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by **W. T. BALLARD**

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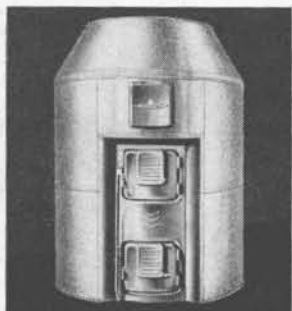
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NOVEMBER ISSUE OUT SEPT. 4th!

Volume 33

September, 1946

Number 4

A SPINE-TINGLING MYSTERY NOVEL

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 The Spanish treasure sweet Sue Pedarre and I dug up that night in the dark was a hot stack of black market G-notes, and hailstorm of white-hot death!

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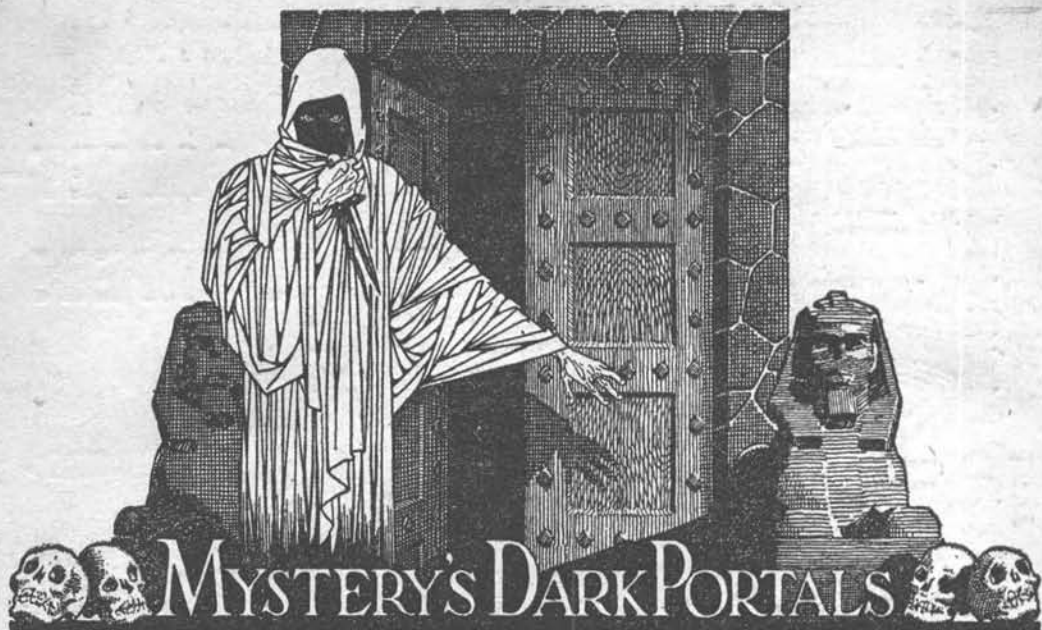
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FOR two days and nights, a pair of Scotland Yard's ace detectives had been staked out in that room in a luxurious West End London apartment. Their eyes were glued to a peep-hole in the floor and they were watching and recording every motion of the attractive girl in the apartment below. Headquarters had detailed them to the job after having received a mysterious, yet seemingly authentic, tip that the woman's life was in danger.

The lonely, seemingly thankless vigil continued, until they heard a door spring open. Followed the angry cry of a man's voice. To the detectives' consternation, the man never once stepped into the field of vision of the peep-hole, and then to their complete bewilderment, the girl also stepped out of sight!

Suddenly they heard a shrill scream, closely followed by a shot. Racing down the stairs, they broke into the apartment to find the woman murdered, and the man completely vanished, without an apparent trace.

The eerie quality of this case came to mind today when we read Cyril Plunkett's new novelette, "Terror On Twelfth." Let's see if you agree.

Jean Kirkwood, a serious blue-eyed ex-fashion model, found herself peering through a haze of uncertainty into the life of her handsome young husband, Bert Kirkwood. Upon him fortune had smiled; he was gay, handsome—and highly successful.

But who was he? Who were his friends? What had he done before they had met during the war and were married after a whirlwind romance? The answers to these questions, like the identity of the strange killer in the

London apartment, were outside Jean's field of vision.

Then suddenly—again, like the shot which the detectives heard—a shred of the answer came to her in a mysterious, sinister phone call when a froggy voice croaked over the wire, "You wouldn't want your husband sent to prison, lady, would you?" That was all. But the terrifying calls kept coming, day after day. . . .

"Did you think it over?"

"Who are you?" she whispered.

He laughed. "Wait a minute, Mrs. Kirkwood. This is business. I'm in business, and business can be risky. Get it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" "You didn't tell your husband?"

"Not—not yet," she admitted.

"Okay! You get in a cab, and tell the driver Honny's Bar, on Twelfth. He'll know where it is. You look in the last booth. I'll be waiting. 'Mike,' you say. And I'll say, 'Hello, Mrs. Kirkwood.' Then we'll know we're on the right track, and we'll sit down and talk business. You bring—oh, say couple hundred, as a retainer."

She had just two hours. Her whole life, and Bert's—yes, the little fellow's too—was to be decided in 120 minutes. Two hundred dollars? That in itself was nothing. It was what would come next. . . .

"Honny's?" said the cab driver. His card read John J. Mudge; he was young and brown and brawny. Then he grinned. "You sure you've got that right, Miss?" "It's a dump, Miss."

(Continued on page 8)

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RUSH COUPON

(Continued from page 6)

Her voice caught. "Yes, I'm afraid so." Still he watched her in the mirror. "You'll want me to wait, Miss?"

Suddenly she liked his face there in the mirror. "Yes, I'll be out in fifteen minutes."

So she went to keep her appointment with Mike. . . . It was a bizarre rendezvous, she found, for when she arrived, Mike was a corpse!

After that, her mind was a little hazy, Honny, Ed, Soo, Lux—all men from the bar—the taxi driver and the wild procession of ex-



plosive events whirled and kaleidoscoped through her frightened mind. But even so, there remained the deep inner urgency to look behind the dark curtain which separated her from Bert.

Then, crouched in the rear of the black-mailer's car, things were becoming only too clear. . . .

She cringed in the farther corner, on the floor. Soo's hand grabbed her, held her by the neck. Then the car door opened—and closed. Honny was inside now. Soo was still there, in his corner. And. . . . Mike lay on the floor. She'd met him at last, introduced by death. His body pressed against her, and she shuddered. . . .

Honny said, "Where's the blanket?"

Ed had the blanket. Ed stuck his face in the door. He said to Honny, "Here's to a nice trip, kid."

"Get the joint open, Ed. Everything the way it should be. Get a couple of the boys down here, in case the cops show up tomorrow. You know—we were upstairs all evening, playing poker."

Honny pulled the car door shut. Then he said, "All right, Mrs. K. You can have a

rough out, or a smooth one. You know I play for keeps. You know I don't argue—you saw what happened to Mike. Okay. I want to know what the pitch was with Mike."

Lux was crawling in behind the wheel. Lux turned, looked across the seat at them. Soo and Honny sat there.

"Come on, Mrs. K.," Honny said, his voice sharper. "We haven't got all night. Mike called you this afternoon. That right?"

She murmured a faint, "Yes."

"But are you sure he didn't contact your husband?"

Yes or no? By which would she now gain an advantage? Before she could decide, though, Honny said, "I get it, He didn't. Mike said he didn't, and I guess it checks. I don't get his angle. How come he buzzed you? Where do you stand on Leslie?"

Leslie? Her mind began whirling faster, the merry-go-round to spin faster. Leslie? Was that name a brass ring, that somehow, she must reach out and grab quickly? A ring to save her—or bring her death?

Then Honny snarled savagely, "Come on, Mrs. K. Leslie—the guy who was murdered."

For a moment her heart ceased to beat. All the long, long day she had tried to feel Bert's past. She had wondered if it had been a stolen car, some escapade way back in Bert's youth. She'd wondered if he'd held a job of some importance, somewhere once, and stolen money. She knew she should have made Bert open the book before their marriage. Didn't a girl marry more than a man? Didn't she marry his past, too? But she'd loved Bert, and to love him was to trust him. She'd never, even in her wildest fancies, conceived that in his past there might be a murder.

That's what we mean by "eerie". That's the way "Terror On Twelfth" grips you as you race through its pages to find out what dark secret actually had happened to Bert, which would bring himself, his lovely wife and child into the grim shadow of lurking death.

The story will appear in the next issue of *Dime Mystery Magazine*, and we feel that it will bring the readers, as it did to us, a spine-chilling sense of impending menace, tense drama and convincing human color.

You'll find many other thrilling and compelling novelettes, and short stories in the forthcoming issue, written by masters of murder-mystery fiction, and to be published September 4th!

—THE EDITOR

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DIG YOUR OWN



The gun hammered a second time, blasting sharply into the night. . . .

Who wouldn't help out a lovely gal like Sue Pedarre, when she wanted a strong arm to dig up a fortune in buried gold? I never knew that each spadeful of earth I dug in the dark of the moon was coming from my own grave!

MURDER!

By
W. T. BALLARD



Mystery Novel of the Year!

CHAPTER ONE

Home of the Dead

DID you ever go on a treasure hunt? I don't mean the game which is something like a paper chase. I mean the real thing.

I did. I thought I was too smart for anything like that, but everyone has a weak point. I guess mine was a blonde. I can't explain ever getting mixed up in the foolishness any other way.

It all started when Malcom Ramus sent for me. Ramus didn't look like a professor. He looked like a snow bird. He was a little guy with a pointed nose and brown eyes which stood out from his face like two half-buried marbles.

His office was one flight up in an old ramshackle building on Rampart a couple of blocks off Canal. The black letters on the glass panel of the door read, *Information on Anything, M. Ramus*. A very modest guy, the professor.

He always gave me a laugh. Maybe that's why I kept up a contact with him. He knew

the town like the back of his hand, and all about the people in it, both living and dead.

What he didn't know he could find in his books. The books occupied the room at the rear and they nearly filled it, piled in huge stacks which reached almost to the dirty ceiling. There must have been six or seven thousand, but Ramus could find the one he wanted within a couple of minutes. He must have had a card index in his head.

His income wasn't very good or very certain. The library called him occasionally, the university asked him questions, and he lectured once in awhile. Sometimes he borrowed money from me. I suspected that he wished to borrow some on the afternoon he phoned but I was wrong. He wanted me to meet a girl.

The girl gave me butterflies. She was so blonde that her hair looked almost white in the ray of afternoon sun which crept in through Ramus' dusty windows. Her eyes were blue and very dark. Her lashes dark too and it made a startling effect.

She wore a shark-skin suit and she was the kind of person who could wear tailored clothes and still look very, very like a woman.

I caught my breath. I like pretty women. Who doesn't?

Ramus said, "This is Van Kerby, the best detective in North America."

"The world," I told her, playing it straight.

"This is Sue Pedarre." The little professor looked at her as if she'd been made of rare porcelain, "and this is her attorney, Boyd Henderson."

Henderson shook hands. He was big, fifty perhaps, a well conditioned fifty which spoke of plenty of golf or maybe hand ball.

"I've heard of you," he said.

I let that pass. A lot of people had heard of Kerby and Smith. We pride ourselves that we have the biggest agency in the south.

"What gives?" I was watching the girl. I liked watching her. I thought I could sit there for a long, long time, just looking.

Ramus said, "Miss Pedarre belongs to one of the old families. However she wasn't born here but in California."

I looked at the girl. The name was certainly French, but that blondness, "They raise them nice in California," I said.

Ramus ignored me. The girl tried to. The lawyer cleared his throat.

"One of her ancestors," said Ramus, "was a smuggler, or a trader—a pirate perhaps. His name was Henri, Henri Pedarre. He is supposed to have financed some of the Lafitte operations, although I've never been able to connect him directly with the brothers."

I waved this aside. I wasn't concerned with history. "Well?"

"At any rate, he was killed in the battle of

New Orleans. Before he died, he told his wife that he'd buried a fortune. She never found it although she spent her life looking. Her sons never found it. The story of the treasure became a legend in the family."

"So now Miss Pedarre is hunting the treasure?" I started to reach for my hat which I'd placed on the floor beside my chair. "Well, I wish her luck."

"Wait," said Ramus, and there was an urgency in his voice. "She found a chart. It was in an old trunk lid. It's evidently been there since Henri Pedarre hid it after burying his gold." He reached into his desk, drew out a piece of parchment and handed it to me.

I took it unwillingly. Almost every old property in the state has its own story of buried treasure. Some of them may be true. The fact remains that not many have been found.

I looked at the chart. It seemed to be the plan of a house, or of a number of plantation buildings. Below the plan were three columns of numbers and to the right was a silly jingle.

Start at the center and turn to the right.

From Y to A and V to D,

The bishop's longest move you see.

Dropping squares at bottom and right,

And using only those which are white,

You have no place for the letter Z.

I READ it over twice. Then shook my head, passing it back. "Sorry, I'm not good at puzzles."

Ramus said, "You don't understand. I didn't send for you to solve this. I've already solved it."

"You have?" I looked at him completely startled.

"And a very simple matter." He wasn't bragging, merely stating a fact. "It only took me two hours. You see, anyone familiar with chess would spot it at once."

"What's chess got to do with it?"

"The bishop," he explained, "is one of the pieces used in a chess game. He moves diagonally across the board. Therefore the bishop's longest move would be from the upper left hand corner of the board perhaps to the right lower."

He opened his desk again and produced a chess board. "You see." He drew a line with his finger.

"Go on." I didn't see, but I was listening.

"All right. Now, half the board squares are white, half black. The rhyme says to use only the white squares, and also to ignore the bottom row and the row to the right.

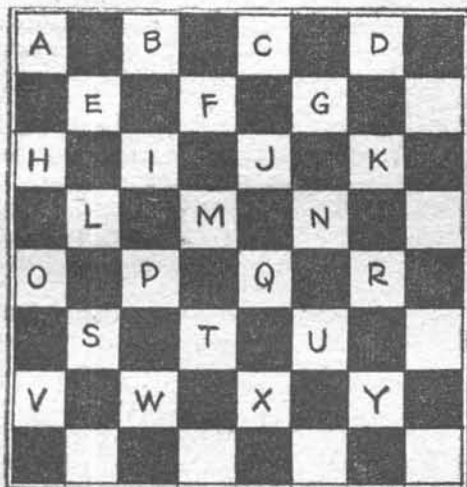
"Now, when a chess board is correctly placed, so," he turned the board, "A is in the upper white corner, Y at the other end of the diagonal if we ignore the row at the bot-

tom and right, thus," He arranged the letters hurriedly.

"You see?"

I stared at the board. "Okay, if you say so. What now?"

"These columns of numbers." He explained. "Take the first number 23335. You notice that in no place does a one appear. Therefore I figured that they began counting with one. Now your rhyme. The first line is, *Start from the center and turn to your right*. I started in the center of the board first. It didn't work. I then started in the center of the first



line. Try it, counting the square between B and C as one. It will come out D. I won't bore you with working out each number. The cipher reads:

"Dig ten paces from the post
Where the whip is used the most."

I stared doubtfully at the columns of figures. "All right, if you say so. But if you've solved the cipher, what do you need with me?"

The lawyer interrupted. "Frankly, Mr. Kerby, we're scared."

I turned to look at him. He didn't seem scared, nor was he the type of guy who I'd expect to scare easily. "Scared of what?"

He shook his head. "We don't know. Miss Pedarre's luggage has been searched twice since her arrival, and she's been followed."

I grinned at the girl. "I can think of several reasons why she should be followed that have nothing to do with buried treasure."

She flushed, the color coming up into her face. The lawyer made a noise in his throat. It was obvious that he did not appreciate my little joke.

Ramus said, hurriedly, "It's simple, Van. Miss Pedarre wants to hire you. She's afraid that if she goes out to dig up the treasure, someone will hi-jack it before she gets back."

I shrugged. "I'll send an operative. It will cost you twenty-five dollars and expenses."

The girl spoke up, almost for the first time. Her voice was low, yet warm and throaty. "Wouldn't you go yourself? I'd feel much safer."

I looked at her. "When does this digging take place?"

"Tonight."

"You and his nibs?" I nodded toward the lawyer.

"I can't go," he said. "I've got an important meeting. If I could, I wouldn't need you."

Our eyes measured each other. I thought, I'm pretty much in my own line, but to this bird, I'm just another hired man. He's not going to like me with his blonde girl, but he can't help himself.

"Okay," I said. "You're hired yourself a digging man, but just where do we dig. That rhyme isn't very clear."

"In the old slave quarters," said Ramus. "Where else do you think they used a whip around there?"

We drove out the old river road. I know that country pretty well and I'm familiar with the old plantations. Once it was a place of beauty, of life, but that was some time back. Most of the old houses have boards at their windows now, and the land has gone back, neglected and uncared for.

It wasn't really worried about the girl being followed. I've found that treasure seekers are usually given to screwy ideas.

But I didn't say that as we drove along the sweeping road. "How long since you've seen the place?" I asked.

SUE PEDARRE shook her head. "I've never seen it. I inherited it from an uncle a couple of years ago. Mr. Henderson came down once to look at it. We've been trying to sell, but we haven't found a buyer."

A lot of the old places are for sale, and a lot of them have failed to find buyers. The country isn't what it once was. It's kind of empty now, a little desolate, its productivity mostly gone.

"How'd you happen to find the cipher?"

She smiled. "That was an accident. When Mr. Henderson was down here he sold the old furniture, but he shipped several old trunks up San Francisco. I didn't want them so we decided the best thing to do was to burn them. The cipher was hidden in one of the lids."

"Henderson there when you found it?"

She nodded.

"He seems to be around most of the time?"

"He's an old family friend," she said.

I tried to make something of that. I had directions from Ramus how to find the place. He'd even told me how to park. "There's an

old lane," he said. "You can pull into that and walk across the field to the slave quarters. That way, anyone following you won't see the car."

I'd laughed. The idea of anyone actually following us had struck me as funny. But I did watch the rear view mirror all the way from town. I was certain we hadn't been followed.

I parked the car in the lane and took up the pick and shovel I'd brought. The whole setup made me feel ridiculous, but the blonde being with me made it fun. We started across the field toward where the old house made a dark outline against the sky.

Nothing bothers me usually, but as we walked across the rough ground I had the sensation of ants crawling up and down my back. Maybe it was the girl's excitement, for she was nervous.

The hand resting on my arm pressed hard enough so that they should have been able to take her finger prints off my hide.

"Relax," I said. "I'm going to have to use that arm to dig with."

Instead of relaxing, her grip tightened and her voice had the breathless dry quality which can be put there only by fear.

"Look."

I turned to look. At first I saw nothing to cause her excitement, then I saw the dark outline of a car parked in the shadow of the trees.

"Someone's here," she whispered. "Someone is after the treasure."

"Probably neckers."

I placed the shovel and pick on the ground. "Just some kids making woo. Wait here until I see."

I moved forward then, loosening the gun under my arm. I was nervous, and getting more so for as I crossed the drive, leading back to the old house, I realized that it had been used recently, used quite a lot for a supposedly deserted place.

I had the gun free. I felt better with its solidness in my hand, a nice gun, a thirty-eight on a forty-five frame with the grip specially built to fit my hand. Then I edged onward, listening for voices. There were none. The car was empty.

I looked it over with care, nothing remarkable, a cheap sedan, five years old. On second thought I jotted down the license number, then I moved back to the girl.

"No one there," I was whispering, "but the car hasn't been parked long. The ground's damp and the mud on the tires still fresh."

"Some one's after the treasure."

"Look, kitten," I said. "Let's pretend we're grown up, huh. This treasure business is okay for kids, and I didn't mind driving out here with you to look for it, but how could

anyone else know about it, or your silly cipher or anything unless you talked?"

"But the car's here."

It was there all right. I couldn't deny that. "All right," I said. "Someone's trespassing. You stay here and I'll look around." I turned and moved toward the dark outline of the deserted house. I didn't know she was following until I felt her breath against the side of my face. I almost shot her. I was that jumpy.

"Hey," I said. "Don't you ever do what you're told."

"I was scared," she whispered. "I didn't want to be left alone."

I hesitated. The smart thing was to take her back to my car. But nothing moved in the dark overgrown yard ahead. I was probably being silly.

"Come on then, but keep quiet."

I moved around to one side of the old house. It was in pretty sorry shape. Once it had been quite a place, but now the windows were covered with rough boards, the white lead of the paint was peeling away from the walls.

I was busy looking at the house, but the girl hadn't forgotten the rhyme.

"Dig ten paces from the post
Where the whip is used the most."

That could only mean the old slave quarters. Again she caught my arm with fingers which dug into the flesh. "Look."

CHAPTER TWO

Dollars for the Dame

I LOOKED toward the row of old buildings at the rear and suddenly I stiffened. It was faint, but very distinct in the darkness. The finger of light which crept out through the chink in the old walls.

I started to tell her to remain where she was. Then I knew it was no use so I merely whispered. "Quiet now," and moved ahead, my gun held ready.

The buildings didn't seem to be in as bad shape as the main house. I guessed they had been used to quarter some of the field hands and therefore had been kept in repair.

The light was coming through a crack in the old stone foundation and I got down on my knees to peer through. I had a restricted look at a stone paved room, lighted by a flickering candle. I guessed that the room had once served as the plantation prison for I could see two pair of rusty chains hanging from the far wall.

This then would be the place where unruly slaves had felt the biting lash of the whip. I

own that I was suddenly quite tense. The rhyme was working out. Ten paces from where those chains hung was the place to dig, only, someone was there before us. Someone must have dug, or be planning to dig.

There were two men in the room. I couldn't see their faces, but I heard one say, "All right then, that's the deal. You handle that much and come back Tuesday."

The second man was uneasy. You could feel it. "I... well..."

"You'll come back," his companion laughed. "You're in this now, brother. How would you like a tip to the bank examiners?"

I didn't catch the muttered answer. He turned and moved to the ladder-like stairs. The last I saw was his legs, climbing upward... I heard him step outside. I heard his feet move across the stone entrance. I thought he muttered to someone, but I couldn't be sure. He might have been talking to himself. I waited, listening for other sound. It came finally, the roar as he started the car.

I told the girl to wait and moved around to the building entrance, keeping well in the shadow of the wall, just in case there was an outside guard. I saw no one, and the girl was right behind me.



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I stepped into the building, guided by the light which came up the stairway, and moved down them cautiously, one hand on the rough cut stone of the wall, the other holding the gun. Moisture came through the wall making the stone wet and a little slippery.

The man was busy in a far corner. He'd raised one of the floor stones and pulled out a metal box. In spite of myself my pulse leaped.

As I watched, he raised the box lid, seemed to place something inside and started to close the lid.

"Hold it," I said, and gained the floor level in three quick steps.

He swung around. It was the first knowledge he had that he was not alone. His hair showing beneath the edge of the low drawn hat was very black. His eyes matched the hair, glittering a little in the candle light. His hand moved as if by reflex toward the gun clip beneath his arm.

"Hold it," I jerked my gun a little and he stopped, standing half crouched.

"What is this, a hi-jack? You'll get killed for this, Mac."

"If anyone gets killed, it will be you. Get away from that box, over by the wall, on the double."

He obeyed sullenly, and I ordered him to turn around, facing the wall.

Again he obeyed and I was just reaching for the gun in his shoulder clip when he kicked backwards.

I was ready for that too. My gun was high, I stepped sideways and slashed it against his head. He crumpled without a sound. I stooped, got his gun and slid it into my pocket. He was out, cold.

The girl uttered a little half smothered gasp. She stood for a long moment staring down at the man. "Is he . . . dead?"

I shook my head. "Take a look at your treasure, kitten," I indicated the metal box with a jerk of my gun.

She stared for an instant longer, then moved over to the box and looked down at its contents.

"It's . . . it's full of money . . . there was a treasure . . . I didn't really believe it." She had dropped to her knees beside the small box and was hauling forth bank notes.

I moved over to her side. There was a treasure all right. But no pirate had buried it. The box had told me that. It was new, of light metal like a dispatch box. I reached down and looked at the bills. They were signed by Henry Morgenthau.

It hurt me to tell her. She was like a kid with a new toy. She hadn't really looked at the money. It didn't dawn on her that they hadn't printed bills like that in eighteen-twelve.

I said, "It's money all right, kitten, but I'm afraid that you won't get to keep it."

SHE looked up and her eyes fastened on the gun which I still held loosely. Her blue eyes seemed to crystallize into chips of ice, and her shoulders stiffened. "You . . . you mean you're going to take it, to rob me?"

I shrugged. After all, you couldn't blame her. It was a natural reaction. She'd seen me club the punk and it must have seemed pretty ruthless. Who was I? A private detective, out for what I could get.

I grinned. "Look, sweet. Those are nice, thousand dollar bills. It's hard to spend thousand dollar bills right now. The banks make you register when you bring one in. The FBI asks strange questions."

"But why?"

"Don't you read the papers? Didn't you ever hear of black market money?"

I could see she had. She looked down at the bundles of money she'd gathered up, and gradually she let them slide back into the box. "Then . . . then, there isn't any treasure?"

I shrugged. "If there is, this isn't the time to hunt for it. Sonny boy over there," I indicated the unconscious man, "may have some friends around. I can't imagine them being this careless. We've got to move easy, we've got to be certain we take no more chances than we need to. Here, you pick up the box. It isn't heavy. You can have the fun of carrying it back to the car."

She closed the box slowly. "What about him?"

I hesitated, then I went over and went through his pockets. There was nothing at all in the way of identity. I thought of tying him up until the authorities could get there. A sound from outside decided me against it. The sound had been a step.

I covered the distance to the candle in two jumps and blew it out, then I whispered to the girl. "Over this way."

Her soles scraped on the stone floor in the darkness. I didn't like it. That cellar was a trap. Whoever was outside would notice the light off in a minute. If he were a guard, he'd be suspicious.

I guessed now that he'd walked to the car with the other man and was just coming back. "Up the stairs," I whispered, grasping her arm.

She almost dropped the box. Yes, she had it. You could trust that gal to freeze onto money.

We moved quickly up the stairs. I hoped we could slip through the door unseen, but our luck was running thin. We had no more reached the open until a voice called,

"Charley."

Maybe we should have stayed inside, but I don't like sweating things out. I'd rather have action than that. "Yeah," I grunted and stepped into the open.

"Hey," said the voice, sounding surprised. "You're not Charley. A gun lanced flame in the darkness and the bullet struck the wall close to my head.

I swung the girl around the corner. The gun hammered a second time, blasting sharply into the night. I knew the guard couldn't see us because of the angle from which his shots came. If the girl hadn't been with me, I might have circled back and tried to get him. As it was, we ran. There was a ditch a hundred feet behind the buildings. We dived for it.

I thought of snakes, but at the moment I was worried more about hot lead than about venom. We made the ditch and worked our way along it. The man back by the house was still jumpy. Every couple of minutes he'd blast at something. I'm not certain what he thought he was shooting at. Maybe he was just exercising his trigger finger.

But he wasn't following and I slowed the pace. The girl was panting and I took the box from her. "Relax, kitten, we're out of trouble now."

She gave a little gasping laugh. "I'm afraid I'm not up to treasure hunting, Kerby. I almost died when those bullets started flying."

"We both almost died," I said soberly. "For shooting in the dark, that bozo was coming close."

She squeezed my arm. "You're nice," she said. "Somehow, I feel pretty safe when I'm with you."

She was very close, and very nice. I had the sudden impulse to kiss her. Instead I squeezed her arm. "Let's get back to the car. The sooner I get this mud off, the better I'll feel."

We came out of the ditch, cutting across the field. It was rough going and she almost fell twice. I was trying to help her. I was careless I guess. I never saw them until they jumped us.

We were close to the car then. They came out of the hedge to the right. The girl was jerked away from me and someone swung at my head.

I ducked, rolling with the blow and went down to one knee. There was a culvert to the right and I tossed the box into the ditch.

The man standing over me swung again at my head. I grabbed his knees and jerked his feet out from under him. He went down and a second man swung at my head. I rolled away, coming up to my feet, jerking my gun free.

I couldn't see the girl. She seemed to have vanished. I heard a car's motor somewhere on the road. Everyone was running and shout-

ing. I ran to the right and suddenly stepped off into a hole.

The water was up to my neck. The brush along the edge was so heavily matted that I couldn't drag myself out. I heard them calling to each other. I saw the wink of a flash light and knew they were searching for me.

I crowded close into the brush, my nose just above water. They must have hunted for ten minutes, but they were worried about something. Finally the car lights cut on. They pulled up beside my coupe, raised the hood and did something to the motor. Then they drove away.

I WAS just about to haul myself out when someone came running up the road. I saw a man move to my coupe, examine it and call something unintelligible. A voice answered. They stayed there for perhaps five minutes, then they too disappeared.

I dragged myself out of the water. I was almost drowned. I didn't know where the girl was. I didn't seem to know much of anything. Somewhere in the mess I'd lost my gun. I went over to the culvert and found the box. It was awkward to carry. I took out the money and stuffed it into my pockets. It would get wet, but that didn't bother me. Then I went over to the car and tried to start it. It wouldn't run.

* * *

I must have walked five miles. There were blisters on my heels from the wet shoes. I finally found a farmer who would take me to town. All he had was an old truck. It was four o'clock when I got back to the apartment. The phone was ringing when I came in through the door. I had the feeling that it had been ringing steadily for a long time. I answered it and a man's voice said,

"We've got the girl. We'll trade her for the money."

Just like that, no hello, no introduction. I took a long breath and told him. "You've got the wrong number, baby. I don't know what you're talking about."

The laugh was nasty and had no mirth. "You'll know when the cops fish the blonde out of the river."

I hung up. In a minute the phone rang and I answered it. "Look, Kerby," said the voice. "We traced the license plate of your car. Even if the blonde hadn't talked, we'd still know that you'd been out at the Pedarre plantation tonight. Don't go to the FBI with that dough, not if you think anything of the little girl's life."

"Okay," I said, "but you've got it wrong, Mac. I lost that dough in the fight. I couldn't find it, so, do what you like." I hung up then.

I was bluffing, but I figured that the girl had a better chance to live if they figured I had nothing to trade for her.

I was so tired that I hardly knew what my name was. I had to do something, but what to do was the question. Then I thought of the man whose car had been parked in the plantation yard. I didn't know what he looked like, or what his name was, but I did know his license number. I reached for the phone and called a friend in the motor vehicle department.

The man's name was Morse. I got his address, on one of the side streets off Canal, a couple of blocks short of Louisiana. He was listed as a teller at one of the smaller banks.

I grinned at the information. Things seemed to be making a little sense. I cleaned up a bit, went down and took a cab over to the address. Light was just beginning to show in the eastern sky. It would soon be morning.

The house was old like its neighbors, set back in a little square yard. I had the cab park at the corner and walked forward. There was no sign of life as I climbed to the porch and rang the bell. I rang it hard, holding the button down a long time. Finally an upper window came open and a man's voice said irritably,

"What's the matter?"

"Telegram," I said, knowing he couldn't see me for the porch roof.

There was a mumble of conversation from above, then the window slammed and the hall light came on. I heard his feet on the stairs, heard him fumbling with the lock, then the door came open and he was staring at me.

"You're not a messenger. . ." he sensed something wrong and tried to shut the door but my foot was in the way and a second later my gun was in my hand.

He was a small man, with thin, sandy hair and tired, squinty blue eyes. The eyes got wide at sight of the gun, then filled with fear. "What do you want?"

I used the gun to back him into the hall. "I want to talk to you, Morse."

He didn't like my use of his name. He didn't like anything about the setup. He was a little rat, caught in a trap and looking desperately for a way out.

I fished out a card case with my free hand. I found a card which said that I represented the Bankers' Protective Association, which was true enough since our office did some work for them.

He stared at the card with dilated eyes. His lips were suddenly dry and he circled them with his tongue. "What do you want?"

"You made a trip tonight," I said. "You saw a man about some thousand dollar bills."

"That's a lie!"

"Don't get excited Mac." My voice was hard. "I was there, I saw you."

"You can't prove anything."

I grinned sourly. "That's what you think. That plantation yard was muddy. Your tires left tracks. Maybe you don't know it, but the police can check those tracks against your tires almost as easily as they can check a set of finger prints."

The long skinny hands hanging out of his pajama sleeves worked. I could see him thinking, wondering if he somehow could grab my throat.

"Don't try it," I said. "I'd have five bullets in you before you touched me."

CHAPTER THREE

Too Hot to Handle

HE COLLAPSED then. He quit. You can tell when a man quits, when he's no longer dangerous, and it isn't pretty to watch. But I had no feeling of mercy for him. I was thinking of the blonde girl.

He let his head hang and his voice was no longer turbulent. "What are you going to do with me?"

"That depends," I said. "I'm not after you. Oh, sure, I know the story, you were short in your accounts, you saw a chance to buy up enough black market thousand dollar bills for maybe seven-fifty a bill, to cover your shortage. I'm still not interested. I want the men you dealt with, and if you help, I'll try and put in a good word for you."

He groaned. "I was short in my accounts. I didn't know what to do. I got a letter through the mail. It seemed like a form letter. It said that a company would make personal loans up to twenty thousand dollars on character only and that my name had been suggested as eligible for such a loan. I knew there was some catch. There had to be, but I was desperate. I didn't know which way to turn, so, I called them up.

"Finally I met a man in a restaurant. He said frankly that it was black market money. He said he knew I was short in my accounts or I wouldn't have answered the letter. He threatened to report me to the bank examiners if I refused to deal."

"What did this man look like?"

Morse hesitated, but he was thoroughly whipped. "The man was big," he said in a cracked voice. "He had black hair, and a scar on one side of his face. The scar wasn't so noticeable except it lifted one side of his face as if he were always smiling."

"How big?"

Morse hesitated. "Well over six feet, six-four or five perhaps."

I nodded. It certainly wasn't the man I'd

struck down at the old plantation. "Do you know how to get in touch with any of them?"

He didn't. He denied any further knowledge and I believed him. It seemed I'd accomplished absolutely nothing by my visit and I said so as I walked to the door.

He stood there, nervously. "You won't turn me in?"

I shrugged. "This will have to be straightened out, but . . ." I never finished the sentence. A gun made a sharp, sudden sound on the still morning air.

It still wasn't light enough to see anything. I couldn't even be certain from which direction the shot had come. I heard Morse give a kind of grunt, then his body fell sideways, almost knocking me from my feet.

It probably saved my life for I went staggering across the porch as the gun sounded again, the bullet striking the house wall, close to the door jam.

I vaulted the porch rail and found shelter behind a tree. I heard the slap slap of feet on the turf. I heard the sound of my cab's motor flare suddenly, heard the gears clash. Evidently the driver was gun shy. I turned and looked back at the house. A woman was in the house doorway kneeling beside the fallen Morse. I heard her dry sobs. Then she started to scream. That was all. I should have stopped to call the cops, I didn't. I turned and ran.

I had the feeling I was followed. I couldn't be sure. I didn't actually see anyone. I made my way to the carline and rode back to my apartment.

From there I called Sue Pedarre's lawyer. He sounded sleepy but the sleep went out of his voice at the news. He started to swear. He kept swearing. "Have you called the cops?"

I told him that I hadn't, that I had no intention of calling them until I knew more than I did. "They've got the girl," I added. "As long as they think there's any hope of trading her for their black market money there's some

hope that she won't be harmed. The best way to sign her death warrant is to call copper."

He agreed. "I'm sorry I ever let her into this," he said. "I never was too sold on the treasure idea, but it's certainly unlucky that this gang chose the old house to hide their hot money in."

I agreed.

"I'll help in any way I can. I feel terrible. Why, Sue is almost like my own daughter. I love that girl."

"Anybody could love her," I said and rang off. I didn't go directly to my office. I went to see Ramus first.

I found the little professor behind his big desk pouring over an old manuscript. He looked up eagerly as I came in. "You found it? I was right?" He jumped up from behind the desk.

"We found something," I said, and told him what had happened.

His dark eyes got very wide. His voice dropped to an excited whisper. "This is terrible. A girl kidnapped, a man dead. Where will it end?"

I shrugged. "Look, Ramus, there's something screwy about this deal. It might be an accident that these black market boys chose the old house as a distribution headquarters where they could sell their hot dough at reduced rates, but the fact that it should be in the same old prison room where the Pedarre treasure is supposed to be buried is really something."

"The treasure is still there," he was excited. "I'll bet you the treasure is still there. You didn't follow the cipher, did you, you didn't do any digging?"

"There was too much happening to do any digging," I said shortly. "I was too busy worrying about getting out of there."

"Then it's still there."

"And as far as I'm concerned, it can stay there until I get the rest of this straightened up. Tell me, what do you know about this lawyer Henderson and the girl?"



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HE LOOKED surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. What do you know about him, and the blonde?"

"Well," Ramus settled back into his chair. "Not too much, really. He's an important attorney in San Francisco. He has some local connections and from time to time I've done some research jobs for him. Why?"

I shrugged. "I like to know who I'm doing business with."

"He's all right," said Ramus. "Certainly you don't think he's mixed up with the black marketeers, do you? Why, if he was, the last thing in the world he could want would be to direct you to the old Pedarre place."

"That makes sense."

"And the girl, did you ever see such a sweet chick?"

I looked at Ramus hard. I had no idea that he had ever heard such a word. The little guy might have unknown possibilities.

"Well, what about her?"

"You're going to get her back? Certainly she's worth more than all that hot money?"

"In my book yes."

He relaxed. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Van. I never dreamed. . . ."

"Forget it," I told him. "Everything always happens to me. This is no exception." I turned and left, going back to my office.

The switchboard girl gave me some calls. Most of them were from regular clients, but one was from a man named Shawn.

I went into the office and looked up the Shawns in the phone book. There were a lot of them listed, none with a number like the one my man had left.

I tried the criss-cross with no better luck. I always like to know who a man is before I talk to him, but in this case, no luck. Finally I called Mr. Shawn.

A man's voice answered and there was a few minutes wait, then another voice said, "Good afternoon Mr. Kerby."

It was hardly noon, but I let that pass. "Thank you very much for calling."

He had a nice polite sort of voice, the kind I associate with grey haired men, tweedy coats, and briar pipes.

"What's on your mind?" I wasn't impressed by the voice. I've been fooled too often.

"I understand you're a discreet man," he said and his tone turned buttery. "I'd like to talk to you tonight about some money which you have in your possession which does not belong to you."

"I'm a busy man," I said. "My partner is out of town, and I haven't much time to talk."

"This won't take time," he assured me. "I think we can work out a deal."

"About the blonde?"

He ignored this. "Just a deal," he said. "You meet me tonight at eight, and it would be wiser if you did not mention the meeting to the police. I have ways of learning things."

I wet my lips. "I haven't talked to the cop yet."

"Fine," he said. "Fine. I think you can do business, big business." He gave me an address on Royal. "You come alone," he added, "and I'll be there. Otherwise, you will find nothing, nothing at all."

I'd hardly hung up the phone when the secretary buzzed the squawk box. "Lieutenant LeMay wants to see you."

I told her to send him in. I thought fast during the couple of minutes it took him to walk from the reception room. LeMay was assigned to homicide.

He came in, small and dapper as always in his double breasted blue suit with the ever fresh flower in his button hole.

"How are you, Van?" He had black eyes and black hair. He looked a lot more like a gambler than a police officer.

