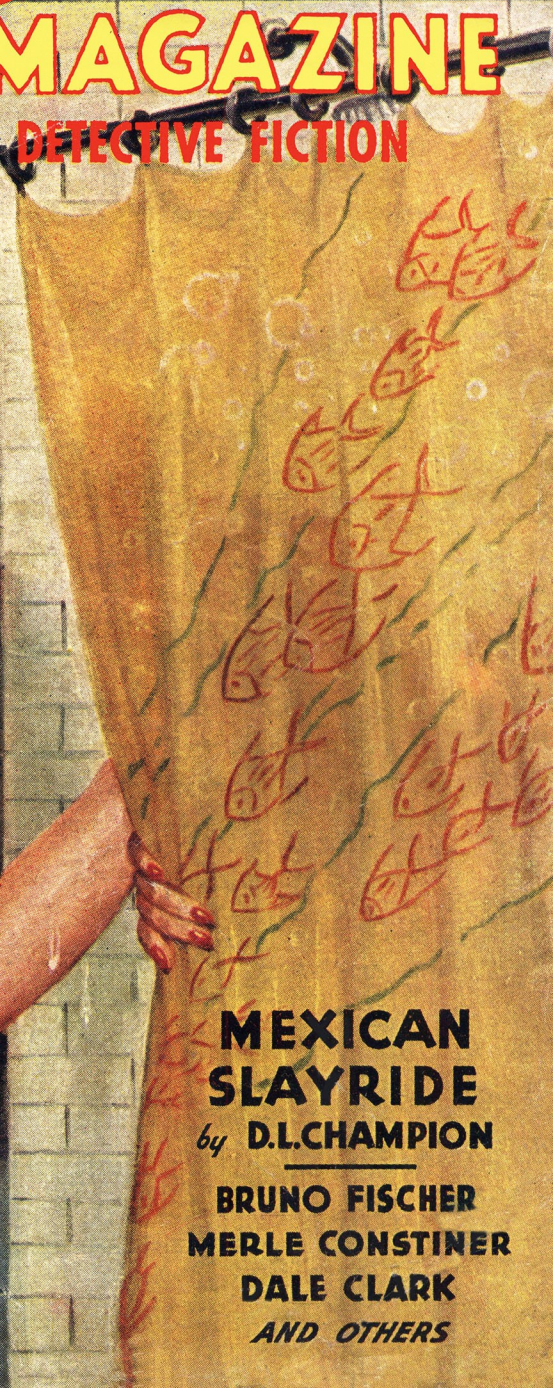


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SEPTEMBER

15¢ **DIME**  
**DETECTIVE**  
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COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

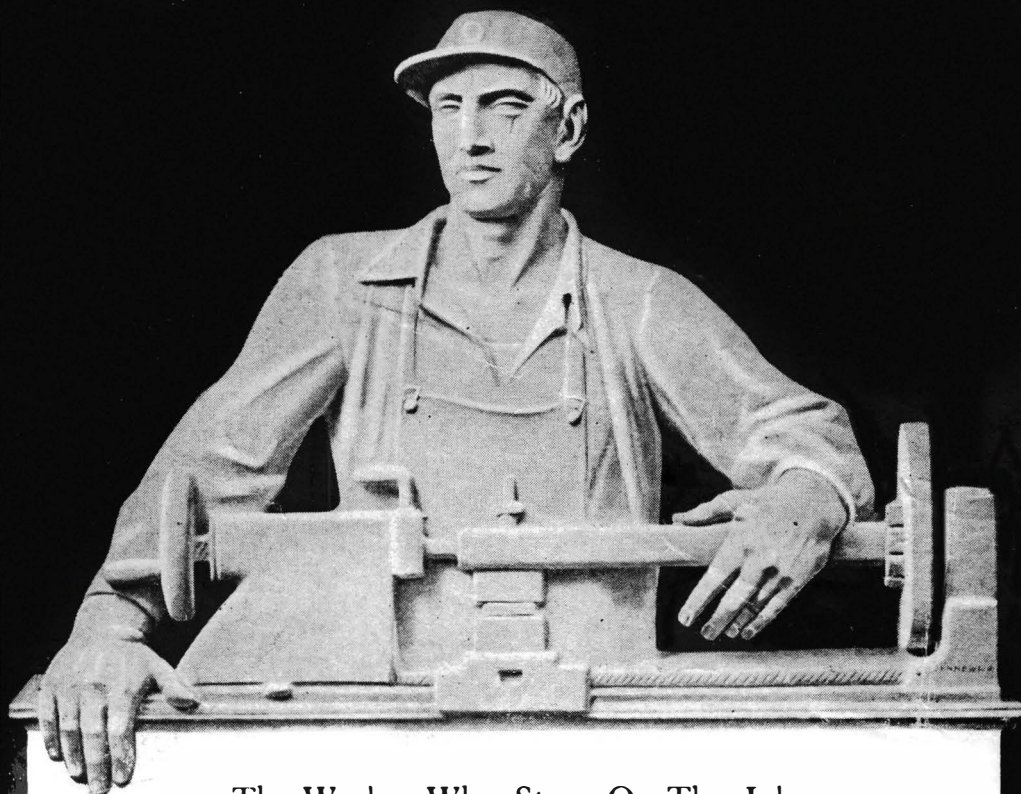


**MEXICAN  
SLAYRIDE**  
by **D.L. CHAMPION**

**BRUNO FISCHER  
MERLE CONSTINER  
DALE CLARK  
AND OTHERS**



# CALVERT SALUTES A CLEAR-HEADED AMERICAN



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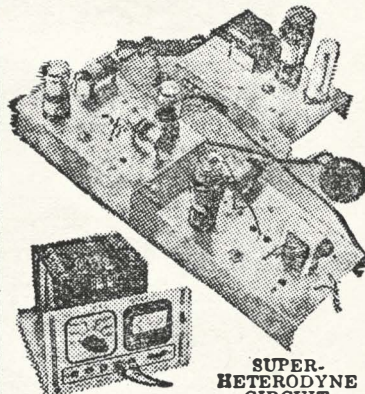
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# DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

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## Vol. 46    CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1944    No. 2

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### 3—GRIPPING SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTES—3

*Join Mariano Mercado, detective particular, on a*

**Mexican Slayride**.....D. L. Champion 10  
In the land of tequila and tortillas that began with the killing of Genaro Diaz, high Government official, and wound up at the golden ampersand of Juan Mondragon & Cia.

*Pictures don't lie, but they can register*

**False Colors**.....Dale Clark 30  
As Plates O'Rion discovered when he tried to fathom the strange disappearance of Inez Forrey, well known tennis star. The Kodak trail soon led to a very dead pharmacist and then the pint-sized pix maker found himself playing hide-and-seek with a killer in a gloomy hotel basement.

*Watch the Dean and Ben Matthews snoop their way through*

**The Affair of the Four Skeletons**.....Merle Constiner 56  
That highly screwy kill-fest that all started with the disappearance of Mr. Stafford's oliphant. Then came a cryptic note from a Mr. Cemetery and the fantastic will of Dr. Driscoll which read, . . . *the remainder of my estate I bequeath to my secretary, and my secretary also do I bequeath to my wife.*

### 2—SMASHING COMPLETE CRIME-ACTION MYSTERIES—2

*Croon a mean tenor to*

**Killer Come Back to Me**.....Mel Watt 43  
Most murderers kill because, to them, it's a desperate necessity. It was no longer necessary to kill Florence Wilson for what she knew about the Grayson killing. Amnesia had effectively silenced her. But what if it were discovered that Miss Wilson's memory had returned and she was willing to talk about the elusive "Mr. Gorman" . . .

*Don't eat a rarebit before retiring or you may wake up screaming*

**I'll Slay You in My Dreams**.....Bruno Fischer 74  
There's no logic in a nightmare. Clare Cobb was dead—murdered—and Tucker was the fall-guy. He could only be sure of two things: he hadn't killed Clare, nor were the ropes binding him a figment of his imagination—ropes with soft padding around them, provided by a killer with a strange concern for his comfort.

### AN EXCITING SHORT DETECTIVE STORY

*If you have a housing problem, take a lease on*

**Parlor, Bedroom, and Death**.....Ken Lewis 88  
Five years in stir can make a man warped and twisted and crazy jealous, particularly if he's got a beautiful young wife and older brother waiting for him at home. It might even make him commit suicide—except why should a man be jealous of his own bathrobe?

AND—

*We want to know if you are*

**Ready for the Rackets**.....A Department 8  
In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle-schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

**The October Thrill Docket**..... 6  
Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next issue.

**Cover: "Miss Wilson reached for the gun from the shower, but never had a chance to use it."**

From: *Killer Come Back to Me.*

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**The October Issue will be out September 1st**

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# THE OCTOBER THRILL DOCKET



CROSSING back north of the Border once more, D. L. CHAMPION returns us to Allhoff's fetid flat in Centre Street to let us quaff another beaker of the legless inspector's triple-distilled java instead of the tequila and pulque we've been imbibing this month as Mariano Mercado sets them up south of the Rio Grande.

You'll meet as weird an assortment of characters in *A Corpse Grows in Brooklyn* as you'll encounter in a year's galaxy of gibbous moons. Take the Professor, for instance—and watch out he doesn't take you as he did Patrolman Battersly and Sergeant Simmonds, Allhoff's clay-pigeons-in-uniform. Not the inspector, of course. The coffee-curdled brain of the commissioner's pet still responds to any stimulus—particularly the bumbling of his confreres on the homicide squad—and the cadaver of Mr. Monroe, conveniently packed in an open Saratoga trunk and left for the expressman to pick up from that front porch in Flatbush, was all he needed to start the machinery working. When the case was wound up, neatly labeled and tossed in the lap of Headquarters, all ready to go to the jury, there was nothing left for anyone to say—except Allhoff, who always had the final word anyway. Battersly should never have left an opening for that crack about leg-irons!

FREDERICK C. DAVIS, in *Thanks for the Lovely Funeral*, brings back Bill Brent *alias* Lora Lorne, that still bloody-but-unbowed hero chained to the ardor-desk of the *Recorder* in another fabulous near-escape from his swivel-chair-of-pain. It wasn't his fault his answers to *Undecided's* inane babblings led the writer straight to his doom on the very steps of police headquarters. The trouble was Bill was just too damn conscientious and tried to give a straight answer to a crooked question. Of course it led to trouble, bloodshed and tighter gyves than ever hitched Brent to the Lorne-spot.

Plus shorts by HENRY NORTON, JULIUS LONG and others.  
This great OCTOBER issue will be on sale SEPTEMBER 1st.



**MEN! Whether You're 16 or <sup>up</sup> 50...**

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*I'll Finance  
Your Training*

Let me show you how to prepare for an  
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A partial view of one of the Training Departments at Coyne

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*H.C. Lewis*

"I now work in the Ordnance Plant. I don't believe a day goes by without something coming up that I had at Coyne. I make \$60 a week and will get DOUBLE that on a new job I'm expecting to get transferred to." — Wm. Ashbrook, Colo.

"Just to inform you my present employer is Uncle Sam, my pay, \$65 per week as a Navy Yard Electrician. Going to Coyne was the wisest move I ever made." — S. Walek, Mass.

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# READY FOR THE RACKETS

## A Department

*Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y., 17, N. Y.*

**F**OR many years the merchants of this country have been more or less unknowing victims of a petty swindle known as "passing the note." Here's how it's worked:

The Racket Editor  
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE  
Gentlemen:

The operator "shops" through a store until he locates a likely-looking clerk, preferably one who has access to a cash register. He makes a small purchase, amounting to a dollar or less, and goes into his "fumble" of searching his pockets for a dollar bill which he is sure he has. He keeps chatting throughout his fumble, and the clerk actually begins to feel sorry for his anxious customer.

At long last, apparently unsuccessful in his search, the phony customer hands the clerk a twenty-dollar bill, but continues to search for the elusive dollar as the clerk wraps his purchase and makes change for the twenty.

The clerk returns with the package, and begins counting out change, as the still fumbling operator suddenly finds the dollar he has been seeking. He apologizes profusely to the now somewhat bewildered clerk, insists he doesn't mean to rob the cash drawer of needed smaller money, and suggests that if the clerk has a ten he might as well return this smaller money to the register. He hands the clerk six bills, accepts the ten, picks up his purchase and turns to go.

"Just a minute!" The crook's voice is more anxious than ever, as the startled clerk turns to find him counting over the bills in his hand. "How much money did I give you?"

The clerk glances at the money he had been ready to place in the cash register and, sure enough, discovers that his worried customer has mistakenly given him a ten, a five, and four ones, instead of a five and five ones. He is almost relieved when the crook adds a one to the nineteen in his hand, saying: "Here's the buck I couldn't find. Just put it all in the drawer and give me the twenty I gave you in the beginning." (Count it in sequence. The drawer is short nine dollars).

Believe it or not, according to veteran operators, it is successful in the majority of cases. It's mostly a matter of timing, and a hard-working operator will take from ten to twenty stores in a few hours, many of them in the same block. Slow-thinking clerks are natural marks, and even if the crook is tripped up, he is usually merely corrected in his arith-

metic, or sent from the store without prosecution.

No average-sized business is immune from this type of swindler. His range is wide and his brass is polished. If he is prosecuted, which is rare, his sentence is short, and but a few months will see him in action again.

If a shortage shows now and then in the cash drawer of Mr. Merchant, and that shortage tallies in the neighborhood of eight or nine dollars, the time has come for him to call his clerks into session and warn them to beware of the anxious customer with the "Elusive Buck."

Robt. A. Dunsford,  
Columbus, 15, Ohio

**T**HIS racketeer poses as a canvasser seeking information for the Government. Beware of his breed before revealing your personal history or facts about your family.

The Racket Editor  
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE  
Gentlemen:

This racket operates under the guise of a W. M. C. survey. And here's how it works:

Pseudo census-takers canvass homes in several neighborhoods of a city taking case histories of whole families, including incomes, dates, sons and husbands in the Service, dead relatives. These blanks are then relayed to another city, to a more shrewd accomplice, usually a middle-aged woman, who visits the canvassed city about a month later.

Armed with this information, these homes are visited on the pretext that she has just received a message from the spirit world. The advance information which was given unwittingly to the phony census-takers gains for her the victim's complete confidence, who is then easily persuaded to part with large sums of money for other messages from the dead, and for the promise of the safe return of sons or husband in the Service.

The amount of money taken by these vicious racketeers cannot be known, since they keep on the move, but it is safe to say that the figure is staggering. The amount can be easily reduced though, by giving information only to bona fide representatives. This will not only help stamp out another wartime racket, it will also help prevent additional hardship from entering an already war-stricken home.

H. M.,  
Columbus, 15, Ohio



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ADDRESS .....  
TOWN ..... STATE .....

**Mason**

**SHOE MANUFACTURING CO.**

Chippewa Falls Dept. M-80 Wisconsin



# MEXICAN SLAYRIDE

A Mariano Mercado Novelette



In the instant I was hurtling above the shoulder of the road, I remembered that when I had last read the speedometer, it had registered fifty.

*Beautiful, sunny Mexico, land of tequila and tortillas—and Mariano Mercado, detective particular, the sanguine señor with the sanitary psychosis. Even money was slightly repugnant to Mercado—think of the millions of germs on just one peso note!—but this was a matter of honor. Genaro Diaz, high Government official, had been butchered with an Aztec sacrificial knife, and the little Latin shamus found himself giving English and criminology lessons to a killer.*



By  
**D. L. CHAMPION**

*Author of "Shake Well Before Dying," etc.*



## CHAPTER ONE

### Microbes and Murder

IT WAS an incredibly beautiful morning. The sun spangled the patio where I sat beneath the stretching branches of a huge Indian laurel. Far off in the distance, beyond the brick and plaster of Mexico City, towered the snow-capped twin peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, as majestic as they are unpronounceable.

On my right, hummingbirds, wings fluttering at magical speed, breakfasted off flaming bougainvillea. On my left, hibiscus and poinsettia painted the stone wall of the house a bright crimson. The sky was as blue as the gaze of a Hollywood blonde, the grass as green as a thousand-dollar bill and equally satisfying.

If anyone had told me there was a corpse within thirty feet of me, I would have called

for the wagon and two husky attendants to assist him into it.

I flicked the riding crop against the top of my highly polished boots and was possessed of such a sense of well-being that I didn't care how long Ruth Fuller kept me waiting. I inhaled deeply of the thin air and remained in a sort of static, comfortable coma.

I came out of it as I heard a heavy footfall and a harsh, grunting vocal sound. I looked up to see Harvey Fuller. His expression was neither cordial nor hospitable. He was a heavy man of something over fifty. He was dressed in a suit which had cost more money than my entire wardrobe. He was fat and the usual wrinkles on his full face were now enhanced by a dark frown upon his brow.

He came down from the veranda which formed the patio's perimeter, walked across the lawn and stood directly before me.

"Latham," he said, "you're an insensitive oaf. Hinting seems to have no effect on you.



I shall, therefore, have to be more direct."

I stood up. "Don't bother," I told him. "I'll say it for you. Merely because I was once engaged to your daughter is no reason for me to call on her now that she is engaged to another man."

"Precisely," he said. "Since you know that, why the devil are you here?"

"Ruth asked me to go riding with her. Since good Queen Victoria is dead, I see no reason why I should first obtain her father's permission."

He grunted. "You have no shame," he said. "She's an engaged girl and you should leave her alone. Besides, I can't stand draft dodgers."

That hurt. But I kept my temper.

"You know damned well I'm 4F. You know further that I'm recovering from a bad attack of pneumonia."

He shrugged beautifully padded shoulders. "Maybe," he said. "However, I consider anyone under thirty-eight a draft dodger."

"Do you?" I said. "And how old are you?"

"Fifty-one. Hell, you don't expect a man my age to be a soldier!"

"Of course not," I said. "Fifty-one, eh? That would have made you twenty-five in '18. What did you do in the last war, Fuller?"

THAT got him. Blood came up over the edge of his collar like lava. A botanist would have found the similarity of his color to the hibiscus most interesting. He knew quite well that I was aware of what he had done in the last war.

He had borrowed a couple of thousand dollars, built himself a munitions plant on credit and proceeded to roll up a fortune. Since that day he had kept on rolling it, right up to the umpteenth power. He was possessed of vastly more money than integrity, a fact which was probably also true when he only had the two grand. That, I reflected, was a rather bright thought and I said it aloud.

Fuller bit his lip, glared at me, then tacitly decided upon an armistice.

"Have you seen Diaz?" he asked.

"No. Is he supposed to be here?"

"He was due to meet me in the library here. I'm quite late."

"Ruth told me you were taking your first Spanish lesson this morning."

"I was going to, along with Walters. But Grew, who is going to teach us, called up and said he couldn't make it."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Walters?" I said. "I hardly think that boy needs any Spanish lessons."

"Why not?" he said sharply. "What the devil are you implying? You hate his guts because he's engaged to Ruth."

"All right," I said, "have it your way. Go

along and see Diaz. I'll just keep waiting for Ruth."

He turned his head in the direction of the house and shouted: "José!"

A middle-aged Mexican shuffled out of the *sala*. José had come with the rented house. He was butler, *mozo*, *criado*, and general factotum. His principal talent was that he spoke English.

"Has Señor Diaz come?" asked Fuller.

The servant nodded. "He is in the library. He came forty minutes ago."

Fuller turned toward the house. On the veranda, he looked back at me.

"You'd better come along, too, Latham. Diaz can't speak English and I don't know a word of Spanish. Maybe we can use that broken-down dialect of yours."

"Your overwhelming courtesy in asking for favors," I said, "is irresistible."

I followed him into the house.

Evidently, the *dueño* who had leased the house furnished to Fuller was no bookworm. The library contained an old encyclopedia, two telephone books and a cheap Spanish dictionary. That was the only gesture it made to literature. For the rest it was comfortably furnished and its walls were criss-crossed with ancient Aztec weapons, knives, swords and mysteriously engraved machetes.

But beyond these furnishings, the room was empty. Fuller grunted. He took a cigar from a silver box on the desk. He did not offer me one.

"Now, where the devil is Diaz?" he growled.

I aimed my thumb in the direction of a lavatory which opened off the east wall. "Probably in there."

Fuller grunted again. He lit his cigar and we sat in a rather hostile silence for some ten minutes.

"For God's sake!" said Fuller. "What's he doing in the can all this time? Washing his socks? Latham, see if he's in there."

I got up and tried the lavatory door. It was not locked. I went inside. A moment later I thrust my head through the door jamb.

"He's here," I announced.

"Then tell him to come out."

"When he comes out," I said gravely, "someone will carry him."

Fuller cursed. "I never yet saw a Mexican who could carry his tequila. My God, has he passed out at this hour of the morning?"

"For eternity," I said.

FULLER stared at me. His mouth gaped and his eyes opened. "You don't mean to say—"

"I do. He's dead. One of those Aztec sacrificial knives which was hanging on your wall is now reposing in his heart. Come and see."



Fuller stood up. He approached the lavatory cautiously, pushed his head into the washroom as if he feared someone were going to slug it with a baseball bat. Then he clapped a hand to his head, retreated to the library and sank, panting, into a heavily upholstered chair.

"This is a terrible thing, Latham," he said. "Terrible."

"What are you squawking about?" I asked him. "With Diaz out of the way you can get that concession on the Guerrero zinc mines with no difficulty at all. Hell, that's what you came down here for, isn't it?"

He didn't answer. He ran his fingers through his disappearing hair and groaned loudly.

A happy thought came to me.

"Maybe," I said, "you killed him."

He looked at me sorrowfully, an expression of pained sanctimony on his face. "Latham, he said earnestly, 'how can you say such a thing?' He paused and looked thoughtful. 'Wait a minute,'" he went on. "Maybe you killed him yourself. You were the only person here when I came in, except José."

"Fair enough," I said. "But I had no motive. Everyone in Mexico knows that Diaz, as the Government official in charge of such things, was opposed to granting you the concessions you wanted. On the other hand, his assistant, who succeeds to his office now, favored you. No, they can't pin it on me, Fuller. But they wouldn't have one hell of a lot of trouble pinning it on you."

His face no longer resembled the hibiscus. It was rather like the emerald green of the Indian laurels which I could see through the open door in the patio.

After a moment, he pulled himself together, got out of the chair and paced the floor.

"You're a fool," he said. "I couldn't have killed him. José saw me come in. You came in here with me. I had no opportunity to kill him. But I admit it looks bad. Bad for my reputation. Latham, we've got to look for the murderer."

"That should be worth something to you."

"It is. We'll notify the police. Then I'll engage a private detective. I'll give him ten thousand pesos."

"Why give it to a private dick?" I asked. "I'll tell you who killed Diaz for five thousand pesos."

He ceased his pacing and came to a West Point halt. "Who?"

"Walters," I said. "Jerry Walters, your prospective son-in-law."

"Latham," he said, "you're crazy. You hate that boy because Ruth's going to marry him. Why on earth should Walters kill Diaz?"

"Jealousy," I said. "Let's look the facts in the face. Ruth, even you must admit, is an un-

conscionable flirt. Walters is a hot tempered, possessive, jealous sort of a guy. During the past few weeks, Diaz and Ruth have been conducting a discreet flirtation. Nothing serious, of course, but enough to enrage Walters who resented it. Now, Walters is here when Diaz arrives. Walters quarrels with him, then snatches a knife from the wall and kills him. It's as simple as that."

"It's positively brilliant," he said. "Except for one minor fact that your malicious mind has overlooked. How the devil could Walters quarrel with Diaz when Walters doesn't speak one word of Spanish, and Diaz didn't know a syllable of English?"

"What makes you think Walters can't speak Spanish?"

"I *know* he can't. What makes you think he can?"

"I've heard him. But why waste time in this futile discussion? Call the coppers first. Then, if I prove beyond all doubt that Walters killed Diaz, will you give me five thousand pesos for the job?"

"Latham," he said, "you're a blockhead. It's not worth a nickel to me if you prove Walters is a murderer. It's not worth a nickel to me if you prove anything. I'm delighted that Diaz is dead. I don't give a damn if his murderer goes scot-free. But I've got to make myself look good. I've got to offer an authentic private detective a fat fee to try to find the killer. That'll sit well with the Government. Anything you do is worth nothing, even if you should be right, which would be extraordinary."

**I** THOUGHT it out in great detail. I saw his viewpoint clearly enough. If the killer of Genaro Diaz was brought to book, well and good. If he wasn't, it didn't mean a great deal to Harvey Fuller. To anyone who knew him it was obvious Fuller was no murderer, even if his business ethics were not the same as those taught in Sunday school.

Moreover, as he had pointed out, my testimony and that of José would easily clear him from all suspicion. However, since he required favors from the Mexican Government, it would look good if, on the face of things, he spared no effort in attempting to track down Diaz' killer.

He needed the publicity which would follow his hiring a detective far more than he actually needed the criminal. On the other hand, there was my point of view. I was short of cash and a piece of ten thousand pesos would look very good. Besides, I don't like Jerry Walters at all and, most important, I had some evidence.

"Listen," I said, "suppose I told you that when I walked in here today, I heard voices coming from the library. I eavesdropped for



a moment. I overheard Walters bawling out Diaz in Spanish, threatening to kill him if he didn't lay off Ruth."

"Really?" said Fuller sceptically. "And I suppose you heard Diaz' agonized cry as the knife went into his heart?"

"I did not. It was none of my business and I went along and sat in the patio where you found me. But what do you say to the rest of it?"

"I say, Latham, that I don't believe you. That no one else would, either. It can be easily proved that you don't like Walters. It can be equally easily proved by scanning the records of the State Department that Walters has never before been out of the United States. It can further, doubtless, be proved that he never studied Spanish in college or anywhere else. All of which makes you look like a vicious and unmitigated liar."

"All right," I said restraining my temper. "I see what I'm up against. But will you call José and ask him at what time Walters came here this morning, what time he met Diaz in the library?"

Fuller nodded. "I'll do that because I'm certain that Walters wasn't here at all this morning. He told me he had some business at the embassy and would be tied up until lunch time."

"Call José."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Microbe Hunter

"NO, señor," said José a few moments later. "I have not seen the Señor Walters today. I was working in the garden when the Señor Latham came in. The gate was unlocked but I saw him enter. I did not see the Señor Walters at all."

"And when did you admit Señor Diaz?" asked Fuller.

"About a half hour ago."

"All right," said Fuller. "That's all."

José shuffled out of the room. Fuller regarded me triumphantly. "There you are," he said. "Even if Walters got in without José seeing him, how the devil did he get out again? There are two doors to the library. One opens on to the garden where José was working, the other to the patio where you sat. Since neither of you saw him, what is your conclusion, Latham? Perhaps you'll agree with me that you're a vicious liar."

I sighed. There was something very screwy going on here. I had never considered Jerry Walters any too bright, but it seemed to me that this time he had been far brighter than I.

"All right," I said. "For the time being, I'm a vicious liar. Now, may I offer you the use of my broken Spanish to call the police?"

"God," he said, "I'd forgotten that. Call them at once, Latham."

I called. In my limited Spanish I made it moderately clear that a Government official lay dead in Harvey Fuller's library. Their reaction was Latin, excited and voluble. After answering several questions I had hardly understood, I hung up.

"Good," said Fuller. "Now, Latham, go out and dig me up a private detective. I don't care how damned incompetent he is, either. I want the Government to know that I've wasted no time, that I have a man working on the case almost as soon as the coppers arrive."

I looked him squarely in the eyes. "You have an unmitigated gall," I told him. "You heap me with insults, then turn to me for favors."

"Favors?" said Harvey. "Look, you can speak this lingo more or less. It'll be easier for you to get a dick than for me. And it's hardly a favor. I'm offering ten thousand pesos. You can hold your man up for whatever commission you can get away with. From what I hear you can probably use a relatively honest dollar."

That was true enough. I could. Ten thousand pesos in Mexico is a great deal of money. I was sure I could chisel any private shamus down to a fraction of that fee.

"Well," said Fuller. "Do you know anyone?"

I scratched my head and recalled a weird evening of a week ago, in a honky-tonk *cantina*. I took a card from my wallet. It was immaculately white and expensively engraved. I handed it to Fuller. It read:

### MARIANO MERCADO, DETECTIVE PARTICULAR

*Investigaciones confidenciales  
Civiles y criminales*

"O.K.," said Fuller. "As long as he's a professional, it's all right with me. Get him. Get him right away. It'll look better if it's known I have a man on the trail before the corpse is cold."

"All right," I said. "If he's in, I'll have him here within the hour. That'll just about give the coppers time to do their stuff and get out of the way."

"Get going." He glanced through the open doorway at the corpse, shook his head like a disapproving schoolmaster, and made a sad, clucking noise with his tongue. "Too bad," he said. "He was a young man, too."

"Don't drown yourself with those crocodile tears," I said over my shoulder. "His demise means a cold million bucks to you. Save the histrionics for the police department."

I could feel his glare on the back of my neck as I went out into the garden.



I WAS almost at the gate when I ran into Ruth. She was a tall brunette with even features somewhat thrown out of symmetry by a spoiled, petulant mouth.

She gave me a smile which once had caused my heart to perform most unreasonable acrobatics. I noted with satisfaction that nothing of the sort happened now.

"Hi," she said. "Sorry I'm late. Had a lot of shopping to do. Hang on a minute. I can change in no time."

"I'm sorry, too," I said. "But we're not going riding now. You'd better go in and see your father. He needs you. I'll be back in a little while."

"Dad? Why, he's in the library with Diaz arguing about the concession, isn't he?"

"He's with Diaz," I said. "But he's not arguing. As I say, I'll see you later. I'm off to retain Mariano Mercado."

"Mariano Mercado? Who's he?"

I went out the gate without answering. One reason was that I wasn't sure of the answer anyway. I had met Mercado only once in my life and under odd circumstances. I hailed a cab, gave the driver the address and recalled the circumstances of my acquaintance with the *detective particular*.

On that day, exactly a week ago, I had been tired and depressed. True, my health was bet-

ter than when I had left the States, but I was at loose ends spiritually and most certainly financially. Under the circumstances I decided to get mildly drunk. Since cash, or rather the lack of it, was one of my major concerns, I eschewed *Ciro's*, the Ritz and the other expensive saloons where the Americans gathered. I chose, instead, a tiny and none too reputable *cantina* hidden in an ill-lit byway in the eastern part of town.

I tossed my hat on the table, sat in the semi-seclusion of a paper-decorated booth and ordered a double rum. I sipped it and glanced dolefully around at my surroundings. The *cantina* consisted of a single long, narrow room. Opposite me the bar ran the length of the wall. In the rear a juke box vomited brass and woodwinds. A half a dozen *muchachos*, whose profession would have shocked and fascinated your Aunt Ida in Indianapolis, ambled about the room, essaying eagerly to detect the faintest glint of interest in any male customer's eye.

I was engaged upon my third double Bacardi when Mariano Mercado entered. Of course, at that time I did not know his name. All I knew was that I was gazing at a sartorial ensemble which would have caused a blind man to blink.

Mercado was a little man, short and springy.

If whisking off tough beard's your worry  
And you want slick shaves in a hurry  
You'll find the Thin Gillette's a honey—  
It saves you lots of time and money!



Top quality  
at rock-bottom price



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade



His complexion was the color of cafeteria coffee, his eyes black and shiny, his teeth as white as the snow-capped peak of Popocatepetl. He approached the bar rather mincingly in button-topped shoes and sat down.

I pushed my rum aside and studied his vestments. The suit with which he had caparisoned himself was a light and revolting green, his shirt was as yellow as a draft dodger, and his tie was a nice admixture of the hues of both suit and shirt. His shoes were the color of highly polished desert sand and his socks were silk and purple.

Now, I am no Thomas Craven when it comes to art and I am of the immovable opinion that Rembrandt and Maxfield Parrish are both excellent artists. Nevertheless, what little aestheticism there is in me rolled over and gagged as my eyes took in the picture of Mariano Mercado.

**I**GNORING my rum, I watched him, fascinated. In a voice tinged with arrogance he ordered a bottle of *habanero* and a glass. When the bartender produced these articles, Mercado did not immediately pour his drink.

He lifted the glass to the light and examined it carefully. He took a tiny bottle from his pocket, uncorked it and dropped a globule of liquid from it into the glass. Then with the aid of a snowy white handkerchief, he swabbed the interior of the glass. He made a very thorough job of it, too.

After that he uncorked the *habanero* bottle, carefully wiped the place where the cork had been with his disinfected handkerchief, then poured himself a stiff drink. He drained it and then, setting the glass back on the bar, wiped his fingers off meticulously as if aware that as many germs could dwell on the outside of the beaker as in its interior.

I observed that neither the girls nor the bartender paid any attention to these odd drinking rites. I assumed, therefore, that he was a habitu   of the place. I gathered up my rum again, but I kept my gaze on Mercado over the rim of my glass.

He knocked off three more *habaneros*, then he coughed. It was a slight, muffled cough, an ordinary common cough that could easily have emanated from as healthy a throat as that of Joe Louis. But from the expression on Mercado's face you would have thought it was the last gasp of a third-stage consumptive. His coffee-colored face became gray, his eyes opened wide and an expression of grave apprehension stamped itself on his features.

He slid from the bar stool where he sat and walked hastily over to the juke box, in the center of whose rococo exterior was a small mirror. Mercado bent down and stared at the reflection of his face. He opened his mouth, thrust out his tongue, examined its counter-

part in the mirror like a Tiffany appraiser staring at a diamond. He pulled up his eyelids and scrutinized his pupils.

Then he straightened up again, reached into his coat pocket and produced another bottle. From this he extracted two pills which he popped into his mouth. He replaced this vial, groped again in his pocket and came up, this time, with a hard black object shaped like a fountain pen.

He unscrewed its top, whipped out a thermometer and stuck it in his mouth. Then he returned to the bar, sat quietly on the stool waiting for his temperature to register.

I emptied my glass and ordered it refilled. But I never took my attention from Mercado. He fascinated me. Apparently this was hypochondria run riot, a hundred and thirty-odd pounds of it wrapped up in a green suit which certainly would scare away any discriminating germ life.

At last he removed the thermometer from his mouth, read it, and made a clucking sound like an apprehensive old hen. He put the thermometer back in his pocket and turned back to the *habanero* like a man resolved on having a final fling ere Death knocks at his door on the morrow.

**I**T was then that the newsboy thrust his tousled black head through the swinging doors and cried out in accelerated Spanish. He spoke too rapidly for me to follow it entirely, but I heard the word *policia* spoken twice. I had lived in Mexico long enough to know what it meant.

It was a situation analogous to the New York coppers descending from time to time on dives and poolrooms for a check-up, a frisk, and to keep an eye on things generally. I was not surprised to find this happening to a *cantina* of this sort. I *was* rather surprised to note that the newsboy's announcement had, apparently, greatly interested Mariano Mercado.

He became suddenly alert. He glanced swiftly around the room. Then he slid off the stool again and headed for the juke box. In order to reach the instrument he had to pass my table. As he did so, his swinging green arm brushed against my hat and knocked it to the floor.

He paused and picked it up. He replaced it on the table top, flashed his white teeth at me and murmured, "*Mil perdones, se  or,*" continued his march to the juke box and dropped a twenty-five centavo piece into its avid maw.

Thirty thousand decibels of *Pistol Packin' Mama* issued immediately from the loud speaker. Simultaneously three coppers came through the swinging doors. They looked professionally around the room. They saw Mer-



cado standing by the music box, grinned and nudged each other.

Two of them lined up the more frowzy characters at the bar and searched them. One devoted his attention to Mercado. He patted Mercado's pockets hopefully and, I thought, seemed disappointed when he found nothing. Mercado, who had made no protest at the frisk, now brushed with his handkerchief those parts of his suit which the policeman's hand had touched.

The copper grinned unpleasantly at him, said something obscene to his companions and a moment later they were gone. Mercado looked after them, in reproach rather than anger. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. He came over to my table.

"*Con permiso, señor,*" he said. He lifted up my hat, revealing beneath it a huge .45 that looked like an aborted howitzer. He deftly dropped it in his coat pocket.

"*Gracias, señor,*" he said.

As I stared at him, amazed, he whipped a card from his vest and handed it to me with a flourish.

"*Si necesita usted mi servicios. . .*" he said, then turned on his heel and strode out into the night.

I blinked after him, then read the card which informed me that Mariano Mercado was a private detective who conducted confidential investigations, both civil and criminal.

I called the bartender over to clear up the item I failed to understand.

I said in my not too fluent Spanish: "The little man in the green suit. He is a detective?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Then why the hell does he find it necessary to plant his gun under my hat when the coppers come in?"

The bartender smiled. "But the Señor Mercado is not of the police, *señor*. He is the private detective. He is a clever one. He has outwitted the police on many occasions. For that they have withdrawn his pistol permit. That is why they search him every time they see him."

"So," I said, irritated, contemplating my night in the *cárcel* if the coppers had found me with an unlicensed gun, "he made me the fall guy, eh?"

What a fall guy was, the bartender, I knew, did not understand, but from his broad grin I knew also he was considering me the Mexican equivalent of one.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Señor Mercado—Detective Particular

THE office of Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*, was in the same apartment as his home. Both were on the third story of a

weary building of plaster and stucco in the Calle de Madellin.

I dismissed my taxi and entered the house. The scurrying of a thousand rats punctuated my own footsteps as I mounted the protesting stairs. I knocked at the panels of the door which bore Mercado's card thumbtacked in its center. His familiar voice called out: "*Entre.*"

At a severe desk in the middle of the room The windows were covered with fine wire mesh and draped over them was a piece of heavy cheesecloth which effectively kept the sun out. The furniture was of plain wood. There was not a cushion, a pillow or a drape in sight.

At a severe desk in the middle of the room sat Mercado. On his left was a huge ledger. The remainder of the space was occupied by an array of bottles, none of them of any alcoholic content. Hanging at the side of his desk was a large oblong of ruled paper which looked vaguely familiar to me. I peered through the gloom of the room and examined it. It was a temperature chart, and none ever had as even an ink mark across it.

Mariano Mercado showed me his glittering white teeth. He waved me to a severe straight-backed chair. He said in Spanish: "Ah, *señor*, so we meet again. You did me a favor the other night, albeit inadvertently. Perhaps you have come so I may return it?"

I sat down and drew a deep breath. My knowledge of Spanish is barely adequate. I can inquire courteously the direction of the men's room, I can order a drink, and conduct an intelligible conversation provided my auditor has patience and is not adverse to a constant and dogged use of the present tense.

Hence, this interview was going to be something of a task. I had to acquaint Mercado with the principal facts of the case and also induce him to handle it for, say, two thousand pesos, so that I could pocket the rest.

While I was pulling myself mentally together, Mercado picked up a glass, wiped it out with his handkerchief and filled it with water from a sealed carafe. He held it up to the light and squinted.

"Do you know," he said, "that in a drop of distilled water there are, on an average, six billion, three hundred million bacteria? In distilled water, mark you! Think how many there must be in ordinary liquid!"

He clucked as if resigning himself in the face of such overwhelming peril. He drank the water with his eyes half closed, as if imbibing a cup prepared by Lucrezia Borgia.

He put the glass down. "Disease," he said. "We must fight it, *señor*. You will note there is not a pillow in this apartment. I have no nests for germs. Health is a gift from heaven. We must devote our lives—"

"Sí, sí," I said hastily. I gathered that germs were a subject to which the Señor Mercado was willing to devote himself with larynx and tongue for long periods of time. It was better that I cut him off now. I drew another breath and dived into my limited Spanish vocabulary with both hands.

"Señor," I said, "are you interested in making two thousand pesos?"

His reaction was unexpected and entirely un-Mexican. "Money," he said musingly. "Do you have any idea how many germs there are on the average peso note?"

"Billions," I said quickly, "and billions. But, señor, I have a case for you. I am here to call upon you in your professional capacity. This is a murder case. I believe I can get you a fee of two thousand pesos for your services."

Mariano Mercado sighed. Since I refused to discuss bacteria, he reluctantly came to the matter in hand.

"Very well," he said. "What is it you have to tell me?"

I gave it to him, slowly and in detail. I told him how Fuller and Diaz had been arguing over the zinc concession, of how Bob Leftworth, a business rival of Fuller's, who was also in the country, seemed to have the inside track with Diaz. The papers were ready for signing. Diaz had kept the appointment at Fuller's place to listen to a last-minute appeal.

Moreover, I told him what I had already told the incredulous Fuller about the brawl I had heard in the library, when young Jerry Walters threatened Diaz. I told him further that it looked as if Walters had bribed José to lie and that, under the circumstances, no one would believe me.

When I had concluded he regarded me thoughtfully. "So," he said, "I am to get two thousand pesos for a murder case in which you already tell me the name of the murderer."

"Right. But, as I said, I'll be considered an interested witness. My evidence isn't worth anything. Now that I've told you this, it should be easy for you to trap Walters."

He nodded. "I shall accept the commission—on one condition."

"Which is?"

"That I am not required to enter any unsanitary place—that I am not, in the course of my duties, exposed to any perilous bacteriological situation."

"Done," I said. "Perhaps you will now accompany me to the scene of the crime?"

He nodded again and stood up. He slipped on a sweater and put on his coat. His suit today, I observed, was a restrained tan, the color of an autumn leaf in a dry country. His tie was a cerise noose tied so tightly it reminded me of the silken cord they used to hang peers with in England.

He gathered up some of the less lethal-ap-

pearing bottles on the desk and dropped them into his pocket. He buttoned his coat tightly in order to keep out the chilling Mexican air whose temperature at the moment was exactly seventy-two.

WE went down into the street and hailed a taxicab. I gave the driver Fuller's address.

"All you have to do," I told him, "is tell Fuller through me, of course, that you accept the case and the fee. Then it is a simple matter of watching Walters carefully, searching his things, perhaps, or threatening him into a confession. It is as easy as that. Probably the easiest money you ever earned, eh?"

I looked at him to find out he wasn't paying me the slightest attention. His gaze was directed to a fat Indian woman in the street whose face was covered with black blemishes.

"Pinta," he said with a shudder. "The germs get under the skin and are impossible to get out again. Do you know how many germs are living in that woman's body?"

"Billions," I said. "Trillions. But for God's sake, will you realize we are engaged upon a murder case?"

"It is an interesting fact," he said, "that the bacteria in the human body do not die until long after the person has ceased living. You see, the germ life. . ."

I gave up then. For the rest of the journey I listened to a gloomy discourse of death, bacteria and the helplessness of man upon an earth so thickly populated with invisible microbes.

We arrived at Fuller's house to find that the coppers had been and gone, bearing with them the corpse of Genaro Diaz. Fuller, Ruth, and Jerry Walters were in the study. Walters was a young, handsome, dark-haired lad with features which even his mother would not have classified as strong. At the moment, I was pleased to note, he seemed nervous.

