

15 STORY DETECTIVE



25¢

APR.



**YOU ONLY
DIE TWICE**

by **DONN
MULLALLY**

AND MANY
OTHERS

**TWO'S COMPANY—
THREE'S A SHROUD**

by **BURT SIMS**

PIGSKIN PATSY

by **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

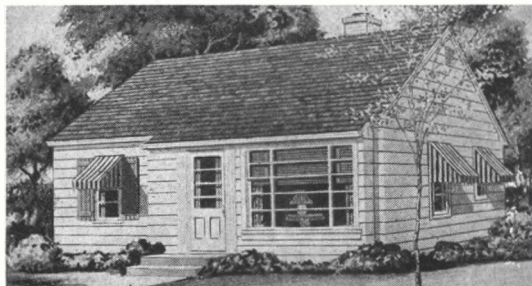
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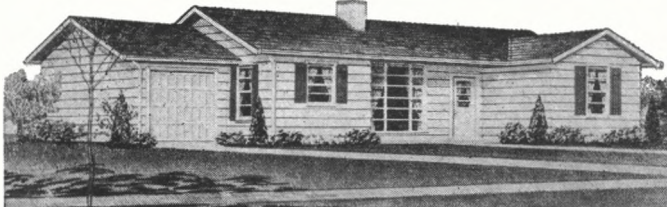


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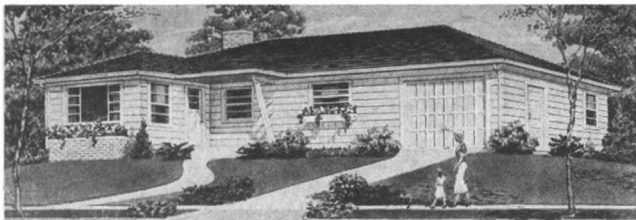
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15 STORY DETECTIVE

25c



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April, 1950

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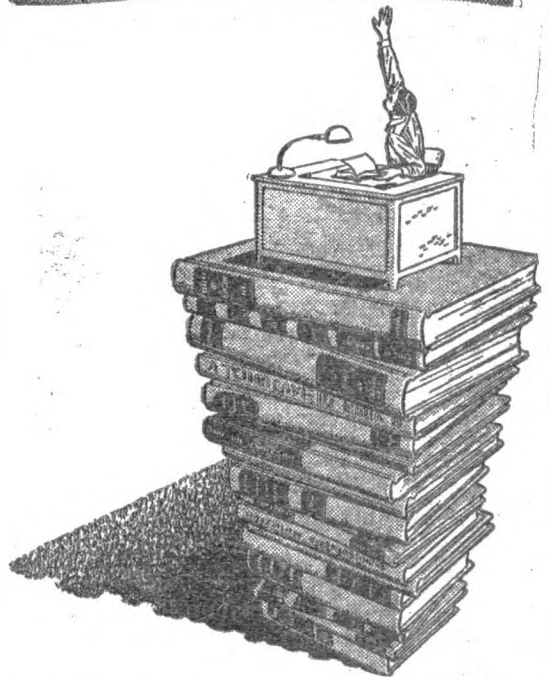
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PLEASE PASS THE POISON

THERE are obvious killers—and then again, there are some Very Unlikely People. There is a difference. Some killers are not in the least unlikely; they're born to their skills as to their death-beds. And, of course, many Very Unlikely People never commit any crime at all. But sometimes you get a combination of VUP and assassin all wrapped up in one king-size economy package—and you've got mayhem!

One of the finest VUPs of all time was Dr. Erich Muentner.

One of the peculiarities of VUPs is that they have souls, generally in some graspable form. Things began to pop when Dr. Muentner took a good, long look at his. It seemed so much a part of him that he couldn't possibly see how it would ever be rid of him in the event he died. As long as any part of him remained in organic form, no matter how decayed, his soul would have to hang around. It was a depressing contingency, one that required immediate attention, and it did not take him long to arrive at a solution.

Cremation—it was enough to burn a person up! Ashes are inorganic—ergo, the soul is free!

The thought was beautiful—or was it?

As is often the case with a married man with a problem, Dr. Muentner's thoughts turned almost automatically to his wife. Naturally, in this particular instance, there was no sense in taking her into his confidence. When one is about to liberate the soul of the party of the second part, it should always be a delightful surprise.

Besides, looking the situation over, it seemed to Muentner she had already done her part by contributing him a reasonable chance of getting away with what many people would undoubtedly regard as murder. Mrs. Muentner was about to have a baby, and women frequently died in

childbirth. Of course, he could take a chance on the natural course of events. On the other hand—why risk it?

Dr. Muentner embarked upon his project with enthusiasm. If his wife had ever had any craving for arsenic, he satisfied her.

She, however, upset his schedule by dying several days after her child was born, and by exhibiting symptoms which so outraged her physician that he demanded an autopsy. Dr. Muentner met this crisis with a courteous flourish in the general direction of the Cambridge officialdom, as much as to suggest they help themselves. The medical branch of the police took the dead woman's vital organs and withdrew, in some uncertainty and confusion, to examine them at leisure.

It was merely unlikely.

Dr. Muentner realized immediately that the jig was up. He had partly foreseen such a contingency, and now acted with a brilliant presence of mind and dazzling simlicity. He collected such parts of Mrs. Muentner as the police had found non-vital to their research, transported them and himself to Chicago where he cremated her body. He then changed his name to Frank Hope.

As Frank Hope, he was calm and intelligent enough not to fool around with trying to establish a brand new background and personality; such mistakes often trip the criminal. He merely got in touch with Cornell University under his new alias, representing himself as an expert on Romance languages—which he was—and expressing himself as qualified and willing to accept a professorship.

But as the scholarly semesters piled upon one another, quietly uneventful, the good professor once more felt the stirrings of an urge to do somebody some good; an unkind way to put it might be—do

(Please continue on page 128)



IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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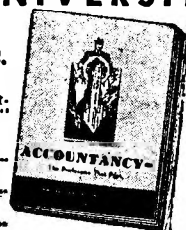
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TWO'S COMPANY—

CHAPTER ONE

Blonde and Luscious!

By **BURT**
SIMS

LOU had said the horse couldn't lose. He was sharp and willing. But as I stood there in the howling mob, watching the pack thunder across the finish line, the horse 'with my next to last ten bucks' looked as sharp as a marble, as willing as a hangman's guest.

He came galloping along as though wondering which way the others had gone. I couldn't blame the jockey, except maybe for dragging his feet on the turns. But my affection for Lou Klein, the gambler, was the affection you'd have for fuel oil on your oatmeal. I was turning away when a hard, quiet voice said, "You guard bodies?"

I glanced up in surprise. "Live ones,"



THREE'S A SHROUD

I said, studying him. "All the dead ones I get I give to the cops."

He showed his teeth. "You're quick."

He was of medium height, but the shoulders of his expensive gray flannel were very broad. He was rugged, and there was a calculating look about his eyes that indicated he had seen more than the average citizen, and possibly had figured a sharp way to get along. We started toward the bar.

"If you'll pardon me just a second."

I said, "I'll improve the breed another ten dollars worth."

I pushed my last piece of currency through the wicket for a win ticket on a beetle named Easy Go. This was my own selection—no tips from Lou Klein, no horoscope consultation, no eavesdropping in the paddock. Easy Go was a longshot. Sucker bait. But private investigators make a living by guesswork.

As we took a table in the bar I said, "Why did you pick me?"

"What's the difference?" he asked shortly.

"Sometimes I get paid for being curious. Maybe it's becoming a habit."

He grunted. "I was talking to a guy we both know. I mentioned I needed someone for a job. He pointed you out."

"The guy?"

"Lou Klein."

Lou knows a lot of people, as well as a few horses. Some are nice; some aren't. It's an even bet.

We ordered, and as the waiter departed my new chum suddenly got to his feet. "Back in a minute," he said curtly.

I turned, and watched him intercept something tall, blonde and luscious just as she entered the bar. Her face was faintly familiar, but I couldn't find a place card for it. He took her arm, and said something. She shrugged, and they went out. She hadn't seen me with her boyfriend, I was sure, and I wondered if that hadn't been his idea.

The waiter un-trayed our drinks. He's a good waiter. He inquired politely, "Something else, Mr. Morgan?"

"I guess not, Dennis."

He emptied the ash tray, wrote out a check. He said, "You aren't Mr. Wilkins from Detroit, are you, Mr. Morgan?"

I stared. "Why, no. I'm Mr. Broke from playing the horses, remember? . . . What is this; a word game?"

He smiled slightly. "A gentleman at the bar asked if you were Mr. Wilkins. He thought perhaps he knew you."

"Why didn't he ask me?"

"I'm sure he just wanted to know who you really are."

"So you told him what?"

"I told him I didn't know you." Dennis glanced toward the bar. "That's the one. The brown suit."

He was a heavy-set man, middle-aged, somewhat gray at the temples, somewhat ruddy at the nose. He looked like he might have been a banker from Des Moines. I walked over and stood in front of him. "I understand you wanted to see me?"

He stared coolly. "I don't believe so. Some mistake."

"Your's, maybe. What's your racket, friend?"

He put his back to the bar, and a patient expression came to his face. "What are you trying to do; impersonate a junior hoodlum? Your tone is rather rough. I don't particularly like attempts at intimidation."

And with that he jammed my hat down over my eyes.

I knew it would take quite a jerk to get it off. It did—and I was. I felt as foolish as a guy whose suspenders had busted during a dance contest. When I could see again, the banker type was strolling out the door. I let him go. Maybe he really was looking for a Mr. Wilkins from Detroit. Besides, it was my only hat.

I WENT back and sat down, trying to ignore the curious glances. In a few moments, my hard-faced chum returned. Something about the cut of his coat made me wonder. I shelved the thought, and said, "Suppose we get our wheels up. The name is Clint Morgan. Private investigator, it says on the license."

"I heard," he said dryly. "I'm Jake Left."

"Left?"

"Right." He didn't smile.

"Now, that's a snappy routine. I'll bet we would wow 'em in Chautauqua."

It bounced off him like buckshot off steel. He said, "You know show business?"

"I used to buy midnight lunches for an Earl Carroll girl. And, now and then, write a review when the drama editor drafted me into it."

"Lou said you had been a police reporter."

I nodded. That had been my assignment for a few years, until I decided the private investigators in our weird town were doing less work and getting paid more. I had managed to pass the examinations, and had seen a lot of movies, and had belabored my way through a few easy cases. But let's face it. What I didn't know about the business would have filled a five-foot shelf, but there was no point in cutting myself off at the wallet. If I took his case he'd get his money's worth in effort.

"It doesn't matter much," he was saying, "only this is sort of a show business job I had in mind."

"I'm a little stiff for chorus work. And I couldn't carry a tune in a barrel. I could possibly be top man in a pyramid act."

He said dryly, "You're a clown."

"Not for laughs," I retorted. "I'm just trying to get you to the point. Where's the body you want guarded—cash in advance?"

He studied his cigaret. I noted the pause. He still wasn't sure how he should treat the subject. It must be a touchy job. "I'll take care of you," he said.

"Just pay me," I told him. "I'll take care of myself."

From the loudspeaker above the bar came a metallic, disinterested voice, "The horses are on the track . . ."

"I know a girl named Dawn Layne," Jake Left was twisting a match in his thick fingers. "A singer. Very good. Maybe you know her."

I had found a place card for the girl who had come looking for him. "Someday there'll be a singer who'll admit her name is Sophie Glockenspiel—The Prince Club. I've seen the ads. That place is off my beat."

"I want you to keep your eye on her for a few nights. Keep anybody from bothering her."

"Who'd want to?"

"The horses are nearing the starting gate," remarked the loudspeaker. I cocked one ear at it, thinking about Easy Go and my last ten dollars.

"I know another girl," Left said slowly. "She's mentioned carbolic acid."

I drained my glass, and started to get up. "Thanks for the drink, Jake. It's been swell."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"Take it to the cops. I don't want a jealous female burning off my one good suit with carbolic."

"It's only for a couple of days," he protested. "Then Dawn's going back to Detroit. Why bother the cops with a little thing like a couple of days?"

DETROIT was getting to be a very popular town. I settled back. "Or a little thing like mayhem?" I made wet rings with the glass, and thought about the full cut of his coat. "Jake, why'd you quit packing the gun you had that suit built for?"

He inhaled slowly, and his face was inscrutable. "Yeah, you're quick," he said. "Lightweights always have to be quick."

"Cops wouldn't give you a pistol permit, eh? Maybe you have a record."

His jaw muscles hardened. "Maybe your lip flaps too much."

"So you have to hire someone to watch Dawn Layne for you," I went on, "because you can't carry a gun to protect her yourself."

He scowled, and for a moment I thought he would leave. I thought, too, about the fee leaving with him, and was regretful. But the prospective job suited me like a fat man's belt suits a midget—I had no stomach for it.

He said, "I've told you how it is. . . . I take Dawn to the club. I take her home. All you have to do is guard her dressing room for a couple of hours each night. If you don't want the job, say so."

I was on the point of saying so when the loudspeaker cut in with, "And—there they go!"

I thought, If Easy Go wins, like a nice, well-behaved horse who loves suckers, I can tell this Jake Left to go take a walk. I won't need his money. I said, "Let's have reverent silence, please. My bank-roll is running."

"Into the stretch," said the loudspeaker, and there was electricity in the air. "It's Fair Friend in front by two lengths—and on the outside, here comes Easy Go!"

Jake Left wore a crooked smile. "Don't breathe," I said. "That's me, and many dollars."

"It's Fair Friend and Easy Go. It's Easy Go and Fair Friend," barked the speaker, as though he couldn't believe it, either.

And that's the way they finished. Easy Go had closed at ten to one. I had a hundred dollars, and Jake Left needed another boy.

I straightened, and at that moment my brain let go of the dollar sign and adopted

another thought. I had needed money the way a wagon needs wheels. I couldn't go far without it. Now I had money—but the new thought reminded me that I needed something else, and had needed it for some time.

Call it encouragement, revival of interest or confirmation. But I had been wondering whether I belonged in this crazy business, sometimes up, sometimes not up, acting as a check-room attendant for trouble. Perhaps I should blow out my brains and go back to being a police reporter. Here, simply was a chance to find out. Because underneath Jake Left's studied casualness I had caught a hint there was more to this than I was being told.

"Morgan," he said, "it's such a simple thing."

"Yeah. Real simple. Like sticking my neck under an axe. Makes me hate to take your money."

"Really?"

"No," I said, and couldn't shake the feeling I had just swallowed a hook. He handed me two twenties and a ten, and the hook tasted a little better, even if he did act as though he were pitching crumbs to a pigeon.

"Be there at ten tonight."

"You'll recognize me," I said. "I'll be the one in the acid-proof armor."

He frowned. "One more thing. Don't tell Dawn about this. That's why I hustled her out of here. I didn't want her to see us together. No point in worrying her."

"Or letting her know about the other girl," I said. "That's just dandy. What am I supposed to do; blend into the woodwork? Or are there always bodyguards around her dressing room?"

"You make everything tough, don't you? I don't care how you do it, Morgan. Just do it." He left.

I watched him go, wondering about many things, and couldn't help but think

that Jake Left, my new client, had been about as helpful as a split lip to a trumpet player.

CHAPTER TWO

Hole in the Head

IF YOU'RE the champagne and caviar type, the Prince Club might very well be one of your favorite play-spots. It's a sophisticated, semi-exclusive place with a low ceiling over the customers, dim lights, built-in cigaret smoke and voices louder than the floor show.

But if you're the beer and peanuts type, like a certain Clint Morgan who shall remain nameless, even entering the place through the rear door might give you an inferiority complex.

Unless, of course, you wore white tie and tails.

The wizened little man just inside the vestibule door had shrewd, kindly eyes. He sat behind a large table with nothing on it except his feet, and surveyed my evening attire with respect.

"My name is Morgan. Fire Department—special detail," I went on brusquely, giving him a fast and wholly unrevealing glimpse of my private investigator's badge.

He took his feet off the table and got up. "We ain't had any fires, Mr. Morgan."

"Inspector Morgan," I said, in a clipped tone. "I know that, Pop. Just checking up. I want to see your fire extinguishers, the exits, conditions in the dressing rooms. It's just routine, but it may take a couple of nights. I'll have to tabulate the traffic through the doors of the dressing rooms." I tried to sound authoritative. "That's important."

"Yes, sir," he said respectfully, although his face was bewildered.

I had to get the layout of the place, and locate Dawn Layne's dressing room

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without raising a crop of questions. "Show me around back here."

We went through another door which opened into a long hall. The Prince Club had plenty of glamor and glitter for the paying customers—but none of it had been spread around the dressing rooms.

The hall had a couple of unshaded bulbs, walls decorated with nothing but faded paper and a pay telephone, and a well-worn carpet. It was an L-shaped hall, coming in from my right, making a corner and stretching a longer distance in front of me. It ended at a heavy curtain. Beyond that were the people who could afford it.

"All right, Pop," I began briskly. "How many people use these rooms?"

He scratched his bald spot. "I figure about 22, counting the musicians." He pointed down the short hall to our right. "The far one is empty. Then this one, right here near the corner, that's Joey Moore, the comedian. In the six rooms in the big hall there's Miss Layne . . ."

"Which rooms for which people, if you please."

"Yes, sir—Well, on the right side of the hall, Miss Layne has this first one, just around the corner from Joey Moore. Next to her on the other side is the countess—"

"Countess?"

"Countess Von Berolberg," he explained. "Plays classic piano. Then the end one on the right side, that's for six of the girls."

"Fine. And these three on the left side?"

"The Norris Twins," he answered, "in the first one."

"Guy and a girl?"

He shook his head. "Two young fellas. Dancers. Very nice. Then the middle one is for four more of the girls. And the one at the end, the musicians use that. There's seven of 'em."

"Okay, Pop. I'll just watch the traffic."

His head bobbed. "If you want anything, Inspector, just let me know." He turned away, then stepped aside as a couple of girls hurried through the door. They greeted him, and went down the long hall. At their dressing room door, one of them, the little brunette, looked back. I guessed it was the white tie and tails.

I PARKED on a wooden chair about midway down the hall, and tried to look as though I belonged there.

It was nearly ten o'clock. The first floor show would begin in half an hour, and the hall traffic was getting busier—and interesting. More of them arrived, along with a haughty-looking old crone I guessed was the Countess Von Berolberg. She glanced at me sharply, and her long, thin nose wrinkled a little, like a bloodhound catching scent. Then her eyes went blank, and I might as well have been part of the wallpaper. She entered her dressing room—the one beyond Dawn Layne's.

Presently Jake Left came in with a girl. He saw me immediately, but gave no sign of recognition. I didn't pay much attention to him, either. No one would, with that girl around.

She was the same one I had seen him with at the race track. She wore a mink cape over a lowcut gown. Her blonde hair hung to her shoulders, and there was a smoky look to her eyes that aroused the fire inspector in me. They paused at her door, which was about ten yards away. I saw now that her face had a deceptive quality of softness. The set of her chin and the line of her jaw hinted she could harden like a shallow pond in a quick freeze.

"Coming in, darling?" she asked Jake in a husky voice.

He shook his head. "I'll see you later, baby."

"No," she said. "I'll see you later. For sure."

It didn't sound like burning love, but then these people lived in a different world than I. He came slowly toward me as she closed the door. He didn't look happy. I said, "That's the body? Chum, I've never guarded a nicer one."

"In this case," he said roughly, "don't concentrate too much on your work."

The vestibule door let in two young fellows, wearing identical tweed overcoats, who hurried into the room at the end. "The Norris Twins," I guessed. "That just leaves Joey Moore, and the musicians."

"Anyone else shows up," said Jake, "keep them away from Dawn."

"How about the manager? Don't I even let him into his own place?"

Jake made a thin smile. "He won't want to see her. I told him if I caught him in her dressing room again, I'd cave his face in."

He went out the front end of the dingy hall, through the thick curtains. In a few minutes I heard a fanfare from the orchestra, with the trumpet man a shade flat. Then the floor show was on, and with those chorines hurrying out of their dressing rooms it was no place for a guy with only one head. The hall emptied much too soon. The last one to leave was the little brunette. Just before she went through the curtains she gave me a nice smile. I was thinking about that when the vestibule door opened once more.

This one came in fast, a short, stocky guy in a brown overcoat, with a brown hat pulled low over his eyes. I assumed he was Joey Moore. He said harshly, "Is he in there?"

I said, "Who?"

And a voice behind me said, "No. He's out front."

My head whirled, and there was a second one standing inside the curtain. He was short, too, but skinny, and he preferred gray. My nerves jumped alive as I came out of the chair.

THEY were advancing down the hall, one from each end, and me in the middle. It was like trying to watch a fast tennis match from the net. The one in brown, coming in from my left, halted at Dawn Layne's door. I called sharply, "Get away from there!"

That was about as effective as a whisper in a windstorm, but I couldn't go pull him away because his friend, the skinny one, was standing squarely in front of me with his hands in his overcoat pockets and an expression that said no. "What's the deal?"

The skinny one laughed nervously. "He wants to know the deal, Al." He said it like it was a big joke. It went over with me like a lead balloon.

His thin, blade-like face had tensed. His right hand came out swiftly, and I felt the wind from the blackjack as I ducked under and butted him in the stomach and ran him into the other wall. I was tugging frantically at the gun in my shoulder holster, but it felt like someone had nailed it there. I couldn't keep that up. His blackjack chopped at me, and as I dodged it landed on my left shoulder. It felt like a ton of sharp cement.

My breath gushed with the pain. I hit him in the face. He swung with both hands. We were banging around inside that narrow hall like a pair of berserk ping pong balls, and he had all the best of it.

The one in brown, Al, pounded toward us. I kicked my chair at him, and he went down in a tangle. I kept wondering where the hell everyone was, but I was too busy to go looking for them. Then Al's friend finally found the top of my head with his little leather-coated sleeping pill.

I rolled with it, and didn't go completely out, but wished I had. An ache tore through me, top to bottom. As my nose tried to bore a hole through the carpet I

heard Al yell, "Get out! Get out!" They sprinted down the hall and through the vestibule door as the help I had needed so desperately began to arrive.

The Norris Twins, a pair of handsome young men, were trying to prop me on my wobbly legs as the girls came back from their number. One twin said, "What happened?"

"That's supposed to be my line," I said.

Several of the girls had stopped in curiosity. The little brunette had a worried frown. The other twin righted my chair. I fell onto it, and wondered how soon the gremlins would stop using my head for a bass drum. At that moment the Countess Von Berolberg swept imperiously out of her dressing room without so much as a glance in my direction. She went out, through the curtain. The show had to go on, I remembered—but why?

"Just a couple of drunks, wolfing around," I mumbled, touching my scalp gingerly.

The twin said, "Who are you?"

I got to my feet, and felt the boat rock. "Inspector Morgan, fire department. Don't think it hasn't been charming," I told the knot of girls, "but you kids had better get back to work." The twins and I went out to see what had happened to Pop.

HE WAS sitting on the floor, blinking and rubbing the top of his head. He didn't have to tell me what had happened, but he did. The door had opened, he had glanced up to see the guy in brown—and the next thing he knew, the color scheme had changed. Everything went black.

"Ever see that guy before, Pop?"

"Not that I recollect," he replied shakily.

"Maybe you'd better go home and lie down."

"Maybe," he admitted.

The twin who could talk said, "We're

on in a little while. Everything seems under control, now. Okay?"

"Go ahead," I said. "But if that hall gets noisy again, shake the cement out of your shoes. I'm not in shape for this sort of thing."

They left, and I started back to my guard post. A wiry, dark-haired guy in a tuxedo was coming through the curtain.

He said, "What was all the riot about?"

"No riot," I said. "Just a couple of stray wolves on the prowl. Why?"

He shrugged, and his dark eyes went restlessly over my face. "I work here. Just wondered, that's all."

"You're Joey Moore?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you had a dressing room back here."

"I have."

"Don't like it? You haven't been in it."

"I don't use it much," he said shortly. "I've been on with one of my numbers. Before that, I was out front with some friends, having a drink. What's the difference?"

"No difference," I said, studying him. He sounded truthful, but he seemed nervous. "You're a comedian. I haven't heard you say anything funny, yet."

"You aren't paying me, either," he retorted, as he went past me. At Dawn Layne's door he halted, and knocked. "Dawn, baby—three minutes." He waited, and knocked again.

He turned, and said, "She's in there, isn't she?"

I nodded, walking toward him. He frowned, and knocked once more. The hair on the back of my neck began to rise slowly, and I felt the sweat pop out in my palms. I rattled the knob. The door was locked.

I rocked back, the way they do in the movies, and prepared to crash it with my good shoulder. Moore said worriedly, "You think something's wrong?"

I went at the door as though I had

been fired out of a cannon. I came back about the same way. I caromed into Moore, and nearly fell to the floor. I guess movie doors are thinner.

With both of us working, it finally cracked. I went in fast, and stopped short. The bright horseshoe of lights around the dressing table mirror glared unwinkingly at me—and Dawn Layne. From where she lay sprawled on the floor, her sightless eyes glared back at them.

Behind me, Joe Moore gasped, "Good Lord!"

There was a tiny hole, so small that only the thin, erratic string of blood enabled me to find it, right between her cold blue eyes. I straightened, trying to control my voice. "Tell the manager no one's to leave. I'll call the cops."

His face was pale and his legs rubbery as he hurried out. I closed the splintered door, and stepped to the pay phone beside it.

I got Mike Sheil, in the Homicide Bureau. It was almost like old times. I had called him often, when I was working for the *Gazette*. "Maybe you'll want to send someone out, Mike—maybe you'll want to come yourself. I've got a murder for you."

"Who?" he asked calmly, "and where?"

"It's the Prince Club. The singer, Dawn Layne. Dead in her dressing room, with a hole in her head."

"Lock the joint up," he ordered. "I'll have a prowler car there right away. And don't fool around!"

I hung up, and felt a little sick. Death by violence has always done that to me. I might have stayed on a police beat until I was walking on my beard, but I'd still have felt that way. It never settles anything. I had been hired to protect her. The failure was a miserable knot in my stomach and I felt a dull, growing anger at something I might identify later. I was in it, now, up to my neck. There would

be no rest until I had pulled myself out.

There wasn't much point in tramping back in there. Dawn would wait for Mike Sheil. But I went, anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

A Red-hot Clue

IT WAS a box-like room, perhaps twelve feet square, with the dressing table on the side opposite the door. A long, curtained closet, filled with costumes, ranged along one side. In one corner was a wash-bowl. There were a couple of chairs, and a screen at the left.

The key still was in the lock—from the inside. That's when I first realized how tough this one could be. There was no other entrance. And unless Dawn had swallowed the weapon, it couldn't have been suicide.

I stared down at the dressing table, littered with jars and makeup stuff and trinkets—and a bare-faced envelope. I didn't touch it, but I didn't have to, to guess it was empty.

I looked under the table, and saw the fountain pen. I could add that one up without an abacus. She either had been writing, or intending to write.

There was a chance the note was under her body. I was toying with the forbidden idea of trying to find out when I heard people coming down the hall. I stepped outside as Joe Moore arrived with a troop of everything but cavalry.

There were chorus girls, the Norris Twins, Countess Von Berolberg, two guys who looked like genteel bouncers, a few other people and a fat man who said he was Portola, the manager.

They were making so much racket it sounded like bargain day in a basement. I could hardly understand Portola—but he wasn't making good sense, anyway. He kept wiping his pudgy hands across the front of his dinner jacket like a baker

shedding flour, and the sweat was out on his low forehead like dew after a cold night.

The Countess Von Berolberg, a handy gal with her elbows, shoved her way to the front of the group. With her eyes flashing, she said, "She is dead. She is dead, no?"

"Yes," I said.

There seemed to be an evil triumph glowing beneath the thin, wrinkled parchment the countess wore for a face. She was powdered and brightly rouged for work under a soft light, but in the merciless glare of the nearby hall bulb she looked like she should have been riding a broom.

"You're all broken up," I observed. "You're feeling terrible, aren't you?" Like you just cashed a lottery ticket."

Her pointed chin came up like a spear aimed at me. "And I should feel so bad? She was no good. No good, the way she was. Death improves her!"

So Dawn was dead, and here was someone who obviously had hated her. But no murderer, I thought, would be so blatant about such a hate. Unless—I wondered how clever the countess actually was.

"The police are on the way," I said. "You'd better get into your dressing rooms—and stay there."

The babble erupted again as they moved slowly away. I leaned against the wall, infinitely tired, waiting—and suddenly Jake Left came through the curtain at a fast walk. I didn't like the look on his face, and it was a cinch he wouldn't like the looks of mine. I managed to loosen the gun, and held it there, under my coat. He said hoarsely, "Dawn . . ."

"Jake—settle down. It's too late, now."

He stared at the splintered door.

"I don't know how." Futility was like a rock in my chest. "No one went in or out of the place as long as I was there. Two guys—"

LIKE A big cat, he whirled swiftly. His broad hands clutched my throat, and began shaking me as though he wanted to see my teeth pop out. He looked as though he still couldn't believe she was dead. Any moment, I thought, the idea will sink in, and he'll go completely berserk. Meanwhile, I was losing a lot of air. I jerked out the gun and clubbed him across the forehead. That broke the grip.

He stumbled back, clutching his arm, and stared as though seeing me for the first time. "Two guys tried to get in," I wheezed, holding the gun on him. "We wrestled, and they left. Then Jeey Moore knocked on her door. No one answered. We broke it down, and found her. Jake, nobody went in or out of there!"

He shook his head, as though trying to clear it. "It doesn't make sense," he mumbled. "No sense. No sense at all . . ."

"Murder never does," said a slow, dry voice. I turned to see Mike Sheil of homicide.

He's a big man who looks like a sleepy fullback, and I had covered enough stories with him to know he doesn't miss much. Mike has seen a lot of life, and a lot of death, and that leaves scars. He hides them as well as anyone. Like most good homicide men, he isn't too fast, but he's thorough. He sauntered down the hall.

"What's this?" he asked me.

"Jake Left," I told him. "A client."

Mike shook his head, glancing at the gun. "Things must be tough. That's a helluva way to get customers, Morgan."

I put it away. I said, "Jake hired me as a bodyguard for the girl."

"Now he's sore," said Mike dryly. "Maybe you should refund his money. Where is she?"

I took him into the dressing room.

Mike stood and looked as I filled him in on what had happened. He pursed his lips, hearing me in silence as his keen eyes catalogued the room. Then he inspected the neat little hole between Dawn

Layne's eyes. I said, "No powder burns."

"H-mm-m. You've been studying that correspondence course, haven't you? Maybe the guy used a bean-shooter. If it was a guy."

"Funny dialogue," I said. "Joey Moore could use it. Mike—I don't like murder. Women, particularly."

He peered up at me. "You going to be sick?"

"My face always feels this white," I told him, "ever since I stopped sleeping with the light on." I sat down just before my knees buckled, and put my head low, waiting for the nausea to pass.

He moved around the room. Presently a couple of guys showed up with a stretcher, followed by another guy with a black bag, a guy with a camera and a guy with a fingerprint outfit. It was getting crowded. I stood up.

Mike said brusquely, "They've got a kitchen. Go sit in it and drink some cof-

fee. I'll see you after I look around."

I was opposite the dressing room for the six girls when the little brunette stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. I hadn't heard the latch click. She must have been peeking out, waiting. I wasn't flattered, just curious.

She was still wearing her dance costume, a very short thing that left little room for guesswork. Her dark eyes were wide. She said hesitantly, "You—you're a policeman, aren't you?"

"No," I said. "Now, can we be friends?"

"Oh—we thought you were," she said, and seemed disappointed. I wondered why she had assumed I was a gendarme, and said so.

"The countess," she replied. "When she first saw you, she said, she knew you were a policeman."

I wondered where the countess had obtained such an allergy to police that their



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presence awakened her intuition, but I kept that to myself. "I'm a private investigator. Name's Morgan. Clint Morgan."

"I'm Doris," she told me. "Private investigator—that's like a policeman, isn't it?"

"It's better. Look, sweetheart. Skip this dumb act. If you know something that might help on this case, I'm listening. What else did the countess say?"

DORIS wore a sober expression. "Nothing else—tonight." She sighed. "I liked Dawn, even if she was kind of funny, sometimes. She knew what she wanted, all right. She tried hard to get it, that's all."

"Sure. Maybe too hard. But—the countess?"

"Well," Doris said slowly, "they had a fight—an argument, maybe that's all it was. She and Dawn, a couple of nights ago . . . Maybe I shouldn't say anything. But, golly, a murder and all—"

"What was the fight about?"

"It was so silly," she answered, shaking her head. "The countess told Portola she should go on just before the finale. That's the best spot in the show. She always had seemed jealous of Dawn—and that was Dawn's spot. Dawn lost her temper, I guess. And so did the countess. They said some awful things. Portola stopped it."

I nodded. "Thanks, Doris. I'll buy you a drink sometime."

She smiled. "A soft drink."

"Have it your way."

I went into the kitchen, a small place, not too clean, and watched the chef pour some hot and black into a cup. A little later Mike came in and sat down opposite me. I waited. He took his time. "The medical examiner thinks it was some kind of a dart. He won't know, for awhile."

"A blow-gun?" I asked, surprised.

Mike shook his head. "He doesn't think

so. He was in the war, you know. Travelled around a lot, in Europe. Says it might have been one of those steel darts, from a high-powered air pistol."

"Made in Germany," I said reflectively.

"Maybe. Why'd you say that?"

"I'm impulsive."

"So maybe it was German," he admitted, after a pause. His keen eyes searched my face. "The old woman who plays the piano is German."

"Yeah." I told him about the countess and Dawn having a fight. He tapped the table thoughtfully. "You were in the hall, all the time?"

"The countess didn't go into Dawn's dressing room," I said. "But her room is right next door. Maybe that dart was fired through the wall . . . Hey—did you find a note?"

He drank coffee slowly, eyes fixed on mine. He put down the cup, and pulled a sheet of writing paper from his pocket. "You're guessing pretty good—for a new man."

He handed me the paper. In a bold, feminine hand it read:

"Chief of Police

"Los Angeles

"Dear Sir:

"I have an idea that something possibly may happen to me. If it does, a friend of mine will mail this to you.

"You may remember that a year ago, in Detroit, several—"

And that's where it stopped.

I handed it back. "What happened a year ago in Detroit?"

Mike shrugged. "The sixty-four dollar question. I'll have to find out."

"You holding anybody?"

"The countess. And Jake Left . . . Just for questions."

"I'd like to know how you make out, Mike."

"From here on," he advised, getting to his feet, "you keep out of it. Your assignment has been completed."

"You have it wrong, Mike. Somebody completed it for me. I'd like to work on this—if only because Jake Left didn't get his money's worth. Besides, it happened to the body I was guarding. That makes it personal." And I thought, too, of my original reason for taking the case, and what I actually was trying to prove to myself.

He shook his head. "Cops have it tough enough without amateurs cluttering up a case. Be a good boy, Morgan, and go pick some horses. And, listen—"

"Yeah?"

"If you get a hot one, call me."

CHAPTER FOUR

What Happened in Detroit?

I STEPPED into the telephone booth in the club lobby. It was shortly past midnight; time for most good citizens to be in bed. That was one reason I knew I'd find Lou Klein, the gambler, awake.

The guy who answered talked as though he was hoarding words, but he got Lou for me. "You winning?" I asked.

"It doesn't pay to lose," he answered. "What do you want—bail money?"

"Information, Lou. You know a lot of interesting characters. And you keep posted on things. What comes to mind if you think about Detroit—a year ago?"

He said curtly, "They're holding up the game for me."

"H-mmmm. Lou, you've been smart, long as I've known you. You're solid, in Hollywood. Even the nice people bet with you. But it wouldn't do your reputation or your business any good if it was noised around that you'd cover up for murder."

He said slowly, "Who got it?"

"That job you sent me. Dawn Layne, Jake Left's girl. I was hired to guard her. And no snappy remarks, please."

He didn't flood the phone with tears, but who would expect that of Lou Klein?

"That's too bad . . ."

"Detroit, Lou?"

"I should cut my own throat," he said. "I should even buy the knife. You think I'm crazy?"

"Make sense. I could look through the files at the Gazette. But that would take time. Right now, I'm running short." I thought of Al and his thin friend. They hadn't impressed me as small-time hoodlums. If they were mixed up in what had occurred in Detroit a year earlier, it should be something of a magnitude Lou would recall.

"A big job," I told him. "Maybe a payroll heist. Thing hard, uncle. A big job."

He was in no hurry to answer. I could stand that. It meant he wasn't going to deliver a snap judgment. In a moment he said with lethal politeness, "Morgan—you don't remember where you heard this . . ."

"Go on."

"Maybe it was a jewel robbery. A dame lost a hundred grand necklace. Remember?"

"Vaguely." The details were hazy. It seemed I had seen a police circular on it. The chauffeur had been killed . . . I said, "Seems like a couple of guys pulled that one. Maybe a third guy was involved."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe the third one wasn't there at the time."

"The third one, then," I reasoned aloud, "could have been the finger for the job." My mind added up Al and his friend, and a third person who wasn't singing anymore. In her spot as a nightclub singer, Dawn Layne could have easily spotted likely prospects for robberies—particularly if they wore jewels. I tried the theory, just for size.

So Al and his friend pulled the necklace job, I reasoned, after Dawn set it up. But why had they killed her? And then it got real tough. *How* had they killed her, without ever entering her dressing room, without ever leaving my sight?

I said, "Thanks, Lou. Good luck."

He said nervously, "It was nothing you couldn't have found out from the cops, or at the paper."

"Don't worry your little pointed head for a minute. I won't talk."

"See that you don't." The implied threat was about as subtle as a cannon in my face.

I stepped out of the booth. Joey Moore was hurrying toward the street door. I called, "Just a minute, Joey."

He turned, and his dark eyes narrowed. That detective, Sheil—he said they were through with me."

"Sure," I said easily. "I'm just a friendly sort who likes company. Thought we'd have a nightcap."

HE THOUGHT about that while his eyes went over my face. Something seemed to be chewing on him. He shifted restlessly. "Some other time." He turned.

"Ever played Detroit, Joey?"

He stopped. In the silence I heard traffic shushing past, outside. He said tightly, "Yeah."

"When?"

He shrugged. "When the rest of them were there. Dawn—the Countess—the Norris Twins. We've worked a lot of places together."

"About a year ago," I said, buttoning my topcoat. "Come on, friend. Let's have a drink."

On the sidewalk, he paused. "What's your angle?"

"What's your's?"

His face had a calculating set. "You getting paid?"

He could assume what he wished. I said, "Where's a good spot for a quick one?"

"Across the street. It might be a good idea."

The place was crowded. We found standing room at the bar. If Joey wondered whether I was getting paid, I reflected, maybe he had something to sell.

Something like information. In his eyes, I would be a better market than the cops. They don't pay for information. Not in the kind of cash he would want.

Over the drinks, he said casually, "Why'd you ask about Detroit?"

"Let's play it straight, Joey. You're selling?"

He glanced at me coolly. "Could be,"

"What do you know?"

"How much you got?"

I sighed. "Obstructing justice can be a stiff rap. How'd you like to play a split week at San Quentin?"

