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by
**ROBERT
TURNER**

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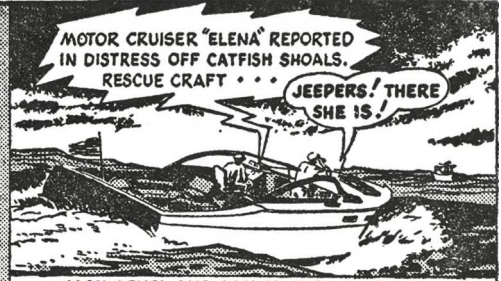
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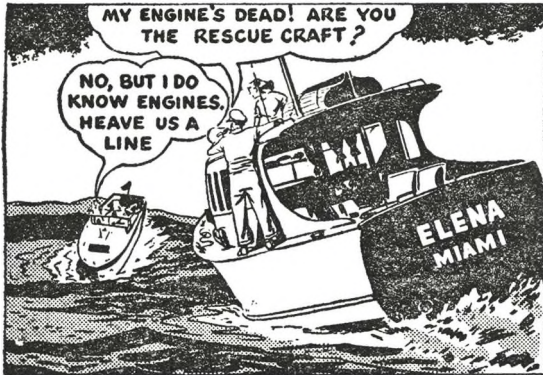
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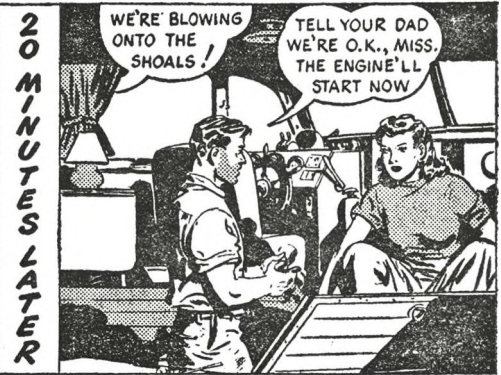
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BLACK MASK



SEPTEMBER, 1949

VOL. 33

NO. 3

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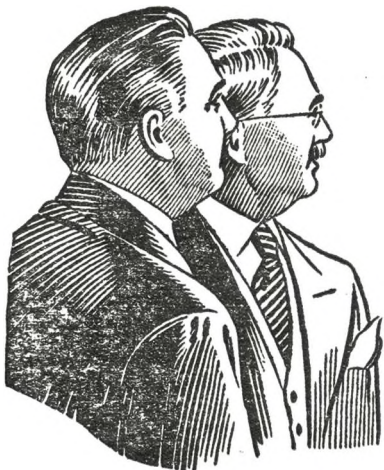
ALL STORIES NEW

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 21ST

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For A Western—"Roughshod" with Robert Sterling, Gloria Grahame and Claude Jarman, Jr. (RKO).



As if they didn't have trouble enough, a quartet of women from the dance hall at Aspen, Nevada, join up with Clay and Steve Phillips (Robert Sterling and Claude Jarman, Jr.) who are headed for California with a herd of blooded horses. To make matters worse, an ex-convict is gunning for Clay. The brothers manage to get rid of all the women except Mary (Gloria Grahame) who has taken a shine to Clay—but Clay isn't taking. That is, until after a rip-roaring gunfight during which the outlaw bites the dust. *A "western" proving that men are still men.*

• • •

For Suspense—"House of Strangers" with Edward G. Robinson, Susan Hayward and Richard Conte (20th Century-Fox).



The strangers in this house are the four Monetti brothers. The story is of Max Monetti's (Richard Conte) personal vendetta against the others for allowing him to go to prison while trying to save their father (Edward G. Robinson) from jail. It's the love of a woman (Susan Hayward) and the final realization of how futile his motives are that saves Max. In between, *this film develops plenty of chair-gripping tension.*

• • •

For Romantic Adventure—"The Great Sinners" with Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Melvyn Douglas, Walter Huston and Ethel Barrymore (MGM).



Peck's a writer, Ava's his girl, Huston's her father, Melvyn's the churl. Mix them all up in a European gambling casino around 1860 and you have a story. Pauline Ostrovsky and her father (Ava Gardner and Walter Huston) have gambling in their blood—not so writer Peck. But when the Ostrovsky chips go down—and down, Peck risks his own money to prevent Pauline from marrying the

cad, Armand De Glasse (Melvyn Douglas), for his money. Peck loses at the wheel—and loses spiritually. He finally regains mastery of both—and the girl. *A well-played tale.*

• • •

For Comedy—"Sorrowful Jones" with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (Paramount).



Damon Runyon's wonderful story of bookmakers, mobsters and "little Miss Marker" is retold here with Bob Hope in the title role. Filled with typical Hope clowning, Runyonesque characters like "Regret," "Big Steve," "Once Over Sam" and the beautiful Lucille Ball, this picture makes the best of a good story. Briefly, Sorrowful, as a miserly bookmaker, accepts a five year old girl as a marker for a bet on a fixed horse race. When the child's father is liquidated by the mob for trying to "unfix" the race, Hope takes it upon himself to protect her from the gang. In the end, the thugs are outwitted and everyone lives happily ever after. *This is an hilarious Hope vehicle for all.*

• • •

For Music—"Look for the Silver Lining" with June Haver, Ray Bolger and Gordon MacRae (Warner Brothers) Technicolor.



Perhaps all won't remember Marilyn Miller—one of the greatest musical comedy stars ever—but everybody will recognize the many tuneful and nostalgic melodies that stud this screen portrayal of her life. With June Haver as the star; Ray Bolger as Jack Donahue, one of the inspirations in her life, and Gordon MacRae playing Frank Carter, her first husband, this picture tells Marilyn's story of devotion to the stage. From her very first appearance as a child with the "Four Columbians" to her final performance in "Sally", she and all about her were a part of the theatre. Musical memories include "Who", "Sunny", "A Kiss in the Dark", "Time on My Hands", and, of course, the title piece. *A skillful blend of fact and music, solidly entertaining.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Great Dan Patch" with Dennis O'Keefe, Gail Russell and Ruth Warrick (United Artists).



The greatest pacing horse of them all was Dan Patch, and this is his story—more or less. He gets born, trained, raced on the Grand Circuit and made a champion. There's also some kind of plot involving people, but *you'll be most interested in the harness racing on which this film is based.*

HOW SAFE'S A SAFE?

By JOSEPH W. QUINN

WHATEVER man has locked man can open. The challenge behind those words has for decades motivated the endless war between the makers of safes and vaults and the slick-fingered men who never stop trying to crack them.

It has been a ruthless and costly war, with first one side and then the other gaining the upper hand. What was doubtless the opening gun was fired by Langdon Moore, of Natick, Massachusetts, who, in the mid-1800's, devised and first used the drill-and-gunpowder technique.

Safes in those days were awkward contraptions fashioned out of iron or heavy wood, bound with iron straps. Keys were often huge and ungainly and easily duplicated. As far back as 1813, a man named Perkins was working on a keyless lock, but it remained for Linus Yale, to come up with a practical tumbler lock. His invention was soon followed by that of J. H. Butterworth, of New Jersey, who developed the dial type of combination lock.

Langdon Moore, while maintaining his front of a New England farmer, and with the aid of an accomplice, began a career of looting banks.

He was followed by a trio of safe-crackers who made his work seem picayune in comparison—Jimmy Hope, Ned Lyons and Mark Shimburn.

While they used gunpowder whenever it seemed feasible to do so, their technique was of the wedge and jack-screw variety. They'd hammer a wedge between the safe's door and frame, follow it with a series of increasingly larger wedges. When the door no longer "gave" to the hammered wedges, a final, and much larger wedge, was inserted. This wedge was placed under

the head of a jack-screw—comparable to today's auto jack—that had been secured by a number of iron cables wrapped around the safe. By turning the jack-screw handle, increasingly greater pressure was exerted on the wedge, until finally the door sprang free.

Finally, the Hall and Marvin Safe Company developed a case-hardened steel that would not give under pressure, and that could not be bored by drills. The safe-crackers had at last been stymied.

But not for long. Michigan Red discovered a simple process for removing the highly explosive nitroglycerine from dynamite.

So-called nitro cups were fashioned out of cakes of soap. The cup would be affixed to the safe at the crack between door and jamb. The nitro, about a teaspoonful, was then poured into the hollow and let stand until most of it had seeped through to the safe's interior. What little remained in the cup was then touched off with a fuse.

At the turn of the century an English scientist came up with a new kind of steel that not even nitro would budge—manganese steel.

But in 1913 Oakland Tommy happened to pass through a steel mill in Pennsylvania. He watched a mill hand cut through a slab of metal with an acetylene torch. It gave Tommy the answer to manganese steel.

The best metallurgists in the country frantically sought for a new kind of steel that would resist all possible assaults of the safe-crackers, who were now busy as bees and growing rich fast. Finally, they found it in a metal called Donsteel, the formula for which still remains a heavily guarded secret.

MAN'S BEST FIEND

By **ROBERT TURNER**



"Get out of the way!"

Suspense-Packed Murder Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Crazy Canine

THE whole thing is crazy, sure, and a lot of people around here say it couldn't have happened that way. But you'd have to know Harry Wenzel and the dog, Satan. And

you'd have had to be there to believe it. . . . It isn't much of a place, Loon Lodge. A huge, rambling, rustic inn and roadhouse on a tar road, miles from anyplace. It has a sweep-around verandah and nestles in a grove of pines, mirrored from behind by a lovely lake.

The big, semi-circular bar was empty. There were never many people in the place, except during fishing season, when the lake was well worked.

Harry Wenzel, the owner, was behind the bar. We gabbed awhile and he told me about the dog somebody had just given him. He said I had to see it.

He'd built a big, chicken wire pen and the animal was pacing up and down the narrow confines, when we got there. He stopped still, when he saw us and I felt my skin go cold. I like dogs. But I didn't like this one.

He was a Great Dane, powerful and sleek-muscled, even though he was only about nine months old. But there was something wrong with his eyes. They were set too closely together and they were mean and reddish like little live coals. A nasty, warning rumble rolled from his throat as we approached. His ears flattened and his flews curled back

Sneering at the warnings of bottle-happy Irma, Harry Wenzel pitted his cunning against the animal that hated his guts—and the man who loved his wife.

Harry figured he was going to train Satan. . . .



to give a hint of the shining white fangs beneath.

"Harry," I said. "You'd better not keep him. You'd better get rid of him. That dog's no dam' good. Got a mean streak in him, heart-deep. He'll cause you a lot of trouble."

Harry Wenzel laughed. When Harry Wenzel laughed, he put everything into it. At quick glance, he didn't seem such a big man, but when you looked real close, you saw the power and the beef. He was about five-ten and went one-eighty or one-ninety. He was in his fifties, gray-templed and with a high, bony forehead. In contrast to his powerful body, his face was almost wolf-gaunt and was always an unhealthy gray color.

He wore an old pair of baggy trousers, loosely belted at the waist and an ancient striped shirt, opened at the throat. His sleeves were rolled up and he had the veiniest, most muscular forearms I ever saw. Once, I'd seen those arms lift a man up and bodily hurl him ten feet through a window.

The laughter roared from him, mouth wide, showing the empty gums in back and the gold-capped front teeth glittering in the afternoon sun. He slapped me on the back and I almost fell on my face.

"Get rid of that mutt?" he roared. "You got stones in your skull? He's worth three hundred dollars. Got more papers than you ever saw. He ain't mean. Just got spunk, a lot of guts and fight to him. I like a mutt like that. He respects me. I'm his boss. Watch."

I watched. Harry Wenzel went up to the chicken wire and grabbed it with his hands, grinning. "Here, Satan, you big, ugly scoundrel! Come over and see your master. Let's be friends, boy. Come over here!"

The dog took three long bounding leaps and hit the wire with his full hun-

dred pounds. I thought he was coming right on through it at Harry Wenzel's throat. The wire stopped him, a snarling, flashing-toothed monster. The weight of him knocked Wenzel backward and some of the dog's fangs got him across the back of the hand. Not badly. Just enough to break the skin and bring blood.

Harry Wenzel stood there, swearing and looking down at his hand. "The big stupid lug!" he said. "I'll have to get that cauterized." He smeared the blood on the back of his trousers. "I'll fix him for that," he roared. "I'll show him who's boss."

"Harry, I told you to get rid of that dog," I said.

He wheeled on me, savage-eyed, his thin mouth tight, the muscles in his lean, wolf-like jaw, showing all bunched. "Shut up!" he said. "You wait here. I'll show you. Get rid of him, hell! I'll break him if I have to kill him!"

He spun away toward the house. I didn't want to wait but I had to. He came out of the lodge wearing a knee-length winter sport coat, leather on the outside and sheepskin-lined, thick and heavy. There were thick leather gauntlets over his hands and wrists and a baseball catcher's mask on his face. He must have been expecting to have to do something like this.

He headed right to the door that opened into the pen, unhooked it and stepped inside. The dog backed away from him, at first, crouched, his back hair ruffled, growling and suspicious and just a little cautious. Harry Wenzel swore at him. "Come here, roughneck. You want to fight? I'll fight you!" He made a threatening move and the dog came at him.

The animal was lightning fast. The only thing that saved Harry Wenzel was the baseball mask and the fact that he had his chin down and his head hunched

into his neck so that the padded bottom of the mask protected his throat. I could hear the rasp of the dog's fangs against the steel front of the mask. For a moment, they were a tangle, the dog kicking, twisting and letting unearthly growls from deep in his throat.

Then the growls cut off and I saw that Harry had gotten his leather-gloved hands around the animal's throat. He straightened his powerful arms and held the beast at arm's length. He held him there for a moment. Then he hurled him the length of the pen and against the wall of the building.

The dog fell, floundered and then got to his feet again, shaking himself. Harry Wenzel went toward him and the dog circled, snarling, crouching. "What's the matter, Satan? You didn't have enough? You want more?"

The Great Dane went for him again. This time, Harry Wenzel sidestepped and swung his gloved fist in a vicious hooking blow. The animal turned over once and fell on his back. He rolled over and lay there for a moment, dazed. Then he recovered and got up and tried it again, this time, going in low for Harry Wenzel's legs. Harry booted him square in the face.

Then Harry whipped off the baseball mask and tossed it aside and stood there, glowering at the dog and waiting for him to attack again. But the animal was finished. He wasn't having any more.

HARRY backed out of the pen. The dog watched his every move, hatred in his close-set little red eyes. When he joined me outside, Harry was breathing hard and his face was shiny with sweat. He sleeved it off. "Okay, let's go in and have a drink. You think that dog'll ever bother me again?"

"Not if you never turn your back."

He laughed and we went inside. Harry's wife, Irma, was standing at the back door. She had a mocking grin on her face. She was Harry's third wife, an almost too-thin and willowy woman, about half Harry's age. She had a high-cheekboned, Oriental cast to her thin features that was fascinating. Her eyes were long and pulled up a little at the outer corners, long-lashed and sort of sneaky and cat-like and beautiful and they could make your spine crawl with a look.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she said to Harry. "Picking on that poor dumb beast?"

Harry raised his wiry gray brows, turned to me. "How do you like that? Me, picking on Satan?"

"You'd better watch out for that animal," she told him. "Some day he's liable to kill you."

He grabbed her around the waist. "What do you care, baby?" he demanded, roughly. "I got insurance. And you'd make a lovely widow." He laughed uproariously and then he cut it short and kissed her. She turned her head, giggling. Over his shoulder, she looked at me. She looked bored and cynical and her green eyes gave me a look that could have melted me.

Harry Wenzel was funny. Sometimes he didn't care what Irma did, nor how she acted. Sometimes he was jealous as a groom. Sometimes he flattened the guy Irma was flirting with and sometimes he took it out on her after the guy was gone.

I didn't want any trouble. I had my drink and went out of there and didn't think any more about it at the time. That was six months before Harry Wenzel was killed and that was when it started, I guess. That was the beginning.

It ended on a chill and rain-swept night in June. The fourteenth, to be ex-

act, the night before opening day for the bass season. Every year, on this night, Harry Wenzel closed the place up against regular trade and held a special party, on the house, for a group of customers who were fishing fans.

There was nothing philanthropic about this on Harry's part. He made a big night for these men, at the opening of the season, gave them rooms and provided an early breakfast so that they could get out shortly after sunrise and play for some of the bass in the lake behind the lodge.

It was a smart play. Later in the season, these men would come back here and spend their whole vacation at the place, fishing.

I'd been invited to the shindig, the past couple of years because I'd once done a feature story about Harry Wenzel's early ring career. He'd never gotten over that quick flash of local fame. I was looking forward to the evening, as I drove up the long, winding driveway that led to the lodge. It had never been a brawl. We'd have only a few drinks, eat a lot of sandwiches and do a lot of lying and bragging about our prowess with rod and reel. It was always very pleasant.

I worked my battered coupe next to Pete Saterlee's swank and shiny car. From inside I could hear some jazz piano that was the McCoy and somebody singing. The piano was fine and the singing was all right, though slightly whiskey-fuzzed at the edges. I was a little late and the party was evidently well under way. Then the grin froze on my face.

There was the deep and throaty barking of a dog. I rattled the knob when I found the door was locked and then knocked on the glass of the door. The barks subsided into savage growls. It meant that Satan was behind the bar with Harry tonight and that Harry Wenzel was drunk. That was the only

time he brought the Great Dane inside.

I'd heard about that but I hadn't seen it. I didn't want to see it. People who had witnessed it had been much impressed; it had made a lot of talk around that part of the country.

Harry Wenzel would bring Satan up behind the bar, leading him on a stout choke-chain around his neck. The dog would ignore anyone at the bar unless they spoke to him, then he would turn and growl and show his great white, savage teeth.

Then Harry Wenzel put on an act. He would invite comment about the brute strength and savagery of Satan. He would say the customers were crazy, why, Satan was gentle as a lamb if you knew how to handle him. He would put the dog through a series of simple tricks and end up by forcing open the animal's powerful jaws and sticking his hand full between them, for a moment, then pulling it out, unharmed.

All the time, Satan would be looking at Harry with his close-set, red and shiny eyes full of animal hate. Anyone watching, could tell the dog hated Harry Wenzel's guts and would love to sink his fangs into his master's throat.

Just to make sure nobody missed the point, Harry had a strong metal ring sunk deep into the floor behind the bar. At the end of his act, he would securely fasten the other end of the choke chain to that ring. Then he'd back off just past the length of the chain, deliberately turn his back on Satan and wait. In a few moments, without so much as a warning growl, the Great Dane would hurl himself toward Harry's back, only to be brought up short, half strangled by his own weight and the power of his leap.

That was the end of it. Harry would turn around and Satan would sprawl peacefully, for the moment, on his belly, and satisfy himself once again with merely looking his hatred at the man

who had partially tamed him. Harry would serve drinks around and bask in the awe and praise of his customers and laugh at the ones who told him he was foolhardy to play games with a murderous beast like Satan.

Looking through the glass of the door, now, I saw several people at the bar. I saw Harry Wenzel coming toward the door. He was waving his big arms and saying, "Sorry! Closed for the night. Come back tomorrow. Closed. Closed!"

"Okay, Harry," I said. "It's me, Matty."

Harry Wenzel's ugly face pressed against the glass for a moment as he peered out. Then his hand flirted with the door lock and the door swung in and open. He made a mocking bow and ushered me inside.

"What's the idea of locking me out?" I said, kidding. "You don't want me at your party, all right. I'll go."

"Matty Hoyle!" he yowled delightedly. "Thought you'd forgotten about the clambake. How's the best dam' newspaperman in these parts?"

He wasn't kidding. I work for the *Wildwood Press*, the sheet that passes for the local newspaper. But once, before I'd gotten fired, I'd worked for one of the big wire services and that made me top drawer as far as Harry Wenzel was concerned.

He grabbed me in a mock wrestling bear-hug and pulled back his head, preparatory to banging me gently against the skull with his own massive, rock-hard forehead. I twisted and lunged away from him. I wanted none of that, even in fun. I'd seen Harry Wenzel knock out a big-mouthed roisterer at the bar, one night, who'd been giving him a hard time all evening, by butting him with the forehead like that.

"I didn't want to hurt the guy," Harry had apologized as they threw water on the character. "But somebody had to

quiet him. I didn't want to hit him. I didn't want to hurt him."

That was Harry Wenzel, a gentle soul who loved his fellow man. That was what he sold, but not many people bought it. He was a fairly good guy when he was sober but there was a hoodlum streak that came out when he was drunk. Everybody was always very nice and very tender of Harry Wenzel when he was drinking.

He took my arm, his laughter subsiding and steered me toward the bar. He squeezed my arm gently and left all his fingermarks. "Door's only locked to keep out the peasants. You know that, Matty."

Harry had been born and raised right in this township but the local people were always peasants to him when he was crooked. He'd bummed around all over the world as a seaman on tramp steamers and he'd seen and done plenty. You wouldn't call him a small-town guy, even though he'd been settled in these parts again for over ten years, now!

BUT Harry had one weakness. He liked the arts, or what he liked to think of as the arts. The real big-time to him was anybody who could write and get paid for it; anybody who was connected with the stage or professional music. Every hack writer who ever had a greeting card verse published was somebody to Harry Wenzel. Every broken down bum of an ex-vaudeville trouper was a great actor. Every gin-mill piano-banger was a virtuoso. Anybody else was a peasant and Harry Wenzel would tell them so, if he was drunk.

A lot of people hated him. A lot liked him for what there was in it for them. Somehow, he had some good connections in state and county politics. Hundreds had tried to have his place closed up, from time to time, to have him thrown out of the township. Nobody had ever

succeeded in eliminating Harry Wenzel.

"You missed it, Matty," he told me, moving toward the bar. "I just gave the folks a little entertainment with Satan. You ever see the act we put on?"

I shuddered. "No, thanks. I saw the original. Remember, Harry?"

"Yeah," he said. "Listen, you know everybody here, Matty? You know all these tosspots?"

I looked along the bar. The four people at the bar all had that relaxed, smug and slightly giddy look that comes when you're on the edge of being tight. I knew them all. I waved and made greeting sounds. I straddled a stool next to Pete Saterlee, the county road commissioner and a wealthy, retired contractor.

Saterlee was the big, hearty, man-of-distinction type. Florid, always expertly barbered complexion. Clipped military gray mustache. A handsome, middle-aged man in sport jacket and slacks, oozing success and well-being.

"Pete," I said. "What's new? I mean, I have to ask that. You know how we reporters are. Not that I ever expect to get anything but double-talk from you wily politicians."

He rocked back on the stool. His fine gray brows raised. "New?" He made a sweeping gesture that included everybody at the bar. "You hear that, folks? This backwoods newsboy asks me what's new! What do you think we're stoking up so heavily for? This is a celebration, son. Tell him, Harry!"

Harry Wenzel had gone behind the bar. He was unchaining Satan from the ring in the floor. He grinned across the bar at me. "Yeah, Matty," he said. "You bumped into a real party tonight. We're celebrating. Pete Saterlee brought me news that I'm goin' to be a rich man before long, kid. The county's going to run a parkway through this section, right at the edge of my property. It's

going to hook up with Route Seventy. You know what that means, boy?"

While I was letting the news sink in, Harry ordered Gus Berkaw, his bartender, who had been sitting around at the front of the bar while Harry was putting on his exhibition with Satan, to take over and fix me a drink.

On the other side of Saterlee, Eric Fabian, leaned forward and looked around Saterlee, toward me. Eric was in his early forties but he still looked like a beach resort life guard. He had a thick mop of wavy, yellow-blond hair, and his features were cut in what was almost classic perfection.

He had made himself a small fortune as a juvenile star in the movies just before silent pictures went out. He was supposed to have invested most of it wisely and as far as anyone knew, he never did a lick of work and had no other source of income.

"I'll tell you what it means, Matty," Eric Fabian said. He had a harsh, guttural quality to his voice that had ended his movie career when sound came in. "It means Loon Lodge is going to be worth a fortune, once that new highway is in. It won't be just a backwoods ginmill and occasional flop-place for fisherman. It'll be right out front with a million cars going past its doors over weekends.

"With the right handling, a guy will be able to clean up. I got so enthusiastic about the idea, I offered Harry twenty-five grand cash, on the spot, for the place when I heard the news."

I made a whistling noise through my teeth. I was impressed. Now I knew why they weren't talking about fishing, why they were going heavy on the liquor. This wasn't going to be any ordinary, pre-opening day get-together. It was going to be rough. I almost wished I hadn't come.

The other side of Eric Fabian, Irma

Wenzel was saying something about what a damned fool her husband was, not to grab Eric's offer. After all, she said, a bird in the hand and all that and twenty-five thousand wasn't horse chestnuts. Her low, furry voice sounded a bit thick and too high pitched. I figured she was maybe four or five drinks ahead of the crowd.

The piano player was going to work again. He was knocking out a low-key, throbbing blues and his fingers weren't just educated, they had half a dozen degrees. From the back, he looked like a short, dumpy, round-shouldered little old man. But it wasn't him I was really looking at. It was the girl, standing next to the piano, watching him play.

CHAPTER TWO

Poker for Blood

A LITTLE better than average height she was wearing jodhpurs and a black, turtle neck sweater. Her hair hung long and shimmering blonde and ended up around her shoulder blades in loosely rolled scrolls of gold. She had her back to me and I couldn't see her face and something had to be done about that.

The piano player looked up and I recognized him, then. It was Willis Marlow, who had recently opened up a record and music shop in Wildwood. I'd seen him around town and heard about him, but I had never met him. Word had gotten around that up until recently, he'd played piano with just about every name band in the country.

The girl turned, then and I had never seen her before. I wondered who she was and where she'd been hiding. If somebody had kept her under lock and key, I wouldn't have been surprised. She was treasure enough to do that. She wasn't just pretty. The nose and the

mouth were a trifle on the large side and her forehead was too high and broad but on her those faults looked good. It gave a certain character to her features that mere prettiness couldn't touch.

It was the eyes that really got me, though. They were wide-set and hazel brown, deep and soft. The lashes were like the long, spiked, sticky jobs that chorus girls affect. Only these were real and they hadn't been doctored up. She gave me a wisp of a smile and took a sip of a very weak looking highball.

Marlow lifted his fingers from the keys and glanced up at me. "Hi," I said. "Don't let me interrupt. That was swell stuff. You don't know me but my name's Hoyle. Matty Hoyle. I work for the *Wildwood Press*."

He stuck out a soft white hand with long, agile looking fingers. "Pleasure," he said. "I'm Willis Marlow. Run the new music shop. Been meaning to run over to your place to see about some advertising."

"Didn't Sam Walterman get around to see you, yet? He's our huckster. Must be slipping."

"No." Marlow reached for a shot glass of whiskey set on top of the piano next to a chaser of water. He put it down neat and didn't bother with the water. I saw his eyes, then and they were a squinty, watery blue. They were red veined. There was a slight tic to one corner of his mouth.

He weaved momentarily on the piano stool and caught himself, rigidly. He was quite drunk but in the quiet way that a life-time drinker, an alcoholic, often gets. He gestured toward the girl.

"Matty, meet my daughter, Lee. Fine girl. Been away to school. Reason we're here, Harry Wenzel stopped in the shop last week for some recordings. Got to chinning and he found out I'm a fishing bug and so's Lee. He invited us up."

I saw some fishing gear on top of the

piano and ducked my head toward it. "Who owns the spinning outfit?" I said.

Lee Marlow said, "I do." She made an impatient gesture. "I wish I'd brought my regular casting rod and reel along, though. I can't get used to that one. I'll probably make a fool of myself, tomorrow. So you're Matty Hoyle. I've heard that you're the fishing champ around here."

I shrugged and shifted my feet awkwardly. Her smile was making me feel like a schoolboy. "I keep my line wet and try hard and sometimes I have some luck."

"Like landing the biggest bass and pickerel to come out of Loon Lake, on the same day. That isn't luck. That's genius."

I felt the blush rising from my collar and wondered what was the matter with me. I reached to the top of the piano and took hold of the whip-like spinning rod and reel. "This thing shouldn't bother you too much," I told her. "You'll get used to it after the first dozen casts tomorrow. I like these outfits. Got one myself."

"How about a demonstration?" she said. "Show me what can be done with one of those things by an expert."

"Here?" I said. "Tomorrow, I'll show you, maybe. Not here."

"Please," she said, softly and if she'd asked me to flap my arms and fly, I'd have done it.

I folded up a matchbook cover and tied it on the end. It was a little light and with a regular casting rod it would have been tough going, but I thought I could handle it with this outfit. An impulse to show off, like a kid riding a bicycle no-hands past his girl's house, came over me and I'm not apologizing. That's just the way it was. That's the way Lee Marlow was hitting me. I took a round, cardboard beer glass coaster from the top of the piano and scaled it

across the room. It rolled near the far wall, about twenty-five feet away.

"Okay," I said. "Here goes."

I whipped an easy side-arm cast and the nylon line unfurled from the spinning reel silently and smoothly. The matchbook cover at the end of it, dropped an inch away from the coaster on the floor.

"Wonderful!" she said. "Will I ever learn to do that? If that coaster was a bass, you'd have hit him right on the nose with the plug. You —"

She was looking past me toward the bar and a worried frown darkened her lovely eyes and made vertical lines above her short, straight nose. I turned and followed her gaze. At the bar, her father was tossing off another drink. He turned and headed back toward us.

"He sneaked away on me, while we were busy with our fishing talk," Lee said. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I've got to watch him. He doesn't know when to stop."

At the same time I saw that Harry Wenzel had come back in. There was a lot of laughter and loud talk from the bar, now. Pete Saterlee was getting a little boisterous. He'd moved around beside Irma Wenzel and had his arm around her waist. I hoped Harry wouldn't see that, or that if he did, he wouldn't be in one of his jealous moods.

Irma was laughing up into Pete's face as he talked. Eric Fabian was on the other side of her, looking bored, working his highball glass around in his fingers, making circled figures on the bar. Harry was down at the other end, talking with Gus Berkaw, the bartender.

Willis Marlow came back to the piano and I heard his daughter say, "Pops, you promised to take it easy, remember?"

"OF COURSE," old Marlow said, with tight-voiced dignity. He pulled at the flesh of his throat. "Tonsils got a little dry,

is all. And that last blues number was a little muddy going. Want to get in the spirit for something gay. This is a party, you know."

I turned away from them for a moment, embarrassed for Lee and I was just in time to see what happened at the bar. What had led up to it, wasn't too hard to guess after I'd seen Pete Saterlee coying up to Irma Wenzel.

Harry Wenzel had Pete Saterlee backed up against the bar, holding him there with his fist screwed up into the front of Pete's jacket. Saterlee said, "Get your damned dirty paws off of me, Wenzel," and put the flat of his hand into Harry's face, shoved him away. Then Harry Wenzel swung. It was a powerful, chopping right. Saterlee managed to get a hand up fast enough to partially block and deflect the blow so that it caught him just above the ear instead of flush on the jaw. Still, he went down. He rolled over, got up onto his hands and knees and shook his head.

Irma Wenzel let out a little belated scream and was leaning against Eric Fabian, hiding her face in his shoulder. Gus Berkaw came over the bar in a vaulting leap and grabbed Harry Wenzel from behind, held his arms pinioned at his sides.

"Cut it out, Harry," Gus said. "What's the matter with you? The guy didn't mean anything. Cut it out."

Harry Wenzel shook himself loose and wheeled on the bartender. For a minute I thought he was going to go after Gus, too. Then he shook himself all over, wiped a big hand down over his face. "Sorry, Gus," he said. "Thanks for straightening me out."

That didn't surprise me any. Gus Berkaw was the only man that I knew of for whom Harry Wenzel held any real respect. Gus had worked for Harry for six years, now. He lived upstairs in the inn and was quiet and a little on the

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moody side, but a good barkeep. He was a stocky, powerful shouldered man, about three inches shorter than Harry Wenzel.

There was a story that once, when Gus had first gone to work for Harry Wenzel, they'd had an argument. After the place had closed up, they had gone at it with their fists. Harry Wenzel had beaten the daylight out of Gus, but he hadn't been able to knock him out or make him quit. And Gus had floored Harry Wenzel. It was supposed to be the first and only time Harry had ever been floored. Finally, they'd both gotten so exhausted they'd had to quit fighting.

Ever since that night, the story went, Gus Berkaw had been Harry and Irma Wenzel's personal friend as well as an employee. Folks said that he could do anything with Harry and that the Wenzels would do anything for him..

Pete Saterlee got up onto his feet and brushed himself off. Harry Wenzel went over to help him and I watched them shake hands. "I'm sorry, Pete. Guess I just lost my temper. Maybe it was just a friendly kiss, I dunno. But, Irma, damn her, sometimes she—" He broke off, obviously fighting to control his temper.

He put his arm about Saterlee's shoulder. "Aw, forget it. Let's all have a drink and forget it."

Saterlee mumbled an indignant reply but it was obvious that he was going to let himself be coaxed into accepting the apology and forgetting the incident. I turned back to the Marlows to see how they'd taken the scene. Lee Marlow looked pale and nervous. "I don't like this, Pops. There's liable to be more trouble. They're all drinking too much. There won't be much fishing done in the morning, anyhow. Let's get out of here. Let's leave, Pops."

I knew how she felt. I thought may-

be I could help her out. I said, "I know what you mean. It's a good idea and if you don't mind, I'll go with you. You have a car?"

"No," she said. "We rode out with Eric Fabian. But I can call a cab from Wildwood. I —"

"Nonsense," I told her. "You can ride with me. If you don't mind a jalopy with a broken spring. I'll go tell Harry we're leaving, while you're getting your coats on."

I turned away before she could refuse. I went over to the bar and said something about a headache and I had to go. I'd see Harry on the lake tomorrow. I told him that the Marlows were going to check out too, were going to ride with me. He let out a roar like a buffalo.

"That's a hell of a thing, Matty," he said. His yellowish brown eyes showed flecks of temper. His mouth pulled into a thin, ugly line. "Running out on us just when the party's gettin' good. What's the matter, you too good for us or something?"

"It's not that, Harry," I said. "It's just —"

"Nuts!" he cut me off. "Well, you don't have to drag Will Marlow and his gal with you. I'll see that they're taken care of. We got to have some more of that piano of Will's. He's staying."

Willis Marlow and Lee joined us, then. They'd heard what Harry Wenzel had said. I looked at Willis Marlow. He drew his small, plump figure up with dignity. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wenzel. We said we're leaving and we are. You can't bully us around like—like —"

Lee Marlow put a hand on her father's arm and stopped him. "Please, Pops," she said. "Maybe we'll stay a little longer. Play another couple of songs for Mr. Wenzel, anyhow." There was fear in her voice. She hadn't gotten over the scene of violence that she'd witnessed a couple of minutes ago. She

was afraid of Harry Wenzel's deep bullying voice and his temper.

But Harry Wenzel looked at the stooped little old piano player with raised brows and an amused, surprised look. "Of course," he boomed. "Don't be silly. Stick around, kid and play us some more tunes. The evening's young. Here." He reached to the bar and brought a brimming shot glass over from it. He held it toward Marlow.

The old man stared glassily at the whiskey and licked his dry lips. He hesitated. Harry Wenzel said, "Go ahead, Will. There's plenty more where that came from. We'll all join you. We'll all have another round."

That did it. Old Willis Marlow took the drink and gulped it and smacked his lips. He turned to his daughter. "Perhaps for just a little longer," he said, apologetically, not looking at her.

"All right, Pops," she said. She looked at me. "Thanks, anyhow, Matty. Are you going to stay?"

There was something in her voice that seemed to be asking me to do that. Maybe I imagined it. Anyhow, I stayed. Finally, everybody gathered around the piano and Will Marlow thumped out all the old fashioned standby songs in a rollicking imitation of an old time player piano and everybody pitched in and sang. For awhile it was fun.

Lee Marlow stood next to me and she had a clear, strong contralto. She pretended not to notice when Harry Wenzel kept bringing drinks to the piano for her old man but she didn't like it. When he got the hiccoughs and broke out into song, himself, in a cracked voice, she turned and looked at me as if to say, well, it was too late now; he was over the hill and there was nothing more she could do.

The community sing finally broke up and Irma Wenzel began to look a little green around the gills and said she was

going to turn in. She left the barroom and went upstairs. Eric Fabian started to leave, too, but Harry Wenzel stopped him. He went behind the bar and came out with a pack of cards.

"It's too damned early to hit the sack. Anybody here feel like a little poker?"

Willis Marlow ended his piano playing on a thumping discord and stood up, swaying slightly. Between hiccoughs, he managed: "There's nothing I'd like better than a little gentlemanly game."

Lee bit at her lip and tried to catch her father's eye, but he studiously avoided her gaze. Harry Wenzel put his arm around Marlow's shoulder, "Okay, we got a good start. How about it, Eric—Pete—Matty?"

Reluctantly, Eric Fabian and Pete Saterlee agreed to sit in. I said, "I'll try a couple of hands, Harry, but if the going gets too rich for my blood, I'm dropping out."

HARRY WENZEL went over to a table, snapped on a wall lamp and ripped off a checkered table cloth. As I started to join him and the others, someone touched my arm, lightly. I turned toward Lee Marlow. Her hazel eyes were intent and pleading on mine. She said, "Could I ask you a favor? I don't want to hang around and kibitz—the only female. I'm going to go upstairs and go to bed. Would you keep an eye on Pops? Sometimes, when he's drinking, he doesn't use very good judgement. If he gets to losing too heavily, maybe you could cajole him into calling it quits?"

I took her hand and squeezed it hard. "I'll try," I said. "I'll do what I can."

They started off conservatively enough and I lasted five hands, losing each one and it cost me twelve dollars, so I quit. I took a little ragging, but not bad because everybody had an idea

what the *Wildwood Press* paid its help. I stood around and watched awhile and slowly but surely, Willis Marlow became the heavy winner. His luck was almost incredible.

With every hand that he won, he ordered a drink around for the players. He held it well, but I could tell by the sagging of his facial muscles and the way he occasionally rocked in his chair that he was getting progressively drunker. But it didn't seem to affect his judgement. He played a good tight game. Eric Fabian dropped out after losing about a hundred and fifty dollars.

Gus Berkaw, the barkeep, who had come over to watch the game, sat in his place. Eric yawned a few times and went off upstairs to bed. I followed him a few minutes later. I wasn't too worried about Willis Marlow. He was so far ahead, I didn't see how he could possibly wind up losing. Lee Marlow didn't have to worry about her Pops on that score.

The second floor of Loon Lodge was reached by a center stairwell. At the top, on a bulletin board, was tacked a slip of paper with a listing of tonight's guests and the numbers of the rooms to which they'd been assigned. There was a long hall, dimly lit by an overhead light at each end. There were doors opening off of each side of the hall. The old fashioned gas jets had never been removed but only sealed up. At one end of the hall was a door leading to the apartment where Harry and Irma Wenzel lived.

I went into my room and it was a big, high-ceilinged affair. It was furnished simply but comfortably, and was more like a bedroom in a private home than an inn room.

I put on pajamas and flopped on the bed for a nightcap smoke. I started thinking about Lee Marlow and all the people who were at Loon Lodge, tonight,

but mostly about Lee. The cigarette burned my finger and I found that I had drowsed off. Irritably, I punched the burning butt out in the bedside tray and that was the last thing I remember. . . .