He sat on the edge of the couch and kept smoothing his hair nervously. Ruth Fuller was at his side and as I entered she shot a hostile glance at me.

"What do you mean by saying Jerry killed Diaz?" she demanded in a flat, cold voice. "You know damned well he can't speak Spanish. Dad told me what you'd said."

"All right," I said wearily. "All right. I'm rather tired of being branded a liar for today. May I present the Señor Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*? Let's see at whom he points the finger of suspicion."

Mercado beamed around the room and the sun came in through the patio doors and bounced brilliantly off his white teeth.

"All right," said Fuller. "Have you made the necessary financial arrangements with him? Have you told him I am willing to spend ten thousand pesos?"



"I have."

"O.K. Let's acquaint him with the facts. Then, Latham, you phone the papers and announce that, shocked and grieved by the death of my friend, Diaz, I have hired a private investigator to bring the murderer to justice."

"I can call now, then," I said. "I've already acquainted him with the facts of the case."

"Wait a minute," said Walters excitedly. "Mr. Fuller, if Latham has told only his biased version of the matter, God knows what garbled report Señor Mercado has. We must tell him the truth."

"Naturally," said Ruth, her eyes venomously upon me, "Mr. Latham has told Mr. Mercado that Jerry is guilty."

I shrugged my shoulders. "All right," I said. "What do you want to tell him?"

"Wait a minute," cried Walters again. "Don't let Latham do the interpreting. Heaven knows how he'll distort what you say, Mr. Fuller!"

I sighed. I seemed to have quite a reputation among those present.

Harvey Fuller kept his eyes on me and nodded slowly. "Of course, you're right, Jerry," he said. "We'd be fools to trust Latham, who seems bent on seeing you hang. I'll send out for an interpreter." He sighed again. "This language problem is such a damned nuisance. Now, if Mercado only knew a few words of English we could understand each other, somehow."

During this hearty fraternal dialogue, Mariano Mercado had sat quietly, blinking around the room. Now he straightened up suddenly.

"Telegony," he said amazingly. "Continuum. Uxorious. Viviparous."

WE all stared at him. Fuller took the cigar from his mouth, said, "Huh," and put it back again.

"You see," said Mariano Mercado in infinitely better English than was spoken by anyone in the room, "you were wrong, Mr. Fuller. If I knew only a few words of English, you would not necessarily understand them. For instance, you do not understand the words I have just spoken. However, most fortunately, I command other, simpler words of your language. I understand them, too. The fee you are offering, I believe, is ten thousand pesos?"

I clapped my hand to my head and was aware of a strong current of hate against Mariano Mercado.

"You double-crosser," I yelled. "Why didn't you tell me you spoke English?"

Mercado flashed me his snowiest smile. "I do not recall that you asked me."

Fuller slapped his hand upon his knee and burst into coarse laughter.

"This is terrific. How much of that ten thousand did you offer him, Latham?"

"Two thousand," said Mercado. "However, I agree that Mr. Latham is entitled to a commission for bringing the case to my attention. Moreover, I am most grateful for the use of his hat the other evening. I shall be no less generous than Mr. Latham. I now offer him two thousand pesos of the ten as a commission and for his services which I may need while engaged upon the case."

I opened my mouth to utter a sharp refusal. Then I shut it again. In my present financial condition, two thousand pesos was not precisely alfalfa. Moreover, I was morally certain that Jerry Walters had murdered Diaz. And if I were able, directly or indirectly, to pin the crime upon him, it would afford me a vast amount of satisfaction.

Now that it was established that Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*, spoke an excellent grade of English, the room was filled with eager babble. Ruth, Walters and Fuller began simultaneously to give their opinions of the reasons and methods of the death of Genaro Diaz. They were still unintelligibly at it when José opened the door and Bob Leftworth came into the room.

The prime difference between Leftworth and Fuller was that in the case of the former his wealth had not run to fat. Leftworth was tall, lean and almost cadaverous. His black eyes glanced mockingly at Fuller as he said: "Hello."

Fuller nodded. "I thought I'd left you at the Foreign Club."

"You did," said Leftworth in a slow drawl. "But right after our little chat, I heard an amazing thing. I heard that Diaz had been murdered in your house. Do you think the Better Business Association would approve such tactics?"

Fuller glared at him, then said icily: "I have excellent evidence that I am not involved. Moreover, I am paying a stiff fee to a private detective to look into the case for me. Now, is there anything else you want to ask, Señor Mercado?"

Mercado shrugged his shoulders and stood up. "I think not. I shall get in touch with you when necessary."

He bowed and strode out of the room. I looked after him with frank envy.

First, he was going to collect a cold eight thousand pesos, provided he paid me the two thousand he had promised. Second, I had thrown the case in his lap by telling him even before he had seen Fuller that, without doubt, Walters had killed Diaz. Never had a *detective particular* had such a windfall without working.

I spent the afternoon losing thirty pesos out at the Hippodrome Racetrack, and in the late afternoon returned to my hotel. I ate a bad dinner and spent a somewhat sleepless night.

On second thought, I came to the conclusion that perhaps Mariano Mercado wasn't going to have as easy a time as I had first thought.

There was no evidence against Walters save mine. No one seemed willing to believe me. What was needed, I decided, was some more and conclusive evidence with which I had no connection at all. I thought about this for a long time before I finally went to sleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Amber Sands of Acapulco

THE following morning, I attended to a few more or less personal matters, then went to call on Mariano Mercado. I waited in his sterilized office until he finished gargling in the bathroom. He emerged after a few moments, bowed to me and sat down at his desk.

"Well," I asked. "Any progress? Have you grilled Walters yet?"

Mercado shook his head. "I shall have to handle this in my own way," he said. "Now, who is the least likely suspect in the case?"

"That's easy," I said. "Leftworth. He was a cinch to get the mine concession if Diaz had lived. He's a cinch not to, now."

"Good," said Mercado. "We shall investigate Leftworth first."

I blinked at him. This seemed even less logical than his dread of germs.

"You see," said Mercado, "I usually investigate the least likely suspect first. It saves time."

This made even less sense than his first statement. I said so.

"It's an elimination process," went on Mercado, his tone implying I was rather stupid not to see it. Usually, it is simpler to eliminate the least likely suspects. Then you can really go to work on those that remain."

I lit a cigarette and let him see that the bewilderment on my face had not abated.

"On the other hand," he continued, "if you start with a likely suspect who proves to be innocent, you spend so much time checking every angle that it enables the least likely suspect—always supposing he is guilty—to take warning and cover up. And if the most likely suspect is actually guilty, as he usually is, it takes very little time to get around to investigating him, for the check on the least likely suspect is usually over in a few hours."

By this time I was reeling. "Look," I said, "I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'd rather listen to you discuss bacteria."

"Would you?" said Mercado brightly. "Consider this: Would you prefer to be bitten by a boy or a dog? Do you know that there are more variegated germs in the human mouth than in that of any other animal? Consider this, *amigo*."

"I flatly refuse to consider it," I said. "I also refuse to consider that Bob Leftworth killed Diaz. I've told you once that Walters is the murderer. I tell you again. I insist you search his hotel room before anything else."

"Why?"

"Because you may find some evidence which corroborates what I've already told you."

Mercado looked thoughtful. He took a complicated atomizer from a desk drawer and sprayed his throat. Then he said: "Why are you so anxious to convict Walters? Are the reasons personal, or have you an overdeveloped sense of justice?"

It was a fair question—one which I had deliberately refrained from asking myself. Reluctantly, I considered it.

It was true I had once been engaged to Ruth Fuller, that Jerry Walters had superseded me. That, of course, was a blow to my ego. I was certain, however, it was nothing more. I was sure I no longer loved Ruth, unsure that I ever had. She was spoiled and selfish and was no wife for a man whose income was vastly less than her own.

But, despite these facts, I assuredly did not like Walters. And I did not like Fuller. I would shed no tears if the potential son-in-law, of whom Fuller approved, were shunted off to a Mexican prison for twenty-odd years.

And in addition to all this, I was positive Walters was the killer. I had heard what I had heard even if no one believed me. Like every other normal person, I had an aversion to murder and murderers. Walters was guilty and he should be tried for his offense.

Lastly, Walters' conviction would absolve me of the charge of lying in an attempt to frame a man I didn't like. I listed all these reasons to Mercado, and urged him once more to search Walters' hotel room before he did anything else.

"How?" said Mercado. "How am I to get into his hotel room?"

That was a question I had never expected to hear from any detective, official, private, or for that matter, *particular*. My opinion of Mariano Mercado dropped several inches.

"There are many simple, tried-and-true methods," I told him. "Perhaps the easiest is merely to ask for the key. It's a big hotel and Walters has only been there a week. Certainly the clerks don't know him."

"I am a Mexican," said Mercado. "They will certainly know I'm not a New Yorker whose name is Walters."

"True enough. I'll get the key for you."

Mercado sighed and stood up. "Very well, since you are so damned insistent."

FIRST, I checked circumspectly, discovered Walters was having lunch at Fuller's house, then we took a taxi to the hotel. Tea



minutes later we were up in Walters' room.

I figured I had done enough of Mercado's work for the day. I lounged by the window while he gave the room a frisk which was surprisingly professional. However, he found nothing. He completed his task, looked over at me and shrugged. On the table by the window lay four books. Catching Mercado's eye I glanced down at them significantly.

He paid no attention to me. I sighed and wondered how the devil he ever made a living as a private detective.

"Well," he said, "I trust you're satisfied. Obviously, there's nothing here."

I stared at the books again. There was a Prescott on Mexico, a guide to the city, a recently published novel and an English-Spanish dictionary. Still Mariano Mercado paid me no heed. I tried a more direct approach.

"Did you look through these books? People often hide things in books."

"Hardly confessions of murder," said Mercado. "At least I never heard of it being done."

Nevertheless he picked up one of the books and riffled its pages. He repeated the process until he came to the dictionary. Then his eye caught something on one of its pages. He thumbed through it more slowly, then dropped it in his pocket.

"Well," I said, trying to keep the eagerness out of my tone, "find anything?"

He regarded me with an odd expression. He shook his head and said slowly: "Maybe. I'm not quite sure."

I shrugged and let it go at that. It seemed to me that by now he should have made up his mind about the identity of Diaz' killer. But if he wanted to mull over it for a few hours it wouldn't make a great deal of difference.

We left the room and went down into the lobby. I accompanied Mariano Mercado back to his office. I noticed that he was silent and thoughtful. Why, I didn't know. From his point of view, everything should be as plain as a bayonet by this time.

He left me to pay the cab and went up the stairs into his flat. I was held up some time while the driver canvassed the stores on each side of the street seeking change for a twenty-peso note. As he finally counted the change into my palm, Mercado came dashing out of the building and sprang into the cab again.

Wonderingly, I climbed in, too. Mercado shot a Spanish address at the driver, then turned to me.

"Grew's dead!" he said. "Murdered. Happened less than an hour ago. There was a message from Fuller in the house."

"Grew?" I said, puzzled. I was sure I knew all the angles on the death of Diaz, but I couldn't figure Grew in it at all.

Albert Grew was a bookish sort of lad who

had come to Mexico as an assistant to the commercial attaché of the Embassy. He was something of a linguist and, liking the country, he had quit his job and set up in business for himself as a Spanish teacher to Americans and Englishmen.

I had met him a couple of times and quite probably would have forgotten his name had it not been for the fact that Fuller had engaged him for lessons, had been due to take the first one on the day that Diaz was killed.

But if Walters had killed the Mexican, and I firmly believed he had, I could see no motive for his killing Grew.

TEN minutes later, we disembarked again in a street of moderately priced stores and apartments. In front of us loomed a tremendous hardware store. Over its plate glass windows was a wide, black board upon which had been nailed enormous gilt convex letters spelling out with Castillian pride the owner's name: JUAN MONDRAGON & CIA., S. A.

Mercado left me to pay the hack for the second time and entered the building. I followed a moment later in time to see his dapper little figure disappear through a doorway on the first landing. A moment later I found myself in Grew's living room.

It was a comfortably furnished room, its walls lined with bookcases, filled and apparently often read. But at the moment it was in chaotic disorder. Obviously, it had been searched. On the couch something large and irregular lay motionless beneath a sheet. Lounging against the wall was an indolent copper. He nodded at Mercado. Obviously he was a policeman too indifferent to his job to resent the intrusion of a *detective particular*.

They went into rapid Spanish which I didn't even try to follow. After some ten minutes of it, Mercado sat down and lit a cigarette. He seemed troubled. His mind seemed so far away that I'm sure a germ could have sneaked up on him completely unobserved.

"Well," I said, "what happened?"

Mercado shrugged. "It's rather bewildering," he said. "Grew was knifed. His landlady found him a couple of hours ago. He was still alive when she arrived and the room, as you see, was ransacked."

"Then," I said, "he named his killer?"

"No," said Mercado. "He only uttered two words. He spoke them three times."

"What were they?"

"I'm not sure. But they apparently were English. He said, 'amber sands,' three times. Of course, this was heard only by the landlady who speaks no English so we can't be sure."

"Amber sands?" I repeated. "Have the coppers any theory?"

"They have, as usual. They checked and found out that Grew went down to Acapulco

for the swimming whenever he had the chance. He was crazy about the beach. They think—"

"I get it," I said. "He was delirious. He was raving about that terrific beach at Acapulco. The amber sands, get it? It's obvious."

Mercado shook his hands doubtfully. "I'm not so sure," he said. "Besides, there's something else."

"Which is?"

He stood up abruptly and I could hear the arsenal of bottles rattle in his pockets. "There was a strange car parked outside for about a half hour before Grew was found stabbed. It had an American license plate. No one, however, got the number."

"My God!" I said excitedly. "What kind of car? What model?"

"Pontiac coupe. 1940."

"Click!" I yelled. "I told you. That's Walters' car."

Mercado nodded without surprise. "I am not amazed."

"Neither am I," I said grimly. "This proves I'm no liar. Moreover, it proves Walters the killer. He killed Diaz, I know that. He probably killed Grew because maybe Grew taught him some Spanish, probably told him what to say to Diaz. Walters was afraid if Grew said so, everyone would know I wasn't lying. Now do you get it?"

Mariano Mercado paced the floor. Obviously, he wasn't listening to me. I became annoyed. There seemed to be a tacit conspiracy to make certain that Jerry Walters literally got away with murder. Mercado stopped pacing abruptly and said: "Leftworth has a house in Cuernavaca, hasn't he?"

"Yes. But, for God's sake, why? What's Leftworth got to do with it? Are you still pursuing your least likely suspect theory?"

"Perhaps. Anyway, let's go out and call on him."

"Are you crazy?" I yelled. "Go and pinch Walters. My God—"

"You may pinch Walters," he said, walking to the door. "I'm going to Cuernavaca."

He strode into the hall, while I glared after him. I had about as much authority to pinch Walters as I had to mobilize the Mexican army. Finally, I shrugged my shoulders and followed him.

**A** FEW moments later the taxi Mercado had hired raced through the suburbs of Mexico City, past Xochimilco to the curving, dangerous mountain road to Cuernavaca. We rode in silence, Mercado apparently occupied in thought, I in sullen anger at his stubborn stupidity.

Then some fifteen kilometers out of town, we both spotted the car ahead simultaneously.

"That's it!" I yelled as I saw the coupe with the New York license plate. "Walters is try-

ing to make a getaway. We'll nail him dead to rights."

Mariano Mercado paid no attention to me. He leaned forward in his seat and instructed the driver to pass the car ahead. As we forged past the Pontiac on the narrow road both of us peered intently out the open window.

There was but one person in the car and it was not Walters. A thin, swarthy figure sat at the wheel. There were two ugly, pale scars, reminiscent of knife wounds, on his face. He did not look up as we passed.

We shot ahead. Mercado spoke to the driver. "Keep about half a kilometer ahead of that car," he said, then lapsed once more into thoughtful silence.

I considered for a moment, then said: "It's still easy. Walters hired a thug. A killer. That's him in the car."

"You're half right," said Mercado. "Morelos is a thug."

"You mean that guy at the wheel? Do you know him?"

He nodded. "Every copper in Mexico knows him. Moreover, they know he's a killer. But they've never been able to prove it. He lives in a well known hotel and more or less defies the entire Federal Police."

I sank back in my seat well satisfied. Everything seemed to fit in perfectly once more.

"Though I know Morelos both by sight and reputation," said Mercado musingly, "I doubt that he knows me. Perhaps it would be well to get into the car with him. Perhaps we might find something in the car or, if he is unsuspecting of us, trap him into a damaging admission."

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. Mariano Mercado, true to the tradition of the story-book detective was not going to do it the easy way. I had explained that Diaz murder to him. I had explained the killing of Grew. Yet Mercado persisted in playing Sherlock Holmes to my irritated Doctor Watson.

He leaned forward again and spoke to the driver. Some pesos passed hands. A moment later the taxi slewed across the road, effectively blocking traffic, and stopped. Mercado climbed out. I followed him. A moment later the coupe came around the curve. Its brakes screeched. It halted a few feet from us.

Mercado showed all his teeth in his most ingratiating smile. He opened the door of the coupe and said to Morelos: "Will you aid us? Our cab has broken down. Will you take us to the nearest gas station where we may get assistance?"

Morelos was by no means cordial. But even before he had finished his sentence, Mercado was already in the car. I squeezed in beside him as the cab driver pushed his car over to the side of the road to give us clearance.

The coupe started. Morelos grunted but



did not speak and we went on. I glanced swiftly around the car. There was certainly nothing in it which might be considered a clue, but considering the evidence Mercado already had, I couldn't see that it made any difference.

I looked at the speedometer. The needle was close to fifty which was a dangerous speed over this narrow and constantly winding road. Then I looked at Morelos. He stared straight ahead and his jaw moved rhythmically as he chewed tobacco.

Morelos took his eyes off the road for a moment and spat tobacco juice out the window. The wind was most unfavorable. A stream of brown saliva was promptly hurled back into the car. Three drops landed on Mariano Mercado's chin. The rest enhanced the glorious beige of his tie.

Mercado uttered a shriek, half of rage, half of fear. "*Valgame Dios!*" he cried. "Are you mad, *hombre?* Do you know the bacteriological contents of this stuff?"

He scraped his face with his handkerchief. He was gray with fright. Morelos grinned at him.

"It won't hurt you," he said in Spanish. "Even a little more won't hurt."

He opened his mouth and turned again to the window to expel more tobacco juice. Mercado uttered a howl. He reached across me and opened the door of the coupe. He shoved against me with all his might. He knocked me out into space and followed a second later himself.

IN the instant that I was hurtling above the shoulder of the road I remembered that when I had last read the speedometer it had registered fifty. It came to me that when I landed I was going to be a hospital case. It was all very well for Mercado to prefer a broken neck to a few germs on his chin, but I was most indignant that he had forced me to share his views in the matter.

I landed alive, though with a good deal of skin clipped from my nose and knees. I got painfully to my feet, to see the coupe round a bend in the distance and with indignation overwhelming me.

I turned around to face Mercado. Apparently he was unscathed. He was spraying some sort of disinfectant from an atomizer all over his face.

"You idiot," I yelled. "Are you crazy? We might have been killed. Do you know we were going fifty miles an hour?"

He lowered the atomizer and stared at me. "*Dios,*" he said, "fifty miles an hour! I'm glad you said that. Fifty miles an hour and the amber sands of Acapulco. *Dios,* there's the entire case in our laps."

"Did you land on your head?" I asked bitterly. "What jargon are you talking now?"

He regarded me with mockery. "I am speaking English," he said haughtily. "If you knew your own language as well as I do, you might understand me."

I looked around me and saw nothing but mountains. "How the devil do we get out of here?"

"There's a gas station with a phone about three kilos away. We'll walk there. On the way I shall tell you what I expect from you tomorrow."

We trudged along the road.

"You will call Fuller," said Mercado. "You will tell him to have everyone assembled at his house at noon."

"Who's everyone?"

"Fuller, his daughter, Walters, Leftworth and yourself. I shall have the police bring Morelos along under escort. If they think I can pin something on him, I'm sure they will cooperate."

"What the devil have all these people to do with the two murders? Why do you need them to charge Walters and possibly Morelos with murder?"

"The connection of the others," said Mariano Mercado, "I shall tell you tomorrow. You already know your own connection in the affair."

He stared at me so steadily that I reddened beneath his scrutiny. How much he knew I wasn't sure. Neither was I certain as to whether Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*, was something of a pompous dolt, or a very shrewd little package, indeed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Doublecross—Latin Style

IT seemed that the clan had already gathered when Mercado and I arrived at Fuller's. Mercado looked about the room, achieved a Renaissance bow and showed his enviable teeth. I nodded brusquely and sat down.

I took stock of the audience. Fuller sat behind his desk, a cigar in one hand and a Cuba libre in the other. He looked sleek and smug, rather like a fat cat who has stumbled across a derailed milk train. The reason for this was clear enough.

He fully expected that Mariano Mercado was about to unmask the killer of Genaro Diaz. That done, he would phone every daily paper in town, take several modest bows and ingratiate himself with a government which was on the verge of handing him a million dollar concession.

Over on the sofa, Ruth Fuller and Jerry Walters sat huddled together. Walters, I thought, seemed a trifle nervous. Ruth was defiantly belligerent, as if tacitly challenging Mercado to utter a single derogatory word

about her fiancé. They ignored me completely.

On the other side of the room, sprawling in a leather chair, was Bob Leftworth. His angular figure was bent at the knees, the hips and the shoulders. He was giving his wholehearted attention to Mercado, as if trying to look through the latter's ebony eyes and read what was in his mind.

Morelos and a copper completed the assembly. Morelos stood scowling against the wall. The scar on his face was livid and his frown was volcanic. His arms were folded and he wore the expression of a man who was prepared to fight if things went against him. Mercado had informed me that he understood enough English to follow the proceedings. The copper who had brought him lounged at Morelos' side and appeared mildly bored by the entire proceedings.

Mariano Mercado took a dominant position in the center of the room, looked about, counted heads, and said: "Where is your *criado*, José?"

I sighed and shook my head. There were doubtful moments when I believed that Mariano Mercado was not very bright. I knew who had killed Diaz and Grew. Moreover, I knew that unless Mercado's forefathers were of the Mexican branch of the Juke family, he knew, too. He had all the evidence he needed. Yet he was asking for the harmless José who, I was certain, had nothing more to do with either killing than Camacho himself.

Fuller, however, appeared to find nothing odd in the request. He yanked the bell pull on the wall and a moment later José shuffled into the room, leaving the door open behind him. Mercado waved him to the wall alongside the bored policeman. Then he glanced at the open door and shuddered.

"*Valgame Dios!*" he cried in anguished tones. "Close that door! Shall we all die in an oxygen tent with pneumonia?"

The temperature was a steady seventy-two. There was not a ghost of a zephyr stirring. Nevertheless, I humored him. I got up and closed the door. As I took my seat again, I saw the thoughtful expression that had crawled into his eyes. I knew what was coming.

"Of course," he said pontifically, "it has never been definitely established that the common cold is caused by a germ. However, all researches indicate—"

"Unless," cut in Leftworth sharply, "you are about to argue that Diaz and Grew were killed by the common cold, suppose you drop the subject and get on with what you have to say about murder. I'm a busy man."

I GRINNED at the crestfallen expression on Mercado's face. He looked like a garrulous mother who has been cut off in the middle of her favorite baby anecdote.

"Yes, yes," said Fuller, with heavy good-fellowship, "let's get down to business, *señor*. It will be most gratifying to me to have been an instrument in the solution of Diaz' killing, even though he was opposed to granting me valuable concessions."

"Oh, no," said Mercado blandly, "you are wrong there, *señor*. Genaro Diaz was going to give you copper concessions. On the very day he was killed he was about to tell you so."

Fuller blinked. I could see what faith he had in Mercado oozing out of him. He had spent days and nights arguing with Diaz about those zinc mines. But Diaz had been adamant—the mines were to go to Leftworth.

"Well," said Jerry Walters, "this certainly is a new angle. I—"

"If the remainder of Mr. Mercado's theory is as sound as this one," said Ruth, "I'm afraid we're all wasting our time."

Mercado looked at her reproachfully. He sighed heavily, said: "It is a most deplorable case."

Even Fuller was looking leery now. It appeared as if Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*, was stalling. The only statement he had put forward—that Diaz was about to award the zinc concessions to Fuller—was most dubious, and beyond that and an aborted lecture on the common cold, he had said precisely nothing.

"Yes," went on Mercado, "the whole case is a history of deplorable doublecrosses, all of which happened because Genaro Diaz was a man of honor and integrity. There has been a vast quantity of lying, illuminated by some fragments of truth."

"Well," put in Ruth, "Jerry told the truth throughout—when he said he wasn't in the house, that he didn't speak Spanish, that he didn't use threatening words to Diaz in the library."

She glared at me when she finished as if challenging me to reiterate my story. I shook my head and silently cursed Mercado. How he could let that speech go unchallenged in view of the evidence I knew he had, was beyond me. I had just about reached the conclusion that he was a brainless charlatan, when he said: "I fear you are wrong again, *señorita*. It was the Señor Latham who spoke the truth when he said he overheard your fiancé speaking Spanish in the library."

I drew a deep breath and my faith in Mariano Mercado returned. Of course, I told myself, he had the answers. He had been stalling because of his Latin sense of the dramatic, to create suspense. I sat back and waited for him to point an accusing finger at Jerry Walters.

Fuller looked worried, Ruth apoplectic, and Walters uneasy. Morelos retained his stone face, but I thought I detected a gleam of satisfaction in Leftworth's eye.



Ruth Miller slapped her hand on the arm of the couch. "You are a fool!" she said angrily. "Jerry doesn't know a word of Spanish. Not a single word."

Mercado bowed politely. "This time, *señorita*," he said, "you are half right. I am not a fool. Yet it is true that Señor Walters does not know a word of Spanish."

At this point all of us looked as blank as an unused note book. Fuller blinked, then said very slowly, like a man who is striving to make himself thoroughly clear: "You say Walters threatened Diaz in the library in Spanish? You also admit that Walters does not know a single word of the language?"

"That is it, *señor*," said Mercado. "I am glad to see you understand so rapidly."

**T**HIS time, Fuller's jaw actually dropped.

He understood neither rapidly nor in any other matter. Nor, for that matter, did anyone else. I gave up all over again. I reverted to my opinion that Mercado would never have passed the Japanese army intelligence test. It was Ruth who voiced the thought that was in each of our heads.

"How in the name of heaven," she demanded, "could Latham have heard Jerry talking Spanish when he can't speak a word of it?"

Mariano Mercado sighed heavily, as if the density of his audience was too much for him.

"I didn't say he couldn't *speak* Spanish. Anyone can speak Spanish if it is written down for them. I merely said that Walters didn't *know* any Spanish. He doesn't. He didn't have the slightest idea of what he was saying."

Ruth's annoyance at Mercado evaporated

immediately. It was replaced by a look of something approaching awe. Walters registered something between acute worry and vast relief. Once again I lifted my estimation of Mercado. I waited confidently for him to produce his next statement which I was sure would be conclusive evidence.

"You mean," said Fuller, "that Walters read those Spanish words to Diaz—that Latham really heard him say them?"

"Exactly, *señor*."

Fuller's bewilderment in no wise decreased. Glancing over at Morelos, I noted he was staring at Mercado. His expression was not pleasant. Mercado's gaze was directed out the window. Before he spied some germ life and embarked upon a harangue, I decided to take matters in hand myself.

"Look," I said, "it's simple. It would have been much simpler if you'd believed me in the first place when I told you what I'd overheard in the library. Walters was sore because Diaz was paying attention to Ruth, who, for reasons of policy couldn't very well rebuff him. So Walters, speaking no Spanish, looked up the words he wanted in the dictionary, copied them out, and read them off to Diaz, or maybe Grew helped him. Diaz got sore, pulled a gun or something, so Walters yanked a knife off the wall and killed him. There it is, with no more hocus-pocus."

"That's a lie," cried Ruth Fuller, in a tone which was perilously close to hysteria. "A damnable dirty lie!"

"I was framed," cried Walters. "I can explain everything. I never copied—"

"Shut up," said Ruth, suddenly self-possessed.

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Mariano Mercado flashed his teeth at me and inquired sweetly: "And how do you know all this, Señor Latham?"

"I know because I saw that dictionary in Walters' room before you did. I saw what words were underlined. They were the same words I heard Walters address to Diaz."

Mercado's white teeth vanished as his lips closed and he regarded me severely. "I know quite well you saw that dictionary before I did."

"So what? And how can you know? I never told you."

"No, you didn't. But you *did* underline those words yourself."

There was a deadly silence in the room. Despite all my efforts I could feel the hot color surging to my cheeks. I looked guilty as hell and it didn't make matters any better that I was aware of it.

Walters stared at me, horrified. "My God," he said, "so it was you who framed me! I thought all the time it was Grew."

"Are you trying to say," asked Fuller hopefully, "that Latham really murdered Diaz, then tried somehow to pin it on Walters?"

To my unutterable relief, Mercado shook his head. "No," he said. "All Latham did was to mark up Walters' Spanish-English dictionary. For that he may be forgiven since he really believed Walters was the killer. He actually thought Walters a murderer who was about to get away with his murder. So he tried to bring about justice by framing him."

"For God's sake," said Bob Leftworth, "did we come here to listen to a solution to the mystery or merely to hear it get more jumbled up than ever?"

"I will simplify it for you," said Mercado. "Grew murdered Diaz. Grew then doublecrossed his partner and José doublecrossed Grew."

"Great heavens!" said Fuller. "Is this simplification?"

"We will take it slowly," said Mercado rather condescendingly. "On the day of the murder, Grew learns that Diaz will be in this house. He learns, further, that Fuller will be delayed in meeting him. He has prepared for this day. He has obtained José as a confederate at, of course, a price."

**I** STILL didn't know where Mariano Mercado, *detective particular*, was headed, but one glance at the sudden ash which colored José's coffee-hued features was enough to convince me he was moving in the direction of truth.

"Now, Grew also has been called by Walters who wants to take Spanish lessons. On the morning of the murder Grew phones Walters, tells him he'll give him his lesson in Fuller's library since he already has an appointment

later with Fuller for another lesson. Walters, who has the run of the house here, thought nothing of it and arrived at the appointed hour."

It hit me then. True, it was several hours after it had hit Mariano Mercado, but at least it was before anyone else in the room had figured it.

"I see it," I announced. "José admitted Grew, but later denied it. Grew knifed Diaz, dragged the body into the lavatory, then awaited the arrival of Walters. He handed Walters a piece of paper upon which was typed some Spanish. He told Walters some cock-and-bull story about the importance of a correct accent and told him to read the words aloud. Walters did and I heard him."

"Which was accidental and not particularly important," said Mercado. "But the fact that José heard him was the paramount point."

"But José said he heard nothing," said Fuller.

"He also said that Walters had not been in the house, that Grew had not been in the house, and that Grew had telephoned saying he couldn't come. All these statements are lies."

Now I had completely lost it again. "But why?" I asked. "Why is José doing all this lying?"

"José had been well bribed. He was to be the witness who swore he heard Walters threatening Diaz. Naturally, when he confronted Walters with the evidence, Walters would tell the truth. Grew would deny it. And José would deny that Grew had ever been in the house. Walters' word would never, under the circumstances, be accepted."

"But, damn it all," yelled Fuller, "José also said that *Walters* wasn't in the house!"

Mercado nodded blandly. "That was the second doublecross," he said. "José's. José decided that Walters was a man of means. He could keep his original fee and could blackmail Walters for the rest of his life."

Ruth picked it up there. "That's true. Jerry told me all about it. We were afraid to tell the truth. José made his proposition, promised to keep his mouth shut if we'd accept it. We did. No one would have believed the truth."

Mariano Mercado nodded as if he had known these incredible facts all the time. I scratched my head and pondered. I was reluctant to give up the idea of Walters' guilt. And since I didn't see any motive for Grew's committing the crime, I clung to it doggedly for the time being.

"So you see," went on Mercado, "Grew waited for José to denounce Walters, as their plan called for, thus covering up for Grew for all time. But José was embarking on his own blackmail career. He made his deal with Walters and kept his mouth shut. Grew could



say nothing without exposing his own hand, which, incidentally, was full, because he was working his own doublecross."

Fuller took his cigar from his mouth long enough to say interrogatively: "And the guy he crossed caught up with him and killed him?"

"Indirectly," said Mercado. "Actually, Morelos, here, killed him. *No hizo, valiente?*"

**M**ORELOS' breath hissed sibilantly through his teeth. His muscles tightened and he looked as if he were about to spring. The bored copper came suddenly out of his lethargy and his hand went to his hip. To my surprise, I saw Leftworth's lips move as he said something inaudible. Morelos relaxed again.

Now, for the first time, I began to believe that I had been wrong from the beginning and Mariano Mercado right. But I still didn't see any motive for Grew as the killer. Moreover, if Morelos had slain Grew, which theory, under the circumstances, I was willing to accept, Walters might well have been the principal. After all, it was his car which we had found Morelos driving. I opened my mouth and said as much.

"*Dios mio*," said Mariano Mercado mildly, "do you still believe that was Walters' car?"

"Well, wasn't it? It carried his license plates."

"It did. And it was a car of the same make, same model and same year. But it certainly wasn't Walters' car."

"Have you ever seen Walters' car?" I demanded.

"No."

"Then how the devil do you know whether it was or not?"

"It is elementary," said Mercado. "Has it never occurred to you that it would be most difficult to leap off a car that was traveling fifty miles an hour?"

"It has occurred to me. I still marvel that we weren't injured. But what the devil has that to do with the ownership of the car?"

"Everything," said Mercado. "Walters' car was bought in the United States. Its speedometer reads in miles, of course. The car we were in, the car which was supposed to be Walters', bore a Mexican speedometer, registering in kilometers. So, that figure fifty was really a kilometer reading. Actually, we were only going thirty miles an hour."

"You mean," I asked, "that someone deliberately tried to create the impression that the car was Walters' in order to frame him for the death of Grew? That someone obtained a car of the same make and model and put Walters' plates on it?"

"Exactly. The first frame had failed. Maybe, the second wouldn't. The killer wanted a suspect all ready for the police. He didn't want an investigation pushed too hard. It might have revealed the truth."

"Then I don't get it. What possible motive could Morelos have for killing Grew?"

"Money. He was paid for it."

## CHAPTER SIX

### Of Ampersands and Murder

**T**HERE was a taut silence in the room, broken only by a sigh of Ruth Fuller's. Leftworth no longer slouched in his chair. He sat bolt upright, his air of bored insouciance gone. He stared at Mercado with an admixture of awe and menace.

"You have told us," said Fuller querulously, "that Grew killed Diaz and Morelos killed Grew. I am quite willing to accept this theory. But I would like to know why either of them killed anyone."

"Because," said Mercado, flashing his teeth in Leftworth's direction, "they were hired to do so."

"By whom?" said Leftworth between clenched teeth.

Mariano Mercado sighed, sat down on the arm of my chair and said: "By you, Señor Leftworth. Who else?"

Again Fuller and I looked doubtfully at Mariano Mercado. Of all the people in the room Leftworth seemed to have less reason than anyone to kill Diaz. Diaz' death had certainly snatched the mine concessions out of his hands. Fuller shook his head wearily and said as much.

Mariano Mercado remained unruffled. "I began this little talk," he said, "by saying that Genaro Diaz was a man of integrity. So he was. He was firmly convinced that granting the mine concessions to Leftworth would be of the greatest benefit to his country. However, he changed his mind as soon as he discovered Leftworth was a crook."

Morelos stirred. Both the copper and Left-



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worth shot hard glances at him. Leftworth said with artificial casualness: "I suppose you can prove all this?"

"Indeed," said Mercado. "Diaz had absolute proof of your chicanery. He obtained a document, I don't know how, which proved conclusively that you had bribed his men. You had also bribed the appraisers to under-value the mines in their report. You bribed Grew to kill Diaz who, you knew, had brought the document to show to Señor Fuller."

Fuller dropped his cigar. He smashed his fist on the desk and his face grew red. "God," he said, "it was Leftworth's call for me to see him immediately that made me late to meet Diaz here that day."

"Precisely," said Mercado. "Grew killed Diaz, took the incriminating document, but did not give it to Leftworth as per contract. He kept it for blackmail purposes, much the same as José kept his mouth shut in order to milk Walters."

"At last," I said, "it's easy. Then Leftworth hired Morelos to kill Grew and recover the document which was essential to keeping him out of trouble with the Mexican Government, also to put an end to Grew's blackmailing."

Leftworth moved in his chair. His eyes were hard. "I repeat," he said, "can you prove all this?"

"In time," said Mariano Mercado. "First, I should like to explain to Latham that it was no accident that we met Morelos in the car supposed to be Walters' on the Cuernavaca road. He was on his way back to Leftworth's with the car. Luckily for us he took his time after the murder. As soon as I realized that, I knew I had all the answers."

Mercado beamed at Leftworth and his teeth reflected the sunlight. "The document proves it for me," he said. "The document your hired killer, Morelos, couldn't find."

"Brilliant," said Fuller. "You have the paper?"

"I have it. Or rather, I have given it to the federal prosecutor."

Morelos came to life suddenly. "Where did you find it?" he asked. "Where, *cabrón*?"

"In the amber sands," said Mercado.

I blinked. "You mean at Acapulco? You haven't been to the coast."

Mercado sighed. "It is strange that you Americans do not understand your own language. When Grew was dying he spoke, you thought, of the amber sands of Acapulco. He did not. What he said was *ampersand*—the *ampersand*. He was telling where the incriminating document would be found."

**WE ALL** looked blank. I asked the question which was in everyone's mind. "What the devil is an ampersand?"

"It is an English word," said Mercado re-

provingly, "not a Spanish one. You will recall that directly outside the window of Grew's bedroom there is a sign, a gilded sign bearing the name of the store downstairs. It reads, 'Juan Mondragon & Cia.' That symbol representing the 'and' is called an ampersand."

"I've got it," I said. "Those were gilt letters, big and hollow, nailed to the black board. Reaching out his window Grew detached the ampersand, stuffed the paper in behind it for safekeeping."

"Right," said Mariano Mercado. "Of course, Morelos could not find it. But then," he added chidingly, "can you expect an illiterate Indian to know what an ampersand is if you educated gentlemen don't?"

I ran my fingers through my hair. Reluctantly I admitted to myself that Mariano Mercado was a far shrewder operator than I had thought. I recalled my efforts to pin the crime on Walters and was aware that my face grew uncomfortably red.

Across the room, I saw Morelos look inquiringly at Leftworth. Mercado, beaming like an actor taking a bow, did not notice it.

"So," he said, "Leftworth had to get that paper. True, he would lose the concessions anyway, but he would escape criminal prosecution. The evidence I have now and the fact that José will be required by the police to swear to the truth by the Saint of Guadalupe, and, if necessary, by harsher methods will give us enough to jail the criminals in the case."

Leftworth stood up. He nodded to Morelos. Morelos' hand dived into his pocket. It reappeared an instant later holding a thirty-eight. The indolent copper at his side stared at it dully, then snapped his fingers like a man who remembers he has forgotten something. Which indeed he had—the minor matter of searching Morelos before he brought him in.

Morelos moved much faster than the policeman's brain cells. He swung the pistol with incredible speed, brought its barrel down on the officer's skull. The man's knees buckled and he sat gently upon the floor. Morelos' gun muzzle then covered the rest of us.

"Good," said Leftworth, his face pale and his lips set grimly. "Now, we will escort you all to another room in this house, a room in which there is not so much glass that you can break through. There we will lock you up in order to give us time to make our getaway."

"Venezuela," said Morelos in broken English. "I do not believe the police can touch us there."

At this moment, José fell to his knees, jabbering in Spanish. Half his prayer was devoted to repenting his awful sins, the other half to asking Guadalupe to paralyze Morelos' trigger finger.

Ruth and Jerry Walters sat stunned on the couch. Fuller, who certainly was no United



States Marine when it came to physical courage, had laid down his cigar and his drink and stared with frightened eyes across the room.

I considered myself something more of a rough and tumble fighter than the rest of them. However, I made no move. Morelos had the drop most certainly, and there was a desperate grimness about him that boded neither mercy nor consideration for any adversary.

"All right," said Leftworth. "Stand up. All of you. Turn your backs to us."

There was slow movement in the room. Then Mercado suddenly said: "I cannot permit the flouting of my country's laws."

WITH that he sprang into action like a puma. He snatched up Fuller's half-empty glass and hurled it at Morelos. At the same time he charged. He disposed of Leftworth, his patent leather shoe sinking into the American's groin. Morelos, half blinded by coco-cola and rum, fired wildly. The bullet entered the wall over my head.

In the next instant Mercado was clinging to Morelos' gun arm with one hand, while the other circled Morelos' brown throat. The two pressures, combined with a certain knowledge of jiu-jitsu leverage, brought Morelos to his knees, an expression of agony upon his face.

Again I marveled at Mariano Mercado. I had already admitted to myself that there were no bacteria adding his wits. But courage was a virtue I had hardly expected in him. He wasn't a big man and he seemed too concerned about his physical health to risk sudden extinction at the hands of a thug like Morelos.

Morelos slugged upward wildly at his adversary. But Mercado's slim brown fingers tightened about the other's throat like rusty springs. Morelos' eyes bulged. His jaw dropped open. A harsh, dry cough emanated from his throat full into Mariano Mercado's face.

Mercado sprang back as if a host of scorpions had jumped him. There was horror in his eyes and his face was the color of muddy milk. All the courage he had evinced a moment ago oozed from him like gas from a punctured balloon.

"Dios mío," he cried and his voice shook with terror. "He has murdered me! He has assailed me with a billion germs!"

His hands rattled nervously in his pocket. He extracted two blue vials and a package of pills. Then, completely forgetting Morelos and the thirty-eight in his hand, he turned tail and fled ingloriously into the bathroom.

At this point I, who was vastly more afraid of a gun in the hand of a killer than of any germ life which ever existed, charged in. I was upon Morelos before he could recover. I wrenched the weapon from his grasp. I stood up, covering both Morelos and Leftworth, who had begun to stir on the floor.

"José," I said, "call the police."

José, who at this point was willing to do anything to ingratiate himself with anyone at all, obeyed.