I said I was fine and motioned him to a chair. He sat down on the edge and laced his fingers over the head of the cane he always carried. The fingers were encased in pearl grey gloves. Quite a dresser, LeMay and from all accounts, quite a lady's man.

"What gives?"

"Have you read the noon papers?"

I hadn't, and said so.

"But you might know that a man named Morse was shot to death about dawn this morning, a nice little harmless bank clerk."

"What make you think I'd know anything about it?"

He sighed. He carefully removed one glove, produced a beaten silver case and extracted a long Russian cigarette with a false tip. "Your card was clutched in his hand," LeMay said. "Very careless, Van, very careless indeed."

"There might have been a dozen reasons why the guy could have my card."

He admitted this by inclining his head. "But also, we found a cab driver, a man who hauled you from your apartment to Morse's street. When the shots came, he took off."

"Go on."

"Isn't that enough?"

"I know you," I said. "You always hold something back to club a man with. I'd rather have it now."

HE SIGHED again, then he blew smoke at me in a perfect ring. "We found some money in Morse's pockets, thousand dollar bills. The wife broke down and talked. Her husband was short in his accounts at the bank. He'd been dealing with some gentlemen who had thousand dollar bills for sale at reduced rates, black market money."

"So now I'm tied in with the black market?"

He shrugged. "I'm merely asking you what you are tied up in. We found a farmer who drove a man to town this morning. We also located your car, broken down on the old river road."

"Thanks for telling me. I've wondered where it was. I thought some of reporting it stolen."

His black eyes gleamed. "What kind of fire are you playing with now, Kerby?"

I shrugged. "Look, LeMay. There's no need telling you that I won't talk. At the moment I can't. You've known me for some time. You know that this office has always played it straight across the board with the cops."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I know, but the boys down at the hall don't all feel that way. I think you'd better come down and talk to them."

I went down and I talked. They even brought in the FBI because of the thousand dollar bills. I've sweated it out before, when a case of mine ran afoul of the cops, but I'd never gone through anything like that. It was after six before they finally turned me loose. I was surprised that they did. They could have held me as a material witness and I'd have been forced to give bail. I guess they figured I had too much at stake. Our office was the biggest of its kind in the south.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Who Knew Everything

THE address on Royal which Mr. Shawn had given me was an old house. It differed not at all from the houses which flanked it on either side. I'd spent the better part of an hour making certain that the cops weren't following me. They'd tried, but I still knew a couple of tricks for getting rid of unwanted trailers.

I judged that the house was at least a hundred years old, probably more, and guessed there was a court yard beyond the wall. Most of the older houses had been built around court yards.

I searched for the bell and found none. An old fashioned iron knocker made a heavy, hollow sound as I dropped it.

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog howled, a cat was singing at the distant moon and the rumble of traffic was a faint but steady sound from the direction of Canal.

Nothing passed along the street, no sound came from within. I had about decided that Mr. Shawn was playing games with me when the door came open suddenly and the beam of a hand torch was squirted directly into my eyes.

"What do you want?" The woman was very old. Her voice was cracked and high and accusing.

"To see Mr. Shawn. I have an appointment. The name is Kerby."

"Whydidn'tyuhsayso." She ran the words together until it was a single mumbled syllable. She backed up, taking the light out of my eyes and I followed her, stepping sideways so that she could close and chain the heavy door.

She turned, throwing the light's beam on the stone-paved covered passageway which led along one side of the courtyard.

I had a confused glimpse of a little pool, of heavy uncared for jungle like growth, then we reached the iron stairs which led upward to the balcony.

The balcony served as an upper hall and it was not in good repair. It sagged and groaned under our weight as we moved along it to the door at the end.

The old woman was an uncertain shawl-covered shape, sinister in her silence, like some hooded spectre out of the middle ages. I had a feeling of unreality and the weight of the gun beneath my arm gave little comfort.

She paused and knocked on the closed door, then turned and creaked her way back along the way we had come, taking the light with her.

For a full minute the door remained closed. I almost called after my departing guide, then the strap hinges creaked and the door swung back, letting out light and the musty, dusty smell of age and damp and carelessness.

The man standing there was nothing like the voice on the phone. He was big. He wore chocolate slacks and a tan sport coat.

I raised my eyes and looked at his face. I'm tall, but I had to look up to Mr. Shawn. He was a good six feet four.

His face was as big as his body, his hair black, rather thin and curly, and he would have been good looking save for the scar which perpetually lifted the corner of his mouth.

"Thank you for coming," he said, and I jumped for it was the voice on the phone. Also, from Morse's description it was the man of the black market money.

But the voice was no longer soft and friendly. It had a mocking hardness which rode the words like a haunting overtone.

"That's all right," I said, again conscious of the bulk of the .38 beneath my arm. It felt good and reassuring.

"COME in," he backed away and I had a look at the bare room. There were two chairs, nothing more. Evidently this room was being used for this meeting only. Mr. Shawn was apparently a cautious man.

He shut the door and moved toward one of the chairs. Mr. Shawn took the other. He reversed it, straddled the seat with his thick legs and rested his big chin on knotted forearms.

"You don't look tough," was what he said.

I chuckled, but not from amusement. "Have you been hearing rumors?"

"I made inquiries," he admitted. "I like to know what I'm up against when I sit in a game. It gives me some advantage."

"I can see your point. I know nothing about you."

"You knew enough to hi-jack my money. How many men have you buried, Kerby?"

"I never bury them. I toss the bodies in the river. What else did you learn?"

"That you're wise, and smart, that you and your partner have a nice business here, solid accounts and connections which you wouldn't care to lose."

"That's right, we get along."

"Then why monkey into my game?" His tone had turned hard. "We want that money back. We're willing to pay a reasonable amount, but no more than reason. If you don't deal, we'll see that you are taken care of. Frankly, we don't like hi-jackers."

"What about the girl?"

"What girl, you mean the one who was with you? We aren't going to pay her off separately if that's what you're getting at. You take care of her yourself."

I started to say something, then changed my mind. Instead I asked, "If I decide to deal, what's my cut?"

"Ten thousand, or if you want to throw in with us, use your connections to move some of the hot money, we'll pay you ten and a percentage on everything you handle."

"That might be a possibility." I appeared to think it over.

Shawn said, "We'd rather do business with you than fight you."

I nodded. "It's always easier that way but I don't want the same thing to happen to me that happened to Morse."

His eyes tightened a little at the corners. "That would be unfortunate. Too bad that Morse got killed. I didn't order that done. The boys were acting on their own. They figured Morse had led you out to the old house and that you went there to take over his cut. Did he?"

I passed over that one. "When do we make the deal?"

He was eager. "Tonight."

I nodded. "Okay, tonight then." I gave him an address. "Be there in two hours."

"No crossing?"

I shrugged. "How could I cross you without losing out myself?" I rose. "And if you try to cross me. . ."

He said, "We won't. We can use a man like you, Kerby. We need a local connection."

* * *

When I got back to my apartment it was a wreck. Someone had searched it thoroughly, and they hadn't been careful to put things back where they belonged. I stood in the doorway for a long time, looking at it, then I went over to the phone and called Henderson's hotel.

His voice had an eager, nervous note. "What's happened?"

I told him about the cops, and then I told him about Mr. Shawn. I said, "I've made a deal. I turn over the money and Shawn turns over the girl."

He was silent for a long moment. "You're certain he has her?"

"Who else? Someone surely does unless she's hiding herself."

He agreed with that. "Where are you meeting Shawn?"

"At Ramus' office," I said. "I couldn't think of any other place. I didn't want to bring them here or to my office."

"Are you going to tell the police?"

"And have them maybe kill the girl, that's foolish."

"Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, if anything slips you can tell the cops I was on the level, trying." I rang off, hurried down stairs and caught a cab to the station. I'd checked a package at the check-room that morning, the package held the hot money. Then I caught another cab to Ramus' office.

The little professor met me on the sidewalk. He was almost hopping up and down. "Henderson called me," he said. "He told me what you were going to do. You have no right to use my office, to get me mixed up in this thing."

"You got me mixed up in it," I reminded him.

He stared at me with round, reproachful eyes. "But that's your business. I'm just a quiet man."

"Gimme the keys," I told him, "and go on home. If there's trouble, blame me. Tell the police you knew nothing about it."

He hesitated not knowing quite what to do. Late evening traffic rolled by us in never ending waves. No one paid any attention.

"Make up your mind," I said. "You can call the police if you like, but then, if anything happens to the blonde, why then it's all your fault."

He made a little helpless gesture with his hands. "Here are the keys. But don't let them go into the library. Don't let them disturb my books."

I PROMISED. I went up the dirty stairs and unlocked the door. Then I put the package of money on the desk. I was just headed for the library when a noise behind me made me turn. Mr. Shawn slipped into the room.

Slipped is a strange word to use in connection with such a big man, but it's the only one which explains his movements. I never saw anyone else so light-footed. There was a gun in his big hand. It looked small by comparison, the hand almost smothered it.

I stared at the man, at the gun. "What's the deal, a double-cross?"

"I haven't made up my mind. His eyes look in the package of money on the desk and glowed for an instant. "You brought that, anyway."

"What do you mean, anyway," I sounded angry.

He said, "You were talking to some little jerk down on the street. He hurried away."

"It's his office," I said. "He didn't like me singing it."

"Maybe," said Mr. Shawn, "he didn't like it so much that he was going for the police." I didn't answer. I wasn't surprised when the man appeared, shoving Ramus' small figure before him.

"We just don't take chances," said Shawn. I shrugged. "Okay, you don't take chances. Here's your money. Let's deal."

"You know," he said, giving me a slow grin. "There really isn't any reason why we should deal with you. As you say, there's the money. All we have to do is to take it and leave."

I nodded. "That's right, unless you want me to use my connections to help you change those thousand dollar bills into smaller money, money which won't be questioned."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I fooled you on that one, now, didn't I? You fell for it. I sized you up. I thought you would. The question is now, what is wisest to do."

"Meaning?" I was watching him closely.

He laughed again, the rumbling sound which seemed to come from deep down in his big chest. "What was it you said earlier about throwing bodies into the river. It's a thought, Kerby. Do you realize that you and this little jerk," he indicated Ramus with a movement of his big thumb, "are the only ones who can tie me to this business?"

"Sure," I said, "that's what you think, but wait a moment. How do you think I happened to be at the plantation last night? It wasn't an accident, I assure you."

The other corner of his mouth lifted to match the one puckered by the scar. "You tell me, Mac."

I said, "Ever hear of an attorney named Henderson?"

His eyes came alive at the name. "What about him?"

"You have heard of him, I see. Was he, by any chance the reason you decided to use that plantation for your payoff point?"

Shawn was definitely interested now. "Go on?"

I said, "Henderson sent me out there. He sent me out on a trumped-up story of a treasure hunt. I wasn't sold on it, but there was a blonde involved and I was sold on the blonde. A lot of smart men have done dumb things because of a girl."

"Why do you think I know Henderson?"

I shrugged. "I'm guessing, but look at it this way. I go out on a treasure hunt and find a box of hot money. I don't believe in coincidences. They happen sometimes, but not often."

"But why would Henderson . . . ?"

I said, "I don't know what your deal with him was but I do know that he was in control of the plantation as Miss Pedarre's agent. He probably suggested it as a nice, lonely place from which to operate."

"You're warm," said Shawn. "Go on."

"And then he wanted the money for himself. He was afraid to tackle your men, so he picked a nice pigeon to do it. He picked me because I



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FAMOUS SINCE 1909

was supposed to be a tough guy. He framed up a cipher which sent me to the old slave prison. He even told me where to park my car. Like a fool, I played right into his hands. I got the dough, just as he hoped, I made a run for the car, taking the girl with me and he was waiting there to jump me, to grab the dough."

"Well . . ."

"But he didn't get the dough. I managed to slip out of his fingers. So he held the girl. He called and offered to trade her for the money. When I talked with you on the phone, I thought you had kidnapped her, but when I talked to you tonight, I realized that you hadn't, that you knew nothing about her being gone.

"That meant there was someone else in the game, someone I hadn't been counting on. It must be Henderson. He was the only one who knew I was connected with this thing, except for your men who apparently spotted me at Morse's and followed when I left there."

His face was tight, the scar standing out very white against his skin. "Yes," he said. "I know Henderson. He was my lawyer in San Francisco. He did suggest that we use that plantation. If I could get my fingers . . ."

"YOU can," said Henderson. He had pushed open the door of Ramus' library and was standing to Shawn's right, his gun covering the room.

"Drop it."

Shawn dropped it. Surprise came up in his big face, and then hate to wash it away. "When I get my hands . . ."

"You won't," said Henderson. He was very pleasant about it, and very business-like, and very deadly. "I'm going to kill you," he added, almost as an after thought. "I've intended to for some time."

The words rocked Shawn, but if Henderson noticed he gave no sign. "Pick up the gun, Ramus, and get the one from the jerk who's guarding you."

Ramus obeyed.

Henderson smiled thinly. "You were very handy to have around, Kerby. And you're a fool. We did fake that cipher to start the treasure hunt. Ramus worked it out and I planted it in Sue Pedarre's trunk lid. I thought it was clever. Old plantations, treasure, the two naturally go together."

My lips were a little dry, but I managed to smile. "Wouldn't it have been simpler merely to hi-jack the money yourself?"

He shook his head. "It wouldn't. I wasn't certain how well it was guarded, or what might happen. If there was a slip, and the cops came in, I would be involved. If you found it, and got as far as your car, I thought we could take it away from you."

"And I suppose I die too?"

He nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. I have nothing against you, but you have no more usefulness."

"And the girl . . . is she in the library?"

He chuckled. "You are smart. What better concealment than stacks of Ramus' books?"

Shawn made a noise in his throat. He took a step toward Henderson. The lawyer's gun steadied. "Stay where you are."

Shawn took another step. "Go ahead and shoot." His tone was mocking. "You made a mistake, Henderson. You've let me get too close. You'll shoot me, yes, but all six bullets won't stop me, and once I have your throat . . . he jumped. The gun roared. The last shot were muffled by Shawn's vest. Every bullet took effect, but he was right. The power of his big body carried him to Henderson, his powerful hands seized the lawyer. Between the shots there was a little snapping noise as they went down together. Henderson's neck was broken.

* * *

Sue Pedarre shuddered. "I never want to hear the word treasure again as long as I live. It was terrible, in that room, just listening.

"It wasn't pretty to watch," I told her.

"And when the cops came in. It was lucky . . ."

"Not so much luck," I told her. "Ever cop in town knows me by sight. They tried to follow me earlier. I stood out on the sidewalk for awhile talking to Ramus. The station is only a few blocks away. I knew someone would spot me, and that the law would show up. I thought they would come earlier."

"But if you suspected Mr. Henderson . . ."

"I had no proof. I set a trap by calling him and telling him I was going to deal with Shawn at Ramus' office. By that time I figured they had you. I thought you might be in the office. Shawn lived at a hotel, Ramus in a furnished room. The library with its stacks of books would be a good place . . ."

She sighed. "You're kind of smart. I'm surprised that you ever got mixed up in this thing."

"Blue eyes have effect," I grinned down at her. "You'd be surprised what a pair of blue eyes would make me do."

She looked away, but she didn't seem to be angry. She didn't seem to be mad at all. "What will they do with Ramus?" she was trying to change the subject.

"Send him up, probably. Best thing that could happen. He'd like the prison library."

"You're hard."

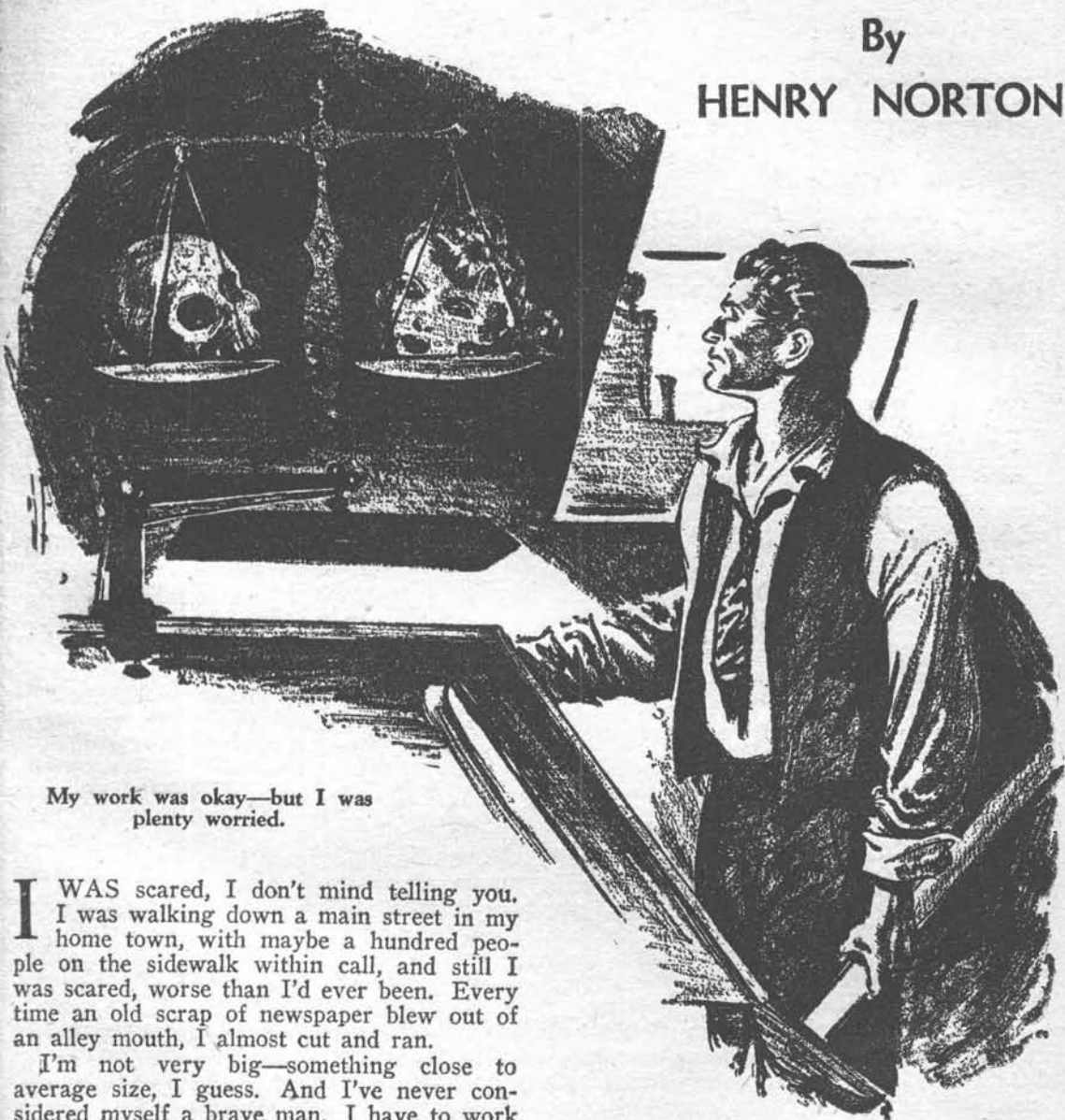
"You think so?"

She didn't really. Her eyes showed that when she turned back to face me. They were smiling, and very, very blue.

THE END

C.O.D.—CASH, OR DEATH!

By
HENRY NORTON



My work was okay—but I was plenty worried.

I WAS scared, I don't mind telling you. I was walking down a main street in my home town, with maybe a hundred people on the sidewalk within call, and still I was scared, worse than I'd ever been. Every time an old scrap of newspaper blew out of an alley mouth, I almost cut and ran.

I'm not very big—something close to average size, I guess. And I've never considered myself a brave man. I have to work up my nerve for a couple of weeks to make the regular call to my dentist, because the thought of pain, of being deliberately hurt, really gets me.

I was thinking about that, and the whole mess was the craziest thing I'd ever heard of. I stopped in front of the Crosset Jewelry Store and lit a cigarette. The dark window pane made a mirror for the street behind me, and I looked at that until the match burned my fingers. All I learned was that I needed a shave and looked like hell in general.

I don't know what I expected to see. Rusty,

In these days, living expenses are admittedly high. But thirty thousand dollars was a lot more dough than I cared to put out for rent—on my grave!

the chauffeur, or red-haired Diana, or Joseph Grieve himself. Or the shape of fear, I didn't know what to expect. I knew only that I was scheduled to be killed. . . .

FOUR days ago, I'd been a quiet, undisturbed draftsman in an architect's office down town; single, with no more money in the bank than you'd expect, and no entangling alliances with babes or booze or betting that would make anybody want to knock me off. I had as much fun as the average guy, but the company didn't like playboys or trouble-makers, so I kept my nose clean.

Then, four nights ago, this big car met me at the building entrance at five o'clock. A tall, slim guy in a chauffeur's cap and uniform with shiny black boots came over, polite as you please.

"You're John B. Severn," he said.

It didn't sound like a question, the way he said it, but I told him I was, anyway. And he asked me if I'd be good enough to come with him for a half hour. Said he'd take me home immediately afterward. Said it was important, and to my advantage.

Well, it didn't make sense, but I've given up expecting everything to make sense anyway, so I climbed into five thousand dollars worth of automobile and this guy started off. He couldn't—or wouldn't—tell me what it was all about. When I fired questions at him he'd just grin and shake his head.

We stopped in front of a big old stone house in a quiet neighborhood, and the chauffeur followed me up the steps and rang the bell. The door was opened by a quiet little man about fifty or sixty. He had bright blue eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses, gray hair brushed back in a smooth wave, and clothes that must've cost as much as I make in a month. There was a girl in the hallway behind him, and she was—

She was terrific. She had red-gold hair in the length I like, down to her shoulders on the side, and a kind of page-boy deal in the back. There wasn't too much curl—the hair looked like a burnished helmet on her head, like Diana Artemis. You learn stuff like that in architect school. But she was terrific. She smiled at me, and I came back with a moon-faced grin. I hadn't seen so pretty a girl in all my life, I was sure of that.

She had on a light green wool sport suit that made her figure something to dream about. She stood by the door to the living room, doing nothing but smile at me, and the old guy took me by the arm and led me past her. The driver of the car followed us, and slouched down with one shining boot cocked carelessly over a chair arm.

The old guy wasted no time.

"My name is Joseph Grieve," he said "and these are my associates, whom you will not see again if you are wise. Briefly, sir, we want thirty thousand dollars."

It took the wind out of my sails, completely. I suppose I looked ridiculous, staring at the guy. I looked at the girl, and at the odd-acting chauffeur, but neither of them seemed to think it was a joke. I looked back to the little gray-haired man who called himself Joseph Grieve.

"Perhaps I should explain more fully," the man said. "When I read that John B. Severn had inherited a hundred thousand dollars I had you brought here, so that you might not mistake the seriousness of our intentions. We are criminals, Mr. Severn, and we feel no compunction about it. You will either turn over to us thirty thousand dollars of your new fortune, or you will be killed."

I could think of only one thing to say.

"Is this a gag?"

"Do you think so?" Grieve said crisply. "I assure you it isn't. We know that the money, in cash, will be in your possession tomorrow. The newspaper accounts of the inheritance have been quite complete, fortunately. Now here is a special delivery envelope with my address on it. It was addressed, never mind how, on a typewriter in your office, on your office stationery. You will enclose a cashier's check for thirty thousand dollars, explaining to the administrator that it is a business transaction. If that check is in my hands Friday, you will never see any of us again. If it is not, you will be dead within four days, no matter what steps you may take to prevent it."

I turned the envelope over in my hands. It was an envelope from Storm, Solvig and Company, the outfit that hired me. It was rubber-stamped above the firm name with the regular rubber stamp I use for my own mail. It was addressed to Mr. Joseph Grieve, at the address of the stone house we were in.

Something about the calm and complete efficiency of the whole thing sent a little thrill of fear into me, even then, tightening my stomach muscles, making a tiny rill of perspiration go down my spine.

"I'll go straight to the police," I said.

I knew as soon as I'd said it that I'd weakened my position. By giving them even that much of an argument I'd admitted a kind of half belief in their deal. I knew it by the scornful tilt of the redhead's lips, the sudden fierce brightness of Grieve's eyes. I knew it even better from the fact that my words were hollow and gave me no comfort.

"Logical, but quite useless," Grieve said. "Believe me. One of our assets in this business is a flawless reputation. We shall sim-

ply deny your charge, and present convincing evidence that it is merely a scheme on your part to avenge yourself because Diana here has spurned your advances. It will put you in a very bad light. In addition to which, you will still be killed."

"Do you people mean to sit here and tell me you're serious about this?" I said. My voice wasn't any too steady, but I drove it. "Do you honestly think this crazy scheme has a chance of working?"

"It's worked before," Grieve said.

I stared at him.

"Remember Clinton Carruthers?" he asked. His smile was gentle, but it held a queer sense of menace, like the smile of a tiger or crocodile. "Clinton Carruthers was an attorney in the same building you work in, Mr. Severn. He died, they said, from an overdose of sleeping pills. He did not. We killed him, because he refused what we asked."

THAT one hit home. I'd known Carruthers. He took in a fancy fee just before his death; something like fifty thousand dollars. There was no reason why he'd commit suicide, and nobody knew of him taking sleeping pills. But he'd died from an overdose of them, just five days after he got his big check. It was peculiar, to say the least.

But this would explain it, quite nicely. And it did more than anything else to convince me that these people meant business.

There was a way out. I thought about it, but it wasn't a way I cared to use. Better to take the rap myself than—no, that way was no good. So I decided to bluff it out, really play hard to get, and see what happened.

I stood up. "I'll have to think about it," said.

I could tell by the old guy's grin that he figured he had me hooked. He nodded and said, "Today's Wednesday. If you mail the money tomorrow it'll reach me in time. If

you don't; if it doesn't get here by Friday, you won't live through the weekend."

I didn't answer that. I walked over to the red-head. She stood up as I came near, and her eyes were wary. She was just as pretty close up as she'd been from across the room.

"So, Diana, you spurn my advances!"

I put a hand under her chin, none too gently, and kissed her hard on the mouth. For a second I thought she was going to return the kiss, and then she backed away and swung a hand at my face. It missed, and I walked out of the house. Behind me the old man was grinning, but the chauffeur didn't seem too happy about things.

The more I thought about it, the screwier it got. When I thought about Carruthers, the idea seemed practical, and dangerous. But when I thought about myself, it was just funny. Because I could no more send Grieve a check for thirty grand than I could swim the Atlantic. If I raked all my cash together it might total seven hundred bucks, but not any more.

So I gave it a miss. What else could I do? I went back to the office and turned out the plans for the Forbes store, and they went off pretty well. Charlie Myers, the head of the drafting department, came around about four.

"You been boozin'?" he asked me.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Plans wrong?"

"They're okay," he said. He was a small guy, with fierce eyebrows, and a kind of nervous way of sniffing. "What I mean is," he said, "you've been so jumpy all day. Every time anybody walks behind you, you act like they're gonna stick a knife in your back."

Maybe I had. It was certainly closer to the truth than I liked. I wasn't sure.

"So maybe I had a bad night," I said.

"Better lay off," Charlie said. "You know how the bosses go for that. Or maybe you don't care now that you got all the dough."

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"Same sweet character," I said.

"Well, straighten up an' fly right!" he told me.

Some fun!

A pack of predatory parasites preparing to pop papa in the pants, and I'm supposed to act like it was April in Paris. I gave Charlie the grin I usually save for maiden aunts at Christmas and birthdays.

"I'll watch it," I said.

My work was okay, that was something. I left the joint at five and went home. I opened the door of the four room apartment I call my castle, and something made a big noise in the fireplace, throwing ashes up and around more than somewhat.

When I got through jittering I went over and looked, and there was a typewritten note on the mantle. "That was a firecracker," the note said. "It could have been a bomb. Better send the money." It wasn't signed and it didn't need to be.

I'm enough of a construction man to follow back the wires and see how nicely the joint is wired for an explosion. I got the apartment manager on the phone and raised hell.

"Said he was from the phone company," the manager told me. "Why wouldn't I let him in?"

"You ask for his credentials?" I wanted to know.

"Would you?" asked the manager.

I shut up then. Chances were six, two and even the guy would have had good enough credentials to get by an apartment house manager anyway.

So I kept on letting it slide. Hell, I didn't have the dough they wanted, but I couldn't tell them that. I had to sweat it out. I had to let it slide.

I went to the office next morning, and about ten-thirty I wanted a little coffee, so I went out. There was a little car with its engine idling by the corner as I went over. It started with a lunge, and I missed being run over by inches. The car went slewing around a corner and out of sight before there were any cops available, or before anybody got a look at the mud-spattered license.

That was plenty. I went to the police. And did I ever get a surprise!

The cops thought I was crazy. The harder I talked to make them see how serious it was, the more I could see that look on their faces that said, "Here's a nut with delusions of persecution. Harmless, maybe, but screwy!"

There was a sergeant named Riley. "If we started an investigation every time a fire popped or somebody almost got hit by a car," he told me, "we'd have time to do very little else."

"But these people threatened me!" I said. "Here's the note that was on my mantle. Hell, you can see I'm not making this up."

He looked at the note, turned it over, and said, "Storm, Solvig and Company. That where you work!"

I don't know how I'd missed it. The note was on the reverse side of one of our own letterheads. It looked plenty phony to Riley and I could see how it would. But I had to keep trying.

"Won't you even talk to them?" I asked pleadingly.

He gave me a long, unfriendly stare. "Ye I think I will," he said finally. "I think will."

I SAT there while he wangled the telephone number out of information, called, and got Grieve on the line. It wasn't a very long conversation and Riley's face got darker and darker as it went on. He hung up at last and swung around like he was going to slug me.

"I've a notion to run you in!" he said.

"Now hold on!" I said. "I know what Grieve told you. He said I'd been chasing after his daughter; that I was just trying to get even for being turned down."

"It makes a good deal more sense than your story, young man!" Riley said. "I'm going to do a little checking up on you, and heaven help you if I find you're trying to pull a fast one. Now get along with you!"

When you came to think of it, Grieve did have the better story of the two. No cop was likely to believe a wild thing like their threat, and if any cop saw that red-head he'd easily imagine a guy making passes at her.

So I followed the sergeant's advice and got along. I went down onto the street, and Riley came out while I was still standing there. He started to say something, and just then a truck going past backfired. I was back in that doorway like a cat getting off a marble-topped table. Riley looked at me and frowned.

"You got it bad, haven't you?"

"Don't mind me," I said. "I need exercise."

"You sure you don't want to come back upstairs and talk to a couple of guys?" he said. "Maybe we could find some place for you to lie down and rest a while."

"In the psychiatric ward," I snorted. "No thanks."

"Now I'm warning you," he said sternly. "No funny business from now on, or it'll get hard with you. Just don't try to start anything!"

"All I want to do is stay alive," I said. "And I'm getting damned little co-operation."

THE fat was in the fire now, but good. Grieve knew I'd gone to the cops. He'd have to get me fast now, before I could convince anybody I was telling the truth. Maybe if I were killed now the police might think a little more of my story, but that wouldn't do me any good. That wasn't the way I wanted to convince them.

Well, I figured, if the cops wouldn't believe me, I'd have to get help from someplace else. I couldn't see myself licking the gang single-handed; not with the way it was organized. And there was only one guy I could think of who might go to bat for me. I went to the office.

Charlie Myers was sitting in front of a drafting board with a sour look on his face. "Where the hell have you been?" he said. "Three hours for lunch!"

I let him have it straight. "Charlie, there are some people in town trying to kill me. I need help!"

"I'd rather help them," he said.

"No kidding," I told him. "They think they can scare me into giving them some dough. That, or they'll bump me off."

For a minute he stared at me and forgot to sniffle. He leaned back in his chair and said, "Are you serious, Johnny? You mean somebody really has threatened you?"

"Hell, yes!" I said. I let him have the whole story then, and he kept shaking his head as if he didn't know whether to believe me or not.

"Why don't you tell the police?"

"I did," I said, "and they didn't believe a word of it. The sergeant offered to throw me in the jug."

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea," Charlie said thoughtfully. "If this is the straight goods, you'd be safer in jail than any place else."

It was an idea, but not one I liked.

"I couldn't stay there forever," I said. "And they'd be waiting for me when I came out. No, Charlie, I got to get the goods on them. That's the only way."

"You could pay 'em off," Charlie said. "There's that way. After all, you did inherit the dough. Maybe it'd be smart to pay 'em off and get rid of 'em."

For a minute I was tempted to tell the straight of it to him, but I couldn't see where I'd gain anything, so I kept on playing it the other way.

"Hell, it'd only whet their appetites," I said. "If they found out they could scare me into paying them once, they'd keep at it as long as I had a nickel."

"Even that might be better than—"

"Whose side are you on?" I asked him. "No, I'm going to give 'em a run for it, anyway."

"Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Damned if I know," I confessed.

Charlie sniffled thoughtfully. "What seems to be indicated," he said, "is some kind of a trap where you'd be able to make a record of their voices. Even your pal Riley wouldn't be able to laugh that one off."

"Dictaphone?" I was thinking out loud.

"Say, how about that?" Charlie said. "Get 'em to come to your apartment. Pretend you've decided to pay off, or something. I'll rig up a wire recorder, and catch the conversation from a closet or something like that. When we get enough evidence, I step out and throw a gun on 'em while you call the police."

"Probably both get killed," I said.

"I can take care of myself," Charlie Myers said. And there was a grimness about his mouth that made him look like he meant it.

I BEGAN to cheer up a little. It looked like I'd picked a pretty good guy to help me. And desperate as the chance was, it was better than sitting around waiting for a sudden and violent death from some unexpected quarter.

"How soon can we do it?" I said.

"Gimme your key," he said. "It's quarter to three now. You stay here till six, and then come home. Call this joker and have him meet you at your apartment, with his crew. I'll have the trap all set."

"That's action," I said.

I shucked the apartment key off my chain and handed it to him. He wrinkled his nose and said, "You better let me have some dough to get the gear, Johnny. I haven't got it to spare right now."

I gave him a check for a hundred, and he went on out. I sat down and tried to get Joseph Grieve's phone number from information. It was an unlisted number, and the operator wouldn't give it to me, so I called Riley.

I told him what I wanted and he bellowed at me. "You're up to some more of your shenanigans," he roared. "Didn't I tell you I'd put you in the tank?"

"I'm going to get evidence enough so that it'll even penetrate that thick Irish skull of yours," I told him. "Give me that number, and stand by for a call about seven o'clock. And I mean stand by!"

He argued a while, but I finally got the number. I called Grieve, and he answered like he'd been sitting by the phone waiting for me to call.

"Expecting to hear from me?" I asked.

Genially, he said, "No, I was expecting to hear from Rusty, the chauffeur. I was expecting to hear that you'd been taken care of."

"Damn you," I said.

I hadn't meant to let him get me down, but hearing him condemn me to death in such a breezy fashion was too much. I wished for a crack at him then.

He chuckled. "You've come round, haven't you?"

So I went into my act. "Yeah, you win," I told him. "I can't go on dodging cars all my life. Want to come up to my apartment this evening and collect?"

He said, "Mail it, as I told you."

"No," I said. "Look, Grieve, I think I'd ought to get something for my dough. How's about a date with the red-head?"

He hesitated. "That's something you'll have to arrange for yourself, I'm afraid. Diana is her own mistress in affairs of that nature."

I was doubtful about that, but I said, "Anyway you can bring her along, can't you? You'd better bring your boy Rusty too. Because I might try to knock you off, if I get the chance."

"I'd thought of that," he said seriously. "I'd prefer that you mailed the money as we agreed."

"It's too late to get a check certified tonight," I said. "You can pick it up at my apartment, or you can go to hell. I can't be any worse scared than I am."

There was quite an interval. I finally said, "You still there, Grieve?"

"Yes," he said. "All right, Severn, we'll be over. No funny business, now!"

"That goes double," I said.

"Which reminds me," he said. "Be very careful on your way home. Rusty's orders are still to kill you, and I won't be able to warn him not to unless he calls in."

WELL, that's where you came in, with me sanding in front of the Crosset Jewelry Store, unshaven, dirty, tense and scared as all hell.

I skulked home, trying to see everywhere at once. I didn't know what to look for, but believe me, I didn't take a single chance I could avoid, and I got home alive, which was something. But it wasn't enough, for the deal began to queer as soon as I put my foot in the door.

They were all there alright. Grieve was thumbing through a magazine, Diana, the gorgeous redhead, was curled up on my davenport with her legs displayed to good advantage, and the fake chauffeur was leaning against the wall by the door. He cut over quickly as I came in, and closed the door behind me.

But this was it; Charlie Myers was sitting there too, chewing the fat with them like they were old school chums.

For a second I figured they'd caught him

and made him sit down with them, but on look at his face made that idea no good.

Brother, I was trapped for fair—all I could do was try stalling them in the frantic hop that I could figure an angle. Whatever happened, I decided then to make it cost them plenty to get me.

"So that's the way it is?" I said.

"You weren't very bright," Grieve said. "How did you think we obtained the stationery from your office, if we didn't have someone there working with us?"

And then the other idea got to me.

"Then it's got to be a rub-out," I said. "Even if I paid off you couldn't leave me alive, now that I know Charlie's with you."

Grieve nodded quietly, as if murder was a very small item to him, as if a few corpses more or less made no difference. The red-head gave me a nice smile.

"Hell with all of you," I said. "You don't get any dough out of it. Why should I pay off if I know I'm going to get killed anyway?"

"We'll do all right," said Charlie Myers. "When I took that check to the bank, I managed to find out you hadn't deposited the money yet. I know it isn't at the office, so it's got to be here someplace. And we'll find it, brother. We know how to make you talk."

I don't usually cuss in front of women, but what I told Charlie then made him blink and made Grieve's head come around. The red-head smiled a little wider. She could take it—that was plain.

I went over and sat down beside her on the davenport. I put an arm around her and pulled her against me. This time she cooperated on the kiss, plenty. We held it way past the movie limit. Then I put my mouth down close to her ear.

"Sell these tramps out," I whispered. "Why not take thirty grand all for yourself, instead of a split. Maybe we could have some fun, that way."

Behind me I heard Grieve say something about, "Let him have his fun." The girl pushed me away and looked to see if I meant it. I tried to look like I did.

"I'm going to make a fight out of it," I whispered. "Throw in with me and you'll get what's coming to you. Come on, baby, make up your mind!"

This time she kissed me, and I had my answer. I turned around and looked at the three men. Charlie and Rusty were scowling, but Joseph Grieve wore the same serious, calm look as always.

I said, "Can't we make a deal, fellows? You don't have to rub me out. I know when I'm beat. I'll turn the dough over and keep my mouth shut if you let me live. I warn you it isn't going to be easy to find."

"Maybe we can," Grieve said. "Maybe

we can work out some way. First though, the money."

"Oh, no!" I said, as defiantly as I could, "First the deal!"

I was standing up now, walking around the room and waving my arms a little, like I was really upset. It took a little maneuvering, but I finally got between Grieve and Rusty so I could reach both of them. They weren't expecting me to try anything, being four to my one, so when I got hold of both of them and whanged their heads together, it really made a swell thump. Rusty went out like a candle, and all Grieve needed to put him out was a smash in the chops with my left hand.