"You have to prove it," he said with a thin smile. The kid had all his marbles, and he knew how to shoot.

"I suppose you know who killed Dawn?"

Matter-of-factly, he replied, "I suppose I do."

"Then tell the cops."

He shook his head, and his mouth twisted. "This is a tough racket. I've been at it, one way or another, since I was fourteen. That's twelve years, and it's never been easy. I should knock myself into little pieces for little money all my life? Some guys get big dough, and don't work half so hard. That's for me."

"You're liable to get something besides dough if you try a shakedown. You're indestructible? Whoever killed Dawn wouldn't hesitate to blow you over, too, if you attempted blackmail."

"A nasty word," he said cockily. "If the racket is so impossible, how come it works for others?" His eyes were reckless. "It's worth the chance."

I pursed my lips, and exhaled. "Okay, Joey—it's your clambake. But if you change your mind, where can I reach you?"

"The Sheridan-Plaza," he said, putting down his glass.

I was growing desperate. I had gotten about as far with him as a pigmy gets carrying a piano. He knew who had killed

Dawn. I gambled. "Be careful, Joey. That Al is a tough customer."

Joey's face was inscrutable. "Isn't he, though?" he said, and left.

I finished my drink. Joey had left part of his. I was paying for both, I remembered. I finished his, too, and went out.

The early morning air, gray with a thin fog, was a filmy wet curtain on my face. Traffic had eased off, and my footsteps made loud sounds as I walked into the parking lot. It was dark, and chill. A guy stepped out from behind the car next to mine.

He said, "Don't be in a hurry."

I couldn't distinguish his face. I had one foot on the running board, and my keys in my hand. I threw them in his face, and grabbed at my gun. Just as my hand closed on it, something round, firm and fully packed landed alongside my head. I went down. My face was full of wet gravel.

WHEN I raised up groggily, the guy was leaning over me with someone beside him in the murky fog. I could recognize them, now. My pulse began beating like a runaway machinegun.

"Get up," Al grated. "Get on your feet."

"Anything for a friend," I mumbled. As I arose, his companion, the thin one, clubbed my chin up with his forearm. I wondered bitterly why people always use

private detectives for punching bags.

The thin one plucked my gun. Al said harshly, "You get around a lot, Morgan. You like to travel, don't you? . . . Come on."

I would have been crazy not to have been scared. I was bruised, and shaken, and very lonesome. I asked, reasonably enough, "Where are we going?"

He said, "Move out," and back-handed me across the face. His friend laughed, that high, shrill sound like a nervous whinny, and stepped in. Al said, "Not here, Harry. Get the car started."

So now I had the thin one's name, Harry. They knew I was probably the only link between them and the time Dawn Layne had been murdered. For me, that was practically an epitaph. I said, nerves taut, "You got the wrong guy. You want somebody who knows you better than I do. Somebody from Detroit."

Al took a fistful of my shoulder. "Keep talking."

I was stalling, hoping someone, anyone, would show up to give me a chance at a break. Harry had started the engine of their coupe, and was gunning it impatiently. "Getting rough won't help."

"Maybe," he said. "Let's see." He jerked a gun out of his pocket and snapped it down in a short arc. He was talented, all right. He didn't break my jaw, but he gave me a reasonable facsimile of how it would feel.



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

"What about Detroit?" he demanded.

The pain was throbbing through my face like water through a firehose. I was half out on my feet. But maybe I could make a trade. Maybe he would talk, if I did. I said, "A jewel job—a necklace. Did it fit you, Al?"

He said grimly, "That fixes your wagon, Morgan. But good." He spun me around, and shoved me roughly toward the coupe.

So I had guessed his part in it, all right. But it had been a bad idea to guess out loud. I kept pitching. "If you got the necklace, what're you sore about?"

"Open the door," he ordered. "Who says I got it?"

If he didn't have the necklace, I realized abruptly, I had a motive for Dawn Layne's murder. If she had obtained possession of it after the robbery, and then tried to double-cross Al and Harry . . .

Getting into that coupe would be like stepping into an elevator shaft. There'd be only one stop. That new moisture on my face wasn't fog. I hesitated at the door, and turned. "Listen," I said swiftly. "So I know a few things. But somebody else knows more. What kind of a deal can we make?"

"None!" He jabbed me in the back with that gun. "Get in!"

I put a foot on the running board, stepped up—and planted my other foot in his stomach. As he doubled, I brought my knee up into his face. I was running around behind the coupe when I heard the door slam. I tried to stop, and slipped on the gravel. That saved me. Harry's first shot blammed a few inches above my head. He came out, fast, on his side.

I had no gun, no place to go, no way to fight him. I heard a second shot, and a yell of pain that might have been mine as I dived to the ground. I thought wildly that perhaps I had been killed, and if this was dying it wasn't the way I had heard it. I could still feel the gravel, and I heard

someone cursing, and footsteps running away. Then a door slammed again, and the coupe roared out of the parking lot as though it were jet-propelled.

I raised my head, and saw something glinting. It was my gun, lying where Harry had dropped it. As I reached, a polite voice said, "Leave it there."

I froze. "For you," I said into the fog, "whoever you are, I'd leave an arm there. Friend, you couldn't have arrived at a better time."

"Oh, I've been here awhile," he said, coming toward me. "Sitting in my car. You had rather a close call, didn't you?"

I recognized him with a start. He was the banker-type, the guy who had fitted my face into my hat at the race track.

I got to my feet. "A close call, you said? Mister, I just tried on my halo." I was still dazed, but my reflexes were returning to normal, and I began to overheat. "You mean, you were sitting there all the time? Just sitting? What the hell were you waiting for—rigor mortis?"

"IT WAS interesting," he said calmly. "Particularly, the conversation." He was a heavy man who spoke in measured tones, as though he expected to get an answer to most everything, eventually, and had the patience to wait. "I did mess things up, though," he admitted. "I hadn't intended for the others to get away. It all broke so fast I had to shoot. Hit Harry in the arm, I believe."

"He was the one who ran?"

"Yes. Al took the car . . . How long have you known those men?"

"A few hours. And not by chance. You seem to know them pretty well yourself."

"By reputation, for about a year," he said casually. "Well—come along. Considering the type of companions you have, I'm sure the police will be interested in talking to you."

"Everybody wants to give me a ride tonight," I complained, as he picked up

my gun. "Mister, the police aren't interested in me, unless they need a fourth at bridge."

He held a pistol on me while I dug out identification. He read the cards in the glare of his headlights. "Private investigator."

"You sound so disappointed," I said. "What did you expect?"

"I must admit I didn't take you for a detective."

"Occasionally," I conceded, "a client makes the same complaint."

He said thoughtfully, "Why did Al and Harry want you?"

"Listen, friend, how about letting *me* ask a few questions? Like—who are you, how come you know who Al and Harry are—but don't know them personally—and just how did you pop up at such an opportune moment? Also," I drew a breath, "how do you fit into this case?"

"You can have some of it," he said agreeably. "I was here because I had been following someone who went into the Prince Club. I saw you come out, a little while ago, and go across the street."

His voice was deliberate. "Al and Harry, although I didn't know who they were at the time, came into this parking lot and waited. I presume they had seen you leave the club, too. They couldn't see me in the dark. I just sat."

"You're doing fine," I said. "Now, who are they?"

"You must know that. They're a pair of very undesirable characters. Long police records."

"Brother," I asked, "are you a Detroit cop?"

He just shook his head.

"I know," I said testily, "you're an inspector from the fire department. Okay—play your little game. Maybe I could figure you out, if I had the time and wasn't so dead weary. Right now, I'm heading for home. If you want me, I'm in the phone book."

He nodded, half-smiling. "Is that all you have to say?"

"No," I said, and shook hands. "Thanks for saving my dissolute life."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hidden Microphone

IT FELT as if someone had smeared glue across my eyelids. I forced them open, and blinked at the sunlight shafting into the room. It must have been close to noon. The sleep slipped reluctantly out of my brain, and the weird, rapidly-shifting picture of the night before came rushing back. It brought me out of bed like an electric shock.

The shower, hot, cold and hot again, helped. I dressed, and called Mike Sheil.

"I thought I told you to forget this case," he said curtly. "It's in the hands of the department now."

"Don't be like that, Mike. Maybe I've got news for you. I told you this thing has become a personal matter. Haven't I been helpful, so far?"

"In an accidental way," he admitted grudgingly. "You provided the body . . ."

"And now I know who did it," I said. "But I don't know how."

"Well, well, well," said Sheil, in mild surprise. "And how did you find out—by reading palms, or consulting your files of Racing Forms?"

"Remember Dawn's mention of Detroit? I suppose you've checked on that?" "I suppose I have."

"And I know what you found out, A jewel robbery . . . A hundred grand necklace. Two guys pulled the job, killed the chauffeur. The cops thought there was a third party involved—maybe a girl who fingered the deal."

There was a moment's silence. Then Sheil said, "Where'd you buy the crystal ball?"

"In a dark and lonesome parking lot,"

I answered. "The two guys who raised all the rumpus in the Prince Club, trying to get into Dawn's dressing room, played an encore for me later. They're the guys you want, Mike. Name, Al and Harry. I gave you their descriptions last night. Al breaks out in a rash when you mention Detroit."

"Sounds good—on paper," Sheil remarked. "We were working on something like that. I teletyped those descriptions to Detroit. The boys back there say that Al's last name is Pilar. And he's very rough."

"That's supposed to be news? . . . Well, that's it. Pick 'em up. Your case is cracked."

"You mean, your head is cracked," he snapped. "What makes you think that's all there is to it? There's an item known as motive, you know."

I chuckled. He was playing my game. My own theory had too many blank spaces. The more he talked the better chance I had of filling them in.

"That's not hard, Mike. Try this. Al and Harry pulled the necklace job after Dawn selected the target. It's tough to peddle a hunk of ice like that. She would be the logical one to take care of it until the heat cooled off, because she left town for a legitimate reason—to come out here with the show. How's that sound?"

"Keep singing," he said shortly.

"Then Al and Harry, maybe nervous, maybe tired of waiting for the split, followed her and tried to get her to put the necklace on the market. She wouldn't. She might have thought it was too soon—or was planning a doublecross. Maybe she told them that if they got too tough she'd throw the switch on them for the chauffeur's murder . . . So they either got impatient, or scared, and—well, there you are."

"And there I am," he commented dryly. "Nothing but a theory. You don't know how they killed her—if they did."

I gave him a quick guess. "Through the keyhole?"

"With the key in it, on the inside? And she put her forehead up against it, just to oblige them? Sober up, Morgan. You don't even have the necklace, to tie Al and Harry to the Detroit caper. And you can't even connect Dawn to the job, outside of the theory. That's great."

"MIKE, it's the best theory I've got," I defended. "I'm sticking with it until a better one shows up. What did you find out from Jake Left, and the countess Von Berolberg? And was it a dart that killed Dawn?"

"Yeah—and not much," he replied. "The crime lab says it was from one of those German air pistols, all right. Jake's story holds up. He was out front, except for a quick trip to the washroom. I turned him loose. The countess—well that's a little different."

"She'd had a beef with Dawn. Was she sore enough to kill her?"

"The kind the countess is," he replied, "you couldn't bet she would stop at anything. She doesn't say much, except that she's glad Dawn is dead. I can't figure out whether she's scared, a psycho—or just mad at the world. We're hanging onto her for awhile. I'm checking Detroit on her, too."

"You're not doing any better than I am," I told him. "Listen, Mike. It's Al and Harry. I'm completely convinced of it. Why—"

His short laugh cut me off. "I hate to see you knocking yourself out like this. Morgan, Harry is a punk named Harry Luwen. And we've got him."

My jaw nearly fell off. "Got him? You've got—"

"A prowler car picked him up shortly after midnight," Sheil said, laughing at me. "He was staggering along the sidewalk. Boys thought he was a drunk. He had lost a lot of blood from a bullet in

his shoulder. He's in pretty bad shape."

I could tell Mike how that had happened—but not at the moment. His laughter was sandpaper on my nerves. "What the hell's so funny, Mike? That guy—he and Al—killed a chauffeur, stole a hundred grand necklace and murdered Dawn Layne. That's funny, like a broken glass sandwich."

He was fairly roaring, now. "You're the joke," he wheezed. "But don't let me hurt your feelings. Harry Luwen couldn't possibly have pulled that Detroit job a year ago. Up until four months ago, he was finishing off a two-year robbery stretch in San Quentin."

It wasn't possible, I thought, as I slowly put down the receiver. Al and Harry *had* to be the pair who pulled the robbery. That had been the very keystone of my theory. But I couldn't deny that Mike Sheil had touched off a charge of dynamite beneath it.

I was lost. I had to start all over again. But I still hesitated. So many pieces of the pattern had clicked that I hated to throw the whole thing away. I had one more chance. There was one person, outside of the murderer, who knew more about this case than either Mike Sheil or I. It was time to call on Joey Moore.

The Sheridan-Plaza is one of those gray brick-and-chrome, lots of glass, apartment houses southeast of Melrose and Vine. It's no longer an exclusive dis-

trict, but you don't get an apartment there for bottle tops. Joey Moore's place, according to the neatly printed directory, was on the third of five floors.

I knocked, then pushed, and the door swung wide. The noonday sunlight was streaming in the big window. It was still, and peaceful—and empty. There was no one in the tastefully furnished living room. The bathroom was empty, too.

I sniffed. There was an odor of cigarettes. Joey must have stepped out for a moment. I sat down behind the knee-hole desk to wait.

There was a stack of humor books on the desk. Joey wasn't the most original guy in the world, I thought. But he thought of most of the angles.

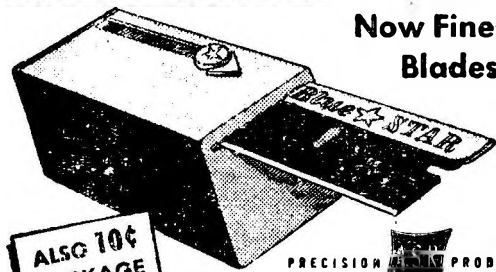
I was fiddling around, just looking, when I noticed a thick, black rubber cord trailing out of the top desk drawer. If I was going to stop being curious, I might as well stop being a detective. I slid the drawer open, and gazed with sharp surprise on the small microphone nestled there.

I STILL didn't understand, until I traced the rubber cord behind the floor-length window curtains and into the bedroom. Then the blood pounded hard through my face.

The machine, a gray, metal box about the size of an overnight bag, was on the floor behind the door.

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I knew what it was. I had seen them in the Army, and even had been exposed to a short course in their operation when I had been shooting for a job as a radio combat correspondent. It was a portable wire recorder.

The recording spool was full, and still revolving. Joey Moore might be back any moment, I thought. It might be just as tough to get him to talk as it had been the night before. But perhaps some of the answers I needed were right here.

With hasty, fumbling fingers I removed the recorded spool and replaced it with the empty. Then I rethreaded the machine. My palms were wet with nervous sweat as I crouched beside the machine. One ear was practically in the other room, waiting for Joey's footsteps. I flipped the first switch. The box hummed, warming up. It was quiet, except for that and the traffic sounds coming up faintly from the street below. I hit another switch, and listened.

"I'm happy to see so many smiling faces," said Joey's voice, from inside the machine. He paused. "But just wait until you get your dinner checks . . . Not that the food is expensive," he went on. "But you should try our de luxe dinner. With that, you get a knife and fork. . . ."

I felt like throwing the damned thing out the window. Now I knew the reason for it. Joey Moore had used it to test his comedy routines. It wasn't a bad angle, at that. He could speak his gags, and time his show. Then he could listen, and if the stuff lacked luster his trained ear might tell him where to apply the polish.

But I wasn't interested in a floor show. I crouched there until rheumatism took over my knee joints, listening to Joey go on and on. There was a long pause, then a scraping, rattling, hurrying sound. I bent low. My heart thumped as I remembered where I had found the microphone. Those sounds might have been made by it coming hastily off the desk into the drawer

. . . All I heard now was a very slight mumble.

Swiftly, my fingers turned up the volume as high as it would go, and caught Joey's voice, faintly.

". . . a surprise. I didn't hear you knock."

There was some answer, but too far away to be distinguished. I nearly twisted the volume knob off, trying to bring that other voice within range. Maybe it was only the landlord, but I definitely wanted to know.

"I didn't expect you so soon," Joey was saying. There was another pause, longer this time, and I thought: I'll hear that other voice, now. Maybe I'll recognize it. . . .

But it was Joey again. "Not much more to say," he replied, to some remark. "I heard you arguing with her the night before. The walls are thin. I can add two and two. It makes murder."

I slapped the machine. I fooled with the volume knob. I snapped the switches. It was driving me crazy. Here was Dawn Layne's murderer, spinning around and around on a thin wire, right in front of me. And I couldn't hear the murderer's voice. I couldn't even tell whether it was a man or a woman. But the voice would come nearer any moment. I had to wait—and wait—

"So you came around," said Joey, in the distance. "Sure—In my racket, it pays to keep your ears open.

"How much? Well, I'm glad to see you're being reasonable. . . . What's it worth, for me not to say anything about the way she was trying to shake you down?"

I nearly fell flat on my face. So Dawn had been killed trying the same thing that Joey Moore was trying—and on the same person. I had to give the kid credit for having plenty of moxie—or for being an utter fool. He was taking a terrific chance, a murderous chance, for money.

BUT my theory, the one Mike Sheil had kicked in the face, was getting off the floor. Now I had the motive for murder, and it fitted Al Pilar like sand fits a beach.

I could see Dawn pressuring him about the murder of that chauffeur; perhaps demanding Al's share of the necklace in exchange for silence. That was all the motive Al would have needed. Al and Harry that is. And then I remembered again how Mike Sheil had torpedoed that motive, and sighed in frustrated despair. Sheil must be wrong. He had to be wrong.

"Nobody else," Joey said, in answer to some question. "Just me. Anybody else would have gone to the cops with it."

Now, I thought, I'll be able to hear that other voice. And when Al Pilar speaks up, he'll make Mike Sheil as wrong as a three-dollar bill.

"So what if you haven't got it," Joey said airily. "You know where it is, don't you? . . . All right, go get it. We can make a deal . . ."

I almost pushed my ear through the speaker. Al had told me he didn't have the necklace. And if that's what they were talking about, its location could be a very vital piece of information.

"So it's tough to peddle a hundred grand worth of pearls," said Joey, his tone suddenly hard. "I don't care how much heat is on. It's on hotter, as of now . . ."

"Twenty-five grand," he said, after a pause, as though he were giving someone the time of day. I shook my head. He was shooting plenty high.

"That's your problem, not mine," he said. "And by tomorrow night—or else . . ."

There was a silence, broken only by the hum of the machine. I slapped it again, and slowed it down, and still got nothing. Joey was getting an argument, I decided, but I couldn't hear it. Then suddenly his voice rose sharply. "Get out!"

My ears strained. Something had gone wrong. I had heard the alarm in Joey's tone. Now I would hear that other voice, or something from Joey that would tell me. . . .

There was a bumping sound, and that could have been a drawer quickly closed—and then nothing but the smooth, uncompromising hum of the machine in an otherwise deathly silence. . . .

I straightened slowly, easing my cramped legs. Joey had talked a great deal on that wire recorder. He hadn't said much that could help me. But there was a little salvage. Just a little. There was nothing to do but wait for him to return.

When he came back . . . I wondered, suddenly, if he would come back. I hadn't checked the closet to see if his clothes were there. He could have packed up and fled, suddenly frightened out of his blackmailing plan. Muttering a few well-chosen words, I strode to the closet and yanked open the door.

Joey Moore still wasn't saying anything funny. He was staring right at me, horror twisting his sharp face the way death by strangulation had frozen it. He came out of the closet, brushing against me as I jumped back, and his face went into the carpet with a wet sound that chilled what was left of my blood.

CHAPTER SIX

Paint Remover

PERHAPS five seconds, perhaps five minutes passed before I could stop vibrating long enough to reach the telephone. I got Mike Sheil. The first time I opened my mouth, nothing happened. Then I said, "I've got another body, Mike. Joey Moore."

"What?" he yelled.

"At the Sheridan-Plaza," I said, fighting off the nausea. "Apartment 303."

"That's a helluva hobby you've got,"

he said angrily. "Why don't you try collecting stamps? If this is a gag, Morgan—"

"The guy is lying on the floor, Mike. And he's not breathing. Somebody strangled him. Where's Al Pilar?"

"We haven't found him, yet. Did he do it?"

"It sounds like it. When you get here, turn on the wire recorder in the bedroom."

"The what? The wire recorder?"

"You'll get a lot of answers," I said. "Just fill in the questions."

"Stay there," he ordered. "I'll be right out."

The thoughts that had been half formed in my spinning brain began to crystalize. If Al Pilar had killed Joey Moore, Al was still in town—and close. He had admitted knowing where the necklace was. Maybe he had been telling the truth, maybe not. I had to guess that he did know, and was on his way to get it. He had attempted to get into Dawn Layne's dressing room once before. It seemed logical he might try it again.

"Mike, believe me, I just can't wait. I'm headed for the Prince Club. But I'll be back."

"Damn it, Morgan, you stay there or—"

I gently replaced the receiver . . .

It was early afternoon, and the sun was warm, but it did nothing at all for the chill I was wearing. Now that it had no wire recorder to occupy it, my brain dwelled on Joey Moore, and the ugly way he had died.

The back door of the Prince Club was locked, of course. I stepped back, sized it up—and my aching shoulder told me: Morgan, you can carry this too far.

A check of the windows finally paid off. I clambered in, and closed it. Judging from the chairs racked along the wall, this room was used only for storage. I went out, walking lightly, and saw I was in the

short hall leading to the main corridor. This, then, had been the unused dressing room that Pop, the doorman, had mentioned.

I went past Joey Moore's dressing room, and turned into the central corridor leading toward the main part of the club. The splintered door of Dawn Layne's dressing room was slightly ajar. It was gloomy in that hall, and the silence was oppressive. A board creaked under my slow footsteps. I stopped. There was no sound except my breathing, and the blood pounding in my head.

HOLDING my pistol, I knew I should have waited for Mike Sheil. You can pick the winner, but there's no profit in it. I took a deep breath, and pushed open the door.

There was no one there. I flicked the switch, and that horseshoe of lights around the mirror leaped awake and glared at me.

All that I had pieced together indicated Dawn had been in possession of the necklace when she was murdered. Several other people, some of them of lethal temperament, were looking for it, too. I had to work fast.

The cops would have checked the obvious places in their routine search. I started with the three chairs. I tapped them for hollow legs. My pen-knife ripped the one with the covered seat. I knocked on the baseboards, and ran my hands along the shelves. All I got was dirt.

It went like that for perhaps fifteen minutes. The search didn't improve the appearance of the room, nor my disposition. I even rummaged through Dawn's costumes, in the wardrobe closet. She must have been versatile. There were evening gowns and abbreviated skirts, and a Spanish-style outfit that caught my eye—but no necklace.

And there was no way out. That was the other thought beating at my brain with a jungle drum rhythm. *How* could Dawn

have been murdered—when there was no one else in the room with her?

I peered closely at the mirror, seeking the tiny hole that would mark the path of a dart. All I saw was bloodshot eyes. I checked the wall carefully. No holes. I glared back at the mirror. So maybe she was shot with a light ray, I told myself sarcastically. The thought ballooned. Swiftly, I grabbed a light bulb. Just as swiftly, I let go. It was hotter than a quick-lunch griddle.

With a handkerchief for protection, I began unscrewing light bulbs, looking for the phony one. One after another came out, and went back in. They all worked, and they all were solid in their sockets. My soaring hopes collapsed.

If I could only find the necklace, my theory would be substantiated to some extent.

I might have folded up right then if my laboring brain hadn't suddenly suggested that a necklace doesn't have to remain a necklace to be worth a hundred thousand dollars.

Quickly, I removed the lids from the make-up jars, and ran my fingers into the stuff. No loose pearls. My eyes swept the room—past the evening gowns, the gay costumes, the Spanish outfit. I came back to that, noting the costume jewelry sewn on the colorful jacket.

I kept staring, trying to pull up the thought buried somewhere in the welter

of ideas and hunches and theories. I had seen a movie once in which some stolen gems were sewn on a girl's gown.

I grabbed that jacket like it was a refund from the tax collector. I ran my hands over it, tore out the lining, plucked off some of the phony jewelry and held it to the light.

And I was ready to go back to the Gazette. Mike Sheil was right. I was an amateur. I had no business in this racket. There wasn't anything even remotely resembling a pearl on that jacket. I let it fall to the floor in disgust, and glanced up at the shelf. And there, suddenly, crazily, was money from home. The hat—the flat-crowned sombrero . . . It looked like the usual thing, wide and black and . . .

I WAS reaching for it when I heard a popping sound, just once, and felt the darting pain bore through my left shoulder. The stale smell of death was strong in my nostrils. In that instant I had sense enough to crash to the floor, and lie very still. The pain was liquid fire, soaking through my shirt. My heart was hammering at my throat, choking me.

I heard a sound beyond the wall, a going away sound, and because it meant living or dying, I took a chance. I sat up quickly, fighting off the black curtain of shock, and worked my gun loose. Across the room, I saw now, the path of Dawn Layne's murder had opened again.

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

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Dangling on a short length of cord, like a plant pulled half-way out by its roots, was one of the dressing table lights. Socket and all, it had been loosened from its fastening on the other side of that thin wall, and dropped a few inches. Through the hole thus provided, the murderer had shot Dawn Layne right between the eyes as she sat at the mirror. And had chosen the same method of attempting to kill me.

I heard stealthy, heavy footsteps in the hall. That same board creaked. My shoulder felt as if it was seeping hot lead . . .

That dressing room from which the shots had been fired had belonged to Joey Moore. But Joey was dead. I knew he was—I had seen him.

I was losing blood, and much too fast. My head was spinning. The floor lurched under my left hand, then steadied. My eyes were on the door, staring, straining to see a movement. The pistol was gripped in my right hand, resting in my lap.

Someone, something, blurred, a gray bulk appeared in the opening, coming to kill me. I fired, and fired again and again, my breath caught in my throat, and heard something hum violently past my ear as the gun bucked in my fist. There was a moment's utter silence, then a crashing sound in the hall, and a wracked, torn cough. The smell of powder smoke was thick. I tried to get up, and the room got up with me and all the lights swam together in a yellow pool and went out.

FROM a distance, a familiar voice said, "He's waking up, doc." I blinked, and objects shifted slowly into focus. Something was pinching my shoulder, hard, and it hurt. As I struggled to get up, Mike Sheil said, "You're the damndest idiot I've ever known! Lie still!"

"But the guy, whoever it was—"

"Dead."

The doctor bending over me said, "You've lost some blood. The dart went

all the way through. You'll be all right in a few—"

I said shakily, "Mike. Tell me."

"She knew about the Detroit job," he answered. "He got drunk, and talked too much. She tried to shake him down, and he killed her."

"But Dawn was on the Detroit job with him."

He shook his head, and smiled wearily. "You didn't do bad, Morgan. You had the right number of people—two guys and a dame. You had the shakedown attempt figured right, too. I'll give you credit."

"Well, hear this. Put that in writing?"

"Okay, okay," he said brusquely. "So I gave you a rough time. But you didn't have anything except a theory . . . Dawn didn't know about the necklace job until she was told. The dame in the picture was the Countess Von Berolberg. She picked out the robbery prospects for her two boyfriends. We found out she had a record for larceny. She'd pulled the same stunt before . . . She finally admitted being the finger for the job—but she wouldn't tell us who was in it with her . . . Now, she doesn't have to."

"The one in the hall," I said. "That's who killed Dawn, and Joey Moore. It's—it's Al Pilar?"

Sheil chuckled. "No. . . . It's his partner."

So Sheil *had* been wrong about Harry Luwen. I said, "But how could Harry—"

"Who said Harry?" asked Sheil, and his grin was as wide as Wilshire boulevard. "It's Jake Left."

I nearly fainted. From far away I heard Sheil, relishing every word, say, "Jake pulled the light trick on you. It fits that he pulled it on Dawn. He's also packing a beautiful dart pistol. He and Al pulled the Detroit job, and hid the necklace. I figure that, because Al showed up and apparently was trying to find it. Jake wasn't ready for the split—the heat was still on. He was being tailed by a

guy from the insurance company—Hector MacNair, here."

I twisted my head, and the banker-from-Des Moines-type was grinning down at me. He nodded pleasantly. "I couldn't talk too much," he explained politely. "Company's very strict about things like that."

"Al was impatient, I guess," Sheil was saying. "He had picked up a new crony, Harry Luwen. They threatened to give Jake's girl friend, Dawn, a going over if Jake didn't produce. They knew that working on Jake wouldn't help. When we told Harry he faced a possible murder rap, he sang a little. He said he was just along to help Al operate on Dawn, but he didn't say why. It fits."

"But, listen, Mike—Jake hired me to protect Dawn."

"Sure." He squatted beside me with a patronizing air. "You're new here. Look, junior. That part wouldn't make sense—unless Jake were afraid that if Al and Harry worked Dawn over she'd get scared and spill what she knew about Jake to the cops? Right? So he hired you to keep that from happening. Meanwhile, he was rigging a very neat way to kill her to keep her from talking."

"But he was out front all the time."

"Uh-huh. Except for that trip to the washroom. There's a window in there,

too. Out that one, in the other one. Very cute. . . . Stick around, Morgan. You may learn a little something about police work."

"You did fine, Mike. Just dandy."

He frowned. "Except for one thing. It all adds up, except. . . ." He shrugged, and stood up. "But why sing the blues to you? It's a department matter."

"What do you need?"

"What else," he growled, "but that ding-donged necklace?"

"An amateur like me," I said apologetically. "I'd like to help, but—"

"Yeah, I know. It'll take smart detective work to turn it up, but we'll get it. Maybe when we get Al Pilar, we'll be able to make him talk."

I said slowly, "I could pull it out of a hat."

"Oh, sure. Doc, the guy's getting delirious."

I closed my eyes and thought again about that flat-topped sombrero up on the shelf, the sombrero Jake Left must have seen and utilized as a handy place to keep his pearl marbles. His girl could look after them for him, and never know it.

I thought about those precious little black balls on the hat's tassels, and I said, "Mike. Get a bottle of paint remover. We don't need any smart detectives."

THE END

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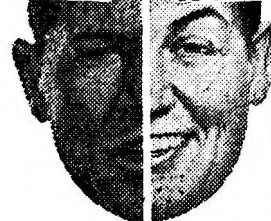
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CORPSE'S COMEBACK

SPENCER was waiting at the foot of the rock-quarry road with his suitcase when the headlights pulled over and the dark coupe stopped. The driver leaned over and asked, "Going far?"

"Border City."

"Hop in," the man said.

Spencer opened the door. He put the

By **JOHANAS L.**

BOUMA



His fist shot out, caught
Brent full in the face.

Being charged with stealing his crooked employer's funds was the start and finish of William Spencer's pleasure jaunt to Mexico.

small suitcase on the floor and stepped in. The man shifted gears and the coupe rolled away. For a while there was no talk. Then the man asked, "Wait long?"

"No," Spencer said, then added, "I worked at the rock-quarry back there."

The man glanced at him. "What did you do, quit?"

"Yeah." Spencer leaned back. He supposed he would have to pay for the ride by answering questions. He half looked at the man. In the dim glow from the dash light he saw an erect figure wearing a slouch hat. He saw a clean profile and gloved hands on the wheel. Down below there were black oxfords and dark gray trousers.

"What are you planning on doing now?" the man asked.

"I haven't made up my mind," Spencer said. He'd made up his mind all right. He had over two hundred dollars in his wallet and Mexico was next door to Border City. With the dollar bringing a little better than eight pesos, his money would last him a while.

"Why did you quit?" the man asked casually.

"I got tired of working," Spencer said.

Sick of working for Bogan, he should have said. He'd worked two months for Bogan at a promised salary of fifty a week. The first month was fine, Bogan paid off on Saturday nights, and Spencer had it figured to stick around for a long time and build a big stake. The next week Bogan hedged, saying his customers weren't coming through on their bills. Spencer let it go for three weeks. Then he had all of it he could stand. He knew Bogan kept his cash in a tin box in his shack.

This morning he'd told Bogan he wanted his money at the end of the day. When they finished work he cleaned up, dressed in the gray pinstripe and packed his suitcase. But Bogan whined that he didn't have the money, for Spencer to wait another week. Bill Spencer was lean

and young and impatient. He hit Bogan a couple of times and made him produce the tin box. There was a fat stack of money in the box but Spencer took only the two hundred that was coming to him. When he walked away, Bogan shouted threats, but Spencer didn't even look back.

The coupe was picking up speed. The clock on the dash said six. Spencer looked at his watch. It was quarter to seven. He looked again at the clock and saw that it wasn't working.

The coupe slowed down a little and the man leaned over and pushed the glove compartment button. A sweet whiskey smell hit Spencer. The man took the pint bottle from the compartment. "Care for a shot?" he asked.

"I can use one," Spencer said. The bottle was half full. Spencer took two swallows, handed the bottle to the man, watched him drink.

"Hits the spot," the man said.

"You said it." Spencer took the bottle, capped it and slid it back into the glove compartment. He closed the little door.

The coupe turned off the main highway onto an oiled road. A few house lights came in view. The man glanced at Spencer. "I have to stop and see a friend. You don't mind?"

"I'm just going along for the ride," Spencer told him.

The wash of the headlights showed a row of poplars up ahead. The coupe made a turn at the side of the trees. The headlights caught a mailbox that had M. Warton printed on the side. The man stopped the coupe, opened the door and said, "Come on in for a minute."

"I'd just as soon wait out here."

"There might be a drink in it," the man offered.

Spencer shrugged and got out. They went up the walk. There was light coming from behind the blinds.

The man tried the door, opened it. They entered a hall. To the left was a sunken

living room. The color scheme was blue-green, with blue predominating. A long mantel ran above the fireplace and three Chinese porcelain figures stood on the mantel. Everything in the room looked very expensive to Spencer.

THE MAN crossed the room, reached for one of the figures. He handed it to Spencer, saying, "Centuries old. Lovely, isn't it?"

The statue was perhaps a foot tall, heavier than Spencer had imagined. He looked at the man and saw a squarish tanned face, a small dark mustache. He said, smiling, "If it's that old I'd better put it back."

Spencer put the statue back gingerly.

The man indicated a decanter and glasses on a low table. "There's the drink I promised you. I think my friend is upstairs. I'll only be a minute." He left the room.

Spencer lifted the glass top from the decanter and sniffed brandy. He poured himself a short drink and walked around the room, holding the glass.

He saw the colored photograph of a girl on an end table. The hair was coppery, the eyes smoky green and somehow arrogant. She looked to be in her early twenties. Across the bottom of the picture, in bold pen strokes, was written: To Aunt Mary with love, Dora.

Spencer straightened, hearing voices. He recognized the man's voice. "But, Mary—"

"Don't Mary me!" a woman's voice answered harshly. "Because of you, Dora has left this house. But I still hold the upper hand, Rincon. If she's fool enough to marry you, you can be certain that I'll change my will. And don't think you can wait me out. I expect to keep on living for a good many years!"

The man answered in a low voice. Spencer finished the brandy, put the glass back on the tray. He wished he hadn't accepted

the man's invitation to enter the house.

The voices were coming nearer. There were steps, the sound of tapping. The man appeared. The angry woman was directly behind him. She was thin and elderly, with white hair and a tight-lipped mouth. She walked with the help of a cane. A double strand of pearl necklace glowed at her throat. She said, "You knew this was the maid's night off, so you came—"

She broke off, glared at Spencer, her head lifted. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Before Spencer could open his mouth, the man said, "A friend of mine. I invited him in to see—"

"How dare you presume that I want your friends in my house!" the woman cut in. "Get out, both of you!"

The man's face worked. Then he shrugged, walked with Spencer to the door. Spencer looked back at the woman, thought of offering explanations. But this was none of his business and he wanted no part of it.

They walked to the car in silence. The man reached for the glove compartment, brought out the bottle. He took a long drink and looked back at the house. Suddenly he passed the bottle to Spencer. "Go ahead, kill it. I forgot my hat. Be back in a minute." He strode rapidly to the house.

Spencer sat in the car, holding the bottle. He didn't care for another drink. He was thinking of Mexico, wondering how long his money would last across the border. Acapulco would be the spot to go, he thought, but Acapulco was a tourist trap. Durango was the place. He could pick up a tourist permit in the morning easily enough.

The man was coming back, getting into the car, and Spencer was wondering idly what the trouble was all about.

"Is there a drink left in that bottle?" the man asked nervously.

Spencer passed it over. The man drank quickly, tossed the bottle out. Rincon, Spencer thought. An odd name. They drove away from the house.

For five or six miles they did not speak. Up ahead, there was an intersection, a sign saying Border City was ten miles away. There was a roadside liquor store on the corner. They crossed, went on for three or four hundred yards. Suddenly Rincon pulled to a stop, turned off the headlights. He reached inside his coat, pulled out a wallet and handed Spencer a bill. "I can use another drink. Mind running back and getting a bottle?"

It was in Spencer to refuse. He wanted no more drinks until he hit the city. But the guy was giving him a lift. He was buying the drinks. Spencer walked back to the liquor store and brought the bottle back. The man had a long drink, sighed and started the car. They drove on.

The lights of Border City showed up ahead. A few service stations and eating places were scattered along the highway. Traffic thickened. The buildings of the city came into view. Rincon turned the coupe up a dark side street and stopped. He said, "I'll have to drop you off here."

"Sure," Spencer said. He stepped out with the suitcase. "Thanks, mister." The man lifted a hand. The coupe rolled away. Spencer watched it turn at the next corner. Then he headed along the sidewalk.

The hotel was cheap but clean. Spencer

registered, followed a boy to the second floor. He washed up, thought about unpacking and decided to forget it. It would only mean packing all over again in the morning.

HE WENT downstairs, asked the desk clerk for information on air travel out of Tijuana. The clerk didn't know. He said Spencer could find out by calling there. Spencer thanked him and went outside. Time enough to call in the morning after he got his tourist permit.

He walked along the street and found a barber shop still open. He had a haircut, his shoes shined, and then walked to the nearest bar for a drink. He had three drinks and when he went outside again it was nearly eleven and he was feeling fine.

He turned back to the hotel. A thick man wearing an iron-gray suit stood beside the desk. The clerk spoke to him as Spencer entered the lobby. The man nodded, stepped forward. He looked at Spencer with flat blue eyes. "William Spencer?" he asked.

Spencer nodded, puzzled. The man opened a thick hand, showed Spencer a badge. "Brent," he said. "Border City police." He waited.

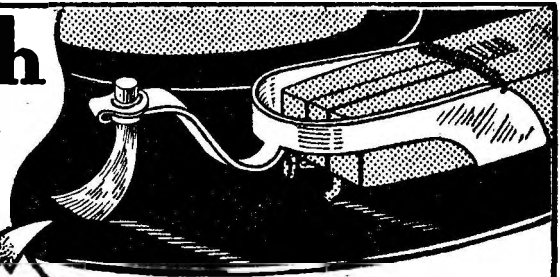
Spencer said curtly, "If Bogan brought this on, forget it. You're on the wrong track. He owed me two hundred dollars. I took two hundred dollars."

