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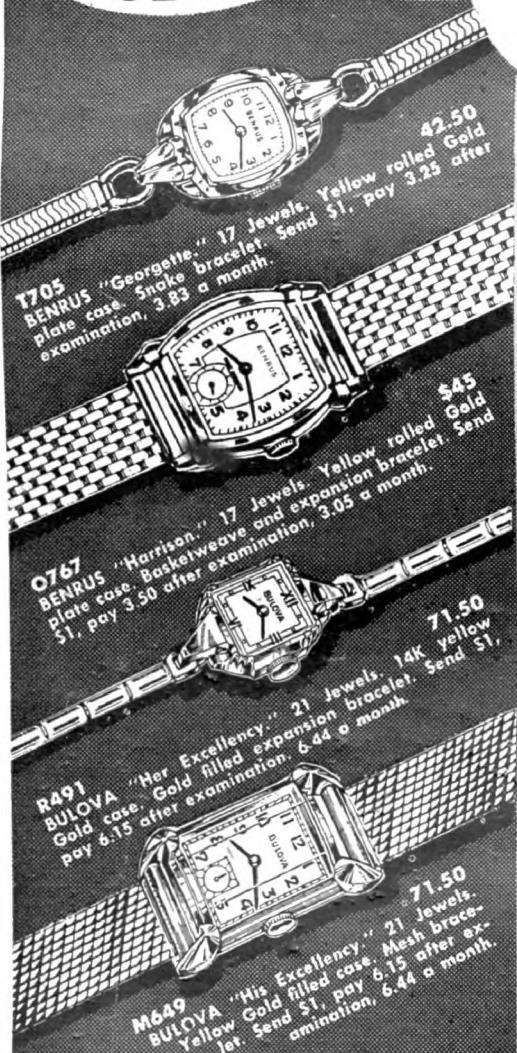
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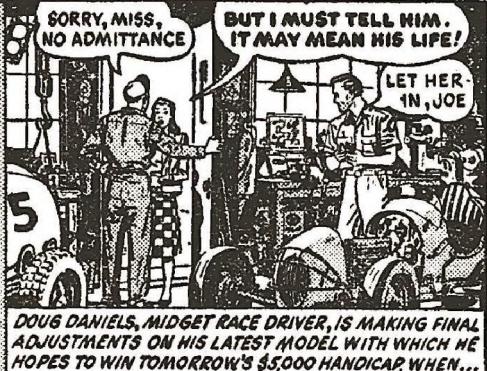
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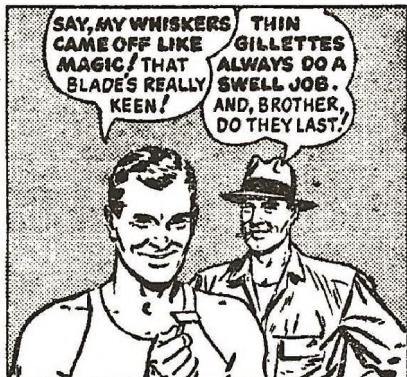
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VOL. FORTY-ONE

DECEMBER, 1948

NUMBER ONE

Two Sensational Murder Novels

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—was sweet, brown-eyed Jannie . . . But how could I know, when I married her, that when love came in the window, I'd go out the door—in my coffin?
2. **THE BLONDE WITH TOO MANY NAMES** *Botonin Herndon* 106
—added an adjective to her list when she became the *late* Judy Weeks!

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3. **KNOCK ON ANY GRAVE!** *Talmage Powell* 42
—out in the perilous fastnesses of the Big Hungry, and you'll find an ex-seeker of Cracker Magee's fortune. Maybe it'll be Obie Tucker . . . or Claude Cofer . . . or the beautiful—and far too deadly—Holly!
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—Betsy was all dressed up to go to the same place her mother had gone—via the same route!
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—sounded when Roberto The Robot teamed up with that deadly blonde in a death-house duet!

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6. **NOW YOU SEE IT** *Dave Sands* 33
—and now you don't . . . But either way, Herbie Carpis figured, he'd settle for his money going down the drain—as long as his blood didn't follow it!
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—but Rookie Johnny Smith knew that sometimes the smartest uniforms are worn by the deadeast bluecoats!
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—was the bundle the cops had wrapped up . . . with the wrong killer!
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—which made it such a popular pastime that even Deputy Sheriff McRae wanted to get into the act!
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January Issue Published November 26th!

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POISONER, BEWARE!

By

JOHN LANE

With no marriage clinics to help him with his problems, John Hendrickson had to take counsel with himself. And Hendrickson's advice to Hendrickson was—poison!

POISONING, down the ages, has been the favorite *modus operandi* of lady killers, literally and figuratively. Easy to administer and practically impossible of detection, the lethal-minded among the early Greeks, Romans and Far Eastern peoples used the vegetable toxins in preference to slitting a throat, bashing in a skull or other messy forms of mayhem. As a method of eliminating an unwanted marital partner it became so popular that the Hindu custom of suttee—the cremation of a wife on her lord and master's funeral pyre—is supposed to have originated to safeguard husbands against wholesale slaughter.

Science added the toxic minerals to the poisoner's bag. But as medicine and toxicology evolved tests for determining the presence of the commoner noxious substances, poisoners were forced to obscure varieties difficult to trace.

Such was young John Hendrickson, tall, dark, handsome, intelligent in a snide way, who lived with his wife Maria and assorted relatives in a dilapidated farmhouse nine miles from Albany, N. Y. Why Maria ever married John nobody could understand. But marry him she did, in 1851, and the charming heel subjected her to practically every indignity a gentlewoman could suffer with his gambling, drinking, wenching, and worse.

Before dawn on March 7, 1853, John's brother came pounding on a neighbor's

(Continued on page 8)



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

door with word Maria had died in her sleep.

The coroner, observing the odd rigidity and spongy feel of the body, ordered an autopsy. This disclosed an empty convulsed stomach and suggested the girl had died after prolonged retching, evidently from poison, although the Hendrickson clan steadfastly maintained there had been no sign of illness.

County Sheriff Horton dispatched the vital organs to Dr. James Salisbury at the State Laboratory and went poking around drugstores. At Springsteen & Bullock's pharmacy in Albany, he hit a lead. Mr. Springsteen, who knew John well, recalled he'd recently tried to purchase prussic acid.

Horton hurried this information to Salisbury.

"I've tested for prussic acid and the common poisons," the doctor said shortly. "Why, man, I've tested for every toxic substance that's figured in criminal proceedings in the entire country. Negative, all negative. There's only one thing left. Get out my toxicology books and test for every poison there is—from A to Z!"

That wasn't necessary. The first on the list, aconite, an extremely noxious alkaloid highly regarded by the ancients as a permanent remedy for marital troubles, showed up in quantity. To make sure, Dr. Salisbury fed some to a cat, which expired promptly and unpleasantly, its poor stomach empty and acutely convulsed.

The medico notified Horton at once, but search as he would the sheriff could find no record of a sale of aconite. Poison books were haphazardly kept. Some druggist might simply have forgotten to record a purchase. He began over again.

At a pharmacy not far from Springsteen & Bullock a druggist did recall, after some prodding, that he'd sold tincture of aconite within the month to a young man who left without giving his name.

A description of the purchaser fitted John Hendrickson like a well-tied noose, which it did prove to be, for this wife-killer who had dug deep into the past for a new murder instrument was convicted and hanged.

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DETECTIVE TALES

ON THE SPOT

For Next Month



It was in his office that Willoughby Tudor first experienced the stomach cramps that were to play so important a part in his life. It was lucky that his efficient and beautiful secretary, Miss Hazelton, was there to take care of him.



In the hospital Tudor finds out what is wrong. Someone, Dr. Whitehead tells him, has been systematically poisoning him with arsenic. Tudor suspects his discontented and greedy wife, Dixie.



Home from the hospital, Tudor is alone when Miss Hazelton visits him. They have a couple of drinks together and Tudor kisses her, frightening her so that she leaves hurriedly.



Later, Dixie comes home. They quarrel again and Dixie slaps him. Tudor reels back, stumbling against the fireplace. His hand closes over a poker. He rushes forward, poker high...

The above scenes are taken from the January DETECTIVE TALES lead novel, "Meet Mrs. Murder!" . . . a G. T. Fleming-Roberts crime story.

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YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH **MURDER!**

By NELSON and GEER

THE MURDER MONOGRAM

Amateurs in homicide could draw a lesson on the futility of murder, no matter how clever, from the case of the Montmartre playboy in which Paris detectives identified the victim, arrested his killer and secured a confession—a month before the *corpus delicti* turned up. One morning in December, 1931, three suspicious reports from widely divergent spots around Paris appeared on Commissioner Guillaume's desk in the Prefecture of Police. The first mentioned a bloodstained automobile seat cushion found on a lonely road. The second listed a charred vest button, a bit of bloody tweed and remains of two shirts—one size 14 with D. B. embroidered in a dainty monogram on the pocket—poked from a fire smoldering beside gasoline tins in a field. The last report described a dark sedan, seat cushion missing, wrecked against a tree.



since Davin's initials were G. D. not D. B. The commissioner, investigating nevertheless, found Davin was a spendthrift black sheep recently married to a young lady named Bouvais. Something suddenly dawned upon Guillaume. That dainty monogram bespoke a woman, and Mrs. Davin's maiden name was Bouvais. "Quelle sentiment!!" he thought. "Bouvais-Davin. B. D. not D. B. as I assumed. Just what a young wife would do—entwine their family initials in a monogram."

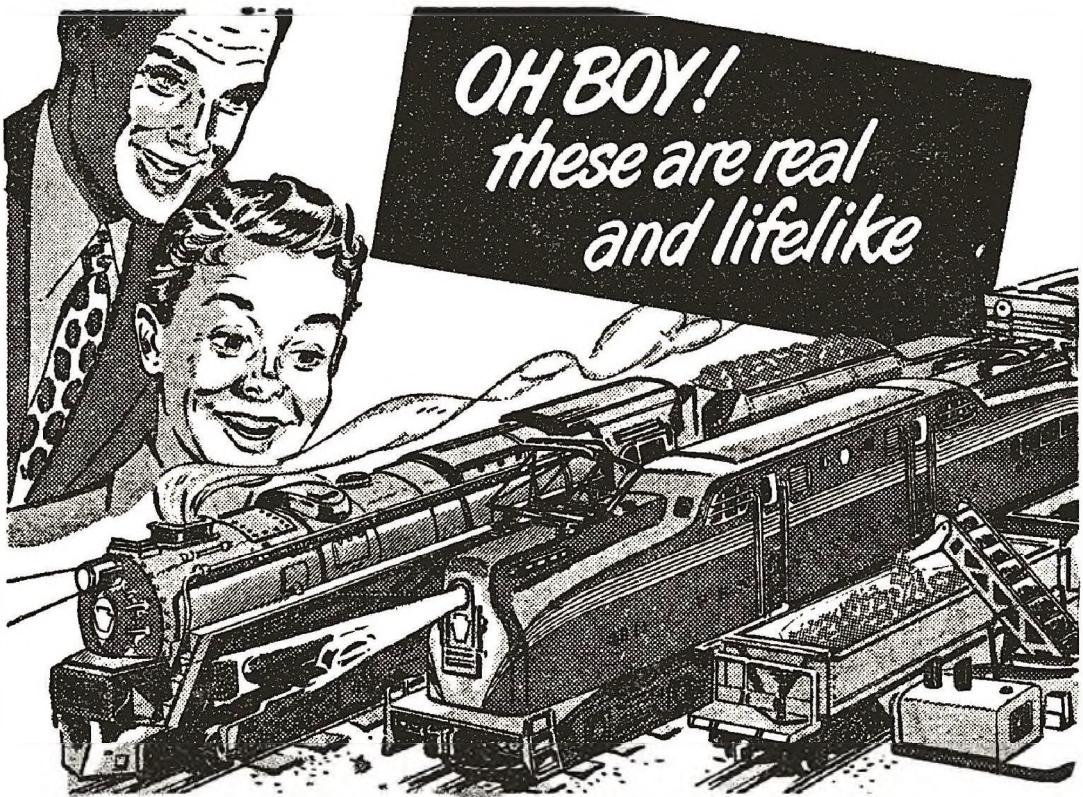
Confronted with the initialed shirt, Davin broke. Desperate for funds he stole the sedan, he admitted, and knowing Wall had cashed a large check invited him for a drive. Parking, he shot the American. At another spot he stripped the corpse, then pushed it off a bridge over the Seine. Securing gas, he burned the clothing, jettisoned the blood-stained seat cushion and drove the car into a tree. A month later Richard Wall's body was recovered from the Seine 35 miles below Paris. Convicted, Guy Davin's expedition into homicide brought him life imprisonment on Devil's Island.



From letters on the vest button Guillaume traced it to an English tailor shop where the tweed was identified as from an overcoat made for Richard C. Wall, wealthy expatriate American playboy. Police, investigating, learned that Wall had attended a gay party at a Montmartre cafe the night before in celebration of his reconciliation with Duval Barbat, following a violent quarrel over an American show-girl. Wall himself they could not find.

It looked open and shut. Barbat was slight and wore a 14 shirt. Barbat's initials fitted. Barbat had a beautiful motive. But Barbat denied everything, maintaining Wall left the party with Guy Davin—also slight and wearing a 14 shirt—which appeared a shabby attempt to divert suspicion, especially





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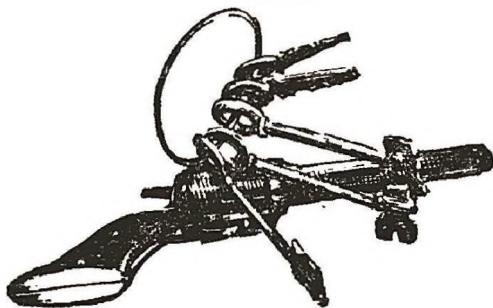
SEND FOR IT AT ONCE!

"Do you take this woman to be your lawful, wedded . . . widow?" the insinuating voice inquired from the radio. "Bosh!" said Martin Neubold. But was it . . . ? For who but Jannie—sweet, brown-haired, brown-eyed Jannie—could prepare things just as Martin liked them: His coffee, his steak, his drinks . . . and the most comfortable gas chamber a man ever died in?

MY KILLER, MY BRIDE!

*Gripping Murder
Novel*

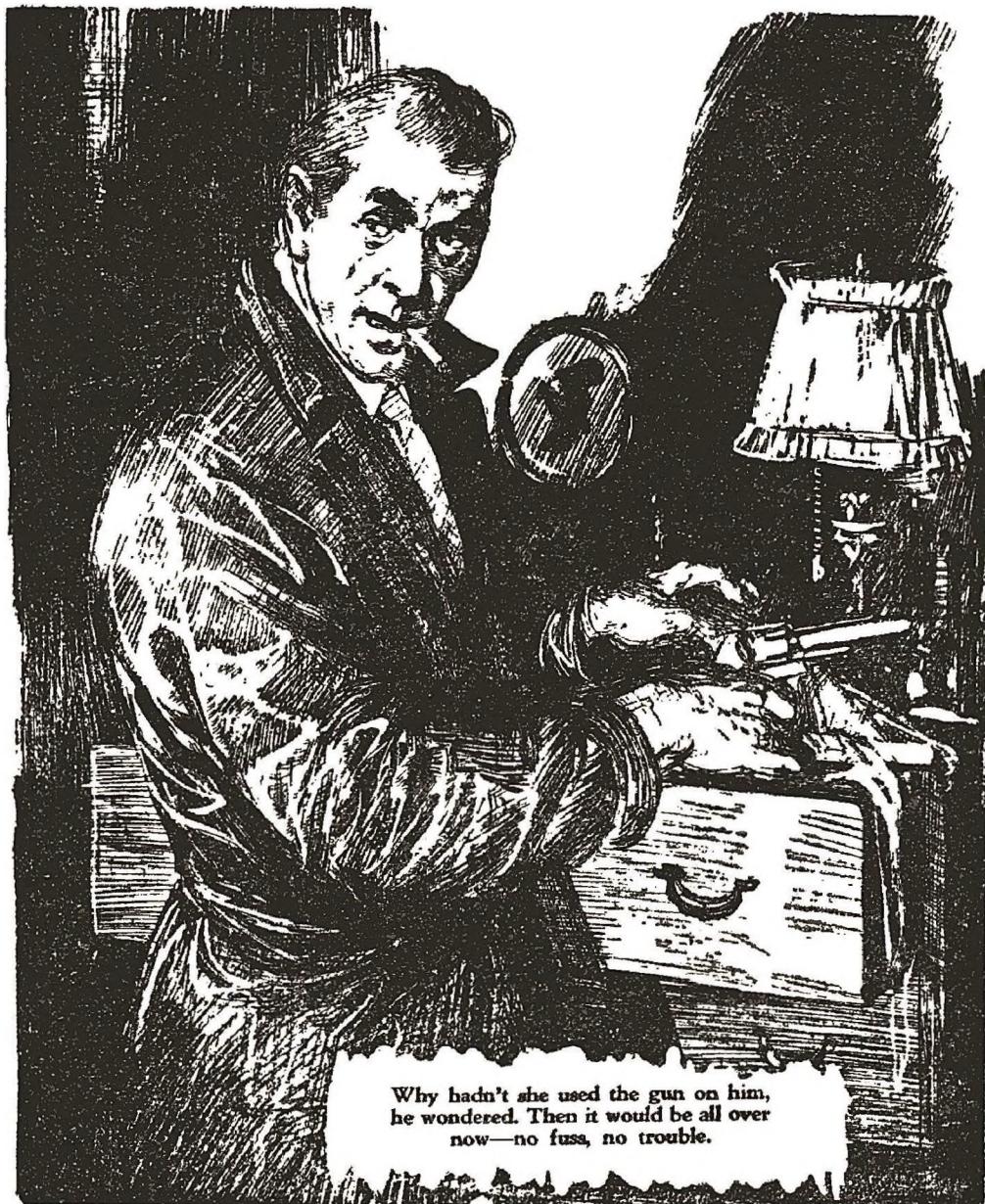
By
G. T.
FLEMING-ROBERTS



CHAPTER ONE

The Unwary

“A RE YOU one of the Unwary?" Regardless of a high Hooper rating, the voice of the Man In The Rain came as an intruder into at least one living room that night. Janice Neubold, standing at the picture window, the prettiness of her small face thinly reflected



Why hadn't she used the gun on him,
he wondered. Then it would be all over
now—no fuss, no trouble.

against the dark, made a fluttering gesture of distaste.

"That creepy thing again," she said. "Martin, isn't there anything else? Any music? That is, unless you want to hear that."

Her husband, a large smiling man with thin blond hair, got up from a grey-green lounge chair and went over to the radio that didn't look like a radio. The room was filled with furniture that didn't look

like furniture, in Martin's estimation, anyway—modern, utilitarian stuff, practically every piece of which was designed to lead a double life. He mentally eeny-meennied over the two possible panels in the top of the bleached wood cabinet and this led to the discovery of two decanters and several glasses where he had expected to find the radio controls.

"It's pretty cold," he said, which was as good an excuse as any. "Have one before

you go, to keep yourself warm, Jannie?"

"No thanks, honey." She was still at the window, watching for Grace Felton to drive up. Martin poured himself a small shot of rye while the unwanted voice of the Man In The Rain continued its sinister implications against a gloomy background of tolling bells and sustained minor cords from the wood-wind section.

"How well do you know your wife? Pretty well, huh? You know what she does with her spare time when you're at the office? Of course you do. She thinks of you. All day long when you're away she's thinking of you, perhaps worrying her pretty head, afraid that something might . . . happen . . . to you. You know—happen? You've spent a good deal of time thinking about that yourself, haven't you? What would happen to her if something happened to you? You've taken precautions—the life insurance, the bonds you two hold jointly. Why, you've thought more about that unpleasant eventuality than she has. . . . Or have you?"

"Damn it," Martin Neubold said under his breath. Having located the radio compartment by means of the process of elimination, there would be no place to set the glass and decanter while he was turning off the radio. He sighed, resolving that he would just have to get used to his bride's choice in furnishings, unless that coffee table that could be converted into a dining table succeeded in amputating a few of his fingers.

"Do you take this woman to be your lawful, wedded . . . widow?"

BOOSH!" Martin said. It was a good word. His mother, he remembered, had flung it with dignified vehemence into the faces of political promisers and earnest young magazine subscription salesmen who were trying to work their way across her threshold. Martin applied it now to the words of the Man In The Rain, and then returned the decanter to the cellar-ette, lifted the second panel and reached the radio switch. As he turned he was aware of a flash of car lights through the picture window.

"There's Grace now," Jannie said. She moved away from the window and looked fondly at Martin. There had been reluctance in Jannie's voice, Martin thought.

He flattered himself that it was reluctance, that she would have preferred a quiet evening with him to going out somewhere with Grace Felton. He put down his glass and allowed himself to be drawn into the flurry of confusion that always accompanied Jannie's exits. First, the brown kid gloves which Jannie knew she'd put on the coffee table but which Martin found eventually on the bed in the guest room. When he came back with the gloves, Jannie dashed into the hall for a quick glance into the long mirror, her dark eyes eager in self-appraisal—the tilt of her small brown hat just right, the seams of her dark brown hose straight—then back to the living room for her purse before she swooped into his arms, her smile radiant. A little thing, all in lively shades of brown, soft in her brown mink coat.

"Miss me terribly, darling, won't you please?"

"I don't know that I will," he teased. "It's good for old married people to be separated for a few hours once in a while."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" Their kiss was unhurried, and as she drew away, her eyes half closed, she said softly, "Umm-in-in, nice. I'll be back for more of the same, Mr. Neubold."

Then she ran across the thick pile of the beige carpet to the hall door and stopped there as he had known she would. Knowing that—knowing her intimately and being able to anticipate what she would do—gave him a pleasant sense of assurance, and he laughed.

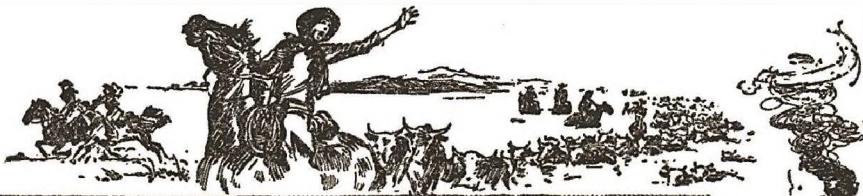
"Jumped the take-off, didn't you, scatter-wit? What is it this time? Have you forgotten the pink tissue-wrapped package?"

"Package?" She stopped digging in her purse. Her slim hand caught at the narrow, white-enamored door trim, and there was suddenly a big-eyed fawnlike alertness about her, unfamiliar to him, faintly annoying.

"Why, yes," he said. "Isn't this a baby shower, this thing you're going to with Grace?"

She laughed. The Bambi look was gone. "I had the store send something out to Alice's. A bath table. Too bulky for me to handle. When you said a tissue wrapped package, that threw me. I couldn't think, because a bath table wouldn't be. Unless

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**HOWARD HAWKS'
"RED RIVER"**

starring

JOHN WAYNE • MONTGOMERY CLIFT
WALTER BRENNAN • JOANNE DRU

with HARRY CAREY, Sr. • COLEEN GRAY • JOHN IRELAND • NOAH BEERY, Jr.
HARRY CAREY, Jr. • PAUL FIX • From the Saturday Evening Post story,

"The Chisholm Trail", by Borden Chase

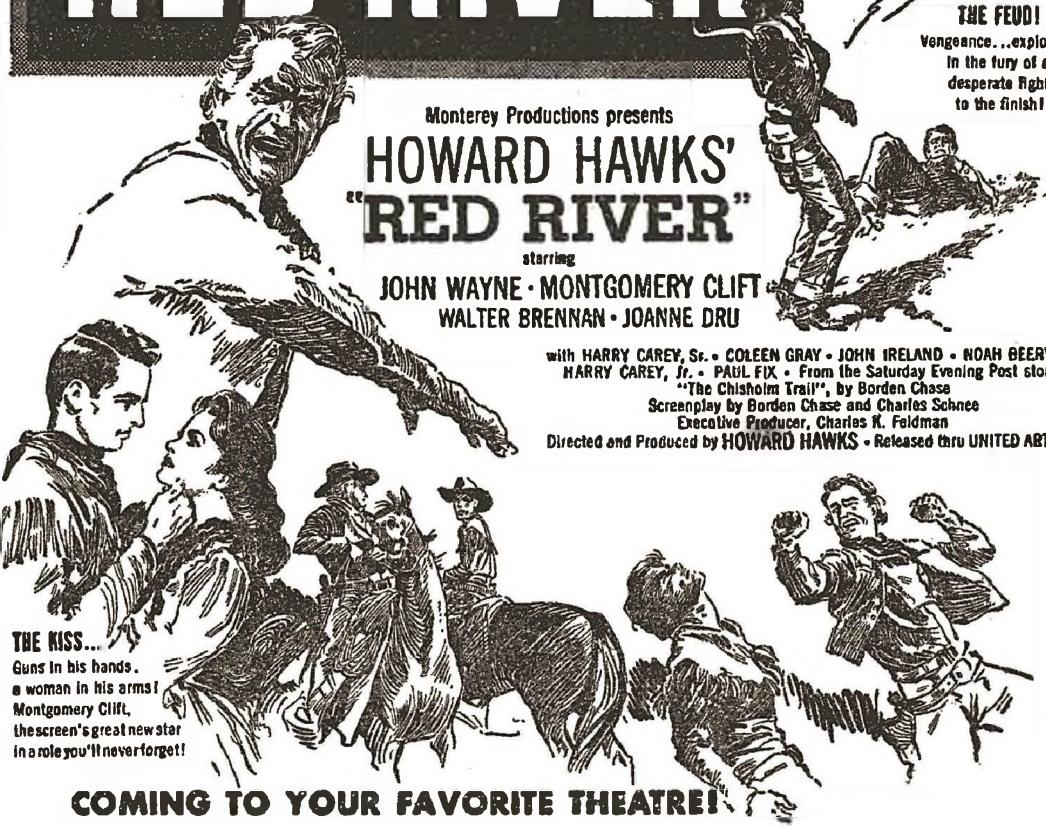
Screenplay by Borden Chase and Charles Schnee

Executive Producer, Charles K. Feldman

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they come knocked down." She laughed again. "We'll probably find out about that one of these days."

He said, "You'll find out tonight. At Alice's."

"Darling, it's my keys...." She snapped the purse shut, a small provoked frown on her brow. "I can't think what I did with them, and I don't want you to have to wait up for me if I'm late."

Martin reached down into his trousers pocket, brought out his leather keycase and gave it to her. He pressed it into her warm little hand, then went with her to the door and turned on the entry light.

"No, don't come out with me," she said hastily. "It's so cold tonight. Br-r-r-r!" She came up on tiptoes to plant a quick, dry kiss on his cheek. "My much-married kiss, for the public eye," was the way she always referred to it, "so we won't have that new look." Then she whirled and ran sure-footedly down the steps and toward the car that idled at the curb. A new car, he decided. Well, he didn't know of anybody who needed a new car more than Charlie Felton.

Martin closed the door and stood for a moment with his hands tucked in his hip pockets, watching the wink of red tail lamps through the frost crystals that had collected on the small oblong of glass set in the door.

It certainly is cold, he thought. He didn't know how cold, but cold enough. He didn't have an outside thermometer because of a long established theory that if you didn't know everything about Nature's extremes of temperature they bothered you less. "What you don't know won't hurt you," had been a favorite axiom of his mother. But tonight, oddly, he would have liked to have known just how cold it was. He frowned slightly.

BACK in the living room, he picked up the paper, glanced at the weather report. Ten degrees above was the minimum expected for tonight, and his shiver bore out his original premise concerning thermometers. The cold air mass found its way to the thermostat and the automatic furnace came on. He liked that. He liked things that were regulated and constant. Things you could count on.

He sat down in the grey-green chair

that was, besides being a chair, the central portion of a convertible bed for an unexpected guest, and took out a thin, dappled cigar. He peeled off cellophane, his eyes thoughtful.

Something, dammit, was bothering him, he didn't know what. Not business. He was getting his share of commercial refrigeration jobs in spite of some blood-letting competition from the Aikens people. He owned his house, and although its outward appearance resembled a freshly iced loaf cake that would melt in the first warm rain, it was staunchly constructed of reinforced concrete and glass brick. He would have preferred something in the colonial tradition that looked its staunchness, but this was Jannie's idea of a house, and he had yielded to it, remembering that she was ten years younger than he.

Jannie, a widow, had proved a delightful marriage partner. They had struck no serious snags in the course of six months, no great differences if you excepted the subject of Jannie's brother, Jim Wayne, who had turned up shortly after their marriage. Jim was an ass. Jannie seemed to think him wonderful, which, if you wanted to be literal, was an understatement. Jim Wayne was amazing. A man of thirty-two or three, he retained the mannerisms, opinions and temperament of an adolescent. Further, Martin had good reason to believe that Jim Wayne was not trustworthy....

Well, it isn't that, Martin thought. I'm not being bothered by any fresh escapade of Jim Wayne, thank God.

But there was something, and like a speck in a drink it submerged itself whenever he made a direct move to get hold of it.

He was lighting his cigar when the door chime sounded. Jannie, he thought. She's forgotten something, the little scatter-wit. And he hurried to the door.

I wasn't Jannie. The narrow glass in the door showed Martin a grey snapbrim hat that had been purposely battered to achieve that casual jauntiness affected by Hollywood's tough guys and Jim Wayne. Martin's annoyance was translated into the sudden jerk with which he opened the door. He just managed a smile.

"Hello, Jim," he said as cordially as he could, wondering as he frequently did how

Jannie and Jim Wayne could have had the same parents. Jim was tall and lath-like, coarse-featured, blond, with washed-out grey eyes that were continually on the move. Those eyes touched Martin's face, then prowled on into the house while Jim himself remained on the threshold, thick lips pouting around a cigarette, hands thrust down into the pockets of his top-coat as though possibly he was packing a gun. Which, of course, Martin realized, was absurd.

"Jannie in?" Jim Wayne asked.

Martin shook his head. "No, she went out somewhere with Grace Felton." He added, but without saying it, And don't get any idea you're going to come in and wait and consume all my liquor either.

"For all evening?"

"Yes."

Jim hesitated a moment as though expecting Martin to ask him in. He took his cigarette out of his mouth, flipped ash, and his eyes came back to Martin. "Okay," he said. A superior smile tucked up one side of his mouth. "Okay, fella. Take care."

He turned, started back toward the street, walking more rapidly than usual. Martin called good-night, then closed the door. His conscience pricked a little as he went back to the living room. . . . Ought to have asked Jim in for a drink. After all, he *is* Jannie's brother. I would have, too, if there was any way of getting rid of him once you put a glass in his hand.

Martin sighed, sat down, and for the next several minutes gave some consideration to the new Williams Cafe job in Terre Haute. He'd have to get his bid in tomorrow or the next day. A six-by-nine box with a walk-in door off the delivery entry and two reach-ins off the kitchen. Aikens would probably figure on a single-horse motor and three inches of glass wool, which simply wouldn't do the trick in hot weather but would enable Aikens to undercut Martin's bid. There ought to be a way to beat Aikens. There ought—

The phone rang. It startled Martin out of his chair. Queer how jumpy he was tonight. Jumpy and restless. He went out into the hall, picked up the phone, and somebody who sounded as though he had a mouth full of peanut brittle asked if this was Mr. Martin Neubold. If it was, then

this was a Sergeant Ketchum at Police Headquarters.

"Yes?" Martin thought angrily, It's Jim Wayne. Jim's in some sort of a jam with the police, and that's why he came here, wanting to see Jannie. I thought he acted strange, somehow. . . .

"Do you know a man by the name of William Coyle, Mr. Neubold?" the voice asked.

"Why . . . yes. Yes, I do, Sergeant," Martin replied, frowning. "He's in our service department. Why? What's the trouble?"

"Uh-huh. Wonder if you'd mind running down here this evening, Mr. Neubold? Right now, if you can."

"Yes. Yes, I can get down in thirty minutes. But why? What's the trouble?"

"Good enough," the voice evaded. "Thanks." And Martin was left with a dead phone in his hand and his mouth open, wondering what the hell. Bill Coyle had been with the Neubold Company for two years, a quiet, retiring chap who stuck strictly to business, steady and sober. He had a rather plain wife, frail looking and shy, the mother of Bill's two children. Bill Coyle just wasn't the sort to get into trouble with the law.

"Damn." Martin said it worriedly. He let the phone drop back into its cradle, stepped to the closet, got out overcoat and hat and put them on. He relighted his cigar, still wondering what could have happened to Bill Coyle.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Trap

MARTIN went back through the living room, the dining "L", and into the kitchen. In building the house there had been no excavating except for the basement garage. The heating plant and the automatic laundry were installed in a small utility room at ground level. He opened the door at the head of a short flight of stairs, flipped a light switch, went down one step before he closed the door behind him.

Bill Coyle must have had an accident, he decided. Maybe Bill had gone out with the truck on an after-hours service call and had run over somebody. A hell of a

note. There'd be a lawsuit undoubtedly, a lot of red tape to go through with the insurance company, a lot of trouble.

A scowl on his big face, Martin moved along the side of his conservative blue sedan. It was a late pre-war model, as good as new—possibly better, according to some reports—and equipped with a hydraulic transmission. But would it start? He hadn't had it out of the garage for three or four days, and this cold snap had caught him with heavy oil in the crank-case. The way things were going for him this evening, it probably wouldn't start.

There was no heat in the garage, but it was tight. It was damned tight. The north wall was solid masonry, the south, at the extreme end of the house, was glass block to admit light and still obstruct the view of a rather dilapidated farm house next door that had got caught in the rapid growth of the city. There were no windows in the overhead door that opened onto the short drive connecting with the street. Glass lights in the door would have spoiled that flush, clean-cut appearance of the exterior which appealed to Janice but which did not in the least appeal to Martin.

Looks like a damned sepulcher for Buck Rogers, he thought, suddenly a little resentful of Jannie as he faced the blank door. But doubly resentful of Bill Coyle as Martin heard the roar of the wind beyond the door. Why couldn't Coyle have picked a warmer night to get into whatever scrape he was in?

Martin took a resolute grip on the latch lever that centered the door and operated bolts on either side through a system of steel chains. The lock released, the door rose and, with little effort on Martin's part, rolled smoothly back on its overhead track. The wind tore into his face with icy claws, whipped at the tails of his coat. He jerked his collar up about his neck, took hurried, sidling steps to the front door of the car, opened it and paused. . . . His keys, damn it—he'd given them to Janice, which not only prevented him from going downtown but which might very well mean that he was locked out of the house. If the night latch on the door at the top of the steps was set, as it invariably was, he wouldn't be able to get back in without breaking a window.

Shoulders hunched, the cold pinching his nostrils, Martin hurried around the car and up the stairs. He caught the chilly knob of the door in a bare hand, tried twisting it, and then, senselessly, he kicked the bottom of the door. Nothing gave. It was a very tight house, very snug, and here he was virtually outside looking in, and with the temperature expected to hit ten above zero.

He turned, took slow, jolting steps down into the cold garage. He stood for a moment beside the car, his cigar clenched in his teeth, and pulled on his gloves. What the hell to do? Go next door and telephone Jannie, he guessed. Admit he'd locked himself out—not that it was his fault. If Jannie wasn't such a scatter-wit—

Something on the instrument panel caught his eye. Something red. He opened the right-hand door for a closer look, saw Jannie's slim leather keycase, the ignition key in place and in the off position.

"Thank God," he breathed. But then it was queer, her keys being there. Jannie couldn't drive. She didn't understand the mechanical complexities of a can opener. The only possible explanation was that she'd let that ass of a brother of hers borrow the car—something that Martin had put his foot down on because Jim Wayne was a reckless damn fool driver.

AS HE slid into the seat, he thought, I'll have to speak to Jannie about this. I'll have to make it distinctly understood that Jim Wayne isn't to touch this car under any circumstances.

He shut both of the car doors, turned the key over, and plugged at the starter switch. The starter motor fought congealed oil, the engine kicked over and held. Because he had a lot of respect for things mechanical, especially dependable things, he let the engine idle for a bit while it warmed and while the cold crept down the back of his collar and settled into a spot halfway along his spine. His teeth were chattering by the time he slid the steering post lever into reverse position. He glanced into the rear-view mirror to see if the drive was clear, but then he couldn't see the drive. He couldn't see anything but white exhaust vapor billow-

ing quite thickly up against the door.

The door? He'd opened that door not two minutes ago. He'd opened the door and felt the biting west wind in his face. The wind—that was it. He'd never known it to happen before, but he supposed it could happen. He supposed the wind *could* strike the counter-balanced door in just such a way as to cause it to swing down and shut. Damn the wind, anyway.

He got the car door open, had one foot on the floor of the garage when he thought he'd better turn off the engine. That carbon monoxide was nasty stuff. You couldn't smell it, you couldn't see it, but it crept up on you and it killed. He flipped the key to the off position, shifted to the extreme left end of the cushion, but still he didn't get out. Something had happened. Or rather, something hadn't happened. The engine hadn't stopped. It hadn't even hesitated. He thought the ignition lock was possibly stuck some way, so he flipped the key on and off a couple of times and finally pulled the key out altogether.

The engine kept right on running, a

brainless robot that breathed the air that Martin breathed and exhaled a noxious vapor that Martin couldn't breathe.

He got out of the car, the keys in his hand, took hop-skip steps to the door of the garage where the white vapor poured from the exhaust. He found the latch lever blindly, yanked upwards on the lift handle at the same time. Nothing happened. Nothing gave. He tried again, carefully this time, felt the chain-operated bolts on either side of the door pull from their sockets. But he couldn't lift the door. He couldn't budge it an inch.

Frozen? It couldn't possibly have frozen. . . . My God. I just had this door open a minute ago. It opened easily. Easily. . . .

He gave it a kick that didn't do any good and thought, Dammit, there's one way. One sure way. Get in and plow right through the damned thing.

He turned, and one of the heavy chrome bumper guards caught him on the knee. He gasped at the pain before it occurred to him he oughtn't to gasp. He really oughtn't to breathe at all. He plunged



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then along the side of the car, got in, felt rather than saw that the gear lever was in reverse, put his right foot down on the gas pedal. No, he just put his foot on the gas pedal—not down. The pedal wouldn't go down. It was stuck. Everything was stuck. *He* was stuck. Because as long as the engine merely idled, the automatic transmission remained in neutral. It was stubborn that way. It had to be. He'd tried to explain it to Jannie when she'd asked how it worked. . . . "Over-running clutch," he'd said, not at all sure that it was an over-running clutch. Later, Jannie had referred to it as a "high-riding grab," and he'd laughed at the dear little scatterwit.

Good God, he had to get out of here! Something could easily happen. You know . . . happen?

A sound like laughter came from Martin's lips as he scooted to the right side of the cushions and out the car door. He was conscious of a dull, cold pain between his eyes. Trying not to breathe, he ran up the steps to the kitchen door. It was locked, but he had the key. He'd be out in a jiffy. And then, by heaven, he'd call the Gulligan Motor Sales and tell them what he thought of their damned robot. He'd send a wire collect to the factory. He'd—

But then he wouldn't. He wouldn't do any of those things because he couldn't get the key into the lock. He couldn't force, he couldn't coax it into the keyhole, yet he was sure it was the right key. And then, foolishly wasting the precious fleeting seconds, he tried every key in Jannie's little red case.

None of them fitted the lock.

HE COULDN'T get out and he couldn't stop the damned thing. He'd raised the long alligator hood of the car, thinking that if he removed the air cleaner he would be able to hold his hand over the intake and choke off the engine. He would have needed a screwdriver for that, but the kit of tools that had come with the car was curiously missing from the trunk compartment. There's wasn't a tool of any sort in the garage. It was without doubt the neatest, cleanest garage in the city, and the tightest. It was a gas chamber for the condemned. It was a trap for—for the Unwary.

No, I'm not going to believe that, he thought. I'm not going out with *that* on my mind. It's a freak accident. They happen all the time. You read about them. Like the man who burned to death under an electric blanket. A gadget that can't fail does, and then you're caught like this. . . .

He reached down into the engine, got hold of the ignition cable, tried to rip it from the distributor head. He might as well have tried to uproot an oak. The engine had been designed to run, to keep right on running. He'd never known it to stall. It wouldn't stall now.

He reeled back from the car, flat against the chill glass brick wall. The pain between his eyes was a blinding thing. There was a fullness in his ears, and between them a partial vacuum where the process of thought was reduced to a montage of meaningless things—Jannie's little brown hat whirling madly around on a contraption of wheels within wheels. A high-riding grab. A robot thing that shifts gears, you know, he explained to somebody who was helping him plant a rose garden he intended to plant in the spring. . . . But I haven't got the tools. If I had an axe or even a spade maybe I could stop the damned thing. But I haven't lived here long enough to acquire garden tools. I haven't lived long enough, period. I haven't lived long enough to die. . . .

He stumbled forward on rubbery legs. He all but fell into the front seat of the car. . . . Sleep, he thought. No, dammit, don't go to sleep! You'll never wake up. . . . He jerked convulsively, then stiffened, then rammed down with both feet, all of his weight on his feet like pushing out the floorboards when you ride with a reckless driver. Like riding with Jim Wayne. . . .

Something gave. The floorboards maybe. But something, or everything gave, as though the axle of the earth had broken and all the crazy jigsaw parts had shot off with a splintering crash and a grind and a rending of metal and a fanfare of trumpets louder than Gabriel's.

Then all that stopped. A jolting, sickening end to motion, a thunderous silence.

Martin's collapsed lungs sobbed at the cold night air. The fresh, clean air.

He knew that he had never completely lost consciousness. He'd been on the verge,

right over the deep end, teetering on the brink. But he hadn't blacked out. Somehow, he'd managed to cram that stuck accelerator pedal down to the floor. The robot that had threatened his life had perversely saved it. The car had lunged backward through the closed door of the garage, crumpling the rear end, folding the right-hand door of the car forward against the fender. The car had skewed on the drive, had climbed high on the embankment on the left side. The engine Martin hadn't been able to kill had died a natural death, and consequently the car had settled back into the drive, right front wheel against the property line curb.

Beyond the twisted wreck of his car, Martin was dimly aware of people. They came toward him from three sides at once, from neighboring houses, from cars that had been passing along the street, from the corner filling station. They came running, all talking at once, and somebody—Martin thought it was that friendly, red-faced man who lived in the next block—said, "My God, it's Neubold!"

Who the hell else, he thought, not moving. Who else would drive my car through my garage door. Not Jannie. Jannie doesn't drive.

"Neubold! Hey, Neubold!"

"Somebody get an ambulance."

Martin saw the shiny bald head of Mr. Cobb who lived in the old farmhouse next door. He felt Mr. Cobb's bare hand touch his, Martin's, wrist. He said, "No, don't do that. Don't call an ambulance. I'm all right, Cobb. Just shaken up a bit." He moved his legs awkwardly, dragged himself to the right side of the cushions. Cobb took hold of forearm and shoulder, helped Martin out of the car.

"Wadidjah do, Neubold?" That was the red-faced man from down in the next block being jovial and hearty.

MARTIN drew heavily on his inherent dignity. "I should think it would be quite apparent." He nodded toward the shattered door of the garage.

"You mean you started your car without opening the door? Good Lord, man, don't you know that's suicide?"

"Oh, is it?" Martin said. "Is that what it is?"

"Now, now, Mr. Neubold." Cobb pat-

ted Martin's shoulder. "You let me help you into the house. You're shaking like a leaf. You're half froze."

"Yes," Martin said. "It's cold." He allowed Cobb to help him along the drive and through the splintered door of the garage. Jannie's keys were on the floor where he must have dropped them. Cobb picked them up for him.

Martin said, "Uh, I'll have to go around. The door at the top of the steps seems to be jammed or something." He turned back through the jagged opening and noticed the knot of people standing around the wrecked car. Neighbors, he thought, and strangers, and I don't want them messing around my car. He said, "Cobb, would you mind shooing them off? I don't want anybody picking up any souvenirs."

"Sure," Cobb said. "You're all right? Think you can make it into the house?"

"I can make it." He watched the gaunt figure of Cobb strike out resolutely for the curiosity seekers about the wreck. Then he climbed the three steps in the embankment unsteadily and lurched toward the front door with Jannie's keys in his hand.

He did not close the door after he had entered. He still felt stifled. He moved into the living room, dropped into the nearest chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. He thought, I might as well stop kidding myself. Everything wouldn't stick at once—the garage door, the ignition switch, the lock on the door at the top of the steps, the gas pedal. All that wouldn't, couldn't happen. If somebody wired a jumper across the ignition switch some way, the engine would start and wouldn't stop until the jumper was removed, unless the engine stalled. I'm going to have to look things over pretty carefully.