The screaming awakened me. I came to, sitting bolt upright on the bed. The screaming was not high-pitched but it was tight and terror-filled and sent sharp pains through my ears. It cut off, then, suddenly, yet the sound seemed to hang in the air for seconds afterward.

Then I heard the dog and realized that that sound had been there, all the time, too, under the screaming. The dog sound was a savage, frenzied snarling that kept up for awhile and then gradually diminished. Then there was a heavy, leaden silence that hung like a smothering cloak over everything.

I forced my still sleep-drugged body up off the bed and moved toward the window. From the hall and from the rooms along it, I heard the sounds of other people moving around. The window of my room faced onto the back of the Lodge. I flung it wide and leaned out. The rain had stopped and gray fog hung among the trees and wisped in from the lake.

I looked toward Satan's pen but I couldn't see anything because of the fog. But there were sounds from down there. The back door of the lodge flung open and light washed out into the mist. Someone went out into the yard. A flashlight came on. The bright beam fought its way through the smoky fog, moved about the yard as the person wielding it, walked toward the dog's pen.

The flash beam hit the pen. At the same instant an unearthly howl rose into the air, prolonged, anguished.

The flash light found Satan in his pen. He was standing with his front paws upon something huddled on the ground. His great, handsome head was back, the ears flat and the howling poured from

his deep throat. The short, light brown hairs of his neck and head were dark and shiny with blood. It glistened on his long white fangs. The person wielding the flashlight spoke and I recognized the hoarse, guttural tones of Eric Fabian. He swore. "That damned beast has killed Harry. He finally got Harry."

The light focused on Satan and the thing huddled on the dirt floor of the pen. The dog stopped howling, stared into the light, and backed away from it, growling, his reddish eyes glittering. I got a good look at the thing on the ground, then. It *was* Harry Wenzel or it had been. He was curled on one side and his head was twisted on his neck as though it had been broken.

The sharp *clap* of a pistol shot bit through the fog-muffled silence. I saw Satan jump clean off the ground and when he came down his legs didn't hold him. He lay still for a fraction of a

second and I thought the bullet had gotten him.

But then he began to crawl along the ground toward Harry Wenzel, whimpering. He reached the dead man and, whining, began to lick Harry's hand. There was a second pistol shot and the great beast jerked spasmodically, twisted over onto his side and lay still.

Eric Fabian entered the pen and squatted down beside the dead man and the dog. He peered closely at Harry and then he looked up toward the windows that faced down on the back yard. With the fog, he couldn't see anybody, but I guess he knew we were there, looking out, watching this. He said, "He got Harry, all right. He really got him."

I turned from the window and yanked trousers and a sweater over my pajamas and went out into the hall. I almost bumped into Pete Saterlee, running

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toward the stairs. He shouted something incoherent. I saw Lee Marlow pop out of her room.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"You'd better stay in your room," I told her. "Something's happened to Harry Wenzel. It's pretty messy. You'd better stay up here for awhile."

She turned from me and darted across the hall to the opened door of another room. She reached in and flicked on the light switch, peered inside. She turned back to me. "Where's Pops?" she said. "He's not in his room. The bed hasn't been slept in."

"I don't know," I said. "If I run into him downstairs, I'll send him up."

"No," she said. "Maybe something's happened to him, too. I'm going down."

CHAPTER THREE

I.O.U. Death

THE lights were on in the big bar-room and Gus Berkaw was just going out the back door in his shirt sleeves. We followed him outside, and almost bumped into him, where he had stopped to talk to Eric Fabian. Eric was still holding the nickle-plated .32. He looked quickly at Lee Marlow and stuck out his hand in a warning gesture. "He's a mess. You'd better take her back inside, Hoyle."

"It is Mr. Wenzel, isn't it?" she said, tightly. "It—it's not my father?"

"Your father?" Eric said. "Of course not, child. It's Harry. That damned dog finally got him. I shot the dog, afterward. You'd better go back inside. It's not something you'd want to see." Suddenly, he clapped his hand to his forehead. "Irma!" he said. "We can't let her come out here and see him. Somebody's got to take care of her."

I reached and took the flashlight from his hand. "You go on inside and take

care of Irma. Take Miss Marlow with you. I want to take a look. I'll be in in a minute."

He and Berkaw started back up the steps and I told Lee, "Go ahead, please. Go on back in with them. Maybe you can help take care of Mrs. Wenzel."

"All right," she said. "If you see Pops, tell him to come in, please. I'm worried about him. Please, Matty!"

"Sure," I said. I watched her leave and then swung toward the dog pen. I found Pete Saterlee standing in the doorway of the pen, looking over the flame of his cigarette lighter at what was left of Harry Wenzel and his pet. I shot the light of the flash over them, quickly and then ran it around the pen.

"The poor fool!" Saterlee said. "He wasn't a bad guy—rough as hell—but all right. He was an idiot to mess with that dog, though."

"Yeah," I said. I remembered, dazedly, the first day I'd seen Satan and the way Harry Wenzel had whipped the animal into submission. I remembered that Irma Wenzel had made a prophecy: "*Some day that dog will kill you, Harry!*"

I said, "What in the world did he come out here to the dog for at this time of night?" I glanced at my wrist watch. It was after 4 o'clock. "And in the dark and fog on top of that. He must have been crazy."

"Or drunk as a coot," Pete Saterlee said.

The flash beam, at that moment, spotted something caught on the barbed wire that topped the pen. I walked toward it and looked at it closely. It was a piece of cloth about an inch square, blue material of some kind. I switched the light back to the corpse of Harry Wenzel, lying beside the dead dog. I saw that he was wearing a blue workshirt and that it was ripped and torn. The piece caught on that barbed wire might have come

from Harry's shirt and it might not. I left it where it was.

Pete Saterlee and I walked back to the door and went into the lodge. Eric Fabian, Lee Marlow and Irma Wenzel were sitting at the bar. Gus Berkaw was behind it, fixing the others drinks. As Pete and I walked in, he set shot glasses on the bar for us, too. I sat down and gulped the double shot that Gus poured. I needed it. The shock of this thing had fogged my mind. I couldn't seem to think.

In the back bar mirror, I watched the others. Both women had a thinly covered expression of fright in their eyes and finely etched tight lines about their mouths. Eric Fabian was poker-faced, but his hands gave him away. When he raised a drink to his mouth, he had to pause and steady his hand for a moment. Gus Berkaw kept polishing the same glass over and over.

"I can't understand what happened to Pops," Lee Marlow said, breaking a short silence. "Where could he be?"

"That's a good question," Gus Berkaw told her. "If he'd come back, maybe we could find out what made Harry go out to Satan's pen at this time of night."

"Why should old man Marlow know that?" Eric Fabian said.

"Because he was the last one to be with Harry, tonight," Gus told him. "When you quit the game, Eric, Harry and Willis Marlow and I kept playing. Then I quit and Harry and Marlow continued by themselves, bumping heads over big pots."

"Was Pops losing?" Lee asked.

"He was way ahead for awhile," Gus told her. "Then he hit a bad streak. He was going behind when I quit. Maybe he came out of it with a lucky run of cards again or maybe he didn't. Either way, neither of them could have lasted long the way the betting was going by that time."

I said, "Did anybody have sense enough to call the police? They'll want to know about this."

"I called them," Eric Fabian said. "The whole police department will be over soon."

"You mean Quimby?" Irma Wenzel said. "Quimby's the chief."

"He is *the* police department," Fabian told her with feigned dignity.

"Why is it necessary to call the police in on this?" Lee Marlow wondered.

"FOR a routine investigation," I said. "After all, there's always the possibility that what looks like an accidental death isn't that at all. They always check up on all the facts to make sure. Maybe Harry was forced into the dog's pen, made to turn his back. Maybe he was unconscious and thrown in there. Of course—"

"Don't be a jerk, Matty," Pete Saterlee stopped me. "What the hell's the idea of starting a rumor like that? Who'd want to kill Harry Wenzel and why? That's ridiculous."

There was silence for a few moments and then Irma Wenzel, holding the rim of a cocktail glass close to her lips and talking over the top of it, said, "Maybe Matty's got something there. The theory is not as ridiculous as it sounds. If somebody *did* have murder in mind, it would be an ideal way to commit it. Harry, himself, has set the stage perfectly for it ever since he first acquired that murderous beast."

Gus Berkaw moved over in front of Irma, leaned across the bar toward her. "Easy, kid," he said. "You're still suffering from shock. You don't want to get yourself all upset. You don't want to go saying things you'll be sorry for, later."

Gus, himself, looked more strained and upset than Irma did at that moment. His heavy-featured, handsome dark face was taut and too intense. His

deeply sunken brown eyes were too bright and restless. Irma, on the other hand, seemed calm and in full control of her emotions, now.

"I know what I'm saying. I'm saying that it strikes me as a little odd that Harry would go out into Satan's pen at this time of night, in the dark and the fog. Did he even have a flashlight? Did anybody see a flashlight out there?"

Nobody answered. Nobody said anything. "Okay," Irma went on. "So he *didn't* have a flashlight. Don't tell me, no matter how drunk Harry might have been, that he'd be fool enough to go out into that pen without a light of any kind. As for who would want to kill Harry—the answer is almost anyone.

"I have a reason. He was loaded with insurance. Eric Fabian, there, might do it. Eric wanted to buy the place when he heard about the new road coming through, but Harry wouldn't sell. Eric knew I would. So he eliminates Harry and—"

Eric Fabian knocked over the whiskey glass in front of him. He spun around on his stool. "Now, wait a minute, Irma," he snarled. "Are you accusing me of murder?"

She laughed brittlely. "I'm not accusing anyone. I'm just saying what could be. Pete Saterlee might even have wanted revenge on Harry for slugging him, last night. People have killed for lesser, sillier motives."

"That's fine talk," Pete said, "with a newspaper reporter sitting right here, listening. How is all this going to sound on the front page of the *Wildwood Press*?"

Before anybody had a chance to answer, the sound of a car moving into the parking space outside, was heard. Its headlights flashed through the windows and then were turned off. We all sat there silently, listening to the car door slam. Footsteps came up onto the

verandah outside and then the door burst open and a man in uniform came in.

Chief of Police Arnold Quimby was a proud and portly figure in a resplendent uniform with razor-creased trousers and plenty of gold braid on his sleeves. His badge and brass buttons were brightly polished as pushcart apples. He walked toward the bar with a brisk, military step and whipped off expensive, soft leather gloves. Chief Quimby's moon face was heavy-joweled and florid and was puffed with an expression of smug importance.

"Where's Harry?" he said. "Let's have a look at him."

Nobody said anything but Gus Berkaw moved around from behind the bar and gestured with his hand for Quimby to follow him. I trailed them outside. Dawn was just beginning to break and the fog had lifted somewhat. You could see things close to the ground quite clearly but I still had the flashlight, so I flicked it on. As we entered the dog pen, Quimby asked for the light and I passed it to him. He flashed it on the twisted figures of the dead dog and man and squatted down beside them.

"Dead all right. Who shot the dog?"

"Eric Fabian," I said. "He was the first one down here."

"What's the story on this?" Quimby turned to me.

I gave it to him quickly, neatly. When I'd finished, he pulled at his full lower lip, put on a wise and authoritative expression. "Seems clean cut enough," he said. "I've heard about that damned dog and the way Harry was always showing off with him, taking chances. I —"

He broke off, leaned forward and pulled forth a little slip of white paper that was partly protruding from the breast pocket of Harry Wenzel's shirt. He unfolded it and held the flashlight

on it. Over his shoulder, in a fine but wobbly and uneven script, I read: *I owe you \$3,300.00. Willis Marlow.*

Quimby made a whistling sound. "Brother!" he said. "What's that for?"

"**T**HEY were playing poker." Gus Berkaw told him. "It looks to me like Harry cleaned out old Marlow and then ran him along on credit. The I. O. U. was the final payoff, I imagine. Say, maybe this gives some credence to Irma's theory that Harry might have been murdered."

Chief Quimby puffed up importantly. "Murdered? How could he have been murdered? The dog killed him, didn't he?"

"Sure," Berkaw said, quietly. "But somebody could have set up the thing. Irma—Harry's wife—has an idea that somebody might have heaved Harry, dead drunk, into the pen, here, and let the mutt do the rest."

"Where is this guy, Marlow?" Quimby

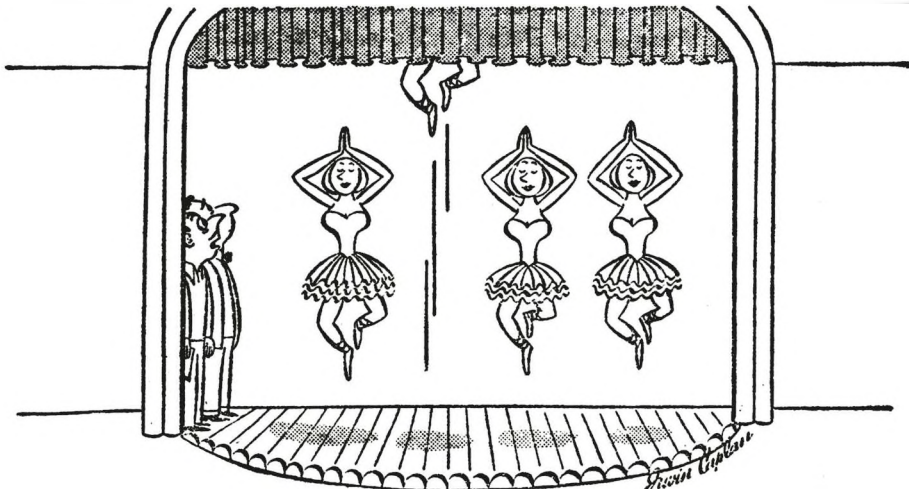
demanded. "If anything like that happened, this I. O. U. of his makes him a likely suspect."

I said, "He's not around right now. Nobody knows where he is."

"You mean he's disappeared?" Quimby blurted. "Well, that makes it look bad for him. Maybe he's run away. Maybe he got cold feet after pulling the crime and —"

"Take it easy," I stopped him. "In the first place it hasn't been established that a crime really did take place. In the second, I doubt that old Marlow's taken a powder. He was pretty well liquored up. I figure maybe he took a hike to try and walk it off or maybe he's curled up in some dark corner, sleeping it through. I imagine he'll turn up, one way or the other, pretty soon. Let's get back inside. There's nothing else out here."

As we left the pen I remembered the piece of cloth I'd seen caught onto the piece of barbed wire. I directed Quim-



"We'd better tell Pavloma to take it a little easier with her Wheaties!"

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by's attention to it. He studied it, closely and then hustled back into the pen and looked at the torn and bloody shirt Harry Wenzel was wearing.

"Looks like a piece of Harry's shirt to me," Quimby said. "How the hell would it get caught in that top strand of barbed wire, so far from the gate, unless it got caught when Harry was being heaved over the top of the fence?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't like the looks of the way this thing was shaping up. By this time I was pretty well convinced that somebody *had* tried to work out a perfect murder by letting Satan do the dirty work for him. And in spite of my protests, before, it did look bad for old man Marlow.

He'd been pretty drunk and the I. O. U. showed that he'd wound up a heavy poker loser to Harry Wenzel. He was the last person to be seen with Harry. If he was in bad financial shape, a debt of that size might make him go to any extreme to wipe it out.

I followed the others back inside the inn. Quimby and Berkaw went to the bar and joined Irma Wenzel and Pete Saterlee and Eric Fabian, there. I found Lee Marlow over by the piano.

"My spinning outfit is gone, Matty. Maybe Pops went down to the lake to try it out."

"Getting a head start on the rest of us, eh?" I said. "Could be." If that was so, it meant that he didn't even know about Harry Wenzel's death. A man wouldn't calmly go off to fish in the face of a tragedy like that.

"We'd better get him, bring him back," Lee said.

"Maybe you're right." I didn't say anything about the I. O. U. that had been found or the fact that her father might be a suspect, if police officials finally decided on the verdict that Harry Wenzel's death was not accidental.

We got out of there without the oth-

ers noticing. They were too busy arguing different ways the piece of cloth might have gotten caught onto the barbed wire fence and if it meant anything. We hurried along the little path that led through a thick grove of pines, downhill toward the lake.

Loon Lake was really nothing more than a large sized, artificial pond, about fifty square acres and kidney-shaped, with a lot of little coves and inlets and a small island in the middle. The shores were thick with shrubbery and shaded by clumps of huge trees.

Even though it was daylight, now, mist still hung in shaggy wraiths over the water and in wisps along the shore. We could feel its cold, dank touch on our faces as we made our way along the shore fishing path. Every once in awhile, Lee Marlow would shout: "Hey, Pops!" But there was no answer.

Everything was still and the mist and that deadly quiet gave the whole scene a heavy, gloomy quality. Beside me, Lee Marlow held my hand tightly and I knew that she felt the same way.

We came around a turn in the path and I kicked something that was lying under a clump of shrubbery. It was Lee Marlow's rod and reel, her new spinning outfit. Part of the line had become unspun and was tangled around in the twigs and thick grass. I straightened it out and found that a bass plug had been tied on the end of the line. It was a wicked looking little lure with a realistic wriggle on a slow retrieve and the off-set hooking made it hard for the fish to get a purchase on the plug and shake it off.

"Your Pops meant business, working with one of these things," I said. I was just making conversation, trying to think what finding the rod and reel like this might mean.

Lee Marlow had hold of my arm very hard and I could feel the bite of her

fingers. "Something's happened to him, Matty. He—he wouldn't just go off and leave his gear in the bushes like this. Matty! Matty, I'm scared."

"Come on. Let's walk a little farther. We'll find him. There's probably a logical explanation for this. Try to take it easy, Lee."

Kind words. Very helpful. Matty Hoyle, the old comforter and advisor. The things I'd said didn't do either of us any good as we moved around another turn in the path and stopped cold. We found Lee's father.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sinister Key

LEE stood there, staring and screaming, a blood-thinning sound that seemed to go on and on until you didn't think you could stand it anymore and then, miraculously, it stopped. But the sudden, smothering silence that followed, seemed worse.

I caught her as she started to fall and looked over her head at the thing, swinging ever so slightly on the end of a length of rope from a tree limb just ahead of us on the path.

That it was Willis Marlow, was obvious even from the back. The plump, round-shouldered figure in the rumpled tweed suit, the unkempt, straggly gray hair at the collar in the back, saw to that. An old box-crate had been kicked over from under his feet.

I scooped Lee Marlow up into my arms and pushed off the path, through the shrubbery until I came to a small patch of grass. I set her down and began to chafe her wrists between my hands. She came around in a few moments, her eyes at first dazed and confused and then as memory returned, once again bleak and stark. She couldn't even speak at first, just stared up at

me, dumbly, while I tried to calm her.

"Lee, you'll have to get control. I know it's going to be hard but you've got to do it. I've got something to tell you about your father."

The crying came then and she buried her face against my shoulder and it was bad for a few moments but it got rid of some of the tension. When she was finished, she dabbed her eyes dry and turned toward me. "I'm all right now, I think, Matty. For awhile, anyhow. But we've got to do something. We just can't let him hang there like—like that. We—"

"Easy, Lee," I said. Her voice was starting to rise. I watched her fight for control and make it and then I said, "You'll hear it from the others, anyhow, Lee, so I might as well break it to you here. Maybe it'll be easier."

She didn't say anything. She waited for me to go on. I took a deep, ragged breath and pitched into it.

"Your father killed himself, Lee, but it's probably for the best. He—I guess he was going to have to face a murder rap, anyhow. It was beginning to show up that Harry Wenzel was killed deliberately—that somebody tossed him into Satan's pen while he was either drunk or unconscious.

"There was an I.O.U. in Harry's pocket, signed by your father, for over three thousand dollars that I imagine he lost in the poker game, last night. It looks as though your father killed Harry to get out of that debt. Then, in a fit of remorse, he came down here and took his own life."

Lee's small, firm chin hardened. A glint of anger came into her eyes. "No, Matty. No. That's all off. The whole thing is wrong. It *couldn't* be like that."

"I know it's hard to accept, but it's the only logical way to figure it. Why else would he kill himself?"

"He didn't, Matty. That's just the

point. Pops *didn't* hang himself. I know it!" She shook her head, desperately. I felt sorry for her. She was a sweet, loyal little kid and she was trying hard, but denying the facts didn't change them.

"In the first place," she went on, "if Pops killed Harry Wenzel to get that I. O. U., why did he leave it in Harry's pocket?"

I couldn't think of any answer for that.

"And how could a little old man like Pops, hoist a big lummoX like Harry Wenzel up over that high fence? You've got it all wrong, Matty. Maybe somebody did try to frame Pops, to make it look as though he murdered Harry and then took his own life, but it couldn't have been that way. Pops didn't kill himself."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"When Pops was a kid, he worked for awhile on a newspaper. He was a reporter like you. One time he was assigned to write up a penitentiary execution. They died by hanging in that state and Pops had to watch it. It got him. He was sick for a week afterward. It was so bad, that was the end of his newspaper career.

"He's told me about it many times. It gave him sort of a phobia about ropes, even. He hated to even *touch* a piece of rope. Once, he got up and walked out of a movie when they showed preparations for a hanging. If he was going to—to get rid of himself, that's the one way he *wouldn't* do it, Matty. Can you understand that?"

"Maybe," I said. "But you're going to have a tough time selling that to the police."

I helped her to her feet. She was dizzy for a moment and clung to me. Somewhere out over the mist on the lake a catbird shrieked. Stray puffs of mist swirled around us. I thought about the

things Lee Marlow had said and they began to make sense. But if she was right, then there'd been a double murder.

Chances were, the same person had killed old man Marlow. But, why? They were safe enough as it was, without doing that. If Harry's death got by as an accident, they were okay. If murder was suspected, the I. O. U. practically put it into Willis Marlow's lap. Why go to the trouble of killing him, too?

It hit me, then. "Maybe your father saw them. Maybe he saw who it was that heaved Harry Wenzel into the dog pen. They killed him to shut him up about that."

HER eyes grew very wide. "Yes," she breathed. "When he'd been drinking, Pops never went right to bed. He had a fear of lying down when he was drunk. He didn't like the way everything spun around and it sometimes made him sick. He liked to get out and get a lot of air and sometimes walk a lot. Maybe he was out back there, somewhere, when the murderer thought everybody had gone to bed and like you say, Pops saw the thing done."

"The fishing rod?" I said. "Would he have that?"

"He might," she said. "Maybe he decided to try a little night fishing. He was very anxious to try that spinning outfit, anyhow."

"But would he go through with his plans, calmly, go down to the lake to go fishing after witnessing what was obviously a murder?"

"No," she said. "But he could have become afraid. Maybe the murderer saw him, knew that he'd been a witness. Maybe Pops ran down here, trying to get away."

We pushed it around some more and the more we talked, the more convinced

I was that we had the correct answer.

"If we're right, the killer is very clever. It's going to be hard to prove anything against him. But I've got an idea how we might root him out into the open, if you're game for it."

Her lovely mouth thinned and a vein stood out along her young white throat. "I'll do anything," she said. "Anything to prove Pops was innocent, that he didn't hang himself."

"Maybe it won't work," I said. "And I might get into a lot of trouble but I'm willing to take a chance on it."

I told her this crazy idea, then. I was going to cut down Willis Marlow's corpse, carry it back to the lodge, slung over my shoulder. There was a side entrance that led upstairs. If we could get Willis Marlow up to his own room without anybody seeing us, there was a chance we could put this over.

"We'll go back to the others, then," I told Lee. "We'll tell them that we found your father, passed out and sleeping it off and that we helped him back up to his room. Only the murderer will know that we're lying. He'll worry and think maybe that we might even suspect him. He'll get nervous and jumpy and maybe make a slip of some kind that

will tip us off. That's about *all* we can hope for."

"Maybe," she said. "You keep saying 'he', Matty. What about Irma Wenzel?"

"I don't think so. It would take somebody much bigger and stronger to heave Harry over that fence."

Lee was dubious about the possible success of the idea and so was I. But there didn't seem any other alternative. We went back down onto the path. She kept her back turned to the corpse gently swinging from the tree limb.

"I—I'm afraid I can't be much help, Matty. I can't watch even. I couldn't take it. I feel sick, as it is."

My own stomach felt as though a lot of cold, creeping things were slithering around inside of it. I went over and stopped and wrapped my right arm around Willis Marlow's legs. With my left hand, I reached up and sawed through the clothesline rope with my pocket knife until I felt Marlow's dead weight fall full over my shoulder. I hefted him into a more comfortable carrying position and joined Lee. She didn't look at me. She kept a few steps ahead as we moved along the path.

We got to the side door and carried the dead man upstairs without running

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into any of the others. I took him into his own room and slung him face down on the bed. He sprawled there, arms and legs outflung, one hand dangling loosely over the edge of the bed. His face was turned toward the wall and we couldn't see the noose marks on his neck, nor the things strangulation had done to his sensitive features and his complexion.

Lee Marlow was standing in the doorway when I turned around. I saw that she was holding her spinning rod and reel in one hand. She must have automatically picked it up and brought it back with her. Her face was very pale and pin-pointed with tiny globes of perspiration on the forehead above the nose and along the soft curve of her upper lip. Her eyes were a little starey and there was a frozen setness to her features. But otherwise she seemed to have herself in control.

I took the rod and reel from her hand and she looked down at it dumbly as though she hadn't even realized she'd been carrying it. "Let's go downstairs," I said. "Let's get this over with." I hated to rush her but I wanted to go through with this while she was still emotionally numbed, before the complete realization that her father was dead really penetrated.

She would break when that happened. She wouldn't be able to keep quiet and all the others would know that her father was dead, too, not just the murderer. We would really be out in the cold, then.

I held her arm, going down the center stairway. We came out into the big barroom of Loon Lodge and in broad daylight, it was now a dull and dreary place. The rest of the party were still sitting at the bar where we had left them.

Quimby, the police chief, had removed his hat. He was bald, except for

tufts of hair above the ears and at the base of the skull. His moon face was red and he was gesturing and talking loudly. He had been taking advantage of Gus Berkaw's generosity.

Walking toward them, I said, "When do the county police get here, Arnold?"

Quimby stopped his story in mid-sentence and turned around. "Any time, now," he said. "I called him about fifteen minutes ago. Meanwhile, there's nothing much I can do."

Eric Fabian let his eyes move slowly over Lee Marlow. He ran his fingers, comb-like through his thick yellow hair. "And where have you two been all this time?"

"Did you find your father, honey?" Pete Saterlee said.

"Yeah," I said. "We found him, all right." I let it lie there for a moment and didn't say any more. I let my gaze move over the faces turned toward us. They showed curiosity, nothing more. Nobody was giving anything away. I saw though, that Irma Wenzel was drowning her sorrow, if any. She was getting into bad shape again. Her eyes were taking on a glassy stare. Her mouth was too loose at the corners. There was the beginning of a twitch in her right cheek.

"After looking all around the grounds," I said, "we came back here and went up to his room. He must have come back by himself. We found him sprawled out on the bed, sleeping it off."

"Bring him down," Quimby said. "Why don't you bring him down? I want to talk to him. The county police will bring him to and hammer at him to find out what he knows about this, if anything, when they get here. You better try again."

"We tried to get him up but couldn't," I said. "Maybe by the time the county boys get to him, he'll be more ready to rouse up. Right now,"

I said, holding my breath, "he's like a dead person."

"LIKE a dead person," Irma Wenzel repeated. Her voice held a low throb. It rose as she went on. "You mean like Harry out there?" She flung her arm toward the back of the building. "You mean like Harry, flopped out there in the mud. You hear what I'm saying? Right now, he's out there, dead, dead, dead, stiffening and we're in here—"

Her voice broke and she stopped talking. She set her drink down on the bar, very carefully. She moved off of her stool and away from the bar, away from the rest of us. Her wide-spaced, lovely, catlike eyes, glittering, now, circled the whole group. They finally came to rest on me.

"Where did you say old Willis Marlow is? Where did you say you found him?"

I felt a hammering at the pulses in my wrists. I kept my voice level but I don't know how.

"He's upstairs, Irma. He's upstairs in his own room, sleeping off a drunk. Why? What's wrong with that?"

Gus Berkaw, the bartender, had slipped out from behind the bar. He came up behind Irma Wenzel, now. His hand cupped her elbow. His square, dark face was grim.

"Easy, Irma. You're upset. This has been a tough deal for you. You don't want to get all upset. Maybe you'd better get upstairs and rest."

She tried to twist her elbow away from his hand but he hung on. He urged her away, toward the stairs. She said, "Up there? Are you crazy? Not if Willis Marlow is up there." She stiffened. Her voice got tight and high. "Gus, they say Willis Marlow is upstairs. How did he get up there, Gus? Gus, how—"

"Come on, Irma," he stopped her. He was almost pushing her toward the stairs, now.

Suddenly, she whipped away from him. She staggered and half fell against the wall. She stood there, her hands at her side, pressing flat against the wall as though trying to force it back out of her way. "Take your dirty hands off me, Gus! You go upstairs. I'm staying—"

"Do as I say!" His words came out tough and clipped and his face was tense, white around the heavy jaw muscles. A vein stood out, throbbing, in his neck.

All this time, ideas were chasing themselves around in my brain like scared rabbits. They stopped one by one and began to form a pattern. I was thinking of Gus Berkaw, who stayed here at the inn with Harry and Irma Wenzel, who was with them all the time. I was thinking of Irma—of Harry, a good twenty years her senior. It didn't make a pretty picture, but it was a picture just the same.

For a moment, Irma Wenzel seemed to wilt, as though her will was broken. It looked like she was going to meekly turn and go upstairs as Gus Berkaw had ordered. But, suddenly, she wheeled back. She turned toward me. Her eyes were wide and wild, now. She began to realize they were caught.

"Matty," she said. "You said old Marlow is upstairs in his room. Is—he all right, Matty? I mean you sure he—he's only drunk?"

I suddenly decided to ride everything on this hand. I shot the works. It was now or never.

"No, Irma, he's not all right. Willis Marlow is dead. He was murdered, just as your husband was murdered, Irma. And by the same person."

She looked scared and bewildered, both. Her eyes cast from side to side,

like a trapped and frightened little animal's.

"But how—how did he get up there, Matty? He couldn't. He was down by the lake. He was hanged there. Gus told me. Gus said Marlow was—" She broke off, staring at Gus.

"Stop it!" Gus Berkaw cut in on her. He suddenly walked over to Chief of Police Arnold Quimby who was standing at the bar, still, looking on, goggle-eyed, befuddled. Berkaw said, "Arnold, you've got to do something with her. She's blowing her roof. The shock of her husband dying and all has been too much for her."

He got up close to Arnold Quimby. The police chief wore a Sam Brown belt and a fine, hand-tooled leather holster. Gus Berkaw had no trouble slipping the gleaming black .38 from Quimby's holster. He did it fast and neatly and stepped back and away while Quimby stared, dumbfounded at his own gun in Berkaw's hands as though he was wondering how it got there and what it was doing there.

Gus Berkaw held the gun on all of us, while he stood clear. He spoke to Irma Wenzel and his eyes stayed with all of us, watching our every move, yet somehow he seemed to be looking straight at her.

"Are you crazy, Irma? What's the matter with you, you drunken little fool? If you hadn't broke, if you hadn't let it get you, they couldn't have proved anything. That damned busy-body reporter didn't know a thing; he was just guessing. Now you've thrown it right in his lap."

She kept looking at Gus Berkaw, at the revolver in his hand. She stood there, drunk and swaying and the tears ran on her face and left mascara streaks down her cheeks. She said, tiredly, "It's no good, Gus. You talked it to me so much. You talked me into it. But

after it was done, it was no good. It wasn't what I wanted."

"No good!" he repeated. He spat out the words. "I did it for you. You were in love with me, you said. You always said, if it wasn't for Harry— Well, you're in it, damn you. You're right in it with me. You were my accomplice. We were going to be in clover.

"There wasn't only the insurance. There was the big dough this place was suddenly worth with the new highway coming through. It was when I heard about that, that I knew it had to be tonight. Well, now you've lost all that for us, Irma. But you're not going to cheat me altogether. You're going with me. Come over here, Irma. Don't make any more mistakes."

"Don't be crazy, Gus!" she told him. "I—I don't love you. I couldn't—not a cold-blooded killer. When I started to realize—to really understand that Harry was gone, I knew I'd made a mistake. He was worth ten of you, Gus Berkaw. He was a man. He—"

Berkaw took a step toward her and his face was twisted like a mask. He jabbed the .38 toward her. "Get over here!" he said. "You're going with me, Irma!"

"No, Gus!" she said. She put up both hands, palms out.

He took another step toward her. "I said, come here. I—"

I didn't hear the rest of it. I was scared and all tight like a spring inside of me. There was a buzzing in my ears. Gus Berkaw wasn't seeing anybody but Irma at that moment. I still had Lee Marlow's spinning outfit in my hands. That viciously hooked *Flatfish* plug was still on the end of the line. It was worth a try.

I wasn't trying to be any hero. It was just sort of something I had to do. I whipped the light rod back and then

forward. I watched the plug flash across the room toward Gus Berkaw and I saw it hit his hand in a perfect cast. I pulled back on the pole as though to hook a striking fish.

Gus Berkaw screamed and the gun fell from his hand. I held the line taut, his hand, hooked solidly, pulled out the full length of his huge, beefy arm toward me.

"Don't try to move. Stand still, Gus, or that plug will rip out half of your hand."

He did that, his face all twisted with the pain of the hook barbs sunk deeply into his flesh. The rest of the crowd closed in around him. Gus Berkaw's legs gave way with him, then and he sunk down onto the floor, holding his wounded hand with the plug still in it. He kept mouthing curses, incoherently and tears wormed down his dark, meaty cheeks.

Then, before anybody could stop her, Irma Wenzel stepped toward the gun that had been flung from Gus' hand. She bent and scooped it up, her eyes flashing hatred.

"Get out of the way!" she said harshly.

Pete Saterlee and Eric Fabian stepped swiftly out of her path. Chief Quimby yelled something at her but she didn't seem to hear. Holding the revolver in

both hands, her face as stiff and drawn as though it had been bathed in alum, she walked close to Gus Berkaw. She shot him in the head at close range. Before the echo of the gun shot faded from the room, she turned the smoking barrel toward herself. That second shot was muffled, somewhat.

I turned and caught Lee Marlow as she fainted.

There was no trial, of course. There was no one to try. All the principals involved were dead. The whole affair had the township of Boone buzzing for a long time and there was a lot of talk that the thing had been twisted around and some angles covered up because a couple of rich and influential men like Pete Saterlee and Eric Fabian were involved. But that wasn't so. It was just like I've told it. What did they want; how much worse could it possibly have been?

It took a long time for Lee Marlow to get over the whole thing. But I waited. She was worth waiting for. And we never talk about it at all. Mrs. Hoyle and I.

We don't go out fishing very much, either. If we do, it's with an old bamboo pole and worms. We don't have a dog, either. Not that we don't like dogs, but there are some things that are hard to forget.

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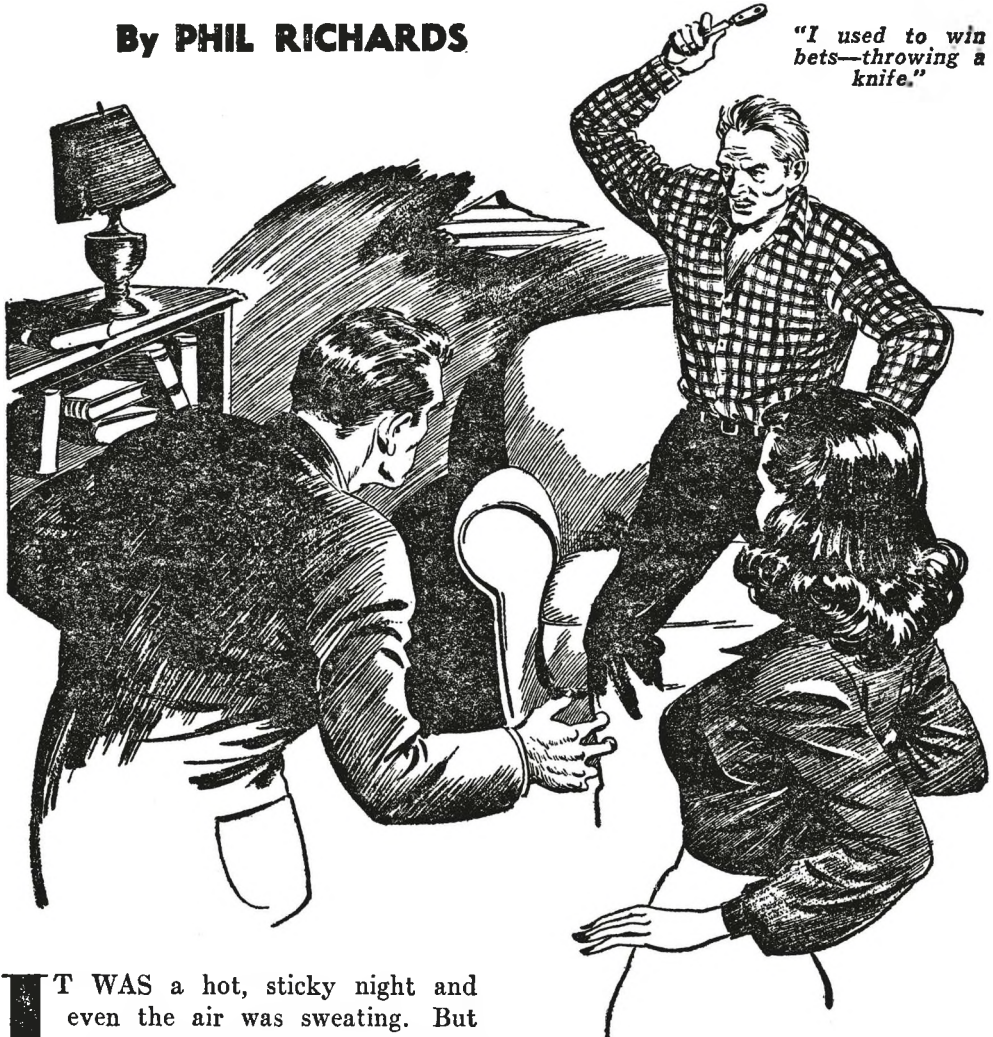
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THE SLAY'S THE THING

By PHIL RICHARDS



"I used to win bets—throwing a knife."

IT WAS a hot, sticky night and even the air was sweating. But Rawne, turning west on Twenty-second Street, looked cool enough. Everybody else was parboiled. Brownstone stoops were draped with people too fagged to stagger to the corner tavern. They stared languidly at Rawne as he strutted airily along.

Ex-playwright James Greer gave flop space to the local parasites—so his guilt complex could wear a halo.

Halfway down the dusty block he spoke to a wispy little man leaning against the brick wall of an apartment house. The little man was bald and he had a straggly gray mustache. He wore a pink-striped silk shirt dabbed with green paint, and the sleeves were cut off near the shoulders. His arms were muscular. He was nursing a perspiring bottle of beer.

