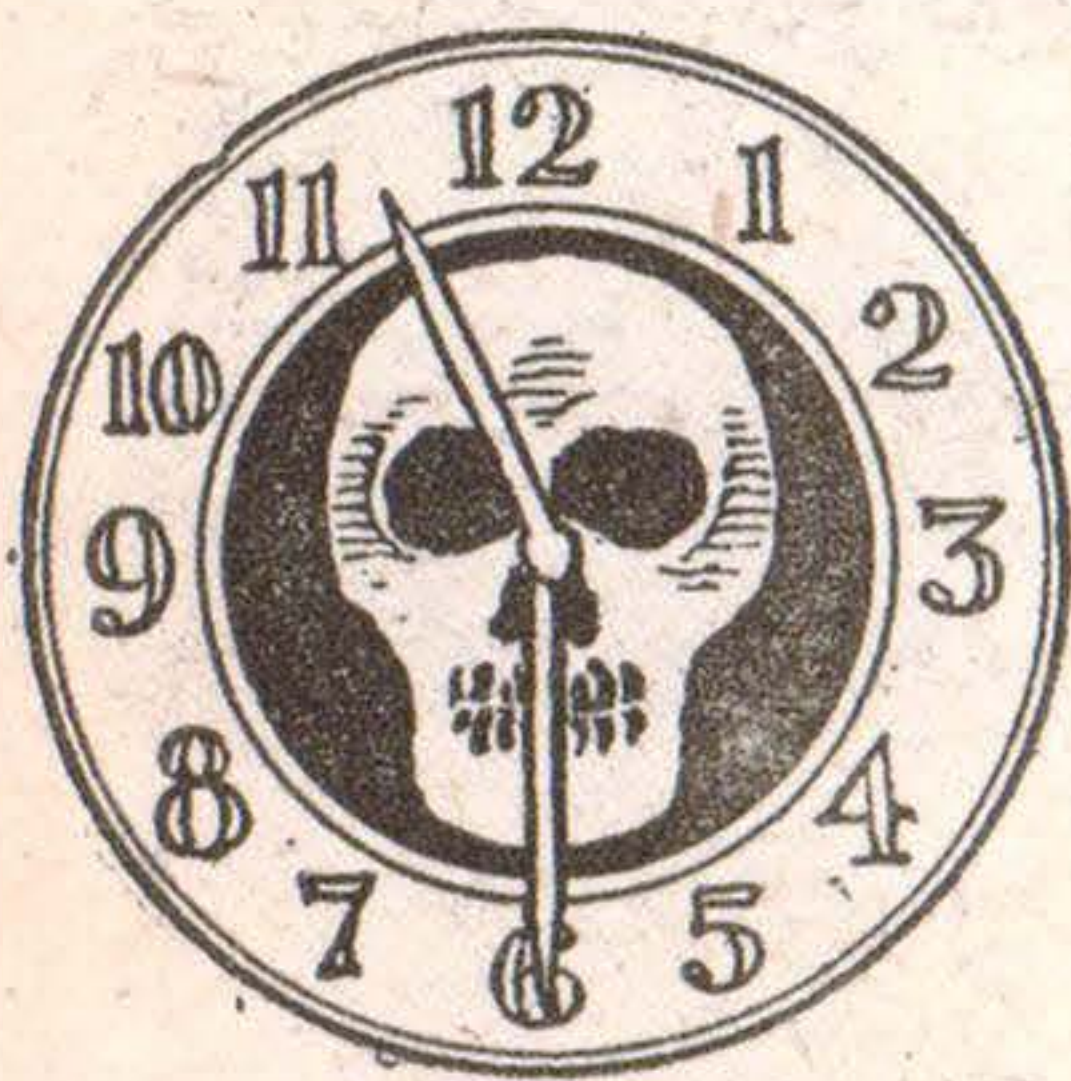
THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXVII, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

February, 1951

A Don Marko Novelet



THE BUTCHER ALWAYS SMILES

By STEWART STERLING

When Nimblett's store detective tackles the case of a shoplifting redhead, fifty-eight stolen watches lead him to a realm of violence where a strangler stalks!

9

Another Complete Novelet

DEAD MEN DON'T NEED BAIL..... Burt Sims 46

Trying to clear himself of the suspicion of manslaughter, Private Eye Clint Morgan bumps into something which dwarfs his own trouble!

A Detective Novel Classic

SIGN OF THE NOOSE..... Robert Wallace 79

The lady in the trunk had been stabbed five times, and Delgado, the gambler, was betting that before the party was over—the killer would strike again!

Short Stories

THE TOUCH OF DEATH..... Wayland Rice 29

That green door was strictly a one-way passage for the condemned

KILL ONE, KILL TWO..... B. J. Benson 38

If Danny's pal had been slain, his killers would pay, bullet for bullet

MURDER COMES HOME..... D. L. Champion 68

There was a safe to be cracked—and fifty thousand dollars to gain

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Everything was make-believe in this case—except the corpse!

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A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

LAW AND (SOME) ORDER..... Harold Helfer 67

An entertaining collection of true anecdotes

"Sign of the Noose," Copyright, 1941, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in February, 1942, Detective Novels Magazine

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I Send You Parts To Build This Equipment

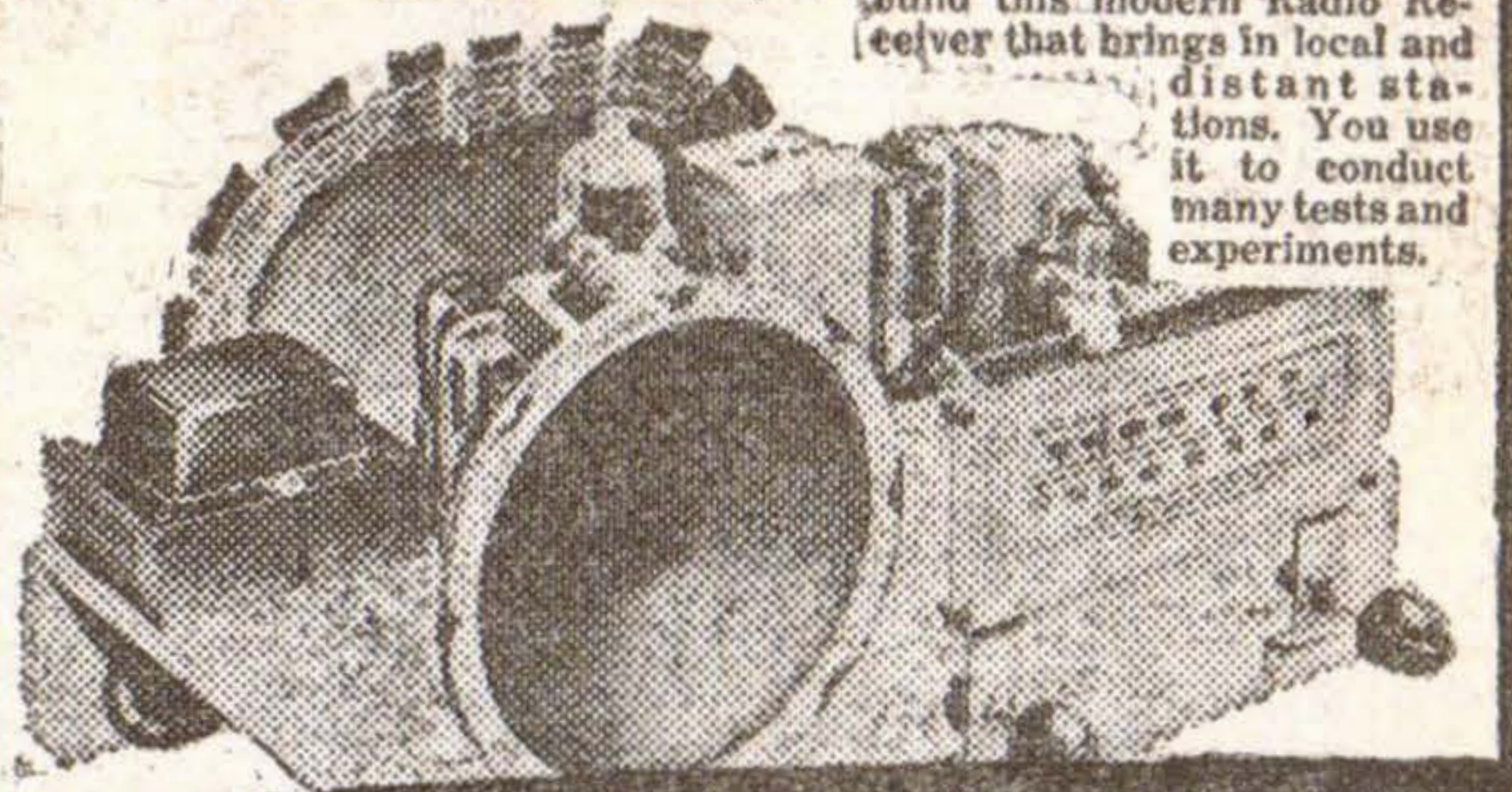


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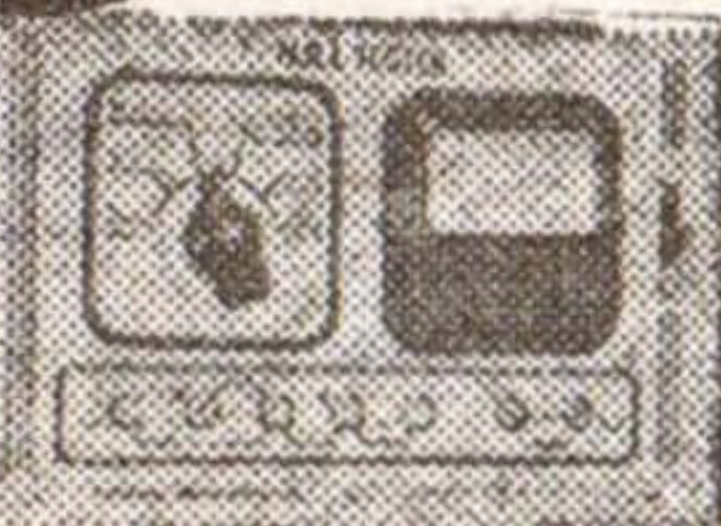
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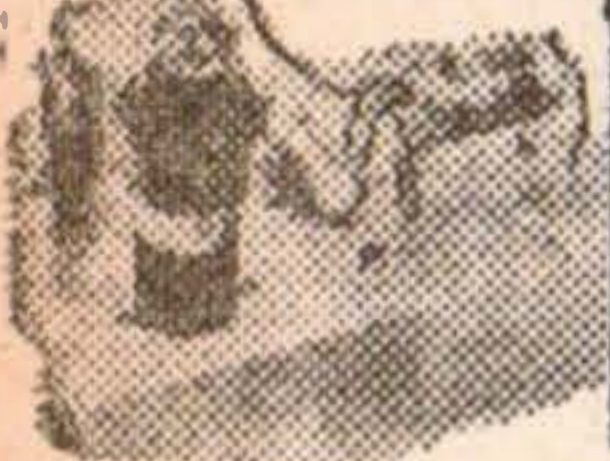


YOU BUILD this Power Pack as part of my new Communications Course. Use it to conduct fascinating experiments with frequency amplifiers, multipliers, buffer stages, etc.

YOU BUILD this Superheterodyne Receiver Circuit and conduct Frequency Modulation experiments and many other tests as part of my Servicing Course.



YOU BUILD this Signal Generator as part of my Servicing Course for more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many interesting tests and experiments.



VETERANS

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YOU BUILD this Wavemeter as part of my new Communications Course. Use it with Oscillator you also build that furnishes basic power to transmitter and determines transmitter frequency.



I TRAINED THESE MEN AT HOME

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, WQOX." —T. S. Norton, Hamilton, O.

"I received my 2nd Class Radiotelegraph License and worked on ships. Now with Station WEAN as control operator." —R. Arnold, Rumford, R. I.


"Today I am considered an expert Radio-Television Technician. Have 4 employees. Radiorepair business has doubled." —F. G. Miller, Toledo, Ohio.

"N. R. I. has been my stepping stone from a few hundred dollars to over \$4,000 a year as a Radio Engineer." —A. B. Michaels, Trenton, Georgia.

"Two months after starting, took a part-time job. Now working full time. Make \$200 a month plus commission on servicing." —L. McNiel, Rockdale, Texas.

"While learning, made \$5, \$10 a week in spare time. Now have spare-time shop at home and earn up to \$25 a week." —Leander Arnold, Pontiac, Michigan.

MAIL COUPON! FIND OUT ABOUT THIS TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY



Headquarters

STEP up and shake hands with a new friend, folks. No—he's not a private eye! He's a reporter for the *Morning Herald* in thriving Johnson City. He used to be on the rackets angle at City Hall, but that's before he got tangled with the crooked unions, the gunsels and the town's petty crooks. Someone even went so far as to bump off the fellow who took his place in easing the lid off the garbage can of unsavory city politics. He's quite a man! His name is Gregg Lane and we present him in **BY-LINES CAN BE HEADLINES**, by Noel Loomis. A grand novelet coming next issue!

For years, scores of underworld characters mumbled under their breaths that some day, some one of their caliber would "get" Gregg Lane—not only for his courageous writing as a newspaper man, but for his two-fisted behavior as a man of action. Didn't Lane actually shoot and kill a man during those building-trade riots? Didn't it even come out that the slain man was an agitator for "Toothy" Fellowes, overall rackets king of the city?

A Marked Man

Not only are the sinister elements against him, but the smoothies on the legal side of the fence are also after his scalp. Wouldn't Hughes, the County Attorney, give his right eye to put Lane behind bars? The reason for this has nothing to do with our story, except that it has something to do with the lawman's wife. Maybe it was before she married Hughes—maybe it wasn't!

Anyway, it seems that no matter what way the cat jumps, Gregg Lane is a marked man. Demoted as a reporter to the status of "handling parades," forced to be always on the alert for a bullet in the back from cop or

robber, Lane is seriously thinking of going elsewhere. And when our story opens—it is Friday the Thirteenth!

But Lane is a fighter by both instinct and nature. Also his "nose for news" has always twitched for the *big* story. No epitaph could possibly be better than the yarn that would uncover the chief spider in Johnson City's ugly web. So when Scotty Webb, managing editor of the *Herald*, wants Lane to take the rap and stand trial for the riot killing, the young reporter is seriously considering it—only he is afraid of juries. He is also aware of the sinister influence of a jealous county attorney.

Charged With Manslaughter

But the big snowball of gathering evidence against him starts very simply. Coming out of a parking lot, Lane bumps the fender of a car belonging to one Loren Caldwell. The damage to the man's car could easily be covered by a two-spot, but when said sleek-looking Caldwell finds out Lane carries no liability insurance, a bill for \$81.00 comes to Lane in the mail!

But that is nothing to the trumped-up hit-and-run charge which brings our reporter face-to-face with a manslaughter rap! The odd part of it is, the whole thing starts as a sob story in Gregg's own paper—all about the poor old man with grandchildren to support, ruthlessly slain in the streets. Gregg is forced to smile when he sees how thickly they have piled on the corn. *He* knows that the victim is one of Toothy Fellowes' pool-runners.

But Gregg Lane soon has reason to smile on the other side of his face. The number of the car reported by the police is *his* car and they even find human blood on the fender! Lane knows very well that unless he takes up the

(Continued on page 107)

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



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

privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This Free Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you* how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. Use the coupon below and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed free book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)

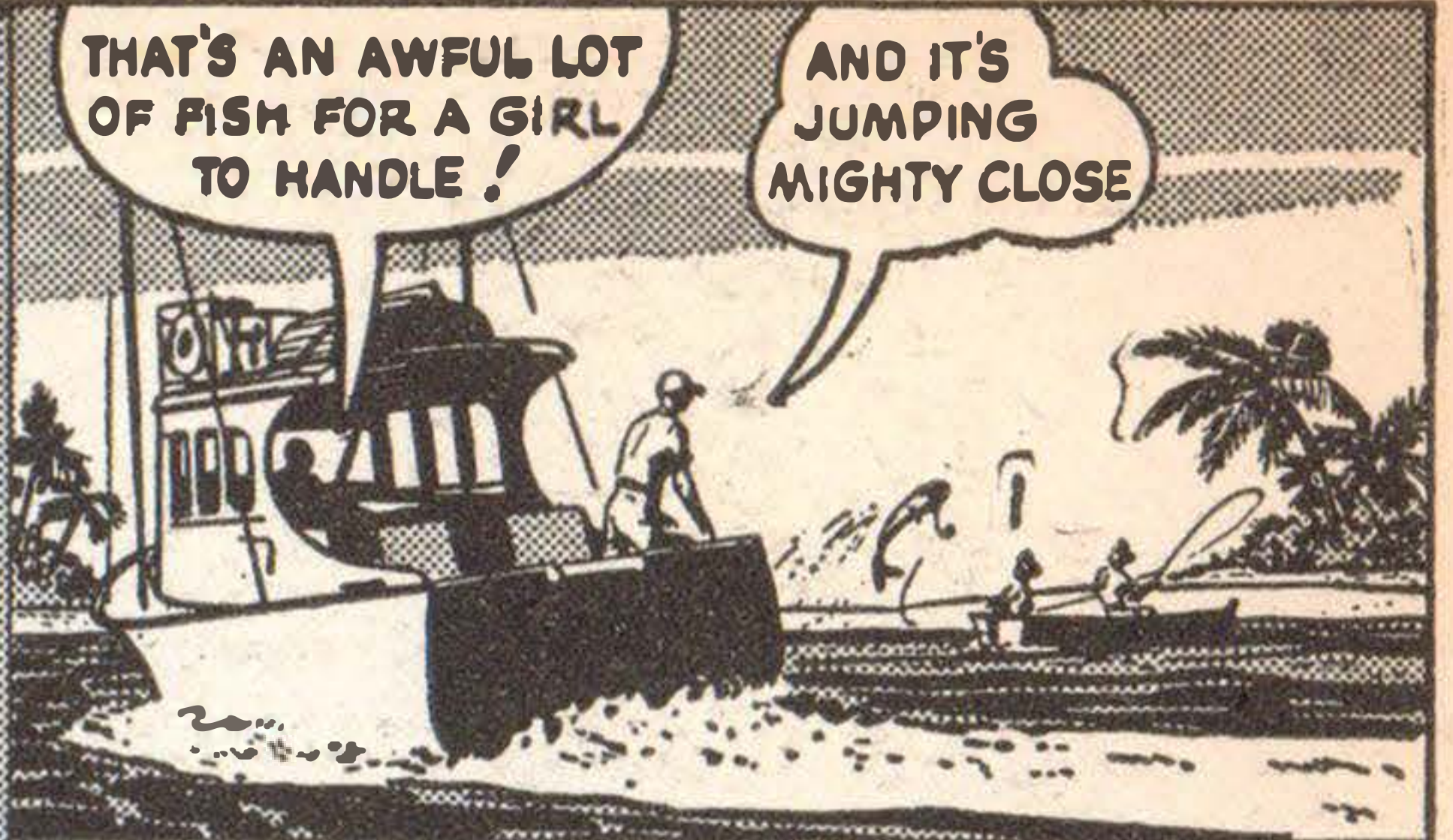
Scribe X.L.J., The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
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Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

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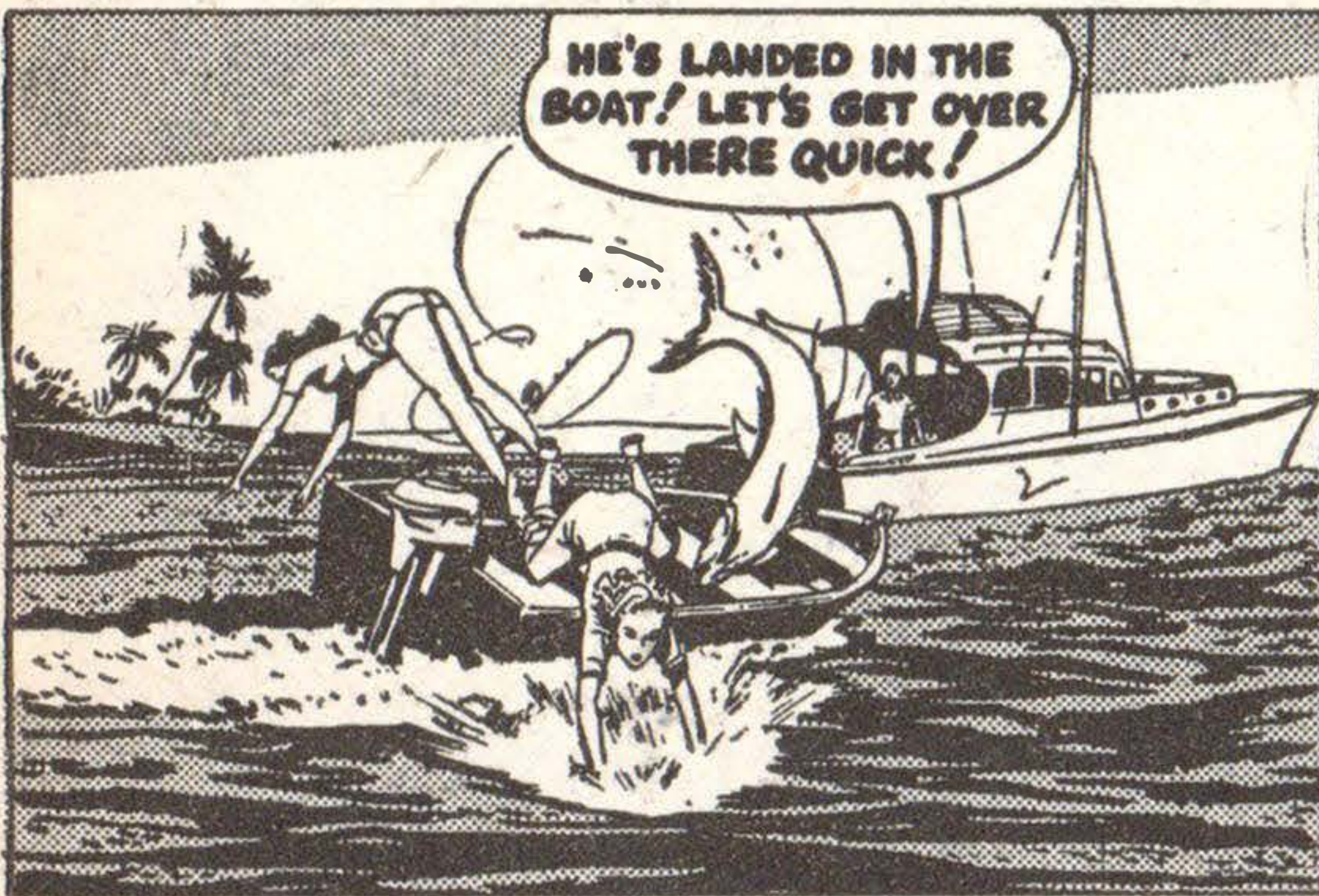
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



THAT'S AN AWFUL LOT OF FISH FOR A GIRL TO HANDLE!

AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE

JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!



HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN

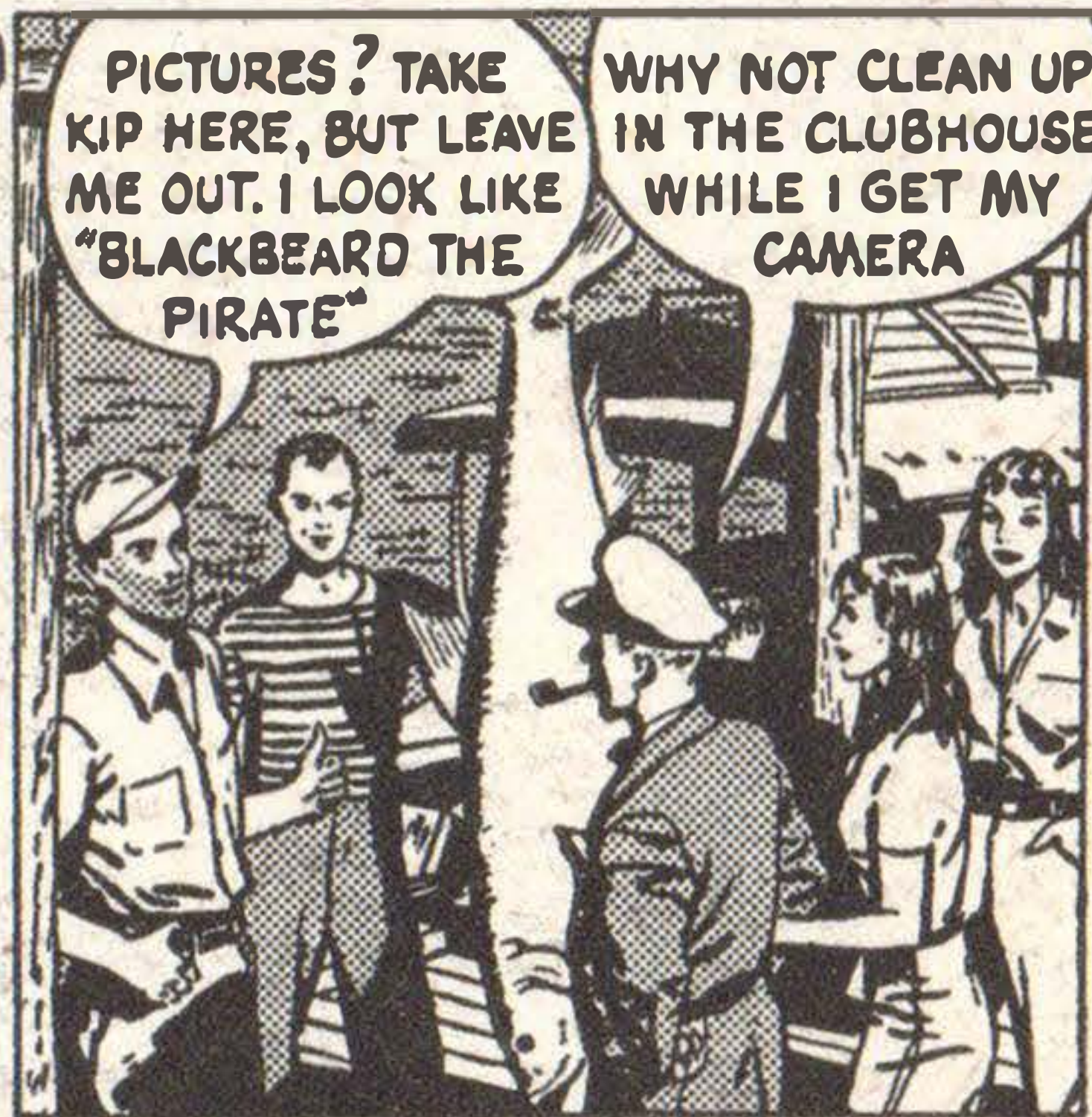


THAT'S OUR PIER

HOW'S MY FISH?

RESTING QUIETLY

SHE'S A KNOCKOUT



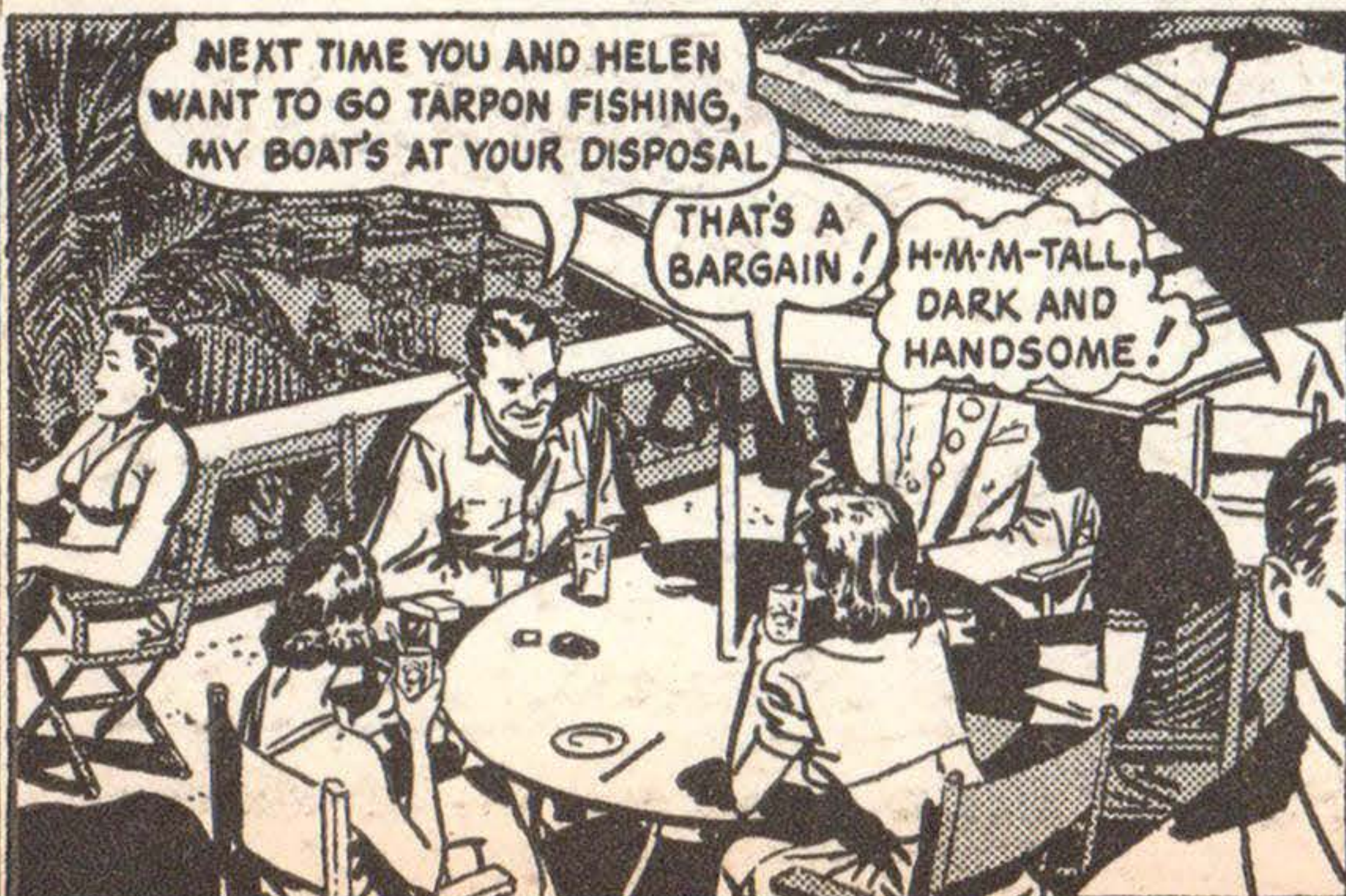
PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA



SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN



NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL

THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME!

THIN GILLETTES GIVE THE BEST-LOOKING, MOST COMFORTABLE SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE. UNIFORMLY KEEN AND LONG LASTING, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT

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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES



The BUTCHER ALWAYS SMILES

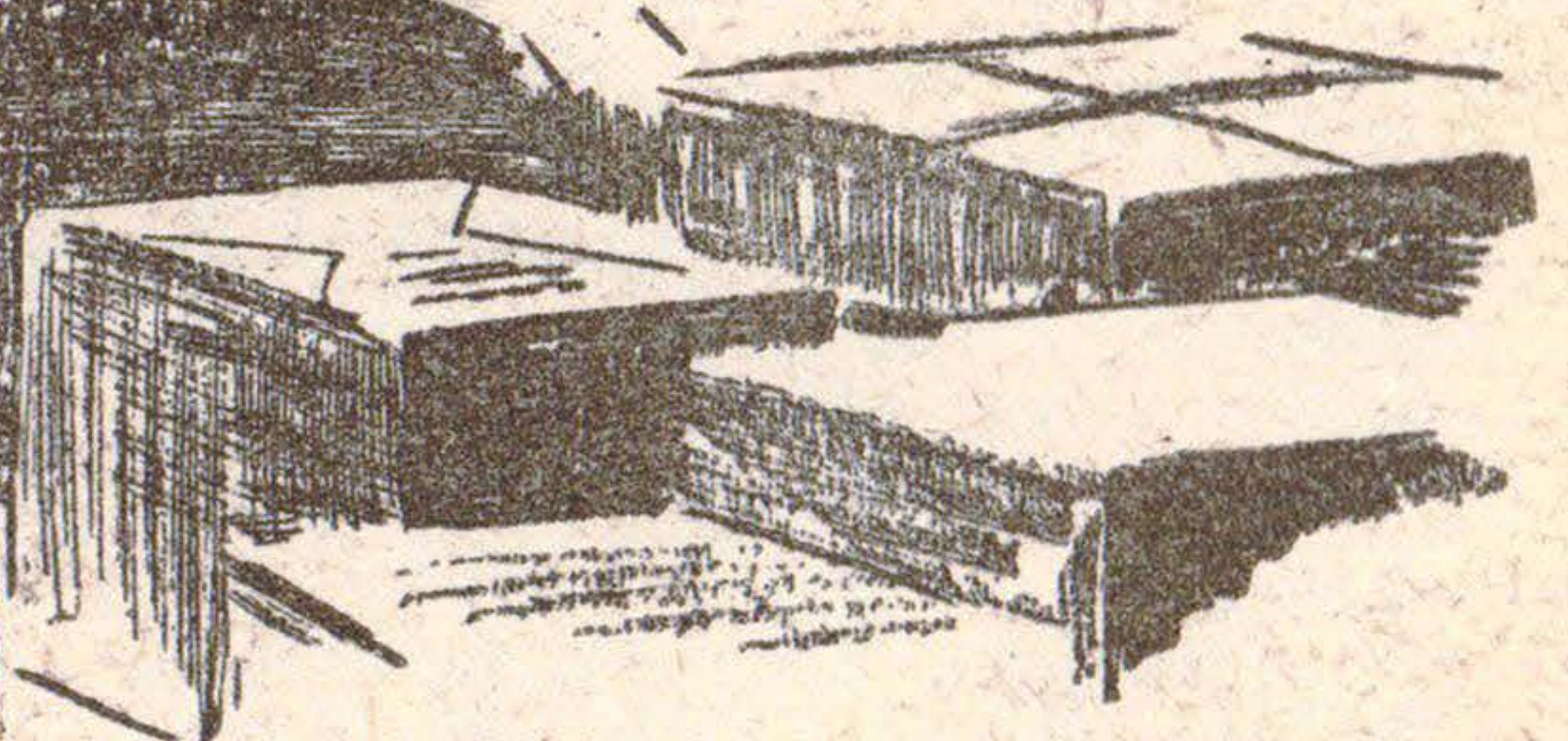
CHAPTER I

SHORTAGE AT THE STORE

TENSELY she sat on the edge of the bed in the half-darkness, listening to the footsteps pounding up the stairs just beyond her locked door. The ghostly fingers of the alarm clock on the bed-table said eleven-thirty. It was time—if he was coming.

Footsteps echoed loudly on the thin carpeting of the hall outside her one-room-and-bath. Then they went past, moving toward the fourth floor. She

Hands loosened the gags
—girl's hands



A DON MARKO NOVELET BY STEWART STERLING

Fifty-eight stolen women's wrist watches lead Nimblett's store dick to a realm of intrigue and violence where a deadly strangler stalks!

Don Marko Tackles the Puzzling Case of the

shivered slightly, tucked a stray strand of hair under her jaunty beret, nervously. He could have been delayed. There were any number of things which might have held him up. He'd be along any minute.

The traffic roar from the Avenue came through the closed window like distant surf. The pink light of the neons on the Village Grotto sign, filtering through the slats in the Venetian blind, made wavy ripples on the brown round hatbox at her feet. Like sand ripples on a Cuban beach, after the surf had pounded it.

Her mouth felt dry. But that was natural, wasn't it? She'd had to pack in such a rush. And at a time like this, a girl was a fool if she wasn't keyed up a little. Probably there'd be time for a drink at the airport, anyway.

The rap at the door brought her to her feet with her heart hammering. She'd been so concerned with her own feelings she hadn't even heard him! She ran to the door, unlocked it, flung it open.

"I thought you were never—"

Her voice died to a terrified whisper, to a strangled moan.

....to nothing.

Then night ran its course and morning came.

A FEW blocks away, over on Fifth Avenue, few persons keep their eyes straight ahead while passing Nimblets. There's too much on display behind the gleaming plate glass. Even at eight-thirty on this blustery morning, those hustling to shop, store or office twisted curious heads for a glimpse at the resort windows. Sleek sirens in navel-flaunting swim suits lounged languidly on real sand beneath candy-striped parasols and gay cabana awnings. YOUR WINTER VACATION OUTFIT IS HERE . . . AT NIMBLETS.

In his office on the third floor of *The Store For Savings*, Don Marko thought of that Palm Beach display with bitter resentment. That was the sort of thing that made it tough for store employees; it was like being a bank teller or cashier, working all day with thousands, never being able to handle much

of their own outside of business hours. Take these clerks—was it any wonder some of them had *their* heads turned by constant exposure to luxuries not many would ever be able to afford—legitimately?

This Celia Ludlow now, the salesgirl Myron Gotch had just phoned about in such agitation. She'd been working in Jewelry for a couple of years, making a pretty decent salary for a youngster. But maybe the strain of handling thousand-dollar brooches and three-thousand-dollar necklaces as if they were dime store gadgets had begun to get to her.

He studied the Confidential Personnel Card he'd just taken from the file. The photograph showed a pert blonde with frank, friendly eyes; a short, snub nose; an agreeably attractive mouth. Ludlow, Celia Grant, 24, 921 Jane Street, Manhattan, might, from the snapshot, be taken for one of those Junior Leaguers from the East Seventies just as easily as for the salesgirl who waited on them. Except that the swanky-pants cuties didn't need to steal their jewelry. And apparently Celia had.

Don Marko rubbed his hands over his thin, deeply-tanned face, ran his fingers unhappily through close-cropped, prematurely gray hair. This was starting out to be one of those grim days. The part of his work he liked least was checking up on Nimblets' own people. Outwitting shoplifters, giving the bum's rush to bag-snatchers, putting the arm on pickpockets—those things he handled with unemotional efficiency. But he hated to call the precinct wagon for one of the home team.

He slipped the card in his pocket, called the switchboard to tell the chief operator he'd be in Mr. Gotch's department, took the Protection elevator to the ground floor.

The doors were still closed. Stock boys wheeled empty dollies back to the freight elevators. Salesgirls fussed with counter displays. Information clerks listened to one of the assistant merchandise managers expound on the day's Special Promotions. Everybody was busy—except in Jewelry.

Jewelry Salesgirl and the Shoplifting Redhead!

There by the flat silver counter, four clerks huddled as if waiting for funeral services to start. At the other end of the department, Gotch flapped feverishly through the sheets of his running-inventory ledger.

Don said quietly: "Trying to give everybody on the floor the heebies, looking as if you've lost your last friend?"



DON
MARKO

"Gosh, Don, it's worse than that! I've lost fifty-eight Women's Wrists, most of 'em diamond-studded. All the way from our thirty-eight-dollar seventy-five Special to the Lady Ambassadors at twelve hundred and fifty! You know what this means?"

"Sure. The bonding company will pay our loss. The police will catch up with Miss Ludlow. You'll catch hell from the front office for not double-checking the trays before they were put in your safe last night."

Myron Gotch fingered his long, sharp beak of a nose. He scowled until the thin, black eyebrows met beneath the tall, round dome of his partly bald forehead. "That I could take. But I'm in a lot deeper than that, Don. And I guess there isn't one thing that can be done about it."

"Reported it to the big boss yet?" Don

liked this gaunt, homely specimen. Gotch knew his business from amethyst to zircon; Nimblets had the biggest jewelry volume, year in year out, of any department store on the Avenue.

"I didn't even let the bonding company know. All I did was ring you. Because—look Don." He put a bony hand on the Protection Chief's arm. "I was out with this Ludlow kid, on a party, a couple nights ago. Yeah, I know, I know. It's not done. But I did it. Extenuating circumstances, I thought at the time. Now I think I was being played for a patsy. She's cleared out with about ten thousand bucks' worth of wrist-watches—and I'm sunk for keeps. I might as well shoot myself."

DON looked at Gotch sympathetically, then shrugged.

"Waste a good cartridge? When you can go up to the sixth and jump out the window? Don't be silly." Don knuckled him in the short ribs, gently. "Who else knows about this—uh—party you had?"

Gotch groaned. "I didn't even go out with her myself. Ed Siddon, of Catawba Rings, up in Providence—he was in town; he wanted a whirl with a girl. So I asked Kay Wessler if she knew anyone." He reddened under Don's calm stare. "Yeah, I been out with Kay before. She's my senior saleslady. You know Kay?"

"Sure. Nice." Don glanced down the length of the clock counter at the willowy brunette with the upswept hairdo; Kay Wessler was the sort of girl who'd look well-groomed after she'd been in the vortex of a cyclone, slim, cool, poised. But behind the poise, as her gaze met Don's, something very near panic.

She only hesitated a moment before she started toward them:

"Mr. Marko," she said tensely, "I don't believe Celia would ever do a thing like this. I know her too well. She wouldn't! She couldn't!"

Don said: "Watches aren't here. She isn't here. So?"

"So," Kay said, "something must have happened to her."

"That's a maybe," Don admitted. "But let's start with what we know for sure. We know something's happened to ten thousand bucks' worth of tickers. How'd *that* happen?"

The five-to-nine gong rang sharply

through the store. From the central loudspeaker came a briskly pleasant voice:

"Good morning. Let's make this a good morning for Nimblets by remembering that talk doesn't sell merchandise. The merchandise talks for itself—if you let it." The invisible speaker went on over the last minute hubbub before Doors Open.

Gotch had a sickly grin as he gestured in despair. "Those watches would have screamed value; we've never had such an assortment. All my own fault. I'm supposed to check the ring, brooch-and-pin, lavalliere and watch trays myself before the safe is locked. But just before closing last night, the advertising department sent down a proof for next Sunday's ad. I asked Kay to check in the trays while I okayed the prices in the ad."

Kay's big eyes were dark with distress. "Mr. Gotch is trying to let me down easy. I'm the one who's to blame. I let Cele help me; she stacked the trays in the safe. The watches were underneath so when I came in to have a last look I simply counted the trays instead of lifting each one to see the watches were all in the slots. When we took the trays out this morning, five of the trays were empty."

Don scowled. "Did you see the watches in place before Miss Ludlow took the trays into the safe?" This wholesale theft didn't quite seem to fit the apprehensive blonde he'd questioned a couple of weeks ago, after the disappearance of three men's watches from Gotch's stock.

Tensely, the girl listened to the footsteps pounding up the stairs



"Yes." Kay Wessler was miserably positive. "They were all there. But I just can't believe she'd take them! I knew her pretty well, and she plainly wasn't that kind."

Don nodded. "Let me have a detailed description of each item, for the hock shop squad and stolen property fliers."

"I'll copy it off the stock sheets right away." Gotch sighed. "But she couldn't pawn 'em. Any experienced person could tell the watches hadn't ever been worn."

"Sure." Maybe, Don thought, the Ludlow kid hadn't bothered to figure out how to dispose of the watches. On the other hand she might have supposed it would be easy to cash in on the loot these days when watches were being sold by everybody from drugstores to street peddlers. Not that many peddlers would dare to fool with \$500 watches.

"I'll call the bonding company, Myron. You get up to the front office, lay it on the line. But you don't need to talk about that little party the other night. Not yet, anyhow."

Kay glanced at Gotch, startled.

"I had to tell him, shugie." The buyer straightened his four-in-hand uneasily.

Kay's chin went up. "I don't care about that. I didn't do anything I'm sorry for. It's just—you're so certain Cele stole those watches, and you're so wrong."

The loud-speaker, in a different voice, called "Doors O-pen." Customers began to surge in.

Don said: "Don't talk about it. To anyone except the Bonding man, huh?"

CHAPTER II

LIGHT-FINGERED EXPERT

MARKO went to the rear of the great store, through *Employees Only*, to the Women's Locker Room. There were only a few stragglers, hastily slamming the metal doors, spinning the combination knobs, dashing off to their departments.

The locker number on Celia Ludlow's card was 492/6-3-3-9. It was close to the time clock. He set the roller knobs to 6, 3, 3 and 9. The empty locker told its own story.

He'd been in the girls' lockers often, after

closing, for professional reasons. Always there'd be things left on the bottom of the cabinet, on the steel shelf, or the hangers. Aspirin, extra handkerchiefs, perfume, bobby pins, candy bars, extra raincoat, so on. Celia Ludlow's was clean. Not even a pack of matches.

Back in his office he phoned the surety company:

"Looks like she planned a runout. Didn't notify anybody she was quitting, but took everything out of her locker. Lives down in the Village, but her phone doesn't answer. Huh?... Well, can't say we've had any particular reason to suspect her up to now, but you remember Jewelry lost those men's watches a couple of weeks ago. I questioned everybody in the department at that time. Miss Ludlow seemed sort of upset, worried. But I put that down to some personal problems. Could have been wrong, the way it stands. Yeah, I'll be there."

