

THRILLING

DETECTIVE

10¢

SEPT.



**A THRILLING
PUBLICATION**

**THE
EXTORTION
MURDERS**

**A Willie Brann
Novelet
By BENTON
BRADEN**

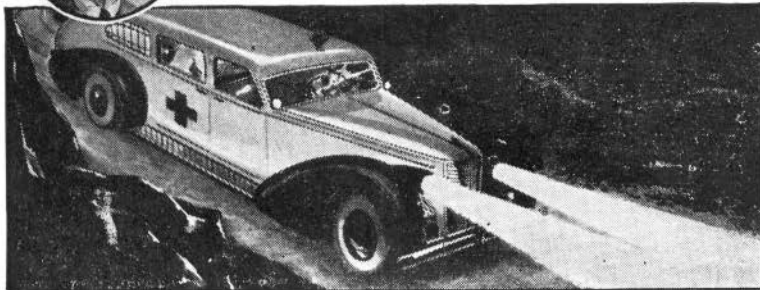
**THE
DIAMOND
BRIDE**

**A Jewel Theft Novelet
By W. T. BALLARD**

"WE RACED DEATH DOWN A MOUNTAIN SIDE!"

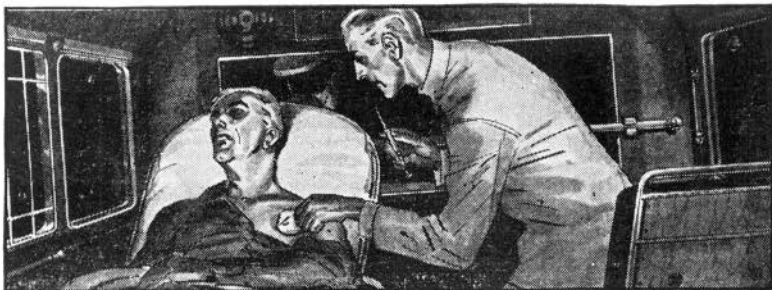


A true experience of male nurse GROVER C. BIRCHFIELD, Los Angeles, Calif.



"WE WERE RUSHING A CARDIAC CASE by ambulance to the hospital one dark night," writes Mr. Birchfield. "We were two thousand feet up on a winding mountain road and six miles from our goal, when all lights blew out.

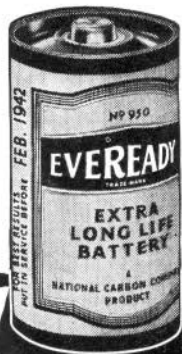
"THE PATIENT WAS AT DEATH'S DOOR. I gave him a shot of adrenalin, but I knew with horrible certainty that unless he reached the hospital quickly he could not live. Yet we dared not move without lights.



"THEN, I REMEMBERED OUR FLASHLIGHTS! Lying on a front fender, I played their bright beams on the road while the car careened down the mountain. Thanks to dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries, we won our race against death.

(Signed) *Grover C. Birchfield*

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D. H. Beam, Calif.



Miss H. Swain, Ariz.

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Large Incomes from Doctors,

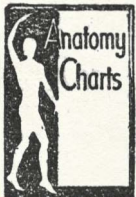
hospitals, sanitariums, clubs and private patients are bound to come to those of our graduates who profit by the thousands of opportunities available to make money. Mr. Charles Romer, Wisconsin, writes: "At times I have had to turn away people: I have been so busy the depression never touched me." Miss Childs, Baltimore, Maryland, says, "I already have over 40 patients. I hope many others take your course and profit financially and socially as I have." Hundreds and hundreds of graduates have written similar letters. Get into Swedish Massage through our "Right in Your Own Home" Plan.

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. XLI, No. 1

HARVEY BURNS, Editor

September, 1941



Featuring a Complete Willie Brann Novelist

The EXTORTION MURDERS

By BENTON BRADEN

It Looked Like a Simple Case—but when the Cole Agency's Ace Sleuth Sank His Teeth into It, He Ferreted Out a Smooth Plan with Plenty of Rough Trimmings! 14

Other Gripping Complete Novels

- THE DIAMOND BRIDE W. T. Ballard 36
Groomed for Murder when Thieves Fall Out, Humbolt Smith, Adventuring Investigator, Breaks the Deadlock of a Sinister Marriage!
- NO MAN WALKS ALONE George Armin Shaftel 72
Jimmy Craig Faces Big Odds when He Makes a Smashing Solo Campaign to Whip a Baffling Murder Frame-up!

Thrilling Short Stories

- SECRET MISSION Frank Johnson 55
Lou Gifford and Nancy Harvey Enter a Fifth Columnist's Den
- THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A HERO . . . William Brandon 63
Sam Ireland's Valor Lifts Him from the Depths of a Slaughter Charge
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- HOT-SPOT DEPUTY Maxwell Hawkins 96
Trapped, Bud Helger Applies a New Twist to an Old Adage

and

- HEADQUARTERS A Department 106
Where Readers and the Editor Meet

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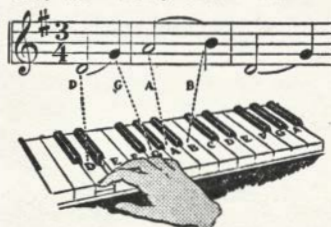
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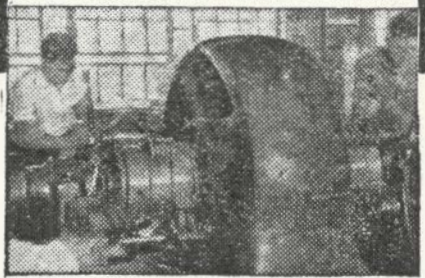
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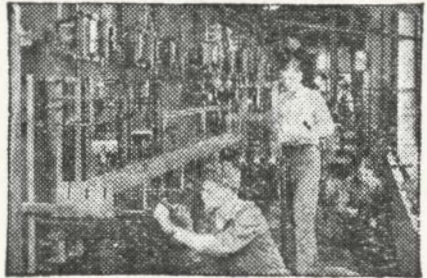
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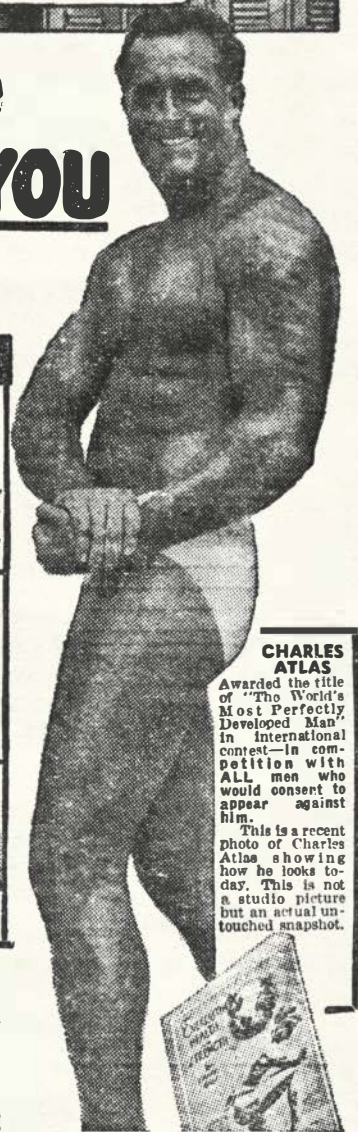
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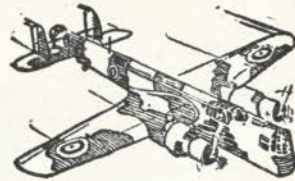
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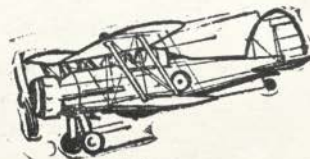
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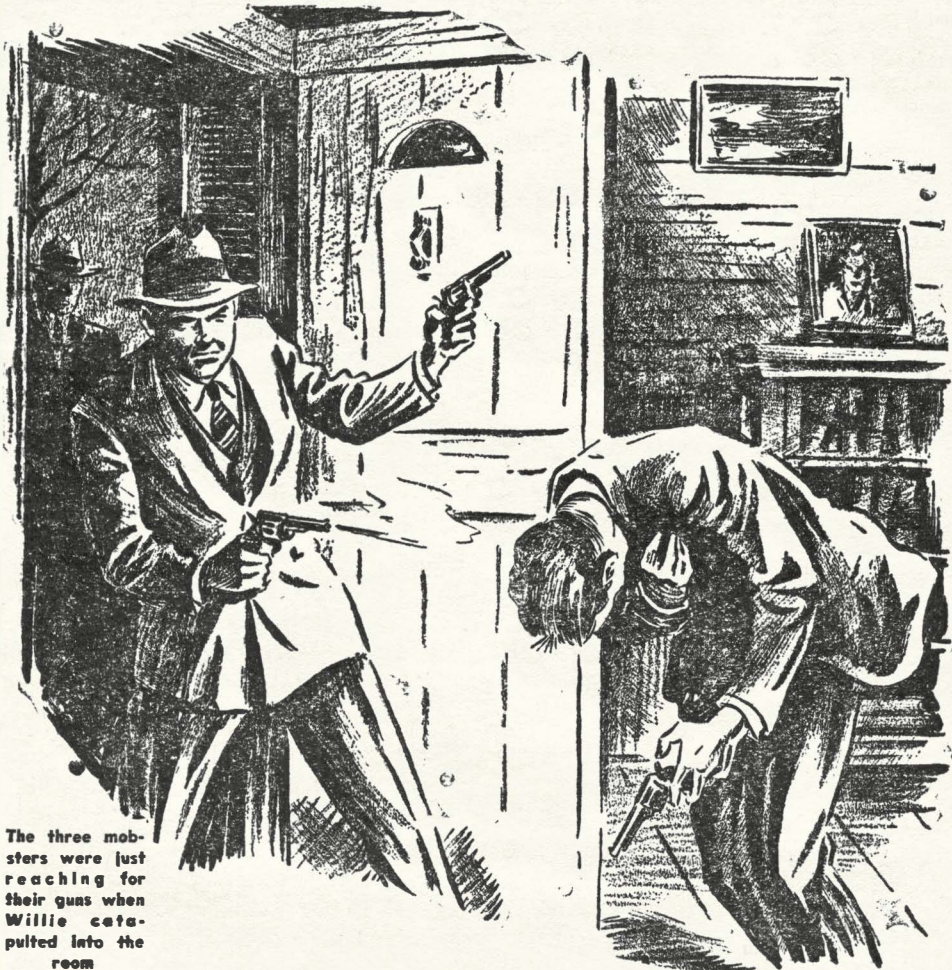
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The Extortion



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CHAPTER I

FIFTY GRAND ANTE

MISS DEARDOFF, who ruled the reception room in the Theodore Cole Agency, frowned severely as she opened the door of the private office. She couldn't

quite approve of this informal manner of conducting the business while the boss was away.

True, Willie Brann was working industriously in clearing the papers on Theodore Cole's desk. But there was a disgraceful pile of empty peanut shells on the polished surface of

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the desk at his right. And Maxey Gates' big feet were perched comfortably on the other end of the desk. Maxey was puffing a huge black cigar and obviously enjoying himself. He jerked his feet to the floor as Miss Deardoff glared at him.

Miss Deardoff was not alone. The

young man who followed her into the private office was in his early twenties. He was well dressed and a little under average size. He had good features and eyes that were clear and frank.

"Mr. Brann," Miss Deardoff said in her business-like voice, "this is Mr.

Bruce Morgan. He wishes to consult the Agency on a very confidential matter."

She lifted her eyes in a manner that informed Willie Brann that Mr. Bruce Morgan was an important client of the Agency and not to be taken lightly. Then she withdrew, closing the door.

Willie smiled as he came forward and shook hands.

"This is my assistant, Mr. Gates," he explained. "He works with me on all my cases."

Bruce Morgan looked doubtful. His eyes went from Willie's short and plump figure to the pile of peanut shells on the desk, then came back to Willie's round and almost cherubic face. Bruce Morgan knew Theodore Cole. He couldn't quite understand why the stern and capable Cole hadn't left a two-fisted detective in charge during his absence.

"I—I thought I'd find Theodore Cole here," he blurted out awkwardly.

"He's on the West Coast," Willie explained crisply. "He won't be back for a week. He left me in charge here. I'm sure we can take care of any matter you have."

Bruce Morgan smiled faintly. "I guess you can, Mr. Brann. Anyway, this is hardly a case that will require any—rough work. It's about—about a girl."

"Now that's right down my alley!" Maxey Gates broke in boisterously. "If it was about a kill or a snatch Willie would go out and work 'em over with his gats. But I'm the expert on dames. If it's a dame that's in your hair you just—"

"Mr. Gates just *thinks* he's an expert on dames," Willie cut in with a glance that caused Maxey quickly to subside in his chair. "Suppose you tell us, Mr. Morgan just what the trouble is."

BRUCE MORGAN nodded. "I'll put it just as briefly as I can. I'm no playboy, Brann. I haven't burned up

the spots or been in any jams—up to now. But about a month ago I met a girl. She was a singer in a club. I had a couple of dates with her—and went head over heels. I was sure she was on the level. During the last two weeks I've given her a real rush. I would have gambled my life that she was just what I thought she was—until last night."

"She was just playing you?" Willie said as Morgan paused.

"Worse than that. Last night she made a flat demand on me for fifty thousand dollars!"

Maxey Gates rolled his eyes and looked at the ceiling. Willie Brann frowned and said:

"At least she's no piker, Morgan. Fifty grand is pretty steep. Just what will happen if you refuse to pay the money?"

"She said that I'd either pay her fifty thousand or she'd slap a breach of promise suit on me that would blast my name in headlines. She knows that I'm worth a couple of million in my own right that my father left me when he died. She knows that I'm very proud of the family name and reputation. That's why she put the price high."

"What grounds does she have for such a suit?" Willie asked directly.

"No grounds at all!" Bruce Morgan declared emphatically. "No truthful grounds. I told you that I went overboard for her—in the right way. I was really nuts about her. The funny part of it is that I would have asked her to marry me eventually, if she hadn't made this break."

"But she must have something on you to make a demand like that," Willie said.

"Sure. She has perjury back of her. I was in her apartment a couple of times. For nothing more serious than a couple of drinks and a bite to eat. But the way it stands now, I compromised her, promised to marry her, and she's got two witnesses to swear to it if it ever gets to court."

"She gave you the names of these witnesses?"

"No. She said she'd produce them at the proper time if it became necessary."

"What is her name?"

"Margery Minton. She is a singer at the Green Clock. I don't know what to do, Brann. I hate to be a sucker for fifty grand. Yet I don't like to have the family name dragged through the mud. And in the end she'd hook me if she went to court. She has a face like an angel. —I thought she was an angel. Even now —it's hard to believe."

Bruce Morgan's mouth twitched miserably as he finished. Willie Brann had no doubt that the youngster had told the exact truth. Willie smiled a little.

"You go home and try to forget it, Morgan," he said encouragingly. "I'll look into it right away. This Margery Minton is sure to have connections. She isn't trying to pull this all by herself. I'll go down and have a talk with her. Then I'll get in touch with you."

Bruce Morgan looked a bit more cheerful when he left the office a few minutes later.

"I guess he told the truth about not being a playboy," Willie observed after the door had closed. "I don't believe he's been around much."

"A face like an angel," Maxey snorted in disgust. "The poor fish!"

CHAPTER II

NIGHT CLUB MYSTERY



THE Green Clock was no novelty to Willie Brann. He had had business there before and he knew his way around. He hesitated just a moment as he reached the door of Jim Maxim's office. The door was closed. He went on down the hall until he reached a door on which was painted a faded "6". He raised his hand to knock, and paused as he thought he

heard faint voices beyond the door. He moved his head over, listened. He couldn't be sure that anyone was talking in there.

He tapped on the door with his knuckles, and thought he heard feet moving inside the room. He waited half a minute, then knocked again. A woman's voice called:

"Come in."

Willie opened the door and stepped into the room. He couldn't help but stare a little as the girl who sat at the dressing table turned and faced him. Bruce Morgan had come close to the truth. She didn't quite look like an angel—but she wasn't the wise little chiseler type that Willie had half expected to see. Her eyes were as clear and as blue as the open sea. Her features were finely molded.

It was no wonder that Bruce Morgan had been fooled, Willie thought. Here was a girl whose expression, Willie would have sworn if he hadn't known better, was wholly without guile or insincerity. Obviously she was dressed for her turn on the floor. Her pale blue evening dress was simple but exquisite. Her hair, carefully coiled on her head, was somewhere between copper and gold.

"Yes? What is it?" Her voice had no husky gin quality. It was clear, liquid.

"My name is Brann," Willie said evenly. "I'm from the Cole Agency."

"Agency?" she said as though she were puzzled. "I don't believe I know what—"

"I'm a private detective," he said.

Her breasts raised just a little and she said, "Oh," in a faint gasp.

"You're Margery Minton, aren't you?" he asked and then, without giving her a chance to reply he went on, "Bruce Morgan has employed me to handle his end."

"Oh," she breathed again.

"There's no use mincing words," Willie said, his words edged a little. "Bruce Morgan has been giving you a play, hasn't he? He's taken you

around quite a bit in the last month, hasn't he?"

"Yes," she answered in a voice that was almost inaudible.

"And last night you handed him a bill for his fun. Fifty grand! Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think the bill is a little high, Margery? He couldn't have had fifty grand worth of fun—not in that time. You know as well as I do that he could have bought the whole Green Clock for fifty grand. Only he made the mistake of not asking for the—the tax—in advance."

SHE didn't say anything to that, just stared at him. Willie smiled a little and sat down in the plain wooden chair that stood at his left. He took a handful of peanuts from the left pocket of his coat, crunched one, and put the meats in his mouth. He did it carelessly, but he was watching her face. There was something in her expression that worried him.

"So if he doesn't pay you the fifty grand you're going to slap a suit on him. That right?"

"Yes." She whispered the answer.

"And you're going to take the stand, show the jury plenty of hosiery, and tell 'em all the lurid details of how you loved not wisely but too well. Is that it?"

Her lips parted a little but she didn't say anything.

"Will you take two grand for a quick settlement, Margery?" he asked flatly.

"No."

"You don't mean you're going to stick to highway robbery—the price of fifty grand."

"I—I want fifty thousand dollars."

"You won't get it, Margery. Not without putting more cards on the table than you have. Morgan says this whole thing is a frame. He says he never even made a real pass at you. What about these witnesses? Who are they?"

Something like a shudder went over her shoulders. Then her chin steadied and she spoke in a firm voice.

"I—I'll produce my witnesses when they're needed—in court. I'll have plenty of proof—beside my own word."

"So it's pay or else, is it?"

"That's it."

Willie flipped another peanut shell across the room. Then he leaned forward and grinned.

"You know what, Margery?" he said. "You played this wrong—even if you collect the fifty grand. Because this Bruce Morgan was the prize sap of all time. The poor cluck really fell for you, Margery. He was nuts about you. If you'd had sense enough to play him along for another week he'd have proposed to you. You could have married a couple of million—without any doubt. He was head over heels in love with you. He worshiped the ground you walked on."

She was trembling now and as Willie spoke he saw her eyes change. There was a look in her eyes that was like—like agony. She was fighting to keep self-control.

"Yeah, I guess you passed up a cool couple of million there, Margery," he said cruelly. "Of course, it's all off now. Now you're poison to him—of the rough-on-rats variety."

He flipped another peanut shell to his left and his eyes followed it. The room had no closet but one corner was draped off. Willie knew that the drapes formed a sort of dressing room she could use when she had company. Her clothes hung in there. The drapes didn't quite come to the floor and Willie could see a line of slippers on the floor. Tiny slippers—except for one pair. That pair of shoes—Willie had noticed them when he had first entered the room—were tan, large, definitely men's shoes.

Willie centered his gaze on those shoes until she noticed it and her eyes went in that direction, too. Willie rose and put his hand on the doorknob.

"You can tell those two witnesses of yours, Margery, that Brann of the Cole Agency is going to talk to them—before Bruce Morgan pays a dime. Don't worry. I'll find 'em. And you can tell that punk behind the drapes to come out now!"

Willie slammed the door behind him as he went out. He went down the hall toward the door that led into the supper room and waited. Girls in costume from the line were coming out of their dressing room now, but they paid him no attention as they chattered. It was nearly five minutes before the door of Room 6 opened.

Willie complimented himself that he had guessed right. The lad who came out looked like a punk. He was sharp-faced, dapped, slick-haired. He took a look up and down the hall, then moved in the opposite direction. Willie went after him, followed him on down the stairs that led to the entrance from the street.

As Willie reached the street he saw the punk hurrying away to his right. The punk looked back and saw Willie. Willie took a few steps after him and motioned with his right hand. The punk kept looking back and Willie stopped and chuckled. Maxey Gates, on the other side of the street, had taken over.

Willie waited a few minutes, then went back up the stairs to the Green Clock. This time he stopped before Jim Maxim's office door. He didn't knock. He opened the door and walked in.

MAXIM raised his fat face from a ledger on his desk. He opened his mouth and at least four chins settled over his vividly purple collar. He leaned back and his stout chair quivered with the weight of him. His small brown eyes showed mild alarm.

"Now, look here, Willie Brann," he said in a high voice that was ridiculous in contrast to his vast bulk. "Don't you come in here and throw peanut shells all over my place and go

shootin' holes in my dressin' rooms like you did the last time. I'm runnin' this place strictly on the level."

"Sure you are, Jim," Willie smiled. "But what level?"

"I don't like that crack, Willie," Maxim said, his little eyes flickering warily. "It sounds like insinuat'in'. What you doin' in here?"

"I'm looking into a case of—I'm not just sure what, Jim. It may be extortion—or blackmail. On the surface it may be legal. I was just wondering if you've got your hand out for a cut in this fifty grand that's in the making."

"Fifty grand!" Maxim exploded. "You give me fifty grand and I'll hand you the keys. Even for fifteen grand I'll sign you over a full forty-nine percent partnership. What are you talkin' about?"

"One of the young ladies in your cast is trying to take a short cut," Willie said, still smiling. "I guess she can't live in the manner she'd like to be accustomed to on the salary you pay her, Jim. So she's trying to put the bee on a client of mine—for fifty grand."

"You're not kiddin'?" Maxim blinked for a few seconds. "I give you my word, Willie, that I ain't promotin' anything like that. Fifty grand—for what?"

"For not filing a breach of promise suit—for not giving one of the city's fine old names a ride through the mire."

Maxim leaned forward quickly. "That's no crime, Willie!" he declared. "That's strictly legitimate. If some wise guy has crossed one of the girls, he ought to pay off. And be glad to do it. Of course, the fifty grand is too high. She'll come down on that price."

"Come down—to how much, Jim?" Willie asked softly.

"Say!" Maxim's face reddened. "I told you I wasn't in on no play like that and I meant it. Nobody around here has even asked me any advice. I'll prove it to you. You gimme the

name of this girl and I'll drag her in here and make her give the lowdown. What girl is it?"

"It's that starry-eyed little singer, Jim. Margery Minton."

Maxim's face reddened still more. He lifted a fat fist and shook it at Willie.

"If you weren't so touchy with those gats of yours, Willie Brann," he yelled, "I'd call you a—a dirty liar!"

"You mean I'm stepping on *your* toes, Jim?"

"I don't mean nothin' of the kind!" the night club owner denied hotly. "What I mean is that I don't believe any story like that about Margery Minton. I been in this business for a long time, Willie. I've seen 'em come and go—both up and down. And if you asked me right now to name the straightest, nicest girl that ever worked for me, I'd say Margery Minton without even thinkin' about it. You got a bum steer this time."

"How long have you known her, Jim?"

"A couple of years at least. Long enough to know what I'm talkin' about."

"But she steps out with guys sometimes, doesn't she?"

"If you mean she has dates—sure. Why, for the last month she's been datin' a nice feller who has—" Maxim's head jerked. "What's the name of this client of yours?" he demanded.

"Bruce Morgan."

Maxim leaned back in his chair and tugged at his collar with his fingers. The color slowly ebbed from his face and he seemed to settle in his chair like a huge mass of beaten jelly.

"Maybe I spoke out of turn—if that's the guy," he mumbled. "If that's the way Margery says it is, that's the way it is as far as I'm concerned. Fifty grand, you say? My advice to him would be to pay it—before the ante goes up to a hundred!"

He struggled up out of his chair and lumbered toward the door.

"I'm going out to the bar and get me a drink," he said. "I feel rotten."

CHAPTER III

WILLIE GOES HUNTING



IT WAS after midnight when Willie Brann stood on a corner of Central Avenue that was just inside the city limits. Trees lined the streets out here and there was considerable space between the houses. Maxey Gates pointed down the side street where a small neon sign spelled out, "Delano's."

"That's the dump where this guy you seen come out of Margery Minton's dressing room went in," Maxey explained. "I tailed him out here in a taxi. I guess he thought he was clear when he was sure he shook you."

"He's still in the place?" Willie asked.

"I don't know," Maxey admitted. "There's plenty of parking space around the dump and cars have been going and coming. I went in the place and had a couple of drinks after I called you but I didn't see anything of the guy. He might have gone into a room in the back to see somebody. And he might have come out of a back door and driven away with somebody in a car."

"I'll go in and take a look," Willie decided.

"I asked about the place up the street," Maxey informed him. "A guy by the name of Mike Delano runs the place. Supposed to be some games in the back rooms. This Delano is rated as pretty tough."

"I'll look around, Maxey. You go back to the Green Clock and keep tabs on Margery Minton. Tail her when she leaves and find out where she goes."

Maxey Gates went back up the street to look for a taxi. Willie left his car parked there and walked on down the street to Delano's. It was a one-

story structure and was set back from the street about fifty feet. There was room for six or seven cars to park in front among the trees. The only light came from the neon sign that hung just above the front door.

Willie reached the front door, opened it, and walked in. The room was about forty feet long, seemed to run the whole width of the building. The tables and chairs looked old and rickety.

A bar ran along the rear wall, its battered condition partially concealed by the feeble lights.

A tall, sallow-faced girl sat on one of the stools at the bar. A sandy-haired, red-faced bartender with a scar on his lower lip leaned with his elbow on the bar, seemed to have been talking with the girl. He turned his head as Willie walked up to the bar and slid onto a stool.

"Make mine rye," Willie said.

The bartender took his elbow off the bar and straightened.

"We was just getting ready to close," he announced sourly.

"It's a little early for that, isn't it?"

"You can see for yourself." The bartender waved his hand over the length of the room. "There ain't no business tonight."

"Maybe a guy could find a little entertainment in the back," Willie suggested.

"Nope. There's nothin' doing back there, either."

"I'll take a rye," Willie said again.

The bartender hesitated a moment, then reached back and got a glass and a bottle of bar whiskey, set them on the bar before Willie.

"A couple of more glasses," Willie said, smiling at the sallow-faced girl. "Let's have one together."

The girl looked at the bartender for a second.

"I don't care if I do," she said.

THE bartender set two more whiskey glasses out. Willie picked up the bottle and poured. The girl's drink

vanished in one quick swallow. Willie tossed his down.

"Not bad at all," he said.

"I got to close now," the bartender said.

"I was looking for a guy that came in here awhile back," Willie said. "A young fellow. He had a sharp face, was a snappy dresser, wore tan shoes."

"What was his name?" the bartender asked carelessly.

"I can't think of it," Willie answered. "But he's known around here. He came out here in a hurry and went on back to see Mike Delano. Maybe he's still back there, talking to Mike."

"He's not," the bartender said quickly. "Mike's gone."

"I saw a light back there before I came in," Willie insisted.

"Then you must have been sneaking around back there," the bartender accused. "But light or not—there ain't nobody back there now. So beat it. I got to close up."

"I'll take another rye," Willie said stolidly.

The bartender made a face. "You don't look like you was boiled."

"I'm not. I just want another drink—before I go back to see Mike."

The scar on the bartender's lower lip reddened. "This place is closed," he said hoarsely. "I ain't servin' no more drinks!"

Willie smiled complacently at the girl as he crushed a peanut between his fingers. His right thumb flipped—and the shell hit the bartender in the right eye.

"Suppose that had been a bullet," Willie said. "It would have killed you dead."

"Now, listen," the bartender said anxiously. "I don't want no trouble. But I gotta—"

"I'll take another rye," Willie cut in without a change in his tone. "One for our girl friend here, too. And you look like you could stand another one."

The bartender nervously rubbed

his chin with his right hand and his eyes glanced quickly at the door at the right end of the bar that led to the rear. He gave the girl a quick questioning look. Then his eyes came back to Willie Brann. He shrugged.

"Have it your own way, fella. You can have one more."

Turning only a little he reached back behind him. He tried to keep his body between Willie and his hand but Willie Brann didn't miss the maneuver. The bartender didn't pick up the same bar bottle. His hand went on back and rested on the neck of a bottle that stood next to the big mirror at the back of the bar. He lifted the bottle, brought it forward and placed it on the bar. He turned again, picked up a clean whiskey glass, placed it beside the bottle.

"Two more glasses," Willie smiled.

"I'll pass," the girl said a little shrilly.

"So will I," the bartender chimed in.

"Two more glasses anyway," Willie insisted. "It won't look so lonesome."

The bartender frowned, then put two more glasses on the bar. Willie raised the bottle, filled all three glasses. He picked up one in his left hand.

"I don't like to drink alone," he said mildly.

"I don't want another one," the girl said hastily.

"It isn't polite for a lady to refuse a drink when a gentleman offers one," he told her reprovingly.

"Now, listen, guy," the bartender said nastily. "This is goin' too far. The lady said she didn't want another drink. She's had a lot of 'em and another one might make her sick. So be reasonable."

WILLIE looked at the glass nearest the bartender.

"You haven't put yours down, either," he said pleasantly. "Another one won't make you sick. It'll do you good probably. I can see you're nerv-

ous. Your hands are shaking. You need that drink, pal. You need it bad. Toss it down."

The bartender took a step backward.

"I said I passed," he snapped.

"That's too bad." Willie Brann's right hand moved. It moved so fast that it was hardly more than a blur—and then there was a gun in it. The gun was leveled at the bartender's head. "Yes, that's too bad," he repeated. "This gun is loaded, pal. And so is the drink. So you can take your choice. Which will it be?"

"Now listen—"

"I wouldn't be sure which would be the worse dose to take—the gun or the drink," Willie said calmly. "But you know. So it's your choice. You got five seconds to make up your mind."

The bartender's lips were twisting and beads of sweat popped out on his forehead.

"You gotta listen, Brann," he begged. "You got me all wrong. I didn't mean nothin'. I just wanted to—"

"I could let you have it through that scar on your lip," Willie speculated. "Or I could give your right eye a time exposure. So it will be the right eye. Did I say five seconds? Three . . . four . . ."

The bartender let out a moan as he picked up the drink. He raised it to his lips. He started to say something again. But he changed his mind when he saw Willie's bleak and unrelenting eyes. He shut his eyes and emptied the glass. He put his hand to his head and moaned, dropped the glass and it crashed on the floor.

The sallow-faced girl shrieked and ran. She ran to that door at the right that led to the rear, opened it, and fled into the rear hall.

The bartender's eyes were a little glassy. He staggered, supported himself by hanging onto the back bar. Willie Brann saw the purse that had slipped from the girl's lap to the floor

as she had run. He stopped with a swift motion and picked it up, opened it. His fingers went over the assorted junk in it. He took a sheet of paper out, looked at it. It was a receipt for sixty dollars. Rent, Willie guessed. The name and address read:

Myra Weston, Apt. D-3, 857 Dolton Place.

Willie dropped the purse back to the floor as he heard the noise in the rear hall. The bartender seemed to have sat down on the floor behind the bar.

The man who came through the door and around the bar was well above six feet in stature. He had a queer build. His legs were almost spindly in proportion to the rest of him. From his waist up he was very large. His shoulders were huge and his big arms bulged his coat sleeves. His face was big and square and his stiff erect dark hair looked as if it had been cut by a Prussian barber.

He stopped and blinked at the gun in Willie's hand. Willie smiled a little and returned his gun to its holster.

"Hello, Delano," he said.