"Bogan says different," Brent said

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quietly. "He says you took it all after you slugged him. Eleven hundred dollars. He swore out a warrant. I'm afraid you'll have to come along, Spencer."

Spencer groaned. "The guy's a chisler. He stalled me for a month. I wanted my dough and I got it. That's all there is to it."

Brent shrugged. "You'll have to prove that in court."

"But I was leaving for Mexico in the morning—"

"So the clerk told me," Brent said dryly. "That won't look so good, will it?"

"My Lord, man! Would I go to a hotel, register under my own name, if I'd robbed him? Use your head!"

"Yeah, it was easy enough finding you. But that still doesn't solve anything, does it? Let's go, Spencer. The clerk said you had a suitcase—"

"Up in my room," Spencer said angrily. He wondered if anything could come of this. One man's word against another. Damn Bogan!

They took the stairs, Brent a couple of steps behind Spencer. In the room, Brent said, "You made pretty good time."

"Fellow gave me a ride," Spencer said. He turned and spread his hands. "Will it help if you search me?" He dug out his wallet, flung it on the bed. "That's all of it." He picked up the suitcase, snapped it open, dumped the contents beside the wallet.

Brent said wearily, "They'll go through your stuff at headquarters. Now put that stuff back and—"

Brent broke off, staring at the bed. He stepped around Spencer, reached into the tangle of underwear, shirts and socks. Then he was holding up a pearl necklace, looking at it, then at Spencer, suddenly alert. "Where did this come from?" he asked in a cold voice.

Spencer's insides turned to putty. He stared at the necklace, moistened lips that were suddenly dry.

Brent said, "They look and feel like the real thing."

Spencer closed his eyes, opened them again. "The woman—she was wearing them."

"What woman?"

Spencer gestured and Brent stepped back. Spencer said, "The guy who gave me a ride. He stopped at her place, invited me in. The woman—"

A look of frozen disbelief on Brent's face stopped him. He felt panic rise. He blurted, "I'm telling you that's what happened."

"You can tell it at headquarters," Brent said.

Spencer stood there, too paralyzed to speak. The horrible conviction had hit him that Mary Warton was at this moment lying dead in her house.

It didn't take a second thought to convince him. He had a picture of Rincon riding around, taking drinks from a bottle, trying to raise the nerve to commit a murder. And then he sat inside of Rincon and saw Spencer waiting at the side of the road, a patsy to catch the penalty for an unspeakable crime.

It was suddenly very clear to Spencer. Mary Warton had threatened to cut her niece out of her will if Rincon married the girl. Rincon hadn't liked that and had taken steps to alter the old lady's fatal decision.

Spencer saw even more. He saw his fingerprints on the Chinese statue, on the decanter, on the glass. He saw them all over the pint bottle in the driveway, and he saw himself walking back to the liquor store while Rincon planted the necklace in his suitcase.

Rincon had forgotten his hat on purpose. He'd gone back after it and then, killed Mary Warton.

Spencer wanted to weep, to cry out for help. He looked at Brent's frozen face. No help there. He measured the distance between him and Brent. He thought of

facing it and then something in his head was measuring the distance again, wondering if he could hit Brent hard enough the first time to keep him quiet. He thought of how it would be at the police station. It would be very tough, especially after they checked his story and found the body.

Brent said, "Put the stuff back in the suitcase, Spencer."

Maybe there wasn't a body. Maybe this was all a joke of some kind. No, no, no, his brain told him. This isn't a joke. This is the way it starts for the guys who pay the penalties for crimes they didn't commit.

BRENT had the necklace in his coat pocket now. His hand was moving to his right hip. Spencer stepped toward the bed. He stuffed his belongings into the suitcase, snapped it shut, flung it at Brent's knees. His fist shot out, caught Brent full in the face. Brent was still tugging at the revolver, bringing it out. Spencer hit him again, throwing all of his weight behind the blow. Blood spurted from Brent's mouth. He sagged, mumbling. Spencer hit him on the jaw and knocked him out.

For a second Spencer reeled, his heart pounding inside his chest. The panic in him was so strong that he was faint with it. He groped for the door, lurched down the hall. He started for the stairs.

On the first floor he stopped. The panic steadied, edged back. The clerk. If Spencer came down alone, the clerk would become suspicious. He would only have to take one look at Spencer to know that something was wrong. Spencer sobbed, ran to the end of the hall, looked for a back stairs. The window at the end of the hall was open. He saw a fire escape. He crawled over the sill, got his feet on the ladder, climbed down.

He found himself in an alley. At the end of the alley a red neon flicked off and on, off and on, paving the alley blood red.

Bill Spencer quickly ran the other way.

Now the alley behind him and he was crossing a street. Lights rushed at him, brakes squealed, a voice cursed him. But he was running, finding another alley, then another, running until the breath sobbed in his lungs and his mouth tasted of leather.

At least he could run no farther. He put his back against a brick wall, chest heaving, listening for sounds that meant pursuit. Listening for the wail of a siren.

He heard nothing. Now he thought of ways to escape the city. He thought of the border but by the time he reached the border the alarm would be out, and the border would be a very dangerous spot. The more he thought about it the harder he knew escape to be. Border City was on the coast. Mexico guarded one side. There was the coast highway, another danger spot. Then there was the back country. But even that direction offered few roads.

He thought of Rincon and he damned him. And he damned Bogan because Bogan had brought this on. It was good to feel anger; it swept the panic away, made him think. If only he was certain that a murder had been committed. But he wasn't certain—not really certain. And yet everything pointed to a murder. Mary Warton's apparent hatred for Rincon. The necklace.

He looked at the dark sky. He closed his eyes and he felt the night. He was young. There was so much of life still ahead of him.

He moved away from the alley, into the street. And then the thought stopped him. It was crazy, but if there had been a murder, it wouldn't be discovered till morning because this was the maid's night off. It meant that he could face Rincon without fear, because Rincon wouldn't dare recognize him and give himself away. The man probably had an iron-clad alibi for the evening.

All right. If you weren't certain of the facts you presumed. Rincon had killed Mary Warton, making Spencer the stooge for the crime. That meant that as far as Rincon was concerned he would know nothing until the police or Dora notified him.

He would be wondering about Spencer, about the necklace, and what Spencer would do when he discovered the necklace in his belongings. If Spencer went to the police with his story, Rincon would have his alibi ready. What Rincon didn't know was that police already had the necklace, that they were relentlessly looking for Spencer.

The siren reminded Spencer of that fact. He heard it first in the pit of his stomach, and then his feet were taking him away from the immediate vicinity. And then he heard another piercing wail off to the left and coming closer. Somewhere in the depths of the city another sounded.

Spencer hurried his steps. They were combing the city; they would stop and check every man that even slightly resembled the right one.

The siren on the left was closing in. Spencer jerked around, looking for escape. The panic was edging in again. Dark store fronts. The corner street light. A drug store over there.

The siren beat against his ears; the red spot of a prowl car came around the corner. A white spot swept the opposite corner. It picked out a man standing there, steadied on him. The man stood outlined, frozen. Then he moved. The prowl car swung back and a loudspeaker blared out.

"You there, on the corner! Don't move!"

The spotlight held the man again. He didn't move. The prowl car slid against the curb; a uniformed cop got out, followed by the driver. They closed in on the man.

SPENCER moved forward against the buildings, gained the lighted entrance of the drugstore. A man wearing a smock and two women were staring across the street. They didn't look at Spencer as he entered the store.

A girl clerk came to wait on him. She wanted to know what was going on out there. Spencer told her he didn't know, said he wanted to use a phone, and the girl told him the booths were at the rear.

He went back there. There were three empty booths. There was a directory on a slanting ledge. He opened the directory, unable to read, his brain with the prowl car and the man they had stopped. He didn't know long he stood there, looking at lines on a page. He heard the siren start up again, very softly at first, then building to a climax. It was going away from him, dying away. He focused his eyes.

Rincon. There was a Rincon bar, then a Harry Rincon, then a Roy Rincon.

He had his back turned; it was easy to tear the page out of the book. Then he went inside the first booth, made a pretense of dialing and talking. Then he eased out of the booth and walked outside. No one paid attention to him.

He found the Rincon bar easily enough. Spencer had his beer served by a burly barkeep.

Spencer walked away from his beer, hurried outside. He looked at Harry Rincon's address, out on 46th Street. His eyes jumped to the next line. Roy Rincon kept house at an address that was listed as being on the corner of Eleventh and Elm.

Spencer hunted for a cigarette, couldn't find one. He walked ahead and found a magazine and newspaper stand in the middle of the block. He bought cigarettes, matches, asked the old man casually where Elm Street was. The old man told him to hike up to Broadway and Eleventh, then turn left one block. Spencer thanked him and went away.

There was too much light on Broadway. Spencer stayed on the next street, followed it up to Eleventh. He was feeling doubt again, wondering if either one of the Rincons was the one he wanted, wondering what he could do if he found his man. Somewhere inside his brain he continued to hear the sirens, pinchers of sound that told him he was hemmed in.

For a second it got him, for a terrible moment it was too much. He summed it up. He took Bogan's charges and his inability to prove his innocence. Then he added a probable murder and slugging a cop and running away. He took Mexico and he wanted Mexico terribly, and he would never make it there. He didn't want to run any longer; he wanted to face the nearest policeman and immediately give himself up.

He continued to walk.

Now he was turning up Eleventh, crossing Broadway, seeing the tall, modern building on the next corner, seeing the huge neon sign on its roof that read: SEASIDE APARTMENT HOTEL.

It looked expensive. Through the downstairs windows, as he walked toward it, he could see the wide expanse of a dining room. Even at this late hour it was partially filled. Waiters hurried between white-covered tables. Laughter showed on faces. A beautiful woman seated next to the window, turned her head and looked at him. He moved away.

The stairs. The glass doors. The cock-tail lounge opposite the dining room. The desk at the rear of the carpeted lobby.

He approached the desk, not knowing what to say. The clerk was short and dapper with a fixed smile that swept Spencer's appearance and obviously found it satisfactory. "May I help you, sir?" he asked.

"Mr. Rincon. Is he in?"

"He's been in since this afternoon. But he left word that he doesn't wish to be disturbed."

Spencer looked at the clock behind the desk. Midnight. He had been running for a little more than an hour. Now he needed time to think. He said, "Well, never mind. I'll catch him in the morning."

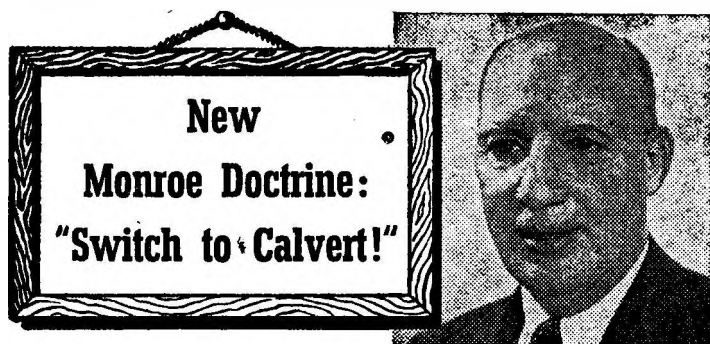
"Do you wish to leave a message?" The clerk looked to one side as the elevator door opened.

"It's not necessary," Spencer said.

THE CLERK was moving away. The smile he wore now was not fixed. He was wearing it for the tall and shapely girl with coppery hair that was approaching the desk. Her smoky green eyes touched Spencer and moved away, and Spencer heard her say, "Any mail for me, Harry?"

"Nothing today, Miss Davis. How was the class this evening?"

The girl's low laugh was rueful. "The harder I work, the less I seem to learn."



NEW YORK, N. Y.—George H. Monroe, New York singer and entertainer, advises men of moderation: "Switch to Calvert Reserve—as I have. Calvert really is lighter, milder, finer. It always makes your occasional highball taste better."

Is Mr. Rincon in the bar right now?"

"He hasn't come down yet—"

Spencer didn't hear the rest. His heart was beating queerly and he needed very much to collapse in one of the deep chairs and hold his head.

This was it all right. The girl from the photograph, Dora Davis. Mary Warton's niece.

He walked very slowly toward the bar, and his brain was sending out an urgent message for Dora Davis to follow him. The light in the bar was made up of soft, earthy colors. It softened features that were otherwise hard, made beautiful that which was plain.

She came in as he ordered his drink. She was wearing a green suit, and she walked with the easy grace of her youth.

Spencer watched her select an empty booth at the back of the room, speak to a waiter. The moment she has her drink, Spencer thought. He'd have to get it over with fast, get across the plan that was half formed in his brain. If Rincon came down and found them together, if she didn't believe him and screamed for the police, if—

The waiter was bringing her drink. She signed the tab, smiled at the waiter. Spencer picked up his glass. It was a mile to her booth and she was looking at him, all the way. He stopped and tried to make his voice pleasant, but it came out hoarse, urgent. "I have to speak to you, Miss Davis."

Her eyes met his and stayed there. Then she half smiled and said, "If it's that bad, sit down."

He sat, put his drink on the table and leaned over. His words came in a rush. "You're Dora Davis, you have an aunt, Mary Warton, you paint, at one time you lived with your aunt but you moved out because there was trouble about Roy Rincon—"

Her green eyes widened. "What is this leading up to?"

He continued to talk, fast, telling her about the house, the Chinese statues, that her aunt owned a pearl necklace, wanting to establish a background for the payoff. "And either you or Roy Rincon drive a dark blue coupe," he finished, naming the make and year.

The girl's eyes narrowed. "That's my car. But what—"

"The clock on the dash is out of commission. It's stopped at six o'clock."

"Well, my goodness, you have been around, haven't you? But it still doesn't give me anything, does it?"

Spencer took a deep breath. "Rincon picked me up this evening, about twenty miles outside of the city. He was driving your car."

"You missed out on that one," the girl said. She was smiling, but behind the smile there was puzzled annoyance. "My car was parked in front of the art school from before seven until after ten. Care to try again?"

"Your aunt threatened to cut you out of her will unless you stopped seeing Rincon," said Spencer. He felt sweat break out on his face.

"Now you're speaking of things that don't concern you," the girl said angrily. "Who are you, mister?"

"I'm the guy Rincon set up to take the rap for your aunt's murder," Spencer said hoarsely.

The girl straightened, her face drawn and suddenly pale. She half rose. "What are you saying—"

"Please, please!" The words came on a sob, and his hands formed fists and heat softly against the table. "Don't do anything yet. Please don't do anything yet. I had to hit you with it, and I'm sorry. But it might mean my life. Do me this favor. There's a phone booth back there. Call your aunt. See if you get her to answer."

She looked at him. There was a little fright mixed in with the puzzled anger

now, a bit of uncertainty. She got up, strode to the booth, stepped inside.

Spencer watched her. He was afraid to look around, afraid that he would see Rincon walking into the bar. He had grasped for his one hope and he was holding onto it now, feeling his fingers slipping.

She came back. She stood over him, her face hard, her eyes fixed accusingly on his. "All right, mister—she doesn't answer. Now what's to stop me from calling the police?"

He closed his eyes. He felt himself drowning. "Nothing," he said. He opened his eyes and he looked at her. "Nothing, except that I'm telling the truth. And that if you call the police I'll be accused of murder. Listen," he pleaded, "if I wasn't telling the truth, would I be here? Would I be telling you that the police found your aunt's necklace in my possession, that I managed to get away and came here only to try and clear myself? If I was guilty I'd keep running, wouldn't I?"

She sank on the seat across from him, her eyes wide on his face. "I see no reason to believe you—"

"I don't ask that," Spencer said. "All I ask is that you give me a chance to clear myself, even if it means Rincon's neck. I know that's plenty. You're probably in love with the guy. And if you are, you should have enough faith in him to prove me a liar."

"Aunt Mary never leaves the house," the girl said, as if speaking to herself.

Spencer said, "If I'm wrong I'll give myself up. I swear it."

"You swear it," the girl said. "I've never laid eyes on you before tonight. Yet you know all about me and my aunt and Roy." She shivered and took a deep breath. "All right. Just how can you clear yourself?"

Spencer started to shake. He told himself to stop it. She was going along with him and there was nothing to shake

about. He said, "Does Rincon own a car?"

She nodded. "He keeps it parked in the garage downstairs."

"And your coupe?"

"It's still out front. Why?"

"Because I'll need to use it. Here it is. In just a few minutes I'm going to drive your car away. I want you to go upstairs to your apartment. Ask Rincon in for a drink. That's important because about a half hour after I leave you'll get a phone call. Be sure that Rincon doesn't answer it first. After you hang up, you'll be very frightened. You'll tell Rincon that your aunt called, that she's badly injured, but that she was unable to say enough to make sense. It'll mean putting on an act when you answer the phone—"

"Do you know what you're asking?" There was anger in the girl again, Spencer saw.

He said, "If I'm right, and I'm staking my life on it, Rincon will want to rush directly to your aunt's side. And he'll work it so he can go alone. Don't try to stop him. Be wearing a housecoat and say that you'll follow in your car the moment you're dressed."

She looked at him for a long moment. "And where will you be?"

"I'll be at your aunt's place, waiting for him with a certain cop—if he'll believe me."

The girl was silent. The doubt was back again. Then it went away and the hard arrogance had taken its place. She lifted her head. "Don't ask me why I believe you—"

"William Spencer."

"All right, Spencer. I care a hell of a lot more for my aunt than I do for Roy." She gave a wry smile. "The only reason we disagreed over him was because we're both stubborn. Now I don't give a damn. If what you say is true, I want the guilty person caught. That's all that matters."

"Your car keys and your phone number," Spencer said softly. When he had

both, he got up and started for the phone booth.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"Call a cop," Spencer said.

He called headquarters and asked for Brent. The man told him that Brent had gone off duty. Spencer asked for and got his phone number. He made the second call. Waiting, he looked through the glass partition at the bar.

DORA DAVIS was just getting up from the booth. At that moment, toward the girl, smiling. Spencer pressed Rincon came in from the lobby. He came himself into a corner. He saw the girl hesitate, half turn and look his way. Then she straightened, smiled up at Rincon, spoke a few words. Rincon grinned and took her arm. They walked out of the bar.

"Hello?" a woman's voice said in Spencer's ear.

"I'd like to speak to Brent," said Spencer.

He felt the woman hesitate. "He's asleep. Is it necessary—"

"Very," Spencer said.

In a moment Spencer heard Brent's voice, the words coming slowly, as if it hurt him to speak. "What's the trouble?"

"This is William Spencer, the guy who clipped you."

"Thought it over, eh?"

"The story is the same. But there's something else you probably don't know yet. I have reasons to believe that the woman who owned the necklace, a Mary Warton, has been murdered. And everything is fixed to point my way."

"I'm listening," Brent said.

Spencer spilled out his story. When he'd finished he said, "It's my only chance, Brent. And if you're square you'll give me that chance and come with me."

"Suppose I say yes. Then we take a prowler car and three or four of the boys—"

"That's just what I don't want! We'll be just a step ahead of Rincon. If he spots a prowler car he'll know something is wrong."

"All right," Brent said after a moment. "Pick me up on the corner of Broadway and Fifth in fifteen minutes. That'll give us a chance to get a couple miles out of town before you make your call."

* * *

They were beyond the city limits. Spencer looked at his watch. "We'd better find a phone, and fast."

"There's an all-night service station up ahead," Brent said. He sat stiffly in his corner of the seat. His mouth was swollen and there was a lump on the side of his jaw. He fingered the jaw and looked sideways at Spencer. "I wish somebody would tell me why I'm doing this."

Spencer didn't answer. He was thinking about the girl, wondering if she could put it across, wondering if now that she'd had time to think it over she might not be changing her mind.

The lights of the service station showed. Spencer brought the coupe to a stop, climbed out. Brent followed him. "This I got to hear."

Spencer made the call, his cold hand around the receiver. He heard the ring, two rings. Then he recognized her voice. "Hello?"

"This is Spencer," he said softly. "Is he there?"

"Yes," she breathed. Then, "Aunt Mary! What—"

"I have the police with me. Remember what I said about letting him leave alone."

"Aunt Mary!" the girl said in a frightened voice. Spencer heard her tap the receiver buttons. "Aunt Mary! Say something!"

"I'm hanging up," he said softly. "Keep it up a few seconds longer." He hung up.

Brent took his arm. "Okay, take it easy. You can shake later."

"He's got to believe it," Spencer said in a low voice. "He's got to believe that he didn't kill her, that she came out of it long enough to call Dora."

"That's fine," Brent said harshly. "But right now we've got to get rolling. If he drives like a madman he might beat us there."

It took them twenty-five minutes by Spencer's watch.

The front door was unlocked, the lights in the living room were still on. Brent led the way up the stairs. The front bedroom door was open. Brent stopped short. Spencer looked past him.

MARY WARTON lay face-down, arms outspread. The back of her head was thick with blood. Pieces of the Chinese statue were scattered around her. The shattered base lay to one side.

Brent bent over her. Then he raised his head, nodded. "Dead as she'll ever be." He straightened, reached the telephone from the nightstand, dropped it next to the woman's outstretched hands. "The stage is set, Spencer," he said in a tight voice. "All right. I'll take the closet over here. You try that door for size—"

Spencer darted for the darkened bathroom. He kept the door open a crack.

He stood there and he waited. All of his life led up to this point. If Rincon

looked at the body and immediately called the police, he, Spencer, would still have a lot of questions to answer.

A door opened and closed.

Then a slight scuffle. Spencer drew back an inch. Rincon stood framed in the doorway, a haunted, fearful look on his handsome face. He looked at the body, at the phone, and then he froze and Spencer's back became rigid as the sound of a siren floated into the room.

Rincon moved swiftly. One gloved hand reached down, grasped the shattered base of the statue. He lifted it high.

"Drop it!" Brent's voice snapped.

Rincon turned in a flash, one hand darting to his coat pocket. He dove headlong behind the bed, his right hand holding a gun. He disappeared from sight as Brent pulled trigger. Rincon snapped an answering shot.

It had happened in the space of a second. Brent fired again as Spencer leaped from the bathroom, feet first across the bed. He landed squarely on Rincon, kicked the gun from Rincon's hand. Rincon offered no resistance; there was a bleeding hole above his right eye. Brent's second shot had done the job.

The front door burst open. Brent and Spencer went out of the room, met two uniformed policemen on the stairs.

Looking past them, Spencer saw Dora Davis coming up the stairs.

She looked at Spencer. "Is she—"

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Spencer nodded.

The girl looked at him a moment longer. Her lips quivered, her face crumpled and she began to weep. Spencer went to her, folded her in his arms. Her body shook with her weeping. He heard Brent say softly, "Better take them back to town. We can go over it in the morning."

It was noon of the next day in Brent's office, and Dora was telling how Rincon had reacted on hearing about the phone call. She looked at Spencer. "I did just as you said. I invited him up and changed into a house coat. Then, when your call came, and I cried 'Aunt Mary!' he—I thought he was coming at me. But I kept talking and then I hung up. He started to walk toward me with a terrible look on his face, and then I told him that Aunt Mary was hurt, and that I'd heard her phone drop. I said we had to go to her right away, that I'd get dressed. Then he said that would take too long, that he would go on ahead.

"Then I couldn't bear the waiting so—I called the police."

Spencer blew out a long breath. "It's a good thing you did. That siren was just what he needed to make up his mind. He still wasn't certain but what your aunt might be alive."

"Yeah," Brent said dryly. "That brings us back to you, doesn't it?"

Spencer flushed, stole a glance at Dora. "I didn't tell you about that," he said in a low voice. "I'm supposed to be under arrest for stealing my former boss' bankroll."

"Oh, no—" Dora breathed. "You couldn't have—"

Brent broke the following silence. "As it turned out, he didn't." Spencer shot him a quick look, found Brent grinning. "That's right. I paid Bogan a visit early this morning, made him swear again that you'd cleaned out his tin box. Then I told him that you were involved in a murder, that he would be pulled in as a witness.

He didn't like that at all. I told him to produce his tin box and he changed his tune, saying that as long as you were in real trouble he'd drop his charges. That was one way of getting out of it, but I told him to bring out the box. I let him go in after it, and then went to a side window and watched him take a roll out of the box and slip it under his mattress. So he brought me the empty box and I marched him inside and made him admit that he'd been lying all along. He's warming up a cell right now."

Spencer gave a tremulous smile.

"And so you're going to Mexico, eh?" Brent asked idly.

"Well, I—" Spencer was looking at Dora, remembering all they had been through in the past twenty-four hours, and thinking that this was the first time in his young life that he had ever cared for a girl. But there was more to it than that, he told himself. He had nothing to offer her. Two hundred dollars. That was fine, wasn't it? He said, "Yeah, I guess that's where I'm going all right," and thought he saw her face cloud up a little.

"Did you ever think of becoming a cop?" Brent asked.

Spencer looked at him. "Me?"

"Why not? It's a future."

Spencer smiled.

Brent nodded, grinning. Then he became serious. "We do need good men on the force. I think you're a good man. What do you say?"

"I don't know— He was looking at Dora again, finding her eyes calm on his.

"I'll be staying around here?"

"You won't regret it," Brent said. "There are worse places than Border City. And," he added dryly, "you can still spend your days off in Mexico."

Spencer drew a breath. "All right," he said. "But I can think of better places to spend my free days."

And what he was hoping for, happened. Dora smiled happily.

MAYHEM WITH A MATCH

Nothing on earth would
be able to save the
building from ruin.



By
**HARMON
BELLAMY**

THIS, Slade reassured himself, would be the perfect crime. He put down the coal shovel, wiped a clammy palm against his jacket, and expelled a sighing breath as he squinted nervously at the steam boiler. Everything was set.

Rupert Slade anxiously awaited the explosion that would destroy his whole world.

Rita and little Bobby were in Long Island by now. With no witnesses and no clues, it would be a cinch to collect the insurance.

Yet, being new to lawlessness, the shaky feeling persisted. A pinpoint of doubt tangled with the back of his mind. Should he drop the whole idea? There was still time. Let the bank examiners find the shortage. He'd been a faithful employee for ten years; maybe they'd be lenient with him.

Faithful? He twisted the word this way and that. Was embezzling funds being faithful? A sickness filled him. The vision of prison bars floated before his closed eyes and he shuddered. Not that, not that! It would be too ghastly.

He closed the fire door, straightened his thin shoulders with a convulsive jerk. Why worry now? The deed was as good as done. Instead of brooding, he should feel thankful he had received an inside tip that the examiners were coming next month.

"I'm going through with it," he whispered huskily. "I've got to keep my nerve. There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing. Not if I keep using my head."

He clamped his mouth shut, then. He'd have to quit talking to himself. It was a bad sign. Better to think about his cleverness, his ingenuity.

That spat this morning with Rita, for instance. It had been brilliant, a masterpiece. He'd mentioned it to one of the tellers, using just the right tone of regret. They knew how crazy in love he was with her, and that was no lie. He was doing this for her, and Bobby. He must keep remembering that. Wouldn't they be destitute if he went to prison?

Slade's bloodless lips spread in a distorted grimace. It had turned out exactly as he'd hoped. She'd gone off in a huff, leaving a note on the kitchen table, taking Bobby. The old "I'm-going-home-to-mother" stuff. Rita's mother would be

a witness in Slade's favor if it ever came to that. Especially after he begged Rita to come back to their little home. A man doesn't do that when he's planning to burn it down.

"This is a natural," he mumbled. None of the crazy stunts professional firebugs usually pull. Instead of arranging an intricate touch-off that might go wrong, or leave traces, he wasn't going to hide the cause from the inspectors. "Let 'em know," he gloated. "Let 'em know. What can they do about it?" He bit his lips again, shutting off the spouting words.

The cause of the explosion would be laid to his haste to reach his wife. You couldn't be arrested for carelessness of this sort. Insurance companies always paid off on human mistakes. And his company, he knew from their excellent reputation, paid off very fast. When the check came through, he'd square up the shortage in his accounts before the bank examiners arrived.

He felt a twinge over that. It would be tough returning all that dough, but it was better to be without a home temporarily and still have his job than to live for the rest of his life in the pen with cutthroat murderers and bank robbers. He'd still have Rita and little Bobby, and after he got out of this mess he'd quit playing the horses.

"That's it," he whispered. "No more horses. I'm through with the nags. I'll never again—"

He clammed up, gritting his teeth savagely. That damn fool tongue of his would get him in trouble if he wasn't careful.

For the last time Slade examined the soot-choked flue of the old-fashioned boiler. Five years without a cleaning had done that. Maybe it was lucky he couldn't afford an oil burner. He chuckled nervously. Who said there could be no perfect crime?

He checked over the entire set-up. The

smoke hood was closed tightly; so was the fire door, the ash door, the clean-outs. the coal was packed as high as he could pack it. When the tiny flames finally pushed through that jam and hit the gas pocket on top—*blam!*

It was time to go. Danger lay here. He must be far away when those tiny tentacles of fire came up through that ceiling of coal and hit the gas chamber.

Shivering, Slade extinguished the electric bulb and stumbled upstairs. His fingers were all thumbs as he buttoned his overcoat and pulled on his galoshes. The nervous grin kept twisting his thin face spasmodically.

Hurry! Hurry! When that boiler explodes, it will hurtle upward with terrific force, perhaps through this very floor. . . .

THE train carried Slade swiftly to Long Island. When he knocked on the door of Mrs. Borden, his mother-in-law, he forced an expression of worry, regret, and sheepishness to his pale features. He must make this look natural.

"Where's Rita?" he cried, simulating distress. "Is she still mad?" He was kicking off his galoshes. "It was all my fault. Guess I woke up on the wrong side this morning. I've come to take them back."

"Rita?" Mrs. Borden was puzzled. She closed the door, followed him into the living room. "What do you mean, Rupert? She hasn't been here."

A cold dagger of fear knifed through him. What was this? Had his perfect plan gone wrong after all? But it couldn't.

"But they—she left me, took Bobby with her. We had a quarrel this morning. She was gone when I came home from the bank. She left a note—"

Suddenly the words were choking him. Where had Rita gone? A ghastly horror filled him.

"What's the matter?" pleaded the old woman, frightened. "You're trembling. Where's my daughter?"

He scarcely heard her. He struggled dazedly to get the full import of this catastrophe. Could he still prove his wife had left him, that he'd chased after her? The note! Where was it? He searched frantically in his pockets. Not here. Had he left it on the kitchen table?

The doorbell rang discordantly. He whipped around. Was it Rita at last? How had he arrived here first?

He threw open the front door. He stumbled backward, cringing.

Two policemen, huge in their winter overcoats. Stern, tight-lipped, eyes burning into him. Caught! So soon they had discovered him. He stared dazedly, eyes bulging. Why did they look at him like that? How could they have known? He hadn't left any clues. Or had he? Where had he slipped up?

"Rupert Slade?" One of them stepped forward. "We've been looking for you. Headquarters sent out a radio flash that you might be here."

His perfect crime was a shambles.

"—I was going crazy. I had to make good that deficit. I set the rubbish barrels there. I closed all the doors to create the gas pocket. I— Why are you staring like that? Stop it! Damn you, stop it!"

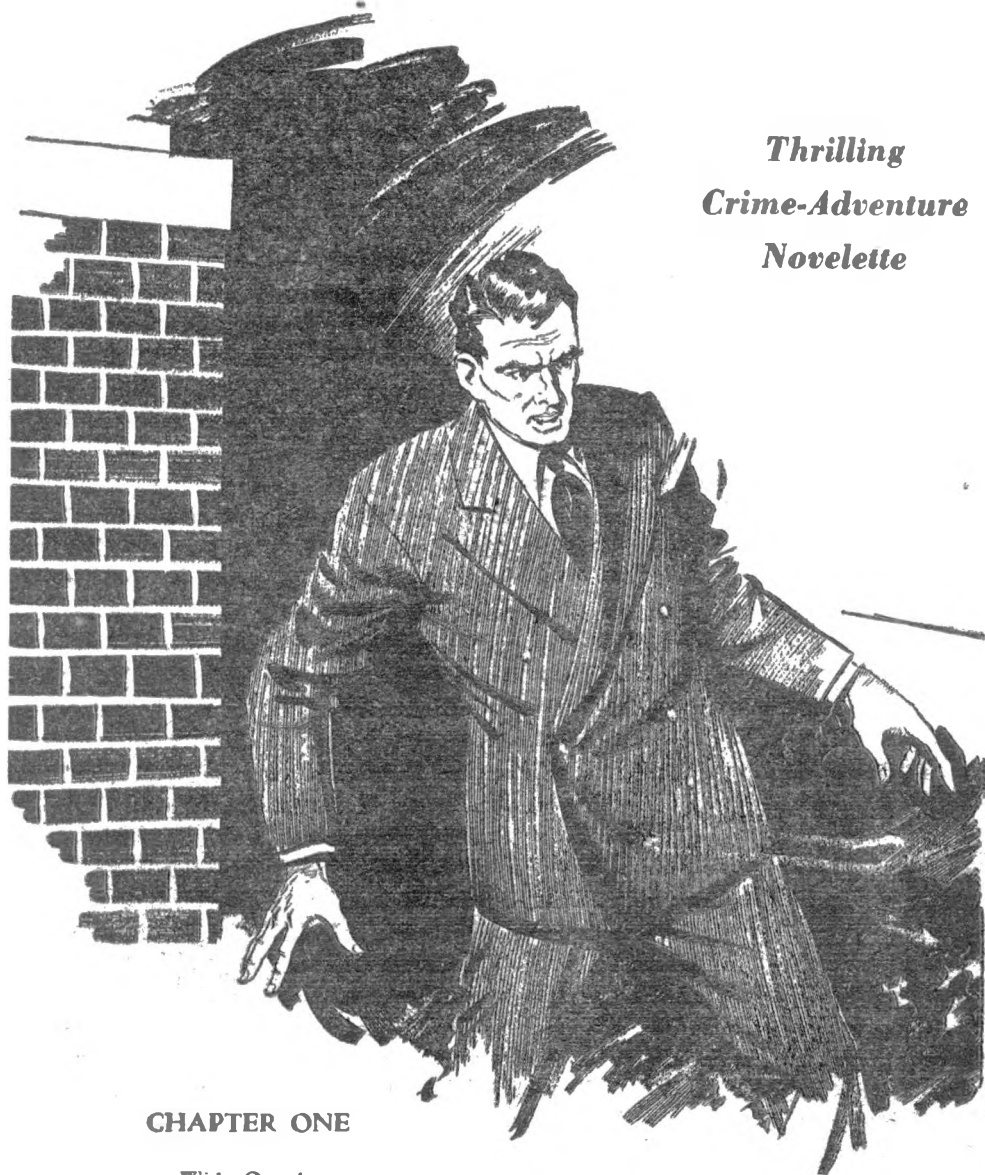
He was aware dizzily of Mrs. Borden's racking breath. What was he saying? Couldn't he keep that fool mouth of his shut? Handcuffs slipped over his limp, flabby, sweating wrists; pinched cruelly.

"Well," a grim voice beat through his stupor, "we just came up to break the sad news about your wife and child. They were killed in the explosion that wrecked your home. She lived just long enough to say something about changing her mind; something about going back to make up with you. But now— Hey, Tim, give us a hand. He's fainted."

With nine yards to go, fullback Barry McBride fumbled the fixed ball—and was labeled the . . .



*Thrilling
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CHAPTER ONE

Wide Open!

HE HEARD the brisk tap-tap-tap of her heels as she came down the row of booths and he didn't look up. He kept staring down at his big hands, made into fists on the edge of the

table. Nor did he look up when Laura slid into the opposite side of the booth. He could smell the familiar perfume, hear the faint creak of the cheap plywood bench.

"Barry!" she said.

PIGSKIN PATSY

By *JOHN D. MacDONALD*



He remembered the look of
surprise on George's face.

He didn't answer her.

"Barry, look at me!"

Slowly he lifted his eyes, seeing first the small, squarish capable hands, then the severe tailoring of the suit, her fragile throat above the froth of white waist, the stubborn chin he loved and the direct eyes, sherry-brown, almost the precise shade of her hair.

"Laura," he said. "Laura, I—"

"You promised, Barry. You promised to get out of town. I told you you have to get out of town."

"Run, Laura? What'll they say then?"

"No more than they're saying right now."

"Why did they have to do it to me? Why?"

"Barry, please."

He shook his head slowly. "I can't run. I've got to stay. I've got to figure it out. I've got to know why. Besides, where would I go? What would I do?"

"You've saved money, Barry."

"I've been saving it for us."

"This is for us, Barry. Anything for you is for us. Go to Chicago. Get a room there, Barry. Go to movies, read, do anything. Date a girl if you have to. But don't think about all this."

"I can't stop thinking about it. When I think about it I want to go out and kill Stackie Coult. He lied, Laura. He lied like hell."

"Barry, I know he lied and you know he lied. Maybe there's a few others that still believe in you. But you could count us on one hand. Killing won't do any good."

His smile was grim. "My good pals. Good old Barry. How's everything, Barry. That's the way it is one day. The next day they want to spit on me. Why did they do it to me? I wasn't in anybody's way, was I?"

She glanced toward the bar, leaned toward him and lowered her voice. "One of the people who still believe in you,

Barry, is Kyle Benedict, the sports editor. We had a little talk. He thinks there's more to this than meets the eye. And he thinks you ought to go away for a little while. And—I didn't want to say this, Barry darling, but it isn't easy for me, on the paper. All the cats have their claws sharpened."

"If I could just prove," he said dully, that it was a frame. If—"

"Don't talk nonsense, Barry!" she snapped. "Don't try anything foolish. This frame was arranged by experts. Every last detail." She dug in her purse and took out the ticket in the railroad envelope and put it next to his hand. "Chicago," she said. "There's a train at six this evening. That gives you two and a half hours to pack and be on it."

He studied the envelope for a long time. Then he pushed it back toward her.

"They give you refunds on these things."

"Barry!"

"I'm sorry, Laura. That's the way it is. That's the way it's got to be. I can't run. What was I? A pro fullback. They turned me into nothing, just like that. Smart Barry. One more year, I said, and then we'd have enough to take a little coaching job. Clean Barry McBride. A credit to the coaching staff of West Whoosis Tech. They hit that in the head, Laura. They hit that in the head."

"Don't be bitter! It hurts me inside to hear you like this."

"Am I bitter? I hadn't noticed. May I have this dance?"

"Barry!"

"I'm sorry, Laura. Why don't you run along? Being here with me isn't doing you any good."

"I've got to go back to the news room. And you're going to walk me there."

"Am I?"

"Yes, Barry. You are."

She stood by the door as he paid his check at the bar. The bartender gave him change from a dollar and said, loud

enough for the other customers to hear, "Why does a guy with your dough drink beer?"

She saw Barry go white around the mouth, saw his shoulders lift. She saw the bartender's hand reach under the bar top. He stared with calm contempt at Barry McBride.

"Please, Barry," she said, just loudly enough to carry to him. The tension went out of him slowly and he walked over to her.

"I'm on the edge," he said. "Sooner or later I got to break the mouth on one of these smart guys."

"That's why Kyle and I want you out of town. The cops would love throwing you in the tank and roughing you up."

"I might like that too."

She took his arm as they went down the street. The late fall sunshine was watery, but the day was unseasonably warm. Her mind was full of a hopeless anger at what this was doing to him. Barry McBride had been as uncomplicated and friendly as an airdale puppy. Now a deep streak of violence was beginning to show.