I WAITED until the coppers arrived and took over. Then I sought out Mercado in the bathroom. He was still shaken, but apparently he had so dosed himself with anti-

(Continued on page 95)

*"We don't like glamor boys in Mexico. Better go back to Hollywood—they need you there, since the men went to war."*



That was the anonymous message Britt Mandigo received the day he arrived in Mexico City. He couldn't help the glamor part—that was just one of the penalties of being a movie star, and he knew damn well he was a man and up to his neck in the war, even though he couldn't admit it publicly. But try to snoop quietly when your face is known and sighed over from coast to coast, and, as Ken Pratt put it: "If the Idol of American Womanhood gets himself bumped off, it won't be an incident, it'll be an international catastrophe!" A brand new thriller by a brand new contributor, K. M. KNIGHT'S

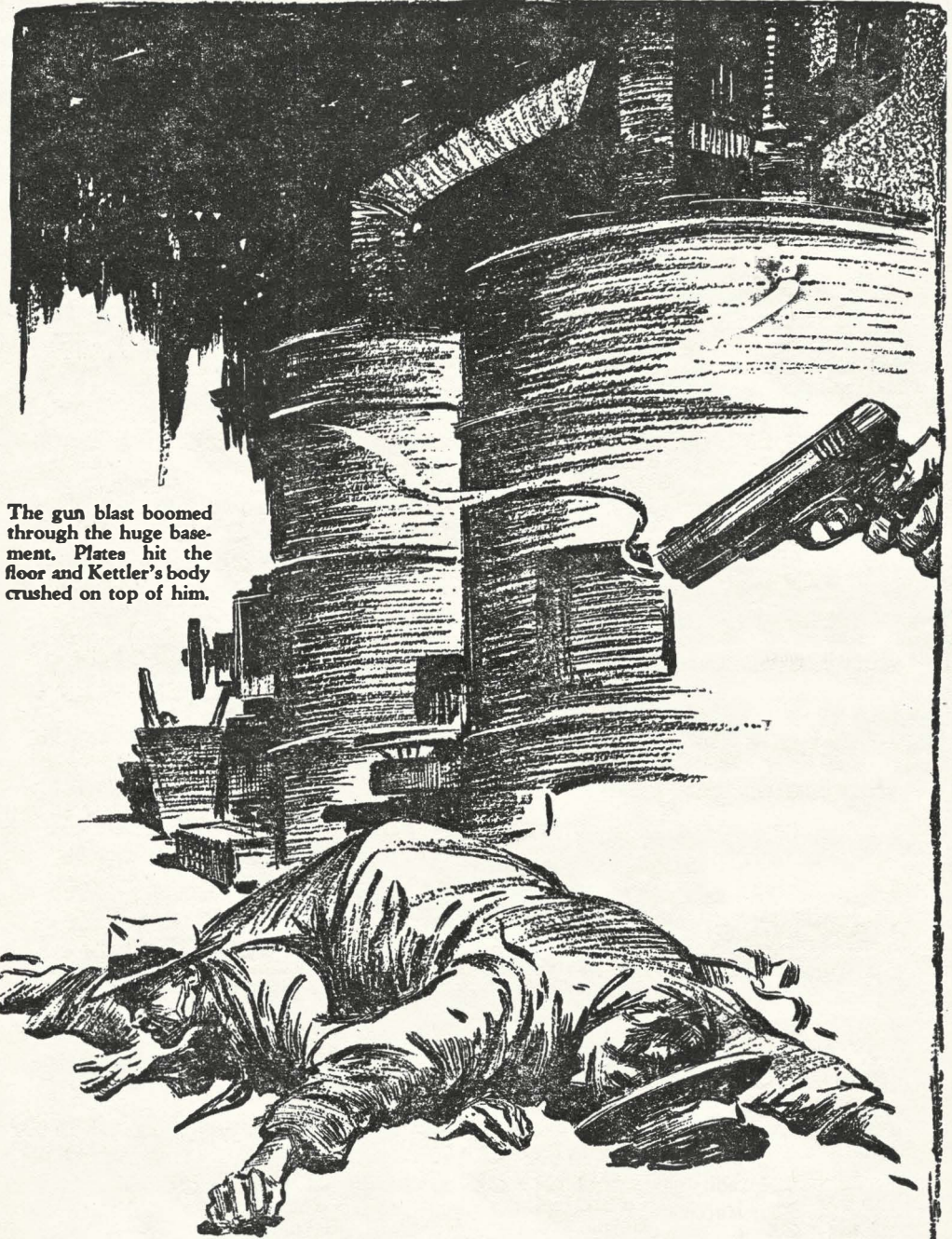
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September issue on sale now.

**BLACK MASK**

## A Plates O'Rion Novelette



The gun blast boomed through the huge basement. Plates hit the floor and Kettler's body crushed on top of him.

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Lost and Found

**I**T WAS just a little box, about as long as a man's thumb and an inch square in depth and width. You yourself have seen hundreds like it, always torn open on one end, 30

left bleaching on the rim of the Grand Canyon, or in the middle of Death Valley—not to mention parks, picnic grounds, beaches.

In big blue letters along the side ran the tradename, *Bestchrome*. And in smaller letters, *For Perfect Pictures*. And, in indelible pencil, a scrawl of two letters: *wb*.



# FALSE COLORS

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Shave and a Homicide," etc.

*Inez Forrey's name meant tennis to some and a \$10,000 reward to others. The gal had simply vanished until Plates O'Rion, the wiry little photo-snoop, found her picture in a roll of undeveloped film lying on a street corner. From there the Kodak-trail led to a very dead pharmacist in an old-fashioned pill parlor and wound up with the pint-sized lensman playing hide-and-seek with a killer in a gloomy hotel basement.*

But you had to look close to see the pencil mark. The little yellow box of snapshot film, however, was so common and ordinary that it attracted hardly any more attention than a chewing gum wrapper, despite its resting place under the "Bus Stop" sign on the busy street corner. It might have been there five seconds or five hours, since nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand would have passed it without a second glance.

The thousandth man, the exception, was a photographer. A pint-sized, graying, rumpled veteran of a man, he let his keen glance come to a stop on the yellow box, and muttered: "Uh-h, Sal, wait a minute—"

He wriggled out of the human tide flowing up to the opened door of the crosstown bus. It was only a few steps to the box resting on the curb, and he'd taken the steps and was bending toward it when a fat woman, hurrying, bumped into the pint-sized photographer and incidentally kicked the yellow box into the gutter.

"Pardon me for being alive!" Plates O'Rion grumbled uselessly, as her elephantine avoirdupois surged past him and in front of Sal up to the bus.

He took another step, stooped a second time and closed his fingers upon the box. He straightened, turned around triumphantly with his find, and saw the bus door folding itself shut behind the fat woman.

Sally O'Rion said: "Fine thing! You made us miss our bus!"

They were father and daughter, although a stranger would have had to inspect Sally O'Rion's birth certificate to believe it. The parent was just a little weatherbeaten, sharp-featured runt. The daughter was blond, beautiful and curvaceous—the kind of girl who steps into an elevator, and you see every man

in the crowd suddenly remember to remove his hat.

She rubbed it in, said: "It's all right to be patriotic, but really aren't you carrying saving wastepaper too far?"

SALLY O'RION was nineteen years old, and had been spoiled for exactly nineteen years by her over-fond, proud father. She could bawl him out for something that wasn't his fault and get away with it, and in this case, of course, he *had* made them miss the bus.

Plates was on the defensive. He showed her the box, said: "It's not wastepaper, hon. Look, there's film in it." There was, sure enough, a cylinder of dense black paper tucked into the box.

Sally O'Rion took the coldly practical, feminine point of view. "What are you going to do with it now that you've got it?"

"Return it to its owner, of course."

"How?"

"Turn it in to the bus company. Chances are somebody lost it getting on or off a bus here."

"You don't know that. It's just as likely somebody pulled it out of a pocket or a purse along with a handkerchief, walking along the street. In that case the bus company's the last place they'd go to ask for it."

Plates thought and decided she was right. "Or I could advertise it in the newspapers," he amended.

"At thirty cents a word?"

"Whoever claims it has to pay for the ad."

"Nobody's going to pay for three dollars' worth of advertising to get back a two-bit roll of film."

Plates thought some more and said: "They might. Say a service man was home on furlough. Say his mother or his sweetheart took some snapshots of him. They wouldn't want

to lose their pix for any amount of money."

"Yes, but how do you know it's that? It could just as well be snapshots of the monkey cage at the zoo. Here," urged Sally, "let's not miss this bus."

They boarded the bus, which was crowded, and a sailor got up and gave Sally his seat. The driver told Plates and the sailors and a dozen others to step on back. So it wasn't until they got off the bus at Delaware Terrace and started walking the two blocks home that he resumed the discussion.

"I tell you what," Plates said then, "I can develop it tonight and see."

"What on earth are you talking about?" queried Sal.

"That film I found."

She said, "Oh," as if the whole thing had slipped her memory.

"I ought to, anyway. So if anybody claims it, they can identify their property by describing the pix they took."

And that was what he did. Right after dinner, while his daughter and his placidly Junoesque wife did up the dishes, he hustled down to his basement darkroom.

The basement darkroom dated back to the years when Plates had carried a newspaper camera for a living, and picked up pin-money doing odd, off-time commercial jobs at home. Then gradually, as sometimes happens, the part-time job became a profitable career. Called into court on a few occasions, he had learned of the fancy prices a good photo can command in a big money lawsuit. He'd got wise to the fact that an auto smash-up can be photographed from a dozen different angles, and the resulting pix peddled to evidence-hungry lawyers and insurance adjusters—that a crack in a sidewalk where a woman catches her heel and breaks an ankle can be a goldmine for a photog who gets there before the hole is filled—that a \$50,000 fire damage claim may hinge on the direction of radial fractures in a broken plate glass shop window.

So Plates had quit the newspaper job and opened the downtown O'Rion Studio of Legal Photography. He had kept the basement darkroom equipped because accidents happen on Sundays and at nights, and occasionally it was more convenient to do a hurry-up job at home than to chase down to the elaborately outfitted studio.

**U**PSTAIRS, Sal and Mrs. O'Rion had the dishes finished when the man of the house came pounding up the steps, hot-eyed and shrill-voiced.

"Ma! Sal! Look here! You see what I see?"

They saw he had a dripping, limp enlargement clutched in his fist.

He waved it toward them, said: "Beginner's

luck! That was an eight-exposure roll, and one pic was over-exposed to hell and gone, two were so light they wouldn't print at all, number four was out of focus, five the camera moved, six is a blank and seven a double-exposure. But golly, look at the last one!"

Sally O'Rion frowned her blond brows over the last one. Technically, it was O. K.—pictorially, it didn't add up to much. It was a picture of a dog standing in the middle of a stretch of sidewalk. There was a girl in the background, apparently just there by accident since she wasn't smiling or looking at the dog or staring into the camera. It was hard to tell whether the inexperienced photographer had even realized the girl was in the background at the moment the shutter clicked, or whether it was the other way around, and even more inexpertly the camera had been aimed at the girl and photographed mostly the dog.

Sally said: "Are you kidding? Tailwagger pix like that are a dime a dozen. Probably whoever owns the pup has hundreds—"

Plates cut in: "Not the mutt! The dame! Look at her—see who she is?"

Sally stared. She saw a tall girl clad in a dark tailored suit and light-hued shirtwaist, carrying a purse under her arm. Her hair, under a trim hat, was dark.

"Stranger to me," the nineteen-year-old confessed.

Plates' wife entered the discussion. "It looks a little like that movie actress . . . what's her name? We saw her with Cary Grant in—"

The little lensman cut in again: "It's Inez Forrey, that's who. I bet a dollar."

His wife and daughter both tensed when he said it. The name meant something, all right. It meant ten thousand dollars reward, for one thing.

This Inez Forrey was front-page and sports-page copy. She'd been born in South America, of a South American mother and a Yankee father who'd since accumulated a fortune in nitrates. What put her on the sports page were her own good looks, plus the fact that she'd picked up a name as a tennis player south of the equator. She'd arrived in the States with her multi-millionaire father, had hired a full-time professional tennis coach, and announced her ambition of winning the championship at Forest Hills.

Only she'd never got that far. She'd reached the quarter-finals in one tournament, had been practically beaten when she sprained an ankle and had to default. The next time it was the semi-finals and a sunstroke. People began to say she wasn't good enough to win, nor a good enough sport to take a licking.

The third tournament, she'd played two matches, and had been scheduled to meet the champion the next day. Some time during the



night before this match, Inez Forrey walked out of her expensive hotel suite—and didn't come back.

Maybe she just didn't have the heart to face a better player and a hostile gallery. Maybe it was something else, amnesia or suicide or even murder. The newspapers hinted at all these theories—the Missing Persons Bureau worked on them, and didn't find her. She had simply dropped out of sight, and was still missing now, two weeks after her disappearance.

**SALLY O'RION** gulped: "Gee, it does look like— If we'd only saved the papers with her picture!"

Plates shrugged. "I worked the shipboard beat too long to miss on a celebrity."

He meant he used to ride the revenue cutter out through the harbor, go aboard incoming liners, and get pix of names-in-the-news travelers. A man without a memory for faces could never have held down the job, since checking the passenger list alone wasn't enough. Frequently the personages most in the news were traveling incognito, trying to duck reporters and press cameras. And these were often persons he'd never met in the flesh, and could only identify through recollecting pix he'd seen of them.

Years of newshawking had developed in Plates an uncanny mental filing cabinet stuffed with faces in the news.

He said confidently: "Look at her forehead. That girl's been out in the sun with a visor pulled halfway down to her eyes. You might find ten girls who looked more or less like her, but how many of them would have that line, hardly tanned at all, where the visor band fitted?"

"A hat would do the same—" Sally started to suggest.

"No, because there's suntan again higher up, above the white line. A hat would shade her whole forehead, not just a strip across it."

Sally O'Rion drew in her breath. "Gee, if it really is— If we could find her!"

"That shouldn't be so hard. The whole city is looking for her, and has been for two weeks. You have to figure she's lying low, hardly going out at all, so that wherever this picture was snapped is close to where she's living."

"Yes-s, but where was it taken?" The nineteen-year-old gloomed over the photo. It showed a dog and some sidewalk and the girl—and not much else. "It could be any one of a hundred streets, and any one of a thousand dogs," she despaired.

"Don't discourage me before I even begin." Plates shrugged his slight, wiry shoulders. "First thing, I have to show this pic to her father. See if he says it's his missing daughter."

"But if you're already sure—"

"I want to be sure *he's* sure enough to sign his John Henry on a receipt for the pic."

The pint-sized photog brooded, moody with wary wisdom: "Hell, nobody ever actually gets *all* of a reward like that! I've seen it happen twenty times over. Invariably the line forms on the right, everybody who ever had any contact with the case holding out a hand for a piece of the pay-off. You can't follow a cold trail without asking questions along the way, and every living soul who tells you anything now, later on claims a piece of the reward money. This man Forrey may want to do the right thing, yet if he doesn't split the dough a dozen ways he'll be faced with a dozen lawsuits. So he'll split it. He'll go right down the line, handing out a thousand here and fifteen hundred there, just enough so each claimant will decide it's smarter to take the cash than risk fighting in court for more.

"That's how it is," Plates said grimly, "and the only thing you can do about it is get your ticket to stand first in the line on D-day—divvy-up day."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Prescription for Death

**IT TOLD** much about Carter Forrey that he could offer ten thousand dollars for information concerning his missing daughter's fate. It told more that he had wrested the ten thousand, and a million or more besides, from a pick-and-shovel prospector's start in life.

There was a delay while a silken-voiced, lily-fingered private secretary tried to persuade Plates O'Rion it wasn't really necessary to see Carter Forrey at all, that he, Juan Menico, could attend to the matter.

Then there was more delay while the tennis pro, Larry Windahl, made his white flannel-clad entrance and stalled things a while. Plates O'Rion suspected that Windahl was playing for time until the police arrived.

He suspected wrong. It wasn't the police they were waiting for, it was a private dick. Plates found that out when Menico came back to announce, "Mr. Forrey will see you now," and led the way into an adjoining room.

The place was a penthouse apartment topping off twenty-odd stories of exclusive hotel. Twelve-foot windows of plate glass faced the city skyline, looked dizzily down on beetle-sized street traffic. The modernistic furniture looked as if somebody had skinned zebras to obtain upholstery covers for the chairs and divans. The floor was a chessboard of brilliantly polished parquet, with a poolhall spittoon in the middle of it.

Five yards from the spittoon, old Carter Forrey sat chewing tobacco. A cud the size of a Brazil nut rounded out his right cheek.

The left cheek was sunken, mapped with a tracery of tiny blue veins. His eyes were sunken, too, and looked a lot like an alligator's.

The private dick was a hot-shot named Dave Kettler. He was fat, had thick, curly hair, and wore a brand-new blue pinstripe suit. You could smell Martinis on him at six feet, which was probably why he'd chosen a chair on the far side of the spittoon from Carter Forrey.

Forrey let fly, and Kettler instinctively lifted a foot off the floor, but the shot didn't miss the spittoon. To cover up, Kettler hopped from his chair. "You've got information about Miss Inez," he challenged Plates. "What is it?"

Plates ignored him, walked by and handed Carter Forrey the photo.

Forrey stared at the picture for a while. He didn't need glasses to do it, either. Finally he asked: "You took this?"

"Is it your daughter?"

"Would I give a damn who took it if it wasn't my daughter?" Forrey said.

The pint-sized photog reached in his pocket, drew out a slip of paper with typing on it, and said: "Sign this."

Kettler came up on one side of Plates, Juan Menico on the other.

"What the hell!" Kettler blurted.

"It's just an insurance policy," Plates O'Rion told him. "In case you forget later on who gave you the clue."

"You haven't answered my question," Carter Forrey growled.

"I'm not answering *any* questions until you sign."

Juan Menico bent a glossy black head over the typed slip. He was close enough so Plates could smell the hair gloss. Silkenly, the secretary advised: "It's quite all right, Mr. Forrey. It commits you to nothing legally." He uncapped a fountain pen, handed it and the slip to the old man.

Forrey read it carefully, twice, and signed.

**P**lates O'RION blew on the signature, folded it into his wallet, and said: "O. K., here's the story—"

Dave Kettler's well-fed face showed contemptuous dissatisfaction. "Hell, you're not telling us anything. That snapshot might have been taken weeks ago, before she disappeared at all."

The little lensman admitted it. "Yeah. It boils down to who took the pic. Find that person, and you'll know where and when and all the rest."

"And how," Larry Windahl interjected from across the room, "are you going to do that little thing, considering that probably ten thousand people walked by that corner today, and any one of them might have dropped the darned film?"

"It isn't that tough. If everything else fails,

maybe we can fall back on a lost-and-found ad, as a last resort."

"And what would you suggest as a first resort?" Kettler scowled.

"The box the film was in." Plates produced it, jabbed his forefinger at an indelibly penciled *wb* scrawled on the yellow cardboard.

"Someone's initials?" Windahl puzzled.

"No, it's a code cost mark, of course. Shopkeepers pick some ten letter word made up of different letters. Say the code word is *hospitable*, then *h* is for 1, *o* for 2, and so on. If the price of the article is twenty-one cents, it would be written *oh*."

Plates chuckled. "What I'm getting at is that practically every store has its own code word—which means there's probably only one dealer in the city who marks a roll of film like this with a *wb*."

Old Carter Forrey leaned forward in his chair, hit the jackpot squarely again, and said interestedly: "Go on."

"O'Rion isn't going anywhere." Kettler stroked a plump hand over his curly hair. "It'd take him a week to check all the drugstores in town alone, and there are hundreds of little candy stores and news stores and what-not that sell film."

Plates said: "And most of them have a photo-finishing service, too. Only they don't do their own developing. They shoot the stuff in to one of the big outfits, usually Central or Ace Foto. In most instances people put film back in the same box it came in, and nine times out of ten turn it in at the same place they bought it. You'd check with Ace and Central, and whichever store is sending them film in boxes marked *wb* is the store you want."

Kettler flushed, said: "Hell, I thought of all that, Mr. Forrey. It's still no good, because in the end it'd turn out to be a chainstore with thousands of customers and they wouldn't have the faintest idea who bought this one roll of film."

"I don't make it a chainstore." Plates sounded positive. "I'm guessing, but my guess is it's some little behind-the-times corner drugstore out in the sticks, run by an old fossil who's just going through the motions of being mentally alive."

Kettler looked uneasy.

Carter Forrey bull's-eyed again, looked at Plates. "Why?" he asked.

Plates said: "Because a code cost mark doesn't mean anything except at inventory time. Film doesn't stay on a dealer's shelves to be inventoried nowadays. It's in today and out tomorrow. A live-wire dealer wouldn't waste his time writing inventory prices on merchandise he could sell in a day. A man in a mental rut, though, wouldn't stop to think."

Carter Forrey said: "Brains. Smart."

Kettler asked: "And what makes you think



your old fossil will remember exactly whom he sold this film to?"

"I think he might remember the dog."

"The dog?"

"People don't as a rule go around snapping pix of just any dog on the street. Usually it's their own, and this dog very likely belongs to the person who snapped him." The pint-sized photog spread his hands. "If it's a small store, if the customers mostly live in the neighborhood, there's a fifty-fifty chance the owner of the place will look at this pic and know whose dog it is."

Tiny sweatbeads glistened on Kettler's broad, plum-colored face. Juan Menico made a business of adjusting his necktie. Larry Windahl's eyes were crinkled under carroty brows, as if he were squinting into glaring sunlight.

They all waited for Carter Forrey to say it. The old man took his time, wrinkled his lips deliberately, *pinged* the spittoon with a sound like buckshot striking a tin can.

"Brains," he said. "Smart brains. Kettler, get busy on it. Take O'Rion with you. And listen to him. Remember I dropped the police because they got no results, and I'm entirely prepared to drop you for the same reason."

Kettler said: "O. K. Come on, O'Rion."

**T**HEY dropped in an elevator to the hotel lobby, crossed the lobby to the street, without exchanging a word. Plates waited for Kettler, and Kettler at last opened his mouth. "These photo-finishers open nights?"

"Central runs a night shift."

"Let's hope it's Central, then." Kettler flagged a cab. He kept shooting side glances at the pint-sized Plates. Finally he blurted: "I don't get it! If you think it's so simple, why cut me in at all?"

"Who said it was simple?"

"You don't think so?"

"It stumped the cops."

Kettler said: "Nobody threw the cops a photo of the kid. With your dumb luck, you couldn't miss."

They unloaded in front of the photo-finishers establishment.

Plates said: "Well, I figured Forrey would turn it over to Missing Persons. A city dick wouldn't have any trouble here—he'd just flash his badge and go through the place. That isn't going to be so easy for us, because why should these people let us nose into their business?"

Kettler laughed and said: "I'll tell you what makes a bigger flash than a cop's badge. A twenty-dollar bill." He opened his wallet and folded a twenty into his palm before pushing in through the door.

The night-shift manager spent twenty minutes looking. He returned and said: "I found

half a dozen boxes marked that way, in a pick-up from the Modern Pharmacy out on Dwight Street."

The Modern Pharmacy, when they unloaded from the cab a second time, proved to have been modern about thirty-five years ago. An old-fashioned globe filled with tinted water adorned the one narrow window. The door had an overhead bell which rang a cracked note when opened. Down one side of the narrow length of the store traveled a soda fountain belonging to the imitation marble era of interior decoration, outfitted with wire-legged stools. A pane of glass in the cigar counter had been broken and replaced with plywood. On the wall behind the soda fountain was a peeling mirror, and behind the cigar counter a picture of a race horse named Dan Patch. The opposite wall held shelves stacked with patent medicines.

There was no sign of a clerk in sight. The doorbell suggested it was strictly a one-man store.

At the back of the store was a frosted glass partition with the words *Prescription Dept.—Private* painted in gold letters.

Detective Kettler drummed a half dollar noisily on the cigar counter glass.

There was no response, just as there had been none to the jangling bell.

Kettler said: "I'm going back and tell Rip Van Winkle the Spanish-American War is over."

He swaggered confidently past the antique soda fountain, rounded the end of the prescription department wall.

There came a choked curse and a crash.

Little Plates O'Rion dived after the big private dick. He, too, dashed past the soda fountain and pivoted into the back room.

There wasn't much light, just a vague flow through the frosted glass. There was enough, though, to see that the prescription was death, wrapped up in the lank, white-aproned form of an elderly druggist sprawled in a pool of blood.

Plates caught one fleeting glimpse of the corpse. Then a blinding wallop knocked him as cold as a seafood cocktail.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dog Catcher

**P**lates O'RION woke up with a blue-coated cop waving smelling salts under his nose. Plates blinked his eyes and the cop said: "This one's gonna be O.K., Mike."

He tossed the salts bottle, and Plates turned his head gingerly, and followed the throw. There was another cop, farther back in the prescription department, bending over Kettler's limp bulk.

Mumbling sounds formed on the photog's lips. "Wh-what hap-happened?"

"You tell me," the cop said.

Kettler's voice panted: "We walked into a stickup. The so-and-so shot up the druggist and was cleaning out the safe back here when we barged in."

"You seen the so-and-so, then?"

"Let me up," Kettler said.

The cop helped him sit up. Kettler had a red bruise running down from his curly hair onto his flesh-padded cheekbone. His mouth was bloody. He said through the blood: "Yeah. One of them zoot-suit punks. Not more'n eighteen or nineteen."

"And you let a punk like that take the two of you?"

"One at a time he took us," Kettler said.

Plates' cop asked: "How about it? What's your story, fella?"

"I didn't even see what the hell hit me," the little lensman grimaced. Lamely, with some help, he managed to prop himself in a sitting position. The cops had switched up the back room lights, revealing an iron safe in the far corner of the prescription department. Its door, partly ajar, bore the legend, *MODERN PHARMACY, J. R. Summers, Prop.* On the wall over it, a framed license indicated that J. R. Summers had been a registered pharmacist. A rolltop desk and swivel chair, a work shelf, and a lot of shelves and bins labeled with the names of pharmaceuticals completed the layout.

"The lights weren't on then," Plates explained.

"There was a light on when we came in," Kettler's cop said, frowning.

Kettler rapped out: "Judas! O'Rion, how much dough did you have on you?"

"Fifteen or twenty bucks."

The private dick waved his wallet. "I was carrying two hundred, and I'm cleaned."

Plates dropped a hand inside his coat, got out his wallet, and admitted he, too, was cleaned.

Kettler said: "Then that's it. The punk switched on the lights and jack-rolled us, besides what he got out of the safe."

"Who called the cops?" Plates wondered.

"A dame," his cop said.

"Who?"

"Just a customer. She came in, thought it was funny nobody waited on her, and looked back here to see. She phoned in there were three dead men here. Homicide ought to be here any minute."

Captain Harry Beale, night man on Homicide, ushered himself in about two minutes later. He ordered Plates and Kettler into the front of the store so fingerprints and measurements could be taken in the prescription department.

THE girl who'd reported the case sat on a soda fountain stool, sniffing into a handkerchief. When she lowered the handkerchief, she revealed a pretty face. She said her name was Tess Norton, that she lived in the next block over, on Fabro Street, and was sure the light had been turned on in the back room.

Kettler repeated his description of the zoot-suit bandit, and Plates repeated that he hadn't seen what hit him.

Beale dawdled his fingers over his southern sheriff-like mustache. He looked as if he'd just stepped off a train from hillbilly-land, but he was really a big-time manhunter.

He drawled: "It's one of those things, huh? We throw out a dragnet tonight, and in the morning you come down and look over the line-up and try to pick out the zoot-suiter."

"I'd be glad to," Kettler cream-and-sugared.

"Yeah. Do that. Oh, by the way"—and Beale's teeth snapped, his tone climbed to a raucous bark—"you forgot to tell what you guys were doing here! The town's number one photo finagler and redball snooper both in this pill parlor right on the heels of murder wouldn't be accidental!"

Kettler said instantly, smoothly: "Believe it or not, we were looking for a dog."

Beale's stare indicated he didn't believe it.

"It's the truth. I'll show you." Old Carter Forrey had given the dog pic to the private dick, and now Kettler plucked the print from his side pocket. He held it toward Captain Beale. He kept his thumb over the figure of Inez Forrey in the background.

"That mutt?" The Homicide officer showed annoyed skepticism. "Somebody is actually paying you money to play dog-catcher for that?"

"I don't say it's a show animal," Kettler replied. "The client happens to be rich. For purely personal reasons, he's willing to pay money on the line for finding Fido."

"Yeah? Well, beat it, I'll be seeing you at the morning line-up."

Kettler seemed glad to go. Less eagerly, Plates pushed his aching head into the night breeze. They walked nearly a block in silence.

"Well," the dick pulled up, "where do we go from here?"

"From here," the little cameraman replied in tense bitterness, "you go your way, and I go mine."

"Hunh? What's eating you?"

Plates O'Rion spilled it. "I don't think you were down on the floor when I went back there. I don't think there was any zoot-suit bandit. I figure you peeled off and slugged me."

The reflection of a street corner lamp highlighted the big dick's stare.

"You'll be saying next I knocked off the druggist," he scoffed.



"No. But I'm saying right now you've got a hell of a sweet idea who did bump the fellow. Beale couldn't pay you for what you know, but you're pretty sure someone else can and will."

"You forget I got knocked out, too."

"For a lot less than ten thousand bucks, I think you'd bump your face into a door jamb—hard."

Kettler shrugged. "If you feel that way about me, half-pint, we better make this good-bye."

"Good night!" the photog snapped.

Kettler hesitated. "I wouldn't advise you to spout any of your theories to Beale. You might find out what the words libel, slander, and defamation of character can cost a hot-air artist."

"I won't say it with *words*. I'll say it with *pix*, Kettler, when the time comes."

**T**HE big man grunted derisively and strode off. Plates stood still, his hands exploring his pockets. The breaks were against him. He didn't have the price of a streetcar ride in his pocket, or even a nickel to feed into a phone.

He reminded himself that Captain Harry Beale could hardly refuse to lend carfare to the victim of a holdup.

Plates turned back, had covered half the distance to the drugstore, when a figure un-melted itself from the shadows of a darkened doorway.

"M-mister," it breathed hesitantly.

Plates stopped short, craned his neck to peer into the doorway. The barely visible face belonged to Miss Tess Norton.

The girl said: "I heard what your friend said, about looking for a dog. I—I'd like to see the picture again."

"Again?"

"I didn't really see it before. I got just a glimpse while your friend was showing it to that officer." Tess Norton gathered her breath. "So I'm not absolutely sure. It may not be the same dog. But I know where there is one—well, a lot like it."

The little lenshawk's blood pulsed faster. "Yeah? Where?"

She made a sibilant sound of moistening her lips. "Aren't you a little previous? Remember, I heard what the officer said, too, about how important you men are. If there's money enough in it to interest you, well, there ought to be something in it for me."

"There will be."

"How much?"

"It depends."

The girl said: "You've got to be more definite than that. That's a stolen dog you're after, isn't it? I'm not going to get into a lot of trouble for nothing. I expect to be paid for this. At the very least"—she paused to make up her mind—"ten dollars."

"I'll guarantee you ten bucks if it's the right dog."

"Come on, then," Tess Norton said.

It was a shabby, brown apartment building on Fabro Street, too commonplace to boast an awning at the entrance or a clerk in the foyer. There was, in fact, only six feet of foyer furnished with hole-in-the-wall mailboxes with a pushbutton under each. Tess Norton fished a key from her purse, unlocked an inner door, and led on down a gray-carpeted corridor lined with numbered doors.

At Number 12, she stopped, said: "You'll have to wait while I see if my roommate's decent."

"Sure."

She frowned. "What'd you say your name was?"

"O'Rion."

"Well, so far as my roommate's concerned, your name's Higmantle, and you work for the Miller department store. That's where I work, and she's heard me talk about Mr. Higmantle. If you know how to act like a wolf, that won't hurt any."

She unlocked the door, left it ajar as she went inside and called: "Ina! Oh, Ina!" The sound blurred as she moved on into the place. In a minute she was back, her eyes sharp and excited.

"She's gone! She took all her things and Skippy, too!"

"Skippy?"

"Skippy's the dog in the picture."

**F**OR a long moment the little photog stood rooted in thought.

"You wouldn't have a phone?" he asked.

The girl led him into the apartment, the kind of place which rents, furnished, under a ceiling of thirty-five or forty dollars. Plates dialed the hotel number, told the hotel operator to give him the penthouse apartment.

Larry Windahl's voice took the call. "Grab some photos of your favorite pupil and meet me in apartment 12 at 2433 Fabro Street," Plates told him.

The lensman balanced his pint-sized form on the edge of a sofa, one of those which pulls out and makes a bed. His Irish-blue eyes were friendly. "Tell me all about her, Miss Norton."

The girl said: "Well, it all started when I ran an ad in the paper. One of those 'Business girl will share apartment with same' ads. And Ina Ford was what I got."

"She was the only applicant?"

Tess Norton said: "No, but I'm just a little bit finicky and fastidious about taking in a total stranger, and there was something about Ina—she was more refined, better educated, than the others."

"What did she tell you about herself?"

"Not very much. She told me she had a job

as a lab assistant in a dentist's office, a Dr. Hall in the Medical Arts Building. One day, I thought we could have lunch together, but I couldn't find any Dr. Hall in the book. I mentioned it to her, and she said Dr. Hall was a new man in a dental clinic, so his name wasn't in the book yet, and anyway I must never call her during business hours. She said they had strict orders against any of the employees using the phone for personal calls, and it would cost her her job. So I let it go at that."

She hesitated. "I have to punch a time clock at eight and five. Her hours were nine to four, so she was always here when I left and got home first."

"You couldn't positively swear she went to work at all?"

Tess Norton shook her head slowly. "Now that you mention it, no. But the thing which bothered me and got me to thinking was, she didn't have any points."

Plates blinked.

"Ration points," the girl explained. "Part of my idea was to share the kitchen expenses with my roommate. But Ina insisted on eating her meals out. She told me she was on her feet all day long in the dental laboratory, and she absolutely refused to stand over a cook-stove at night, and it wouldn't be fair to let me do the cooking and dishwashing for both. To make up the money part, she was willing to pay an extra ten dollars on the apartment rent."

"So that was all right, I couldn't complain, but last Friday I ran out of red points. It's pretty darned hard for just one person to make the points reach. You can't buy less than a pound of oleo at a time. Anyway, I asked her, since she wasn't using her book, if she'd lend me a few stamps." Tess Norton blushed. "You should have heard her! The way she acted, you'd think it was the most unpatriotic thing on earth, that I was a one-woman black market and a menace to the war effort, and all that. Of course, technically, I'll admit she was right. But it struck me she acted sort of funny about it, sort of scared. So in a quiet way, I did a little snooping. And, you know, I think the real reason was, she didn't have a ration book to her name!"

"Eating out," Plates suggested, "maybe she never bothered to apply for one."

"But she'd need it for other things. Shoes. And come to think of it, she didn't have but one decent pair of shoes to her name. The rest of her clothes were high-class, but when it came to shoes she went around in play wedgies, and you can buy those without a stamp."

Tess Norton tapped a cigarette, looked to Plates expectantly. The little man snapped out of a momentary brown study. "Oh. Pardon me. Here." He dragged a paper match across its scratch pad. "You were saying—"

She exhaled smoke. "I guess you're not in-

terested in what I was saying. It's the dog you want to know about. Ina had him in tow the first time she came here, and it was one reason she was willing to pay a little more than half of the rent. I like dogs myself, so that was O.K. with me. It took that camera business on Sunday to open my eyes to it."

"Somebody took Skippy's picture?" Plates asked. "Who?"

"I don't know. It was just a fellow, out walking Sunday afternoon with a camera. It happened right here at the front door. He took the picture, and then he passed some remark about what a handsome dog Skippy was and maybe we'd like it if he sent us one of the pictures. To tell the truth, he probably thought we were the kind who could be picked up that way. He certainly got the shock of his life, the way Ina bawled him out. She actually followed him down the sidewalk practically ordering him to take the film out of his camera."

Tess Norton dragged deeply at her cigarette. "Frankly, I'm not the type to tell a strange man my name and address on such short acquaintance, but neither am I the type to stage a public scene on the sidewalk, with people stopping to stare at me. I caught Ina by the arm and got her inside, and after a while she quieted down."

"But it was funny, and it made me wonder tonight if she hadn't stolen the dog or something. That's the real reason I invited you here. Frankly, I didn't care a hoot about the ten dollars! I only asked about that to make sure the dog was stolen. Because if Ina was a thief, naturally I wouldn't want to share my home with her—"

The clacking notes of a buzzer interrupted. Tess Norton crossed the room and held her thumb on a wall button.

"I guess this is your man," she told Plates.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Murder Shows Its Colors

IT was Larry Windahl. A pullover cashmere sweater and California-style sports coat topped off his white flannel trousers.

"You're quick like a comet," he congratulated Plates, tugging a handful of snapshots from his pocket. "Here's the dope you wanted."

Plates passed the camera artwork on to the Norton girl. Her eyes fled over them. "These are Ina, all right." Her lips twisted. "So you were looking for her, not for the dog at all?"

"Don't you read the papers?" Windahl asked dryly. "I thought the whole city was looking for Inez Forrey."

Tess Norton made choking sounds. "Is she—why—I never dreamed!" She gave a sudden



laugh. "I'll tell you what threw me off! Skippy did. You just don't expect a missing person to turn up with a dog on a leash, acting as if she owned it for years."

Windahl said mechanically: "It fits. Inez is fond of dogs, always stopping to pet stray ones. She left a Dalmatian at home—thought the quarantine laws wouldn't let it into the States."

Plates gestured. "Let's do our talking in a cab."

When the three of them were settled in the cab he asked: "Why do you figure she took a powder, Larry?"

The tennis pro shrugged. "You met the old man. He's absolutely intolerant of failure. He wouldn't settle for anything less than a championship, and Inez simply cracked under the strain of trying to live up to his expectations."

"Hell, it's only a game."

"Tournament tennis isn't just a game," Windahl said. "Take it from me. I went through it myself. I took my beatings from Tilden when Tilden was good. Physically, it's brutal. Try racing around at top speed for a couple of hours on your blistered feet when the temperature's a hundred in the shade, one tournament right after another all summer long. Of course, the girls' game isn't so fast, but I think the mental strain is worse. They're catty as hell, the way they squabble over who took how many games from whom, and so on. That goes on all day, and in Inez' case it went on half the night. Her old man and Menico would sit up in the stands with score cards, keeping track of how many backhands she missed and how many lobs fell short, and every night they'd go into a huddle and play over every set she played during the day."

"Is that guy Menico any expert?"

"He's a fair amateur," Larry Windahl said. "He used to coach Inez when she was just a kid. But that isn't the point. You could be Don Budge and Ellie Vines rolled into one, and still the pressure would be more than any one human being could take."

"So she blew up, like Lenglen."

Larry Windahl gaped. "You sure know your tennis."

"I never had a racket in my hand. I used to shoot sports page pix, that's all."

**P**lates lapsed into brooding silence. The tennis angle seemed to him minor, because it did nothing to explain the blood-bathed druggist in the little back room prescription department.

A fresh slant flashed into his perplexed brain. "Those snaps of Inez you brought—who took 'em?"

"Menico. Why?"

"He makes a hobby of it, huh?" The pint-

sized lensman canted his thin features to the cab windows, eyed the passing parade of downtown buildings as they neared the hotel. He rapped on the glass. "Drop me here, driver. Windahl, take Miss Norton to the penthouse and tell Forrey I'll be along in an hour."

He trudged two blocks, signed himself in on a night register, and journeyed up to the O'Rion Studio of Legal Photography on the fourth floor. Keying the door open, he hurried to the phone.

"Sal? Listen, pick up that roll of film from the basement and bring it to the studio, pronto. And, oh," morosely, "bring some money. I was robbed."

A silken voice behind him said: "So that's why I couldn't find the negative. It wasn't here."

Plates twirled. "Damn you, Menico!"

The other's dark, Latin face was tranquil above a flash of white shirtfront. Juan Menico lounged in the light-trap entrance to the studio darkroom. Stripped to shirtsleeves, he wore one of Plates' rubberized work aprons.

He waved a thin hand. "Remember, Señor O'Rion, you are shooting for a ten thousand dollar reward. I have much influence with Señor Forrey. It will pay you to remain the good neighbor, *amigo*."

The photog grunted. "What the hell d'you want here? How'd you get in?"

"I picked the door lock. I wanted to examine the negative of this picture you claim you so luckily found."

"Why? What's it to you?"

"Shall we say, *amigo*, I was merely protecting my employer against possible fraud?"

Plates giped: "You can say it, but you can't sell it to me. The reward is for finding Inez in the flesh. The picture by itself doesn't rate a plugged peso, or whatever you use for money down there."

Menico's dark eyes glittered. "*Señor*, the reward is nothing. It is a frivolity. It is a fleabite."

"Pardon me, pal, but I don't know what the hell you're driving at—if anything."

"You have heard, perhaps, of men signing over their property in their wives' names?" the secretary suggested.

"Yeah. . . You mean—huh?"

Juan Menico nodded, said: "It is a legal peculiarity, *señor*, that many countries below the Rio Grande do not permit certain properties to be owned by non-citizens. Señor Forrey, for reasons of his own, chose to remain a citizen of the United States."

Plates gulped. "You mean, Inez was born down there, so she—so it's all in her name?"

"Yes, *amigo*. When the *señorita* disappeared, she took with her the legal ownership of twenty-five millions of pesos."

THE hollow whirr of a ceiling fan sucked up heat generated by the ponderous Thornton-Pickard horizontal enlarger. A cone of whiteness fanned from its lens to spread a pattern of light and shadow across the upright easel. Plates O'Rion's wiry fingers, closed on a photoelectric-meter, ghosted in and out over the pattern.

"Skirt, 7.2," he droned. "Blouse, 5.9. Purse, .05. Hat, 7.1."

Sally O'Rion repeated, "7.2, 5.9, .05, and 7.1." Across the room, under the glow of an amber bulb, she flipped to a fresh page of steno notebook.

The little lensman was through. He straightened, called: "O.K., Menico, hit the switch. We'll call that enough."

Juan Menico touched a wall switch, brought white light flooding from overhead. It showed his eyes narrowed in a deep-creased squint.

"I don't understand," he complained. "These figures. What is the meaning?"

The pint-sized photog peeled the film out of the enlarger, curled it into a careful roll. "They don't mean a damned thing—yet. Come on, we'll go penthouse partying."

"But, *señor*, what does it hope to prove?"

Plates shrugged. "Not prove. Probe is the word. We're going to play a memory game."

The trio walked the few blocks to the hotel. Old Carter Forrey's strident voice greeted them as Menico ushered Plates and his daughter into the penthouse.

"Damn it, Kettler," the old man was shouting "we're only an hour behind her now! We'll have the police cover the railroad stations, the bus terminals, the airport—"

Kettler's voice was brittle. "Mr. Forrey, that's no way. People just don't jump on a train or a bus these days. They need reservations. Inez won't go to any of those places."

The big detective stood sullenly in the middle of the parquet floor. Larry Windahl, hands burrowed in his pockets, watched from in front of the tall windows.

Tess Norton offered a suggestion from the depths of the zebra-striped divan. "Why don't you try the cab companies? She wouldn't have walked far carrying two big suitcases."

"Or try the pet shops," volunteered Windahl hopefully. "Maybe she gave a name and address when she bought the dog, and has gone back to the same place again—"

Kettler's was the head shake of a baited bear.

