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APRIL



BLACK MASK

MAN'S BEST
Fiend

by
**ROBERT
TURNER**

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BLACK MASK

A Magazine of Gripping, Smashing Detective Stories

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April 1950

Contents

MAN'S BEST FIEND	Robert Turner	3
<i>Harry Wenzel pitted his cunning against the animal that hated his guts . . .</i>		
THE SLAY'S THE THING	Phil Richards	22
<i>James Greer played angel, so his guilt complex could wear a halo.</i>		
MURDER EXPRESS	Hiawatha Jones	31
<i>I kept remembering the look in Mug's eyes when he saw the kid's wallet.</i>		
BLACKMAIL BACKFIRE	D. L. Champion	36
<i>It was murder in the mail for Private-Eye Joey Graham.</i>		
HOW SAFE'S A SAFE	Joseph W. Quinn	49
<i>Whatever man has locked, man can open.</i>		
NOT NECESSARILY DEAD	Robert P. Toombs	50
<i>Wealthy manufacturer Sprague rushed to break an appointment—with death.</i>		

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MAN'S BEST FIEND

By ROBERT TURNER

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

CHAPTER ONE.

CRAZY CANINE.

THE whole thing is crazy, sure, and a lot of people around here say it couldn't have happened that way. But you'd have to know Harry Wenzel and the dog, Satan. And you'd have had to be there to believe it. . . . It isn't much of a place, Loon Lodge. A huge, rambling, rustic inn and roadhouse on a tar road, miles from anywhere. It has a sweep-around verandah and nestles in a grove of pines, mirrored from behind by a lovely lake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dog took three long bounding leaps and hit the wire with his full hundred pounds. I thought he was coming right on through it at Harry Wenzel's throat. The wire stopped him, a snarling, flashing-toothed monster. The weight of him knocked Wenzel backward and some of the dog's fangs got him across the back of the

BLACK MASK

hand. Not badly. Just enough to break the skin and bring blood.

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

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

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

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

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

The animal was lightning fast. The only thing that saved Harry Wenzel was the baseball mask and the fact that he had his chin down and his head hunched into the neck so that the padded bottom of the mask protected his throat. I could hear the rasp of the dog's fangs against the steel front of the mask. For a moment, they were a tangle, the dog kicking, twisting and letting unearthly growls from deep in his throat.

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

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

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

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

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

"Not if you never turn your back."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

It ended on a chill and rain-swept night in June. The fourteenth, to be exact, the night before opening day for the bass season. Every year, on this night, Harry Wenzel closed the place up against regular trade and held a special party, on the house, for a group of customers who were fishing fans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was the end of it. Harry would turn around and Satan would sprawl peacefully, for the moment, on his belly, and satisfy himself once again with merely looking his hatred at the man who had partially tamed him. Harry would serve drinks around and back in the awe and praise of his customers and laugh at the ones who told him he was foolhardy to play games with a murderous beast like Satan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Harry had one weakness. He liked the arts, or what he liked to think of as the arts. The real big-time to him was anybody who could write and get paid for it; anybody who was connected with the stage or professional music. Every hack writer who ever had a greeting card verse pub-

lished was somebody to Harry Wenzel. Every broken down bum of an ex-vaudeville trouper was a great actor. Every ginmill piano-banger was a virtuoso. Anybody else was a peasant and Harry Wenzel would tell them so, if he was drunk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

through this section, right at the edge of my property. It's going to hook up with Route Seventy. You know what that means, boy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The piano player was going to work again. He was knocking out a low-key, throbbing blues and his fingers weren't just

educated, they had half a dozen degrees. From the back, he looked like a short, dumpy, round-shouldered little old man. But it wasn't him I was really looking at. It was the girl, standing next to the piano, watching him play.

CHAPTER TWO.

POKER FOR BLOOD.

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

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

The girl turned then, and I had never seen her before. I wondered who she was and where she'd been hiding. If somebody had kept her under lock and key, I wouldn't have been surprised. She was treasure enough to do that. She wasn't just pretty. The nose and the mouth were a trifle on the large side and her forehead was too high and broad but on her those faults looked good. It gave a certain character to her features that mere prettiness couldn't touch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I saw some fishing gear on top of the piano and ducked my head toward it. "Who owns the spinning outfit?" I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I folded up a matchbook cover and tied it on the end. It was a little light and with a regular casting rod it would have been

tough going, but I thought I could handle it with this outfit. An impulse to show off, like a kid riding a bicycle no-hands past his girl's house, came over me and I'm not apologizing. That's just the way it was. That's the way Lee Marlow was hitting me. I took a round, cardboard beer glass coaster from the top of the piano and scaled it across the room. It rolled near the far wall, about twenty-five feet away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course," old Marlow said, with tight-voiced dignity. He pulled at the flesh of his throat. "Tonsils got a little dry, is all. And that last blues number was a little muddy going. Want to get in the spirit for something gay. This is a party, you know."

I turned away from them for a moment,

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

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

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

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

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

That didn't surprise me any. Gus Berkaw was the only man that I knew of whom Harry Wenzel held any real respect. Gus had worked for Harry for six years, now. He lived upstairs in the inn and was quiet and a little on the moody side, but a good barkeep. He was a stocky, powerful shouldered man, about three inches shorter than Harry Wenzel.

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

Ever since that night, the story went, Gus Berkaw had been Harry and Irma Wenzel's personal friend as well as an em-

ployee. Folks said that he could do anything with Harry and that the Wenzels would do anything for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Willis Marlow and Lee joined us, then. They'd heard what Harry Wenzel had said. I looked at Willis Marlow. He drew his

small, plump figure up with dignity. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wenzel. We said we're leaving and we are. You can't bully us around like—like—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The community sing finally broke up and Irma Wenzel began to look a little green around the gills and said she was going to turn in. She left the barroom and went upstairs. Eric Fabian started to leave, too, but

Harry Wenzel stopped him. He went behind the bar and came out with a pack of cards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They started off conservatively enough and I lasted five hands, losing each one, and it cost me twelve dollars, so I quit. I took a little ragging, but not bad, because everybody had an idea what the *Wildwood Press* paid its help. I stood around and watched a while and slowly but surely, Willis Marlow became the heavy winner. His luck was almost incredible.

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

Gus Berkaw, the barkeep, who had come over to watch the game, sat in his place. Eric yawned a few times and went off upstairs to bed. I followed him a few minutes later. I wasn't too worried about Willis

BLACK MASK

Marlow. He was so far ahead, I didn't see how he could possibly wind up losing. Lee Marlow didn't have to worry about her Pops on that score.

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

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

I put on pajamas and flopped on the bed for a nightcap smoke. I started thinking about Lee Marlow and all the people who were at Loon Lodge, tonight, but mostly about Lee. The cigarette burned my finger and I found that I had drowsed off. Irritably, I punched the burned butt out in the bedside tray and that was the last thing I remember. . . .

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

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

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

I looked toward Satan's pen, but I couldn't see anything because of the fog. But there were sounds from down there. The back door of the lodge flung open and

light washed out into the mist. Someone went out into the yard. A flashlight came on. The bright beam moved about the yard as the person wielding it walked toward the dog's pen.

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

The flashlight found Satan in his pen. He was standing with his front paws upon something huddled on the ground. His great, handsome head was back, the ears flat and the howling poured from his deep throat. The short, light brown hairs of his neck and head were dark and shiny with blood. It glistened on his long white fangs. The person wielding the flashlight spoke and I recognized the hoarse, gutteral tones of Eric Fabian. He swore. "That damned beast has killed Harry. He finally got Harry."

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

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

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

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

I turned from the window and yanked trousers and a sweater over my pajamas and went out into the hall. I almost bumped into Pete Saterlee, running toward the stairs. He shouted something incoherent. I saw Lee Marlow pop out of her room.

"What happened?" she demanded.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE.

I.O.U. DEATH.

THE lights were on in the big bar-room and Gus Berkaw was just going out the back door in his shirt sleeves. We followed him outside, and almost bumped into him, where he had stopped to talk to Eric Fabian. Eric was still holding the nickel-plated .32. He looked quickly at Lee Marlow and stuck

out his hand in a warning gesture. "He's a mess. You'd better take her back inside, Hoyle."

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

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

I reached and took the flashlight from his hand. "You go on inside and take care of Irma. Take Miss Marlow with you. I want to take a look. I'll be in in a minute."

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

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

"Sure," I said. I watched her leave and then swung toward the dog pen. I found Pete Saterlee standing in the doorway of the pen, looking over the flame of his

"DEAR JOAN THE WAD.—Since you sent me your lucky charm I've had several small wins on Football Pools, and last week I won £136, 8s. on Vernon's 3d. Points Pool. Please send me another 'Joan the Wad' for which I enclose P.O. Many thanks and good luck."—F. W. Doddridge, South Brent.—16.5.48.

"DEAR JOAN THE WAD.—Some time ago I received 'Joan the Wad' morning. I had a cheque for £57, 2s. 10d. which I had won with 'Spot the Ball Competition' and that is the best bit of luck I have had for years, so hoping I shall still be a lucky one."—Mrs. J. Gray, Worktown, Lancs.—16.5.48.

"This is to tell you that on the day I received 'Joan the Wad' I was lucky enough to win £10, 2s. on the Football Pools."—O. M. Burgess, Westerham, Kent.—28.9.47.

"Please find enclosed Postal Order for one 'Joan the Wad' and one 'Jack o' Lantern.' P.S.—I had one 'Joan the Wad' which I lost, but must say no sooner had it arrived than I won £19, then several smaller prizes at intervals of two weeks, but since losing it have won nothing and had very poor health for considerable periods."—C. M. of Wales—17.9.47.

"Since I bought your 'Joan the Wad' about six weeks ago I have had three prizes in the Football Pools: £2, 2s., 10s., and £10, 16s. It has impressed my family so much that my brother and his wife are now sending for 'Joan the Wad.' My best wishes for bringing me a change in luck."—Mr. W. Langlands, Wallsend-on-Tyne.

"JOAN THE WAD
is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

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**DO YOU
BELIEVE IN
LUCK?**



few lines to let you know that since I have received 'Joan the Wad' I have won £6, 17s. on Vernon's Pools. I have great faith in these charms that I am enclosing Postal Order for 'Jack o' Lantern.' Hoping you will supply me 3 of the same by return post.
F. H. Woods, 148 Lupin Street, Ashton, Birmingham, 7.

"Have enclosed P.O. for which will you please send a 'Jack o' Lantern.' My 'Joan the Wad' is lonely! Have won £15 in football since I got 'Joan.' Thanking you."—A. M. Capland, Nettleham, Lines.

and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to:
LANIVET, BODMIN

cigarette lighter at what was left of Harry Wenzel and his pet. I shot the light of the flash over them, quickly and then ran it around the pen.

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

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

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

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

The flash beam, at that moment, spotted something caught on the barbed wire that topped the pen. I walked toward it and looked at it closely. It was a piece of cloth about an inch square, blue material of some kind. I switched the light back to the corpse of Harry Wenzel, lying beside the dead dog. I saw that he was wearing a blue workshirt and that it was ripped and torn. The piece caught on that barbed wire might have come from Harry's shirt and it might not. I left it where it was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was Pops losing?" Lee asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gus, himself, looked more strained and

upset than Irma did at that moment. His heavy-featured, handsome dark face was taut and too intense. His deeply sunken brown eyes were too bright and restless. Irma, on the other hand, seemed calm and in full control of her emotions, now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

heavy-jowled and florid and was puffed with an expression of smug importance.

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

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

"Dead all right. Who shot the dog?"

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

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

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

He broke off, leaned forward and pulled forth a little slip of white paper that was partly protruding from the breast pocket of Harry Wenzel's shirt. He unfolded it and held the flashlight on it. Over his shoulder, in a fine but wobbly and uneven script, I read: *I owe you \$3,300.00. Willis Marlow*.

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

"They were playing poker," Gus Berkaw told him. "It looks to me like Harry cleaned out old Marlow and then ran him along on credit. The I.O.U. was the final payoff, I imagine. Say, maybe this gives some credence to Irma's theory that Harry might have been murdered."

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

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

"Where is this guy, Marlow?" Quimby demanded. "If anything like that happened, this I.O.U. of his makes him a likely suspect."

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

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

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

As we left the pen I remembered the piece of cloth I'd seen caught onto the piece of barbed wire. I directed Quimby's attention to it. He studied it, closely and then hustled back into the pen and looked at the torn and bloody shirt Harry Wenzel was wearing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We got out of there without the others noticing. They were too busy arguing different ways the piece of cloth might have gotten caught onto the barbed wire fence and if it meant anything. We hurried along the little path that led through a thick grove of pines, downhill toward the lake.

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

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

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

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

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

Lee Marlow had hold of my arm very hard and I could feel the bite of her fingers. "Something's happened to him, Matty. He—he wouldn't just go off and leave his gear in the bushes like this. Matty! Matty, I'm scared."

"Come on. Let's walk a little farther.

We'll find him. There's probably a logical explanation for this. Try to take it easy, Lee."

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

CHAPTER FOUR.

SINISTER KEY.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Easy, Lee," I said. Her voice was starting to rise. I watched her fight for control and make it and then I said, "You'll hear it

from the others, anyhow, Lee, so I might as well break it to you here. Maybe it'll be easier."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I couldn't think of any answer for that.

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

"What makes you so sure of that?"

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

"He's told me about it many times. It gave him sort of a phobia about ropes, even. He hated to even *touch* a piece of

rope. Once, he got up and walked out of a movie when they showed preparations for a hanging. If he was going to—get rid of himself, that's the one way he *wouldn't* do it, Matty. Can you understand that?"