AFTER he hung up, he leaned back in his swivel chair with his hands clasped behind his neck, staring blankly at the ceiling, for a long ten minutes. He tried to gauge the possible reasons that could turn a nice kid only a few years out of the Chester, Pennsylvania High School, with letters of recommendation from her previous employers in Philadelphia and Newark, with friends like Kay Wessler, into a thief about to be indicted for grand larceny.

He could think of only one sufficiently strong reason and it had little to do with money.

He didn't suggest the possible motive to the Bonding man, who came, listened, took the descriptive lists and Celia's home address, departed.

The usual procession of light-fingered ladies began at ten. Don listened imperturbably to bland denials, weeping protestations, spat-out threats. He was making the day's first call for the police cart to dispose of a juvenile bag-snatcher whose face and record were already in the card file at his elbow, when the Nimblett operator cut in with:

"Hurry call for you, Mr. Marko! Post Three!"

"On my way." He turned the teen-ager

over to the operator on the Protection elevator, reached Leather goods and Giftwares in time to see a chunky woman in a sealskin coat struggling with a tall stringy redhead who flailed at the other with bony fists, uttering sharp little squeals of rage. The chunky, motherly woman in the fur coat was Alice Stein, Don's Number One operative on the First.

Don came up behind the redhead as she ripped an arm out of the cheap cloth coat Alice was gripping and wrenched away.

He caught the tall girl's elbows.

She swore fiercely, twisted, clawed at his face.

Alice stamped on her instep. The girl cried out, doubled over in pain.

Don got her wrists. "Nice and quiet, that's it, ni-i-ice and quiet. If you make it tough for us, we have to be tough on you. Let's all go up to my office, huh?"

The redhead screeched: "She framed me! She put those things in my pockets. I never took one single thing."

Alice pulled two brown and gold Florentine tooled-leather cigarette boxes out of the lining of the cloth coat where they'd dropped down to the hem. The coat rattled.

"Pen and pencil sets in there, too, Mr. Marko." Alice rubbed a thumb the redhead had bitten. "I've been watching her for a quarter of an hour. I *saw* her grab the cigarette boxes. She might have taken something else."

"She might have." Don forced the redhead's left wrist up behind her back to get leverage on her, keep her moving toward the elevator. The shoplifter's wrist glittered like icicles in the moonlight. A wrist-watch, set with at least twelve stones, the largest two nearly a half-carat each. Sticking to the filigree platinum above the black cord wrist band was a tiny spur of deep purple fuzz—the shade, if Don remembered rightly, used on Nimblets watch display cases.

"She might have," he repeated. "I think you are entitled to paste a gold star in your crook-book for this, Al."

AFTER they had all reached Marko's office, Alice stood with her back to the door whose frosted glass was gold-leafed: CHIEF OF STORE PROTECTION. Don sat on

the edge of his desk, examining the array of articles spread on his blotter: the leather boxes, the watch, a black handbag, keys, coins.

The redhead glowered sullenly in a straight-backed chair. Her eyes were blood-shot, the pupils small and dull. She kept dabbing a handkerchief at the tip of her reddened nose though she had no signs of being bothered by a cold.

Don said: "What you use, heroin?"

"Baloney!" The redhead laughed bitterly.

"Doesn't make any difference," Don said mildly. "Whatever it is, you'll get so you'd do anything for a shot, by and by. Then the narcotic boys will keep you on the hook until you come through with the inside info about your dope supplier."

"In your hat," the shoplifter snarled.

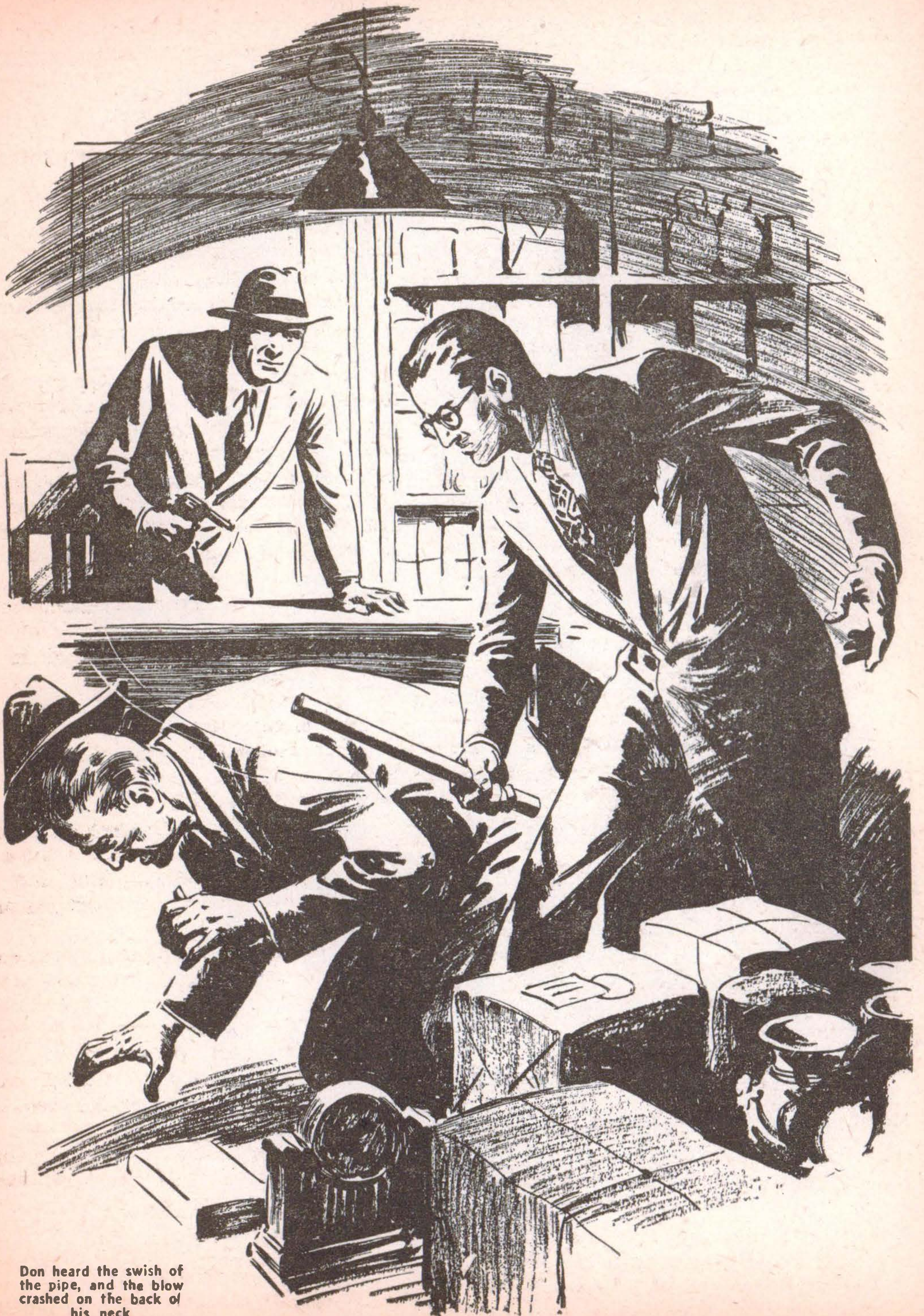
Don picked up the cloth coat, ran his fingers along the hem. "Be easier to talk to us, here. I might go so far as to compound a felony and let you beat it, if you make with the lowdown." He pulled out the lining of one pocket, studied the slit which had been cut to allow articles to drop to the bottom of the coat.

"I told you!" The redhead reached for the pack of cigarettes Alice had taken from her. Don snapped his lighter for her. She dragged in deeply, exhaled through her nostrils. "All I know."

Alice said coldly: "You gave us a phony name, a false address in the Bronx and a lot of mahooly about this being your first offense. We know better; I watched you snag those boxes."

"If you know so stinkin' much, why don't y'know the answers to all them lousy questions," the redhead sneered. "I told you my name's Frances Flemming; you try an' prove it ain't. Maybe I did give you a bum steer on my address; you think I want my mom gettin' a stroke when she hears I been arrested in a rotten frameup?"

Don said sympathetically: "No. We don't think you want your folks to find out what's with you. Or your friends. There must be people somewhere who still think a lot of you. Fact you happen to have a drug habit wouldn't affect that. Even if they knew you'd been doing this sort of thing," he touched the Florentine boxes, "still that wouldn't



Don heard the swish of the pipe, and the blow crashed on the back of his neck

keep them from caring about what happens to you. Matter of fact, we care—here at Nimblets. We aren't in business to prosecute people."

"Ha! And a good rich ha-ha-ha." The redhead made a sour face.

"We haven't lost any goods. We've got the stuff you slipped off the leathersgoods counter." Don poked at four gold pen-and-pencil sets, still in their plush boxes. "But this watch, now. You'll have to loosen up on that, before we could make any deal."

Miss "Flemming" pretended to be affected by the Protection Chief's friendly attitude. "Okay. I lied about her givin' it to me. She sold it to me, for ten bucks. She said it was worth fifty."

"When was this?" Don inquired.

"Las' night. Around nine. It was a present to her from her boy frien', but she hadda get a quick buck to scam down to Florida or Havana for some reason."

Alice asked: "You know her well enough to buy a watch from her, but you don't know her name?"

"All I ever see her was at this bar. Over on Lexington Avenue. I hear the bartender call her Sealy couple times. You gonna let me keep the watch?"

Knuckles rapped. Alice let Gotch in. His face was livid with strain, his forehead beady with sweat. He frowned at the redhead, glanced at the things on Don's desk, pounced on the watch.

"Yes, yes." He whipped a batch of carbon tissues from his coat pocket, poked a trembling finger at one item. "Number J722—The Baroness. Twenty-one jewels. Twelve diamonds. Platinum. Ailanthus leaf chasing. See?" He set the watch on the carbon description.

"Value?" Don asked.

"Seven hundred sixty-five." Gotch nodded.

THE redhead cursed with blunt obscenity. "Mean them stones is *real* ice? An' genuwine platinum? Why the dirty little—"

Don cut in: "Ever see this girl before, Myron?"

"Not to my knowledge." Gotch mopped his forehead. "Where'd she get this Baroness?"

"Says a girl sold it to her in an East Side

bar." Don palmed a couple of Yale keys out of the litter of lipsticks, compacts, combs, match packs, chewing gum, aspirin, which had come from the redhead's handbag. "For ten fish."

Gotch groaned. "A cute blonde?" he asked the shoplifter. "Nice eyes?"

"I guess you could call her a swell number." Miss "Flemming" stuck out her lower lip insolently. "I says to her: 'A looker like you oughtn't to have no trouble raisin' ten bucks without sellin' off yer jewelry.' But from what *you* say, the dame musta stole that watch."

Don eyed her with distaste as he dialed the phone. "We were ready to make a deal with her, Myron. Info on where the watch came from, in exchange for no prosecution on the petty larceny charge. But she's one of those characters who think that even Merry Christmas is spelled with a double cross. So we'll just charge her with lifting the watch, too. That'll make it grand larceny, hold her for the Grand Jury, and give her plenty of time to think it over."

The redhead sprang to her feet, smacked both hands flat on the desk so hard the stuff on the blotter bounced. "Why, you crummy bum, you!"

"Lieutenant?" Don cradled the phone on his shoulder, regarding the shoplifter stonily. "Package for you. Dress goods, yeah. No, this one's a deep dish. We think she's in on a ten-thousand-dollar steal. Thanks."

The redhead whispered: "Ten—thousand?"

No one answered her. Gotch licked his lips uncomfortably. Alice touched the girl on the shoulder but she kept her eyes on Don.

"Is that—up and up?"

He nodded. "Surprise?"

She bared her teeth. "You bet your butt it's a surprise, brother!" She straightened, holding her hands rigidly at her sides, fists clenched. "But it's no part of the surprise that'll be comin' to somebody else!"

Don scooped up the miscellany from the bag, dumped it in beside her purse. "They'll give this stuff back to you after they've assigned you your single with bath. Am I telling you anything you don't know from experience?"

"Go jump in the river, wise-o."

"Help her on with her coat, Al." Don slid open the lower right hand drawer of his desk, fiddled with something there.

"I don't need no help with a coat!" The redhead snatched the garment from the desk.

"Say you don't," Alice said drily.

Don brought the camera up in one practiced, smooth movement, aimed the lens at the redhead, snapped the trigger.

The flashbulb flared before she had a chance to be frightened. But she lunged wildly at the camera:

"You got no right to take my pitcha!"


Don held her off with one hand, until Alice grabbed her, shoved her back into the chair.

The Chief of Protection monkeyed with thumb screws at the bottom of the camera. "This is quite a gadget. Only sixty seconds from snapping the subject to a finished print. There...we are..." He flipped a lever, pulled out a still moist photograph of the redhead.

"Yeah," she sneered. "Ain't science wonderful. It's got so you can take a pitcha in one minute." She leaned forward, her small-pupiled eyes bright with venom. "One of these days, they'll think up somep'n that don't take no longer'n that to *kill* a person! Ever think of *that*?"

CHAPTER III

WEALTHY BOY FRIEND

 **S**TAGE-DOOR JOHNNY'S was only a step off Times Square but it was seldom crowded at the lunch hour. The prices were terrific, the food better left unmentioned, drinks thimble-size. The tunnel between bar and booths was illuminated only by lavender bulbs which made patrons look as if they'd just been dug up. Even the television was bad. Nevertheless there were those who dropped in at Johnny's with a curious regularity.

The young man who pushed in from the brightness of the noontime street paused beside the purple and crimson horror of the juke box, blinking owlishly about him behind

the horn-rimmed glasses, which gave him an oddly professorish look for one dressed in the peak of Broadway fashion. A gray silk muffler fluffed out from the velvet collar of his narrow-waisted short-coat. His porkpie hat was matching gray. So were his gloves.

His face, by contrast, even under the half daylight by the door and the revolving kaleidoscope of the juke box, had a dark bluish cast, though he was close-shaven.

He sauntered the length of the bar, noticing everyone, hello-ing nobody. At the next to last booth, he drew off his gloves, removed hat and coat, slid under the table.

When the sloppy-aproned waiter had taken his order for a double slug of scotch-on-the-rocks, he leaned back against the booth, turning his head toward the wall, apparently addressing the violet shade of the wall-bracket lamp above him:

"They took her."

A pleasant voice drifted up over the back of the booth from the one adjoining: "What'd she do?"

"Clammed a couple cig boxes. She put up a hassle before they got her." The conversation with his invisible tete-a-tete lapsed while the owlish youth paid for and tasted his drink. He inspected the glass with disgust. "They cut this stuff with carbolic?"

"Sulfuric." The unseen party chuckled. "What ensueth?"

"She had the watch on her. The snooper-sleuth spotted it right away."

"And—"

"They kept her upstairs for half, three-quarters of an hour, then sent her to the pokey." The owlish one rolled his eyes toward the top of the booth partition as if expecting to see a face pop up behind him. But he saw nothing, heard nothing except the tinkle of ice in a highball glass. "I guess that does it," he added finally.

"You never can tell—" the voice was curt—"with a hophead."

"No. That's a fact."

"I'll tell you another fact. This cold weather is getting me down. If we have a good pitch this afternoon, we'll cut up a watermelon and bust down south where the lovelies don't wear so many clothes."

Under the grisly lavender light the young man's smile had the toothy effect of a grin-

ning skull in spectacles.

"Miami." He seemed to think it was a very comical idea. "Or Havana, maybe. I always did like this time of year in Cuba."

THE four-story red stone house at 921 Jane Street was wedged in between an abandoned livery stable and a storage warehouse; as Don Marko climbed the chipped and worn stone steps, the hoarse bellow of a liner roared from the Hudson docks a few blocks west. Except for the chill salt wind lancing in from the river and the steady, surf-like drone of traffic on the West Side express highway, this part of Greenwich Village might have been located anywhere—say Chester, Pennsylvania, for instance.

C. Ludlow was engraved on the card beneath the battered black mailbox stenciled 3B. A printed card on the paint-scabby wall advised apartment-seekers to *See Superintendent, 13 Seventh Avenue*. Don climbed the narrow stairs.

At 3B he knocked, automatically tried the knob, wasn't particularly surprised to find the door unlocked. The astonishment came, a moment later, when he discovered that Celia Ludlow hadn't moved out. There were still some of her belongings in the cramped room looking out over the roof of the livery stable. Pictures, knickknacks, magazines, a pair of battered ostrich-feather mules, an alarm-clock on the bed-table with its pale, green hands pointing to 12:20.

The bed was made. The place was neat as a pin. There were a few things on the bureau but no hair-brushes or combs on the embroidered dresser-cover. He looked in the closet. No luggage.

A worn, blue raincoat drooped from a wire hanger. A pair of red rubber Snow Boots sagged against a stack of dress-boxes. Three hats hung forlornly from bonnet-pegs on the shelf. One red wool dress lay crumpled on the floor. She'd planned to go away, all right, but it was clear she meant to come back. He wondered how she could have thought that would be safe, if she'd stolen ten thousand dollars' worth of diamond-crusted watches.

He went in the bathroom. No towels, nothing in the wicker laundry hamper. Medicine cabinet empty, except for a box of face

tissue. Queer. Left some of her clothes, but scraped the cupboard clean. Why?

On the gateleg table in the living-room were a row of paper-covered two-bit mysteries and love stories; beside them a pile of travel booklets. He riffled through them. *Fun-Filled Cuba, a Guide for Visitors. What To See in Happy Havana. Fifty Famous Places in Sun-drenched Havana, the Pearl of the Antilles. Handbook of Spanish for Tourists*. The pamphlets struck him as a peculiar thing to find here, too.

Marks on the beat-up carpeting caught his eye, parallel marks about two feet apart where something heavy had been dragged across the floor. Probably a trunk. He peeked under the bed. Yes. A long dust-free rectangle would be about the right size for one of those low steamer-trunks. Something against one post of the maple bed glittered, red and gilt. A cigar band. *Coronado. Superior. Genuine Havana*.

Well, there was nothing against a single girl inviting a man up to her apartment in the Village, though it might not have been the thing in her home town.

Steps sounded on the stairs, light steps, hurrying. Don stood up, hastily dusting off his trousers. He'd left the door ajar. It might not look so well for him to be poking around under a girl's bed in her absence.

"Cele!" a girl cried. "Cele!"

"Hello." It was Kay.

"Oh!" She was startled. "I was hoping—"
"—she'd be here? No. Skipola."

She brushed past him. Her eyes swept the room, the open door to the closet, the still disordered spread where Don had lifted it to look beneath the bed. "Mr. Gotch and I kept calling her all morning, and about quarter of twelve, just before my lunch time, he thought someone picked up her phone without answering, just waiting to see who it was calling, he thought. So I told him I'd scoot down during my lunch hour, on the chance"—The corners of her mouth quivered, she shook her head wretchedly—"but I guess our hopes were vain."

"Trunk and bags gone. Lot of stuff about Cuba there on the table. Looks like she planned a Caribbean getaway." He held out the cigar band. "Who was the boy friend who could afford seventy-five-cent cigars?"

KAY sat on the edge of the bed disconsolately. "Mr. Potter? I only saw him a few times. He came in the store to see her. He was much older than Cele. He looked like one of those prosperous married wolves who think they're misunderstood at home and spend their evenings trying to snuggle up to some decent, lonely kid like Cele." She began to cry, quietly.

"What's he look like?"

She gestured dismally. "Like a well-to-do wolf. Big, plump fat-puss. Red face, kind of jolly. Hail-fellow type. I suppose you could call him good-looking in a butterball fashion. He dressed like a million. I know he used to take Cele to expensive places for dinner—Chambord, Pierre's, Dinty Moore's. I *warned* her about guys like that."

"What'd he do?"

"I'm not sure. She never said right out plain. Something to do with exporting, I think." She got up, galnced in the bathroom dejectedly. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Marko..."

"What?"

"If she did do anything wrong, it was on his account. She was the sweetest, most honest sort of person you ever knew in your life—but she was lonely. When a man like that latches onto a girl like that it's tragic!"

"Yeah." Don nodded. "Sure. Way it happens, sometimes. When I came in, her door was unlocked. Is Miss Ludlow the forgetful kind who'd go away and leave her apartment open?"

Kay sniffled drearily. "I wouldn't have said so. No. Do you think—"

Don shrugged. "After you've been dealing, for ten years, with shoplifters who pretend to be kleptomaniacs and just can't help stealing, you always think the worst."

CHAPTER IV

STEAMER TRUNK



WITH her sharp prow throwing up jets of white spray, the cruise-ship *Bahia de Mariel* plowed the crystal blue of the Gulf Stream, leaving a foaming furrow behind. Sunlight glinted on the choppy water. The white

funnels sparkled blindingly. The air was cool and brisk, but already most of the passengers had shed their drab New York clothing for gaudy tropical slacks and sweaters.

Down at the Purser's Office, Ramon Suvez, cabin steward, was shedding nothing except gloom.

"I'm tell you, Mist' Harris. Thees girl, she's not there. I am worry."

The purser smiled sardonically. "Ever hear of a chicken spending the night away from her own roost before?"

"Oh, yes." The steward patted the paunch under his starched jacket. "But thees one, she 'as not even taken toilet articles out of trunk. No clothes out of hat-box. I am ver' afraid."

"All right. Let's have a look-see." The purser took a brass key from a mahogany board lined with hooks. "A Sixty-one?"

"Yes, Mist' Harris."

Laughing, chattering groups sidled past them in the starboard corridor. Ramon said:

"She was ver' pretty girl. I see her when thees porter bring her bags to cabin, just before we leave dock."

"Hope to heaven she didn't have one too many Zombies at the bar and stumble overboard on our way down the harbor, that's all. Does seem queer she wouldn't have opened her luggage to get pajamas or a nightgown—no matter *where* she meant to sleep." Harris unlocked the A 61 door.

The steamer trunk with its black C. L. on the front was obviously locked. So was the hat-box on the bunk. Aside from the red cube of a handbag on the dresser, there was no sign any occupant had been in the tiny cabin since the ship left port, shortly after midnight.

Harris opened the handbag.

"Holy hat!" He dangled a magnificent diamond-sprinkled wristwatch from his fingers. "Think of leaving a hunk of ice like that lying around loose. Proves you're an honest man, Ramon." He chuckled.

The steward was unhappy. "I do not like thees—" he sniffed delicately. "You smell?"

Harris scowled, drew in his breath sharply. Then he reached for the handle of the trunk, hefted it, let it drop with a thud.

"Ramon," he said heavily. "You better notify the Captain and ask him to step down here just as soon as he can."

Back in New York, Don was making doodle marks on the pad beside the coin phone; they could have been simply cross-hatched lines until he put a frame around them, making them into a barred cell-window.

"You get anywhere with her, Lieutenant?"

"No," said the receiver. "None of these narcotics ever do much talking until they begin to beg for another deck. She claims the watch was sold to her."

"Well, she's still paying for it. Did your Identification boys have anything on that cleaners mark I found in her coat?"

"Yup. P bar C slash is Primrose Cleaners. Only, they've gone out of business, Mr. Marko."

"Ow." Don grimaced. "Where were they when they were in business?"

"Five-eleven West Seventy-fifth Street, just off Broadway. They folded in September, some time."

"Thanks. Let you know if I find anything on her." Don hung up.

The hack driver who took him uptown was talkative. At a traffic tie-up near Columbus Circle he turned to Don:

"Ain't nothing you can do about these jamups. Situation gets worse alla time. Guy can go where he wants to twice as quick on a bus or the subway."

"Sure."

DON was musing about the redhead—and the peculiar coincidence which had led her to Nimblets the morning after those watches had been stolen.

"Course in a taxi fella doesn't run th' risk of losin' his roll to a pickpocket. D'ja see that piece inna paper about there bein' eight hunderd wallet-workers in New York City alone?"

"Didn't happen to—"

"More an' more alla time, yuh. It ain't tough enough to beat ya brains out makin' a livin', then some dip bumps into you in a subway crowd! An' there goes th' rent dough!"

"S'right." Don gave him an extra dime on the tip. He could have told the hackie

something about pickpockets; they were a sore spot with stores like Nimblets but at least they didn't get away with ten thousand at a clip. Not often.

The store at 511 West 75th had a sign in the window stating that the premises would be occupied shortly by Mae's Mode Shoppe—copies from famous couturieres. He went to a Grocery & Provisions next door.

The Italian at the vegetable stand examined the photo with interest. "Dunno, mister. I only been here since-a Monday. Better ask-a th' butch man, see?"

Don went to the meat counter. A thin youth was doing things to a chicken with a cleaver. From the refrigerator room emerged a big, florid-faced fellow in straw hat and blood-spotted apron.

He pursed his lips over the minute-print.

"I couldn't guarantee it's the same dame, bud. But this closely resembles one of our customers who comes in here once in a while."

"Charge account?" Don knew the redhead wouldn't have been a credit risk, but he wanted to keep the meat man talking.

"We're strictly for cash. Now I come to think of it, though, I don't believe I ever saw her pay for any steaks. Herself, I mean. She generally breezes in here with Cary Grant, lets him shell out."

"You're kidding. Not the movie star."

"No, no." The butcher smiled broadly at his little jest. "Just a name we give him here in the store. He does look a lot like the actor, though—and that's not kidding. And I will say he's very free and easy when it comes to pulling out the lettuce and peeling off a few leaves for a nice, thick T-bone."

"Spender, eh? Live around here?"

"You a detective?"

"I'm with Nimblets, Fifth Avenue." Don evaded a direct answer. "Girl got into a little trouble down there this morning."

"Too bad." The butcher kept the smile on his face. "Wish I could help you. But I haven't any idea where they live."

Don thought he was lying, but knew there was no use pressing the point. It was six stores later, at a liquor dealer's on Broadway, that he got his lead.

The liquor man, an alert-eyed, dapper-

dan individual, said right away: "Absolutely, I know her. Mrs. Sorrick. One sec!" He fingered sales slips beside the register. "Mrs. B. Sorrick. Four-seventeen West Seventy-seven. Four H. Always the best Scotch. Nothing but the best for Mister and Missus Sorrick. I hope there's nothing wrong, my friend?"

"Hard to say," Don answered. "Mr. Sorrick, now...Happen to know what line of business he's in?"

The dapper man hunched up one shoulder, raised his eyebrows. "How should I know? I sell them whiskey. I don't ask how he makes the money to buy it."

"No. Of course not. Much obliged." Don went around to West End, to 417 West 77th Street. A six-story brick apartment with an automatic electric elevator.

He pushed the 4H button down in the vestibule. No action. He rode up to the fourth, thumbed the buzzer button beneath the neatly printed strip cut from a Sorrick business card. Somewhere down the hall he heard a radio blaring: "If I'd known you were coming, I'd have baked a cake."

After a long minute, he used the keys he'd palmed out of the miscellany from the redhead's bag. The second one worked.

Still in the hall, with the door open, he called:

"Hi-yo, anybody!" Silence.

He went in.

IT WAS a huge apartment. An enormous living room with a tile fireplace and a wide mantel, a curved set of divans around

it and an incredible clutter of tables, overstuffed chairs, floor lamps with gold shades, a television set big as a sideboard, a bar-ette, bookcases, two desks. The rug underfoot was moss-thick with a dragon in violent yellow on a dusty blue background. Everywhere—on tables, mantel, bookcases, video set—a frightful assortment of Chinese vases, chromium cocktail sets, plaster figurines, bronze ash-trays, gilt-and-marble clocks, brass bowls.

"She never filched that junk from Nimb-letts," Don muttered to himself. "Good Heavens!"

On an ash-tray were two cigar butts. The band still remained on one. It was another *Coronado Superior*. He told himself the guy certainly did get around.

He wandered into a dining-room. More gewgaws on buffet, side tables, hanging shelves. The place looked like a lunatic's dream of an antique shop.

The kitchen was a mess, too—of a different kind. Soiled dishes stacked on a long sink. Enough dirty glasses and empty bottles to make Don think of a weekend at a roadhouse. A refrigerator crammed full of club soda, coke and left-over dishes. The odor was not agreeable.

There were three bedrooms, one of which seemed to be used as a storeroom for more bric-a-brac. Imitation alabaster book-ends, jade idols that functioned as cigarette lighters, cheap "cut glass" punch bowls that still bore the marks of the pressing moulds. On the bed, piled on a gaudy roman-striped satin spread, were half a dozen brown paper

[Turn page]

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To

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2164 West 42nd Street
New York City, New York

He was juggling one of the packages on his palm when the phone out in the living-room jangled. He let it ring a few times before he decided to answer it.

"Yeah?" He didn't talk directly into the receiver; he spoke indistinctly, as if he might have the stub of a cigar in his mouth.

"Fa gossake! I been tryin' t' catch up with y' since maybe one o'clock." The voice at the other end of the line was thin, querulous, masculine.

"Well?"

"Mickey Fowler, all right for five hunderd bail, huh?"

Don grunted vaguely. Bail? What was he to reply to *that*? "What's the charge?"

"Pickin' a poke in th' Times Square station! What ya think it was, fa gossake?"

"I thought," Don experimented, "it might be murder."

The man hesitated. "Just a funster, ain't you. Ha, ha." He didn't sound as if he appreciated the humor. "Murder, he says, yet!"

"Yeah," Don answered. "Anything for a gag."

He cradled the receiver.

CHAPTER V

SOUR NOTE AT THE AUCTION



ON THE first floor of Nimblett's swarmed the after-luncheon shoppers—business men in a swivet to get back to their offices, matrons with a liking for pawing over merchandise and bedeviling clerks. The four rows of glass showcases in Jewelry had some of both.

Kay Wessler brought a topaz ear-ring to Myron Gotch. "Customer claims the pendant just 'came off.' Personally, I think, she let

her Pomeranian chew on it. Just take a look."

The buyer disdained an examination. "Have it fixed. No charge." He had deeper troubles to contend with.

Kay dangled the bauble, as if still discussing it.

"Have they found Cele yet?"

"No word. The surety people think she's probably in South America by now." He bowed and put on a prop smile for a bosomy dowager laden with trinkets like a Christmas tree. "I'd give a month's salary if we'd never gone to the Stork with her."

"There you go again. Blaming the poor kid, when for all you know... Oh, oh! Here's the brain." She returned to her customer, began to scribble on a Repair envelope, glancing surreptitiously at the Chief of Store Protection as he greeted Gotch.

"Don't act so down. People'll think our markup's too high."

"Gosh, Don, if you think *I'm* sunk, you ought to spend a few minutes in the front office. They're all like pallbearers—and at my funeral!"

"Chin up, chum."

"Think a stiff looks better that way? No fooling, Don, I'm dead—upstairs."

"Pulmotor's on the way." Don surveyed the dozen customers at the pen, watch and flatware counters. "Meantime, what's with this Siddon party who took Miss Ludlow wining and dining?"

"Ed? Not so much. But he gives me good breaks on special numbers for promotions. That amethyst dinner ring at forty-nine fifty—that made 'em all sit up an' take notice."

"Yeah. I meant, is he a big joe, physically?"

"Well. Tall. But not dark or stylish, exactly. He's in his fifties."

"On the Cary Grant side in appearance?"

"Hells bells, no. Ed looks more like a frightened fishhawk. Beak nose, slope forehead, no more chin than a chicken. What gave you that idea?"

"Just my way of getting you to describe him. Did you think the Ludlow kid went for him in a big way?"

"How could I tell? She was agreeable. Ed's single. He has a five-figure salary and

a chirpy line of chatter." Gotch sighed. "One thing for sure, Ed wouldn't touch anything dishonest. That I'll guarantee."

"Good enough for me. Mind if I borrow your Number One salesgirl for an hour or so?"

GOTCH stared at Marko in obvious dismay.

"Kay? Lord! You're not going to get her involved in this?"

"I'll involve anybody who can help to clear it up." Don became brusque. "Including you, if I have to!"

"Your job, I suppose." Gotch replied with some stiffness. "Kay? Here a minute."

She came up behind the counter. "Yes?"

"Mr. Marko wants you."

Don said: "Mind getting your coat and hat? Meet you at the Fifth Avenue doors."

She threw a troubled frown at Gotch, hurried away.

The buyer cleared his throat. "I'd rather have you get the details on this party from me, instead of dragging it out of her. We had dinner at the Stork, got in Ed's car and drove out to—"

"Relax," Don said curtly. "I'm not going to quiz her about where you stayed or who was in who's room. This is past that point." He walked to the main entrance.

When Kay arrived in beaver and fur-trimmed hat, she was flushed and excited. "Are we going down to Cele's place again?"

"Not now." He hailed a cab. "We're going a-gawking. To see if you can spot the Potter person."

"Oh. Where?"

"Forty-second Street gyp joint. Where they sell fifty-cent punch bowls as antiques from ye olde Manhattan mansions. Dollar bookends as rare works of craftsmanship direct from the Orient."

"Pete's sake!" She stared in surprise, but made no further comment until they reached the auction room.

It was merely a store, with the windows painted a chaste gray. Over the door hung a modest black and gold sign: *Auction Today—Money back PLUS.*

Inside, there were no chairs. The customers crowded up close to the raised platform at the far end in front of a black velvet

drape adorned with spangled sequins proclaiming:

IF GOODS ARE NOT EXACTLY AS REPRESENTED, PURCHASERS WILL BE REFUNDED THE FULL AMOUNT—PLUS A CASH BONUS! YOU MUST BE SATISFIED!

There were forty or fifty people in the hall. More elderly men than young ones, more middle-aged women than men.

The man at the auctioneer's pulpit was not more than twenty-five. He was dressed quietly. Except for his gray-blue jowls he might have been a minister exhorting his flock, for he was solemn and serious as he held up a blazing red and white rug of Indian pattern.

"Come closer, friends, so you can admire this marvelous pattern, the splendid texture. Crowd right up close! That's it. Now, just imagine this gorgeous, genuine Navajo in your own home ladies and gentlemen! How it would brighten up that dark corner! How its cheery color would change the whole tone of your room. You've all seen the exact duplicate of this, sold for forty—even fifty dollars in the big stores with the big overhead. But Gothamagic doesn't want fifty dollars for it. Not even forty. We're willing to take just whatever you'll give—from a dollar up... Now, then—what am I offered?" He peered owlshly at the customers as if regretful at having to part with such a precious work of art at any price.

"Let's get up front," Don said softly, "so you can get a look at these birds."

"All right," she whispered nervously. "But I don't see Mr. Potter."

They pushed their way through the throng. Sweaty bodies and sour breaths closed in behind them, pressed against them.

"Now turn around. Take a good peek." Don watched the owlsh young man signal to an obvious shill at the rear by waggling his thumb as he held up the Mexican rug. The stooge responded by upping a woman's bid two dollars.

"Twenty-six... I'm offered twenty-six, but it makes me sick—it really does, friends—to take a bid like that for a rug worth easily twice as much. If I didn't have one at home already, I'd buy it myself. And

remember, folks, if you can walk out of this bargain hall and find any—I mean *any*—responsible rug man who will value this rug at less than forty dollars, Gothamagic will refund your money *plus* two dollars for your time while here. Fair enough?”

A chorus of murmured approval.

Kay whispered “He’s not here, Mr. Marko.”

Don said “Wait” beneath his breath.

The bidding on the rug went to thirty-one dollars. A sad-faced old lady came to a table on the level of the main floor, beside the platform. She began counting bills hesitantly from a leather purse.

A MAN emerged from behind the velvet drapes to whisk the rug into a brown paper roll, looped with cord. As he took the money, he beamed at the old lady, congratulating her on her wonderful bargain.

Don nudged Kay. “Get a load of the smoothie wrapping up the merchandise.”

“Oh.” She did. “He isn’t Mr. Potter, though.”

“Hell, no. But isn’t he an absolute ringer for Cary Grant?”

The owlish youth proceeded with his spiel:

“Now arrives the great moment in an auctioneer’s day, my friends—the time when he is about to offer the cream off the top of the bottle—something which we know you here, some lucky one of you, will appreciate as much as did our customers last week, when six of these bee-yutiful, spectacular watches, simply *loaded* with the finest blue-white diamonds, were snapped up for amounts far, far below the actual worth of these matchless examples of the jewelers craft.” He held up a lady’s wrist-watch.

From below, a disembodied *psst* came to his ears. Cautiously he sneaked a glance at his dark-haired assistant who leaned with his back to the platform and to the pulpit.

“This particularly magnificent timekeeper,” the auctioneer went on, “has eight large diamonds mounted in solid platinum, the whole encasing a twenty-one jewel movement. Now, what am I offered?”

“*Nix* on the *ticks*.” Anyone watching the assistant’s mouth would have noticed no movement of the lips. In his position he

couldn’t even see the youth with the horn-rimmed spectacles at the rostrum. His entire attitude was one of idle repose.

Someone offered ten dollars. Don Marko bid twenty. A stooge raised it five. Don upped it to thirty.

The auctioneer was in a fix. He couldn’t halt the bidding by knocking the watch down to one of his own shills. He wasn’t even sure that’s what the man leaning against the platform wanted him to do. So he played it safe, waiting for instructions. They came quickly, in the same hollow, impersonal voice which seemed to come out of nowhere:

“Silver-haired man with the golf course tan. You’re dumb as a hick, you can’t spot a dick.”

The auctioneer shot a swift look at Marko, bidding sixty-five, seventy-five, a hundred, a hundred ten, a hundred thirty. He wig-wagged to his shills to come in fast with the raises.

The crowd was electrified by the flurry of the competition, by the calm certainty with which Marko snapped out his bids even before the last stooge had his phoney “raise” out of his mouth.

“Don’t let him get it, or you’ll regret it.” The assistant retired behind the curtain.

“A hundred sixty-five,” called Marko.

“Two hunnert,” yelled a shill, a frowsy individual of sixty with a ragged mustache, a frayed overcoat and bulging, watery eyes.

“—And ten,” Marko added.

“Two fifty.”

“—And five.”

“Three—hunnert—dollars!”

“—And five.”

“Sold!” howled the auctioneer. “To the elderly gentleman over there in the corner. For three hundred dollars!”

“Wait a minute, there.” Don shoved right up under the pulpit. “What kind of con game you trying to put over, mister? I raised that bid; you haven’t any right to sell it to one of your stooges—not if this is a legitimate auction.”

“No arguments, please.” Owlface appealed to the crowd, found no support. He glared at Marko. “The gentleman back there made the last bid.”

A woman cried, “No, he didn’t, either.”

A grizzled gent in an army sergeant's uniform hollered: "We all heard this buster top his bid. What y' pullin'—a racket?"

Don took out his wallet. "Three hundred and five bucks. Here it is."

"Sorry, my friend." The auctioneer was sweating. "Some other afternoon you'll have your chance. Today's Special goes to the elderly—"

Don interrupted. "He hasn't even got three hundred bucks in cash on him." He pointed. "Look at him." The stooge cringed. "Does he look as if he'd buy a three-hundred-dollar watch for his girl?"

The crowd uttered noisy disbelief.

Kay tugged at Don's sleeve. "Let's get out of here," she whispered, frightened.

"I want that watch," Don snapped. He waved his money. "Come on, slippery. Give."

The old fellow with the bulging eyes came forward timidly. "Let him have it, if he wants it so badly."

"No *indeed*," the auctioneer said indignantly. "This gentleman has suggested that we at Gothamagic don't do business the way he likes. Very well, he doesn't have to do business with us at all. As auctioneer, I withdraw the article from bidding." He raised his voice. "Furthermore, there will be no additional articles offered this afternoon. I am sorry if you are disappointed, my friends, but—"

Catcalls and hoots answered him, but he jumped off the platform, vanished behind the velvet curtain.

Don was after him before the drapes stopped swaying.

CHAPTER VI

THE BUTCHER ALWAYS SMILES



BEHIND the black drapery ran a yard-wide passage. A door at the distant end was closing as Don caught his first glimpse of it. He went at it striding, brought his leg up as if he were booting a football, hit the lock with his heel. The door crashed open. The darkly handsome man sat at a pine table with a Webley in his fist.

"I've got a right to pop you on sight," he said thoughtfully.

"Maybe that's the law in Australia, where you must have picked up that rhyming jive," Don said harshly, "but it doesn't go here. Especially when I'm trying to recover stolen property."

The blue-jowled auctioneer swung a length of iron pipe. "Nothing's been stolen from anybody."

"Yeah." Don eyed the shelves lining the small storeroom. The rows of statuettes, bookends and trick lighters were up at the top; the lower tiers were packed solid with cartons, shoe boxes, packages wrapped in newspapers, paper bags, brown bundles. "The watch. Maybe others like it. Came from Nimblett's Jewelry department. Sorrick knows, if you don't."

Sorrick showed nice even rows of teeth. "For every item that is here, we have a bill of sale that's clear."

The jingles got on Marko's nerves. "I don't doubt you've rigged up papers to prove you bought the stuff you sell. Probably you do buy some, places like North Attleboro. But a good chunk of it is shoplifters' loot. Funny nobody ever thought of it—much better than hocking the take or fencing it for twenty percent of its value. Bring it in here, let you get what you can, split even. Or do you hold out eighty percent on the poor suckers like that redheaded Flemming babe?"

Sorrick chuckled merrily. "We got to do something about this crut, Hal. First thing you know, he'll be making trouble for us. What you suggest?"

Owlface sniggered. "He looks to me like he ain't getting the right diet. Not enough iron. Let's make up the deficiency." He slid behind Don, closed the door, as Sorrick got up slowly, still pointing the pistol at the Protection Chief's top pants button.

Don said: "Think it over, you cheap yentzers. Disposing of stolen goods gets you five to seven in this state. Even conspiracy to defraud is only seven to ten. You know what the price for murder is."

"Give us credit for not being that crude," Owlface sniggered again. "All we want is to give you a slight touch of amnesia. Tem-

porary loss of memory, while we waft ourselves to greener pastures."

"You'll waft yourselves into a six by eight with a hard mattress and a tin plate." Don winced as the Wembley jabbed him in a tender spot. "The murder I'm talking about was last night."

He heard the swish of the pipe, twisted, ducked. The blow crashed on the back of his neck. Pain stabbed clear to his toes. He felt dizzy.

Sorrick said softly: "Wait, mate. What's this, about a murder?"

"Celia Ludlow. Gal in jewelry at Nimb-letts. I should tell *you*. You used to spend nights down in her apartment." Don's tongue felt blurry.

"She's not dead."

"Yeah. Body was found in a steamer trunk in her cabin on the *S. S. Bahia de Mariel*, New York to Cuba. Captain wirelessed the authorities here to confirm identification only couple hours ago. She's been strangled."

Hal snarled: "That ain't the way I heered it, Sorrick! How *about* that? If I'd known it was a chair proposition—"

Don said thickly: "You wouldn't have primed that poor dopehead to walk into our leathergoods department and clumsy up a theft so she'd be caught wearing one of the stolen articles. No. If *she'd* known, you wouldn't have been able to get her to come up with that phony yarn about buying the watch from Celia Ludlow, either."

Sorrick said almost caressingly: "Bop him hard, pard. Leave him lay, while we amscray."

The auctioneer cried: "Do your own bloody butcher work! I've got too much already. I'm getting out now. But pronto!" He opened the door.

Sorrick murmured: "I'll tie him up. Use a rag for a gag. Give us time to grab a plane." He poked the muzzle hard; Don grunted. "Hand me some of those nylon scarves, Hal."

THEY worked swiftly. In three minutes Don lay on his side, behind the table, trussed up like a holiday turkey—wrists behind his back, ankles lashed, jaws aching

from the pull of the cloth stuffed in his mouth.

They hurried out. Don could hear Owl-face shouting: "No more auction today, folks. Shut up shop. Everybody out, now. Everybody on the sidewalk, please."

A shadow moved in the row of shelved boxes at Don's side. Hands loosened the gag. Girl's hands.

"Hi," he mumbled. "Thanks."

Kay knelt beside him. "I told you not to stay here. You might have been killed."

"No. They didn't want any more homicide."

"More?" She couldn't get the knot at his wrists loosened."

"Cele." His tongue felt like a dry sponge. "She was choked to death last night downtown. Before she went on the Havana boat. She went aboard inside her own trunk."

"No!" she whimpered. "Oh, *no!*"

"Yeah. Murderer thought the theft of the watches would be put on her—expected the ship people would figure she'd been strangled in her cabin, blame somebody on board."

"But why?" She struggled frantically with the knot. "Why wouldn't the store think she stole the watches if she just ran away?"

"Would have. More to it. She was in somebody's way. With her boy friend. Party you called Potter. Name seems to be Sorrick. Handy andy with the femmes. Must have noticed that, yourself."

"I didn't know his real name. I didn't want to tell you I recognized him. Cele wouldn't ever have forgiven me, if I'd gotten him in trouble."