He listened to the sounds coming through the open front door. The roar of the wind, the footsteps and voices, cars starting. He wondered if, among his other wonderful talents, Jim Wayne knew how to wire around an ignition lock. Motive? Plenty of that. Martin's life was heavily insured. His business property and house were worth quite a bit. And Jim Wayne could wrap Jannie around his finger.

Yes, if it was anybody, it would be Jim Wayne. Not Jannie. Good Lord, no! Jannie was devoted to him. . . . Besides,

she couldn't open a catsup bottle without help.

Footsteps, and the front door closed. Martin opened his eyes, saw Mr. Cobb standing uneasily in the cased opening of the hall, hands in pockets of his blue serge trousers. He was an old man, thin-faced, colorless except for a chafed red spot on his prominent Adam's apple.

He said, "I thought I'd see if there was anything I could do."

"Thanks," Martin said weakly. "There is. Mind getting me a shot of whiskey?" He indicated the radio that didn't look like and wasn't altogether a radio. Cobb moved bewilderedly toward it, and Martin said, "You may have to eenie-meeny. Sometimes you get Fred Allen when you're after Old Crow."

Cobb found the whiskey, and Martin told him to make it two. The old man chuckled, said he didn't mind if he did. He filled two shot glasses, brought one over to Martin, went back to sit down with his. He nodded his bald head in the general direction of the drive.

"Just leave her set like that? Might be I could run her back for you, if she'll run."

"Thanks, but I'll call Gulligan's tomorrow." Martin sipped the whiskey. "You've been kind, Mr. Cobb."

Mr. Cobb thought he had, too. "Always aim to be neighborly. You've always been. Take that time Miz Neubold fixed m' wife's sewing machine."

"Jannie?" Martin's spine stiffened. "Er, Mrs. Neubold fixed your wife's sewing machine?"

Cobb polished off his drink and stood up. "Yep. Didn't she mention it? Is there anything else I can do? Want I should call Miz Neubold for you?"

Martin didn't answer. There was the tightness of a frown across his brow. Jannie had fixed Mrs. Cobb's sewing machine. . . .

"I noticed she went out a while ago. If you'd like her to come home right away, I'll be glad to phone her for you."

"No-o," Martin said slowly. He was thinking now of Jannie's hat—the little brown one with the tall crown which she had worn tonight. The first time she'd worn that hat she'd gone out somewhere with Grace Felton, and Grace had been wearing a hat exactly like it. Grace, Jan-

nie had told him, had been actually unpleasant about it.

He thought, That's what's bothering me. The hat. She wouldn't have gone out with Grace wearing that hat.

He said, "No, thanks, Mr. Cobb. I wouldn't want to upset Mrs. Neubold. I wouldn't want you to call her." And I don't know where she is. I don't know whom she's with, but it isn't Grace, and Jannie lied. She lied to me. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Lie

MARTIN sat hunched in the chair for a long time after Cobb had left, and in spite of furnace heat and his overcoat, he was cold. Or it was a sort of numbness. Finally, he got up, plodded out into the kitchen and opened the door at the top of the steps. He squinted painfully at the keyhole on the garage side of the door, then got a paring knife with which to explore the tiny opening. Somebody had plugged the keyhole with some plastic substance that had hardened. His shoulders drooped. He went back to the cabinet, replaced the knife and then searched rather absently through other drawers until he found a flashlight.

He descended the stairs into the garage, stepped through the shattered door, and examined its outer edge in the beam from the flash. The right side rail of the door was still intact and in place. Three feet from the bottom, a small hole had been drilled through the rail and into the casting. A bolt inserted in such a hole would have securely fastened the door from the outside. Somebody had waited outside the door until Martin had started the car. That somebody had closed the door, slipped the bolt into the hole previously prepared. That the bolt was missing now simply meant that the somebody had been in the crowd that had milled around the wrecked car, had hung around to pick up the shreds of evidence.

Some other man, he thought. That's it. I'm too old for Jannie. Too old and too staid. She's found somebody else, and there's the money she'd get if something were to happen to me.

Too old. . . . He felt about ninety as he

moved out and walked toward the car.

Not all the evidence of attempted murder had been removed from the car. While there were no signs of a jumper that would have eliminated the switch from the ignition circuit, there were other things. Little things. Traces of cement of some sort on the distributor cap, the missing tools, a bit of hard steel wire which Martin found under the floor mat and which appeared to have been twisted about the rod attached to the tip of the accelerator pedal to prevent the rod from traveling down through the hole in the floor. It was this wire that had snapped during that last critical second when he had unconsciously concentrated all his strength against the accelerator pedal.

Then there was the hairpin. One of Jannie's, and he found it under the floor mat. That was the thing. After that he had seen enough. Physically and mentally sick, he went back into the house, removed his coat, hung it in the hall closet. He went into the living room and poured himself a drink. Some of the liquor stopped, and he caught himself wiping it

carefully from the polished cabinet top, as though it mattered.

He forced steadiness into his hands and lighted a cigar. He wondered what he was going to do. He tried to concentrate on that, but his mind kept wandering with the current of wishful thinking. His mind kept trying to find a way out for Jannie. Take the lock that had been plugged. If it was Jannie—or Jannie and somebody else—why plug the lock at all? Jannie could have simply removed the proper key from the case and then, having got hold of Martin's keys, the same end would have been accomplished. But wouldn't that have pointed even more definitely to Jannie if the trap had failed to work? It would have. She would have thought of that.

Well, what are you going to do?

He thought, I might call Bill Coyle and check on that phone call. Only, that's idiotic, because that didn't come from the police. That was just a ruse, the bait that got me into the trap.

Well, just exactly what are you going to do, let them take another crack at you?

He didn't know. If Jannie was mixed

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up in this, then it was too bad the first attempt hadn't worked. He propped up his aching head between his hands and tried to think. The trouble was, he didn't know Jannie. He only thought he knew her, as you thought you knew anybody. You couldn't know the devious workings of the human mind.

Well, what the hell are you going to do? he asked himself again.

Jim Wayne. Jim could have rigged this thing, could have thought out the mechanical details. He'd demonstrated a handiness with tools which had led Martin to hire him for the Neubold Company's service department, to work with Bill Coyle, until Martin had learned that Jim was selling freon gas from their carefully hoarded supply to a home appliance repair shop. Yes, it could be Jim Wayne, and Jannie needn't be involved at all.

But what about Jannie's hairpin under the car floor mat? What about her wearing the little brown hat tonight?

Jim Wayne and Jannie. The monstrous thought rose like a sob in his throat. Suppose they were plotting together. Maybe they weren't brother and sister. When he got right down to it, he didn't know anybody who had known either Jannie or Jim before he, Martin, had known them. He'd met Jannie in Detroit, when he'd been working there, before he'd come to Indianapolis to open his own business. Jannie's friends were all Martin's friends or the wives of his friends. There wasn't one among them who knew any more about Jannie's background than he did, which was damned little. She'd been there at the plant in Detroit, working in the office. He'd noticed her the first day, and every time he had passed her desk to go into J. B.'s office, she'd smiled at him. Someone had told him that her first husband had died suddenly some time ago. Martin had started taking Jannie places—the theater, concerts, dancing—and then they had married. It wasn't until after that that Jim Wayne had turned up. Martin hadn't even known she'd had a brother.

JANNIE had told Martin very little about Gordon Meed, her first husband. Martin hadn't asked. He'd felt instinctively about first husbands as he did about sleeping dogs—they were better left alone.

He'd never concerned himself about Gordon Meed at all, until right now.

Now he would have liked to have known how Gordon Meed died. Suddenly, someone had said. Suddenly....

Martin's hands dropped from his head. He stared at them, at the sweat-damp palms. He thought, My God, if I keep this up, I'll go out of my mind. Jannie, Jannie, Jannie....

She came home at eleven-thirty. He heard the *tap-tap* of her key against the keyplate. He didn't get out of his chair. She burst into the house, his name on her lips. Then a kind of sob, and she was standing there in the cased opening, staring at him, her mouth open and squarish, like screaming.

I'm alive, he thought—is that why you're looking at me like that?

He pushed his lips into a strained smile. "Well, what's the matter, Jannie?"

"Darling!" She ran to him, sat on his lap, covered his forehead and face with kisses. "Darling, I saw the car. I—I thought—" She straightened, her hands on his shoulders, and soberly examined his face. "Martin, you *were* hurt. You're pale, honey. You're—"

"I'm perfectly all right," he insisted sharply. "I simply—" he swallowed. "That is, the wind blew the door shut and I backed right through it. I'm not hurt in the least. Just a little shaken and nervous and sorry about the car."

She crinkled her nose. "Phooey to the car! That's what insurance companies are for, isn't it?" She jerked off the little brown hat, tossed it into the air, tried to kick it on the way down. A slim brown pump went sailing. She kicked off the other pump, extended stockinginged toes toward the baseboard radiator, which reminded him that she'd once said that the nicest thing about being married was that you didn't have to keep your shoes on. He chuckled.

"Phooey to cars and shoes and hats," she said.

Which reminded him of something else, and his chuckle trickled off.

"It's people that matter. Nice people like you." She pointed a finger, pressed it against the second button of his vest. "Don't you think it's people, pet?"

He said casually, "But what about that

hat? How did Grace feel about your showing up in *her* hat again?"

She was still pressing the button, concentrating on it as though that were the most important thing in the world. "Oh, Grace doesn't care. Not now. She burned her hat, or gave it away—I forget which. She said it was more my type of hat, anyway."

"Oh," he said.

She tipped over against him, her head snuggling against his shoulder. Her arms went up—he saw his hands faltering in the air, a kind of helpless gesture—and then he held her close. The sweetness of her hurt him. Deep down in his throat, the hurt was.

"Jannie—" He thought, If only I could believe that about the hat. God knows, I want to believe it.

"What?"

"Just Jannie," he said limply. He blew a kiss into her soft, dark hair.

She yawned. "Nice to be tired and have a warm bed to go to. Don't you think so?"

"Uh-huh." But I've got to know, he thought. I've got to. "Jannie, I—" but make it sound matter-of-fact—"I found one of your hairpins under the floormat of the car."

She said, just as casually, "I'm always dropping them."

"And do you know where your keys were?"

She sat up straight on his lap. "Don't tell me." She closed her eyes, and if that was a mock trance, it was damned disconcerting to him. "In the car," she said. "I see my keys in the car. That's where the battery man left them."

"Huh? How's that? What battery man?"

She opened her eyes wide. "From Gulligan's, I guess. He came late this afternoon."

He said, "I didn't ask Gulligan's to send anybody." He spoke slowly, watching her face. He couldn't see anything in her face that hadn't always been there. But he didn't want to see anything.

"That's funny," she said. "I'm sure it was Gulligan's." She stood up, smiling. "Let's go to bed, honey. I'm a sleepy, tired girl."

But there was something bothering her,

he knew. She couldn't sleep. In the small, dark hours of the morning he heard her turning quietly on her side of the bed. Quietly, to avoid disturbing him. As though he could sleep. As though he'd ever sleep again until he knew the truth.

He said into the darkness, "Can't you get to sleep, Jannie?"

"No." A very small voice. Then she sat up. He could see her sitting there, silhouetted against the dim glow from the window. "Martin, I—I told you a little . . . fib."

"Yes?" He was wary and at the same time hopeful.

"Not exactly a fib. . . ."

No, more like a lie, he thought.

" . . . It's an act, I guess. I'm only trying to fool myself. Trying to forget. You see, honey, I really can drive a car." As though that wasn't quite what she was trying to say. As though she were skirting the heart of the matter. "I just pretend I can't, that I never could. That I never . . . did. I was driving home to Detroit one night, and going through the Irish Hills I was involved in a terrible . . . accident."

"Yes? Was that how Gordon Meed was killed?"

"Gordon—" She broke off, and he heard her gasp. "Why, no. Whatever made you think that?"

"I don't know," he said. But you're lying, Jannie. You're trying to cover something up, aren't you?"

She bent over him, her hair falling forward, touching his face. His lips shaped bitterly against her kiss.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man With Two Names

THE SERVICE department manager at Gulligan Motor Sales said he hadn't sent a man to the Neubold house on a battery call. He went over the records of the previous day to make sure. He checked the batteries on charge, but none were tagged for Martin Neubold.

"It must have been somebody else," he said.

"I see," Martin said tonelessly, staring at the polished toes of his conservative black shoes.

"Now on this body and fender work, it

looks like about three hundred, three hundred and fifty dollars. We'll get on it right away, but we close tomorrow at noon. That'll get you out of here late Monday, say about five o'clock."

"All right." Martin turned, entered the salesroom, crossed to the street door, his head down, his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat. He went out onto the sidewalk, into the chill, bustling morning, unconscious of the crowd. Jannie had lied, his mind kept repeating. She'd lied about the battery man, about how her keys happened to be in the car. She'd lied about where she'd gone on the night before. Jannie was made of lies, all of her loveliness a thin veneer for the little monster within. How had her first husband died? Why had she never told him? Suddenly, someone had said. Why had the mention of Gordon Meed's name startled her last night?

But what the hell am I going to do about it? His mind had come back to that. The sixty-four dollar question, and he didn't have an answer. He'd considered going to the police. He'd tried to hear himself saying, "My wife tried to kill me last night," and he couldn't. He couldn't conceive of any of the Neubolds ever saying anything like that.

There wasn't anything he could do but wait, he had decided by the time he boarded a bus. Either there'd be another attempt or Jannie would realize he was onto something and just pull out of his life. He hoped that was the way it would be—that she'd just walk out and leave him alone.

As he entered the one-story building on Northwestern Avenue that he had converted for the manufacture of commercial refrigerators, Martin noticed Bill Coyle in the shop at the back—Bill Coyle, dirty faced and sober as usual, diligently tearing down a compressor. Martin stood for a moment, his hand on the knob of the office door, his lower lip drawn back into his teeth, his eyes thoughtful. Then he sauntered back into the shop where Bill Coyle said good-morning and at the same time reached for a socket wrench.

"How's everything, Bill?" Martin asked.

Bill Coyle shook his head as though everything wasn't good. "Kid's got measles. Cough, cough, cough, all night

long. Nobody gets any sleep at all."

This was as far as Martin went—as far as he needed to go. He said that was too bad, turned and walked back to his office. . . . But why pick out Bill Coyle as somebody who *might* have gotten into serious trouble with the police? Martin had always spoken highly of Bill. Why should Jannie pick Bill Coyle's name out of all other possibilities when she must have known that Bill Coyle was the least likely person to get into trouble?

He thought, It looks as though somebody—some complete stranger, maybe—picked up a newspaper containing one of our ads in which the names and photographs of our staff are used, and picked Bill Coyle at random.

It was a thread of hope, a possible out for Jannie, but—he decided, an hour later—it wouldn't stand close scrutiny. Because Martin thought highly of Bill Coyle, the plotters might have figured that Bill Coyle was just the person to get Martin to move into the trap.

It's Jannie, he thought, and I've got to face it. I might just as well go home right now and have it out with her. Jannie and some other man.

BUT HE didn't go home just then. He didn't leave the office until the usual time—five o'clock. He walked to Thirtieth Street, rode the cross-town bus for eleven blocks, got off within half a block of the grey-painted frame house where Jim Wayne had a furnished room at the end of an upstairs hall. Jim, in trousers and undershirt, looking as though he'd just rolled out of bed, opened the door, and his washed-out grey eyes gave Martin a cold going-over.

"Come on in, fella," he said, and Martin, wordless and swallowing past the dryness in his throat, entered a dingy room that stank of cheap whiskey and stale cigarette smoke.

"Jim, I want to talk—" Martin began.

"Siddown." Jim Wayne set the example by dumping his lank figure into the only chair. Martin considered the bed. It was unmade, the exposed sheets and pillow case tinged with grey. He sat on the edge of the bed finally, his back stiff, big hands clasped around a knee. He watched Jim Wayne light a cigarette and toss the

burned match onto the threadbare rug that was littered with mashed butts.

"I can't stay. . . ." No, he thought, get right to the point. "Did you know Jannie's first husband?"

Jim took the cigarette out of his mouth. He made tongue-and-lip *pfffft-pfffft* sounds, trying to dislodge a crumb of tobacco. "Yeah. I guess you'd say I knew him as well as anybody. Knew him before Jannie did." He looked at the ceiling. "An all 'round good joe, if there ever was one."

It was the first time Martin had ever heard Jim Wayne speak highly of anybody. "He died . . . suddenly, didn't he?"

Jim flung out of the chair, went over to the dresser where he slopped whiskey into a drinking glass. "Yeah, suddenly," he said huskily. He turned with the glass in his hand, his smile contemptuous. "Yeah, I guess you'd say it was suddenly. Why? What's got into you, fella. You look—well, you look kinda funny. Jannie been talkin' to you about good old Gordon?"

Martin shook his head. "No. She—she's never talked about him. That's it. I'd like to know—"

Jim Wayne was laughing quietly, watching the liquor swirl in the glass.

"How—Was it an accident? Meed's death, I mean."

Jim Wayne went on laughing. He tossed off his drink, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He put the glass back on the dresser. "Maybe," he said.

Martin stood up. His hands fell to his sides and clenched. "What do you mean . . . maybe?"

Jim shrugged. "Maybe it was an accident." He sauntered over to Martin, planted fingertips in Martin's middle. His coarse lips smirked. "Maybe it was something else. Whatsa matter, fella? You beginning to wise up?"

Martin asked again, "What do you mean?"

"Wise up to Jannie—the kind of a tart—"

Martin struck Jim Wayne across the side of the face, an open-hand blow, entirely instinctive. Jim's practical left jab caught Martin below the ribs, sat him lumbly down on the edge of the bed, head bowed.

"You ast, didn'tcha?" Jim Wayne

snarled. "And I told you. And I'll tell you more."

I asked, Martin thought, and now I don't want to listen.

"I said maybe it was an accident and maybe it wasn't," Jim's voice went on. "Anyway, she got his money. She got rid of him, didn't she, and you was set up in the next alley. What the hell did you come to me for if you didn't want to hear about it? Well, I'll tell you, fella. That dame's poison. Poison, get it? And I don't hate your guts so much I won't tell you."

Martin's lips moved. "Last night—" He broke off. He struggled to his feet, his eyes on the door. Jim Wayne was like a thin shadow on the periphery of vision, dogging Martin to the door, a whispering shadow.

"My own sister, and I'm tellin' you. Some day she'll hook something bigger and tougher than she is. Not you, fella. Maybe the next one."

The next one. The next Mr. Average. The next Mr. Unwary. Martin Neubold, Gordon Meed, and God only knew how many before that. But some day . . . somebody bigger and tougher. Somebody who in the name of justice would put an end to it. . . .

The door was open. Martin was not aware that Jim Wayne had opened it, but it simply wasn't there, and now Martin walked out into the hall and down the stairs. . . . *Not you, fella*, the echo of Jim's words followed him.

Why not me? he wondered. *Why not?*

SHE WAS in the bathroom when he got home, and as he entered the adjoining bedroom she called to him from behind the closed door.

"I thought we'd go out for dinner, darling. Do you mind? I'm just a lazy, no-good girl tonight."

He didn't say anything. He stood there, his hat and coat on, seeing nothing clearly, yet conscious of the room about him. Their room. He dropped his hat wearily on the bed.

"Martin?" His name was edged with alarm. "Is that you, Martin?"

Who else? he wondered. Who's the next sucker on your string? The man who phoned me last night? Did you take him into the plot so that you could have him,

body and soul, for as long as he was of any use to you?

He said tonelessly, "Yes," his listless eyes moving about the room. She'd laid out a dress on the bed—the soft grey dress—her mink coat and the cocky little brown hat. That was the beginning of his awakening—the hat. Or call it the start of a nightmare. She'd lied about going out with Grace Felton because if she'd gone with Grace she wouldn't have worn that particular hat. And she hadn't wanted Martin to accompany her out to the car. She hadn't wanted him to know who had called for her.

Whoever it was, that same man had later phoned Martin and offered the Bill Coyle story as a ruse to get Martin down into the garage. Into the trap. And the same man had to be outside the garage in order to close the overhead door and bolt it securely in place.

That meant, Martin thought, that whoever had telephoned the Neubold house had done it from the filling station on the corner. . . . I'll find out who, he told himself. Somebody at the station will remember. Then after I'm through here . . .

He listened to Jannie moving around in the bathroom, heard the door of the medicine cabinet open. Something—a bottle—fell from a shelf and smashed in the wash basin. He heard Jannie's cry of dismay.

"A whole, brand-new bottle of cologne, Martin. All down the drain!"

"Never mind," he said and moved over to the chest of drawers, where he stood facing the bathroom door. One of the top drawers of the chest was open and, out of habit, he started to close it when he noticed the butt of a revolver sticking out beneath a neat stack of Jannie's handkerchiefs. It didn't surprise him. Not now it didn't. He stared at the gun and wondered why she hadn't used that on him.

It'd all be over now, he thought, if she'd used the gun.

"Well, it certainly smells lovely and expensive in here," Jannie said laughingly. And then she came from the bath, her filmy negligee floating out from her shoulders and wearing very little else, the laughter still crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Hello, honey-boy."

He took a breath. He brought his arms up and out, and she would have run into

them except that he caught her shoulders and held her out from him. Laughter went suddenly out of her face.

"Martin. . .what's wrong?"

Something. It shows in my face. His tongue thick and dry, he said, "I know . . . about last night."

Her shoulders jerked a little.

"And about Gordon Mead," he said.

"Yes." She scarcely breathed. Her eyes were moist, fixed on his face.

"You can't deny it, can you. . . Jannie?"

"No, I—" Her head drooped like a child ashamed.

He said, quietly resolute. "It's going to end . . . right here. Now." His hands moved along her shoulders and towards her throat. She didn't seem to notice, or she didn't care. There wasn't any fear in her face—only grief. She raised her head, her eyes brimming.

"I love you, Martin," she whispered. "I always will, no matter what."

His arms were heavy, their muscles like pulp. His hands dropped away from her throat and dangled. He shook his head, turned and walked to bedroom door.

"Martin—"

He slammed the door behind him.

JIM WAYNE was in the front hall. Martin didn't wonder how Jim happened to be there or why, because anything can happen in a dream; people walk in and out without apparent motive. Jim was there with his hands jammed into the pockets of his baggy topcoat, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and Martin spoke to him.

"Somebody bigger and tougher than I am, Jim."

Jim grunted. "Whatcha goin' to do?"

Martin said on his way to the front door, "Find the man. The one who telephoned from the filling station last night. Somebody'll remember. Then . . . I'll go to the police."

"Like hell!"

Jim had caught Martin's arm from behind, had spun Martin around to face him. Jim had pulled his right hand from his coat pocket, and it was clenched around an automatic pistol.

"Like hell you'll go to the cops. She'd like that, she would!" Jim Wayne threw back his head and laughed. "Five years

of rotting in stir wasn't enough, I should go back. Go back for the rest of my life, maybe! She'd like that. She'd like to put me where she'll never set eyes on me again. I'm not good enough for her—she's gotta have a stuffed shirt. Well, listen, stuffed shirt—do you know what?"

Martin stared at the thin, blond face. Jim Wayne's grey eyes were bright and hot, a crazy gleam in them. "No," Martin said, wondering at the steadiness of his voice, "what?"

"I'm gonna blow the guts out of you. Last night maybe you was lucky. Tonight I don't think you look so lucky. I'm gonna pour lead into you, see, and then I'm gonna take her out of here with me. She'll stick this time. She'll stick or have to face the rap with me, for knockin' you off. I'll get square with her, the little—"

Martin's eyes flickered toward the bedroom door. It had opened, and Jannie was standing there, looking very small and pale, yet somehow not ineffectual. She had her right arm up and out straight like pointing a finger at Jim Wayne's back. Only it wasn't a finger she pointed but the small revolver.

She said faintly, "Drop the gun, Gordon. Right now."

Gordon. Gordon Meed, Jannie's first husband. Well, that was all right, in a dream. Sometimes in a dream you were talking with somebody, and then that somebody was suddenly somebody else.

"I'll shoot." As though she were telling herself she would, not at all sure that she could.

Jim or Gordon or whatever his name was, jerked around, facing Jannie, and Martin slugged at him, caught him in the

side of the neck with a big fist. A slug from the automatic tore into the white-enamored woodwork of the bedroom door as Jim-Gordon reeled under the blow. Then Jannie shot from that finger-pointing position, and while Martin afterwards swore that Jannie's eyes were closed, luck rode the bullet. Jim-Gordon hit the wall of the hallway with his left side, flattened against it, cheek to the wall, a dazed expression in his pale grey eyes. And then he peeled away from the wall, took half a step toward Jannie, and fell full length.

Jannie had already dropped the gun. She was clinging to the door frame with both hands, her shoulders shaking, eyes on the man on the floor. Martin stepped over Jim-Gordon's sprawled legs to get to Jannie, to hold her in his arms.

"It—it's all right." She was telling him it was all right. "They told me to. They—they said if I had to use it I was to use it. The district attorney said it was all right. It—it is all right, isn't it?" Hysterically now she asked him.

"It's all right," he was telling her. "Everything." Because now he knew it was Jim-Gordon who had arranged the death trap in the garage. It was Jim-Gordon who had baited the trap with a phone call from the corner filling station, and had Martin made inquiry at the station regarding who had used the phone at that critical time, the attendant would have described Jim-Gordon. And that was why, when Martin had mentioned he was going to the filling station, Jim-Gordon had decided to step out into the open.

"It's all right, Jannie." But it was several hours before Martin had everything straight in his mind. Only after the police



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arrived and Jim-Gordon had gone off in the ambulance did Martin understand it all. This Gordon Meed, whom Jannie had innocently married at an early age, had a criminal record as long as his arm. Detroit police suspected him of two killings following armed robbery, though there had never been sufficient evidence to bring an indictment of murder.

JANNIE had obtained a divorce while Meed had been serving a five-year stretch, and she had thought she'd never see him again.

"I pretended he was dead," she confessed to Martin. "Like pretending I can't drive a car. It seemed easier that way. And—" she gave Martin a sidelong glance—"after I met you, I thought I'd better go right on pretending. Because if you found out my ex-husband was a crook and a jailbird—well, you're *you*."

"I'm—" his expression conveyed self-distaste—"a stuffed shirt, you thought. But you should have told the truth, Jannie. It wouldn't have made any difference."

"Well," she said, "now it sounds fine to say it wouldn't have made any difference, but I'm not too sure, darling."

And then, after she and Martin had married, Meed, just out of prison, had showed up. She ought to have told Martin then, she admitted. She couldn't have done anything worse than say that Gordon Meed was her brother.

"Because that gave him the whip-hand over me," she said. "He threatened to tell the truth to you unless I gave him money. And I've been giving him money—some that I'd saved, dribbling it out to him and wondering what I'd do when that was gone. And then it was suddenly gone, and I had to do something. So I talked with Pat Deegan, your lawyer. He advised me to tell you about it all, but I was afraid you'd . . . hate me. I asked if there wasn't some way to put Gordon back in prison. So Pat took me to the district attorney—"

"That was Pat who called for you last night," Martin said.

Jannie nodded and hung her head. "Fibbed again, didn't I? My second since we've been married. The district attorney

thought that if Gordon made his demands for money in front of a suitable witness they could get him on a blackmail charge and put him back in prison. And they gave me that gun to use in case—" She broke off, shivering.

He said, "You ought to have told me." But he couldn't be stern about it, remembering guiltily how he had suspected her.

"And then I fibbed again," she said. "My third, my very last fib ever. About the car keys. You see, I let Gordon borrow your car yesterday afternoon, late. I was being extra nice to him, you see, because I didn't want him to guess that I was preparing a trap for him."

Which was a laugh, Martin thought. The only reason Meed had borrowed the car was to fix up that kill-trap that was to close on Martin and, indirectly, on Jannie, too. He told Jannie and the police about what Meed had done to the car, about how Meed must have planted the hairpin beneath the floor mat in order to frame Jannie.

"Revenge," Martin said, "must have been his motive. "Or if he could have got rid of me and still kept his hold on Jannie he probably could have controlled my estate."

"Revenge," Jannie echoed. "That was what he always wanted. He always harped on getting square with me. Though actually I divorced him as soon as possible after I found out what he really was, he liked to think I'd deserted him when he was out of luck and run to another man. . . . But tell me, Martin, when you found my hairpin under the floor mat—"

"Yes?" He didn't look at her.

"What did you think—that maybe I had something to do with that?"

He looked at her then, at her clear brown eyes and her sweet fresh mouth. He thought, I ought to have my head examined. I must be nuts!

"Why, no," he lied. "Think you'd try to murder me? Say, that's a laugh!" He made it sound like one. "Besides, you couldn't have rigged a thing like that—you who can't even get the top off a can."

"Oh," she said demurely. Her smile was a queer thing, like a whispered secret. "But I like to be helpless around you, darling. All wives do. Didn't you know?"

NOW YOU SEE IT...

By
**DAVE
SANDS**



"Carpis," he said, "you got my dough? Or do I have to get tough?"

It would take a magician to put Jim Connors in stir, where he belonged, actors' agent Herbie Carpis told himself. . . . But then—who had more magicians than Herbie?

THE PENCIL rolled across the top of Herbie Carpis' desk. It didn't roll very well, because there was a place in the middle where the soft wood had spread and flattened, the place the man had squeezed. Herbie folded his hands on top of his paunch, leaned back in his swivel chair. He said, "Strong men are strictly from hunger. I ain't booked one in ten years. Unless you wrestle, maybe . . . ?"

The ugly face got uglier, and the man said, "Come off it, Fatty. I don't want a job. My wife's a client of yours. I wanna know where she works."

Herbie looked at him. Maybe the fat woman. She should have a man like this. She should also have another agent, and Herbie had been ready to tell her so when some optimist started carnival, thus enabling Herbie to book her out on the road. Herbie Carpis said, "What's your name?"

"Jim Connors. My wife's name's Kay."

"Kay Connors," said Herb Carpis, "positively has got no husband. I know her like my daughter. I been handling her three years."

Jim Connors showed his teeth and said, "I been in the pen for five."

"Then you must have married her when she had long curls. She's only twenty-three."

"She was pretty young," Connors said. "Where's she workin' now?"

"At the Pelican. I got them the job five weeks ago. For dancers to stay five weeks at that club, it's never been done before. But do me a favor. Stay away from there."

Connors widened his eyes in mock surprise. "You mean," he said, "you'd keep a man from his wife?"

"My clients," said Herbie, "can marry apes. To me it is nothing as long as I get my ten percent. But the Pelican is a Grade A club. They like things quiet and classy."

"And expensive," Connors said. "So I'll save myself the cover charge and settle for fifty percent."

"A shakedown? From me, Herbie Carpis? You give one little shake, and I have them pick you up. So you just got out of the pen, you say. That means you're still on parole."

CCONNORS lighted a cigarette, threw the match on the floor, and said, "No shakedown. I'm doing my wife and you a favor, takin' the check here instead of picking it up at the club. That's why I came to you. I been readin' where she's doin' all right. I says to myself: She'll be willin' to split to keep you out of the way."

"Divorces," said Herbie pointedly, "my client can get much cheaper—a good one for two hundred dollars."

Connors said, "You'll have to do better than that. Divorce is against her religion. She's a dame who's married for keeps . . . Tell you what, Carpis. You check with her on the phone. I'll be back to pick up the dough. Tell her either I get it, or I dine at the Pelican Club."

"Yeah," said Herbie. "Sure." He got up and waddled back and forth along a

strip of rug. "But you watch. Nobody creates a disturbance at a high-class club without winding up in the can—unless he's a blue-book boy."

"Fatty," Connors said, "I was crabbin' better acts than this one back in the days when you were still earnin' an honest living. All I do is laugh in the wrong places. An' if Kay is still doin' the same kind of dancin', it won't be no trouble at all." He poked a hard finger deep into the fat on Herbie's chest and lumbered to the door. "Be back," he said, "in an hour or two."

Herbie said, "So long," nervously, and waited until the door closed before he went to the phone. He said, "Call Kay Connors and that partner of hers. Tell them they should be here. I got to see them right away."

Kay Connors and Dick Roney, her partner, were like happy, healthy children. They walked in time to imaginary music as they came across the room.

Herbie Carpis said, "Hello, kids."

Dick Roney said, "What stirs?"

"Marriage," Herbie said, "is wonderful. Why don't you two get married?"

"Agents," Roney said. "Two weeks ago I turned down a chance to sign with Acme Artists. Why? Loyalty. And now the guy I'm loyal to rushes me down to his office so he can play Dorothy Dix."

Kay Connors wasn't smiling. She said, "It's a long story, Herbie. But what do you want with us?"

"Him only," Herbie said, pointing at Dick. "Did the girl say I wanted you both? You should wait outside, please, Kay. We're talking business only."

Kay Connors shrugged and left the room and Herbie turned to Dick Roney. "You know she had a husband?" Herbie waited till Roney nodded. "Well, he just got here from jail."

"How'd he happen to come to you?"

"Never mind. I'll do the question asking. You love that girl. You would like to marry her?"

"Sure," Roney said. "But it's no dice. She doesn't believe in divorce. She'll never marry anybody until her husband's dead."

Watching his client's thoughtful look, Herbie said rather quickly, "Never mind. As your agent, believe me, I'm handling

this, you leave this to your Uncle Herbie."

Young Roney hadn't been raised in a flower garden. He was perfectly muscled, because it took a lot of zing to make a girl like Kay float through the air with ease, and his mind was hardened by the leaner years that preceded the Pelican Club. He said, "You can have my part of Connors. But you're letting yourself in for something if you think he's a wayward boy. He's been sent up three times, and he beat two murder raps."

"Murder?" echoed Herbie. He rubbed his fingertips together. "Two times he was charged with murder?"

THE UNPLEASANT thought stayed with him long after Roney had left the office. It spoiled his work. When he found himself agreeing with a producer who spoke of one of his clients, a leading man, as a misbegotten jerk, Herbie made an excuse and hung up the phone. Business would have to wait.

Jim Connors came back, and his mood was mellow. He'd had more than a couple of drinks. He said, "Carpis, you got my dough?"

Herbie Carpis, thinking of the two murders, swallowed and said, "Nothing. For you I got nothing. To me it is straight blackmail."

"It'll be worse than blackmail if you don't come up with that change," Connors' voice was harsh and grating. The mellow mood had passed.

Herbie said, "You do something foolish, pretty soon you'll be back in jail."

"It'll take a magician," said Connors. "No cop's going to put me there." He leaned across Herbie Carpis' desk and

flexed his powerful hands. "Most guys go back," he said, "for carryin' knives and guns." Picking up two pencils, he held them between his fingertips, slowly crushed the wood. "Hands," said Connors, dropping the pencils. "Everybody's got hands. They can't pass a law about that."

"Them pencils," Herbie said, poking them with his finger, "they cost me three cents each, if I buy them by the box."

"Charge it to my account. If you change your mind about that dough, I'll be at a ringside table tonight at the Pelican Club."

Herbie said, "Please . . ." but the door slammed. The girl put her head in to announce two actors. Herbie said, "Send them away."

He stared at the top of his desk until he seemed to see Connors' fingers there, writhing like deadly snakes. The light came slowly, and he raised his eyes to the ceiling gratefully and said very softly, "It'll take a magician to put him away . . . but who's got more magicians than me?"

When he pressed the buzzer, he did it firmly. The girl answered, and Herbie Carpis said, "Get me Gorko the Great on the phone. And find out who sells guns."

Gorko, a gaunt magician who had spent his middle age tightening an imitation belt about a waist that had never been large, said that he thought he could make it. He happened to be between shows.

The management of the Pelican Club was a little more reluctant. They agreed to make a place for Gorko's act when Herbie reminded them that he controlled ninety percent of the talent they were using for their show. "Everybody,"



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Herbie pleaded, "ought to work one night in one good spot some time before he dies. Even a magician. . . . Sure, you have to pay him. But minimum scale. Not for money, but for policy. It shouldn't happen an artist with Herbie Carpis went to work for free."

Sweating, Herbie put down the phone and went out to buy a gun. The red tape cost him the afternoon. The ancient weapon cost him six dollars, though the man had wanted a lot more. There wasn't any extra charge for the five corroded bullets.

The Pelican Club was full of hand-sewn suits and evening gowns with no tops. Jim Connors sat near the dance floor. He didn't see Herbie Carpis when the agent waddled in.

Herbie skirted the little tables and made his way to Gorko's dressing room. There he watched impatiently while Gorko kept a number of balls in the air in a flowing, colored stream. When the magician caught them and caused them to vanish, Herbie extended the box. "Better," he said, "you should juggle this. But, remember, be careful." Striving to remember the jargon of the shopkeeper, he added. "For a trigger, it's got a hair."

Gorko said, "Carpis, let your mind be at rest. I have worked with guns before. Is this fellow among those present?"

Herbie watched the thin hands at work on the package. Uneasily, he backed toward the door. "Fourth table on the right," he said, "like you're looking from the banstand." He hesitated, took out a handkerchief and mopped the back of his neck. "I'll be sitting with him."

"Never fear," said Gorko the Great. He fished out a dollar watch. "In precisely six minutes, I open the show. You obtained a nice engagement, Carpis. There's a dance team following my act. Very talented, I hear."

Herbie didn't answer. When he saw Gorko's fingers touch the gun, he hurried from the room. Down near the end of the hall he found a phone and methodically spun the dial.

THE MUSIC had stopped and the floor show was being announced by the time he completed his call. Herbie headed for Jim Connors' table, forcing his

reluctant feet to wade through the soft pink rug. Connors raised his eyes as Herbie cautiously pulled back a chair.

"Have two chairs, Fatty," Connors invited. "You're just in time for the show."

Herbie sat and said, "Thank you."

"You bring any money?"

"Look," Herbie said desperately, "that girl worked hard to get where she is. Is it right you should louse it up?"

"Not me," Connors said. "It ain't me that wants to make trouble. All I want is half."

"Half," Herbie repeated gloomily. From the corner of his eye, he watched Gorko bowing, doing things with cards. "Next week you want three-quarters. After that it's ninety percent."

"You'll think it's a bargain, Carpis, when I finish with her—and you."

Herbie said, "Me? I'm an agent, that's all. I work for ten percent." He gripped the edge of the table, then, watching Gorko come toward them.

The magician was circling the floor, and the spot was moving with him. His long white fingers fluttered like birds as he moved among the diners, plucking coins from dowager's ears, garters from businessmen's pockets. Now he was hovering over Connors. His hand flicked carelessly on either side of Connors' head, and the convict growled profanely and pulled the flowers down from his ears.

Herbie thought he saw it, but he couldn't be sure. Maybe Gorko was only brushing a flower petal from the front of Connors' coat. Connors let out a bellow and looked as if he might swing at the magician. Gorko gave him a final pat and gracefully drifted on. The people at nearby tables got quite a bang out of the incident, and it helped to brace Gorko's exit applause, which, even so, was sparse.

"Kay," Herbie said, "comes next."

Connors said, "Yeah? Well, any time you change your mind, just slide the moola across." The voice was thicker now. Having boxed the jug for eight hours, Connors was getting drunk.

She looked, Herbie thought, like an angel. Like Sarah, his daughter, had looked the day she got married. Kay danced like an angel, too. The crowd was quiet, and it takes a lot, in a night club, to make the crowd calm down. But

you couldn't hear a sound, except somewhere way back in the kitchen where it didn't bother you much. She was up on one toe, and so exquisite, with the drapery so thin. The crowd was holding its breath.

And Connors whistled. He whistled so low you could barely hear it, but it carried through the club. A wolf-whistle. Good for a laugh. And it got one. Several people chuckled. Others began to talk.

Herbie Carpis wrung his hands. A thing like that dance depended on mood. One more whistle, and the crowd would break. Two more would get a roar. Herbie said, "Connors, you win. I'm done arguing."

"Okay, Fatty. Hand it over."

"Not here," said Herbie. "Outside." He kept his eyes on Connors as the big man got up from the chair.

A startled look crossed the ugly face. Connors patted the front of his coat and said softly, "What'dya know?"

Herbie Carpis rolled his eyes. "What is it?" he said.

"Nuthin', Fatty. Nuthin' at all," Connors said grimly.

All the long way out to the lobby, Herbie thought of that gun. He had planned



Gorko

to have Gorko plant the weapon, and when he had phoned the police, it had been with the pleasant thought that Connors would never know the gun was on him until they picked him up. But a Connors who knew that he carried a gun was something else again.

Mingled with his fear, there was the contempt for his own stupidity. Anybody, just anybody, would know that Connors

would notice the extra weight. A baby would know it. A little girl would know it. Herbie Carpis thought of his family in the best apartment on Riverside Drive, and a single tear of self-pity ran out on his chubby cheek.

They were entering the lobby now. The frozen-faced lackeys and the cigarette girls were gone. Everyone was gone except the four grim men who lounged far back in the corners.

Connors was too old a hand not to have a nose for a stake-out, not to know the signs. He snarled, "You first, Fatty!" and jerked out the battered gun.

The muzzle was large in Herbie's face. He heard the gun click twice. Then from all sides came sounds that hurt his ears, as roaring police specials cut Jim Connors down.

The policeman, who knew Herbie slightly, said, "Good thing you called, Mr. Carpis. That boy was raring to go."

HERBIE clung to the hat check counter. "All he said was, he wanted money. And I knew he carried a gun. I figured that was against the law, a convict to carry a gun. But—" Herbie watched them carry Connors out—"he shouldn't have to die."

"Maybe not. But if that gun had worked, they'd sure be carrying you out, Mr. Carpis."

Herbie said, "Yeah." And then he remembered with sudden indignation that he himself had been charged six dollars for a rusty, worthless gun. "A thief!" Herbie Carpis said.

The cop watched the body go out the door. "Probably," he agreed.

"But it's all right," Herbie said. "I can charge it to Roney and Connors." The officer looked at him oddly, and Herbie waved a reassuring hand. "Don't pay too much attention. I got things on my mind." The gun had cost him six dollars. The cab he'd pay for himself, because he had met a songwriter down at the pawnshop who might write a hit some day. But the pencils—the pencils at three cents each—Herbie took out a card and scrawled on the back, to remind him not to forget: "Deduct \$6.09 from Roney-Connors acct. Misc. expense."

CLOTHES MAKE THE COP

By

KEN LEWIS

Meet Johnny Smith, the police rookie who knew more about the killing of Arthur Manton than anyone—except the killer himself—had a right to know!

HE CAREENED the sedan out of the police parking lot on two wheels, braked it to a screeching stop in front of Headquarters. He was sweating and his uniform collar seemed to be choking him. He loosened it absently and wished his heart would go back down in his chest where it belonged.

The big man was already coming down the Headquarters steps. The tall, grey, remote man who held the power of life or



Dunnegan leveled the Positive over the seat back as Johnny shot the car forward. "Get back in the seat," he ordered.

death over him. The big man opened the sedan door and surveyed him sourly. "Where's Harkness?" he asked.

"He—he was sick this morning, sir. The sergeant assigned me to take his place."

The big man grunted and climbed into the car. "What's your name?"

"Johnny, sir."

"Johnny what?"

"Johnny S-Smith, sir."

"Rookie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hmph. How long you been with the force?"

"J-Just since this morning, Lieutenant."

The big man sighed and settled himself in the seat. "The goops the homicide detail draws these days," he said, half under his breath. "Your collar's open."

"It—it's too tight, sir."

"Then have it enlarged. *But button it!*"

"Yes, sir!"

The sedan slipped into the stream of traffic, turned right on Figueroa.

"You know where we're going?"

"Yes, sir. The sergeant said we were to drive to 2604 Avenue Fifty-Six and pick up a witness in the Arthur Manton killing. Alfred Costa, Manton's landlord. The one who reported the body, and put the finger on this Jack Kroller, Manton's partner, as the killer. Kroller was picked up at his own apartment this morning, and we're to take Costa down to identify him formally."

The big man grunted again. "You seem to have got that much straight, anyhow."

"Yes, sir . . . You going to run this Kroller through the line-up and let Costa pick him out?"

"No. I'll just bring them together in my office. Costa's identifying him now is only a formality, anyway. Just for the record. He's already tagged Kroller definitely as the man who went up to Manton's room last night, quarreled with him and shot him."

THE SEDAN turned into a narrow, shaded side street, drew up before a brown two-story house set back in a terraced, weedy lawn. Johnny jumped out and opened the door for the big man. To-

gether they mounted the front steps, and the lieutenant twisted the knob of the old-fashioned door bell.

A thin, wizened man of perhaps sixty opened the door. He had thinning grey hair and was wearing a claret dressing robe. The lieutenant showed his badge.

"Dunnegan," he said. "You're Costa?"

The little man nodded. "A pleasure, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?"

