

10¢

# CLUES DETECTIVE

APRIL 1937

*509*  
Death hung by handcuffs  
on the edge of the cliff—

**MURDER CITY**

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

*A Violet McDade Story*

STORIES



Inner Cover Missing

# They Sank to Eternal Rest...and Waked Again!



"It was 28 below zero. A 40 mile gale whipped blinding sheets of icy snow into huge drifts," writes Mrs. Marjorie B. Tyner of Liberty, Nebraska.

"My son and I climbed out of our stalled car. The longer we worked to free it, the deeper it seemed to sink into the mounting barrier of driving snow.

"Chilled to the bone from our efforts, we looked about for possible shelter. Up the road a single light shone from a farmhouse window, a lone beacon of safety in this howling, icy desolation. With our flashlight to help us in keeping out of the ditch, we struggled toward it, floundering through the swirling drifts, leaning into that breath-snatching, icy blast.

"But even our exertion could not warm us. Numbness crept gradually over me, and with it a drowsiness, compelling as ether. My son was fighting the same losing battle, for we sank down together in that howling white waste. It seemed warm and snug down in the snow. In great peace I surrendered to sleep.

★ ★ ★

"As in another world and beginning a new existence, I came to my senses. My son was bending over me,

**Beaten by the Blizzard, Numb, Drugged by Exertion, They Gave up Their Fight for Life**



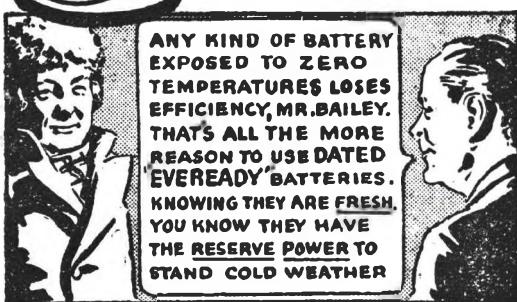
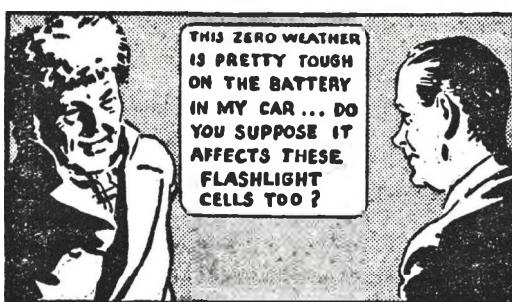
tears running silently down his cheeks. We were safe in the farmhouse with the lighted window... saved from death in the snow... saved because the **fresh DATED 'EVEREADY' BATTERIES** in our flashlight kept on working after we gave up, and the light in the snow attracted our rescuers.

(Signed) *Mrs. Marjorie B. Tyner*



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ARE FRESH  
BATTERIES**

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Guarantees Freshness**  
National Carbon Company, Inc.,  
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On Sale Second Wednesday of Each Month

Vol. XXXVII  
No. 5

CLUES

APRIL  
1937

# DETECTIVE STORIES

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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Single Copy, 10 Cents

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Yearly Subscription, \$1.00

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Verner, Vice President. Copyright, 1937, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1937, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter September 2, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$1.25 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$1.75 per year.

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#### There's a Real Future In Radio for Well Trained Men

Radio already gives jobs to more than 300,000 people. In 1934 over \$500,000,000 worth of sets, tubes and accessories sold, an increase of 20% over 1934! Over 1,000,000 auto Radios were sold in 1935. 25% more than in 1934! 22,000,000 homes are today equipped with Radios, and every year millions of these sets go out of date and are replaced with newer models. Millions more need servicing, new tubes, repairs, etc. Broadcasting stations pay their employees (exclusive of artists) more than \$23,000,000 a year! And Radio is a new industry, still growing fast! A few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75-a-week jobs have grown to thousands in less than 20 years!

#### Many Make \$8, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you

Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly! Throughout your training I send you plans that made good spare time money—\$200 to \$500 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My training is famous as "the Course that pays for itself."

#### I Give You Practical Experience

My Course is not all book training. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loudspeaker installations. I show you how to build testing apparatus for use in spare time work from this equipment. This 60-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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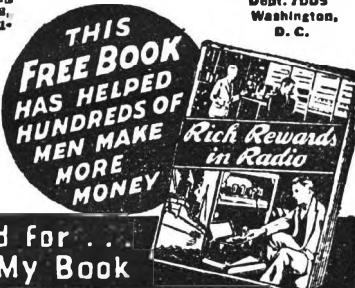
I am so sure that I can train you successfully that I agree to write to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. I'll send you a copy of this agreement with my Free Book.

#### Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

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Washington,  
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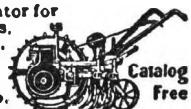
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12x32.00-17	52.15	36.00	32/4	2.00	52.15	36.00	32/4	14.35	19.05	14.35
12x32.50-17	52.15	36.50	32/4	2.00	52.15	36.50	32/4	14.55	19.25	14.55
12x33.00-17	52.15	37.00	32/4	2.00	52.15	37.00	32/4	14.75	19.45	14.75
12x33.50-17	52.15	37.50	32/4	2.00	52.15	37.50	32/4	14.95	19.65	14.95
12x34.00-17	52.15	38.00	32/4	2.00	52.15	38.00	32/4	15.15	19.85	15.15
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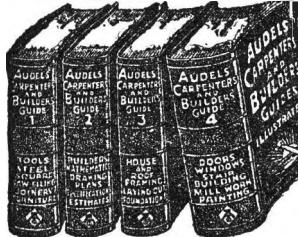
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... writes George Bailey



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# MURDER CITY

*A Violet McDade Story*

by

CLEVE F. ADAMS



**V**IOLET McDADE does not take offense easily. On the other hand, though she may look, talk and act like a particularly uncouth dock walloper, she is none the less proud of her sex. So when one of our visitors paused in the office door and said, "Oh, you are women!" in a tone of surprise, if not actual disparagement, she scowled ferociously.

"O' course we're women! But

we're the best dicks in Los Angeles, or mebbe the whole world, for all I know!" She glanced ostentatiously at the card on her desk. "Vega City Improvement League!" Reformers, hunh?"

The second of the two gentlemen smiled a propitiating smile. "Not exactly reformers, Miss McDade. That is, not in the usual sense. And Mr. Barton and myself are sorry if we—so to speak—got off on the

wrong foot. McDade & Alvarado were recommended to us so highly that—well, it was somewhat of a surprise to find you members of the fairer sex."

"And what could be fairer than that?" Violet chuckled, mollified. "So what can Nevada and me do for you?"

The two gentlemen took chairs. The one who had roused Violet's ire was tall, spare, in his middle fifties. Well-groomed, with the grooming that comes only from long habit, iron-gray hair brushed carefully, cold gray eyes beneath finely arched brows, he was every inch the aristocrat. I put him down as a banker. It turned out that he was a judge.

The other fellow was the banker. Fat, almost as fat as Violet McDade,

with a pink-skinned, triple-chinned face that somehow, despite the chins, managed to look like a baby's, he was a picture of roly-poly good nature. A little on the baldish side, his thin, sandy hair lay in damp little ringlets atop his enormous head, and eyes as blue, as ingenuous as a child's, regarded us delightedly. He said his name was Cyrus Q. Flagg.

Judge Monette Barton came to the point immediately. "Vega City is having district-attorney trouble. Your own prosecutor, an old friend of mine, recommended your firm as being the most trustworthy private investigators he knew."

Violet looked at me. "Mark one up for the 'cutor," she said. "I'd no idea he was that fond of us."

Judge Barton frowned slightly at

*We sent our man to  
Murder City. He came  
back two days later—  
in a trunk—*



*Violet screamed "Hold it, Flagg!" He didn't hold it.  
Violet's guns flashed out—*

the interruption. "We have been a long-suffering lot in Vega City, but crime and corruption finally reached a point where our reputation was being dragged in the dirt. The old district attorney and the police force were almost openly aligned with criminals. A few of us—the better element—organized the Improvement League, spent a lot of money and eventually ousted the old prosecutor. We elected our own man."

"Swell!" Violet approved. "It ain't often that it works out that way."

"It hasn't worked out." Cyrus Flagg chuckled happily, as if it were all a huge joke. "Fact is, it looks like our money and ideals were a total loss."

JUDGE BARTON said, "Let me finish, please." You could almost imagine the tapping of the gavel in a crowded courtroom, as his cold eyes again rested on Violet's moon face. "The new prosecutor is my personal friend. I hate to believe that he has been reached by the criminal element, yet the facts seem to point that way. Crime is still rampant in Vega City, and indictments, even the petty ones, are all too few. Considine claims he is hampered by insufficient evidence. As an ex-justice I disagree.

"Proving Considine, our own man, corrupt will work a great injury to our cause; will, in fact, enable the old gang to once more take over in full force. We should hate that. I, particularly, because the man has been my friend, and—well, there are other reasons. But if he has double-crossed us, I will go to the governor of the State, if necessary, to see that he is removed."

"Very noble indeed," said Violet. "So you want us to either prove him guilty or innocent, and if innocent,

to get him the kind of evidence he needs to function."

Cyrus Flagg nodded. "Judge Barton feels that strangers may uncover more than local talent. Besides, no one knows whom to trust in Vega any more. Pitiful state. Sad." He pursed his babyish mouth, winked at me. "The judge thinks that a man named Shane Fowler is the curse of Vega City. You might look him up and ask him."

Judge Barton clamped his thin lips in a straight, harsh line. "You take this thing too lightly, Cyrus!"

"I'm in it for fifty thousand, my friend, and that's not so darned lightly these days." Flagg yawned behind a pink, pudgy hand. "Heigh-ho, I guess I'm not a born zealot. I've made money in Vega. So have you. But that's neither here nor there, eh? We've been crossed—or think we have—and we must have our r-r-r-revenge. These ladies, I hope, will get it for us."

"Nevada and me can't leave town right now," said Violet. "We're tied up on a insurance fraud, but I can send a man back with you. Twenty-five a day and expenses."

"A good man?"

"One of the best."

We sent Tully O'Neill to Vega City. Two days later he came back to us—in a trunk.

It was pretty awful for a while. I mean, you read about these things in the papers, and if you think about them at all, you're only mildly sorry for the people involved. But when it happens to you—when it's actually some one you've known and liked—well, it really gets you.

Violet and I were dressing for dinner when the bell rang. I heard Bridget go down the hall to answer it; then voices raised in argument. Bridget came back, muttering.

"Man out here with a trunk. You got a trunk coming?"

I said no, we didn't have any trunk coming.

Violet yelled through the communicating door: "Miz Sturtevant was gonna send me something from China. Is it from China, Bridget?"

Bridget said no, it wasn't from China, it was from Sacramento. "But it's addressed to McDade & Alvarado, all right." And hopefully, as a sort of added attraction. "It's prepaid."

Violet waddled into my room attired in a dressing gown which made her look more like a circus elephant than ever. "We better take a look, Nevada. Mebbe Miz Sturtevant didn't go to China." The three of us went down the hall.

THE EXPRESSMAN had the trunk inside by that time, and thrust his metal-sheathed hook at us aggressively. The trunk wasn't locked. Violet looked at the shipping label, undid the straps and lifted the lid.

The belligerent expressman quietly fainted. Bridget turned green, crossed herself. Then, clapping her hand to her mouth as if she were going to be very sick, she wabbled hurriedly down the hall. And I? Well, I felt the skin on my face begin to tighten and the effect of paralysis crept down into my arms, my legs. I wanted horribly to shriek, yet somehow couldn't. Numb, I watched Violet close the trunk, very gently, as though afraid of waking Tully O'Neill.

I began to laugh hysterically. Awaken him! With seven slugs in his body? The next think I knew, Violet was holding me upright with one hand, and slapping me hard with the other. Her rumbling voice gradually drowned out the pounding in my ears. She was saying, over and

over again: "Take a brace, Mex. Steady does it. We can take it, kid, and we can dish it out. Just fix your mind on that last part, Nevada. We're gonna dish it out."

Well, she was right. Grieving over Tully O'Neill wasn't going to help him any. The very least we could do was to avenge him. Somehow I got a grip on myself. Bridget came back with a tumbler of whisky and the three of us managed to bring the expressman around. He was a big fellow, but his eyes carefully avoided the trunk, and his teeth sounded like castanets as he tried to answer Violet's questions.

He didn't, he said, know a thing beyond the fact that the trunk had been prepaid to our door. The express agent at the S.P. depot had turned it over to him. He was a regular bonded driver for the company, and it was pretty obvious he hadn't been aware of the trunk's contents.

Violet said, "O. K., fella, you'll hafta stick around till the law gets here. Mebbe Bridget can find you something to eat."

He gagged. "Eat! Me eat? Lady, I ain't never gonna eat another bite as long as I live!" But he followed Bridget docilely enough as she went out to the kitchen.

Violet phoned the district attorney at his home. After that, she turned to me. "Get dressed, Mex, and pack us a couple bags. We're leavin' for Vega City." She lifted the phone again and called an airport. I paused in the dining room for a quick one, which I needed badly, and I could hear her bellowing: "I don't give a damn how much it costs! I want a plane and I want it ready to go in half an hour!" She pronged the receiver with a bang.

Now that I was out of sight of that damned trunk I was beginning

to do a little better. The palsy went out of my legs and I began to pack. And then I began shaking all over again, only this time with wrath.

Somebody, *somebody*, thought himself so powerful, so impregnable, that he could actually flaunt murder in our face. Was that the idea? A taunt, a sort of dare? Or was it meant as a warning of what would happen to us, if we, too, came to Vega City? The shipping point on the label didn't fool us; it hadn't been meant to fool us. Tully O'Neill had gone to Vega City. He had returned from Vega City, and by what devious route he had reached us made no difference. Or did it? Suppose the trunk had been shipped over the State line via public carrier. That would bring the Federals into the case. I found myself wishing that the Federals were in. But the man, or men had been too smart for that. They'd carted the body over the State line into Sacramento before shipping it.

For a moment I felt an overwhelming sense of fear, of impending disaster. What could two lone women, even granting that one of them was Violet McDade, hope to accomplish in a graft-ridden city, strange to us, yes, and in another State? Maybe our unknown was as powerful, as omnipotent as he thought he was. I shivered a little.

**THE DOORBELL RANG.** It was Marx, the district attorney. He had two of his staff with him, and Violet was just closing the lid of the trunk again when I got out to the hall. The three men, hardened as they were, looked a little pale around the gills.

Violet said, "In a way, Marx, you got us into this. Not that I'm blamin' you, but you gotta help us."

She gave him the details of how we'd been retained.

Marx spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "All right, I recommended you to Judge Barton and this fellow, Flagg. But the thing is out of my province now. What do you want me to do?"

"Take charge of O'Neill's body, prosecutor. See that the local law and the papers don't try to make it tough for us to get away. You can communicate with Sacramento, or do any damn thing you please. All I want is some o' the slugs that did for Tully O'Neill, and a hour's start. Can do?"

He nodded gloomily. "Yes, I can promise you that much. But just the same, I think you're making a mistake, Violet. I'd hate to have you and Miss Alvarado come back like"—his eyes went to the trunk—"like that, or not come back at all. I could get in touch with Considine, the district attorney in Vega City—"

"We'll get in touch with Considine ourselves," said Violet grimly. "And how!"

Marx compressed his lips. "Law and order—" he began, then changed his mind at the look on Violet's face, and said instead, "Very well, I'll have the slugs at the airport for you."

He and his men went away, taking the expressman and the trunk with them. Five minutes later, when I entered Violet's bedroom I found her tossing a motley collection of clothing into a third bag.

"That isn't at all necessary," I informed her. "I thought of every thing we'd need."

"Mebbe," she said. "Then again, mebbe you didn't." And it turned out later that she was right. I hadn't thought of everything.

## II.

THE CHARTERED PLANE set us down at a small field just outside Vega City; not the regular transport field, but another, a private one whose owner was evidently known to our pilot. There was a border of tall trees surrounding it, a small hangar and machine shop, and up on a little knoll at the far end was a small house, lighted now, and apparently a residence.

Violet told the pilot, "Don't put the ship to bed, fella. We may hafta light outa here in a hurry."

He was a young fellow, with a devil-may-care look about him. He grinned at her. "O.K., Miss McDade, anything you say. And if you need a strong back and a weak mind—well, I've got a weak mind, anyway."

Violet said, "This is our show, fella. You stay under cover with your pal here, and don't stick your neck out."

Before the man could answer, a car's twin headlights picked us out of the darkness. The car itself roared down the slope from the house and came straight across the field as if bent on running us down. The driver and another man piled out of the front seat; from the tonneau came a third. This last was evidently the owner of the field.

He said, "Hello, Ted." Our pilot said hello, and the two other men eyed us from under tugged-down hat brims. They were dicks. You can tell 'em the world over. Their language may vary a bit according to the locale; small personal mannerisms may differ; but they all carry the rubber stamp of their profession.

The driver was a thickset man who mouthed his cigars till they were limp, soggy. He said, "You ladies must've been in a rush to get here,

hunh? Mind telling us your business in Vega City?"

"Not at all," said Violet equably. "This here State and 'specially Vega City is noted for quick and easy divorces, and that's what I crave lots of. My old man has been beatin' hell outa me for two or three years now and I'm leavin' him flat."

The other dick edged in closer. He was a finger-snapper. He kept snapping his fingers, sort of punctuating his words, and I didn't for an instant believe that Violet's wild yarn had gone over with him.

"A divorce, eh? And this other lady, is she after a divorce, too?" I could have slapped him.

Violet chuckled. "Nope, she's just a friend o' mine. Kind of a confidential adviser, you might say. So now if you're all through snoopin' in our private business, how's about givin' us a lift into town?"

Our pilot and his friend had been carrying on a low-voiced conversation. They turned to us now.

Ted said: "I'm going to bunk in with Stack Petersen, but we'll be glad to run you into town if you'd rather not—" He broke off, looked at the two detectives.

The one with the cigar said, "Hell, there ain't no need o' that. We'd be delighted to ferry the ladies into Vega, hunh, Wogan?"

Wogan snapped his fingers, "Sure. Fact is, that's what— I mean, yeah, sure we would!"

Violet played dumb. "Gee, that's swell! That's what I call bein' downright hospitable." She waddled over to the plane, yanked out the two bags I'd packed, came back and tossed them into the police car. And to the pilot ahead, she said, "We'll settle up with you in the morning, Ted. Mebbe my friends will wanna go back with you, but me, I gotta establish residence here accounta

bustin' them—now—shackles o' matrimony."

**WE GOT INTO** the car. The two dicks got into the car. As we roared away, our pilot turned from the plane, shouted something after us. He had our third bag in his hand. Violet waved to him.

"I bet he forgot his toothbrush," she said loudly.

The dicks in the front seat didn't say anything. After a while—ten minutes or so—we drew up before a glittering hotel. The neon sign over the marquee labeled it the Vega Vista.

The driver said, around his tattered cigar, "Well, here we are, ladies. The best is none too good, hunh?"

"Right you are," said Violet, and thanked them both profusely. They made no effort to get out, to help us with our bags. Rather, they seemed in something of a rush to get rid of us now. Six feet five of ebony doorman descended on us, showing double rows of gleaming teeth. He, too, was a finger-snapper. His efforts brought two scurrying bell hops through the revolving doors, and our detective friends left us with grunted good nights.

Violet addressed his magnificence, "Know them birds, admirals?"

"Sho." He grinned. "Sho Ah knows 'em. Dem's dicks fum the district attorney's office."

"Who'd've believed it!" Violet marveled. "And them such accommodatin' gents, too." She suffered the bell hops to take our bags, and we went inside, registered. But we didn't follow the bags up to our rooms. Instead, Violet led the way into the crowded grill and picked out a booth from which we had a clear view of the desk. Presently—we had hardly ordered—our new-

found friends, "Cigar-mouther" and "Finger-snapper," came into the lobby and glanced over the register with affected carelessness. Cigar-mouther went away, but his partner didn't. Finger-snapper bought a paper and blended with a clump of palms near the elevator bank.

Music drifted to us from the ballroom; immaculate men and beautifully gowned women passed to and fro. The cocktail lounge was doing a nice business and, personally, I'd have liked to augment it. Somehow I couldn't seem to get my mind on food. Violet, as usual, ate like a horse. After a while she put down her third cup of coffee with a gusty sigh of repletion.

"Things," she announced cheerfully, "is pickin' up."

"Are they? What things?"

"Oh, just things. Looks like we ain't got much chance o' workin' under cover in this man's town, hunh?"

"You never had a chance in the first place, you elephant. It isn't only your size that makes you conspicuous. That crazy tale, for instance, about getting a divorce. Why, it wouldn't have fooled a child!"

"Ain't it the truth!" She chuckled. "Even a Vega City dick could tell nobody would ever marry me. But mebbe that there yarn will give them the idea that it's us that's dumb."

"And they wouldn't be far wrong, at that." Landing at an obscure field as we had, and being met by detectives, was pretty conclusive evidence that our every move was being checked. I couldn't see an out of any kind, and I told her so.

"Trouble with you"—she sniffed—"trouble with you, Nevada, is you got no 'magination. Now me, I can 'magine all kinds 'o things—like what would happen if we did the op-

posite from what we're expected to do."

She beckoned the waiter, paid the check and waved the change away with a lavish gesture. Then, loud enough for all in the grill to hear, "Know who I am, fella? I'm a detective. I'm here to clean up Vega City." She guffawed at his slack-jawed amazement. "Yep, ol' Vi'let McDade, the greatest female shamus that ever lived!"

THERE WAS a sudden hush in the room. Somebody laid down a fork and it sounded like the Fourth of July. Then everybody began to

In our rooms at last, I unburdened my soul. I gave her my entire repertoire without making a dent in her smug complacency. Finally, worn out by the sound of my own voice, I sank to the bed and buried my face in my hands. What was the use? The harm was done now. Vega City, down to the last street sweeper, knew by this time just who we were and why we were there.

"Sure," she said calmly "Everybody of importance probably knew it anyway. So mebbe the unimportant ones will kinda make it tough on the others. I mean, by puttin' ourselves in the spotlight, mebbe



talk at once, and I could have yelled, I was so embarrassed. Did I say embarrassed? Lord, I was petrified.

But do you think she stopped with the grill? Not Violet McDade. There was a repeat performance in the lobby. Then, when I was praying for the very floor to open and swallow me, she took my arm and, bowing to right and left like a prima donna of the old school, she led the way to the elevators. The operator had the grace to mask his smirk as a concealed yawn. Otherwise I should have shot him.

it'll be harder to put us on the spot. The whole damn town'll have a interest in us now."

Well, there was a lot of sense in that remark. There usually is a lot of sense in anything Violet McDade does, but often I'm not bright enough to see it at the time. I apologized, but I still couldn't see our next move.

She said, "Why move? Why not let the other guys do the movin' while you and me just sorta relax and be comfortable?" Suiting action to words, she removed her shoes and sprawled in a groaning chair. "We

oughta be havin' visitors 'most any time now."

And again she was right. I'd hardly began to unpack when there came a knock on the door. It was Judge Barton and he was very, very angry indeed. Carefully groomed as usual, perfectly controlled, you could still see the flames leaping behind his cold, gray eyes.

He said, "I am disappointed in you, Miss McDade." He ignored me, spoke only to her. "I was given to understand that you were discreet. That is one of the reasons my committee retained you. Finding you everything but discreet makes it necessary for us to demand your withdrawal from the case, and preferably from Vega City."

Violet studied him as if he were some new kind of worm. "You didn't retain me, Judge Barton—not for twenty-five bucks a day. You hired one of my men, through me. He came to Vega City with you and Cyrus Q. Flagg. He was sent back to us in a trunk—dead." She took one step forward, clutched his arms and shook him. Her face was terrible. "Dead, do you hear? Murdered in your lousy city. And you've got the nerve to demand my withdrawal from the case. Why, for two cents I'd take your whole damn town apart!"

BARTON looked as if he were going to faint. The flame died in his eyes and he tried to speak two or three times before the words finally came. "I didn't know! Believe me, I didn't know, Miss McDade. Flagg and I thought it better if we weren't seen with your man. We gave him everything we knew on the train, then separated. From that time to this we haven't heard a word, either directly or indirectly, concerning O'Neill. I—I am deeply shocked."

There was another knock on the door, and, opening it, I found Cyrus Q. Flagg, pink-skinned, triple-chinned face more babylike than ever above the broad expanse of dress shirt. He ambled into the room, regarded us all with cherubic good humor.

Judge Barton said, "O'Neill was murdered, Flagg." He passed a lean hand over his eyes as if to clear his vision. "Murdered—in our city."

Flagg bobbed his great head, once, let his naïve blue eyes rest on Violet's scowling face. "Tell me about it," he said quietly.

Violet told him. Concluding, she said, "So you can see why I don't give one little damn whether your committee or anybody else likes it. I'm stayin' in town till I've found O'Neill's killers, or until I'm dragged out in a coffin."

Flagg looked at Barton. Barton looked at Flagg. You could almost see them making up their minds.

"I—I guess we were wrong about you," Barton said. "Maybe, under the circumstances, your method is best. We'll have to have a blow-off some time and it might as well be now. Consider yourselves retained by the Vega City Improvement League, to uncover O'Neill's murderer and all the rest of the dirt. All of it. Shall we say a thousand a day?"

Violet said stubbornly, "We're doin' this job for personal reasons and we don't want any Improvement League under our feet. But if we live long enough to do you any good we'll bill you for plenty. So now you can tell us what you told Tully O'Neill."

There wasn't much they could add to what they'd given us in our office back in Los Angeles. It was the current belief that a man named Shane Fowler was the controlling genius

behind all of Vega City's rackets. There was no proof of this. It was merely that Shane Fowler had always been a sort of political boss in the county. He had elected the former district attorney.

"And ever since that election things have gone from bad to worse. Gambling, of course, is legal in this State. We have no quarrel with gambling. We are in no sense the old-style, blue-nose reformers. But I believe that gambling is what brought on the present epidemic of crime. Since the governor of Lower California banned gambling we have had a steady influx of men from over the border; men apparently hoping—to use the idiom—to muscle in.

"A score of killings have resulted, and they haven't all been confined to the criminal element. Nearly all of these crimes remain unsolved, despite our electing our own district attorney, Considine. In addition, the furor has brought to light the fact that our city was honeycombed with rackets and vice even before the chiselers moved in from Mexico. Wealthy visitors were fleeced in our supposedly honest casinos; shops were preyed upon. But these, unfortunately, are only rumors. Those victims who might talk, either can't or won't. Our law-enforcement agencies were apparently corrupt, and switching horses hasn't helped us any."

Violet turned to Cyrus Flagg. "About this Considine fella. You're a banker. Has Considine's account been growing?"

"I wouldn't know," Flagg said. "Frank Considine took his account away from us before he was elected. I believe he banks at the Calnevar Trust now. At least, that's the only other bank beside our own First National in Vega City."

"That in itself looks bad," said

Barton. "It looks as if Considine intended to go crooked even before he was elected. But aside from the fact that we know Considine was wealthy—didn't need graft—we have no means of checking up on his financial affairs. Carewe of the Calnevar Trust wouldn't come in with us, said he didn't believe in mixing business with reform. Naturally, we had words, and now he refuses to give us any information whatever."

Violet said, "This Calnevar Trust is a branch, ain't it? Part of a tri-State chain?"

Flagg nodded.

"O. K.," said Violet grumpily. "Anybody asks you, you don't know us from Adam's off ox. We'll be seein' you—mebbe." She ushered them out.

Hardly had the elevator gate clanged shut behind them when there was another knock on the door. We seemed to be very popular all of a sudden. Violet put a pudgy finger to her lips.

"This'll probably be the cops," she whispered. "Stall 'em for a minute." Snatching up her shoes, she vanished through the communicating door which led to her room.

THE KNOCKING on the door grew louder, more insistent. I unlocked it, opened it a crack, and some one gave it a kick. It flew inward, knocking me sprawling. Cigar-mouther and Finger-snapper came in, kicked the door shut behind them. Cigar-mouther pounced on me, jerked my gun from its knee holster. Furious, not at the taking of the gun, but at the way he did it, I slapped his fat face.

Finger-snapper said, "Tsk, tsk, Charlie, she wants to play." He lifted me to my feet, slapped me casually, went on over to Violet's

door and looked in. "The fat one is gone, Charlie."

Charlie worried his cigar, rubbed his cheek where I'd hit him. He opened the hall door, looked out, closed it again and came back to stand spraddle-legged, belligerent before me.

"Where's the hippo? We got a warrant for her and you, too."

"On what charges?" I snapped.

"Carrying concealed weapons."

"Why, you poor fools! We've a license to operate in this State. I can show it to you."

"I already got it," said Fingersnapper. He had, too. He'd gone through our bags and tumbled stuff all over the floor. "But we're funny in Vega. We got a little private ordinance says you can operate, but you can't carry a rod without a special permit. We passed the ordinance just a hour ago. Funny, hunh?"

I said it was funny, very. I was literally seething with rage, as furious with Violet as with these two louts who were probably only carrying out orders. The she-devil had left me holding the sack.

Charlie bit his cigar in two, looked at the pieces sadly, chose one and put it back in his mouth. It seemed he couldn't talk without some kind of an impediment. He said, "Well, let's go, Wogan. The boys downstairs will pick up the fat dame."

They let me put on my coat before they led me away.

Everything seemed so unhurried, so inevitable: O'Neill's murder, our own reception to Vega City, and now this almost casual arrest. It was as though everything had been planned years ago, and we were being moved about like inanimate pieces on a chessboard. The finger which moved us was the more terrible for being without identity.

I wondered if it was Frank Con-

sidine, the district attorney, or if he, too, was merely another pawn. And if we were to be killed, why didn't they get it over with? The answer to that one seemed obvious. Violet had circumvented the usual spot murder by making us public entities. And landing in the lobby I found that she had outwitted "the boys downstairs," too.

### III.

THE COPPERS were there all right, seven of them. But Violet wasn't. The finger-snapping Wogan cursed sourly, and Charlie almost swallowed the remnants of his cigar. I began to feel better, even giggled a little as recriminations flashed back and forth. The dicks watching the exits had thought Wogan and Charlie had both of us. Wogan and Charlie had fondly imagined Violet in the clutches of the men downstairs.

Wogan said finally, "Take the joint apart. She must still be here. Find her." The seven coppers separated. Wogan and Charlie urged me through a lobby full of staring eyes and out to their car. Three minutes later they sat me down in a hard chair facing a broad, flat-topped desk. On the other side of the desk was Frank Considine, the district attorney.

I'd have known it was he, even without the sign on the door and the salutation of my captors. The name seemed to fit him somehow. He was tall, broad-shouldered, as immaculate as Judge Barton, though a lot younger, and nervous with a sort of unleashed energy. Very keen, very black eyes bored holes in me.

Wogan said, "We slipped up on the other one, chief, but the boys'll bring her in later."

Considine said, "All right, you two

wait outside. I'll talk to Miss Alvarado alone."

They went out.

"Now, then," said Considine crisply, "I can guess why you and the—um—large lady are in Vega City." A shadow passed over his face, like a cloud. "I can even guess who sent for you. But it's no go, Miss Alvarado."

"I've heard that before, prosecutor. If it weren't for one thing I'd agree with you, and so would Violet McDade. We are not particularly interested in the problems of Vega City. We never were. But when a man of ours is murdered, and sent back to us in a trunk—well, it becomes a rather personal matter."

He looked startled. "Murdered! You mean one of your operatives was murdered in Vega City?"

I said, wearily, "It's not even a fair act, Considine. You know more about the whole thing than I do, and there's no use pretending you don't. Tully O'Neill was sent here to investigate you. He was killed. We followed up, and were tagged by your own men from the moment we hit town. And now this arrest on a trumped-up charge that is ridiculous on the face of it. You see, it all leads back to you."

He got up, strode to the windows, stood there staring out into the night. I couldn't see his face, but I had an idea his lips were moving, because sounds like smothered curses, or maybe a prayer, came to me faintly over the noise of the traffic.

Presently, still not turning, he said quietly, "You are right about one thing, at least. I did order you picked up when I heard of the ridiculous threats your partner was broadcasting. Vega City doesn't seem to be very healthy for people who insist on stirring up trouble. I

can hold you on what you are pleased to call trumped-up charges, or I can give you an escort out of town. Believe it or not, I'm trying to save your life, Miss Alvarado."

A HOARSE VOICE behind me inquired, "And mine, too, Frankie?" He whirled. So did I. It was Violet, very pleased with herself, looking like the cat who has just finished off the last of the goldfish. There was an open door behind her—not the one into the corridor, but another, leading from a darkened office beyond. She said, "Marvelous how I do get around, ain't it?"

Considine looked at her. "It is indeed," he said, and did something with his foot. Immediately an alarm bell sounded out in the hall. The door was flung open and Wogan and the cigar-chewing Charlie dashed in with drawn guns. The darkened office behind Violet was suddenly a blaze of light and the doorway bulged with uniformed cops.

Considine said, "Search her, Wogan," and Wogan snapped his fingers in pleasurable anticipation.

Violet flipped her sleeve guns down, chuckled as the cops closed in on her. "You wouldn't wanna search a lady, gents. It ain't considered—now—cricket. So I'm gonna save you the grief o' tryin'." She released the two .45s from their spring harness, tossed them to the desk. "That makes me as harmless as a kitten. Or almost as harmless, anyway." She fixed the grim-lipped Considine with a jovial eye.

"Between the time your boys collared my partner, and now, I been doin' a little investigatin', Frankie. I discover that—like they say in books—you're more to be pitied than given the Bronx cheer. I know you've been *nolle-prossing* cases that should've drawn raps, and I know

why you been doin' it. So you wanna play with me, or you want I should spill what I know to certain other parties?"

He said, "I don't know what you are talking about, Miss McDade. Any cases I've *nolle-prossed* have been because of lack of evidence. But I admit the conditions make your presence here at this time a little inconvenient. As I just told Miss Alvarado, I can have you locked up. Would you prefer that to leaving town under escort?"

She scowled. "I think you're makin' a mistake, Considine—a big mistake, mebbe bigger'n the one you made a long time ago. But if you insist—well, Nevada and me'll take a powder."

His dark eyes searched her moon face. "That is very wise of you, I'm sure." Fingering the guns on his desk he added, "I'll just keep these for a day or two. If you'll leave your address, I'll have them shipped down to Los Angeles—"

"Like O'Neill was shipped?"

He went very white, but his eyes remained steady and his voice was without inflection. "I'm—er—sorry about O'Neill, Miss McDade. If you can give me proof that he was killed in Vega City, I'll be glad to make an investigation."

Her placid face, the little green eyes, gave no indication of her anger. Probably I was the only one in the room who knew just how close she was to an explosion. She said, carelessly, "Forget it, Considine. Get the parade started."

And a parade is what it turned out to be, too. A quartet of motor cycles, sirens screaming, cleared traffic ahead of us. Behind us came Considine in an official sedan, and behind him, in a third car, rode what looked like part of the riot squad. The inseparable Wogan and Charlie

kept us company. Charlie had acquired a new cigar somewhere, but it was gradually disintegrating.

AS WE WENT, our modest little procession began to grow. It was nearing midnight, but private citizens, in a variety of vehicles, attached themselves to our train and added the encouragement of blaring horns to the din of the sirens. It was like being ridden out of town on a rail, only—I imagine—not so uncomfortable. Physically, that is. Mentally, I suffered from a distinct inferiority complex, coupled, paradoxically enough, with a seething rage which mounted in direct proportion to the growth of our entourage.