"You got him in plenty of trouble. He'll be picked up as accessory to murder. The cabin steward on the ship radioed a description of the gal who brought the trunk on board."

The scarf that had been between his jaws went around his neck, drew tighter.

"I couldn't help it," she breathed close to his ear. "She wouldn't let him go. She even made him promise to take her to Havana. I had to get her out of the way before he came for her, last night."

Don wanted to ask if that was why Kay had made reservations on the steamer a week ahead in the Ludlow girl's name. But

the scarf was choking him.

He thought the high-pitched ringing in his ears was the preliminary to unconsciousness. It was only Kay, screeching like a maniac.

Don rolled over.

The grizzled man in the army uniform snapped handcuffs over the rung of a chair before he closed them on the girl's wrists. "I couldn't hear much of what she was saying to you, Mr. Marko."

Don flexed his throat muscles. "Same difference, Lieutenant. She admitted it."

Kay kicked at him, savagely.

The precinct Lieutenant bunted her away. "Sweet cookie, isn't she. Give you five to one the jury feels sorry for her an' comes in with a second degree verdict."

"No bet. With me. Cut away those scarves, will you? I want to look around for a sackful of watches."

Several hours later Myron Gotch was checking off the items on his inventory. "All but five, here."

"One, the cops have, as evidence against

that redhead," Don said. "One is on the cruise-ship. Kay put that in Miss Ludlow's handbag as a clincher. You'll get that back. Only three missing."

"I'd buy the whole lot out of my own pocket," the buyer said morosely, "not to have known about Kay."

"Maybe if you'd known sooner," the Protection Chief pointed out, "you could have stepped in and broken it up. Once those girls come under Sorrick's spell—*voom*. The Ludlow kid met him first in the auction room. Fell like the fat lady going down the well. She didn't even dare tell on him when he nicked your stock for three Men's wrist-watches a while back. She might have known he was a crook even before that, though."

"How long," the buyer wanted to know, "has Kay been playing around with him?"

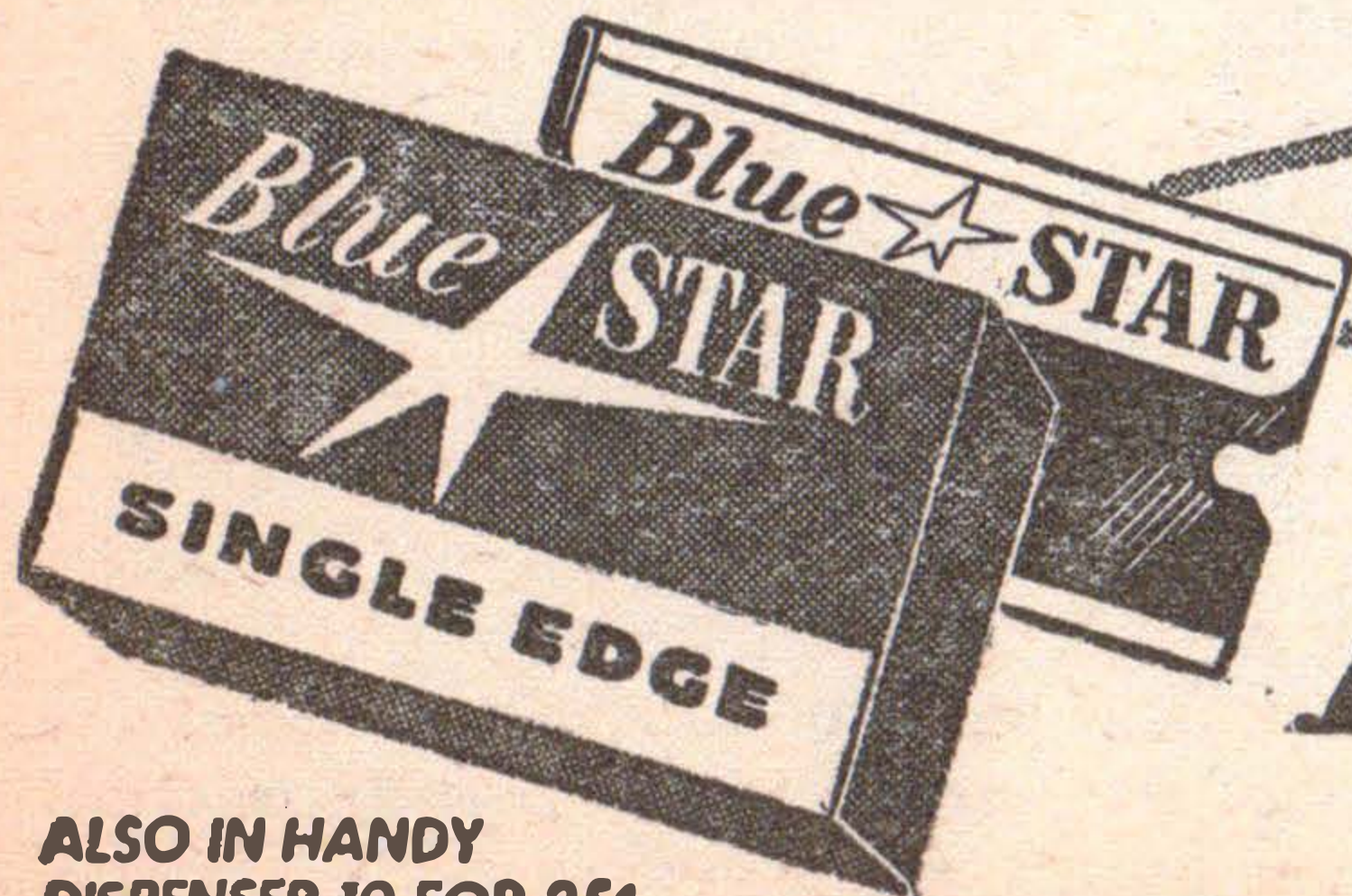
"Month or so. Miss Ludlow introduced him to Kay, right here at this counter. From then on it was a battle. Of course, neither of them could really get him. He had too many entries in his stable."

[Turn page]

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GOTCH asked:

"Did the police get a confession from him?"

"The lieutenant nabbed both of 'em, Sorrick and his auctioneer. They squawked their heads off, downtown, to get clear of the murder charge. Yeah. Ingenious lad, that Aussie. Bought shoplifters' loot, mixed it in with a lot of cheapjack slum, sold it at auction, and made dough coming and going. Even in the middle, you might say, because his stooges were all dips who cleaned out the customers after they'd shown where they kept their money by making a purchase. Wouldn't surprise me too much if he rented the pickpocket privileges of his auction room. I know he had a crew of them working for him. A bondsman called up to ask if he'd go on bail for one of 'em while I was frisking his apartment uptown."

Gotch shook his head, hopelessly. "Thought I'd feel better when you told me Miss Ludlow was in the clear. This way I feel worse. Both the girls were in with this slicker, and Kay a killer, besides."

"You can feel as badly as you want to about Celia Ludlow. But only because she's dead. She wasn't any thief. She tried to get Sorrick to give up the racket, he said. Thought if she could get him away from New York she might reform him. That's why he half agreed to fly to Havana with her, and would have if Kay hadn't learned about the plan a week ahead of time from the Ludlow kid."

"Sure," Gotch said bitterly. "All simple, now you've got him to talk. You didn't imagine Kay was a murderess when you dropped in here to take her with you this afternoon, though."

"No. I hadn't put the pieces together," Don admitted. "But I did think Celia was dead. If she'd stolen the watches and was on the lam, she'd have taken every last possession with her. She hadn't. She left a coat, some good hats, boots, stuff in her bureau, an alarm clock, so on. That meant she intended to come back. She'd have known she couldn't come back, if she'd glommed those watches. And it was between her and Kay; they were the only two who'd handled the trays between showcase and safe. Then, when Kay raced down there, during her lunch hour," Marko smiled, reminiscently, "I did begin to consider her. Yeah. I did so."

The buyer's nerves reacted, "Jeeps, Don, how can you smile at a time like this! One of my girls dead, another practically in the electric chair!"

Don felt of his throat, where the scarf had hurt him. "Professional pride, Myron. Can't act as if you're thinking of murder and robbery all the time. Ever notice a butcher? Always seems the happiest man in a provision store, though he spends half his time dabbling in gore up to his wrists. No matter how gloomy the other clerks in the store look, the butcher always smiles. Same like me. Yeah."



If you liked "The Butcher Always Smiles," by Stewart Sterling, you will also enjoy "Innocent Party," a novelet by the same author featuring Fire Marshal Pedley—coming in the next issue!



Corday lifted the stricken girl's head

THE TOUCH OF DEATH

By WAYLAND RICE

That green door was strictly one-way for the condemned. . . .

THEY opened the last big iron door. Don Corday walked slowly into the bullpen. It was a circular barred room. Off it was a corridor of cells. The condemned cells. Corday looked straight ahead. There was the green door. The men who lived their last hours in these cells went through that door once. It was strictly one-way for them. Don Corday shivered.

The guard motioned toward a bench against the bullpen bars. Corday walked over but he didn't sit down. He heard keys

grind in locks, heard the guard's voice and then a voice Corday thought he'd hear to his grave.

"Who?" the condemned man asked. "Did you say Corday? Hey—that's the guy who put the finger on me. Sure I'll see him. If they march me tomorrow night, he'll have something to remember. Yeah—something good."

The click of heels and Don Corday turned slowly to face the door through which Peter Langan would come. He hadn't changed

much. Of course the plain white shirt and the black trousers made some difference. In court he'd been natty, wearing a checked suit and loud ties. He was the same otherwise. Maybe a trifle paler, but months in prison will do that to a man. Those months and then—the last hope gone.

Langan had cold blue eyes and a thin mouth. It was smiling now but there was no mirth in the eyes. His figure was tall, nearly six feet, but spare. He offered his hand.

Corday took it. "Hello, Langan," he said. "I'm surprised you'd shake hands with me."

Langan grinned. "What have I got to lose? Okay, so you testified me into this. Tomorrow night they'll take me to the chair. That's not your fault. You did what you honestly believed to be right. The fact that you were wrong doesn't matter. I'm not much good anyway."

Corday sat down. "Look here, Langan, I'll still swear it was you who entered Old Jules' store, robbed him and deliberately fired a bullet through his head. I was across the street, in my radio shop. Just closing up and the lights were out. Maybe if I'd been open you'd have come there to steal and kill. I had a perfect view of you. Especially when you ran out and the awning knocked your hat off. When I swore you were the murderer in court, I honestly meant it."

Langan shrugged. "You're not a bad kid, Corday. You're no more than twenty-three or four. Me, I'm forty odd. Half of those years I spent in stir. I always figured I'd wind up this way some day. Though not because I was mistaken for somebody else."

CORDAY sighed. "Langan, I never did anything I hated more in my whole life than get down from the witness stand, walk over to you and put my hand on your shoulder. I knew I was killing you when I did that."

"You should have had a gun in your hand, Corday. It would have been better for me. But, it's okay. My record convicted me. Everybody expected I'd come to this some day and they were not surprised. Funny

thing, neither was I."

"You haven't shown any curiosity about why I came here," Corday said. "It wasn't to gloat over a man who will die tomorrow night. It's not that. Langan—the time for lying is past. I guess I'd believe you now, no matter what you said. Did you kill Old Jules?"

Langan shook his head slowly. "Kid, don't torture yourself like that. You identified me but you didn't convict me. A jury did. Like you say, it makes little difference at this late date about what I tell you. However—I wasn't lying in court. I didn't kill Old Jules. I wasn't even in that vicinity."

Corday inhaled sharply. "I got in to see you by a police order, Langan. I hate to do this almost as much as I hated to identify you. Raising a man's hopes at a time like this—"

Langan clawed at his arm. "Corday—has something happened? Tell me—what did you mean by hating to raise my hopes?"

"Take it easy," Corday begged. "Here are the facts. Whoever shot Old Jules stole a tin box full of rather good gems. Some of them have shown up in the last two weeks."

Langan's eyes widened. "That's it!" he shouted. "That's what I been praying for. If the stolen stuff is being peddled, I couldn't have done it. I couldn't be selling the stuff."

"Hold on," Corday warned. "The police say you could have hidden it and some other crook found it. Or you gave it to someone. They say the appearance of the jewels doesn't mean a thing."

"The cops!" Langan raised both hands high above his head in a theatrical gesture. "The cops! They been against me since I got a reform school record when I was fourteen. They dogged every step I took since then, waiting and hoping I'd come to this. They always said I'd die in the chair or they'd kill me. Corday—I'm innocent. Some of the proof is coming out now. You've got to get me a stay. You've got to!"

Corday pulled the excited man down to the bench. "Listen, Langan, I can't do anything. I'm just a little guy. A radio repair shop owner. I swore you killed Jules and I thought so then. I'm not so sure now."

"Go to the Governor. He'll listen!"

Corday shook his head. "The Governor will only listen to the D.A. and he listens only to the police. It's your record, Langan. You tried to kill two other people. You served time for attempted murder. As you say, they expected it of you."

Langan suddenly buried his head in his hands. "What am I going to do then? Walk through that door an innocent man? Just because nobody will listen? Just because they always expected I'd check out this way? Did you expect it? You who thought you knew me for about one second before we met again in a police precinct. Were you damning me too? Isn't it possible that you did make a mistake?"

"Okay," Corday said. "I am going to do something. If what I do won't get you a stay of execution, I'll go before the D.A. and tell him I'm not sure you're really the man I saw. I'll say I lied to get publicity for my radio shop. I'll tell him anything, because I won't sit by and let a man who might be innocent go to his death because of what I did."

Langan looked up. "Corday, you always struck me as a square Joe. In court I almost believed you myself. But I didn't kill that guy. I never swiped his money or his jewelry. I've been in here for thirteen months. I've said good-by to seven men who went into the room and were carried out by their ankles and wrists. Sure, I'm no good, but I've learned plenty here and had time to think."

Corday offered his hand. "I'll do what I can and work fast. I'm glad I came here to see you. Believe me, when I began hearing about this other person who hinted he killed Jules, it kept me awake nights. Lieutenant Ahern of Homicide talked to me about it. He won't believe those rumors."

"Ahern is an honest cop," Langan said. "Most of 'em are, but like all the others they wrote my name in their dead file long ago. What happens to me is just a natural affair. They're not interested. They figure I'm so rotten I might as well be dead anyway."

"I don't believe that," Corday affirmed.

"Well I do. I believe I might as well be

dead. That is, I believed it when I first came in here. Now I know I can make something of myself. I won't say I'm depending on you. I won't say a word. Not even if you don't make it and I take that little walk tomorrow night. If I do, Corday, there's no hard feelings. You're a right guy."

Corday watched as a guard led Langan to the door, signalled, and a guard on the other side unlocked the gate. They passed through but didn't go back to the cell from which Langan had been led.

Corday turned to the guard who had accompanied him.

"Why are they changing his cell?" he asked.

"Tomorrow is his last day," the guard answered. "They're putting him in a bigger cell and two husky guards will sit with him from now until the time they take him away. Just a precaution—so the state can't be cheated. We call it the goldfish bowl. You leave that pass at the main gate. Just follow that corridor."

DON CORDAY found the air fresher than he'd ever noticed it. He sat behind the wheel of the light delivery truck and breathed in and out. That prison had a peculiar smell. It took sunlight and a breeze to wash it out of his nostrils.

He returned to the city and put the truck away. He didn't go near his radio shop but headed for the Star Bar and Grill. Nobody knew he'd been to the prison and Corday was greeted just as he'd been on any other night.

Murph, the barkeep, slid the glass of beer in front of him. Murph said, in a low voice, "That Homicide cop was lookin' for you, Don. Anything new about that guy in the death house?"

"Only what you know already," Corday replied wearily. "Some of Old Jules' jewelry showed up in a hock shop last week. That's all I can tell you."

Murph nodded. "They ought to burn that guy Langan on general principles. I wouldn't do any worrying about him."

No, Corday thought. Why should you worry? You didn't put a hand on his shoul-

der and kill him. Yours wasn't the touch of death.

Murph excused himself, walked from behind the bar and stepped up to a wall telephone. He left the receiver dangling and called Corday in a loud voice. Corday went over.

A woman's voice said, "Are you the Donald Corday who was a witness in the case of Peter Langan?"

Corday had a premonition of what was coming. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

"I'm Langan's sister. I saw him this afternoon, very late. You'd already been there. I've got to see you, Mr. Corday. It means Peter's life or—his death."

Corday didn't hesitate. He made a date to meet her at a fashionable restaurant uptown. She'd be wearing a green suit, hat, purse and gloves. Corday blew a dollar and a half on a taxi to get there.

She seemed to know him at once and he could no more have missed her than he could a St. Patrick's day parade. She wasn't bad looking. There might have been a trace of hardness around her mouth and eyes but that could be expected. She was about thirty, slender and auburn-haired.

"I saw you in court," she told Corday. "I've reserved a table in a quiet corner. I'm so grateful you could come."

"Don't be," Corday grunted. "If you can show me your brother is innocent, I'll reverse my testimony and get him a stay. But I've got to be convinced."

A waiter led them to a dark corner, brought drinks and bowed himself out of the scene. An orchestra was playing in some other room. Here its music was muted and caressing. In the soft lights, this girl looked absolutely beautiful.

"My name is Glenda," she said. "I've never married. I guess keeping track of Peter soured me on men. But you're not interested in me. Peter is innocent. He—nor I—do not doubt but that you told what you firmly believed was the truth. You're that kind of a man, Don Corday."

"Thank you," he said. "But get on with it. Time never goes by faster than when a man's life is at stake."

"You are the key witness," Glenda said.

"You must be convinced you were wrong. Peter didn't steal the jewelry nor murder that poor old man. Someone else did—someone who looks remarkably like Peter."

"Do you know where this man can be found?" Corday asked tensely.

"Yes," she answered. "I've been working on him for days. Ever since some of that stolen jewelry appeared. His name is Farlan. Frank Farlan. He lives in a rooming house west of Columbus Circle. He's the same build as Peter. From a front view you might never associate him with my brother, but from a profile—they are identical."

"It was a profile of Peter that I saw," Corday admitted. "Go on, Miss Langan."

"My brother has underworld friends. Through them I learned of this Frank Farlan who made drunken boasts that Peter would die for a crime he committed. I looked Farlan up. We are friendly and he does not know who I really am."

"I want to see him," Corday said flatly.

"That is why I asked you to come here. Perhaps, if I bring him to the very scene of the crime, under almost identical conditions, you will be able to tell."

"What if I insist he can't be the man?" Corday asked.

She looked down at the table. "Mr. Corday, I have faith in my brother. I'd be a poor sister if I didn't, but—Peter has been bad all his life. Twice he tried to kill people. Perhaps he is lying. I do not believe it but perhaps—"

"Let's get on with it," Corday said. "We can't waste a minute."

"I'll have him at that same store, across the street from your radio shop," she said. "Can you be there in an hour?"

"Yes. The time will be approximately the same. So will other conditions because it's just about one year since the murder. Suppose this slips up? Where can I reach you?"

"The Hotel Splendide, Suite 1109. It can't fail, Mr. Corday. My brother's life depends upon it—and us."

LEAVING her there, Corday went to his radio shop and locked himself in. He

turned out the lights, sat near the window and puffed on a cigarette while he waited. The jewelry store had changed hands but nothing else had been changed. He had an excellent view of it.

At eight-forty, almost to the minute of the time Corday had seen the murder, a cab pulled up and Glenda Langan got out. Corday held his breath. A man got out next and paid off the cab driver. The shadows were too intense for Corday to have a good look at her companion.

They went into the store, the man giving furtive looks up and down the street before he walked in. Corday sat spellbound. Now he had a good view of the man. In profile he did look like Peter Langan. Not a positive twin but the outline of the face had the same high forehead, prominent nose and sloping chin.

Corday left the radio shop and crossed the street. He ducked beneath the awning over the jewelry store door, pushed open the door and at that moment the man gave him a startled look, let out a yelp and went past Corday so fast there was no chance to stop him. Corday yelled at him. Glenda Langan seized his arm. She said, "You did recognize him. He is the man."

"I'll find out," Corday grunted and darted out of the store. The man he was after had reached the next corner and took it very fast. Corday was running full speed too. He rounded the same corner in time to see Farlan streak into an alley. Corday kept following him, lost the man in the darkness of the alley and reached a six foot high fence. The man must have scaled it.

Corday backed up, gave a running jump and hauled himself up and over the fence too. He was in some sort of a garden courtyard behind apartment houses on the other street.

A DOG barked sharply. The animal snarled and barked again. Then it yelped and a stone rattled on pavement. Corday knew where his man was then and streaked in that direction. He avoided any encounter with the dog, came to the street and spotted his man running up the steps of a brownstone.

Corday saw something else too. That brownstone was in the process of being torn down along with several others in the row. Maybe this Frank Farlan knew that too, but hoped he'd outstripped his pursuer and this abandoned house would be a good place to hide.

Corday let him enter. It was better to allow the man to trap himself. After a moment or two Corday sprinted across the street, climbed the steps and found the door unlocked. He opened it slowly, fearing the aged hinges would scream a warning. They were as silent as if recently oiled. He closed the door behind him and suddenly realized he was a fool.

The man he was after might have been a murderer. A killer who knew that Corday could put him in the electric chair. Such a man would be desperate enough to kill. In fact he had to kill now. Corday didn't even possess a weapon, but he'd gone this far and there was no backing out.

[Turn page]

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VERY cautiously, Corday tiptoed across a hallway, the floor creaking under his weight. He came to the foot of a staircase which was faintly illuminated from a street light shining through the dirty window of the front door.

Corday took one step closer and the man hiding in the darkness above, opened fire. The first bullet whizzed past Corday's ear and stopped him in his tracks. He'd never been shot at before, and the experience was horrifying enough to induce a mild paralysis.

The second bullet was wilder but that one served to bring Corday out of his trance. With a yelp he dived aside and got out of that illuminated spot. He waited half a minute, knew if he left to go for help his man might escape and knew it was suicide to attack him so long as he had a gun.

Someone was coming up the outside stairs. The door opened and he saw Glenda Langan step in. Corday didn't stop to think now. He dashed toward her, got an arm around her and lifted the girl off her feet. He scampered out of range, put Glenda down and wiped sweat off his face.

"How did you find us?" he gasped. "That guy has a gun. He's been shooting at me."

"I saw you go in, Corday. Then I heard the shots. I—was afraid of this. Was he the man? Could you have been mistaken about Peter?"

"It's possible," Corday acknowledged, "but I want to nail this crazy fool with the gun!"

"I can do that," Glenda said. "He—he's fallen for me pretty badly. He thought you were a cop—or so he said. That's why he ran. Corday, his running indicates his guilt. Let me bring him down here. Why should you risk being killed?"

"Why should you?" Corday countered. "The guy is nuts. He'll shoot at anything."

Glenda turned and ran to the foot of the stairs. "Frank," she called. "Frank! It's me—Glenda. Everything is all right. Frank—don't shoot. I'm coming up."

She took a couple of steps very slowly while Corday worried ten years off his life. Nothing happened and she began running up the stairs. Corday moved about softly, trying to find some sort of a weapon.

There was a scream from upstairs, then running footsteps. Corday raced for the steps and tore up them three at a time, risking his life in the gloom of the place. He almost fell over Glenda. She was sprawled out in the middle of the hallway.

Corday lifted the stricken girl's head and cradled it on his knee. She was moaning. Then her eyes opened.

"Corday—he suspected me. He hit me with his fist and ran for the back steps. Don't let him escape!"

Corday helped her up, saw that she was all right and then left her. He ran down the stairs, out the front door and at the top of the stairs he saw it happen.

The man he'd chased and who had escaped by the back stairs, was running up the middle of the street. A car bore down on him. The driver swerved twice but the man kept running in the same direction. Corday shouted a warning. It was too late. Car and fleeing man met head-on with a sickening thud. Corday raced the three quarters of a block to the scene.

The driver was already bending over Frank Farlan. His face was white, horrified. He was a distinguished-looking man of about fifty.

"He's dead," he said. "The fool—he ran right into me. I tried to avoid him—"

Corday knelt in the street and slid a hand beneath Farlan's coat and shirt. There was no heartbeat. He doubted there would be. Farlan's skull looked as if it had been crushed in.

A police car rolled up. Corday told one of the radio patrolmen to get Homicide Lieutenant Ahern here as quickly as possible. There was a half-hour wait, which Corday spent in a doorway with Glenda Langan. They both smoked cigarettes until their mouths felt as if they were burning.

"He was certainly afraid of me and he did his best to kill me," Corday said. "Perhaps he saw me that night. He looks like your brother. There could have been a mistake. I'm telling Lieutenant Ahern the whole story. If he believes me, something will be done for your brother."

Ahern was a sympathetic listener. After twenty odd years on the force with half

of them in Homicide, he recognized the fact that strange things can happen in a murder case. He studied the dead man's profile.

"Okay, he does look something like Langan. If you have any idea you made a mistake, Corday, then Langan deserves the benefit of the doubt. Where did you say this dead man lived?"

"Glenda knows." Corday summoned the girl. "She's Langan's sister. She's been trying to prove his innocence."

Glenda told Lieutenant Ahern the address. Ahern sent her to his office at the Homicide Bureau. He took Corday's elbow and piloted him toward a detective squad cruiser. They rode to the address Glenda had given them,

rooming house. He went back to his store. Ahern called him there after awhile and reported that the dead man had been identified as a petty thief. Corday thanked the detective and hung up. He sat staring out of the window at Old Jules' place across the street.

The phone rang again. Lieutenant Ahern this time told him he was letting Glenda Langan go free.

"She'll be leaving my office in about half an hour, Corday. Just thought you'd like to know."

Corday dropped the phone down. He walked to the rear of his store and fussed with several slender high precision tools. He



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learned that Frank Farlan had rented a room more than four months ago. In that room they searched bureau drawers, took the bed and two chairs apart and finally discovered the tin box in a cleverly fashioned hiding spot beneath the floor.

Lieutenant Ahern dumped the collection of jewels onto the table. None of them were extremely valuable—maybe their total worth was about three hundred dollars. Jewelers on the street where Corday kept his radio repair shop, didn't go in for diamonds by the carat but by the point.

"Well," Ahern shrugged, "this is the jackpot, Corday. All the stuff stolen from Old Jules. The cheap geegaws he tried to protect with his life—and lost. What do you say now, Corday?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. I need time to think. Langan doesn't go until tomorrow night. Give me a few hours."

"Sure," Ahern said. "See me any time you like. Only be certain. Absolutely certain."

Corday nodded and walked out of the

put three of these into his side pocket and hurried out.

He entered the Hotel Splendide like any registered guest, told the elevator operator he wanted the eleventh floor. The car whispered its way upwards, let him out and he found Suite 1109 without any trouble. He put a finger against the buzzer, heard it sound inside but nobody came to answer.

Corday studied the lock for a moment, took one of those small tools from his pocket and inserted it into the wood beside the point where the bolt socket would be. He leaned on the instrument and felt the bolt forced back. There was a click and the door opened.

The apartment was dark. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Then, in the jet blackness that surrounded him he saw a pinpoint of crimson fire.

"Turn on the lights, Corday," a voice said. "I figured it might be you."

Corday backed up, breathless. He fumbled for the switch, found it and drenched the room with light that made him blink. Lieutenant Ahern, a gun on his lap, sat comfort-

ably in one of the easy chairs facing the door. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth.

"How—what?" Corday gasped.

"Take a look in the bedroom." Ahern motioned with his thumb. "See what I found hiding in here. I'm betting you expected to find the same rat here."

EAGERLY, Corday almost ran toward the bedroom door. He wasn't especially surprised at what he saw. The distinguished-looking man who had driven the car which killed Frank Farlan, lay on the bed. His ankles were tied to the baseboard, his arms were handcuffed around one of the bedposts and there was an efficient looking gag in his mouth.

"A beauty, isn't he?" Ahern remarked laconically. "You know it was a frame, Corday?"

"Yes," Corday answered, "I know. I guess I knew all along."

"I thought so," said the detective. "That's why I tipped you, to see if you'd follow my hunch. They roped that poor sap of a cheap grifter into it. Gave him the jewels which Langan had swiped and told him they were hot. He peddled them at the right time and the word got around. He was told to build up his rep by boasting he'd done a job somebody else died for. He didn't know the man he fronted, was waiting for the chair."

"And this man in the bedroom," Corday motioned with a jerk of his head. "He was in on it? Glenda's job was to convince me I could have been wrong. She must have told the poor fool who got killed, that I was a cop. He ran out of the store. She'd told him where to hide and if I hadn't found him she'd have worked it so I'd reach the place."

"I figured the sucker had been told I'd probably kill him so he started blasting away at me. Then Glenda came. She gave it away that time. She knew where we were. She said she'd seen us enter but that must have been a lie. The rest of it you can probably guess."

Ahern smiled. "I didn't have to, Corday. Our friend in the next room shot his mouth off. Glenda told the fool who died, that if

he ran out the back there would be a car waiting for him. He slugged her, as she ordered him to do, so you'd be convinced. The guy tore out of there, recognized the car which he'd seen before, of course. He ran toward it and his nibs on the bed drove toward him. One had escape on his mind, the other murder which would look accidental. So the suspect was dead and couldn't deny the crime they were trying to switch from Langan's shoulders to his."

"Are you taking Glenda in when she arrives?" Corday asked.

"Yes. Want to stay and give me a hand?"

"I don't think so. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow night, around eleven. At the Star Bar and Grill near my store. Both of us could probably use a drink about then."

Lieutenant Ahern walked in at five of eleven. Corday had two filled glasses on the bar, backed up by their respective chasers. Ahern looked at the clock, didn't touch his drink.

"Glenda talked too," he said. "You see, I know that Langan never had a sister. He was a foundling, raised in an orphanage. He and his girl friend, Glenda, and that con-man who worked with them, forgot that a careful check is made of any felon's antecedents."

"I suppose so." Corday was watching the clock. "They forgot something else. The man they dug up was a fair ringer for Langan except for one thing. When Langan ran out of Old Jules' place, he was tall enough so the awning knocked his hat off. He stopped and picked it up. The ringer—well, he ran out too, but there were a couple of inches to spare between the top of his hat and the awning."

"Not bad," Ahern commented. "I read the whole record and never noticed that. Well—they're strapping him in now." He raised the glass. "Here's to Langan. Up to the moment they lead him into that room, he's a deadly dangerous criminal. A man to fear and do battle with. But right now he's just a poor slob, all caught up. Just a poor slob, like all the rest of them that go that way."

"I'll drink to him," Corday said. "Not for your reasons, but for mine. He made a mighty good try. Give him credit for that."



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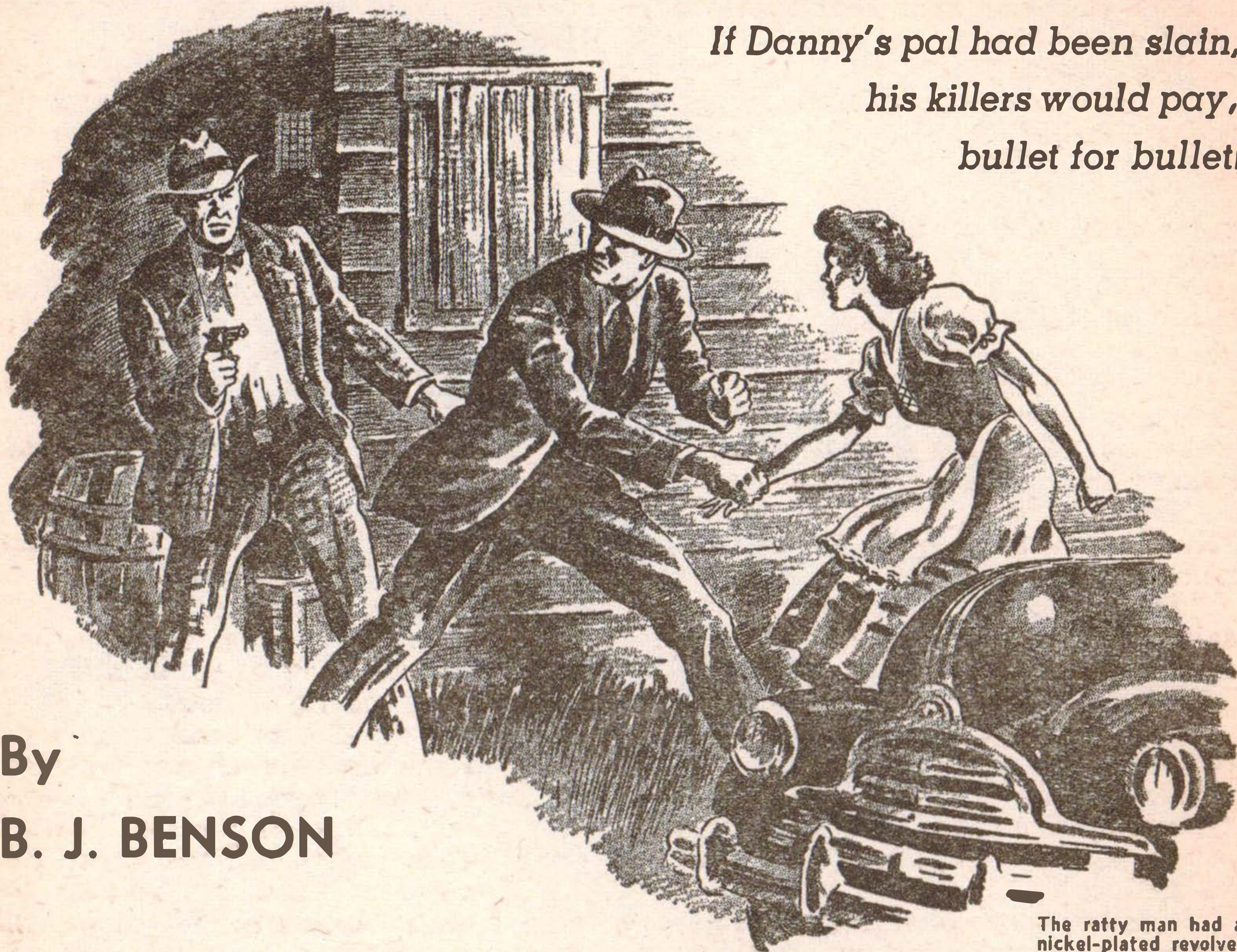
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By

B. J. BENSON

The ratty man had a nickel-plated revolver

IT WAS four-thirty in the morning and I was sitting in Mrs. Hayes' living room with a pair of pants over my pajamas and slippers on my feet. Mrs. Hayes sat across from me on the divan wringing her hands. Her face was as gray as slate and her white hair had straggled down over her eyes.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Hayes," I said, for the fourth time. "I tell you, nothing's happened!"

"But you heard what the police said, Danny. They found his car down by the railroad station."

"It doesn't mean a thing," I said. "He might have left it there and gone off in somebody's else's car."

"But he's never stayed out this late before," she sobbed. "Ken never did. It's almost daylight."

"He might have had just a wee bit too much to drink. He's probably sleep-

ing it off somewhere."

"He never drinks anything stronger than beer," she protested. "He's not one to drink heavy."

"You'd be surprised what beer can do," I told her. "Now don't you worry about your son. He'll probably turn up before work with a silly grin on his puss."

"I know I can trust you," she whispered. "You grew up with Ken. You work with him over at Seaboard Brands."

I reached over and patted her hand.

"You've got to know the rest of it, Danny." Her fingers clutched at my sleeve. "There's a girl mixed up in this."

"Now, now, Mrs. Hayes. Relax. I know all the girls Ken knows. They're harmless, every one of them."

"Danny, do you know where Ken has

been going every Monday night for the past few months?" she asked.

"No. I never see him Monday nights."

"Did you ever hear him speak of a girl named Millie?"

"No, I never did."

"He sees her every Monday night at a place called 'Alfie's.' Do you know where that is?"

"It's on the old Bayport road about eight miles out of town," I said. "It used to be the Gold Coach Grill. But they built that new super highway and the Gold Coach closed up. Alfie's took the place over a few months ago. The only traffic that goes through there now is heavy stuff—trucks, vans, trailers. They say Alfie's has good food and it's cheap. I've never been there myself."

"That's where he goes," she said. "He went there tonight. He told me so before he left."

"Then he must have come back," I said. "His car was down at the railroad station."

"It isn't like Ken," she said.

"Why didn't you tell all this to the police?"

"He may be in trouble, Danny. You know how Ken is. He's a little wild sometimes. He and the girl—well, you know."

"I *don't* know, Mrs. Hayes. Ken's a pretty level-headed kid under all those shenanigans of his."

"You'll find him for me, Danny," she pleaded. "If anybody can, you can!"

"Sure, we'll find him, Mrs. Hayes. Just don't you worry."

WHEN I got into work a few hours later there was a note on my desk to see Mr. Baxter. I knew what it was about, so I sat down and smoked a cigarette first. After I'd finished it I went out of the credit department and down the corridor to the office that said, "G. R. Baxter, President."

I went in and spoke to his secretary. She told me to sit down and wait. But I didn't sit down. I paced back and forth nervously until she spoke into the phone again. Then she looked over at me and nodded. I opened the huge walnut door and walked in over the deep carpeting.

Mr. Baxter was sitting behind the big

desk unwrapping the cellophane from a long cigar. The morning papers were spread across the desk pad.

"Have you seen the newspapers, Holden?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I've seen them."

"Good! Then you know all about it," he said. His bald head glinted in the rays of the morning sun.

"Yes, sir. I was up with his mother since two this morning."

He pointed a blunt forefinger at one of the newspaper columns. "Did you also read about one of our trucks disappearing last night?"

"Yes, sir—the warehouse load from Bayport."

"Don't stand there, Holden," he said impatiently. "Sit down."

I sat down.

"There was thirty thousand dollars' worth of merchandise in that load," he said. "Did you know that?"

"Yes. I made out the traffic order."

"Ken Hayes knew about it, too."

"I suppose he did," I said.

"The driver of that truck was found lying in the underbrush shortly after ten o'clock last night. He said he ran into a road block on the old Bayport road. When he stopped the truck, two men jumped him and hit him on the head with a blackjack. We're insured of course, Holden, so that's not the point. The point is that not only the truck disappeared last night, but also Ken Hayes. Doesn't that appear strange to you, Holden?"

"No, it doesn't," I told him.

"Does to me," he said tersely. "And I mean to find out!"

"You've got it all wrong," I said. "I know Ken like I know my right hand. We grew up together. We worked here together in the credit department since we got out of the army. That's a long time. Ken wasn't mixed up in this hijacking."

"Ken was quite the ladies' man, wasn't he?" Baxter asked.

"He liked the girls and the girls liked him. But that doesn't mean anything."

"I've got eyes and ears, Holden. The office staff calls him the shop-girl's Van Johnson. You're his associate. What do they call you?"

"I don't know," I said, smiling. "I

got this dent in my nose from the tailboard of a weapons carrier at Avranches in 'Forty-four. I guess they don't call me anything."

"The idea is that a man who's partial to the ladies has to spend money," Baxter said. "Ken's salary perhaps wasn't adequate enough for him to carry out the program he wanted."

"You're mistaken there," I said. "Don't forget this is the third truck hijacked on the old Bayport road in the past year. The other two weren't Seaboard."

"I don't give a hang about the other two," he said angrily. "This one was ours and I don't like the way it smells! That'll be all, Holden. I'll talk to you later."

AT NINE o'clock that night I was driving along the old Bayport road listening to the news on my car radio. Same old thing—no news of Ken Hayes or the missing Seaboard truck. Mrs. Hayes was in a state of prostration. State and local police were expending every effort . . .

I snapped the radio off because, just ahead, I saw a neon sign that said "Alfie's." I pulled in onto a gravel driveway and behind the only vehicle there—a big moving van. Two truck drivers, toothpicks in their mouths, came out of the building. They got into the van and pulled out.

I left the car and walked across to the building. I opened the front door and went inside. The place was empty. A short counter ran along one wall, with a swinging door to the kitchen behind it. Small square tables, with checkered red-and-white cloths on them, clustered around a waxed dance floor. Over in a corner were a piano and a juke box.

There was only one waitress. She came out of the kitchen when I entered. She was young, with soft golden skin, and she wore a Dutch outfit with a tight-laced bodice and a flaring skirt. She had a beautifully curved mouth and blue-black hair. Her eyes were green and her nose was small and straight.

She came up to me and I saw the stitching on her curving breast pocket. It read "Millie." I stared at it. Now

I knew that I couldn't blame Ken for running off every Monday night. I wouldn't have blamed myself.

She looked me over carelessly and pulled a chair out at one of the tables. I sat down.

She went over to the counter and brought me back a menu, a glass of water and a cloth napkin.

"The barbecued pork is very good tonight," she said.

"Pork it is," I said, "and a glass of beer."

She nodded. She wore high heels and they clicked over the polished floor as she disappeared into the kitchen.

A short, husky man came out of the swinging door and stood behind the counter looking at me. He had a ruddy face and thick lips. His nose was square and stubby and his black hair was thin, and graying around the temples. It was hard to tell his age. It could have been anywhere between forty and fifty-five.

Millie came back with my sandwich and beer. As she set it down she brushed her soft body against mine. Then she turned to me and there was a little smile on her face.

"Would you care for some music, sir?" she asked.

The "sir" part sounded a bit like mockery, but I let it go by. I nodded.

She went over to the juke box and set it in motion. The music was a Strauss waltz. I sipped on the beer and munched on the sandwich. She stood before the juke box and swayed back and forth with the rhythm for a moment. Then she came back and sat down at my table.

"Have you a cigarette?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. I fumbled for my pack. "Makes it cosy," I said, as I held the light for her. "No nickels for the juke box."

"It's free," she said. Her beautiful legs were carelessly crossed as she let cigarette smoke out of her lips.

"It's a good sandwich and good beer," I said. "Is that Alfie behind the counter?"

"That's the boss."

"Call him over."

MILLIE shrugged her shoulders, turned and motioned with her head. Alfie left the counter and walked

over, like a prizefighter coming into a ring.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I want to tell you how good the sandwich is," I said. "It's a low price for these days. How do you do it?"

"I'm not trying to get rich," he said tonelessly. "I just want to make a living."

He walked away, going out the swinging door to the kitchen.

"He's shy," Millie said, looking at me through half-lidded eyes. "What's your name?"

"I'm Dan. Danny Holden."

"I'm Millie."

"I know. This year in school they taught me to read."

She pealed off into a gale of laughter. "I forgot it was on my blouse! Say, you're one of these deadpan kidders."

"Thanks for the compliment," I growled.

"Where you from, Dan? I haven't seen you before."

"I'm from Bayport," I lied. "Just passing through. I can see what I've been missing."

She looked at me closely. "I don't remember seeing you before."

"That's twice you said that," I said.

"I just want to be sure, that's all. I don't like to make mistakes."

"Everybody makes mistakes sometimes," I said. "Is all this part of the service?"

"You mean me sitting here with you?"

"Yes. Not that I mind."

"Friendly service. On Monday and Tuesday nights it's quiet here. I sit with the people I like."

"Thanks. Just sit?"

"I might dance," she said, sort of dreamily.

"And afterward—when you close up?" I insisted.

"It all depends how much I like the particular person. We'll see."

"Meanwhile, we can dance," I said.

"Finish your sandwich, Dan. It's a long evening."

I went back to my sandwich and I was down to the end of it, when I heard a car pull up in front. The door opened and two state troopers came in. The older one, with gray temples visible under his

visored cap, wore sergeant's stripes on his sleeves. The other was a tall, rangy kid, with black boots that shone like patent leather. The sergeant hitched at his gun-belt and looked around.

"Hello, Millie," he said.

"Hi, Sergeant Rider," she greeted him. "Still looking?"

"Still looking," he said.

He went over to the counter with the young trooper. They sat down on the leather stools and Alfie came out of the kitchen. They exchanged greetings and Alfie drew two cups of coffee from the urn. The young one turned halfway around on the stool and watched Millie as she got up and went over to the juke box.

I finished my beer about the same time they finished their coffee. They got up, threw some coins on the bar and came over to me.

"Whose car is that out there?" the sergeant asked.

"Mine," I said. "It can't be speeding. I never could get that hack up over thirty-five miles an hour."

Rider grinned, showing deep seams in his tanned face.

"I didn't think so, either," he said. "Your rear license plate is hanging by one screw. You're liable to lose it."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll take care of it before I leave."

He turned and waved to Millie, then he nodded to the young one.

"Let's go, Clancy," he said.

THEY went out and the door closed. I looked out of the front window and watched their white cruiser turn out of the drive and onto the highway.

Millie came back and stood over me. "What did they want?" she asked lazily. "Nothing. Told me my rear license plate was loose."

I ordered another beer and she went over to the counter and drew it. She put it on a tray and brought it over to the table. Then she ran her hand slowly over the back of my neck and sat down again.