"Our prowl boys picked up Jack Kroller this morning. We'd like to have you come down and identify him formally. You *can* identify him, can't you?"

"Absolutely!" Costa's head bobbed. "I've only seen him two or three times—when he came to visit Manton, you know. But I'd know him any place. In fact, I'm the one who let him in last night. Will you come in while I dress?"

Johnny stepped forward into the path of sunlight slanting beneath the porch eaves. "Hey!" He grinned suddenly. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before? Back in Ohio, before the war?"

Costa regarded him blankly. "You may have," he said at last. "I come from Ohio."

"Yeah! You were a teller in the bank where I used to keep my account! The First National Bank, of Cleveland, Ohio! Don't you remember me now?"

"I'm afraid not, Officer. I never worked in a bank. I had a Buick agency, in Akron."

"Oh." Johnny's face fell. Dunnegan was scowling at him impatiently. "If you'll just get dressed, Mr. Costa," he said.

They entered a long, dark hall with stairs at the rear. "The living room's there on the left, gentlemen, if you'd care to be seated," Costa said. "I'll only be a minute."

Johnny pointed to the stairs. "Manton's room was up there?" he asked.

"Yes. That's where he was killed. I heard them quarreling, after I'd let Kroller in. But I figured it was none of my business, till I heard the shot. Then, before I could do anything to stop him, Kroller ran down the hall and out the front door. I went up to Manton's room and found him shot through the back of the head, with the gun lying beside him. I called the police at once, of course—but he was already dead when they got here."

Johnny tugged at his collar. "What was the beef?"

"The . . . beef?"

Dunnegan was glaring at Johnny now. "You run off too much at the mouth for a rookie," he growled. "We already have Mr. Costa's complete statement on file."

"Yes, sir," Johnny said, reddening. "Only—I just wondered what they were fighting about."

Costa smiled indulgently. "It's all right, Lieutenant. I don't mind repeating the story for your man's benefit. They were quarreling about their business—the little toy factory they owned down on San Pedro Street. I couldn't help overhearing, they shouted so loud. Kroller accused Manton of stealing money from the company and threatened to call the police. I don't know exactly what happened after that, but I imagine that Manton pulled a gun on his partner, and in the struggle that followed Kroller took it away from him and shot him. Anyway, the officers who were here last night said the gun, which had been wiped clean, had Manton's initials on it."

Johnny's mouth opened again, but Dunnegan cut him off. "Until somebody tells you different, *Probationer Smith*," he said, "your job is to drive that car out there. Nothing more. *I'll* handle the interrogation of witnesses. Now for God's sake shut up and let the man dress!"

"Yes, sir!" Johnny's jaw closed with a click.

THEY were halfway to Headquarters before he opened his jaws again. Then he looked at Dunnegan out of the corner of his eye and said pleadingly, "Please Lieutenant—I just thought of something. I just want to get it all straight in my mind—"

"I said, *shut up!*"

Costa leaned forward on the seat behind them. "Don't be too hard on him, Lieutenant," he said. "After all, an inquiring mind must be one of the requisites of a potential detective. If there's anything I can do to set the boy's mind at rest, I'll be only too happy. What is it, son?"

"Well—" Johnny gulped. "Did you actually see Kroller leave the house, after the shot?"

"No. But I heard him running down the hall. And I heard the front door bang shut behind him."

"But—are you *sure* it was Kroller? Are you *sure* it wasn't somebody else, who just *said* he was Kroller?"

"Nonsense! I'd seen him before. And I heard Manton call him by name, just before the shot."

Johnny took a deep breath. "Are you *sure*?" he asked softly. "Are you *sure* you'd ever seen Jack Kroller before? Are you *sure* Kroller wasn't just someone you'd heard about previously from Manton? Someone you decided to use as your patsy, after *you* killed Manton yourself?"

His voice rose, cutting through the indignant sputter from the back seat. "Are you *sure* you didn't already know something that Kroller only found out *after* he began to suspect his partner of embezzlement, and really checked up on him for the first time? That Manton, under another name, was a former Cleveland bank teller who disappeared with ten thousand dollars in stolen funds twelve years ago!"

"Are you *sure* you weren't using that information to blackmail Manton? Wasn't his need for money, to pay you off, the real reason behind his present embezzlement? And when Kroller found out about it and threatened to call in the police unless he made the stolen funds good by this morning, didn't Manton come to you and threaten to implicate you as a blackmailer unless you came through with the dough to help him out of his jam?"

"Didn't you shoot him with his own gun, to prevent his squealing? And then, because he twisted around just as you pulled the trigger, and the bullet entered his head at the wrong angle to make it look like suicide, as you'd originally planned, didn't you decide to saddle the murder on Kroller instead? Didn't you phone Kroller's apartment after the murder, posing as a radio research poll-taker, and learn that he was home alone and thus wouldn't have any satisfactory alibi for the time of the killing? Didn't you then frame your story for the police, figuring that if you implicated him enough at the start, you wouldn't have to worry about identifying him later, even though you'd never actually seen him in your life? You probably had a superficial description of him

from Manton, and figured that because of your claim of previous acquaintanceship with him the cops wouldn't make you pick him out from among a group of other suspects, anyway. That they'd merely bring you two together and have you identify him under oath, just as a formality."

He paused for breath, keeping one eye on the traffic outside the sedan and one on the sick, pinched face in the rear-view mirror. He realized that Dunnegan was watching the mirror, too—one hand on the butt of the Police Positive under his coat.

"Look at him, Lieutenant!" he said harshly. "Look at that face! I'll bet when you check up you'll find that Costa knew Manton back in Ohio—maybe sold him a car, or something. He read about Manton's original embezzlement and disappearance in the Cleveland papers—and when he ran into him again out here, he knew a soft touch when he saw it! He even made Manton move in with him, so he could keep a closer check on his pigeon. I'll bet when you check Costa's finances, you'll find they took quite a spurt each time Manton juggled the toy factory's books. Anyway, it's worth a try."

Dunnegan grunted, keeping his eyes on the rear-view mirror. "You seem to know a helluva lot about this case, for a rookie," he said.

"No more than anyone could have guessed, from reading the morning papers. Anyway, he's just proved that at least one part of his story's a lie. He's just proved that he wouldn't know Jack Kroller from Adam's off ox, unless somebody pointed Kroller out to him first."

"Yeah? How do you figure that?"

Johnny braked automatically for a red light. "Because—" he began. But sudden movement from the back seat interrupted him. Costa had grabbed the sedan's nearest door handle, was twisting it desperately.

"No dice," Dunnegan told him flatly, leveling the Positive over the seat back as Johnny shot the car forward again. "Maybe the kid's got something, at that."

A RED-FACED SERGEANT ran down the steps to meet them when they pulled up at Headquarters a few minutes later. "Thank God, Lieutenant!" he gasped. "You got him! I tried to phone you at Costa's and tip you off, but some dame was talking to her boy friend on the party line, and by the time I got her off, I guess you'd already left."

Dunnegan finished cuffing Costa to Johnny's wrist and turned. "Yeah," he said. "I got him, all right. But how the devil did *you* boys know it was Costa?"

"Costa?" The sergeant blinked bewildered. "Hell, Costa's just a witness! It was Kroller there that got away! He slipped into the squad room while we was waiting to book him, locked the door and stole Harkness' uniform out of a locker. Then he sneaked out the washroom window!"

Dunnegan glared malevolently at Johnny. "So," he said. "So! *That's* how you knew so much! But how'd you happen to have sense enough to pick *me* up?"

Johnny unbuttoned the uniform collar. "I heard the dispatcher's voice over the loudspeaker when I reached the parking lot. He was ordering a car for you to go out and get Costa in, and I kind of wanted to see Costa myself. So I decided to be your driver."

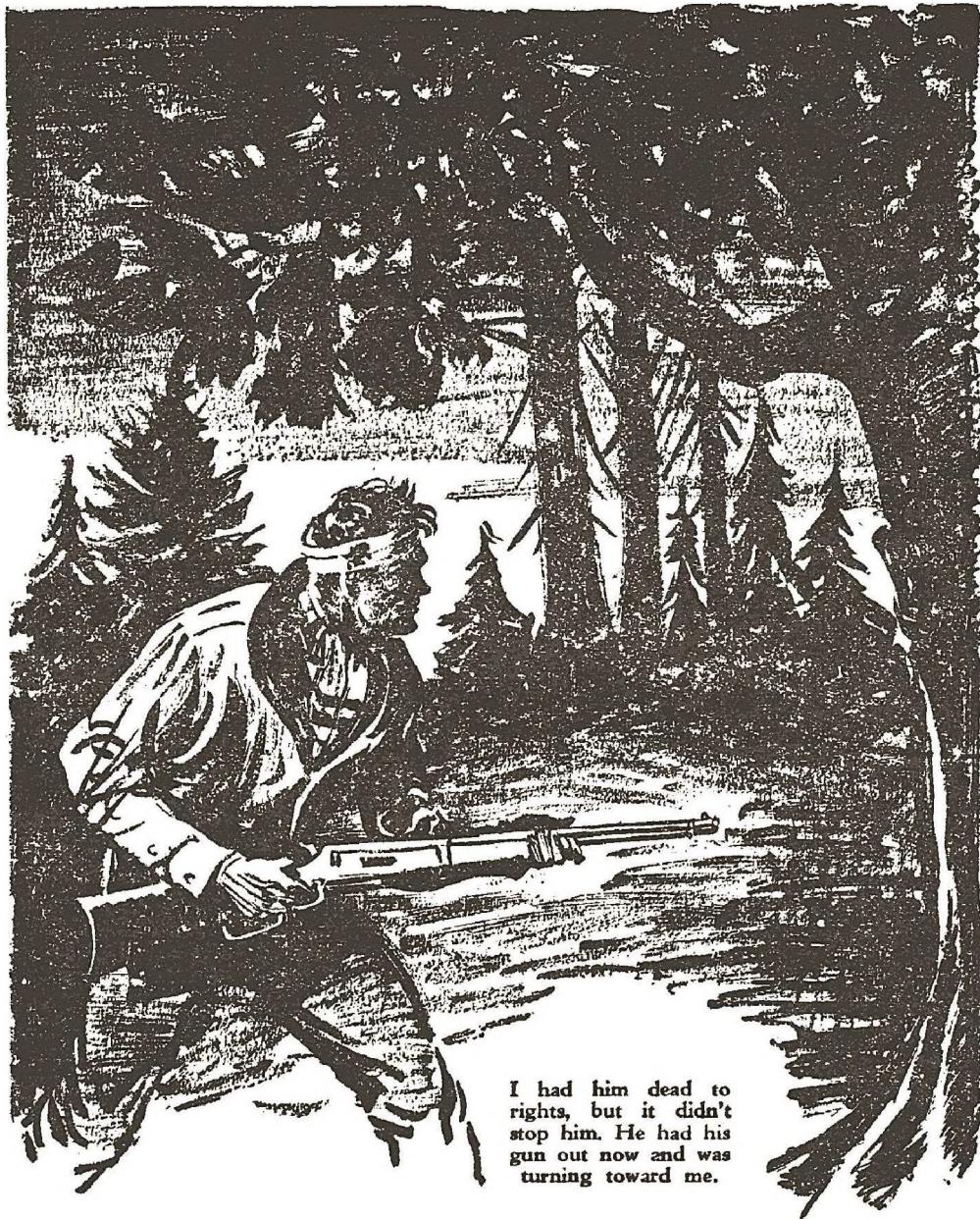
Dunnegan grunted thoughtfully. "Well," he said at last, "you gonna come quietly? You still got one or two little things to square, you know."

"Sure," Johnny said, grinning. "Sure, I'll come quietly. I'll even plead guilty—of impersonating an officer, that is. But I can't help wondering, Lieutenant, if you haven't been guilty of that, yourself, sometimes."

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I had him dead to rights, but it didn't stop him. He had his gun out now and was turning toward me.

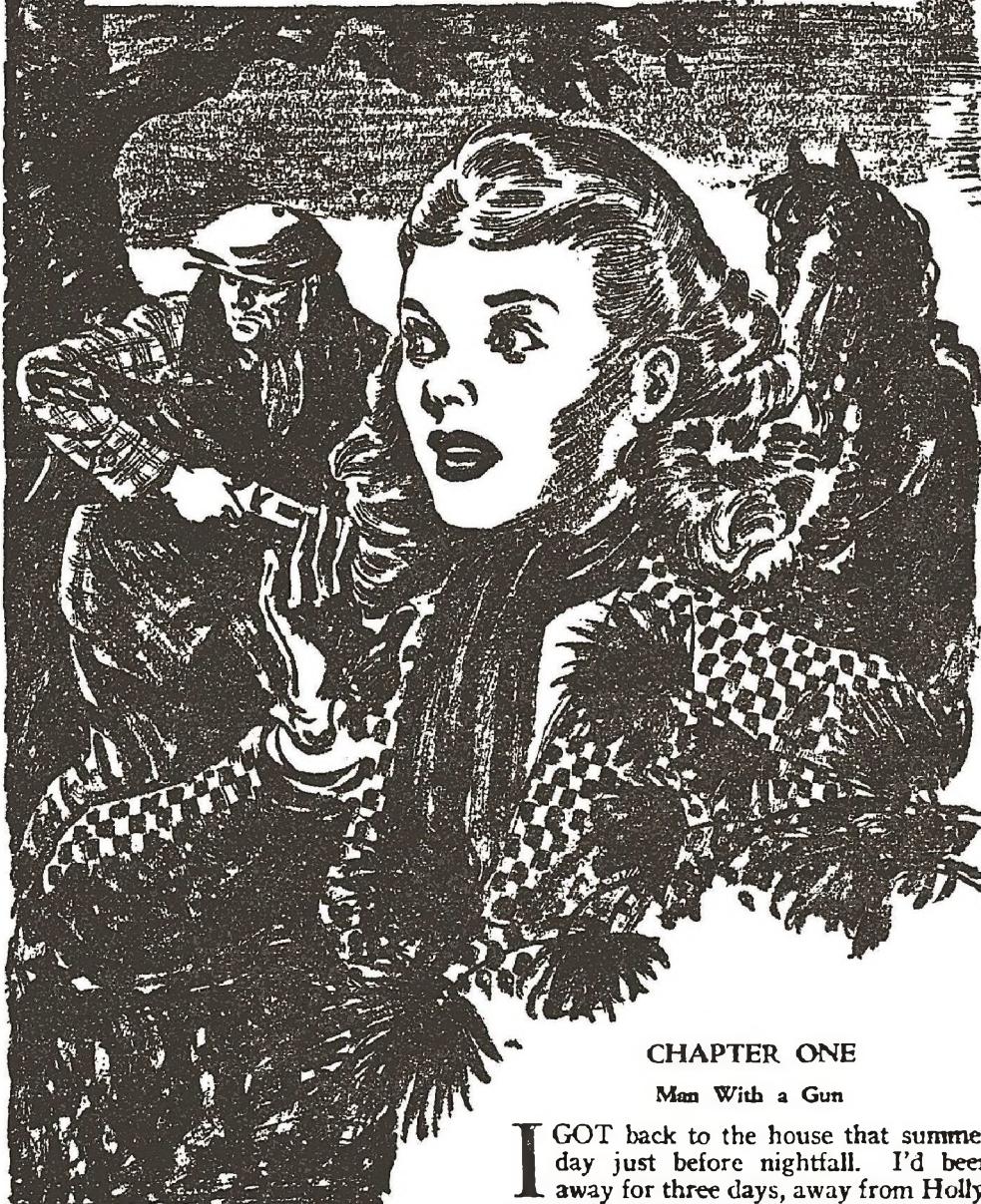
Gripping Novelette of Death in the Big Hungry

By TALMACE POWELL

Somewhere in the perilous fastnesses of the Big Hungry, Cracker Maggee's fortune waited—the same fortune that had meant death to the Cracker . . . and to Obie Tucker . . . and to the man called Claude Cofer. . . . The same fortune that Steve could hear calling to him now:

"Come and get it!"

KNOCK ON ANY GRAVE!



CHAPTER ONE

Man With a Gun

I GOT back to the house that summer day just before nightfall. I'd been away for three days, away from Holly, and I was like a starving man going toward food. All the way down through

the timber I was thinking of her, thinking that the things they said about her were of no account; any woman as full of life as Holly would get herself talked about back in these mountains. She was different. You've got to understand that. She was different, and that made her strange, and anything that was strange the mountain people didn't—couldn't—accept. But she was mine, and that made it right, and nothing else mattered.

All the way down through the timber I was alive in that way that makes you ache with it. There were the mountains, rolling into the depths of eternity, all about me. The night was dark purple and gold, moving in from the east like a mantle drawn with a giant hand as the blazing sun sank its crimson fires behind the awesome pile after pile of shadowy mountains in the west. The headiness of spring seeped through all the air. I could smell it in the mustiness in the timber, the odor of green things bursting into life. A brook, darting silver, splashed its way down through the rank shadows of laurel and rhododendron. The brook would flow to a river, and the river to the sea, and Holly was like the brook. She was quicksilver, and the silence of deep, still pools; she was the fire of a sun ray caught in a drop of water, and she was the mystery of the brook seeping into a mountain cavern, dark and chill. She was restless like the brook, and some day she would find her way to the sea. I knew that. I knew it from the beginning. Maybe it was one reason why I loved her so. I knew she would find her way to the sea and if I wanted to keep her I would have to go to the sea also.

THEN I came in sight of the house and stopped. I sank on my haunches and stared at the house and picked up a dry twig and snapped it in my fingers like a dry, brittle bone. The house was dark, which meant that Holly wasn't there. My first glimpse of her would have to wait; the things I had to tell her couldn't be spoken as I had planned. She wasn't there, and I was afraid, the way I'd always been afraid when she disappeared for a moment around a bend in the road or over a hill-top.

I went on to the house and quartered my pack mule in the barn, washed up on

the back porch. Inside, I lighted some lamps. The place was a mess. There were dirty dishes piled on the kitchen table, and old bread, and bacon cemented in its cold fat. In the bedroom her face powder and open cold cream jars littered the bureau. There was a stocking tossed across the bed and a blue dress in a pile on the floor beside the bed where she'd stepped out of it. I picked the dress up, put it on a hanger. I went back to the kitchen, thinking that there was only one thing wrong with Holly: She'd been born a thousand miles and million dollars away from her environment. She studied fashion magazines and dreamed her dreams and imitated the people down at Amber Lodge where she worked summers. She knew how to talk, dress, act. Secretly a lot of the hill girls envied and wanted to be like her, and the girls' parents all hated her. Put her in a city a thousand miles away from the rugged desolation of the Smokies with a million bucks behind her, and Holly would have knocked 'em cold.

I found old corn pone in the stove warmer and munched that with a glass of buttermilk. I left the house then and started down the twilight road toward the Lodge.

If you've ever vacationed in the mountains, you know the Lodge. A rustic setting, a swimming pool fed by the icy water from the hills, a row of tennis courts, a long sweep of lawn, graveled drives, bridle paths, a row of station wagons to bring you up from the town. It's splendid, and it's restful, the Lodge. It's a vast building of fieldstone, overgrown with ivy, with a lobby as big as a small airplane hangar and fireplaces you could barbecue a cow in. The Lodge was heaven to Holly. She'd gotten to be a dining room hostess, and sometimes when she was going to work, crossing the grounds, a guest would mistake her for another guest and that made her so happy her eyes turned to jewels with the memory of it.

The mountain people, even her own people, didn't understand. The Lodge to them was a cesspool of sin, a cancer on the earth, and I knew in my heart, though I'd never actually seen it, that the eyes of the mountain men got hot and lecherous when they talked about Holly working at the Lodge. But I understood. I looked at

the Lodge and I thought of the cabin she'd been born in up in Stoneman's Cove, and I understood. She'd had five brothers and two sisters, and they were all still in the Cove, but somehow in Holly the chemistry was different. Maybe it would happen again in a million births, maybe never.

But she wasn't basically mean or vicious or intentionally sinful. Remember that. Remember, when you see what happened to me and Holly, that she wasn't debased. She was just Holly, my wife. She was different and it made me love her and scared me to reach for her sometimes in the night just to be sure she was there. But through all the pain and fear that loving her brought, I wouldn't have had her different. It would have killed something in me to see her like all the other girls I'd known and grown up with. After you touch a jewel you never put much store by a pebble. . . .

I heard the fast, jerky rhythm of a string band before I came in sight of the Lodge. They were playing *Bill Bailey* and the fiddle was sawing hard, as if the fiddle player was crazed on white lightning liquor and the guitars were twanging. A dance caller's voice rose in the night, and the shuffle of many feet was a current of sound under the music.

I walked up the drive, toward the dance pavilion. It was a vast platform out under the trees east of the Lodge. The pavilion was lighted with a soft haze from overhead Japanese lanterns. The band and dance caller worked on a dais at the far end, and the pavilion swarmed with swirling, gliding, twisting bodies all caught up in the intricate movements of the old folk dances.

I moved up to the edge of the pavilion, knowing that if she weren't here I wouldn't know where else to look for her. Everybody was having fun, and not a few of them were good square dancers. I let the frenzy of the music beat at me and watched for her, and then I saw her.

They were in a promenade movement, couple behind couple, each man's arm across his lady's shoulder. She was dancing with a tall, broad-shouldered man. That's all I saw of the man at first. My gaze was impelled to her face. She looked like a young and infinitely lovely mountain nymph of the night. She wore a yellow dress like a mantel of cold fire. Her head was thrown back and she was laughing, and the laughter and fun had put stars in her eyes. I could see the soft pulsing in her white velvet throat as she came near and the gleam of her white, even teeth behind her parted red lips. She had hair the color of a glossy polished piece of coal, and she wore it loose about her shoulders.

SHE SAW me then, and the smile died out on her lips. Her steps faltered, and her face went white so that there were shadows around her high cheekbones. The stars faded in her eyes, leaving a swirl of darkness in their depths.

The change in her scared me, and I forced a smile, wondering what mad jealousy and pain had been on my face to scare her like that. Her own smile tugged back, and she was back in the midst of the dance.

I looked at her partner and found him casting a glance at me. He was handsome in a square-faced, rugged way. His hair was a mass of red ringlets on his head. He

should have looked boyish and full of fun. But his nostrils were pinched in tight, and his mouth was a cold, colorless line and his eyes were a cold, colorless grey, and on his face was the stamp of a lot of living. A hell of a lot of hard, fast living.

I rolled myself a smoke, watching my hands, and wondered what Holly and I were coming to. Some time, something was going to happen to us. You couldn't have your body in one place and all your yearning in another and have nothing come of it.

The music ended with a shave-and-a-haircut. There was a spattering of applause. People began filtering off the dance floor. I didn't watch for her. I tried to make myself look idle and unconcerned. But there was a desperate, wild turmoil in my mind as I thought of the way she had been laughing up into the red-haired man's face before she'd known I was anywhere around. The trouble was in my fear, in my long, old knowledge that I held onto her by the slimmest kind of thread. Always there had been the fear that some time she would meet somebody at the Lodge who would take her away from me. The red-headed man had looked like that kind. Like the kind who would take a woman from any man without any kind of compunctions. . . .

"Hello, Steve," she said.

I turned to her. She had come down from the rustic dance floor to stand beside me. She was smiling, but deep in her eyes was a kind of hidden guilt, a faint breathlessness in the way she touched her pink tongue to her lips—and I wondered what had happened in the three days I'd been gone.

"You weren't at the house, Holly. I remembered this was party night at the Lodge. I thought you might be down here."

"Yes, I—it was so lonesome at the house without you, Steve. This is Mr. Fisk. Mr. Fisk, my husband."

I shook hands with Fisk. Up close, I saw that his red coloration extended to his eyebrows. They were a sandy kind of red, and if he had grown a beard it would have been red, too, I guessed.

"Holly has told me a lot about you, Steve. My handle is Barney. Call me that."

So we were all at the first name stage

already. Nice and cozy. He was looking at my wife with those cold eyes of his, and I wondered how much time she'd had with him to tell him so much about me.

"Let's all go over to the bar and have a drink," he suggested. He linked one arm in mine, the other in Holly's. I didn't want to go. I wanted to take her home. But I knew, looking at her face, that if I didn't go along there'd be a scene.

He chatted pleasantly as we crossed the lawn. And right then I began to hate him. He was, I gussed, ten years older than Holly and me, about thirty-five. He had a way of making me feel awkward and young—and helpless. And there was Holly, comparing us, his easy, worldly way of talking against my silence.

I was in whipecord pants and suede jacket, but it made no difference in the bar. A lot of male guests drank in similar garb after hunting trips when they came in and wanted a drink before going up and changing clothes.

Barney Fisk ushered us into a red leather booth. I ordered bourbon, and it was good. I don't have the money to enjoy that kind of liquor often, and I wished I could enjoy it. But I couldn't. I drank it, but I was tense and quivering inside because I could sense the change in Holly. Something had happened that I didn't know anything about. In three days she'd become different, and I knew it was because of Barney Fisk, and I hated him for it.

SHE ORDERED a champagne cocktail—and for some reason it made me think of her brothers and sisters back in Stoneman's Cove. She drank in the cool liquid, the talk of the people around her, the soft lights and luxury. And she drank in Barney Fisk's smile. That's what hurt most. The stars were back in her eyes, but they were the kind of stars you see on a frosty winter night. And I sat there with mush in my guts. For no visible reason at all I had a strange, nameless, dreadful sense of disaster hanging over us.

A small man came walking over to the booth and stood looking at us silently. He was a wizened guy with a neck like a chicken's, a sad, angular face, eyes pinched close together over the narrow bridge of his nose. He had a high forehead and

sparse hair that was neatly parted and slicked down.

"Hello, Claude," Fisk said to the little man. "Sit down. Have a drink. You know Holly. This is her husband. Call him Steve. Steve, my business associate, Claude Cofer."

Cofer nodded without speaking. From the looks of him he never spoke. But his little, glinting eyes missed nothing. They were everywhere. And when they fell on your face it gave you a creepy feeling as if something out of a grave or crazy house had touched you.

Fisk ordered another round of drinks. He clasped his big, red hands on the table and said, "Steve, this Big Hungry section back up in the hills is pretty wild and rugged, isn't it?"

"You're not thinking of going into Big Hungry, are you?"

"That bad?"

"And worse. There's stretches of Big Hungry that's never seen a human face since the Indians left it. No roads, not even trails. Just mountain piled after mountain, brambles, timber, stretches of shale, wild gorges and wilder rivers."

"Holly telis me you know Big Hungry pretty well."

"Better than anybody else around here," I said, "though Holly knows the section pretty well herself. I've hunted a lot back in there and lately I've been doing some prospecting for feldspar. I just got back from a trip up in there. If I could find some 'spar and get the mineral rights before anybody else knew about it, I'd make myself a pile of money."

"Holly would like that, wouldn't you, Holly?"

"You can say that again!" She laughed, and Fisk laughed with her. I looked at Claude Cofer. He wasn't laughing. Just sitting there, looking sad, never taking his eyes from my face. It made my cheeks color.

I closed my hands around my empty glass, cleared my throat and repeated myself a little, "You going into Big Hungry?"

Fisk chuckled. "Claude and I thought we'd do a little hunting. The Lodge here is just a civilized imitation of the rugged life. It'd be a waste of vacation if we didn't get back deep in the hills and rough it,

wouldn't it?" He turned to ask Claude.

"Yah," Claude said, "rough it." He picked up his glass. He was dainty, holding the glass with the tips of all ten fingers, the glass between his hands. As he bent forward to have his drink, I knew what was really bothering me about Claude. All the time I had been seeing the bulge under his coat without realizing it. Now as he bent forward, his lapel fell back a little and I saw the black, cold, vicious butt of an automatic in his shoulder holster.

All three of them were looking at me, and I looked at Holly, and I knew that there was some secret they shared. Then I thought of a man like Claude with an automatic, and I felt little snakes of cold terror writhing around in the bottom of my stomach. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

What's a Little Blood?

LATE that night Barney Fisk drove Holly and me home in his big, red coupe. It was a long, sleek car that took the ridges and bumps out of the road that wound up the mountainside to our house. I sat over in the corner of the seat and was silent. Holly sensed there was something wrong with me. She talked too fast, too much, in a voice that was too loud.

The sweeping, silent scene that flowed past the car was like a picture on those postcards you buy in the souvenir stands down in the village, a moon of pure silver pouring pale milk over all the peaks. There were patches of moonlight on the road filtering through the trees, then the house standing stark in the moonlight, looking poor and lonely. Holly and I got out and bade Fisk good-night, and the big, red coupe whined away.

We went in. The night was chilly now. It would get a little more so before morning; then the sun would come up to dry out the hollows. I started a fire, sitting on my haunches and watching the flames rise in the fireplace.

She moved about the room like something caged. Finally she stood near me and snarled softly, "What's eating you, Steve? Why don't you get it off your chest!"

"How much have you been seeing him

during the time I've been away?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, are we going to start that?"

I came to my feet. I could feel a vein hammering in my temple, and I opened and closed my hands. I had trouble dragging my breath through the pain and wrath that filled my insides. "What kind of man do you think I am, Holly? Sitting there tonight, watching him make eyes at you! Maybe I ought to slap some sense into you!"

Her lips curled with a scorn that was like a physical slap across my face. "Why don't you do that?" she shouted thickly. "That's the way some hill men treat their women, isn't it? You managed to get yourself a half-decent education, Steve, but sometimes I think you're still the filthiest kind of hill trash at heart. Why don't you—"

She caught the back of my hand across her lips. I didn't know what had happened until I had already done it. I was just striking out against the pain, against the memory of the way Fisk had looked at her, against the thought that she was angry because I'd been a wet blanket all evening.

I saw her stagger back one step. Then she was standing in the middle of the poor, chill, lonely room, her hands like talons at her sides, her hair wild about her face, her breath coming fast and crazy, and the fires of hell in her eyes. A single drop of blood squeezed from the side of her lip and splashed on her chin. She was like something out of a terrifying myth standing there, but she was so beautiful it pulled at my heart like a sudden plunge in ice water.

"Holly . . ." I whispered. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry, Holly. I didn't know what I was doing."

"No, Steve, you didn't, did you? You just didn't know what you were doing! Well—you just don't know what that *slap cost you, Steve Calhoun!*"

She turned and went into the bedroom. I heard her moving about in there. Then it was still, with only the night noises outside and the crackling of the fireplace to break the silence.

I was trembling inside. I went out in the kitchen and got a jug from the cupboard and poured myself a heavy drink. I drank it and sat alone in the darkness at

the kitchen table. Through the window I could see the pale moonlight splashing the clearing around the house, and it looked lonely, like a strange, terrible world out there. I knew I had lost her. I knew that Barney Fisk and Claude Cofer had some kind of reason for coming back into the hills. Men like that don't take hill vacations. They take vacations in Miami and Atlantic City, in places where there are lights and excitement and lots of people of their own kind. Whatever the reason that had brought them here, it had to be big, and Holly had cut herself in on it. I remembered something she'd said once: "Just let opportunity come, Steve! I'll meet it more than halfway, and I'll never let it slip away from me, no matter what I have to do!"

I shivered, remembering those words. I should have gotten up and gone to her and somehow made it right about the slap. But I kept torturing myself with the picture in my mind of Fisk's red, hairy hands touching her, of Fisk's heavy lips claiming hers. I kept seeing his cruel, cynical, knowing eyes. It could have been going on for days, not just the three days I'd been away. I couldn't go to her with those pictures in my mind, and I sat and nursed the jug and hoped that when daylight came things would somehow seem different. . . .

SHE WAS gone when I woke next morning. I was stiff and cramped, and sunlight was streaming through a window into my eyes. I could hear birds outside singing like crazy because it was summer and the earth was rich. But the earth didn't feel very rich to me.

I sat up. Some time in the night I'd gone in the living room to sleep on the lumpy sofa. The bedroom door was standing open. She wasn't in there, and when I didn't hear her in the kitchen, I knew she was already gone.

In the kitchen, I put some fresh wood in the stove, stirred up a fire and made coffee. After I cleaned up and shaved and got the coffee in my gullet, I felt better. I fed and watered the mule in the barn, brushed off my hands and started for Amber Lodge.

It was almost lunch time when I reached the Lodge. Guests were sitting around on the sweeping veranda having drinks, or

playing cards, or just talking. A croquet game was going out on the lawn, and from the tennis courts came the *pock-peck* of racquets slamming balls.

I walked around to a service entrance, took my hat in my hands and my pride in my belly. A grey-haired housekeeper who wore shell-rimmed glasses was in the narrow hallway, stacking crisp, folded sheets in a closet from a four-wheeled push cart.

I cleared my throat, and the housekeeper looked around. "I hate to bother you, ma'am, but I'd like to see Mrs. Calhoun. She works in the dining room. If you could tell her Steve would like to see her a second or two . . ."

"I'll see," the housekeeper said. She went away, and I stood twisting my hat and thinking of the things I'd say to Holly. I could smell the steamy, cloying odors of the kitchen and hear them rattling pans. I was so tense the smells turned my stomach faintly, and it seemed that Holly would never come.

Then the housekeeper returned, nodded to me and went to work at her pushcart again. In a second or two, Holly was there at the end of the corridor. She didn't come any closer than that, and she didn't give me the chance to say anything. She said, "I thought we said everything last night, Steve. I'm busy, and I hope you won't come here any more."

She turned with a twinkle of ankles, a swishing of hips, and she was gone. The housekeeper looked embarrassed, but I thanked her anyway. I went out of there fast and crossed the lawn, brushing people and not caring. I was full of hate and love and fear all at the same time. I was nothing without Holly. I tried to tell my-

self I'd been worse than nothing with her. She was the kind who would drag me right down in the mud. She was decay that would eat away at a man until he was something old and vicious. I saw Cofer standing on the lawn watching me with his blank and evil eyes. I think I cursed him as I passed, because he was Barney Fisk's friend. Claude Cofer didn't say anything, just watched me go. Then I rounded a bend in the road, and I was out of sight of the Lodge.

I don't know what I was planning to do with myself. I went down in the village and whiled away the afternoon buying beers for anybody who would talk to me. I didn't get drunk. I had that much sense left. I was a little too much hill-stock man to get blind drunk at a time like this. . . .

Along about dark all the talk ran out and there was only the hollow sadness left. I went home. Up the long, rutted dirt road, up into the silence and solitude. I didn't know whether I'd try to stay on the place, or whether I'd turn the mule out, get some things together and leave the house again right away.

I could hear a whippoorwill calling down in the wooded hollow as I went in the kitchen. I got a fire going, and while the stove was getting hot, I went out to see about the mule.

When I came back there was a man sitting at the kitchen table, helping himself to a drink out of my jug.

"Obie Tucker!"

Obie grinned. "This is rotten liquor, Steve."

"Hell, it's the best I can do."

"Then it's good enough for me. I'll



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even have myself another drink, maybe."

HE TOSSED the liquor down while I looked at him. Obie was so rawboned it made you wince to look at him—wide, bony shoulders, big-knuckled wrists, a face so bony it looked like a skull with big ears flapping at its sides and a wild thatch of sandy hair covering its pate. The last time I'd seen Obie, he'd had the earthy color of wind and sun. Now he was pale as paper and there was something cold and calculating in his restless blue eyes.

"Last time I heard about you, Obie, you were in Michigan state pen."

"A rotten joint," he said. "I just got out."

"I thought about you several times, Obie, and wondered how you were getting along."

"I got along. Even time off for good behavior. I used to think about you sometimes, too, Steve. Remember the 'shine we ran across the Tennessee line?"

"Yeah." We'd both been eighteen, bigger than the world. Obie had got his hands on a souped-up Ford with a special transmission and overload springs. Nothing could catch us. But the law had. We'd spent six months on the road, two eighteen-year-old kids, and we'd laughed about it.

"You were always the nervy, smart one, Steve. If we'd done it your way, we might have made a fortune bootlegging."

I didn't say anything. He didn't mean it as a compliment, just a statement of fact. I sat looking at him, thinking about the way we'd grown up together. In some ways Obie Tucker was closer to me than a brother.

He curled his big, bony hand around his glass. He looked up, and there was a kind of breathless, serpentine glitter in his blue eyes. "I need somebody like you, Steve. Somebody I know I can trust and depend on. Somebody with guts and at the same time with sense enough not to try anything rash." He leaned toward me. There was a twitching in his cheek "This is big, Steve. It would set you for life. How would you like that?"

"How big?" I said.

"Bigger than anything you've ever imagined, Steve."

"What do we do to get it?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I need you. I might do it alone, but I can't take chances. It's too big for that. I want this to be a sure thing. I want insurance—somebody else along."

"Maybe it sounds too big. You'll have to tell me."

"Sure, I'll tell you everything. Just one thing, Steve, there might be blood—bright, red, hot blood."

I was sitting with my back pressed hard against the back of my cane-buttoned chair, looking down at an angle into his eyes. I licked my lips. "I'm not exactly afraid of blood, Obie . . . but—how big?"

"A hundred thousand dollars, Steve. A cool, lovely, delicious one hundred thousand of those little green skins that'll take you out of these hills forever. . . ."

MY HANDS were shaking. I poured half a water glass of liquor and gulped it down. Obie and I sat looking at each other, thinking about a hundred thousand dollars. That vast, bony frame of his was hunched over the table. The stove was pouring heat out into the room now, but we didn't feel it. In the light of the lamp, Obie's strange blue eyes were like the eyes of a jungle cat.

He said, "You remember Cracker Magee, Steve?"

I nodded. A lot of people knew the tale of Cracker Magee in this neck of the woods.

"A funny thing about Cracker," Obie said. "I always felt toward him as if he was a very old man. He was so tall and gaunt and grey looking, and sad around the eyes."

"I remember," I said.

"Still he was only fifteen years older than me," Obie said.

"Was?"

"Has T. B. got him." Obie's face took on a far-away look. "Cracker was the main reason I went up to Detroit when I finished that road stretch you and me did, Steve. Cracker was from my own neck of the woods. He was somebody to know. But I never did get teamed up with him. I saw him a few times around Detroit, then I got nabbed on a bum rap." Obie's face went hard and bitter. "A dirty tramp fed me to the cops to save her boy friend's

neck. For a long time I figured to kill her when I got out."

"But you got over that?"

"She wasn't worth it, Steve. She wasn't worth it, that's all."

"And Cracker Magee?"

"He had ideas big as the U. S. Mint, Steve. No long, drawn-out process for Cracker, no frittering away your effort and jail sentences on peanut jobs. He and another guy planned that Page payroll job."

"I remember," I said.

"Well, they got in the paymaster's office when the morning shift was changing. And they got their hands on the money. But they slipped somehow. Cracker never did tell me. A clerk or somebody tipped the alarm button. The other guy was killed. Cracker got away. But he was hot as a four-alarm fire."

"I remember," I said again. "Even the papers down here were filled with the stories, Cracker being a home-town boy."

"He was caught right over here in Madison county," Obie said.

"I remember that, too."

Obie stared into his glass. "They never did find the hundred grand, and I doubt if they'd have caught Cracker if he hadn't been sick. He holed up in the hills for weeks—but he was weak, run-down. He couldn't stand it any longer. And when he tried to get out, a hill sheriff spotted him, pounced on his neck, and he was shipped back to Michigan."

"All that was in the papers, Obie. Tell me something new."

"All right, I'll tell you plenty new. Cracker holed up back in Big Hungry, in an old abandoned cabin. He cached his money there. He never did tell them that."

"Big Hungry is the one logical place for Cracker to have holed up, I guess."

"So when he went out," Obie said, "he didn't take much of the jack with him. Afraid there was a lot of chance of getting caught in his condition."

"A few people around here figured it happened about that way, Obie."

"Okay. But I had the inside track. When he got to feeling better, Cracker was my cellmate. But he never did get well. He was dying, and he knew it. He knew he would never get back to his

money. It was driving him crazy, thinking of the money just rotting away in Big Hungry. So he told me. He gave me a pretty good idea of where that money is hid, Steve, in a good, solid, steel box."

"And you're going after it?"

Obie's mouth formed his twisted grin. "I'd go alone, Steve—only there's one hitch. There was a trusty in the pen, a big, red-headed man who worked in the hospital. I saw him a time or two when they let me cross the grounds and see old Cracker during his last sickness. Today I saw that same trusty down in the village, Steve. There's just one reason why he'd be here. Cracker must have said something while he was dying that made this trusty able to put the pieces together. I asked around and find this trusty, this guy who calls himself Barney Fisk, has got a sidekick with him, a little adder snake named Claude Cofer. That makes two of them, and only one of me. That's why I need you, Steve. If blood is spilled it'll be snake blood, so you needn't worry on that account. Hell, I think I could handle the two of them myself once they get back in Big Hungry. But why takes chances with so much at stake. There's plenty of money for both of us. What do you say, Steve?"

CHAPTER THREE

The Big Hungry

I SAT staring into the lamplight, seeing her face in the yellow glow. Holly's face. I had the taste of gall in my mouth. You can see how it was. There were one or two things Obie didn't know. He'd just got in. He couldn't know. Here was a hundred thousand dollars, and Barney Fisk and Claude Cofer going after it, and she was going with them. Holly was going to guide them into that wild, primitive wilderness, because it was a hundred-thousand-dollar opportunity and she couldn't let it slip from her grasp. And here was Obie Tucker asking me to go in with him, dangling a hundred thousand dollars before my own eyes. If I went in with Obie, I'd be on one side and Holly on the other, and between us would be a hundred thousand dollars blood money. . . .

I had to tell Obie. All the things he didn't understand. But when I looked up at him, he was stiff and startled in his chair. His face was a white mask of terror. He was looking past me. I swiveled my head to follow his gaze, and I got one swift glimpse of a white blur out beyond the window. A face out there in the night. Then a gun clapped twice, and I saw the flame and heard glass tinkle.

It happened fast, but while it was happening, it seemed the second would never vanish in time. The two shots happened, then Obie was trying to rise. He looked horrible. One bullet had torn off one of his big ears, and the other bullet had punched him in the teeth. For an instant there was that black, gaping hole in his face and the terror in his frozen eyes. When the blood came it was a bright, red fountain, choking whatever he was trying to say.

I hit the table. It tilted over and the lamp shattered. For a second I thought of the floor catching fire, trapping me in a roaring oven or against that clapping gun outside. But the lamp winked out. It was dark. I lay there on the floor and knew someone was outside, waiting.

I listened for Obie, heard nothing, and knew he was dead. Nothing happened outside. I knew he was close to that broken window, waiting for a sound inside so he could use his gun again.

I could hear the sighing of the summer breeze, the little night noises out there. It made the house get smaller, smaller, until the place was choking me. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I began inching my way across the floor.

I was a long time in the process, or maybe the time only seems long when the night is dark and silent and the smell of death is in your nostrils. I reached the bedroom; the bureau drawer whispered softly. I touched some of her things when my hand dipped in the drawer. Then I felt cool metal, and I pulled the gun out.

I was on even ground with him now. Unless there were two of them. I wouldn't think that Holly might be out there with them.

I rubbed along the wall, walking close to the baseboard so the floor wouldn't creak. Then I was back at the kitchen door, and I saw the strip of moonlight and knew the

outside door had been opened. He was eeling his way in. I knew it was Cofer. Cofer would be the one to come in for the kill. Cofer wouldn't be sad at moments like these. He would drink the excitement. It had all been in his pinched, flat, inhuman eyes. . . .

I tried to get him with my first shot. But I missed. His gun winked back at me, and I heard the bullet thud in the wall beside my head. My finger jerked twice, and under the sound of the gun, I heard his cough, hollow and rattling; I knew a bullet had knocked the cough out of him. I heard the thud of his body hit the floor.

I didn't move for a long time. I watched the moon shadows move across the yard outside. He'd left the door standing open a little. I kept waiting, waiting for Barney Fisk to make his move.

Cofer was very still, and I wondered about him. Finally I edged my way out across the kitchen. I could see the dark mound of Cofer's shadow against the wall. I held the gun ready to blast him again if he made a move.

Cofer was beyond moving. I could tell it by the limp, cool feel of his outflung hand. I was drawing my hand away from his flesh when I heard the rustle of movement. I swung the gun up. But the other gun crashed first, splashing fire in the kitchen doorway. I felt the bullet slam my head, and everything was a crazy montage of sparks and stars and intolerable pressure that was bursting my head. Then all the lights went out.

I WOKE with a raw, red sun like blood in my eyes. I couldn't move at first. I wasn't able to do anything but lie and fight the pain in my head. I crawled over to a chair and dragged myself halfway to my feet. I looked around. I was in the bedroom, and the bedroom was filled with carnage. I understood what had happened. Cofer had shot Obie Tucker, I had shot Cofer, and Barney Fisk had shot me. Then Fisk had dragged the three of us in here, thinking we were all dead. It all must have pleased Fisk. He'd had to stop Obie before going after the money in Big Hungry and had followed Obie here. Now Fisk must be thinking that it was all left for him and Holly. . . .