Two boys of about fourteen coming toward them nudged each other and whispered. They stared at Barry. She looked at him. He was looking straight ahead, a funny expression on his face. She felt the muscles in his arm tense.

When the boys were fifty feet behind them, one of them yelled, "Crooked Barry McBride! Crooked Barry!"

"They don't know," she said. "Don't hate them for that. All they have to go on is what the paper said."

"I just don't know people were like this," he said in tones of wonder. "I just didn't know. I figured you do the right thing and you're all set. Lord, how they climb on you!"

They came to the Courier building. "I've got to leave you here," she said. "No fights. Promise?"

His grin was shamefaced. I pinched

her heart to see how much his face had changed in two days. There were lines bracketing his mouth that she had never noticed before. His eyes seemed deeper in his head.

"No fights," he said.

KYLE BENEDICT was in his office. She pulled the door shut behind her and sat down. The office was barely large enough for two of them and the big steel desk. Two walls were covered with the signed photographs of sports stars. She found the familiar one of Barry McBride and looked at it. An action picture taken with a telescopic lense, showing Barry coming through a big hole in the line in the '47 Packer game, plunging at express train speed, thick knees pumping high.

"How's he taking it, Laura?" Kyle asked. Kyle was a slim, fresh-faced young man with a mild manner. He had started on the Courier. Now his sports column was syndicated in two dozen mid-western papers. He called the shots as he saw them, and was respected for it.

"How would you expect him to take it?" she said bitterly. "Everything he has believed in has blown up in his face."

"Everything but you."

"I guess I'm just a one-man gal, Kyle."

"And to think that it could have been me," he said, smiling.

"What are we going to do, Kyle? What are we going to do?"

"He wouldn't go, eh?"

"I knew he wouldn't. It wouldn't be like him to go. He's going to stay out in public until somebody says the wrong thing. And then they're going to jail him. You know that as well as I do."

"At least he'll be safe in jail. I'm beginning to have some interesting ideas about the whole setup. Almost everybody in town except you and me think Stackie Coult's was telling the truth. I've been wondering why he would lie. If we

can show motive, we can create a little germ of doubt in Barry's favor."

Laura frowned. "Motive? How would Barry's being thrown out of pro ball help Stackie Coult's?"

"Maybe Barry wasn't the target. Ever think of that? Maybe he's the innocent bystander who got shot. Maybe George Deever is the target."

"Now wait a minute," she said. "Let's recapitulate, Kyle. On Saturday night before the game with the Rams, Stackie phoned the association and stated that he had been approached by George Deever and offered money to throw the game. He stated that the same offer had been made, in his presence, to Barry. He also reported it to Coach Bray. Bray and the association decided to wait and see how Barry would react. They let him go into the game. He fumbled on the Ram nine and Bray yanked him. Barry has no way of proving that the fumble was accidental. He has no way of proving that Deever didn't approach him. And he has no way of explaining the mysterious five hundred that was deposited, by mail, in his bank account on Saturday morning. How does that hurt Deever? He was charged and he's out on bail and when the excitement has died down he'll be given a little fine and he'll go his merry way. I don't get it."

"The most precious possession of any big-gun gambler, Laura, is anonymity. George Deever lost a slice of his. It could hurt him."

"I don't see how."

"Neither do I, but I think we ought to find out, don't you?"

Barry McBride, after he had delivered Laura, walked down the sunlit sidewalks of the main streets of River City. He met many people who had always greeted him with what he had assumed to be genuine liking. He was snubbed, whispered about. One man, an elderly citizen who, for many years, had been one of the financial

angels to the Tamaracks, was bolder than the rest. He pulled up to the curb and said, "Come here, McBride."

"Hello, Mr. Swanton."

I've been hoping for a chance to see you, McBride, before you leave town. I want to get this off my chest. If I had my way you'll be tarred and feathered and ridden out of this town on a rail."

"That's nice."

"We gave you every break. I remember personally getting you your off-season job with the Willoughby Foundaries."

"I've given them their money's worth."

"No doubt. What I mind, McBride, is the kids. You were a hero to the kids of this town. This is a football town. It is a shame that it had to be you to show them the dirty side of human nature."

"Are you through?"

"Almost. Remember this, McBride. No matter how many times you change your name from now on, we'll find you and we'll spread the story. We want to make certain you'll never play ball again. Leave football alone and we'll leave you alone. Is that clear?"

"If you had twenty years less, Mr. Swanton, I'd drag you out of that car and spoil you."

"That's exactly the sort of reaction I expected. You smart boys don't know what to do when you get caught."

"A man here is guilty until he's proven innocent, eh?"

"Innocent, eh? Maybe you can get a job as a comedian."

The rear tires squealed on the road as Swanton drove off. Barry stood on the curb for a long time. The anger was fading now, the redness behind his eyes. Instead a great cold lump was forming in the middle of him. This was a new sort of anger. It was like ice.

AT FIVE o'clock he was back in the small tavern where Laura had found him. He switched from beer to rye.

Though he was not used to drinking, the rye had almost no effect.

An extremely thin man with the shoulders built out on his suit coat stood beside the booth. Barry looked up. "You got something to say too?"

"Yes. George wants to see you."

"I don't want to see George. I've got this thing figured out. I think George made some bets on the rest of the season and with me out of there, he can win 'em."

The thin man sat down. "Sonny, you are green. The games are bet as they come along. You being out gets figured in the odds same as anything else. I told you George wants to see you."

"I don't come running. George Deever can come here."

"Sonny, you look a lot smarter than you talk. I give the word and Joe gives you a pull in your next drink. Or I get you up to the bar and sap you behind the ear. Or I have the boys come in from the car and take you the hard way. But George says you and he got to put your heads together."

Barry stared at him. There was no animosity in the flat black eyes. Just a hard amusement.

"Okay," Barry said. "So I go see George."

The thin man held the door of the tan sedan. Barry got in beside the man in back. His face was in shadow. The thin

man climbed in front beside the driver.

"With these two you were going to try to take me?" Barry asked.

The man beside him said in a querulous tone, "The bane of this existence is the incredulous amateur. Yes, lad, we would take you. Quickly, quietly, discreetly."

"Listen to Doc," the thin man said. "He always makes sense."

"The folklore of this nation," Doc said, "insists that a brave and muscular man can defeat all odds if his heart is pure. I constantly find myself proving the reverse of this persistent myth. I am fifty-three years old, but I could handle you if the situation required it."

"Judo?" Barry asked.

"Goodness, no! Quickness of hand and a knowledge of anatomy."

The car crossed the city line heading up river.

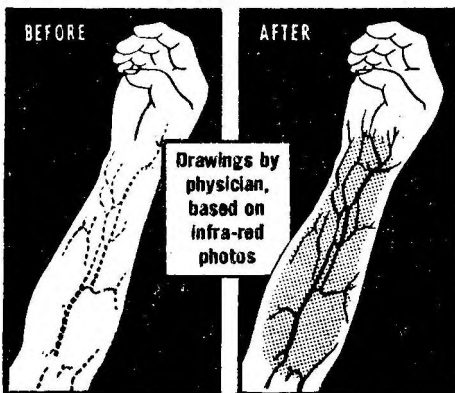
"I detect a trace of doubt in your attitude, lad," Doc said. "Permit me . . ." He reached quickly over, grasped Barry's thick arm at the elbow.

Barry gasped. The jolt was like that of a live wire. His hand went numb.

"That is commonly called the funny-bone," Doc said mildly. "Within twenty minutes you'll be able to use the arm."

Barry suddenly laughed. It was the first time he remembered laughing in forty-eight hours. "You've convinced me."

A passing headlight illuminated Doc's face. Barry glanced over. The man wore



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rimless glasses. He looked like a movie version of a country doctor.

The rest of the trip was made in silence. They turned off between the stone pillars of a suburban development. The winding asphalt climbed steadily. The house was of stone, set apart from the others, surrounded by a woven wire hurricane fence.

A man swung the gate open, closed it after them. The driver went straight on into the open attached garage.

George Deever sat at a stained oak booth in the gleaming white kitchen. A pot of coffee was on the electric plate plugged in at his elbow. A loose-leaf ledger was open in front of him. He wore a white shirt with the cuffs turned back, the collar open at his throat.

"Hello, McBride," he said. "Thanks, Jerry. Sit down, McBride."

The driver hadn't come in. Doc and Jerry went on into the front of the house.

Barry sat down gingerly. George smiled as he got up. "Coffee? I drink gallons a day."

"Thanks."

Deever put the cup and saucer in front of Barry, filled it. He sat down again with a sigh and waved his hand at the ledger in front of him. "How many people know that my income tax statements have to be just as accurate as if I were a stock broker? Uncle Sam doesn't seem to care how you get it, just so long as he gets his cut."

Barry sipped the hot coffee, put the cup back on the saucer. "Why did you want to see me?"

Deever shrugged. "You didn't run for it, McBride. You stuck around. You might want to clear yourself. At least your actions have indicated a certain amount of guts."

"Why did you do it to me?"

"You'll never clear yourself, kid, if you have me picked up as Mister Fix. I've got to give you a liberal education in the

River City setup. How many bookmakers do you think we have in town?"

"Twenty or thirty, I'd guess."

"As of right now, McBride, there are five hundred and sixty-one. They handle a half million dollars of the bettor's money every week. That makes a tidy little yearly total of about a hundred and fifty million dollars. Year in, year out, the horse players lose twelve and eight tenths percent of their money. So there is nineteen million, two hundred thousand, roughly, to spread around. In a city of three hundred thousand people, that is not an extraordinary state of affairs. Expenses, grease and the bookie rake add up to about fourteen million. The remaining five million a year goes to the 'house'. The house brokers all bets the bookies place. I have an ownership share of the house. One seventh, to be exact. And I've got a geographical area assigned to me by common agreement. My office is in this home of mine and my little staff takes the bets as phoned in by the roughly ninety books that use me as their broker. Sometimes I have thin weeks, sometimes fat. I haven't had a red week in two years. The gravy on top of that is the take from the football and basketball pools."

Barry whistled softly.

"My stock in trade is keeping my name out of the papers," George said. "I happen to be one of the two house owners who haven't got another occupation as a cover. Out of the seven house owners you've got two professional gambling brokers, then, a retired commissioner of police who is in the wholesale grocery business on the side, two men in the city hall and two in the county court house. It is a very good business. We have the connections so that when the books complain to us about individual cops getting too hungry, we can squelch it. And, in reverse, if one of the books tries to step out of line, we can arrange to have him

picked up every now and then and held so that his business goes to hell. The customers like to have their bookie right handy when they want to get their bets down. Up until now there's been no violence and no beefs for a long time. When anything opens up this racket, such as a reform administration taking over, we have to coast until we can open the town up again. You follow me?"

"It's big business."

"Yes, and it's run in a businesslike way. But, human nature being what it is, seven guys can't continue peacefully splitting up the pot forever. Sooner or later, somebody gets greedy. For a month or so I've smelled some kind of a deal in the wind. It's been making me nervous. I don't like strongarm stuff. I didn't contact Coult's or you. But my business put two strikes on me, and pleading guilty is my best out. The publicity has disturbed my fellow house owners. Too much of this stuff and we all go into a lean period. Somebody, McBride, is trying to shake me out of the tree. It damn near worked. There was a meeting last night. They asked me to sell my one seventh share for the good of the organization. I refused. Right now I'm too hot for them to handle. I mean, should I get in bad trouble, I get thrown to the wolves. So it's my risk. If I should be slapped in jail, for example, they'd break up my little organization and split my territory six ways. When I got out, I'd be all through here, unless I wanted to go back down the ladder and make direct book with the public. If I set up an opposition house unfortunate things would happen to me. As a book, I'd have to broker through the syndicate. See how it works?"

"You think they're trying to squeeze you out, eh? Do you know who?"

"Here's the clue, McBride. One of my ninety bookies runs a nice little tavern and a nice little three thousand a week

book. It was one of my good accounts. When business started to fade off from that source, I did some checking. The book was getting just as much play as usual, but he wasn't brokering as much. We can't stop a bookie from holding out a bet or two now and then. But we don't like big holdouts. I warned him twice and then I reported him. Nothing happened. He hasn't been picked up. The amount he brokers with me is still dwindling fast. I reported him again and got a run around from those shrewd city hall boys."

"So?"

"His name happens to be Si Coult's, Stackie's older brother. He bought the tavern with the dough he saved playing with the Tamaracks."

Barry thought it over. "It would fit," he said slowly. "He might want to buy into the syndicate. He might have a friend who is one of the owners."

"Right," said Deever. "And a secret agreement. Si Coult's could have built up a fund by booking his own bets plus a string of luck. He could say, 'Force Deever out and I'll pay you so much for letting me in.' That would be better than buying me out. They wouldn't consider an eight way split. When they wouldn't give him a quick answer, he talked Stackie into giving me some bad publicity. You just happened to be the obvious guy to yank in to make it look good."

"What do you think we can do?" Barry said.

"Your girl is on the Courier. I make it my business to know stuff like that. I've got an expert who'll wire your room for sound. You ought to be able to get Stackie up there, and I've got a hunch that, without witnesses, he's the type to pop off. Then you get the recordings to your girl and let the paper blow the whole thing wide open. What do you think of that idea?"

"I like it," Barry said. "I like it a lot."

CHAPTER TWO

Sentimental Guy

WHEN he saw her come out of the doorway and hesitate for a moment, Barry moved forward out of the shadows. She turned quickly. "Barry! We've been trying to find you!"

"Who's we?" he said.

She pulled him around so that the streetlight was on his face. "What's happened? You look so much better than you did."

"I feel better, honey. How about the steak house?"

"Fine!"

She took his arm and they went diagonally across the midnight street and down the flight of stairs to the basement room that was a favorite spot for the Courier employees.

They ordered. She said, "I knew something happened. Kyle and I decided that the man to talk to was George Deever. Kyle phoned him. He was pretty cagey. Finally he told Kyle to put me on. He told me that you'd give me the details. What made you go to him, Barry?"

"He sent his boys after me. One of them is named Doc. That one you've got to meet some time."

"Don't waste time, darling! What happened?"

He repeated the conversation. She had a dazed look. "Barry, who on earth would think that River City had a setup like that. I thought, working on the paper and all, that I knew what goes on. Why, if we could break that it would make the biggest yarn that ever hit the street. But we'll never, never, never be able to get names and facts and places. Do you think Stackie will talk?"

Barry said grimly, "Willingly or unwillingly, he'll talk."

She reached over and touched his

hand. "Keep it buttoned down, Barry. Don't let it blow. When are you going to do it?"

"I gave Deever the key to my room. He says that his boys will have the recorder installed tonight. It's probably in by now. We decided to put the unit in the windowseat with the switch right under the edge. He says it's absolutely soundless. I'm going to try to get Stackie up there tomorrow morning. Hey, here's Kyle."

She looked at him and said in a hushed voice, "Something's wrong."

Kyle came to the table and gave them a forced smile. "Smile back at me," he said. "I'm going to go back out and get my car. Give me a thirty second lead and then come out. I'll pick you up in front."

"What's happened?" Laura asked.

"Tell you later. Remember, thirty seconds."

Kyle walked out. Barry paid the check. Laura's eyes were wide. She walked ahead of him, smiling back over her shoulder in a strained way. Just as they reached the sidewalk Kyle drove up in his three year old convertible. The door swung open. Barry climbed in after Laura. The car was moving even before he'd slammed the door.

"What is it, Kyle?"

"You've got a gun and a permit, haven't you, McBride?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you've still got the permit. You haven't got the gun any more. The cops have it and they're looking for you. One of Deever's neighbors up in Broadview heard shots about forty-five minutes ago, and they reported it. Somebody shot George twice in the face with your gun, McBride. The number was on file at headquarters. He's very dead. They left the gun there beside him. He was found in his driveway just outside the gate to his property. There isn't much time. Where were you forty-five minutes ago?"

"Standing in the alleyway waiting for Laura to come out. I was there at about eleven."

"Anybody see you?"

"I was back in the shadows. I don't think so. I haven't been anxious for people to see me lately."

"How would anybody get your gun?"

"I don't know. Wait, I gave George the key to my room. I gave it to him at about nine o'clock, just before I left his place."

"How did you get back into the city?"

"One of his men drove me in his car. He let me out at State and Eleventh. I walked around for quite a while because I knew Laura wouldn't be out until a little after midnight."

"Tell me one thing," Kyle said in a level voice, "Were you really mixed up with Deever?"

"Why?" Barry asked angrily.

Kyle laughed nervously. "I'm a sucker. It wouldn't make any difference, I guess. Anything I do for you, I'm doing for Laura."

"He wasn't mixed up with Deever and you know it, Kyle," Laura said indignantly.

"Well, he is now, but completely. Revenge motive, opportunity and weapon. McBride, you're certainly batting a thousand."

"Thanks. Why don't you be a hero and turn me in?"

"Please, Barry," Laura said. "He wants to help."

"Big help! He's making me feel good."

"You've got to have a place to stay, McBride," Kyle said. "If they grab you right away, they'll stop digging into this mess. The longer you stay free, the more men they'll have on it, and the better chance of their turning up something in your favor. Got any ideas, Laura?"

"Everybody in the city knows his face. Wait a minute! How about Aunt Kath?"

"What makes you think she'd hide

him?" Kyle demanded very adamantly.

"You just don't know my Aunt Kath. Turn here, Kyle. Then right again on Center Boulevard."

Kyle parked around the corner to wait. Laura and Barry walked down to the small frame house. Laura pressed her thumb on the bell, released it, pressed again.

"Who is it?" an irate voice demanded from overhead.

"It's me, Aunt Kath."

"Laura Kinger! What are you doing out ringing doorbells?"

"Please let us in."

"Just a minute. Just a minute."

Five minutes later the downstairs hall light clicked on. Aunt Kath came down the stairs. They could see her through the glass pane of the door. She was a little old lady with a mop of hennaed hair.

She pulled the front door open and stared at Barry. "Well! Married at last, Laura?"

"No, this is—"

"I've seen his face before. In the paper. Just lately. What'd he do? Kill somebody?"

"No, Auntie, but they think he did. Can he stay here?"

"What's your name, young man?"

"Barry McBride."

"McBride. Humm. Used to know a McBride. Had him on the circuit with us one season. Had a bunch of silly dogs that walked tight ropes. You related to him?"

"I don't think so."

"Come in, then. Come in." She shut the front door. "Might as well get out of the light, McBride. How long are you going to be here?"

"Maybe a week, Auntie."

The old lady studied Barry. "Big, ain't he? Like a horse. Probably eats like one. I got nosey neighbors. Go on upstairs young man. Take the second door on the left. That'll be your room."

Don't turn any lights on. The rules of the house are no smoking, no busting up the furniture. You play cribbage?"

"Yes, m'am."

"Then trot on up there. You'll need your sleep for the trimming I'll give you tomorrow."

Barry said, "Well, Laura, I don't know how—"

Aunt Kath turned around, facing the other way. "Well, kiss her."

He kissed her. She was yielding in his arms, with a tiny trace of ferocity about her, and then she was gone. The door swung shut. He went wearily up the stairs, undressed in the dark and lay on the bed, his mind spinning in endless useless circles.

AT FIVE minutes to two, Si Coult clicked the bar lights several times as a signal to order the final round of the evening. He surveyed the diehards. There was about two dozen of them. A handful of couples and quite a few men from the city hall crowd. It made Si feel good and confident to see them in his place. It meant he was in favor. Those complacent, small-bodied men had a seventh sense about such things. They lifted black wings and flapped away from the scent of disfavor, taking their women with them. Si had learned just how delicately one had to tread.

Things were beginning to shape up now. He'd been warned that you couldn't make book and hope to keep the liquor license at the same time. But he'd taken the chance and won. It was beginning to look as though they could lift the license at any time. He looked around the paneled room and realized that he would, in a sense, miss all this.

The number on the juke ended and he grunted as he bent over and yanked the cord. An angry girl squalled at him and he refunded the three nickels she claimed were in the box.

He gave the sign to the two bartenders to cut off the drinks. Customers began to leave, nodding to him. "'Night, Si. See you tomorrow, Si. Take it easy, Si."

He stood by the door and closed it when the last one was gone. The bartenders had started cleaning up.

"Skip the cleaning tonight, . . he said. "Get it tomorrow."

They went down to the cellar and came back up again, aprons exchanged for street clothes. He let them out and then locked the door for the last time. He went behind the bar, selected a glass, poured three fingers of his best Scotch in it. Funny the phone hadn't rung yet. It should be ringing. He swirled the liquor around his tongue, drank it gratefully.

Then, a man with an odious task to perform, he went into the back room. Stackie lay with his cheek on the table, his arms outstretched, his black hair rumped. Asleep, he had a young and innocent look.

Si pulled him up by the shoulder, hit him forehand and backhand across the mouth, the slaps loud in the stillness.

Stackie fought his way to his feet, bewildered. "What the hell?" he snarled.

"Rise and shine, Stackie boy."

Stackie Coult stood five eight, a hundred and seventy, small for pro ball. He had long, quick-fingered hands, a look of dark vitality. His faking in the backfield was a thing of beauty.

"You take after the old lady," Si said heavily. "And you got the same streak of soft in you, Stackie. I thought you had guts."

"I did what you told me to do, didn't I?"

"Sure, you did that fine," Si said with contempt.

"So," said Stackie with defiance, "I got a right to say I don't like the way it's going now. Framing that bonehead off the squad is one thing. Setting him up for a murder is something else. I don't have to like that."

Si sat down heavily. "You discourage me, kid. I'm trying to take care of you and me. Blood's thicker than water. You went to college. Where's your brains? What difference does McBride make to you or me when you add him up against a million bucks. And don't think we can't stash away a million if we work at it. You know what a million buys? Fast cars, speedboats, cruisers, a smear of pretty little movie extras, platinum wristwatches as thin as a half buck. Or would you rather stay out on the field and let the farmer boys beat your brains in every Sunday?"

"Tell me one thing, Si. Were you figured in this way from the beginning?"

"No. It just happened to break this way. Deever got stubborn. When a guy starts to lose his clutch down at the hall, that's no time to get stubborn."

"You didn't do it?"

Si laughed. "What kind of a monkey do you think I am? I haven't stepped foot out of this place all evening and I got a dozen people can vouch for that. The dough, Stackie, does your dirty work for you. Always. Remember that."

Stackie had a brooding look. "How is it going to shape?"

"They'll nail McBride. Gambler queers player. Player kills gambler. As far as the public knows, Deever was the only big-time gambler in town. Now everything is clean and pretty again. You can finish out the season and then come work for me. By then I'll be where I can use you."

"What do I get out of it?"

"Now, kid, you're beginning to sound normal. If it goes like I hope it goes, I ought to be able to pay you five hundred a week. I know what you make a season, but this is for fifty-two weeks a year, don't forget that."

Stackie looked at his older brother for a long, breathless moment. "And suppose," he said quietly, "I happen to know

just enough about this so I think I'm worth a little more?"

Si let out a long, tired sigh. At the end of it, he shoved the round table violently toward Stackie. It hit him across the thighs and he fell forward just in time to meet the big fist on its way up. It hit him flush on the chin, lifting him onto his toes. He dropped, face down, onto the table, rolled over and bounced off onto the floor.

When he grunted and stirred, opening his eyes, Si stood over him and said, "That's just to let you know who's running the family. Get wise again and you won't play any more ball this year. On your feet!"

Stackie stood up wearily. He kneaded his chin. "Okay," he said. "All right."

"And brother or no brother, kid, if they ever find you out in somebody's back lot, I think I could get over it."

"Some brother!" Stackie said.

"When there's a million the top of the table, kid, it's no time for sentiment."

CHAPTER THREE

Clay Pigeon for Murder

CAPTAIN DE WITT, Chief of the Homicide Section, smiled in a brittle way at the elderly man who sat across from him. "Just what are you trying to tell me? I'm giving you time because you are an ex-Commissioner of Police. But I would appreciate your coming to the point.

The elderly man smiled amiably. "Why, I just came in to discuss the case, Captain. I wondered if you shared my opinion that it was a pretty open and shut affair."

DeWitt turned his desk chair and looked out the window. He seemed to be selecting his words with great care. "Homicide is the department of any police force least likely to be subjected to undue influence, sir. When a man or woman is

killed, it is our job to find out who did it and present our evidence to the District Attorney's Office for prosecution. I do not know of anyone in this city who could buy his way out of a murder charge. Meaning no offense, sir, I know of you as a man who, from time to time, has been able to bring enough pressure to bear on other departments to achieve the release of known criminals. Now you have given me reason to think. You come in here obviously intent on making certain that I pin the Deever murder on McBride. I do not think you have any great interest in upholding the law. I have reason to believe that you make every week in an unlawful manner as much money as I make in a year. You make me wonder why you are anxious that McBride be caught and convicted." DeWitt spun back slowly and his eyes were level. "I was willing to give McBride the benefit of every reasonable doubt. Now I am even more determined to do that."

The man turned white and then purple red. He went to the door. "Those words may do you a great deal of harm, Captain."

DeWitt smiled blandly. "They might at that."

But when the door had shut behind the man, DeWitt's smile faded quickly. Every police force, he knew, works under constant pressure. In River City it was no better and no worse than most. The lid has to be kept on but the cauldron, bubbling underneath, rattles the lid and sends out gouts of steam. Sometimes the lid blows off. Not often.

He thought of Barry McBride, of what he knew of the man, both as a football player and as a man. He was too old and wise in the ways of human nature to make the mistake of supposing that an open face and an infectious grin meant innocence. But the psychology of the murder didn't suit him. It would seem to be more McBride's style to use his big hands and

shoulders on Deever—if he had a reason to go after the man. Murder might result from a blow struck too hard—but then it would be a different sort of a charge. The gun being found was almost too pat.

Crainstock came in and sat down and grinned at his captain.

"Got him?" DeWitt asked.

"The Kinger girl and Kyle Benedict took him to the Kinger girl's aunt's house about one a.m. He's still holed up there. From what I could find out in the neighborhood, the old gal is a pretty hardy citizen."

"Who's on it now?"

"Freeman and Kelly front, Bikel, rear. Under cover."

"Have 'em stay that way, Ed. I want to know who goes to see McBride and I want him followed if he leaves there."

"Isn't it taking a chance, Captain?"

"Yes, it is. And here's more of a chance. How many more plainclothes can we put on this?"

"Let me see. Right now, this minute, I could re-assign Cherzack and Linelli, and maybe Hooper."

"You got tails on Deever's men?"

"Yes sir."

"Cherzack is the newest man, isn't he? Put him on our honorable ex-Commissioner of Police. Plant Linelli where he can watch what visitors the man has. Put Hooper on Stackie Coult's, and get a wire man on the Ex-Commissioner's phone."

Ed Crainstock whistled softly. "You planning to retire?"

"I need a rest," DeWitt said with a sour smile. "I'll cover you all the way, Ed, by putting it in writing."

Crainstock stood up. "Hell with it. I might as well have some fun too."

"Thanks, Ed."

* * *

When the front door bell rang, Aunt Kath trotted to the hallway. She looked

back at Barry after taking a cautious look toward the door. "It's Laura. You stay back away from the windows."

Laura came in, her cheeks flushed from the coolness of the morning, her eyes intent and worried.

"You've seen the paper, Barry?"

He nodded. "Dragnet, murder, athlete sought in murder of gambler. I've seen it. Haven't had this much publicity since I made that hundred and two yard run-back. Were you followed here?"

"I'm pretty sure I wasn't."

"Come on upstairs and we'll take a look."

As they went up the stairs she said, "They've sealed your room, Barry, and there's a uniformed cop there. I thought I might get some of your clothes, but there isn't a chance. People are saying dreadful things about you."

"What's Kyle saying?"

"He says we're both crazy, and the only way I can justify my actions if you're picked up here is to say I was after an exclusive. But the paper won't, of course, back me on that."

"I should get out of here as soon as it gets dark. There's no point in loading my troubles on your shoulders."

She turned and faced him. "Don't be silly, darling! What is your girl for?"

"Not for this kind of a ratrace. That's for sure."

"Don't go all heroic on me."

"I've been thinking. The best thing I can do is give myself up. Maybe it'll make a good impression."

"Please, Barry. Not quite yet."

They went to the front room. The shade was drawn. Barry stood at one side of the window and pulled the shade out a fraction of an inch.

She saw his shoulders tighten. "What is it?" she whispered.

"Come here. Take a look. Ever see him before?"

She looked. "Barry, I'm *such* a fool.

Yes, I saw him somewhere this morning. I can't remember where. I noticed him because he's so thin."

"He followed you here. It's one of George Deeever's men. George called him Jerry. Jerry, Doc and a driver took me out to George's house."

"Is he trying to kill you before the police get to you, Barry?" she asked, fear in her voice.

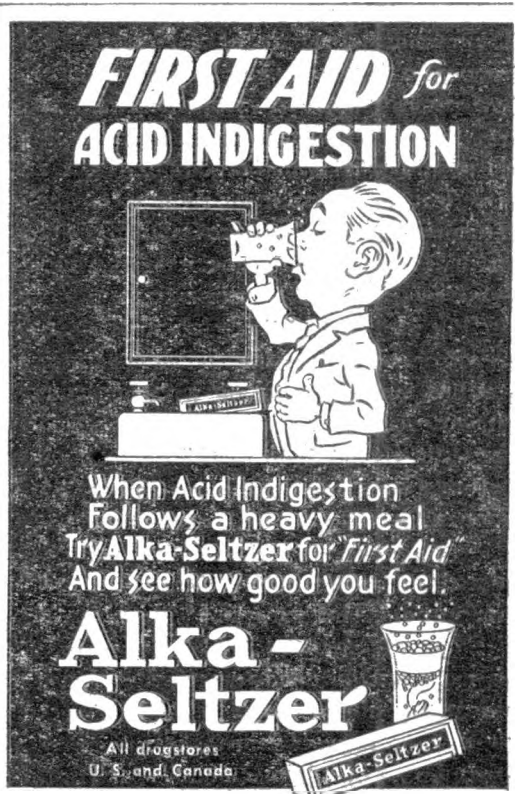
"No. He drove me back to town after I was out there. He'd know that it would be damn difficult for me to get back out there and kill George. And he knew that we parted friends. He wants to see me for something. Here he comes."

They stood at the head of the stairs. Aunt Kath opened the door. "Yes?"

"Inspector from the fire department. Got to look at the trash in your cellar."

"My cellar, young man, is as clean as this front hall. Go away."

"Got to, lady."



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They heard him come in. As soon as the door shut he said, "I got to talk to McBride, lady. Don't make me horse around. This neighborhood is crawling with cops."

"McBride? Young man, I haven't the faintest—"

"Never mind," Barry said. "Come on up here, Jerry."

The thin man came up the stairs. His eyes were bright and alert. He nodded at Laura and said, "Honey, you got to do more than go around the block three four times. Hi, McBride."

"What do you want?"

"Can we talk alone?"

"Laura can listen to anything you've got to say."

JERRY hesitated, licked his lips and said, "Okay. I'm a businessman in a small way. With Deever out of business, I'm out too. If the organization stays in one piece, I'll have to find me a new town. I like it here. And I got a couple of hunches about what happened to George. I want to use you as a front man. If I can give you enough to go on in and blow the whole works upside down, I got a chance of coming out all right when the business starts up again. Get it?"

"Why don't you go to the police yourself?"

"I'm not tired of living. Not yet. Before I give you the dope you've got to tell me that you won't let on where it came from."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because if you don't you won't get the dope. And if you don't have the dope there's a pretty fair chance that you get the sleighride for killing George."

"Can you prove I didn't kill George?"

"Not off hand, but I think I can fix it so the cops can prove that George never had that talk with you and Stackie Coult. If they can prove that, then it washes out your reason for killing George. And then,

with a line on who's mixed up in it, they maybe can find the real killer."

"I promise. Shoot."

"Okay. The paper said Stackie said George talked to you and him at eight o'clock Saturday night in Stackie's car, parked out on the cemetery road. George had some urgent business Saturday night. I picked him up in the car at five o'clock and we drove over to Banner City for a little meeting. At eight o'clock George was in the bar of the Banner House over there, a hundred and twenty miles from where Stackie said you had the little talk. People saw him in the bar at that time. George was tired and when the meeting broke up at eleven, he registered in and caught some sleep. We drove back and got here at nine the next morning. The cops can check and prove it's the truth. By the way, here's your room key. We got the stuff in all right. It isn't going to do much good now. I guess you can call the recorder a present from George. We got back ten minutes before George got it."

"You didn't see who did it?"

"I was in my room. I didn't see who did it."

"You said something about a line on who killed George."

"I already told you, didn't I? With that dope the cops can make Stackie say who hired him to lie. Whoever hired him set you up as the clay pigeon for George's murder."

"Is that enough?"

"I got to know something about the law. I think in the eyes of the law it makes Stackie equally guilty along with the guy firing the shots. Stackie may be a rough kid on the football field, but he'll come unglued at the edges if the cops play it right. Then, if he blows, I think the whole organization is going to fall apart. And Jerry lands on his feet. You see, all this has left Doc and me out of a job. I talked it over with him. Soon as we found

George dead we grabbed some of his loose dough and stashed it. With a little capital, we might be able to do okay."

"What's this about there being police in the neighborhood?"

"I recognized one, a guy named Freeman, up the street trying to act like a man with nothing on his mind. They've got you covered and they're either waiting for orders to grab you or waiting for you to make a break."

Laura held his arm tightly. "Oh, Barry!"

"They'll have a man on the back too, I suppose," Barry said softly.

"What are you thinking of?" Laura asked.

"Don't you see?" Barry said. "This is my chance. I've got to get out of here. Stackie spends most of his time around the apartment over his brother's bar. I've got to have more to go on before I turn myself in. I'm going to take this news to Stackie and see what happens. If he cracks I'll have a real lead to take to the police."

"I don't think that's so smart," Jerry said. "Maybe they got Stackie covered too. They had me and Doc covered this morning until we shook 'em."

"Everything has been happening to me," Barry said. "I haven't done a damn thing. So now I start. I'm getting out of here."

"A nice trick if you can do it," Jerry said.

Aunt Kath, who had come silently up the stairs, said, "Mrs. Mulroy's house was built far too close to mine. I objected, but it didn't do any good. I'd say it was about six feet away. At least it seemed that far when I poked her window out with a broomstick a few minutes ago."

"You what?" Laura said.

"Oh, she isn't home, child. I saw her go out a half hour ago. There's a plank in the cellar that would fit across nicely, McBride. They have a side entrance only

about fifteen feet from the city bus stop on the corner. It's a very small lot they built on. You could wait until a bus stopped, and then run quickly and—"

* * *

Doc Leeds looked at his old-fashioned gold pocket watch. Quarter to eleven. Si Coult's would open his doors in another fifteen minutes.

HE SIGHED, wondering if he were getting too old for this sort of thing. Lately intrigue seemed to result in a form of acid indigestion. Breakfast sat leadenly in his middle. The thing to do in this life was to accept the position of a hired man and be contented with your lot. He thought of the money that had passed through his hands since he had been drummed out of the medical profession. A taste for high living was a bad thing. If he had saved half that money, he would now be well established. Instead he was once again finding it necessary to do violence. He realized that there was a hint of rationalization in decrying violence. Violence had always suited him, had always eased some inner need. Murder was an end in itself, and, considered only from the point of view of the pleasure in the act, the penalty could be avoided. It was murder for gain that established motive and led to worry—and to acid indigestion.

There had been a certain clumsiness about all this that he found distasteful. There were too many imponderables in the equation. He smiled. Too many people named Coult's. Si Coult's seemed to have a certain basic ruthlessness that was refreshing, but the young one. . . . Doc shook his head sadly. That young one was definitely a menace.

He thought back over his actions. He had done his part admirably. He had tried to argue Deever into selling out, and then had made his report so that they

knew that Deever was going to refuse even before he had faced them. And it was the Commissioner who had made the tactical mistake of telling Si to use his younger brother as a means of giving Deever that unfortunate publicity. Better if they had merely hired Doc Leeds to kill Deever without that preliminary unsuccessful maneuver. But Stackie's move had made McBride a nice scapeboat. And the gun had been perfect. Jerry, busy on the wiring, hadn't seen or heard the drawer opening and closing.

It was this new notion of Jerry's that held the promise of trouble. And if Si had been stupid enough to advise Stackie of who had been hired to do the actual dirty work—

Doc Leeds shivered slightly. Stackie was the weak link in the chain. If he knew enough and if he talked, one Doc Leeds, one Si Coultis and one ex-Commissioner of Police would be facing a very distasteful trial with the possibility of a black hood at the end of it. DeWitt was a thorough man.

He smiled as he remembered the look of surprise on George Deever's face. Horrid surprise as understanding came. And, even on the edge of death, George had known the proper appeal. "Doc! I'll pay—"

Doc wondered what it was that George was going to pay. Not that George would ever have gone through with it. Once you show your hand, the play is made. But death with a gun was an unsatisfying thing. Death at a distance, even if it was only five feet. George had come willingly when Doc told him that there was a man watching the house.

"We'll take him," George had said. And, of course, had been taken himself. Taken a long way. Now, with one little detail to clean up, it would all be right again. They wouldn't suspect a soft, asthmatic little man with the look of a country doctor. It was always nice to

laugh at them—inside. The half fee was impressively large. And this evening he would get the balance from the ex-Commissioner. Not in person, of course. The ex-Commissioner was a cautious man. Then Deever's area would go to Si Coultis, but at only half the profit. The other half, without overhead, would go to the ex-Commissioner.

He saw the tavern door open. Si was airing the place out. The bartender would show up pretty soon. Doc walked across the street. He pulled the door shut behind him.

Si was behind the bar. He looked up, immediately angry. "What the hell are you doing here? You aren't supposed to come here."

"A grievous problem has arisen," Doc said. "Jerry has had an idea. The cops, with proof that Deever was out of town last Saturday night, will soon be picking up your esteemed quarterback brother and squeezing him for information. I suspect that you are not entirely lacking in imagination. That kills Barry's motive for murder and puts you and me and our mutual friend in line for trouble."

"Shut up," Si said. "Let me think. Oh, why did we let that kid in on it? Surer than hell, he'll crack wide open."

"Naming you, me and our friend?"

"No," Si said. "He'll pass the buck to me. All he knows is that a big-shot and I hired a killer to take care of Deever."

"I find your vocabulary distasteful, but I admire your caution. That is all he knows, eh?"

"That's all."

"Then they descend on you, Si. I cannot, somehow, visualize you facing a murder charge without surrounding yourself with your associates."

"Right, Doc. If it comes to that, I'm going to want company. You and our friend."

"I thought so. If the young man is upstairs, I can arrange it immediately."

Si bit his lips. "Hell, he's my brother."

"On one side of the ledger is a great deal of money. On the other side is life imprisonment, probably, and your brother. Maybe he'll send you cookies every Thursday. It should be a great comfort to you."

Si lowered his voice to a whisper. "Can you make it look right?"

"Remorse. The man who framed a teammate commits suicide."

"Can you fix it so it won't . . . hurt?"

"I can't avoid a moment of realization. But it shouldn't last long."

"I hate this!"

"Oh, come now, Coult. Sentiment is a sticky substance. Lead the way."