The kitchen door opened again and two men came out. One was small, thin and ratty-looking. The other was tall and dark. They helped themselves to beer from the tap, and the tall one

watched me over the rim of his glass as he drank. He wiped his hand on his driver's whip-cords. Then he put the glass down, brushed a hand over a thin mustache and went back into the kitchen.

The little one drank slowly with his back turned. When he put his glass down he went through the swinging door without looking back.

Millie reached for a cigarette from my pack on the table. She held it up and I lighted it for her. She took two puffs out of it and got up, mashing the cigarette into the ash tray. She was off in a whirl of her short skirt and over to the juke box.

I sipped on my beer and looked at the red smudge of her lipstick on the cigarette butt. A moment later a fox trot started up and she came back and held out her arms. I got up and put my arm around her soft waist. The music was slow and we glided back and forth over the shiny floor, with my lips brushing her scented hair. The record went off and another started. We kept on.

I had her back to the side window when I heard a truck start up out back. I led her closer to the window, and my eyes caught headlights as a truck flashed by the side of the building. As it roared out onto the highway I got a quick look at a blue panel and gold letters that said "Seaboard."

The record ended and we went back and sat down. Millie patted her hair and took a drink of my beer.

"What was that truck?" I asked her.

"What truck?"

"The truck that just pulled out."

"Oh, that," she laughed. "Our weekly shipment of groceries. You know—canned goods, syrups, shortenings, sugar."

"Were those the same drivers as before?"

"Yes," she said. Her eyes looked me over slowly. "Why?"

"Nothing. I thought it looked funny, them helping themselves to the beer."

"That's Nick and Eddie. They've been coming around so long that they feel at home. It's a hard job unloading and Alfie doesn't mind."

I nodded. Reaching over very deliberately, I took a cigarette from the

pack. Then I slid it back in. I yawned, and looked at my watch. Getting up, I threw a bill on the table.

"Keep it, Millie," I said. "I'm running along."

"So soon?"

"I'm tired. Had a long day."

She put the bill into her breast pocket.

"Too bad," she said. "We were just getting to know each other."

"I'll be back," I said.

"I'll be expecting you," she said languidly.

"I'll be back soon," I said, and left.

OUTSIDE, the night air was cool. A car flashed by on the highway and whined away in the darkness, the two red eyes of the tail lights disappearing quickly. I went over to the car and got in, started the motor and flicked on the lights.

I rode down the highway about two hundred yards, pulled over to the shoulder and stopped. I turned the lights off and got out. Keeping along the underbrush, I walked back. My eyes were on the green neon sign of Alfie's.

When I got to the gravel driveway I jumped quickly into the bushes. A small coupe, without lights, had roared down the highway out of the darkness. It was now skidding into the drive and spitting tiny stones from its tires. It careened by me and out back, where it disappeared into the darker shadows. I heard the motor being shut off.

I waited.

The car doors slammed. There were footsteps, a light flashed briefly, and it was dark again.

I walked along the path out to the rear of Alfie's. There I came to a huge barn with boarded-up windows. Light showed through the cracks and picked out the coupe alongside it. I went over to the car and tried the door. It was unlocked. I opened it and looked inside. Nothing. I started to turn away when I heard something in the dark beside me.

"Hello," the voice said. "Lose your way, Dan?"

"Hello, Millie," I said. "Looks like you're lost, too."

"I work here, darling. Remember?"

You looking for anything in particular?"

"It's a nice night for a walk," I said.

"It depends what you're out after."

"Yes," I said. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. His name is Kenneth Hayes."

She didn't answer for a moment.

"Never heard of him," she said finally.

"He came to see you here every Monday night," I told her. "He was here last night."

"I can't place him."

"You've got a short memory. Try again."

"Sorry, chum. It doesn't register."

I grabbed her, got my hand over her mouth and twisted her arm behind her back.

"All right," I whispered. "Where is he? What is he mixed in with?"

She shook her head wildly.

"Nod your head," I said, "when you're ready to talk."

She shook her head again.

"One last chance," I said. "I'm going to break your arm."

I heard the step in the gravel near me and let go and whirled around. It was the small, ratty one—the one I had last seen behind the counter. He had a nickel-plated revolver in his hand.

Diving at him, I got him just above the knees. We went down together on the crushed stones. He tried to bring the gun into action but I snapped his fingers back. He screamed like a woman and dropped the gun. His hand scrabbled in the stones, grasping for some kind of weapon. I punched him twice in the mouth as he hunched his knees up and tried to slide away from me.

I reached down, yanked him to his feet by the collar. Then I let go from way back and hit him as hard as I could. His head snapped back as my fist bounced off his chin. He slumped down. I let go of him and he slid to the ground.

The barn door rattled and began to slide back as I rubbed my bruised knuckles. I looked around for Millie.

Something hard pressed into the small of my back, then.

"It's the gun," Millie said, prodding me with it. "Go ahead—in the barn. You have company there."

I looked over and saw Alfie and the tall, dark one standing in the doorway. I went by them and in. I blinked in the glare of a three hundred watt lamp.

"Eddie's knocked out," Millie said to the tall one. "Bring him in, Nick."

Nick went out into the darkness and came back with the small one slung over his shoulder.

"More nuisance than he's worth," Millie said. "Dump him in the back room."

NICK walked over to a small door and kicked it open. He went in, and came back alone in a moment. I was looking around at all the merchandise stacked along the walls.

"Take a good look," Alfie said.

"Where's Ken Hayes?" I asked.

He nodded to Nick. Nick came up and pushed me against the rough planking of the wall. He went through my pockets and came out with my wallet. Alfie stepped over and took it. His fingers pulled cards out.

"Daniel Holden from Eastern City," he said. "Works in the credit department of Seaboard Brands."

"How lovely," Millie said.

"Where's Ken Hayes?" I asked again.

"He's around," Alfie said. "He's playing the big time, now."

"You're a liar," I said. "Not Ken Hayes."

"Nobody calls me a liar, kid!"

"I said you're a liar!"

Alfie's hand opened and closed. He put the wallet in his pocket and reached to the floor for a long, black crowbar.

"Wait a minute," said Nick. "I don't like this. The guy may be working for the cops."

"Shut up!" Alfie grated. "The cops don't need this punk. If they were wise they'd be looking here themselves. The kid's got big ideas, that's all."

"Tell him where Ken Hayes is, darling," said Millie.

"He's dead!" Alfie said to me.

"You mean he's been murdered!" I cried.

"People get hurt when they snoop," he said.

"He saw that Seaboard truck pull in here last night," I said. "He knew you didn't have an account with Seaboard

and he knew those two drivers were phonys. He started to ask questions of Millie."

"This one's smart," Millie sneered. "He knows all the answers!"

"I'm not so smart," I said. "But I know you couldn't get rid of the truck until tonight. Things were too hot. You had it in the barn here. The cops will be finding it any minute, now."

"Sure they'll find it," Alfie said. "But you won't be around to tell them anything. We've got some woods out back and the ground is soft there this time of the year."

"One of the boys drove Ken's car back to Eastern City," I said. "You thought you had it well covered."

"When I get rid of you," Alfie said, "I'll have the cover on tight again. I killed one, I'll kill another. What's the difference."

"Too bad," Millie said. Her free hand went up and patted her hair. "Too bad Ken had to be working for Seaboard. He was a lot of fun."

"Shut up!" Alfie snapped at her.

"Let her talk," I said. "Maybe I'll learn something I don't know."

"You know enough," Alfie said.

"You mean your setup here?" I asked. "The free juke box? The good food, the low prices? Sure, I know! You're losing money on your trade here, but that's chicken feed. The main idea is to draw a crowd. Because if you stayed open and nobody came here the cops would get suspicious. They'd come around and look in your barn, and you wouldn't like that. You wanted them to get used to seeing trucks pulling in and out of here."

"That takes brains, kid," said Alfie.

"And muscles, too, darling," Millie said. "Don't forget Nick and Eddie. You wouldn't want to hurt their feelings."

"And we mustn't forget Millie's contribution," I said. "She makes a nice come-on."

"Millie?" he echoed. "Millie's my wife."

I turned and looked at her. She jiggled the gun in her hand and smiled. I spat at her feet.

"You don't mind," I said, "but I always spit when I see something slimy."

Her face went dead-white and her finger tightened on the trigger.

"Wait!" Alfie shouted. "You crazy? You want the cops to hear?"

"Take it easy," Nick said to her. "If that gun goes off, they'll hear it for miles around."

"I want to give him one in the middle," she said. Her eyes were slitted.

"Better give me the gun," Nick said. "I'll give him a going-over for you."

SHE HANDED Nick the gun and came over to me. She slapped me across the face. I hit her, then. It was the first time in my life I had ever hit a woman. I just reached out and jabbed her square in the nose.

Millie shrieked and went down backward. Blood trickled from her nostrils. I saw Alfie raise the crowbar and I crashed into him, head down. We both went to the floor, the crowbar banging against my side. I got my hands on his thick bull neck, forgetting all about Nick.

Something came down on the back of my head and exploded into white sparks. I sagged over sideways. Through glazed eyes I saw Nick standing over me, holding the gun by the barrel. I tried to get up but my feet wouldn't work.

Alfie rose slowly.

"The kid's got a lot of fight," he panted heavily. "We'll take it out of him. Tie him up, Nick."

Nick went over to a bench along the wall and came back with a length of clothes line. He pulled my arms behind me and lashed them tight.

"That's it," Alfie said, reaching for the crowbar again. "Better put something in his mouth."

Nick brought out a piece of oil-stained flannel and began stuffing it between my lips. I gagged and retched.

Millie was dabbing at her nose with a handkerchief. Suddenly she cocked her head and held up her hand. She went over to the open doorway and peered out.

"Somebody drove in," she said. "There are headlights out front."

"Go out and get rid of them fast," Alfie ordered.

He moved over to the door and listened. Nick stood behind me, with the

gun against my side. There were footsteps coming back along the gravel and we heard Millie's loud voice.

"That's what happened, Sergeant Rider," she was saying. "He said something was wrong with the distributor. He got a ride back to Eastern City with another couple."

"It's the cops," Alfie muttered to Nick. "Quick, push him out into the back room and stay with him."

Nick lifted me to my feet and shoved me through the tiny door and inside. I saw Eddie huddled there but I wasn't interested in him. There were wide cracks in the boards and through them I could see back into the lighted part of the barn. Nick stood behind me, with the gun jammed into my ribs.

Rider came into the barn with Millie.

"That boy," he said to Alfie. "We saw his car parked along the road a way. We wondered where he went to."

"It's like Millie said, Sergeant," Alfie answered. "It's an old car. It broke down. He said he'd be back tomorrow for it."

"I see," Rider said. "We just found that hijacked truck in the brush down off the four corners. It was cleaned out."

"Too bad, Sergeant," Millie said.

"Yeah," Rider said. "Too bad." He looked around slowly. "This is the first time I've been in your barn, Alfie. Big one. What do you use it for? Cows?"

Alfie laughed mirthlessly. "No cows, Sergeant. Storehouse for my things."

"You carry a big stock."

"I do a big business, Sergeant."

"You must. Cases of cigarettes. Cases of canned goods. Soap. Must be fifty thousand dollars' worth of stuff here."

"I like to carry a big stock," said Alfie, wetting his lips.

"So I notice," Rider said. "I imagine the wholesalers have their names stenciled on the cartons."

"It's only general merchandise," Millie said quickly.

"That's Millie," Rider said. "She al-

ways has an answer for everything. I'll take a look."

He walked over to where the cases were stacked. His hand was on his holster. I saw Alfie raise the crowbar behind him and I tried to scream through the gag.

Rider swung around and fired two shots that echoed through the barn. Alfie stopped. The crowbar dropped and his hands went to his midsection. Blood oozed out through his fingers. He rocked on his feet and shook his head unbelievably. Then he staggered forward and fell, face down, on the wide planking.

I banged my head on the wall and Rider looked over. Nick's breath rasped behind me. I turned to look at him as he dropped the gun.

Rider stepped over to the little door with his gun raised.

"Hold it!" Nick yelled. "I'm coming out with my hands up!"

"Come on," Rider said. He kicked the door open with his boot.

Nick came out. I stumbled right out behind him as young Clancy ran into the barn, gun in hand.

Rider came over to me and took the gag out of my mouth.

"I didn't recognize you with your mouth stuffed," he grinned. "You ought to get that number plate fixed. It's still hanging by one screw."

* * * * *

Alfie died that night. After the trial and the newspaper publicity, they put Millie and the other two away and there was no more hijacking on the old Bayport road. Sometimes I rode by there and saw the overgrown weeds, the boarded windows, and the broken neon sign. The weather-beaten old barn was still there and behind it, in the woods, was the hole where they had dug up Ken Hayes.

Sometimes, on the way back, I'd see a white State Police cruiser. I'd wave to it as I went by.

She was beautiful and deadly—and when the mobsters wouldn't play along with her—she went to the FBI! Meet THE MISTRESS OF MURDER in the novel of that name by C. K. M. Scanlon in the Winter issue of G-MEN DETECTIVE, 20c At All Stands!

DEAD MEN

a mystery novelet by BURT SIMS

CHAPTER I

SUSPICION OF MANSLAUGHTER

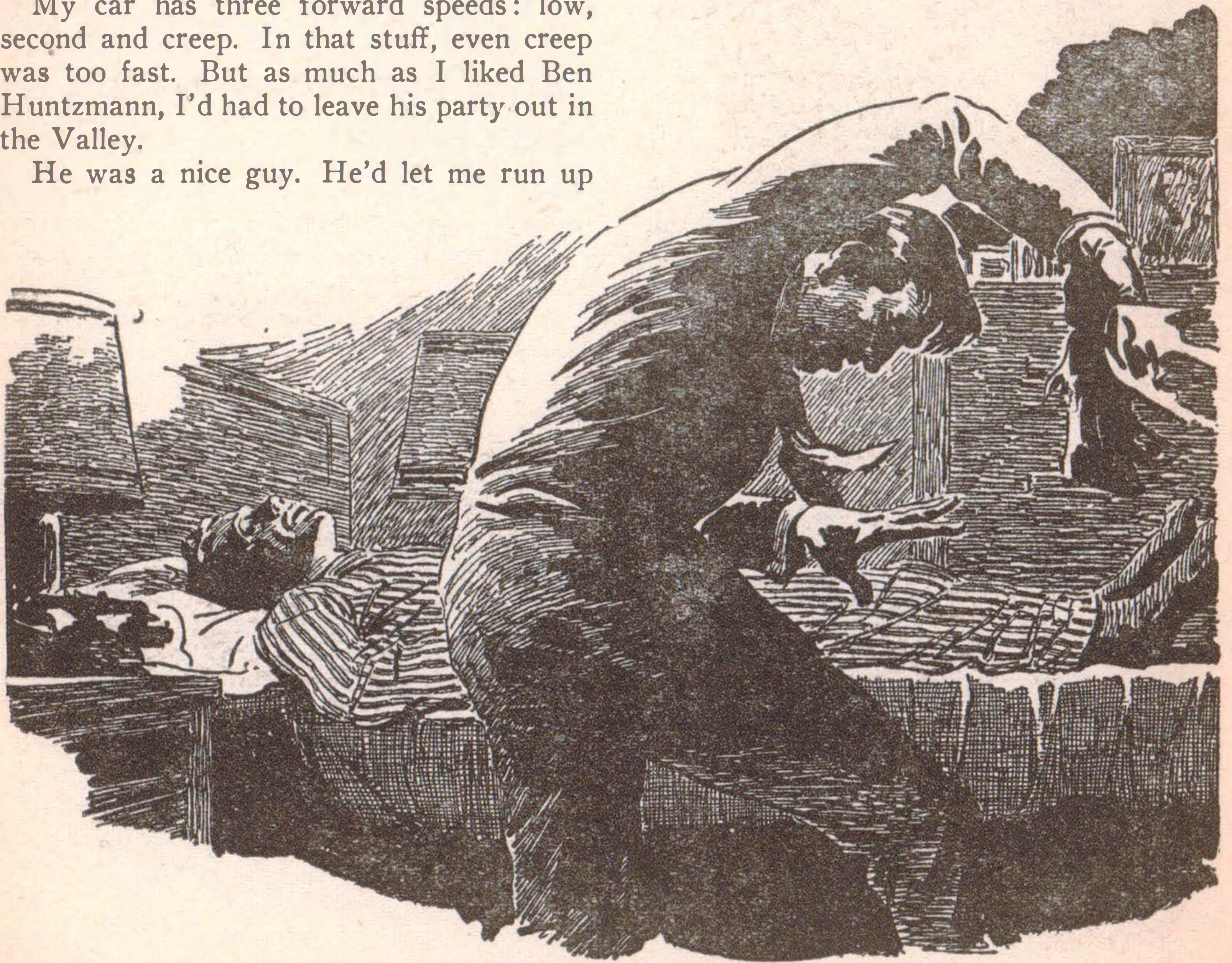
IT WAS gray and nasty, that night fog. It was a solid block, blunting my headlights like an impenetrable, slowly receding wall. The cold air above the Pacific was pushing it inland, forcing it like clammy putty into the crevice that was Laurel Canyon.

My car has three forward speeds: low, second and creep. In that stuff, even creep was too fast. But as much as I liked Ben Huntzmann, I'd had to leave his party out in the Valley.

He was a nice guy. He'd let me run up

smoke. Even the alcoholic content couldn't brighten up the place for me. And he had never come around to why he had asked me out there. Fog or no fog, I was going home to my four walls and built-in towel.

The windshield wipers clucked asthmatically. It was past midnight and cold and



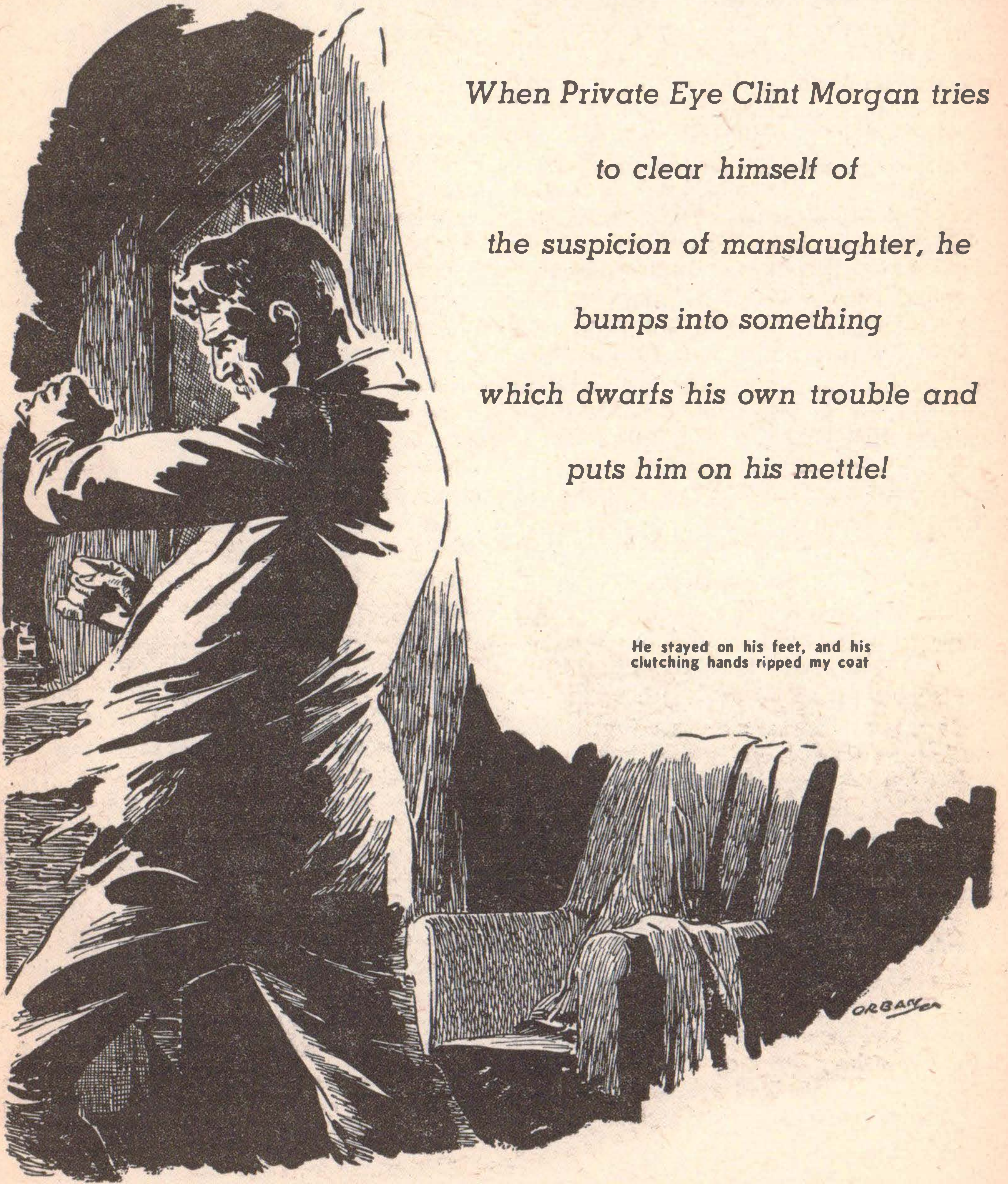
many a fat bar bill at his Twelve-thirty Club. But the party at his home had attracted too many babbling people, too much cigarette

damp. I yawned. And in the next instant, my mouth still open, the other coupe came hurtling out of the narrow road barely visible

don't need BAIL

*When Private Eye Clint Morgan tries
to clear himself of
the suspicion of manslaughter, he
bumps into something
which dwarfs his own trouble and
puts him on his mettle!*

*He stayed on his feet, and his
clutching hands ripped my coat*



to my right and I slammed into its rear left fender.

My foot tried to jam the brake pedal through the engine. The other car slewed

around crazily, skidding past in the other direction. Then I was beyond it, hearing only the tearing sound of metal and rattling and banging.

The road is steep up there. I waited in a moment's ghastly silence for the crash that would mean the other car had gone over the side. But there was no further sound except the assorted clackings, mutterings and wheezings of my own car. The crash had deflected him, kept him from going over.

I backed up and into that narrow road and got hurriedly out, and stepped into a world no larger than the thin beam of my flashlight. The fog draped a wet, chill arm across me, drew me close. The finger of light poked at it and became a yellow cobweb pulling me toward the wreckage.

The right wheels of the coupe, a late model, had bounced over the thin curbing. Now it straddled that meager safeguard, and a telephone pole was flush against the radiator grill. There wasn't a sound in the night but my own hoarse breathing. I went closer with the flashlight.

THERE was no one at the wheel. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I had the wild, soaring hope that the car had been parked there and had slipped its brakes. Then the light reached through the window and softly touched him where he had fallen sideways across the seat, and I knew I was in trouble. Big trouble.

He was a heavysset man in a brown suit. No hat, no topcoat. He looked like he was asleep, but the crumpled attitude of his body was the kind from which there is no awakening. There was sudden sweat on my face, even in that chill night. I reached inside his coat and felt no heartbeat. No pulse, either. Maybe I'm too nervous, I thought. Maybe I can't tell whether I'm alive myself.

The whole business was taking on the shape and size of a horrifying nightmare. The fog and the stillness were a tremendous weight, crushing down on that deathly little scene. I turned the light square on him then, and my breath caught in my throat when I saw the back of his head. I leaned against the side of the car and was quite sick.

A murmur grew louder and became an approaching car. I stood in the middle of the road like a damned fool and jerked the flashlight back and forth. I had to jump to get out of the way, but the car stopped and a head

was stuck out. It was a young kid in a light-weight convertible, and his face was a mirror of alarm.

"There's been an accident," I told him jerkily. My teeth wanted to chatter. "Get to a phone as fast as you can, call the cops. I'll stay here."

He didn't say a word. He just took off, much too fast for that road and the fog. I heard him burning rubber on the turns.

I took four matches to get the cigarette going. I thought abruptly, What if he isn't dead? What if he's dying while I'm standing here?

He was dead, all right. My flash caught a glimpse of white that was the car registration slip on the steering post. Harry Sellick, it said. The address was a good neighborhood in West Los Angeles. Something else tried to register, but didn't quite make it. It was like looking at a picture from which a piece is missing, yet not being able to put your eye on the vacancy.

My nerves were quivering. I gave up and went back to my car and sat down. The fog cupped me in a cold, still hand, and I smoked cigarettes, and in about twenty-nine years the cops arrived.

The two boys in the radio car were real nice in a firm sort of way. They listened patiently to my story. They looked at Sellick, called in some details on their radio, and then took a lot of notes.

"How fast were you going?" the older one asked. The other one, a young fellow, listened attentively, as though he were new to the job and didn't want to miss a trick.

"Ten, maybe fifteen," I said. "It's no place to be in a hurry."

The older one let it roll around in his head for a moment. "You must've been doing more than that. Quite a collision. His car's pretty badly smashed up."

"That happened afterwards, when he hit the pole. It could've been worse if he had gone over the side."

"No worse for him," the cop said laconically.

"You've got a point there," I agreed. "But ten or fifteen, that was all."

He wrote it down. Then: "You're a private investigator?"

"That's right."

"Know any of the boys at Hollywood Division?"

"A few. Mike Sheil, a lieutenant. Homicides and rough stuff."

The cop nodded. In the distance I heard the first faint whine of a siren. The cop said, "You've been drinking?"

The other cop nodded at that, as though he had been wondering if the older man had forgotten that sobriety tests were a standard procedure following traffic accidents.

"A couple of short beers," I admitted.

"Let's see," he suggested.

SO THERE on that foggy road, with nothing but headlights and flashlights to illuminate the eerie scene, I danced for the boys. I held my arms out to the sides and tilted my head back and closed my eyes. Then I brought my right index finger over to touch my nose. It scored a direct hit on my chin.

I opened my eyes. "Look, friend. I'm not too good at this, even on a clear day without a care in the world. It's tough enough to do without even a short beer. But I'm not drunk."

"Nobody ever is," the cop said. "There's a white line down this road. Walk it."

I walked a few steps. He said, "Okay. Try to hit your nose again."

I managed a near miss. He said, "You're getting warm."

"No coaching from the audience, please," I counted dryly. I took a deep breath, bore down mentally, and this time I made it. The cop wrote something.

"Drunk?" I queried.

He shook his head, and that was the first square break I'd had all night. Then the siren was on top of us and I got a nice, comfortable ride down to Hollywood Division jail.

I mentioned Mike Sheil's name to the desk sergeant, a pleasant-faced man with graying hair.

"Like all good citizens, he's home and in bed," said the sergeant, a chiding note in his tone. "With his wife. You wouldn't want me to disturb him, would you?"

"No," I said. "I'll talk to him later."

The business took a little while. It wasn't until they were about to start me off to a jail cell that my brain caught the full significance of it all.

Suspicion of manslaughter, the book said.

The sergeant was talking, but my mind suddenly wasn't on him. It was on the fact I was looking right at a penitentiary sentence, so close it began to give me chills.

"Wait a minute," I said. "This wasn't my fault."

"I'm not the judge." The sergeant was patient. "He'll decide that. With twelve good men, tried and true. Like it says in the rules."

"But, look—" I started.

"Man's dead," the sergeant said in that patient voice. "You understand that. Dead. Did you know him?"

"Know him?" My nerves were taut. "How in hell should I know him?"

"Lots of private investigators did. Harry Sellick."

"Sure, I know his name. But what about it?"

"He worked for Sammy Nye. Now, don't tell me you never heard of Sammy Nye."

"The bail bondsman?"

The sergeant nodded. "Sellick worked in his office."

I had heard of Nye, all right—the town's biggest trouble-shooter for the boys who made trouble an occupation. Always there with the ready bank roll, and he knew more angles than an expert of modern design. Only, quite a chunk of that ready bank roll wasn't so ready at the moment.

"He put up fifty thousand dollars last week for Lou Mario," I said. "Everybody in town heard about that one."

"Maybe I can even give you the cell Mario used," the sergeant said politely. "He didn't hurt it."

"He wasn't there long enough to throw a shadow," I said. "Even with an assault-with-intent-to-commit-murder charge."

"Nye got him out," the sergeant pointed out mildly. "Fifty thousand, the bail was."

"And Nye could be worrying a little about that," I remarked. "Where's Mario now?"

The sergeant shrugged. "That isn't my department. If he doesn't show up when he's

supposed to, they'll find him."

"Maybe. But if he's not the punctual type, Sammy Nye is out fifty grand. Look, I get to make a phone call, don't I?"

He nodded. "If you have a nickel."

WORRIEDLY I told him, seriously, "I wasn't at fault in this thing. I'm not anxious to collect this kind of material for my memoirs. So I'm not spending any more time here than I have to. There's a bail-bond place up the street, isn't there?"

"Like I've been saying," the sergeant said patiently. "Sammy Nye."

I squinted at him. "Now, wouldn't that be sweet? I'm booked on a charge of killing Nye's boy—and Nye should go my bail!" I shook my head.

"Business is business. It might be worth an effort." The sergeant winked. "Knowing Sammy Nye."

I studied him. He was a subtly persistent character. I could have asked how much Sammy was tipping him for pushing business. But why antagonize him? I made the call.

"I don't suppose Mr. Nye is there?" I said when I got the number.

"That's twice you've guessed wrong," the man said. "This is Mr. Nye. Who's calling?"

He had a smooth voice, as though he had long ago had all the surprises he was supposed to get.

"When was the first time?" I said.

"Everybody who calls me," he said easily, "has guessed wrong at least once."

"I get it. Well, this is going to be a jolt. My name is Morgan. Clint Morgan. I'm a—"

"I know," he said calmly. "That was bad about Harry. He was a very nice fellow."

"You sure heard about it fast!"

"Yes. Now you want me to bail you out?"

The way he was taking it slowed me way down. "That," I agreed, "or a reasonable facsimile." I raised an eyebrow at the sergeant. He had a slight smile on his face. He obviously knew Nye's penchant for business better than I did.

I took a breath. "It's suspicion of manslaughter."

Nye was as unruffled as high-grade glass. "What's the recommended bail?"

I turned to the sergeant. "Fifteen hundred," he said quickly before I could even get my mouth open.

I told Nye. He said, still in routine fashion, "Can you raise the premium?"

"About ten percent?"

He agreed to that.

I had sixty dollars, a desk drawer full of "Please remits" and a business sadly in need of adrenalin. There also was some office furniture that might be worth more to an antique dealer than it was to me. I told Nye that. It didn't seem to worry him.

"You'll be out for breakfast," he said.

I thought about how long the night had been, of how Harry Sellick had looked, and of how there was a big, fat piece still trying to crowd into the picture. I felt like I never wanted to eat again. My stomach was as tight as a snare-drum.

There wasn't much I was sure of, just then—but there was one thing: I couldn't believe it was the accident that had killed Harry Sellick.

But if it was homicide, I still was the best suspect the cops had at the moment. It was a dubious distinction.

"Never mind the breakfast," I told Nye. "Just get me out."

CHAPTER II

"FIND HIM—DEAD OR ALIVE!"



SOME four hours later we stood on the fog-dampened sidewalk outside my little, iron-barred, home-away-from-home and watched a ghostly dawn try to seep through the veil.

Those first few deep breaths of air seemed to instill a strange sense of freedom. It felt good in my lungs, but it did nothing for my head. Too much had happened, and there was an odd, ominous promise of too much yet to happen, to give me the buoyancy of the young American boy. I glanced at Sammy Nye, who was chewing contentedly on his cigar.

He was a short, well-padded character, somewhere in his upper forties, with a round face and the easy manner of a prosperous

businessman. He looked as amiable as Santa Claus—unless you studied his pale, expressionless eyes and the set of lips that were too thin for his fleshy face. Then you would get the feeling Santa's pack of goodies might contain brass knuckles or a blackjack or worse, if he felt the need.

A buck was a buck with Sammy Nye. And if you owed him, he would collect—one way or another. Of that, I was certain. I couldn't help but wonder how Lou Mario would pay him off. Or vice versa.

The fog stirred fitfully, and he said around the cigar, "See? For breakfast, I said."

Maybe it was a habit with him. But he had been up all night. To get me, and I didn't know how many others, out of jail, he had brought pressure, played angles, used connections. All for the sake of a few hours. I know that with customary channels, I'd probably still be inside looking out. But with Sammy Nye it seemed to be a sort of game, where power counted and was utilized to the hilt. Short-cuts, for this boy, were always a challenge.

I ran a hand across the stubble on my face. "I'm practically a criminal," I reflected. "Mugged and printed. Full face and profile."

"That's your problem, sonny," he said easily. "You'd better get a good lawyer."

"Yeah. Right after I get some good sleep."

"Driving home?"

"They've locked my car up somewhere. And even if they hadn't, I'm in no mood for it." I blew out a deep breath. "All kinds of things happen to me when I drive."

"Well," he invited, "come on. I'll drop you. It's on my way."

He had an expensive car, naturally. Convertible, with black and chrome. I wondered fleetingly how many guys had sat in how many cells to get that chunk of luxury for Sammy.

He was softly humming some nameless tune as we headed for my apartment. Somehow, it got under my skin. I said curtly, "Sellick's death hasn't exactly given you hysterics."

The humming stopped. "I've known a lot of people who got killed." He shrugged. "He was a nice fellow, but crying for him won't do any good."

"It never does," I said. "But that doesn't stop people from doing it, in one way or another."

"I'll make a deal," he suggested calmly. "You mind your business, and I'll mind mine."

I grunted at him. After awhile I said, "Your business is pretty good. But can you take a fat loss, Sammy? Say, fifty thousand dollars worth?"

His head jerked toward me, then swung back. "What's that supposed to mean?" he mouthed around his cigar.

"There's a lot of talk that Lou Mario hasn't been seen lately. He's supposed to show next Friday, isn't he?"

The car slowed a little. Maybe Sammy was just being careful; the fog hadn't lifted much. "Friday," he said.

"And if he doesn't, he'll forfeit that bail. Your fifty thousand. But you aren't worried, are you? If you were the worry type, you wouldn't be in this business."

"Smart people don't have to worry," he told me. I didn't think he believed it, either. "What makes you think Lou won't show, sonny?"

"I don't think either way," I said. "But he must have put up some beautiful security for that bail."

"The best," said Sammy Nye, and once more he seemed quite pleased with himself, for the humming started again.

I WONDERED a little about that. I knew Lou Mario slightly. I knew Ben Huntzmann much better. Ben, who had asked me out to his Valley home for something that turned out to be nothing, was a partner with Mario in the Twelve-thirty Club. It was there that Mario had bumped head-on into that charge of assault with intent to commit murder. It was there that Mario had stabbed Matthew Banning, the socialite-politician, over Banning's daughter, Doris.

Ben Huntzmann had built the Twelve-thirty Club into one of the classiest spots on The Strip. He had done it with food. Delicacies flown in daily from the east, the northwest, Hawaii and way points were on his menus.

Lou Mario had come into it, somehow,

later, and had added his hard, ruthless approach to the liquor-and-business end of it. He was tall, heavy and strong, with a sinister set to his darkly handsome face that attracted women.

For every ounce of Ben's tolerant indulgence, Lou Mario had a pressurized aggressiveness that demanded dollars, not sensibilities. And from what I could gather, Mario was like Sammy Nye, in a way. They both seemed to feel that the shortest distance between two points was an angle. One partner was a rein and a goad to the other, and the club made the kind of money that income-tax collectors dream about.

Sammy glanced at me now. "Lou will show, sonny. I'd bet on it!"

"You did," I pointed out.

He stopped in front of my place. As I turned wearily away, he said, "Don't forget the date—Thursday morning, at ten o'clock."

"Yeah," I mumbled. "See you in court."

"You know they'll be waiting for you."

"The cops? Sure! With a neat little manslaughter complaint." I sighed. "So I have until Thursday, anyway."

He studied me for a moment. "For what?"

"Why," I said slowly, "to live freely and handsomely, without funds—and to find a good lawyer." And to prove, I almost said, a hope—a hope that I hadn't killed Harry Sellick.

Sammy lifted a hand in parting and purred away with my sixty bucks and a promissory note.

I did pretty well. I got my tie loose and shoes off before my eyes closed and my head hit the pillow. But I should have known it was too good to last. It couldn't have been ten minutes before bells started going off in my ear.

Sleep had become a precious thing, a fabulous jewel almost within my grasp. I struggled for it. But then I found it was staying out of reach so long as that bell sent its strident summons through the apartment.

It stopped. I grunted and rolled over. It started again. There was no way to beat it. I stumbled across the room.

"Make it fast," I snapped.

"Ben Huntzmann, Clint." His voice was sharp, anxious, "What an awful thing! They

told me Sammy Nye had bailed you out."

"How'd you find out about it?"

"I was driving some people home. We ran into the cops at the wreck. How do you feel, boy?"

"I'm numb. I've got to get some sleep, Ben. I'll call you later."

"Wait!" His tone was urgent. "Clint, I have to see you. I'll be right over."

"Save your time. I couldn't stay awake another thirty seconds, not even if you brought dancing girls." I dropped the phone and my eyes were closed the last three steps to the bed.

THE earthquake struck some twenty minutes later. When I finally threw one leg over the side of the bed, it stopped shaking. Ben Huntzmann's anxious face came into focus.

"What the little blue hell is this?" I howled. "How'd you get in here?"

"I'm sorry, Clint." He was sincerely apologetic. "But you left the door unlocked—and this can't wait."

He was a chunky man of middle height, giving the impression he was the same width all the way to the floor. Ben was always well dressed in quiet taste, but I usually had the idea he should be wearing a baker's apron. He kept pushing his heavy-framed glasses against the bridge of his nose, and his square, tanned face was troubled.

I leaned back on an elbow and took the cigarette he proffered. "It's like this, Ben. I need money like a rowboat needs oars. Without it, I'm liable to be in drydock for one to ten years. But, so help me," and I yawned hugely, "if you paid me I couldn't stay awake more than five minutes!"

"It won't take that long," he said hurriedly. "Just this: Did Harry Sellick say anything before he died?"

I blinked at him. "He might have, but it wasn't to me," I said slowly. "He was dead when I reached him."

It looked, in the dim light, as though Ben's face came apart a little at the seams. He sagged all over. He pushed at his glasses again, as though trying to find something solid.

His voice came from so deep down inside

it sounded hollow. "Then something's happened to Lou Mario. I'm sure of it! I had a special reason for asking you out last night, Clint. I thought I might have a job for you. You know, I haven't seen Lou since last week—the day he got out on bail."

"You're in the majority," I said. "There's a rumor drifting around that no one else has seen him, either. You wanted me to try to find him?"

"Him," Ben Huntzmann said slowly, "or his body."

That was Cannon Number One. He fired Cannon Number Two. "Someone else was supposed to see me last night. Someone who claimed to have some valuable information concerning Lou. I wanted you there."

I thought of a lot of people, but Doris Banning, the current light of Lou Mario's life, stayed in my head longer than the others. I said, "Why didn't she show up?"

"Who?" Ben said quickly.

"Doris Banning."

He shook his head. "She wasn't the one—but I'm keeping her in mind. No—it was a man. The man you killed. Harry Sellick."

The cigarette fell out of my fingers. "Take that slow," I said. "Don't say I killed him, Ben. Not yet. . . . Sellick was on his way to see you—about Lou Mario?"

Ben nodded. "Not yet?" he echoed. "But the crash—"

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe I'm wrong. Skip it." I got the cigarette back and inhaled deeply. "Lou Mario, you said—or his body. You think he's dead, too?"

He ran a hand across his face. "Why else wouldn't he be in touch with me, his partner? . . . I got a phone call at the house after you had left. It was a man. All he said was, 'You can quit looking for Lou.' Then he hung up."

"And you can quit looking for Harry Sellick, too," I said thoughtfully. My eyes were heavy. Sleep was so wonderful. . . .

Ben gripped my shoulder. "Find Lou," he said tautly. "Find him!"

"Take it easy," I soothed. "I know you're upset, but after all, the guy has until Friday. Maybe he just decided to take a little rest. Anyway, if he doesn't show, the only one who's hurt is Sammy Nye. And you know Sammy—he'll collect, one way or another."

Ben's mouth worked. "No," he said softly. "Me. *I'm* the one who's hurt."

I stared. Ben was more than a nice lad. He was a friend in a town where the word is as scarce as a two-pants suit.

"Break it down for me," I suggested gently.

He pushed at his glasses, and his voice still was soft. "Lou wanted out of jail. He didn't have that kind of cash. You know the type of place I run. Hollywood people keep it going. They have their own code. What would they think if I let my partner stay in jail? They'd stay away in crowds." He sighed. "So Sammy Nye put up the bail. It was only a few days. But Lou has disappeared, and I have to make that fifty thousand good!" His eyes pleaded. "Clint, you have to find him by Friday—dead or alive!"

CHAPTER III

MORGAN MAKES A DATE



MAYBE my subconscious was telling me that I didn't have much time. There was one dead man, perhaps two, mixed up in this, and those stone walls and iron bars were creeping closer by the minute. Inside, I'd have no opportunity to track down anything but gossip items for the prison paper. So not more than four hours after Ben Huntzmann had left, I came sharply awake.

The shower and the shave worked wonders. While the pot was muttering that it hadn't seen fresh coffee grounds for a week, I phoned Mike Sheil at Hollywood Division.

He's a better cop among good cops; a man who has seen violence in all its dirty shades and forms and has managed to keep most of it from getting beneath the shell he long ago learned was necessary to do a clear-thinking job.

He started like a line drive. "You pulled a neat one, you did. Why can't you learn to stay off the streets at night? Murder—maybe I could help you. But manslaughter—you're in it, but good!"

"Murder it may be," I said. With one hand holding the phone to my ear, I lifted the

coffee pot off the grill. "Right now, I'm guessing. But I need some help, and fast. Fill me in on Lou Mario."

"Mario?" His dry, patient voice hardened. "Now, there's a nice playmate for you. This time, he's all through. I haven't been working the case, but I know about it. What's the connection?"

"There isn't any—yet. What do you know about him?"

He said flatly, "Three times is out, in any league."

"Three times?" I echoed softly. "They're going to hang a habitual criminal rap on him?"

"That, or bust a girdle trying," Sheil said. "His record is as long as a player-piano roll. It includes two felony convictions. They were back a ways, but good. This will make three—and that's all, brother."

"What and where?"

"Armed robbery in Indianapolis. And assault with a deadly weapon in a little town—Marinette—in Wisconsin. If the D. A. has any luck at all, Mario will get a life sentence."

"That's really news to me," I admitted. "He's been behaving himself out here."

"Oh, sure," said Sheil dryly. "Just pulls a knife now and then on leading citizens. With elections coming up, you think that's going to get by? And," he added more gently, "you might be losing a little sleep about the same thing. You know what they say around the courthouse, Clint: 'Convictions mean elections.'"

"You're real encouraging," I told him bitterly. "I'll bet you're the homicide crew's head cheer leader."

"You seen a lawyer yet?"

"I'll get around to it," I promised. "Tell me, Mike. How did Mario ever chisel himself in with a nice guy like Ben Huntzmann?"

"What makes the world go around?" was his answer.

"Don't tell me it was love. Not with those two."

"Money," Sheil said. "Huntzmann got in a bind a couple of years ago. He needed cash, and fast. Mario, in case you hadn't found out by now, is a very sharp cookie. He's good at grabbing opportunities, and even building a few."

"So he bought into the club."

"For pennies, practically. And he's been adding to his percentage ever since."

"I have to give you credit, Mike. You really get around."

"You'd better get around, too—to a good lawyer!"

"Right away. Only—"

"Only what?"

"If somebody *murdered* Harry Sellick, they couldn't try me for manslaughter, could they?"

"That's right," he agreed affably. "But they could try you for murder."

ON THAT happy thought, we broke it up. I picked up the two twenties and a ten which Ben Huntzmann had thoughtfully left on the table, and set sail.

People who lived at the Chateau Sherry received a number of things for their money, including privacy. It was an imposing-looking monument of gray stone and glass, overlooking a country club which somehow had let an apartment district mushroom around it. It wasn't more than five minutes from Whistle and Leer, also known as Hollywood and Vine.

Inside, the place was as quiet as a ballroom at noon. I went across the thick carpet of the foyer and down the dimly-lit center hall. It was mid-morning, now, and time was out at the elbows, but wherever I was going I had to go fast.

The first door paid off like a gimmicked slot machine. In neat letters, the little chrome sign read: "MANAGER." I buzzed, and when the portly little fellow with the sleek hair opened up and arched a sleek black eyebrow I said, "Paisano, which cell does Mr. Mario occupy?"

The eyebrow tried to reach the hairline. Even ten years earlier, it wouldn't have made it. He tried to appear dignified, and succeeded in appearing officious.

"What's that, sir? Mr. Mario?"

I gave him a rapid and wholly unrevealing glimpse of my private investigator's badge—the standard, not the deluxe model—and struck it back in my pocket.