Violet appeared to take it all as good, clean fun. Knowing her, I wondered a little at that; wondered, too, why she hadn't blasted her way out of Considine's office with her two guns. She could have done it. Despite her three hundred and fifty pounds of awkwardness she's faster than greased lightning at times.

She said, as if reading my mind, "Something about a district attorney—even one that's supposed to be crooked—kinda keeps me from gettin' tough. Mebbe it's the majesty o' the law, hunh?"

"Or maybe," said Charlie around his cigar, "maybe it was me and Wogan."

"I wouldn't argue, fella. You guys kinda fascinate me, at that. If Wogan only chewed cigars, you'd be practically twins."

We drew up at the little airport. Ted, our pilot, and his friend, Stack Petersen, must have heard us coming. They could hardly help it—for they were out and waiting beside the ship. Headlights from the fifty or more cars made the field as light as day, and the occupants of the

cars all got out and crowded around the plane as if they'd never seen one before.

I caught a glimpse of Judge Barton and Cyrus Q. Flagg in the background, but they appeared not to notice us. I couldn't blame them—much. And anyway, Violet had told them to stay in the clear. With

them were three other important-looking gentlemen, doubtless the rest of the executive committee of the Improvement League.

Frank Considine was making a little farewell speech, and Wogan and Charlie were putting our bags in the plane's cabin. I wondered if they had paid our hotel bill, too,

*He was as nonchalant as if the island was Seventh and Broadway and we were merely casual passers-by.*



idly, not letting my mind dwell on it too much because, after all, I didn't care if the bill was ever paid. I hated the hotel and everything else in and around Vega City.

Considine concluded his remarks, "I ask you good citizens to bear witness that Miss McDade and Miss Alvarado are leaving Vega City in excellent health. Their public announcement that they intended to clean up the town—presuming that it needs cleaning up—placed them in serious danger. I did not wish to assume responsibility. That is all, I believe."

There was a mild scattering of applause. We were helped into the plane. The door closed. Ted revved the motor into a steady roar and we took the air.

#### IV.

THE SHIP was a four-place, in-closed cabin job, with a glass door into the pilot's compartment. Violet found the third bag, the one she'd packed herself, tumbled the miscellany it contained out on the floor, and gravely presented me with another gun. It was the duplicate of the little .32 taken away from me by the phlegmatic Cigar-mouther. There were also two spares for her sleeve clips.

I said, "You think of everything, don't you? Usually too late. Has it occurred to you that we're going away from Vega City?"

"But we don't hafta stay away," she said. "We got off to a bad start and stayin' there like we was is just like bumpin' your head against a stone wall. This—now—public departure will mebbe lull somebody to sleep. But they're gonna get woke up. If you think Violet McDade lets anybody push her around 'thout pushin' back, why, you got another

think comin'." She got up, waddled forward and spoke to Ted.

We were wheeling now, coming back over the field. The long queue of cars was headed back toward town, looking like an illuminated dragon from above, and over the rim of trees I could see the lake, a gigantic ink spot brooding under a moonless sky. Lake Vega is perhaps thirty miles long by fifteen wide. An imaginary line drawn across its middle marks part of the boundary between California and Nevada. I wished we had never crossed it.

Violet closed the glass door behind Ted. "We'll circle as soon as we cross the lake, go on up to Reno. With a rented car we can make it back to Vega in two or three hours, and with what I found out we can—"

She didn't get a chance to say just what she intended to do. There was a sudden burst of flame from the pilot's cockpit. It blotted Ted from view. The intervening door seemed to melt before my eyes, and with a horrible roar the flames leaped out into the main cabin. A tremendous shudder shook the ship, but I wasn't conscious of any sound. I think I must have been shocked stone deaf.

Violet leaped into that roaring inferno, snatched at an invisible extinguisher. Gaseous fumes choked me, filled the cabin with steaming smoke. Gasping, half blinded, I felt my way along the narrow, tilting aisle. The flames died as swiftly as they had come, and I saw Violet bending over the frightfully twisted, blackened body of our pilot. Ted was dead. I knew it as much from Violet's curses as from the sickening sight of the body.

I thought it was the blistering heat that was making me dizzy, suddenly discovered that our prop was stilled and that we were wabbling

downward like a falling leaf, only at crazy speed. Violet was doing something to the controls now; I never knew what, and I don't think she did, either. Just as I realized how immense was the black sea leaping up at us, our right wing crumpled disappeared. Over we went, and over again, and then Violet—or the gods who watch over drunks and fools—did the impossible. We flattened our lone wing out on the water, skipped once or twice, tilted and sank.

MAYBE it was the pressure of the air in the cabin that lifted us to the surface again. It didn't seem possible against the dragging weight of the motor, but bounce we did. And in that infinitesimal fraction of a second that we floated on a wing tip Violet got the door open and pushed me through. Then she was beside me, supporting me with a mighty arm and spouting like a whale.

The water was icy, numbing. Somehow I brushed the hair from my eyes, looked for the ship. It was gone. There wasn't even a ripple to show where it has been. Teeth chattering, I began to tread water desperately.

Violet said, "I think there's an island or something 'bout a quarter of a mile off on our port bow. Can you make it, Mex?"

"I d-d-don't remember seeing any island!"

"Well, for crying out loud! Mebbe I should swim over and bring it back just to prove it! Snap out of it, you lug! And if you hafta shed any 'o your clothes, don't lose 'em. The rest are down in Davy Jones' locker, with Ted and the ship."

I thought of Ted as I'd first seen him: laughing, happy-go-lucky Ted, loving life, eager to help us. And now he was a blackened, shriveled

corpse at the bottom of a mile-deep lake.

"Yes," I said grimly, "I can make the island even if it isn't there. I'll swim the whole length of this damned lake to pay some one for what they've done to us."

"Atta girl, Mex! 'At's the old stuff!" She struck out in a wallowing overhand that nevertheless ate up the distance in astonishing fashion. I was hard put to it to keep up. But there really was an island.

It sat, low on the horizon, like one of those little coral atolls you find in the South Seas. There were perhaps a dozen stunted trees in its half-mile area, nothing else as far as I could make out in the darkness. My knees grated on a shelving, rocky beach. We stood up, waded ashore, and I began to squeeze water out of the bundle I'd made of my shirt and coat.

Violet hissed, "Put your skirt on, you hussy! If I ain't mistook, there's a man over there on the point."

THERE WAS a man. Outlined against the stars, bearded to his waist and wearing something that looked like a monk's robe, he stood shading his eyes with a skinny hand and peering out into the nothingness which was the lake. I donned my soggy skirt hastily. We approached the man, making noise enough, Lord knows, as rocks and loose gravel rolled under our feet.

He gave not the slightest sign that he heard us, and when Violet finally touched his elbow he lowered his hand reluctantly, eyed us as if the island was Seventh and Broadway, and we were merely casual passers-by.

"I seen a comet!" he yelled, and in case we, too, were deaf, he repeated, "I say I seen a comet! Did you see it?"

"Yeah," Violet grunted sourly. "We not only seen it, we was it."

He didn't hear her. "Funny," he muttered. "Funny you didn't see it. I seen it—plain as day."

"It's too bad," Violet said, "it's too damn bad you can't see some other things as plain as day." Then, bellowing loud enough to be heard on the mainland, "You got a boat?"

"Hey? Oh, a boat! No, I don't wanna buy no boats. I got two now. Besides, I'm a hermit."

"And thank Heaven for that," said Violet under her breath. "I'd hate to have you followin' me around." She made a funnel of her hamlike fists, "Look, fella, we ain't sellin' boats. We wanna *buy* one! Fifty bucks for a boat and a pair o' oars!"

He understood that apparently. A sly look in his pale eyes, he extended a scrawny talon. Violet peeled a fifty from her soggy roll, and he led us, muttering, to a little cove. The fifty-dollar boat was almost submerged; the only reason it wasn't totally so was because the water wasn't deep enough at that point.

We hauled it out, emptied it. The plug was gone from its bottom. Our hermit produced a knife, whittled a foot-long stick and twisted it carelessly into the hole. He went away, returned with a pair of oars. We launched the boat, climbed in and water began to seep in around the plug. The hermit, standing knee-deep, pushed us off.

"This lake," he announced in sepulchral tones, "never gives up its dead. Be careful."

I shivered. Every time Violet bent forward on the oars her fists hit the protruding plug and the seepage was turning into a flood. Teeth chattering, not only with the cold, I pried off a shoe and used it as a hammer, and after that I just sat there

in the inch-deep water, holding the plug and pretending I was the little boy at the dike.

Violet rowed manfully on. It dawned on me, suddenly, that there must be other holes in the boat, because the water kept on rising. I resorted to mental arithmetic: depth of boat divided by rise of water per minute equals how many miles at our present rate of speed? I could see lights on the far shore and knew that the answer wasn't going to come out even. I started to bail desperately with my shoe. Violet suggested that I use one of hers because it was so much larger. I did that. Rowing and bailing, bailing and rowing, we went on toward those distant lights.

The boat sank under us before we quite reached them. Again we were in the water, and swimming, but I took it rather philosophically this time. I'd been in the water all the time anyway, the boat only making it a little more shallow.

WE CRAWLED OUT on a little beach, lay there panting for breath. Beyond a line of trees was the highway, and the lights we'd seen belonged, apparently, to an auto camp. Presently we got up and swish-swished our way to the office. A little bell rang as we opened the door, and from behind a curtain emerged a man, rubbing sleep-reddened eyes.

He looked at us, didn't say anything. I was beginning to feel that perhaps it was we who were crazy. I've heard that when every one else appears cuckoo it's a good time for a little self-analysis. Still, it did seem that the hermit, and now this fellow, might have evinced a little surprise at a couple of bedraggled, but fully-dressed, mermaids.

Violet got out her dripping roll once more. He understood that, at

least—just like the hermit. Cupidity quickened his glance.

"You wanna cabin?"

We said that we did. "With a stove," Violet added. "You go ahead with him, Mex, and get a fire started. I gotta use the phone." She tendered a bill to the man. "Give me a few nickels and dimes, mister, and you can have the rest for the cabin—with stove."

He led me away presently, down the long line of shacks, opened a door and turned on the lights.

"Stove," he said, jerking his thumb toward it. A man of few words, yet one, his gesture told me, who observed a bargain to the very letter. I closed the door on his retreating back.

Violet came in after a time. We disrobed, hung our clothes to dry beside the roaring fire, and enveloped ourselves in blankets. My wrist watch still ticked. It was two o'clock.

"Violet," I said, "you told Considine that you'd found out something about him after leaving me to the clutches of the law. That, I presume, is why he arranged to have an incendiary bomb somewhere near our plane's gas line. Did you really find out something, or was that just a stall?"

She looked up from cleaning her guns. "I found out he was bein' blackmailed into doin' whatever he's been doin'. If you remember, back there in our rooms, Judge Barton and Cyrus Q. Flagg told us Frank Considine had plenty o' jack, but had moved his account from Flagg's bank to the Calnevar Trust. He done this before he was elected district attorney, and I wondered why. So then I remembers that this Calnevar Trust is a branch of a chain. It happens that one o' the directors in Los

Angeles is also a director o' one of our insurance-company clients.

"By usin' long distance I pulled a few wires and got Carewe, the branch manager, to loosen up. Seems Considine really was in the money once—made plenty, both from a hell of a legal practice, and from real estate. But he ain't wealthy no more. 'Cause why? 'Cause from the time he moved his account he's been draggin' down batch after batch—in cash—till he finally ain't got a dime left and even has to mortgage his home.

"This mug has got a swell wife and daughter, see? They're tops in Vega City society, and it's my idea that somebody's got somethin' on him. This somebody squeezes him dry, and then, when he can't pay no more, he's forced to do little favors like *nolle-prossing* a few cases." She wiped the last slug, slipped it into the clip, and snapped the clip home. "A tough spot for a district attorney, hunh?"

"Very," I snapped. "I can work up a lot of sympathy for a man who has just done his best to murder me. Did murder our pilot, and probably Tully O'Neill. He bids us a fond public farewell, knowing we won't live out the hour. When something happens to our plane—well, it didn't happen in Vega City, and his skirts are clear. We left there in excellent health. He can prove it. And planes do catch afire from natural causes. He may even have timed it so we were bound to land in the lake."

"Like a comet." She chuckled. "Well, mebbe you're right, Nevada. Funny, you bein' named after the State like that. You reckon that's a—now—good omen?"

I pulled on a stocking with two runs in it. "Of course," I said nastily. "We've had nothing but good luck ever since we crossed the line."

"We're still alive," she pointed out optimistically. "And if that don't surprise somebody, I'll miss my guess."

"Phooey!" I said, thinking of the hermit and the lout who ran the auto court. "Nobody in this whole damned county is ever surprised at anything. It's—it's like trying to make a dent in that lake out there!"

"We got a start," she said doggedly. "I can damn near tell you who put the bomb in the plane and when, but I still don't know who ordered it. Mebbe Flagg and Judge Barton are right. Mebbe we'd better look up this big shot and ex-political boss, Shane Fowler."

"In Heaven's name, why?" I demanded. "Aren't you satisfied that Considine is behind every move that's been made? And as for your blackmail theory, I've another that is just as good—or better. He has deliberately stripped his bank account and turned everything into cash for a quick get-away in case anything ever goes wrong. And how do you like that?"

"I think it's swell." She beamed. "I think you got a great head on you. And you know what else? I think I should've left you out there with that hermit."

Some one knocked at the door. It turned out to be "Stack" Petersen, the owner of the little airport, and Ted's friend. He looked pretty broken up.

He said, "Thank you for calling, Miss McDade. I've started the inquiries you suggested over the phone, and I've got the fastest car in Nevada. Whenever you're ready—"

"Let's go, Mex," said Violet. I spun the cylinder on my little gun, tucked it away above my knee. We went out to the car.

## V.

I WATCHED young Stack Petersen's face in the rear-vision mirror; it was hard, grim-lipped, and the muscles stood out along his lean jaw as though his teeth were clenched. He drove like a devil. The speedometer needle climbed to seventy, eighty, hovered there for a bit, then crept upward as the great car got its second breath.

Off to our right lay the lake, dark, brooding under the cold stars. And speaking of cold, I was pretty darned cold, myself. This part of Nevada is a mile high, and at two-thirty in the morning there is a bite to the air, even in summer time. I think that was the first time I ever envied Violet her shape. Three hundred pounds or so of fat is great insulation against the chills.

We hurtled on, beginning to climb. The black ribbon of asphalt ahead of us seemed to shrink in upon itself. Pine trees—great towering fellows—edged down toward the lake as if bent on pushing us off the cliffs. We were perhaps halfway to Vega City when our headlights picked up an obstruction across the highway. It was a car. Broadside on, it completely filled the narrow gap between the solid rank of trees and the not-so-solid, but equally terrifying, blackness which fell away from the cliffs. We were near enough now to see that the car was empty.

Stack Petersen said, "Looks like a trap, but I don't see how it can have anything to do with us. Shall I hit 'em, or stop?"

"Stop," said Violet. "Probably only a coupla State officers lookin' for contraband fruit."

Tortured tires screamed under swiftly applied brakes. The wheels locked and still we hurtled on. We

stopped just in time. The jar sent Violet and me out of our seats, clutching for the robe rail. We were sitting there like anchored dummies, when the two rear doors opened.

"O. K.," said Cigar-mouther, "hold it just like you are." He had a gun in his hand and so did the man in the other door. This wasn't the finger-snapping Wogan, but a uniformed cop with a red, beefy face and little, pig eyes.

Stack Petersen sat hunched over the wheel like a graven image of despair.

Violet gave me the nod and we climbed out meek enough. Petersen followed.

With a slow deliberation, Petersen's body slid over the cliff. Violet braced her great frame. I screamed as the weights almost jerked my arms out of their sockets.

For an instant there was silence, except for me stifling a moan.

Then Charlie raised his gun, brought it down in a slashing blow—that never landed. Violet shot him. I saw the cigar in his mouth mushroom as the bullet hit, mushroom and disappear. Beer-belly dropped the handcuffs, snatched at his gun. Violet let him have two slugs square in the chest. He tumbled, lay still.

We got Petersen back on the road, with my sockets still intact, and I looked him over. He was alive. The

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## THE GIRL IN THE YELLOW MASK

by CARROLL JOHN DALY

will appear in the May issue of

CLUES-DETECTIVE STORIES

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Charlie mouthed his piece of cigar "O.K., beer-belly, get your cuffs out."

He leered at Violet while the bracelets snapped the three of us together.

Petersen said, very low, "I'm sorry, Miss McDade. I don't know how this happened."

The beefy-faced cop hit him with his gun. I could almost hear the bone crunch under that cruel blow. Petersen sagged, out cold, maybe dead for all I knew.

Charlie said, "Cliff's high. Lake's deep here. Maybe that'll hold you, huh?"

blow hadn't done for him after all. His eyes opened and he smiled a little. "The Swedes are a hard-headed lot," he said weakly. Fingers explored the back of his head, came away bloody. He sat erect suddenly. "What happened?"

"Charlie had a good memory," I said. "Too good. He remembered our guns had been taken away from us. I guess it never occurred to him that we might have more. He was a little careless."

Violet popped up beside the car. "Beer-belly's dead, but Charlie ain't!" she cried. "Can you beat that? I plugged him right in the

teeth and he's still kickin'. Mebbe the cigar was stronger'n it smelled."

We got out, looked at Charlie. Blood welled from under his walrus mustache, and little flakes of soggy tobacco still clung to his lips. We turned him over, saw where the bullet had come out. It wasn't a pretty sight. Violet was propping him against the running board when his puffy eyes opened.

"Guess I'm a goner, hunh?" The words were horribly thick, mushy.

Violet lied to him. "Hell, no," she said. "You'd be O. K. if we'd take you to a doctor. 'Course we couldn't do that, though, unless you spilled the dope first."

A faint hope lighted his pale eyes. He tried to say something and it brought on another hemorrhage.

I was beginning to feel a little sick, but Violet was inexorable. "Look," she said, "I'll do most o' the talkin'. You and Wogan killed my man Tully O'Neill. Right?"

He shook his head.

"Then who did?"

Again he shook his head, no. Words struggled from the blood-frothed lips. "We took him down to Sacramento and shipped him, but we didn't kill him. Shane Fowler gave us a grand apiece for the job."

"And Shane Fowler had you pick us up at the airport, had you plant that bomb in one of our bags when we were deported? Are you sure it wasn't Frank Considine?"

He nodded his head, yes. "Fowler, not Considine," he mumbled. "For Heaven's sake, get me to a doctor now!" And those words were the last Cigar-mouther ever spoke. His gross body arched up in a tremendous shudder; the pale eyes closed. He sank back to the road and his eyes opened. This time they stayed open.

Violet stood up, spoke to Peter-

sen, "You and Nevada see if you can get their car outa the way. I gotta go through this guy's pockets."

We left her to her grisly task, began jockeying the police car back and forth till there was room enough for us to get by. Far down the highway a pair of headlights showed, but they were apart, not like a car's. In the stillness the wail of sirens was remote, yet somehow piercing keen. Motor-cycle cops!

Violet climbed back in the car with a little leather-covered notebook in her fist. We got under way with those menacing headlights less than a quarter of a mile to the rear. Staring back, I saw one of them halt at the spot we'd just left. The other came on. Stack Petersen trod the gas pedal to the floor boards.

AFTER A WHILE it began to dawn on me that the motor cycle was losing ground. Funny, I thought, those things are supposed to do ninety or better. I took a peep over Stack Petersen's shoulder. We were doing a hundred and five. I nearly passed out.

Violet, apparently oblivious to our crazy speed over that twisting, snake-like highway, was trying, in the semigloom of the tonneau, to decipher the contents of the little notebook.

She said, "Charlie's memory couldn't have been so good, after all. He had to write some things down. There's enough names and dates and amounts in this thing to hang ninety per cent o' Vega City."

"You mean he actually wrote names?"

"Well, some is only initials, and I don't recognize any of 'em, myself, but a good guesser familiar with the town oughta be able to add two and two. So whadda you think about Frank Considine now?"

"I haven't seen or heard anything to change my mind. Maybe he and Shane Fowler are in it together. Maybe Cigar-mouther was lying."

"Yeah, and mebbe pigs has got wings. Anyway, our next stop is Shane Fowler, though I dunno if he is the answer. Somethin'-a funny little somethin'-keeps whispering in my ear that we've missed the key to this whole business." She raised her voice, called, "Hey, Stack, this guy you got checkin' the hotels and all—is he reliable?"

"Plenty," said Petersen. "He's my twin brother."

"Then how you reckon Cigar-mouther knew we were alive and comin' back? They must have staked out your place, just in case the bomb didn't do a complete job. Figured if anybody came out in one piece they'd probably contact you—which is just what I done—and the minute you start chasin' around at two in the morning, they're hep."

"It's possible," he admitted. "I never thought of that." And then, "Hang on, you two. We're ditching the highway around the next turn."

I closed my eyes. There came a tremendous shudder, but no telltale screech of burning rubber. The car tilted far over on two wheels, swayed sickeningly, settled, bounced over on the opposite wheels, then rocked gradually to a complete stop.

Petersen's calm voice, seeming to come from a long way off, said, "I used to be a race driver before Ted and I took up flying. If the dust settles in time that cop'll go right on past."

I opened my eyes. Our lights were out and we were parked on a dirt road. The little swirl of dust from our skid was swiftly dissipating itself in the breeze from the lake. It was practically gone when the motor cycle flashed down the highway,

whirled by us. Petersen started the motor and we began a slow, tortuous climb up over a ridge. Presently we came to the top, and there beneath us were the lights of Vega City. We dropped down to a parallel highway, crept into town at a modest forty.

## VI.

THREE O'CLOCK in the morning was apparently only the shank of the evening in Vega. Traffic, though it had thinned a little, was still lively, and cafés, gambling joints and bars were still flourishing. Stack Petersen pointed out Shane Fowler's casino, said, "He may still be there, but his home would be more quiet, don't you think?"

Violet said she thought it would. He went on, came to an exclusive residential section. Petersen indicated the house was sought. It was set far back in perhaps a half acre of ground. There were trees, and a tall hedge, but there was also a light on the first floor.

Violet said, "Roll around the corner and drop us off. Then look up your brother and see if he has found out anything. We'll be waiting for you."

The car halted and we got out. Spreading trees shaded the cross street so that you couldn't even see the street light on the corner. We went down an alley, dark as a tunnel, counting the houses till we came to Fowler's.

Violet was only a bulky shadow against the iron gate set in the hedge-covered fence. We went in, crossed a shrub-dotted rear lawn to the side of the house. There was a porte-cochère, and under it, a car, lights out but motor purring softly. Without warning a side door

opened, letting out a rectangle of pale-yellow light, and framing a man. It was Frank Considine, the district attorney. I had just time enough to see that much before he closed the door behind him, ever so quietly, got in his car and, still not putting on his lights, drifted ghost-like down the drive.

We waited a moment or two. I had the impulse to nudge Violet, whisper an "I told you so," but I throttled it. Crowing over Violet McDade doesn't get you anywhere, even when you're right. She opened the door stealthily, reached in and snapped off the hall light. We stood there listening. Not a sound. I felt her hand fumbling for me, reached out and grasped it. We crossed the hall in total darkness. There was a door farther along, with a crack of light showing under it. Still no sound.

Violet opened the door, stiffened. We were staring at Shane Fowler, all right. Stack Petersen had described him to us. But Shane Fowler wasn't going to help clear up any mystery. He was dead. There was a small, round, bluish hole in his right cheek and a thin trickle of blood made a little river down along his jaw and disappeared inside his collar.

He sat behind the desk, leaning back against the tall chair, eyes fixed in a sort of mild wonder at some spot on the wall near the ceiling. I almost caught myself turning to see what he was looking at. White, well-kept hands rested on the jumble of papers before him, as if he himself had been sorting them. But he couldn't have been responsible for the wild disorder of the rest of the room. The wall safe stood open, gaping, and its contents littered the deep-piled rug.

VIOLET closed the door softly. Rounding the desk, she cursed, stared down at the floor beside the dead man as if she couldn't believe the evidence of her own eyes. I, too, stared. It was my little .32—the one Cigar-mouther had taken from me back there in the hotel—which lay beside the chair. Violet picked the gun up, using the hem of her skirt, and smelled it.

"Yep," she sighed. "A very neat frame. It's been fired recently, and the size o' the hole in his cheek makes it almost unanimous. Added to that, the killer bungles a suicide set-up on purpose. You're supposed to have killed the guy, tried to make it look like he done the Dutch, when even a kid could see he didn't. The bullet ranged up through the top o' his head. He didn't have no time to lay your gun down on the floor and then fold his lily-white hands on the desk. So the cops will see it's murder, and they'll check your gun numbers against your license, which is also in their possession."

"Let's get out of here!" I chattered.

"Not yet, me haughty damsel. Mebbe you really did kill him, for all I know. It'd be just like you." She sighed again, heavily. "Every time I leave you for just one teeny-weeny little minute you get into some kind of a jam."

"You fool!" I cried. "You fat, clumsy elephant! Oh, how I hate you! You know damned well that Frank Considine must have got my gun from Cigar-mouther. He got yours, didn't he? And we saw him leaving here just now, didn't we? Certainly it's a frame, and Frank Considine did it!"

"All right, all right!" she growled. "You don't hafta scream, do you? Mebbe this mug has got servants, or a wife, or somethin'!" She cocked

her great head in a listening attitude. Apparently we were alone in the house.

I caught her arm, tried to drag her out of the room. She shook me off. "What's a little murder rap in a whole city fulla murders? 'Sides, that motor cop back on the highway has already phoned headquarters about Charlie and beer-belly. We're as safe here as anywhere."

She was on her knees now, shuffling through the mass of papers before the safe. She rifled the stubs of a check book, found two pass books and went through them. I couldn't tell from the expression on her moon face whether she'd found what she was looking for or not, nor from her enigmatic mutter, "Then where *did* it go?"

I stamped my foot. "I don't care where it went. I know where I am going. That's away from here, and I'm taking my gun with me!"

THERE WAS a sound like somebody snapping his fingers. Wogan stepped from behind the drapes over the French windows. The muzzle of his gun looked like the mouth of a cannon. He stood there, balanced easily, hard eyes sardonic.

"I don't think you're going out, ladies—not under your own power, anyway. They'll probably carry you out." He raised his gun slightly. "Don't make a move, either of you. I'm not making the same mistake Charlie did. Word just reached me of what happened on the lake road, so I know you've got guns. He didn't. And speaking of frames, how's this one sound? Nobody but me and Charlie knew you had a gun, Miss Alvarado. We just neglected to turn it in. All I've got to do is drill you both and I'm a hero. You killed Shane Fowler; I killed you. Neat?"

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"But not gaudy," said Violet, still hunkered on the floor. "But look, Wogan, before you drill us, tell me something. If nobody but you and Charlie had access to Nevada's gun, then it must've been you or Charlie who killed Shane Fowler. Right?"

"Not quite, sheba. I didn't say we were the only ones who had access to the gun. I said we were the only ones who knew the gun was hers. As a matter of fact, neither Charlie nor I killed Fowler." He grinned crookedly, snapped the fingers of his left hand.

I knew my reprieve was over. The gun muzzle was trained directly on me, and he was going to shoot.

"The mystery," he said, "of who did for Shane Fowler will give you something to think about, Miss McDade, on your trip to—well, to wherever it is that you're going." His trigger finger whitened.

Desperate, I flung myself at the desk. His first slug caught me in the leg. It went dead under me and I sprawled forward in a crazy dive. My head crashed into a corner of the desk as I fell. Partially stunned, I waited for the finish while reverberating echoes filled the room. Nothing happened. No more bullets buried themselves in my helpless back. The echoes chased each other out the windows. I sat up, looked for Violet.

She was wiping a smear of blood from her cheek and there was a look of smug satisfaction in her little greenish eyes. Her guns were out of sight. I rolled over, saw Wogan face down by the windows. He wasn't moving.

Violet bent over me. "Where you hit, Mex?"

"It's my leg!" I cried. "He got me in the leg!"

She stuck a pudgy finger through the bullet hole in my skirt, and for

the first time I noted there wasn't any blood. "In the leg!" she sneered. "He got you in the gun, you mean. I always wondered why dames carry guns on their legs, and now I know. It's to protect their legs, the most important part of 'em. Stand up, you sissy."

I spat at her. "I can't stand up, you ape! I may not be shot, but my leg is paralyzed."

She lifted me, propped me against the desk and went over and looked at Wogan. "Ol' Finger-snapper couldn't figure, either. He thought he was smarter than Charlie, but he forgot that you can't shoot at two targets at the same time. Not with one gun, anyway. He just happened to pick the wrong target first."

"Meaning you're faster than I am?"

"Meaning just that," she said placidly. "You're slower with a rod than molasses in January." She took my gun—the planted one—clenched it in Wogan's fist. About one of her own she curled the dead fingers of Shane Fowler. They were stiffening rapidly and I wondered a little about that. She affixed Wogan's .45 to her sleeve harness and surveyed the scene with a critical eye. "Not good," she said, "but mebbe somebody will believe Wogan killed Fowler. Not that I care much."

## VII.

SOMEBODY was pounding down the stairs now, from the floor above. Closing in on us rapidly like barking dogs, one starting another, sirens lifted their brass-throated voices. Violet scooped me up with a mighty arm, carried me out through the windows. In nothing flat we were back in the Stygian alley, down it and into the sanctuary of Stack Petersen's hurtling demon.

The sirens converged on the house behind us with a strangling sound, a Gargantuan death rattle. We rolled smoothly away from it all. Massaging the numbness from my leg I listened to Violet and Petersen.

"Any luck?" Violet inquired.

"No proof that O'Neill ever landed in Vega City. He didn't register at any of the hotels, either under his own name or an alias. You gave me a good description of him and I passed it on to my brother. A porter at the railroad station thinks he remembers a man like O'Neill getting off the train, but he isn't sure. After all, it was two days ago."

"Unh-hunh," said Violet. "Well, that kinda bears out my theory. Bein' a stranger in town, it looks like Tully O'Neill would have gone to a hotel. Only he didn't—makin' it pretty conclusive that he never got a chance. Well, what did your brother find out from the bank cashier?"

"No records of deposits in anything like those amounts."

I said, "Is this a secret conference or may I be included? I'm supposed to be a partner in McDade & Alvarado, but I must confess I don't know what you two are talking about."

"Why, the money!" said Violet, surprised. "The dough had to go somewhere, didn't it?"

"What money?" I demanded.

"Never mind," she said irritably. "Let it pass. I'll write it all out for you later." She said to Petersen, "Look, Stack, we gotta work fast. We need a coupla cans o' gas, and some oily or greasy waste. Can do?"

"Sure," he said. "My brother owns a gas station."

"I'm sure glad," said Violet fervently, "that your mother had twins. I don't know what I'd have done without you." She looked at me



*"All I got to do is drill you both and I'm a hero. Neat?"*  
*"But not gaudy," said Violet.*

reflectively, disparagingly. "A lotta help you are."

I could only make gargling noises in my throat.

That bothered her, too. "For Heaven's sake, stop that! You give me the creeps!"

WE PAUSED presently at what I presumed to be the other twin's gas station. It was closed, but it

seemed that these Petersen brothers functioned almost as one. Stack had a duplicate key. After a little while we were once more rolling, this time toward the center of town. We ended up at a flatiron building which was the First National Bank. Two main arteries crossed diagonally at this point and, despite the hour, traffic still ebbed and flowed.

A watchman came out of the main

entrance to the bank, descended marble steps 'neath a small neon sign which read: "Safe Deposit Boxes." There was only a dim night light in the bank proper, but apparently the safe-deposit department was kept open all night.

We turned, parked across the street from the bank.

Violet said, "I gotta make a couple or three phone calls. You and Stack keep your eyes open, on account of if that guard goes back in the bank my plan won't work." She waddled down the sidewalk to an all-night drug store.

We waited. I said, "Listen, Stack Petersen, maybe you don't know it, but helping Violet is sometimes like being the tail to a kite. If you'd like to resign, now is the time."

He looked at me. "I'll trail along with Violet McDade. Ted was my friend. Violet got the two who actually placed the bomb, and I believe in her, believe she can get the man who ordered the job done."

I stared out at the traffic. It seemed that death stared back at me from each passing car. I shivered a little. The guard hadn't reappeared by the time Violet got back. She was puffing, in a hurry now.

"Gimme some matches, Stack, and the other stuff."

He said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Stick right where you are—you and Nevada, both. This is my show and if anything happens you two can help me more by bein' on the outside lookin' in. Scram if they pick me up."

I protested. "I'm not going to let you do it!"

"You try to stop me," she said, "and I'll take you apart!" Snatching up a pair of pliers from the front

seat, she waddled up a great roll of greasy waste under an arm. Then, a five-gallon can in either fist, she stalked directly across the street to the bank. I lost her for a moment in the shadows of its granite walls. There was a sharp, metallic blow and she reappeared with only one of the cans of gas. Holding it close against the building she waddled along as if she had all the time in the world.

A man in a dilapidated truck yelled at her, "Hey, lady, your can is leaking!" She paid him no heed, rounded the corner. An ever-widening trail followed her. In a moment she was back, running now, and the next thing I knew, the second can of gas was hurtling through the air, straight at an enormous plate-glass window.

GLASS SHATTERED with a booming sound, lost immediately in the ensuing explosion. A flaring wad had followed the can of gas. There was a tremendous roar and a furnacelike blast which swept upward and out, almost licking the paint from our car. Blistering flames shot skyward as the train of gasoline outside caught fire. The building was an inferno, a thing alive, blazing furiously now.

I saw Violet again. She was in the entrance to the downstairs vaults, waving her arms, and though I couldn't hear her I knew she was bellowing: "Fire! Fire! The bank's on fire!"

Already traffic had stalled on both arteries, was piling itself up into an inextricable jam. People got out of cars, began rushing to and fro. Some one must have turned in the alarm, for sirens and the warning clang of engine bells came to me faintly over the noise from the fire.

The uniformed guard and two frantic clerks came tumbling up from the safe depository. The crowd swallowed them. Violet, shielding her face with an arm, disappeared down the stairs and almost immediately great clouds of blackish smoke began to issue from the entrance.

I missed seeing her completely when she finally emerged, didn't know she was out till she was at my very elbow, panting, sweating, smoke-smudged and altogether disreputable. We watched a hose cart and a pumper crash through the stalled cars, hook in to a plug. As the first nozzle shot its stream against the towering wall of flame, a man dashed around the corner nearest us. The fire lighted up the lean face, the cold gray eyes of Judge Barton.

He saw us, halted as if restrained by some invisible force. "You! I—I thought you had left Vega City!"

"Just temporary, judge," said Violet. "Just a detour, you might say." She gestured toward the depository. "Flames ain't reached the boxes, yet. If you hurried, you might be able to save something from the wreck."

Eyes on the fire, he said, as if he'd scarcely heard her, "What? Oh, my box. Why, there's nothing in it, at present."

Violet looked very disappointed. "Nothing in it, hunh? Well, now, that's too bad. I mean, that's—uh—swell, judge." She stiffened suddenly and I followed her stare. The fire was still doing nobly. They'd found out that water wasn't helping much and were beginning to use chemicals. From the vault stairs, blending with the billowing smoke, a figure emerged—a figure swathed in a great coat, hat tugged low over his eyes and the lower part of his

face covered with some kind of a cloth. Something that might have been a steel drawer was clutched in his arms.

Violet leaped into the street. "Hold it, Flagg!"

He didn't hold it. He began to run. Violet's guns flashed out, leveled, boomed twice like miniature cannons above the roar of the pumpers.