"You're a bunch of amateurs! Why the hell can't you let me handle this my way?"

Plates O'Rion snapped: "You're afraid, hot-shot. Afraid the cops might hook up this latest disappearance with the drugstore kill in the next block. And, brother, you're right. They would!"

Old Carter Forrey spat explosively, and

missed the cuspidor a yard. He didn't notice. He hacked out: "Inez, mixed up in a murder? You're crazy!"

"I think I'm sane." The photog swung to confront Tess Norton. "You remember how somebody snapped Inez' picture, and she tried to make the man give up his film?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Let's see how well you remember it. How was she dressed at the time?"

Tess Norton said promptly: "She was wearing a very light summer suit, sort of a seer-sucker material."

"What color suit?"

"Blue, darkish blue. She had a hat that almost matched it, not quite."

"And what else?"

"She wore a yellow shirtwaist, a ruffled one, and carried a black purse. It went with the one good pair of shoes she had."

The little lensman nodded. "It's a good description. I think it'll crack the case."

Kettler jeered noisily: "You're cuckoo. She won't wear that get-up again in a hurry. Especially after she was photographed in it."

Plates O'Rion turned away. He walked to the door, opened it, jerked his head toward Sal.

The unexpectedness of the move left Kettler open-mouthed. Old Carter Forrey blurted hoarsely: "What's this? Where are you going?"

"To find Inez. That's the idea of all this, isn't it?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"I've got a hell of a good idea warming up," Plates said, and pushed the door shut.

IN the dropping elevator, the little man moved his lips close to his daughter's blond head. "I think it's gonna break fast now! Get to a phone in the lobby, and call Harry Beale at headquarters. If he isn't back yet, tell whoever answers to hurry over here."

Her blue eyes widened. "Beale is Homicide!"

He grunted. "So's this. Two homicides, in fact."

They emerged into the lobby. Sally O'Rion hurried toward the telephones. Plates swung the other way, past the bellhop bench into a corridor with another elevator marked *Service* at its end.

He punched the down button.

The bowels of the building lacked the deluxe elegance of the lobby overhead. It was just a basement like any other. He found steel steps laddering down into an engine room where fat, murky boilers heated the water for umpteen-hundreds of bathtubs.

The furnaces were oil-fed. A twenty-story hotel would burn a lot of fuel oil in a week. The piping led to vast cylinders of tanks, each



large enough to have driven a jeep through had the ends been open.

Plates found a footing on a petcock, hoisted himself so his chin came to a level with the circular hatch atop the first tank. He stretched a burning match at arm's length.

Mouse tracks printed themselves through a layer of long undisturbed dust. He went on to the next tank. It, too, was dust-filmed.

The third was the charm. The elliptic prints on the tank top showed where the round hatch had been lifted off and laid aside.

A racket of footfalls came from the steel stairs. Plates blew on his match, spat on the still-glowing end. His shoe leather scraped huskily as he dropped to the concrete floor.

"O'Rion?" The voice rumbled hollowly in the cavernous basement.

Plates said nothing.

"I know you're back there, O'Rion." Big Dave Kettler waded into view around the hulking furnaces.

The photog stepped out into the open, now. "How long have you been hep to this, hot-shot?"

Kettler breathed hard. "Use your head, can't you? There's a fortune in this—a fortune apiece for both of us. We can write our own tickets, and roll in dough."

"I don't like the risks in that game."

"You don't need to risk a dime. You won't have to put up any money. Hell, I'll split with you—"

"Put up money? What are you blabbing about?"

The big dick blew a Martini breath at Plates. "My God, I thought you knew! Don't you follow the stock market? Haven't you seen what's been happening to Konak Chemical?"

"My dough rides on War Bonds, where I know I'll get it back with interest."

"You can get it back a hundred times over in Konak stock," Kettler urged. "It's one of those little firms nobody ever heard of it until Carter Forrey started buying control. He's

going to make it the United States agency to handle his whole South American output. The price has jumped to twenty-three and it'll hit one hundred and twenty-three if the deal goes through."

"Well?"

Kettler's anguished: "Can't you see? The crash won't come until the world finds out Old Forrey's hands are tied without Inez. All we have to do is keep our mouths shut a few more days, wait till the price hits the top—"

He stopped, swallowed, stared at Plates' shaking head, and growled: "Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Murder is wrong with it."

Kettler laughed harshly. "We're not shielding murder. Not permanently. After we clean up our profit, hell, we'll turn the guy in."

"What guy?"

Maybe Kettler knew. Maybe not. He opened his mouth, but whatever he started to say, the gun blast was louder. It boomed through the huge basement like a clap of thunder.

**PLATES O'RION** hit the floor so fast that he got there first and Kettler's heavy weight crushed on top of him. His arms were pinned. He got one hand free and pushed it inside Kettler's wet, sticky coatfront.

There was a rubbery, squeaky whisper of somebody racing across the floor with crepe-soled shoes.

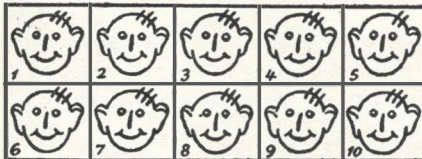
The little lensman's hand, wet with Kettler's blood, closed on the butt of Kettler's shoulder-holstered gun.

There came another thunderclap, and lead ricocheted off the concrete a foot from the photog's face.

The man came closer for his second shot, actually bent down to push the gun at Plates' skull. Plates couldn't see his face, or lift the blood-wet gun because of Kettler's weight sprawled over him. So he pushed the weapon out quickly, shoved it against the knob of an ankle just above the crepe-soled sport shoe, and squeezed the trigger.

## WHAT DO YOU SEE?

All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?



ANSWER:  
Number five. He is only "two-haired"

## WHAT DO YOU SAY?



It wasn't until he'd managed to shove Kettler's body away that he saw sprawled next to him Larry Windahl in a glassy-eyed faint. Plates cursed. "You damned tennis bum!"

He hobbled upstairs and into the lobby, where two women screamed at the blood leaking from his garments, and then screamed again when Harry Beale and two other Homicide dicks came racing across the lobby with drawn guns.

They went back downstairs, with Sally O'Rion tagging along. "I make it this way," Plates said. "Inez Forrey had dropped a couple of tournaments. She dropped them the easy way, faking a bum ankle and a sunstroke, so I take it she was a spoiled brat. It's my guess she decided she needed a brand new coach, had made up her mind to fire Windahl, and he killed her before she could."

Harry Beale said it was the craziest motive he ever heard of, and he didn't believe it.

"There's more to the story. I'd say Windahl had been using his favored position in the family to do a little speculating in Konak Chemical. He couldn't lose, since Forrey was buying that stock, and therefore he'd know in advance exactly how high the price would be pushed. It'd make a difference of thousands of bucks," Plates pointed out, "whether he sold at ninety or one hundred and fifty. If he lost the job, he'd be just another outsider trying to guess the answer. If he killed Inez in such a way so as to make it seem that she'd merely wandered off in a fit of amnesia, he could probably stick around a few more weeks and pick up a fortune doing it."

Harry Beale said he liked that better. "So far as motive goes. What's the rest?"

**A** HOMICIDE dick had slapped a quick tourniquet onto Windahl's shattered ankle, and now a doctor arrived to do a professional job, but Windahl was still unconscious from the shock.

Plates said: "He was just so dumb he didn't realize Inez' death would kibosh the whole deal. So he had to invent some kind of evidence to show she was still alive. Tennis bumming all over the country for years, he must have known girls in practically every big city. It's a cinch he knew Tess Norton pretty well beforehand, or he couldn't have trusted her to help cover up his kill.

"All *she* had to do, of course, was say that a dame answering Inez' description had shared

her apartment the last ten days. But I suppose her record, if anybody looked it up wouldn't be so good. So he tried to build it up some more with a phony picture. He bought a roll of film, shot seven snaps that didn't mean a thing, and then used the eighth and last to make a copy of an earlier snapshot he'd taken of Inez some time or other.

"The theory was, anybody finding a roll of film would be curious enough to have it developed and also, he gambled, would recognize Inez from the newspaper publicity. Too bad the wrong guy picked up the film."

Beale thought a moment, then said: "You mean you started to trace it, so he had to stop the druggist from identifying the party he'd sold it to?"

"Partly," Plates said, "but mostly because that was a roll of chrome-type film, which isn't red sensitive at all, but is blue sensitive as the devil."

"Huh? Don't go technical on me."

Plates related Tess Norton's description of Inez' costume. He said: "But if you photograph a blue suit and a yellow blouse on ortha-type film, the yellow will turn out almost black and the blue will print light, just as the blue sky shows white in the average snapshot. Of course, you can change print values by a dodging process, but I took care of that by taking light readings off the film itself. Sal's got the exact figures in her notebook—"

Harry Beale interrupted. "I know an easier way." He stooped and pulled the pic from the slain Kettler's coat. "Huh? It's a dark suit and a light colored blouse," he admitted.

"That's what I'm saying. If color values are correct, so the original picture was taken on panchromatic film, and then re-photographed from an enlargement."

Plates cast a hurried glance at a pair of Homicide dicks clambering on top of the fuel tanks with a long window pole.

"That's it. I knew the pic was a fake, so the Norton girl's story was phony, and probably Inez Forrey had been dead the entire time. The rest was just figuring out the place in a hotel where he could hide a body for a long time."

He grabbed Sally O'Rion's arm. "We're scrambling, because the proof ain't going to be so nice to look at!"

Up on the tanks, the detectives were fishing up a heavy, black oil-soaked, dripping bundle on their pole. It wasn't nice to look at.

## A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.



# KILLER COME BACK TO ME

By MEL WATT



Sharkface said: "You boys shouldn't stick your noses in where they don't belong." Then a gasp of pain from Charley followed by his agonized groan.

*Most murderers don't kill for the love of it. They kill because, to them, it's a desperate necessity. It was no longer necessary to kill Florence Wilson for what she knew about the Grayson killing. Amnesia had effectively silenced her, so she was permitted to live. But what if it were discovered that Miss Wilson's memory had returned and she was willing to talk about the elusive "Mr. Gorman" . . .*

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Murderer Named Gorman

THE thing started on what sounded like a note of quiet insanity.

My name is Sam Coad. About a year ago I was left some money by an uncle, so I quit working for other guys and threw in with Charley Rickard's agency, which became

Rickard & Coad, private investigators. Charley was the brains and I was the feet. A pretty good leg man on routine stuff, but that about covers me. We had just finished the Stacey case, a tough one, and Charley was in Washington tying up the loose ends with the Government.

I was sitting in my office that afternoon, doing nothing much—something I'm good at.

Miss Wilson came in from the outer office. Miss Florence Wilson was our secretary. She was a quiet little woman, pushing middle-age, pleasant, friendly, and efficient.

She stared at me without the slightest sign of recognition, and said in a hushed voice: "How did I get here? How long have I been here?"

I stared back at her and said: "What's the matter with you? Are you ill?"

Her hands were clenched and her white face was frozen stiff. She looked scared to death.

She pleaded: "Please! You must help me! I—I suddenly seemed to—come awake—and found myself sitting at that desk out there. I've no idea how I got there. The last thing I remember was the shot, and the bullet hitting my head, and then I passed out. . . . Did they catch him?"

I asked soothingly: "Did they catch who?"

She cried, with a sort of frenzied impatience: "Gorman! The man who shot Mr. Grayson! The man who shot at me!"

Ants scampered up my back and got under my scalp and pushed the hairs up. At least, that's the way it felt.

I asked gently: "What Mr. Grayson was that?"

She almost screamed it at me. "Frederick Grayson, of course! The man who was running for mayor! What's the matter with you? It certainly must have been in the papers!"

It was my turn to freeze stiff. The sensational Frederick Grayson murder! It certainly had been in the papers—*three years ago!*

I got up from my desk, guided Miss Wilson to my chair, put her down in it, and said: "No, they didn't catch him. The murder never was solved. . . . It happened three years ago."

At first she looked bewildered, then her eyes got a wild, panicky look.

I gave her a reassuring smile. "It's all right, Miss Wilson, you're not crazy. You've been suffering from loss of memory. Amnesia. That bullet wound in the head—"

"Miss Wilson! You called me Miss Wilson. That's my real name—Florence Wilson! How could I have known. . . ."

That wasn't so hard to figure, and I sought to explain. "After you were found and taken to a hospital, the cops would be around to ask questions. They'd know what your name was. So, even though you couldn't remember

anything in the past, you'd know your name was Florence Wilson."

She nodded slowly. She was getting calmer.

I said: "Take it easy now, and tell it from the beginning."

"I WAS Mr. Grayson's private secretary," she told me. "I was taking some important correspondence to his home that night. He was alone at home. His family had gone to visit relatives. I let myself in—I had been given a key—and I heard a shot. It came from his study. I hurried there. He was lying on the floor, with blood on his face. The man with the gun was running for the French windows. He saw me, and fired frantically. The shot hit my head. I passed out—but I got a good look at him first! It was Gorman!"

She stopped for breath, and I urged: "Go ahead. Who was this Gorman? What did you know about him?"

She looked at me, and frowned, as if I had thrown a wet blanket over her. She shook her head, and said: "I—I don't know. I'd only seen him twice before. I didn't know anything about him. I didn't even know his first name. He was a peculiar man, quiet and mysterious. I knew he was doing some kind of work for Mr. Grayson, but I didn't know what. Mr. Grayson never said."

I tried to keep the sour note out of my voice. "A mystery man named Gorman. Would you recognize him if you saw him?"

She was in no doubt about that. "Of course I would! How could I ever forget!"

I looked at her for what is known as a long minute, until I saw I was making her nervous. Then I told her: "Look, I'm not saying this just to scare you. But I think you ought to understand the situation fully. You are apparently the only person in the world, besides this Gorman himself, who knows that he killed Frederick Grayson. We don't know who he is, or where he is, but we're going to try to find out. We'll do it as quietly as possible. However, when you investigate, you have to talk to people. And when you talk to people—well, word may reach this Gorman that something's up. In other words, Miss Wilson, your life may be in danger."

She shivered, but surprised me by saying quietly: "I'll just have to take that chance."

"It's very likely," I pointed out further, "that the only reason this Gorman didn't return to finish you off was because he had found out you had completely lost your memory. Most murderers, with the exception of homicidal maniacs, don't kill for the love of it. They kill because, to them, it's a desperate necessity. It was no longer a desperate necessity to kill you after you had lost your memory. So he let you live. But if he ever found out you'd got your memory back. . . ."



She looked a little sick, and I said quickly: "I'm not saying this to be brutal. I just want you to understand what you're in for. There's still time to reconsider. It happened several years ago, and if you'd rather let sleeping dogs lie, then we'll check it off right now."

She stared at me as if I'd said something immoral. Maybe I had, but I didn't want to put her in a spot.

She said quietly, sort of primly: "I don't need time to reconsider. I want to see this man Gorman caught. He is a murderer."

I sighed and said: "All right. Let's go."

We had to look it up in the files to find out where she lived, because, of course, the past three years of her life were now a total blank. She lived in the north end of town, and we went down to my car and drove out there.

On the way, she said: "I feel so strange, so unreal. You haven't told me how I came to be in your office, and how long I've been there."

"Over two years," I told her. "You came the usual way—answered an ad for a secretary, and Mr. Rickard hired you. Charley Rickard and I are partners. He's in Washington at present, winding up a case. I'm Sam Coad."

She looked puzzled. "It seems strange that I was still able to do the work. . . ."

"Not so strange. In some forms of amnesia you retain your skills, especially mechanical skills like typewriting."

She smiled wanly, and said: "It's as if I were meeting you for the first time."

I grinned. "How do you do, Miss Wilson?"

IT WAS a little after five o'clock when we got to her apartment building. We went up in the elevator to her apartment, number 726.

She took out her key and unlocked the door.

We went in, and a woman's voice called from the bedroom: "That you, Florence?" When we stood silent and didn't answer, the woman appeared in the doorway. She glanced at Miss Wilson and then goggled at me. She was younger than Miss Wilson, but no chick. She was a brunette with a few pounds too many, and a rather tense face.

Miss Wilson looked at her without recognition, and flushed with painful embarrassment. She looked pleadingly at me.

Coad to the rescue! Trying to sound casual, I said: "This will take a little explaining, Miss—"

"Searle. Irma Searle." Her gaze darted from me to Miss Wilson and back to me again. "What is this all about?"

"Just a minute, Miss Searle," I said. "I can see you're a friend of Miss Wilson's—"

"Friend! For heaven's sake, we live here together! We've shared this apartment for nearly three years! What's the matter?"

I explained. At first she was upset, but when she got over the shock she was sensible about it. I could see she was a gal who wouldn't let anything faze her for long.

She said to Miss Wilson: "You poor thing! I often wondered why you never talked about the past. Now, you go lie down and rest. I'll fix supper."

Miss Wilson smiled shyly at her. "I'm all right. I just feel rather silly. Living here with you for three years, and now you're a total stranger to me."

Miss Searle patted her shoulder and smiled. "We'll soon fix that. Don't you worry."



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15¢

I asked: "How did you first meet Miss Wilson?"

"I put an ad in the papers for someone to share my apartment. Several answered, but I liked Florence best. She had been ill, so she rested and took things easy for a while, helping me occasionally with extra stenographic work I brought home with me. I'm secretary to the vice-president of the Planet Insurance Company. Then she went to work for a press agent, but after a few months he went into business with another man and didn't need her any more. Then we saw an ad in the papers for a secretary and she applied and got the job. That was at your office."

I asked casually: "Anybody ever inquire here about her?"

Miss Searle looked at me curiously. "No. Not that I know of. Florence lives very quietly. We both do."

I turned to Miss Wilson. "What about family? Relatives?"

She shook her head, and there was that quiet sadness in her voice of a woman completely alone in the world. "I have none. Not anywhere. I was brought up in an orphanage."

For the first time, Miss Wilson—the efficient secretary, the curious but impersonal case of amnesia—became for me a rather pathetic human being.

I smiled at her and said: "Well, I'll be going along now. Take a couple of days off to get used to things. I'll call you later."

She nodded, and thanked me. At the door, I had an afterthought.

I asked Miss Searle: "That press agent she worked for, what was his name?"

Miss Searle had to think for a moment. "Let's see. Harriman—Harmon—Garson. . . No. *Gorman!* That was it, Gorman."

I tried to suppress the gasp, and choked on it. "G-Gorman, did you say?"

"Yes, I'm sure that was it. Why?"

"I just wanted to be sure I had the name right."

I looked back at Miss Wilson. She had sunk into a chair. She was as white as chalk, and her eyes were horrified.

I said to Miss Searle: "See that she stays in and rests, will you?" Miss Searle nodded.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Meddling Leads to Murder

**N**O MATTER how impersonally you start out, at some point in a case you feel the tension beginning to get a hold on you. Especially when you come to realize you've got a personal interest in someone involved, like quiet, little Florence Wilson, who had got a lot of rotten breaks.

So the killer had deliberately hired her for

a while, to observe her and make certain her amnesia was the McCoy. Satisfied, he had let her go. A sinister and cold-blooded character, this Gorman.

I started for a lobby phone with the intention of calling the listed press agent and publicity outfits and asking casually for "Mr. Gorman," when I remembered it was after office hours.

I drove down to the *Sphere* offices and got hold of my friend Walt Allan. I told him I wanted to see the files on the Frederick Grayson case. He raised an eyebrow, but was otherwise noncommittal. He took me up to the newspaper morgue and got me the stuff.

The only thing I found out that I didn't already know was that Miss Wilson had been taken to General Hospital. There was a lot of stuff, of course, about the police getting new leads, and questioning of suspects, and an arrest being expected shortly. But none of it got anywhere, and they had failed.

I was putting the clippings back in the envelope when Walt Allan strolled in again.

He said: "What gives? That's a cold turkey. Or are you writing it up for one of those true mystery magazines?"

I put on a grin. "It's an idea. I might even tack on a solution, and hereafter be known far and wide as Coad, that brilliant mastermind."

"I should live long enough to see it."

Walt Allan was an old newspaperman, a thin, dark man, cynical but honest.

He said cryptically: "That's a good case to let alone, chum."

"Yeah? Why?"

He shrugged. "Because it is. I'm just telling you."

"Political angles, huh?" I waxed scornful. "Look, pal, that's not very bright, is it? No political gang in its right senses would make a martyr out of Grayson, thus making certain that Grayson's clean government crowd would get in office. I didn't live here at the time, but Grayson's crowd did get in, didn't they?"

Walt looked at me pityingly. "That's what they thought. Their new candidate for mayor was secretly controlled by the machine. He turned out to be what the papers termed, 'Well-meaning but ineffectual.' It was very clever."

Walt shrugged and said cynically: "A year ago, need I remind you, the people got impatient with our well-meaning but ineffectual mayor, and the machine's candidate was elected without opposition. Their theme song should have been *I'm Back In The Saddle Again.*"

Because somehow it was the thing uppermost in my mind at that moment, I said sourly: "All that damn stuff—and there's a war going on."

Walt parroted: "Wars may come and wars may go, but politics go on forever."

"Well, why don't your lousy newspapers do



something about it if they know so damn much?"

Walt said mockingly: "Proof, pal, proof."

I asked: "You think they know who shot Grayson?"

He said sharply: "Whom do you mean by 'they'—the newspapers?"

"No. The machine crowd."

He shrugged again. "Sure. The investigation was a burlesque, played with a straight face. Questioning suspects they knew had legitimate alibis. Flimflam."

His thin face went tense from some deep inner feeling. He said with bitter sarcasm: "Don't be too hard on the boys. They buy bonds. They'll fight to the last drop of loot."

I remembered then that he had a younger brother in the Service.

I said: "Well, thanks for the tip, Walt."

He looked at me closely and said: "In one ear and out the other, huh?"

I shrugged, and he said: "Look, you stubborn fool, if you should need some help—"

I grinned at him. "Sure, you big bad cynic."

He shook his head and said soberly: "Don't say I didn't warn you."

**I** SAW it was after seven, and I hurried on home. The minute I set foot in the apartment Albert greeted me with cold politeness. "You're late, sir." He was annoyed because I was late for supper again, even if he had got most of it at the delicatessen. I apologized.

I want to tell you about Albert, because—I may as well state the fact here—it was Albert who finally solved the case. His name is Albert Blunt, and he calls himself my "man." I need a manservant, or any servant, like I need a third leg. But I sort of inherited him along with the money from my uncle, who had spent several years in England. My uncle brought Albert back to America with him, after an interlude during which Albert had been picked up on the beach at Dunkerque with a bullet through a lung.

Albert is always astonishing me. Like the time I invited him to have a drink with me in a bar, and he ordered it without ice, and some wise guy made a crack about his being a "limey." Albert is smallish and compact, with what you might call a frozen baby face. He turned to me and said quietly: "With your permission, sir." Then he turned to the other guy, and his fist didn't travel more than six or eight inches. It was as neat and lethal a jab as I ever saw. When the other guy came to, Albert informed him quietly: "I am not a limey. I am Scotch-Canadian." We finally pried the confession out of Albert that he had been lightweight champ of his army division. We had several drinks all around, the wisecracker having turned out to be a pretty good egg. They seemed to have no effect on Albert

whatever, but I got to feeling a trifle hazy, and he decided to take me home. He accomplished this with fatherly solicitude, getting me to the apartment, guiding me to bed and putting me down on it. He straightened up like a soldier at attention, and said: "May I suggest that you rest, sir?"

Then he fell flat on his face. Out like a light. I laughed myself sick. As I said, Albert is always surprising me.

I said to him now, trying to appease him for being late: "Albert, I've got to find a man—a murderer. I don't know who he is, where he is, or anything about him. It all happened three years ago. How am I going to do it?"

He gave it some thought before replying quietly: "If I may say so, sir, just carry on. Something will turn up. It quite often does, when things look blackest."

Maybe it was imagination, but I thought I saw Dunkerque in his eyes. The trapped men, the black days. Then the boats from England—the big boats and the little boats. They turned up. I wished I had Albert's faith.

I phoned Miss Wilson the next morning to ask how she was feeling, and she said she was fine. I told her to stay in her apartment and take a good rest, and she said she would.

After that, I went down to General Hospital to get what information I could about her. The only thing I learned that I didn't already know, was that Frederick Grayson's son and daughter had visited her once at the hospital, and they had footed her hospital bill. She hadn't, of course, been able to recognize them. They never came again.

I thought I'd go out and have a talk with them. I phoned first, and found out from a servant that they wouldn't be home till evening.

After lunch, I sat in the office making phone calls to all the listed publicity agencies, asking to talk to "Mr. Gorman, please." There was no Mr. Gorman with any of them and never had been. Apparently, the guy had gone to some other town. That would make tracing him easier. In a pig's eye!

About four, Albert phoned in to say he had called for the car from the repair shop where they'd taken it when I couldn't get it started that morning, and should he come down to get me? I told him, yes. He arrived in about half an hour, and I told him we'd eat downtown, as I wanted to drive out to the Grayson place afterwards.

**I** WAS just getting ready to close up the office when the phone rang. It was my partner, Charley Rickard. I was never so glad to hear him in my life. He said: "I'm at the airport. I just got in. Be right up."

He lumbered into the office about fifteen minutes later, bellowing, "Hi, Sam!" and when

he saw Albert, "Hello, Albert." Charley is not tall, but he has a broad, barrel-chested build that makes him look big, and the knobby face of a pugnacious bulldog. At the moment, he looked as if he'd been through a wringer. He dropped his leather bag on the floor and flopped into a chair.

"Washington! Gawdalmighty, what a town! It's crazy, absolutely nuts!"

"The capital upon which the eyes of the world are turned," I said sardonically.

"I'd sooner turn mine on a bughouse! . . . Oh, they get things done, eventually. But red tape! Holy sufferin' mackerel! I could've been back three days ago. Ed Hoover was sore as hell when he heard about the run-around I'd been handed. There's a guy for you, that J. Edgar Hoover! Hates red tape as much as I do."

"You and Ed, just like that," I said, putting my index and middle fingers together.

He grinned. "All right, sneer. You're just jealous." He looked around the place as if he missed something, then saw what it was. "Where's Miss Wilson? She sick?"

I told him about her getting her memory back, and he dropped the boisterous manner, which was only a front anyway.

"Say, this might be serious," he said.

I asked: "Did you know about her when you hired her?"

He looked at me as if he thought it a pretty dumb question. "Of course. Her name had been in all the papers during the Grayson case. She'd been working for some other guy before she applied here, and I called him to find out if she was competent at her job. When he said she was, I saw no reason not to hire her. She needed a job."

"A guy named Gorman?"

"Yeah. That sounds like the name. But how'd you know?"

I explained: "Her roommate told me. But here's the payoff—Miss Wilson says it was a man named Gorman who shot Grayson and almost killed her."

When you toss Charley a shocker like that, he doesn't get excited, he gets quiet. He doesn't holler and wave his arms, but usually sticks his hands in his pants pockets, and his tone of voice becomes calmly curt. It gives clients confidence, and it's one reason he's a first class operative.

He said: "Is she sure?"

"She has no doubt about it," I told him.

He got up from his chair, stuck his hands in his pockets, and walked around, frowning.

"Sam, this is serious. If it gets out, it puts her life in danger. Where is she?"

I told him she was in her apartment and that I'd told her to stay there.

"You mean alone?" he asked sharply.

"Well, the friend with whom she shares the

apartment works during the day. But I left my gun with her and she's safe enough if she stays in the apartment."

As I said it, it somehow sounded a little lame.

"Have you talked to anyone?" he asked curtly.

A little nettled, I said: "Her roommate, my friend, Walt Allan, General Hospital, a reputable institution. I doubt that any of them would want to kill her."

He stared at me, and growled: "Oh, for the love of Mike!" When he saw me looking a little sore, he said: "All right, Sam, forget it. It's just that this Grayson business went pretty deep." He shook his head worriedly, and spoke in an urgent tone: "I don't like this. I want to see her—right away. Call her and tell her we're on our way out."

I picked up the phone and called Miss Wilson. I was suddenly relieved to hear her quiet, mousy voice. She said she would be waiting for us.

**A**LBERT drove. He drives very cautiously, especially in traffic—and he hasn't quite become accustomed to our right-side drive yet—so it was after five when we got out there. A lot of people getting home from work rode up in the elevator with us. We got out at the seventh floor and went along to Miss Wilson's apartment and knocked on the door. We waited a few moments, and when the door wasn't opened, we knocked again. There was still no answer.

Charley and I looked at each other, and I said: "She wouldn't have gone out, she said she'd be waiting." I added lamely: "Maybe she's in the bathroom."

We listened closely, but couldn't hear any sounds of anybody moving inside.

Charley turned to Albert and said curtly: "Go get the janitor, will you? Tell him to bring his key."

While Albert was gone, Charley and I didn't say much. But the corners of his mouth were tight with tension, and mine felt the same. To relieve it, I said lightly: "We're going to feel pretty silly, walking in on a lady probably only partly dressed."

He mumbled grimly: "Maybe."

Albert came back with the janitor, who seemed set for a lengthy discussion before opening the door. Charley grabbed the key and opened it.

There was no one in either the living room or the bedroom. The bathroom door was partly open. I called: "Miss Wilson." When there was no reply, Charley went to the bathroom door and pushed it open. I was right at his elbow.

We saw only her feet at first, because she was lying in the bathtub and the shower cur-



tain concealed her body. We pushed aside the curtain and looked. Her still, waxen face looked as if all the blood had been drained out of her. It had, just about. A pool of it had formed in the tub, and was splattered on the floor beside her. On a stool beside the bathtub lay the gun I had given her. She must have heeded my warning and placed it there in readiness for any emergency. Poor thing, she never had a chance to use it. I've seen a few stiffes in my time, but I never saw a mess like that. She had got it through the heart—some big artery that had pumped the blood out. I felt sick.

The janitor ran out, making funny sounds in his throat. None of us said anything, except Albert. For a moment, Albert reverted to cockney English. "Cor!" he gasped. "Oh, cor!"

When I could talk, I said to Charley: "I'm going to get the guy who did this if it takes the rest of my life." I know it sounded corny, but that's the way I felt. I don't very often get mad enough to feel a hot rage, but I felt it then. I suppose I felt a little guilty, as if it were partly my fault. But it was more than that. Florence Wilson was a quiet, harmless little woman who had been pushed around all her life. She deserved a better break than this mess in the bathtub. I hated the guy who had done this to her. If that makes me a sentimental sap, then that's what I am.

Charley coughed and said gruffly: "You and me both."

I told him frankly: "I'm glad you're back. This is getting out of my depth."

We heard someone come in through the open hall door. Then Irma Searle's startled voice: "Florence! Florence, what—"

She hurried towards the bathroom, but we blocked her at the door. I said: "Don't go in there, Miss Searle."

She cried, in a high scared voice: "Why not? What's the matter?"

I told her. She goggled at me, gave one short scream, and fainted.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dead But Not Forgotten

LIEUTENANT Tom Nielan, of the homicide division, shook his head and said: "He sure got to her quick."

Nielan was looking a little worried, and, if you looked closely enough, a little uneasy. He knew about the Grayson case, and when we told him about Miss Wilson, there was a subtle change in him. He tried not to show it, but his professional nonchalance dropped a couple of notches, and this was no longer just another homicide to him. Nielan was known as a straight cop, but there are times when even

a straight cop has to walk softly, if he knows what's good for him. He didn't like dirty politics, but he accepted them as part of the system, with the somewhat cynical hope that maybe some day it would be different if the people really got sore and cleaned house, and made it stick. He was skeptical of this, but a guy can hope, can't he?

They had gone over the place with their usual thoroughness, but the only thing they found was the bath towel the killer had wrapped around his gun and shot through to deaden the sound. A woman in the next apartment said she had heard the radio going for a little while, but it had been turned off. There was nothing else—it had been a neat, fast job.

We had brought Miss Searle out of her faint, and she sat there crying and moaning: "I shouldn't have left her alone! But what could I do? I have a job."

She looked at me as if I was as much, or more, to blame than she was. Maybe she was right. But what else could I have done? I couldn't very well have taken Miss Wilson home with me. And suppose I'd told the police about her, and it had got into the wrong hands? This Grayson business was deep in political murk. How could I be sure she would get real protection? I hadn't wanted to chance it. I didn't see how this Gorman could hear about her so soon, or get to her when she was locked in her own apartment.

But he had, and that was that. I'll be the first to admit it knocked a lot of the cockiness out of me. And knocked into me the realization of the kind of opposition we were up against. Clever and ruthless.

There's no point in going into details about the next few days. The police questioned Miss Searle some more, and questioned Charley and me, too. But nothing happened. The newspapers gave it a play, but only for a couple of days. The war news was hot about that time.

I saw Walt Allan once, and he remarked with his usual cryptic cynicism: "See what I mean, chum?"

Charley and I, and Miss Searle, too, paid for Florence Wilson's funeral and burial place. We were the only ones at the services, except the minister and the undertaker. It all seemed sort of lonely, just as her life had been. I was surprised to see Walt Allan at the cemetery. I asked him why.

"You fascinate me, you damn fool," he said, and turned and went back to his car.

The report of the coroner's inquest had been: "Shot through the heart by a person or persons unknown." It seemed a silly way of saying it, but inquests are frequently silly.

The police seemed to be satisfied to let it go at that. Whether they were really stumped, or whether the whispered order had come down

from higher up to lay off, is anybody's guess.

Charley said grimly: "This is going to be tough."

You know that old description used by writers, "He felt unseen eyes watching him." It sounds pretty corny now, but that's exactly the way we felt. Unseen eyes, all over the city, watching us, waiting to see how far we'd get. We didn't kid ourselves. This, as Charley had said, was going to be tough.

**WE WENT** out to the Grayson place. It was a fine old house that looked in need of a few repairs. We rang the bell, and a pale, patrician blonde answered the door. We told her who we were, and what we'd come about. She said, a trifle hesitantly: "I'm Eve Grayson. Won't you come in?"

She took us into the living room. A young fellow was sitting in an armchair. He was in officer's uniform, and his right leg was stretched out stiffly. There was a cane beside his chair. Eve Grayson said: "This is my brother, Frederick." She told him who we were, and why we'd come.

Charley said: "You read about Florence Wilson?"

They both nodded, and Eve said: "I meant to be at the services, but my brother just got home, and—"

She left it unfinished, and we glanced at young Grayson's leg and nodded. Charley asked: "Did your father ever mention a man who was doing some work for him, a man named Gorman?"

They exchanged looks, and young Fred said: "No. Never heard of him. Who's Gorman?"

I said: "That's what we're trying to find out. He's a sort of mystery man. When Miss Wilson regained her memory, she said it was this Gorman who shot your father, and wounded her."

You could see the shock stiffening them, and Eve gasped. This hadn't been in the newspapers. There was no proof that Gorman existed. The inquest report had stated "by a person or persons unknown," and the papers had printed that.

Young Grayson said thickly: "You mean, it was this Gorman who killed Miss Wilson?"

Charley nodded. "What do you think?"

"But, the inquest—the police—"

"The police!" Eve Grayson broke in, and her voice was harsh. She glared at Charley and me with a sort of pity mixed with scorn. "What do you think you can accomplish? Don't you know what you're up against?"

Charley said quietly: "We've an idea."

"What good would it do, anyway?" she cried bitterly. "My father was murdered and my mother died from the shock, and nothing was done about it. That was three years ago,

and it's all buried and forgotten! Just as Florence Wilson is buried and forgotten. Why don't you leave us alone?"

Her brother said sharply: "Eve! Please!"

She shrugged, and turned away, mumbling: "Sorry."

Young Grayson said quietly: "You can't blame us very much. They kept coming around, assuring us they had a new lead, and they'd get the murderer any minute. Nothing happened, except that they kept us rubbed raw. We're not morons. We knew it was just an act. My father was murdered because he had found out something and was going to expose it."

The bitterness of the memory carried him away, and his mouth was just this side of a sneer as he said: "What's in this for you?"

I suppose if he hadn't been wounded, either Charley or I would have popped him. We're no angels, but it isn't pretty being classed with the lower strata of political goons which young Grayson seemed to have in mind.

Charley said dryly: "We're just working for our eagle badges."

Grayson saw he'd talked out of turn. He said: "Excuse that crack. I'm afraid we're a little off the beam on that subject. . . . I wish we could help you, but we just can't. We don't know anything about this Gorman. There was nothing in my father's papers, either. Maybe there had been, but this murderer very likely stole it."

Eve Grayson showed us out. She said: "Sorry we can't be of some help." Her voice suddenly rose to a savage intensity: "I wish we could help! I honestly wish we could! We were a happy family until this—this murderer . . ." She turned away quickly and slammed the door.

**ON THE** way back to the office, after a silence, I said: "Well, where do we go from here?"

Charley's brow was creased. He said, with dry irony: "If I were a cop I'd probably say 'we expect to make an arrest shortly.' But frankly, I don't know."

Well, how would you go about finding a wraith, a ghost, a name that didn't seem to have any physical body? Yet it was no ghost that shot and killed Grayson and Florence Wilson.

I suddenly had a hunch, born of desperation, and I said: "Look, Charley, the only person who was close to her was Irma Searle. They shared an apartment for three years. Maybe she knows more than she's told."

Charley shrugged. "The cops questioned her. They would have found out—"

"They might if they'd wanted to," I interrupted. "Maybe they didn't try too hard."

He suddenly looked interested. "Yeah,



that's so. Maybe you've got something there." I was getting enthused over the idea, and I had a brainstorm. "How do we know Searle wasn't planted there from the beginning to keep an eye on Miss Wilson?"

Charley stared at me and gave a low whistle. "Boy! Are you flying high! If you ever get tired of the detective racket, you ought to take up story writing."

"A smart crook can figure out more angles than any writer ever dreamed of."

Charley was sold. "When she gets home from work we'll go see Miss Searle."

About five thirty, I phoned her from the office. She wasn't in. We waited till about six, and Charley phoned her again. She still wasn't there. I called Albert and told him I wouldn't be home for supper, and Charley and I ate downtown. At seven, Charley phoned her again from a drugstore booth, and she still wasn't home. Maybe she had gone to a show or something.

I felt myself beginning to sweat, and I said: "Say, you don't suppose—"

Charley shook his head quickly. "I don't know. Let's go out there."

We didn't get any answer when we knocked at the apartment door. We lost no time going down and rousing out the janitor. He beefed all the way back. "Listen, I can't be opening peoples' doors for you all the time! What do you do, go around looking for dead bodies?"

Charley said curtly: "Open up. You know who we are."

The janitor evidently was under the impression that we were from the cops. He opened. I found the light switch, and turned it on. We went quickly through the place. There was no one there. We were standing around in the living room, when Miss Searle came in.

She took one look, her eyes goggling wildly, and then she exploded shrilly: "What's the meaning of this? How dare you break into my apartment!"

"We didn't break in," I said, nodding at the flustered janitor.

He whined: "They're the cops, Miss Searle. What could I do?"

"They're nothing of the sort," she snapped. "And they have no right here!"

The janitor scurried out. Miss Searle got shrill again. "Well, I'm still waiting! What's the meaning of this?"

"Take it easy," Charley said placatingly. "We just thought something might have happened. We phoned here several times—"

"What for?" she snapped.

"Well, it's like this," Charley said calmly. "You were the person closest to Miss Wilson. You lived with her for three years. Yet when you were questioned, you seemed to know very little about her. We were wondering,

Miss Searle, if there might have been some things you had forgotten to tell."

She glared at him. "If there had been anything else to tell I would have told it. I'm a decent, honest citizen. I forgot nothing."

I was getting a little edgy, seeing my swell hunch evaporating. I spoke sharply: "That doesn't sound reasonable. Three years of living with a person—you're bound to know a lot more than you've told!"

She gave me the goggle again. But this time there was fury behind it. "So that's it." The first time she said it it was low and tight. The second time, it came out very near a scream. "So that's it! You stupid police and detectives can't find the murderer, so you're going to try and—frame a helpless, innocent person. And I'm the goat, because she lived here with me! . . . *Get out!*"

She picked up a book, and let go at me. She picked up a vase, and let go at Charley. All the time she was screaming: "Get out! Get out of here! If poor Florence were here, she'd help me throw you out! Get out!"

We retreated under fire. Back in the car, I said: "Whew! And I was scared we might find her dead!"

Charley chuckled dryly. "I wouldn't tackle a gal like that with anything less than a cannon."

I said: "The fireworks were impressive, all right. But it could have been an act. I still think she knows more than she's told."

"Stubborn mugg, aren't you?"

"Me mither was Scotch," I told him.

It was a good thing we could find a slight element of comedy in it. Because it was no comedy the following night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Sally in the Alley

THE day after our visit to Miss Searle, nothing at all happened. We'd decided to put the pressure on her, until maybe something broke. But we couldn't do that while she was at work.

We waited until about ten o'clock in the evening, giving her plenty of time to get home, but too early for bed. Then Charley and I drove out there.

We left the car and were making for the entrance, when two guys stepped out of another car and blocked us. They were big bruisers and they looked smirking mean. One of them ambled like a bear, and the other one had a face like a shark.

Sharkface spoke with fake heartiness: "Well, if it isn't Mr. Rickard and Mr. Coad! Going visiting again, gents? Miss Irma Searle?"

Charley said: "Sure. What's it to you?"

Sharkface's fake heartiness dropped from

him. "That's all we wanted to know. Come on down to headquarters."

"What for?" I snapped.

"Persecution and intimidation of an innocent citizen. Miss Searle registered a complaint." He said to his pal: "Frisk 'em."

Charley growled: "What's all this 'frisk 'em' business? You know damn well we've got permits to carry a gun."

"Listen, shamus, I wouldn't trust guys like you with a pea-shooter. And don't give me no arguments, or we'll add resisting an officer to your bill of goods."

The Bear took our guns, and then they began shoving us towards their car. "Come on, get going!"

I objected heatedly: "What's the matter with going in our own car?"

Sharkface grinned meanly. "Just what you're thinking about, chum, that's what's the matter with it. Taking a run-out. No dice. Get in."

They shoved us into their car. I started to shove back, but Charley said: "Let it go, Sam. We'll get our innings later."

The Bear snickered—he had a snicker like a woman—and said: "Sure you will."

They shoved us into the back. Sharkface drove. The Bear sat beside him, turned half-way around in his seat so he could keep an eye on us.

The minute the car turned the corner, I knew something stank. Police headquarters was south. The car turned north. Charley saw it, too. I saw him go rigid—as rigid as I was.

"Say, what is this?" he growled. "You aren't from the cops!"

The Bear snickered—he had a snicker like in a high soprano: "Gee, fellas, how'd you ever guess it?"