Si walked heavily back to the stairs leading up to the apartment. Doc walked behind him. Halfway up the stairs an idea fraught with delicious irony occurred to him. He went over the pros and cons in his mind. The idea appealed to him. And it had the advantage of being much quicker.

Si had reached the next to the top stair. Doc reached forward, almost delicately, and grasped the thick wrist, Si's left wrist, with both his hands. He turned quickly, bracing his feet, spinning Si half way around. Keeping Si's elbow downward so that the big arm would remain stiff, he got his shoulder wedged against Si's armpit and pulled down sharply on the arm, bending over, facing down the stairs as he did so. This was a far more satisfying method.

Si gave one thin gasp as he flew, head first, into space, down the stairs toward the asphalt tile floor of the tavern proper.

He hit with a thud that shook the building. Doc came quickly and lightly down the stairs. The big man was unconscious and his face was bloody, but he seemed to have suffered no mortal hurt. Doc clucked disapprovingly, pressed down with his left hand between Si's shoulder blades, reached around and cupped his right hand

on the heavy chin. He made one hard wrench and heard the distinct snap of the bone.

"Hey!" a startled voice said from the head of the stairs. Doc did not give way to the impulse to look up. He knew that it was Stackie who had come to the head of the stairs and who had seen it. And he knew that his hat brim shadowed his face. He moved fleetly for the door. Once on the sidewalk, he'd be all right.

He yanked the door open and saw Barry McBride blocking the doorway. McBride's eyes widened as he recognized him. Bare feet were padding down the stairs behind him.

The possible courses of action ticked through Doc's agile brain. Claim the kid killed his brother. Too weak. Slam by McBride and run for it. Not and give up the profits. Kill McBride. Too close to the door and the street.

This, Doc decided, is very likely to turn into a shambles.

He backed into the bar, saying mildly, "Hello, McBride. Come on in."

Stackie stared at his brother and then at the other two. His tone was full of wonder. "That little old guy killed Si! Broke his neck with his hands!"

"Oh, come now," Doc said affably. "Do I look as if I could do that? Your brother took a bad fall. I just checked to see if he killed himself. I saw that he did and so I was getting out of here to avoid just such foolish accusations as you just made, young man."

As he spoke he backed casually over to one side. He wanted the two of them bunched close to the bar and Si's body.

CHAPTER FOUR

His Guard's Up!

DE WITT listened to the report. "Then McBride must have given them the slip, Ed," he said. "Doc and McBride calling on the Coult. Grab

'em as they come out. I'll call Freeman, Kelly and Bikel off and shoot you a couple prowling cars. They brought Jerry Schaydel in a few minutes ago. Right." He hung up the phone and smiled. Things were shaping up quickly.

* * *

"Watch him, Stackie!" Barry said. "That guy is dynamite."

"Who are you kidding?" Stackie said. He hitched up his pajama pants. "I'm going to take him apart with my hands. I saw him do that to Si."

Barry began to move cautiously toward the telephone. "Don't you go near him, Stackie."

"Now," Stackie said to Doc, "get yourself set, old man."

Doc sighed. It wasn't going well. He noted Barry's progress toward the phone. The boy advancing on him looked quick and hard.

Foolishly, Stackie reached out with his left hand and grabbed the front of Doc's suit. Doc held his hands up, palms outward, in a helpless defensive gesture. Stackie smiled tightly and swung. One of the hands cupped over his fist, clamping down suddenly on the little finger knuckle, bending it back so that Stackie gasped and his knees bent. Doc hit him, almost casually, in the side of the throat, under the ear, with the edge of his hand. Stackie dropped in a boneless way and lay still.

"Get away from the phone, McBride," Doc said sadly.

"So you crossed Deever," Barry said. He moved away from the phone, slid along behind the bar. He was frankly running from the man. And it didn't hurt his pride. There was something of incredible evil in the pale eyes behind the rimless glasses.

With a smooth motion Barry took a bottle from the back bar and threw it

through the plate glass out onto the street. He followed it with a second one before the clatter of falling glass had stopped.

Doc stopped his slow forward movement. His mouth worked. "Brighter than I thought," he said acidly. "Brains, yet." He tilted his head back and opened his mouth. "Help!" he yelled, with all the strength of his lungs. "Help, Police!"

They came swarming through the door, guns in hand. Doc was a trembling wreck. "Arrest them!" he shrilled. "Arrest them both. I saw the big one kill that man over there at the foot of the stairs and then he tried to kill that one on the floor by the bar. I broke the window."

"Put your hands on top of the bar, McBride," the nearest plainclothesman said. "Keep 'em close together. No tricks."

"I'll come along, but bring Doc too. Stackie will tell you what happened."

The man who had been examining Stackie straightened up. "This one needs an ambulance. I can hardly feel his pulse."

Barry looked at Doc and saw the expression of complacency. Steel was cool around Barry's wrists. "Put some on him too," Barry said.

"No need, no need," Doc said briskly. "I'll be glad to testify."

Sirens moaned in the distance, drawing closer.

DeWitt had listened separately to the stories of Leeds, McBride, Jerry Schaydel and Laura Kinger. Ed Crainstock had been a silent witness to the questioning. The testimony had been transcribed as they talked.

DeWitt and Crainstock carefully laid their plans. Outside the day was turning to dusk.

"Okay, DeWitt said, "take 'em all into the big room. I'll be along in a moment." Crainstock left. He phoned a number. "Ah, good evening. Captain DeWitt speaking. Remember our little talk of the

other day? You do? Good. Sir, it looks as if we are winding this up. I thought because of your interest in the case you might like to sit in on it. Since you were once connected with the force, I'm sure that we are within our rights. Mr. Tobert of the District Attorney's office is on his way over. That's right. Sorry you can't make it, sir. A man named Leeds is helping us crack the case. Oh, you think you might be able to? Good. I'll be expecting you."

When DeWitt walked in Barry McBride, his face expressionless, was sitting on a straight chair opposite the windows. Laura Kinger sat beside him, her fingertips on his wrist. Jerry Schaydel sat against the far wall, his eyes hooded. Doc Leeds was sitting two chairs away from him, his legs crossed, a look of mild unconcern on his face. They all looked at him as he came in.

"This is ridiculous," Laura said.

"May I remind you, Miss Kinger, that you are not here in your capacity as a representative of the press, but as a person accused of hiding a wanted man."

The clerk sat in the corner behind his table, his notebook open, a cigarette smouldering in the ash tray. The sounds of the city traffic came clearly through the early evening air. The overhead lights looked weak.

Ed Crainstock sat on the edge of the table, one leg swinging. He gave DeWitt a glance of amusement. The electric clock on the wall clicked sharply as the minute hand jumped ahead.

Tobert came in with his briefcase. "Sorry if I'm a little late," he said. "Good evening, Walter, Ed, Miss Kinger. Hello, McBride."

"One more person coming," Walter DeWitt said.

The ex-Commissioner arrived three minutes later. He was a white-haired, gaunt, clipped, brushed, polished man with hollow cheeks and a small military mus-

tache. He greeted the others, selected a chair, sat down and crossed his long legs. DeWitt noticed that he gave Leeds no more than a casual glance.

"I GUESS we can start," DeWitt said.

"There's no need to mention how upset the citizens of River City are over this affair. Any mixture of gambling and athletics is a stench of the first order. Add murder and you have a most serious affair. So far one obscure gambler and one one-time famous tackle have died. Before too long they may be flashing word of the death of Stackie Coult. A nerve in the side of his throat was crushed. That nerve controls the breathing reflex. He's in an iron lung right now, but there is spastic action of the nerve which interferes with the rhythm of the lung. Another famed ball player—you, Mr. McBride—is in disgrace, held on suspicion of murder. Organized professional ball in this city may not recover from this triple disaster. But we can't tell yet."

The ex-Commissioner yawned openly. "Can you hurry it along, DeWitt?"

"I'll try. One of these men is lying. McBride or Leeds. Each tells an entirely different story regarding what happened in Coult's place. It is one man's word against the other's. So we have been making it our business throughout the afternoon of trying to prove or disprove one story or the other. We have found one serious flaw.

DeWitt turned to Leeds. "Tell us again about the two bottles, Leeds.

Doc shrugged. "He is a muscular young man and he was chasing me. Fright made me pretty spry after I saw him hit young Coult. As I dodged around the bar I grabbed two bottles and threw them, one after another, through the front window to attract attention."

DeWitt turned to Ed Crainstock. "Please tell us about the bottles."

"Yes sir. As soon as you gave me the

orders I went back there. One bottle had broken out in the street and it had been cleared away. Large fragments of the other bottle were still in the gutter, untouched. I collected those fragments and brought them back to the lab. From them they found two prints. One was of Mr. McBride's little finger on his right hand. The other was a half-print of his middle finger. The other prints were too smeared to identify."

"Well, Leeds?" said DeWitt.

Doc smiled. "That must have happened when he made a grab for me over the bar. I think he got his hand on the first bottle before I pulled away and threw it."

"You didn't mention that in your story."

"It must have slipped my mind."

The phone on the table rang. DeWitt said, "Pardon me." He walked over and picked up the phone. "DeWitt here. Yes. Yes. About what time? Ten minutes ago, eh? Out of danger. Good! What? He did, eh? Yes, we *can* use that. Thanks, Al.

DeWitt hung up. He turned with an odd smile on his face. "That helps us a lot. Stackie Coult's rallied and ten minutes ago he regained consciousness. The doctor says he's out of danger. And the doctor permitted a few questions. You seem to be in trouble, Leeds. Coult's says you killed his brother. And he says you hit him, not McBride."

Barry watched Doc. The man was good. He cocked his head on one side. "That *does* put a different complexion on it, Captain." He chuckled. "I guess I'm going to have to straighten my story out. While the boy was in bad shape, I was trying to pass the buck to McBride for hitting him. Now that he's okay I'll admit that I did hit him. But he's wrong when he says that I killed his brother. When I came into the tavern Si Coult's was on the floor at the foot of the stairs. McBride straightened up just as I heard

Stackie call something from the head of the stairs. I admit that McBride and I look nothing alike, but when you are looking down on a person, height can be deceiving. Besides, the light is bad there. I don't think you can use him as any kind of a witness, Captain."

DeWitt pursed his lips. "You might be right. But why did you hit young Coult's? Self defense?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," Doc said, still smiling.

DeWitt shrugged. "Too bad you didn't. Stackie died about an hour ago, Leeds."

The room was full of a deadly stillness. All eyes were on Leeds. Twice he opened his mouth to say something.

"Well?" DeWitt asked, still calm.

Leeds' voice was a harsh whisper. "A deal, Captain. A deal."

"Ask Tobert," DeWitt said.

Tobert said briskly, "We'll listen. Take your own chances. But make it good."

Leeds licked his lips and swallowed. "Si Coult's wanted to take over Deever's area. He had to have help from topside, or the house would stomp on him. So he made a deal with the Commissioner over there. The Commissioner has the biggest slice of the house, but he was willing to take more. They tried to scare Deever out with the fake yarn Stackie gave the association. Deever wouldn't scare. Si and the Commissioner decided the cheapest way out was to have Deever killed. They'd gotten to me two months ago. They met my price and I killed him, framing it on McBride, because he was the logical one. I had a chance to grab his gun when Deever sent us to install a recorder in McBride's room so McBride could clear himself by trapping Stackie. Then Jerry thought up a way to help clear McBride and went to him. Stackie was the weak link. I went there this morning to kill Stackie. That was on my own initiative. But when I found out how

(Please continue on page 129)

NIGHTMARE HIGHWAY

By JOHN KRILL



The skinny guy raised
his hand.

Truck driver Sam Dowell brought his machine to a screeching stop on a lonely road—while two killers rigged him for the death of a State cop.

ROAD INSPECTOR BOB EMERY caught sight of the Lamb Transport rig as he slowed down on the wooded curve. He let the rig snort up the sharp grade before flagging it down. The autocar tractor pulled to a reluctant halt and the thirty-foot semi-trailer followed it obediently to the side of

the road, and turned down the window.

"Hi boys," Emery shouted cheerfully.

"S'matter, Bob?" an annoyed voice growled from the dark interior of the cab. "You gave us clearance at the checking point 'bout forty minutes ago."

"That's right, Andy. But a call came in a little bit ago. Your wife's been taken to the hospital. Turn the rig over to Sam. He can wheel it to Scranton himself."

The annoyance in big Andy Welling's voice was replaced by worry. "Let's get going, Bob." In the glare of headlights, Andy appeared even bigger than he was. Sam Dowell got out of the cab. He gave the worried man an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

"It'll turn out okay, Andy. She's young. I know how you feel, boy. I felt the same way when mine was about to have her first," Sam placed all the cheerful confidence he could muster into the words. He liked the big guy.

Sam got in behind the wheel. The tail light of Bob's car winked out in the distance. "Hope everything turns out well," Sam muttered to himself. He eased the rig off the shoulder and concentrated on the unraveling concrete ribbon. The night was warm and he caught whiffs of dewy pines and spruces and the fresh, sweet scent of flowering apple trees. He thought in disgust: why should trouble come to anyone on a swell night like this? Especially to a prince like big Andy.

The miles flew under the spinning wheels. Traffic was light. "Ten to four," Sam read the neon clock of a closed beer joint aloud. "Bob andb Andy must've reached the hospital 'bout two hours ago. Bob should be returning back along the road by now," Sam was talking to himself, as do many truck jockeys pushing a lone haul. A spike buck dashed out of the gloom bordering the highway. Blinded by the glaring lights of the truck it stood like a statue in the center of the road.

Sam swore softly as he turned off his

lights for a few seconds and pressed the brake pedal down.

The frozen buck was gone when Sam turned the light back on. "Wish more guys would do that," he sighed. "I'll be looking for you this December with a rifle, my bucko, I'll—" Sam suddenly stamped hard on his brakes as he rounded the sharp bend. A cry of horror burst from his lips.

Etched in the white glow of his headlights was a parked truck. Behind it was a dark sedan. Cutting across the front of the truck which stood fully on the road, was the white car of a Pennsylvania State trooper. Sam caught the entire scene in a flash. The trooper was beside the tractor waving the driver out. A hand clutching an automatic came through the open window of the sedan. A single report lashed out and the trooper fell heavily to the hard road.

Sam's rig came to a screeching stop. There wasn't enough clearance to pass the patrol car. Before he could leap out of the cab, a shadowy figure appeared at each side of the tractor. The door on his side was wrenched open. "Get out!" a rough voice commanded.

Sam stumbled out, hands raised high in the air. In the bright light of the moon and that which reflected from the lights of the truck, Sam could see the men plainly. The short one was dressed in neat gray. He was the one who came out of the sedan. The other guy was tall and skinny. The little, neatly dressed man was holding the automatic on Sam. The eyebrow mustache almost disappeared on the thick dark lips as he snarled to his companion, "Quick, you fool!"

The skinny guy raised his hand. A million lights blazed in Sam's eyes as something crashed against his head. He went out like a blown fuse. He came to with a weak moan. Where did this crowd come from? He tried to feel the bump on his head, but both hands came up at

the same time. Puzzling over this, Sam painfully opened his eyes wider. Why were handcuffs on him? He stared up.

"Be still, you murdering skunk!" a big trooper spat at him. "Too bad that bullet didn't find your black heart."

"Bullet? What bullet?" Sam asked in bewilderment. He tried to sit up but sank back to the cold ground with a shrill cry of severe pain. He looked at his right shoulder. It was thick with blood. He looked around. The truck was gone. Only the sedan was still there. His own rig had been moved over to the shoulder.

SUDDENLY a familiar voice raised in surprise reached him. "What's going on here, officer." Sam gazed up with a befogged stare. Road inspector Bob Emery stood looking down at him. The burly trooper's square jaw hardened.

"That rat shot and killed a trooper."

"I didn't! Where'd you get that noise." Sam heard himself protest dully. He turned appealing eyes on Bob. The road inspector knelt beside him. "Honest, Bob, I didn't. A guy shot the trooper from that Sedan when the trooper stopped a truck. I saw it. Then I was hit on the head and—and—that's the last I remember."

"A likely story," sneered the burly trooper. The wailing of an ambulance sounded faintly in the distance.

"What proof have you that he isn't speaking the truth," demanded Emery.

Wearily the trooper crooked a finger at a short, neatly garbed man in gray. The man stepped forward eagerly. "Here is an eye witness—"

"That's the guy that shot the trooper from the Sedan!" The fog was clearing away from Sam's brain. He tried to rise to his feet. But he couldn't. He sank back again. "Him and the skinny truck driver did it."

The husky trooper merely glared contemptuously at Sam. "Tell him what you

saw, mister." He indicted Bob Emery.

"I came around the bend in my car," the eyebrow mustache wiggled like a black caterpillar, as the short man spoke. "I came upon this man," he interrupted dramatically to point an indignant finger at the prone driver, "standing beside his truck." Suddenly he pulled a gun on the trooper who evidently was placing him under arrest. The trooper pulled his gun in a flash and fired at the same instant as this man did. The trooper fell, but his bullet struck his killer in the shoulder."

"Then I leaped out of my car and struck the armed man over the head—the impact of the trooper's bullet had knocked him down and the risk wasn't too great. Then I flagged down a passing car and had the highway patrol barracks informed while I stood guard over this—this—murderer."

"That was a very brave and risky thing to do, mister. He coulda plugged you too," the burly trooper said admiringly. The little man shrugged his shoulders modestly in acknowledgement.

The ambulance drew up with a final screech of its siren. Silently the body of the dead trooper was placed on the padded stretcher. The bare hands dangled mutely over the sides. An angry murmur welled from the growing mob. Sam was jerked to his feet and gruffly ordered to get in. Bob Emery followed the ambulance in. The trooper brought up the rear with the little man in the patrol car with him.

Once in town, Bob Emery phoned Jim Lamb and told him what had happened. "Stick to Sam until he's completely cleared beyond all doubt," Jim Lamb ordered.

"Swell guy, Jim," Bob whispered as he hung up. "Sure sticks to his men when they're in trouble." Sam had been placed in the hospital under guard. Emery hurried over to the police laboratory.

Lieutenant Fox silently nodded to Em-

ery, cleared his throat with a series of labored rasps, then said: "It's all sewed up, Boh. More than enough evidence to fry that murdering driver. We've already taken a paraffin test of his hand. It shows that he fired a gun recently. The melted paraffin collects the particles of nitrate, even though invisible to the eye, that have been driven into the flesh of the hand by the fired bullet. Even washing cannot rid the shooter of this evidence."

Emery's brain weighed this bit of damning evidence carefully. Against it he had only the sincerity in Sam's denial. He knew instinctively that Sam wasn't lying. "What would the motive be in killing the trooper," he asked.

"Sam musta had it in for Trooper Main. Sam's boy was pinched by Main and sent up on his evidence as the ring-leader of a car stealing mob. That's motive enough." The labored rasps came again. "There's more. Sam's fingerprints were all over the automatic that killed Main." Lieutenant Fox rasped again. He shook his narrow, bald head slowly. "Better forget it, Boh."

MORNING found Bob Emery, accompanied by the district attorney, walking into Sam's guarded room. A lawyer for Sam was also on the way. Mute despair crystallized in the injured man's brown eyes as the damning evidence was explained to him.

"How could any test prove I fired a gun when I didn't?" he said hopelessly. "I've been framed by that little guy who said I did the shooting. He did it."

"Come, come, man!" District Attorney Larski snapped. "We took a test of Mr. Loffel's hands, too, on the chance that he might've fired the fatal shot. The test showed negative." He frowned in anger.

"He wore gloves! You just reminded me of it. His hands were bare when I came to. He—"

"Indeed! How very convenient for you.

How do you explain the positive indication found on your hand?" Larski smiled with righteous triumph "And your fingerprints on the death weapon? And Main's bullet in your shoulder? How do you explain these trifling details?"

Emery watched silently as the horror grew on Sam's ashen face. "My wife—my kids—"

Sentiment for Sam struggled mightily against material evidence in Emery's heart. "Let him tell us again all he knows," he urged Larski. The district attorney's slim fingers carefully patted his blonde hair into place as he gave a grudging permission. He didn't even listen as Sam related the tale earnestly. Emery paid strict attention.

"Then they musta taken the trooper's revolver and shot me through the shoulder after the skinny guy knocked me cold. It would be easy to put the automatic in my hand to get my fingerprints on it," Sam concluded miserably.

Larski said: "Very interesting display of imagination, Sam. Only the prints on the trooper's gun were his. Main shot you when you shot him." He stifled a yawn. "Here, my man," he was extending a paper to Sam. "Sign this confession and maybe you'll get off with a life sentence."

Sam drew in a deep breath. "Life sentence! Never to hold a wheel in my hands? Never to feel the pound of wheels on the free road and know the stink of exhaust? I'd sooner fry!"

Emery's hand reached out and clasped Sam's in a hard grip. "I believe you, Sam," he said in a low voice. "Jim Lamb is backing you, too. There must be some way to clear you. We'll find it."

A faint gleam of hope shone through the despair in Sam's brown eyes as Bob Emery turned to look at him from the door. He left him in the cream-toned room, propped up in a gleaming white bed, wrapped up in black fear just faintly

bordered with hope. He left the smell of medicines behind as he walked to his car.

Emery found Jim Lamb waiting for him at the terminal. They shook hands silently amid the uproar of trucks arriving, loading, and departing. "Looks bad for Sam," Emery sighed. "With that eye witness reporting that he saw the trooper shoot Sam and the slug from the trooper's gun in his shoulder, I guess Sam will have a hard time beating the State."

Lamb was a big blonde man. A bit on the soft side from riding a Morris chair instead of a rig. "Yeah. That positive reaction of the paraffin test on Sam makes it worse," he spoke in a clear tenor voice. "But I don't believe Sam'd kill a cop because he sent his boy up on a car stealing charge." Emery nodded in agreement.

He headed straight for bed after taking his leave of the truck line's president and owner. But sleep wouldn't come. He pitched and tossed like a ship in a gale. Over and over his mind travelled the course laid by the irrefutable evidence, seeking some side road that would lead to Sam's salvation.

It came to him in a blinding flash as he fervently cursed the fate that had slapped

Sam behind the eight ball. With trembling fingers Emery threw on his clothes. Then he raced madly to the D.A.'s office.

Larski listened attentively, his fingers forgetting to pat his wavy hair in place. "All right," he said, excitement tinging his words, "I'll give it a try, Bob."

He reached for the phone on the highly polished mahogany desk. He dialed a number rapidly and hurled staccato instructions into the cone of the mouthpiece. Then with a sigh of satisfaction, he murmured: It's just barely possible."

"I simply have to be right," Emery replied. A shudder ran up his spine. If a blank turned up now, there'd soon be a widow and a bunch of orphans in Sam's family. He tried to sit still, but a high tension of nervous expectancy gave his body and mind no peace. He started to pace around the D. A.'s spacious office. Nor did he relax even when Larski's lovely young secretary came in with a bunch of letters in her hand. An hour crawled by.

EVERY time the phone rang, Emery held his breath as Larski answered it. Then he swore nervously as the calls



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proved to deal with other matters. But he recognized the one he was waiting for. Larski hitched himself closer to the desk and a look of absolute concentration froze his face as he held the receiver to his ear.

Emery's jaw hung loose. He crowded against Larski hoping to hear what came over the green silk-wound wire. But Larski held the receiver tightly against his ear and Emery could hear nothing. Larski hung up and drew a deep breath. No emotion showed on his frozen features. The bitter cold fist of fear clutched at Emery's heart.

Larski gazed at Emery's set face. "You were right, Bob."

"Thank the Lord!"

There was a lot of action immediately. Larski knew how to get his office working at high speed. To make sure there would be no hitch, Larski called in two short-hand stenographers. He ordered the police laboratory technicians to come right up. And finally he called the jail and instructed that the dapper Mr. Loffel, who was being held as a material witness, be brought to his office.

Loffel's mustache twitched nervously as he entered the office behind a pot-bellied policeman. Larski waved him to a chair with a matter-of-fact gesture. "Just routine, Mr. Loffel," he soft-soaped, "mere routine. We wish to take down a word for word statement." He nodded at the burly trooper sitting across the room. "Trooper Schaff who took charge at the murder scene will listen and inform me if you tell a different story from the one you told him."

"Oh!" A confident smile drew the eyebrow mustache to a long pencil line. "I'm ready." The stenographers poised their pencils. Bob Emery turned his face away from the man. He didn't want him to sense a possible trap. The mustache danced and writhed as the owner talked rapidly, confidently on. The stenographers

made swift pot-hooks, dashes, and curls.

"Um-huh." Larski grunted noncommittally as Loffel concluded. Emery could barely keep himself from crying out with joy. Larski kept control of his voice admirably. "So you actually saw Trooper Main shoot back at Sam?"

"Indeed I did! It was horrible!" The mustache screwed up in a wince of extreme pain.

Bob Emery leaped from his chair. "If the trooper shot at Sam, why did the paraffin test taken on his dead hands show a negative reaction? If he'd fired the gun, the test would have been positive!"

Loffel's face grayed and he stuttered wildly. He looked about in panic. Larski's face grinning wolfishly held him at bay. Emery was waving an angry finger under the quivering mustache. "You shot Sam with the trooper's revolver after your skinny pal knocked him cold. You had gloves on and placed the revolver back in the trooper's dead hand. But you made sure that Sam's hand was placed near his shoulder when you shot him. You know about paraffin tests and knew that a close range shot would spray his hand with nitrate that would appear in the tests.

"But you never figured that the dead trooper's hands would be tested. You stuck the automatic you killed the trooper with in Sam's unconscious hand and got his prints on it. And you thought you had a perfect frame-up of the witness to the murder."

"I'll tell everything! Give me a chance! I didn't do it. It was my partner!—" But Emery was walking rapidly out on the quaking man with the mustache.

"Hey!" Larski shouted. "Whereinella running, Bob?"

There were tears of joy in Bob Emery's eyes. "I'm on my way to tell Sam that he's going to be the godfather to Big Andy's first baby."

POET LAUREATE OF CRIME

How an anonymous criminal attained the highest literary honors.

THE most hauntingly beautiful verse of the fifteenth century was penned by a jail-bird who pursued his criminal career under so many aliases that even yet his real name is not known! Burglar, highwayman, murderer, pick-pocket, and lyric poet, he was the most incredible product of a sordid age.

His boyhood was spent in Paris, traditional spawning ground of colorful brigands. The nation's resources having been exhausted by the Hundred Years' War, poverty and violence was the order of the day. Children spent their days, not in school, but on the streets begging for a crust of bread. Wolves invaded the outlying district, snatching infants and occasionally killing an adult.

François Villon, as he became known to posterity, spent his childhood in obscurity that not even the research of five centuries of scholars has dispelled. From early adolescence, he was reared by an old priest, Guillaume de Villon.

The boy adopted the name of his benefactor, but none of his ways. Much against his wishes, he attended school for about nine years. For his extra-curricular activity, he chose to prowl the streets in company with an ambitious young pick-pocket and a notorious burglar.

By way of diversion, he frequented the taverns and wooed the working girls with huge success. It was one of them who led to his first murder, in 1455.

Having quarreled with a priest over a girl, Villon proceeded to attack the cleric. He received a dagger slash that left a gruesome scar on his upper lip, but finally got the best of his opponent and left him lying in his own blood.

Police records of the time listed him as François de Montcorbier, alias Villon, alias des Loges, alias Cerbieul, alias Mouton. Francis joined the professional criminals, of Cooquillards, who systematically robbed, killed, and looted. Known as "Knights of the Dagger."

By 1456, the heat was off in the capital city, so he returned to his old haunts. Within a month, he had planned and executed a daring burglary of the College of Navarre. The swag, some two thousand dollars, lasted for just one week.

Again leaving Paris, Villon spent five years roaming in the provinces. He was arrested many times, and suffered agony in frequent experiences of the third degree.

In that day, one accused of crime had no legal rights whatever. If his captors could not get a confession by gentler methods, it was the accepted practice to beat the prisoner until his spirit broke. Once a gendarme forced a funnel in Francis' mouth, poured in water until his stomach stretched almost to the bursting point. He paid at least two visits to the death cell, but each time eluded the hangman. His hard life and the damp prisons

(Please continue on page 127) -



By WEBB GARRISON

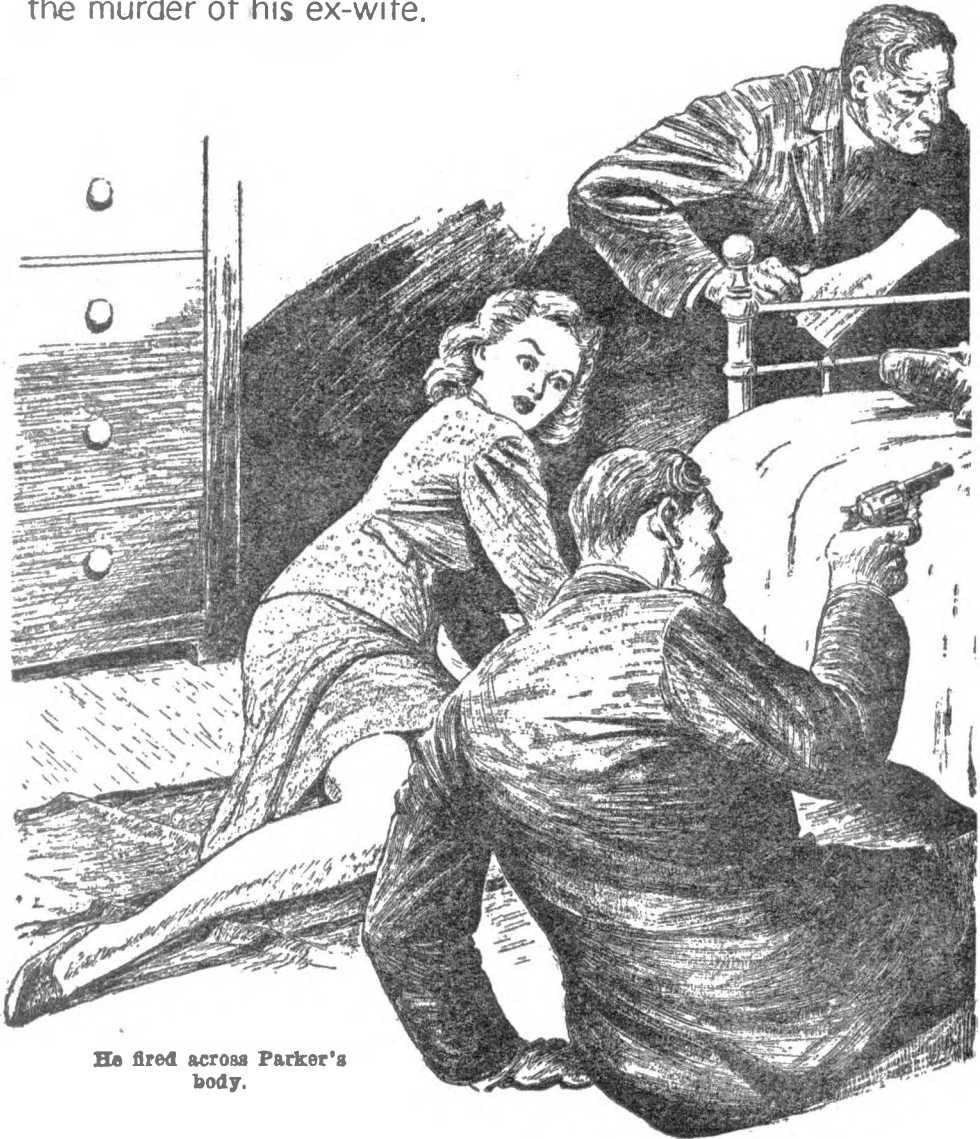


YOU ONLY

Seven years at Alcatraz had dulled the edges of George Ball, but he was still sharp enough to know he was being framed for the murder of his ex-wife.

By

DONN MULLALLY



He fired across Parker's body.

DIE TWICE

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CHAPTER ONE

The Reception Committee

NOTHING had changed. He'd been seasick seven years ago in the launch that took him to The Rock. He was seasick now. He'd need a mirror to know he was leaving that much of his life back at Alcatraz. It could be yesterday, the same launch careening through the choppy water of San Francisco Bay toward The Rock—except that George Ball knew his hair was thinner, grayer; the bones under the skin of his face some-

how larger, knottier; his eyes sunken and dark. He looked like a just-sprung con—the cheap suit and cap, stiff shoes.

Seven years ago he'd watched The Rock grow out of the Bay and swallow him; now it was the City. He didn't know which was worse. He'd had some idea what to expect on The Rock. But what happens to an ex-special investigator with a record? Where does he make his buck?

George Ball had never been anything but a cop. He fought his way out of the stuffy cabin, stood on the open deck and let the cold wind and spray blow on his face. He felt better, but no braver.

The skipper brought the launch alongside the dock, lines were made fast and George walked down the gangplank. He had a queer minute when the rough planks under him seemed to heave like the deck of the launch; his knees trembled. But that passed and he moved slowly toward the gate.

"George Ball!"

Someone was shouting his name. A man in a soft, gray snap-brim hat and a sharp gray worsted suit waved at him from the gate, met him halfway, smiling, "You know me, don't you, George?"

Ball nodded. "Sure, Dick—I just didn't expect a welcoming committee."

Dick Casle was shaking his hand, beaming. "It's good to see you, boy."

Casle's tailor-made shirt was immaculate, a blue bow tie snug against its collar. Ball was uncomfortable, aware of his own seedy outfit. He eyed Casle suspiciously. He'd known Dick casually for several years down in Los Angeles—a police lieutenant.

"I hope this reception isn't official, Dick," he said.

The detective's grin faded. "No, this is strictly my own idea. I wanted to talk to you. Look, I've got a cab waiting. Suppose we let him drop us someplace where we can get a good breakfast—I'll tell you about it."

"I don't know, Dick, I . . ."

"Hey," Casle grinned. "I came four hundred miles to see you. You're not going to brush me off?"

He already had Ball by the arm dragging him toward the waiting cab. George shrugged. "Okay, Dick, I'll take you up on that breakfast."

Dick had plenty to say over their ham and eggs, but nothing worth a trip to San Francisco to get off his chest. He filled Ball in on the latest political gossip around L. A. Who was looting the city treasury; that sort of thing. He let the waitress bring their second cup of coffee before he turned the record over.

"George," he said, grinning across the table, "this probably isn't the thing to say, but you look swell!"

"Have you had your eyes checked lately, Dick?"

"No, I mean it. I—"

"All right, Dick," said George quietly. I won't argue about it. The Rock is a great little rest home—beautiful climate, sea breezes, regular meals and no worries. So let's drop it and you tell me what's on your mind."

Casle offered him a cigarette and a lighter. The detective's face set in a solemn, Slavic mask. "I always thought you got a rotten shake, George," he said. "I didn't have any better luck proving it than you did at your trial, so I kept still. I knew it was tough enough on you doing time, without someone on the outside building up false hopes."

"Thanks."

DICK lighted his own cigarette, toyed with the lighter. "I don't imagine you've heard from Laura?" he ventured.

"Not since they served me with the divorce papers."

"I've run into her occasionally—she's doing all right for herself."

"That figures," Ball said bitterly.

"How do you feel about Laura?"

"I don't. I used to lie awake nights—hating her guts. Then one morning I woke up and I couldn't remember what she looked like, the color of her eyes, anything."

Casle nodded across the table. "I'm glad, George. I was afraid Los Angeles wouldn't be big enough for the two of you."

"I could ignore her in Azusa," Ball shrugged. "But that doesn't mean I'm coming to L.A."

"You'd better change your mind. You've got a lot of friends down South."

"Yeah," Ball leered at him. "I remember them fighting to testify for me when they had me on the stand."

"That was seven years ago, George..."

"Is that all?"

"I'm sorry, George, I—"

"Forget it."

Dick leaned back and smiled. "Let's both forget it," he said. "Look, I've been talking to a lot of people about you these last couple of weeks. You'd be surprised how many of them agree that something ought to be done about you. Here's the point, George—I want to bring you back to L.A. We'll find a job for you, and in the meantime you can shack up at my apartment. I've got a pull-down bed in my living room that's not working. How about it?"

George studied Casle's earnest expression, trying to read what was behind all this sudden interest in Ball's future. "Well, Dick, I—"

"If you were still carrying a torch for Laura, I could—"

"I was just going to say," Ball snapped, "that it was the best offer I've had yet."

"Then it's a deal?"

"What've I got to lose?"

Maybe he should've made Dick answer that question before they got in the cab to drive to the airport. But seven years on *The Rock* makes a guy careless about those things.

The pilot found a hole in the smog over Burbank and set them down at Union Air Terminal. Dick took George directly to his apartment, explained that he'd have to go downtown. George was to make himself at home with the shower, linens, liquor or anything else he saw around the place. Dick would give him a call later and they'd have dinner together.

He left twenty bucks with George, "Just in case my shirts don't fit, or you want to buy a pair of socks."

After Dick was gone, George took him up on the shower. He found a terry-cloth robe in the closet. The icebox produced makings for a steak sandwich, and George settled down to spend a peaceful afternoon on Dick's davenport. There was nothing lavish about the apartment—just some Grand Rapids furniture in a respectable amount of space—but George had forgotten even that much luxury. Some time during the afternoon, his last, sleepless night on *The Rock* caught up with him.

He awoke to the bleat of the doorbell—had to lie there for a minute, eyes staring, while he squared himself with his situation. Then Ball got off the davenport and shuffled to the door, opened it a crack and peered out. A girl was standing in the dimly lighted hall.

Ball seemed to be something of a surprise to her. Maybe even a shock. He realized he hadn't pulled the robe across his chest, clutched the lapels together, as she said, "Oh—I beg your pardon."

She glanced at the number on the door, to reassure herself. "I was looking for Dick Casle," she explained. "Is he—"

"Dick isn't here right now," Ball replied. "Can I take a message?"

The girl smiled. "Then you're a friend of mine," she said.

Ball had no choice. He opened the door and she came in. "Dick ought to be home later," he stammered.

"Oh, that's all right," she lilted, crossing the room to a carved mahogany cab-

inet Dick had identified as his booze locker. "I'm really not in any hurry."

George watched her help herself to a bottle of Scotch. What in the hell did he do now? Dick hadn't mentioned that he expected company; but, on the other hand, she seemed to take the whole place so much for granted—Ball didn't think he had any business pitching her out.

She smiled at him again as she squirted seltzer into her highball glass. "I'm Marilyn Toomey," she said, as though it explained everything.

"That's fine," Ball mumbled stupidly. "I—"

"Yes?"

"I—I'm George Ball. If you'll excuse me a minute, I'll put on some clothes."

He backed modestly through the door of Dick's bedroom.

Marilyn Toomey didn't know it, but she was the first woman he'd been alone with in over seven years. She would be a beautiful woman—red hair—tiny, but a very solid package in her green afternoon suit. Those slanty eyes, and the way they had mocked him while she was making her drink!

Dick had left an office number beside the phone on his night table. George dialed the number now. "Dick," he said when his friend came on the wire, "You know a pixy-faced character who calls herself Marilyn Toomey?"

"Yeah," Dick said. "What about her?"

"She just waltzed into the apartment and started lapping up your Scotch. Thought I ought to check."

"Oh no!"

