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By Talmage Powell

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10-STORY DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

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February, 1946

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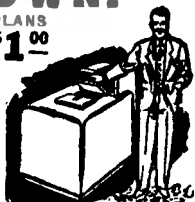
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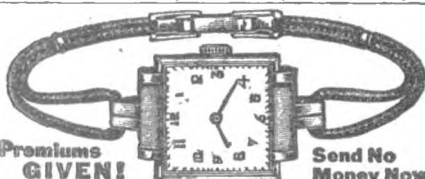


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Sandman of the Long Sleep

By Glenn Low



CHAPTER I

A THIN billow of white dust followed City Detective Camden Crawley into Pinky's lunchroom. When he closed the door the stirred air grabbed at the dust, pushing it ceilingward in a blanket-shaped cloud. Crawley blinked away the darkness that had been in his eyes a moment before, and grinned at Pinky who stood by the coffee urn mopping a plate. He saw they were the only ones in the lunchroom and started to speak. Just then the clock above the cash register began striking twelve.

Pinky, a rotund, happy-looking little fellow, twisted his plumpness around, dipped a hand to a shelf under the coffee urn, and came up with a big, white coffee mug. As he drew the java he said, "I wish the city would finish its paving job. Them dump trucks kick up an awful dust. The stuff gets into everything, especially the gravy."

"Pretty good idea doing the work at night, though, when the traffic's light," said Crawley, settling his large, square body onto a counter stool. When Pinky slid over his coffee he folded a huge, brown paw around the mug, and, for a

More things than gravel were being dumped along the torn-up street that was Detective Camden Crawley's patrol. Things like bloody clues, extortion lists, and finally murder itself. And when Crawley tried to fence off that growing mystery heap, he found himself directly in the path of a homicide ring's steam roller.



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moment, gazed musingly into its tar-hued depths.

"If it wasn't for you, Pinky," he said slowly, "I'd never manage to keep awake on this night detail. It grows so rotten monotonous, loafing over in the squad-room, and having Sergeant Iggley beat me at dominoes, one game after another."

A big dump truck slewed to a stop in front of the restaurant. A moment later there was a deafening roar as three tons of gravel hit the macadam.

Pinky made a wry face. "Sounds like London during the blitz," he said.

Crawley started a reply, but just then the street door opened and he checked it. A thick swirl of dust entered, started

to spread and lift. But nobody came in. After a few moments Pinky walked around the end of the counter. "Why don't you learn to close doors?" he said, reaching for the knob.

But his hand stopped midway in its journey, hesitated, then dipped down as Pinky stooped over. When he straightened up he held a cane in his left hand.

"Somebody lost his cane," he said. "It was lying across the door." He stepped into the street, stood a minute, twisting his head as he glanced up and down and across. Then he came back inside.

"Nobody out there—nobody. Funny where he went. My place is the only one in the block that's open."

Crawley slid off his stool and strode out onto the sidewalk. The driver who had just dumped the gravel was letting the truck bed down. He saw Crawley and greeted him by lifting his hand. Crawley walked over to the truck. "See anybody here just now, maybe when you drove up?"

"Yeah," said the driver, nodding quickly. "Two guys just went into Pinky's place."

"Did they?" said Crawley, surprised.

"Sure. You was in there. Didn't you see them come in?"

"They must have taken a front booth," Crawley said. He started to turn back to the restaurant, then stopped. "Did you know them?"

"No," said the driver, shaking his head.

Crawley was certain no one had entered the restaurant after him. When the driver pulled out he went across the street. He stood over there a long time, scanning the buildings on each side of the lunchroom. Three doors away were the Alhambra Apartments, a four-story building with eight apartments, two on each floor. The vestibule light was burning, but that was all. Otherwise, the place was as dark as a tomb.

CRAWLEY recrossed the street, angling his course, and entered the vestibule. He found the inside door locked. For a minute he studied the names in the little paper-filled brackets to the right of the bell buttons. He knew a lot of people in town; he knew five of the Alhambra's occupants. Three of them he didn't know.

He pulled a notebook from his coat and copied the three strange names. *Mr. John Bunch. Mr. and Mrs. Charles King. Miss Waneta Selmy.*

When he came from the vestibule he saw Pinky standing in front of the restaurant. Pinky saw him at about the same moment and motioned to him.

As Crawley came up he held the restaurant door open, then quickly followed the detective inside.

"We missed something—this cane," he said, reaching the cane from beneath the counter. He held it close for Crawley's inspection and put a finger on a short, deep gash in its handle.

Crawley supposed Pinky had found a monogram or initials. He said, "I think

it belongs to George Gilbert, the banker."

Astonishment widened the little caterer's squint eyes. "Does it?" he said. "Was there a fight? Did you find a body?" He stared at Crawley, licking his lips rapidly.

"Fight? Body?" said Crawley.

"You said you thought the blood was Mr. Gilbert's?"

"Blood?" snorted Crawley. He took the cane from Pinky, rolled it in his fingers, stared at it. "I said I thought this cane is Gilbert's. He's the only man in town who carries such a cane."

Pinky put out a finger again. It trembled a little as he laid it on the gash in the cane. "There's blood in that nick—deep down in it, but it's there."

Crawley took a toothpick from the counter and ran its small end through the gash in the cane handle. When he held it up a moment later its point showed red.

"It hasn't had time to dry," said Pinky in a tight whisper.

Crawley gazed at Pinky a moment, a studious light in his broad brown eyes. Then he put up his right hand, and placing the ball of his thumb against the brim of his hat, slowly pushed it back from his forehead.

"The truck driver said the two men came in here after I did," he said. "Which was wrong. If anything happened it must have happened out front while we were talking." He glanced toward the street, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes.

Pinky said, "The door came open, remember? It was maybe then that they started in, and something stopped them."

Just then the door came open again, but this time there was someone holding onto the knob.

They both knew the expensively dressed, pale-faced young man who stood in the door staring at them. His large, dark eyes were clouded with fear and anxiety. He didn't offer to come in after he saw Crawley, just stood there staring at them. Then suddenly he licked his almost colorless lips and said:

"It's mine. I lost it a while ago." He pointed at the cane.

Crawley had known Stacey Morden all his life, and his father before him. There was a definite reason for the impulse that now prompted him to protect, to shield, if possible, the irresponsible

youth. He said, "Since when did you start carrying a cane?"

"Why, I—" Morden paused, still staring. Then his eyes fell in line with his innate character and wavered. A moment later they were lost in a confused fluttering of their heavy, bluish-tinted lids. "Tonight," he said. "I started carrying a cane just tonight. It's—it's rather a distinctive practice, don't you think?"

Pinky said, "Come inside and close the door. Them dump trucks keep the dust moving. You're letting a lot of it in. And it gets in the grease and the gravy and—" Pinky's words quit as Morden suddenly whirled back toward the sidewalk. The door banged shut, then he was gone.

"WELL, I'll be—" muttered Crawley a few seconds later as he stood in front of the restaurant with Pinky beside him. "Disappeared! Just like that." He snapped his big fingers with a loud *pop*. Then without a word to Pinky turned and trotted down toward the Alhambra Apartments.

He heard Pinky call behind him. "Wait, Morden dropped something!"

But he didn't stop. Inside the vestibule he paused, eyed the names alongside the bell buttons, then leaned closer and examined the third button from the top. Seven of the buttons were coated with a thin layer of dust. The one beside Miss Waneta Selmy's name was rubbed clean.

He glanced up at the row of mailboxes. A large brown envelope was sticking in Miss Selmy's box. He saw one word scrawled on it, *Police*, and took it out, examined it, smiled grimly. Then put it in his pocket.

He was pushing Miss Selmy's bell when the street door opened behind him. He thought it was Pinky coming to show him what Morden had dropped. But when he turned around, a tall, blonde girl was standing just inside the door looking at him.

Crawley gave her a quick once-over, saw a white, blemishless face, nice after a chiseled, hammered-out fashion. Her eyes were like two big, round sapphires.

Crawley knew she'd seen him ringing the bell. He grinned, and nodded to her.

"Were you ringing my bell?" she said.

Her voice was like ice rubbing on ice. Crawley knew he'd never seen her before. He said, "If you're Miss Selmy, yes."

"I'm Miss Selmy," she said. "What do you want?"

"A guy entered this building awhile ago. A guy named Stacey Morden. I thought maybe he'd gone up to call on you."

"Why?" The sapphires grew brightly translucent.

"Well, you're the only Miss on the bell directory," said Crawley a little lamely. "Besides I know most of the folks who live here. They're not Morden's kind."

"Am I?" she said.

Crawley sighed, reached up, and thumbed his hat closer over his eyes. "I'm a detective, Miss. Name's Crawley, City Squad. Maybe you wouldn't mind letting me take a look inside your apartment."

"Maybe I would, though." There was uncalled-for vehemence in her voice. The sapphires turned almost white.

Crawley shrugged. "In that case I'll wake up the janitor. He'll at least permit me to look in the halls."

She didn't reply then, but took a key from her purse and stepped to the inside door. She was unlocking it when she said, "On second thought, there isn't any reason why you shouldn't look into my apartment if you like. That is, if you are a detective."

Crawley was about to assure her of his city-hall connections when a truck driver burst into the vestibule. "You Detective Crawley?" he blurted excitedly, his big face all pale and twisty. It was the fellow Crawley had talked with after Pinky had found the cane.

"Sure, I'm Detective Crawley," he said.

"Something's happened up at the restaurant. Pinky's asking for you."

The way he said it, the hot excitement in his eyes, told Crawley to hurry. But he reached Pinky too late. The little caterer was dead. He'd been neatly stabbed in the middle of the back. In his right hand was a wadded piece of notebook paper. But the cane Crawley had left with him wasn't anywhere in sight.

Crawley quickly smoothed out the paper. On it, scrawled in black ink, were thirteen names. Stacey Morden's name headed the list. Numbered amongst the remaining twelve were the names of some of that town's blackest-hearted hoodlums.

The truck driver was standing just inside the door, maybe six feet from

where Pinky lay. When Crawley looked at him he said, "I didn't see it happen. I just now let down a load of gravel out there and stepped in here for a cup of coffee. Pinky was lying where he is now. He asked me to go down to the apartments and try to find you. I didn't know he'd been stabbed."

"What's your name?" asked Crawley. "Jay Gratch."

"A while ago you told me about seeing two men come in here. Do you remember, did either of them carry a cane?"

"One of them did," said Gratch. "He was a tall, slim fellow. He walked with a limp."

For a moment Crawley was thoughtful, then he said, "You hang around. Sergeant Iggley will be here in a few minutes. He'll want to talk with you." Crawley went back to the phone and called headquarters. Afterwards, while waiting for Sergeant Iggley to arrive, he copied the names from the list of thirteen into his notebook.

He was searching the restaurant for the cane, not expecting to find it, when the sergeant and two patrolmen came in.

Crawley's shift ended at seven in the morning. By eight-thirty he was over to Mrs. McCorkle's boarding-house, where he'd lived for years, in bed and asleep. He slept until six, snoringly sound, and might have slept on and on had not the phone on his bed stand wakened him.

He answered, then drew a tight breath as he recognized Waneta Selmy's voice stroking the receiver. It was a nice voice now, smooth and fluid, not ice like it had been when he'd heard it last.

"I called to thank you for not having a bunch of dumb cops to my apartment this morning," it said.

"Thanks," said Crawley. "A lot of people think I'm a dumb cop, especially Sergeant Iggley. And it may interest you to know that I'm not on the Pinky killing. Special officers investigating."

"They put your name in the paper," she said.

"They always do. '*Detective Camden Crawley discovered the crime.*'" He paused. "It's never '*Detective Camden Crawley discovered the criminal.*'"

She laughed a small laugh. "Would you like to come over to my apartment for sandwiches and coffee?" she demurred.

Crawley drew another tight breath,

then said, making it sound casual, "When?"

"Now."

"All right. I go on duty at eleven—maybe a show after we eat, eh?"

Silence waited for a minute, then she said, "No. But I'll be expecting you any minute now." Then she hung up.

CHAPTER II

CRAWLEY drove his own car over to the Alhambra Apartments. When he drove past Pinky's lunchroom he glanced sadly at the unlighted windows and locked door.

There was an automatic release on the inside door at the apartments. A moment after he rang Waneta Selmy's bell the latch began to click. He pushed open the door and went slowly up the stairs. Waneta opened the door for him before he was near enough to knock. Her smile was warm, friendly.

She wore a blood-red housecoat with a plastic zipper running halfway down its front. The zipper was imitation ivory and served as the only relief from the garment's fierce red. She'd fixed sandwiches and coffee in a little breakfast nook off the kitchen. Crawley sat down when she pulled out a chair for him.

As they ate she made a lot of small talk, much of it about her work as a window decorator in a local department store. She hadn't held the position long, only a few weeks; she'd formerly worked in an eastern Pennsylvania town. A friend of hers—a girl she'd met at art school in Philadelphia—had written her about the opening here, and she'd come on and taken the job.

She liked it here, meant to stay. So the conversation drifted until they'd finished their sandwiches and were beginning on their second cup of coffee. Then suddenly, after a lag in the talk, she said:

"Stacy Morden was here to see me last night."

Crawley almost choked on his coffee. But he didn't say anything, just looked at her. Once his thumb started moving toward his forehead, then remembering that his hat was hanging in the hall, he dropped his hand.

Waneta went on, "Only he was here before the—trouble at the restaurant. I went out with him at eleven forty-five.

We walked over to the City Terminal. He was going to ride the bus home." She paused, passed Crawley a tentative look, then continued. "Of course, you know where he lives?"

Crawley nodded. "His mother has a swell home out at Salem Crag. I know the family. I knew his father well, Joe Morden was mayor of this burg for a good many terms."

There was a knowing expression in her eyes when she said, "Well, I stayed with him until his bus came in. When he got on it I returned here. That was when I found you ringing my bell."

"You didn't come straight home from the terminal?"

"No. I stopped at the Skerries Hotel Coffee Shop long enough for a cup of coffee and a bite to eat."

"The bus out for Salem Crag leaves at twelve," said Crawley. Then he said, looking directly into her sapphire-hued eyes, "You know Sergeant Iggleby is accusing Stacey Morden of the killing at the restaurant?"

"I know," she said.

He was silently thoughtful for a moment. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

Her face hardened. "First, because you're a smart detective. Second, because something quite strange has happened to my friend, Stacey Morden."

"About me being a smart detective," said Crawley, "you can save the oil. There's a shortage." He grinned. "You think something strange has happened to Morden, eh?"

"Yes, I do. He never reached home this morning."

"No. If he had he'd be in town now. Headquarters has a man out there waiting for him to show up. He probably went out and got drunk after you left him." She didn't immediately reply. Crawley went on, "You're new here. Maybe you don't know it, but Morden's not much stuff."

Her sapphire eyes paled in the hot glance she sent him.

He grinned slowly, understandingly. "Oh, he's a good enough guy in lots of ways. He's smart—kind of a poet, he is—used to write jingles for the local paper. But he's shilly-shally. His old man died and left him a lot of dough, and his mother doesn't attempt to control him. Lately he's been spend-crazy. And

he does do a good deal of drinking."

She'd waited patiently for him to finish, her eyes showing how much she resented the things he'd been saying. "He had been drinking a little last evening. He had his car in town. It's still here, parked over at the hotel parking lot. He wanted to drive home, but I persuaded him to take the bus."

"But it must not have worked," said Crawley. "He probably waited until your back was turned, then scooted off the bus. Likely he's somewhere around now, sot drunk."

"I WAS talking with the bus driver this morning," Waneta said. "He said that two men came into the bus before he pulled out and talked with Stacey. Then they got off and Stacey went with them."

"Did the driver know the men?" Crawley asked.

"He said one of them was the banker, George Gilbert."

Crawley straightened up in his chair. "Is that so?" As he stared at her she nodded slowly. "Say," he said, "did Morden have a cane—maybe a cane that belonged to George Gilbert—when he came here last night?"

"No. He never carries a cane."

They were silent for a time. Crawley produced a package of cigarettes, offered her one. She refused it. He lit one and was letting two broad ribbons of smoke filter from his nostrils when he said, "You think Morden's been treated rough. Why?"

"Because," she said, a slight tremor working in her voice, "he was afraid something dreadful was going to happen to him. He told me someone might try to kill him, but he didn't say who. He kept talking about the *thirteen* who stood in danger. When I asked who the thirteen were he said, 'Thirteen fools who'd made a helluva mistake.'"

Crawley was interested now. He was remembering the names on the paper he'd found in Pinky's hand. Sergeant Iggleby had laughed at the idea that the list of thirteen might help locate Pinky's killer, might reveal the motive for the crime.

He shrugged, deep in thought, telling himself that as a detective Sergeant Iggleby was a first-class domino player. As Waneta started to speak, he listened

very closely to everything she said.

"Morden had loaned someone a very large amount of money. He said he didn't have any means of proving he'd ever made the loan, but that he'd be a fool to let anyone gyp him and not try to do anything about it. When he left here last night he was terribly distraught and afraid. That's why I walked to the terminal with him."

Crawley finished his coffee and stood up. "Did he say he feared anyone in particular?"

"No."

After a thoughtful pause he asked, "Instead of telling me, why didn't you go to the police?"

"You're the police," she said simply.

"You knew I wasn't working on the Pinky killing."

"Have we been discussing the Pinky killing?" she asked.

For a moment Crawley was silent, then he shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

"I'm convinced something dreadful has happened to Stacey," she said, anxiety, sincere and strong, striking in her voice.

Crawley put away a cigarette-lighter he'd been holding in his hand since lighting his cigarette, and glanced at his watch. "I'll have to be going along," he said. "I'll not forget what you've told me. If anything turns up on Morden you can get in touch with me, if you wish. If Iggley happens to decide you're important, I'll back you up where I can."

"That's why I talked with you instead of going to headquarters," she said.

Crawley's broad-set eyes were puzzled as he looked down at her. "That's why—" He hesitated, grinned good-humoredly. "That's why—what?"

Her sapphire eyes softened, darkened, drew a color almost pure lapis lazuli. "I love Stacey Morden," she said. "I'm certain he hasn't killed anyone. I know if I have the chance I can make a splendid man of him."

Crawley reached up and thumbed a lock of rough brown hair off his brow. "Stacey told you about his old man and me?" he said. He went on before she could reply. "I know he did. I've known it ever since you phoned me this evening."

"Yes, he did," she said.

Crawley's face clouded a little. He was remembering how she'd acted towards him earlier this morning, and wondering

if a talk with Morden since then was responsible for her changed attitude. He couldn't believe she was lying. Still, she'd said she'd seen Morden before the trouble at the restaurant.

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Stacey's father and I were like that," he said, pushing his big fists together, knuckle to knuckle. "He was my best buddy. His friendship meant a lot to me. That's why I stood as godfather to his kid—to Stacey. And I guess—" He thumbed back the lock of hair again.

"I guess if it isn't too late and the right kind of girl got hold of Stacey that maybe— Well, I'd like to see the boy straighten up and be a man. I've got a fondness for him. It's a fondness I've had a feeling about for a long time—a feeling that sooner or later it was going to cause me plenty of trouble."

He gave her a level look, a look that told her, *Don't lie to me. Give me a chance and I'll do all I can to help you.*

For a moment she avoided his eyes, but when she started to speak she faced him squarely. "I may as well tell you," she said. "When I first came here I had a few dates with the banker, George Gilbert. He seemed a gentleman at first, but later became abusively possessive. I refused to see him after one night when he forced me to stay in his car while he tried to make me promise to leave town with him, go to South America perhaps."

She paused. Crawley said, "Has he bothered you since?"

"He's telephoned several times. The last time he called, after I answered, he didn't say a word, just laughed, was still laughing when I hung up."

Crawley said, "I'm sure it was his cane that was found in front of the lunch-room."

CRAWLEY went directly to headquarters when he left Waneta's apartment. For an hour he listened to what Sergeant Iggley had to say about the Pinky killing.

He learned they'd interviewed George Gilbert at the bank that morning, and the banker had denied losing his cane. Stacey Morden hadn't made it home as yet, probably was drunk and hiding out somewhere. The boys had been around town, talking with ten of those whose names appeared on the list found in Pinky's hand. They'd not been able to

locate Sam Erd, a local junk dealer, and a hot-spot operator named Carl Rostrum. The clerk at the Willopy Hotel where Erd lived hadn't seen him around for a day or so.

"It's my notion"—Sergeant Iggle never had theories, but was always running over with vague ideas he liked to call notions—"that Pinky had a fuss with somebody, probably Stacey Morden. Morden was drinking, and there was a fight. Morden lost his head and used a knife."

Crawley stood up, yawned. Iggle continued. "It's my notion Morden came back after his cane, and when Pinky wouldn't give it to him, there was trouble."

Crawley sighed, thumbed back his hat. "No coffee at Pinky's tonight," he said. "I'll have to find me a new place to refuel." He looked at his watch, saw it was about time he was hitting the street.

Crawley moved west on Main Street when he left headquarters. He went over to the bus terminal and loafed awhile, then bought a package of cigarettes. After that he stepped into a phone booth and dialed Waneta Selmy's number. Waneta answered immediately.

"Oh, I'm so glad you called!" she said. Her voice seeming to relax.

Crawley was going to ask her to do him a favor. He'd been thinking about the truck driver, Jay Gratch, and wondering why, if Gilbert had lost his cane in front of the lunchroom, Gratch hadn't seen him there. He took it for granted that Gratch knew Gilbert, as Gilbert was one of the best known persons in town. The banker was a huge grizzly of a man, and always carried a cane.

He'd been going to ask Waneta to keep an eye on the street in hopes that she might see the banker fraternizing with Gratch. The city was dumping a lot of paving material in the block where the Alhambra Apartments were located. Waneta would have a good chance to watch any of the truck drivers.

But now something in Waneta's voice caused him to forget for the moment why he'd called.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Plenty," she said, her voice low-pitched and muffled. He knew she was speaking with lips pressed against the phone. "Gilbert's here. He's in an ugly mood. Will you come?"

He started to speak, but just then she hung up.

As Crawley alighted from a cab in front of the Alhambra two men came out of an alleyway a few doors down the street. One of them was tall, stooped, and walked with a limp. He carried a cane. Crawley thought it was the junk dealer, Sam Erd. He did not recognize the other one.

They were walking across the sidewalk when a dump truck pulled into the curb in front of them. They disappeared, walking behind the dump truck as it sent its load of gravel to the sidewalk. Crawley thought he saw them enter a car farther down the street. The dump truck pulled out before he reached it. He turned back to enter the Alhambra, but stopped when a sedan pulled into the curb behind him.

"Wait, Crawley," someone said from the sedan.

Crawley was anxious to see what Gilbert was up to, what was going on in Waneta's apartment. He recognized the two men in the sedan. One was a pin-ball machine operator named Pride Clones, the other his crony, a hood named Stitcher. Their names were written on the dead man's list.

Crawley said, "See you later." He reached for the apartments' outside door, touched the knob.

"You'll see us now," said Pride Clones sharply.

When Crawley turned around, Clones was standing on the sidewalk, juggling a monstrous automatic in his hand, its snout darkly frowning at him.

"Climb in the back seat," said Clones. "We're going for a little tour." He grinned softly, his long, knobby face breaking into a mass of wrinkles, all of which seemed to course in wrong directions. "You're a hard-working dick, Crawley, so we've decided you need a nice, long vacation," he said.

Stitcher got out of the car and walked around and opened the back door. Crawley got inside and Stitcher got in beside him. He took the detective's gun, stowed it away out of sight.

Clones got in the front seat and started the car. He said as he booted it away from the curb, "It's tough for you, Crawley, but what we're going to do is simply a matter of good business—since you watched the kid."

CHAPTER III

AS CLONES worked the car off Main Street onto River Road Crawley leaned back in the seat, gave a small sigh, then reached up and thumbed back his hat. As his arm moved Stitcher pushed the snout of a gun deep in his ribs. "You boys better make this good," said the detective. "If you muff it and give me a chance, I'll smash the hell out of the both of you." His voice was somehow like iron, the anger in it caused it to clank.

"We'll make it good," said Clones. "Since you saw what happened to Sam Erd we have to."

"Sam Erd?" said Crawley, puzzlement lightening his voice.

"Don't play so dumb," said Stitcher. "We saw you watching when Sam was bumped off. You saw the killing. Now you know all the answers. Only you won't be around when they start asking the questions."

Crawley smarted up. He said, "Yeah, I saw you kill Sam, but what puzzles me is why. What did Sam do to you guys?"

Clones laughed. He said to Stitcher, "Listen to the flatfoot. Hear him playing dumb, just like he thinks we killed Sam Erd." His laugh was mocking. Stitcher chuckled.

Crawley knew he'd made a miss and wondered how. He remembered the two men crossing the sidewalk—one of them had looked like Erd. But Erd didn't limp or carry a cane. Maybe Erd had been killed early this morning. Maybe before that. One thing, these goons thought he'd witnessed the killing. He hadn't, of course, but he knew they'd never believe it. Besides, they'd told him too much. They'd have to try to kill him now.

Clones had been driving fast. For the past few blocks they'd been moving along River Road through the tail end of the city's factory district. At a point where River Road turned within a few feet of the river, where there were no occupied dwellings, only warehouses and small factories, Clones parked the car and got out.

The street lights were few and far between here, but Crawley saw they'd stopped in front of a little frame house—a house squeezed in between two large buildings, and long ago abandoned as possible human residence. The windows

were boarded over, and the door looked as if it hadn't been opened in years.

Clones opened the back door of the sedan and told Crawley to get out. Stitcher followed when Crawley moved, keeping his gun against the detective's back. Clones went over and opened the door of the little house. Stitcher prodded Crawley with the gun and told him to go inside.

They forced him up a pair of rickety stairs, bare and gritty with dust. On the second floor they turned into a little room, dark and windowless. Clones flicked on a flashlight. The room had one door and two windows. The windows were tightly boarded over.

Stitcher cuffed Crawley's hands behind his back with his own handcuffs, as Clones took a long piece of stout cord from his coat pocket. Clones said, "Get onto the floor, Crawley. Stretch out and hold your feet together."

Crawley hesitated, and Stitcher gouged his back with the gun. "We don't want to have to make a racket here. It'll be easier on you if you do as you're told."

Crawley played it smart and obeyed. Clones quickly bound his feet with the cord. Then Stitcher had the gag ready, and they gagged him.

Stitcher went over to a gas pipe sticking some three feet above the floor and fitted a small wrench to the safety nut on the end of it. Then he leaned against the wall and said, "Whenever you're ready we'll give him the air." He laughed, a whispered chuckle.

Clones hesitated beside Crawley, examined the handcuffs, the knots in the cord. "I guess you'll keep," he finally said. Then he reached and patted Crawley's arm. "Good-by, flatfoot," he said. "Here's hoping you die dead and stay put."

He spoke to Stitcher. In a few seconds Stitcher had screwed the safety nut off the pipe. He put it in his pocket as gas began whistling into the room. Crawley heard them go out and lock the door, then go tramping off down the stairs.

STRANGELY then, when he knew he was alone, knew that death was certain unless he managed to escape the room, he thought of Waneta Selmy, and winced as he thought that she must be thinking that he'd let her down. Next he began wondering how long it would take the gas to fill the room down to him.

Probably ten, maybe twenty, surely no longer than thirty minutes.

He recalled a gas explosion he'd once witnessed. It had occurred in a little hot-dog stand uptown. The wind had got in through a swinging door and snuffed out a burner under the grill. There'd been a canary hanging high in a window. Someone had noticed it when it stopped singing and toppled off its perch. Then, a few minutes afterwards when the gas had worked up from the burner to the ceiling and back down to a lighted cigar in a tall man's mouth, the explosion had occurred.

No one had been seriously hurt, but fire had roared under the ceiling like in a smelter. Several persons, including himself, had had their hair singed.

Well, the canary hadn't complained. It had kept on singing up to the last. Kept on singing . . .

But he could not quell his mounting fear. Death was so utterly unfathomable, so dreadfully lacking in anticipatory qualities . . . No telling what stark terror, what black despair, had pierced the little canary's courage at that last short moment when it clutched desperately to hold onto its perch . . .

The lurking moment—the very last one consciousness would permit—marked his fear. The black moment, when panic might take him rampant . . .

He'd been in nearly as bad circumstances before—but no! Before there'd always been some chance, though meager. Now there was none. No chance!

He knew the last place the gas would reach would be the lowest point nearest its place of escape. So he rolled over to the pipe, then stretched out on his back.

The slitting sound of the invisible poison pouring into the room was like the constant hiss of some huge viper, he thought. At least, the sound warned of the same thing—death.

He recalled Clones' words, "Die dead and stay put." He might have given a cheerless smile at thought of those words had not the gag clothed his tongue so tightly.

He thought, "*The dirty rat was some doubtful whether or not I'd behave.*"

Then, suddenly, he was seized with an awful, black anger. It had taken him unsuspectingly. He began bucking, rocking on his spine, lashing out with his feet, aiming them at the spewing gas pipe.

The anger passed in a moment, leaving him breathless. He cursed himself for a fool. He told himself, "I'd like to smoke one more cigarette before it's too—"

HOPE, like a shaft of instant lightning, crowded his brain, his being, laxed his nerves. A moment a great limpness took him, then he was taut—taut like a madman's fiddle. He knew, now, a means of escape, perhaps! There was a chance for freedom . . . one . . .

Yes, if he'd make haste, hurry before the room held too much gas. Hurry! Hurry!

He rolled onto his side, fingers clutching at the back of his coat. Finally he had pulled it around, inch by inch, until he could reach in the side pocket. The next instant he was holding his automatic cigarette-lighter in his fingers.

He paused a moment, breathing hard because of the gag, sweat pouring over him like water from a shower spray; then, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth, he thumbed the strike-latch on the lighter. He heard the corrugated wheel strike flint, but nothing happened. He opened his eyes. A soft glow lit the room at his back. The lighter had lit, but nothing had happened.

He realized the gas was still too high for the flame to ignite it. At the same instant he realized that the sooner he lit the gas coming from the pipe the better it would be for him.

He set the lighter on the floor, then worked himself around until he could grasp it between the toes of his shoes. Then he held on to it, rocked backwards, and lifted it into the air. Nothing happened until the lighter's flame struck level with the gas pipe's lips. Then there was a blinding flash, a deafening, ripping sound. A jarring boom!