Charlie Myers jumped up and pulled a gun out of his pocket. The gal raised a little automatic from the handbag in her lap and shot him right in the stomach. He sniffled once, sort of surprised, gasped horribly, and dropped over.

"Nice going, baby," I said.

I phoned Riley, and then kept my arms around the babe pretty constantly till he got there, which was long before Grieve or Rusty came to. Riley didn't like the looks of the thing, but he simmered down when the girl backed up my story. She told him they wanted her to accompany them, and I gave her a very good self-defense angle for shooting Myers.

"Maybe you'll get a light sentence, darling," I told her, "for turning State's evidence."

Her face got white and she said, "But you promised—"

"I promised you'd get what was coming to you, sister, and I meant just that," I said. "I think Riley better check on whether Clinton Carruthers had a red-haired maid when he was poisoned."

I felt like hell about it, but she didn't fool me any. I'd seen her shoot a guy in the guts to make a few thousand dollars. I wasn't having any.

Riley said, somewhat sheepishly, "You've got to admit it sounded crazy, though. Maybe that's why it came so very, very close to working."

"It was never close to working," I said, "because I didn't have the dough. My old man's name is John B. Severn, too. He's the one who got the inheritance, but the papers never bothered to check up, it wasn't that important."

"Why the hell didn't you say so!" Riley exploded. "That would've taken them off our back!"

"And put 'em on my Dad's," I said. "I'll admit I was scared, brother—but not that scared!"

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DEATH'S OLD SWEET SONG

THEY rode to the prison together, Sam Lester, the big Homicide Lieutenant, and Craig Manton, the girl's lawyer, in Manton's long, sleek car.

"It would pick this night to rain!" Sam Lester said.

Craig Manton had been drinking, and he was in a surly mood. "It doesn't matter," he said. He watched the rain dance on the windshield. "Why do they have to pick *me*?" He spat out suddenly. "I don't want to see the damn thing!"

Sam Lester rubbed his blue-tinged jaw. "They're not too bad," he said through his cigarette smoke. "Just a couple jerks against the straps, a little bit of a smell—and it's all over. They're not too bad."

Craig Manton swung his head around. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"You're used to this," he said. "That's why I wanted you with me. That's why I called you." He turned back to the road. "But a girl. . . ."

"So what?" Sam Lester asked. "She killed a man, didn't she?"

Craig Manton, the girl's lawyer, watched the wet asphalt stream into the headlights beneath the pelting rain.

He licked dry lips, recalling the afternoon that Sam Lester had spent in the lawyer's office when they heard that the governor had refused to grant a stay. . . .

Craig Manton had done the best a lawyer could, but Sam Lester's men had pulled the net too tight.

The girl had been found with the body. The gun was on the floor, where she'd dropped her prints on it. Just those two, in her dressing room. They hadn't heard a shot. It was lost in the blaring music. The band leader had gone back to see why she didn't come out for her number. He found her standing over Spook Slade; the man she was supposed to love. Slade had been murdered.

Bluebird was the name she sang under. She had lived up to it, singing the blues as the

She was just a two-bit blues singer, and tonight she would die in the chair—unless detective Sam Lester could spot the one flimsy note that would trip up an unknown Murder Maestro.

should be sung, from the heart . . . not the lips.

SAM LESTER was a straight dick. He could do nothing but let the cards fall as they would. The girl was found guilty by a jury which couldn't buck those cards. The death penalty was mandatory.

Craig Manton swung the car up before the prison gates.

"Execution witnesses," Sam Lester told the guard who peered through the rain-streaked window. In a moment they were inside, entering the warden's office.

Warden Kelly, a tall man with white hair, pink cheeks, gravely inspected their credentials. His face showed strain. Bluebird was the second woman he'd had in his death house. He knew what it would be like.

Lester and Manton sat on hard chairs, stared at blue-gray walls, stark and clean.

"This is murder," Sam Lester said.

Craig Manton looked at him. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean the girl here is innocent."

"But it was your evidence. . . ." Manton began.

Sam Lester raised a big hand. "I'm a cop, Manton," he said. "I had to go through with it. The evidence forced me to. Still, I think the girl is innocent."

"But you can't prove it," Manton said.

"As I've been telling you all day, Manton, if I could prove it I'd be up with the governor myself."

Manton lighted a cigar, puffed blue smoke up into the hot, sick air of the room.

"I'm not through with this case," Sam Lester said. "Whether the D.A. likes it or not."

Cigarette smoke swirled above the heads of the men in the little room and Sam Lester sat quietly waiting, smoking, talking softly to Craig Manton.

"I had to take her," he said. "All the cards were against her. You knew her defense. I didn't kill him. I found him there. Yes, I picked up the gun from the floor where it was, dropped it when I realized. . . . I didn't kill him, he was no good, but I loved him. . . ." Then about her past. About Bluebird being strictly

a press agent stunt. Her name was Marion Maxon and she came from Groveton, Pennsylvania. Just a kid with a husky voice and a heart that belonged to a no-good hoodlum."

"That was it," Manton said. "What could I do for her? What could any attorney do for her?"

Lester kept talking as if he didn't hear Manton. "About the gun," he said, "there was something about the gun. One piece of evidence that didn't tie in. The D.A. never used it. Had enough, he said. So I kept it. I wondered about it. A funny little thing, just a piece that didn't fit. I kept it and it tantalized me, told me that someone had framed that girl. Someone very smart."

Sam Lester stopped, lighted a cigarette. Watched the smoke fan out from his lips.

Manton was looking at Lester, tight lipped. "You mean you had evidence that you withheld?"

"It wasn't withheld. It was turned over to the D.A. It just didn't fit in."

"What was it?" Manton asked.

Lester didn't have time to answer. He was called to the telephone.

He went into the other room to answer it and Manton sat back, smoking and waiting. . . .

Sam Lester came back with the warden.

"It is time, gentlemen," Warden Kelly said quietly. His humanity was in his eyes; his face was lined. He had a job to do. He was acting in accordance with the dictates of the law. He had no choice.

They went outside then, into the lashing rain, across the prison yard to the Death House, down a long corridor and into the execution chamber. The cub reporter followed, nervously inhaling a bent cigarette.

There were benches for them to sit on beneath a sign marked SILENCE, and the grim instrument of justice at the other end—the chair, stark and fearsome, waiting for the kill.

Sam Lester and Craig Manton sat in the rear row. Despite the sign, Lester still talked in a low soft voice, charged with high excitement.

"My men are giving me a hand," Lester was saying. "That was Sergeant Conroy on

By **GEORGE WILLIAM RAE**

the phone. They went over that alley in the rear of the *Blue Moon* again with a fine comb. They found a shell from the .32 that killed Slade! He must've been killed in the alley, carried inside, and the girl is right—she *did* find him that way!"

"It's all theory," Craig Manton said. He was a shrewd lawyer, knew his evidence. "The governor wouldn't—"

"Yeah, I know," Sam Lester said bitterly.

Manton wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked tired, worn.

He took a flask from his pocket, drank deeply. He replaced the flask in his pocket, then carefully wiped his lips with the cobalt-blue handkerchief which he always wore in the breast pocket of his coat.

"Conroy is checking one last lead," Sam Lester said. "If it works out, I'll be able to put the finger on the real killer."

SAM LESTER took one more telephone call in the autopsy room off the execution chamber. He was back quickly.

"The warden is calling the governor one last time," he said. "We found out about an angle the D.A.'s investigating attorneys muffed, or passed up. There was another guy. A big shot. He was trying to make a play for Bluebird. I think I can pin it on him. We found out this other guy was being black-mailed by Spook Slade and that he was nearly broke and half-crazy because Bluebird wanted no part of him. He killed Spook Slade and put the frame on Bluebird."

Craig Manton took another drink. "What're they waiting for?" he asked.

Lester said, "The warden. He'll be back in a minute. Then he'll either go on with it or keep her in the cells. It all depends on what the governor says. I tied in that last piece of evidence. The warden knows that, too. That funny little thing that bothered me so much. I tied it in."

Manton said, "I can't stand much more of this."

"It won't be long," Lester said. His dark eyes were half closed. "Take it easy."

Manton had his flask out again. "I can't stand it."

"Take it easy, you got nothing to worry about. You're not going to the chair."

Manton swung around savagely. "No, I'm not. But *she* is."

"Maybe," Sam Lester murmured.

"Maybe—*maybe!* Why don't they get it over with? Damn it, I can't stand it!"

"You're not going to the chair." Lester's voice was a low monotone.

Manton's sullen eyes blazed suddenly. "And damn you, too!" he cried. "You've been playing cat and mouse with me all day! I see it now, you've been sweating me, working on my nerves. I see it now!"

A rumble rose from the men on the benches. They turned and stared at Manton and Lester. Sam Lester was smiling. He said nothing.

"God knows what you've dug up," Manton went on, his voice rising. "You wouldn't let well enough alone. *Let the girl die like I planned for her to die!*"

Manton stopped and stared around, wide-eyed. "Yes, I killed him because he was sucking me dry and keeping her away from me! He had a hold over her. She wouldn't give me a chance. . . ."

Sam Lester was on his feet as were all the men in the execution chamber.

"You were the one who arranged for me to be a witness," Manton screamed at Lester. "You fixed it, didn't you, you devil! Well, you're coming with me!"

A gun glittered in Manton's hand. He swung it toward Sam Lester.

At that instant a sharp blue flame darted from the police positive of Lester's man—the detective who had been masquerading as the cub reporter.

Manton's gun became a great weight in his hand. He dropped it and staggered back, eyes wide. Slowly he folded to the death chamber floor, gasping out his life.

Sam Lester bent over him, "Get the doc," he said tersely.

Lester took the cobalt-blue handkerchief from Manton's breast pocket and an envelope from his own. The blue thread in the envelope matched the blue of the handkerchief.

Sam Lester looked down at Craig Manton. "It was on the gun, Manton, when you wiped the prints off. Just that blue thread, caught on the sight. Just a little blue thread to tie you up for Hell. . . ."

Dime Mystery offers you stories of spine-tingling excitement, eerie mystery salted with more than a soupçon of horror. Here you will find stories by masters of the exotic murder mystery—such outstanding creators of crime-fiction as *Dale Clark, Henry Norton, Robert Turner* and *Ken Lewis*. Make a date with yourself for an evening of fascinating murder fiction enjoyment. The next issue will be out on September 4th!

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



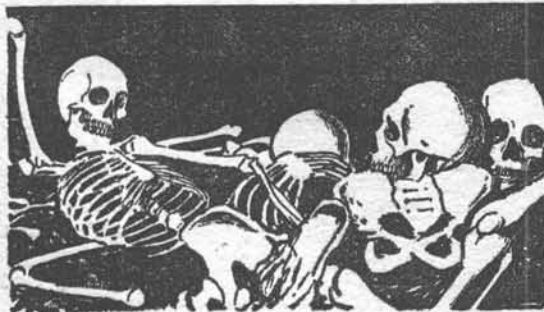
It was a dark night in Warrangel, India, when Dr. Butchia answered a hurry call to the outskirts of his village to treat a patient. In a dimly-lit house he found six brothers, one of them ill, the other five grimly expectant. One thing they promised him—prompt payment of his bill.

The doctor set to work. Despite his ministrations his patient sank steadily and five nights later the sick man died.

Authorities found Dr. Butchia had been buried alive with his patient—and sentenced the five brothers to life at hard labor.

The constancy of young Ahmed Djafek's love for wealthy Widow Koprulu had become a byword in Anatolia, Turkey—even when she became desperately ill, he remained at her bedside, administering to her wants, heedless of possible contagion from her mysterious malady. Friends finally were called in to witness a wedding at the sick-bed.

The marriage rituals and festivities over, neighbors tiptoed out, sure the bride would recover—her voice had been a lot stronger than for some time—but she didn't. In fact, medical examination proved conclusively that she had been dead at the time of her wedding—and the courts proved her groom to be a fortune-hunting—ventriloquist!



White man's justice is old in the British colony of Burmei out Singapore way—and tenacious. Not too long ago authorities finally solved the 150-year-old disappearance of two men and two women, known to have incurred the local natives' displeasure. A tropical storm helped them by felling a giant tree and dislodging a huge slice of its bark. Foresters examining the tree for disease, found the bark had grown over a panel leading to a hollow cavity, containing four identifiable skeletons—obviously imprisoned alive!

For a century and a half their living prison had continued its growth around them.

In 1938 medical circles in Paris were set on their collective ears by a newcomer, one Dr. Louis Beneteau, whose bloody scalpel effected "cures" where others believed them impossible—so unusual were his treatises on cancer, his specialty, that he was invited to address a conference on cancer at the Sorbonne. In the meantime, though, he was called on to act as chance witness in a minor case in a Paris courtroom, and made such incoherent replies that the judge ordered him investigated.

He turned out to be an escaped maniac from the Villejuif Asylum—an ex-carpenter with no medical background. His patients promptly keeled over in droves, while the "doctor" was taken back to his keepers, protesting smilingly, "Not really mad."





A Thrilling Mystery Novelette
of Creeping Menace

THE POOL OF FEAR

By KEN LEWIS

Perhaps that dark, bottomless pool, the strangely frightened girl, and the decayed, empty grandeur of the silent house should have warned me. . . . But I, too, counted myself as among the lost and the damned—and not even my grisly masquerade could save either Ellen or me from the living death that crept about us.

CHAPTER ONE

Dark Water

I DROPPED off the freight as it slowed for the last curve before reaching the Milvale yards. On either side of the railroad cut, high clay bluffs cut off the view; but far ahead, shimmering vaguely in the wheat country heat, rose the towers of the flour mills which gave the town its only excuse for existence.

It looked like a thousand other places I'd seen in the past two years, and for the thousandth time I asked myself what it was I expected to find here, or anywhere else, for that matter. Then I shrugged, knocked some of the cinders out of my hair, and started up an old 'bo path which climbed the right bluff toward a grove of elms and sycamores at the

top. I'd almost reached the crest when I noticed the high wire fence girdling the trees there. A small sign, red and white, was nailed to the nearest post:

TRESPASSERS BEWARE—
THIS FENCE IS CHARGED!

I cursed. It had been too much of a climb, almost thirty feet straight up in all this heat, just to turn around and go back down again. Besides, fences have always irritated me. In the end, I shinnied up the post, taking care not to touch the top strand of wire, and dropped over into the trees on the other side.

About ten yards in, the grove began to thin, and I could hear muted sounds of splashing ahead. Ten yards more, and I came out

He screamed and fired his first shot . . .



at the edge of a natural, rock-bound pool—the kind of place they call a gravel pit in California, but which here would be known as a quarry hole.

A girl was swimming in the pool, with just her head, shoulders, arms and feet showing intermittently as she stroked.

I started to fade back into the trees, and then I caught her watching me and grinned at her.

"Pardon me. But is this the Milvale public baths?"

She laughed. Her face puckered up like a child's and her eyes crinkled. They were nice eyes, a kind of gray-blue which went well with her taffy hair, and there was no fear in them at all; only a very small touch of obscure longing.

But there was something about the laugh which didn't quite fit—certain high thin overtones I'd heard before. I studied her.

"I didn't think it was that funny."

"You don't know how funny it was. No one's come over that fence in years."

"I don't like fences."

Her eyes seemed to darken a little. Treading water, she looked almost boyish, with her slender freckled face and flat beautifully curved lips.

"No, neither do I. Well, as long as you're here, you might as well join me."

I eyed the dancing water hungrily. "Love to. Only I seem to have forgotten my swimming trunks."

"That's all right. I'll promise not to look till you get in."

Something told me this was crazy; that I ought to be on my way right now. Instead, I grinned.

"Fair enough. It's a deal."

She turned in the water to face the knoll opposite, while I slipped out of shoes, pants and shirt.

"How's the bottom?" I called. "I mean, can I jump in right here without cracking my noggin?"

"Oh, there isn't any bottom. Or if there is, no one's ever been deep enough to find it. I think it goes straight through to China. It's artesian, you know. Very cold."

I dived in head first, and felt the pull on my heart as the icy water wrapped me. I came up, gasping and tingling, and found her laughing at me from about ten feet away.

She didn't make one-tenth the work of it that I did, but she always managed to keep the same distance between us. Finally, I had to take hold of a root beside the bank and call it quits.

"You're good at this. Like you'd done it before."

She was facing the other way, but I could

tell by her voice that she didn't like my implication.

"Why shouldn't I be able to swim? That's all there is to do around here." She pulled herself out and disappeared into the trees.

ALL the time I was dressing, I could hear her back in the grove somewhere, sobbing. I tried to tell myself that I didn't get it; that I didn't know what was wrong, and didn't care. But I think I was beginning to get it, even then.

She was sitting hunched over on a log when I finally found her. She had put on a pair of blue coveralls, but there was plenty that was feminine about her.

"I didn't mean anything by that crack," I said.

She had stopped crying now, but her mouth had a sullen twist. "I know what you meant. And I asked for it. What else could I expect, inviting a—a tramp from the railroad tracks to go swimming with me. Do you think I'd have done a thing like that, if there was anyone else I could ask? I guess you don't know what it's like to be lonely, so lonely you'd welcome the company of the lowest, tramps that ever lived, just to have another human being around!"

She wasn't trying to be gentle about it. I nodded. "Yes," I said slowly. "I know all about loneliness. I guess I could write a book about it. But if you're so damned forlorn, why don't you find somebody respectable to play with? I thought that fence was to keep other people out, not you in."

She laughed, and it was all ugly overtone this time. "The fence isn't needed to keep other people away. I'm enough for that. No one will come near this place, not even to work. They think I'm sick."

"Are you sick?"

"I had a nervous breakdown."

She watched me carefully for my reaction. I shook my head.

"That doesn't mean anything. People have been having them for years, and getting over them."

She was studying me more closely now; still frowning, but with something new in her eyes.

"What's your name?"

I don't know why I gave it to her straight. I hadn't done that for two years. But somehow, despite her ugly mood, I liked this girl and felt sorry for her. I told her the truth.

"Stephen Langley, not that it matters."

She nodded. "Yes, I knew you were a doctor. The way you looked at me, back there at the pool. Just like Dr. Welsh, at the sanitarium."

I could feel the old bitterness crowding me

hard. I shook my head. "You were right the first time. I'm just a bum."

"I read your book, Dr. Stephen Langley. 'The Incidence of Maniac Depressive Symptoms in Late Adolescence'. Don't tell me you're not the man who wrote that book."

"No," I said. "I'm not the man. I may have his name, his measurements, even his fingerprints. But the man who wrote that book died two years ago. He's as dead as that log you're sitting on. And so, goodbye."

She let me get as far as the third row of trees. Then she called out suddenly, and her voice had that little rising note of hysteria that I'd noticed earlier in her laugh.

"Doctor! Doctor Langley! You can't leave me now, when I need you so! It's in your ethics, you can't turn away a patient!"

I wheeled to find her directly behind me. Her lips were parted and her eyes were bright. She was panting.

"I told you I'm not a doctor any more," I snapped. "And a bum has no ethics!"

"All right. All right then, bum! I'll put it this way: How'd you like to sleep between sheets for a change? How'd you like a nice warm homecooked meal? . . . Oh, I'm not offering any handout. There's work to be done around this place, and I told you the town people won't come here to do it. I could probably get my brother to put you on for awhile, as handyman. Or are you afraid, like the others?"

I knew it was just a ruse. That she thought, if I stayed, she could find some way to make me treat her.

I thought so, too. And I knew I had no business doing that—nor any right to.

I said. "What's your name?"

"Ellen. Ellen Beaumont."

"All right, Miss Beaumont. But strictly in the capacity of handyman."

THE house was one of those two-story colonial types, with a facade of decaying white pillars, and a shingle roof that needed patching. We reached it from the pool by crossing a rolling five-acre pasture, by-passing a ruined garden plot, and circling a musty brick carriage house. A brick drive wound through the front lawn from the gates out front, and the lawn itself was dotted by huge old black walnut trees, the grass growing high around their trunks and littered with the rotting husk of last year's nuts.

She led me to a second-floor bathroom that must have pre-dated the first world war, and waited in the hall outside while I shaved with rusty water from a thumping faucet. It was as though she feared I might escape if left to my own devices.

"One thing," she called. "You mustn't tell

Tim about me swimming in the pool. He's forbidden me to go there."

"Why?"

"My mother drowned there, when I was a little girl."

"An accident?"

"Yes. She had a cramp. But Tim had to pull her out, afterwards. I was too small, and Daddy didn't swim. . . He's never forgotten it."

"Tim your brother? He lives here, too?"

"Yes. Dad left the place in my name, but Tim had to take charge when I was committed. He also looks after my interests at the mill. Poor Tim—he's practically spent the past ten years taking charge of me. He'll go on doing it, too, unless I can find some way to make you help me. He's a grand guy—very devoted. But I don't want to ruin what's left of his life. . . ."

I grunted. "What makes you think you need any help? The hospital discharged you, didn't it?"

"Yes. But only because they'd given up on me. Oh, they didn't tell me that, of course. But I know. I know they think I'm a hopeless case."

"And you think I could succeed where they failed? A bum like me?"

"You could try. I've read your book. I know how highly it was regarded at the san."

I threw open the door between us.

"Look, Lady. Let's get this straight: I'm not a doctor any more. I couldn't treat you, even if I wanted to."

"You've been disqualified?"

"Not officially. But I've disqualified myself."

"How? Won't you tell me about it?"

I could feel myself freezing up inside; could feel my thoughts twisting and turning, desperately hunting some cranny of escape. Then I remembered the similar symptoms I'd witnessed so often in my patients, and the arguments I'd had to use to break them down; to convince them that running away did no good, that it only prolonged the agony, and the cure. And at last I faced her.

"Yes," I said. "I'll tell you about it for your own good. It's not pretty, but here it is: . . . I had a patient once; a woman, who thought she was in love with me. I put her down as a mild neurotic, when actually she was a dangerous paranoiac whom anyone but a bumbling incompetent blinded by his own ego would have committed to an institution.

"But I had faith in her; confidence in my ability to help her—and I even let her come to my own home for treatment. And one day, when I was out of the room for the moment, she stole into the kitchen where my wife was getting dinner. She hated my wife;

blamed her for my own failure to reciprocate her love. There was a butcher knife lying on the table, and she used it. . . She ended up in a hospital for the criminally insane; my wife ended up in the morgue; and I ended up riding the rods, after trying various other methods of escape, and finding them all futile.

"Now do you see why I can't help you? Why I could never treat anyone again? Why it wouldn't be fair to me, or the patient?"

I must have shouted the last of it. She had slumped down on the edge of the tub while I talked, and now her eyes were the biggest and softest eyes I've ever seen. But her voice, when it came, was clear and crisp:

"No. No, I don't see. You had the knowledge and the ability once, and you didn't lose them by just making a mistake. The doctor doesn't live who hasn't made mistakes. Most of them compensate for those mistakes by the help they are able to give others afterwards. All I'm doing is offering you that chance. You're my last hope. And if there's any good left in you at all, you're going to help me. At least, you're going to try!"

CHAPTER TWO

The House That Terror Built

TWO brisk honks of greeting came from the street out front, followed by the rasp of the front gates opening and the sound of a car turning into the drive.

Her face lighted. "There's Tim now. You'll like him!" She raced along the hall and down the stairs.

"Remember," I growled, hustling to keep up. "I'm just Joe Doaks, an applicant for the job of handyman."

The car, a '35 Packard sedan, had stopped before the veranda when we reached the door, and a tall slender man with sandy hair and a thin red line of mustache came bounding up the front steps. He shot me a glance of sheer surprise, dropped the market bag he was toting, then ignored me completely while he gave his sister a big warm grin and a long hug. Her eyes danced like a little girl's welcoming Daddy home from the office.

At last she pushed back, laughing, and pointed to me. "Look, Tim—what I've found! This is Steve Lang, our efficient new handyman!"

He subjected me to a half-amused scrutiny. He had red-brown eyes with that little shine an over-active thyruus sometimes causes, and I put him down as at least ten years older than her, which would make him about my age—thirty-three.

"Well," he said, "he certainly has the shoul-

ders for it. How'd he get in—climb the fence?"

"Of course not, silly! He called to me from the gate. And when I found out he wanted a job, I let him in right away. I know how hard you've been hunting for someone to help with the work around here."

"Stranger in town?"

I nodded. "Got in this afternoon—by fast freight."

His grin was just the right size. He hadn't exactly impressed me as the democratic type, but now he put out his hand.

"Glad to have you with us, Lang. You can bunk in the gardener's old room in the carriage house. But I'm afraid you'll have to put up with us at meal times. We haven't the facilities for keeping a separate table. . . And speaking of meal time, I'm drooling! You'll find some steaks in the bag, Sis. I think there's enough for three. . ."

The steaks were tough. We worked on them awhile with the blunt old case knives we were using, and then he pushed back his chair with a mock frown.

"This seems to call for sterner measures."

He crossed to an old-fashioned china closet in the corner, unlocked its top drawer with a key from his pocket, and took out three sharp, short-bladed steak knives with ornate ivory handles. He passed them around.

The meal done, he turned to me:

"Your first job, Lang, will be to take my place in the kitchen and help Ellen with the dishes. I have to dash. Those old fuddy-duddies who run the mill pick the most ungodly hours for their board meetings. . ."

"By the way, when you're through, you'd better put those knives back where they came from. I left the drawer ajar, but it locks when closed. That set's a sort of heirloom—one of the few remaining mementoes of a decadent family's grand past. It would be a shame if anything happened to them."

When he'd gone, Ellen made dish water in the kitchen while I cleared the table. Then she washed while I dried, getting through first and apologizing for leaving me to finish.

"Maybe it hasn't been much a day for you," she said. "But I'm dead! More excitement than there's been around here for weeks. I'm going to bed."

Her eyes did have a tired, febrile look, at that.

After she left, I put the dishes and silver in their proper places in the cupboard, as she'd showed me. But when I came to the steak knives, I could find only two.

I went through the kitchen and dining room thoroughly, hunting the third, and finally opened the drawer in the china closet where they were kept. There were three in there,

making five of the set of six. I put my two with the others and returned to the kitchen, thinking that perhaps the missing member had been dropped into the regular cutlery drawer by mistake.

It hadn't. It hadn't, but I did find out one thing: That drawer didn't contain a single cutting instrument worth the name. Just a couple old paring knives, so dull and worn that they'd have bent double if you tried to force them through anything more solid than a head of cabbage.

I could feel the skin tightening across my scalp. Apparently there was more than one reason why Timothy Beaumont kept those nice sharp steak knives under lock and key!

After that, I went up the stairs and knocked on her door.

"I want to talk to you, Ellen."

"I'm in bed. Can't it wait until morning?" Her voice held the sulky sullenness of the early afternoon.

"No, it can't wait." I tried the door and found it locked. "Your brother gave me specific instructions about those steak knives. I want him to find all six in the drawer when he comes home."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Go away now and stop bothering me, or I'll have to report you."

So she'd have to report me! She, who less than six hours ago had practically been on her knees, begging me to stay!

"Ellen," I said tightly. "*I want that knife!*" "Ye gods—you've got knives on the brain! I saw that this afternoon! Why don't you go through your own pockets? . . ." Her voice softened a little. "I'm sorry, Steve. It's just that I'm so tired. . . The gardener's room is in the loft of the carriage house. You'll find a key, flashlight and clean blankets in that closet at the end of the hall. That knife must still be in the kitchen some place. We'll look for it again in the morning. . ."

FOR awhile, I was willing to believe her. To believe that maybe Tim had taken the knife, hoping to throw suspicion on her—or me. But after I'd settled myself in the creaking bed in the carriage house loft, and had time to think about it some more, I knew she was lying.

And I knew something else: That I didn't want to get mixed up in a thing like that again. I tried to tell myself that this was as good a way to spend a couple of weeks as any. That the bed was soft, and the food passable, and if I stuck it out till I'd accumulated a little stake in my jeans, the going would be easier when I hit the road again.

But I could feel the old compulsion building up inside me; the compulsion to be on my

way, no matter where. And the fact remained that anyone who didn't have to, would be crazy to stay around a place where knives disappeared as soon as they were taken from their locked drawers for a minute. Brother, that was just asking for it!

Still, it took me almost two hours of that kind of thinking to get me out of bed and into my clothes again. Because through it all I kept remembering the way she'd looked that afternoon, and the way her voice had sounded, pleading for the help she thought I could give her. And she needed help, I knew that, now. Regardless of who had taken the knife, she needed help. . .

A few yards beyond the carriage house door, I paused for a last look at her window. It was dark. An early moon rode above the railroad cut to the north, and in its diffused glow the rot and decadence of the place was washed away. The house stood big and white against the night, with only a few vaguely darker patches to show where the siding needed paint, and the roof, new shingles.

The weeds in the neglected garden plot might have been flowers about to bloom; and the rolling acreage beyond, a pasture where trim young Morgans frolicked, waiting to be broken to the saddle. In the moonlight the whole place looked like the haven of stately dignified good living it once had been.

But it didn't tempt me much. I'd seen it by daylight.

Skirting the trees to the point where the path dead-ended against the far side of the fence, I had to pass by the pool again. Its surface glistened like black glass beneath the moon, and I remembered how good that cold spring water had felt that afternoon. It was the time of night when the world is supposed to be cooling off, but that wheat country heat hadn't lifted an inch since noon, and pretty soon I was pulling off my clothes again, for a last dip before I went over the fence.

I'd been splashing around for about ten minutes, when I heard someone coming across the pasture, moving fast and kind of panting about it. I turned in the water to face the sound, and pretty soon there he was, Timothy Beaumont, silhouetted on top of the knoll. His long thin arms and legs moved with a sort of jerky tension, like a badly-manipulated marionette; his tongue was caught hard between his teeth, and his face was as white as the skull of one long dead. His fingers opened and closed spasmodically on the butt of the 12-gauge pump gun in his arms.

Before I could yell at him to take it easy, he caught sight of my face bobbing in the water, and the gun barrel levelled off.

I submerged.

None too soon. The sound of the gun was

a hollow ringing in the water, and I could almost feel the shot slapping against the surface above my head.

I scissored into the shadows of the rock ledge where he stood, before I came up for air.

"Don't shoot," I gasped. "I was leaving anyway."

The water interfered with his sense of direction. I could see him almost directly above me, searching the far bank with frenzied eyes.

"Who—who is it?" he croaked.

"Steve Lang. The man you hired this afternoon. I just came down for a midnight plunge."

"My God! My God—don't ever do that again. I—I thought it was prowlers."

He collapsed on the ledge, his face slack with relief, too spent to think of helping me over the side.

"You look like you might have thought it was a ghost," I said drily, hunkering down on the grass beside him. "How'd you know anyone was down here?"

"The fence. I heard you when you touched the fence. It's wired to a buzzer in my room. . . We've been having trouble with prowlers lately. I haven't had a full night's sleep in weeks. But I've never been able to catch them at it."

"Nuts. What is there in here that anyone would want to steal?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not that. I—I think it's some of the youngsters from town, trying to sneak in here for a swim. The water's too cold for that. I'm afraid they might drown. That's why I put up the fence in the first place."

"Well," I pointed out, "filling them full of lead's indeed a very poor way to insure their safety."

He tried to laugh. It came out as a dry whinny. He was still too shaken to more than talk coherently.

"Oh—I wouldn't shoot at them. Just over their heads. Give them something to think about, in case they had any plans for coming back."

I THOUGHT of the way that shot had spanked the surface at the exact spot where my head had been a split second before, and decided that maybe Sister Ellen wasn't the only Beaumont who could use a good psychiatrist.

"I didn't come within twenty yards of that fence tonight," I said, studying the grove which fringed the pool's far side. "How long has it been since those trees were pruned? Probably a branch has grown so that it scrapes the fence when the breeze is

right. I'll try to locate it and cut it off tomorrow."

He shook his head weakly. "We had an accident here once before. I don't want a thing like that to happen again."

"You mean your mother? Ellen told me about it this afternoon."

He eyed me dully. "Yes. Ellen's mother."

"Not yours?"

"No. My mother was the old man's first wife. She—she left him when I was five."

"And left you, too?"

His voice got a little more starch in it. "No one knew her ever condemned her for it! The old man wasn't easy to live with. Ellen's the only one who ever got along with him. . . Look, old man, I'm afraid you'd better not stay here, after all. There's something about Ellen you don't know."

I could feel the sack coming, and all at once an unreasoning stubbornness possessed me. Half an hour ago I'd been all ready to call it quits and leave. Now I felt just as obstinate about being kicked out. The ramifications of this thing were intriguing.

"I know all about Ellen!" I cut in. "Beaumont, I'm afraid I invaded your premises under false pretenses this afternoon. But it was the only way I could get in without arousing her suspicions. And for the time, I prefer to remain *icognito* where she's concerned."

He was eyeing me more closely now. "What are you getting at?"

I grinned apologetically. "The fact that I'm really Doctor Stephen Langley of California. My old friend, Dr. Welsh, sent me here. He wasn't quite sure of Ellen's condition when she left the sanatorium, and he knew I specialized in her type of aberration."

His eyes were narrow. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

I shrugged. "This is the first chance I've had to see you alone."

Gradually, his shoulders relaxed, and a look of very real relief crossed his face. He held out his hand.

"By God, Doc," he breathed, "I'm glad you're here. Frankly, I—I haven't been too satisfied with Ellen's condition lately. She seemed to be all right when she first came home. But during the past few weeks she—well, I'm afraid she's slipping back again."

I nodded. "Small wonder, cloistered away here with no outside contacts. She needs people around her, friends, something to take her mind off herself. Have you tried to do anything about that?"

He nodded ruefully. "Yes, I tried. I planned a surprise homecoming party for her, the night she came back. Not a soul showed up. . . I guess you don't know much about the people in these little back-country towns,

Doc. They're still pretty medieval when it comes to things like nervous disorders. And in some idiotic way, I think they blame her for what happened to Jeremy Richards."

"Who's Jeremy Richards?"

"Her first and only beau." Again his eyes narrowed. "I supposed you were familiar with her case history."

I shook my head. "I follow rather eccentric methods, Beaumont. I prefer to go into these things cold, with no preconceived diagnoses to throw me off the scent. . . Tell me about it. When did she first begin to show symptoms of emotional instability?"

He looked away. "She was always a little on the high-strung, nervous side," he said. "But nothing serious ever happened till the night Jeremy Richards jilted her,"

"All right—let's have it. What sort of guy was this Richards?"

He shrugged. "Oh, he seemed to be a nice enough lad. He delivered groceries here; that's how they met. They fell in love and decided to elope. His folks didn't want him to marry, and she had some silly notion that I wouldn't approve, either. . . . But we've always been rather close to each other, especially since the old man died. So a day or so before the scheduled elopement she broke down and told me all about it.

"I won't pretend to have been overjoyed. They were only nineteen at the time, and—well, young Richards wasn't exactly in the Beaumont social circle. But she'd made up her mind, and after all, that was all that mattered. I hope I have more sense than to try to tell any girl whom to fall in love with—especially my own sister. . . . But I pointed out that an elopement would be foolish; they could be married right here in her own home. She was tickled to death, but afraid Jerry might not like it, if he found out. So we decided to surprise him.

"She would go down to meet him when he came up the path from the tracks, as originally planned. Then I would step out of the trees, waving my shotgun, and marshal them up to the house, where the minister and wedding guests would be waiting. The whole thing would just be a big gag. I'm afraid it was rather crude, but you know the sort of thing the smart young set in any town thinks is funny." He paused.

"But I take it Jeremy didn't show up for the party?"

"He didn't show up. Of course, it's obvious what happened. They had been putting too much pressure on him at home—probably threatening him with an annulment if he went through with it—and he couldn't take it. But he couldn't stand to break the news to Ellen, either. So he lit out. And he hasn't been heard from since."

"SHE cracked up that night?"

He nodded heavily. "We left the house together, with the guests sitting around in the dark and giggling at my prop shotgun. She took up a position at the top of the path, there wasn't any fence then, and I hid back in the trees, where I could watch her and time my entrance. I could see her tightening up, as the minutes dragged by and no one showed up from the tracks below. And finally she had hysterics and collapsed, and I had to carry her back to the house and put her to bed; to tell the guests they could go on home now, that there'd be no wedding at the Beaumont menage that night." His jaw tightened. "It wasn't more than a week till they had to come and take her away."

He was shaking all over now with the strain of reliving it. I put a hand on his arm and helped him up. On the way back to the house, he suggested that I move into the room across the hall from hers, where I could observe her better.

"We'll tell her the gardener's room's untenable—rats or something."

He waited outside the carriage house while I went in and picked up my bed-roll. Then we entered the house together and walked up to the second floor hall.

His room was the first to the right of the stairs. The door was open, and as he stepped through it, I saw something gleam in the shaft of moonlight across the room.

The something was an ivory-hafted steak knife, held in the hand of Ellen Beaumont.

AS MY eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could see her in there, standing by his bed in her nightgown. She was facing us, and her face was as blank as a sleeping baby's. All but her eyes. They held a kind of dull sickly shine.

Then they fastened on him, and her features convulsed in an expression of the most burning and implacable hatred I've ever seen. The knife came up, and she began to advance slowly toward us.

He stumbled back, his face as white as it had been down by the pool. "Oh, God—" he choked. "Throw the blankets at her. Do something." His fingers began to scabble along the wall, hunting the light switch.

I forced them down. "She's somnambulant," I hissed. "A sudden shock right now might force her into a crisis from which she'd never recover! Get back in the hall—out of sight. Go get her a sedative, if there's any in the house."

"Th—there's nembutal," he whispered, from behind me. "But she doesn't react to it very well. I've tried it before, but she always stays awake."

"Get it anyway. A double dose. Put it in a

glass of milk, and leave it on top of the china closet downstairs. But for God's sake, *stay out of her sight!* Wait in the kitchen. . . ."

I could hear him stumbling down the steps behind me. I was watching her. She had stopped moving when he disappeared from the room, and now her eyes were as black as before. But the knife was still lifted.

I remained perfectly motionless. "Hello, Ellen," I said softly, as though I was talking to a sleeping child. "I'm glad you found the knife. Now we can put it back in the drawer downstairs, before Tim comes home."

"Timm—?" The words were thick, slurred. "Timm—not home?"

"Not yet," I crooned. "We'll have time to put the knife back where it belongs, before he gets here. Come on, we'll do it together."

Her eyes swung dully to the knife, as though she had never seen it before. "All—all right, Stevie."

I stepped forward slowly and took her arm. The one with the knife. I let my fingers rest gently on her elbow; but all the way downstairs I was ready to tighten that grip like a vise if the need arose.

The drawer of the china closet was still ajar. She dropped the knife into it without a tremor, and then I picked up the drugged glass of milk Tim had left on the cabinet, and offered it to her.

"Here's a nice glass of milk I poured you to help you sleep," I said. "Drink it, and then we'll go to bed."

She swallowed it like an obedient five-year-old. Then she said, "I don't want to go to bed yet, Stevie. I want to be with you."

I walked her over to an old-fashioned love seat in the corner. She didn't seem to want to talk, so we just sat there. Pretty soon her arms slid around my neck and she kissed me.

I kissed back. "What else could I do?"

It did something to me. But before I had time to think about that, her lips had left my mouth and her eyes had closed, and she was sleeping gently with her head on my shoulder. Ten minutes later, when her breathing had deepened and her head had slipped a little, I picked her up and carried her back upstairs. She was sleeping like the enchanted princess when I tiptoed out of her room.