"What's the idea?" Delano asked darkly. "Comin' in here and raisin' a row just as we were closin' up!"

"I was looking for a guy," Willie said easily.

"What guy?"

"A guy that came in here to see you a couple of hours ago. He wore tan shoes, snappy clothes, and had his hair greased back. Just a kid. But a punk. You know him."

"I don't!" Mike Delano denied. "No one like that has been here to see me tonight. What made you think such a guy came here to see me?"

"He was one of the witnesses," Willie said as though that explained everything.

Maybe it did—but Willie couldn't be sure. Couldn't be sure that Delano's start and the quick flash of his eyes showed surprise—and alarm. Delano's voice was cool and steady when he replied.

"Witnesses! What witnesses are you talkin' about?"

"The witnesses in the fifty grand breach of promise suit. The punk was one of them, wasn't he? He was doing a pretty good job of eavesdropping when I spotted his tan shoes beneath the drapes tonight."

MIKE DELANO squared himself on his feet, put his hands on his hips, and shook his head sadly.

"You must be completely nuts. I haven't the slightest idea what you're talkin' about. Just because a guy with tan shoes came in here tonight doesn't prove anything. A lot of guys come in here."

"The punk made a bee line here from the Green Clock, Delano. Then when I came in and asked questions your bartender went for the loaded bottle. He was set for me. He had orders to slip me a Mickey if he couldn't ease me out."

* "He tried to slip you a powder because you were set to raise Cain and bring the cops down on us," Delano charged. "That bottle is always there for that purpose."

Willie Brann put two nuts in his mouth and flipped an empty shell far across the room at the juke box.

"He let it out, Delano. Right at the last. He hated like the dickens to swallow that stuff. He begged—and called me by name. The punk told you what had happened. You couldn't be sure whether the punk had been tailed from the Green Clock or not. So you tipped the bartender to keep his eyes open."

"Maybe he guessed—like I'm going to guess now," Mike Delano said slowly. "You're a short guy, a little fat, and you look as innocent as a babe. You're the last guy anyone would pick out of a crowd as a man who was fast with both hands. To look at you anybody would guess that it would take you five seconds to get a gun in your hands. But those peanuts are the tip-off. Everybody's heard

about that. You can get both gats in your hands as fast as you can flip one of those goobers. So—you're Willie Brann of the Cole Agency."

"That's right, Delano. And I'm looking for two witnesses. Whether I find them or not, there's not going to be any pay-off. There isn't going to be any breach of promise suit filed, either. You can put your teeth in that—if you're interested."

"I'm not, Brann. It doesn't make any sense to me. But you made a crack about the Green Clock. That's the tip-off. The guy you want is Jim Maxim."

"I just want to get word to those witnesses tonight, Delano. I want to get word to them that I'm fronting for Bruce Morgan. I'll work on those witnesses if any suit is filed. I'll work on whoever is behind the witnesses. Morgan will pay the Cole Agency—instead of a bunch of cheap chiselers."

"I'll pass that along, if anybody asks me about it," Delano said glibly. "Now, how about easing out of here so we can close up?"

"Sure," Willie agreed. He took two steps toward the door, then turned again. "It's very quiet around here, Delano," he said. "Too quiet. I don't like it. It'd be a good idea for you to go out the door ahead of me—just in case."

MIKE DELANO'S mouth opened and he gulped. He looked toward the door. The only sound in the room was a heavy snore that came from the floor behind the bar.

The bartender was sleeping very soundly.

"Let's go, Delano," Willie urged. "You're in a big hurry to close up, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I might as well turn out the lights in the back now. You wait here while—"

"Nix, Delano. We go out the door now. You—first!"

Delano gulped again and ran his tongue over his lips. He was watching

Willie very closely. His right hand moved and moved fast. It stopped even more quickly, though, as Willie flashed a gun into his hand and covered him. Willie motioned with the gun. Delano took a step toward the door. He took another. But he was moving very slowly. He reached the door, put his hand on the knob, opened it.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled. "It's Mike!" He tried to dive out the door. Willie, right behind him, swung his gun, clipped him a glancing blow as he went out.

Willie turned and sprinted across the barroom. He ran through the back hall. He reached the rear door, opened it a little, leaped out into the blackness there. He stood there for a second with both guns ready. He heard someone shout at the front of the building and he went around the left side. He saw a shadow move there.

Yellow flame leaped out toward him. Willie fired twice as he flattened on the ground. He heard a yell, feet scuffling, then silence. He waited.

It was hardly more than a minute before a motor roared and a car shot out into the street and went away fast. Willie moved out to his left in a wide arc. He circled the building. There was no car left now. A minute later he convinced himself that there was no one left in the building but the bartender. He lay on the floor where he sat down, sleeping peacefully. Willie hurried back to his car and drove back downtown.

It was late when he found Maxey Gates.

"That dame was already gone when I got to the Green Clock," Maxey reported. "They announced she had suddenly been taken sick when it came time for her turn. Nobody seemed to know where she had gone. Jim Maxim wasn't around, either. I couldn't get a line on either of them."

"Okay, Maxey. We'll call it a day," Willie told him.

CHAPTER IV

SURPRISE TURN



WILLIE and Maxie had breakfast the next morning at the café near their apartment that they regularly patronized. When they came out they saw Lieutenant Deneen sauntering toward them. This was no great surprise.

Deneen kept pretty close tabs on Willie.

"Well, this is a surprise," the lieutenant said cheerfully.

"Not to me, it ain't," Maxey Gates said. "It's gettin' so we can't even go in and eat breakfast without being cross-examined about the menu. I'll bet he's got something on his mind, Willie."

"Right, Maxey," Deneen admitted. "But it's just a trifle. There was a shooting affair up in the Thirty-eighth Precinct last night. At Mike Delano's dump."

"I can positively prove I wasn't there," Maxey declared virtuously. "I'll bet he found one of his pet clues up there, Willie. I bet he found some peanut shells on the floor of that Delano dump."

"No," Deneen said. "The floor had been swept clean when I went up and looked the place over early this morning. There were no shells on the floor. I did find a few in the trash can out back where the sweepings from the floor had been dumped. And I dug a forty-five caliber slug out of a tree. So if I had any idea that Willie had been in that mess I'd check that slug with his gats."

Maxey Gates gave Willie a quick glance and looked a little worried.

"But I found out later that Willie wasn't up there. One of the boys saw him at the Green Clock. I'll admit I was a little curious, so I checked there. Willie talked to the little singer who's been playing around with that kid millionaire, Bruce Morgan. Right

away I figured it was an extortion play of some kind. Well, we all make mistakes. My face is a little red this morning. So long. Be seeing you."

They stood and watched as Lieutenant Deneen strolled away.

"Now what do you think of that, Willie?" Maxey asked. "Was he kiddin' us or just givin' us a nasty hint?"

"You got me there, Maxey. It sounded like he was trying to apologize about something. I don't get it. Come on. Let's get to the office. It's late."

They received another surprise when they walked into Theodore Cole's private office. Bruce Morgan was waiting for them there. Morgan had a beautiful shiner on his right eye.

They stared at him. Morgan grinned.

"Go ahead and laugh," he chuckled. "It's the same old gag. I forgot to duck."

"Who socked you?" Willie asked.

"Jim Maxim."

"Maxim!" Willie's eyes narrowed a little and he frowned hard. "How did Maxim happen to sock you?"

"He came to my apartment last night and said he wanted to talk to me."

"Talk—about what?"

"About Margery Minton. When I refused to listen to him he got mad and let me have it. Not only on the eye. He put a right to my jaw that cooled me for a minute. Then he sat on me and made me listen. Till I finally saw the light."

"Light? What do you mean by that?"

"Why, he showed me what a fool I was," Bruce Morgan explained. "And he was right. I was twice as much of a fool as Jim said I was. So that's how it all happened."

Willie Brann stared, looked badly puzzled.

"I don't quite get all this, Morgan," he said. "What was it that happened?"

Bruce Morgan stared, in turn for a moment, then his face broke into a broad smile.

"I guess you didn't look at the papers this morning," he said. "The papers gave it a good play—pictures and everything. News sure gets around fast. It was about two o'clock when we got married."

"When you—what!"

"When we got married. You really haven't heard about it? That Margery and I were married last night?"

WILLIE sat down rather abruptly. Maxey rolled his eyes at the ceiling and whistled a little.

"We hadn't heard a word about it," Willie said. "Just how did all this happen?"

"It was Jim Maxim that really fixed it for us. As I told you Jim socked me and made me listen to him. He told me he had just found out about that fifty thousand dollar business. He told me he didn't give a hoot about me but that Margery was the nicest girl who had ever worked in his place and he wasn't going to stand for her taking the jolt. He said he knew she was in love with me, that if she was asking for fifty thousand that someone was making her do it under terrible threats.

"He told me I ought to go right down there and make her tell me the truth. He said he'd beat the dickens out of me if I didn't at least go down there and make her tell me what was behind it all."

"You went down there with Jim?"

"Sure I did. Because I was sure Jim was giving me straight dope. And I just couldn't believe that I had been so wrong about my previous judgment of Margery. So we went down to the Green Clock and Jim had Margery come into his office. We both landed on her. She stuck to her story about five minutes and then broke down and cried. Jim sneaked out and left us in there and she told me the truth."

Bruce Morgan's face had sobered and his tone was very earnest now.

"I got it out of her," he said. "Margery told me the whole truth."

"What was the truth?" Willie asked.

"I—I can't tell you that, Brann. All I can say is that Margery hadn't been acting on her own. She had been forced to try to raise fifty thousand quickly, forced by threats—about something else. To make it short—I fixed everything. And then we drove to Ridgeville and were married by that Justice of the Peace who makes a specialty of quick weddings. Believe me, Brann, I haven't made any mistake. I'm just about as happy as a man can be."

"So you fixed everything," Willie's voice was a little grim. "You simply paid over the fifty thousand that was demanded."

"No, I didn't. I did hand out five thousand—to fix up things quickly."

"You paid the five grand to Jim Maxim?"

"I can't tell you that, Brann. I can't tell you any more than I've told you. I came up here this morning to tell you everything is all right. I didn't want you to continue with your investigation. Because it's all settled. Drop the case. Send me a bill and it will be paid promptly."

"The Cole Agency only sends bills when its cases are concluded to its own satisfaction," Willie told him.

"But I employed you. I want the case dropped. I am specifically directing you to abandon your investigation. The only thing you could do now would be to hurt an innocent party."

"Meaning the same person Margery was trying to protect?"

"That's right. I'll even tell you who that person is. It's the only person in the world she would have done it for. Her mother. Her mother is a very fine old lady—in very delicate health. Margery was trying to pro-

tect her. But it's all over now. Everything is settled."

Bruce Morgan smiled, nodded, and left the office.

MAXEY snorted. "The poor dumb cluck!" he exclaimed. "You told the girl that Bruce Morgan would have married her, didn't you? So she told Jim, and they rigged up a fancy story. Then Jim went up and convinced the kid it was all a mistake. The kid swallowed the whole thing because he was nuts about Margery. So she's married to two million bucks. And will she take him to the cleaners now!"

"I don't know about that, Maxey," Willie said thoughtfully. "You didn't talk to Margery Minton. I did. I'd take a fifty-fifty bet that she's on the level."

"You're going to drop the case, you mean?" Maxey asked narrowly.

"No, we're not dropping the case. Because the pay-off was too small. Whoever was back of that isn't going to be satisfied with five grand when there is almost three-quarters of a million to shoot at."

"Two million," Maxey corrected. "The guy is worth two million."

"But the point is, Maxey, that if Bruce Morgan should suddenly die, Margery would take a third of his estate, about three-quarters of a million, even if there is no will. I've got a hunch that Mike Delano tried to rub me out last night—after he knew about the marriage. His punk was in the dressing room when I spoke to Margery. If that guess is right, Bruce Morgan's life isn't worth a nickel. They could work on Margery after she got her share of the estate."

"They wouldn't have to work on her," Maxey said wisely. "You always were a sucker for dames, Willie. You let that little warbler put the hex on you last night. She and Jim are pullin' this. And just usin' that Mike Delano as a stooge to back up the play. I'd like to talk to her for just

about five minutes. She couldn't fool me a minute. I can always tell by their eyes."

Willie grinned at that. "We know what Lieutenant Deneen meant now, Maxey. Deneen learned enough to be a bit suspicious. But when he found out about the wedding he decided I had been in on the wedding party. So he was just easing out for fear we would razz him about it later."

Willie Brann did some quick checking. Jim Maxim was back at the Green Clock, grinning broadly, obviously very well satisfied with the situation—but refusing to talk. Mike Delano's place was closed tight and there was no one on the premises. Willie learned something about Delano and a couple of his men but he couldn't find a trace of them. They seemed to have faded out of the picture.

So Willie went after his only lead. It was the name and address he had taken from the purse of the sallow-faced girl who had been at Delano's bar. That girl hadn't sprinted for the front door when trouble broke.

She had run into the rear hall, so she must have known her way around pretty well.

So Willie went to 857 Dolton Place and went up to Apartment D-3. The bell didn't answer when he rang. He wasn't surprised. He produced some keys and worked for about two minutes before the door responded. He went through the small foyer, then made a fast check of the three rather gaudily furnished rooms. He was a bit disappointed.

The only thing in the whole place that interested him was a picture he found on a dresser in the bedroom. A picture of a man who was chiefly distinguished by thin lips and a sharp prominent nose. On it was inscribed: "With love—from Harpy."

He went back into the hall and on into the living room. He took two steps in there and stopped. The sallow-faced girl stood there by the

foyer door. She had a gun in her hand.

"Just hold it, Willie Brann!" she said viciously. "You try a fast draw on me and I'll prove to you that I can shoot right down the line!"

Willie smiled a little as he shrugged in surrender. The girl was mad, dangerously mad. Her eyes were raging.

"What is it you're looking for here?" she snapped.

"Not for you, Myra," he said easily. "To be honest I was looking for a line on Mike Delano."

"I don't know where he is," she said. "What made you think you would find him here?"

"I didn't expect to find him here," Willie told her. "But I did a little checking. I found out that you were—let's say a very close friend—of Harpy Kling. Harpy Kling is one of Mike Delano's men. So I thought I might find Harpy here."

"He's not here! I haven't seen him for weeks."

"He was here about the first of the month," Willie said glibly. "I inquired of the superintendent downstairs. He said Kling paid the rent on this apartment the first of the month. That was exactly twelve days ago."

She stared hard at Willie, her eyes smoldering, venomous.

"Maybe Kling is one of those witnesses I'm looking for," Willie said lightly.

"Maybe you'll get something you're not looking for!" she said savagely. "Sit down in that chair at your right. Don't move!"

WILLIE sat down. A small table with a phone on it stood about three feet to the left of the foyer door. She edged toward it. She didn't take her eyes from Willie once as she felt with her fingers and dialed a number. She held the receiver to her ear with her left hand.

"This is Myra," she said. "I've got

a friend here you might like to see. His name is Willie Brann."

She replaced the instrument and smiled triumphantly. Willie crunched the peanut he held in his left hand. She moved forward from the table a little.

"Don't do it!" she warned. "I've heard about that peanut gag of yours—where you start to put a peanut in your mouth and instead make a fast draw. Keep your hands down!"

"I'm surprised at you, Myra," Willie chuckled. "Surely you don't think I'd pull a trick like that on a lady. And I'm not quite as fast with my guns as all that. No, I'd have to use a different sort of trick on a lady. No rough stuff. No gun. Just hands reaching out and—"

She shrieked—too late. Maxey Gates came from the foyer on his toes, cat-like, reached around and caught hold of the wrist that held the gun, bent it downward. He twisted the gun out of her hand and gave her a little shove. She reeled backward across the room until her back collided with the wall. She stood there, panting, glaring back at him.

"You ain't too smart, baby," Maxey told her. "You might have known we'd spotted you first. You were eatin' a late lunch down in that café. We figured you'd come back right afterward. Willie let you get the drop on him, figurin' you'd do something like call Mike Delano. Now all we got to do is wait and see who shows up. Then we'll all have a nice quiet party."

Myra bared her teeth and spat not too nice words at them until she was out of breath. Then she dropped into a chair by the table at the rear wall of the room. They waited. Maxey stood by the front window, looking down into the street. Twenty minutes passed.

"Maybe this is it," Maxey said at last. "There's a green coupé parking across the street. Guys gettin' out. Two of 'em. Yep, it's Mike Delano—

and that bartender that took the nap. Now all we got to do is—"

Willie Brann was too far away from Myra to stop her. She picked up a metal cigarette box from the table and flung it with all her strength at the window. It struck the glass pane just above Maxey's head. The glass shattered and the case landed down in the street.

"Come on, Maxey!" Willie said. They ran out through the foyer and down the two flights of stairs. But when they reached the street the green coupé was disappearing around the corner on two wheels.

Willie and Maxey heard a shrill whistle and looked up. Myra had her head out through the broken window pane. Her right hand was raised significantly. She was giving them the Bronx cheer—in the sign language.

CHAPTER V

MURDER THREATENS



AN HOUR later, Willie Brann rang at the door of another apartment. The door was opened by a lady. A white-haired lady with a fine face and a very gentle expression. She was so slender she looked almost fragile.

"You're Mrs. Minton?" Willie asked.

"Yes," she nodded.

"I'm from the *Globe-Tribune*, Mrs. Minton," Willie said. "There's been quite a bit of excitement about the marriage of your daughter to Bruce Morgan. I'd like to ask you a few questions—just to make a good story for the morning paper."

She smiled happily. "I don't know what I could say," she said. "But—come in." Willie followed her into a small living room that was furnished modestly but tastefully. He waited until she sat down.

"You've seen Myra since she was married?" Willie began.

"Oh, yes. She and Bruce came by

this morning and told me all about it. I'm so happy about it. Bruce seems like such a nice boy."

"He is," Willie assured her. It wasn't hard to get Mrs. Minton to talk. It was obvious that she could talk for hours about Margery. But Willie was puzzled. He wondered if Bruce Morgan had told him the truth when he had said that Margery had been acting to protect her mother. It didn't seem possible that this motherly lady could have become involved in any kind of crookedness.

"I suppose you'll want a picture of Margery," Mrs. Minton was saying. "But that one on the table there is the only good one I have of her. It's my favorite and I couldn't even lend it to you."

Willie glanced at the picture. It was framed in a small easel. Willie stared. There was another picture on that table. It was a picture of a young man with a rather sharp face. The face of the man who had stood behind the drapes in Margery Minton's dressing room. Willie gazed at that picture so hard that it attracted Mrs. Minton's attention.

"That is my son, Jerry," she explained. "Jerry Potter—he's a half-brother to Margery. His father died and I married Mr. Minton later. He's a fine boy too, Jerry is."

"He lives here with you?"

"No, he doesn't. He has a job in an office at the other side of the city, so he rooms near his work. But he comes home to see me often."

"What does he do?"

"He's a salesman," she said, and added a little vaguely. "He sells some kind of fixtures, for restaurants, I think."

"I'd like to talk to him, too," Willie told her. "Where can I find him?"

"He has a room at Four sixty-three Central Avenue."

It was several minutes before Willie could excuse himself and break away. Mrs. Minton, it was plain, would have been willing to talk on for

an hour about her favorite subjects.

Willie went down a dark carpeted hall and rapped on a door. He heard feet moving across the room toward the door. The door opened. Willie stepped inside and kicked the door shut. The young man's eyes went wide as he recognized Willie's face. He stepped back and his right hand clawed at his shoulder. Willie crowded him, caught hold of that right hand, twisted it until the gun dropped to the floor. Willie tapped him, then shoved him into a chair.

"I was right the first time I saw you," Willie said grimly. "You may be Margery's half-brother — but you're just another cheap punk. Now, it's about time to talk."

"I'm not talking to you," Jerry Potter spat. "Get out of here, or—"

"Or you'll call the cops?" Willie jeered. "I don't think you will. I don't think you'll want to say anything to the cops. You're the answer to this whole set-up. You were in your sister's dressing room when she told me she wanted fifty grand from Bruce Morgan. You left there and high-tailed it for Mike Delano's. I know some of the answers. I know that Margery was acting to protect your mother."

"You leave my mother out of this!" Jerry lashed out.

WILLIE stepped in and slapped him hard on his right cheek.

"Did you leave her out?" he charged. "You made her think you were a salesman. But you're rooming here just five blocks from Mike Delano's dump. You're not one of his regular men. You've been just a punk for him—and you got in a jam somewhere. A bad jam it must have been. It was so bad that your sister, Margery, was willing to sacrifice everything to save you—to save her mother from a blow that would probably kill her. Margery cracked down on the man she loved in an effort to save you. And your new brother-in-law

put up five grand to smooth things over."

Jerry Potter sat with his shoulders hunched defensively, his eyes on the floor.

"Maybe I did get into a jam," he mumbled. "Anyway, it's all fixed now. And none of your business. Morgan fired you, didn't he? What are you all hot and bothered about?"

"I'm bothered because I'm not quite sure it is, as you say, all fixed, Jerry. This must have been a pretty hot spot you were in. It was fixed a bit too quickly and easily to suit me. I want to be sure there won't be a backfire somewhere."

"There won't be," Jerry said quickly. "Everything is fixed. Why, Bruce and Margery are sailing on a year's cruise next Tuesday. They'll be gone a whole year."

Willie's hands slowly clinched.

"A year," he said slowly. "Where are they now?"

"They drove up to a cabin north of here that Morgan owns. It's in the hills. They're going to spend the week-end up there, then come back Monday."

"Whom did they tell they were going up there?"

"It was in the papers. They told the reporters, I guess."

Willie's face looked like granite now. His blue eyes were grim and searching.

"What kind of jam were you in, Jerry? Who was going to get that fifty grand that Margery was demanding from Bruce? Who got the five grand?"

Jerry sneered. "You think I'd be sap enough to tell you?"

"Sure you'll tell me, Jerry," Willie said and his tone was icy. "You'll tell me because if I don't find out, Bruce Morgan, and perhaps your sister, won't live to take that year's cruise."

"You're crazy. Everything's fixed."

"But is it fixed for keeps? What happens if Morgan should die? Your sister would have a lot of money then.

And she might have to pay plenty to keep her mother from learning the truth. I'm taking no chances on that. I want the truth."

"I—I won't tell you!"

Willie caught him by the collar and shook him.

"Talk, rat!" he threatened. "Talk! Or I'll take you and Mike Delano and his whole mob down to my friend, Lieutenant Deneen, and have him beat the truth out of you. I'll get Morgan and your sister, too. But first I'm going to work on you. Talk—or I'll smash you!"

"I—I can't talk," Jerry wailed, "because—"

"Because why?" Willie whipped out his gun and raised it. "Why can't you talk? You'll have to talk anyway if I tell the cops the truth. You've got just one chance. To spill it to me and let me see if that fix will hold water. Why can't you talk?"

WILLIE had tightened his hold on the collar. Jerry was choking. He cringed before the uplifted gun.

"I—I can't," he moaned. "I—it was—murder!"

The private detective lowered his gun and loosened his hold a little.

"I could almost guess that it had to be murder for a set-up like that," he said. "Now talk and talk fast."

"I didn't mean—to do it," Jerry half-sobbed. "I was drunk—I didn't know what happened. I—I shot—"

"Who was it you shot?"

"A guy by the name of Kling. Harpy Kling."

"Where?"

"It was in—in a dice game—in one of the back rooms at Delano's. I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing. There were six of us in the game. I caught Kling switching dice. We had an argument. I remember fighting him. I was so drunk I don't remember how it happened. I guess I shot him—and then somebody hit me. When I came to, I was on the floor with my gun in my hand. I guess I had fired it twice. The others were working on Kling. There was blood on his shirt. He died right there."

"But nobody called the cops."

"Delano started to. But he changed his mind. He said Kling was dead, there was nothing they could do about it, and there was a chance to cover me. I worked for Delano. Steered suckers into his games and helped him—on other things. He said if we'd all keep our mouths shut they could cover it. He said they'd take the body and drop it somewhere. He made me write out a confession so they'd be protected if anything went wrong. Then they put weights on Kling's body—and sunk it in deep water in the river."

"But that didn't finish it, did it, Jerry?"

"No. Delano knew Margery was going with Morgan. He said it would be a cinch to make Morgan cough up some dough. Said she either had to

[Turn Page]



make Morgan pay or they'd mail that confession to the cops. And Margery, because Mother has a bad heart and she was afraid the shock would kill her if I was arrested for murder, said she'd go through with it.

"Then, after you talked to Margery in her dressing room, Bruce Morgan came down there. I guess he finally made her tell him the truth. She phoned me at Delano's and told me she was going to marry Bruce. When I told Delano that, told him that Bruce would pay five grand for that confession, he agreed to it. So that fixed everything up."

"You poor fool!" Willie ground out. "What Bruce Morgan did was to pay five thousand for his own death warrant. This was just a case of extortion. Now it may be a case of extortion murders! Delano didn't know that Bruce Morgan was really in love with Margery. The marriage played right into his hands. Now he has almost a million to shoot at. Where is this cabin they went to for the week-end?"

"I don't know exactly. But it's out from a little place called Marysville, eight miles north of here. There's no phone up there. They wouldn't be getting up there until about now. But Bruce Morgan's butler knows where the cabin is. He could probably tell you just how—"

Jerry Potter dropped weakly into a chair as Willie turned and ran through the door into the hall.

CHAPTER VI TIMELY RESCUE



MAXEY GATES had broken every traffic law on the road up to Marysville. They had to stop at a store there and get more exact directions. Now Maxey was urging the powerful car up a steep grade that led into the hills.

"I guess you figured it right,

Willie," Maxey said. "The guy at the filling station said another car went up this road about an hour after Bruce and Margery went up. He said there were four men in the car, he thought.

"But he just thought they were going up to one of the other cabins in the hills."

"Delano had probably figured on waiting a few months to make it look good," Willie said. "But he wouldn't wait a whole year—while they were on a cruise like that. Too many things might happen. Mrs. Minton might die.

"And this week-end up here in this lonely cabin gives him a golden opportunity. A fire, a wrecked car, a hundred ways for an accident to happen. No one could ever prove that it was murder."

Maxey drove on up the grade. It was little more than a trail, winding and twisting its way through the woods. Finally Maxey pointed.

"That's it. It's the third trail off this one to the right. We'd better park here, huh?"

"Another hundred yards, Maxey."

Maxey had already turned off his lights. He squinted, trying to see ahead into the blackness.

"Can't make it," he grunted. "I can't see a blamed thing."

He stopped the car and they got out and groped their way on up the road. In three minutes they saw a faint light ahead.

"We better circle around first," Maxey suggested.

"There's no time," Willie said. "We can't tell how long they've been here. We may be too late now. We've got to go right on up to the cabin and take our chances. I'll go ahead. You trail along behind me and cover me if I run into a guard in front of the cabin."

Willie didn't once look back as he walked steadily toward the light. The cabin was on top of a hill and its faint outline suddenly revealed itself when he was hardly more than fifty feet

away. He saw the vague shadows of two cars parked at his left. He had both guns in his hands. There was a porch that ran across the front of the structure. He didn't hesitate as he went across the clearing. He went up the porch steps on his toes.

The light from the window came from his right. A shade was pulled down there but it lacked several inches from reaching the window sill. Willie went to that window, crouched there. He saw Margery and Bruce first. They were sitting in chairs, their backs to the inside wall. He recognized the two men who stood close to them. Mike Delano and the bartender with the scarred lip.

Mike Delano was speaking. His words came faintly but clearly. Willie guessed that there was at least one more man in the room that he couldn't see.

"Yeah, we got that five grand, Morgan," Mike Delano was saying. "You was a sucker to think you could buy Jerry out with pocket change like that. That was just a laugh. We would have paid you a few grand to marry her instead of you payin' us."

"What is this now? Are you kidnaping us?" Bruce Morgan asked.

"Yeah. We're kidnapin' you to keep you from takin' that cruise to South America that we read about in the papers. We wouldn't mind waitin' a little while. But we ain't goin' to wait a year. Not when we got a murder rap on a dumb punk like Jerry. Now we're goin' to cash in quick."

"How much?" Morgan asked. "How much will the ransom be?"

"Close to four hundred grand, I'm figurin' on now."

"Four hundred grand! That's preposterous!" Morgan exclaimed.

"Not the way we're goin' to work it," Delano grinned. "You see, this ain't goin' to be the kind of snatch you think. It's goin' to be more of a fire than a snatch. Then, the way I figure it, all we'll have to do is handle Jerry."

"Jerry! You mean he's to act as intermediary."

"You might call it that. Or you might call him a beneficiary—or maybe an heir." Delano's face abruptly lost its humor and he bared his teeth. He turned away from Margery and Bruce and spoke to the rest of the room.

"Let's get busy and do this right!" he said harshly. "We got to make sure that the cabin burns completely down. Margery's got to have a few burns on her and some marks so it'll look like she jumped and crawled a mile or so. We got to be sure about that. She's got to go last so there'll be no doubt that Morgan died first. She's got to—"

"You're not kidnaping us!" Bruce Morgan cried. "You're going to murder us!"

"Yeah, we're goin' to quit foolin' around right now, Morgan."

He took a step toward Morgan, pulling a sap from his pocket. Willie Brann raised the gun in his right hand and covered Delano.

Then he turned his head sharply as the full glare of a flashlight caught him. It came from the right side of the porch.

"Drop those gats, Brann!" a voice said sharply.

Willie let his guns slip from his fingers. But he was picking them up again as Maxey Gates' guns roared some twenty feet out from the porch. There was a hoarse scream at the right and the light went out.

Willie had his guns again and he charged for the door. The three mobsters in the room seemed to have been bewildered by those unexpected shots that Maxey had fired. They were just reaching for their guns as Willie catapulted into the room. He fired first at the bartender in the middle and the man went down. He started to swing that same gun, his right one, over to Delano. Delano turned and ran for the window directly behind him, dove through it head-first.

Willie had to jump as he sensed, rather than saw, that the man he hadn't been able to spot from outside the window was cracking down on him. That man was squeezing his trigger and Willie wasn't quite quick enough. He felt a burning sting in his left arm as he flung himself to the right and fired with his right gun. That man had on a green suit and he seemed to fall over like a clothier's model in a show window.

Willie ducked again as he saw the hand and the gun that was being thrust back through the broken pane of the window. Willie moved a little and waited. Mike Delano thought he was playing it safe. He got his gun just where he wanted it before he showed his face, took quick aim, and tried to pull the trigger of his gun. There wasn't over two seconds between the time his gun appeared and his face appeared—and Willie Brann fired a single, almost deliberate shot. The gun dropped from Delano's hand. His face disappeared and his arm followed as though it were being jerked by a string.

Margery had rolled to the floor in a faint and Bruce Morgan was getting down on his knees beside her. Willie crossed the room and took a quick look at the two men on the floor. He knew he wasn't going to have to check up on Delano.

MAXEY came in a minute later and confirmed that.

"That guy outside has got three eyes now instead of two, Willie," he said. "But he ain't goin' to see any better with that extra one. Well, I got one to your three this time. What's the matter with your arm?"

"A nice clean one through the flesh, Maxey. It only stings a little."

Maxey pulled Willie's coat off and looked at it. He took a clean handkerchief from the coat and wrapped the arm.

"That'll hold it till we get the first-aid kit in the car," he said.

Margery was sitting up, shuddering. Bruce Morgan looked at the two men on the floor.

"I'm glad the Cole Agency always concludes cases to its own satisfaction, Brann," he said unsteadily. "I didn't understand it until just a few seconds before you came in. When they first came in I thought it was a kidnaping. Then I found out—what it really meant."

"Their idea was to burn the cabin down with you in it," Willie told him. "They would have burned Margery some, probably made it appear as though she had jumped from a window and escaped the fire but had been hurt. They'd have left her down the road a way. That would have been evidence enough that she had outlived you. But she would have been found dead. You don't have a will, do you?"

"No, I intended to make one Monday, before we left on the cruise."

"Margery, having outlived you, would have automatically inherited a third of your estate. Jerry and his mother would have inherited from her. With that murder charge to hold over Jerry's head as a threat, Mike Delano could have made Jerry hand over every dime of his share. That's why he figured it out almost four hundred thousand. He figured he had a cinch on that."