When it was over Crawley knew he was unhurt.

The ceiling was an inferno in an instant. Heat, hard and searing, beat down upon him.

He elbowed the floor again, and, at the risk of some bad burns, lifted his legs and held them over the whistling flame that now stemmed the gas pipe. Soon the cords that bound his legs were ablaze. They melted and his legs were free. But his trousers were afire at the cuffs. With surging despair he realized he could not reach the fire to put it out.

He tried desperately, forcing back his legs as far as he could, and beating at the smouldering cloth with his manacled hands. At last, seeing the hopelessness of the effort, he rose quickly, and bending far over to escape the flames above, moved to the door.

With swift, sure kicks he knocked the panel from the door. Then he found the forced aperture too small to afford escape. He rued the breadth of his gigantic shoulders, only to thank their worth a moment later.

His next move was sudden, born of fierce desperation. The fire was eating through trousers, socks, and touching his flesh! He flung his shoulder against the door, driving it with all his power.

The door splintered, sagged. Another lunge and he was outside the room. The fire lit the hall and showed him a way down the stairs.

He was going down fast when the door below opened, and Stitcher stepped inside. He saw Crawley coming, but saw him too late.

Crawley jumped from halfway down the stairs, aiming his burning feet at Stitcher's head.

His aim was good. Stitcher gasped, flung up one arm, and went down. Crawley came down on top him. Instantly he rolled off and over, wedging his back against Stitcher, driving him against the wall.

He forced himself to take his time, as his fingers working at his back painfully sought out the pockets in Stitcher's clothes.

Any moment he expected Clones to come in. He knew if that happened the jig was up. But Clones never came in. Finally Crawley found what he sought.

The key to the manacles that locked his wrists!

CRAWLEY beat the fire from his clothing then dragged the still unconscious Stitcher across the street and handcuffed him to a lamp post.

"Hug that for awhile," he said. He relieved Stitcher of his gun.

Pain seethed his legs. The burns were shallow but irritatingly painful. The pain served to keep his anger at a high pitch. He was watching the smoke as it worked its way through cracks in the boarded windows, trying to remember where the nearest fire-alarm box was,

when from the direction of the river someone began sounding an automobile horn. The sound came in short sessions of quick, staccato beeps.

He guessed it was Clones, parked somewhere off the main way, signaling for Stitcher to hurry. Probably Stitcher had been sent back to make sure that he'd perished, and now Clones was growing impatient.

Crawley started moving toward the sound, hoping to find a fire-alarm box on the way. Then he drew an easier breath. Behind him, still blocks distant, he heard the first squall of a fire siren. The boys from the City Station were on their way. Ahead of him the signaling stopped.

Not far away there was a cobblestone lane that led off River Road and worked a narrow way between the buildings down to a little boat landing at the river. Crawley stopped when he reached it, stood for a minute in the shadows.

A sudden burst of roof fire from the little house lit up the landing and the river bank. He saw a car parked at the end of the cobbles. A man he guessed was Clones stood beside it.

Slowly he began working his way along a wall, keeping in the shadows, muffling his steps by walking on the soft earth at the cobbles' edge. The man ahead was highly impatient. He began pacing up and down. Crawley continued to move nearer, until at the end of the shadows he was within a few feet of the car.

The man was Clones. He was pacing nervously. Once he walked several feet from the car toward Crawley. When he turned back Crawley said, "Stand still. You move and I'll rod you."

Clones stiffened, stood still. His back was to Crawley. The detective approached him with care. He was reaching to put the gun against his back when Clones whirled and lifted his hand.

Crawley waited as Clones' hand darted under his lapel, came out filled. Then with a quick stroke, Crawley slapped the gun from his hand.

Clones jumped back, ducked and ran, zigzagging, toward the boat-landing.

Crawley told him to stop. When he didn't do so, the detective fired. Clones lurched to one side as the gun cracked, reeled, almost fell, Crawley fired again.

He knew his second shot had missed.

CHAPTER IV

Clones jumped off the landing into the river. Crawley ran onto the landing, then stood for a long time listening. Finally, when no sound came up to him from the river, he turned and went to Clones' car. He got into it and backed it up the cobbles and out onto River Road.

When he drove past the scene of the fire things were pretty much under control. The fire had been prevented from spreading to the other buildings. He saw a policeman he knew standing beside Stitcher, who was still handcuffed to the lamp post. Crawley stopped and spoke to the cop.

"Hang onto that guy, McManus," he said. "Iggley wants him for attempted murder."

"I'll do that, Crawley," said the cop, grinning broadly.

Crawley, losing little time, kicked down the gas and drove on.

Minutes later at the Alhambra Apartments when Crawley rang Waneta Selmy's bell he got no response. He rang again, and then again. Satisfied she was not going to answer, he rang the janitor's bell.

After what seemed hours to the anxious detective, a little man, bareheaded and wearing patched pajamas, opened the door. "What's up?" he said sleepily.

"I'm a detective—name's Crawley, City Squad," Crawley told him. "I've got to see inside Miss Selmy's apartment."

"You've got to what?" said the janitor. He had little, round blue eyes. Now they bugged.

"Look," said Crawley firmly. "Maybe it's murder. Do you want yourself mixed up in a lot of hell?"

The janitor paled, his eyes stayed bugged, and he wagged his head. "No, no! I'm—I'm innocent." His voice was a wheezing whine.

"Sure you're innocent," said Crawley. "Go get the house keys. We're going up to Miss Selmy's apartment."

He found the keys and returned with them in less than a minute. In the next minute they were inside Waneta's apartment.

They found George Gilbert's body in the bedroom. He'd been shot between the right ear and the eyebrow. He was warm dead. Waneta was not in the apartment.

A SEARCH of Gilbert's clothes revealed—besides the usual things, cigars, matches, a penknife, some business papers—a small memo book. The book was new. Written upon the first page were the names of thirteen men—the same list that Crawley had taken from Pinky's dead hand. Only Gilbert had crossed three of the names off, Morden's, Sam Erd's, Carl Rostrum's.

Rostrum owned—still did if he were living—the Comet Lake Night Club, a hot spot located on the river highway five miles above town. Rostrum, a reputedly dangerous character with gun, knife or fists, was supposed to be filthy with cash.

For a minute Crawley studied the remaining ten names on the list. Clones' name was there, as was Stitcher's. As he read the other names over, his face a thoughtful mask, he reached up and slowly thumbed back his hat.

From the first, when Pinky had been killed and he'd found the list in his hand, he'd believed—and Sergeant Iggley had made fun of the idea—that the thirteen men listed were marked for death. But what had puzzled him, still did, was Pinky's killing. Why had the little caterer been killed? His name wasn't on the list. He knew Pinky well enough to feel certain he hadn't been involved.

Perhaps Pinky had seen something, maybe a killing? Maybe they'd killed him to shut his mouth? Knowing that Clones and Stitcher had tried to kill him for a like reason, he could believe that that was why Pinky had been killed. But Clones and Stitcher were numbered amongst the doomed thirteen—if the thirteen were doomed? Could it be that they were ignorantly working toward their own extermination? And if anyone concerned in bumping off the thirteen men had killed Pinky, would he have left the list in Pinky's hand?

He slowly shook his head, his face a puzzle, and looked down at Gilbert's dead, bloody features. Gilbert's name wasn't on the list. Where did he fit in, if at all? If Gilbert had engineered the killings—if there had actually been any killings besides Pinky's, and he had only Clones' and Stitcher's words for it that there had been—who had killed Gilbert?

Morden's name was crossed off the list in Gilbert's memo book. If Morden was dead he couldn't have killed Gilbert. Unless . . . Crawley frowned, thumbing his hat farther back. "But who besides Morden would have been in Waneta's apartment?" he asked himself.

He put the memo book in his pocket, shrugged, told himself that the list probably had nothing to do with the killings; then went to the hall phone and dialed headquarters.

Sergeant Igglely answered. Crawley told him where he was and what he'd found. "I don't like to say it," he said, his voice thudding flatly, "but it looks like Morden. He was strong for the Selmy girl. He probably came here and found Gilbert annoying her and killed him. Wherever he is now, it's likely the girl's with him." He paused. "Yes, she's that way about him, too."

He was recradling the phone when he glanced toward a corner and saw the cane. When he picked it up he saw the gash in its handle.

For a long time he stood looking at it, unable to believe that Gilbert had carried it to the apartment, knowing that the banker knew the police were looking for it.

Finally he gave a grim smile, thought, *Well, this is one for Sergeant Igglely and his chosen few to figure out.* He was returning the cane to the corner when he saw the janitor come edging from the murder room.

"Ever see the guy before?" he asked.

The janitor nodded. "Yes," he said, licking his pale lips slowly, staring at Crawley. "He's been here other times to see Miss Selmy. He was here tonight. They went out together."

Crawley's voice was shot with interest when he said, "Tonight? You mean last night, it's morning now. What time was it?"

"A few minutes of twelve. He passed me in the hall."

"He? I thought you said they went out together?"

"I did," said the janitor, nodding. "Only he—the fellow that's dead—must have forgotten something. After they were out on the sidewalk he came back and went up to the apartment. Miss Selmy waited outside for him."

"Did you see him go out again?"

"No." The janitor wagged his head. "I

was on my way to my place downstairs, and I didn't wait to see him go out again."

Crawley heard footsteps on the stairs, coming up—a heavy, numbered tread—and knew that Igglely and his boys had arrived.

HALF an hour later, Crawley, weary with explaining and answering questions, was glad to get free of Sergeant Igglely. He went into the street, got in Clones' car, and was driving along Main Street, heading for headquarters, when he drove past a dump truck. The driver was Jay Gratch, and the truck was loaded with sand. Crawley wanted to talk with Gratch, and slowed down, permitting the truck to pass him.

In the next block, Gratch pulled into the curb. Crawley parked just behind him, sat still, as the bed started rising for the dump.

The bed was about halfway up when Gratch stopped it. Crawley pushed open the sedan's door and started to get out. A chunk of river mud, probably picked up at the boat landing, stuck to his shoe. He banged his foot against the running board three times to dislodge it.

He was stepping from the car when Gratch loomed in the thick shadows, walking around the end of the truck.

"What's up?" he said, his voice strained, husky.

Crawley kept still. Gratch came a step nearer, stopped. "Anything gone wrong?" he asked.

Crawley moved quickly toward him. Gratch drew back as he recognized him. He heard the truck driver's breath whistle through his teeth in an astonished gasp.

Crawley started to speak, but then Gratch leaped at him. The suddenness of the attack caught the detective off guard. Gratch was the younger, heavier man. With pile-driver blows he clubbed his fists in Crawley's face.

The detective backed away, unable to return a blow. In dodging a fierce right he tripped and fell backwards over a heap of sand.

This pile of sand was to be increased by the truckload waiting to be dumped. When Crawley landed his head and shoulders scooted beneath the truck bed, and his face was spared the heavy blows that now rained on his stomach.

In a moment Gratch was clutching

Crawley's waist, working to pull him into the clear where he could get at his head. Crawley kicked out with both feet, missed and felt himself being dragged over the sand and heap.

He clawed at the sand, kicked, fought mightily to free his legs, to free the vice-like hold Gratch had on his knees.

"I'll kill you! You snooping—" Gratch said, his voice ending in a hard grunt. Crawley's hands were plowing the sand deeply, uselessly. Then his fingers grasped something solid—something in the sand, something soft and solid, something that anchored him for a moment. And he found sufficient leverage for a mighty kick.

Gratch's hold broke. He went lurching backwards. But he was back before Crawley could move, and now he held something in his hand.

A cane! A heavy cane with a crooked handle. He raised it, was maneuvering for better advantage for the killing blow.

Crawley let loose whatever it was he'd grasped in the sand, was withdrawing his hand when his fingers touched something cold, hard. His touch recognized the automatic's grip. In the next instant he'd snatched the gun from the sand. As the cane came down, Crawley leveled it at Gratch's head and jerked the trigger.

Gratch reeled backwards, crumpled against the radiator of Clones' car.

Crawley thought he'd lost a right hand. He brought around his left to explore, felt of each finger. The hand was intact but devoid of feeling. He knew what had happened. The automatic had been jammed with sand. It had blown up when he fired it. He didn't know what had become of it, but he saw Gratch move, struggle to rise. He clawed Stitches' gun from his pocket and moved over to the truck driver.

"I'm going to kill you, Gratch!" he snarled, ramming the gun into Gratch's neck. "See—you're going to die! Die!"

Gratch whimpered, clawed at his face. Crawley knew the bluff was working. The truck driver's face was bleeding profusely. Even in the darkness, Crawley saw the blood pouring from its mass of tiny cuts. Sand with a bullet behind it had slit his face in shreds.

"Now, Gratch! Now, you're going to die!" he whispered, making his voice rough, a slitting hoarseness.

"Don't! Don't kill me!" wheezed Gratch. "It was Gilbert—Gilbert."

"Where's Morden?" said Crawley, guessing his way swiftly.

"In Gilbert's apartment. He's not hurt. Gilbert wanted to kill him, but he didn't have the paper. He's in the—the bathroom—tied and gagged, but he's not hurt."

"Why did you kill Gilbert?"

Gratch clawed at his bleeding eyes, moaned. He writhed in pain. "He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't leave here now," wheezed the truck driver. "I was afraid we'd be caught. I wanted to take the money and get out, now while the getting was good. He wanted to wait and kill the others. He was afraid they'd hunt him down, kill him. But two was enough, two was enough."

"Erd and Rostrum," said Crawley.

"Yes, yes. But I didn't kill them. Gilbert did. He caned them down when they weren't watching. He'd borrowed fifty thousand from each of them—just like he did from the others. And—"

"Go on," said Crawley. "When you stop talking, you die!" His voice clanked menacingly.

"He told them he had worked out a scheme to swindle the bank, but needed money to work it. He promised to double their money in a few days if they'd make the loans. He was lying, but they ate it up. He was going to kill them—kill them in a way they wouldn't get wise. The living ones wouldn't know the others were dead. He meant to kill them one by one and bury them..." Gratch gave a hoarse sigh.

"But he was nuts about that big blonde. Pinky saw him kill Rostrum. After that I wanted him to leave. He had their money, nearly seven hundred thousand dollars, and I—" His voice whistled away, came back weaker. "I got the cane, all right." He stopped, humped over, and began rubbing his bloody face.

"Who killed Pinky?" said Crawley.

But Gratch didn't reply. Crawley shoved the gun deeper in his neck. "You'd better—" He stopped speaking as Gratch groaned and rolled over.

Crawley ran back to the sedan, snapped on the lights. He wanted to examine Gratch. When he got back to him, he was dead. He found the bullet hole high in Gratch's chest.

CRAWLEY flagged the next passing car, told the driver to stop at the Alhambra Apartments and tell Sergeant Iggleby to come to him right away.

When Iggleby arrived, Crawley told him that Gratch had confessed to the Gilbert killing.

"Gratch probably killed Pinky after I left the restaurant," Crawley went on. "It's my guess Pinky saw them bump off Rostrum. Besides he had Gilbert's cane, which was probably lost in the scuffle. He knew the cane would put the police after them. I think they held Rostrum alive in the truck until after I left the restaurant. Gilbert left when they'd finished with Rostrum, then Gratch learned Pinky had found the cane.

"When Gratch killed Gilbert awhile ago, he left the cane in the apartment and brought the cane Gilbert was carrying out with him. He had it in the truck and tried to slug me with it."

"How did all this begin?" asked Iggleby.

Crawley grinned cheerlessly. "I was driving Clones' car. Gratch thought I was Clones. He undoubtedly knew Clones and Stitcher had been sent to bump me, and thought Clones had my body in the car. I believe they meant to bury me here on Main Street. I accidentally signaled him, I think, when I kicked some mud off my shoe.

"When he came around the truck and recognized me, he didn't take any chances. He knew I was wise and attacked me. Rostrum's dead hand saved me. I was clawing in the sand for a hold during our struggle, when I got hold of his hand. It had a gun in it. Gratch was ready to smack out my brains with the cane. I had to shoot him or else."

Iggleby nodded. "Gratch was playing sandman for the dead," he said.

"Yeah," mused Crawley. "Sandman of the long sleep."

Iggleby and the special officers were digging Rostrum's body from the sand pile when Crawley drove away. It was a sight that pleased the very ordinary city detective very much.

Crawley found Morden bound and gagged in the bathroom at Gilbert's apartment. But before he went to Morden he untied and ungagged Waneta Selmy. Then she helped him untie Morden.

Morden knew everything Gratch had known. He broke loose with it when Crawley told them Gilbert was dead. He'd

stumbled onto the Rostrum killing while returning to Waneta's apartment after his talk with Gilbert and Rostrum at the City Terminal.

"You were in the business, too," said Crawley.

"He was not—not really," said Waneta, a tigerish light in her round sapphire eyes. "Morden's loan to Gilbert was an up-and-up transaction. Gilbert gave a note. He meant to kill Morden, but first he had to get the note back. He thought that would be easy. But Morden gave me the note to hold."

"Is that why Gilbert came to your apartment?"

Waneta nodded. "He came after me and the note. When he didn't find it, he forced me to come over here. He left me here, and, I think, went back to look for the note. He probably turned my apartment upside down, but he didn't find the note."

"No," said Crawley.

"No. I put it in my hair." She reached and took a folded paper from the deep folds of her golden-white hair and gave it to the detective.

Crawley looked at it.

MORDEN said, "Gilbert didn't tell me about his deal with the others until I'd loaned him the money. He borrowed all he could get from those crooks, and fifty thousand from me. He must have got a half million. He and Gratch were going to leave as soon as they made sure all thirteen of us were dead. Gilbert wasn't afraid of the law, but he feared the crooks. He knew it would be days before the city moved the paving material. He planned to be in South America by then. He told me he had a way of getting there. He meant by plane, I guess. I think he meant to take Waneta with him."

"He was nuts," said Crawley. "When did you get wise to him?"

"When I came up and saw him and Gratch fighting with Rostrum near the restaurant. He saw me then, but I didn't know it at the time. That's why I came to the restaurant after the cane. I saw him lose it. I wanted plenty of proof when I went to the police to expose him."

"You didn't know he and Gratch were out to do murder and bury the bodies on Main Street?" asked Crawley.

Morden shook his head. "Not then. It was when I went back to the restaurant

after you went down to the apartments that I found out what was up. I saw Gratch stab Pinky. I was on my way to tell you. I'd been to the apartments just a few minutes before, when Gilbert caught up with me. He forced me to come here with him. He had a gun. He told me he was going to kill me. He seemed to enjoy telling me the rest—all about what he and Gratch meant to do."

"Gratch is dead," said Crawley. "When Gilbert left here, he returned to the Alhambra. Gratch went up with him. They quarreled over the money Gilbert didn't have, and Gratch shot him. He had the cane he took from the restaurant, and he left it in the apartment. He took the cane Gilbert brought to the apartment away with him."

Crawley paused, reached up and thumbed down his hat. "Just one thing sticks me," he said. "Pinky said you dropped something when you left the restaurant in such a hurry. What was it?"

"A list of thirteen names," Morden told him. "The names of the men who had loaned Gilbert money. I threw it down intentionally. It was when I saw Gilbert coming for me in front of the restaurant. I'd written out the list while waiting for the bus to pull out, before Gilbert and Rostrum came for me."

"What did they want with you?"

"Nothing much. Gilbert wanted Rostrum to know I'd loaned him money. I think Rostrum was slow in handing over his cash."

Crawley nodded. "Gilbert was nuts. But he just might have got away with it, nuts or not, if it hadn't been for you."

"For me?" Morden was surprised.

Crawley nodded. "Yes. If you hadn't

put that envelope in Miss Selmy's mailbox after writing the word *police* on it, I wouldn't have taken finding Gilbert's cane outside the restaurant any too seriously. And then I wouldn't have held out on Sergeant Igglee—not much, but I did hold out on him a little.

"You see when a guy finds almost a half million bucks in an envelope sticking out of a girl's mailbox, and when the handwriting on the envelope is that of his own godson, well—"

"I didn't know what was in it," Morden said. "Gilbert lost it during the scuffle with Rostrum. It skittered under the truck, and I picked it up. I was in the dark and Gilbert didn't see me then. When Gilbert was after me, I tried to get inside Waneta's apartment, but she wasn't at home and the door was locked. I didn't have time to look inside the envelope, so I wrote *police* on it and left it in her mailbox. I trusted she'd turn it over to the authorities."

Crawley pulled the envelope from his coat, looked at it musingly, smiling grimly. "It would have been a good joke on Gilbert if two of his future victims had succeeded in bumping me, and then didn't find this," he said.

He saw Waneta's hand steal out and entwine itself in Morden's. She knew Crawley's finding the envelope cleared her boy friend of all possible connection with Gilbert's crazy scheme. The very ordinary city detective's smile lightened. "Did anybody ever hear how a guy's supposed to go about welcoming a god-daughter-in-law into his family?" he asked.

Waneta showed him. The demonstration was enlightening and pleased Crawley very much.



Blood on the Blossoms

By Berna Morris

¶ *Though it was a simple matter to take these papers from Professor Elwood, getting them away from his garden was murderously complex.* ¶



THE boss had said, "I don't care how you get it, Scaife. Buy it if you can. Steal it if you must. But get it." He had thumbed a thick sheaf of bills.

"This is yours when you hand it over. Ten thousand dollars, Scaife."

Now Les Scaife thrust his gloved hands savagely into his coat pockets. His pudgy red face quivered with rage. He drew a deep, long breath, and his voice was tight and brittle as he spoke to the man kneeling on the other side of the wide flower bed. The hugh tawny dog lying on the turf pricked his ears forward and rose to a low crouch, inching forward as Scaife spoke.

"Ain't gonna change your mind, eh, Professor Elwood? Not even if I up the ante about five thousand? How about it, huh?"

The slow-moving man only a few feet away seemed not to have heard. He gave the rich damp earth a final pat before laying aside his trowel. He got to his feet, brushed the knees of his trousers, then stood cuddling the bowl of his pipe while his eyes slowly traversed Scaife's corpulent hulk.

"Not even if you up it fifty thousand, Mr.—eh—Brown, didn't you say?"

Scaife licked his lips, and his small eyes glinted.

"Now look, Professor, my boss is willing to pay you dough, real dough to get this new—what you call it—this annoy thing—"

Elwood's lips quirked slightly, but his face was wooden.

"It's a new metal alloy."

Well, my boss wants it. He'll pay and pay good."

One of Elwood's earth-stained hands

cupped the pipe. A match flame glowed in the gathering dusk.

"Sorry, Mr. Brown. You see, I'm signing over all claims to the government."

For an instant there was dead silence while the professor puffed on his pipe and the dog's worried eyes went from one man to the other.

The bubbling fury in Saife exploded. He took a furious step toward Elwood. His feet sank into the freshly dug earth of the flower bed. There was a roar of rage from the fawn-colored dog, and the animal hurled himself at Scaife's throat.

"Down Trin! Down!" Elwood made a flying leap and circled the slaving creature's throat with his arms.

"Quiet, Trin!" He backed the dog slowly away from Scaife's quaking terror. He spoke quietly. "Mr. Brown, if you will get out of that flower bed, he'll be all right."

Creeping backwards with his heavy shoes Scaife again felt the firm sod underfoot. He put a gloved hand to his beaded forehead.

"Wait in the front room there," Elwood jerked his head at the cottage a short distance away. "I'll lock Trin up for the night, then I'll give you a drink."

Scaife watched as the professor tugged the reluctant dog around the corner of the laboratory adjoining the cottage. Then cruelty returned to his slack mouth, and his lips flattened against his teeth.

He looked down at the imprint of his feet in the earth of the bed. His lips twisted. His eyes took in the sweep of the cottage fronted by its lush garden. He turned swiftly, pounded through the maze of paths to the doorway.

He closed the door with quick purpose. Before him a long low room extended entirely through the central section of the house. His small intense eyes darted about, stopped suddenly as he saw,

through the rear windows, the dim figure of the professor. Elwood was fastening the still angry Trin into a wire enclosure about a hundred yards in back of the house. The clang of the heavy gate came faintly through the dusk.

FOR all his hulking ungainliness Scaife moved swiftly through the room. His black, questing eyes froze into little points of intensity as they fell on the untidy desk. His breathing was quick and noisy as his thick gloved fingers pawed through the litter of papers.

Then he straightened slowly, his fingers clamped rigidly onto a large yellow envelope. His moist pendulous lips quivered as he looked at the address. He flattened the bulky folder between his palms, and his lips drew back from his teeth in a thin smile. The smile froze and he spun about.

There was the sound of a door closing in another part of the cottage and the thud of approaching footsteps. Scaife hesitated for the fraction of a second, his whole huge body poised in quivering stillness; his eyes scurrying about, seeking, probing. Then he dropped the envelope back on the desk and was staring down into the charred embers on the dead hearth when Professor Elwood swung into the room.

Elwood brushed his hands together and switched on a lamp.

"Sorry to keep you waiting for that drink. Trin was being a little obstreperous." He laughed as he set a decanter and two glasses on the corner of the paper-strewn desk.

"When Trin was just a puppy I had to break him of digging in the beds." He laughed again. "Now he considers himself the protector of the flowers. Sometimes even I dare not set my foot off the grass. Sometime I—" He stopped, the decanter poised over the glasses; his eyes glued to the yellow envelope lying atop the litter on his desk.

"Good heavens! I thought I mailed that!" He snatched the envelope and turned to the wall beside the desk. He swung aside a large pin-studded map and started twirling the dial of a safe imbedded in the paneling. He smiled slightly as he spun the numbers, speaking over his shoulder to the inert man by the dead fire.

"Trin and I do our best to protect

ourselves from my absent-mindedness, but sometimes even he can't help me." Elwood tugged at the handle. The safe door swung open sluggishly.

Scaife came slowly to life. One of his heavy arms jerked slightly, then the fingers of his right hand spread apart and crept out from his body, moving furtively toward the heavy brass poker leaning against the bricks of the chimney piece. Slowly and silently he edged toward Elwood's unseeing back, his face growing red with his effort to keep his breathing silent.

The professor slipped the yellow envelope into the safe and pulled at the ponderous door. Scaife sprang forward. The poker glinted balefully in the lamplight as it crashed on the back of Elwood's skull.

For the space of half a breath there was silence in the room. Scaife stood, the poker still raised, and his breath was a slobbering noise in his throat. With a stifled grunt the professor's body crumpled to the floor, rolled slightly, and came to rest on its back. A trickle of blood oozed from one ear and dropped slowly onto the rug. From the wire enclosure in the rear of the house came a wild sobbing howl that rose to a thin pinnacle of sound.

Scaife faced the back windows and the fat folds of his face whitened. He hunched his shoulders, turned, and stepped across Elwood's body to the safe. His little black eyes gleamed. His small teeth clicked audibly as he patted the yellow envelope and slipped it into his pocket.

For a silent, careful moment he stood, his eyes searching the room. Finally they rested on the body at his feet. He touched it callously with the toe of his shoe.

"You dumb cluck!"

He stepped across the body again and made his way to the door. He gave a last glance about, and the door clicked behind him.

SCAIFE started forward. At the edge of the flower bed he paused. In the deepening twilight he could still see the nodding shapes of the flowers. The dusk was heavy with their scent.

Something like a growl came from Scaife's throat. He gave a low snorting laugh, and brought his heel down on a clump of yellow pansies, grinding them into the soil. He kicked viciously at some

tulips, gave another low laugh, and clomped through the middle of the flowers. Suddenly he staggered, clutched wildly at the air, and fell forward with a thudding crash.

From somewhere in the distance came a dull clanging sound.

For a moment Scaife lay still, then he pulled his face out of the moist friable soil and sat up. He spat out a mouthful of dirt.

"Goddam flowers—" He stopped, his mouth falling open, his eyes fastened on a thin copper wire hidden in the lush growth about a foot above the ground. He twisted his neck right and then left; the wire followed the contour of the bed.

"Damned dumb cluck and his home-made burglar traps!"

Scaife struggled to get to his feet, then stopped—his fingers clawing the

earth—listening. Again there was a heavy clang from behind the cottage. Scaife's thick lips slackened. A trickle of moisture crept from one corner of his mouth. His eyes bulged as he stared at the copper wire.

"Oh, my gosh!" His voice rose to a shriek. "He's loose! He's loose!"

A high keening sound came from around the house. Frantically Scaife pawed the ground, trying to regain his feet, but something was wrong with one ankle. He thudded back down among the flowers, struggling with his clumsy gloved fingers to reach the gun under his left arm. But even as he clawed at his coat, the whining sound grew to a moan and a blast of terror, and the great snarling dog charged around the corner of the house.

Scaife screamed only once.



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Doom in Dead Storage

By Fergus Truslow



Before Mickey Dudek could get the lease he needed, he merely had to hook a hotel room for that underworld landlord. But when the rented room turned out to be a coffin setup, the only lease Dudek seemed slated to sign was a long-term one for the morgue.

MICKEY DUDEK walked straight into Salmonson's cigar store out of a hot October night on Hollywood Boulevard and laid the key on the counter. "Nice little shack," he said indifferently. "Thanks for letting me see it."

It was hard to do. Remembering how Mrs. Michael Dudek had taken to staring at the four walls of a hotel room made it no easier.

Salmonson didn't raise his bald, kettle-domed head. He kept on rolling red and

black poker dice across a square of green felt.

"What's the idea, Dudek? Why not put the key in your pocket? For a small favor and forty bucks a month it is a bargain."

Dudek's blue eyes twinkled, but he smoothed his short blond curls with an anxious hand. He could feel the sweat running on him, under his old pre-war gabardine.

"Look," he countered. "Before I was back in civilian clothes twenty-four hours I found out a guy has to be a magician to find a place to live in L. A. Then you hit me with this. I can't believe it. Two bedrooms. A front yard. Even a real orange tree by the kitchen door, with real oranges on it."

"For a small favor and forty bucks you put the key in your pocket."

"What's the small favor—a murder?"

Salmonson stiffened. "You should say a thing like that. And you a detective."

"Me a detective?" Dudek said piously. "Why where did you get an idea like—"

"You're opening the Dudek Agency," Salmonson cut in.

"When Sacramento okays the papers for it, I am. Until then I wouldn't touch a case with a ten-foot pole."

Twin points of diamond-hard light flickered in the cigar-store proprietor's eyes. "Who said anything about a case?"