Tim was still in the kitchen when I got back downstairs. He had a fifth of bourbon, and there were still four drinks left in it. I had three of them.

"You say she doesn't usually react to nembutal?" I asked.

"That was a triple dose," he told me grimly. "In a way, she reacts to a normal dose, too. But she doesn't get sleepy—just high. So high that she even draws a blank the next morning."

I nodded. "It has that effect on some people.

Leaves them conscious and even lucid after a fashion. That's why it's sometimes used in childbirth now. But if it's no good as a sedative for her, how come you keep it around?"

He shrugged. "It works fine, on me."

Again I nodded. "Something like this tonight has happened before, hasn't it?"

He eyed me glumly. "Frankly—yes. Though it's never been quite this close before. But that's why I always lock her door from the outside, before I turn in. Only that damned buzzer sounded before I got around to it tonight."

I poured myself another drink. "Well, you mustn't let it affect your feeling for her. She was walking in her sleep—acting out a nightmare. Probably didn't recognize you at all in your true identity, when she started for you with that knife."

The liquor had brought back some of his color. He was even able to manage a wry grin. "I know. But you must admit it is damned disconcerting."

CHAPTER THREE

Return of the Living Dead

I WENT to her room at nine the next morning, with a hot pot of coffee and eggs and bacon in an antique chafing dish. She hadn't stirred from the position in which I'd left her the night before. Her taffy hair was tousled on the pillow, and her face was very soft and young and vaguely disturbed in repose.

I put up the blinds and returned to her bed. She opened her eyes to find me smiling down at her. She blinked bewilderedly, and then recognition swam into them, and she lifted one hand from the covers in a clinging gesture. Her lips moved.

"Oh, Steve, I'm so glad you're here."

I grinned brightly. "Thought you might like breakfast in bed, for a change. How do you feel, this fine hot morning?"

She twitched slightly and her eyes darkened.

"Terrible—except about you being here. My head aches, and I feel all sick and scared inside, like I'd had another of those horrible dreams."

"You dream a lot?"

"Sometimes. But I can never remember a thing about them the next morning. Just that I always wake up so tired and frightened, afterwards. It's maddening. . . ."

* * *

We had been for a swim in the pool, and were lying on the knoll now, letting the sun dry us. Three days had passed since my first hectic night with the Beaumonts, and so far

I hadn't been getting anywhere much. There had been no more somnambulist nightmares.

"Ellen," I said dreamily. "Tell me about the night you were going to get married—"

Her face clouded, and I went on quickly: "Never mind, if you don't feel up to it. But Tim said that you collapsed down here that night. That was a pretty strong reaction, under the circumstances. I wouldn't have expected that to happen till you'd at least had time to make sure that Jerry had really run out on you—that he hadn't merely been prevented from meeting you by some accident or sudden illness, that night."

Her head shook. "It's not that I'd mind telling you if I could, Steve. It's just that I can't remember—not a thing. Couldn't even remember, the next day. The doctors at the san put it down as amnesia accompanying emotional shock. But even they couldn't pierce that particular curtain."

I grunted. "I'd like to know this Jeremy Richards," I said. "I'd like to see what kind of a bird could walk out on a swell dish like you. You don't happen to have a picture of him, do you?"

She smiled wanly. "I don't need a picture of him, with you around. You're very like him, Steve. You even have his tall dark handsomeness, and football shoulders. You're just a little older, Steve, that's all. But so am I. You could take his place—completely."

It was very hard for me to remember the proper relationship between doctor and patient at moments like this.

I DON'T know exactly when it was that I definitely decided on hypnosis. Sometime the next day, I think. I knew the danger of trying it this early in the treatment; that it might fail completely, and make the final solution that much harder. But the old restless compulsion was on me again, and I knew, too, that the more time I spent with Ellen Beaumont, the harder it would be for me to say goodbye when the time did come. Then, there was always the danger that Tim might somehow find out my true status here and kick me out forthwith, thus ending the treatment right now.

I explained all this to her, leaving out my personal feelings, of course, and she agreed. She'd undergone it before, at the hospital, without too much success.

So I took her up to the gardener's room in the carriage loft, on one of those warm lazy afternoons, and had her stretch out on the bed in her sunsuit and get comfortable. Then I pulled all the shades down tight, and carefully punched a tiny hole in one, so that a stiletto-thin blade of sunlight pinpointed the low tabletop beside her head, where her eyes could rest upon it naturally.

After that, I assembled my razor and covered the spot with its flanged end, till a single flickering bead of light danced there in the three-quarter darkness. I told her to concentrate on that glow.

She reacted beautifully. It was no trick at all to put her under.

You know what hypnosis is, of course: merely an induced sleep in which the subject's subconscious remains in contact with the practitioner.

All it takes on the part of the patient is the ability to relax completely, plus an implicit faith and confidence in the doctor. What it takes on the part of the doctor is something of a professional secret, dangerous in the hands of the untrained, which we won't go into here.

When I judged that she had reached the proper state, I began to question her slowly and softly. It was a difficult, exhausting and complex process, trying to dredge up those secrets which the tortured mind had striven so frantically to force down into oblivion. But at last I decided I'd achieved the maximum possible results. One of the things I took especial note of was the complete description she was able to give to me, of the way Jeremy Richards had been dressed on the night he disappeared!

DONE, I broke contact, and decided to let her sleep it off normally. I was about to tiptoe out for a smoke, when the loft door was flung violently inward, and Timothy Beaumont stood there on the threshold, taking in the half-revealed scene. His thin face darkened with fury, and his eyes became dangerous pinpoints of red-brown light.

"This does it, Langley!" he said thickly. "You're through!"

I pushed him roughly out the door, closing it behind me, and sidewheeled him down the stairs.

"Shut up!" I hissed. "You'll wake her! If you have to shout, at least wait till we get into the house, to do it."

"What were you doing to my sister?"

I snapped, "I was hypnotizing her. It's a recognized therapeutic technique in cases like this."

He was still trembling violently with rage. "You might be able to fool me with that double-talk, if I didn't know the truth about you! But I called Welsh the day after you got here! I found out he knew you only by reputation—and that wasn't good. He told me how you'd cracked up two years ago—gone on a two-month bender and then dropped out of sight—after botching a job on one of your patients, and letting her kill your wife! . . .

"I should have kicked you out right then. But damn it, you seemed to know how to handle Ellen, and under the circumstances I was

glad to have someone else around the place for awhile, even if it was only a drunken bum. But this today is too much! Get out! If you're not off the place in ten minutes, I'll call the police!"

I didn't say anything. What was there to say? I just walked leadenly up the stairs, while he waited fuming by the telephone in the lower hall, and gathered up the handful of pocket articles I'd left in my room. On the way back down, I slipped into his room for a minute and examined the shotgun he kept beside the bed there. Its magazine contained five shells. I pumped them out, removed the paper wadding at their ends, and poured the shot from each into my pocket. Then I refilled the casings with strips torn from my pocket handkerchief, tamping the cloth down tight against the powder charges, and replaced the waddings at their ends. After that, I reinserted the shells in the magazine and left the gun where it had been before.

If death paid a visit here tonight—and I had an uncanny feeling that it might—then I meant to make sure that it didn't effect its entrance by means of that gun.

Timothy Beaumont was still sitting by the telephone when I came downstairs, his pale face suffused, his sandy hair rumpled. Neither of us spoke as I swung through the door and down the drive to the gates out front.

* * *

Forthwith, I paid my first visit to the town of Midvale. I still had fourteen dollars in my pocket, residue of five days work in the harvest fields the week before, and I found a little second-hand clothing store on the wrong side of the tracks, where I acquired a skimpy two-piece suit, and a cheap Panama hat, sweat-stained beyond redemption, but which would probably still get by at a distance, by moonlight. I was even able to pick up a small jar of luminous greasepaint at a novelty shop in the vicinity.

After that, I spent the early evening at a nearby pool room. But as soon as it began to get reasonably dark, I headed back up the tracks toward the Beaumont place.

Darkness was almost complete when I reached the steep narrow path winding up the face of the bluff there. With the aid of a mirror from my comb case, I dabbed some of the luminous paint on my face and hands, highlighting the hollows around my eyes and mouth and making my fingers look longer and thinner than they were. Not too much—I didn't want to give the effect of a Hallowe'en masquerade.

Then I climbed the path, using the same post I'd used before to get over the fence without touching it. On the far side, I moved through the trees for a final reconnaissance before

giving the signal which would bring Tim Beaumont down here on the run, as though the devil himself were after him.

LUCK was with me. The setting that night was perfect for my experiment. A thin new moon rode the sky, tossing a single star between her horns, and some change in the atmosphere presaging storm had wreathed the pool in wispy pockets of mist, which reached out to finger the boles of the nearest trees. The whole place was like some shadowy druid glen, with the rise and fall of cicada songs for chorus, and fireflies darting their yellow torches through the miasma.

I paused a moment, selecting a hiding place, then returned to the fence and pummelled the top wire hard with my hat. I didn't want him to think it was just some stray branch dipping in the breeze this time.

Thirty seconds of that, and I went back to the pool. I crouched immobile at its edge, hid my faintly glowing face and hands with my coat sleeves, and waited.

It wasn't two minutes till I heard him coming across the meadow, sliding and blowing again. He came to a stop on my side of the knoll and swung the shotgun in a frenzied arc, hunting for something to shoot it at.

I pushed my hands up out of the mist and started toward him, as though I'd come from the depths of the pool itself.

He screamed, and fired his first shot. His voice had a hoarse, animal timbre:

"Go back! Go back, Jeremy!"

I kept coming, not making a sound, with my hands hung out like hooks before me.

He began to back away into the trees, stumbling and firing as he went. When we were less than ten yards apart, the hammer clicked dead on the empty chamber, and a kind of gagging came from his chest. He flung the gun at my head and dived for the fence.

He was up and over it like a monkey. And then one of his ankles touched that hot wire at the top, and he screamed and plunged headlong into space.

I doubt if he even heard the outbound freight rolling through the railroad cut below. I hadn't counted on that, myself. But the result was inevitable, anyway. He could never have survived that thirty-foot drop to the tracks, or the hangman's noose that would have awaited him later, if he had by some miracle managed to pull through.

As it was, he went rolling and tumbling down the bluff like a sawdust doll, and disappeared beneath the wheels of the last gondola. The train crew probably never even knew about it.

I stood there staring through the fence, while the red lights of the caboose disappeared around the bend, and I could feel the

recurrent tremors shaking me. I'd meant for him to confess—not to die.

But after all, it amounted to the same thing in the last analysis.

At last, I retraced my steps.

A GAIN, I sat by Ellen's bed while she awakened. And again the frightened bewilderment in her eyes gave way

"Steve, oh, Steve! I'm so glad you're back. Does Tim know?"

I let my fingers close about her hand. "Lie back and try to relax," I said gently. "There's something I have to tell you, Ellen. You may not understand, at first. But when you do, I think it'll clear up a lot of other things, too. Among them, this illness."

I told her about Tim's death, then. "Don't you see, Baby? Actually, it was suicide. That's what we'll have to tell the police. He was really killed by his own conscience. If he hadn't murdered Jeremy and hidden his body in the pool, he wouldn't have had such a phobia about the place. He wouldn't have forbidden you to go there, or built that fence to keep others out. And he wouldn't have fallen for that phony apparition which rose from the mists to confront him there last night. Subconsciously, from the moment of the murder, he lived in mortal terror that some day the dead would rise to haunt him."

"But how—how could you know?"

"It was mostly a shot in the dark," I admitted. "But it hit the target. But I learned enough from you under hypnosis, to fill in the blanks. It was your description of the way Jeremy was dressed that night, that cued my own disguise. . . . From the moment you told him in a burst of sisterly confidence that you planned to marry Jeremy, he must have begun to plot Jeremy's death. Your father had left this place and the family interest in the mill in your name; and if you married, your husband would take over both.

"He told you later that the mill was losing money; that that's why he had to take you out of the sanatorium. But if you hadn't been isolated from the world so long, you'd have known that no mill has lost money during the past five years. He told you that he couldn't get servants to come here, because of you. Actually, he wanted no servants; he had to keep you isolated. The same applies to that homecoming party he said he planned for you."

"Actually, no invitations were sent. He knew you were too proud to try to get in touch with your former friends."

Her eyes were wide and dark with shock. "But how—how could he kill Jeremy?"

"If you mean the mechanics of it, that was simple. He talked you into holding the wedding here, and proposed that gag with the

shotgun. But when Jeremy met you at the top of the path, Tim didn't merely emerge from hiding and use the gun to marshal you both to the house. Instead, he used it to strike Jerry over the head, killing him. And later, with you in bed under sedatives and the guests gone home, he went back and weighted the body with rocks and dumped it into the almost bottomless quarry hole.

"And I—I've known all this, all along?"

I nodded. "A little part of you knew it. But only a very small part, buried deep in the hidden substrata of your mind. And it was the conflict between this subconscious knowledge, and the secret hate it made you feel for Tim, set against your conscious image of him as a loyal and devoted brother who deserved your warmest affection, that has caused all your trouble. . . . You see, darling, you're really made of very tough emotional fibre. Otherwise, that conflict would have torn you to pieces long ago. As it was, it found expression only in your dream activity.

Her head moved rebelliously on the pillow. "But I couldn't forget a thing like Jeremy's murder! Nothing could ever make me!"

"Yes," I said. "There is one thing. It lies in your reaction to a certain drug. There are some persons whom this drug, normally a sedative, does not put to sleep at once. Instead, they apparently remain conscious, even lucid to a degree. But the drug affects their memory centers so that later, after it has worn off, they can't consciously remember a thing that happened while it was in effect. . . . Tim had noticed your reaction to it, earlier. Probably it was given you as a sedative when your father died. So he gave you a dose, in a drink or something, before you left the house together that night. Later, your temporary amnesia could be explained as the result of the traumatic shock brought about by your disappointment at Jeremy's failure to appear."

Her eyes were alive now, bright with relief. She had pulled through unbroken.

"Steve," she said softly. "Kiss me, Steve."

I could feel the blood pounding through my temples, but I shook my head.

I said shortly. "I'm still your doctor."

"And what's to become of me, Doctor?"

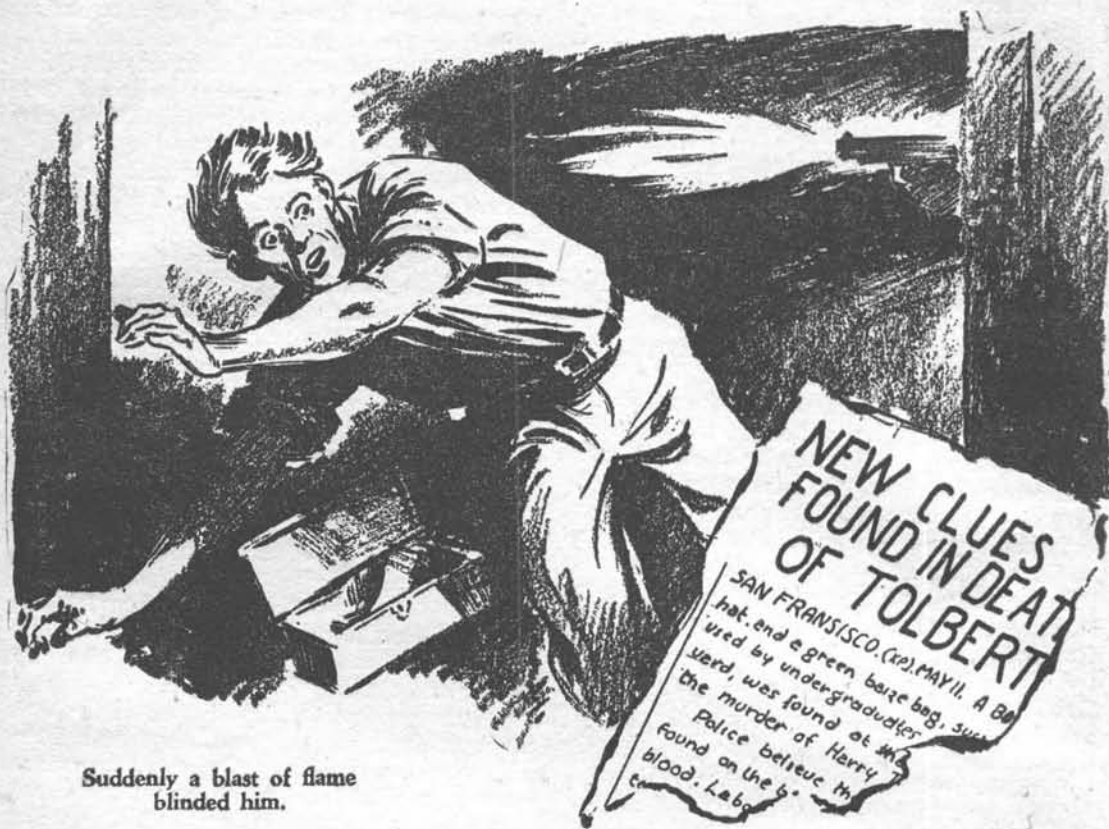
"If you're smart, you'll take a nice long trip and forget all this."

"And you?"

I looked away. "Oh, I—I suppose I'll go somewhere and try to re-establish a practice. You see, all this—well, damn it, it's sort of given me a reason to go on living now, too."

She took my hand between hers, and her eyes were shining. "I'll do it, Steve!" she said. "I'll do just what you said—on one condition: that you make that trip you prescribed a honeymoon."

THE WORM IN THE ROOT



Suddenly a blast of flame blinded him.

SANDY GRAHAM adeptly whipped up his breakfast of four scrambled eggs and toast, then hollered, "Uncle Deak," a couple times hopefully, though it was no use. Uncle Deak hadn't been home since Pa and Sandy returned from their trip, a week ago.

Sandy frowned. He was worried, yet he shouldn't be really. According to pa, Uncle Deak went off one time twenty years ago for a day and stayed ten years. Sandy guessed that was back when his uncle was fat and husky.

Pa had already gone to the filling station. Sandy looked for the time but the old clock had stopped and Pa's watch, which he most always left at home, was lost somewhere.

"Creeps," he growled. Uncle Deak not being back meant he'd have to dig the worms another day. He almost wished the fishermen around Lakewood would lay down their poles for good.

Garbed in his checked shirt, blue jeans and Stetson hat that pa gave him on his seventeenth birthday, he meandered down to the tool shed. He removed the orders from the hook, got a lifting fork and an armful of paper cartons like those that chili comes in, and went to number six bed on the far end.

The worms there, unmolested for a time, should be fattest and besides, the earth was hove up, loose, as if the bed had recently been worked over.

Sandy looked off through the trees toward the lake. He could see the top of the mast on Mr. Townsend's yacht and hear the cries of the bathers. Sandy guessed it was nice to have plenty of money.

He started digging, one forkful at a time and then removing the fat, wriggling worms from the pungent earth and placing them carefully in the cartons. Consulting his order—which people called in to Pa at the filling station, he counted the appropriate number into each carton before dropping moss inside for the wriggling creatures to feed on.

"Creeps," he cried—the deeper he went the fatter the worms became. He remained in that one spot till his fork hit something solid. At first he thought he'd hit the copper wire which served as a bottom for the bed and kept the worms from escaping, but then he leaned down, and it wasn't the bottom at all.

"Golly!" He rammed the fork down again, pried up. And then he went cold all over.

The object under his fork was a man's bare leg. Sandy turned white. He caught his

breath before resolutely digging the earth away from the recumbent form.

"Uncle Deak!" he cried. Already decomposition had blurred the thin features, but the shaggy grey head, the narrow eyes, the lobeless ears were familiar. There was a hole the size of a dime in his temple.

Sandy dropped the fork and ran for Black John Morton's house, a quarter mile up the road, where there was a phone. Black John was sitting in the yard. "I found Uncle Deak's body in the worm bed!" he shouted. Black John stiffened, rising at once. Sandy dashed on into the house.

Deesie Morton was washing dishes. She had on a print dress and her yellow hair, which just missed matching Sandy's, was done in a knot that didn't seem too sure of itself. "Lemme use the phone!" Sandy cried. Deesie almost dropped a dish.

"Why, Sandy! What's the—?"
But Sandy was cranking the phone. He asked the party line operator for the sheriff first, and then called pa. Pa hollered, "My God!" and the receiver crashed down.

"Who—killed him, Sandy?" Deesie burst out.

"I don't know." And then he remembered how Uncle Deak looked. "And you stay here. It's no place for kids, anyway girls."

"Stop calling me a child," Deesie snapped. "I'm sixteen. Some girls marry no older'n I am."

Sandy didn't feel up to arguing with women, so he let her follow him. Black John was already on the scene. Black John was Deesie's pa, and as peculiar a man as Sandy ever saw. He was forever glum, and mean looking. He and Deesie had lived alone since her ma died. Black John was retired. He used to be in the real estate and insurance business in Lakewood.

Then the sheriff arrived, and by the magic wrought by the party line operator an assemblage of Lakewood citizenry got there almost as fast as Pa, who puffed up in the old jalopy.

Cox Bann, the sheriff, nodded to Black John and gazed a long time at the body. "Guess that's what you'd call a man's sins catching up with him." Cox was round, stubby, and grey bearded but his eyes were wise and cool.

Pa bristled. "Deak wasn't no model. But

he was my brother." He gazed levelly at Cox. "The law'd ought to learn to hold its tongue."

THAT'S how pa was, Sandy thought—loyal and good. Pa was the finest man he knew anywhere. And he was touchy about Deak. He had a love for him that Sandy never understood. He'd admit that Deak was wild, even at fifty, and he once said to Sandy that his uncle would end up bad yet.

"When'd you last see him?" asked Bann, looking around at the two deputies and the somber little coroner who had just arrived.

"Well, er—two weeks ago," said pa. The sight of his brother's body upset him, Sandy guessed. "Me and Sandy went upstate for a week, visitin'. When we come back Deak was gone."

By now twenty or thirty people had assembled, among them Claude Gray, a Lakewood attorney that Uncle Deak went to see once or twice. Sandy never knew what business his uncle had with Gray.

Gray addressing nobody in particular said, "It might be of interest to note that Deak Graham left Harve quite a sum of money."

Pa's eyes popped. "Deak . . . left me . . . money?"

"Approximately twenty thousand dollars," Gray said, folding his hands so that his manicure showed. "I was his lawyer."

"Twenty thousand—!" Pa made a funny sound with his lips. "You must be off your nut. Deak never had twenty dollars."

"What about his profits from the worm business?" Black John put in hoarsely.

"He had more worms than business," pa snapped. This questioning was making him mad. "Deak come and went, I admit. Last time he rolled in broke, 'bout a year ago. He got the idea of selling fishing worms. Not ordinary worms, but *'lumbrious terrestris specie'*, he called 'em. Fat worms anyway. So he drew up blue prints for the beds and I let him use the land." After that long speech Pa shut up tight.

Bann stepped across the concrete border around bed number five. "Come off it, Harve. Tellin' us you don't know nothing about Deak having that much money."

"I didn't," pa snapped, reddening under the stare of the crowd.

Young Sandy never knew, when he dug for fishing worms and turned up, instead, Uncle Deak's murdered body, that one good corpse deserves another!

Some of the rich folks from the lake club strode up, gawking like anybody. Among them was H. Phillip Townsend, owner of the yacht Marilyn which was named after his daughter. He wore white pants, blue coat, yachting cap. He nodded to the sheriff and pa, and looked very surprised when he saw the body.

"I wondered what had happened to him," Mr. Townsend said. "He's been selling me bait and I need some now."

The sheriff then asked both Mr. Townsend and Black John of they'd seen anything peculiar going on around the Graham's property lately. They both said no. "It looks to me," Bann said, "as if Deak was shot at night, buried under cover of darkness here in the worm bed—the idea being the worms would consume the body. By using this bed on the far end, the killer figured the body wouldn't be disturbed."

He drew a breath. "That has a meanin'. The killer knew this bed wasn't used much." Bann looked at Sandy. "Son, I see you in town sometimes at night. Ain't it possible things could happen here that you wouldn't know about? Say, like when you're in a movie?"

Sandy felt sick, trapped. He felt himself turn white. Then he looked at pa. "Yes-sir. But if you saying that pa might have done it—"

"I ain't—yet," Bann cut him off. Then, as if he was thinking to himself, he said, "Deak might've got the money on one of his trips. He was mysterious. But where he got it don't matter right now. The main thing is finding the gun."

The deputies scattered out, looking in the weeds in the back lot, and Mr. Townsend kicked around in the loose dirt, turning up fat worms. The coroner and another man loaded Uncle Deak into a basket and took him off. Some of the crowd started drifting away. Deesie whispered, "I'm sorry, Sandy. But you know they can't do anything with your pa."

And just then Mr. Townsend exclaimed, "Look here!"

Everybody regarded the end of Mr. Townsend's toe. An object glinted against the brown earth.

"My watch!" pa exploded. "It's been missing for two weeks!"

Bann picked it up by the chain. Sandy didn't move. Nobody did. It was like electricity in the air. Then Bann said, "Not much arguing against this, Harve."

Pa shrugged as if what had happened had been building up right along. Before he left he came over to Sandy. "Keep things going at the house. Don't open up the station. And Sandy—" he put his big hand on Sandy's

shoulder—"don't go nosin' into this. It's murder. Leave the nosin' to the sheriff."

Sandy watched them drive off in the sheriff's car. Cox Bann looked pleased, and pa waved to Sandy from down the road. Sandy would've cried then except Deesie came over and put her hand in his.

"I want to help you, Sandy."

"Like doing what?"

"Like cooking for you, maybe."

Sandy squeezed her hand. He'd never squeezed a girl's hand before, not just like that anyway. "No, Deesie." He strolled into the house, Deesie following. "You better go now. I got thinking to do."

But Deesie didn't go. She accompanied him into Uncle Deak's room. On the wall was a blue print of the worm beds, showing the location and size of each bed. "I helped him draw the map," Deesie said, because I took drawing in school, but I never saw that on there."

"What? On where?"

"That X. See that X on number four bed."

Sandy looked, but he paid slight attention. Uncle Deak was always doing mysterious things, none of which ever meant much.

"You're still imagining pirates and buried treasure," he said. "Like when we used to play down at the lake."

"You liked me better then, didn't you, Sandy?"

Sandy didn't answer. A big voice outside the window shouted, "Deesie, come out of there. You got no business in that house." It was Black John.

Deesie said, "Yes, Dad," and whispered to Sandy, "Don't mind dad none. He don't like anybody." She tiptoed out, so as not to intrude on Sandy's thinking.

SANDY crossed through the living room, neat and tidy, as pa kept it since Sandy's mother died, and then he went outside. He decided not to bother with filling any worm orders today, he didn't feel up to it. Instead he went on down into the woods. He could think straighter there. He found an old limb that was down and straddled it. Off by the lake he heard music and a girl's laughter.

Nothing made sense, or added up. Where had Uncle Deak got twenty thousand dollars? But, since he had it, why didn't pa know? Or did he? Sandy felt disloyal over that question. And if pa lost his watch in the worm bed, wouldn't he remember about where he'd been and look for it there?

At first he hated Cox Bann for arresting pa but he repented that now. He had to look at it as the sheriff did. There was all the evidence, the motive and all. And to Bann, pa was just another man, really. Sandy didn't know much about murderers except what he'd read. It gave him chills thinking that some-

body—somebody he knew probably—had killed Uncle Deak.

Noon came and Sandy fixed himself some corn flakes but he didn't feel like eating much. The afternoon was wearing away when he started up the flivver and drove into Lakewood. First he got pa some cigars and then cut around to the filling station that pa'd run for ten years to see that it was locked up tight. Afterwards he went to the jail.

Cox Bann was in the front. Sandy confronted him, eyes bright. "I've been thinking," he said, "the coroner didn't say how long Uncle Deak'd been dead. Figure that out and you'll find pa was visiting."

Cox Bann chuckled. "It wasn't mentioned because he can't tell about a decomposing body. Might've been six days, maybe eight."

Sandy slumped. He trudged on back to pa's cell. Pa was sitting on the edge of the bare cot, his chin down, his face sort of gray. He made himself smile when Sandy handed over the cigars.

Sandy said, "I've been going through Uncle Deak's room—"

Pa got purple in the face. "I ain't whipped you in ten years but God Almighty, son, I'll skin you if you tangle up in this." He observed the shadows on Sandy's face. "Set," he said softly, pointing to the cot.

"I don't want you hurt, son," he began. "Just between us, Uncle Deak was mixed up with bad company. I'm purty sure. And they're killers, Sandy. They killed once, would again. See?"

"But you're locked up," Sandy protested. "And Cox Bann will build a tight case."

"No matter! You stay out of it." He paused. "I reckon why Deak come back last time was because somethin' was getting too hot for him, or he was running away from somebody."

Sandy leaned over. "He was my uncle. You're my pa. You keep forgetting I'm grown now. I got a right to know such things."

This jolted pa, as if he hadn't thought about it before. At length his eyes softened. "Mebbe you're right, son." He took a breath. "Well, when Deak come back I was in his room one day. I run onto a copy of a police record hidden in his grip. Some man named Harry Tolbert was wanted for killing a wealthy oil man near San Francisco. He got away, according to the record, and after the wife collected her share of the estate she disappeared too. The police are looking for both parties."

Pa gazed off. "You know who I think Harry Tolbert was?"

Sandy shook his head. He'd never seen pa so solemn.

"Uncle Deak, or one of his cronies, under a changed name. Especially since this money turns up."

"He might have . . . killed the man, then the woman?"

"I don't know what to think." He got up. "Son, I want you to promise me you'll not—" At that moment Claude Gray, treading so lightly that neither heard him coming, appeared in front of the cell.

"I brought a copy of the will, thought you'd like to see it," Gray said. Sandy slipped out before pa could make him promise anything.

Darkness had settled down when Sandy got home. He saw a light on in Deesie's room. The rest of the Morton house was dark. Sandy wondered where Black John was. Deesie wouldn't be afraid alone however. When she and Sandy used to play pirates, Deesie'd make a canoe landing—only it was a frigate to them—and come clear through the woods at night.

A big affair was going on at the lake. Sandy saw a log burning and heard music. He kept thinking of pa—maybe in the electric chair, and to banish the thought he strolled down to the water. The rich folks were dancing on the pier, sleek gowned women and men in dinner clothes.

H. Phillip Townsend was on the rim of the group, leaning against a tree. He was wearing a white coat, dark pants, and white gloves. Sandy tried to imagine what pa or Black John would look like wearing fancy gloves.

Townsend jumped when Sandy went over. "You startled me," he said. "I'm sorry about your uncle, and the unfortunate circumstances that brought on your father's arrest."

"It wasn't your fault, really," Sandy said, digging his toe in the soft earth.

"Murder is serious. If your father isn't guilty, he'll be exonerated at a fair trial. And if he did—"

"Don't say that," Sandy burst out. "No matter what happens, pa didn't do it."

The music ended and the dancers strolled off the pier. Townsend's eyes followed them. "I'll miss your unce. Bought bait from him, you know. Talked a lot about his worms being the best in the country." He chuckled. "Which I doubted. His worms were like himself, fat and lazy."

A SLIM girl about Sandy's age, in a dress cut lower than Sandy had ever seen before, joined them. "My daughter, Marilyn," Mr. Townsend said, and with a wink at Sandy, drifted away.

"I've heard about you," Marilyn said. Her dark hair was upswept and her lips deeply crimson. "You're the worms man's nephew." Uncomfortably, Sandy said, "Yes'm."

"Well, I hate your old worms. I hate it here." The firelight cast shadows on her cheeks.

"Your ma and pa like it," Sandy reminded her.

"Mother doesn't. She came because Phil thinks there's no place else to fish. As if there isn't the whole Atlantic coast—" her eyes misted—"places with swanky club houses, and Naval officers. . . ."

"I think you're spoiled," Sandy said simply.

She stepped closer to him. Her lips parted in a way Deesie's never did. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I could like you."

Sandy flushed. "I—I got to go," he stammered. "G-good night." He was twenty feet away when he heard her giggle.

But Sandy was very thoughtful as he strolled back to the house. It startled him when he saw a shadow ahead. He slipped behind some tall brambles, waiting breathlessly. Finally the shadow moved on, and he recognized Black John. He watched as the old man threaded toward his house.

When finally he flung himself across the bed, fully dressed except for his shoes, it was late. But he couldn't sleep. All the factors were present, he realized vaguely, but he couldn't put them together somehow. And then he got to thinking about pa in jail, alone. Then a vision of Uncle Deak's body returned and Sandy shivered.

It scared him when he heard a scraping sound in the vicinity of Unle Deak's room. He jerked upright. The sound came again, eerily. He'd never thought much about ghosts, but now he wasn't so sure. Covered with nettles, he eased off the bed and bare-footed, padded through the living room toward the sound.

He was almost there when he bumped a stool. He leaped back, the unexpected frightening him. It took a lot of nerve but he went on and flung the door open, snapping on the lights.

The room was silent but one window was up, mute evidence that somebody, not a ghost, had been there. The curtains stirred weirdly from the outside breeze.

Sandy brushed a hand through his yellow hair, fighting down an impulse to clear out. Then his eye rested on the blue print on the wall, on the X on number four bed that Deesie had pointed out. Now that things were taking shape in his mind, the X came to mean something. Just what, Sandy wasn't sure, but he was having an idea.

Bolstering his nerve, he went for a flash light and then slipped out into the night. He didn't turn on the light however. He crawled against the ground to the tool shed, where he groped for a spade. Still crawling, dragging the implement, he worked his way to number four bed.

It was a moonless night but the sky was clear. The mounded earth where Uncle Deak's body had been excavated was ominously near him. Sandy lay on his belly and dug. He could only guess at the exact location of the

X on the map, but it looked about two feet out from the northeast corner. The spade crunched against the damp earth. Worms crawled against Sandy's bare feet—cold, slimey creatures. He had the feeling that somebody was watching him. His spine tingled.

He dug down about eighteen inches before the spade touched metal. The screech of it chilled him. Exploring with his fingers, he touched the top of a box. He used his fingers as a fork and dug the earth away. The box was metal, the kind a mechanic uses for carrying tools. He lifted it out. The lid was sealed with wax to keep out moisture.

Deserting the spade, Sandy crawled back to the tool shed with the box in tow. The feeling that unseen eyes were following him persisted. He gained the shed, squatted in front of the door and, reaching a screwdriver off the rack inside, pried away the wax. The lid open, he removed an oilskin cloth which was wrapped around a heavy object. Beneath the oilskin was a chamois. Sandy's eyes popped.

Uncovered, the object was a gleaming .38 revolver! Sandy rewrapped it carefully and returned it to the box.

Instantly a high, tortured scream penetrated the stillness. Deesie's voice! Sandy flung himself down. A blast of flame blinded him. Sandy lay there, listening, not breathing. Thudding footfalls retreated across the yard. That would be Deesie, but where was his assailant?

Sandy's heart pounded. Indian-style, he crawled on his belly around the shack. Suddenly he could see the shadow of a figure, stealthily advancing toward the shed. It struck Sandy that the man figured he'd hit him. Sandy wished he dared use the .38, but that was out. The gun meant something that handling might obliterate. He edged farther, dragging in the dirt.

The shadow came nearer but still Sandy couldn't see who it was, although he was pretty sure he knew. Moreover, he knew why it was who it was—all useless information, if he didn't live to use it to free pa. And the man was desperate or else he'd have run when Deesie screamed.

"I reckon he knows Deesie wasn't close enough to see him good," Sandy thought grimly. Which meant the killer was free to finish the job. Sandy figured now he'd have done better to hang onto the revolver, evidence or not.

THE figure neared the shed door. Sandy considered rising, running, but even in the darkness it was a big gamble if the man gave pursuit. So he waited, a plan forming in his mind. When the figure stooped over the metal box, Sandy leaped up. He charged the shed door.

The man heard him, straightened abruptly. "Why, you little—"

Driving hard, Sandy hit the door before the man could fire. Anger displaced fear. He heard a groan. The figure hurtled into the shed. Sandy slammed the door, swiftly inserting the lock in the hasp. There was wild cursing within.

"Frame pa, will ya?" Sandy cried triumphantly. Just then a shot ripped through the door. Sandy spun, falling backwards. A tingling besieged his shoulder. He touched his flesh. Blood on his hand, warm, sticky. He was fighting back nausea when another shot from within the shed blasted loose the hasp. The door was swinging outward as Sandy, losing his fight, swam away on the wide, soaring wings of the metal box, just outside the door. . . .

Sheriff Bann, Deesie, Black John and H. Phillip Townsend were in the room. It was Sandy's bedroom and he was on the bed. Dr. Ormsby, from Lakewood, was inserting a needle in Sandy's arm.

Sandy looked up at the sheriff. "I—I was just going to call you—" he blinked, choking—"No, he was escaping out the door!"

"Deesie called me," said the sheriff. "And he didn't escape. Black John had a change of heart. He finally did somebody a good turn."

"Black John did?"

"It was Deesie's doin's," said Black John grudgingly.

Deesie touched the bed. "He'd been out walking down by the lake. I couldn't sleep and I started over this way when I saw you and the man drawing the gun. I ran for dad, and he stopped him." She viewed her father with pride. "Now he's going to stop being so grouchy and selfish. He promised me just now."

Black John surveyed his daughter and almost smiled.

"Townsend's 'cuffed, Sandy," said Bann. "You done a nice piece of work and we're proud of you."

Sandy raised up. Townsend was scowling, his smooth face a mask. "He's not Townsend," said Sandy knowingly. "He's Harry Tolbert."

"Harry Tolbert?"

Sandy told him about the police record pa read. "Pa won't like me telling about Uncle Deak but, creeps, I think he was blackmailing Towns—Tolbert. That's where he got the twenty thousand. Uncle Deak had the murder gun, all wrapped up so the fingerprints wouldn't rub off." He related the episode of finding the gun. "And I'll bet a bullet from it will match the one that killed the rich oil man. I don't know how Uncle Deak got it,

but Mr. Townsend'll tell you. . . . ask him."

But Mr. Townsend wasn't talking. "We'll get it later," Bann said confidentially. "You figure he came here, pretending to fish, in order to kill Deak. I guess his wife is the San Francisco woman."

"And Marilynn is her daughter, but not Townsend's. She called him Phil, not 'pa' or 'dad'."

"I see," Bann smiled. "Funny, come to think of it, how he uncovered your pa's watch when none of the rest of us saw it."

"That's what started me thinking. A window was loose in Uncle Deak's room. While we were all away he climbed in, stole the watch, planning to use it to frame pa. When pa and I went visiting he killed Uncle Deak, thinking he would locate the gun later. But he couldn't find it. He was desperate all right; tonight, when he thought I was asleep, he came back to search some more." He felt weak again.

"I connected them up when Mr. Townsend called Uncle Deak 'fat and lazy' at the landing tonight. Uncle used to be fat when I was a kid, but he got thin. Townsend had past and present mixed up. Another thing, he was wearing gloves. I reckon his hands were blistered from digging Uncle Deak's grave."

Townsend seized that moment to plunge toward the window. Black John, moving faster than Sandy had ever seen him, knocked the handcuffed man down. The sheriff grabbed him.

Dr. Ormsby said, "Rest now, Sandy. You're overdoing it."

Sandy did feel dopey. He asked for pa. "I've sent a deputy for him," Bann said. A moment later they drove up.