Flagg stumbled, went to his knees, then his chest. He skidded a little on the wet pavement and the steel drawer made screeching sounds on the sidewalk. Violet scooped up the box, whirled just as Flagg fired. She kicked the gun out of his hand.

Somehow—I hadn't been conscious of running, or even getting out of the car—I was at her side. Judge Barton and Stack Petersen were there, too. And Frank Considine, the district attorney. There were others, of course, literally hundreds of others, but for the moment they didn't seem to count.

CYRUS Q. FLAGG crouched there on the sidewalk, the handkerchief gone from his face, legs twisted under him like a legless pencil peddler. His three chins were a sort of yellowish gray, but he was laughing at us. Even his eyes laughed, and for just a moment I was sorry for him.

"You take a lot of scaring, Violet McDade—and a lot of killing, too. I'm sorry I can't bow." He chuckled happily. "My legs are not quite up to it."

Violet didn't laugh, "You killed O'Neill, didn't you? On the train?"

"Certainly I killed him. I was sending a wire ahead to have him stopped. He came in at the wrong time, so I let him have it right there in my compartment. I dumped him

out of the window after a while, and Shane Fowler later had him picked up and shipped back to you. My mistake. I underestimated women."

Violet rifled the manila envelopes in the steel drawer, and the packages of currency.

"Oh, it's all there." Flagg chuckled. The fire seemed to chuckle, too, and it was all rather horrible, like a nightmare. "The money you couldn't find, and the evidence against—"

"Don't say it, Flagg. I've got all the evidence I need. Your cigar-chewing dick kept records, too. Only I don't know why you had to kill your front man, Shane Fowler."

"Poor Shane." Flagg sighed. "Your presence worried him so, and he was beginning to forget that he was only the front man. He was even weighing what I allowed him to keep against what he could have if I disappeared. Very sad case. Very sad."

Violet said, "Ain't it?"

Flagg said, "Isn't it?" and then he brought out the gun from his overcoat pocket. "I'm not a vengeful man, Miss McDade. Still, I should miss you where I'm going. I think I'll take you with me."

It seemed as if we all were paralyzed. Violet's two hands were anchored to that damnable drawer. She couldn't drop it in time. No one else seemed to be doing a thing except stand there, and in the fraction of a second before he squeezed the trigger I thought of a million and one things. I thought of Tully O'Neill in the trunk, and of Ted at the bottom of the lake, and of Violet as she would be, lying there on the sidewalk. Something—some reflex within me put my gun in my hand. I shot Cyrus Q. Flagg in the back of

the head. Cowardly? Perhaps. But I saved Violet McDade.

I heard her voice, apologetic, but blurred as if with distance, "Thanks, Mex. You can shoot, can't you?" And then I got a look at what my slug had done to Flagg's face. I fainted.

WHEN I finally got around to opening my eyes again, I was between Violet and Frank Considine in the tonneau of the hurtling demon. Judge Barton was up in the seat beside Stack, and the cold wind was fanning my face.

Judge Barton's head was erect, uncompromising.

Violet was saying, "I'd rather it had been you, judge. It always burns me to find out a fat guy is a villain. I kinda liked the way Flagg laughed."

Barton half turned. His face looked bleak, hard, and his voice was the voice on the bench. "Then you didn't know till he came out with the evidence?"

"Nope, I didn't, for a fact. It could've been either of you. Not finding a trace o' Tully O'Neill in Vega, I got to wondering if mebbe he hadn't been stopped before he got here. Which kinda put it up to you or Flagg, you two bein' the only ones who knew he was on the train. 'Course, there was the puzzle of why you two hired us in the first place.

"It dawned on me sudden that mebbe you couldn't help yourselves. Your committee decided to bring in outside talent. You had to do it. Flagg, bein' on the committee, got his money's worth out of inside information, which is why he came along with you to see who was hired. But there was no way o' me knowing which was which, you or him, till I located the dough."

"But the fire! Of course, the damage is small and fully covered by insurance, but was the fire necessary?"

"Look," said Violet, "I don't go around bein' a arsonist just for fun. I kept lookin' for the dough Considine paid out. I couldn't find it, so I guessed it might be in a deposit box. If I'd said we'd got an order to search the boxes, that, in itself, would have tipped our hand, given somebody time to cover. But not knowing how serious this fire was gonna be, or how many visiting firemen might be pawing through his private papers, our man was bound to make a try for the box. I admit I was disappointed when you didn't. Gosh, if you'd only grin a little, or somethin', mebbe a guy could like you!"

CONSIDINE said bitterly, "Judge Barton is probably worried about why I was being blackmailed. He wants to know whom I murdered—if any. Well, show him the envelope with my name on it."

Violet chuckled. "There ain't no more envelope, folks. I left it back there, smolderin' in the fire."

"You what!" The judge was incredulous.

"Yep," said Violet placidly, "it's burned all to hell by now. I was afraid that if I kept it, I'd become a blackmailer, too, and if there's anything I'd hate to be, it's one o' them mugs. Look, judgie, mebbe Considine did something when he was just a kid; mebbe he even took the rap for something he never done at all. He's pulled himself out, ain't he? He's made a name for himself and his family. And with all this evidence he can clean up your lousy town, can't he? Besides," she added slyly, "the reform league can't publicly go back on its own man. So how's about a little smile for Vi-let?"

The cold eyes seemed to soften, the fine, aristocratic mouth to tremble a little as he looked at her sooty face. "In Los Angeles," he said huskily, "I told you Frank Considine was my friend. Smile? I've got all I can do to keep from crying. You are a great woman, Violet McDade. Not only the world's best cleaner-upper, but a soft-hearted old fool. You—you make me feel pretty damned small!"

"Hell"—she chuckled—"oh, hell, judgie, that's just because I'm so big and fat. Like Nevada says, 'most anybody is small beside a elephant.' "



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# PEACE and QUIET

by James E. Smith

**F**IFTEEN MINUTES after leaving Elton Hospital, I entered Chief Marcy's office. I caught the echo of his usual bark as he replaced the telephone receiver. Seeing me, he wiped the dark frown from his face with a wide smile.

"Come in, Tom," he said. "Glad you're back on the job. You look fine. I always said those Elton doctors are the best ever."

I dropped into my favorite seat. "If you said that," I replied, "you must be on their pay roll. They're fakers, racketeers, dressed-up grave diggers. I go there to get some of Al Macklin's lead out of my hide and they keep me ten days."

Marcy nodded thoughtfully. "Too bad you couldn't prove it was Macklin who fired the shot. We pulled him in on suspicion, but I knew we wouldn't be able to hold him. Not when a guy has Joe Bates for a mouthpiece." Marcy beamed, waved his hand. "But what the hell. The rest did you good. You look like a different man."

"That's the trouble," I said. "I wanted to see the papers. I wanted Annabelle to visit me. I wanted to get to hell out of that place. Would they let me? No. The doctors prescribed peace and quiet. Ten whole days of it. I got so much peace and quiet in my system, I feel like a walking tombstone."

Marcy cocked his head to one side, squared his jaw. "Tombstone, eh? Then I got just the job for you. Maybe before the case is finished you'll have to arrest a ghost."

I studied the chief's oversized

bulk, wondered how he would look when squeezed into an ordinary strait-jacket. "That's all you want?" I asked. "A ghost. You're sure you wouldn't like a first-class imp of hell —Al Macklin?"

"Maybe Macklin does figure in it. He's always had a weakness for jewelry. But if you don't let me explain, I'll be wanting your badge and the force will be minus a second-rate sergeant detective." Marcy re-lit his cigar, started puffing.

"About six months ago, Mrs. Roger Corbin, the society dame, paid a small fortune for a hoodoo string of pearls known as The Noose. The pearls have a long and black history. They bring hard luck to every one who handles them. Sometimes it isn't so bad. But in most cases it's suicide—by hanging. Mrs. Corbin hanged herself a week ago to-day.

"Murphy investigated the case. When he called me, I went up. It was suicide, all right. And the pearls were gone."

"You think the ghost got them?"

"I don't know," Marcy confessed. "I do know the mayor and Corbin's insurance company are burning my phone. If we don't break this case soon, I got to find myself a good spook doctor."

"You can forget about a hanging, thieving ghost," I said. "Mrs. Corbin suffered from an incurable disease. She tried to shoot herself down at Palm Beach last season. The papers hushed it up, said it was an accident incurred while cleaning a revolver. The pearls are something else again. Macklin is a good

*He felt like a  
walking tombstone—  
on his way to arrest  
a ghost.*



*"You dope! Didn't you hear  
what he said about the hat?  
You think I want to burn?"*

suspect. And we mustn't forget Cash Hammond."

Hammond calls himself an adjuster. Whenever a big gem job is pulled and we fail to make an immediate arrest, the victim or his insurance company gets Hammond to adjust matters. A large sum of money changes hands. The victim's sparklers are returned; the crook gets more money than a fence would pay, and Hammond grabs a big commission.

"Hammond was seen entering the insurance people's office yesterday afternoon," Marcy said. "Since then, he's been pulling his favorite stunt —making it his business to be seen with every crook in town. It's like hiding a tree in the middle of a forest. I wish we could do something with that guy. I guess it's no use, though. Even the stoolies play dumb when his name is mentioned."

"You know why," I said. "He's like Joe Bates. They help make

crime profitable. They have the full confidence of gangdom. Why don't you invite Hammond down for a session in the back room? I know a dozen cops who would enjoy swinging the hose."

"That's out," Marcy snapped. "The opposition papers are harping on police brutality. The mayor will be up for reelection soon, so we got to be extra careful. I want the pearls and I want the punk who lifted them. But I warn you, any rough stuff and you'll be handed a fifteen-day vacation without pay." Marcy made a pretense of clearing his throat. "Incidentally, there's a five-grand reward on the pearls. That could buy you and Annabelle a nice two-week vacation—if the ghost doesn't decide to hang you."

**LOCATING AL MACKLIN** was no simple matter. I finally found him at the Club Paree, a hot-spot road house near the city limits. He was with Joe Bates and an attractive little blonde named Ruby Roth. Ruby used to be in the floor show at the Palace. Bates was making a play for her at the time. Now, she and Macklin were staging a hand-holding act. Bates didn't seem to like it.

I side-stepped the manager and his muscle men, worked my way down the narrow, crowded aisle. I knew the three had spotted me. I caught a glimpse of them with their heads close together. Then they straightened up. I stopped at their table, sat down.

"Mind if I join the party?" I asked.

Macklin, directly opposite me, grumbled something. Ruby played with the clasp of her hand bag. Only Bates was able to control his true feelings. "We are honored," he said.

"I hear you've been down with lead poisoning. A serious case?"

"Think nothing of it," I said. "A man born to hang will never drown."

Bates smiled. "Pearls of wisdom. By the way, sergeant, any new developments in the Corbin pearl theft?"

"Not one. Confidentially, I hope I don't have to touch the hoodooed things. Of course, I pretend searching for them. I'll pat your pockets before I leave, if you don't mind."

Bates leaned back in his chair. "Macklin and I would like nothing better," he said. "We are always most eager to help."

Macklin banged his fist on the table. His face grew red and his short, powerful figure seemed to grow an inch taller. "Stop beatin' around the bush," he all but shouted. "Listen, copper, you thought I pumped lead in you. Now you think I got the pearls. You do too damned much thinkin'. One of these days—"

Bates put his hand on Macklin's arm. "Quiet, Al," he said. "The public has ears—and a memory. Don't mind him, sergeant; Al never takes time to think."

A waiter approached with the drinks Bates had ordered on my arrival. As he was serving Macklin, Ruby's bag fell to the floor at my side. Ruby bent over, hastily gathered up the spilled contents. I had caught a side-view glance of its fall. The next instant, my eyes darted to Macklin. He was pulling a cigarette case from his pocket. The waiter was coming around to my side of the table.

"You're slowin' up, Hawk-eye," Macklin said with a forced smile. "You should have poked around in Ruby's bag. Maybe she pulled the Corbin job."

I said nothing. The waiter had my glass in hand, was about to set

it down. I turned toward Ruby and, at the same time, hit the waiter's arm with my elbow. The tablecloth got most of the drink. My suit got the rest.

I pushed back my chair. "That ruins my three-year-old serge," I said.

THE WAITER was profuse with apologies. He busied himself with towel and napkin, sopping up the liquor. He stood so close to me that if I hadn't moved, his jacket would have brushed my face. It was a simple matter to slide my hand into his pocket, pull out the pearls and deposit them in my own.

"That's another time you thought wrong," Macklin said, when the waiter had gone. "Just because you're afraid o' knock-out drops, you spoil a good drink. That's another pearl o' wisdom."

"Let's forget pearls for a while," I said. "I'm sorry I drew the assignment. If I touch them, I'm hoo-dooed. If I don't get them, I'll be pounding a beat again. Come to think of it"—I gave them a sweeping glance—"Bates is the only fortunate one here. Ruby is playing with fire. Al is headed for the thunderbolt and—"

Macklin sprang up. "Why, you are—" he started.

Bates stopped him again, forced him back in the seat. This time, it was Ruby who hurried to his defense. "You have a grudge against Al," she said. "That's why you say such things. Al is sweet and kind. He likes to see people happy. Only yesterday, he gave me this diamond wrist watch. And my mink cape"—she tugged at the wrap hanging over the back of her chair—"was a birthday present from him. You can't make me believe anything bad about Al."

"I know," I said. "I couldn't make Mary Doran believe it, either."

Macklin must have decided to accept Bates' counsel. He said nothing, regarded me with a sickly sneer on his face.

"Mary was Al's girl two years ago," I went on. "He gave her that same cape. Some time later, she fell in love with a young salesman. They were to be married. Poor Mary never did hear the wedding bells. She was killed by a hit-and-run driver.

"Your watch looks like the one Al gave Vivian Rawson, when they were going around together. Vivian was a nice kid but she wasn't very smart. She hinted that if she wanted to, she could strap Al in the hot seat. Vivian's name is still listed at the missing-persons bureau. Al sure does have tough luck with his girl friends."

Macklin patted the blonde's hand. "Don't mind him, kid. He's only running off at the mouth. If there was any truth in that stuff, he would have collared me long ago. Even if he had to frame me."

"I'm in no hurry," I said. "You'll be framed proper one of these days—as soon as Bates has half a million dollars."

Three heads jerked up. Bates was about to light a cigar. He let the match burn out. "Half a million dollars," he repeated. "Years ago I had a foolish notion about such a sum of money. Have you been delving into my private life, sergeant?"

I nodded. "You're one of the smartest lawyers in town and I like to study the lives of smart men. During your law-school days you were called Half-a-million Bates, because you swore you would quit work the minute you got that much. I figure you must be nearing the mark."

Ruby and Macklin looked at Bates. The lawyer lighted his cigar, examined the glowing end. "And how does that affect my client?"

"It's very simple," I explained. "While Macklin is on the street, you'll have to work to keep him there. He wouldn't let you quit. Bad as he is, Macklin's no fool. He knows that professional ethics and future business won't let you tell what you know about him. But there's no guarantee that you won't talk after taking down your shingle and going places. Therefore, before resigning practice, you'll have to sell him down the river. Only when Macklin rides the thunderbolt will you be a free man."

No one said anything. Ruby had stopped flashing her mink cape and diamonds. Macklin had a grim look on his face. He sat toying with an empty glass. For once, Bates was without a ready answer.

I got up. "Don't thank me," I said. "I get paid for finding faults."

I LOST NO TIME reaching the lobby. The hat-check girl was exceptionally slow. I could see Macklin leave the table, search the room. I knew he was looking for the waiter—for the pearls.

I hurried down the dusty, rutted road. A full moon flooded everything with a silvery light. The large weeping-willow tree under which I had parked my car seemed a mile away. A stiff breeze ruffled the hanging branches, started weird shadows dancing all around me. "Listen, pearls." I whispered. "If you must pull some high jinx, wait until I put you on the chief's desk."

Motor roar sounded in the club's parking lot. A big car pulled into the road and stopped. Then a powerful searchlight swung in a half arc and made the world brighter still.

Waiting until it was focused in the opposite direction, I shot from under the branches, shifted from first to high and gave the car free rein.

An intermittent glare in the rear-view mirror showed the other car getting under power. A bullet struck a front fender, careened off into the night. Another zinged past. It was impossible to crouch in the seat. What with the ruts and all, the light car couldn't hold the road. I was sitting on air, hanging onto the steering wheel, with my right foot clamped down on the gas pedal. I still don't know where my left foot was.

Within a very few minutes, I realized I would never make it back to town. Bullets were coming faster, and, even if the aim was bad, the hoodoo pearls might make me bounce into a couple. Hammond lived less than a quarter of a mile away, down a side road. Once inside the house, I could phone Marcy and start planning how to spend the reward.

Skidding around the turn put me at right angles to the pursuing car. I tried to learn who and how many were following me. All I saw was a belch of flame. Then the windshield burst into a million pieces and sprinkled my hair. Hammond's house was crawling into view. I snaked my gun out, made ready for a wild sprint.

A bullet-torn tire revised my plans. The car wabbled, slid, headed straight for a stone fence. I yanked open the door, jumped. I landed on my feet, but the momentum sent me staggering across the road and down into a ditch. I heard a terrific smash, a roar. The world turned red and hot as crackling flames went to work.

The wind, now stronger, was blowing the heat and sparks toward me.

My gun had been lost in the shuffle. Blinded by the glare, I started crawling away. An explosion sounded close by. A bullet rammed my shoulder, hurled me against the wall of the ditch. Then a dark figure jumped down to my side, began clubbing, kicking me. I lost interest in pearls, rewards, everything.

RETURNING consciousness brought pain and bewilderment. I lay on the floor of a room, a stiff wind blowing over me and a tumult of noise pounding in my head. I grabbed hold of a chair, pulled myself erect. The wind from an open window struck me full in the face, helped drive away the grogginess.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, I heard my name called again and again. It was Marcy's voice. I tried to think—a painful process. I began to get some inkling of my whereabouts. I was in a large bedroom. It was not my own, although I felt that I had seen those furnishings before.

Suddenly there came the crash of splintered wood. Marcy's arm and shoulder broke through the panel of a door. He fumbled with the lock, pushed the door in.

A uniformed cop followed Marcy. Still somewhat dazed, I stood looking at them. Marcy grabbed my hurt shoulder. I almost passed out again. He held his face close to mine.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Why didn't you open up?"

While I was trying to find the right answer, the lights were switched on. Then I was faced with a more mystifying question: Why had I been carried from the ditch to Hammond's bedroom?

The cop opened another door of the room, snapped the wall light. I

could hear him catch his breath. "Look, chief," he said.

Marcy and I turned and looked into a large, private bathroom. Marcy cursed. I held on to the chair for support.

Death is never a pleasant sight. Death by hanging changes pathos into horror. It would seem that Hammond had adjusted matters to a finality. Eyes bulging, blackened tongue protruding, his body hung suspended from the crossbeam of a stall shower.

"Lord!" Marcy exclaimed. "I told you to cut out the rough stuff—and then you go and hang the guy. Give me your gun, Falkner. You're under arrest."

Forgetting that I had lost the gun in the ditch, I put my hand in a pocket, pulled out a thick roll of bills. Marcy snatched them away.

"So that's the way it is, eh?" he growled. "Robbery and a fake suicide. You should have known you wouldn't be able to get away with such a stunt, Falkner."

"It looks as if some one stands a good chance of getting away with something," I said. I related my experience at the Club Paree, on the road and regaining consciousness in the room. I could see that Marcy, every one, doubted me. I hunted through my pockets for the pearl necklace. It was gone, of course. I told Marcy. "Also," I continued, "isn't it strange that you should arrive here at the opportune moment? I suppose you received one of those mysterious phone calls."

Marcy scratched his jaw. "Well," he said, "as a matter of fact, we did get a call from a pay station. Some one said he passed this place and heard screams. When I heard it was Hammond's house I decided to come along. We found your hat in the hall. You're staking your life on a

lousy story, Tom. If you were half smart, you'd have said you just got here and found Hammond a suicide—that you locked the door through excitement or something. But it's too late for that, now. The door was locked from the inside and no one climbed out of the window. The ground below isn't disturbed and there's no way to climb to the roof. I'm taking you in, Tom."

"Wait a minute," I said. "It won't help the department one bit to arrest the wrong man. Let me have a look at Hammond. You can't tell, I might confess."

MARCY thought for a moment. "O. K. But don't touch anything. Any prints around here represent evidence. I'll not have you say they were made after we arrived."

We entered the bathroom, moved closer to Hammond. The yellow, woody rope was new, perhaps bought for the occasion. It was fastened at the back of his neck. After passing over the beam, the long end was wound around and tied to a water faucet. An overturned stool lay a few feet away.

"Well," Marcy said, "did you see enough?"

"Do yourself a favor. Let me play detective for a few minutes."

"Like hell." Marcy motioned to the cop. "Leo, you stay in this room until homicide arrives. I'm taking Falkner down to headquarters."

Before leaving the house, Marcy tried to telephone. The line was disconnected. Another cop was stationed on the front porch. He received orders similar to Leo's. Marcy nudged me toward his car. "You drive," he said with a wave of his gun. "And if you think I don't know how to pull a trigger, just try something funny."

He sat at my side, the gun held

only a few inches from my body. Gritting my teeth to withstand the pain of my tortured shoulder, I speeded toward town, wondered if my hurry would seem unnatural and prompt suspicion.

"I suppose you know you're making a fool of yourself," I said.

"Maybe yes and maybe no. I can't take the chance of having you roam around after all this. Don't think I'm trying to railroad you. If any other evidence turns up, I'll investigate every bit—personally."

"While I rot in jail," I said bitterly. "You think you have a case against me. What about a motive? The few bucks that were planted in my pocket? Chicken feed compared with what Macklin might have and probably did get."

"What you mean?"

"Figure it this way: To stand off a frisk, Macklin passed the hoodooed things to a waiter. I didn't see the pass, but I did see Ruby push her bag off the table. I got the pearls from the waiter. The main thing is, Hammond didn't have them. And that means he had plenty of money on hand—money from the insurance company. I think the few hundred in my pockets were part of it, but where's the rest?"

"That's a good idea, Tom—if you really did have the pearls some time or other. Of course, you might be imagining that Club Paree stuff. Anyway, I promise to think it over."

Marcy is not a fast thinker, and I couldn't see Macklin or his friends verifying any statement coming from me. Also, time was precious. We were about two miles from Hammond's house. I eased up on the gas. Speed slackened.

"WHAT the hell you trying to do?" Marcy demanded. "I warn you, no tricks."

We were barely moving. I pumped the gas pedal. The motor coughed, sputtered. Frowning, I looked at the gasoline gauge, the ammeter. I applied the brake without relieving the clutch. The motor stalled.

"Seems like a short circuit," I said. "We're not far from Hammond's. Suppose we walk back. If you and I dug around in that room, we might be able to break the case without calling out the rest of the force."

Marcy's gun hand tightened. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "the case is already closed. Get this can started or I'll—"

Watching him through the corner of an eye, I stepped on the starter, roared the motor. I braced myself as much as possible without advertising the act. Then I let the clutch in with a jerk.

The car gave a sudden leap. Marcy's head snapped back, his gun hand flew up. While my foot slammed on the brake, one hand grabbed the gun and the other came around in a short jab that collided with Marcy's jaw.

The blow wasn't enough to knock him out, but it did release his hold on the gun. I let him see its business end. "Next time you won't be so bullheaded," I said. "I'm not warming a cell while some guy plays with my own murder case. Get out of the car."

"My Lord!" Marcy roared. "I'm beginning to believe you did kill him."

"If I did, one more murder won't make much difference." I prodded him toward a big tree near the road, forced him to stand with his back against it. I brought his arms around the trunk and snapped bracelets on his wrists. With some maneuvering, he could stand or sit, but

he couldn't take a walk without carrying the tree. I searched his pockets, found a flexible steel rule and a magnifying glass.

"Don't forget the blood money," he said sarcastically. "Too bad there's no rope around. You could hang me, too."

"Don't blame me," I said. "It's the pearls' fault. I'm hoodooed, jinxed. After I bust this frame-up, I'm going to get a job haunting houses."

I sent the car flying over the road. Two left turns and a long stretch on an overgrown cow path brought me to the rear of Hammond's house. I ran across a field, stopped in some bushes to make sure no cops were around and then tried the rear door. It was locked.

Rather than mix with the cop on the porch, I broke a window and climbed into the cellar. Having searched the house many times for stolen property, I was well acquainted with the layout. And there was no servant problem. Hammond employed only day help. I gained the kitchen, moved silently through the lower hall, up the stairs.

Leo was standing at the open bedroom window. That was bad. One cry and the other man would be running to his assistance. I flattened myself against the wall near the door, tapped once with the butt of my gun.

Leo muttered something. He walked across the room. When his head came through the doorway, I hit him smack on the bald spot. I carried him into the bathroom, dropped him in the tub.

Using the steel rule, I compared the height of the stool with the distance between Hammond's feet and the floor. There was a slight difference, but, I reasoned, the body would have stretched that much. Due to

strangulation, Hammond's features were ghastly. Nowhere could I find a bruise or wound. Even his finger nails were unbroken and clean.

I climbed onto a clothes hamper and examined the rope through Marcy's glass. Strangely, the fibers of the rope were directed neither up nor down. Except on the part that touched the crossbeam, all the fibers maintained their natural position.

I went to the bedroom, pulled the key from the door. Under the glass, the tip showed telltale marks. I knew then that the murderer had used a *oustiti*—a pair of thin, semi-lunar tongs inserted into the key-hole from the outside to grip and turn the key.

I returned to the bathroom. Leo had regained consciousness. He stared at me stupidly, tried to pull himself up.

"Be wise and you'll rate a promotion," I said. I told him where to find Marcy. "When you get there," I continued, "tell the chief—"

Leo made a grab for me. He was all set to do some fancy shouting. I closed his eyes and mouth with another crack on the sore spot.

YOU COULD hear Marcy's bellowing almost a half mile away. He wasn't too pleased when I stood in front of him. "Oh, it's you again," he growled. "Loosen these cuffs and I'll—"

"Save it," I said. "They'll be off soon enough. I haven't much time, so you'd better listen carefully." I told him about my findings at the murder scene, returned his glass and rule. I kept the gun, held it ready and unlocked the handcuffs. "You can call headquarters from a house down the road. Get a good photographer on the job. We want close-ups of Hammond's hands and the

rope—suitable for microscopic enlargements."

Marcy glared at me, rubbed his jaw. "A lot of good that'll do the police, after you've had time to fix things."

"Keep quiet. After calling headquarters, get Bates. I don't care how or why, but get him and keep him away from telephones. I'm going after Macklin. I'm going to beat the truth out of him. If he should get to a phone and call Bates, we'd be up against the same old legal trickery."

"You talk as if you were still on the force," Marcy snapped. "You don't fool me, Falkner. I'll have you behind bars in less than an hour." He lunged at me, arms outstretched. I dodged to one side, tripped him. He went sprawling on hands and knees. I was in the car and moving, before he rose from the underbrush.

Marcy must have lost no time getting to the phone. Within a few minutes, the car radio sounded a general call for my capture. Haggerty, the radio announcer, said I was dangerous, that I would probably show fight. The description and number of the car was given. I drove to the beginning of the subway line, abandoned the car and hurried underground.

DURING her Palace floor-show days, Ruby Roth stayed at the Hotel Emmert, a second-class joint near the theatrical district. That was before Macklin and mink capes, but I decided to give it a try.

A long, powerful car stood at the flashy entrance. It looked familiar. The liveried doorman of the hotel pretended he was examining the car's tires. He hid a lighted cigarette in a cupped hand. I walked around to the service entrance,

climbed four flights, and knocked on Ruby's door.

Macklin answered. "Who are you an' what do you want?"

"Your car, sir. It was struck by a cab."

I was ready when the door opened. My revolver poked Macklin's stomach. I pushed him back into the room. One suitcase stood near the door. Ruby was packing another. "Going somewhere?" I asked Macklin.

His grin showed a full set of yellow teeth. "How'd you guess it, copper? Ruby an' I are getting married —after I turn you over to your friends. They want you, dead or alive."

"Not now, they don't," I lied. "We found your fingerprint on my hat in Hammond's hall. That connects you with the murder."

Ruby picked up a hairbrush. "You beast!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you caused us enough trouble?" She came at me, swinging wildly. Although there wasn't a great deal of power behind the blow, it struck my wounded shoulder. Reflex action caused me to turn around. That gave Macklin his chance. He whipped his gun out, fired. Burning lead cut the side of my neck. I stepped back a pace.

Ruby was clinging to Macklin. The shot and the blood streaming from my neck had frightened her. "Don't shoot any more, Al," she pleaded. "I'll telephone the police. Let them arrest—"

"Like hell!" Macklin snarled. "You dope! Didn't you hear what he said about the hat? You think I want to burn?" He wrenched his gun hand free from her grasp, brought it up.

I chanced a pot shot. The bullet struck metal. Macklin's hand

kicked back; the gun flew across the room. I tried to get around Ruby.

Macklin let out a bellow of rage. He grabbed the girl with both hands, rammed her into me. I staggered back, tripped over the luggage. Macklin dug into the open suitcase on the bed. His right hand dripped blood; the left came up with another gun.

Hysterical, Ruby was floundering all over me, helplessly. I pushed her off, tried to roll, as Macklin's gun roared again. The slug fanned my forehead.

I sent one into his chest. His knees buckled. He tried to grab Ruby. She evaded his grasp, ran to the window and raised the sash. Macklin held on to the bedpost. His eyes followed Ruby. I jumped up, pumped shots into him. It was no use. Alive or dead, Macklin's finger pressed the trigger once more, and Ruby crumpled, a bullet in her back.

My collar and shirt were streaked with blood. Tying a handkerchief around my neck to stop the flow of blood, I staggered over to Macklin and searched his pockets. Then I tackled the luggage. I collected an armful of money, but no pearls.

Police sirens screamed in the street; brake bands screeched. That would be Marcy. When louder noise makers are manufactured, Marcy will get a couple.

Macklin was deader than a pork chop. Ruby was going fast. Blood flecked her lips. I raised her up, let her head rest against my good shoulder. Even while dying she looked beautiful. Too bad she'd chosen mink instead of long-wearing gingham.

THE DOOR slammed open and an army of cops barged in. Marcy disentangled himself from the mob. "Now what?" he asked.

I motioned for him to come closer. He bent down.

"Macklin's finishing stroke," I said. "A bullet in her back—pierced a lung."

"Is that right?" Marcy demanded. "Was it Macklin's or—"

Ruby tried to answer. She gulped hard; her eyes fastened on Macklin's still form. A hemorrhage finished her.

I found a bottle of bonded rye, sampled half and stuck the bottle in my pocket as an emergency. Marcy was checking the serial numbers of the bills with a list of numbers in a notebook.

"You better get the boys busy on my old hat," I said. "Macklin got scared when I said we found his prints on it."

"Don't tell me what to do," Marcy snapped. "This stuff, coupled to that *oustiti* trick, may spoil the murder rap, but you're still under arrest for striking an officer. I'll never forgive you for that, Falkner. And what about those damned pearls?"

I started for the door. A cop barred my path. "What do you want," I asked Marcy, "the pearls or personal satisfaction? I can give you both, but one at a time."

Marcy took my arm and led me across the room. "Listen, Tom," he said in a low voice, "if you know something, you'd better spill it. I'm not going to fool around much longer. And you know me when I get rough."

"Sure. But this time you can't get rough enough. The law won't let you. With me it's different. I'm supposed to be outside the law. I think Macklin parked the pearls up at Bates' place. If Bates is smart—and he is—by the time you fool around getting a search warrant he

can cache them where even the jinx wouldn't think of looking."

Marcy did some strenuous thinking. "O. K.," he grumbled.

The hall was filled with sensation seekers. I must have looked a sight. When two faded beauties in curlers and bath robes saw me, they fainted. A short, weasel-faced man, carrying a black bag, jumped in front of us.

"Can I help you gentlemen? I am the house doctor."

Marcy flashed his shield. "You're just the man I'm looking for," he said. "Come along and keep this guy alive until you see him hand me a string of pearls."

I finished the quart on the way to Bates' apartment. I felt weak from loss of blood and my head roared like a trip hammer, but things weren't so bad once the liquor started splashing around inside me. The doctor almost drove me nuts. He wanted to stop in the middle of the street and practice on my shoulder.

BATES' sleepy-eyed servant opened the door and showed us into the living room. Bates appeared a few minutes later. His hair was mussed and he wore a dressing gown over pajamas. He looked from Marcy to me.

"In trouble, Falkner?" he asked.

"A little. I just shot it out with your former client, Al Macklin. He was trying to get Ruby Roth to leave town with him."

Bates grew concerned. "How is Ruby? Is she all right?"

"I don't think she has a care in the world—except one, maybe. You see, it's this way: Macklin was carrying about five grand of Corbin insurance money. I suppose he mailed the rest of it to Canada or Mexico to be picked up later. Before he

died, Macklin said he left the pearls with you. How about it?"

Bates kept a perfect poker face. He started to shake his head.

"Wait a minute," I said. "We all know lawyers must honor the confidence of their clients. A dead client is something else again. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't hold out on us without risking a stiff jail term. Hammond's murder eliminates a safe market. You'd be a fool to take a chance, now that you're free from Macklin. Hand them over and we'll forget about that end of the business."

Marcy looked as if he were about to burst with unholy wrath.

Bates took a long time lighting a cigar. "Your offer is most generous, sergeant. Does the chief agree to it?"

Marcy nodded his head glumly.

"The reason why I ask," Bates continued, "is that Macklin did give me something sealed in a plain, white envelope. He asked that it be forwarded in ten days to the general post office at Mexico City. It may be the pearls. He seemed so excited, I let him choose the hiding place. Will you follow me?"

We trooped into his bedroom. A chair stood near a small night table. Bates' jacket was draped across the back. There was a bulge in the breast pocket. I poked two fingers in, pulled out a silk handkerchief.

"Not there, sergeant," Bates said. "Wrapping valuables in handkerchiefs ended with Queen Victoria."

Something pricked my hand. I gave the handkerchief to Marcy, held my palm up to the light. I could see nothing. Bates walked across to the window and lowered a Venetian blind. The envelope dropped from a fold. He caught it, offered it to the chief.

"Give it to Falkner," Marcy said. "I'm taking no chances with the hoodooed thing."

I tore open the envelope, pulled out a long string of pearls. The doctor let out a loud gasp. Marcy was rubbing his fingers together.

Bates smiled broadly. He stood with legs far apart, his hands in the pockets of his dressing gown. "Is that what you're looking for?" he asked.

The infamous string had been featured so often in the newspapers, you couldn't mistake it. "I'm not sure," I said. "I thought all the pearls in *The Noose* were flawless. This one—"

"Where?" Bates sprang to my side.

I DROPPED the pearls, grabbed Bates in a bear hug. "Get his gun and snap cuffs on him," I said to Marcy. "We want this guy for murder."

Excited, Marcy and the doctor got in each other's way. Bates twisted and turned. He hammered his head against my shoulder. My hold loosened and he broke away. His fist came up inside of Marcy's gun arm, landed on the other side of his jaw.

Marcy is a heavy man. He doesn't topple over easily. His gun barked. Bates' left leg gave way. He tried to drag it. Marcy collared him. "I hope to Heaven Falkner's right about this," he said. "You've cheated the chair so many times, they should make it extra hot for you."