I could think about her in these mo-

ments with clarity and without pain. I was enduring too much physical pain to be able to feel any thinking about her. The brand of pain she could bring me would come later.

I wanted to get out of the house soon, but I couldn't. I nursed that head all morning, going weak every time I thought of the nasty gash where the bullet had creased my temple.

As the day wore on, the pain subsided. I wasn't glad, for that other pain came in its place. By early afternoon I was able to eat and after that I was able to force some steadiness in my legs.

I knew that Barney Fisk was already well on his way into Big Hungry. The way seemed clear to him now; his whole purpose in coming here, he thought, was almost accomplished. And I knew that Holly would be with him. I tried not to think about that. I tried to think only of Obie Tucker's corpse in the bedroom and the pain in my own head. I checked my revolver and loaded a carbine. After that, I packed the mule. I was going to travel light, far, and get there fast as possible. Through it all I kept remembering what it was like to drink the warm red wine of Holly's lips. . . .

It was early the next morning before I cut any sign on them. I figured they would go into Big Hungry by way of Hickory Nut Gap. Holly would take that shortest, quickest way. I was right. As I came up the long trail toward the pass I found the almost warm embers of a campfire in a clearing. There were two sets of tracks around the fire, hers and his. There were horseshoe imprints that indicated a pair of horses had grazed at the edge of the clearing.

The carbine was in my hand from that point on. I reached the pass and before me was the sudden vista of trackless miles of untouched mountains. I could see a ribbon like silver in the distance, a river. Valleys and plateaus stretched before me. Over it all hung a deep silence. It was ageless, eternal and unchanged by man. But in the midst of it somewhere was a man with blood on his hands—and Holly.

At noon that day I came out on a small tableland of shale. It was there that I saw the finger of smoke eeling up out of the valley beyond and below me. I watched

the smoke for a second or two, feeling my hands go slick and my face hot. I led the mule down toward the brush and hobbled it there. I could take it from here on foot, down through the timber, over the face of the mountain, taking short cuts where no horse could go and moving faster than any horse could move in this terrain.

They were in a clearing down beside a lazy creek that meandered through a wild meadow. They were getting ready to leave when I crawled up close to the clearing in the brush. I looked at Holly and wished I hadn't had to. Her face looked grim and hard. Her eyes looked cold, as if something in them had been killed—or had committed suicide. Barney Fisk flipped away his cigarette, held his horse's reins, ready to mount. The sun was catching in his red hair, and I got a look at his eyes; they were like hers, and I knew he'd caused her eyes to turn hard and flat, the way they had.

I stepped out of the brush with the carbine centered on his stomach. They both heard my footsteps. Holly screamed when she saw my face, and Fisk looked as if he was seeing a ghost.

He knew I had him cold. I guess he thought I was going to kill him then and there. I guess he was pretty sure of it. There was only one way out for him. Only one wild crazy gamble.

I'll have to give him credit for that. He had nerve. He didn't hesitate. He moved in a blinding blur. I swung the gun around and fired. I saw dust jump from the sleeve of his shirt, but it didn't stop him. He flung himself toward the bole of the huge oak beside him. I fired again, but he was too flat, too small a target. Then I was moving myself, because he had dragged a gun from a saddle holster and had turned the tables.

He fired, and I felt a hole gouged in my shoulder. I was knocked back, sprawling, losing the carbine. I tried to scramble to my feet, but he was fast. He was standing over me. I was looking up into his gun, on beyond into his crazed face.

I saw his lips peel back from his teeth. Sweat was dribbling down his face. His laugh roared out, mirthless and hard and thirsty for my blood. His gun was swinging up, and I cringed back against the earth because there was nothing else I

could do. This was it, and I knew it, and I almost didn't give a damn.

Then the little sound came from her. From Holly. From off there behind him, and a switch clicked deep in his eyes. He was remembering: Even if she was his, she had once been mine.

He whirled on her, saw the carbine she had half drawn from her saddle scabbard. Then he shot her.

She screamed, over and over, like a small, homeless animal mystified and scared by sudden pain. And over her twisted, screaming mouth were her eyes, black and liquid and enormous in her white face.

Then he was turning back to me. But he was too late this time. His luck couldn't go on forever. I'd reached my carbine and the slug hit him in the middle of the face like the kick of a mule. Blood blossomed where his face had been; his knees did a shuddering dance; he pitched headlong. I stepped over his body to Holly.

I kneeled beside her. She was breathing hard, painfully. I looked at the spreading crimson on her chest, and I knew this was the end for Holly. The end of all her dreams and wanting. The end of her determination. The end of the bewilderment that life had been to her. She had always tried to be sure of what she wanted. But she hadn't been really. She'd been all twisted and knotted up with desires that got crazily tangled with her surroundings.

I was so choked up I couldn't speak. But I knew, looking in her eyes, that she hadn't been with Fisk and Cofer when they'd killed Obie Tucker. They had followed Tucker alone, or she never would have let Fisk shoot me that night and leave me for dead. Her actions today had proved that, and I was glad, and for just a few moments now she was going to be my Holly again. The same girl I had loved and grown up with and tried to understand.

She groped and found my hand. A spasm of pain crossed her face. "Steve," . . . she whispered, "I couldn't let him. Not even for a hundred thousand dollars. I couldn't let him shoot you. . . . Hold me, Steve! Please! Hold me—don't let me go!"

"I'll hold you," I said. "And I won't let you go."

Part of the promise I kept. I held her, with tears blinding my eyes—but I couldn't keep her from going. Not this time either.

I BROUGHT her and Fisk back. I felt like leaving Fisk out there for the buzzards, but I didn't. I brought them back and dumped the whole thing in the lap of Sheriff Kincaid. I told him just about everything, and I told the coroner's jury the same things, and there was nothing they could do except call it justifiable homicide.

I buried Holly in the cemetery beside the little wooden church up in Stoneman's Cove. Her mother and father and most of her brothers and sisters were there, and I tried to imagine them being blood kin to her, and I couldn't. I could just remember her drinking a champagne cocktail in the bar at Amber Lodge.

The church was pretty well filled. The whole business had made quite a noise in the surrounding hills, and they came from far and wide to look upon her. Looking upon her made their snug, self-righteous shells a little thicker, I guess. They always knew she would come to a bad end.

After it was all over, I went back to the house. Our house. Mine and Holly's. I walked over the acres around the place and I knew we could have had a life here, a good life, but we'd got things mixed up in our minds and we'd been impatient. We'd been trying to rush Fate, or God, or whatever or Whoever decides things, and God or Fate, whichever you will, won't be rushed.

I walked over to the barn and rubbed the muzzle of the mule with my knuckles. I thought about Cracker Magee's hundred thousand dollars. They were dead, Tucker and Cofer and Fisk and Holly. Not another living soul knew where that hundred thousand dollars was—except me and the mule.

I walked over to the corn bin, and I pulled out the rusted steel box. When Cracker Magee had been captured, a lot of men in the hills had figured he'd cached his money, from stories in the papers. A

(Continued on page 126)

NEAT PACKAGE



"When I found him, I was afraid . . . afraid . . . and I ran," she told Marty.

The cops had everything on her— motive, weapon, opportunity—everything. In fact, it was such a neat package that Detective Marty Carroll almost hated to spoil it with the little technicality . . . of someone else being the killer!

By **FRANCIS K. ALLAN**

IT WAS six o'clock in Manhattan. The first snow of the year was sifting through the November twilight. In bars on Third Avenue, in cocktail lounges along quiet side streets men ordered martinis or whiskies or old-fashioneds and smiled at girls who smiled at them. Darkness floated out of doorways and settled

on empty windows. Subways rushed and halted; people hurried home.

In the East Fifty-ninth Street Station, Detective Marty Carroll pulled on his worn coat and put on his hat. He was tall. He was young and he was tired, and he was thinking of a beer somewhere. He was lonely.

That was six o'clock. Six o'clock was everywhere in Manhattan. It was a part of the draperies and the ticking clock in the penthouse of Mitchell Dryver. The windows looked east across the terrace, across the twilight, over the East River, and over the lights in Brooklyn and Queens. It was dark in the room and there was an odor of burned cloth. A chime note broke the silence. It came again, and a third and fourth time. Then the front door swung open slowly and a voice called in the darkness:

"Mitchell?"

It was a man's voice, thin and impatient; it belonged to Stewart Dryver, Mitchell's older brother. Stewart called again, more impatiently, then turned on the light. "Mitchell! What in the devil are—" The words dissolved. The clock ticked on. Stewart's grey lips made a moist sound. One bony hand went out in front of him, anxiously at first, seeking, and then the motion turned to a shove of protest. "No, no. No," he whispered.

Mitchell Dryver, a large, bald man of sixty-one lay on the rug. His glasses, attached to a dark ribbon, lay near his soft, white hand. A cigar lay on the rug; it had burned into the rug, then gone out. There was a small hole in Mitchell's coat, squarely between the shoulder blades. And Mitchell Dryver, retired broker, collector of first editions, bachelor, was dead. It was six o'clock all over Manhattan, as people hurried or drank or smiled at a lovely girl.

Detective Marty Carroll lit a cigarette and started out the door as the telephone rang. The desk sergeant stopped him . . .

BY THE TIME Marty reached the penthouse, Stewart Dryver had regained his stiff composure. He was a small man, grey of face and cold of manner.

"No, I have touched nothing except the telephone, the light switch, and the outside knob of the main door," he said curtly. "I arrived here at precisely six o'clock. My brother and I had planned to dine together at the Walton. I found the main door slightly ajar. That is unusual."

Marty pushed back his hat and knelt beside the body. Mitchell had been a

warmer man than his brother, Marty felt intuitively; even in death he looked happier. He had lived alone, Stewart was saying. A woman came in the mornings to clean, and there was a Miss Marlin who came four days a week to do secretarial work. Oh, yes, his brother had retired from active business, but he had maintained interests in real estate and also had been active in a number of charities. Foolish, of course.

Marty rose and walked slowly around the room, his grey eyes roaming over the paintings, over the ivory vases on the mantel, over the ceiling-high book shelves that filled one side of the room. Beyond the living room was a small dining room, a bedroom, a bath and a kitchen. Nothing was disturbed. A dark suit was laid out on the bed and the white bathtub was filled with water.

On the other side of the living room, Marty found an office-study. The faint scent of perfume was here. A girl's purse lay open on the desk; a lipstick had rolled out. On the floor was a bottle of ink, spilled over the red-and-grey pattern of the rug. Marty took the billfold from the purse and looked at the identification card: Jean Marlin, age twenty-three, an address on West Seventy-eighth Street. In case of emergency, please notify Mrs. Robert Marlin, Dugganville, Ohio. And in the depths of the purse, under matches and cigarettes and a handkerchief and a dozen other things, Mary found two bullets of .38 caliber.

"Ah! Indeed, indeed," Stewart breathed shrilly. "So! That little tramp! I'm not at all surprised, young man. I've seen her many times. I—Look at that cabinet! Open! That's where Mitchell was fool enough to keep a dangerous amount of cash. I dare say it's gone now, however."

Marty looked at him for one moment, silently, then crossed the room to the steel filing cabinet. Within was a small metal strong-box. It was open and it was empty. And at that moment the chime at the front door sounded. It was Captain Harrison, arriving to take charge. It was an East River penthouse case, and a millionaire was dead.

"Bluejaw" Harrison understood publicity somewhat better than most men in

advertising offices. He shook hands with Stewart. He put on his glasses and frowned. He was a large man, well-dressed, heavy-shouldered. He moved and talked powerfully. Exactly four minutes after his arrival, Marty was on his way across town to bring Jean Marlin in.

She lived on the fifth floor of a red-brick apartment building, just west of Amsterdam Avenue. As Marty lifted his hand to knock at her door, he heard the muffled voice of a girl saying, ". . . tell him, please, as soon as he comes in. Please don't forget to tell him." There was fear in the girl's voice—a soft voice. Marty heard the click of a telephone. Then he knocked. He waited, and the silence lasted for thirty seconds. He knocked again, and at last the girl opened the door.

Their eyes met and Marty knew that she knew what he was. It was in the fear and confusion in her blue eyes. Her face was pale. She was a slender girl, a pretty girl, with a lovely figure and golden-brown hair. She seemed scarcely to breathe. "I'm Detective Carroll," Marty said.

The girl stepped back. "Oh," she whispered. That was all. Marty closed the door behind him. It was a one-and-a-half apartment, clean and bright with curtains, with a plant of some kind growing in a pot on the window sill. Something in Marty began to question him: Was this right? Did it fit with murder? But he closed his mind to the question. All things, at some certain time and pressure, could fit with murder. He must remember that.

Marty took off his hat and began to ask his questions in a quiet voice. Was she Jean Marlin? Did she work for Mr. Mitchell Dryver?

"Yes," she answered in a whisper. She was standing against the wall, her hands pressed against it at each side of her. She could not take her eyes from Marty's.

When had she last seen Mr. Mitchell? . . . At about—about five o'clock this afternoon, she answered. Yes, at his penthouse. Where? . . . In the living room. The living room, yes.

"Was he dead or was he alive?" Marty asked.

"He was alive! Alive!" the girl cried. But she cried it out in protest, and there was no surprise on her face. She was, Marty realized, a terrible actor and a terrible liar. He started to speak again, when he noticed the white feathers in the wastebasket. He noticed them because they were stuck together in a loose mass and, second, they were stained. He knelt down, touching them with one finger. The stain was blood, still moist.

FEATHERS . . . Feathers come from where? Pillows, for one thing. . . . Marty rose and looked at the girl again. Her eyes were like twin cameras, following him on some dark journey. He moved to the studio couch and prodded it and the cushions. Too bulky for feathers. He turned to the two doors that filled the space of one wall. The first was a closet. The second was a pull-down bed. Two pillows were lodged at the head of the bed. Marty took off the slips. The second pillow had been cut open. The feathers filtered out of the six-inch gap. Marty pressed the pillow and felt the hardness of some object deep inside.

He wrapped his handkerchief around his hand and dug into the feathers. He

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brought out a .38 revolver. The muzzle was bloodstained and fluffy with sticking feathers. He turned slowly toward Jean Marlin. Her eyes were vast and bottomless with horror as she stared at the gun. Then she screamed—a faint and breathless scream—and pressed her hands against her eyes.

"I didn't kill him, I didn't, didn't! I wasn't even there, I swear! I was gone. I was downstairs, I was, honest I—" She choked, and then she began to cry with deep, tearing sobs. Fragments of words fought through her sobs: "Mr. Dryver sent me . . . wanted a package of razor blades . . . back in the side door to study and . . . then when I found him . . . afraid . . . just like the call said, and I ran—"

Marty put the gun on the table and lit a cigarette. It tasted dry and hot. "You say you didn't kill him, but you lied a while ago when you said he was alive."

Jean Marlin nodded. "I was afraid. . . . If anything happens to Friday, I don't know what I'll do. Don't you see. It's so close to Friday!"

Marty frowned. "Two days until Friday, but what does that make?"

"But that's when I'm getting married, and this will ruin it and—" Her sobs drowned her words again. Marty blinked, then put out the cigarette.

"Let's start all over and tell the truth this time," he said bluntly. "Sit down. It doesn't help to cry. Talk slow and tell the truth."

She told him: She had been working for Mr. Dryver for almost two years. It was a nice job and he was a nice man. She had another job too, from seven until eleven at night, handling the night switchboard for the Jason Forwarding Company in Brooklyn. And the way it had been today was just like this: She'd typed the letters and just when it was time to go and Mr. Dryver was starting to get ready for dinner, he came in and asked her to please go down to the drugstore for razor blades. So she had, and it hadn't been more than ten minutes.

She'd let herself back into the study by the side door and stopped at the desk to get the razor blades out of her purse. The first thing she'd noticed was the open drawer of the cabinet where Mr. Dryver

kept cash; she knew she hadn't left it open, but then she decided that he'd been in and forgotten. And the next thing, she'd started into the living room to take Mr. Dryver the blades and there he was. Just sprawled out on the floor . . . and the blood and everything. She didn't know.

Maybe she'd screamed. Anyway, for a long time she couldn't move. And then she was so frightened she couldn't think of anything except running and getting away. So she'd come home, and ever since then she'd been trying to get Jay and ask him what to do. . . . Jay? He was James Harmon, and they were going to be married Friday. Only . . . with this, added to all the rest, it was ruined now.

"Added to all the rest?" Marty put in before she began to cry again.

"Oh, Jay is a lawyer and his family lives on Park Avenue; his father is dead, and his sister and mother don't think I'm right . . . right for him. And it's true, in a way," she added slowly. "I made a mess of things once."

"What kind of a mess?" Marty asked. Why was he asking these things? Why didn't he take her back to Captain Harrison and hand them the gun? That was his job, simple and bare, so why didn't he do it?

"When I first came to New York, three years ago," Jean said, "I didn't know what I wanted to do. I met somebody named Phil Trainor. He played the piano and had a five-piece band. He was different. I thought it was gay and fun, and I thought I could sing. And next I thought I loved Phil. We got married, and it didn't work. Things happened that I don't want to remember, ever, and finally Phil got into trouble and it took a terrible amount of money to get it hushed. I had to borrow and borrow, and then I had to borrow from other places to pay the first, and the interest kept getting higher and the places wrote letters and I got fired. That's the way it was. But then Mr. Dryver gave me a job, and Phil and I were divorced, and I've paid almost all of the money we owed because of Phil's trouble. But Jay's mother and sister think it's terrible. They don't want him to have anything to do with me. They don't say it out loud, but I know. I know." She stared at the wall and shook her head.

hopelessly. Then her eyes came back to Marty.

"What kind of trouble did Phil get into?" Marty asked slowly.

"Dope. I guess they all had it in the band, but they caught Phil. He— Sometimes it's like a nightmare and I can't believe it ever happened, but then he comes back, begging me to marry him again, and then he gets mean and says I can't dump him. He says he knew me when, and so help him, he'll see me again when. I'm afraid of him. He comes and won't leave and he sits there and his eyes are so soft and brown, but not gentle, and you can see him hating me. I'm afraid. Don't you see? That's why I ran," she said desperately. "I'm afraid of Phil, and I'm afraid of Jay's mother, and I'm afraid of his sister. I know she's the one who phoned. She's like that and she hates me. And every day that brings us closer to the time we'll be married, I get more afraid because I—I *know* something will happen to ruin everything! Just like the woman's voice on the phone said: 'You won't be happy if you try to marry Jay, I promise you. You'll be sorry for a long time, little fool.'

MARTY found himself staring silently at the waves of her tumbled hair. Time was passing, and what was he waiting for? He tried to think. Then the telephone rang. Jean cried out softly and ran to answer. But it was not Jay. Marty knew by the greyness that swept across her cheeks as she turned and thrust the telephone toward him. It was Harrison.

"Well, did you find that girl or not?"

"Yes," Marty said. "I found her. She's here. I've been talking to her."

"Oh. You've been talking to her for this last hour?" Harrison echoed with rich sarcasm. "Do you think you can spare the time to bring her over here when you get through, sir?"

Marty flushed and set his jaw. "I will bring her at once, sir."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I bothered you." He slammed down the receiver.

Slowly Marty turned to Jean. "You'll have to take a ride with me." He picked up the .38 revolver. In the car neither of them spoke. Harrison was furious, Marty knew, and that would make it worse for

the girl. It was his fault and he was sorry. Sorry. . . . Marty's brain clung to the word as he tried to understand why. Deep in him he knew: He believed she was innocent. But Harrison would not believe it. Harrison would listen to the story of the gun, of the money Jean owed. And Jean would tell her story clumsily. Marty knew that. "Tell the truth and tell it the best way you can," he told her. "I don't think I'll be there long."

He stopped at the entrance of the tall apartment building. There were two press cars, and reporters came swarming down on them. Marty shook them off and moved Jean to the elevator. Suddenly she turned to him.

"Will they keep me long? If they do, please, will you go back to my apartment and tell Jay? I left word for him to phone, and he won't understand. Please, will you tell him? And tell him I didn't do it." She held to his arm and looked at him beseechingly. "You believe me, don't you?"

"I—I'll go back if I can," he promised.

Harrison took off his glasses and gave a slight bow as they entered. Stewart Dryver was bristling like an angry terrier as he peered at Jean. "Are there any minor details for me to handle?" Harrison asked ironically.

Marty's face reddened again and he put the revolver on the table in front of him. In an almost toneless voice he told how he had found it. Then he stopped, cleared his throat and looked stubbornly at Harrison. "The reason I took so long, after I heard a few things I— Something didn't fit. A feeling, I mean, sir. I've got a hunch that this girl didn't kill the guy."

Harrison put on his glasses and his eyes seemed to swell behind them. He smiled, but there was no humor in the smile. "I see. And I'm very fortunate to have your intuition working on the case. I'm surprised I've lasted this long without you." Then, in a flat voice, he added, "That's all tonight."

Stewart Dryver seemed to smile. Jean looked at him helplessly. A bead of perspiration ran down his cheek, and he turned stiffly and walked out. The snow was still falling when he reached the street. It was not yet eight o'clock. It seemed hours since he'd first come here. He got

in the car and drove it back to the station. Then he remembered Jay. But why should he give a damn about Jay? He pushed it away and turned toward home. At a bar on Lexington, he drank a rye and soda.

It was so clumsy. That was it. So clumsy that it rang true, he kept thinking. The girl walked in and saw the body. She'd been getting the raw-nerve treatment from all around; it was only a couple of days until her wedding. So she did what a kid would do—ran and hid and tried to hope that would fix things a little while.

But what about the gun? The bullets in her purse? Someone put them there, the same someone who killed Dryver. And it was a crazy kind of a job, wasn't it? Marty frowned and ordered another drink. It didn't stack up when you thought about it. First, if Jean *had* done it, the chances were she'd have done a better job—disposed of the gun elsewhere, not forgotten her purse with the slugs in it. But on the other hand, the real murderer had done a sloppy frame-up, hadn't he? Or she? Fingerprints were going to turn up on the gun, probably. And where was the money that Jean was supposed to have stolen. Harrison would see those things—but not till after plenty of headlines had been splashed. Maybe the kid's wedding would be blown up, but it was her wedding, not his. Forget it. One more drink.

Instead of one, he had three. And instead of forgetting it, he took a crosstown bus to Jean Marlin's apartment to keep his promise. When he got there, he heard the telephone ringing inside. The door had locked when they'd left. He found the superintendent, showed his badge and got the door opened. This, he knew, would be something else to explain to Harrison.

HE STOOD in the center of the bright, clean room and tried to think. If Jean had taken the money, where would she have hidden it? He started with the tiny writing desk. In the first drawer he found a careful list: New buckle for blue dress, telegram to Mother, blouse from cleaner. . . . The things to do before the wedding, Marty realized. And murder wasn't on the list. Nor did he find the money in his search. He pushed back his hat and scratched his dark hair. Then

the impatient knocking came at the door.

"Jean, I've been trying—Oh, didn't—Who are you?" the man asked.

"Marty Carroll. Come in." This was Jay Harmon, Marty knew. And the next moment Jay told him: He was Miss Marlin's fiance. The tone of his voice said, What was Marty doing in this room? "Miss Marlin is in trouble," Marty said. "She asked me to explain."

"Trouble?" The word brought Jay Harmon's head up. His hair was black and curly. His face was handsome and smooth. He was younger than he looked, Marty suspected. Perhaps twenty-five or six. "Trouble?" he kept repeating.

Marty told him quietly and swiftly exactly what had happened. "Oh, my God," Harmon murmured. He hunted a cigarette and mopped his face. "Oh, dear God, what a mess!" He blinked. "What an impossible mess!"

Marty stood there, his feet squarely planted, his eyes taking Harmon's face apart, feature by feature, and finding something suddenly missing. "You know," he said strangely, "you haven't asked me whether she did it?"

"What? Oh. No, I suppose not. I was just thinking of the confusion. . . ."

"Of the publicity in the paper? Of what your family will say?"

"Yes, precisely." He began to pace the room. "I've been through hell on this thing already. But how can I explain this to them?" he demanded.

Marty's cigarette turned sour in his mouth. He walked over and threw it in the wastebasket. "If it's that hard, then maybe you shouldn't try. Maybe," he said in cold contempt, "you should just go home and say it was a big mistake, that now you've seen the light. They would love you."

Marty couldn't believe it, but the guy didn't get the sarcasm. He nodded vacantly and mopped at his face once more. "At least until it blows over," he began anxiously. "Until the thing comes out, one way or the other. After that there'll be time to clarify things."

This was what they said about Park Avenue sometimes, Marty was thinking, but this time he was seeing it. A guy stood up and said he'd take a powder until his girl got out of her squeeze. Only he called

it, "until things blow over." Great God!

And that was the way it happened. Harmon smiled in a nervous way and said it had been damned decent of Marty: then he skidded away down the hall. Marty walked over and slammed the door, then abruptly opened it and leaned out. "Hey, Mr. Harmon! When you get home, ask your sister if she killed Dryver."

"Fantastic," Harmon flung over his shoulder. "Eileen is in Miami."

Marty slammed the door again and sat down wearily at the desk. He noticed the list of things to do before the wedding. He picked it up, read it again, then tore it in several pieces. "You didn't miss any great big prize, honey," he murmured. Finally he shook his shoulders heavily and stood up. He took a last look around the room, then started out. He stopped and went back to the little book beside the telephone. He found it in there: Phil . . . EMpress 3-6550. . . . There was an address on West Twelfth Street.

IT WAS after ten o'clock when he walked into the lobby of the place on Twelfth. It called itself the Alistaire Hotel. It was narrow and the odor of beer came from the bar off the lobby. The clerk looked at Marty listlessly and said he hadn't seen Phil Trainor all day. He tried the house phone and got no answer. Trainor came and went, he said. Sometimes he played the piano over at the Sawdust Club on Seventh Avenue; sometimes you could find him at McGarry's on Ninth Street. Sometimes you couldn't find him at all. His room number? . . . 506, but he wasn't there.

Marty took a walk into the bar and had

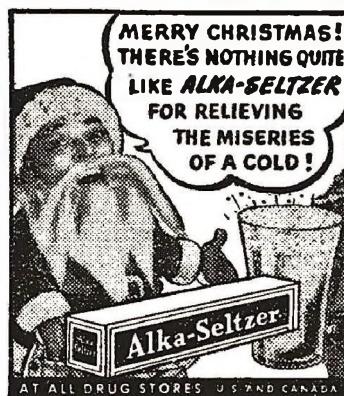
another rye. The idea of Phil was eating deeper at him. Wasn't it the kind of layout a snowbird would dream up? Murder a guy to nix his ex-wife's wedding, and pull it half smart and half sloppy. Wasn't it? He stared at himself in the mirror. And he asked himself: What in hell was he doing here? All it would add up to, even if he hit right, would be a boiling from Harrison—maybe even a bounce back to a Coney Island beat. So why? . . . And then he thought of Jean, sitting in Dryver's apartment, or sitting in jail, waiting for a Park Avenue romeo who wouldn't appear. She was a nicer kid than that, wasn't she? Pretty. Flower pot on the window sill and—Marty slapped down his empty glass and jammed a cigarette in his mouth. So now he was thinking of flower pots!

He wandered back to the lobby and waited until the clerk got busy behind a newspaper. Then he went up the stairs to Phil Trainor's door. It wasn't much of a lock, and Marty had the answer on his ring of keys. Inside, it wasn't much of a room, either. A line of empty beer bottles along the wall, an unmade bed and some dirty shirts over the chairs. On the dresser a glossy-print photo of a thin-faced, soft-smiling guy at the piano with a cigarette drooping off his lower lip. Marty didn't need to ask anybody if that was Phil. That was a guy who loved himself, who loved to look at his mysterious smile, and who loved his picture on his dresser.

Marty looked through the dresser drawers, then through the closet, the pockets of the monkey-suit. He was looking for anything, and he found one stack of cocaine. He found a knife, too long and too

How Santa Claus found out...

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE ALKA-SELTZER FOR RELIEVING THE MISERIES OF A COLD



AT ALL DRUG STORES U.S. AND CANADA

sharp for peeling peaches. It had a spring-snap open. He found nothing else, and yet he had the feeling that he had found what he wanted. And now he wanted to find Phil.

Phil wasn't at the Sawdust Club. The bartender said he'd been there a while around eight, drinking a little, which probably meant he was over at McGarry's by now.

And he was. Marty spotted him the moment he walked in the door. It was a narrow bar, with just enough light to see a drinking glass. Back at the rear were half a dozen bare tables, and Phil was sitting at one of them. He was alone, and he was sitting there with a drink in front of him, his arms on the table, and he was pulling matches from a book, striking them, letting them burn almost to his fingers, then blowing them out. Each time he blew, he smiled at the wisp of smoke. A soft smile, vague and dreamy, as if the smoke were talking to him, telling him a fairy story.

Marty leaned against the bar at the back, about ten feet from Phil. He could see him in the mirror: black hair, small ears, restless twitches in the cheeks, and always the smile. Marty made two drinks last until twelve, when Phil stood up. For a few moments he blinked around him, as if he had just woken in a strange place; then he nodded to himself and walked slowly toward the door.

Marty gave him thirty seconds, then followed. At Fifth Avenue Phil stopped and seemed to think it over. Then he waved for a cab. Marty climbed into the next one that stopped on the light. It had passengers and the driver started a yell. Marty stuck his badge under his nose and the driver was glad to give a little lift. Phil's cab went uptown and then east to a corner a block from Dryver's apartment building. There he got out, and Marty thanked his cabby.

But Phil wanted nothing but a look. He walked around the two outer sides of the building, looking up. Once he whistled a part of a rhumba. After he'd had his look, he took another cab. This time Marty got one without passengers and rode to Jean's building on the West Side. Again Phil took his look; then suddenly he dissolved into the darkness of a service passageway

between Jean's building and the next. Many minutes passed. Marty crossed the street and moved near the passageway. He heard a blunt tapping sound. It stopped, came again, then ended entirely. Footsteps drew nearer. Marty drifted away, and Phil reappeared. At Broadway he got another cab.

MARTY hurried across the street to a drugstore and bought a flashlight. Back in the passageway, he started looking. The walls on either side were solid brick and windowless; there was another windowless wall at the dead-end rear. Two metal doors opened at each side. They were locked. Seven ash cans stood at the rear of the passageway; there was nothing in them but ashes, and the snow-mantle over them was undisturbed. The footprints in the snow led directly to the rear door of Jean's building; there they tangled, then returned to the street.

So what had he done here? What had been the tapping sound? Marty tested the door again. He fingered the moulding along the sides. He knelt down and tested the wooden step-down. It moved slightly. He took a new grip and jerked. The heavy board came up, toppling him back in the snow. And there in the space beneath the step Marty found the money—almost two thousand dollars. He found two keys on a bit of string. One to Dryver's, one to Jean's, he mused. There he found a rag, streaked with blood.

Just like they say, Marty was thinking fixedly. They go back to look in the windows, and they go back to check on the look. As simple as that, just as they always said. . . .

Marty replaced the board and rose. Quiet excitement filled his throat. He could see it now in one picture, all the smart and stupid parts. Phil had hated her because he'd lost her. He'd wanted to hurt her, and he'd wanted money, too. Some time—perhaps as lately as last night—he'd been in her room and hidden the bullets in her purse. At some other time he'd stolen her keys, had others made. He'd planted the feathers in the wastebasket to lead to the pillow and gun, knowing that soon Jean would be questioned. All of it had the half-crazy, ragged smartness of a snow-dream.

And the answer was in walking, asking, by a cop like himself—neither very smart nor very dumb. A guy was murdered, and a cop started walking, asking, following.

Marty returned to the drugstore and made his call. "This is Detective Carroll, sir," he said quietly.

"Carroll? Oh, yes, indeed, Detective," Harrison said archly.

"I believe I've found the man who murdered Mitchell Dryver."

Ten seconds passed. Marty was glad he wasn't there. "I'm waiting for you to keep talking," Harrison said bluntly.

"The man is Jean Marlin's ex-husband, Phil Trainor. I've been following him. He led me to the place where he hid the money. He's gone to his hotel now, I think." Marty paused. "Do you want me to meet you there, or would you rather handle it yourself?"

Again ten seconds went by. "Where is the place? I'll meet you."

* * *

Harrison was waiting when Marty reached the Alistaire. He nodded without speaking, and they went up to Trainor's door. A margin of light showed at the door. Marty knocked deliberately. He felt warm and his breath came swiftly. Phil Trainor opened the door and looked at them with bright, hot eyes. He was barefooted and in pants and undershirt. A cigarette was burning on the edge of the bedside table. The room had the scent of a hot, moist body, untouched by clean air.

Harrison was letting Marty make the moves. Marty walked in as Trainor stepped back, and Harrison closed the door behind them. "We're detectives," Marty said. "Sit down."

Trainor blinked, then moved his fingers through his dark hair—gently, as if preparing to put on a new hat. He backed to the bed and sat down. He remembered the cigarette and picked it up hungrily. "Detectives," he repeated. "All right. What about it? What about detectives?"

"Did you ever hear of a man named Mitchell Dryver?" Marty asked.

"Dryver?" Trainor wet his lips. "Yes. She works for him. A girl I know. Why?"

There was a dreamy monotony to the words. He's been kicking himself upstairs with the cocaine, Marty decided. He tried asking where Trainor had spent the time between five and six o'clock.

Trainor licked at his lips and smiled. "Drinking. Why not?"

He was high when he pulled the job, Marty realized. It was a slow-motion dream, and it didn't really matter to him now.

"Where have you been for the last couple of hours?" Marty asked.

"Drinking. Why not?" The same sing-song, the same dreamy smile, the same bright hotness in the eyes.

"You hate you ex-wife, don't you? You love her, but you can't have her, so you hate her. Don't you?"

Trainor smiled and lay down on the bed. His shallow chest rose and fell jerkily as he breathed. "She's pretty. Pretty when she cries."

Harrison didn't like it. "Get up! Wipe that sticky look off your teeth and put on your shoes," he snapped.

Trainor stared at him vacantly. Harrison bulled forward and started to drag him up. Marty saw Trainor's eyes brighten with a mixture of fear and delight. He saw the bony arm jerk under the dirty sheet. He shouted at Harrison. It was not quick enough.

A gun roared under the sheet. The sheet jerked slightly, as if an invisible hand had plucked it slightly. Harrison gave a raw grunt and stopped dead-still. His big hands jerked to his stomach and mashed in. Marty hurled himself against the stunned man, knocking him off his feet and sending him crashing to the floor. Marty followed him down as Trainor fired again. Marty scrambled on the floor, freeing his gun. Then, on his back, he wriggled furiously under the bed and rolled out on the other side. He fired once at Trainor as Trainor sat upright on the bed, his smile unchanged and his eyes glistening. The bullet grazed Trainor's neck and knocked off the smile. The next bullet from Marty's gun went into Trainor's right temple and killed the man instantly.

Marty stood up. His legs shook and his body was wet with sweat. Harrison

(Continued on page 127)



Suicide, the police had said. But Betsy knew better. Her mother would never have thrown herself out of the window.

IN HER MOTHER'S BEST BIER!

*Suspense-Packed
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By **LARRY HOLDEN**

CHAPTER ONE

Homecoming

THE TELEGRAM came quite early. Joel went to the door to get it and brought it back to the breakfast table, reading it eagerly as he came down the room. He was a heavy,



There was something terribly, terribly wrong with the way her mother had died, Betsy knew. And Betsy knew this, too: Nothing—not the wrecking of her father's life; not even the possibility of her following her mother to the grave—was going to stop her from learning every deadly, damning truth!



bumbling young man with a sullen face and a clumsy way of throwing his legs when he walked. His pants were always a little too tight across the seat and his shirts always pulled under the armpits. He waved the telegram at his sister, sitting stiff and white-faced at the table.

"They'll be home this afternoon," he said with satisfaction. "They're driving down from Lake George." When she didn't answer, he looked at her and demanded peevishly, "Now what's the matter with you?"

She pushed back her half-finished plate. "Nothing." She turned her head and stared through the open window.

He shrugged and sat down at the table again. He shoveled his food into his mouth and crunched the crisp bacon between his champing teeth. "See that new set of golf clubs Mildred sent me from New York? It cost two hundred if it cost a nickel. It beats me how the old man ever got her to marry him, all that money she's got. She could have had the pick of the field. What was in that package she sent you, Betsy?"

She looked at him with hatred and said between clenched teeth, "Will you please stop it?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop gibbering like a moron! Why did he have to marry her so soon after mother's death? Six months and—"

He said, "Oh, nuts! They've been mooning at one another for the past six years, ever since mother started to go screwy."

"And don't talk about mother that way!"

"Why not?" He looked up calmly from his plate. "It's the truth, isn't it?" He slid a half slice of toast into his mouth and talked through it, pointing his fork at her. "The trouble with you is, you don't face reality. Didn't Mother make your life hell the same as everybody else? Sitting up in her room crying for three, four days at a time, everybody walking around on tiptoe, scared to breathe, waiting on her hand and foot. And what was she crying about? Nothing, that's what, nothing. Nobody knew, not even the doctors. Yeah, and speaking of the doctors, I suppose you enjoyed living from hand to mouth because all the old man's money

went to pay the doctor bills, even after the doctors old him she'd be better off in a nut house. And most of my salary, too."

SHE WATCHED him with wordless horror as he took a roll and carefully wiped his plate with it.

"And what's more," he went on, "I think the old man's pretty lucky to have married a rich woman like Mildred. She might not be much on looks, but she ain't stingy. And she was always helping you take care of Mother, wasn't she? That was pretty nice. And if she'd been here that day, I'll bet Mother wouldn't have jumped out of that window. Not that she isn't better off," he said unctuously. "Not that we all aren't better off."

Betsy said slowly, "Mother didn't jump out of that window."

"What did she do—fly out?"

"Mother didn't commit suicide."

"You're nuts," he said calmly. He reached for the platter of doughnuts, took one and buttered it liberally. "Absolutely nuts."

"Listen, Joel." She gripped the edge of the table and leaned toward him, pleading. "Stop eating for a minute and listen. I loved Mother . . ."

"So did I. She was my mother, wasn't she?"

"Please listen to me! I know Mother would never have committed suicide. Don't ask me how I know, but I *know*. I think she was—" She paused, looking a little frightened, then said breathlessly, "I think she was murdered!"

He dropped his doughnut and gaped at her. "What!"

Her voice plunged on, hurdleing the little sobs that caught at it. "Even the police weren't entirely satisfied. You know that, Joel. Remember how they pried around for days, grilling everybody, going through all Mother's things, questioning the doctors . . ."

"So it was the doctors that did it! Is that the idea?"

"Please, Joel! I'm trying to discuss this logically with you."

"There's nothing logical about it," he said resentfully. "The whole idea's screwy." Then, sarcastically, "Have you pick out your murderer yet?"

She lowered her head and stared so long

at the tablecloth that finally he said, "Well, well? Who is it?"

"Father," she said in a low voice.

Joel picked up his doughnut. She sat opposite him, her head still lowered and her eyes closed. He finished another doughnut and stood, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

"In the first place," he said sourly, "the police were pretty sure it was suicide when they finished, and you don't fool them so easy. And in the second place, you're nuts. You're completely nuts, the way Mother was at the end. My God," he burst out, "you even look like her. You're neurotic. Take a look in the mirror some time." He turned and clumped up the room, scowling. "I'm going out and play some golf," he said over his shoulder.

"You're not going to work?"

"They canned me yesterday, I'm taking a little vacation before I look for another job, and I suppose you'll have something to say about that, too!"

The moment he was gone she jumped from her chair and ran to the long mirror that hung over the buffet. She started, wide-eyed, at the thin, white face, the pale hair, at the delicate chin that came almost to a point beneath her strained mouth. She glanced involuntarily at the miniature of her mother that stood in an oval gold frame on the mantel over the fireplace. The likeness was undeniable.

"But I'm not!" she whimpered softly.

HENRY LAMB and his bride arrived home at four that afternoon. He stepped out of the car, looking nervous and exhausted, his face grey from fatigue. He wasn't accustomed to long drives, and

his hands were still shaking from snaking the big car through city traffic.

He said jerkily, "I'm going upstairs and lie down, Mildred. I'm tired out, absolutely tired out. I'm going to take a nap."

Mildred smiled and put a fond hand on his arm as they went slowly up the flagged walk to the house. She was a sturdy, quiet woman, grey and serene, and there was no doubt that she loved this fussy, querulous man. "I'll make some coffee," she said.

Joel met them in the living room, where he had been sprawled on the sofa, hulking and still perspiring from playing golf. His heavy face lighted. He kissed Mildred on the cheek and patted Henry clumsily on the back.

"Welcome home," he said noisily. Henry pulled fretfully from under his heavy hand. "And say, thanks, Mildred, for those golf clubs. Played the best game in m'lfe with them this afternoon. Wonderful clubs. Must have cost you a fortune, eh?"

"I'm glad you like them, Joel. Where's Betsy?"

"Around some place, I guess. Say, whatta think—I lost m'job."

"That's too bad, Joel."

"Well, yes and no, yes and no. It wasn't much of a job, selling men's underwear six days a week in that lousy department store, and I figured I needed a little vacation, anyway."

Henry looked at him with disapproval. "Did they fire you or did you quit?" His cold eyes were suspicious.

"Oh, they fired me all right, and it wasn't my fault. You know those nosy floorwalkers we had. Well, I was in the

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stockroom having a cigarette and he walked in and canned me. You'd think nobody ever smoked in there before."

Henry said sharply, "I suppose the stockroom was full of inflammable material, wasn't it?"

"Oh, papers and stuff, but I wasn't setting anything on fire. Anyway, they gave me three days' vacation pay. It didn't last very long. You can't do much with the kind of vacation money you get in department stores." He looked slyly at Mildred.

She patted his hand and smiled. "I'm sure you deserve a vacation, Joel. I know the sacrifices you had to make while your mother was ill. Young people should enjoy themselves."

Henry made a sharp, derisive noise deep in his throat. He kissed his wife with awkward affection and went stiffly up the stairs to his bedroom on the second floor. Mildred waited until he was out of sight, then slipped a folded bill into Joel's waiting hand.

She said, "Enjoy yourself for a while, Joel. Where did you say Betsy was?"

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe she went to a movie or something. She's always going off somewhere and not saying anything to anybody. You'll get used to her."

She looked thoughtfully into his sullen face. "Tell me, Joel, does Betsy resent the fact that your father married me?"

Joel squirmed uneasily.

"Shucks, why should she, Mildred?"

"I want to be friends with both you children."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me. You're friends with me already."

"Thank you, Joel. Will you do something for me? Bring in the bags from the car. Your father is very tired. I want him to have his rest. I brought you and Betsy a little something as a coming-home gift."

His eyes lighted greedily, but he said, "You don't always have to be giving us stuff, Mildred. I'll get the bags right away."

Outside, he furtively opened his hand and looked at the bill she had slipped into it. He whistled. It was a fifty.

He was sitting on the front lawn, playing with his coming-home gift—an expensive fly-casting rod—when Betsy came up the street from town, where she had spent

the afternoon in the public library. He watched her, glowering, and when she turned into the walk, he lurched to his feet and went over to her.

"Remember what you were talking about this morning?" he said darkly.

She faced him stonily, not answering.

"If you'll take my advice," he said roughly, "you'll forget it. You're just trying to make trouble, that's all."

"Forget it?" she said with icy politeness. "Forget that my own mother was murdered and that her murderer is still unpunished?"

"All right, all right!" he shouted. His face got red and he waved his thick arms. "I suppose you got the proof right in your pocket. I suppose you got something your eagle eye found after forty-nine thousand police missed it! I suppose—"

"Stop shouting."

He stopped abruptly. He should not have tried to bully her. He had tried it many times before, and it had never worked. It had always, in the end, been her frigid strength against his loud voice, and she had always defeated him.

He mumbled, "Aw, Betsy, you're just going to make it tough for the old man, and it won't get you any place. He didn't have any—"

"Do you know where I've been all afternoon? I've been at the library reading about some of the famous murder cases. Some of them were like father, and they always confessed. The police didn't need proof."

"Hasn't the old man had it tough enough all these years?" he asked plaintively. "Would he have spent all that money on doctors if he was going to murder her? It ain't reasonable."

"He killed Mother because he wanted to marry Mildred. Mildred is rich. He killed Mother because he was greedy."

"You think it over," he urged. "I'll bet you'll change your mind. You're going to like Mildred. She's pretty swell and she ain't stingy with her money, either. Look what she brought me." He flicked his casting rod. "She brought something for you, too. A big package."

She looked at him with cold contempt and walked around him into the house. He watched her, then turned and tramped around to the back of the house where he

spent the rest of the afternoon angrily swinging his new golf clubs.