Bruce Morgan looked very worried.

"I owe you enough now, Brann," he said brokenly. "I can't ask you—to cover Jerry on that murder charge. But Margery is afraid her mother—wouldn't live through the shock of having him tried for murder."

Willie Brann smiled.

"Margery needn't worry too much about that," he said. "It's true that Harpy Kling is dead. I saw Kling's picture this afternoon in a certain girl's apartment. So I know Kling is dead. But he hasn't been dead long. There he is—that man in the green suit lying over in the corner."

"You mean that Jerry—didn't—"

"Sure. As soon as I found out how

Jerry was involved I figured that the whole thing was a frame. Jerry was so drunk that he didn't exactly know what had happened. They got him drunk, probably gave him a drink out of a certain bottle that stood on Delano's bar. Kling put fixed dice in the game and let Jerry catch him, so a fight could be started. Jerry said somebody hit him and when he came to Kling was lying on the floor. He was sure that Kling was shot, dead—but he wasn't. They took Kling out of there and hid him out, but brought

him up here to help out on this job tonight.

"It was a frame straight through. After I talked to Margery I knew she was acting under pressure, so I started out to get to the bottom of it. I had a hard time getting at the truth." He sighed, shook his head dolefully.

"Yeah. If you'd just told Willie the truth in the first place," Maxey Gates said reprovingly, "he could have gunned all these guys out last night and saved us all this trouble!"

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CHAPTER I

ANONYMOUS CORPSE

THE girl came into Humbolt Smith's office. She was nice looking, expensive looking—not the kind of expensive looking that goes with a lot of money.

But as if she made a very good

salary and spent the most of it in out-fitting herself in expensive and good-looking clothes.

She was nervous. Under her arm she carried a paper, folded open to the personal column. There were pencil marks around one of the items, which read:

“Adventurer, six feet tall, one hun-

When Thieves Fall Out Humbolt Smith

BRIDE

By W. T. BALLARD

Author of "He's in the Death House,"
"Heads—It's Murder," etc.

Smith's shoulder struck Dalton's
chest and the gun exploded



dred and eighty pounds. What do you want done?"

She looked at Smith, seated across the desk.

"Is this your ad?" she asked.

Humbolt Smith nodded. That ad had brought a strange collection of visitors through the door of his office—including the police.

They had found a man in his late

Breaks a Sinister Marriage Deadlock!

twenties with level gray eyes and a firm though sensitive mouth—a man who, although a graduate of one of the country's largest law schools, held a license as a private detective. The police had demanded to know what he meant by running such an ad, and Humbolt Smith had smiled at them pleasantly and told them to go roll their hoops.

Captain Kranz had blustered, but Smith pointed out that in running the ad he had broken no law. If the captain didn't like, he could take it up with the Commission, which had issued Smith's license.

"What can we do for you, Miss Albright?"

The girl hesitated for a moment as if searching for words. "You take adventures—any adventures?"

He moved his shoulders. "Well, almost any."

"I want you to marry me," she said.

Humbolt Smith prided himself on being shock-proof. "And the reason, Miss Albright?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you the reason. It's a personal one. I'll give you five hundred dollars to marry me—that is, go through a fake ceremony. But there is one condition. Colonel Dalton must not know that I've been here. He'll call you up this evening and make the arrangements himself. Don't let on that you know me."

She had opened her purse and laid five one-hundred-dollar bills on the desk. Before Smith got through glancing at the bills, she was on her feet and moving toward the door.

He made no effort to stop her. He pressed the buzzer and talked to Bo Zeller through the office phone.

"Follow that jane," he said. "Find out who she is, who she works for and who she loves. That's all."

BO ZELLER reported three hours later.

"Her name is Nan Albright. She works for the Dalton Import and In-

vestment concern. They deal in precious stones. She's in love with a guy named Frank Austin who works for the same company, only none of his friends have seen him for two weeks. Colonel Dalton is in a private hospital taking a rest cure. A mug named Curtis is running the business. He should be running a racket. Maybe he is."

The phone rang. "Mr. Humbolt Smith?" A man's voice said. "You advertise as an adventurer. Can you be at my estate at nine this evening? I have an adventure to offer you."

Smith replaced the phone. "That," he told Zeller, "was Colonel Dalton. His voice sounded very strong for a man who is taking a rest. Be here at eight-thirty. Dealers in precious stones, eh?"

He turned back to the phone and called every insurance company in town.

It was close to nine when Bo Zeller swung the big car toward the curb. The car bore the name of a famous manufacturer of automobiles, but the manufacturer would never have recognized it had he lifted the hood, for Bo Zeller, besides being a trusted employee, gun artist and ex-fighter, was also a mechanic par excellence. The car pulled up before the estate gate and Smith got out.

"I don't like it, Chief," Bo Zeller said. "I tell you that Dalton guy is a rat of some kind."

Smith nodded. He had a solemn way of nodding.

"That's right, Bo. But we need rats. The law business isn't what it should be and if it wasn't for rats we'd have to shut up shop. Drive around to the back gate and park. It might be that I shall have to leave in a hurry."

Bo Zeller's employer disappeared through the wrought-iron gates and walked slowly up the curving path.

The wind, cutting over the high wall, raced across the garden, whipping Smith's coat about his long legs

and sending a chill up through his lean body. He had covered almost half the distance to the house when the toe of his imported Oxford struck something soft and he almost tripped.

Swearing under his breath, he explored the soft object with his toe. The oath died on his lips and he bent forward suddenly, cupping a match in his gloved hand.

What he saw made him whistle softly. The body of a man lay beside the path. A quick glance at the body gave Smith the impression that the man was young. But he couldn't be sure, because the head was missing.

The match died, caught in a sudden puff of wind. He lit another and got down on one knee, exploring the man's pockets. They were empty and two of them were turned out as if they had been searched hurriedly. The second match died and Smith did not light another.

HE STAYED on his knee for a full minute, thinking. His impulse was to turn and leave the garden as quickly as possible. He almost yielded to that impulse, but he squared his shoulders, rose and followed the path onto where it joined the drive.

If he had stayed on the drive coming from the gate he would never have found the corpse. He thought about this as he mounted to the wide porch and pressed the bell.

The door was opened at once, showing a man past middle age—big, bluff, with iron-gray hair and a fleshy red face. He peered at Smith for a full minute, seeming to be a little disconcerted by what he saw.

"Colonel Dalton, please," Smith said. "He's expecting me."

The bluff man cleared his throat. "You must be Smith. I'm Dalton. Come in, come in, sir."

Smith stepped into a big square hall and glanced around. The furnishings were plain enough, but the whole place gave the impression of money—lots of money.

Dalton was smiling. "You'll have to pardon my attitude at the door. I was a little surprised by your appearance. I rather expected something—I mean, some one different."

Smith silently eyed him, and Dalton got a little uneasy under the steady gaze.

"No offense, no offense. But from your ad I judged that you'd be a little seedy—down at the heels, as it were. You know, adventurers are always run down at the heels."

He laughed again, too loudly, and there was little mirth in the sound.

"Let me take your hat, Mr. Smith, and come in. This way." He led the way into a small study on the right, indicated a chair and walked over to a small barette.

"Drink?"

"No thanks. I finished dinner less than half an hour ago."

"Some brandy then?" Dalton filled a small glass and carried it to his guest. The brandy was excellent.

"And now to business." Dalton sat down gingerly on the edge of a small couch as if he were too nervous to relax. "Your ad in the paper said that you would undertake adventures. Well, I have one for you and I'm willing to pay money. By the way, you are Smith, aren't you?"

For answer Humbolt Smith produced his license and police card, added to them his driver's license. The big man seemed satisfied. He pulled out a note case, found five bills and laid them fan-wise on the floor at Smith's feet. They were for one thousand dollars each.

SMITH concealed his start of surprise. His lips tightened a little. This was, by far, the largest retainer ever offered to him, and he was not at all certain that he wanted to try to earn it. The headless body in the garden offered unpleasant possibilities.

"I always reserve the right to know what an adventure is before I embark upon it," he said.

The man on the edge of the couch chuckled softly. The sound surprised Smith. He had expected almost anything else—threats, bargaining—but not a laugh. The man saw his surprise and the chuckle grew until it rumbled down through the huge frame, a cascading torrent of sound.

"My boy, I'm offering you the greatest of all adventures. Matrimony."

"Matrimony?"

The big man nodded. "Yes, marriage. You aren't married already, are you?" A shadow crossed his face as if that possibility had entered his mind for the first time.

Smith didn't answer for a full minute.

His eyes were on the bills, still spread out on the floor at his feet. Slowly he raised them until he was looking directly at the big man's reddened face.

"What's the catch?" he asked.

"Catch?" The big man had risen as though he could no longer sit still. Smith sensed the nervousness in him, the restlessness, the hidden force. The big man was trying not to appear too eager, but it was all he could do to contain himself.

"There is no catch. I'm asking you to accept five thousand dollars for marrying a beautiful girl. I assure you that she is beautiful—a fact that you can ascertain for yourself as soon as we come to terms."

"Why?"

The big man spread his hands. "Does an adventurer ask questions? No. You're a fraud, sir. You advertise yourself as an adventurer, and yet you ask questions. No adventurer would do such a thing."

A faintly cynical smile touched Humbolt Smith's lips, then was gone. He rose.

"I'm sorry if it seems that I've deceived you, Colonel Dalton. Thank you, but I'm not having any."

Suddenly there was a gun in Dalton's hand.

CHAPTER II

DOOMED BRIDEGROOM



IT SEEMED to Humbolt Smith that the gun had always been there. He had not seen the motion that produced it. He had no idea whether the gun had come from the man's pocket or had been concealed in the big hand.

Colonel Dalton was not smiling anymore.

"This is no shotgun, but it will serve just as well. I believe, Mr. Smith, my unwilling adventurer, that you will go through with the marriage. Get up slowly, carefully, and turn around."

Humbolt Smith obeyed. There was little else he could do. If he had doubted that Dalton would shoot he had only to think of the headless corpse in the dark garden.

He felt the man's hand come around, get the gun from his shoulder clip. Then Dalton stepped back.

"And now, to the wedding. Pick up your money, Mr. Smith. I shouldn't pay you, since you are earning it unwillingly, but a bridegroom will need money."

Humbolt Smith's mouth quirked. He stooped, gathered up the money. Then they left the study, crossed the hall, went down through a long music room into a big drawing room.

There were two men in the drawing room—a stout man with a well-fed look and a reversed collar, and a slighter man with heavy black hair, eyebrows to match and black eyes shot with gray. The gray gave the eyes a dull hard sheen as their owner turned them to look at Smith.

Dalton was behind the self-styled adventurer, both hands deep in his side coat pockets. He made no motion to move either hand.

"This is Mr. Foster, the minister of the church down the road," Dalton said. "And this is Mr. Curtis."

The minister shook hands. He had a deep resonant voice and a friendly interested smile.

"One of the great pleasures of my life is to officiate at times like this, Mr. Smith," he said.

Curtis shook hands heartily. "How are you, Smitty, old boy, old boy?"

Humbolt Smith had never liked being called Smitty. He didn't like Curtis. The man was as phony as the joy he put into his voice.

He was not conscious that Dalton had touched a bell, but suddenly a servant was in the door—a rat of a man, looking out of place in the neat livery he wore.

"Tell Miss Albright we're ready," Dalton said, and the man departed.

The next thing Smith knew, the girl was before them, even more attractive than she had seemed that morning.

She wore a neatly-tailored suit of some grayish material, with a little fur collar. Her fair hair was caught up beneath a tiny hat. Her eyes were big, blue, but now they were dark, and Smith, looking at them, sensed the tension in her. She paused there in the doorway, her eyes on him.

"Come in, Nan," Dalton said. "Come in. You don't want to be late for your own wedding."

There was deep mockery under the big man's words and Smith shot a glance toward the minister, wondering if that dignitary had caught it.

APPARENTLY he hadn't. He'd picked up a small black book and was opening it. The girl came slowly forward into the room. Nervousness was riding her, but it might have been the nervousness of a bride. She was at Smith's side, looking up at him.

He put one hand out to touch her, but she shrank a little away from him.

Dalton's voice had an edge of impatience. "Come on, come on. Let's get going."

The girl gave him a quick glance, then turned to Smith and managed a little smile.

"Are you ready?"

He took her arm and they walked over before the minister. Humbolt Smith had heard the marriage service a number of times, but he heard very little of this one. His racing mind was on other things. To him the minister's words were a droning mumble. He had to be prompted before he said: "I do."

The minister looked at him. "And now the ring."

He fumbled in his vest pocket. It was an unconscious gesture. He had forgotten that he had no ring—and then Curtis was at his side, shoving something into his palm, and he was fitting the ring onto her finger.

The little hand felt like a fragment of ice as he touched her. Then Dalton was saying in his rough voice:

"Go ahead and kiss her, man. If you won't I will."

Her lips, too, were cold, unresponsive. He brushed them lightly with his own, then whispered almost noiselessly:

"Everything okay?"

As he straightened he saw her eyes, read thanks in them, then they narrowed and were dull again.

The minister shook hands, kissed the bride. Curtis followed suit. He seemed to derive a great deal of pleasure from the operation and Smith had a momentary pang of jealousy.

Dalton was paying the minister. The man went through the door, escorted by the rat-like servant. Smith thought that the man must believe this the strangest wedding party at which he had ever officiated.

Dalton turned toward the girl. "And now you'd better get your bags packed." There was a marriage license lying on the table. Smith walked over idly and looked at it.

The minister had signed. It was legal—a license taken out in the names of Humbolt Smith and Nan

Albright. He thought of the girl's words, "fake marriage." Some one had crossed her, or him—or both. Nan Albright was legally Mrs. Humbolt Smith. There couldn't be any doubt about that.

He turned to find Dalton arguing with the girl.

After an instant she shrugged and went rapidly toward the door. Just before she disappeared she looked around, giving Smith a long shadowed glance, then she was gone and silence came down on the room.

Curtis cleared his throat and there was relief in the words when he said: "That's that."

"Yes," said Colonel Dalton softly. "That is that."

Smith was smiling, although his eyes were watchful and every sense alert.

"I don't feel much different than I did a few minutes ago, and they always said that marriage broadens a man."

Curtis laughed. "Give it time."

DALTON came across the room, extending a thick-palmed hand. "You did the little girl a favor to-night, Mr. Smith, one that she won't forget. Now, if you are ready to leave—"

Smith nodded. "As soon as you return my gun."

Dalton hesitated. "That is a request that I fear is unwise to grant. It will be much better if you don't insist. For reasons I don't care to make clear, it is wiser that you leave this place unarmed. I'm sure you won't press the point. Mr. Curtis will show you to the gate, won't you, Maury?"

Curtis smiled. "Surely," he said, and led the way. At the wide front door he stood aside. "You first." Humbolt Smith stepped out into the night.

The wind was still blowing. The air felt sharp and fresh after the stuffiness of the house. Curtis closed the door and there was a gun in his

hand, pressing against Smith's back just under the shoulder blades.

It seemed to Smith that guns had a disconcerting way of leaping into these men's hands. He drew his breath sharply, then said in a normal tone. "Why the gun?"

Curtis was low-voiced. "Don't make a difficult job more difficult, Smith. There's a little house at the lower end of the garden. Let's get to this as quietly and easily as possible. Death is always so messy."

Humbolt Smith wanted to smile. This was like a chapter out of a nightmare. Things didn't happen this way, and yet the pressure of the gun in his back was very real. He started slowly down the steps.

"If I'm to die, would you be so kind as to satisfy my curiosity?"

"Sorry." Curtis' voice showed no regret.

Smith sighed. "The end of an adventurer, a modern adventurer—one of the few left. And he dies in the tool house of a garden, with no chance. Dumas would not have written it this way."

The man at his back laughed. "Really, Smith, you make me almost sorry that this is necessary. If things had been different I believe I would have really enjoyed knowing you."

"After you shoot me," Humbolt Smith went on, "do you cut off my head, or do you leave that pleasant job for the rat-like individual in the butler's suit?"

The gun seemed to tighten against his back.

"Cut off your head? But why, my dear sir, should I cut off your head?"

"It seems to be the way to treat corpses in this charming garden," Smith said airily. "At least the one I stumbled over on the path up to the house certainly had no head."

Curtis' voice had lost its easy sound. "What the devil are you babbling about?"

"Nothing, except that on my way up through the garden earlier this

evening I fell over a body, and that body was decapitated."

He had stopped and Curtis did not push him forward.

FOR a full minute there was no sound save for the constant rush of the wind through the thick foliage of the shrubbery. Then the man said: "Where was this body?"

"Want me to show you?"

"Yes."

"It's on the path which cuts straight through the garden from the gate and comes out on the driveway just before you reach the house steps. I'm sorry. I'd have mentioned it sooner, but I assumed that you and Colonel Dakton knew all about it. In fact I rather thought you put it there."

"We didn't. Curtis' voice was strained. "Come on, show me."

Smith turned willingly. Every moment that he managed to keep this man away from the tool house lengthened his life. He led Curtis back around the house, along the drive to where the path branched off. They went slowly, Smith feeling his way, Curtis close behind.

The moon had come out from behind a cloud bank and bathed the garden in an eerie greenish hue. The path wound in a twisting course through the shrubbery and Smith could not be sure exactly where he had seen the body. Not until he came out onto the drive close to the gate did he realize that he had missed it.

Curtis cursed. "Wait a minute. What's the idea?"

Smith told him: "We must have missed it. It wasn't directly on the path. It was off to one side. Let's go back." They went back, slower this time, but there was no sign of the body.

When they came out on the drive near the house Curtis was swearing.

"So you were just stalling? There wasn't any body?"

Smith shook his head. "Whether

you believe me or not, there was a body. And it was headless."

Curtis breathed deeply, nervously. "He would do something like that."

"Who?" Smith demanded.

"It doesn't concern you," Curtis snarled. "Come on, let's go to the tool house and get this over with. You've stalled long enough." He pushed Smith ahead of him around the house and walked rapidly toward the far end of the garden.

The tool house loomed out of the semi-darkness, a small affair of weathered brick. Smith's back muscles tightened. He had been watching for a chance to whirl and grasp the gun, but Curtis had never relaxed his attention for an instant. However, Smith had resolved to try it before that house was reached. He had no illusions. He knew the man behind him would not hesitate to shoot him down.

They were almost there. They turned from the path into a bricked spot, bare of shrubbery, and then a dark figure dived out of the shadows on the right and a hard fist made a startlingly sharp sound on the bone of Curtis' jaw.

The man's knees folded under him. The gun slipped from his grasp, but he did not hit the bricks, because Bo Zeller's big hand caught him and held him upright.

"Hi, Chief."

SMITH had stooped and caught up the fallen gun. Hi, Bo. Nice work."

Bo grunted. "I've been trailing you ever since you come out of that house, but there wasn't no place clear enough to take a good swing." He sucked the knuckles of his right hand while he supported the unconscious man with his left. "What'll I do with this?"

"Put him in there." Smith jerked his head toward the tool house. "And see if there's some way to fasten the door."

Zeller shifted his burden, carrying it easily into the little building. When he came back he reported: "There's a hasp and a padlock. I won't say that he can't break the door down, but he'll have fun doing it. What happened to you, anyhow?"

"Before I tell you what happened, I want to ask you a question. Did you move a headless body from the path out in front?"

Zeller sucked in his breath. "A headless body! Not me. I wouldn't come within twenty feet of one if I could help it. Me, I like my bodies all in one piece."

Humbolt Smith nodded. "I didn't think it was you. Still, I wanted to be sure. As for what happened to me, I was paid five thousand dollars more for marrying the Albright girl."

Zeller started at him. "Marrying? You mean you really married her?"

Smith said: "Yes."

"And you got five grand for it? I've been hitched three times and I never got a dime from any of them. Have you got the five grand?"

"I rather think Mr. Curtis expected to take the five grand from my pocket after he used a thirty-eight slug on me in that tool house, but your unscheduled appearance rather upset his plans."

Zeller whistled. "Look, Chief. If you weren't kidding about that headless corpse, let's you and me scam out of here and yell copper at the top of our lungs. We don't want to get mixed up with any headless bodies or nothing. If we do, they'll be calling us maniacs in all the papers. I'm not punch-nutty and I don't want to give some bright scribe the right to say I am, in his lousy scandal sheet. I gotta reputation to think of. Once I fought the champ—"

"And got thoroughly licked," Smith reminded him.

Zeller was reproachful. "You would bring that up. Anyhow, let's scam."

"Scramming would be an excellent idea, except that you forget my dar-

ling wife is in that house. You wouldn't want me to go away and leave her at the mercy of those wolves."

Zeller showed his surprise. "You've got your five grand, haven't you? What more do you want?"

Smith smiled. "You wouldn't understand. Look, pal. You and I are going into that house and get Mrs. Smith. I'll walk up to the door and ring the bell. You keep out of sight in case they get the drop on me. There are several questions which I wish to ask Colonel Dalton—questions which he will have to be persuaded to answer."

Zeller kissed his knuckles. "Why didn't you say that before? Lead me to him. I feel like I got a persuading mood coming on." He trailed Smith back toward the house joyfully.

CHAPTER III

POLICE BUSINESS



HERE was a light burning in the square hall, showing through two small windows on either side of the door. Smith tried it, found it locked and used the knocker. Nothing happened. He tried the knocker again, still without response. Then he glanced toward the small windows. They were both locked. He hit the upper glass pane with the barrel of his gun. It shattered with tinkling sound, falling inward. He kicked the catch over with his finger, raised the lower pane, reached through and twisted the door's bolt. Then he pushed it open.

"Watch yourself," Zeller said. "Those lugs will probably shoot."

Humbolt Smith was watching himself, but nothing happened. The hall remained silent, empty. He edged through the door with Zeller at his heels. They were halfway across it when a motor raced somewhere at the rear of the house and a car shot

around the curving driveway toward the gate.

Humbolt swore, pivoted and jumped back toward the doorway. He was just in time to see a tail-light disappear into the thick shrubbery. He stood on the porch listening, heard the car make the turn into the street, its motor getting fainter as it shot away into the night.

"I think," he told Zeller, "that our friends have gone."

The ex-fighter swore. "I'll bet if I was in my heap I could catch them."

"But you're not in your heap," Smith reminded him. "It's parked out behind the estate. It would take you five minutes to get going and by that time you wouldn't have a chance. Come on, let's search the house."

They ransacked the house and netted nothing. It was as if the girl had never been there. There was no sign of her clothes—nothing. Nor was there any sign of servants. The place was absolutely empty. Smith gave it up finally.

"Let's go back to the tool house. Our pal, Curtis, should have come to by this time and perhaps he can be persuaded to answer some questions."

They left the big house and went back toward the corner of the estate. Smith stopped in the bricked space. The tool house door was standing wide open. There was no one inside. Smith lit a match and examined the padlock. It had been broken. His lips were tight as he turned away.

"What do we do now?" Zeller asked.

"We get out of here as fast as we can. Which way is the car?"

Zeller jerked his head toward the rear gate, turned and led the way. The big car stood silent, glistening in the shadows. Zeller opened the rear door and helped his employer in.

SMITH'S foot struck something soft, yielding. He knew what it was before his hand went over to click on the dome light. The headless

corpse sat in the far corner of the rear seat. Zeller uttered a half-smothered gasp.

"Here, give me a hand," Smith ordered. "We'll carry him back to the tool house."

He backed out of the car and with Zeller's help lifted the headless body from the seat. Between them they lugged it into the garden and along the path. They placed the body on a pile of empty sacks in one corner of the building, turned and left.

Smith was fastening the hasp when a voice came out of the darkness to jerk him erect.

"Wait a minute. What goes on here?"

He spun around to get a flashlight's beam directly in his face. Zeller cursed and raised his gun, but two dark figures came out of the bushes, caught his arms before he had a chance to use it. Captain Kranz of the Homicide Squad was peering at them.

"Smith! As I live. The boy adventurer!"

There was joy in his voice. Ever since Smith had almost thrown the captain out of his office Kranz had been hoping to catch him off base. He came forward now, the light held steady, and half a dozen men appeared from the darkness to converge on the prisoners.

"Humbolt Smith. And what may you be doing in this garden?"

Smith didn't say anything. His mind was racing. His one idea was to get Kranz away before the captain thought of looking in the tool house.

The captain repeated his question and Smith lied.

"I was driving by the back road and thought I heard a scream. Bo and I came over to investigate. There's nothing in the tool house." As soon as he said it he knew that he had said the wrong thing, for the captain shot a quick glance at the door.

"We'll just have a look. Watch these guys, Sweeney. They're tricky."

He advanced past Smith and unfastened the catch, pulling the door open and flashing his light around the small interior.

"Wh-what the—"

"What is it, Captain?" A couple of his men had sprung forward.

Kranz was wiping his forehead with the back of his free hand. He advanced gingerly into the building and his voice came back, somewhat muffled by the brick walls.

"There's a dead guy in here and he hasn't got any head."

He was gone three minutes, then he was back, staring at Smith with hard eyes.

"All right, wise guy. Start talking. So there wasn't any one in that shed, huh?"

"I didn't see him when I looked in," Smith said truthfully.

The captain snorted. "You need glasses." Then his voice hardened. "I knew there was something wrong with you. I knew that if I watched you long enough I'd catch you. Now, who's the headless guy in there and why did you kill him?"

SMITH shrugged. "Let me take a look." No one offered objection and he went into the tool house with Kranz at his heels.

The captain's flash bathed the body in its white circle and Smith stood staring at it for several minutes. When he turned there was a thin, cynical smile on his lips.

"I'm afraid, Kranz, that you're going to have to keep on watching. This is one killing you're going to have trouble hanging on my shoulders. That man has been dead four or five hours and I have a very good alibi up until an hour and a half ago."

Kranz swore and pushed Smith out of the way roughly. He knelt and examined the body. When he rose his thin thoughtful face was blank. "He's been dead quite a time, all right. Just the same, I'm going to take you in and let you explain why you were wander-

ing around Colonel Dalton's garden. That story of yours about driving along the back road and hearing a scream won't wash, because that back road doesn't go any place—just around the estate. And you didn't have any business on it."

Humbolt did not let his emotion show either in his face or voice. "Would you mind telling me how you happened to show up here so opportunely with your army?" he asked.

"That's easy. Someone called us on the phone a little while ago and said there was murder being done at the Dalton estate. We were just starting out on another call and dashed over here."

Smith whistled under his breath. Kranz turned as one of his men hurried up. "Any one in the house?"

The man shook his head. The detective-captain turned back to Smith. "All right, wise guy. Last chance to tell us what you know about this."

Smith shook his head. "I don't know a thing. I was called on the telephone at six-thirty tonight and asked to come out here at nine to see the colonel. I came—"

The detective interrupted him. "Stop stalling. Colonel Dalton has been in the hospital for months. He couldn't have called you. An old housekeeper has been taking care of this place."

"Where's the housekeeper, then?"

The detective captain shrugged.

"How would I know?"

"Then who turned on the lights in the house?"

Kranz was irritable. "Listen. I'm the guy that's suppose to be asking questions, not you. Come on, we'll ride down to the station."

They rode down in Smith's car, Bo driving with a burly policeman at his side. Kranz occupied the rear seat with Smith, and Smith was careful to sit in the corner which the corpse had occupied.

He hadn't dared to look for bloodstains. He was pretty certain that

there weren't any, but he was taking no chances. At the police station Kranz ran into a set-back.

They couldn't charge Smith with murder, since the coroner established that the murdered man had been dead for at least four hours, and Smith had an air-tight alibi up to within an hour and a half of the time Kranz had caught him coming out of the tool house.

In forty minutes he walked out of the station, apparently a free man, but he knew that from now on Kranz would be checking up on him more closely than ever.

Bo was at his shoulder and he spat on his hands as they turned toward the big car. "For two cents I'd have gone to work on those buzzards and given them a taste of their own third degree."

Smith smiled. "Calm down," he advised and stopped to buy an early edition of a morning paper.

Under a street lamp he opened the paper to the vital statistics. He wasn't surprised to find an account of his marriage, but he was surprised when he found quite an article under the heading: "ADVENTURER LEAPS INTO MATRIMONY. Nan Albright marries Humbolt Smith."

He stared at the paper, not quite believing his eyes. He wasn't important enough to rate a spot on page one, and from the article, the girl wasn't, either. She was listed as the secretary of the Dalton Import and Investment Company.

He turned to Zeller. "The cops are going to start trailing me as soon as we move. It's your job to let me out around a corner somewhere."

Zeller protested. "Gee, Chief. And I miss all the fun."

Humbolt Smith's mouth was grim. "I think there will be enough fun, as you call it, to go around. Just get around a corner into a dark street fast enough so I can drop off without our friend Kranz knowing that I'm not still in the car. That done, you

can drive around and keep them entertained for an hour, then head for the garage."

He walked to the big automobile and swung into the rear seat.

Zeller climbed under the wheel, pouting like a small boy denied a chance to play his favorite game. The big car shot away from the curb, its spinning wheels throwing loose particles of gravel across the hard pavement.

Smith leaned forward and said sharply: "Don't lose them. I want them to trail you." Zeller slowed his speed obediently. Smith twisted to look through the rear-view window.

A police car had pulled out after them and was frankly following, making no effort at concealment. Smith swore under his breath. Kranz was merely trying to be annoying.

"About the fifth or sixth corner, go around slow. Let me swing off, then speed up before they can get around."

Zeller obeyed. He chose the fourth corner. It was dark down the side street, the store fronts unlighted. The car took the corner sharply, veered to the curb, slowing.

Smith swung off, slamming the door. The car shot ahead and Smith ducked across the sidewalk to the shelter of a dark doorway. He was none too soon, for the police car came barreling around the corner, saw that Smith's car was perhaps a block ahead and slowed again. Smith watched them pass, a little smile twisting his lips.

CHAPTER IV

THE INVALID



HUMBOLT SMITH turned and walked back to the main street, found a cab and gave the driver the address of the private hospital where Dalton was supposed to be confined.

The attendant at the desk looked at him uncertainly. "I'm not sure Colo-

nel Dalton should be disturbed at this hour."

Smith showed his police card. "My friend," he said, "I'm certain that the last thing your boss would want would be a squad of cops tramping through these quiet halls. That's exactly what he'll get if I don't have the chance to talk to Dalton for five minutes."

The attendant was young and uncertain. No one of authority seemed to be in the building. He called a pretty brunette in nurse's uniform, and they conferred in undertones, casting side glances toward Smith. Finally the nurse came over.

"You can go up," she told him, "but you mustn't stay for over five minutes. Mr. Dalton is here for a rest and this is very irregular."

She took him up in the automatic elevator and showed him the door of the room.

The man on the bed said without turning:

"What is it now, nurse?"

"It isn't the nurse," Smith told him.

The man on the bed rolled over quickly. He was the same man Smith had seen at the big house. At least Humbolt would have sworn to it in court, but there was no sign of recognition on the big face.

The man wore pajamas and a robe. He put his bare feet over the edge of the bed and sat up quickly. "Who are you? What the devil do you want?"

Smith shut the door quietly. His hand was still on his gun and he never took his eyes from the man.

"I want my wife," he said. "And I want her now."

The seated man's face changed. "What are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

"I'm beginning to believe I am, Colonel Dalton. But that doesn't keep me from wanting my wife."

The man put his bare feet down on the floor and reached for the bell. "Don't touch it," Smith told him

crisply, and let Dalton have a peek at his gun.

The hand dropped away from the bell cord, but there was no sign of fear in the big face.

"You must be insane. Put that gun away before you hurt yourself. I don't know anything about your wife. I don't even know that you have one."

"You should; you were at the wedding tonight."

The man laughed. "You *are* crazy. I haven't been out of this room for six weeks. Go ask my nurse, if you don't believe me."

SMITH'S brows drew together. Either Dalton was an accomplished liar or he was telling the truth. Smith dropped the gun into his pocket, backed into the hall.

The nurse was waiting for him at the little desk beside the elevator. Smith paused before her.

"Would it have been possible for the colonel to have left the hospital at around nine tonight?"