"That's all I want to know, pal," George said. "I'll go out and give her the bum's rush—if you say so."

"Yeah. Marilyn's a tank," Dick said. "I don't know what she's doing there, but heave her out. Before you do, though, George—I'm glad you called. I was about to give you a buzz. I think you're set."

Ball gripped the phone hard, tried to

keep his voice under control. "No foolin'? That's great, Dick. What is it?"

"I think I've talked Cary Jensen into putting you on as assistant night clerk at his hotel down on Spring Street. The Rodney Villa. Its kind of a dump, but it'll keep you in eating money."

"Am I complaining?" George laughed.

"No, but I don't want you to think I'm settling for a from-hunger set-up like this for you. Talk to Cary, and look the place over. If you can stand it, I think he'll put you right to work. Call me after you see Jensen, and let me know how you make out."

"Sure thing, and thanks." Ball hung up, grinning.

He remembered Marilyn. At the rate she was going, she'd be half-way through Dick's bottle of Scotch. He'd put a stop to that!

He jumped into his clothes and strode into the living room. It was empty. Like Marilyn's glass. Pinned down by the Scotch bottle was a hastily scrawled note. "Dear Knothead," it read, "You should take a course in whispering if you're going to talk about a lady behind her back!"

George crumpled Marilyn's note and tossed it into the wastebasket.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble at the Switchboard

AFTER Dick Casle's no-buildup on the Rodney Villa, George Ball was expecting a run down hotel. It didn't damage his morale to discover the hotel was a large, brick structure advertised as both fire and quake proof. Maybe it was no Ambassador, either. But the lobby was large and well-lighted.

Jensen was a nice guy. They settled their business over a couple of cigarettes, and he took George to the desk and introduced him to a little gray-haired character named Wilson. George met the house de-

tective and the night bellhop—didn't see why they should give him any trouble.

Wilson explained that normally the Rodney Villa didn't rate two men on the desk at night; but he was moving out in a week, to take a day job at another hotel. He chuckled, "So I hope you won't think I'm riding you, Ball, if I seem to pour it on."

Ball's number one job was to learn to operate the switchboard. Wilson showed him how to handle the plugs, and then said, "We'll turn on the buzzer so we can hear any calls and I'll tell you about the rest of the set-up."

He was explaining how they racked up reservations, when a couple entered the lobby.

From the front door, they were just another man and woman, trailed by Kenny, the bellhop, who was lugging a couple of heavy bags. Then Ball looked again.

He could feel himself getting sick and hot, his hands starting to sweat.

The woman didn't come all the way to the desk with the man, but close enough that her face focused sharp in the unmasked light from the crystal chandelier.

While he was in prison, George had forgotten how Laura looked. Now he remembered. Every turn of her features. The way she held her head. Her black hair; her large eyes that could look at a man and through him, as she was looking at him now. Not a flicker of recognition.

Wilson handled the registration. It was like watching them from a movie seat. The people seemed to be black and white shadows moving across a screen into the elevator—and, as the door slid shut, fade-out.

George shook his head. Wilson was speaking to him. "Next time we have a registration, Ball," he said, taking the card out of its leather holder on the desk, "I wish you'd come up and see how it's done."

"Yeah. I will."

The buzzer on the switchboard sounded off, and Ball leaped at the opportunity to learn that a lady in 305 wanted to be called at eight in the morning. He had a tough time controlling his hands as he entered her request on the call sheet. Then he checked the last registration.

Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Palmer, it said. San Diego.

So Laura had remarried.

He wasn't surprised, but he wondered why Dick hadn't mentioned it.

Laura hadn't aged a day in those seven years. Not the way he'd aged. It hit him hard and low, as though their lives had never separated—as though she were still his wife and he'd been there to see her register at the hotel with another man.

He told himself off for being a damn fool.

The switchboard was dead, Wilson was absorbed in his paper. The elevator whirled back to the first floor, and Kenny got out, flopped in a high-backed chair. Except for the traffic noises that filtered in from the street, the lobby was quiet.

Wilson looked up from his paper. "Anything the matter, Ball?"

George shook his head. "No— Is it always like this—nothing doing?" he said, trying to promote a conversation to get his mind off Laura.

The little night clerk leaned one elbow on the counter and grinned at Ball. "You'll get used to it," he said, closing the paper. "I thought I'd run over to the diner across the street for a cup of coffee. If anything comes up that you can't handle, ask Kenny. He's been around here long enough to know most of the answers."

"Sure, go ahead," Ball said. "I'll be all right."

He watched Wilson lift the drop-leaf in the counter, walk toward the front door. George glanced at Kenny. The kid's eyes were closed, head nodding on his chest. George tried to work up an interest in

Wilson's paper, but couldn't quite do it.

The elevator bell rasped. Kenny didn't move, so George called to him, "You'd better catch that, hadn't you?"

The bellhop jumped, grinned sheepishly and got in the cage. Ball watched the indicator climb to 7, stop, and float back to the lobby.

Laura's husband stepped out, walked past the desk. He was a big man, very blond, with good shoulders; carried himself like he was going somewhere. Ball followed him with his eyes until Palmer straight-armed one of the big double doors and disappeared.

THE buzzer on the switchboard came to life, one bright, white light showing in the bank of holes. George didn't want to answer it. He didn't want to hear her voice.

The buzzing continued, and he saw Kenny looking at him. Trapped, he went to the board and plugged in, said, "Desk."

She said, "George!"

"This is the desk, Madam."

"George, I've got to see you!"

His mouth was dry. He looked over his shoulder, expecting to see her husband coming back. He wasn't that lucky.

He said: "Yes—what is it, Laura?"

She said, "I have to see you, George. Right away. Can you come up here?"

His hands were shaking. He said, "No, Laura. I can't leave the desk."

There was a moment's silence on the wire; then she sobbed, "George, please! He's going to be gone for an hour. I want to talk to you. Please!"

George didn't answer. He pulled the plug and let it slip down in home position. The banks of blank holes stared at him like dead, accusing eyes. The light over 726 flashed on again, then off, then on.

He disconnected the buzzer. The light kept flashing. Finally, his fingers punched the plug into the connection.

"For heaven's sake, Laura," he cried,

"be reasonable!" Before she could work on him any more, he'd broken the connection—shut his eyes to the flashing light.

He opened them. It was still there.

He stood up wearily, stumbled to the counter. Kenny was back in his chair. Ball said, "Hey, Kenny—think you can watch the board for a minute?"

"Sure, Mr. Ball."

George mumbled that he'd be right back, stepped into the cage and angrily punched the button for the seventh floor. He leaned his head against the cool metal. He didn't move until the elevator bounced to a stop.

He got out, walked down the dimly lighted corridor to her room, knocked.

"Come in, George."

The knob was wet in his hand.

He didn't know what he expected when he opened the door. Laura to run to him with open arms? Or just sit there looking at him as though he were a cockroach? He did expect her to be alone. His muscles crawled when he saw she wasn't.

Laura sat at the dressing table, the light behind her. She wasn't looking at George at all, but at the man. George knew why, before he'd taken a step into the room. He saw the gun, heard Laura cry, "No—don't!"

Her scream was something George felt, like the cracking impact of the shots.

The man turned, as Laura sprawled off the dressing-table stool. His back was to the light, his face almost masked by shadows. He was covering Ball. "Lie down on the floor," he said quietly.

If he'd told Ball to stay on his feet, there would have been an argument. George's knees bent and he grovelled on the carpet, dazed, sick.

He saw large feet pass his eyes. A heavy object dropped a few inches from his hand, and the door slammed shut.

George raised his head, saw the butt of a revolver. He grabbed it and threw himself at the door.

When he got to the hall, the fire door

at the far end of the corridor was just closing. He raced the length of the hall, opened the door. Several floors down, he made out a movement in the purple-red glow of the emergency lights. He fired, shouting. He could hear feet pounding on the metal steps. He emptied the magazine down the shaft.

George listened. There was no sound. He took the steps two at a time, hoping one of his wild shots had dropped the hood. All the way to the bottom; through the metal door opening on an alley. Nothing.

Ball dropped the gun in his pocket and charged into the lobby.

Wilson had come back from his cup of coffee. He and Kenny were leaning over the desk, talking excitedly with Leroy Palmer. Ball saw the house detective at the elevator shaft.

"What's going on up there?" he growled at Ball, as the elevator doors slid open in front of them.

Ball pushed him into the cage, set it in motion again for the seventh floor. "A woman's been shot," he told the house man. "I was there when it happened."

The detective eyed George sourly. "Yeah? We'll see."

They ran down the hall, past doors that were beginning to open and spew curious guests into the corridor. Ball followed the house man as he elbowed through the mob gathering in front of Room 726. The detective advised everyone to go back to their rooms, wasn't having much luck selling the idea.

They finally got inside and closed the door. The house dick looked at Laura lying on the rug, leaned over.

"She's dead," he said, straightening. "Dumdums, from the look of the wounds. Know her name?"

George nodded. "She and her husband registered tonight. I believe their name is Palmer. That was her husband at the desk."

The house man squinted at him. "What were you doing up here, Ball?"

"Why—I—"

The pieces were clicking together in Johnny's brain. They made a picture he didn't like, because it was a picture he couldn't explain to this house dick—or any dick.

"She called down and said she wanted to see me."

"Why?" the man repeated. "You know her before?"

Ball knew all he had to say was, "*Pretty well—she used to be my wife,*" and this time it wouldn't be a seven-year stretch on The Rock. It would be the little, apple-green room at Quentin.

He lied. "No. She said her husband had stepped out and someone was knocking on her door."

"Yeah?" said the house man. "Why didn't you call me? That's my department, isn't it?"

"I guess I didn't think. I'm new at the job." He edged himself toward the closed door.

"What's your hurry, Mac?" the detective leered. "I think we ought to go over your story again. You say the woman called you?"

"That's right," George said. His hand was gripping the empty rod in his coat pocket. He knew what he had to do; jerked the gun out and waved the house man to the closet. Ball shoved him the last step, turned the lock and told him to keep quiet; went to the door of the room, opened it, snapping the night lock on as he went.

He pushed through the crowd, shouting, "Please—I've got to get a doctor!"

A little guy in a flannel bathrobe said, "I'm a doctor."

Ball said, "Great. They need you in there," and kept going. He heard the doctor rattle the doorknob, cry "Why, the door's locked!"

George didn't stop to sav how sorry he

was. He took his cue from the killer and sprinted down the fire steps to the alley.

CHAPTER THREE

A Fast Get-Away

THERE was only one way out of the alley and that was on Spring Street, about thirty feet from the front entrance of the hotel. Another five minutes and George Ball would have been bottled up in the dead end—but he got to the street before any general alarm had been given, was several blocks further down Spring when he heard the sound of police sirens. He'd been moving as fast as he dared, wanting with every step to break and run.

He passed a couple of stray dames walking their dogs, but otherwise had Spring Street pretty much to himself. Ball knew it only takes a few stray dames to put the cops on a guys track. He had to get transportation, and soon. He'd made a pass at a cab, but it was loaded and not about to stop.

As the sirens closed, he ducked into a darkened shop doorway. A prowler car batted by heading for the Rodney Villa. George stepped back to the sidewalk. The only thing moving his direction was a chrome-laden convertible. It came abreast of him, swerved suddenly to the curb and stopped.

He heard a girl's voice say, "George Ball! Can I take you any place?"

He gasped. Seven years ago this might have happened. Not that he had known so many girls who cruised around town late at night—but it was possible. Now, so far as he knew, only one woman knew he was in L.A. And here she was—showing up like a death house reprieve.

Down the street the siren on the police car wailed and died. That was all the urging he needed, not to question his luck. He opened the door and crawled into the

car beside Marilyn Toomey. "Thanks, You can give me a lift."

She smiled. "Where'll it be?"

"How about Beverly Hills?"

She put the car in gear, commenting, "Beverly Hills is a big place, George. Are you particular about where?"

He shook his head. "Any corner you want to drop me."

She laughed. "You sound like a man who's running away from something."

"Good guess," he nodded grimly. "Just keep driving. I'll tell you when to stop."

"You haven't killed anyone, George?"

He saw her glance at him as she sent the big car chasing after its headlights.

"No," he said. "I haven't; although there may be a difference of opinion about that."

She drove in silence for several minutes.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I'll keep you out of it."

"I wasn't worrying," she said. "I was wondering—I mean, if you're really hot—"

"I'm hot," he said, "but it only concerns you to the extent of setting me down in another part of the county. I'll make out."

"But you'll need a place to stay," she protested.

"I'm working on that."

They left it there, drove through Hollywood and out Sunset Boulevard. He wasn't paying any special attention to Marilyn's driving, until she spun the wheel and took them up one of the canyon roads back of Beverly Hills. She picked a spot with a view of Los Angeles lights, pulled off the road and cut the engine.

The only sound in the darkened car was the engine cracking in the night air. Then Marilyn said, brightly, "There's a bottle in the glove compartment, George. Suppose we have a drink and you tell me about it."

He opened the bottle and handed it to her.

She passed the bottle, said, "Your turn."

"All right, Miss Toomey," he said bitterly. "You've bought yourself a story."

HE WENT back ten years for her—the day he married Laura. How he felt that day, every day Laura and he were together. How he'd done everything he could for her on the four thousand bucks the City paid him as a special investigator for the D.A.

"I didn't mind going in hock for Laura," he explained. "I thought it was my mission in life to keep her dressed like a movie star, show her off at Ciro's and the Derby."

He filled Marilyn in on the political set-up at the time—how a couple of factions were at each other's throats with a grand jury in the middle. "It got so hot, somebody had to be fed to the wolves—and there sat George Ball. I was indicted for accepting bribes from certain characters around town.

"You don't have to believe this, Marilyn, but I'd never taken a dime from anyone. However, when they got me in court, they sprung a joker.

"Somebody discovered Laura had a private bank account with fifty grand in it.

"I tried to shake the truth out of Laura—where she got it. She wouldn't talk. Of course, they couldn't make her testify against me—but the mere fact that the wife of a small-time investigator had banked fifty thousand dollars over six months convinced the jury there was something wrong somehow.

"The D.A. dropped me, and Uncle Sam's income tax boys caught me on the first bounce—shipped me to Alcatraz for tax evasion."

The bottle passed back and forth. George told Marilyn the rest of it, how Dick Casle had met him in San Francisco, brought him down here and put him to work at Cary Jensen's Rodney Villa—the

killing, how he'd escaped from the hotel.

He could see the dim, white glow of Marilyn's face looking at him, the flash of her teeth when she spoke. "This Laura, your ex-wife, she wouldn't be a tallish sort of gal, dark hair and brown eyes?"

"You might say that—yeah."

"And her present husband—an exact opposite, blond, rangy with kind of dreamy blue eyes?"

"I wouldn't know about the dreamy part, but otherwise, yes. Why?"

He heard Marilyn chuckle to herself. "Just playing a female hunch, George," she said. "I may be wrong, but I think that name they registered under was phony. They sound like the Jud Parkers to me."

"So?"

"I hope you'll forgive me for saying this, George, but if the police are looking for you it's probably to pin a medal on your manly chest."

"What do you mean?"

"You said you're certain the cops think you killed Laura Parker. I don't know how much newspaper reading they let you do on The Rock, Johnny, but it's pretty general knowledge that there are a lot of boys on the force who'll sleep better now that Laura isn't going to be around. What you told me about the political set-up here ten years ago is very interesting. It was before my time—but, frankly, the situation hasn't changed. Only the characters. There's another grand jury. I understand Laura and her husband had been playing with some rough citizens and had been subpoenaed to sing pretty for the people of California."

Ball nodded. "Thanks. That makes the whole thing add up, doesn't it? All the questions I'd been asking myself. Why Casle went to San Francisco—why he took such a fat interest in my welfare—the job at the Rodney Villa—all of it. Even what looked like the world's most crashing coincidence—that Laura and her

husband registered there my first night.

"I think I get the picture. Laura has finally sold out, herself, this time—by her old man, who went for a walk to let the killer do the job they'd hang on me!"

George dragged at his cigarette until the coal burned his fingers. He flipped the butt out of the window, swearing.

He heard Marilyn sigh. "To coin a phrase," she said, "you were framed. What're you going to do about it, George?"

Ball shook his head. "I don't know—probably stooze around until the cops get me in a pocket."

"Know what I think you ought to do?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea."

"Let me put you up for a few days—until the heat's off and you've had a chance to figure something more intelligent than just stoozing around."

"You know what happens if I'm caught at your place?"

"Let me worry about that," she whispered.

"Why should you?"

He heard the empty bottle fall on the gravel beside the car. "Come here, George." Her voice sounded thick. "Come here—Marilyn will explain it to you."

THE next morning, they spread the Los Angeles papers out in the living room of Marilyn's Spanish villa. A comfortable little hide-out in the Hollywood Outpost section—twelve rooms, with a view of the city from every window. The view got a big play from George last night when he was walking the floor of his room, trying to beat the insomnia that closed in on him after Marilyn said good-night.

He'd read every word written about Laura's murder—the big, more or less conservative morning papers and the tabloids. His picture was blown up to a quarter page in all of the papers. Fortunately, it had been taken when he went to Alcatraz seven years ago. A great many

things had happened to George since then—none of them good. His face was leaner now, mouth narrower, and he had gray hair over his ears. He could probably walk past any cop in Los Angeles without getting a tumble.

George had a lot of ideas to try on Marilyn. "I think I understand the mechanics, now," he told her.

She encouraged him with a smile. "Yes?"

"Here's Laura and her husband somewhat on the lam. They've got enemies, with the cops and with some big-wheel hoodlums. So somebody comes up with a deal for Laura's husband. They'll let him off if he delivers his wife to their executioner. The Parkers register at the hotel; then, according to instructions, Laura's old man takes a walk for himself. He's no more than gone when this hood breaks into the room and, using his gun, persuades Laura she wants to talk to me. I buy—and the rest happens exactly as planned.

Marilyn's eyes were large. "There's just one point, George—the gun. You said after the killer shot Laura and made you lie on the floor, he threw the gun back into the room. Wasn't he taking an unnecessary chance?"

Ball snorted. "I stayed awake a couple hours last night worrying about the same thing. It's cute, Marilyn; very cute. Suppose the killer wanted my fingerprints on the gun. Also, powder marks on my hands in case the cops picked me up at the scene of the crime. Wouldn't it be the neatest trick of the week to load his gun with two dum-dum shells for Laura and six blanks backing them up?"

"When he threw the gun back into the room, he knew I'd pick it up and follow him; that I'd fire until the magazine was empty, trying to stop him. He'd slow his getaway enough to insure that. Does it make sense to you now?"

She nodded.

George walked to the huge picture windows, stared at gray fog shredding itself on the Hollywood hills. His friend Dick Castle had made the papers too, with the story of bringing George Ball to Los Angeles fresh from The Rock. He'd recalled for the reporters their conversation about Laura, how Ball had assured him he had no feeling for her one way or another. Of course, his statement was all George needed to queer any chance he might have had.

Without looking at Marilyn, George said, "I think Laura's husband is my best bet. I know it was no accident he was talking with Wilson at the hotel desk while his wife was getting shot. Maybe, if I worked on Parker, I could make him tell who was calling his play."

"Is there any doubt in your mind, George?"

He turned, faced Marilyn. "No—but I've got to prove Dick engineered Laura's murder. So Parker's my boy."

They looked at each other for a minute. Marilyn ran her fingers through the soft ends of her hair, smiled at him. "I've got some contacts around town, George," she said. "I may be able to arrange for you to talk to Parker."

It was his turn to go wide-eyed. "You're terrific! You show up when I need you most, and now you think you can pull Parker out of the hat. How do you do it?"

"I get around, George," she giggled. "Meeting you was an accident. I'm glad it happened, and I hope you are. Finding Parker will be a little tough, but I know some people who are good at those things. I'll have to circulate a little; but if you've got any stray cash, put it on Marilyn to deliver."

Ball started combing the papers for the second time, was only half through when she came out of her room in a light tan, gabardine street suit, looking as fresh as tomorrow morning.

"I haven't any idea how long this will take," she said soberly, "but don't worry if I'm not back in a couple of hours. There's food in the icebox. I called my maid this morning and told her to take a vacation, so no one should disturb you. I won't phone, so don't answer the telephone if it rings—or the door."

He grinned at her.

She came to him with a little cry, clung. "George, we can't have anything happen to you!"

"It won't—not the way you look after me."

George Ball wouldn't wish a day like he spent around Marilyn's house on Dick Castle. There was food, booze, cigarettes—but he was going nuts, waiting. Marilyn's house perched on the hill, flush with the sidewalk; so whenever a car went by, sound rumbled through the blank wall facing the street. Every time he heard a motor, he'd hold his breath until it died away and the big, beam-ceilinged room was quiet again. Traffic wasn't heavy; but a car every half hour or so was enough to start an ulcer.

The lights were on along Hollywood Boulevard before he heard Marilyn's key in the door. George was waiting in the entrance hall, having heard her car pull into the double garage attached to the house. The hallway was almost dark, but light enough for her to make him out against the picture windows in the other room. She closed the door, crying joyfully:

"Jackpot, George! I put the finger on Parker."

He picked her off the floor, starved for the sound of her voice—for her. All the hours he'd paced back and forth, trying to imagine how she'd tell him she'd found Parker—the exact words she'd use, the inflection of her voice. He hadn't come within a million light-years of how good it really was.

"Where is he, honey?" George asked,

his lips against the soft hair at the back of her neck.

She wiggled out of his arms, walked with him into the living room. Her skin was luminous in the pale blue twilight; her eyes dancing excitedly.

"Parker checked into a hotel in the County Strip," she explained. "I drove by it. Just one story, above a grocery store. It doesn't even have a name—just 'Hotel.' I'm sorry I was so long, hut—"

"That's all right." He drew her down on the davenport, roughing her shoulder gently. "You're terrific, honey."

"I thought we'd wait a few hours, until people get off the streets. Less chance of your being seen."

"Did I say I was in a hurry?" George laughed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Her Diamond Solitaire

MARILYN'S description of the hotel where Parker was holed up said about everything for the old, brick building on Santa Monica Boulevard. She and George left her car on the side street and walked up a dingy, dimly lighted stairway to what the management probably called the lobby, on the second floor. Marilyn had insisted she was going along. George couldn't say no, because it seemed she had as much invested in this project as anybody.

The desk was a small counter fronting a door marked, "Manager." A blue-shaded bulb dangled over it on a long cord. There was a bell on the desk, if anyone wanted conversation with the manager. They didn't.

According to Marilyn's information, Parker was in Room 12. They crept by the desk, down a corridor; stopped in front of Parker's door, knocked—not loud. Ball thought he heard a kind of cross between a moan and a growl, inside. But no

one came to the door much to his surprise.

George tried the knob. It was unlocked. Not according to his book on guys who aren't expecting company—but there it was.

He eased the door open, the weak light from the hall fanning out in the darkened room until it crossed the foot of an old, iron bedstead, crawled across it to the wall. A man was stretched out on the bed, fully clothed. He'd raised his head, squinting at them as though the light were bright as a police line-up.

Marilyn's lead on Parker had been a hundred per cent. It was George's boy.

He stepped inside, dragging Marilyn with him; snapped on the room light and shut the door. This time it was locked, for sure.

Parker was trying to boost himself up on the bed with his elbows, not having a lot of success. His lips looked burned, white; they were moving, but no sound came. There was a biting, strong odor in the room. Ammonia. George took hold of Parker to help him up and got the stench full strength.

Someone had made sure Parker wouldn't be talking.

George pushed Parker back on the bed and looked at Marilyn. "I'm afraid we're a little late, honey," he said. "Somebody has forced enough ammonia down this joker's throat to burn a hole through his hip pockets."

They watched Parker painfully move his hand to his face to shut out the glare of the overhead light.

Ball asked him: "Look, Parker, can you understand what I'm saying?"

He nodded his head.

"Good." George felt his pockets for a pencil. No luck. He asked Marilyn, and she produced a small, gold pen.

Paper. He had to find paper. There was none in sight; but he opened a dresser drawer, hoping some tidy soul had slipped up and lined it.

He found paper—and something else that stopped him dead in his tracks. A small, empty cardboard package—the kind a druggist puts pills in. One typewritten word on the label: “Phenobarbital.”

George showed the box to Parker. “Yours?” he asked.

The man nodded.

“How many did you take?”

He shook his head, groaning.

“How long ago?”

Another shake of Parker’s head. His eyelids were fluttering, his breath fast and shallow.

Ball said to Marilyn, “This guy isn’t going to do us any good. I doubt if a doctor can help him—but I suppose he deserves a chance. I’ll get out, and you call the manager.”

As he was speaking, Parker’s body went into a spasm, stiffened. They stared at him, waiting to see his chest move again. It didn’t.

Marilyn turned white beneath her make-up, her lips sucked tight against her teeth. “Oh, George! How horrible!” she said, her eyes filling.

“It’s a rotten way to go,” George nodded. “Somebody loaded poor, old Parker with sleeping pills, then burned out his vocal cords so he couldn’t even make a last request. Nice people you meet in the rackets.”

He was having to hold Marilyn up—or maybe she was holding him up.

All this jelled for him. All the little pieces.

“Marilyn, honey, I want you to do me one more favor. You know Dick Casle. Can you take a message to him for me?”

She stepped back, her eyes large and frightened. “George—you’re not going to turn yourself in!”

He shook his head. “No—but I’m ready to talk to Dick now. Right here in this room. I think it’ll be a perfect spot for a showdown.”

He walked her to the door. “Tell Dick

I’m ready to give myself up—that I want him to be the man to take me in. Say I got in touch with you by telephone. Can you handle it?”

“Of course, George,” her mouth trembled. “If you’re sure you—”

She stood on tiptoe quickly and kissed him, turned and ran to the door, was gone.

BALL sighed and looked at his roommate, sprawled grotesquely across the bed. The room was pretty grim, small; shared a connecting bath with another room, just like Parker’s except that it was unoccupied. George could bet, whoever paid Parker’s rent had seen to this detail.

He went back to Parker’s room, turned out the light so he wouldn’t have to look at the dead man’s staring eyes and ammonia-burned mouth. He fished in his pockets and found a half-empty pack of cigarettes, lighted one and dragged the stale-tasting smoke over his own dry tongue. The paper stuck to his lips.

George Ball had ground his last cigarette into the no-nap of the rug in Parker’s room before he heard the sound of people stopping in front of the door. A knock—Marilyn’s voice: “George—”

He said, “Yeah, just a minute,” turned on the overhead light. The gun he’d picked up off the floor of Laura’s room was in his coat pocket. Empty, but Dick Casle wouldn’t know that.

He flattened himself against the wall to the right of the door, the gun in his hand now. He turned the key and gave the door a gentle push.

Dick walked in, empty-handed—froze when he felt George’s gun in his back. Ball said to Marilyn: “Come in and take his rod—he in a shoulder clip.”

She said, “Right, George.”

George kicked the door shut, locked it again. “Okay,” he told Dick, “You can come unstuck. Turn around if you want to.”

Casle did. The personality smile was

missing, but not the brass. "What the hell's happened to you, George?" he asked.

"You tell me," Ball snapped, twisting a grin at Marilyn who'd taken a position beside the room's beat-up dresser. She was holding Dick's police .38 at her side.

Dick shook his head. "I don't understand you." The skin on the back of his neck twisted as he looked at Parker's quiet form on the bed. "What's the matter with him?" he asked.

"A mild case of dead," Ball answered. "It comes as a big surprise to you, of course."

"Frankly, George, I—"

"Look," Ball said, "let's knock off the sweet talk. When you brought me down here, this was already in the book. Laura and her husband were going to die and George Ball would be the hot-seat patsy."

Dick was facing George now, his eyes narrow. "Then you didn't shoot Laura?"

"Stop," Ball leered. "You know damn well I didn't—not after you went to the trouble to move her into the Rodney Villa."

"Maybe what you're saying makes sense to you," said Dick levelly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will before we're through, Dick," George said, dropping the gun into his pocket. "It'll make sense when your head stops ringing. You'd better protect yourself, Dick, because I'm going to beat the truth out of you!"

Casle didn't move his hands from his sides—until George chopped a sharp right against the side of his jaw. Ball could feel the impact to his elbow, watched Dick spin across the room and come to his knees in the corner by the window. His eyes were glazed—not angry—just glazed.

Dick shook his head, scrambling to his feet. "George, don't be a dope. If I'd framed you, would I have walked in here the way I did? I could've come shooting. But I wanted to give you a break, I—"

"Yeah," Ball snorted, "I know the kind of break you mean—a chance to cop a plea for murder. No, thanks, sweetheart."

Ball was on top of his phony friend again. "You might as well make a fight of it, Dick."

"I don't want to."

Dick bounced off the wall and changed his mind. George saw his jaw set. Casle weaved under a big roundhouse swing George had aimed at his head, caught him flush on the button. Casle put his shoulder into it, and the walls of the room danced past George as he tried to grab something to stay on his feet.

Marilyn was available, but not too sturdy. They sprawled to the floor together and she screamed on the way down. The gun got away from her and George dived after it, half under the bed.

HE GOT his hand on the butt of Dick's .38, the hammer pulled back, when the bathroom door opened and a heavy-set citizen charged into the room. He was carrying a cocked automatic, counting the house as he came. He didn't see George right away, which was too bad.

This time George Ball wasn't shooting blanks down a darkened stairwell. The range was perfect. He fired across Parker's body and drilled the big hood just below the ear. The room shook when he fell.

Dick didn't have the color for it, but otherwise he would've made out as a cigar-store Indian. Wooden, pressed into the corner of the room. Marilyn's green eyes were large, her mouth too. But she wasn't screaming. George's guess, she was trying to breathe.

Ball stood up, went to the fallen gunsel and kicked the automatic away from his hand. He was wasting his time. The hood was definitely scratched.

He turned and smiled crookedly at Marilyn. "I thought maybe we could flush

this character if I staged a little fight with Dick," he said.

Castle said. "Who was he?"

"He's the boy who shot Laura," George explained, watching Marilyn. "And I imagine he fed Parker a lethal dose of sleeping pills with an ammonia chaser. But you'd better check with my girl friend. How about it, honey?"

"I—I—don't know—" she wailed.

George pulled her up, dumped her on the bed beside Parker.

"Don't give us that. It's time you talked straight. Tell Dick how you pitched Laura's old man into selling her out; how your boy, here, went to Laura's room at the Rodney Villa and made her call me up from the desk, shot her, then tossed his gun loaded with blanks back into the room. Tell Dick you and this hood waited in your car outside the hotel to see the cops bring me out.

"Only they didn't. You saw me come out of the alley and beat my way down the street. For a second, maybe, you were worried that something had gone wrong. Then you got another idea. You saw how you could use me to get Parker out of your pretty red hair, too. You left your boy to pick up Parker and sit on him until you were ready, then drove after me. A sweet parlay, honey—too bad you ran out of the money."

"You're crazy, George!" she screamed.

Dick had come over.

"Marilyn picked me up on Spring Street after Laura was shot," George told him. "Said she just happened to be driving by. A lucky break for Ball—like meeting her at your apartment. She took me to her place. She was sweet, Dick—sympathetic as hell about my being framed. I'll admit I bought it, at first. Everything pointed to you.

"Everything except her motive for being so tender with an ex-con she'd never seen before yesterday. I'd like to think

so, but I know I don't affect women that way. I had time to turn it over—she was gone all day today; supposed to be locating Parker for me. When we got up here, he was dying.

"His vocal cords were burnt out with ammonia, so he didn't talk."

Ball grinned at Marilyn huddled on the edge of the bed—no glamour there now, but raw terror. "Parker didn't have to talk, Marilyn. It was too slick. This time I knew who'd led me into the trap."

"That's nothing but conversation, Dick," snapped Marilyn.

George ignored her, went on. "So I could run some more—until she set me up for the cops."

"Yeah," Castle nodded, "but letting her lift my gun, George, I—"

"I had to make it look good, didn't I? Besides, I wanted her to feel on top of the situation, Dick. I knew she'd wait to see how our fight came out. If you won, she'd hand the gun to you; and if I really started to take you, she'd shoot me."

Castle looked at him blankly, said: "No— But look, George—what was it all about? What was Marilyn after?"

Ball shrugged. "That's your headache."

He grinned at Castle. "It might turn out our little redhead stood to lose a bundle if Laura got together with the Grand Jury. You'd been talking me up around town, how Laura had given me a bum deal and you were going to bring me back for a fresh start. Marilyn's smart enough to know what to do with a break like that when it's tossed in her lap."

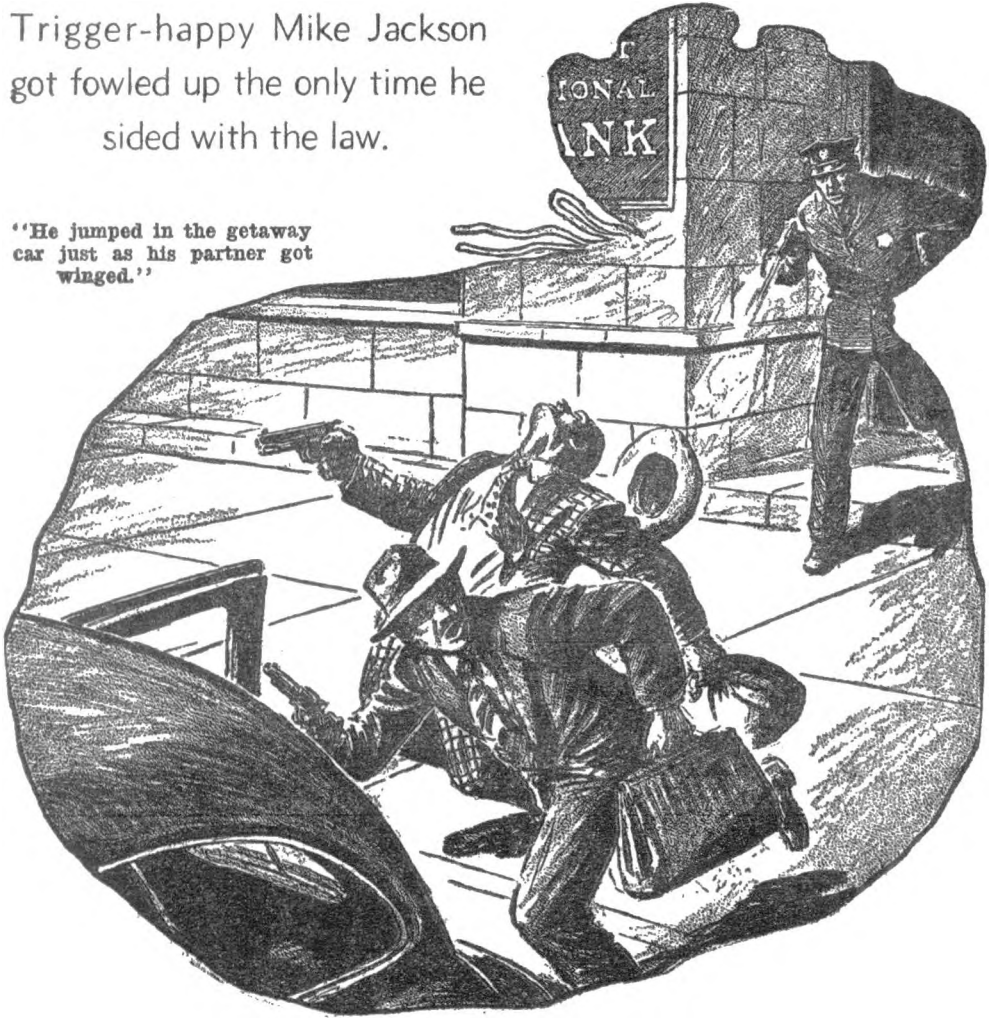
Marilyn flew off the edge of Parker's bed and lashed the side of Ball's face with her open hand. She must've turned her solitaire before she moved because he felt the diamond rake his cheek.

George Ball touched his face and his fingers came away red. "Thanks, honey," he said. "I wanted something to remember you by!"

DEATH—IN THE BAG

Trigger-happy Mike Jackson got fowled up the only time he sided with the law.

"He jumped in the getaway car just as his partner got winged."



By WALTER SNOW

THERE was a crisp, frosty tang to the air when "Trigger" Mike Jackson awoke. Instinctively he took a deep breath. It eased the dull, throbbing pain in his head, purged the sickly sweetish odor of reefers and the fumes of rotgut whiskey. Gone even was the mustiness of the fuzzy, moth-eaten blankets he had dragged out of a trunk last night.

Hunching up on one elbow, he stared through a fly-specked window at a gnarled apple tree outside. Momentarily, he was saddened to realize that, with three quarters of the branches dead, the yield probably had been less than a dozen knobby winesaps. No longer the firm, juicy fruit that made lips smack. Of course the tree hadn't been pruned in five

years. That would mean real hard work.

Beyond the winesap stood smooth maples, sturdy oaks, gaunt elms. It was strangely peaceful. The only sounds were the sighing of the wind, the rustling of the last dead leaves. Far in the distance a shot rang out through the wooded countryside.

Trigger Mike Jackson did not flinch. He was amazed how still his tobacco-browned fingers were. Gone were last night's shakes, the reefer-jag jumpiness that had sometimes given him the distasteful label of "Trigger-Happy." Thanks to his boyhood in these low-rolling Connecticut hills, he recognized that report as a No. 6 shot fired from a 12-gauge shotgun with modified choke. It was the Indian Summer open season; already somebody was out after those fat partridges.

From the sagging cot, he looked around the one-room shack. It was sparsely furnished with a cracked wood stove, a warped maple bureau, two spindle-legged chairs, a rickety table, a trunk and an old-fashioned foot-pedal sewing machine. The sole mementoes of a hard-luck family. After the farmhouse burned down, his pa had been planning to add another wing to this rebuilt chicken coop but pneumonia got him first. Young Mike cleared out after that first funeral.

For five years his maw had lived alone in this dingy shack, raising Rhode Island Reds and peddling on that sewing machine. Trigger Mike had gotten word that the old lady had kicked the bucket just two days before the town buried her in Potter's Field. He was on the lam then, hiding out in an East Harlem furnished room. It was six months before "the Jackson boy" showed up in town to put this shack and ten rocky acres on the market. Last Autumn he was glad no buyer had been found and now he was pleased again. It was a swell hideout.

The State Police, with their campaign hats and yellow-striped trousers, and the

town constable hardly ever came up this back dirt road. If they did, Mr. Jackson was merely an old resident, a property-owner in fact, returning for a bit of partridge shooting.

He had been foolish to have the heebie-jeebies and get potted last night, especially after he had buried his loot in the flue-box of the old chimney, unused since the farmhouse burned down. There was a bed of leaves in the ruins leading to it; no chance for telltale footprints. For weeks there had been no rain.

Trigger Mike sprang out of the narrow cot, closed the window and blinked in the cracked mirror. His ratty face was sallow but, after all, allegedly he had been out here only a week. Or should he say just three days? One doesn't acquire a tan in October. More important, he could hardly recognize himself now that his wax-pointed moustache was shaved off. The teller at the Whalers National Bank in Providence had gotten a good look at his face, couldn't have missed its most distinctive attribute. Luckily, it had been grown only six months ago to please that stacked peroxide blonde of a cigarette girl. The townfolk here in Mashapaug always remembered him as clean-shaven.