Dudek ran a finger around the band of a wilting collar. "What's on your mind?" he demanded. "Turn the crank."

Salmonson's black eyes came up. His hand uncovered a square cardboard tag on the green felt.

Dudek looked at the lettering on it. "Claim check, from the Wilton Hotel," he observed. "What's it for—baggage?"

"A trunk," Salmonson said. The twin points of light in his eyes flickered. "You go to the Wilton. Take a room. Give this check to the bellboy and have the trunk brought up to your room."

Dudek grinned. But he could feel a cool breeze blowing on his back, right between the shoulder blades. No cool breeze had been included in the weather forecast.

"Is that all?"

"No. You leave your room door unlocked. You go down to the lobby for a smoke. Only, on the way you knock on another door, see?"

Dudek saw. "Then what?" he inquired.

"Then a half hour later you go back

up to your room. Call the bellboy to take the trunk back to the storeroom. Say to him you got the suit out you wanted. Or anything. I leave that to you."

Dudek's tongue explored dry lips. "Is this on the clean side or not?"

Salmonson slapped the palm of his hand down on the square of green felt as if swearing on a stack of courtroom Bibles. "Clean. I absolutely guarantee."

"Then why the hocus pocus?"

"It's only that a guy with your experience knows how to keep his mouth shut."

Dudek sighed. "Salmonson, did you ever see a woman sit and stare at the walls of a hotel room like they were closing in on her? Squeezing in slow, kind of?"

The hard points of light in the bald man's eyes didn't waver.

"Never mind," Dudek told him. "I see you never did. Okay. What's the room number on the door at the Wilton where you want me to knock?"

"212. Your room is 217."

"My room? You mean you've already registered for me?"

"And paid in advance," Salmonson nodded. "I took care of everything."

Dudek opened his mouth, shut it, and whistled long and low. His face reddened.

"Tomorrow you get a lease on that house," Salmonson put in hastily. "Well?"

Dudek stared for a long thirty seconds. "I'm on my way," he said, and turned on his heel.

JUST outside the open door Dudek stumbled over a bandy-legged little man in a glen plaid suit. Bowlegs muttered an apology and scuttled away with a backward look over his shoulder. Vaguely Dudek remembered him as a small-time gambler and hanger-on to the big boys out in the Strip.

I wonder how long that little guy's ears are? he thought.

Before he'd taken two steps into the warm October night a black-and-white police car purred up to the curb. Out of it lumbered a florid, perspiring cop in plainclothes.

Dudek grinned. "Hello, Henry. How's everything in the fallen arches department?"

Police Sergeant Henry Gardner mopped his heavy jaw with a handkerchief and chewed on a dead cigar. "Dudek," he said

Frankly, "It's horrible to see you back from the wars. Horrible. I hear you're trying to set up your own agency."

"What's with the blood pressure, Henry?" Dudek soothed. "Has your current crime got you baffled?"

Gardner put away his soggy handkerchief. "Baffled? Me? Why, I'll have this murder solved inside twenty-four hours. Maybe less."

"What murder?"

The plainclothes man jerked his double chin in the direction of the side street. "A guy named Pape got himself knocked off in a boarding house last night. His landlady says he used to hang around Salmonson's, shooting poker dice."

He scratched a match to light his dead cigar and glared suspiciously at Dudek. "You're not toying with this case, are you?"

"Me?" Dudek grinned. "Certainly not, Henry. Just stopped in to buy a pack of smokes."

By this time he could feel the claim check in his pocket burning like a red-hot penny. He shoved a cigarette between his lips, reached for Gardner's left hand, which held the match. "Hold it," he murmured.

He got his light and blew out the match. "Thanks," he grinned brazenly. Gardner's neck bulged over his collar like a bull terrier straining at the leash. "Listen, Mickey," the big cop warned. "It's only a thought, but if your foot slips just once, the Dudek Agency gets smothered in the cradle. Remember that."

"I'll remember," Dudek promised casually.

Gardner lumbered into the cigar store. Tossing the cigarette into the gutter as if it suddenly choked him, Mickey Dudek bee-lined up Hollywood Boulevard for the Wilton Hotel.

The Wilton, a white, gingerbreaded, cupola-topped resort hotel, stood on one of Hollywood's busiest corners, ignoring 1945.

Dudek crashed the main line of defense, a verandah full of old ladies who had worn out six rocking chairs apiece since Hollywood filmed its first opus, and got his key at the desk.

"I want to talk to Tiffany, the manager," he told the clerk. "He in his office?"

At the clerk's nod, Dudek walked down

the hall to the manager's frosted glass door, tapped and walked in.

"... be very glad to put it in the vault for you," Tiffany's soothing tones were saying.

The chubby, redheaded manager looked up. "Ah, Dudek. Good to see you back. Glad to have you with us again."

He rose from the swivel chair, where he had been sitting back with his fingers steepled. A violin case lay on the desk before him.

Tiffany waved a hand at the sultry brunette who sat across the desk from him. "Madame Fragenti," he announced, "Mr. Michael Dudek, one of our old friends here at the Wilton."

Dudek stared. A wine-red silk dress fitted her ripe curves snugly, drawing the male eye like a magnet.

She stared back, raising a long white hand to pat the black, shining, expensively coiffed hair at the back of her neck.

Tiffany's voice burbled on. "Mr. Dudek is one of our outstanding private eyes—er—I mean detectives."

"Really?" Madame Fragenti's nostrils flared in disdain. She drew a cigarette and a jeweled lighter from her purse.

Tiffany coughed apologetically at Dudek. "Madame Fragenti is a violinist. A truly great artist, as you would know had you heard her play on the concert stage as often as I have."

"Really?" Dudek said, putting a smoke between his lips. "Hold it, Madame Fragenti."

He reached for her left hand, which held the jeweled lighter. Pulling her long white fingers to him, he lit his cigarette. "Thanks," he said with a brazen grin.

Her dark eyes flashed. "Of all the impudent—" she began angrily.

Tiffany coughed. "Now Madame Fragenti," he soothed. "About your instrument. I was about to say, it can remain here in the vault tonight."

He seized the violin case, put it inside the vault on the floor, and patted it. "You need have no fear whatsoever," he assured her. "Your violin is safe."

Madame Fragenti stood up, like royalty dismissing an audience. "Good night, Mr. Tiffany. And Mr. Dudek."

But Dudek was on his way to the door. "See you later, Tiffany. Good night, Madame. An honor, I'm sure."

Grinning, he shut the door on Madame Fragenti's mounting fury.

EXACTLY as Salmonson had instructed him, Dudek went to Room 217, had the trunk brought up. On the way down to the lobby he paused to knock at the door of 212.

For some thirty minutes he smoked in the lounge of the Wilton and amused himself by staring at pictures of ocean liners long gone to the scrap yards.

When he went back up to his room even the feel of the doorknob made him uneasy. He reached in and clicked on the lights before he stepped across the sill.

A jet of arctic air tickled his spine and his belly tried to shrink away from his belt buckle. Somebody had decorated Room 217 with a nice fresh corpse.

Dudek shut his door carefully, locked it. *Well, sucker*, he thought. *What did you expect?*

He gulped. Not quite this. Not a fat man's body slumped on the floor in a sitting position with a knotted hotel towel tethering the neck to a bed post. Not the limp leathery, purple tongue that stuck out at him.

Dudek stepped across a litter of clothing spilled from the open trunk and frisked the dead man's pockets quickly. A wallet yielded a musician's union card. "Hermann Bix," Dudek read.

The wallet also yielded a red claim check like the one Salmonson had given Dudek. The detective pocketed it.

He dropped the wallet back in the dead man's pocket, went to the door, opened it a crack.

The hall was clear. Dudek stepped across and listened at the door of room 212. Inside, somebody was moving about hurriedly. Dudek heard the unmistakable double click of a suitcase being snapped shut.

He retreated to his own room and watched through a crack of the door. An instant later Salmonson's bald, kettle-domed head showed itself. His black eyes glittered in a pale, taut face. The cigar-store proprietor, with a tagged hotel room key in one hand and a suitcase in the other, hurried downstairs.

Dudek, still in his own room, took the phone off the hook. "Order please," whined a bored female voice.

"212 is checking out," Dudek informed her. "When he turns in his key tell him the night maid says he left something in his room."

He hung up. Two minutes later he was

again watching from a crack of his door as Salmonson puffed back up the stairs.

Dudek stepped up silently behind the bald-headed man as he turned the knob of 212. The door swung open. Salmonson looked into the room and grunted. The suitcase fell from his hand. His breath whistled in his throat.

"Surprise, surprise." Dudek murmured, nudging the dazed man across the sill and shutting the door.

Salmonson wrenched his eyes away from the corpse of Hermann Bix, tethered by the neck to the foot of the bed. "You—you dirty, double-crossing. . ." he choked. His hand dived under his coat lapel.

Dudek nipped him above the elbow with hard fingers, stepped on his toe and shoved. Salmonson caromed off the wall, the breath driven out of him by the impact.

Dudek lifted a .45 automatic from the bald man's shoulder holster. "Too much gun for you," he consoled. "You might get yourself in a jackpot with it."

"Jackpot!" moaned the cigar-store proprietor. "What do you call this?"

He swallowed hard, his eyes fixed on the dead, swollen visage of Hermann Bix.

"Give," Dudek said.

"What—what do you mean?" Salmonson stalled, his face a dirty gray.

"Where'd you get that claim check for the trunk? From Pape?"

"P-poker dice," Salmonson nodded. "I won it."

"Begin at the beginning and level," Dudek suggested. "Or you can explain that guy tied to the bed when the cops arrive."

"You parked that stiff in here!" the bald man choked.

Dudek grinned. He snapped his fingers. "Come on, give."

CLAMMY sweat dewed Salmonson's brow. "Pape lives—lived—in a boarding house round the corner from my place. He bucked my poker dice a lot. Couple of nights ago I got into him about five bucks and he shows me the claim check for this trunk. An old pal left it with him a couple years back and then ups and dies. Pape never got around to claiming the trunk."

Dudek nodded. "So you let this Pape guy shoot the claim check against his own

five bucks and you won. Then what?"

"Two nights later—that's last night—somebody rubs Pape out. They look at his room with a fine-tooth comb. So the landlady says. Ripped the mattress open. Cut his clothes and suitcase up with razors, even."

"You figured they were looking for that claim check?"

Salmonson gulped, nodded. "Specially when this morning a bow-legged little stool everybody calls 'The Bar' comes sniffing around my place. He wants to know did Pape ever mention about a claim check."

"Okay." Dudek's blue eyes held a malicious twinkle. "I'll take it from there. You kept your mouth shut, figuring there's something valuable stashed in that trunk. But what? What did you expect to find?"

Salmonson shrugged. "Jewelry. Maybe bonds. If it's good enough to kill Pape for, it's got to be something."

"So you picked me for the sucker to get it for you. Go on. What next?"

The diamond-hard points of light had begun to sneak back into Salmonson's eyes. "When you knocked on this door I waited five minutes for you to get out of the way. Then I went over to your room. This dead guy"—he paused to shudder—"is looking me right in the pan."

"You searched the trunk?" Dudek put in coldly.

"I hadda bust the lock. Inside that trunk there ain't a thing I'd risk a dime on. But the worst of it is that this dead corpse in the room is named Hermann Bix. I looked at his wallet."

"So?" prompted Dudek.

"That trunk belonged to him?"

Dudek's eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

"There's stuff inside that says so?"

Dudek whistled thoughtfully. "Pape told you that it belonged to a guy dead two years. But the guy is still warm right now."

Salmonson shivered. Dudek grinned. "I'm going to do you a big favor," he told the bald man.

"Yeah?" Salmonson said eagerly.

"Yeah. I'm going to let you rent me that house of yours for only twenty-five bucks a month."

The points of light flickered in Sal-

monson's eyes. "Forty is what I said. At that it's robbery by the O.P.A."

"Twenty-five. Or would you rather have the corpse of Hermann Bix on your hands?"

"That's blackmail!" Salmonson cried. "Besides, you told me before you get your papers from Sacramento you can't take a detective case."

"I can't. But there's no law against getting myself out of a murder rap if Hermann turns up in my room across the hall just before the cops arrive."

Dudek whipped out his check book and scribbled on the back of a blank check. He handed the fountain pen to Salmonson.

"But this is a contract binding in a court of law!" objected his victim. "It says I'm accepting seventy-five dollars down as one quarter's rent in advance, on a year's lease. A year's lease at twenty-five bucks a month? No! Never!"

Dudek cast a significant look at the garroted musician slumped against the foot of the bed. Salmonson swallowed hard. "Gimme the pen," he groaned.

With a shaking hand he signed his name. Dudek gave him a check for seventy-five dollars. Sourly Salmonson pocketed it.

"Okay," Dudek remarked in cheery tones. "Now a little journey for Hermann."

WITH Hermann Bix's body once more back across the hall, propped against the foot of the bed in Room 217, Dudek adjusted the towel around the dead man's neck.

His own collar began to feel a bit too tight as he finished.

"Right now I'm leaving," Salmonson announced, heading for the door. Dudek yanked him back. "You're staying."

"But you said—you agreed—"

"I agreed to take the corpse. You're going to tell the cops the truth about the claim check racket you tried to pull."

He handed back the .45 automatic. "Here's your cannon. I don't want the cops to think it's mine."

Salmonson glowered, but relaxed. "Who do you think done it?" he queried, jerking his chin at the dead man.

"I dunno," Dudek admitted. "Maybe you."

He began to sort through the mess of junk Salmonson had pulled out of Hermann Bix's trunk. Thumbing through a

pile of personal papers, he stopped to stare.

"Only a printed program for a music concert," Salmonson snorted, looking over his shoulder. "With a picture of the orchestra guys on top of the page. Why would he keep it?"

"To show when he was trying to get bookings," Dudek said. "Take a gander at the names in this ship's orchestra. Hermann Bix, piano. Harold Pape, trumpet, Pape—"

Salmonson started. "Why that's the guy—Pape!" He got himself rubbed out last night!"

Dudek nodded. "The guy who lost the claim check to you at poker dice."

"Then both the murdered guys were members of the same ship's orchestra at the same time!"

"On the *President Pierce*," Dudek agreed. "She was a trans-Pacific boat before the war."

He folded the printed concert program and put it in his pocket. "All right, Salmonson. You can go."

"Go?" the cigar-store proprietor gulped.

"As far as the lobby. No farther. I want you handy when the law starts asking questions."

In the hotel manager's office Dudek found Tiffany, the plump, redhaired chief of the hostel, at his task toiling over the day's transcript sheet.

Dudek dropped the printed ship's concert program on the desk. "Here, Tiffany. Take a squint at the picture and the names underneath. Ever see any of these guys before?"

Tiffany looked wonderingly at the program. "Bix? Hermann Bix? Yes, indeed. He's registered here right now. In 201, if I'm not mistaken."

Plainly interested, the plump manager picked up the transcript sheet and ran a finger down the rental columns. "Yes, Bix is in 201. Why do you ask? Is there something—"

Dudek cut him off. "What about the other names and faces? Think back."

Tiffany scanned the printed program eagerly. "This one, I think. Withington. Let's take a look at the files."

He dug a steel drawer full of registration cards out of the open vault. "Withington," he muttered, thumbing back through the files. "Yes, Dudek. Here he is."

He triumphantly pulled out a card. "Two years back, but—"

Tiffany stopped, his mouth open.

"What about him?" Dudek prodded.

"Why—why, that's a guest who died on us," the hotel man yelped indignantly. "He died up in 260 and never even paid his bill!"

"A dirty trick if I ever heard of one," Dudek sympathized. "Did this guy by any chance leave a trunk?"

Tiffany whacked his own knuckles with the card. "I believe he did. By gravy, that trunk must still be taking up storage space in the basement. All this time!"

He made indignant clucking noises with his tongue. Tiffany turned to the detective uneasily. "What about this other man, Hermann Bix? The guest up in 201."

Dudek stopped grinning. He ran a finger around the inside of his collar. Tiffany's office was suddenly stifling in spite of the open windows, which let in a faint breeze and the chirping of crickets.

"He's not in 201. He's in 217," he told Tiffany.

"But that's your room!"

"I know. He's dead. Murdered."

"Murdered!" moaned Tiffany, his plump face aghast. "Here at the Wilton! In my hotel?"

He reached for the phone on his desk. Dudek stretched out a long arm, clamped the handset to its cradle. "You want this cleared up, and quick, don't you, chum?"

"Of course I do!" the hotel man babbled. "What will the board of directors say when—"

"Then forget that phone for fifteen minutes. I've got work to do."

"But the police—" Tiffany protested.

"I'll handle the police," Dudek told the perspiring little manager. "Cops are like trained seals. Everything is rosy if you know when to throw them a fish."

LEAVING Tiffany moaning and smiting his brow in the office, Dudek prowled down the long hallways to the basement stairs. Passing by the men's washroom Dudek descended to a dimly lit sub-basement. The stagnant air was heavy with odors of furnace oil, stale hotel laundry, and worn-out carpet stacked in rolls against one wall.

Dudek found the baggage storeroom, a large open cage of steel mesh fencing. A padlock secured its door.

In the darkness he could see a white string dangling through the wire barrier. "Penny saver," Dudek smiled to himself at thought of hotel managers' tight-fisted ways. "That string is there so the housemen and bellhops can turn out the light from the outside if they forget and lock the door first."

He tugged at the string. A blue glare of light flooded the cage. Dudek pulled a heavy ring of keys from his pocket, tried them until he found one that mastered the padlock.

Once inside he had no trouble finding the trunk he sought — a big battered wardrobe. The numbers on the claim stub wired to it tallied with the numbers on the red claim check he'd taken from the dead Hermann Bix's wallet.

Working quickly he opened the trunk and ran his hands through layers of camphor-smelling garments until he encountered a violin case.

He grunted, as he opened the case. The case itself looked old, the fiddle inside it was new and cheap. Dudek lifted it out. He strummed a fingernail across the taut strings.

"No catgut in the world will stay set up two years," he told himself. "Every one of these strings would break."

He laid the cheap violin aside. The case he examined closely before he shut it on top of the clothes in the trunk.

He was closing the trunk lid when a warning whisper of shoe leather on concrete reached his ears. Dudek reached up and yanked the white string overhead.

Blackness came down to shield him. In the instant a pencil of orange fire probed through it. The shot barreled against concrete walls like thunder.

Buttoning the cheap fiddle under his coat, Dudek dodged out of the cage. Footsteps prowled the smelly darkness, but by the time he'd ditched the cheap violin in a stack of carpeting, the whisper of leather had faded away.

Dudek's heart was thudding when he reached the upper and safer levels of the Wilton Hotel. His shirt stuck to his back, damply.

"Mr. Dudek!" the elderly clerk hailed him as he passed the desk. "Mr. Tiffany just phoned down from your room. He said to tell you the fifteen minutes is nearly up. He said you'd understand."

Dudek nodded grimly. "I know what he means. Thanks."

He went on down the hall to the manager's office, found the door unlocked. He went in, locking it behind him.

Madame Fragenti's violin case was on the floor of the steel vault, where Tiffany had put it earlier.

Dudek brought it to the desk. "Locked," he grunted, and swore.

Quickly he jimmied the violin case open with the thick end of a paper-knife from Tiffany's desk. "Holy Toledo!" he gasped.

Madame Fragenti's fiddle case had been neatly packed with small square tins wrapped in tissue paper. Dudek dumped them out on the desk, ripped the paper off a few.

The tins were in two sizes. The smaller ones measured two inches high by one-and-a-quarter wide and three-fourths thick. The larger ones, he estimated would hold five times as much. "Lam Kee," he muttered, seeing the trademark—an elephant on one side, a rooster on the other. "One tael and five tael tins."

Dazed, he tried to estimate the price the L.A. narcotic rings would put on the tins of prepared opium. "Over twenty grand, anyway," he decided.

The empty violin case he closed and put back in the vault. He glanced around Tiffany's office, spotted the wide top drawer of the desk open. The key was in its lock.

Dudek pulled the drawer out, shoved papers aside, and packed in all the flat tins of Lam Kee.

He locked the drawer and threw the key in the wastebasket before leaving.

UPSTAIRS in Room 217, he found Tiffany wringing his hands. "By gravy, Dudek!" the plump little redhead moaned. "Why can't these things happen in some other house? Why am I crucified?"

He waved a hand at the purple, bloated visage of Hermann Bix, still tethered to the foot of the bed with a hotel towel. "Can't you see what the newspapers will say?"

Dudek found a sick grin somewhere. "I sure can," he admitted, as he bent over the dead man, took out his wallet and examined Bix's identification papers. "The Dudek Detective Agency is a dead duck before it takes its first toddling steps."

He slipped the trunk check back in the

wallet when he replaced Bix's union card. "This stuff seems to identify him okay," he remarked. "Do you recognize him as the guy who signed the register as Hermann Bix?"

Tiffany swallowed hard. "Yes, although the swollen features, and the—er—blueness of the epidermis make it difficult to—"

Dudek cut in. "Have you called the cops yet?"

"Not yet. I promised you fifteen minutes."

Dudek took the room phone off the hook. "Here we go," he said grimly.

Twenty minutes later Madame Fragenti's contralto voice echoed in anger from the walls of Tiffany's office. "I'll sue you!" she threatened. "I'll sue everybody, including this hotel and the police department!"

The well-rounded bosom of her wine-red dress heaved.

Police Sergeant Henry Gardner mopped his perspiring brow placidly. One of the phones on Tiffany's desk jingled. He picked it up. "Yeah?" he grunted.

It made scratchy noises at him. "Bring it up," he said and dropped the phone back on its cradle.

He turned to the furious woman. "Now, Madame Fragenti," he rumbled, "the only reason I called you in here is because this guy Dudek says he saw you comin' out of his room, Room 217, just before he runs into a dead corpse up there."

Madame Fragenti's nostrils widened. "He's lying!" she flared. "Look at him! Any fool can see he's lying."

Dudek shrugged. "You've heard all I know," he told Gardner. "Like I say, I was only doing Salmonson here a favor by getting the trunk up to the room for him."

Salmonson, standing beside him, squirmed.

Gardner snorted. "Your story is fishier than a barrel of mackerel. Look. First a musician named Pape gets chilled. This Pape has a claim check for a trunk another musician left with him before kicking the bucket. Now a third musician is killed in your room and you holler cop."

Gardner stuffed his damp handkerchief into a hip pocket. "All three guys played in the same ship's orchestra."

"Ah, yes," Tiffany put in nervously. "Withington died first, of natural causes. He left the claim check to Pape."

"Who got murdered last night," Gardner nodded. "Next this Hermann Bix upstairs is rubbed out in Dudek's room. We found the claim check on him. I got a man down in the basement, and he's on his way up now with something."

"Come in!" he boomed at a tap on the door.

A freckle-faced plainclothes man walked in carrying a violin case. "Is that it?" Gardner demanded eagerly. "You said you'd found something screwy, didn't you? Well?"

The freckle-faced cop shrugged. He put the leather-covered fiddle case on the desk. Gardner opened it.

"Empty!" he snorted. "What the hell do you mean by getting me steamed up about an empty fiddle case?"

"It hasn't been empty long," the plainclothes man opined. "Take a look at the plush lining, where the nap's pressed down. Them little square marks ain't made by a fiddle."

Gardner grunted and pulled out a folding rule. "That ship's fiddler must've brought back a lot of illegal souvenirs from the Orient. The marks on this plush lining are about right for one tael and five tael tins."

"PARDON me for interrupting," Dudek sighed. "But this is good a time as any to tell you I've made a terrible mistake, Henry."

Gardner's beefy face was eager. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I guess it wasn't Madame Fragenti I saw leaving my room."

The woman in the wine-red dress stared at Mickey Dudek with hard, angry eyes. "Thank you too much," she sneered.

She turned on Tiffany. "You may be interested to know that you've missed a lawsuit by an eyelash."

The manager was perspiring. He waved his hands apologetically. "Now Madame—"

She stood up. Her lip curled. "Now, if nobody objects, I shall go to my room!"

She started for the door. Dudek caught her. "Your violin is in the vault. After all this business you'd be safer taking it with you."

She looked at him, her eyes black pools of steel.

Gardner cut in suspiciously. "You got a violin around here, too?"

"In the hotel vault," Madame Fragen-

it's syllables were icy. "And if you so much as lay a finger on it I'll sue this hotel. The relationship between artist and violin is personal, intimate. I forbid you to touch it."

"I'm afraid she means it," groaned Tiffany. "After all, she is a concert violinist, you know. I'll vouch for that."

"If she won't show Gardner the fiddle," Dudek suggested amiably, "maybe she'll show him the little callouses that form on the fingertips of a violinist's left hand, where they press the strings."

The sound of the crickets outside the window was suddenly loud in the quiet office. Madame Fragenti closed her fingers into fists.

Gardner pried the left fist open. He took one look at the woman's fingers and dived for the vault.

"Look out!" yelled Salmonson.

Madame Fragenti's right hand had produced a midget .25 automatic. Dudek slapped at the blue steel toy as it spat ordite flames.

A heavy hand-gun bellowed. Dudek, with a firm grip on the .25 automatic, turned his head in time to see Gardner trigger a second shot into the suddenly galvanized Tiffany.

The plump little hotel man dropped a .38 and slumped forward. His body hit the office floor limply.

"Well, how d'ya like that!" remarked Gardner's freckle-faced assistant, putting away his own weapon. "That little shrimp Tiffany was fronting for the drome. But why? What—"

"Search the office," rumbled Gardner. "We'll begin with Tiffany's desk."

The hotel manager's mortal remains had departed from the premises in a basket, and the tins of Lam Kee were stacked on the office desk before Sergeant Gardner. "Lemme get this straight," the big cop ruminated, blinking at the woman in the wine-red dress.

"What's there to get straight?" she said wearily. "Withington used to haul dope in, using his job in the ship's orchestra as a front. Last week I found out he had a load of stuff hidden somewhere when he died. I contacted Hermann Bix to help me find it. He got hoggish and killed Pape trying to pry the claim check out of him. But Pape had let the claim check go in a poker dice game."

Dudek cut in. "Then you took a long

chance and felt Tiffany out to see if he'd come in for a cut?"

She nodded. "He came along easy. But Hermann Bix didn't like being dealt out of the game. We had to get rid of him the hard way, because he'd checked his own trunk into storage here at the Wilton to have an excuse to prowl around."

"You had a tip Salmonson was sending me over here to get a trunk out of hock for him?"

She nodded again. "We had the tip in time for Tiffany to unload the Bix kill on you. To make it look worse, Tiffany switched the claim stubs in the basement, so when you sent for the trunk, you'd get the one Bix just checked in. Now can I go? Jail is going to be restful."

Gardner nodded to his aide. Grinning, the plainclothes man led her away. The office door closed.

HENRY GARDNER hauled out a cigar and bit the end off. "Much as I hate to admit it, Dudek, your skirts are clean. I guess we can call the case closed. But just the same, there's a coupla details I'd like to know."

"Such as?" Dudek suggested.

"Well, the dame said all this business about her being a concert violinist is to cover for you finding her in Tiffany's office. She'd just come up from the basement with a violin case full of dope. She claims she put a cheap fiddle in Withington's case, so if anybody got nosy it would look kosher."

"What about it?"

"We didn't find a fiddle. In fact it was the empty case with the marked plush lining that roused suspicion. Another thing," the big cop went on, "we found a cartridge case, .38 caliber, down there in the basement, and a bullet hole in a trunk. I got a hunch the ballistic boys could tag that bullet as being from Tiffany's gun. But it don't tie in with my case as it stands."

Dudek explored his pocket for the key to the house Salmonson had rented him. It was there all right. Mrs. Michael Dudek could stop looking at hotel room walls as if they were closing in on her, now.

"Why worry about minor details, Henry?" he consoled Gardner. "The press will give you a big hand. You have solved a double killing. The newspaper boys will like that business of you forcing

{Continued on Page 34}

Tabasco Charley knew his red-hot sauces, but the sizzling stew that past crimes cooked up for him was . . .

Too Hot for a Hellion

By D. A. Hoover



TABASCO CHARLEY was excited. And why not? How was his little dining car rating a visit from the society editor of the *Clinton Times*? That supreme authority of Who's Who in town was coming in his front door right now. What he had done to attract the sparkling pen of this glamorous young woman he couldn't imagine.

The front shade had been down for five minutes. As every one in the small town knew, that meant Tabasco Charley had cooked his last thick, red steak for the evening. He filled a glass with water and picked up a menu card. Sweat glistened on his forehead. He wouldn't dare refuse to serve Chit-Chat as she was called.

But the tall bushy haired stranger who came in behind her, he could and would. "I'm closed, Mister," he tossed over his plump shoulder.

Chit-Chat slid onto one of the red leather stools at the long varnished counter and opened her handbag. She produced pencil and note pad. "I'll bet you wonder why I'm here," she said brightly. "You remember serving a slumming party from the theater, the other night?"

Tabasco Charley fidgeted. "A what? I remember some society folks coming in here." He sniffed. "Didn't they like the food?"

"Oh, yes. It's the steak sauce they've been raving to me about. They tell me it's simply divine. How do you make it?"

Charley warmed to the subject nearest his heart. "Why, I'm making a fresh batch today. Maybe you write about it, I get a lot of rich customers, hey?"

"Exactly. Now, do tell."

"First I take the sweet Spanish onion, the Mexican chili pepper, the big red tomato—"

The bushy haired man banged down savagely on the counter with a salt

shaker. "Service," he bawled. "Bring me a cuppa coffee."

Charley frowned with annoyance. Here was his big chance and he didn't have time to argue with anybody. *I should have run him out of here with a cleaver*, he thought. Charley bobbed an apology to Chit-Chat and slid the stranger a cup of steaming coffee.

He quickly covered the other ingredients of his sauce. "But that ain't the real secret of its flavor."

"No? Then it is—?"

"I keep everything separated until just before it's used, then I blend it carefully. The aromas, the garden-fresh flavors, are all brought right to the table. Let me broil you a steak. That's the only test. I'll fix it special, cook it so slow the sizzling fat will sink in to the very last, tender bite. You can cut it with a fork—"

Chit-chat swallowed blissfully. "Oh my, no, it's closing time for you. I really must run. Friends are outside waiting in the car." Her hazel eyes danced across to a decanter of ruby-tinted tomato juice, the crystal glass beaded with cold drops from the refrigerator. "Such lovely tomato juice. I might—"

Charley sprang forward. A song rang in his heart. Long lines of moneyed people cramming his car. Perhaps he'd even get to leave Railroad Street. A white brick place nearer the center of town. He held the juice up toward the light.