"Good evening, Mr. Rawne," the little man said. He polished his moist skull with a calloused hand. "Hot, isn't it? I hear Mr. Greer has Blown Smoke in the seventh race at today and goes to the fifty-dollar window with a stack of win tickets. Mr. Greer doesn't visit me and pay six months back rent."

Rawne blew a cloud of smoke. "You're the superintendent, Schmidt," he said. "You've known the bum for years. He's got dough. Reach him quick. Because fellers he don't owe are fellers he don't know."

Rawne went down two steps into a spotless foyer. He pressed the button opposite the brass name plate *James Cullen Greer*. There was no click to the front door's lock release. Schmidt came in jingling a large ring of keys. He let Rawne into a gloomy hall lit by a small bulb.

"Whenever I ask Mr. Greer for the rent," Schmidt said, "he gives me his speech on the brotherhood of man, but now that Blown Smoke pays sixteen forty, I think Mr. Greer resigns from the lodge."

"You're sharp, Schmidt," Rawne said, and bounded up the creaking stairs.

The odor of cabbage and ham hocks mingled with the mustiness of old walls and gave the house a lived-in smell. The white paint in the wall niche at the top of the first flight was mottled with cigarette burns. At the landing Rawne glanced down. Bottle tilted to his mouth, Schmidt was looking up at him. Two

more flights, and Rawne stopped before a door marked $\frac{1}{4}$ A. Inside, a woman's voice was raised in angry tones.

Rawne hammered on the door and the angry voice stopped. He puffed his cigar and looked at the clinging ash. Rawne's face, as brown as iodine, was flat and square. The bulging frontal bone above deep-set brown eyes, the nose with the Irish dip, the blunt jaw with its curved, heavy line, made him almost as handsome as an English bulldog. He hitched his left shoulder. The brown sports coat flapped, showing the shoulder holster under the left arm. He knocked again.

"Want the door busted in, Jimmy boy?" he said loudly.

The apartment floor creaked. A man of perhaps fifty, though with a full head of black hair, opened the door. He'd been handsome, but his face, sensitive and even, looked tired and drained. The lines around red-rimmed pop eyes were deep, and under a weak chin hung a wattle of useless flesh. The bristly black mustache was neat.

A moth-eaten robe of faded blue, minus a sash, took away none of his distinguished air. He gave Rawne a muscular smile, but there was no love behind the thick-lensed glasses.

"Nice to see you, Kevin," Greer said to Rawne. "How's the private detective racket?"

"You should know," Rawne said. "You've been living off it. I've loaned you twenty-three hundred dollars, if your memory needs jogging. Let's go to the fifty-dollar window and pay off."

Greer attempted to build up the smile, but the corner of his mouth twitched and the upper lip took on a mean little curl. He stepped aside for Rawne to enter. The hallway was cluttered with yellowed magazines and dusty cardboard boxes of old theater programs.

Rawne went into the living room, his

cigar at a belligerent angle. Two large studio couches with threadbare green covers took half the space. A tall girl with deep-red hair falling softly to her shoulders was facing the peeling green wall, looking at autographed photos of famous people. She swung around and Rawne's cigar sagged.

The nose was lovely, the mouth full and red. The short upper lip had a tantalizing lift. The anger in the big green eyes took nothing from her.

"Have you met Lulie Nolan, Kevin?" Greer's voice was weak in his throat. "Wonderful Lulie Nolan? What an actress! What an answer to an old playwright's dream. I'm writing *the* play for her."

Rawne gazed at the angry green eyes and tensed face. "Relax," he told her. "I'm not a talent scout."

"You know Lee Searle," Greer said dispiritedly.

Rawne turned to a lean kid in his twenties, who was glaring at Rawne and looking as though he wanted to hit somebody. Lee Searle had a high forehead and hollow temples. He was almost milk-white with a jutting nose and lopsided mouth with fuzz on the upper lip. He wore a checkered shirt with a button off and his black trousers had frayed cuffs.

"Sure I know Lee Searle," Rawne said amiably. "Searle's one of the bums you feed and give flop space to, Jim—so your guilt complex can wear a halo."

Greer acted as though the barb had gone in deep, and he looked very sad, though the twitch at the corner of his mouth wasn't sad. The girl Lulie studied Rawne with sudden interest. Searle's lopsided mouth twisted straight. An unhealthy flush tinged the milk-white skin. Searle was narrow-shouldered but strong, and his clenched fists were large.

"You'd better take a walk, Lee," Greer told Searle.

Searle gave Rawne a malevolent look. He reluctantly swung a faded green gabardine jacket under his arm. "I'll walk. But when I come back and you got marks on you, Jim, I go looking for this keyhole peeper."

SEARLE went out and slammed the door. Greer was standing by a crowded bookcase over which hung a policeman's nightstick. He was moistening his lips. Rawne grinned at Lulie Nolan. The damp air accentuated her perfume. He inhaled deeply and blinked his eyes.

"Delightful, but it weakens me. Now, honey chile, if you'll just step outside. I wouldn't want to offend your delicate sensibilities."

"Don't be coy, goon boy!" Lulie Nolan retorted. "I don't brush. Not when I'm owed money. Grandpappy here talked me loose from nineteen hundred dollars."

She stepped to a maple dropleaf table piled with books and unwashed dishes. Rawne watched the loose-hipped movement of her stage walk with no apparent distaste.

The girl slapped open a bulging scrapbook of time-scorched clippings. "Reviews of *Tarnished Lady*," she said. "A smash-hit on two continents. Six future stars in the cast. So I listened to grandpappy say that he did it once and he can do it again."

She walked toward Rawne. She wore a gray skirt and she was slender and small around the waist. Her arms were smooth and the black blouse was a startling contrast to the green eyes and red hair. Rawne took the cigar out of his mouth. Lulie stopped a step or two away from him.

"Grandpappy is writing a play for me. Oh, yes." Lulie Nolan's voice had a husky quality, a low-pitched vibrancy. "Grandpappy is going to make me the

greatest star ever seen on Broadway."

"It's a great play, Lulie darling," Greer protested weakly.

"Sure," the girl jeered. "Act One, Scene One. That's as far as you've got. You haven't even written in an ash-tray."

Rawne took her arm. "You and I, Lulie darling," he said, "are not the only suckers who've been supplying Jim with cabbage which he fed to racetrack pari-mutuel machines. But I'm putting in the prior claim. You can go to work when I get my twenty-three hundred."

She turned on Rawne, her green eyes hot with anger, but his grip was not light. He guided her firmly into the hallway and closed the door on her. She hammered on the panel.

"Oh," she shouted in a trembling voice, "what a slow, slow death I'd like to arrange for you!"

Rawne returned to the living room. Greer was standing by a lounge chair that had a torn gray slip cover. He was wiping his glasses. Tears rolled slowly down his aging cheeks.

"Kevin boy," he pleaded with Rawne, "you talk like I have money. Good Lord, Kevin, don't upset me now! I'm too finely tuned. I'm keyed to concert pitch. I'm so filled with this new play I should be in an ivory tower. I should be in a monastery. It's all written, Kevin. Every beautiful line of the play.

In my head. You'll make me lose it."

Rawne rolled his cigar across his mouth. "Cut it, Jim. You've been washed for fifteen years. You haven't written anything except bad checks for years. You've been living off this racket, kidding chumps like me that with a little financial help you could repeat *Tarnished Lady*. When I stopped dreaming of fast cars and a hunting lodge in Maine, you were in my bankroll so deep I kept supplying the spinach, hoping you'd pick a horse that wouldn't graze in the backstretch. Today you had him—Blown Smoke in the seventh, and you walked away from a cashier's window with ten thousand dollars."

Greer put on his thick glasses. He ran a nervous hand through his black hair. "You've been drinking, Kevin."

"I've been talking to a detective," Rawne said. "He phoned me from Belmont Park after the eighth. I've been slipping him beer money to keep tabs on you."

"Oh." Greer nodded grimly, wisely. "I see." His tone was bitter. "No trust. No faith. Little wonder the world's upside down. Okay, Kevin—if that's the way you want it. I'll pay you. Tomorrow."

Rawne took a short puff and waved his cigar impatiently. "You'll pay me now. The detective put an exercise boy on your tail. You came straight home.

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The wrinkled lids came down over Greer's pop eyes. He went to the closet muttering, and fished a bulging wallet from an old coat. The corner of his mouth kept twitching while he counted hundred-dollar bills into Rawne's palm.

Rawne gave them a second count and put the money in his wallet. He buttoned the wallet down in his back trousers pocket. He stood there, scowling thoughtfully, smoking, his gaze shifting about the cluttered room. The radio was on, tuned low.

Across the way a man and woman leaned together on a window sill.

RAWNE looked at Greer and shook his head. Greer's cheeks were unnaturally red. He stood rigidly. His thin lip had its mean little curl and the corner was working. His eyes were like black agates. With a final wondering glance, Rawne turned around and went out, humming.

The hallway was pitch-dark. He walked down the creaking stairs, his cigar a red lamp in the blackness. Radios blared. Somewhere a woman was screaming. A child was crying. Rawne groped along the third-floor hall.

Starting down the next flight he felt along the wall. He touched somebody who was crouching in the wall niche just below the landing. Rawne started to speak. He got a violent shove from this somebody, a terrific shove. Rawne crashed into the railing, almost toppling over it. He cut loose with loud, short words and threw his right fist.

His fist hit this somebody in the face and there was a groan. Rawne got slammed in the stomach. He got slammed with a foot that caught him on his belt. His breath left him in an agonized grunt. His cigar went spinning.

He went crashing down the stairs, backwards, feet out from under him, left arm hooked over the railing. His head hit the floor, and the vertebrae in his neck clicked.

He lay there like a drunk sleeping it off. Somebody yanked at his back pocket. A button rolled off into the stairwell. The stairs creaked going up.

Pretty soon Rawne began cursing and then he was able to push himself to his knees. There was no weight under the left armpit and his voice grew as loud as the radio's. The baby was still squalling and the shrill lady hadn't worn herself thin. Rawne slapped around in the darkness until he found his gun. He stuck it in the holster and got up.

A sag was in his knees. He labored up the stairs, lurching from side to side. On the fourth floor a line of soft light came from 4 A. The door of Greer's apartment was opened a crack. Rawne kicked it wide. He went into the foyer and looked at himself in the cracked mirror. His hair was rumpled and his face was dirty. The right side was covered with blood.

Rawne went into the living room, still waltzing a little. The odor of Lulie's perfume still hung in the wet air. The room was lit by a parchment-shaded reading lamp on an end table by a studio couch. The glass over one of the pictures was shattered and the policeman's nightstick wasn't hanging over the bookcase any more.

The bulky scrapbook of *Tarnished Lady* lay on the floor and clippings were scattered everywhere. James Cullen Greer, lying face down between the dropleaf table and the lounge chair with the torn gray slip cover, was almost covered with clippings, almost buried with them.

The nightstick lay there, too, with blood and black hair on it. The back of Greer's head was crushed.

Rawne's bleak gaze traveled from the bludgeoned skull down the threadbare robe to the shabby, runover slippers. His square face was blank. The telephone rang and he gave a little start. It rang again and stopped. In the kitchen a mouse was gnawing at something. The radio picked up the scrape of a phone that was being dialed somewhere in the house.

In the house opposite Rawne, the man and woman stood back from the window. Their features were indistinct but they were facing the Greer apartment. Rawne's lower lip slid out slowly and his heavy brows pulled down.

Suddenly his eyes opened wide. He jerked his head around. Lulie Nolan was standing in the doorway. Her lips and hair were very red against the blanched face. She was holding a gray corde handbag and a worn black wallet.

Rawne slapped at his empty back pocket. His brows went up. He reached the frightened girl before she could do anything. She cried out. Her green eyes were shiny with fear. Rawne took his wallet and was rough with her. He flung her into a lounge chair where she broke out in convulsive sobs, her long red nails digging into hair stuffing which tufted through the torn gray slip cover.

"Oh, please!" the girl cried. "Oh, please!"

Rawne opened his wallet to nothing but black leather. "Lady, lady," he chided her. "You've had a busy evening."

The man across the way stood at his window. He was telephoning.

"You and Searle working as a team?" Rawne asked her.

Lulie Nolan leaned forward, sobbing, her red hair tumbling across her shoulders.

Rawne's fingertips touched the hair lightly. "You do something to me," he said. "You sure do. If you didn't knock

off old Jim, it'd be a pleasure to be seeing you in all the old familiar places. Provided you come across with twenty-three hundred bucks."

"I haven't your money!" She pounded the arms of the chair. "I walked to the corner, but I was worrying. Nineteen hundred dollars, that's how much I was worrying. I came back and the halls were dark and I stepped on something and it was this—this wallet. Then I—"

Rawne whirled around. This time his hand was moving to his left armpit. Lee Searle was in the room. His lopsided mouth was puffed, the upper lip split, and fresh blood was trickling over a dried smear. He was sobbing. His right hand was wrapped around something that he pressed his thumb against. A long blade leaped out with a click.

"I used to win bets throwing a knife," he said.

Rawne lowered his hand. "Your mouth is bleeding," he said. "I was standing on the stairs is the reason you're only skinned up. If I'd got you solid, you'd be wearing your teeth through your lip."

Searle broke into tears. "I shoulda stayed. Jim always said you was a dog. Jim said you was a low-grade moron. Poor Jim. He was a genius and you killed him. You murdered a great heart. Jim never turned a Joe down. Jim believed in the brotherhood of man—"

"Jim was a bum," Rawne said. "Just like you. He fed you phonies and drifters to delude himself that he was a right guy. He was a chiseler, a plain thief."

Searle was trembling. His entire mouth had become an ugly smear of blood. His right shoulder went back and Rawne scooped an egg-encrusted plate from the dropleaf table and let it go. Searle dodged and the plate shattered itself against the door frame. The knife left Searle's hand. A silver flash went by Rawne's head and an inch of blade sank

into the picture on the wall behind him.

A siren shrieked outside. Rawne's heavy fist got to Searle's chin and the stiffened body went back and down, Searle's head striking a taboret and upsetting a pile of books. Dust spiraled around Searle, and he sat there on the floor, head against a cane-backed chair, quite unconscious of the reading matter which tumbled into his lap.

LULIE NOLAN was standing up. Her lower lip was caught between her white teeth and she was too frightened to move. Rawne pulled her into the cramped kitchen, getting tangled in drying shirts and underwear hanging overhead. She skidded on a piece of bacon and knocked over the garbage pail, scattering eggshells and coffee grounds.

Rawne opened the dumb waiter, measuring the width of the shaft with his shoulders. "Hear that?" A siren wailed and faded. "Another radio car. There'll be more. The house will be swarming with cops. Our inquisitive friend across the way phoned Centre Street."

Rawne hauled down on the greasy rope. "If they catch you, baby, you're in for a rough shuffle. Questions all night long. By morning line-up you'd have circles under your eyes you could trip over."

The dumb-waiter box rattled up to the dirt-caked rectangle.

"Get in," Rawne said. "I'll stand on top and let us down easy—I hope."

Lulie Nolan looked at him with terrified eyes. A bell rang and she jumped. With a hopeless expression she scrambled into the box. Rawne shot a strange glance at her. He lowered the box and muscled himself on top. At the bottom the girl was gone before he could get out. He picked up a rag, shrugging, and wiped his hands. She came back, trembling.

"Police!" Her voice was hoarse.

"It's their party," Rawne said.

They were in the furnace room. Pipes ran overhead and a naked bulb burned dimly. On the side wall next to a racked hose hung old work clothes, overalls, shirt, a boiler suit. A fire roared under a boiler and a scattering of coal was spread in front of the bin and the cement floor was covered with coal dust. A shovel lay near the wall under a fuse box which was open. The box was dusty, but there was no dust on the switch handle to the hall lights. A splatter of blood stiped the concrete wall. Rawne looked closely. The blood was fresh.

He took the girl's hand. Her fingers gripped his. They were very cold. They went up a wooden stairs into a small storeroom that smelled of disinfectant and was cluttered with brooms and mops and squeegees. They went through a white, spotless kitchen to a bedroom furnished with double-decked walnut bunks and into the front room which faced the street. The venetian blinds were shut and a bridge lamp was lit alongside a typewriter on a small metal desk.

Rawne went to the bathroom. When he came out, the blood was gone and his hair was combed.

"We're in Schmidt's apartment," he said. "Schmidt the superintendent. This must be his quiet hour at the corner pub."

The girl threw herself on the blue divan and put her hands over her eyes. Rawne looked at her thoughtfully, lower lip buried between his teeth, and then he took a turn about the room. The walls, rug and upholstery were a deep blue. A sheet of paper was in the typewriter. A white-enameled box in a corner was half filled with colored catalogs or something. On the long oaken library table the city's business directory, was open to a page near the end.

Rawne took Lulie Nolan's corde hand-bag and emptied it on the table. Among the jumbled contents were no hundred-dollar bills.

"Fork over," Rawne said.

"I haven't your dirty money," the girl said bitterly.

"Do I have to search you?" Rawne said.

A loud pounding on the door cut off the girl's retort.

"Any one in there?" a deep voice demanded. "Superintendent. You in there? Open up."

Rawne's eyes were harried. He stood in the center of the room, indecisive, looking at the door and then at the girl. He motioned toward the back rooms and the girl tiptoed across the rug. She had both hands to her mouth and her eyes were wide with terror when she went into the next room.

Swiftly Rawne got his clothes off and hung them in the closet. He stowed his gun and harness under sheets on the shelf, putting the girl's bag with them. He rumped his hair. When he opened the door, he was yawning and stretching.

"No vacancies," he said drowsily.

A stout man in gray tropical worsted stuck his foot against the door. He wore a new light-cream panama. Purple veins mottled his cheeks. He had a thick, splayed nose and a double chin. He was grinning.

"What brand of sleeping pills you use, super?" he asked. "I want to get some for my wife."

"Ask me tomorrow," Rawne said, yawning.

"I probably will," the stout man said. He came in, looked around quickly, and sat down, taking out a small notebook and a ball pen. "I'm Griffin. Lieutenant. Homicide. I ask questions in my sleep."

"Homicide?" Rawne said with a note of disgust. "Where? Not in the hallway. I have enough trouble keeping this place clean."

Rawne got his trousers from the superintendent's closet.

"What do you know about Four A?" Griffin asked.

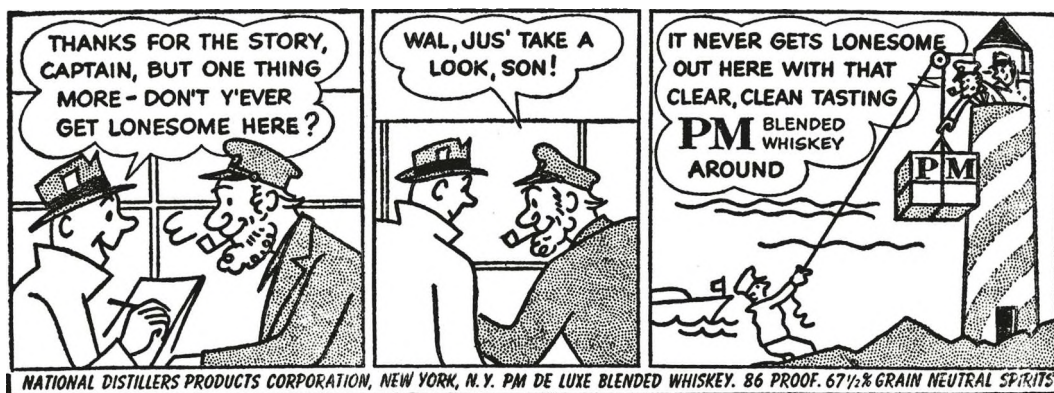
Rawne shoved a foot through a pants leg. "Four A? Greer? Jim Greer's all right. A little slow on the rent, that's all."

Griffin jotted something in his book. The questions were routine and Rawne dressed while he answered them. Griffin stood up and put his notebook away.

"We'll go up," he said, "and view the stellar attraction. By the way, Schmidt," he asked Rawne, "do you like perfume?"

"Huh!" Rawne looked at Griffin as though he hadn't heard right. "Do I—Sure, sure."

The hall lights were on, and Rawne's palm left a moist trail on the railing.



He kept wetting his lips. The fat man was puffing, but he wasn't pouring sweat the way it was coming from Rawne.

"Relax," Rawne told Rawne while he paused for breath on the fourth floor. "These stiffs never rise up."

Rawne was rigid going into the apartment. Lee Searle was slumped unconscious in a lounge chair, head wobbly, and some one was working over him. There was coal dust on Searle's shoe point. Rawne's eyes swept about the room, not focusing on anything. Griffin was watching him. Griffin was looking at Rawne's big hands.

The body hadn't been moved. A photographer was still working and Rawne blinked when flash bulbs went off. Fingerprint men were throwing aluminum powder around. A neat little man with a black satchel stood by, waiting for the photographer to finish. Rawne went over and looked at the body, nodding at Griffin.

THE homicide man jerked his thumb at Searle. "This guy got knocked hard. Concussion. Maybe a busted noggin. I think he can explain the knife in the wall. Searle's his name. You said you'd seen him. Now and then he mutters the name Rawne. You know Rawne?"

Griffin was looking at him intently and Rawne gazed at the ceiling, rubbing his chin.

"Rawne. Rawne. The name's familiar," Rawne said. "But Greer had a parade going in and out all the time. I never kept track of his friends."

"Okay, Schmidt." Griffin grinned at Rawne. "Thanks for helping us. We'll call you if we need you."

Rawne went down the stairs heavily, hitting each step hard. He was talking to himself and his brown face was sulky. He had the expression of a child who has been caught in a shameful act. He went

into Schmidt's apartment, slammed the door and cursed loudly.

"Do I like perfume!" he spoke in an outraged tone. "Do I know Rawne!"

Lulie Nolan came out of the bedroom with that walk of hers. Her eyes were dry and she seemed more self-possessed. She held a book or something in a yellow cover. On the divan were strewn other books in colored covers, and the white-enameled box in the corner was empty.

"Griffin! Lieutenant! Homicide!" Rawne exclaimed. "He treated me like a water-brain."

The *ting-a-ling-a-ling* of an ambulance came down the street and stopped outside. Rawne scowled and took a bite at his lip. The latch release on the front door buzzed and clicked and tramping steps went up the stairs.

"That Griffin!" Rawne exclaimed. "Cat-and-mouse stuff. Griffin had the effrontery to look at my hands. I don't shovel coal. I haven't any janitor's calouses. The way he acted he must have found those work clothes in the furnace room. Schmidt's boiler suit wouldn't fit me. If Griffin likes me as Jim's killer, why doesn't he take me in?"

He went to the closet. Lulie Nolan swallowed. The green eyes followed him tensely. Footsteps were coming down the stairs now.

"You could have scrambled," Rawne said.

"I was going to," the girl said. "But I couldn't trust myself. If a cop even looked at me, I would have gone to pieces screaming."

Rawne walked toward her. "Is that all? You weren't stopped by some quality you saw in me, a certain, let us say, something?"

The girl clutched the yellow book to her. The cover was wet where her hand had been. She was not at ease.

"Your repulsiveness," she said, "is the

source of deep pride to you, isn't it?"

Rawne grinned and went back to the closet. "You helped get Griffin interested in me. The next time you use perfume, don't spill the bottle. Schmidt's apartment smells like a boudoir."

He opened the closet door and the girl almost dropped the yellow book.

"Have you seen this?" she asked quickly, ruffling the pages. "It's a play script." She motioned to the divan. "Those are play scripts, too. Schmidt—Emil Schmidt—is a playwright."

"Yeah," Rawne said. He reached up and took the shoulder harness off the shelf. "I read what's in the typewriter. Dialog between Lady So-and-So and Lord Something. A Twenty-second Street janitor writing about British nobility."

Rawne reached for the shelf again. The girl gulped.

"But this play," she rushed on. Her voice was unsteady. "It was written in nineteen twenty-six. The title is *Shady*—"

A knock on the door sent her scurrying to a back room. Rawne flung his holster in the closet and when he opened the door Griffin was standing there, grinning. A stretcher was going by with Lee Searle on it, with a man in a stiff-visored cap and white coat on each end. The basket with Greer's body was ahead of them.

"We're carting away the debris, Schmidt," Griffin said.

"I see," Rawne said. He nodded toward the stretcher. "Does Searle close the case for you?"

Griffin grinned at Rawne. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Schmidt. Neighbors saw more than one party in Greer's room. We're not finished with the loose ends. There's a busted dinner plate that's interesting. And a bit of coal dust and a dash of perfume and an odor of cigar smoke with no cigar butt around

and a slice of bacon with the narrow part of a woman's shoe imprinted on it. The neighbors in an opposite apartment saw some of the show. They couldn't see much, but they called us up. Maybe they can help. I'm leaving a patrolman at Four A. Well, I'll see you, Schmidt. Thanks for everything."

Griffin went away grinning and Rawne closed the door fuming. The soft, irritating ring of the ambulance went up the street and car gears ground in the shifting.

The girl came back. She was flushed. "It's my shoe print on that bacon up there."

BAWNE was glowering at the floor, jerking his head from side to side. "Yeah, yeah." He looked up angrily. "They'll have a tail on you the moment you walk outside. Griffin considers me in custody already. He's going to see where I go and then he'll tag me when he wants me. I can fry for what they can build up against me."

He went to the closet. "They packed Searle off—the lead I wanted. I was hoping to crack Searle open. He had plenty of motive. He could dodge work forever with Greer's ten grand. What does that leave me?" He looked sourly at the girl. "That leaves me *you*. You're not excused, Lulie darling. You had my wallet. But how can I bang you around?"

Rawne felt under the sheets on the shelf. He muttered and turned on the girl, his eyes sharp. "Hey! What'd you do with it? Where's my gun? Don't play katzenjammer with me."

Lulie Nolan shivered. She clutched the manuscript of *Shady* Something to her. "I hid it. I was afraid. How do I know you didn't kill Jim Greer?"

A key scraped in the lock and the door opened. Schmidt came into the

room with a startled look of perplexity. His narrow face was shaved and pink and powdered and he smelled like a barber shop.

"What is this, Mr. Rawne?" Schmidt rubbed his nude pate apologetically and nodded to the girl. "Miss Nolan."

"You're looking at a pair of suckers, Schmidt," Rawne said, "who are going to stay awake all night getting pushed around at police headquarters. Jim Greer was murdered."

Schmidt nodded solemnly. "The whole block's buzzing with it."

"We were in Four A," Rawne said, "when the sirens hit Twenty-second Street. We came down the dumb waiter and ran in here to keep from bumping into cops. I was Emil Schmidt for a while, but I didn't fool anybody."

Schmidt was self-conscious in his own apartment. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rawne. It's too bad about Mr. Greer. I guess if you owe everybody, it's best to stay poor."

Rawne strapped on his empty shoulder holster. "We'll get out, Schmidt. Thanks for the use of your apartment. You can read all about us in the morning papers." Rawne sniffed. "You smell mighty nice, Schmidt, and you look pretty."

Schmidt rubbed his powdered face sheepishly. "I went in for a shave and the barber wanted to sell me a massage. I said that was gilding the lily. When you make a wisecrack like that you got to pay for the laugh. I had the massage." Schmidt mopped his skull. "Have some beer before you go." He gestured toward the yellow-covered manuscript in the girl's hands. "I see you have *Shady Lady*, Miss Nolan. Have you read any of it? Does it play?"

"A lot of the lines," Lulie Nolan said, "are identical with the lines in Jim Greer's *Tarnished Lady*. And your play was written two years before Jim's." Schmidt nodded. "Every producer on

Broadway rejected *Shady Lady* before Mr. Greer bought it. Mr. Greer gave me fifty dollars and two complimentary tickets, but one seat was behind a post. I'll get the beer."

Rawne looked up from the city directory, opened on the library table to the T's. "Schmidt," he said. His voice was strangely soft. "Mind coming here?"

Rawne was humming. Schmidt looked at him oddly and advanced a few steps.

"What's the matter with your eye, Schmidt?" Rawne asked. "The left one."

"My eye?" Schmidt caressed his skull. "It's bloodshot, you mean? I got a clinker in it."

"Around the outside, I mean," Rawne said. "The flesh looks raw and tender." Rawne ran a finger down a page of the Red Book. "Look, Schmidt."

"Yes, Mr. Rawne?"

"Under the caption *Tattooing*," Rawne said. "There's a finger smudge opposite the name Flags Buchanan. He's the tattoo artist and black eye specialist. I know Flags Buchanan. He's painted out more than one black eye for me. I know how the flesh looks after the leeches are taken off."

Schmidt backed away. His left hand was on his head, his right hand was in the pocket of his yellow-green sports jacket. He was frightened, but he was looking at the empty holster under Rawne's arm.

"You're the guy, Schmidt, I slugged on the stairs, aren't you?" Rawne said. "I'm the guy you kicked in the head. Right? You hairless little rat! I can find out pronto. You wouldn't trust a hiding place. You'd pack the whole ten grand around with you. You killed Jim Greer!"

Schmidt whipped a blued .32 from his coat pocket. "I have a permit for this gun. I keep rent money overnight and this is a bad neighborhood."

Rawne laughed. "Put that away. You

can't buck the whole police system."

Schmidt's eyes were diamond hard. "It's been done. This is my home, my castle. You're trespassing. I come in. You go for your gun. I shoot you. Miss Nolan tries to get your gun. I shoot her. Two murder suspects dead. The case of James Cullen Greer, deceased, closed."

"AWFULLY simple, the way you tell it. How about Lee Searle? You caught him switching off the hall lights, didn't you? He was going to hijack me. You swiped him with the shovel, slugged him with your fist, came upstairs, dumped me, emptied my wallet and tossed it in the hallway, killed Greer, got the rest of the ten grand, and sneaked down after I went into Greer's apartment."

"Searle didn't see me," Schmidt said.

"But the man and woman across from Greer's saw you," Rawne said. "He called the cops."

Schmidt laughed harshly. "Try to describe him. His face, I mean. I was too far back in the room when I hit Mr. Greer. They might have seen a shadowy movement but nothing more."

Lulie Nolan caught Rawne's eye and her glance went briefly, sharply to a corner of the divan. She made a motion with the manuscript.

Schmidt glowered at her. "What's this, Miss Nolan? You going to throw

Shady Lady at me? You want, maybe, a bullet in your sweet little nose?"

Rawne belched loudly and plopped down in the corner of the divan. He sang softly.

Schmidt stared at Rawne. "You're nuts. I'm going to knock you off and you sing ragtime. I've been waiting years for James Cullen Greer to snag himself a bundle of lettuce so I could bump him off profitably. This is my night."

Schmidt stepped toward the typewriter. "You read, maybe, what's on the machine? Yah! Lady Vandermeer: Blah, blah, blah. Lord Cavendish: Blah, blah, blah. Funny, eh? Pathetic, eh? Who's going to buy a janitor's lords and ladies? Why don't I write about deadbeats and all the riffraff I know? I'll tell you. Because I'm part of the riffraff. My life's a gray monotone. My life screams for escape. So I kept up the facility, I kept up the flow in a fantasy world of lords and ladies. Now I've got the escape—ten thousand dollars' worth of escape. I can write about the drabs now. Tremendous stuff about deadbeats and—"

Lulie Nolan laughed hollowly. "And they'll all be as worthless as—this!"

She ripped the yellow-covered manuscript of *Shady Lady* in two.

"Hey!" Schmidt shouted.

Rawne's hand came from where it was dug down behind the end cushion of the

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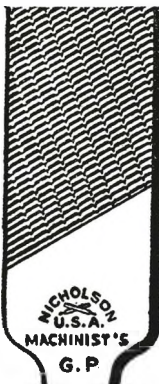
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divan. That brown hand came up wrapped around a snub-nosed automatic and it was spouting flame. The walls took the angry crack of it and bounced it around. The bullet smashed the distracted Schmidt in the shoulder and knocked him back.

Schmidt was blasting as he fell. A bullet splintered the closet door. Blue-tinted plaster fell from the ceiling. Schmidt collapsed then and Rawne kicked the smoking gun from Schmidt's hand. Rawne kicked it again, across the room.

Then he had Lulie Nolan in his arms.

"You suspicious honey!" Rawne said. "If you hadn't hid my gun—"

The door crashed open and a cop stumbled into the room with a drawn Smith & Wesson. Griffin, breathing heavily, came in behind a .38 Special. Men poured in through the bedroom.

"Whew!" Griffin exclaimed. "My tobacco heart! We heard Schmidt canary on himself, Rawne, but we were afraid to disturb him. I sent men up through the furnace room to pick Schmidt off from the rear. That wasn't good, either. A dying man can do a hell of a lot of damage with a gun in a split second."

"You certainly had your fun with me," Rawne said.

Griffin shrugged. "You liked it that way, didn't you? You were on top of the list, but I thought things would go faster letting you move around a bit."

A plainclothesman extracted a stuffed wallet from the cursing Schmidt.

"Hey!" Rawne exclaimed. "Go easy with my money!"

"Life's little ironies," Griffin said, grinning. "You've got to stand in line with the other creditors now, Rawne."

"I think," Rawne told Lulie when they were in a squad car bound for Headquarters, "that we should commiserate each other over a quantum of Daiquiris. We'll be lucky to pay off ten cents on the dollar. I'll vary the mood with a few passes."

The car stirred up a breeze and Lulie made herself comfortable in the curve of Rawne's arm. "We're old enough not to cry over spilt milk."

"Okay," Rawne said. "I'll just make passes."

He kissed her and her lips were clinging.

"Maybe," he said after a while, "I should go home first and change to my bowtie."

"You mean the one that lights up," Lulie murmured, "and makes you the life of the party?"

TURNED TABLES

A man with a knife took \$104 away from Walter Reichert, Baltimore filling station attendant. But when Mr. Reichert told him, "You know, I'll have to make all that money good," the bandit returned \$84 of the money.

* * *

When a man tried to hold up Mrs. Mary Quinlivan in Springfield, Mass., she turned on her heel and slapped him. He turned and ran away.

When Mrs. Evelyn Hatton was held-up in Peoria, Ill., she took off her shoe and whopped the bandit in the face with it. He fled and she kept her purse.

* * *

When a bandit tried to hold-up the proprietress of a Brooklyn, N. Y., store, she smacked him in the face with a bowl of prunes. He was so flabbergasted that he turned and ran—straight into the arms of the law.

—Harold Helfer

MURDER EXPRESS

By HIAWATHA JONES



He knelt on the floor of the boxcar. It was the kid's money. So what?

I had to keep awake remembering the greedy look in Mug's eyes when he saw the kid's wallet.

SLEEP, like a thousand thick-gloved hands, clutched at me but I kept tearing myself away. I had to stay awake! The dark wet-smelling floor lurched under me. We had pulled the freight car doors nearly shut, but through the panel of opening I saw the black night sky and the moon sliding behind a bank of dark clouds.

The sky would be lightening soon. It

would be day. And the kid would be safe. I looked over to where he was lying.

He was on the floor next to me. I had been listening to his low convulsive coughing before he finally fell asleep. He's a good kid, I thought to myself.

Once away from Mug he'll be safe. I remembered the hard, greedy look in Mug's eye as he had seen the kid's wallet. Stay awake, I told myself.

I couldn't get up and sit by the freight car door. Mug and his friend were across the car from us. The friend didn't bother me. He was a harmless little guy. But Mug could make trouble. That wouldn't do the kid any good; I had to lie where I was. I had to keep awake. If there was going to be trouble I had to be ready for it.

Think about something, I kept telling myself. Think about the kid and the story he told you. Think about the army. The road. The look in the kid's eye. The picture. Stay awake. You owe it to the kid, as a friend.

As a friend. I hadn't known the kid for more than six hours! But that's how it is on the road. You meet a guy. You size him up as a good Joe. And before you know it, you're both trading life stories, exchanging gripes.

We had both gotten on at a little depot outside of Albany. It was a warm night and we had shoved the doors back and were sitting on the edge of the freight car floor, watching the country whip by. The other two hoboes who had got on with us were sitting in the center of the empty freight matching coins in the moonlight from the open door. One of the 'boes was a thin, ragged little guy whose gray hair needed cutting. The other was a big guy with a flat nose and a scar sliced across his knotty cheek. One or the other of them would mutter a curse every time a coin changed hands.

The kid and I didn't pay any attention to their game. We were both quiet, looking at the dark scenery rolling past us. He was a good looking guy, a couple of years younger than I. Not more than twenty at the most. He had red hair and a thin face. The shirt he wore was torn at the shoulder. He looked like he was still green at freight-riding.

I sat back against the edge of the open door and listened to the clatter of the

speeding wheels. The fields we passed were gray with darkness. I looked over to the kid. His head was lowered to his chest as he muffled a low hacking cough.

"Why don't you get inside, kid?"

He shook his head at me. "It's okay. The wind feels good going down."

I reached over and threw him a small woolen bundle I had at my side. "Put this on," I said.

The kid undid the sweater and poked his arm into its sleeve. He wasn't used to holding down a freight. I would have known that even if he hadn't told me. A lot of times I meet up with kids his age who are bumming around the country just for a thrill. Road kids. A wild lot. But this kid was different.

I watched his thin fingers fumble at the buttons of the sweater. "If you just cashed in on a season's pay, why are you riding the freights back?" I asked. He had told me earlier in the evening about working in a lumber camp all summer. He had shown me a wallet crammed with bills. The only thing wrong with the job was that it kept him near water all the time. It had given him a cold. He still wasn't over it.

"The freights are okay," the kid answered. "Beside it ain't my money."

"You worked for it didn't you?"

He turned his face to look at the two other hoboes in the car. They were still matching coins. Then he looked back to me. "I didn't work for it for myself." He reached into the waist of his dungarees. I saw him untie the money belt where he kept his wallet. He opened the crammed leather folder and pulled out a photograph. The kid handed it to me, and he was smiling.

I looked down at the picture. It was a photograph of a girl, a pretty blonde, about seventeen. She wore a thin summer dress and carried her hat in her hand. She was smiling. I looked at the

picture for a long moment, then looked back up at the kid.

"Your wife?"

He had laughed. "My sister."

I glanced down at the picture again. "She's pretty."

"There are just the two of us left," he said. "Ma died a couple of months ago. My old man's been gone longer than that."

He took a bill out of his wallet as he spoke, and he handed it to me. I must have looked puzzled. He only nodded his head toward the money, and I had looked down at it.

It was a five dollar bill. Regulation. Nothing unusual. The moonlight through the trees streaked past, and the freight car lurched under us making it hard to read. I kept studying the bill, turning it over, and then I noticed something. On one side, in the clear space above the serial number, there was a word written. A name.

"Peggy."

"That's her name. My sister's name," said the kid. I looked down at the bill again.

"I did it with every dollar I got," said the kid. "Most of the guys used to go into town on a drunk every payday. Whenever I thought that I would go with them I took my money out and there was her name on it, where I had written it. That's what I was working

for. I never let myself forget about it."

I looked at the photograph in my hand. "She's a lucky girl."

He sort of snorted and looked out at the country passing by. "She's a smart kid," he said turning back to me. "Too smart and too decent to have to take the knocks. She graduates from high school this month. That's what the money is for. It'll start her off in college, pay for tuition and buy some clothes too, maybe. Oh, it ain't much, but it will start her off. That's the main thing."