I felt the sweat rush out. I was scared stiff, but I was sore, too. I blew my top, and yelled, "The hell with this!" and lunged forward in my seat. The Bear's fist rose, with a gun in it, and he struck. Instinctively, I ducked, but the barrel caught me alongside the ear. I fell back onto the seat, stunned and feeling sick.

Charley didn't move. I heard him sigh. Then I heard him say, with sour sarcasm: "Couldn't you think of something more original?"

Sharkface sneered: "What for? We're doing all right this way, ain't we?"

My head was clearing, and I noticed we were in the factory district at the extreme north end of town. There is nothing more ominous looking than a factory district at night—I mean, when it's closed and dark, as this section was.

The Bear said: "My, my, it seems a shame wasting gas driving these guys around, with the shortage and all."

Sharkface clowned: "Oh, that's all right, Snodgrass. I got a C card. Essential war worker, y'know."

They sat there, haw-hawing at each other. Were they having fun!

**T**HE car wheeled suddenly and went down an alley. Sharkface cut the lights at the same time he pulled on the hand brake. It was as black as a Nazi's heart. Sharkface got out first, and said: "Get out!" We got out—me first, Charley behind me. The Bear came out last. They started pushing us towards a building wall.

I am not the strong, silent type. "All right!" I shouted. "Quit diddling around and get the firing party over with!"

"Firing party!" Sharkface said, as if he were surprised. "What's he talking about?"

"Search me," the Bear said. "Maybe he's been seeing a movie or something."

"You mean they think we're gonna shoot them? You mean they think we're cold-blooded murderers?" Sharkface's brand of sadism was just as cute as it could be. He let his voice rise to that cory soprano again. "Why, I've never been so insulted in my life!"

They came closer to us. Sharkface said: "We just wanted to persuade you boys not to stick your noses in where they don't belong."

The difference between the first and last half of that sentence was the difference between a simper and a snarl. I heard a sudden movement and a heavy thud, then a sharp gasp of pain from Charley followed by his agonized groan. My eyes were getting used to darkness, and I made out the bulky form of the Bear, in back of Charley, swinging his foot for another kick.

I said, through my teeth, "You dirty son —" and started to go for him, when I tripped over something and went down on my hands and knees. What I'd tripped over was Sharkface's foot, and it caught me in the side as I humped there. It kicked the wind out of me and I got sick as a dog. I started to crawl away, and he was right beside me, kicking with a sort of vicious rhythm. I got over against the wall, braced myself, and jammed a heel at his shins. He let out a sharp yowl of pain and danced around for several seconds. It gave me a badly needed break.

I pushed myself up on my feet, and waded into him. I must have looked like a drunk. I didn't get set, and I didn't aim the punch. I just flung myself at him, and both my fists landed together on his face. The solid impact felt good. The fact is, most men have never hit another man in their lives. Let me tell you, there's nothing so satisfying as the impact of your fists against the body of a guy when you hate his guts. Sharkface grunted, and went back a little. I brought a heel down on his foot.



If he wanted dirty fighting, I wasn't going to disappoint him.

He cursed with pain and rage. He snarled: "O.K., bud, now watch an expert at work!" He slid to one side, and feinted with a kick at my side. When I tried to grab his foot, as he had figured I would, he got me with my guard down and came in with both fists pumping at my face. I was off balance and still groggy anyhow. I never knew a guy could land so many blows on a face in so short a space of time. It was like a butcher working with a cleaver on a piece of raw meat and bone. My face felt just like that—the places where there was any feeling at all, that is.

I couldn't see a thing, and he knew it. I kept swinging, but they were all wild. He buried a couple in my stomach, and when I bent over he straightened me up with the heel of his hand under my chin. I could feel him close in. The next I knew was his knee jabbing into my groin. That was all, brother. I felt myself passing out, slowly and agonizingly, in a wave of nausea.

I remember my last thought was of Charley, wondering how he was doing. I had been too busy to notice.

WHEN consciousness came back, the first thing I did was turn over and be very sick. I've read about these hard boys in stories who take a hell of a beating, get up and put their heads under a cold-water faucet, take a couple of slugs of whiskey, and then sally forth looking for more trouble. Don't let them kid you. When you've taken a bad beating, you're a sick guy. All you want is a bed, and liniment and bandages, and pain-killing pills.

I heard a low moan. I dragged myself over to it. Charley was lying there, breathing heavily and moaning. I thought he was still unconscious. I said: "Charley!"

He answered weakly: "Yeah."

I asked him: "How is it, bad?"

He whispered: "Yeah."

I waited a few minutes, then I heard him say: "How about you?"

I told him: "I'm still in one piece, but that isn't saying much."

He said: "They gone?"

It was one of these goofy questions you ask when you aren't clicking. We both knew they were gone. I said: "Sure." His hands went to his stomach and he moaned again. I said: "I know just how you feel."

He said, through gasps: "He got me in the back, then when I was down, he kept kicking me in the stomach. I thought he'd never quit. It feels like a balloon on fire."

Well, we couldn't lie there all night, and he didn't look as if he could walk. I said: "Look, you stay here. I'll go scout around for a beer joint or something, and call a cab."

When I stood up, and the dizziness stopped, I was conscious of something heavy in my coat pockets. I felt, and there were our guns! Those mugs had put our guns back! Very nice of them, I'm sure. A gentleman never beats another gentleman into unconsciousness without giving him back his gun. . . . Realistically speaking, of course, they wouldn't want to be found with our guns on them, in case they were picked up.

I trudged for several blocks, one walking carcass of hurts, looking for some place with a light and a phone in it. Eventually, I was bound to come to one of those crummy little beer joints scattered throughout the factory district. I did, at last.

When I walked in, the only guy there was the owner himself. I asked to use the phone. He pointed with a finger, and stared at me open-mouthed. "Jeez!" he said in awe. "What you been through, bud, a meat-grinder?" I got a look at myself in the old-fashioned glass behind the bar. He wasn't kidding.

I phoned a cab company, an outfit I knew, and asked them to send a cab to the beer joint, getting the address from the bartender. The cab got there about fifteen minutes later. I saw that the driver was Rusty Hogan. Rusty took a look at me and whistled: "Whew-w-w! Slumming?"

I said: "Yeah. I was lying stinking drunk in a gutter, and the gremlins did this to me."

I'd had enough brain cells working to keep in mind my directions, and I guided Rusty to the alley where Charley was. The headlights showed him sitting against a wall. We didn't do any talking. We helped him up—Rusty doing most of the helping—and got him into the back of the cab. Rusty said, a little embarrassed: "Do you want I should drive to a hospital?"

Charley said: "No, no, it isn't that bad."

"Drive to my place," I told Rusty.

Rusty supported Charley going up in the elevator and along to the apartment. I fiddled with the key, and before I could get it to work, Albert opened the door. For just a moment he looked startled, then his face froze again.

He said calmly: "Allow me to help you, sir."

Well, I thought, he's seen worse sights than this. I said: "I'm all right. Help with Mr. Rickard."

He and Rusty got Charley into my bedroom and put him on the bed. Rusty came out, and said: "Say, if there's anything else I could do—" I told him no, and thanked him, and gave him some extra dough. He went out.

I went into the bedroom. Albert was saying to Charley: "We had better get you out of your clothes, sir."

Charley shook his head weakly and said: "No, I don't believe I could stand it. Just let

me lie here and rest a while. I'll be all right."

Albert looked at me, and I nodded. Charley's eyes were already closed. We tiptoed out of the bedroom.

Albert said quietly: "You take my room, sir. I'll sleep on the sofa. But first let me attend to those cuts."

That was all right with me. I undressed, with Albert's help, and got into bed. He doctored the cuts and bruises, and even insisted, politely, on rubbing me with liniment. When he was through, he said: "I have some sleeping pills, sir. I used to take them at the hospital in England. I suggest you take two, sir. Mr. Rickard, too."

I took them. What's good enough for Albert is good enough for me. He went in to Charley, but came back a few moments later, saying: "He's sleeping, sir. If he awakens, I'll take them in to him. I'll keep an eye out. Good night, sir."

He didn't ask what had happened. He did what had to be done, without any frills or talk. Then he beat it. Good old Albert. I love that guy.

I slept like a log. I looked like one, too, after a little chopping has been done on it.

I slept, while Albert worked. But I didn't know that at the time. The quiet, clever little son of a gun!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Albert the Magnificent

WHEN I awoke, I looked at Albert's clock and saw it was about noon. I felt stiff all over, but a lot of the pain was gone. The liniment had helped. I got out of bed, with some effort, and tried my legs. Well, I could get around all right.

I opened the door and called for Albert. He didn't answer. He wasn't anywhere in the apartment. I went into Charley's room last. He was lying there, awake. He grinned at me. He looked better. His face wasn't cut up like mine—he had got most of his beating in the stomach.

I grinned back at him. "Well, whaddaya know! We're both alive! How you feeling?"

"Sore," he snorted. "But I'm sorer in my mind than I am in my stomach. I'm going to meet up with these guys somewhere, and I'm going to—"

"Sure, sure," I said. "Only wear a suit of armor next time."

He said: "I could sure use a cup of coffee. Where's Albert?"

"Out," I said. "Maybe he's picking up some groceries."

The doorbell rang. I went to answer it, and there was Walt Allan. He looked at me, made a sour face, pretended to shut out the sight

with a hand over his eyes, and said: "I heard about it. Rusty Hogan. I'm one of these annoying people who come around saying, 'I told you so.'"

"Oh," I said, striving for the light touch, "this was intended to scare us off, was it? Tsk, tsk! What makes me so stubborn?"

He said cynically: "As a dead hero, you won't look any better than you do now—and you're not very pretty." He turned abruptly serious and said: "Stop it, Sam! Don't be a damn fool! You haven't a chance."

I liked Walt, but at the moment he wasn't my pal. I said coldly: "How's Miss Irma Searle? Tell her we'll be paying her an uninterrupted visit, as long as you're getting around."

He shrugged, and sighed. "I don't know. Maybe I've been in the newspaper racket in this town too long. You remind me of the guy who said: 'The difficult we do immediately—the impossible takes a little longer.'"

"Write a piece about it," I said. He gazed at me a long time, shrugged again, and went away.

It was less than half an hour later that the phone call came. I picked it up, figuring it would be Albert. It wasn't.

A muffled voice said: "Coad?"

I said: "Yeah."

The voice said: "Lay off, see? Next time, we won't stop with just a beating." I heard the click of the receiver.

I was stewing around, wondering what the devil was keeping Albert, when he came in. I said testily: "Where the hell have you been?"

He looked at me without a change of expression and said quietly: "I had some things to do, sir. It required a bit of time." He was carrying a large paper sack.

I said: "Sorry, Albert. I don't get beat up every night. How about some coffee and stuff?"

"At once, sir."

When Charley smelled the coffee, he got up out of bed and came after it like a mouse after a piece of cheese. For what ails you, you can have everything in the *Materia Medica*. I'll take strong black coffee with brandy. If that doesn't cure you, you aren't worth curing.

I was on my third cup when the phone rang. It was Lieutenant Tom Nielan.

He said curtly: "I want to see you. I think we've got something. Come on down here."

I felt my insides tighten up. I said: "Sure. Right away."

I told Charley, and he got up from the table. I asked him: "Can you make it O. K.?"

He nodded. "I'm O.K."

ALBERT drove us. I was surprised to see the car. Albert explained: "I went and got it this morning, sir. I called the police



traffic department, and they had a record of it." His tone became apologetic. "You have a summons, sir, for parking all night on a public thoroughfare."

Heigh-ho!

Lieutenant Nielan was waiting for us at headquarters. But he wasn't waiting alone. Charley and I stopped for a second in our tracks when we saw who was with him. Walt Allan! And the two bruisers who had beaten us up the night before! They looked sullen and showed no sign that they'd ever seen us before. Walt's thin face was deadpan. But there was a tightness around his eyes and mouth. He stared at me, but didn't speak.

I knew something was up. Tension squeezed my insides like a vise. Through a thick lump in my throat, I asked Nielan: "How'd you find these two muggs?"

He said: "Never mind that now. Let's go over to Ballistics."

He summoned a pair of cops, and told them: "Lock these two guys up." They took Shark-face and the Bear away.

We started for the ballistics department. Walt Allan asked quietly: "Am I invited, too?"

Nielan said: "We wouldn't dream of leaving you out, sweetheart."

Outside the door of the police lab, Albert whispered to me: "I'll remain out here, sir, if you don't mind." I gave him a preoccupied nod.

Nielan and Charley and I and Walt Allan went inside. Dr. George Avery is head man of the place. He is as cold and impersonal and precise as any of the scientific gadgets he works with. If I were a crook, a man like Avery would scare me a lot more than any cop.

He looked us over through his thick glasses, impersonally, and then beckoned us over to a table. He picked up three spent bullets, each one tagged. He weighed them in his hand, looking at them speculatively. We all stared at them as if they hypnotized us. The room was packed tight with silence and tension. My insides were trembling, as if I were waiting for an explosion.

Avery spoke in his dry voice, precisely, wasting no words: "I have here three spent bullets. This one was taken from the body of Frederick Grayson. This one was taken from the body of Florence Wilson. This one"—he held up the third—"is a test shot fired from a gun. I won't take up your time talking about comparison microscopes and other scientific instruments. Enough to say that the three bullets were fired from the same gun."

He tossed the bullets back onto the table. He pulled open a drawer and lifted out a revolver, covering it with his fist. He said: "The gun is registered."

He held the weapon out in the palm of his hand, so that we could see it. He said crisply: "Your gun, isn't it, Mr. Rickard?"

I didn't think I'd heard right. I thought maybe this was one of those dreams where things seem awfully real. I stood, stunned.

The next I knew, a hand streaked out past my side, and snatched the gun from Avery's palm. An arm came down in front of me and pinned my arms to my sides. I felt the barrel of the gun dig into my back.

Then Charley Rickard's voice, hard, ruthless, savage: "Don't move! I'm leaving, and if anybody tries to stop me—" He jerked me against him tighter, saying: "Sorry, Sam. It's me or you—and with me, I come first." He didn't sound sorry. But I was so dumb from shock, no emotion registered.

Lieutenant Nielan said coldly: "How much chance do you think you've got, Rickard?"

"Enough. I've been in tight spots before."

He pulled me backwards with him towards the door. I was bumping against his stomach, and it suddenly occurred to me it must be hurting him something awful. Yet it didn't seem to be. He wasn't breathing or gasping like a man in pain. . . . I began to get the picture.

He took his left arm away from me for a moment to open the door, warning me: "Don't try anything, Sam." The arm came back around me, and he kicked the door wide. We started to back out.

THE next thing I knew, he let out a sharp yell of pain. I heard the gun clatter on the cement floor, and his left arm fell away from me. Across the room, Nielan and Avery and Walt Allan were standing, staring. Before I could turn around, there was a short, sharp bit of action behind me. I wheeled around then, just in time to see Albert release his grip on Charley Rickard and let him sag to the floor.

The others across the room came running. I stared at Albert, and said soppily: "For gosh sakes, what did you do?"

"Kidney punch, sir," he said coolly. "Very effective, when applied properly." He looked at the stiff edge of his hand. "I'm afraid I broke his collarbone, too, sir. It's the quickest way, however, especially when you are smaller than the other chap."

I breathed: "My gawd!" I was beginning to feel mad now, and I snapped at Avery: "That was a bright stunt, holding out the gun that way!"

Avery smiled thinly. "Oh, it wasn't loaded. I just wanted him to do a complete job. Not that it was really necessary. The bullets and the gun will burn him."

Nielan called the police infirmary and they came and took Charley Rickard away. Then we all went back to Nielan's office.

(Continued on page 96)

# THE AFFAIR OF THE FOUR

*"You wish to aid me, I presume, in recovering the oliphant—the oliphant with the lyciskes," Stafford told the Dean. They might have been talking Sanskrit as far as I was concerned, and further developments didn't add to my understanding—particularly when the boss started referring to an anonymous gent named Lichfield as Mr. Cemetery, and when the catch-line in the late Dr. Driscoll's will read, . . . the remainder of my estate I bequeath to my secretary, and my secretary also do I bequeath to my wife.*

My foot had hardly cleared the last step when I was flooded with light. Winston and his gunman playmate were waiting for me, their guns focused on my midriff.



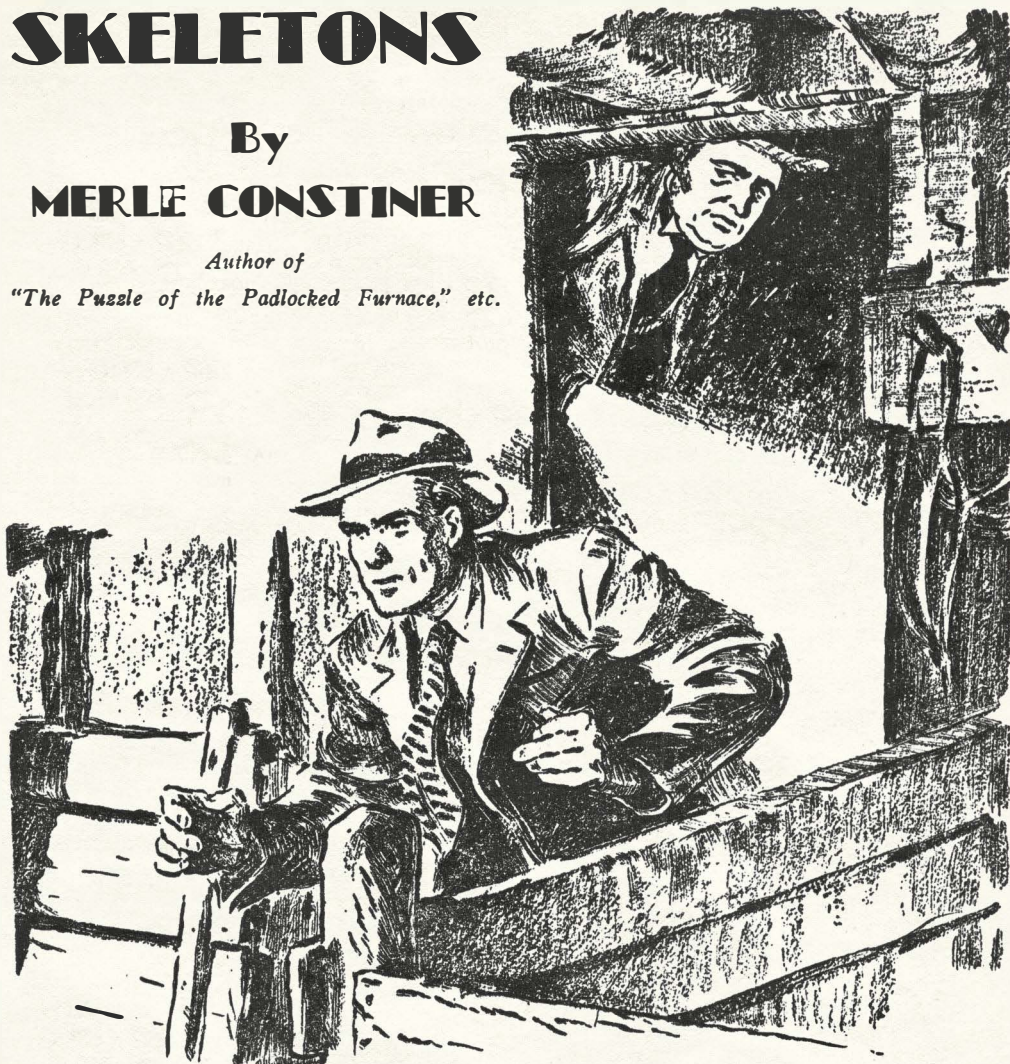
**A Novelette of the Dean**



# SKELETONS

By  
**MERLE CONSTINER**

Author of  
*"The Puzzle of the Padlocked Furnace," etc.*



## CHAPTER ONE

Mr. Lichfield of Lych Manor

**I**F I LIVE to be a hundred and ten, which I won't at the rate the Dean is beating me down, I never want another merry-go-round like the affair of the meddlesome killer. It had everything—everything from a twelfth century drinking horn and wolf-dogs to a non-existent gent who called himself Mr. Lichfield, and whom the boss referred to as Mr. Cemetery. The Dean broke that case in seven hours.

He broke it by taking a gander at a knot in a shoestring.

It was late afternoon, and we were in our office-bedroom. The summer sun, burning

across the tarred rooftops, steamed in through the window, sultry and oppressive. The Dean was at his workbench fiddling with a batch of papers. Restless, I strolled aimlessly about the room.

My constant motion was getting on the chief's nerves. He tried not to show it, said finally: "Straining at the leash, eh? Well, roam to your heart's content. Doctors say the desire to wander is a form of insanity, they name it ecdemomania, but I always claim it's a cure-all, a panacea—"

"That's true," I agreed. "I got ants in my panacea. For two weeks we've been in a lull. What I want to know, is when do we—"

"Soon, Ben, soon." He got up, came to me with a pencil and a scrap of blank paper. "Would you give me your autograph, please?"

If you'd care to add any little sentiment, I'd be doubly indebted."

"Autograph?" I got cagy. "What's the joke?"

"No joke," he said shortly. "For several years now, on and off, I've been working on a book about handwriting. A treatise called *Cacography, A Constructive Analysis*. Gad, I've overlooked you. You should give me a really fine specimen!"

Laboriously, I wrote: *This is to certify that I am indeed a happy serf for my master payeth me off in old clothes and bread crusts. Benton Matthews.* He stared at it in glazed admiration, said: "Beautiful. Just what I need."

"I'm glad you like it. Just what is this cacography?"

"Cacography is merely bad writing. Illiterate, fumbling script, childish spelling, and so forth." He beamed. "Dozens of books have been done on the subject of calligraphy, proper penmanship, but I can call to mind no reference work on bad penmanship. Now, there is a crying need in criminology for such a volume as the majority of criminal documents, ransom notes, anonymous letters, and so forth, are invariably written in this oafish, infantile style."

I grabbed at the paper in his hand. "Give me that back! Why didn't you say—"

Out front, we heard the door to the reception room open. The Dean perked up. "So they actually came! I was afraid they'd pass us up. Let's go forth and counsel with our clients, Ben. I have a feeling we're going to make a lot of money."

"Clients? I exclaimed. "Who are they?"

"How should I know? I just rang them on the phone and invited them over. You make everything so difficult!"

**WE WALKED** into an interesting scene.

A gal was seated on the loveseat in the reception room and a guy was fussing over her, putting on the dog, going through the motions of making her super-comfortable.

She was a young kid, in her late teens maybe, with blue-black hair and a pallid, milk-white skin. Her figure was a little on the skinny side for my taste, but small-boned and piquant in a fragile sort of way. She wore little-girl pumps, no jewelry, and was dressed simply but effectively in a modest blue frock with a big, starched white collar. She lounged on the sofa, limp and helpless, like an anemic rag doll, her head lolling back against the wall, her slender hands clasped loosely in her lap. She was the picture of exhaustion except for her eyes—her eyes were amethyst hard. She studied us through long, curling lashes as we entered, added us up, and stored the answer back in a corner of her brain.

Her escort was puttering around her as if

she were an invalid. He was in his early fifties, plump, well-fed and haughty. I didn't like him from the moment I saw him. He had a bulbous, porcine head, thick, moist lips, and little brown button eyes that crouched in their baggy pockets beside the little nodule of red-veined flesh which served him as a nose. He reeked money, though—that I had to admit. He was garbed in expensive gray—fancy gray sport shoes, gray flannels and gloves, and a spotless pearl gray hat. At the moment of our entry, he was bent over the kid, offering her in quick succession a cigarette, a soda tablet, a stick of chewing gum, all of which she rapidly refused. He was whacking and slapping cushions on the Dean's priceless *ante bellum* loveseat, as you would a pillow, to make the gal more comfortable, when the Dean said curtly: "Take your hands off my furniture, if you please!"

I said: "Is the lady sick? Maybe she's just fainted. Shall I get some spirits of ammonia?"

"There's nothing wrong with the lady," the Dean retorted coldly, "except a craving to be saturated with masculine attention. Who are you people? What are you doing here?"

They showed no resentment at his slur. The man said: "I'm Grover Dismukes Stafford, don't you remember? You called me and made an appointment about ten o'clock this morning. This, gentlemen, is Miss Elaine Flanders. We can talk freely before her. She's my fiancée. Ahem, let's put it this way—she's trembling on the verge, aren't you, dear?"

Miss Flanders looked vaguely ecstatic. "I love you, Dismukes, but marriage is so serious. I can't seem to make up my mind."

"Foo-foo!" the Dean exclaimed good-naturedly. "Romance, I understand, is a wonderful thing, in its place, but let's get down a moment off the trapeze. What do you parakeets know about murder?"

They looked blank. The gal batted her eyes, Stafford frowned. "Murder? I haven't heard of any—oh, I see." He smiled. "I guess that's the way a detective always starts an interview. He warms up with a discussion of homicide. No, I don't know about any murder. I'm Grover Dismukes Stafford and—"

"And you live at 681 Sycamore Drive."

"Yes. I'm here in answer to your summons." Stafford beamed. "I must say, Mr. Rock, that you're really on your toes. It only happened last night and presto, this morning, you invite me over to consult me about it. I haven't even reported it as yet to the police. You wish to aid me, I presume, in reference to the oliphant? The oliphant with the lyciskes?" His guttural voice rose in a question mark.

The Dean stared at him agate-eyed, remained silent.

The plump man looked confused. "Don't tell me I'm wrong?" Suddenly his meaty face



roiled in irritation. "Don't tell me that it isn't the oliphant at all. By golly, I bet I'm right. I bet you're being retained by that goofy widow, Mrs. Driscoll!"

The Dean said archly: "For the moment, we'll leave Mrs. Driscoll's name out of this, please." He was talking over his head, and I knew it. "What about the oliphant?"

"What's an oliphant, chief?" I asked.

"An ancient ivory drinking horn," the Dean explained. "They're quite rare and very valuable. A lyciske is a heraldic monster, a wolf-dog. I take it this horn of Mr. Stafford's must be carved with wolf-dogs. The lyciske was the symbol of Godfrey Bighand. That's twelfth century. I should certainly like to see this specimen."

"I should like to see it again myself," the fat man declared. "That's why I'm here." He screwed up his face. "Let me get organized so I can give you the background. You're quite correct. It's the horn of Godfrey Bighand. I bought it from the late Dr. Driscoll, a dentist. It set me back sixteen thousand dollars. Last night it was stolen from me. Doc Driscoll picked it up, of all places, in a pawnshop down in Peru about twelve years ago. With an item like an oliphant, of course, usually go papers affirming its authenticity. In this case I had to forego them, as did Driscoll, but I have a bill of sale showing my present ownership, and good proof of Driscoll's right to sell. You see—"

**MISS FLANDERS** was being excluded from the conversation. She stirred restlessly, said: "Dismukes, tell them about the strange telephone call."

The fat man fawned. "I'm coming to that, Elaine. I won't forget the telephone call, hon. Well, gentlemen, four months ago when Doc Driscoll was in a pliable mood, I bought his oliphant from him. Just in time, I might add. A week later he died of heart trouble."

The Dean raised his eyebrows. "And what happened last night, sir?"

"I live alone. About three o'clock in the morning my bedside phone rang. I lifted the receiver and said hello. A man's voice said: 'Stafford?' I said yes. He said: 'Stafford?' I answered yes. He repeated it about three times. Finally he began to talk, as though he were speaking to someone else, someone there by the phone with him. He said: 'Stafford doesn't answer. His phone must be out of order. It's just as well. I'm telling you, babe, you're all steamed up over nothing. His boathouse isn't on fire. That's just moonlight shining on the window . . .' And then he hung up."

The Dean nodded. "And so you put on your bathrobe and went out to investigate, leaving your door unlocked?"

"Yes. The boathouse is at the far rear of my grounds. The neighborhood is sparsely built up, big estates, you know. I was almost down to the lake when it occurred to me it was hardly likely that any neighbor could see the windows of my boathouse. I realized I'd been tricked. I returned to the house and went through the building from stem to stern. They'd stolen my twelfth century drinking horn. My museum is a little one-room annex built out from my library. They just drove the van up to the casement window and got the thing out while I was—"

"Wait a moment." The Dean frowned. "You mean they took it away in a moving van?"

"They'd have to." Mr. Stafford pulled down the corners of his moist lips. "Because of the alarm. You see, Driscoll had a special cabinet made for it, a sort of a bookcase with a special shelf for the horn. The oliphant lay on a velvet rest and beneath the horn was a powerful gong. Just move the horn without cutting the switch, and all hell would break loose. They didn't know how to cut off the switch, so they took the whole works."

"That," the boss said thoughtfully, "appears to simplify matters. Who knew about the alarm?"

"Widow Driscoll, most certainly. And anyone she happened to mention it to."

"How about Miss Flanders here?"

"No! And I don't relish the inference, sir. Miss Flanders is my—"

"Yes, yes. So you've said. Who knew about the alarm switch?"

"No one. No one but me. Driscoll passed it on to me when I bought the relic. Passed it on in the greatest secrecy."

The Dean changed the subject. "You say you live alone there at Number 681 Sycamore Drive? You don't have a fellow resident, a Mr. Lichfield?"

"Never heard of him." Stafford was emphatic on the point.

"This residence of yours, it isn't known as Lych Manor, is it?"

"I should say not. It has no name. I don't believe in fancy titles for residences."

The chief appeared satisfied. "Well, I guess that's about all. I'll see what I can do for you." He seemed to remember something. "A moment ago, when our discussion began, you intimated that I might be retained by this Mrs. Driscoll, that I might be representing her in an action against yourself. I assume the lady is the late doctor's widow, the very personage who has filtered into this interview several times. Has Mrs. Driscoll a grievance against you?"

The fat man looked disgusted. "She's my next-door neighbor. She lives on the adjoining estate. I met her for the first time yesterday under most annoying circumstances. Lis-

ten, Mr. Rock, she has no more gripe against me than I have against her."

"I don't quite grasp—" The Dean looked bewildered.

Elaine Flanders got to her feet. She made quite a spectacle of it. She spread a slow smile about the room, said hazily: "I think we'd better be getting on, don't you, Dismukes? I'm sure these gentlemen will recover your ivory thingumabob. I need some fresh air—it's, well, stuffy in here."

Stafford hopped to her side. "Anything you say, hon."

Gravely, the Dean bowed them to the door. At the threshold he said amiably: "I loathe and despise a client who tries to needle me. Unless you are perfectly candid with me, I must cancel our association. By indirection you've cast dire suspicions on this Widow Driscoll, and yet you're withholding something—"

The fat man laughed it off noisily. "I'm withholding nothing, Rock, nothing to do with our case. For the past month, every week or so, I have been getting letters in the mail from this crackpot neighbor of mine. Proposals of marriage! And me practically engaged to the loveliest little birdie alive! And such proposals, too!" He dug in his pocket and came out with an envelope. "You might care to look this over. I received it yesterday. It was the last straw. I put a stop to it."

Absently, the Dean took the letter. "You put a stop to it?"

"Yes. At least I think I did. I dropped around to have it out with the old gal."

The Dean prodded him. "Don't tell me she promised to desist?"

"She asked me in." Mr. Stafford faltered. "I was red-hot. I spoke my mind, told her it was impossible for me to marry her." He flushed. "Blast it, if she didn't have the insolence to say she was glad to hear it. One word led to another and believe it or not she produced a stack of letters of her own. Proposals of marriage to her, signed with my name! Listen, Rock, she wrote both batches of letters!"

"How do you know?"

"They were both in the same script, you couldn't miss it. Besides, I've heard the rumor that her husband, contrary to expectations, didn't leave her much moola. Now, I'm a mighty wealthy man, as the public knows!"

The Dean winced. He preferred his clients rich, but he liked them to be modest about it. He reared back, said sternly: "So you're a mighty wealthy man! Have you ever been in Mammoth Cave? Have you ever had stomach ulcers? The ancient Indians of the Caribbean smoked cigars by thrusting the stogy up their nostrils. Have you ever tried that? No? You see, Mr. Stafford, money isn't everything."

He eased them out into the hall. "I'll contact you later." Before they could answer, he closed the door behind them.

ALONE, we retired to the office. The chief was showing signs of strain. "Call Homicide," he said crisply, "and ask for Malloy. Better yet, leave a message for him. Say we have some dope. Don't say any more and I'll guarantee he'll be right over."

I did as he ordered. "Listen, boss," I complained, as I dropped the receiver on its bracket, "this business is a little too much for me. I'm your assistant—don't deny it, you've told me so several times in strictest confidence. Well, how about clearing up a few points?"

"Of course, Benton. Anything, anything at all." He picked up the envelope that Stafford had given him. "But first let's take a look at one of these so-called marriage proposals our client has been deluged with." He slipped the paper from the flap, straightened it out. "Hah! Most interesting. A novel approach to the altar, I must say."

I read it over his shoulder, and gasped. The letter was written on a sheet of smooth white paper in India ink. It said:

Grover Dismukes Stafford

Dear Sir:

For some time now I've been sending you amatory epistles declaring my honorable intention of wedding you. It occurs to me that this dalliance cannot go on much longer. Neither of us will live forever, will we?

Please don't construe this as a threat, but I can't help thinking how my former husband, who was about your age and stature, was cut down by Fate while he was in the prime of life.

Devotedly,

Lucille Driscoll

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "I'd hate to have an old lady like that after me. But wait a minute. She's been receiving them, too. What do you make of it?"

"It's a little early to say, but it appears at this stage that some meddler is attempting to force the widow into committing digamy!"

"But her husband's dead. How could she commit—"

"Digamy," the Dean said patiently, "is not like bigamy or trigamy. There's nothing unlawful about it. It just means a second legal marriage. What do you think of the script?"

I'd been noticing it. I'd never seen writing like that before. The letters were round, generously large, and perfectly shaped. That was it, I realized. It was just too perfect. "You shouldn't have much trouble in tracing the author," I remarked. "Not many people can write like that."



"No one can write like that," the Dean declared. "We're up against a shrewd brain. That was done by a pantograph, a very simple tracing machine. First the writer composed his message, and then he traced it. That way he eliminated such graphological giveaways as pen-strokes and shading. If he took the alphabet, as I presume he did, from an old copybook, then we're going to have a tough job fastening it on him. Thus we progress to a higher state of ignorance. Any further questions?"

"Plenty." I tried to control myself. "You're not kidding me a bit. Ten to one, you've got this case half solved already, and I don't even know that we have a case, a murder case. Who was murdered? Doc Driscoll, the dentist?"

He was deliberately trying to ball me up. He likes to pose as an amiable crank, and as well as I know him, sometimes he catches me off base.

I used to be a troubleshooter for a small safe company. He picked me up when I was down and out and gave me a job. I'm no genius myself. All I know is guns and locks.

I said: "And while we're on the subject of questions from the gallery, who is this Grover Dismukes Stafford and if, as you said, you never heard of him, how did you come to invite him in?"

The Dean went to the pile of manuscripts on his desk, the material for the volume on cography that he been working on. He extracted a sheet of cheap notepaper, said dourly: "Stafford isn't the only one receiving unsolicited correspondence. This came in the morning's mail. It carries a pretty grisly story, so I followed it up."

This note was quite different from the other. It hadn't been written on a pantograph. It was printed in little square letters, in red crayon.

DEAR ROCK,

I TAKE THIS OCCISION TO INFORM YOU, TO INFORM YOU, OH, WELL, SKIP IT. MY PHONE IS WALNUT-6843, MY ADDRESS IS SYCAMORE DRIVE 681.

MR. LICHFIELD  
LYCH MANOR

I felt let-down. "So this is the document that started everything rolling! It was written by a screwball. He takes this occasion to inform us of what? And that's not the right way to spell occasion, is it?"

"He's no screwball. He means just what he says. *Occision* is an obsolete word meaning slaughter, or death." The Dean looked grim. "Take that signature. *Lych*, or *lich*, is from the old Anglo-Saxon, and means corpse. Lichfield would be cemetery and a

lych manor would be a house of death. Someone is warning us of a secret murder! Now, as for Mr. Stafford—"

Out front a door banged open, solid footsteps echoed down the hall, turned into our apartment. More visitors—and this time it was the law.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dentist Driscoll's Busy Night

IT WAS Lieutenant Bill Malloy, all right, and Captain Kunkle was with him. They strolled back into our office and sank down, side by side, on the edge of the chief's bed. The Dean went white around the earlobes—he has an almost fanatic taboo against receiving callers in his sanctum—but he made no comment. They seemed a little too blithe and friendly to be natural and I had a hunch they were staging the whole act just to rattle the boss and loosen his tongue. The Dean said: "Believe it or not, I think I've got a lead on the killer of Ferncliff Park."

Their faces tautened. I gaped.

He was referring to a brief wave of horror that had passed over the city some five months past. It had come and gone, occupied the front page of the papers for a few days, and now no one seemed to think about it—no one except the Dean and the police.

Ferncliff Park was a wild spot of woodland out at the north edge of town. It was idyllic, in an efficient sort of way, with rustic tables and grills scattered here and there in its dales and hollows. In the spring, school kids tramped it with their teachers looking for wild flowers, and in the summer it was popular with picnickers. Five months ago it had been the scene of two spooky murders.

Two killings had occurred there, in the same night, and under pretty creepy circumstances. On a cold, damp February night, the cops got a telephone call telling them there was a dead man in the main shelter-house. They thought it was a rib but made a routine check. They found their corpse, who was later identified as a fellow named Brockman, a kind of derelict house painter and small-time carpenter. He was sitting on one of these rustic benches in the dark, slumped over the table. Before him was spread out a skimpy picnic lunch, a dill pickle, a tomato sandwich and a devilled egg. This was in February—a good three months before the season opened. He'd been shot in the head, and hadn't been dead an hour.

They carted him away to the morgue. About three hours later, Homicide got a second call. In exactly the same place, they found their second body—picnic lunch and all—shot through the head.

This time it was an old man named Dalbert, a down-at-the-heels music teacher.

The police were unable to find one single point of relationship between the two of them. Brockman left a wife and she swore up and down that neither she nor her late husband had ever heard of this other victim, this Dalbert. She said she thought her husband had gone to a neighborhood movie on the night of the killing. The old music-teacher was a recluse, so the trail stopped dead with him, too.

Captain Kunkle got laboriously to his feet. He walked to the center of the room, and waggled his outstretched hand dramatically. "Are you intimating, Mr. Rock, that you have uncovered the madman responsible for those—"

"No, I don't know who he is," the Dean declared. "I say I have a lead. He's no madman, by the way. He's just fiendishly clever. The picnic lunches he left, for instance. That was merely an attempt to inject an element of chaos into his crime. Now, I have a client, and I'd like to work along with you people on this. Do you think there's any chance of our cooperating?"

Lieutenant Malloy stood up. "Come on, Captain. We've been through this before. He doesn't know the meaning of the word cooperate. We tell all—he tells nothing. He just brought us here to milk us."

"Wait a moment, listen." The Dean spoke hastily. "Permit me to mention three names before you leave. Stafford and Flanders and Driscoll. Hah! I perceive they strike a chord!"

Captain Kunkle looked uneasy. "What can we lose, Lieutenant? Perhaps Mr. Rock can—"

**T**HE Dean smiled unctuously. Kunkle hesitated, said: "Those first two parties are unknown to us. But Driscoll, ahem, is another story. You're familiar with the peculiar case of Driscoll, then?"

The Dean shook his head. "Never heard of him until an hour ago."

Kunkle frowned. "Driscoll was a comparative newcomer to town. He had retired from practice, and moved in last winter with his wife and a secretary. Not his dental secretary, I mean the lady who was really a female curator of his private museum. Driscoll's hobby was relics and curios and such."

"You appear to be rather well posted on the man," the Dean remarked. "Don't tell me he had a police record?"

"No," Captain Kunkle said angrily. "That's the catch. We wish he had. You see—I hate to say it—the word has been out in official circles for some time that, er, Driscoll actually performed that rarity of rarities, the perfect

crime. Did it and got away with it, too!" Malloy said gently: "Let's be getting on, Captain."

The Dean asked: "What do you mean, perfect crime?"

"Just that." Kunkle blew out his breath. "The Driscolls came from a small town in Nevada, a town that caught a lot of wealthy Eastern trade. The doctor had his dental office above the town's only jewelry store. One night the jewelry store was cleaned out. Gems were missing to the tune of a hundred and fifty grand. The doors and safe were locked but the stuff was missing when the owner entered in the morning."

The Dean was attentive. "And Driscoll was suspected?"

"Because he was the one who pointed out how the trick was pulled. There was a small white patch of new plaster up in the corner of the ceiling, in the room with the safe. On the second floor, directly above, was a lavatory. The dentist suggested that someone had locked himself in the lavatory, taken up a floorboard, and watched with a pocket telescope while the jeweler spun the dial. That way he got the combination. On the night of the robbery, he just plastered the hole up again. The ceilings were high and dark. The idea was fantastic, but possible. The sheriff took this plaster to the lab and analyzed it, hoping that it was that special stuff that dentists use. It wasn't. It was just ordinary plaster of Paris."

"And how," the Dean asked, "did the good dentist explain the thief's entry into the shop?"

"He had an answer to that, too," Captain Kunkle said. "He suggested that the jeweler's key had been borrowed from a locker at the country club, and an impression made while the jeweler was in the shower. He was suspiciously emphatic on this point."

"And Driscoll had an alibi?"

"Sure. He claimed he was on a fishing trip that night. It was flimsy but it seemed as though he wanted it that way. The whole thing was so ridiculous that the law was afraid to make a case of it. Driscoll was questioned and released. He had the time of his life. Everyone suspected him, but no one could do anything about it. This Driscoll! sure had a twisted sense of humor."

Malloy said: "One busy night and he was on easy street."

"So now," the Dean said thoughtfully, "we're looking for the gems?"

"No. He took the stuff to South America and disposed of it. At least that's the word that seeped into the official grapevine. And if he put it out himself, as we suspect, it's probably true."

"Such a man!" the Dean sighed. "A dyed-



in-the-wool prankster. That always makes things hard. You say he brought his secretary to town with him?"

Kunkle nodded. "Yes. And that's only part of it. From here on, it really gets squirrely. When Driscoll pulled his single big-time job, he also had a little money of his own. He promptly retired from his profession, hired a gal to help him, and began collecting antiques and relics, as I told you. He brought the whole caboodle, wife, relics, and secretary to town with him. When he died, we were ready with an auditor to check his bank account. All he left was about two thousand dollars and his house on Sycamore Drive. This he willed to his widow."

The Dean grinned. "Is that strange?"

Captain Kunkle said: "But the way the will was worded! They tell me it was just barely legal. After he'd made this bequest of all his earthly goods to his widow he said: . . . *and the remainder of my estate I bequeath to my secretary, and my secretary also do I bequeath to my wife.*"

"I bet Mrs. Driscoll enjoyed that," I said. "Wives just adore their husbands' secretaries!"