"Red as a sunset," he chanted. "Fresh as dew from clover."

The society girl drank it slowly, a far-off look in her eyes and Charley knew she was sold. Oh, happy day. The stranger banged the counter. Chit-Chat arose. Charley saw her to the door, bowing and thanking her and urging her to return—and bring her following.

"And now, you noise-making Mister," he said when she had gone. "You get the hell out of here or I'll—" His black eyes snapped open. The stranger had laid a big blue automatic pistol on the counter.

"Lock the door," he ordered.

CHARLEY'S damp fingers shook as he obeyed. Now that he could take a better look, there was something vaguely familiar about this rogue. A harsh bell of alarm began to clang in Charley's heart and slowly shut off his breath. His memory mocked him with a picture of a cash register knocked open with an axe and the scream of police sirens. A bloody old man, groaning and trying to rise.

"Bagley," he gasped. "It's you, from Chicago!"

"Yeah, it's me. I wondered when you'd quit goggling that dame and notice your old pal."

Charley gulped. "I'm no pal of yours. I never saw you in my life until I was visiting my friend in the city, and he dropped in on your wild Halloween party. You had been drinking too much and suggested we go out and set trash barrels on fire. That's been a year, but I still remember we went in behind that ten-story department store—"

"Yeah, and the cops come. They said one of us had slipped in and slugged the old watchman and robbed the joint. Imagine that."

"I recall that," Charley said. "I was scared to death. They took us in and questioned us until morning, but they let us go. What are you down here after me for, with that—that gun?"

Bagley laughed, a deep, coarse chuckle. "The old guy never got out of the hospital, that's why. He croaked last week. It's murder now. We can't buy the cops out of that. You'd ought to hear the stories the gang told the coppers about you. We spent a whole night dreaming 'em up, tying them into a noose for your neck. They want you now. I'm taking you back to Chi to swing, you killer."

Charley needed with sweat suddenly dried cold. "No, no, not that!"

The front door rattled. Maybe some customer had defied his rule and was coming in. But the door was locked. The shade was down. He had cut off any chance of help with his own hands.

Bagley's thin lips twitched. "Now cook me a steak, red, juicy, and slow-cooked like you told the woman. You went and made me hungry."

Charley leaped to obey. It would give him precious time to think. But what good would either time or thought do him now? It was after eleven o'clock at night. He would be put in the back seat of a car, slugged, and driven to the city. The gang had their stories and their crooked lawyers ready. What chance did he have against these?

He reached out slowly and his hands came to rest on a long-bladed keen butch-

er knife. If he could just get close enough to the crook. . .

"Steak dinner starts off with tomato juice," he said turning toward the gleaming white refrigerator. He filled a glass. With it held up in sight in one hand, he edged toward the smirking Bagley. Three feet away, two feet—

"I'd drop that knife if I was you," Bagley said easily without turning his head. "Or would you like a slug in the guts?"

The knife hit the floor with a tinny rattle. How had he seen that? Charley would have sworn his hand was out of sight all the time. *I'm finished*, he thought. He turned back to the steak, which was beginning to whisper and sizzle in the skillet, and dribbled a few sweet, shredded onions over its red surface. He turned the gas down a trifle.

"JUST look at you," Bagley chuckled, sniffing the aroma from the steak. "You ain't over thirty years old and got quite a belly already. Nothing to do but just loaf around and eat. And ain't that mustache a dewey?"

Charley gritted his white teeth in helpless rage.

"Gimme another glass of that good tomato juice. That's real. They water it up where I come from. No tricks now. Even if you did manage to get the upper hand of me for a while, the story's all laid out. Sure I hit the old duffer and ran into a burglar alarm system they must have put in that same day. I'd cased the joint for weeks. It was the old watchman's regular night off."

Charley picked up Bagley's empty glass and turned back to the stove. What the crook said was true. Even if he'd slipped the knife between his ribs, he was still sunk. Bagley would have told the gang where he was going. He chilled. That door rattling a while ago. The back door was unlocked. One of the gang from the car of course, maybe right now holding another gun on him. He chilled, thinking about his attempt to use the knife.

The mangy outfit had traced him to this little Illinois town where the air was sweet and clean and not tainted with the odor of the stockyards like the section they prowled. He'd learned to like folks here and josh them when they came in to eat. And now, he was leaving it all, to be slowly and unjustly choked by a rope until he was dead.

Then his sagging face and spirit leaped up. It couldn't last, but it might be worth a try. He handed Bagley a full glass. Bagley killed it at a gulp, as he would a shot of choice rye. Then he

erupted from his chair like a Jack escaping from his Box.

He almost hit the low ceiling. He knocked the pistol to one side and his fingers, encrusted with heavy rings, tore at his throat. He emitted choked, gargling, mewing sounds and fell down on the linoleum. His feet drummed against the counter. A tray of water glasses came apart and rolled and smashed with tinkling, icy music.

Tabasco dashed instantly to the counter, his hands clawing for the automatic. His hot flesh contracted expecting a bullet from the doorway. But no bullet came. Chit-Chat did. Her face was drawn

and white, and her notebook was open in one hand.

"I got the whole story," she said. "What's the matter with him? Did you poison him?"

"Not for nothing I keep the ingredients of my steak sauce separate until I serve," Charley said, a load springing from his heart. "I fed him a glass of stock squeezed from chili peppers. But how did you happen to come back?"

Chit-Chat smiled. "You made me hungry. I'm going to have one of your thick, juicy steaks even if it is after closing time."

Tabasco Charley grinned and agreed.

Doom in Dead Storage

By Fergus Truslow

(Continued from Page 31)

Madame Fragenti's hand open and looking for violinist's callouses on her fingertips. Of course the minute you spotted that, you knew Tiffany was in on the deal. He was the guy who said he'd heard her play on the concert stage."

Gardner's beefy face reddened. "Yeah," he admitted, striking a match to light his cigar. "Not bad."

He paused with the match halfway to

his weed. "Say, Dudek," he grunted. "You wouldn't have happened to get a squint at that dame's fingertips earlier in the evening, would you?"

Mickey Dudek spoke around the unlighted cigarette between his lips. "Who me? How would I do that?"

He pulled Gardner's left hand close with the match, lit his cigarette, blew the flame out. "Thanks," he grinned.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933 Of 10-Story Detective Magazine, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass. for October 1, 1945

State of New York 1 ss.
County of New York 1 ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the 10-Story Detective Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

A. A. Wyn
(Signature of publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945.

ROSE BLUMENTHAL, Notary Public
New York Co. Clk's No. 435, Reg. No. 975-B-7
Commission expires March 30, 1947

Mystery of the Punctual Vulture

*Dramatic
Murder
Novelet*



**By
Talmage
Powell**

Lew Briggs came to that hate-filled mansion to find out how Hazel Addington had disappeared. But the tough-repped dick seemed doomed to pull off a life-vanishing act, himself when he uncovered only a curiously punctual vulture and a ghost with a taste for detective blood.

CHAPTER I

LEW BRIGGS had seen towns more disillusioned-looking than Fairlands, South Carolina, but he couldn't remember when. Even the dust on Main Street moved sluggishly under the heat waves. The low-lying buildings flanking the street looked tired.

Lew saw Valerie Morris nowhere. He turned his lean, slightly hunched body back into the gloomy interior of the mul-

tiple-purpose bus terminal. He was hot, dusty from the ride from Spartanburg in a bus that threatened with every wheeze to expire and leave the passengers marooned on the narrow road, hemmed on either side by alternate acres of sandy, red South Carolina soil, peach trees, or cotton fields bursting white under the hot autumn sun.

A car door slammed behind him. Lew Briggs turned in the doorway. A station wagon had stopped at the curb. A girl in green slacks and yellow sweater got out. She was nice to look at, and Lew Briggs looked at her a moment. He remembered that he'd run away from this girl once. He wasn't the kind for her. She could do much better than Lew Briggs.

"Lew!" Her voice fitted her soft, heart-shaped face. "I'm glad you came."

"You phoned me," he said simply. "I caught the first bus." He was close to her. He looked at her eyes, the darkened something in back of them. "You're afraid, Val."

"Yes," she nodded. "I—I couldn't think of anyone to turn to but you."

For a second he frowned, wondering what she wanted of him. She said, "Can you come to Addington Manor right away?"

"That's what I'm here for," he said.

He put his sleek tan bag in the back of the station wagon, got in beside her. She reached the gears, pulled the car away from the curb.

"You didn't know my sister Hazel," she said.

"I don't know any of your family," he reminded her. "I never met any of them but you." Then her words sank in fully. He started. "You said 'didn't know' just now."

Her words throbbed. "Hazel's gone. I want you to find her, Lew."

He wondered about the police, why she hadn't gone to them. He had a harsh, hatchet face that wasn't nice to look at at times. His eyes were rarely warm, his lips could be cruel.

She was speaking in a monotonous voice that indicated a rehearsed speech. Or perhaps it was desperate suppression of hysteria. "Four months ago Silvio Addington, the textile tycoon, died at Addington Manor. Hazel has been living at the place since then, with her husband, Roger Addington. There was a crazy clause in old Silvio's will that his heirs

must live together in Addington Manor for a period of eight months. That's why Hazel and her husband Roger, old Silvio's son, came here.

"I came down a few weeks ago on Hazel's invitation. On the surface there was nothing wrong. But there's an undercurrent, and it's not just due to the fact that old Silvio's three sons dislike each other.

"Four mornings ago," Valerie Morris finished starkly, "Hazel didn't come down to breakfast. She hasn't been seen since."

THEY drove a moment in silence. Lew

Briggs looked at the soft lines of her profile, the haunted look on her face. He'd seen people with the same harried expression before. People who came to him, thinking that a private detective with a shady reputation was a miracle man. The reputation he'd built deliberately; it had been good for business.

He'd never regretted it until that night months ago when he'd met Valerie Morris in a Baltimore night club. Then he'd wished things were different. He'd wished he was the sort of guy to which you tie a girl like Valerie Morris. It had hurt then, just as the anxiety in her drawn face hurt now.

He said, "What does Roger Addington, Hazel's husband, say?"

"He created a scene. Stormed about the house shouting that she'd run out on him, that he'd never chase her or beg her to come back. Then he seemed to forget her, and life went on in Addington Manor as if she'd never been there."

"I see," Lew Briggs said. "She was just a girl existing in the house. She disappeared, and it's hardly caused a ripple."

Valerie Morris nodded, swallowing hard.

He lighted a cigarette, passed it to her, lighted another for himself. "Why haven't you gone to the police?"

"You see those spirals of smoke in the distance?"

His gaze followed her pointing finger. Miles away sentinels of smoke rose in the hot twilight.

"That smoke," she said, "is from one of the Addington cotton mills. They own a dozen. A round dozen, Lew." She took one hand from the wheel, made a sweeping motion. "In any direction you look from this point you are looking at Addington land. They own the county. They are the

law. Anyway, how could I approach the sheriff: without a shred of evidence. He'd simply pat me on the shoulder, tell me I was running a case of nerves."

"Are you sure you aren't?" he asked, knowing she wasn't the kind to run a case of nerves.

He saw the tremor shake her. "I've checked at the bus terminal, the train terminal, every taxi company in Fairlands. Hazel hasn't bought a ticket or hired a car. Lew, there are only two ways Hazel could have gone out of Fairlands. Up into thin air—or down into the sandy earth. And people don't vanish into thin air. . ."

That left the sandy earth. . .

The house loomed before them suddenly as they came through a tangy-smelling pine woods. It was made of grey stone, clothed with dead and dying vines, casting a gloomy overtone over the landscape.

Valerie Morris followed the gravelled drive around the house, ran the station wagon in a long, low garage of the same grey stone. There was one other car in the garage, a powerful black sedan.

The veranda was supported by Ionic columns that the years had touched with grey. There were two men on the veranda as Lew and Valerie came around the house.

A slight man, with a long, thin face and lank brown hair, was sitting stiffly on the glider. Hulking over him was a powerful, big-faced, bald-headed man. Despite his baldness and the glower he'd evidently worn on his face since he'd turned voting age, the big man appeared to Lew to be in his early forties.

As they faced Lew and Valerie, Lew sensed the undercurrent between the two men. He wondered if they had been arguing. If so, from the looks of their faces, it had been heated.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," Val said. "Mr. Lew Briggs."

The slightly built, brown-haired man on the glider was Jerry Addington. He shook hands limply with Lew. The big man was Roger Addington, Hazel's husband. His grip was crushing.

Lew regarded him with veiled interest. Lew hadn't known Hazel, but he knew her sister. Knowing Valerie, Lew suspected the sort of girl Hazel had been. He found it a little hard to imagine her married to this glowering, hulking man.

There was a certain handsomeness, in a rugged, harsh way, about Roger Addington, but Lew didn't like the glower, the way the big man's mouth turned down at the corners.

Jerry reseated himself indolently on the glider. Valerie was saying, "I hope you don't mind my inviting Lew down for a few days, Roger."

"Of course not," Roger Addington said, without warmth. "We'll have Micah bring his bag in. Micah," he added, "is the hired man. He'll fetch whatever you want, if you can find him."

"That's kind of you," Lew said.

"What sort of business are you in, Mr. Briggs?" Jerry Addington asked, without interest. From the way he lolled on the glider, Lew suspected that Jerry Addington had given old Silvio his own share of trouble. Idle, perversely selfish, neurotic—Lew had seen Jerry's type before.

"I'm a research man," Lew said, letting it ride at that.

"Dinner will be in an hour," Roger Addington slipped his sleeve back over his wrist watch, turned his back in a gesture of dismissal.

LEW followed Valerie into the house. Inside, the place was surprisingly bright, furnished in an almost modern motif. But the overall effect, Lew thought, was like draping a tomb in chintz.

Val paused in the hallway. "Did you feel it, Lew?" she asked. "The undercurrent, I mean. As if Jerry and Roger would like to tear at each other's throat?"

"They showed no burst of warmth when we arrived," he admitted.

Val was on the point of saying something more, but a door down the hallway opened. It framed a girl. Though Lew Briggs was objectively detached about all women except for his bitter-sweet feelings concerning Valerie Morris, he felt at once the magnetism of the strange girl. The lines of her body flowed under her green dress. She had an almost Slavonic face, midnight hair, and liquid red lips.

Valerie made introductions. The girl was Luisa Shaw, Roger Addington's secretary.

"He had certain business interests to look after, you know, even though he was bound by the silly clause in his father's will to spend eight months in this place if

he expected to inherit anything." Luisa Shaw's voice was touched with huskiness. "But I wouldn't have cried if he had brought another secretary along with him and left me at home."

"You don't like it here?" Lew asked.

She smiled, her gaze veiled as it touched him. She said, "Well, new faces are always welcome. I'll see you at dinner, Mr. Briggs."

She moved away, closed the front door behind her. A nasal voice behind Lew said, "She's a woman with tricks up her sleeve, Mr. Briggs."

Lew and Valerie turned. A man in a wheelchair was coming toward them, propelling the chair slowly. Through the open doorway from which the man had come, Lew could see the book-lined walls of the library. The man stopped the chair. "I overheard your introduction to Luisa. I'm Elwood Addington." The third of the sons old Silvio had left behind.

"Like Luisa," Elwood said, "I wouldn't cry if I was out of this place. It was a master's stroke, old Silvio's idea of putting that residence clause in his will. He knew that Roger, Jerry, and I hated the place. And each other. Perhaps," Elwood's thin features were morbid, "Silvio was hoping we'd begin murdering each other for his money."

Elwood Addington didn't make a pleasant picture. A heavy lap robe covered him from the waist down. His chest and shoulders were thin. A bluish cast hovered about his waxlike eye sockets. He smiled grimly.

"Old Silvio knew it would be worst on me. I've spent my life here, since the auto accident thirteen years ago that took my wife and did this to me." He touched his legs with his fingers. "Sometimes I sit for hours, wanting attention, thirsting simply for a sip of water."

He whirled the chair abruptly. "But I needn't bore you." He rolled the chair away with a heavy sigh.

"I—I don't like his talk of murder," Valerie said softly. Lew took her fingers in his. She was trembling a little.

"They dislike each other intensely, Lew," she said. "And if any of them should die, his inheritance would snowball to the others. The estate is to be divided equally between Elwood, Jerry, and Roger at the termination of eight months after the death of old Silvio. I—I think the old man was a crackpot to leave a

will like that. But I can understand, I think.

"Roger left home when he was young, he married some girl down in Columbia, whom he divorced later—and he refused to help old Silvio in the business. Jerry and Elwood have never done a hard day's work in their life. Jerry, I understand, caught pure hell from the old man. Elwood was spared somewhat, because of his being an invalid. But old Silvio, dying, struck back at them."

Reached out from the grave, Lew thought. It's corny, maybe, he told himself, but it doesn't seem too corny to me. It's dynamite. Aloud he said, "But, Hazel—I mean, would there be any reason why she—"

"No. And that makes it the more frightening, Lew. She didn't figure at all in the will. There was no reason for her disappearing!"

Anything else Lew might have wanted to say was interrupted by rolling thunder. Once, twice. But it wasn't a day for thunder. Then it dawned on him. Someone outside had emptied a double-barrel shotgun.

CHAPTER II

THE backyard was indefinite in area, stretching to the field grown with scrub pines. Lew drew up short. Roger and Jerry Addington behind him and Valerie. A tall, rawboned man in overalls was a hundred yards back of the house, a shotgun loosely in his hands. He was looking upward, at the wheeling flight of a spiraling bird. The bird was winging away in the lowering twilight.

"It's Micah," Roger Addington bit out, "shooting at a damned turkey buzzard." His voice lifted, "Micah!"

The rawboned man turned, spat tobacco juice, ambled toward them. He appraised Lew with faded blue eyes under scraggly brows. "Howdy."

"Hello," Lew said. "What was the trouble?"

Micah shrugged his bony shoulders. "Just a buzzard. Funny thing. The day before yesterday and the day before that the buzzard circled over that field over there at exactly eleven o'clock in the morning. Then yesterday he didn't show. I waited around most all morning with my shotgun. Just now he came from the north, going to roost, I reckon. I had

my shotgun and tried to get 'im." He added:

"I don't like a buzzard. Just the word makes me shudder." His gangling frame rippled in an appropriate shudder.

"Very interesting," Jerry Addington said, "but you've got other things to do. This is Mr. Briggs. Take his bag up to one of the guest rooms. It's in the station wagon."

Micah nodded, moved away. Lew motioned Valerie back into the house with the others with a slight gesture of his head. As they turned toward the house, Lew fell in step beside Micah.

"Friend of Miss Valerie's?" Micah asked as they went toward the garage.

"That's right," Lew said. "She's upset a little. Her sister Hazel."

Micah opened the garage doors. "Yeah," his voice was perhaps a little tightened. "Mrs. Hazel. Always liked her, felt a little sorry for her. Don't blame her much for running out."

"Running out?" Lew watched the lines of Micah's face in the twilight.

"Roger wasn't a good husband, I guess. Anyhow, I wouldn't lay money on him making any woman happy. But he had a way with women. I guess he turned Mrs. Hazel's head. She sort of fell for Jerry once, you know."

"No," Lew said, "I didn't know."

Micah fumbled in the back of the station wagon. "It's a fact. Or so I've gathered from talk I've heard. Seems that Jerry was in Baltimore. He met Hazel when she was still Hazel Morris. Then he introduced her to his brother Roger. Wasn't long until Hazel and Roger were married."

"Roger was in business in Baltimore?"

"It's a fact. Some sort of importer. He went to Baltimore right after he married that Roberta Field gal in Columbia. That was about ten years ago. Roger and Roberta were divorced—she went to Reno about two years after their marriage. Roger ain't been back here in the state of South Carolina since then."

Lew's thoughts were clicking. He could recall no Addington importer in Baltimore, and he'd been a private dick in Baltimore for quite awhile. But one thing he remembered vaguely now that the impression of the Addington name had called it up out of his subconscious. About nine years ago an Addington and his wife had narrowly escaped indictment for sell-

ing bogus stock in a development company that had never developed. He wondered if it had been Roger and Roberta Addington.

"This Roberta Addington," he said, stepping back as Micah, grunting, pulled his bag out of the station wagon, "what was she like?"

"Couldn't tell you. She was with a show that hit Columbia. Roger was down there, met her one day, married her two days later, and went north. He's like that. He's rugged and looks sort of dull, but don't let it fool you."

"Thanks, Micah, I won't. And Micah—I I don't like buzzards either. It's the things they hunt that bothers me—dead things."

"You and me both," Micah's voice shuddered. "I thought maybe that buzzard that circled at eleven o'clock the day before yesterday and day before that might have spotted something. I looked all over that field, but I didn't find a thing."

Lew was aware that his breath was being let out slowly at the completion of that statement of Micah's.

He said, "I'll jaw with you some more, maybe later, Micah."

"Shore. It's a pleasure. They call me the biggest talker in Flandane County. I'll take your bag in now. I'll get that snooping maid, Vindy, to straighten a room for you."

BACK inside the house, Lew found the hallway deserted. He'd ambled around to the front while Micah had entered through the back. Lew stood pondering his next move. He was a man who could bide his time. He'd learned patience through the years. Detecting, his way, was the slow, remorseless gathering of facts and details, cloaking a crime like a growing shadow.

So far today he'd learned some very interesting things. Roger, the ladies' man. Elwood, the brooding invalid. A buzzard circling. Jerry, once in love with Hazel. He was sure now that she'd really disappeared, not of her own free will. Valerie's fears had grounds. And Lew had fears of his own. If Hazel were still alive, he'd have to keep her that way. Move cautiously. But every time he thought of Hazel still being alive, he remembered the slow, wheeling flight of a turkey buzzard . . .

Micah came clomping down the stairs. "Didn't find that Vindy anywhere. I guess she's snooping someplace. So I sort of straightened your room myself. It's the third on the left past the top of the stairs. That bloomin' Vindy!"

Lew stared over Micah's shoulder. Valerie was standing at the head of the wide stairway. Her rigid body seemed in the grip of an invisible net. With one hand she was motioning for Lew to send Micah on his way. With her other hand, she was pleading with frantic motions for Lew to come upstairs.

Still numbling about the laxity of Vindy, Micah shuffled down the hall. Without appearing to hurry, Lew took the stairs two at a time.

Val gripped his hand. Her fingers were icy. "In my room," she said. He followed as she went to a door and opened it. He was close behind her and they slipped inside.

It was a large bedroom, Val's things on the dressing table. A woman lay on the bed. She was sparrowlike. Her face was thin, shrewish with bone. She was staring at a lonely fly on the ceiling. The fly moved, but her eyes didn't. She had been clammed back across the bed and stabbed in the hollow of her throat with a finger-nail file that was definitely not the size file to be carried in a purse. The bed in the vicinity of her neck was gory.

For a long moment the only signs of life in the room were the fly buzzing lazily against the ceiling, the thin sound of Val's breathing, and Lew's soft motion as he slipped his arm about her shoulder.

"I—It's my nail file, Lew. It was on my dresser when I went out this afternoon. It's Vindy, Lew. She won't be making any more beds, will she?"

He pressed the hysteria out of her with the grip of his arm. "No, she won't be making any more beds."

"You—You see what it means, Lew?"

"Yes," he said, "I see." The Addingtons owned the county. The Addingtons were the law here. It wouldn't be too hard to trump up a motive. Hadn't the body been found in Val's room, stabbed with Val's nail file?

Vindy's blood was still seeping sluggishly. "She hasn't been dead long," Lew said. "Probably killed only minutes after Micah shot at the buzzard. Everyone had come back into the house from the backyard. Except Micah and me, that is. We

were getting my bag. Where were they, Val?"

"I—I don't know, Lew. When you and Micah turned toward the garage to get your bag out of the station wagon, I came in the house through the back way. I came upstairs and went to Hazel's room. I've looked the room over a dozen times. But I still hoped to find something. Then I came in here."

Lew lighted a cigarette, passed it to her, lighted another for himself. He watched her drag hard on the steady smoke.

He kept his voice calm. "Part of it is apparent. Vindy learned something or discovered something tangible. About Hazel, Val. Easy. Vindy was that kind, snooping, Micah said. She either came here in your room to tell you what she'd found or she was chased here after trying to test the value of whatever she'd found for blackmail. Then she was—was made like this."

"But what are we going to do, Lew?" He sensed, from her voice, the thin edge on which she was tottering. His throat knotted. He wanted to say things to her, soft, comforting. She'd been here, a stranger in this tomb, for four days wondering where her sister was, what had happened to her.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to make a boomerang out of Vindy. We'll let her catch her own killer." He crossed the room to a door. "This your closet?" She nodded, and he tried the knob. The closet was locked. "Good," he said, "nobody'll think anything of it—the closet being locked, I mean."

Her cottonlike face showed him that she understood. He said, "Chin up, kid. This takes nerve, but we can do it. You'll slip down to the linen closet for fresh covers for the bed. Don't let anyone see you. While you're gone I'll put Vindy in the closet, lock the door again. Then we'll go downstairs. We'll be smiling. We'll smile through dinner, you understand."

"The first thing the killer expects is to hear an outburst when Vindy is found. The next—if there is no outburst—is to see you shaken and wan at dinner. He'll get neither of his expectations. He'll meet a blank wall, a smiling Val, a Lew who apparently has seen nothing. Put yourself in his place. He's just murdered a person. He—"

"If I were in his place," Val said shak-

ily, "the suspense would drive me crazy."

"Exactly. He'll start to sweat. He'll begin to wonder. This room will take on a horrid fascination for him. And when he comes here—" Lew dropped a flat automatic on the bed—"you're going to be ready for him." His eyes clouded. "Or maybe I can't ask you to do this."

"You don't have to, Lew. If he comes, I'll take care of myself. I haven't the average woman's aversion to guns. What else can we do?"

He weighed it in his mind. There was not much else they could do, unless he wanted to see Val thrown behind bars. He'd be on hand even if she needed the gun. He'd lost many night's sleep on lesser jobs than this. He said, "Scram to the linen closet, then. This won't take over five minutes. We'll leave the room without a trace of Vindy." It was a long five minutes.

THE Addingtons had a good stock of wine, Lew decided at dinner, and the round-faced cook knew how to broil lamb chops to a turn. Lew casually mentioned Micah's opinion of buzzards and Vindy. When he laughingly breathed the maid's name, he watched for a change of expression, a flickering of an eyelash. He saw none. But one of them was a murderer.

The morbid clannishness of the Addingtons, the hollow coldness of the house swathed him like a cloak. Somewhere there was a girl named Hazel; upstairs in Val's closet was a maid named Vindy; in this room was a person with ice water in his veins.

"Vindy," Jerry laughed, his tall length hunched in his chair, "is probably the world's worst criminologist."

Luisa Shaw turned her almost Slavic face to Lew. "Vindy," she explained, "reads books. On How Criminals Are Caught."

Roger Addington raised his heavy face. "If I catch her snooping again, I'll show Vindy what happens after they are caught."

Elwood Addington brought his wheel-chair closer to the table. "You don't understand Vindy. She's a rare soul. She's the only person in this house who really enjoys those books in the library that the rest of us have never read."

Each of them had spoken of Vindy. And still there had not been the slightest flicker of an eyelash. But Lew relaxed

in his chair. Time, he thought. Give him time. The grain of uncertainty is in his mind. It will take a while for it to grow. A murderer is never afraid during his first few moments of elation at his success. Then he has time to think. He sees loose ends, and the loose ends become panic. But somehow the house and presence of these people whispered back to Lew that this time it would not be so. The only panic in this house was that panic bubbling in Val and beginning to stir within himself.

When dinner was over and they straggled out of the dining room, Lew held Val's arm lightly and walked down the hallway with her.

"I've one more errand outside," he whispered. "It won't take long. But be careful." He pressed her arm with his fingers, avoided her eyes because he was afraid his own gaze would return the things her eyes were saying, and went upstairs to his room. He opened his bag, reached beneath his folded shirts, and took out his spare gun. He slipped it in the waistband of his trousers, against his flat stomach.

The hallway was deserted when he came back down. He could hear the murmur of chatting voices in the living room. He went down the hallway, out the back door.

There was a light in a small, weather-beaten, clapboard building a few yards from the house. Lew went to it. It was a tool house of sorts. Micah was filing a drawing knife. He looked up as Lew entered.

"I'm still thinking about buzzards, Micah."

The lank man angled tobacco juice at a box of wood shavings. "How so?"

Lew seated himself on the edge of the workbench. "You said the bird was circling over the same spot day before yesterday, and the day before that at eleven in the morning."

"That's right," Micah nodded. "I noticed it the second day. I mean, when I saw the buzzard that second day I happened to think it was queer that he'd be there two days in a row. So I marked the time."

"That would be the two days after Hazel Addington disappeared."

Micah's brows corrugated.

"But the bird didn't come back this morning at eleven," Lew said.

"No," Micah said slowly.

Lew Briggs was a stiff statue on the workbench. "Where would the sun be in the sky at about that hour, Micah?"

Micah started, said softly, "What you figuring?"

"I'm thinking about a hole," Lew said. "A pretty deep hole. In any other position, the sun's rays angle over the hole, lighting only the rim, but at eleven in the morning, the sun is directly over the hole, throwing its rays to the bottom."

Micah's face had lost some of its color.

"A buzzard doesn't smell carrion," Lew said. "A buzzard sees it. That's why a buzzard circles for hours, to make sure the thing he has spotted isn't moving. Let's say we got a deep hole, Micah. Somebody drops a dead body into it. For some reason the somebody doesn't have a chance to cover the body right away.

"The next morning at eleven the sun shines directly into the hole revealing the contents of the hole to whatever eyes might be overhead. The turkey buzzard sees the body, circles over the hole until the sun has passed on, leaving the depths of the hole again in darkness.

"The same thing happens the next day, but the day after that—today—the buzzard doesn't circle because the somebody has had a chance to cover the hole."

Micah wiped oozing beads of moisture from his lined forehead. "There's an old well off yonder in the field near an old oak stump. The well was dug when the house here was first built, years ago. The well was used for a long time, but it ain't been lately."