"Don't worry," I said. "The Hammond murder was a two-man job. He was unconscious or strangled to death before they hanged him. That's why no part of his body showed bruises. He didn't have a chance to fight back. A dead or un-

conscious man is heavy, limp. They tightened the noose around his neck. Then Macklin or Bates held him erect on the stool while the other threw the rope over the crossbeam and tied it to the faucet."

"Pardon," the doctor said. "One man could have hoisted the body. A few pulls on the rope—"

"The rope wasn't pulled," I said. "If the body had been pulled up, the fibers of the rope would be bent upward on the part pulled by the murderer—because of the rope's contact with the crossbeam. In this case, the fibers weren't bent. That means the rope was simply thrown over the beam."

"All of which means nothing as far as I'm concerned," Bates said. "I'll bring suit against the city for this."

"You won't live long enough," I said. "You've been getting Macklin out of one murder rap after another. I spoke of that in the Club Paree, hinted at the power you held over him. Of course, Macklin wanted you to help finish Hammond. But there was no need of force. Macklin had only a few thousand on him. You have the lion's share of the insurance money somewhere in this apartment."

"The whole set-up seemed so sim-

ple. You were going to cash in on the pearls' history. Mrs. Corbin hanged herself. Every one suspected Hammond of having received the pearls—every one but me—so you intended making him a fall guy for the hoodoo. The plan might have worked, if you hadn't changed it at the last minute. Macklin would have liked to see me burn, so I was added to the plot. I was supposed to be the one who tried to fake a suicide and got caught in the act. Whatever your share in the actual murder, you did handle the rope. Later, you wiped your hands on the pocket handkerchief. It's full of broken fibers."

Bates lowered his head. I saw no need to tell him of Ruby's murder. Marcy rubbed his fingers together again. He grinned, picked up the pearls.

"I may as well handle these," he said. "It makes no difference; I get socked on the jaw anyway."

"Sure," I said. "That hoodoo stuff is the bunk. One hour after I get the reward you'll find Annabelle and me on the Honeymoon Special."

"Not so fast, young man," the doctor said. "You're going straight to a hospital and have that bullet removed. Perhaps after a few weeks of peace and quiet—"

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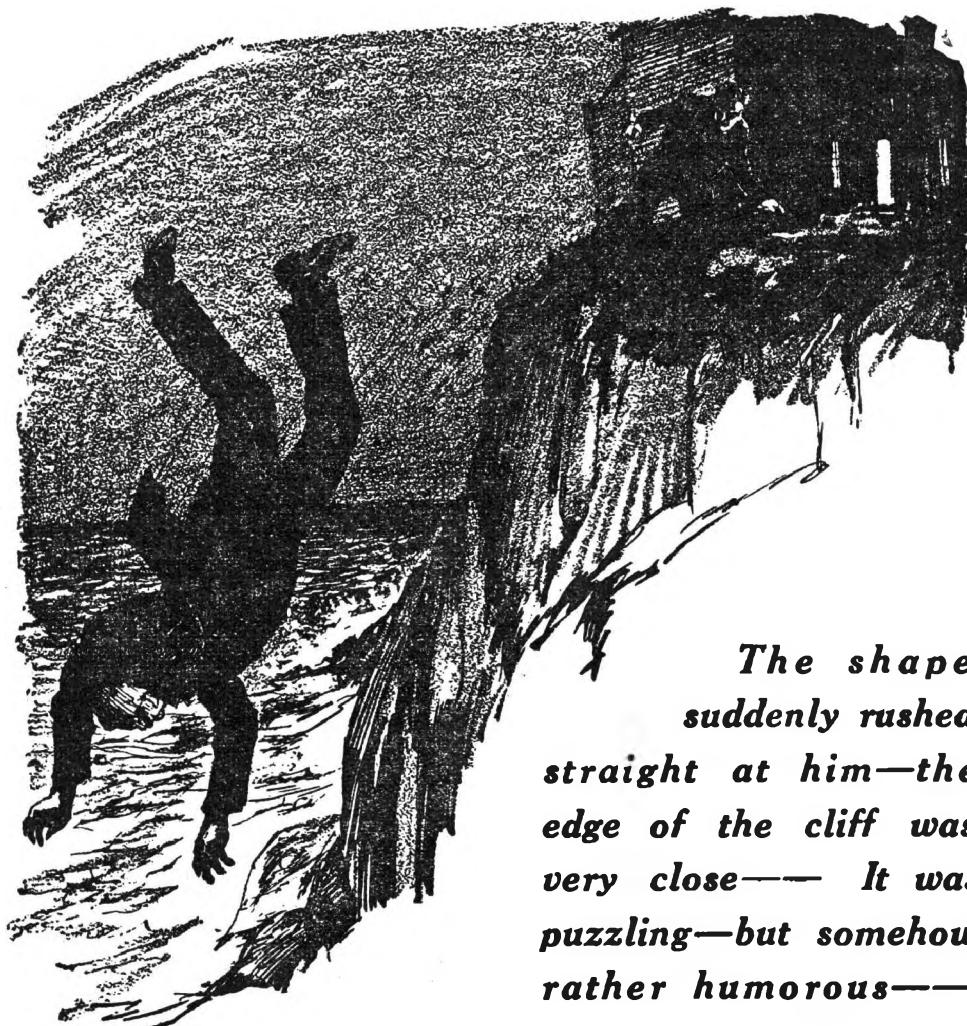
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# Danse Macabre



*The shape  
suddenly rushed  
straight at him—the  
edge of the cliff was  
very close—— It was  
puzzling—but somehow  
rather humorous——*

by Hugh B. Cave

**H**EAVY SEAS beat sullenly at the ragged base of Half Head Cliff. Far above, in midnight darkness, yellow light gleamed from the windows of the isolated summer home of Dr. Rocco Frattenelli.

Four men sat in the expensively

furnished living room and listened intently while Frattenelli paced the floor and talked.

"For years, gentlemen, our more daring brethren have studied difficult diseases by exposing themselves to those diseases and recording the data thus obtained through first-hand experience. You who respect my years of research in the study of

insanity have volunteered to help me. With all my heart, gentlemen, I thank you.

"I have here a supply of the drug used recently by another eminent student of insanity in a test similar to this one. The medical journals have told us the results of that test, and—"

Dr. Louis Golden leaned toward Dr. Isadore Savoie and said in a whisper: "Startling results, too. I remember hearing it dramatized one evening—"

"And so, gentlemen, we are ready. In this out-of-the-way place no one will disturb us. These four capsules, one for each of you, will produce complete but temporary insanity, which should last about an hour."

Gordon Bieder, youngest of the group and an interne at Frattenelli's private hospital, said quietly, "You yourself are not taking the drug, doctor?"

"That would be most unwise. One of us must retain full possession of his faculties, in case anything should go wrong."

Bieder nodded. The explanation satisfied him because, having worked with Frattenelli, he trusted the man implicitly. More than any of the others, he knew how carefully Frattenelli had planned this venture.

He wondered why some of the others had volunteered their services. Golden, the fat, red-faced authority on mental diseases, was probably sincere in his search for knowledge. Vincent Combs was no doctor at all, but a suitor for the hand of Frattenelli's lovely daughter.

Combs might be less willing to risk his neck if he knew more about that fickle young lady. Even now she was probably accepting the ardent advances of some other admirer.

Like her eminent father, she found the opposite sex irresistibly alluring and prospected for love in varied fields.

One of Frattenelli's two major weaknesses was his ardor for women who, frequently, were other men's wives. The other weakness—his inexplicable fear of high places—had sharply evidenced itself only a short while ago, when he had balked at venturing to the cliff's edge to see the *Queen Mary's* lights on the horizon.

As for Savoie, he was a Viennese surgeon on vacation in America, and was to Bieder a total enigma.

"Well, gentlemen?"

Four capsules lay in Frattenelli's palm. Each man took one, swallowed it. Gordon Bieder was the last to do so, and felt a cold, clammy thickness in his throat as he leaned back to await developments.

IT WAS a weird sensation. The room slowly assumed a new and puzzling shape and thereafter kept changing. Breathing was difficult, and he felt that every gasp was a scream that could be heard for miles.

His face felt heavy; it had turned to wax; the wax was melting; in a little while his head would be merely a bone formation rising out of his shoulders, while molten flesh dripped to the floor. He might presently become a living skeleton. That would indeed be amusing.

He waited patiently for this to happen, and was sure after a while that the desired metamorphosis had taken place. He felt light and brittle. His bones crackled like crisp paper when he squirmed in the chair. This was a new sort of life, highly intriguing.

"Look at me, Frattenelli!" he cried. "Look, the rest of you!"

Frattenelli looked, but the others

paid no attention. Savoie, the gentleman from Vienna, was furiously smoking cigarettes and mumbling to himself and glaring at the floor. Louis Golden had marched into the adjoining room and was violently assaulting the organ—Frattenelli's beautiful organ!—and how horrible was Golden's idea of music! How abominable!

Vincent Combs, who was not a doctor and who hoped to marry Frattenelli's daughter, poor fool, was striding around in circles and singing at the top of his lungs. Singing a ribald thing about Christopher Columbus.

"How mad every one seems to be," Bieder thought.

Wanting a cigarette, he fumbled a package from his pocket; but while the package was light, the cigarettes themselves were heavy and he could not raise one to his lips. "I'll drop one," he thought, "and it will make a terrific hole in the floor." Dropping the whole pack, he promptly forgot them and went weaving across the room.

Queer, but he was two persons, not one, and he could stand back and watch himself do things. There goes Gordon Bieder. See? He is stopping now to stoop and stare into the face of Isadore Savoie. Savoie is going to be very ill. The drug did not agree with him. That is funny. Gordon Bieder laughs because Isadore Savoie is going to be ill. "You should go back to Vienna!" Bieder declares, with gestures. "Sick people do not belong in America, Savoie!" It is uproariously funny.

This was highly interesting, this remarkable new ability to stand back and watch himself do things. Perhaps it was a fourth dimension, or a fourteenth—or something. Look now, Bieder, you're in the adjoining

room, where Louis Golden is banging out horrible discords on the organ. Golden looks ill, too. See how he slumps over the keys. That kind of music would make any one ill!

And here is Frattenelli's studio, with the door open. You knew Frattenelli was an artist, didn't you? Yes, indeed! He paints pictures, some of them excellent. It's a hobby of his. And here's an easel—see? And paints! Red and yellow and blue and black and—

Ah, but this was exciting! Here were paints and brushes and an easel supporting a half-finished picture. Bieder studied the picture and decided it was too delicate, too pale. It needed a few bold sweeps of color and then—bravo!—it would be a masterpiece!

Bieder supplied the dashes of color, stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. He shook his head sadly. Something was still wrong with Frattenelli's picture. It was worse now than before.

"I guess I'm no artist," Bieder declared. "But I do like to paint."

He painted part of a table and smeared red and blue paint on the walls. Part of the time he seemed to be standing at a distance, watching himself do these things; and part of the time he just did them and kept up a running conversation with himself.

FINALLY he centered his attention on a chair. It was a black chair. With black paint he painted the entire back of it and part of the seat; and then, throwing away palette and brushes, he picked the chair up by its legs and carried it out of the studio.

In the adjoining room, Louis Golden was still assaulting the organ. In the room beyond that, smoke from Savoie's cigarette hung

like a gray blanket, and Frattenelli stared as Bieder entered.

Bieder put the chair down and wagged a finger at Frattenelli. "Come here," he said, and in a confident whisper added, "I've something important to show you."

Frattenelli came forward, smiling.

"Sit here," Bieder instructed.

Frattenelli did not notice the wet paint. The room was full of cigarette smoke and the light was dim. Both the chair and its coating of paint were black. Frattenelli sat in the chair and said expectantly: "Yes? What is it, Bieder?"

Bieder hopped up and down, gleefully chortling: "Wet paint! Wet paint! Look at your coat and trousers! You sat in wet paint!"

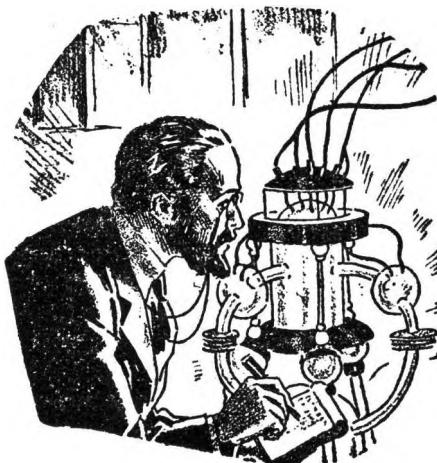
The eminent doctor did not seem to mind. Rising, he examined his clothes as best he could without removing them, and then stared at Bieder and said calmly, "Now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"I'd better put this chair away," Frattenelli said, "before some one else sits in it."

Bieder pushed him away and said, "Let me put it away. I painted it."

Proudly, he carried the chair back



to the studio, stopping for a moment to listen to the mournful dis cords created by Louis Golden. Leaving the studio, Bieder locked the door behind him and hid the key under a carpet. With the door locked, no one would be able to steal his pretty chair, and later he could bring the chair out again and fool some one else with it.

"You're ruining Frattenelli's organ," he said to Louis Golden.

Golden said, "Am I? What of it?" and went right on playing. He was very pale and kept poking at the stops with his right hand while his left wriggled like a crab over the keys.

Bieder said, "Let me help you," and was angrily told to mind his own business. Pouting, he wandered into the kitchen and out the back door into rain and darkness.

It was cold out there on the cliff. The wind numbed him and the rain made him weary. He was suddenly two persons again, and watched himself trudge along the path that led to the lookout tower on the cliff's edge.

It was nice to be two persons. One could rest while the other walked, and he could take turns with himself and not get overtired. There goes Gordon Bieder. See? A little while ago he swallowed a capsule and went mad, and he's been doing queer things ever since. You'll have to watch him closely. Perhaps he doesn't realize how dangerous it is out here in the dark.

Here, here, Bieder, you mustn't do that! Come back! Sit down and let me do the walking for a while. You're acting like a drunken man, and if you go too near the edge of the cliff it will be the end of you. Hear the roar of the surf down there? Hear it? Ugh!

Bieder sat in the wet grass, with

his back against a tree, and stared out into space. The night was very dark. Surf gnawed at the cliff's base, and the wind was a whining ghost that snatched and slapped and became most annoying. Bieder said, "Aw, beat it! Leave me alone!" and the wind laughed at him.

FROM THE HOUSE came a multitude of strange sounds. That fool, Golden, had not for a moment abandoned his assault on the organ, and that other fool, Vincent Combs, was yelling and singing and reciting at the top of his lungs, all over the place.

A door opened, spilling light into the night. The voice of Vincent Combs came closer.

Bieder leaned on one arm and looked around. "Hey!" he called. "Combs!" Hands in pockets, Combs strolled by without stopping. Ah, the minstrel man! Ah, the Pied Piper! Head in the air, face to the rain, yodeling.

Some one else was coming now. Golden? No, not Golden, for the organ's discordant dirge was still in evidence, and an organ was too huge to be carried on one's back. Isadore Savoie, then? Perhaps, but Savoie had appeared to be very, very ill a short while ago in the smoke-filled living room.

Ah-ha! It was Frattenelli—Frattenelli himself!

"Looking for me, I'll bet," Bieder thought, and sat quite still so as not to be discovered.

Yes, Frattenelli was looking for something, peering this way and that way and mumbling to himself as he trudged along the walk. The shepherd was seeking his strayed sheep and feared for their safety. Undoubtedly that was a fact. It was dangerous out here. A puff of wind as you walked near the cliff's edge,

and *whoosh!*—down you would go, to be mangled on sharp rocks and drowned in the sea.

Frattenelli hated the cliff. He had said so. Great heights made him violently ill, but like a good shepherd he was out seeking his sheep. "Halloo!" he was shouting now. "Halloo, where are you? Hallo-o-o-o-o-o!"

"It must be me he wants." Bieder chuckled.

It couldn't be Golden, because Golden was still playing the organ. It couldn't be Combs, because if you wanted Combs you had only to go toward the voice that was bellowing over there in the dark. And Savoie was sick, so it must be Bieder.

"Hide and seek." Bieder chuckled. "I'm invisible. Try and find me!"

Frattenelli had stopped near the brink of the cliff and was swaying there with the wind in his face. It was very dark. The eminent doctor was no more than a shadow in the darkness. He had given up shouting and was gazing out to sea.

"Perhaps he thinks I walked off the edge," Bieder mused.

A shape came out of the darkness and moved slowly toward Frattenelli's back. Bieder stared, scowling. The shape passed so close to him that he could have thrust out a foot and kicked it, but he let it go. It might be his other self. He might be two persons again, and it would never do to kick the other part of him. That would hurt.

The shape fascinated him. It made no noise, but crept stealthily toward Frattenelli as if intending to perform an evil deed. Frattenelli was looking out to sea and did not turn.

The shape suddenly rushed straight at him, with both arms out-thrust. Bieder heard a thud and a

scream, and Frattenelli staggered forward.

The edge of the cliff was very close, and Frattenelli could not stop when he reached it. Off balance and still screaming, he stumbled out into space, while his assailant turned and fled back into darkness.

Bieder scowled. Over near the lookout tower, Vincent Combs was yodeling, and from the organ room in the house came discordant music. And Frattenelli was gone. Frattenelli's awful scream had plunged with its maker over the cliff's edge.

It was puzzling, but somehow rather humorous. Bieder put his arms around his knees and rocked back and forth, back and forth, chuckling.

"WELL, one of us did it!" Vincent Combs paused in his nervous pacing of the floor and snarled the words out viciously. "The man didn't walk off the cliff. A team of mules couldn't have dragged him close enough for a misstep. He was pushed, and one of us did the pushing!"

Rocco Frattenelli had been dead for hours, and for quite some time now the body had lain beneath a blanket on a divan in the living room. The mantelpiece clock read seven a. m. and a murky daylight was trying hard outside to dispel the drizzle.

At four o'clock, when the effects of the drug had finally worn off, Gordon Bieder and his companions had begun a search for the missing Frattenelli. At five, Bieder and Louis Golden had fished the body from the rocks at the base of Half Head Cliff.

"It is a very horrible thing, gentlemen," Savoie said, "and to be sure, one of us must have done the deed. But at the same time, none

of us can be held responsible. We were insane. Now we must be calm."

Savoie was still very ill. The ash receptacle beside the chair in which he had sat was choked with the remains of cigarettes which he had smoked, chain fashion, in a vain attempt to fight off the sickness. He had not moved out of that chair; therefore, he could not have murdered Frattenelli.

He was willing to swear that he had not left that chair. But that was not necessary. The others had seen him there. They were quite sure he was not lying.

"Well," Combs declared, "I suppose I could have done it. I remember being out there on the cliff. I remember climbing the lookout tower and yelling at the top of my lungs, and singing."

"Yes," Savoie said, "you could have done it."

Gordon Bieder slowly shook his head. "You forget," he said, "that I saw the thing done. Combs couldn't have done it. He was over by the tower at the time, singing. The man who pushed Frattenelli came from the other direction."

Louis Golden took a cigarette from his lips and said wearily, "I don't remember a damned thing, except that I hammered away at the organ. I might have left the organ and gone out there, but I don't think so."

Again Bieder shook his head. "The organ was going full blast when Frattenelli went to his death. It wasn't you, Golden, and it wasn't Combs, and it wasn't Savoie."

Bieder's face was pale. Moving to the table, he poured himself a stiff drink and downed it, then turned, grimly enduring the stares of his companions.

"From the very beginning, gentle-

men, I was obsessed with the queer notion that I was two persons. I watched myself do things. That's how the drug affected me. Well, I've told you that I saw the murderer rush forward and push Fratennelli off the cliff. There's only one answer. Evidently I saw no one but myself."

The ensuing silence beat against Bieder's brain. It hurt terribly. He licked his lips and stared, and finally slumped into a chair and put his face in his hands. "I—must have done it," he whispered. "Lord!"

"Wait." It was Savoie again. "Is it not possible that some stranger came here?"

"Possible," Combs said. "Not probable, though. This is a summer residence, been closed for weeks. Our plans were not broadcast."

"No one can prove you did it, Bieder."

"That's right, Bieder. No one saw you."

"No," Bieder said dully, "no one saw me."

"No jury would ever—"

Bieder was intently staring at Isadore Savoie, the Viennese surgeon. Under that stare, Savoie wriggled in his chair and nervously reached for a cigarette.

"You might have left that chair without being seen," Bieder mumbled. "Golden was at the organ, and Combs and I were outside most of the time."

Savoie's eyes glittered. "It was raining out there, was it not?"

"Ye-es. Yes, it was raining."

"And my clothes are quite dry. Please take that into consideration."

Bieder sighed. His last hope gone, he said wearily, "I suppose we should notify the police."

"Nonsense!" Savoie had assumed

leadership. "We are respected members of society, not public enemies. We will go to the police, yes—but we will depart from here calmly and without haste. When we are ready, gentlemen—"

BIEDER stood up with the others. His hat and coat were on a table in the hall; he would get them on the way out. Savoie, plainly ill, had to be helped by Vincent Combs. Golden excused himself and left the room.

Bieder waited, grew tired of waiting and sat down again—this time in the chair vacated by Golden. The chair was unpleasantly damp.

That was funny. An organ was not like an accordion. You couldn't hang an organ around your neck and go walking—in the rain—

Bieder strode down the hall and stopped beside the bathroom door, which was closed. A sound of running water swelled from within.

When he opened the door, Louis Golden whirled with guilty quickness to look at him.

Golden's sleeves were pulled up. Creamy soapsuds dripped from his hands into a water-filled basin. It



was the first time Bieder had noticed those hands.

"Paint, is it?" Bieder asked, frowning. "Black paint?"

"It is dirt!"

"It's paint. Frattenelli's coat was smeared with it."

Golden was a fool. No judge would have sentenced him—no judge in the world. But he paled, began trembling. He looked at his hands, which were black where the soap had dripped off, and he looked at Bieder.

"Damn you!" he choked. "Damn you, Bieder!" And, crazed by fear, he hurled himself at the door.

Bieder stooped, wrapped both arms around the man's hips and upset him. Both men went to the floor gasping. Golden fought. Bieder fought back.

From the living room Savoie and Combs came running, but Bieder needed no help. When Savoie thrust the door open, Golden was flat on his back on the floor, his arms extended. Bieder's knees were on his biceps and Bieder's hands had snared his wrists.

Golden raged, pounding the floor with his heels, twisting his head from one side to the other in vain attempts to bite. Bieder, looking up

at Savoie, said, "It was he, not I. I accused him and he attacked me. I think—now I think—that he planned the murder."

Deftly, he emptied the man's pockets. Cigarettes, keys, matches, money—and a capsule.

"Frattenelli and this man's wife were good friends," Bieder said simply. "Too good, I suspect. Frattenelli loved many women. And you see—Golden didn't take the drug. His madness was feigned. His playing of the organ—"

"You are mad!" Savoie declared frantically. "He was playing the organ when Frattenelli died. He never once stopped playing it!"

"He must have. His clothes are damp, and there is paint on his hands. Paint from Frattenelli's coat. What is the answer, Golden?"

"You are mad, all of you!" Golden shouted.

"And you are sane. You have never been anything else. The organ—a book on the keys would have kept it playing. So easy, so clever, Golden. A book on the keys, playing discords. Confess!"

Golden, no longer struggling, closed his eyes and groaned.

Isadore Savoie said softly, "Perhaps, after all, we had better send for the police."

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*"Just keep your shirt on, buddy, and everything'll be all right. If you try anything funny—"*



# DOUBLE CATCH

by Morris Hoyt King

BRET SEVERE, operative, wheeled his coupé along glittering Forty-second Street. A sharp, driving rain spattered the windshield and made driving deceptive. Lights shimmered against shiny cars and street puddles sparkled. Bret could just make out the tower of lights ahead that marked the Shelby Arms. He began looking for a parking space.

Another car swung out and started to pass. Bret swore as he nearly sideswiped a parked car to keep out of the way of the machine passing.

It drew alongside, so close that

the fenders almost touched. Bret turned to make a few remarks to the driver.

He rolled down the window and found himself looking into the muzzle of an automatic. It was gripped by a thin-faced man with a hook nose. Bret recognized "Trigger" Rathert, one of the shrewdest racketeers and gunmen in town.

Before Bret could make a move the gun leveled. There was a low *pfutt*, and he felt a searing burn on his cheek. Bret let go of the wheel and slumped forward as the other car swept on into the traffic.

The crash, a second later, was not

hard enough to do much damage, Bret backed away from the wrinkled fender of a parked car before a crowd could gather.

He risked parking at a fire plug at the next corner and ran into a drug store. In the phone booth he dialed Anton Bergen's number. Bergen was Bret's partner in the Surety Detective Agency.

Bergen's wife, Mary, answered.

"Anton there?" Bret asked.

"No, he hasn't come home yet," Mary's tinkling voice said.

"Has he phoned in or anything?" Bret continued, not wanting to say anything that would alarm Mary.

"Why, no. Is anything wrong?"

"No. Just wanted to ask him something," Bret reassured. "If he comes, have him phone me. I'll be at Jules Gameau's. Gameau's a jeweler and is having a private showing to-night. He hired some protection. Anton knows about it."

Bret left his car in a garage around the corner from the Shelby Arms. He entered the apartment building and pressed the "up" button in front of the elevator door.

"Roof!" he told the operator. The man glanced at the red streak on Severe's cheek, but said nothing. He manipulated the controls, and in a few seconds Bret was let out on the twentieth floor.

"You take the stairs from here, mister." The operator pointed down the hall.

Bret ascended to the roof. A butler ushered him into a modernistically furnished living room.

"Mr. Bret Severe," the butler read from Bret's card.

BRET saw a slight, short man with a pale, cadaverous face and sleek black hair look up from an evening paper. He seemed to struggle from the incongruously capa-

cious chair and said, "Glad to see you, Severe. Rotten weather, isn't it?"

Bret nodded agreement as he shook hands with the jeweler. Then he shed his dripping trench coat and handed it and his hat to the butler.

"How many guests are you expecting to-night, Mr. Gameau?" Bret asked.

"About twenty. Just a congenial crowd of friends and customers," was the answer. "Some of them ought to be arriving soon."

"What was your reason for calling us to-night? Expecting trouble or just want to keep on the safe side?" the detective asked.

"No, no trouble; just thought it would be better to have a detective around. I'm going to have about fifty thousand dollars' worth of assorted gems, most of them diamonds, on display, and I feel safer knowing that some one besides myself is on the lookout for them."

Bret nodded approbation.

"I've one man coming who is a stranger, more or less. He's from Chicago; been in the store a few times. Buyer from some house in the Middle West I never heard of, but I guess he's all right. I think I may be able to sell him something. He seemed interested when I invited him up to-night. But as I don't know him well, you might keep an eye on him when he gets here. I'll introduce you."

Just then the butler appeared, bringing a tray with a bottle and two glasses. Gameau poured two stiff ones.

"This'll fix you up after being out in the rain."

Bret tossed off the whisky, nodded appreciatively, and said, "Mind if I look around a bit? I want to get the feel of the place."

"Not at all. Just wander around

and I'll stay here. Some of the guests may arrive." Gameau waved.

Bret sauntered from living room to library. He saw a heavy safe in one corner, shut tight. That was where the jewelry was, Bret decided.

HE WANDERED down the hall, peeped into three bedrooms, the kitchen, dining room, and bath. There were no servants but the butler. He was putting over a siphon in the kitchen, leaving now and then to answer the doorbell.

Bret went back to the living room. By this time several guests had arrived. Bret noted that some of them seemed acquainted, others comparative strangers. About half were women. The butler had not wasted his time with the siphon.

Gameau beckoned Bret.

"Mr. Severe, I want you to meet a friend of mine from Chicago, Mr. Angelo."

Bret grasped the outstretched hand. He was hard put to return the grip. Angelo was bulky. His dinner jacket fitted him like bark on a tree. He had the glimmering black hair of the Latin, a swarthy complexion and an aquiline nose that went with the hair. The lobe of his left ear hung low and looked mashed. Bret wondered if he was an ex-pug.

"Mr. Gameau has an excellent collection," Angelo remarked conversationally.

Bret decided he'd got that flat ear in some place besides the prize ring.

"Yes, it is very interesting," Bret agreed, still trying to figure the man.

"You'll pardon me; I want to speak to a friend over there," the man from Chicago said, turning away. He disappeared into the library, where the jewelry was now on display.

But the show itself didn't inter-

est Bret. If somebody tried to crab it, then he'd get interested. He kept his eyes in as many places as possible. He was thinking of that gunning he got on the way, and worrying about Anton Bergen. Anton could take care of himself if he was still alive, though.

Bret decided he needed another drink. Not seeing any whisky around, he started for the kitchen to mix it himself. It wasn't until he felt something prod his back at the kitchen door that he knew any one was behind him.

"Just go on in and raise 'em high," said a hard voice.

Bret stepped into the kitchen and heard the door close. He turned around carefully.

FACING HIM was a tuxedo-clad man, red-faced from a tight collar. His sandy hair stood on his head like a hedge, beginning not very far above the eyebrows. He had beady little eyes and his big chin made his head look like a smoked ham standing on the heavy end. Bret hadn't seen him before.

"Turn back around!" growled the man with the chin.

"What's coming off, mister?" Bret asked as he was relieved of his automatic.

"None of your business, buddy. Just keep your shirt on an' everything's gonna be all right. If you try anything funny—" The fellow's voice trailed off and he gesticated with his gun.

"My friend, I came in here for a drink. I don't suppose you'd mind if I went ahead and mixed it, now that you've got my artillery," Bret suggested.

"O. K., buddy, but remember, no funny stuff!"

Bret casually poured ginger ale

and whisky into a glass—mostly whisky. He downed it.

"Now sit down an' put your arms around that ice box leg an' put these on," the stranger directed, tossing a pair of handcuffs on the floor.

Bret didn't have much chance to argue. He sat down and handcuffed himself to the refrigerator leg. The man with the chin opened the kitchen door a crack and peered out.

Then came a voice from the hall, "C'mon, Hunk, we're scrammin'!"

The stranger, "Hunk," left the kitchen and shut the door behind him.

Bret felt embarrassed. He'd have given considerable to have got loose before they found him. But the refrigerator wouldn't budge. He knew that a holdup had been committed, that he was probably the only person in the apartment who carried a gun, and that he'd been singled out for special attention. That meant that whoever pulled the job knew he was a detective. Again he thought of the episode on the street, of Anton, and of Angelo. But the gent that held him up somehow didn't look like the sort of man Trigger Rathert would have working with him.

Jules Gameau interrupted Bret's deductions by pushing open the kitchen door. Bret had to twist around to see who it was.

"I've been robbed! I'm ruined, cleaned out!" shrieked the little jeweler. "What did I hire you for? Here you sit, and they've taken everything. Fifty thousand, lost!"

"Shut up and tilt this furniture so I can get up!" Bret flung back.

Gameau put his shoulder against the top of the box and grunted and strained, while Bret slid the links out from under the leg. Then he got up and said, "You'll find a bunch of keys in my left pants pocket.

One'll probably fit these cuffs. They're old-style."

The jeweler took out the keys and finally found one that fitted, muttering to himself all the while.

"How many were there?" Bret asked when he was free.

"Two, with guns. I'd never seen them before. Don't know how they got in. Probably just walked in and nobody suspected, because they were in evening clothes. They got my whole layout. Where were you?"

"Bein' held up by the third one in here; he followed me, you lunkhead," Bret retorted. "Now let's go in and see what the damage really is."

Bret strode through the hall toward the living room, the jeweler following and whimpering at every step. The guests were all there.

AS Bret and Gameau entered, the outside door nearly flew off its hinges. Four masked men plunged into the room, guns out and sweeping the crowd.

"This is a stickup! Line up against the wall, everybody, and no one'll get hurt. Snap into it!"

As the foremost said this, one of the masked men dashed into the hall and began opening and closing doors. He was back in half a minute.

"There ain't nobody else; they're all here," he reported.

Bret looked at the man who was giving orders. The mask failed to conceal the fact that he had a thin face, unusually thin, like Trigger Rathert's. It could be Trigger, Bret thought.

"Here, you, Gameau, where's the sparklers? We ain't got no time to fool around," came an order from the thin-faced fellow.

The jeweler was trembling visibly. Words stuck in his throat.

Bret grinned. "You're too late, boys. Your competitors just left with the works," he volunteered.

The thin-faced one looked at Bret. Bret thought he detected surprise.

"Shut up, flatfoot, or you'll get lead poisoning!" And to one of his companions, "Frisk the place, Slim. Turn it wrong side out. If this guy's lyin' I'm gonna rod him."

Bret was crowded against the wall with the others. The one who was giving orders saw to it that they didn't get behind each other, and that they kept their hands in sight. It took "Slim" and another of the four ten minutes to go over the apartment. From the noise they made, Bret calculated that they weren't missing a thing.

They came back swearing. "They ain't even a chunk of cut glass in this dump; it's a bum steer," Slim reported.

The thin-faced fellow turned baleful eyes on the group of guests.

"We ain't leavin' this place with nothin' fer our trouble. Every one's gonna kick in."

At the point of guns, each member of the party was forced to come forward and deposit his billfold and personal jewelry on the table. One of the holdups scooped it into a small satchel.

"Take care of the phone, Slim," the leader ordered.

Slim went into the library where the telephone was.

"The wires is already pulled," he called back.

Then the foursome backed out the door. Bret didn't have his gun, so he thought it best not to stick his head out the door and get it shot off. He turned to Gameau as a babel of voices sounded.

"You got a nice place for a heist here, Gameau. You get many visits like this?"

"I've never been robbed before," the little jeweler whined. "Two in one night! What does it all mean?"

"Can't tell very well from here, but I got ideas," Bret answered meditatively. "And my ideas lead me elsewhere. I'll call the police and give them the dope on the way out. If you want me, I'll be at the office in the morning—maybe."

Bret got his coat and hat and stalked out. The elevator didn't come up when he pushed the button, just as he expected. He took the stairs, twenty flights of them.

At the bottom he saw the elevator, door closed. He knew the operator was inside and probably still unconscious. He'd see him later, if necessary. Right now he had more important things to do.

He snaked into a hall booth, rang up police headquarters and reported the robberies. The desk sergeant wasn't very polite about it. He'd probably had unpleasant experiences with private operatives, Bret figured.

"That's the trouble with you guys; you collect your fee and wait for the municipal police to do the clean-up work. I ought to just hang up an fergit about the whole matter," came the coöperative reply.

"Listen, sarge, I'm not asking any favors. I'm just reporting a robbery. I mean two robberies. You can do what you like. I'll probably have the stickups by the time you boys got the names of the witnesses. S'long!"

Bret hung up, then called Anton Bergen's home again.

"Listen, Mary, has Anton come in yet?"

He hadn't. Mary was really worried now.

"Well, I think I know where he is," Bret lied comfortingly. "I'll

call you soon's I get in touch with him."

HE LEFT the building just in time to miss a couple of squad cars that stopped at the entrance. Bret didn't want to talk to any officers—not until he'd run down a lead or two, at least.

He went to the garage and got his car, parking it a few doors down the street from the Shelby Arms. He took an extra gun from the door pocket.

There was a bar across the street. It afforded a lengthwise view of the canvas marquee sheltering the apartment entrance. Bret walked into the bar and took a table at the front, where he could see every one who went in and out of the Shelby Arms. He ordered a Tom Collins. Then another.

About the time he'd finished the second the police filed out and drove away. He was in the middle of the third when Gameau's guests straggled out in twos and threes. He slowed up his drinking. About an hour later, while Severe was sipping his fifth Tom Collins, a man in a derby, black overcoat, and white scarf came out. Gameau's butler.