My throat felt sort of thick. I'd like to bash in the teeth of any guy who considers a man a tramp just because he happens to be riding the rails. I looked down at the picture, then handed it and the bill back to the kid. He smiled at me.

The two other 'boes in the car must have finished their game, because they walked over to where we were sitting. The kid was just putting the picture back into his wallet.

"Cleaned!" said the big guy. I had heard the other 'boe call him Mug.

"Like a whistle," chuckled the little gray haired guy. As he smiled I could see that his front teeth were missing.

Mug had been watching the kid stuff his wallet back into his money belt. The big guy's eyes gleamed like shattered glass. His thick lower lip hung loose. "You made out better than I did."

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The kid started to laugh but it ended in that hacking cough. He pulled the sweater over his belt.

"This your first time on the rails, kid?" continued Mug.

"Yes," said the kid.

Mug grinned a fleshy grin. I didn't like the look I had seen in his eye as he had stared at the kid's wallet. Mug was a big guy. I'm far from being a pint size myself, but he still looked like a guy who could make plenty of trouble if he wanted to.

Mug looked away from the kid. "You oughta see Pete here matching coins," he said, turning to the little gray-haired guy. "The damnest little cheat in the world."

The little character called Pete laughed his toothless grin again. "You boys wanna play?" he asked, turning to the kid and me. We both shook our heads.

I twisted the thick ring on my finger, looking down at it. I knew that even then Mug was only thinking of the kid and his crammed wallet.

"It's cold," said Mug.

"Sort of," agreed the kid. Pete grunted.

"Now down on the rods," continued Mug, "that's where you really get a comfortable trip."

I looked up quickly. Riding the rods was the most dangerous part of hoboining. A 'boe only did it when he was afraid of being spotted by a prowling dick or when all the cars were locked.

"It's an easy way of slicing off an arm," I said.

"Hell! It's the best way of riding," said Mug angrily. "It's as safe as riding on top if you don't get panicky."

"I wouldn't do it," I said, talking half to Mug and half to the kid.

Mug threw me a hard look and then laughed harshly. "You just gotta know how."

Pete lit a pipe. "It is dangerous," he said. "I'd never do it."

There had been no more talk about it. While the kid listened with open-eyed wonder, we traded road stories for a couple of hours, then bedded down.

And here I was now, lying on the freight car floor. Listening, waiting. Fighting sleep. The freight rushed through the lonely night with a comfortable rocking sound. This was my kind of life. Traveling, doing what I liked, being on my own. After I had gotten out of the army I wanted my freedom. The locomotive whistle hooted somewhere far up the track. The freight car doors rattled slowly. . . .

I awoke with a start. It was day! The kid was still on the floor next to me. One car door was open and Mug and Pete were sitting with their legs dangling over the platform. I looked back at the kid. One side of his face was flat against the floor. I raised myself on one elbow and looked more closely at him. He wasn't breathing!

I got up quickly and bent over him. Everything inside me tightened, then knotted hard.

The kid was dead.

Pete was calling to me. "Something wrong?"

I got to my feet slowly. If I had only stayed awake the night before. Pete and Mug started over toward me. Then I remembered the wallet. I bent down again and unfastened the kid's money belt. I started to take out the wallet.

Pete looked down at the kid. His thin mouth hung open. His eyes widened. "Is—is he?"

Mug rubbed one large, gnarled hand against his jaw.

The wallet was empty. Only the picture and a few cards were left in it. I closed the wallet and put it in my pocket.

"Musta been his lungs," said Mug

finally. "I heard the kid coughing most of the night." For a long moment I just stared at Mug. I remembered his look the night before when he saw the kid's wallet. I just stared at him and there must have been a hatred in my eyes.

"Yeah," I said finally. "His lungs." I turned around to the slumped body on the freight car floor. It swayed lightly with every lurch of the train. I beat down beside him.

The inside of the car was bright with sunlight from the open door. I looked at the kid. His collar had been torn open. As I looked even closer I could hear my heart pounding my ears. My mouth went dry. Around the kid's neck was a harsh ringlet of red marks. Finger marks!

I turned around, getting to my feet. Mug's large hands were hanging at his side. He bulged them into big bony fists as he saw me staring at them. I walked to the open door, looking out at the rushing green country.

I didn't actually know whether Mug had murdered the kid. I would swear my life on it, but I didn't *know*. Somehow, I had to find out for sure.

Pete stood beside me at the open door. "We'll be hitting a mail junction in ten minutes," he said nervously. "I'm getting off. I don't wanna be around when they find the kid's body."

I looked at the little guy. A gray stubble covered his thin jaw. He kept looking between me and the rushing scenery.

"Should be about ten minutes," he continued. "You comin'?"

Mug was rolling some things up into a bundle in one corner of the freight.

"Maybe," I answered slowly.

"There ain't gonna be another train along here for a couple a' hours," said Mug looking up. "And it ain't sayin' we'll be able to hop that one. I'm sticking."

"Mug may be right," I said quickly.

I couldn't afford to lose track of Mug.

"But what about the yard dicks?" asked Pete.

"They won't bother us."

"They won't bother me," answered Pete. "That's for sure. I'm high tailing it just as soon as this rattler stops. You coming or ain't-ya?" He turned to me.

I looked at Mug before I answered. "I'm staying."

Mug turned to look at the slumped figure on the car floor. I followed his eyes. "Okay," he said finally. He looked over to me. "But Pete's right. We can't be caught with this kid. And we can't dump him. They'd be waiting for us at the next depot if they found the body. The kid'll have to stay on. We'll stay too but not in here."

He finished knotting the bundle with a hard yank. I knew that there was no other freight car open. I waited for what he was going to say. I almost knew what he was going to say. Pete stopped scratching his head and looked at the big guy expectantly.

"We'll ride the rods," said Mug finally.

Pete shook his head and gave a low whistle. "I'm gettin'," he said quickly. "Sure as hell I'm gettin'!"

I felt my forehead cold with sweat. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the body of the kid lurching with the movement of the car. "Okay," I said quietly. "We'll ride the rods."

Mug looked over at me and smiled. Sunlight caught the thin glazed scar on his cheek. He just kept smiling and didn't say anything.

The train pulled into a siding in what might have been ten minutes but seemed like an hour to me. I kept thinking of all the stories I had heard about the rods. About sudden jolts throwing 'boes under the speeding wheels. About guys falling asleep and dropping beneath the rushing train.

Pete crouched by the open door as the train slowed to a stop. "So long," he said and jumped. His bundle was tied to his belt and it bobbed as he moved. We watched him run crouching. He dashed across the network of tracks into a thicket of bushes. He didn't turn around once he had left the train.

One long screech and the train had stopped. Mug and I jumped down on to the crunching gravel. We bent low and ran quickly along the side of the line of freight cars. Up ahead I could see the engineer leaning out of his cab. A breakeman was climbing down off the caboose.

"Under!" said Mug in a loud whisper.

I saw him duck low and scamper beneath a heavy freight. I followed him awkwardly, bruising my knee on a track tie and scooping up a handful of gravel.

In the dark under the freight car I saw the rods. They were about ten inches from the gravel bed. Each rod was about the width of a broom handle and there were two of them running along under each side of the car. Several others crisscrossed almost flat against the bottom of the car.

"Get up! Get up!" yelled Mug in a loud whisper. I looked across to where he was. Mug rested on the two bottom rods, gripping the top rods with his hands. As I lifted my head to look at him I bumped it sharply on the bottom of the freight. My nostrils were filled with the sharp cold smell of the gravel and the hot oily odors of the freight car bottom.

I finally managed to arrange myself directly across from Mug. I balanced my entire length on the two thin rods under me, winding my feet around them and with my arms and hands grabbing every top rod within reach. An octopus couldn't have done a better job.

I heard a loud sssss'ing noise. I was about four inches from the side of the

wheels. They began to turn slowly. I shifted my eyes and looked down at the ties below slipping away. I gripped my rods tightly, desperately. The ties began to blur. The wheels were like buzz saws.

I finally worked up enough courage to lift my head slightly and I turned it carefully to look at Mug. He was balanced easily on his rods. Only one hand gripped the pipes above him. The other held a little dried apple which he was eating contentedly.

"It's—it's—not—bad," I said across to Mug. My voice sounded strangely too loud. The noise of the wheels sliced against my ears.

"It's like I told your friend," answered Mug. "It's the only way to ride." He hadn't called the kid 'my friend' before.

I looked up quickly at my hands gripping the rods above me. The knuckles were strained white. My thick gold ring seemed too large for its finger.

"To bad about your friend," continued Mug. "He did die of that lung trouble, didn't he?"

"Sure," I said. "I told you he did." I looked over at Mug.

He was smiling again. His thick lips hung loose and his teeth were like pieces of shell stuck in red clay.

"Good," he said. "For a while I thought you might have thought something else. Something unhealthy." He laughed and then dropped the apple core from his hand. We both watched as it was carried a little ways by the wind, then mashed under the train wheels.

Mug reached across with his free hand and patted me on the shoulder. "Don't hold on so tight, buddy," he said. "You ain't gonna get hurt." He looked at me mockingly. I could feel my heart pounding louder than the clatter of the train. Slowly I let go with one hand from the rod above me.

"Good!" Mug laughed.

I held my free hand suspended a minute then laid it across my chest, breathing deeply.

Mug turned his body on the rail, still holding on with one hand, until he was now facing me entirely.

"That's a nice ring you got there," he said looking at my hand. "Gold, ain't it?"

I nodded my head.

A train rushed past us on the opposite track in a rumbling steely racket. The first shock of the noise nearly threw me off my perch. I quickly gripped another rod with my free hand, staring panicky at the rushing road bed beneath me. Mug didn't move. He was smiling and he kept looking at my hand and the ring.

The train passed and it was lighter again under the freight car. I let go with one hand again.

"Let's see the ring, buddy," said Mug. I can't show him I'm scared, I thought to myself. He knows it, but I can't admit it. I extended my arm toward him. I've got to tag on to him until we get off the train. It would be suicide to start a fight now.

Mug's hand turned the ring around on my finger.

"You wanta sell it?" he asked.

For a moment I couldn't answer. "Sure," I said finally. My heart was beginning to pound again. "If you've got the right price."

He still held on to the ring and my hand with his big hand. One push—one forceful pull from him—

"Ten bucks," I said.

Mug let go of my hand. My arm dropped a little ways and almost hit the rushing track ties. I grabbed the rod above me quickly.

Mug turned around on the rod again, until he was facing the bottom of the freight once more. With one hand he loosened his collar and pulled out a small tobacco pouch that was tied to a string around his neck. Still working with only one hand, he opened the bag and looking with his chin down on his chest, pulled out two bills.

He looked at the bills, closed the bag, and with the bag still on his chest outside his shirt, handed them to me.

"Ten bucks," he said. "You got a sale."



DOWN THE ADVENTURE TRAIL...



It's a fascinating trail next month that winds its way to faraway places in stories of adventure-round-the-world . . . It starts out with a long novelette of pearls and peril, intrigue and sudden death in the languorous Spice Islands somewhere "South of Celebes"—by LaSelle Gilman . . . and carries us along to a Mexican bullring where, in the sun-drenched Plaza de Toros, we meet a "Tijuana Toreador"—by Llewellyn Hughes . . . then across the world to the jungles of East Africa to snare a man-killing lion in a "Kenya Trap"—by Jan Saakse . . . and back to our own great American West to find "Free Land at War Eagle"—by Edmunds Claussen.

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On Sale August 10

I looked at the top bill. Nothing unusual. Regulation. But in the space above the serial number was a word, a name. Peggy. My heart was beating too fast. The girl in the picture, the look in the kid's eyes. They came flashing back to me with each fast turn of the train wheels.

The other bill was the same. I stuffed the bills into my pocket. I could feel my hand shaking. Mug was looking at me.

"It's good money," he said. He laughed.

I put out my hand and he reached to pull the ring off. I felt my mouth getting tight. With my other hand I gripped harder at the rod above me. Mug's fingers brushed against mine.

Suddenly, quickly, I grabbed for the bag on his chest. I gripped it tight and yanked. It broke loose and I felt it in my fist. My hand was in my pocket now. The bag, in my pocket.

Mug was startled. His eyes blazed at me. The scar on his knotted cheek flamed. I saw him wet his lips, slowly.

"That was bad, buster," he said slowly. "Very bad."

My breath came back suddenly. "It was the kid's money," I said.

Mug smiled tauntingly. "It was the kid's money. So what! I murdered him. So what!" He laughed. "You can't do anything about it."

I gripped my rod tightly. One hand was free. Mug seemed to be arranging himself slowly, deliberately. He weaved both legs around the rods. One of his hands was free. Suddenly he let go of the rod with the other. He held the top of the car with the flat of his palms.

"Give me that money," he said slowly.

The road sped below us. A few inches above our heads the heavy freight car lurched and clattered.

Mug's arms leaped at me suddenly. I felt his steel grip at my neck. I held on

tight with one hand. My free hand bashed down again and again at the side of his face. His fingers pressed hard at my throat. I continued beating his face. He shrieked curses above the noise of the train.

I struggled to suck in my breath. Mug's hand clawed at my shoulder and neck as I twisted on the narrow rod. His whole body leaned across the whipping, speeding rails. I straightened my free hand. Tensed it still, till it trembled. With one sharp cutting blow I struck Mug across the back of the neck.

I didn't hear him scream. I didn't let myself, though the shriek filled my ears, splintering my senses with its noise. I closed my eyes, breathing quickly, almost hysterically. Holding on tight to the rod above me.

Every time I opened my eyes I saw his body hurled and knocked against the wooden ties, across the track. And the wheels. The wheels! I closed my eyes but it did no good. The picture was there. His body, the track. The sharp rushing wheels!

A piece of clothing that had been ripped away from him fluttered darkly in the breeze under the speeding freight car. For a while I just stared at it senselessly. Then I remembered the kid. The young red-headed kid, with a picture of his sister and a faraway look in his eyes.

I turned my head to look at the gravel speeding past. Sunlight sparkled on it. The kid was dead, on the floor of a freight a couple of cars back. But I had the money. I could feel the stuffed bag bulge in my pocket.

And I had a picture with his sister's address. I remembered her blond hair and her smile. All the way into the next stop, I kept staring at the lurching freight car bottom above me, thinking about what I would say to her, how I would explain.

BEHIND THE



What's on your mind, detective fans? Here's where you can tell us what *you* think of **BLACK MASK**. Who are your favorite mystery writers; which ones would you like to see more often? What kind of stories do you like the best? This is your column; your chance to let us know what you like to see in **BLACK MASK**.

Judging from the response we have received since our last issue it seems that you like to see your letters in print. So keep them coming!

Dear Editor:

I think that "Lifting the Black Mask" is a wonderful way to tell the readers about one of the stories to appear in the next issue of **BLACK MASK**.

The pictures are a real incentive to buy the magazine and read that story, and all the others, too! I am always more ready to read a story when I have my curiosity whetted.

I also wanted to mention how much I liked the new cover style on your magazine. A real step forward!

(Miss) Doris Craig
Syracuse, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

My husband and I are both fans of **BLACK MASK** and have been reading it for as long as I can remember. I've never written a letter to an editor before but I thought I'd like to tell you about my favorite detective in your magazine.

He's the hero of the Robert Martin stories; Doctor Clint Colby. A really fascinating person! Colby's medical knowledge added to his sleuthing makes him more interesting than others.

Robert Martin really knows how to handle a story. Let's have some more of his stories regularly.

Mrs. John Caren
Danbury, Conn.

Dear Editor:

I wish you'd have lots more pictures. The stories are real thrillers, and you could get a lot of good ideas for pictures from them. I'm glad you don't have continued stories. I like to read them all at once. No matter how good a synopsis of what's happened is, you lose a lot when you have to wait a month or two between installments.

The size of the magazine is what I really like. Really handy when you're hanging from a subway strap.

John Arnold
Brooklyn, New York

Dear Editor:

I'm a mystery fan and the stories in your magazine rate tops with me. But, I am also a printer, and the type used in **BLACK MASK** also rates tops! It's the easiest to read, for me at least, of all the detective books; nice clean cut type that makes it a pleasure to read your magazine. There is no feeling of words being crowded into the page, but a feeling of space that carries your eye right along.

Tomas Sargent
Los Angeles, Calif.

We'll have more of your letters in the next issue. We'll print as many as we can. Write today so we'll have your letter in time for the next issue. Address your letters to **BLACK MASK**, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York. **THE EDITOR**

BLACKMAIL

BACKFIRE

It was murder in the mail for Private-Eye Joey Graham when his boss Rex Sackler nobly gave up the ten-G reward.

CHAPTER ONE

Conscience Money

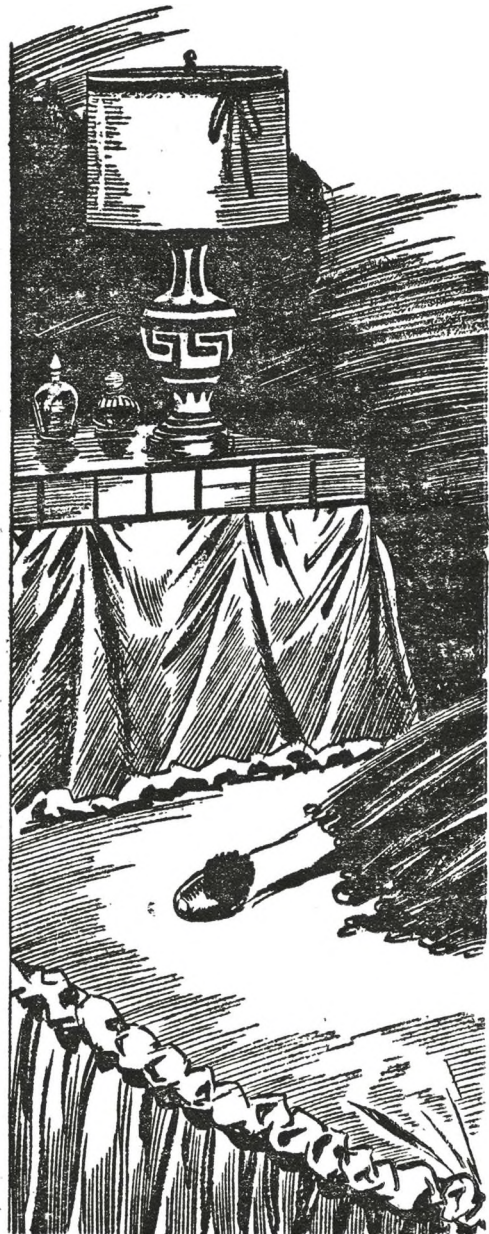
DURING the major part of my professional life, my salary has been paid and determined by Rex Sackler. What few raises I have gained have never been more than three dollars at a time and have been achieved only by dint of wearisome argument, bluster and minor blackmail.

However, on this particular Monday morning my bargaining position had been immeasurably strengthened. I was about to buttress my financial position at Sackler's expense and for the first time in my life I did not fear the outcome of a monetary joust with the most niggardly man this side of Aberdeen.

I sang in my shower that morning; I whistled a lilting melody as I shaved. Of necessity I forsook music as I consumed my bacon and eggs. And after a second cup of coffee I headed for the office on springy feet.

Sackler was already at his desk as I entered our shabby suite. I gave him my heartiest 'good morning' and laid my

By D. L. CHAMPION



**Detective-Action
Novelette**

He held the blade poised. . . .



paper on his desk. He grunted and snatched it up.

Several years ago he had pointed out to me, at some length, that it was foolish for each of us to toss a nickel away each morning for a paper. After all, he was in no great hurry to acquaint himself with the news of the world. He could contain himself until such time as I had arrived and handed over the journal which I had purchased from my meager salary.

As I crossed the room to my own desk, Sackler ran his long white fingers through his black hair, buried his corvine nose in the editorial page. I leaned back in my chair, put my feet on the scarred blotter and whistled a happy lay.

Sackler took his nose out of the paper and frowned. "Do you have to make that ghastly noise, Joey?"

"I am young," I said. "I am exuberant. The sap of life courses through my veins."

He made an unpleasant guttural sound. "You look as if you've come into money."

"Ah," I said, "you anticipate me. I'm going to come into money."

"Where are you going to get it?"

"Probably from you."

He assumed an expression of suspicion and pain.

"Or," I added, "from Ralph Owens."

He winced. For years Sackler had never faced a rival in the field of private investigation. Six months ago, Owens, a police lieutenant with a college degree had quit the force and gone into business on his own. He was a bright lad with connections. Certainly his income was not a fifth of Sackler's, but Rex considered that Owens was snatching the bread out of his mouth.

He pulled himself together. He said in a strained voice, "What do you mean?"

"I saw Owens Saturday night. He offered me a job. Twenty-five percent

more than you pay me. Plus a cut on rewards and big fees."

That statement was no more than two-thirds true. Owens had offered me a job. He had offered me a slight percentage of the fees. But the salary was the same as I drew now. However, I saw no point in being too literal.

Sackler said, "Judas!" He buried his face in his hands and gave the general impression that my betrayal was more than he could bear.

I knew better. I did not doubt that he was suffering. But I know quite well that his agony was engendered by the fact that I was conducting an assault upon his bank account.

In spite of the fact that his income ran well into five figures, he dwelt in a shabby, furnished room on the upper West side. He possessed three frayed suits. His only hat was a shapeless blob of felt.

His meals were consumed in a coffee pot which prepared all its food in a lard encrusted frying pan. His annual expense for amusement and miscellaneous was nil.

Each Wednesday he paid me what we laughingly called a salary; then devised various sure-thing gambling games in order to win it back. He succeeded more often than not.

His head was still bowed in sorrow at my perfidy when the door opened and Campbell Parry walked in. Of course, I didn't know his name then.

He was a short man of middle age. His hair was graying and he wore a pair of gold rimmed glasses. His eyes were diluted blue, his chin weak and his manner deferential. He coughed quietly and Sackler took his head out of his hands.

Parry said, "Mr. Sackler, I have a small commission for you, if you will accept it."

Sackler stared at him. His nostrils

twitched as if he were smelling money, which as a matter of fact he was. It was then that Parry told us his name and sat down gingerly on the edge of the chair by Sackler's desk.

"It is a small matter," he said. "But I am willing to pay you five hundred dollars for some advice which you can give me in less than fifteen minutes."

The melancholy fled Sackler's face. I frowned and mentally kicked myself for not having insisted on a percentage of fees before Parry had come in.

"Of course," said Sackler, beaming. "Of course. Any advice at all which my humble talent may produce is yours."

"Well," said Parry, "I want to go away. The question is where."

"Virginia Beach," I said. "And the suggestion is free."

Parry said, "You do not understand. I don't want to go away for a vacation. I want to go away forever."

Even Sackler seemed puzzled now. Parry sighed.

"LOOK," he said. "I have a wife and a son. I also have a monotonous job as an executive with a trucking company. I live in the suburbs, which bores me. My wife nags constantly. In short, I'm sick of life—at least the kind of a life I lead. I want to start all over again. From scratch."

Sackler nodded. "In other words you want to run away from your wife and family."

Parry nodded emphatically. "And my job and my home and the dull bridge and cocktail parties."

I stared at him incredulously. If he wanted to scam why didn't he just do it? Why offer Sackler five hundred bucks to tell him where to go? I lit a cigarette and said as much.

Parry shook his head at me. "It's not that easy," he said. "I've read

several articles lately. Not only is the Missing Persons Bureau always keeping an eye out for escaping husbands but there are several private agencies who specialize in the same thing. I've heard they're most efficient."

Understanding was now in Sackler's game. "Ah," he said, "you want me to tell you how to avoid being caught, how to keep away from the police and the private agencies your wife will employ?"

"Exactly," said Parry. "You, as a detective, should know all the methods used by such agencies. You can tell me how to keep out of their way."

Sackler looked like a child who has fallen into an ice cream freezer. There may be simpler ways of making five hundred dollars but I had never heard of them. I tried to throw a monkey wrench into the proceedings.

"Just scam," I said. "As far as possible. Keep out of trouble with the cops and it's ten to one no one will ever find you."

Sackler glared at me, then, remembering he had an audience, adopted a superior and pitying smile.

"That sort of advice will lose us all our clients, Joey," he said. He turned to Parry. "This is the proper procedure. First, select a town with a population of about a hundred thousand. In a small place the inhabitants are too inquisitive. Second communicate with no one. No one at all. Third, do you have any hobbies or particular forms of amusement?"

Parry considered this for a moment. "Well," he said at last, "I'm fond of bowling and I'm nuts about chop suey."

"Not any longer," said Sackler. "Your wife will doubtless furnish that information. They'll look for you in the alleys and the chop suey joints. You'll give up both. They'll also check the trucking companies to see if you've applied for a job since that's your line of business.

You must take up something else. Is that clear?"

This was all obvious enough to me but Parry nodded gratefully as if he thought he was getting a bargain for his five hundred bucks.

"That's about all," said Sackler, "except my advice to take as much cash with you as possible. It may take a little while to get yourself started in a new line."

Parry shook his head. "I'm taking no cash at all—or very little. I have about thirty thousand dollars in savings but I'm leaving that behind for my family."

"Your wife has no money of her own?"

"Oh, yes. Her family's quite wealthy. She has plenty."

Sackler looked blank. That kind of a deal baffled him. Parry went on. "They don't really need my cash but I'm leaving it as a sort of—well, conscience money. I'm going to start right from the bottom."

Sackler still looked baffled. But as Parry rose, withdrew his wallet and laid five new hundred dollar bills on the desk a smile wreathed his face.

"Thank you," said Parry. He put on his hat and left the room. I regarded Sackler with outrage.

"You are Fortune's fool," I said bitterly. "People actually track you down and thrust money into your pocket."

He stowed away the bills and looked at me smugly. "For services rendered," he said. "The little guy ought to keep well under cover if he does what I tell him. That is, unless he had a girl."

"A girl?"

"Sure. Lots of these runaway husbands have girls they leave behind them who plan to join them later. That's death. Because they'll write. They'll send the girl their address. Either some smart dick'll steal the letter, or the girl, herself will talk. Women do, you know."

I nodded. I wasn't particularly in-

terested in Campbell Parry. I said, "We shall now revert to the subject which was under discussion before your client came in."

"What was that again, Joey?"

"Cash. Whether I go over to Owens or whether you pay me a sum approaching my worth."

Now he looked pained again. "Listen," he said. "I pay you a regular salary, Joey. I pay it whether we have a case or not; whether we work or not. Sometimes it puts me sorely out of pocket. I wish I drew a regular salary as you do."

He sounded convincing. I said, "All right, I'll forego the salary raise but I want a percentage on all your fees and rewards."

"How much?"

"Ten per cent."

He closed his eyes and shuddered. I followed it up with what I thought was a magnanimous offer.

"Moreover," I said, "if I stumble across a client or if I solve a case all by myself, I'll give *you* ten percent of any rewards I get."

He wasn't enthusiastic. Considering the fact that I had never brought in a rich client, that I had never cleaned up a case by myself, I hadn't exactly expected him to be.

"Of course," I said, bluffing cautiously, "if you don't feel you can afford it, I can always go over to Owens."

He looked at me as if he'd caught me stealing a Bible. "Go away," he said. "Let me think about it. You're doing a terrible thing to me and I must think it over. I'll tell you tomorrow. Let me sleep on it."

I said, "That's fair enough," and put my hat on preparatory to going to lunch. "You sleep on it."

But knowing what the idea of parting with dough did to his emotions I knew he was in for an insomniac night.

CHAPTER TWO

"Too Damned Efficient"

IN THE following morning I was drinking my coffee and munching a slice of toast as I opened the paper. I ran a careless eye across the front page. Then a headline jumped at me. I blinked, put down my cup and proceeded to read.

When I had finished the story, I threw back my head and howled with joyous laughter. I paid the check without finishing my breakfast and ran all the way to the office.

Sackler was at his desk, rolling a cigarette with inexpert fingers, when I arrived, breathless. He looked up at me with some distaste and said, "Must you pant all over my desk at this hour in the morning? I never knew you to be so assiduous about getting here on time."

"Listen," I said. "You remember Parry yesterday? You told him how to hide out?"

"Naturally."

"Could you find him yourself?"

"Of course not. If he does as I told him, not even I can find him. When I give five hundred dollars worth of advice, it takes."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "Especially considering that there's a ten grand reward for Parry's capture."

His eyes bugged and his jaw fell. "What are you talking about?"

"Parry. He killed his wife last night, then scrambled. His father-in-law has offered ten thousand bucks for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killer."

"You're screwy," said Sackler without conviction.

"Then so's the paper," I said tossing it on his desk. "Here, read it."

He grabbed the paper and his startled eyes bored into the page. I crossed to

my own desk, tilted back in my chair and once again filled the atmosphere with hysterical hilarity.

The story he was reading with bug-ging eyes was simple and to the point. It stated baldly that Mrs. Parry had been found in her bedroom neatly stabbed through the heart and that her husband was missing.

Friends had announced to the police that she and her husband had got along none too well in recent years and there was a four state alarm out for yesterday's client, Mr. Campbell Parry. In addition, Mrs. Parry's father was offering ten G's cash for any information leading to the apprehension and conviction of the killer.

Sackler hurled the newspaper to the floor and registered a typical reaction.

"I'm out nine thousand, five hundred dollars," he said bitterly.

"How do you figure that?"

"If I wasn't so damned efficient, if I hadn't told him how to hide himself so well, I could find him. I could claim the dough the old man is offering."

He paced the floor, running his long fingers through his dark black hair. He was thinking of money, money which had eluded his sticky fingers and he was suffering. I watched him, not without enjoyment.

He came suddenly to a halt. His brow brightened somewhat as he said, "Well, if the old guy's offering a reward, I suppose anyone can get into the act. The coppers won't have an exclusive on the case. I call him and offer my talents."

He thumbed through the phone book, put through a call and spoke briefly. Evidently the answer was satisfactory since his face registered relief when he hung up.

He picked up his shapeless hat and said, "We're working, Joey. Old man Parry wants all the help he can get.

Let's go down to the Parry house and see if we can pick up anything."

I sat firmly in my chair. I said, "I have something to discuss with you first."

"It can wait, can't it?" he said testily. "There's money involved here."

"There is," I agreed. "You were to sleep on a certain proposition I made you yesterday."

"Afterwards," he said, annoyed. "Business first. There's ten thousand bucks in this case."

"Ten percent of which is mine."

"We'll talk about it later, Joey. Come on."

"No," I said. I stood up. "Here is my last, my final offer. My salary remains the same. But starting right now, I get ten percent of all fees if you break the case. If I break it, I get ninety percent, you get the ten."

He stared at me.

"When," he said with heavy sarcasm, "did you ever crack a case without my help?"

I thought it politic not to answer that. I said, "For instance if you find Parry and bring him back, you get nine G's. I get one. If I find him I get the nine thousand, you get the one."

"You're nuts, Joey. First you never solved a case in your life. I solve them all. Why should I give you ten percent?"

I shrugged and essayed to look nonchalant. "You forget Owens has offered me a job."

"Then take it," he snapped. "I'm going up to the Parry house."

I hadn't expected this and was taken somewhat by surprise. But I still held the top card in the deck. I took a deep breath and played it.

“WHAT would your old pal, Inspector Wolfe, at Headquarters say; what would every paper in town say; what would the

whole damned city say if they knew that Rex Sackler took a five hundred buck fee from a killer to tell him where to hide?"

He looked at me, stricken. He said, "Traitor!"

"Joey," he said in a voice which had a tremor in it, "you wouldn't do it."

"The hell I wouldn't."

He stood for a long silent moment. Then he gave up like a man giving up his right arm. He said, "All right, Joey. I shall do as you say. But the memory of this perfidy shall bow my back until the day I die."

"Okay with me," I said cheerfully. "As long as I get my ten percent."

I put on my hat and we went down to the street en route to the Parry house. Naturally, he sneaked out of the taxi first and stuck me with the bill but I was so elated with the sharp bargain I had driven I didn't care.

The Parry domicile was a neat semi-Colonial job on the Nassau county border. There was a copper at the gate who made no move to stop us as we went by. The heavy front door was open. I thrust my head around the jamb and the first person I saw was Inspector Wolfe of the Homicide squad. He saw me, too, and groaned. He said, "I suppose Sackler's with you."

I nodded brightly. Wolfe groaned again. "I might have known publication of a reward would be bringing him running."

Sackler pushed past me and confronted Wolfe.

"Reward!" he said with fine contempt. "I am here to do my duty as a citizen. To bring a killer to justice. If there's any money involved it's a mere by-product."

Wolfe looked as skeptical as I did.

"Now," said Sackler, "have the police discovered anything of any importance?"

"There's nothing to discover," said

Wolfe, "except Parry. The thing's cut and dried. Parry and his wife didn't get along. So he pushed a carving knife into her, grabbed what dough there was in the house and scrambled. The only problem is to find Parry. If you do that before us, I suppose you can claim the reward."

It seemed to me that this was a fair and accurate statement of affairs. Sackler, however, seemed skeptical. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "You don't mind my looking over the house?"

"No," said Wolfe. "But I assure you Parry's not here. And that's all we're looking for in this case."

Sackler shrugged again and walked past Wolfe into an elaborately furnished living room. I tagged along behind him. There, seated in an arm chair at the far end of the room, smoking an exceedingly nervous cigar, was a portly man of middle age. His hair was graying and sparse. Tortoise-shell glasses gave him an owl-like expression. He stood up as we entered and looked at us inquiringly.

Sackler announced his name and mission. The portly man said, "I've heard of you. I hope you can find that dirty, little killer."

Sackler said, "You mean Campbell Parry?"

The portly man regarded him curiously. "Of course, I mean Parry. Who else?"

"I don't know," said Sackler. "I've made no investigation yet."

The other grunted. He said, "My name is Franklin. Harry Franklin. I'm Mrs. Parry's business advisor, investment counsellor. She never should have married that miserable little man. He was only after her money."

"Ah," said Sackler, "she had more than he did, eh?"

"He had nothing save his salary."

Sackler helped himself to a cigarette

from a silver box on a taboret. He inhaled gratefully as if relishing the fact that the smoke was free.

He said, "Are there any suspects besides Parry?"

Franklin looked at him as if he were listening to a half-wit. "How could there be?" he exploded. "The case is cut and dried. No one was here last night, save an old servant, the Parry's son and Parry himself. The boy's only sixteen years old and a bit of a sissy. He wouldn't murder a mouse."

Sackler seemed taken aback at the vehemence of Franklin's speech. He said, "I think I'll take a look at the room where the body was found. Upstairs, isn't it?"

"Second door on your left," said Franklin. He sat down again and puffed nervously at his cigar. Sackler headed for the stairs with me at his heels.

But before we got to the second door on the left, we naturally enough, passed the first door on the left. It was open. Inside the room, a woman, extremely well dressed, about thirty-five, sat on the edge of a bed and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Standing over her, futilely attempting consolation, was a pale-faced lad of sixteen.

Sackler paused in the doorway, then entered. He said courteously, "I just spoke to the deceased's father at his office. He engaged my services. May I ask if you can tell me anything which may help in solving this murder?"

The woman took the handkerchief from her face and looked up at us. Her hair was red and her face was striking. All in all she was a beautiful woman.

She said in a harsh, flat voice, "I can tell you nothing, save that I wish I were dead instead of Agatha Parry."

The boy said quickly, "This is Mrs. Abbott. Mrs. Robert Abbott. She was mother's best friend. She's all upset."

There was a tremor in his voice and

a dazed expression in his eye which indicated that he was quite upset, too.

"Then, you," I said, "are young Parry?"

The boy nodded. "Arthur Parry." He paused for a moment, then his voice broke and he said, "How, how could dad have done a thing like this?"

The Abbott woman uttered something between a cry and a sob and buried her face once more in her handkerchief. Sackler turned to me and spread his palms upward.

"Well," he said, "let's take a look at the place where they found the body."

THE Parry bedroom was in a state of mild chaos. Twin beds thrust themselves out from the far wall. One of them had been slept in; the other was still made. A bureau stood at one side of the room. Its drawers had been pulled out. Their contents was scattered all over the floor. Sackler looked around the room, sighed and walked about slowly.

He did this for some five minutes. Whether he was thinking or looking for something I didn't know. I did know that I was rather bored and considered he was wasting time. The only point in the whole case was to find the missing Parry. It was a cinch that he wasn't in this bedroom.

I got bored. I wandered idly out into the hall. I could still hear sounds of faint sobbing coming from the next room. I strolled along and peered around the doorway. The Abbott woman's face remained in her handkerchief. Her shoulders shook convulsively. Young Parry stood at her side, obviously uncomfortable.

He patted her tentatively on the shoulder. He said, "Try not to cry so much, please. Let's try to remember that mother is in heaven."

The woman took her face from the

handkerchief. She looked at the boy and it seemed to me that there was red rage in her eyes. She said in a low, hoarse voice, "You fool. You utter damned fool."

The boy blinked and blushed. Mrs. Abbott opened her bag, withdrew a cigarette case. I pulled my head back and groped in my pocket for a cigarette of my own. I furrowed my brow. The Graham brain went into action. I was gestating one hell of an idea.

A little later Sackler emerged from the bedroom. He didn't look happy and he didn't answer me when I inquired if he'd discovered anything. He walked silently down the stairs.

Wolfe was still in the hallway sitting by the telephone. Sackler halted before him. He said, "What's all that disorder in the bedroom? Who frisked the joint?"

"Parry. Obviously. Before he scrambled."

"Why obviously?"

"He needed dough. It figures easily enough. He had a fight with her. He killed her. He needed cash to make a getaway. So he went through his wife's bureau looking for money. Or maybe he took her jewels. We're trying to check on that now."

Judging from the expression on Sackler's face this theory didn't impress him much. He grunted and went out into the street. We returned to the office where we spent a quiet afternoon.

Sackler sat brooding at his desk. I didn't know whether he was actually trying to figure where Parry might be or brooding about the fact that he couldn't get his hands on the ten G's reward money.

Anyway, I wasn't too interested. I was busily engaged on a mastermind of my own. When I'd forced Sackler to agree to pay me ninety percent of the fee earned on a case which I broke myself, I never had any idea of col-

lecting. My principal aim had been to cut myself in for the ten percent on the items Sackler cracked himself.

But now I had an idea. I knew something Sackler didn't know. Something which might well lead me to Parry's trail. Something which would toss the whole case in my own little lap. The concept of this happening, of me holding on to nine grand and handing Sackler ten percent was the most beautiful thought I'd had in years.

Sackler hadn't heard what the Abbott dame had said to Arthur Parry; he hadn't seen her face when she'd said it. But I had and it impressed me. It convinced me that whatever she may have been weeping about it wasn't her dead pal, Agatha Parry.

And I recalled something else. Only yesterday Sackler had said that Parry would probably be found if he didn't have a girl, that all these runaways who had girls wrote to them, sent them addresses.

I began adding two and two like mad. After a while I came up with a sum.

If the Abbott woman had not been weeping for her old pal, Agatha Parry, who *had* she been upset about? Parry, himself? It certainly figured that way. And if she was weeping about Parry, it followed that she was fond of him. And fond seemed a mild word. Suppose that Parry intended to send for her after he'd lammed?