"And it hasn't been filled in?"

"Huh," said Micah, "you didn't know old Silvio Addington! He just had a board cover made for the well. The same kind of cranky thing to do that caused him to put that part in his will so that his sons had to live here together eight months, being disinherited if any of them left."

Lew said, "Thanks, Micah," and slid off the workbench. He turned toward the door. Micah laid his hand on his arm. "You're gonna look in that well?"

Lew nodded.

"Then watch for the ghost walker, Mr. Briggs. That night Mrs. Hazel disappeared—I seen the walker then. Over in that field. I had been possum hunting and it was late. I was coming across the field

and seen this here dark figure. Skeeered me, it did. I come on in the house.

"Jerry was in the library reading, and Roger was in the kitchen, making him some coffee. I didn't see Luisa Shaw or Miss Valerie, but that walking figure was a man. That leaves just Elwood, and he's pinned in that wheelchair of course. That walking figure was nobody in that house!"

"May have been a tramp," Lew said.

"Well," Micah said, his eyebrows plainly saying that that suggestion was silly.

LEW found the old oak stump without difficulty. Near it, in the broom sedge field, he found a slightly sunken impression in the earth covered by an eight-foot square of hickory boards. Lew hesitated, reluctant.

Then he grasped the edge of the well cover, lifted it, grunting beneath its weight. He worked his way around, lifting the cover higher until it fell back with a sodden thud. Below Lew, a black hole, four feet across, yawned hungrily. He raked his sleeve across his face, fumbled in his pocket for his pencil flash. The wan finger of light inched down the red earthen sides of the hole.

The bottom was mounded with red earth, strewn with broom sedge and leaves. Then Lew's light touched the hand. It was limp, projecting from the mound of earth, its fingers curled in entreaty. Lew knew he'd found Hazel Addington.

He stood without moving, a slow wave of red claiming his mind. Then he heard the rustle of sedge behind him. He spun on his heels. The movement saved his life.

The gun intended for his head smashed through his upthrown arms, crashing into his collar bone. He jerked sideways with the pain, staggering. Staggering back. The world fell from beneath him and he was falling, the hard earth of the side of the well tearing loose the fingernails on one hand.

He hit the bottom of the fifteen foot drop, and his legs caved beneath him. He lay still a moment on the mound of soft earth and sobbed for breath. He worked his way to his knees, struggling against the singing in his head. He looked up.

Early night was a lighter shadow over the mouth of the well, but over that shadow a heavier shadow was creeping. Then

the heavier shadow seemed to hang a moment, then rush over the mouth of the well with a plop that reverberated. The lighter patch of night overhead was gone. The killer had replaced the heavy cover, sealing Lew in Stygian blackness at the bottom of the well.

For an instant he knew blind panic, the walls of the well pressing in on him, the blackness grinding his eyeballs. Then he thought of the girl under the mound of soft earth at his feet; he thought of the girl up there at the house. He'd promised himself he'd be on hand if she should need him.

He forced his thoughts into straight channels. Scaling the perpendicular walls was out of the question. Lew's only hope was to attract outside attention. He pulled his gun, raised it over his head, and squeezed the trigger.

The crash of the gun almost burst his head in the confines of the well. Lew was still seeing the flash of the gun in the darkness, his ears ringing, ten seconds after the last echo had died.

He waited. Nothing happened. The air was bad and would get worse. He fired again, endured the ear-ringing, the small avalanche of tiny clods that the reverberation of the gun brought down. Perspiration grew like clammy fungi on his face.

Then a new moon of early night sky took form at the rim of the well as the cover was raised. The cover fell back and Micah's voice quavered, "Mr. Briggs?"

"Yes," Lew said, "get a rope."

Micah's head disappeared. Lew pressed against the side of the well, watching the mouth of it, prepared to start shooting if anyone got fancy ideas such as tossing stones down on him.

Minutes later Micah reappeared. A rope slapped its way down the well. Lew caught the end, hung on, climbing with his toes as Micah hauled him out. Micah helped him over the edge of the well.

"After you'd left the tool house and been gone a few minutes," Micah said, "I had a hankering to sneak out and see if you'd found anything. I heard your shot."

"You see anyone else?" Lew brushed red dirt from his clothes. He wondered if his collarbone where the killer's gun had struck was fractured.

"Nary a soul," Micah said. He ventured a look at the well. "Mrs. Hazel down there?"

Lew nodded. "And somebody wanted me to join her."

"There just ain't no reason for it—her being down there, I mean. There's about eight million dollars' worth of reason if it was Elwood, Roger, or Jerry. But not her."

"There's always a reason," Lew said. He turned, faced Micah squarely. "You can keep your lip buttoned. You can forget this. Only you and I and a killer know she's down there. He's beginning to sweat. He's tried to get me out of the way once. He'll try again."

"You mean," Micah gulped, "that you're gonna make buzzard bait outta yourself?"

"We'll not put it that way," Lew said, wondering how it could be put any other way.

CHAPTER III

FROM his window, Lew could see a cotton field, like snow when the moon cleared the clouds, over in the distance. The house about him was still. He looked at his wristwatch in the moonlight. Ten minutes of one.

It seemed much later than that. He'd spent eternities lying clothed on his bed, waiting for someone to try to kill him. Lew's gaze drifted along the lawn. He leaned forward, his hands splayed on the window sill. A hundred yards away from the house the dark shadow of a man was moving, taking a midnight stroll. Lew remembered Micah's words. He was seeing, he knew, Micah's ghost walker.

Lew paused long enough to tie his shoe laces, then he slipped into the hall. He inched his way along, paused at Roger Addington's doorway. The creak of a chair, Roger's steps.

Lew eased back, made his way to Jerry's door. Contented snores rattled against the door panels. Lew stood flat-footed in the middle of the hall. He'd been positive that the ghost walker had been Jerry or Roger. He'd been wrong.

On a sudden hunch, he crept down the hall, stopped at a door near the stairs. The room beyond the door was silent. Lew touched the knob and the door swung. Moonlight shafted into the room. Moonlight touched a gaunt wheelchair. The chair was empty. With a shock, Lew realized that the figure strolling on the lawn

was Elwood Addington, the problem lad who couldn't walk.

A hinge creaked down the hall and Lew eased in the shadows of Elwood's door. A woman in a frothy white garment closed a door, came down the hallway. She went to Roger Addington's door, opened it, slipped inside. In the brief flareup of light when she'd opened the door Lew recognized Luisa Shaw, Roger's secretary.

The hallway was quiet again as he went to Luisa Shaw's room. She'd left the door unlocked, a dim lamp burning beside the bed. Without losing a moment, he began a search. Through drawers, her dressing table. A tan bag reposed on the floor of the closet. He opened it, pawed through the bag, found an envelope at the bottom, his hands drawing up short.

He took the envelope out, opened it. It contained a newspaper clipping from a northern paper that Silvio Addington, textile tycoon, had passed on. The date was four months ago. Then Lew's breath whistled through his teeth as he opened a legal-looking document. It was a marriage license issued to Roger Addington and Roberta Field ten years ago.

Luisa Shaw said from the doorway, "Just what do you think you are doing?"

Lew ignored her question. "You can drop the act. You're not a secretary and your name isn't Luisa Shaw. You're Roberta Field Addington."

She saw the papers in Lew's hand. "And what if I am?"

"I'm just hunting a motive for murder. You learned that old Silvio was dead four months back. He was a nation-wide figure and papers gave his death notice. You knew the terms of his will, the laws of the State of South Carolina, you had a Nevada divorce, and you came back. That's motive, Roberta Field Addington."

She laughed. "You talk like an orangoutang."

"Maybe. But it's straight talk, lady. The State of South Carolina has a funny law. It recognizes absolutely no grounds for divorce whatsoever. In addition, for the last couple or three years all states have become wary of divorces granted in other states, because of the rising wartime divorce rate. More than one divorce granted in Nevada—Reno, where you got yours eight years ago—has been declared invalid. For in any divorce action the plaintiff must not only establish residence

but commit himself to domicile as well. Residence is an act—domicile an intention of making your home in the state where the divorce is granted.

"The past eight years have proved that you have no intention of making Nevada your home. So with all these factors—especially that South Carolina law—you knew you could crack that divorce. You knew the terms of the will, that Roger would have to remain here eight months—which would make him a resident of the state—if he expected to inherit his share of eight million. So you simply threatened him with bigamy, knowing he'd pay off, for he could leave this place under no circumstances without losing his inheritance.

"But Hazel found out, wouldn't play ball because she was too decent. So she had to be killed. Vindy also. A pity Vindy was such a snooper. Or maybe she didn't know she was up against a hardened criminal. You were in on those phony stock deals Roger pulled in Maryland years ago. Crime was nothing new to you."

He'd followed her slow drifting toward the closet too closely with his eyes. The door slammed open and Roger Addington said, "It was nice eavesdropping, Lew, but it's all wet."

THIS was what he'd played for, a killer to watch him, make a break. But it really was all wet. The revolver in Roger's hand made it that way.

Lew said, "I knew it had to be you, a man. A man to carry Hazel's body, after she was too decent to have your kind of marriage. But when you'd put her in the well, you were interrupted by one of Elwood's nocturnal strolls; you didn't have a chance to cover the body immediately. The buzzard saw things and began circling.

"That was the first break against you—a psychopathic brother. Placed in his wheelchair years ago, by an accident, Elwood found it damn pleasant to be waited on hand and foot. The kind of labor that old Silvio demanded terrified him. So he just didn't mention it to anyone when he regained use of his legs. He was outthinking his slave-driving father. He got in your way the night you carried your wife's body to the well and dropped her in."

"You'll have a hell of a time proving that," Roger said.

"No," Lew said. "For I won't prove it on you. I'll pin it on her—Roberta Field Addington. She's not an Addington by blood. The sheriff won't have to soft-pedal with her. She'll break. She'll prove it on you, Roger."

"No!" Roberta's voice was a muffled scream. "I didn't do it! You can't do that!"

"I've seen it done lots of times, sister. It won't be so hard."

"I won't let you!" she screamed. "He did it! Roger did! I—"

"Shut up!" Roger commanded. "He hasn't got a thing."

"The hell I haven't. I've got a woman who'll yell her head off to save her skin." Lew didn't feel all the heartiness he put in his laugh.

Roger and Roberta looked at each other. She was reading things in his eyes. She mouthed, "I won't talk, Roger. I won't! I—"

A shadow had drifted out of the hall to the doorway. The flat automatic Lew had given her was very steady in Valerie's hand. Roberta screamed. Roger spun toward the doorway.

Lew hit him once, high on the cheek. Roger staggered, jerked the gun up. Lew flung himself to one side. A gun coughed, the crack of an automatic, and Roger slammed against the wall, settled slowly to the floor. He clutched his shoulder and blood trickled through his fingers. Lew kicked Roger's gun across the room.

Roberta sank to her knees. "I'll talk. I never intended it to lead to murder. I..."

Valerie let the automatic fall slowly. She stumbled to Lew and he slipped his

arm about her. She said, "Luisa—Roberta talked too loud, too shrill. I wasn't sleeping, not with Vindy in the closet. I heard Roberta, came across the hall. I—Hazel's—Hazel's dead?"

"Yes," Lew said softly. He knew the house was waking to the sound of that shot. They'd be coming in here in a moment.

"And you—" Valerie whispered. "You're thinking that you'll leave soon, tonight."

Lew Briggs thought of the men he'd beaten, teeth set, when he could get information no other way. He thought of the snooping he'd done when a wife or husband wanted a divorce, dirty snooping. He thought of the reputation he'd built because it was good for business. "Yes," he said. "I'll be leaving."

"You ran away from me once," she said. "I'm throwing myself at you now, can you see?"

"I can see." But it did no good, this crystal-clear seeing. He was seeing that it could never be.

"Oh, you fool!" she said. "Hazel married a man with a solid background, from a good family with wealth. A man whose family even told everybody in a whole county how to live. And where is—where is Hazel?"

Lew Briggs was as rigid as a block of ice. He looked at Roger Addington's twisted, frightened face. The face of solid background. The face of a murderer. A man didn't have to be poor to be a rat, just as he didn't have to be rich. Lew Briggs held the girl tight with his arm. His eyes wary on Roger and Roberta. Lew touched the girl's lips with his own.



Fry-By-Nights

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Alvin Hinkey, the sleuth New York could do without, took leave of absence to go fishing. And when he helped to hook a finless cadaver, Alvin neatly netted himself for crookdom's biggest poor-fish fry.

Sgt. Louis Garfunkle
c/o Postmaster, N. Y. C.

DEAR LOUIE: Got your letter and showed it to Eva, the dame you took to the steamfitter's ball at Dorgan's Hall on West Eleventh. She says to tell you she lost your APO number, also the ring you give her, and to send another on, or both. She was wearing a new fur coat although she says she hasn't worked in two months. But I wouldn't draw no conclusions from that as you need all your morale such as it is.

But we were fighting a war too, me and Hambone, and the war against the criminal elements goes on. I'll prove it by telling you what happened to me and

Hambone one week-end not so long ago.

We both have some time coming to us. So we decide to go roughing it for a week-end up in the Catskills. We are in the precinct house saying good-by to the boys when in comes word that some tough characters have held up the cashier of the Grummit Girdle Company up in Harlem and have anteloped with close to fifty grand. The bandits wore masks and there were three of them, which is all eye witnesses know. The cashier, Elsmore Huride, was slapped a little too vigorously with the hind end of a Roscoe, and his rites are planned for this coming Thursday.

"Well, Alvin," Hambone says. "It looks like we do not get our outing. Protecting

the home front always comes first."

"Don't forget to send us a postcard," a big fathead of a lieutenant of detectives says. "And if you two slugs go hunting I will be surprised if you even catch wet feet. This department needs a vacation too, from the likes of you."

"Awright," Hambone says, nettled. "Let them do it alone and see how smart they think they are. I can take a hint, Alvin. Anyways, it is a good chance for me to give you pointers on detective work around a big fireplace. Think of these bums gettin' shot at."

"I am sure lucky," I says with one cheek full of tongue. "I never thought I would ever git a chance like this, Hambone. Not many do."

"Oh, it's nothin', Alvin," Noonan says. Imagine the big illiterate, Louie! The only arrest he ever made legitimate was of a citizen for assault. That was because he was the victim and couldn't help seeing the guilty party before both of his lamps were closed.

"We'll start bright and early, Alvin."

"Early, anyway," I retort, but the crack is lost on Hambone. I am quite depressed over not getting the chance to help catch the monkeys who did the Grummit Girdle job, as I was just getting hot in this detective business and am sure I know three times as much as Noonan already. Which is not half enough of course to be considered just ordinary.

ME AND Hambone hop a rattler at the Grand Central Station with tickets in our pockets good to drop us out at a very small community, which is only a whistle stop half the year and is called Gideon. It is not where they distribute the Bibles, Louie. There is an old native with alfalfa on his chin that grows down to his belt buckle. He is sitting in a light truck and ogling us.

"Going my way?" Hambone queries.

"Yep, it's playin' in town. Took the wife last night, Buster. That Crosby is a dinger. Bus goes in at—"

"Look," I says. "We are looking for a likely place to put up for three days, Junior. Not too steep and near a place to fish. We need a change and a rest."

"Yep, went to Boston fer one oncet," the rural antique squeaks. "Them big hotels got the change an' them rest'rants got the rest. He-e-e!"

"Er—as I was sayin'," I says.

"Why not stay with me an' the old babe?" the rustic replies. "Vittels ain't bad an' the beds have springs in 'em, so's you don't havta go downstairs when you git thirsty. By Godfrey, I'm in the groove t'night, boys!"

I almost tell the hick it should be the grave as he must have been all of eighty, Louie. "Let's take it, Alvin," Hambone says. "It is the only jalopy I see near this depot. And it looks like rain."

"Better make up your minds, boys," the hayshaker says. "Fore I start a'goin'."

We hop in and ride to a tired looking farm. Even the roosters are lying down. "My name's Jeb Dewberry," the hick offers. "What's yourn?"

We tell him and follow him into the house. An old doll as full of wrinkles as a balled-up sheet of paper asks Jeb where he found us.

"Just a couple of idle roomers, maw. Don't pay no attention to 'em, he-e-e!"

"I ain't goin' to stand much more of this," Hambone says.

We eat supper. If my ma ever cooked like Mrs. Dewberry, I would have left home sooner. Then we go to bed. They have hard slats and a mattress as thin as a waffle stretched over them. Hambone plops down in one and almost breaks his. I mean slats, Louie. There are holes in the screens a buzzard could fly through. All kinds of insects come in in formations and peel off at us. "Happy vacation," I says to Noonan. He opens his bag and plunges a hand in and then lets out a yowl that would have made him chief in any Comanche tribe. I see he has a mousetrap on his finger.

"That little punk, LeRoy," Noonan yelps. "Always pullin' stuff on me. Why I had to have a nephew like him!"

"Why, I think it was quite thoughtful of LeRoy," I says. "We could expect mice here, Hambone."

Me and Hambone go fishing the next night. The lake is an oversized pond with old willow stumps sticking out of it. The mosquitoes are thicker than Noonan's head. And fireflies come in hordes.

"I don't believe they are lightnin' bugs," Hambone says. "They are the big musketeers carryin' lanterns to git a better bite out of us, Alvin. When I think we could have been helping look for them badmen instead of suffering like this—it was your idea. I got a good

mind to push you in and hold you under the third time."

WHEN we get back to the farmhouse, there are two visitors there, and they look like very nice citizens. Dewberry introduces us to them. They are from the city and have a log cabin two miles down the road. Their names are H. Busbee Sprott and Mortimer Culp. Like me and Hambone, they have come to forget the hustle and bustle of the big city for a spell. Sprott is a banker and Culp a chiropractor. We tell them we are detectives. One laughs.

"I ain't kiddin'," Hambone says, and shows his badge. "Honest."

"Well, well," Culp says. "You never know, do you?"

"This is my assistant, Alvin," Noonan says. "I am trainin' him."

I hold my tongue, Louie. We get to talking about the city and books, movies and plays, and things. I says I wish I had seen that musical called *Kansas*. Sprott says he saw it. Ma Dewberry pipes up, "You did? Oh, I wisht I could show some ticket stubs to certain old riddies in this town. I went to the city last week and made out I saw it, but they won't believe me. By the way, Jeb, that hired girl is comin' tomorrer. Quite a looker."

"Hmm," Hambone says. I says not to forget he is a dumb flatfoot and not a travelin' salesman.

Sprott fishes out his wallet and pulls two ticket stubs from it. "Here you are, Mrs. Dewberry. Lucky I kept them stubs. Best seats in the orchestra, and right on the aisle."

"Well, I'm all beat out!" Jeb says. "Maw, they sure will elect you president of the Every Other Wednesday Night Womans Arts an' Handiwork Society."

Culp and Sprott get up. "Got to be goin', friends. Up here for our health, you know. In bed every night at ten sharp. Glad to meet you, Noogan."

"Noonan," Hambone says.

"You too, Sninkey!"

I let it pass. I follow Hambone up to our room. "I am sure anxious to meet the hired girl," I says.

"May the best man win," Noonan says. "They had a newspaper down there and I got a gander at it, Alvin. It says the cops got a clue to work on. Ha, the commissioner has to say somethin'

to earn his gilt badge, don't he?"

"Yeah. I bet he wishes you was back to help him out, Hambone."

"You're not kiddin'," the big cluck says, and he should have known I was, Louie.

We get a wire from the department the next morning. Noonan yelps, "Didn't I tell you, Alvin?" then rips it open. It says to stay at least a week as we have no idea how that helps them solve the case. Hambone goes into a kind of tantrum. Ma Dewberry hustles to the family medicine chest and brings him a bottle.

"Take this, Mr. Noonan," she says. "It always helped a hired man we had once who had epilepsy."

"Take double the dose, Hambone," I says. "If you are that bad as a slewfoot, what does it make your assistant, huh? Don't tell me. Let's go fishin' again this eve, huh? We could catch somethin' maybe. Fish is good for brains, and you no doubt have never been near a fish market."

We get all slicked up for breakfast at eight A. M. The new hired girl is there when we put on the nosebag. Hambone puts corn syrup on his eggs and salt in his coffee and does not notice it. The dame is quite plump and has big googly eyes and corn-colored hair. She asks do I want more of everything, and even takes Hambone's wheatcakes out from under his nose and hands them to me.

"You don't look as well fed as him," she says. I got goose pimples all over, Louie. She asks do I like movies as there is one over by Phoenicia and she has an old flivver.

"You stop leadin' her on, Alvin!" Noonan says. "You don't even know her name."

"Asphodel Entwistle," the country cupcake snickers. "Wa'n't that awful of me? You must think I am terrible."

"Er—I like people to come right out and git acquainted," I says. "Have you got a friend for Noonan?"

The doll nods. Hambone says he was afraid she had and asks does she have a harelip.

"Of courst not," Asphodel sniffs.

NOONAN'S date proves to be the fattest babe in the county. She had to sit in Noonan's lap most of the time,

as there is not room for both of them in the back seat of the Model T. When we are finished with the ride, Hambone looks like an old mattress that was wedged against the cushions. All of his cigars are mashed flat as lampwicks. But I did not write you to tell of my love life. Wait until I tell you what happened.

It is next night about eight P. M. that we go out in the old flat-bottom boat and look for a likely place to fish. The mosquitoes are so thick they sound like an organ is playing. They must have found a whetstone to sharpen up their spears with. We fish for an hour with no luck until I feel a very violent tug on my line. I yell to Hambone I have a big sucker, when he screeches something fearful.

"Don't be afraid of it, you sissy," I yip. "Git the gaff an' pull it in close to the boat. What you gapin' at?"

"Huh? If it—it—it is a fish, Alvin," Noonan says. "It has a gold tooth an' is wearin' a necktie. I believe it—oh, it couldn't be, but it is. Alvin, you have hooked a corpse!"

I nearly fall out of the boat, Louie. I get on my knees and peer at my catch. Hambone is right for once. It is a cadaver and is baring its teeth at me. "I feel faint," I says. "Imagine meetin' a stiff here."

"Alvin, we have discovered a murder, maybe. We should call some cops."

"What do we look like, barbers?" I sniff, still weak in the meridian. "I have not heard the Dewberries say anything about missing persons or a suicide, and they know everything, even that their neighbor's cow is expecting. You row, Hambone, and I'll tow the corpse."

Louie, it is a horror movie setting Dracula would have balked at walking into. The mist is as thick as chicken gravy and owls start hooting. A loon howls, and it is not Hambone.

We get the cadaver ashore and case it, using a flashlight. The citizen has not been away from the world too long. Rigor mortis has set in. It is a well-dressed corpse and about your age. He has been shot as nobody should have three eyes. Hambone says we should really call some cops. I retort that he would hire a guy to decorate a room if he was an interior decorator.

"Look, stupid," I says. "We have a

murder of our own and have the laugh on the wise guys in the department. Let's solve this crime."

"Awright, so watch how I work, Alvin. Play the flashlight on the stiff. Look, they removed everythin' from his pockets and the labels off his clothes. Alvin. That is a favorite trick with crooks."

"Imagine!" I exclaim, then hear something. "Did you hear a twig snap, Hambone?"

"Nope, Alvin. Stop bein' nervous. Look, I got my gat here." Hambone takes out the Roscoe and puts it on a stump. We keep going over the corpse.

Finally I find something in the watch-pocket of the remains. I put the light on it and see it is a theater ticket stub. "Boy, what a break," I says.

Hambone scoffs. "We will contact every theater for miles around and ask ushers did they see this citizen attend a show. I didn't think you'll ever be a good detective. Give the stub to Mrs. Dewberry as she is savin' them. Alvin, where is the stiff's hat?"

"Huh? Maybe he hung it up somewhere just before he was rubbed out," I sniff. "How do you know he wore one?"

"You can't overlook the littlest detail. Alvin, like I always tell you. We got to find his hat in case he wore one to the scene of the crime. Let's git in the boat and row around the pond."

Hambone is going to walk right off without his gun. I pick it up and start to tell him I have it, when I suddenly change my mind. I will teach the big ox a lesson this time, I tells myself. "Hambone, there is something about this ticket—"

"Oh, shut up" Hambone says. "Stop makin' out you got a clue."

"I'm sorry," I snap.

LOUIE, the luck of that Noonan sometimes. After we take one turn around the pond, we bisect the place and Hambone does find a hat. We row ashore. I play the flash on the chapeau. Noonan digs into the sweatband of the hat and comes up with part of a sheet of note paper. The water has soaked some of it away. Hambone stabs a finger at the writing.

"There, look what I found, Alvin. It goes to show what a detective can do by real seductive methods and not be

slashed. Read that writin' there."

I do. It says:

Henrietta Sickle. Leonidas Fallow. These two people came to me this day. They threat—

"And it is addressed to the chief of police somewheres around here," Hambone chirps in triumph. "The Dewberries know everybody."

"It looks like you are on the right track for once," I says to Hambone, but I am not forgetting the ticket stub, Louie. It cost three bucks, thirty, but I do not tell Noonan. We hurry to the farm and barge in. Hambone says we found a corpse, the big-mouth, Mrs. Dewberry nearly swoons.

"Don't you dast bring it in here," she growls.

"We ain't," Hambone says. "Do you know a Henrietta Sickle anywheres near here?"

Mrs. Dewberry drops her lantern jaw in her hands and thinks but not too long. "Himm, I know now. She is a brazen hussy who has had two husbands already an' me havin' to be content with one like Jeb. Lives over in Phoenicia. Why?"

"It is all I want to know. Mr. Dewberry, in the name of the law, I must have your flivver!" Hambone says. "I am on my way to that town to make an arrest. See the papers tomorrow!"

"Hey!" I says.

"Sorry, Alvin," Noonan says. "This takes a cool head. An assistant would only be in the way. I got my Roscoe with me if they put up a battle!"

"All right for you, Noonan!" I snap. "You will get a big surprise, I'll bet!"

"My, he is a brave man," Mrs. Dewberry says. "Just think, Jeb, we are watchin' a big detective work not just readin' one of them whodunits. Maybe we will be mentioned in the city papers an' will get our pitchers took. Better let me press the blue serge, paw."

I feel guilty just as Hambone drives out of the farmyard. I rush out and holler at him, but it is too late. Louie, I get scared and full of remorse, as maybe I am sending him to certain death. There goes Hambone, and here I am with his cannon in my back pocket. I asks myself what gets into a man at times. Then I replies to myself and says may-

be they will aim at his dome and nothin' can prove fatal.

I go back into the house and sit down. Jeb says, "How many big cases has Mr. Noonan solved, huh?"

"Offhand," I says, "I couldn't say. He has been in on many. Have you got the theater stubs, Mrs. Dewberry? The ones that city fellow give you?"

"Yep. I won't never part with them."

"I'd like to take a look at the pasteboards if you don't mind," I says as a matter of fact. "I never went to no swell show like *Kansas*. Do you mind?"

"Nope, long as you give 'em back, Mr. Kinkey." She goes upstairs, and soon comes down again. She hands me the ticket stubs. The ones Sprott gave her are B-5 and B-7. The one I have in my pocket, Louie, is B-9. It is the same color and has the name of the same theater. I push air out of my lungs and swallow hard.

"Er—thanks, Mrs. Dewberry," I says. "I found this and thought it might match and you'd have three. But it is just a movie stub, is all. Well, I've had quite a day an'—what was that?"

"Thought I heard somethin' outside the window," Jeb says. "Better take a look, huh?"

The hayshaker goes to the door and opens it up. Who are standing out on the porch but Sprott and Culp. But they no longer resemble big tired business men. Culp is pointing a very ugly looking bang-bang right at me. Sprott has another diminutive howitzer unlimbered just in case.

"**OKAY**, Buster!" Culp says. "So you stumbled over a stiff. So you got that ticket stub that tells you he went to the same show with us once! You are a flatfoot as I recall. Well, just in case you have found out more'n we think, we're takin' over this joint while we erase certain characters who could send us to a hot squat. Too bad, but what more could we get for three murders, Albie?"

"You got somethin' there," Sprott says and moves into the Dewberry kitchen. "Nobody is goin' to cheat us out of spendin' a winter in Florida, Spud. It is the first time I ever had close to sixty grand an'—"

"So you admit it!" I says, wonderin' if my voice had changed for the

second time, Louie. "You are two cold-blooded assassins and you won't git away with—"

I see a chance and go for Hambone's Roscoe. I pull the trigger. A stream of water hits Culp right where a bullet would have liquidated him!

The character named Sprott is about to shoot but starts laughing. That little punk, LeRoy, Louie! He has switched on Hambone. Culp does not laugh very long and says for all of us to gather in one corner of the room until they figure out what kind of death we should get. Clubby, huh, Louie?

Then Asphodel comes down from her room. Sprott tips his hat and says, "My, my. This will be a massacre, Spud. I wished we could afford not to make her a corpse. She has it all over my last babe. But say la gare, huh?"

"Why, they have guns," the doll says. "They are playin' tricks, Mr. Hickley."

"Ha ha," I push out. "What you've missed, as they are a scream! I have laughed so much my knees rattle. Look, all killers git caught so what makes you think you can duck the cops forever? My pal will be back soon an'—"

"No kiddin'. We saw him drivin' toward Phoenicia and stopped him. Said he was going to make an arrest. We'll be done before he gets back, haddock face," Spud Culp grins.

Albie Sprott says, "We'll knock off the dames first so's they won't have ta stand watchin' the male jerks take it. Then we burn the joint down—"

"They m-must be f-foolin'," Asphodel says, I ask her to convince me. If I was granted a last wish, I tell myself, I would ask for little LeRoy's neck in my hands. Only Hambone could be an uncle to such a twerp. Don't ever believe there are no gremlins, Louie. It sure looks as if I would be the late Alvin Hinkey come rooster-crowing time.

"You see," Spud says. "Me an' Albie wasn't takin' chances you two gees could be dumb as you look. That is impossible. We kept our eyes peeled on you. We was peekin' in the window watching you match up them stubs. Seein' they all belonged together you figured three of us went to the show, but where was the third character, huh? So you found a corpse who should have been alive and with his two pals

if everythin' was on the up an' up, huh? There was three guys held up the Grummit Girdle Company. You begin to add up, pal. Just as you was gettin' the answer, in we come. Right or wrong?"

"That is the upshot of it," I admit.