Bret paid his check and left hurriedly. He got to his car just in time to follow the cab the butler hailed at the corner.

The cab whipped around a corner and followed a surface line for eight blocks, then turned into a side street. Three blocks later the butler got out. Bret drove past and watched in the mirror.

He saw another cab slow up at the corner, then continue toward him. The butler disappeared around a corner, afoot.

Bret wheeled around the block just in time to see the butler climb

into another taxi at the next corner. Then he knew he was right!

The other taxi was no longer in sight, but Bret kept watching for it just the same. Somehow he knew it would still be following. He could only guess why.

The butler's second taxi went east toward the water front. Bret kept as far behind as he dared.

WHEN the taxi stopped at a small apartment house about four miles later he swerved into an alley and parked. He was back on the street in time to see the butler enter the building.

Bret gave him time to get off the first floor. Then he followed. The list of names above the annunciators at the door told nothing. The elevator at the right was one of those push-button contraptions. But the name card for Apartment No. 1 said, "Manager."

Bret knocked. A graying, wizened old man opened the door.

"You had anybody move in just recently, say in the last month or so?" Bret asked.

"Well, lemme see now," the manager reflected, stroking a two-day beard. "They's a family up in twenty-one, and some people just moved in seventeen. Yeah, I 'member 'cause they was awful anxious to git the place right away. Livin' comes high now y'know, and this is perhaps the best for the money you kin git. We got one apartment left. Just you wait'll I slip on a shirt an' I'll show——"

"Never mind," Bret cut him off. "I don't want to rent; I just want to see somebody."

He took the stairs. Twenty-one was on the third floor. Bret listened at the door. Children's voices sent

him down to seventeen on the second floor, where he'd expected to go anyway. Seventeen was the fourth apartment back from the street. There were people moving about inside, and subdued voices.

Bret went to the rear and down and out the back door. He rounded the corner into the alley, which ran along the side wall. The fire-escape ladders hung there. Bret counted four sets of windows from the street. The fire ladder he wanted to climb was about ten feet up, but the building bricks provided handholds.

When he swung out on the ladder it dropped slowly and groaned incredibly, it seemed. He waited a few minutes before going up. If the police found him running around on apartment fire escapes at this time of night he'd have a tough

time explaining, especially if his plans went sour.

The fact that the people in the first-floor apartment were not at home or were in bed made things a little safer. All he had to do was climb the ladder and he was on the iron grating outside the back door of No. 17. It was the kitchen, and dark. But there were lights in another room.

Bret tried the door. It was locked. It was an old-fashioned lock, though, and a few careful, silent attempts with his supply of keys turned the trick. He twisted the knob again with infinite care. The slightest squeak and he might not be able to make the alley in time.

When the knob was completely turned, he pushed the door open an inch, then slowly released the knob.

*"Steppin' outa your line, aren't you, Dutch?  
You ought to stick to safe blowing. You're  
good at that."*



In ten seconds more Bret was in the kitchen. He had his gun in his hand now.

A little light filtered through the small dining room—and the sound of voices, low and indistinguishable.

Bret moved across the kitchen floor, gun poised. He made the carpeted dining room without a sound. It was easier here. He could see better and was not afraid of bumping something.

When he got to the portières of the living room, where the light came from, Bret could hear the voices plainly. The curtains afforded a protected view of the room.

THERE WERE four of them. Hunk—the man with the hamlike head—was there. Also a short, thin man with flashing black eyes and bushy eyebrows. The third had his back turned, but Bret could see by his girth and bulk that he was powerful. He looked familiar from the back, Bret thought. The fourth was the butler from Gameau's. All were in formal dress. But Trigger Rathert wasn't there. None of them looked like any of his mob, either.

The familiar-looking fellow, whose back was toward Bret, was speaking.

"Flanner, you was a fool to come here to-night. The split was set for to-morrow afternoon, and that's when we'll have it."

"I don't care about that; I want my share. I'm leaving town. That second affair didn't look so good to me," the butler argued.

"Let him have his cut, Dutch," put in the short one.

Now the detective recognized the big fellow—"Dutch" Klotz, the best cracksman in town.

"The hell he will!" It was Hunk. "He ain't runnin' this crowd. He'll

get his when the rest of us get ours, and not sooner!"

"You ain't runnin' it either," interrupted Dutch. "What I say goes. First we got to figure what to do with that dick in there."

Bret's legs nearly buckled. Then he remembered Anton Bergen, his partner. Yes! That was it! Anton was hidden somewhere in the apartment. But was he still alive, or was it merely a corpse they were talking about?"

"Dump him in the river and no one'll be wiser," suggested the black-eyed hood.

"Wait a minute!" It was Flanner again. "When I went into this we agreed not to do any killing. I won't stand for murder!"

"Gettin' cold feet, huh?" Dutch jeered. "Maybe you'd be a good one to do the dirty work. It'd keep your mouth shut if the cops got wise."

"Yeah, let Flanner finger the trigger an' we won't hear no more squawkin' outa him," the chinny Hunk put in.

Flanner's demeanor changed. A pallor overspread his face. He took a step back.

BRET didn't wait to hear more. He knew now that Anton was alive, and that he was in these very rooms, probably tied hand and foot in a closet. He'd have to act quick. It was too risky to attempt a search with these killers in the next room.

Bret resolved upon a desperate move. If he got started right, it might work.

Bret took another look through the portières. Dutch was not more than five feet away from him. If he could step through and get his gun on Dutch's head, he would hold the whip hand. And Flanner would turn yellow at the prospect of prison.

Bret held his gun ready. Then he parted the curtains and stepped into the circle of light. He had his gun boring into the big man's neck in a split second. The tension was stifling. Not a man spoke or moved. They all saw the flash of Bret's gun as he pressed it into Dutch's neck. Dutch could feel it. He knew what it was and didn't move either.

"Line up and face the wall, and get 'em up!" Bret barked out.

Flanner and the other two got up and faced the wall, arms raised. Dutch didn't stir.

Then Bret said, "Now, Dutch, get up and turn around. I'll just take a look at your mug to make sure. And don't move too fast or you'll get the business."

Dutch got up, arms aloft. He slowly turned around. His face was big like the rest of him, with bushy, overhanging eyebrows, watery blue eyes, and a scraggly mustache that hadn't been on his lip very long. There was a cruel brutality about the set of his thick lips.

"Well, well!" Bret grinned. "If it isn't Dutch Klotz, the master safe cracker, liftin' gems. Steppin' outa your line, aren't you, Dutch? You ought to stick to safe blowing."

Klotz didn't say anything, but he kept his eyes on Bret's gun, waiting for it to waver even a fraction. He was standing just in front of the chair, and Bret was almost against the back of it. There was not three feet between them.

As Bret stopped speaking, the chair smacked him in the stomach. His gun arm dropped.

As Klotz kicked the chair he dived for the gun in Severe's hand, caught his wrist, and yelled.

Hunk and the black-eyed fellow turned almost simultaneously. The two hoods streaked for their guns, as Bret tried to wrest free his arm.

The crack of an automatic sounded from the room behind the detective. The short gunman let out a yell of agony and clutched his stomach. He slid slowly to the floor. By this time Hunk had his own gun out.

He fired at the flash. The shot was returned and Hunk's gun flew out of his hand. Blood spurted where one of his fingers was nearly shot off. He raised his arms again in a hurry. Flanner, petrified with terror, did likewise.

By this time Klotz had knocked away the chair and was grappling with Bret. Klotz was just as powerful as the detective, and Bret's arm was forced into the air so that there was no chance for a shot.

Bret heard a step behind him. Some one came from between the portières, walked around behind Klotz. The butt of an automatic landed with a *thwack* on Klotz's skull. Klotz dropped like a beef, almost carrying Bret to the floor with him.

Bret looked up, ready to fire. The newcomer was in evening dress and looked familiar. Then Bret saw the flattened lobe of his left ear. It was Angelo, the jewelry man from Chicago.

"Thanks, pal," Severe said, breathing heavily. "Just in time. What brought you here, anyway?" Bret's tone was dubious.

ANGELO reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He opened it and showed Bret a slip of paper. The detective whistled.

"I've been thinking about that angle myself, wondering why the government didn't look things over at that sharper's place. How'd you get a line on this joint. Tail me?"

"Yeah. I was just a little curious about you and tailed you from Ga-

meau's. Figured you either knew something, hurrying off like you did, or were trying to keep something quiet. Wasn't sure which. In either case, it was a good bet. I been on this case a couple weeks now and this is the first good break I've had. By the way, the name is Durkin, not Angelo, if you noticed on the card," explained the department of justice operative.

"You did a good job of tailing, brother. If I hadn't been so watchful of Flanner you might've got shot."

Bret stooped over the unconscious Klotz. Klotz's coat pockets tinkled as Bret ran his hands over them. He reached in and turned them inside out, one after the other. As near as Bret could remember, the entire Gameau assortment came out: diamond rings, brooches, bracelets, and other ornate mountings.

"I'll take the rocks," Durkin said crisply, gathering up the jewelry as Bret scooped it out on the floor.

"O. K., but this job's only half over," Bret assented. "We've got more work to do. You handcuff Flanner and Klotz and Hunk, over here, to the stiff and we'll be on our way. The wagon'll pick 'em up. And while you're doing that I'll take a look around. I think I got a partner here some place."

Bret methodically started opening closet doors. Then he came to the bathroom. He knew Anton was there as soon as he put his hand on the doorknob, from the odd sounds. And he was, tied, sacked, and dumped into the bathtub like a slaughtered hog. Bret couldn't help laughing as he cut the cords.

"You don't want a good body-guard, do you?" the detective chided.

Anton Bergen got up, stretched, and chafed his wrists and ankles.

"I'm looking for a man named Dutch Klotz right now, and I don't care what happens after that," Anton said grimly, not deigning to notice Bret's good humor.

"Dutch is right in there asleep. What happened to you?"

"They picked me up as I came out of the office. They lugged me up here. What'd they want me for?"

"They relieved Jules Gameau of his pretties a while ago. C'mon, we're going places, you and me and the Federal dick in there."

Just then Durkin entered the little room.

"Durkin, meet Anton Bergen, my partner. He's been in the bathtub here for a few hours and is out of sorts, poor man, but he's all right most of the time."

The two shook hands. "That makes it kidnaping as well as robbery and conspiracy," the Federal dick said. "These guys will be in so long they'll have to have guardians when their sentences expire."

"Yeah. We'll just go out the way we come in. There might be some curious neighbors wondering what the rumpus was about and we don't want to bother," suggested Bret, leading the way to the kitchen.

ON THE STREET a few minutes later Bret said, "Durkin, you go up to Gameau's and pin the goods on him. If he's not there, wait. Bergen and I'll drop in at Trigger Rathert's hang-out and see what he's got to say about this crease in my cheek. We'll meet you at Gameau's."

Durkin hailed a cab and Bret and Anton took the coupe. "Trigger keeps an apartment out on Forty-second Street," Bret explained. "I don't think he knows I'm wise to him. He took a shot at me from a car on the way to Gameau's, and it was he and three of his hoods that

held up the place the second time, I'm pretty sure. Trigger's face is hard to cover up good."

Bret related what had happened. Then he stopped at a drug store long enough for Anton to telephone Mary.

"How'd you suppose Rathert knew about this business to-night?" Anton asked as he lolled back in the seat and watched the street lights go by. Bret wasn't wasting any time.

"Well, how did Dutch Klotz know?" was the reply.

"I getcha," Anton responded, adding. "I bet there'll be an insurance company interested in this case to-morrow. I just have a hunch there will."

Bret didn't have time to answer. The midnight traffic was too thick at that point. Then he brought the car to a stop in the block in which Rathert's apartment was located.

"We'll just park here and take it easy. Trigger isn't a fool, and I don't want to walk into another bullet. It might not miss this time," he said.

Rathert's apartment was not like the pretentious Shelby Arms. There wasn't any doorman or clerk; you just walked in and fended for yourself. That was the reason for Bret's extra caution. There weren't enough people in evidence to make a killing too risky to try, and the detective knew that he was entering the warren of one of the city's worst criminals—a mobster and racketeer who would stop at nothing if cornered. Bret figured that Rathert was cornered this time, if he was there at all.

"It's No. 15," Bret remarked as they entered the hall. "I've talked to people who know. This is just his headquarters when he isn't wanted. He's got another hide-out

that no one but himself knows about."

The hall went up half a dozen steps and then extended back into what seemed an interminable dimness. There was only one light, halfway back to the alley door. It looked lonesome back there in the dark. There were numbers on the doors. Bret counted off the odd ones on the left as they walked back.

"Here it is," he whispered, about a third of the way down the hall. "I'll knock and barge in. You stay out of sight and be on hand."

The detective stepped up to the door and rapped while Anton Bergen stood flat against the wall a few feet away. There was no answer but an ominous silence. Bret rapped again. Presently a woman's voice sounded inside, harsh and impatient.

"What d' you want!"

Bret felt a paper under his foot. "Collect for the *Herald*!" he called, shrilling his voice a little.

THE DOOR opened a crack. Quick as a flash Bret's foot shot out and kept it open. He put his shoulder against the panel and lunged.

The woman cried out, "It's a plant!"

Bret was in the room, gun sweeping the occupants, before the alarm registered. There were four men besides the woman. He recognized Trigger Rathert, sitting by a window and resplendent in a purple lounging robe. Trigger's hand was on his shoulder under the robe.

"Don't draw it, Trigger!" Bret barked out.

"What's the game, flatfoot!" came the snarled reply.

The other three men sat silent near Rathert. The woman just stood in the middle of the floor and chewed gum furiously. In the moment of silence Bret noticed she

was a synthetic blonde and was dressed flamboyantly in brilliant green. She couldn't have been less than thirty, he decided, though she'd made up to fool the public.

"I wasn't sure it was you up at Gameau's, till you called me that," Bret retorted. "Now, Trigger, just sit back and take it easy. We're going to have a little talk—a little talk about a robbery and an attempted killing. And take your hand away from your shoulder. . . . There, that's better."

"Yeah? You're smart, ain't you? It might not matter if we did have a little talk at that." Rathert glanced around at his men.

"I hate to do this to you, Trigger, you're such a good egg— Anton!"

Bergen came through the door.

"Keep your iron on the boys, Anton. I'm going to work on Rathert. He's a little reluctant to converse in the right sort of language."

Anton herded the three hoods and the blonde into a corner and kept his gun on them. "Now we'll get down to cases," Bret said decisively. He was beside Rathert's chair in two catlike paces. A flick of his hand under the purple robe and Trigger's gun clattered across the room.

Rathert started to get up. "Sit down!" Bret thundered. Then he pocketed his own weapon. "I wouldn't want it said that I took advantage of a cheap crook like you," Bret repeated ominously.

His right hand lashed out and grasped the front of Rathert's shirt. The gunman was jerked to his feet.

Bret's left followed. There was a satisfying crunch of fist meeting face, and Trigger flopped back into the chair.

He came back like a jack-in-the-box, lips twisted into a malevolent snarl and arms tensed to swing. A rapierlike right caught Bret in the

stomach. It was followed by a kick in the knee.

Bret saw the kick coming. As the gunman's foot landed, Bret grabbed his ankle and wrenched it suddenly.

RATHERT SCREAMED in agony and rolled over onto the floor to escape the pressure. When he was on his face the detective dropped down and clamped on a toe hold. There was another agonized yell.

"Hell, gimme a break, wontcha!" the gunman groaned.

"That's just what I'm going to give you, and it'll be right in the leg if you don't talk straight. If it hadn't been for that shot that nicked me I wouldn't be so keen about this sort of thing. And it's too bad, too, because you've been the chump all the way, Trigger. You plan a fifty-thousand-dollar heist with Gameau, and what does he do. He gets another mob to pull the job ahead of you. That sort of puts Gameau and his friends in the clear, with you holding the bag and the cell doors waiting. Why, you couldn't even ride the subway with what you got out of that work to-night. You were just the fall guy."

Rathert groaned again.

"The only thing that hasn't come out yet is what Jules was going to get out of it," Bret went on placidly, weighing his words. He gave the gangster's foot another wrench.

Rathert grunted and beat the floor. "Lemme up an' I'll tell you what that little weasel was gonna get. But that ain't nothin' like what he's gonna get later! They don't cross Trigger Rathert an' get away with it."

Bret arose, his gun appearing in his hand again. Rathert got up painfully and sat in the chair.

"I'm waiting!" Bret said acidly.

"All right, here's the dope. Gameau planned the robbery with me. I was to come up there about ten o'clock an' walk in on the party an' take the ice. It looked like a phony at first, but that rat opened up that he had all the stuff insured. He figured to collect the insurance, and I'd get the stones. That's all there is to it."

"That's what I thought. Call the wagon, Anton!"

Bret held his gun on the five while Anton used the telephone in the next room. Five minutes later the room was crowded with uniformed officers, handcuffs gleaming. A few minutes later Bret and Anton were in the street again.

"I'm going to ring up that insurance firm to-night instead of waiting," Bret decided. There was a drug store on the corner. He went in and came out five minutes later.

"Now we'll meet Durkin at Gameau's," he said, starting for the car.

THE ELEVATOR BOY'S head was bandaged when Bret and Anton went up at the Shelby Arms this time. He looked suspicious when Bret called the top floor, but didn't say anything except his mechanical, "You take the stairs from here, mister."

Gameau himself opened the door. He looked frightened, almost panicky.

Bret pushed the door wide and entered, Anton following. The little jeweler looked first at Bret, then at Bergen. Finally he found something to say.

"Come in, gentlemen. My butler's gone for the night."

"Your butler's gone for good, Gameau!" Bret began. "Where's Durkin?"

"Right here," the Federal dick

said, stepping from behind the door, his right hand still resting in his coat pocket.

"You can put the cuffs on this rat, Durkin," Bret went on, closing and locking the door. "He's guilty as hell. You'll find that out when you have those gimcracks examined."

"Listen, you cheap detective, I can have you arrested for those remarks, and I'm going to as soon——"

Bret interrupted the jeweler.

"Here's what happened: Gameau had some smuggled stones in his stock. He knew the government was on his trail. That's where you come in, Durkin. Gameau planned this robbery to get rid of the alien stones and realize a nice profit on some of his legitimate gems. He removed the good rocks from his stock to take them to his private showing. They were the insured ones. Instead of showing them, he brought out the illegal stuff. Trigger Rathert was to come in and rob the place. Gameau would get the insurance on the good stones, which never were taken, and Trigger would get rid of the smuggled ones for what he could, as his share. Gameau even had me come up so he'd have a perfect out.

"It might have worked out fine, except that Gameau didn't know his butler decided to try the get-rich-quick game himself. Flanner knew about the showing, but not about the arrangement with Rathert. He met up with Dutch Klotz some place and planned for him to rob the place, too."

"But how did you know the thing was screwy in the first place?" Durkin queried.

"I wouldn't have, but Trigger took a pot shot at me on the way here and I recognized him. Then I knew something was up. The Klotz job did look authentic, except that the

bunch knew I was a detective. And I recognized Trigger's outfit. Something happening to Anton, the shot at me, both from different parties, and then the two separate robberies made it a cinch that there were two angles. And Gameau and Flanner were the only possible bets. Flanner's bunch got the rocks, so I trailed him. I knew I could get Trigger any time."

"What about those good stones, the ones that Gameau expected to collect on?" Durkin persisted.

Bret turned to Gameau, who had sat quietly through the recital of his clever scheme. The jeweler was paler, if possible.

"Let's have the keys and combination to that safe, Gameau!"

"I never use that safe," the jeweler retorted weakly. "It hasn't been opened in years. I don't even know where the keys are."

Bret darted forward, jerked him to his feet. He turned out Gameau's pockets, one by one. A billfold and key case were among the articles which fell to the floor. Bret let go and picked up the two items.

He strode into the library, fol-

lowed by Anton and the Federal dick leading the protesting Gameau. Bret kneeled in front of the safe.

Then he turned out the contents of the billfold. The combination was on the back of one of the "Jules Gameau, Jeweler," cards.

The click came on the second try and the door swung open. Another door inside responded to one of the keys in the case. It disclosed a bundle wrapped in purple velvet.

Bret drew it forth and began unrolling it. Finally the light struck the facets of the diamonds.

Suddenly there was a scuffle of feet, a scream.

"I'll never go to prison!" Gameau flung after him.

Before the three detectives could lay a hand on him he dashed out of the room. A bedroom door slammed in Durkin's face a split second later.

Then another scream, muffled by the walls. It trailed off into silence, ending horribly.

Bret's shoulder broke down the door. A gust of wind whipped the curtains at the open window.

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# MANY NIAGARAS

*He might have been just another pebble—tossed about in the majestic workings of that dam—— What were mere things of wood and steel to a man who could master mountains?*

A *HARLAN DYCE Story*  
by ARTHUR J. BURKS

**F**IVE grave-faced men, all past middle age, sat in chairs that formed a kind of semicircle about Nick Mechem and the only woman present. The woman was Helene Kocsis; Nick gravely introduced her as his secretary.

"Not a whisper of what we fear must get out of this room," said the spokesman for the five—all men in whose hands rested responsibility for the completion of the greatest work ever attempted by man: the Grand Coulee Dam.

The time was near midnight, the place a rough board shack on the outskirts of Coulee Center, one of

*Here was something no other man in the world could do. He was sure of it—and yet—*

the mushroom towns which the dam had caused to spring up.

"Not a whisper, do you understand?" repeated Michael Harrison, the spokesman. "For if enemies hear, Mr. Dyce—"

"I understood that when I left New York," said Nick Mechem. "You may go on."

He raised his voice a little, hoping that the others would automatically do the same, so that the real Harlan Dyce, hidden in the bedroom, could hear every word. For



Mechem, as he so often did, had taken the name and identity of his midget boss in order to leave the little man free to work his marvels of crime detection without hindrance. The clever little man must miss no word, no intonation of any voice.

"Mr. Dyce," went on Harrison, "we've heard a great deal about you, naturally."

Nick bowed, kept a straight face.

"We asked you here to save for the future the greatest work ever tried."

"You've already said something of the sort."

"It can't be said too often, because it's true. Grand Coulee Dam must go through to completion."

"Is there any reason to believe that it may not? I've looked it over, you know, and am inclined to believe that nothing could stop it."

"Maybe we're all scared for no reason," went on Harrison, "but we can't take chances. The world, as you know, is full of cranks. And we've been receiving letters—"

"Letters?"

"Yes. They're anonymous, as such letters usually are. They threaten to bring the work on the dam into the newspapers in a horrible manner, that will so arouse the country, the country will demand that the work cease!"

Nick Mechem leaned forward. "It should be easy," he said, "to head off any such attempt."

"Yes, Mr. Dyce? You're a city man. Maybe we were wrong in bringing you here, but we thought that some one from far outside—well, fifty-seven hundred men are employed on the dam and we are hiring nearly three thousand more. It's impossible to check on all of them individually. It takes time. And just one man, in an hour's time,

could carry that threat into execution."

"How?"

Harrison was breathing heavily. He leaned forward. Nick Mechem noticed how white were the faces of them all. Helene Kocsis' lips were moving, as though she memorized every word—which was exactly what she was doing.

Harrison, pausing, unconsciously attaining a certain dramatic effect, snapped the grim word: "Murder!"

Nick almost jumped out of his chair. "Murder?" he repeated.

"Yes. Up to a week ago the loss of life on the dam was less than ten per cent of such loss on any other like work ever attempted. But during the last week five men have been killed. We believe that those deaths could have been prevented. They were not due to carelessness, but design. *Those men were murdered!*"

"Whom do you suspect?" asked Nick Mechem.

"Nobody. Anybody. Everybody. One another. Try to pick the killer out of close to eight thousand men and what does it get you? That's why we offered you, perhaps, the biggest retainer you've ever had. We want the deaths to stop, the killer or killers to be found."

"I have a free hand," said Nick, "to go through the workings, at any hour of the day or night?"

"Of course. That in itself, especially for a city man, is dangerous, as you must know. And if the killer suspects who you are—well, it was smart of you to come here under an assumed name. What was it again?"

"Nick," said Nick. "Nick Mechem."

"It doesn't sound like an assumed name," said Harrison.

"No," said Nick, "it doesn't. I understand the danger and will take care of myself. I accept your com-

mission. I undertake to catch your man or men within seventy-two hours."

"Seventy-two?"

"Forty-eight then!"

"A hundred men can be killed in that time!"

"I'm no miracle worker. If you don't think I can do it—" Nick rose.

Harrison lifted a protesting hand. "You must understand," he said placatingly, "that our nerves are on edge. Some of the men killed have been close to several of us here. Any man killed is a personal loss."

"I understand, gentlemen. And I think I have enough information. Leave the matter in my hands."

THE FIVE, doubt in their faces—doubt and desperation—rose and departed.

The real Harlan Dyce, commanding the situation for all his thirty-three inches of height and sixty pounds of weight, came out of the bedroom, made sure the visitors were gone, drew the curtains. He whirled on Nick Mechem, his ace assistant.

"They've got a right to be afraid, Nick," he said. "They have the right hunch. This dam is a big thing. Any number of cranks might try to queer it, if for no other reason than to satisfy the strange urges of their egos—just as a nameless assassin will shoot a president or king to get his picture in the newspapers.

"Helene, you will record every word spoken here to-night for future reference. You will set down your impression of each of those five men—and record that the fat one, Bartlow, had a gun in a shoulder holster! I wonder why— The other four were unarmed."

"You think one of them—" began Nick Mechem.

"Even the men who retained us

must be regarded as suspects until we know otherwise, Nick. And say, we've taken a job for ourselves—"

"You did!" said Nick.

Harlan Dyce grinned. "Yes, I forced you into it. Sorry?"

Nick's face was grave. "If I were sure I was going to get killed on this job I'd still undertake it. I never saw anything so majestic as that dam, and it isn't even half finished. They deal in tremendous figures here. More material than all the pyramids put together—a lake over a hundred miles long—freezing mountains artificially to keep them from sliding—sponges bought eleven carloads at a time. I've looked the place over, boss, as you know."

"They wouldn't let me on it," said Harlan Dyce, grinning in his turn, though his eyes were grave. "But here's one outsider that'll fool 'em—get on the dam and off as many times as may be necessary, with none the wiser."

"You'll be careful, won't you, Mr. Dyce?" said Helene Kocsis softly.

There were many things in her eyes as she asked the question. Helene Kocsis idolized her midget, handsome boss.

Now he patted her hand. "I'm not big enough to make a good target, Helene," he said. "You just be a secretary and forget the danger."

"Just the same—" She subsided, bowing her head over her notebook, a slow flush moving over her cheeks.

"Now, Nick," said Dyce, "some-time during the night I'm going to have a look at every man on shift."

"I don't understand how. You'll have to make yourself invisible to get past a thousand men on the roads that lead to the workings."

"I won't make myself invisible, and nobody will see me. Both of you have a job to do. Helene, you

will drive me across the river, to the far end of the pebble-sand-cement conveyor—”

Nick Mechem gasped. “Boss, for the love of Mike! I can’t allow you to take any such ghastly chance!”

“It is not your place to allow or disallow, Nick,” said Harlan Dyce grimly. “This is what you will do: You will lie down in the shadow of the blacksmith shop on this side of the river, and watch the conveyor. Since you are the only one who knows, you’ll probably be the only one who sees me. Anyway, that’s the chance I’ll have to take. You will have a rifle. If anybody tries to do anything to me—”

“He’ll get drilled between the eyes,” said Nick grimly.

“He will not! He’ll get drilled in the leg, so he can live to talk; and then only if he does any more than kick my pants off the dam.”

“If you fall off the conveyor, two hundred and more feet above the river—”

“Cut it, Nick. You’re just jealous you’re not getting a cool ride like that yourself. Ready, you two?”

**TEN MINUTES LATER** Helene Kocsis, her face very white, sat in Dyce’s car, in the shadow of a great cement bin on the Columbia’s right bank, across the river from Coulee Center. Helene looked at the spider web of the conveyor and held her breath. Harlan Dyce glanced at her.

“It won’t be bad, really, Helene,” he said softly. “But wish me luck.”

She didn’t answer or turn to look at him. He did an impulsive thing. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

The door slammed and Harlan Dyce was gone. Then she turned and saw his tiny form, keeping to the shadows, vanish toward the whispering, speedy, hard-rubber con-

veyor, now bearing cement, now sand, now gravel of various sizes.

Dyce knew exactly what he had to do. There were, Nick Mechem had told him, spaces on the conveyor, between long streams of sand and long streams of gravel, that fed the mighty concrete mixer across the way—empty spots on the four-foot-wide belt. In such a space he might lie down and, just possibly, escape detection.

He watched for such an area to come toward him out of the night. He stood close beside the conveyor. When he saw such an empty spot racing toward him, he broke into a run, matching speed with the conveyor. He dropped into the space, lay as flat as he could, and rode silently toward his destination.

Far away, on the other side of the river, Nick Mechem took the night glasses from his eyes, swore softly, savagely, and from the bottom of his heart. Then he cuddled the stock of a high-powered rifle against his cheek. His eyes, for a moment, were on the spider web of the conveyor, bearing Harlan Dyce across the river, hundreds of feet above its surface.

Dyce might have been just another of the pebbles, for all the outline he showed above the upcurved edges of the rubber belt. He came swiftly on.

Mechem saw the headlights of Helene’s car swing back into the road and come racing across the bridge.

“She’s so scared she doesn’t know what she’s doing,” thought Nick. “And I’m almost as bad. I couldn’t be worse if I were out there myself on that piece of thread. But, boss, if guts are worth anything, you’re worth as much as this dam!”

And then the conveyor stopped. Dyce’s form was almost above the middle of the mighty Columbia.

## II.

IT WAS THEN that Nick Mechem saw the shadowy figure, a veritable human fly, on the topmost part of the framework of the bridge crane. At that moment the crane was at the far end of the wooden structure, over the actual workings, just above the cofferdam that held back the river.

Mechem fastened his eyes on that shadowy figure. Then he grabbed his night glasses again.

"Good grief!" he muttered. "And there isn't a chance that any one, even the boss, can see him. Too many shadows—and who would think of looking there anyhow, where nobody has any right to be?"

Nick stared. The man was looking up at the now motionless conveyor.

Something shot upward from the skulker's hand. It looked to Mechem like one of those diamond-shaped extensions for a telephone transmitter. Mechem gasped as that metal arm—which could in the beginning have been carried in a man's coat, and then become a long, reaching tentacle—shot up toward the rubber belt.

"If there is a razor-sharp knife blade on the end—" thought Mechem.

In a twinkling he knew what it would mean if that belt were cut through. A ton of pebbles, many of them six inches through, would drop with a murderous roar upon the men working below.

Moreover, Dyce, sprawled on the top half of the belt, right over the river, would plunge to death. So Nick reasoned—forgetting that there were two thicknesses of belt, that the belt moved on countless rollers, which would give time for a warning to be shouted before men would die.

Even so, the mere cutting, no matter what it might cause physically, would strike terror to the workers.

That went through Nick's mind like lightning, as the end of that black tentacle reached up for the conveyor.

His rifle jumped against his cheek. In the same instant he fired. Nick Mechem was a dead shot. The man down there was kneeling, so Nick did not take a chance on a leg. He aimed for the shoulder instead—and the grisly knife halted just short of its goal.

Instead, the marauder, as though realizing what he faced in the immediate future, hurled the knife from him. Nick Mechem smiled grimly as he saw it slide over the edge of the cofferdam, into the river.

"You may think we won't get the evidence," thought Nick, "but you'll be plenty fooled!"

So much noise was going forward on the dam that the rifle shot was not heard at all. Nick watched the man try to climb down, taking care not to attract the attention of the man who maneuvered the great bridge crane. But the attempt was not successful, and the marauder fell onto the wooden structure.

Nick stayed where he was. Dyce must know, by this time, for Dyce knew where Mechem was, would be watching for the flame from the muzzle of a rifle. The great conveyor continued its course, moving swiftly toward the gigantic concrete mixer.

Nick held his breath. If, somehow, Dyce didn't get off the conveyor before it fed into the mixer—well, the remains of the midget would go, beyond all recovery, into the structure of the dam, ground into the concrete.

But Dyce knew that. Nick watched Dyce disappear behind a corner of the great mixer—

DYCE, just as the conveyor came into the shadow of the four-story mixer, rose swiftly to his feet, sure that none would see him. The building rushed to meet him. He stood with his legs wide apart, his arms uplifted, his keen eyes watching for something on the side of the building to which he could cling.

The building was of wood and there were beams and joists——

The conveyor sped into the mixer, and Harlan Dyce clung like a fly to the outer wall of it; it shook, as in an earthquake, as the great mixer inside rumbled and roared. Dyce grinned to himself, even as he went down the side of the mixer, finding footholds with the surety of the born acrobat.

"Poor Nick's afraid, this minute, that his boss has been turned into mincemeat. For a moment I was none too sure myself!"

A great roar, as fresh concrete spilled into the eleven-ton containers and——

"There," thought Dyce, as he stepped onto the wooden structure, "but for plenty of luck, goes Harlan Dyce!"

He bent low, so that to an observer, had there been any, he would have appeared smaller than any man had a right to be—like some queer animal that might have come down from the uplands.

Dyce raced out on the structure, keeping the bulk of the flat car between himself and the man on it, heading for the motionless figure under the bridge crane. The man on the crane, working from the opposite side of the structure, had not seen the other fall, nor heard him in the general tumult.

Dyce knelt over the fallen man, turned him to look into his face.

The fellow fought for consciousness. His eyes widened in his

bloody face as he took in the form of Harlan Dyce.

"What are you? Who are you?" he managed.

"I am, perhaps," said Dyce, "the voice of your conscience, if you have any!"

The man started to scream.

Dyce put a small hand over his mouth. "Shut up. You may die in a matter of minutes. Who is working with you?"

The man's eyes went wide with terror. Dyce took his hand away for a moment.

"They'd kill me if I told."

"You'll be sorry if you don't. What were you trying to do, anyhow?"

Since the knife had shot up directly below the conveyor, Dyce had not seen it.

The man shut his lips tightly. But his eyes stared at Harlan Dyce in growing terror. Dyce was an anachronism even his comparatively numb brain recognized as being utterly, miraculously out of place in the midst of that great working.

The man screamed. His scream was like the screeching of car wheels on an uneven track.

Even the man on the flat car heard it. Dyce stepped away, fast. The eyes of the victim, watching him, noted his size—and the vandal screamed again. But Dyce was under the motionless flat car now, whose moving would have smeared him flat, awaiting developments.

Men were running to the scene. Shouts souded all over the dam.

A cable led down from the bridge crane to the workings. Dyce considered it for a moment. He crawled through the railing, stood on the edge, with his back to it, launched himself into space, feet and hands extended.

To slide down would take the skin

and hide from his palms. Dyce clutched the cable with the soles of his shoes and went down like a monkey, hand under hand. He knew that men watched him.

But they wouldn't believe what they saw. He didn't give them much time. He touched the rim of the great container, leaped off on the side opposite the men charged with the labor of spreading the concrete. His eyes caught the ghostly, great shape of the mouth of one of the nine partially completed conduits. He was into it, running full tilt, before the dumfounded workers could circle the container and see what strange thing had slid down the cable, almost into their faces.

They saw nothing. They looked at one another, mouths agape.

Neither thought to look down, where the tiny footprints in the mushy, soft concrete were slowly filling. They were not detectives—and Dyce was gone. One of the men rubbed his eyes.

"Did you see what I saw?"

"I dunno. I think so. A man? A rat? An ape?"