Well, Sackler, himself, had given me the answer to that one. It meant that Parry would keep in touch with her, that he'd send her his address. And if I could get that address it would put nine G's in my pocket and break Sackler's avaricious little heart.

I left the office early, went home to my furnished room, lay down on the bed and summoned every brain cell into action. As I reconstructed what had happened it all became clear.

Parry, doubtless, had decided to leave his wife, then send for the Abbott woman. He had consulted Sackler to make sure Mrs. Parry wouldn't be able to track him down. Somehow, his wife had learned of his plans at the last minute, they'd quarrelled, and he'd killed her. The Abbott dame was upset because Parry was a murderer, not because Agatha Parry was dead. It figured perfectly. And if I could somehow get Campbell Parry's address from La Abbott I was in.

I got off the bed and dressed myself in my best clothes. I decided to call on Abbott, tell her what I knew, point out the coppers would surely get Parry sooner or later and it would be much better for all concerned if he surrendered to me personally. I could pretend an influence in the D. A.'s office which I didn't have and swear I could fix it so he could cop a plea.

I went out into the night, looked up Abbott's address in the phone book and climbed down into the subway.

An hour later, I returned home disconsolately. I had got exactly nowhere. A fat and formidable maid had opened the door of the Abbott's apartment. She viewed me with no enthusiasm whatever and informed me that Mrs. Abbott was in bed and unwell, that she would see no one at all.

MY ARGUMENT that my visit was a matter of life, death and several other vital things got me nothing. I considered bribing the maid to let me see Abbott's mail before she got it, but one look at her grim, forbidding face forced me to discard that brilliant idea.

I was still wracking my brains as I climbed into bed. It seemed an absolute cinch to nail Parry if I could somehow keep an eye on Abbott's mail—provided, of course, my theory was right.

I had come to no solution when I went to sleep; nor when I arrived at the office on the following morning.

Sackler was at his desk waiting for me to hand him the morning paper. I did so and inquired, "Any line on Parry?"

He said, "Parry? Oh, he'll probably turn up sooner or later. I'm working on a different angle."

"What other angle is there?"

He shrugged and turned to the financial page. I remained silent for a while, then asked nervously, "Is there any line on this Abbott woman?"

"Nothing much. She's a widow. Friend of the Parry family. That's all." He paused a moment, then glanced at me sharply. "You're not free lancing on this, are you? You don't figure Abbott did it?"

I breathed an inward sigh of relief. If he spoke like that, it argued he hadn't worked out the same theory I had.

I said, "Of course, I don't figure Abbott did it. Parry did it obviously. It's just a matter of finding him."

He grunted and returned to the paper. I lit a cigarette and my head ached with thinking. I was surer of this case than I had ever been of anything. It was just a matter of somehow getting to Abbott to find out if she knew where Parry was.

It was a little after 11:00 o'clock when the door opened and Harry Franklin came in. He bowed, sat down and passed around a cigar case. Sackler grabbed his as if it had been a hundred dollar bill.

"Something came up this morning," said Franklin. "I've already given it to the police; since you're working on the case, I thought I'd drop in and tell you about it, too."

Sackler puffed on his free cigar and said, "Decent of you."

"Yesterday afternoon," said Franklin.

"Parry came to my office to draw some cash. I take care of all his wife's affairs. If she needs money she simply sends me a receipt for it and I hand over the cash. Well, Parry came in yesterday with a receipt, signed by his wife, saying she wanted five thousand dollars. This has happened before and naturally I merely glanced over the signature."

Sackler glanced at him sharply. "You mean Mrs. Parry's signature was forged?"

"That's right," said Franklin. "It wasn't even a good imitation of her writing. But, I guess, Parry figured correctly I wouldn't examine it too closely. She'd sent him for money before."

Sackler nodded slowly. "So you believe that Parry forged the signature, came to you for cash to run away after he'd killed his wife?"

Franklin seemed mildly surprised. "Why, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"It's obvious enough," I said, giving voice to my own problem. "The trouble is we don't need any evidence proving Parry's guilty; we need evidence showing where the devil he is."

Sackler gave me a long, hard look. "Ah," he said, "you've been working out a theory, Joey?"

"I don't even think the case needs a theory," said Franklin. "The police, everyone know Parry is guilty. Don't you think so, Mr. Sackler?"

Sackler drew a deep breath. He said, "I haven't made up my mind. All I know is that Joey, here, never came to a correct conclusion in his life. That rather throws me over to believing that Parry is innocent."

I smiled blandly. I was closer to nine grand than he was. All I had to do was to figure out how to get hold of Abbott's mail.

Franklin said slowly, "I can't see how anyone but Parry had either opportunity or motive."

"Well," said Sackler noncommittally,

"I'm working on it. Thanks, anyway, for letting me know about that forged receipt."

Franklin nodded, stood up. There was a thoughtful expression on his cherubic face as he left the office. Rex Sackler went back to the morning paper. I went back to my problem.

I went out to lunch alone to avoid getting stuck with Sackler's check. I ate two hamburgers, washed them down with two glasses of beer and returned to the office. I still had no solution.

The afternoon went by quietly. Sackler leaned back in his swivel chair and stared at the far wall. He, too, seemed lost in thought. I doodled on the pad before me and my head ached with the strain I was putting on it.

Then, about 4:30, the hood came in. I looked up as the door slammed to see a swarthy, heavy-set individual with a chest like an anvil. His eyes and complexion were dark and there was a livid scar on one side of his face. His lips were thick and his hat was pushed on the back of his head. His hair was greasy and slicked down. As I watched him I had a vague feeling that I had seen him somewhere before.

He looked at me, then at Sackler.

He said, "Which of you mugs is Sackler?"

I pointed across the room and said, "He is."

The hood said, "Ah," and thrust his hand in his pocket. When he withdrew it again it held an automatic, the muzzle of which drew a bead on Sackler's heart.

NOW, Sackler never had been Congressional Medal material. I had seen him with a gun on him before and his conduct had not been exactly courageous. However, this time he met the hood's eye and failed to holler for help.

The hood said, "I'm Spike Sligo. Maybe you never heard of me in the East. But where I come from guys know better than to argue with me."

Sackler said, with astonishing calm, "To what do I owe the honor of the visit, Mr. Sligo?"

"I come here to talk business."

I kept looking at the guy. I was certain I'd seen him somewhere. But there was nothing familiar about either his voice or his accent.

"Go ahead," said Sackler. "Talk."

Sligo balanced his automatic on his knee. Idly he put a hand in his vest pocket and produced a silver dollar. He spun it nonchalantly, caught it and replaced it in his pocket.

"I hear," he said, "that you're a guy who is willing to pick up a fast buck."

I blinked with annoyance. Was it possible that once again someone was going to toss a bundle of money into Sackler's emaciated lap?

"You're working on this Parry case," said Sligo. "Trying to pick up that ten G reward. Well, I'm here to offer you eleven G's."

"For what?"

"To lay off. Old man Parry offers you ten to work on the case. I offer you eleven to lay off. More dough and less work. What do you say?"

I squirmed in my seat. This I didn't like. Sackler wasn't even close to collecting the reward and now this joker was offering him even more dough to quit the case.

Sackler said, "This is interesting. When and how do I collect?"

"We'll wait a week," said Sligo. "If you don't do nothing more in the case, you'll get the dough. In a plain envelope through the mail."

"Mailed from where?"

Sligo grinned. "Not New York. From out of town. That's all I can tell you. I guess you can figure it out."

Even I was smart enough to figure it out. Parry, apparently, had heard that Sackler was tracking him down. Parry, it seemed, didn't have much fear of the police department but, as was demonstrated by his original visit, had an exceedingly high opinion of Sackler. Rex had told him how to hide and he was scared that Rex might be able to find out where he was hiding.

So he'd sent in this hood to make a deal. Even the reason for his picking a guy like Sligo was obvious. Sackler might have held an ordinary citizen for the coppers to work over, after he'd made such a deal. But you couldn't very well held a guy who was holding a gun on you.

"Well," said Sackler, "it sounds reasonable to me. Go back and tell your principal I'm waiting for the money."

Sligo stood up. "Good. You'll get it in a week." He backed toward the door still keeping his automatic in front of him. "By the way, don't get any funny ideas of chasing after me. Stay right where you are for ten minutes after I leave. I may be right outside the door ready to blast you if you come out before then. Well, so long, bozos."

Again he took the silver dollar from his vest pocket and tossed it nonchalantly in the air before he opened the door. It slammed behind him.

I looked at Sackler and said, "Are you really going to take that dough?"

He shook his head. "It's damned dubious dough, Joey. And even if they send it, it won't pay in the long run. I can do better solving cases than laying off them. I can see a buck under my nose easily enough. But I can also see two several furlongs away."

"Then you're still working on the case?"

"I'm still working on it." He stood up and reached for his disgraceful hat. "As a matter of fact I'm working on it

all day. I have some calls to make and I won't be back. You take care of the office. Close up."

He went out of the office leaving me once again to my own unsolved problem.

CHAPTER THREE

Illegal Ethics

NOT only did I have to dig up an idea but I had to dig it up fast. Wolfe with all the power of all the coppers in the country behind him was going to find Parry sooner or later and probably sooner. If I wanted to grab the reward I had to move fast. I lit a cigarette and went into mental action again.

An hour later I thought of something. It wasn't terrific, true, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances. I would write La Abbott a letter. I put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and went to work.

Now, I am by no means a great writer. But for nine G's I had to be eloquent; I had to sweat.

First, I told the Abbott woman that no one save myself realized that she had been in love with Parry. I threw in a paragraph expressing deep sympathy with her position. I mentioned one's civic duty. I pointed out that sooner or later the coppers were bound to pick Parry up. I lied about my connections with the D. A. and guaranteed that if Parry was to surrender to me, I'd see to it he faced no worse a charge than second degree murder.

It took me three hours to write a thousand words. When it was done I wasn't quite satisfied with it but it was the best I could do. I sealed it in an envelope, stamped it and dropped it in the hall mail chute.

When I went home that night I felt relieved. Now the thing was out of my

hands. If my letter worked, okay, it worked. If it didn't, I was licked.

Sackler didn't come in at all the following morning. I kept the vigil myself, nervously wondering if my all out literary effort would bear fruit.

Shortly after lunch Sackler arrived, grunted at me and sat down at his desk. I was in no mood for conversation and, apparently, neither was he. We sat in silence until the 3:00 o'clock call of the postman.

He tossed some letters on Sackler's desk and announced, "Special delivery for Joseph Graham."

I sprang up and signed for it. I ripped open a violet scented, purple envelope with trembling fingers. There was a single sheet of paper inside. It bore a street address followed by two words: *Gary, Indiana.*

My heart leaped. Obviously, my missive to Abbott had worked. In my hand I held the address of Campbell Parry. I also held nine tenths of ten thousand dollars.

With an effort I kept a dead pan. I didn't want Sackler to suspect anything. I walked calmly back to my desk. Sackler said, "What is it, Joey? Anything important?"

I shook my head. "Dame I know. Always bothering me. Can't seem to get rid of her."

He nodded. He looked at me thoughtfully. "Joey, I'm not sure I believe you. I think you're doing your own investigation on this Parry thing. I think you've got something."

"Well, suppose I have?"

"If you really have," he said, "I wouldn't want to take unfair advantage of you."

"What do you mean by that?"

He scratched his head. He said, "If you've really got this thing figured I'm willing to waive my ten percent."

"Aren't you getting a little out of

character?" I asked him suspiciously.

"Maybe. I know you think I'd sell my mother for a buck. But you never broke a case single handed before. If you can do it now, I think you're entitled to the entire reward."

This speech from Sackler was highly suspicious. However, I turned it over in my mind I couldn't figure how I could possibly lose anything. I had Parry in my pocket. No one could take that away from me. All I had to do was to see Wolfe and tell him that I knew where Parry was. If Sackler waived his ten percent, well, it was just another grand in my pocket.

"All right," I said. "So you waive. I accept the waiver."

"Okay," said Sackler. "Then our previous agreement is wiped out, cancelled, eh?"

That should have warned me. But with Parry's address in my pocket I was riding too high to scent danger. I said, "It's off. Cancelled. Now, if you don't mind, I've got some business downtown."

"How long will it take you?"

"About an hour."

He scribbled something on a piece of paper. "When you've finished your business, will you please meet me at this address?"

I took the paper, said, "Okay," and headed for the door. Sackler called after me, "Oh, you might get in touch with Inspector Wolfe and bring him along with you."

Since I was going to see Wolfe and he wasn't supposed to know about it, I glanced at him sharply over my shoulder. He was rolling a cigarette and wearing a bland expression. I figured it was sheer coincidence. I went out into the hall and pressed the elevator button.

Wolfe, who disliked Sackler with the same passion that he disliked arsenic, wasn't too happy to see me. He looked up from a sheaf of papers in his hand

and said, "Well, what's old Scrooge want now?"

"Nothing," I said, "I'm working on my own."

"Doing what?"

"Making ten grand out of which Sackler gets exactly nothing.

That interested him. "How's that?" he asked.

I told him of my original deal with Sackler and how it had just been canceled at Sackler's request. Wolfe was unimpressed.

"That won't do you much good. We don't have a line on Perry yet. Maybe Sackler will beat us to it. But you ain't in the same class as him, Joey. What chance have you got?"

I grinned smugly. "I don't know about that," I said, "I have a piece of paper in my pocket which may interest you?"

"Go on."

"Written on that piece of paper is Parry's present address."

He stared at me and held out his hand.

"Wait a minute," I said. "The reward is all mine?"

"Every nickel of it," he said. "Give me that paper."

I handed it over to him and explained my theory and told him of the letter I'd written to the Abbott woman. Wolfe listened, grinning. Then he grabbed a phone and instructed someone to call the Gary cop immediately. He hung up and said, "And Rex doesn't get a cent of this dough?"

"Not a cent."

We looked at each other. We smiled broadly. Then we broke into hearty laughter. It wasn't every day that Rex Sackler talked himself out of dough.

WE WAITED for some forty-five minutes. Then a message came in from Gary that Parry had been picked up and announced he would waive extradition proceedings.

Wolfe and I congratulated each other, then set out for the address Sackler had given me.

Somewhat to my surprise I found the apartment at whose door we knocked was that of Harry Franklin. A servant admitted us, ushered us to the living room where we found Sackler smoking one of Franklin's fat cigars and conversing amiably with his host.

Wolfe grinned happily at Sackler.

"Well, Rex," he said. "It's taken one hell of a long time but at last Joey's got his hand on a buck before you."

Sackler raised his eyebrows. "What buck are you referring to?"

"The ten grand reward for Agatha Parry's killer. We got Parry."

Rather to my surprise Sackler didn't wince. He regarded us blandly and said, "And what the devil do you want Parry for?"

"Murder, of course," said Wolfe. "You been looking for him, I've been looking for him, but Joey found him all right."

"Well," said Sackler, "I hope Joey's happy with him. I found him rather dull myself."

I was a little taken aback. Upon receipt of our news I had expected Sackler to beat his breast, tear his hair and call upon heaven to witness the injustice I had done him. But he was taking it as calmly as a weather report.

Franklin stood up. "I guess I should congratulate you," he said to me. "I'm glad Parry will be brought to justice. I think it was pretty smart of you to find him."

"So do I," I said modestly.

Sackler sighed and puffed deeply on his cigar. Wolfe looked at him, nettled. "You're a bum sport, Rex," he said. "You should congratulate Joey, too."

"Why?"

"He's tracked down a killer and earned a ten grand reward."

"He hasn't," said Sackler quietly. He

paused for a moment and added, "I have."

Franklin stared at Sackler. Wolfe looked suspiciously at me. I was aware of a faint empty sensation at the pit of my stomach. I had seen Sackler pull rabbits out of a vacuous hat before.

Then I pulled myself together. He simply couldn't do it this time. I had the whole thing in the bag.

"Would you mind explaining that last crack?" I said politely.

Sackler's courteous tone matched my own. He said, "Not at all." He stood up, crushed out his cigar and helped himself to another from a humidor on the taboret.

"First," he said, "I must tell the inspector that Parry came to me on the day of the killing and told me he was going to run away from his wife."

Wolfe glared at him. "You're an accessory," he yelled. "An accessory before the fact of murder."

"I would be," Sackler conceded, "if Parry was a murderer. He isn't."

The empty feeling in my stomach became more noticeable.

"During that interview," said Sackler, "Parry told me that although his wife had money he was leaving all his savings, some thirty thousand dollars, behind in her bank account as a sort of conscience fund."

"That was an obvious lie," I said. "He told you that so you'd believe everything was on the level when he asked you for advice about how to keep under cover."

Sackler shook his head. "It wasn't an obvious lie, Joey. It wasn't even a lie. I checked with Mrs. Parry's bank yesterday. The money was deposited before Parry disappeared."

"Well," said Wolfe, "suppose this is all true. What does it prove?"

"It proves," went on Sackler, "that Parry didn't rifle his wife's bureau looking for cash and jewels with which to

scram. If he'd wanted that he wouldn't have sunk all his dough in her account. If he'd planned to kill her he wouldn't have done it either."

"If that's true," I said, "how do you account for the forged draft Franklin got?"

"By arguing that Parry never forged a draft."

"That's nuts," snapped Franklin. "I showed the draft to the police. It wasn't Mrs. Parry's signature written on that draft, at all."

"And it wasn't Parry's, either," said Sackler.

"Then whose was it?" Franklin exploded.

Sackler drew a deep breath and looked at him. "Yours," he said quietly and drew deeply on his cigar.

Franklin was suddenly pale. I was apprehensive, and Inspector Wolfe was annoyed.

"Damn it, Rex," he yelled. "If you've something to tell us, do so. Stop being mysterious."

"All right," said Sackler, flashing his most superior smile. "Let's go back to the beginning. We find Mrs. Parry dead, her husband missing. Naturally everyone leaps to the conclusion that the absent husband is guilty. Since I believed he'd actually left cash behind for his wife, I simply couldn't believe he'd killed her. Much less rifled her bureau for money and jewels with which to escape."

"So," said Wolfe, "who else had any motive?"

"I didn't know right away," said Sackler. "But it occurred to me that if Franklin and Mrs. Parry were engaged in various financial deals, there might have been a money motive. I looked into it."

"And found what?" I said, having clear visions of ten grand slipping from my little fist.

“**I** FIRST found out the name of the broker with whom Franklin dealt on behalf of Mrs. Parry. I visited the broker and learned that on the afternoon of the killing she had visited him and asked for a statement of her account. It showed vast profits.

“Now,” went on Sackler, “that broker’s statement was not found in the house by the police or anyone else. It was a natural conclusion that it had been taken, taken by the person who ransacked Mrs. Parry’s bureau. Parry, himself, would certainly have no use for it.”

Franklin said, “If you’re accusing me that’s not much evidence.”

“Not in itself,” said Sackler. “If you hadn’t badly overplayed the hand I might have been stuck. But you insisted on making sure that the guilt was fastened on Parry, as soon as you found out your luck in having him take a powder from his wife on the very night you killed her.

“So you fixed up that phoney draft and swore you’d given Parry money on it. You convinced Wolfe, all right, and Joey, here. But you didn’t quite convince me. And you knew you didn’t. Then you overplayed again. In order to convince me as thoroughly as you’d convinced everyone else, you sent in that ham, Wainwright.”

“Wainwright?” I said.

“That exhibitionist who called himself Sligo.”

I blinked and said, “I don’t get it.”

Slacker grinned. “You told me yourself that you thought you’d seen that mug somewhere before. You had—in many places. He was made up to look like a hood. That dollar tossing routine was swiped from the movies. Do you get it now?”

I got it slowly. “You mean he was a tenth rate actor, make up as a hood?”

“Right. He was so phoney it stuck out a mile. I checked by phone with several second class actor’s agencies. I’ve identified him as an out of work ham, named Wainwright. Wolfe can pick him up and sweat him afterwards.”

“Yes,” I said. “But why should Franklin send him in to make that phoney play?”

“He was still trying to make me believe Parry was guilty, that Parry had sent this hood to call me off the case.”

“You mean Franklin was robbing Mrs. Parry? She found out, faced him with it and he killed her? Then, learning that Parry had scrambled, Franklin tried to pin it on him?”

“It’s pretty obvious circumstantially,” said Sackler. “Parry, reading of the murder, was too damned scared to come forward. The newspapers flatly stated he was the murderer.”

Franklin took a step forward. He uttered two ugly words and his right hand thrust itself into his coat pocket. Sackler moved hastily behind a chair. Wolfe and I stepped forward. Wolfe grabbed his right arm just as the automatic came into view. I threw an arm around his throat, held him tight as Wolfe disarmed him.

Sixty seconds after Wolfe had removed Franklin, via the handcuff route, I stared at Sackler bitterly. “Don’t you ever lose?”

“Do you think you deserved to win, Joey?” he said severely.

“Why not?” I demanded hotly. “I figured that Abbott was Parry’s dame. I heard her say something you didn’t. I figured it all out, then managed to get his address from her. All on my own hook. I certainly deserved something.”

Sackler smiled faintly. “I’ll give you one thing,” he said. “You’re certainly one hell of a letter writer.”

I blinked. I said, “Say that again?”

(Please continue on page 129)

COLLECT FROM A CORPSE

The safe-cracking job had all the earmarks of Pete Slonski's work—
only Slonski was dead!



*He threw the girl from
him and grabbed his
gun.*

PIKE AMBLER called the Department from the Fan Club at 10 in the morning, and Lieutenant Wells Ryerson turned it over to Joe Ragan. "Close this one up fast," he ordered, "but give me an air tight case."

**By LOUIS
L'AMOUR**

Ragan nodded. With Captain Bob Dixon headed for early retirement Ryerson was acting in charge of the burglary detail. If he made a record his chances of taking Dixon's job were good.

He knew the Fan Club. A small club, working in the red, it had recently zoomed into popularity on the dancing of Luretta Pace. He was considering that when he arrived at the club with Sam Blythe and young Lew Ryerson. Sam was a veteran, Lew a tall young man with a narrow face and shrewd eyes. He had been only four months in the department.

Sam Blythe glanced at the hole chopped through the ceiling, then at the safe. "An easy one, Joe. Entry through the ceiling, a punch job on the safe, nothing touched but money, and the floor swept clean after the job was finished." He walked over to the waste basket and picked from it a crumpled wad of crackly paper. "And here's the potato chip sack—all the earmarks of a Pete Slonski job."

Ragan rubbed his jaw and said nothing, his eyes puzzled and probing.

"Slonski, all right," Ryerson agreed. "It checks with the *modus operandi* file, and it's as open and shut as the Smiley case. I'll call Headquarters and have them send out a pickup on Slonski."

"Take it easy," Ragan interrupted, "let's look this over. Something smells."

"What's the matter?" Lew Ryerson was like his brother, too impatient to get things done. "You can see Slonski written all over it, like Sam said."

"Yeah," Ragan was dubious, "it does look like it."

"It is it!" Ryerson replied flatly. "I'm going to call in."

"It won't do any good," Ragan said mildly. "I said something smelled and it does. This job would even fool Slonski—but he didn't do it."

Sam Blythe was puzzled, Ryerson irritated. "How can you be so sure?" Ryerson demanded. "It's obvious to me!"

"This isn't a Slonski job unless ghosts crack safes. Pete was killed last week in Kansas City."

"*What?*" There was shocked incredulity on Ryerson's face. "How do you know that?"

"It was in the papers. And as we have a charge against him, I wired the FBI. They had a check on the prints. It was Slonski, all right, dead as a herring."

Blythe scowled. "Then something is funny. I'd take an oath this was Pete Slonski."

"So would I," Ragan admitted, "but now I'm wondering about the Smiley case. He swears he's innocent, and if I ever saw a surprised man it was Smiley when I put the cuffs on him."

"Oh, he's guilty, all right!" Ryerson was positive. "Of course, he would say he was innocent, but that case checked too well, and you know you can go almost as much by a crook's method of operation as by his finger prints."

"Like this one, you mean?" Ragan gestured at the safe. "This was a Slonski job, but Slonski's dead and buried."

"Smiley has a long record," Blythe said uneasily. "I never placed any great faith in his going straight."

"Neither did I," Ragan agreed, "but five years and no trouble. He's bought a home, built up a business, and not even a traffic count against him."

"On the other hand," Ryerson insisted, "he needs money. Maybe he's just been playing it smart."

"Crooks aren't smart," Ragan objected, "no man who will take a chance on a stretch in the pen is smart. They all make mistakes. They can't beat their own little habits."

"Maybe we've found a smart one," Ryerson suggested, "maybe he used to

work with Slonski and made this one look like him to cover up."

"Slonski worked alone," Blythe objected. "However, the similarity may be an accident. Let's get some pictures and get along with it."

Joe Ragan prowled restlessly while Ryerson got his pictures. Turning from the office he walked out through the empty bar, crossing the shadowed dance floor through the aisles of tables and stacked chairs. Mounting the steps from the street, he entered the studio from which entry had been gained to the office below.

The door had been unlocked with a skeleton key, or picked open. There was a reception room with walls covered by the pictures of sirens with shadows in the right places and bare shoulders. In the studio itself there was a camera, a few reflectors, a backdrop and assorted props. The hole had been cut through the dark room floor.

Squatting, he studied the workmanship with care. A paper match lay on the floor and he picked it up and after a glance, put it in his pocket. The hole would have taken an hour to cut, and as the club closed at 2, and the personnel left right after, the burglar must have entered between 3 and 5 in the morning.

Hearing footsteps, Ragan turned to see a plump and harassed photographer. Andre Gimp fluttered his hands. "Oh, this is awful! Simply awful! Who could have done it?"

"Don't let it bother you. Look around and see if anything is missing and be careful you don't forget and break a leg in that hole."

Ragan walked to the door and paused, lighting a cigarette. He was a big man, a shade over six feet tall, his wide, thick shoulders and big hands made men look twice. His hair was always rumpled, and despite his size there was something

surprisingly boyish looking about him.

Ryerson had borrowed him a few days before from the Homicide Squad, for Ragan had been the ace man on the burglary detail before he transferred to Homicide.

Ragan ran his fingers through his hair and returned to the club. He was remembering the stricken look on the face of Ruth Smiley when he arrested her husband. There had been a feeling then that something was wrong, yet detail for detail the Smiley job had checked as this one checked with Slonski.

Leaving Lew Ryerson and Sam Blythe to question Ambler, he returned to Headquarters. He was scowling thoughtfully when he walked into Wells Ryerson's office. The lieutenant looked up, his eyes sharp with annoyance. "Ragan, when will you learn to knock? What is it you want? I'm very busy!"

"Sorry," Ragan dropped into a chair. "Are you satisfied with the Smiley case?" Briefly then, he explained their findings at the Fan Club.

Wells Ryerson waited him out, his irritation obvious. "That has nothing to do with Smiley. The man had no alibi. He was seen near the crime within thirty minutes of the time. We know his record and that he needs money. The tools that did the job came from his shop. The D.A. is well satisfied and so am I."

Ragan leaned his thick forearms on the chair arms. "Nevertheless," he insisted, "I don't like it. This job today checks with Slonski, but he's dead, so where does that leave us with Smiley? Or with Blackie Miller or Ed Chalmers?"

Ryerson's anger and dislike were evident as he replied. "Ragan, I see what you're trying to do. You know Dixon is to retire and if you can mess up my promotion you might step up. Well,

you go back to Homicide. We don't want you or anybody like you. As of this moment you're off the burglary detail."

Ragan shrugged. "Sorry you take it that way. I'm not bucking for your job. I asked for my transfer to Homicide, but I don't like to see an innocent man go to prison."

"INNOCENT!" Ryerson's contempt was thick. "You talk like a school boy! Jack Smiley was in the reform school when he was sixteen, and in the pen when he was twenty-four. He was short of cash and he reverted to type. Go peddle your papers in Homicide."

Joe Ragan closed the door behind him, his ears burning. He knew how Ryerson felt, but could not forget the face of Ruth Smiley, nor the facts that led to the arrest of her husband. Smiley, Miller and Chalmers had been arrested largely on information from the *modus operandi* file.

It was noon and lunch time. He hesitated to report to his own chief, Mark Stigler. Yet he was stopping his car before the white house on the side street off Melrose before he realized it.

Ruth Smiley had no welcoming smile when she opened the door. He removed his hat, flushing slightly. "Mrs. Smiley, I'd like to ask a few questions if I may. It might help Jack if you'll answer them."

There was doubt in her eyes, but a flicker of hope, too. "Look," he said, "something has come up that has me wondering. If the Department knew I was here they wouldn't like it, as I'm off this case, but I've a hunch." He hesitated. "Now, we know Jack was near the scene of the crime that night. What was he doing there?"

"We told you, Mr. Ragan. Jack had a call from the Chase Printing Com-

pany. He repaired a press of theirs once and they wanted him there not later than four o'clock as they had a rush job to begin the following morning."

"That was checked, and they said they made no such call."

"Mr. Ragan," Ruth Smiley pleaded, "please believe me! I heard him talking! I heard his replies!"

Ragan scowled unhappily. This was no help, but he was determined now. "Don't raise your hopes," he said, "but I'm working on an angle that may help."

The Chase Printing Company was no help. All their presses were working and they had not called Smiley. Yes, he had repaired a press once, and an excellent job, too. Yes, his card had been found under their door when they opened up.

Of course, the card could have been part of an alibi, but that was one thing that had bothered him all along. "Those guys were crooks," he muttered, "and yet none of them had an alibi. If they had been working they would have had iron clad stories to prove them elsewhere!"

Yet the alternative was a frame-up by someone familiar with their working methods. A call had taken Smiley from his bed to the vicinity of the crime, a crime that resembled his work! With their records he would certainly be convicted.

He drove again to the Fan Club. Pike Ambler greeted him. "Still looking? Have you any leads?"

"A couple." Ragan studied the man. "How much did you lose?"

"Two grand three hundred. I can't take it, Joe." His brow creased with worry. "Loretta hasn't been paid and she'll raise a squawk you'll hear from here to Flatbush."

"You mean Loretta Pace? Charlie Vent's girl?"

Ambler nodded. "She was Vent's girl

before he got himself vented." He smiled feebly at the pun. "She's gone from one extreme to the other. Now it's a cop."

"Cop?" Ragan looked around at Ambler. "Who?"

"Lew Ryerson's dating her." Ambler shrugged. "I don't blame the guy. She's a number, all right."

Ragan returned to the office and reported, then completed some routine work. It was late when he finally got to bed.

He awakened with a start, the phone jangling in his ears. He grabbed it sleepily. "Homicide calling, Joe. Stigler said to give it to you."

"To me?" Ragan was only half awake. "Man, I'm off duty!"

"Yeah," the voice was dry, "but this call's from the Fan Club. Stigler said you'd want it."

He was wide awake now. "Who's dead?"

"Pike Ambler. He was shot just a few minutes ago. Get out there fast as you can."

Two patrol cars were outside and a cop was barring the door. He took his arm down to let Joe in and he walked back to the office. Ambler was lying on his face alongside the desk, wearing the cheap tux that was his official costume. His red face was drained of color now, the blue eyes vacant.

Ragan glanced around to the doctor. "How many times was he shot?"

"Three times, and damned good shooting. Two of them right through the heart at close range. Probably a .45."

"All right." Ragan glanced up as a man walked in. It was Sam Blythe. "What are you doing here?"

"Prowling. I was talking to the cop on the beat when we heard the shots. We busted in here, and he was lying like that, with the back window open.

We went out and looked around but nobody was in the alley and we heard no car start."

"Who else was in the club?"

"Nobody. The place closed at two, and the last one to leave was that Pace gal. What a set of gams *she's* got!"

"All right. Have the boys round 'em all up and get them back here." He dropped into a chair when the body had been taken away and studied the situation, with Blythe watching him through lowered lids.

He got up, finally, and made a minute examination of the room, locating two of the three bullets and digging them from the wall. They were .45's all right. He studied them thoughtfully.

"You know," Blythe suggested suddenly, "somebody could be playing us for suckers. Kicking his *modus operandi* stuff around like they are."

"Could be." What was Blythe doing here at this hour? He got off at midnight. "Whoever it is has established a new method of operation. All these jobs, Smiley, Chalmers, Miller and this one, all between 3 to 5 a.m. The technique of other men, but his own working hours."

"You think those jobs were frames? Ryerson won't like it!"

Ragan shrugged. "I'd like to see his face when he finds I'm back on this case."

"You think its the same one?" Blythe asked quickly.

"Don't you?" Blythe was shrewd,

"I don't know. Those were burglaries, this is murder."

"Sure," Ragan said, "but suppose Ambler suspected somebody otherwise not suspected? Wouldn't the crook have a motive for murder?"

A car slowed out front and then a door slammed open. They heard the click of angry heels and Loretta Pace swept into the room. Her long almond

shaped eyes swept from Blythe to Ragan. "You've got a nerve!" she stormed. "Getting me out of bed in the middle of the night! Why couldn't you wait until tomorrow?"

"It is tomorrow," Ragan replied. He held out a crumpled pack of smokes. "Have one?"

She started to refuse, but something in his amused gray eyes made her resentment flicker out. She turned abruptly, seated herself on the arm of a chair. "All right, ask your questions!" she flared.

She had green eyes and auburn hair. Ragan found himself liking it. "First," he suggested, "tell us about the fight you had with Ambler."

Luretta Pace stiffened and the warmth left her face. "Listen!" she protested sharply. "Don't try to frame me! I won't stand still for it! I was out of here before he was shot, and you know it!"

"Sure, I know it. And I don't think you slipped around back and shot him through the rear window, either." He smiled at her. "Although you could have done it."

HER face paled, but Luretta had been fighting her own battles too long. "Do you think I'd kill a guy who owes me six hundred bucks? You don't collect from a corpse! Besides, Pike was a good lad. He was the first guy I'd worked for in a long time who treated me right."

"What about the fight?" Joe persisted.

"You'll hear about it, anyway," Luretta said. "Joe owed me money and couldn't pay up. The dough he figured on paying me was in that safe, so when he was robbed, I figured I was working for nothing. I can't afford that, so we had some words and I told him what he could do with his night club."

"Did he say when he could pay? Or

tell you when he might have money?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact he said he would have it all back, every dime. He told me he would pay me tomorrow. I didn't believe him."

"Where do you think he planned to get it?"

"How should I know?" Luretta shrugged a rounded shoulder.

"Then," Ragan asked gently, "he said nothing about knowing who robbed him?"

Sam Blythe sat up abruptly, his eyes on Ragan's and Luretta lost her smile. She was suddenly serious. "No, not exactly, but I guess what I told you could be taken that way. Do you think that was why he was killed? Because he knew, and tried to get his money back?"

It was a theory and a good one. Suppose Ambler possessed information not available to the police, and believed he could get his money returned by promising not to turn in the thief? If he contacted the criminal, that would be a motive for murder. Joe realized there were other reasons for murder. He believed the relationship of Ambler and Luretta was strictly business, as they represented it—but suppose someone had not?

Yet the only admirer of Luretta's he knew was Lew Ryerson, and that was ridiculous. Or was it?

Such a girl as Luretta Pace would have many admirers. That Sam Blythe thought she was really something was obvious. For that matter, he did, himself.

It was almost noon when he left the club and walked out into the sunlight, trying to assemble his thoughts and assay the value of what he had learned. He was standing on the curb when Andre Gimp came up to him. "Mr. Ragan," Gimp was fluttering again, "only one thing is missing, and it seems very strange, for it was only a picture."

"A picture?" Joe Ragan knew what was coming. "Of whom?"

"Loretta Pace—in costume!"

There it was again. The burglary, Loretta, the murder. He drove back to Headquarters and found Stigler pacing the floor with excitement. "Hey," Stigler exploded. "Look at this! You've really got something! *The gun that killed Ambler was the same that killed Charlie Vent!*"

"I thought so when I ordered them checked. A hunch I had."

"You think this ties up with the burglaries?" Stigler asked. Then he smiled. "Ryerson called up, boiling mad. Said you'd been questioning people. I told him Homicide had a hand in it now. He shut up like a clam, but he was sure sore." Stigler studied him. "What next?"

"A little looking around, then another talk with Loretta Pace."

In the alley back of the Fan Club he found where a man had been standing behind a telephone post watching Ambler through the window. A man who smoked several cigarettes and dropped paper matches. Ragan picked up a couple of them and each paper match stub had been divided at the bottom, parted by a thumb nail and bent back to form a cross. Such a thing a man might do unconsciously, while waiting.

Ragan stowed the matches in a white envelope with a notation as to where they were found. In another envelope was an identical match. And he knew where more could be found.

Later, he went to a small target range in the basement of Headquarters and fired a couple of shots, then collected all the bullets he could find in the bales of cotton that served as a back stop for the targets.

Loretta met him at the door when he arrived, and he smiled at her curious glance. "Wondering?" he asked.

"Wondering whether this call is business or social." She took his hat, then glanced over her shoulder. "Drink?"

"Bourbon and soda."

She was wearing sea green slacks and a pale yellow blouse. Her hair was down on her shoulders and it caught the sunlight. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs, watching her move about.

"Ever think about Charlie?" he asked suddenly.

The hand that held the bottle hesitated for the briefest instant. When she came to him with his drink and one of her own, she looked at him thoughtfully. "That's a curious thing to ask. Charlie's been dead for four, nearly five months."

"You didn't answer my question," Ragan said.

She looked over her glass at him. "Occasionally. He wasn't a bad sort, you know, and he really cared for me. But why bring him up?"

"Oh, just thinking!" The highball tasted good. He realized suddenly that he was sleepy. "I wondered if some of your most recent company had made you forget him."

Loretta looked him over carefully. "Joe," she said suddenly, "you're not subtle. Why don't you come right out and ask me what you want to know?"

"I wasn't trying to be subtle. The truth is, I've got a finger on something and its pure dynamite. I can't do a thing until I know more or the whole thing is liable to fly up and hit me in the face.

"This I will say. Two things are tied up with the killing of Pike Ambler. One of them is these burglaries, and the other one is you."

"Me?" She laughed. "Oh, no, Joe! Don't tell me that! Why, it couldn't be! There was nothing between us, and you certainly don't think I double in robbing safes?"

"NO, I DON'T. Nor do I think there was anything between you and Pike. It's what somebody else might think. Moreover, you may know more than you realize, and I believe if I could be inside your mind and memory, I could put the pieces together that would give me a murderer. He got to his feet and put his glass down. "If anybody should ask you, this call was purely social. If you're looking as lovely as you do now, it would be easy to believe!"

The buzzer sounded from the door, and when she opened it, Lew Ryerson stood there, his eyes going from her to Ragan. He seemed about to speak, but Ragan beat him to it. "Hi, Lew! Nice to see you."

Ryerson came on into the room, his eyes holding Ragan's. "Heard you were wrapped up in a murder case?"

"Yeah, but I took time off to drop around for a drink."

"Looks like I've got competition." There was no humor in the way he said it, and his eyes were cold, measuring.

"With a girl like Loretta you'll always have it."

Ryerson looked at her, his lips thinned down. "I guess that's so," he said, "but that doesn't make me like the idea any better."