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

I helped her to her feet. She was dizzy for a moment and clung to me. Somewhere out over the mist on the lake a catbird shrieked. Stray puffs of mist swirled around us. I thought about the things Lee Marlow had said and they began to make sense. But if she was right, then there'd been a double murder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We pushed it around some more and the more we talked, the more convinced I was that we had the correct answer.

"If we're right, the killer is very clever. It's going to be hard to prove anything

against him. But I've got an idea how we might root him out into the open, if you're game for it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We got to the side door and carried the dead man upstairs without running into any of the others. I took him into his own room and slung him face down

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

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

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

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

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

Quimby, the police chief, had removed his hat. He was bald, except for tufts of hair above the ears and at the base of the skull. His moon face was red and he was gesturing and talking loudly. He had been taking advantage of Gus Berkaw's generosity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We tried to get him up but couldn't," I said. "Maybe by the time the county boys get to him, he'll be more ready to rouse up. Right now," I said, holding my breath, "he's like a dead person."

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

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

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

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

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

Gus Berkaw, the bartender, had slipped out from behind the bar. He came up behind Irma Wenzel, now. His hand cupped

her elbow. His square, dark face was grim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked scared and bewildered, both. Her eyes cast from side to side, like a trapped and frightened little animal's.

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

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

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

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

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

She kept looking at Gus Berkaw, at the revolver in his hand. She stood there, drunk and swaying and the tears ran on her face and left mascara streaks down her cheeks. She said, tiredly, "It's no good, Gus. You talked it to me so much. You talked me into it. But after it was done, it was no good. It wasn't what I wanted."

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

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

going with me. Come over here, Irma. Don't make any more mistakes."

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

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

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

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

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

I wasn't trying to be any hero. It was just sort of something I had to do. I whipped the light rod back and then forward. I watched the plug flash across the room toward Gus Berkaw and I saw it hit his hand in a perfect cast. I pulled back on the pole as though to hook a striking fish.

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

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

He did that, his face all twisted with the pain of the hook barbs sunk deeply into his flesh. The rest of the crowd closed in around him. Gus Berkaw's legs gave way with him, then, and he sunk down onto the floor,

holding his wounded hand with the plug still in it. He kept mouthing curses, incoherently and tears wormed down his dark, meaty cheeks.

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

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

Pete Saterless and Eric Fabian stepped swiftly out of her path. Chief Quimby yelled something at her but she didn't seem to hear. Holding the revolver in both hands, her face as stiff and drawn as though it had been bathed in alum, she walked close to Gus Berkaw. She shot him in the head at close range. Before the echo of the gun shot faded from the room, she turned the smoking barrel toward herself. That second shot was muffled, somewhat.

I turned and caught Lee Marlow as she fainted.

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

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

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

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THE SLAY'S THE THING

By PHIL RICHARDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The odor of cabbage and ham hocks mingled with the mustiness of old walls and gave the house a lived-in smell. The white paint in the wall niche at the top of the first flight was mottled with cigarette burns. At the landing Rawne glanced down. Bottle tilted to his mouth, Schmidt was looking up at him. Two more flights, and Rawne stopped before a door marked 4 A. Inside, a woman's voice was raised in angry tones.

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

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

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

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

"Nice to see you, Kevin," Greer said

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

to Rawne. "How's the private detective racket?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You know Lee Searle," Greer said dispiritedly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She turned on Rawne, her green eyes hot

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rawne took a short puff and waved his cigar impatiently. "You'll pay me now. The detective put an exercise boy on your tail. You came straight home. The money's here. So make it easy for yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sag was in his knees. He labored up the stairs, lurching from side to side. On the fourth floor a line of soft light came from 4 A. The door of Greer's apartment

was open a crack. Rawne kicked it wide. He went into the foyer and looked at himself in the cracked mirror. His hair was rumpled and his face was dirty. The right side was covered with blood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rawne's fingertips touched the hair lightly. "You do something to me," he said. "You sure do. If you didn't knock off old Jim, it'd be a pleasure to be seeing you in all the old familiar places. Provided you come across with twenty-three hundred bucks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A siren shrieked outside. Rawne's heavy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Police!" Her voice was hoarse.

"It's their party," Rawne said.

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

He took the girl's hand. Her fingers gripped his. They were very cold. They went up a wooden stairs into a small storeroom

that smelled of disinfectant and was cluttered with brooms and mops and squeegees. They went through a white, spotless kitchen to a bedroom furnished with double-decked walnut bunks and into the front room which faced the street. The venetian blinds were shut and a bridge lamp was lit alongside a typewriter on a small metal desk.

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

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

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

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

"Fork over," Rawne said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No vacancies," he said drowsily.

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

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

"Ask me tomorrow," Rawne said, yawning.

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

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

Rawne got his trousers from the superintendent's closet.

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

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

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

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

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

The hall lights were on, and Rawne's palm left a moist trail on the railing. He kept wetting his lips. The fat man was puffing, but he wasn't pouring sweat the way it was coming from Rawne.

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

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

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

The homicide man jerked his thumb at Searle. "This guy got knocked hard. Concussion. Maybe a busted noggin. I think

he can explain the knife in the wall. Searle's his name. You said you'd seen him. Now and then he mutters the name Rawne. You know Rawne?"

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

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

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

Rawne went down the stairs heavily, hitting each step hard. He was talking to himself and his brown face was sulky. He had the expression of a child who has been caught in a shameful act. He went into Schmidt's apartment, slammed the door and cursed loudly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You could have scrammed," Rawne said.

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

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

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

"Your repulsiveness," she said, "is the source of deep pride to you, isn't it?"

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

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

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

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

Rawne reached for the shelf again. The girl gulped.

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

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

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

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

Griffin grinned at Rawne. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Schmidt. Neighbors saw more than one party in Greer's room. We're not finished with the loose ends. There's a busted dinner plate that's interesting. And a bit of coal dust and a dash of perfume and an odor of cigar smoke with no cigar butt around and a slice of bacon with the narrow part of a woman's shoe imprinted on it. The neighbors in an opposite apartment saw some of the show. They couldn't see much, but they called us up. Maybe they can help. I'm leaving a patrolman at

Four A. Well, I'll see you, Schmidt. Thanks for everything."

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

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



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

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

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

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

A key scraped in the lock and the door opened. Schmidt came into the room with a startled look of perplexity. His narrow

face was shaved and pink and powdered and he smelled like a barber shop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My eye?" Schmidt caressed his skull.

"It's bloodshot, you mean? I got a clinker in it."

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

"Yes, Mr. Rawne?"

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

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

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

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

Rawne laughed. "Put that away. You can't buck the whole police system."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Schmidt glowered at her. "What's this, Miss Nolan? You going to throw *Shady Lady* at me? You want, maybe, a bullet in your sweet little nose?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey!" Schmidt shouted.

Rawne's hand came from where it was dug down behind the end cushion of the divan. That brown hand came up wrapped around a snub-nosed automatic and it was spouting flame. The walls took the angry crack of it and bounced it around. The bullet smashed the distracted Schmidt in the shoulder and knocked him back.

Schmidt was blasting as he fell. A bullet splintered the closet door. Blue-tinted plaster fell from the ceiling. Schmidt collapsed then and Rawne kicked the smoking gun from

Schmidt's hand. Rawne kicked it again, across the room.

Then he had Lulie Nolan in his arms.

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

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

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

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

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

A plainclothes man extracted a stuffed wallet from the cursing Schmidt.

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

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

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

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

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

He kissed her and her lips were clinging.

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

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



MURDER EXPRESS

By HIAWATHA JONES

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

The sky would be lightening soon. It would be day. And the kid would be safe. I looked over to where he was lying.

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

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

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

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

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

We had both gotten on at a little depot outside of Albany. It was a warm night and we had shoved the doors back and were sitting on the edge of the freight car floor, watching the country whip by. The other

two hoboes who had got on with us were sitting in the center of the empty freight matching coins in the moonlight from the open door. One of the 'boes was a thin, ragged little guy whose gray hair needed cutting. The other was a big guy with a flat nose and a scar sliced across his knotty cheek. One or the other of them would mutter a curse every time a coin changed hands.

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

I sat back against the edge of the open door and listened to the clatter of the speeding wheels. The fields we passed were gray with darkness. I looked over to the kid. His head was lowered to his chest as he muffled a low hacking cough.

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

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

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

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

I watched his thin fingers fumble at the buttons of the sweater. "If you just cashed in on a season's pay, why are you riding the freights back?" I asked. He had told me earlier in the evening about working in a lumber camp all summer. He had shown me

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

a wallet crammed with bills. The only thing wrong with the job was that it kept him near water all the time. It had given him a cold. He still wasn't over it.

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

"You worked for it didn't you?"

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

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

"Your wife?"

He had laughed. "My sister."

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

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

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

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

"Peggy."

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

"I did it with every dollar I got," said the kid. "Most of the guys used to go into town on a drunk every payday. Whenever I thought that I would go with them I took my money out and there was her name on it, where I had written it. That's what I was working for. I never let myself forget about it."

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

He sort of snorted and looked out at the country passing by. "She's a smart kid," he said turning back to me. "Too smart

and too decent to have to take the knocks. She graduates from high school this month. That's what the money is for. It'll start her off in college, pay for tuition and buy some clothes too, maybe. Oh, it ain't much, but it will start her off. That's the main thing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," said the kid.

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

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

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

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

"It's cold," said Mug.

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

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

I looked up quickly. Riding the rods was the most dangerous part of hoboing. A 'boe only did it when he was afraid of being

spotted by a prowling dick or when all the cars were locked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The kid was dead

Pete was calling to me. "Something wrong?"

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

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

Mug rubbed one large, gnarled hand against his jaw.

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

"Musta been his lungs," said Mug finally. "I heard the kid coughing most of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe," I answered slowly.

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

"Mug may be right," I said quickly. I couldn't afford to lose track of Mug.

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

"They won't bother us."

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

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

Mug turned to look at the slumped figure on the car floor. I followed his eyes. "Okay," he said finally. He looked over to me. "But Pete's right. We can't be caught

with this kid. And we can't dump him. They'll be waiting for us at the next depot if they found the body. The kid'll have to stay on. We'll stay, too, but not in here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Under!" said Mug in a loud whisper.

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

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

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

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

I heard a loud ssssing noise. I was about four inches from the side of the wheels. They began to turn slowly. I shifted my eyes and looked down at the ties below slipping away. I gripped my rods tightly, desperately. The ties began to blur. The wheels were like buzz saws.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mug reached across with his free hand

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

"Good!" Mug laughed.

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

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

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

I nodded my head.

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

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

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

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

"You wanna sell it?" he asked.

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

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

"Ten bucks," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Give me that money," he said slowly.

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

Mug's arms leaped at me suddenly. I felt his steel grip at my neck. I held on tight with one hand. My free hand bashed down again and again at the side of his face. His fingers pressed hard at my throat. I continued beating his face. He shrieked curses above the noise of the train.

I struggled to suck in my breath. Mug's hand clawed at my shoulder and neck as I twisted on the narrow rod. His whole body leaned across the whipping, speeding rails. I straightened my free hand. Tensed it still.

[Continued on page 48]

BLACKMAIL BACKFIRE

By D. L. CHAMPION

CHAPTER ONE.

CONSCIENCE MONEY

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

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

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

Sackler was already at his desk as I entered our shabby suite. I gave him my heartiest good morning and laid my paper on his desk. He grunted and snatched it up.

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

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

Sackler took his nose out of the paper

and frowned. "Do you have to make that ghastly noise, Joey?"

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

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

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

"Where are you going to get it?"

"Probably from you."

He assumed an expression of suspicion and pain.

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

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

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

"I saw Owens Saturday night. He offered me a job. Twenty-five percent more than you pay me. Plus a cut on rewards and big fees."

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

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

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

In spite of the fact that his income ran well into five figures, he dwelt in a shabby

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

furnished room on the upper West side. He possessed three frayed suits. His only hat was a shapeless blob of felt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even Sackler seemed puzzled now. Parry sighed.

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

Sackler nodded. "In other words you

want to run away from your wife and family."

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

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

Parry shook his head at me. "It's not that easy," he said. "I've read several articles lately. Not only is the Missing Persons Bureau always keeping an eye out for escaping husbands but there are several private agencies who specialize in the same thing. I've heard they're most efficient."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your wife has no money of her own?"

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



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

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

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

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

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

"A girl?"

"Sure. Lots of these runaway husbands have girls they leave behind them who plan to join them later. That's death. Because they'll write. They'll send the girl their

address. Either some smart dick'll steal the letter, or the girl herself will talk. Women do, you know."

I nodded. I wasn't particularly interested in Campbell Parry. I said, "We shall now revert to the subject which was under discussion before your client came in."

"What was that again, Joey?"

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

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

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

"How much?"

"Ten per cent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO.

"TOO DAMNED EFFICIENT."

On the following morning I was drinking my coffee and munching a slice of toast as I opened the paper. I ran a careless eye across the front page. Then a headline

jumped at me. I blinked, put down my cup and proceeded to read.

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

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

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

"Could you find him yourself?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He grabbed the paper and his startled eyes bored into the page. I crossed to my own desk, tilted back in my chair, and once again filled the atmosphere with hysterical hilarity.

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

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

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

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

"How do you figure that?"

"If I wasn't so damned efficient, if I

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

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

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

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

He picked up his shapeless hat and said, "We're working, Joey. Old man Parry wants all the help he can get. Let's go down to the Parry house and see if we can pick up anything."

I sat firmly in my chair. I said, "I have something to discuss with you."

"It can wait, can't it?" he said testily. "There's money involved here."

"There is," I agreed. "You were to sleep on a certain proposition I made you yesterday."

"Afterwards," he said, annoyed. "Business first. There's ten thousand bucks in this case."

"Ten percent of which is mine."

"We'll talk about it later, Joey. Come on."