After dressing, starting a kindling fire and breakfasting, Trigger Mike went out with his 12-gauge slide action Winchester repeater. The old man never had anything better than an ancient Remington single shot. But Trigger Mike, having planned in advance on his hideout last year, had time to pick out this honey, a beautiful job of gunsmithing, a five-shot repeater, four shells in the magazine, one in the chamber. With a 28-inch barrel and a walnut stock, it weighed eight pounds, which meant much less recoil than a lighter gun. He wouldn't have to eat canned goods for dinner.

Not only were the birds multiplying in these parts—the red foxes were virtually cleaned out—but the game and conserva-

tion people always well-stocked Windham County.

LESS than three hundred yards from the shack. Trigger Mike startled his first pheasant, a big gorgeous bird with green head, golden breast and radiant green tail. The slow and cumbersome flyer rose from a tumbled down stone wall, soared over a clumb of hazelnut bushes, heading for a thicket of white birches. There were no obstructing trees. It was a perfect target, just twenty yards away. His No. 6 shot would be evenly distributed over a 30-inch circle.

A teenage boy with his first shotgun shouldn't have missed. Trigger Mike saw the glistening metal rag ring on one blue foot; it was a bird just released for the game season. Just as he was squeezing the trigger, his left foot slipped on a white flint pebble. The blast went off. The gamecock was safe in the birches with not a tail feather disturbed.

"Shoot him on the rise, eh?" growled Trigger Mike, breaking into a string of sulphurous curses. He didn't want to eat those hard pellets of Boston baked beans again. Shoot him on the rise! It sounded like that dried apple face, Leander Jones, who had been game warden ever since Mike himself had been in knee breaches. He had no use for Leander then, less later on when he had brought down a white-tailed doe a good mile from a cornfield she had allegedly been destroying. Leander had let him get away with that doe: it was just after the farmhouse had burned down and the folks needed that meat. But the old geezer always was lecturing.

He was mighty curt because Mike failed to attend his own mother's funeral. Mike hadn't shown up for three years after that, hardly said "Howdy" to him last Autumn. To hell with him! But were thoughts of the old game warden interfering with his shooting? Mike tramped the woods for two hours but three more shots were all

misses. He climbed over the stone wall onto the dirt road and was returning for more of those beans when he spotted her.

There could be no mistaking the hen partridge as she stood exposed in the leafless blueberry bushes just this side of the stone wall. She was a big fat bird, wonderful eating, but her plumage was drab and dull compared to the splendor of a gamecock. She was just fifteen yards away, motionless. Except for the bright noonday sun, Trigger Mike would not have spotted her. He muttered a silent curse as he raised the blued steel barrel.

Old Leander Bailey would have argued that he should rustle the bushes, seeing he didn't have a retriever dog; that he should shoot him on the wing. This of course, was a her but no one would know the difference once she was plucked. Trigger Mike fired. The succulent bird fluttered once and flopped over.

The hunter snatched up the prize, clambered over the stone wall. He would return to the shack by the back way so that he wouldn't encounter anyone along the dirt road. Leander Bailey lived just a piece up the pike; he might be rattling back from the postoffice and feed store in his flivver. Calmness returned to Trigger Mike. He was just rusty, a bit on edge this first day. Now that he had regained confidence in the shotgun, he would get plenty of gamecocks the rest of the week. Of course the blue legs of this hen weren't tagged. She had survived the red foxes, lived through the hard winter, mothered a brood and might have supplied more birds next season.

Starting over a rocky knoll, Trigger Mike suddenly spotted that lanky fence rail of Leander Bailey moseying over to the shack. Of course he had heard the shooting, dropped in to be neighborly.

At the foot of the banking there was an old skunk hole. Reluctantly, Trigger Mike stooped, shoved his hen partridge inside.

The dirt was so dry he had to drop to his knees to scoop up enough clay and sand to cover the bird. Then he scampered over the banking and went down to meet the warden, who was toting a double-barreled shotgun.

"Good hunting?" asked Leander, tugging at his white walrus moustache.

"Not today. Off my oats. Got me a good gamecock yesterday."

"Then you were here yesterday, huh? Didn't notice you but your place is set far back from the road."

"Yep. Been here three days now. Got me a very big gamecock the first day. Guess you won't have to worry about me getting over the limit."

"Shoot any hens?" asked Leander slowly, without any expression on his dried apple face.

"Hell, no! And the cocks I got three days ago and yesterday weren't tagged. So I got nothing to do with a game warden."

"Seen any other hunters the last three days?"

"Not today or yesterday. Ran into a chap three days ago. Nobody I knew."

"Was he lucky?"

"Got his limit. Three beauties."

"Any hens?"

"Hell, no! And if they were, I wouldn't be a stool pigeon. You ought to know me better than that."

"Guess I know you too well, Mike. Just was wondering if you saw a stranger hereabouts yesterday afternoon."

"Why, what's up?"

"Nothing here, I guess. Got a call from the Stafford Springs barracks. They thought that Providence bank bandit might have headed for these parts. I was out hunting myself yesterday, didn't get the word until late last night."

"Didn't hear about it. Haven't seen a paper in three days. No radio in the shack an' I didn't use the one in my heap. What's he look like?"

"He's a mean cuss. Shot down the teller in the Whalers National, jumped in the getaway car as his partner got winged in the leg by a bank guard. The wounded man had dumped the loot inside, slumped against the opened front door. One tug would have pulled the partner inside. Instead, this mean killer decides to save on doctor's fees. Lets him have it three times. Dead men don't talk. But the teller gave a good description before he died three hours later."

"That so?" Trigger Mike caught himself just in time. He was feverish to know how that little runt of a teller described him.

"Yep. Said he was a tall bloke, about six feet."

TRIGGER MIKE breathed more easily.

He stood only five nine in shoes. The teller was a half-pint, hardly more than five feet one. Naturally anyone who was considerably taller would be a six-footer to that runt.

"This here killer," continued Leander, "had one of them lady killer moustaches, with waxed points. Quite a dandy. 'Course he's probably shaved it off by now. The description was on the radio. By the way, Mike, let's see your hunting license?"

Trigger Mike pulled out his wallet, didn't look in the pocket where a New York automobile license was windowed but flipped out a crisp twenty.

"Guess I forgot to write in for it this year," he said. "Will you get me one, Warden? You can keep the change."

"That's keeping a lot of change. What have you been burying?"

Trigger Mike gasped, bit his lower lip. His pasty face turned whiter. He glanced down nervously at his telltale fingers. The nails were caked with dirt, both hands grimy from scooping up earth to cover the skunk hole. He rubbed one soiled hand against his trousers, noticed that

there were two clay spots on the knees.

"Burying, eh? That's a hot one. I just stumbled in a woodchuck hole. If I were a city feller, I'd have accidentally discharged my gun, blown my brains out."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea."

Trigger Mike hit his lip again, wondered what the old codger was up to (*He couldn't have found the death gun. The nine-shot automatic, a war souvenir Belgian Fabrique Nationale, had been tossed in a lovely lake twenty miles away.*) Not having had a reefer today, Trigger Mike had enough self control to shrug his shoulders, turn around, start for the shack.

"Why are you lying, Mike?" asked Leander.

"What's eating you?"

"For one thing, you haven't been here three days. For another, if you shot any birds, they were hen partridges."

"Why don'tcha mind your own damn business? Even if you stuck your nose into my shack, you didn't find any hen partridge feathers. There weren't any."

"Didn't say I found 'em."

"Then why the fuss? S'pose you found one newly opened can of beans. You think that's all I had, just breakfast, huh? Well, the other cans are over in the dump. Was shooting at 'em. Maybe I'm not your idea of a sportsman, but I wouldn't shoot a hen partridge 'cause I know you'd be around, sooner or later. Wouldn't give you a chance to collect a fine."

"Let's have your gun, Mike. You're coming into town with me to talk to the constable."

Trigger Mike swung around, started to

bring up his barrel when the lanky warden clouted out with his butt. The blow knocked the Winchester repeater out of the killer's dirty hands. As the shotgun went spinning into a clump of leaves, Trigger Mike kicked the warden. The old man winced in agony, doubled up and dropped his own shotgun. Leander Bailey was in his middle seventies, the ghost of his former self. He sank to his knees.

Just as the gnarled, feeble fingers reached out to retrieve the fallen weapon, Trigger Mike snatched up the Winchester repeater. The dried apple face stared into the muzzle, realized that the killer already was thinking that there was an old mud pond, full of horned pout, in back of the shack. A blast of birdshot at a one foot range would spell food for those Northern catfish. The trigger finger tightened but there was only a dull click. The city gunman had fired his five bird shells, forgotten to reload.

The gnarled fingers seized the double-barreled gun, raised the muzzle.

"A real hunter always reloads," said the game warden, rising. "But you, you're accustomed to nine-shot automatics like the killer's Belgian Fabrique Nationale. When you insisted you'd been here for three days and talked so much about hen partridges, I realized that a no good weasel like you were as a boy might have developed into a treacherous killer. You and your big mouth! Hell, if you'd talked to a hunter who had a bag of three and no hens, you'd have learned that this year it's legal for the first time in Connecticut to shoot hen partridges. But killers don't keep posted on legal shooting."

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

Larry E. Larson and Edward Mooers were arrested in Hollywood, Calif., after they broke into a church and began playing "Chibaba, Chibaba, Chibaba" on the organ.

After breaking a crutch, stumbling, falling headlong down a flight of stairs and bashing his head, Russell Mitchell was arrested in Indianapolis for using profanity. —H. H.

HOT HOMICIDE

YOU DETECTIVE-Story readers will want to follow the thrill-shot adventures of a likeable private-op who is trying to track down the human-touch murderer of a fabulous racket king, who was mysteriously and hideously burned to death. . . . And here, for your suspense, is an exciting scene from this action-packed novel:

With Junie under my wing I hustled along the dark downtown street.

Pausing at a brownstone house, we found Kay Glenn's name on the bell-button of the street-level door.

"Are you sure," I asked Junie, it's Kay's habit to rest in her dressing room between shows?"

"She used to do it regularly as clock-work, but she's been sort of upset since what happened to her Vic." Junie added anxiously, "Lee, are you sure it was all right for me to slip into Miss Glenn's dressing room like that, when she wasn't there, and sort of sneak her key?"

"It's all in a good cause, sweet," I assured her.

While Junie trustfully kept her pretty ears cocked I gave a quick look around the living room. If Sam Whitman had ever presented Kay with a photo of himself, it wasn't on display now.

I turned to the captivating Miss Glenn's bedroom.

Turning I found a packet of folded newspaper clippings beginning with the front page that had blared out the fiery death of Vic Jerome.

Instead of snooping further for a scandal-loaded diary, I found myself indignantly re-reading the pieced-together story of Vic's last living minutes. The ghastly fascination of it held me. Why me, more than others? Because it was *the end* written to a career I'd been watching.

It was a fact known to only a few that I had known Vic Jerome as a kid. We had run through the same alleys without ever having much truck with each other. But having yielded to an inclination to stay honest, I had watched with deep interest, and maybe a shade of perverse envy, Vic coming up the hard, crooked way. Vic had been born to be murdered, and regardless of the coroner's findings I knew in my heart his death was just that. If they had only made it a good, clean shooting murder I would have shrugged it off as something that had been in the cards all along. But to burn a guy to death like a scrap of rubbish, in some sneaking way that never gave him a fighting chance—

"Lee!" The door! Somebody's coming in!" Junie cried.

She whirled out of sight again in a squeaking panic. I stuffed the clippings back into a jewel case with one fast poke and headed out. My plan was to get through a rear window under a full head of steam, and duck out—but not without Junie, of course. I stumbled over the fact that Junie had somehow vanished. She wasn't in the kitchen and when I swung back desperately to look in the opposite direction I saw that she wasn't in the living room either.

Junie wasn't but another woman was. "Hold still," the woman said.

Seen at close range, in her trim suit and spike-heeled sling-backs, Miss Glenn was an eyeful. And one of the breath-taking details about her right now was the gun in her lovely fist. . . .

The complete story will be told in the next issue in Frederick C. Davis' novel—"Murder's Madcap Mermaid"—published April 26th.

—THE EDITOR.

ROPE'S END



He drew the rope
taut across the hall.

FIVE WORDS! Five lousy words! They whiplashed through Courtney Vorst's fuddled brain and he was suddenly cold sober. He felt sick. His stomach kinked and the small of his back gossepimpled. He sat at the trestle table staring at the flame of the candle burning in an ornate brass holder. His wife Gretchen stood at the end of the table. She wore white shorts and a halter. She was a slob. She always looked like a fat slob, even in a five hundred dollar evening gown tailored to her dumpy figure.

Courtney Vorst licked his lips. "What'd you say, Gretchen darling?"

"I'm cutting off your allowance," she repeated, voice flat. She had a peasant's

By

ALAN RITNER

ANDERSON

The heat was really on when playboy Vorst mixed with tough gamblers—and his wealthy wife cut off his allowance.

face, a shiny, bovinely stupid face and her blue eyes bugged. Her hair was stringy and the color of sulphur—dirty yellow.

"Now, kitten. . . ."

"Don't *kitten* me!" she warned. "I didn't mind horses or poker. I didn't make a fuss about the burlesque queen or the hat check girl. But Fifi! My own maid. It's the last straw. My money bought you, I know that. I thought you could be faithful to twenty-five thousand a year."

Courtney Vorst tried to turn on his high voltage charm. But he was frightened, frantically frightened, and his voice cracked. "Kitten, I'll swear on a stack. . . ."

"You had your chance!" she interrupted. "Up here at the lodge—just the two of us. You've sulked and gotten sodden drunk. So no more allowance. And I'll keep my eye on your charge accounts. We'll start back in the morning. I'll sleep in the small guest room tonight so you won't have to listen to my snoring."

Vorst sat like a rock. He couldn't think, couldn't move. He watched Gretchen go to the sideboard, light a candle, and climb the creaky stairs. She waddled. The lodge had no electricity, just bottled gas for cooking, refrigeration and hot water heating. He watched Gretchen turn left at the top of the stairs and enter the guest room overlooking the gully. The door closed and there was the soft rasp of the key turning in the lock.

Vorst went to the sideboard and poured a brandy. No allowance! No allowance! He had a marker at the Casino. Eleven thousand dollars lost at stud poker. The Casino boys were tough on welshers. The burlesque queen was blackmailing him. Her price was five thousand.

There was a mirror above the sideboard. Borst stared at his reflection and gave himself a nod of smug self satisfaction. He was a handsome devil, no doubt about it. Wavy black hair, soulful brown eyes, smooth, tawny skin. Too bad about Hollywood and the failure of his screen test. It

was hell to be so handsome that the camera couldn't record it faithfully.

He snapped out of his reverie. The Casino boys! You paid in money or in blood and broken bones. He shuddered. The beauty and her shyster lawyer! It was a mess. He was twenty-six. In his prime. Gretchen was thirty-three and a slob. He'd outlive her handily. If she died. . . . Vorst carried his brandy to the picture window in the north wall. He looked down into the moonlit gully some sixty feet below. Briars and rocks, jagged, sharp-edged rocks. The small guest room at the top of the stairs faced the gully!

Brain racing, Vorst gulped the brandy. He and Gretchen had always put on a convincing public performance of devoted husband and wife. Hadn't they driven up to the lodge as a sort of second honeymoon? If she fell from the window . . . ? No, that was out. Gretchen was a slob, a tub of lard. She couldn't possibly fall from a window unless the sill was very low, the window opening large.

What if she jumped? What if there was a logical reason for her jumping? He turned around and rested his back against the window pane. He saw the answer in the wavering candle flame. Fire! It was a frame building and would go up like a box of matches. A fire! Gretchen would have to jump or be burned to death.

Vorst turned and looked out of the window. The red smudge in the distance was the sign of a roadside tavern. It was about a quarter mile from the lodge and reached by a footpath that wound deviously through a thick woods. They'd run out of liquor! Of course, it would be neighborly to stay and treat the yokels. He'd be in the tavern when someone would spot the fire. An alibi! Alibied by the natives.

There were details, problems to solve. He had to figure some way to make Gretchen's door stick so she couldn't get out. He walked up the creaky stairs without any attempt at stealth. Candlelight formed

a thin bar of yellow under the door to the guest room. The master bedroom was directly across the hall. Vorst frowned. He couldn't remember. He twisted the door to the master bedroom. The door opened into the room and away from the hall.

VORST went downstairs and out to the convertible under the carp port. The tow rope was in back, greasy in spots but sound. He coiled the rope and started back toward the cabin. There was a bench beside the kitchen door and the ground around it was thick with wood shavings. The caretaker was a whittler. Vorst had forgotten. A fierce exaltation warmed his blood. The old caretaker was at his home in the village six miles away.

Lady luck had dealt him a pat hand. Like his gambling. When his luck was good, it was, in the parlance of the Casino boys, stinkpot luck. He went into the kitchen. The red gallon can sort of flagged him to a stop. Gasoline!

He sprinkled the shavings on the ground outside, lightly, then returned the can to the shelf. He carried the rope up to the top of the stairs. Candlelight no longer rectangled the door. Through the thick wood he could hear Gretchen's soft snoring. Did she have a will? He didn't know. It didn't rightly matter.

Vorst took the rope and deftly tied a running knot. He knew his knots. One summer he had been a counselor at a swank boys camp and knot tying was part of the course he taught. He'd taken the job so he could meet the parents and sisters of the kids. Come to think of it, that's how he'd first met Gretchen. He smiled. It was . . . It was a . . . He couldn't think of the word. Anyway, it was the height of something or other. His means of meeting her, his means of killing her. He drew the rope taut across the hall and secured a timber hitch on the knob to the master bedroom. He tried to open the door. It inched in a trifle. The rope was sound.

He went downstairs and had another drink. The rest was simple, but delicate. The candle in the brass holder under the stairs, beneath the third step. The gasoline damp shavings strewn around the base of the holder, then piled up to within three inches of the orange flame. The mild heat from the flame would sort of preheat the bottom of the step. It couldn't miss.

Then thoughts of the Casino boys sent him walking stiff leggedly down the footpath.

There was quite a crowd of yokels. The conversation stopped as Vorst entered, then picked up on a softer, lower key. He was a city man, an alien.

The door burst open and a man stuck his head in, yelled, "Hey! Hey! The lodge is on fire!"

Vorst's reaction was pure ham, a carry-over from the Hollywood adventure. He flung the back of his right hand to his forehead, screeched, "My gosh! My wife's in there!"

There was an interval of unreality; of sounds and movements, the ruddy sky and the smell of smoke. Vorst moved like a person in a dream. The heat stopped them at the edge of the clearing. There was no sound save the crackle of the flames.

The group of men who had gone at the rear of the lodge chorused muffled cries of relief and triumph. A ghost hand grabbed Courtney Vorst by the throat as two men led Gretchen around the edge of the clearing.

Courtney Vorst stood like a rock.

Gretchen's voice came from close behind him. She said, "Did you forget? All doors open into the hallway except the master bedroom. It blocked the staircase when it opened into the hall, so we reversed it."

Vorst looked at the funeral pyre he had kindled. He thought of the Casino boys and the burlesque queen. He'd touched the torch to a funeral pyre, all right. But it was his own.

WELCOME, STRANGLER!

By H. HASSELL GROSS

REALLY, there were times when the memorial in the village square seemed more like a cause of scandal than a tribute to a war hero. Franz Littman was the first to say so. He could not understand it, he said; people paused to look at the high sculptured cheekbones and hawk-like nose of the stone head, but instead of recalling the dead soldier and his patriotic sacrifice, they stood in front of the station gossiping about the wretched behavior of the hero's wife.

Littman wanted to shake them. Why couldn't they remember the brilliance and charm of his dead friend, Bela Kiss, without going into all these sordid details about that Budapest artist? It had been nearly five years since the shameless woman and the artist eloped. Littman recalled the rainy October evening in 1912 when Bela knocked at his door and stood, speechless and shaking, the woman's cruel note in his outstretched hand.

It was shameful to admit—yet admit it to his heart Littman must—but those days of Bela's grief and complete dependence had been the happiest in Littman's life. He was by nature so timid, so shy and naive that almost everybody dismissed him as a dull, ineffectual man. In the days before Madame Kiss ran away, he had been honored by one or two invi-

tations to Bela's rich, elegant home and had had the happiness of gazing with her into a charming little crystal ball while she pretended to tell his fortune. For the rest, he had watched wistfully as the handsome couple came and went between Czinkota and Budapest in their powerful car.

During the loneliness and sickness that followed Madame's desertion, Bela Kiss saw nobody but shy, warm-hearted Littman. And during that time everybody in Czinkota sympathized with the bereaved husband. But then Nurse Kailman came from Budapest to nurse the sick man and gossip of all kind began to fill the village. The brassy-tongued woman discussed her patient endlessly. As the tangle of fact and supposition she spewed forth was related back to Littman, it soon grew clear to him that the hysterical old maid was obsessed by thoughts of the run-away wife. Why did the sick man rise two or three times a day from his bed to enter the wife's locked room? Why did he return from those solitary visits with colour in his lips and a glow of pleasure in his eyes? To Littman, at least, it was evident that the nurse thought of nothing but what the locked door of that room must hide—rich curtains covered with dust, a slipper lying on its side, flung there by the beautiful, romantic wife, a silver comb

In war Bela Kiss had the admiration of a nation—at home he had the pity of his neighbors . . . because his wife had eloped with an artist.

and brush tarnishing on the satin-skirted dressing table.

Finally, Littman dared to speak to the sick man of what the woman was saying. Three days later, the village rang with the wildest gossip yet—for now, Nurse Kailman disclosed, she had found the bedroom door unlocked, she had entered the room and, no, contrary to what she had supposed, it was clean and in order, as if awaiting its former tenant's return.

But there was one thing strange—so strange she turned her head watchfully as she whispered it—inside the closet of the bedroom stood five tall cans. She had gone up close, the lids were on tight and when she tried to move one it was too heavy to be lifted. She lowered her voice still further—what could Bela Kiss be hiding in those cans? Suppose he was the head of a whiskey distilling ring? Wasn't it true that just such a band of criminals were giving the police a great deal of trouble just now? The thing was ridiculous, as Littman promptly said when it was reported to him.

Nevertheless, the nurse's melodramatic whisper grew as it went the rounds of the village until at last it was so loud that Bela Kiss was forced to notice the tale and deny it. Through Littman he announced that the five tall cans held petrol for his car. Everybody understood—petrol was dear and just now, with Hungary on the verge of war, it was disappearing from the open market. No more attention was paid to the nurse's wild tales. A week or so later, in fact, she left the village, and Bela remained alone with no companionship but that of his devoted Littman.

And now, Littman thought as he gazed at the memorial, Bela slept in a soldier's grave. The last months before he went away to join the Army had been peculiar ones. Littman did not like to recall them. He himself knew that Bela scarcely left his house and received no visitors during that time; yet there were people so idle

and depraved as to make up lies that were harmful and vicious. They said Bela's car raced through the village at night—but Littman, who lived near him, never heard the sound of the motor on the occasions mentioned. They said Bela was in love again, and repeated silly twaddle about somebody seeing him and a girl together on the edge of the village. The stories were too preposterous for Littman to believe.

THE one thing he did talk to him about always made him uneasy when he recalled it. There was a story in the Budapest papers about a girl named Luisa Ruszt and a dark stranger who drove her to a house near a little village where he held a crystal globe up to her eyes and then, when she seemed mesmerized, tried to strangle her with a green silk cord.

The story fascinated Littman because his friend's wife had owned just such a crystal ball and once, playfully, while she gazed into it Bela had stolen up behind her with a noose in his hand and made as if to loop it around her neck. Littman remembered it well—though, of course, the details had become mixed in his mind and now he even seemed to remember that the cord Bela held was green. Littman could not help dwelling on the girl's description of her assailant. The newspapers reported that there had been several similar cases; the victims always came to in the street or along the road, their money and jewels gone. It was this aspect of the cases that he mentioned to Bela. "It seems a great risk to take merely to rob," he said.

He still remembered how his friend had looked at him and finally had smiled. "You think the thief would be wiser to kill these women?" Bela had said in his deep, slow voice. For some reason, as Bela spoke Littman had felt his cheeks turning scarlet; he left his friend in a few minutes, feeling as if he had been guilty

of suggesting some nameless evil. And in fact for days afterward he had scanned the papers for further news, his heart beating with fear, as if he really expected to read that the thief had turned murderer.

It was a strange passage in his friendship with Bela Kiss. Their conversations became very uncomfortable. A little later, when Bela went away to join the Army, Littman felt almost relieved; but since he was ashamed of this feeling, he soon persuaded himself that what he had said to Bela was a perfectly normal remark; there had been nothing in it to make Bela regard him with that long, sidewise stare of distrust.

Surely, then, he had imagined it all. By the time he received the official communique stating that Bela Kiss had died in a Belgrave hospital of wounds received in action, he felt perfectly sure that there had never been anything but the utmost trust between him and the soldier hero.

But now, just when the monument to his friend should have filled him with comfort, there began a strange and disquieting fear for Littman. A farmer turning over new ground on the edge of Czinkota found the skeleton of a young woman buried under six inches of earth. The villagers filed by her bier and Littman heard a voice identify her as a girl seen with Bela Kiss. He knew her by her clothes, the owner of the voice said. That was in May; and in July the same farmer plowing the same section of land turned up another body.

This time, though nobody spoke Bela Kiss's name aloud, Littman seemed to hear it echo horribly, almost with the noise of a breaking heart, from behind the dry, official identification of Isabelle Koblitcz. She had been a student of spiritualism, the papers said, and Littman, staring at newsprint, saw a small crystal globe and a knotted length of green cord.

The day the Government issued its order commandeering all gasoline held in

garages and private homes, Littman closed the door of his cottage and drew the shades. What was passing in his mind it would have been impossible to say. Two thoughts or rather two phrases of a few words each seemed to hammer at his temples: Nurse Kailman—five cans of petrol. He knew that these phrases expressed his terror, but why he was afraid and of what he did not dare to explain to himself.

The only thing he really knew was that he hoped they would come before night fall—if they did not, he felt with superstitious certainty, he would presently hear a knock and find outside upon his doorstep a pale, tall man with still, cavernous eyes, holding in his shaking hands—He could not image the thing that would be between those fingers which he had touched in friendship.

When he heard the motorcycles of the Commissioner's agents go past his doorway up the graveled hill and heard the door bang upon the empty garage, he suddenly began to weep. A wild gust of hope swept his heart—perhaps they would not enter the house after all. Perhaps he could still believe. Yes, yes, when they had gone his heart would still retain the image of his brave, handsome friend! And in the townsquare the statue would remain, a sculptured hero.

He knew better, of course, for now he was listening to the silence up there where they searched . . . How had he known? He could not tell, but now in his pain he felt that he had known since the words came, slow and calm, from Bela's lips: "You think the thief would be wiser to kill these women?"

The following day when, hollow-eyed from sleeplessness and grief, Littman appeared in the town square on his way to give evidence, it was observed that he avoided glancing toward the statue. Since out of pity nobody came forward to speak to him, he had to learn from the magis-

trate that whatever it was that had made Bela Kiss turn to him for friendship it was not grief for a faithless wife. Like the four other women whose alcohol-preserved faces stared up from the huge petrol drums, Madame Kiss had died while gazing into a little crystal ball.

Twenty-six other bodies had been found that day in the grounds surrounding the house, the magistrate added drily. The numbers meant nothing to poor Littman; one or five or twenty-six, his friend had been a monster—"the only real friend I ever had," he said.

IN THE year that followed, it was observed that Littman spoke less and less, and avoided the village square. The monument to Bela Kiss had been removed, of course, but Littman could not seem to get rid of the thought of it. He seemed almost to fear that Kiss might in some way, even now, come back to claim his friendship. Yet when the newspapers first appeared with the story that Luisa Ruszt—the girl who had escaped Bela nearly five years before—had recently seen him again on a Budapest street, Littman was happy.

The villagers whispered among themselves, wondering at his strange reaction. A week passed, and Littman's manner again became apathetic and fearful. Then, at the end of the second week, Inspector Resch of the Budapest Police suddenly appeared in Czinkota and sent for Littman.

He greeted the little man jovially. "Still feeling crushed, eh? Well, well you must not take these matters so seriously. Anyone might have such a friend. In fact," he said, and snapped to pieces the match with which he had just lighted his cigar, "many have had, and they are not alive to feel contaminated, as you do, my friend. In short—you are lucky. But come, come!" he cried expansively, seeing that Littman was trembling, "You have not seen Bela Kiss, have you?"

Littman's face went white. "Seen—" He swallowed. "How—seen, sir?"

The official laughed. "A great joke that scoundrel played. You know, after Luisa Ruszt told her story, I went to the hospital in Belgrade where Kiss's death certificate was issued. It looked like a goose chase, but with such a man one can't ever be too certain. Luck was with me. The nurse who attended Kiss was still there. She was horrified when I told her of Kiss's murders. 'How could such a boy have done these terrible crimes!' she exclaimed.

"I—I am alert, Littman. I seized on the word. 'Boy!' I said. 'Bela Kiss was forty years old, tall, dark, a hooked nose—' I described him in full. The upshot was simple. The patient who died in that hospital, with Kiss's identification papers in his clothes—cleverly planted, no doubt, by that arch-fiend when the boy was wounded—was a lad of twenty, blond, gentle—everything, in short, that Kiss was not.

"And so, my dear Littman," the Inspector concluded, "the murderer is still at large." He paused, observing the dilated eyes and flushed countenance opposite him. "Ah, I see you are glad. You, too, want him to suffer in this world for his crimes!" He nodded. "I understand.

"Yes, yes," said Littman joyously, interrupting, "I will bring him to you! Never fear!" and he closed his fingers together with a sudden, powerful movement suggestive of strangling.

That was over thirty years ago. Franz Littman never again saw the man who murdered his trust and admiration. Nor have any of the police in any of the great cities of the world ever been able to find Bela Kiss. If the monster is still alive, he is past seventy, a lonely man with but one friend. That friend will be naive and warm-hearted; and to him some day Bela Kiss may show a length of green cord and a small crystal ball. There may not be time enough to call the police. . . .

FELONY FOLLIES

by Jakobsson and Thomas

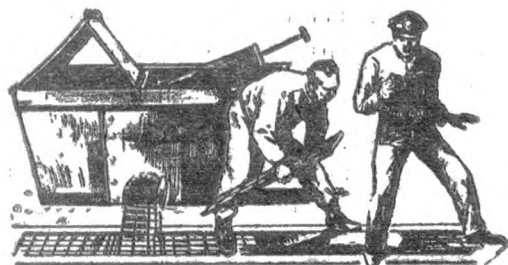


"I'm innocent," George Moore, facing an assorted assault and robbery rap, told his lawyer, Attorney John J. Hess, "and I got the dough to prove it."

The "dough" proved to be \$5000 worth of stolen loot—which Attorney Hess promptly turned over to the authorities—leaving George Moore, poorer but wiser, to ponder for thirty long jail years the definition of an honest man!

The U. S. government, which had to think up the angle of income tax evasion to convict Al Capone, has nothing on old England. There, during the recent war, authorities found themselves confronted with a racketeering lady spiritualist who was swindling her dupes out of an estimated \$500 a week. Because of the difficulties involved in proving or disproving Helen Duncan's connections with a yonder world, and because of the crowds of misguided people who still believed in her, weary justice took a shortcut.

It sentenced Mrs. Duncan to prison under the Witchcraft Act, passed in 1735, and fortunately, still on the books!



An advanced case of civic thrift comes to light in examining the criminal records of Old Boston. First wrong-doer to sit in the brand-new stocks in the colonial village was Edward Palmer, the carpenter who had built them.

His crime? He had charged too much for the job!

You never sausage luck, might have been the comment of Adolph Luetgert, Chicago sausage manufacturer, whose wife vanished some years ago. Police, after considerable travail, traced her to one of Mr. Luetgert's sausage vats—through one of the smallest corpus delicti ever to convict a killer. In her girlhood, Mrs. Luetgert had broken a toe, which healed in a double-hard layer of calcium. This tiny bone sheath, found in the drain of his sausage vat, and described by the district attorney as an ossified sessamoid, was beyond Luetgert's previous experience in carcasses, and it sent him to jail for life.



MURDER

Dramatic Mystery

Novelette

Murder went round and
round when disc jockey Bud
White blasted souls on the
hot-air waves.

By

ALBERT SIMMONS



He chuckled as he tightened
the loop.

SPINS THE DISC

CHAPTER ONE

That Famous Record

I PEERED through the thick sound-proof glass window like a huge tropical fish in the Aquarium—the difference being that I'm too tall to be a fish,

I've got a nice open, generous face with a shock of curly blonde hair on top, and I make more money than any species Pisces that ever lived.



I pushed a button on my monitor panel in the control room and Bud White's ingratiating voice nuzzled at my ear through the loud speaker:

"—And now you swell people out there," the disc jockey said in a tone that oozed with honey, "we're going to play you a brand new platter." He nodded his head at me through the glass. "How about the KG record, Johnny?" he asked right "on air"—so the whole listening audience was in on it.

I wigwagged "can do" back at him and he said, into the microphone.

"That's my assistant I'm talking to folks—Johnny Carlson, a great engineer." He was smiling. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

I felt all warm inside even though I knew the guy was just buttering me up for his listening audience. But that was Bud.

"About that platter," he was saying, "it's Ken Gavin's latest, you should pardon the expression, recording. *RIDERS OF THE SAGE* it's called, but any resemblance between this and a good record is purely coincidental. Now, before we play it for you, let's talk about it, a little, hummmmm?"

I recognized the tone he was using and I knew what was coming, so I snapped off the speaker button and with it Bud's voice. He looked away from the microphone and his large, expressionless eyes fastened on me behind the glass. His thin, lips formed a slow smile and his white, bony hand moved swiftly with a jerky motion, thin forefinger pressed against the side of his thumb forming the letter O.

Mechanically I returned the "coming through okay" signal and leaned wearily back in my chair, watching the bug-eyed little shrimp in Studio 12, calmly mouthing his disc jockey chatter at the huge all-night audience.

Where Bud got all his info from I only guessed, but he sure had tabs on every-

body—and he did more than play records. Politics, sports, and theatre were his field—but he wandered. He made plenty friends and beaucoup enemies. But that's probably how he dug up his dirt. He shoveled deeper than Winchell and he wasn't afraid to pull all the stops either. What he was doing now was the thing that Bud did best—ripping a fellow artist to shreds.

This was why Bud White had become the biggest name in all-night broadcasting. Sure they got a kick out of hearing him explode bomb shells on graft in city politics; looking through slimy keyholes with him at the social set; and getting the inside doings on the big time and small time mobsters. But this was what they turned him in for—to hear him annihilate a star's career.

After you've been in this business a while you get pretty hard-boiled, but just the same it was tough to stomach what Bud had done to the careers of dozens of talented people in show business—but a job's a job. Being with Bud paid good dough, and besides I couldn't help it if I liked the guy.

I reached over and selected Ken Gavin's newest release from the record rack and slipped it on the turntable. My finger touched the speaker button and Bud's voice again filled the small control room.

"Of course," it was saying with a sarcastic whine, "I've got nothing personal against Ken—"

Personal! I cocked my ears at the loud speaker on the wall above my head. Was he kidding? It was personal all right—and her name was Honey Smith.

SHE had pink skin and red lips and all the other equipment that went with it. Honey was the featured dancer at the swank Velvet Club and she was the only doll who had top billing with Ken Gavin in the romance department. But that didn't bother Bud any; he tried to latch on to

her in his crudely direct and clumsy way. He got as far with Honey as a fat man trying to take an extra base on Joe DiMaggio.

So, Bud did a switch. He turned his attention to Ken and every night he butchered him on the air. It wasn't long before Ken started slipping, but Bud kept wielding the knife.

"—Ken's all right," he went on, "it's just that instead of singing in front of that corny band of his he ought to be selling fish down at Fulton Fish Market." He sounded smug and satisfied with himself as he finished, "Listen to this record and see if you don't agree."

I took his cue, killed the studio mike, spun the record and dropped the needle. As Ken Gavin's orchestra took the downbeat on wax, two doors opened simultaneously—the door to Studio 12 and the one to the control room I was in.

We didn't allow visitors, especially at 3:30 in the A.M. So I turned and tossed a curious look over my shoulder at the big guy standing behind me with his back against the door. I didn't recognize his face but I sure knew his type. My hands froze to the table and my tongue to the roof of my mouth, because although there was no sign of a gun in his hand, I didn't have to see it to know he had one.

The thin, hard-faced man inside grabbed Bud by the arm and jerked him away from the microphone. Bud went spinning across the studio and ended upside down draped over a chair in the corner.

The mike in the studio wasn't open so the only sound in my box-like control room was Ken Gavin on record. I started to slide my hand slowly towards the red button that would put the Studio 12 "on air" and the heavy barrel of a 45-calibre smashed across my knuckles with a dull sound. I yowled a couple of times at the torn skin and stuck my fingers in my mouth sucking on them like a baby with a bottle.

"Look, sonny," the big guy said through a nose that sprawled all over his face, "don't try that again." Then he reached over in the bin labeled "15 minute transcripts" and pulled one out: "Here; put this on."

"Nuts," I barked "that doesn't fit this show."

"Look, sonny, you do like I say, huh?" And he bounced the 45 up and down in his right hand like he was hefting the weight of it.

I got the idea all right so I slipped the record on the turntable and switched the controls. Then together we went down the steps, through the other door and into the studio.

"Okay, Slip," the big guy grinned crookedly. "You got fifteen minutes."

"Good. How about this?" The thin man with the hard face asked, and his finger jabbed at the microphone.

"It ain't on." The big gunman looked pleased with himself.

There was a red spot on the side of Bud's face where he'd made contact with the chair, but the rest of his face had a white, angry look. He walked over to the man called Slip and growled.

"I don't like it, Slip," and his index finger played a steady tattoo on the thin man's shoulder. "Nobody pushes me around."

The big man standing next to me guffawed out loud and Slip's gaunt face broke open in noiseless laughter. As for me, I suddenly caught on who Slip was and I wondered where Bud got the guts to talk like that to him.

Slip Madden wasn't the biggest mobster around—but he was big enough.

"Take it easy, Bud," I soothed, "maybe the guy's got reasons."

Bud fired me a dirty glance and kept yapping away until Slip interrupted his tirade.

"Now look, Buddy boy," he said in a voice that was meant to be calm but was

loaded with dynamite, "I ain't pushing you around. This is just a friendly little visit, right?"

"Friendly!" I snapped—then shut up as the big guy cracked me across the mouth with his open hand. I took the hint and just listened.

Slip looked once at me then turning to Bud went on. "All I want, Buddy boy," his voice caressed, "is for you to lay off Ken Gavin."

My mouth opened in surprise, then closed quickly as the big guy next to me moved his hand.

"You must be nuts," Bud shot at him. "I've already told you, nobody tells Bud White what to do."

"Well, I'm telling you, Buddy boy, lay off. I wouldn't like it if you don't."

I watched Bud closely and he sure didn't reflect any of the butterflies that were flapping their wings in my stomach.

"Why?" he asked casually. "Ken a friend of yours?"

"Uh uh," Slip shook his head. "Maybe I just like the way the guy sings."