She showed him puzzled eyes. "Left the hospital? What are you talking about? Of course he didn't leave the hospital. I was on duty this evening myself."

"Mind giving me your name?"

She gave it to him and he made a note of it. "I think the colonel wants you," he told her, and stepped into the elevator. He didn't linger in the building, but got out as fast as he could.

They might decide to call the police and he didn't care to answer any more of Kranz' questions at the moment. He got back into the cab and told the driver to take him out to the parsonage beside the church, which sat a quarter of a mile below the Dalton estate.

The house was dark. He went up onto the porch and banged on the door. He banged a long time and finally a woman's frightened voice called from the upper story window. He answered her, asking if the minister was there.

She called back that he wasn't, that he wouldn't be home for twelve weeks as he had left for a cruise to South America that night.

Smith's lips tightened. "What time did he leave?"

She said about eleven o'clock and slammed the window. Humbolt Smith turned back to the cab. The minister was gone—Dalton had apparently never left the hospital—he began to wonder if he had dreamed the whole thing. But one thing was certain—there had been a headless body and Kranz' questioning had been very real.

He had the cabman take him to a telephone and called one of the insurance companies he had contacted after Bo Zeller's report on Nan Albright.

"Did you have your man put on Dalton? You did. And you haven't heard from your man? Well, if you can identify his *body*, go over to the morgue. No, you'll have to do it from the body. The head is missing."

He hung up and resumed his journey in the cab.

His apartment was on the far side of town and it took them a good half hour to get there. It was a two-storied building and Smith occupied the upper front. When the cab pulled up he saw that the lights were on.

He hoped that it wasn't Zeller. If the driver had led the police to the apartment he meant to give him a proper balling out.

SMITH paused before the door, found his key and, thrusting it into the lock, pushed the door open. It opened directly into the front room of the apartment. Zeller wasn't there. Instead, the girl sat in Smith's favorite chair before the window, quietly staring out into the night.

She evidently had not heard him until he opened the door, for she leaped to her feet with a little smothered cry, one hand coming up, palm out, to cover her mouth.

Smith put the keys into his pocket, stepped through and closed the door.

"Good evening, Mrs. Smith."

She was staring at him with very wide eyes, her face white. Slowly she let the hand fall away from her mouth, showing nice lips, not too thin and with not too much make-up.

"How—how did you get in here?"

Smith's mouth twisted cynically. "I'm in the habit of walking into my own apartment. Perhaps you didn't know it was mine. Or perhaps you didn't think I was able to walk anywhere—"

She made no movement to sit down. "I don't—I don't understand what you mean."

His voice hardened. "Look, honey. Let's stop playing games. I meant that you probably thought I was dead, and at first sight you took me for a ghost. Well, let me assure you that I'm not a ghost. Mr. Curtis didn't quite carry out his assignment."

She showed him puzzled eyes. "You speak as if Curtis had tried to kill you."

Smith expressed amazement. "And where would you get a foolish idea like that? You read into my words things that I don't put there."

She gasped. "Please—won't you—won't you go away for a little while? It will spoil all the good that you've done if you remain here."

He smiled at her. "I like it here, Mrs. Smith. You're one of my most interesting cases. I always did like blondes."

She said: "You know I'm not Mrs. Smith. You know that—that it wasn't a real marriage."

"That," he told her, "is what you think. It was a real marriage all right—with a license and everything. I suppose they got the license by using a couple of proxies."

"Do you mean we're legally married?"

He shrugged. "Very thoroughly legally married."

She slumped into the chair, burying

her face in her small hands. "Oh, no—"

"Don't take it too hard. You can always go to Reno or get an annulment or something. Most of my wives enjoy it for a little while."

"You don't understand." She seemed to be thinking desperately. "But please leave now. You can come back later. But if you don't leave now, you'll be killed."

"I'll say he will."

There was a man standing in the doorway which Smith had carelessly left unlocked.

THE girl's head jerked up. "Frank, wait! Wait a minute. Don't do it. You don't understand. I never saw Smith before today—"

The man with the gun started. When he spoke his voice was harder than it had been.

"Stop trying to cover him up. I told you what I'd do if you ever went for anyone else. You didn't believe me. Well, believe me now."

She came away from her chair, jumping in front of Smith with one motion.

"Listen to me. Don't kill a man, Frank. Get hold of yourself. Watch that temper.

"Don't ruin our whole lives by killing a man."

His voice was tight. "Get out of the way or I'll shoot you first—"

"I wouldn't, Frank." Curtis had stepped through the bedroom door. At the same moment the rat-like man, no longer in butler's uniform, stepped out of the hall and jammed a gun against Frank's side.

"Drop it, punk."

The man let the gun slide. Curtis' voice was tight. "Easy, Smith—watch yourself," he warned when Smith reached quietly for his gun.

The rat-like man pushed Frank into the room.

Curtis had come up behind Smith, gotten his gun and shoved him over toward the wall.

CHAPTER V

REUNION



DALTON chose that instant to make his entrance. He looked around, rubbing his hands.

"This is nice and friendly-like. We're all here, I see."

Smith said nothing. He knew that he was a spectator. Not so Frank. His face was twisted with anger, lacking color of any kind.

"So this is your gag."

Dalton nodded. "Exactly, my dear Frank. When you disappeared with that two hundred thousand dollars in diamonds I thought it over carefully. I decided that the thing you cared for most in the world was my secretary. I went to her and explained that you'd made a mistake, that you'd disappeared with company property and that we had to drag you back.

"I was certain that you were hiding somewhere in the city. I didn't know where, so I told her that we'd pull a fake marriage, get the news into the papers and that you were bound to appear."

The girl glanced sharply from one to the other.

"He didn't tell me that, Frank," she cried. "He said that you'd gotten sore and gone off in a huff and that we had to get you back before the insurance company discovered the loss of the stones and sent the police after you."

The man's face was bitter. He ignored the girl, facing Dalton. "Very clever, Colonel. I should have known better."

"Of course you should have known better," Dalton told him comfortably. "But don't worry, Frank. All I want is the diamonds."

The man's face was tight. "You'll not get them."

"I rather think," the colonel told him, "that I will. You see, Frank, I have two things that you want badly

—your life and the girl's. Now, I've found that when a man holds as strong a hand as that, he wins. Don't be stubborn, my boy. Where are the stones?"

Frank shot an angry look toward the girl. "You got me into this. You played in with the colonel. You thought that I'd run out on you and you were trying to get even."

She was staring at him wide-eyed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He sneered at her. "You don't know what I'm talking about? You don't know that the colonel and I arranged between us for me to steal the diamonds. He was to give me time to get to South America before he reported the theft. I was to leave the diamonds at a certain place and he was going to pick them up and sell them—only I overheard him and Curtis talking.

"They were going to grab the diamonds and have me killed as I got onto the boat. It would look as if some one had discovered that I had the diamonds and had killed me to get them. He would be perfectly in the clear, collect the insurance and have the diamonds, too. I fooled him. I merely disappeared with them.

"He didn't dare report the theft until he knew where the stones were. He had the boats watched, but I was too clever to try to get out of town. He never would have gotten me if it hadn't been for you."

"You mean you were planning to steal those diamonds?" the girl said incredulously. "That you expected me to go away with you?"

AUSTIN'S voice was harsh. "Stop playing innocent. You knew what was going on. You couldn't have worked for Dalton for a year without realizing that he and Curtis were crooks."

Smith could tell by her face that Austin was wrong. She said slowly: "I guess I'm dumb. Well, I've found out now."

"Come, come." Dalton's voice had lost some of its oiliness. "This is no time for playing hearts and flowers. I'll trade your life and the girl's against those diamonds, Frank."

"Leave me out," the girl said dully, and turned away.

Frank shook his head. There was a bitter look on his handsome face. "No deal, Colonel. I wouldn't give you the satisfaction, you fat louse, of turning over those stones. Go ahead, blast me."

Curtis had been watching him closely.

"You know, Colonel," Curtis now said, "I've been thinking. Frank isn't the kind of a guy who would leave those stones lying around loose. He'd have them on him if I know anything about it."

Frank swore at him and jumped toward the door. The rat-like man tripped him neatly, knelt on the middle of his back and began searching him.

His breath made a whistling sound as his clawing fingers exposed the belt of soft leather which encircled Frank's waist. He rose and, with Curtis' help, turned the man over. They unfastened the belt, drew it free and straightened. As the rat-like man straightened he kicked the man heavily in the side.

Frank groaned. Dalton was examining the belt under the table light. Each of the little pockets yielded a small group of sparkling stones. The big man licked his lips.

"This is really perfect. All we have to do is dispose of Smith, Frank and the girl. That'll be easy. We'll make it look as if Frank learned that his girl had married another man, that he came up here and killed them, then killed himself. We'll put the belt back around Frank's waist, leave a few small stones in it. He'll be blamed for the theft of the rest of the diamonds, and the insurance company'll pay off."

"Very clever, Colonel," Smith said.

Dalton made him a little bow. Smith extended one hand. "Could I look at that belt? Diamonds have always fascinated me."

"The condemned man ate a hearty meal," Dalton gibed. "Sure, have a look at the sparklers. It's going to be dark where you're going."

Smith took the belt. There were four pockets and he spilled the stones from each into his big palm, stepping forward to get better light.

For a moment his big body was between Dalton and the belt. The window beyond the chair was open. There was no screen. With a single motion of his hand Smith sent the belt flying directly through the center of the window.

The rat-like man uttered a wordless cry. Curtis cursed, leaping forward. Only Dalton had presence of mind enough to jam his gun against Smith's side. Hate made his eyes small and very round looking.

SMITH'S voice cut at him. "Wait, Colonel. Don't shoot yet. Take a look out of the window first. There's an awning on the floor below. The belt probably lit on that awning. If you shoot now the neighbors will hear and call copper. You won't have time to crawl up and retrieve the belt."

Dalton swore. "You're clever yourself. Where'd the belt land, Curtis?"

Curtis was leaning out of the window. "He's right, Colonel. It caught on the awning. I can reach it by holding Jake on my shoulder." He backed away from the window. "Come on, Jake." He led the rat-like man into the hall.

As he passed, Jake kicked the prostrate Frank again in the side. Dalton backed away from Smith so he could cover the room.

The girl was standing close to the far wall. Suddenly there was a shriek from below, welling up through the building in a piercing wave.

Dalton jumped toward the window. "What the devil!"

Smith didn't bother to answer. As Dalton turned he launched himself toward the colonel. Dalton caught motion from the corner of his eye and swung around, his gun exploding, the bullet cutting above Smith's driving figure.

Smith's shoulder struck him directly in the chest, carried him back against the wall and they went to the floor, Dalton losing the gun in the fall. He tried to crawl toward it, Smith fought to pull him back.

Over his shoulder Smith shouted for the girl to run. She started toward the door, stopped. Frank Austin had come up onto his knees.

His white face was twisted with insane rage.

She cried out: "Frank," and he knocked her aside, advancing on the struggling men. He picked Smith up and pushed him out of the way, then he caught Dalton by the coat and heaved the man up over his head, carrying him toward the window.

Smith realized what he intended to do, jumped forward, but he was too late—Frank had managed to get the colonel's big body over the lower sill. But as Dalton dropped, his clawing hand managed to fasten itself desperately on Frank's collar, and Frank Austin was jerked from the room like a plumb-bob on the end of a string.

There was ripping, tearing sound from the awning as they hurtled through it to the sidewalk below. Smith snatched the gun from the floor and pounded along the hall and down the steps.

The wreckage on the sidewalk was an unmoving mass. Austin's and the colonel's bodies were interlaced as if knitted together with gigantic needles. Curtis lay to one side, stunned, but not dead. The rat-like man had seized the belt and was running down the street as a police car swung to the curb and Captain Kranz leaped out, the hobnails of his broad heels kicking tiny sparks from the rough surface of the concrete.

Kranz saw the running man and took out after him, the policemen stringing out behind him. Two other cars jerked to the curb behind the police machine and a small man, expensively dressed, ran up to Smith's side.

"What's going on here? What's happened?"

Smith looked at him angrily. "This is a fine time to get here."

The man was the head of the big insurance company Smith had talked to on the phone.

be sure, so we sent for his brother."

Smith ignored him. He turned around and went into the building.

The girl was still standing where he'd left her. He took her over to the chair and made her sit down. She passed a hand tiredly across her eyes.

"I still don't know what really happened—"

He smiled down at her. "It wasn't very complicated. Frank ducked out with the diamonds, according to Dalton's plan. Dalton went to the rest-home for an alibi and bribed the

Parolee Tom Parker Gets a Job Where the Boss Pays Off in Bullets — and a Fish Net Catches a Mob



IN
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A Smashing Mystery Novel

By MARVIN RYERSON

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FEATURED IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE!

"I don't like your tone," he sputtered.

"I don't give a hoot what you like," Smith said. "I told you to get over to my apartment as fast as you could and cover me. It's not your fault that we're not all dead."

The little man moved uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Smith. We went over to the morgue to see if that headless body was Mitchell—the operative we had watching Dalton. We couldn't

nurse so he could slip out whenever he wanted to. Curtis was running the business. Everything was going swell, but Frank Austin figured out that they were going to cross him, so he merely disappeared with the diamonds. Dalton figured the way to bring him back was to have you married and have the news announced in the papers. I still don't know why you came to my office."

Her face relaxed a little. "I wanted

to see what the man I was going to marry looked like, but I still don't understand how you figured it all out."

"I'll tell you. First I found that headless body in Dalton's garden. I assumed it was the operative who was watching Dalton for the insurance company. I figured they cut off his head to keep him from being identified. You said that the marriage was a fake, but I saw the license and there was nothing fake about it. Then it came out in the papers in a spot on page one, which neither of us was important enough to occupy. I knew by that, that Dalton wanted someone to *know* that we were married.

"The natural place for a wife to be would be in her husband's apartment. I figured this boy friend of yours would be the one Dalton was trying to reach, and that he'd come to my place looking for you.

"I called the insurance men to cover us. I didn't call the police because I wanted to get full credit. I had Bo Zeller lead them around town, thinking they were following me, then I threw the belt out of the window because there's an old maid living under me who's afraid of burglars and who's always home. I thought it would catch on her awning and that when they tried to get it she'd scream—" He broke off as Kranz and the insur-

ance man hammered into the apartment.

CAPTAIN KRANZ was carrying the belt in his big hand. "Hey, where the devil are the diamonds? We got that guy, but the belt's empty."

Humbolt Smith turned and gave him a slow smile. "Why, Captain—you didn't think I'd throw two hundred thousand dollars out of the window? They're here." He reached into his coat pocket as Bo Zeller appeared in the door.

"What goes on, Chief?"

"Nothing, now. You've done your part."

Bo looked crestfallen. "Boy, I'm always too late for everything."

His employer shook his head. "On the contrary, you're just in time to take Mrs. Smith home." He turned and smiled at the girl. "I'll be over tomorrow. We can talk things out then."

The police captain looked after her, scratching his head. "You're a funny mugg, Smith. If I had a wife like that I wouldn't wait until tomorrow to talk things over."

"That," Smith told him, "is exactly why you'll never have a wife like that. It was a very strange marriage but I shouldn't be surprised if it lasts for a long time."

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Secret Mission

By FRANK JOHNSON

Author of "Enter the Crimson Mask," "Death to Come," etc.



Malden's fingers were cutting off Gifford's wind

Lon Gifford and Nancy Harvey Put Their Heads in a Fifth Columnist's Den to Draw Some Fascist Fangs!

FOG shrouded the dingy street in a dismal blanket of gray. The mist muffled all sounds along the waterfront. Somewhere out in the river a steamer's horn snored with muted resonance, and there came a far off rattle that might have been made by the lowering of an anchor chain. Halfway down the street, Lon Gifford paused and stood motionless, listening.

The girl paused too, her thin cellophane slicker rustling as she moved closer to him, as though to find comfort in the nearness of his stalwart form.

"What's wrong?" the girl was asking. Her voice was low, but he sensed the effort she was making to keep it under control. "Did you hear something, Lon?"

"Someone's coming," Gifford said

softly. "It may be Malden. He said he would meet us here."

Nancy Harvey shivered, for there was a dank chill in the mist that ebbed about her slender shoulders and clung damply to her blond hair. Her slender fingers caught Lon Gifford's arms and tightened.

The muffled footsteps grew louder. Someone was approaching slowly and deliberately. Finally a white-faced, shadowy figure loomed out of the fog. The man stopped in front of Gifford and the girl.

"We're here, Malden," said Gifford, and there was no hint of friendliness in his tone. "Remember, no tricks. I've got you covered with an automatic in the side pocket of my coat."

"Tricks?" Malden's voice was placid. "Why should there be? You're attitude will alarm Miss Harvey needlessly." He swung around. "This way, please. There is a place where we can talk. The fog is too uncomfortable."

They followed as he led the way to an open door halfway down the block. That doorway was like a yawning black maw in the fog. Malden stepped in through it and was swallowed up in the gloom.

Nancy was about to follow, but Gifford caught her arm and drew her back.

"Wait!" he said tersely. He raised his voice. "Malden!"

"What?" came the voice of the other man out of the darkness.

"A light first," said Lon Gifford sharply.

THERE was a moment's pause and then an uncovered electric light bulb gleamed brightly from the ceiling of a drab hallway. Peter Malden stood there waiting, a thin-faced, slender, dark-haired man with a slightly Oriental cast to his features.

"Please come in and close the door," he said, his long slender hands busy lighting a cigarette. "Such caution is hardly necessary."

Gifford motioned to Nancy to enter and then stepped inside himself, closing the door behind him. The day-latch snapped into place. Malden took a long draw on his cigarette, blew the smoke out lingeringly.

"This way," he said, turning to a second door behind him and drawing it open.

Gifford, glimpsing a luxuriously furnished room, smiled ironically. Evidently this was a hide-away that Peter Malden used often. The contrast between the dingy hall and the room beyond was in keeping with the man's character. Beneath his innocuous exterior, Peter Malden, as Gifford had reason to believe, was one of the most dangerous individuals in America.

Nancy shared that knowledge—knowledge gained in their work as Government agents. And even though both felt that Peter Malden was acting under orders of someone else, someone who was an important undercover agent to a Foreign Power, they had no intention of underestimating him.

It was a desperate game Lon Gifford and Nancy Harvey were playing. It had taken them months to establish their present identities and give themselves an "in." One little slip could ruin all their preparations. Worse still, Malden and those for whom he worked had subtle but extremely thorough ways of eliminating those whom they considered dangerous.

So far as Malden now knew, Lon Gifford and Nancy Harvey were two of the cleverest jewel thieves and smugglers in the country. The selection of this type of role was no accident. Peter Malden had at one time, according to the best information, been closely associated with the diamond merchants in the Netherlands. There was still a chance that he had contacts that would make him welcome the aid of a pair of clever jewel smugglers.

So in fact, it had turned out, Malden had contacted Gifford and Nancy during the day by phone and had requested that they meet him here on this street near the river. Gifford had agreed, even though he suspected a trap. Now, looking at Malden, the big brown-haired government agent was still wary, still ready for trouble.

"All right, Malden," Gifford said curtly, unable to shake off the premonition of danger that clung to him like the fog they had just left. "We're here. Now what do you want?"

The slender, dark-haired man hesitated a moment, and to Gifford his deliberation was becoming a little hard to take. It was as though a sleek cat were playing with two helpless mice.

"Well?" Gifford glared at him. "Let's have it."

"There is no need to be antagonistic." Peter Malden smiled slowly, his tone placid and unhurried. "I merely thought we might be able to do a little business together, Gifford." He examined the carefully manicured nails of his white right hand. "Of course if you'd rather not—" He shrugged. "We'll just forget the whole thing."

"What's your proposition?" demanded Gifford truculently.

"I believe Mr. Malden is right, Lon," said Nancy as she removed her slicker and seated herself on a leather divan in one corner of the room. "After all, there is no reason for us all not to be friends."

Malden turned slowly and looked at her, nodding approvingly.

"That is better," he said. "Yes, much better. After all, this is purely business. I have investigated you two, and I feel that you may succeed in doing what for me would be quite impossible."

"And what might that be?" asked Gifford in a more friendly tone as he removed his hat and raincoat and placed them on a chair. "State your proposition, Malden."

Malden punched out the tip of his cigarette butt in an ash tray on a table. He went to the wall near a closed door and pushed a hidden button. A panel of the wainscoting slid back to reveal a wall safe. Malden twirled the dial and drew the safe door open.

"You see, I trust you far more than you do me," he said, his back to Gifford and the girl. "If I didn't, I would be foolish to let you know about this safe."

He reached inside the safe and then drew out two objects. One was a plush-covered case about three inches wide and eight inches long. The other was a white cardboard box. He placed both of these on the table. Then he returned to the safe and carefully wiped his fingerprints off the dial.

"Caution is always advisable," he said as he walked back to the table and looked down at the case. "You will deliver this to my agent in Mexico." He pointed to the case. "You will fly from New York by plane as a bride and groom making a honeymoon trip. Naturally, no one is even to dream that you have the contents of this case in your possession." Malden smiled. "But I understand you are quite clever at this sort of thing."

"What's in the case?" asked Gifford, moving closer to the table. Nancy remained seated on the divan. "Of course we will have to know that."

"Naturally." Malden opened the case. "You see!"

LONGIFFORD found himself gazing at a collection of cut diamonds that glittered brightly in the light. His expression did not change, but inwardly he gasped at sight of the unmounted stones. There was no doubt in his mind that they were real.

"You flatter us, Malden," he said. "If we attempt this, it will be the greatest smuggling job we've ever tackled."

"I am offering you ten thousand dollars if you accomplish this without any slips," said Malden, closing the lid on the jewel case. "Agreed?"

"Right." Gifford nodded. "We'll do it. We deliver the diamonds to your agent in Mexico. Is that all we have to do?"

"No, there will be further orders after you contact him," said Malden. "Perhaps you may take a little sea voyage. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Gifford smiled. "After all, we have to earn the ten grand."

"Good!" Peter Malden lifted the lid of the cardboard box. "Do you know much about guns. I have just bought this one. It is for target practice—a Colts twenty-two caliber on a forty-five frame."

"They're good guns for that sort of work," said Gifford as he looked at the long-barreled revolver in the box. "Have a nice balance?"

"The balance of this one is perfect." Malden picked the gun up by the barrel and handed it to Gifford butt first. "Try it."

Gifford took the gun and aimed it at an imaginary target. The gun had a nice feel in his hand.

"Swell," he said placing the revolver back in the box. "Good gun, all right."

Malden covered the box and then placed it back in the safe, then locked the safe and pushed the button that slid the pannel back into place. Gifford smiled as the dark-haired man turned to him.

"Haven't you overlooked one thing?" the government agent asked. "Suppose we should steal the diamonds instead of turning them over to your agent in Mexico?"

"I thought of that." Malden went to the closed door and drew it open. "But you won't dare — because of this."

Nancy uttered a startled cry and Gifford cursed under his breath. They stared at the figure huddled on the floor of the closet. It was a slender

blond man with a bullet hole in his head.

Blood had dried on his forehead, and there could be no doubt that he was dead.

"You see, he was killed with the gun I just showed you," said Malden calmly. "And if I turned the weapon over to the police, naturally only your fingerprints will be on it. Mine will be wiped off the barrel, of course." Peter Malden shook his head sadly. "It is most unfortunate that you found it necessary to murder a man in order to steal the diamonds that were originally in his possession."

"A nice frame, but you won't get away with it." Gifford leaped toward Malden as he spoke. "You're going to give me that gun!"

ABRUPTLY Malden moved with the speed of a panther making a kill. He caught Gifford in a flying tackle and brought the government agent to the floor with a thud. The two men struggled desperately. Gifford flung Malden back against the table and knocked it over, but Malden was tough and wiry.

He leaped forward and caught Gifford by the throat with his left hand, long powerful fingers pressing into the flesh with a grip of steel. Gifford grabbed at Malden, his fingers clutched the man's necktie and tore it loose from the shirt collar. Then Gifford released his hold on the tie and balled up his fist to strike.

Nancy remained seated on the divan, watching breathlessly. She reached for the big handbag lying on the leather seat beside her. She had learned it was best not to attempt to enter into a fight such as this until she saw an opportunity to be of some real assistance.

Gifford was breathing heavily. The fingers of Malden's left hand were proving amazingly powerful and were cutting off his wind. He was pounding at Malden with his left fist, but the other man was also deal-

ing heavy blows with his free right arm.

"Peter!" exclaimed a deep voice from the door leading into the hall. "Why you play so rough?"

Nancy glanced toward the door. A big man with shaggy dark hair stood there watching, a look of surprise on his rather grimy face. He was carrying a square package under one arm.

Instantly Malden released his grip on Gifford and leaped to his feet.

"I'm glad you got here, Tony," he said. "Mr. Gifford was getting much too excited. He doesn't like the idea of being implicated in the murder of John Craig—"

"Craig?" said the man called Tony. "But I thought—" He shrugged his shoulders. "What does it matter. It is none of Tony Gallo's business."

"Sorry this happened, Gifford," said Malden. "The business of the body and the fingerprints was intended merely to prove to you that it would be dangerous to doublecross us. I had no idea you would become so violent about it. Naturally I had to protect myself."

Gifford silently got to his feet. The shaggy-haired man moved into the room, put down his package and then helped Malden straighten up the table.

They both seemed quite sure of themselves now.

"And now, if you'll just give Lon that gun out of the safe, Mr. Malden," said Nancy. "I think we had better go now."

Malden and Tony Gallo turned to find the girl covering them with an automatic she had taken from her purse. In the next brief instant, when the other two men were not looking at him, Gifford drew his own gun.

"I'd advise you not to try anything foolish, gentlemen," said Gifford. "Open the safe, Malden. Both Miss Harvey and I have extremely nervous trigger-fingers, and we might as well

be implicated for three murders as one."

"But you said you had your gun in the pocket of your raincoat," exclaimed Malden in surprise. "I watched you when you took off the coat and I did not see the gun."

GIFFORD smiled grimly.

"Wrong," he said. "I merely said I had you covered from the side pocket of my coat when we were outside. You see, the raincoat is made with slits above the pockets so that I can reach into the pockets of the coat beneath it."

"Good Lord!" Malden shuddered. "And when I was fighting with you I might have been shot." He pushed the panel button. It slid back and he opened the safe, took out the cardboard box containing the gun.

"I'm sorry about this, Gifford," he said. "I just wanted to convince you that you had better not try and steal the diamonds. We still need your services and my offer of ten thousand stands."

"I don't like corpses," said Tony Gallo, closing the door of the closet and hiding the dead man from view.

Gifford dropped his automatic into his pocket. He took the box and placed it on the table, then carefully wiped off the butt of the Colt. Nancy was covering the two men with her automatic.

"All right," said Gifford. "The deal still stands. But just how do you expect us to smuggle the diamonds?"

"I have the way," said Gallo. "It is in the package I brought. A radio that is a little larger than the new pocket size. You will place the diamonds in the secret compartment that has been built in it."

He opened the package and showed them how the secret compartment in the radio case worked. It could only be opened by removing one of the power tubes. This slid back a panel in the side of the case. Malden placed the diamond case in the compartment.

Then Gallo rewrapped the package and handed it to Gifford after he and Nancy had put on their coats and were ready to go.

"You take the regular plane that leaves for Mexico tomorrow evening," instructed Malden. "In Mexico, a man named Jefferson Brown will get in touch with you. You will receive further orders from him. You understand?"

"Perfectly," said Gifford. "Come on, Nancy." He smiled at Malden and Gallo. "I'm sure you gentlemen will lead the way out. We'd feel safer that way."

MALDEN and the shaggy-haired man led the way along the hall and stood to one side as Nancy and Gifford passed the door. It closed behind them as soon as they were outside. The fog had begun to lift and the street did not seem so dismal and sinister. They found a cruising taxi when they reached the corner, flagged it and climbed it. Gifford gave the address of the hotel at which they were staying. Nancy breathed a sigh of relief as she settled back in the seat.

"There were a few moments when I didn't think we'd get out of there alive," she said. "They were much too casual about that dead man. I wonder which one of them killed him and why?"

"I don't know," said Gifford. "Friend Tony seemed quite surprised to learn the corpse was named John Craig. But anyway, they think we're a pair of fools. Their Fifth Columnists, just as we suspected. This business of our smuggling the diamonds is just a blind. They've probably got some important papers that they want us to smuggle through for them after we contact their agent in Mexico." He smiled grimly. "I've got a hunch our little plane trip is going to be quite interesting."

The next evening Gifford and the girl boarded the sleeper plane bound

for Mexico City. There were only six other passengers, though there was sleeping accommodation for sixteen. Gifford and Nancy did not recognize any of their fellow travelers, though they suspected that Malden was smart enough to have sent someone to make the trip in order to keep watch on them. Peter Malden was not the type of man, in their estimation, who would risk losing the diamonds even if the gems were merely a blind.

One passenger interested Lon Gifford more than all of the others. This was a tall, square-headed man with close cropped blond hair, who was dressed in a green suit. Once or twice this man glanced at the government agent and Gifford found there was something strangely familiar about his eyes. He was sure he had seen the blond man somewhere recently, but could not quite place him.

Gifford, Nancy and the rest of the passengers turned into their berths for the night, to sleep through the greater part of their journey, not even waking for the various stops the plane made along the route. Morning found them approaching Mexico City.

At a quiet word from Gifford, Nancy stopped the pretty auburn-haired stewardess as she passed down the aisle. The berths had been made up and the passengers were now in their seats.

"Could you tell me the name of that blond gentleman?" Nancy asked. "His face seems familiar, but I'm not sure I know him."

"That is Mr. von Stole," answered the stewardess. "I believe he is in business in Mexico. He travels back and forth quite often. We've carried him a number of times."

"Von Stole," repeated Nancy. "That's not the man I knew. His name is Martin—but thank you, anyway."

The stewardess smiled and continued her duties. Gifford and Nancy watched von Stole. It was not until

they were flying over the mountains that the blond man appeared to grow anxious. His attention was centered on a large red box-kite that was being flown high in the sky.

"The red kite!" he exclaimed rising from his seat in front of Gifford, and hurrying to the pilot's compartment. "Turn north," he shouted to the man at the controls. "We must not land at the airport at Mexico City. Turn north, I tell you!"

"Please, Mr. von Stole," said the stewardess, running forward along the aisle and taking him by the arm. "You mustn't disturb the pilot—that is dangerous!"

"Be quiet!" von Stole pushed her roughly to one side with his left hand while he drew a Luger automatic out of his pocket and covered the pilot with the gun. "Turn north," he said harshly. "Do what I say or I'll put a bullet in you and take over the ship myself."

"You're crazy!" exclaimed the pilot. "We're landing at Mexico City!"

Gifford and Nancy had been watching, sitting in their seats dumfounded with amazement, but now the government agent leaped to his feet, and he had his own automatic in his hand, covering von Stole.

"Drop that gun, von Stole!" Gifford shouted.

VON STOLE swung around, the Luger flamed, and a bullet went whistling by Gifford's head. The automatic roared before the blond man could fire again. Von Stole uttered a howl of pain as a slug caught him in the right arm and forced him to drip his gun to the floor.

That was all the chance the pilot needed. He reached out and knocked von Stole cold with a blow over the head with a wrench. The blond man dropped to the floor to sprawl there motionless. The stewardess at once began calming the frightened passengers. Gifford and Nancy aided her.

A few minutes later the plane

landed at the air port. The moment it rolled to a stop, some Mexican police officials came rushing up. To Gifford's amazement, he saw that Peter Malden was with them.

"Careful, Nancy," said Gifford softly. "Malden may have told the Mexican police we murdered that man in New York, and they are here to arrest us."

The other passengers departed hastily and Gifford and Nancy were the last ones left on the plane, with the still unconscious von Stole.

"What happened, Gifford?" demanded Malden as he climbed into the cabin. He glanced at the man on the floor. "Who shot him?"

"I did," said Gifford. "And I've just realized that von Stole was also your friend Tony Gallo. Evidently he was wearing a black wig as part of his disguise back there in New York." Gifford glared at Malden. "He's the man we've been looking for, Malden, the man who must be your boss. No wonder I thought his eyes were familiar!"