"No," I said. I stood up. "Here is my last, my final offer. My salary remains the same. But starting right now, I get ten percent of all fees if you break the case. If I break it, I get ninety percent, you get the ten."

He stared at me.

"When," he said with heavy sarcasm, "did you ever crack a case without my help?"

I thought it politic not to answer that. I said, "For instance, if you find Parry and bring him back, you get nine G's. I get one. If I find him I get the nine thousand, you get the one."

"You're nuts, Joey. First you never solved a case in your life. I solve them all. Why should I give you ten percent?"

I shrugged and essayed to look nonchalant. "You forget Owens has offered me a job."

"Then take it," he snapped. "I'm going up to the Parry house."

I hadn't expected this and was taken

somewhat by surprise. But I still held the top card in the deck. I took a deep breath and played it.

"What would your old pal, Inspector Wolfe, at Headquarters say; what would every paper in town say; what would the whole damned city say if they knew that Rex Sackler took a five hundred buck fee from a killer to tell him where to hide?"

He looked at me, stricken. He said, "Traitor!"

"Joey," he said in a voice which had a tremor in it, "you wouldn't do it."

"The hell I wouldn't."

He stood for a long silent moment. Then he gave up like a man giving up his right arm. He said, "All right, Joey. I shall do as you say. But the memory of this perfidy shall bow my back until the day I die."

"Okay with me," I said cheerfully. "As long as I get my ten percent."

I put on my hat and we went down to the street en route to the Parry house. Naturally, he sneaked out of the taxi first and stuck me with the bill, but I was so elated with the sharp bargain I had driven I didn't care.

The Parry domicile was a neat semi-Colonial job on the Nassau county border. There was a copper at the gate who made no move to stop us as we went by. The heavy front door was open. I thrust my head around the jamb and the first person I saw was Inspector Wolfe of the Homicide squad. He saw me, too, and groaned. He said, "I suppose Sackler's with you."

I nodded brightly. Wolfe groaned again. "I might have known publication of a reward would be bringing him running."

Sackler pushed past me and confronted Wolfe.

"Reward!" he said with fine contempt. "I am here to do my duty as a citizen. To bring a killer to justice. If there's any money involved it's a mere byproduct."

Wolfe looked as skeptical as I did.

"Now," said Sackler, "have the police discovered anything of any importance?"

"There's nothing to discover," said Wolfe, "except Parry. The thing's cut and dried. Parry and his wife didn't get along. So he pushed a carving knife into her, grabbed what dough there was in the house and scrammed. The only problem is to find Parry. If you do that before us, I suppose you can claim the reward."

It seemed to me that this was a fair and

accurate statement of affairs. Sackler, however, seemed skeptical. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "You don't mind my looking over the house?"

"No," said Wolfe. "But I assure you Parry's not here. And that's all we're looking for in this case."

Sackler shrugged again and walked past Wolfe into an elaborately furnished living room. I tagged along behind him. There, seated in an arm chair at the far end of the room, smoking an exceedingly nervous cigar, was a portly man of middle age. His hair was graying and sparse. Tortoise-shell glasses gave him an owl-like expression. He stood up as we entered and looked at us inquiringly.

Sackler announced his name and mission. The portly man said, "I've heard of you. I hope you can find that dirty, little killer."

Sackler said, "You mean Campbell Parry?"

The portly man regarded him curiously. "Of course, I mean Parry. Who else?"

"I don't know," said Sackler. "I've made no investigation yet."

The other grunted. He said, "My name is Franklin. Harry Franklin. I'm Mrs. Parry's business advisor, investment counsellor. She never should have married that miserable little man. He was only after her money."

"Ah," said Sackler, "she had more than he did, eh?"

"He had nothing save his salary."

Sackler helped himself to a cigarette from a silver box on a taboret. He inhaled gratefully as if relishing the fact that the smoke was free.

He said, "Are there any suspects besides Parry?"

Franklin looked at him as if he were listening to a half-wit. "How could there be?" he exploded. "The case is cut and dried. No one was here last night, save an old servant, the Parry's son and Parry himself. The boy's only sixteen years old and a bit of a sissy. He couldn't murder a mouse."

Sackler seemed taken aback at the vehemence of Franklin's speech. He said, "I think I'll take a look at the room where the body was found. Upstairs, wasn't it?"

"Second floor on your left," said Franklin. He sat down again and puffed nervously at his cigar. Sackler headed for the stairs with me at his heels.

But before we got to the second door on the left, we naturally enough passed the

first door on the left. It was open. Inside the room, a woman, extremely well dressed, about thirty-five, sat on the edge of a bed and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Standing over her, futilely attempting consolation, was a pale-faced lad of sixteen.

Sackler paused in the doorway, then entered. He said courteously, "I just spoke to the deceased's father at his office. He engaged my services. May I ask you if you can tell me anything which may help in solving this murder?"

The woman took the handkerchief from her face and looked up at us. Her hair was red and her face was striking. All in all she was a beautiful woman.

She said in a harsh, flat voice, "I can tell you nothing, save that I wish I were dead instead of Agatha Parry."

The boy said quickly, "This is Mrs. Abbot. Mrs. Robert Abbott. She was mother's best friend. She's all upset."

There was a tremor in his voice and a dazed expression in his eye which indicated that he was quite upset, too.

"Then, you," I said, "are young Parry?"

The boy nodded. "Arthur Parry." He paused for a moment, then his voice broke and he said, "How, how could dad have done a thing like this?"

The Abbott woman uttered something between a cry and a sob and buried her face once more in her handkerchief. Sackler turned to me and spread his palms upward.

"Well," he said, "let's take a look at the place where they found the body."

The Parry bedroom was in a state of mild chaos. Twin beds thrust themselves out from the far wall. One of them had been slept in; the other was still made. A bureau stood at one side of the room. Its drawers had been pulled out. Their contents were scattered all over the floor. Sackler looked around the room, sighed and walked about slowly.

He did this for some five minutes. Whether he was thinking or looking for something I don't know. I did know that I was rather bored and considered he was wasting time. The only point in the whole case was to find the missing Parry. It was a cinch that he wasn't in this bedroom.

I got bored. I wandered idly out into the hall. I could still hear sounds of faint sobbing coming from the next room. I strolled along and peered around the doorway. The Abbott woman's face remained in her hand-

kerchief. Her shoulders shook convulsively. Young Parry stood at her side, obviously uncomfortable.

He patted her tentatively on the shoulder. He said, "Try not to cry so much, please. Let's try to remember that mother is in heaven."

The woman took her face from the handkerchief. She looked at the boy and it seemed to me that there was red rage in her eyes. She said in a low, hoarse voice, "You fool. You utter damned fool."

The boy blinked and blushed. Mrs. Abbott opened her bag, withdrew a cigarette case. I pulled my head back and groped in my pocket for a cigarette of my own. I furrowed my brow. The Graham brain went into action. I was gestating one hell of an idea.

A little later Sackler emerged from the bedroom. He didn't look happy and he didn't answer me when I inquired if he'd discovered anything. He walked silently down the stairs.

Wolfe was still in the hallway sitting by the telephone. Sackler halted before him. He said, "What's all that disorder in the bedroom? Who frisked the joint?"

"Parry. Obviously. Before he scrammed."

"Why obviously?"

"He needed dough. It figures easily enough. He had a fight with her. He killed her. He needed cash to make a getaway. So he went through his wife's bureau looking for money. Or maybe he took her jewels. We're trying to check on that now."

Judging from the expression on Sackler's face this theory didn't impress him much. He grunted and went out into the street. We returned to the office where we spent a quiet afternoon.

Sackler sat brooding at his desk. I didn't know whether he was actually trying to figure where Parry might be or brooding about the fact that he couldn't get his hands on the ten G's reward money.

Anyway, I wasn't too interested. I was busily engaged on a mastermind of my own. When I'd forced Sackler to agree to pay me ninety percent of the fee earned on a case which I broke myself, I never had any idea of collecting. My principal aim had been to cut myself in for the ten percent on the items Sackler cracked himself.

But now I had an idea. I knew something Sackler didn't know. Something which might well lead me to Parry's trail. Something which would toss the whole case in

my own little lap. The concept of this happening, of me holding on to nine grand and handing Sackler ten percent was the most beautiful thought I'd had in years.

Sackler hadn't heard what the Abbott dame had said to Arthur Parry; he hadn't seen her face when she'd said it. But I had and it impressed me. It convinced me that whatever she may have been weeping about it wasn't her dead pal, Agatha Parry.

And I recalled something else. Only yesterday Sackler had said that Parry would probably be found if he didn't have a girl, that all these runaways who had girls wrote to them, sent them addresses.

I began adding two and two like mad. After a while I came up with a sum.

If the Abbott woman had not been weeping for her old pal, Agatha Parry, who had she been upset about? Parry, himself? It certainly figured that way. And if she was weeping about Parry, it followed that she was fond of him. And fond seemed a mild word. Suppose that Parry intended to send for her after he'd lammed?

Well, Sackler, himself, had given me the answer to that one. It meant that Parry would keep in touch with her, that he'd send her his address. And if I could get that address it would put nine G's in my pocket and break Sackler's avaricious little heart.

I left the office early, went home to my furnished room, lay down on the bed and summoned every brain cell into action. As I reconstructed what had happened it all became clear.

Parry, doubtless, had decided to leave his wife, then send for the Abbott woman. He had consulted Sackler to make sure Mrs. Parry wouldn't be able to track him down. Somehow, his wife had learned of his plans at the last minute, they'd quarrelled, and he'd killed her. The Abbott dame was upset because Parry was a murderer, not because Agatha Parry was dead. It figured perfectly. And if I could somehow get Campbell Parry's address from La Abbott I was in.

I got off the bed and dressed myself in my best clothes. I decided to call on Abbott, tell her what I knew, point out the coppers would surely get Parry sooner or later and it would be much better for all concerned if he surrendered to me personally. I could pretend an influence in the D.A.'s office, which I didn't have and swear I could fix it so he could cop a plea.

I went out into the night, looked up

Abbott's address in the phone book and climbed down into the subway.

An hour later, I returned home disconsolately. I had got exactly nowhere. A fat and formidable maid had opened the door of the Abbott's apartment. She viewed me with no enthusiasm whatever and informed me that Mrs. Abbott was in bed and unwell, that she could see no one at all.

My argument that my visit was a matter of life, death and several other vital things got me nothing. I considered bribing the maid to let me see Abbott's mail before she got it, but one look at her grim, forbidding face forced me to discard that brilliant idea.

I was still wracking my brains as I climbed into bed. It seemed an absolute cinch to nail Parry if I could somehow keep an eye on Abbotts' mail—provided, of course, my theory was right.

I had come to no solution when I went to sleep; nor when I arrived at the office on the following morning.

Sackler was at his desk waiting for me to hand him the morning paper. I did so and inquired, "Any line on Parry?"

He said, "Parry? Oh, he'll probably turn up sooner or later. I'm working on a different angle."

"What other angle is there?"

He shrugged and turned to the financial page. I remained silent for a while, then asked nervously, "Is there any line on this Abbott woman?"

"Nothing much. She's a widow. Friend of the Parry family. That's all." He paused a moment, then glanced at me sharply. "You're not free lancing on this, are you? You don't figure Abbott did it?"

I breathed an inward sigh of relief. If he spoke like that, it argued he hadn't worked out the same theory I had.

I said, "Of course, I don't figure Abbott did it. Parry did it obviously. It's just a matter of finding him."

He grunted and returned to the paper. I lit a cigarette and my head ached with thinking. I was surer of this case than I had ever been of anything. It was just a matter of somehow getting to Abbott to find out if she knew where Parry was.

It was a little after 11:00 o'clock when the door opened and Harry Franklin came in. He bowed, sat down and passed around a cigar case. Sackler grabbed his as if it had been a hundred dollar bill.

"Something came up this morning," said Franklin. "I've already given it to the police; since you're working on the case, I thought I'd drop it and tell you about it, too."

Sackler puffed on his free cigar and said, "Decent of you."

"Yesterday afternoon," said Franklin, "Parry came to my office to draw some cash. I take care of all his wife's affairs. If she needs money she simply sends me a receipt for it and I hand over the cash. Well, Parry came in yesterday with a receipt, signed by his wife, saying she wanted five thousand dollars. This has happened before and naturally I merely glanced over the signature."

Sackler glanced at him sharply. "You mean Mrs. Parry's signature was forged."

"That's right," said Franklin. "It wasn't even a good imitation of her writing. But, I guess, Parry figured correctly I wouldn't examine it too closely. She'd sent him for money before."

Sackler nodded slowly. "So you believe that Parry forged the signature, came to you for cash to run away after he'd killed his wife?"

Franklin seemed mildly surprised. "Why, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"It's obvious enough," I said, giving voice to my own problem. "The trouble is we don't need any evidence proving Parry's guilty; we need evidence showing where the devil he is."

Sackler gave me a long, hard look. "Ah," he said, "you've been working out a theory, Joey?"

"I don't even think the case needs a theory," said Franklin. "The police, everyone knows, Parry is guilty. Don't you think so, Mr. Sackler?"

Sackler drew a deep breath. He said, "I haven't made up my mind. All I know is that Joey, here, never came to a correct conclusion in his life. That rather throws me over to believing that Parry is innocent."

I smiled blandly. I was closer to nine grand than he was. All I had to do was to figure out how to get hold of Abbott's mail.

Franklin said slowly, "I can't see how anyone but Parry had either opportunity or motive."

"Well," said Sackler noncommittally, I'm working on it. Thanks, anyway, for letting me know about that forged receipt."

Franklin nodded, stood up. There was a thoughtful expression on his cherubic face

as he left the office. Rex Sackler went back to the morning paper. I went back to my problem.

I went out to lunch alone to avoid getting stuck with Sackler's check. I ate two hamburgers, washed them down with two glasses of beer and returned to the office. I still had no solution.