CHAPTER TWO

Costume of the Dead

HENRY was livelier at dinner, almost gay in his prim, fussy way. With an air of triumph, he brought a towel-wrapped bottle of sweet champagne to the table and made an elaborate ceremony of filling everyone's glass.

"Everybody drink a toast," he said, practically beaming. "To—um—ah—better days. That's it—to better days!"

Looking affectionately at Mildred across the table, he did not notice that Betsy merely raised her glass and set it down again without drinking.

She looked steadily at her father and said in a clear voice, "Tomorrow morning I'm going to clear the weeds away from Mother's rose garden. She loved those roses. She always had some in her room."

Henry's face contracted slightly and some of the gaiety went out of his voice. "I thought you didn't like gardening, Betsy."

"I don't, but I don't like to see the roses being killed off, too." She put no special emphasis on *too*, but Henry set down his glass and his mouth thinned bitterly.

Mildred gave the girl a quick, narrow glance. Betsy had said nothing about the two gifts she had received. In fact, Mildred had seen them, still unopened, in the bottom of the girl's closet.

She said quietly, "Do you mind if I help you, Betsy? They were lovely roses, and it *would* be a shame if the weeds killed them. We can plant some delphiniums, too, along the sunny side of the garage." She looked at Henry and smiled. "Remember my delphiniums in Westfield, dear? They took prizes year after year."

"Indeed I do. Indeed I do!" his spirits seemed to lift at the memory. "The blue ones, especially. I'll tell you what—I'll give you a hand myself when I get home from the office."

Joel said loudly, "Mildred. Hey, Mildred. Want me to help, Mildred? You just say the word and I'll be there. You can count on me, Mildred. Yessir.

Muscles, see?" He bent his arm boastfully. "That's what you need in a garden, muscles. I'll help you, Mildred. I'll be Johnny-on-the-spot!" He laughed noisily.

Betsy compressed her lips and looked down at her hands, curled tightly in her lap.

* * *

Henry came home early the next day. He jumped spryly from the car, carrying a new rake and spading fork. He walked jauntily toward the garden, where the two women were working in the hot sun. Betsy straightened up, pushed back her hair and faced him as he came around the garage. She had on a wide-brimmed straw hat, green cotton overalls and a pair of white gardening gloves. Her fair hair was looped loosely on either side of her forehead from a center part, and her face was without make-up.

Henry's steps faltered at the sight of her. Blood rushed into his face, then drained, leaving it grey and sunken. He stopped and stared haggardly at her. He dropped the rake and did not stoop to pick it up. He swayed.

Mildred cried, "Henry!" and walked quickly toward him. "What's the matter, dear?"

"Nothing, nothing," he stammered. "I thought . . . I thought . . ." He turned and lurched back toward the house. Mildred gave Betsy an accusing glance and hurried after him. The girl had said nothing, had done nothing, yet . . .

Betsy watched them, then walked to the garage, pulling off her gloves—her mother's gloves. The broad-brimmed straw hat was the one her mother had always worn, and the distinctive green overalls had been her mother's also. She had spent an hour before the mirror that afternoon, a photograph of her mother propped against it, carefully copying the hair-do of the dead woman, wiping all make-up from her face to make it look older.

She didn't feel the grim sense of triumph that she had thought she would; she felt only a little sick.

Joel panted around the edge of the garage, pushing a wheelbarrow of top-soil. He had on an old pair of dungarees,

as tight as a drumhead across the seat. He looked, bewildered, at the empty garden, then peered into the garage.

"The old man go in to change his clothes?" he grumbled. "Cripes, it's hot." He rubbed his muddy hands down his thighs.

BETSY turned her back. There were tears behind her eyes and she didn't want him to see them. She stripped down the overalls and hung them on a nail beside the straw hat. She looked immature, almost fragile, slim-legged in her linen shorts.

"You can stop now," she said with shaky scorn. "Your audience is gone. They won't be out again."

"What? What's that? You're crazy. I saw the old man jump out of the car as if he was ready to dig an excavation." Then, suspiciously, "Whatta mean, they won't be out again?"

"Father wasn't feeling well. Mildred went in with him."

"What did you say to him this time?" he demanded. "I heard you last night at the table. I knew what you were up to, talking about mother like that. What did you say to him this time?" He took a threatening step toward her.

She faced him defiantly. "Nothing!"

He lunged at her. She jumped backward, but he caught her wrist and twisted her arm. "What were you up to?" he asked heavily.

She snatched up a trowel from the work bench and raised it. They stood motionless, their faces almost touching, each breathing hard, and Joel was the first to break. His eyes shifted uncomfortably. He dropped her arm and pulled his hand across his mouth.

"You don't know what you're doing," he complained. "You're just making trouble for everybody."

"What's the mater, Joel—are you afraid Mildred will take Father and her money and go away? Are you afraid you'll have to go back to work again, Joel?"

His face colored, but he eyed the trowel warily. "Don't you say that!" he growled. "Don't you say that again."

"But she *has* been giving you money, hasn't she?" Betsy taunted him. "That's the reason you want me to stop, isn't it?"

You're afraid that if Father turns out to be a murderer, Mildred will leave us and you'll have to work for a living. That's what you're afraid of, Joel."

His hands clenched at his sides and the muscles gathered at his shoulders. His lowered head swung from side to side and his small eyes glared hatred. She had goaded him too far. She gasped and stepped back, her hands trembling as she raised the trowel again.

He laughed a little wildly. "You're a great one for making up things, Betsy. Even when you were a kid you were always making believe. Remember when you were a kid, Betsy?" He craftily watched the trowel. "Remember?"

She said breathlessly, "Get out, Joel!" Her heart thudded.

His glance wavered from the trowel to her set face. "Sure, sure. I got things to do. I can't waste time hanging around here."

He turned and lurched out of the garage. At the door he tripped over the wheelbarrow handle and sprawled on the grass. He scrambled up and stumbled toward the house, almost running, robbed of his dignity, even of his menace. Betsy leaned, shaking, against the work bench. She burst into tears.

But when the sobs gradually died away, the tears seemed to have washed all the softness from her, for her mouth assumed again its unrelenting, pencil-thin line, and her chin was stony and tilted just a little too high.

Henry did not come to the table for dinner. He was, Mildred said, upstairs resting. She carved the roast.

As she passed the plates, she said evenly, "Your father is not very well, Betsy. His life has not been easy. He loved your mother very much and her death affected him more deeply than you know." Then, significantly, "If his health doesn't improve, I shall have to take him somewhere for a complete rest."

Joel blundered hastily, "Don't you worry about the old man, Mildred. We'll treat him with kid gloves." He cut a two-inch square of meat and thrust it into his mouth. Still chewing, he said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll get him to come out and play a little golf with me. How's that?"

"That will be fine, Joel. I wish you would."

"Sure. He's had a tough time, just like you say, Mildred. And nothing like golf for relaxation. Gosh, that reminds me. I was in the rough this morning on the ninth hole and I took my brassie because I had a good two hundred yards to go and it looked pretty clear. I had a nice lie and I took a healthy cut at the ball. My foot must have slipped or something because I wrapped the club around a tree. Do you think," he asked innocently, "I could send back to New York and get a duplicate. I'd sure hate to bust up a matched set of clubs."

"I'll send back for it, Joel."

"Gosh, thanks, Mildred. I'll give you the money for it, of course," he added hastily.

"That won't be necessary, Joel."

"Gee, thanks again. I'll give it back to you later, but the fact is, I'm a little broke right now." He gave a little embarrassed, hinting laugh. "I had a little hard luck with this fella I played. I can beat him with my club tied behind my back, see, so when he suggested we play for fifty cents a stroke, I took him up on it. Then I broke my brassie. I was stuck. I ended up twenty strokes behind him on thirty-six holes. You never saw such lousy luck."

Betsy's fingernails bit into her palm. She said tightly, "Isn't it about time you were looking for another job, Joel?"

"I will, I will! You don't have to keep harping on it. I haven't been out a week yet. I can get a job any time I want. What's wrong with a week's vacation, if I might ask? If I go right out for a job, I

won't get any vacation until next year."

Betsy disdained to answer. He didn't intend to look for a job as long as Mildred kept giving him money, and she knew it. "I'm going to look for work tomorrow," she said.

"You don't have to, you know, Betsy," Mildred said gently. "Why don't you take a vacation, too? You took care of your mother for a long time, and that was a real job—as real as the ones your father and Joel had. Why don't you take a cruise or—"

Betsy interrupted uncompromisingly, "I need a job more than I need a cruise—even if I had money for a cruise, which I don't, until I earn it." There was a flat note of finality in her voice.

Mildred did not protest, but Joel raised his head and stared incredulously at her. Now he was sure she was neurotic.

CHAPTER THREE

A Note on Murder

After dinner, Betsy went straight to her room on the third floor. She sat at her vanity table, pushed back the bottles and jars of perfume, toilet water, creams and nail polish and took a pad of cheap paper from the bottom drawer, and with it a black litho pencil. She experimented first with an ordinary pencil, printing. The discarded sheets she tore carefully into small pieces and stacked them neatly on the end of the table. When, at length, she was satisfied with what she had written, she picked up the sticky litho pencil and with great care copied it in block letters. She sealed it in an envelope and printed

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CLEAN-SAFE-ACCURATE

the address. She took the sheaf of torn paper and slowly descended the stairs to the first floor.

In the living room, Mildred and Joel faced one another over the card table, playing a game of double solitaire. Joel thumped down each card, making a great racket with his noisy, insincere voice. Betsy went quietly to the front door, opened it noiselessly and slipped out into the starry darkness. Down the street, she dropped the handful of torn paper into the yawning mouth of the sewer, then, with heavy steps, walked toward the center of town. At the post office, she stood for a long while before the box with the addressed envelope in her hand. Then slowly she raised the lid of the drop and slid the note inside. The metallic clang of the dropped lid seemed to fill her with terror, for she turned about and walked quickly away.

The echo of her own footsteps pursued her down the street, and she fled, not from fear, but from a sense of depressing guilt. She paused at the neon-lighted Bit & Spur Tavern and listened enviously to the tinkling of glasses, the laughter, the boisterous rise of voices.

Through the slats of the venetian blinds, she could see them inside—a man in his shirt sleeves, one elbow hooked on the bar, talking eagerly to another man and woman. He threw back his head and laughed, and she could see the glitter of his strong, white teeth. A man walked uncertainly to the gaudy juke box, stood solemnly before it, dropped in a quarter, then haphazardly pushed five of the gleaming red plastic buttons. He danced happily back to the bar, clasping an imaginary partner in his arms. The juke box played *There's a Tree in the Meadow*.

Betsy leaned her forehead against the cool window and rested. She was quietly crying.

* * *

She did not come down for breakfast the next morning until Henry had gone to his office. She was dressed for the city, and she went straight to the kitchen where she ate a half melon and drank a cup of coffee standing before the gas range, bending over a little so that the drops

from the juicy melon would not spill on her linen suit. Mildred came in while she was drinking her second cup of strong black coffee.

"Would you like to use the Buick, Betsy?" she asked. "Your father took the Chevrolet this morning."

"No, thanks." Betsy shook her head and put down the half-empty cup. "I'm going to take the train." She pulled on her gloves.

"Will you be home for lunch?" Mildred asked quietly.

"No."

Mildred said, "Good luck, Betsy." She had a ten-dollar bill folded in her apron pocket, but she did not offer it. The girl's pale face was too proud and forbidding for her even to attempt it.

She stood aside as the girl walked past her. She sighed.

It was a long day, a hot day, a day of brazen sunshine and blanketing humidity. Joel went swimming early in the morning and stayed at the pool all day. Mildred knitted industriously in the cool living room.

Betsy did not return until almost six, and she crept into the house, discouraged and dripping with perspiration. She went straight upstairs and in ten minutes Mildred heard the urgent, rushing hiss of the shower. Henry came in a few minutes later, looking hot and harassed. He went into the living room, kissed Mildred on the cheek, smiled briefly and went upstairs to change his clothes. Mildred watched him anxiously, then went into the kitchen. He was too thin, too pale, too nervous. His lips had fluttered like tired butterflies against her skin, and she was worried. Joel came in the back door, his hair tousled and still wet. He threw his arm around her and damply kissed her firm chin.

He said, "I'll be right down, mother. I'm just going to change my shirt." He had started calling Mildred *mother* that morning. Whistling, he clattered up the stairs.

His was the only cheerful face at the table. Henry went glumly through the mail piled beside his plate, slitting each envelope with his knife. Mildred watched him anxiously, and Betsy sat tense, with a

scream frozen in her throat as his fingers slowly approached the litho-penciled envelope. He picked it up, frowned and opened it.

He had read no more than the first few lines when he gave a hoarse, strangled cry, pushed back his chair and started to his feet. He took two stumbling steps away from the table and pitched straight forward, as rigid as a falling tree.

Joel leaned over the table and stared stupidly at him. Betsy covered her face with her hands, but Mildred rose, leaned her hands on the table and gave the girl a horrified glance before she crossed the room and knelt at her husband's side. Her face was composed by the time she looked up.

"Betsy, call the doctor," she ordered quietly. "And you, Joel, help me get Henry upstairs to his bed."

AS THEY carried Henry out of the room, Betsy snatched up the piece of note paper from the floor and stuffed it into the pocket of her frock. She didn't have to read it again. She knew the lines that had stricken her father. They said:

1. Who pushed your wife out of that window?
2. Why did you marry so soon after her death?
3. Why does your present wife attempt to bribe your children with expensive gifts?

White-lipped, she hurried into the hall and called a doctor. He was there within fifteen minutes. She met him in the hall, said quickly, "This way, Doctor," and led him up the stairs. Mildred was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding Henry's waxen hand, and Joel stood helplessly at the window, gnawing his lip. He gave Betsy a lowering glance, and as the doctor crossed hurriedly to the bed, he sidled down the room to her side and gripped her arm.

"I'm gonna see you later," he whispered grimly. "You did this to the old man, and don't tell me you didn't. I won't forget this."

Mildred turned her head and said sharply, "Joel, please!" He lapsed into sullen silence. He leaned against the wall and angrily thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

Henry muttered and tossed on the bed.

The doctor took his pulse, lifted his eyelid. He whispered to Mildred, "He's talking about Veronica. Which of you is Veronica?"

"Veronica was his first wife. She . . . died."

"Oh. Well—there's nothing seriously wrong with him, but he can't take much of this. He's run down, you understand? The man needs a rest. He has an enlarged heart, and he'll have to take it easy, or," he said bluntly, "you'll have a



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dead man on your hands. You understand?"

Mildred said quietly, "Yes, Doctor, I understand."

Joel stared at Betsy and the muscles bunched at the base of his heavy jaw, twitching.

The doctor went on, taking a hypodermic needle from his bag. He held it to the light. "With his heart I shouldn't do this," he said, "but he needs a good night's sleep. I'll leave you some medication. He's to take it every three hours, and under no circumstances is he to get out of bed until I call again tomorrow morning."

He bent over Henry's pitching figure and with a lift of his shoulder, drove the needle into his arm.

Betsy's hand flew to her mouth as if she were going to retch, and she ran from the room. She ran to the bathroom, locked the door with feverish haste and then, as if she had used all her strength, she stumbled to the bathtub, knelt and leaned her face against it, her right arm dangling inside.

She stayed there for an hour, and when she came out she felt sodden. She crept to her room on the third floor and sat before the vanity and stared at the haunted face that peered out of the mirror at her. Behind her the door opened quietly. She didn't turn.

She said dully, "Not tonight, Joel, please!"

"It's not Joel. It's Mildred." She crossed the room and stood over the girl huddled on the bench. She said levelly, "Give me that note you sent your father." She held out her hand.

Mechanically, Betsy took the crumpled paper from her pocket and dropped it into the waiting palm. Mildred read it, crumpled it again and dropped it into the waste basket.

"Then you *do* know," she said. "I wondered."

Betsy sat with her head bowed. "Yes, I know."

Mildred looked across the room. Her eyes picked out the brilliant bird pictures Betsy had painted, the candlewick spread, the gay glazed-chintz draperies at the window. Her eyes turned back to the girl.

"I love your father," she said, almost tonelessly. "I have loved him for a long while. I loved him before he married your mother, and I loved him while he was wrecking himself with her, and I love him now. And he loves me. Do you hear?" she demanded fiercely. "He loves me and he's going to have the happiness he deserves. *He's going to have it!* I killed your mother, Betsy, or she would have killed him. I loved him too much to let her do that." She put her hands on the girl's shoulders and tightened her fingers. "And I won't let you destroy him, either. I won't let you!"

Betsy was too paralyzed with horror to move until Mildred's strong hand clamped itself over her mouth. She tried to scream, but Mildred pulled her backward off the vanity bench and held her tightly. She put her left hand under the girl's chin and with a heave, dragged her free of the bench. She pulled her across the room, stopped a moment at the open window, then shifted her feet to get her hip under the girl's.

"It's three stories down to the pavement," she panted, "You'll die the same way your mother did!" She shifted again to raise the girl to the level of the low sill.

The door burst open and Joel stumbled into the room. "I'm having a showdown with you," he started heavily—then stopped with his mouth agape. For once his mind worked quickly enough to realize what was going on and he yelled, "Hey!" and lunged toward them. He tripped over the hooked rug at the foot of the bed and sprawled across the floor, his arms still outstretched, but he had given Betsy the chance to wrench herself partially free. Shrieking, she pushed against Mildred's muscular arm and threw herself backward. Mildred teetered back on her heels. Her knees struck the low windowsill and with a wild, despairing scream, she disappeared, her hands clawing the window frame for a futile moment. The thud, as she struck the concrete three stories below, was clearly audible.

Betsy lay on the rug and as she stirred, she moaned, "Daddy! Oh, Daddy, Daddy!" She had not called him that since childhood.

EVERYBODY'S KILLING By FERGUS TRUSLOW COONEY!

It is very disheartening, Deputy Sheriff McRae told himself, when the girl for whom you have fallen, gun-butt over tin star, insists on confessing to murder. In fact, McRae added, a thing like that can be very fatal!

McRAE got his first whiff of the kerosene smell on the night wind through the dark stables just before nine o'clock.

He was making his rounds when he got it. Haines, the older deputy who relieved him, was due on for the graveyard trick any minute. McRae sniffed again, and his scalp got up and started to walk. He

One hand reached for the gunwhale; the other clutched, as he broke water, for the man's shoulder.



fervently wished Haines were here now.

Kerosene was a firebug's dish. And this rambling old horse hotel was full of horses. Silken, cream-colored palominos had come from all over Southern California to carry silver saddles and red-sashed riders in Santa Barbara's Fiesta Week parade tomorrow.

For once McRae was glad to be smaller and wirier than the average man behind a badge. Skinning over the closed lower half of a barn door, he made no more noise than a stable cat.

The deputy eased his Positive out of a new, creaky holster, snapped on his flash.

"Drop that can of oil, you!" In spite of himself, he let his voice wobble.

A pudgy man with a baby's soft, unfinished, fuzz-bald head blinked back at him. "It's only you, huh, McRae? Don't scare me like that."

He lowered a five-gallon can of kerosene, casually, contemptuously. McRae stared. "Huh? I mean, say, you're under arrest! Who are you?"

"Never mind the name. Just call me Mr. Arson." The firebug patted the silky flank of a horse whose bedding straw McRae had just caught him drenching with kerosene.

"I knew you'd be on guard tonight, McRae," he said. "I gambled on your inexperience to keep you out from under foot."

McRAE ordered him to walk forward and put out the hands for the cuffs. The pudgy man obeyed with a sneer. "You're not going to really go through with this, are you, McRae?"

He had a soft pulse in the top of his bald head, like a baby's before the bones grow closed, this firebug. McRae scowled. "Why not?"

"The talk around Santa Barbara is that you're pretty sold on a redhead named Ellen Malone, with the salt of the devil in her. She owns six of these high-priced—and highly insured—nags."

McRae knew his first foreboding then; it hit him in the form of goosebumps. "What're you getting at? What's Ellen got to do with this?"

"Her six palominos are insured for twenty grand. She needs that money. I

was only trying to help her get it, see?"

McRae gawked at the man for a few dazed seconds. Then quick fever spots of color invaded the normal Celtic pallor of his high cheekbones. He grabbed for a fancy belt around a fat waist.

"You mean," he underlined every word with a savage jerk, "that Ellen Malone would burn horses for insurance?"

His last angry jerk brought a fancy silver buckle loose in his hand. "Hey," protested Mr. Arson, grinning. "That's a Duarte buckle. I paid the best silversmith in Santa Barbara thirty-five doll—"

He ducked. McRae remembered in time that his prisoner was cuffed. Instead of backhanding a grin off the man's loose mouth, he stamped the buckle into tan-bark under an angry heel.

"Ellen's father left her money," he said thickly. "You won't get out of this by trying to involve her!"

"Her dough," chuckled Mr. Arson, "is tied up in a trust administered by Emil Joesting, the big probate lawyer. He won't let Ellen have anything more than her quarterly allowance. You know that yourself. So—the only quick money in sight is the insurance on these horses."

McRae's feet, in his hand-stitched boots, were suddenly clammy. "What's this about quick money? What for?"

"Because I've got the gun."

"What gun?"

"The .32 automatic she used on Roger Cooney. If you get around, you know they found a gambler named Cooney dead under a big live oak in Montecito a few days back. He had a couple of nice fresh bullet holes all the way through him."

McRae's tongue felt dry as a new kid glove. All of Southern California had been alerted for Cooney's as-yet-unknown killer.

Not Ellen, he prayed. *Not Ellen*.

A cold sick worry crept into his belly. Ellen Malone, headstrong as a pasture-raised filly, needed gentling. McRae knew that she had made a pastime of drifting into beach casinos with other wealthy, irresponsible youngsters. But Ellen wasn't a killer.

"It's her gun, no mistake," Mr. Arson was boasting. "I checked the registration—get it? I found Cooney's car, too—hid

out in the back country. Blood all over the seat. Bullet holes in the body. I fixed it so she can't move it. She plays ball and you do. Or else. See what I mean?"

McRae was busy seeing something else. Mr. Arson had had a helper. A shadow slid out of a stall, melted deeper into dark, stable-smelling gloom.

McRae butted the pudgy, handcuffed man aside. Plunging after the flitting shadow, he made the error of trying to find the button of his flash and drag out his Positive again at the same time.

IN THE DARK he went headlong over the kerosene can Mr. Arson had set down in the aisle. The tiny crash it gave forth roused equine bedlam in the barn.

Horses plunged, snorting in terror. Halter chains rasped. Steel-shod hooves lashed frantically at stall sides.

The overhead lights came on. They found McRae cursing through white lips and digging around in stable tanbark for his gun and flashlight.

A small crowd of horse owners and stable hands rushed up. "What happened, Mac?" A girl whose copper-red curls brushed the shoulders of a green suede riding jacket helped McRae dust himself off. "We were playing gin in the front office when we heard the—Phew! What's that smell of kerosene!"

McRae could hardly smell the kerosene for the faint but potent scent of the sixty-dollars-a-dram perfume she always used. McRae was attuned to it, and it was always dynamite to him.

"Just a couple of firebugs," he explained miserably.

A flashbulb's wink set the palominos to plunging again. "Hold it, McRae," boomed a big, cocky, crew-cut man behind a Speed Graphic. "Hold it while I get another bulb in my gun. There's a story in this for the *Dispatch*. Get down on your mush in the tanbark again, will you?"

Mark Priest, the grinning, husky city editor of the *Dispatch*, wore the Caballeros Club's fiesta costume of green bell-bottomed pants and shell jacket with red sash.

"Was it really a firebug, McRae?" he said. "Or did Mrs. McRae's boy Johnny

pull this himself, to give himself a build-up as a hero?"

The deputy's reaction of blind anger carried him two steps forward, to slugging range. He eyed the deep cleft in Priest's handsome chin, breathing hard.

McRae hesitated. If he swung on Priest, he'd spend the rest of the evening on the carpet at the sheriff's office. He shoved his itching fists into his pockets to keep them out of trouble.

"Tell us just what happened, McRae." Emil Joesting, a grey, heavy lawyer with a froglike mouth and popeyed stare, stepped forward.

Joesting, like Priest and most of the other professional men in town, wore the Caballeros Club's green fiesta costume for a barbecue later in the evening.

McRae shrugged. "I caught one guy. He got away while I was trying to nail the second. That's all."

That was all, except that McRae's mouth was still dry when Haines, a stringy, sour old veteran of the sheriff's department, relieved him.

"Tough," Haines grunted. "'Specially I do not like him taking it on the Arthur Duffy with your shiny, new handcuffs. The boys are going to rub salt in your wounds for that, Mac."

McRae, with hot hammers of anger pounding in his temples, got his flashlight out and probed around in stable tanbark.

"What you lookin' for?" Haines shot at him.

"This." McRae held out a glittering silver belt buckle. "It's a hand-wrought Duarte piece, all right. Duarte, the little Mexican silversmith, will know who he made it for."

IT WAS nine-forty-two when McRae thumbed a doorbell on Salsipuedes Street. Four note chimes just inside a dark, open front door made him jump.

McRae waited. Nobody came. Loosening the Positive in his new, creaky holster, the deputy stepped across the threshold.

He snapped on his flash, and froze. A sign painted on the floor at his feet in wet, shiny red letters said: X I T.

McRae stared incredulously. Stooping, he made the park-bench test for wet paint. Instead of wet-paint stickiness he got a

slippery feeling between thumb and forefinger. "Blood," he said aloud, amazed.

A faint spur-jingle on hardwood floor behind him brought him around, gun high and heart slamming.

Ellen Malone's scent was there, fragrant, heady, in the darkness. Her face looked white as scraped bone. She faced him, clutching a five-foot branding iron. The three letter stamp of the tool gleamed red and wet when the torch beam touched it. "You!" she whispered. "It's you, Mac!"

McRae took the red-stained branding iron from her fingers, trying not to show that the wind had been snatched right out of his lungs. "Where did you get this Ten-in-Texas iron?"

"It was standing right there by the door, on the floor," Ellen Malone gulped. "I—I grabbed it up when I heard you coming. I thought it might be—well, the man who lives here."

McRae squirted his flashlight around the walls, at rows of black-painted branding irons. The man who lived here was a collector, he decided.

The deputy wheeled on the girl. "You came here to see a fat firebug named Mal Root. Oh, yes, I got his name from Duarte, the slversmith. You'd better tell me the whole thing, Ellen. Root had the gun that figured in the Roger Cooney killing, didn't he? He'd been shaking you down. He tried to firebug your horses tonight so you could get twenty grand insurance to hand over to him. Right?"

She nodded, wordlessly. She shrank in her riding clothes as if McRae had quirked her across the face.

McRae's heart went cold within him every time he looked at the bloody Ten-in-Texas iron. "You came here for a showdown with Mal Root," he said. "You didn't know anything about his firebug try for the insurance until after he failed. He might shake you down, but he couldn't get you to hurt a horse. You'd come to have it out with him, hadn't you?"

"Yes." Her breathing sounded tight and croupy.

"Where is he now?"

"Honest Injun, Mac, I don't know. I just got here ahead of you. I grabbed the iron to defend myself in case it was Mal Root I heard coming."

"Let's look around," McRae said grimly.

They found Mal Root at home, all right. He just wasn't answering any doorbells. He lay, leering, on a rumpus room's linoleum floor, in a spreading lagoon of blood around a crushed head. He still wore McRae's handcuffs. He held them out to ward off a blow he couldn't feel now.

"Don't look at his head—not at the top of it," McRae said. Womanlike, Ellen Malone disregarded the advice. She turned a shade of green that matched her suede jacket.

Gingerly, McRae touched a still-warm cheek. "He's just been ushered out of this world. It looks bad for you, Ellen. I find you with a bloody branding iron in your hand. And this pair of handcuffs tags him as the guy who tried to firebug your horses. Haines, the deputy who relieved me, knows that Root gave me the slip while wearing my nippers."

"C—can't you take them off him?" Ellen Malone shivered.

"Tamper with evidence and you make it worse every time." McRae told her. A cold hand was squeezing his heart. He wanted to take off his badge and throw it away somewhere.

He sledge-hammered his next question at her, knowing he had to jar her, get her off balance. He had to get the truth before somebody with infinitely more time, and an infinitely colder purpose, did so.

"Come on," he snarled, shaking her. "The law's for everybody, even you! You shot Roger Cooney, didn't you?"

Stunned, she looked at McRae as if she'd never seen him before. Her lids opened and shut, like a doll's with weights behind the eyes. "Yes," she said dully. "I killed him."

"Why?" McRae shot at her instantly, watching the numb, pinched look spread around her mouth, hating himself. "Was it money? You went to Cooney's casino with your screwball married friends. You bucked his crooked wheel, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Oh, I know I've been a fool, Mac! I'll never gamble again. Never! I got in deeper than I meant, and I couldn't pay Cooney. He'd carried me on the cuff too long. That night—Emil Joestings was there at the casino—Cooney de-

manded his money. I guess he thought I could go to Joesting right then and get it. He doesn't know Joesting. Mark Priest was there, and Mark let me have three hundred. It wasn't a drop in the bucket to what I owed Cooney. Cooney insisted on driving me home, to discuss the debt. On the way he stopped and—"

Her voice trailed off. "Go on," McRae hammered brutally, despising himself for it.

"He offered to forget the debt if—if I'd be nice to him."

"Where did this happen?"

"Near that big whitewashed live oak in Montecito where Verea Street makes the sharp turn on the hillside. I jumped out of the car. Cooney followed, kept coming. I had my little .32 automatic in my purse that night because women in our neighborhood have been molested getting out of their cars late at night, even in their own garages. I fired. Twice, I think. Cooney fell down. He didn't move. I dropped the gun. I ran. My feet were bleeding through my torn evening sandals when I got an all-night service station and called a taxi. I went straight home."

McRae felt his own pulse leap a little. "Go on about Mal Root and the .32 automatic."

"Two days ago, Mal Root came to me with the gun. He said he had Cooney's car spotted, too. I didn't understand what he meant by that, but the gun was enough. I paid. I was in a blind panic, or I wouldn't have done such a thing. I gave him every cent I could raise. You know the rest."

McRae nodded. "I know the rest, ex-

cept for the angle about Cooney's car. Mal Root said you hid it out in the back country. You claim you left it standing under that live oak when you ran from the scene of the shooting."

ELLEN MALONE'S eyes were beginning to lose their stunned, out-of-focus look. She gave McRae a level stare that made him feel as if he had a sharp nose and a long, hairless tail.

"Well, Mac, I guess I'm a big pinch for a green copper like you. I'll be a feather in your cap, won't I?"

McRae winced inwardly but kept his voice casual as he knelt by the dead Mal Root and took out a pencil. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm not so sure you killed Cooney."

"But I just confessed!"

The deputy snorted. "You said you *thought* you fired twice. That means you were so excited you aren't sure now just what did happen. You might have only wounded him, or even missed altogether."

"But he was found dead—right there!"

"Suppose he drove off after playing possum and told somebody of his brush with you," McRae said. "Suppose that somebody had a motive for killing Cooney. Don't you see how easy it would be to kill Coney and take him back and leave him under that big live oak, where your empty cartridges would give the law a bum steer? Besides, you're the kind whose conscience would break you down. Within a few days more, you'd have gone to the D.A. and confessed, giving the real killer a perfect alibi."

Disbelief faded in her face. "That might explain what Root said about Cooney's car."



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"If a killer hid Cooney's car out in the back country, and Mal Root found your gun in it, he'd naturally think you hid the car," McRae said.

Her horrified glance saw what McRae had picked out of the dead man's scant fuzz of hair with a pencil point. "What's that?"

"Rust," McRae told her. "A flake of oily rust. He's got rust on his collar like dandruff, too. It may have flaked off a branding iron used to crack his brain pan."

He held the Ten-in-Texas iron up to the light. "That iron isn't rusty," she objected. "It's been scraped free of rust and painted black, like all the others in the living room."

"Sure," the deputy agreed. "The killer pulled a switch. He left the blooded Ten-in-Texas iron where you found it, by the front door, as if an excited man carried it to the door, making his getaway. But that's not the iron used to murder Root!"

"Why would anybody bother to switch irons?"

"Because the rusty branding iron had some special significance for the killer."

The deputy was riding a goosebump hunch now. "If Mal Root found an old rusty branding iron out on a back-country ranch, he might have found something else there, too."

"Cooney's car!"

"Yep. The killer switched irons because he feared the rusty one would point the way to some ranch."

McRae came to a bird-dog point near the tool-littered work bench in the corner. "Here's where Root cleaned up his branding iron. There's rust, a file, a pan of oil. And here's the newspaper he stood an iron on to drain oil."

They eyed rusty, oily brand marks on newsprint. Ellen Malone snapped long, brown fingers. "That's one of the old Spanish California snake tracks. Can you read it?"

McRae shook his head. "We can look it up in the Book of *Fierros y Senales*—the old brand book in the Hall of Records. But we'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Mark Priest," the girl told him, "made a photostat copy for the Caballeros Club library. We can go there instead of waiting until the City Hall opens tomorrow."

A cold, swamp-water distaste for what had to come next flooded McRae until his back teeth floated. "You aren't going anywhere, Ellen. Just one step now and you'll pin two killings on yourself. Stay here while I phone the lieutenant."

He went to the phone in the front room, dragging that long, hairless tail behind him again, and carrying the sharp whiskered nose in front.

When he got back, she was gone. McRae swore. A strip of oil-marked newspaper had been torn from the sheet on the work bench. A kitchen door stood open to the soft, syringa-scented summer night.

McRae hesitated, listening to the first far-off keening of a siren. By the time he had torn another strip off the oil-marked newspaper, it was closer.

A cold breeze blew out of the warm night and localized itself along his spine. He couldn't stay here now for an hour or so of answering questions. Ellen Malone would be hell-bent for the back country, alone. . . .

MOUTH-WATERING odors of barbecued beef from a sizzling pit kept the crowd at the Caballeros Club out of doors. McRae had no trouble getting in the library alone; he prowled down a long, vine-screened veranda, whose adobe wall was hung with steer horns, branding irons and coiled rawhide riatas, until he found the little corner with the barred window.

The book of *Fierros y Senales* was calf-bound, octavo size, and McRae found it on a table very close to the barred window, under a green-shaded reading light.

In the deputy's hands, the book opened of its own accord to the right page. McRae's mouth went dry. A folded strip of oily newspaper had been left in it as a book mark. He didn't even need to look at the piece of paper in his own pocket.

The india-inked brand on a margin of the photostat page matched the oil-and-rust-stamped brand on the newspaper. Ornate Spanish script said: "Habiendo pagado los tres pesos de custumbre, Juan Maldonado. . . ."

McRae jerked his head as something hissed at his ear, fell in snaky coils over his shoulders. He struck at the thing in-

stinctively, but he could not get free.

The rawhide riata had been dropped over his head from outside, from the vine-hung veranda. It crushed his windpipe cruelly. His head butted against window bars sending slivers of bright agony through his brain.

Losing consciousness didn't hurt. McRae found it just a lonesome hayride into the dark. . . .

* * *

A sousing mouthful of smoky Scotch and soda choked him before he could swallow. McRae opened his eyes. Emil Joesting's froglike face loomed fuzzily. "Come on, son. Make an effort," the lawyer urged.

McRae sat up. "My gun," he croaked, feeling his holster. "It's gone."

"What happened?" Joesting flung at him. "I found you black in the face, strung up to these window bars as if you'd tried a Dutch. Another minute and you'd have never come around."

"Somebody noosed me from the veranda," McRae said weakly. "Never saw him." The deputy felt in his pocket. "Somebody's taken my piece of the newspaper with the Maldonado brand on it. Ellen left hers in the brand book. That's gone, too."

The deputy explained Root's murder briefly.

"Let me get the facts in order." Joesting's frown was skeptical. "You say the murder weapon was a rusty old branding iron from the Maldonado ranch. The murderer took this iron with him when he left. And Ellen's been here to look up the Maldonado brand."

McRae tried to nod. "Killer left a different iron, all bloodied up. That was a decoy. He did it because he didn't want callers out at the old Maldonado ranch. And Ellen's on her way there right now!"

Emil Joesting, absurdly like a bullfrog in tight green pants and Spanish jacket, was already hopping for the door. "Come on, we'll take my car."

The probate lawyer didn't spare the horses under the hood of his Mercury station wagon. In silence, they swooped up and over San Marcos Pass. The damp smell of the Pacific dropped away. A hot,

sage-spiced breath of the back country came up to meet them.

Joesting swung off on a rutted dirt road. "Smell the dust hanging in the air here? That fool kid can't be far ahead of us."

McRae's nails were digging holes in his palms. "She left her fingerprints on the bloody branding iron the killer left by the front door," he said. "By now the pic men are busy on it."

Joesting groaned. "That iron could spell exit for her all right, if the D.A. wants it to. She might even exit into the San Quentin gas chamber. Why didn't you rub her prints off it?"

McRae shrugged unhappily. "Tampering with evidence always makes things worse."

Joesting gave him a disgusted look and changed the subject. "This old Maldonado place was long since swallowed up in a corporation-owned ranch. I've shot duck out here. There's nothing left except a labyrinth of old adobe corrals and a fallen-in stable. Back of the corrals in a *cienega*—a marsh, with a pond, and cattails and tules. You can always find a few green-winged or cinnamon teal, and there's a water-logged duck punt."

A metallic, slamming chorus of frog music met them as they topped a rise. Joesting killed his lights suddenly. He coasted to a stop in a grove of dusty live oaks. "That's Ellen's convertible, all righty," he whispered. "And there's not a light in sight."

McRAE got out, his knees jello. The labyrinth corrals and the old barn loomed gaunt under bright stars.

"You take that side of the corrals," the lawyer whispered. "I'll take the other. We can't holler for her—it might draw company. If you find her first, get her back to the car and wait."

His plump bulk melted into the night. McRae, a pulse ticking in his dry mouth, obeyed orders. Turning a corner of a crumbling adobe wall, he got a whiff of scent he knew cost sixty dollars a dram.

"Ellen," he whispered.

A pale blur moved against the wall, but the girl didn't step forward to meet him. "Tallyho," she said coldly. "You must have a little bloodhound in you, Mac. Well, go on. Say it. It's your duty to warn me

anything I say will be used against me."

McRae kicked a bulging leather bag on the ground at her feet. "What's that?"

"Mark Priest's camera kit. I picked him up at the Caballeros Club."

"Where's Priest now?"

"Hiding out with a camera set to take your pic. He heard you coming and wants photos for legal evidence if anybody goes near Cooney's car."

"Cooney's car?" McRae's throat went dry. "Show me, quick!"

She led the way into the barn. In a corner of the rat-haunted place, the deputy struck a match. He cursed himself for leaving his flash back in Mel Root's rumpus room.

The tiny explosion of the lucifer's head was loud enough to bring cold sweat out on him. McRae hardly spared a glance for crusted, dry blood on upholstery. He wanted to look at bullet holes in the body.

A faint scrape gave him warning. It came from the sill of a broken-paned window. The noise was no louder than a pack-rat might make dragging away a bauble of broken glass.

McRae's match whimpered as he snapped it away. In the dark he knocked Ellen Malone flat with a sweep of his arm.

A spurt of muzzle blast lit cobweb sails on sagging rafters. Before dirt showered down, McRae had the girl outside, running for the corrals.

Behind them the gun roared again, hammering into the blurred hundreds of echoes their feet left in the adobe labyrinth.

Wading into the warm *cienega* water, McRae pulled the girl after him. The marshy-smelling liquid was only waist deep, but bottom muck held him to slow-motion pace.

A looming cliff stopped them at the far edge of the marsh. Splashing sounds worked toward them, along the base of it. "He's after us!" the girl choked, crouching in the reeds.

McRae's ears picked up a thump from the other side of the pond. "No," he muttered. "The guy splashing is hunted, not the hunter. Our killer is coming out in a duck boat!"

He raised his voice, trusting to the cliff's echoes to confuse a gunner. "Over here, Priest. The water's deeper here!"

Mark Priest, clutching his Speed Graphic high, splashed up. "Good Lord!" he panted. "I got shot at! Somebody—"

McRae hit him then, full on the cleft of his handsome chin. "Get down in those tules and shut up! Keep your camera ready."

A yellow glare bloomed in the night. In the circle of golden danger, Emil Joesting squatted in the duck boat. A burning cattail dripped gasoline.

McRae's heart sank into the gluey muck at his feet. Joesting, his gun in hand, looked froggily in his element.

All he needed now was a bullfrog's long, whiplash tongue to capture three foolish green mayflies. The Police Positive in his hand would do, for that.

"You can't get out past me," Joesting grunted. "I'm a pretty fair shot, if you'll permit me to boast."

The lawyer poled nearer. Ellen Malone fought to silence her chattering teeth; McRae could feel her shivering, though the pond was soupy-warm.

The deputy began to move away from the girl and Priest, stealthily as a duck leaving its nest in the reeds.

Joesting spoke to the silent night. "Of course, you know by now I killed Cooney. I owed him money also. When he came back to the casino that night and told me what had happened, I finished what you started, Ellen."

THE CATTAIL dripped fire on the mirror of the pond. Joesting's chuckle sounded like a froggy croak. "I have to tell this—it's a joke on me. I didn't know Cooney had picked up her gun until I'd already shot him with my own .38 and left bullets embedded somewhere in his car. The .38 holes in him were all right; if the slug doesn't lodge in a man, it's hard to tell the caliber of the bullet that killed him. But Cooney's car, with my slugs in a door—well, I had to hide the car. Are you listening too, McRae?"

McRae was listening. His heart flopped in his mouth like a wet pollywog in a kid's hand. Joesting had drifted almost on top of Ellen's hiding spot in the tules.

"That fool, Mal Root," Joesting went on, "stumbled on the car when he came here to look for old branding irons. I learned that tonight, by accident, when I

was in the barn at the time you captured Root. I was the second firebug you thought you saw, McRae. Knowing Mal Root was liable to disclose the hiding place of the car, I simply shut him up for keeps and removed the Maldonado iron. I killed two birds with one stone, you see, using the old branding iron on his skull, as you surmised."

One more gentle push with the punt pole would drift Joesting right on top of the girl trembling in the reeds.

McRae spoke up, from a screen of tules. "You were the one who noosed me with a riata, back in the club library, Joesting."

Joesting swung around clumsily, and poled the boat toward the deputy's voice. "Yes, son," he spoke with casual, unhurried enjoyment, "I did just that. I brought you around afterward, because I found the scrap of oil-marked newspaper in your pocket and guessed somebody else had been there ahead of you, since there was a second brand-marked piece of paper in the book. I had to know who else was in on this deal. Incidentally, you're going to be blamed for killing Ellen and Priest here. This is your own gun."

Blue glitters ran along the Positive's barrel as he aimed. "I had it with me all the way over San Marc—"

McRae didn't wait to hear the rest of the boast. He sucked in a deep breath and dived.

The bottom mud hampered his swimming. But when the shadow of the duck boat loomed over him, he drove upward, one hand reaching for a gunwale, the other clutching, as he broke water, for Joesting. The gun roared in his face. But the bullet slammed upward at stars a million light years away.

Emil Joesting gave one scared-frog croak as the punt tipped him into the tules. Mark Priest's flash bulb winked.

McRae released Joesting, got hold of the punt pole, and the deal was clinched. He held Joesting down until the gluey struggles telegraphed up the pole had almost ceased.

Then he dragged Joesting up to face the light of the cattail torch, which still floated. The probate lawyer only vomited marsh water feebly.

"How did you know it was he, when you called a warning to Mark Priest in

the dark, Mac?" Ellen's voice wobbled.

McRae was shoving his mud-choked Positive back in his holster. "Joesting tripped himself up by tampering with evidence and then talking about it. He mentioned the iron you'd left your prints on, the bloody iron the killer had left as a decoy. He said that iron would spell exit for you. He said you might exit through the door to the San Quentin gas chamber because of it. Both cracks were plain references to the XIT head of that Ten-in-Texas iron. But I hadn't told Joesting the name of the iron left by the killer in place of the rusty Maldonado iron. The only way he could've known that was by being the killer himself. He branded himself with that brand. I was sure of it, when I'd had a look at the .38 holes in Cooney's car. That added his motive to the picture. . . . Come on, Joesting—you're my pigeon."

"Me, too," announced a redhead who looked more like a drowned Irish water spaniel at the moment. "I'm your pigeon, too. I'll go quietly, officer."