No one paid any attention to me. Captain Kunkle said: "Does it mean anything to you?"

The Dean spoke softly. "It's beginning to."

Malloy put in his oar. "And you claim Driscoll was tied up with those Ferncliff Park killings?"

"No doubt about that, Lieutenant." The Dean was bleak.

Malloy scoffed. "Impossible. I happen to recall the exact dates of both incidents. Driscoll was buried two days before the Ferncliff murders!"

The Dean went to the closet, came out with his hat, handed me mine. "Well, gentlemen, this has been a pleasant visit," he said graciously. "You'll pardon our rushing off."

**S**YCAMORE DRIVE was numbered in the 600's, but it turned out to be just one short, crescent-shaped block in a sedate, run-down section of the suburbs. The big, old residences were lonely-looking and forbidding with their broad, unkempt lawns, their gaunt porches tangled with trellises of honeysuckle and trumpet vine. The two houses in the center of the block were 681, Mr. Dismukes Stafford's, and 683, Widow Driscoll's. The buildings were about forty yards apart, on the crest of a little knoll, and a thicket of lilacs grew between them. The street sloped down from them on either side, leaving them twinned on the hilltop, and yet they gave the impression of secluded hostility to each other.

Without a word, the Dean started up the drive of 683, and I followed him. We ascended the rotting steps of the porch, passed from the hot sun into the cool shadow of the vines. The Dean pulled the T-lever of an old-fashioned doorbell, set off a clinking and clanking within. I said: "You know what, chief? This super-criminal, Dentist Driscoll, is dead and mouldering in his coffin, yet I got a feeling he's manipulating us around, as if we were puppets to his sinister whims."

The Dean looked disgusted, gestured me to silence. The door opened and we were confronted by a blowzy dame in a greasy, pink silk negligee. Maybe in her late forties, she had a lumpy, formless body, with puffy ankles and wrists. Her gray-streaked hair was tied up in a tatter of old lace curtain. From her frayed, blue satin pumps, bulging and slit at the sides for comfort, to the embedded grime in the crow's-foot wrinkles of her chubby neck, she was about as slovenly a female as I ever saw. The Dean said courteously: "First, I must ask you this, madam. How fast can you pick cotton?"

She was all set to give us the bum's rush. Befuddled, she parted her lips laxly to answer, and the Dean eased past her through the doorway. I tagged along. Automatically, the widow led us down the hall, ushered us into a small sitting room. The Dean seated himself in a comfortable chair, hung his hat on his knee. I followed suit. Mrs. Driscoll lowered her shapeless frame on a horsehair sofa, asked: "What's this about cotton? Who are you?"

"I," the Dean proclaimed gallantly, "am Wardlow Rock. This is my nephew, Ben Matthews. Mr. Matthews owns a small frog hatchery and cotton patch in the deep south. He is in the market for a wife. He wants a competent helpmeet, of course, but he agrees to handle the frog business, if you will till and pick the cotton. It's a delightful country—magnolias, romance, and all the froglegs you can eat! If you'll just sign these papers, here—" He made motions towards his vest.

I thought she was going to have apoplexy. Her face went white and then fiery red. She asked hoarsely: "What nonsense is this?"

"Mr. Stafford, your neighbor," the chief explained blandly, "has been receiving proposals of marriage from you in the mail. Now, Mr. Stafford has other nuptial plans. He's very generously sold us wedding privileges to you, subject, of course, to mutual agreement. Do you like froglegs? A good cook can prepare them eighty-three different ways, I'm told. Now—"

"Stafford, that fat slob!" she lashed out. "So he's behind this! Selling me on the matrimonial market as if I were a sow or something. That man's dangerous. He should

be confined. He writes me silly letters, trying to frighten me into marrying him, then comes around and lays the blame on me! I have no intention of getting married to anyone, that's final! I wasn't any too happy with my late-deceased but I have the decency to respect his hearth and home!"

"A valiant sentiment," the Dean endorsed heartily. He let his gaze wander about the cozy room with its bright print curtains, its pleasant apple-green walls. "That was a strange testament the doctor left, bequeathing his secretary to you. Didn't that introduce an element of post-mortem friction, I mean—"

Mrs. Driscoll seemed anxious to discuss it. "I don't understand it. It appeared at first to be an insult, but I knew the doctor too well for that. He was very profound. He meant something by those foolish words. If Dorothy hadn't left us just before his death, maybe she could have helped me understand—"

"Dorothy, I presume, is the secretary in question?"

"Yes. Dorothy Verheyden. You see, last winter the doctor suddenly decided to dispose of his collection. There were a good many pieces in it but it didn't bring much. With the collection gone, we had no real need for Dorothy. However, we kept her on until she got that other job."

THE Dean listened quietly. Mrs. Driscoll continued: "Dorothy was a bright girl, and all that, but her talents were a bit specialized—curios and antiques and so on. She was lucky to get work, as I told her when she asked my advice. She just fell into the new job, you might say."

"Think of that!"

"It was a mixup, crossed wires or something, over the telephone. The phone rang and she answered it. A man was talking. She kept saying hello but he couldn't seem to hear her. He was calling the president of some big college long distance, asking if the college would recommend a good archeologist. It seemed that the speaker was the president of a small college and his museum needed a curator. Dorothy hung up and told me all about it. I told her to take it."

The Dean leaned back in his chair. "Did she happen to name this small college?"

"No, that she wouldn't do. She didn't quite trust me. She did say, however, that it wasn't a regular college, and that it was right here in town. Later I realized why she was so tight-lipped. She was getting ready to swindle me before she left us!"

The Dean clucked his tongue in sympathy. "Did she consult with Dr. Driscoll before she left?"

"No, the doctor was mighty sick up in the

back bedroom. She said she didn't want to disturb him. I believed her then—now, I know different. She was ashamed to face him because of the swindle."

"Swindle?" The Dean looked mildly interested. "How sad."

"She didn't get away with it. The doctor's sudden death threw a monkey wrench into her plans." Mrs. Driscoll's lumpy face glowed with righteous indignation. "One night, my husband took an abrupt turn for the worse. Our family physician said he probably wouldn't pull through till daybreak. After supper, Dorothy said she was going out for a stroll. She never returned. Later, I discovered that her traveling bag was gone. She must have packed it secretly and set it out her window." Mrs. Driscoll grew sullen. "At dawn the doctor died."

The Dean looked doleful. The widow said with emotion: "You know what?" The Dean shook his head. She continued: "The next morning I was away from the house—talking to the undertaker, pricing caskets, arguing with the cemetery man. When I came home, I found the bundles!"

I got into the conversation. "No kidding? You found the bundles, eh?"

"Yes. They'd been sent from various stores, addressed to Dorothy. I opened them. Hats and frocks and lingerie! Glamorous, slinky stuff, and expensive. Not like Dorothy had ever worn before. A little investigation uncovered the fact that she'd bought them the day before, and charged them to my husband! You see, she got panicky when she heard he was failing fast, and kited." She set her jaw. "You know what I did?"

"Don't tell me you kept them for yourself?" The Dean smiled flatteringly.

"No, I couldn't have worn them. Dorothy is a good twenty years younger than I, and somewhat slimmer. I loaded those fripperies under my arm, took them right back to the shops they'd come from, and read the riot act. She'll never try that again in those shops." Mrs. Driscoll grinned dourly.

The Dean guffawed. He got up, strolled aimlessly about the room. After a few turns, he drew up at a small row of books on an end-table. He bent over them. Mrs. Driscoll said reverently: "Those belonged to my husband. He was very fond of them during his span on this earth. Stafford, next door, showed interest in them yesterday and wanted to buy them, but I won't sell. It's only decent that I hold on to them."

"As a *memento mori*, I presume." The Dean read the titles aloud: "*A History of Mayan Artifacts—The Ebonist, or A Monograph on Carved Ivory—Anaerobia; An Elementary Approach*. Your husband was quite a student, wasn't he?"



She saw us to the front door. "Yes," she agreed. "The doctor was a great reader, especially towards the end."

We bid her adieu, left her standing beyond the curtain of shrouded vines.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Shop in Noonan's Alley

WE HIT the sidewalk, turned into the yard next door. I said: "I don't like that dame, boss. I suspicion her! Did we learn anything?"

"Gracious, yes." He didn't much care to discuss it. "You heard me read those book titles, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"You remember the last book I mentioned? *An Elementary Approach to Anaerobia*? That volume has nothing at all to do with curio collecting. It's a rather profound biochemical study. *Anaerobia* are a type of bacteria."

I suddenly got an idea. "Listen, how does this sound? Say Mrs. Driscoll was jealous of the way her husband was carrying on with his secretary. Maybe the Doc didn't have all the brains in the family. Maybe his wife has a few, herself. Well, she stood it as long as she could and then she killed them both, with bacteria—her husband and this Dorothy Verheyden. Then she made up that story about the secretary ordering all those clothes just to pretend Verheyden was still alive! By golly, it's a mighty smart scheme, and fool-proof!"

The Dean listened, hypnotized. "It is a remarkable scheme, Ben. That I have to admit. But, unfortunately, it happens to be wrong in every single detail, as well as in its gross conclusion. No one was killed with bacteria. Those glamorous clothes arrived on the morning of Driscoll's demise, just as we have heard. And Mrs. Driscoll is guilty of no crime greater than stupidity. She's the blundering victim of a cruel and malicious intellect. It's a mighty good thing we've entered the picture." He looked troubled. "And finally, Dorothy Verheyden, the elusive secretary, is very much alive. It's our job to corner her. By the way, did you know that originally the word *secretary* meant a keeper-of-secrets? Interesting, isn't it?"

MR. STAFFORD'S house, number 681, was a lot like the Driscoll place, big and rambling and shadowed with shrubbery. It was in better condition, though. The lawn was neatly trimmed, the house was bright with white paint, the rows of shutters were sky-blue, and the floral ironwork around the sagging veranda was spick-and-span with a

new coat of black. It was hard to put in words, but somehow all this gaudy display made the hulking structure more gloomy, more unpleasant. It was like a vain man taking out his false teeth and handing them to you to prove what a swanky job they were. Instead of ascending to the front porch, the Dean wandered around the corner of the building, to the rear. I said: "What if he's not home?"

"He'll be home," the Dean answered, out of the side of his mouth. "He's always home. That's the catch. Everything hinges on that."

Grover Dismukes Stafford was in the back yard sunning himself. He was in a wicker chair beneath a red-and-yellow beach umbrella. He was nude, except for shorts and sandals, and as he lay there, half-supine, his obese body shimmered in massive, puffy fat. The sight of him made you long for a harpoon. You felt that he was loaded to the gills with ambergris. He whipped off a pair of dark specs as we approached.

"So you've found my ivory horn already?" Stafford pulled down the corner of his lips. "Wasn't much of an assignment, was it? I expect I could have done it myself if I wasn't such a busy man." He thought it was payoff time and he was beginning to chisel. "Let's see. You've been on the case about two and a half hours, we'll call it three. Five dollars an hour is a lot of money. We'll say fifteen bucks plus a ten-dollar bonus—that makes twenty-five. Twenty-five simoleons for two hours' work! *Whoo!* What the hell, I'll write you a check. By the way, where is it?"

"The oliphant?" The Dean shook his head. "I haven't the slightest idea. You're quite a sport, aren't you, sir. Willing to pay twenty-five dollars to regain a sixteen thousand-dollar relic."

It didn't faze him. "It's just gravy I'm throwing your way. The horn was insured. If you can't locate it, the insurance people will."

"So the horn's insured?"

"Of course it is. Driscoll had it covered. The transfer of ownership endorsement on the policy is the best way I have of proving that I acquired it from a party privileged to sell. As I said, there are no documents to show ownership until it got into Driscoll's hands. The insurance policy is good enough for me. It's actually an affidavit that Driscoll owned the horn. As long as I can show a legal bill of sale I don't give a hoot who owned it before Driscoll."

The Dean said suavely: "I see your point. Now, you mention the policy as the best identification of Driscoll's ownership. Is there something further?"

"Yep. Driscoll gave me some photographs when we closed the deal."

"Would you mind getting them for me? I should like to see them."

He stared at us as if we were children, not too bright. Finally he lumbered away into the house. He was gone for some time.

Quickly, the Dean circled the building, drew up beneath a brace of casement windows. "These must be the windows to his museum, through which, according to him, the horn and its cabinet were carted away last night." We examined the spongy sod. If, as Stafford had stated, a moving van had driven over the lawn, there was certainly no sign of its wheelmarks.

We returned to the rear of the house. For a long moment, the chief gazed moodily about him.

The back yard fell away in a grassy slope. At the bottom of the hillside was a small artificial lake, not much bigger than a pond, and flanking it was a diminutive boat-house. Just beyond, was an old red stable and a few small out-buildings. The lake was covered with stagnant green scum and the little cluster of sheds was on its last legs. Like so many gentlemen of his ilk, Mr. Stafford had run out of nice new paint when he came to the less public part of his premises.

Our host reappeared and swung across the lawn to join us. He'd taken the time to dress and was again in his gray flannels. Under his arm he carried a black folder. The Dean seemed suddenly sociable. He asked: "Lived here on Sycamore Drive very long, sir?"

"All my life. This is the old Stafford home." He smiled superciliously. "Quite a charming neighborhood. Nothing but the elite of the elite on Sycamore Drive!"

"I don't think I'd care for it," the Dean speculated. "I'm a man who enjoys his shower bath. I don't believe I could go back to the old washtub in the kitchen on Saturday night! I guess I'm spoiled."

Stafford looked shocked. "What are you talking about? Man, we've had running water, sewage, and electricity since 1917. Before then, Sycamore Drive was Sycamore Heights, but in 1917 we became a part of the city. Washtub in the kitchen! What a gruesome thought!"

THE Dean mumbled an apology, took the black folder from Stafford's pudgy hand. I stepped to his side, examined it with him. It was a photograph album, about twelve inches square, and contained but four pages. Mounted on each page, was a large photo. At first glance they all seemed alike. As you studied them, you could make out slight variations.

"So this is the famous Driscoll, and the ivory horn!" The Dean's face froze in concentration.

As I say, at first they all seemed exactly alike. The dentist was seated stiffly on a chair in his library. The corner of a desk protruded into the picture at the left and on the wall, above Driscoll's shoulder, was an anatomical chart of a skeleton. The dentist was a merry little fellow with a jolly twinkle to his eye and a birdlike tilt to his head. He stared full into the camera. It was pretty obvious that he was taking his own photo and was enjoying it. On a level with his chest, in a position of display, he held the oliphant. It was an ivory drinking horn, all right, and beautifully carved. You could easily make out the raised figures of the circlet of wolf-dogs.

"Notice the calendars," Stafford said. "In each picture they vary. The series of photos indicates a passage of time. Every four years he posed, to show that the oliphant was in his possession. The group of four pictures covers a period of twelve years. It was a wacky thing to do, but Driscoll was as wacky as they come."

The corner of the desk in each picture held a calendar. The first said, *June 30, 1930*, the other dates, in sequence, were *June 30, '34, '38, and '42*. There was a progressive change in the dentist, too. In the first picture he was shabbily dressed, but plump-faced. As the years rolled by, his clothes became increasingly better, climaxing in a sporty outfit of fine cheviot. His clothes became better, but the man became more haggard. His face grew thinner, his eyes sunk in their sockets, and finally, in '42, he seemed almost a cadaver.

"Observe the skeleton on the chart," the Dean said queerly. "Now Driscoll was a dentist, not a physician. Why should he have such a— And notice the arrows!"

The chief was right. There was something funny about that chart. In the first picture the arrow was pointing at the skeleton's foot, then, in the second, it worked up to his ankle. In the last two it went from his knee to his elbow. Stafford said: "I've told you that Driscoll was whimsical. I imagine he was the victim of rheumatism and took this peculiar method of recording its discomforts. In '30 he had it in his foot, and so forth."

The Dean returned the album to its owner. "Most enthralling, Mr. Stafford. Thank you, sir. I want to visit Mrs. Brockman. You wouldn't care to join us, would you?"

"Who's this Mrs. Brockman? Is it social or business? Remember that you're working for me today, Rock." Stafford shook his head. "I'll have to decline your invitation. In my youth I was quite a gadabout. Now I'm enjoying the comforts of home. I rarely leave the premises."

"A cave-dweller, eh?" The Dean nodded amiably. "Go back to your basket-weaving,



sir. I hope we haven't upset you too much."

On the way back to town, I said: "You know what I've been thinking about? I've been thinking about Curly Winston. I bet he could help us solve this nutty case."

The Dean bridled. "Now comes out of the cosmos a Curly Winston! A name I've never heard. So that's it, hey? When you get mired down, you take your troubles to this Curly Winston. I, your employer, am just a beetle-head, an insignificant driveler. But Curly Winston sees all, knows all." He got sirupy. "Perhaps you'd like to quit me, and team up with this—"

"No, I wouldn't. We seem to be stuck and so I just said—"

"Who's stuck? I've got this case practically solved. All we need, in a matter of speaking, is a few more facts and then. . . What are you looking so sour about? You don't believe me?"

"I said: 'Comes out of the cosmos those photographs of Dentist Driscoll. If you've got this case solved, I sure wish you'd explain those screwy pictures.'"

"You mean Dentist Driscoll's album? The photos were taken all in the same sitting, hand-running, of course." The Dean was smug. "Now don't contradict me until I've finished. Different clothes, I grant you, and different dates on the calendar but—"

"I thought of that at first, but his face—you could actually see him age!"

"Driscoll was a dentist. He knew how to alter the face by false teeth, built-up gums and so forth. The shoestring was the giveaway." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Didn't you notice the shoestring? Well, it had a knot in it. The same place, in every picture. It's too much to believe that on June 30, every four years, the dentist's shoestring broke and he was forced to splice it. No, it was the same string!"

I was thunderstruck. "So he faked that photographic record just to rook Stafford?"

"Partly. He took pleasure in gypping Stafford, all right. But he did it mainly to pass on his acrostic." He grinned. "The four skeletons! Remember the arrow pointing in each picture to the *foot, ankle, knee, elbow*. Take the first letter of each word—they spell out *fake*. Yes. Mr. Stafford's horn is a forgery."

"But why would Driscoll so label it?"

"He no doubt got fooled on it himself—he was quite a student. Later he discovered it was spurious, remarkable craftsmanship, no doubt, but phony. As we've already noticed, he had a strange sense of humor. He probably insured it to test the appraisers, as much as anything, and then passed it on to Stafford with the photos as a prankish tipoff."

"But why?"

"He was a strange and devious man, Ben. A man who walked through life, and left murder in his wake. And we're not finished with him yet, by a long shot." He slowed up on the curb, said: "Go back to the apartment. I'll join you in about an hour. And let me tell you this—things are going much too smoothly. We're dealing with a ruthless killer, a killer who certainly knows we are on the trail. I don't like all this peace and quiet. Watch yourself!"

It was getting to be supertime. He rarely ate when he was on a fast case. I asked: "How about a little food?"

"You'll find a nice big bowl of cold boiled potatoes in the icebox. Have yourself a feast." He was perfectly serious. Before I could retort, he'd left me.

I didn't ask him where he was going—I knew it would have been a waste of time.

I'D NEVER met this Curly Winston, but now and then I picked up word about him. He had a little shop in Noonan's Alley and the grapevine said he made a nice living. Folks who dealt with him weren't too gabby but the story was that he specialized in stuff that other fences wouldn't handle, good antiques and paintings and relics, stuff that was generally considered non-negotiable. He had his own markets and they claimed as long as you brought him something really A-1 he would take it off your hands at a fair price.

Now I reasoned this way. Peculiar things had happened at the Driscoll home just before and just after the dentist's death. We'd heard a lot about his collection being disposed of, but we hadn't heard anything at all about where it went. Say somebody, say this Dorothy Verheyden, for instance, had culled out the best pieces while the household was in confusion. Could easily be. And where would she unload them? Winston would be glad to handle them. And if, as we had been told, she was a semi-professional curator, ten-to-one she knew about him.

I stood on the street corner, thinking it over. The Dean had an iron-clad rule against me free-lancing but this seemed too good to pass up. I flipped my cigarette butt in the gutter and set out for Noonan's Alley.

Noonan's Alley is a crooked spur off a warren of slum courts and backstreets down in the tenderloin. The evening sun was golden and harsh along the squalid pavements. I passed through a neighborhood of dingy chilli parlors and cut-rate drugstores, turned into a passage between a basement poolroom and a hockshop. The alley was littered with rubbish and the thick, fermenting odor of neglected garbage filled the tepid air. Despite the hot dryness of the summer day, the dank brick walls gave off a fetid, steamy moisture.

There was no show window—just a door. A blistered, weathered door back in a recess. The card on the warped panels read: *J. WINSTON, Watches, Clocks Repaired*. I couldn't help grinning. Come nightfall, a guy with a watch on him took his life in his hands just to be in Noonan's Alley. I laid hold of the old brass doorknob, and entered.

The little cell-like room was bare, murky. In the feeble light from a fly-specked ceiling bulb I made out a small, empty showcase, and just back of it, a sleazy black curtain. I was just about to call out my presence when a man appeared from behind the curtain. He side-stepped the dummy showcase, came directly to the center of the room where I was standing.

He was Winston, all right, and fitted the unpleasant description I'd picked up. He was a weary-looking lad, skinny, with horn-rimmed spectacles and a mop of black hair which stuck out above his ears in a mat of ringlets. His clothes just missed being shabby, but there was a definite quality of gentility about him. He bobbed his head between his shoulders in a humble little gesture of welcome and then I knew the word for him—snaky! Suddenly, I revised my whole opinion. I realized this Winston was dangerous—damn dangerous! I said: "Mr. Winston, I'm a man of few words, and so, I hear, are you. Recently there was a chap in town named Driscoll who had a fine collection of relics and antiques. I want to talk to you about—"

"Driscoll? Driscoll?" He suddenly began to cough. "I believe I recall the name." He went to the showcase, reached behind it, came out with a dirty rag rug. "I'm glad you dropped in. I'd like to hear what you have to say." He sauntered to the door. There was a small crack beneath the doorframe. He stuffed the rug into the crack, arranging it with great care. "I'm delicate natured. I like to shut off all draughts." He stood upright, bolted the door. "We'll just go into the back room where we'll be more comfortable."

I didn't like it. He didn't kid me. He was making the shop soundproof. He produced a vicious, snub-nosed automatic. "Don't be alarmed at the show of weapons. I just want to be certain we're not spied upon while we converse. I always protect my friends in this manner." His voice was a bit too glib to be convincing.

I'd run into guys like this before. Guys who formed snap judgments—and acted upon them. I hadn't been in his shop one minute, and he already had me slated for extinction. There was no doubt about it. He motioned me forward with the gun muzzle. I went behind the counter, passed around the curtain to the back room. Mr. Winston followed.

Mr. Winston's back room was something of a surprise. It was about twelve feet square and fitted out in the height of luxury. There was a rich-napped carpet on the floor, the walls were wainscoted in glossy old mahogany. Two delicate Queen Anne chairs stood by a taboret on which there was a red glass decanter and two crystal goblets. In the corner of the room was a rosewood kidney desk. The mop-headed man beckoned me to a seat, said: "Drink?" I shook my head. He seated himself facing me, laid the gun laxly on his knee. There was a moment of strain while he inspected me voraciously through his big headlight spectacles. Finally, he asked: "What's this about Driscoll?"

I SHOT the works. "The way I got it, you picked up some of his choice pieces. And not from him, either. Now did you know that Driscoll had a rare ivory horn, an oliphant of Godfrey Bighand, worth about sixteen grand, and that he disposed of it personally before his collection was broken up?"

"No, I can't say I did." Winston was suddenly eager. He tried to hide it, but I knew I had him hooked.

I said: "It makes me nervous to speak my mind in the presence of a gun. If you want to do business put that baby out of sight." He reached back under his arm, dropped the automatic in a desk drawer.

He said: "What's your proposition?"

"For ten per cent cash, now, I'll tell you where that horn is. A kid could glom it."

"I don't do business that way," he said slowly. "You bring the oliphant here to me, and we'll work out something a little better than ten per cent. You'll find me very generous indeed."

"I'm no crook," I said coldly.

He said hastily: "Of course not. Neither am I. That was just a suggestion. By the way, just who are you, and how do you happen to connect me with this Driscoll in the first place?"

I did some quick thinking. My mind went back to those Ferncliff Park slayings. The Dean had said that those deaths—Brockman, the carpenter, and Dalbert, that old down-at-the-heels musician—were part of the general set-up. Yet, except for the single allusion that the boss had made to Mrs. Brockman, their names hadn't appeared at all in the case. I was here to get information, so I took a chance.

I said: "I heard about you in a funny way. My secret ambition is to be a great violinist, but I'm tone-deaf. There was an old guy around town who had a method of instruction which he called the touch system. You didn't have to hear the tone, you just put the right pressure on the bow and strings. We had some tough sessions but I got to know Old Dalbert



pretty well. It was he who told me about you. He said you'd buy—"

Curly Winston was astounded. "You mean Mark Dalbert, the piano-tuner?"

"He wasn't a piano-tuner, he was a music teacher."

"He was a piano-tuner, my friend, and a nut to boot." Winston paused angrily. "He was on my payroll, in a small way. He had the opportunity of getting into homes and—er—looking around. One morning he paid me a visit here just as I was finishing my breakfast. He talked like a madman. When he got his story off his chest, I eased him out, and that was the end of my relationship with him. He talked so loose I was afraid of him."

"It must be a different Dalbert. This guy was eccentric but perfectly sane."

Winston sneered. "It was the same man, only he fooled you. He was quite crazy. Here was his tale—judge for yourself. He said that he'd received a letter in the mail, with a ten-dollar bill, from Driscoll—Driscoll was still alive at the time. The letter ordered him to go to the big barn back of Driscoll's place at midnight and tune a piano he'd find in the loft. How does it sound so far?"

"Very strange indeed."

"You haven't heard anything yet. He claimed he went there, to this old stable, in the middle of the night, as per orders. He found the piano in the loft, and tuned it. And all the time he was there, there was another fellow in the barn, too. A carpenter named Beckman. This carpenter was putting in a new floor in the harness room." He smiled evilly. "Would you like the payoff?"

"If I can stand it."

"Well, after I gave Dalbert the brush I got to wondering if he might be right. I went out to Sycamore Drive and looked around. There isn't any barn at all on the Driscoll place!"

I got to my feet, picked up my hat. He led me out past the black curtain, into the front shop. Before I left, I said harshly: "Mr. Winston, you've been decent enough to me, but maybe I should warn you. That girl has been pushing me around and I don't want any more of it. If she brings you this ivory horn before I get my hands on it, remember I was here first."

"What girl?"

"The kid who contacted you about the time of Driscoll's death, and sold you the cream of his stuff. The kid who always just beats me to the draw." I gave him my best description of Miss Elaine Flanders, Stafford's fiancée. "She's a little brunette, come about to your shoulder. Skinny, but pretty in a droopy sort of way. Hard purple eyes and a lazy way of talking—"

He looked disturbed. "There's something

wrong here. This I will admit—I seem to know the person you speak of. But she's not a brunette. She's a cornsilk blonde!"

"Hah!" I exclaimed. "She fooled you. She dyed her hair."

"I'm a difficult man to deceive," Winston said complacently. "I've conversed with her on numerous occasions. I took care to get her in a good light. Not only the hair on her head, *but the hair on her arms*, is genuine blond. Possibly the girls we refer to are sisters." Humbly, he showed me to the door. "Good day."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 733 Midtown

**T**WILIGHT was beginning to fall when I got back to our apartment. Mrs. Duffy, our landlady, was sitting behind the potted plants in her bay window, watching the sidewalk. When Mrs. Duffy was at her self appointed post, that meant we had a noteworthy client in our reception room. It meant also, in this case, that the Dean hadn't shown up and that she was waiting for our return to tip us off. I ascended the stone steps and entered the dark hallway. Mrs. Duffy's door opened a crack, and I got the tell-tale aroma of lilac toilet water. She said: "P-s-s-t!" I slowed up, and she whispered: "Mr. Matthews, stay out of your apartment. I warn you. A brazen and dangerous female lurks within!"

"No kidding?"

"That's true. She informed me that she's here to question you about your virtue. Don't tell her anything."

I was a little taken aback. "I won't," I answered. "But I can't help being flattered that she's interested."

It was the little brunette, Elaine Flanders. She was in the reception room, leaning casually against the fireplace, her elbows cocked backed on the mantelshelf, her ankles crossed. This time she was just a bit too lazy. I had the definite impression that she'd been prowling the chief's office, that she'd just had time to assume the careless posture before I caught her. I said: "Hi, there. What's this about your being inquisitive about my morals?"

She lowered her lashes, studied me with those calculating amethyst eyes. "What on earth are you talking about?" Suddenly she smiled. She came forward, seated herself meticulously on the loveseat. "You've been discussing me with your landlady. She's all mixed up. I told her I was here to inquire about an article of *virtu*. That's professional terminology, I guess. Collectors and dealers use it when they mean objects d'art or curios. I was referring, of course, to the ivory horn. Have you found it?"

"Nope, not yet. But we will."

"I certainly hope so," she said vaguely. Demurely, she straightened the folds of her dress. "Do you know what happens when people die?"

I made a steeple of my hands, said pedantically: "Opinions differ. Some say it's oblivion, some say it's the Happy Hunting Grounds. I hold that—"

"I'm not referring to that." She bit her lip. "I mean what happens here on earth, to the estate? As I understand it, after the deceased passes away some men come in and itemize everything he left. They make a list of everything he owned and call that assets. That list goes on file with the will. Is that right?"

"Something like that, yes."

She pawed around, located a tiny handkerchief, began to dab at her eyes. "Sometimes Mr. Stafford means one thing and says another. You remember when he was here this afternoon he said that he bought the oliphant and its cabinet from Dr. Driscoll before he died? That's true, of course, except that he didn't buy it from Dr. Driscoll—and he bought it after Dr. Driscoll died. He bought it after the estate was appraised."

I began to get it. "And after you left you decided that we could figure this out ourselves by taking a look at the appraiser's list. So you decided to come clean."

"Frankly, yes. You see I'm involved. Those misunderstandings will arise and I wanted to clear it up." She was sitting beneath the bridge lamp where I could plainly see the fine, down-like hair on her arm. It was definitely brown, and this gal was indisputably a bona fide brunette.

"I want to get the record straightened out," she explained, "because I'm the one who actually bought the ivory horn. Dismukes had been negotiating with Dr. Driscoll, but he just let things slide. When Dr. Driscoll died, and after the estate was settled, Mr. Stafford asked me to approach the widow on the subject of the sale. We'd heard that the widow was peculiar and Dismukes thought maybe, being a girl, I could make a better bargain than he could. We were wrong there. She made us pay just what it was insured for!"

"Hold on a minute." I wished the Dean was with me. "Do you mean to tell me that you actually visited in Mrs. Driscoll's home? That you talked with her, persuaded her to sell?"

"That's right. As I told you, she was difficult to persuade. I had to visit her several times. We talked for hours."

I felt there was some question I should ask her, but I couldn't imagine what it was. She picked up her purse and gloves. "I'll be get-

ting on. I just thought I should tell you. I feel better now. Good-by."

**T**HE DEAN blew in about ten minutes later. He had a grin on his face like a kid eating taffy and I knew, wherever he'd been, he'd run into good luck. He'd been to visit Mrs. Brockman, the wife of the fellow who was killed at Ferncliff Park—he did finally let that slip—but that was as far as he'd loosen up on the subject.

I stalled around and tried to put it off, but at last I told him about my experience in Noonan's Alley with Curly Winston. I thought when he heard that I'd been out on my own he'd burn my ears off, but he actually seemed pleased. "Fine," he said. "This Winston's strange tale about the piano-tuner just about winds everything up. Not that I needed it, but it helps."

Piqued, I exploded. "Not that you need it, but it helps. You're certainly lavish when it comes to handing out praise of someone other than yourself. Are you telling me that you've completely solved this mess?"

"Exactly. In fact, I phoned Lieutenant Malloy a half hour ago and used those identical words. He's to meet us at Stafford's with Widow Driscoll at ten o'clock sharp."

I tried to nail him. I said: "Aren't you surprised to hear that Fatso Stafford bought the ivory horn after, instead of before Driscoll's demise?"

"Of course not. If it were otherwise, there wouldn't be any case."

I made one more attempt. "Why did Winston have the gall to spin that fantastic yarn about the old music teacher and the barn loft? And then have the effrontery to point out that there couldn't be a barn loft, because the Driscoll place had no barn!"

The Dean fumbled in his pocket, came out with a pencil stub and a scrap of paper. He made two dots on the paper, said: "This is Sycamore Drive and here is 681, Stafford's—and here, 683, Driscoll's. Back here"—he made a third dot in the general outline of a triangle—"back here is the stable. It's Stafford's stable, of course. According to Winston, the old piano-tuner was instructed to show up at midnight. If he prowled around and found only one stable, he would naturally assume that it belonged to Driscoll, especially if he'd been previously instructed to that effect."

"Pretty neat," I said. "I hadn't thought of it that way. But what has Stafford's stable got to do with—"

"A great deal, I imagine." The Dean looked grave. "Let's go and see."

The moon was well up, climbing through a sky of scudding clouds, when we returned to Sycamore Drive. Just as we reached it, the



Dean turned from the pavement, cut back in a wide circle behind the little row of houses. We made our way in an arc of several hundred yards, through grassy pastureland. As I've mentioned, Sycamore Drive was on the crest of a small ridge and from where we were, down below, we could look up at the somber line of ancient mansions from the rear, could see the scattered amber oblongs of lighted windows beyond the veil of tangled shrubbery and gnarled trees.

Suddenly, in the shifting, racing shadows of the moonlight we found ourselves confronted by a cluster of tumbledown buildings. My nose caught the faint stench of stagnant water. I could make out the silhouette of Stafford's boathouse, and beyond it gleamed the scummy pond. The Dean touched my shoulder, indicated the hulk of the old barn. "See, look up the hill. From here it might belong either to the Driscoll place, or to Stafford." He lifted the peg from the hasp, swung open the creaking door, and we entered the musty building.

The Dean flipped on his flashlight. The old barn hadn't been used for decades. Cobwebs hung in beaded filaments from the rough rafters, and there was the dry, dusty smell of chaff and harness and dung. I said: "The floor, chief. Old Dalbert claimed Brockman, the carpenter, was putting in a new floor. He was mistaken. These planks are warped with age."

The Dean ignored me. Just beyond the crib, to the right of the stalls, an enclosed staircase led to the loft. He said quietly: "Let's go up." I followed him up the flight of steps.

There was no piano in the loft, but there was something twice as interesting—Stafford's curio cabinet, ivory horn and all!

It was standing there, all alone, in the center of the big, empty room. The Dean grunted. He handed me his flash that he might have both hands free, and set about examining it. It was a small antique-looking cabinet, maybe five feet high. The upper part was cupboard, the lower part was a series of three drawers. The Dean opened the cupboard and there lay the oliphant on its velvet rest. It didn't look to me as if it were worth sixteen grand, even if it was genuine, but folks do funny things when they're dough-heavy. The chief passed it up with a cursory glance. He let down a kind of shelf in the middle of the cabinet and opened up a little desk. One by one, he went through the pigeonholes, tapping and listening. Dissatisfied, he progressed to the drawers below—they were bare. Bare except for the last, which held a cloth bag. The bag was full of keys. I bet there were a hundred and fifty of them, everything from old trunk keys to door keys. Every shape and size, brass and iron.

The Dean chuckled. He then did a strange

thing. He laid the bag aside and drew the drawer from the cabinet. Deftly, he turned it upside-down. On the bottom, fastened by a strip of adhesive tape, was yet another key, a small, flat key about an inch and a half long. Beside it, written on the wood in pencil was: 733 *Midtown*.

The Dean thrust the small key in his vest pocket. "Dentist Driscoll was quite a fellow, wasn't he?" He motioned me to the stairway, said politely: "You first, sir." We descended to the ground floor.

I WALKED right into Curly Winston—and he had a boy friend with him. My foot had hardly cleared the last step when I was flooded with light. Winston, lounging against the crib, had flicked on a large sportsman's lamp. He had his snub-nosed automatic in his thin hand, tight to his side, and the thing was focused on my midriff. He was playing for keeps, and one look at the lad with him confirmed this completely. This other baby was a professional killer if I ever saw one. He was undersized, dressed in a shoddy suit of electric blue, and had the pinched, animal face of a third-rate gunman. The revolver in his fist was big and shiny in the lamplight. I stepped to one side, said politely to the Dean: "You first, sir."

Completely unabashed, the boss ambled forward. He said: "Hello, boys. I found it where you missed it. By the way, I was expecting you."

"So you found it? That's fine. We'll take it—off your body." Winston suddenly snarled. "What do you mean, you were expecting us?"

"I knew you would be here. Why, it was practically an appointment." The Dean lowered his voice confidentially. "Perhaps, Mr. Winston, you'd prefer to send your rather crummy alter ego outside while I—"

Curly shook his head. "Meredith stays."

The little gunman spat venomously. "You bet, Meredith stays. I ain't pulling out at this stage of the game!"

"I was just thinking of you, Mr. Winston, and your prestige." The Dean smiled blandly. "I didn't want to expose your stupidity before your young friend. However, you can have it any way you want it. Of course I knew you'd be here, with guns! When Ben talked with you this afternoon in your shop in Noonan's Alley, you realized, as soon as he mentioned Driscoll, that he was dangerous. Your first reaction was to kill him then and there, but you worked out something a little safer. You fed him a silly story intended to lure him to this out-of-the-way place, so that you might do away with him with greater security."

Owlishly, Curly Winston listened. "That's quite correct. In spite of your torrent of words I'm afraid you've walked into a trap. I don't

know how you fit into the picture, but I intend to get you out of it!"

"By mentioning Brockman, whom you slyly called Beckman, and combining him with old Dalbert, you thought you had foolproof bait. I knew that the two men had never met, so I presumed your story was in every detail a fabrication. Your big blunder, of course, was in knowing about Brockman."

The mop-headed man said through flattened lips: "I never make blunders!"

"Tut-tut!" The Dean reproved him mildly. "How can you say such a thing? This business has been one big blunder after another. In the first place, you muffed the key."

"But I got it now, or will have it just as soon—"

The little gunman said: "Wait a minute, Curly, I want to hear about this!"

The Dean agreed heartily. "And that you shall, sonny boy. Here's the situation. The two of you have been murdering left and right. You are in the employ of a—ahem—slightly greater intellect than your own. You are the lads who have been making these mysterious telephone calls. You are the rats who executed the Ferncliff Park kills. Brockman and Dalbert. I know this and I know why—"

He wasn't goading them to action. He was just giving their gunhands a little something to worry about when the time came. And the time came then. *Wow!*

Curly broke under the pressure. He batted his eyes and started to shoot. He let loose three wild slugs, one tore through my pants leg and the other two slapped into the oak timbers behind me. I went for the bulldog in my belt. From the corner of my eye I saw little Meredith's elbow tighten, his gun muzzle lift maybe an inch. The Dean's hand went to his shoulder holster, came out with his big Magnum. He twisted his body as the gun left its clip and the .357 was firing as it cleared his lapel. Three times he touched it off, the shots overlapping in one short, guttural roar across my eardrums.

I had my bulldog in my hand when Meredith went down in a shoddy tangle of wrinkled blue suit. Curly stood before me, upright and gaunt, tilted a little forward, as though he were listening to sweet, distant music. The lamplight glazed his horn-rimmed glasses and there was a black hole above his left eye about the size of a large spider. He was dead on his feet. As I thumbed back my hammer, he collapsed.

It seemed like an age, but the whole fracas was over before a man could take a good breath.

The Dean reholstered his Magnum. "You've got a quick draw, Ben," he declared reverently. "And an economical one. Just think of the powder and lead you save in a year!"

I flushed, started to answer. It was hard to take, but I knew it was for my own good.

The chief turned off the electric lamp. "Let's get up the hill. I imagine Malloy's waiting for us."

THEY were all there, in Stafford's parlor.

I'd been anxious to get a look at the inside of the house, and it was just about what I'd expected. Big and rundown—and showy. The old red carpet on the parlor floor was threadbare, the pier glass just inside the door was chipped and blurry, its gilt frame nicked and broken.

Stafford, our host, and his fiancée, Miss Flanders, were seated self-consciously at a battered claw-and-ball table. Widow Driscoll, in a shapeless black silk frock, with three inches of pink slip showing, and in long gloves, was perched silently and disapprovingly on a Windsor chair, as though no matter what developed, she wasn't going to like it. Lieutenant Malloy, his arms folded across his chest, stood in the shadows by the red velvet portiere—and waited.

The Dean tabulated his audience with his index finger, smiled. "All present and accounted for, eh? Splendid. Now we can begin. First, perhaps, I should explain what all this has been about. It's been a search for money, of course. Dentist Driscoll stole jewels, sold them. He spent a bit of this money, doubtless, but he was a frugal sharpshooter. His loot was originally valued at a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It's safe to guess that he had most of it still in his possession when he changed gears and slid into a better world. The question is, where did he leave it? His widow got none of it, though she was legally entitled to it." He produced the key, forked it over to Bill Malloy. "Driscoll left his money in a safety deposit box. Number 733 at the Midtown Trust Company. A perfectly normal thing to do, but here the normalcy ends. Mrs. Driscoll was indeed married to an extraordinary criminal."

The lumpy widow glared. "He was no criminal and he didn't steal those gems. He was a good husband, as long as you didn't cross him. I honor his memory."

Stafford looked bewildered. "I know nothing about any money. It's all Greek to me. But if you've solved your case, why don't you folks go home and leave me to my—"

"The will," the Dean went on, "left the fortune to the secretary, and the secretary to the widow. Now Driscoll didn't say, 'I bequeath my secretary, Dorothy Verheyden, to my wife,' because Driscoll wasn't referring to a live person. He meant the cabinet in which his ivory horn was kept. That cabinet was a sort of bookcase, a small secretary." He turned to the lumpy dame. "You didn't know that,



did you, that the key to his deposit box was hidden in the—"

"No. I sold it to Miss Flanders, here."

"Well, somebody knew it," the Dean continued quietly. "This party was associated with a couple of thugs. The thugs, so the story goes, phoned Mr. Stafford last night to get him out of his house—"

The fat man glowered. "That's right. And while I was away they took—"

"Not last night," the Dean corrected. "The theft of the cabinet came off yesterday afternoon, while you were next door arguing about those anonymous marriage-letters. Those amorous notes were decoys to suck you from your home long enough to—"

Stafford gloated. "I see! So Mrs. Driscoll is behind this after all!"

"Don't tell me, Rock," Malloy exclaimed, "that it's this kid, Miss Flanders—"

"No," the Dean answered grimly, "it's that woman, there." He pointed to the dumpy dame in the baggy dress. "That's the party behind this—but she's not Widow Driscoll. She's Dorothy Verheyden!"