"Listen, Bud, we've got to keep quiet about this. We'll get fired for being drunk. If not that, then every man in the place will razz us to death. Or else everybody else will get scared, and you know what it's like when men get scared on a job like this. Shake and keep mum?"

White-faced, the two men shook hands to bind their compact.

IN ALL THE NOISE they did not know what was happening atop the wooden framework, where men were carrying a babbling man away to a hospital—a babbling man who kept saying: "He wasn't any bigger than a lemur! He didn't come to my knees! He moved like greased lightning!"

CLU—6

"Crazy," said those who carried him. "Crazy as a loon! Wonder what happened to him?"

In the hospital, when the man was stripped down, a medico looked him over carefully and his eyes widened with amazement.

"This man," he said, "besides having got some bones broken in a fall, has a bullet hole through the shoulder! We'd better send for some of the bosses."

Three of the five men who had interviewed Nick Mechem—among them Harrison, the spokesman—came at the mysterious call. The medico repeated his finding.

Harrison said: "Not a word about this. It would scare other men out of their wits."

"But that bullet hole, Mr. Harrison!"

"There may be an explanation later; but now—silence!"

"Very good!"

"What's that he's saying about a little man, no bigger than a monkey? He's out of his head, isn't he?"

The vandal himself spoke up. "I'm not out of my head, I tell you! I saw him, as plainly as I see you. Next instant he was gone."

"No," said the medico. "I assure you the man is not delirious. He believes he saw what he says he saw."

Harrison turned to the broken man. "What did this little man you mention say to you?"

"That he was the voice of my conscience!"

"Why, do you suppose, did he say that?"

But on this point the victim gave no answer. Nobody, so far, had said a word to him about a murderous knife reaching up for the conveyor—a murderous knife that would never rise out of the Columbia to confront him. He was lucky, with

only a bullet through his shoulder and a few broken bones.

Nick Mechem came in, then, and Harrison turned to him.

"Do you know anything about this?"

Nick shook his head. "What's the man's name?"

"It's Clyde Huston," said the victim.

"How long have you been working on the dam?"

"One week."

"Where?"

"As a puddler."

"What were you doing on the bridge crane?" asked Mechem softly.

The man's eyes widened. He stared in consternation at Nick Mechem. "How did you know—"

"I came to you, don't you remember?" said Nick, quietly. "I turned you over, asked some questions—"

Harrison and the medico exchanged startled glances. Nick Mechem certainly didn't look like a boy-sized man!

Huston bit his lips until they bled.

"When you are ready to talk," said Mechem softly, "you will talk to none but Mr. Harrison, Huston. And he will wish to know what you were doing when you were hurt, and who ordered you up there."

"I've nothing to say!" said Huston.

Nick stared at him for a full minute. "Maybe," he said slowly at last, "the voice of your conscience will dictate otherwise!"

Harrison went out with Nick Mechem.

"It's all damn queer, Dyce," said Harrison.

"Don't forget," warned Nick, "that my name is supposed to be Mechem."

"All right. All right. But it's still queer. Why does Huston keep raving about a little man?"

"That's one of the things we have

to find out," said Mechem comfortably. "Meantime, I've got to go back to the house for something I need."

He saw no reason for telling Harrison that what he needed was contact with Harlan Dyce for further instructions. The team must work together.

Dyce was waiting for him at the shanty. He wasted no time whatever. His small, handsome face was grave.

"We've got to move fast," he said, "and work together as no detective team ever did. Nick, do you know what you have to do?"

"Yes. Question Huston and recover that knife from the river."

They traded experiences, to bring themselves down to date on what had happened to each.

"Are we all set now, Nick?"

"I think so."

"Good. Now I'm going conduit-hunting. Helene, you go with Nick to take notes on what Huston says, if anything. I'm on my way; not, this time, on the conveyor. I'm going down from this side—"

Nick Mechem stared, and there was a bit of sarcasm in his voice. "It's only a couple of thousand feet, practically straight down!"

Harlan Dyce grinned tightly.

"Fine! If I find I have to hurry I can simply drop and be at my objective!"

### III.

"DO YOU THINK he'll make it, Nick?" asked Helene Kocsis, as she drove down to the hospital from Coulee Center.

"He always has. But just to think of him going down that way, where a misstep— Say, Helene, you're sort of soft on the boss, aren't you?"

She didn't answer.

"Not that I blame you," said Nick.

"He's just like any other man except for his size——"

"He isn't like any other man! He isn't like any other man in the world! He's better——"

Nick Mechem chuckled. "I practically agree with you, and I'm not even in love with the little mutt! Don't worry about him."

They stopped long enough for Nick to rouse one of the engineers from sleep, tell him what had happened, and about where to locate the apparatus with which Huston had tried to wreck the dam. The engineer, whose whole future depended on the dam, could surely be trusted.

"We'll get the knife," he said. "Then what?"

"Bring it to the hospital. I'll be there."

Helene Kocsis, as Nick talked, stared straight to the front. Once, and just once, she had looked over and down on the dam from the bend of the highway where it first contacted the valley, and the height had made her deathly ill. Now, in the eye of her mind, she saw Harlan Dyce working his way down that cliff face—the only approach to the dam where foot traffic would not be congested! Where nobody would notice a visitor to the dam at midnight.

"It was bad enough," she said, when she drove on, "to watch him ride that conveyor over the river, but that was safe compared to——"

"Forget it!" snapped Nick. "He moves so fast he's probably already out on the dam, listening to everything that is said. You remember that you're a secretary, supposedly an efficient one, and we've both got work to do."

They entered the hospital.

"It won't do Huston any good physically to be questioned at this time," said the medico.

"I've got to know things, or men on the dam may die. Huston probably has the answers. I'll get them if it kills him! He may be behind some of the recent deaths on the dam."

"In that case," said the medico grimly, "I'll fill him so full of hop he'll live even if his heart stops! One of the men recently killed was my son-in-law!"

They entered the chamber where Clyde Huston tossed and tumbled and mumbled. Nick, seating Helene close to the bed, but back so that Huston did not notice her, wakened the skulker.

"Open up, Huston. I'm here to find out something. Why were you on that dam?"

"Why," retorted Huston, "were you?"

"I repeat the question. You can guess why I was on the dam when you understand that I was the man who put that bullet through your shoulder!"

"Oh, you dirty, crooked——"

Mechem glanced at Helene, who was taking down every word.

"Never mind the abuse, Huston. You'll be lucky if you can talk yourself off the scaffold. Listen, my friend, why did you try to cut the conveyor belt?"

"I didn't."

"Why did you toss your improvised knife into the river?"

"I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!"

"I saw you, through night glasses. Want me to tell you how you did it? You had a knife on a collapsible extension. You crawled onto the bridge crane when nobody was looking. You thought that by cutting the belt you could spill tons of rock on the men working below——"

"I didn't, I tell you! You can't prove that!"

"Maybe not, but I'm sure going to

try. How many more like you are working on the dam?"

"Almost six thousand!"

"I'm not speaking of honest workmen, but of murderous vandals—like you, Huston! Maybe, if you give me the names of the others, you will get something less drastic than the scaffold."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Nick Mechem looked at a piece of paper in his hands. He read off five names: Herbert Logan, Isaac Derby, Frank Hesit, Trent Milton and Casper Devor. Then he looked back at Clyde Huston. "Those names mean anything to you? Well, they do, really, whether you ever knew their names or not! They're the five men who were killed during the last week! One was crushed under eleven tons of soft concrete. One fell under the wheels of the bridge crane. One walked into a cut just as a charge of dynamite exploded. One accidentally got locked in the giant refrigerator across the river, and was frozen to death. One fell, somehow, into the concrete mixer. Well, Huston, where were you when each of those men died?"

"If I was close to any or all of them," said Huston, "you'd have a case, wouldn't you? But I wasn't. If I was, who saw me? It won't stand up, copper; you know that, don't you? And you are a copper; anybody could see that."

NICK MECHEM sat back. "Copper—copper," he said musingly. "Most of the men working on this dam are from the surrounding farms and small towns. Not one in a thousand would use the word 'copper' to denote a policeman——"

"Maybe 'dick' is the right word!" sneered Huston. "Since a dick is a detective!"

"And none of the workmen would know that, either, I'm thinking. But you, Huston, you do know both those words, and you use them as though you were accustomed to using them. How does that happen? Where are you from, Huston?"

"Mansfield, in Douglas County, Washington!"

"We can check on that. Where is Mansfield. I mean what's the nearest town?"

"Wenatchee," said Huston, hesitatingly.

"Even I know better than that," said Nick Mechem.

"Then I'm through talking until I've seen a lawyer!" said Huston.

Nick chuckled. "Know the rights of the criminal, too, don't you?"

"That's nothing. Anybody who can read would know, also the meaning of the words 'copper' and 'dick.' "

"But they'd stumble over them, I think, if they didn't come natural to them. You can fence with me all you want, Huston, but I'll have the truth before I'm finished——"

There came a knock on the door. Helene Kocsis paused in her short-hand-taking, looked at the door with sudden terror in her face. Nick could read that terror—fear of a report that some one had fallen two thousand feet into the canyon——

But it wasn't that. It was a man who came in after the doctor, bearing something in his hand that dripped with water. Nick looked at it. Then he turned back to Huston.

"Did you ever see it before?"

"Haven't the slightest idea what it is. Are my fingerprints on it?" The mashed lips twisted in a sneer.

"I fancy," said Mechem, "that the river water took the fingerprints off. Now this is how it works—slightly different from what I thought. It's a jointed steel rod, the joints successively smaller, fitting into one an-



*Mechem gasped as that metal arm shot up toward the rubber belt.  
In a twinkling he knew what would happen next—*

other. They can be shot to their full length by a small wheel at the bottom, something like the reel of a fishing tackle. Humph! Nasty-looking knife, Huston! I don't blame you for tossing this gadget into the river. Too bad for you that those chaps out on the barge have taken fifty-two soundings, getting the lay of the river bed, so that they know every inch of it. This rod, Huston, will hang you!"

Huston sneered. He twisted contemptuously away from Mechem's accusing stare. Then, looking for a moment squarely at the window, he emitted a piercing scream.

"There!" he shouted. "I wasn't mistaken, wasn't delirious! There he is again. *The little man!*"

Helene Kocsis cried out. There was joy in her voice, but so terrified was the injured man he didn't even hear her. Nick noted the dim, almost ghostly features of Harlan Dyce beyond the window. It was enough even to make Mechem shiver a little, the accusing stare in the eyes of Harlan Dyce.

Nick stared at the window, even walked to it, looked out. His body hid Dyce from view for a moment. Dyce grinned at Nick, touched his hand to his forehead in mock salute, and dropped from the sill.

Nick turned back. "You're crazy, Huston," he said softly. "There's nothing out there. A trick of the moonlight or—maybe your conscience troubles you!"

Mechem was working to the limit his knowledge of what had passed between Dyce and this man on the dam—which Dyce had passed on quickly when the two met in the shanty after Huston's fall.

Huston's face was pearly with sweat now, sweat mixed with blood. His eyes were wild.

"Maybe I'm crazy," he said, "but

I've had enough. Yes, I did try to cut the belt. I know who killed those five men, and how it was done. I'll tell everything. I don't care what happens to me. I can't stand it—"

Huston struggled to sit up.

"Get these names," began Huston, as though eager now to tell everything.

But he never spoke one of the names. There was a deafening explosion. A bullet hole appeared in Huston's forehead. Helene Kocsis screamed, even as her speeding fingers recorded the fact of the explosion. Nick Mechem whirled.

The door slammed shut. There was powder smoke hanging there, as though the closing door had caused it to eddy wildly. Nick hurled himself at the door. It was locked. Outside he heard footfalls racing down a corridor. He heard shouts.

He looked back at Helene Kocsis, at Clyde Huston. Huston had flopped back, his part played to the end.

"Did you get his last words, Helene?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Then I'm going out!"

Nick Mechem hurled his weight against the door. It crashed open, the lock exploding as the door went. Nick was out in the hallway, racing in the direction he had heard the footfalls die out.

Outside in the dark a desperate man ran frantically away, toward the bridge that led to the right-hand side of the river.

Something struck him in the back of the head and he plunged forward on his face, out even before he started falling.

#### IV.

HARLAN DYCE reached the rim of the canyon, at the bottom of

which showed the myriad lights of the dam. Grand Coulee Dam, at night, was a sight worth seeing—

But Dyce gave it the most fleeting of glances. He must get down among those lights, and at once. He shivered a little as he glanced down the sheer face of a precipice that dynamite had sliced out of the mountain.

Then he saw the first hand- and footholds.

Unhesitatingly he slipped over the edge. His feet found nubs of rock that would not have held the weight of a normal man. His hand found holds that a normal man's hand could not have grasped. He worked his way swiftly, scarcely pausing. He chuckled as he went. Here was something he could do that he was sure no other man in the world could do.

"I'm earning my spurs," he thought, "even if nobody but Nick and Helene know it."

After a time he paused for a brief rest. He looked up at the towering height above him, down at the abyss below. But he was not afraid. The slight misgiving that had afflicted him in the beginning was gone. He was master of the mountain, and now he knew it. Nothing, except maybe a high wind, could make him lose his grip.

He went on, swifter than before, never at loss for a place to put hands or feet, secure from discovery because the mountain's shadow was over him like a mantle.

He breathed a sigh of relief when his feet went into the rubble at the base of the cliff. He had done one more impossible thing. But he didn't waste time in self-congratulations. The busy dam was right behind him. There was plenty of cover behind which he could hide his small body.

Now, instead of going onto the wooden and steel framework, it was his intention to go right down where concrete was being poured, where more men were at work. It meant some precarious crawling down wooden and steel uprights that were thrice his own circumference. But he didn't hesitate on those either. What were mere things of wood and steel to a man who could master mountains?

He stood on the oldest portion of the dam, where work had been stopped to give the concrete time to set, and looked about him. High overhead was the framework where Huston had been plotting mass murder. High overhead were the giant crane, the trundling flat cars with their forty-four-ton burdens. And ahead of him, along the dam toward the river, hundreds of men were working like beavers.

Lights were everywhere. He must keep to whatever shadows he could find to avoid discovery—and disclosure of his whole project.

He instantly eliminated the men he could see who were obviously wrapped up in their work. There was an almost reverent surety in their labors, as though the dam were a god, they devotees. He could read things like that in their bent backs, their taut bodies, their flying hands. They loved their work, were proud to be a part of such a vast enterprise.

"The men I'm after will be skulkers, keeping to the shadows the same as I am," he decided. "Now where would they hide? Where would they go to be in position to cause the most trouble? And how many of Huston's confederates, if he has any, know he's been hurt? That he's got a bullet in him? Any one of the men who carried him to the hos-

pital might be one of the confederates, who warned the others."

Dyce kept to shadows, then, because among the shadows he would find what he sought, if it existed. He came to the first uncompleted conduit, through which, within a month or so, part of the Columbia, diverted from its present bed, would be flowing. There were nine conduits. They were filled with shadows. Other things, too, perhaps. Dyce must find out.

He looked into the first, which curved down, then up again, like a huge horn. He heard nothing in the conduit. He slipped into it, slid down. His footfalls echoed as though inside a great barrel.

But save for himself it was empty.

He peered out the lower end before venturing forth, to make sure he was not observed. Then he raced to the next conduit, listened, stepped into the mouth—from which, one day, water would rush in a terrific flood.

Nobody. No use exiting on the top, even if he could climb back up. He retraced his steps, hurried to the next. That would leave six to go. Nobody in the third. No work being done on any of the conduits—

"Which makes them all perfect hide-outs for plotters," thought Dyce.

ON THE POINT of entering the mouth, or exit, of the fifth conduit, Harlan Dyce came to pause. Voices were coming out of the great opening. He had to strain his ears to listen, because of the noise above.

"If I were on top now," he thought, with some chagrin that he hadn't thought of it before, "their voices would come right up to me. Oh, well—"

He listened carefully, trying to pick voices, to guess how many men

were in the conduit. If he so much as showed his head—some one might be watching the conduit mouth.

"I tell you," cried one man, "Huston bungled things. And he raved. I'm worried. He had a bullet in him."

"Don't talk so loud," said another voice.

"Nobody'll hear with all the racket on this dam."

"Maybe not, unless the bosses are suspicious and have brought some one here whose job is to listen."

"How could any one find us here, or even get into the workings?"

"Just the same, I don't like it. If Huston were to talk—"

"The whole five of us," said a third voice, "would hang!"

"Does that mean," Dyce asked himself, his heart hammering with excitement, "that there are five men in the conduit, or five men in the plot, counting Huston?"

There was a long period of murmuring voices, when Dyce could catch no intelligible words. Then he heard the first voice say:

"We can't take a chance on Huston. That bullet hole will start some talk and maybe some tall thinking. And Huston is scared. Something has to be done before anybody has a chance—"

"Who of us could get into that hospital?"

"I could," said the third voice. "It'd be easy, since I used to work there!"

"Then you're the man, and you've got a job to do. I hate to have it done, but I don't care to swing, either. Have you a gun?"

"Who of us hasn't? I wonder what Huston did with his? He was supposed to use it on himself if in danger of being discovered. He didn't have the guts, so—"

"So we have to do it for him."

"Exactly. And we don't waste any time. There are too many strangers around, any or all of whom may be dicks."

"Then let's scatter and you do the job, while we get back on the jobs we're supposed to be doing!"

Dyce jumped back, entered the next conduit, around whose edge he peered to see the speakers come forth. There were five of them. Two turned left, passing so close to him he could have touched them. Two turned to the right, striding into the deeper mysteries of the works.

"None of the four," thought Dyce, "will do anything now until Huston has been disposed of."

He looked out of the conduit. The fifth man, with long strides, was going up the rough road that led away from the workings. There were many men about. Dyce, hesitating, stooped and picked up a rock about three inches in diameter. His face was grim.

"If anybody sees me," he thought, "he gets this between the eyes before he can yell. And when he comes to, he won't—I hope—remember what happened to him. Not so good, but it has to serve just now."

Dyce, darting from cover to cover, trailed the fifth man, whose name he hadn't heard. He had the names of none of the others. It didn't matter; he had seen the faces of at least three. Somehow they would later be picked out of the thousands who worked on the dam. He gripped the rock tightly, eyes straining for sight of any one who might spot him.

THE MAN AHEAD of him did not look back. Obviously he did not think of danger from the rear. Dyce knew why. Only an act of Congress permitted any but workmen on the dam, and workmen only when they were on duty.

Now and again Dyce ducked, but en route to the hospital he even cut the distance a little between the plotter and himself. He didn't care a bit whether Huston lived or died. The man deserved to die. And there were things the plotters hadn't taken into consideration. For one, the effect a murder in the hospital would have on the other workers.

And with leads directly to these latest five, Huston's life didn't matter. Dyce wouldn't go out of his way to prevent the killing, if it interfered with what might have to be done. And Helene and Nick wouldn't get killed, for the prospective victim was Clyde Huston, no one else.

"But who's behind these murders and murderers?" Dyce asked himself. "Who would profit most if the dam failed of completion?"

There were many possible answers to that. Some of them chilled Dyce to the marrow of his bones. But one he accepted, for the time being, as the most logical. Millions upon millions of dollars were going into the dam. Any number of desperate criminals would commit murders and murders to force some of that money into their own pockets.

Did they think Uncle Sam could be blackmailed?

A criminal with a brain sufficiently twisted would believe that every man—even Uncle Sam—had his price. Next, when the world looked askance at the dam, the ultimatum would come—and there'd be blackmail or the dam would shut down.

Dyce saw the fifth man go into the hospital. Men standing on the steps moved aside to let him in, without question.

Dyce looked through windows, still keeping to shadows, still undiscovered, until he found what he

sought: the room in which Helene and Nick tried to get the truth out of Clyde Huston.

He saw the improvised knife come in. But for a lot of luck that knife might have cost the lives of Harlan Dyce and many others.

He saw the sneer, the contempt, the mockery, on the face of Clyde Huston.

"I'll have to take a hand," he thought. "Maybe it'll help."

He waited until Clyde Huston turned toward the window as, for a full minute, Dyce had been willing him to do—not that he believed in such telepathic influence—and then showed himself, stepping squarely onto the low outside sill.

Huston's terrified face filled Dyce with satisfaction. His brief glimpse of the room showed no way by which the would-be murderer could reach Huston.

As he jumped back, though, he saw the room door open slightly.

He raced for the outer door, intent on shouting a warning to the men who stood there. To them he would be just a small boy. But they did not see him at all, because they whirled as a muffled explosion came from inside.

Dyce still gripped the rock in his hand.

A man raced out another door of the hospital. He had a gun in his hand.

Dyce watched him turn toward the bridge, saw him thrust the gun into his coat pocket. Dyce was fast, but never fast enough to catch the murderer.

He stopped, poised for a pitch, knowing beforehand that he could send that rock exactly where he wished it to go. If he couldn't, there were other rocks at hand.

He hurled the rock. It struck the

running man at the base of the skull. The man fell on his face.

Dyce rushed up, knelt above him, took the gun out of his pocket by the barrel. He wrapped his handkerchief around it tenderly. Then he looked down at his victim.

"A three-inch rock," he said, "makes even a fellow your size not a bit bigger than a man mine! Now, my friend, come to as soon as you like, and hang yourself higher than Haman! I'm giving you enough rope for you and all your friends!"

## V.

HELENE KOCSIS, terror-stricken, stared at the bloody face of the dead Clyde Huston.

Nick Mechem raced down the hall outside. He saw a number of running men.

"Did any one see a man running away from Huston's door?" he demanded.

"Yes. A man—I couldn't see him very well—raced out the other door. I, with several others, was standing at this door."

"Which way did he go when he got outside?"

"I heard his footfalls going away to the right, as though he were making for the bridge."

"Spread out to right and left and run. We may catch him if we travel fast. Clyde Huston has just been shot."

They exclaimed with consternation as they did Nick Mechem's bidding. Nick, racing along, wondered where Harlan Dyce had got to, and how, when he had previously avoided going by any usual road to the dam workings, he had later used one of those very roads. Obviously only an emergency had made Dyce change his mind. Mechem felt like a puppet, pulled by invisible strings, at

the other end of which, somewhere, was Harlan Dyce.

The stumbling footfalls of racing men— They couldn't be more than a minute behind the fugitive, Mechem thought. But still, a man like Dyce could do a lot in a minute.

"Here's something!" It was a thick cry in the night. Nick Mechem swerved to the right.

One of the men had stumbled over a still, unconscious form. Now one of them shot the beam of a flashlight upon the fallen man.

"It's Ken Darcy. He used to work in the hospital. He's been knocked out. Wonder what happened. I saw him go into the hospital to-night."

"So?" said Mechem. "I wonder why he went out again, and by the side door? Look, let me have the flashlight while you get some water to bring him around."

Nick took the flash. The road was filled with dust, and Mechem had seen something—tiny footprints. But when he held the flashlight he could keep the beam from showing those prints. Later he could rub them out with his own big feet.

The man came back with the water, flung it into the unconscious man's face. The fellow gasped, sat up. His eyes were dazed. He blinked as he looked straight into the beam of the flash.

"What happened?" he asked stupidly.

"That's what we're wondering, Darcy," said Nick Mechem. "What do you think happened?"

"Well, I was going into the hospital. I heard a shot, saw a man rush out. I ran after him. I must have twisted, fallen and hit my head on a rock."

Mechem snorted. "Did you really see any one, Darcy?" he asked grimly. "Or did you do the shooting and the running yourself?"

Darcy stared belligerently at Nick Mechem; he did not answer.

Mechem knelt beside the fellow, ran his hands through the man's pockets. He sensed that Darcy held his breath.

"Where's the gun, Darcy?" he asked.

Darcy gasped. That told Nick something, just as Darcy's held breath told him something. Darcy had expected Mechem to find the gun, and this failure to do so had caused Darcy to gasp in surprise.

"Gun?" said Darcy. "Gun? I don't know what you're talking about."

"So you threw it away as you ran, eh? Listen, you fellows, this man committed a murder to-night, with a gun. Look around for it. He might have thrown it quite a distance, though he must have known it would be found—and with his fingerprints on it. Hurry, now."

Darcy grinned. He knew he hadn't thrown the gun. He hadn't the slightest idea what had happened to it. That this man, obviously a dick, didn't have it, was plain. Therefore, some friend, maybe, had taken the evidence off his person while he was unconscious. There was hope for him.

NICK, on the other hand, guessing that Harlan Dyce had got the gun—and was even now taking every care of it—played a little part of his own. Let this man think the gun couldn't be found. Nick was trying to guess what Harlan Dyce had done, was doing, and planning to do, and fitting his own actions and conversation into his guesses.

Darcy stood up.

Mechem pumped him, with little result, until the men came back. They had, they said, carefully scanned every foot of ground from

where Darcy had gone down, and as far ahead of that spot toward the bridge as he could have thrown the gun in falling, and had found no sign of the weapon.

Nick knew then, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Harlan Dyce had it —when he coupled its absence with those tiny footprints he had seen in the dust. Most of those prints, now, had been erased by the men who had been hunting the gun.

"Now," thought Mechem, "what shall I do with Darcy? What does the boss want me to do? Take him into custody? Too many men know it if I do. The word will get to his confederates. There *must* be confederates. So I let him go because there isn't evidence enough to hold him."

Nick said aloud: "I guess I was mistaken. You did right, Darcy, trying to catch the running man. I'm sorry I accused you. I'm sorry you got hurt. Do you think he socked you?"

"Nobody socked me."

"All right, have it your own way, Darcy. You're at liberty to go about your business."

Darcy looked slowly from face to face of the men who stood around the pair. But he looked longest and most searchingly at the face of Nick Mechem. Nick felt cold chills race along his spine. That long look told him something.

"I'm the next to go! Now he knows that something is afoot and I won't be allowed to go on with my business. Also, he will go straight to his fellow conspirators——"

Mechem knew then that he had guessed aright. This was exactly what Harlan Dyce wished him to do. For when Darcy went to contact his fellows, the midget would be right on his trail, as he must recently have been—with a rock in his hand. Nick

had seen the rock, close beside Darcy's head. There had been brown hair adhering to it. Darcy's hair was brown.

Mechem had heeled the rock into the dust.

Now he stood, watched Darcy head for the steep road that led down to the workings.

Nick went back to the hospital. He sent for Harrison and the medico who had cared for Huston. Their faces were very grave.

"I'd have had screaming hysterics, with this dead man," said Helene Kocsis, "if you'd stayed away another minute. I'd have sworn he whispered!"

Nick shrugged and pulled a sheet over the face of Clyde Huston; it was beginning to look waxy through the blood.

"Harrison," said Nick Mechem, "you'd better bring in those other four men. The ones who, with you, retained me to find out what's going on on this dam."

That required ten minutes.

They came, white of face. Mechem looked at each face carefully, recalling the name of each. Bartlow, Cranstan, Figler and Haren.

"You gentlemen," said Nick Mechem, "furnish much of the material used in constructing this dam; is that right?"

They nodded.

"If it ceases construction, what do you lose?"

"The money it pays us. Besides, we're all considerate of a certain patriotic duty." This from Bartlow, the obese man. "Personally, I lose money under my contract. But I don't mind. It will be a monument to me. These other gentlemen——"

"—may speak for themselves!" snapped Mechem. "Are you getting



*Nick lifted his voice in a great shout: "Stand still, you men—"  
The answer to this was startling.*

all of this, Helene?" Nick asked his secretary.

She nodded. She was looking worried again, because things had happened she didn't know about.

"There was a murder to-night," said Mechem. "Huston here was shot to death. But earlier in the evening he tried to cut the big conveyor. I shot him. I was watching the dam. He was brought here. His shooting became known to his confederates. I don't know how many there are of them. But get this straight! He was killed right here in the hospital, at the very moment he was going to confess, to give me the name of his confederates!"

The medico, Dr. Gerson, swore. "I apologize, Miss Kocsis," he said to Helene Kocsis. "But, Dyce, you don't by any chance think I had anything to do with the killing of Huston? I could have done it, of course, and he was in my charge. But I wouldn't have used a gun—"

Mechem snapped at Gerson. "Maybe you *would* use a gun, because it wouldn't be expected of a doctor who could lay his hands on any kind of poison he wished to use."

GERSON'S FACE got red as fire. His eyes blazed. He stared at Nick Mechem, who did an odd thing. The lid of the eye away from the five men lowered almost imperceptibly. Helene Kocsis noticed it, and the fact went down in her notes. It was safe, she thought, in shorthand.

Gerson played up. "If I thought you were going to try to hang anything on me, Dyce," he bellowed, "I'd—I'd—"

"Use a gun on me?" said Nick. "Or poison?"

Gerson spluttered. But his eyes were dancing.

Bartlow said: "Gerson was in a

position to have done Huston in, if Gerson happened to be interested in the sabotage of the dam."

"I know it," said Mechem. "Unfortunately, I haven't anything to hold him on. But don't leave the dam, Gerson!"

"I wouldn't think of running away from such a ridiculous insinuation!"

Helene Kocsis suddenly gasped, all but rose from her chair.

Nick Mechem fell silent.

The other men looked startled.

From the outer hallway came the swift patter of running feet—tiny feet! Nick and Helene exchanged glances. Nick's brain worked at lightning speed. Helene sat back, her hands tightly clasped over her notes.

"Huston raved about a little man ——" began Harrison, almost hysterically.

Nick jumped to his feet. Stay where you are, all of you!" he snapped. "I'll handle this."

He raced into the hallway, found Harlan Dyce in the shadows at one end of it, grimly darting back and forth to make the sound of footfalls.

"Nice going, Nick," said Dyce, stopping his strange dance.

Nick felt something slide into the side pocket of his coat.

"Huston's gun, Nick," said Dyce matter-of-factly. "Now listen! There'll be hell to pay. Darcy ran back to the dam so fast I had an awful time following him and not getting caught. He's contacted his friends in the middle conduit. They're going on a rampage, smash everything in sight, and no matter who gets killed. In the excitement they intend to make their get-away, down the Coulee toward Soap Lake. I heard them. Keep on using your head. Take Bartlow with you."

Then Dyce was gone on business

of his own. Nick Mechem went back to the others, offering no explanation for his strange behavior, saying nothing whatever about the footfalls.

"Helene," he said, "things are going to happen fast now. Get back to the shanty and wait for me."

"O. K., Mr. Dyce." She rose, took her notes and walked out.

"Dr. Gerson," said Nick, "there's a bullet in Clyde Huston we'll need at the trial of his murderer. Get it out, while we get busy."

To the others he said: "Hell is going to pop on the dam, any minute now. Is there some way of signaling a warning?"

For a moment there was shocked silence. Then one of the men said: "There is a regular whistle signal, when dynamite is to be shot off. If that were sounded at this time of night—"

"Have it sounded!" snapped Nick. "Have all of you got guns?"

Bartlow was armed. The others said they could procure arms at once.

"Then form here," said Nick. "We're rushing the middle conduit the second the warning whistle sounds. Think whether you want to go or not, for there'll be bullets flying. Step lively!"

In less than a minute six grim-faced men were rushing down the road that led to the workings. Nick Mechem saw a sign in a beam of light from the window of an office building. The sign said:

EXTREMELY DANGEROUS!  
VISITORS POSITIVELY NOT  
ALLOWED BEYOND THIS  
POINT!

There was a touch of irony in it, Nick thought.

Then, sudden, sharp, ear-tingling, came the shriek of a whistle.

## VI.

AS THOUGH by magic, every man at work came to a full stop. Only the grinding crash of machinery continued for a few seconds. Then this too died down to a grisly, waiting silence.

Mechem led the way down over the rubble, heading straight for the middle conduit, risking his neck and those of the men with him, to make it by the shortest route.

Nothing but the black mouth of the conduit showed.

Nick, so sure was he of Harlan Dyce, lifted his gun long enough to send a bullet into the gaping maw of the conduit. Then he raced on. Behind him, while rocks rolled under their feet, hammered the others.

The result of his shot was not apparent for a moment.

Then men began to spew out of the upper end of the conduit. Nick counted five of them. They paused up there, as though undecided what to do next.

Nick lifted his voice in a great shout: "Stand still, you men above the middle conduit. The rest of you on the dam—keep out of line of fire, but don't let those five get off the dam!"

The answer to this was startling. Savage oaths came across to Nick and his men. Guns blazed and cracked from the top of the conduit. One man started to drop back into the conduit, thought better of it. They milled for a moment, snapping shots at those who rushed down the rubble upon them.

Bullets were striking the rocks all about Nick and his men. But not one hesitated or tried to turn back.

"Hold your fire a bit," said Nick. "You can't take a chance on killing

innocent men. I said to hold your fire, Bartlow!"

"Sorry," said Bartlow. "I guess I lost my head."

"Yes," said Mechem grimly. "I guess you did—but you got one of those men—"

"I'm a crack shot," said Bartlow. "I'll get them all if you'll give the word."

"There are such things as ricochets," said Mechem, pausing not at all in his headlong dash, "and I still don't want innocent men killed, even by a crack shot. I want those men alive, even if we have to be shot at a few more times to get them."

Now, though, the fight took a different turn. Harrison gasped and went down, groaning. But he yelled at Nick.

"Just got it in the ankle. Never mind me."

They raced on. But now the four remaining men had bunched above the conduit, as though by whispered agreement, and were moving along the uneven, segmented top of the dam.

Nick heard one of them shout: "Keep out of the way, you working stiffs, if you don't want your guts full of lead!"

The workmen hesitated. Then a group of a dozen or so started toward the men with the guns.

"Keep out of line of fire, you men!" raged Nick.

The workmen stopped, but they were in such a position now, with the killers in full flight, that for a few seconds Nick dared not allow his men to fire.

And more men, constantly, were moving from their positions to see what was going on. It was hopeless now to try to bring the fugitives down with hot lead.

"I could do it, Dyce," said Bartlow.

"No!"

"You seem to be the boss."

"I am until this job is finished."

Nick's eyes were savage as he watched the maneuvers of the four killers. Their brandished guns kept back the workmen who would have laid hands on them. Even so, Nick knew, they would have closed in had not Nick shouted to them to stand clear, to do nothing against the fugitives.

The four men raced for the end of the dam, in the shadow of the giant concrete mixer. Nick studied the situation. He led the way to the conduit. With the help of Bartlow and another, he crawled up the curving end of the conduit for a look at the dead man.

"Good shooting, Bartlow," he said. "It's Darcy!"

"I know," said Bartlow. "And I got him in the head—at over seventy-five yards!"

"And in the dark," said Mechem. "But why did you pick on Darcy?"

"I didn't know it was Darcy."

"That's odd," said Mechem, "for I'm the first man to see him after his death. I'm the only one who can see him now. Yet when I said it was Darcy, you said you knew—"

MORE SHOUTS were coming from the direction of the giant mixer. Mechem slid back into the conduit and out at the lower end. Two pistol shots sounded from the shadow of the mixer. A man screamed.

Mechem stared in that direction.

"It's a race," he said grimly. "I guess I muffed it, but I didn't think they'd try it like that."

The four fugitives were racing up the slanting road from the mixer, up toward the main highway.

"Back the way we came," said Nick Mechem grimly. "They're going to run for it."

"I could get all four of them," said Bartlow.

"There are men at work, or standing now, watching, beyond them!" Mechem's voice was savage. "I'll take that gat away from you if you don't stop that blasted nonsense! You're too anxious to blast those men down!"

"They're murderers, aren't they?"

"The law has to decide that."

"If the law ever gets its hands on them!"

"That's my lookout, Bartlow. Now move!"