She followed Ragan to the door. "Don't mind him, and do come back!"

There was ugly anger in Ryerson's eyes. "Loretta," he said, "I want you to tell him not to come back!"

"Why, I won't do anything of the kind!" She turned on Lew. "We're only dating occasionally, Lew. I told you after Charlie was killed that it wouldn't be any different. I just wasn't tying myself down. If Mr. Ragan wants to come back, he's welcome!"

"Thanks, honey," Ragan turned to Lew. "See you later, Lew. It's all fun, you know?"

Ryerson glared. "Is it?" he demanded. "I'm not so sure."

Sam Blythe was waiting for him when he walked into the office at Homicide. His face was dark and angry. "What goes on here?" he demanded. "Who gave you the right to have my gun tested by Ballistics?"

"Nobody," Joe admitted cheerfully. "I knew you didn't carry it off duty, and figured I'd have it checked. I had mine checked, too, and Stigler's."

"What?" Stigler glared. "You had Ballistics check my gun?"

"Sure!" Ragan dropped on a corner of the desk. "I had to have some dope, and now I've got it."

"Aside from fooling around, how are you coming with the Ambler case? Have you found the murderer?"

"Sure I have."

Stigler jumped and Blythe brought his leg down from the arm of his chair. "Did you say—you have? You *know* who did it?"

"That's right. I know who did it, and that means I know who killed Charlie Vent, too."

He scowled suddenly, and picked the phone from its cradle, dialing a number. Loretta answered. "Joe here," he said, "still busy?"

"Yes."

"Loretta, I wanted to tell you but forgot. The same man who killed Pike Ambler killed Charlie Vent."

"What?" He heard her astonished gasp, but before she could ask questions, he interrupted.

"Honey, don't ask any questions now, or make any comments, but you do some thinking, and then call me, any time of the day or night."

He replaced the phone and turned back to Stigler, who took the cigar from his mouth. "All right, give! Who did it?"

"Stigler," Ragan leaned back against

the desk, "you'd call me a liar if I told you. Nor have I evidence enough for a conviction, but I've arranged a trap for him if he'll only walk into it. Also, he pulled those jobs for which Blackie Miller, Ed Chalmers and Jack Smiley are now awaiting trial!"

"That's impossible!" Stigler protested, but Ragan knew he believed. Sam Blythe sat back in his chair watching Ragan and saying nothing, his eyes cold and curious.

"Well, then. What happens now?" Stigler demanded.

"We sit tight. I've some more prowling to do."

"What if your killer lams? I want this case sewed up, Ragan!"

"Just what Wells Ryerson told me. You'll both get it." Ragan studied his shoes. "Anything about Charlie Vent's murder ever puzzle you, Chief? You'll recall that he was shot three times in the face, and that's not a normal way to kill a man."

"I've thought of that. If it hadn't been a gang killing, I'd say it was jealousy or hate."

"That's my idea. Somebody wanted to take over, all right, but the muscle was on Charlie's girl, not the rackets."

"That doesn't make sense," Blythe protested. "Lew Ryerson is going with her."

"And how many other guys?" Ragan asked. "She's a doll, that one."

"Yeah," Sam agreed dryly, "I could name three of them right now."

The phone rang. Ragan dropped a hand to it, lifting it. "Joe, this is Loretta. I think I know what you mean. Can you come over about ten tonight?"

"Sure, and not a minute late." He hung up and glanced around at them. "That's a date for ten, and I think we'll get all the evidence we need. If you guys can sit in a car and wait for awhile, I'll give you a murderer."

It was dark under the row of trees along the curb opposite the apartment house where Loretta Pace lived, and the dark, unmarked car was apparently empty. Only a walker along the walk between the park fence and the trees might have seen the three men who sat in the car.

"You're sure this deal is set right, Joe? We can't slip now!"

"It's set. Just sit tight and wait."

Rain began to fall, whispering on the leaves and the car top. It was almost 8:40 when Ragan suddenly touched Stigler on the sleeve. "Look!" he whispered.

A man had come around the corner out of the side street near the apartment house. He wore a raincoat and his hat brim was pulled down. He stepped quickly into the door.

Mark Stigler sat straight up. "Man, that looked just like—!" His voice faded as he met Ragan's eyes.

"It was!" Ragan replied, grimly.

A curtain in an apartment house window went up and down rapidly, three times. "Let's go," Ragan said, "we've got to hurry."

AN OFFICER in uniform admitted them to the apartment next door to that of Loretta Pace. A recording was already being made, and through the hidden mike in the next apartment they could hear the voices, hear them plainly.

"—I don't care who he is!" A man was speaking, a voice that stiffened Sam Blythe to the same realization that had touched Mark Stigler on the outside. "Keep him away from here!"

"I don't intend to keep anyone away whom I like. As a matter of fact, I don't care for him."

"Then tell him so!"

"Why don't you tell him?" Loretta's

voice was taunting. "Are you afraid? Or won't he listen to you?"

"Afraid? Of course not! Still, it wouldn't be a good idea. I'd rather he not know we're acquainted."

"You weren't always so hesitant."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, you never approved of Charlie, either. You knew I liked him, but you didn't want me to like him."

"That's right. I didn't."

"One thing I'll say for Charlie. He was a good spender. I don't really care whether a man spends money on me or not, but it helps. And Charlie did."

"You mean that I don't? I think I've been pretty nice, lately."

"Lately. Sometimes I wonder how you do it on your salary."

"I manage."

"As you managed a lot of other things? Like Charlie, for instance?"

There was no sound, then the man's voice, lower and colder. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Well, didn't you? You didn't really believe that I thought he was killed in a gang war, did you? Nobody wanted Charlie dead—nobody but you."

The man laughed. "I always did like a smart girl! Well, now you know the sort of man I am, and you know just how we stand, and what I can do to you or anyone. The best of it is, they can't touch me!"

There was a sound of a glass put down on a table. "Loretta, let's drop this nonsense and get married. I'm going places and nothing can stop me."

"No, I won't marry you. This has gone far enough as it is." Loretta's voice changed. "You'd better go now. I never knew just what sort of person you were, although I always suspected. At first, I believed you were making things easy for me by not allowing too many questions, but now I realize you were protecting yourself."

"Naturally! But I was protecting you, too."

Joe Ragan got up and took his gun from the shoulder holster and slid it into his waist band. Blythe was already at the door. His jaw was set hard.

"I neither wanted nor needed protection," Loretta was saying, "I cared for Charlie. I want you to know that. No, I wasn't in love with him, but he was good to me, and I hadn't any idea that you killed him. If I had, I'd never have spoken to you. Now get out!"

The man laughed. "Don't be silly! We're staying together, especially now."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I wouldn't dare let you go now. We'll either get along together or you'll get what Charlie got." There was a bump as of a chair knocked over and a shout. "*Stay away from that door!*"

Ragan was moving fast, his face white. He swung into the hall and gripped the knob, but it was locked. There was a crash inside, and in a sudden fury of fear for the girl, he dropped his shoulder against the door in a lunge. The lock broke and he stumbled into the room.

Lieutenant Wells Ryerson threw the girl from him and grabbed his gun, but Ragan came too fast. Slapping the gun aside, he smashed a right to the chin, then a left. Ryerson fell backward, firing as he fell, then scrambled to his feet, lifting his gun.

Joe Ragan drew and fired in the same instant and his shot slammed Ryerson back against the wall, while the other bullet buried itself harmlessly in the wall. The gun dribbled from Ryerson's fingers and he slipped to the floor.

His eyes opened and for a moment as they met Ragan's they were sharp, clear and intelligent. "I told you," he said hoarsely, "to close this one up fast. An air—tight case."

His voice faded, and then he fought

(Please continue on page 130)

LIFTING THE NOVEMBER

BLACK MASK



Pickpocket Harpie Gordon lifted two grand that brought him a load of grief when he picked the gargantuan Dumbo as his business partner. Harpie's first transaction brought two hairy hands to his throat. . . .



Detective McCardle came upon the dead Dumbo in the squalid el-shadowed, flop-house. On the trail of the elusive two grand, the only lead was the night-watchman who happened to see a man with an umbrella. . . .



Eve, the luscious wife of a killer, got her red-tipped fingers on the sinister loot and went on a glorious spending spree—which had to end in murder when she slowly squeezed the trigger. The flash blinded her momentarily. . . .



McCardle figured he had the answer to the murder merry-go-round when he tackled mercenary Private-Eye Quade. . . . The complete story will be told in E. A. Morris' "Steal Your Own Grave" in the November issue—published Sept. 21st.

NOT NECESSARILY



His mouth was a snarling gash.

Thrilling

Crime

Novelette

DEAD

By **ROBERT P.
TOOMBS**



CHAPTER ONE

Unexpected Visitor

●

Wealthy manufacturer M. Harrison Sprague rushed to break a puzzling appointment—with death.

● ●

A WAKENED from sound sleep by the explosive bark of a gun, I looked for Lyria. The covers were thrown back—she was gone! The bedroom door stood wide open. I staggered out of bed, stumbling around in my pajamas. There was an acrid odor in the air; gunpowder. It was just get-

ting daylight. Bits of the windowpane lay on the persian rug; long, glittering splinters of sharp glass. Our bedroom is on the second floor of the house. The outside wall is of figured stone, easy to climb.

Lyria screamed! It came from somewhere downstairs, her voice muffled, rising thinly up the stair-well. Footfalls, frantic, fearful, came up the stairs and I whirled, ran to the vanity and picked up a bronze candleholder. The mirror tossed out my reflection, lips drawn back, new lines fanning around my blue eyes. I was staring at my own conscience! Yesterday afternoon I had flung the bank-loot in my safe downstairs, telling myself: *Just overnight. Tomorrow you can return it. Tomorrow!* And *this* was tomorrow—with my wife's screams tearing me wide open!

I lunged into the hall.

Lyria ran toward me, stumbling, sobbing—threw herself into my arms. Her negligee was torn, silvery blonde hair whipping almost to her waist.

"What is it?" I choked.

"A man—" she gulped, fighting to get her breath. "I couldn't see—. He's gone! I heard a noise, got up and went downstairs. He must have been up *here!* I thought he'd shot you! He came leaping downstairs. He had something over his face—something black—he grabbed me, threw me to one side and ran out the front door—"

With one hand I tried to jerk her arms from around my neck, gripping the candleholder in the other. "He must have put a bullet through the bedroom window. Let go, Lyria!"

"No, Monty! Stay here! Don't go down—" Strong and supple, she wrestled me into the bedroom. "Let him go. He had a gun! What are you mixed up in? Tell me, Monty. I saw that money in the safe last night when I put my pearls away!"

I stared down into her eyes, breathing heavily. "Better get dressed."

She pulled away from me. Her cheeks were ashen. "What is it, Monty? What?"

"I don't know—for sure. But I can guess. Lyria, I'm in trouble up to my neck! He's after me all right!"

"To kill you?" she whispered.

I looked at her. Until yesterday I would have said I had no enemies—unless I'd inherited some I didn't know about since my manufacturing business began tottering three years before. This had been a riotous year, in which I'd married Lyria, built this fine house on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida, and decided only last week to slow down a bit.

My forty-two years couldn't stand the strain of dumping my personal funds into the plant with one hand, and hurling luxuries at Lyria with the other. But yesterday—? Yes, I had an enemy—even if I didn't know what he looked like exactly. Maybe *more* than one?

I grabbed up my robe, stuck my feet into straw slippers and moved toward the door, gripping the candleholder.

"Wait," she panted. "I'm coming too."

"You stay here!"

I slammed the door after me and plunged down the wide stairway to the floor below. Where were the servants? Then I remembered Lyria had taken them all to task yesterday about something or other—fired the lot of them. The front door was open.

My hand shook as I pulled it wider and stepped outside; padded toward the corner of the house, rounding it cautiously. In the gray half-light of dawn, nothing stirred. The grass beneath our bedroom window was spongy, wet with dew. There was lots of glass, almost as if the entire windowpane had fallen. It was impossible to detect footprints. Maybe he came this way; maybe not. I

found a baseball bat. What connection that had I don't know. I threw it back under the honeysuckle bush. A car was passing the line of palms hedging the highway and I realized I looked pretty silly clutching my improvised weapon. It was barely 5:30. I had a tennis match at 7:00; was supposed to fly to my plant in Tampa at 8:00. Our place is well out of Jacksonville, really isolated, and once the sound of that solitary car dwindled up the road, the silence seemed closing in. . . .

As we finished dressing, Lyria kept eyeing me, vigorously brushing that shoulder-length cloud of silver, before the mirror. "We can't just—just *ignore* a thing like this!"

"It wouldn't do any good to call the police."

"You mean you're afraid too?"

Color was washing back into her face. Only twenty-six, she *is* attractive, the sleekness of that figure accentuated by her riotous hair, and eyes like a sleepy kitten's eyes—sea green—wide and guileless. But those eyes were frightened now; filled with questions. "Someone may be only warning you, Monty—the first time. Is it—stolen money?"

"Funny," I said thoughtfully. "In a way I'm a thief—simply by an act of omission. Simply because I didn't drive right back to the bank and return it."

She lowered the brush, turning slowly.

"Listen," I pleaded, "Try first to understand. The business isn't going good at all. You've known that. I haven't even tried to fool you. I hate to lay people off. I've kept up our output of heaters—"

"The money in that box—I counted it last night. Almost sixty thousand dollars. Crisp bills with a bank seal. Its from that bank hold-up yesterday downtown, isn't it?"

"Listen!" I said savagely. "I'm trying to explain to you what prompted the

idiotic impulse to keep it overnight. Why I—"

"You don't say how you *got* it? Aren't you ever going to get around to *that*?"

"Well shut up and let me! I was parked in front of the bank, ready to drive off, when there was a lot of shooting—you read the headlines last night in the paper—and one of the crooks ran right past me. He took a good look, tossed that tin box into the back seat and kept going. I just sat there.

"THE police ordered me on finally, after I'd identified myself with the help of some of the cashiers. They all know me. No one saw anything. I couldn't even give them a description."

"The paper said they got them all—three of them—killed them, Monty!"

"What do *you* think?"

She shivered. "He traced the car license—here! He knows you on sight."

I turned back to the mirror, knotting my tie.

"Monty—you're insane!"

"Sure. How am I going to get the money back to the bank?"

"Oh just walk in and say—I've had a change of heart. I needed this in my business, but now I'm scared."

I saw her eyes in the mirror, drifting over me scornfully.

"Lyria!"

"Well it's true, isn't it?"

I strode over and caught her arm roughly. "I've been worried lately. Couldn't you see? I've spent far too much on—things—this house. I was tempted— Hell *yes*, I was tempted! But only for awhile. The money's going back to the bank!"

She pretended to be applauding.

I saw red.

Then abruptly she relented, melting into my arms.

"You'd better go away, darling."

"A trip?"

Her face crumbled, lips quivering. "Please, Monty. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you. He'll be back. He's a big man—savage—a killer! Look where his hand gripped my arm?" She showed me an ugly bruise.

"What was he wearing? What can you remember about him?"

"I don't know—the shock of seeing him plunging at me—a shape—he was just a big shape. Monty! Today—promise me you won't do the usual routine things? Cancel your appointments. We'll go away—just for a few days!"

I held her trembling body close, surprised, and a bit angered that her terror could effect me like this. I was peering at the drapes along the wall as if expecting a movement—a sudden glimpse of a gun barrel.

"D'you think I'd take *you* with me?" I growled. "If I'm somebody's target I certainly won't have you mixed up in it!"

"You *must* go, Monty. Hide the money somewhere for a few days. Maybe under the edge of the swimming pool?"

It was a place we had often joked about; only she and I had discovered it. She was right. I had to get the tin box out of the house.

The task was easily accomplished. Our pool is surrounded by a high wall. But first I made doubly sure I was unobserved by sauntering around casually outside. Later I beat it back inside, greatly relieved, and we completed plans in the living room. I would take the convertible and drive—

"Sh-h-h—" she implored.

"You mean—?"

"I don't even trust the walls," she said slowly. "If you're going to vanish, Monty—don't tell *anyone* your destination!"

"That's right," I agreed. "But you can't stay here alone. I'll—"

"Have you forgotten?" She was checking the contents of my overnight bag.

"Your sister!" I exclaimed. "I've never met her—and she's arriving today from Chicago!"

"Of course."

"But what will you tell her about me?"

LYRIA paused, dismayed. "What *should* I tell her, Monty? That you're away on business?" She eyed me anxiously. "That would sound all right."

"Sure," I said. "Tell her anything. And Lyria—fill the house with people. You two mustn't be alone. Don't worry about me. This will be a little vacation. I'll figure out a way to get the money back to the bank without implicating myself."

Her lovely eyes clouded. "Oh, Monty, take me with you!"

I shook my head firmly.

"I'll live by the phone," she said. "If you need me—?"

"Of course!"

It was exciting—racing the car down long, open stretches of highway beside the blue gulf. Unconsciously, I had decided to head this way, instead of inland. Friends at the Club would never have recognized M. Harrison Sprague, wealthy manufacturer of hot water heaters. I wore dark-colored glasses, no hat at all, and sport clothes much in need of pressing. And I hit the accelerator hard, between towns.

Lunch was a brief affair. A loose wire under the dash had been giving me trouble. I monkeyed with it awhile. Then I was off again. Miami mileage signs were growing more frequent. Saturday traffic was getting thick. A strange tenseness entered my hands. I was jumpy on the wheel, passing cars with too little margin to spare. I've made the trip before—but never with this feel-

ing of impending disaster close at hand.

A flaming sunset dappled the cloudy horizon as I merged with the long line of cars on Biscayne Boulevard. I spotted a neon sign: EMPIRE HOTEL, and a parking lot; pulled into the driveway and eased up against the brick wall of the building. The motor sputtered. I fiddled with that loose wire again, but gave it up, hauling my grip out of the back. Momentarily I stood admiring the green sweep of grass beyond the boulevard, leading down to the bay, then walked around the corner of the building, glancing at my wristwatch. It was 6:30.

The lobby was large, comfortable, fat marble pillars extending up to a high ceiling. No bellhops came rushing forward. This seemed to be one of those moderate places that seek the average tourist trade. I lowered my grip before the long desk at the rear and a clerk rose from behind a switchboard.

He hurried forward, tall, dark haired, wearing glasses, an affable smile lighting his scarred face—the scar was more like a cleft in his chin, faintly purple. He turned the ledger around for me to sign.

I hesitated, then scrawled my name in a bold hand.

He whirled the book around dexterously. "Oh yes—Mr. Sprague. I have your reservation."

I almost dropped my glasses as I slipped them in my pocket, eyeing him sharply. "Must be a mistake."

He bent above the name again. "M. Harrison Sprague? No sir. I received a phone call about four o'clock." He went over to the switchboard, ruffled through a few pieces of paper, moved to the key rack and brought out a key from box 214 with a slip of paper. "Here it is, Mr. Sprague. I've given you room 214—very nice—" He handed me the paper.

On it was scribbled a notation in pen-

cil: *M. Harrison Sprague. Phoned 4:30 p.m. Saturday.*

I looked at him. "But at four-thirty I was sixty miles from here!"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Perhaps a friend—?"

"Was it a man's voice?"

"Yes sir."

"I see." I said slowly.

He came out from behind the counter and picked up my grip. I followed him across the lobby to the stairs. There was an elevator, but the door was closed, the indicator hand moving slowly from 4 to 1. We mounted to the second floor, moving down a dim hall.

He let me into room 214, fussed around opening the window, but I told him it wasn't necessary. I reached in my pocket for a tip. He smiled, shaking his head. The overhead light gleamed on his glasses as he put the key in the door and left.

I closed the door, locked it, sat down limply on the bed, fumbling for my cigarette case. This was utterly impossible! No one knew I was coming to Miami, nor to this hotel. I hadn't known it myself! And yet someone had phoned a reservation in my name at 4:30! I lit a cigarette, sitting very still, trying to think. I gazed around the room.

There was a phone. For an instant I battled a crazy notion to call Lyria—tell her about it. But I put the desire out of my mind. Presently I stood up, snubbing the cigarette in an ash tray on the dresser.

The phone rang.

I picked it up. The operator's voice said she had a long distance call for M. Harrison Sprague! I groped for the back of a chair, leaning heavily.

"New York calling. Mr. Sprague?"

"Yes." I replied weakly.

She spoke to someone on the other end of the line, "Here's your party, sir." A pause, a strange man's voice spoke

quickly, sharp and clear: "Sprague? You have something that doesn't belong to you. You'll have a visitor soon?"

"Who is this?" I asked.

There was a click. The line was dead.

My heart was banging against my ribs as I replaced the phone on the table. I didn't know anyone in New York. How could a hoodlum that held up a bank in Jacksonville, have someone phone me from New York, a few minutes after I'd checked into a hotel I never expected to stop at? In Miami! This was *too* much!

The overhead light blazed down from the ceiling, unwinking. The sound of traffic outside was muffled, distant. The room began to take on an eerie aspect. I peered into the bathroom. Empty. There was a door on the other side of the room. It opened, I found, into a huge, barren clothes closet. I looked under the bed. I was sweating. Maybe I should get help? But who could I trust? I was a stranger in this city. I didn't even have a gun, in case my soon-to-be-visitor—?

I strode over and threw open the window; stood for a long time watching the lights on Miami Beach across the causeway. At 6:45 it was already dark. A warm wind blew across the sill, fanning my face. Abruptly I couldn't take this room any longer. It was a trap! I stepped to the hall door, unlocked it, yanked it open.

There was nothing out there—except a sour, musty odor. Turning off the light at the wall switch, I whipped the key to the outside of the door, stepped out and locked it behind me, slipping the key in my pocket. I needed fresh air—and a chance to think—maybe the opportunity, once outside, to start running—?

I found the stairs and started down. A man was coming up, taking two steps at a time, his breath sounding harsh in the stillness. He was neatly dressed,

hatless, with iron-gray hair and glasses. I slunk back against the wall, half raising my fist.

"Don't be alarmed," he said soothingly. "The police are here now. It's all right. Just an attempted robbery. I'm the manager, Mr. Albritton."

"An attempted robbery? Here?"

He shook my hand off his arm impatiently. "Yes. My clerk was slugged and bound, dragged into the inner office. But he'll be all right. They're taking him in the ambulance now. You can go down, Mr. —?"

"Sprague. I'm in 214."

"Oh yes—Mr. Sprague." He started on up, changed his mind, muttering, "I must tell the police those crooks didn't locate the wall safe. Nothing was taken." He plunged downstairs again.

I followed.

He went across to a group of people at the desk, spoke to a blue-uniformed figure. They went back into an office beyond the switchboard. A few people were standing around, either guests of the hotel or onlookers attracted from the street. A siren moaned in the darkness out front, growing fainter.

I chatted with a bellhop near the elevator but didn't learn much. He said the hotel had been "stuck up" about a year ago. This time they didn't get anything. "Better stick around," he advised me. "They may want to question everybody."

I nodded, but headed toward the front door.

A detective eyed me suspiciously. At least I judged he was a detective when he came out of the manager's office. He topped my one hundred and forty pounds by a good sixty, hat pulled low over his eyes, maneuvering past the switchboard, lifting the hinged part of the front desk and stepping into the lobby.

I knew he was watching me. I'm

afraid I wore my fear badly—my hands were shaking when I paused, trying to light a cigarette.

He passed me slowly.

CHAPTER TWO

Crowded on the Inside

AVOIDING his gaze I sauntered toward a phone booth, fumbling for change, heard him say something to the cop who was stationed by the front door, then his heavy stride approaching.

I closed the door; the light flicked on, and the operator's voice was crisp, impersonal.

I asked for long distance. I was worried about Lyria—or maybe I just *had* to hear her voice again.

The echo returned: "Long Distance?"

"I'm calling Jacksonville. Mrs. M. Harrison Sprague. Reverse the charges. The number is—"

He pulled the booth door open, rested one shoulder against the edge, motioning for me to continue.

My ears grew red. I didn't hang up because it would look suspicious. Instead, I repeated my information to the operator and added the number. Then there was the formality of waiting, and finally Lyria's cool voice on the wire: "Monty? I've been waiting."

"Guess where I am!" I could hear the radio going, a woman's laughing voice.

"Are you all right?"

I wanted to tell her—so many things, but I said I was all right.

Her voice lowered: "I wish I was along."

"You can't guess how much I wish that," I agreed fervently, "But, it's best this way. Did your sister arrive?"

"Yes. She wanted to meet you. Monty—? Your voice sounds—worried. What is it?"

"Nothing," I lied hastily. "You sound a bit strange yourself. Maybe it's the phone. Now listen, don't worry, Lyria. Please."

"How can I help it? Has anything happened?"

"No! I've got to hang up, Lyria. See you soon?"

She murmured what any husband likes to hear and I was smiling—until I turned.

He'd been taking it all in, face expressionless.

"My wife," I explained coldly. "What do you want?"

His upper lip lifted slightly, exposing strong, white teeth. He took his time about stepping back and letting me emerge. "I'll ask the questions, mister. There's been an attempted robbery here.

"I know that. I checked in at six-thirty. It must have happened shortly afterward."

He bit off the end of a black cigar, looking around for a cuspidor. "What are you so jittery for?"

"I'm not."

"Anybody here identify you?"

I clenched my hands. "I don't know anything about it."

"I asked for your identification!"

While I fumbled angrily for my wallet, he spat on the floor, one hand carelessly sliding beneath his light, gray topcoat.

I've never been mistaken for a thug before. I didn't like the faint prickles it aroused in the small of my back. "My name's Sprague," I told him. "I'm a stranger here. But my driver's license ought to prove who I am. And here's my check book—a business card—"

He thumbed through everything thoroughly, pausing to study my card. "Sprague Manufacturing Company." His eyebrows lifted. "Hot water heaters."

I didn't like him, and yet—he seemed capable. There was a solidness about him—not just physically. He was tough, experienced. My eyes were taking him apart, estimating. How much should I tell him—about me? I realized that here was an opportunity to get protection—if I handled it right.

"I need your help," I blurted. "Something's happened in the last hour—since I checked into this hotel."

He tossed the wallet back. "I'll say it has. The clerk's on his way to a hospital for one thing!"

"I don't mean the hold-up or whatever it was. I mean to *me*."

"Yeah?"

I hesitated, groping for words. "Someone knows every move I'm making. I don't know who or why." I dug out a hundred dollar bill and handed it to him. "Will you help me—say—unofficially?"

He was silent, the bill lost in his fist, black eyes studying me.

A bellhop brushed past with a handful of luggage. There was a different clerk at the desk, gazing nervously around the lobby, fooling with the inkwell. Suddenly I was desperately afraid that this big man wouldn't help me. I watched him apprehensively, holding my breath.

The bill disappeared, tucked in a vest pocket. "M'name's, Mace," he grunted. "I've got to make a report. How about waiting in the bar?"

I nodded, relieved, staring after his broad back as he moved away. He went to the desk. The clerk ran and brought him a phone, asking several rapid questions, desisting when Mace volunteered nothing but grunts.

I went into the cocktail lounge, took a table and a Collins, grateful for dim lights and the booth at my back. A Viennese waltz drifted from the radio. There were a few people seated at the bar, laughing and whispering, receiving

scowls from the bartender. But none of this affected me, nor held my interest. I don't suppose anything could really penetrate that fog of fear swirling within my mind. That voice—? I peered around furtively. There was no one in the next booth. I forced the quiver from my hands as I raised my glass.

He walked in a moment later, removing his coat. His glance found me, merged with the gloom. He thrust his bulk my way; a smooth, heavy stride, devouring the distance between us; squeezed in across from me. "All right, Sprague. From now until midnite I'm on my own time. Let's cut the formalities and get down to facts!"

"What'll you drink?" I asked.

"SKIP IT." He pushed his hat to the back of his head, eyes drifting over me appraisingly, missing no detail. "You look crowded—crowded on the inside. Know what I mean? I've seen guys takin' the last walk that looked better."

I drew a shaky breath. "I must admit I *am* afraid. I think I'll tell you first about the bullet hole in the window."

I told him that part as briefly and concisely as I could, finishing with: "So you see I left Jacksonville this morning, driving alone, not heading any particular place."

"Destination unknown, huh?"

It didn't sound too good, the way he said it. I lifted my glass swallowing the rest of my drink. "That's correct, Mace. I picked the Empire hotel just by chance; maybe because it had a parking lot easily accessible. I registered, and when the clerk saw my name he assured me my reservation had been taken care of. I was dumfounded! He had all the information scribbled on a card. The call had come in at four-thirty—a man's voice, he said. But at four-thirty I was sixty miles from here!"

Mace looked skeptical.

I plunged on grimly. "There weren't any bellhops around at the moment and he showed me up to the room. While I was having a smoke, the phone rang. It was a long distance call from New York. I don't know anyone in New York." I paused, sweat coming out on my forehead.

Mace flicked an ash from his cigar, watching me. "Go on."

"It was a man's voice, sharp and clear. He said, 'M. Harrison Sprague? You'll have a visitor soon!'"

"Go on."

"That's all. He hung up."

Mace blew smoke at the ceiling, eyes almost closed. His left hand lay flat on the table, fingers lifting in time with the music crooning from the radio. "You checked in at six-thirty you said? How long were you in the room before you got the call?"

"I finished a cigarette—about three or four minutes, maybe less."

"No visitor yet?"

I looked around uncomfortably, shaking my head.

He scratched his chin, a faint, rasping sound above the music. "Did you hear the operator's voice?"

"Yes. She said, 'here's your party, sir' to the man on the other end. One thing I *am* sure of—no one knew what town I'd stop in tonight—or that it would be this hotel. How could they? I didn't know it *myself* until I got here!"

"Got any enemies?" he asked softly.

I looked him straight in the eye and shook my head.

He planted both elbows on the table, leaning forward. "You've stepped on *somebody's* toes, haven't you? Look, Sprague—you gotta come clean with me if you expect me to dig up the dirt. No guy's perfect!"

I flushed. "I don't say *I am*. But—"

I spread my hands helplessly. "There isn't anyone. I'm just an average person. Why would anybody—?"

"I'd say you're above average. Owner of a manufacturing business, able to take off when you feel like it. That suit cost better than two hundred bucks. Right?"

I remained silent a moment, digesting this. "You think it's money someone's after?"

His lip lifted. "What else?"

"But how? And that New York call—"

"We'll check on that in a minute. How many people knew you were taking this trip today?"

"Only my wife."

"You sure?"

"Positive. But she didn't know *where* I was going. She couldn't even have let it slip accidentally. Lyria was more frightened than I was. She urged me to cancel my appointments today and just vanish for awhile. She wanted to come with me, but of course I wouldn't let her."

"Naturally."

I didn't like the way he said it, his eyes half closed, not actually regarding me, as if his thoughts were racing far ahead. "A bullet hole in the window. Glass all over—" He paused, eyeing the tip of his cigar, gripped between the stubby fingers of his left hand. "You smelled gunpowder. How about your wife? Did she smell it too?"

"I don't remember that I asked her. I was a bit confused—awakened from sound sleep like that. But you can leave her out of it, Mace."

He shook his head. "That's just where I begin, Sprague."

I half rose.

He shoved me back. "Okay. So you're touchy. But I'm sticking to *facts*. I've got to earn my hundred between now and midnight. That doesn't give me much time."

The blood was suddenly throbbing in my temples. "I said leave her out of it!"

His eyes went cold, boring into mine, probing.

When I couldn't stand any more of it, I looked down into my empty glass. Lyria's red lips, softly curved—her face—seemed to stare up from the bottom. I could hear her voice, frightened—or had it been coaxing? "Go away, darling. Now!" But her terror was entirely natural. Why *shouldn't* she be worried about me? Me, with a stick-up artist on my neck, and sixty thousand hot dollars! A kill-crazy shape—hurtling down-stairs.

Mace was watching me—sympathetically.

"Look," I spluttered, "I just talked to Lyria on the phone. She doesn't know yet where I am. She didn't *want* me to tell her; probably in case someone was listening in. If you can't do any better than to suspect *her*—?"

"What about the sister?"

"Viola? I never met her. She's with Lyria now. You can't connect her with this. How do you explain the fact that someone knew I'd stop here tonight?"

"There's only one way to explain it. If you weren't so upset you'd have figured it out."

I sat back slowly. "How?"

"You were tailed. As you put it yourself—someone knows every move you're making."

I stared—trying to think back over long stretches of highway, recalling nothing particularly suspicious. . . .

"You forget," I said, "the clerk. He said a reservation was made at four-thirty this afternoon. I wasn't even *here* yet!"

"That's easy too. He was probably lying in his teeth!"

"He never saw me before in his life. Why would he?"

Mace sighed. "You're a nice fella, Sprague. Would it break your heart if I informed you that there are rascals and scoundrels in the world?"

I stiffened. "We don't need the wise remarks, Mace. Maybe this is funny to *you*—but not to me!"

His expression hardened. "It isn't funny. Murder seldom is."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. *Yours*. I never saw a better build-up for just that."

The music was pounding, pounding. Someone had turned up the volume. I smiled a bit uncertainly. "You put it pretty strong. Are you trying to scare the hell out of me? Because if you are—"

"**S**OMEONE beat me to it," he said curtly. "Whoever your little playmates are—they play rough. You should have seen that clerk's head."

I looked my bewilderment.

He leaned across the table. "It was six forty-five when the manager found him lying on the floor of the inner office. Just how long before that he was slugged, we don't know."

"But what has that to do with me? I told you I checked in at 6:30. He was all right when he showed me to my room."

Mace frowned, snubbed out his cigar. "Maybe plenty. I want to check that long distance phone call." He rose, shrugging on his topcoat.

"Shall I—sit tight then?"

He glanced around. "You better stick with me. Come on."

I tossed the bartender a bill and followed him into the lobby. At the desk, Mace beckoned the clerk.

"Do you keep a record of all phone calls?"

The young man shook his head. "Just out-going."

"Get the supervisor on the wire and find out if there have been any New York calls to this hotel within the last four or five hours."

"Yes sir." The man hurried over to the switchboard.

Mace drew out another cigar, eyeing me. "You wanta bet there haven't been?"

"You think the call was faked from right here?"

"Sure."

"But the operator's voice—?"

"All right. A man and a woman did the faking—so we're after a man and a woman."

"As simple as that? They walk into a hotel and take over the switchboard?"

"You said no one was around but the clerk when *you* checked in," he pointed out. "This is only a two-hundred room joint, usually only one bell-hop on duty, as I recall it, and *he* probably shoots craps in the basement every chance he gets!"

"But the clerk—?"

"*He* was slugged. Remember?"

We stood waiting. Presently the deskman returned, shaking his head.

"No call from New York."

Mace looked at me, turned back to the clerk. "I wanta know one more thing—about the clerk who got slugged. Describe him for Mr. Sprague here."

The young man stared. "You mean William Baker? I thought you saw him? He's about fifty-five, real short, five foot three or four, red-headed—"

At the look on my face he stopped.

"That's not the man," I declared. "You're not talking about the clerk at all! The clerk was tall, dark-haired, weighed about one hundred and seventy, had a scarred chin—a peculiar scar, jagged, faintly purple. He wore glasses."

The clerk flushed. "I guess I know what I'm talking about. We've worked alternate shifts for three years!"

"Never mind," Mace grunted. He grabbed me by the arm, drew me across the lobby out of ear-shot. "Good for you, Sprague. You've got an eye for detail."

I shrugged him away. "What are you talking about? I tell you that man's lying about the other clerk!"

"No he's not. He's talkin' about the clerk all right. But *you're* talkin' about the man we're after—or who's after *you*—either way you wanta look at it. And there's a woman in on the deal all right! Or else how could they have faked the operator's voice?"

Mace was excited. It was the first time I had seen his face lose its immobility. "You see," he said, "I'll gamble it's like this—. The clerk, Baker, was slugged *before* you checked in. They got him out of the way. This other guy *posed* as a clerk. It was a fast switch because he had to familiarize himself with the desk set-up, pick the right key for an unoccupied room, scribble that fake reservation business on a card—all the time keeping one eye out for a bell-hop or some guest who might give him away. Probably the woman stood by to help out in any way she could if something like that happened.

I nodded slowly. "If I was being followed on the way down, they saw what hotel I picked when I swung into the parking lot, and then beat me inside the hotel!"

"Sure! Think back. . . . You probably took a few minutes getting your grip out of the car, locking it up—?"

"As a matter of fact, there's a loose wire under the dash. It caused me some trouble today. I fooled with it a minute or two, but quit because it was getting dark."

"*Sure* they had time to knock the clerk out!" He pulled me around a corner of the lobby near a large pillar, almost hidden from the elevator.

The full impact of his reasoning began to sink in. Everything fit. An eerie feeling sent my pulse racing. It was like unseen hands reaching from the dark for my throat—reaching—to what end? Why? The money was under the edge of the swimming pool. If they wanted to snatch me; force me to lead them to the tin box, why all this hocus pocus? Mace had only certain pieces of this jigsaw puzzle to work with. I was afraid to give him more. But I put the question to him anyway. Why?

He looked at me for a long moment, appraisingly. "You seem to have a pretty stiff backbone at that. I'm gonna level with you on this case because we gotta work together. You know what the guy looks like and I don't."

"Well?"

"As I see it they're trying to scare the hell out of you. Maybe wanta smoke you into going to the police here in Miami, telling a crazy story. They may fake an attempt on your life, so you tell the cops here about it. Then it's on record. See? You're a long way's from home. You get knocked off—probably tonight—they might make it look like suicide. Anyway, the point is—the little lady at home is in the clear. See? All the dough you've got belongs to her, and the guy workin' with her—and I imagine you've got *plenty!*"

I stood there, dazed. Then I swung.

He handled me very easily. My uppercut missed a mile. He jerked me behind the large pillar out of view of the desk and the cop by the door. By my second wild blow caught him on the mouth, and a thin, red string ran down over his chin. He slammed me back hard against the pillar, his breath hot on my face. "You fool! She's played you for a sucker, and that hurts. Sure. Now grow up! It's *your* life, Sprague. And they want it!"

Anger blurred my vision. Perhaps what he said stirred an instinctive fear

deep within me. "I don't want any part of *you*," I rasped. "Get away from me, Mace, or I'll kill you!"

He sneered. "You're just off your nut. Cool down, fella. You think a bullet went through your bedroom window? Uh uh. A bullet makes a clean-cut penetration through glass; maybe a few cracks spreading away from the point of impact—you said half the window-pane was on the lawn, long splinters of glass, didn't you? Use your head. Something was thrown through it from the inside, probably the baseball bat. Your wife could have fired a blank cartridge, a real gun for that matter—split timing wouldn't matter—you were asleep.

"She was after an effect, something to make you think a killer had been heading into your bedroom. She probably sent the servants away the day before. Anyway, it scared you, and her talk of a man being in the house cinched it. And—get this—there's no real evidence of anything except a broken window which is probably repaired by now. Kick me off the case? You—"

I was trembling. "You're off!"

Slowly he released me, stepped back, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He pulled out a handkerchief then and did a better job, grimacing wryly.

I left him there, walking blindly toward the stairs, fumbling for the key to my room.

A bellhop looked at me curiously as I passed. "Elevator, sir?"