"Why should you be looking for my boss?" Malden appeared puzzled. "It was I who made the deal with you."

"True," said Gifford. "But as it happens, we aren't crooks. We're U. S. Government agents. Our job was to round up you and the rest of your Fifth Columnist gang. We've about done it."

"What?" Malden gazed at him in open-mouthed amazement. Then his mouth twisted in a wide smile. "Lord, but this is rich. I'm a British agent myself—been working under cover and have gained quite a reputation as a Fifth Columnist. So much so that von Stole made me his right-hand man."

"But the dead man back there at your hideout," said Gifford. "Who was he?"

"A British agent like myself," said Malden slowly. He frowned. "And my best friend. They discovered he was working against them and they

killed him. Of course, I had to pretend that he meant nothing at all to me. But I made a dangerous blunder there at the hideout. I called the dead man by his real name—John Craig Gallo, or rather von Stole, heard me. He became suspicious. So I got away in a hurry yesterday, and came here by plane to await your arrival. We have rounded up all of von Stole's men here except Brown."

"Then Brown must have been flying the red kite that got von Stole so excited," said Gifford. "He tried to make the pilot head north as soon as he saw the kite."

"Red kite means danger," murmured von Stole as he recovered consciousness. "White kite means all is well. I—"

He raised his head and glared about him wildly.

"So that was it," said Gifford. "We were willing to smuggle the diamonds because we felt that by doing so we might get in contact with the whole gang, and particularly learn the identity of the man higher up. We weren't dumb enough not to realize that the diamonds were just a blind so that we could smuggle important papers that we probably would have been given here."

"Bad guess," said Malden, as von Stole was turned over to the Mexican police. "There are papers in that radio now—papers that are of great importance to British Intelligence. The man who built that secret compartment was working with us." He smiled. "I guess your work is over. You don't need to pretend you are a young couple on a honeymoon trip any longer."

"But we are," said Nancy with a smile. "We've been married nearly a year and this is the first time we've had a chance for a honeymoon. I'm sure I'm going to love Mexico."

"Remarkable people, you Americans," said Malden. "Sorry about that fingerprint business, and trying to frame you for murder. I was acting under von Stole's orders. Had no way of being sure he wasn't watching and listening. Obnoxious chap, always hanging about."

"You'll carry on your work?" asked Gifford. "You have quite a reputation as a dangerous man in the United States."

"Good!" Peter Malden smiled, slowly and deliberately, and there was no doubting the cool nerve and courage of the man. "I'll try to continue to live up to my reputation!"

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There's Something About a Hero

By WILLIAM BRANDON

Author of "Little Miss Murder," "Drums," etc.



Ireland flattened his hand over the secretary's mouth

Sam Ireland Stumbles Knee-Deep in a Killing—But His Valiant Courage Lifts Him From the Grim Depths of a Slaughter Charge!

“NAME?” the secretary asked.
“Hasenpfeffer,” answered Ireland.

The secretary slid out of her chair and walked around her desk, and opened a door.

“Mr. Hasenpfeffer,” she announced. “A Mr. Hasenpfeffer.”

Ireland stood behind her now and, gently, pushed her through the door. He stepped after her, slid one arm around her neck and flattened his hand over her mouth. She threw back her head, and he saw her terrified eyes roll up behind her glasses. Then she fainted.

Ireland put his other arm around her waist and dragged her to the

empty leather chair in front of the desk. Expertly then, he gagged her with the handkerchief from his breast pocket.

The man behind the desk stared at him with dead eyes. His head was bent, his jaw sagged to one side. His upper plate had fallen free and hung partly out of his open mouth, the even teeth extending over his slack lower lip.

Ireland leaned across the desk and tipped the swivel chair over backward. It shook the floor when it hit. The body somersaulted out of it, going over very slowly, and collapsed on its face.

The secretary was still unconscious. The whites of her eyes showed under the half-closed lids.

Ireland went out. In the outer office two dozen girls banged on two dozen typewriters. He walked through them, whistling, winked at the telephone operator when she smiled pleasantly at him from her glass booth. His face impassive now, he went into the corridor and caught an elevator down. . . .

The girl was little and slim. She had curly yellow hair and smooth, white, child-like skin. She cried like a child, her hands over her face. She was curled in a deep chair.

The apartment was in disorder. Two packed bags, not yet closed, were on the floor. A box of powder had been dropped, and left, a large, dusty semi-circle on the carpet.

Ireland closed the door. The girl didn't look up. After a moment he walked over to her and touched her yellow hair with the palm of his hand. His eyes were bleak.

"It's all right, Janey," he said.

Her crying stopped. She caught her breath and her stretched fingers tightened over her face.

"It's okay," Ireland said gently. "Get your duds on, kid. You've got to make that plane. It's all okay."

Her teeth bit desperately into her lip and she stared unseeingly at the

wall. Her eyes were reddened and wet with tears.

Ireland stooped over her. "Come on, Janey," he whispered. "It's all over. You're all right now."

HER arms went around him and she clung to him frantically, pressing her face against his sleeve, shivering. He smelled the faint sweet scent of her powder.

"Don't think about it now," Ireland said huskily. "You don't have to. Wait till you get out on the Coast. Keep your chin up till then, Janey. Then you can live in a cottage on the beach and you can cut loose. But not now, kid."

He rubbed his hand over the back of her head, and the callouses on his fingers caught in the soft curls.

"Just a little while longer," he went on. "Keep pitching in there. Ben's pulling for you. Sure he is." His eyelids drooped almost shut and his jaw hardened, and tiny knots of muscles danced in his cheeks. "You were right, Janey. You were wonderful. You gave him a square shake. There's not a white man on earth would blame you. Now forget it."

Janey tried to smile, but her efforts only produced a sickly attempt.

Ireland picked up a comb from the dresser and ran it through her hair. After drying her cheeks, he closed the bags and strapped them and put the keys in her purse. Then he put his arm around her slender waist and picked up the bags and took her out.

The elevator operator took them down in a sober, sympathetic silence. The doorman, standing guard in the foyer, saluted gravely and lowered his eyes.

They went into the street and she lifted a hand to her face against the glare of the sun. A cab rolled up from the stand and he settled her in it.

"The airport," Ireland said. "She's taking the Five O'clock plane for Columbus. You get that? The Five

O'clock for Columbus." He gave the hacker a small envelope. "Here's her ticket." He gave him a ten-dollar bill. "Stick around and see that she gets on it."

The driver nodded. "Sure. Sure, I will."

"The Five O'clock for Columbus," Ireland repeated patiently. He hesitated and took out another ten-dollar note. He folded it lengthwise and offered it. "Stay there until it takes off. See that she leaves on it. Will you do that?"

The driver glanced at the back seat and said earnestly:

"You depend on it, Mister. I'll take care of her."

Ireland reached into the back and touched Janey's hands, folded on her lap. She didn't look up. Her yellow hair glimmered in the mottled sunlight as the cab began to move. It pulled out, sliding into traffic with excessive caution, and crept around the corner to Madison and out of sight.

At seven o'clock in the evening, Ireland entered his own apartment on East 78th, went into the kitchen and fried a cube steak and some potatoes. After slicing a tomato, he set out the trimmings, and sat down to eat.

He took off his jacket and vest and hung them over the chairback. He unstrapped his gun harness and took it off, loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. Coffee boiled behind him on the little range, and he reached around and poured himself a cup.

The steak was good, the coffee was good. Mrs. O'Teel, who was on her afternoon off, had left a jar of strawberry preserves and a cherry pie. Ireland was hungry, but he didn't enjoy it. His thoughts were black and he couldn't make them anything else. There they were. They rode him. There are some things you can't shake off. He could still smell faintly Janey's powder. He could feel her shivering. He could see a man's false teeth hanging out of his mouth.

The kitchen was white and glaring in the unshaded light. Ireland shut his eyes and ran his hands through his hair, squeezed his palms against his skull. It was like a headache.

He whirled around and switched on a small white radio on a shelf behind him. Presently music filled the small room. Boogie woogie. Piano and bass. A high voice singing:

"Thanks for the boogie ride, thanks for the boogie ride. . . ."

Ireland's foot beat in time to the rhythm. He took his hands away from his head and gulped his coffee, poured another cup.

The doorbell buzzed, and he jumped and knocked over his chair. He swore heatedly and righted the chair and rearranged his jacket. The buzzer sounded again, a long shattering peal. He dropped on his shoulder harness, let it hang loose, the gun bouncing under his armpit in its spring holster. Then he went through the dark front rooms to the door.

"Ah," he said, "Lieutenant McBride!"

"Hello, Sam." McBride was a big man, as tall as Ireland and thirty pounds heavier. He was middle-aged and wore rimless glasses. He dressed quietly. His coat was open and his vest pockets were serrated with the clipped butts of pencils and fountain pens. An elk's tooth hung on a watch chain. His pockets were usually crammed with assorted papers. He was probing a toothpick among his molars. "Busy?" he asked.

"Having something to eat. Come on in." Ireland closed the door, switched on his living room light, and led the way back to the kitchen. He gestured to the other chair at the table. "Have a cup of coffee?"

MCBRIDE sighed and settled himself into the chair.

"No thanks, Sam," he declined. "Just finished. Had a bite in the cafeteria around the corner."

"On Lexington? Nice place."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. Mashed potatoes were cold, though. Always are in those joints. It's the way they have to serve 'em out." He sighed again and changed position. He seemed to be having some trouble getting at a back tooth.

Ireland ladled out strawberry jam on his knife and piled it on a piece of bread.

"Better have a cup of coffee," he suggested.

"The boogie ride — the boogie ride. . . ." beat out the little radio. "Tha-anks for the boo-oogie ride."

McBride was successful with the toothpick and drew it out gratefully. He pointed his thumb at the radio.

"Boogie woogie." He chuckled.

"I like it," Ireland said.

"You would," McBride told him. He became engaged again with the toothpick.

Ireland chewed a piece of steak and swallowed. He speared another bite of steak with his fork and pinned it to the plate. He looked McBride in the glasses.

"What's on your mind, Mac?" he asked.

McBride sighed and changed position again. He dragged his chair up to the table and leaned on his elbows, the toothpick between his fingers.

"Well"—he studied that toothpick and put it in an ash tray—"I just wanted a talk with you, Sam. Something that's come up." His head sunk between his bulky shoulders and his glasses glittered. "You know what I mean, Sam?"

Ireland looked at him curiously, his fork suspended.

"Why should I?"

McBride grunted. "I don't want to go at it that way, Sam. After all, you used to be a cop."

"I'm still a cop."

"Well— Yeah." McBride's eyes shifted. "You seem to be doing all right, too, on your own. Glad to see it. But—" He looked down and prodded two fingers into a vest pocket,

and brought out a slip of paper. He tilted his head back and looked at it closely. "You know a guy named March Hasson, Sam?"

Ireland touched his coffee cup, and it rattled against the saucer. He moved his hand away.

"Hasson?" he repeated. "I think I've heard of him. I've heard the name."

"Well, I'll tell you, Sam. He's a publisher. Offices on Park Avenue, at—" he squinted at the paper again—"Forty-sixth. I think he's one of these guys that make the night clubs pretty steady. You know, a real big time Humpty Dumpty. About fifty years old, lives in Westchester with his third wife." McBride forgot to look at his paper for this. He cleared his throat and added, "He was due to be tried next month for manslaughter. Something about hitting a guy one night last winter with his car, when he was tanked up."

Ireland shook his head very slowly and, it seemed to him, jerkily.

"You don't know him?" McBride persisted, as if he felt bad about it. "Never heard anything about him?"

Ireland went on shaking his head. He chewed on a piece of steak and thought it would choke him. His mouth was dry.

"Well," McBride said, "you know a girl named Mrs. Jane Key? She used to sell tickets at the picture show down here on Lexington."

"Sure," Ireland said quickly. "Jane Reese. I used to take her out before she was married." He drank his coffee and added, faintly accusing, "You remember her, Mac."

"I thought I did. She wanted to be a dancer or something, didn't she? But she wasn't good enough for the big time. I remember her."

"Yeah," Ireland said. "Something like that."

"A nice kid. She reminded me of Emily."

"How are the kids?"

"Fine," McBride said absently. He

probed again in his vest and brought out two cigars. He offered one to Ireland, who declined. He peeled the cellophane wrapper off the other.

"Can't you turn off that radio, Sam?" he said abruptly.

IRELAND reached around and cut the boogie woogie.

McBride crushed the cigar wrapper and held it over the ashtray, finally letting it fall. He hunched sideward in his chair, searching his pockets for a match.

"Did you know this guy Jane married? This Key?"

"I met him," Ireland said. He cut the cherry pie.

"Say," McBride said, "that looks all right. I'll sit in for a slab of that." He moved his chair again, an inch or so, and Ireland put a piece of the pie on a clean plate and shoved it over to him with a fork. "That's good-looking stuff," he admired. "Where can you buy that kind of pie?"

"A woman," Ireland said. "She cooks for me. Want some coffee with it, Mac?"

"Well, I guess I will. Got a cook, huh? You *are* doing all right, Sam. Glad to see it." He accepted his coffee and held up the cup in a beefy hand, red-haired and freckled. He blew on the coffee and sipped it. "I'll tell you," he said. "About this Key." He bent his head again to the coffee. "He was the guy that March Hasson ran over with his car last winter."

"What!" Ireland exploded. "Sure. I knew I'd heard the name."

McBride didn't look up. "It was hit and run, see? They didn't pull in Hasson for three weeks." He wiped his hand across his mouth and sat back in his chair. He held his fork upright, gripped in his fist. "Well, this Hasson's a skunk. You know what this Key did? His job?"

"He was a street cleaner."

"Yeah, that's right. College guy, too. Well, you see in the paper where they're taking 'em on. College guys

on the police force, too now. All over the joint. Ain't any difference in 'em though. Don't know any more than I did. Don't know what good it does 'em. That's what I tell my kid. Jack, you know, the oldest one. He wants to go to college anyhow. Wants to go to Columbia." He grinned faintly. "Well, I suppose the guy had to have a job."

"Key?" questioned Ireland.

McBride nodded. He was eating his pie hungrily.

"So this Hasson—he rates a little around town, you know, and he's got his lawyers—he got out of a murder rap. They fixed it at manslaughter, gave him bail, and the trial was set for next month." He went on hurriedly, "Well, what I'm getting at, Sam—have you seen much of that girl since the guy got knocked off?"

"I've seen her," Ireland said.

McBride returned his attention to his pie.

"I guess she took it plenty big," he muttered. "Almost blew her top, I guess, when it happened."

There was a silence.

"How would you feel," Ireland remarked, "if your wife was killed that way?"

McBride jerked up his head and stared at him for a long minute. At last he said:

"Yeah. Sure." He waved his hand to fan away the smoke from his cigar, smoldering in the ashtray. "Well, I'll get to the point, Sam. Hasson asked her to come to his office and see him. She went there today. He said he'd pay her well, if she'd go to his trial and ask the court for leniency. Put in a plea for him. You get the idea? Widow of the victim asking for mercy for the guy that smeared him. Could help him a lot. You know."

Ireland carefully kept his silence. He realized that his piece of pie was gone, and cut another.

"So," McBride said, "she probably told him what he could do with his proposition, and they popped off

some. He got pretty nasty, I guess, and then she went out." He leaned his bulk over the table, reaching for the coffee pot, and poured himself another half cupful. "That was today," he said.

Ireland cut into his second piece of pie. The fork slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. He swung down and got it, and looked at it moodily.

McBride picked up his cigar and puffed on it.

"A couple of hours later," he continued, "a guy came in, slugged Hasson's secretary, and shot Hasson through the head." McBride smoked furiously on the cigar and smoke billowed around the room. "With a twenty-two," he added.

Ireland found himself very calm. His hands were no longer shaking. He picked up his coffee cup and touched the edge of it with his lips. Then he held it in the air. At last he said:

"Where do I come in on this, Mac?"

MCBRIDE chewed his cigar uncomfortably. His manner was slightly pained.

"Well," the detective said, "there are a couple of angles. You knew this Jane Key, see, so I'll tell you. The secretary told us this. She could hear Hasson and Jane Key talking, when Jane was there, you know, a couple of hours before this guy came in and killed him. She could hear a lot of what they said. She could hear Hasson needling her. You know, telling Jane he was going to beat the rap anyhow. Telling her she was a little chump if she didn't take his proposition and pick off a little change for herself. Telling her she could call it a payment for her dead guy. The secretary said Hasson got pretty rough."

The skin on Ireland's face felt stiff. He felt that he should say something, but he kept still.

"Then," McBride said slowly, "the

secretary went out some place. When she came back, there wasn't any talking in Hasson's office. The girl was gone. But the secretary didn't look in to see, understand. She said she only went in Hasson's office when he sent for her. And he didn't send for her."

McBride idly ripped off some frayed wrapper from his cigar.

"Hasson didn't send for her at all," he went on, presently. "So a couple of hours pass and this guy comes in and tells her his name is Hasenpfeffer and he wants to see the boss." McBride looked up. "She opened the door to her boss' office and this guy slugged her. When she came to, Hasson was on the floor behind his desk and he was a dead pigeon. Naturally she didn't hear any shot. She was out cold."

McBride dragged out a heavy pocket watch and looked at it. He didn't make any move to go. He replaced his watch and drummed his solid fingers briefly on the table.

"We haven't been able to get any line on this guy," he said musingly, "except the secretary's description. Doesn't mean too much, though." He sighed. "Of course, it wouldn't do us any good to get him. We could only throw an accessory charge at him—unless he wanted to talk for us. That'd be a big help. Be the only smart thing he could do, too, for that matter. Could make it pretty rough for him with the accessory rap."

Ireland rose and his chair fell over backward. His knees shivered and he closed his fists and planted them on the table, and leaned forward slightly.

"What do you mean, accessory?" he demanded. "You said he killed Hasson."

"That's what we thought at first," McBride said. "The secretary said she opened Hasson's door and got a glimpse of him sitting behind his desk before this guy slugged her. Then when she came to, Hasson was on the floor and dead. What she

didn't have time to see, was that Hasson was dead when she saw him sitting behind his desk. All this guy who slugged her did, it looks like, was shove the body over. Screwy. He pushed it out of the chair."

He glanced at Ireland, who was still standing, and at the chair on the floor, and he seemed to be mildly surprised.

Ireland reached down stiffly, his eyes on McBride's face. He set up the chair and lowered himself into it. His lean face was dark and taut. His eyelids drooped.

"I don't get that, Mac," he said slowly.

"The M.E. gave us that dope," McBride said. "Post-mortem lividity.

the secretary out of the way and making it look like he'd done the killing himself. That's the way it looks to me."

Ireland fought for control.

"Sounds logical to me," he said.

"Yeah. Sure. And like I say, it'd be the wisest thing all around if this 'Hasenpfeffer' would give us the whole business. He can't do Jane Key any good, any longer. He could talk himself free of the accessory charge and he could make our case open and shut. And look." McBride studied Ireland sympathetically. "She had a reason to let Hasson have it. She won't go too bad at a trial. She won't take too much."

White-Haired Amy Stafford Held Her Seventy-first Birthday Party with Twelve Gorgeous Blondes as Guests—and Murder Was Served as the Main Course!

BLONDE DEATH

A Baffling Mystery Novelet

By DALE CLARK

COMING IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE



You know. After death the blood settles to the lowest points in the body. Gravity. Takes a couple, three, four hours. We found Hasson on the floor, on his face. But post-mortem lividity didn't jell with that. It showed he'd been sitting in a chair for at least a couple of hours after he'd died. So—"

Ireland swore, flatly, without passion. The veins on his forehead stood out like black cords.

"The way I see it," McBride said, his voice almost apologetic, "Jane Key blew her top when Hasson got rough with her, and killed him. Then, say, a friend of hers found out about it and came up a couple of hours later and tried to cover for her, by getting

Sam Ireland swallowed and touched his dry lips with his tongue.

"Maybe only life," he muttered.

"I'd say less," McBride said soberly. "She might get out with eight or ten years. You never know."

"Eight or ten," Ireland echoed. "Eight or ten years in women's stir."

McBride stared at him impersonally. After a time he spoke.

"Will you tell us where Jane Key is now, Sam?"

Ireland shook his head once, deliberately.

"I don't know a thing about it, Mac," he lied.

"You won't throw in with us, Sam?" McBride cleared his throat.

He waited. He added, without rancor, "Well?"

"I don't know anything about it," Ireland persisted.

McBride stood up. He took a deep breath.

"Well, you know I'll have to take you in." His voice rose suddenly. "You know it means your license. Maybe a prison jolt. For God's sake, Sam—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ireland broke in.

McBride released his breath in an explosive sigh.

"All right. Come on."

"I'm ready." Ireland stood up and buttoned his coat. "Let's go."

McBride went first, out of the kitchen, through the front rooms to the door. His head was lowered, his shoulders hunched.

At the door he stopped and started speaking.

"Listen, Sam," he said hopefully. "We'll pick her up sooner or later. You know that. We've got enough evidence to try her anyhow, if it's used right. You're not doing her a bit of good. Not any more. Why crucify yourself—"

The buzzer sounded by their heads and they both whirled to face the door.

McBride clamped his teeth on his cigar, closed his hand around the knob and threw the door open. It was Jane Key!

"Oh!" She gasped. Then she saw Ireland. "Sam!"

Ireland didn't look at McBride. He stepped past him and took Jane's hands. She was quiet. The tears were gone from her eyes.

"Come in, Janey," he said.

McBride closed the door behind her.

"I heard a radio out at the airport," she explained her presence. "The police wanted me. I—I didn't know just what you'd done, Sam. I didn't really know what I was doing, myself. I just sort of came to myself, and I knew I should come back."

Ireland's hands gripped her arms desperately.

"I didn't do anything wrong, kid," he said. "What's the matter with you?" He tried to chuckle. "What are you talking about?"

McBride dropped his hands on Ireland's shoulder.

"You've been smart long enough, Sam," he said. "Let's take it on the level from here. Huh?"

"All right!" Ireland yelled. "Who's been playing cute copper for the last hour?" Jane Key started to speak, and he shouted at her, "Shut up!" He spun back on McBride and twisted his fist in McBride's lapels. "If you've got anything else to say, Mac, say it over a warrant! Get that? All right! Get out!"

"I don't need any warrant for this job, Sam," McBride reminded. "You know that."

Jane Key pulled at Ireland's shoulder. A strand of her wheat-colored hair fell loose and brushed her cheek.

"But Sam," she protested, "this is about that man's suicide, isn't it? Can't I just give him my testimony and—"

Ireland released McBride. "What did you say?"

"I supposed they wanted to ask me about that—that man killing himself," she went on. "I shouldn't have started to go away, I know, but I didn't know what I was doing. And you said it was all right."

McBride's teeth snapped shut and he bit his cigar in two. He choked. His face reddened. He got his breath.

"Just a minute, sister," he began. "I—"

Ireland interrupted. He put his left hand on Jane Key's arm. His hand was shaking.

"Listen, Janey," he said. "What did you tell me this afternoon?"

"I—I'm not sure I remember now, Sam. I was so— But I must have told you that I'd been to see him— Mr. Hasson. And that he was dead."

"You said he *was* dead," Ireland reminded.

"Yes." She looked at him curiously, her teeth set in her lower lip. "And you told me to stay in the apartment, that you'd fix everything. And later you came back and sent me out to catch a plane. I knew I could trust you. But I remembered, when I heard that news flash on the radio at the airport, that I hadn't told you about the dictaphone. I knew it was important that you should know that, so—"

"Dictaphone?" Ireland questioned, puzzled.

"When I went in Hasson's office," she began, "he switched on a dictaphone to record our conversation. He said it was for his own protection, if he needed it later on. And of course the police would want the record—"

"Of his suicide," Ireland finished.

SHE nodded. "Yes. Everything he said." Her eyes darkened a little, thinking of it. "I think he was drunk. It was like a nightmare. I kept refusing to do what he asked. He talked, said things. . . . And then he begged me to help him. He said the trial would ruin him, kill him.

"I kept seeing Ben, the way he'd been—been hit by that car, and the way Hasson had talked about him just a minute before. I told him I would never help him. I only wanted to get out of there. And suddenly he—he screamed at me that he would

kill himself. I ran for the door, and heard the gun go off—"

Ireland went over to the wall and leaned against it. Jane Key turned her head and watched him oddly. Her eyes were again misty with tears.

"You told me to go away, Sam, but shouldn't I have come back?" she asked.

Ireland swallowed hard.

She took a step toward him and smiled, her faintly scared, timid smile. "I didn't know just what you'd done, Sam," she said. "I was afraid you might have done something wrong, to try to make it too easy for me."

"Why," McBride said loudly, "not him, sister. No, no! Sam is a very, very good cop." He closed his mouth soberly and opened the door. "And me," he said. "Me, too." He lifted his hand. "Good night." He closed the door after him.

Jane Key stared after him in bewilderment. She turned to Ireland. He looked at her bleakly, and roused himself.

"Sam!" she cried. "He didn't think you—"

"Later," he broke in. "Much later." McBride was waiting for him in the hall.

"Hiya, hero," he said briefly.

They went downstairs and Ireland said flatly: "This way."

He led the way around a corner and into a bar.

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No Man Walks

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"Death Held Four Aces,"
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Craig pounced at Monahan,
got hold of the pistol and
wrenched savagely



Jimmy Craig Faces Big Odds in a Solo

Alone

CHAPTER I NIGHT TRIP

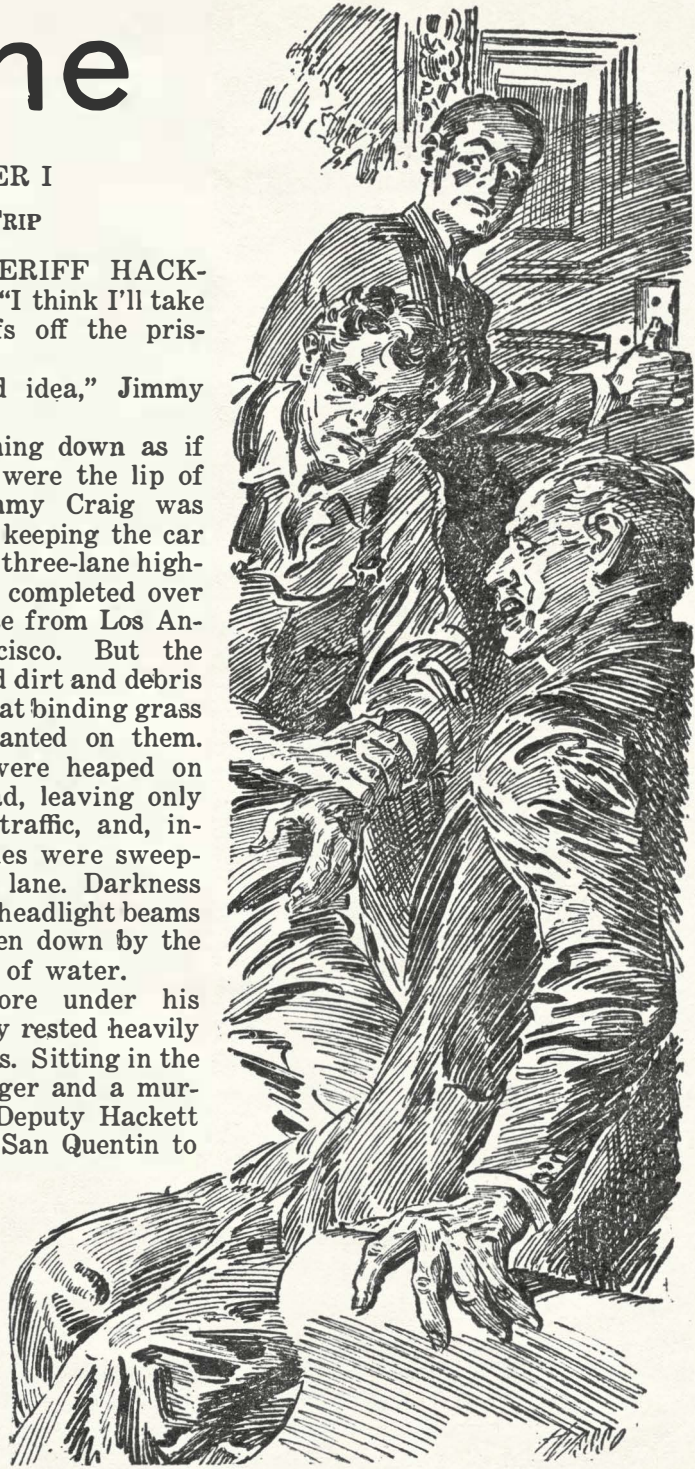
DEPUTY-SHERIFF HACKETT spoke. "I think I'll take the handcuffs off the prisoners," he said.

"Might be a good idea," Jimmy Craig agreed.

The rain was coming down as if the clouds overhead were the lip of a Niagara, and Jimmy Craig was having a tough time keeping the car on the road. It was a three-lane highway, a new one just completed over the ridge on the route from Los Angeles to San Francisco. But the downpour had washed dirt and debris off of banks so new that binding grass had not yet been planted on them. Mud and boulders were heaped on each side of the road, leaving only the center lane for traffic, and, increasingly, small slides were sweeping across that center lane. Darkness didn't help any. The headlight beams seemed actually beaten down by the wind-whipped smash of water.

Jimmy Craig swore under his breath. Responsibility rested heavily on his young shoulders. Sitting in the back seat were a forger and a murderer whom he and Deputy Hackett were transporting to San Quentin to

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Campaign to Whip a Murder Frame!

start serving their sentences. Jimmy would have liked to stop the car and wait till the downpour eased up. But he couldn't stop in the single lane left open to traffic; and if he pulled into the mud and rubble on the side, he would surely get stalled and might put the car on the spot for an avalanche sliding off the steep walls of the cut.

Deputy Hackett bent over the back of the front seat. "I'm takin' the 'cuffs off you men so's if we skid off the road or anything, you'll be able to get clear of the car."

"That's white of you, Hackett," the forger, Neely, said.

But Monahan, the murderer, grated, "What the hell difference would it make!"

Jimmy Craig, leaning over the wheel and straining to see into the whoop and smother ahead, felt an icy tingle along his spine. In a way, Monahan was right. Monahan was sentenced for life. Why should Monahan care whether they got through this storm or not?

Jimmy Craig felt the car increasing speed, though his foot wasn't on the gas at all. They were heading down a steep grade which had a turn at the bottom. His lean face tightened, his gray eyes straining to see through the murky maelstrom of rain. In his mind formed regrets that he had jumped at the chance to come on this trip.

STONY broke, he was waiting for a promised opening in the crime laboratory of the Los Angeles Police Department. He had a couple of college degrees in chemistry, and some five years of research work in various laboratories to his credit. When the possibility of this job in Los Angeles came up, he had quit a newly acquired job at five thousand a year in the East to come take this position in a field of work in which he was sure he could make a career for himself. But there had been delays in opening the

police laboratory and it was necessary for him to mark time. This trip paid six dollars a day.

The car was gaining speed with dizzying swiftness. He shoved on the brake without perceptible effect. He pushed harder—and the wheels, skidding the car on the streaming pavement with a dizzying, heart-stopping swoop that almost projectiled it head-on into the bank. Somehow he fought the front end around to where it should be, and again they were hurtling downgrade.

"Slow up!" Deputy Hackett ordered tensely.

In the back seat, the forger blurted, "You want to break our necks, for cripes sake?"

BELOW, Jimmy saw headlights. Another car on the road, coming his way! No room to pass unless he pulled off the center lane onto the mud and rubble at the side! But if he tried that at this speed, it would mean a wreck. Again, praying swear words against his clenched teeth, Jimmy eased down the brakes. Now it was either a skid, or a head-on collision!

Below, he saw the twin headlights turn as the car swerved to come over the bridge at the bottom of the grade. So close, so terribly close that car was now! And he wasn't slackening his own car's speed fast enough!

"Slow up! Brake it, Craig!" Hackett yelled.

"I'll maybe skid 'er into the bank!"

"You'll kill the lot of us, if you don't."