The afternoon went by quietly. Sackville leaned back in his swivel chair and stared at the far wall. He, too, seemed lost in thought. I doodled on the pad before me and my head ached with the strain I was putting on it.

Then, about 4:30, the hood came in. I looked up as the door slammed to see a swarthy, heavy-set individual with a chest like an anvil. His eyes and complexion were dark and there was a livid scar on one side of his face. His lips were thick and his hat was pushed on the back of his head. His hair was greasy and slicked down. As I watched him I had a vague feeling that I had seen him somewhere before.

He looked at me, then at Sackler.

He said, "Which of you mugs is Sackler?"

I pointed across the room and said, "He is."

The hood said, "Ah," and thrust his hand in his pocket. When he withdrew it again it held an automatic, the muzzle of which drew a bead on Sackler's heart.

Now, Sackler never had been Congressional Medal material. I had seen him with a gun on him before and his conduct had not been exactly courageous. However, this time he met the hood's eye and failed to holler for help.

The hood said, "I'm Spike Sligo. Maybe you never heard of me in the East. But where I come from guys know better than to argue with me."

Sackler said, with astonishing calm, "To what do I owe the honor of the visit, Mr. Sligo?"

"I come here to talk business."

I kept looking at the guy. I was certain I'd seen him somewhere. But there was nothing familiar about either his voice or his accent.

"Go ahead," said Sackler. "Talk."

Sligo balanced his automatic on his knee. Idly he put a hand in his vest pocket and produced a silver dollar. He spun it nonchalantly, caught it and replaced it in his pocket.

"I hear," he said, "that you're a guy who is willing to pick up a fast buck."

I blinked with annoyance. Was it possible that once again someone was going to toss a bundle of money into Sackler's emaciated lap?

"You're working on this Parry case," said Sligo. "Trying to pick up that ten G. reward. Well, I'm here to offer you eleven G's."

"For what?"

"To lay off. Old man Parry offers you ten to work on the case. I offer you eleven to lay off. More dough and less work. What do you say?"

I squirmed in my seat. This I didn't like. Sackler wasn't even close to collecting the reward and now this joker was offering him even more dough to quit the case.

Sackler said, "This is interesting. When and how do I collect?"

"We'll wait a week," said Sligo. "If you don't do nothing more in the case, you'll get the dough. In a plain envelope through the mail."

"Mailed from where?"

Sligo grinned. "Not New York. From out of town. That's all I can tell you. I guess you can figure it out."

Even I was smart enough to figure it out. Parry, apparently, had heard that Sackler was tracking him down. Parry, it seemed, didn't have much fear of the police department but, as was demonstrated by his original visit, had an exceedingly high opinion of Sackler. Rex had told him how to hide and he was scared that Rex might be able to find out where he was hiding.

So he's sent in this hood to make a deal. Even the reason for his picking a guy like Sligo was obvious. Sackler might have held an ordinary citizen for the coppers to work over, after he'd made such a deal. But you couldn't very well hold a guy who was holding a gun on you.

"Well," said Sackler, "it sounds reasonable to me. Go back and tell your principal I'm waiting for the money."

Sligo stood up. "Good. You'll get it in a week." He backed toward the door still keeping his automatic in front of him. "By the way, don't get any funny ideas of chasing me. Stay right where you are for ten minutes after I leave. I may be right outside the door ready to blast you if you come out before then. Well, so long, bozos."

Again he took the silver dollar from his vest pocket and tossed it nonchalantly in

the air before he opened the door. It slammed behind him.

I looked at Sackler and said, "Are you really going to take that dough?"

He shook his head. "It's damned dubious dough, Joey. And even if they send it, it won't pay in the long run. I can do better solving cases than laying off them. I can see a buck under my nose easily enough. But I can also see two several furlongs away."

"Then you're still working on the case?"

"I'm still working on it." He stood up and reached for his disgraceful hat. "As a matter of fact I'm working on it all day. I have some calls to make and I won't be back. You take care of the office. Close up."

He went out of the office leaving me once again to my own unsolved problem.

CHAPTER THREE.

ILLEGAL ETHICS.

NOT only did I have to dig up an idea but I had to dig it up fast. Wolfe with all the power of all the coppers in the country behind him was going to find Parry sooner or later and probably sooner. If I wanted to grab the reward I had to move fast. I lit a cigarette and went into mental action again.

An hour later I thought of something. It wasn't terrific, true, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances. I would write La Abbott a letter. I put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and went to work.

Now, I am by no means a great writer. But for nine G's I had to be eloquent; I had to sweat.

First, I told the Abbott woman that no one save myself realized that she had been in love with Parry. I threw in a paragraph expressing deep sympathy with her position. I mentioned one's civic duty. I pointed out that sooner or later the coppers were bound to pick Parry up. I lied about my connections with the D.A. and guaranteed that if Parry was to surrender to me, I'd see to it he faced no worse a charge than second degree murder.

It took me three hours to write a thousand words. When it was done I wasn't quite satisfied with it but it was the best I could do. I sealed it in an envelope, stamped it and dropped it in the hall mail chute.

When I went home that night I felt relieved. Now the thing was out of my hands. If my letter worked, okay, it worked. If it didn't, I was licked.

Sackler didn't come in at all the following morning. I kept the vigil myself, nervously wondering if my all out literary effort would bear fruit.

Shortly after lunch Sackler arrived, grunted at me and sat down at his desk. I was in no mood for conversation and, apparently, neither was he. We sat in silence until the 3:00 o'clock call of the postman.

He tossed some letters on Sackler's desk and announced, "Special delivery for Joseph Graham."

I sprang up and signed for it. I ripped open a violet scented, purple envelope with trembling fingers. There was a single sheet of paper inside. It bore a street address followed by two words: *Gary, Indiana*.

My heart leaped. Obviously, my missive to Abbott had worked. In my hand I held the address of Campbell Parry. I also held nine-tenths of ten thousand dollars.

With an effort I kept a dead pan. I didn't want Sackler to suspect anything. I walked calmly back to my desk. Sackler said, "What is it, Joey? Anything important?"

I shook my head. "Dame I know. Always bothering me. Can't seem to get rid of her."

He nodded. He looked at me thoughtfully. "Joey, I'm not sure I believe you. I think you're doing your own investigation on this Parry thing. I think you've got something."

"Well, suppose I have?"

"If you really have," he said, "I wouldn't want to take unfair advantage of you."

"What do you mean by that?"

He scratched his head. He said, "If you've really got this thing figured I'm willing to waive my ten percent."

"Aren't you getting a little out of character?" I asked him suspiciously.

"Maybe. I know you think I'd sell my mother for a buck. But you never broke a case single handed before. If you can do it now, I think you're entitled to the entire reward."

This speech from Sackler was highly suspicious. However, I turned it over in my mind I couldn't figure how I could possibly lose anything. I had Parry in my pocket. No one could take that away from me. All I had to do was to see Wolfe and tell him that I knew where Parry was. If Sackler waived his ten percent, well, it was just another grand in my pocket.

"All right," I said. "So you waive. I accept the waiver."

"Okay," said Sackler. "Then our previous agreement is wiped out, cancelled, eh?"

That should have warned me. But with Parry's address in my pocket I was riding too high to scent danger. I said, "It's off. Cancelled. Now, if you don't mind, I've got some business downtown."

"How long will it take you?"

"About an hour."

He scribbled something on a piece of paper. "When you've finished your business, will you please meet me at this address?"

I took the paper, said, "Okay," and headed for the door. Sackler called after me, "Oh you might get in touch with Inspector Wolfe and bring him along with you."

Since I was going to see Wolfe and he wasn't supposed to know about it, I glanced at him sharply over my shoulder. He was rolling a cigarette and wearing a bland expression. I figured it was sheer coincidence. I went out into the hall and pressed the elevator button.

Wolfe, who disliked Sackler with the same passion that he disliked arsenic, wasn't too happy to see me. He looked up from a sheaf of papers in his hand and said, "Well, what's old Scrooge want now?"

"Nothing," I said, "I'm working on my own."

"Doing what?"

"Making ten grand out of which Sackler gets exactly nothing."

That interested him. "How's that?" he asked.

I told him of my original deal with Sackler and how it had just been canceled at Sackler's request. Wolfe was unimpressed.

"That won't do you much good. We don't have a line on Parry yet. Maybe Sackler will beat us to it. But you ain't in the same class as him, Joey. What chance have you got?"

I grinned smugly. "I don't know about that," I said. "I have a piece of paper in my pocket which may interest you?"

"Go on."

"Written on that piece of paper is Parry's address."

He stared at me and held out his hand.

"Wait a minute," I said. "The reward is all mine?"

"Every nickel of it," he said. "Give me that paper."

I handed it over to him and explained

my theory and told him of the letter I'd written to the Abbott woman. Wolfe listened, grinning. Then he grabbed a phone and instructed someone to call the Gary cop immediately. He hung up and said, "And Rex doesn't get a cent of this dough."

"Not a cent."

We looked at each other. We smiled broadly. Then we broke into hearty laughter. It wasn't every day that Rex Sackler talked himself out of dough.

We waited for some forty-five minutes. Then a message came in from Gary that Parry had been picked up and announced he would waive extradition proceedings. Wolfe and I congratulated each other, then



set out for the address Sackler had given me.

Somewhat to my surprise I found the apartment at whose door we knocked was that of Harry Franklin. A servant admitted us, ushered us to the living room where we found Sackler smoking one of Franklin's fat cigars and conversing amiably with his host.

Wolfe grinned happily at Sackler.

"Well, Rex," he said. "It's taken one hell of a long time but at last Joey's got his hand on a buck before you."

Sackler raised his eyebrows. "What buck are you referring to?"

"The ten grand reward for Agatha Parry's killer. We got Parry."

Rather to my surprise Sackler didn't wince. He regarded us blandly and said, "And what the devil do you want Parry for?"

"Murder, of course," said Wolfe. "You been looking for him, I've been looking for him, but Joey found him all right."

"Well," said Sackler, "I hope Joey's happy with him. I found him rather dull myself."

I was a little taken aback. Upon receipt of our news I had expected Sackler to beat his breast, tear his hair and call upon heaven to witness the injustice I had done

him. But he was taking it as calmly as a weather report.

Franklin stood up. "I guess I should congratulate you," he said to me. "I'm glad Parry will be brought to justice. I think it was pretty smart of you to find him."

"So do I," I said modestly.

Sackler sighed and puffed deeply on his cigar. Wolfe looked at him, nettled. "You're a bum sport, Rex," he said. "You should congratulate Joey, too."

"Why?"

"He's tracked down a killer and earned a ten grand reward."

"He hasn't," said Sackler quietly. He paused for a moment and added, "I have."

Franklin stared at Sackler. Wolfe looked suspiciously at me. I was aware of a faint empty sensation at the pit of my stomach. I had seen Sackler pull rabbits out of a vacuous hat before.

Then I pulled myself together. He simply couldn't do it this time. I had the whole thing in the bag.

"Would you mind explaining that last crack?" I said politely.

Sackler's courteous tone matched my own. He said, "Not at all." He stood up, crushed out his cigar and helped himself to another from a humidor on the taboret.

"First," he said, "I must tell the inspector that Parry came to me on the day of the killing and told me he was going to run away from his wife."

Wolfe glared at him. "You're an accessory," he yelled. "An accessory before the fact of murder."

"I would be," Sackler conceded, "if Parry was a murderer. He isn't."

The empty feeling in my stomach became more noticeable.

"During that interview," said Sackler, "Parry told me that although his wife had money he was leaving all his savings, some thirty thousand dollars, behind in her bank account as a sort of conscience fund."

"That was an obvious lie," I said. "He told you that so you'd believe everything was on the level when he asked you for advice about how to keep under cover."

Sackler shook his head. "It wasn't an obvious lie, Joey. It wasn't even a lie. I checked with Mrs. Parry's bank yesterday. The money was deposited before Parry disappeared."

"Well," said Wolfe, "suppose this is all true. What does it prove?"

"It proves," went on Sackler, "that Parry didn't rifle his wife's bureau looking for

cash and jewels with which to scram. If he'd wanted that he wouldn't have sunk all his dough in her account. If he'd planned to kill her he wouldn't have done it either."

"If that's true," I said, "how do you account for the forged draft Franklin got?"

"By arguing that Parry never forged a draft."

"That's nuts," snapped Franklin. "I showed the draft to the police. It wasn't Mrs. Parry's signature written on that draft, at all."

"And it wasn't Parry's, either," said Sackler.

"Then whose was it?" Franklin exploded.

Sackler drew a deep breath and looked at him. "Yours," he said quietly and drew deeply on his cigar.

Franklin was suddenly pale. I was apprehensive, and Inspector Wolfe was annoyed.

"Damn it, Rex," he yelled. "If you've something to tell us, do so. Stop being mysterious."

"All right," said Sackler, flashing his most superior smile. "Let's go back to the beginning. We find Mrs. Parry dead, her husband missing. Naturally everyone leaps to the conclusion that the absent husband is guilty. Since I believed he'd actually left cash behind for his wife, I simply couldn't believe he'd killed her. Much less rifled her bureau for money and jewels with which to escape."

"So," said Wolfe, "who else had any motive?"

"I didn't know right away," said Sackler. "But it occurred to me that if Franklin and Mrs. Parry were engaged in various financial deals, there might have been a money motive. I looked into it."

"And found what?" I said, having clear visions of ten grand slipping from my little fist.

"I first found out the name of the broker with whom Franklin dealt on behalf of Mrs. Parry. I visited the broker and learned that on the afternoon of the killing she had visited him and asked for a statement of her account. It showed vast profits.