**T**HERE was a tense interval of silence.

"It's very simple, and very vicious," the Dean explained. "She was Dentist Driscoll's private secretary, the curator of his museum. She knew he was in possession of huge ill-gotten funds. When he died—maybe she killed him, I can't tell from here—when he died she immediately murdered his wife. She then attempted to assume the wife's identity by several tricks. The wife and the secretary were not known here in town. Miss Verheyden ordered glamorous feminine clothes, in a petite size and had them sent to the Driscoll residence in the Verheyden name. She returned them to the shops, no doubt causing quite a scene, in Mrs. Driscoll's personality. All along she tried to implant in our minds that Miss Verheyden, the missing secretary, was young and frisky."

The lumpy dame said sullenly: "You're balmy. I know who I am. I'm Mrs. Driscoll, and I honor my husband's memory!"

"Even your hiring, Curly Winston, kept up the image of a young secretary!" The Dean paused, went on relentlessly: "You'd been pilfering pieces from your boss's collection, peddling them to this Winston. When you worked out your murder scheme you got Win-

ston and his helper to aid you. You had Brockman and Old Dalbert slain. They knew the real Mrs. Driscoll. Dalbert had no doubt tuned a piano in the home, and Brockman, so his wife tells me, had done repair work in Mrs. Driscoll's bedroom. With these two gone, you thought your role would never be questioned. You sold the ivory horn and cabinet to Stafford, and afterwards, realizing the secret of the cryptic will, connived to get it out of his house where you could search it. In your assumed identity, you would just as soon have the key and the box number as the actual cash!"

He turned to Elaine Flanders. "You were afraid, weren't you? It was you who sent me that Lichfield of Lych Manor note. I thought so."

Malloy coughed. "But where's this real wife, this Mrs. Driscoll?"

"When I was visiting Verheyden this afternoon in her role of bereaved widow, I spied an unusual book on the table. A book having to do with anaerobia. Old homes like these on Sycamore Drive, you know, still have one surviving relic of their now obsolete plumbing systems—waste tanks dug in some far corner of the yard. Anaerobia are the destructive bacteria that such tanks cultured when they were in use. Verheyden was interested in the idea. However, the system now hitched up to the city water supply functions quite differently. Lieutenant, if you'll search the Driscoll yard for disturbed sod, you'll find your abandoned septic tank and the remains of Mrs. Dentist Driscoll."

Stafford heaved his big frame erect. "But what about my oliphant?" he asked petulantly. "This is all very well, but what about my—"

"It's in your stable," the Dean said, "in the loft. There'll be no charge, sir. I'll take my fee from the recovery of the Driscoll loot."

Stafford glowed with rapture. The Dean said intimately: "I'll give you twenty-five dollars for it!"

Geniality left Stafford's obese face. It twisted in arrogant scorn. "Twenty-five measly dollars for the horn of Godfrey Bighand! Haw-haw-haw. How laughable. I paid sixteen thousand, and I won't sell for twice that sum!"

"That I can believe." The Dean's eyes twinkled. "Good night, good people."

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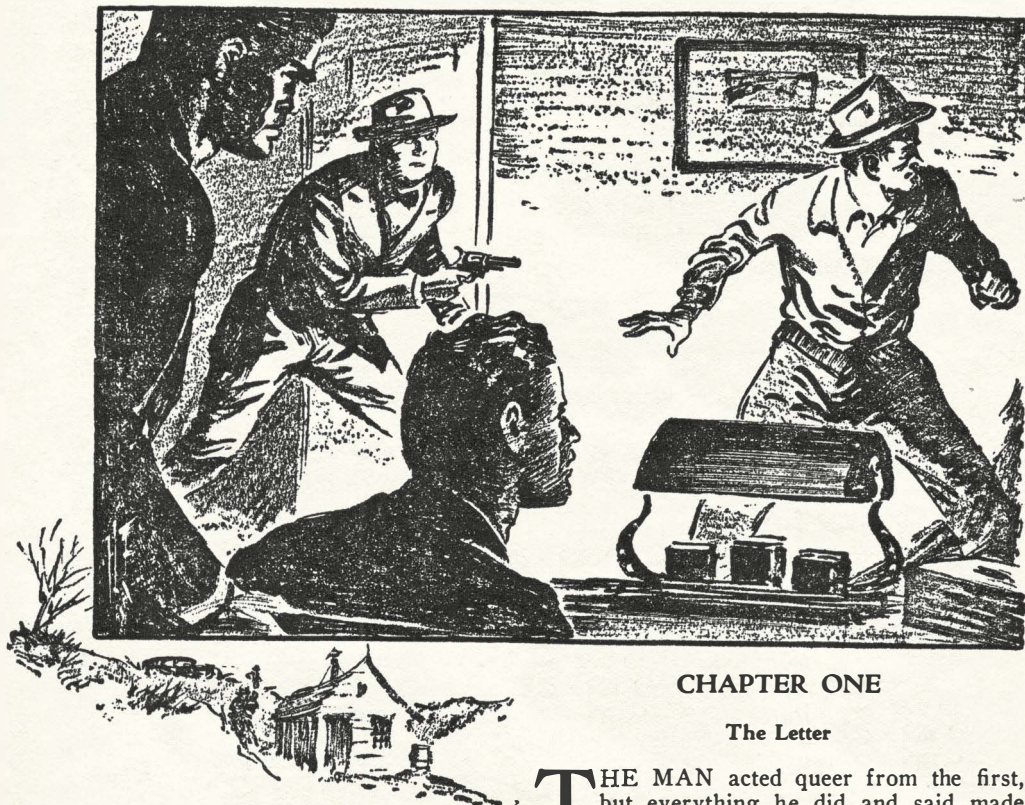
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# I'll Slay You in My Dreams

By

**BRUNO FISCHER**

*There's no logic in a nightmare. Clare Cobb was dead—murdered—and I was the fall-guy. I could have laughed in grim appreciation of the way the evidence had been built up against me, bit by bit, except you can't when there's a gag blocking your mouth. I could only be sure of two things: I hadn't killed Clare, nor were these ropes now binding me a figment of my imagination—ropes with soft padding around them, provided by a killer with a strange concern for my comfort . . .*

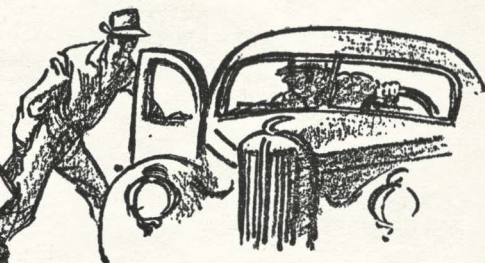


## CHAPTER ONE

### The Letter

**T**HE MAN acted queer from the first, but everything he did and said made sense. That's what I want to get straight—it could have happened to anybody. I'm no dumber than the next fellow. It's only that I had the tough luck to be hitching in that direction at that time.





Two strange men plunged into the room, both with guns cocked menacingly.



At twilight I had only twenty miles to go to reach Coast City, and I was worried about getting a lift before dark. Then this swanky coupe came along. When it slowed as it approached me, I thought I was set.

The car didn't quite stop. As I moved toward it, it abruptly picked up speed. The mudguard missed me by a hair.

I figured that it was my fault. My good suit was in my bag. For hitching I wore un-

pressed Army pants and a faded windbreaker, and I hadn't had a chance to shave since the day before. Probably I hadn't looked prepossessing enough to be given a lift, with darkness coming on. But as I stood there looking after the car, it began to roll slowly, as if the driver were trying to make up his mind about me. Apparently he did, for the coupe soon came to a complete stop.

I broke into a run. The driver was waiting for me. He had the right door open, but his arm barred me from entering. He was a heavy-set, middle-aged man, with a florid face in which the skin sagged loosely. Through shell-rimmed glasses, he peered suspiciously at me in the gloom.

"I don't make a habit of picking up strangers," he said fussily. His eyes dropped to my battered straw bag. "I assume you don't live in Coast City."

"No, sir. I've just been discharged from the Army. I heard there were good jobs in Coast City shipyards."

His arm still blocked me. "Why were you discharged?"

It was none of his business. All I wanted was a lift, and he was acting as if he were interviewing me. I explained: "I'd had rheumatic fever as a kid, and it came back."

At last he seemed satisfied. "You look like a clean-cut boy," he conceded and removed his arm from the door.

**I**T WASN'T until I was sitting beside him in the car that I got a whiff of his breath. He smelled pretty drunk, but he didn't look it or act it. Seemed to hold his liquor like a

real gentleman as they used to say in books.

For a while, we drove in silence. Then he mumbled: "She can't mean it. If she'd only let me explain."

"What's that, sir?" I asked.

He glanced sideways at me, somewhat vacantly, so I realized that he hadn't been speaking to me. He said: "What's your name, son?"

"Elliot Tucker."

"Have you come far?"

"From Trevan," I said.

"That's pretty far."

"Only four hundred miles," I told him. "It's a small place with no industry and little work, so yesterday morning I left to hitch to Coast City."

"Relatives?" he asked.

"Just my mother. If I get a good job, I'll send for her and—"

I stopped. Men who gave you lifts generally did so because they wanted company and conversation. They often asked personal questions, and that was all right, but this guy was different. I had a feeling that he was intensely concerned with my answers.

"I'm Howard Cobb," he said suddenly.

He said it as if I should be impressed. I wasn't. I just sat there.

Howard Cobb laughed. "I suppose you've never heard of the Coast City Cobbs?"

"No, sir."

"Naturally not," he said. "You're a stranger."

It seemed to me that he was leading up to something, but suddenly he became silent again. In a little while he turned the car off the highway.

It was dark now, but I could distinguish empty stretches of sand on either side of me. The road wasn't much, hardly wide enough for two cars to pass each other. There were no houses.

"Is this a short cut?" I asked.

"I have to stop off at my cabin for a minute," he said. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not if I get to Coast City tonight."

He laughed again, a dry, thin sound. "You'll get there."

Now I could smell the wet, salt smell of the ocean, and I heard the dull rumble of breakers. Tall pines grew here, and amid them stood a rambling log cabin. Howard Cobb stopped the car.

"How about a drink?" he invited.

I'd have preferred supper, but a drink was welcome. He unlocked the door and put a light on in the hall and then in the living room.

The place might have been a cabin to Howard Cobb, but it was a palace to me. The living room in which I found myself wasn't much smaller than a barn and furnished in a way I'd seen only in the movies. Howard Cobb was money, all right.

HE opened a liquor cabinet and poured two Scotch and sodas. With the glass in his hand, he crossed the room and brooded at the photo of a woman in a silver frame on top of the grand piano.

"She will," he said thickly. "If she'll listen."

I felt embarrassed.

Cobb turned to me. The folds of his fleshy face seemed to hang more loosely, and his wide shoulders drooped. "That's Clare, my wife."

"She's attractive," I muttered politely, though she wasn't, particularly.

Glumly, he nodded. "She kicked me out of the house."

I wished he'd stop it and drive me on to the city. I drained my drink and put it down with a thud to let him know I wanted to go. Through his glasses his pale eyes appraised me intently.

"How would you like to earn a thousand dollars, son?" he asked.

"A thousand dollars a year or a month or what?" I said.

"For a few hours' work tonight."

I stared at him. Anybody who made that sort of offer couldn't be honest—not even a rich man—or couldn't be sober.

"Oh, it's nothing shady," he said quickly. "It's like this. My wife and I quarreled and now she refuses to see me. When I enter the house, she locks herself in her room. When I phone, she hangs up before I can say a word. It's all a silly misunderstanding. I'm sure I can patch it up if I have five minutes with her. I want you to bring her here."

"Me?" I said.

Eagerly, he came forward and placed his untouched drink next to mine. "We have to be subtle, of course. Clare loves me, that I'm sure of. If she heard that I was here, injured, she'd come at once. And that would give me my chance to explain."

He didn't sound drunk or crazy now. A man in love would do something like that.

"You think I won't pay you the money?" he said. "Here." He took out a roll of bills which dazzled me. I saw a hundred-dollar bill on top, but what he peeled off were five twenties. "Here's a hundred dollars in advance. You'll get the rest when you bring Clare here."

I took the money from his outstretched hand. Why not? He could afford it and what I had to do to earn it wasn't in any way crooked. Even if he didn't shell out the rest of the money, this hundred dollars would be the easiest I had ever made.

"Will she believe me?" I asked.

Cobb thought that over and scowled. "She might suspect a trick." His fingers snapped. "I have it. Sit down at that desk and write a letter to her. Say that I fell outside of my



cabin and injured my spine. Sign the letter 'Dr. H. L. Davidson.' He's my physician."

I went to the oak desk and found paper and a pen. With the pen in my hand, I hesitated. "This will be forgery, sir."

"Nonsense. You're not imitating Dr. Davidson's handwriting."

No, but I would be signing the doctor's name. I didn't like it. Then I looked at the money still clenched in my left hand and that decided me. After all, she was his wife.

I said: "Do I write 'Dear Clare,' or 'Dear Mrs. Cobb?'"

"My dear Mrs. Cobb." I wrote as he dictated the letter. Then he told me the address which I wrote down on the back of the letter.

"You'll have to use my car, of course," he said. "It's the only way you can get to the city."

**N**ODDING, I stuck the letter into my pocket and walked over to the piano. The woman whose photo stood on the piano was a brunette who might have been thirty, but no more. Her husband was a good twenty years older. She wasn't bad looking, except that her face was too plump for my taste.

Howard Cobb came up behind me. "Don't you trust me?" he said softly.

"I want to make sure I'll give the note to the right person."

"That's what I mean," he said. His mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't. They kept studying me. "Do you think my scheme is far-fetched?"

I shrugged. "It's your money, sir. I hand her the letter, and either she comes or she doesn't."

"You understand that you are to drive her back?"

"Of course," I said. "I'd have to return your car anyway." Suddenly I frowned. "Talking about trust, aren't you trusting me too far with your expensive car? You don't know me. I might never come back with it."

"I think you will. Nine hundred dollars in cash is more than you can get for a stolen car. And you look honest." He made an impatient gesture toward the door. "You'd better go. It's getting late."

When I was in the hall, I glanced back. Howard Cobb was avidly gulping down the drink he hadn't touched before.

All the way to Coast City I was uneasy. One thousand dollars was too much for the job. Even if I didn't get more than the one hundred I had already received, it was too much. I would have considered myself overpaid for twenty bucks.

After a traffic cop gave me directions, I had no trouble finding the Cobb house. It occupied an entire block in the swellest section of town

—final proof that the Cobbs were very rich. You could expect anything from the wealthy. They didn't know the value of money. A thousand dollars meant nothing to them. Besides, Howard Cobb was probably drunker than he seemed, and he was in love with his wife. Add that up and the whole thing was reasonable.

For the first time in my life I came face to face with a butler at a door. He looked at my clothes in haughty astonishment, making me feel socially unclean.

"I have a message for Mrs. Cobb," I said quickly. "Mr. Cobb is hurt."

Gingerly he took the letter from me and was about to close the door in my face. When I told him I was to receive an answer, he reluctantly permitted me to wait in the foyer and somberly walked up a curving staircase.

In a matter of seconds a woman came flying down those stairs. Though at the moment she was wildly distraught, there was no doubt that she was the woman whose photo stood on the piano in the cabin.

"What happened to Howard?" Mrs. Cobb cried. "Did you see him?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "I was passing the cabin when a man came out and said that Mr. Cobb was injured and asked me to drive to town and take you there. He said he didn't want to leave Mr. Cobb and he couldn't move him."

"Was that Dr. Davidson?"

"That's what he said his name was."

My letter was a crumpled ball in her hand. She was taking the news very hard, and I felt like a heel. It was a dirty trick.

The butler appeared with her coat. "Shall I call the car, madam?"

She glanced at the paper ball in her hand and shook her head. "Dr. Davidson said this young man would drive me. It will take less time."

"Yes, madam." The butler looked narrowly at me. "Do you think, madam, you ought to go alone with—a stranger?"

I suppose what bothered him mostly was the stubble on my chin, though my clothes didn't help any.

"Nonsense, Willow." Mrs. Cobb's eyes were on me and at the same time had a worried, faraway look. "You can see he's a nice young man. My coat."

She dropped the paper ball on a table, got into the coat the butler held for her and went out to the coupe with me.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Nightmare

**F**OR a while Mrs. Cobb didn't say anything as we drove. She sat forward in the seat, her hands working convulsively on her knees.

There was no doubt she loved her husband. They'd be reconciled in the cabin, and Howard Cobb would be so grateful that he wouldn't hesitate to fork over the remaining nine hundred dollars. This was my lucky night.

She spoke for the first time when we were almost there. "Why didn't Dr. Davidson telephone me instead of sending you?"

"What?" I said. "Oh, the telephone." I hadn't known there was a telephone in the cabin. Why hadn't Cobb thought of that question? "Dr. Davidson said it was out of order."

She gave me a sharp, sidelong glance. "Then how did my husband call Dr. Davidson?"

"I don't know, ma'm. Maybe the doctor was there when it happened. He didn't tell me anything except to deliver this letter and drive you back."

She didn't press the matter. I suppose she was too worried over her husband to think about details. Anyway, we were practically there by then.

She slammed out of the car the moment I brought it to a stop. As she ran, I tagged after her a little distance behind. She left the front door open. I was in the hall when it struck me that it would be better if I waited outside. Howard Cobb wouldn't want an audience.

Then I saw that the living room was empty. Mrs. Cobb had already crossed to a door on the other side. Apparently Howard Cobb was waiting in one of the other rooms. I sat down to wait for my money at the desk where I had written the letter.

Doors slammed in other parts of the house. I heard feet out in the hall. Then Mrs. Cobb was back in the living room, standing just inside the doorway with her hands tightly clasped.

"There's nobody here," she said.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Did you look everywhere?"

"He's injured. Where would he be but in one of the bedrooms?"

I thought I had the answer to that. The idiot had got himself cockeyed drunk while waiting and had wandered out of the house. He'd be back, though. I was sure of that.

Her eyes were frightened as she waited for an answer. With a shock, I realized that she was afraid of me.

"Perhaps Dr. Davidson managed to get him to a hospital after all," I said.

She relaxed at that. "Then Dr. Davidson must have left a message at my house. I'll phone—"

"The phone's dead," I reminded her. "Dr. Davidson knew I was driving you here. He'll come back for you or send somebody to tell you where your husband is. I think we'd be better off waiting a little while."

"He would have left a note," she argued distractedly.

I was anxious to keep her here until Cobb returned. That was my only chance to collect all of the thousand dollars. I said: "Anyway, there's no harm waiting a couple of minutes."

"No harm?" she muttered and kept looking at me through wide, scared eyes.

To show her that I was harmless, I took up the pen, drew a sheet of paper to me and casually started to make a sketch.

WHEN I looked up again, Mrs. Cobb was pouring herself a stiff drink. She drank the stuff straight and the glass shook in her hand. Silently, I cursed Cobb. I wouldn't be able to keep her here much longer.

After a minute I felt her standing beside the desk. "Oh, you're an artist," she said indifferently. Her eyes remained distant and preoccupied.

On the paper was a rapid ink sketch of her face. "I'm not very good," I said with a dry laugh and stuck the sketch into my pocket. "It's just a hobby."

I doubt if she heard me. She had turned to a window and stood tense, listening to the voice of the ocean. There was nothing else to hear. Abruptly, with quick, agitated strides, she went out to the hall. Then I heard the thin whirring of a phone being dialed.

I felt like a criminal being caught red-handed. What was I to do now?

The hell with Howard Cobb, I thought, and went out to the hall. Mrs. Cobb was bent over the phone, whispering: "Dr. Davidson? Did you—"

"I can explain, Mrs. Cobb," I said.

Her dark eyes tilted up at me in terror. The hand-set fell from her fingers. She cowered back. It wasn't a nice feeling to have a woman mortally afraid of you.

"The phone isn't out of order," she said, in a voice so hoarse that I could hardly distinguish the words. "Dr. Davidson is home. You tricked me into coming here."

"Don't be afraid of me, please. Your husband—"

She never let me finish. In panic she darted toward the door. Weakly, I put out a hand. It was so important that she let me explain. My fingers brushed her arm. She screamed and plunged past me.

"Damn Cobb!" I said aloud. It wasn't worth a hundred dollars, or a thousand, to have any woman look at me the way she had. At the least, she would drive off in the car and leave me stranded here.

I didn't hear the car motor spring to life. I waited, and there was nothing but the relentless rumbling of the waves breaking on the shore. In her terror, she must have run wildly into the darkness, forgetting about the car. Or



maybe she was crouching somewhere out there, waiting for me to leave.

I went outside. The night was black except for the area around the lighted windows.

"Mrs. Cobb," I called. "If you'll only listen to me—"

A step sounded behind me. *She's come back*, I thought, puzzled, and started to turn.

I felt nothing. The night closed in on me and entered my brain, and then I knew nothing.

**S**LOWLY I pulled myself up into consciousness. I had been drifting in a state between sleeping and waking, and now I thought I lay in my bed at home trying to remember the bad dream I had had. It was something obscurely absurd about earning a thousand dollars in a couple of hours by luring a woman to meet her husband.

I opened my eyes, but the darkness remained. It was still night. My stomach was queasy, my limbs were stiff, and my head throbbed. I decided to get out of bed and go to the bathroom for a drink of water. That was when I learned that I couldn't move.

My limbs were weirdly rigid and numb, and there was something wrong with my tongue. My mouth was distended in a kind of frozen, silent scream, my tongue was fixed against my palate and tasted vile. And I heard the ocean.

Then I was fully awake, and truth came with a sickening rush. I wasn't at home. I was lying on a hard wooden floor, and I was bound and gagged.

It hadn't been a dream. All that business with Mr. and Mrs. Cobb had happened. Tentatively, I lifted my throbbing head. Fire stabbed the back of my skull and I sank back. That last instant of awareness outside the cabin. . . I must have been knocked out. Then I'd been dragged back into the cabin and my arms and legs had been tied and a gag shoved into my mouth and the lights turned out.

But by whom? Howard Cobb? Why would he do that to me? And what had happened to Mrs. Cobb? I hadn't heard a sound out of her after she had fled from me. Maybe she was the one who had socked me. That was as reasonable as anything else.

In frenzied revolt against the unfairness of what had been done to me, I started to struggle. That only made my head hurt more. I subsided. Whoever had tied me had done the job very well, though strangely, I couldn't feel the ropes.

My fingers were free. I stretched them, groping, and felt the material of a Turkish towel around my arms, under the ropes. Was somebody stark, raving mad? The only explanation I could find for the towel was to prevent the tight ropes from digging into my flesh.

I laughed at that notion, or tried to. One can't laugh against a gag. Why would the person who had knocked me out be so solicitous of my comfort as to see to it that the ropes didn't hurt me?

Maybe I was still dreaming. Maybe I was really home in bed at this very moment and deep in a nightmare.

It wasn't many hours before grayness appeared in front of my eyes. Dawn was breaking. I'd lost consciousness around ten o'clock last night. Unless my sense of time had become completely cockeyed, that meant I'd been out cold for several hours, at least.

In bewilderment I stared up at the ceiling. The cabin ceiling, I was sure, had been beamed and paneled. What I saw above me was the underside of a tin shed roof.

Risking the pain of movement, I lifted my head. I wasn't in the cabin. This was a small shack, completely unfurnished. Inches of grime covered the plank floors. There were two doors, one leading outside and the second to another room or perhaps a closet. The two windows were both tightly shuttered. What light and air trickled in came through cracks in the siding.

Was this an outhouse of the cabin? One thing was plain—I was still very close to the ocean. The breaking of waves on the beach made an endless rumble in my ears.

Hours later I decided that I had been left here to die. There was no reason for it. I was nobody, I had nothing valuable, I was nobody's enemy. There were no answers to questions, only facts like this. Enough air came through the cracks to keep me from suffocating, but death would come even harder than that. I would die of thirst. Already my tongue seemed to swell against the gag. And my stomach twisted with hunger. My last meal had been lunch the day before.

From then on nothing mattered but thirst and hunger. The pain of the blow subsided, but that didn't atone for lack of drink and food. Nobody would find me here. Probably nobody had looked into this shack in years.

How long before I would die? How great the agony? Please God, make it come quickly.

**I**T never grew lighter in the shack than that dismal grayness. Eventually it deepened and gave way to blackness, and it was again night. I thought that if I could sleep it would make it easier for me. I shut my eyes.

A cool breeze swept over me. Instantly I was alert. The door was open. Somebody was in the shack with me.

I could see nothing. I could hear no more than the creaking of a plank. Then somebody was breathing close to me. A hand fumbled on my body. I was pushed on my side and something hard and cold touched the back of

my hand. It was the flat side of a knife. Whoever had knocked me out and tied me up had returned to kill me.

Now that I would die quickly and cleanly, I wanted desperately to live. I tried to plead with him against the gag. I squirmed away from the cold steel.

The knife moved up along my windbreaker sleeve and then down, over the towel and through the ropes which bound my wrists. I was free, except for my legs.

I didn't dare move. My arms were too stiff, and besides, he had the knife and probably another weapon. Now he was going away from me. A plank creaked again. Softly the door closed, and the silence that was louder than the clamor of breakers was back.

Slowly, I sat up, removed the gag from my mouth and rubbed the agonizing numbness from my arms. Somebody had made me a prisoner here and somebody else had freed me. Maybe the same person. But why slug me and tie me up in the first place? And why hadn't my rescuer wanted me to see him—or perhaps her? There was no logic in a nightmare.

The rope around my ankles wasn't easy to untie. Another Turkish towel was around my legs and the knots had become imbedded in it. When at last I rose to my feet, I tottered like an infant learning to stand. I stumbled in the direction of the door.

Light glowed dully outside the shack. It couldn't have been on when my rescuer had entered because I would have seen it through the open door. Blinking, I rubbed my eyes, though the light was far from blinding. It came from the dimmed headlights of a car parked only a few feet away.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What do you want?"

Nobody answered. Now that I was outside, I could smell the ocean as well as hear it. I had a sense of being terribly alone, though my rescuer had to be nearby.

I walked around the hood of the car. The dashboard light showed me that nobody was in the coupe.

**C**OUPÉ! I stepped back, sweeping my eyes over the graceful length of the car. This was Howard Cobb's coupe. I had driven it for at least twenty miles to Coast City and back. So Cobb was the one who had freed me—or maybe Mrs. Cobb. Then why all this mumbo-jumbo about not letting me see who my rescuer was?

I got behind the wheel. The key was in the ignition lock. The motor turned over sweetly, everything was in order. It struck me that it was as if the car had been placed here at my disposal, with the lights on to show me where it was. That was absurd, of course. Cobb, or

whoever it was, had parked the car here and gone to the cabin.

I switched on the brights and weaved the car back and forth across the narrow road, so that the headlights covered the area beyond the shack. Then I turned the car and searched the other side of the road. There was no structure of any kind visible. Nothing but a stretch of endless desolation. I headed the coupe away from the ocean.

This was not the firm concrete road which led to the cabin. It was crumbling tar, broken by murderous ruts. Where was I? At the moment, though, I couldn't really care about anything but food and water.

Soon, I was sure, this outrageous caricature of a road would get me to the Coast City highway. It didn't. I reached a better road, but one that seemed fiendishly to avoid stores, houses, any sign of life. My thirst became a kind of madness, and I was back in the nightmare on a road that had no end.

Presently, I came to a tiny village with only one street, and a lunchwagon. I stumbled in. The smell of frying food made me fight nausea, and I spilled half the contents of that first glass of water over my shirt as I gulped it down. Thirty minutes later, having eaten and drunk my fill, I felt as if I had just recovered from a long illness.

Over a cigarette, I asked the counterman how I could get to Coast City. His directions puzzled me.

"Look," I said, "I'm north of the city and you're telling me to drive north."

"Brother, you're really lost," he said. "You're a good thirty miles south of Coast City."

The cigarette turned to straw in my mouth. While unconscious, I'd been transported forty miles from the cabin where I'd been knocked out, then left in the shack for twenty-four hours, then released and provided with transportation to get back. Who was stark, raving mad?

I took out my wallet to pay my check. Before closing it, I counted my money. One hundred and sixty-three dollars—what remained of the money I had left home with, and the five twenties Howard Cobb had given me. Whatever else had been done to me, my wallet certainly hadn't been lifted. Somebody hadn't been interested in money.

But something else of mine was gone. My valise hadn't been in the shack and it wasn't in the car. When I left the lunchwagon, I tried the ignition key in the coupe trunk. It worked. No valise. I didn't think that anybody who had transported me forty miles to get me away from the shack would have carelessly left my valise behind. On the other hand, why steal it? All it contained was some clothes and a few personal belongings.



## CHAPTER THREE

## The Awakening

IT was close to midnight when I reached Coast City. I not only had a car to return and a bag to get back, I was, by God, going to get an explanation. I had no taste for being pushed around, especially by rich people who thought they could buy anything for a hundred bucks.

Lights were on in the Cobb house and the butler was up. He wasn't surprised to see me. "Mr. Cobb is expecting you," he said stiffly.

Just like that. I'd been plenty sore before. Now I felt myself tremble with rage. With my hands clenched, I followed the butler into a sitting room.

Two men were in there. One was tall and slender and somewhere in his thirties. He would have been smooth-looking if not for the lines of strain around his eyes and mouth. The second was a bear of a man, looking as angry as I felt. I had never seen either of them before.

"So you came?" the younger man said tightly.

"You're damn right I came," I said. "Where's Mr. Cobb?"

"I'm Howard Cobb," he told me.

I wasn't interested in any of Howard Cobb's relatives who had the same name. I said: "I mean Clare Cobb's husband."

The younger man opened and closed his hands convulsively. His eyes were bloodshot. "Don't be wise. I'm Clare's husband. I'm the only Howard Cobb there is."

I couldn't seem to extricate myself from the nightmare.

"You can't be," I protested. "Howard Cobb is a short, thick-set man who wears glasses. And he's older."

"Cut it out," the younger man said testily. "You spoke to me twice over the phone today. The second time I told you I'd have the twenty-five thousand dollars waiting for you. You offered to come here. You were pretty cocky. The butler had seen you last night, so we knew what you looked like, but you thought your threat to kill my wife would keep me from going to the police. Well, now that you're here—"

"Just a moment," I broke in. "I don't know what you're talking about, except that I couldn't possibly have phoned you."

The bear-like man spoke for the first time. "This is getting us nowhere. You admit you have Mrs. Cobb?"

"I what?" I stared from one to the other. "Didn't Mrs. Cobb come home last night?"

"Do you mean to say you released her?" the younger man asked eagerly.

I thought I had it then. These men were

impostors. They had taken possession of this house and the butler was in on the hoax with them.

I asked the older man: "Who are you supposed to be?"

"You should know," he replied. "You sign my name to letters. I'm Dr. Davidson."

I didn't believe him. If the younger man wasn't Howard Cobb, then this one wasn't Dr. Davidson. I turned to the door.

"Wait," the younger man called. "I've the money ready. Tell me where my wife is and it's yours."

I kept going. I'd been played for a sucker once by an offer of money. This was a matter for the police.

"All right, Lieutenant Kearny," the younger man said wearily.

TWO strange men plunged into the room. One grabbed my arm and the other leveled an automatic pistol at me.

"It didn't work," the man who called himself Howard Cobb said bitterly. "Something made him suspicious."

I stared at the sour, rugged features of the man with the gun. "Lieutenant?" I said. "Are you a cop?"

"What do you think?" The lieutenant stuck out his jaw at me. "You sure played this dumb."

There could be two impostors—but four? And that wasn't counting the butler. The two detectives looked genuine.

I said tightly: "Was Mrs. Cobb really kidnapped?"

"You answer that."

"But I don't know," I said.

"Where's that butler?" Lieutenant Kearny turned his head and the butler stepped into the room. "Is this the man who drove away with Mrs. Cobb last night?"

"It certainly is." The butler's eyes flashed hatred. "I warned Mrs. Cobb, but she was considerably upset by the note and would not listen to me."

"That's true," I admitted, "but—"

The lieutenant stuck a sheet of crumpled paper in front of my face. "Did you write this?"

It was the letter I had written in the cabin, to which I had signed Dr. Davidson's name. Dully, I nodded.

"And did you phone Mr. Cobb twice this afternoon, each time demanding twenty-five thousand dollars ransom for Mrs. Cobb?"

"No, sir," I said firmly. "Even if I had wanted to do such a thing, I couldn't. I—"

The lieutenant cut me short. "Mr. Cobb, was it his voice you heard on the phone?"

Cobb scowled at me. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. The voice sounded distant, as if disguised. He was perfectly willing to come here for the

money. He said his accomplice would kill Clare if anything happened to him. He said he would be here between eleven and twelve tonight. What more do you want?" His voice went shrill. "Make him tell! Torture him! You've got to get Clare back alive!"

The fingers of the detective who held my arm tightened. On a wall there was a mirror, and for a moment I didn't recognize myself in it. The stubble on my cheeks, the wild look in my eyes, made me appear like what they thought I was—the worst kind of criminal, a kidnaper.

"Listen!" I said urgently. "The guy who said he was Howard Cobb used me as a dupe to kidnap Mrs. Cobb. Give me a chance to tell what happened."

"Go on," Lieutenant Kearny said quietly.

They listened to me in silence. I left nothing out. When I finished, their faces remained hard, merciless. They didn't believe me. I had trouble believing myself.

Dr. Davidson yanked up my right arm and pushed up the sleeve of my windbreaker and then of my shirt. His mouth went crooked as his thick fingers ran over my smooth skin. "So you say your wrists were tightly bound for many hours?"

"I forgot to tell you about the towels," I said. "There were two heavy Turkish towels, one wrapped about my arms and one about my legs, so that the ropes would leave no marks."

With a snort of disgust, Dr. Davidson threw my arm from him.

"Why not leave marks?" Lieutenant Kearny asked, as if he didn't care what I answered.

"So I could be framed, of course, by the guy who claimed to be Howard Cobb," I replied hotly. "Isn't it plain that he used me to kidnap Mrs. Cobb and then fixed it so I couldn't prove that I hadn't done it? Besides, how did I get hold of Mr. Cobb's car? It's outside now."

"What's this about my car?" Cobb said. "Both my cars are in the garage."

Of course, I thought. It wouldn't have been one of Cobb's cars. The nightmare had dissolved. Looking back, everything the man with glasses had done fitted into a pattern.

**T**HE lieutenant moved away from me and consulted in whispers with Cobb and Dr. Davidson. Even the detective who held my arm seemed to be ignoring me. I had a sense of having reached an end, of my fate having been decided. If they'd only believe me enough to look for that other man! My description wasn't enough. If I could show them—

"Listen!" I cried excitedly. "I'm pretty good at sketching. Give me paper and pencil and I'll make a drawing of the man who said he was Howard Cobb. Maybe he's a well-known criminal and you'll recognize him."

The lieutenant wasn't impressed, but he

asked the butler to fetch pencil and paper. I sat down at the table. I'm not much of an artist and ordinarily it would have been difficult for me to sketch somebody from memory, but I would never forget that face. When I was finished, I thought it was a rather good likeness.

The four men stood around the table and stared down at my sketch. Hopefully, I looked from face to face. There was no recognition anywhere.

"He's sparring for time, Lieutenant," Dr. Davidson growled. "It's obvious this man never existed."

"He did!" I felt trapped. Walls were closing in on me. "Why don't you come to the shack where I was held prisoner? You'll see the ropes that tied me. Maybe there'll be other clues."

"That's what I've been thinking," Lieutenant Kearny said quietly. "Let's go."

A third detective was behind the wheel of a black sedan. The lieutenant sat in front with him while I was in the back seat with the detective who had held my arm in the house. Now he had handcuffs linked to his wrist and mine.

His name, I learned, was Sergeant Donlin. He had a round face and pleasant, round eyes. Unlike the lieutenant, he was capable of smiling.

"Why don't you get wise, son?" he told me confidentially. "They hang kidnapers these days. Tell us where Mrs. Cobb is and you'll get off easy."

"I told you what happened."

Sergeant Donlin shook his head. "It doesn't fit. To begin with, why all that hipper-dipper to kidnap a woman? It's not so hard to snatch somebody. And why frame somebody else for it before the whole purpose of the thing—collecting the ransom—has been completed? Cobb has to be convinced that a certain person kidnaped his wife before he'll pay out money. If Cobb thinks it was you, why should he fork up to anybody else?"

He was right. All that had happened didn't add up to kidnapping—except for one thing.

"But somebody did phone Mr. Cobb and demand ransom for Mrs. Cobb's return," I pointed out.

"That's what I mean. Your story is screwy. Now why don't you confess, son?"

The car stopped. We had reached the village where I had eaten and the driver turned to me for further instructions. I leaned forward in the seat, trying to work it out. Twice we took the wrong road and had to go back when the ocean stopped us. The cops got fidgety. They seemed to suspect a trick. I knew the third road was the right one as soon as we got on it. No other could be quite that bad.



THE shack appeared in our headlights. Howard Cobb and Dr. Davidson had been following us in another car and they pulled up behind. The door of the shack was still open, the way I had left it. I started forward, but the handcuffs which attached me to Sergeant Donlin jerked me back. All three cops had flashlights. Lieutenant Kearny and the driver entered first.

The first thing I saw when I followed with Donlin was my straw bag near one wall. And there was nothing else in the shack. The ropes and towels had been removed.

My legs turned watery. Nothing had been overlooked. The walls closing in on me were all set to crush me.

"Well?" Lieutenant Kearny snapped fiercely.

Weakly, I said: "He came back. He removed the ropes and the towels. And he brought my bag. It wasn't here when I left. He—he. . ." I fought for air. "Don't you see how he's framed me?"

Nobody answered me. The lieutenant meandered across the room to that second door. He turned the knob, but the door stuck. He pulled his weight back and the door flew open.

"Here she is!" he yelled.

They all pushed forward. I tried to, also, but Sergeant Donlin held me back. I saw that it was the door to a small closet, and the converging beams of the flashlight showed me the oddly contorted body of a woman.

"Clare!" Howard Cobb cried and flung himself toward the closet.

Roughly, Dr. Davidson blocked his way. "Give me a hand with her, Lieutenant. I'm afraid we'll have to work quickly."

She wasn't wearing her coat, though I saw it in a crumpled pile in the closet. Her face was completely covered with a Turkish towel, and what I could see of her body seemed to consist of rolls of flesh, like tires of varying sizes placed together so as to form the shape of a woman.

"God!" Dr. Davidson said hoarsely. "She's been tied with wires. Wires all over her body tightened into her flesh. And she's—"

His strong fingers worked frantically to remove the towel from her face. That, too, was secured with wires. It seemed to take him forever. Then the towel was off and her face—

"No!" Howard Cobb shrieked. "Clare!"

Awkwardly, Dr. Davidson pushed his big body upright. I felt myself cringe under the look he gave me. "She's been dead for some time," he said tonelessly. "I should say, off-hand, that she suffocated—the towel, the wires, the lack of air in the closet."

That was when Howard Cobb hurled himself at me. His hands were on my throat when the cops pulled him off. They pulled him off me reluctantly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Dead Accomplish

ALL the rest of that night and most of the next day they shouted at me and nagged me and bullied me. In the late afternoon I was permitted some rest, and at once I fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion. After a few hours I was yanked out of my cell and deposited in an office where Lieutenant Kearny and the district attorney were waiting.

The D.A. was a kindly-looking man. He offered me a comfortable leather chair and held a light for a cigarette he had given me. New tactics, I thought dully, to make me confess. On the desk I saw my Army discharge paper which had been in my bag and the sketch I had made of Mrs. Cobb and the letter I had written in the cabin.

"We all make mistakes, Tucker," the D.A. said amiably. "This seems to be your first one. I have ascertained that you had an excellent record in the Army. I had a number of your home-town authorities on the phone. Some of them know you and think highly of you. If you were the criminal type, I'd slap a murder indictment on you and see that you hang. But in your case, if you meet me halfway—"

"Whoever murdered Mrs. Cobb," I broke in, "deserves to hang."

Lieutenant Kearny started angrily to his feet. The D.A. waved him silent.

"I'll tell you precisely what happened," the D.A. said to me. "You must have planned this job right after you left the Army hospital. You said you'd never been in Coast City before. I doubt that—you knew too much. You knew that the Mintons were the richest family in Coast City, and you knew of the Cobbs' summer cabin and that nobody would be using it at this time of the year."

"Minton?" I said. "Are they the ones who own the shipyards in Coast City? Everybody's heard of them. But what have they got to do with Mrs. Cobb?"

"Come now, Tucker. I'm sure you were aware that Mrs. Cobb's maiden name was Clare Minton. You planned carefully. After your discharge from the Army, you returned to Coast City, ostensibly to look for a job. On the way you stole a car. We've traced the owner, a highly respected citizen living on the route you must have taken from Trevan."

"The man with the glasses stole it," I maintained. "Then he drove along looking for a sucker. He studied me before picking me up and asked personal questions before he decided that I had the makings of a fall-guy."

The D.A. went on, as if I hadn't said anything: "The Cobb ocean-front cabin is easy to break into. You thought you were clever. You wrote the letter with paper and pen you found

there, and made a sketch of Mrs. Cobb from the photo on the piano to be sure you abducted the right woman."

"And took her to the cabin where the butler knew we were going," I said dryly.

"For a short while, yes. She would have become suspicious if you had driven her anywhere else, and you couldn't afford a row on the highway or any road on which cars passed. The cabin was isolated. There you could render her helpless without fear of interruption. You took your time when you reached the cabin, but when Mrs. Cobb saw that nobody else was there, she started to phone Dr. Davidson to check up on the letter. You pulled her away from the phone, tied her with the wire, gagged her with the towel, and transported her to the shack."

I OPENED my mouth to interrupt again, but I was too tired, too overwhelmed with a sense of futility.

"I doubt if you intended to kill Mrs. Cobb," the D.A.'s voice purred on. "There would have been easier and less brutal ways. She died because you're not a criminal. Everything you did smacks of the amateur. A professional would have known that she could not survive the towel and the wires and the airless closet. A professional wouldn't have been so confident that he had Howard Cobb so scared into helplessness that the ransom could be boldly collected at the house."

Bitterly, I laughed. "Everything that doesn't make sense you explain by saying that I'm young and stupid and an amateur. Why would I take the police to the shack to show them the body of Mrs. Cobb?"

The D.A. frowned, but Lieutenant Kearny had the answer to that one. "You figured the jig was up when Mr. Cobb handed you over to the police. You tried to get out from under. You had a cock-and-bull story prepared. You figured if you showed us Mrs. Cobb, we'd believe you."

"In that case Mrs. Cobb would have accused me of having kidnaped her." I pointed out.

"Only she wasn't in a position to accuse anybody." The lieutenant turned his sour face to the D.A. "That's one thing I disagree with you about. He deliberately murdered Mrs. Cobb."