"I'll walk," I mumbled, and took the stairs two at a time.

I don't know what I really had in mind—to get out of the hotel and drive—anywhere. Get my grip. And think. Just think about Lyria, and how much she meant to me, and try to get back on an even footing. She *could* have made up the story about the "shape," bruised her own arm.

She knew about the money in the safe

last night. That gave her a few hours to plan. I hated Mace for what he was doing—destroying my faith in *her*. I hated everyone and everything at that moment and it was all the worse because down inside I was icy with fear!

The second floor hall was dim. I found myself wandering the wrong way; turned and retraced my steps. When I got to my room I paused and stared stupidly. The door was ajar. I hesitated—but common sense precaution wasn't in me at the moment. I edged in, fumbling along the wall for the lightswitch. The room seemed filled with a clammy dampness. My fingers brushed the wall vainly. There was a faint rattle as the breeze drifted in through the open window. Then I touched the plastic switch.

The overhead light sprayed down—silently, relentlessly, probing that object in the middle of the room. A sight that brought a hoarse scream to my lips, "Lyria!"

Her green eyes were wide, staring. . . . Her slim, crumpled form stiffly propped in an armchair directly facing me, silvery hair falling in a disheveled cloud. . . . A red, sponge-like stain spread horribly across the front of her blouse. My visitor had arrived!

For endless seconds, my scream dying in my throat, I stood numb, unbelieving. I took a faltering step forward and something blasted my skull, thrusting me into a black void, thick and soundless. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Don't Come Back

YEARS may have passed; centuries. I saw a pin point of light. Something was moving. My head jiggled up and down, throbbing, cradled on a man's arm. I looked up into a familiar face. Mace!

"Take it easy," he advised. "Close

your eyes again if it makes you feel better."

Close my eyes? I didn't think I'd ever close my eyes again! He was pressing a cold towel against the side of my head, his voice rattling on and on, "It isn't bleeding now. You're lucky. I *told* you they play rough. Maybe you'll have sense enough to keep me on your team? It's a good thing I decided to follow you."

"Lyria," I groaned, thrusting him away and sitting bolt upright. The chair was empty! My eyes darted around the room. "My wife—" I shuddered, grabbing his arm, babbling out the story.

"Here?" Mace exclaimed incredulously. "Dead? Look, fella—that sock on the head made you woozy!"

I climbed to my feet, staggering around the room. "I *saw* her, Mace. She had blood on her blouse."

"Yeah? You talked to her on the phone a half hour ago too. And Jacksonville is a long ways from here!"

"The blood."

"Shut up!"

I pressed my hands to my head, knees almost buckling; slumped on the edge of the bed. "I told you I had no enemies, Mace. I lied."

He sucked in his breath. "You didn't lie very well, Sprague. You're not very practiced at it. I knew you were holdin' out."

"I was afraid, Mace, that's why I didn't tell you all of it. I thought he'd be after *me*, not Lyria. I left her there this morning. He must have got to her. She wouldn't tell where the money was. He killed her."

"Stop babbling!" he roared. "What money?"

I began shivering uncontrollably.

He jerked me up with one mawl-like hand, commenced cuffing me, slowly, methodically, open-handed blows that sent pain stabbing through my head.

My ears ringing, I began to talk, lucidly—and to the point, and he dropped me. I told him about the bank hold-up; the tin box containing almost sixty thousand dollars. That didn't surprise him because he'd read the teletape at police headquarters. But as for *my* part in it—?

He stood wide-legged, hands on his hips, hat pushed back, and a look on his face that said I was a damned liar. Those opaque eyes nailed me to the bed.

"You don't think I intended to return the money? Mace—Listen—. It's hidden safely right now. Only Lyria knows where. Would I be telling you all this? Would I? Lyria's dead. Murdered!" I covered my face with my hands.

After a long moment, his voice reached me, as though he was speaking to himself. "You couldn't be lying, mister. Not now." He began prowling about the room, searching for something. "This chair here?" he asked, "Facing the door?"

I looked up, groaned an affirmative.

"Too theatrical," he said disgustedly. "And they can't lug a corpse around like a suitcase." He stopped, bent over and made a swipe at something with his fingers on the rug. They came away red. He brought it close to his face. "Look, Sprague."

"Don't!" I was shuddering again. "I've got to get out of here."

He lunged toward me, one fist raised threateningly.

I ducked, raising my guard, blood rushing back into my face.

He ploughed to a standstill. "That's better," he growled. "They're trying to turn your guts into jelly. Stay mad, Sprague. Stay mad! Take a poke at me if it'll help any. But don't give in to 'em. Your wife isn't dead. I'd bet on it! She *isn't* dead!"

"Not dead" I repeated inanely.

"I told you I had this thing figured!

She was faking. If you'd have got to her you'd have known—but they saw to it you didn't." He jammed his finger under my nose. "Smell it!"

I sniffed, filled with a mixture of relief and loathing. It was catsup!

Mace brought one big fist into the palm of his hand with a resounding crack. "From now on we're after *them!* Here's your hat. Let's get outta here!"

I stumbled to my feet. "Where?"

"We'll use your car. I know this town like a book. We'll make the rounds and you keep your eyes open for the guy with the scarred chin and—your wife!"

Lyria? Lyria wasn't dead? I grabbed his arm. "But who did I talk with when I phoned home? Don't you think I know my own wife's voice? Mace you're crazy! You—"

“THE SISTER, you fat-head! Their voices are probably identical, or enough alike to fool you. Come on! We're wasting time.”

"If Lyria was faking, Mace. That means she—?"

He grabbed my hat and shoved it into my hands, pushing me impatiently out into the hall, snapping off the light and closing the door. He reached into a shoulder holster and pulled out his revolver. "Here—keep this .38 handy. Don't use it unless you have to."

"But you—?"

"I'm not in *your* shoes."

I slipped the gun into the side pocket of my coat. It was awkward and bulky and the pocket flap wouldn't lay down, but it was the best I could do. The sagging weight of it felt pretty good at that. "Thanks, Mace." I hesitated. "About tonight—there in the lobby. I lost my head. It isn't easy to believe that Lyria—that my wife—"

"Oh shut up!" He batted at the brim of his hat. "I'd feel the same."

We went down the hall. The stairs

gave my head a jolting. It felt like it was tearing from my neck. I barely noticed the people in the lobby, but the hands of the clock above the front door stood at 8. I must have been unconscious longer than I realized.

Why hadn't they finished me when they had the chance? Or was my friend, Mace, upsetting their plans? Or—and this was what gave me the peculiar feeling in my mid-section—were they biding their time; waiting for a better opportunity?

We were rounding the corner of the building, bending into a stiff breeze, Mace in the lead. The parking lot was black, no attendant. He held out his hand warningly, pressing me back against the brick wall. "Steady. Let's wait a second. Which is your car?"

I pointed to the convertible.

"Soupy looking crate," he said appreciatively.

But I knew he was stalling, eyes trying to pierce the shadows for any shape that might be lurking. I swallowed, looking up at the stars, thankful that I had a man like Mace at my side.

"Let's go," he said.

I led off to the car, handing him the keys. "You better drive."

He shrugged, unlocked the door and climbed in first. As I slid in and closed the door, he found the starter, and the lights, backed us around in a tight circle. "We'll hit a couple of roadhouses I know, Sprague. Ten to one they'd spot a place on the outskirts of town; the same route you came in from Jacksonville—the coast, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"My guess is, they'd use a joint out there somewhere for headquarters."

He fell silent, and we wound through the boulevard traffic. It began to thin out finally. I recognized a super gas station. "It's a slim chance, isn't it?" I broke the silence at last. "They could

be almost anywhere." It was then I glanced into the double, rear-vision mirror and noticed the headlights following us. Those lights had been with us all the time and surely Mace was aware of it? Of *course* they'd be spotting the hotel when we came out, but playing it smart, keeping well hidden. Maybe Mace didn't want to alarm me, but had figured all along that it would happen this way?

His eyes were on me. The light from the dash reflected flinty chips in those cold depths, then his gaze shifted back to the road. We were flying like a greased bow-string, wrapping up each turn of the highway neat and tight. Flying into the blank darkness of nowhere while a chill crept up my legs that wasn't caused by the rushing wind.

The suspicion insinuated itself into my aching brain—exploded to full-blown warning. Was Mace *really* a policeman? I had never asked for any credentials, just assumed it because he had blustered up to me there in the phone booth—because he *wanted* me to think that perhaps? I thought he had exchanged official words with that cop by the door, but—he could have asked the time—anything! There in the room I had almost told Mace where I had hidden the money! Was Lyria—alive?

He was insisting that she was, trying to prove to me that she was behind all this. But *was* she? And here I was being rushed to an appointment—with those in the car behind—an appointment with—death?

My fingers encountered the gun in my right coat pocket. Why had he given it to me? My new-found distrust wavered. I told myself that I was simply worked up, so unstrung that it was too easy to imagine anything. To hand a man a loaded gun—Loaded? I felt it over with my fingers. How did I break it open to find out? It had been a long time

since I'd handled a gun, but I remembered the trick of the catch on the top of the frame.

Presently, in that roomy pocket, I managed it. With my forefinger I discovered that the cylinder was devoid of shells. He had removed the bullets before handing it to me. Simple. Probably while I was still unconscious in that room.

I didn't dare close the gun again, afraid he'd hear the slight click. My head was throbbing, but I managed to keep my face calm.

He was slowing, peering ahead. I saw that those lights stayed a good distance behind; were even now dropping farther back. A blue, neon sign flickered off to the right: "Jack's Place."

"I'll pull in," Mace said. "Liable to find *anybody* here. Usually some pretty tough boys. They run a game upstairs. We'll have a quick drink and see what goes."

Cars were parked before the door at haphazard angles and I noticed a big space behind the building, when our lights flashed over it, that held a few more. Watching Mace from the corner of my eye, I saw him glance that way, then into the rear mirror. Did he know they'd be here soon, perhaps in the next few moments, waiting out back?

He coasted up silently, shooting between two sleek looking sedans; motioned me out. We headed for the door, Mace taking the lead. "Don't tip your hand if you see him," he cautioned. "I'll know by your face. Better jerk your hat over your eyes. And don't pull that gun on anybody. That's *my* end of the deal."

"All right," I agreed quietly. My teeth drew back from my lips when he turned. Somehow I'd give him the slip. . . .

Eyes swung toward us when we entered and I kept my head lowered, fol-

lowing Mace to the bar. There were tables and booths, partially filled, the usual juke-box pitching an assortment of jive. The man behind the bar had a towel wrapped around his bull-neck. He nodded at Mace coldly, ignoring me altogether.

Over our drinks, such as they were, we gazed into a long mirror, eyeing the crowd. I saw a dapper little man edge toward a rear hallway and disappear. Mace looked at me questioningly.

"Don't see him," I mumbled to him quietly.

He nodded.

I saw his gaze shift toward the front door; linger there. His coat bulged out at the hip and I was convinced he had another gun hidden there. Our eyes met in the mirror above the bar.

"You look better," he said. "Up in the hotel room I thought you'd pass out on me."

I managed a stiff nod. "Because I didn't know what I was up against before Mace."

His lips twitched as though at a fleeting, humorous thought. "Yeah."

The front door swung open. I gripped my glass so tight my knuckles ached, but it was only a newsboy. He began circling among the tables. I was tense, watching—

"We'll stay here awhile," Mace said out of the corner of his mouth. "Take it easy."

Yes. Take it easy. While he was holding me here, what was going on outside? I was burning with impatience. They probably wouldn't come in here at all. And presently he'd suggest we go back to my car. Once out there in the dark, what chance would I have? The time to make the break was now!

The juke box was blasting out with another round of rumba, screeching, jangling my nerves. I stood up and Mace half turned, cat-like.

"Wash my hands," I explained. "Be right back."

Slowly he sank back on the stool, eyes narrowing.

I don't know whether he fell for it or not. I ambled toward that rear hall where the sign pointed to the washroom. Once out of sight, I trotted past it, turned and went up a flight of wooden stairs. A long hall stretched before me, closed doors on each side and a crack of light shining dimly beneath one of them.

A man's voice, muffled, filtered from the room, mingling with the rattle of poker chips; a loud guffaw; other voices. I went on, stepping softly, came up against a closed door at the end of the hall. I eased the gun out of my pocket to use for effect if necessary, and twisted the knob. It opened.

My heart leaped when cool, night air struck my face. Wooden steps descended to the ground. My way was clear. But I hesitated. If Lyria and the man with the scarred chin were below somewhere, and I had bullets in my gun—? Ambitious thoughts of retribution held me there. I glanced back toward that room where the game was in progress. Tough men hung out here, Mace had said. They had guns of their own probably, and I knew a .38 revolver was a fairly common calibre. By now, Mace might be coming up those stairs after me, but I took a big chance and went back to that door with the slitted, yellow light creeping from beneath. I tore off my tie, opened my shirt at the throat, pasted an evil leer on my lips and kicked the door open, stepping into the room!

Five men froze, staring.

One wore a green eye-shade. There were stacks of currency on the circular, green-topped table. All of them held cards, chips piled high. I closed the door, backing against it, watching closely.

The small, wizened fellow nearest me, let his breath whistle through his teeth nastily. "You won't get away with it, friend!"

No one else spoke. Their eyes were on my gun.

"This ain't a stick-up," I said harshly. "A cop's on my tail and I need some spare lead for this .38. Who's got some slugs?"

The expression on their faces was ludicrous. No one moved.

"The quicker I get outta here—the better for all of us!" I prodded.

The man with the green eye-shade moved cautiously, pulling open a drawer in front of him; carefully lifted out a revolver, broke it, and spilled shells on the table, pushing them toward me, watchfully.

Nodding wordlessly, I scooped them into my pocket.

"You got a car?" the wizened man growled.

"Yeah."

The dapper little man I had spotted downstairs, picked up a stack of bills. "You need dough?"

"No. I'm all set!" I let my gaze travel over each of them in turn. "You guys are okay! Be seein' you around."

"Sure," the man with the eye-shade nodded. "Sure."

I opened the door and stepped out, closing it gently. No sign of Mace yet. There wasn't a sound behind me in that room as I reached the outside and descended the wooden stairs. The wind was rising. In the blackness surrounding the building I loaded the revolver. Now I was on an even footing with Mace.

I moved off slowly into the darkness, prowling—seeking for a car with a man and a woman. A slight click back up those stairs, and the door on the landing opened—a large figure stood momentarily silhouetted—blotted out with the

quick closing of the door. He was silent, evidently listening. There was no moon, no stars, and his eyes had to adjust themselves to this darkness.

The wind blew in gusts, sending dust swirling across the parking lot; pieces of paper skittering and scraping noisily; then it would subside, leaving an unnatural stillness that heightened even a faint football. During one of these gusts I covered ground fast, running head down, dodging just in time as I came up to a line of parked cars. I leaned there, breathing swiftly. The first car was empty. I heard steps descending those wooden stairs, unhurried, sure. It was this that spurred me on more than anything else, filling me with a strange panic. Crouching, I went from car to car, thinking that at the end of the line I'd cut and run blindly off into the darkness. With a shock I saw a glowing cigarette arc out of the front seat of the last car, a long, heavy sedan. It lit on the ground near my feet and rolled. There was the outline of two people in that seat!

Creeping close, I put one hand gently on the handle of the rear door, gun ready, easing the handle down, little by little. When it clicked, I jerked the door open and leaped into the back seat, growling: "Don't move!"

Blurred faces swung toward me, a woman's frightened gasp. She sat behind the wheel, one hand gripping it tightly. She was beautiful, long, silvery hair falling free to her shoulders, clasped about the temple by a narrow, jeweled band—a band I had recently given her. Lyria!

The man with her was twisting, coming over the seat. He wasn't wearing glasses now, and he didn't act like a clerk. His mouth was a snarling gash. I hit him in the face with the side of the .38, a chopping motion, and he fell back, but rose again.

"You want a bullet in your teeth?" I gritted. "Get back!"

"Monty!" Lyria whispered. "You found me. You—I've tried to warn you all day, darling—tried to get to you—Why are you staring at me like that? Monty!"

Her voice was clawing the insides out of me. Her lying, snivelling voice. I felt sick. I went blind, trying to pull that trigger—blast her from my sight forever. Maybe I would have—but a hand reached from nowhere, twisted my wrist, and the gun fell. Pain shot up to my elbow. It was Mace, reaching through the window!

THE psuedo-clerk came over the front seat then, stabbing viciously with a knife—a silent, horrible death-thrust that took part of my coat as I squirmed back. He kept coming toward me.

The car starter ground raggedly, gears meshed as Lyria spun the wheel and I heard Mace bellowing above the lurching of the car—but I was struggling desperately with scar-chin, one arm locked around his neck, my other hand gripping his knife wrist.

It was the longest moment I ever lived, feeling the strength of him, like live steel, slipping away from my clutching hands—the car moving, rocking, gaining tremendous speed—then a crash as we went into a brick wall instead of the street. Mace was still on the running board.

Everything seemed to cave in—sluggish, struggling figures like a movie on top of me jerked. Mace brought a gun butt down on his head a second time, which was enough, hauling the limp body out on the dirt. A crowd started to gather.

The front of the car was pushed in, the front seat hideously compressed beneath

a sheet of broken glass, gasoline and oil gurgling onto the ground. Lyria lay crumpled up there, barely stirring. I groped for the .38 on the floor, but Mace leaned in again.

"Cut it out, tough guy. Where you got the bullets for that gat I wouldn't know, but the way you go for it makes me suspicious." He picked it up, broke it open, and whistled. "I musta had a hunch when I saw you getting ready to blast your wife. I think the law has a better right to stop her crooked schemes, don't you?"

I stared at him dazedly. "The law—? But you gave me an empty gun. You didn't let on when you knew they were following us here!"

He was opening the front door, lifting Lyria up roughly. He shot me a glance. "I didn't know whether you could handle a gun. But I thought it would help your morale. Then I thought you might go to pieces if you knew they were trailing us—like you almost did back there in the hotel room. As it is—you're plenty okay, M. Harrison Sprague. By the way, is the guy on the ground your hotel clerk? He's Tony Mendraza, a gentleman the Florida police have had occasion to chat with more than a few times."

"The same, minus the glasses," I nodded, staring out at that still heap on the ground.

Lyria came to life, slapping Mace, twisting and clawing, knocking his hat off; her voice shrilling, not the cultured voice I had known in our one short happy year of marriage. "You dirty copper—"

He would have slapped her back, hard, but I saw him look down, stiffen. He was holding her instead. Her eyes darted to me, filled with hate and loathing and—something almost like disappointment—then she was going limp,

drawing a deep, shuddering breath. She lay quietly.

Mace eased her head back, reached down and brought up the tin box from the floor. He snapped the lid up, eyeing those crisp banknotes, nodding. "This is it. We got the dope on the Jacksonville bank job that was pulled last night. All here, girlie?"

She looked at me, her lips quivering—terror in her green eyes. "Monty—?"

Mace turned her face gently with his big hand. "Was your husband here going to return this?" Is that one reason you wanted him out of the way? And because you'd gotten tangled up with a rat like Mendraza and thought you might as well own a manufacturing company too?"

Lyria's lips moved. "Yes."

My expression must have been haggard.

"Monty?" she whispered. "There wasn't anyone in the house this morning—except Tony. He'd been there a long time. He mixed me all up. I'm no good, Monty. Sis is no good. You would have known—if you'd met her. "You've *always* been blind where I was concerned. She said your voice was nice on the phone. I called her, later. You—you *are* nice. You—"

I forced myself to look at her. "Why didn't you just take the money and go?" I asked bitterly. "You got me out of the house—would you really have murdered me, Lyria?"

I never found out. She couldn't answer.

Mace laid his hand on my arm, squeezed tightly. "Steady, Sprague. Take a walk. And don't come back if you don't want to."

I climbed out slowly, realizing it was the first time I had seen him with his hat off. He was almost bald. I didn't look back.

BACK DOOR TO HELL

By JAMES
HALL



Pleasure-hunting Reba got tired of waiting for week-ends to see Joe—and went looking for another soft-touch.

I stared at her. "You found him just like that when you came in?"

IT BEGAN one of those warm evenings in early May. I was at the bar of The Club Click and had just picked up my old-fashioned. Then I stopped with the glass half-way to my mouth. Across the bar Reba was staring at me. No doubt about it—it was

Reba! The same honey-colored hair, swept into a casual looseness, framing her round face. The same blue eyes, narrowed and calculating, with that one eyebrow raised questioningly. The same full lips, slightly parted and slightly scornful.

The years rolled away quickly and I was right back where I had been when she walked out of my life.

"I've got no time for small potatoes, Joe," she had said with her hand on the door. "I'm going places."

"Have a good time, baby," I'd told her.

I didn't think she would go, but she did. In the three years that had passed I thought I'd gotten over Reba. Now, as I set my glass carefully on the bar, I knew that I hadn't.

I rose slowly. "George, excuse me a minute."

George Preston's handsome face broke into a wide grin and his dark head nodded. "I saw her, too."

"Sure, but I saw her first!"

If it hadn't been for George I wouldn't have been at The Club Click. It just isn't the kind of place you walk into unless you have some dough to toss around, even if you can still dress the part. George and I had known each other a long time. But George had gotten some breaks that I hadn't. Or maybe he'd *made* some breaks that I hadn't.

Beneath that soft, playboy exterior he was as hard as nails. He knew what he wanted—and got it. What he'd wanted wasn't quite as green as grass, but it could buy a lot more. Now he was head of the tri-state Preston Trucking Company.

I edged my way over to the other side of the bar. "Hello," I said.

"Well, Joe Adams!"

"Good to see you again, Reba."

I climbed on the stool beside her as she drained her glass. "Buy you a drink?"

She turned her eyes full on me.

"For old time's sake," I said.

She shrugged. "Why not?"

When the fresh drinks were in front of us I tried again. "I hear you married money, Reba."

That funny eyebrow went a little higher. "Things get around."

"Don't they though. Is your husband with you?"

"No."

"No?"

"Sometimes, Joe, it's just as boring being married to money as it is to tag along with a guy that'll never have any.

"Especially," she continued, "if you can't get your hands on any of it."

"Oh? Who is he?"

"Charles Jaxon."

Uh-oh! Old Charlie Jaxon, of Jaxon and Durant, king of the baby food industry. "Should I say congratulations, Mrs. Jaxon?"

"Don't bother!"

I let it go. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Anybody that isn't old enough to be my father and doesn't have arthritis could help."

You should have decided that before, baby, I thought. "The description fits me," I said.

She glanced at me out of the corners of her eyes. "You mean that?"

"Sure."

"I thought you might be sore?"

"About walking out on me? That was yesterday. This is tonight."

She tossed off her highball as though it were water. "My car's outside." One tapered, nylon-smooth leg stretched out as she turned to slid off the stool.

"Let's go," I said.

Miles away from town she turned down a short dirt road and halted the car. The lights of the city were spread below us like so many winking fireflies. In the distance could be heard the crashing roar of the surf. Reba edged away from the wheel, toward me.

Her face glowed momentarily in the shadow as she drew on her cigarette. "I like seeing you again, Joe."

I nestled her against me. "Reba, don't leave me again."

I twisted her shoulders until I could look into her eyes, lazy now and half-open. "You hear me?"

"I hear you, Joe."

"When am I going to see you?"

"I—don't—know." She straightened slowly.

"Let's make it soon."

She flicked her cigarette through the open window and her voice was bitter. "You don't know what it's been like, Joe, being married to him. All bent over, the way he is. Why sometimes I have to help him or he couldn't get around at all. He's never without his cane anymore.

"And nag—he's always nagging me! 'Where have you been, Reba? What did you spend that for, Reba? Why don't you stay with me, Reba. I can't stand you being away from me, Reba. No, Reba, I can't afford to give you any more money—I'm an old man—I can't tell when I'll need my money.' And he's got plenty, Joe! Plenty!

"He still owns half that business. He's got a stack of bonds a mile high and a bankful of cash. Yet he treats me as though he hadn't a dime. He won't even move out of that business-woman's-club section where we live. The old fool! I wish he was dead!"

"And what if he was dead?" I asked softly.

SHE flung herself against me. "Oh, Joe, if he was, I'd have everything, I've always wanted. I'd—" She gazed up at me. "Then there'd be just you and me, Joe. Nobody else in the whole wide world, but you—and me."

I'm not sure how long she'd been thinking about murder or how long she'd been looking for a sucker; but that night when I walked back into her life, I was it! . . .

The next morning I was awakened by the ringing telephone.

"Hello," I said.

"Joe? George Preston. You said something about looking for a good spot."

I had, but not the way he put it. I'd hit George for a job.

"That's right," I said.

"Well, I think I know just the spot for you. I can take care of it—if you'll give me the name and phone number of the gal you walked out of The Click with last night."

"Hey, wait a minute, that's blackmail."

"Well?"

"Sorry, George, I've known this one a long, long time."

"So it's that way?" He laughed.

"Okay, Joe, you stop over at the office today sometime and we'll talk about that job."

I hung up the phone and crawled out of bed. By the time I'd finished dressing the phone rang again. This time it was Reba.

"I don't think I can make it tonight?"

I swallowed my disappointment. "Try, baby."

"I will, but it doesn't look like it. He'd raise the roof if I took the car out again tonight. How about tomorrow night?"

"I might not be around that long."

"Not running out on your hotel bill are you?"

"No, that's paid."

"Not running out on me, are you?"

"Nothing like that. George Preston, a fellow I know, might have a job for me. If he doesn't, I can't afford to hang around."

"Oh." She paused so long I thought she'd hung up. "Maybe I can make it tonight, Joe. Where will it be?"

"How about here?"

"Why not? About eight?"

"Suits me," I answered.

"Did you get the job?" she asked, when she arrived.

"I did, and a company car to go with it."

"That's swell, Joe. Now you can stick around."

I laughed ruefully. "I don't know. What I mean is—I won't be in town very much."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. You see, the new job is sales representative for Preston Trucking Company. I cover the whole state, contacting clients, routing trucks and things like that. So I'll only be here Wednesday and over the week-end."

"Well, at least, you'll be here?"

"That's right."

"And we can get together once in awhile."

"Every day I'm here, baby, if you can make it."

She rose. "Which reminds me, I'd better be getting back."

"So soon?"

"Sorry, darling. Next time we'll plan to spend the entire evening together."

I drove Reba out to a neat, white house on Sherman Drive. I watched her start up the steps and I drove away. When I reentered my hotel room, the phone was ringing.

"Hello."

"Joe?" It was Reba and her voice was low, vibrating with urgency.

"Yeah."

"Joe! Listen to me! Something's happened."

"What—what's wrong?"

"It's Charles. He fell down the stairs while I was out. He—he's dead! If anyone should happen to ask you, I wasn't with you this evening."

"No?"

"It might not look so good."

"Why should anyone ask me?"

"Because I want you to come out here right away. I'm going to call the doctor

now. But the way I'll tell it—I called the doctor first, then you. You're an old friend of mine."

"But—"

"It's natural that I'd call someone!"

"How about the neighbors?"

"I don't know any of them well enough. I'd call a friend—I called you!"

The receiver clicked sharply in my ear. I turned slowly, my mind a jumble of confusion. I didn't like it, but Reba wanted me right away! Hurriedly I descended the two flights of stairs and strode out to the parking lot.

It took me ten minutes to return to the white house on Sherman drive. The windows were blazing with lights now. Reba opened the door and I paused on the threshold. Charles Jaxon's twisted body lay face down at the foot of the stairs.

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"I'm sure."

I stared at her. "You found him just like that when you came in?"

"Just like that."

"Didn't you touch him?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he's dead?"

Her gaze moved from mine to the body of her husband and back again. "He looks dead!"

"Turn him over."

She stood woodenly.

"Turn him over! Regardless of how you might feel, it would look damned funny if you just walked in here, saw him like that, and called a doctor."

"But I didn't walk in here. I haven't been out of the house."

"All the more reason. You hear him fall, run in here, try to help him, turn him over, then call for help."

QUICKLY she moved forward to drop on her knees. She lifted the dead man's thin shoulders and rolled him face up. She glanced at me

and I nodded. As she rose she dug a finger nail into her stocking. A beautiful run spread over her knee.

"His cane!" I exclaimed.

"What?"

"You told me he was never without his cane anymore. Where's his cane?"

The eyebrow twitched and her eyes bored into mine. "Oh, that's right," she said slowly, deliberately. "He should have his cane."

And now I knew! Of course, I should have known before, but this time she didn't even pretend. I heard her rapid steps mounting the stairs and crossing the hall. I heard the cane hit the top step and clatter down to rest against Charles Jaxon's legs. I heard a car door slam out in the street.

Reba opened the door for the doctor. I helped him carry the body to the living room sofa.

He made a brief, thorough examination, then I called a prominent undertaking firm. By 11 o'clock we were alone in the hallway.

"Joe." Her eyes were wide and pleading.

"Yes?"

"I—I— Are you going?"

"I can't stay here."

"No." She hesitated. "You'll see me through this, won't you?"

"Sure." A choking nausea hung in my throat.

"It was an accident. You know that don't you?"

I didn't even try to answer that one.

"I swear it was! When I came in he was just lying there. Maybe it didn't look that way to you, but that's the way it was."

I *could* be wrong. It *could* have been an accident. "I'd better go, Reba."

She clung to my arm. "You've got to believe me! It might just be the break we've been waiting for—if everything works out."

But things didn't work out.

First, there was a guy named Chambers. I opened the door when he knocked. He was middle-aged, well-groomed and very polite.

"Mr. Adams?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to talk to you a few minutes."

I hesitated.

"I'm from police headquarters."

"Oh." I stepped aside.

He dropped into my only chair and removed his hat. "Sure hot."

"Yes, it is." I perched on the edge of the bed.

"We've been trying to see you for a couple of days, Mr. Adams, but you were always out."

"I've been down state. I'm a sales representative for Preston Trucking Company."

"Yes, I know."

"Is—anything wrong?"

"Well, no. We're just trying to clean up some old files." He smiled blandly.

"I see." But I didn't.

He pulled out a notebook and leafed through it casually. "Oh, here it is—the accident on Charles Jaxon."

My heart nose-dived to my stomach.

"You don't mind answering a few routine questions, do you?"

"No indeed."

"All right." He glanced at the notebook again. "You were the first one to arrive after the accident. I believe."

"Yes, after Reba—" I almost stopped there, "Mrs. Jaxon called."

"And she called you because you were a close friend?"

"Yes."

"Yet you've only been in town four days."

"I don't believe she had any friends here. I've known her for a long time—before she was married."

"Quite natural," he nodded. "Now

would you describe the scene for me."

"The scene?"

"Yes, the position of the body and so on."

"Oh. Well, I went in and he was lying at the foot of the stairs."

"How?"

"How. Why sort of on his back—face up."

"Anything else?"

"No. Oh, his cane was beside him."

"Beside him, Mr. Adams?"

"Now that you mention it, no. It was resting against his legs." And it shouldn't have been! It should have been under him or beyond, anyplace but where it was.

"I see. You have a good eye for detail."

I didn't say anything. I'd said too much already.

"Can you describe Mrs. Jaxon's appearance, Mr. Adams?"

"You mean how she was dressed?"

"Well, partly. Was she overwrought?"

"No," I answered slowly.

"Didn't that strike you as strange?"

"Well, she was white and sort of tense, but I think she was expecting something like that to happen."

"Really."

"Not in that way, of course." Everything I said seemed to be wrong.

"I see. You mentioned the way she was dressed. Anything odd about it?"

"No. Except she had a large runner in one stocking."

"Ah. Wonder what caused that?"

"I—I don't know?"

"Possibly when she ran in to help her husband, she dropped quickly to the floor, and the strain—"

"Possibly."

"Can you tell me *how* she was dressed, Mr. Adams?"

"Why she was fully dressed."

"Yes, of course. Like she'd been out or was going out?"

"Well—I suppose so."

"Do you remember any details of her clothing?"

I didn't. I tried, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what she had been wearing. "No," I said, realizing numbly that nothing I'd said would help Reba's case any.

"NO? YOU'RE sure?" He closed the notebook. "Funny the things a man will notice at a time like that—the things that stick in his memory." He rose. "Well, thanks, Mr. Adams. We wouldn't have bothered you except we like to get the views of an outsider—a disinterested party, like yourself."

I watched him go down the hall, but he left a gnawing fear behind him as he went.

Reba told me about the second thing that didn't work out. That was Charles Jaxon's will.

"You mean he cut you out entirely?"

"He might as well have. I am to receive five hundred dollars to take care of expenses."

"Then who—?"

"The business was incorporated. I can't touch it. Everything else he had goes to a cousin in some tank town in Maryland."

"But you have dower rights."

"Only in real property."

"Well?"

"There isn't any. Even the house was rented."

"Can't you contest the will?"

"I've seen a lawyer. There isn't a chance of breaking it—not in this state."

"How about insurance?"

"Charles didn't believe in that. He had one small policy, just enough to cover his funeral expenses."

"So you get nothing."

"Nothing except the car, that was in my name, and my clothes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll have to start over—somewhere."

I swung her around to face me. "Reba, we could get married."

"Joe!"

"I mean it."

"Oh, Joe."

"After this all blows over."

"What do you mean—blows over?"

I told her about Chambers.

"So?" she said. "There is nothing he can pin on me."

"No," I answered, my earlier suspicions fading away. Besides they say love is blind. "I guess not."

"Anyway, I don't even have a motive."

Maybe that's the reason Chambers never came back to see me—because the way the will read Reba *didn't* have a motive.

The third reason that things didn't work out took longer to show.

We figured that six months would be a decent interval to wait before getting married. In the meantime Reba moved into my hotel. That way it was easier for us to be together when I was in town.

Saturday morning, seven weeks after I started working for Preston Trucking Company, George called me into his office. He congratulated me on doing a good job and he gave me a nice raise. He also invited me to his home for dinner. I asked him if I could bring a friend—which was a mistake.

The dinner was excellent. George was a friendly, charming host and Reba was—well, she was just Reba.

"He's awfully nice," she told me on the way home.

"Yeah. George is a good guy. He came right up from the bottom. And he won't rest on his present laurels either. He'll keep going up. Someday George Preston will be a millionaire."

I guess that started her thinking.

Tuesday night I got in from the road a little earlier than usual. By the time I'd showered and changed it was only 11 o'clock. I thought maybe Reba would like to go out for a drink. I called her room, but she didn't answer.

As long as I was dressed, I decided to pick up a quick one anyway. I headed for the corner tap room and half-way down the street George Preston drove by. I saw him and it didn't mean a thing. I had a double scotch, then went back to the hotel. For want of something better to do I called Reba's room again. This time she answered.

"Oh, hello, Joe. Did you call before?"

"Yeah."

"I was asleep."

"All right if I come down?"

"Oh, Joe. Not tonight. I'm dead."

"Okay, honey. How about lunch tomorrow?"

"Fine."

"I'll call you from the office."

But when I called, Reba had a headache and didn't feel like going out. I postponed my own lunch to finish okaying some invoices, and when I did go out, I decided to try a new place on the next block. In the entrance way I halted . . . and I never got any further. I suddenly wasn't hungry anymore.

Reba was there in a secluded booth. A man was with her and they were snuggled up closer than quarter after three. I couldn't see who the guy was and I didn't try. I just wanted to get the hell out of there!

I didn't say anything to her that night because I didn't know what to say, but I made it a point to get in early Friday evening. As soon as I reached my room, I dialed her number. No answer. I smoked a lot of cigarettes and tried again about every fifteen minutes. At 11:30, she answered.

"Where have you been?" I demanded.

"To a movie. What's wrong?"

"I've been trying to get you for hours."

"I'm sorry, Joe. If I'd known you'd be in early—"

"I'm coming down. I want to see you."

"Look, Joe, I'm beat."

I slapped the receiver against her ear and hot-footed it to her room. I didn't have to see the evening dress to know she was lying like a taxi meter.

"So you been to the movies! Was it formal?"

Her eyes were narrow and her lips had that scornful twist. "So I wasn't at the movies."

"Where were you then?"

"Out." Her voice was flat, final.

"Now listen to me, Reba—"

"You listen to me! A gentleman invites me out. I go out. I have a nice time. Then I have to come back to this. What do you expect me to do—just sit around and bite my nails, waiting for Wednesday and Saturday nights? You don't have any ball and chain on me."

"Maybe not, baby, but I've got plenty on you without that."

"Like what?"

"Like pushing an old man downstairs!"

She stared. "You don't think you could get away with it, do you?"

"I might, if I gave the cops the full story."

"And what would that make you?"

Now it was my turn to stare.

"An accessory, Joe! An accessory on a murder charge!" She cocked that eyebrow and her lips twitched. "I might even be able to convince a jury that you handled the whole job!"

And she might! If a face and figure would sway a jury, Reba could do it.

"You'd better go back to your room, Joe, and think it over."

That's the way everything was at 5

o'clock Tuesday afternoon. It was then that I was tipped-off that all the truck drivers were going on strike at noon the next day.

I tried to get George Preston at home, but he didn't answer. I was downstate, but I made it back to town in three hours. I drove right out to George's place. With one foot on the sidewalk, I paused. Reba's car was in the driveway!

I dressed carefully the next morning and ate a leisurely breakfast. On my way to see Reba, I made a quick stop at my own room. A few minutes later I was tapping on her door.

"Oh, Joe. Come in."

She was seated in front of the mirror, brushing that long honey-colored hair. I looked at her, and I didn't feel a thing. I was all dead inside—just as dead as she was going to be.

"You didn't call me last night."

"You weren't in, anyway, were you?"

"No."

"Movies again?"

"Look, Joe, our arrangement doesn't seem to be working out."

"Have you worked out a better one?"

She kept on brushing.

"With Preston?"

"So now you know?"

"Yeah, now I know."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

Maybe I wouldn't actually have done anything. Maybe I would have lost my nerve. But she had to keep talking!

"I told you once before I didn't have time for small potatoes. I'm leaving you again, Joe, and this time it's for good. Of course, if I ever need another sucker—" And she laughed!

I moved forward one step, snaking the .32 out of my coat pocket. I placed the barrel against the back of her head and closed my eyes. Then I pulled the trigger.

LET ME KILL YOU, SWEETHEART

CHAPTER ONE

Die Tonight

AT JUST 5:30 on the afternoon of September 10th the door of Timothy Regg's liquor shop at 413 Beetle Street swung open with a sharp, shrill clatter of its bell. Sitting behind the counter with his thin shoulders hunched over his "little black book," as he called it, Timothy Regg said pleasantly, without looking up "Hello, Blossom, dear."

To another man the bell might have seemed a nerve-jarring jangle, but to Timothy Regg it was a welcome and dulcet sound because it signalled the return of his beloved wife, Blossom.

This afternoon, however, the bell's clang was louder and sharper than usual. Timothy Regg lifted his gaze from his little black book to find that his wife had halted just inside the door and was staring at the front page of the newspaper she had brought in.

"Why, Blossom, sweet," Regg asked, disturbed by the shocked expression on her plump face, "is anything the matter, dear?"

Ignoring his solicitous question, Blossom continued to pore over a front page news item. She might be described in a



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Could Timothy Regg's blonde wife resist the temptation to touch his forbidden black book?