The four were running up the road, their guns to the fore, and workmen gave them plenty of room. Mechem and his men had to run back over the rubble to head them off. The result of the race, as rocks rolled under the feet of the pursuers, was a foregone conclusion. The fugitives gained the shadows of the buildings ahead of them.

There was the starting roar of a car. It raced up the hill, heading, as Dyce had said, for Soap Lake.

"Step on it!" panted Mechem. "We've got to get those lads. My car should be near the hospital."

But if, by any chance, Harlan Dyce hadn't used his head from the beginning to end—and the car was in Coulee Center—

However, it stood where Mechem thought it should be, near the hospital.

"Bartlow and two others, come with me. The others, get Gerson to bring Harrison to the hospital. He's suffering. Here we go!"

Under the hood of Mechem's car—or Dyce's—the motor hummed with power. Mechem, an expert

driver, shifted to second and high almost in the same movement. The car took the grade swiftly. The fleeing car was already vanishing at the top of the grade, turning right toward Steamboat Rock.

"The driver doesn't live in this coulee," thought Mechem, "who can outspeed me to-night!"

He kept his finger on the button of the horn. Its shriek raged through Coulee Center and Coulee Dam. Far ahead he saw the red tail lights of the fleeing car. The speedometer needle moved steadily up to seventy miles an hour. Coulee Center dropped astern.

In the shack which Harlan Dyce had rented, Dyce listened to the dying of the shrieking siren. He knew that siren, which was peculiarly Dyce's own.

"Nick's on the job, Helene," he said. "That means the killers didn't get away with whatever they had planned for to-night. Also, that Nick will run 'em down. And since he's busy, how about you and I doing our part to put the whole piece together?"

"I'm ready, Mr. Dyce."

"Good! Now, don't leave out a single word, comma or period, and read me every one of your notes, from beginning to end. We ought to be finished with them by the time Nick gets back from the chase."

Meantime, the fleeing car kept well ahead of Nick Mechem.

Bartlow said: "You're going eighty, Dyce. That's all-fired dangerous on this road. If you happened to hit a rock you could shoot off into space that would—that would—"

"Hold it, Bartlow," said Mechem. "If they can travel this fast, so can we!"

Bartlow grumbled. The others said nothing. Mechem stepped it up until his car literally shrieked through the night. The tail lights of the other car started back toward them. Nick Mechem chuckled grimly. The fugitives couldn't stand the gaff, when death yawned at them from all sides.

NICK had his arms fairly wrapped about the wheel. His eyes never left the road or the car ahead.

"Bartlow!" he said, after twenty minutes or so of the maddest driving even Nick Mechem had ever done.

"Yes?"

"Do you suppose, if I got close enough behind them, you could puncture a tire?"

"I could, Dyce, but great Scott!"

"What's wrong?"

"Well, how would you like to have a blow-out, at this speed?"

Both men had to shout to make themselves heard.

"I could keep in the road," said Nick Mechem. "That driver is just as good as I am—or at least close enough to it."

"All right, but if anything happens—"

"You're working for the law, Bartlow!" snapped Nick Mechem.

Bartlow leaned forward, staring ahead. His right hand held a gun. Bartlow shouted again: "There's a curve ahead, and a grade beyond it. They'll have to slow down, and if they miss—"

"Is that the place to get them?"

"It's as good as any."

"Dry Falls is to the left!" shouted one of the men in the back seat. "It's too close for me—and there's a hundred-foot drop!"

"I'll stay on the road," retorted Nick. "Just be concerned about the chaps ahead."

As Bartlow had said, the fleeing car had to slow down for a turn ahead. And as it did, flames speared from the rear window. The men up there, except the driver, were shooting.

"O. K., Bartlow," said Mechem.

Bartlow thrust head and shoulders out the side of the car. The muzzle of the gun pushed into the wind. Flames winked, twice, three times, from the gun. Nick kept his eyes on the car ahead. He didn't even hear the explosions. He saw the spurts of flame out of the tail of his eye.

The car ahead did not take the turn to the right. Instead it left the road, went straight on.

Somebody in the back seat screamed. Nick Mechem cut the gas, fought with wheel and brake. The tires shrieked on the black road. The car slid to a halt just beyond the turn the fleeing car had failed to take.

That car, bouncing like a wild horse with an unwelcome rider on its back, with scarcely diminished speed, was going straight ahead.

Nick leaped from the car.

As his feet hit the road the fleeing car disappeared as though it had been swallowed by the earth itself. A shuddering sigh came from the men in Mechem's car. The boiling radiator of Mechem's car was the only sound for a few seconds.

Then, ghastly screams and a far, muted crash.

Nick, his face grim, looked at the men in the back of the car.

"Just where," he asked, "did they go? You gentlemen know this road, surely."

It was some time before any one

answered. Bartlow was staring straight ahead.

"To miss this turn," said one, finally, "and go straight ahead, is to shoot off the rim of a cliff. It's two or three hundred feet high, and a straight drop."

Nick shrugged. He drove on down the grade, traveling slowly.

He pulled off the road at the bottom of the grade, looked to his left where towered a cliff of sullen, black basalt.

"I'm going to have a look," he said.

"Look out for rattlesnakes," said Bartlow.

Nick Mechem moved into the dark. He was gone for ten minutes.

He came back, crawled into the car. "Just a job for the grave diggers," he said. "That must have been some blow-out you caused, Bartlow! But it doesn't matter. Those four were so badly smashed their own mothers wouldn't know them. Let's get back. The war's over!"

It was a silent party of men that went back to Coulee Center.

Nick Mechem held the car down to a conservative fifty miles an hour. The country off the road, in the dark, had suddenly become grim, dangerous and horrible.

## VII.

NICK drove up to the shanty, led the way in, stepped aside for the others.

Harlan Dyce, impeccably dressed, rose and bowed to the visitors.

Nick Mechem enjoyed their exclamations of amazement. "Gentlemen," he said, "this is the real Harlan Dyce, my boss, and my name is really Nicholas Mechem."

Dyce said: "Sit down, gentlemen,

while we finish the grim business we started. Nick, what happened since I last saw you, at the hospital?"

"A little man!" ejaculated Bartlow. "Huston was right, after all!"

"I don't," said Dyce, "like to be called 'little.' And I'll do the talking from here on if you don't mind. Well, Nick?"

Nick talked rapidly, explaining everything about the chase and its grim climax.

"Good!" said Dyce, when he had finished. "It ties in with what I already know. Gentlemen, it appears that a certain gun, one that Mechem left with Harrison, which I took off Darcy before he regained consciousness—after the shooting of Huston—bears fingerprints that obviously belonged to Darcy. It appears that Dr. Gerson knows something about fingerprints, as every doctor should. He brought his information here, and like a good professional man, didn't have the bad manners to comment when he met me!"

The others stared. Bartlow got red in the face.

"We have no ballistics expert," went on Dyce, "but we can rest assured that the bullet probed out of Huston will prove to have been fired from the same gun. Not, of course—"

"What need is there for any of that?" demanded Bartlow. "All five of those men are dead. That must have been all of them."

"One thing remains, though," replied Dyce softly. "The identity of the man higher up, or the group who was paying them for sabotage and murder!"

"How can you find that out, now that they are all dead?" demanded Bartlow.

"Well, it's difficult to say," replied Dyce, while his audience stared at him almost without blinking, "and requires a certain amount of deduction. I'd say, though, that the man higher up, if he knows what happened to all of those men, that they died without talking—as Huston did—would sigh with relief about now."

Bartlow grinned. "I was thinking the same thing."

"According to Mechem, Bartlow, you shot Darcy, didn't you?"

"I did, and it was a good shot, too! I'm an expert—"

"Excellent, a good job. I'm glad he's gone. I'm glad that the others are gone, too; though it complicates the work we still have to do."

"How?"

"Well, Bartlow, it was like this: Nick went to that car you gentlemen were chasing, after it went over the cliff; remember?"

"Yes, to find its occupants smashed beyond recognition. That was to be expected."

"Right, Bartlow, but there was something else not to be expected. The driver had been shot through the head!"

Dyce's auditors gasped. "How could you know?" asked one. "Mechem didn't say anything—"

Nick grinned. "I didn't have to. Mr. Dyce doesn't need much. As a matter of fact, Bartlow, the driver of that car *did* have a bullet through his head, and his comrades in the car wouldn't have put it there—"

"You did that, Bartlow!" snapped Harlan Dyce, looking fearlessly up into the face of the expert shot. "Was it by any chance because some one might have lived to talk too much? Might mention your name?"

"I'll sue you for everything you own, Dyce!" said Bartlow.

"Another thing, Bartlow. You lied when you said you sold material to the dam. Harrison said so, to Miss Kocsis. He stated he didn't know you had anything to do with the dam, except that you constantly claimed a patriotic interest. That's odd, isn't it, Bartlow? Besides, you said you sold to the dam at a loss. That first gave me the idea you might have wanted to stop work on it, to break your unfortunate contract. I was on the right track, though I didn't have it exactly. Harrison stated that he always thought you were a newspaperman! How do you square these stories?"

"I don't," said Bartlow grimly. "You've nothing against me."

"No," said Dyce, "I haven't, now that you've bumped off all your accomplices. But—"

Here Nick Mechem leaned forward, fixing his eyes intently on Bartlow.

"—but," he said, "here's something you don't know: Huston *did* talk before he was shot, just enough to mention a name"—Mechem was lying desperately, thinking even as he did so that Dyce had certainly flung out a wild guess, simply because Helene's notes had stated that Bartlow habitually carried a gun—"and an accusation! 'Kerl Bartlow hired us all—'"

NICK MECHEM got no further. With an oath, Bartlow jumped to his feet. Nick beat him to it, as Bartlow went for his gun. His fist struck Bartlow on the temple. His left hand grabbed the pistol, wrenched it free.

Nick, as Bartlow staggered back, dropped the gun and snapped bracelets on Bartlow's wrists, slammed him into a chair.

"You'll come clean, Bartlow," he said, "for we've got the goods on you now. You can't get away with it—especially when we take your prints and start checking back. Are you sure there is no record back of you, of jobs something like this one?"

The suddenly gray face of Kerl Bartlow told them how truly Nick's last shot in the dark had struck home.

"Criminal records," said Nick, "sometimes even reach out of-the-way places, like Coulee Dam!"

"Good going, Mechem!" said Harlan Dyce.

"You devil!" raved Bartlow, staring at diminutive Dyce. "If I could be free just long enough to take one shot at you!"

"Sorry, Bartlow," said Dyce grimly, "I don't like to be shot at, even by experts. I'm sorry, too, that I won't be on hand to watch you swing, as you so richly deserve; but I have a mania against appearing in public!"

Dyce looked at Mechem, at Helene Kocsis, and the still amazed engineers and contractors.

"That's all, I think, gentlemen. His own words, his behavior, heard

and seen by you all, will hang him. I'll send Nick back from New York as a witness if you need him, when the trial comes up. One last word; I'd like to keep my true identity out of this, for reasons which must be obvious to you all. I can trust to the discretion of you gentlemen?"

They nodded, each in his turn. Bartlow stared, sullenly.

Dyce went on: "Of course, Bartlow, if you talked out of turn, nobody would pay any attention to you. Everybody would think that you were playing crazy to keep your neck out of the noose! So yell your head off, while you can still talk; it will make the jury more determined than ever to see that you swing! O. K., Nick, see the prisoners on their way. Let's pack while he's gone, Helene, and it's New York for us, on the first plane out of Wenatchee!"

Helene looked at Nick Mechem, who grinned at her.

"All right, darling," he said, "I'll follow on the train if you insist! I know when the good detective assistant makes a crowd."

Helene got very red in the face, but was equal to the occasion.

"Fine, Nick," she said, "and don't hurry!"

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# Blondes Are Poison

—so he hired a brunette.

I'M SITTING in the reception room of the bureau of investigation, International Jewelers' Association, waiting to see Mike Day. He's the boss. Maybe he has a job for me. If he hasn't, nobody has and I might as well join the ranks of the unemployed without a yelp. Time was when I bought Mike his coffee. Maybe he'll remember, but they seldom do.

I've been there an hour, looking at the blonde behind the desk. She's a nice little bundle, but blondes are poison to me. She has a hard look in her blue eyes and a tight twist to her mouth. She looks me up and down. I am not in the money and she knows it.

"Did you tell Mike I wanted to see him?" I asked.

"Mr. Day is engaged. He will see you as soon as he can." And her nose goes up two points.

"He may be Mr. Day to you, sweetheart, but he's just Mike to me. Me and him are just like that." I hold up two fingers.

She sniffs. I sniff back.

A buzzer on her desk sounds and she picks up the interoffice phone.

"Yes, Mr. Day," she says sweetly. And to me: "You may go in. Mr. Day will see you now."

"Mike," I said.

I went in. It's funny how guys can change.

"Hello, Mike," I said. "How's the boy?"

He gave me a soft, fishy hand and said, "How are you, Kincaid?" not caring how I was. He's soft with

prosperity. It's fattened his head and his waistline. Time was when the boy packed a punch, but not now. He has that tired, strained look that comes from too little sleep—nerves. A dick with nerves isn't worth much to anybody.

He has no time to discuss the past. He starts right off.

"I understand you want work," he says. "I think I have something for you. This is a file on a case we have on hand. Treager's, the big jewelry store, was robbed of about fifty thousand dollars' worth of stuff. They sent it up to the Place Hotel to a maharaja who was here a few weeks ago. A bonded man and a guard took it. They were jumped in the hotel corridor by two men, taken into a suite of rooms, robbed and bound.

"Treager's heard about it when the maharaja phoned to ask where the jewels were. We don't know much, except this: Treager's bonded man says a blond girl was in the suite where the thugs took them. He got a good look at her and later we found this picture."

He handed me a photograph, about post-card size, of a shapely dame in a few clothes.

"That's the girl," he said. "Try to find her."

"How many men have you had looking for her?" I asked.

"Half a dozen. No luck. If you don't want the job, say so. If you do, go ahead. I'll put you on the pay roll. You can handle it in your own way."

by Eric Howard

*I butted her aside with my shoulder—before she could make a grab for the gun—*



"You think she's still here?"

Mike shrugged and grinned. The grin was like his old self.

"I don't know. But we've got to find her, wherever she is. It's the only way we'll get to the others, and unless—"

I turned the picture over. On the back is the name of the photogra-

pher who made it—a Chicago theatrical photographer who specialized in burlesque pictures.

"Did you check this?" I asked.

"Of course. No use. It was made a couple of years ago; the photographer has sold out since, and they have no records. They thought she belonged to a burlesque chorus, but we haven't found out anything about her yet. I've had copies of the pic-

ture made. I'll give you one and you can get to work."

"Any suggestions?"

"You might try all the shows, the night joints, and so on. You might find somebody who knows her."

He didn't seem very much interested. I didn't get him. Maybe he was just putting me to work for old time's sake, even if he hadn't greeted me like an old friend. I didn't care. I'd eat for a while, get my laundry out of hock, pay my room rent and so forth.

I got up. "O. K., Mike," I said. "I'll give it a whirl. You ain't looking so good. They're working you too hard."

"I'm all right!" he snapped at me, like he didn't want to hear such things. "If you learn anything, phone me. Here, I'll give you an order on the cashier. And here's the picture. That's all, Kincaid."

"Thanks," I mumbled and eased out.

"So long, toots," I said to the blonde outside. "I'll be seein' you. Any time I phone in, put me through to Mike quick. Kincaid's the name. Make a note of it."

I FELT BETTER with money in my pocket. But this assignment Mike had handed me was a puzzle. Find a blond chorine everybody had been looking for. Try the shows and the night joints. That would be a weary round.

It might be better to start at the other end—at the Place, where they pulled the grab. "Bat" Riley was the house dick there.

I went up and found Bat.

"You had one of them Hindu princes here a while ago," I said.

"Yeah, the Maharaja of Quandore, his missus, and a flock of servants. The place was full o' Hindus. He was a nice little guy. They

say he's richer'n any American. His missus was a ravin' beauty, boy. Made me think I'd like to go to India."

"He was the real thing, huh?" I said. "Not a phony?"

"He was too ugly to be phony. A little guy with squint eyes and spectacles. Sure, he was real. What you on, Kincaid? The jewel robb'ry?" He laughed.

"Yeah. Show me the rooms where they bound up those fellers."

"O. K. But it'll do you no good."

We went up. This floor was nothing but de luxe suites. You'd have to be rich to pay for one. There was a frosty-faced floor clerk on duty. Riley got the key to the suite and we went in.

"We found 'em tied up here," he said.

"Who had this suite?"

"Nobody," he said. "That's the puzzle. We don't see how anybody got in, or how they could grab these two in the hall here."

"Where was the Hindu?"

"In the next suite. The men from Treager's were going there. Somebody opened this door and jumped them, dragged 'em in, clubbed 'em, tied 'em up. The bonded feller says he saw the blonde there—in the door of the bedroom. The other one, the guard, didn't see her."

I looked down the corridor. The floor clerk's desk was around the corner. It could have happened without his seeing it. As for getting into the suite, that could be managed. They tried to keep a check on everybody who came or went, but they might have missed a few.

But why the blond girl? What good would she be to two thugs on a stickup? And why did she leave the picture?

It looked all wrong to me.

Somebody at Treager's or in the maharaja's crowd must have talked. Otherwise, how would the crooks know the trinkets were on their way? Neat timing.

"Thanks, Bat," I said.

"What for? You didn't get anywhere, did you?"

I grinned at him. "Did you ever hear of deduction?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Just remember this: blondes are poison."

"I like 'em," he said. "But that little Hindu princess—"

"You're probably a gentleman," I said, and left him.

THE GIRL at the cigar stand gives me the glad eye and I wander over.

"Well, well!" I say. "If it ain't little Nora, the Kelly brat! You're coming up in the world, sis. Last time I saw you, it was in a cheap hotel."

She laughed. She is not a blonde; her hair is blue-black and her eyes deep blue.

"I have a way with me," she said. "I can sell more cigars and books and magazines and candy than anybody in the business. How are you, Mr. Kincaid?"

"Swell. How long you been here, Nora?"

"A few months."

"You knew the maharaja then?"

"Sure. And the missus. They were very nice to me."

"Why not?" I took out the blonde's picture. "Ever see this dame around here?"

She glanced at it and laughed. "Oh, you're looking for her, too! No, I never saw her. I'll bet you're the tenth man to ask me."

"Yeah, I'm on a cold trail. If you ever do see her, give me a ring, baby."

"Sure. Can't I sell you some cigars?"

I bought a pocketful. "You have a way with you, colleen."

"Even the maharaja thought so," she said. "He was thinking about how an Irish girl would fit into the harem. I could see it in his eye."

"Stay out of harems. You'd probably kill off the other wives. Did he have more than one with him?"

"No. He left the others at home. This one is his favorite. She was sweet."

I gave her my card with the phone number on it.

"Don't forget the blonde," I said. "If you see her, call me, night or day."

I know a little guy that runs a booking agency. He furnishes entertainers for floor shows and so forth. He might know the blonde.

HE WAS ASLEEP when I went in—sitting in his chair, with his feet on the window sill, ashes all over his vest.

"Hey, Barney!" I said.

"I don't want any," he said, without opening his eyes.

I shook him and he blinked.

"The dicks!" he said. "The joint's pinched!"

"Wake up! I want to talk to you."

He came awake and yawned at me.

"I'm looking for a girl," I said.

"We all are." He shrugged and spread his hands. "It's a theme song."

I handed him a Place cigar and he sniffed it, opening his eyes.

"When a cop gives you anything," he said, "it's news. What do you want, Kincaid?"

I laid the picture on his desk. "I want to get a line on this blonde."

He looked at the picture. "Nice legs and curves. Can she dance?"

"Look at her face and tell me if you know her!"

He lighted his cigar, inhaled and blew out a lot of smoke. He studied the blonde's face, turning the picture this way and that.

"She looks like a lot of girls," he said. "They all look alike, anyway, in this business." He took a reading glass out of a desk drawer and held it over the picture. He shook his head, then took another look. "She cut her hair off!" he said then. "I'll be damned! Yeah, I know her. I knew her, I mean, two or three years ago. She used to have hair so long she could sit on it. Golden blond, not platinum. I used her in a Godiva act, once. And she worked at stag parties, dressed in her long hair."

"Who is she? Where can I find her?"

He shrugged. "You got me, Kincaid. She was mixed up with a photographer, the last I heard of her. One of the art-study boys. They sent him up for two years and I haven't heard of her since."

"What's her name?"

"That won't help. She's probably changed it. She called herself Gloria D'Or."

"And the photographer?"

"Clarence Lunn. He was in the movies once, but he was too bad even for them." Barney chuckled. "Pretty bad, huh? He was making a naughty film for stag parties, with Gloria, when they nabbed him. You have to be pretty bad to be obscene, and he was. I never saw Gloria after they put him away." He looked at the picture again. "It sure surprises me she cut off her hair. Maybe it made her too conspicuous. Every high-school kid had her picture."

"Got any ideas?" I said. "How could I find her?"

"The head's empty, brother. I wouldn't know. If Lunn's out, she might be with him again. Why do you want her?"

"She knows a mug I'm after. He got away with fifty grand worth of baubles."

Barney Bernstein whistled. "She's traveling high, ain't she? Say, tell your friends at headquarters to lay off the Frolics show and I'll see if I can help you."

"It's a deal," I said and moseyed.

I WENT DOWN to the Star and started work in their morgue. I got the dope on the Lunn case quick enough. Gloria D'Or had not been arrested with him, but she had appeared at the trial and had wept when he was sentenced. Lunn was an ugly-looking mug with a bald head. There were some pictures of Gloria. One of them showed her long hair. They checked with the one I had. After that, there was no mention of Gloria. But Lunn had been paroled six months ago.

I patted myself on the back. I was doing more than Mike's other boys had done.

It wasn't far to headquarters and I drifted down to ask McGuire, of the vice squad, to lay off the Frolics. Their Saturday night show was supposed to be pretty bad.

"Always glad to do you a favor," McGuire said. "But not this one. We've got to raid the Frolics. The pressure has been put on us. The mayor has promised 'em a clean-up. The church folks are yelping. The Frolics has been getting uptown trade and now it's talked about. They got a redhead from Chicago doing a number there that makes my cops blush."

"When you going to hit 'em?"

"Never mind," said McGuire. "It'll do 'em no good to clean it up. They can put on a Sunday-school play and we'll still raid 'em."

That was that.

I phoned Mike and reported, just to show him I was on the job.

"Good!" he said. "Stay with it, Kincaid. Call me when you have something more."

He was cool and crisp about it.

I put away a dinner, smoked a Place cigar and found myself down near the Frolics. I don't go for such shows. Me, I like them sweet and simple. But I went in this time.

The show is a double bill. First, there's a colored company. And can those coffee-and-cream babies dance! And sing! And play the piano! It's fast and furious, and their cracks aren't so bad.

Then the whites came on, and right from the start they're enough to make a man ashamed of his race. They should be raided. I sit through it all, though, waiting for the redhead. She comes out in a spotlight, wearing a black velvet cape and a mask. She has long red hair down her back. She moves around, whirling the cape. It, and the mask, are all she wears to protect her from the drafts. The music booms up and the spot picks her out. She drops the cape, and the boys who have paid their money yell and clap. Then she grabs up the cape and runs off stage.

Two comics come out and talk about her. One of them says, "You ought to be here Saturday night. That's when the cape goes to the cleaner's."

I still like them sweet and simple. I went out and looked at the big colored pictures in the foyer. There's the redhead, and under the picture it says: "Glory Dawn, Too Hot for Chicago."

I look at her face, then at the picture I have in my pocket. Glory Dawn—Gloria D'Or.

And then I ran around the corner and up the alley toward the stage door.

A couple of people are coming out—a man and a woman. They're battling. She's snapping at him in a high-pitched, grating voice; and he's saying, "Shut up before I smack you!"

I hugged the wall until they passed. There was enough light for me to see the woman's face. It's Gloria, all right. And she's a short-haired blonde now. The red hair that goes with her Glory Dawn act is a wig, just a prop like the velvet cape.

I FOLLOW THEM to the street. They make for a coupé at the curb. She gets in and bangs the door hard. The man crawls behind the wheel. She's still talking and he's promising to smack her. I get the license number as they pull away. A cab came around the corner and I flagged it. We followed the coupé through the traffic, out into a boulevard, until it stopped in front of a big market.

The man got out and started buying a lot of stuff at the delicatessen. I looked him over. But he didn't mean anything. He was heavy, broad-shouldered, stocky, about five feet eight. He had on a cap and a gray suit. His hair was black and curly, with gray in it. He had black eyes and thick, bushy, black eyebrows. I'll bet he had to shave twice a day.

He lugged his bags of food back to the coupé.

"Did you get the vermuth?" the girl said.

"You'll drink whisky and like it," he growled.

She got out and banged the door

again. "I'll get it myself," she snapped.

And did. When she went back, he had the engine started.

"Hurry up," he said, "or you can walk home."

"You're the cheapest fool I know," she told him politely. "You try to two-time me with every girl in the show and you won't even buy me a drink!"

"Let Clarence buy your drinks," he growled.

He jerked into gear and they moved. I crawled into the cab and we followed. They pulled up in front of a stucco bungalow and the girl got out, clutching her vermouth. The man turned into the drive and went on back to the garage. She went to the front door, rang the bell and a man opened it. She put her arms around him and kissed him, then went in. I just got a look at him, but I was ready to bet he was Clarence Lunn.

I paid off the taxi driver and stuck around. Just the three of them in the house, I figured—Clarence, Gloria and the tough one.

I went up on the lawn and leaned against a tree. I could look into the living room. Clarence was wearing a brown silk dressing robe. The tough one tossed his cap on a davenport and switched on the radio. Gloria went into another room and came back wearing a red-and-gold kimono. She went up to Clarence and put her arms around him, starting a dance. The tough mug glared at them, then turned around and changed the program. The music stopped.

"Blackie's on the make for every girl in the show!" she yelled. "And he don't want me to dance with you."

I was surprised that I could hear her. She must have bellowed it.

But I don't hear what the others say, not until I crawl up under the window.

There's a gas log burning in the fireplace and the window is up an inch for ventilation. The girl is telling them.

"I'm keeping you tramps," she said. "I'm paying for your whisky, Blackie, and all you eat. Where would you be if I didn't drag in a hundred a week for taking my cape off? Back in stir, where you belong! Let those girls alone!"

Clarence is a peacemaker.

"Now, Glory, sweetheart, don't be that way!" he tells her. "Blackie didn't mean anything. He's just playing around a little. We love you, girlie, and we appreciate all you're doing for us, but wait! Just as soon as Jake gets rid of the ice, we'll all be rich—ten grand apiece, or close to it!"

He put his arm around the girl and she smiles up at him, running her hand over his bald head.

"You're all right, Clarence. But Blackie—"

"Blackie" snarls something at her, accusingly.

"Where in hell is Jake?" he wants to know. "How do you know we can trust him?"

"Jake is all right," said Clarence. "We'll hear from him any time now."

"Yeah, he's all right—when he ain't hopped up!"

"We had to have somebody to handle that end," said Clarence. "We couldn't do it. Jake could. Come on, let's all have a drink and be friends."

They do. The phone rings and Clarence answers it. He talks for a minute or two.

"Jake's coming right up," he said. "It's all right."

They relaxed then. The girl

sprawled on the davenport, smoking, with a drink beside her.

I wished I had a drink. But I'd better wait for Jake.

A TAXI sailed up, after a while, and a little runt in a big overcoat got out and went up to the house.

Clarence opened the door. "Hello, Jake," he said. "Everything all right?"

"Sure. You can leave it to me, pal."

When I saw him, after he had shed his coat, I knew he was hopped

up. He paraded around, proud of himself, waving his hands.

"Thirty grand," he said. "We cut it four ways."

"How much you holding out?" growled Blackie.

Jake began cussing him, telling him they were lucky to get that much.

"If it wasn't for me, you couldn't get rid of the stuff. Anybody can lift it—all you need is a strong arm—but it takes a guy with brains to peddle it when it's hot. Me, see?" And he cussed Blackie some more.



Blackie moved in on him, gliding like a panther. Clarence tried to get between them, but he was slow. Blackie swung and connected. Jake went down, crashing against the wall.

"No little dope can talk that way to me!" growled Blackie. "Brains! Hell!"

Clarence was holding Blackie back.

"You haven't got any brains, anyway," said Gloria.

Blackie looked like he wanted to smack her, too.

Jake was mumbling. Then he was pulling a little gun out of his coat pocket. The girl let out a yell. Blackie threw off Clarence and his hand dug for his own gun. Clarence tried to stop him, calling to Jake at the same time. Some way, Clarence got between them. Jake fired and Clarence pitched toward the davenport. Then Blackie fired twice and Jake slumped down against the wall.

"I knew I'd have to kill that damned hophead!" Blackie said.

He went for Jake and rolled him over, roughly. He took out a big, bulging billfold and ran his fingers over the money.

The girl was trying to pick Clarence up. He was limp and there was a lot of blood on him. He coughed once, then sagged.

"Damn you!" Gloria yelled. "You killed Clarence!"

"Nuts! Jake killed him," said Blackie. "That makes it nice. Get some clothes on. We're going places—and we got thirty grand to go on!"

"I wouldn't go any place with you! Give me half that money!"

"Yeah? You'll come with me, all right. And you'll get your share a dollar at a time—if you treat me right. Think I'm going to leave

you here to get picked up by some cop? And talk? Get your clothes on!"

Gloria didn't move. He caught her arm and snapped it down hard. The palm of his hand smacked against her face. She swore like a stevedore.

I thought I'd better cut in before there was any more killing.

When Blackie dragged Gloria into another room to make her dress, I lifted the window. It swung up noiselessly. Any time, now, the cops might come along. Somebody, hearing the shots, would phone in; a radio prowler would pick up the message. But if I wanted to show Mike how good I was, I'd better get Blackie and the girl without police help.

I eased through the window, ducked down back of the tall radio, worked my gun out.

Blackie made her dress, all right. When he dragged her back, she was pretty well clothed. Her lip was bleeding from another punch he had landed.

"Just act nice and take it easy," Blackie said. "We'll get along. The dough's mine, ain't it? I did all the work."

"It was Clarence's idea," snapped Gloria. "He got wise to it when he was selling the maha—whatever you call him—those pictures. It was all his idea. Clarence was a swell guy. You could depend on him. He always treated me right."

"Why wouldn't he? You were his meal ticket. You even stuck by him when he was in stir. I used to smoke the cigs you sent him." He gave a croaking laugh. "I thought then I could go for you."

Blackie had his back to me. He was stuffing things into a bag.

I got up. "Lift 'em, mug," I said. "You ain't going anywhere."

He lifted them, so did Gloria. She also let out a yell, then laughed.

"I'm glad!" she said. "I'm glad they got you! You'll fry!"

"If you're that glad, sister," I said, "you can tie him up."

I ripped a silk cord off a curtain and tossed it to her.

"Use that, and the rope from your friend's dressing gown," I said. "Tie him right."

**SHE STARTED TO**, when somebody ran up on the front porch and opened the door. I caught a glimpse of a white, worried face, and then everything blurred. There was a shot. My gun flew out of my hand. Then Blackie socked me and I was out.

It was surprise that did it, more than Blackie. The mug who crashed the party and shot my gun out of my hand was the boss, Mike Day!

But I didn't have a chance to think about that.

The next thing I knew I was trussed up, my head ached, and I heard a buzz of voices.

One of them was Mike Day. The double-crossing—

He was a double-crosser, all right. The first words I heard showed that.

"And who told you Clarence Treager was sending the stuff at that time?" he asked. "He promised to cut me in for one third, and I'm here to get it. Since you rubbed out Clarence and Joe, you two can fight over the rest. Where would you be now if I hadn't come along. Kincaid may be dumb, but he can slug."

That made me sore, but I was too groggy to talk. I listened.

"The fence phoned me as soon as Jake closed the deal. You think I'd trust you mugs!" Mike went on. "I waited for Clarence to call me, like he promised. When he didn't, I

came out to see what you were trying to pull—and saved your thick neck. Maybe I can fix it with Kincaid, maybe I can't. If I can't, we'll have to—"

"You can't!" I grunted. "What's the idea putting me on this gang if you're one of 'em?"

"Hello, sleeping beauty, did you wake up?" Mike asks, nasty. "Too bad! You looked so cute. I put you and a lot of other dumb ones on it, because I thought you'd stumble over one another's big feet. I had to show the big chief I was working hard, didn't I? A flock of dumb cops can mess a case up so nobody can ever solve it. That was the big idea, boy, but you were dumber than the rest—you wanted to show me what a good detective you could be! And that's your tough luck."

The way he said it made me shiver.

"Mike, don't you remember I used to buy you eats?"

"So what? I gave you a job, didn't I? You going to be reasonable or—"

"I'll finish the big-footed slob for you," growled Blackie.

"You've used your gat too much already," snapped Mike. "Kick through with the ten grand. Then we can talk about other things."

"You going to take it off me?" asked Blackie.

"If I have to," said Mike.

"Why, you little rat, I could bust you in two. Listen! You've talked a lot. Now it's my turn. Me and Glory are leaving, see? And we're taking all the dough with us. How do you like that, cop? I hate cops, even crooked cops like you. See?"

"You're forgetting the murder, Blackie," Mike said. "You won't get far."

"Far enough. I know where I can

go—with thirty grand. And Glory goes with me. Try and stop me!"

BY THIS TIME my head has cleared some. I look around. We're in a shabby, dirty room—the living room of an old, cheap house. While I was out, they brought me here. I wondered if the cops had showed up at the other house and had found the two stiffs.

There's nothing I can do. My gun's gone and I'm tied.

There wasn't much chance of the cops trailing them here. Mike and Blackie glared at each other like a couple of strange dogs. I worked at my ankles, tied with the cord from Clarence's dressing gown, to see if I could snap it. My feet did look pretty big.

Gloria is looking from one guy to the other, waiting for something to pop. She doesn't like either one of them, and I guess she sees that she's in for it, no matter what happens. Maybe she's grieving for her Clarence. He wasn't much, but when a girl sticks by a man as long as she had, it gets to be a habit.

Blackie grabbed her arm and jerked her toward him. He put his arm around her and started for the door. I blinked, expecting Mike to blast him. But he didn't. The girl was in the way. He just waited, with a crafty smile on his pale face, until Blackie had his hand on the knob.

Then Mike dived for his legs, tackled him and snapped him down to the floor. Mike still had some of his old stuff, but not much.

As Blackie fell, his hand went under his coat. He took the fall like a wrestler, on his shoulders, but it never stopped his arm work. As he landed he rolled over and shoved his gun right into Mike's stomach. He let him have it.

Blackie's head was close to my feet. I pulled them up and banged down on him. He slumped right beside Mike.

The girl was at the door, white-faced, scared. I was afraid she'd make a grab for Blackie's gun.

"You!" I yelled at her. "Untie these ropes!"

She stood there, trembling, looking ten years older, shaking her head.

She was going to take a run-out powder. I got to my feet and started hopping toward her. The cord on my ankles gave way, but my hands were still tied behind me. I got between her and Blackie's gun. As she tried to open the door, I knocked her against the wall with my shoulder.

"Easy, sister," I said. "You're going to need a friend when the cops get you. I could tell 'em you're a good jane mixed up with a bad crowd. I could tell 'em you were scared o' Blackie and you had to do what he said. If you ever want to dance again, you better play ball. Untie that rope!"

"You'd cross me, you dirty cop, like all the rest—except Clarence," she sobbed.

Blackie is stirring. I kicked him in the head again.

"No," I said. "I'm just a dumb cop, too dumb to cross you. I could give you a break with the cops. You'll need it—with three men dead."