"Now," went on Sackler, "that broker's statement was not found in the house by the police or anyone else. It was a natural conclusion that it had been taken, taken by the person who ransacked Mrs. Parry's bureau. Parry, himself, would certainly have no use for it."

Franklin said, "If you're accusing me that's not much evidence."

"Not in itself," said Sackler. "If you

hadn't badly overplayed the hand I might have been stuck. But you insisted on making sure that the guilt was fastened on Parry, as soon as you found out your luck in having him take a powder from his wife on the very night you killed her.

"So you fixed up that phoney draft and swore you'd given Parry money on it. You convinced Wolfe, all right, and Joey, here. But you didn't quite convince me. And you knew you didn't. Then you overplayed again. In order to convince me as thoroughly as you'd convinced everyone else, you sent in that hain, Wainwright."

"Wainwright?" I said.

"That exhibitionist who called himself Sligo."

I blinked and said, "I don't get it."

Slacker grinned. "You told me yourself that you thought you'd seen that mug somewhere before. You had—in many places. He was made up to look like a hood. That dollar tossing routine was swiped from the movies. Do you get it now?"

I got it slowly. "You mean he was a tenth rater actor, make up as a hood?"

"Right. He was so phoney it stuck out a mile. I checked by phone with several second class actor's agencies. I've identified him as an out of work ham, named Wainwright. Wolfe can pick him up and sweat him afterwards."

"Yes," I said. "But why should Franklin send him in to make that phoney play?"

"He was still trying to make me believe Parry was guilty, that Parry had sent this hood to call me off the case."

"You mean Franklin was robbing Mrs. Parry? She found out, faced him with it and he killed her? Then, learning that Parry had scammed, Franklin tried to pin it on him?"

"It's pretty obvious circumstantially," said Sackler. "Parry, reading of the murder, was too damned scared to come forward. The newspapers flatly stated he was the murderer."

Franklin took a step forward. He uttered two ugly words and his right hand thrust itself into his coat pocket. Sackler moved hastily behind a chair. Wolfe and I stepped forward. Wolfe grabbed his right arm just as the automatic came into view. I threw an arm around his throat, held him tight as Wolfe disarmed him.

Sixty seconds after Wolfe had removed Franklin, via the handcuff route, I stared at Sackler bitterly. "Don't you ever lose?"

"Do you think you deserved to win, Joey?" he said severely.

"Why not?" I demanded hotly. "I figured that Abbott was Parry's dame. I heard her say something you didn't. I figured it all out, then managed to get his address from her. All on my own hook. I certainly deserved something."

Sackler smiled faintly. "I'll give you one thing," he said. "You're certainly one hell of a letter writer."

I blinked. I said, "Stay that again?" He did. I said, "What the hell do you know about that letter?"

"I read it. As a matter of fact it was delivered to me."

"Delivered to you? How come?"

"Well, Joey, even without your special knowledge, I, too, figured that perhaps Abbott was Parry's girl. I recalled that when he said he was leaving his savings for his wife he used the words conscience money. It seemed to me he felt guilty about it. Moreover, the Abbott woman made an odd crack when she said she wished she were dead instead of Agatha Parry. That was peculiar if she was just upset about the death of a friend. It made more sense if

she were in pieces because Parry was the killer."

"All right. So what's this got to do with your getting my letter?"

"I went to the post-office and put in a change of address."

I still didn't get it. I said so.

"Well," said Sackler, "I put in one of those change of address cards for Mrs. Abbott. I gave the new address as care of me at my rooming house. Since then all her mail has been coming to me. I would take it up to her place at night and drop it in her house mail box. Until Parry wrote. I kept *that* letter myself."

I glared at him. "And you sent me that card with Parry's address on it just to come into giving up my ten percent?"

"I gave up my ten percent first."

I sat down and clapped a hand to my head.

"To be successful in this business," he said smugly, "there is one thing you must learn above all others."

He crossed the room and stuffed his pockets with cigars from Franklin's humidor. "And that," he concluded, "is ethics."

MURDER EXPRESS

(Continued from page 35)

till it trembled. With one sharp cutting blow I struck Mug across the back of the neck.

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

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

A piece of clothing that had been ripped away from him fluttered darkly in the breeze under the speeding freight car. For

a while I just stared at it senselessly. Then I remembered the kid. The young red-headed kid, with a picture of his sister and a faraway look in his eyes.

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

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

HOW SAFE'S A SAFE?

By JOSEPH W. QUINN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



NOT NECESSARILY DEAD

By ROBERT P. TOOMBS

CHAPTER ONE.

UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

AWAKENED from sound sleep by the explosive bark of a gun, I looked for Lyria. The covers were thrown back—she was gone! The bedroom door stood wide open. I staggered out of bed, stumbling around in my pajamas. There was an acrid odor in the air; gunpowder. It was just getting daylight. Bits of the windowpane lay on the Persian rug; long, glittering splinters of sharp glass. Our bedroom is on the second floor of the house. The outside wall is of figured stone, easy to climb.

Lyria screamed! It came from somewhere downstairs, her voice muffled, rising thinly up the stair-well. Footfalls, frantic, fearful, came up the stairs and I whirled, ran to the vanity and picked up a bronze candleholder. The mirror tossed out my reflection, lips drawn back, new lines fanning around by blue eyes. I was staring at my own conscience! Yesterday afternoon I had flung the bankloot in my safe downstairs, telling myself: *Just overnight. Tomorrow you can return it. Tomorrow!* And this was tomorrow—with my wife's screams tearing me wide open!

I lunged into the hall.

Lyria ran toward me, stumbling, sobbing—threw herself into my arms. Her negligee was torn, silvery blonde hair whipping almost to her waist.

"What is it?" I choked.

"A man—" she gulped, fighting to get her breath. "I couldn't see—. He's gone! I heard a noise, got up and went downstairs. He must have been up *here!* I thought he'd shot you! He came leaping downstairs. He had something over his face—something black—he grabbed me, threw me to one side and ran out the front door—"

With one hand I tried to jerk her arms from around my neck, gripping candleholder in the other. "He must have put a bullet through the bedroom window. Let go, Lyria!"

"No, Monty! Stay here! Don't go down—" Strong and supple, she wrestled me into the bedroom. "Let him go. He had a gun! What are you mixed up in? Tell me, Monty. I saw that money in the safe last night when I put my pearls away!"

I stared down into her eyes, breathing heavily. "Better get dressed."

She pulled away from me. Her cheeks were ashen. "What is it, Monty? What?"

"I don't know—for sure. But I can guess. Lyria, I'm in trouble up to my neck! He's after me all right!"

"To kill you?" she whispered.

I looked at her. Until yesterday I would have said I had no enemies—unless I'd inherited some I didn't know about since my manufacturing business began tottering three years before. This had been a riotous year, in which I'd married Lyria, built this fine house on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida, and decided only last week to slow down a bit.

My forty-two years couldn't stand the strain of dumping my personal funds into the plant with one hand, and hurling luxuries at Lyria with the other. But yesterday? Yes, I had an enemy—even if I didn't know what he looked like exactly. Maybe *more* than one?

I grabbed up my robe, stuck my feet into straw slippers and moved toward the door, gripping the candleholder.

"Wait," she panted. "I'm coming too."

"You stay here!"

I slammed the door after me and plunged down the wide stairway to the floor below. Where were the servants? Then I remembered Lyria had taken them all to

Wealthy manufacturer M. Harrison Sprague rushed to break a puzzling appointment—with death.

task yesterday about something or other—fired the lot of them. The front door was open.

My hand shook as I pulled it wider and stepped outside; padded toward the corner of the house, rounding it cautiously. In the gray half-light of dawn, nothing stirred. The grass beneath our bedroom window was spongy, wet with dew. There was lots of glass, almost as if the entire window-pane had fallen. It was impossible to detect footprints. Maybe he came this way; maybe not. I found a baseball bat. What connection that had I don't know. I threw it back under the honeysuckle bush. A car was passing the line of palms hedging the highway and I realized I looked pretty silly clutching my improvised weapon. It was barely 5:30. I had a tennis match at 7:00; was supposed to fly to my plant in Tampa at 8:00. Our place is well out of Jacksonville, really isolated, and once the sound of that solitary car dwindled up the road, the silence seemed closing in. . . .

As we finished dressing, Lyria kept eyeing me, vigorously brushing that shoulder-length cloud of silver, before the mirror. "We can't just—just *ignore* a thing like this!"

"It wouldn't do any good to call the police."

"You mean you're afraid to!"

Color was washing back into her face. Only twenty-six, she is attractive, the sleekness of that figure accentuated by her riotous hair, and eyes like a sleepy kitten's eyes—sea green—wide and guileless. But those eyes were frightened now; filled with questions. "Someone may be only warning you, Monty—the first time. Is it—stolen money?"

"Funny," I said thoughtfully. "In a way I'm a thief—simply by an act of omission. Simply because I didn't drive right back to the bank and return it."

She lowered the brush, turning slowly.

"Listen," I pleaded, "Try first to understand. The business isn't going good at all. You've known that. I haven't even tried to fool you. I hate to lay people off. I've kept up our output of heaters—"

"The money in that box—I counted it last night. Almost sixty thousand dollars. Crisp bills with a bank seal. Its from that bank hold-up yesterday downtown, isn't it?"

"Listen!" I said savagely. "I'm trying to explain to you what prompted the idiotic impulse to keep it overnight. Why I—"

"You don't say how you *got* it? Aren't you ever going to get around to *that*?"

"Well shut up and let me! I was parked in front of the bank, ready to drive off, when there was a lot of shooting—you read the headlines last night in the paper—and one of the crooks ran right past me. He took a good look, tossed that tin box into the back seat and kept going. I just sat there.

"The police ordered me on finally, after I'd identified myself with the help of some of the cashiers. They all know me. No one saw anything. I couldn't even give them a description."

"The paper said they got them all—three of them—killed them, Monty!"

"What do you think?"

She shivered. "He traced the car license—here! He knows you on sight."

I turned back to the mirror, knotting my tie.

"Monty—you're insane!"

"Sure. How am I going to get the money back to the bank?"

"O just walk in and say—I've had a change of heart. I needed this in my business, but now I'm scared."

I saw her eyes in the mirror, drifting over me scornfully.

"Lyria!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

I strode over and caught her arm roughly. "I've been worried lately. Couldn't you see? I've spent far too much on—things—this house. I was tempted—Hell, yes, I was tempted! But only for awhile. The money's going back to the bank!"

She pretended to be applauding.

I saw red.

Then abruptly she relented, melting into my arms.

"You'd better go away, darling."

"A trip!"

Her face crumpled, lips quivering. "Please, Monty. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you. He'll be back. He's a big man—savage—a killer! Look where his hand gripped my arm?" She showed me an ugly bruise.

"What was he wearing? What can you remember about him?"

"I don't know—the shock of seeing him plunging at me—a shape—he was just a big shape. Monty! Today—promise me you won't do the usual routine things? Cancel your appointments. We'll go away—just for a few days!"

I held her trembling body close, surprised, and a bit angered that her terror could

elect me like this. I was peering at the drapes along the wall as if expecting a movement—a sudden glimpse of a gun barrel.

"D'youthinkI'dtakeyouwithme?"I growled. "If I'm somebody's target I certainly won't have you mixed up in it!"

"You *must* go, Monty. Hide the money somewhere for a few days. Maybe under the edge of the swimming pool?"

It was a place we had often joked about; only she and I had discovered it. She was right. I had to get the tiny box out of the house.

The task was easily accomplished. Our pool is surrounded by a high wall. But first I made doubly sure I was unobserved by sauntering around casually outside. Later I beat it back inside, greatly relieved, and we completed plans in the living room. I would take the convertible and drive—

"Sh-h-h—" she implored.

"You mean—?"

"I don't even trust the walls," she said slowly. "If you're going to vanish, Monty—don't tell *anyone* your destination!"

"That's right," I agreed. "But you can't stay here alone. I'll—"

"Have you forgotten?" She was checking the contents of my overnight bag.

"Your sister!" I exclaimed. "I've never met her—and she's arriving today from Chicago!"

"Of course."

"But what will you tell her about me?"

Lyria paused, dismayed. "What *should* I tell her, Monty? That you're away on business?" She eyed me anxiously. "That would sound all right."

"Sure," I said. "Tell her anything. And Lyria—filled the house with people. You two mustn't be alone. Don't worry about me. This will be a little vacation. I'll figure out a way to get the money back to the bank without implicating myself."

Her lovely eyes clouded. "Oh, Monty, take me with you!"

I shook my head firmly.

"I'll live by the phone," she said. "If you need me—?"

"Of course!"

It was exciting—racing the car down long, open stretches of highway beside the blue gulf. Unconsciously, I had decided to head this way, instead of inland. Friends at the Club would never have recognized M. Harrison Sprague, wealthy manufacturer of hot water heaters. I wore dark-colored

glasses, no hat at all, and sport clothes much in need of pressing. And I hit the accelerator hard, between towns.

Lunch was a brief affair. A loose wire under the dash had been giving me trouble. I monkeyed with it awhile. Then I was off again. Miami milage signs were growing more frequent. Saturday traffic was getting thick. A strange tenseness entered my hands. I was jumpy on the wheel, passing cars with too little margin to spare. I've made the trip before—but never with this feeling of impending disaster close at hand.

A flaming sunset dappled the cloudy horizon as I merged with the long line of cars on Biscayne Boulevard. I spotted a neon sign: EMPIRE HOTEL, and a parking lot; pulled into the driveway and eased up against the brick wall of the building. The motor sputtered. I fiddled with that loose wire again, but gave it up, hauling my grip out of the back. Momentarily I stood admiring the green sweep of grass beyond the boulevard, leading down to the bay, then walked around the corner of the building, glancing at my wristwatch. It was 6:30.