Pa came in, big and powerful looking, his head high. Then he was holding Sandy in his arms, like when he was a kid and a storm scared him. "Your uncle was a strange man, staying on here when he was rich. In his queer way, maybe he thought he was helping us, making that will and all. The money being unclean didn't bother him none. Guess though he'd have gone off some day again like he did before."

"The money is yours now, Pa," Sandy said wonderingly.

"The law'll probably take it. Anyway, it's not for us." He pondered. "I been thinkin', mebbe blood's thicker than water, but wrong's wrong."

The room blurred. Sandy was sinking away when he felt a drop of moisture on his face. It was out of pa's eyes. "My—son—" That's all he could say right then. Sandy fell asleep with pa holding him and Deesie's face swimming over the bed.

THE WHITE SQUARE

By EVERETT M. WEBBER

IT WAS a raw, cloudy day—coming dark, and Dirk expected to find his uncle cooking supper, or eating it. But the little windows of the house showed no light as he stopped the buckboard. Then Dirk saw his Uncle Mac down below the corral working on the earthen dam of his pond. He had evidently heard the buckboard for he straightened slowly, one hand at the small of his back, the other still holding the shovel.

Dirk's heart beat a little fast with a mixture of apprehension, excitement and something a little like fear. There was also a tinge of shame mingled with his feeling at being here begging again. But none of that must show.

He waved at the old man, clambered down and swiftly unhooked the horse. Easing the collar a bit and roughing the wet hair under it, he tied the animal to the porch post. And then, seeing that his uncle wasn't coming up to greet him, he walked down toward the pond, careful to close the gates behind him. Bluffly, above the croaking of frogs and the blatting of sheep, he exclaimed, "Hello, there, Uncle Mac! You look younger every time I see you!"

And, as he clambered the grassed-over dam and shook hands with the old man, he saw that his uncle knew he was here again for money.

Sweating, old Mac said, "Well, I don't feel any younger, lad. . . . Guess I've done about enough here. Just fixing the dam a little against the rain. We'll go to the house. Throw your horse in the corral and feed 'im an' we'll eat supper. You're in money trouble again?"

The words graveled Dirk, but they gave him a sort of relief, too, at having the reason for his trip brought up. "Well, not exactly trouble," he said, "but I am needing another loan."

Old Mac grunted dourly, squinting at the heavens as the wind became suddenly dank. And then, before they reached the house, a fine drizzle set in.

"You'll bear in mind," he stated as Dirk presently untied the horse to lead him to the corral, "you haven't paid the other four loans. And like I've told you over and over, I can't let you have any more till I'm paid. But you're welcome to stay the night, or longer."

* * *

It was only gradually, after supper, that Dirk brought the matter up again. It was sprinkling rather steadily, now, and as old

Mac opened the door to let the extra heat from the fire go outside, the buckboard glistened in the lamp light, and the bare earth of the yard shined wetly. A night hawk zipped past the door and away.

"The fact is," Dirk said as casually as he could, "I've had tough luck at cards, and I promised to pay up in a hurry. Five hundred would hold them off."

Old Mac turned from the doorway and stared at Dirk who still sat at the table, and Dirk saw that his little eyes were troubled as he shook his grizzling head.

Dirk swallowed the black anger that rose within him, and then the entire story was tumbling from his lips and he couldn't hold it back: How he had had to beg like a dog to get a few days' grace to drive the sixty miles over here, across wild prairie, to try to raise a little cash. How, if he didn't get it, he wouldn't dare go back for fear of his very life, and how the men he owed would hog up his land, the well he had dug, and the few cows he still had left.

But still his uncle shook his head. "I can't do it, Dirk. I'm an old man. I can't work forever."

"You could live with me. You could sell out and get away from this God-forsaken place."

"And come to a place where someone else is owner, a place you'll gamble away any day? And this isn't so God-forsaken. It's only four miles from town. I've got friends. It's not that I want to hurt your feelings, nor—"

"But like you say," Dirk reasoned desperately, "all you've got will be mine some day."

"I couldn't live in another man's house, and that's what'll happen if I keep giving—"

With a sudden angry oath, Dirk came out of his chair, jerking at the revolver in the waistband under his coat. The old man stood paralyzed a second, there by the door, and in that second Dirk was upon him, firing almost in his face. Old Mac tottered to a chair, collapsed across the back of it, and then sprawled to the floor with it half upon him. He didn't move after that, but a few drops of blood trickled down onto the wide, clean boards.

Dirk stood there, staring down at him, his heart thundering furiously. And then, half aloud, he panted, "The pennypinching old varmint—it serves him right."

He put the gun back into his waistband and



Dirk came out of his chair, jerking at the revolver in the waistband under his coat.

Frugal Uncle Mac's idea was never to send good money after bad, and so he swore he'd rather be dead before he lent Dirk another cent. . . . Which was exactly Dirk's idea, too!

stood listening, lest there might have been someone who heard, or saw, the shooting. When there seemed to be no one, he quickly closed the door. The shades were already drawn. At the fireplace, he worked out the right hand corner stone of the hearth and thrust his hand into the hole.

A SHORT, sharp cry burst from his lips. It was empty. Frantically he leaned low to peer into it, and then he brought up a slip of paper. The red printing at the top said, "Bank of Boiling Springs." And under that: "Deposit Receipt." Dirk stared with blurring eyes at the firm, pale writing under that: "Silver, \$670. Currency, \$15,665. Gold, \$1,445." It added up to \$17,780.

Dirk licked his dry lips. The slip was dated scant two weeks before. He put it back into the hole and replaced the stone and rose.

"The dirty old varmint!" he growled. His heart was slowing now, and he forced him-

self to steadiness as he rose. "Banking it—now I can't touch a dime." The anger somehow restored him.

But it was his. He was old Mac's only kin. It was all his. And this little ranch, which he could sell for good cash. He wouldn't go back home. Let them take his few cattle and his shack. Why, with cash like this, what couldn't he do! He would go to some city—maybe Denver or San Francisco. Liquor—Women in fine clothes—new cars—good horses. . . . Set himself up in a nice saloon in a good part of town. Buy railroad stock and run his money up . . .

His enthusiasm suddenly cooled. First, he must get the money. And he must avoid getting himself into trouble for what he had done. Maybe it would be best to get on back home and wait to be advised that old Mac had tossed in his chips. On the other hand, it was known there that he had come here—and, besides, that infernal buckboard would leave tracks

clear across the country the way it was sprinkling.

Dirk began sweating as he stood in the middle of the floor, racking his brains for a notion of what to do. First off, he guessed he should get rid of the gun. And after that, drive to town and report that he had come to see his Uncle Mac, and found him murdered. Maybe they would suspect him, but what could they prove? Nothing. All they could do, after the funeral, was to hand him the money.

He reached for his dusty old hat and jumper and put them on. The drilled well, six inches in diameter and two hundred feet deep, would be a fine place for the pistol, and in the pitch blackness of the yard Dirk found the little well shed. He raised the cover and dropped the gun in and heard it scrape and bang the casing several times before it struck the water.

The rain was coming harder, now, already soaking him through at knee and shoulder as he headed for the corral. Stooping low, he could faintly see his hammerheaded old horse against the skyline. His eyes were getting used to the dark. He caught the animal by the mane and led him up by the barn and brought the harness out and threw it on. The leather was wet and slick as he fastened the buckles.

It was as he reached under for the belly band that he heard the pound of hoofs and then the rattle of a buggy, and for an instant he leaned there, paralyzed. Whoever it was would be coming here, for no one else lived down this way. Suddenly he grabbed the bellyband and buckled it and caught the bit ring. Let them come. Give him three more minutes, and let them come—

He led the horse out of the corral and flung himself upon its back and rode him swiftly to the yard and slid down. In a second, he had backed him into the shafts and was fastening them. He hooked a tug, then, with the sound of the horse and buggy coming closer, and ran around to hook the other, and as he undid the lines from the hame he could see the moving blackness of the rig coming at him. Swiftly he clambered to the seat.

The rig pulled up. A man said, "Hello, there. That ain't you, is it, Mac?"

Dirk knew the voice. Old man Vanderwet. Then some other man said, "Mac?"

Dirk got a good grip on his voice. "It's me," he said. "Dirk Callen. Uncle—Uncle Mac—has been killed—"

Vanderwet exclaimed, "I told you! I told you something was wrong!" And as the two men piled out of the rig, he added, "Every Friday night for twenty years we've played checkers, and when he didn't show up tonight—I—I knew something must be wrong, so I brought the doctor—"

Startled, Dirk kept quiet as he stepped from hub to porch. He had forgotten it was Friday.

Maybe, in the excitement of their talk, his uncle had forgotten it, too.

The rain beat down with sudden fury as he shoved the door open and let the yellow light flood out. That was fine. It would smoot out the tracks he had made, getting the horse up here from the barn. He led the way and stood silently as Vanderwet moved ponderously behind him. Vanderwet looked at the body for a long time, face shaken and pale and his grey mustaches trembling a little now and then. The doctor, a little man in baggy clothes whom Dirk did not know, knelt by old Mac and took his wrist.

And, in surprise, he exclaimed, "Why, he's only just been shot!"

Dirk tensed. "He—he's dead, isn't he?"

"There's no doubt of it."

"I heard the shot," Dirk explained. "I drove up just before you got here. I wasn't quite to the gate when I thought I heard a gun, and when I came inside, this is what I saw."

The doctor said, "Somebody evidently ate supper with Mac."

"They must have taken out the back way," Dirk declared, "when they heard me."

"But why?" Vanderwet exclaimed. "Why would anybody—"

HE FIXED a long, searching look on Dirk, his little grey eyes peering out above bushes of grey flesh, his brows glistening a little with drops of mist. Dirk forced himself to keep a steady countenance.

"You weren't by any chance the one who ate here?" the old man asked, and his look moved to Dirk's shirt front and back up to his eyes.

In spite of himself, Dirk glanced down and saw the streak of egg yoke down his belly. He felt sweat break upon his body. "I . . . I didn't mean to mention it," he said, "but—well, I was starved when I came in. Uncle Mac was dead. Past help. They had left a little stuff, he and whoever ate with him, and, being hungry, I bolted it down, and started for you."

Vanderwet nodded. "Then you—you must have got here, say, ten minutes ago? Fifteen, maybe?"

"Maybe fifteen."

Vanderwet said, "How long has Mac been dead, Doc?"

The doctor shrugged. "Who can say? Five minutes—ten minutes—maybe a quarter of an hour. Not longer."

"I told you I heard the shot!" Dirk exclaimed. With an effort he toned his voice down. "I heard it."

Vanderwet sighed heavily and picked up the lamp. "I'll hold the light for you to turn around, Doc. Have John and them bring out

the very best coffin—that all right, Dirk?”

“Sure.” Dirk was getting a little dizzy with relief. “Sure. The best.”

“We’ll lay him out an’ shave him while you’re gone,” Vanderwet added. He led the way onto the porch and stood there a second and then he whirled on Dirk, drawing a gun from his armpit. He cocked it, holding it un-waveringly on Dirk’s middle.

“I would enjoy shooting you,” he said, as Dirk backed toward the table in the room. “I hope you move one more step.” He came in with the lamp, squinting his left eye against it. “Find his pistol, Doc, and tie his hands behind him . . . and don’t get between me and him.”

Dirk tried to speak as the doctor moved behind him and felt over his body for a gun, but no words would come. He calculated his chances for a break. They were nil. Then it came to him that he must brazen it out. Old Vanderwet was merely suspicious and trying to stampede him into talking.

“All right. Find my gun,” he said. “Since I never owned one of the things, I’d like to see it.”

The doctor’s hands moved quickly and expertly over him a second time, and finally the man grunted, “Well, there’s no gun, that’s sure.”

“Tie him!” Vanderwet exclaimed. “Out of his own mouth, gun or not, he stands convicted. There’s a rawhide lace on the nail behind you, Doc. Put your hands behind you, Callan.”

Dirk obeyed before the cold, hungry mouth of the pistol. His sweat had dried. “But—you

see I have no gun—” he croaked, his mouth growing dry.

“I’ll see something else before snow flies. A hanging.”

Dirk felt the rawhide bite into his wrists, and the doctor’s warm breath blowing upon his hands.

Then Vanderwet backed onto the porch again, the lamp throwing heavy angles of shadow into the room. “Come out!” he ordered. “Doc, pick up that poker and if he tries anything, brain him.”

Something in the man’s manner, in his voice, struck an icier terror into Dirk than he had ever felt before. His knees wobbled as he moved out onto the porch, and it was hard for him to breathe. But he would think of something yet. He would admit nothing to them.

“You’ve been here fifteen minutes, you say, and it’s been raining upwards of an hour. The ground is muddy, the road full of puddles.” Vanderwet took a deep breath, pointing. “And yet—”

At first, Dirk thought he was pointing at the buckboard, and he stared at it, dripping and shining, but he could see nothing wrong. And the horse, standing dejectedly, looked all right.

“Look under it,” Vanderwet grunted, and the doctor gave a sudden cry of understanding. “Take a look under the buckboard, Callan.”

Dirk looked. The ground there hadn’t been rained on. It was dry and white. A white square of it, in the lamp light, the size of a gallows floor.

“JUST A NICE FRIENDLY KILL”

Marcia Rodman was a pin-up queen way back in father’s day, but Cash Wale still found her interesting, especially when she offered the pint-size private peep a tidy fee just to listen to her proposition. But when he heard it, it was too much even for tough-guy Wale: five grand for a bump, and who do you think was the intended victim? None other than Marcia herself. “Come on, be a sport, Cash,” pleaded the Gay Nineties torch-singer. “No hard feelings—just a nice friendly kill.” Cash told her his rod was for hire—not the slugs. But when the old dame got knocked off that night, the cops were a bit skeptical of Cash’s story—and it took three more kills to make it stick! Read PETER PAIGE’S latest Cash Wale murder-go-round—*Guilt-Edged Frame*.



Plus: *Death for a Chaser*, an exciting Counsellor Mort novelette by JULIUS LONG; a gripping tale of murder and madness—*Lend Me a Murder*, by H. H. STINSON; a new and hilarious Doc Pierce story by RICHARD DERMODY; another Mike Donlan yarn by JOHN WHITING; and an unusual short detective story by JOHN H. KNOX. It’s a feast of fiction for crime-story connoisseurs—in the big August issue of DIME DETECTIVE. On sale now!

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By
WILLIAM
HELLMAN

Her clutching fingers clawed at her mouth and face in a gripping spasm of pain and terror.

Like all artists, Rick took pride in his work, but for a brush he used a .25 automatic, and for a model, he used the woman whose unspoken words would damn him to the chair.

RICK HAINES was a master craftsman. He admitted it. He also admitted to the cleverest brain in the profession; the police hadn't a thing on him because he always planned his jobs well and his plans always worked because they were simple and direct. As now—

He came briskly down the hall, a tall, well-built man, impeccably dressed, carrying a battered brief case. He fore-knew exactly what to do and what to expect when at noon he walked into the fourth-floor office of Acme Finance, and closed the door behind him. The lone occupant, a little gray-haired man, rose

hastily and came toward him, said: "I'm sorry sir, but we—"

Rick said not a word. He pushed the little .25 deep under the man's breastbone, fed him two efficient little pills with no more of a report than the pop of bubble-gum, and rolled the body out of sight behind a desk. Then he pulled off the big, black-lensed glasses that were an effective disguise for his small, shrewd eyes, laid his gray fedora on top of them on the desk and went to the unlocked safe where he swiftly and efficiently transferred its more cheering assets to the briefcase. He turned to pick up his hat and glasses and walk out the



EASY KILL



way he had come, when he froze in amazed disbelief—standing in the open doorway watching him, was a woman. She just stood there with her hand on the knob, a stout, middle-aged woman with gray hair under a little, pertly styled bonnet and blue eyes behind rimless glasses. She was looking at him, her lips parted a little in surprise, as though she had expected to find someone else there.

At the sight of her standing there like that, his well-oiled plans deserted him; he hadn't even remotely considered a chance intrusion. His first wild, blind impulse was to flee, to shoot his way out, but his clever, high-speed brain kept him from making such a fool mistake. He reasoned: she's just standing there, not yelling her head off. So, she just thinks I belong here. I'll get her inside, let her have it, and— He came toward her, smiling, bowing politely.

"Come in, madam," he invited heartily. "We are—"

For a moment longer she just stood there, watching him like a hypnotized bird, shifting her bulk uneasily, trying to see past him into the office. She brought her hands up in a little gesture, as if to make a sign, then suddenly turned and fled.

"Wait!" Rick shouted after her, but she scurried away and was gone before he could grab her. He cursed loud and luridly—she was on to him! He had to catch her and kill her before she got away. She was a living, competent witness who had had plenty of time to memorize his face.

He had the presence of mind to slap his hat on his head, hook his dark glasses on his long nose and grab the briefcase, before he dashed down the hall after her. But the pause had given her time to disappear; he heard the elevator doors clang shut and the car was just dropping out of sight—he knew his ticket to the chair was on it.

He took the stairs in amazing, long-legged strides, almost dropping straight down them. At the street floor, he compelled himself to pause a moment, then go swiftly but sanely through the door into the foyer. The elevator car was loading for another ascent; ahead of him, waddling desperately for the street, was the fat slob who could put the finger on him.

Panic caught at him again. He had to stop her, had to! It was all he could do to keep from shouting at her to stop; he actually started to pull the gun from his pocket to shoot her as she drove ahead through the crowded foyer. She paused once as she came abreast the line of telephone booths, and Rick

thought: here it is, she's calling the cops where I can't stop her, here in front of this mob. But she went on, and he guessed without looking that the phones were all busy.

But it was a brief respite at best, a few more steps and she'd be on the street, yelling her head off for a cop. Back in his brain something seemed wrong, for why hadn't she given the alarm before this, to the elevator operator or someone? His quick mind had the answer: she was a woman scared silly and she was beating it for a place of refuge—her home, probably. She'd keep her tongue in silence until she could contact someone she trusted—her old man, likely.

She lumbered out onto the street, paused a moment, while Rick, panicky in his fear and uncertainty, weighed his chances of plugging her right here and running for it, or tailing her. He had no choice; while he hesitated, she popped into a waiting cab and was off down the street.

He had a bad few seconds as he got his car out into traffic, but the drizzling, misty rain helped him, the cabby was a cautious soul and Rick caught up with him two blocks down. He kept close as they threaded through traffic, his eyes glued onto the back glass of the cab, where he could see her huddled and staring back at him repeatedly in her terror.

He smashed the steering wheel a savage blow with his fist and let his rage run free. "The stinking idiot!" he snarled aloud. "I ought to have killed her right there in the office, then I wouldn't have to chase her a couple miles to do it."

They came out onto the wide boulevard and the cab speeded up, but Rick drove carefully, just keeping his quarry in sight; he didn't want to be picked up now. The rain beat steadily against the windshield; the sedate whir of the wiper was company for his thoughts. His master mind was already busily at work planning and as it worked, his rage vanished and his confidence returned. He could handle this job—easy!" He'd been right back there—she was holing up somewhere to wait a chance to spill what she'd seen after she got over her terror. And she wouldn't expect the killer to trail her clean out here in the suburbs; she'd figure he was already on the lam. Which was O.K. for Rick Haines.

The cab swung off the boulevard, went down a quiet, tree-aisled street, lined on both sides by big, box-like houses set back from the sidewalk behind a narrow strip of lawn. Rick swung in, parked the stolen green Chevy and watched intently; the cab pulled up to the curb

half-way down the street, the woman got out, scurried up the walk onto the wide porch. In the half-murk, Rick watched intently and when she used a key instead of ringing the bell, he laughed in pleased confidence, for it meant he had guessed aright—she'd be alone!

He clambered over the seat back, lifted the rear cushion and slid the briefcase back under a mess of papers and old rags he had placed there. He waited a while, then drove boldly down and parked before the house. He got out, swung briskly up the flagstone walk, across the porch and punched the button. He didn't hear the sound of the bell within, so he punched the button again, peering through the curtained glass, and he saw a little light flash off and on somewhere inside in response to his fingered pressure. His lip curled in derision—of all the silly stunts! So the big fool's nerves were too bad to stand the clatter of a bell, eh?

He never had a doubt that his surmise was correct, that she would answer his summons. He waited until she opened the door, stood looking at him enquiringly, then he whipped off the black glasses; she gasped in surprise, her eyes amazed. Her hands came up in a gesture again and before she had the wit to close the door on him, it was too late; he was in the hall, the door closed, the little gun jammed deep against her soft, bulging middle.

Her eyes were big pools of surprised terror.

"Not a peep!" he warned savagely. "So you do recognize me, you blundering idiot! Well, you'll never live to tell it!"

She was paralyzed in her horror, trying desperately to back away from him, her fingers twisting helplessly at her mouth, from which no words would come. He pushed the little gun deeper under her sagging breast, fired twice, the bullets slanting up and to the right. Her clutching fingers clawed at her mouth and face in a gripping spasm of pain and terror; she swayed, then crumpled without a sound.

Rick froze crouching over her, listening—the gun ready in his hand. But no other sound came to him, except somewhere the slow, ponderous ticking of a clock. The shots had made a small noise, like the snapping of a pencil, and perhaps there *was* someone else in another room. He couldn't wait to find out; cautiously he investigated and found no one, and relaxed with a grin.

Swiftly, he executed the rest of his lightning plan. He ransacked the house, turning out drawers and cupboards indiscriminately, spilling their contents in confusion, garnering items of value into a pillow slip.

He came downstairs, dropped the sack of loot with a clatter on the kitchen floor, near the rear exit. He unlocked the door, leaving it partly open, and dropped the little gun nearby. He allowed himself a moment to grin in self-appreciation of his cleverness; the dumb

police would lay the crime to a prowler who had killed the woman, ransacked the house, then had been frightened into dropping his loot and escaping out the back door. The little gun could be easily traced to a small-time, misshapen snowbird with a long record.

He went back through the hall to where the woman still lay, a lumpy, sprawling heap. He peered out into the street through the curtain; the rain had stopped, it was wholly deserted and gray in the murky half-light. He put on his glasses, paused, went over and deliberately kicked the woman in the face, laughed and opened the door.

He was half-way through it, when he halted, stunned—a man was coming toward him on the sidewalk, not ten feet from the flagstone walk. A car was parked a little distance behind the Chevy. Instantly, Rick realized what had happened; he hadn't noticed the other car parked by the trees when he had looked out the curtains, and when he had gone back to kick the woman, the man had got out of it. Who was he? But more important, where was he going? Rick Haines wanted desperately to duck back into the house, but it was too late; the man had seen him.

His master mind came promptly to his rescue. He paused, as though listening to the woman past the edge of the partly open door, said distinctly: "Thank you again, Mrs. Anderson." He almost grinned at the name, he had noticed it on a small plate on her mailbox. He stepped out onto the porch, his hand on the knob holding the door several inches ajar. "I really am sorry. . . ." He paused politely to let her speak, stood listening and nodding, aware that the little man on the sidewalk had slowed, was looking at him curiously. Rick ignored him. "Yes . . . I understand . . . believe me, I'm sorry, too. Well . . ." He laughed ruefully. "Guess I'll have to ask elsewhere. But thank you again. And goodbye," he added gallantly and closed the door behind him, knowing that the spring lock would work.

The little guy on the sidewalk was still looking at him, walking slowly, and a sudden rage flared up in Rick Haines, and he swore silently that he'd be damned if he'd leave a witness this time, no matter how remote the chances of being identified, nor how involved the task of bumping him off. He had cleverly and effectively lulled any suspicions the lug may have had as to his business here, and now to get him into the Chevy and the rest would be easy. And in his pocket a gun, which he had a license to carry because of his apparent lawful profession, would be enough persuasion. This buzzo was going to die!

He stopped the little man with a word. What a skinny, innocent-looking worm! "Can you please tell me where J. E. Thalmus lives hereabouts?" he asked politely. "Mrs. Ander-

son tells me she never heard of him at all."

The little man's eye brows went up just a twitch. "Mrs. Anderson said that? Now that is strange—I mean, she has lived here all her life and gets about a lot and knows every soul on this quiet little street. She's a nice woman, Mrs. Anderson; kind and quiet-spoken."

"You know her?" Rick asked and a little alarm bell tinkled back in his brain somewhere. "Yes, she is." Who is this lousy little runt, anyway? Have I seen him some place before? His hand went rigid, hard on the gun in his pocket. He was aware of the little guy's stare, of his quick glance at the bulging hand in his pocket. He laughed. "Well, I guess I'll have to go back for a better address."

He moved a little, looking about to see if any chance window-watcher might see him force the little mug into the Chevy. Then the pee-wee surprised him.

"Look," he said suddenly, in a sort of desperate, choked voice, "would you give me a lift downtown?" He laughed ruefully. "That blasted skate of mine there quit on me up the street and I coasted to here."

"Sure, sure!" Rick agreed heartily. "Glad to have you." His heart was singing now—boy, what a break! A solid, hard whack on the buzzo's neck, then drive out along the highway, open the door on that curve and let the body spill out, over the bank in the dark, and into the river below. As simple as that—and the little runt asking for it!

They came down off the quiet, tree-lined street onto the boulevard lanes, then turned west; there were plenty of places along here where he could knock the little guy out before they got into the congested district where traffic was heavy. He'd take it slow. . . .

At an intersection, a cop stood in the renewed drizzle, directing cross-traffic. Rick slowed the car to the required twenty-five; he was too smart to slip up now. But as they approached the officer, the little man suddenly caught at the steering wheel with both hands, heaved with all his puny might. His might was as little as his body, but the maneuver caught Rick off guard because it was totally unexpected. Before his amazed senses could react properly, the wheel spun in his relaxed hands, the car swerved and plowed with a rending crash into an iron trolley pole.

The impact dazed him; for a moment he couldn't move. But the little man had the door open, was out on the street. The cop came over, angry and bawling.

"Watch that man!" the little fellow shrilled. "He's dangerous. He just killed Mrs. John Anderson because he thought she saw him kill my cashier."

My cashier! Rick heard the words and went numb—so he had seen the mug before—when

he had cased the joint. He started up, but the cop was beside him, the door open, his big service pistol in his mitt. That cop wasn't a coward, but he wasn't a fool either.

"Come out of there, fellow," he said stolidly.

Cold terror revived Rick Haines. "He's a fool," he said furiously. "The jackass asked me for a lift, wrecked my car. I'm a salesman and I called on Mrs. Anderson on business."

"Yes," the little man cut in, dancing in his excitement. "Look, officer, I returned from lunch, found my man dead, the safe looted. I remembered that this is the day of the month that poor Kelly stayed to attend to Mrs. Anderson. She always came at noon when everyone else was out—you see, Officer, she was sort of sensitive about her—her ailment, and Kelly was the only one she would converse with. She came today, stumbled on this guy tapping the till, didn't see poor Kelly, and left because she was unwilling to deal with anyone else! I don't believe she had any idea at all that this thug had killed, but—"

"You libelous little fool!" Rick ranted. He kept his senses by reminding himself that they couldn't pin a thing on him. Sure they'd find her dead, but this runt himself would have to admit she was still alive when they left her! "I never harmed your man, nor Mrs. Anderson. You heard me talking to her when I—"

"Yes," the little man said again. He grinned suddenly. "That's what put me next to you, warned me you were a phoney with something to hide. I came out to talk to Mrs. Anderson because she—well, she can't use the phone. I saw you come out, got a little suspicious, but I'd have to let you go unnoticed—if you hadn't stopped to talk to her. The rest I added up, and when I saw that gun in your fist in your pocket, I was sure. I was sure, too, that the car was stolen, so I deliberately got you to give me a lift so I could—"

"You're a fool!" Rick snarled, but something in the little man's grin put terror in his soul. "Mrs. Anderson was alive when I left her. I talked to her—"

"Sure, but she didn't talk back. She didn't, because she couldn't! That's why she used a door-light instead of a bell—that should have tipped you off, if you saw it. And that's why Kelly alone could talk to her; he alone could talk with his hands! You see, wise guy, Mrs. Anderson did *not* talk to you, because she was a deaf mute, born deaf and dumb!"

Rick's panic possessed him completely then. He forgot everything, even his gun, in his lust for life. He swung around the car, raced in agony for the shielding corner and escape. The policeman's bullet shattered his leg, dropping him screaming to the street.

"Wise guy," the little man said. "Just a death house dummy."



The gun was right behind Larry and the man's breathing seemed close to his neck.

RED DAWN

By DON JAMES

God knows, Larry had reason enough to wish Pete Lundquist dead, but when someone beat him to that ugly job of murder, Larry became "it" in a deadly game of hot-squat tag!

LARRY HALDER gulped the last of the hot coffee he had made and looked at the clock. It was twenty-seven minutes after three and outside the night still was dark and cold. The bus passed the corner at three thirty-four. He'd have to hurry.

Quietly he rinsed the cup and put it away. He didn't want to awaken Mildred. She hadn't spoken to him for three days—since their last quarrel—and if he awakened her now, she would probably go into a tirade about the split shifts he worked, the relatively low salary he earned, and what she thought of marriage to a news man who worked for a press bureau.

He got into a top coat, put on his rain-battered hat, and left the house. He had to run the three blocks to the bus line.

Several passengers looked at him casually and settled back into early morning expressions of boredom and sleepiness. The bus picked up speed and rattled toward town.

It disgorged most of its passengers at the central bus station and Larry hurried toward

the Examiner building, wishing he had time for a quick cup of coffee. He had to pass it up. The wire opened at four and he had to write and punch enough in the next forty minutes to get something on for the four-thirty split.

A janitor was mopping the entrance to the Examiner and nodded a greeting as Larry hurried in. Larry ran up the one flight of stairs to the city room where the Allied News Service had its office partitioned off in one corner.

At one side of the large room, near the copy desk, a light burned at a littered desk and a man slept there in a top coat and hat tipped off his head.

Larry smiled grimly. Pete Lindquist was on another one. It wasn't unusual to find the ace reporter at his desk sleeping off too many hours in the Press Club. Usually Larry or whoever was working the early morning shift would awaken the good looking Examiner man before the paper's crew began to arrive.

In the bureau office Larry hastily shed hat and coat and snapped on the teletypes. In a few moments stuff would come in from San Francisco and when they finished down there, Larry would feed his copy into the machine.

The night man had left some overnight, punched and ready to go. Larry quickly scanned the remainder of the last night's news and went to work. The teletypes began to tick the California scoops.

At four-thirty he fed in his punched tape and watched the fifteen minutes of news clack out on the copy paper. Finished, he lit a cigarette and relaxed. He had an hour and a half before the next split. Time for a cup of coffee and something to eat. At six his day man would come on.

As he went through the city room, Pete Lindquist grunted in his sleep and moved slightly.

"Better let him sleep," Larry thought. "He'll wake up to a hangover soon enough."

The night phone rang on the city editor's desk. Larry hesitated for a moment and then answered it.

"Lindquist?" a voice asked.

"No, but he's here. Wait a moment."

"Never mind," the voice snapped. The line went dead.

Larry dropped the telephone in its cradle. "Polite guy," he thought.

The janitor had finished mopping and the foyer was empty. As Larry left the building, a thin man in a black coat and hat down over his eyes brushed past him going into the building.

It was after five when Larry returned to the Examiner. He walked up the stairs feeling better with ham-and-eggs and coffee under his belt.

He started through the city room when he noticed Lindquist and stopped.

Something was wrong. Lindquist's head had turned on the desk top so that he faced Larry. His eyes were wide open, staring.

Larry hurried to him and stopped again, his eyes riveted on the reporter.

"Good God!" he breathed.

Someone had caved in the back of Lindquist's head.

* * *

The man in charge of the homicide squad introduced himself as Lieutenant Rodson. He was middle-aged and displayed the efficiency that comes from long experience.

Larry Halder explained what had happened; about the telephone call and the thin man who had brushed past him at the building entrance.

Rodson looked thoughtful.

"Lindquist played around in some queer places," he said. "Places where a man can pick up enemies."

Larry nodded. "He was in trouble with some husband last year, and I've heard other tales."

An assistant who had been busy over the body turned to Rodson and handed him a wallet without comment.

Rodson thumbed through the dead man's pocketbook. He glanced briefly at a social security card and a driver's license. Then he closely inspected a photograph.

"Know the woman?" he asked Larry and passed a snapshot to him.

Larry took it and tried to cover the hollow, empty shock that the picture brought to him. In the far corner of the room the teletype chattered monotonously. Rodson, sensing a change in Larry, looked at him closely.

"Who is she?" he prompted.

Larry didn't try to explain it in his mind, he simply stared at the picture and everything in the room and the world stood still.

"I don't know," he muttered.

HIS own questions began to assail him. What was Mildred's picture doing in Lindquist's wallet? What had been going on between his wife and the Examiner man? Was this the answer to the frequent quarrels, the strained marriage, the unhappiness? He hadn't thought of another man, but there was her picture in another man's wallet.

Rodson was asking him a question.

"What did you say?" Larry asked blankly.

"You're sure you don't recognize her?"

Larry shook his head.

Rodson's eyes narrowed. "What's bothering you so much?"

"I—I guess I'm not used to murder," Larry said tightly.

Rodson nodded and looked impassively at squad men working at their routine jobs. A

medical examiner yawned and got ready to leave. Two men from an ambulance waited patiently with a stretcher.

Larry hopelessly tried to make thoughts add up to a sensible answer. In the bureau office the teletype continued to chatter.

"I've got to get the next split on the wire," Larry said tonelessly.

A squad man held up a heavy piece of type metal that someone had used for a paper weight on a desk.

"Killed him with this," he told Rodson briefly.

"Fingerprints?"

"Wiped clean."

Rodson turned to Larry. "You'll be around today?" he asked. "We'll want to talk with you later."

"I'll be around," Larry said. He walked stiffly to the bureau. He wondered how he was going to make sense of the news he'd have to punch on the teletype ticker. The only thought that pounded through his mind was the question of why his wife's picture had been found in the dead man's pocketbook.

It was late morning when the excitement of the city room murder died down and things began to work smoothly. Larry slipped into his coat.

"I'm going out for an hour or so," he said. "I'll call in."

He hurried through streets that had become alive with the morning and caught a bus. He tried not to think on the way out, but the questions drummed methodically at him, seeking, probing.

Mildred was in the kitchen over a tardy breakfast when he arrived. Even in an old housecoat, with hair uncombed, she was pretty he thought. Pretty enough for a man like Lindquist to want.

She looked up from her coffee in surprise when he came in.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He walked to the sink and drank a glass of cold water before he answered. It helped to stop the trembling within him.

"We'd better have a talk," he said.

"If you came out here in the middle of the morning just to pick a quarrel with me—"

"Someone murdered Pete Lindquist this morning," Larry said curtly.

His wife's mouth remained open over un-said words and her eyes widened. A thin line of whiteness edged itself around her lips.

"Murdered!" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"The police found your picture in his wallet."

Suddenly she was on her feet, staring at him.

"You're lying!" she cried. "You're trying to frighten me!"

"I'm telling the truth," he said dully. "And I'm learning another."

"But I—we—"

"Was there something between you two?" he asked.

She shut her eyes and tried to stop the violent trembling that swept over her.

He crossed to her and his hands bit into her shoulders. She was limp in his grasp.

"Tell me," he whispered. "Tell me the truth."

She turned her head in a forlorn, hopeless gesture. He shook her with straining fingers.

Abruptly her eyes opened and she struggled to free herself.

"I hate you!" she cried hysterically. "I hate you!" She clawed at the fingers on her shoulders.

His hands dropped limply.

"Then it's true about you and Lindquist," he said.

"Yes! It's true! And now he's dead!"

She stumbled to a chair at the table and sank down, a crumpled figure with head buried in her arms and sobs racking her body.

Blindly Larry turned and walked out of the house. He wondered if he would ever return. There was nothing left there for him.

* * *

On the way back to town the shock of the truth he had learned about his wife faded beneath the realization that eventually someone would identify the picture from Lindquist's wallet.

When Rodson learned who the woman was, he'd know that Larry Halder had lied to him.

Realization became icy water that spread through Larry's body.

"That gives me a motive," he thought. "Rodson will tab me for the murder! I should have admitted that it was her picture!"

He remembered how vague his story had been. The telephone call; the thin man coming into the building. There was no one to prove that it wasn't Larry's imagination that had invented the call and man.

Perspiration broke out and crept from beneath his hat band. Within hours Rodson would send for him and there would be the questions and the clumsy attempts to explain.

They wouldn't believe that he hadn't known about his wife and the dead newspaper man. Too many people in the bureau had heard him quarrel over the telephone with Mildred, had known that they were not getting along.

He wondered how many of them knew about Lindquist. Maybe he was the only one who didn't know. Maybe the others had been laughing at him behind his back.

But Rodson wouldn't laugh. Rodson would tie it all up into a motive, an opportunity, and a murder with Larry Halder tabbed for a death cell.

THE bus stopped at a downtown corner and Larry left it hurriedly. He couldn't go back to the bureau now. He had to have time to think.

He found a cafe and ordered coffee. The pungent taste of it seemed to clear his mind. "I've got to find that man who came in this morning," he thought. "And I've got to do it before Rodson identifies that picture and picks me up. I'll never get a chance if he takes me in."

Larry tore at the puzzle, trying to find a place to start; an opening that would lead to the end. "Someone knew he was there," he thought. "The phone call. And he had been somewhere during the evening."

The Press Club looked unusually empty in the morning. Larry went to the bar where a squat bartender nodded and wiped the top expectantly. Larry ordered a soft drink.

"So somebody killed Lindquist," the bartender said.

Larry nodded.

"Well, you never know," the bartender observed wisely. "Pete was in here late yesterday afternoon. Little did I think he'd be dead today!"

"Was he here alone?" Larry asked casually. The bartender smiled knowingly.

"That guy alone when there was a woman within ten miles?"

Nervous fear made Larry's next question low and hurried.

"He was with a woman?"

He wondered if the bartender would nod and describe Mildred.

"He was with that babe who works in Tony Cintrella's night spot—Clara Lorn," the barkeep said. "Blonde and like a calendar girl."

Larry smiled in relief.

"They went out together?"

"About midnight. I wasn't here then, but Sam told me this morning. Sam's working night shift."

"Pete and the gal must have made quite a night of it," Larry suggested.

"They were plastered when they left here," the bartender grinned.

Larry finished his drink and left.

On a corner he debated his next move. A prowling car drove slowly by and instinctively he turned to look in a window. The car didn't stop. He wondered if Rodson had sent out a pick-up order for him.

Abruptly he walked down the street. A few moments later he climbed stairs to the night club where Clara Lorn worked.

The same vacant appearance of the Press Club hung over the night spot. The bar was deserted. At the far end of the place a janitor was waxing the floor. Near him was an open door into another room and the sound of a voice came faintly through the quiet. The

voice stopped and there was the sound of a telephone dropping into its cradle.

Larry walked across the club to the open door. The janitor glanced at him impassively and continued his waxing.

It was an office and a short, fat man with thinning hair looked up from papers on a desk.

"Something I can do for you?" the fat man asked.

"Are you Cintrella?"

The fat man nodded.

Larry said, "A girl named Clara Lorn works for you. She was with Pete Lindquist last night before he was murdered this morning. I'm from Allied News. Thought there might be a story if I talked with her."

If news of Lindquist's death startled the nightclub owner, he didn't show it. Larry supposed it had been on the radio, though.