"An' it means we git shot up," Dewberry says. You have to admit that is giving out with the old corn, Louie, even though it is a safe bet the hayshaker will never plant another crop.

"Look, Babe," Albie says to Asphodel. "We wanta eat as we can't never do jobs like we got to do on an empty stomach. Make it meat, see?"

"Don't you dare cook them pork chops," Mrs. Dewberry says. "They are for our dinner tomorrow an'—"

They have very nasty laughs, Albie and Spud. Spud says, "The old doll is quite a diehard, huh? Tomorrow, she says!"

It certainly looks like a stalemate, Louie. Here I have got a water pistol handy to beat down two bona fide Betsies. Asphodel gets scared for the first time and hotfoots it to the icebox and brings in the red points. She puts a skillet on. Albie and Spud lick their chops.

Soon the skillet is sizzling and the tantalizing aroma of frying porker permeates the kitchen. Then I remember why my Aunt Clytie has a scar on her chin. I pick up the water pistol and apparently eye it ruefully. "Tough break, Jerk," Albie says.

I MEASURE the distance from me to the frying pan with my dome. Although I am not fat, I figure to get what I have on my bones pulled out of the pyre. That was sharp, hey, Louie? I am a desperate man and try to act savvy fair as Asphodel takes the chops out of the skillet with a fork. Spud and Albie crowd the stove and sniff at the aroma, all the time keeping us covered. The frying pan is sizzling hot as I pull the trigger of that little squirt, of LeRoy's persuader and find it has a big squirt left in it.

It is a bull's eye! The water lights right in the skillet. There is an awful sizzling and spattering sound. Hot fat sprays the rough boys. Albie lets out a blood-curdling yell and lets go of the Roscoe. Spud clamps both paws to his

pan and jumps half way to the ceiling.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Dewberry make with everything short of mayhem, as I dive for a loose cannon and retrieve it. The hayshaker hits Sprott with a copy of Dr. Phineas Gassaway's *Family Physician* or *Help Yourself Until the Doctor Comes*. Mrs. D. whangs the other criminal person over the pate with a bottle of buttermilk.

Asphodel puts down the pork chops quite nonchalantly and then picks up the coalhod and crams it down over Sprott's noggin. Then she rushes to get an old musket hanging up over the Dutch oven. I yell at the chick.

"We got the beachhead established," I says. "Let's take the crooks alive to find where is the loot, Sister!"

"And one for the show!" Mrs Dewberry says, and crooks Culp over the shins with a stick of stovewood.

Louie, we tie up the two dishonest characters and Dewberry rings up the town constable. Mrs. Dewberry sends Asphodel downstairs for a jug of elderberry wine. "We'll need a snort after that rat chase, Mr. Skinkey," she says. "Whew! Remind me to pay up the rest of the money on that burial lot, Jeb. By Godfrey, they don't bury on instalments."

We swig the home brew, Louie. It is stuff that lifts your hair off and sets it back in place again. I spill a little of mine and the scatter rug starts smoking. "Here's mud in your eye," the old doll says, and takes a fourth wallop. We thought we was two-fisted drinkers, Louie.

A car comes in the yard an hour later and we run out, but it is not the constable. It is Hambone Noonan pulling in on three flat tires. He is as miserable looking as eleven cents worth of chopped dogmeat. He gets out of the old Nipper and shuffles over.

"Alvin," Noonan says. "Why do things happen to me? I could fall into a freezer of ice cream and come out scalded to death. It looked like a cinch but what do you think? That was a hat belonged to a parson in town. He went fishin' an' lost it. He is absent-minded and makes notes to himself, he says. So he made one and put it in his hat. To remind him to write the chief of police about the Sickie doll and that cluck Leonidas Fallow. To tell him that his

daughter threatened to run off an' marry Leonidas if he refused to do it, which he did. If it was planned by my worst enemy—an' I lost my gun, Alvin."

"Here it is," I says. I hand him the water pistol. "LeRoy made a switch, and I am goin' to buy the little twerp ten ice cream sodas when I see him again."

"That little runt—I'll personally break off his arm and beat him over the head, Alvin! I'll—" Noonan's eyes bulge out. "Who you got tied up, Alvin? It is Sprott and Culp. Why—I—"

"The citizens who knocked off the Grummit Girdle payroll," I says. "That theater ticket stub tripped them, Hambone. Also because they insisted on havin' pork chops before murderin' us all and settin' the house on fire to hide all evidence, so's they could spend their ill-gotten gains in some winter resort an'—"

"Hold it, Alvin," the lug says and grabs hold of me. "Drive by a little slower, huh? You said—"

I repeated it so even Hambone can understand. "I'll be a great detective someday if I stick with you," I says sourly. "Alongside of you, a baboon would look good with a magnifyin' glass in his hand. Let's go in and ask the tough boys where the lettuce is cached."

"Poor Mr. Noonan needs some elderberry wine," Mrs. Dewberry says. She pours him a glass. Hambone takes it and sets it down on the table next to another glass. When he picks it up and takes a big gulp, he learns he has drunk bluing for Mrs. Dewberry's next big wash by mistake. It is not one of Hambone's good days, Louie, not that he ever had one mentally. Mrs. Dewberry and Asphodel suddenly realize how close they were to having to take up or let down the hems of Celestial kimonas. They have relapses and go upstairs to pick up some marbles.

"Hambone," I says. "It is time you made yourself useful. So you guard these two characters until me and Mr. Dewberry go and pick up the corpse delecti."

"Sure, Alvin," Noonan says sheepishly. We go down, pick up the corpse and bring it back. It takes us about a half hour. When we arrive in the yard,

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Rip Tide Boomerang

By Ralph Berard



There was no doubt that his half-brother was out to kill him, even if Don Blandy couldn't prove it. And Don had to figure a way to liquidate the murder plotter that wouldn't boomerang into a hot-seat sentence.

THE evening sun was still warm where Don Blandy lay in his swim suit on the soft sand. He was leaning back against a big drift log which protected his bare back from the sun's direct rays, and he had stuck on a ridiculous old-fashioned straw hat of Marion's to shade his face and eyes.

He was half asleep when a huge fly buzzed past his ear. Subconsciously, he raised his arm, swatted at the fly, then ran his hand under the sloppy brim of the hat, raising it a little.

The whistle of a bullet startled him. He heard the sharp snap of a rifle. A smarting tingle of pain stabbed at the knuckles of his hand beneath the hat. The hat jerked upon his head.

Don's first reaction was anger. Some careless fool was shooting wildly along the beach. He barely controlled himself

from leaping up as another shot sounded. This time he heard the bullet plump into the solid log behind him.

Another shot whistled overhead. Don pulled his head lower, realizing with meager comfort that though the log protected him temporarily, to move from its shelter might mean being struck by a bullet.

He looked at his hand. The bullet had scraped the knuckles barely enough to draw blood. After a moment of thought, he realized well enough who was doing the shooting.

Don had a half-brother, Jeddy. Twice before Jeddy had tried to kill him. Evidently Jeddy had been watching for Don's head to come above the log. When the buzz-fly had caused him to raise the hat, Jeddy had thought it was Don's head coming up and had sighted carefully.

intent on murder. Then Jeddy had gone on firing at the log to create the argument that he was target practicing as he had done several times before along the beach. Killing Don was to be accidental.

Don lay crouched in the sand while several more shots whistled over. He was a slender chap, the only child of his father's second marriage to the fine, upright woman who had been Don's mother. His half-brother, Jeddy, was the offspring of his father's first marriage with a woman whose past had never really come to light. It was whispered she had deserted Don's father shortly after Jeddy's birth and finally met death in a gun battle in some eastern city where she had become a moll for a gang of veggs.

Don's parents had left a fifty-thousand dollar estate. Five thousand of it left to Jeddy had been spent in a few wild months. Don's father's will provided that in case of Don's death the balance of the estate was to be divided equally between Jeddy and Don's wife, Marion. Meantime, Don was charged with the responsibility of caring for any shortage in Jeddy's immediate financial needs and the half-brother had insisted on living in the family household. It was a hell of a mess to be left in. But it represented Don's father's dying wish to do what was right by the son of his first ill-conceived marriage. There was nothing Don could do but make the best of it.

AN HOUR after the shooting stopped, Don walked into the little beach cabin where they were spending their summer vacation. Jeddy was lounging in a comfortable chair. At sight of Don a startled expression crossed the half-brother's dark features. Marion, her face flushed and worried-looking, turned eagerly toward her husband.

"Oh, Don!" she exclaimed, "we didn't know what had happened to you."

Don kept his eyes intently on his half-brother's face. "Jeddy wasn't calling his shots," he explained evenly. "He's been shooting at me."

Jeddy feigned an uncomprehending frown. "Shooting at you? What do you mean?"

Don shrugged. He knew how totally useless it would be to accuse Jeddy of anything. He felt certain that until this very moment Jeddy had thought him

lying dead behind the log. He hadn't had the courage to approach the log in the pretense of checking his marksmanship by the bullet holes. Jeddy would want someone else to find the body, even if it had to be Marion.

"I was behind the log you were shooting at," Don explained. "You put a hole through Marion's hat I was wearing." He stepped over and showed Jeddy the hole.

Marion's hand had gone to her cheek. Her face went as white as it had been flushed a few moments before. She had often confided to Don how she despised Jeddy. They had talked things over many times. Both felt certain that only the easy living Jeddy obtained from them prevented his making distasteful advances to Marion.

Jeddy was examining the hole in the hat. "You mean to say you were really behind that log?" He pretended astonishment. "Why didn't you yell or stand up so I could see you?"

Don showed him the newly congealed blood on the back of his hand. "I thought you'd sure kill me if I did. It isn't likely you'd hit the hat without seeing it." Don held Jeddy's eyes until Jeddy swung away with a contemptuous laugh and resumed his comfortable seat.

"You're crazy if you're trying to insinuate I was deliberately trying to hit you."

Marion had come around the table. She laid a restraining hand on Don's shoulder.

Don continued to address Jeddy, "It was funny how you dropped a brick that missed my head by only an inch when we were fixing that high chimney last winter. It was kind of odd, too, the way my car tipped off the jack when I was working underneath it last summer. If I hadn't been thoughtful enough to stand a couple of bricks under the frame the crank case would have crushed my chest."

Jeddy stood up. His black eyes flashed and he towered over Don a full six inches. He was muscular and strongly built in comparison. "I'm tired of your damn insinuations," he yelled. "By gad, I will kill you if you keep talking like you do. Just because my mother had a hard life, you keep picking on me and making contemptible insinuations."

Jeddy rushed at Don with tight fists. His teeth showed wolfishly. There was a flash in his eyes of animal cunning and

ferocity. Marion screamed. She jerked Don's arm back before he could raise it to defend himself. Jeddy's fist flailed toward Don's face, and his wife's jerking at him pulled Don off balance. Jeddy's blow missed by the fraction of an inch.

He did not strike again. The fiery flash faded from his eyes. The wolf-like expression on his face softened. It seemed almost as if he would shed tears of disgust with himself. Suddenly he became apologetic. "I'm sorry, Don," he said. "I'm awfully sorry. If you were behind that log and a bullet scraped your hand, I don't wonder you thought I was shooting at you. But you know better, Don."

Jeddy turned to Don's wife. A soft, pleading expression had come into his eyes. "You know I wouldn't do anything to you folks, Marion. You've always been so good to me. My dad trusted you kids. He fixed things up with you because he knew I couldn't be depended on. I'm not much good, I guess, but I wouldn't do anything to make you kids unhappy. Honest to gosh, I wouldn't."

Don said no more. He sat down to Marion's fine sandwiches, feeling certain Jeddy wouldn't have tried slipping poison into his food on the same day he'd tried gunfire. Poison was one thing Don didn't worry much about. The police could trace poison. Jeddy wanted the murder to be accidental. It would likely be several months before Jeddy made another attempt. But he would make it. Don felt sure of that.

WHEN they were alone Marion and Don talked. Nervous strain had brought a suggestion of tears to Marion's eyes. "Don," she pleaded, "isn't there anything we can do about this? I just can't stand the strain we live under."

Don shook his head slowly. "I don't know how to solve it, Marion, dear. Going to the police would be useless. There's no charge we can place against Jeddy. Legal protection against someone who intends to kill you is very inadequate even when they make threats."

Marion's face blanched. "Don, Don," she exclaimed. "You'd be almost justified in killing him. It would really be self-defense."

"Yes," Don admitted soberly. "I've even thought of that. I couldn't kill him, Marion. You know that. It wouldn't be self-defense in any legal sense. I couldn't do it anyway."

"But we've got to do something, Don." Marion's voice broke into a high key. She was becoming hysterical. "Living like this will drive me crazy. Can't we have your father's will changed or something?"

"I don't see how we could," Don said. He placed his arm about Marion's shoulder and tried to comfort her. "I'll figure something out. There must be some way."

Marion went on more quietly. "I feel sorry for him in a way. He never had a chance. He was born with bad blood in him. Or maybe it's his mind that's affected. He seems unbalanced. Didn't you notice how sorry he seemed after he tried to hit you?"

"He wasn't sorry," Don said positively. "He just forced himself under control because he doesn't want any record of quarreling with us. He doesn't want anything that will point suspicion on him when he does kill me. He plans definitely to kill me. He knows as well as you and I that the accidental dropping of a brick, or a jack slipping under a car, or a stray shot into a log during target practice, are all things that any jury would say you and I had magnified in our own minds. Accidents or near-accidents happen to everybody. No, Marion, Jeddy is cleverly dangerous. His is the criminal type of mind. Society has to be rid of his type. We've got to get rid of him or he will get rid of me."

Don's eyes softened as he looked down into the smooth, clean features of his pretty blonde-haired wife. "I think, Marion, I shall have to get rid of Jeddy. There is no other way for us to ever be safe or ever be happy. I cannot bear to think of what might become of you if he were to succeed in doing away with me."

She looked at him, a startled questioning in her eyes. "You mean—you mean you'll kill him?"

Don smiled reassuringly. "To kill him would be murder. I'd hang for it." He stooped and kissed her forehead. "We wouldn't be happy that way."

Nevertheless, a plan was forming in Don's mind. It was a crazy kind of plan perhaps, but it was at least a plan.

Jeddy had forced a battle of wits which Don could no longer avoid. This was the most exciting kind of battle a man could fight. Life itself was the stake. It was worse than a battle in war. There, you at least knew and expected the

enemy. You had comrades to share your danger and generals to plan strategy. You had some idea where and when the enemy might strike and some plan of defense. Don had only the days of suspense which followed slowly one upon another.

Marion tried to guard the food they ate. Don watched every move Jeddy made. He never let himself get in any position which Jeddy could turn into a dangerous one. Don knew the coast here along Golden Harbor where they lived. He had been born and raised on this little inland sea. He knew its changing tides, its wild winds and its boiling whirlpools and currents, its freakish squalls and its screaming winds. These, he told himself, were his allies. He tried to keep his mind upon them and upon his plans so that murder could find no place in his thoughts.

As the summer passed, Jeddy's manner became so friendly and co-operative that both Don and Marion were again lulled into their old false sense of security. Jeddy even worked for a while at a good job and brought home his earnings to share their expenses. The interest from their small fortune was not really enough to assure them any complete independence.

ON A wild gusty Sunday morning in late October, Don stood on the porch looking out over the foam-flecked water. Jeddy came up and stood beside him. Some intuition seemed to warn Don that a new attack soon would be made upon him. He had to act immediately, something seemed to tell him, or tomorrow might be too late.

"There's a lot of ducks flying today," he said pointing out a sizeable flock winging southward.

"Good hunting weather," Jeddy said.

"I haven't hunted ducks for a long time. How about taking the skiff tomorrow and trying our hand off Cyclone Point?"

Jeddy turned, looked at Don as if he didn't quite believe this unusual suggestion. The only boat they had was a tiny twelve-foot skiff. Don couldn't swim a stroke. Jeddy had always considered him a weakling. Now his dark eyes sparkled expectantly. "I'd sure like it," he agreed.

That evening Don spent a long time studying tide tables. He surveyed the murky evening sky with unusual care

and took an estimated bearing on the ghost of a cold sun that set beyond the timbered ridges of the island. When he told Marion of the intended trip, she shuddered. "He'll shoot you or try to tip the boat over," she warned. "You aren't safe with him alone."

"He'll tip the boat over," Don said. "He won't shoot me, because my body'd float ashore later with a hole in it. A bullet hole would be suspicious. But if the boat tipped over and Jeddy had to swim for it, too, that would be an accident."

"He's a fine swimmer," Marion said.

"I tried but never could learn. Guess I'm too skinny," Don said. He smiled and kissed her. "I'll watch him every second," he promised.

"But why—why did you suggest such a thing?"

"I had to," Don said through clenched, determined teeth. "I couldn't stand the strain of living like this any longer."

Jeddy seemed willing, even anxious, to row the boat. Don sat in the stern with his old Remington pump gun across his lap. Jeddy's double-barreled hammerless Parker lay leaning against the bow piece of the tiny skiff where Jeddy could swing about and grab it up quickly if ducks flew by.

Don glanced at his watch. It was twelve-thirty. The sky was overcast, and there was a slight drizzle suggesting heavier rain by gusts if the wind increased. Don glanced at his watch again and closed one eye as if that would help his thinking. The tide would be fifty-three minutes later today than yesterday. Off Cyclone Point it would turn at 1:58. Don knew exactly.

It took Jeddy forty minutes to row to the point. As they passed the rock barrier which protruded toward the open channel between the mainland and Arch Island, Don said, "Better take it easy. Keep her bow into the wind. There's a bad tide running. There's whirlpools in here, and it's choppy as hell."

A sudden gust of wind crashed down on them. Two low-flying mallards came riding it. Jeddy shipped his oars, swung, and grabbed up his gun. Don let go a single shot. Jeddy brought up his gun and fired once. Both ducks came down dead. The small boat swung into a tide-swirl out of control and dipped water. Don threw his weight to the left and

righted it. Jeddy replaced his gun, picked up the oars and steadied the boat. He rowed after the two downed ducks. Don picked them up and tossed them into the boat.

The half-brothers grinned at each other. The sport was good. They'd done good comradely shooting. Don was relaxing his caution. Jeddy was being a swell sport. Maybe he and Marion did imagine things about Jeddy.

Jeddy pulled the boat back into the tide rip. The force of the current struck the stem. The skiff started to swing. Jeddy dipped his right oar deep, straightening the boat with an effort. Scattered spray came scudding aboard but Jeddy managed to pull the skiff through the rip and the whirlpools to the quieter water in the open channel.

"A man couldn't swim in those pools," Don remarked casually.

"I could," Jeddy claimed. "Maybe you couldn't."

"I can't swim at all," Don said. "I don't think anybody could swim in there. The pools would pull him under."

"He'd either swim through there or drown if something happened out here," Jeddy said. He seemed pleased with himself, as if confident he could swim through the rip without any trouble.

A flock of mallards bore down on them riding the wind. Don pulled his gun into position. Jeddy turned forward, swinging his legs over the seat and facing away from Don. Don let go at the ducks.

The big drake leader fell out of line. Don shot again. Two ducks came down. He heard the roar of Jeddy's gun going off. It sounded like the two barrels had fired in quick succession.

A moment later he saw two spurts of water geysering into the bow of the skiff. Jeddy began swearing. "Damn bow piece tripped the triggers. Good gosh, I've blown half the bottom out of the boat!"

DON sat perfectly still. After a moment, he quietly reloaded his gun and balanced it across his lap while his eyes watched the salt water boiling into the boat through the shattered bottom. Jeddy turned toward him excitedly. "You can't swim, can you, kid?"

"No, I can't," Don said with cold calmness. "I guess I'm going to drown."

Jeddy tossed his gun into the tide. He stood in the skiff. "No, kid, you don't

have to drown. I'll swim for it. I can make it. You hang on to the boat. I'll get ashore and bring help."

Don looked at his watch. It was 1:25. His eyes shifted to the dark whirlpools slightly inshore from the skiff. The water was already bathing his ankles inside the boat. The slightest shift of weight threatened to capsize them because the water inside shifted also.

"Get to the bow and hang on," Jeddy yelled. "Jump over and hang on before she capsizes. If she drifts upright in the water, it will be easier hanging on."

"The wind and current will force me out where it's impossible hanging on long before you could get help," Don said in a crisp, accusing voice. "You know that, Jeddy. You planned it that way. You're just acting like my savior till you're sure nothing goes amiss this time."

Jeddy stood grinning now with the expression of animal cunning distorting his features. "And this time, kid, I've really got you. I can swim ashore. You can't." With a final gleam of evil triumph, Jeddy let himself over the side and started to swim.

Don tossed his gun overboard. He crawled carefully on his hands and knees through the rising water inside the skiff to the bow. The wind was already blowing the crests of waves over the side. Inside the water was only an inch or two lower than outside.

Reaching the bow, Don took his watch from his pocket, jerked the chain loose from a buttonhole fastening. It was 1:40.

He laid the watch on the bowpiece of the skiff and kept hold of the chain between his fingers as he let himself carefully into the water. He was not conscious of the chill. He became intent on watching Jeddy trying to swim through the tide rip.

Suddenly Jeddy cried out. "Don! Help! I can't make it." Jeddy's head disappeared, then reappeared several feet away. His body was twisted crazily. Once his feet and legs appeared where his head had been only a moment before. "Help! Help!" His voice was choking with salt and water and desperation. "I can—can't make it!"

"You're damn right you can't make it," Don said under his breath. "And there's no way I can help, even if I would. I knew you couldn't make it."

Jeddy. I told you so. I know the winds and the tides better than you do, Jeddy. You planned it this way—but I timed it. I didn't plan to kill you, Jeddy. You planned to kill me—but it was you who died."

The wind drove the skiff further offshore. It dragged Don with it but it wasn't hard for him to hang on yet. His hands weren't cramped yet, his body wasn't chilled. He watched Jeddy's vain thrashing about in the whirlpools. He listened to his agonizing and gasping cries until there were no more, then he pulled himself up a little and looked at his watch. It had only taken Jeddy five minutes to drown.

Don kept watching the whirlpools. He saw the gradual change that came in them, how they gradually ceased to boil and quieted themselves. He watched the slower and slower whirl of the tide until there seemed to be a glassy stillness that even defied the wind to ruffle its quieted mood. At three minutes past two, Don let go of the skiff.

It was almost night when he took Marion in his arms and told her, "We don't have to worry any more, dear. Jeddy's dead. His only mistake was in choosing a weapon that I knew more about than he did. He thought he knew the force and the humor of the tide. He thought he could swim through the pools

while the tide was still running. I knew he couldn't.

"He knew I couldn't swim, but he forgot how easy it was to wear a pair of waterwings under my coat and to blow them up while I hung to the boat. His biggest mistake was in letting me time things like I did. I decided when we should start and I planned on the tide. The water almost stands still, and the pools swirl only gently at the turn of the tide. There were a few rips which pulled me under for a second now and then. I was tired when I got ashore. I had to walk a long way home—but I made it."

Marion kissed him again, then gave him a gentle, happy squeeze. For a moment her manner sobered, "I'm sorry for Jeddy, Don, but I guess it had to be this way."

"It was the only way," Don said. "It was the way he chose for himself."

She looked up at him suddenly. "No one will accuse you—they won't think—?"

Don smiled reassuringly. "I'll make a report to the sheriff at once. The boat or the boards from it will turn up somewhere on the beach. Nobody's going to believe that a guy like me who can't swim would blast two holes like that in his own boat. Those holes will prove it was an accident. That was what Jeddy always wanted folks to think."

Fry-By-Nights

By Joe Archibald

(Continued from Page 52)

there is one of the tough babies hanging over a window sill out like a maid on Wednesday afternoons. The other one is locked in deadly embrace with Hambone. We have to crook Albie again and take a knife from him which was close to Noonan's jugular.

"You dumb ox," I howl, "How did they git loose?"

"They wanted to be untied to toss a coin to see who would turn state's evidence, Alvin. I thought it would save the taxpayers plenty of cabbage, so I cut them loose. They ain't to be trusted, Alvin."

"Noonan," I says. "It must have took long practice and a post grad course to make you so stupid, huh? It would have served you right to get your throat cut. Come on an' help us load these mugs in. LeRoy should have your badge."

Well, Louie, I will close and wish you get a quick ticket back home. Eva, your old girl friend, didn't look so well when I told her you should be ambling in any day now. But maybe it was something she et. We are rooting for you, pal. As ever.

Alvin

A Slay for Santa Claus

By Davisson Lough



When Detective Wilson Cory followed the slay-ride tracks of the man who shot Santa Claus, he found a trail of quick-death presents. And Cory could not trap that holiday killer until he'd unwrapped his own little gift labeled Not To Be Opened Till Doomsday!

THE blood was scarcely noticeable until after it had soaked its way through the red sateen and began spreading in the white, rabbit-fur trimming. Then everyone saw it.

When he'd fallen, the sounds of merry-making had quieted. Even the boy with the horn had stopped prancing around the Christmas tree and was standing, horn pressed to lips, staring down.

A mother clutched the hand of her

little girl and hurried away. It was the first movement after he'd fallen. It set up other movements. A lean-faced man, brawny and lithe, came from the crowd and dropped to one knee beside the fallen one. He unbuttoned the bright red coat at the collar and slipped his hand beneath it.

The silence was heavy while his hand was beneath the coat. When he removed it and grimly shook his head, a little

boy began sobbing, saying, "Oh, it's true! Santa Claus is dead!"

A consoling father led the little boy away. Through the rift opened by their departure a policeman entered the circle. He immediately recognized the man beside the crumpled Santa Claus. "Hello, Cory," he said. "How goes it?"

"Hello, McClanahan." The lean-faced one shook his head. "It goes bad—for this fellow, and the kiddies . . ." He glanced around at the sad, shocked faces. "He's dead."

Policeman knelt beside detective and quickly removed the false-face with whiskers from the dead man's face. It was a thin, tired face with weakish blue eyes staring up blankly.

A child glimpsed the face and gave a glad cry. "It ain't Santa Claus! It's just some old man."

When the ambulance had come and gone and the body in red and white was no longer there, after someone had sprinkled artificial moss over the human blood, the noise and merry-making resumed. But a subdued atmosphere lingered. The horns, the firecrackers, the shouts and songs seemed to lack something of the snappy cheer they'd had a few minutes before.

As the ambulance wended its way through the holiday littered street, in no hurry now because the trip was to the city morgue instead of the hospital, a group of carolers began singing. But Wilson Cory, detective on a holiday, thought they sang a little too sadly and just a bit off key.

"Christmas Eve is a heck of a time for murder," he told himself, grimacing distastefully as he fished a stogie stump from his vest pocket, pushed it between his teeth without letting the wet, loby part touch his lips, and lit it.

DR. ARMIN TOMSEN, creator, president, and very active member of the city's Lend A Hand Society, was badly shaken and overwrought when Detective Wilson Cory arrived at his home. After admitting the detective he quickly closed and locked the door. He shook hands with Cory, said:

"I'm very glad you witnessed the shooting tonight, Mr. Cory. It is most fortunate for me that you happened to be present."

Dr. Tomsen was a short, thin man with large brown eyes and thin pale lips. He had a way of licking those lips with the tip of his tongue.

"I didn't see the shooting," said Cory. "I only saw the old guy fall."

A young, tall, handsome chap entered the hall. Dr. Tomsen introduced him.

"This is my son, Olun. You've probably heard of him. Before he went into the Navy he managed the College Gun Club here." The doctor beamed proudly.

Cory liked the fellow's warm handshake. "I've often envied your expert marksmanship," he said. Then, frowning slightly, "Seems you got your name in the news recently."

"I had my pocket picked last Saturday night, if that's what you mean." Young Tomsen shrugged lightly. "The loss was negligible, only a few dollars."

"The dip nearly got caught, didn't he?" Cory was not really interested, but wanted to chat for a minute in hopes of working the edge off the doctor's apparent nervousness.

Olun Tomsen said, "Yes. Dozens of people saw him make his getaway. The police were hot on his trail, but lost him in the crowd. He lost his glasses during the chase."

"Let's go back to the study," Dr. Tomsen said. "I want to tell just how it happened tonight that that old man was murdered instead of me."

He led the way down a hall lavishly spangled with Yuletide decorations. Even the study was strung with blue and gold tinsel chain and thickly splotted with evergreen sprays.

Dr. Tomsen's words came in jerks. He licked his lips several times. "As you know, Mr. Cory, I've played Santa Claus at the community Christmas tree party for years. No doubt you and Inspector Liss think it strange that I didn't play that part tonight."

"It was plenty lucky for you that you didn't." Cory's voice sounded of routine disinterest. He withdrew a stogie stump from his vest, stared with antipathy at its soggy, cold bite before sticking it between his teeth. He had lit it and was happily enwreathed in a fat halo of smoke when the doctor said:

"Whoever killed Mort Rilay believed he killed me."

He shivered visibly, began strumming his desk, rapping an irregular rhythm with his long, pale fingers.

"Somebody gunning for you?" queried Cory.

"I certainly hope not." Momentarily Tomsen was startled, confused. "I can't imagine why anyone should be—" His voice jerked weakly. He stared a sick stare at the detective, his slightly protruding eyes filmy with terror.

His son said, "Father is unwell. He's taking this thing entirely too seriously. I've been telling him the shooting was somehow a mistake; that perhaps someone had it in for Mr. Rilay."

"It was I and no other the gunman

meant to kill." Dr. Tomsen said despairingly. He shuddered. The pale, pink of his hair-line lips faded, leaving his face a solid white.

"How'd Rilay come to take your place at the tree?" asked Cory.

"Because of my sciatica," Dr. Tomsen explained. "I suffer chronic sciatica of the left hip. Tonight it is and was especially painful. However, I intended playing Santa Claus as usual. At about seven o'clock this old man came to my door and asked if he could play the part. He said it had been his lifelong desire to play Santa and cheer the kiddies on Christmas Eve."

"Your guardian angel works holidays like I do," said Cory.

Dr. Tomsen went on, jerking out his words. "The pain in my hip prompted me to consent to Rilay's request. I helped him dress in my Santa Claus costume, put the bag of penny tokens I always hand out to the children over his shoulder, then drove him to City Park and let him out near the tree. No one saw him without his false-face mask from the time we left here until after he was killed. It was dark in the car. No one saw me, as I did not leave the car at any time."