The lobby was large, comfortable, fat marble pillars extending up to a high ceiling. No bellhops came rushing forward. This seemed to be one of those moderate places that seek the average tourist trade. I lowered my grip before the long desk at the rear and a clerk rose from behind a switchboard.

He hurried forward, tall, dark haired, wearing glasses, an affable smile lighting his scarred face—the scar was more like a cleft in his chin, faintly purple. He turned the ledger around for me to sign.

I hesitated, then scrawled my name in a bold hand.

He whirled the book around dexterously. "Oh, yes—Mr. Sprague. I have your reservation."

I almost dropped my glasses as I slipped them in my pocket, eyeing him sharply. "Must be a mistake."

He bent above the name again. "M. Harrison Sprague? No, sir. I received a phone call about four o'clock." He went over to the switchboard, ruffled through a few pieces of paper, moved to the key rack and brought out a key from box 214 with a slip of paper. "Here it is, Mr. Sprague. I've given you room 214—very nice—" He handed me the paper.

On it was scribbled a notation in pencil: *M. Harrison Sprague. Phoned 4:30 p.m. Saturday.*

I looked at him. "But at four-thirty I was sixty miles from here!"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Perhaps a friend—?"

"Was it a man's voice?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see," I said slowly.

He came out from behind the counter and picked up my grip. I followed him across the lobby to the stairs. There was an elevator, but the door was closed, the indicator hand moving slowly from 4 to 1. We mounted to the second floor, moving down a dim hall.

He let me into room 214, fussed around opening the window, but I told him it wasn't necessary. I reached in my pocket for a tip. He smiled, shaking his head. The overhead light gleamed on his glasses as he put the key in the door and left.

I closed the door, locked it, sat down limply on the bed, fumbling for my cigarette case. This was utterly impossible! No one knew I was coming to Miami, nor to this hotel. I hadn't known it myself! And yet someone had phoned a reservation in my name at 4:30! I lit a cigarette, sitting very still, trying to think. I gazed around the room.

There was a phone. For an instant I battled a crazy notion to call Lyria—tell her about it. But I put the desire out of my mind. Presently I stood up, snubbing the cigarette in an ash tray on the dresser.

The phone rang.

I picked it up. The operator's voice said she had a long distance call for M. Harrison Sprague! I groped for the back of a chair, leaning heavily.

"New York calling. Mr. Sprague?"

"Yes." I replied weakly.

She spoke to someone on the other end of the line, "Here's your party, sir." A pause, a strange man's voice spoke quickly, sharp and clear: "Sprague? You have something that doesn't belong to you. You'll have a visitor soon!"

"Who is this?" I asked.

There was a click. The line was dead.

My heart was banging against my ribs as I replaced the phone on the table. I didn't know anyone in New York. How could a hoodlum that held up a bank in Jacksonville have someone phone me from New York, a few minutes after I'd checked into a hotel I never expected to stop at? In Miami! This was *too* much!

The overhead light blazed down from the

ceiling, unwinking. The sound of traffic outside was muffled, distant. The room began to take on an eerie aspect. I peered into the bathroom. Empty. There was a door on the other side of the room. It opened, I found, into a huge barren clothes closet. I looked under the bed. I was sweating. Maybe I should get help? But who could I trust? I was a stranger in this city. I didn't even have a gun, in case my soon-to-be-visitor—?

I strode over and threw open the window; stood for a long time watching the lights on Miami Beach across the causeway. At 6:45 it was already dark. A warm wind blew across the sill, fanning my face. Abruptly I couldn't take this room any longer. It was a trap! I stepped to the hall door, unlocked it, yanked it open.

There was nothing out there—except a sour, nasty odor. Turning off the light at the wall switch, I whipped the key to the outside of the door, stepped out and locked it behind me, slipping the key in my pocket. I needed fresh air—and a chance to think—maybe the opportunity, once outside, to start running?

I found the stairs and started down. A man was coming up, taking two steps at a time, his breath sounding harsh in the stillness. He was neatly dressed, hatless, with iron-gray hair and glasses. I slung back against the wall, half raising my fist.

"Don't be alarmed," he said soothingly. The police are here now. It's all right. Just an attempted robbery. I'm the manager, Mr. Albritton."

"An attempted robbery? Here?"

He shook my hand off his arm impatiently. "Yes. My clerk was slugged and bound, dragged into the inner office. But he'll be all right. They're taking him in the ambulance now. You can go down, Mr. —?"

"Sprague. I'm in 214."

"Oh, yes—Mr. Sprague." He started up, changed his mind, muttering, "I must tell the police those crooks didn't locate the wall safe. Nothing was taken." He plunged downstairs again.

I followed.

He went across to a group of people at the desk, spoke to a blue-uniformed figure. They went back into an office beyond the switchboard. A few people were standing around, either guests of the hotel or onlookers attracted from the street. A siren moaned in the darkness out front, growing fainter.

I chatted with a bellhop near the elevator but didn't learn much. He said the hotel had been "stuck up" about a year ago. This time they didn't get anything. "Better stick around," he advised me. "They may want to question everybody."

I nodded, but headed toward the front door.

A detective eyed me suspiciously. At least I judged he was a detective when he came out of the manager's office. He topped my one hundred and forty pounds by a good sixty, hat pulled low over his eyes, maneuvering past the switchboard, lifting the hinged part of the front desk and stepping into the lobby.

I knew he was watching me. I'm afraid I wore my fear badly—my hands were shaking when I paused, trying to light a cigarette.

He passed me slowly.

CHAPTER TWO.

CROWDED ON THE INSIDE.

AVOIDING his gaze I sauntered toward a phone booth, fumbling for change, heard him say something to the cop who was stationed by the front door, then his heavy stride approaching.

I closed the door; the light flicked on, and the operator's voice was crisp, impersonal.

I asked for long distance. I was worried about Lyria—or maybe I just *had* to hear her voice again.

The echo returned: "Long Distance?"

"I'm calling Jacksonville. Mrs. M. Harrison Sprague. Reverse the charges. The number is—"

He pulled the booth door open, rested one shoulder against the edge, motioning for me to continue.

My ears grew red. I didn't hang up because it would look suspicious. Instead, I repeated my information to the operator and added the number. Then there was the formality of waiting, and finally Lyria's cool voice on the wire: "Monty? I've been waiting."

"Guess where I am!" I could hear the radio going, a woman's laughing voice.

"Are you all right?"

I wanted to tell her—so many things, but I said I was all right.

Her voice lowered: "I wish I was along."

"You can't guess how much I wish that."

I agreed fervently, "But, it's best this way. Did your sister arrive?"

"Yes. She wanted to meet you. Monty? Your voice sounds—worried. What is it?"

"Nothing," I lied hastily. "You sound a bit strange yourself. Maybe it's the phone. Now, listen, don't worry, Lyria. Please."

"How can I help it? Has anything happened?"

"No! I've got to hang up, Lyria. See you soon?"

She murmured what any husband likes to hear and I was smiling—until I turned.

He'd been taking it all in, face expressionless.

"My wife," I explained coldly. "What do you want?"

His upper lip lifted slightly, exposing strong, white teeth. He took his time about stepping back and letting me emerge. "I'll ask the questions, mister. There's been an attempted robbery here.

"I know that. I checked in at six-thirty. It must have happened shortly afterward."

He bit off the end of a black cigar, looking around for a cuspidor. "What are you so jittery for?"

"I'm not."

"Anybody here identify you?"

I clenched my hands. "I don't know anything about it."

"I asked for your identification!"

While I fumbled angrily for my wallet, he spat on the floor, one hand carelessly sliding beneath his light, gray topcoat.

I've never been mistaken for a thug before. I didn't like the faint prickles it aroused in the small of my back. "My name's Sprague," I told him. "I'm a stranger here. But my driver's license ought to prove who I am. And here's my check book—a business card—"

He thumbed through everything thoroughly, pausing to study my card. "Sprague Manufacturing Company." His eyebrows lifted. "Hot water heaters."

I didn't like him, and yet—he seemed capable. There was a solidness about him—not just physically. He was tough, experienced. My eyes were taking him apart, estimating. How much should I tell him—about me? I realized that here was an opportunity to get protection—if I handled it right.

"I need your help," I blurted. "Something's happened in the last hour—since I checked into this hotel."

He tossed the wallet back. "I'll say it has.

The clerk's on his way to a hospital for one thing!"

"I don't mean the hold-up or whatever it was. I mean to me."

"Yeah?"

I hesitated, groping for words. "Someone knows every move I'm making. I don't know who or why." I dug out a hundred dollar bill and handed it to him. "Will you help me—say—unofficially?"

He was silent, the bill lost in his fist, black eyes studying me.

A bellhop brushed past with a handful of luggage. There was a different clerk at the desk, gazing nervously around the lobby, fooling with the inkwell. Suddenly I was desperately afraid that this big man wouldn't help me. I watched him apprehensively, holding my breath.

The bill disappeared, tucked in a vest pocket. "M'name's Mace," he grunted. "I've got to make a report. How about waiting in the bar?"

I nodded, relieved, staring after his broad back as he moved away. He went to the desk. The clerk ran and brought him a phone, asking several rapid questions, desisting when Mace volunteered nothing but grunts.

I went into the cocktail lounge, took a table and a Collins, grateful for dim lights and the booth at my back. A Viennese waltz drifted from the radio. There were a few people seated at the bar, laughing and whispering, receiving scowls from the bartender. But none of this affected me, nor held my interest. I don't suppose anything could really penetrate that fog of fear swirling within my mind. That voice? I peered around furtively. There was no one in the next booth. I forced the quiver from my hands as I raised my glass.

He walked in a moment later, removing his coat. His glance found me, merged with the gloom. He thrust his bulk my way; a smooth, heavy stride, devouring the distance between us; squeezing in across from me. "All right, Sprague. From now until midnight I'm on my own time. Let's cut the formalities and get down to facts!"

"What'll you drink?" I asked.

"Skip it." He pushed his hat to the back of his head, eyes drifting over me appraisingly, missing no detail. "You look crowded—crowded on the inside. Know what I mean? I've seen guys takin' the last walk that looked better."

I drew a shaky breath. "I must admit I am

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afraid. I think I'll tell you first about the bullet hole in the window."

I told him that part as briefly and concisely as I could, finishing with: "So you see I left Jacksonville this morning, driving alone, not heading any particular place."

"Destination unknown, huh?"

It didn't sound too good, the way he said it. I lifted my glass swallowing the rest of my drink. "That's correct, Mace. I picked the Empire hotel just by chance; maybe because it had a parking lot easily accessible. I registered, and when the clerk saw my name he assured me my reservation had been taken care of. I was dumfounded! He had all the information scribbled on a card. The call had come in at four-thirty—a man's voice, he said. But at four-thirty I was sixty miles from here!"

Mace looked skeptical.

I plunged on grimly. "There weren't any bellhops around at the moment and he showed me up to the room. While I was having a smoke, the phone rang. It was a long distance call from New York. I don't know anyone in New York." I paused, sweat coming out on my forehead.

Mace flicked an ash from his cigar, watching me. "Go on."

"It was a man's voice, sharp and clear. He said, 'M. Harrison Sprague? You'll have a visitor soon!'

"Go on."

"That's all. He hung up."

Mace blew smoke at the ceiling, eyes almost closed. His left hand lay flat on the table, fingers lifting in time with the music coming from the radio. "You checked in at six-thirty, you said? How long were you in the room before you got the call?"

"I finished a cigarette—about three or four minutes, maybe less."

"No visitor yet?"

I looked around uncomfortably, shaking my head.

He scratched his chin, a faint, rasping sound above the music. "Did you hear the operator's voice?"

"Yes. She said, 'Here's your party, sir,' to the man on the other end. One thing I am sure of—no one knew what town I'd stop in tonight—or that it would be this hotel. How could they? I didn't know it myself until I got here!"

"Got any enemies?" he asked softly.

I looked him straight in the eye and shook my head.

He planted both elbows on the table, leaning forward. "You've stepped on some-

body's toes, haven't you? Look, Sprague—you gotta come clean with me if you expect me to dig up the dirt. No guy's perfect!"

I flushed. "I don't say I am. But—" I spread my hands helplessly. "There isn't anyone. I'm just an average person. Why would anybody—?"

"I'd say you're above average. Owner of a manufacturing business, able to take off when you feel like it. That suit cost better than two hundred bucks. Right?"

I remained silent a moment, digesting this. "You think it's money someone's after?"

His lip lifted. "What else?"

"But how? And that New York call—"

"We'll check on that in a minute. How many people knew you were taking this trip today?"

"Only my wife."

"You sure?"

"Positive. But she didn't know where I was going. She couldn't even have let it slip accidentally. Lyria was more frightened than I was. She urged me to cancel my appointments today and just vanish for a while. She wanted to come with me, but of course I wouldn't let her."

"Naturally."

I didn't like the way he said it, his eyes half closed, not actually regarding me, as if his thoughts were racing far ahead. "A bullet hole in the window. Glass all over—" He paused, eying the tip of his cigar, gripped between the stubby fingers of his left hand. "You smelled gunpowder. How about your wife? Did she smell it too?"

"I don't remember that I asked her. I was a bit confused—awakened from sound sleep like that. But you can leave her out of it, Mace."

He shook his head. "That's just where I begin, Sprague."

I half rose.

He shoved me back. "Okay. So you're touchy. But I'm sticking to facts. I've got to earn my hundred between now and midnight. That doesn't give me much time."

The blood was suddenly throbbing in my temples. "I said leave her out of it!"

His eyes went cold, boring into mine, probing.

When I couldn't stand any more of it, I looked down into my empty glass. Lyria's red lips, softly curved—her face—seemed to stare up from the bottom. I could hear her voice, frightened—or had it been coaxing? "Go away, darling. Now!" But her terror was entirely natural. Why shouldn't

she be worried about me? Me, with a stick-up artist on my neck, and sixty thousand hot dollars! A kill-crazy shape—hurting downstairs.