"She comes to work this afternoon," Cintrella said. "Yesterday was her day off."

"Do you know where she lives?"

Cintrella hesitated and then shrugged. He brought a small notebook from a desk drawer and consulted it. Indifferently he gave Larry an address.

Larry thanked him and turned to leave.

"Just a second," Cintrella said softly. "You going to use her name in a story?"

"Probably—if there's a story."

"You going to mention where she works?"

Larry got it then. He smiled crookedly. "I'll leave the name of your club out, if that's what you mean."

Cintrella smiled. "That's fine. Want a drink?"

Larry refused and Cintrella walked to the main entrance with him.

"I know you got to print the news," he said. "But if you leave the name of the club out, I'll appreciate it. Getting mentioned in murder stories isn't good publicity. Some guys like it. I don't."

Outside, Larry took a taxi to the address Cintrella had given him and found that it was a third rate apartment house. He found her apartment number on an outside listing. A middle-aged woman carrying a shopping bag came out. Larry caught the door before it could latch and went in.

THE apartment was on the third floor. He rapped three times before a voice answered him.

"Who is it?"

"Telegram," Larry said.

There was movement within the apartment and the door opened. A blonde wearing a thin bathrobe over pajamas eyed him suspiciously.

"What's the gag?" she demanded.

He grinned. "I'm from Allied News. Someone murdered Pete Lindquist this morning."

The girl regarded him with steady eyes. After a few moments she spoke.

"So somebody killed him. What does that make me?"

"You were out with him last night."

"What time was he killed?"

"Around five o'clock."

"I left him at four," she said.

"Let me come in and talk it over."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to talk over."

Larry looked at her shrewdly. "You're in the clear, but you were with him last night. How the papers play it depends upon how you play it."

Abruptly she opened the door. "Come in," she said shortly.

She motioned him to a chair and selected a davenport for herself. When she lit a cigarette, he noticed that her hand trembled.

"Who killed him?" she asked.

"They don't know."

"What do you want from me?"

"Where you went and what you did."

Her account was colorless. They had left the Press Club and visited several night clubs, including Cintrella's. Lindquist had taken her home at about four o'clock. That was the last she had seen of him.

Larry was thoughtful. "Did he talk with a tall, thin man in a dark topcoat during the night?"

"I don't think so."

Something about the way she avoided his eyes made him press further. "Do you know a man who looks like that?"

She looked at him with expressionless eyes. "Maybe," she said. "Why?"

"Because a man who looks like that probably killed him."

She stood and restlessly walked about the room. Finally she stopped at a window and gazed down into the street.

"What makes you think that?" she asked over a shoulder.

"I saw a man like that go into the *Examiner* just before he was murdered," he said flatly.

At the window the girl stiffened, her eyes intent upon the street below. Abruptly she whirled and spoke, but it wasn't to Larry. She was looking beyond him at a half closed door that obviously led into her bedroom.

"Nick," she said sharply. "The cops! They're downstairs!"

The door swung back and a man came into the room.

Larry sprang to his feet. The man was the thin man he sought.

"I want you," Larry snapped and started toward the man.

The man called Nick brought a hand from a coat pocket and a squat, blue gun jerked up toward Larry. "And I want you," he said.

Somewhere in the apartment a door buzzer sounded.

"What'll I do, Nick?" the girl asked tensely. "Stall. I'll take this guy down the back stairs and out the basement door."

The man stepped toward Larry. "Turn around and out the door," he barked.

The newsman looked at the gun and turned. They walked along a hallway to back stairs. The gun nudged against Larry and the man's breathing was close on his neck.

The basement was empty and they scurried into an alley.

"Down the alley and turn left," Nick instructed. "The blue coupe. You'll drive."

Larry wet dry lips and nodded. He suddenly realized that Nick had heard every word that had been said in the apartment. That meant that Nick knew he had been identified as a probable murderer. Suddenly Larry was frightened. There was no reason why Nick shouldn't plan to kill again to cover another crime.

A few moments later Larry slipped behind the wheel of the coupe. Nick inserted the ignition key in the lock and turned it.

"Out the boulevard to the Hacienda," he said.

Larry recognized the name of a suburban night club.

"And be careful," the man added. "I don't mind killing."

During the afternoon it had grown hot in the small backroom at the Hacienda. Sitting across the room from Larry, Nick lit another cigarette and looked at the newspaper man with bleak eyes.

When they arrived, the man in the dark topcoat had locked Larry in the room and Larry had heard the dialing of a telephone down the hallway and then a few low words. Nick had come back to the room then.

Since his return there had been no talk, no movement, just the methodical lighting of cigarettes and Nick's hands toying with the squat gun.

Larry glanced at his wrist watch. It was after three. He wondered what was happening at the *Examiner* and at the bureau. He wondered what Lieutenant Rodson was doing.

SUDDENLY heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway and the door jerked open. Cintrella waded into the room looking out of breath and worried.

He gave Larry Halder a brief glance and then turned to Nick.

"This is a hell of a mess, Tanner!" he exploded.

Nick Tanner eyed him with an amused smile.

"You ought to know," he said easily. "You started it."

Something like fear crossed Tony Cintrella's eyes.

"Shut up," he snapped. "Not in front of him."

"Why not?" Nick Tanner asked. "He saw me go into the *Examiner*. He was looking for me."

Cintrella began to pace the floor; a thick, heavy man obviously perturbed.

"How much does he know?" he demanded of Tanner.

The man shrugged. "Too much."

"I shouldn't have let you go through with it," Cintrella rapped. "I knew that as soon as you left."

"Lindquist is dead," Tanner said tonelessly.

"You loused it up," Crinella said angrily. "You let this guy see you. I should have known better that to use a damn fool who—"

"That's enough," Tanner said softly. "My gun is for hire, but I can use it for myself. Don't shove. Maybe I'll decide to use it."

Tony Crinella mopped at his face with a handkerchief. "Okay, okay," he muttered. "What are we going to do?"

"You figure that. This town is your back yard; not mine."

Cintrella stuffed his handkerchief into a pocket.

"Incidentally," he snapped at Tanner, "where were you all morning? I tried to find you."

"In Clara Lorn's apartment."

The night club owner stared at him. "I told you to stay away from her. I wouldn't have given this monkey her address if I had known you were there!" He paused and added, "How much does she know?"

Tanner shrugged. "She's not dumb."

"Damn you! I—"

Suddenly Tanner stood. "Okay, fat boy," he said thinly. "Let's cut out the gab. You found out that Lindquist had learned you're wanted for murder in New York and planned to use it in the clean-up job the *Examiner* wants to start against the hot spots in town. You get me last night after Lindquist got too many drinks in your joint and hinted what he was going to do to you. You tell me to follow him when he leaves with Clara and to take care of him. I did, but this punk sees me go in. We're both in a spot, but not the spot he's in."

Larry swallowed hard, his eyes intent upon the two men.

"Will you shut up?" Cintrella demanded. "Spilling all that in front of this guy!"

"What's the difference?" Tanner smiled.

"He's not going to be talking any more after while. Dead men haven't much to say."

Cintrella had the handkerchief out again sopping at his forehead.

Full realization of what Tanner meant

drummed into Larry's mind. He got to his feet.

"You can't—" he started to say.

Tanner motioned the gun toward him. "Sit down."

Larry sat down again, desperately wondering if he would have a chance if he rushed the thin man. Abruptly he wished he had gone to Rodson and told him the story. This wasn't a job for an amateur. You had to be tough to deal with killers. Tougher than a news bureau man.

Tanner nodded at a newspaper in Cintrella's coat pocket.

"What are the cops doing?" he asked.

Cintrella unrolled the paper. Larry recognized an early street edition of the *Examiner*. He could see the heavy, black headline: "Examiner Reporter Murdered."

Cintrella glanced down the page and a change came over him. His heavy frown disappeared and he looked thoughtful.

"I didn't get a chance to read this on the way out," he said. He looked at Larry.

"What's your name, punk?"

"Larry Halder."

The fat man smiled and looked at Tanner.

"The cops are looking for him," he said.

"They learned that Lindquist was playing around with this guy's wife, and they label his story about you and the phone call as phony—he left there this morning and said he'd be back in an hour. They're still looking for him and for their money he's guilty."

Tanner's eyes narrowed.

"Okay, I'll take it from there," he said.

"We bump this guy and make it look like suicide. We make him write a confession to leave. That takes care of everything."

Once during the day the shock of learning about his wife's infidelity had made life sour and hopeless to Larry Halder. Now faced with death, he realized that it was sweet. He didn't want to die. What had happened between Mildred and him seemed suddenly far away and almost unimportant. Now the important thing was to live. And facing him in the small room was death.

A deep urgency became a frantic desperation to prolong time, to delay death. He grasped at straws.

"You'd better get straightened out with your fat partner, Tanner," he said. His voice was weak when he wanted it to be strong. His thoughts were mice wildly trying to escape a trap.

Tanner looked at him.

"SOMEONE called Lindquist just before he was killed," Larry blurted rapidly. "He hung up before I could call Pete. Maybe someone was trying to warn him. Maybe it was

Cintrella. He just said he shouldn't have let you go through with it."

"So what?" Tanner asked.

"If Cintrella called, that means he was afraid—that he didn't trust you at the last moment and thought you'd blow things."

"You're crazy," Cintrella snapped. "Why should I—?"

"Let him talk," Tanner interrupted.

Cintrella mopped at his forehead and was silent.

Larry said, "If he didn't trust you then, he won't now. He's afraid of you. You know too much and you've murdered for him. He's been running away from one rap for a long time."

"Keep talking," Tanner said.

"The easiest way to keep you from talking is to get rid of you."

"I can take care of myself," Tanner snapped.

"This is Cintrella's back yard," Larry reminded him. "Not yours. How many other guys has he around to handle things for him? Or maybe he might do it himself. He's murdered before."

The fat night club owner spoke harshly. "He's stalling. Your idea is good, Nick. Go ahead with it. Make him write the confession."

Tanner looked at him with deadly interest. "Maybe he talks sense," he said softly. "Did you call Lindquist when I was heading there? Were you going to tip him off?"

"No!"

"I called you and told you where he was. Said I had to wait until the janitor got out of the entrance. Did you call him?" Tanner pressed.

"No! Don't think that I—"

"I think you're lying," Tanner said.

"Nick, I didn't!" Cintrella said harshly.

"Maybe I'd be smart to eliminate *everyone* who knows that I bumped Lindquist," Nick Tanner said. "Except Clara. I'll take her with me."

Cintrella's floridness paled and grey tinged his lips.

"Wait, Nick! Don't let this guy give you ideas."

The gunman's full attention was on the fat man now. Larry felt his leg muscles contract and he was very still. He'd been lucky and he'd started something.

Tanner's gun was up again and this time it menaced Cintrella.

"I don't think I like you," Tanner said in his quiet voice.

"Don't be a fool, Nick. I'm in this as deep as you are. You know about that rap back east. You've got me where you want me."

"You can always talk if you're alive," Tanner told him.

Tony Cintrella stared down at the gun in Tanner's hand.

"No!" he whispered.

"Cintrella, you'd fold like a wet bar towel if the cops got tough with you," Tanner said. "I don't like it. I'm going to do something about it."

His eyes watched Cintrella carefully. The smile on his tightened lips had become tense and ugly.

"No!" Cintrella cried. "Nick! You're wrong! I—"

Nick Tanner took a step toward him and the springs that were Larry Halder's leg muscles uncoiled as he lunged toward the gunman.

Desperately Larry struck down on Tanner's gun arm. Sharp pain ripped through his wrist, but he heard the sharp grunt from Tanner and the clattering sound of the gun hitting the floor.

Larry fell forward, his body over the gun, a hand groping madly for it.

Tanner kicked and the blow thudded into Larry Halder's face. There was a flash of red before his eyes he tried desperately to clear his mind.

The touch of metal in the hand beneath him helped. He rolled and tried to fend off kicks with his free arm. Something crashed into his mouth. He spit out blood.

He rolled again and brought the gun up. Blindly he pulled the trigger knowing that he probably would miss, but hoping the shot would stop them momentarily.

He didn't miss. Cintrella screamed and staggered to the wall holding his wounded shoulder.

"I'm hit . . . I'm hit . . ." he moaned frantically.

Tanner hurled himself at Larry and Larry fired again, low. Tanner lurched awkwardly and crashed to the floor, his hands pawing at a shattered shin bone.

Larry stumbled to his feet and backed to the door. There was a key on the outside. He turned it as he quickly slammed the door to the room.

Down the hallway he saw the wall telephone Tanner had used.

His breath was heavy as he spoke rapidly to the desk sergeant who took his call.

Down the hallway in the locked room Cintrella still moaned. He was moaning when Lieutenant Rodson unlocked the door twenty minutes later.

The bus stopped at his corner and Larry Halder alighted and headed wearily for home. He was tired and his nerves were tight through him like singing violin strings.

The scene at the hospital marched through his mind like a monotonous parade. Cintrella, broken, moaning, talking wildly and accusing

Tanner. Tanner's tight-mouthed silence. Then the ugly words he voiced at Cintrella. And later at headquarters with Clara Lorn, frightened and talking. Answering questions with deep fear in her eyes.

Afterwards Rodson shook hands with Larry Halder and congratulated him. He handed a telephone to him so that he could phone the story in. A bureau man is a newspaper man first; other things would have to come afterwards.

NOW he walked toward the house where he and Mildred had lived and loved and quarreled and eventually found unhappiness.

The door was unlocked.

He left his coat and hat in the hallway and walked slowly into the kitchen. Mildred was there and food was cooking on the stove. She stood at the sink staring straight ahead out the window.

"I've a good dinner for you," she said. "You must be tired. I've had the radio on. I know about it."

Larry wet his bruised lips with his tongue and tried to make sense of what she said. He had expected to find her gone, the house empty and cold. He didn't understand this. Or did she think he was fool enough to—

She turned and tears were streaming down her face. "I've had a lot to think about today, Larry," she said. "I've been a fool. What happened between Pete and me wasn't as serious as you think. I kissed him a few times and I thought I was crazy about him. But when he was murdered and you—you were gone and they couldn't find you . . ."

She stopped and then went on in a choked voice.

"I've died a hundred deaths today. Thinking that maybe you'd killed for me. Thinking he might be dead because of me. And they told about him and Clara Lorn and . . . and I knew he'd been playing with me, I think I've always known."

Tears made her eyes bright under the kitchen light. On the stove a tea kettle began to sing.

"I'll do anything you say," she whispered. "I'll leave if you want it that way. But—but I love you, Larry."

Too many things were with him and he couldn't think straight. People could make mistakes. Mildred could. He remembered how it had been at first. He remembered his own mistakes. You can't be right always, but you can learn.

Tomorrow he'd think about it. Tomorrow they could talk about it. Maybe it would be all right. Maybe it would even be better. Sometimes it took something like this to make things right.

"Anything you say," she whispered her eyes gentle.

He tried to smile and it brought a sharp twinge of pain to his lips.

"Then how about a little dinner?" he said softly.

He didn't know how gentle her lips could be until they were pressed against his bruised mouth.

And maybe the kiss was rushing things a little. Somehow, though, he didn't care. Things were going to be all right.



Now on Sale.

He was tough and steel-hard, all right; a mean and merciless private eye who, as he cheerfully admitted, would yank the gold fillings from his dead grandmother's teeth for a profit. I hated him but I had to work for him and I'm afraid to think what might have happened if it weren't for the corpse, the crying girl—and a bowl of milk. . . .

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ONE LAST



Barney raced for the cellar.

This was the last time Eddie would search for his lovely, too-lively torch-singer wife. Until she, herself, started to seek him, with her blue, dead fingers groping blindly from the lacy tissue of the candy box. . . .

THE young man lit a cigarette before he went inside the tavern. He knew he'd need one in there, but he couldn't risk having anybody notice how his hand shook.

He went straight to the end of the bar. The piano was just four feet away.

"Gimme a double shot, Whitey."

The bartender set it down carefully. The glass was pretty full.

"Flora's not here yet, Eddie. She told me to tell you not to wait."

The young man filled his lungs with smoke and blew it out with a hiss like steam taking a lid off.

"I'll wait," he said, trying to control his hand as he reached for the shot glass of raw whisky.

"Okay, Eddie. But it's a shame to spill that

SONG FOR FLORA.

whiskey. Want I should lift it up to your mouth?"

"Go to hell, Whitey!"

"Now look, kid. Why get sore at me? I give you a message from Flora, that's all. She told me to tell you. . . ."

"Yeah?" asked Eddie, his eyes too bright in his haggard face. "She says I shouldn't wait. Just when did she tell you that?"

"This afternoon. She dropped in about four and picked up her pay envelope. Then she sat down at the piano and played a couple of tunes absent-like. Her eyes were on the glassy side . . . you know. . . ."

"Who else was here then, Whitey?"

"Just the usual. Barney Emmett was hanging over the piano and she wasn't giving him any chatter at all. Her face was white and she looked plenty sore at the guy. And Cass Edwards was around with his gang, pretty drunk and loud."

"I should have busted Barney Emmett's lantern jaw a long time ago," said Eddie. "The way he hangs around Flora."

"Barney's not a guy you can bust," said Whitey, shrugging bitterly. "Lot of people have tried that to their sorrow. And I guess Flora can handle herself."

Eddie finally got the shot glass to his mouth without spilling more than a third of it over his hand.

"Who went with Flora when she left here, Whitey?"

"I dunno, kid. She goes out the back way after leaving the message for you and I don't notice particularly. Why? How come you're so upset about the dame all of a sudden?"

Eddie was watching the bartender's face very closely, but Whitey had a hard map to read and he looked as calm as ever.

"Just in the mood for asking questions, Whitey. That's all. She said I shouldn't wait for her, huh?"

"That's right."

"And what time did she say it?"

"Four o'clock."

"Okay, Whitey. So long."

Eddie glanced once at the piano as he left. Flora wouldn't be sitting there tonight playing those lazy tunes she loved so much. Her round white arms wouldn't be moving with the rhythms of the dreamy spell she created. Her warmth was gone. The piano looked black and cold, as forbidding as an automatic.

He walked two blocks down and got into his cab.

A fare came up.

"Sorry, buddy," said Eddie. "I got a call." He drove off, his hands sweating on the wheel.

Whitey was a damn liar! At four o'clock that afternoon Flora had been dead for several hours! It was just after his noon stop for eggs and a cup of steam that he'd found her body stuffed into the back of his cab.

Not all of her body—just part of it—Just the head with a few strands of the blonde hair caught in the zipper of the leather bowling bag.

The shock hadn't worn off. It was still pounding through him, making it impossible for him to think of what he ought to do. Go to the police? Hell, they'd slap him in the clink so fast he wouldn't have a chance. It would be open and shut to them.

Flora was a handful as well as an eye-ful. And when you're married to a dame like that there's bound to be other guys. And in a spot like that the cops can figure you've got a solid motive for killing her. Somebody else had thought of that angle and had planted enough evidence in his cab to send him to the chair. Eddie didn't want to play that way.

So he had kept quiet all afternoon, trying to guess it out. He had put the bowling bag into the trunk of the car without looking at the thing again. One look had been enough. One touch of the yellow hair, one glimpse of that fair skin faintly dotted with freckles.

He knew vaguely what he had to do now. The same thing he'd done a lot of other nights. Look for Flora. Only this time he wouldn't be expecting to find her higher than a kite, making the rounds of the joints with five or six men. He'd be looking for the rest of her body. It had to be somewhere.

And when he found it, he might find evidence enough on somebody else to make it all right for him to yell copper.

But not until. Eddie knew enough about circumstantial evidence to know that he'd be everybody's choice for the most likely suspect. A clear conscience doesn't do you any good at all. Not if the court thinks you're guilty.

HE DROVE to the apartment to shave and change clothes, trying desperately to think straight with his aching head. One thing was for sure. Somebody had killed Flora and was trying to frame him.

But Eddie hadn't any desire to burn for a murder he didn't commit. There wasn't any

By DOROTHY DUNN

special reason why he should want to go on living, he told himself. He didn't have a helluva lot to look forward to, but he kept thinking of little things he liked about being alive. He got a kick out of the goofy fares he ran across; he liked the thick flapjacks he got at the diner with the hunks of hard butter melting under the syrup; he liked to walk up Randolph Street on his night off and maybe take in a movie; he liked big steins of beer in the summer and the free concerts in Grant Park. Not much to live for, but it was his life and he liked it.

Something else was important beside saving his own skin. Somebody had killed Flora and they ought not to get away with it. It was a lousy thing and made him burn deep inside with a longing to get his hands around the killer's throat and give him a dose of his own medicine.

He thought about Flora as he snaked the cab through the heavy traffic to his apartment on the south side. He didn't have much real feeling left for her. He'd loved her plenty in the beginning, like all these other guys did now. Some dames are like that. They got hearts so big they can always find room for one more. And that's a good kind of woman to be crazy about, but it's hell to be married to one.

You get to watching out for her like you would a kid, because she's not too bright about the company she keeps. You quit being jealous after a while and just hope she won't get onto reefer or something really bad. You let her take the job at Whitey's playing the piano. And you hope it'll do her good. But it doesn't. Too many guys come in there that fall for her. It makes it easier to keep track of her, though. You know it's always from Whitey's that she started out and that makes it simpler to pick up her trail if you have to go out looking for her.

So when she gets killed, you don't cry your eyes out. But you do start remembering her round white arms, her full red lips, and the way she always had a smile for everybody, including you.

Eddie remembered how warm her hands always were, how full of love and excitement. She had led him a dog's life, sure. But there hadn't ever been any other woman for him, and he'd hunt out her killer if it was the last thing he ever did.

And it'll probably be that, he thought grimly as he climbed the stairs to their two-room apartment. Especially if I have to tangle with Barney Emmett. Whitey was right—nobody ever had any luck getting the goods on that guy—not even the cops. He had an organization that made Capone's old gang look like a bunch of boy scouts. And Barney had been seeing Flora pretty often. He was in Whitey's

place nearly every night. In fact, since Flora had gone to work there, Barney had practically taken over at the small tavern. Eddie swore, just thinking about that big jutting jaw and the thick, selfish mouth. Guys like that shouldn't be allowed to operate the way they do. They get too smart, get to thinking they're like God. But Whitey was right. Try to buck up against a thug like Barney! You know better—you don't know how you know—you just do.

Eddie snapped the lights on, noticing the apartment was just the way it always was. The rooms smelled musty and the Murphy bed was folded up sloppily, the mattress sagging where it had slipped out of the clamps. Flora's make-up things were scattered over the top of the desk in the livingroom because there was a better light there. Her mascara box was open and she had left a stocking hanging over the back of a chair. There was that choking dust over everything, big gray rolls of it under the heavy pieces of furniture where Flora said it didn't show anyway.

He walked into the dinette and kitchen. The breakfast dishes were still in the sink. His cup was there and Flora's with the lipstick smear on one side and there was an egg shell under the stove where Flora must have aimed at the can and missed.

Nothing looks different, he thought. He'd half expected to see something changed to show that Flora had broken her usual routine on the day of her murder. But she must have gone out like always, not expecting anything to happen.

Eddie put the bowling bag into the far corner of the closet, not knowing what else to do with it. He couldn't keep carrying it around in his cab. Just touching the leather straps and feeling the weight of it, produced a quick, slimy sweat on his skin.

He took a warm shower and then went back to the closet to get his good suit, the double-breasted brown that Flora had liked. He tried not to think of the grisly thing that was there in the dark corner of the cubicle. He wondered if he would shudder like this every time he opened the closet door.

He put his old suit on the hanger—funny—he didn't have to squeeze all the clothes back to get it on the rod—there seemed to be more room. Then his eyes really focused on the interior.

Flora's clothes were gone! The fur coat, her two evening dresses that she wore on special nights at Whitey's. The plain black thing that she wore so it always looked like a different dress, sometimes with a lace collar, sometimes with beads, and sometimes with a jewel belt. The green wool that she said made her look hippy.

All her clothes gone out of the closet. But

no make-up things! That looked plenty queer to Eddie. Flora would rather go off without her dresses than without her mascara and creams and powder. Not only that, the only suitcase they had was still on the closet shelf, and it was empty. Eddie looked.

THERE was only one answer. Flora hadn't packed those clothes herself! Somebody else had run the risk of coming here and leaving with a suitcase full on the day she was murdered and cut up into pieces.

He switched off the lights and went out the back way onto the concrete porch and down the back steps to the janitor's apartment. Maybe Albert had seen somebody around.

Albert came to the door looking comfortable with a pipe in his mouth.

"Hello, Mr. Henderson. What's on the bum now? I fixed that stopped drain last week."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, Albert. Say, did you see anybody around here today?"

"Always see people around. Dozens. Who you mean?"

"Up at my place. Did you happen to notice anybody going up there or coming out?"

"Don't believe so," said Albert, wrinkling his shiny black brow with the painful process of thought. "Nope, don't recall seeing anybody around your place. Your wife out helling around again, Mr. Henderson?"

"That's none of your damn business!" flared Eddie.

"Now wait a minute," soothed Albert in his gentle drawl, "I didn't mean to go stickin' my nose in where it don't belong. Didn't mean that at all. But it's no secret in this building about what kind of a life Mrs. Henderson leads you. You're a hard-working, steady sort of man and it's a shame what you have to put up with. I just asked because if there's anything I can do. . . ."

Eddie gave him a crooked grin, sorry that he'd blown his top. Hell, he couldn't count the times that the good old coon had come out to help him get Flora up the back stairs.

"Sorry, Albert, I'm just on edge. You sure you didn't notice a man around the building with a suitcase?"

"With a suitcase? Yes, now that you mention it, Mr. Henderson. But not up at your place. He passed me in the lobby about two this afternoon."

"Why didn't you say so!" yelled Eddie.

"You didn't say suitcase. Besides, he wasn't coming out of your apartment when I saw him. Just down in the lobby. Maybe that's not even the one."

"What did he look like, Albert?"

"I hardly noticed. Big heavy-set fellow with thick lips, dark hair, I think."

Barney Emmett! Those lips always stuck out. Albert would have turned white if he'd

realized that he had just put the finger on the big shot hood himself.

"Well, thanks Albert. So long."

"That the guy you want?"

"Maybe. Take it easy," said Eddie.

He climbed into his cab and drove toward Whitey's place. He had to find the rest of Flora and then find her killer. And when you're looking for Flora, it's always Whitey's that you start out from.

But he didn't get far. A black sedan shot out of a side street, half a block from his own apartment, and nosed his cab to the curb.

"What the hell. . . ?" muttered Eddie, staring into the muzzle of an automatic.

"Climb out, hacker. Somebody else is doing the driving tonight. Crawl into the back seat of the sedan and see what it feels like to be a customer."

Eddie turned his eyes toward the car. There were three men inside in addition to the bruiser that was holding a gun on him.

"Gonna make trouble, Bud?"

"No," said Eddie, getting into the car. "I guess I'll mind. Where we going?"

"He wants to know where we're going!" the big man with the gun said. The others laughed nastily.

Eddie shut up then. Punks! Just a crowd of punks out on a routine pick-up job and trying to have a little fun on the side scaring him. Well, he wasn't scared. If Barney Emmett wanted to see him, it saved him the trouble of looking for Barney.

He fished out a cigarette. The man with the gun tensed.

"Mind if I smoke?" asked Eddie.

"Go right ahead. The smell of it don't bother me none," quipped the guy in a falsetto. "But you're a real gentleman to ask first!" They laughed at that, too.

"Thanks, Sweetheart," mumbled Eddie, wishing he could take one good poke at this smart-pants.

Eddie noticed that the gunman relaxed as soon as he had blown out the match. A clown, but he tended to business.

They pulled up in an alley off State Street and it was Eddie's turn to laugh. They were parked in back of Whitey's Place!

"Barney took some extra trouble," he said. "I was on my way here anyhow."

"For pleasure, maybe. But this ain't gonna be no pleasure. Go into the back room, Barney's there."

They patted him to make sure he didn't have a gun, then they opened the door and pushed him inside. They didn't come in with him.

BARNEY had the room to himself. Whitey always let some of the boys play cards back here and drink. Eddie could just picture

Barney throwing his weight around, telling Whitey to get those bums outta there so he could have the room for some private business. He might pay Whitey something for the money he'd lose on the room, and he might not—more likely not. Guys like Barney got what they wanted because everybody knew what would happen if they didn't shell out on demand.

Eddie saw the gun on the table close to Barney's hand, but he didn't care. He was glad he was here, glad to be facing the man who must have killed Flora.

"Hello, Barney. Nice night for murder." "Shut up!"

"All right," said Eddie. "You talk."

Barney picked up the gun.

"This does my talking for me. Where's Flora?"

"You ought to know," said Eddie. "You took her clothes out of the apartment."

Barney slapped out with the gun butt, scraping Eddie's cheek. His thick neck was red and he was puffing like an angry bull.

"So the black boy did recognize me! But I didn't ask about that. I said, 'Where's Flora?' If you don't tell me, I'll choke it out of your skinny neck. Hurry up, Henderson! You knew she was leaving you for me. Now what did you do to her?"

Barney's hot breath was right in Eddie's face and the look in the man's eyes was almost insane.

"I didn't do anything to her," snapped Eddie. "And I didn't know she was leaving me. I don't think she was."

"Where is she?" asked Barney again, his shoulders slumping a little.

"I don't know," said Eddie.

Something was wrong. Eddie could feel that. Barney wasn't putting on an act. If he killed Flora, why should he keep asking where she was? But if he hadn't killed her, why would he be so excited? You don't look the way he looked just because some dame you like doesn't show up for a few hours.

"Henderson if you lie to me, I'll blow your brains from here out to Michigan Boulevard! What's happened to Flora?"

Eddie decided it was time to level off.

"She's dead."

He expected Barney to lash out at him again, but nothing like that happened.

"It's hers then," he mumbled foolishly. "By God, I thought it was, but I had to make sure!"

Eddie's heart beat faster.

"What's hers? What Barney?"

"This."

Barney slid a candy box across the table to Eddie. Inside was a hand.

Eddie's stomach turned over and he flopped the lid down.

"Some damn fool mailed that to me," said Barney in a flat, cold voice. "You wouldn't pull a trick like that, would you, Henderson?"

Eddie looked into the murderous eyes.

"No, I wouldn't. But if you didn't kill her, Barney, we're looking for the same man. Somebody gave me a present today, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah—the head."

"My God!" said Barney. "You thought I did that?"

"That's what I thought. You took her clothes out in a suitcase."

"She left a message for me to pick them up. Said she was leaving you and I should get them. That's all there was to that. Henderson, if it's the last thing I do I'll find the lousy rat that did this and tear his heart out with my bare hands! Did you call the cops?"

"No."

"Good. We can do it quicker ourselves."

"You mean pull together?" asked Eddie.

"Have a drink, Henderson."

Eddie tipped the bottle up to his lips. He believed Barney and said so with his eyes.

The big man heaved a long sigh and dug at his cheeks with his meaty hand.

"I loved Flora, Henderson. That's a hell of a thing, but there it is. I loved her too damn much and somebody knew that!"

Eddie looked the other way. Barney Emmett, the toughest man in Chicago, had tears in his eyes.

It was four o'clock in the morning. The back room at Whitey's was filled with a blue haze of smoke and the damp malty odor of too much alcohol breath breathed into an almost airless room.

Cass Edwards and his three worthless friends were there being worked over by Barney. Eddie hated all four men. They had money, they were supposed to be from quality. Cass Edwards, especially. Yet they hung around a place like Whitey's, drunk all the time, and they had often taken Flora off on their slumming trips. Eddie considered them the worst degenerates in the book. They weren't satisfied to go to hell themselves. They wanted to take other people along.

BARNEY slapped Cass again, his heavy fingers leaving big red streaks on the weak face.

"For God's sake, Barney!" Cass whimpered, "I've told you all I know."

"You said you got a package this afternoon. Special delivery. What was in it?" Barney yelled.

"I've told you. A hand—a human hand."

"Flora's? Her right hand?"

"I don't know," mumbled Cass. "It looked like hers."

"And what did you do with it?"

"I told you that, too. Your man is out looking for it now."

"That doesn't matter! Tell me again!"

Eddie wondered what kind of a torture method this was. Cass was desperate.

"I threw it down a manhole," he repeated.

"Oh Dearborn Street off Randolph."

"Why?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Barney, let up!"

"Why?"

Cass broke then.

"What the hell did I want to keep it for?" he yelled, "What good is a dead hand?"

That did it. Barney jerked Cass up out of his chair and dragged him over to the table. He called to the clown, the gunman that had picked Eddie up in the sedan.

"Hold this right here," Barney instructed.

The clown looked as happy as a lark as he held the right wrist of Cass Edwards flat against the wood.

Eddie got a little sick when he heard Cass scream with pain every time the gun butt came down. It was a relief when he fainted. Every bone in his right hand must have been crushed.

"That'll show him," rasped Barney, breathing like an ox, "That'll show him what good is a hand!"

Eddie didn't like Cass Edwards, but he couldn't stand much more of this. Barney was letting his emotions take over, he was acting crazy. He hadn't got to be the biggest man in the Chicago rackets this way.

Cass was crying like a baby.

"Why don't you just kill me?" he screamed at Barney. He was hysterical.

"I'm going to," said Barney in his coldest voice, "As soon as I check your story."

Just then Alex, one of the gunmen, came in with a wet-looking cigar box.

"Here it is, boss. I had one helluva time. . . ."

"Who asked about your troubles?" asked Barney, cutting him short. He took the box and looked inside. He closed it quickly. Then he placed it on the table beside the other cigar box that had been mailed to him. The bowling bag was there, too. Barney hadn't lost any time sending to get it.

"I told you it would be there," said Cass, rocking on the floor, cradling his broken hand, "Now, can I see a doctor?"

"Yeah," said Barney. "You'll need one."

The shot was a thundering blast in the back room, and the smell of cordite curled up into Eddie's nostrils along with the stale air.

Barney put the gun back on the table without batting an eye.

"He shoulda had more respect for Flora than to pick a sewer," he said. "Now we got to find the rest of her body. Alex!"

"Yes, boss?"

"No you're too dumb. Monk, come here."

"Yes, Barney?" The clown stepped up.

"Check the morgue again, the police blotter. You can do all that through Daly. I want that torso! Flora's going to have a decent funeral in a casket. It's not right. . . ."

He broke off, knowing he was giving out with too much sentiment. Monk went out.

"You got any ideas, Henderson? Any other guys we can pick up who might know something? What about that janitor?"

"Not a chance," said Eddie, thinking of Albert's round, gentle face. "Flora left the house alive. We know that. You've traced her movements as far as Whitey's, or almost."

"Yeah," said Barney thoughtfully. He took a long drink, draining the bottle. "The clerk in the drug store saw her at eleven o'clock this morning, and it was just a little after noon time that she was killed. Had to be. The package was delivered to me by four."

Eddie almost had a thought right then, but it didn't quite come clear.

"I'd like a drink," he said suddenly. "My head feels a little foggy."

"Okay," said Barney. "Go get a couple of bottles, Henderson. And Alex! Clear out this mess of society trash. No wonder we can't think straight."

"All of 'em, boss?"

"Hell, yes! They saw me trigger their pal, didn't they? An automobile accident ought to do it. You can fix that up, dumb as you are."

EDDIE left the room in a hurry. He was scared now. Scared all the way down to his heels and sicker inside than he'd ever been in his life. Barney wasn't human. He was some kind of monster, operating the deadly machinery of murder the way an ordinary business man does a day's work. He could see why people didn't try to cross Barney, why they couldn't. He could even understand why the cops couldn't touch him. Nobody could touch him and live!

Eddie should have gone to the cops in the beginning. He knew that now. He'd been a damn fool to let Barney take over the job of finding Flora's killer. The man was a maniac, and Eddie would have felt a lot safer in the death house than he felt right now.

Whitey was leaning on the bar, sulking.

"Barney wants two bottles," said Eddie.

Whitey got them down.

"He say anything about paying for them?"

"No," said Eddie.

"He never pays!" moaned Whitey. "He laps up more of my profit. . . ."

Eddie got out his wallet.

"Never mind, kid," said Whitey. "And here. Take a slugger with me. I'm getting tired of Dick Smithing out here. Barney's orders! I can't even see what's going on in my own back room. Sounds like torture."

"It's awful," gulped Eddie, sliding his glass back for more. Then all of a sudden it hit him! The thought he'd almost had.

"Whitey," he said, "you're a damn liar!"

"What do you mean, kid?"

"About Flora. You said she was in here at four o'clock. She couldn't have been. She was dead then!"

Whitey's face didn't change its expression.

"Hell, Eddie. I'm sorry about that," he whispered, "Barney made me promise to say that. He said he'd kill me if I didn't. I thought then that something had happened to Flora that he was trying to cover up, but you know how it is, Eddie. You don't dare cross Barney. Why, just look at what he's done to my business by coming in here! He's poison to have around a place. People get scared off. And what can I do about it?"

Eddie was getting it now. Prize chump. That's what he had been. Prize idiot.

"Barney killed Flora?"

"Who else, Eddie? I've got a gun back here if you want it, kid."

"Thanks," said Eddie. "Hand it over."

Whitey obliged with a smile. The first smile that Eddie had seen on his face for months.

Eddie tucked it in his pocket and picked up the bottles.

"Call the cops, will you, Whitey? It's time. We'll have the case all finished by the time they get here."

"Sure, Eddie." Whitey made for the phone.

Barney was alone in the back room again. His men had gone out the back way with Cass Edwards and his pals.

"Took you long enough," complained Barney, reaching for the bottles.

"Can that line," said Eddie.

Barney didn't get riled. He looked a little tired. Eddie took the bottle he passed over and asked casually: "Say, Barney. Who told you that Flora was leaving me? Who gave you that message to pick up her clothes?"

"Whitey."

"That's what I thought," said Eddie, his mouth grim. "Whitey killed Flora!"

Barney just sat there. "You sure?"

"Yeah," said Eddie. "I'm sure. You didn't tell him to lie to me about Flora being in here at four o'clock, did you?"

"I didn't tell him anything."

"Neither did Flora," said Eddie. "Flora didn't leave that message for you. Whitey made it up. He wanted to place you at my apartment with a suitcase, just in case something went wrong with his other frame."

Barney was taking it easy in a slow burn.

"But why should Whitey kill Flora?"

"Because of you," said Eddie. "He couldn't get rid of you without getting rid of Flora. He hates you, Barney."

"Why?"

"Because you're hurting his business. You're ruining it. He tried to play it smart because he was afraid to cross you openly. He tried to drive you off your nut by sending you a piece of his hate in a cigar box. Then he pulled me into it and Cass Edwards, thinking one of us might polish you off for him. He knew how to hit you where it hurt the most. He knew how you felt about Flora. And he didn't think I'd care. He thought Flora just caused me a lot of grief."

Barney's eyes were like glass now.

"But you did care, didn't you, Henderson? You wanted to get the man who killed Flora?"

"That's right, Barney. I did care. Not as much as you maybe. But you don't forget Flora very easy once she gets under your skin."

Eddie pulled out the gun.

"Whitey gave me this to use on you, Barney."

"The hell you say! Leave it here, Henderson," he said, picking up his own gun that had already killed Cass Edwards. "This one's on me!"