"Trouble, sir?" He came into the hall and his hot little hands tried to start a fire by

friction. "Oh, please, no trouble!"

"No trouble," I said agreeably. "Just give me the number."

His head bobbed quickly. He said it was Room 210, on the second floor.

I was casual. "Seen him lately?"

His head shook emphatically. He was the kid who had invented co-operation with the law. But I had the feeling he was hob-nailed boots with the hired help.

"Give me your pass-key," I said, still casual.

He hesitated. My chest felt tight. I wasn't in any condition to break down doors, not when it would bring the gendarmes buzzing around me like hornets.

"I could put on a floor show for your tenants," I bluffed brusquely. "I could call a couple of squad cars. Fill the hallowed halls with uniforms."

He produced a few drops of perspiration, and the key. He'd go far, that boy. "Shall I come along, sir? I'd better, hadn't I?"

"You'd better drop anchor right here," I warned. "I'll be down just as soon as I make sure he's not there."

Before he could get a spark of brilliant thought, I was in the self-operated elevator, a neatly padded cell that hoisted me up on silent wings. It was a simple start, but I had to start somewhere and the best way to find out whether Lou Mario was in his apartment was to look.

I knocked at 210. That brought about as much satisfaction as trying to play a zither with boxing gloves. I wasn't getting anywhere but tired, there in the hall. I opened the door, one of those nice, solid slabs through which you wouldn't be able to hear an anvil drop through glass.

The place was big, and well-decorated with deep colors. The walls were cocoa brown, the carpet was moss green, and the furniture was a sharply accented modern.

I stood in the open doorway, looking around. Faint traffic sounds floated up from the street and I saw that a window was open. Across the living room was another door, partly cracked. I went across the thick carpet like I was walking on ping-pong balls.

There was no sound from inside. I pushed at the door slowly and squinted through the

crack. There was a bed there, and it was not made. I swung the door wide. There still was no sound. It took only a moment to check it—the bed was warm. Whoever had been using it hadn't been gone long.

Things began to get muddled. If Mario had been hiding out here, it was the most obvious spot he could pick. If he hadn't been hiding out, why hadn't anyone seen him around? And if he hadn't been trying to hide, he was the most confident two-time loser on record.

There was another possibility, of course. It was that someone besides Mario had used the bed. That added up like five and ducks.

I SAT down on the edge of the bed, after checking the empty bathroom, and tried to get some sense out of it all. I couldn't shake the idea that somehow Mario's disappearance and Sellick's call to Ben Huntzmann, and Sellick's death, were all mixed up in this. But right now it looked like such imaginings were the result of nerves and lack of sleep.

If Mario were dead, I thought, he was the warmest corpse I would ever encounter.

I was staring at my shoe laces, and not seeing a thing, when the telephone's abrupt ringing went through me like an electric shock. It was right by the bed. I picked it up, and grunted.

She had a voice that was lower register, with a sultry overtone that could sell you wonderful ideas. I got all that, although she only said, "Lou, darling?"

I grunted again. I guess that wasn't her idea of snappy repartee. She said sharply, "Lou?"

I was running out of ideas. And grunts. She demanded, "Who is this?"

Curtlike, I said, "Detective Morgan. Who is this?"

"Miss Doris Banning," she came right back. "Is something wrong there? Has something happened?"

Doris Banning! Everything I had ever heard about her leaped alive in my mind.

She was a good kid, not a nice kid, the way it all shaped up. She had lived the sheltered life with Papa until it began to get suffocating, and when she finally broke loose for air

she was willing to settle for the kind you find in night clubs.

This was most annoying to Papa Banning, who was the soul of dignity and respectability. He dealt in higher strata politics, a hobby which he could indulge because his grandfather had invented some sort of foul-tasting brew that was supposed to cure everything from rheumatism to losing on the horses. It had been a huge success, and the Bannings had become wealthy socialites.

Doris, when she finally cracked the shell, had been just as pioneering and willful as her pot-stirring ancestor. She had been seen with several different men over three or four years, but apparently none of them could be exciting enough for long enough. Until she met Lou Mario. And that one was spontaneous combustion!

It had lasted longer than the others and still was burning fiercely—if his attempt to carve a filet out of Papa hadn't cooled her affections. It would be nice to find that out. If anyone knew where Mario was, Doris Banning should be the one.

"Answer me," she demanded. "Are you still there? Has something happened to Lou?"

"Maybe," I said. "Let's get it straight from the start. I'm a private investigator. And the way it looks, Miss Banning, your boy friend may have turned up missing."

"You're crazy!" she said succinctly.

"I know a bookie who'll buy that," I admitted. "When was the last time you saw Mario?"

She hesitated. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"Look," I said. "So far, Mario's disappearance is just an ugly rumor. If you'll give me a few minutes, maybe we can knock it in the head."

There was a brief pause. Then: "Whom are you working for?"

"I could ask you the same thing," I said simply. "After all, it was your father Lou stabbed. Now, why don't I just run out to your place and talk this over with you, Miss B?"

"No," she said quickly. "I'm coming into Hollywood. I can meet you."

So she didn't want me out at the house. It

was possible Papa Banning was there. If so, Doris was either on Lou's side—and I could imagine how Papa would go for that—or she hadn't made up her mind. Papa could well be there, I thought. The stab hadn't been more than a nick, just enough to make him so mad he had thrown all his weight into an effort to blast Lou Mario out of his daughter's life.

"Fine," I said. "In an hour?"

"Oh, no. This afternoon."

"Sold. Two o'clock, at the Twelve-thirty Club bar. They open about then."

She hesitated. "The Twelve-thirty Club?"

"It'll be all right. I don't carry a knife. Not even a letter-opener. My mail has been most uninteresting."

"You're a real gay boy, aren't you?" she said dryly.

I thought of manslaughter and Thursday^r and possibly a couple of corpses. I thought of how nothing seemed to be a fact except that Harry Sellick was dead and I was charged with causing it.

"The way things are, it's laugh or cry," I said. "Whether or not you can help me find Lou Mario, it's possible you feel the same way. I can see how it could happen."

The sound she made was like a sigh. How much of it was for her father, and how much for Mario, I couldn't guess. But all she said was, "Two o'clock."

CHAPTER IV

MAN IN THE ALLEY



WITH my curt gratitude in his ears, I left Paisano, the manager, the key in his hand and a look of vast bewilderment on his face. As I walked out on the sidewalk and beckoned for a cab, a lean man in a gray suit, wearing a pork-pie hat, studied me a moment too long and kept on walking past.

I taxied to my office. It has walls, but there's no guarantee against a gentle wind removing them. It has a nice view overlooking an alley and the roof of an all-night diner. You've already heard about the furniture.

I paid off the cab, and turned around. Halfway down the block another cab slid into the curb, but no one got out. I walked into the building lobby, waited a full minute, then walked out again. This time, the other cab's passenger was out on the sidewalk.

He glanced in my direction. He wasn't a very bright boy. If he had merely walked away, I wouldn't have paid too much attention. But he stopped in the act of paying the driver and hurriedly got back into the cab. This was more than coincidence, it seemed to me, because it was the same lean man in the gray suit.

I went on up the creaking stairs to the door that said "CLINT MORGAN, Investigations." It was unlocked, the way I always leave it. It opens into my outer office, which is tastefully furnished with bench and hatrack. The inner office, which is tastefully furnished with two chairs, desk, filing cabinet and another hatrack, I leave locked, principally because I haven't lost the key to that one, yet.

The woman on the bench turned with a startled expression. I didn't have to guess twice about her. She was middle-aged, with a pinched face and flaring nostrils and dark eyes that were reddened, perhaps from crying. Her lips were a little too slack, and the petulance of her face was the kind that's permanent. She was dressed, hat to shoes, in black.

All I could think to do was to remove my hat. I said uncomfortably, "Mrs. Sellick?"

She nodded. Her eyes wavered just a trifle and she dabbed at them with a damp handkerchief.

I unlocked the other door. "Please come in."

She took the chair opposite the desk. I hoped she would speak first. After a silence that seemed like eternity, I said, "I'm sorry, really sorry. There isn't much I can do, or say, I guess. But my part in it was purely accidental."

She drew a quivering breath. "I know, Mr. Morgan. I'm sure it's something that couldn't have been helped." She dabbed at her eyes again, and then tried to catch the handkerchief as it fluttered to the floor. I came around fast and picked it up for her.

And if that was cologne I smelled, I could

buy it at two-bits a shot in any bar off Sunset. She had been shocked, I thought, and it takes all kinds of things to hold some people together.

"I really shouldn't have come," she said, her lips trembling. "But I had to know."

"If there's anything I can do, Mrs. Sellick—help in any way. . . ."

"Just one thing," she replied piteously. "Did Harry—did my dear husband say anything, Mr. Morgan?" Her voice dropped to a ragged wisp. "Before—"

Ben Huntzmann had asked the same question. Harry Sellick had left a few questions in my mind, too. I wondered what kind was bothering her.

"Not a word," I said.

HER SLACK lips tightened a little. I couldn't tell, then, whether she was relieved or disappointed. She seemed uneasy, as though she were having difficulty phrasing her questions.

"You—you saw his car. I understand it was all smashed up," she said hesitantly. I nodded. She gestured, and I noted that her wrists were as wide and strong as a champion milker's. "Was there—had anything fallen out? You know, like it had been shaken loose from somewhere?"

I sat down behind the desk and leaned on my elbows. "This interests me strangely," I conceded. "What should have fallen out?"

"I don't know." Her glance darted at me. "A package? Money, perhaps?"

"I didn't see it," I told her flatly. "The police were there. Ask them. You're his widow. I presume you'll get his belongings, and his money, and whatever other stuff he had left."

Her face hardened, but the petulance remained. "I know what he left—so many debts there won't be a cent for me! I should have known it would turn out like this." Her voice rose stridently. "I told him when we split up he'd never amount to anything! Always had a big deal on. Always going to make a killing." Sarcasm dripped from her words. "He did that, all right, didn't he? It was the only promise he ever kept! That good-for-nothing—"

"The poor little widow," I said. "All

broken up. . . . So you and Sellick had split. Divorced?"

She nodded curtly. "Two years ago. He owed me fifteen hundred dollars, Morgan. Fifteen hundred in back alimony." The mask of mourning had slipped completely, now. "I could have done a lot with that money. Now, what do I get? Nothing!"

The futility of it all was getting to her. That, and the liquor. Any moment, now, I'd have a crying jag on my hands.

"A package, you said," I tried to head her off. "Why should he have had money last night?"

Her sniffles stopped. "Yes, that's right." New hope burned in her reddened eyes. "Maybe he did have it, at that. He was going to get it for me. Every cent, he said, if I'd stop hounding"—she caught herself—"if I would sign an agreement that it was a full settlement. He didn't like it when I started going around to his office."

"I can understand that," I remarked.

"He said I'd have it today," she went on. "And look what happened. That Harry Sellick! That bum!"

"The police," I soothed. "Maybe they found it. Maybe, even, he left insurance."

Her head came up sharply. She got to her feet unsteadily and fumbled with the door-knob. "Insurance? I never thought of that. I'm his widow, ain't I?" She got the door open, and if it all was an act it was a good one. "Harry," she was saying as she went out, "my poor, dear Harry. . . ."

I sat there a moment, thinking after her. She had known damned well about the insurance, I thought. She was bitter. She loved Harry Sellick like I'd love a ground-glass sandwich. She wanted money and would do anything, I was sure, to get it. Anything to Harry Sellick, that is.

They could have been sitting up there in the car, I thought, arguing about money or anything else. With her around, Sellick would have no trouble finding subjects. I thought about those wrists. A strong woman, Mrs. Sellick. . . .

I closed my eyes and tried to dream about his car, trying to find the piece of puzzle that was missing—the piece that was in my mind, and had been there from the beginning, but

wouldn't come out.

The scene swam back . . . the fog and the eeriness and the thin beam of my flashlight sweeping the car . . . the back of his head . . . If my brain had muscles, they were as taut as a well-tuned harp . . . Sideways on the seat . . . Frustration brought sweat to my face. The back of his head, I thought, the back of—

And the little piece popped out and slid into place and the picture was murder!

THE SHELF behind Harry Sellick had been bare. Of that I was certain. There had been no heavy object there against which he could have been hurled. And unless he had been sitting with his back to the steering wheel, a most unorthodox way to drive, there was only one method for him to get that kind of a haircut.

Someone had bludgeoned him, then aimed his car for the canyon rim, knowing that when it hit bottom there'd be no way of telling he had been murdered.

On paper, it looked sound. But I'd have to prove it in court. And there was the fact that somehow, I was sure, Lou Mario tied into this. I was supposed to find him.

It was early for my date with Doris Banning. There are several places where you can get hurt by arriving early. A bar is one. But mixing business with pleasure like this, and having just started to score, I felt I could afford a bruise or two.

When I sauntered out of the building, the lean man in the gray suit was as conspicuous as a full-grown shark in a bathtub. He was studying the menu pasted to the window of the next-door diner. His head didn't turn, but he knew I was there.

Curiosity was chewing on me like a puppy with a rag. I walked a few steps toward him, then cut sharply into the alley. It was dim in there. I went about twenty yards, stepped into a recessed back door, and waited.

Maybe he panicked. Maybe he thought I was going to vanish for good. He came hurrying along, stumbling over an occasional tin can. He might have been trying, but he was as quiet as a dice game on a sheet of galvanized tin.

Just as he came abreast, I said quietly,

"Lose somebody?"

He whirled, startled, and the eyes in his thin face narrowed. It must have been embarrassing for him, and that was making him mean.

"Just why the hell are you following me?" I said.

"You got the wrong idea, chum," he said harshly.

"Oh," I said. "Just out for a stroll?"

"Could be." His face was hard, and his eyes were hard, and he looked, up close, as though perhaps he was packed with coil springs. I felt at the moment as though I were packed with hollow eggs. But I was grasping for leads. I needed them like coffee needs a cup.

"Who do you do your strolling for?" I asked.

"Like I said," his hard eyes challenged me, "you got me mixed with somebody else. I just came through here taking a shortcut. I do it all the time."

I jerked my head at the blank wall a few yards down. It was a dead-end. "Friend," I told him, "we're spinning our wheels. Are you going to tell me—"

He was the impatient type. At that point he brought a knee up at my stomach. I dodged back, then grabbed his coat, whirled and slammed him against the wall. He was coil springs, all right. He caught me alongside the head with a roundhouse right that knocked me across the alley.

I was staggering for balance when he hit me again. This time, I managed to stay close enough to hang on. My ears were buzzing. I buried my head in his shoulder, trying to recover, and hammered at his belt-line. It was like trying to dent concrete. Then his shoulder jarred my chin so hard I thought my teeth would come out the top of my head. This was getting to be a non-profit venture. I would have to get curious, I thought. This guy not only liked alley fighting; he was damned good at it.

He shoved me away and leveled again, and I remembered the first roundhouse right. I threw one straight from the shoulder while he was taking the overland route. His nose made a wet sound and crumpled. We banged around between those two brick buildings

like a pair of ice cubes in a cocktail shaker.

He didn't like it about the nose, and he was using elbows, knees and fingernails, but frenzy was destroying his timing and I wasn't losing much blood. I caught him with another solid one on that nose again, and he gasped and went back until his shoulders hit the wall. Then he slid down.

I stood over him, wheezing. "If I played it with your rules, about here is where you'd get the boots!"

He shook his head weakly.

"Who hired you?" I demanded.

He blew out a tooth. I don't know whether I would have used it, but I drew back my right foot. He mumbled something.

"Who? Speak up, Buster!"

"Nye," he sputtered. "Sammy Nye."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Well, now, that's real nice, Sammy looking after me like that." I felt a few bruises blossoming on my face. I remembered how this lad had tried to knee me in the beginning. "Get up," I ordered, and helped him to his feet.

When he was nice and straight once more, I belted him as hard as I could on the jaw and left him lying there.

At the moment, it added up to only one thing. If Sammy Nye had found out I had been hired to find Lou Mario, and was beginning to worry himself about Mario's disappearance, tailing me was a sort of cheap service. That way, if I found him, Sammy found him, too.

CHAPTER V

CONFERENCE IN THE TWELVE-THIRTY CLUB



HALF an hour and a service station's washroom later, I arrived at the Twelve-thirty Club. I paid off the cab and turned, and the doorman, a big guy with a rough-hewn face, was standing there in his comic-strip general's uniform, making like he was ambassador at large.

"You're Mr. Morgan, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded. He said politely, "Mr. Huntzmann said if you arrived he would like to see you. You can go up the stairs at the rear

of the dining room."

"I come here now and then," I said, "but not that often. How'd you know me?"

"I remember faces," he said.

The way he said it, with no inflection, I could believe it. His pale-blue eyes were expressionless. He looked like a man who could be rough in a poker game. Or anywhere else, if necessary.

"You worked here long?" I said curiously.

"Yes," he answered.

"Which one hired you—Mario or Huntzmann?"

His face stayed as blank as a brick, but I had the strange feeling he was smiling inside. "Mr. Huntzmann."

"Known him long?" I probed.

"Yes."

"Known Mario long?"

"Yes."

This guy spent words like they were uranium. I said, "When was the last time you saw Mario?"

When he shrugged, I said, "You'd better think of a date, Gabby. The cops may be asking the same question."

I was turning away when the big convertible purred up to the curb and Sammy Nye pried himself out.

"You're a little early," I observed. "It isn't Friday."

"A big day, Friday," he said genially. His cigar rolled contentedly around in his mouth. "But *your* day is Thursday. Don't forget it, sonny."

"I won't," I agreed, "if Lou Mario doesn't forget he's due on Friday. Buy you a drink?"

"No time." He was ambling toward the door. "I want to see Huntzmann."

"I'll go up with you. Ben wants to see me."

It was too early for the late afternoon crowd, but there were a couple of guys at the leather-padded bar. The place had lots of dark wood and lots of leather and not much light. It smelled expensive.

A waist-high, glass-brick wall cut the bar off from the dining room, now empty. It wasn't a huge place, but Ben Huntzmann could crowd enough postage-stamp tables around that small dance floor to handle a

medium-sized session of congress.

Going up the heavily carpeted stairs, Nye glanced sideways at me. "You play rough, don't you? I heard about it from Hafner."

"That's your alley cat? He started it. Why was he tailing me?"

"You're just an investment of mine," Nye replied smoothly. "Just routine."

"He should have told me."

"I thought he did."

I nodded. "He was a little slow getting it out. Who followed Lou Mario for you?"

He rapped on the big oaken door of Ben Huntzmann's office.

He said nothing, but his fat face seemed to jell.

I said, "I didn't get the name?"

He stared at me coldly. "Sellick," he bit off.

I WAS still reeling a little from that one when I saw Ben Huntzmann's face. He looked drawn and worried, and when he saw Sammy Nye with me it did nothing for his complexion. He pushed at the bridge of his glasses and waved at a couple of leather chairs.

It was an expensive office—walnut panels and indirect lighting and thick gray carpet. He sat behind a huge walnut desk, weight on his arms, but from his appearance it was the weight on his mind that was heavier.

"What's up, Benjie?" I said.

He sighed. "What luck have you had?"

I shrugged. "I said I'd let you know when I knew."

Sammy Nye crossed his legs. It was an effort. "You worried about Mario, Ben? The boy'll show. Don't give it another thought."

"You're pretty confident," I said. "Why? Nobody else is."

He frowned. "Make sense. I know Mario, that's all. I figure he'll be there Friday. After all, didn't I put up fifty thousand that said he'd be there?"

Ben said in a pained voice, "For the club, you did. Don't try to sound like you took a risk, Sammy. It's worth four times that much."

My jaw hit my ankles. It took me a moment to sputter it out. "You what? Ben,

you mean you put up the club as security for that bail?"

He made a futile gesture.

"What the hell were you using for a brain?" I demanded. "The free and easy way you operate, I knew you never were much of a businessman. But the club? Are you a moron, you idiot?"

Nye made a noise in his throat. "Take it easy, Morgan. I don't like the way you sound. Mario wanted out, and fast. So I got him out."

Ben's eyes were sick. "Yes, I agreed to the deal. It was only for a few days." He swallowed. "But now something's happened to Lou. It must have. He'd have called me, or come around by now."

"Look, Ben," I said. "It's finally coming through to me that you're a nice guy and all, but your I.Q. has a bad case of the sags. Didn't you know Lou was a two-time loser? Didn't you know that if they stuck him with another felony rap, they could send him up for life?"

If Ben's eyes had been sick before, they were practically registering rigor mortis now. I hadn't created the punch, I had just been the one to tell him about it, but it was a low blow. He opened his mouth, then closed it, and he was having the kind of pain that doesn't leave you enough strength to howl.

"You're great," Sammy Nye told me sarcastically. "You're scaring Ben to death. You talk like they've already convicted Lou."

"No," I returned. "I talk like Lou's afraid they might convict him. If he is, he'll never show up. Personally, I think the guy's going to play it cagey. I don't think he's dead. He's hiding."

Ben's stricken eyes were on me. I said gently, "It's tough, Ben, but you'll have to face it. If he has run out it costs you the club."

"He wouldn't run," argued Nye. "It would cost him his share of the club, too."

"He only had twenty percent," Ben said slowly. "The rest is mine."

I kicked that around a little, squinting at nothing. I remembered how warm Lou Mario's bed had been. If he were running, he wasn't running far—yet. But why not? The rest of it figured, except for that.

"Mario had a piece of good business," I said thoughtfully. "He had a toe-hold on his way to the Banning fortune. He lost his temper and was in a great way to lose everything else. Skipping town wouldn't be enough, with a felony rap. He'd have to skip the state. But that would leave him with nothing."

BEN AND Sammy were listening carefully. I almost felt like I was holding a seance. I thought out loud some more. "I don't think Mario is the type who would settle for nothing. Not if someone else gave him a better idea."

Ben's eyes had fastened on my face. It was taking him a little time to get it, but he was getting it all.

"California would always be hot for him," I reasoned. "So would anyplace else, if they wanted to push extradition from this end. So there's Mario, looking at all that and seeing that he's possibly whipped. Unless—"

"Unless what?" They said it together, like a pair of well-rehearsed comedians.

"Unless he remembered," I said slowly, "or someone reminded him, of a way he could beat the rap and maybe still keep the club. Maybe, even, get fifty percent instead of twenty." I stared at Sammy Nye. "And whoever wanted that other fifty percent bad enough might be just the one to suggest the whole deal."

"This is the craziest thing I ever heard!" Nye said hotly. "You're getting Ben all upset, and with nothing but a theory."

Ben gestured shortly at him, said to me, "Go on, Clint. How could Lou do that?"

"Statute of limitations," I said calmly. "If he stayed out of sight for three years, and the cops couldn't prove he had left the state in that time, he'd be loose as a goose."

"If he hadn't been indicted," Nye snapped.

I shrugged. "Three years is a long time. Time enough for his girl friend to cool off her father."

"Crazy!" flared Nye. "Absolutely crazy, Morgan!"

For a moment, I was willing to agree with him. The only thing that delayed me was the fact that it all dovetailed so neatly. Up to a point. That point was: If Mario were play-

ing the vanishing act, how come the warm bed? There was something else—the matter of Harry Sellick being dead and me charged with manslaughter.

Nye was on his feet, rocking a little like a balloon man. His little eyes drilled through me. "I'm going to cancel your bail and have you thrown back into jail. You're too much of a nut to be running loose on the street!"

I glanced at my watch. I had ten minutes before Doris Banning was due. Nye wrenched open the door, and turned. "You're going to feel pretty silly about Friday, when Lou Mario shows up," he growled.

"I will," I admitted. "And it's not an impossibility, seeing as how his bed was still warm a few hours ago. But right now I'm betting he won't be there. Not if he can help it."

Nye hesitated. Then he shook his head angrily and went out, slamming the door.

I turned back to Ben Huntzmann, and a chill wind blew abruptly across the back of my neck. He was looking straight at me, but his mind was on someone else. It was on a partner who would doublecross him, a partner who would sacrifice everything Ben had built up for the sake of his own ends.

Ben's fixed gaze was seeing not only a Lou Mario who would throw the club away for bail, but a Lou Mario who would reconsider and break him and take the club away for himself.

"Take it slow, Ben," I said. "Take it easy. It isn't anything I can prove, yet."

He wasn't hearing me. His hands were clenched so tightly on the desk his knuckles were white, but his face was expressionless.

"Ben, listen," I said worriedly. "Nye was right—it's all theory. Almost all of it, anyway. Don't do anything silly."

He sat there in utter silence, immovable, unheeding. I believed everything I had told him, and he did, too. I saw that, and my hands were suddenly sweat-coated. I knew, then, there was only one thing to do.

If Lou Mario were going to lie low for three years, he must have picked a spot. Doris Banning might be able to give me a lead. And if I was going to keep Ben from

tearing Lou Mario apart with his bare hands, and possibly getting killed himself, I had to find Mario, but fast. I had to keep them apart.

I got up quickly and went out, and Ben Huntzmann was still sitting there like a big bear, slowly and irretrievably deciding to wipe out an enemy with a crushing, lethal sweep of a paw.

CHAPTER VI

A TALK WITH DORIS BANNING



IT WAS two o'clock on the nose when I plucked my drink off the bar and walked back to a cushioned booth. The ice hadn't even begun to melt in my glass when Doris Banning came in the door. She melted it.

She stood for a moment, getting used to the dimness. I half rose, and she came swiftly down the room. She had a couple of mink scarves over her shoulders, and a fitted blue afternoon dress that really fitted. Her blond hair was cut short, framing a face that would have more than one expression. Her eyes were blue, and direct. She had the kind of a walk that interrupts conversations.

"Mr. Morgan?" she said.

I nodded, and she sat down. A waiter appeared from out of the carpet. She was the kind waiters would do that for. She also was the kind who would expect it. I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Brandy over ice," she told me matter-of-factly. I cocked an eyebrow at the waiter. I was being real cosmopolitan. He nodded and vanished. He didn't even leave a puff of smoke.

"You do talk?" She said.

I nodded. "Some. My teeth are beginning to ache."

"You should see a dentist."

"And a lawyer," I added. "But first things first. I'm glad you could come."

She threw back the scarves. Yes, a fitted dress that fitted. I fumbled for my drink and finally had to look for it. She said, coolly, "What about Lou, Mr. Morgan? Something about him—missing, you said?"

She had more confidence than a man betting a three-horse entry to show in a five-horse field.

"You know," I said casually, "it's an odd set-up. A girl like you—very social family, fine background, wealthy—and a sharp-shooter like Lou Mario. . . ."

The lines grew firm along her jaw. "This is all far from entertaining, Mr. Morgan. I would be appreciative if you would make it as brief as possible."

"Score," I nodded. "When was the last time you saw Mario?"

"Yesterday," she came right back. "Why?"

Some of my drink spilled as I set it down. "You're lucky," I told her, "in a way. No one else has seen him or heard from him since he got out of jail. Where is he now?"

She was still dealing them right off the top. "I don't know. Should I be worried about that?"

"I wish I knew that," I said earnestly. "Look, Miss Banning. I'm mixed into this mess myself, but good. I don't know exactly how it all started, but it started with Mario. Right now, he's in a bad spot. If I can find him, a lot of people—including me, and possibly Mario himself—are liable to turn out to be very grateful." I studied her. "Do you know where I can start looking?"

The waiter materialized again, left her drink and snapped back to invisibility.

It looked as if it would take some coaxing. I thought of Ben Huntzmann, probably in motion by now, and I began to fidget. She just sat there, her eyes thoughtfully on her glass.

I said persuasively, "So maybe you're in love with the man. But I can't hurt him. So help me, all I want to do is talk with him. And, speaking of love, I hope you know what you're getting into with him."

"That," she said succinctly, "is none of your business. A great many people don't understand Lou. He had a difficult time as a boy."

"Poor kid. I'll bet your father is one of the people who finds it tough to understand him."

"That was a terrible thing," she said

slowly. "Lou lost his temper. He's very hot-headed. People who've had to fight the world all their lives often become that way."

I gave her a cigarette. "Since you're trying to enlighten me, Miss Banning, why did Lou knife your father? The details, I mean."

Her gaze dropped. "He—he had heard that Lou and I were seeing each other often. We talked about it, to some extent, father and I."

I could imagine, I thought. From all I had heard of Papa Banning, he would have certain and violent views on such a subject.

"So, that night," she went on in a low voice, "when father came in and saw Lou dancing with me, he came right out on the floor. He's very—direct, you might say."

"And the wrestling match started," I said. "And you were right in the middle. Lou finally blew his top, hauled out the knife and pressed home, you might say, his point."

She shuddered slightly. At that, it must have been a rough go for her. She said, "It really wasn't Lou's fault. He was forced into losing his temper. Father shouldn't have been so—"

"Direct, you might say," I finished drily.

SO SHE had seen Lou knife her father, and whether there had been provocation, I couldn't say. But it was highly interesting that she was taking Lou's side. I wondered for how long.

"If you're trying to sell me Lou Mario," I said, "save your gentle breath, baby. I'm one of the people who can figure him out on paper. The police records."

"I know about that." Her eyes flashed warmly. "He was young, irresponsible. The wrong kind of kids for friends. It could have happened to anyone."

"Both times?"

She started to speak, then hesitated. I said, "I'm just talking about the felonies. How about the smaller jobs? You know about those, too?"

Her voice came low. "The trouble in Wisconsin—he explained that."

Pieces of this were beginning to fit just a little. Lou Mario had everything but respectability. He was making money, he was

through with the strongarm stuff, he was making a name as a businessman even if it was night-time business. But if he had really wanted to get out of the mud for good, he would need a name like Banning behind him.

It was only a stray thought, but it said: Maybe that's why the pitch for Doris Banning—respectability. If he married into the Banning family, the old, bold days would be gone forever. He would be king of the mountain, with her father's fortune eventually going to Doris, and thus to Lou.

Somebody had to wake her up. A quorum of me elected Clint Morgan. It was a selfish motive. If I could jar her into a realization of what made Lou Mario tick, she might give me a lead to him. And that I had to have.

"There also was the armed robbery in Indianapolis," I said calmly, "And a lot more that you could read over my shoulder down at headquarters. The police, who make a living at this sort of thing, think he's a mean, ruthless hoodlum. Right now, he's double-crossing a man who has given him every break in the world. Shake off that dream, baby. You're the only one who doesn't see Lou Mario as he really is."

For a moment, I thought she was wavering. But whatever doubt flickered into her eyes faded as quickly as it had been born. From her eyes, that is. She tucked it away somewhere deep inside, where the world wouldn't see it, and I had to admire her for it.

Her eyes flashed and her chin came up, and in that breath of time I knew she had made up her mind and I had lost. Lou Mario was her man, win, lose or draw. She had taken him, and if it had been a mistake she would never acknowledge it. Stuck with him, she'd stick by him. Maybe already she was trying to convince herself there was some good left in the man, and she was just the one to find it.

"I think we've said about all we can say to each other, Mr. Morgan," Doris said now. "But if Lou is really missing, in some sort of trouble I don't know about—"

"Yes?" I was all ears.

"Find him for me. I'll pay you. I want to talk with him. I *have* to talk with him!"

Her eyes seemed tortured, suddenly. "We wanted father to know him better. That's why we have kept it a secret. We wanted to give Lou a chance to show what he's really like."

I must have looked like I was wearing goggles. My eyes couldn't have opened any wider if she had pulled out a match in a gas-filled room.

I swallowed, gulping for air.

"We're married, Mr. Morgan," she said softly. "Lou and I."

In a moment I could get out the only question that mattered:

"When?"

"Five days ago." Her voice was barely audible. "Right after he—after he was released on bail. We already had the license. We stayed at La Jolla until yesterday. He was going to call me this morning, but I didn't hear from him. That's why I called his apartment."

It was going through me like I had grabbed a couple of hot wires. "A fine bridegroom," I managed to say.

"That's why," she said slowly, "it's possible something has happened to him. I know he would have phoned."

Unless, I thought, he were on his way to a quiet little hideaway for just a few days. He'd only have to hide long enough for Doris to have a few words with her father. It would take a few days for her to convince Papa Banning, but I was sure it could be done. He'd speedily see that having a tiff with a hoodlum in a nightclub, and dragging the Banning family, including the new son-in-law, through the courts would be two entirely different things.

So Lou had everything, now. The bail would be forfeited and he and Sammy Nye would have the club. Then the charge would be dropped and Lou could come out into the open.

It was beautiful! And Doris Banning was sticking with a guy like that.

The stray thought came that so many nice guys wind up with women who shouldn't even be prizes in a cat fight, and yet a bum, a no-good like Lou Mario, gets a champion like this.

Or, I thought fleetingly, was it chumpion?

CHAPTER VII

FIGHT IN THE DARK



OBVIOUSLY I was on a treadmill, running like crazy, but running too long in one place. All I could hope was that Ben Huntzmann, out to kill, wasn't making better time. There were no leads, nothing but nothing. I had to start from scratch, and the only place I could think of to start scratching was back at Mario's apartment. There might be something there, anything, that would somehow provide a clew to his hideout.

I didn't bother Paisano, the manager, this time. I went at the elevator in a sprint. If Ben Huntzmann had arrived ahead of me, the least I could do was interrupt him. I could always come back down and get the key.

But I didn't have to do that. The door was unlocked. I kept the knob twisted, so it would stay unlocked, and knocked.

I didn't know whether I had heard a sound inside or imagined it. I knocked again. My nerves were tighter than two fat men in a phone booth. I opened the door slowly.

Everything seemed about the way it had been on my earlier visit, except that this time the bedroom door was closed. The maid could have done that, I thought, but it didn't quiet my nerves. With the design that some modern furniture has, I wasn't sure whether the chair by the desk had been knocked over or not. It could have been built that way. I closed the door behind me.

Expensive and neat as the place was, it seemed to have an air of ominous waiting, a sulky quiet. I could hear the blood flowing through my head. I went on across the room, steadily but quietly, to the bedroom door and listened at it. That got me about as far as a guy trying to thread a needle with a rope. For a moment I watched the afternoon sunlight slanting through the half-open window. It wasn't making any noise, either.

I opened the door a crack. That bedroom was as dark as the inside of a closed mouth.

Mario had those kind of sleep-late drapes that could give you a moonless midnight at high noon. I slid my hand along the wall, inside that slightly opened door, and found the light switch.

Lou Mario was in bed, asleep. It wasn't until I started into the room that I knew he'd never wake up from this one. He was lying on top of the covers, arms thrown wide, and strangulation had left his face contorted in a wild pleading that had done him absolutely no good at all.

I was too late—or too early, depending on how you wanted to look at it. I thought only: Ben, why didn't you get him out of here? And then I knew that Mario couldn't have been removed because I had arrived too soon.

That's when I knew it was coming. In that instant I felt the floor give slightly behind me, and I knew it was going to hurt and there was no way out, and I hoped Ben wasn't so crazy he'd kill me, too. I had time for all that and a turn half way before the top of my hand was driven down inside my ankles.

It was that half turn that kept it from being driven through the carpet. In the next instant, virtually out, I heard a sliding frantic hand across the wall and the lights really did go out. The door slammed shut—and I knew he meant it, now. He was going to kill me if he could, in that pitch-black darkness.

"Ben, don't be a damned fool!" I said.

I was on my hands and knees, and I could have climbed Pike's Peak on a pogo stick easier than I could have climbed off that floor. But I heard him coming heavily at me across the carpet, and I had to get up.

"Don't! Don't, Ben!" I yelled.

THE NEXT moment I knew it was no good, I'd never stop him with words, because his thick, strong arms went around me in a bear hug and he was trying to break my back. I didn't know whether my eyes were open or closed, it was that dark. I thought wildly that perhaps the blow on my head had blinded me.

I was bending back and back, and trying to find his hair with both hands before some-

thing snapped in my spine. His head was against my shoulder and a guttural, animal breathing was hoarse in my ears. I got his hair and yanked with all my might.

He had the strength of a maniac. His head went back but a fraction, then came down on my shoulder again and fire darted across my stomach. My muscles were beginning to cry for help.

I got my hand under his chin and forced it up. With every inch, the steel-like grip on my back lessened. He growled in his throat and suddenly let go, and his hands clubbed me across the face.

Free for a second, I brought my knee up into his stomach as far as it would go. I sensed, rather than saw, him double up. As swiftly as I could, I brought that knee up again and felt it smash the front of his face into jelly. He moaned but stayed on his feet, and his hands ripped my coat.

Sweat coated me as though I had strayed under a shower. I drove punches at where I thought his face should be. I rained them on him. Some landed and some didn't, and then I was off balance and feeling that grip half-encircling me again. I didn't think I'd be able to break it this time. There wasn't anything keeping me on my feet but the desperate will to live.

I gave him the knee in the stomach again, and once again, and felt him give with it. My fists were balls of pure pain. It was torture to hit him. I clubbed at him with my forearm and missed completely, and went right on down on my face.

In the next instant he dropped on me, full weight, I knew I'd never get up. Writhing, twisting, I tried to throw him off, and was getting nowhere when a great block of light crashed across my eyes. Half senseless, I heard a shout and a rush and the sound of blows. I couldn't tell whether they were on me or near me.

Then the weight came off my back and I rolled slightly to one side, and Ben Huntzmann was staring down at me with horror on his face. Right about there was where I passed out.

I must have been out close to an hour. When I opened my eyes, Mike Sheil, from Hollywood division, was the first person I

saw. His flat-nosed, broad, wise face couldn't have looked better to his mother. I was afraid to try to move, but I saw I was on the divan in Lou Mario's living—or maybe it was dying—room and Mike was seated beside me. "Well," he said brusquely, "decided to come to the party, eh?"

"I threw the party," I reminded him weakly. "And it was a pip."

"You've got a nasty habit of collecting corpses," he said grimly.

"How many, Mike?"

"Counting Sellick," he said, "it's two and a half."

"I'm glad I didn't kill him," I said. "But I didn't feel that way at the time. So it wasn't Ben. It had to be Sammy Nye."

Mike nodded. "Didn't you know?"

"Not until now. Let me figure it awhile, huh?"

"Any answers you need, just ask," Mike said patiently. "What was left of Sammy Nye—and I must admit you do quite a job when you really turn your hand to it—babbled it all. He was in no condition to do less."

I MOVED my head slightly and a red film started down over my eyes and pain started up from my toes. I decided to hell with it.

"Mario wasn't hiding," I said. "Not anymore. So that's why Sammy killed him?"

"Yeah. Seems that Sammy thought Mario was going through with the deal—hiding out until the club was taken over. But Mario managed to marry the Banning girl and changed his mind. With her, he had all the money he could use. The club was peanuts."

I let that sink in. "Then, at the last minute, he was going straight? He wasn't going to double-cross Ben?" The irony was soul-satisfying. "Only, none of us knew that."

"Except Mario," Mike said. "When you mentioned that his bed had been warm, Sammy got suspicious that all wasn't going the way he had planned it. He called Mario and found out the deal was off. Mario even laughed at him, and did it in a way that promised plenty of trouble for Sammy in the future. He knew far too much about the way

Sammy operated. Sammy came over here to talk him into sticking with the deal, and wound up killing him."

"If Sammy could have gotten the body out," I said, "he still might have taken over the club. And all for himself. Real neat, that. Which leaves only one thing."

Mike nodded. "Sellick."

The medical examiner, a skinny old duffer with a heavy mustache, paused beside us. "Don't talk an ear off him, Sheil. He's had it rough. . . . We'll have a stretcher up here for you in a few minutes, young man."

Mike smiled slightly. "When I tell him he's a free man, he'll feel good enough to walk out."

"Hell, no!" I said. "I hear those nurses downtown are terrific! But tell me, anyway."

"Short and bitter," Mike said. "Sellick, working for Sammy, got onto the deal Sammy and Mario were hatching. He needed dough. He made a tentative approach to Mario, a shakedown, and meanwhile called

Ben Huntzmann to see if he could sell his information there if Mario didn't buy him off."

"Uh-huh. So Mario set up a meeting with him, and killed him."

"Not quite," Mike corrected. "Mario was too busy getting married. And as he was just getting out of one rap, he didn't want the chance of another. He passed the job on to Sammy."

"That Nye," I said. "A real busy boy."

"Nye confessed it," Mike said. "He cut the car loose, figuring it would go over the side. You hit it."

Someone came softly over to us. I turned my eyes as far as they'd go without moving my head. Ben Huntzmann was standing there. I managed to stick my hand out.

"Benjie, I'm always glad to see you," I said. "But there was one time that I'll always be gladder than all the rest."

He squeezed my hand, and smiled, and didn't say a word, and I knew he was glad that Sammy had been there before him.

Law and (Some) Order

True
Anecdotes

Fort Worth, Tex., proudly announced that of its 343 policemen only two had flat feet.

Marcos Palatas, Los Angeles, complained bitterly to police that holdup men, disgusted at the 65 cents they found on him, walked off with his lunch.

Dr. Cyrus Katzen, Washington, D. C., burglary victim, went to police headquarters to see if he could identify his stolen property. Taking one look at the familiar hat, jacket, pants, shoes and extra loud sport shirt the burglary suspect was wearing, Dr. Katzen exclaimed: "Is that me or him?"

An inmate of a British prison wrote a library in Edinburgh, Scotland, asking for a book on escapes.

Hurrying to a Perth Amboy, N. J., apartment house to discover why half a dozen tenants' door bells were ringing simultaneously, officers found a young man kissing his girl goodnight as she leaned against the bell buttons.



by

HAROLD
HELPER

There was a safe to be cracked—and fifty grand to gain!



Naylor dropped as Lennison's fourth shot struck him in the base of the brain

Murder Comes Home

By D. L. CHAMPION

THE TRAIN snaked its way through the flat, rich farmland of the Midwest. The corn was high; the fruit hung ripe in the orchards. Lennison stared through the begrimed Pullman window at the familiar scene, at the

countryside where he had spent the first fourteen years of his life.

Suddenly, a half mile distant from the tracks, a lumpy concrete structure reared itself against the sky. Lennison's eye focused on it and he frowned. This

was the state reformatory, an institution in which Lennison had dwelt between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.

Lennison's seat companion was a swarthy man with wide shoulders, dark eyes and hair and possessed of a pair of incredibly delicate and supple hands. He took a mangled cigar from his mouth and said, "Well, how does it feel to come back home?"

Lennison turned his head away from the window. He spoke in a hard, clipped tone.

"It feels good, Louis. But not for sentimental reasons. I hate Roxport and everyone who lives there, but it still feels good because we're going to pick up fifty grand at the end of the line."

"You said that before," said Louis. He paused as if in thought and gave the impression that thought was a difficult process for him; then he added with a touch of truculence, "You ain't given me details and I got to have details before I go to work."

"I want you to case the job yourself," said Lennison. "In daylight. It's so easy you won't believe me if I tell you about it."

Louis' suspicion was not assuaged. "Then why don't you do it yourself? What are you bringing me along for?"

"Because," said Lennison patiently, "you're the best safe man in the business. And the fastest. With you and me working together, we can break in the joint, crack the safe, pick up fifty grand and be out of town, eight hours before the coppers know anything has happened."

Louis grunted, replaced his cigar in his mouth and ruminated in both senses of the word. The train steamed through the suburbs of Roxport.

FIVE minutes later it came to a halt in Roxport's new and proud Union Station. Lennison, tall, with sandy hair and wearing Broadway's newest clothes, led the way through the waiting room to the taxi stand. He got in, Louis following him. He said to the driver, "The Latham Hotel."

In the office of the Roxport Chief of Police, Curt Harford sat at his desk, thumbing through a sheaf of onion-skin reports. He was a young man, not quite thirty. His body was lithe and erect. His hair was blond and sandy; his eyes, blue and honest, but with a certain mature shrewdness in their depths.

At the moment his concentration was not of the best. His mind wandered from the task in hand and persisted in conjuring up an appetizing vision of a thick steak and a cooling glass of beer. Harford pushed the papers away from him, glanced at his wrist watch and decided it was time for lunch.

He stood up, donned his cap with its glinting golden badge and strode into the outer office. He said, "Back in an hour," to his secretary, and went out into the street.

He was a block from the English Tavern when he noticed the taxicab. It was pulled up close to the sidewalk waiting for the light to change. His first glance was casual. Then his pulse picked up a beat as he thought he recognized one of two passengers in the rear.

The light changed and the driver put the cab in gear. Harford stepped from the curb, put his hand on the window sill and said, "Hold it." He thrust his face through the open window.

He said in a tight, hard voice, "Lennison! I thought it was you."

Lennison looked innocent. "I know they got the bomb," he said. "But I didn't know they'd already taken us over."

Harford said, "Lennison, get out of town. I'll give you twenty-four hours."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is still America, ain't it?" demanded Lennison. "I can go where I like, do what I like. If you think you got anything on me, make the pinch. If not, let this hackie take me on my way."

A flaming and impotent anger beat within Harford. There was but one man in all the world that he hated and that man was Lennison. Moreover, Lennison was a crook with a record. He

was, in fact, quite notorious in police circles.