Mace was watching me—sympathetically.

"Look," I spluttered, "I just talked to Lyria on the phone. She doesn't know yet where I am. She didn't want me to tell her; probably in case someone was listening in. If you can't do any better than to suspect her—?"

"What about the sister?"

"Viola? I never met her. She's with Lyria now. You can't connect her with this. How do you explain the fact that someone knew I'd stop here tonight?"

"There's only one way to explain it. If you weren't so upset you'd have figured it out."

I sat back slowly. "How?"

"You were tailed. As you put it yourself—someone knows every move you're making."

I stared—trying to think back over long stretches of highway, recalling nothing particularly suspicious. . . .

"You forget," I said, "the clerk. He said a reservation was made at four-thirty this afternoon. I wasn't even here yet!"

"That's easy too. He was probably lying in his teeth!"

"He never saw me before in his life. Why would he?"

Mace sighed. "You're a nice fella, Sprague. Would it break your heart if I informed you that there are rascals and scoundrels in the world?"

I stiffened. "We don't need the wise remarks, Mace. Maybe this is funny to you—but not to me!"

His expression hardened. "It isn't funny. Murder seldom is."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. Yours. I never saw a better build-up for just that."

The music was pounding, pounding. Someone had turned up the volume. I smiled a bit uncertainly. "You put it pretty strong. Are you trying to scare the hell out of me? Because if you are—"

"Someone beat me to it," he said curtly. "Whoever your little playmates are—they play rough. You should have seen that clerk's head."

I looked my bewilderment.

He leaned across the table. "It was six forty-five when the manager found him lying on the floor of the inner office. Just

how long before that he was slugged, we don't know."

"But what has that to do with me? I told you I checked in at 6:30. He was all right when he showed me to my room."

Mace frowned, snubbed his cigar. "Maybe plenty. I want to check that long distance phone call." He rose, shrugging on his topcoat.

"Shall I—sit tight then?"

He glanced around. "You better stick with me. Come on."

I tossed the bartender a bill and followed him into the lobby. At the desk Mace beckoned the clerk.

"Do you keep a record of all phone calls?"

The young man shook his head. "Just out-gong."

"Get the supervisor on the wire and find out if there have been any New York calls to this hotel within the last four or five hours."

"Yes, sir." The man hurried over to the switchboard.

Mace drew out another cigar, eyeing me. "You wanna bet there haven't been?"

"You think the call was faked from right here?"

"Sure."

"But the operator's voice—?"

"All right. A man and a woman did the faking—so we're after a man and a woman."

"As simple as that? They walked into a hotel and take over the switchboard?"

"You said no one was around but the clerk when you checked in," he pointed out. "This is only a two-hundred room joint, usually only one bellhop on duty, as I recall it, and he probably shoots crap in the basement every chance he gets!"

"But the clerk—"

"He was slugged. Remember?"

We stood waiting. Presently the deskman returned, shaking his head.

"No call from New York."

Mace looked at me, turned back to the clerk. "I wanna know one more thing—about the clerk who got slugged. Describe him for Mr. Sprague here."

The young man stared. "You mean William Baker? I thought you saw him? He's about fifty-five, real short, five foot three or four, red-headed—"

At the look on my face he stopped.

"That's not the man," I declared. "You're not talking about the clerk at all! The clerk was tall, dark-haired, weighed about one

hundred and seventy, had a scarred chin—a peculiar scar, jagged, faintly purple. He wore glasses."

The clerk flushed. "I guess I know what I'm talking about. We've worked alternate shifts for three years!"

"Never mind," Mace grunted. He grabbed me by the arm, drew me across the lobby out of earshot. "Good for you, Sprague. You've got an eye for detail."

I shrugged him away. "What are you talking about? I tell you that man's lying about the other clerk!"

"No, he's not. He's talkin' about the clerk all right. But *you're* talkin' about the man we're after—or who's after *you*—either way you wanna look at it. And there's a woman in on the deal all right? Or else how could they have faked the operator's voice?"

Mace was excited. It was the first time I had seen his face lose its immobility. "You see," he said, "I'll gamble it's like this.—The clerk, Baker, was slugged *before* you checked in. They got him out of the way. This other guy *posed* as a clerk. It was a fast switch because he had to familiarize himself with the desk set-up, pick the right key for an unoccupied room, scribble that fake reservation business on a card—all the time keeping one eye out for a bellhop or some guest who might give him away. Probably the woman stood by to help out in any way she could if something like that happened.

I nodded slowly. "If I was being followed on the way down, they saw what hotel I picked when I swung into the parking lot, and then beat me inside the hotel!"

"Sure! Think back . . . You probably took a few minutes getting your grip out of the car, locking it up—?"

"As a matter of fact, there's a loose wire under the dash. It caused me some trouble today. I fooled with it a minute or two, but quit because it was getting dark."

"*Sure* they had time to knock the clerk out!" He pulled me around a corner of the lobby near a large pillar, almost hidden from the elevator.

The full impact of his reasoning began to sink in. Everything fit. An eerie feeling sent my pulse racing. It was like unseen hands reaching from the dark for my throat—reaching—to what end? Why? The money was under the edge of the swimming pool. If they wanted to snatch me; force me to lead them to the tin box, why all this hocus pocus? Mace had only certain

pieces of this jigsaw puzzle to work with. I was afraid to give him more. But I put the question to him anyway. Why?

He looked at me for a long moment, appraisingly. "You seem to have a pretty stiff backbone at that. I'm gonna level with you on this case because we gotta work together. *You* know what the guy looks like and I don't."

"Well?"

"As I see it they're trying to scare the hell out of you. Maybe wanna smoke you into going to the police here in Miami, telling a crazy story. They may fake an attempt on your life, so you tell the cops here about it. Then it's on record. See? You're a long ways from home. You get knocked off—probably tonight—they might make it look like suicide. Anyway, the point is—the little lady at home is in the clear. See? All the dough you've got belongs to her, and the guy workin' with her—and I imagine you've got plenty."

I stood there, dazed. Then I swung.

He handled me very easily. My uppercut missed a mile. He jerked me behind the large pillar out of view of the desk and the cop by the door. But my second wild blow caught him on the mouth, and a thin, red string ran down over his chin. He slammed me back hard against the pillar, his breath hot on my face. "You fool! She's played you for a sucker, and that hurts. Sure. Now grow up! It's *your* life, Sprague. And they want it!"

Anger blurred my vision. Perhaps what he said stirred an instinctive fear deep within me. "I don't want any part of *you*," I rasped. "Get away from me, Mace, or I'll kill you!"

He sneered. "You're just off your nut. Cool down, fella. You think a bullet went through your bedroom window? Uh uh. A bullet makes a clean-cut penetration through glass; maybe a few cracks spreading away from the point of impact—you said half the windowpane was on the lawn, long splinters of glass, didn't you? Use your head. Something was thrown through it from the inside, probably the baseball bat. Your wife could have fired a blank cartridge, a real gun for that matter—split timing wouldn't matter—you were asleep."

"She was after an effect, something to make you think a killer had been heading into your bedroom. She probably sent the servants away the day before. Anyway, it scared you, and her talk of a man being

in the house cinched it. And—get this—there's no real evidence of anything except a broken window which is probably repaired by now. Kick me off the case? You—"

I was trembling. "You're off!"

Slowly he released me, stepped back, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He pulled out a handkerchief then and did a better job, grimacing wryly.

I left him there, walking blindly toward the stairs, fumbling for the key to my room.

A bellhop looked at me curiously as I passed. "Elevator, sir?"

"I'll walk," I mumbled, and took the stairs two at a time.

I don't know what I really had in mind—to get out of the hotel and drive—anywhere. Get my grip. And think. Just think about Lyria, and how much she meant to me, and try to get back on an even footing. She could have made up the story about the "shape," bruised her own arm.

She knew about the money in the safe last night. That gave her a few hours to plan. I hated Mace for what he was doing—destroying my faith in *her*. I hated everyone and everything at that moment, and it was all the worse because down inside I was icy with fear!

The second floor hall was dim. I found myself wandering the wrong way; turned and retraced my steps. When I got to my room I paused and stared stupidly. The door was ajar. I hesitated—but common sense precaution wasn't in me at the moment. I edged in, fumbling along the wall for the lightswitch. The room seemed filled with a clammy dampness. My fingers brushed the wall vainly. There was a faint rattle as the breeze drifted in through the open window. Then I touched the plastic switch.

The overhead light sprayed down—silently, relentlessly, probing that object in the middle of the room. A sight that brought a hoarse scream to my lips, "Lyria!"

Her green eyes were wide, staring. . . . Her slim, crumpled form stiffly propped in an armchair directly facing me, silvery hair falling in a disheveled cloud. . . . A red, sponge-like stain spread horribly across the front of her blouse. My visitor had arrived!

For endless seconds, my scream dying in my throat, I stood numb, unbelieving. I took a faltering step forward and something blasted my skull, thrusting me into a black void, thick and soundless. . . .

CHAPTER THREE.

DON'T COME BACK.

YEARS may have passed; centuries. I saw a pinpoint of light. Something was moving. My head jiggled up and down, throbbing, cradled on a man's arm. I looked up into a familiar face. Mace!

"Take it easy," he advised. "Close your eyes again if it makes you feel better."

Close my eyes! I didn't think I'd ever close my eyes again! He was pressing a cold towel against the side of my head, his voice rattling on and on, "It isn't bleeding now. You're lucky. I told you they play rough. Maybe you'll have sense enough to keep me on your team? It's a good thing I decided to follow you."

"Lyria," I groaned, thrusting him away and sitting bolt upright. The chair was empty! My eyes darted around the room. "My wife—" I shuddered, grabbing his arm, babbling out the story.

"Here?" Mace exclaimed incredulously. "Dead? Look, fella—that sock on the head made me woozy!"

I climbed to my feet, staggering around the room. "I saw her, Mace. She had blood on her blouse."

"Yeah? You talked to her on the phone a half hour ago too. And Jacksonville is a long ways from here!"

"The blood."

"Shut up!"

I pressed my hands to my head, knees almost buckling; slumped on the edge of the bed. "I told you I had no enemies, Mace. I lied."

He sucked in his breath. "You didn't lie very well, Sprague. You're not very practiced at it. I knew you were holdin' out."

"I was afraid, Mace, that's why I didn't tell you all of it. I thought he'd be after *me*, not Lyria. I left her there this morning. He must have got her. She wouldn't tell where the money was. He killed her."

"Stop babbling!" he roared. "What money?"

I began shivering uncontrollably.

He jerked me up with one maw-like hand, commenced cuffing me, slowly, methodically, open-handed blows that sent pain stabbing through my head.

My ears ringing, I began to talk, lucidly—and to the point, and he dropped me. I told him about the bank hold-up; the tin box containing almost sixty thousand dollars.

That didn't surprise him because he'd read the teletape at police headquarters. But as for my part in it?

He stood wide-legged, hands on his hips, hat pushed back, and a look on his face that said I was a damned liar. Those opaque eyes nailed me to the bed.

"You don't think I intended to return the money? Mace—Listen—. It's hidden safely right now. Only Lyria knows where. Would I be telling you all this? Would I? Lyria's dead. Murdered?" I covered my face with my hands.

After a long moment, his voice reached me, as though he was speaking to himself. "You couldn't be lying, mister. Not now." He began prowling about the room, searching for something. "This chair here?" he asked, "Facing the door?"

I looked up, groaned an affirmative.

"Too theatrical," he said disgustedly. "And they can't lug a corpse around like a suitcase." He stopped, bent over and made a swipe at something with his fingers on the rug. They came away red. He brought it close to his face. "Look, Sprague."

"Don't!" I was shuddering again. "I've got to get out of here."

He lunged toward me, one fist raised threateningly.

I ducked, raising my guard, blood rushing back into my face.

He ploughed to a standstill. "That's better," he growled. "They're trying to turn your guts into jelly. Stay mad, Sprague. Stay mad! Take a poke at me if it'll help any. But don't give in to 'em. Your wife isn't dead. I'd bet on it! She isn't dead!"

"Not dead" I repeated inanely.

"I told you I had this thing figured! She was faking. If you'd have got to her you'd have known—but they saw to it you didn't." He jammed his finger under my nose. "Smell it!"

I sniffed, filled with a mixture of relief and loathing. It was catsup!

Mace brought one big fist into the palm of his hand with a resounding crack. "From now on we're after them! Here's your hat. Let's get outta here!"

I stumbled to my feet. "Where?"

"We'll use your car. I know this town like a book. We'll make the rounds and you keep your eyes open for the guy with the scarred chin and—your wife!"

Lyria? Lyria wasn't dead? I grabbed his arm. "But who did I talk with when I phoned home? Don't you think I know my own wife's voice? Mace you're crazy! You—"

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"The sister, you fat-head! Their voices are probably identical, or enough alike to fool you. Come on! We're wasting time."

"If Lyria was faking, Mace. That means she—?"

He grabbed my hat and shoved it into my hands, pushing me impatiently out into the hall, snapping off the light and closing the door. He reached into a shoulder holster and pulled out his revolver. "Here—keep this .38 handy. Don't use it unless you have to."

"But you—?"

"I'm not in *your* shoes."

I slipped the gun into the side pocket of my coat. It was awkward and bulky and the pocket flap wouldn't lay down, but it was the best I could do. The sagging weight of it felt pretty good at that. "Thanks, Mace." I hesitated. "About tonight—there in the lobby. I lost my head. It isn't easy to believe that Lyria—that my wife—"

"Oh shut up!" He batted at the brim of his hat. "I'd feel the same."