But Craig had no time for talk. It was either skid or hit that other car head-on. Then Craig blinked. Those headlights below had abruptly vanished.

For a split-wink instant Craig couldn't understand that. Surely that other driver hadn't switched off his lights on a road like this.

And then, with a rush of heart-stopping panic, Craig understood,

That bridge below was out! The other car had smashed down into an arroyo now racing brim-full with the run-off of a cloudburst! And the police car was heading straight for that same arroyo!

Jimmy Craig slammed the brakes on hard, and instantly it was as if he were trying to control a ricocheting 16-inch shell. Neely and the deputy yelled as the car skidded sickeningly, rear end trying to swing ahead of the motor, and swooped across the road as Craig fought the wheel. The wheels hit mud and boulders. The car toppled crazily and went over onto its side against the bank. The jar loosened a section of the saturated slope and with a dull *whoosh* part of the wall slid down. The slide shoved the car off the road and into the dark current of the brimming, roaring arroyo.

JIMMY CRAIG had managed to get the door open as the car went onto its side, but was jammed back under the steering wheel when the mud and rock slammed over the vehicle. He was caught there as the machine went off the bank. Cold, swirling water closed over his head.

His throat swelled, as if for a scream, but he was hearing nothing, seeing nothing, only struggling with a blind, instinctive ferocity that was useless.

He *had* to breathe. He gasped open-mouthed, and drew in water that seemed somehow to become a shattering explosion of fire within his chest. His wits blacked out.

Somebody was hauling on him; somebody was clutching him under the armpits and dragging him. Suddenly he realized he could breathe, and he gulped great draughts of air.

The hands released him. He was lying flat on his back, rain streaming on his face. A man lunged past him, jumped into the swirling current of the full arroyo. Presently the man was coming out of the water again,

hauling on something . . . another man, whom he pulled over beside Craig.

Then again the rescuer plunged into the stream, finally emerging with a third body.

Craig's strength slowly came back to him. He sat up giddily, coughing water out of his lungs.

"Feel better, huh?"

Craig recognized him, then. It was Monahan, the murderer. It was Monahan he had to thank for pulling him out of the car.

"They're dead," Monahan was saying curtly. "Neely and the deputy. Neely's neck was broke. Hackett had a weak heart, maybe. We could try pumping his arms back and forth, but there ain't even a flicker of heart-beat."

Craig stared at the dark bulk of the man standing before him. "You weren't caught in the car?"

"No, I got the door open and squeezed out as we hit the water."

So Monahan could have got away. He could have simply run on down the road, striking off into the hills, instead of risking his neck to haul his three companions out of the doomed car.

Craig lurched to his feet and bent over the deputy's limp body.

"We got to try artificial respiration," he said. "Lord, I'm weak. You do it. Go ahead, get to work."

Monahan did not move.

Craig yanked his pistol from its holster, commanding: "I said pump his arms and—"

Monahan lunged forward and his fist smacked to Craig's jaw. Jimmy reeled back, his knees buckling. He hadn't enough strength even to level pistol and squeeze trigger. Monahan seized the weapon and wrenched it from his grip as Craig slumped to the ground.

"Sorry, kid, but I need that gun in a job I got to do!"

Monahan's tall, muscular figure straightened up. For an instant he

stood there, looming in the rain, peering down the road. Then he started off at a long, fast, mile-eating stride, and vanished from Craig's gaze in the rain-swept darkness.

CHAPTER II

KILLER'S DAUGHTER



POLICE COMMISSIONER DAVIES considered his caller. "Frankly," he said, "your appointment to the crime laboratory will have to wait until this matter is entirely cleared up, Craig.

The whole thing looks fishy to a lot of people. There's no proof against you, I'm glad to say, but there's considerable suspicion that you did take a bribe to arrange for Monahan to get away. That you disarmed Deputy Hackett, unlocked Monahan's handcuffs, and that the two of you knocked Neely and the deputy on the head and then ran the car into the creek. It looks pretty plausible, you know. Until it can be established positively that such wasn't the case, why—"

The commissioner bent over papers on his desk letting the interview fray out. Jimmy Craig stood there before his desk, his lean, strong fingers unconsciously twisting his hat brim out of shape. Protests and denials were hot on his tongue, but he had enough shrewdness and self-control to realize that lashing out against the unfairness of suspicions against him would do no good. Nothing would do any good—except Monahan's recapture. And Monahan had saved his life.

"Good day!" Craig said, and turned on his heel. Running his hand abstractedly through his thick red hair, he put on his hat and strode out of Police Headquarters.

Sitting in front of a steaming cup of coffee in a Main Street hash house, Craig pondered.

Loren Monahan had been president of the firm of Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick, Incorporated, who built

airplane parts. The newspapers stories of the Monahan case were to the effect that the firm had had a chance to obtain contracts for parts from several of the big airplane manufacturers who had a five-year backlog of orders for military machines—if the firm of Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick would re-tool their plant to make the new type of altimeters and radiodirectional finders to fit the latest type of ships.

The firm lacked funds for the purpose and wasn't eligible for government money. The firm had competitors who'd sew up the business if Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick didn't move fast.

So Monahan had pulled the old fire insurance gag, with a completely new twist.

He burned his plant down, and took advantage of current uneasiness about fifth column activity to yell sabotage! He planned, with the insurance money, to re-build and re-tool the plant. But an employee had got wise, going to Monahan and trying to blackmail him. Monahan had a wild, reckless temper. He had shot and killed the employee, and had been convicted of murder.

"Now where would Monahan hide out?" Jimmy Craig wondered, remembering that Monahan had a daughter, Sheila.

"The man's not an underworld character," Craig reasoned. "He wouldn't know of any crook hangout to hole up in. Chances are he'd go to his daughter. Or, at least, that he'd try to get in touch with her."

Sheila Monahan lived in the family residence at 1567 La Cañada Drive.

JIMMY CRAIG took a bus to the address. He studied the house that evening. It was a big Norman house set among fine gardens. But the lawns were yellow and burnt out, the shrubs untended, and the house looked deserted. Monahan must have gone broke hiring expensive lawyers.

Was Sheila Monahan living here alone? In such a big establishment, with no servants around, it would be easy for Monahan to hide out. That is, if Monahan could get into the place without being nabbed by the cops!

Craig strolled past the place. A police car purred by, and two uniformed cops gave him a sharp glance. He noticed, too, that a Ford coupé was parked down the road, a man in it.

A plainclothes dick, likely keeping an eye on the Monahan home.

Jimmy walked to the corner, turned to the rear of the block. The Monahan estate backed up on the edge of the Arroyo Seco, the wide, shallow canyon at the west end of Pasadena in which was located the Rose Bowl. Craig walked to the dead end of the street, climbed down into the canyon, then stole through the brush to the rear of the Monahan place, and climbed up to the back yard.

Stealthily he approached the house. One rear window was lit. He reached it, and peered inside.

A girl was at work in the kitchen. Nobody else was around. She was a slim, shapely girl with shining chestnut hair and vivid blue eyes. She wore a short plaid skirt and a yellow sweater that molded close over her firm young breast.

She was fixing a light supper—two eggs, some toast, lettuce and tomato salad and coffee.

She ate hurriedly, but more as if she thought she ought to eat, than with appetite. Her lovely eyes were shadowed and thoughtful, as if her mind was full of worries. She cleaned up after eating, turned out the kitchen light and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

Jimmy Craig promptly slid the window up and climbed inside.

Using a flashlight, he examined the kitchen.

A half-quart of milk, some crackers, a quarter pound of butter, three eggs and a box of corn flakes were all he found.

Obviously Monahan wasn't hiding on the premises, or she would have more groceries on hand with which to feed him. It was little enough grub, even for herself!

"But maybe she's smart enough to know the police might look for just such signs," he reflected.

He stole down the hallway, then. Upstairs, he heard light, quick footsteps, heard a shower spattering water. The girl must be taking a bath.

Quickly he looked through the library, living-room, dining-room and maid's quarters on the lower floor. The rooms were gracious, generous in size—and practically empty. As if the furniture had been sold in a hurry. Fighting a murder rap can take plenty dough.

Carefully, Craig now tiptoed upstairs.

One room was lit, and looking inside, he saw the girl. She was lovely, *lovely*. Sitting in a rocking chair, clad in a white satin nightgown, she picked up a pair of sheer stockings and started mending a run, her sweet young face frowning with a deep absorption.

Carefully Craig explored the other rooms on this floor, one after another. But he did not find Monahan, nor any signs of Monahan—no dinner tray with remains of a meal on it, no cigarette stubs, no bed with the imprint of a big body upon it. Monahan simply was not in the house.

OUT in the hall, Craig looked through that lit doorway again. With long, rhythmic strokes the girl was brushing her chestnut hair. It shone and glistened under the light.

Feeling uncomfortably like a Peeping Tom, Craig stole down the stairway to the floor below.

Brrr-r-r-ring-g-g!

A bell shrilled out almost at his elbow, startling him with a shock like a club smash at the funny-bone. For

a moment he was too jittered to think. Then, upstairs, he heard the girl's voice anxiously saying, "Hello?"

The telephone was right here at his elbow in the lower hall, but the girl had an extension in her bedroom. He reached out, carefully picked up the phone and put it to his ear.

"Sheila?" he heard a man's voice ask.

"Oh, Dad! Where are you? How are you? I've got to see you." The words burst from her in a worried torrent.

"Hush, baby. Let me talk. This is risky for me, and I've got just a minute or so. You all right?"

"Of course! But you—"

"Listen, Sheila. My insurance policies are in the wall safe in my room. The combination's in my desk, upper right drawer, the marked numbers on a calendar. They'll amount to forty thousand dollars. When you get it, go away, honey. Honolulu, perhaps—"

"Dad!" Her voice was horrified. "I don't want insurance money! *Please*, Dad! You're not yourself! Don't do what you're planning! Where are you? I've got to see you!"

"Look, honey." His voice was tired, heartsick, but determined. "What've I tried so hard to teach you? To face facts. No hysterics, now. Stick your chin up. You haven't got a dollar. And aching out the rest of my life in a penitentiary is something I simply do not choose to do. I can escape that, and I can leave you with money for a few years. That's the choice I'm making, and if you care a damn for how I feel about you and about myself, you'd see it my way. Do you?"

"Of course, Dad, but—I've got to see you! Even if it's for just a minute!"

"It won't help, baby. There's a job I've got to do, and every hour that passes will make it harder."

"What job? Dad, tell me!" Her voice was hoarse with fright, as if she understood him so well that she guessed what he meant.

"Good-by, kid."

"Wait! Dad, *please*—meet me at Billy's, just for a minute. *Please*, Dad!"

After a long, taut moment the answer came. "All right. At five-thirty tomorrow evening—if I've finished my job." And the phone clicked as he hung up.

Craig heard Sheila catch her breath with a sob as she cradled her transmitter. Not till then did he replace his own phone. Then he tiptoed toward the front door, his pulse racing excitedly. Tomorrow he'd trail the girl, and she would lead him to Monahan!

HE TIPTOED on through the dark kitchen, to that rear window he had left open.

Just as he reached it a flashlight beam shone through.

He dodged to one side, heart yammering in his throat.

"There! The window's open!" a man was whispering. "I told you I saw him sneak around the back of the house! Here's the window he crawled in by. Casey, go phone for the squad. I'll watch here!"

"Why don't us two just go in and—"

"So maybe it's glory you want, huh? Monahan's a killer, and orders is to get this place surrounded if he shows up. Go on, damn it, put in that call!"

Craig slipped out via a side porch. Looking around the corner, he saw the dim bulk of the cop crouched behind a bush, watching that open window.

He thought of the squad cars that would come yowling up, of the cops who'd barge into the house and wake Sheila Monahan up as they searched for her father with guns in their hands. Pleasant thing for a girl. Impulsively Craig stepped forward and drove a hard, looping right to the back of the cop's ear, stretching him senseless in the dirt. . . .

CHAPTER III

"I'VE GOT A JOB TO DO."



JIMMY CRAIG, watching from seven in the morning, saw Sheila Monahan leave home. She walked to the corner and waited for a bus. Not so long ago the Monahan garage had housed a station wagon, a town car, and a sport coupé. Now Sheila Monahan went to town at eight in the morning by bus. Craig felt a throb of pity as he got on the same bus.

The girl got off at Eighth and Hill, and walked briskly into a hosiery shop. Craig hesitated, frowning. Had she walked into this store just to shake off anybody trailing her? He finally entered and asked the approaching floorwalker for Miss Monahan.

"Busy," the man said, pointing to the front window.

The windows of the shop were covered by paper emblazoned with advertising of Flattery Hosiery, the Nylon Stocking for Patricians. The paper covered the upper part of the windows completely, but left the lower third uncovered—and a crowd gradually gathered to stare. For there in the window paraded a dozen pairs of shapely, Flattery-clad legs. You couldn't, of course, identify any of the young women who posed, who took a light step this way, did a pirouette that way, and showed off youthful calves and rounded knees fully as glamorous as anything in the street-car ads.

Craig stared. "What a way to make a living!" he mused.

At noon Sheila Monahan hurried out. Jimmy followed her. She walked into an Owl Drug Store and had lunch—a malted milk, nothing else. Then, hurriedly, during the rest of her lunch hour, she applied for a job in a millinery shop, a chain grocery, a beauty parlor, and an agency for advertising models. She got turned

down, but always with reluctance because of her slim beauty, her chestnut hair with its bronzy sparkles in the sunlight, and her quick, warm smile.

"Soon's we have any opening, Miss. Leave your name and address."

She had to hurry back to her job in the hosiery shop. Pretty hard lines for a girl who'd gone to Vassar and likely spent summer vacations in Europe.

At five that evening she came hurrying out of the stocking emporium. In her brisk, light walk was no hint of the day she had spent on her feet in that window. Admiring her grit, Craig followed her.

In a Pig'n Whistle shop she had a quick sandwich while a dinner was put into a carton. She paid a dime for her sandwich and a dollar for the box lunch. Craig's lips tightened as he sipped a drink nearby. So she was thoughtful enough to take a meal to her old man. He followed her to Spring Street where she stopped on a corner in front of Billy's Ticket Agency. There she waited.

And Craig waited. Idly he bought a newspaper, read it without seeing the words as he watched the time on his wrist-watch. Five-thirty came—and went. A quarter to six. And six.

Sheila Monahan was getting impatient, and worried. And by the time another quarter-hour had passed, Craig realized that he was pumping a dry hole. Monahan was not going to meet his daughter here!

Deliberately, then, Craig walked up to Sheila Monahan.

"Miss Monahan, your father's delayed," he told her in a low tone. "He can't meet you here as he promised, so he sent me."

SHE gasped, and her lovely face went pale with startled surprise. Then she got the full sense of his words and realized he was friendly, and color flowed back into her cheeks.

"Where is Dad? Is he all right? He's not going to—"

"We can't talk here." He put his hand under her elbow. "Come inside."

He took her into a soda fountain, guided her into a back booth. As a waitress bore down on them he hastily ordered cokes.

Sheila Monahan grasped his hand across the table and demanded again, "Where is he? Is he all right?"

"Of course he's not all right," Craig said. "He's in mean trouble, and we've got to use our heads not to get him in deeper."

She nodded, biting her lip. She was studying him, Craig knew. She had to trust him, but just the same she had the keen wit to be alert for the old run-around. Just as frankly he studied her. It was odd how the same general cast of features could be so rugged and tough in a man, and in a young woman be sheerest beauty.

Loren Monahan's blue eyes had been frosty, challenging, sardonic. Sheila's blue eyes were just as direct, but warm, alive with intelligence, shadowed now, but with hints of quick generous laughter in their depths. Monahan's high cheekbones made him look gaunt, and his heavy lips gave him a sulking, wilful expression. But Sheila's lips were sweet and generous, and the fine modeling of her face left a sensitive shadow under her cheekbones and gave strength and character to the clean rounding of her jaw. It would take little to hurt her, Craig reflected, but a hell of a lot to get her down!

"How do you come into Dad's affairs?" she asked.

"I—owe your father a lot," he said, wincing a little inwardly. "Fact is, he—once saved my life. So I want to help him. You don't believe he's a murderer, do you?"

"Of course he isn't!" she said vehemently. Then, with an honesty and keenness of insight that Craig silently admired, she added, "But he could be. I know that! He—gets aroused. Then he's violent."

Jimmy Craig pondered that. He

was trying to find out from the girl what Loren Monahan might do next, where he might be. "I've got a job to do," Monahan had said repeatedly. He was a nice enough guy ordinarily it seemed, but a man of violent passions, a man who could deliberately plan to kill himself rather than serve a life sentence in prison.

Craig had put the newspaper he'd bought on the table beside his glass. Now, as he stared unseeingly at the paper, thinking, an article there focused into his consciousness.

BUSINESS MAN VICTIM OF MYSTERY ATTACK

Raoul D'Arcy, of the firm of Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick, was the victim of a homicidal attack this afternoon at his home in Eagle Rock. He had gone out to the garage to get his car in order to drive to the Meadowbrook Country Club to play golf, when an unseen assailant took two shots at him. One bullet lodged in his arm and the second, hitting the garage wall, ricocheted and struck him a glancing blow on the temple. He collapsed and has not yet regained consciousness. At the Emergency Hospital it was feared that he may have a skull fracture.

The gun reports brought a gardener and Mr. D'Arcy's son running. They saw a man leap over the rear garden fence. A pistol fell from his pocket or waistband. The younger D'Arcy says it was impossible for them to see the assailant well enough to describe him. However, police have identified the weapon used positively through a study of the bullets. The gun is a Police Positive, a .45 frame shooting a .38 cartridge. Its number and initials cut into the butt reveal it to be a weapon which belonged to Deputy Sheriff Charles Hackett. The gun was loaned by Hackett to James Craig, who was deputized to aid him in delivering two prisoners to San Quentin Penitentiary. Police are seeking James Craig for questioning. The two prisoners whom Hackett and Craig were—

CRAIG read no further. Realizations raced into his brain like short-circuiting flashes of heavy voltage. And one of them was that unless he caught Loren Monahan soon, he was going to find himself in jail and on the receiving end of a tough third degree! Which was bad enough. But

over and above this was the conviction that if he acted fast, he could prevent a murder that was going to happen this very night!

"Look, Miss Monahan. The law says your father shot an employee. You believe he didn't. How come a jury was convinced that he did do it?"

"Because his partners, D'Arcy and Broderick, perjured themselves!" she exclaimed. "They swore they *saw* him shoot McGaa. Against that kind of testimony he had no defense! But Dad didn't shoot McGaa. I know he didn't! I m-mean, I'm sure he didn't!"

Jimmy Craig reflected on that. Sardonically he figured that Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick had all three been in cahoots to burn down their plant and collect the insurance. It wasn't just Monahan's plan and act! But when the arson job got tangled up, and Monahan piled a shooting onto the grief, the aforesaid D'Arcy and Broderick had turned rat and connived to let Monahan take the full rap.

And Monahan, being the explosive-tempered, direct kind of man he was, now was out to get his own brand of justice. He had tried to kill D'Arcy this afternoon. Probably thought he had succeeded. And tonight, he would exact his own idea of a full measure of justice by paying off his other doublecrossing partner, Broderick, in the same leaden coin!

"Look, Miss Monahan," Craig said earnestly. "Maybe you know this, maybe you don't. Your father doesn't intend to go to prison. He's—you know?"

She nodded, her lovely eyes filling. "I know."

"But before he does that, he intends killing both D'Arcy and Broderick!"

She turned utterly white.

"We've got to stop him!" she gasped.

"I wonder if you've got the guts to see this—that the one way to prevent your father from doing himself or

anybody else any harm is to get him safely locked into jail again!" Swiftly he added, to forestall the protest so vivid upon her anguished young face, "That's the only way we can keep him alive long enough to find out who really *did* commit that first murder and get your father cleared! You get it?"

She nodded mutely, with a courage he doubted that he himself could have shown. "You're right."

"Will you help me, then? I could go to the police and set a trap, but—"

But Dad would fight!"

"And kill a cop or two, and likely get killed. But he'll listen to you, and *only* to you. Will you come along with me?"

"Where?" Sheila asked, promptly rising to her feet.

"To find your dad. At the home of that other partner of his—John Broderick's place!"

CHAPTER IV

CRAIG WINS—AND LOSES



BRODERICK lived in the San Rafael Hills district. Craig and the girl raced to the address in a taxi. Jimmy Craig didn't feel so good. He had worked on the girl, played on her fears and hopes to get her aid. Maybe he was just a heel at heart, a lowlife. But, damn it, all he'd told her was true! Except that part about it being all for her old man's sake, to get him cleared of a murder rap.

Dusk was darkening into night by the time they reached the Broderick home. A shining silver scimitar of a moon hung over the lofty rampart of the Sierra Madre to the east. As he and the girl hurried up the driveway to the house, Craig noticed the thick shrubs landscaping the big residence.

He had a gun, but Loren Monahan probably had one, too. And it makes a hell of a difference if you're reluc-

tant to shoot and you know the other fellow is not. With a sort of shock, Jimmy Craig realized all of a sudden that he was reluctant to shoot Sheila Monahan's father.

The house was a big, two-story Spanish, L-shaped around a *patio*, with a balcony porch and red tile roof. It looked deserted, for not a light was visible in the windows. Craig rang the bell, keeping his thumb on it as if glued there.

A light went on above the door on the outside, glaring down on him and Sheila. Through a tiny barred window somebody peered out at them. Cautiously the door swung open.

"What do you want?" a man-servant demanded.

Behind this man stood a husky, bronzed chap who looked like a gardener. He had a pistol in his hand.

"We've got to see Mr. Broderick. Right away!" Craig snapped.

"He's not home—" began the butler uncertainly.

"He *is* home, and he'll listen if he doesn't want to get what Mr. D'Arcy got this afternoon," Craig snapped.

"Let them in!" a voice called from an inner room.

Craig and Sheila entered, hurried down the hallway into a dining-room where chubby, white-haired John Broderick sat at a table graced with a bottle of White Horse, another of soda and a plate of salted peanuts, almonds and cashews. He looked like a cherub grown old in sin. His shrewd, dark eyes under heavy black brows were scared and mad.

"Sheila!" he stammered. "S-say, where's your father?"

"You haven't seen him, yet?" Craig demanded grimly.

Broderick came out of his chair in a rush.

"Yet? Th-then you know he's coming here?" he gasped.

"Don't you?" Craig snapped, and looked at the two servants. "Why you got every shade pulled and armed bodyguards?"

Broderick laughed. It was a quick recovery. This man had poise and brains. He was no fool and no push-over.

"As a matter of fact, I'm sort of kidnaped by my own servants. They read the story of the attempt on D'Arcy's life this afternoon, and insisted that we take precautionary measures. But, Sheila, why've you come here?" Broderick asked.

"To find Dad," she answered frankly. "I'm so afraid he might—"

"Come put a bullet in me? Well, self-defense is the first law of nature," Broderick said heavily. "Sit down. Have a drink. My butler'll bring some sandwiches. Maybe you're being here *will* do me some good. But why Loren Monahan should turn on his old friends for testifying to the truth—but never mind."

The butler had turned to go to the pantry. Abruptly he let out a yell that was half-scream.

"That shade moved! The window's open behind it!"

WITH a deafening crash, the pistol kicked in the gardener's hand as he put a bullet through the window shade.

"Peck, the light!" Broderick yelled, and the butler jumped to the door and clicked the switch.

Darkness closed on the room like a clenched fist. Sheila Monahan's fingers clutched tight on Craig's arm, and it seemed to him that his heart was thudding like a Diesel pump. Taut moments agonized past. Then Broderick let out a long, shaky sigh in the darkness.

"False alarm. 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all,' as the married man said, coming home at four A.M. Let there be light, Peck—and suppose we all quit jittering like jumping beans on a hot griddle."

The butler spoke up. "Now will you let me call the police?"

"No." In explanation Broderick said to Craig and Sheila, "We're try-

ing to get new capital into the firm. More publicity about our troubles'll make it just that much harder. Peck, the light!"

"Yes, sir, I'm hunting for the switch. Found it, sir."

The light came on with a dazzling burst to eyes that had been straining in the dark.

"Kyle," Broderick said to his gardener, "you might go look around the garden while the rest of us—"

"All of you," said a deep, taut voice, "will remain right in your seats!"

In the doorway leading to the screened side porch opening onto the dining-room stood the figure of Loren Monahan, his strong but haggard face harsh with threat. In his big-knuckled fist was a leveled automatic.

"Dad!" Sheila cried.

"You with the gun—drop it! . . . That's right." Monahan's bleak eyes turned toward his daughter. "What in God's name are *you* doing here, Sheila?"

"We came to keep you from doing something you'll regret!"

"I won't regret this."

"Don't make a murderer of yourself, Dad!"

Monahan's strong, wilful mouth crooked in grim irony.

"But my estimable partners, John Broderick and Raoul D'Arcy, swore that I am already a murderer. They *saw* me kill Bradley McGaa. They said so in court. They swore to it."

"Hell's fire, Loren," Broderick blustered, "this ain't buttering any pars-nips for you. I'd give my right arm to've prevented what's—"

"I think I despise you most of all," Monahan said, as if Broderick weren't speaking at all. "D'Arcy's been just a stooge for you. Putting a bullet in you ought to come under the head of exterminating rats infected with rabies."

Sheila started around the table toward her father.

"Dad, listen to me!"

"Go home, Sheila. I don't want you in on this."

"Dad, we're going to clear you! You'll get a pardon."

"Not a chance."

"But there is a chance. Though not if you do something irretrievable now," Craig put in.

MONAHAN looked at him. "So it's you, Craig," he said tersely. "Well, listen! I spent my last dollar on lawyers. With some big insurance companies anxious to save a couple hundred grand they'd have to pay out if our plant had burned by accident—and my own two partners swearing that Bradley McGaa came to them with evidence that I was a firebug—those same two partners swearing they saw me kill McGaa—what kind of justice do you think I got dished out to me?"

"But you can't get justice this way," Jimmy Craig protested. "A thing like this is naturally beyond any one man's responsibility. You're out to get your own private justice. But that isn't right, either. Put your gun down and forget it!"

"I can't forget it and I'm not putting this gun down."

"You'll hang, Monahan!"

"Sure. But I intend to deserve it," Monahan said, and jerked his gun muzzle to bear on Broderick.

The butler still stood by the light switch. His hand darted like a striking snake. The switch clicked, and darkness clamped upon the room. The gardener, who'd dropped his pistol, crouched and snatched up the .38 again. With a deafening, flashing *cra-a-ack-crack-crack* his weapon spat flame across the table at the doorway where Loren Monahan had been standing. Four times the gun blazed fire as the others flung themselves to the floor.

The gardener quit shooting. For a space no one moved, no one spoke, the dark room seemed still to vibrate with the concussion of gun shots.

Then Loren Monahan spoke through the darkness. "Sheila, lie flat on the floor."

The gardener whipped a bullet at the sound of Monahan's voice. On the heel of that report, from the doorway came a single answering shot. The gardener gasped out in pain, and his pistol fell to the floor with a clatter. To judge from the swearing, Kyle wasn't badly hurt.

"Dad, listen to me!" Sheila pleaded. "I'm not on the floor. I'm standing up. I'm coming toward you. If you shoot, you'll hit me!"

"Get down, Sheila!"

"No. I'm coming toward you. I'm blocking the way. I'm right in front of you. You can't shoot."

"But *they* can, girl! They can shoot me without a kickback from anybody! They won't mind killing you as well. *Get down!*"

"Dad, you've got to give up. It's all you can do."

ACROSS the pitch-dark room Sheila walked, in the way for any bullet that a panicky finger might trigger through the darkness. Craig's nerves tensed to screaming tension as he heard the girl moving, each slow step taking her nearer to Monahan. Abruptly Craig strode after her.

"Dad, give me your gun. You must surrender to the police, but it's just for a little while. You've got friends, Dad! We'll be working day and night to clear you. It won't be long. It *can't* be. Then—"

"No." From the darkness just ahead of her Monahan spoke. "I don't mind dying. But not uselessly! I want something to be gained by it!"

Sheila jumped forward then, and dimly in the doorway ahead of him Craig made out a blurred tangle of figures.

"Let go! Sheila, let go!" Monahan was saying.

"Switch on the light!" Craig yelled at the butler, and lunged forward.

As the light came on, Craig saw

the girl clinging to her father's arm and Monahan pulling away from her. With all his strength, Craig smashed his fist to Monahan's jaw. Monahan reeled back against the wall, and Craig pounced onto him, got hold of the pistol and wrenched savagely on it. But he didn't break Monahan's hold of the weapon, and it blazed almost in his face as Monahan squeezed trigger.

Then Broderick reached them, a heavy candlestick grabbed off a sideboard in his hand. He brought it down on Monahan's head, and the fugitive's knees buckled and he went down. Jimmy Craig yanked the pistol from his hand.

"Peck, phone for the police!" Broderick yelled.

"I should've let you drown," Monahan groaned at Jimmy.

"Dad," Sheila begged, "this is for the best, I know it is! Mr. Craig's your friend. We'll work day and night to get you freed. Have faith in us, Dad!"

"Craig's no friend of mine. He's one of the cops I escaped from. I don't know what he's told you, but it looks as if he's used you for a cat's paw to help capture me. He's not interested in doing me any good. What he wants is to get himself out of the dog-house with the police commissioner by getting me back into jail again. That's all!"

Sheila gasped. She turned and looked at Craig. She didn't say anything, just looked, but her vivid blue eyes were full of stunned surprise, of burning scorn and contempt. Craig's face turned a hot crimson. He felt low, like a heel, like something that crawled under rocks and shunned the light of day. He wanted to deny things, to explain—but Sheila Monahan turned from him in heartsick disillusion. And he knew, suddenly, that nothing he could say, now, would mean a solitary thing.

To him came an appalling sense of shame and loss.

CHAPTER V

WHO IS FLETCHER PENRHYN?



THE re-capture of Monahan got Jimmy Craig considerable newspaper hullabaloo—and the prompt offer of that job in the police laboratory for which he had been waiting. He accepted the job, not with thankfulness but with a sense of guilt, as if he had taken blood money.

In the D.A.'s office he read the transcript of record on the Monahan case. Boiled down, it all summed up to the fact that Loren Monahan had been convicted of murdering Bradley McGaa on the basis of three items: a threatening note he had written McGaa, the murder gun which was admittedly Monahan's own weapon and bore only his fingerprints, and the eyewitness testimony of Raoul D'Arcy and John Broderick.

"Why the interest in that case, Jimmy?" inquired McGillivray, the district attorney's first assistant.

"Because I don't believe Monahan killed McGaa!"

"You have a fat chance of proving he didn't."

"Look, Mac, give me an order on the exhibit clerk to take the murder gun and the threat letter to the police laboratory for further study, will you?"

"Well, I'll ask the chief," acceded McGillivray. He went into the inner office, and came back presently with the required order.

Later, in the police lab, Craig examined that incriminating note which Monahan had written McGaa. It read:

You've had my final terms, and I won't discuss the matter further. You'll either toe the mark or face the consequences. I'm giving you warning. I don't bluff and I don't load my gun with blanks.

Monahan.

A threat? Yes. In the light of what happened later, the note could defi-

nately be interpreted as a murder threat. According to the record, Monahan had acknowledged the signature of the note as his own, and admitting the handwriting to be his own. But insisted that he could not remember having written the message at all. Which had done him more harm than good.

Shaking his head over the note, his gray eyes troubled, Craig got busy. He made a photostat of the message for a permanent record. Then he spread vaseline over the letter to make the paper transparent. He photographed the message on an ordinary plate, with a blue filter over the camera lens. Next he photographed the note with a specially prepared plate sensitive to red, and with a red filter.

Shortly he was comparing these two different plates.

"Holy, jumping—look at that!"

Part of the message showed in one color. Another part showed in a different color.

"Which means," Craig said to himself in excitement, "that part of this letter was written with one kind of ink, and then more words were added in another kind of ink! The two inks show different colors!"

And that meant, he reasoned further, that Loren Monahan likely had written:

You've had my final terms and I won't discuss the matter further. You'll either toe the mark or face the consequences.