But in one respect Lennison was dead right. This was America. Legally, Lennison had as much right in Roxport as the Chief of Police, himself. Harford controlled his rage. He stepped back to the curb, signaled the driver to go on. He heard Lennison's mocking laughter behind him as the cab moved away.

Harford did not enjoy his lunch. His mind occupied itself with Lennison, with what to him was the puzzle of Lennison and a thousand others like them.

He had gone to grade school with Lennison. They had played the same games. Their parents had been the same solid middle class kind of people. They had read the same books, eaten the same breakfast foods. Yet Lennison was a hoodlum and a killer. He had been a professional thief since his fourteenth birthday.

Harford recalled that evening when Lennison had begun his criminal career, remembered it far more clearly than Lennison himself.

In those days Harford's mother was already dead. His father owned and operated a small barbershop down by the railroad station. On that Saturday night ten years ago, when the elder Harford was alone in the shop counting the day's receipts, Lennison had entered, a crude home-made mask on the upper part of his face and a slingshot in his hand.

In response to his demand for the contents of the register, old man Harford had laughed. He said, "Go on home before you get into trouble."

Lennison mouthed an astonishing oath and let fly with his slingshot. The stone with which it was loaded cracked into Harford's temple. He dropped to the tiled floor, staining its whiteness with his blood.

Lennison scooped up the cash from the register and fled.

He didn't get far that time. Harford had easily recognized him through his amateurish mask. The money was found in his pocket and Lennison had been sent

to the reformatory to serve his first prison sentence.

AFTER HIS release he had traveled east and gone on to bigger and more notorious things. He was a well known criminal on the eastern seaboard but no one had ever been able to produce enough positive evidence against him to put him behind bars.

Harford emptied his beer glass thoughtfully. Now, after ten years Lennison had come home. The question was why? Harford hardly believed it was for sentimental reasons. And if Lennison were here professionally that was Harford's immediate business.

He paid his check and returned to his office. He didn't get much work done the rest of the afternoon. . . .

Lennison sat on the edge of the hotel bed, half filled a glass with rye whiskey and said, "Well, what do you think of it now?"

Louis, standing by the window, took a cigar from his mouth and nodded.

"It's a pushover. I could open that safe with a boy scout knife. How did you know about it?"

"I told you I lived in this town once. Old man Naylor has had that little office here for thirty years. It's ideally located, from our point of view. In an alley off the main streets. On Fridays he takes in a lot of weekly rentals which he stashes in his broken down safe. Besides, he keeps a chunk of cash there in addition. The banks are closed on Saturday and he cashes checks for farmers and working men. I tell you what's in that safe won't go under fifty G's."

Louis nodded his head again. He was a cautious man but he found nothing to worry about on this job.

"Hit it fast," he said. "And scram."

"Right," said Lennison. "We'll crack it at say, two a.m. You crack the safe. I'll stand by with a rod just in case. I've got a car planted in the lot back of the hotel. We'll be out of the state before sunrise."

Louis grunted. "How did you know this Naylor'd still be in business after

ten years?"

"I was coming through from Chi a month ago. I had a wait between trains. I recalled old man Naylor's joint and cased it. As you see, it's too good to be true."

"Okay," said Louis. "We'll hit it at two in the morning. We'll be out of town before dawn."

He was half right. They hit it at two.

Old man Naylor was a rugged individualist from away back. The crowded shabby office, the ancient battered safe had been good enough for Naylor's father and they were good enough for him. He sneered at red leather and chromium. His booming real estate and insurance business did well enough without any fancy trimmings.

He was a hearty man in spite of his sixty-six years. Save for the fact that he was a diabetic he was as healthy as many a man twenty years his junior.

On Friday night, following the custom of years he adjourned to the card-room of the Elk's club and after several hours of shrewd play managed to win four dollars and a half. He quit the game at exactly 1:45, donned his hat preparatory to going home, then, recalled suddenly that he had forgotten to stop at the drug store for a fresh supply of insulin.

He swore mildly. He was going to need a shot of the drug first thing in the morning. There was none in his house. The stores were closed. Then he remembered the half bottle on the desk in his office. It would have been far better for old man Naylor if he had forgotten.

The insulin was in a yellowish bottle less than a foot from Louis' elbow as he worked. His bag of cleverly contrived tools lay on the floor. In his hand he held an instrument of bright steel which gleamed in the flashlight which Lennison focussed on the safe door. In Lennison's other hand was an automatic.

There was a slight nervousness in Lennison, a fact which was made apparent by the tremor of the light beam in his unsteady hand. Louis, phlegmatic

as the Petrified Forest, worked ploddingly, calmly as a garage mechanic.

There came a dull, clanking sound. Louis breathed heavily, wrenched the safe door. It opened, groaningly, on its uncoiled hinges. And at that moment, Lennison heard the footstep.

He swung about on his heel, bringing the light and the automatic around with him. The beam framed the hulking figure of old man Naylor. He blinked. He registered not fear but astonishment.

Lennison said hoarsely, "Come in here. Put your hands up and sit in that chair."

Naylor stared at the dim figure behind the flashlight in hot outrage.

He said, "You thieves! You robbers!" Then he threw an extra hundred decibels into his voice and yelled, "Police! Help! Robbers!"

THOSE three dramatic words were next to the last he ever uttered. Lennison's taut and nervous finger tightened on the trigger. Three dry, cracking reports filled the little office. Naylor coughed painfully and staggered forward. He fell into the ancient swivel chair before his desk.

He had courage, had old man Naylor. He slumped over his desk and his hand upset the insulin bottle which he would never need again. He knew his life was oozing out from three bullet holes. He knew he would live no more than another minute. But he went down fighting.

With his last ounce of energy, he snatched up the telephone, swung the dial around from *Operator*. He didn't wait for anyone to answer. He yelled his name into the phone and added the information that he was being murdered. He yelled twice before Lennison's fourth shot put a slug through the base of his brain.

Louis stood before the open safe, a thick canvas money bag in his hand. His brow was painfully wrinkled. Louis' slow mind was beginning to grapple with a new situation. He said, "All right,

you're the brain, Lennison. What do we do now?"

Lennison was panting like a man after a hard run. He said jerkily, "You got the dough?"

"Sure."

"All right. Let's scram. To the car. Let's get right out of town. Before the heat is on."

They moved to the door. No sooner had Lennison stepped to the sidewalk, he knew that the heat was on already. Two shrieking sirens sounded in the night. It was grimly apparent that the telephone operator had heard Naylor's last words, that she had communicated with the police who in turn had radioed the squad cars.

Louis said gloomily, "Them sirens. They're between us and the hotel."

"I know it," said Lennison. "But I know this town, too. We'll work around through the alleys, then circle back again."

He sped across an empty lot. He clambered over a low, rotting fence. He maneuvered through backyards, junk piles and dim unpopulated streets. Finally, he stopped in the brooding shadow of a warehouse and waited for Louis to catch up with him.

Louis came up, the bag of money flung across his wide shoulder. "So," he said, "are we anywhere near that car you got planted?"

Lennison shook his head. "And it wouldn't matter if we were." There was a deep frown on his brow and he seemed worried. "Look," he went on. "There are only three roads out of this town. You can bet there's blocks on every one of them right now. Moreover, Harford knows I'm in town. It's a cinch he's looking for us in every hotel already."

Louis assimilated this information slowly. He eased the bag off his shoulder and put it between his feet. He asked the inevitable question. "All right. What do we do now?"

Lennison said quietly, "We can get out of town if we got the chief of police

with us. If he's riding alongside us and we got a gun in his ribs. He can get us through the road block. He's about the only guy who can."

Louis considered this and found it sound. "Okay. So we go to his house and snatch him. Where does he live?"

Lennison shook his head. "He won't be home. He'll be out heading the search for us. They probably called him right away."

Louis said incredulously, "You mean we snatch him out of the cop house? With all his flatfeet around him?"

"No," said Lennison. "We'll trap him. We'll bring him to us. Alone. Come on."

He moved along the street without further explanation. Louis picked up the money bag and followed along phlegmatically. Louis may have been stupid but he was aware of it. He took orders as a matter of course.

The house in which Curt Harford lived with his father was a neat white structure on the outskirts of the town. A green picket fence girded its smooth lawn and bright shrubbery. Lennison picked his way deftly through Roxport toward it. Skilfully he avoided the radio cars which were now swarming through the streets. He kept to the back ways, the alleys and the dark factory streets.

THEN a block away he saw the Harford home. He drew a deep breath and thrust his hand into his pocket, where it touched the butt of his automatic.

"All right, Louis," he said. "Come on. You keep your mouth shut. Let me do the talking. I'll get you and me and that dough safely out of this hick town."

There was a light burning in the lower story of the house as Lennison approached. That confirmed his belief that Harford had been summoned downtown as soon as the police had discovered Naylor's corpse. Old man Harford was probably waiting up until his son returned.

Lennison climbed the three steps to the porch. Noiselessly he turned the

knob. The door was locked. He took the automatic from his pocket and rang the bell.

After a moment the shuffling sound of slippered footfalls moved toward the door. A bolt was shot and Peter Harford stood framed in the doorway. Lennison's first impression was that Harford had aged frightfully. It was ten years since Lennison had seen him. From Harford's appearance it could have been thirty.

There was a wisp of snow white hair on the top of his head. His face was gaunt, almost skeletal. His eyes were set deep in his head, encircled by black rings. He stared blankly at Lennison and Louis and said, "Yes?" in a cracked voice.

Lennison poked him gently in the stomach with the muzzle of his gun. He said, "I see you don't recognize me. But my gun can tell you I mean business. Get back in the house."

Harford backed into the living room. Lennison and Louis followed slamming the door behind them. Harford sat in an armchair, next to the telephone table. There was no fear in his gaze nor in his voice as he spoke.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Lennison grinned. He was calmer now. From where he stood his plan seemed bound to work. Louis sighed and put the money bag carefully on the floor.

"So you don't know me?" said Lennison. "Look me over carefully."

After a long moment Harford shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't recognize you. But somehow your voice seems familiar."

"I'm Lennison."

"Ah," said the old man and his voice died away like a dispirited breeze. "Of course. My wits are slow these days. Of course, you're Lennison. You're a crook and my son is looking for you right now. He believes you killed a man tonight."

"Look," said Louis impatiently. "Will you *do* something, Lennison? This idea of hiding out in a copper's house don't

appeal to me."

"We won't be here long," said Lennison. "Now, listen to me, Harford. Listen carefully, if you want to live."

The old man blinked at him and said nothing.

"We've got to get out of this town," said Lennison, "before the coppers get us. By now they'll have road blocks up. So there's only one way I figure to make a getaway. That is in your son's car, with him riding along with us."

"Are you crazy?" said Harford. "Curt won't do it."

"He'll do it if he thoroughly understands we'll blow your brains out, and his, too, if he doesn't."

There was a long silence in the room, broken at last by Harford's wheezing sigh. He said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Phone him at headquarters. If he's not there have them radio him to call you. Tell him you've had a stroke. You're sick. Tell him to come right away. Oh, and tell him you've already called the doctor."

"I see," said Harford. "And when he comes in here you jump him with your gun. You force him to accompany you, to lift the road block. And if he tells you to go jump in the lake, you threaten me?"

"You ain't so dumb," said Lennison in mock admiration. "You got it the first time."

He crossed the room. He put the cold muzzle of his gun against the old man's temple. He said, "Be sure you got your story right, then pick up that phone."

The old man's gaze was steady but thoughtful. He sighed and wrinkled his brow. At last he picked up the receiver without taking his eyes off Lennison. He fumbled a moment for the dial, then spun the mechanism six times.

CURT HARFORD was directing the search for Lennison from his office. As his quarry had already figured, every highway out of town was blocked. Plainclothesmen dotted the railroad station

and the bus terminal. Squad cars were engaged in checking every hotel in town.

Harford sat grimly at his desk smoking a cigarette. There was a blazing wrath in him, wrath that a hoodlum like Lennison should outrage the tranquility of the town he loved. However, that rage was tempered somewhat by the thought it seemed impossible that Lennison could wriggle through the police net which had been cast around him.

The telephone rang. Hopefully, Harford snatched it up. "Chief's office. Harford speaking."

"Curt," said a voice that he knew so well, "this is your dad."

"Hi. Why don't you go to bed? I ought to be home soon. We'll have Lennison any minute."

"I want you to come home now, Curt. I'm sick. I've had a spell."

"I'll be right home," said Curt swiftly. "This thing can run itself now. I'll bring the doc with me."

"I've already called the doctor," said his father. "I'm dizzy. Think I might faint. Never happened to me before."

"Sure. Sure." Curt was about to hang up. But his father continued. "I was reading. Suddenly got spots before my eyes. Couldn't see anything. Terrible headache, too."

"That's too bad," said Curt very slowly. "I'll be right home."

"Okay, son. See you soon."

"Right away, Dad."

He clicked the receiver back on its hook, sprang to his feet and rushed to the door, shouting for Captain Hooker, his second in command.

Old man Harford hung up the telephone. Lennison smiled bleakly at him.

"That was very nice, pop," he said. "A nice convincing story. Now, Louis, stand over there by the wall. When we see him coming up the walk, I'll open the door. I got to get the drop on him before he can reach for his own gun."

Harford said, "You're not going to harm my boy?"

"That depends. If he does as he's told

we'll send him back in one piece. And I kind of think he will when we threaten to blow your brains out."

Old man Harford opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. He sat silent, his hands folded in his lap and his gaunt face expressionless.

THE sound of a car broke the quiet of the early morning. Headlights shimmered down the block. The car halted at the gate of the Harford house. A single man stepped out and Lennison breathed with relief.

"He's alone," he whispered to Louis. "Keep an eye on the old guy."

He moved to the door. He held his automatic in one hand, put the other on the knob. The instant he heard the footfall of Harford on the porch, he flung the door open and thrust the muzzle of his gun in the police chief's stomach.

"Come in," he said. "We've been waiting for you."

Harford advanced into the house. He said, "Lennison, you and your pal, there, are under arrest for murder."

"That's very interesting. You're going to drive us out of town, past your road block in your car. There'll be a gun on you all the time."

Harford smiled across the room at his father. He said, "And if I won't?"

"Your old man will never see another birthday."

Harford's smile grew broader but there was no mirth in it.

"Lennison," he said, "I don't suppose it's occurred to you, but if you'd laid off my father some ten years ago, you'd probably have gotten away with this killing tonight."

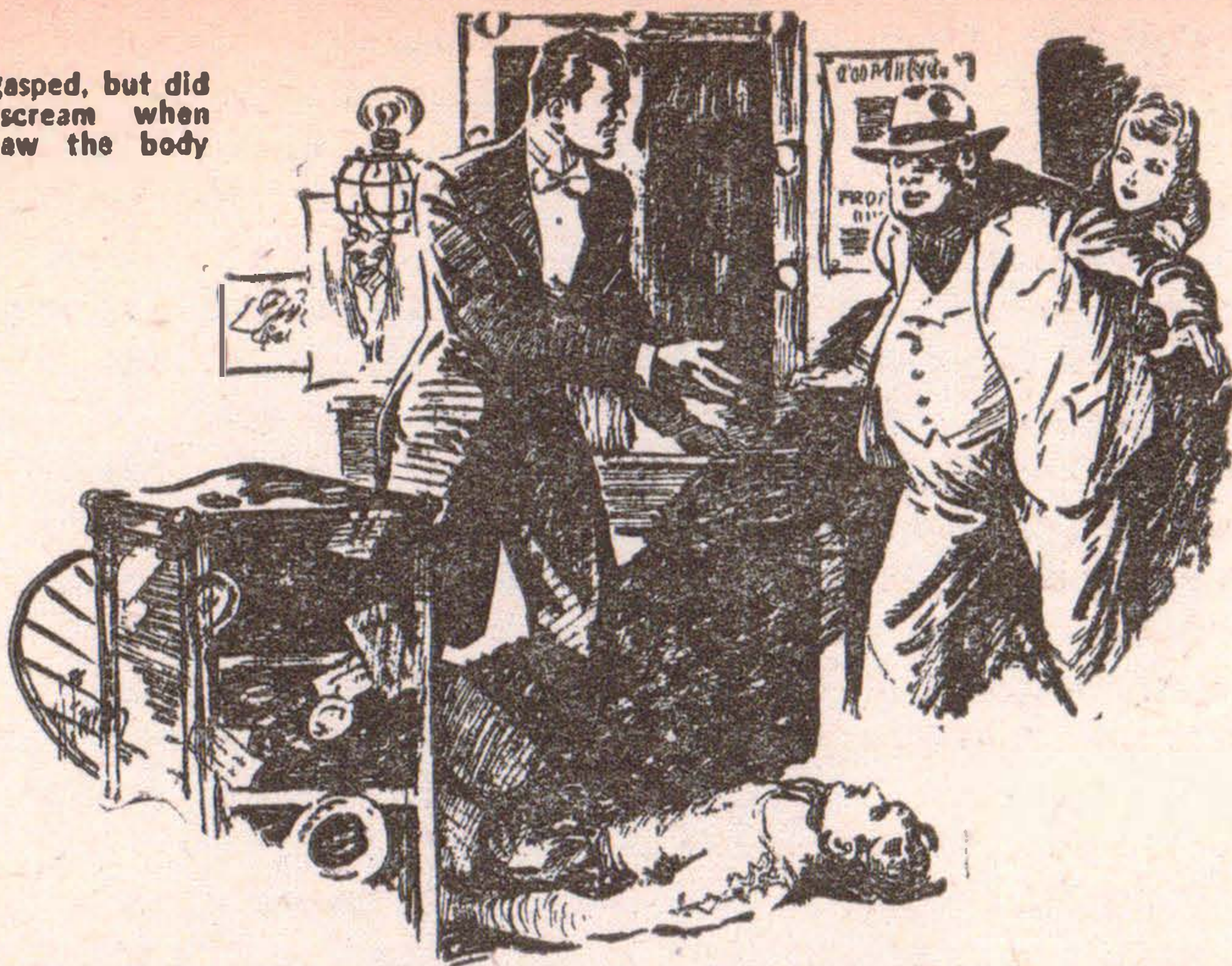
"What are you talking about? I *have* got away with it."

"The hell you have," said Harford. He lifted his voice. "All right, Hooker."

The door at the rear of the room—the door leading to the kitchen opened suddenly and four men spilled through. Hooker and two others held Police Specials in their hands. The fourth man

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Nan gasped, but did not scream when she saw the body



TROUBLE BACKSTAGE

By JOHN L. BENTON

Everything was make-believe—except the corpse!

IT SURE felt good to be on the bill in a theater where vaudeville was trying to make a come-back, and doing very nicely, thank you. My act had the important spot next to shut. "Dan Lyon And His Music of Yesterday And Tomorrow"—that was us. With a sixteen piece band and four of us doing specialties, we worked full stage, and it was a flashy act if I do say it myself.

We went over big in the Monday afternoon opener, and I was expecting a repeat on tonight's performance. The theater was a two a day house, all class and no grind, like some of them we had played while working the act into shape.

During the afternoon show I hadn't paid much attention to the four other acts on the bill. I knew the opener was an acrobatic act, "Wallace Stoll and Company," that did a lot of balancing stuff. They were followed by James Milburn, a fat comedian who did a single

and worked in one. Nan Conway was the third act. She was a pretty blond singer who worked with a piano accompanist on stage with her. As I said before, we had the spot next to shut, and Forrest McCoy and Dotty closed the show with a trick roller skating act.

I was standing in the wings watching Stoll do a balancing act on a high pole when James Milburn joined me. The comedian was the fattest man I had ever seen. He must have weighed at least four hundred pounds and he was wearing a panama hat and a linen suit that must have been specially constructed by Omar the Tent Maker.

"Caught your act this afternoon, Lyon," he said in a low tone that reminded me of a five gallon jug trying to whisper. "Good stuff. That band of yours sure is hot."

"Thanks," I said. "You've got a great little act, Milburn."

"It will do," he said. "Though I wasn't getting the laughs I usually do from the bunch out front this afternoon. Coldest audience I ever worked with. Hope they are better tonight." He stared at me, a strange sort of look, as though he knew where the body was buried and wanted me to help with the digging. "I've got a feeling we're going to have trouble backstage before the week is over."

HE MADE it sound ominous. "What do you mean?" I asked anxiously.

"Wallace Stoll is already making a play for Nan Conway," Milburn said, "And I caught Forrest McCoy making sheep eyes at her too. McCoy better watch his step."

"Why?" I asked. "Is Stoll likely to put poison in his soup?"

"No, but Dotty, the girl who works with McCoy in the act, is his wife, and she doesn't stand for any fooling around. I've been on the bill with them before. McCoy always has an eye for a pretty girl and when he takes too long a look, Dotty slaps him down, but good."

"Sounds like the makings of a jolly week," I said drily.

"You'll be in it when trouble starts," the fat man said. "I saw Nan watching your act this afternoon, and she was raving about the tall, dark and handsome band leader."

"These women," I said in a bored tone. "Always trailing me around. They are such a bother."

I didn't mean a word of it, but I wanted to see how Milburn would take it. In my estimation, the fat man was a male gossip who would be right in his element digging up tasty tidbits for a meeting of the ladies sewing circle.

He blinked and looked at me like a petulant whale. Apparently he expected dancing in the street upon my part when he told me that Nan Conway was interested in me. Not that I objected to the idea. After all, I am thirty-two—unmarried—and willing to walk around the block if romance waits just around

the corner.

The three men and the woman who made up Stoll's act went into a pyramid stand with Stoll balancing the two other men and the woman on his shoulders. The pit orchestra stopped playing and the drummer started a long roll.

"You're on next, Mr. Milburn," the stage manager said from behind us.

The acrobats held the pose, and then the woman who was standing on the shoulders of the third man of the pyramid slid to the stage floor. The third man did a back flip and landed on his feet on the stage. The second man came down, and then the orchestra was playing their exit music, and the acrobats were taking their bows.

The drop came down for an act in one and the orchestra swung into James Milburn's opening music. The fat man stepped out on stage and went through the motions of singing, though he didn't utter a word. Finally he gave up in pretended disgust and motioned to the orchestra leader to stop playing.

"Who switched off that microphone?" Milburn asked. "I couldn't hear a word I was singing—and with my voice, too."

I stepped back from the wings. I had heard the fat man's act that afternoon and I found I wasn't in the mood to listen again now.

"Mr. Lyon," a low voice said as I moved away, and a hand caught the sleeve of the evening clothes I wear when I lead the band in my own act. "I'm frightened."

It was Nan Conway who stood beside me, her hand on my arm. She wore her blond hair in a long bob, and she was dressed in a low cut evening gown.

"What's wrong, Miss Conway?" I asked.

"We can't talk here," she said glancing about her in the semi-darkness. "But I just have to tell someone."

Behind the drop, the stage hands were silently clearing away the stuff that Wallace Stoll and Company used in their act. Stoll and his troupe had gone to their dressing rooms.

"You follow Milburn," I said, conscious of a roar of laughter that came from out front. "But he just went on. His act runs about fifteen minutes. Come on, there's time for us to talk."

WE WENT back through the passageway leading to the stage door. The old stage doorkeeper was sitting in a chair reading an evening paper. He lowered it and glanced at us, then went on reading. We stepped out through the stage door. The night was fairly cool for mid-August.

The alley at the side of the theater was dark and shadowy. I stood close to the girl, feeling as protective as all get out.

"Someone wants to see me dead," Nan said. "Someone who must hate me terribly, and I don't know who it is that feels that way."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

She stepped closer to the stage door. It was open and light came from inside. Nan held up her left hand. She was holding a tiny blond doll dressed in a white dress like the one Nan herself wore. There was a pin stuck in the doll's body just over the heart.

"I found this lying on my dressing table when I reached the theater tonight," she said. "Voodoo stuff. Someone wants me to be found with a weapon sticking in my heart—just like the doll."

"You think of the nicest things," I said. "Somebody is probably just playing a joke on you, though I don't think much of their sense of humor."

"Neither do I," said Nan. "I'd better get back on stage. It must be nearly time for my act." She handed me the doll. "Won't you please help me? Find out who left that doll in my dressing room and why, Mr. Lyon."

I glanced in through the door. Mike Carter, the stage doorkeeper, had lowered his paper and was watching us, his face expressionless. I stepped back into the shadows and dropped the doll into a pocket of my evening trousers. My swallow-tailed coat had no outside pockets.

Nan hurried in through the door and I followed close behind her. I went with her to the wings. Milburn was just finishing his act. I left Nan and hurried down to my dressing room, I wanted to make sure that I looked all right before I appeared on stage in front of the band. We open with me leading the boys with a baton just to be fancy. On the next number I take over the piano and lead from there. I play piano, sax and drums, but I'm best on the eighty-eight.

When I reached my dressing room the door was closed just the way I had left it. I opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind me. Then I just stood there—staring at the figure lying in front of the dressing table.

It was Wallace Stoll, lying there on his back, still in his acrobat costume, and I had an awful feeling that he was very dead. My first impulse was to scream murder at the top of my lungs and go away from there fast. I had a feeling that the police would be morbidly curious about finding a dead man in my dressing room. I didn't like the idea at all myself.

I went to the body and examined it. As far as I could tell, Stoll was dead, all right. Just how he had died, I didn't know. There wasn't any sign of a wound, as far as I could see. No knives sticking out of his chest, or bullet holes in his head. For all I knew, he had died of a heart attack, but why had he picked my dressing room in which to do it?

I thought of reporting what had happened to Wallace Stoll right away and then decided it wouldn't do any harm to wait a little while longer. I was suddenly filled with "the show must go on" spirit. After all, I hadn't known Stoll in life, and didn't know him a bit better in death.

I noticed there was what looked like a piece of paper lying beneath the dead man's right hand, as though Stoll had dropped it as he fell. I reached down and picked it up. It was dated a year ago, and was an I. O. U. for five thousand dollars—and merely signed with the

initial M, and nothing more.

"Which could stand for Milburn or McCoy or a man named Murphy," I muttered, staring at the initial. "All the same, I've got a hunch this is murder—though if it was, then Stoll must have been smothered to death." I was startled by my own words. "Maybe I've got something there!"

I looked around the dressing room. My wardrobe trunk was closed and stood near the body. Not far from it, a chair had been overturned, and a heavy cushion was lying on the floor. I left everything right where it was. My trunk had been open back against the wall when I had left the dressing room and watched the show from the wings. The chair hadn't been overturned either.

AFTER looking at myself in the mirror and not caring much for the pale face that stared back at me, I combed my hair and then went to the door. I stepped out and locked the door behind me. If the murderer expected me to yell for the police right now he was in for a disappointment.

I went up and stepped out onto the stage, just as the boys in the band began to play and our act started. I was jittery, but I tried not to show it. The act went smoothly enough. Johnny Lake, the drummer, sang the chorus of a popular number. Eddie Lang, the guitar player, put down his instrument and did his tap dance routine.

We moved a small, combo—piano, trumpet, trombone, drums and clarinet—out front and gave an imitation of the Dixieland Jazz Band that went over big. We finished up with the full band playing "Tiger Rag" and practically everybody taking a crack at the rides.

We got a big hand and had to take some bows, but all the same I was glad when the act was over. I headed for my dressing room and found James Milburn and Nan standing in front of the locked door. The fat man looked worried, and he had a lot of face for it.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We were waiting for you," Milburn said. "Miss Conway told me about the doll. Sounds strange. Did you learn any more about it?"

"Plenty," I said, taking the key out of my pocket and unlocking the dressing room door. "Come in, and I'll show you."

I stepped into the room, Milburn followed me with Nan close behind him. Nan gasped, but she did not scream as she saw the body.

"It's Stoll!" Milburn muttered. "And he's dead."

"You ought to know," I told the fat man. "Since you killed him."

"I killed him," snapped Milburn. "What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. You killed him," I repeated. "But if we keep on saying it, it will get a bit monotonous. The way I've figured this out, you've owed Stoll five thousand dollars ever since last year." I drew the I. O. U. out of my pocket. "I found this beside the body."

"You can't prove I wrote that," Milburn snarled. "It is only signed with an M."

"Strange you should know that without even looking at the paper," I said. "You owed Stoll five thousand dollars—probably borrowed it last year when you weren't working. You told me that there was going to be trouble backstage. Tried to build it up that Stoll and Forrest McCoy were both interested in Nan and there might be trouble over that."

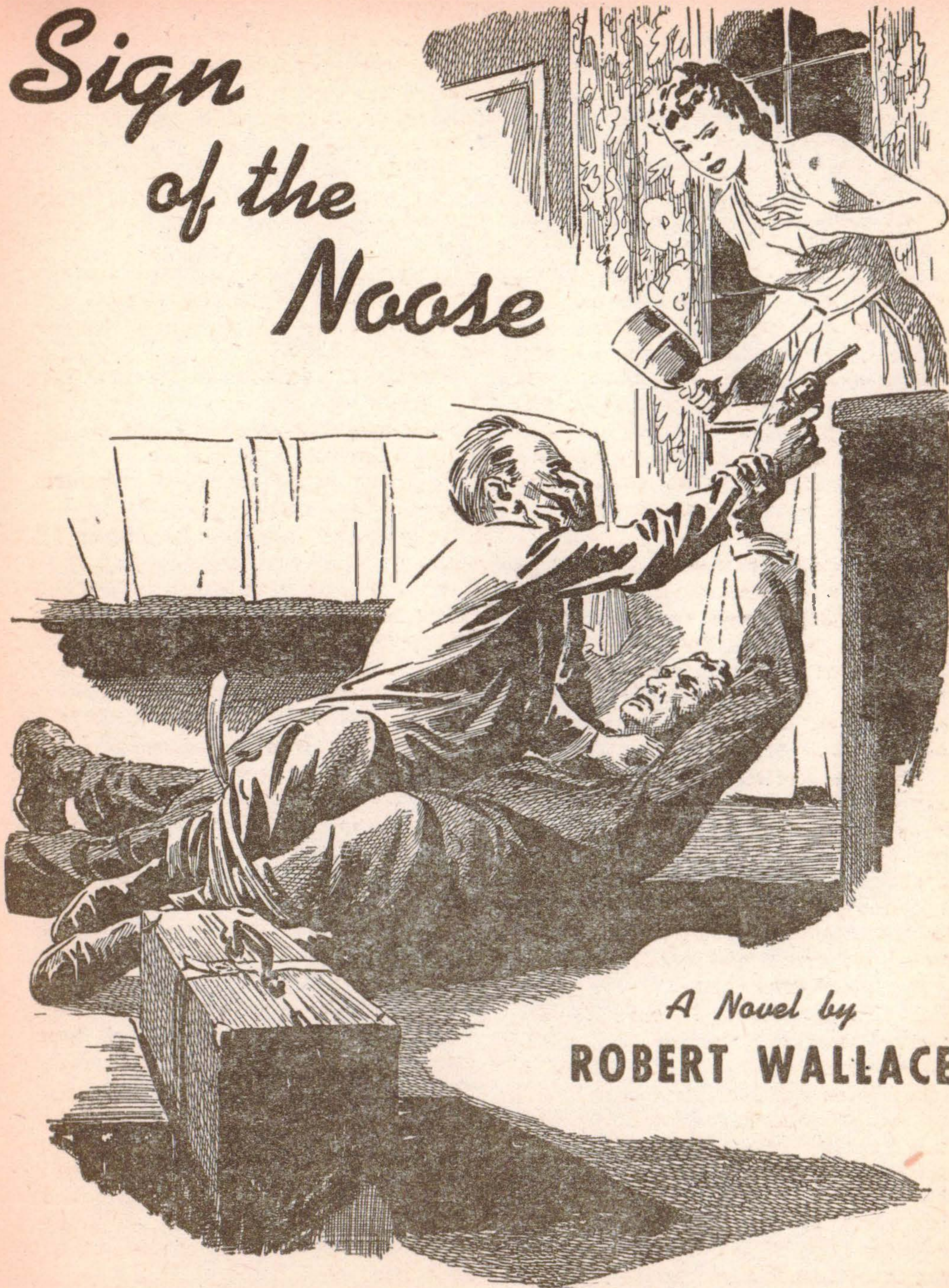
"Why neither one of these men even noticed me," Nan said as she listened.

"Here's another of them little dolls you asked my wife to make for you, Mr. Milburn," Mike Carter said from the doorway. The old stage doorkeeper stood there with a small package in his hand. "She used part of an old black coat of mine to make the dress suit for this one."

"So that's it," I said. "You had Carter's wife make the blond doll that looks like Nan. Then you stuck a pin in the

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Sign of the Noose



A Novel by
ROBERT WALLACE

A CLASSIC OF DETECTIVE FICTION



The lady in the trunk had been stabbed five times, and Delgado, the gambler, was betting that before the party was over—the killer would strike again!

CHAPTER I

BLOODSTAINED FINGERS

CHARLES DELGARDO, vaguely uncomfortable, as he always was in the presence of something he didn't quite understand, stood alone on the veranda of the great house and watched the moon's unsteady progress across the cloud-ridden sky. Behind him, beyond the open French windows, there were light and music and a great deal of laughter.

Too much laughter, Delgado thought. It had a false note, as though covering, or meaning to cover, something not very pleasant. Hysteria, that was it. All evening he had sensed it—all through the lavishly heavy dinner and the ensuing demonstration of her occult powers by the woman who called herself Mercedes.

Delgado's prematurely white hair was like a halo in the reflected light from the French windows: a halo oddly at variance with his impassive face and the sardonic humor in his very dark eyes. He wondered why he should be here tonight. Obviously, because Sarah had asked him to accompany her, and he had found, quite lately, that he couldn't refuse Sarah Ames.

It was a new experience for Delgado, the gambler, the private detective, the man whom the papers sometimes referred to as the mystery man. In a way he was all of these, though the motive behind some of his strangest affairs was clear to none but himself.

The underworld hated him, the police distrusted him; many of his clients found his manner too aloof, too critical for a hireling

detective. Sarah's father had been one of these.

A flicker of movement far out on the shadowed lawn caught his eye, and held it. Presently he saw that it was a woman, and at first he thought she was merely drunk. She ran with a curious swaying motion, lurching from shrub to tree as though unable to see clearly, yet Delgado had the distinct impression that she was trying to reach the house unobserved. As she came closer he could hear the sob in her agonized breathing.

HE MOVED into the shadow of one of the great pillars, unwilling to acknowledge that he had been watching her. She stumbled on the top step, almost fell. Instinctively Delgado put out a hand to steady her. With an almost inaudible scream she collapsed against the white bosom of his shirt. He was holding her like that, trying to think what was best to do, when a mildly bantering voice behind him spoke.

"This is quite amazing, Delgado. My wife is rarely so charmed with a new acquaintance."

Pat Conway, Delgado's host, stepped through the lighted French windows. He was tall, as tall as Delgado himself, though softer, with the softness of wealth and easy living, and a little heavier about the waist. His gray eyes viewed the spectacle of his wife in another man's arms with a sort of detached amusement.

"Your wife has fainted, I think, Mr. Conway," Delgado said, quite undisturbed. "She

was running and I startled her."

He lifted one of the woman's limp wrists, feeling for a pulse. Her hand was wet and sticky and—red. There was no mistaking this redness for anything but blood.

Conway took a backward step. "Blood?" he said. "On Nina's hands? Has—has she been hurt?"

Delgado's voice had a touch of crispness. "I think you know she hasn't," he said. "I think you know that it isn't her blood, that it is, in fact, someone else's, and you are afraid."

"What do you mean by that? Why should



Nina's hands were wet and sticky with blood

I be afraid?"

"I don't know—yet," Delgado said significantly.

Nina Conway stirred in his arms. She was small and dark and very, very beautiful. Long lashes lay like violet shadows on her waxen cheeks. Delgado straightened, cupping an arm under her silken knees, pilloing the still head against his shoulder.

He looked gravely at Pat Conway who, dazed, was staring off into space as though at something he'd rather not see. He made

no move to relieve Delgado of his burden.

"Conway!" Delgado said sharply, "we can't stand here like this. The thing to do is get her upstairs as quickly as possible. See if the hall is clear. Then find Sarah and send her to me."

Still with that dazed look on his face, Conway fumbled unseeingly for the latch, found it and disappeared inside. Presently he came back and held the hall door wide.

Delgado mounted heavily carpeted stairs. Ribald laughter issued from the living room at his right and he cursed softly under his breath. Not a nice party. The few remaining guests were not happy, despite the laughter.

There was an opened door near the head of the stairs and he laid Nina Conway on the bed, closing the door after him. She looked like a child against the white satin of the counterpane; a tired, rather petulant child. Blood made an ugly stain on the bodice of her gown. There was blood still on her hands. As Delgado had guessed, it wasn't her blood. He wondered whose it was.

Sarah Ames came in, a little breathlessly, followed by Pat Conway, who looked sick. Sarah gave you the impression of competence, of clean living and straight thinking. She had sort of coppery-brown hair and fine, clean looking gray eyes, and on the whole she was very efficient, though she had her whimsical moments.

Her eyes passed over the figure on the bed met Delgado's. "What is it, Charles?" she asked. "What happened?"

"I don't know that yet," he said. He looked at Conway, dark eyes probing. "Whatever it is, I'm afraid it's bound to be unpleasant for all of us."

"You mean—"

"That it probably has to do with the reason you asked me here; with the fear I have sensed in nearly every one of the guests and in Mrs. Conway herself."

PAT CONWAY broke in roughly. "See here, Delgado. I don't know what you are implying. As a matter of fact—" He flushed, swung on Sarah. "See here, Sarah, I don't mean to be rude, but I don't under-

stand—I mean, you apparently just dropped in for cocktails and then stayed on for dinner. Now it seems that there was some purpose behind it all."

"Yes, Pat," she said quietly. "You see—well, I have known that Nina was in trouble for some time now. Mr. Delgado is a man who takes other people's troubles seriously. I brought him." She looked at Delgado. "What do you want me to do?"

He smiled. "You had better close the door, I think. If I am not mistaken, Mrs. Conway is coming to and she will probably scream."

Nina Conway opened her eyes. As memory flooded them, she screamed, just as Delgado had said she would.

"Mercedes! Oh, Mother of Heaven, she is dead and I—I touched her!" She sat up, stared in horror at her two hands. "I touched her, do you hear?"

Conway dropped to his knees beside the bed.

"There, there, honey. It's all right." His voice was soothing. "It was just a bad dream, sweetheart."

She thrust her hands at him. "A dream! Does that look like a dream? It's her blood, I tell you. She was there beside the pool, lying—lying—"

Mercifully the vision was blotted out again. She fainted.

Conway stared up into Delgado's eyes. "You — you don't think that she — that Nina—"

"That your wife has killed the Mercedes woman? I'm sorry, but really I wouldn't know. At any rate, it seems to be a matter for the police, doesn't it?"

Delgado wasn't being nasty. He just felt out of place here, and Pat Conway's manner hadn't made him feel any better.

"Charles!" Sarah said sharply. "I asked you here to help. You're not going to let me down now, are you?"

He gave her one of his rare smiles. "It's almost as though you expected this to happen, isn't it?" he said.

When she didn't answer, he took a turn around the room, trying to make up his mind. The police would have to be called. Most certainly they wouldn't like his meddling, and

if he went so far as to conceal evidence, to shield Sarah's friend, and was caught at it, it would more than likely be his neck. Delgado rather fancied his neck. Still, Sarah was Sarah.

"Very well, I'll do what I can," he said, making a bitter mouth. "You two had better get Mrs. Conway into her own suite. Get her out of that gown and wash her hands. I'll send Dr. Grace up presently. Don't let Mrs. Conway talk."

He went out and down the broad stairs.

CHAPTER II

CORPSE IN THE CAR



THE enormous living room, and the dining room beyond it, seemed full of people, yet in reality there were very few compared with earlier in the evening. It was nearly eleven o'clock now. Over half the dinner guests had left long since.

Those who remained seemed bent on getting drunk, or were already that way. Liquor, the desire for it, was one thing they seemed to share in common. No, there was something else too—an intangible something. Fear, perhaps? Well, then, fear of what?

Pausing in the arch from the entrance hall, Delgado thought of the woman who, presumably, lay dead out there by the swimming pool. This fear, call it a strange uneasiness, that he had sensed in everyone, certainly antedated her death. Tension, suspicion, uncertainty, all these had been apparent preceding and throughout the dinner.

Casting back it seemed that the Great Mercedes herself had been the only one unaffected by the symptoms. She had been composed, even a little disdainful as she had gone through her bag of tricks. A genuine seeress? Delgado doubted it, being something of a magician himself. A mind reader, perhaps. It was strange that she had been on terms of intimacy with such an ill-assorted group.

Take Dr. Grace, for instance. Grace was a thick-set, rather stodgy looking man with square, capable hands and a brusque manner. He was reputedly one of the best sur-

geons in the city. Granting that, it wasn't so odd to find him and his wife at the home of the Patrick Conways.

But how explain Leon Leonetti, who was dancing with the doctor's wife? The most you could say for Leonetti was that he was an excellent dancer. With a name like that you'd expect him to be handsome, and he DeGroot hated her had been obvious to Delgado placed him mentally as above the average as that type goes.

Sulking in a corner by himself, Emil DeGroot, the motion picture director, was getting quietly but thoroughly plastered. He had a beefy red face and piggy, bloodshot eyes, and if you hadn't been told you'd have thought him a butcher, instead of an artist with a score of hits to his credit.

Vesta Darling, Colossal's big drawing card, an ash blonde who looked ten years older than she did on the screen, was curled up on a divan, apparently asleep. That Emil DeGroot hated her had been obvious to Delgado for some time. Why should all these people be here? Why should they have stayed after the others? And did they, or didn't they, know that Mercedes was dead?

Come to think of it, Delgado thought, I don't really know it myself, yet. He crossed the big room skirting Leonetti and Mrs. Grace, who were still gyrating to the blare of the concert-size radio. He touched the doctor's arm.

"Pardon me, Dr. Grace, Mrs. Conway is not feeling well," he said. "Have you your bag with you?"

Grace took his eyes off the dancers, looked at Delgado as though he'd never seen him before.

"What's that you said?" he demanded. "Oh, Mrs. Conway? What seems to be the trouble?"

"She has had some sort of a shock, I believe. Perhaps a sedative—"

The doctor's absent manner left him. "Of course. My bag is upstairs in one of the guest rooms." He looked keenly at Delgado. "Mrs. Conway?"

"In her own suite."

Delgado followed the doctor into the hall, stood at the foot of the stairs for a moment after Grace had disappeared. Then, certain that he was unobserved, he went out-

side and found his car and got a small pocket flash out of the dash compartment. After that he crossed the wide expanse of lawn in the direction from which Nina Conway had come.

There was a hint of rain in the air. The pale sliver of moon was showing less frequently and giant trees made only deeper blobs of gloom in an already ink-dark world. The lighted windows in the great house were mockingly malicious rather than cheery. Surrounding the pool on all sides was a tall box hedge, square-cut, pierced only now and then by arched openings, heavy with dew. The water was a sheet of jet black glass, unruffled, opaque.

It was very quiet out here. Delgado was quiet, too, his feet making no sound, even on the Spanish tile walks. He skirted the entire pool, using his flash occasionally, though his eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom.

There was no sign of a body, dead or otherwise. If Mercedes had indeed been here she was gone now. Had Nina Conway lied? Had the whole thing been just a figment of an overly active imagination?

No, Delgado decided, that was out. The blood on her hands had been real enough. He went through the hedge, searching the ground on the outside.

Still no body. Once again he entered the enclosure, examining the tiled walk more minutely.

There was a place that looked wetter than the rest, though the dew was so heavy over everything that he couldn't be sure. Conceivably, however, a body could have lain here. Conceivably the bloodstains could have been washed away with water from the adjacent pool. But where was the body now?

Delgado shrugged. He didn't even know that there had been a body. Perhaps the Mercedes woman had merely fallen and stunned herself, and Nina Conway had jumped to the conclusion that she was dead.

A little irritably Delgado started back toward the house. A furtive sound beyond the hedge, hardly more than a whisper, halted him.

He retreated with a minimum of noise into one of the embrasures.

STEALTHY feet entered the enclosure, came along the wall. A pin-point of light appeared, flared. A pocket lighter. As the flame steadied it illuminated the handsome face of Leonetti, whom Delgado had mentally catalogued a gigolo.

Leonetti looked a little sinister now—for a gigolo. Stooping he passed his light back and forth over the tiles, looking for something. He was especially interested in the patch of wetness Delgado had noted, but whatever it was that he sought he didn't find it. Presently his light went out and he vanished as noiselessly as he had come.

Delgado stood quite still for a moment, listening. After a while he heard the whir of a starter, the throaty, muffled exhaust of a powerful motor. Again he had the impression of stealth. Parting the hedge he stared out toward the drive.

A big yellow coupe was just nosing out from behind another car. Leon Leonetti was at the wheel, and the tail light, illuminating the license plate, shone also on something else. Something on the smooth concrete that was not oil. It gleamed too redly for that.