We went down the hall. The stairs gave my head a jolting. It felt like it was tearing from my neck. I barely noticed the people in the lobby, but the hands of the clock above the front door stood at 8. I must have been unconscious longer than I realized.

Why hadn't they finished me when they had the chance? Or was my friend, Mace, upsetting their plans? Or—and this was what gave me the peculiar feeling in my mid-section—were they biding their time; waiting for a better opportunity?

We were rounding the corner of the building, bending into a stiff breeze, Mace in the lead. The parking lot was black, no attendant. He held out his hand warningly, pressing me back against the brick wall. "Steady. Let's wait a second. Which is your car?"

I pointed to the convertible.

"Soupy looking crate," he said appreciatively.

But I knew he was stalling, eyes trying to pierce the shadows for any shape that might be lurking. I swallowed, looking up at the stars, thankful that I had a man like Mace at my side.

"Let's go," he said.

I led off to the car, handing him the keys. "You better drive."

He shrugged, unlocked the door and climbed in first. As I slid in and closed the door, he found the starter, and the lights, backed us around in a tight circle. "We'll hit a couple of roadhouses I know, Sprague. Ten to one they'd spot a place on the out-

skirts of town; the same route you came in from Jacksonville—the coast, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"My guess is, they'd use a joint out there somewhere for headquarters."

He fell silent, and we wound through the boulevard traffic. It began to thin out finally. I recognized a super gas station. "It's a slim chance, isn't it?" I broke the silence at last. "They could be almost anywhere." It was then I glanced into the double, rear-vision mirror and noticed the headlights following us. Those lights had been with us all the time and surely Mace was aware of it? Of course they'd be spotting the hotel when we came out, but playing it smart, keeping well hidden. Maybe Mace didn't want to alarm me, but had figured all along that it would happen this way?

His eyes were on me. The light from the dash reflected flinty chips in those cold depths, then his gaze shifted back to the road. We were flying like a greased bowstring, wrapping up each turn of the highway neat and tight. Flying into the blank darkness of nowhere while a chill crept up my legs that wasn't caused by the rushing wind.

The suspicion insinuated itself into my aching brain—exploded to full-blown warning. Was Mace *really* a policeman? I had never asked for any credentials, just assumed it because he had blustered up to me there in the phone booth—because he wanted me to think that perhaps? I thought he had exchanged official words with that cop by the door, but—he could have asked the time—anything! There in the room I had almost told Mace where I had hidden the money! Was Lyria—alive?

He was insisting that she was, trying to prove to me that she was behind all this. But *was* she? And here I was being rushed to an appointment—with those in the car behind—an appointment with—death?

My fingers encountered the gun in my right coat pocket. Why had he given it to me? My new-found distrust wavered. I told myself that I was simply worked up, so unstrung that it was too easy to imagine anything. To hand a man a loaded gun—Loaded? I felt it over with my fingers. How did I break it open to find out? It had been a long time since I'd handled a gun, but I remembered the trick of the catch on the top of the frame.

Presently, in that roomy pocket, I managed it. With my forefinger I discovered that the cylinder was devoid of shells. He had re-

moved the bullets before handing it to me. Simple. Probably while I was still unconscious in that room.

I didn't dare close the gun again, afraid he'd hear the slight click. My head was throbbing, but I managed to keep my face calm.

He was slowing, peering ahead. I saw that those lights stayed a good distance behind; were even now dropping farther back. A blue, neon sign flickered off to the right: "Jack's Place."

"I'll pull in," Mace said. "Liable to find anybody here. Usually some pretty tough boys. They run a game upstairs. We'll have a quick drink and see what goes."

Cars were parked before the door at haphazard angles and I noticed a big space behind the building, when our lights flashed over it, that held a few more. Watching Mace from the corner of my eye, I saw him glance that way, then into the rear mirror. Did he know they'd be here soon, perhaps in the next few moments, waiting out back?

He coasted up silently, shooting between two sleek looking sedans; motioned me out. We headed for the door, Mace taking the lead. "Don't tip your hand if you see him," he cautioned. "I'll know by your face. Better jerk your hat over your eyes. And don't pull that gun on anybody. That's *my* end of the deal."

"All right," I agreed quietly. My teeth drew back from my lips when he turned. Somehow I'd give him the slip. . . .

Eyes swung towards us when we entered and I kept my head lowered, following Mace to the bar. There were tables and booths, partially filled, the usual juke-box pitching an assortment of jive. The man behind the bar had a towel wrapped around his bull-neck. He nodded at Mace coldly, ignoring me altogether.

Over our drinks, such as they were, we gazed into a rear hallway and disappear. Mace looked at me questioningly.

"Don't see him," I mumbled to him quietly.

He nodded.

I saw his gaze shift toward the front door; linger there. His coat bulged out at the hip and I was convinced he had another gun hidden there. Our eyes met in the mirror above the bar.

"You look better," he said. "Up in the hotel room I thought you'd pass out on me."

I managed a stiff nod. "Because I didn't know what I was up against before Mace."

His lips twitched as though at a fleeting, humorous thought. "Yeah."

The front door swung open. I gripped my glass so tight my knuckles ached, but it was only a newsboy. He began circling among the tables. I was tense, watching—

"We'll stay here awhile," Mace said out of the corner of his mouth. "Take it easy."

Yes. Take it easy. While he was holding me here, what was going on outside? I was burning with impatience. They probably wouldn't come in here at all. And presently he'd suggest we go back to my car. Once out there in the dark, what chance would I have? The time to make the break was now!

The juke box was blasting out with another round of rumba, screeching, jangling my nerves. I stood up and Mace half turned, cat-like.

"Wash my hands," I explained. "Be right back."

Slowly he sank back on the stool, eyes narrowing.

I don't know whether he fell for it or not. I ambled toward that rear hall where the sign pointed to the washroom. Once out of sight, I trotted past it, turned and went up a flight of wooden stairs. A long hall stretched before me, closed doors on each side and a crack of light shining dimly beneath one of them.

A man's voice, muffled, filtered from the room, mingling with the rattle of poker chips; a loud guffaw; other voices. I went on, stepping softly, came up against a closed door at the end of the hall. I eased the gun out of my pocket to use for effect if necessary, and twisted the knob. It opened.

My heart leaped when cool, night air struck my face. Wooden steps descended to the ground. My way was clear. But I hesitated. If Lyria and the man with the scarred chin were below somewhere, and I had bullets in my gun—? Ambitious thoughts of retribution held me there. I glanced back toward that room where the game was in progress. Tough men hung out there, Mace had said. They had guns of their own probably, and I knew a .38 revolver was a fairly common calibre. By now, Mace might be coming up those stairs after me, but I took a big chance and went back to that door with the slitted, yellow light creeping from beneath. I tore off my tie, opened my shirt at the throat, pasted an evil leer on my lips and kicked the door open, stepping into the room!

Five men froze, staring.

One wore a green eye-shade. There were stacks of currency on the circular, green-topped table. All of them held cards, chips piled high. I closed the door, backing against it, watching closely.

The small, wizened fellow nearest me, let his breath whistle through his teeth nastily. "You won't get away with it, friend!"

No one else spoke. Their eyes were on my gun.

"This ain't a stick-up," I said harshly. "A cop's on my tail and I need some spare lead for this .38. Who's got some slugs?"

The expression on their faces was ludicrous. No one moved.

"The quicker I get outta here—the better for all of us!" I prodded.

The man with the green eye-shade moved cautiously, pulling open a drawer in front of him; carefully lifted out a revolver, broke it, and spilled shells on the table, pushing them toward me, watchfully.

Nodding wordlessly, I scooped them into my pocket.

"You got a car?" the wizened man growled.

"Yeah."

The dapper little man I had spotted downstairs, picked up a stack of bills. "You need dough?"

"No. I'm all set!" I let my gaze travel over each of them in turn. "You gugs are okay! Be seein' you around."

"Sure," the man with the eye-shade nodded. "Sure."

I opened the door and stepped out, closing it gently. No sign of Mace yet. There wasn't a sound behind me in that room as I reached the outside and descended the wooden stairs. The wind was rising. In the blackness surrounding the building I loaded the revolver. Now I was on an even footing with Mace.

I moved off slowly into the darkness, prowling—seeking for a car with a man and a woman. A slight click back up those stairs, and the door on the landing opened—a large figure stood momentarily silhouetted—blotted out with the quick closing of the door. He was silent, evidently listening. There was no moon, no stars, and his eyes had to adjust themselves to this darkness.

The wind blew in gusts, sending dust swirling across the parking lot; pieces of paper skittering and scraping noisily; then it would subside, leaving an unnatural still-

ness that heightened even a faint footfall. During one of these gusts I covered ground fast, running head down, dodging just in time as I came up to a line of parked cars. I leaned there, breathing swiftly. The first car was empty. I heard steps descending those wooden stairs, un hurried, sure. It was this that spurred me on more than anything else, filling me with a strange panic. Crouching, I went from car to car, thinking that at the end of the line I'd cut and run blindly off into the darkness. With a shock I saw a glowing cigarette arc out of the front seat of the last car, a long, heavy sedan. It lit on the ground near my feet and rolled. There was the outline of two people in that seat!

Creeping close, I put one hand gently on the handle of the rear door, gun ready, easing the handle down, little by little. When it clicked, I jerked the door open and leaped into the back seat, growling: "Don't move!"

Blurred faces swung toward me, a woman's frightened gasp. She sat behind the wheel, one hand gripping it tightly. She was beautiful, long, silvery hair falling free to her shoulders, clasped about the temple by a narrow, jeweled band—a band I had recently given her. Lyria!

The man with her was twisting, coming over the seat. He wasn't wearing glasses now, and he didn't act like a clerk. His mouth was a snarling gash. I hit him in the face with the side of the .38, a chopping motion, and he fell back, but rose again.

"You want a bullet in your head?" I gritted. "Get back!"

"Monty!" Lyria whispered. "You've found me. You—I've tried to warn you all day, darling—tried to get to you—Why are you staring at me like that? Monty?"

Her voice was clawing the insides out of me. Her lying, snivelling voice. I felt sick. I went blind, trying to pull that trigger—blast her from my sight forever. Maybe I would have—but a hand reached from nowhere, twisted my wrist, and the gun fell. Pain shot up to my elbow. It was Mace, reaching through the window!

The psuedo-clerk came over the front seat then, stabbing viciously with a knife—a silent, horrible death-thrust that took part of my coat as I squirmed back. He kept coming toward me.

The car starter ground raggedly, gears meshed as Lyria spun the wheel and I heard Mace bellowing above the lurching of the

car—but I was struggling desperately with scar-chin, one arm locked around his neck, my other hand gripping his knife wrist.

It was the longest moment I ever lived, feeling the strength of him, like live steel, slipping away from my clutching hands—the car moving, rocking, gaining tremendous speed—then a crash as we went into a brick wall instead of the street. Mace was still on the running board.

Everything seemed to cave in—sluggish, struggling figures like a movie on a blood-red film. The writhing form on top of me jerked. Mace brought a gun butt down on his head a second time, which was enough, hauling the limp body out on the dirt. A crowd started to gather.

The front of the car was pushed in, the front seat hideously compressed beneath a sheet of broken glass, gasoline and oil gurgling onto the ground. Lyria lay crumpled up there, barely stirring. I groped for the .38 on the floor, but Mace leaned in again.

"Cut it out, tough guy. Where you got the bullets for that gat I wouldn't know, but the way you go for it makes me suspicious." He picked it up, broke it open, and whistled. "I musta had a hunch when I saw you getting ready to blast your wife. I think the law has a better right to stop her crooked schemes, don't you?"

I stared at him dazedly. "The law? But you gave me an empty gun. You didn't let on when you knew they were following us here!"

He was opening the front door, lifting Lyria up roughly. He shot me a glance. "I didn't know whether you could handle a gun. But I thought you might go to pieces if you knew they were trailing us—like you almost did back there in the hotel room. As it is—you're plenty okay, M. Harrison Sprague. By the way, is the guy on the ground your hotel clerk? He's Tony Mandraza, a gentleman the Florida police have had occasion to chat with more than a few times."

"The same, minus the glasses," I nodded, staring out at that still heap on the ground.

Lyria came to life, slapping Mace, twisting and clawing, knocking his hat off; her voice shrilling, not the cultured voice I had known in our one short happy year of marriage. "You dirty copper—"

He would have slapped her back, hard, but I saw him look down, stiffen. He was holding her instead. Her eyes darted to me, filled with hate and loathing and—something almost like disappointment—then she was going limp, drawing a deep, shuddering breath. She lay quietly.

Mace eased her head back, reached down and brought up the tin box from the floor. He snapped the lid up, eying those crisp banknotes, nodding. "This is it. We got the dope on the Jacksonville bank job that was pulled last night. All here, girlie?"

She looked at me, her lips quivering—terror in her green eyes. "Monty—?"

Mace turned her face gently with his big hand. "Was your husband here going to return this?" Is that one reason you wanted him out of the way? And because you'd gotten tangled up with a rat like Mandraza and thought you might as well own a manufacturing company too?"

Lyria's lips moved. "Yes."

My expression must have been haggard.

"Monty?" she whispered. "There wasn't anyone in the house this morning—except Tony. He'd been there a long time. He mixed me all up. I'm no good, Monty. Sis is no good. You would have known—if you'd met her. You've *always* been blind where I was concerned. She said your voice was nice on the phone. I called her, later. You—you are nice. You—"

I forced myself to look at her. "Why didn't you just take the money and go?" I asked bitterly. "You got me out of the house—would you really have murdered me, Lyria?"

I never found out. She couldn't answer.

Mace laid his hand on my arm, squeezed tightly. "Steady, Sprague. Take a walk. And don't come back if you don't want to."

I climbed out slowly, realizing it was the first time I had seen him with his hat off. He was almost bald. I didn't look back.



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