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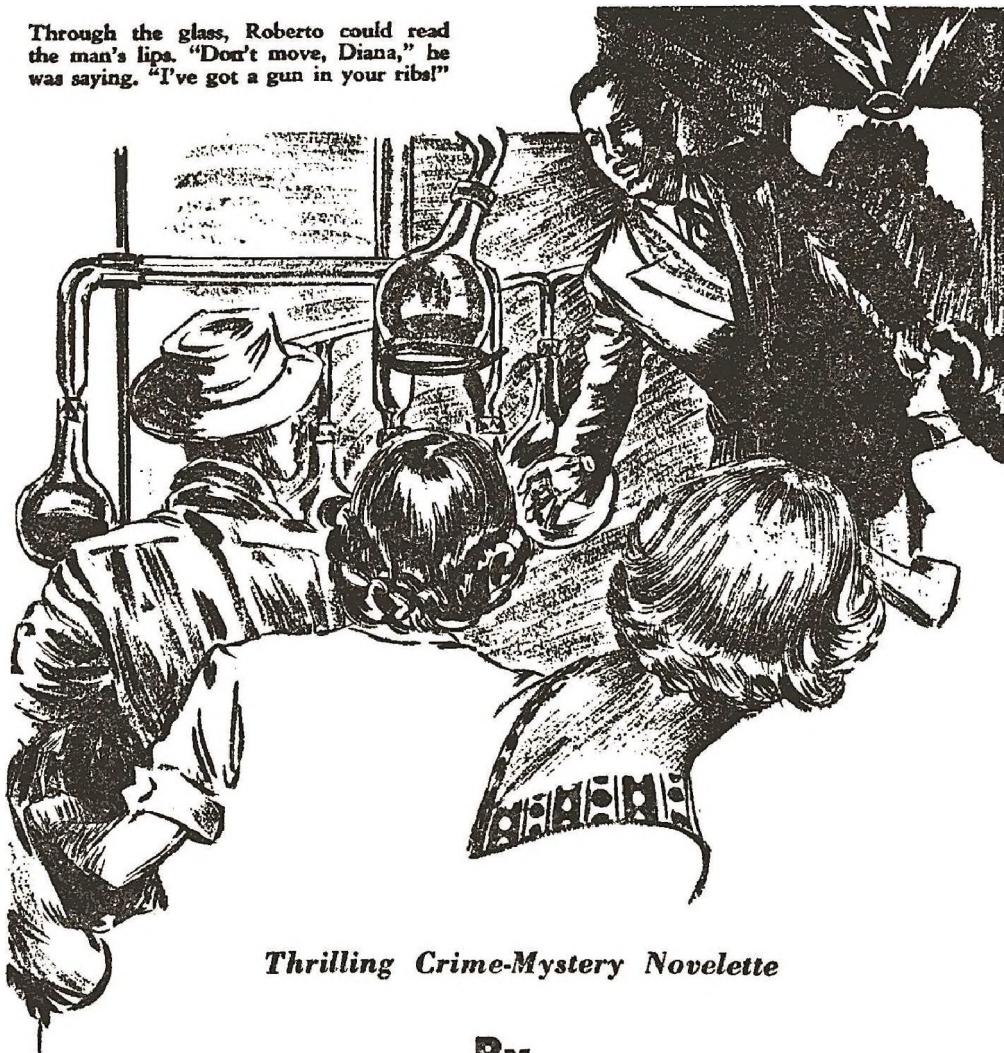
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CURTAIN CALL FOR ROBERTO

Every day she came and smiled at him where he stood in the window of Stacey's Department Store ("Twenty-five dollars reward if you make Roberto The Robot smile!"). But it didn't work. For Roberto was saving his smile for the time when he could die for her!



Through the glass, Roberto could read the man's lips. "Don't move, Diana," he was saying. "I've got a gun in your ribs!"



Thrilling Crime-Mystery Novelette

By
MILTON T. LAND

CHAPTER ONE

The Robot

SOMETIMES he thought the loneliness was more than he could bear, and that seemed strange to him, for this was the only kind of life he'd ever known. He was Roberto, the mechanical man. He'd practically been born in the trunk that contained his mother's costumes. She had been the daring and lovely Fifi Darlene, and his father had been Marchetti The Great, whose muscular control

had amazed kings. The names, of course, had been strictly for stage. Fifi and the great Marchetti were a pair of Americans who'd started their team act in Hoboken.

Roberto had started making entrances as soon as he was able to toddle onto a stage. Marchetti had burned with the tradition of the theater and had taught the little one everything he knew. While other children had been playing in the sun, Rob-

ert had been hearing his father's exasperated, "No, no, no, no!" Unpleasant, Marchetti had demanded perfection, even if the muscles screamed in protest. So the boy Roberto was molded into a mechanical man, and as the years passed he came to know ten thousand stage doors and backstage dressing rooms. The old ones retired and then passed on in an auto accident. Because he knew nothing else, Roberto worked. He worked in a frenzy, against the loneliness, against the hollowness of his life, for with the years, he had come to hate the never-ending procession of silent, impersonal hotel rooms. He was sickened of having to wander, a stranger, in some bar and pick up a conversation over a glass of beer with a person he'd never see again.

When Roberto got the booking in Stacey's Miami store, the years had all rolled together in a montage that meant nothing. He set up the window display in Stacey's Flagler Street window, giving it all he had, because there was nothing else, no other work or person, to whom he could give anything.

Stacey's window stopped them; it kept the sidewalk teeming with curious humanity. The huge window resembled a pseudo-laboratory a Hollywood writer might have dreamed up for a mad-scientist serial, dummy breakers and flasks bubbling varicolored liquids, spider webbings of glass tubing glowing and crackling eerie blue light. Roberto's place was in the center of the window, in the high, tinsel chair. He was as waxen and white in his make-up as something out of a tomb. A sign was at the base of the chair: "Twenty-five dollars reward if you make Roberto The Robot smile!"

Then the blonde girl happened. It got to be a little game with her. Every day she came out of the sleek office building across the street, crossed Flagler, looked in the window display at the mechanical man—and smiled. It was almost as if she sensed the vacuity of his life, as if her smile said, "I feel the same things myself, so I sense them in you. Look—for a few moments each day I'll be your friend."

She was a rather small girl, pert and nicely built. Well tanned from the Florida sun, she wore her golden hair loose about her shoulders. That was all the mechanical

man knew about her, that she was beautiful and evidently worked across the street.

ROBERTO got in the habit of waiting for her. As five o'clock neared each day he wondered in a kind of panic if she would show up. She always did, and the tension would melt out inside of him, and he, the mechanical man, would let a flicker of acknowledgment come to his never-blinking eyes.

It was something you hardly dared believe yourself, something you didn't talk about. At night in his room, though, he would wonder about her. Who she was, where she lived—why she played the little game. Was it because she had just that many minutes after five until she caught a bus? Perhaps she was a bit of a coquette and enjoyed the strange little flirtation—maybe she joked to her friends about her robot. Maybe there was a psychological thread that he strengthened by being a robot in whose eyes none but her could bring a flicker. . . . Maybe in her was a deep need to triumph, and this was the expression of it, though she didn't seem that kind of girl.

Or maybe, Robert Hillary writhed mentally, she came because he held the same fascination for her that a corpse would. . . . There he would cut his thoughts off. She'd come the first time a week ago, out of curiosity, seeing the crowd on the sidewalk before Stacey's window. The second day she'd stopped long enough to give him a gamin, challenging smile. By the third day it was habit. Sometimes a carefully formed, silent "Hello" shaped on her lips. She didn't know it, but Robert Hillary could have read anything she said. He'd picked up lip-reading years ago in a slightly different act on the stage. It was about the only diversion in the hot, silent window, reading their lips out there. Sometimes it was fun, knowing what they were saying about him—sometimes it wasn't. He wished she would come from the office building with a friend. If she talked to someone, he might learn something about her. But she seemed to have no friends in the building over there. She always came alone.

But this day it didn't seem that she was coming, and the panicky question oozed out of Roberto's mind and he thought that

he was a fool for ever attaching any importance to her little game.

Then his frozen-eyed gaze caught the splash of sunlight on blonde hair. Traffic was snarling out there in the molten, late afternoon of Miami, and she was dodging through the traffic almost in a run.

She passed from the robot's unmoving line of vision. It was maddening to sit like a mummy and wonder if she were going to stop. She did. He saw her again, there beside a fat woman. But there was something wrong with the face framed in the gold hair. There were faint quiverings here and there as if the lines of her face were ready to break apart. She was insinuating herself into the crowd—like a person melting in the swarm to seek safety.

Roberto could see the jerky looks she kept casting over her shoulder. He wanted to speak out to her. "That tall, lean man moving in over there—is he what you're scared of? The way he's looking around . . ." He didn't say it, of course. The tall man might not even know her, and then it would have been ridiculous for the robot to scream words out.

She was looking the wrong way. And then Roberto knew that the man did know her. He had melted his way through the crowd until now he touched her. Her white face flew around.

Roberto saw the tense movement of the man's lips, and knew the man was whispering to her. But reading the movement, the tall man's words were like a shout in Roberto's ears: "Quiet! Don't move, Diana! I've got a gun in your ribs, and if I pulled the trigger they'd never catch me in the confusion!"

Diana. So that was her name. Diana . . . gun . . . Roberto's throat was dry. The robot cracked first with a twitching of the upper lip—then reeled to its feet so abruptly a girl in the crowd giggled, high-pitched and tense. The crowd thought it was part of the free show, the mechanical man coming to life inside the window this way. . . .

Robert Hillary tried to keep his eye on the girl and the man. The man had a rugged face that showed a lot of bone—like a real cowpuncher's face might be, if the cowboy were cruel.

Cowboy was taking her out of the crowd, holding her wrist. But the crowd was too busy watching the mechanical man to no-

tice what was happening behind them.

THE PANEL had slid back now, and Roberto came out of the window into the store. The place was jammed with late afternoon shoppers. A pair of dowagers gawked at him. He headed for the wide crystal doors that opened on the street. Higganbotham, the floor manager, saw him, mirrored consternation. "Here, here! My goodness, Mr. Hillary, what does this—"

"Please," Hillary said, "out of my way. . . ." Around a fat woman. To the doors finally.

He got a glimpse of them out there. A heavy, grey sedan was cutting to the curb. Hillary fought the stream of shoppers, trying to get out of Stacey's.

Then he was on the sidewalk, but the grey sedan had pulled away with a smug whine of power. "Stop them!" he cried. "Stop that sedan!"

"Look!" somebody said. "It's the mechanical man—out here on the sidewalk!"

Hillary bucked the stream of pedestrians. Miami, when founded, was laid out to be a village; its downtown streets were all one way, its sidewalks choked.

The sedan drew up in a snarl of traffic on the next corner. Hillary grunted, and ran. The sedan began to move. Hillary left the curb and started for the car. It was rounding the corner, roaring away down the side street.

Hillary stood gasping, the dying sun shafting down the canyon of buildings, hot on his face. He jumped when a horn blasted behind him. An irate driver had touched Hillary's pants leg with his bumper.

Hillary locked about. He was standing in the street. People were staring at his make-up. He'd tried to jump the grey sedan, he realized. Tried to stop the lean man . . . tried to face Cowboy's gun. . . . He began trembling, down along his arms to his fingertips, and he felt faintly sick.

On the curb, Hillary saw the cop waddling toward him. The cop pushed his red kissер close to Hillary and sniffed.

"I'm not drunk," Hillary said thickly, sounding almost as if he were. "That grey sedan . . . he pushed the girl in it. . . ."

"Grey sedan? Lots of grey sedans, mister." The cop was staring at his make-up.

A crowd was starting to gather around. "Listen," Hillary said. "You'd better get somebody after them. The cowboy-looking guy had a gun. He forced the girl in the car. I read his lips."

"Well, now, did you? And I guess the pixies painted you up like that."

The cop made a sudden motion. Hillary felt himself spun. Now the cop was behind him, and he felt the cop's hand dug under his belt. "Son," the cop said in his ear, "don't you know better than to sniff that stuff and then come out on the streets? I dunno if you can make sense of—"

"Oh, hell!" Hillary choked out. "I'm not coked up! Look—I'm the robot, I mean the window display in Stacey's. There's a girl. She's been stopping by there every day. Just a kind of game to her, see? Only today a man was following her. I—"

"Stacey's huh? And you're sure you ain't been on the gage?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? You want to kill her? Can't you get moving, get me to somebody who will listen and do something about this?"

"Don't threaten me, lad!" But the cop loosened his grip and motioned toward the call box on the corner. He still looked skeptical, but he also looked as if he'd better shift the responsibility for this, whatever it was.

While the cop made his call, Hillary's mind raced. He'd gotten the sedan's license number. Out of the whole city, it had been a robot who'd done that for her.

Hillary wondered where the sedan was now, whether he would ever see her again. It came back to him, how the sun had looked in her hair, the way she'd smiled, as if she'd known how hungry he was for somebody to look at him as a human being. He owed her a debt for that. Debts weren't measured in their own size, but by how important they were to somebody.

CHAPTER TWO

A Visit to Pierre's

THE MAN wore wrinkled, tropical blues. He seemed small, but when he stood up you knew he was a hank of sun-dried tendons, tougher than wire. He had

a gnarled, weather-beaten face and gimlet eyes that were almost sadistic. His name, he had said, was Sam Oakley. He was a detective.

With Oakley standing beside him, Robert Hillary felt the heat in Oakley's office. He knew that Oakley was trying to file him in some pigeonhole in his mind. Oakley was patience incarnate as he spread the photographs on the desk. "No," Hillary would say, "that isn't him. . . . No, not that one. . . . Him? Wait a sec . . . no, not him."

The desk was littered with the photographs now. Overhead, fluorescent light beat back the creeping, hot shadows of twilight. Hillary had removed his heavy make-up at the basin behind the screen in the corner and felt sweat on his taut face. Oakley laid another likeness before him, and Hillary felt excitement race along his spine. "That's him!"

"You're sure?"

"I couldn't miss that cowboy face!"

"Hmmm," Oakley said, and his gimlet eyes glittered. He squinted at the photograph and licked his lips. Robert Hillary slouched back in the chair and touched his handkerchief to his face.

"I hope you're right," Oakley said in a thin, deadly whisper. "I hope I'm finally getting something on Latchett and Toutain!"

"Latchett?"

"The cowboy's name," Oakley said. "Hank Latchett. He's been in Miami a little over two years. Picked up three times since he's been here on minor charges. Nothing proven against him. Served one long stretch for manslaughter in Rhode Island before he ever came south—may be one reason why he came."

"Latchett works for a gambler named Vierre Toutain, who drifted in here from New Orleans four years ago. Town was getting too hot even for him. We collect a lot of driftwood in the glamor around here."

"Toutain's slippery as an eel dipped in oleo. This Hank Latchett is a cool, ruthless boy. If they've done something to the girl . . ."

Silence then. Hillary stared at Oakley's face. He swallowed. "You—you'd be almost glad if something's happened to the girl . . . so you could get Toutain. Why?"

"Toutain's wife," Oakley said, "is a too-foolish, too-beautiful girl named Marie. I used to call her daughter. . . ."

The desk buzzer whined. Oakley went around the desk, flipped a switch. A voice grated in the inter-office com: "Sam, that license is for a '48 Buick sedan, registered in the name of Miss Diana Blanchard."

"Blanchard! It wouldn't be—"

"It sure would! Sounds big, huh? Or screwy as hell."

"All right," Oakley said, "I'll see if it's screwy. Get a general out on Hank Latchett."

He flipped the switch off, stood unmoving, just staring at Hillary with those button eyes.

"We bump into a lot of fancy capers in this town," Oakley said finally.

"You think that's what this is?" Hillary's voice quivered in disbelief. Looking in Oakley's depthless eyes, he knew the cop expected intrigue at every turn. Hillary didn't want intrigue. He just wanted somebody to get on the trail of Diana Blanchard, and quick!

"Next you'll say you don't know who the Blanchards are, Hillary."

"I don't."

"They're about the oldest family in Miami. They made a mint of money three generations ago. They're still living on it. They helped to found this town. There's even a park and a street named after them."

"And you think because it's Diana Blanchard and the Blanchard money, that maybe I'm pulling a fast one. Is that it?"

Oakley lifted his scarecrow shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe, you're on the level. Maybe not. But if you *are* fixing some kind of fancy caper, I'll feed you to the fishes in the bay—in little pieces!" Oakley went to the tree, put on a Panama hat. The brim of the hat shivered with Oakley's every movement. "Come on," he said. "We'll see what the inside of Toutain's office looks like."

IT LOOKED expensive to Hillary, a sweeping office that was more like a comfortable den, with huge windows on one side overlooking a strip of white beach and the blue waters of the Atlantic beyond. Outside, tropical darkness was becoming a deep blue-black velvet over the

sky, with the lights of Miami Beach casting their iridescence against it.

The office was in the rear of Pierre Toutain's club. The club was called, simply, Pierre's, noted for, Hillary had gathered from Oakley's remarks, its French cuisine, its drinks and its gambling, though no gambling was supposed to take place in this neck of the tinsel woods.

In the cool of the air-conditioned office, Hillary watched Oakley. The cop was looking over Toutain's desk. The office was very silent. The waiter who had bowed them in had been gone long enough to find Toutain, if Pierre was close around.

Like I'm psychic, Hillary thought as the door opened and a man came in. Hillary knew it must be Toutain. The gambler was slim and well put together with the lean hips and shoulders of a man who keeps himself in condition. He had a narrow, intense face.

"What do you want, Oakley?"

"Hello, you rat," Oakley said, every inflection of his tone begging Toutain for the excuse to kill him.

"Oakley," the gambler said, giving Hillary a passing glance, "you are an old, soured, embittered man. You see the world through smoke-colored glasses. Why'd you come out to the Beach, anyway?"

"I want to talk to Hank Latchett."

"This isn't your bailiwick, Oakley, but I'll call Latchett." Toutain picked up the phone, mumbled in it, replaced it. He sat behind the big, blond desk, looking up at Oakley. "Have you figured out a way to railroad Hank on some trumped-up charge?"

"It isn't trumped up this time. It's about as serious as you can get."

"Is anything that serious?"

"Kidnaping is."

Toutain's dark eyes shimmered. Then he laughed coldly. "Some day, Oakley, I'm going to laugh you right out of Miami!"

The door opened, and the cowboy with the cruel face walked in. Hillary looked at Latchett and felt a little hammering of his pulse. Too much time had passed. . . . Plenty of time for a man like this to kill the girl. . . . Seeing Latchett up close, Hillary realized that Hank Latchett might be the man for a job like that. Latchett's eyes were like frosty agate.

Hillary could hear himself breathing. In and out. In and out. He heard Oakley say, "Where's the girl, Hank?"

And Hank saying what girl, in an innocent voice.

"Diana Blanchard, punk! You picked up her car, using somebody else around this rat-trap to drive, and forced her in it in front of Stacey's department store at five-fifteen this afternoon. You did it at gun point. That's kidnaping in my language, son, kidnaping!" Oakley's tone sounded as if he felt fervently thankful. As if he relished the word, he said it again, "Kidnaping! You know what they do to you for that, don't you?"

"He's off his nut," Latchett told Toutain, reaching for a cigarette in the box on the desk.

Oakley used his wire-tough tendons. Compact, quick power, Oakley spun the taller, heavier Latchett around. "Where's the girl?"

"Who said I know anything about Diana Blanchard?"

"Him." Oakley threw a nod in Hillary's direction.

Hillary felt the impact of Latchett's and Toutain's eyes on him. A seed of fear blossomed like black poison, drawing his stomach in. He had worked shows in plenty of clubs. But he'd always avoided personal relation with men like Latchett and Toutain. Toutain might not be so bad; he looked like a gentleman gambler who liked plenty of money and made it the easy way, but who wouldn't lay for you in a dark alley. Latchett was more the dark-alley type. He would enjoy such a thing, and the picture burst in Hillary's mind of himself running, choked with terror, down a black, silent alley with Latchett behind him with a knife. . . . But none of it showed on the mechanical man's frozen face.

"I saw you," Hillary said. "I was in the window of Stacey's. I read the movement of your lips when you warned the girl to keep quiet."

There was a shifting of shadows in Latchett's eyes. *I'll get you for this*, Latchett's eyes were saying. *I'll remember it to my dying day*. . . .

"Well?" Oakley demanded.

"I don't know what he's talking about," Latchett said.

TOUTAIN came around the desk. "Before you light any more firecrackers, Oakley, why not try to find out if the girl isn't in some of her usual haunts? Latchett hasn't seen her today. He's been here at the club since four-thirty."

"I believe you like I'd believe the devil," Oakley said.

Toutain lifted and lowered the neat shoulders of his white suit. "Why not let me call her house and see if she's come home to dinner?"

Toutain took Oakley's silence as assent. He picked up the phone and dialed. "Hello, the Blanchard residence? Oh, hello, Harry. Pierre speaking. . . . No, no, I think we've settled that. Is your sister there? She is? Fine. Why don't you drop in the club tonight? See you then."

Toutain hung up, his lips drawn in, his eyes as blue-black as the sky outside. "Diana Blanchard is at home. She just finished her dinner. Now get out of here, Oakley, and stay out!"

"All right," said Oakley, "but one of these days I'm coming in here and take you out with me."

Hillary followed Oakley out. At the curb in front of Pierre's, they got in the black police car. Hillary said, "You don't believe my story now?"

"No. But I wish you had been right."

Hillary pressed back against the seat. "There was a girl—and Latchett forced her in a car. I don't know what's happening—except that there was a girl!"

They drove back across the causeway, into Miami, southeast. It was the smallest division of Miami, and the oldest. Southeast had gone to seed in spots, but in other spots were the big, solid homes that had been built by the first of Miami's rich.

Oakley slowed the police car. The street was quiet, bordered by stately royal palms. The breathless hush of the tropical night lay over everything. Oakley turned the car into a white driveway. There was a screening of shrubbery that hid the house from the street. But a few feet up the drive, Hillary saw the house. It looked like something out of a picture book—a big, colonial house with white columns, a magnolia tree in bloom near the veranda, wisteria creeping lazily here and there.

Roberto the mechanical man felt like laughing aloud at himself. What a fool

you were to dream of her in the silence of the lonely nights! This house—her house. The Blanchard name—her name. And, you fool, all the time you thought she was a working girl. Somebody lonely like yourself. Somebody you might somehow get to know. Roberto swallowed, and the taste of it was bitter.

A heavy, grey sedan sat in the driveway. Oakley braked near it. Hillary followed the cop from the police car. Oakley walked to the sedan, bent, squinted at the license number in the flare of a match.

"Well?" Oakley demanded. There was a sharp edge in his tone, an edge that sliced into Hillary and made known to him what Oakley was thinking.

"It—it's the same license number?"

"It is. Brother, why don't you break down and tell me what kind of caper this is? It might go easier on you."

"It's no caper! Let's . . . see if the girl is here."

They mounted the veranda, and Oakley rang. A colored butler with a face as mild as Uncle Remus answered. Oakley said he was police and that he wanted to see Diana Blanchard.

"Just a moment sir, I'll see—"

"We'll just wait inside," Oakley said.

The butler stood stiffly a moment as Oakley brushed into the soft-lighted, vaulted hall. It was a very old house, Hillary saw, with the signs of its age here and there. But old houses are always good houses, somehow. Or perhaps they seem good if you've never had a house, only apartments and hotel rooms, Hillary thought.

"You may wait in here," the butler said.

He showed them into a large parlor. The room swept across the house, ending with a vast window that must picture the side yard in daytime. An old man was in the room, writing at the secretary. In the soft glow of the secretary lamp the man was withered, old, like a husk that has dried in the sun. He turned at the intrusion, showing annoyance. It was a face, Hillary thought, that showed annoyance well, a narrow, sharp-featured face with sunken cheeks and eyes that glittered deep under the overhanging cliff of brows. A face stamped with suffering, it showed bitterness that was so deep it had turned to

evil. The man was sitting in a wheel chair, and shot the chair around from the writing desk.

"This man is a policeman," the butler explained, "and insisted on seeing Miss Diana."

The old man removed his pince-nez. "I'm Kirstein Blanchard. This is my house. Why did you want to see my daughter?"

"I'll ask her if you don't mind, Mr. Blanchard."

Kirstein Blanchard made a small, sharp motion with his hand. "Fetch her," he told the butler.

As the butler was going out, a young man came into the room. He was slender, in sports clothes, with a thin, pale face capped by a tousle of careless blond hair. He was smoking a cigarette with jerky puffs. Hillary saw now that he had long, thick lashes, almost like a girl's.

"My son, Harry," Blanchard said.

"Hello," Harry said. He snubbed Oakley and Hillary with his cool blue eyes, said to the old man, "I'm going over to Pierre's." He crushed out his cigarette. "I'll be late." He was almost there when Blanchard's voice stopped him: "You fool! You crazy young fool! I forbid it I don't want you going to Pierre's any more!"

The old man had pushed himself up, gripping the arms of his chair. Harry paused, turned, swept his father with his cool, disdainful gaze. "You forbid? And just how are you going to stop me?" He stalked out.

The old man slumped back in his chair. "No respect for his father," he whined, "not even before strangers. Oh—there is Diana."

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse on the Carpet

HER BRIGHT HAIR and smile relieved the gloom and decay in the room, Hillary thought. A short, pudgy young man entered behind her, closing the door. As she neared the center of the room, the fat young man took his place beside her. A boy friend? Hillary thought. A lover? He swept the young man with his gaze. The face was like an innocent

moon, the eyes a bland grey. The young man's hair was a very light cap of blond silk, almost like a baby's hair. He looked innocent and harmless and pampered to Hillary—and the bland grey eyes rested on Diana with adoration. Hillary dropped his gaze away.

"Mr. Oakley, Mr. Hillary," Blanchard said, twisting his chair, "my daughter, Diana, and Mr. Buddy Rugby."

Hillary acknowledged the introductions. He shook Buddy Rugby's fat, soft hand, somehow surprised at the feel of strength down beneath the flabbiness. Rugby said, "Hi-ya, hi-ya!" with gusto.

The girl didn't recognize him without his make-up, Hillary decided. She said to Oakley, "You wished to see me?"

"I wanted to ask you where you went with Latchett this afternoon."

"Latchett?"

"You can't mean Hank Latchett?" Buddy Rugby ventured. "The sidekick of that crumb of a gambler?"

"That's the Latchett I mean," Oakley said.

"Oh, cripes, oh, cripes," Buddy said, the words quickening the flesh of his jowls. "Diana, I'm broad-minded. But my mater—oh, cripes, if the old gal hears that Latchett has involved you with the police . . ." He turned a wry smile to Oakley. "No reflections on the police, of course. But my mother, oh, a very decent woman, but the boss of her household. Almost a shrew, you might say." Buddy gave a little laugh. "Not that I'm disrespectful to her—one shouldn't be to one's parents. But she has very definite ideas about conduct. If she learns the police—Oh, cripes, you haven't seen any reporters?" The thought appalled Buddy.

"It hasn't got to that stage yet," Oakley assured him.

"Ahhh . . . well, perhaps it won't. My mother—her definite ideas, you know. Class-consciousness, you might say. Not that I agree with quite all of her ideas," he added hastily. "People are people, I say. But water. . . oh, cripes, if any bad publicity developed on the eve of our marriage . . ."

He was saying something else, but Hillary didn't hear. Buddy's voice became a distant drone in Hillary's ears. He looked at Diana, and all the old loneliness gagged

him like gall. Well, what had he expected anyway? He had been a fool. Because she'd played a little game with a mechanical man, he'd built up a crazy half-world of dreams in his mind. He had indulged in fantasy. He had let her personify something to him without ever stopping to realize what a foolish path his mind had been taking. It just goes to show you, he thought, what happens when you let a dream get out of hand.

Buddy said to her, "Darling, darling, just what was it about you and Latchett?"

"Why, I haven't seen Latchett! Mr. Policeman, just what was supposed to have happened?"

"You were supposed to have been forced in a car by Latchett, in front of Stacey's this afternoon. Hillary here saw it."

She looked at Hillary. And he felt warmth drawn up into his face by the magnetism of her gaze.

"I—I'm the robot, the display at Stacey's . . ."

"Oh, really! I've been quite interested in you. I'm with Reinhardt and Reinhardt—"

"Really quite important with the firm, too," Buddy interposed. "Career girl, you know. Strong-headed about it, too. Mater doesn't quite understand . . ."

"I like my job," Diana said. "We're one of the biggest agencies in the South, handle the advertising for a lot of important accounts. I've been getting ideas from that Stacey window. But I didn't recognize you, Mr. Hillary, without the make-up. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? I'm flattered." For just an instant, he had her gaze gripped with him. There was something fleeting in her eyes. It shook him without reason.

"Hillary says," Oakley stated, "that you were in front of Stacey's window, that Latchett put a gun in your ribs—"

"Gun?" Buddy shouted. "In the hands of a character like Latchett? Oh, cripes, the mater—"

"Hillary," Oakley's words trod on, "claims he read Latchett's lips."

Hillary felt the impact of her gaze again. He lifted his eyes, and she was smiling at him. "Perhaps it was another girl? Perhaps you might have made a mistake?"

She strolled over to a table, picked up a

cigarette. Hillary was watching her, but the others were looking at Hillary, waiting for his answer to her question.

Then Hillary saw her lips moving. She wasn't speaking aloud. Her eyes were pleading. She had the cigarette in one hand, a flaming table lighter in the other. The cigarette was half raised to her lips. Her head was bent toward the cigarette, but she was looking at Hillary up through her lashes. He read the silent words that formed on her lips: "Please. If you can really read my lips, please give me a chance to explain. Couldn't I see you later? I've done nothing wrong, and I will explain. To you. Please, not to the policeman. . . ."

Hillary opened his mouth slowly, licked his lips. "Maybe—maybe I was mistaken. Oakley, I'm staying at the Gracelyn on Fourth Avenue southwest—" he saw she understood; her eyes said thanks—"if you want to question me in case any blonde girl turns up missing."

He didn't like the way Oakley was looking at him when they went out. As they drove back downtown, Oakley said, "There's too much about it I don't like. Your having her license number, for example. I smell something rotten and it isn't as far away as Denmark. While you're in this town, Hillary, you'd better be a good little boy!"

Oakley let him out of the police car on Flagler near the Olympia theater. Hillary entered a drugstore, had a sandwich and coffee. The girl was safe; that was the important thing. Unless she wanted to explain something to him—which he didn't think any of his business now—the whole thing was over.

He walked down the street, saw a movie, trying to relax. It was late when he came out. He decided to catch a taxi to the Gracelyn. His own car, a sedan old enough to be called a flivver, was in the Gracelyn garage.

He had an efficiency apartment in the Gracelyn. He liked to fix a little breakfast and mix a drink now and then. It was better than a hotel room.

He went up to his silent, close apartment on the third floor, and when he turned on the light he knew the whole thing wasn't over; it had just begun. He knew too that he would never have to worry about Hank Latchett carrying a

grudge for him. Latchett was crumpled on the carpet, and even before he touched Latchett, Hillary knew the man was dead.

HE THOUGHT of her in that first moment. Why had she stalled? So she could get Latchett up here and kill him? Why hadn't she wanted to tell the police what happened today in front of Stacey's? But why kill Latchett here? Hillary shook his head numbly. He felt fire in his lower lip and eased the pressure of his teeth. He cracked the apartment door, looked down the corridor. It was still silent, deserted, white walls gleaming in the small night lights.

He came back to Latchett. He tried to think. Like trying to keep a chip from the center of a whirlpool, for his thoughts kept coming back to her. He relived that scene before Stacey's this afternoon. No, yesterday afternoon. It was shortly after midnight now.

He kneeled beside Latchett, and the robot hands shook a little. Latchett had been shot in the back of the head by a very small caliber gun. The bullet was still in his brain. The gun must have made one short, sharp crack in the apartment, not loud enough to be heard and noticed beyond the near-soundproof walls. There was still a faint odor of burnt powder in the apartment, though that might have been his imagination.

He slipped his hands in Latchett's pockets. A wallet, cigarettes, matches and a long, thin steel tool that Latchett must have used to enter the apartment. He stuffed the things back in the pockets.

The silence was eating away at the edges of his nerves. He stood up, almost in a bound. Latchett hadn't been dead long. . . . If he had walked in on—

He was trembling, and afraid. He picked up a heavy bookend. He could hear his own breathing in the apartment, in shattering echoes against the walls, in his ears. He moved slowly. The moments had the fantastic quality of a nightmare, the kind of nightmare a child might have, Hillary realized. A nightmare that caused the child to wake fighting the clammy sheets, knowing the awful bottomless terror of the fantastic.

Hillary squeezed through the shadows in the little hallway. The door of the closet

was first. He opened it. Light filtered wanly from the living room. The closet was empty. The bath was next. Gleaming white porcelain, the glazed pink of the shower curtain—that was all. At the end of the short hall, Hillary fumbled for the switch. Light flooded the kitchen. It, too, was empty, and the tiny dining nook yawned vacantly at him.

So there was no one in the apartment. Only he and the dead man. Hillary went back to the living-bedroom. He stared at Latchett. "I wonder how Oakley will feel now?" he muttered to the dead man. "I wonder how he will interpret this—how he will interpret *you*!"

Hillary saw the light straw hat on the table near the door. Latchett's, he decided. He picked up the hat, looking from it to the body. Bending, he pulled Latchett's right arm about his neck. The wound in the back of Latchett's head hadn't bled much. The wound was too small for that; death had come too quickly.

Hillary pushed the hat on Latchett's head. Latchett didn't look so dead now, with the hat covering the wound. He dragged Latchett over to the door. The corridor was still silent, deserted.

The robot shuddered, licked his lips and dragged in a deep breath. Then he started down the hall with Latchett. He held Latchett upright, one arm about the man, Latchet's right draped over his shoulder. Hillary told himself that it would look like a friend taking a drunken friend home. Unless somebody took a closer look. . . .

The service stairs were in the back. It was hard, going down, trying to keep Latchett's toes from bumping. He counted the stairs. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. . . . On and on, like stairs leading down to a dungeon. He was gasping when he reached the rear door. His fingers fumbled with the spring latch that locked the door. A breeze brushed Hillary's face—the door was open.

He carried Latchett across the open space to the garages, expecting any moment a voice to say something to him. He conjured voices out of the soft night breeze, movement from the shadows. Finally, he had dumped Latchett in the back seat of his sedan. Then Hillary collapsed over the wheel, and his shoulders shook.

It was five minutes before he could trust himself to drive the car. He turned south on Fourth and drove steadily in that direction. His mind was still a chip in a whirlpool, with the one thought now of getting as much distance between his apartment and Latchett as possible.

He swung out on the Trail. Then Coral Gables. On beyond. The city had dropped behind now. Lights were fewer; passing automobiles were going faster.

Off to Hillary's right were the white-ghost shadows of a division of new houses under construction. He turned off on the side street. It was a dirt street, and bumpy. He could hear Latchett bounce now and then in the back. . . . He couldn't stand the dead man's presence any longer. The whirlpool now was a kind of white-hot flash. He pulled the car to the edge of the street, dragged Latchett out. Night creatures and a few buzzing insects cried out in Hillary's ears against his bringing the dead here.

Hillary pushed the body. It tipped, rolled. Hillary couldn't move. He stared in frozen fascination as Latchett's body rolled down the short incline and stopped in the ditch. One of Latchett's arms lodged on the lip of the ditch, pointing mutely to the warm, starry sky. Hillary shook himself, scuffed out his footprints, got in the sedan and drove back to his apartment. A very moderate drinker, Hillary nevertheless killed a pint of raw whiskey. Then he locked the door and propped a chair against it. He put the heavy book-end close at hand, knowing that, actually, it was a futile, frightened gesture. A gesture and nothing more, but it helped him to go to sleep somehow.

CHAPTER FOUR

Encore for Roberto

THE MORNING sun streamed through the Flagler Street window of Stacey's department store, touching the pink tongues of its rays on the waxen cheeks of Roberto The Robot. He sat like a statue; then he began his series of movements like something made of steel rods and wires. As if cogs were clicking in him, his left arm started coming up in a series of jerks, his right arm going down. *Snap!*

his head had turned. Now the right arm, jerking up, left arm descending. . . . Never varying, always repetitious, the movements went on and on for endless minutes. Then the mechanical man rose, flexed his arms to prove he was human, and dropped a curtain over the wide plate window. It was lunch time, but Roberto wasn't hungry.

As he stepped down out of the window into the store, Higganbotham came over to him. Dry-washing his hands, the effete little floor manager still looked peeved about the way Hillary had burst out of the window yesterday afternoon.

"There's a man in my office who wishes to see you, Mr. Hillary. He was quite inconsistent. I—ah—you may use my office for as long as you like."

Hillary thanked him, threaded his way over to a door. He waved back and smiled at the switchboard girl, passed along the bank of offices, and entered Higganbotham's cubicle.

Buddy Rugby jumped from the leather chair beside the desk when Hillary closed the office door behind him.

Rugby mopped his pink, noon face; his silken, pale hair looked as if a breeze had toyed with it.

"Hello, Hillary. Cigarette? No, well I shall have one—didn't sleep well."

"What's on your mind?"

"Those statements you made at Diana's house yesterday. Oh, cripes, I think I know what the trouble is!"

"Do you?" I wish I did, Hillary thought.

"I—ah—can trust your discretion, Mr. Hillary?"

"Completely."

"That's good, because part of it is rumor and gossip that I've picked up. I certainly wouldn't want to confide those things and have them spread!"

"I can well understand that."

"Yes. Well. Oh, cripes, it's partly about that gambler, Pierre Toutain. I heard he had a wad of cash he hadn't declared, paid no tax on, see? He was figuring a way to keep the real source of the money covered. Understand? Well, I heard this money was in his office, and that somebody picked it up." Buddy snapped his pudgy fingers. "Like that. Snatched the combination of Toutain's safe, which

wouldn't be too hard if you knew exactly how to go about it. Oh, cripes, I think he's a common thief!"

"Would you mind telling me who?"

Buddy looked at him askance and smoked furiously. "I think it was Harry—Harry Blanchard."

"Harry Blanchard? How do you know?"

Buddy twisted in his chair. "Well—when you said that Latchett had forced Diana into a car yesterday, it clinched things in my mind. I know that Harry has been spending more than usual. I know that he was at Pierre's the night the money disappeared. But he wouldn't spend too much in one lump, see? But if Pierre got wise . . . striking through Harry's sister. . ." Buddy shuddered the sentence off. "I'm frightened for her, Mr. Hillary. Oh, cripes, frightened!"

"How much money was there?"

"I'm not sure. Something like ten or fifteen thousand, I think." Buddy coughed on his cigarette. "Look, maybe I've already told you too much. I was frantic. I had to ask you if you saw or heard any more than you stated in my presence last night?"

"No, that was all."

"You're absolutely positive?" Buddy insisted suspiciously.

"Of course I am!" Hillary said.

"Well, I shall be toddling. You understand our need for secrecy. Don't slip any of your cogs, Roberto, ha, ha!"

FOR SEVERAL minutes after Buddy had gone, Hillary stood in the office. The more he knew, the more lost he was in the maze. He felt sweat beading his lip. There was as yet no news of Latchett's body. Would it ever be found? Of course it would. A body couldn't just lie indefinitely. Hell, here in Florida, out on the edge of town somebody would notice buzzards eventually—if Latchett lay that long. The only thing—was there anything, any mistake he'd made, to attach Latchett in a ditch to Latchett dead in his apartment. . . ?

At five o'clock Diana came. He saw her in the crowd before Stacey's window. She gave him a smile, and her lips formed words for him: "I'll drop by your apartment this evening. The Gracelyn, wasn't it? I do want to explain, please."

He did a slow, mechanical nod that only she understood, and with another flash of her smile she was gone.

Twilight was a mass of hot grey dust blanketing the earth when Hillary reached his apartment. Sam Oakley was sitting on the window seat at the far end of the corridor; from there he could watch the hallway. The sight of the gnarled cop brought Hillary up short.

Oakley came walking down the corridor. "Been waiting for you, Hillary."

"Have you?" He looked at Oakley's face and was afraid. Oakley looked like a hound that had just licked its chops over a tender morsel of food.

"Let's go in, Hillary?"

"Oh—sure."

Inside the apartment, Hillary watched narrowly for Oakley to make a move. They've found Latchett, Hillary thought, and somehow I slipped up. Somehow Oakley has traced the body here. . . .

Oakley rubbed his palms together. The motion made faint, dry sounds.

"Come on, Hillary, where's your hospitality?"

"Oh. . ." Hillary nodded toward the kitchen. Oakley followed him back. Hillary got out a fifth and set two glasses on the drain. He poured two hookers.

Oakley held his glass up. "Here's to the quick execution of killers!"

Hillary almost dropped his glass, but the robot face showed nothing. "Have we found a killer?"

"We have. Pierre Toutain!"

"No!"

"And why not?" Oakley's eyes blazed. "I've finally got that rat where I want him. Word's been around that Toutain lost a wad of dough out of his office. I say *lost* advisedly. The money was stolen. This afternoon, a worker, taking a short cut across a field on his way home from the housing development where he works, found Hank Latchett's body. And on the body, son, we found a money belt holding nearly twelve thousand dollars!"

A money belt. . . . Hillary hadn't searched for a money belt.

"As I see it," Oakley said, "Latchett lifted the money and his boss killed him."

"Where do I fit into the picture?" Hillary inquired.

"Just thought you might tell me some-

thing more than you did yesterday—about Latchett, I mean."

"No, I told you everything." Hillary poured Oakley another drink, listened to the cop gloat a few more minutes, then watched him to the door.

Ten minutes after the cop's departure, a knock sounded on Hillary's door. He opened it, and there was Diana.

"Hello," she said.

"Did you drive over?"

She nodded.

"Do me a favor," Hillary said. "Let's go for a ride. This place has given me the crawling willies."

They drove out to a public park and picnic ground. In the wan light of the dash lamp, he watched the wind toy with her hair. She parked on a white-shelled drive.

They got out and walked beneath spreading banyan trees, the night soft and warm on their faces.

"About yesterday afternoon . . ."

"You don't have to explain," Hillary said.

"But I want to."

In the shadows of a huge cypress, he touched her arm, turned her toward him. He could see the warm oval of her face in the darkness; it grew closer and closer, and his lips gently brushed hers.

She looked away, silent.

"Do you think it possible for me to have fallen in love with you, just seeing you from Stacey's window?"

"Should you say such things?" she said huskily. "What about Buddy Rugby? I'm marrying him just a few weeks from now."

"I don't care anything about Rugby. Neither do you, the way you might learn to care for somebody else."

SHE LOOKED up at him with a sudden motion. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to go away with me. No—don't laugh. You'll have to go away with me."

"Really! I will? Why?"

"To keep Oakley from getting you for killing Hank Latchett," Hillary said. There. It was out, but a trace of it remained, like poison in his throat.

He looked at her white, set face in the darkness. His throat was so tight he could

hardly speak. "Your family—the Blanchards—has no real money left, have they? It adds up. You working for a living, shrugging it off as a mere whim. Harry, your brother, having to stoop to being a common thief and stealing spending money from Toutain. And you again—marrying Buddy Rugby. There's only one reason why a woman like you would marry him—his money.

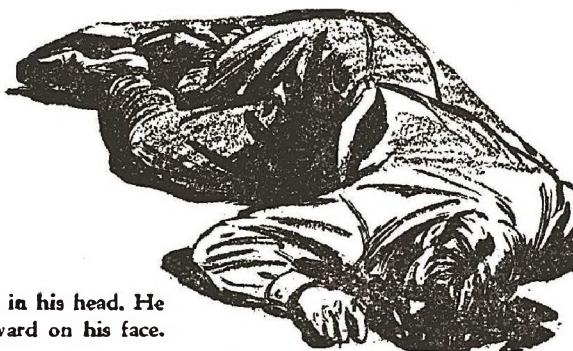
"I'll guess a little about what happened, Diana. Harry saw the chance of getting Toutain's money and was too weak to resist. Toutain found out who had got the money and must have got pretty rough about it. Yesterday Latchett came after you to scare Harry into returning the money. You made a deal with Toutain that you'd make Harry return the money if Toutain would promise that nothing would ever be said where it might reach Buddy's mama's ears. Toutain knew you'd never go to the police and figured it safe to gamble with you. Last night he sent Latchett around to pick up the money. Harry had it ready for him. Latchett had

scandal and Mama Rugby would never let her precious Buddy marry you. And no Buddy meant no millions. The millions—that's what you were thinking of, Diana. The Rugby jack.

"But you had no scratch to satisfy Latchett. You knew the Rugby millions would never be safe for you as long as he lived. You followed him to my apartment, shot him. Oakley is holding Toutain for it—but Oakley overlooked one thing: Toutain would have taken his dough back, knowing that Latchett was wearing a money belt when he left Pierre's. So whoever killed Latchett didn't know about the money belt. That doesn't fit Toutain—it fits you, Diana!"