Swiftly, because there was need for hurry now, Delgado broke cover and hailed the man at the wheel.

"Leonetti!" he called. "Just a moment, please!"

For a moment he thought the car was going to run him down—then it sort of settled back on its haunches, was still.

LEONETTI leaned out of the open window.

"Oh, it's you, Delgado," he said impatiently. "Well, what is it? I'm in a hurry."

"No doubt," Delgado said. "I'd be in a hurry too if I had a lady's body concealed in the trunk of my car. Incidentally, I see that this is not your car."

He was looking at the registration slip by the light of the dash. The car belonged to Mirabelle Mercedes, the Great Mercedes.

Leonetti scowled. "So what? Are you intimating that I'm stealing her car? I—well, if you must know, I rode out from town with the lady."

"I see. And you are once more riding with the lady—only this time she doesn't



Even as the man fell, he yanked Delgado down

know it." His voice grew hard. "Will you get out, or must I drag you out?"

"Just try it and see how far you get! Then, for the first time, Leonetti seemed to realize the full import of Delgado's words. Some of the belligerence went out of him. "You wouldn't, by chance, be drunk, would you?"

"I'm quite sure of that much, at least," Delgado assured him gravely. He opened the car door. "Shall we have a look?"

Leonetti got out. He appeared more curious than afraid. They went around to the turtle back of the car and Delgado put out a hand, then swiftly withdrew it.

"You open it, my friend," he said. "I'll

just sort of stand here and look on if you don't mind."

Leonetti had driving gloves on. With a great show of bravado he grasped the handle, twisted it, lifted the turtle back.

"Merciful God!" he gasped.

Delgado didn't say anything at all, just stood there looking at Leonetti and at the thing that had been a woman. Her face was blackened, distorted, and there was a thin red line around her throat. As if this were not enough, the killer had used a knife too. It was pretty messy. There was a piece of heavy canvas around the body, as though someone had wanted to protect the interior of the trunk.

Delgado took a deep breath. "Well, Leonetti?"

The man whirled on him. "You think I did it? Don't be a fool!"

"I try not to be," Delgado said. "Still, you must admit that appearances are very much against you. What were you looking for there by the pool?"

"None of your business!"

"All right," Delgado said. "We'll let that pass. But you'll hardly try to deny that you were driving off with the lady's car, and that the lady herself is inside."

Leonetti cursed him. "If you think I put her in there, you're crazy!" At a sudden thought his eyes narrowed. "By the Lord Harry, I think I know who did, though!"

He started to run and Delgado stuck out a foot and tripped him. The man was like an eel. Even as he sprawled flat he managed to twist and yank Delgado down on top of him. Over and over they rolled, fighting for holds, gouging, first one on top, then the other. It was Delgado's misfortune that it should be his head instead of Leonetti's that hit the concrete curb. He went out like a light.

WHEN he finally opened his eyes again there was no change in his immediate surroundings except that Leon Leonetti was gone. Back along the drive, in the servant's quarters, a radio played dance music. Otherwise, there was no sound.

Delgado climbed to his feet, went over to the yellow coupe. The Great Mercedes was still as he had last seen her, the car lights still glowed, the motor still idled rhythmically beneath the long hood. He reached in, got the keys out of the ignition, went back and locked the trunk.

Presently he turned off the lights and made his way quietly into the house. The Great Mercedes, latest sensation in crystal gazers, had become police business.

Leonetti was nowhere in sight. Dr. Grace and Sarah were presumably still upstairs with the Conways. Mrs. Grace, a heavy woman with artificially red hair and rather protruding blue eyes, was ogling Emil De-Groot who appeared too soddenly drunk to notice.

Vesta Darling's green eyes were wide

open, and she had a champagne glass in her hand. She was still curled up on the divan as though she had never left it. Delgado wondered who had brought her the drink.

Jergens, the butler, came soft footing along the hall from the kitchen.

"Something you wanted, sir?" he asked.

"Quite a number of things," Delgado said. "First, I'd like you to round up all the men servants, all the chauffeurs, and put a guard around the house. I'm afraid we've missed Mr. Leonetti, but no one else must leave the grounds, understand?"

"I'm afraid I don't sir," Jergens said. "I'd like to see Mr. Conway about anything like that." Jergens had a perpetually tired look. There were wrinkles about his eyes and mouth and the neatly parted dun hair was thinning at the temples. "Has—has something happened, sir?"

Delgado's voice sounded faintly annoyed. It was bad enough to have let himself in for a mess of trouble without having even the servants buck him.

"Yes, Jergens," he said, "something has indeed happened. A lady has been murdered, in fact, and we shall have to call the police."

"Mercedes murdered!"

Delgado looked at him. "You amaze me, Jergens. Really you do. Just how did you know that it was Mercedes? I merely said it was a lady."

The butler's pale eyes shifted. "I—well, I just thought—I mean, she doesn't seem to be around just now, does she?"

"Very fast thinking, Jergens," Delgado nodded approval. "Now will you do as I ask, while I call the police?"

PAT CONWAY, descending the stairs, heard this last. He looked at Delgado with sick eyes.

"Then it is true?" he asked.

"Quite true. The police must be notified without further delay. If it will relieve your mind, though, there are plenty of suspects beside Mrs. Conway. Leon Leonetti, for one. He seems to have made good his escape. Will you please have your man see that no one else does?"

Conway nodded dully. Jergens went away, soft-footed, apparently unperturbed,

giving no sign that the news affected him in the slightest. Patrick Conway passed a shaking hand over his eyes. He'd aged ten years in the last half hour.

Delgado studied him from half-veiled eyes. The man was worrying over more than the evidence uncovered so far against his wife. Conway must have sensed the unspoken thought because he turned without a word and went back up the broad stairs.

CHAPTER III

LIEUTENANT IN CHARGE



SIGHING, Delgado picked up the hall phone and called the sheriff's office at Santa Monica. The Conway estate was in the county, halfway between Santa Monica and Malibu. It would have to be the sheriff, he thought disgustedly. He'd had more trouble with the county officers than with the metropolitan police. More than likely they'd accuse him of murdering the woman himself.

He hung up presently, after giving the desk man a description of the missing Leonetti. Not that he was satisfied Leonetti was guilty. That was the worst of it. There were too many people who could have done the job. Every last one of them was concealing something. The only thing was, the police would blame him for letting the man get away.

He looked at his reflection in a wall mirror. He'd aged a little himself. The whiteness creeping into his crisp, well-cut dark hair had nothing to do with it. The hair was a matter of circumstance, not of age. Still, he looked older, a little more disillusioned than his thirty-two years would warrant. Maybe it was because they had been tough years.

Turning away he went through the arch into the living room and poured himself a drink. He felt that he was going to need it. Vesta Darling raised seductive green eyes, measuring him.

"You're the detective person, aren't you?" she said.

Delgado said that he was.

"How fascinating!"

He said yes, he found it so. A little devil inside him prompted him to probe beneath her bored exterior, to see what made her tick.

"I'm doing a little impromptu detecting now, as a matter of fact," he remarked casually. "Had you heard that Mercedes is dead?"

She was a great actress, he decided. Not a muscle of her face moved. But the stem of her glass snapped off short in her fingers. She sat up then, brushing absently at the bosom of her gown.

"Clumsy, aren't I?" she said.

"Very," Delgado's tone was sardonical. "One can overdo it at times. How long have you known about Mercedes?"

"Why—why, you just this moment told me!"

Delgado gave her a brittle laugh. "Save it for the police, my dear lady. They'll be here shortly." He turned as Jergens touched his arm.

"The police are here now, sir," Jergens said. His pale eyes were fixed on Delgado's shirt front. "And if I may say so, sir, if I were you, sir, I should borrow a fresh shirt from Mr. Conway. Yours seems to be a trifle—ah—bloody."

Delgado had a moment of panic. Of course. Nina Conway had clung to him out there on the veranda. He didn't know how he'd missed seeing it himself, there in the mirror. Still he had been studying his face, and paying no attention to his clothes.

"Thank you, Jergens," he said. "Very thoughtful of you, I'm sure."

He strode swiftly through the dining room, through the butler's pantry, and came out into the stillness of the rear hall. Pat Conway was just coming in from outdoors.

"Just having a look about, you know," he explained.

Unnecessarily, Delgado thought. Why should Conway feel called upon to explain his movements?

He was annoyed with Conway, with Sarah for getting him mixed up in this affair, with the whole business.

"The police are here, Mr. Conway," he said a little stiffly, "and I find that your wife has left blood all over my shirt. I'll have to borrow one of yours to pass in-

spection. Unless, of course, you'd prefer that I'd tell them—"

"For God's sake, no!" Conway was panicked at the thought. His bloodshot eyes sought Delgado's with a sort of desperation, a drowning man look. "See here, Delgado, I've been rude to you, but it's because I—well, one hears things about you. Whether you're good or evil nobody seems to know. Nobody but Sarah. She apparently thinks you're a saint. But good or bad I'm asking you to help us out of this jam. If it's money you want—"

"Money is always useful," Delgado admitted. "However, I draw the line at bribes. If, as you seem to fear, your wife is guilty, then there will be little that I can do. But I'll do this—I'll try to prove her innocent, and if I'm lucky and still have my own neck—well, we'll talk about money then, eh?"

"Any amount you name!"

"Well," Delgado smiled, "I'm a very reasonable guy. If I wasn't, if money meant anything to me, I'd probably have some of it, and then Sarah's two million wouldn't scare me so."

He went up the stairs two at a time, suddenly feeling a great deal younger. Rum-maging through a chest of drawers in his host's room he found a fresh shirt that looked as though it might fit. His own he thrust down a laundry chute. He was just knotting his tie when Sarah Ames came in.

"Charles, you surely don't think Nina killed that woman?" she said.

Delgado loved the straight slimness of her, the way her gray eyes looked at him. A thoroughbred, this Sarah Ames. She'd have gotten by without the two million her mother had left her, without all the other millions her father had. He wondered what she saw in him, a guy who spent his life associating with touts and bellhops and one thing and another.

"I don't know, hon," he said, quite honestly, because that was the only way he could be with her. "I hope she didn't. There are a lot of things that need explaining around here, though. For instance, what sort of trouble did you think was bothering Nina Conway?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Charles.

Something to do with money, I suspect. She's been worried sick for months, and just the other day she borrowed ten thousand from me."

"Hasn't her husband money?"

"Yes," Sarah admitted. She wrinkled her nose. "Pat's got money of his own, and his father has more. The fact that she couldn't ask either of them rather suggests something, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid you've got a nasty mind," Delgado said. He shrugged into his coat. "But even a nasty mind is better than no mind at all. Well, I guess I'll have to show the police the location of the body. Keep your chin up, Sarah. If they question you, tell them as little as possible. It certainly won't be any harder to explain our presence than that of the mismated crew downstairs. I hope!"

Sighing, he left her and descended to the lower hall.

LIEUTENANT ED BRODY of the sheriff's office eyed him without a flicker of recognition. This was just a stall, because Brody knew him, and hated him with more than the inbred hatred of a regular cop for a private detective. Delgado didn't like Brody very well, either.

"So, what's *your* name?"

Delgado's eyes were very wide, very bland. "My name is Charles Delgado," he said politely.

"Oh, that guy! Now I remember. Suppose to be a shamus, aren't you. One o' these dime-a-dozen keyholers?"

"That's the idea," Delgado said, lighting a cigarette. His dark eyes hardened. "And now that that's over, my flat-footed friend, I am the one who called your office and I may as well tell you in advance that it was not I who killed the dead lady. I do, however, know where the body is. Would you like to see it?"

"So you're going to get tough, huh?" Brody winked at another detective, whom Delgado didn't know, and drew a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. "Well, we'll take that out of him, eh, Sarge? Maybe I'll use these on him later. But right now we got work to do." He strode hard-heeled to the living room arch, stuffing the

cuffs back in his pocket. "Just make yourselves at home, folks. But don't try to get away on account of I've got the place sewed up tighter'n a sack." He spun around, glared at the little deputy medical examiner. "Okay, Doc, let's go see what the shamus is so eager to show us."

They tramped out, Brody and Delgado, the doctor with his little black bag, two plainclothesmen and a uniformed officer from the motorcycle squad.

Other policemen were scouring the grounds, though Delgado didn't know why. Servants and chauffeurs huddled together like sheep in the patio formed by a wing of the house. There were lights now, quite a lot of them, and it had started to rain.

Delgado gave Brody the keys, stood back out of the way. After a time they had the body of the Great Mercedes stretched out on the drive and the little medical examiner went through his grisly routine.

Delgado rather liked the doctor. He supposed this was because Lieutenant Brody so obviously didn't. There was a design of cut steel beads on Mercedes' bloodied gown. Some of the threads had pulled loose and here and there a bead caught the light, seemed to wink wickedly at Delgado as if they shared some evil secret in common.

Presently, peeling off his rubber gloves, the examiner stood up and looked at Brody.

"She was strangled first. You can see the mark left by the noose. But whoever did it was afraid he hadn't done a good job. He hadn't, either, or she wouldn't have bled so much after she was stabbed. Five knife wounds, only one of them fatal." The little medico clucked in puzzlement. "How even a layman could have missed the heart so far and so often is amazing. Probably a butcher knife or something of the sort. I don't seem to see it anywhere."

"Don't let a little thing like the knife worry you, Doc," Brody said. "We'll find the knife. What I want to know, if it wouldn't be stretching your imagination too far, is when all this happened. What time was the dame killed?"

THE doctor glanced at his watch. "Not over an hour ago. Say ten-thirty, Brody, and that's without stretching my imagina-

tion the slightest bit. Sometimes I think it's too bad you haven't a little of that commodity. You could imagine what I think of you."

He clicked his bag shut, stomped off toward the front of the house. With him went Delgado's very best wishes. He liked to have his impressions of people confirmed.

"If you're ready, Lieutenant," Delgado said. "I'd be glad to tell you what little I know of the case."

Brody was examining the bloodstained square of canvas they'd taken from the car's trunk.

"All right," he said carelessly, "go ahead and speak your piece. Not that I'll believe it."

Delgado's eyes glowed, but he was still being very polite. "I'm pretty sure Mercedes was killed over there beside the swimming pool," he said in his most suave tone. "Inside the hedge."

"Oh, yeah? What gave you that idea?"

Delgado avoided mentioning what had brought him to the pool in the first place. "It just occurred to me," he said. "A few of the tiles looked as though they'd been freshly scrubbed, and seeing that square of canvas—well, isn't it possible the killer wrapped her in that to keep from getting blood on himself while carrying her to the car?"

Brody stood up, prodding Delgado's chest with a hard forefinger. "Look, shamus, I don't like private dicks, but even if I did like dicks I wouldn't like you," he growled. "You're probably covering something for these society swells of yours and I'm telling you right off the bat that if you are, I'm gonna make you wish you'd never been born." His hand curled into the lapel of Delgado's coat. "So now that we understand each other, baby, you can answer me this one. How'd you know the dame was in the car?"

"I was coming to that."

Delgado was acutely conscious of Brody's fingers. They were exploring the coat fabric, back of the right lapel. He wondered if Nina Conway had managed to get some of that damned blood there, too.

"Of course," he went on, "I didn't know that there was anything wrong—that there

had been a murder. I was just taking a quiet stroll. Then, while I was behind the hedge, I heard a car being started out here in the drive. Something about the way it was done, some subtle quality of stealth, made me investigate. That is when I saw the patch of blood under the rear of the trunk. A man named Leon Leonetti was driving. He got away from me."

"See if they've found Leonetti yet," Brody tossed over his shoulder. One of the detectives went away. "And you," Brody barked at the other, "stick your flash against this guy's coat! Uh-huh, just like I thought. It's blood. Come on, you, how'd you get blood on you?" He slapped Delgado across the mouth. "Sing, baby!"

"Brody, if you ever do that again I'll take you apart," Delgado said, dangerously quiet now.

Something about his eyes at the moment must have reminded Brody that this white-haired, old-young man, was believed by the police to have killed his share of tough mugs. His hands dropped away.

"It's possible the blood may have got there at the time I was struggling with Leonetti," Delgado said. "Beyond that I have nothing more to tell you."

If it had been anyone else but Brody, anyone with the remotest sense of decency, Delgado might have made a clean breast of everything. As it was, he decided to keep what he knew of Nina Conway's movements to himself. At least for the time being.

He turned abruptly on his heel and strode towards the house and, strangely enough, the lieutenant made no effort to detain him.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER WEAPON



INSIDE the house someone had finally had the good sense to turn off the radio. Someone, Jergens, probably, had replenished the fire in the great fireplace and closed the French windows. Delgado shook the rain from his shoulders, looked around.

Dr. Grace had come down from above and was talking to the little medical exami-

ner. The discussion was so full of technical terms that Delgado couldn't distinguish it from Greek. Grace was in evening clothes—he and his wife had arrived late—and the starched white vest was wrinkled untidily over his fat paunch. Somehow, even with the paunch, he looked capable, though.

His wife and Vesta Darling were huddled together on the divan, as though for mutual protection. Delgado had never seen two women so strikingly dissimilar. Apparently they had nothing in common except their sex, nothing whatever to talk about. They just sat.

Over in the corner the butcher-like director, Emil DeGroot, had ceased to pour his liquor into a glass. He was taking it direct from the bottle, but he seemed no more drunk than he had before. Perhaps he was attempting the impossible.

Delgado waited patiently for either or both of the two medical men to run out of breath, but when it became apparent that neither was going to, he finally went over and touched Grace's arm.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, I've a question I'd like to ask the examiner." He gave the little man one of his very best smiles. "This cord that you say was used to strangle Mercedes—it must have been a very fine cord indeed, don't you think?"

"Exceedingly, Mr. Delgado." The examiner could be very polite too. "I'd hazard a guess that it could have been wire except for the fact that wire makes a rather poor noose. And how do I know it was a noose? Because there was the mark of a knotted loop at the back of the woman's neck."

Delgado had missed that point.

"Ordinarily a cord that fine would have broken, don't you think?" he said. "Perhaps it did break and that was the reason the murderer had to resort to a knife."

"Not necessarily. I didn't tell Brody this because he irritates me, but it is possible there was something incriminating about the noose itself. The murderer could have used it merely to silence his victim until he'd stabbed her. He was afraid that if he drew it too tight he couldn't get it free again." The examiner looked at Dr. Grace. "You wouldn't believe it possible, Doctor. The man must have been either a maniac or

very drunk. You'd think that in this day of enlightenment even a child could hit the heart in less than five tries. Five wounds, mind you, and only one of them hit the spot."

Dr. Grace nodded and said he didn't see how anyone could be that ignorant of the heart's location. He was more interested in staring at the puffy, red-faced Emil DeGroot.

"Now there is a peculiar case. A man who looks like a butcher and is in reality a great artist. And speaking of butchers—he smiled down at his contemporary—"but perhaps we hadn't better speak of butchers, eh. Our friend, Mr. Delgado, looks as though he is about to make a very bad pun about doctors."

DELGARDO said they'd stopped him just in time. He went out, humming not very musically and not particularly happy. The house was literally crawling with police. He stumbled into them upstairs and down.

Leon Leonetti, he gathered, was still missing, though all the cars had now been accounted for and it was evident that if the man had got away he must have left on foot.

From a detective who was disposed to be friendly Delgado learned that a dragnet had been spread up and down the coast highway. An autoist had been stopped, a man who claimed to have picked up a pedestrian answering Leonetti's general description, but Leonetti, if it had indeed been he, had left the car in Santa Monica before its driver had been accosted by the police. A county-wide alarm was out for the missing man.

Looking for Pat Conway and not finding him elsewhere, Delgado finally brought up outside Nina Conway's door. He thought he heard someone moving around inside and decided this would probably be Conway. Nina should be asleep by this time, under the influence of the opiate administered by Dr. Grace. Delgado opened the door quietly.

Nina Conway whirled from the nightstand, wide eyes dark with sudden terror. Something in her hands, something she tried desperately to hide, dropped to the floor with a little metallic sound. She was quite alone

in the room. Her silken negligee clung revealingly and one of her small hands was tight against her breast, as though to still the beating of her heart. She moistened dry lips.

"What—what do you want?" she asked.

"I think," Delgado said, coming into the room and closing the door softly behind him. "I think you and I had better have a little talk, Mrs. Conway."

She retreated before him. Presently, Delgado stooped and picked up the thing she had dropped. It was a woman's powder bag. Cut steel beads winked in the light, evil, malicious, matching those on a dead woman's gown. The bag had belonged to Mercedes. The man and the woman just stood there for a moment, not saying anything. There didn't seem to be a great deal to say. The little ivory clock on the vanity ticked loudly.

After what seemed a very long time Delgado spoke, quite gently.

"Sarah is your friend, Mrs. Conway," he said. "Perhaps I too could be your friend. Was it you who asked all these people here, or was it your husband?"

She sank to the edge of the bed, head drooping under his gaze, fingers picking aimlessly at her negligee. Delgado wanted to reach out and touch her. Despite the roundness of her limbs, the full curves of her figure, she reminded him of a child.

"It was Pat's idea," she said, lips scarcely moving. It was like a sob.

"Thank you," Delgado said.

IT WAS another piece in the puzzle, no more. It was still quite possible for this woman before him to have committed the murder. The fumbling method pointed to a frantic, hysterical woman rather than a man.

There was the matter of hiding the body in the car, however. Mercedes was grossly fat. She must have weighed close to two hundred pounds.

Nina Conway could not possibly have lifted her, carried her from the pool to the car in the drive.

Then who had? Pat Conway, perhaps? Leon Leonetti, whom Delgado had actually seen attempting to remove the car from the premises? Was there some sort of a tie be-

tween Nina Conway and the missing Leonetti?

Delgado shrugged. He was wasting time trying to answer a lot of hypothetical questions when he had something much more tangible right there in his two hands. His fingers toyed with the catch of the little beaded bag.

"You were afraid of this woman who called herself Mercedes, weren't you, Mrs. Conway? Just as many of your guests were afraid. I've had that impression for quite a while now, and to me that can add up to but one thing. The woman was a black-mailer. She knew something about you that you have been trying to conceal from your husband. Isn't that true?"

In a way Nina Conway was as good an actress as Vesta Darling, downstairs. She quit fiddling with the folds of her gown and gave Delgado a blank stare.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "I've nothing to conceal from anyone."

Delgado frowned. For a moment he was on the verge of washing his hands of the whole affair. This woman was obviously guilty, if not of the actual murder, then of something that wouldn't bear the light. What was the use of trying to help someone who obviously didn't want to be helped?

"I'm sorry." There was a little rasp in his voice. "Sorry, I mean that you won't trust me. For Sarah's sake, because she asked me to, I've held out on the police. The matter of your bloody hands for example, and the fact that you were out there by the pool with Mercedes. Now I find you actually in possession of the woman's bag and you persist in lying to me. I'm disappointed in you, Mrs. Conway."

Behind him there was the faintest of noises and he turned to see Patrick Conway in the connecting doorway. Conway looked haggard.

"I think you have said quite enough, Delgado," He came in quietly, stood over his wife. "You didn't take the medicine, Nina. You will take it now, please, and go to sleep. As for anything else, you needn't worry. You see—I love you."

Something climbed up in Delgado's throat, jiggled there queerly. He went through the connecting door feeling very

sentimental. So much so that when Sarah found him a little later in Patrick Conway's room she looked at him with concern.

"Aren't you well, Charles?"

"Quite well, thanks."

"Then why do you look like that?"

"Because I'm a fool," he said, suddenly savage.

"Of course you are," she agreed. "A very grand fool, though, Delgado. Have I told you recently that I love you?"

"No," he said gloomily. "Not recently enough."

SHE came close to him then, lifted her fine eyes to his.

"Charles, if Nina is guilty, if you're sure of it in your own mind—well, I wouldn't have you endanger yourself to save her. I won't let you do a thing like that."

Pat Conway came in at that moment. "That fellow Brody wants to see you, Delgado," he said. "What are you going to tell him?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind," Delgado said. "Your wife, guilty or innocent of the actual murder, is concealing something. For all I know you may have killed the woman yourself."

"I wish to God I had! If ever a human deserved killing, that woman did. Seeress? Crystal-gazer? A dirty, rotten blackmailer is what she was! Look, Delgado, you're supposed to be a detective. If you weren't totally blind you must have seen how she deliberately tantalized half the people here tonight. Played with them like a—like a cat."

"I knew that."

"Well, believe it or not, I'm not as dumb as I look. I've known for some time now that something has been bothering Nina. She has a pretty fair income in her own right, but she's continually overdrawn at her bank. I could hardly bring myself to hire detectives to spy on my own wife, so I—well, I did a little sleuthing on my own account.

"This Mercedes woman has been a sort of a fad lately. Checking up a bit at a time I discovered that she seemed to wield a certain power over a lot of people whom you ordinarily wouldn't associate with crystal

gazers and that sort of bunk. Blackmail appeared the logical answer. So I got a bunch of my prize suspects together, hoping that we could maybe throw a scare into Mercedes and wash the whole thing up."

"Quite a novel idea," Delgado said. "Of course it wouldn't have worked. Mercedes was the only one in a position to call her shots. The rest of you were behind the well-known eight-ball." He examined his nails. "There were other guests beside the ones you suspected of paying tribute to Mercedes?"

"Just for the decorative effect," Conway said. "By one means or another I managed to detain the ones that counted. Then, when Sarah said you were a detective, I thought—well, I hadn't planned on you, but I thought your presence might help, at that."

"I was to scare the woman witless."

Conway flushed. "I want you to understand one thing, Delgado," he said with painful earnestness. "I don't give one little damn what Nina has done that she is ashamed of. It's just that—" He broke off, took a deep breath. "Couldn't you—can't you see that any one of the others downstairs had as much motive for the murder as Nina?"

"But none of them had blood on his hands," Delgado pointed out. "None of them had Mercedes' powder bag." He lifted a hand, stilling Conway's protest. "Now don't misunderstand me. Aside from your wife, we have a most excellent suspect in Leon Leonetti, but unfortunately he isn't around at the moment. Was this Leonetti one of those you thought Mercedes was blackmailing?"

"He was a frequent visitor at her establishment."

"He also accompanied her out here. Does that suggest anything to you? No? Well, perhaps it doesn't to me either."

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CHAPTER V

STRANGE SERVANT



BRUPTLY someone knocked on the hall door. Conway looked at Sarah, uncertainty in his eyes, and Sarah looked at Delgado.

"That sounds like a cop to me," Delgado said. "Probably Lieutenant Brody is becoming impatient." He grinned suddenly, almost boyishly, at Patrick Conway. "I should like to keep him waiting for a moment or two longer. Sarah and I will go out through your wife's room. When you answer the next knock, you haven't seen us, don't know where we are."

He drew Sarah into the next room just as the hall door banged open. The officer hadn't waited to knock again.

Down the corridor at the head of the stairs there was another policeman. Delgado turned back in the one direction, toward where a narrower stairs led upward.

"That reminds me," Sarah whispered. "That fellow Jergens, the butler, you know, passed me in the hall a little while ago. He didn't see me, but I saw him, and there was the most terrible look on his face. As though he were fearfully afraid, pretty desperate about something. Do you suppose—Charles, could he be mixed up in this thing too?"

They were on the stairs now. Behind them they could hear the cop barge out of Conway's room, yell at his fellow cop down the hall.

"Hot on the trail, those boys," Delgado chuckled. "So you've picked Jergens as another likely suspect, eh? Well, I want to keep out of Brody's way till I can use a telephone without being overheard. Jergens' room should be as good a place as any. Know where it is?"

She said she did. "Not all of the servants live outside. Jergens and the housekeeper have rooms up here on the third."

She paused outside a closed door. Beyond it, inside the room, there was the sound of feet moving around hurriedly but quietly, the opening and closing of drawers. Sarah, putting a finger to her lips and man-

aging to look very mysterious, dropped to her knees and applied an eye to the keyhole.

"He's packing!" she whispered.

As though this were a signal, the door was jerked open and Sarah sprawled on her face across the threshold. There was a gun in Jergens' hand and a look on his face that said he knew how to use it. He pointed the gun at Delgado's middle.

"Come right in, Mr. Delgado," he said. "And you two, Miss Ames."

Unaccountably, Sarah giggled. She'd managed to get her face off the floor, was on her hands and knees.

"I'm already in—or almost in. Aren't you being rather ridiculous, Jergens?"

The man frowned, took a backward step into the room, still covering Delgado with the gun.

"I assure you both that I am no longer the comedy butler." His tone was harsh. "You will come inside and shut the door. I'm not playing."

"I can see that," Delgado said.

He went in. There was never much use in arguing with a gun in a competent hand. Jergens lifted the gun a trifle.

"Now lock the door," he ordered.

Delgado locked the door. Sarah, still on her hands and knees, opened her mouth to scream and Jergens kicked her lightly under the chin.

She fell over backward, but she didn't scream.

"I'll remember that, rat," Delgado said.

"Go right ahead and remember," Jergens grinned. "I won't be around to see whether you do or not." His pale eyes flamed suddenly. "I'm lamming out of here, see? If I have to drop you both to get clear, well, I can do that too."

DELGARDO had played around rats too long to doubt that this one would do exactly what he said. Keeping his voice quiet, not moving, he spoke.

"The coppers worked you over, eh?" he said.

"Sure they worked me over. That's what those men think they were made for. Not that they got anything, but that mug Brody is going to remember where he saw my picture. When he does—well, I'm not going

to be around, get it? You want to try anything?"

Delgado said he didn't. His eyes warned Sarah that she'd better forget whatever it was she was thinking of doing. Jergens backed to the far wall, tight lips curling away from his teeth in an unpleasant grimace. The gun swung a little, covering Sarah.

"There's a couple of trunk straps there on the bed. Tie your boy friend up. And you, Delgado, lie down and let her do it. You can yell if you want to, but I'm telling you it'll be your last yell."

Delgado, weighing his chances of jumping the gun, couldn't see the percentage. Obediently he stretched out on the floor, face to the ceiling, body relaxed.

Sarah got the two straps from the bed. Jergens' pale eyes watched her, unmoving, expectant. She backed away from the bed, clumped over to Delgado's side. Jergens moved in closer, not close enough for Delgado to grab an ankle, though. Sarah finished binding Delgado's legs, was beginning on his wrists, and Delgado knew that this would be his last chance.

Strong fingers curled suddenly, jerked the heavy strap free and flicked it at Jergens' eyes. The leather cracked like a whip. The buckle caught Jergens on the temple, not stunning him, but enough to divert his aim. The gun blasted once. Then Delgado had a pair of sturdy ankles in his hands and had jerked the man down on top of him.

They threshed about the room, Delgado clamping down on the gun, trying to wrest it free, Jergens hanging on like grim death. Delgado's bound legs were a handicap. He couldn't use his knees. The butler was showing unexpected strength.

Delgado swung a right to the man's chin without visible effect. Jergens let go of the gun, curled talon-like fingers into Delgado's unprotected throat.

Together they rolled, over and over, panting gustily. Black spots swam before Delgado's eyes but try as he would he couldn't seem to break that strangling grip. Then, surprisingly, as if of their own volition, the iron fingers relaxed, went away.

Sarah's voice, complaining, came to Delgado from miles and miles off.

"Why didn't you hold him still?" she

asked. "I've been chasing you all over the room trying to hit his head instead of yours!"

Delgado sat up groggily, making tortured, wheezing sounds. After a while the room quit going around and around and he was able to see again. Sarah had Jergens' big revolver in one small fist. She looked at the gun in a surprised way; looked down at the unconscious Jergens; stooped and tapped him with the gun once more, for luck, and then fainted. Delgado caught her as she fell.

HIS throat tightened as he remembered that one shot. It might have hit Sarah. Rather feverishly he searched for sign of a wound, didn't find any. His lips moved as though he might be praying a little prayer of thanks, but no sound came out.

Pillowng Sarah's head on his breast, he sat there on the floor for a moment, staring moodily at Jergens' still form. Undoubtedly the butler was a crook. But was this act part and parcel of the Mercedes killing, or just a side light, a coincidence?

Delgado decided that the answer to this, like the answers to a lot of other things, could wait for a while. The important thing at the moment was to get in touch with one of his operatives and get some action on another angle. He wondered why Jergens' one shot hadn't been heard downstairs.

Lifting Sarah, he laid her on the bed, began chafing her wrists. Presently her eyes fluttered open.

"Charles? Are you all right, dear?"

"Quite," he answered her. And then, a little grimly, "Well, you asked for it. You said you liked excitement. Is this it, or am I just a softie?"

She wrinkled her nose over this problem. "No," she concluded, "no, you're not a softie. But just the same—I mean, if it weren't for poor Nina, I'd say we were having fun."

"Remind me to take you to the morgue some time," Delgado said.

He removed the strap from his ankles, went over and picked up the phone.

Sarah looked at Jergens who was beginning to show signs of returning life. "What are you going to do with him?" she asked.

"I'm going to let you tie him up," Delgado said. "You needn't bother to gag him. He won't yell."

Presently he was talking with an operative named Dugan, a man who could do some very funny things with safes. The police didn't know about Dugan. That is, they didn't know all there was to know. He was a very handy fellow to have around, especially in the private detective business.

Sarah, finishing with Jergens, stared. "So you're turning safe-cracker, too!" she said.

"If the police haven't beaten us to it," Delgado said. He was listening to the rattle of Dugan's voice. After a time he said, "That's the idea, Dugan, my friend. Just a resume is all I want, a sort of synopsis. Call me back at this number, but you'll have to be careful. There's a switchboard downstairs and the place is crawling with cops."

He hung up. All the time he had been talking his dark eyes were busy. There was a violin, uncased, on top of a highboy.

There was one string missing from the violin. He looked down at the butler. "Play the fiddle, Jergens?"

The man refused to answer. He just lay there like a trussed fowl, unmoving, apparently resigned to his fate.

"A gut violin string would make a swell noose, eh, Jergens?" Delgado said musingly. "Strong, easy to replace. By the way, Jergens, why didn't you replace it?"

Jergens spoke then. Suddenly, not expecting to be believed. "If you're accusing me of strangling that Mercedes woman with it, you're crazy," he said. "I broke that E string over a week ago and you can't prove different."

Delgado rubbed his throat gingerly. "Come to think of it, Jergens, you very nearly strangled me," he muttered. "Strangling seems to be a sort of mania around this place."

He looked down at himself. His ordinarily immaculate clothes were beginning to show signs of wear and tear.

Sarah tried her hand with the butler. "You've been with the Conways a long time, Jergens. Three or four years. Surely you must have some sort of feeling for them. Admitting that you killed Mercedes will do a lot to make it easier for Mrs. Con-

way. One thing is certain. It can't make it any worse for you. You're on the spot anyway."

"I didn't kill her," he said stubbornly. "Leave me alone, will you?"

Without the slightest warning the locked door crashed in, and there stood Lieutenant Ed Brody, red face congested, eyes blazing. In his two hands he had Delgado's discarded shirt. The one with the blood on it. Even without the blood Delgado would have recognized the shirt as his. It has his initials worked into one sleeve.

Brody snarled. "The fair-haired boy, huh? The guy that don't know a thing! Why, you lousy two-timing keyholer, for two cents I'd—" He held up the shirt. "See that? Know where I got it? You're darn right you do, because you put it there. I've been praying for a break like this for a long time, and so has every other peace officer in the county. And now we've got you"—he opened and closed a ham-like fist—"like that! You either killed the woman yourself, or you know who did. Either way it's curtains for you, shamus.

CHAPTER VI

STABBED FIVE TIMES



FOR an instant there was silence and then Sarah's suppressed gasp jerked Brody's eyes away from Delgado. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking a little sick. Her copper-brown hair was not as neat as it should have been, and she too showed signs of the recent conflict.

Brody looked from her to Delgado and his scowl gave way to an even more unpleasant leer. "Now isn't this just too cute!" he said. "A couple of love birds celebrating a murder!"

"That's enough, Brody!" Delgado said.

Brody, apparently for the first time, saw Jergens, lying there on the floor. Cursing, he strode over and kicked the defenseless man in the ribs.

"Well, as I live and breathe, it's the gentleman's gentleman or something, my old pal Jergens! Only your name isn't Jergens,

mug. It's something else that's going to come straight to me most any minute now. And when it does—" He broke off, swung on Delgado.

"What's goes on here? How'd you catch this punk?"

Delgado shrugged. "I don't know any more about Jergens' history than you do. Jergens is one of those strong silent men. He won't talk."

"The heck he won't!"

"Well," Delgado said, "he hasn't yet."

Brody snapped his fingers. "So what are you and the dame doing up here in the guy's room if you don't know what it's all about? I suppose you'll be telling me next it wasn't you who tied him up like this?"

"No," Delgado admitted, "there's no point in concealing the fact that we did that. Miss Ames and I came up here looking for a quiet place to phone. We found Jergens packing as though for a getaway, and Jergens discovered us at the same time, and it was Jergens who happened to be holding the only gun in sight, so—"

Brody pounced. "So you were using the phone, huh? And you wanted to do it in private. Just who were you calling?"

"My office."

Brody took two swift steps, snatched up the phone and barked at it.

"There was a call went out of here a little while ago," he snapped. "You get it?"

A voice on the other end rattled. Brody hung up, cursing a blue streak.

Delgado clucked sympathetically. "No wonder you don't get any place with that kind of cooperation."

"Don't worry about me, shamus. I'm doing all right." Brody balled an iron-hard fist, looked at Delgado's chin, measuring the distance. "You going to come clean?"

"No," Delgado said. His voice sounded muffled and there was a sultry, humid look in his eyes. "No, Brody, I'm not going to do any more talking. Not to you at least. You can put that fist in your pocket. Remember what I told you an hour or so ago? About taking you apart? Well, at the moment you're all out of assistants and it would give me a great deal of pleasure to do that very thing."

Brody's fist sagged. "Yeah," he muttered.

"Yeah, I guess this is the wrong time. I'm saving a nice shellacking, though, all for you." He lifted the phone again. "Send a couple of men up here. Yeah, the butler's room."

Delgado gave Sarah what purported to be a cheering smile. He wasn't feeling particularly cheerful. He was in quite a spot and he knew it. The discarded shirt alone was evidence that he'd tried to hoodwink the police. Even without the damning initials, there was the matter of the bloodstains. Jergens had remarked on them. Probably others had too.

Jergens hadn't uttered a word all this time, though his pale eyes shifted from one to the other and his lips moved a little, without sound. Delgado wondered if the man were praying. He was rather sorry for Jergens, knowing what lay ahead of him at Brody's hands. He tried not to think about what the future held for Charles Delgado. Sarah's eyes scorned the burly lieutenant, who was sitting on the arm of a chair, twirling the cylinder of his gun.

The two men Brody had sent for appeared in the doorway. Both were in plainclothes. One was a tall, gangling fellow, with a gold tooth and a saturnine, one-sided grin. The other was the sergeant who had vouchsafed Delgado the information about the missing Leon Leonetti. The sergeant looked like a beer barrel set on short, thick legs. He had a round moon face and naive blue eyes, and his pudgy hands had dimples, like a baby's.

Lieutenant Brody lifted a lip at Delgado. "Okay, punko, here's the picture," he said. "You and your gal friend are under arrest for aiding and abetting. We know whose cute little hands made those bloody smears on your shirt front. Nina Conway has also left her prints all over Mercedes' car. And just as soon as we can snap her out of her drugged sleep we'll find out all the rest of it." At Sarah's stifled exclamation, Brody gave her a leer of triumph. He grinned wolfishly at Delgado. "So you thought I wasn't getting anywhere, huh?"

"My mistake."

"You said it, boy, you said it." Brody scowled at the rolypoly sergeant. "You stick with this pair, Sarge. Don't let 'em out of

your sight, not for a minute." Stooping, he hauled the trussed butler to his feet. "Gimme a hand, Shatto."

The tall dick gave him a hand. They went out and down the stairs, half carrying half dragging the sullen Jergens.

THE sergeant looked at Delgado, saying apologetically, "Well, now look, Mr. Delgado, this ain't my idea. What I mean is, I ain't like the looey. I think you're a right guy. Still and all, orders is orders, and so don't you or the little lady go gettin' ideas." He took out his gun, hefted it. "I would kind of hate to blow you in two. I always get sick afterwards."

"I can readily believe you, Sergeant," Delgado said gravely. "The little lady and myself will try to be as considerate of your feelings as possible."

Idly, apparently without a care on his mind, he went over and examined the violin on top of the highboy. The three remaining strings were of gut so it was reasonable enough to suppose the E string also had been of gut. He didn't know exactly why he should be puzzling his head over the noose that had strangled Mercedes. After all it hadn't been the noose itself that had killed her. Clumsy though the stabbing had been, the actual instrument of death had been a knife.

He queried the sergeant. "Have they found the knife?"

"Yep, it was a butcher knife, just like the medical examiner said. We found it in the butler's pantry. There wasn't any prints, but the guy or the dame that did the job wasn't very careful about gettin' all the blood off. So, findin' it like that in the butler's pantry and all, Lieutenant Brody goes to work on the butler. This guy claims anybody could have used the knife, and Brody thinks maybe he's right at that. Just the same, with him trying to take it on the lam, it looks kinda bad for this Jergens, huh?"

"Then why," Sarah demanded irritably, "why doesn't Brody call it a day? He's got two perfectly good suspects in Jergens and Leon Leonetti. By the way, have they found Leonetti yet?"

"Nope." The sergeant plucked at a pendulous lower lip. He looked at Delgado.

"And anyway, you folks is kind of forgetting a thing or two. Like Nina Conway's fingerprints on Mercedes' car, and the blood on your shirt and one thing and another.

"Brody's a very funny guy. Mean as the devil but thorough, if you know what I mean. He claims that everybody in this whole house is hiding something and he's so mad he'd like nothing better than to uncover a smell against the whole caboodle. That's why he phoned into town to have this Mercedes dame's house searched."

Delgado's lips felt dry. Mercedes' house was probably as full of cops by this time as this one was, and he'd sent his man, Dugan, out there to crack the safe. Straight into the arms of the police. If the police had arrived on the scene first, though, it might not be so bad. Dugan would most certainly reconnoiter before entering. But suppose Dugan had got there first? Suppose he'd actually been caught in the act of opening the safe? He was known as Delgado's man. And even if he weren't, even if he kept his mouth shut, Delgado couldn't let him take the rap alone, could he?

Sarah's eyes were wide with apprehension. Delgado gave her a tight, rather bitter smile. Then, very casually, he addressed the obliging sergeant.

"So Brody had the woman's house prowled. Did they find anything of value?"

The sergeant yawned. "We ain't heard yet."

Delgado wondered whether the yawn was real or feigned. This sergeant fellow might be one of those who were infinitely smarter than they looked. Those naive blue eyes could very easily mask a not-so-naive brain.

It was most embarrassing. Delgado wished he could use the phone. Still, even without the sergeant, it wouldn't do any good. Brody had a man on the switchboard downstairs now. There could be no incoming or outgoing calls without this man hearing the conversation.

"I suppose you boys combed the place pretty thoroughly for the wire or cord or whatever it was the killer used to strangle the woman?" Delgado said.

"Yep. Nothing doing on that angle, though, and it don't make no difference anyway. The dame was stabbed to death."

"True," Delgado agreed. "The dame was certainly and most amateurishly stabbed. In fact, Sergeant, the dame was stabbed five times. Amazing, I calls it." He rubbed his chin, eyeing their jailer, but speaking more to himself than to either Sarah or the sergeant. "That thin red mark around her neck, though—the sign of the noose, you might call it—" His voice trailed away and once more the sergeant yawned.

"Maybe you got somethin' there." You could see he didn't believe this, though. He got up, stretched his arms wide. "Well, I expect we might as well mosey down and see what the rest is doin'."

Sarah rose, patting her hair into place. "That ought to be interesting, Sergeant."

He gave her a benign, paternal smile. "I gotta hand it to you, little lady. If I was in a spot like yours I'd be worried as all get out. Darned if I wouldn't."

He lagged a step or two behind as Delgado and Sarah descended the stairs to the second floor. Delgado, trying to devise some sort of scheme for getting temporary relief from their shadow, finally gave it up as a bad job. The man was there and that was that. Delgado's man, Dugan, presuming he'd evaded the city police, couldn't call back here because the phones were being watched. Delgado, for the same reason, couldn't locate Dugan.

Very well, then, he'd have to forget Dugan for the time being.

CHAPTER VII

FIRST AID



DOWN in the second floor hall they met Patrick Conway, just emerging from his wife's room.

Conway had an angry looking bruise high up on his right cheek and his eyes were murderous.

"Brody?" Delgado said.

Conway nodded somber acknowledgment. "The lieutenant barged in after they found your shirt. He insisted on comparing the smears with Nina's hands. Nina had just gotten to sleep at last, and I—well, I tried to stop him." He touched the cut on his cheek gingerly. "If we ever get out of this

jam I'm going to bop that guy just for luck and I don't mean perhaps."