Cory frowned thoughtfully, said, "Receive any crank letters lately? Anybody unruly at the Society's mission, anything happen there that might reflect on you in a nasty way?"

"No, sir," said Tomsen flatly.

"Nearly every grown-up knows you play Santa at the community tree. That fact is practically an institution in this town," said Cory, ponderingly.

"Maybe it was someone Santa wasn't good to when he was a kiddy," said Olun Tomsen, smiling at Cory.

"I wish you'd take this more seriously," said his father. "A man has been murdered. In a way I'm responsible for his death."

"I wouldn't feel like that about it, Dr. Tomsen," said the detective.

"If it's as you say, I don't see that you have much to worry about."

THE little doctor stared at Cory for a minute, licking his pale lips rapidly, then leaned forward slightly. His face was shades paler as his eyes, fixed in near terror, fastened on the detective's face. His words were a rough whisper. "I've nothing to worry about, eh? That's all you know. After I returned home to-night and had put the car away, the killer tried it again."

Cory's voice dropped its tone of routine disinterest. "What do you mean?"

"He shot at me as I came from the

garage." The doctor glanced fearfully around the room, shuddering. "I ran to the house, grabbed a gun and fired several times at shadows on the back lawn. But without results."

Olun Tomsen said, "I think someone must have set off a firecracker in the alley back of the garage. Father has been so overwrought lately that—"

"Hush up!" commanded the doctor. "Don't you think I know a bullet's whine from the snap of a firecracker?"

Cory said, "How long had you known Mort Rilay?"

"The first time I ever saw him was tonight," the doctor said.

"Have any other visitors tonight?" Cory put out his stogie stump by rolling the hot end between thumb and forefinger.

"Yes," Dr. Tomsen said nervously. "A Mr. Andrew Laggard was to see me before dinner."

"Andrew—Laggard?" Cory gulped and his fingers hurriedly sought the stogie stump again. "You mean Handy Andy Laggard, the shooting gallery goon?"

"He said he owned a shooting gallery."

"Do you mind telling me what he came to see you about?" Cory lit his stogie stump and began puffing out great gobs of smoke.

"He wanted to adopt a boy we've recently admitted to the Society's orphanage," Tomsen said. "A boy called Sandy Rose whose mother died last week in a rooming house on the South Side."

"Is that a fact?" mused the detective. "The boy got a father?"

"Not that we know of."

"Tell me more." Cory was interested now.

"There's nothing else to tell."

"Nothing else to tell?" Cory snorted two white blades of smoke from his nostrils. "Did you let him have the boy?"

"Of course not. Adoptions never go through as quickly as that. Besides his references were faulty. But I tried not to offend him."

Cory gave a mirthless laugh. "You did, eh? Listen, Dr. Tomsen, when Andy Laggard doesn't get what he wants, he's always offended. You told him he couldn't have the lad. Right away he thinks, 'Oh, yes, but I can,' and he starts figuring now." Cory rose, took a monstrous blue handkerchief from his overcoat sleeve and loudly blew his nose. "Can you give me the rooming house address where the boy's mother died?"

"Why—yes—but you're not leaving here tonight?" Fear stroked the doctor's face. "Didn't the inspector send you to guard me, to watch this house?"

Cory shook his head. "A fellow named Spuggler is doing that. He's outside now."

This information didn't seem to ease the doctor. After a moment's pause he said, "It's 3660 Verne Street." His eyes were bleak as he watched Cory jot down the address in a little memo book.

Cory pocketed the book, said, "Is this boy talented in any way, can he sing, turn cartwheels, juggle?"

"He dances," said Tomsen, surprise causing confusion in his slightly popped eyes. "How did you guess?"

"Easy. Laggard closes the gallery of roomers and takes a little show of his out into the sticks. He calls it a medicine show, and he's always on the lookout for performers. He especially favors the kind he doesn't have to pay."

The doctor nodded slowly. "I didn't know. The Rose boy is only seven and small for his age. He dances magnificently. Eccentric dancing, I think it's called. He does the steps on his hands as easily as he does on his feet."

"Then Laggard's after him," said Cory. He smiled a soft, contented smile behind a barrage of smoke. His eyes shone brightly for a moment. "Christmas is a wonderful time," he said. "Imagine me, old Wilson Cory, bored to death with a holiday an hour ago, old homicide hunk that I am, getting a whack at Handy Andy Laggard—a real good whack!"

His smile flattened on his good-humored face. His eyes burned bleakly. "What a wow of a Christmas gift!" he said.

CORY had just throttled his rattle-trap coupe from the curb in front of the Tomsen home when a bit of wind—seemingly too light for the job—sent somebody's hat bouncing across the street in front of him. A moment later the hat rolled to a halt against the opposite curb. He stopped the car and went after it.

Cory thought he recognized the hat. It was a man's grey felt. He put it on the seat beside him. He drove on, then two blocks away cut back and parked in an alley at the rear of Dr. Tomsen's home.

There was a small gate beside the Tomsen garage which opened into a large back lawn. When Cory entered he left it open behind him. After several minutes search he found what he was looking for. The body was sprawled on the ground just beyond the garage, its feet tangled in a clump of low-growing shrubbery.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," mumbled the detective. He squat-

ted beside the corpse's head, carefully draping the skirt of his overcoat to hide the glow of the match he was going to strike.

The dead man's arms were flung wide. In his right hand, clutched tightly, a forefinger hooked in its trigger guard, was a repeater type .22 rifle. It was the kind of rifle commonly used in shooting galleries.

"I hope Spuggler doesn't find this for awhile," Cory told himself as he pinched out the match. As he returned to his car he saw a dark figure walking slowly down a sidewalk and knew it was Spuggler.

On his way over to the South Side, Cory stopped at a drug store long enough to phone the city morgue. He learned that Mort Rilay's body hadn't yet been given the official look, but the morgue keeper told him there was every reason to believe that the death wound had been made by a .22 bullet.

A SMALL man, shabbily dressed, with an inch-long beard, opened the rooming house door at 3660 Verne Street a minute after Cory jabbed the bell.

"Hello," said the detective. "Merry Christmas! And who are you?"

The fellow wagged his head mournfully, his face a map of incurable despair. "I'm Roy Bubbs. I own this house. Who are you—but it's not until tomorrow." He drew a forlorn sigh.

Cory laughed. "I'm Wilson Cory from headquarters. What's not until tomorrow?"

"Why, Christmas isn't." Roy Bubbs gave another depressed sigh. "Which one of 'em is it now?"

"Which one of what?"

"Which one of the roomers. Anyway they're all out. You'll have to wait or go find them."

Cory laughed again, this time humorlessly. "Ease down, Bubbs," he said. "The roomer I'm here about died last week."

"Oh, you mean young Mrs. Rose?"

Cory nodded.

"They took the laddie-buck to the orphanage. His mother's been buried for days."

"Sure, I know. I want a look inside her room, the one she died in."

The little man moved back for Cory to enter. "Nobody killed her. I think. He might have though. That bug-eyed doctor from the mission said she just died. She was sick for days."

"She had visitors, eh?" said Cory as he followed the little man upstairs.

"One of 'em. That bug-eyed doctor. Big fellow around town, he is. Always threatening to help the poor."

"You mean Dr. Armin Tomsen."

"Yes, he's the guy. Everytime he was here that poor, sick girl had a crying spell, she did. I'm a needy man, copper, but I'd give a fin to push that pill-peddler one in the puss, I would."

He opened a door and preceded Cory into a scantily furnished room. "This is where she lived and died." He pointed to a cot by the window. "She died over there."

Cory moved about the room, casually examining the furniture. When he came to the cot he leaned above it and looked at the window pane.

Roy Bubb said, "She did that. Cut it on the glass with the diamond in her ring."

Two lines of poetry had been scratched on the glass. The detective read them aloud:

O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side.

"A world of truth in it, isn't there?" asked Bubb.

Cory was silent for a minute, then said, "You ever in the Handy Andy Shooting Gallery?"

"No. Guns make me jittery."

"What do you do for pastime?"

"Eat hard rolls and drink buttermilk at the Ferry Lunchroom and watch the coal boats go up and down the river. It's diverting, it is."

Cory laughed easily, then said, "Was the boy much of a dancer?"

"He was a whiz at it," said Bubb with feeling. "He was the toppin'est thing at it I ever saw, he was. When he heard fiddle music he went wild."

Thoughtfully Cory fished the stogie stump from his vest pocket. He gazed at it a moment before putting it between his teeth, grimacing. In the next moment he was puffing out great swirls of smoke and staring through it at the death cot, the scratched window pane, and at an ugly shadow that was slowly dissolving into an uglier picture in his own mind. After a minute he said:

"Did she have money to pay her way?"

The little man didn't answer immediately. When he did his voice was tight and reserved. "If she didn't, is it anybody's business? She was a good girl. She was a kind that would have been good to me had I been in her circumstances." He paused, cleared his throat roughly, then finished:

"Nobody's complaining about what she and the laddie-buck ate while they were under this roof. If she owed any rent, nobody's complaining. Nobody at all." He glared at Cory for a second after he spoke.

"She was handed a rotten deal," said Cory.

"I know it," Bubb said. "She didn't breathe a word of complaint, never said where she came from or what or who he was, or anything. But I knew it, I did. The poems she read and the songs she sang to the boy told it all and plainly. Some scabby heel had walked out on her."

Oozing with stogie smoke, Cory went over to him, laid a heavy hand on his thin shoulder. "You're okay, Bubb," he said. "All wool and a yard wide, guaranteed not to rip, ravel, or run down at the knees." He grinned warmly. "Tomorrow when this mess is cleared up, I'll come over and we'll go down to that stinking joint by the ferry and have hard rolls and buttermilk and I'll tell you how it all came out."

THE vestibule light was burning at the address on Cart Way where Mort Rilay had roomed. Cory heard singing and a piano going inside, but when he rang the doorbell everything went quiet.

The door was draped with a large splurge of pine and holly. A little silver bell tinkled from the spray when a middle-aged, sleekly groomed woman opened the door.

"I'm Wilson Cory, Homicide," he said.

"Another one!" gasped the woman. She scowled at him. "Look, copper, we're just trying to celebrate Christmas. Is that against the law?"

"A man who lived here was murdered tonight."

"You think I don't know it?" the woman snapped. "All I've done for the past two hours is letting coppers in and out." She glared at him, shrugged, said, "Second floor, last room back. You can help yourself to a snoop around, but don't rip off any wallpaper."

She flipped on a hall light, turned quickly and went through a near door, slamming it behind her.

Cory had reached the second floor when the piano started up again and several voices began singing *Jingle Bells*.

He smiled grimly. "Christmas is a funny time," he mused. Then he thought of Andy Laggard. "Some people never get too old to stop believing in Santa Claus—never do . . ."

A large, tightly bound bundle of newspapers, apparently salvage stuff, partially blocked the room door. Cory squeezed past it and jabbed the light switch.

He thought, *the boys probably didn't miss anything, but a look can't do any harm*. In a wardrobe were two badly worn shirts and an ancient necktie, frayed and faded, and two pairs of dirty socks. He found some old newspapers in a dresser drawer. One of them had been

folded to fit a man's overcoat pocket. It showed signs of having been carried around for several days.

Cory glanced over it. The first item he read was a brief account of Olun Tomsen winning a divorce from a wife who had deserted him six years ago, just after he'd enlisted in the Navy.

Cory smiled wistfully, put the paper in his pocket. He went over the room carefully, but the only other thing of interest he found was a wall calendar on which Rilay had kept a running account of his daily expenses. He'd listed every small expenditure. Most of them had to do with food and tobacco. On each Saturday for three Saturdays past the old man had spent three cents for a newspaper.

Cory made sure of the dates on every newspaper in the room, but they were all over a month old. He went into the hall and tackled the salvage bundle.

About halfway down in the stack he found what he sought. He snapped off the room light, closed the door, and fumbled his way down the hall to the top of the stairs. He left the house without disturbing his disgruntled, merrymaking friend.

It was after ten o'clock now. The holiday crowds were at their most dense and dizziest flow. As Cory drove through town toward Andy Laggard's shooting gallery he wondered if the kids out at the orphanage would be in bed. They probably would be. But he guessed as it was Christmas Eve they wouldn't be asleep.

The shooting gallery was closed. He'd expected it would be. There was a light burning above the shooting range. He left the coupé and walked over to a window. For a long minute he stood counting the guns on the rifle rack. He'd counted them before. There'd always been twenty-one. Now there were twenty. He counted them a second time to make sure, then returned to his car.

He drove two blocks uptown, parked, and went into a newsstand phone booth. He dialed Dr. Tomsen's home number. Olun Tomsen answered the phone.

He said, "This is Cory. I'd like you to join me on a little trip. It won't be for long. It might help things along considerably."

"Very well," said young Tomsen. "Anything to oblige."

Cory said, "I'll drive past your place in half an hour. You be out front and I'll pick you up. If you can manage it, don't let your father know you're away from the house."

Back in his car, Cory removed the three newspapers he'd taken from the

salvage bundle from his pocket, unfolded them, and closely examined the contents of three moneyless men's billfolds he'd found concealed within their pages.

One of the billfolds held a much-handled letter. He'd glanced over this letter back at Rilay's rooming house. Now, using his flashlight, he read it carefully.

He glanced at his watch when he'd finished reading, then put newspapers and billfolds in his overcoat pocket. He held the starter down for a long time before the motor sparked. When it took he sighed heavily, clumsily maneuvering the coupé into the slow lane of traffic. Deep in thought he drove toward Dr. Tomsen's home.

AFTER Olun Tomsen had settled himself in the seat beside Cory he lit a cigarette and said, "Where are we going, if it isn't an official secret?"

"To the orphanage," mumbled Cory. "To the orphanage! Why?"

Cory drew a long breath and wished he might have the consolation of his stogie stump. But his kind of smoking was unmanageable while driving. "Some years back you married a girl by the name of Rose Rilay," he said.

"Which is common knowledge. We're divorced now," said Tomsen.

"A few months later you went into the Navy."

"Yes."

"A few months after that your wife had a son."

"A son. How do you—" Tomsen's words died of astonishment.

"You never knew?"

"No."

"You had a letter from your ex-wife not long ago. She gave an address in this town. She'd come here, maybe hoping to get in touch with you. Why didn't you go to her?"

"Father went to see her. He asked me not to, said she was living a kind of life I wouldn't want to see. She didn't mention in the letter that she'd had a child."

"You usually do pretty nearly as your father wants, eh?" said Cory.

"Pretty nearly, not always. He's been good to me."

Suddenly, following a short pause, Cory said, "Why did your wife leave you?"

"I don't mind telling," said Tomsen. "While I was in the Navy my father visited her and somehow found out that her father was serving time in prison on a larceny charge. I guess he asked her some personal questions. They quarreled. She was always too hot-headed, too in-

dependent. She got huffed and walked away. That was over six years ago. I hadn't heard from her until I got her letter here."

"Did you know her father was in prison when you married her?"

"Yes. It didn't cut any ice with me; but it was something that nearly drove Father insane. He's worked all his life to establish a good name, a perfect reputation. It ate him like acid to know I'd married a convict's daughter. Since Mother died he's been highly zealous in regards to my conduct."

"It was your wife's father who picked your pocket last Saturday," Cory said.

"That's how you know about Rose's letter?" Tomsen said quickly. "It was in my billfold."

Cory said, "Mort Rilay was what is known to the light-fingered gentry as a pants-pocket worker, the kind that likes a newspaper in their hands when they make a dip. They use the newspaper as a shield. That's how I got wise to him. In the room where he'd lived there was a calendar with a penciled account of his daily expenses. It showed he'd bought a newspaper on Saturday for the past three weeks."

"Saturday was when your wallet was snagged, so I started looking around. I found three newspapers with three billfolds hidden inside them in a bundle of litter outside his door. A dip always has the worry of safely disposing of emptied pocketbooks. I happened to figure it right for once."

"Are you trying to show a motive I might have had for shooting Santa Claus tonight?" Tomsen's voice was edgy.

Cory said, disregarding Tomsen's question, "Rilay lifted your father's wallet the Saturday before he lifted yours. In it was a note your ex-wife had written your father six years ago."

"I'd like to see that note," said Tomsen.

"Okay," said Cory. "Only it won't be so nice. Your father bullied her, threatened her, forced her to leave you." Cory gave Tomsen a billfold. "The note's inside. My flashlight's there on the seat."

Tomsen read the note slowly, then returned it with the billfold. Cory said, "She died last week in a rooming house over on the South Side."

"I didn't know. Father made it seem different," Tomsen's voice wobbled a bit.

"She must have been thinking of you right up to the last," Cory said, "because there were two lines of poetry—from Will Shakespeare, maybe—she'd scratch-

ed on the window-pane near her cot. They go like this:

"O what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side."

"Rather a raw inference," said Tomsen sourly.

"Or maybe a coincidence," Cory said. "Anyway your initials begin the lines. She made those first letters, O and T, extra large. It made me think of you somehow."

A minute later as Cory parked the coupé in front of the orphanage, he said, "Your father let his selfish pride run away with his good sense."

"The children are all in bed now," said the young lady at the desk in the orphanage office. "It's against institutional rules to disturb them."

Cory grinned at her warmly. "The law, Miss, in high purpose even stoops so low, sometimes, as to stir up infants in their cradles. I'm from Homicide. Mr. Tomsen and I have come to visit with the new boy, Mr. Sandy Rose."

"But it's against the rules and—"

"Tush, tush," Cory interrupted her. "You go rustle out the kid or I'll do it myself."

She went, stubbornly reluctant in her movements, glaring meanly at the detective.

When she returned with the boy, Cory edged out the front door. One look at Olun Tomsen's face when he took his little son in his arms was enough for the big homicide dick, who knew a great deal concerning the validity of emotions when he witnessed them first hand.

Before he got in the coupé he mashed the fire from his stogie, pulled the big handkerchief from his coat sleeve and blew his nose. "Anyway," he told himself with a kind of finality, "it is Christmas Eve."

CORY phoned Dr. Tomsen from a confectionery a block distant from the doctor's home. "This is Cory," he said. "How goes it?"

"Quiet here," said the doctor.

Cory said, "Just wanted to check. Thought I ought to warn you to stay close home until we round up Laggard. Remember, the guy's a deadshot, even if he does shoot left-handed."

"Thanks," said the doctor.

Cory thought the little medico's voice was too taut, too strained. He didn't go to the coupé when he left the confectionery, but ran the short block to Tomsen's house. He saw Detective Spuggler standing in the garage drive, spoke to him in a hard whisper, "It's Cory. Come along."

He led Spuggler to the back lawn,

ound the spot he wanted in the shrubbery, quickly dropped to one knee, pulling the detective down beside him.

"Maybe thirty feet over there"—he pointed the direction—"is a corpse."

"I know," said Spuggler. "I found it first. I threw its hat in the wind in front of your car. I was watching when you came back for a look."

Cory was surprised. In the dark he squeezed Spuggler's arm. "Spug, you're a prince," he said.

They'd waited maybe five minutes when they heard someone walking on the lawn, coming toward them. After a minute, over in the direction of the corpse, the sound of footsteps quit. Cory thumb-popped the flashlight's switch.

A little man stooping over the corpse whirled to face the light. Cory balanced the giant automatic in his right hand, then gasped:

"You, Bub! Holy Doughnuts!"

Roy Bubb stood up, faced the light meekly. "Don't shoot, copper," he said. "I won't run away."

Cory went to him, talking, lashing his words out. "Hard rolls and buttermilk, eh? Coal boats going up and down the river, huh? Murder's a better word for your kind of pastime."

"I never killed anybody," said Bubb, his face livening with astonishment. "I only wanted to help you a little. I says to myself after you left my place to-night, 'That copper's a swell egg,' I says. And thinking I might do you a little good I came here to have a chat with old Bug-eyes."

He paused. Cory said, "Go on, and make it good. It has to be to stick."

"Why, I comes over here, as you see. I slips past the flatfoot on the front, then I slips into the house by the back way. Old Bug-eyes is jabbering with his son on the phone when I find him in the hall. When he puts down the phone I'm right behind him, and I say, 'You fed Mrs. Rose some p'ison along with that medicine you gave her,' I says, 'and I'm going to turn you over to the police.'"

"You're lying," said Cory.

"I am not," said the little rooming house proprietor. "It's a thing I don't do. Things are too indifferent to a guy like me for him to tell lies." He stared at Cory belligerently.

"You try any slick stuff and I'll mess you up," said Cory.

"I wasn't lying to Bug-eyes," said Bubb. "I believe the little dope did p'ison Mrs. Rose, I do truly. And when I accuses him of it, his face goes white and he starts to jabber. 'Please don't do that!' he say. 'What'll my son think?' Then his eyes go queer, filmy like. 'If

you won't,' he says, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll write a confession. I'll put it in writing that I killed two men, two low-lifed thugs.'

"And, by gracious, he does. All about how he shot a man named Rilay. How he fixed him up like Santa Claus and then pops him over for keeps. And how he offers to let a guy named Laggard have a dancing boy from the orphanage if Laggard'll loan him a gun to knock off Santa. And how he pops down Laggard when he comes here for the gun afterwards."

BUBB stopped speaking, smiled a bright little smile, and took a paper from his coat pocket and shoved it at Cory. "Here's his confession, copper."

He paused as Cory took the paper, then said "The reason I'm out here is I was making sure he wasn't stringing me about bumping off these guys, especially the one he said he left on the lawn."

"Where's Dr. Tomsen now?" asked Cory.

"Tied hand and foot in the house, he is," said Bubb. "He didn't seem to mind it a bit when I tied him."

Cory put the flashlight beam on the corpse's dead face. Spuggler said, "Laggard was out to get something for nothing, but this time it worked the other way around."

"Awhile ago," said Cory, "I phoned Tomsen and told him Handy Andy shot left-handed. I figured he'd beat it out here to change the rifle from Andy's right hand to his left. It was a good trick. I still think it would have worked."

They went into the house and found the doctor tied hand and foot like Bubb had said. But he didn't need the cords to keep him now, because he was dead.

"Poison, maybe?" said Spuggler.

"He must have taken it before I phoned," said Cory thoughtfully.

"You're wrong about that," said Bubb. "He received two phone calls. The second one was from his son. I heard him say, 'And you, my own son, would turn me over to the police.'"

Cory looked at Spuggler and shook his head helplessly, grinning.

"He took some pills just after he hung up," Bubb continued. "I thought maybe he had a headache."

"He had a headache, all right," said Cory. He fished the stogie stump from his vest pocket and jammed it between his teeth. "I want to say this. It's about something of my own finding, I hope." He lit the cigar and began puffing out billows of smoke.

"If an old man hadn't lost his glasses
(Continued on Page 70)

Earl Fannin figured out a machine-tooled schedule for murder on the assembly line. But even such belt-line efficiency does not always pay off when . . .

Crime Slips a Cog



By
Bill Morgan

EARL FANNIN stared resentfully at the assembly belt that crawled endlessly like a flat snake along the top of his bench. In another minute he'd have to reach out his hands and insert little chromium valves in each of the knobs riding the back of that snake. A simple task but a distraction; it would draw his mind from the question of how best to face his showdown with Ben Kelsey.

Time was important now. Kelsey was no fool. It wouldn't take him long, once he started working at the plant again, to discover what had been going on for a year and a half. Then the fireworks would start: those returned soldiers were tough customers when it came to the subject of their wives.

A pattern of sweat beads gleamed on Fannin's upper lip as he thought about it. It wasn't enough that he and Eileen

Kelsey had been running together for better than a year now, recklessly and in the open. There was the money Ben had been sending back from the Pacific, to be banked as a post-war nest egg. There were the bonds Eileen had cashed in.

She had shared the cost of the good times they'd had together. She'd bought expensive clothes. She'd even spent some of the money on gifts for Fannin. At the time he'd seen nothing wrong with it, figuring Ben might never return; that the future, in any case, could take care of itself. Now the future was here. Ben had been home for three frightening days.

The moving assembly belt caught Fannin's attention. His minute was up. Little turret-shaped knobs were drifting past now without valves sticking out of their backs.

He scooped valves from the bin and started screwing them in. He didn't stop when he'd caught up with himself, but left his chair and worked backward along

the moving belt until a dozen turrets were valved in advance. That would give him another breathing spell, more time to think about the menace of Ben Kelsey.

He returned to his chair and glanced at the clock above the bench. It was 7:30. He saw the motion over his head, but not in time to move. The sickening thud scattered colored lights through his head, then the night closed in . . .

WHEN Earl Fannin finally opened pain-beared eyes, he had a bad scare. The face that swam above him, slowly blurring and dissolving, suddenly came into clear focus. It was Ben Kelsey. Fannin twisted against the floor, tried to scream.

Hands clutched at him, more hands than could belong to Kelsey or any other one man. A voice said, "Take it easy, lad." The smell of whisky was suddenly raw in his nostrils. He felt the stuff burning his mouth, dribbling on his chin.

"Don't let him get me!" he tried to scream, but with his mouth full of liquor he only produced a choking gurgle that nobody understood. A minute later he was glad of that, because his ideas were beginning to straighten out. Kelsey hadn't done anything to him; his broad face showed too much sympathetic concern. The other men were too quiet and subdued, like they'd witnessed an accident rather than a fight.

The pink face of the company doctor came into view. "You've had a nasty whack, boy, but you're going to be all right. No cause for worry. You've got a good thick skull."

A little later the doctor left. Whitey Dunn, the foreman, sent the other men back to their jobs. Only Ben Kelsey and the foreman remained in the room with Fannin.

"It was the drill press," Dunn was explaining. "We should have pulled it out of here when we tore down the last job, before we started on these supercharger parts. It's a freak anyway, with that out-size control arm. What happened, the bolt came loose that was holding the arm up out of the way. Vibration must've done it. The thing caught you square across the head."

Ben Kelsey smiled wryly at Fannin. "Lucky thing I wasn't supposed to start work today. You got good solid bone there to take the wallop. But me, with a shrapnel groove in my skull—"

Fannin felt the odd twist in his stomach then. He stared with strange intentness at the returned soldier. "When you starting, Ben?"

The uniformed plant policeman came in, interrupting the talk. He handed a

sheet of ruled paper to Whitey Dunn. "Guess that covers it, Whitey, except for the time the thing happened."

"7:35," Dunn said, and took a pencil and jotted it down.

Fannin started to correct him. He caught himself in time and asked a question instead. "How come you know it happened at 7:35?"

"Easy. We know the speed of the assembly belt. We know it takes a unit on that belt exactly ten minutes to leave the place where you're sitting, move through the vent in the wall, and get to the next man on the line. It was 7:45 when the first unit got to him without a valve in it. So you must have been kayoed exactly ten minutes before. Follow me?"

Fannin clamped his mouth shut, remembering how the clock had stood at 7:30 just before he'd passed out. Dunn had missed by five full minutes, because he had no way of knowing that a dozen turrets had been valved in advance. Five minutes: ample time to be somewhere else and have an airtight alibi rigged up.

The blood was surging through his eardrums when, a few moments later, at 8:00 P.M., he quit as usual and hurried away from Building Six. He headed for Schultz's place, a block down from the plant, thinking of Eileen Kelsey and how easily now he could have her for himself, for keeps. How easily he could avoid that unpleasant showdown with her husband.

At Schultz's he had two quick shots of rye to quench the feverish jitters throbbing within him. The idea of murder was something he'd never contemplated before.

Only it wouldn't be murder, he told himself. Not by any means. Murder was something you associated with tabloid newspapers, with fingerprinted guns, and with poisons the police could trace by autopsy. This was something else again, an accident, pure and simple. Neither clues nor suspicion to arouse the Law. What had happened accidentally to one man could happen to another . . .

THE next day, Wednesday, Ben Kelsey started on the night shift. He came in to relieve Fannin at eight o'clock. Men from other parts of the building started dropping in almost immediately to say hello and wish him luck on the job, so Fannin did a quick fadeout. The well-wishers would complicate things. Tomorrow night or the one following would be soon enough.

Thursday morning at eleven Fannin was jarred loose of any idea to postpone the thing further. He was at Schultz's having breakfast and getting his lunch box made up, when Eileen Kelsey came

in. Her yellow hair was uncombed and her lipstick was on crooked, as though she'd applied it in a hurry.

"Let's sit in a booth," she whispered.

Fannin left the counter, frowning. He guided her to the farthest booth in the corner. "What's up, Baby?"

"I'm scared, Earl. He came home this morning and woke me up to ask about the war bonds and the savings account. It was still early, because he doesn't get home till almost five, and—"

Fannin didn't like the drift of things. "You what?"

"I tried to put him off, said I was too sleepy. He wouldn't have it. Said he'd been talking to somebody at the plant about wives who weren't saving the money sent back from overseas. How they were spending it, and running around with other men—"

"So?"

"So he made me go get the box I used to keep the bonds in, and the passbook for the savings account. It—it was awful, Earl. The way he didn't say anything for a long time afterward, the way he just went to the big chair by the window and sat smoking one cigarette after another while it was getting light outside—"

There was an uncomfortable tightness in Fannin's chest. "He didn't—mention any names?"

"Not exactly, but I think he's got an idea. I went back to bed, but I couldn't sleep except for a few minutes at a time. Once when I opened my eyes he was standing over me. He asked if I'd been running around with one of the boys at the plant. I said no, and he told me not to lie. He said he'd find out sooner or later if it was true—"

Abruptly, Fannin swung from the booth, feeling cold inside. Kelsey was catching on too fast. "Gotta be getting to work," he said thickly. "See you later."

He dropped past his room for the pair of pigskin gloves he'd bought last winter. At the plant, in a salvage bin behind the locker room, he found a six-inch length of lead pipe. He put it in his lunch box. Then he checked in at Building Six to sweat out the longest day of his life.

Ben Kelsey relieved him promptly at 8:00, for which he was grateful. He left in a hurry, purposely forgetting the lunch box. Outside, the deepening blue haze of dust was settling over the factory grounds. He went to the outer gate and chatted a while with the plant policeman there, until he saw Whitey Dunn making his final round of the buildings. This was the moment he'd been waiting for.

"Hey, Whitey!" he called, and cut back

to meet him in front of Building Six. "How's about a beer?"

Dunn looked at him quizzically. "Little late for you to be around, isn't it, Fannin?"

"Yeah. Started home and then had to come back. Forgot my lunch box. What time is it, anyway?"