She turned quickly and started back toward the car. He started after her. She heard his step and turned. A wave of cold horror poured over him. The pale light of the fresh moon glinted on the little gun she had taken from her purse.

"Diana . . ." But nothing came out. He looked at her eyes and wished he hadn't. He knew then. He knew. Nothing could



A lancing pain burst in his head. He pitched and fell forward on his face.

another errand—to drop by my apartment and drop the gentle hint that I keep my mouth shut clam-tight from now on. Toutain feared Oakley because he knew Oakley hated him. Latchett was to make it plain to me that I give Oakley no help in trying to dig up a kidnapping or assault charge.

"All these things Latchett was doing under somebody else's orders. But he also saw a way to turn a little deal of his own. He threatened to reveal Harry's thievery to Mama Rugby unless you came through with some scratch. That would have meant hell to pay. One breath of that kind of

keep her from the millions. She would get them. Nothing would stand in her way.

He was still trying to speak her name, his hands forward in a groping gesture, when the little gun winked and cracked.

He felt the jar of the bullet across the ribs. He turned, stumbled and began running, up toward the heavy shadows of the trees.

Diana, he thought. Diana, the huntress! She was hunting him, hunting him. . . .

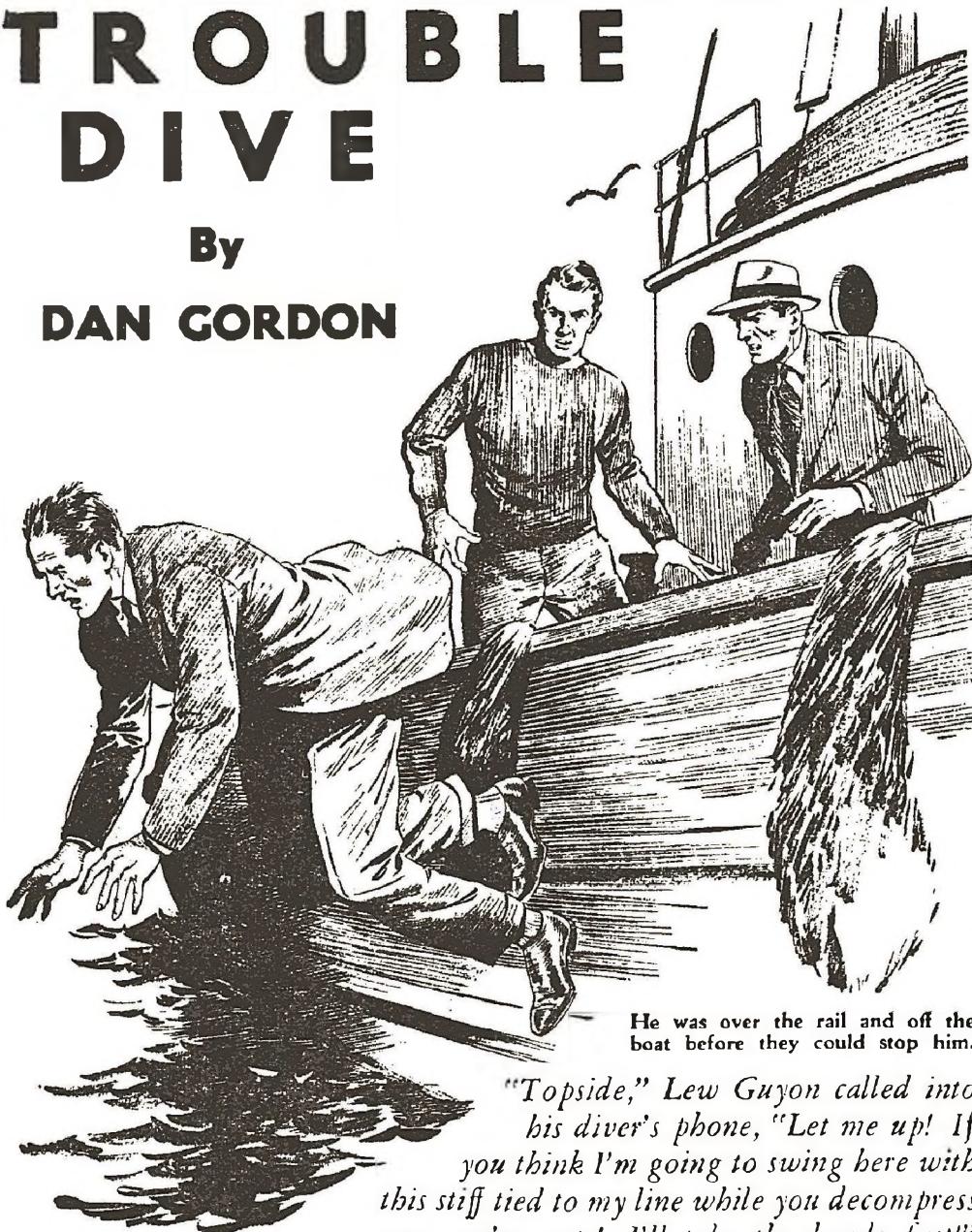
He heard the crack of the gun once again and a lancing pain burst in his head. He pitched, fell forward on his face, then

(Continued on page 128)

TROUBLE DIVE

By

DAN GORDON



He was over the rail and off the boat before they could stop him.

"Topside," Lew Guyon called into his diver's phone, "Let me up! If you think I'm going to swing here with this stiff tied to my line while you decompress me, you're nuts! I'll take the bends first!"

THE YOUNG MAN looked at Lew Guyon with a sullen stare. He said, "That's a lot of money."

"Don't I know it?" Lew Guyon said.

His visitor said, "I suppose just because my name happens to be Philip Wharton, you expect a double fee."

Lew said quietly, "I told you. I've got a

tug to maintain and a crew to pay, whether I use them or not. You asked me how much. I told you. As far as your name is concerned, I never heard it before. Who the hell do you think you are?"

Philip Wharton said, "You must have quite a thriving business if you talk to all your clients this way."

"I eat," Lew said, "now and then. If there was another firm on the coast doing marine investigation, I'd send you to them."

"Do you want the job, or don't you?"

"I don't want it," Lew Guyon said, "but I happen to need the dough. That fee will be in advance."

Philip Wharton threw some bills on the desk and strode out the office door. Lew Guyon carefully counted the money, then sighed and picked up the phone. "Get me Carver," he said. "Down at Homicide."

Lieutenant Carver came aboard after they'd shifted the tug down the bay. Lew Guyon put down the diving dress he was patching, grinned gaily and said, "Hello, Loot."

"Five miles," said Carver bitterly. "I've driven five miles to find this tub, and you haven't even started."

Lew said, "I drove it, too. It's only two miles by sea. But look. I'm doing the department a favor, recovering a body free. And you want it to be on schedule. Loot, you're a hard man to please."

"Where's the yacht?"

"Out there." Lew waved one arm loosely. "She lies in about twenty fathoms. I thought of Mermack's financial rating and the fact that he's still aboard, and I figured you'd want to be here."

"Sure," said Carver. "I'm glad you called. But who's paying you? His estate?"

Lew slowly unrolled a strip of material, cut an oval patch. "No," he said. "A heel. You know what a reputation Mermack had? Playboy and party-tosser. Well, he's had his yacht anchored off here long enough to make a play for the local belles. They say when that craft burned the other night, there were dames jumping around in the briny like salmon headed upriver. Some of them weren't wearing too much, according to the crowd that was down at the water's edge watching the pretty fireworks."

Carver said impatiently, "I know all that. I read the papers, too."

"Society columns?"

"No."

"Then you wouldn't know my client, Philip Wharton. Friend Phil strongly suspects that the lady he's going to marry was aboard the yacht that night."

CARVER sat on the rail and watched without particular interest while Lew finished applying the patch, laid the canvas suit on deck and placed a weight on the mend. When Lew picked up another dress, the lieutenant stirred uneasily. He said, "You *are* going to work today?"

"Sure. But the light'll be better later. Better underwater, I mean. But back to that louse, my client. You know why he has to check on this girl to make sure she doesn't defile the great Wharton name? It's because sonny boy has been on those parties with Mermack. He knows whereof he speaks."

"Nice people," Carver said. "But what do you look for, my little submarine shamus? Footprints?"

"Lingerie," said Lew. "Or knicknacks. That fire sent the lovelies ashore in some very interesting rigs. Wharton was down on the beach when a bevy of 'em waded ashore and ran like hell. He thinks he recognized his."

From up on the dock, a voice said, "Guyon, I don't mind your discussing my private affairs with your friends, but it galls me a little to have you do it while I'm paying for your time."

Without looking up, Lew said, "Lieutenant Carver of Homicide, Mr. Wharton."

Wharton gulped and said, "How do you do?"

"I was explaining to the lieutenant," said Lew, "what I'm doing on this job. If I called you a louse, think nothing of it. It won't affect my work. By the way, what's the name of that girl?"

"Jen Tobey. But what—" Wharton looked uneasy.

"Initials. They have 'em on handbags, luggage and such. Don't worry, Wharton. I'm not going to call her up."

Later, when Wharton had gone and the three girls came out on the pier, Lew was sorry he had said that. Jen Tobey looked like the girl in the motor-oil ads. She talked the way good oil flows, smooth and soft and clear. Lew put down the suit and looked up at her when the other girls called her Jen.

Lew Guyon said, "You girls like to come along for the ride? We're shovin' off pretty soon." He was looking at Jen Tobey.

She smiled and said, "Some other time. When the job is not so gruesome. We heard you were going out to the yacht."

Lew kept his eyes on hers until she grew a little uncomfortable, bit her lip and looked away. And in that long moment, he felt that he knew her well. She wasn't wild yacht parties. She was clean and wholesome, and fine. It made Lew sick to think of her as Mrs. Philip Wharton.

Callao Johnson, the mate, called down from the bridge, "Ready, Mr. Guyon."

Lew answered, "Let's shove off—No, wait. I've got to get something out of my car." He sprang to the dock and, swinging up, he collided with Jen Tobey. She almost fell, and as he put out a hand to steady her, Lew knocked her purse from her hand. Its contents bounced along the pier. Lew hastily gathered them up, stuffed them in the handbag and handed it back to her. Mumbling his apologies, he ran to the car and returned.

THE GIRLS stepped back as the tug crew threw off the lines. Lew leaped aboard, the screw churned the water, and Carver said, "You take your time about starting, but once you make up your mind to go, you're really a ball of fire."

Lew Guyon didn't answer at once. He was inspecting the shining compact that lay in the palm of his hand.

The tug crew found the sunken yacht by trailing grapnels, and the anchor chain ran out with a brief metallic roar. Lew was by now completely dressed, except for the helmet. A tender lowered it over his head, locked it in place. Lew lurched to his feet, and they guided him to the stage and swung him over the side.

Comfortable, now that the air and water had joined forces to take the weight from his shoulders, Lew adjusted his air. The water was cold on his hands, and later they would be numb. But he preferred the discomfort to the inconvenience of working with gloves.

A line moved in front of his face plate. That would be the grapnel line, swung to him by Callao Johnson. "Going down," Lew said into the phone and stepped from the metal platform.

He rode the grapnel line down, down through the light green water to the darker green, the layer where the pressure

touched him with soft and clinging hands, gluing the dress to his legs, pressing with ominous firmness against his lower body.

Below him, the dark shape took form, became the outline of a sunken craft. Lew checked his descent and let his feet come down against the prongs of the grapnel. The hook had apparently caught in one of the yacht's portholes. Shoving his jaw against the chin valve, Lew let his body fall slowly forward and began to crawl along the fire-scorched deck.

Systematically, he worked his way through the staterooms, finding evidences of revelry in assorted bottles and gowns. It was a slow process, but the danger of fouling his lines kept him cautious. Death, always at your side, would climb right in there with you if you hurried, twenty fathoms from your natural element. Crabbing sideways through the door of the fifth cabin, he dragged the light in behind him and saw the huge body floating against the overhead. Hesitating only for a moment before he went forward again, Lew caught one floating foot and hauled the dead man down.

The face showed calm and peaceful in the light from the underwater lamp. The mouth was open a little, lending an expression of faint surprise. Lew had seen that look before. He ran his hand through the gently waving white hair and found the place where Mermack had been hit.

He had got it from behind. And that was that. He hadn't drowned. But because all the buoyant material within the cabin was floating high off the deck, moving restlessly with the tiny, shifting current that came through the open door, it was impossible to say whether or not there had been a struggle.

Lew took a firmer grip on the body and forced his way through the resisting water until, outside the stateroom, he unfastened the cord from Mermack's dressing gown and bound the body to the rail.

"Don't go away," he said softly.

From above, Callao Johnson said, "Repeat?"

"I got company," Lew said. "I'm going to the engine room now."

Tonelessly, Callao repeated Lew's words. "You got company . . ."

He doesn't, Lew thought as he worked his way forward, give a damn. I could be

knee deep in bodies, surrounded by ghosts, and as long as my air was okay, Callao would think I was well off.

The engine room was rough going. Lew carefully tied back the door with a strand of manila cut from the profusion of cordage on deck, then worked his shoulders through the opening. He turned and, spotting his feet on the rungs of the ladder, said, "Give me slack."

"Give you slack," Callao said.

Sliding and stepping downward, Lew came at last to the floor plates and began his search for the sea valve.

The flange had been removed and the valve was open. Long before the fire had eaten its way into the hull, probably long before the fire started, someone had opened the giant valve and let the sea rush in. Lew shoved his light into the bilges, saw the flange, some loose bolts, a wrench.

"I'll be a detective yet, Callao."

"You'll be a detective yet. How's your air?"

"Okay." Lew followed his lines to the foot of the ladder and began his ascent. "Coming up."

"Coming up."

THE GENTLE TUG on the lines told Lew that Callao was taking in the slack. He fed more air into his dress and floated up, guiding himself against the

engine room ladder. At the rail, he unfastened the body of Mermack, towed it to the grapnel line. Throwing a leg around the line, Lew let the slight pull raise him until he saw the rays of the afternoon sun slanting down through the light-colored water. The pulling stopped.

Still gripping the body, Lew dangled there beneath the surface. Moments ticked by. Finally he said, "Topside. Let me up."

"Decompression, sir," Callao said.

"You think I'm going to swing here with this stiff all day? I'd rather have the bends."

"Decompression," said Callao, unimpressed. "Eighteen minutes to go."

"Well, lower the stage."

The stage came down. Lew stepped to the platform and fastened the body to it. He had plenty of time to think as he waited for the compressed air to work its way out of his bloodstream. . . .

Philip Wharton came alongside in a speedboat as Lew was wriggling out of his dress. Wharton climbed aboard and said, "Well?"

Lew stood up and tossed him a compact. "Looks like you called it," he said to Wharton. And to Carver, "Give me a cigarette."

Wharton turned the compact over. He looked puzzled, yet snug and satisfied like a man who has gotten his money's worth,



Plus other stories of suspense and esoteric crime by such famous writers as D. L. Champion, Bruno Fischer, Shad Collins, Dorothy Dunn, and others. At your newsstand November 3rd.

PRINCESS OF EVIL

Certainly a strange and darkling doom stalked the Miller clan for—so whispered the neighbors—who else but the loveliest and last of that mad family would toil by night on a weird masterpiece of statuary, using bright, devouring flame instead of a chisel—and ME as her model?

Thrill and chill with Frederick C. Davis' weird epic

"SCULPTOR OF FLAME"

In the December Issue

15c DIME
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but who isn't quite sure he can carry it home. "It's hers," he said. "I know. I'm the chump who gave it to her. I thought I knew that voice."

Lew let the smoke drift out as he talked. "Voice?" he said carelessly. "I thought you saw the girl on the beach."

"It—it was dark," Wharton said.

"Detecting," Lew Guyon announced to the world at large, "is mostly a matter of science."

Behind him, Lieutenant Carver choked, recovered.

Wharton said, "I don't follow you."

"It's because," Lew said gently, "we were raised in different neighborhoods. Where I come from, now, most anybody is apt to toss a wild party."

"I'm not narrow-minded," Wharton said stiffly. "But there's no point in our discussing codes. You've done me a service, and promptly. I no longer regret the fee."

"You will," Lew Guyon said. "But as a man broad-minded enough to take murder in stride, you will see that I can't return the fee even though I found out that *you* were aboard that yacht."

Wharton jumped, regained control as Carver began to pay attention. The young man's face was yellow now. The bronze had gone from his tan. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Carver's lazy eyes had become interested, alert. Without looking away from Wharton, he jerked his head at Lew and growled, "Go on."

"The girl," Lew said, "was just an excuse. He doesn't care about the girl. He doesn't care about anybody but Philip Wharton the third or fourth, or whatever he is. He needed an excuse for an interest in this yacht. The strain was getting pretty rough, and he had to know whether he'd get away with it or not. Couldn't wait till the regular salvage people got around to working the boat."

Wharton squirmed and said, "How silly."

"It was," Lew agreed. "Especially when you used the same wrench, first to tap old Mermack on the skull—" Lew broke off to see how well his guesses were shaping up. Satisfied with Wharton's expression, he resumed—"then to take that

flange off the sea valve. I took the old fingerprint gear down with me. And there you were. Big as life." Lew looked at Lieutenant Carver.

Carver was gazing at him with wonder and new respect.

Wharton said, "But I didn't . . ." and pausing, he searched the two hard faces, seeming to search for an out. Then he was moving, jumping up on the rail and off the boat. He hit the water and shot away, using a desperate crawl.

Carver had his gun out, but Lew laid a hand on his arm. "The dope," Lew said softly. "With a speedboat tied alongside, he's got to take a swim. . . . Callao! Take a couple of men and pick that squirrel up, after he's good and tired."

The speedboat muttered and moved away. On the tug it was very quiet. "A washout," Lew said against the silence. "No good at love, no good at murder. And when it comes to making a getaway, he goes at four knots an hour. I guess he owed Mermack money."

"Those fingerprints," said Carver. "Why didn't you tell me about that before?"

"You too?" Lew needled gently. "You got a picture of me sprinkling powder or whatever they use—in twenty fathoms of water? Maybe I'd better latch onto you before *you* take a swim." Lew grinned and picked up the compact Wharton had dropped when he left.

"You're bright," Carver conceded. "But it runs to spots. Like stealing that girl's compact. That was a dizzy trick."

Lew looked at the distant shore line, tossed the compact into the air. "Maybe," he said. "But when I go calling tonight, I'm a friend returning this thing—not a hairy-chested detective who tosses boy friends into jugs."

"But you didn't know about Wharton then. Not when you swatted that purse around. You were going to hand the compact to Wharton and tell him she'd been aboard."

Lew Guyon said easily, "Sure, Lieutenant. What's a little reputation, compared to a life with that heel?"

From out on the water, there came a hail and Callao's voice: "Have got! We catch him, sir!"

AMERICAN ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

When Chicago police arrested Mary Boston in 1903 for shoplifting, with her accomplice, a five-year-old niece, hidden beneath her voluminous pocket-lined skirts, they unearthed the largest family to dishonor modern crime. Mary, as well as her niece, was the direct descendant of two prolific emigrant families all of whose children and the resulting children—cousins—had intermarried. They all lived together, more than a hundred strong, in a lonely rambling house in the worst part of town. All were professional criminals, even the children. They ate stolen food from stolen plates, wore stolen clothes and hospitably kept open house for all manner of stolen goods.



2

One of the most consistent complaints of police is that people who get burglarized are usually equally guilty with the burglar. They leave money and valuables about, doors and windows unlocked, etc. To prove their point, New York's finest cite the case of John McLaughlin, who, with a burglary record longer than the law's arm, finally reformed. He worked hard for years as a machinist, perfecting an invention which had the whole-hearted support of the authorities. The invention was a success and the police forgot about McLaughlin. Then, not long ago they picked him up in a burglary. He was broke, he explained.

He hadn't been able to sell his brain-child, a really burglar-proof lock!



They sent Jack Ryan to jail for life, for not killing his half-brother. Ryan had left two corpses in the Mad River Mountains—but for two years, he kept a straight face when they tried to make him confess. Then a third corpse was found, that of Ryan's half-brother, in the same spot as the first two.

Again, he swore violently that he was innocent. In fact, twice as innocent as he'd been before, he said, because this time he was even telling the truth. To prove it, he confessed to the first two killings. Authorities believed him, whole-heartedly, at last. And put him away for good.



Yvonne Cassieri almost had the last word in her last marital quarrel. She was found on a Brooklyn street at midnight, peppered with bullets, and dying. She managed to tell detectives, before she expired, that it was her husband who'd shot her. A deathbed confession, when properly obtained, is considered valid in court. Authorities had an open-and-shut case—except that John Cassieri, the husband Yvonne had framed with her dying breath, could prove he'd been home all evening with Yvonne's own mother, while Yvonne had been out with her killer, who was subsequently apprehended and sentenced.



4



THE MOST RESPECTABLE CROOKS



EVERY YEAR "honest" men and women steal \$200,000,000 from employers in the United States. Their reasons for theft are the usual hazards of living encountered by the average person.

In Florida, the forty-three year old secretary of a real estate company went overboard for wine, women and song. At a night-time beach and drinking party, his companion, a married woman, was drowned. To pay for his frolics and to settle with the woman's husband, the realtor filched from his firm \$29,382.

In Europe, the married, highly reputable branch manager for a U.S. motion picture company fell in love with his secretary. His superiors discharged the girl. The manager continued to pay her salary from



She "borrowed" until she couldn't pay back.

his own funds. In addition he began to drink and gamble. When his bosses investigated, he burned up the office, himself with it. He had stolen \$3,507.

A forty-five year old Nevada widow had worked for twelve years in a finance company. She earned \$175 a month and owned some of the firm's stock. Her associates were of the best and she lived quietly. When a shortage of \$13,742 appeared in her accounts, she admitted stealing for the benefit of a man who headed a religious cult to which she belonged. Ironically, her "apostle of truth" fled to California where he spent the money on another woman.

Gambling on the stock market cost the

president of a Wisconsin company his reputation and life. He had lost heavily at the exchanges, and his brokers demanded their money. Casually, one day, he paid his life insurance premiums, settled his chauffeur's salary, paid off his market losses. Then he killed himself. To square accounts he had taken \$271,777 of his company's funds.

In a company reorganization, a thirty-six year old Canadian feared that he would lose his job. To protect his family from what he thought would be a period of unemployment he stole \$2,183 in cash from his employers. He carried the money in his wallet and had the bad luck to lose the wallet.

These are actual case histories from the files of the United Fidelity and Guaranty Company of Baltimore. As an underwriter of employee honesty, the company annually examines the lives and characters of 500,000 persons. It receives daily one hundred or more dishonesty claims.

On the basis of its experience, the company has compiled a study of *1,001 Embezzlers*, clearly indicating that, under stress, a habitually honest person may become a thief.

An embezzler, the company found, is usually not a criminal type. Up to the time of their defalcations, the 963 men and 38 women in the study had lived normally and honestly. Their employers trusted them and hired them for their ability. The men and women themselves were, for the most part, married and supporting families.

These 1,001 had none of the anti-social, pathological characteristics of the professional criminal. The professional criminal usually avoids honest companions. He has seldom made an effort to live by honest means. Usually he does not marry. Jailed, he is often unruly, lazy, resentful. He hates the embezzler who is practically always a model prisoner.

By NAT W. McKELVEY

Among the most respectable Americans are embezzlers, the people who never welsb on a debt—even if they have to dip into their employers' tills to pay up!

The typical embezzler, the U. S. Fidelity and Guaranty Company reveals, is a white-collar worker, thirty-six years old, married. He has two children. He lives in a good neighborhood, has been reared according to high moral standards. He has



A businessman continued to support his discharged secretary.

a high-school education, is a good mixer. He drives a medium-priced car, but his traveling has been confined to weekends and short summer vacations.

The typical embezzler is often active in social and community projects. He works in every kind of business. He is intelligent and competent. He has held his job for nearly six years, and he has honestly earned the trust of his employer.

When finally he takes his employer's cash or goods, the typical embezzler regards his defalcation as "borrowing." He resents the implication that he is a thief. He dislikes the idea of running away with the money and generally does not plan to do so. Only two percent become absconders. When discovered, slightly more than two percent commit suicide. By and large, most embezzlers face the music with courage and withstand their punishment with dignity.

It is almost axiomatic that, when caught, the typical embezzler will have practically none of the stolen money left. He squanders it as fast as he steals it.

Why do these normally honest men and women steal? Why might you also become a thief?

Of the 963 men in the study, 169, or 17.6 percent, stole to satisfy a craving for gambling and liquor. Of the women, 34.2 percent stole in order to live beyond their means.

Living above their means was, for the men, the second most potent stimulus to theft. Then came debts, bad business management, women, speculation, family sickness, inadequate income, insanity, operation of another business, wives, replacing lost money, saving for a rainy day, blackmail, covering a dishonest son, and revenge. Only forty-one, or 4.2 percent of the 963, stole because they were professional thieves.

FOR THE MOST part, women stole for the same reasons that caused the men to become defaulters. One forty-two-year-old widow had worked for fifteen years in a department store. Her first peculation was \$3.80 which she badly needed to pay a small account. She intended replacing the sum out of her next salary check. But she failed to do so. Not only that, she continued to "borrow" from her boss until



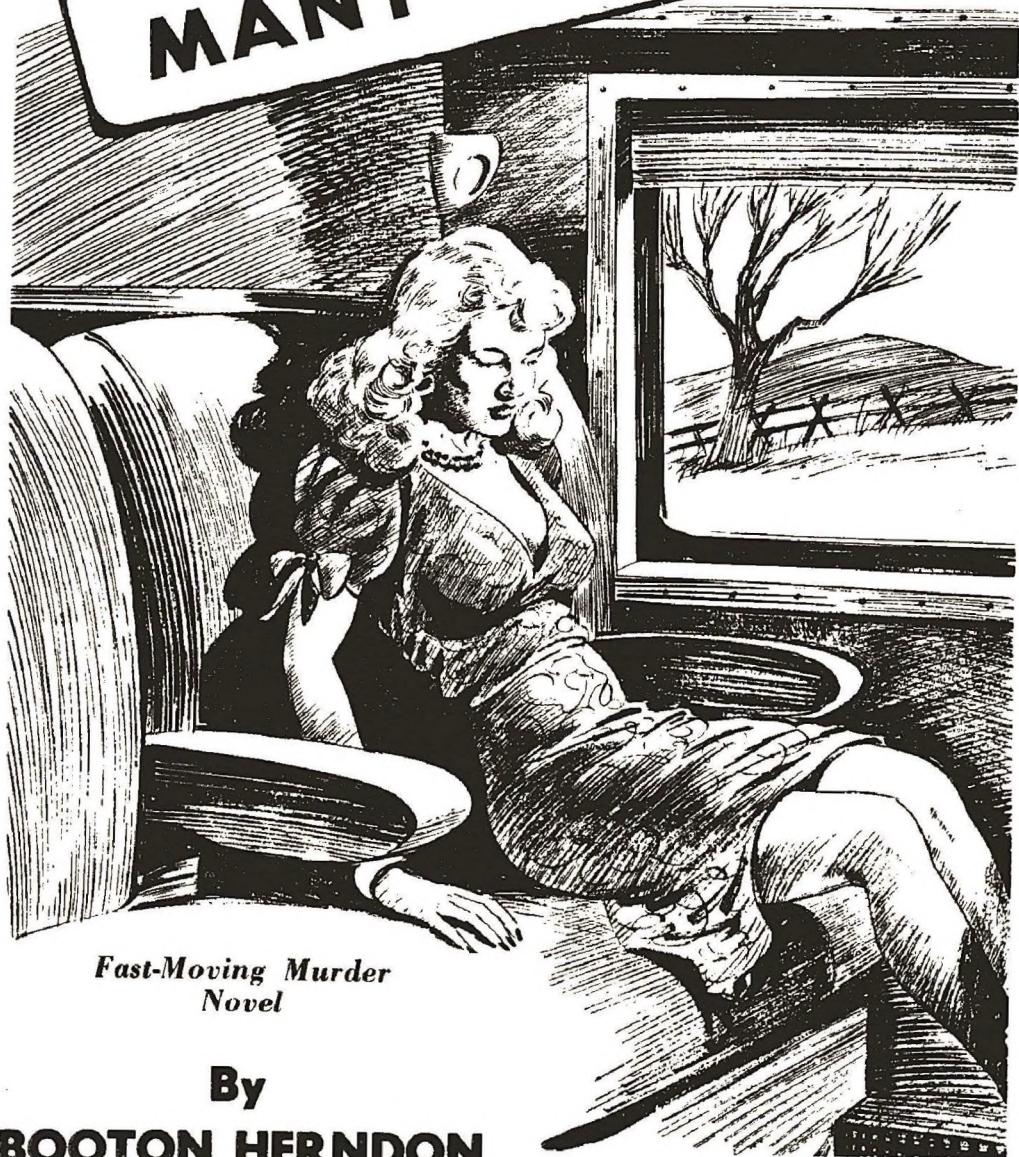
A forty-five-year-old widow stole to support a religious cult.

she had taken \$1,363 and could no longer cover the shortage.

Like this woman, the typical embezzler usually goes from bad to worse. He intends to repay the money, but the situation gets out of hand. If the stolen cash was placed on a sure winner at the race track,

(Continued on page 129)

THE BLONDE WITH TOO MANY NAMES

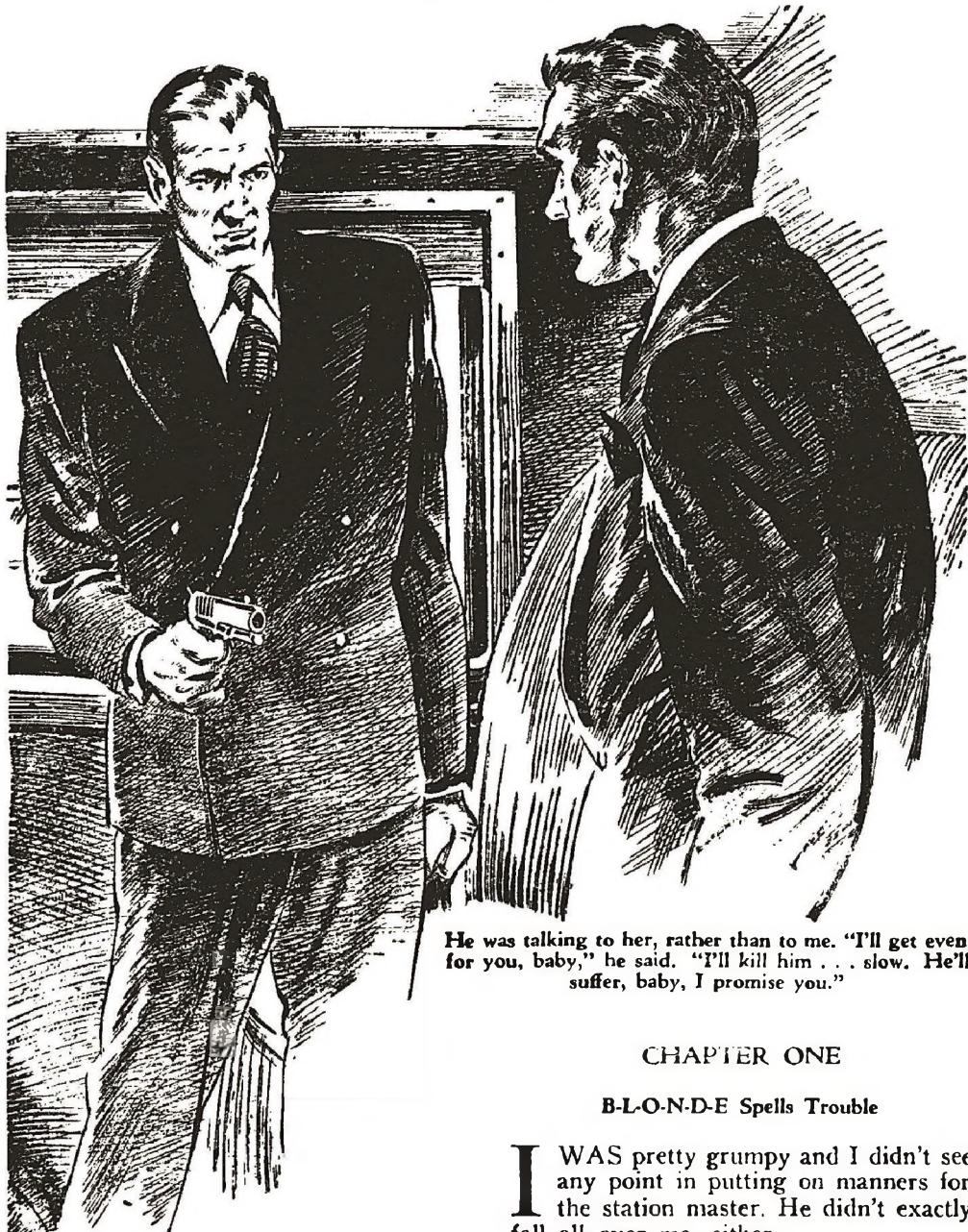


*Fast-Moving Murder
Novel*

By

BOOTON HERNDON

With five husbands to her credit and a hole in her head, that blonde mantrap, Judy Wieczynski De la Plata Schlesinger Smith Hawkins Rocco, was at last out of the running. But there were three men still mourning her: her last husband, Rocco, who had loved her; Spink, the conductor who had to take care of her corpse; and me, the guy sitting behind the biggest eight-ball this side of the death house!



He was talking to her, rather than to me. "I'll get even for you, baby," he said. "I'll kill him . . . slow. He'll suffer, baby, I promise you."

CHAPTER ONE

B-L-O-N-D-E Spells Trouble

I WAS pretty grumpy and I didn't see any point in putting on manners for the station master. He didn't exactly fall all over me, either.

"My name's Al Hanley," I said.

Weekend Magazine. You're holding a bedroom for me."

He looked at me over his glasses and grunted. "I can remember when people called up and made reservations," he said. "Here y're." He handed over the tickets and reservation slip the magazine had arranged for.

"And now for Mrs. Judy Wieczynski De la Plata Schlesinger Smith Hawkins Rocco, the one-woman United Nations," I said. "Where is she?"

"Compartment A, Car 47," he said. "Convention going on?"

"Huh?"

"You're the fourth one to ask about her. Other three were husbands, I think. Might be a little crowded for an interview."

Well, that was just one more straw, having three husbands along interrupting whatever interview I might get. I didn't even bother to find out their names, or why in the world they chose that train for a gathering of the clan.

I was mad enough as it was. The station clock said five o'clock, Friday, time to take off on a nice long weekend with a very lovely lady who'd been married to only one guy, me. Instead I was off to Bar Harbor with Judy et cetera Rocco.

It's a new low in the magazine business when an outfit as big as *Weekend* goes all out for a babe whose only claim to fame is the number of husbands she's been able to accumulate. Jerry Banks, one of the seventy-eight editors who do nothing all day long for *Weekend*, gave me the job at four in the afternoon. I was to ride up with her and call in my report the next day. What I was supposed to get in the report was a mystery to me. Every time Judy Weeks got engaged, married, divorced, or even picked up, all the tabloids had a field day. Getting new material on that walking bundle of clippings would be about as easy as finding a new angle on the goldfish in your living room.

I WENT to the bedroom *Weekend* had so graciously procured for me, opened my briefcase and dumped the contents out on the seat. One sheaf of clippings, shoved in my hand as I left. One tooth-

brush, brand-new. And a bottle of Scotch, in case I ran across a Scotch snake. I slopped some in a glass, gave it a dash of water and sat down with the clippings. A half-hour later the train was almost in Connecticut, the conductor, a roly-poly gent named Spink, had my tickets, I was snakebite-proof, and this is what I knew about Judy Weeks:

Born Judith Wieczynski, somewhere, sometime. First husband, De la Plata, movie producer, drank himself to death long ago. Second, Schlesinger, went back to Germany where he belonged. Those two were eliminated as train companions, at least. By now, incidentally, Judy had a half-million or so, plus a few houses. Third, Ronald A. Smith, artist, and, of course, money, some of which Judy relieved him of in parting. Next, James P. Hawkins, a young screwball who had inherited and spent the more oily parts of Texas. No. 5 was Salvatore Rocco, gambler. They were still married but it seemed that the road of their romance was about as Rocky as his nickname. The story went that she was tired of him and was retiring to her Bar Harbor estate, the one she nicked Ron Smith for, to make up her mind how many grand she'd allow Rocky to pay off.

That was the story of Judy Wieczynski, otherwise known as Judy Weeks. I sighed, finished off the drink and went to take a look. Her car, two back of mine, was all compartments, with a narrow aisle running down the side. Compartment A was towards the front.

I rapped on the door and she asked me who I was without opening the door. I told her. She wanted to know if I had any credentials. I'd do anything to stop screaming through a Pullman door, so I shoved the envelope that my tickets were in under the door. It had my name, car of *Weekend*, on the front. She let me in. I evidently had beat the trio of ex's, because she was alone.

I knew what to expect, having seen her picture about once a week for the last ten years, but I didn't find what I expected. Oh, sure, she was easy on the eyes, from her fifty-dollar permanent on down. But that wasn't what surprised me.

That walking gold mine was scared stiff. It showed all over her.

She slammed the lock back, and turned to me with a big cooing smile that was about as genuine as her first half-dozen marriage vows. She told me to sit down and asked about my drinking habits. I told her. She made a drink and I sized her up.

She was okay. Figure soft and cuddly. Glistening eyes. Voluptuous, sensuous lips. Soft blonde hair around her face. She reminded me of a kitten. I could see her cuddling up in some guy's lap, and I could also see her bristling and clawing the hell out of him where it hurts—the pocket book.

"So," she said, handing me a glass and sitting down opposite me. Her voice was like a feather running up and down my backbone. "Mr. Alvin G. Hanley, of *Weekend*. I've been wondering when your mag was going to discover little Judy."

"Looks like we couldn't have picked a better moment," I said. "What do you think's going to happen?"

A double-take from Miss Weeks. Charming. Well acted. And phony. "Happen?" she asked.

"What are you scared of, honey?" I asked. "Look, I've been in this business a long time. You're petrified."

She gave me the second reel. Her eyelids dropped down to her jaw and she swayed a little. I got the idea all right. "Please," she said, "let's not talk about it. Here we are, you and I. Nothing to talk about but me."

She got up, turned around and plumped down on the seat by me. Her hand reached out—it was a gesture that could be taken as friendly, if her hand hadn't been so hot. I began to see how Judy changed her name. If it weren't for Mrs. Hanley sitting back in our apartment just as mad as I was, I might—

The thought cleared the atmosphere. "Okay," I said. "Let's talk about you. After Rocco, who's first—I mean sixth."

She sighed, but she didn't move her hand. "Nobody," she said. "Nobody at all. I'll be so lonely. . . ."

"Come on, Judy," I said. "You're talking to *Weekend* now. Three million circulation. That beautiful mug of yours spread out from coast to coast. Only thing is, I have to have some kind of a

story to go along with the pictures."

SHE LIT a cigarette, inhaled it down to her pedicure and leaned back. "You can't print it, honey. But if you want it, here it is. Seems like I got a little out of my depth with Mr. Rocco. I thought it would be so romantic, a gambler's wife. Besides, he was so different—like a leopard. But he wanted to play for keeps, and you know little Judy. She likes variety."

"So you want to quit, and he doesn't?"

"You're so smart, baby. Furthermore, he intends to play rough. He told me I could keep on living with him, or I could quit living. It made no difference to him."

That was about as much melodrama as I could take. I got up, put the drink down and headed for the door.

"Look Miss Weejysinki," I said, "I want to get some kind of a story, but *Weekend* Magazine isn't in the detective thriller business this week. Suppose I take a trip around deck or something. When you want to talk sense I'm in Bedroom D, two cars ahead. Okay?"

I got to the door before she caught me. She whirled me around. She mashed up against me and cut on the motor. "I mean it, Mr. Hanley!" she said. "I'm scared! That's why I made you stick that envelope under the door. That's why I don't want you to go."

She drew back a little, not too much, and looked me over. "Not bad, anyway," she said. "Even if Judy wasn't scared, you'd do. Stick around, Mr. Hanley. Have another drink."

"I'm married," I said. You don't always make clever cracks when three million bucks worth of sex is wrapped around you.

"So'm I," she said. "That's the trouble. Please, Mr. Hanley . . . Al" She pressed a little closer against me.

I was weakening fast. Who wouldn't? But I didn't get a chance to make Mrs. Hanley unhappy, not right then. I'd been aware of a squeaky noise coming from the door, but I put it down to the age of the Pullman we were in. It wasn't a squeak, though, and it wasn't age. It was somebody picking the lock.

It all happened so fast I'm not clear yet just what did happen. The door

busted open and I grabbed at Judy.

Lightning struck. The room went black. Judy screamed.

The door slammed shut. The room got light again. And then red, when I figured out what had happened.

"Flashlight picture," I growled. "Somebody took a picture."

"Oh," she sighed. "Is that all?" She got a better grip on my neck and nuzzled her cheek against my chest.

"That's enough, baby," I said. "That's enough for Mrs. Alvin G. Hanley. And Mr. H., too, as far as that goes. Pardon me."

I threw open the door and looked up and down the corridor. It was deserted. Not a soul. The door to every room was tight shut. Whoever it was, they could have gone thisaway, thataway, or right next door. I decided to go toward the front. Guys just don't walk up and down railroad trains with flashlight equipment every day, you know. Surely *somebody* saw something.

"Please, Al," Judy said behind me, "I'm not scared any more—I figured Rocky'd try more than just a bedroom photograph—but I'm still lonely. Wouldn't you like a little Scotch and Judy?"

I whirled on her. "Look, screwball," I shouted, "that picture may not mean a thing to you, but it does to me, see? That might mean that marriage number one for Al Hanley might go right where marriage number X for Judy Weeks has gone—right down the divorce drain. Get it?" All the time I was yelling she was getting closer and closer. "Damn it," I said, "unwrap!"

She unwrapped like a sulky little kitten. "Okay, smarty," she said. "If you change your mind in a half an hour, come back to mama. After that, Judy's going out to look for somebody nice."

I was halfway toward the front of the car by that time, busy establishing a record as the first guy who ever walked out on Judy Weeks. Not so enviable, when you come to think of it. What more can a man who's roaring away from his wife at eighty miles an hour want? What's so wrong with a million-dollar figure, both ways?

I was at the door to the vestibule before

I suddenly realized that I was going out after Rocco or one of his boys, armed with nothing but ten knuckles, and the sensation was something like a gallon of ice water. The worst scrape my job had ever got me in before was a frosty look from a personal secretary to some big shot. And now I was on the trail of a mob. I didn't like the chore.

I thought it over. Behind me was Judy Weeks in a receptive frame of mind.

Ahead of me—if I was going the right way—was a tough little guy who was at least as big as I was, counting in a gun.

There was another fear lurking there, too. That one tipped the scales. I started out again, away from Judy Weeks. I was just plain scared stiff, but not so much of Rocco. It was a five-foot dish of dynamite named Mrs. Alvin G. Hanley seeing a picture of me in a clinch with some other dame, that had me buffaloed.

My friend Spink, the conductor, a portly old guy with a stripe on his sleeve to match every inch on his belly, was coming up the aisle of the next car ahead. He'd seen nobody with a camera. Rocco? He gave me a blank look.

"Short, dark, slender," I said. "Hell, everybody knows Rocco. He's the numbers king. Married to Judy Weeks."

"Who isn't?" he sighed. "I know who you mean."

"Where is he?" I yelled.

He looked at me as though I should be riding the rods and began a long song and dance about how it was not his policy to give information which might interfere with the privacy of his guests, but I didn't hear all of it. I didn't hear anything, as a matter of fact. I only felt.

Somebody was pushing something small and hard and round in my back. I was no longer looking for Mr. Rocco, because Mr. Rocco had obviously found me.

CHAPTER TWO

So-Long, Sweetheart!

"JUST step into the drawing room," a cool voice said in my ear. "Step back slow."

Slow was the word. I looked over my shoulder, and there was Rocco, grinning.

holding a door open. I didn't see who was holding the gun, but I didn't have to. He was there, all right.

"Thanks," he told the conductor. "Rocco is not exclusive. Come in," he said to me. "Didn't you get my invitation?"

He emphasized the question mark with a little jab of the gun. "Yeah," I said. "I got it, all right. As a matter of fact, you can have it back any old time."

Rocco nodded. The pressure in my back eased off. I smiled at the conductor, something like the smile you give when you're being led off to the salt mines. Old Stupid smiled back, turned around and walked off. I backed in, and the door closed. There I was in a nice comfortable drawing room with three of the most uncomfortable-looking guys I ever saw in my life.

Rocco nodded again, and the two bruisers sat down. Rocco turned to me. His mouth was grinning, but his eyes weren't. "It disturbs me when people yell my name outside my door," he said smoothly. "Only, in your case I am very glad. I was looking for you."