Delgado turned his back on the sergeant. His meaningful look was for Conway alone.

"Better let me do something for that bruise, my friend," he said. "It seems to be cut a little. Danger of infection, that sort of thing."

Conway either couldn't or wouldn't understand. "Hooey, I'm all right. I'm just seeing red, is all."

They paused before the open door of the room set aside for the guests' wraps. Delgado's swift glance inside took in the elaborate furnishing, the pile of hats and coats. On a straight backed chair was a small leather bag—Dr. Grace's medical kit, Delgado thought. He turned, appealing to Sarah.

"Don't you think Conway should have something on that cut?" he asked. "Some iodine or something?"

Sarah was swifter on the uptake than Patrick Conway. "I certainly do," she said. "I remember once, when I was taking chemistry, a professor just scratched himself." She shuddered. "The poor fellow died in agony." She looked at the sergeant. "Lockjaw, you know."

"What is this, a rib?" Conway said suspiciously.

"Certainly not," Delgado assured him.

He led the way inside the room. Conway and Sarah followed, the sergeant bringing up the rear, fearfully impressed with the lurking dangers of lockjaw. Delgado still wasn't sure about the sergeant. The man could hardly have attained a sergeancy without being smarter than he looked. He snapped the bag open, didn't touch it immediately.

"Oh, Sergeant, would you mind getting a damp towel from the bath?" he said.

The man was docile enough. He backed toward the bathroom, but he still held his gun at the ready and he wasn't taking his eyes off his charges for a minute.

"No funny business, now." He reached behind him, fumbling for the basin and a towel.

Delgado made a great show of rummaging through the bag. While his left hand palmed a smallish bottle, his right brought up a flat

leather case of sealed glass ampoules. There was liquid in the little tubes, and something else. He put the case down hastily, snatched up a bottle of mercurochrome as the sergeant returned.

DR. GRACE himself came in at that moment. He smiled pleasantly at Delgado, apparently not in the least disturbed by the rifling of his bag.

"Are you something of a surgeon too, Mr. Delgado?"

Delgado apologized. "I understood you were busy with Mrs. Conway, Doctor. We were just going to touch up Mr. Conway's cheek with a bit of something."

He handed over the mercurochrome. Magically the other bottle disappeared in his vest pocket and strangely enough he seemed to have lost all interest in Conway's bruised cheek.

"Perhaps we'd better let Dr. Grace take care of it, Sarah."

He took her arm. The moon-faced sergeant tagging along behind, they descended to the main floor and the great living room. Lieutenant Ed Brody was conducting a bellying interrogation of suspects.

The same group of servants, who had been huddled together like sheep, out in the patio, were now—due to the rain, Delgado supposed—huddled like sheep at one end of the living room. Like sheep, they needed only one shepherd and this turned out to be the gold-toothed, lop-eared Shatto.

Jergens, the butler, was in an upholstered chair. His face was battered almost beyond recognition and his pale eyes showed only as slits above puffy cheeks.

Delgado said in an aside to Sarah, "So you once took chemistry, did you?" He passed her the little bottle from his vest pocket. "Well, see what you can do with this."

He moved over to the dining room arch. Sarah, pretending a great interest in the appointments of the sideboard, went over to it. The sergeant leaned comfortably against a pillar, unaware of what had gone on under his nose. As long as he could see both Sarah and Delgado he was satisfied.

Delgado looked at Mrs. Grace. The doctor's wife was sitting alone on the divan

now, hugging plump knees. Her slightly protruding blue eyes stared straight ahead, unseeing, vacuous. With Leon Leonetti gone, she seemed to have no one with whom to dance, and apparently if she couldn't dance she just sat. The color of her hair was almost unbelievable.

The very beautiful, very seductive Vesta Darling posed languidly before the fire, one elbow on the mantel. Flame silhouetted long slim legs through the sheer whiteness of her gown. Her green eyes watched the proceedings amusedly.

Emil DeGroot still sulked in his corner. His beefy red face and piggy, bloodshot eyes hadn't changed a bit in spite of the two empty bottles at his elbow. Delgado had thought the director well on his way to oblivion an hour ago. The man must be a sponge. Delgado eyed him speculatively. There was strength behind all those layers of fat. Again he was reminded of a butcher in a slaughter house.

Brody shot a question at Vesta Darling. "Just what were your relations with the Mercedes woman?"

"I knew her very casually, that is all."

Emil DeGroot wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And that, my dear Lieutenant, is a bald-faced lie," he said. "Vesta Darling was a constant visitor at the Mercedes establishment. She is also overdrawn at her bank. You may conclude what you like from that."

Vesta Darling unsheathed her claws at last. "Liar, yourself!" She turned her beautiful green eyes full on Brody. "Emil DeGroot hates me, Lieutenant. He hates me because I once had him fired. And if I should tell you the reason he was fired—" She broke off, staring at the ringing telephone with sudden terror.

Brody licked his lips. "Well, now we're getting somewhere! In a minute I'll have you all telling your right names."

He picked up the phone, hard eyes resting with pleasurable anticipation on Vesta Darling. And then, receiver to ear, his face took on a sort of magenta hue and his teeth were bared in a snarl of rage.

"Okay, okay, don't tell me any more. You guys make me sick!" He pronged the receiver viciously, congested eyes settling on

Emil DeGroot.

The director paled, made as if to rise, thought better of it and sank back with assumed nonchalance. "Is it bad news, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Brody set the phone down on the table, quietly, without hurry. And then, so swiftly that even Delgado was unprepared, he pounced on Emil DeGroot.

"So you made a phone call, too!" he snarled. "The great director instigating a burglary. Well, your assistant failed, understand? He failed! The city cops caught him in Mercedes' house and he spilled the works." Strong fingers curled into the director's fat neck. "We've got you!"

DeGroot jerked a knee upward, broke free. He was already at the French windows when Brody, doubled over and groaning with pain, struggled to his feet. From Delgado's right, shattering the eardrums, came the roar of a heavy gun. DeGroot crashed through one of the windows, hung there unmoving. Glass showered down on his plump back. He didn't seem to know it.

Delgado looked at the sergeant, who was holstering his police positive with a grimace of distaste. The sergeant wiped sweat from his upper lip.

"Every time," he said apologetically, "every time I hafta do that I always get sick afterward."

Delgado, not moving from his position, made sympathetic noises. Sarah turned from the buffet in the dining room where she had been experimenting with an electric coffee machine.

"I know just how you feel, Sergeant," she said. "I—I sort of feel that way myself." As if to prove how ill she felt the two cups on the tray in her hands rattled together, making tinkling musical little sounds. "Would you—would you like to try some of my coffee, Sergeant?"

He gulped. "Thanks," he said huskily. "Thanks, little lady, I don't mind if I do. I need somethin' and they won't let us have no liquor on duty." He took the proffered cup, lifted it in salute. "Well, here's luck, Mr. Delgado."

"Luck," said Delgado gravely.

He sipped, watching the huddle of people about the fallen DeGroot. After a while the

group separated. Dr. Grace and the little medical examiner, after a deal of professional argument, finally agreed that DeGroot's injury was no more than a flesh wound. The shock of the heavy caliber slug was what had dropped him, they said. They had the unconscious man carried upstairs while Brody frothed at the mouth over the delay.

DELGARDO crossed the room. "Brody," he said, "I don't like you any better than I ever did. However, I'm willing to make a trade with you."

"What kind of a trade?"

"Tell me what happened at the Mercedes house and I'll give you a tip on Leon Leonetti. You're still interested in the man, I take it?"

Brody's eyes flickered. "Maybe."

"Well, is it a deal? Do we trade?"

Brody hesitated. "Okay," he said finally, grudgingly. "Okay, I'll buy. I hate your insides, Delgado, but at least you're intelligent and this is the screwiest case I was ever up against, so help me! Maybe you killed the dame. Maybe your girl friend did. Or DeGroot, or Leonetti, or Conway, or one of the dames.

"Maybe even Doc Grace did it, though God knows a doctor wouldn't have to stab her five times to hit her heart. There's that rat of a butler, too." He scowled at Jergens. "The point is, you all had the opportunity, and I was just getting in a position to prove you all had motives when— Well, somebody beat us to the Mercedes house. Some lousy so-and-so cleaned out her safe and conked the guy that Emil DeGroot sent to do the same job. All the city cops got was an assistant director with a lump on his head."

Delgado made a mental note to do something very nice indeed for an operative named Dugan.

"That's too bad, Lieutenant," he said sympathetically. "You can't be sure of any of us now, can you?"

Brody's mouth made a thin hard line. "Don't ever get the idea I'm stuck, shamus. There's plenty of angles left for me to work on. And that reminds me, you were going to spill something about this Leon Leonetti."

Delgado nodded. "An idea has occurred

to me about the gentleman with the euphonious name. When I caught Leonetti on the point of driving away with the body of Mercedes in the trunk of Mercedes' car, he seemed—well, I'd say he was more angry than frightened. In fact, if I remember correctly, he stated that he had a good notion about who had hidden the body in that particular place. I've been wondering if he hasn't perhaps found the party he was looking for."

Brody looked blank for an instant. "You mean—"

"I wouldn't look in the pool," Delgado said. "In a tree, possibly, or some place not too inaccessible." He watched Brody dash off, collecting his men as he went. He wasn't conscious of Sarah until she actually hissed in his ear.

"Delgado, for the love of Heavens!" she whispered. "I said I was a chemist, not a magician!"

CHAPTER VIII

A MAN NAMED STEVE



CHARLES DELGARDO turned to see the beer-barrel sergeant propped against a pillar of the dining room arch, brow wrinkled in wonder, knees slowly buckling under his own weight. Sarah had indeed done a good job. She must have mixed at least half the sedative purloined from Dr. Grace's bag in the sergeant's one cup of coffee. Delgado crossed the room in swift strides.

The sergeant's heavy-lidded eyes surveyed him groggily. "I knew I was gonna be sick!" he muttered.

Delgado took one arm, Sarah the other. They led the befogged sergeant, sagging between them, to the door of the butler's pantry. A small switchboard, connecting the various extensions throughout the house with the outside world, was guarded by an owl-faced detective whom Delgado didn't know.

Delgado nodded. "Lieutenant Brody wants you to help search the grounds," he told him. "The sergeant here will take your place. Right, Sarge?" He shook him. The

sergeant muttered something that sounded like "Harrumph!" and collapsed in the nearest chair.

The owl-faced man departed. It was as simple as that.

Sarah's eyes were reproachful. "After all, you couldn't expect me to gauge it to the second!"

"You did very nicely," Delgado conceded. He plugged in an outside line, calling his office. Dugan's voice answered almost immediately, plaintive, reproachful as Sarah's eyes.

"I know, I know," Delgado said soothingly. "I'm very sorry, Steve. The place is alive with cops and this is the first chance I've had to call you."

Listening to the staccato rattle of words from the other end, his lean face registered surprise, displeasure, finally resignation.

"Well, maybe it's all for the best," he said after a while. "Give me what you remember."

Another barrage of words from Dugan. "All right, Steve," Delgado said, "just go home and forget the whole thing. And really I'm very sorry about the cops, Steve. I had no idea."

"His name must be Steve," Sarah said. "Bad news?"

"In a way. Dugan nearly got caught by the city police too. He thought he'd better destroy the papers and stuff he took out of the safe."

"But surely he read it first!"

"Yes," Delgado sighed. "Yes, Dugan read it, but unfortunately we can't ask him to go into court and repeat it. The judge might ask him how he found out." He smiled down at her, one of his brief flashing smiles. "Well, Nina Conway's motive was destroyed along with the rest. That's something, I suppose." He stared moodily at the snoring sergeant. "You'd better feed him some more coffee. Just straight coffee, none of your foul and evil potions. I've got to run upstairs for a moment."

He found the second floor corridor dim and quite deserted for the moment. From behind the closed door at his left came the voices of Emil DeGroot and Jones, the little medical examiner. DeGroot's was the louder. Delgado thought, from the sound of it, that

the director was in no immediate danger of dying. Nina Conway's door was also closed.

DELGARDO went on to the guest suite, entered quietly and closed the door behind him. The air was heavy with the scent of perfume, not any particular perfume but rather a blending of many. He moved over to the closed windows. Examination convinced him that they hadn't been opened for some time, a day or two at least.

Presently he was back in the middle of the room, standing quietly relaxed, using his eyes. Everything seemed the same as when he had last been here. None of the furniture had been moved. His gaze covered each piece, finally dropped to the carpeted floor. He knew, quite definitely, what he was looking for now, but there was no assurance he would find it—that it was even here.

He cocked his head. Perhaps it was this shifting angle of vision, or some trick of light refraction, but whatever it was he caught the barest suggestion of a twinkle from beneath the chaise longue. Stooping, he scratched the carpet with a thumb nail and was rewarded with a tiny bit of glass, no larger than a pinhead, a thousand times as fragile.

Smiling a little, because he was always pleased when one of his hunches proved out, he went into the adjoining bath. In a soiled towel hamper he came upon more of the small glass particles. One of the towels smelled strongly of alcohol. He dumped the hamper, sorting towels, shaking them patiently one by one, until presently he had quite a little mound of pulverized glass in the palm of his hand. He was just about to wrap them in a piece of tissue when the bedroom light went out.

He stepped to the bathroom door, called out. There was no answer, no sound at all. The hall door was still closed. He knew this because there had been light out in the hall. There was still a faint suggestion of it on the floor at the point where he thought the door ought to be.

Thinking that perhaps a ceiling light had burned out he crossed the room toward a remembered reading lamp. The dim light from the bathroom cast his shadow black and enormous on the far wall. He didn't see the

other shadow, wasn't conscious of another presence in the room until strong hands had closed about his neck and he was being borne to the floor by an overwhelming weight.

Instinctively his hands went up and back to grasp those powerful, unseen wrists. Glass bit sharply at the palm of his right hand but he couldn't break the hold. He wasn't breathing now. He couldn't breathe. Iron fingers clamped tighter and ever tighter on his throat. His own hands seemed weak, puny things.

He bowed his back in an attempt to throw his assailant over his head. Failing this he tried whirling, and they both spun off balance and fell to the floor. The ringing in his ears became the pounding of angry surf. He could no longer see.

And then, somehow, some little wave of consciousness returned to him and he heard from a long way off.

"Hey, Doc! Doc Jones! Brody wants you!"

The strangling fingers put on an extra ounce of pressure and Delgado passed out.

HE DIDN'T know how long he had been unconscious. It couldn't have been too great a while, though, because somebody out in the hall was still yelling for the little medical examiner. Delgado lay there for a moment, trying to accustom himself to the sensation of returning from the grave. Of just living again.

He knew that never before had he been that close to death. The inside of his throat felt raw. The outside was swollen till his collar was a thing of torture in itself. He put up his hands, loosened it. Presently he could breathe normally again, so that the sound didn't rasp his ears.

He got unsteadily to his feet, went rubber-kneed into the bath and ran cold water over his face and neck. After a while he tied a Turkish towel around his throat, like a muffler, and made his way down the stairs to the lower hall. The police had at last found Leon Leonetti.

Everyone on the estate seemed to have been drawn into the living room—everyone but Sarah and the groggily somnolent sergeant. Delgado could see these last through

the arch that led into the dining room and the butler's pantry beyond. Sarah was working rather feverishly over the drugged man, chafing his pudgy wrists, kneading the rolls of fat at the back of his neck. The sergeant was slowly responding to this heroic treatment.

In the living room, servants and guests and police all milled about a small central group composed of the little medical examiner and Lieutenant Ed Brody and Leon Leonetti. Leonetti didn't know he was part of the group. He was dead.

His once darkly handsome face was congested, bloated almost beyond recognition, and there was a thin red line about his neck, just as there had been about the neck of the Great Mercedes. There was this difference, however: the thing that had caused that thin red mark was still there, deeply imbedded, immovable. An end curled stiffly out from the folds of flesh—a sinister, tell-tale length of catgut. The body was stretched across a chair.

Jones, the medical examiner, stood up. "You can call it strangulation if you like. Or just say his throat is cut. The noose seems to have done both jobs quite effectively."

"All right, all right!" Brody snarled. "You don't have to tell me that. I can see it for myself. What I want to know is what time it happened?"

Dr. Jones pulled absently at his rubber gloves. His mild eyes were staring at nothing in particular and it seemed to take a long time for Brody's question to reach him. When it did, he looked around him in a vague sort of way.

"What time? Oh, within half an hour or so of the other one, I should say."

"Afterward?"

"Oh, yes."

Brody, still on his knees beside the corpse, was fumbling at the trailing end of the noose. Leonetti's head rolled a little. Mrs. Grace quietly fainted.

Dr. Grace stooped and picked her up in his arms. "My wife is a little upset," he said apologetically. "I am sorry."

The crowd parted to let him through as he carried his wife to the divan. He didn't try to revive her, just made her comfortable.

Over the back of the divan his eyes met Delgado's.

"You don't look very well, my friend," he said.

Delgado said he was all right. He marveled at the color of Mrs. Grace's hair. It looked as unreal as the splotches of rouge on her dead-white cheeks.

Lieutenant Brody suddenly began bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"Where's that guy Jergens?" he wanted to know. "Where's that butler? If you guys have let him get away, I'll do a little killing around here myself!"

Jergens, it appeared, had vanished. The mob of detectives spread out like suddenly released roaches. Brody, sighting Delgado, came plunging across the room.

"I've been thinking about that tip you gave me, shamus. And the more I've thought, the madder I've got. You knew Leonetti was dead. You knew it all the time!" He swung a hamlike fist at Delgado's nose.

Delgado moved his head slightly, let the fist graze his ear. Then, apparently without hurry, without the slightest fuss, he clipped Brody with a hard right and a left.

An astonished expression crossed the big man's face. He took two stumbling steps backward, knees buckling. Delgado hit him once more, just for good measure. Brody dropped.

CHAPTER IX

DELGARDO TRADITION



DELGARDO stood over him a moment, smiling a rather tired smile at the room.

"This really has nothing to do with the two murders," he explained. "It's just sort of a personal matter between the lieutenant and myself." He bent down, helped Brody to his feet. "You've been asking for it a long time, Brody. Now you've got it and I hope you're satisfied. Shall we forget it and take care of more urgent business?"

Brody shook him off. "I want that guy

Jergens!" he yelled. "I'm going to beat that mug's head off if it's the last thing I ever do!"

This seemed to be what Jergens was afraid of when a couple of detectives hauled him in. He looked a very sick man indeed.

Brody didn't hit him right away, just stood over him, fists swinging loosely at his sides.

"Okay, punk, I told you I'd remember you pretty soon. The name isn't Jergens and you aren't a butler. At least if you are, it's a new trade for you. Lets see now, it must be around four or five years since you crashed out of San Quentin. Right?"

Jergens didn't answer. Brody hit him then. Not hard. That is, the man didn't fall. He couldn't. The two detectives were holding him up.

"Talk, damn it!" Brody snarled.

Delgado intervened. "I wouldn't make a fool of myself if I were you, Lieutenant. Jergens didn't kill either Mercedes or Leonetti."

"Oh, he didn't! Think I didn't notice there was a string missing from his fiddle? Well, I did, and there it is right now, buried in Leonetti's neck."

"An error on your part," Delgado said. "I know it is an error because I very nearly made it myself. Jergens may be, as you say he is, an escaped convict. That would account for his panic, his intense desire to get out from under during a murder investigation. But I am very, very sure that Jergens did not commit these murders."

Delgado had been talking quietly. Now he raised his voice a little, looking about the room. They were all here now: Patrick Conway and Nina, his wife; Dr. Grace and Mrs. Grace, the lady with the unbelievable hair. She had recovered from her faint, apparently of her own accord, and her slightly protruding blue eyes stared into space, vacant as usual. There was Vesta Darling, as lovely, as unruffled as ever, and they had even brought Emil DeGroot down from upstairs. A lot of the color had drained from his heavy face. He looked positively haggard.

Delgado's dark eyes sought first one, then another. He felt rather like an entomologist

about to turn over a rock, only an entomologist would probably have enjoyed what he exposed to the light. Delgado suddenly saw a way to make some of these people happier and he began to feel a little better himself.

"Many of you—in fact most of you—were being blackmailed by the woman who called herself Mercedes," he said. "I should like you to know that you have nothing more to fear. Every last bit of evidence has been destroyed."

THERE was an audible sigh of relief from half a dozen throats. Brody's voice shattered the momentary silence.

"So it was you who had that safe rifled!"

"Was it?" Delgado said. "You'd look rather silly trying to prove that, Lieutenant." He sighed, touched the thick folds of the towel around his neck. "Let's just say that I *believe* the evidence to have been destroyed." He looked at Brody. "You know, I've always considered blackmail a particularly nasty business. Except for one thing I wouldn't lift a hand to help hang this murderer. The woman Mercedes deserved to die, and so did Leon Leonetti, her accomplice."

Brody cursed. "How do you know he was her accomplice?"

"Intuition, perhaps," Delgado said.

It wasn't intuition, or even a wild guess. His man Dugan had told him this over the phone, but he couldn't very well admit how Dugan had come by this information. He smiled, a little cynically.

"No, ordinarily I wouldn't uncover this murderer, because in a way he was justified. But there is no justification for framing an innocent man—witness the hiding of Mercedes body in the car so that Leonetti could be caught with it. There is no justification for standing by while another suspect, Jergens here, is beaten to a pulp in an effort to make him confess something he didn't do. In short, we have a very unpleasant murderer, haven't we, Dr. Grace?"

The surgeon stood up slowly. "I don't quite understand you, Mr. Delgado. Are you accusing me of these murders?"

"That's right," Delgado said. He looked

at Jones, the little medical examiner. "Tell him, Doctor. Tell Lieutenant Brody. Tell us all what you realized the minute you saw the noose about Leonetti's neck. Tell them that it isn't the missing string from Jergens' violin, but a sixty-inch length of surgical gut from the little case of glass tubes in Dr. Grace's bag."

"It's surgical gut, all right," the examiner protested, "but naturally I couldn't possibly say where it came from." He stared miserably at his contemporary. Then, brightening swiftly, he swung on Delgado. "You must be mistaken. You've got to be. No surgeon, no, not even the merest novice in medicine, would have hotched the job of stabbing the woman. Five times, mind you. It's ridiculous!"

"That is a well-taken point," Delgado said without heat. "Our murderer thought of that and deliberately butchered the woman so that people would say just what you have said: No surgeon could miss the heart that far and that often."

"You must be mad!" Dr. Grace moistened his lips.

"I am," Delgado admitted. "Not in the way you mean, though. You may or may not know of your wife's rather pitiful affair with Leonetti. Perhaps you didn't. You merely killed him because he accused you of the first crime, and you then conceived the idea of making him disappear. He was to be the missing killer, the one who would never be found."

"And my motive for what you are pleased to call the first crime?"

"You are a surgeon, quite a famous one. Only Mercedes had proof that you were unscrupulous, a disgrace to your profession."

MRS. GRACE came to her feet then, utterly ridiculous but clawing like a panther at her husband's face.

"You killed him!" she shrieked. "You killed my Leon!"

Grace pinioned her arms with his strong, capable hands. "Be still!" he said sharply.

She relaxed in his grip and he flung her from him. Then, once more the urbane and sophisticated society surgeon, he turned his eyes on Delgado.

"Let us examine these rather startling accusations in the light of reason," he remarked blandly. "You yourself have admitted that any proof of motive has been destroyed. We have left, then, only the opportunity and the method. These, I think, were shared by all of us. Assuming that the surgical gut really came from my bag, it is obvious that anyone could have taken it. Indeed, I found even you in the act of rifling my instruments."

Delgado nodded. There was tension in the room, vibrant, almost tangible, yet this old-young man with the prematurely white hair seemed to dominate it.

"It was when I was rifling your bag that I saw the ampoules of gut in alcohol," he said. "I wasn't after them. I was looking for something else." He stared briefly at Sarah and the newly awakened sergeant, standing in the dining room arch. "After a while, when I discovered your excellent motive, Doctor, I began to suspect that the butcher knife and the amateurish stabbing were merely a stage setting.

"I went back, looking for proof that you were implicated, and I found a towel that reeked of raw alcohol; I found bits of glass such as would result if a sealed tube of surgeon's gut were crushed in the towel. To me this was—well, shall we call it the sign of the noose?"

There was a faint smile on Dr. Grace's lips. His resonant voice was under perfect control. "Granted that these things are as you say, can you prove that it was I who used the noose?"

"I can and I will." Delgado's eyes hardened. "My search of your bag worried you. You came back, found me still interested in the towel hamper and the room in general, and you attacked me. I don't know why you desisted unless it was because of the uproar caused by the discovery of Leonetti's body. They found that before you had a chance to remove the surgeon's gut. Perhaps you even thought I was dead."

"And even yet there is no proof, my friend." Grace moved out into the middle of the room where Brody stood watching.

"You might examine your right wrist," Delgado said. "There are a hundred tiny scratches on it. From the glass granules I held in my hand when we struggled. If that isn't enough, it may interest you to know that the prints of your fingers can be matched with—" his hand caressed the impromptu muffler—"with these very painful marks on my throat."

Brody plunged for the man then, snapping out his gun, plunged and actually caught him, but Dr. Grace flung him off as though he were a child. Darting, dodging like a ball carrier through a broken field, he eluded the score of outstretched hands. He was almost to the great French windows when again there came the ear-shattering roar of an automatic. The gun spoke just once. Once was quite enough, it seemed. Dr. Grace bent at the middle, stumbled, collapsed. He never moved again.

In the utter silence which followed, the rotund sergeant's voice sounded very loud. He was at Delgado's elbow and the smoking gun in his dimpled fist shook as with the palsy.

"Every time," he gulped, "every time I hafta do that I always get sick afterward." His naive blue eyes went swiftly to Sarah's face. "But lookit, little lady, don't offer me no more of that coffee. That first cup you gimme—well, it was just plain lousy."

Sarah colored. Delgado had a whimsical, daredevil look in his dark eyes.

"There is magic in good coffee, Sergeant," he said gravely. "And the little lady, you see, claims only to be a chemist, not a magician."

Slow comprehension dawned on the sergeant's moon face. Before long the sergeant was going to be very angry indeed. "A chemist, huh? A chemist. Now I wonder—"

Sarah sighed. "The Delgado tradition," she murmured. "Never a dull moment."

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

cudgels for himself, he is a gone goose. Even his own paper is hesitant about aiding him—he needs five grand for evidence that little "Mouse" Toler can give him.

You'll find out who Mouse is, and meet an interesting group of underworld rascals—most of them a vicious menace to the well-being of our hero. There's a swell girl, too, one Rosella Paige, who works for the undercover car-swindle mill, without knowing its evil intent. She gives Gregg a lot of help. You'll like her. **BY-LINES CAN BE HEADLINES** is a yarn to read and remember! Look forward to it.

Factory Fire

Our second big novelet next issue is **INNOCENT PARTY**, by Stewart Sterling. This swell yarn follows out our promise of bringing before you strange out-of-the-way places and odd and interesting occupations. Our chief character here is Fire Marshal Ben Pedley. Our opening scene starts with a zip and a roar and a crackle. It is eleven P.M. and the Plastoy factory, chock-a-block with celluloid and pyroxylin dolls that burn like incendiary bombs, is a seething mass of flames!

Fire Marshal Ben Pedley takes his life into his hands and rushes pell-mell into that blazing inferno, because one of the firemen has sworn that he has heard a girl scream within these tottering walls.

Fighting his way through the heat and smoke, Pedley finds the girl. She is pinned to the floor by a fallen, charred beam. With superhuman effort, Pedley brings her outside just in time to hand her to waiting firemen.

The marshal is obliged to get all the information he can in the few moments that are left to the unfortunate girl upon this earth. It is a question if she will even last the journey to the hospital. In answer to his entreaties, all the poor girl can call out repeatedly is the name—Joe.

Joe is easily found and identified. He is Joe Brenkow, superintendent of the factory. The

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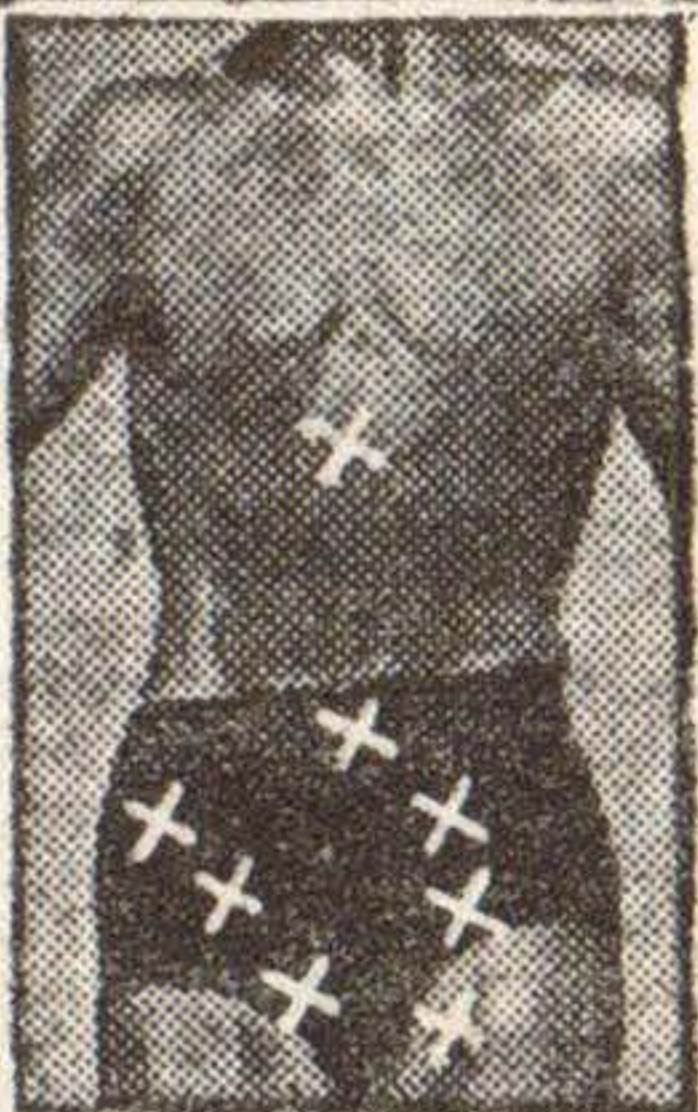
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girl is his fiancée, Stella Vrenn, and she is a designer of dolls.

More Than Arson

Instinctively Ben Pedley feels that there is more than arson here. A bit of glass in the girl's hair and the scent of brandy point to—attempted murder! Of course Joe Brenkow is suspected; but to Pedley and his rough-and-tough detective friend, Shaner, there appears to be no motive.

There is the possible motive of a bankrupt manufacturer burning down his own factory to collect the insurance. Old Gretz, honored and respected in the toy business for years, is grilled for hours. He screams and tears what is left of his hair—why would he rob himself? His factory was insured, yes—but the season was over. And how about the twenty thousand dollars in bills that he had hidden within the folds of the policy?

Old Gretz has a theory. He *knows* who burned his factory and why. Joe and Stella. They were not only planning to get married, but they were systematically robbing him of his plans, his models and his ideas—he *knew* they planned to go into business in competition with him. Also, why did Stella turn down his own son, Ludwig Gretz, when he proposed to her?

Hearing of this complication, Fire Marshal Ben Pedley, with Holmesian sagacity, decides to investigate the girl's home life. He finds she lived in a Greenwich Village apartment with a brunette named Louise Aymer—a flighty individual who revealed unexpected emotional depth.

Pedley also finds that Ludwig Gretz, diletante son of the toymaker, has been a frequent visitor—in fact he is present the night that the Fire Marshal calls. There seems to be no truth in the statement that Stella was once sweet on Ludwig. It is true however, that on the night of the fire, she left the apartment in a huff after a quarrel concerning Joe. Did she take a bottle of brandy with her? Louise couldn't say. But when Pedley tells the room-mate that Stella has died from her burns, the brunette goes white and bowls over in a dead faint.

Who did set fire to the doll factory? Was the death of Stella Vrenn accidental or premeditated murder? Remember the shreds of glass in her hair. Don't forget the scent of brandy. Who got the twenty grand concealed within the pages of the insurance policy—or was there ever such a fabulous sum in such an inconvenient place?

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our writers to go easy on the objected-to bromides and also to avoid, where possible, the old socko on the bean. However—we can't catch 'em all, as our next reader will show you.

In clicking off your clichés or bromides or what-have-you, there's a few you've forgotten. Maybe you just didn't have room for them. Why is the detective—or the gambler or the crooked judge, always paid off—or bribed as the case may be with a "crisp" one-hundred-dollar-bill? Couldn't it be a worn or a sloppy C-note? Also why must the hero always wake up in the hospital—or even in the gal's house, between "cool, clean sheets". Don't people ever have soiled sheets in houses—even though slightly? Speaking of hospitals, why does the nurse always wear "crackling, white, starchy" uniforms. I've seen 'em when they weren't.

—David Baxter, Bronx, N. Y., N. Y.

Thanks Dave. We can only refer you to our preamble. We're distinctly on the *qui vive* and are looking over our forthcoming stories with "the eye of an eagle"—whoops! There we go again. 'Taint easy to eliminate 'em as we said. Here's a lad up in the Catskill Mountain country who likes us:

I think THRILLING DETECTIVE is one of the best detective fiction magazines out today. I wish it could come out twice a month and have Nick Ransom in his own magazine. Think that would be good reading.

—Stan Kaplan, Swan Lake, N. Y.

Much obliged to you Stan—we're sure Author Leslie Bellem will be glad to hear of your suggestion. Comes another bouquet from far-away Hawaii:

We certainly anxiously await the arrival of your THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine away out here. Wish it could come out a whole lot more often. It sure is tops in detective fiction. Aloha!

—Bill Smith, Honolulu, T. H.

Aloha to you, too, Bill and thanks a lot to all you kind folks who have written in. Keep those letters and postcards streaming along in, folks. We welcome the knock of a hammer as well as the dulcet tones of a horn. Kindly mail all communications to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

Hope to see you all next issue, friends, and happy reading to everyone!

—THE EDITOR

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TROUBLE BACKSTAGE

(Continued from page 78)

doll and left it on Nan's dressing table. You wanted to frighten her—make her think someone planned to murder her. You were going to build it up so we all would think Wallace Stoll was some sort of a crazy killer. You probably intended to leave clues pointing to him."

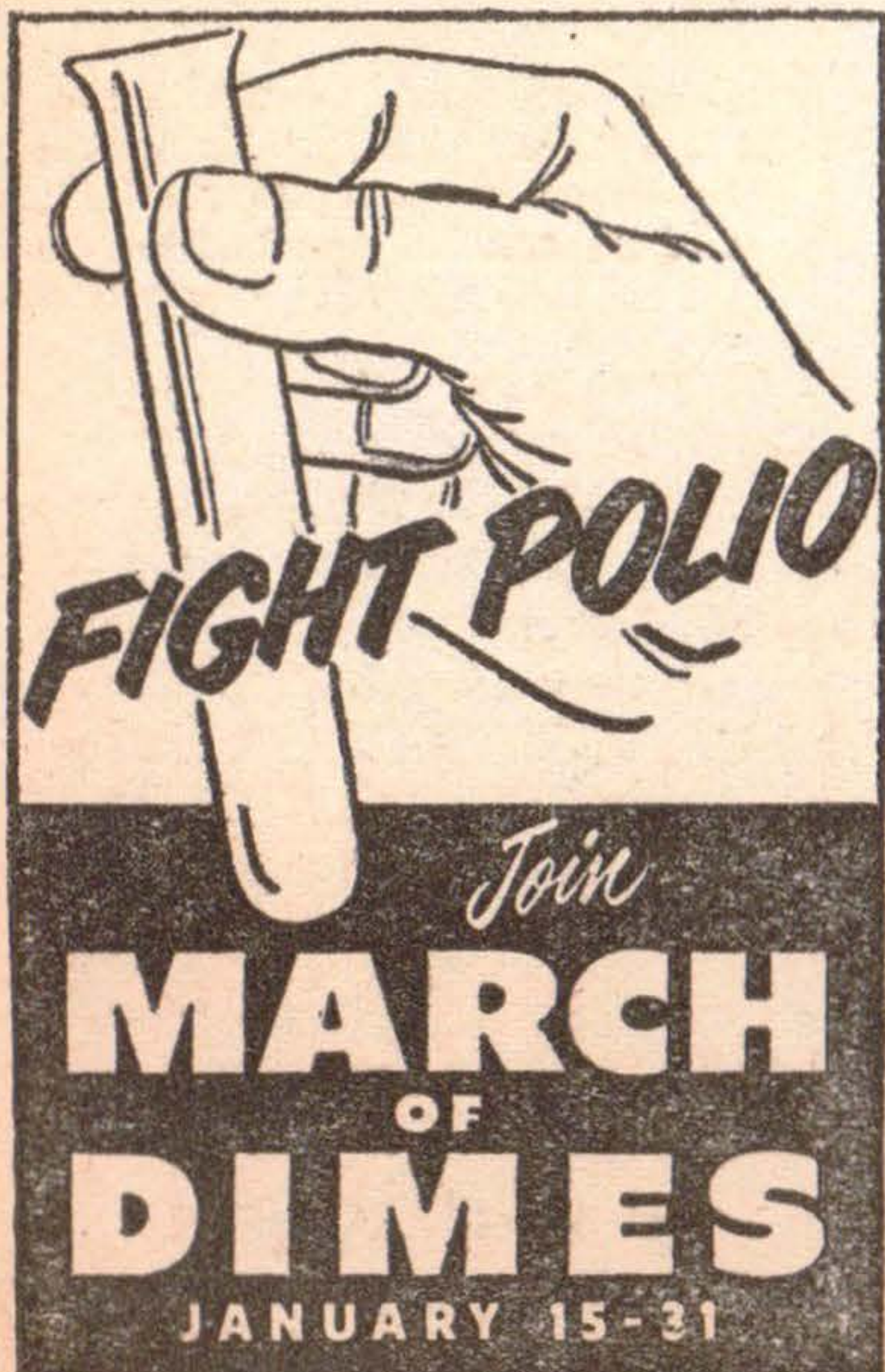
"I heard Milburn and Stoll quarreling out here in the corridor," Carter said. "From what they said I got the idea that the fat man had stolen some money from the acrobat's dressing room and Stoll threatened to tell the manager if Milburn didn't give it back. Then they came in this dressing room and closed the door."

"And then Milburn killed Stoll," I said.

"How did I do that?" Milburn asked.

"You must have knocked him out," I said. "Then you put the cushion over his face, placed the wardrobe trunk on top of it and smothered him to death. Maybe you even sat on top of the trunk." I turned to Carter. "You better phone the police, Carter."

"I did a few minutes ago," the stage [Turn page]



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doorkeeper said. "I knew that Stoll had been murdered, but I waited."

"Why?" I asked.

"For the same reason you waited, Mr. Lyon," Carter said. "We didn't want the police breaking up the show in the middle of a performance."

There were voices coming from the direction of the stage door and I knew the police had arrived. James Milburn just stood there trembling and I knew he would talk and admit everything. I was right about that—that big tub of lard's nerve broke completely.

I talked Nan out of doing her single and got her to become a featured soloist with the band. I've got an idea that I may also persuade her to become Mrs. Dan Lyon. She says I'm a very convincing talker.

MURDER COMES HOME

(Continued from page 74)

carried a sub-machine gun. "Drop that gun," snapped Hooker. "Put up your hands. Both of you."

LOUIS blinked bewilderedly. Slowly he lifted his arms above his head. Lennison's face was suddenly ashen. He swore, swung around, the automatic still in his hand. There was a sharp crack and the automatic thudded to the rug. Blood streaked down Lennison's arm, dripped from the tips of his fingers. His eyes were glazed with fear.

Louis said, in a numbed voice, "I don't get it."

"Neither does Lennison," said Curt Harford. "But it's his fault. You can blame him when you hang, Louis."

"I didn't do anything wrong," said Lennison harshly.

"If you overlook armed robbery and murder," said Harford. "You still did something wrong. My father told me you were here over the phone."

"No," said Lennison. "I heard what he said. He didn't give it away."

"He did. He said he was reading, that he got spots in front of his eyes. He

said he'd see me soon. Thanks to you, Lennison, he hasn't read for ten years. He hasn't had spots in front of his eyes. He—" Harford's voice broke for an instant, then he recovered himself. "He hasn't even seen me."

Louis looked blanker than ever. Lennison said, incredulously, "You mean—?"

"I mean he's blind. When you slugged him with that slingshot stone ten years ago it affected his right eye. That eye went blind two years later. It infected the left eye. He's been totally blind for a long time, Lennison."

There was a long silence. Lennison said in a voice without hope, "If I hadn't have blinded him ten years ago, I could have beat this rap tonight."

"Quite likely," said Harford. "Hooker, take them away."

With rough hands on his arms, Lennison moved toward the door like a dead man. Louis plodded along in the rear. His brow was screwed up with the effort of thought. Things had happened too fast for him. He didn't get it.

He hadn't completely figured it out on the morning that he and Lennison were hanged.

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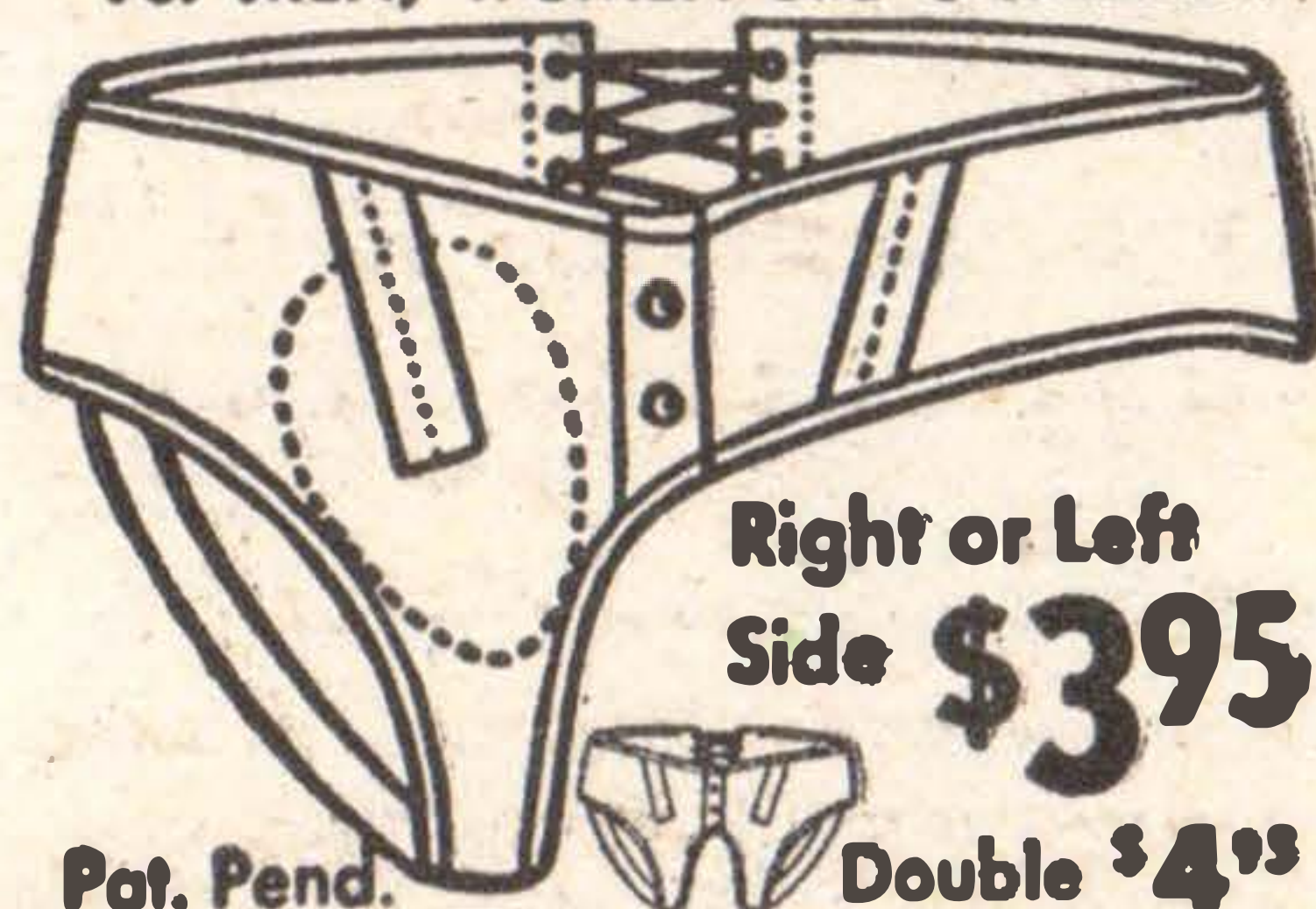
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