Whitey Dunn pulled out his watch and looked down his nose at it. "Eight fifteen. Time I was getting out of here myself."

"Wait a minute for me," Fannin said. "I'll buy you a beer."

"Just one," the foreman said. "But you'll have to hurry."

Fannin didn't need to be told to hurry. His heart was thumping as he entered the narrow room and heard the door close behind him. "Forgot something," he explained to Kelsey. "Had to come back."

Kelsey nodded over his shoulder, intent on his work. Fannin put on his gloves. "Ben, I tried a new way of doing that today. It works fine. Let me show you."

Before the other could answer, Fannin had scooped a handful of valves from the bin and was screwing them into the turrets, working back along the belt at top speed. When he'd finished twelve of them he stooped under the bench and took the length of pipe from the lunch box.

Kelsey never had a chance to realize what was happening. He got his arm up in a startled attempt to guard his head, but the pipe slugged down with crushing force. A strangled cry died on his lips. He slumped limply forward.

FANNIN replaced the pipe in the lunch box. Quickly, he loosened the bolt that held the arm of the drill press in place. He let it fall, then moved Kelsey so his head was nestling against it. He stuffed the gloves in his pocket, picked up the lunch box, and went out to meet Whitey Dunn.

The Naval Observatory clock at Schultz's said 8:20 when they got there. Dunn performed his usual ritual of checking his watch by it, which saved Fannin the trouble of calling the time to his attention. Fannin was in the clear now. At this precise moment, the last of the valved turrets was crawling past Kelsey's inert body. The police could scrape for clues all they wanted to, but they'd have to conclude Kelsey had been alive until 8:20.

It was eleven minutes later that the alarm bell started clanging down at the plant. Whitey Dunn shoved away from the bar and headed out the door on the run. Fannin sprinted after him and, at

the first clump of bushes he passed, discarded the lunch box.

Inside the grounds, he made the appropriate expressions of shock while a plant policeman was describing the accident to Dunn. A wave of exultation swept over him when he heard the time of the tragedy being settled as 8:20.

Whitey Dunn turned a grief-stricken face to him. "It was my fault, Earl! If I'd had that drill press moved out—"

"I wouldn't feel that way about it," Fannin told him, self-righteously. "Accidents will happen—"

Dunn had turned away, and was running unsteadily across the grounds. Fannin watched him, trying hard not to smile. The way was clear for himself and Eileen Kelsey now. There would be a good-sized settlement from the company.

Voices were being raised now, somewhere around Building Six. Fannin moved toward it. Whitey Dunn came out to meet him, flanked by two plant policemen. Dunn's eyes were blazing with controlled fury. His voice was harsh. "There's your man!"

Fannin's jaw sagged. "Now wait a minute, Whitey!"

Powerful hands dug into his shoulders. Dunn was talking again, biting the

words off short. "You're under arrest for the murder of Ben Kelsey. You had a motive. You'd been running with his wife—"

"You're crazy, Dunn! You said yourself that it happened at 8:20. And we were having beers down at Schultz's at that very moment. It won't work, Whitey—"

"It looked like 8:20 was the right time at first," Dunn grated, "because the first valveless turret came through at 8:30, ten minutes later. That was undoubtedly the way you planned it, Fannin, only there was one difference between your accident and Kelsey's that you overlooked. One difference that'll hang you."

Nausea tugged at Fannin's stomach. He squeezed the words out with effort, "I—I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Your head was normal and solid, so you only got a lump. Kelsey's head had been creased by shrapnel, received in fighting so a rat like you could live in a free country. He'd bled before. He bled when you slugged him, Fannin. The blood is what's going to put the noose around your neck. Because it started dripping on the assembly belt the minute you hit him. It fixes the time of his death at 8:15."

A Slay for Santa Claus

By Davisson Lough

(Continued from Page 66)

while picking an ex-sailor's pocket he'd have been able to read the letter in the ex-sailor's billfold. If he had read the letter he'd have known where to find his daughter and grandson, and wouldn't have been playing Santa Claus in hopes of finding that same grandson. Then he wouldn't have been shot by a little pride-crazy, son-goofy doctor who feared more than anything else in this world that his son might make up with his one-time wife, and—Aw nuts!

"Spuggler, you call headquarters and tell them we've got a pair of stiffies out here and a—little nuisance that eats hard rolls, drinks buttermilk, and butts into the city's business as a favor to a

cop he happens to fancy, and who ought to have—have a medal."

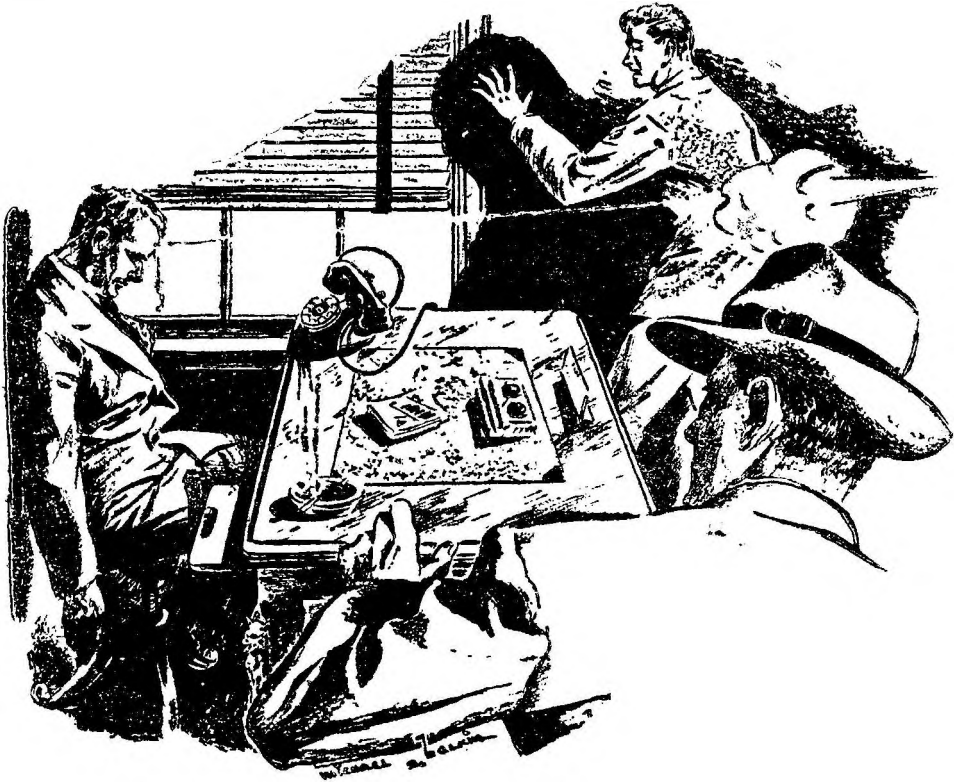
Cory grinned, took out the big handkerchief, looked at it a moment, then loudly blew his nose.

"But what sticks me," said Spuggler, reaching for the phone, "is why the doctor killed Santa Claus."

"I'll tell you why," said Cory. "Santa Claus was about to hand the doctor's son a Christmas gift—a gift of happy reconciliation with the woman he loved, and a son in the bargain. Only the first part of the gift turned out to be sealed—sealed against opening until—until the day Olun Tomsen's body is packaged in the same kind of wrappings."

Midnight Edition Payoff

By Larry Sternig



Gangster guns had blue-penciled Reporter Joe Sears' sizzling crime expose. And Joe knew he must write his next headlines in hot lead language or find his by-line at the bottom of a midnight edition obituary column.

THE wind was cold, up there on the bridge. Off to the left, the lights of the city looked cold, too. And the stars were like icicles in the black sky. The river, I thought, could be colder than any of them, the stars or the lights or the wind.

I shivered. Even with that cheap liquor on me. But only a little. When you've no heart left to fight back, when you've sunk as low in morale as I had, then nothing much mattered except the location of the next beer joint.

I cursed them all again, Reckard and Lawton, and that greasy swine, Kurman. Then I got sick.

As I leaned far over the railing, I had a blurred vision of a coupé parked with the lights off a short distance away. Not that it mattered or that I cared. Not until the girl screamed.

I straightened up, automatically. But only for a moment. Then I heard the staccato click of high heels on the walk and the girl shrieking, "Mr. Sears, don't, please!"

That got me, hearing my name. I straightened up again, leaned dazedly against the railing. Hell, she must've thought I was going to jump! She clung to my arm, trembling, pale. Then she fainted.

I stared down at her stupidly. I was weak, sick. But I couldn't let her lie there. I don't know how I managed it, but we were in the car finally, when she came to.

She shuddered and said in a strained voice, "Couldn't—couldn't we go someplace where we can talk? It's so cold here."

I just nodded, too confused to understand or care.

We found a coffee spot nearby. I hesitated at the door. I hadn't shaved for days and my clothes were a sodden mess. But she had me by the arm.

The first thing I smelled was coffee and my stomach began to growl. We went back to a booth in the rear.

"Coffee," the girl ordered. She glanced at me. "Black—and a bowl of soup."

My eyes went to her face. She was dark and intense. Not pretty in a pin-up fashion, but alive and disturbing. Damned disturbing.

She seemed to have gotten hold of herself. Her voice was calm, steady. She said, "I'm Betty Reckard."

The waitress had put the soup in front of me, and I suddenly remembered that I hadn't eaten since I started drinking. But I didn't touch it. I just stared at her.

"Reckard?" I said hoarsely.

She nodded.

"The daughter of that—"

She winced, but her eyes held mine squarely. "The daughter of your old boss." She paused. "Dad fired you because of me, not because of the libel suit. I found that out today. I've been searching for you since. I trailed you from the last tavern, saw you head for the bridge."

I started to get up. "I've had my fill of your family."

Her eyes flashed just a trifle, and I sat down again. One bit of exhibitionism was enough for one evening. I said, "What do you want from me?"

"First of all, faith."

I laughed at that. "I had it on the battlefields, before I came to this town."

"Maybe I'd better hear your story first," she said calmly.

I TOLD her. I don't know why. I was still a little drunk and plenty bitter. It helped to talk. I told her how I'd come to this rotten town, just a hopeful vet with a flair for putting words together; how I'd landed with her dad's paper.

"In a few months I was right up there," I said. "The young crusader. Well. I guess you know Kurman as well as I do, how he runs practically everything in town."

She nodded.

"Nobody could ever pin a thing on him, but I really worked, never less than twelve hours a day. And in six months, I had a case, air-tight, foolproof. I took it to your dad, every bit of evidence. He turned it over to Lawton. And we began our series on Kurman."

The girl nodded. "And he sued for libel."

"Sure. Just the thing he wanted. We went to court with our evidence, my evidence."

"And you lost."

"We lost. Lawton bungled it. I was fired, washed up in the newspaper game. Then I went on a drunk, my first."

She said, "And tonight—"

"Tonight I didn't care what happened. I was ready to drop the whole stinking mess and go into some business with a future. But I guess it was the liquor."

"You've work to do now," she said.

I started to object, but she silenced me. "Dad has more physical courage than any man I know. But he was afraid of Kurman because Kurman's thugs threatened to get me if he didn't blackball you. That's one place Dad can't take it."

"And what about the evidence?"

"Lawton's office was ransacked, the incriminating material stolen."

"It's a good yarn, even if it isn't true," I said bitterly. "So now what?"

"Dad wants to see you. To apologize—and to ask you to come back to your job and try again."

I looked at her and began to regain some of my faith in humanity. "That would be your work," I said.

"Maybe." Her smile gave me a lift.

I went to work on my soup then. Also a hot beef sandwich and about a gallon of black coffee. I felt like a man again when we got up to leave, even if I didn't look like one.

Outside, as the coupé swung away from the curb, I caught a glimpse of a

big sedan parked behind us, the lights dimmed. It started as we did. I glanced back when we reached the corner street light. 333C22 was the tag number. I'd remember that one.

The girl asked, "Have we company?" I nodded.

She stepped on the accelerator. The coupé began to sing. We took the next corner on two wheels. The sedan wasn't far behind.

The pavement had been sprinkled here, and the girl did something that surprised me. She double-clutched that heavy coupé into second, jammed the accelerator wide open and we went into a power spin. The world teetered, the tires screeched—and we were careening the opposite way.

My heart was up around the roof of my mouth somewhere, but I was feeling more respect for Betty Reckard every minute.

WE DIDN'T talk much on the way out. As she swung into the gravel drive leading to the Reckard home, she said, "Dad will be glad to see you."

"I hope."

The big house was a blaze of lights. I could feel Betty tense in the seat beside me. I shuddered.

Then, as she stopped before the garage doors, we saw the squad cars. We left the coupé and started to run.

The butler met us at the door.

"What's happened?" Betty was pale, close to hysteria.

"Your father—" he faltered, choking on the words.

Betty gasped. I turned my eyes from her stricken face, and glanced into the living room. There were more cops in there. One of them turned, saw Betty, and approached.

"Dad?" Betty asked fearfully. "Is he—"

Then she saw the M. E. come from the other room, his little bag in his hand. For the second time that evening, she fainted.

I was burning plenty as I barged into Reckard's study. A reporter from the *Journal* was in there and his eyes were wet. Reckard was on a couch, covered by a blanket.

The reporter stared at me queerly. "Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "Joe Sears! I didn't recognize you."



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That wasn't strange, I said, "How did it happen?"

"He had a phone call. He called for his car and was waiting for it outside. He was shot with a rifle, a .30-30."

"You can't report that Kurman had anything to do with this," I snarled. "That would be libel. Just write that the police deny there is any proof that Kurman's mob would even think of it."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I'll do everything but draw a diagram."

When I went back into the living room, old Doc Forester, the M. E., was leading Betty up the stairs.

Sam Dallas, the head of Homicide, called me over. "Know anything about this, Joe?"

"Sure," I said, "one of Kurman's rats did it."

Sam shook his grey-streaked head. "You couldn't prove that, Joe."

"No, not tonight," I admitted. "Maybe the City Hall boys wouldn't want me to, Sam."

He winced. Sam Dallas was an honest cop and a competent one. But he was working under great difficulties—a boss who was on the verge of retirement and outside interference. Rotten politics can play havoc with law enforcement when the department lacks leadership.

Sam growled, "If you're suggesting that Vaughn runs the department—"

"Handicaps is the word, Sam," I said.

It was no secret that Arnold Vaughn, political big-wig, had plenty of say-so downtown. He headed a pressure group that controlled practically everything in the city. And if Vaughn wasn't hand in glove with Kurman, I was the world's worst reporter.

I hooked a ride back to town with one of the scribes. I went to my apartment, took a hot bath, and went to bed.

But I didn't sleep. I kept thinking of Reckard. He had broken me, but he'd made me, too. And before I hated him I loved him like a father.

I was going to get his murderer. And, more, I was going to get the combination of men who'd made his death possible. And something else I was going to discard any ethics I may have had until this mess was cleaned up. It was, I knew, that little word "ethics" which made it difficult for honest men to handle crooks.

In the morning, I put on fresh clothes, sent my other suit out to the cleaner's,

and got a haircut and shave. I looked almost presentable when I dropped in at the City Hall. I went straight to Vaughn's office.

I wanted. I told him, a permit to carry a gun.

His fat face creased in a smile. "Another crusade, Joe?"

I ignored that. "Do I get it?"

He shrugged his huge shoulders. "Why come to me? Why don't you try—"

"Don't be funny," I said bitterly. "I couldn't even get a dog catcher's license in this town without your okay."

He liked that. I thought I was going to have my way by the sudden swelling of his gross chest, but then he shook his head. "No, Joe. The police force is doing all right. They won't need your help."

I tried a little pressure then, something he could understand. "Is your wife jealous, Vaughn?" I asked.

His flaccid face stiffened, and his pudgy hands gripped the edge of his desk.

"That little blonde on Garden Street—" I hinted.

His voice rasped. "You win—this time."

Sam Dallas let me borrow a gun. It was a little Colt, a .32 pocket positive. Fully concealed, but deadly.

Then I went down to the Journal Building, told them I was back on the payroll, and wangled an advance.

THAT license number of the evening before was still in my memory. I checked it at the traffic bureau. It was a sedan belonging to one Rosario Bonzelli. I jotted down the address. He'd probably been one of the tailing party last night. The boys wouldn't use a hot car for anything as tame as that.

The address proved to be a combination junk and hock shop. Probably a fence. There was the sound of an electric drill in a back room. Pretty soon an oily little rat came out.

"I'm looking for Rosario Bonzelli," I said.

His eyes were blank. "That's me."

I reached over and slapped his face, hard. He staggered, and his hand darted for an armpit holster.

I said, "If you pull that on me, I'll kill you."

He hesitated, glancing at the phone. "If you're thinking of calling for help,"

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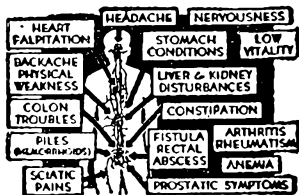
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I told him, "don't forget to ask for Vaughn. He knows me well."

He was trembling, his face white. "What's the game?" he snarled. I reached over, jerked him close with one hand, relieved him of his gun with the other. Then I slapped him again. He whimpered in impotent rage.

"All I want from you is information," I snapped.

He swore.

I said, "You have a very narrow forehead, but not too narrow for a bullet hole." The little .32 was bulging in my pocket. He quieted down then.

"Last night, when I drove home with Miss Reckard, you tailed us in your car. Why?"

"You're nuts," he said.

This time I hit him with my fist. He slammed up against the wall and his head bounced off the edge of one of the shelves. He slumped to the floor, blood trickling from a corner of his mouth. I had a hunch.

I stepped into the back room. It was quite an arsenal, cluttered with guns and ammunition of all kinds. Then I spotted the rifle in a vise. He'd been working on it when I came in. The barrel had been sawed off. He'd just started to drill into the rifling.

I examined it closely and my heart skipped a beat. It was a .30-30!

Bonzelli stirred as I returned. My hand gripped the .32 in my pocket. I had all I could do to keep from shooting the little rat.

"So you killed Reckard?" I snapped. "And now you were going to destroy the gun."

He shook his head, his eyes on my right hand.

"Reckard was my friend," I said, pulling the gun from my pocket. "Rubbing you out will be a pleasure."

His rage had turned to terror. "No!" he squealed. "A guy brought it in, told me to junk it. It was a job."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Never saw him before."

I pulled the hammer back and aimed the gun in a line between his eyes. I tried my best to look like a ruthless executioner. I didn't have to think very far back to make my act convincing. It worked.

"Sloan," the little rat gasped.

I nodded and lowered my gun. The an-

swer seemed reasonable. Bat Sloan was Kurman's ace killer. "Where is Sloan now?"

The punk was shaking his head and sobbing. I'd have felt sorry for him if I didn't know that a gun in his hand would give him all the courage he needed. I left him to his tears and took a cab back to headquarters. Sam Dallas would have the dope.

I told him to pick up Bonzelli and asked about Sloan. "You might try Kurman's night spot," he suggested. Then, "The paper has been calling every half hour. You better take a run over."

WHEN the city editor saw me, he gestured toward Reckard's private office. "Miss Reckard wants to see you."

Betty was sitting in her dad's chair. Her face was ghostly, her eyes red. Lawton was there too, his thin grey face hard.

Betty said, "Go after Kurman. Draw whatever you need." Her voice was weird, frightening.

Lawton rasped, "And if I miss this time—" He didn't finish. We knew how he felt. He'd been Reckard's friend for years.

"This will never get to court," I said.

They both looked at me strangely.

"I'm not taking any chances this time. It's Kurman again. I found that out today. And I know the man who did it. I'm going after him tonight."

"You—you'll be careful, Joe?" Betty pleaded. "You won't do anything rash?"

I said, "Don't worry. Everything'll be strictly legitimate."

I didn't know if the darned things worked, but I borrowed a bulletproof vest from a gadgeteer friend. And I rented a car. Then I wrote my story about Bonzelli's confession. It would be in the next edition, if confirmed by Sam Dallas.

Kurman's night spot was half in, half out of the city limits. The gambling was outside, the dancing inside.

I went straight past the deserted dance floor to Kurman's office. I knocked and someone said, "Come in."

He was sitting behind a swanky flat-topped desk, a well-tailored, well-manicured toad. He looked up and his eyes went wide.

"Joey Sears!" he piped. "I ain't seen you since we made a sap of you in court!"

He was smiling. Then he saw the gun in my hand. His smile seemed to freeze.



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"Don't do anything foolish, Joey," he warned. "The law is the law."

"And murder is murder. Where's Sloan?"

"Sloan?" he asked blankly.

"Yeah, your executioner. We've got the gun and the tie-up. Where's he?"

Kurman was staring at me, his thin lips compressed. I should have been warned, but I wasn't. There was a faint sound to my left.

I turned and there was an explosion. Something tore into my side. It spun me around and slammed me, face first, into the wall. My side felt like someone had slugged me with a mallet. At least one rib was broken.

Sloan stood in the closet doorway, a smoking gun in his fist. He lifted it again—and a heavy caliber revolver roared from the open doorway. Bat Sloan turned and stared, and so did I.

It was Vaughn, a heavy automatic in one fat hand. Kurman had tilted backwards; his chair jammed against the wall. He had a big hole in his forehead.

Vaughn said, "You better get going, Bat. Unless you want to witness that this crazy reporter killed your boss." He'd picked up my gun and was wiping the butt of his own with a handkerchief.

I was framed, but good. The combine was out to get me; this time for keeps. But I couldn't tie in the murder of Kurman; I'd figured he was the backbone of the organization.

Sloan grumbled, "This guy knows too much to go to court."

I got up, rubbing my side. My mind was a red mist of hate.

"Just what I had in mind," Vaughn said. "He could be shot trying to escape." He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket with his left hand, shook one out and picked up a lighter from Kurman's desk. I'd seen casual killers before, but not like this.

I wondered how Vaughn knew I was coming out here. Kurman hadn't. His surprise had been genuine.

Sloan rasped, "What're you waiting for?"

Vaughn shrugged, lifted his gun easily. I tried to garner some semblance of courage, but I was sweating it out.

VAUGHN smiled as he pointed the gun. Then, from the shadow of the ballroom, a voice said, "Take it easy."

It was Sam Dallas. And someone else, a thin hard-bitten gent. They stepped in, and their guns looked deadly.

"My pal here is a Fed." Sam nodded toward the thin man. "We didn't want Joe to be alone. We got here in time to hear the conversation." He glanced at Sloan. "The prints on that gun are yours, all right."

The boys gave up then, and Sam shackled them together. He picked up the little .32 Colt.

"I guess you won't be needing this any more, Joe."

But I wasn't so sure. The picture had a flaw. Kurman killed by Vaughn. Why? To frame me? Not by killing the boss. And neither Vaughn nor Sloan looked too worried. Someone else was back of this; someone big.

I turned to Sam. "Did you tell Vaughn I was coming here?"

He shook his head. "Of course not, Joe. I told you once before that Vaughn didn't run the department."

I had the answer then. "The gun—I'll be needing it, Sam."

He looked puzzled.

"Trust me," I urged. "You're doing swell. They'll have to appoint you chief when this is over."

I made the clunk boil on the way back to town. There were only three people who knew I was going out to Kurman's. And Sam hadn't told.

I pulled up before the towering tenement house fifteen minutes later. After checking the directory, I went up on the automatic elevator to the ninth floor. My mind was working all the while. I tried to plan some approach, something that would trap him into a confession. A direct accusation would be futile because I had absolutely no proof. All I had was my own belief in his guilt.

I knocked on the door of 912.

It opened. Lawton stood there in a dressing gown. His eyes widened and a shadow flicked across his face. "What's happened, Sears?"

"Kurman has been killed," I said.

I could have sworn that his look of surprise was feigned. He motioned me in. I had my hand in my pocket, around the butt of the gun. He waved me to a chair.

"Perhaps," he said, "it's better than trying to get him to court again. Did you do it?"

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I shook my head. "Vaughn. He's been shot, too." I was watching his eyes. "He told me, before he died."

"Told you?" A bare trace of panic came to those calm grey eyes. "Told you what?"

I was sure now. I said softly, "Told me about you."

His face was white. For a moment he was speechless. I kept hammering at him.

"You needn't fear me. You know how I felt about Reckard, Vaughn, and Kurman. All I want is my cut."

He found words, finally. "You're talking nonsense," he snapped.

"Don't kid me, Lawton. I always thought there was someone higher than Kurman, someone with intelligence. It was too smooth an organization. Tonight you proved that. Kurman was too hot. So you sent your City Hall stooge to kill him; frame me. You and Betty were the only ones who knew I was going out there tonight."

"More nonsense," he snorted.

"Okay," I said. "It doesn't matter to me. I can go to Betty with this and set myself for life. I don't need you."

He thought then that I held all the cards. He said, "You're smart, too smart." The fear left his eyes and the greed came back. "What's your price?"

I laughed. It felt good to laugh again, and I might have overdone it. "To see you in hell," I said.

He half rose from his chair. "Whaaat—?"

"That's my price—to sit in court and watch you squirm."

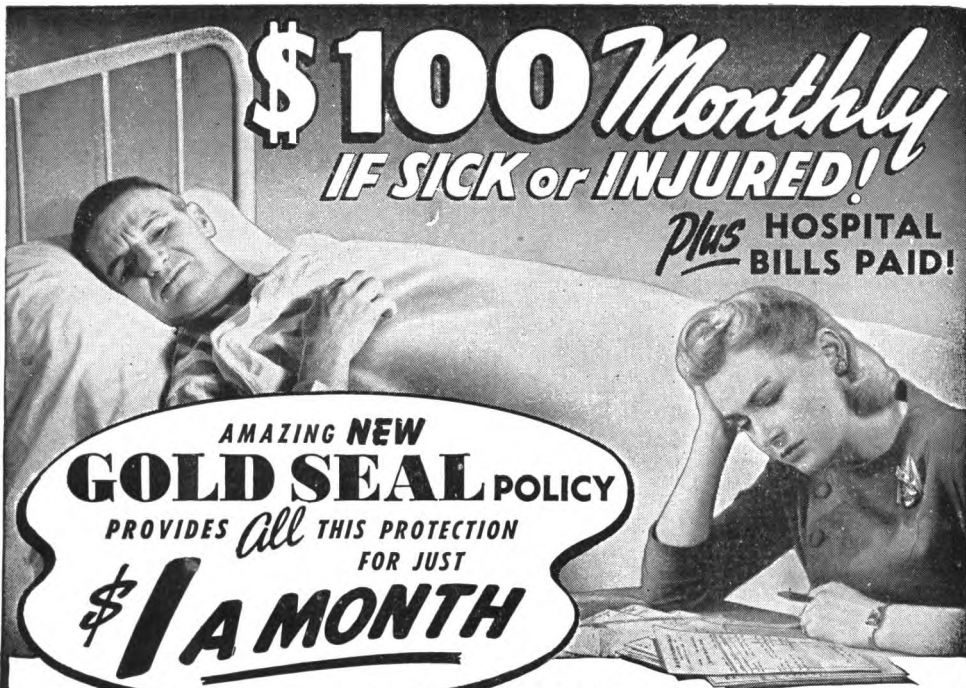
He knew he'd been tricked then. His face was distorted hideously. His hand came out from his gown pocket and it held a short barreled .22 revolver.

With my bulletproof vest, I was fairly safe from the pea shooter. Unless he aimed for my head. But I wasn't giving him the chance. He missed. I didn't.

The slug caught him in the shoulder and he spun, the little .22 flying through the air. As he started to rise, I conked him with my gun . . .

It was nice, landing such a sensational story my first day back on the job. And Vaughn confirmed it—after the proper amount of coaxing.

We'll all miss Reckard, of course. And most of all the paper will miss him. But Betty and I, and some competent editors, are running it only a little under par.



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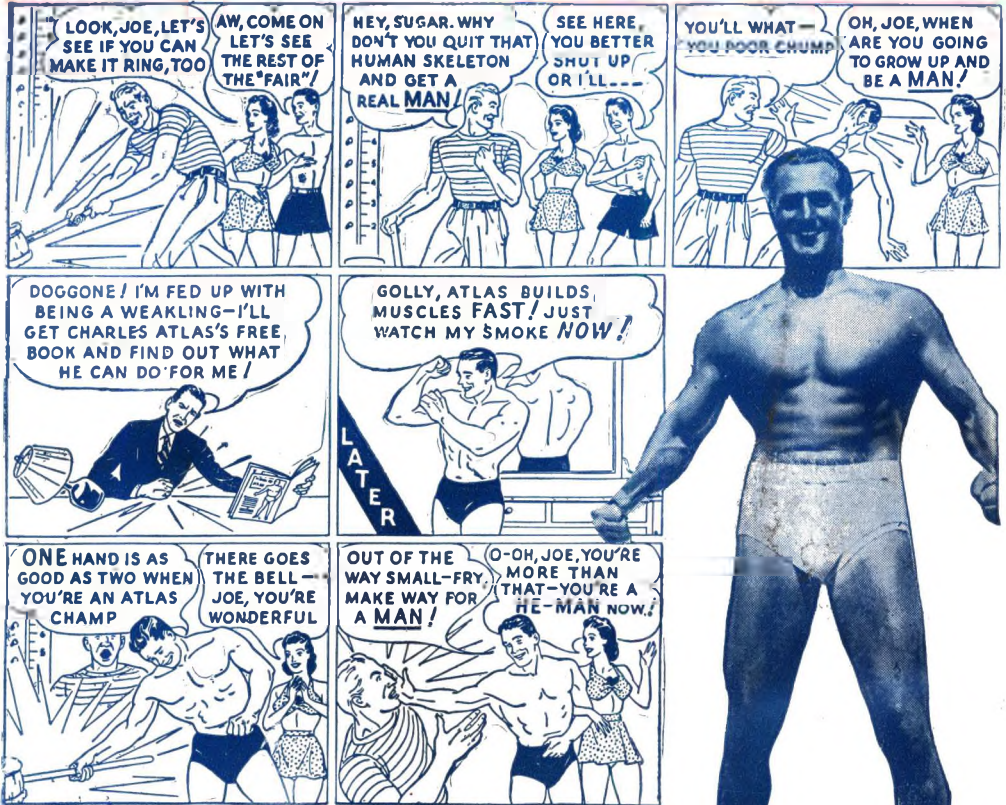
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