Monahan had written just this much—an abrupt, hasty letter from an abrupt, impatient boss to some employee guilty of lying down on the job. Routine, that's all.

But to this innocent note somebody, imitating Monahan's handwriting, had added:

I'm giving you warning. I don't bluff and I don't load my gun with blanks.

"To make the note look like a death threat!" Craig said through his

clenched teeth. He turned, then, to the murder gun.

ACCORDING to the testimony, Monahan had admitted that the weapon was his. But he said it was a pistol he kept unloaded in a desk drawer, and which he had not handled for months. Just the same, it was his gun and the death bullet had come from this weapon.

There were fingerprints on the .45. Lots of them. And they were all Monahan's. Craig checked this point carefully.

"But maybe somebody else wore gloves when he handled the gun. The trigger itself is wiped-smooth," Craig reasoned. "Maybe somebody stole the gun from Monahan's desk, loaded it and—"

Loaded it.

His hands suddenly shaky, Craig turned to the envelope containing the cartridges which had been in the murder weapon. Carefully he dusted the cartridges with powder to make perceptible any latent fingerprints upon them. One after the other he examined the bullets, finding nothing.

Abruptly his heart leaped. Here was a print! It was on the butt of a cartridge—as if the bullet had stuck in the cylinder and the man loading the gun, probably handling the bullets with a handkerchief, had impatiently pushed the shell into place with a bare thumb.

Quickly Craig photographed what there was of the fingerprint. Then he compared the print with the other fingerprints on the pistol. And a soundless yell swelled in his throat.

For the thumbprint was not Monahan's.

"The man who loaded the gun was not Loren Monahan!"

Jimmy Craig stood there at the lab bench, his gray eyes burning with realization. Here, in this thumbprint, inexplicably overlooked by the D.A.'s lab man, was a clue, the only clue, to Bradley McGaa's killer. Here was an

arrow pointing to the man who'd murdered McGaa and maneuvered the guilt to fall on Loren Monahan.

It was a clue, but such a tiny clue! Against the eye-witness testimony of Monahan's two partners, D'Arcy and Broderick, this thumbprint would have as much force as a pea-shooter aimed at the waterline armor of a battleship! Yet D'Arcy and Broderick had sworn in court that they had *seen* Monahan shoot McGaa.

"They lied!" Craig said fiercely. "They lied, and some way—somehow—I've got to prove it!"

First of all, Craig decided to check that thumbprint with the fingerprints of Raoul D'Arcy and John Broderick. That was easy. The firm of Monahan, D'Arcy and Broderick had had all employees fingerprinted, from vice-presidents to night watchman, when the F.B.I. had prompted voluntary fingerprinting. A telegram from the Department of Justice informed Craig that the thumbprint was neither D'Arcy's nor Broderick's.

Slightly disappointed, Craig set other investigating machinery into motion. Day after day passed fruitlessly. And then, finally, he located the thumbprint—in the files of the Postal Savings Department. Postal Inspector Denham told him:

"The print belongs to a man named Fletcher Penrhyn. All we've found out about him is that he's an Englishman—Welsh, probably—who took out papers for citizenship five years ago. But we can't locate him now. The guy has simply vanished, into thin air."

NOW Craig asked further help from McGillivray, the D.A.'s assistant.

"But we've wired police officers all over the country, trying to find this Penrhyn for you," protested the assistant. "We've contacted hospitals, insane asylums, jails, county farms, auto camps. No soap. You got any other ideas, Jimmy?"

Craig breathed a shaky sigh, and shook his head. Only that he thought a lot of Sheila Monahan, and he couldn't very well tell McGillivray that.

Fletcher Penrhyn. English, probably Welsh. Took out citizenship papers five years ago. Impossible to locate.

"Penrhyn shot Bradley McGaa," Craig reasoned. "At least, he loaded the murder gun. So he's somewhere in this state!"

But how to find him? All there was to work with was a name. No description of Penrhyn. And all the routine avenues of hunting down a missing person had led to no results. Perhaps it would be smart to look up some alleys off the beaten track?

Craig called the telephone company and asked that the name Fletcher Penrhyn be looked up in their California records. He made inquiry at the credit association. He went to the offices of the Board of Health. He sent telegrams of inquiry to the State Income Tax Division, to marriage license bureaus in every large city and state, to the "morgue" clerks of the bigger newspapers in the West.

To no avail.

The answers all came back in the negative. No data was available on Fletcher Penrhyn.

Fletcher Penrhyn, an Englishman . . . probably Welsh.

"Say! Come to think of it—"

Hastily Craig phoned a telegram to the Department of Immigration at Ellis Island, and one to the Naturalization Bureau. By six P.M. that day he had a wire from the latter bureau:

FLETCHER PENRHYN TOOK OUT FIRST CITIZENSHIP PAPERS MARCH EIGHT NINETEEN THIRTY-FIVE STOP FRIENDS NAMED WERE DOUGLAS CARMON LOS ANGELES AND FRED T AMES SANTA MONICA

For a moment Craig stared blankly at the message. Then he got it. A man taking out first citizenship papers had

to have people vouch for him, and their names were recorded.

Fingers shaking, Jimmy Craig looked up the name Douglas Carmon in the phone book. He found it! Dialed the man's number. Waited in an agony of suspense while the phone bell rang and rang—

"Hello?"

Carmon was on the wire. Hastily Craig explained what he thought necessary and asked:


"So can you tell me where to locate Fletcher Penrhyn, or anything about him?"

"Why, yes," Carmon answered readily. "Last time I saw him—"

For five minutes Carmon spoke on. And Craig, listening, stiffened and swore in stunned, incredulous surprise.

CHAPTER VI

COOPERATION

RAIG, that night, got Sheila Monahan on the phone.

"Hold on! You listen to me a minute!" he insisted as she was about to hang up. "I told you before I wanted to help clear your father of that murder charge, and that's what I'm trying to do right now!"

"I don't care to have a single thing to do with you, ever," she answered, and there was a sob in her sweet voice.

"All right, all right, but your feelings about me don't amount to a damn if there's even one slim chance to get your father out of the penitentiary. That right?"

"Of course, but—"

"Well, that one wild chance of saving your father has opened up! But I need help. And I want *your* help. Convincing you that I'm not a heel is damned important to me."

"I didn't really think that," she said, her voice very low. "You just did your job, I guess."

"I asked will you help me? Or aren't you interested in proving your father didn't kill McGaa?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Come to my apartment at three-thirty tomorrow. Get excused from your job, and I'll explain when you get here."

She arrived exactly on time next afternoon, looking slim and young in that sweater and plaid skirt she'd worn the first time he saw her. Her sweet face was shadowed and troubled. Craig's pulse stuttered and his throat choked up at sight of her. But, in a very matter-of-fact and businesslike manner, he led her into the kitchen of his tiny apartment and seated her at the table.

"This gadget here on the table is a dictograph I've got set up. Switch it on—like this—when you hear me start talking with a man in the other room. Stay in here till it's all over."

"Who's coming?"

"The man who shot Bradley McGaa," he said bluntly.

Her eyes widened and pallor came into her lovely face.

"B-but shouldn't you have some policemen handy?"

"No. Cops would scare this man. He's got to trust me, or the whole plan goes bust. But I'll be careful. Don't be frightened."

She reddened and her sweet lips compressed.

"I'll be all right," she said, but she started violently then as the doorbell shrilled.

"He's here!" Craig whispered. "Sit tight!"

Shutting the door to the kitchen, he hurried to the front door of the apartment. For an instant he paused; his chest lifted to a quick stab of breath and his keen eyes hardened. Then he opened the door.

"Come in, Kyle."

The grizzled, brawny gardener who worked for John Broderick entered. His left arm was bandaged from the bullet wound he'd got in the fight with

Loren Monahan at Broderick's home.

"What d'you want to see me about?" he demanded gruffly, uneasiness shadowing his seamed, sunburnt face.

"Sit down. Smoke? Look Kyle, you're in a jam. I want to help you. And if you'll play ball with me, I'll be able to help you. But if you turn stubborn, you'll send yourself to the electric chair. I hate to use that kind of talk, but it's fact."

Kyle loomed up out of his seat in a rush.

"Say, what you tryin' to do?" he snarled.

"To clear Loren Monahan of a murder rap of which he's innocent."

"Glad to hear it. But why you haulin' me in on this?"

"Because you happen to be guilty."

Kyle's seamed, sunburnt face showed no change of expression.

"I am not! If this is a gag, it's pretty corny. If it's a trick, it's a misfire."

KYLE turned and strode toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Fletcher Penrhyn," Craig said gently.

Kyle stopped, and whirled around as if caught about the throat by an invisible noose. The change that came over his deep-lined face was shocking.

"What d-did you call me?"

"Fletcher Penrhyn."

"My name's Luther Kyle!"

"Yes—since you changed it three years ago, that time you missed going to jail by an eyelash. It seems you were selling no-good desert land to middle-West suckers, telling them that they could grow six hundred dollars' worth of alfalfa, beans and pears per acre. You didn't mention the alkali. Also, the artesian wells you promised never did run anything but hot air."

"I was acquitted!"

"Your partners weren't. And you found it expedient to change your name."

"Nothing wrong in that!" growled Kyle defensively.

"No, but there's a plenty wrong in arson," Craig pointed out. "You're pretty clever at starting a fire in such a way there'll be no evidence for the cops afterward. You once rented a store from a man named Douglas Carmon, who'd been a good friend to you. But you didn't pay your rent and when he finally dispossessed you, a fire gutted his whole building. He knew damn well you'd set it. Hell, you'd even threatened him!"

"You got no proof of that," Kyle protested hoarsely.

"No. You were smart. But this time you're being rooked by smarter crooks than yourself, Kyle. You've been a stooge for John Broderick. But it's Raoul D'Arcy and Broderick whom I'm after. You write out a confession of everything Broderick has involved you in, and I'll arrange for you to get a lenient prison sentence. How about it?"

"Go to hell!" shouted Kyle, and started out.

This time Craig moved. He staggered his visitor with a blow to the side of the jaw, knocking him into a chair.

"I can be tough, too, Kyle," he said, taking a turn about the room, calming himself. "Man, why be a fall guy for those heels?"

"You—don't talk sense," mumbled Kyle, nursing his jaw.

"Come off it! How in blazes do you think I know that you're a Welshman named Fletcher Penrhyn who took out his first citizenship papers in Nineteen thirty-five? How do you think I know about that small farm racket? And about Carmon, and that other arson job? How do you think I know that you stole Loren Monahan's gun from his desk, loaded it, and used it to kill Bradley McGaa?"

"I didn't kill Brad McGaa!" Kyle yelled, almost screaming it. "I swear to God I didn't kill him!"

"John Broderick testifies that you

did! Broderick has turned rat. He's squealing on you and D'Arcy. Broderick's buying a soft conviction from the D.A., taking a few years in the pen while he throws you into the death house, just as he threw Monahan. Broderick swears that you shot McGaa and—"

"He's lying! I gave Broderick the gun and he used it on Brad McGaa!"

"That," agreed Craig soberly, "is what I've thought all along. That's why I want Broderick to burn in the chair. Kyle, the D.A. won't make a deal with Broderick if you'll testify that he's the murderer. Do that, and we'll get you the lenient sentence! What do you say?"

Kyle slumped onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands.

"There's a phone on the desk beside you," went on Craig gently after a brief pause. "Call the D.A.'s office. Don't be a sucker, Kyle! You call them right now on your own—or I'll turn you in as a murderer!"

Kyle lifted his haggard face. He reached for the phone.

THAT was when the front door opened and wiry Raoul D'Arcy and John Broderick entered. Broderick held a leveled automatic in his fist.

D'Arcy's head was still bandaged, and he was deathly pale, but his ferretlike eyes glittered evilly.

"Put down that phone, Kyle," D'Arcy ordered.

Kyle did not obey. He faced D'Arcy and Broderick.

"You followed me!"

"And a good thing we did. We haven't let you out of our sight longer'n we could help since we hired you. Put down that phone!"

But Kyle had a stubborn, resolute streak in him.

"The operator's on the wire," he said. "You two better scram while you can get a head start. I'm calling the police."

"Put down that phone!"

But Kyle whipped the phone to his lips.

"Operator, I want the police—"

D'Arcy lunged, pulling a gun from his pocket. He struck the side of Kyle's head with the barrel. Broderick leveled his automatic at Craig.

"Don't move!" he warned thinly.

Kyle slumped to the floor, senseless. D'Arcy put the phone back on the cradle, seized a pillow from the sofa, jammed his pistol into the pillow and pressed it against the gardener's chest. Kyle's body jounced as the gun blasted lead into him with a dull, muffled thud. D'Arcy straightened up, his suave, thin face gray with desperation.

"You're coming with us, Craig," he said tersely.

"Like hell!" defied the investigator.

"We'll release you at the Border. Or would you," Broderick put in, "prefer that we leave you here in the shape D'Arcy has left Kyle?"

"You'd leave me at the Border with slugs in my body," stalled Craig.

"Maybe not, if you're cooperative." D'Arcy ordered harshly, "Start walking. Out the door!"

"It's too late," said a new voice desperately.

D'ARCY whirled. Jimmy Craig groaned in consternation.

In the kitchen doorway stood Sheila, her lovely face white and strained. She was leaning against the door jamb for support, but her voice rang out clearly as she spoke on.

"I've already phoned the police. They're probably at the door downstairs this minute."

D'Arcy reached her in a stride, pulled her savagely into the room, and darted past her into the kitchen. Almost at once he was back, his lean, suave face angry and yet relieved.

"She's bluffing," he told Broderick. "No phone in the kitchen. Not even a back door."

"What'll we do with her?" Broderick demanded. His amiable, fat

man's voice was almost shrill with panic.

"She comes with us, too," D'Arcy said savagely.

"No!" It burst out of Jimmy Craig as he sprang, swung at D'Arcy's jaw with all his strength.

But D'Arcy was alert, expecting something. He dodged back. Craig's blow struck glancingly along his bandaged head, staggering him against the wall. Blindly he pulled trigger. The slug creased Craig's side as the investigator charged him in a headlong dive. They crashed to the floor together.

D'Arcy rolled clear—just as the door to the hall burst open before the smashing drive of uniformed men. Broderick looked around, saw the cops, and for a split-instant he stood petrified. Then his gun twisted and spat fire like the stab of a rattler. Answering reports thundered in the room, and bullets smashed into him.

Broderick spun and collapsed as Raoul D'Arcy found his feet and dived for the window. Out of the open window, onto the fire-escape he jumped, and started down. Below, police shouted warning. The gun spoke in D'Arcy's hand, and from the street below a sub-Thompson gun barked staccato answer. D'Arcy crumpled, uttered one stifled cry, and pitched over the railing.

His body whirled end over end as he fell.

Jimmy Craig turned toward Sheila, catching her in his arms as she went limp. "Take it easy, honey; it's all over!"

"But I told them—" she gasped, "I *t-told* them that I'd called the police!"

And she fainted dead away.

JOHN BRODERICK had four bullets in him, but he wasn't dead. At the hospital he dictated a full confession. He and D'Arcy, using Kyle, had planned the arson job, burning their plant. Bradley McGaa had got wise to them and blackmailed them. They

had simply killed him and framed Loren Monahan for the crime.

Craig and Sheila met Loren Monahan on his release from custody.

"I still can't help but feel that you worked a miracle for me, Craig," Sheila's father said. "I want to hear how you did it."

As they sat at dinner, Jimmy explained.

"It wasn't a miracle. Just a routine job for the right people. You see, sir, you tried to bring justice to Broderick and his partners by working as a single individual out to get a personal revenge. If you'd succeeded, you'd only have died in the chair for murder. I didn't try to serve justice on those men all by myself. I set the law machinery of the whole community into motion."

"I don't quite understand," Monahan said.

"The District Attorney's office cooperated with me by letting me study the exhibits in your case. When I found a fingerprint, I needed the help of the F.B.I. to check on it. But it wasn't till we located that print in the Postal Savings Department that we got anything definite to work on. Even then, after searching for data on Fletcher Penrhyn in hospitals, state institutions and so on, it wasn't till I got help from the Federal Bureau of Naturalization that I discovered that Fletcher Penrhyn, who had van-

ished, was a Luther Kyle right under our noses. Y'see, sir, to break this case we had to have help from all over the whole country."

"And the next-door neighbor," Sheila put in, smiling. "When D'Arcy and Broderick burst in on Jimmy with guns in their hands, I was in the kitchen. I called down the dumb-waiter shaft. The woman on the floor below was hauling up a delivery of groceries. I whispered to her, and she rushed to put in that phone call for the police."

"Yes," said Craig, smiling. "Justice can't be any one man's prerogative, it must be a function of the whole community."

"Yes," Monahan said softly. "I see. As long as a man can depend on his community, his neighbor, and his daughter, nothing can lick him. I also realize that I am probably the first murder suspect ever saved by a dumb-waiter!"

They laughed, but Sheila's hand tightened on her father's arm. Then she impulsively kissed Jimmy Craig.

"Jimmy, you've done so much for us," she murmured. "You'll come back to see us?"

"You bet I'll be back," he promised fervently. But he didn't shout the words, much as that kiss inspired him. For this wasn't a matter for the whole community. This was strictly personal. . . .

FOLLOW THE EXPLOITS OF THE BLACK BAT

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BENNY WERNER shifted uneasily in the chair before Captain Hendricks at police headquarters. In front of Hendricks Detective Olsen of the Pickpocket Detail leaned back against the battered desk, his cold blue eyes fixed on Benny.

"You're leaving by tomorrow night, Benny," Hendricks declared.

At the door he shook thin, curling shoulders clear of Olsen's hand.

"You got nothing on me, copper," he repeated, opening the door.

"Third time's the charm," Olsen said. "Don't forget—tomorrow night."

Outside Benny headed toward downtown Los Angeles. He straightened his tie as he walked, ran a thin



Olsen's open palm caught Benny in the mouth

"If you see him in town after then, Olsen, bring him in."

"You got nothing on me!" Benny flared, trying desperately to make his ferret eyes meet Olsen's stare. "Absolutely nothing!"

"You've got a record that'd stretch from here to Jefferson City," Olsen said.

"Where he ought to be," Hendricks added. "Toss him out, Olsen."

Benny got up as Olsen touched him.

finger inside his collar to ease the pressure. But the pressure wasn't only around his neck. It was on Benny Werner in general.

Underneath the double-breasted coat of the gray suit Benny could feel sweat dampening his shirt. This was the pay-off, he decided. It was time to go South with the birds, or East.

It had come sooner than he had expected. Six months ago he had set a

Benny Werner Proves to Be Dumber than His Victim!

goal. He lacked four hundred dollars of that goal. He had enough to take him out of town and to new hunting grounds all right. But it wasn't quite the amount he had decided upon.

Maybe it was just as well though, he reasoned, massaging his slender fingers. He hadn't been working well. His fingers seemed clumsy lately, and he was jumpy. In his business fingers and nerves were everything — like with a piano player.

BENNY paused before a jewelry store. His eyes played over his reflection in the window glass. He looked okay. The "front" was good. But inside he was jumpy.

A woman hesitated beside him, staring at the banks of shining rings. Benny's eyes flashed over the black leather bag she carried on her arm. Big round shiny knobs for snaps. It would be easy. The woman moved off. Benny started after her.

In the drug store on the corner he waited until she had finished a soft drink. He was at the counter when she came to pay her check. He bumped her slightly. His hand darted out for the big round shiny knobs. The woman pulled away quickly, staring.

He muttered an apology, drifted out the door, sweating. He had missed by a good three seconds—a lifetime! That was bad!

He entered the department store a few steps away, wandered aimlessly about, eyes considering each opportunity. But his nerves were bad. He didn't feel like doing open work. He tried the men's washroom.

A guy stood washing his hands and his coat hung beside him. Benny pushed up casually, fiddled with the paper towels. But his free hand went through the coat in a few deft motions. Then he was outside, into the crowded aisles of the store and, finally, onto the sidewalk.

In his pocket was the gun he'd found in the man's coat.

Benny had never carried a gun. He was afraid of guns. At that instant he was sorry he'd taken it. But he could sell it. He'd get ten bucks for it. But he'd sell it quick. He wouldn't want to get picked up while he was carrying it.

On Spring Street he stopped at the bank—*his* bank. He had been putting money in it regularly. He enjoyed standing at the glass-topped table and filling in a deposit slip. The tellers always greeted him with gratifying friendliness. He was a legitimate depositor. He had always been scrupulously honest in the bank.

Not that there hadn't been both opportunity and inclination to be otherwise. People handled money as if bank walls made them and their possessions sacrosanct. Even tellers acted as though some magic made their money drawers untouchable.

Benny left the bank alone because he liked to feel unworried and unhurried when he was in it.

Now, he wrote a counter check for the total amount of his balance. He was drawing it all out. He was getting out of Los Angeles tonight. Even if he lacked four hundred dollars he was getting out. Just four hundred dollars! Benny thought.

"Four hundred"—the teller said, and Benny started.

The man at the window to whom the teller had spoken was counting a stack of twenty-dollar bills. Noticing Benny, he moved aside, went on thumbing through the money. Benny shoved his check under the grille, but his greedy eyes flashed to the stack of twenties. A lump rose in his throat.

"Thank you, Mr. Carson," the teller said to the stranger. The man nodded, smiled and turned away.

The teller counted out Benny's money.

"Sorry you're closing your account, Mr. Werner," he said.

Benny wasn't listening. He turned from the window, eyes fastened on the broad shoulders of Mr. Carson,

who was walking unhurriedly away.

His heart beat swiftly as he left the bank. A few steps ahead the stranger ambled leisurely down Spring Street. Benny glanced at his watch—well, it wasn't really *his* watch. Nearly half-past twelve.

HE HAD already decided he was going to get that four hundred. He was going to make one last haul. But he'd have to act fast. Carson might be going home to lunch. If he took a street car it would be all right, of course. Benny enjoyed working on a crowded trolley. But if Carson drove his own car!

The stranger stopped two blocks away at a small restaurant. Through the windows Benny watched him take a place at a far table. He entered the restaurant.

At the counter he watched a waiter approach the table, heard him say: "The usual today, Mr. Carson?" and saw the man's easy, friendly nod.

This was going to be an easy job. Benny had already noted the man's wallet was in the inside coat pocket, and he wore a single-breasted suit. Benny's fingers tingled in anticipation. It was just a matter of waiting for the proper time and place.

He was at the cashier's wicket when Carson came up to pay his check. Benny stood aside fumbling with a package of gum as the man reached for the wallet, laid a bill upon the rubber mat. A small white ticket flashed beside the money. Carson shoved it back in his pocket, nodded pleasantly to the cashier and walked to the door.

There had been no chance to work in there. Outside Benny hurried on the other's trail. He had recognized the writing on that tiny slip of paper—an auto park receipt. Carson *was* driving his own car!

The picture of those crisp, clean twenty dollar bills burned in Benny's mind. He had to make this last haul. There'd never be as good a chance.

At the next corner he prepared to make the try. Carson merged with the pedestrians at the corner waiting for the traffic signal to change. Benny started edging up. An elbow prodded him. He froze.

"Going anywhere, Benny?" the big man at his side said softly.

He frowned on Detective Olsen, managed an artificial smile. "Home. Are you wanting anything?"

Olsen rocked easily on his heels.

"Not yet, Benny," he said, his large mouth rounded with amusement. "But I will. Don't forget—tomorrow night's the deadline."

Carson's bent shoulders were visible among the other pedestrians. Benny hurried from the curb, following him across the street. On the other side he risked looking back. Olsen had disappeared.

Carson headed west. Benny guessed now that the auto park was on Hill Street. The man would probably head North at the next block. Then it certainly would be too late. Benny almost ran.

An alley running north split the midtown block. Benny's thin lips tightened as he saw Carson turn into it. Following, his glance took in the staggered line of refuse cans, the single fire-escape on one flanking building, the outlines of dusty windows in the other. There was no one in the darkened alley, no one except Carson four yards ahead. He sprinted after him, touched him on the arm. Carson half turned. Fear distorted the man's features.

"Got a match?" Benny called quickly, but softly. "I just want a match."

At first he thought the man was going to holler. Finally Carson shook his head, lips parted slightly, and he started hurrying on.

Benny tightened. The lump was larger in his throat. He swore softly. He was going to have that four hundred dollars. He was going to have it even if—

His hand brushed against the stolen gun. He took three quick steps after Carson, pulling the gun from his pocket. With his other hand he swung the man around.

It happened quickly. Carson's fists clenched, his mouth opened as if to yell. Benny pulled the trigger. In the cavern of an alley the reverberations of the shot were loud. Carson tumbled drunkenly to the pavement.

Panic struck Benny. But before he ran, his hand ripped the wallet from Carson's pocket. Halfway down the alley he drew up. Ahead, across the street, a man was running from a store, heading toward the alley. Benny turned back, started out the other way. Running figures loomed from that direction.

BENNY prided himself on thinking fast. All his life he had depended on lightning mental processes to get him out of jams. This was different, this was out beyond his depth—but tongue and mind could save him. With one swift movement he dropped wallet and gun into a refuse can, knelt by the bleeding body.

A man came running up. Benny fumbled with Carson's coat, unloosed the tie, then looked up.

"Get an ambulance! And police!" he yelled. "Two guys just shot this man!"

Others crowded around as Benny played his part. "They went that way!" he shouted, pointing toward Spring Street. "Two guys—one tall, one short!"

A few men broke from the crowd, started down the alley.

Benny eased to his feet, pushed back slowly to the fringe of spectators. In a minute he could duck. In the confusion he'd make a getaway.

He wasn't waiting for Carson to identify him.

Someone gripped his arm, and Benny flinched. It was Olsen. The detective knelt, touched Carson's chest. Then he turned to Benny.

"He's dead, you rat!"

A groan ran through the crowd.

"That's awful!" Benny blurted. "That's—don't stare at me that way, Olsen! I didn't do it! You know me—you know murder ain't my line!"

"Talk fast, Benny!"

In Benny's mind a course of action shaped itself. Carson was dead—he'd never talk. There'd be no identification. Just stick to your story, he told himself.

"I heard a shot, ran in the alley," he threw at Olsen. "This guy was lying here, bleeding, coughing out his last words!"

"He told you who shot him? He was talking when you got here?"

"I'm telling you! He said the guys went down the alley toward Spring. Two guys—one tall, one short!"

Olsen's hand flicked out. The open palm caught Benny in the mouth.

"I knew this man, Benny. His name was Carson."

"Then get going! He said the guys went that way!" Benny pointed frantically.

Olsen's hand clamped down on Benny's shoulder.

"You killed Jim Carson, rat!" the detective said, and Benny felt the bottom dropping out of everything. There weren't two guys. Carson didn't tell you that!"

"I swear he did! You can't prove he didn't."

Olsen slapped him again.

"I'll prove it, rat!" he said. "Jim Carson was deaf and dumb!"

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Hot-Spot Deputy

By MAXWELL HAWKINS

Author of "Death Orchids," "Headed for Hell," etc.



Bud sprang up and fought for the gun

Caught In a Desperate Trap, Bud Hegler Applies a New Twist to the Old Adage About Setting a Thief to Catch a Thief!

BUD HEGLER tilted his ten-gallon hat slightly forward over his rust-colored hair and studied himself in the cracked mirror on the back wall of his father's office.

"Looks good on me," he commented aloud.

His admiration was not for the

hat. It was for a shiny badge which bore the legend:

DEPUTY
SHERIFF

Bud had pinned it on his vest, which he wore unbuttoned in the approved fashion of movie sheriffs.

Bud's father was sheriff of Casco County. He always wore a coat, except in hot weather. He usually wore an ordinary felt hat, too. He wasn't, Bud felt, up to the Hollywood standard of what a sheriff should look like.

With a reluctant sigh, Bud turned away from the mirror. It was about time his father made him a deputy. When a guy's nineteen he's old enough to be deputized. Especially if he's five-feet-ten and tips the scales at one-seventy.

But Sheriff Hegler didn't agree. He had long ago made it emphatically clear that he would deputize Bud when he became of age—and not before.

Bud walked with a hint of a swagger back to his father's battered, roll-top desk. He sat down in the sheriff's chair. Just as he was starting to unpin the deputy's badge—to replace it in the drawer where it belonged—the door was opened.

Bud looked up quickly, drew a relieved breath. For a second, he had been afraid his father had returned and caught him wearing the badge. The man who stepped into the sheriff's office, however, was a total stranger to Bud. A rather small man, well dressed, and plainly in a hurry.

"Where's the sheriff?" he asked.

"Gone to Cartensville to serve some papers," Bud answered.

The stranger frowned. "When'll he be back?"

"Guess not till late this afternoon. That's what he said when he left."

SLOWLY the stranger's frown deepened. He rubbed his hand thoughtfully over his square chin.

"Anything I can do for you?" Bud asked.

"My name's Darwin. I'm superintendent at the Denning Coal Mines," the stranger said. "I'm in town to get the payroll. Thought maybe the sheriff would give me a man to help guard it."

Bud nodded. He had heard they had a new superintendent at the coal mines, since they'd opened the new pits and taken on a bunch more men.

"I intended to bring my foreman," Darwin continued. "But he sprained his ankle this morning."

Bud swallowed quickly, wet his lips. Then he rose from his father's chair and hitched his pants.

"What's the matter with me goin' with you? I'm a deputy sheriff."

The superintendent looked surprised, and for the first time seemed to notice the shiny badge on Bud's vest. He studied it a moment, then glanced appraisingly at Bud's face.

"You look kind of young for a deputy."

"I'm older than I look," Bud said easily. "Been a deputy a couple of years."

Darwin hesitated. "Well—thanks," he said finally. "I'd like to get started as soon as possible. We have to stop at the bank."

"Be with you in a minute," Bud said.

He went to the closet in the corner. Selecting one of the several cartridge belts and guns hanging there, he strapped it on.

He had often rehearsed that, too, in secret.

Suddenly, his heart sank. He was certain to see someone he knew at the bank. They'd wonder about the badge. But he couldn't very well take it off now. Then he noticed an old coat of his father's. He slipped into it. It wasn't much too big for him and it hid the gun as well as the badge.

"May as well get going," he said.

Bud locked the door and accompanied the superintendent from the office in the basement of the tiny courthouse.

"I've got my car right here," Darwin said.

They stopped at the bank just long enough for the superintendent to go in and bring out a black bag.

"They were putting up the money

while I was at the sheriff's office," he explained.

As they took the main highway out of town toward the hills, Bud glanced down at the bag, resting under Darwin's legs on the floor of the sedan.

"Quite a lot of money there, I suppose," he ventured.

"About eighteen thousand dollars."

Bud whistled. Then he frowned heavily. "Guess it's just as well you got me along," he said.

Darwin nodded. His first doubts overcome, the mine superintendent appeared to have accepted Bud for what he was not—a deputy sheriff.

"Didn't have anyone I could bring along after the foreman hurt his ankle. Except the bookkeeper, and he was busy." He leaned over and began turning the knobs on the car's radio.

"We've got a lot of men out there at the mine, and they aren't all lilies," Darwin went on. "There's some bad characters hang around the settlement, too. Everyone knows when payday is—and where the money comes from. The only thing they don't know is the time we'll bring it in."

The radio began to blare forth. It was in the middle of a news broadcast.

". . . three life-termers in the State Prison made their escape this morning after killing one guard and wounding two others. Armed with the guards' weapons, they forced their way into the warden's office and from there to freedom. The three, described by authorities as desperate killers, commandeered the car of a passing motorist and fled south. The names of the men were given as James 'Blackie' Conroy, Martin 'The Limp,' Gilbert and Pete Lambert. Well, the news from Washington today—"

Darwin shut off the radio, shot a glance at Bud and made a wry face.

"Not very cheering to a couple of fellows carrying a big payroll across country," he said, and laughed. But it sounded a little hollow.

Bud felt a large emptiness in the region of his stomach. He wasn't worried about the escaped convicts. The prison was sixty miles away. He knew there wasn't a chance in a thousand they'd meet up with the fleeing men or be stopped by them if they did.