"Well, here I am," I said. I may even have sounded tough, but I doubt it. Anyway, the anesthesia of that gun in my back was beginning to wear off, and I was remembering what I wanted to find Rocco for. "I'll tell you what I'm here for, too," I said. "I want that picture."

"Picture?" he said.

"Yeah—want me to spell it? I was in Judy's apartment when somebody took a flashlight picture. It's a big joke to her, but it isn't to me. I'm married."

"Congratulations," he said. "So am I." He looked at me hard and repeated it. "So am I. Understand? Why should I take a picture?"

"Damned if I know. All I know is I want it."

"And why is it so important?"

I clouded up on that, and I'd have started raining on him if I didn't have sense enough to count. Three guys are three guys, and while I may not be dying of the palsy, there's a limit to what a guy can do with his fists.

"You know damned well why it's important," I said. "I don't know what you think you're going to do with that picture."

I don't know any paper that would print it, and I don't know what good it would do you if they did, but I can't take chances. I told you I'm married. My wife might not like it."

That grin disappeared off his face as though he'd pulled down a shade. He looked mean all over.

"Your wife! What about Judy's husband?" he hissed. "Her present husband? Me? You had her once and couldn't keep her. Leave her alone, you weaseling . . ."

He lapsed into a mixture of profanity and underworld about then, but I didn't need a translation. His eyes were enough. He was getting ready to blow his top. I knew it, and so did his pugs. They moved over closer to us. They were just in time.

It happened like a flash. His fist shot out and I was just able to roll enough to catch it on the side of my head. Another one was coming, fast, but I had my guard up for that.

Two arms can't block six fists, especially if one of them has a gun in it. The barrel caught me on the head and I went down to one knee. They were punching at me from all angles, and all angles hurt.

ROCCO was swinging like a crazy man. His fists whistled by my head and he didn't seem to care whether he landed each one or not. He figured he had plenty left for each one that missed. When they landed they hurt, but it was the guy with the clubbed gun that was doing the damage.

I got up, bringing a haymaker up with me, and turned it loose in his general direction. It was blind luck, but it landed on him somewhere, and a pain shot up my arm and then there was a crash on the other side of the room and I was up against two of them.

Rocco was still flailing, and the other guy was drawing back for that one punch that wins fights, when the engineer put on the brakes, and the train began slowing down. I was facing the way the train was going and the momentum carried me into them. We all piled up on the wall, but I was on top. I scrambled up like a cross between a cat and a crab, using them as supports, and the combination of me and the drag of the brakes was enough to hold

both of them down so I could get free.

I got to the door first, and I got out of there. A couple of people were coming down the aisle and I pushed between them and took off toward my room. I got there, slammed the door and jammed everything I could find against it.

Then I grabbed the bottle and sat down. We pulled into New Haven. I raised the bottle and drank a silent toast to the mayor, every member of the city council and every student at Yale. If that train hadn't started slowing down for lovely, beautiful New Haven, I'd have still been the reluctant guest of Mr. Rocco, his fists and his pugs.

Wonderful, dreamy New Haven. Poems should be written about it. I raised the bottle again.

And then I sadly put it away. One was enough. I not only didn't have that negative showing me and Judy Weeks in a clinch, but I hadn't exactly gotten chummy with the guy who did. It was mighty fine Scotch, but it wasn't the best thing for the high-powered thinking I had to do.

I began at the beginning. Rocky was married to Judy. Judy didn't want Rocky. Rocky wanted Judy. Rocky took a picture, or had it taken, of his wife and me in what the tabloids call a revealing pose. Why? Why in hell why? There were the facts, but what was the reason?

There was no answer. Newspapers don't print that kind of stuff any more, and if they did, so what? He wasn't out to get me—he couldn't be. He didn't even know who I was. Even then, after using me for a punching bag, he didn't know who I was.

So it must have been Judy, but so what? She didn't care. She'd been married five times and had a bankful of dough—what difference would a picture of her mugging some guy make to her?

It didn't make sense. Something was awful haywire, and it was beyond me. I needed some advice, and there was only one person who could give me a lead, outside of Rocco. That was Miss Judy Weeks. I sighed, got up, washed the blood off my face and started pulling down the barricade behind the door.

It was back up the train again for me, past the tiger's den to get to the lady.

My march back up the car past Rocco's drawing room was to the beat of drums. It was just one drum, and it was in my chest, but it sounded like Gene Krupa warming up. I guess Rocco and his boys must have been deaf, because they let the walking heart-beat that was me go right on by.

When I got out of that car I took a couple of breaths down to the corn on my little toe and wiped off a quart or so of sweat. Then I went up to Judy's door and banged on it.

"Open up, honey," I yelled. "It's me, Al Hanley."

No answer. I banged again and yelled again. Then I started cussing her. She'd wait a half-hour, huh? Well, my watch told me that her time limit still had five minutes to go. I'd stopped one punch for each of those minutes, got myself out of a scrape that would have had Superman worried, downed a stiff shot and done some thinking, and all in the half-hour she couldn't wait.

Suppose I was actually in the mood for what she was in the mood for? Look what she'd have missed. The fact that all I wanted from her was information, and all she was going to get from me was questions, had nothing to do with it. She was still a cheating little tart.

I GRABBED the knob of the door. I twisted and pushed. I went halfway across the compartment when it opened. I caught a glimpse of Judy lounging back on the seat, sighed with relief and then remembered I was supposed to be mad.

"What's the idea?" I said as I pushed the door closed. "Gone exclusive? The half-hour isn't up."

Judy said nothing and I walked over to her. She was a good-looking babe, all right. She had enough left for five more husbands. Her dress was pulled up over her knees, but she didn't seem to care. It was twisted a little around her chest, but she didn't see to care about that, either. And if she didn't, I didn't. Little Judy was all there.

By that time my eyes had finally got up to her face. They stopped there. Judy was staring at me. Her eyes didn't move.

Something was wrong. I leaned over and looked at her more closely. She was

still staring, but she didn't see me. She wasn't seeing anything, and she wasn't pretty any more.

She was dead. I moved her slightly and saw red blood on blonde hair, red blood on the green cushion. I turned her head gently and then quickly took my hand away. The back of her head was like tomato soup.

I looked at her for a long minute before I finally brought myself back to the world. I whirled and snapped the lock. Then I went back and sat down. Then I got up and helped myself to a slug of Judy's Scotch. She didn't need it.

I guess it was the thought that I wouldn't be able to ask her about the picture that snapped me into having some sense. Here I was, alone with a murdered woman, and worrying about a picture. I'd asked for her all over the train. Everybody knew I was going to be with her. My fingerprints would be all over the place. I was smearing more on a glass right then.

Rocco would be glad to testify to anything. Even if he didn't know who I was, he had certainly spared no words making known his opinion of young Hanley.

He'd given a pretty good imitation of temper, too. Although a man with as much experience with the law as Rocco should have been able to do a better job of murder, it couldn't have been anybody else. He must have come back just as soon as I'd left his drawing room, and dropped in on Judy. He was in just the right mood.

She'd said he was like a jungle beast, and he'd proved she was right.

I looked around for whatever it was he'd hit her with. It had to be something heavy, but I didn't see anything that could have done the job. A gun butt, maybe, and he'd taken it back with him. Maybe he was sticking it in my compartment, right at that moment I shuddered and poured myself another slug. That time I noticed that the bottle was damp, and I took a towel off the rack to wipe my hands. The towel was damp, too. Mighty poor housekeeping.

Well, anyway, *Weekend* sure had itself a story. Not often does a magazine have the good fortune to assign an accused murderer to the murder he's accused of.

I looked around the room once more, but I didn't expect any tell-tale clues, such as Rocco's autograph on her forehead, and I didn't find any. Being in that cramped room with a corpse was giving me the creeps, and even if I didn't know where I was going, I'd better get the hell out of there. I didn't bother to try to cover my tracks. I couldn't hope to prove I hadn't been there that first time, and any attempt to rub off fingerprints would make it look even more suspicious.

I GOT a "Do Not Disturb" sign and I hung it on the outside of the door as I left. I did it casually and naturally, I hoped, and it was a good thing. It was also a good thing that I hadn't tried to cover up any fingerprints.

Because the fat conductor was coming up the aisle, his eyes right on me. I gave him a big wave. "Hello," I said. "I'm still looking for Mr. Rocco. Did he come back here?"

He gave me a blank look. "Why, no," he said. "He hasn't left his drawing room. There was an accident. One of the men had fallen against the berth and had a cut on his eye. I went in to check and just left."

He looked at me with a straight face. If he saw the dents on my mug, souvenirs of that accident he was talking about, he didn't say anything.

"But I could have sworn he came back to bother Miss Weeks after I left," I persisted. We were moving on up the train, away from Judy now. That was one good thing.

"Not a chance," he said. He began giving me a half-dozen reasons why, but I didn't listen. I'd had the bad news. Rocky and his boys hadn't left the drawing room. And if he hadn't stepped in Judy's compartment and bashed her over the head, who had?

The answer to that question was too damned personal. And then I remembered the other two husbands. Spink and I were getting along a little better now—I put it up to him.

"Well," he said, "there's Mr. Smith. He's back in the next car. And then there's Mr. Hawkins, in the car back of Smith. Spread out all over the train, three husbands and a man from *Weekend*.

That last one is you, Mr. Hanley."

"Yeah," I said. "That's me, all right."

He shot me a glance. "Something the matter?"

"No," I said. "Not a thing. Not a single, solitary thing."

Except that here was a wonderful way to eliminate a prime murder suspect named Hanley.

The meeting of the protective and benevolent order of the husbands of Judy Weeks didn't just happen. Those three guys were on the train for a purpose. Although I could think of better things to do with Judy than beat her head in, I'd never been married to her, either, and she'd never taken me for a bankroll. Under different circumstances I might feel different.

And anyway, if either one of Judy's remaining husbands had gone in her compartment, it would certainly take a lot of pressure off me.

So I innocently looked at our boy Spink and asked, "Any of them paid a call on her yet?"

That was the time our boy Spink should have shot me one of his glances. I was about as close to trembling as a grown man can get. The right answer to that question could move an eight-ball. The one I was behind.

"No, not that I know of," Spink said. "But I haven't made any effort to find out, of course."

So we were right back where we started. There was only one thing to do. Find the husbands. I didn't know what I was going to say or do, but I had to do something. I had the law and Mrs. Hanley on my neck. I waved good-bye to Spink, having lured him safely away from Judy's door, and took off.

CHAPTER THREE

Too Many Husbands

ON THE WAY I wondered vaguely just what I was going to do. I could be candid:

"Pardon me, Mr. Smith or Hawkins as the case may be," I could say, "but have you killed your wife lately? It would be a convenience to me if you'd confess."

Or the direct, man-of-action, approach.

Walk up, grab him by the necktie, cuff him with the back of my hand, and growl:

"Start talkin', bub, or I'll rub yuh out."

Not so hot, but it got me out of the car. The next was just like Judy's, all compartments. A husky-looking young fellow was swinging down the aisle, and I started to walk sideways to let him get by, but he stopped. His eyes lit up as if he had seen an old friend, and a happy, boyish grin spread all over his face.

"Ho, matey," he boomed, beating me on the back as though I was an old college chum, "how's the lerg on the gaftan?"

"Huh?" I said. It sounded like double-talk to me. Only why would anybody stop me in the train and talk double-talk?

"Simple, old chap," he said. "The rog is inferior to the bamzone, that's what. Got a light?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. I found a match, struck it, and held it for him. He leaned over, then he gave a sudden lurch and fell all over me.

"So sorry," he said. "The train rocked." He said it with that big grin, and for a moment I almost agreed. Only the train was pretty steady, and he'd fallen deliberately. I didn't get it.

"That's all right," I said. "The haspin was nolie."

That drove him crazy. He smote me on the back again. "Oh, brother," he said, "that was a hot one. Where you going, brother?"

"To see—" I started, and then things started clicking. A husband of Judy's, a kid from Texas, Hawkins, on the train, a screwball. This screwball was a screwball, all right. "Your name Hawkins?" I asked.

That killed him. He roared. He thought that was great. "Jim Hawkins?" he asked. "Oh, that's a bemis on the ratch. That's a nifty. You want Jim Hawkins? 'Live or dead?'" He gave me time only to nod, and then pointed to a door. "That's it," he said. "Tell old Jim I sent you." He beat me on the back again and took off in a shuffle-off-to-Buffalo finish. I went to the compartment door. I wasn't going to argue with that maniac.

I tapped on the door, waited a polite interval and tapped again. Then I tried the knob. For the second time that night

I found myself hurtling into a compartment as the door suddenly opened, and I fell all over a little fellow who'd obviously been coming to the door. I felt like a dope. I tried to cover up.

"I'm sorry," I said, "my name's Hanley, *Weekend Magazine*. We're doing a story on Miss Weeks, and I just left—"

I cut it off short. A feminine voice came from the seat, and a fluttery-looking little woman spoke up. "We are not interested in anything Miss Weeks may say or do," she said. "Are we, Ronald?"

So this little dried-up runt was Ronald Smith. That made the screwball outside Hawkins, all right. I shrugged. What was the difference? Let him have his fun. I had Smith. He was looking at me with big brown eyes, like a whipped dog. It wasn't hard to figure. From the tone of his traveling companion, obviously his second wife, the less said about Judy the better.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, quietly. I nodded and he grabbed a bottle. The silence was awful loud. I said the first thing that popped in my mind.

"I see you drink the same whiskey," I began. "Same bottle—"

He shot a quick look, and I remembered and shut up. He handed me the glass. I didn't know what to say, but then the woman came to the rescue.

"That, Mr. Hanscomb—er—Hanley, is a closed chapter in Ronald's life. Isn't it, Ronald?"

"Yes, dear," he said.

"Closed chapter, eh?" I said. The little man shot me another quick look. Old Put-*His-Foot-In-It* Hanley was running in high gear. I saw he was only pouring one drink for me, and I changed the subject. "Through with the bottle, too?"

HE CLOSED his eyes and rocked back as though I'd hit him. With a woman like Flutter-ball around, I might as well have.

"Ronald has found that alcohol only dulls his artistic gift," she put in tartly. "I must say that that woman certainly taught Ronald many bad habits, habits that he is losing by the sheer force of his will. Won't you sit down, Mr. Hanley? Tell me, did that woman mention my husband?"

"Well," I said, but I'd done enough talking for a while. Ronald put a glass in my hand while Yes-dear put words in my ears. She talked for about ten minutes without breathing, and it was all about what a wicked, wicked woman that woman was, and how she had just told Ronald, she had, that he just had to talk to her and make her understand, and if he didn't, she would. She didn't need that Bar Harbor estate and poor Ronald did.

"Oh-ho," I said. "so that's what the convention is for. You figured on getting her alone up there and talking her into giving you back your place. Only why the rush? Why the same train and all?"

The Chatterbox, in a few thousand words, explained how they had found it impossible to talk to Judy in New York, what with Rocco hanging around. They read about her departure in the papers, and that was that.

"Why Hawkins?" I asked. "What's he doing on board? Incidentally, he told me Hawkins was in here."

Chatterbox snorted. "Nobody ever knows what Hawkins is doing, except Hawkins," she said. "He's the shrewdest fool I ever encountered. So he's on board, huh? Has he been to see the woman too? What does he want?"

That little reminder jerked me to my feet. When screwball left me, he was heading straight for Judy's. Probably wanting something too. He wouldn't have been on the train otherwise.

"Excuse me, folks," I said. "Two from three leaves one, and that's that double-talking idiot Hawkins."

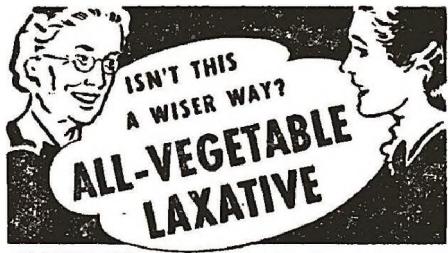
I got out of there and lit out for Judy's compartment. I didn't know exactly what I wanted, but maybe something was going to break. I beat it down the train.

When I came to Judy's door nobody was behind me, nobody in front. Coast clear. I put my hand on the knob and gently turned. Nothing happened. I turned harder and pushed. Still nothing happened.

The door was locked, and dead people don't lock doors.

Somebody had not only discovered the murder, but had locked himself in with it.

My first impulse was to run, but I called up my will power, and then I realized that the last thing I needed was will



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power. I wanted to get away from there. Fast.

I turned to beat it, but the lock turned right along with me. I was one step down the aisle, but that voice was faster. It said just one little word, but that wasn't what froze me to the carpet.

"Stop," hissed Rocco, but a little click that went along with the command had more authority. It was the kind of click that comes complete with the latest-model automatic. All you have to do to hear it is snap the safety off.

I held my hands out from my sides, turned around slowly and started back. Rocco was holding the door open, just a crack. He let me in, then closed the door.

"You can put that thing away now," I said, nodding at the gun. Then I looked again. Rocky's hand was shaking. I looked up at his face. His eyes were wet.

Tough Guy Rocco was bawling. His face was twisted up, a tear ran down his cheek, and his shoulders were shaking. He stood there and looked at me, and he made not the slightest effort toward either putting the safety back on the automatic or putting the gun away.

I'd been thinking that with Rocky locked up in the compartment all I had to do was get word to Spink and Rocky would be the choice selection for the rap, but the way he looked at me made that sudden burst of enthusiasm fade quickly into the night. The guy was wacky, and wacky people shouldn't point guns.

I had to say something, quick. "Why'd you do it?"

HE BLINKED at me through the grimace. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. His hand was still shaking, but the gun was pointing at a pretty large and close object—me. He wasn't going to miss.

"I thought you loved her so much," I said. I had to keep talking. "Is that the way you show it? What'd you hit her with?"

Finally he got a word through. "I did love her," he hissed. "More than you and the others put together. I came in and found her like this. Dead. Did you kill her?"

"Who, me?" I said. Tell me quick

something better to say. "Why, no, certainly not. Why I only came along to—"

"I know," he said. "She told me. You weaseling rat. You made your deal and then came running back to squirm out of it. I hate a weasel."

What Rocco was saying was all Greek to me, but he sure meant it. He was breathing hard through his mouth, and his eyes were like black shining specks.

"Then, when she wouldn't go for your deal, you got mad and killed her. You killed her, didn't you?"

"Look, Rocky," I said, "I don't even know what you're talking about. I—"

But he wasn't listening to me, or talking to me either, for that matter. He was muttering to himself. "Killed her," he hissed. Then his voice changed tone. "Killed you," he said softly, talking to the corpse on the seat. "Blood on your lovely hair. But I'll get even for you, baby. I'll kill him . . . slow. He'll suffer, baby, I promise you."

He was talking to her, but his eyes were on me. Suddenly his voice broke, and he struck out again, like lightning. I knew

what was coming, having had experience along those lines just an hour before, but he was quick. He poked straight out, and the gun sight raked along my cheek. Then he followed it up with a knee and an elbow.

Rocky obviously saw no point in fighting by the rules. The idea was to make me suffer. A clubbed gun, a knee to the groin and an elbow to the solar plexus proved it. I gasped and dropped down on one knee, but I stuck my head along his side so he couldn't get in a good blow with the gun.

He was hammering at me from above, but I stuck close to him so he couldn't get power behind his blows, and climbed up him. All I had to worry about was the possibility that he might come down to earth. As long as he wanted to beat me up I could handle the situation, but I couldn't fight lead bullets.

I came up slow, with my head under his gun arm. When I felt his shoulder on the back of my head I threw all I had in one big chance and twisted.

I used my head and my arms and my

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feet and I swung him around, reaching for the gun at the same time. He was still trying to club me with it, it didn't matter where, as long as he could feel it thud on flesh. I was forty pounds heavier, and I finally had figured out some plan of action, but I was no match for that twisting, squirming maniac.

He broke loose and careened across the compartment. I started after him, but as he whirled he got the gun pointed back at me. The whiskey bottle was right by me and I grabbed it and threw it.

It's hard to miss a guy cooped up with you in a compartment, but the label on that bottle was still wet, and it slipped as I let it go. It missed him by inches, but he still had to duck. I followed up with a glass. It was dry, and I didn't miss. It caught him in the face just as he pulled the trigger, and the bullet went straight up. I had another glass on the way before he could get the gun down.

Then I was on him. I got my hand on his gun arm and pushed it up and crashed him into the wall between the two windows. He was still twisting and squirming and punching with his free hand and trying to get at me with his knee, but I had all my weight on him. I was inching my hand up his arm to the gun when the door opened behind us, then closed.

"Pardon me," a voice said. Am I interrupting something?"

Rocky and I froze.

"If I'm not welcome, just say the word," the voice went on. "Never was one to intrude. Thought I heard a funny noise, but you know these trains. Noisy as the devil!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Which of Us Is Me?

SOMEHOW or other Rocky and I got out of our clinch. I held on to the gun arm as we turned around. When I saw the guy I wished I had the gun. I'd have used it on both of them. The newcomer was the big guy with the grin, Mr. Hawkins, No. 4 on the Weeks parade.

For a minute I forgot his entry made things a lot easier for me. Rocky, insane

The Blonde With Too Many Names

with rage as he was, still had some glimmer of intelligence left, enough to tell him not to do any shooting in front of witnesses. Anyway, I hold on to that arm.

"I just came in to see Miss Weeks," the young fellow said smoothly. "If you're busy, though, I can always come back."

Then for the first time, he took a good look at Judy. He looked again. The grin wiped itself off his face. "She's hurt," he said to nobody. Then to us, "Who did it?"

"Who're you?" Rocco hissed.

"Never mind that," the guy said. He looked at Judy closely, then put out a hand and felt her pulse. Rocky and I stood in our clinch, watching him. "She's dead!" he said. "Which of you guys did it?"

"I'm her husband," Rocco hissed. "This man did it!" He gave a jerk, but I was ready for the move. He didn't get loose.

"Who's he?" the guy said, nodding at me.

"He was her husband," Rocco hissed. "His name's Hawkins. He's been pestering her. She told me. Then he killed her."

I was staring at Rocco. "You dope!" I yelled. "You mean all this time you thought I was Hawkins? Haven't you ever seen a picture of the guy? Why, you two-bit gangster, that's Hawkins right there!"

The grinning guy broke in. "You mean," he said to Rocco, pointing at me, "that this is James Hawkins, who used to be married to her, and that he killed her?"

"Yes," Rocco hissed. He turned to me. "Why should I look at your picture? I didn't look at any of their pictures. I made her throw them away. All I know is you were trying to welsh on Judy. You were trying to get her to give you some money. She told me. You couldn't weasel her, so you killed her. Just like I'm going to kill you!"

"You screwball," I yelled. "I'm not Hawkins! Why don't you bother to find out who people are before you start the bullets flying? Everybody knows what Hawkins looks like!"

"There he is right there," I howled,

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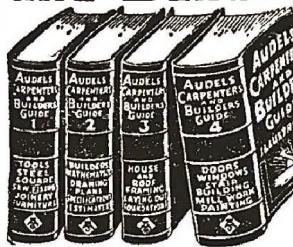
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DETECTIVE TALES

pointing to him. "That's Hawkins! He's your man!"

Rocco looked from one of us to the other. For a minute he was perplexed. Hawkins looked at us, looked at the gun still in Rocco's hand, and then grinned. I was getting tired of that grin. "Not me," he said. "I've seen your pictures even if Shorty there hasn't. You're Jim Hawkins, all right."

My mouth dropped open a foot, and I had to hold Rocco down twice as hard. I finally got him pinned back against the wall again.

"I ought to know," the guy said. "I work for a magazine. Furthermore, here's who I am." He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out an envelope. He waved it under Rocky's nose, but he didn't bother to show it to me. He didn't have to. It was mine. That's what that business was about, falling all over me in the vestibule. Mr. Hawkins was not only a screwball but a pretty fair pickpocket, as well.

"That's who I am," he said. "My name's Alvin G. Hanley." Then he beat it out of there.

And left us right back where we were before, only worse, if anything. I'd been holding on to that squirming monkey's arm for a good three minutes, and he was nearly breaking loose. I let him have a couple of jabs to the jaw, but I couldn't get my weight in it any more than he could.

Finally I just couldn't hold on any more. The muscles in my fingers were no match for his whole arm. He got his gun hand loose. I dived for it again and I thought I had it, just when red lightning hit the train and a mule kicked me in the shoulder and the door flew open and my old buddy Spink yelled "Stop! In the name of the law!"

ROCCO couldn't make up his mind whether to polish me off or run for it, and that split second was enough. I swung from the heels and Spink and the phony Hanley grabbed him just as I landed. Rocco didn't have far to fall. He just lay there against Spink's corporation, glaring. Spink took the gun and put it in his pocket.

The Blonde With Too Many Names

The four of us, jammed up in that room, just stood for a moment. A white face looked in the door and said something about hearing a noise, but Spink said everything was under control and the white face moved on.

Finally Hawkins broke the silence. "That's the man who killed her," he said, pointing to me. "The little fellow there was trying to kill him for revenge."

I stumbled over on the seat and sat down. I looked down at my shoulder; my coat was getting red. "Look," I said to the conductor. "Let's begin this at the beginning. First of all my name is Hanley. I told you that. This guy says he's Hanley. He's really Hawkins."

The conductor shrugged. "I know all that," he said. "Of course you're Hanley, and of course he's Hawkins."

"Think I'm going to stick around in a room with a guy who wants to shoot a man named Hawkins?" Hawkins asked me. "Think I'm crazy? When people start shooting at Hawkins, Hawkins is Hanley."

"You see?" I asked the conductor. "Just a minute ago he was lying through his teeth about who I was, and now he's trying to pin this murder rap on me. That guy's nuts!"

"How do you know he killed Miss Weeks?" the conductor asked Hawkins, taking a look over at Judy to make sure she was dead.

"Easy," Hawkins said. "He was the last guy in here."

"Yeah," the conductor said. "I saw him leave. Hung a Do-Not-Disturb sign on the door. But why'd he want to kill her?"

"Easy," Hawkins said. "Look at this!" He whipped something wrapped up in a paper towel out of his pocket, unwrapped it and held up a wet negative.

"I just finished developing it," Hawkins said. "Carry a kit with me. Take a look!"

Spink squinted at the negative, then at me. A negative isn't as good for identification as a finished print, but it will do. It was me, all right, and I could have been kissing her or killing her. We were tied up in a knot.

"I took that picture," Hawkins said,

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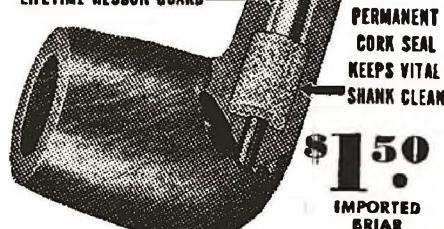
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"just before we got to New Haven. What do you think of that? He was the last guy with her, and he was fighting her!"

This was all a little too much for me. That blabbermouth Hawkins with his cameras and jokes and pickpocket acts was going to get me in the soup for good and all. While I was staring at them, wondering what to do, say, or deny, my hand bumped up against something on the seat by me. The bottle.

"Gentlemen," I said, "this calls for a drink." I picked it up and took off the top. I was pleased to see that I could move my arm all right, which meant that Rocky had only been able to give me a flesh wound from a distance of three inches.

They all gaped at me, but I saw no point in offering anybody a swig. I was the guy who needed it, and I was having trouble enough getting it. The wet label that had spoiled my aim slipped all the way off in my hand, and I had to grab at it with my other hand to keep it from falling. Finally I got the bottle up to my mouth and took a long pull.

It tasted mighty fine, because Judy's whiskey was mighty fine, and my need for it was mighty acute. My stomach got warm, and then, all of a sudden, the atmosphere clarified. I held the bottle out and looked at it again. It was wet and slimy where the label had been. The label had dropped on my lap, and it was soaked. I looked over on the glass shelf, where I had picked it up. The shelf was dry.

It clicked. I don't know how or why, but the whole thing clicked. Here I'd been chasing up and down trains, fighting off grief-crazed husbands and seeing another guy who should have been stopping my bullet flashing my identity, and now, with a 300-pound conductor standing over me ready to turn me over to the sheriff, and a face that felt like hamburger, I finally saw it all.

I braced myself and then looked at Spink and nodded to the door. "I think somebody's knocking," I told him.

THE SECOND he turned his back I was up. I took a chance on Rocco doing nothing, but I let Hawkins have it across the head with the whiskey bottle.

The Blonde With Too Many Names

Spink had his hand on the door latch and I grabbed him by the collar and yanked back. He brought the door back with him and I was out of there like an eel. I had the whiskey bottle by the neck and I broke all records for Pullman dashes as I beat it up the aisle.

I wasn't worried about the gun—Spink would never blast loose in his beloved train, and Hawkins, the only one who could catch me, would have to pick himself up off the floor and then get by Spink. I didn't hear a sound until I was at the door at the far end of the car, and then it was Spink, yelling at me to stop. Then I was through the door and I didn't even hear that.

I got to the compartment I was looking for, banged on the door and barged in. There was Smith, his wife behind him and looking just as startled but not as speechless.

"Well, Mr. Hamilton," she started. "We were just wondering—"

"Never mind, lady," I said brusquely. I looked at Smith. "Remember that conversation we had about bottles, and Judy? Remember what you thought I meant?"

"Beg pardon?" Smith asked. It was obvious. The cluck thought he'd gotten away with it. He thought I was dumb. He came mighty close to being right, at that.

"It just came back to me," I said. "When we were talking in here you nearly keeled over every time I said 'bottle.' When I said, 'That chapter's closed,' it nearly closed you. You were sitting here waiting for somebody to come looking for you. Your wife asked if Hawkins had seen her *too!* That meant you'd already been down to see her once. Ready to come clean now?"

"Why," he squeaked, "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. I'll have to ask you to—"

"I thought you'd be getting your second wind along about now," I butted in. "Maybe by some miracle they couldn't catch you. Well, it's too bad. Because you went down to see Judy, and you tried to talk her into giving you back your house or whatever it is loud-mouth over there wants, and she wouldn't give, and you began worrying about what Mrs. No.

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DETECTIVE TALES

2 was going to say, and you just couldn't stand it any more. And the only thing handy was the bottle. So you hit her in the back of the head. You probably hit her again and again, cold-blooded, too, until you knew she was dead. Am I right?"

Smith puffed out his chest as far as he could and started spluttering and waving. I grabbed his hand and shoved the whiskey bottle in it and closed his fingers over the cold glass.

"When you washed the blood off the bottle you wiped it dry but you forgot the label would stay wet," I yelled. "There it is, in your hand. The same bottle you killed her with. How's it feel now?"

He let out a yelp and started trying to push the bottle back to me. His wife came running over and started clawing, but I brushed her off. "How's it feel now?" I repeated. "There's blood—*her* blood—on that bottle!"

"Please, please," he whimpered. He broke down then. "Please take that bottle back. I'll confess. Only take that bottle back. I'm a sensitive man. I'm an artist. Please . . . please take that bottle back . . ."

He was still going strong when Spink puffed up with Hawkins. Spink started yammering, but I waved the bottle at Smith, and he came through like a little lamb. Mrs. Smith keeled over in a faint behind us and it was all over. Spink slammed ten pounds of hand on the little man's suit collar and dragged him out of there.

HAWKINS and I stepped out of the Smith compartment, leaving Mrs. Smith lying quietly, for the first time in her life, on the floor.

"Look," I said. "What was the idea of that picture, anyway?"

The screwball grinned again. Seemed he could turn it on and off like a faucet. "Well, it does seem kind of silly," he said, "but I've gone through a lot of money lately, and there's a girl, and Judy didn't seem to want to kick back any of the little things she'd gotten from me, so I tried the old picture technique. I was going to tell her I'd show it to Rocco. I knew he had her scared—she wouldn't

The Blonde With Too Many Names

let even me come see her in New York. That's why I got this train."

"Okay, that's that. The pickpocket stuff was to find out who I was, after you got my picture?"

"Yeah," Smith grinned. "No hard feelings, old chap?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "One thing more. What about trying to pin Judy's murder on me? Why were you so eager to have me burned in Boston? You were in there, in her room, yourself, weren't you?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "She was dead, too. I didn't think anybody saw me, but it sounded like a good idea to throw suspicion on someone else, just in case."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, let's go get a drink."

"Oh, fine," Hawkins chortled. "No hard feelings, huh?"

I motioned for him to go first and he started up the aisle, back toward the club car. I let him get a couple of steps ahead, and then I said, pleasantly, "Oh, say, Hawkins?"

He turned around with his grin sticking out all over his big Texas face. "Yeah?"

That's when I let him have it, and where. Right on the grin. I wound up and swung my fist from two cars forward and his head jumped back three feet. Then he hit the floor. I bent over him and pulled my stuff out of his inside coat pocket.

Out of his side pocket came the negative, the one that could break up a happy home. I straightened up and looked down at him.

"No," I said, "no hard feelings," and grinned just as hard as I could. "It was just a plim on the grasnab."

I turned around and walked back down the train as it began slowing down for Boston, ripping the negative into little tiny pieces and wondering if I'd do *Weekend* the favor of telephoning the Boston office before getting aboard a plane back home.

After all, I was the only husband Mrs. Hanley had and I didn't want her to get lonely.

THE END

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 54)

lot of men hunted that money, some of them even for weeks.

I was the one man who wouldn't quit, who hadn't quit—because I'd been hunting the money to make a life for Holly, and me. The kind of life she had dreamed of so long, the kind she had been made for. And I was going along with her.

I had hunted that money for nearly four years, from the time Cracker Magee went up. I'd finally found it on my last trip into Big Hungry, buried less than a quarter of a mile from the rotting remains of the shack where Cracker Magee must have spent his last days of freedom. I'd put the money in the corn the night I'd got home, when I'd gone in the barn to quarter the mule. But I hadn't had a chance to tell anybody. Not Holly, for she hadn't given me time alone with her, except for that fight we'd had, and not Obie Tucker, because he'd been shot first.

I took the steel box of money into the lonely house. I spread the packages of wealth out on the table and looked at it. I buried my hands in it and let the feel of it seep into my fingers.

Then I walked over to the window. The sun was setting, setting over her grave. The same rays that touched her grave touched this room, throwing little lances of light into the corners. It seemed the rays brought something of her here. "Holly," I whispered, "what will I do with the money now?"

There was fear and sadness and the loneliness of her grave in the shadows of the dying day. I turned the thing over in my mind. I had found the money for Holly, but now she would never be going out of the hills, and I hated the money because it had kindled a flame of desire that had put her where she was. Like poison now, I wanted rid of the money. I would take it back, to the people it belonged to. I didn't need the money now. I had wanted it to hold Holly to me, but I didn't need that now. No one could cut the slimmest of threads that bound her to me. No one could ever take her from me. No living mortal could ever hurt her again—for the dead are indestructible. . . .

THE END

NEAT PACKAGE

(Continued from page 63)

was trying to drag himself into a sitting position against the wall. Then he sat there, panting and kneading his stomach tenderly. "Once in a while . . . like this . . . you get a crazy one." He made himself grin. "Looks just as ugly dead, doesn't he?" Harrison grunted again. "Looks just as ugly . . ."

"Yes." Then Marty snatched up the telephone.

TWO HOURS later they said Harrison was going to live, but with four inches less of stomach. The docs said it had been a damn close thing.

It was 4:30 in the morning when Marty opened the door and Jean Marlin walked out with him. It was still snowing. It was silent in the streets. The tires of the car made a muted crunching as Marty drove, and after a long time Jean Marlin spoke. "Jay never did come," she said quietly. "And you told him about me, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I told him." Carroll kept looking straight ahead.

"It doesn't matter," she said slowly at last. "All the time I sat there and knew he wouldn't come, I was wondering why I knew it. I don't know. But he never would have been there when I needed him. Sometimes it's hard to see those things. You kid yourself, don't you?" She turned and looked at him.

Marty said he guessed everybody did. Jean lit a cigarette, then gave it to Marty and lit another. "You've been nice to me," she said simply, "and you did it without a reason." Marty stopped the car in front of her building. After he finished his cigarette, he waited a few moments. Then he got out and opened the car door for her.

"I could call you tomorrow," he said. "We could go somewhere. Maybe we could go to a show."

"Anywhere. Any time." He saw that her eyes were moist.

Marty drove home slowly. He was tired, a little, but it had been a good day. Walking, looking, asking and finding what you wanted at the end. Yes, indeed, it had been a good day.

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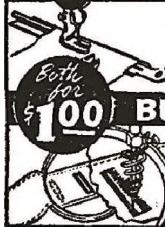
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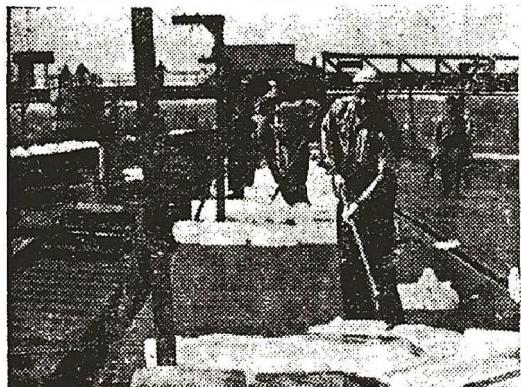
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 97)

slowly rolled to his back, feeling blood flow down over his ear from the side of his head.

He twitched; his features endured a spasm, and then he was still, eyes staring, glazed in the light of the moon. For a moment, she came closer, saw the blood, saw his face. A little sob choked her. Then she turned and ran.

Roberto The Robot watched her go. He heard the car starter grinding and stumbled to his feet. His marvelous muscular control, learned from the man who had amazed kings, was beginning to crack.

He reeled out from the line of trees. He saw the Buick, swaying crazily in her panicky hands, cut into the street at the edge of the park. He heard the scream of its tires as she made the turn.

The truck! he thought. The headlights of that truck!

She missed the truck, but the Buick got out of hand as she wrenches it around. A stream of bright water flowed down out of the park. Hillary couldn't wrench his gaze away as the Buick skidded—then plowed into the concrete abutment of the bridge that spanned the stream.

Hillary listened to the crash, the tearing of glass and the rending of metal, and the Buick was plunging down into the small stream. It tipped over and finally was still, one headlight pointing crazily up toward the sky.

Hillary stumbled off toward the wreckage. The truck had stopped. The driver had pulled her out by the time Hillary got there.

In the excitement of the moment, the driver did not see the blood on Hillary's own head. The driver had carried her body to the grassy stretch up close to the sidewalk.

"God Almighty!" the driver said. "Her neck—look at her neck. Dead, she is! Look, buddy, keep an eye on things till I find a phone, huh?"

"Sure," Hillary said. "Sure."

He didn't look at her. He watched the driver go away, running. Then Hillary raised his face a little so that he was looking into clean, fresh, open sky, and moonlight painted silver the tears that were in the mechanical man's eyes. . . .

THE END

THE MOST RESPECTABLE CROOKS

(Continued from page 105)

the nag ran last. If taken to pay an outstanding bill, another one, more urgent, cropped up. If used to buy stocks that were bound to rise, the stocks always went down. If spent to satisfy a nagging or extravagant wife, the wife was certain to become more extravagant, more nagging.

All kinds of mercantile and industrial businesses are included in the U. S. Fidelity and Guaranty Company's analysis. The employees who become thieves range in importance from warehouse watchmen to company presidents.

Among the 963 men, forty-nine held executive positions and 201 were branch managers. There was one foreign diplomat, one optician and several National Guard officers and ship captains. Other embezzlers were treasurers, secretaries, clerks, accountants, buyers, paymasters, collectors, cashiers, adjusters, investigators, superintendents, salesmen, merchandise brokers, foremen, timekeepers, warehousemen, truck drivers, and even lawyers.

Of the thirty-eight women defaulters, twenty-one were cashiers. There was only one manager and one superintendent.

As a group, the 1,001 stole approximately \$6,284,506, the men getting \$6,127,588 for an average of \$6,363 each. The women grabbing only \$156,918, their average dishonesty worth \$4,129.

By states, Georgia with twenty-seven thefts totaling \$1,066,366 was the hardest hit. New York employers lost almost as much, \$1,049,189, but it required 141 defalcations to make this total. Delaware, having only one theft of \$1,130.58, appears to be a haven for employees of great honesty, strength of character and just plain good luck.

The youngest thief was only eighteen, the oldest eighty-five. One had been employed for forty-five years, eighty-three for less than one year. Most were between thirty and forty years of age.

The bonding company's evidence appears to indicate that anyone, under stress, can become a thief. That most persons do not succumb is indicative of strength of character beyond the pressures and temptations of the moment.

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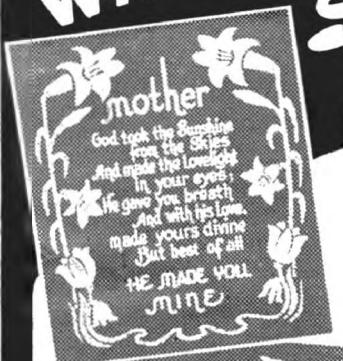
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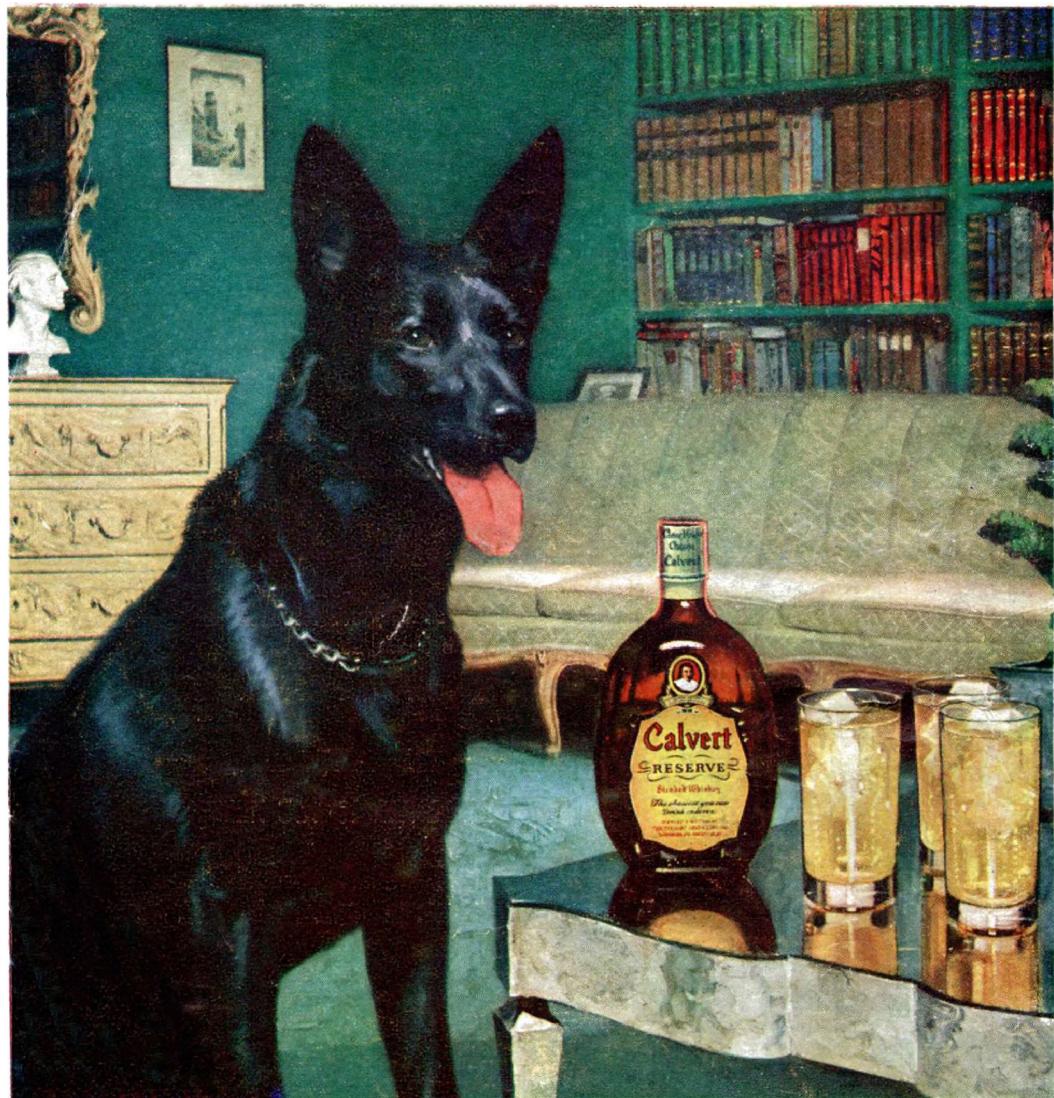
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