It was plain that the D.A. thought so, too, but he was trying to give me enough rope to hang myself—literally. "Let's assume it was an accident," he purred. "This is your one chance, Tucker." His manner was urgently ingratiating. "It was an accident, wasn't it?"

I leaned against the back of the chair and closed my eyes. All of me, including my throat, was so tired that I had to push my voice out. "It was murder," I said. "I know enough law

to know that however she died the kidnaper is legally guilty of murder."

Lieutenant Kearny pounced. "And you admit you kidnaped her. You wrote that letter. You called for her."

That was it. Whichever way you looked at it, I had tricked her into coming to the cabin, I had brought her to her death. I hadn't known what I was doing, but I had done it.

The door opened. A voice said excitedly: "I think I located the accomplice."

I opened my eyes and there was Sergeant Donlin with my sketch of the guilty man in his hand.

"Ah!" The D.A. rocked gently in his chair. "I considered the probability that there was somebody in this with Tucker. The sketch Tucker voluntarily made for us bears the stamp of the amateur criminal, the attempt to immediately shunt off the guilt on his accomplice."

"I've been showing this drawing around," Donlin said. "There's a bartender on the east side who says the guy comes to his joint for drinks. Then a stoolie knew him. The guy's name is Augie Brill. He's new in Coast City, but the stoolie knew him in Chicago where Augie Brill was an all-around bad guy. My idea is Brill is hiding out from the Chicago cops. We'll check."

The sergeant's words were like a cold shower reviving me. I sat up. "Let me get my hands on him. I'll make him tell me the truth. Where is he?"

"We located his place," Donlin said, speaking to the lieutenant. "Brill lives over a grocery store on the east side. His door was locked when we got there. I've got men posted. They'll pick him up when he comes home."

"If he comes home," the lieutenant growled. "Maybe he took a powder. Maybe he's up there asleep. Why didn't you go in?"

"Well, I figured—"

"I'll do the figuring." Lieutenant Kearny strode to the door and turned. "Bring Tucker along. I like confronting criminals with each other. Sometimes it produces interesting results."

Donlin snapped handcuffs on my wrist and on his. The D.A. stood up and wished the detectives good luck. By good luck he wasn't thinking of the same thing I was. He was after a closed case—I was after my life.

WE drove to a shabby part of the city near the shipyards. The moldering, wooden building consisted of a small grocery store and a single story above it. From the car I could see a dim light in one of the two windows over the store.

A man in overalls and cap came over to our car. He was obviously a detective.

"So he came home?" Lieutenant Kearny



said, gesturing toward the lighted window. "That's a funny thing. Nobody came or went. That light's been on all day, but it's so far back that I didn't see it till it got dark. Guess he left last night and forgot to put the light out."

"Maybe," the lieutenant snapped. "We'll see."

I don't know where the other detectives came from, but there were five, including Kearny and Donlin, when we went up the rickety stairs. The door was locked. The lieutenant barked an order, and a beefy detective hurled himself against the door and snapped the lock.

Augie Brill was inside. His stocky body lay face down under the light of a floor lamp. His shell-rimmed glasses had fallen off and were just beyond reach of the fingers of one outstretched hand. The hilt of a carving knife protruded from his back.

"That's why the light's still on," Lieutenant Kearny muttered. "He was murdered last night." He swung toward me in cold rage. "Smart lad, aren't you? You drew that picture of Brill last night because you knew he was already dead."

I sat crushed and silent in that room while the homicide squad moved about its job. Sergeant Donlin remained linked to me by the handcuffs. He was a good guy. He kept feeding me cigarettes and didn't nag me the way Lieutenant Kearny or almost any other cop would have done.

The body of Augie Brill had been removed to the bedroom. Before that, through the open door, I had seen a suitcase sitting on the bed. It was open and half-full, as if somebody had been interrupted while packing.

After a while, the medical examiner came out wiping his hands. He told the lieutenant that Augie Brill had been dead for approximately twenty-four hours.

"That would make it ten o'clock last night," Lieutenant Kearny commented happily. He practically beamed down at me. "That's the time you claim Brill released you in the shack."

"I didn't say it was Brill. I didn't see who it was." I roused myself. This was terribly important. I looked at the medical examiner. "Can you be sure of the exact time of death, sir? I mean, it was many hours ago, and I understand that the longer the interval since death the harder it is to tell."

"I said *approximately* twenty-four hours," the M.E. pointed out.

"Could it be less?" I persisted. "Could Brill have been murdered, say, twenty hours ago?"

The lieutenant watched me narrowly, but he didn't try to stop my questions. At my side, Sergeant Donlin smiled.

"Certainly," the M.E. said. "Twenty hours

ago or twenty-eight hours ago. The window was open and the room temperature varied. Even after the post-mortem, I doubt if I'll be able to be more definite."

"Good enough, Doc," Lieutenant Kearny snapped. "Still trying to be wise, Tucker? If it could be shown that Augie Brill was murdered after midnight, that would let you out because that was when we nabbed you. It can't be shown. Anyway, it didn't happen that way. Before going to the Cobb house for the ransom, you stopped off here to stick a knife in Brill. He was packing his bag as if he intended to leave as soon as he got his share. But you wanted the whole twenty-five grand for yourself, so you liquidated him."

Angry, desperate words poured from my mouth, but Lieutenant Kearny wasn't interested. He had his case. "Take him away, Donlin," he ordered, and turned from me. I felt the steel cuff tug gently at my wrist as the sergeant rose to his feet.

Our shoulders touching, Sergeant Donlin and I walked down those dim, narrow stairs. They wouldn't listen to me, wouldn't believe me. I was being taken to my death. Rage completely possessed me. I swung my free fist at Donlin's jaw.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Trap

THE sergeant bounced back from the banister and put the heel of his hand hard against my chest. I tried to hit him again, but he jerked the handcuffs and got me off balance. I tottered on the edge of a step.

"Don't be a sap," he said harshly. "I can bring a dozen cops here in no time by yelling. Or I can get out my gun."

I sagged against the wall. "I'm sorry," I murmured. I had nothing against him personally. He was the best of the lot.

"That's better," Donlin said.

We continued down the stairs. A police sedan waited at the curb. The driver leaned against the mudguard. "Take a walk around the block, Shapiro," Donlin told him, and then we got into the back seat.

Dully, I wondered what the sergeant was up to now. More fatherly advice, probably, aimed to get me to confess so that the road would be cleared to the gallows. The hell with him! They'd hang me, but not with my help.

Donlin rubbed his jaw and looked sideways at me in the dimness of the parked car. "You're mighty sore, son, aren't you?"

"I said I was sorry," I replied testily. "If I had to hit somebody, why wasn't it Kearny?"

He grinned at that and handed me another smoke. After we both had lit our cigarettes, he said musingly: "You know, Tucker, I have

a boy just about your age. He's in the Navy. Petty officer. He's a good boy. Clean-cut, like you. Eyes like yours—decent, honest."

"Stop the oil," I said bitterly. "You think I'm a kidnaper and a murderer."

"Do I?" He flicked ash from his cigarette. "Get something straight, son. Mrs. Cobb came from important people in this town. The D.A. has to wrap up her killer quick. Good politics. Lieutenant Kearny is in line for a captaincy. It won't hurt him any if he closes this case successfully. Me, I've been on the force nineteen years. I'll never be more than a sergeant. My eyes aren't clouded by ambition."

I stared at him. "You mean you don't think I did it?"

He didn't answer that directly. "I saw the reports the D.A. got on you by phone. You have a fine record in the Army and in civilian life. Criminals don't just happen overnight—not the kind that plan a hellish crime like this in advance. I think I can judge character. And you're not stupid—you're a bright lad. If you were kidnaping Mrs. Cobb, you wouldn't show your face to the butler. Not even a halfwit would come openly to the house to collect the ransom. Too many other things besides, such as the way Mrs. Cobb was tied."

"That was deliberate murder," I said.

"Uh-huh. Not kidnaping—murder! Which makes sense in only one way."

"Don't you think I know that?" I said. Through the car window I saw the driver returning to the car. "If Mrs. Cobb was a Minton, she must have been pretty rich in her own right. So what? Everything you police have points my way and nothing any other way."

"Not if it wasn't kidnaping," Donlin said.

The driver poked his head in the window. "O.K. now, Sarge?"

"O.K., Shapiro."

AS we drove, Sergeant Donlin had no more to say. Actually, he hadn't committed himself to anything. Maybe he would be able to do something, but I couldn't see what. The thing had been too carefully planned, and I was on my way back to jail.

Suddenly I sat up. The neighborhood was familiar. I had been here twice before. The car swung up the Cobb driveway.

"We'll be quite a while," Donlin told the driver as we got out.

We went up the flagstone walk to the house. At the foot of the porch-steps Donlin stopped and unlocked the handcuffs.

"What will happen to you if I escape?" I said.

Shrugging, he dropped the handcuffs into his pocket. "I'll be broken, maybe. But you won't try, son. Not if I put you on your honor."

"No," I said, "I won't."

We went up to the door. As he rang the bell, he looked at me with a kindly smile. "It's a long chance, son. I can't promise anything."

"I don't understand," I said. "What—"

The door opened. The butler looked surprised to see me there. He said that Mr. Cobb was in the library.

Howard Cobb and Dr. Davidson were drinking highballs and listening to the radio. They jumped up to their feet and stared at me.

"What's this?" Dr. Davidson demanded. "I thought this young man was in prison."

Sergeant Donlin moved into the room with his hat in his hands. "Have you heard the latest developments?"

Cobb nodded, not taking his eyes off me. "We heard it on the radio. It seems that Tucker actually had an accomplice, a man named Brill. He was found murdered, and Tucker murdered him."

"Did the radio say that Tucker murdered Augie Brill?" Donlin asked, in a puzzled tone. "Definitely. Besides, isn't it obvious?"

"No," Donlin said. "It's only obvious that we were intended to see it that way. The fact is, Augie Brill was seen going up to his apartment at one o'clock this morning."

I couldn't follow the sergeant. What he said wasn't true. If there had been such a witness, Lieutenant Kearny would not have assumed my guilt.

"I see," Dr. Davidson said slowly. "Tucker was in the hands of the police since midnight last night, so he couldn't have—"

"But that's impossible!" Cobb exclaimed. He glanced away and then back. "I mean, it doesn't change anything, does it? Tucker still murdered my wife."

Donlin smiled without mirth. "Do you think, Mr. Cobb, we would let Tucker walk around free like this if we thought he did?"

Cobb walked stiffly around the big library desk and dropped into the leather chair. "Stop talking in riddles, Sergeant," he said.

"There's no riddle, Mr. Cobb," Donlin turned to me. "Tell him how it was son."

I WAS completely bewildered. Where would this get me? Cobb would merely say I was lying, and that would be the end of it. But Donlin's gentle smile urged me on. Maybe he knew what he was doing.

"All along it was a crazy kidnaping," I said. "The only way the district attorney and Lieutenant Kearny could explain it as a kidnaping was by saying that I was a stupid amateur. I knew better because I was on the inside. I knew that I was the fall-guy for Mrs. Cobb's murder. But why murder her like that? It was much too complicated. I didn't really get it until a little while ago when I learned that Augie Brill had been murdered last night



—it seemed likely a few hours after midnight. In a way I was responsible for his murder because I had drawn a sketch of him.”

I paused for breath. “You’re doing fine,” Donlin encouraged me.

“I think Brill’s job was over when he tricked me into bringing Mrs. Cobb to the cabin,” I continued. “Murder itself could be handled by the man who had hired him. I might describe him, but descriptions at best are vague. Brill was about to leave town, not hurrying much because he believed himself safe. Then the man who had hired Brill saw me make a sketch of Brill, a rather accurate one, if I do say so, and Brill became a menace to him. Since Brill was a criminal, his photo would be on record. He’d be identified, captured. And to save his own neck, Brill would accuse the real murderer.”

Dr. Davidson scowled at me. “Only Cobb and I, besides the policemen, saw you make that sketch.”

“That’s right, sir,” I said. “You or Mr. Cobb. I learned something else—that Mrs. Cobb was the one who had the money in the family. I’m pretty sure Mr. Cobb hadn’t a cent of his own.”

Donlin said: “You’re dead right, son. Not a red cent.”

At the desk, Howard Cobb cupped his chin in his hands. He said nothing, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

“Probably Mr. Cobb is quite a man with the ladies,” I went on. “He’s quite handsome. Isn’t that right, Dr. Davidson?”

The doctor stood with his hands clasped behind his back and looked at the floor. His silence was answer enough.

“That’s it, then,” I said. “It couldn’t be any other way. If it wasn’t kidnaping, it had to be murder—and who but Mr. Cobb would murder her in that way and get a sucker like me to take the rap? If Mrs. Cobb were found murdered, he’d at once be suspected. Don’t you see, nobody but Mr. Cobb would murder his wife that way, and Mr. Cobb couldn’t murder his wife any other way and hope to get away with it.”

I had finished, but what had I accomplished? Cobb sat back in his chair and laughed.

“Sergeant, I’m surprised that you should annoy me with such nonsense,” he said. “I shall certainly make a vigorous complaint to your superiors.”

Donlin shifted his hat over one hand. “Would I come here if I didn’t have evidence? A man was seen going up to Brill’s place after Brill went up. You’re pretty well known in Coast City, Mr. Cobb. You were recognized.”

**T**HOUGH Cobb didn’t move, he gave an impression of jumping inside his skin. That was another of the sergeant’s lies, but it was

so close to the truth that Cobb couldn’t know it wasn’t true.

“I was with you and the other policemen most of last night,” Cobb protested.

“Till two o’clock. It was after two when you were seen going up to Brill’s place. Then there are the fingerprints.”

The third lie, but again it could have happened. I saw now what Donlin was doing. It was an old police trick. A murderer’s nerves start to fray the instant he begins to contemplate the crime.

A wild look came into Cobb’s eyes. “But I—” he started, and caught himself.

“You mean you were careful?” Donlin said. “But you can’t be careful enough when you murder somebody. Take the wire you used to tie up your wife. Thin stuff, you thought, but it’s thick for wire. Police science does wonderful things, Mr. Cobb. A wire will hold fingerprints—tiny bits of prints, but lots of them and they can be put together. Remember last year when we got everybody in town to file their fingerprints as identification in case Coast City was bombed? Yours, too, Mr. Cobb, and they match the prints on the wire.”

Police third-degree consists chiefly of bluff combined with what is known, and Donlin was giving it to Cobb right here in his own home. Cobb seemed to shrivel behind his desk.

“But I—I was right there when we found Clare. I touched the wire.”

“Dr. Davidson pushed you away before you could reach the body and you were never near it again,” Donlin pointed out. “Right, Doc?”

Dr. Davidson nodded heavily. “Lieutenant Kearny undid those wires. There’s only one way Cobb’s prints could have got on them, and that was before we arrived.” He turned to Cobb. “If ever a man deserved to hang, it’s you.”

I think it was that last sentence that did it. Cobb pulled open a desk drawer, and leaped to his feet with a small revolver in his hand.

“I’m getting out of here!” he croaked. Sweat glistened on his brow, his tongue flicked over his lips. “I’ll shoot if anybody moves.” And he started to back toward a window.

There was no sound then. I looked at Donlin. His hat dropped from his right hand, and his fist held an automatic. Calmly, expertly, he put a bullet into Cobb’s gun hand.

Cobb slumped to the floor and sat there, whimpering like a hurt kitten.

Donlin swept up the revolver and stepped back. “Better fix him up, Doc, so we can get him to jail. Sorry I had to do it this way, but I knew he had a gun permit and I hoped he’d pull the gun. That’s as good as a confession.”

I stepped to Donlin’s side and touched his arm. “Thanks, Sergeant.”

He grinned at me. “That’s what we cops get paid for,” he said.

# PARLOR,

By

KEN LEWIS



Tom's face was passive, his eyes were closed and the handle of a .22 revolver stuck out of his mouth.

THE light in June Arnold's eyes as they met mine across the counter was flattering, to say the least. I tried to accept it as the kind of welcome any woman might give her husband's brother, but it was hard to do. For a moment, the sight of her made my heart skip every other beat, the way it used to before Tom came between us. That was one reflex I hadn't been able to recondition in the past five years.

"Hiya, Junebug," I said, making my voice lightly casual. "Hold out your hands and close your eyes and I'll give you something to make you wise."

She laughed at my variation of the game we used to play when Tom and I were the freckle-faced kids of the cop on the beat and she was the spindly-legged daughter of Old Man Gresham who ran this same cleaning shop.

She'd worn her black hair in pigtails and there had been braces on her teeth then. I'd never have recognized the girl before me from those early memories. But I didn't have to. I'd watched her grow into the tall, languorously graceful brunette who now smiled at me, her dark eyes warm and glowing.

"Cliff Arnold, what now?" she chided. "More work? Pants to press?"

"I brought some work, too," I told her, nodding toward the wrinkled bathrobe tossed across the counter. "Clean and press. . . But this is different. Go on now. You know the rules."

She laughed again and did as she was told, looking young and vibrant and little-girlish with her big eyes closed and her slender fingers teasing for the surprise.

I pulled the envelope from the parole board out of my pocket and handed it to her. I watched closely as she slipped out the onion-skin carbon copy and scanned it. But it was hard to read the emotion in those wide eyes.

"Tom. . ." she said at last, a queer, throaty catch in her voice. "He—he's coming back. . ."

I nodded. "This copy of the decision just came through," I said. "I rushed it right over. I pulled a few wires to hurry the release. He'll be home Wednesday."

She looked up at me and there was no mistaking the emotion in the dark eyes now. They were wet. "I'm so glad, Cliff," she said simply. "It's been so long. . . But now it's over—for both of us."



# BEDROOM and DEATH

*Five years in stir can do a lot to a man—can make him warped and twisted and crazy jealous, particularly if he's got a beautiful young wife and older brother waiting for him at home. It could even make him commit suicide if his suspicions were sufficiently aroused—except why should a man be jealous of his own bathrobe hanging in the closet?*

"For all three of us," I corrected, "part of it's over. But not all. Not yet. . . You'll be good to him, won't you, June?"

The dark eyes widened. "Good? Why—why, of course, Cliff."

I nodded, trying to make sure. "After all, it was you he did it for, June. I'm not saying you asked him to, or even wanted him to. But you're his weakness—his whole life. You have been, ever since he was a kid. If he hadn't wanted so desperately to take you places, buy you things, he'd never have touched a cent of money that didn't belong to him."

The black eyes lowered to the counter, veiled so I couldn't see them any more. "Yes," she said dully. "Yes, I suppose so."

"We've been bad luck for him, June, you and I," I went on. "Right from the start. We've got to try to make it up to him now."

Her eyes widened a little at that. "Make it up to him? Yes, I suppose so. But how about us, Cliff? How about what it's done to us? Me, slaving away here, working long hours, never going anywhere. Making my clothes do a second year, a third, a fourth. . . You, with Tom's record haunting you at every turn in your political fight, threatening your career. . . It hasn't been easy for you either, Cliff."

I shook my head. "I've done all right. It's given me something to fight for. Something to work, drive for. I haven't lost anything."

The black eyes came up slowly. "Nothing?" June Arnold asked softly. "Nothing, Cliff?"

I looked at her a long moment, then turned away. "Nothing," I said gruffly. I stalked out to the car waiting at the curb. The gray coupe, with *District Attorney* printed on the door.

**I** KNEW what five years in prison could do to a man. I'd seen it before, many times. But it was different when the man was my own brother. Somehow, I hadn't been quite prepared for this. . .

He walked into the warden's office, looking pale and shrunken in the cheap, ill-fitting suit they had given him. Behind their gold-rimmed glasses, his brown eyes held the sullen, inscrutable look of all caged things. There wasn't much gladness in them, much anticipa-

tion of freedom. There wasn't much of anything, that I could see then. . .

He said good-by to the warden—and "Hello, Cliff," to me. That was all. We walked out to the car in silence.

I couldn't say the things I wanted to say, the warm, cheerful, heartening things. Not yet. I waited for him to speak the first word. But he just sat there on the seat beside me, brown eyes expressionless, thin lips unmoving. And as I drove I thought about the enigma that was Tom. The enigma that only myself, and maybe June, would ever understand.

I didn't blame him for what had happened. How could I? He'd grown up in my shadow. Always in my shadow. Wearing my cut-down clothes, following me in school, never quite making the grades I did, never being quite so popular, because of the comparisons made by the people who knew us.

I was boisterous, rowdy, the captain of the team, the leader of the gang. He liked music, art, mathematics. His weak eyes kept him from doing much in sports, and, being younger, he couldn't run with my kid gang. So he drew more and more to himself, moping around the house, reading.

"Why can't you be more like Cliff?" people would say to him, and it would make me hurt all through to see the tears of anger and frustration in his eyes.

I suppose it was inevitable that we should both fall in love with June. Even as a child she was the most vital kid on the block. And by high school, she was the prettiest, too. Neither of us seemed to have much of an edge with her while we were still in school. She'd go dancing with me one night, to a show with him the next. . .

Then, a year or so after graduation, it looked as though I might be winning out. It must have driven him frantic, playing second fiddle to me with her, too. There was that fight we had, after she'd broken a date with him to go out with me one night. He thought I'd talked her into it deliberately, and though usually I didn't have much trouble handling him, this time his rage gave him added strength.

He got hold of my foot and twisted till the

tendons gave way and finally the bone itself snapped. That ankle had never been the same since. I had to keep it strapped, and that's why I couldn't get into the Army or Navy.

Soon after that I started to spend most of my nights at home studying law, and my spare cash went for courses and texts. Tom had a bank job that left his nights free and apparently gave him plenty of spending money. He spent it, too. Nothing was too good for June. . .

I'll never forget the morning he came in, eyes shining, to say she'd eloped with him. But they hadn't been living two weeks in the little house her father left her, around the corner from the cleaning shop, when the state examiners paid an unexpected visit to his bank. It all came out then—how he'd been putting part of the deposits in his own pocket, fixing the books, so he'd have more money to spend on June. I did everything I could to keep it out of court—promising to pay the money back, to be responsible for him. But it didn't do any good. The bank president was tough.

"We have to turn up an embezzler now and then, to keep the other employees in line," he'd said.

So they sent Tom up. And it had taken me five years, the last three of them as D.A., to get him paroled.

I CLEARED my throat. I couldn't stand it any longer. "June wanted to come, too, Tom," I said softly. "But, well, she couldn't get away from the shop. Help's hard to find, these days. But she'll be home when we get back, waiting for you. With your favorite things for dinner, too, or I miss my guess."

He turned those brown, sullen eyes to me then. And I saw what I'd dreaded all along. That old bitterness still rankled.

"You've been doing all right with her, haven't you, Cliff?" he said, his lips curling. "Doing all right, the five years I was away. Don't worry—I know all about it. You were all she could find to write about."

He broke off, pulled in a deep, ragged breath, started to chant quotations, burning them home like hot irons.

"The reform party's running Cliff for district attorney, Tom. I've been working so hard on his campaign. . . It was a long hard fight, but we won, Tom. The courthouse gang tried to drag you into it, like the dirty, sniveling curs they are, but their mud-slinging backfired. The voters haven't forgotten what a brilliant, inspired defense Cliff put up for you. . .

"Cliff's running for Congress again next fall, Tom. He almost made it last time, but you know how those things go. This time he will make it—I know he will! . . . He dropped by today, so worried about you. He's been seeing

the parole board members. You certainly are lucky to have a brother like Cliff fighting for you. . ."

I stared hard at the highway, trying not to listen, trying to keep my mouth shut. What could I say to make him understand? That I'd seen June only because she was his wife? That I figured he'd rather have me than some outsider look after her, if she needed it? Would he believe that?

He was talking again, the words flat, bitter, accusing. "Yeah, you've done a good job on June, Cliff. I'm surprised you didn't talk her into divorcing me while I was still in stir. But maybe that wouldn't set so good with the voters, huh? That's why you worked so hard to spring me. I guess it won't be long now."

I pulled over onto the shoulder, fingers knuckle-white on the wheel, and stopped the car. I turned, stared into his eyes. Long. Hard. "Let's get a few things straight, Tom," I said, fighting to keep my voice level. "June killed any love I might have had for her when she married you. I figured she'd just been stringing us along, trying to decide which one would be most likely to bring her what she wanted—good times, expensive times. . .

"I was wrong. June herself showed that. She married you because she loved you, Tom. She's kept on working, making a living for herself, till you could come back and take care of her. She hasn't stepped out once, and she's had plenty of chances. You know that.

"I'm not surprised at your suspecting me. I can understand that. But to think you'd doubt June, after all she's gone through for you. . . I'm ashamed of you for that!"

His eyes shifted uneasily, began to lower. His face reddened a little beneath the pallor. Neither of us said anything more till we'd reached the city limits.

Then I felt his hand gently on my shoulder, and suddenly the road ahead was kind of hard to see for a minute. We'd squabbled, tried to cut each other out, fought like wildcats sometimes. Sure! But behind it all there'd always been a bond between us.

"I'm sorry, Cliff," he said. "I've always been a heel where you're concerned. Just because I knew you'd put up with it, I guess. And a man's mind is apt to get warped and twisted back there behind those walls."

I grinned at him as I stopped the coupe in front of the little house where June was waiting. And he grinned back.

"Go on in to her, boy," I said gruffly. "For get me—everything. I'll drop by in a day or so, and we'll get you started on that new job I mentioned out at the power plant."

I felt better than I had for a long time—five years, in fact—driving back to the office alone, and remembering that look in my brother's eyes as we'd said good-bye.



## Parlor, Bedroom, and Death

I WAS still at the office, working late, when the phone rang. June's voice came over the wire, and right away I knew something was wrong. Something bad. In all the years I'd known her I'd never once heard her cry. But she was crying now, sobbing so hard I could barely make out the words.

"Cliff? Oh, thank God! You've got to come over here, Cliff. Right away. I don't know what to do. It's—there's been an accident. . ."

"Tom?" I said sharply. "Tom all right?"

The line was silent for a long time. Then the words, muffled, hardly audible: "Oh, Cliff, he—he's dead."

Numbly, I dropped the receiver. Mechanically, I must have left the office and climbed into my car. I was already pulling up in front of the house before I realized I'd moved at all.

The front door was ajar, and somehow I moved through it into the small living room. I could hear June's sobs, low, half-choked, from the next room, the bedroom. I found her there, still huddled on the chair beside the telephone. And I found Tom—what was left of him. His feet were still on the floor, where he'd put them when he sat down on the bed's edge. But the rest of him had fallen back, sprawling across the coverlet.

His face was turned toward me, passive, eyes closed. And the pearl handle of a .22 revolver stuck out of his mouth. His teeth were still clenched on the barrel, tight, even in death. . . The linen coverlet beneath his head had been white, once. Now it was red. Pooled and spattered with red. The top of the bedspread had been turned back, as though he had wanted to get at something beneath it.

He'd taken off his glasses first. They always do. They were folded neatly, beside a still-warm pan of fudge, on top of the dresser.

My eyes moved back to the body, and blind, unreasoning fury gripped me. I whirled on June. Her eyes, too, were closed. She just sat there on the chair, swaying a little.

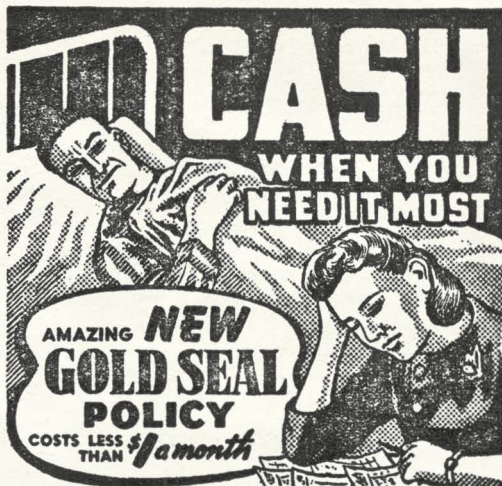
"Why?" I lashed at her. "Why should he do this? Tonight, of all times? Here, of all places?"

She shuddered. She opened her eyes, and they were no longer warm and glowing. They were old. Dry. Glazed with shock.

"I don't know," she moaned. "Unless—" Her eyes turned mechanically to the open door of a closet across the room.

I saw it, then. The bathrobe. The bathrobe I'd left at the shop, to be cleaned and pressed.

"I brought it home, Cliff," she said woodenly. "I brought it home with some other work that needed mending. I was going to sew up that rip in the shoulder. I don't have time to do it all at the shop, Cliff, with customers to be waited on every minute. I never dreamed—"



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**Ken Lewis**

"Oh, Cliff, you know how crazy jealous he always was! He must have found it there, and—and misunderstood. We were just coming in to go to bed. Then I remembered the fudge I'd made—peanut butter fudge, his favorite kind. I went out to the kitchen to get it, and then I heard the shot. I ran back—and found him. He knew about the little gun I kept under my pillow, all alone in the house so many nights. . . What—what can we do, Cliff?"

I stared at her, still half crazy with grief and shock. "There's only one thing we can do," I said, "and that won't bring Tom back."

I reached across her quivering shoulders and dialed headquarters.

LIKE most of the boys on the force, Lieutenant Jim Lowry was a personal friend of mine. He looked at the body, shook his graying head and there was genuine sympathy in his gruff old voice.

"That's the way it goes sometimes, Cliff. It's tough, but there it is. Five years in stir can do awful things to a man. Especially a sensitive kid like Tom. It's a terrific jolt when they finally have to face life outside again. They get to brooding over the two strikes already against 'em, and unless they're pretty tough—well—things like this happen."

I nodded numbly. June told her story, leaving out the bathrobe, and then Lowry stalked to the door and let in the mob of reporters.

"If any of you buzzards from the opposition sheets got ideas of trying to make a murder out of this, forget it!" he warned them bluntly. "There's the glasses, folded up nice and neat. There's the eyes, closed before death, Doc says. And there's the gun jammed so tight in his teeth we'll have to pry it out."

"There ain't a mark or sign of violence on the body or in the room. And if you think a man's gonna take a loaded gun between his teeth without a fight—unless he puts it there himself—you're crazy."

"That's the way my report goes in. Just the facts. And if you try to make anything more out of it for political reasons, you get slapped with a nice hot criminal libel rap. Got that?"

It rained all day Friday, the day of the funeral. Besides Lowry and the minister, June and I were the only ones at the graveside. She asked me in for a drink afterwards, and I slumped down on her living room sofa.

I didn't feel like drinking. My memory kept repeating the details of the night Tom died, like a record playing over and over. . .

June brought her third drink over and sat down beside me. She let an arm drop across my shoulders, let her fingers play with the damp hair that had fallen across my forehead.

"Poor Cliff," she said softly. "It's worse for



## Parlor, Bedroom, and Death

you than it is for Tom, isn't it? You've got to snap out of it, Cliff—got to stop thinking about it. It was bound to happen, sooner or later. . . Tom was weak, Cliff. He was always weak. Even you must have realized that. He could never really have learned to face life again.

I nodded dully, only half listening. Her hair was cool and soft against my shoulder.

"Anyway, I'm glad," she said suddenly. "Glad it's all over, since it had to happen sometime, anyway. We mustn't let it ruin our lives, too, Cliff—"

I turned and looked at her, then. At the long, beautiful lines of her body. The soft curve of her lips. The hot glow of her eyes. And it was as though I were seeing her for the first time.

"Our lives?" I echoed numbly.

She nodded. Her lips parted a little, and the pressure of her arm was suddenly warm against my shoulders. "You know, Cliff," she murmured. "You must know. Surely a man knows when a woman loves him—has always loved him. . ."

I kept looking at her. At her dreamy eyes. "I was crazy to marry Tom," she went on. "I don't know what made me do it, only he kept begging, and you were so busy, studying. . . I guess I wanted to hurt you, for neglecting me. Then, afterwards, I couldn't leave him. I had to stick by him, wait for him, when he needed me most. That's what you wanted, then, wasn't it, Cliff?"

I nodded hazily. A crawling sickness had begun to seep into my bones, my mind. . .

**B**UT she couldn't know that. She smiled. "Now," she said, "we have ourselves to think of, Cliff. Your star is just beginning to rise. You're going to be in Congress, maybe even the governor's chair. And I want to help you, Cliff. You've got to let me help you."

I nodded again. Things were beginning to fall into place, now. Things I hadn't understood before. A bathrobe hung in a closet. . . Glasses folded neatly on a dresser, beside a pan of fudge. . .

"Yes," I said, without expression. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, June? You'd like being the wife of a congressman or a governor."

She pulled away as though I had struck her. Her eyes veiled. "Why, yes, Cliff—if the congressman or governor were you. But that's not the real reason. You don't think—"

"Yes," I said. "I think it is. The kind of reason behind everything you've ever done. Look, June, because I've stuck to my knitting, haven't played around with other women all these years, I suppose you thought I was carrying a torch for you. Secretly gnawing my heart out because I couldn't make love to you,

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## Ken Lewis

ethically, under the circumstances. But if that's why you did it—why you murdered Tom—you might just as well have saved yourself the trouble."

Her eyes widened with fear and horror and sick dismay. "Cliff!" she whispered. "What are you saying? What are you thinking?"

I shuddered a little. "I'm thinking that a man takes off his glasses for other reasons than to kill himself," I told her. "To kiss a girl, for instance. . . I'm thinking that no man's so jealous of himself that he commits suicide, just because he finds his own bathrobe hanging in his wife's closet."

Her eyes darkened bewilderedly. "His—his own. . ."

I nodded. "That was one of the things Tom left at the apartment when he moved in with you," I said. "When I found out he was coming home, I brought it to have it cleaned and ready for him when he got back.

"I knew all along that finding that bathrobe would be no reason for his committing suicide. I thought you'd just guessed wrong about it, that's all. But something kept me from setting you right. I know now what that something was—a suspicion I didn't dare admit then, even to myself."

Her face widened incredulously, went slack. "Oh, no, Cliff!" she whispered. "Your mind—This horrible, desperate brooding! Darling, you must pull yourself together. Surely you heard what Lieutenant Lowry said about the gun! No one could have put that gun in Tom's mouth except himself!"

My eyes narrowed. "No one?" I asked softly, thinking about the tray of fudge on a bedroom dresser, about a silly little game we used to play as kids. . .

"Open your mouth and close your eyes and I'll give you something to make you wise," I chanted.

She screamed at me then, high and keening and feral. She sprang from the sofa, ran into the bedroom before I could stop her. I lunged forward, caught my toe on the old-fashioned threshold, sprawled headlong.

That was all that saved me. The bullet meant for my heart went into my shoulder, instead.

But the way I fell hid that. She must have realized it was all over, then. That there was no one to help her get this second body out of her bedroom, explain it away. She must have seen that there was only one way out, at the last. . .

I heard the sound of the second shot, but I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel anything, even when I crawled over and saw the hole the bullet had made, coming out the back of her beautiful head.

**THE END**



## Mexican Slayride

(Continued from page 29)

septics and preventives that he could again speak in a steady tone.

"Look," I said, "there's one thing I still want to know. How the devil did you know I underlined those words in the dictionary?"

He gave me a moderately realistic facsimile of his old flashing grin.

"It wasn't difficult," he said. "I knew you thought Walters was guilty. I knew you were breaking your neck to have me pin the killing on him. So I was rather prepared for what I found."

"Well, what the devil *did* you find?"

"You underlined all those words which you recalled Walters had spoken that morning. As you quoted his words to me, he had said, among other things: 'I am becoming angry,' and 'pay attention to me.' But, of course he said these things in Spanish. Thus for 'becoming' and 'pay' you used the verb *poner*, which means 'to put.' For in Spanish, as you well know, we say '*Put* attention to me' and 'it *puts* me angry.' No one who doesn't know Spanish would use those idioms. If Walters had looked up the words he wanted he would have marked literal English translations."

"I get it," I said. "So that was what gave you the idea that Walters was reading from script?"

He nodded. "Also that you had fixed the dictionary to fasten guilt on Walters."

Under his bland scrutiny, I blushed. "Well," I said lamely, "I'm glad it wasn't Walters. I'm even gladder I didn't succeed in pinning it on him since he was innocent."

"Forget it," said Mariano Mercado. "You aren't very bright, Latham, but I like you. I understand you haven't much cash. How would you like to carry on as my assistant?"

I put out my hand. "It's a deal," I said.

He ignored my hand and embraced me Latin fashion, kissing me on both cheeks.

He released me and said: "How do you stand with the Army back in the States?"

"A perfect 4F," I told him. "I had a touch of pneumonia a few months back. It developed into a slight case of tuberculosis. But it's cleared up nicely now. I—"

I broke off as I observed him staring at me as if I had suddenly metamorphosed into a rattlesnake. He pointed an accusing, hysterical forefinger at me.

"Tuberculosis!" he screamed. "And you let me kiss you? *Matador! Killer! Borgia!*"

I fled the room in the face of his wrath. As I closed the door behind me I heard the tinkle of medical equipment as Mariano Mercado once again prepared to march against the bacterial hosts.

THE END



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## Mel Watt

(Continued from page 55)

On the way there, Walt Allan took me by the arm. He saw I was feeling like hell. He spoke quietly: "Tough break, Sam. You kind of liked the guy, didn't you?"

I didn't say anything. He sighed. "It just goes to show, you can't tell much about people. He's really a pretty cold-blooded guy."

I snarled: "Oh, shut up!"

Ahead of us, I noticed the lieutenant and Albert talking like pals. When we got to Nielan's room, a couple of detectives were there. Nielan asked them: "Get her?" They nodded, and Nielan said: "Book him for murder and her as an accessory." The men left.

I asked: "Who's her?"

"Irma Searle."

I got the whole story from the lieutenant—and Albert—a couple of days later.

I'll give it to you as fast as possible. I don't like telling it, seeing as how I was the prize sucker of the piece. You probably get most of it already, anyway.

Rickard was secretly tied in with the political gang. They wanted to frame Grayson. Rickard, under the name of Gorman, got himself hired by Grayson. Grayson found out something, and meant to expose it. Rickard, or Gorman, killed him. He let Florence Wilson live when he found out she had lost her memory. But he had to keep an eye on her. He fixed it for her to live with Irma Searle, who had been his woman for years. And he fixed it for her to work in his office, where he could keep an eye on her, too. She never had worked for "Gorman," of course. That was just the old razzle-dazzle, to cover up Rickard, and baffle me. It did, all right.

When Searle learned Miss Wilson had recovered her memory, she wired Rickard at once, and he returned on the first plane. She met him, gave him the apartment key, and he went and killed Miss Wilson. Then he phoned me, came up to our office, and we went out there and found Miss Wilson murdered. And Searle came in and pulled the fainting act.

It was while I was learning this part of the story that I objected: "But I phoned Miss Wilson when Rickard was right there in the office, and she answered!"

Nielan shook his head. "That was Irma Searle. She was in vaudeville years ago. A mimic. You know, imitated peoples' voices."

**M**Y ERSTWHILE partner certainly gave me the royal runaround. It was quite an act—even to hiring thugs to give me a beating to scare me off—pretending to take a beating himself, just to keep the act realistic. I thought it was peculiar his face wasn't marked up. Neither, of course, was his stomach, as I learned.



## Killer Come Back to Me

Give the devil his due, though. The whole scheme was slick and almost iron-clad. Rickard had "Gorman" hidden in the middle of so much bafflement that it seemed impossible to find him. With Miss Wilson dead, he figured the killings would never be connected with him. And he figured a bit of rough treatment would take care of me.

But Albert has a suspicious nature. He noticed little things that never occurred to me. He wondered about them. Then, with simple directness, he cut right through the tangled web. Like all complex plots, it had a simple solution.

Albert explained, a little apologetically: "I rather wondered, sir, about Miss Wilson being shot just at the time Mr. Rickard arrived back here. It might be sheer coincidence, of course. But I—er—took the liberty of calling the airport later, and discovered that the plane on which Mr. Rickard traveled arrived about an hour before he phoned you."

Later, Albert wondered about Irma Searle, too. When she arrived home, presumably from work, on the afternoon Miss Wilson was murdered, Albert checked on her. She hadn't been at the office all that day.

And later, Albert wondered about Rickard again. He explained: "I happen to know something about bodily injuries, sir. In putting Mr. Rickard in your bed, I turned him in such a way that he should have screamed with pain were his abdomen really injured. He didn't make a sound."

That clinched it for Albert. In taking away my clothes, he found the guns—mine and Rickard's. Mine has my initials on it. He took Rickard's gun down to Lieutenant Nielan, whom he had met at the murder scene.

Albert apologized: "I didn't wish to disturb you, sir, after what happened to you last night. But there was no time to lose."

Walt Allan, the old cynic, was champing at the bit with excitement. He asked Nielan: "Is this the green light?"

Nielan nodded. "This is it," he said, with grim pleasure. "At long last. Rickard and Searle sang. I've been waiting and hoping a long time for this."

Well, he got his hope. The thing exploded in the town's face, and there were numerous casualties. Several formerly well-entrenched gents went to prison, two committed suicide, and the smaller maggots slithered out of town. The populace felt victorious and righteous.

Later, I said morosely to Albert: "Albert, you be the detective and I'll be the valet."

He said: "You will have your little joke, sir."


Joke! The hell it was.

THE END

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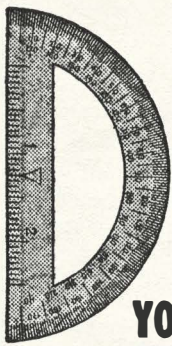
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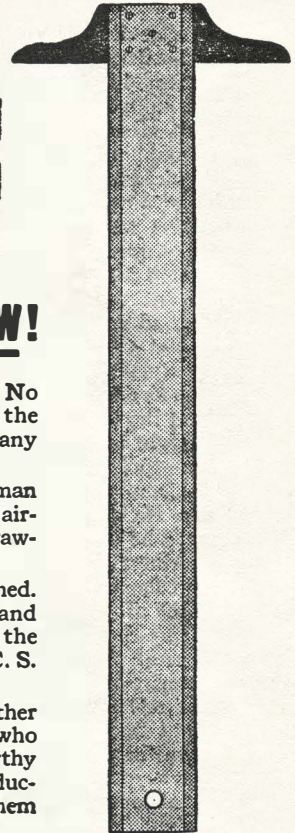
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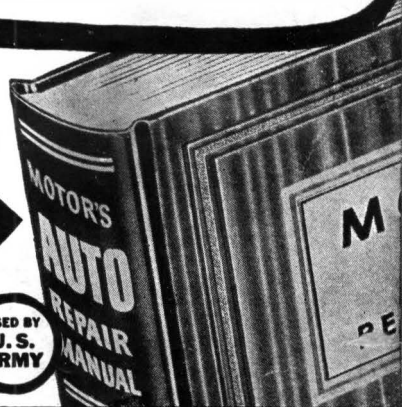
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