They went outside. Whitey wasn't behind the bar. But they heard his footsteps beating it down the cellar stairs, and they heard the siren out in the street. Then the cops rushed through the front door.

Barney raced for the cellar and Eddie stayed upstairs, listening to the shots and to Barney's shouted curses. Five shots. One wasn't enough for the rat that killed Flora. Barney let him have five shots in succession!

The policeman stopped at the head of the stairs beside Eddie.

Eddie caught his arm and whispered to him: "Barney Emmett is down there! You've caught him red-hand committing a murder."

The cop's face went white.

"You can take him," said Eddie. "He just emptied his clip. One shot into Cass Edwards, five into Whitey!"

THEY took him. Barney Emmett, the terror of Chicago, was captured without a single shot being fired. Eddie went down into the cellar with them and Barney didn't seem to be sore at all. He certainly had been a sucker for Flora. All he said was: "Well, Henderson, we nailed the rat that got her!"

The right rat, too. There was no doubt about that. They found the torso down there, buried in a shallow grave. And they found a bowling ball that didn't have any bag to go with it.

And Barney Emmett? Eddie felt a little bit bad about playing him such a dirty trick. But hell, he told himself, Barney had it coming if anybody did.

BLIND DATE WITH THE DEVIL

By
JOHN BENDER



The water hit her with a tremendous, icy blow.

What mad impulse made lovely Marion Carter seek so desperately the death which, so she believed, would end the curse of murder hanging like a sword above her friends and kinsmen?

SHE came alert abruptly, not knowing what had awakened her, her eyes wide and searching in the darkness. For long moments she lay, staring intently at the lighter patch of darkness which was the ceiling, then she turned slowly to face the clock beside her bed. She could hear its rhythmic ticking, but could not see the time.

The movement, slight as it was, tumbled her brain into the cloying whirlpool, and she thought with a quick despair, "No. . . !"

She buried her face in the pillow, afraid, sobbing slightly and the sickness in her relented. But the clock began ticking more and more stridently. Her fear grew less. She flung back the covers and pushed her legs out over the floor.

Her eyes, she found, could now distinguish more clearly the outlines of the room, though she thought vaguely that she could discern a light fog touching everything. All at once the heat of the narrow bedroom clamped down on her, and she struggled into her robe, shaking her long black hair back over the collar.

From far off, as in a dream, she heard the low, long, mournful note of the fog horn on the Point. She stood there, shivering despite the first few flecks of perspiration that beaded her upper lip. And as the note of the fog horn

slipped into the heavy silence of the night, she knew what she must do. . . .

The clock ticked slowly, monotonously. And yet it screamed her thought:

Destroy yourself . . . destroy yourself . . . destroy yourself!

She laughed silently, lips bared wolfishly over her teeth. If she were very silent, oh so very silent, she could get down the long stairs, she could race across the hill to the little bridge. In grateful anticipation she could see even now the dark and friendly waters of the river beckoning to her. . . .

It will be nice and cool and friendly. It will cloak me in the soft secret comfort that I seek.

She went to the door. Her head felt lighter than she had even known it; her stomach fluttered slightly. She opened the door and stepped outside into the long-carpeted, dimly-lit corridor, casting an apprehensive glance in both directions. No one. Thank God, she thought. There'll be no one to stop me this time!

As she hurried along the corridor and down the winding stairs she recalled how Jan and Roger had heard her the last time; she saw again in her mind the flight along the narrow road to the bridge where she had run till she thought her heart would burst, trying to get away from Roger's swift pursuit. He'd caught her, though; then there had been the burning humiliation of being dragged back, a prisoner in her own house; and the further humiliation of being sick, so dreadfully, horribly, animal sick. . . .

The cold draft of air smashed her in the face as she opened the big front door. Quickly she hurried outside and closed the door softly behind her.

Free! Free!

One slender hand pushed the long dark hair back off her eyes. Catching her robe in the other, she ran swiftly across the walk, unmindful of the cold stone on her bare feet. In just a few moments now, she would be at the river, the lovely lonely river that would shelter her forever.

Her bare feet made a faint spattering sound when she raced through the gravel driveway to the road. Then she was outside on the highway. Fifty yards away, shimmering like pale silver, was the river—to freedom.

No one must stop me now! No one!

She reached the bridge and caught herself, breathing hard. And now that she had stopped running, the hands began to clutch and claw at her stomach. She feared that she would be sick again, and hastened to the railing, where she leaned for a moment, exhausted, her head spinning dizzily. But, gradually, the rushing water beneath her took on clarity; she could make out the small ripples that caught the moon and winked it back at her in a thousand little sparkles.

She slipped one long leg over the narrow iron railing, pulled herself to a sitting position, and put both feet on the small ledge on the far side. She took one long, final breath; she released her hold on the railing.

The water hit her with a tremendous, icy blow. She felt herself struggling for support it couldn't give. Then all was a bottomless darkness.

"EASY does it," someone said.

She sputtered and choked, then sneezed violently.

The man, bending down over her, took the glass away and put it on a small table beside the bed.

He was big and clad in tobacco-brown tweed slacks and a gay plaid shirt. When he stepped away she saw that his hair and his eyes were brown. For the rest, he was tall and spare, with broad shoulders and a tan, lean face. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the elbows; his shirt was open at the throat. His hair seemed freshly wet. It dropped in small tight ringlets on his tan forehead.

His smile was warm and friendly. She felt no fear at being here with him. She felt very little of anything, not even relief. Without a word she looked about the room—at the masculine, severe furnishings, at the heavy-quilted coverlet that was tucked up to her chin. She touched her hands against her nakedness, and the slight movements brought a further stinging sensation to her nose. She sneezed again.

"Good way to catch cold," the brown young man said. "This isn't the time of year for moonlight dips."

"Why—" she started. The word loosed a flood of tears. She turned her dark head to the clean, crisp-smelling pillow, startled that she should be crying.

"Get rid of it," he said. "All of it. I'll be back later."

When he returned, she'd got control of herself. She felt a trifle dizzy, but the queerness was gone from her stomach and her nose.

"Perhaps you'd better sleep," he said. "Would you like to, Miss—"

She didn't supply the name. But she realized dully that she would have to, sooner or later. He would be another one. . . . Why, oh why, must all these people intrude upon her. Why couldn't they let her alone?

"Miss—" he asked again.

She said, "Carter. Marion Carter," and watched for flares of recognition to light within his eyes. But his tanned, not unhandsome face did not change. The name was not familiar to him and she was indeed quite thankful.

"You—you haven't told anyone, have you?" she asked.

"About what?" His grin was wide and free.

"About a silly girl who went swimming at this time of year?"

She found the tug upon her lips was a smile. He'd dropped the subject so neatly and emphatically. Conversation was almost easy. "Is this your house?" she asked.

"Lock, stock and mortgage," he told her. "No one will bother you—I'll see to that. After you're rested, I'll drive you home. A good night's sleep will do wonders for you."

He went away, and she listened to his fading footsteps outside. She looked around the room once again. But she could not keep her mind busy enough—she had to think of the bridge and the cool, swift-flowing river. He must have seen her and jumped in after her. Abruptly she shuddered, recalling the water sweeping over her.

Why, why, she asked the ceiling, must she be touched by death? She was not always intent on it—only at occasional moments. Why? Oh, God, why? What sinister force took control of her mind and body, and in those awful moments made her want to destroy herself? Now, as once before, she was appalled by what she had almost done.

For she knew she did not really want to die. She'd had enough of it, with Harry's death.

Abruptly she sat up in the strange bed, the sudden thought setting her heart to a thunderous pounding:

Had she killed Harry?

THE young man's name was Duncan MacClure—even though he spoke without a burr. He was twenty-seven, an artist when he needed money, and a year or so ago had been chasing Jap Zeros in a stubby Gruman out over the blue Pacific. He had been discharged before the war was finished, without benefit of points, for there were in him odd pieces of Japanese-made metal that caused peculiar pains. Recently, though, the doctors had prospected with success and found the alien lode, so that within a month or so he would be fit and well again, ready to pick up his brush and palette with more result than he had in the recent past.

"And that," he said as they drove toward Idlewood, "brings you up to date on me. Except for the little house. A friend of a friend of a friend got it for me."

"You were lucky," Marion said. She was glad to talk of simple things like wars and housing situations in the clear and dripping morning sunlight, for she didn't have to go too far into her mind to get the necessary thoughts and words. Her sentences came as easily as her clothes had come, when this strange young man had pointed to a closet and told her to use what she wanted. What had he said? Oh, yes. "Some of the things belong to my sister—some were left by models. . . ."

Marion drew in great lungfuls of the fresh crisp Connecticut morning. It was so good to be alive—

But with that thought, the memory of last night and all its horror returned, clamping her with its cold wet hand. It gripped her during the rest of the ride. When the coupe pulled up the long gravel driveway of Idlewood, she found it almost impossible to stop trembling.

She was afraid. . . . The terror she associated with this rambling country mansion returned with a strange insistence. She was afraid of Jan and Roger and Mr. Billing. It all had to do with the *last time*, when she'd overheard Roger—Jan's recently-returned young man—saying that the shock of Harry's death was too great a blow for Marion's mind to handle. . . .

As they stopped in front of the house, the front door opened and a girl came out to stand on the short flight of stone steps. She bent her blonde head forward, peering into the car. Seeing Marion, she came quickly down the steps, her shapely legs flashing in the sunlight.

"Marion!" she cried. "Oh, Marion, dear! I'm so glad you're all right. We were so worried about you!"

They got out of the car. Though she shivered, Marion allowed her sister to embrace her for a moment before she had to break away. Janis was an impressionable young girl, three years Marion's junior, and had always looked to her sister for guidance since the death of their parents when they were little girls.

After she had disentangled herself from her sister's embrace, Marion introduced Mac. "Mr. MacClure is almost a neighbor, Janis. He—he lives over in that little cottage near the water."

"How nice," Janis said. She really was not interested in him, and Marion felt embarrassed. But Duncan did not seem to mind in the least.

"Wherever did you go last night, Marion? Mr. Billing and Roger and I didn't know what to think. We called the police, but they said they never investigate a missing person case until at least twenty-four hours go by. Marion, you frightened us so. Where—"

"Yes, indeed, young lady. What's the meaning of scaring us out of our wits? You ought to be spanked!" There was laughter, or the hint of it, at least, in Joseph Billing's booming voice. He was a huge man, given to loud ties, but his benevolent ogreish manner did not fool Marion for an instant. He was another one of them. He'd been Harry's lawyer; he was staying here now to settle the estate. She had known him since she was quite a small child.

Nervously, she looked to Duncan, a mute

pleading in her eyes for him not to reveal what had happened.

He grinned quickly. She heard Duncan say, "Why, I don't know what you folks are raising such a ruckus about. Marion and I went down to New York last night and did the town up properly. I guess neither of us thought about phoning. My fault."

She heard the quick intake of breath, saw Janis looking at her with horror on her pretty, child-like face. Marion felt suddenly weak; the fearful sickness threatened to return. She looked at the queer, frozen expression Duncan wore as he saw the effect of his words on these people and the man who had come out of the big house.

"Really, Marion," said Roger Southern, hurrying past the others across the flagstones to her, "you should have known better!"

Janis caught her fiance's hand. She seemed to cling to him for strength which Duncan's words had stolen from her.

"That was pretty bad taste, Marion," she said. She turned, still holding Roger's hand and started for the house.

"In a minute, dear," said Rogers, and took Marion's arm solicitously. "Come along, now. We'll get you to bed."

Marion turned to Duncan. His face told her that he was struggling to understand. She felt a momentary twinge of pity, then again the inner fear. She did not want to say what she had to say, but perhaps it was best, to tell him now and get him out of her mixed-up life. She didn't know; she didn't know. If only she could escape these scenes, these prying people. . . .

"I should have—told you," she said testily to him. Why did she hope suddenly that he, he alone, would understand and help her? ". . . you see, Duncan, it was not the first time—last night. It happened before—the day that Harry was killed. He was my step-father. He was buried yesterday. . . ."

"I'm sorry," Duncan said. "If I'd known—"

"Of course, of course," said Roger. "But as Miss Carter's doctor, I'd suggest we all get inside, out of this treacherous weather."

The house was warmer, but the smell of death, the smell of flowers and an aged mustiness, clung everywhere. Marion wanted only to be alone, away from these people. She felt suddenly very tired, even though she had slept well in Duncan's tiny, hat-box of a house. . . .

Last night. . . . Could she ever forget that nightmare? Or—did she really want to forget it? At least when she was like last night there were no silly scenes like the one just acted out.

THE queer little man with the funny brown shoes sat in a chair in the corner of the hallway. He rose as they came toward him and

shuffled his battered hat quite foolishly in his hands.

He peered owlishly at Marion. "Back, eh? Good thing." He had a gold-filled smile which did nothing for his personality. "Had these folks mighty worried, Miss Carter."

When no one introduced him, he took care of it himself: "I'm Hamilton Pine, Police Department," and flashed a badge.

"Now, see here, Pine," Roger Southern said.

"Won't take a moment, Doctor," he said. "When your folks called up last night, the station police didn't pay much attention to the call. But I figured I'd drop out here early this morning just in case. You know, Miss Carter, there's still a few things we'd like to clear up about Mr. Johnson's death. And we'd like to know that you're available for questioning—"

"There's nothing to clear up!" Joseph Billing inserted his hugeness between Marion and the little detective. "The coroner's inquiry determined it was an accidental death."

Pine nodded. "So I heard. But I still got my opinions, and the coroner isn't in charge of Homicide. Harry Johnson was shot to death out in the woods. No witnesses. All we find is a gun beside him. Anybody—even a woman—could have plucked him off."

"Dammit, man, are you suggesting—"

"Look," said Pine, "it's common gossip that this Miss Carter has no great love for her step-father since that time he breaks up her romance with that flyer fellow, last year. And Miss Carter is also inclined to—er—" He looked hard, searchingly at Marion—"go a little out of her head at time."

"Pine, I'll have your badge for libel!" Billing roared.

Marion looked from the little man to Duncan, who was standing in the doorway, his lean face splashed with shadows. There were shadows in his eyes, too, she thought, as he regarded her silently.

The detective was still grinning when he walked to the door, nodded at no one in particular, and sauntered out.

Duncan said, "Perhaps—perhaps it would be best if I called another time, Marion. I'll look in on you in a day or so," and quickly vanished from the doorway.

Marion heard the roar of his car's motor in the drive. She was sure that she had seen him for the last time. . . .

Bright and early on the following morning, Duncan MacClure proved her wrong; he arrived with a bunch of wild flowers he'd picked for her. And the next day, when the butler announced him, Marion took a few minutes to dab her cheeks and brighten her lips with lipstick. Duncan was gay and friendly and made her feel so much better that she was amazed.

The third day he phoned, suggesting that

she go riding with him. Marion found herself eager for his company—to get away from the house. The only relief throughout the days was when she saw Duncan. Idlewood had come to be unbearable, with its austere loneliness and whispering shadows that hovered everywhere. She didn't dare let her fears take shape in her mind, but the battle was growing into too great a one for her to carry alone.

She was ready a full ten minutes before Duncan arrived. In the car, he said:

"I've been doing a little snooping, Marion," and she felt the surge of fear in her breast. "I'm sure I can help you," he went on. "If only you'll let me."

"Really," she pleaded. "There's nothing you can do—"

"There must be!" His vehemence almost took them off the road. "No girl as young and pretty as you goes around trying to kick her life away. Is it a man?" he asked.

Yes, she thought, it is a man. A man named Harry Johnson. He is dead, and maybe I killed him. I don't know, I don't know. Don't drag it out into the open, Duncan, please.

She caught herself in time "No, it's not a man, Duncan. I don't know why I—"

"But there must be a reason why you've tried twice to kill yourself, Marion."

They were in the village now, the quiet, quaint old New England village, with its funny, scattered shops and silent people. He stopped the car, in front of a combination blacksmith shop and garage. "Why don't you try telling me about it?"

Suddenly she found herself talking:

"I don't know how to describe it, Duncan. It's as if there were a voice inside of me, telling me to destroy myself. Both times I've been alone, at night. I wake up, only it's as if I'm still asleep and dreaming. A nightmare. There's a haze, like a faint fog—it suffocates me. Everything and everyone is too much to bear—I want to get away from the death-smelling house, from my room, from Jan and Roger and Mr. Billing. I'm—I'm afraid of them. . . . This voice tells me that the river is my only friend and that I should go there. It's so awfully hard to think, Duncan. There's just this voice—which is not a voice, really, I know—and the queer feeling in the pit of my stomach, as if I'm going to be dreadfully sick." Her voice was less controlled; she found the sobs were crowding into the words.

"But why?" he asked. "Why? Did Harry's death mean so much to you?"

"It was a shock. I respected him, and he'd been awfully good to Janis, and me. He'd saved me from making a fool of myself over some man who was infatuated with my money—"

"I've talked with Pine. He seems to think that was why you hated Harry Johnson."

"But I didn't hate him," she sobbed.

SHE stopped, feeling peculiarly uneasy. Her stomach fluttered slightly; her nostrils quivered against the odor which was sickening her.

"Ugh!" She sniffed. "That smell. . . . Let's get away from here, Duncan. I can't stand it—reminds me of the warm, suffocating odor the nights when. . . ."

He sniffed, too, then looked into the blacksmith shop. A drift of the odor moved lazily on the faint breeze. "He must be having trouble with his draft in there. You're right, it is awful."

They drove back to Idlewood in silence, where Janis, Roger and Mr. Billings were having tea. Duncan declined an invitation to join them, but finally promised to come to dinner that evening.

Marion walked to the door with him, not wanting him to go. She knew she'd be afraid without him. She was hardly prepared for the way he wrapped his strong, tweed clad arm around her and drew her close. His lips searched briefly, found hers, and was gone.

She was more upset by Duncan's quick embrace than she had been by his telling her that he had been asking questions in the village. And she was far from happy that Janis had insisted he come back for dinner.

Janis stopped at her room that night, to see if she were ready to go down for dinner. Marion hadn't dressed. She was lying across her bed, clad in her faded blue bathrobe.

"Really, Marion!" Janis said. "I thought you'd be all excited about tonight."

Marion closed her eyes tightly, to keep her fear from showing. "I'm not coming down. I don't want—"

"But darling, you must!" Her younger sister's voice held the softest note of sympathy. "I wouldn't have invited him—"

"Stop it, Jan! I don't want to see him, do you hear!" She flung her face into the protective shadows of the pillow, sobbing.

Janis' hand found her shoulder, comforting-ly. "Marion, you can't make me believe what you're saying."

"Jan, oh, Jan," Marion sobbed. "I can't see him again."

"But, darling, why?"

"You must know," Marion said fiercely. A mirthless smile became a snarl upon her lips.

"How can I think of loving anyone? Or letting anyone love me? I'm not a normal young woman—I'm Marion Carter, don't you remember? The girl the police think killed her step-father!"

"But—"

"No, let me finish." She grew calmer now, but since she had started talking, she was no longer afraid to say what she had to say.

"Twice I've tried to kill myself—you know that. Well, what assurance do I have that I won't try to do it again? How do I know I—" Her eyes grew larger at the sudden contemplation which rose to plague her—"How do I know that one of these strange spells won't come over me, and make me kill, not myself—but Duncan. Or you . . . or Roger—"

"Stop it, Marion! Stop it!" Her younger sister's hand lashed out and caught her across the face, leaving the reddened imprint of her fingers on the whiteness of the skin. "You're not going to help yourself like this! You're not going to kill anyone. Do you hear me?"

Tenderly, Janis placed her arm around her sister's shoulder. "You've got to snap out of it. Come on, now. Be a good girl . . ."

Marion felt weak. Spent by her outburst, she meekly found herself submitting, when Janis helped her dress. But even then, she felt a chilling trepidation. How long had it been now since she had tried to kill—

She tried to banish the thought.

When she was just about to leave, Mary, the maid, came in to lay a few chunks of coal beside the fireplace.

"I'll just take the chill off your room, Miss Marion," the maid said.

Marion thanked her and went on downstairs. She was just in time to meet Duncan, arriving. His mouth opened in frank admiration of her loveliness; he whistled softly.

He grinned, then, and said something like, "Hubba, hubba," she thought. He came forward as if to take her in his arms.

The others were in the library, sleek and comfortable-looking in their evening clothes. Roger, impeccable as ever, wore a splash of colored, lapel decorations he'd acquired in the war. Drinks were served, and Marion found Duncan watching her queerly.

She felt uncomfortable as if something were going to happen at any moment.

Was this to be another night of horror . . . ?

Just after dinner, when they were having their coffee and liquer, Duncan exploded the bombshell. He held aloft his tiny glass.

"A toast," he told the others gaily. He looked at Marion for a moment, the ghost of a smile in his eyes. His glass dipped to her in a salute. "To the future Mrs. Duncan MacClure!"

THERE was a stir of excitement around the room. Marion looked with startled eyes at the faces there; they were looking to her for confirmation. She saw Duncan's glance, eager, strangely, mutely pleading, and again the surge of uneasiness filled her.

"How nice," Janis said finally. "How very nice. She beamed from her sister to Duncan. "Congratulations!"

Then everyone babbled. She tried to speak

into the small sea of sound, but her voice was swept away by Duncan's next speech.

"We intended to keep it a secret for a while longer, but—" He grinned at them, though the glance he gave Marion was secretive, bidding her not to interrupt. His hand found hers, squeezed it hard. "Well, fact of the matter is, I'll be leaving here shortly and taking Marion with me—"

"Leaving?" Roger asked. "Where to?"

"I've got a commission to do some murals in San Francisco."

Billings nodded heavily. "But need you two just pack off—"

"It's quite necessary," Duncan said firmly. "It'll take a good six months to do the work." He drew Marion to him, briefly, then made apologies to the others for his sudden haste in leaving. In the hall, he stopped her questions with a softly-laid finger on her lips.

"I know I was rather abrupt, but you've got to believe me. I love you. I want you to marry me." He grinned his pleasant, lopsided grin. "Don't rush into it—if you want time to think about it. . . . I—I couldn't resist the chance to be dramatic in there—"

"But Duncan, you don't know me—you don't know what it's like for me—"

"I know this," he said firmly. He kissed her.

"See what I mean?" he said.

Downstairs the clock struck three, in the solemn booming notes that tore through her, and she knew with one part of her mind that she had been in bed for four hours now. She had felt surprisingly fine after Duncan had gone; she had gone to bed far happier than she had been anytime since Harry had died. . .

Had she slept, she wondered. She had no recollection of a lapse of time, or the unawareness that usually is associated with sleep. In the darkness she had lain, listening despite herself to the sounds the old house made, to the creaking which told her that the house was settling for the night.

Am I alone, she wondered. . . .

The question thrilled her immensely. It became suddenly important that she find out if there was anyone else in the big house. *Hurry*, she thought, *I must hurry or they will find me and put me back in bed, and Roger will be called, and he will give me a sleeping pill.*

Quickly she flung the covers away, and leaped out onto the thickly-carpeted floor. She moved quickly and lithely—unaware of her strange beauty in the pale moonlight which seeped into a corner of the room. Perhaps two or three steps from the bed she stumbled but did not fall.

She remembered, only vaguely, the last time—the time when she had almost succeeded. She remembered, but with a thick, furry edge upon her thoughts, so that it was

less a memory than an instinct. Who had stopped her . . . ?

Crossing the room, she caught faint sight of herself in the full-length mirror. For a moment, a wave of weakness assailed her, and she stood wavering in the darkness over near the wall. On her quivering legs, she made for the door, the first wave of sickness clutching at her. *No, she thought, I must not get sick!*

She turned the knob and stepped outside into the corridor. There were no sounds in the house. The long, carpeted corridor which led to the staircase wore not a light.

If only I don't get sick. . . .

Moving slowly, with almost exaggerated physical attempts at silence, she reached the stairs. It was growing clearer in her mind, despite the nausea; she knew exactly what she had to do, now. Outside, she could race to the river. Even now she could see the moonlight on the bridge and the water—the cool, inviting water.

Within a minute she had reached the front door and was out through it. The night was not very cold, but with the sickness in her she felt a chill. Her heart was racing wildly, and a reckless urgency made her move more quickly. She felt the sharp ground.

She was free! Free at last!

"Marion!"

The voice chased her, then she heard the footsteps pounding behind. A pair of arms clamped about her; despite her struggles she could not break free.

"Marion! Stop it!" the voice commanded.

She struggled all the more, now. She must get to the river. She must!

The hold on her relaxed momentarily. She tried to twist away, but another person had come up to hold her.

"Take care of her," she heard. "I'll get him." The voice moved away. "Bring her inside. . . ."

Against the rising sickness in her she was helpless. She could fight no longer; quite suddenly things began to whirl, and a cloak of sudden darkness smothered her.

THERE was a faint *slap, slap* noise—a hand patting her cheek, Marion realized. She tried to bring her eyes into focus and gradually she was able to make out the figure of Janis sitting next to the couch on which she lay.

As from a distance Marion heard Duncan's voice:

"So that's how it was. He used Adamsite gas, which he picked up while he was still in the Army. It's a well known fact that Adamsite will cause a temporary mental depression, as well as a sickness physically, and since it smells just like coal gas, no one would

ever guess that it was present. Marion was upset over Harry Johnson's death; it worked making her try to commit suicide."

Hamilton Pine, who stood at the far end of the room with Mr. Billings, said slowly:

"Then you think that's how Johnson was killed, too?"

"Probably," Duncan told him. "But I'm only guessing there. I know he used it on Marion. We caught him trying to get that gas cartridge out of Marion's fireplace!"

"It was unbelievable, at first," Billings said. Pine nodded slowly. "A new one on me."

"It wasn't so very unusual," Duncan said. "He saw a shortcut to a fortune by marrying Janis. But he had to kill Johnson and then get rid of Marion, so that Janis would inherit. . . . I just speeded things up a little tonight by saying that Marion and I were going to be married—which would have put another person in his way, you see. So he had to act fast!"

Fully conscious now Marion realized they had been talking about Roger! She looked at Janis, saw the well of tears in her sister's eyes, saw a battered Roger Southern sprawled in a chair where Pine could watch him.

"Marion!" Duncan had turned to her.

Things were spinning in her head. Roger—a murderer! Poor Janis. . . . And from somewhere came the horrible knowledge that once again she, too, was alone—that Duncan's telling her he loved her was all part of the weird affair. No wonder he'd made all that show of affection: he'd been using her as a bait in his trap!

"Well, I've got it all straight, I think," said Pine, nodding dubiously. To Roger he said, "Okay, bo, let's go—before I let Mr. MacClure work on you some more!"

The little detective herded his prisoner out. Then Janis and Billing left the room.

Kneeling beside Marion, Duncan said softly, "We had a doctor with us too. He says you'll be all right, Marion. He's gone to get a car to take you to the hospital." He paused. "I'm sorry that Pine and I couldn't have cooked up anything better—"

"You were waiting outside tonight," she said dully, feeling that she must say something to hide her aching heart.

"Yes, darling."

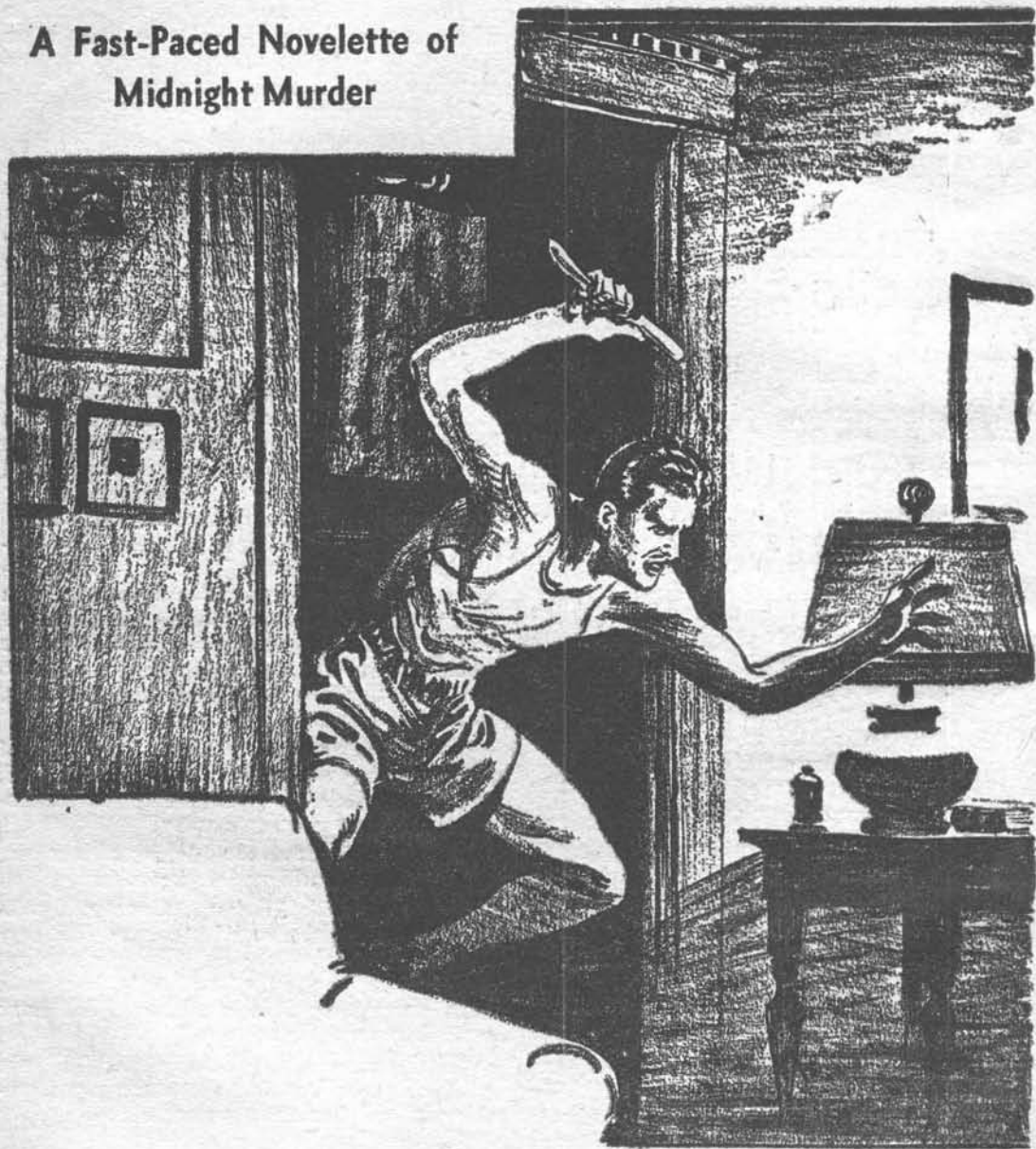
Darling? Was it just a word?

Something must have told him what was going on inside of her.

"Darling," he said again, this time much more reverently. "A few days—a week at the most—and you'll be fit as a fiddle." He grinned, and touched her shoulder tenderly. "I'll need that much time, won't I, to arrange for the license and things. . . ."

DEAD MEN

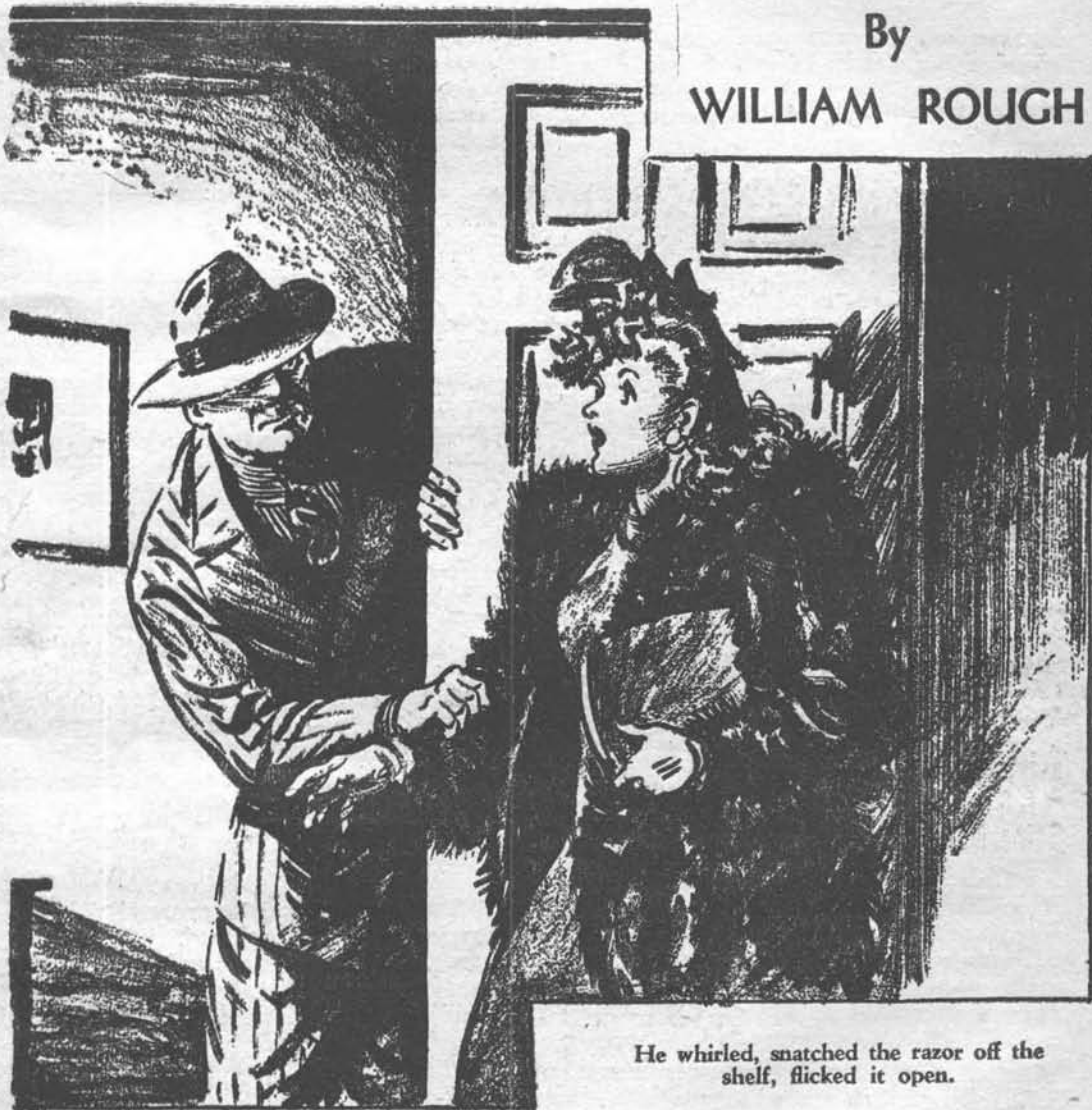
A Fast-Paced Novelette of
Midnight Murder



To the gilded playboys—and playgals—the Colony Plaza offered the height of luxury. But to one man, that fabulous chrome-and-plush hostelry was a maze of sheer terror, with a corpse for every corridor, and at the last dead end—his own lifeless body!

DON'T BLEED •

By
WILLIAM ROUGH



He whirled, snatched the razor off the shelf, flicked it open.

CHAPTER ONE

Trail of the Hunted

SNIPS McGLYNN spotted Garvey, one of the house dicks, and jolly Mr. Frazer coming into the barber shop of the swank Colony Plaza Hotel at the same time. He swung his chair—Number Eight—invitingly to Frazer. Not that he had anything against Garvey; it was just that Mr. Frazer, who was

reputed to own a flock of Mexican gold mines, was a liberal tipper; and when a guy is planning on marrying a cute little manicurist like Tillie Brady, he has to look at things like that.

Srips saw Mr. Frazer give him the nod and stepped back politely, glanced down the gleaming shop to where Tillie's fluffy golden head

was bent demurely over a customer's hands. She didn't notice Snips because she kept her mind on her work, and her nail file was brisk.

Snips grinned happily, then stiffened. Lew Polio, the shop manager, had seen him glancing at Tillie, and the dapper man's dark eyes glittered hotly. He danced forward, caught Mr. Frazer's plump arm and simpered, "Take Number Four, sir."

Mr. Frazer shrugged amiably and pulled his favorite gag. "Long and fluffy on top, barber, sheik style around the ears." He was bald as a golf ball.

The barbers tittered politely. Not Snips. His small, thin features were tight. His neat, soft hands were knots at the sides of his starched white coat. Lew Polio couldn't fire him because Snips rated the job, after three years in the army; but Lew was trying to make things so miserable that Snips would quit. By rights, Snips rated Chair Three. Lew had stuck him at the end on Number Eight, sneering that a thin-haired squirt was bad advertising for any barber shop and Snips should keep out of sight towards the back.

Lew steered every good tipper away from Snips, made dirty cracks and wasn't even above bumping Snips' arm when he was shaving someone and then hissing, "Butcher!"

But this was the blow-off. Snips started for him. Lew wanted him to quit, so okay, he would. But he'd do it up brown—he'd smash Lew's nose all over his olive-skinned puss.

Hard fingers closed on Snips' biceps. It was the house man, Garvey. "Shave," he grunted. "Snap it up!"

It still wouldn't have been enough to stop Snips, by itself; but just then Tillie finished her party and looked up with a smile that was all for him. *That* stopped him. He guessed it would always make him catch his breath when Tillie smiled for him. She was blonde, blue-eyed, red-lipped, just five feet two and everything that he wanted. If he lost the job, it would take just that much longer to get together a nest egg for Tillie.

He pulled his smarting eyes away from Lew Polio, slung a bib around Garvey's leathery neck and stropped his razor, making the steel "slap-slap" the leather viciously. He caught himself. No use taking it out on the fine Swiss steel. It was the keenest and best balanced razor in the shop; a GI pal had picked it up overseas for Snips. Snips hadn't got out of the country himself. He'd cut hair at Camp Pickett all the time, which made him a little bashful about wearing his discharge button. He carried it in his wallet, though, just in case anybody doubted him.

He brandished the razor, blurted wildly, "Wouldn't I just like to get Lew Polio under this!"

"Huh?" Garvey's shrewd eyes bored up at

him for a second. Then Garvey laughed. It was funny—then!

Snips got Garvey out of the chair finally and slid down the aisle to whisper to Tillie, "Honey, that green smock makes you look like a million." Lew Polio's glittering eyes followed him every inch of the way, but the man said nothing till he was on his way up to the hotel to shave Gordon Maxe, a bigshot guest. Then he stopped at Tillie's table and hissed something. Tillie's eyes flashed wide. Her soft mouth trembled. Snips knew that Lew had made another crack of some kind. There was only one thing to do: poke Lew and take Tillie out of this shop!

Snips would have raced after Lew and done it right there, only he had someone in his chair. He no sooner got rid of him than another customer plopped down.

Snips' scissors clicked, his razor flashed, his hands dug the customer's scalp. While he was working, the telephone rang. The shine boy answered it, announced, "Fo' Mist' Garvey. That Mrs. Lockridge Burnard on twenty-two say a fight goin' on outside her door."

Mr. Frazer whooped from under a hot towel, "Hurry it up, son! I gotta be a knight to the rescue of my lady fair!" He laughed like it was a good one, and Snips recalled shop gossip about the wealthy, widowed Mrs. Burnard trying to buy a piece of Mr. Frazer's gold mines. She'd had her cap set for Gordon Maxe till Mr. Frazer showed up, then she'd switched to him.