What worried Bud was the thought of his father. The sheriff undoubtedly would hear the news in Cartensville. He'd hurry right back to organize a watch on the roads. His orders to Bud had been to stick close to the office. But he'd find Bud gone and the office locked. Worse, he'd discover one of the guns and belts missing from the closet.

Bud gulped. He tried to forget his father's wrath and visualize the sheriff in that last Gene Autry's picture he'd seen. Spitting through the car window, he yanked his big hat a notch lower.

"If we meet 'em, reckon you and me can handle 'em," he said. If there was any quiver in his drawl, Darwin failed to notice it.

"Let's hope we don't run into them," he said.

IT WAS about twelve miles from town to the Denning Mines. For eight miles, their route lay over the concrete highway. The last four miles were on a side road into the hills, graveled, but winding and full of unexpected chuck holes. It called for slow and careful driving.

After the depressing experience with the radio, Darwin kept it turned off. He seemed intent only on driving the car as fast as possible to its destination.

"You got a gun?" Bud asked suddenly.

The superintendent patted his pocket. "A thirty-two," he said.

"A toy," Bud said contemptuously. He shifted the holster of his .45 with a touch of ostentation. "I'm a better than fair shot," he volunteered.

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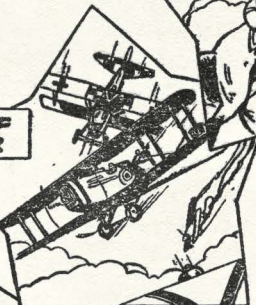
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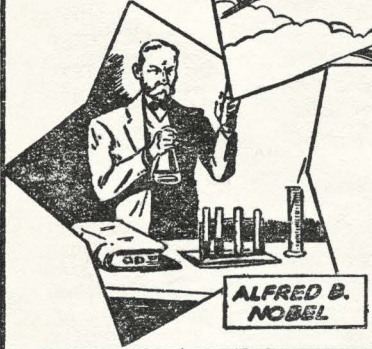
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That was an understatement. Bud had handled firearms since he got his first .22 rifle at the age of eight. Sheriff Hegler was a crack shot with either rifle or pistol. He'd taught Bud all he could. The more a person knows about guns, the more careful he is with them, the sheriff maintained.

"I couldn't hit a barn door," Darwin confessed.

Bud made a couple attempts to continue the conversation. But he found his companion unresponsive, so he finally lapsed into silence. They turned off the highway onto the hill road.

SLUMPED down in his seat, Bud stared ahead through half-closed eyes. He was sorry now he had pretended he was a deputy. He'd just done it on impulse, because he happened to have the badge pinned on his vest. Anyway, it had been before noon, and he figured he'd have ample time to go out to the mine and get back before his father returned. How was he to know a prison break was going to happen?

His father would boil up like a frozen radiator. He was sure of that. The sheriff took his office seriously. The idea of anyone, even his own son, impersonating a deputy would eat right into him.

The road narrowed down for the approach to the bridge over Indian Creek, and Darwin slowed up the sedan. The next thing Bud knew, the black muzzle of a gun was sticking through the window and a hard voice said:

"Stop the car! And keep your mouths shut and your hands still!"

Bud made a low bubbling sound. He hadn't even seen the men jump on the running board from the bushes on either side of the road. He was too scared now to turn his head.

Darwin, his lips twitching, brought the car to a halt. The man on the side near Bud stepped off the running-board and pulled the door open.

His companion stood with his gun poked through the window, covering the inside of the sedan.

"Get out!" the man on Bud's side ordered. "With your hands up!"

Bud obeyed with alacrity. Darwin followed. The superintendent had recovered his composure by this time, but Bud felt as if his knees had no bone structure in them.

"So it's a stickup," Darwin said.

"You catch on quick," the bandit said sarcastically.

The second man came around the front of the car. He walked up to Darwin and went through his pockets. After a scornful glance at the shiny .32, he dropped it in his pocket. Then he walked over to Bud.

Neither of the men wore masks. The one who was doing the frisking was short, almost fat, with small eyes beneath sandy brows. His companion, who kept them covered, was taller and dark. The thing about him that stuck in Bud's mind was his nose. Halfway down the bridge it turned off at an angle, lifting his mouth into a fixed sneer.

The short man patted Bud's coat pockets, then pulled the coat open. When he saw the deputy's badge and gun, he gave a quick, cold laugh.

"We got a copper here, Gus. Ain't that nice?" He gave Bud a sudden blow across the face with the back of his hand. And as Bud staggered back he pulled the forty-five from its holster.

He didn't bother to take the cartridge belt.

A third man appeared from somewhere in back. He was a big man, with a heavy mustache. Younger than the others, Bud judged.

"Get the dough!" he said tersely. "And let's scam."

Bud recalled with a tightening in his throat that there had been three convicts in the prison break. All desperate killers. These men didn't have on prison garb. But that didn't mean anything. The escape had been

several hours earlier. Plenty of time to obtain other clothes.

The short stout bandit called the other two aside. They stood a little way off, talking in low tones. Finally, the big man strode over to Bud and Darwin, who still held their leaden arms high above their heads.

"You're going with us," he announced curtly.

BUD was lying on the floor in the back of Darwin's car. His hands and feet had been firmly tied. In front sat the crooked-nosed bandit called Gus and his short pal, who was at the wheel. Bud wondered what had become of Darwin. The last he had seen of the superintendent, he was headed into the woods, the third member of the gang prodding him along with a gun-muzzle.

The whole stickup hadn't taken more than two or three minutes. The gang had operated with the speed and smoothness of old hands. But Bud had been too scared to notice that; to him it seemed like hours since that ugly gun snout had been poked through the car window.

The man called Gus spoke to his companion.

"You had the right idea, Ziggy."

"About what?"

"Taking these two guys along with us."

"Sure," Ziggy said. "The longer we keep 'em with us the longer it'll be before the job's discovered."

"Yeah."

"Like I said. We got to lie low till things cool off, anyway. We let these guys go, they give our descriptions. So the cops are all on the look-out for us as well as them cons."

"Why in hell didn't they pick some other day to break out of stir," Gus snarled. "We could have grabbed this dough and scrambled. Now we got to hide out. Why? Because every cop in this part of the country is watching the roads."

"What's a few days?" Ziggy said.

"We ought to be glad I always listen to the news on the radio every morning.

"And that ain't all," he pointed out. "When they do discover this job, they'll figure these guys run into the cons, who snatched 'em along with the dough and car."

"You got something there."

Ziggy gave a little laugh. "We got something here, too. Fifteen-twenty grand."

"Nice work, eh, Ziggy?" Gus chuckled.

"Nice work is right," Ziggy said. "And we got it."

In the back of the car Bud was owl-eyed. These three men weren't escaped convicts. Their stickup had been planned long before. But because the convicts had escaped, this gang was hiding out, intending to keep Darwin and himself prisoners until the coast cleared.

Bud tried to figure out where they were going, but he didn't get very far with it, although he knew the country well. They had driven the sedan across the bridge and continued on the mine road for a little distance, then turned left. After that had come many more turns, with the going increasingly rough, until Bud was completely confused. They were somewhere back in the hills. That was all he could be sure of.

Finally, the car stopped. The two men in front got out. The door to the rear was opened, and the crooked-nosed man leaned in.

"Rough ride, huh, fella?" he said, unfastening the bonds on Bud's ankles. "Come on! Get out!"

Bud's cramped muscles refused to respond. Gus grabbed him by the shoulders, dragged him roughly out and hoisted him to his feet. As he stood there a moment, swaying slightly, Bud looked around.

He was in a farmyard. At one side was a house and a hundred feet rearward was a barn. It had been a long time since anyone had lived here.

Tall weeds choked the yard, the barn roof sagged despondently, and the paintless house leaned at a crazy angle, its paneless windows haunting eyes in its weathered sides.

There were dozens of abandoned farms back through these hills, and Bud was certain he had never seen this one before.

"We got a nice room for you, copper," Ziggy said, laughing. "But no bath goes with it." The small, stout bandit was in high spirits.

Gus on one side and Ziggy on the other, they plowed through the weeds to the barn. The pair forced Bud to lie down on the rotting floor in one corner. Then they bound his ankles again, this time gagging him with a knotted handkerchief.

AS SOON as his captors left, Bud tried his bonds. But these had been expertly fastened. The gag, too, was firmly placed. He couldn't see how it would do him any good to yell, anyway.

He wondered why they had bothered to gag him.

He let his eyes roam about the interior of his prison. Light sifted through the cracks in the walls and the holes in the roof. He could see plainly.

Dirt, dust and cobwebs were everywhere. He saw a couple of grimy fruit jars on a shelf and some rusty tin cans in a corner. On the far wall was hanging an automobile casing. On the floor below it stood two cans of motor oil. These newer items indicated that the gang had been using the barn as a garage. They must have been here some time, planning the payroll robbery.

He heard a car drive up, halt in the yard. There was the slam of car doors, and then he caught the murmur of voices. He listened with straining ears, but was unable to distinguish words. He thought they would be bringing Darwin out to the barn any minute. But no one came. And

he heard no further sounds from the farmyard.

He remembered how the big man with the mustache had prodded Darwin in the back with his gun as they disappeared into the woods. A sudden panic gripped Bud. He struggled with all his strength against the cords, but they held fast. Finally, exhausted, he relaxed.

An hour passed. For the tenth time Bud stared around the barn. His gaze at last came to rest on the two fruit jars on the shelf. He looked at them a long while. They were about a dozen feet away; the shelf was at the height of a man's shoulder.

Suddenly he rolled onto his side. He drew his knees up, straightened them out with a jerk, at the same time pushing his feet on the floor. It was a painful effort, but it moved him a few inches. By repeating the operation, he finally reached a point at the end of the shelf.

Once more on his back he drew his feet up and placed them against the side of the barn. He gave a little shove. The jars teetered slightly. Again he shoved, and again. The first jar to fall landed with a dull thud, failed to break. The second hit on its side and shattered.

Bud waited with held breath. But there was no sound from outside, and he decided that the crash of breaking glass hadn't reached any of the gang.

One fragment that had been the bottom of the jar had a rough piece sticking up from it. Little by little, Bud worked around until he had it under him. He jabbed himself repeatedly, but part of the time he managed to saw the cords on his wrists across the sharp edge. Eventually, he felt one of the strands give. Then another. And at last, with a yank, he slipped his hands free.

He removed the handkerchief which gagged him, then untied his ankles. At last he stood up and stretched to restore circulation to his numbed limbs. He put his eye to one

of the cracks at the front of the barn.

He could see two cars in the yard. One of them was Darwin's small sedan. Beside it was a larger and newer car. And on the running-board was sitting the man with the crooked nose. No one else was in sight.

"They're inside splitting the money," Bud told himself.

He moved quickly across the barn to what had once been one of the stalls. A couple of loose boards gave way under pressure without much noise. He wriggled through the opening, ducked through a short stretch of weeds and slipped into the woods.

ONCE he was sure he couldn't be heard, Bud broke into a run. His immediate object was to get away. He couldn't help Darwin at the moment. He was unarmed. Besides, he wasn't certain Darwin was here with the gang. His only hope lay in getting help—reaching a telephone, if possible.

He stumbled on through the brush and trees until, out of breadth, he was forced to slow down. Just as he was beginning to think he had made a mistake and was headed deeper into the hills, he saw the trees thin out ahead of him. A minute later he was standing on a little embankment. Below him was a lane.

Following the lane for a quarter of a mile he suddenly emerged on the concrete highway. Bud recognized the spot. It was about ten miles beyond where he and Darwin had turned off the hard pavement onto the side road to the mine.

He started to trot along the pavement away from town. There was a roadside filling station a mile or two in that direction, he remembered. It might have a telephone.

Occasionally, he glanced over his shoulder, hoping for a possible lift. But no car came along. As he swung around a bend, however, a car was coming to a stop at the side of the

[Turn page]

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road about a hundred yards ahead. Bud broke into a run.

He saw the driver get out from behind the wheel. Steam was spurting through the hood slits, puffing out from under. Bud's hopes fell. The car ahead was in trouble, offering small chance of help. He slowed down to a walk as he heard the driver call to someone inside the car:

"Just like I warned you guys! We've shot the bearings!"

Two other men got out. One was a hulking brute with close-cut yellow hair. The other was small, slight of build, and he dragged one foot a little.

They stared at Bud in silence. The man with the limp kept one hand behind him, edging around until he was in back of Bud. The yellow-haired giant stuck close to the open door of the car. Bud started to speak, but the driver beat him to it. He was a stocky man whose beard was so heavy it gave his skin a blue-black color.

"Well, what do you want?" he snarled.

Bud's answer collapsed in his throat. For a second the landscape spun around. When he finally brought his senses into focus, the man with the blue-black beard was only a couple of feet away, looking at Bud through narrowed eyes.

Bud Hegler knew he was face to face with the three escaped convicts—all of them ruthless killers.

The man in front of him dropped his gaze, then gave a little start. The cartridge belt had caught his eye. He flipped back Bud's coat to get a better look and saw the badge. There was a low animal-like growl deep in his throat.

"A deputy sheriff!"

Bud felt something hard jabbed into his back. The yellow-haired giant reached in and dragged a rifle from the floor of the car.

"Shall I let him have it, Blackie?" a voice behind Bud asked.

"Take it easy!" Blackie snapped. He clutched the lapel of Bud's coat.

"Where's your gun?" he demanded.

Bud started to stall, to say he hadn't brought it with him. But he checked the words before they were spoken. These men were in desperate need of a car. There were two cars only a half mile back from the road. He took a deep breath.

"I left my gun in my car." Bud was surprised at the calmness of his own voice.

"Car!" Blackie smiled grimly. "Where's your car?"

BUD jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Up that lane a ways."

"Listen, guy," the stocky convict said, and his voice was hard as the barrel of the gun he brought out. "Me and my pals just broke out of stir. We already knocked off one man today. It's the chair if we're caught. You understand?"

Bud nodded.

"Don't try anything funny. One slip, and we'll give it to you! Come on, we're gonna get that car of yours!"

He put his gun away as they started back down the highway toward the lane. The big convict and his limping pal followed. Bud noticed that in spite of his handicap, the crippled man was easily able to maintain the rapid pace Blackie set.

"Who's with you?" Blackie asked.

Bud's mind was working fast, faster than it ever had worked before.

"Mister," he said earnestly, "I know when I'm in a spot. I'm going to tell you the truth. So if anything goes wrong, you won't take it out on me."

Blackie shot a narrow glance at him. "Spill it!"

"There's two cars back there at an old farm."

"Two?"

"That's right. And there's three more—more deputies besides me." Bud wet his lips. "I told you I'd give you the truth. We were out looking for you fellows."

Again that low animal growl sounded in the convict's throat. They had turned into the lane now and were hidden from the highway. Blackie called a halt, waited for the others to come up. Then he told them what Bud had said.

The yellow-haired convict let out a low oath. He cocked a huge arm, glared at Bud.

"Not so fast, Pete!" Blackie whipped out. "We need this guy—for a while, anyway."

"What're you John Laws doing at this farm?" the limp-legged convict asked suspiciously.

Bud had been expecting that question. "Waiting for the sheriff. He was to meet us there. I came out to the highway to look for him."

"Then we ain't got much time," Blackie said.

"No, you ain't got much—unless you want to run into the sheriff, too," Bud agreed.

"Step on it, guy!" Blackie snapped.

THEY came to the place where Bud had emerged from the woods onto the lane only a short time earlier.

"Better stop here," he said. "It's just over that rise, on the right-hand side."

They moved off the lane into the woods. Blackie sent the big Pete ahead to look things over. While he was gone, Blackie took out his gun again and examined it carefully, made sure it was working smoothly.

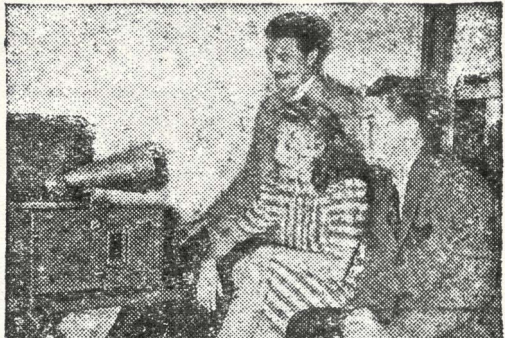
Bud's eyes rested on the weapon. He knew a lot about guns and recognized the one in the convict's hands as a Police Positive. Probably it had belonged to one of the prison guards. Bud ran the tip of his tongue over his lips.

"I told you the truth," he said, "because I didn't want my friends to get hurt. So you could slip up and get the drop on 'em. Then there won't need to be any shootin'."

He watched the effect of his words

(Continued on page 108)

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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



HELLO, readers—get ready for next month's gala thrill parade of exciting novelets and stories by your favorite detective writers! Honestly, we're planning a real eye-opener of an issue—one that's brimful of action, suspense and surprises on every page. That's why we've secured the best brand-new yarns from the pens of Marvin Ryerson, Dale Clark and Benton Braden—to mention only a few—for your reading in the next number. Up at the head of the procession will be **NO REFERENCES FOR MURDER**, Marvin Ryerson's punch-packed novelet that will hold you spell-bound from start to finish.

In **NO REFERENCES FOR MURDER**, you'll meet Tom Parker, ex-con who has been convicted on a phony charge of bank funds embezzlement. After doing his two-year stretch, Parker goes the rounds in search of employment—and is accused of robbing a restaurant!

Trouble, Trouble Everywhere

Tom Parker is the original jinx man. Everything goes wrong when he's on the scene—and he gets in deeper and deeper. But he's no weakling—and when he sets out to defend and clear himself his flailing fists and quick-witted strategy will win your admiration.

Because the restaurant thief resembles him, Parker is chased by an angry mob and cornered by a policeman. He gets out of that—only to fall into other mishaps that will amaze you. And finally he gets a job—a job where the boss pays off in bullets! Mixed up with a crew of tough mugs, Parker holds his own—giving as much as he takes, and he takes plenty. Here's just a sample of the action in **NO REFERENCES FOR MURDER**:

Down the thin, dark, winding staircase, Tom started. He was on the first landing when the street door opened. The silhouetted form of a girl came inside and started toward the stairs. Tom paused and watched her climb. Then the door swung open again. Two hulking figures came through it. The girl twisted her head and let out a piercing scream.

Tom wondered why no one upstairs had heard

it. He found out later from Little Red that the offices were all soundproofed. Gus Smear had had them built that way.

Before the girl could take another step, one of the men grabbed her. He clapped his big paw over her mouth so she couldn't yelp again and began dragging her out. The second man held the door open.

Tom came off the stairs like a bolt from a catapult. Straight at the man holding the door he sailed. The man saw Tom's flying form, tried to dodge. But Tom struck him, knocking him down hard. The other snatcher let go of the girl and came in, his face reflecting mingled rage and alarm. Tom ducked his wild swipes and hit him amidstips with a muscular shoulder. Back into the door the man crashed. He fumbled with the knob, then he and his crony hurled themselves out into the night. Then—

That's all! You'll have to read the rest for yourself next month. And you'll find it mighty interesting. What's behind the mysterious snatch? Why is Tom Parker always being framed? What are the secret activities of his new employer? These and other questions are answered in **NO REFERENCES FOR MURDER**, by Marvin Ryerson, next month! A yarn you'll always remember.

The Death Party

White-haired old Amy Strafford celebrated her seventy-first birthday party by inviting twelve gorgeous blondes as her guests. But there was another guest—an unbidden one—death, the thirteenth guest! In **BLONDE DEATH**, a novelet by Dale Clark, next month, you'll read all about this mysterious celebration—and the tragedy that resulted from it.

It's a gripping, breath-taking novelet from

introduction to climax—and when you read the final revelations explaining the sinister mystery you'll gasp with astonishment!

Willie Brann Again

Our cherubic-faced, peanut-chewing sleuth Willie Brann will be back again next month in a grander-than-ever Benton Braden novelet—THE MISSING BRIDE. This yarn of a vanishing lady presents Willie at his fighting and sleuthing best—and you know what a swell yarn that means!

In addition, next month's gala issue will contain exceptional short stories that have what it takes! Be on hand, everybody, for the best issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE to date!

We're still living up to the motto we adopted several years ago: "Every issue better than the last." The October THRILLING DETECTIVE will testify that we've kept at it conscientiously!

Readers, Write!

Do you like our present policy? Are we improving? Do you prefer longer or shorter stories? Who are your favorite writers? We'd like to know! Write and tell us—addressing The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. It will help us plan future issues. A postcard will do as well as a sealed letter and a beef is as welcome as a bouquet.

Thanks, everybody, for the swell missives you've sent in recently. Here are just a few excerpts from a handful of them:

"Talent for Trouble," by Sam Merwin, Jr., was a bang-bang novel that I enjoyed hugely. Let's have more like it.

—Edward Dowellson, Chicago.

I like the variety of your contents. There's a story for every mood.

—Andrew Thorkelsen, Minneapolis, Minn.

Recently I discovered two of your companion magazines, POPULAR DETECTIVE and EXCITING DETECTIVE. Nothing can displace THRILLING DETECTIVE for me, as I am one of your oldest fans, having read the magazine since it started, but both of these publications are dandy and feature the same high-grade yarns and authors as THRILLING DETECTIVE. Good luck!

—William Breener, New York City.

Your magazine's the best of them all.

—Mrs. Helen Braley, Cleveland, O.

Just a word to say that I enjoyed "Traps Are for Rats," by Richard L. Hobart more than almost any other story I can remember.

—Charles Gracewood, Seattle, Wash.

Thank you for those kind words!

I'll be seeing you next issue. Happy reading!

—THE EDITOR.

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HOT-SPOT DEPUTY
(Continued from page 105)

on Blackie. It was even better than he had hoped for. The convict tightened his lips into a thin line that barely let his answer seep through.

"If these hick cops are good," he said, "they won't get hurt. But if they make one bad move, we'll blow hell out of 'em. Ain't that right, Limp?"

"We ain't got nothin' to lose," Limp said succinctly.

Pete came back.

"This guy give it to us straight," he reported. "There's two cars. A guy's sitting on the running-board of one of 'em. Two other guys are standing there talkin' to him."

Blackie's eyes glittered. "It ought to be a push-over. Pete, you work through the woods till you can come up on 'em from the side. We'll give you a little start on us. Limp and me'll bust right in."

"Okay," Pete said. He slipped into the woods, surprisingly quiet for his big bulk.

They waited in silence for what seemed an hour to Bud. He could feel his heart pounding. Finally, Blackie spoke.

"We go now. And you go ahead, copper! Just so your friends don't start shootin' at us first. If you make a sound, I'll blow your head off!"

Bud managed to get his legs into motion. He didn't like this arrangement at all. But it was just what he'd figured would happen—the convicts would put him out in front as a kind of shield.

As they neared the edge of the farmyard he said a little prayer. Step by step, slowly and cautiously, they advanced. Blackie, gun drawn, was just behind on one side. The Limp was at his elbow on the other.

They were a good ten feet out of the woods before they were noticed. It was the crooked-nosed Gus who saw them first. He jumped up from his seat on the running-board with a curse as he recognized Bud.

"Throw 'em up! We got you!" Blackie shouted.

His reply was a burst of flame from the gun in Gus' hand.

Bud dived sideward into the weeds a fraction of a second before the gun spoke. He had the advantage of Blackie and The Limp, knowing that the men in the yard would start shooting at once.

Blackie's gun roared in response, the explosion mingling with that from The Limp's weapon. The crooked-nosed bandit spun around and pitched on his face. His two companions, Ziggy and the big bandit, dodged behind the car. They started shooting now. The Limp gave a quick cry, then a curse as he dropped into the weeds. But his gun vomited from the ground, and a slug shattered a window in the sedan.

BLACKIE fired again. This time, however, he sent a bullet in the direction of where Bud was lying in a little depression, the weeds rising above him. The slug tore into the dirt an inch in front of his nose.

Ziggy fired under the car, and Blackie dropped. But he wasn't hit. He wanted the concealment of the weeds.

An ominous quiet followed this first burst. The men behind the car and those attacking were holding their fire until they could see something to aim at.

Bud, hugging the ground, wondered what had happened to Pete. He had expected the hulking convict to be heard from before this. But so far there hadn't been the bark of a rifle in the medley of shots. He didn't like that. He wanted this to be a fight to the finish. Or almost to the finish, with as many of the six men accounted for as possible.

He lay there listening, not daring to raise his head, not daring to try to move away. Some instinct caused him to glance over his shoulder. A short distance off, he saw the tops of the weeds move slightly.

[Turn page]



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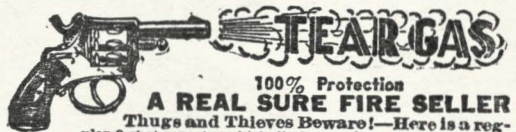
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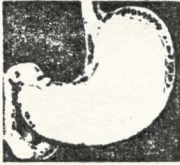
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Bud tried to swallow, but his throat muscles refused to work. Sweat beaded out on his forehead. Those gently swaying weeds meant that Blackie was inching toward him. Stalking him like an animal its prey.

The killer convict still believed the bandits were deputies. His actions indicated that. And because Blackie still thought the two men behind the car were Bud's friends, he somehow had decided that Bud had led him into a trap. Now he was going to settle that score before making any further attempt to capture the cars.

Bud slowly rose to a half-crouch. He dug his toes into the ground, braced his arms. At least, he had warning. The next instant, he saw the deadly round mouth of Blackie's gun pointing at him through the weeds.

Bud sprang. Up and over, he hurled himself. The flame of the gun was almost in his face. He could feel the heat. But the slug tore harmlessly past him. He landed, arms and legs spread wide, full on top of the crawling convict.

Blackie gave a grunt, twisted quickly over on his side. Bud's hands fought for the gun. But they couldn't quite reach it. So he clamped his fingers around Blackie's wrist. He held on with all his strength, striving to keep that ugly muzzle away from him.

A GAIN and again, the convict swung his free fist. Bud buried his head between his arms and froze onto his grip. Blackie rolled on top, and Bud slammed against the ground. He brought his knees up, began kicking. Blackie cursed as the heavy shoes struck his stomach.

Bud was vaguely aware that the men behind the car were shooting at the threshing weeds. But he didn't care. His only thought was to hang onto Blackie's wrist. Strong as he was, Bud had discovered that the stocky convict was more powerful.

Blackie got to one knee. With a violent effort, he rose cursing to his

feet and dragged Bud up with him. Instantly, Bud saw that his purpose was to fall forward, landing on top of his younger foe and crushing the wind from him.

Then a spurt of gunfire came from beyond the car. Blackie's hold on Bud suddenly relaxed. The fingers about the gun loosened. Bud caught the weapon as it fell. He felt something warm strike his shoulder, run down his arm. Blackie uttered a gurgling sound. His hands clutched at his throat. And then he wilted down into the weeds. The slug had passed completely through his neck.

Bud flattened out beside the convict. Blackie's face was only a couple of feet away. As Bud watched, the glassy stare of death crept into the killer's eyes.

With a shudder, Bud began to worm along on his belly away from the dead man. He stopped to listen. But he could hear nothing and he eased slowly ahead again. He came to a little opening in the weeds and halted, his gaze fixed on a figure ahead of him. It was The Limp. Bud's hand tightened about Blackie's gun.

Bud waited motionless. He waited a long time. But The Limp didn't move, and Bud gradually realized the crippled convict never would move again. His shot from the ground had been his last living act.

From the direction of the house now came the bark of a rifle. A couple of seconds later, it barked again. That would be the tardy Pete. The big convict must have circled the house and come on the two bandits from behind.

Bud listened for more shots. But none came. And no answering fire

[Turn page]

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from the car. Cautiously he raised up until he could peer through the tops of the weeds. He had his gun ready.

The hulking Pete was standing near the cars, looking toward the ground. His rifle was crooked in his arm. Bud's hand came up, but he didn't fire.

"I'll give him a chance," he muttered. Then he called out: "Drop that gun!"

The big convict turned swiftly. But he didn't drop his gun. Instead, he whipped it to his shoulder. Bud beat him to it. There was a roar from the Police Positive, and Pete spilled onto his face, his body curled grotesquely around the Winchester. Just above one eye was an ugly hole. The last man of the villainous sextet was down.

Bud burst into the house. He found Darwin sitting in a chair, his arms tied behind him, his ankles bound to the legs. In a corner was the black bag containing the payroll.

SHERIFF HEGLER listened with narrowed eyes while Bud told his story. A little earlier, Darwin and Bud had raced into town with Ziggy and Gus, both badly wounded. The big bandit and the three convicts were sprawled out dead in the weeds of the abandoned farm.

"We couldn't have prevented the hold-up, even if you'd been there, Sheriff," Darwin added. "They caught us completely by surprise."

Sheriff Hegler didn't say anything for a long while. He just sat in the chair at his desk and stared at his son who was shifting uneasily from one foot to the other.

"So you sicked the convicts on the robbers," the sheriff finally said.

Bud nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Didn't you know they'd put you out in front?"

"I reckoned on that," Bud said. "I had to be out in front, because I couldn't let them guys do any talking to each other. They had to start

shootin' right off. I knew if I was out in front, the bandits would think I'd got free and brought the law. If they made a move—well, I'd steamed the convicts up to coming right back. I had to sort of take a chance. It worked out all right."

There was another silence. Bud didn't notice that his father's mouth was twitching slightly.

"I'm sorry now for my foolishness," Bud went on. "I shouldn't have pretended I was a deputy. I sure got myself in a hot spot."

Sheriff Hegler stood up.

"Raise your right hand!" he ordered very sternly. "If you're going hell-roaring around, acting like a first-class deputy, you've got to be properly sworn in!"

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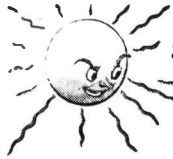
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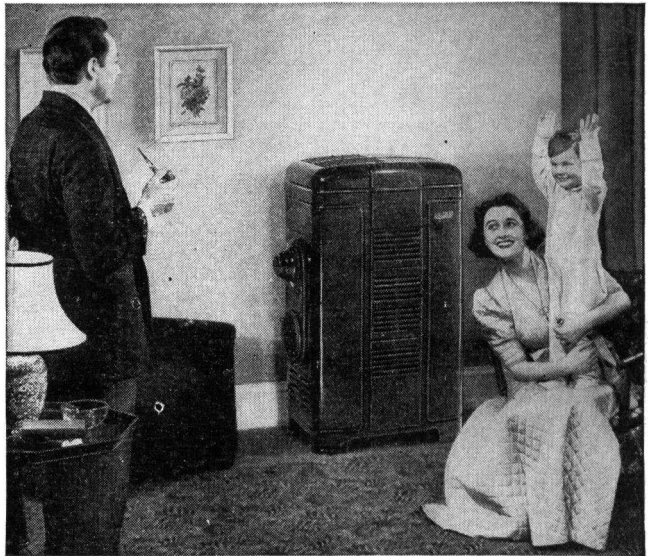
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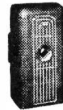
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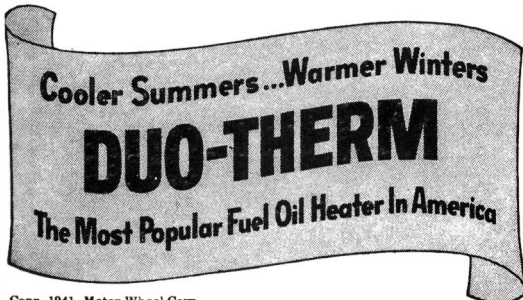


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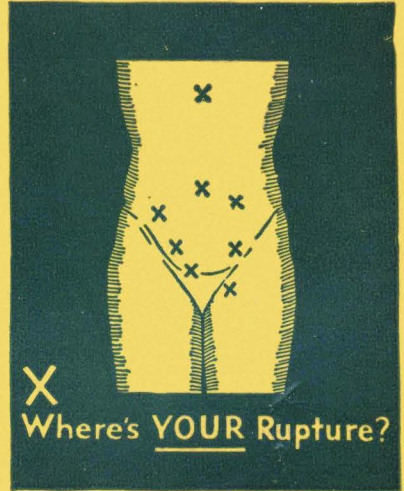
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