By
**FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**

*"Gimme that back,
ya shrimp!" Blossom
screamed.*



**Tense
Mystery
Novelette**

stock phrase as a "big blonde" but this would not give Blossom due credit. Although large-framed and plump, she was also superbly proportioned.

She was always snugly girdled, her nylons were always sleekly smooth, she invariably had her mouth on straight and her mascara never actually dripped. She was largely a self-made woman and could be proud of the job she had done on herself.

Certainly she need never worry about holding her husband's affections. He adored the very ground her spike-heeled, size nine sandals trod on—prized her so highly, in fact, that his friends simply wagged their heads.

Alarmed for her now, Timothy Regg hurried around the end of the counter to her side. Blossom's round face was blanched with anxiety and she had begun gnawing the rouge off her lips. Craning to see the paper, her husband found a headline howling blackly across the whole front page:

LENNOX CORNERED BUT FIGHTS
WAY OUT, KILLING TWO COPS—
MAY BE HIDING INSIDE CITY

"Lennox?" Timothy Regg asked mildly. "Who's he, sweetie?"

Blossom turned a disdainful stare on him. She weighed a good fifty pounds heavier than her husband and towered eight inches over him. She had her lush sort of beauty while he, with his bald head and button nose, could never be called handsome.

His best feature was his eyes, which were bright and blue as gunmetal. They were their brightest and bluest when Timothy was near Blossom, for then they shone with loving admiration for her—even when she treated him with scorn, as she did so often.

"Who's Lennox, you ask me?" she said scathingly. "Sometimes I think you must be the dumbest runt—"

"Len Lennox is— Oh, never mind!" Blossom added acridly. "Among other *important* things he happens to be one of your steady customers."

Undisturbed by the sneering note in Blossom's voice, Regg answered thoughtfully, "Lennox? I don't remember having that name in my little black book, sweetie."

She stared at him now in silent contempt. He seemed to have failed in the first place to recognize Len Lennox as a smooth, big-time operator having such diverse interests that he might easily find use for more than one name. Blossom appreciated so much more about Lennox's situation than her husband did, that she couldn't think how to begin to explain it to the good-natured little simpleton.

"And besides, Blossom, sweet," Regg said patiently, "even if this Mr. Lennox did happen to buy some bottle goods here at some time or other, why should you be upset by the trouble he's gotten into?"

"Who said I'm upset?" Blossom bit at him. "I think it's interesting, that's all. Quit bothering me."

She marched into the little corner office behind the counter, bumped down into her husband's chair, crossed her solidly modelled legs and continued to frown over the news about the fugitive cop-killer, Lennox.

A customer came in to keep Timothy Regg busy for a few minutes. Bidding the customer good-by and turning to his cash register with the money, Regg saw instantly that his little black book was no longer where he had left it on the counter.

BLOSSOM had picked it up while his back was turned and was rapidly leafing through it. His reaction came lightning-fast. He snatched the book out of Blossom's

scarlet-nailed fingers and retreated clutching it behind his back.

"Whattaya mean, ya shrimp!" Blossom said, rising, her face furious. "Don't you get rough with me. Gimme that back!"

Regg shook his bald head, looking immovable. "No. Not my little black book. Anything else of mine you can have for the taking, Blossom. Help yourself to every dollar in the cash register, I won't care. Get mad and bust every bottle on these shelves, tear the shirt right off my back. Anything I own is yours, Blossom, sweet—except you can't have my little black book."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why not? As long as I've known you, you've been guarding that thing like a miser guards his gold. What've you got written in it?"

"Just information, Blossom, such as the names and addresses of all my customers, with their likes and dislikes. But I've been many years accumulating it, Blossom, and it's the very cornerstone of my business now, the most valuable thing I own. I just can't let anybody touch it—not even you, my sweet."

"I don't get this," Blossom said. "What's so precious about a few names and addresses and such stuff?"

Her husband smiled patiently as he explained. When certain rare wines came in, he saved them for certain customers who preferred them. He had a number of free-spenders to whom he never mailed bills, for reasons of domestic strategy; with these, he always waited until they came in to pay cash.

Then too, some of his best customers had deliveries made to addresses other than their homes or offices—sometimes to two or three other places—and Timothy Regg offered an extremely valuable service by never getting such delicate situations fouled up.

"So you see, Blossom, dear, this little

black book is not only my most valuable business asset," Regg wound up, "but also, if this information should leak out to the wrong places it might cause no end of terrible trouble to my very best customers. That would ruin me, Blossom dear, and maybe ruin them too."

A glitter had appeared in Blossom's eyes. She answered with what was, in her, a surprising degree of understanding, "Well, I really can't blame ya, Timmy. Like for instance, if you've got the name of an important man like, say, Mr. Ned Nelling, you've probably got him at one or two addresses which he would want us to keep mum about."

Blossom had mentioned the name of Nelling as a sly means of testing the value of that little black book and her husband's awareness as well. It was no secret to Blossom that Len Lennox had often found it convenient to be Ned Nelling. She watched her husband's homely face to see whether it registered any suspicion of this; but it did not.

"Mr. Nelling's got no less than four different addresses in my little black book, and a couple of 'em he's told me never to mention to anybody else. He might call me up some day, 'Send a case of stuff over to the Number Three place,' and I'd know just what to take and where to go." Timothy Regg shook his bald head.

"But nobody but me must know such information as that, Blossom. Not even you. Because such information could leak out and be very dangerous."

Backing up his injunction, Regg turned to a cupboard under the counter. He placed the precious little black book inside it, closed its door, firmly twisted the key in the lock, then tucked the key snugly in his pants pocket.

"You understand clearly, Blossom, dear? Never, never, never touch my little black book."

"Poo," Blossom retorted, lifting her

blonde head derisively. "Anything I need to know, I'm *quite* sure I can find it out in other ways."

As if to prove it, she directed her big, trimly shod feet across the store and marched out, leaving her husband to wonder just what she might mean.

Timothy Regg gazed after her, past the stacks of bottles in his show windows, with a sad expression settling on his face. Slowly shaking his head, he went to his desk, picked up the paper that Blossom had left there and read about the city-wide man-hunt which had one Len Lennox as its objective. Then he pulled his telephone close and dialed a number.

"Police headquarters?" he said politely. "Let me talk to Captain Dango, please— Captain Dango is out? You don't know just when he'll be back? Very busy on the Lennox case—hmm, I see. Well, it's too bad, because I have met Captain Dango personally and I think he's a very fine man, the kind of man I can talk to. I had a little message to give him. I wanted to tell him I'm afraid my wife is going to die very suddenly tonight."

The telephone made twanging noises at Timothy Regg as he sat there, scarcely hearing them, gazing out the street window at Blossom, who was just then hustling out of sight at the corner.

"Well," he said, breaking in and arousing himself, "I do hope Captain Dango gets back in time, before my wife gets killed. I'd like to tell him about it beforehand, so I'll call back a little later." Then Timothy Regg added courteously, "Good-by," and hung up.

IT WAS 7 p.m. when Captain Dango appeared in his office at police headquarters. He came in quietly through a back door, looking haggard and hungry. The tough job of bringing Len Lennox to book was Captain Dan-

go's responsibility and he had put in an exhausting day getting nowhere with it.

Chagrined, worried and supperless, the captain sank into his chair and listened dejectedly while Kerson, his khaki-shirted secretary, gave him a brief digest of intelligence received during his absence.

Dango responded by saying heavily, "The hell with that routine. I'm concentrating on a rat named Lennox. Rustle me up four hamburger sandwiches and two quarts of coffee, pronto."

Half a moment later, before even getting started on this assignment, Kerson was back with another item of news.

"He's here now, Captain—just came in asking for you. I mean the guy I've been worrying about."

Captain Dango's own troubled mind being preoccupied with the task of smelling out and capturing Lennox, he had paid little attention to Kerson's recital. He blinked and asked, "Which one was that?"

"The one who said he's afraid his wife's going to die suddenly tonight. He's here to tell you about it. Says he runs a liquor store on Beetle Street—name's Timothy Regg."

Captain Dango's eyebrows went up a notch. "I know him slightly. What makes him think she's going to— Wait a minute." Dango's interest grew keener. "I remember his wife too. Name's Blossom. I think she's been mentioned somehow in connection with Lennox."

Dango had been far too busy all day to look into such angles himself, but he scented a possibly important development here. He picked up his interphone and called Lieutenant Detective Hyam, who was acting as his first deputy in the Lennox man-hunt. "Blossom Regg— isn't that the name of the woman who was seen at various roadhouses with Lennox just before he lammed?"

"That's the gal, all right, and we're

checking her," Lieutenant Hyam answered at once. "But like I warned you, Danny, it's too much to expect her to know where Lennox' hideout is. He's too smart to trust that kind of information to a casual friend."

"It may not be so casual on her side," Dango answered. "Anyway, I've got something cooking on her at this end also. Sit tight until I find out what it is."

Hyam said, "Will do, Danny," and Captain Dango, clicking off the connection, instructed Kerson, "Bring that little guy in."

Kerson opened the door and signalled. Timothy Regg entered smiling. He had slicked himself up for this interview, with his best three-year-old suit, last year's snap-brim felt and high-top shoes shining almost as brightly as his burnished eyes.

When they settled into chairs, facing each other across Dango's desk, Regg's expression became sad and the captain's became intent.

"You say you're worried that your wife may get killed tonight? Why should she die so suddenly as all that? What do you think's going to happen to her?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Captain," Timothy Regg answered. "I just have a dreadful feeling that some sort of terrible disaster is hanging over her. I just get these hunches every once in a while and it's sort of uncanny the way every one of them has come true."

Frowning skeptically, Dango inquired, "As for example?"

"Well, just a few weeks ago the feeling came to me, out of nowhere, that I was going to get hurt somehow. Sure enough, the very next day I happened to slip on the damp floor of the cellar under my shop. I fell and wrenched my shoulder pretty badly."

"I heard about that," Dango said evenly. "But in not quite that same way. You didn't actually slip, did you? Neigh-

borhood gossip says you were knocked flat by a bottle wielded by your wife during the course of a pretty loud argument—and rumor says further that this wasn't the first time she'd flattened you."

Regg's thin cheeks flushed indignantly. "Why, that's an unfair exaggeration, Captain! Blossom was there, true, and she did have a bottle in her hand, but that happens very frequently in a liquor store, and she may have nudged me with it accidentally, but really, I assure you, she would never intentionally harm a hair of my head."

Dango glanced at Regg's bald pate and did not smile. "Wasn't she also bawling the hell out of you at the time, or is that rumor exaggerated also?"

"She was just protesting a little, Captain," Timothy Regg explained quietly. "About the missing case of Scotch, I mean. Strangely enough, that was another queer hunch I'd had—about the Scotch. I'd gotten a feeling only that morning that something might be wrong in the stock room and sure enough, when I checked—"

"You keep your stock room locked, don't you?" Dango inquired. "Was there any evidence of burglary?"

"None at all, but—" Timothy Regg sat forward earnestly. "Now look here, Captain! Don't you go and suspect my wife of anything underhanded. It's true I sometimes leave her alone in charge of the shop, but what of it? She couldn't possibly have any use for a whole case of Scotch at once—and on the sly too! I'm sure it was just a clerical mistake on my part. Anyway, the only reason I mentioned it was to show you that these hunches of mine have a funny way of coming true. They really have, dozens of times. That's why I'm so worried by my feeling that something horrible might happen to Blossom tonight."

"Just when did this sense of impend-

ing disaster first creep over you, Mr. Regg?" the captain asked carefully.

"It was at five forty-five this afternoon, just after Blossom went hurrying out of my shop. Suddenly I got this ghastly feeling that I might never see her again—that she was hastening off to her death."

"Then why didn't you stop her?" Dango asked. "Why aren't you with her now, protecting her from this danger that's hovering over her, whatever it is?"

"She was out of sight before I could start after her," Timothy Regg explained, "and she had left without saying where she was going. I haven't seen her since, haven't been able to locate her by phone. That's why I need your help to find her, so we can both do our best to safeguard her. Besides—"

Noting a brighter gleam in those gun-metal eyes of Timothy Regg's, Captain Dango cued him alertly, "Yes?"

"Besides, if something *should* happen to her tonight, I—I want to make sure in advance that I'll be in the clear."

Dango said thoughtfully, "Hmmm?"

"I mean I've heard that the very first thing the police do when a woman meets with a fatal accident is to suspect her husband of foul play. It wouldn't be fair to feel that way about me, Captain. I cherish my Blossom very dearly. I want to do my best to keep her safe from all harm. I implore you to help me do that in every possible way. But at the same time, in case something *does* happen to her tonight, I want to have an iron-clad alibi."

Dango teetered back in his chair, studying this shiny-eyed little man from under darkly lowered eyebrows. He had begun to suspect that Timothy Regg might be trying to slip over a fast one.

On the other hand Dango could not for a moment ignore the scandalous rumor tying Mrs. Timothy Regg to Len Lennox, the cop-killing fugitive whom he

was endeavoring so earnestly to find. Nor, for that matter, could he help being touched by Regg's look of innocent anxiety and genuine concern.

Sitting up decisively, Captain Dango said, "Mr. Regg, I'm going to turn you right back to Sergeant Kerson. He'll start things humming for you. Give him a complete description of your wife and a list of all the places where she likes to go. We'll do all we can to find her and keep her safe."

Gripping Regg's gentle little hand, he brushed aside the expressions of gratitude and steered the little man back into his secretary's custody. Closing the connecting door firmly, he went back to his interphone.

"Listen, Hyam. Blossom Regg is on the prowl right now. If she's really crazy about Lennox she's probably trying as hard as we are to pick up a little information as to where she might find him. Anyway let's play that lead for all it's worth. Spot her, but let her keep on the move and watch her on the chance that she might lead us to Lennox."

"Okay."

"Put Brown on the job of checking the dame's husband, Timothy. Let's get a good picture of what he's been up to lately."

"Check."

"Don't slip up on any of this," Dango cautioned him. "Especially keep a sharp eye on the woman on the chance that something might suddenly happen to her."

He disconnected scowling at himself. The task of flushing Lennox out of cover was proving to be tough enough, but now, on top of it, he had this shiny-eyed little man named Regg to stew about. It wasn't so easy to dismiss Regg as a crackpot. There was a certain quality of sincerity in the guy that carried a sense of conviction. Already Captain Dango had begun to feel that unless he took

quick and careful measures against it, something terrific and fatal *would* happen to Blossom Regg tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

Little Black Book

ABOUT 7:45 p.m. a woman who might have been Blossom Regg was seen entering the Old Keg Tap Room, a medium-class dive just outside the downtown section of the city. The observation was made by Sergeant Miller, one of the many plainclothes men who were scattered at strategic points under orders from Lieutenant Hyam.

Sergeant Miller immediately and quietly entered the saloon after this woman. He found the place crowded with sixty or eighty customers. As he gazed at them in the murky light an expression of bafflement spread over his face. Three minutes thereafter he was enclosed in a phone booth in a rear corner and making a report direct to Captain Dango.

"Look, Captain, I respectfully submit we gotta get a better description," he complained. "There's entirely too many big, bleached blondes on the loose tonight. In this joint right now there's exactly eight of 'em, and every one looks so much like Blossom Regg's supposed to look that I wouldn't know which to pick. I can't step up and ask each one what's her name and is she the dame I'm supposed to be tailing, can I? And if they start scattering, Captain, how'n hell'm I gonna tail all eight at once? See what I mean, Captain?"

Dango, disconnecting, could see very well what Miller meant. He was wondering what to do about it when his phone rang again. This time it was Sergeant Brown, whom Lieutenant Hyam had put to investigating Timothy Regg.

"One thing I found out about him, Captain—aside from the fact that he's a quiet, well-behaved, hard-working citizen—is that last week he bought a couple sticks of dynamite."

"Dynamite?" Dango muttered. "What for?"

"I can't answer that one, captain. In this state people can buy dynamite over a hardware store counter without a license and without explaining what for. However, they do have to have a permit to store it. I checked this and found out Timothy Regg duly got such a permit to keep two sticks of dynamite on the premises at 413 Beetle Street for not longer than thirty days. So he's legal on both counts."

"And just what the hell am I supposed to do about the fact that he's a law-abiding man?"

"Sorry, Captain. Call you back when I've got something important."

While mulling this over in his mind Dango received another call, this one from Hyam.

"The tie-up is getting stronger, Danny. I mean I'm picking up more and more info to show that Blossom Regg really is the babe that Lennox was seeing the most of lately. The usual thing on his part, they say, but plenty serious on hers. No doubt of it, we're getting somewhere by playing your hunch. More info later."

Dango winced at that word hunch. Thoughts of Timothy Regg kept nagging his troubled mind when he should be thinking about Lennox, who was remaining persistently and completely missing. Feeling feverish, Dango began pacing his office. Presently the door opened and Sergeant Kerson stepped in, also looking worried.

"That little guy is getting under my skin," he complained. "I can't get rid of him. He just keeps sitting there. Sometimes he mutters to himself. A minute

ago I heard him saying, 'I do hope and pray she'll never, never touch my little black book.' Then when I asked him how's that again, he apologized and went on fidgeting."

Looking out into his waiting room, Dango found that Timothy Regg, seated there, was looking even sadder than before. His doomful convictions seemed to be growing on him. Regg rose with an apologetic air and came to the connecting doorway with a reminder.

"As I said, Captain, I want you to know exactly where I am every minute, so there won't be any question that I'm entirely in the clear in case something terrible does happen to my Blossom."

Dango quietly took his arm, led him back to his original chair, sat him down, then stood frowning over him.

"Mr. Regg, you recently purchased two sticks of dynamite. For what purpose?"

The little man looked astonished by the question. "Why," he answered, "for rats."

"For rats?" Dango echoed. "Dynamite?"

"Why, yes. I'm troubled with rats in the basement of my shop. Sometimes they get into the liquor cases and eat the tax stamps right off the bottles, and then I can't sell those bottles without violating the law or going through a lot of red tape to get new stamps.

"One of my neighbors suggested using dynamite to get rid of them. She said just to break up the sticks and sprinkle the stuff around, then they'll eat it and die. They seem to like it better than regular rat poison, she said, because it has an attractive sweetish odor and pleasant taste. Besides, it's safer."

"Dynamite safer than rat poison?"

"Yes, because it won't get tracked around and set the place on fire, like phosphorus, and none of it will find its way into the stomachs of my neighbors'

pets, like other poisons. As for the danger of an explosion, of course you know, Captain, that dynamite won't explode unless it's set off by a sudden shock, usually a percussion cap."

"That's right," Dango admitted. "Does it really work? On rats, I mean?"

"I don't know," Regg answered, smiling. "I forgot to use it—so busy I just tucked it back on a shelf and forgot about it. I'm glad you reminded me. Now I'll remember to try it as soon as I get back to the shop. I'll have to try it before my storage permit runs out anyway, because I wouldn't want to violate the law in any way."

Dango shook his head. In more than one wacky way this night was building up into one he wouldn't soon forget.

"Mr. Regg, we've scores of men looking for Mrs. Regg all over the city, but so far we haven't spotted her. Unfortunately it's necessary for me to keep most of my men in the Lennox dragnet. That's important too. You know Lennox?"

"I don't recall that I ever met him."

LENNOX is a self-styled hot-shot who made the mistake of thinking he could get away with wholesale lawbreaking. He insisted on running a fancy gambling den in a respectable residential neighborhood, right next door to a church. He insisted on it in spite of two raids.

"The third time, early this morning, he was drunk when we crashed in on him and he made the even greater mistake of trying to beat the rap with a gun. Now we want him on a double murder charge.

"We're sure he's still somewhere inside this town and we're not going to stop combing it until we come up with him." Dango's frown grew a little darker. "Do you know if Mrs. Regg ever happened to meet him?"

"Oh, of course not," Regg said. "Blossom couldn't possibly know a disreputable character of that sort."

Dango heaved another sigh. This was certainly not the first time he had met a husband in blissful ignorance of the fact that his supposedly loyal wife was running around behind his back with some flashy guy.

This time, however, considering the dashing handsomeness of Len Lennox as compared with the washed-out mildness of Timothy Regg, it was more easily understandable than usual. Still, not knowing just how to size up this odd little man, who might conceal an unknown strength of character or intellect inside his puny frame, Dango felt he must proceed carefully.

"Mr. Regg, you have assured me you love your wife deeply. As one of your neighbors, I know—speaking frankly—that at times she gets, let us say, a little rough with you. With true affection, however, your devotion to her remains unshaken. But tell me this: is there *anything* she might do that would turn you against her?"

"Yes," Timothy Regg answered simply, and a glint came into his bright blue eyes—a glint of such cold mercilessness that Captain Dango shuddered to see it. "Yes. One thing. Only one. If she loved somebody else. But," he added quickly, his eyes growing softer again, "I haven't had the slightest reason to worry."

"You're sure of it?" Captain Dango asked softly.

"Absolutely," Timothy Regg said, pronouncing the word with the force of utter conviction.

Captain Dango sat down. "Mr. Regg," he said wearily, "you may stay right there in that chair if you wish—so I'll know just where you are every minute. Rest assured we're doing our best to bring your wife under our official wing

tonight. Meanwhile all we can do is wait for a report from the field that we've found her. While waiting I'll have to put in a little time on the Lennox case. Please make yourself comfortable, Mr. Regg, and excuse me for a few minutes."

Frowning over various reports on his desk, Captain Dango found his mind peculiarly distracted from the Lennox case. The Lennox man-hunt was undoubtedly the most important job he had ever tackled, but instead of hitting it with everything he had, he found himself, instead, puzzling over the question of just what Regg might be up to, if anything.

It was a little past 9 o'clock when the first definite word on Blossom Regg buzzed in. A patrolman named Nutley sent it, phoning from a call box at the corner of State and Spring Streets, downtown.

"I spotted her, captain," he reported. "Just a minute ago. In the Bikini Bar at 611 Spring."

Captain Dango growled over the wire, "I want you to be sure of this, Nutley. During the past thirty minutes I have had four different reports to the effect that Mrs. Blossom Regg had finally been found. Unfortunately all four Blossoms turned out to be big blondes with other names. It's bad enough that it's taking us so long to find her, so let's not foul it up further with more false reports."

Nutley went on carefully. "This is the way it was, Captain. I saw this big, theatrical-looking blonde heading into the Bikini Bar looking hot and bothered, like she'd been hustling for hours. Inside, I saw her buttonholing one of the barmen. He looked offish and kept shaking his head. After she let him loose I went to work on him with a few questions of my own."

"Nutley—"

"I asked the barman what this big blonde wanted to know so badly and he

said she was just asking about a friend of hers. He insisted he didn't know this friend's name, but of course I knew she was trying to get a lead on Lennox' hideaway. Then I said, "That woman is Blossom Regg, ain't she?" and he admitted that was her name. So this report is the straight goods, Captain."

"All right, Nutley, but you've left something out. Where's the woman herself now?"

"Oh," Nutley said. "She slipped out a back door. Before I could get out there into the alley after her, she'd hustled out of sight again."

CAPTAIN DANGO, at his desk in headquarters, looked harassed as he lowered the phone. Then he shot a sharp glance at Timothy Regg. The little man was still sitting there in the chair, squirming uneasily, his lips working as he muttered to himself. Dango was sure he had heard Regg mumble something about a little black book.

"What say, Mr. Regg?"

"Nothing, nothing," the little man answered quickly. "I guess I was just thinking aloud."

Dango appeared to dismiss the matter from his mind, but a moment later he rose, stepped out into his waiting room and carefully closed the door behind him.

"He just did it again—mentioned that little black book," he said to Kerson in low tones. "Call Brown. I want him to do a quick dig on that little black book, whatever it is. Tell him to call me back about it as early as possible."

Dango returned to his own desk just as his phone rang. Once more it was the busy and efficient Lieutenant Hyam.

"This is a brief recap on the Lennox situation, Danny. Our double-check of all outlets makes us sure Lennox didn't skip town. He's still holed in somewhere inside the city, in a place he had pre-

arranged to go to for that very purpose.

"Of course he intends to stay there nice and snug until we let down a little, then he'll find an opening and squeeze off into a sneak getaway. There's more than one babe willing to keep him company, so he'll probably pick a choice one to lam along with him."

"That's just what our other subject has in mind, very possibly," Dango said, referring to Blossom.

"Certainly," Hyam agreed. "Our boys are beginning to sag a little under the strain, which is exactly what Lennox is hoping for, so I'm fight-talking them into staying on their toes. The last thing in the world we want is for that rat to leave us flatfooted, looking like a bunch of chumps. That's all on Lennox as of this minute. On Blossom there's still nothing. If the two of them should get together now, they'll certainly make a fine, elusive pair."

Silently vowing to prevent that if it were within his power, Captain Dango hung up; and instantly his phone rang again.

"Brown calling, Danny," said the officer specializing in matters pertaining to Timothy Regg. "I'm canvassing Regg's neighbors now and I'll have something on that little black book right soon. Meanwhile the only other piece of non-routine information I've been able to scare up is that just the other day he bought an electric burglar alarm. I know, that isn't illegal either, but can I help it if this guy is entirely on the up and up? More coming, I hope."

Thoughtfully Dango eyed Timothy Regg. The sneaky feeling persisted within him that somehow this little man was hoodwinking him most expertly. Dango couldn't guess how so far, because nothing had yet happened.

Regg continued to look innocently anxious about his Blossom, and also because he seemed to have nothing what-

ever to hide. Even before asking about that burglar alarm, Dango already knew that Regg had had a perfectly legitimate use for it.

"After that one case of Scotch disappeared," the captain asked, "did anything else happen to turn up missing, Mr. Regg?"

Timothy Regg shook his bald head. "I thought it was just a bookkeeping error on my part, Captain, but I decided not to take any chances anyway. Although the store hadn't been broken into the first time, I thought it might be possible that somebody had gotten hold of my keys somehow and had had duplicates made.

"That was just a wild theory, but I bought a burglar alarm anyway and installed it myself—fixed it so a big bell would start bonging like crazy if certain doors in the shop were opened during the night. Not the front door, because then I couldn't go in myself without disturbing my neighbors.

"Just the stock room door, and also the door of a little cabinet under the counter where I keep my valuable records. But of course," he added to his somewhat lengthy monologue, "there hasn't been a tinkle out of that bell so far."

Dango nodded. Of course. It seemed to him that the burglar alarm had been an unnecessary expense, considering the strong possibility that Mrs. Regg had presented that case of Scotch to Len Lennox as a small token of her affection, but in any event Dango, as an officer of the law, could find no reason to criticize Regg's efforts to protect his valuable stock against thievery.

When the captain's phone rang again, after an empty interval, it was Brown with a report on Regg's little black book.

"He keeps accounts and records in it, that's all, Captain, but he's very fussy about it, just as if it contained priceless

trade secrets. The story goes he's always been very strict about his wife having to keep her mitts off it.

"Every one of his neighbors that I've talked to has heard him say at one time or another, 'No, no, Blossom, dear, please, never, *never* touch my little black book,' and apparently that's been going on for years." Then Brown added a complaint. "It's no use looking into this guy any deeper, Captain. Apparently he is exactly what he seems to be."

"And what's that?" Dango inquired ironically.

"Just an ordinary little guy."

"I'm not so sure," Dango retorted.

Disconnecting and staring at Timothy Regg, he felt less and less sure of it. The eyes of this seemingly ordinary little guy were so blue and so bright—and so unreadable.

Dango felt convinced that lots of tricky thinking went on behind them, yet he couldn't begin to guess what secret thoughts, if any, might be clicking through Timothy Regg's mind.

"Captain Dango," Regg said mildly. "I don't mean to seem unappreciative—but shouldn't one of your men be finding Blossom pretty soon now? After all, the longer we go on searching for her like this, the more likely it is that something horrible will happen to her before we even get a chance to stop it."

"We're doing our best, Mr. Regg," Dango said, a great uneasiness inside him. "We're really doing our level best." But he was haunted every minute by a growing apprehension that his best would somehow not be good enough.

CHAPTER THREE

Curiosity Kills

FINALLY, just after 10:30 p.m., the search for Blossom Regg came to a head. It actually was her blonde head, twinkling over the back of

a booth in a downtown tavern, that signalled the end of the hunt for her.

Detective Matt Coombs had been methodically trudging in and out of swank cocktail lounges and back-alley dives all evening, and like many of his fellow woman-hunters had wasted time over more than one big blonde who had turned out to be somebody else. This time his first act was to make sure. He signalled a waitress aside and said, "That babe back there—know her? Name of Blossom Regg?"

The waitress nodded, thereby signalling the pay-off on a long night's work, and added, "She's talking to the boss."

As inconspicuously as possible Coombs faded through the blue-lighted gloom and into the corner where Blossom was seated in the booth with the man named Parker who owned the establishment.

Behind the booth in that secluded corner was a telephone hut. Coombs gratefully eased inside it, noisily closed its folding door, then opened it again very quietly. He was able to overhear the low-voiced exchange between Blossom and the proprietor.

"You're Len's best friend," she was insisting. "He's got no secrets from you. He'd want you to tell me where to find him. He likes to have me around."

"Listen, honey," Parker answered her hoarsely. "The reason you wasn't able to find me sooner tonight, I was paying a little visit down to police headquarters, see? By request, un'erstand? Down there they kept askin' me that same question; where's Len? Honey, I got to tell ya the same thing I told them cops. I just don't know."

"Ya can't hand me that stuff," Blossom argued. "Have a heart, Parkie. I'm nuts about Len. When he starts headin' places I wanta head right along with him."

"Ya got a husband, ain't ya?" Parker reminded her.

"That insignificant little worm!" These words were loaded with purest scorn as Blossom spat them out. "Len's my man. Parkie, if you don't tell me where I can connect with him—"

"Honey, honest, my heart bleeds for ya, but I swear by all that's solemn, I can't tell ya where Len is because I just—don't—know."

A moment of frustrated silence followed, and then Blossom said hoarsely, half to herself, "Well, then, there's one other way I can find out, and I'm goin' right after it."

Noiselessly closing the phone booth again, Coombs dialed a number that connected him straight through to the desk of Captain Dango. Rapidly he relayed to the captain the gist of the conversation he had just overheard. The mirror behind the bar showed him the image of Blossom Regg gulping down the last of her drink.

"She's leaving the booth now, Danny," Coombs reported, giving it play by play. "She's heading out the door under full steam. She said she knows a way to find out where Lennox is hiding and she certainly seems to mean business. Here I go again, Danny, keeping her in sight."

"You and a couple of other guys," Captain Dango said grimly over the wire just before Coombs hung up. "I'm going to keep this move covered every step of the way."

* * *

Within one minute by the clock an unusual alarm was broadcast over the police headquarters transmitter.

"Calling Car 42. Calling Car 42. Turn immediately into Court Street. Proceed northward along the 300 block. Watch the west side of the street. Spot a woman named Blossom Regg, description previously given. Report back by radio at once."

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Car 42 immediately followed these instructions and had no difficulty spotting Blossom Regg. Just as the radio had said, she was moving along the sidewalk on the west side of the street at a fast clip. At a cautious distance behind her Coombs was striding along in her wake. Blossom was too intent on her purposes to be aware that she was being tailed doubly.

Sergeant Sharp of the radio patrol, one of the two men on duty in Car 42, began giving, over the two-way system, a running account of their quarry's progress.

"Have picked up Blossom Regg. She is walking rapidly and has just reached corner of Spruce Street. Now she is turning west and crossing street. She is continuing west along Spruce." The spot news kept flowing in this manner, keeping Captain Dango posted on Blossom's every step, until finally her course took a significant and crucial turn.

"Now into Beetle Street. She just swung into Beetle Street in the 100 block and is steaming right along. . ."

Once Dango had grabbed this impatient blonde he could get to work persuading her to tell him just where she had counted on learning the location of Lennox' hideaway. The captain wasted no time in premature congratulations, however. He strode back into his office, where Timothy Regg was hopefully waiting.

"I think we have her now," he announced on a pardonable note of gratification. "We'll go out right now and make sure. Hustle along with me, Mr. Regg, and we'll have this thing settled in a matter of a few minutes."

His eyes gleaming blue, Regg went rapidly with Dango down the stairs, out into the dark street and into the front seat of the captain's official car. Dango whooshed it off at a speed that almost snapped Regg's hat off his slippery bald

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head. Without using his siren, but blatting his horn a little to clear other cars out of the street ahead, he kept on driving swiftly with one hand while using the other to switch on the radio. Over it he could hear the running account of Blossom's progress as it continued to emanate from Car 42.

"She has now reached the middle of the 400 block on Beetle Street and is turning to the door of Number 413. It is Regg's Liquor Shop. It is entirely dark. She is using a key at the front door."

Dango glanced sharply at Timothy Regg. Squirming in the seat with anxiety, Regg answered breathlessly, "Of course she has a key. A key to the front door, that's all, because sometimes she has to lock up. Please, Captain, can't you drive any faster?" Then he added to himself, in a mutter which Dango couldn't quite make out, something that sounded like, "Oh, dear, I do hope she remembers not to touch my little black book."

It occurred to Dango that Regg's little black book might be the very thing which Blossom felt sure would supply her with the address of Lennox's hide-away. The moment demanded especially careful driving by Dango, with no opportunity to ask questions, because he was just then swinging the car into Beetle Street.

BLOSSOM was already inside. Getting out of his car, Dango could see that she had left the entrance ajar behind her in her haste. She had not turned on any lights. Dango somehow got the impression that she had gone behind the counter and was doing something violent back there, but he couldn't quite make her out.

As he neared the front of the shop he was aware of Timothy Regg hustling

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breathlessly along behind him and again he thought he heard the little man mumbling.

“Good heavens, she *mustn't*—”

Suddenly a burst of terrifically loud and fiery forces struck Captain Dango. He saw light flare up inside the store with the brilliance and violence of a lightning bolt. He was conscious of windows shattering, of bottles flying.

The blast of it caught him completely unawares. He felt himself thrown backward bodily. When his senses stopped spinning he discovered himself lying full length in the street.

There was also a crackling sound as of logs in a fireplace. Lifting his dizzy head, Dango saw first that the liquor store had been transformed into a shambles of broken wood and smashed bottles.

It was a fortunate circumstance to everyone, except Timothy Regg of course, that his property suffered the only damage done. Every other building in the block was vacant. Some months ago the entire block had been condemned by the city to make way for a new housing project; everyone except Regg had already moved out.

Regg's stock, however, one of considerable value, must certainly be counted a total loss.

“She did it!” Regg blurted. “Year after year I warned her never to touch my little black book, but in spite of all my warnings she finally did it anyway!”

Stunned as he was, Dango remembered that electric burglar alarm and those two sticks of dynamite, and putting them together in his mind—

“I kept my little black book in that cupboard under the counter,” Regg went on wailing. “I had the dynamite stored in there too, to keep it safe. I had the big gong wired so that the alarm would go off when the cupboard was opened.



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I had the cupboard locked but Blossom must have forced it open, trying for some reason to get at my little black book, and the jarring of that big bell must have been enough to make the dynamite explode. Oh, my poor Blossom!"

Dango was pulling himself to his feet, not sure of anything, when a bit of paper came fluttering down through the air. It landed gently at the captain's feet—a ragged bit of paper with charred edges which looked as if it might be a page ripped from a notebook. He picked it up and as he read the lines scrawled on it his own eyes widened to their fullest extent.

"Ned Nelling." Say, that's one of Lennox' aliases! You—Regg! Didn't you know that?"

"What? Nelling? Lennox? I told you, I never met Mr. Lennox. Nelling was one of my best customers, a very nice man, but— Oh, I can't think! My poor Blossom! She's gone—gone!"

Blinking, Captain Dango was quickly checking over the four addresses listed on that charred page under the name of Nelling. "Sand Street—we checked that one. Moore Street—also checked. Ohio Street—not there. Fulton Avenue—that's new, one we haven't looked at."

"I warned her, oh, I warned her over and over. Time and again I told her never, never, never to touch my little black book. Maybe I didn't make my warnings strong enough. Maybe they only served to arouse her feminine curiosity. Oh, I can never forgive myself! Captain—Captain Dango! Am I to blame for my Blossom's death somehow? Did I kill my darling Blossom?"

Eying him, Captain Dango answered, "I can't say you did. On the other hand, I can't say you didn't. All I can say is, I'm damned if I know!"

THE END

(Continued from page 72)

He did. I said, "What the hell do you know about that letter?"

"I read it. As a matter of fact it was delivered to me."

"Delivered to you? How come?"

"Well, Joey, even without your special knowledge, I, too, figured that perhaps Abbott was Parry's girl. I recalled that when he said he was leaving his savings for his wife he used the words conscience money. It seemed to me he felt guilty about it. Moreover, the Abbott woman made an odd crack when she said she wished she were dead instead of Agatha Parry. That was peculiar if she was just upset about the death of a friend. It made more sense if she were in pieces because Parry was the killer."

"All right. So what's this got to do with your getting my letter?"

"I went to the post-office and put in a change of address."

I still didn't get it. I said so.

"Well," said Sackler, "I put in one of those change of address cards for Mrs. Abbott. I gave the new address as care of me at my rooming house. Since then all her mail has been coming to me. I would take it up to her place at night and drop it in her house mail box. Until Parry wrote. I kept *that* letter myself."

I glared at him. "And you sent me that card with Parry's address on it just to con me into giving up my ten percent?"

"I gave up *my* ten percent first."

I sat down and clapped a hand to my head.

"To be successful in this business," he said smugly, "there is one thing you must learn above all others."

He crossed the room and stuffed his pockets with cigars from Franklin's humidior. "And that," he concluded, "is ethics."

THE END

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(Continued from page 82)

for air, and whispered, "It looked so—easy! The file—those—those ex-cons on the loose. I—I could make—record, and—money, too."

He seemed to catch his breath, then exhaled slowly. He did not inhale again.

Mark Stigler stared at him. "Ryerson! Who would ever have believed it!" He glanced at Ragan, who stood with Luretta's face buried against his shoulder. "What tipped you off?"

Ragan waved a hand. "It had to be somebody with access to the *modus operandi* file, and who could be out between three and five a.m. It couldn't be you, Mark, because your wife wouldn't stand for it. And Sam likes his sleep too well, but what really tipped me off was this," he picked up a split paper match from an ash tray. "It was a habit he had of splitting the end of those matches.

"Matches like that were found on the Smiley and Miller jobs, and I found some in the alley near Ambler's office."

"Did Lew know his brother liked Luretta?"

"I doubt it."

"What about Ambler?"

"I think he knew. And somehow he knew that it was Wells Ryerson who cracked his safe, and he must have called him. Ryerson didn't dare return it for then there would always be someone who knew his secret."

When the body had been taken away, Stigler looked over to Ragan. "Coming with us, Joe? Or are you staying?"

"Neither! We're going to see Ruth Smiley, and I want that to be the first thing you do. Turn him loose."

"She'll be so happy!" Luretta said, when they were in the car. "It must be wonderful to make someone that happy!"

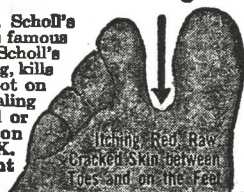
He chuckled. "You'll find out, honey! You'll find out!"



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