She rubbed her head. I thought she was going to untie me. But she tried something else. Blondes are poison. She swooped down and made a grab for Blackie's gun.

If she'd got it, and the dough, she'd have left me there for the cops to find.

I fell to my knees and butted her aside with my shoulder. I kept after her, knocking her over, sending her against the wall. Her hair was falling over her face and her eyes had a wild light in them. She was gasping for breath.

"I could 'a' kicked your brains out," I told her, "but I'm no rough-neck. I treated you gentle."

When she got her wind back, she began cussing me. She let me have all the words she had picked up at all the places she had ever been.

I kept working at my wrists, pulling and tugging and straining. Jolting the girl around had loosened the rope a bit. I hunched my shoulders and jerked. It gave way, and my hands were free, but there was a tight circle of rope around each wrist.

PANTING, I picked up Blackie's gun, sat down in a chair, and grinned.

"Now all we got to do is call the cops!" I said.

There was no phone there. So I lifted the gat and fired through the window. It made a lot more noise than when Blackie shot Mike. I heard a yell down the street.

Gloria stopped talking and began to cry. I felt kind of sorry for her, at that.

"Take it easy, sister," I said. "I'll give you a break with the cops."

The cops came in about five minutes. I gave them the dope and went home to my hotel.

Gloria talked. It was the best thing for her to do. The maharaja was a collector of art-study pictures. Clarence sold him a lot of them. He collected them the way some guys collect stamps. He told the maharaja that he could bring his model, if he wanted to see her. He did.

So Clarence and Gloria went there. That's when they heard about the stuff from Treager's.

Clarence got in touch with Blackie—he knew him in stir—and then with Mike; Blackie and a lot of other crooks knew Mike was in the racket. They rigged it to catch Treager's men. The girl didn't know how her picture happened to be there. It might have fallen out of Blackie's pocket when he tied up Treager's men, or out of her bag. Jake, another stir friend of Clarence's, knew a fence; Gloria named him and the cops grabbed him, too.

The next day I went around to the bureau of investigation, International Jewelers' Association. The snooty blonde was there, but she passed me right through to the big chief. He wasn't a cop; he was a retired jeweler who had been elected secretary of the association. He had hired Mike.

I wanted my pay.

He almost knocked me off my big feet when he offered me Mike's job.

"I'll take it, on one condition," I said. "Blondes are poison to me. Give that blonde out there some other job, where I won't be seeing her all the time. And let me hire a black-haired dame."

That was all right with him, and I phoned Nora Kelly.

"Listen," I said. "I don't want a girl like you being looked over by maharajas and things. You meet too many guys there in the Place. I want you to come and decorate my office, and whatever you're getting I'll raise it."

"Yes, Mr. Kincaid," she said, giggling.

"Tom!" I corrected her.

"Yes, Tom—dear," she said.

# SET A THIEF—

*—and eat potato salad.*

by Howard Simpson

**I** WAS SITTING on the side lines in Barney Moran's billiard parlor, upstairs above Market Street, waiting and using my eyes. Sometimes the hardest work a cop has to do is to sit and wait.

I was waiting for a hopped-up little stool pigeon, known as "Whitey." If he had a last name, nobody knew it. The dope said he hung out at Barney's, although Barney's place was no dump.

My hunch is that the fellow who snatched Mrs. Dalroy's baubles—worth fifty grand—is a lone wolf called "Duke" Grainger. He uses the needle, I've heard, and Whitey might know his hang-out. Anyway, the baubles are gone; Mrs. Dalroy has collected the dough, and the Acme Insurance Co.—the outfit I'm working for, until they fire me—is wailing for its money. The job was neat—which is one reason I think it's Duke's work. He's brainy.

Whitey doesn't show up. But a young fellow, with worried brown eyes, wearing an old dark suit that has been carefully brushed and shoes with run-down heels, that have been polished until they shine, comes in and sits down.

When I take out a package of cigarettes, he says: "Could you spare a smoke, pal?"

I hand it to him. His white hand is trembling so he can hardly fish it out. When he lights up and draws in a deep puff, relaxing in the chair,

I say: "Skipped a few meals, haven't you, boy?"

His brown eyes flash and he grins. But it isn't funny.

"More than a few. But a cigarette is as good as a dinner, when you get used to the diet."

"I'm just waiting for a friend," I said. "Tell me the sad story of your life."

He looked mad, but I got the story. He'd been out of Quentin two months. Yes, he was guilty and he had served his time—two years. Embezzlement. He said his employer had promised him a share in the profits if he put over a deal. A verbal promise. When the deal went through, the boss reneged, didn't even raise his salary, which was low enough. I believed him. The boy was in a jam; there was a girl, and he needed money quick. So he took it and got caught. The boss had him sent up. He didn't see the girl again. He didn't know what had happened to her, where she was, anything. She might be dead.

"I've got to get a job," he said, "and I can't. Nobody will hire me when I tell 'em I've just come out. Lord, I paid my debt to society, didn't I? I didn't holler. Why can't they forget it? The cops keep after me, too; they're just waiting to nab me if I'm within ten miles of anything that breaks."

"I'm a cop myself," I said.

He looked scared. Then he

SET A THIEF—



*"What'll we do with him?" asked Dalroy.*

*Duke shrugged—a death sentence. Then there was a sound in the hall—*

laughed. "I bum a cop for a smoke!" he said bitterly. "All right. Lock me up for vagrancy and panhandling."

"I'm a private cop," I told him. "Work for an insurance company. Chances are they'll let me out pretty soon. Then I'll be in your boat. It's as hard for an ex-cop to get a job as an ex-con. Here! Go throw a feed into yourself and then come back. Maybe I can steer you on to something."

I handed him a dollar bill. He shook his head, didn't want it.

"Take it, you mug," I said, grinning. "Never say cops are all bad."

He took it and went out, saying he'd be back. I didn't know whether

he would or not. Just big-hearted Joe Morgan, that's me; handing out dollar bills to ex-cons—and Acme looking over my expense account with an eagle eye. But I had a hunch. I liked the kid. He was around twenty-five, I figured. Maybe he could do something for me.

WHITEY drifted in while the kid, who said his name was Steve King, was out eating. Whitey weighed about a hundred pounds; he was pale and he had straw-colored hair and pale, wavering blue eyes. He walked sidewise, cocking his head on one side, glancing over his shoulder.

"Hi!" I said, and beckoned to him. I thought he'd bolt and run, but he squared his thin shoulders and came over, grinning sheepishly. I saw that he was wearing fine clothes, tailored to cover up his skinny frame, and an expensive wrist watch.

"What's the good word, Whitey?" I asked him.

"I don't know a thing. I been away."

"Jail?"

"No. Why should I be in jail? I been up in the country—kind of a vacation."

"You didn't get sunburned. You know Duke Grainger?"

His fishy eyes wavered. They said "Yes," but he said "No."

"No. I don't know him. Heard about him, but I don't know him."

"It would be worth money to you if I knew where he was, right now."

"I been out of town. I don't know anything. I don't know him." He spoke in a low, stubborn monotone. He was lying.

"Who paid for this vacation and all the glad rags?"

"None of your business," he said. "I ain't done nothing. Nobody's got anything on me. I paid for these clothes."

"All right, all right. You could be made to talk."

"You can't beat up on me. It'd be murder. The docs say I've got a bad heart. Any excitement—"

I grinned at him. "Louse killing ain't murder."

The young fellow, Steve King, had come back. But when he saw me talking to Whitey, he sat down on the other side of the room and didn't even look at us.

Pretty soon, after some more talk that didn't go anywhere, Whitey got up.

"If you ever meet Duke Grainger,"

I said, "let me know. It would be worth a little change."

"I don't need money."

"But you will, Whitey. The junk comes high these days."

"Oh, I'm off that." (They all say so, even when they're full of it.) Then he went out.

I signaled to Steve King. "If you want a job, follow that egg. Don't let him know it, if you can help it. Come up to my apartment about midnight and tell me what he's been up to. Here's the address."

I shoved a card and a ten spot into his hand. He grinned and saluted.

I sat down again and smoked. The whole set-up was funny. Mrs. Dalroy hadn't been Mrs. Dalroy very long. Before she married this handsome young Geoffrey Dalroy—who didn't have a dime—she was the divorced third wife of Smithson, the sugar man. He had been her third or fourth husband. She was still a beautiful redhead, in spite of being forty or more. And she must have got plenty out of Smithson when he wanted to chuck her.

Dalroy was good-looking; he danced like a professional, played polo, and wore clothes like a movie star. The jewelry had been lifted from the bridal suite soon after their marriage. She had worn the trinkets to a ball, had taken them off when she got back, intending to have Dalroy put them in the hotel safe right away. She stepped into the next room for a moment, to speak to him, and they fell into a clinch, they said. Perhaps she left the jewels on her dressing table fifteen minutes. Her maid wasn't there. There was a door into the hall, but it was locked from the inside. A floor clerk was on duty out there, too. And the suite was on the twelfth floor.

IT WAS SLICK. Slick enough to be Duke Grainger's job. Swell timing, too. So good that it looked like Dalroy might have helped out. But we couldn't get a thing on him. He was poor, but he had all the background: good schools, a good college, a proud old Maryland family, position, friends, and a front that was real.

All I could think of was Grainger. What Whitey said about being in the country stuck in my head like a piece of a puzzle that won't fit. The country was no place for Whitey: he was a city rat.

I dragged my two hundred pounds over to a phone booth and called headquarters. McGuire, my best friend down there, laughed at me when I asked if he had anything on Grainger.

"He ain't been west of Denver in two years," he said. "That's the word on the Duke. He don't like this town. He got sent up here, once—one of the few times."

"It ain't such a jump from Denver to here," I insisted.

"You're hunch-drunk," he said. "Just because one of your hunches was good, once, is no sign you can count on 'em. You ought to learn how to be a cop."

I let that pass. "Where'd Whitey get a roll?" I asked. "And why did he take a vacation in the country lately?"

"I don't know everything," McGuire admitted. "I'll have it checked and let you know."

There was nothing to do then but take a walk down to the Acme office and make a report—a one word report: nothing—and take what the boss, Cobb, had to say about cops in general and one in particular. I burned and got red, but postponed getting fired by letting him yammer without a word.

Then I went home. On the way I picked up something to eat at a delicatessen, remembering hungry Steve King. It was dark and foggy when I went in. I let myself into the apartment—two rooms, kitchenette and bath—and reached for the light switch.

*Bam!* Something cracked me on the side of the head and I dropped the potato salad, the dill pickles, the rye bread and the rest of it. I've been hit harder, but it hurt plenty. I half fell, with the rest of the delicatessen products, and tried to get my gun out.

Whoever hit me swung again. I rolled against his legs, grabbed him around the knees and tried to floor him. He was strong. He broke my hold and cracked me over the head. I was out.

This was another piece that didn't fit into the puzzle.

When I came to I switched on the light, shut the door, and gathered up the delicatessen. The potato salad had made a mess all over the rug. Well, it wasn't my rug; I rented the place furnished. I was going to clean up the worst of it, when I saw the outline of a man's shoe—with a composition sole, new or nearly new from the look of the tread. Expensive, too, according to the brand; must have set him back fifteen dollars, at least. I couldn't figure this, at all, unless the fellow wanted to rub me out, without any noisy shooting, and had been scared off by the sound of the scuffle.

Whoever it was must have thought I knew more than I did.

I was groggy, but I ate a sandwich and mixed a drink. Then I felt better. I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock.

Steve King, maybe, would turn up around twelve.

McGuire phoned.

"Looks like some woman gave Whitey money," he said. "We don't know who she is, but he's been seen with her in her car, a new roadster. He went with her to the country—a little burg in Sonoma County. There's a sanitarium up there that specializes in drug cures. Dr. Graham's place. He's all right, as far as we know. They stayed there a week or so. Tell you more if we learn anything. Maybe Whitey put on a sob about wanting to be cured and this dame fell for it."

"Maybe," I said, and got the location of Dr. Graham's place. "Nothing more on the Duke?"

"Forget the Duke," he said, laughing, "or go to Denver."

I didn't mention getting socked by a strong thug in fifteen-dollar sport shoes. McGuire would get a laugh out of that.

AT MIDNIGHT, on the dot, Steve King knocked at the door. I let him in and looked him over. He was dusty and his face was streaked with perspiration and dirt.

"You told me to report here," he said, breathing hard, "or I'd have followed them."

"Who?"

"That dope and his woman. I was hanging on the spare tire for an hour or so and they took me over some unpaved roads—out beyond the golf course, then across the hills to a big stable. They got out there and went in. A stableman took them upstairs to an office. I couldn't get near enough to hear what they said or see who they met. When they left there, they told the stableman they were going up to Sonoma County.

"The dope had phoned, long distance, around six o'clock. He was pretty shaky, but he took a shot in the men's room in a hotel on Powell

Street, and after that he was all right. I trailed him to the woman's place, up on Bush, where he had dinner. I had a long wait until they came out. Then the ride to the stable.

"After that, it was getting late, so I started for here. Had to run most of the way. No cabs anywhere out there. Maybe I should have gone to Sonoma?"

I waved him into a chair and grinned at him. "You're all right, boy. Hear any names mentioned?"

He wrinkled his brow. "Just one—Gregory. When they left the stable, the dope said, 'I'll tell Gregory.'"

Gregory! That didn't fit in, either. Still, there was my hunch. Gregory—Grainger. It's a funny thing, but when crooks change names they usually pick a new one that's something like the other. Not always, but usually. Of course, there are reasons for it: initials on luggage, laundry marks and so on—and lack of imagination.

McGuire might insist that Grainger was east of Denver, but my hunch said he was in Doc Graham's sanitarium, booked under the name of Gregory. Where could he find a better place to hide out? A reputable physician, as Graham seemed to be, operating a place like that, could get all the junk he wanted through legitimate channels. Duke uses the needle, I've heard. What could be better than a place like Graham's, with an inexhaustible supply of what he needed? More dopes have been caught because they ran out of junk than any other way.

"There's stuff to eat in the kitchen," I told King. "Dive in."

"Thanks. Here's your ten bucks. I didn't use any."

"Keep it. You may need it. Maybe we'll take a little trip."

The way that boy ate! I watched him, admiring. He had noticed the marks of battle on my head and the mess on the floor, but he didn't ask questions. I liked that about him, too.

I told him about the guy walloping me and pointed out the mark of his shoe. He walked around the room while he was chewing his fifth sandwich. Suddenly he knelt down and reached under the table.

He picked up a cigarette butt and held it to the light. It was straw-tipped, an imported Egyptian.

"You ever smoke these?" he asked.

"Not me. I stick to the ones the society dames recommend."

There was a mark on the rug where this smoke had been ground out, then kicked under the table. The brand went with the shoes.

"He buys the best, but he hasn't got manners," I said. "What does he think ash trays are for?"

Duke Grainger might wear shoes like that and smoke imported Egyptian cigarettes. But that didn't check. Even he couldn't be two places at once. He couldn't be resting in Doc Graham's and socking me at the same time.

"Say," King said, "I like this job! Why don't you tell me what it's all about? I picked up some information over at San Quentin College." His eyes lighted up with interest. Then they went dead and discouraged. "I forgot. I'm an ex-con. You couldn't trust me. But I wouldn't cross a square guy—not even a cop."

"Skip it, son," I said. "I'll give you the pieces of the puzzle and let you play with it."

HE WAS bright, keen, interested. Having something to think about besides his own bad luck gave him

confidence. Perhaps my trusting him had something to do with it.

"Looks like an inside job," he said. "Dalroy must have been in on it."

"We can't get a thing on him. Duke Grainger's jobs all look like that. He pulled a ringer for this one in El Paso once—lifted a lot of glass out of a hotel room. How? He wouldn't say. A fence squealed. They caught Duke with some of the stuff, and he took a rap."

"I know!" said King. "A mug in stir was telling about something like that. Grainger had the room above, let himself down on a rope, hung outside until he saw his chance, jimmied the window if it wasn't open and unlocked, and lifted the stuff."

"Sorry to disappoint a budding detective," I said, grinning. "We went all over that. The room above is taken permanently by a rich old maid of good reputation. She was in it the night of the robbery."

"And above that?"

"Empty. Nobody in it that night. Locked. No sign of anybody being there. Dust on the window ledge, undisturbed."

"That's out, then." He sighed. "Did you mention a trip?"

"Yeah. Let's go up Sonoma way."

I got a spare gat for him. He eyed it as though he had never seen one so close before.

"Don't use it unless you have to," I said.

"Better not take it. If anything happened and I had it, they'd frame me."

"All right. I'll lug it. Come on. I got a roadster in the parking lot, downstairs."

This apartment house didn't have a garage. I parked my car in a vacant lot next door.

He was in the hall and I was right behind him when the phone rang. It was McGuire.

"Mrs. Dalroy's dead!" he said in that cold voice of his. "Thought you'd want to know. Dalroy found her when he got in, late to-night; she'd been dead an hour. Stabbed. Dalroy has an alibi. He was at the stable where he keeps his ponies. Yes, he inherits all she had. But his alibi looks good. He couldn't have done it. What? Yeah, come on up. But don't butt in while real cops are working."

So we went to the Franciscan, where the Dalroys lived, where the baubles had been stolen.

King didn't want to meet any cops. He was jittery about cops. They'd try to hang something on him.

"O. K.," I said. "You sit here and watch everybody that goes by."

McGUIRE was a homicide man. He was there, with the usual headquarters gang. They were chasing around the suite, acting busy. I saw the body. Mrs. Dalroy had been stabbed in the back. The finger-print man was looking for prints on the dagger, down at headquarters. It was an Oriental thing that she had used as a paper knife, McGuire said.

Dalroy was there, feigning shock. He looked like a ham actor to me, trying to play the part of a grieving man.

He said something and McGuire turned on him. "What you kicking about? You get all she was worth, don't you? How much?"

Dalroy pretended to be mad. He got up and swung at McGuire. If he'd landed, McGuire would have been out. But he didn't land. McGuire had been a prelim boy in his day. He was fast, a good in-fighter. He got under Dalroy's blow, sank a corkscrew punch into his stomach, drove an uppercut to his jaw.

Dalroy went over backward, landing on a divan. His feet went up.

And I saw that he was wearing a fifteen-dollar pair of new sport shoes, with a familiar tread on the sole!

"Lay off the rough stuff, Mac!" yelled Mason, chief of the squad.

"He made a pass at me," McGuire growled. "When they do that, I sock."

Dalroy was getting his breath, glaring at McGuire. You could see he was controlling his temper and it was hard work. His eyes glittered.

"I'll get you for that," he said. "I'll get you off the force."

"You want to work fast, brother," McGuire told him. "You want to do it before I lock you up."

I went over and sat down next to Dalroy. He gave me a glance with no recognition in it, and wiped his face.

"Ignorant cops are rough," I said, looking at McGuire. "Haven't we met somewhere, Mr. Dalroy?"

"I think not," he said, staring at me.

"Maybe you're right. Say," I said, "I got flat feet from all the pavement pounding I used to do. Those shoes look comfortable. Where'd you get 'em?"

"They're made to order for me," he said, not batting an eye. "You probably couldn't afford them."

"I'll bet you're right," I admitted. "Awful pretty design on the sole. Looks familiar, somehow. I wouldn't want that. I'd leave my tracks around too much, for people to see."

At that, his eyes waver, and behind their cold glitter there's a look of fear—or I can't read eyes.

He said, "What are you driving at?"

But I waved to McGuire and walked out.

McGuire followed. "Well, what are you driving at?" he asked. "Come clean. Tell me things."

I told him about being knocked out and the mark of the sole in the potato salad on my floor.

"Hell, we can't jail him for assault even, on that kind of evidence!" he growled.

"Who asked you to? Just keep an eye on him."

"Where you going, Joe?"

"Up to Sonoma County—after Whitey and Duke Grainger!"

And I duck before he can get his face fixed for a big laugh.

But he yells after me: "You're nuts!"

King was waiting for me in my roadster, screwed down out of sight. There were two or three harness bulls in front of the hotel.

"See anybody or anything?" I asked.

"No. I've been thinking. I'll bet Dalroy was in it, whatever you say. Jewelry don't get out of a locked room on the twelfth floor without help. Maybe he went back in there, after she left, and passed the stuff out to this other crook. Either that, or the crook got by the floor clerk, let himself in and lifted the stuff."

"The questions and answers didn't show anything."

"It's got to be one or the other. You can't get around it. Dalroy's in it some way."

"You're right there. He's in it up to his eyebrows." And I told him about Dalroy's shoes.

I DROVE down to the Ferry Building. We caught a boat and ran the car on it. Then we went to the lunch room and had some coffee. We talked about this and that, King mentioning his girl again and how he would move heaven and earth to

find her as soon as he got a job and the cops let him alone.

"I'll help you," I promised, "as soon as we get this thing cleaned up."

When the boat docked, I drove off and started for the main road. King grabbed my arm.

"There's the dope—in that car, waiting to go back to town!"

I jammed the brakes and slid the car to one side. Then I jumped and ran back to the car Whitey was in. His woman was at the wheel and I got a good look at her. I knew her right away. Sally Starr, she called herself. She used to sing at a joint out on the beach—if you could call it singing.

Their engine was turning over and they were just about to move forward when I jammed my rod in Whitey's ribs. He squealed and looked scared.

"Come with me, feller," I said.

"You can't—" he began, and the woman joined in, making a howl.

"Can't I?"

I pulled the door open and yanked Whitey out.

"So long, Sally," I said to her. "You better pick your friends more careful or else—"

Whitey was kicking, but he was as weak as a baby. I carried him over to the roadster, shoved him in, and squeezed in beside him.

"If he makes a move," I said to King, "crack him one."

Whitey began to whimper. I guess he needed a shot pretty bad. He was probably waiting until they got on the boat.

"I ain't done a thing!" he said over and over. "You got no authority here, you lousy insurance dick."

"Not a bit," I admitted. "Who croaked Mrs. Dalroy?"

That stopped one of his squeals right in the middle. "What?" he asked. Then he tried to get brazen. "Mrs. who—— I never heard of her."

"Maybe you don't know a fellow named Geoffery Dalroy, huh? Maybe you and Sally didn't go out to see him at the stable where he keeps the polo ponies his wife bought for him?"

He screws down in the seat and clasps his hands together.

"You're crazy!" he said. "Where you taking me?"

"I'll give you two guesses."

Sally Starr had driven on the boat. I saw that before I pulled out. And the boat had left the slip. She couldn't phone Duke Grainger until she got to the Ferry Building. By that time——

I gunned the wreck and we went. Whitey shivered and shut up. King and I didn't say anything. Before long we were in the village where Doc Graham had his sanitarium and heading up the road that led to it. The place was on a hill, with acres of woods and gardens around it.

"Ever been here?" I asked Whitey.

"No. I don't know where I am. Kidnaping is a Federal offense and you——"

"I thought maybe you spent that vacation here," I said. "In fact, I'll bet you did."

I parked below the hill and switched off the lights. I jerked Whitey out. He was weaker. I felt sorry for him; those birds suffer without the junk. But this was no time for big-hearted Joe Morgan to get soft.

"You wait," I said to King. "We'll take a walk, maybe talk to two or three people. Here! You better take this pistol, just in case."

King took it gingerly, said some-

thing about coming with me. But Whitey and I were on the way.

I MARCHED HIM up to the main door and rang the bell. A big gorilla opened up and glared at us. One of Doc Graham's gentle little helpers, I guessed. He didn't see Whitey at first, but when he did he blinked and started to grin.

"What do you want?" he asked me, pretending not to know Whitey.

"I want to talk to Doc Graham, boy."

"What about? He's sleepin'. I ain't goin' to wake him up at this hour."

"I'll bet you do," I said, and shoved my gun at him. "I ain't fooling."

He and Whitey exchanged a glance. "All right," the gorilla growled. "I'll call him."

He started down the hall. A couple of dim lights were burning. At the far end, near the door he was approaching, it was pretty dark.

I roughed Whitey up a bit, ripping his coat off him and covering his head with it. Then I tied the sleeves around his arms. The gorilla heard his whimper and started back.

"I'll help you wake up the doc," I said.

He turned, with a sullen look on his face, and swung over toward another door.

"Doc," he called when he opened it, "here's a hard-boiled Frisco cop stickin' a gun at me and makin' me wake you up."

"Eh?" asked some one, sleepily, from a bed in the dark room. "What's that?"

There was something phony about that voice.

"A cop, doc," the gorilla repeated.

He stepped aside, inside the door, as I crowded him.

Then: "Let him have it, Duke!" An automatic cracked at me as I ducked low and fired at the bed. The gorilla hit me on the side of the head. I went down and he jumped on me with both feet. All I knew, as I went out, was that I had been right. I had found the Duke.

When I came out of it, I was sitting in a big chair, with a rope tying me to it. The lights were on in the room—a big living room—and I was facing Duke Grainger, in a dressing gown, the gorilla and Whitey. The dope had had his shot and was gloating.

"Howdy, Duke," I said.

He was a handsome devil, about fifty or so, with iron-gray hair and clear, sparkling eyes. He was cool and calm; he, too, had used the needle. He smiled at me.

And his smile reminded me of some one else. Oh, it was a pleasant smile, in its way; but it didn't ring true. He didn't mean it. He looked like Geoffery Dalroy, especially when he smiled! I frowned. How could there be any connection between Duke Grainger and Dalroy, between the crook and the polo-playing society lad?

"Why did you have Mrs. Dalroy killed?" I asked. "That was a slip, Duke."

He gave me the same disdainful look Dalroy had handed me.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He shrugged and looked at the gorilla. "Go and see if they've found the fellow who came with him."

King! I had forgotten the kid. I hoped they wouldn't catch him.

FROM a few words Duke and Whitey exchanged, after the gorilla departed, I doped it out this way: Doc Graham and two nurses lived

in separate buildings. Duke Grainger had leased the main structure. The doctor had come to see what all the excitement was about and Duke had steered him back to his quarters. There were no patients, unless you could call Duke one. The sanitarium was losing money. Duke came along and offered to lease it. He had handled the doctor without any trouble and was getting all the junk he and his friends needed through him. Besides, he had a nice hang-out. Whitey, I figured, was just a messenger boy between him and Dalroy. Sally Starr—I didn't know, unless she was Dalroy's or Duke's girl.

"Your son, Geoffery Dalroy, will hang for it," I said, after a time.

That brought a quick flash to Duke's eyes. Then he laughed.

"My son? Where do you get such notions? I haven't any son."

"He'll hang, anyway. That alibi of his won't hold. No jury will believe the two or three crooks who are ready to swear he was at the stable."

"The domestic quarrels of the Dalroys are no concern of mine. I don't know them. They don't belong to my set."

"How'd you lift her jewelry, Duke? Dalroy toss it out to you, or did you get past the floor clerk?"

"The floor clerk. Ah, yes. I heard that you cops questioned the poor fellow."

We did. But we couldn't get anything out of him. He had been on duty. He had seen the Dalroys come in. No one else had been on that floor. That was his story; he stuck to it and there was no reason to doubt it.

Grainger was smiling at me—the smile a smooth crook gives a cop

when the cop can't get anything on him.

"The Dalroy jewelry?" he said. "Why, I was in Denver—even the Denver police will tell you that—when that robbery occurred."

I thought that over. He wasn't bluffing. He had an alibi—like Dalroy's.

"You used to be a lone wolf, Duke," I said. "Looks like you've got organized, got a lot of people working for you."

He laughed, to cover the sudden, uncontrollable flash in his eye.

"You think I'm keeping up with the times? No, my friend, you're all wrong. The fact is, I haven't pulled a job in years. I'm a sick man—dying, they say—and I'm here as a patient."

I laughed, too.

The gorilla came in and said they had not found King.

"He prob'lly scrammed."

Duke drummed on the arm of his chair with his finger tips. He wasn't as calm as he had been. He left the room, after a moment, beckoning to the gorilla.

Whitey came over near me. "You're smart, ain't you?" he said. "Well, you're damn near through being smart."

My feet were not bound. I let him have my boot, right in the shin. He went down, yelping, and I kicked him on the arm.

Duke came back in a hurry. "Whitey!" he said. "Get out there and help—"

Duke sat down again and lighted a cigarette.

"You're going to leave, huh?" I asked.

"You're not as thick as you look. Your friend *might* get the gendarmes up here."

"Listen, Duke," I said earnestly,

leaning forward as far as I could. "I know a lot and I suspect plenty more. But there's only one job on my mind: I want the Dalroy jewels, that's all. I don't care whether Dalroy's your son and you've trained him to carry on. I don't want Whitey or Sally Starr or any of the rest. I don't even care about Mrs. Dalroy. That's up to the regular cops. Hand over the baubles and I'll—"

"What an imagination!" he said, admiringly. "How could Dalroy be my son? How could I have lifted her stuff when I was in Denver? How could I have anything to do with her death, if she is dead? Of all the absurd—"

HE BROKE OFF and got to his feet. A high-powered car swung up the driveway, cut-out open. Duke was afraid. He started to shout to Whitey and the gorilla. Then there was a knock on the front door and he sat down, relieved, smiling.

"Come in!" he said.

It was Dalroy who entered. He was flushed and excited.

"Well!" said Duke, with a warning glance toward me.

I was again struck by the close resemblance between them. Dalroy was a younger Duke Grainger.

He was about to burst out with something, but Duke motioned him into the hall. They talked there in whispers, and I strained my ears, but couldn't catch it. Neither could I get out of the rope.

When they came back, Duke was smiling confidently. He had his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"What'll we do with him?" asked Dalroy, meaning me.

Duke shrugged, which might have been a death sentence.

There was a sound in the hall, and

I turned—to see Steve King, pistol drawn, half crouched, looking at Duke and Dalroy.

"Up with 'em—quick!" he said.

Duke froze; then his hands went up. Dalroy stepped forward, ducked sideways and his hand shot to his pocket. Steve let him have it, through the arm.

"Whitey!" yelled Duke.

"No use," said King. "I laid him out. The big fellow, too. And the two other thugs you had on guard outside. There's nobody to help you—except the doctor. And I think I scared hell out of him."

Steve was edging toward me. He fumbled with a knot in the rope and I was free.

I got up slowly and took a long breath. Then I took out my pistol.

"Now, gents, the scenery looks different," I said.

King was right beside me. Duke was glaring at both of us, and he was suddenly nervous. Dalroy was sitting down, nursing his arm.

"I was in a closet there in the hall," King said. "Know what I heard? Dalroy's his son, all right. Calls him dad. Dalroy's supposed to be suffering a breakdown there in his room. There's a doctor with him and a nurse—reputable as hell, but part of Duke's dope crowd. A cop is sitting outside, sleeping, I guess. Dalroy had to see Duke, but he planned to be back in the room by morning. He won't get back—now. How did he get in and hope to get back? I don't know. I still think it's from the room above. Your old maid up there may be a dope, too. Know anybody named Henders in this business?"

"Why, sure, Henders is the floor clerk."

"He croaked Mrs. Dalroy!" said King. "Duke asked him how Hen-

ders was holding up after the job? The way he said job meant murder. And Henders lifted the jewels!"

Duke's eyes were venomous. Dalroy muttered something.

"How the hell?" I demanded. "Henders checked all right. He'd been there six months, and he came from another hotel with good references."

"Yeah, I'll bet it was a hotel in Denver, where Duke pulled another fast one," said King.

Duke was mad now. "Who is this? You can't make a case out of nothing. You're the craziest—"

"Don't get tough!" said King. "I'm no cop. I'm fresh out of Quentin and every cop in Frisco has his eye on me, wanting to send me back—while they don't even look for crooks like you! You're one of the reasons I can't get a break! I'm no cop, but I hate the guts of dirty killers like you. Killing a woman for her money, after making a big play for her. You polo-playing— Aw, hell, I'm just helping a friend who staked me to a feed." He shifted his gun a little. "Don't get tough. I'd love to kill you."

I grinned at Duke. "It's a case, brother. They'll hang Henders and give you two life. You always liked jewelry. Here are some bracelets."

I stepped up to slip them on him. He backed away.

"Listen!" he said, and there were beads on his forehead. "You're an insurance dick. All you want is the jewelry. If—"

"O. K.," I said.

King opened his mouth, but I snapped at him: "Watch Dalroy! All right, Duke, where is it?"

"In my bedroom."

I followed him, prodding him in the back to remind him of the gun. I made him switch on the lights.

He went to the bed and threw back the covers. He tore away a piece of mattress ticking. There, fitting into a little pocket, was a nice collection of trinkets—worth fifty grand, all right. Acme would certainly like to see them!

DUKE was counting on my interest in the jewelry. I was interested, all right, but not stupid. When he reached in and pulled an automatic, instead of a string of pearls, I was ready. It had no more than cleared the mattress when I fired.

He pitched over on the bed, coughing. His lips twitched into a bitter smile.

"Got me!" he grunted. "Told you I was dying." He tried to laugh. "Listen! Make it easy for the boy. I got him into this, made him a crook. He's my kid, all right. I ran out on him and his mother when he was little. She married money and position. The boy was brought up right, but the money gave out. I—I thought I could use him. Did. My fault, all of it. You're a pretty good guesser, you thick-headed cop."

He coughed and spat blood.

I gathered up the stuff as he straightened out, and went back to the big living room. Dalroy was trying to get to his father; King was threatening to shoot him if he moved.

"He's gone, Dalroy. He was too slow. I had to do it. He told me plenty, so you can talk. He said he got you into this. If you can make that stick—"

Dalroy let loose at me, with a torrent of the worst talk I've ever heard. And I've heard some. I let him rave for a while, then slipped the bracelets on him.

"To the Frisco jail for you, Marco Polo," I said.

When we had the three brutes who served as bodyguards tied up and had thrown another scare into the doctor—he was a greedy old guy who kept protesting he didn't know anything—and had tied Whitey, I phoned the sheriff's office and had them send out some hick deputies to round up this gang.

We took Dalroy back to the city in my car.

I was all set to have the laugh on McGuire, but they had already arrested Henders and booked him for murder. That fingerprint guy is a whiz! Henders wore gloves when he picked up the knife, but it had an ivory handle with some sharp points on it. A shred of black glove leather stuck to the knife. McGuire had never liked Henders' looks, and he searched him, just for luck. McGuire found the gloves, with a little shred of leather torn away. Henders cracked quick enough when they gave him the works. Well, anyway, McGuire had to admit it was a Duke Grainger job.

Steve King? The headquarters crowd lays off him now, and he has a job. He's looking for the girl, and I'm helping all I can.

Sally Starr was Duke's girl. After they got away with the robbery, Duke thought they'd better get all they could out of Mrs. Dalroy. She was getting tired of the handsome polo player and would have divorced him before long. They had to act before she changed her will in favor of the next guy she wanted to marry.

All I got out of it was a few kind words from the boss and the potato-salad stain on my carpet. But the feed I staked Steve King to was about the best investment big-hearted Joe Morgan ever made!

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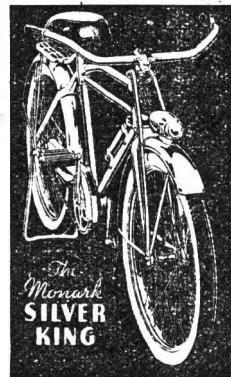
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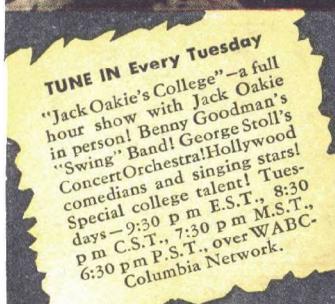
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