"Why?" Bud insisted.

Slip shrugged his shoulders. "All right, so I tell you. I just bought a piece of him and Slip Madden always protects his investments, right?"

Bud laughed in his face.

"No, wrong," he grinned. "This is one investment that isn't going to pay off for you, Slip. I've got that singing goat on the big toboggan and I'm not quitting until he hits bottom."

The big lug at my side moved his hands restlessly and Slip took a step forward with a menacing gesture.

"I wouldn't," said Bud evenly, and his eyes flashed a red light. "Let's talk about your other interests instead, Slip, huh?" He spoke slowly and let his voice come to a point—"Say, your tobacco business?"

Madden cursed in a loud voice and the big gunman reached over, grabbed Bud roughly by the tie and jerked him.

"Cut it," yelled Slip.

The big guy let go of Bud's hand-painted cravat and stood there looking at his boss with a dumb expression on his flat face.

WELL, he had nothing on me, because it was way over my head, too. I didn't even know that Slip Madden was in the tobacco racket and furthermore, I didn't care. Except that I was curious as to his reaction. Then it hit me like one of the big guy's heavy fists and my lips sounded off.

"Marijuana!"

I must have spoken aloud, because Slip whirled savagely and hissed, "Shut up!" And the big gunman cracked me across the mouth again—only this time his hand was closed.

Bud's voice bit out cold and sharp. "Leave him alone."

All of a sudden Slip Madden sounded like somebody had been dipping him in oil.

"Look, Buddy boy," he purred, "you kinda got it wrong, ain't you?" But he couldn't keep the question mark out of his voice.

"Uh uh," Bud answered coolly as he shook his head from side to side. "One of your boys spilled his guts to me, Slip. This, I got straight."

"So?"

"So, you see, it's like I said," Bud went on, with obvious relish, "you don't tell me to lay off."

Madden blinked his lids a couple of times but his lips didn't move, so Bud kept talking.

"You tend to your business and I'll stick to mine," the disc jockey said. "If you don't," he warned crisply, "I'll yap all over town some interesting details Conky Jacobs told me about your new racket."

"Conky Jacobs!" spat out the mobster, and for a moment I thought he was going to jump all over Bud, but he didn't.

"Eh, that Conky had a big mouth," blurted out the big gunman.

"Shut up," Slip told him gruffly.

Well, Conky Jacobs may have had a big mouth but according to the papers it wasn't saying anything. Because when the police fished him out of the river, a few days ago, he had a bullet hole in the back of his head.

"That jockey talks too much, Slip," mouthed the big guy, with an unpleasant grin. "Just like Conky, huh?"

"You got something there," growled Madden and he turned and started to walk across the studio. I didn't like the tone of his voice or the fast glance he flashed at his big gunman—so when I saw the gun come out my brain did a few quick nip-ups. I dug way back and came up with something out of the Arabian Nights, and my tongue got all nice and loose.

"Tell your boy to put away his cannon, mister," I yelped nervously at Madden. "Conky Jacobs may be a corpse but he can still talk."

Slip turned with a curious expression on his tight face, so I kept punching at the opening.

"We've got him on wax, Madden," I said, and I swallowed hard at the fanciful tale I was pitching. "Yeah—Conky Jacobs on a disc—and he sure sings a nice tune."

I don't know why a hep mobster like Slip Madden would swallow a story that we'd persuaded Conky Jacobs to put his rat squeal on a record—but he not only swallowed it, he almost choked on it.

Without another word the mobster turned and took off out of the studio with the gun-toting hunk of beef right in back of him.

I sucked in a lungful of air from way down in the vicinity of my shoe-tops and then fired it out in noisy relief.

"That was close," I breathed.

"Yeah, yeah," Bud replied irritably and his eyes focused on me in a strange way.

I ignored the worried expression on the disc jockey's face and started towards the control room. Half way up the short flight of steps I stopped as Bud muttered under his breath:

"I don't get it, Johnny."

I chatted back over my shoulder, "You don't get what, Bud?"

"I thought I'd kept the Conky Jacobs deal pretty well under the table," he began.

"Huh?" I open-mouthed at him.

"How the devil did you find out about that record?"

CHAPTER TWO

Bud White's in Hot Water!

SO THERE you have it. My fairy tale about Conky on wax had backfired on me. I'd stumbled in with my eyes closed, but now they were open wide—with fear. Sure, I admit it, I scare easy. I'm no FBI man and I don't have a yen for playing button, button with mobsters.

"I didn't mean for you to get mixed up in this, Johnny," Bud told me as he nibbled half-heartedly at a hunk of toast, "but you're in now so I might as well tip the whole thing to you."

We'd finished the broadcast at 4 A.M. and as usual we joined the Broadway crowd at their pet bistro.

Bud wiggled his fingers at a couple of Radio City characters across the room and told me how Conky Jacobs had put the squeal on Slip Madden and his new racket. Only Conky hadn't known that he'd been talking to Bud and a hidden microphone. Now he was dead, but his voice was still very much alive.

As the little disc jockey talked I learned a lot of things I hadn't known before. For one, how he came up with so many gang-land scoops. He was a guy who followed the police school of thought on the usefulness of pigeons, for instance. Only he

added a little trick of his own—a microphone and a recording machine.

"Why don't you let the cops in on this?" I urged.

"Uh uh," Bud wagged his head at me. "If I do that, my boy, you and I are dead ducks. Believe me, Johnny," he said, looking thoughtful, "as long as I hold that record nothing is going to happen."

"Yeah," I bit off suspiciously, "but what makes you think that now that Mad-den knows you have the record, he won't try to get it?"

"He won't!" he insisted.

But I wasn't at all convinced and said so.

Bud made a wry face and continued, "Also, there's the little matter of Ken Gavin. With Slip owning a piece of Gavin's band, he could be rough on me—but he won't be," he said with a tight smile. "Not now."

"Speaking of Ken," I broke in, "he just came in."

"So what," shrugged Bud, "it's a free country."

I'd caught a glimpse of the tall, broad-shouldered band leader as he came through the door of the restaurant, with Honey Smith hanging on to his arm as if she owned him. Ken rubber-necked around the room looking for someone, and from the set of his jutting jaw and the slight list to port I knew he was also looking for trouble.

He spotted us and broke away from the blonde dancer. Honey Smith trailed after him yanking at his sleeve and saying something I couldn't hear. Evidently Ken didn't either because he kept right on coming. As he got to the table I started to get up, but he reached down and pushed me back into my chair and then lashing out with a long right slugged Bud right in his face. The disc jockey went over backwards pulling the table down on top of him with a crash. I reached up and grabbed Ken before anybody got to him and tried to rush him outside. But the

singer clawed at me with both hands, trying to get past me and at the prone figure of the disc jockey on the floor. I held on to him tightly, edging him towards the door, but he was fighting mad and running at the mouth like a lunatic.

"I'll kill him—so help, I'll kill him!"

I'd never seen Gavin like that before so I yelled at him to shut up with that kind of talk, but he wouldn't. So with me on one side and Honey on the other, we managed to whisk him out of the restaurant. I glanced at Honey and there was a cold, disgusted look on her beautiful face. As we maneuvered the band leader to the sidewalk her lovely eyes found mine and once again I felt some of the old warmth returning. I searched her expression for what I'd found there BG, before Gavin, but my line of vision was blocked by Ken's shoulder as he stumbled. When I looked again, her face was a mask. I steered Gavin toward a taxi at the curb and shoved him bodily inside.

I growled impatiently at Honey, "He's all yours, baby, get him away from here."

She didn't answer but thanked me with her eyes as she climbed in beside the band leader. As the cab drove away I heard Ken telling her in a distorted voice:

"I mean it, Honey, so help me. As sure as my name is Ken Gavin, I'll kill that louse."

By the time I got back inside, things had quieted down and Bud was sitting at his table with a queer look on his face.

"The guy's drunk," I said slowly, "and he's a fool, too."

"Yeah, drunk," Bud snarled, then added, bitterly, "I'm going to run that two bit singer right out of the business, Johnny. I won't rest till he's nothing but a—"

"A policeman?" I heard a soft voice say at my elbow.

I looked up. "Hey, Willy Forbes, the Singing Cop," I said.

"Hi, Johnny," he greeted me pleasantly.

"The *EX*-Singing Cop keed," he corrected. Then, without looking at Bud, he said, "I see your pal here is still tearing them down."

"That's right, Forbes." Bud's voice was an icicle—cold and pointed. "When they stink I still pan em." And his eyes bored into Willy's face. "Just like in your case."

Now as for me, I'd always thought that Willy Forbes was a pretty good crooner, and on that I had lots of company. When he quit the Police Force and went into radio they said Homicide Bureau had lost a good detective. But Bud didn't like him, so that's all, brother. The kid lasted about six months after Bud started blasting him, then he disappeared.

I selected another subject. "Are you back on the Force, Willy?" I asked. "I haven't seen you around."

"Uh uh," he grunted. "Times have changed, Johnny. I'm just a private dick for hire now." And he tossed a small card in front of me. As I picked it up, he turned around and started to move away from the table, then stopped and looking directly at the disc jockey with a face that was streaked with lines of hatred, said, "I just hope I'm around when they throw dirt in your face, White," he hissed, the words filtering through the sieve of his teeth, "because when that time comes I'd kind of like the first spadeful."

Then he turned abruptly and walked away.

MY DOORBELL buzzed with angry insistence until I threw the covers off my body and climbed sleepily out of bed. I peered through bleary eyes at my watch—it said 6 a.m. I'd been asleep only about thirty minutes. I stumbled to the door and yanked it open—then slammed it shut, but not quickly enough. The big guy's number 12 was in the way.

I stood there in my pajamas and bare feet and watched Slip Madden's oversized gunman and a pink-faced little guy

with thick, horn-rimmed glasses close the door behind them.

"What's this?" I managed to blurt out, nervously. "Another one of those friendly visits?"

"That's up to you, fellow," the big one boomed.

While I digested that, the little guy with the pink face moved quickly around my small apartment. He came back in a few minutes and shook his head.

"He's alone," he wheezed asthmatically.

"Move!" the giant told me and demonstrated by planting a big palm on my bare chest and pushing me towards the bedroom.

"What do you want?" I protested—as if I didn't know.

They didn't waste words or time and what went on for the next fifteen minutes I'd like to forget—only I can't. After the big ape had bounced me off the floor a couple of times and I still insisted that I didn't know where Conky Jacobs' record was, the little monkey with the thick glasses took over.

He didn't have the giant's muscle, but he did have a cigarette lighter—and this one worked. The bruiser stood behind me and clamped me in the vise of his strong arms, while little "pink face" committed arson on my chest. I would have screamed loud enough to be heard at the 15th Precinct Station twelve blocks away—only my mouth was full of a handkerchief.

Either they got tired or convinced, but when I came to, I was alone—with a chest full of blisters. I filled my face with a handful of aspirin to kill the pain and swabbed my burned skin with salve. Then I taped half a box of gauze on my chest and phoned Bud White.

He insisted that I come right over to his place and as somehow I didn't feel sleepy any more, I went.

Bud had kept the door unlatched so I went in.

"Hey, Bud!" I called. "Bud?"

I heard the water running in the bathroom so I walked over and opened the door. It was like walking into the steam room of a Turkish bath. Swirling clouds of white, hot dampness rushed at me from the open door and through it I could just make out Bud stretched naked in the tub. The tap was bubbling boiling hot water over skin that had already been scalded a sickening shade of red—only, Bud didn't feel it—he was dead!

I hurried away from there. I tried hard to erase the gruesome picture of Bud's eyes bulging from his swollen face; his black, puffy tongue hanging loosely between his clenched teeth and that loud silk tie looped murderously tight around his strangled throat.

* * *

Willy Forbes looked at me with a face chiseled from Stone Mountain. He didn't even tumble when I told him the disc jockey had been murdered, but it didn't have much effect on him.

"So, Bud White's dead!" he grunted callously. "What do you want me to do, break out a crying towel?"

"I don't expect any tears, Willy," I told him, "not from you. But if you'd seen him stretched out in that tub, with the necktie around his throat. . . ." I shuddered all over.

"Look, keed," he said making a face like a prune, "save the details, huh." And he chuckled quietly to himself.

"What's funny?" I bristled.

"After all the rotten stuff Bud pulled on others," the ex-singing cop muttered, "here he winds up in hot water himself," and he grinned again.

I didn't see the joke and said so, but Willy brushed aside my protest. "Look, Johnny, why come to me?"

"Because you told me yourself that you're a dick for hire. Okay, I want to hire you."

"What for?"

"I want you to help me."

"YOU don't need any help from me, Johnny," he replied blithely. "All you have to do is pick up the nearest phone and say—I want a policeman. It's that simple."

I said, "It's not that simple."

"Why not?" he needed. "Did you kill the louse?"

I glared at him and growled, "Cut the jokes, will you, Willy. This is serious."

"Okay, so it's serious—but how do I fit?"

"You used to be on the Force, Willy. You know how those guys figure and you've probably got a line on what to expect from Slip Madden."

"Slip Madden!" he interrupted. "Where's he come in?"

I'd forgotten—Willy didn't know about the Conky Jacobs record—so I told him, including the friendly visits by the hood and his two boys. I remembered what Bud had said about not turning the record over to the police, "We're dead ducks, Johnny," he'd said, "if we turn over the record."

So, I appealed to Willy. "What'll I do? You ought to know."

Forbes got up and walked around the room a few times, then he went over and picked up a glass coffee pot from the table.

"Well?" I prodded brusquely.

"You like your coffee strong?" he asked in that casual way of his.

I sprang to my feet and squawked impatiently. "Never mind the coffee, what am I going to do?"

"The first thing for you, Johnny," he said slowly, in a deliberate manner that was maddening, "is to have a good strong cup of Java—nothing like it to soothe the nerves—get you thinking straight, keed."

I sat there and watched him fill the pot from the spigot at the sink because there was nothing else I could do. He carefully ladled four heaping tablespoons of coffee into the pot and set it on the burner. Then

he came over and sat down beside me.

"If you tell the police about that record, Johnny," he summed up thoughtfully, "they're going to want to hear it."

"But I don't have it," I insisted.

"That's all right," Willy said. "If they know about it, they'll get it."

"—and so will I," I finished for him, "like Bud!"

He agreed with me by moving his chin up and down.

"And if they don't know about the record?" I queried anxiously.

"Slip will probably keep hands off you."

"You mean the way he did with Bud?" I almost yelled.

Willy didn't answer but just sat there slowly wagging his head from side to side, and after a few seconds I caught on to what he was driving at. The gangster hadn't been the killer—it was someone else.

"Strangling is hardly in Slip's line, keed," Willy suggested, "a bullet in the back is his signature."

"Then who?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "That's something for the boys downtown to worry about, Johnny—what do you want from me?"

"I want you to find out who killed Bud."

"Why?"

"If Slip did it, then I might just as well turn the record over to the police and try to get some sort of protection."

"I thought you didn't have the wax?" he cut in and his eyes danced queerly.

"I haven't," I said. "But I can find it."

"—and if somebody else knocked him off," Willy's soft voice nudged, "you can keep your mouth shut about Conky Jacobs and maybe put the bee on Madden for a big wad of dough, huh?"

I knocked over the chair in my haste to get at him. I swung a hard right at his long, angular jaw, but he reached up and easily blocked it with his left hand.

Then he shoved me down in his chair and growled:

"I was just asking, no need to blow your top."

I took a couple of deep breaths while he looked me over. I was sore and showed it. Instead of the guy helping me he was only getting in my hair.

"Any minute," he was saying, "somebody is going to walk in there and find Bud White's body—there's nothing I can do, keed."

"They won't find him until he doesn't show up for the broadcast tonight," I argued. "And that's not until midnight."

"Nothing doing, Johnny. I want no part of this."

There was no doubt about it, Willy meant it. I offered him a handful of greenbacks but I got nowhere. Willy Forbes wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole—I was strictly on my own.

CHAPTER THREE

The Silk Necktie

FINDING the Conky Jacobs platter was easier than I had anticipated. It took me about two hours patient culling of Bud White's private record library at the radio station. After I had played the record back and listened to Conky spill his guts and Madden's apple-cart, I got an idea of what Willy Forbes had meant when he'd said the disc was worth a big wad of dough. Madden was up to his thick ears in marijuana and Conky had named names and places—enough, I figured, to put Slip away for a long time. It wasn't tough to add up that the mobster would probably pay plenty to prevent it from getting to the authorities. But on the other hand, that's not the way I play ball, although I must admit, I juggled it mentally for a good five minutes before I got straightened away. Besides, I wanted to live a while longer.

My Pappy always told me that the shortest distance between two points is minus a detour, so I reached over for the telephone to call the Police—and that's when it rang. I hefted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Johnny?" said Willy Forbes' voice. "You find it?"

"Yeah," I snapped. "I found it."

"Is it hot, keed?"

"Loaded," I told him vehemently.

"Okay, come on over here, I want to make talk with you."

There was a note of surprise in my voice as I asked, "How come you changed your mind, Willy?"

"I need the dough," he said simply. "I'm flat—so, I'll take the case."

"I'll be over in fifteen minutes," I mouthed into the phone. Then as the door opened and Honey Smith walked in, I said, "Make it half an hour," and then hung up.

The camel hair sportcoat she wore couldn't hide the sag to her shoulders, and her eyes that usually sparkled provocatively had an opaque deadness about them that shocked me.

"What's wrong, Honey?" I asked softly.

I guess I must have made it too soft because she threw herself down on the chair and started to cry. I'm a sucker for crying women, especially if they're beautiful, and Honey is definitely in the latter category. But there's nothing much you can do except let them cry; so I walked over and thumbed through some record albums until it passed, then I lit a cigarette and gave it to her.

She took it like she needed it and I watched her luscious red lips drag deeply until her well-shaped mouth expelled clouds of smoke towards the ceiling.

"I'm scared, Johnny," she moaned, and her voice broke in two, "scared to death!"

"Of what?"

"Bud White!" I heard her exclaim through set lips.

While I took a deep breath I noticed the urgent appeal in her eyes.

"Johnny, you must make him stop what he's doing to Ken. Ken will kill him—I know he will. He took an oath last night."

I led her on with premeditated callousness, "Do you really believe that, Honey?"

"Oh yes, yes!" She sounded excited. "He swore it to me. You must make Bud stop!"

"And since when do you care so much about what happens to Bud White?" I asked harshly.

"I don't—I don't!" she chattered. "It's Ken, he's crazy wild I tell you. Johnny, I've never seen him like that before." She clenched her hands together until they showed white.

"You should have stayed with me, baby," I growled pointedly. "We were getting along fine."

She looked up and this time there was no mistake. I did see the old fire in her eyes.

"I made a mistake, Johnny," her soft voice caressed.

"Don't we all," I said and took her hand in mine.

"I tried to reach Bud," she said, "but there was no answer."

"How could there be," I thought bitterly.

She reached over and her warm hand cupped my knee. "Will you talk to Bud? For me, Johnny, for old times."

I reminded her, "Honey, I'd do anything for you, but this I can't do, believe me."

"Then he'll kill him. I know he will!" And her blood pressure went soaring again.

I whipped her with my voice. "Do you know what you're doing?" I questioned loudly. She just sat there moaning. "You're sending Ken to the electric chair," I rapped out and watched her sit up straight. "With what you've just said," I

told her, "you've just put Ken Gavin in the death cell and thrown away the key."

I WATCHED what shock did to her. She stood on trembling legs, her eyes opened wide, her mouth fumbling with words that wouldn't form. Then she slid back down in the chair and found her voice again.

"No, Johnny!" she breathed, "he—he can't be!"

I let my nodding head do the work for me and my eyes watched her closely.

"Ken's a fool," she muttered and she spoke coldly as if she didn't care any longer.

"You're easy to convince, Honey," I bit off and when she didn't answer I went on, "why are you so sure that Ken is the murderer?"

"Why—I—I—" Her tense fingers were again tracing nervous patterns on my knee and her voice got soft and throaty. "I didn't mean it that way, Johnny," she whispered, "really I didn't—it's just that Ken is such a crazy fool—he—"

She got up and pulled her coat even tighter around her well-proportioned body. "I'm sorry I bothered you," she muttered from way back. As she went through the door, she half turned and I thought I saw a tight, fleeting smile pass across her white, drawn face. Then it was gone . . . and so was she.

* * *

Willy Forbes kept insisting that I call the Homicide Bureau. "They'll know about it soon enough, Keed," he reasoned. "When the disc jockey doesn't show up tonight, they'll go looking." His finger pointed at me. "You'll have some answering to do, and believe me, those boys downtown can ask a lot of questions." He thumped himself on his broad chest. "I know!"

"You want I should tell them about the Conky Jacobs record, too?" I demanded irritably.

"That's up to you, Johnny," he fired back, "but no matter what you think of the cops downtown—they're not dumb; they'll get around to it." His smile had an edge.

Willy made sense, but I kept hearing Bud's voice saying: "We turn that record in, Johnny, and we're dead ducks."

I paced up and down Willy's small room until I made up my mind. "Uh uh," I croaked, "I'm going by what Bud said and—"

"... and he's dead," Willy cut in.

"But you said yourself you didn't think Madden did it," I tossed at him.

He shrugged, "Who knows?"

"Oh," I grimaced, "it's like that—you're not sure now. What do you want?" I yelped angrily. "Me on a slab next to Bud?"

His features got all tight and red and then he got hold of himself and he let his body relax in the chair. He spoke in even tones. "Look, keed, the more I talk this, the less I like it. Only one thing," and he looked at me sharply, "I don't care what you do about the record, only make sure that either you or the police have it, because," he said pointedly, "Madden would pay a barrel full of greenbacks to get it."

I whirled on him suddenly. "Willy, would they make a deal?"

"Who?"

"Homicide?" I mouthed excitedly. "Would they play ball with me?"

His keen eyes probed deep into my expression and his lips formed the words: "All depends. What's up?"

"I was just thinking," I murmured softly. "What if Bud White went on the air as usual tonight?"

Willy's forehead instantly became a washboard of puzzlement which he straightened out with a slapping motion of his hand. "The guy's nuts," he whispered gently.

I wagged my head with furious excite-

ment and my face was dressed in a broad grin. "I got an idea, fellow," I breathed, and while he looked, I talked. "If the killer heard Bud on the air as usual tonight, wouldn't he come back and try to finish the job?"

Willy threw both his hands in the air with a gesture of complete disgust. "What do you think this is," he barked viciously, "a B movie? You're playing with dynamite, Johnny, and you're just as apt to get blown—"

He stopped talking on a dime and a curious smile lit on his lips and froze there. Then he snapped his fingers sharply. "It might be the answer!"

"Yeah?" I encouraged.

"Yeah," he laughed out loud. "It's just corny enough to work. But how?"

I told him that the program was always transcribed in full so as to have it on file for any reference and we had two years' backlog. It would be quite simple. I'd take Bud's place at a dead microphone and have an old program of Bud's on the air. It would have the same effect as if Bud were on the air himself "live".

"But won't anybody get wise?" Willy asked cautiously.

"Naw!" I assured him. "I'll pick out a program about a year old. Maybe," I admitted, "a few listeners may think it sounds familiar but by that time, we'll either have what we want or it won't matter anyway."

I noticed deep thought furrows digging at Willy's face, so I asked him what he was delving for.

"I'm trying to figure how to get this back to Slip Madden."

"Then you do suspect him," I shouted.

"The idea is to be suspicious of everybody, keed," he grinned, "so I think I'll plant it where it'll do the most good."

"Stoolie?" I queried.

"Yeah. Maybe I'll let it leak out that Bud's going to play a certain record. That ought to do it." He slapped his fist into

his hand. "You going to bring the platter?"

"Sure!" I spoke up. "I might just as well go all the way."

So that's how we used a dead disc jockey to catch a live killer—with me as the bait.

I WAS thankful that I had the ex-singing cop with me when I walked into Homicide Bureau down at Police Headquarters. With him running interference it wasn't so tough—he knew the boys and they knew him. But, like Willy said, they could sure ask plenty questions. So I held nothing back—except Conky's record of Slip Madden's dealing in marijuana. I just couldn't shake the memory of Bud's words about holding on to it.

When I asked them to keep the murder under cover and explained my plan to trap the killer, all hell broke loose.

Lt. Kesten was the calmest, but also the most adamant. His head shook with obvious disgust and his deep, resonant voice knifed through the din. "That's what comes of listening to whodunits on the radio, young fellow."

Which was what Willy Forbes had said, too, only about a different medium. I don't know how we finally sold them a bill of goods, but I give full credit to Willy. I guess he must have been a good detective when he was on the Force, because it was at his urging that Lt. Kesten gave in.

"Against my better judgment, though," he warned. "That's soap opera radio stuff and it don't happen in real life."

Well, every man to his own opinion, I say, but I couldn't help feeling that in this case the killer would try again. I made the necessary arrangements at the radio station and then went home, took a couple of Pheno-Barbitals and went to bed.

I awakened, sitting straight up in bed, my shoulders pressed hard against the backboard and cold sweat pasting my pajamas to my body. I recognized the harsh,

shrill sound of the alarm clock, so I reached over and turned it off. My aching chest throbbed as little fingers of pain prodded the burned area. I slid down in bed and tried to rest but I couldn't—besides, the alarm reminded me that it was time to go to the studio. I hurriedly washed and dressed, then I called Lt. Kesten at Police Headquarters and spoke with him briefly. After assuring him of the arrangements at the station, I phoned the Velvet Club and left a message for Honey to meet me at the studio right after the broadcast.

Then I went out and hailed the first taxi I could find and drove to the studio.

* * *

I was all alone in Studio 12 and had been for over two hours. I sat at the table Bud had used on so many of his all-night broadcasts, my back to the door and the microphone in front of me. Studio 12 wasn't "on air" but the voice of the famous disc jockey was being broadcast from a year-old transcription on the turntables in another studio—all I had to do was sit there and wait for a murderer!

As the big, black hands of the wall clock wound slowly around from midnight to 2 A.M., I felt the tense fibres in every nerve center of my body wind even tighter with each sweep of their hands. By 2:30 I was a coiled spring of suspense and thoroughly convinced that the presence in a nearby studio of two of Lt. Kesten's best men and Willy Forbes wasn't nearly enough protection from the killer who had snuffed out the life of the disc jockey.

Suddenly my spine became a shaft of melting ice and the wet shirt felt unbearably cold against my back—someone had opened the door behind me!

I tried to turn and look over my shoulder, but I was held in a vise of fear. Then the electrically charged silence was short circuited by Willy Forbes' steady voice.

"All quiet, Johnny?"

I turned and as I spotted Willy's grin-

ning face behind me, I blew the air out of my pumping lungs in a gale of delicious relief.

"Willy," I cried, "you scared the pants off me!"

He laughed easily and put both his hands affectionately on my shoulders. "Looks like it's not going to work."

I shook a determined jaw at him. "It's not four A.M. yet, boy. I'll wait!"

"Still got hunches that the killer will show his head, huh? Okay, so I'll go back to watching this studio from the outside."

I thought, "I've got the tough one," but I said nothing because it was my idea. He half turned and leaning over my shoulder touched the Conky Jacobs record I had on the desk in front of me. "Is that it, keed—the million dollar record?"

I laughed a little uneasily. "Well, I wouldn't say a million bucks, but—"

"Any complaints if I touch something worth big dough, huh?"

AND before I could answer, he picked it up in his right hand and looked at it back and front, then he set it back down on the table.

"Madden will pay a fortune for that record, Johnny." And his voice had a tinny sound. "You should have seen that."

I started to get up but he pressed me back into the chair and for the first time I noticed that he was wearing gloves. I looked up startled. Willy was grinning, but there was something about the way his mouth twisted that frightened me. Then I saw the black, silk necktie in his clenched hand. Before I could move my paralyzed muscles, the ex-singing cop looped it swiftly around my neck, and I knew that my vigil was at an end—I was alone in Studio 12 with the killer!

I tried to speak but couldn't. He gripped the noose just tight enough to choke off my cries, but not my life.

"So now you know, Johnny." His

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15 Story Detective

voice came at me. "White was a lousy rat that needed killing, so I killed him. He won't hurt people any more, not any more, Johnny." He laughed grimly from deep in his throat. "Last night, Ken Gavin was a sucker. He didn't know it, but he gave me the perfect alibi. How could I resist? Everybody heard him threaten to kill—even you." He chuckled as he tightened the loop in his strong hands and my breath came in short, painful gasps.

"I'm sorry about you, Johnny, but Madden will pay plenty for that record. I've got to have it—I need it. You're a fool, Johnny; if you had kept quiet about the record, I wouldn't have known—I wouldn't have to do this. But you insisted on telling me, didn't you? Didn't you? It was your idea." He chuckled again and the sound of it hung in the air like a dead thing. "You wanted to set a trap so I helped you, Johnny. But I come first, Johnny, and now, *I've got the record!*" His voice got so low that I had to strain my ears to hear his mumble. "I'll hide it here in the studio and soon the police will come and they'll find us here together. I'll have a cut on my head, Johnny. I'll be unconscious—but you—you'll be dead!"

The tie cut deep into my throat as he pulled hard on the silk loop. Slowly I started to strangle—and the door burst open and I heard Lt. Kesten's booming voice.

"Get him, boys!"

There was a short scuffle behind me and all at once I could breathe again. I sat up and tenderly massaged my neck as I watched the Lieutenant's two detectives snap links on Willy Forbes' wrist.

"You certainly took your time!" I snapped out of a hoarse throat.

Lt. Kesten flashed me a big, broad grin. "Well, I waited because I wanted to get it all down. It'll sound better in court."

"W-w-what do you mean?"

Murder Spins the Disc

I pointed at the microphone.

"That mike's not dead, Forbes," I told him. "Everything you said went on wax—and I wouldn't be surprised if it was the best record you ever made!"

Lt. Kesten and I left the studio together. He was holding the Conky Jacobs record in his hand.

"You did a good job, Johnny," he smiled.

"Yeah," I replied. "That open mike was the payoff. But what if I hadn't remembered Willy talking about Bud 'getting into hot water' when all I'd told him was that I'd found the disc jockey in the tub!"

"Like you said," grinned the Lieutenant, "it could have been just a figure of speech, too—but now you know, huh?"

I nodded without answering, my eyes eagerly searching for Honey—but she wasn't there.

"Can I give you a lift?"

"Huh?"

Lt. Kesten's voice came at me again, "Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"No thanks, I'll be around a while," I told him glumly.

He patted my shoulder with a big, friendly hand, "See you around, kid. Good night."

I watched him drive away and I waited, but somehow I knew that Honey wasn't going to show—she didn't! About an hour later when I put the key in my door I was cold with anger. Not so much at Honey, because after all how mad can a guy get at a hunk of gal like her. It was me—I was a sap, I'd expected too much. I slammed the door shut behind me.

"Well! It's about time!"

My heart got stuck in my teeth as I looked up. Honey was sitting in my best chair, my best bottle of Scotch in front of her and an inviting smile on her face.

So, you don't think I came out best?

THE END

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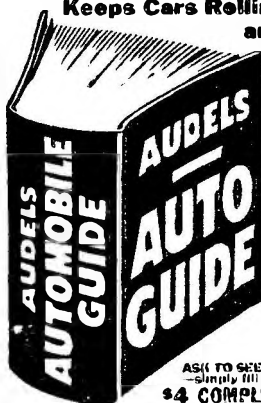
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FULL STEAM TO NOWHERE

By **HAROLD HELFER**

CASEY JONES is the railroad engineer best known in song and story, but it was an engineer named Cassin who smashed just about the most daring jailbreak of all time.

Just north of Sing Sing prison, there is a bridge over a railroad. Across the bridge convicts pushed wheelbarrows containing stone from a quarry.

On the morning of May 14, 1875, a train was emerging from underneath the bridge when suddenly five convicts leaped from the bridge onto the locomotive.

Four ran into the engineer's cab—Engine No. 89 the locomotive was—while the other hastened to the coupling which attached the engine to the train. With drawn revolvers, the prisoners forced the engineer and fireman to jump. Then the engine, disconnected from the rest of the train, roared away.

Prison guards fired at the whizzing locomotive but it was going too fast for any of their shots to take effect.

Danger signals were ordered up and down the tracks. Five men armed with revolvers and a locomotive—there was no telling what to expect.

The stationmaster in the next town nervously awaited the coming of the convict-operated locomotive. But it didn't show up. When the engine was quite a few minutes overdue, another locomotive cautiously started down the track to see what had happened.

A few miles away it was sighted. And

Full Steam to Nowhere

what a sight No. 89 was! All the cylinder heads were broken—for Engineer Dennis Cassin, before jumping off the locomotive, had shoved the pumps on full steam ahead!

He had done it so swiftly and subtly that it had gone unobserved. Consequently, when the convicts opened up the throttle, it had sent the engine roaring down the tracks—to an explosion.

The convicts, no doubt shaken by the eruption of events, managed to take out into some nearby woods but were recaptured.

(Continued from page 79)

combined to undermine his health, and he contracted tuberculosis.

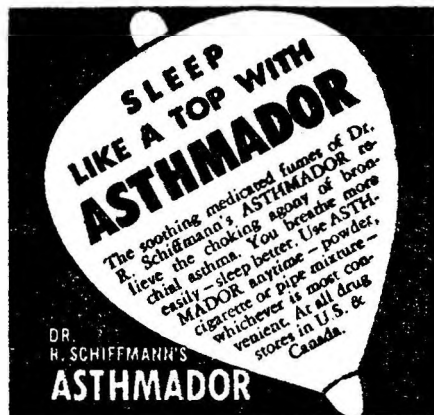
Picked up in a routine raid, Villon was recognized and returned to Paris. He was quickly convicted on the old charge of robbing the College of Navarre. The death sentence was pronounced, but later commuted to ten years' exile.

Where that all his story, it would differ little from that of the typical fifteenth-century criminal. But in addition to a police record that would make many a modern gangster look like a sissy, François Villon left behind the manuscript of a volume of poetry that marked an epoch in literature.

Slime, filth, and violence were in it, to be sure. Alongside these elements, and intermingled with them, are some of the most majestic passages ever written.

The only professional criminal ever to be recognized as a writer of the very first rank, the gallows rat would probably be pleased if he could know that his poems have passed through more than three hundred editions.

On the other hand, he might prefer a flagon of wine and a saucy maid to all the honors of the literary world.



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15 Story Detective

(Continued from page 6)

somebody, good. Casting a searching student's eye upon his contemporary scene, he noted that this nation was irresistibly embarked upon a course that would lead it to World War I.

With a powerful message to his fellow citizens under his arm, the professor journeyed to Washington, D. C., where he planted said message upon Capitol Hill—with a short fuse. The ensuing blast removed the Senate anteroom from the contemporary scene which the professor had viewed with such concern, but did little other damage, because of the immediate censorship with which Congress blanketed the event. By the time the rest of the nation awoke to the fact that the seat of its government had been singed, the horror of it was anticlimatic as compared to the curiosity regarding who had done it.

In the meantime the one man in all the world who knew the answer was seeking another way to meet his problem.

The professor's solvable equation read: J. P. Morgan (equals) Money.

The financier and his family were breakfasting with the British ambassador on the former's Glen Cove estate when the very unlikely professor entered the scene, got the drop on the butler with a completely unscholarly automatic, and began stalking his quarry. Bravely, to protect his guest and family, the unarmed Morgan wrestled him to the floor even though he was shot in the leg and abdomen.

Exactly what went on in the mad, bad little brain of the world's Very Unlikeliest Person was starkly revealed shortly after his arrest. In some quite unlikely manner, though closely guarded, Dr. Muentner managed to unlock his cell door, climb up to the next tier, and launch himself down head first.

And all they saw on that cold cement floor was—broken brains!

—LAURI WIRTA.

Pigskin Patsy

(Continued from page 72)

little Stackie knew, it seemed easier to kill Si. McBride came in at the wrong time. The Commissioner hired me."

"Rot!" the gaunt white-haired man said. "Dream stuff! It's absurd."

"I cover myself," Leeds said. "Every time. They made the deal in Si's car. You'll find a complete record of the conversation someplace among Si's stuff. Later we were going to use it to shake down the Commissioner." He gulped for air. "I can give you a lot of stuff. All the names of the big shots."

Then, without warning the gaunt white-haired man was running for the windows.

He had to pass Barry. Barry came off his chair in a full professional rolling block. The ex-Commissioner fell and then got up slowly. Every bit of fight was gone.

"Thanks, McBride," DeWitt said. "Take the hardware off him, Ed."

They came out of the newspaper office at eleven, arm in arm. "How many people," Laura said, "get a chance to help write the article that turns them from a bum back into a hero?"

"And I don't even get space rates."

"No. All you get is me."

"That sounds like I'm being overpaid."

She stopped and faced him, her expression pleading. "Tell me everything is all right now, Barry."

"Between us, darling, they're better than they used to be. But me and the rest of the world will never be on quite the same basis again. I'll bow for the big cheers and the speeches and all the rest of it, but I won't believe that stuff the way I used to. Now when a guy pats my back, I look for the knife in his other hand. No, not that strong. Just say that from now on my guard is up."

"With me, too?"

He pulled her close. "Hell, no," he growled. "I know I can lick you."

THE END



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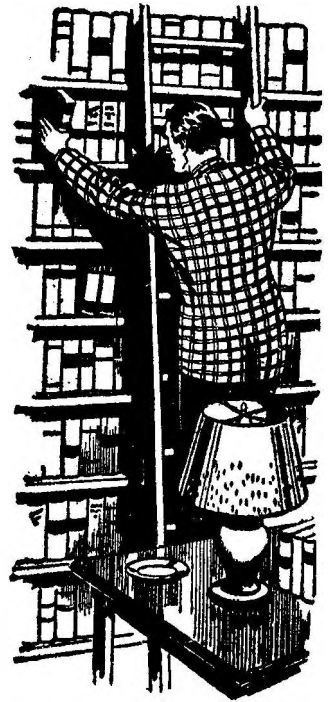
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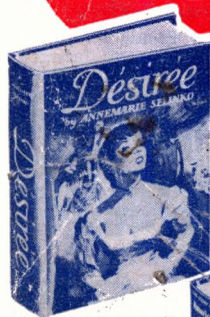
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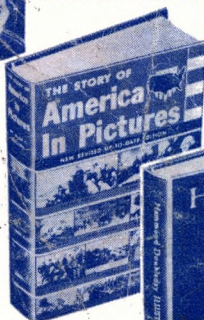
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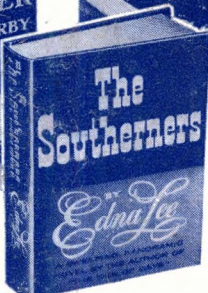
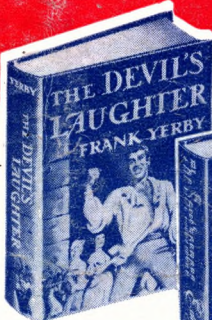


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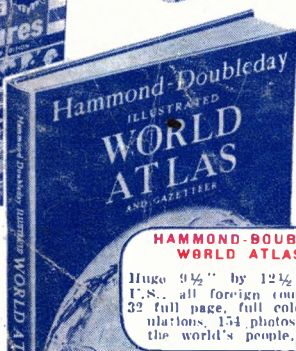
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