It didn't mean anything to Snips. He whisked the bib off his party and scooted down to Tillie. "Hon, what did Lew say to you?"

"Forget it, Snipsy." But her smile was tight.

"You tell me!" Snips burst.

"Don't you order me around! We're not married yet!" Tillie flared. "Oh, all right, then. He said he wants a date with me tonight or he—he'll give me notice."

Snips whirled.

Tillie squeaked, "Snipsy, what are you going to do?"

"**B**UST Lew's nose and take you out of here!" Snips yelled, shucking his white coat, as he skidded back to his chair. He slapped his razor into its case, shoved it into his hip pocket; he knew he wouldn't be working in this shop any more. He grabbed his street coat, crammed his natty white Panama hat down hard and charged through the door that led up to the huge marble hotel lobby. He was five feet five, a hundred and forty pounds, but people got out of his way.

Lew Polio would be finished shaving Gordon Maxe by this time and had probably sneaked down to his own room for a drink, or something. Snips barged into an elevator

cab, snapped, "Fifteen!" The elevator operator, Carl Pence, shuffled. "What you going up there for, Snips?" He wore a natty blue tunic and trousers, which failed to smarten up his pimpled face and receding chin. Snips didn't answer. His heels dug marks in the luxurious carpeting when he sprang out on the fifteenth floor. He got to Lew Polio's door and spanked it with tight knuckles.

There was no answer and Snips shouted, "I know you're in there! Open up!" He grabbed the doorknob, rattled it. It gave. The door opened—and, yes, Lew was inside, all right. He'd be inside from now on—inside a grave.

Snips didn't understand it right off. All he saw was Lew's crumpled figure on the floor. Lew's white coat was mussed and awry. His dark eyes were wide open. His olive skin was pasty.

Snips was paralyzed for a second, then he started forward. He didn't try to dive, but that's what he did—headfirst into the floor. The reason was that he was helped from behind. By a sap, or something equally brutal. It caught him behind the ear and he plunged into blackness.

Snips dreamed that Tillie was giving him a manicure. He felt liquid nail polish on his fingers. It wouldn't dry right, it seemed, and finally Tillie applied quick-drying fluid on top of it with little cotton swabs and then, of all things, put the cotton in Snips' mouth.

He sputtered, tried to spit it out. It clung to his lips, and the liquid on his fingers still didn't dry; it got sticky.

Suddenly he sat up and bled at his hands. He groaned. What was wrong with Tillie, putting red polish on a man's nails! Well, that would come off quick. Snips swiped his hands on his pants. The polish wasn't dry, at that, and wiped off easily. But it made sticky streaks on the backs of his fingers and these picked up cotton. There was cotton still in his mouth, too, darn it. Snips blew, saw a piece of it dance off his lips and float airily.

He scowled. Who ever heard of a cotton swab floating in the air? His eyes focussed, then he understood: it wasn't cotton at all; it was a feather.

Sure, there were feathers clinging to his hands, too. Now where in heck had they come from?

He tried to stand, slopped on his face. He pushed up on hands and knees and smelled a strong aromatic odor of some kind. He saw where it came from—Lew Polio's white barber jacket. He couldn't help seeing. His face was only six inches from Lew now, and Lew had red nail polish on his neck. Lots of red nail polish, a crimson lake of it.

"Mother Mary!" Snips burst and put all his strength into pushing away. He fell back,

scrambled to his feet, lungs laboring. It wasn't nail polish on Lew Polio's neck at all—it was red, red blood! It came from a gash that made a semi-circle under Lew's chin from jawline to jawline. Someone had cut Lew's throat!

Snips caught at the bed to keep from floundering. It seemed that there was no place to put his feet except in blood and feathers. The room was a shambles, as if a rugged fight had taken place, and the feathers came from a bursted pillow.

They were strewn all over the carpet and furniture. The free ones swirled in the air currents, but the ones that had touched the red liquid, especially under Lew's chin, had stuck and clung.

Snips' breathing stopped, then he gagged. He'd heard of men being tarred and feathered—Lew Polio was *bloodied* and feathered!

Snips wanted out—fast! He lurched toward the door. Then he saw it. The razor beside Lew's body. *His* razor!

Snips clutched at his hip pocket, but it wasn't necessary. He knew that the razor couldn't be in two places at the same time. If it was on the floor beside Lew, it couldn't be in its case. Nor was it. Snips spied the case across the room. He felt numb. Lew's throat had been slashed with Snips' own razor.

The door crashed open behind Snips. Garvey's gravel voice ordered, "Don't move, boy!" A second later, he grunted, "McGlynn, I'll be damned! You *meant* it when you said you'd like to cut his throat!"

"No!" Snips screamed. "I didn't! I didn't mean it and I didn't do it! He was like that when I came in! Only his throat wasn't cut!"

"Hagh!" Garvey spat.

Snips wailed, "Honest, Garvey! Somebody knocked me out and used my razor."

"You admit it's your razor?" Garvey shot. "You'd find out, anyhow," Snips gulped. "I had it in my pocket. I was going to quit working at the shop, so I brought it along."

Garvey sandpapered a leathery cheek thoughtfully. "That's it, then. You came up here to even things with Lew before you quit. The room here says you had a good fight. He started to get the best of you and you pulled the razor."

GARVEY nodded, satisfied. Snips trembled. He was caught sweet. Garvey, or any cop for that matter, would swear he had motive, opportunity and the weapon. The best lawyer in the country couldn't argue those away, even if Snips put himself in debt for years to hire one.

Garvey said glumly, "Open and shut, dammit!"

Snips' brain whirled. Garvey once had run his own detective agency but hadn't made out.

He was biding his time as house dick here at the Colony Plaza, hoping for a big case so that he'd get his name in the papers and be able to capitalize on it and start up for himself again.

"Garvey!" Snips blurted. "Listen, if you arrest me, the case'll be closed right away. There won't be any publicity for you at all. But if you let me get away and *then* catch me, it'll be better for you. Honest to Gawd I won't run out on you. I'll meet you anywhere you say, just so I get a chance to find the guy who really did this. Will you do it, Garvey? Please!"

The house dick's eyes flickered. Snips could see that Garvey was weighing the proposition.

"Honest, Garvey, I'll keep in touch with you!" Snips promised. "What brought you up here, anyhow?"

Garvey grunted. "Somebody called down and said there was noise here. I didn't hurry. Had another call about noise from Mrs. Burnard a while back and there was no sign of it when I got to her floor."

"But there wasn't any noise here," Snips cried. "Look! The furniture is turned over, but it's not broken. There wasn't any fight. Lew was out cold on the floor when I came in and the room was okay. Somebody slugged me, then made it look like there'd been a fight and cut Lew's throat. It must have happened that way! Give me a fair shake, Garvey."

Garvey's gun hand relaxed a little. He frowned, still trying to make up his mind.

"Please!" Snips pleaded.

Garvey scowled, shook his head. "Nup. Can't do. I want a build up, not down. They'd ride hell out of me for letting a squirt like you lam."

Snips clenched his fists, opened his mouth to argue some more. He closed it, felt his shoulders sag. It was no use. He was licked.

"No!" he yelled—and jumped Garvey.

He was operating on instinct now. He'd tried to use his head and it hadn't worked. His fists were all that were left. He wasn't big, but he was compact and wiry, and he had strength in his wrists and forearms.

Too. Garvey wasn't expecting action and had eased up. There was more surprise than pain in his first, "Oof!" as Snips' left hooked into his jaw.

Snips felt his knuckles on the bone of Garvey's face, struck again. The house man spat a curse, pulled back and slashed out with his gun barrel. It raked Snips' collar bone.

Snips bleated in pain, felt himself careen off balance and start down. He flung out both hands, trying to grab Garvey anywhere. He missed Garvey's waist and chest, but his arms were still out in a half circle when his knees hit the floor. His soft, but strong, hands scraped down Garvey's thighs. Snips felt the

man's legs getting thinner as he dropped his hands. When he got to Garvey's ankles, they were thin enough to hang onto. Snips hung.

Then he felt Garvey lurch. He yanked on both Garvey's ankles. Garvey spilled backwards. The floor shook as the house cop's beam hit it. He howled and thrashed around. Snips sent strength to his knees and came up. He kicked just once, straight and true, and sent Garvey's .38 clunking across the room. Then he made tracks.

Out the door, down the corridor. Down the first flight of front stairs. Around the corridor on the next landing and back to the service stairs. Snips knew the hotel layout of old. He was twisting and backtracking instinctively but driving ever closer to the ground floor exits.

CHAPTER TWO

A Helping Hand

THEN it hit him: he'd started on the fifteenth floor. All Garvey had needed to do was call the desk and warn the other house cops. They'd be deployed in the lobby and even at the rear of the hotel, and one of them would be outside wising up the patrolmen in the vicinity. The second Snips put foot outside, if he got that far, he'd be shot at or slugged.

He cowered on a staircase. He had to hide in the hotel, at least till the hunt died down. What else could he do?

His breathing, he knew, was loud enough to attract attention from anyone near him. He tried to stop it, control it, but it was no good. By a miracle, his white Panama hat hadn't slid off through it all; it was because he didn't have much hair and he always pulled it on tight. He took it off now, held it over his mouth to cut down the wheeze of his lungs. It didn't help.

"They think I'm on the way down!" he panted. "I'll go up!"

He reversed his field, pumped back up the stairs. One flight. Two flights. He was back on twelve again. There was no thirteenth floor in a hotel, so the next one was numbered fourteen. Snips halted, flesh crawling. He couldn't risk passing fifteen again: the floor would be alive with house cops. He shivered. Where could a guy hide? One of the rooms, sure, but which one?

Snips breathed, "Mr. Frazer lives in 14071 And he's not in!" The jolly, bald man had left the barber shop to go to Mrs. Burnard's suite on twenty-two, Snips remembered. He didn't think any further than that. Mr. Frazer was the kind of guy who'd leave his door unlocked, too. All Snips wanted was sanctuary till his heart stopped pounding.

He scuttled up the remaining steps to fourteen, scanned the corridor, found it empty and slid down to 1407. The door was unlocked. Snips went into the suite like a gopher whisking into a hole. He leaned his shivery back against the door and tried to keep his remaining strength from dribbling away. His lungs made harsh laboring sounds, then quieted a little, and something suspiciously like a sob trickled from his parched lips. What was he to do now?

His knees were too wobbly to support him. He flopped in a chair. There was no meaning to it, yet he'd been framed for Lew Polio's murder. Why? Why would anyone want to kill Lew in the first place? That the killer would frame someone who didn't get along with Lew was understandable enough, but why kill him in the first place? Miserable as Lew had been, he hadn't seemed the type to get his throat cut.

"Unless there was something crooked about him being flush lately," Snips mumbled to himself. Lew made a good salary as shop manager, but the past few weeks he'd been spending plenty. He'd bought new suits and had taken a suite here in the hotel, and he'd bought a new car. "He must have been in something crooked," Snips nodded. "He'd had a fight, or something, with the guys he's in it with and they rubbed him out, then saw a chance to frame me and did it."

Snips nodded vigorously. After Lew had shaved Gordon Maxe and come to his own room, he'd met someone who had slugged him. This someone had either stayed inside the room or waited around outside and, seeing Snips stomp up to Lew's door, had gotten him, then cut Lew's throat with Snips' razor and faked a fight scene which was plenty realistic.

Snips recalling the bloody feathers, shivered. He saw three or four of them still clinging to his jacket and pants. He snatched them off, and saw that his hands were still sticky, though there wasn't too much blood on his clothing. He started for the bathroom to get the stuff cleaned off. He brushed the red-dyed feathers into the commode. One of them missed it. Snips picked it out of the air, felt it between thumb and forefinger. Something clanged warningly in his head.

He fingered the feather, searched his pants for another, found one in a cuff. He compared the two. One was dry and clean and softly brittle. The other seemed more pliable, moistish and soiled.

IT WAS important, Snips knew, without quite knowing why. He cudged his brain for the answer but couldn't grasp it. He wrapped the feathers in a handkerchief, started to wash up. He was a little steadier now,

which was lucky—for suddenly a nattily uniformed man had come up behind him.

Snips saw the man's pimpled face and receding chin in the mirror over the washbowl as the man jumped him. It was Carl Pence, the elevator operator.

"Gotcha, Snips!" Carl yelled.

Snips had a bar of soap in his hand. He writhed around and smacked it wetly at the pimples. He missed the first time and Carl Pence opened his mouth in a laugh.

Snips jabbed out again with the bar of soap. It traveled straight and true and rammed into Carl's mouth, right back to his tonsils. Carl tried to choke it out, failed, and clawed at it. He had only one hand free. Snips batted it aside and whipped a stinger to Carl's stomach. That kicked the soap out of Carl's mouth, together with a tortured, "Ugh!-l-l!"

"You want more, Carl?" Snips challenged, breaking clean and cocking his fists.

Carl shrank away, blubbering soapy saliva that drooled down on his neat blue tunic. He made no effort to continue brawling. In fact, he looked at Snips as if he'd bitten off more than he could chew.

Snips stuck out his chest. He wasn't used to such respect. "Punk!" he leered at Carl. "How did you know I was in Mr. Frazer's suite?"

"I didn't, honest!" Carl snatched a towel and swabbed his chin. His pale eyes were skittery. "I just came in to see Mr. Frazer about . . . something. I seen you here and knew the cops are after you."

"So you thought you'd be a big shot and nab me," Snips cut in. "You thought I'd be easy. What did you want to see Mr. Frazer about?"

Carl eyed the door, took a step toward it. Snips stepped in front of him, fists ready. "Tell me, smart guy," he ordered.

Carl bit his lip. "Garvey thinks maybe Mr. Frazer heard you in the barber shop when you threatened to cut Lew's throat. I said I'd come up and get Mr. Frazer, is all."

Snips cried, "I *didn't* threaten to cut Lew's throat! I was just burned up and made a crack! Jeez, a guy don't have a chance!"

He quivered. This was always what happened when you shot off your mouth. For a second, he knew what it was like to hate cops and the way they built up a case against you. Garvey would get fat, jolly Mr. Frazer to swear he had heard the threat, and Mr. Frazer was just the kind of guy a jury would certainly believe.

Snips burst, "But a jury would believe Mr. Frazer if he was for me, too! I gotta see him first!"

Snips started to turn, remembered Carl. He couldn't let Carl walk out and run for Garvey.

He wet his lips. "Hey, look at yourself in the mirror, Carl."

"Huh?" Carl turned curiously. Snips hit him behind the ear smartly with the edge of a stiff palm. He'd never had any jiu jitsu training himself, but he'd seen other GI's practising it and had wanted to try it. He watched Carl Pence crumple. "Boy," he marveled, "it sure works!"

He was going to let Carl lay and just lock the bathroom door. But Mr. Frazer was up in Mrs. Burnard's suite on the twenty-second floor, and Snips had to get up there without attracting attention. He peeked out into the corridor, saw Carl's elevator cab with the door open, and went back and pulled off the man's blue uniform coat and trousers. He got into them himself, dragged Carl out of the bathroom to a bedroom closet and tied him with Mr. Frazer's shoe laces. A few moments later he was zooming up in the elevator.

He skinned the car doors open on the twenty-second floor and rapped on 2212. Mrs. Lockridge Burnard opened the door herself. She was small, blonde, well-dressed, and for a second Snips hoped that Tillie would hold up as well when she was fifty. Then Mrs. Burnard said, "Yes?" and looked back over her shoulder and giggled, and Snips changed his mind. He didn't want Tillie ever to become coy.

He said, "Is Mr. Frazer here, ma'am? I gotta see him."

Mrs. Burnard's brows climbed. Snips decided they were much too dark and slinky; she didn't spare the make-up. "Really," she began.

MR. FRAZER'S voice boomed, "Yowsuh, I'm here, son. What do you want?"

Snips slid past the woman. She looked petulantly at Frazer. "Horace, can't we be alone?"

"Shucks, honey, the kid's in trouble," Mr. Frazer said. "Bet he's got the same kind of trouble as us—he's in love."

Mrs. Burnard tittered. "The poor thing!" Snips blurted, "That's not all of it, though! They think I cut Lew Polio's throat! They want you to testify that you heard me say I'd do it in the barber shop, Mr. Frazer. You won't, will you?"

Mrs. Burnard screamed, "Horace—how awful! Call the police!"

"Sh'h!" Mr. Frazer's pink jowls were grave. "Now what's this all about?"

Snips rushed through his story while Mrs. Burnard fluttered and gasped. Mr. Frazer polished his bald head with a lavender handkerchief no bigger than a bath mat.

He said, "Well, son, I didn't hear you threaten to cut this Polio's throat."

Snips gulped, "Gee, thanks. I—"

Mr. Frazer frowned. "But I don't see that it'll do much good. Your best bet it to give yourself up and—"

"I wouldn't have a chance!" Snips bleated. "I've got to find something that will clear me!"

"Horace, I'm going to call the police!" Mrs. Burnard cried.

"Hush, Lambykins," Mr. Frazer cajoled. "The boy is innocent. We've got to help him." He pinched his jowls thoughtfully. "I'll bet Gordon Maxe would know what to do."

"Horace!" Mrs. Burnard protested. "You know I dislike that man! You said yourself that he wasn't to be trusted. Remember? You suspected that he was just being nice to me to sell me stock in a worked-out gold mine."

"True, true," Mr. Frazer admitted. "But I knew him in Mexico and he's had legal experience—so long as we're on guard against him we're safe." He turned to Snips. "Come along, son, and we'll see Mr. Maxe. He's shrewd, and he'll advise you what to do just in the hope that it will put him in solid with me and Mrs. Burnard."

Snips licked his lips. He didn't know what to do. But when Mr. Frazer slung a friendly arm over his shoulders and steered him toward the door, he went along. Mr. Frazer had the right idea, maybe. You can't always get out of trouble by yourself; you've got to look for men who know the ropes.

"He's on twenty-eight," Mr. Frazer said, in the corridor.

"I've got an elevator," Snips said. "I met Carl Pence, the operator, in your suite, sir, and— Please don't get sore—I tied him up in your closet."

Mr. Frazer's jaws could get hard, in spite of their fat. "I don't know as I like *that*, son," he growled. "What were either one of you doing in my place?"

"I went there to hide," Snips said apologetically. "He said he came up to take you to Garvey as a witness against me. I couldn't let him walk out then, could I?"

"But they'll notice his elevator isn't running and—" Mr. Frazer broke off, eyeing the elevator indicators. One of them hovered at 22 even now.

Snips saw it and jerked, looked wildly up and down the corridor. The door of a mop closet was a great deal closer than the elevator bank. Snips dived for it, hissing, "Maybe somebody's coming to see why the cab is stuck on this floor."

He was right. He'd no sooner pulled the closet door nearly shut than an elevator operator got out of his cab and peered at Carl Pence's car.

"Hey, mister," the man called to Mr. Frazer, "seen anything of the guy who runs this crate?"

"No, son, I haven't," Mr. Frazer replied.

The elevator operator sighed, "He'll get hell for loafing around. I'll report his cab up here. Everything happens at once, don't it? A barber cuts a guy's throat; they catch a guy stealing chickens in the kitchen; and with cops all over the place Carl has to lay down on the job."

The man clanged his doors again. Mr. Frazer called softly, "Okay, son."

CHAPTER THREE

Jaws of the Trap

BUT Snips' head was whirling. Something was trying to click into place. It was the mention of chickens being stolen in the kitchen that had tightened him up. There was no sense to it, yet some deep intuition was at work. Snips shook his head. The feathers all around Lew Polio's body must have made him sensitive to anything that smacked of them, such as chickens.

"Hurry, son," Mr. Frazer urged.

"Yessir." Snips started out of the closet, skidded a little, caught himself. He saw that he'd slipped on white powder that had spilled from a can of deodorant. He smelled the familiar tang of the strong aromatic odor, but it wasn't until he and Mr. Frazer were shooting up in the elevator that it connected. He blurted, "Why that's the same stuff I smelled on Lew Polio's coat in the room when I found him!"

"Whassat, son?" Mr. Frazer said.

Snips shook his head. "I don't know, sir, honest. There's something I should be able to figure out, but I can't. What was going on outside Mrs. Burnard's suite when she called for Garvey?"

Mr. Frazer waved carelessly. "She said she heard a fight there, but no one saw anything and she hadn't looked out herself. Here's Maxe's floor."

Snips tried to swallow the lump under his tongue as he followed Mr. Frazer to 2805. He had to trust *someone*, he supposed, but he'd never seen this Gordon Maxe and Mr. Frazer himself had told Mrs. Burnard that Maxe was trying to promote phony mine stock.

Mr. Frazer opened the door, calling, "Gordon!" There was no answer and the fat man peered into the bedroom, came back frowning. "Maxe must have stepped out, son," he told Snips. "M'm, but we can't leave that elevator car on this floor or someone will come snooping. Suppose you wait here while I get rid of it."

Snips swallowed. "All r-right, sir."

Mr. Frazer waddled toward the corridor door again, paused. "Another thing," he said thoughtfully. "We can't let Carl Pence stay

tied up in my suite. Tell you what, he can probably be bought, can't he?"

Snips nodded.

"Good," Mr. Frazer said. "If I'm going to help you, I want to do it right. Shuck out of that uniform, son, and I'll untie Pence and give it back to him. I'll pay him to keep his mouth shut for a couple hours at least and bring your own clothes up here to you."

Snips hesitated. It sounded logical, yet . . .

Mr. Frazer advised, "Maybe Mr. Maxe will think your best bet is to get out of the hotel, and you wouldn't get far in that uniform without somebody spotting you."

It was the clinching argument. Snips pulled off the natty blue tunic, stepped out of the trousers. Mr. Frazer scooped them up. "If Maxe comes back before I do, son, just tell him your story and that I brought you here. Keep your chin out now."

Mr. Frazer shut the door. Snips stood in the middle of the sitting room in his jockey shorts and shirt. He shivered, but not from lack of clothing. He realized that he'd entrusted Mr. Frazer with his fate, and everything now depended on the fat man.

There was Gordon Maxe, too. Snips wondered again what kind of man Maxe was. Maybe he'd refuse to help. Maybe he'd take one look at Snips and call Garvey. Mr. Frazer seemed like a jovial sort who'd give a man a hand, but that didn't prove Maxe would.

There was nothing to do but wait and see. Snips paced back and forth. He felt like looking for a dressing gown or something, but if Maxe came in and saw him wearing his clothing it might rub him the wrong way. The best thing was to look helpless, maybe.

But there was no trick to looking helpless, Snips knew. That was exactly how he felt. He tried again to figure out what had tightened him up earlier when the elevator operator who had come looking for Carl had mentioned chickens being stolen in the kitchen. Suddenly he had an idea. He went to the telephone and called the barber shop, asked for Tillie. When she answered, then gasped, "Oh, honey, I'm so worried about you!" Snips felt ashamed that he hadn't got in touch with her sooner. She certainly had known that he was being hunted as a murderer.

"**T**ILLIE, I didn't do it!" he gulped. "Whatever they say, I didn't do it!"

"Honey, I *know* you didn't! I trust you, Snipsy! But what did happen? Where are you?"

Snips said automatically, "I'm in Gordon Maxe's suite, hon. I've been framed for Lew's murder. I want you to do something for me. Find out what happened in the kitchen, will you? Somebody stole chickens, I think, but find out. See who it was and what's going on,

hon. Hurry! Call me back here, or I'll call you."

"I'll do it, Snipsy, but—"

Snips didn't hear the rest. He sensed the corridor door opening, saw a lean black shoestring of a man slipping in and pronged the telephone. He kept his hand on it, though. It was the only weapon handy.

He stuttered, "Y-you're—Are you Mr. Maxe?"

The man's deep-sunk dark eyes were glittering coals. His lips, under a slash of black mustache, scarcely moved as he purred, "That's the name I'm using at the present, yes." His gaze raked Snips' bare shanks. "And you are our little patsy, I take it. I met Frazer outside and he told me he left you here. You'll do nicely, little man."

"I'll do—nicely!" Snips cried. "I'm your patsy! I d-don't know what you m-mean!"

The lean dark man snicked the lock on the door with a flat, metallic sound. He came toward Snips, his long thin arms flexing like the feelers on a skinny black bug. The deep grooves running from the corners of his thin lips to his nostrils told that he was no longer young, yet his hair was black and thick and bushy.

He said silkily, "Don't you understand, little man?"

Snips started to breath faster. "I do understand. I understand some of it, anyhow. You and Mr. Frazer are in something together. Mrs. Burnard said that Mr. Frazer told her not to trust you, but that was just a gag. He brought me right up here for some reason."

Maxe grinned. "An old dodge, but still effective," he said. "Frazer throws suspicion on me and Mrs. Burnard thinks he rescued her and trusts him more."

Snips' nerves were screaming, but he couldn't move. "You and Frazer are after Mrs. Burnard's money!" he squeaked. "But where did Lew Polio come in? You killed him, didn't you?"

"Why, not at all," Maxe murmured. "Murder is a crime. You killed Polio. You slit his throat. Garvey found you right there but let you get away—I should have slugged you harder, little man!"

Snips felt goose pimples on his bare arms and shoulders. He crouched.

"Careful," Maxe warned. Leisurely, he took a compact revolver from under his shoulder, slanted it at Snips. "It will look as if you got away from Garvey," he explained softly, "and then Carl Pence spotted you and tried to take you and you pushed him out of a window."

Snips choked, "Pushed him out of a window! That's a lie! I tied him up in Mr. Frazer's suite, and he's still there!"

Maxe glanced at the watch on his skinny wrist. "Suppose you look out the window."

Snips stared.

"Go ahead," Maxe encouraged. "Frazer's had enough time to get back to his suite and do it."

Snips was fascinated. He moved jerkily to the window, opened it. Twenty-eight stories below a crowd had gathered in the street, huddling around a motionless thing on the pavement. The thing had been human but was now pulp. Snips couldn't make out the pimpled face and receding chin but he recognized Carl Pence's natty blue uniform. He shut his bugging eyes hard, pushed away from the window.

Maxe said regretfully, "If only it weren't crowding things, I could have shoved you on out after him just now. As it is, I want to wait a while so it'll look as if you couldn't stand being hunted and cracked up and jumped."

Snips pressed his fists against his temples with all his might. "Why did you have to kill Carl?" he husked. "He was only an elevator boy."

Maxe's thin shoulders moved negligently. "I lined him up the first day I was in the hotel as a kid who'd like to make a dollar. When I needed an elevator today, I buzzed him, flashed some dough in front of him and he was mine."

SNIPS cried, "You needed an elevator to take Lew Polio from the mop closet on 22 to his room on 15! That's it! Yeah! And later on when Carl saw me go to Lew's room he reported to you. You hurried down and slugged me and framed me."

Maxe stroked his thick black mustache with a yellow thumbnail. "Pence was up to his neck the minute he let me use his elevator. After that he had to string along. The fool bungled when he stole the chicken, though, and I knew that the minute the johns worked on him he'd sing. Thanks for tying him up in Frazer's closet for us."

Snips couldn't keep his eyes off Maxe's mustache and thick black hair. Suddenly he saw it. He burst, "That mustache is phony, and you're wearing a wig. You're disguised! Now I know why Lew Polio had lots of money lately! And why you killed him! And where and when!"

"Tell it to Saint Peter," Maxe mocked. His lean fingers lifted his gun abruptly. "Get into that bathroom!" he lashed.

Snips cursed through his tears, slammed the bathroom door viciously, turned the knob that controlled the belt.

Maxe called, "You're right where I want you, punk. All Frazer has to do to bust that door in is lean on it."

Snips put his head against the cool tile of the bathroom wall, pounded with a fist, im-

DEAD MEN DON'T BLEED

potently. He was trapped pretty. If only he could get out of here or get word to Garvey.

He prowled the bathroom nervously, praying for an idea. Suppose he turned the shower onto the floor. Wouldn't water drip through the ceiling of the suite underneath and get the tenant to complain?

He shook his head. The Colony Plaza was a well constructed building. It would take hours for water to seep through the tile of the bathroom floor and the plaster of the ceiling below.

There was no window in the bathroom, either, no chance to throw something into the street to attract attention. The only way was the way he'd come in, and Snips knew he wouldn't travel three steps.

There wasn't even anything he could throw. Maxe's bathroom was almost as barren as if he'd just walked into the suite. His shaving kit lay on the little shelf over the washbowl and that was all. He'd probably put it out but never used it, since he'd enveigled Lew Polio into shaving him. Snips opened the shaving kit absently. The straight razor was of fair quality, but not nearly as fine as Snips' razor, which was probably marked Exhibit A by now.

Snips put his ear against the door. There was silence beyond, but he was sure Maxe hadn't left by any means. Suddenly there was a faint knock. A chair scraped in the bedroom. Snips realized that Frazer was back and had knocked at the corridor door. Maxe was going to let him in.

Snips waited a second till he figured Maxe was out of the bedroom, walking toward the corridor door. He shot back the bolt on the bathroom door, peeked out just as Maxe opened the corridor door. He expected to see Frazer's belly crowd through the door, but what he saw made his blood run cold. At any other time, Tillie Brady's blonde head, trim legs and neat green smock would have made him glow—but not now! He held his breath, praying that Maxe would get rid of her, that Maxe could get rid of her. He knew Tillie was stubborn and—

CHAPTER FOUR

The Razor's Edge

HE froze. Maxe had shot out a clawing hand and grabbed Tillie's wrist. He pulled her roughly inside.

He whirled, snatched the razor off the shelf, flicked it open.

He was white hot inside, but suddenly cool on the surface. He tiptoed to the bedroom



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door, snatching a pillow off the bed on the
way. He had his finger up to his lips when
Tillie's blue eyes flashed over Maxe's shoul-
der and saw him.

She tried hard not to show surprise, but
her lips parted and Maxe got it. He swiveled.

Snips shot-putted the pillow at the lean
man. It wasn't an accurate shot, but it made
Maxe pull aside and delay his first shot a
tenth of a second.

It was just time enough for Snips to skin
through the doorway so that he wasn't
framed there, an unmissable target. It was
the only break he could hope for. The next
dozen steps had to be straight into the gun.

He expected gun thunder and hot slams on
his body, but none came. His eyes snapped
wide again and he choked, "Oh, hon!" Tillie
had thrown herself on Maxe's back and was
clawing and scratching for all she was worth.
Maxe heaved and flung her aside.

Snips bawled, "You louse—!" and threw
himself on the dark man. Maxe twisted his
gun hand around, trying to get it up into
Snips' midsection. Snips flicked his razor in
a neat little arc. Maxe screamed in pain, eyes
bulging on his dangling thumb.

The gun hit the floor. Maxe struck at Snips
and tried to use his knees. Snips grabbed at
the man's hair, remembered too late that
Maxe's hair was false. His hand came away
with a mop of black wig. He started to drop
it, then swished it around and stabbed it into
Maxe's face.

Maxe kicked and made strangling noises.
Snips got his heel behind Maxe's ankle,
tripped him. He could hold Maxe by the
clothing, but Maxe couldn't hold him. They
went down and Snips held the wig hard on
Maxe's mouth and nose. The dark man's
struggles grew panicky. He was smothering.

Snips dropped his razor and struck down
into the wig. Maxe went limp.

He was mouthing hot words, cursing Maxe
and holding him tight as tight. Suddenly he
felt Tillie's fingers pulling his shoulder.

She cried, "Snipsy! Snipsy, you'll kill him!
He's unconscious already!"

Snips shook his head, saw that it was so.
He wrenched his hands away from Maxe;
they'd been clawed so stiffly that it was hard to
let go. He rolled off the limp figure, panting.

This was when Frazer burst in.

Snips heard the door open. He was on the
floor now. He looked up and saw the fat man.
Frazer took in the setup in one glance, clawed
at his armpit. His snarl was more like that of
an infuriated boar than the jovial fat man he
had pretended to be.

But fat he was, and a man so heavy could
not make a lightning draw.

DEAD MEN DON'T BLEED

Snips had to move only a foot to get his hand on Maxe's gun. He did it, and even though he hadn't been overseas, he'd had Basic Training and knew how to shoot. He turned the gun up, butt in his hand which was hard on the floor, and shot three times from that position. All he had to do was aim at the doorway because Frazer filled it. Then the doorway was empty again and the fat man was huddled over on his knees, holding his clasped hands around his middle. He was still that way when Garvey got there.

Snips was straddling Maxe's chest when Garvey came in. Tillie quickly caught the house dick and pulled him aside so that Maxe didn't see him. Snips flicked his razor back and forth in front of Maxe's nose and slapped the thin man's cheeks once in a while just for good measure.

"If you don't talk, I'll carve you!" Snips leered menacingly.

Maxe's dark eyes were skittery. He couldn't see Garvey and he didn't know how far Snips would go.

"You don't have to tell me," Snips said. "I'll tell you! My girl just told me that a guy was caught in the alley outside the hotel kitchen a while ago carrying a dead chicken in a bloody pillow slip. He swears an elevator boy gave it to him. That's all I needed to know. This hotel buys live chickens, and you admitted before that Carl Pence stole one for you."

Snips looked sideways to see that Garvey's leathery face was intent, took a breath. "Here's what happened. You and Frazer were con men. You picked out rich widows and sold them phony mining stock. First you'd make the contact, then Frazer would show up and throw suspicion on you. You're not the type yourself to pull the whole thing, but if Frazer could make a dame think he'd rescued her from you, she'd go all-out for him. The catch is that you must be hot and you have to wear a disguise."

Snips caught a motion from Garvey out of the corner of his eye. Garvey was making signs to show that Snips was right, and that he'd recognized Maxe without the wig and mustache.

Snips nodded in satisfaction. "Lew Polio was a barber and he spotted your fake hair and mustache," he went on, waving the razor gently in front of Maxe's fascinated eyes. "He pulled a little blackmail on you, and you paid."

MAXE burst, "The dirty creep! He spotted my wig off sides in the elevator one day. The next day he showed up at my room and said he'd come to shave me. I could tell he was wise, so we made a deal. What he wanted



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was chicken feed compared to what we were going to take off Mrs. Burnard."

"That's right," Snips nodded. "That's just about right. Only later on Lew got wise and that there was big money involved. He wanted a cut of that, but you tried to put him off. He got sore and said he'd squawk to Mrs. Burnard. You thought he was bluffing, but he wasn't. And today was the day he got fed up and started for Mrs. Burnard's suite to spill it. You must have seen that he was sorer than usual and followed him. When you saw that he was really heading for Mrs. Burnard's, you slugged him, right outside the door. She reported a fight, but when Garvey got there the corridor was empty. 'Cause why? 'Cause you'd dragged Lew into the mop closet till you had time to move him. Say no!"

Maxe's mouth hardened. Snips drew his lips back on his teeth in a horrible grimace, brought the razor down slowly, flicked Maxe's cheek.

"Wait! Don't! I'll talk!" Maxe blubbered. "You're right! I didn't mean to kill him, damn him! I guess I just hit him too hard."

"Yeah," Snips agreed. "I knew Lew had been parked in that mop closet because there were deodorant crystals spilled there and he had the same smell on his coat. It meant that he'd been in that closet and had been flat on his back at the time."

Snips settled himself comfortably on Maxe's stomach. "The rest of it is simple. You hired Carl Pence and used his elevator to take Lew's body to his room. You left him there and probably intended to let it go. But then Carl saw me heading for Lew's room and told you, and you saw a chance to frame me. You came down and slugged me. My razor fell out of my pocket. I was a barber. Why not make it a good frame and cut Lew's throat? You did, but you forgot that *dead men don't bleed!*"

Snips wagged his head sadly. "It must have been something to cut a guy's throat and not see any blood come out, but Lew had been dead long enough by that time for the blood to stop flowing in him. You were in a spot. You couldn't sew his neck back together again, so all that was left was to get some blood somehow. With Carl Pence knowing the ropes around the hotel, you saw how it could be worked. Carl got a live chicken from the storeroom off the kitchen and you bled it over Lew Polio's throat and body. Am I right?"

Maxe shrank away from the razor. "Y-yeah."

Snips looked triumphantly at Garvey. "Is that enough?" he asked.

Garvey stepped forward. "That's plenty,"

DEAD MEN DON'T BLEED

he said. "And I recognize this bird now. He's wanted in a couple of states."

Maxe jerked, cursed. Snips banged the man's head on the floor, said, "But somebody spotted Carl when he stole the chicken, or anyhow the guy he gave it to was caught. Carl took the chicken back downstairs in a pillow slip so as not to get blood on himself. He had to get rid of the chicken and didn't want it found around the kitchen. There's always guys hanging around the kitchen for handouts and stuff, and Carl just handed the chicken to one of them. But the guy was caught beating it and Carl knew the guy could identify him. He hurried up to Frazer's suite to ask what to do. That's where I got him."

"You see, some of the feathers pulled out of the chicken when they were bleeding it over Lew's body, and in order to cover them up as well as get the pillow slip to take the bloody chicken away in, they busted a pillow and threw the feathers all over. I noticed that some of the feathers were different than the others. These soft pillows are filled with either duck or goose feathers—not chicken feathers."

Snips told Garvey, "Maxe is the one who killed Lew Polio. You heard him admit it. But Frazer is the one who pushed Carl Pence out of the window. As soon as Frazer heard that Mrs. Burnard had reported a disturbance outside her door, he got in touch with Maxe, found out what had happened, and they worked together from then on. I guess that's enough to make it stick, huh?"

Garvey yanked on his handcuffs. "It's plenty, kid."

"You take the credit," Snips said.

Garvey's leathery face brightened. "Well, that's swell of you, kid, but you rate something out of it too."

"I got something," Snips said and looked at Tillie proudly. "They ought to make me shop manager, too. . . ."

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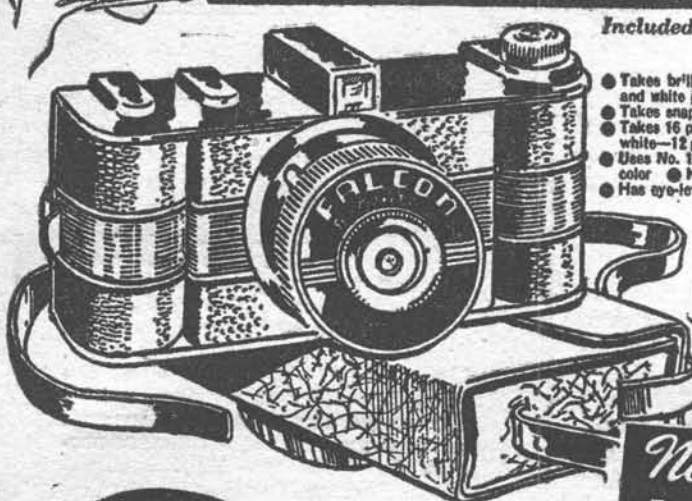
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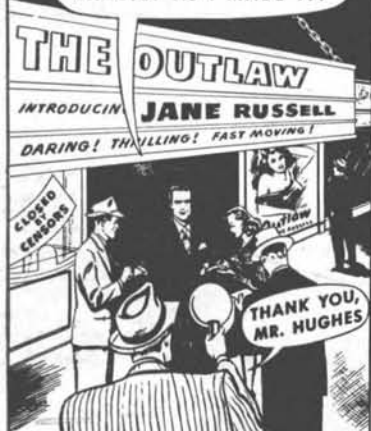


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