

FEBRUARY

BLACK MASK

**FLAMING
ANGEL**

by
**FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**

**LET'S ALL SWING
TOGETHER**
by **ROBERT
MARTIN**

BRITISH
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EDITION



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BLACK MASK

A Magazine of Gripping, Smashing Detective Stories

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SING A SONG OF MURDER

By MARVIN J. JONES

*The cute crooner had an iron-tight kill alibi—
given by the policeman who was sweet on her.*

AT roll call that night, the sergeant told officer Jimmy Bell to go over to Homicide before going on his beat. "Ring in, when you're through over there," he told Jimmy.

"All right, sir," Jimmy Bell said, but the word homicide hit him in the pit of the stomach.

There's nothing wrong Jimmy told himself, as he walked down First Street to Broadway. Nothing wrong, he repeated. He continued on to Main and turned north, toward the City Hall.

As he crossed the intersection, a streetcar crossed too. Its wheels clacked as it crossed the East-West rails. "Homicide-homicide," the double front wheels said. Jimmy's face stayed a cop's face, but his stomach was tight and the palms of his hands were slick with sweat.

The Los Angeles City Hall raised like a giant, gray tombstone from the shrubbery and graceful palms. The night air was warm, but Jimmy Bell shivered involuntarily as he climbed the steps of the Main Street entrance.

He pushed through the door, nodded to the uniformed guard and went up the stairway on the left to the next floor. He passed the silent elevators and turned left along the south corridor. He read the names on the frosted glass of the doors as he passed them; *Communications*—alive with light and the click and hum of teletype machines; the darkened door of *Burglary*.

He turned right at the end of the hall and stopped in front of *Homicide*. A light burned behind the frosted glass, but no sound came out. The brass doorknob was cold in his hand as he turned it and stepped inside.

A stock redhead grinned at Jimmy from a littered table.

"Hi!" he said.

"Hi," Jimmy answered.

The redhead's eyes questioned him.

"I'm Bell, from Central station," he said. "I was supposed to come up here."

"Oh, sure—Bell!" the stock redhead said quickly—too quickly. "I'm Mike Renwick." He thrust out a blunt-fingered hand and Jimmy took it.

"I think Lieutenant Brady wanted to see you," Renwick said carelessly, but there was excitement in his eyes. "Wait a second and I'll see."

He opened a door, went through and closed it. There was a murmur of conversation and he came out grinning.

"Come on in, Bell," he invited.

He waited while Jimmy crossed the room and entered.

"Bell, this is Lieutenant Brady. Lieutenant, this is Bell—the beat man from Central."

The lieutenant was lean and dark, his eyes a pale gray. Thin lips made his smile cold. He got up and shook hands. Jimmy heard the door click shut and the sound startled him. He turned and looked. Mike Renwick was gone.

"Sit down, Bell," Lieutenant Brady told him and pointed out a chair on one side of the desk.

"Thanks," Jimmy said, feeling the muscles drawing in his face.

Lieutenant Brady's gray eyes saw it and his lips smiled their thin smile. "Little excitement on your beat last night, huh?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yes, sir," Jimmy agreed.

"I guess it happened while you were at the other end of your beat," the lieutenant said. "I didn't see you around."

"No, sir," Jimmy said.

The older man slid open and took out a manila envelope. "Got some pictures of it," Lieutenant Brady announced matter of factly.

Bell's fingers were stiff as he handled the pictures. There were several shots from different angles. They were of the interior of an office, showed the body of a heavy, beetle-browed man slumped over a desk—a man with a shock of silver-gray hair.

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A younger man was huddled on the floor, between the desk and the door, a dark worm of blood crawling out of his right temple. Lying on the rug, near the young man's hand was a blue steel automatic.

"Thought you'd be interested in seeing them," Lieutenant Brady said. "You know either one of them?"

You know I know them, he thought. Aloud, he said, "I saw them—once." He licked his lips and then was sorry, because the older man's gray eyes saw it.

"The singer there at the club, Marion Lawson, I think her name is, mentioned some trouble her uncle had one night. Were you in on that? She said she called in a policeman from the beat."

Jimmy looked into the lieutenant's eyes. He laid the pictures down and the moist print of his thumbs were on the edge of the top picture. The gray eyes didn't look downward, but Johnny knew they had seen. Bell drew in a slow, controlled breath. His face stayed like a cop's face. His voice stayed like a cop's voice.

"It was about a week ago," he told the lean lieutenant. "I was walking toward the entrance of the club and Marion—Miss Lawson came running out and grabbed me. She was pretty excited and said there was some trouble inside. I went in with her and she pointed off down a hall. I could hear a loud voice coming from an office at the end and I ran down there."

"Did she go with you?"

"No, sir. She—she waited there, I guess. Anyway, she was still there when I came back."

"What was going on in the office when you got there?"

"Well, Mr. Sawyer—"

"He was the girl's uncle, wasn't he?"

"I believe so."

"That's the one slumped over the desk in the pictures?"

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Lieutenant Brady said, smiling, as Bell hesitated. "Go on."

"Well, he—Mr. Sawyer—was sitting behind his desk and the other fellow, the one lying on the floor in the pictures, was standing in front of the desk. Mr. Sawyer was just sitting there, but the other one was calling him names and yelling at him."

"Pretty mad, was he?"

"He acted like it, but he was a little drunk, too."

"What was he mad about?"

"Well, like I say, he was a little drunk and it didn't make too much sense. He called Mr. Sawyer an old reprobate and told him he knew his type of man and that he better leave some girl alone."

"You know what girl he was talking about?"

"I think it was Miss Lawson."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, Mr. Sawyer looked a little surprised when I came in, but all he said was, 'Officer, this man is drunk. Would you be kind enough to take him out?'"

"Did he sound angry?"

"No, sir. He was very calm, acted annoyed. I took the young fellow by the arm and he came right along, not giving me any trouble. When I got him outside, he'd calmed down so much that I asked him if he'd go on home. He said yes and then went down the street."

"He was pretty drunk, though?"

"Well, he must have been. He acted kind of confused and bewildered, like a drunk—but he walked pretty good."

"Do you know who he was?"

Bell drew in another controlled breath. "I read it in the paper this afternoon," he told the lieutenant. "Richard Worth."

"Did you ever see him again?"

"I saw him last night," he answered.

"Did you ever see the girl again?"

The blood came up into Jimmy's face. "Yes, sir," he told the older man.

"Don't blame you," Lieutenant Brady said smiling. "Not a bit." He put the pictures back into the envelope, as though the important part of the interview had passed. "Did you ever meet a fellow by the name of Phil Travis?"

In the distance, a street car crossed the intersection again, making the same chucking sound. Jimmy looked into the gray eyes. You're not fooling me, he thought. The questions you're asking me now are the ones that count.

Aloud, he said, "Yes, sir. I met him that same night. He and Miss Lawson came out and talked to me after this Richard Worth left. He plays the piano for her."

"What did they have to say about young Worth?" The lieutenant wasn't looking at him now. He was frowning at a ragged edge on the desk blotter.

"They didn't seem to know who he was, or much about him, except he'd been hanging around, watching the act and making passes at her."

"What did he have against her uncle—Sawyer?"

"Well, the way Marion—Miss Lawson explained it," the blood crept up into Jimmy's face again, "he had asked her for dates and she finally told him her uncle wouldn't let her go out, to get rid of him. He wouldn't believe Mr. Sawyer was her uncle and barged on back to the office. He acted kind of crazy. She got scared then, and ran out and got me."

Lieutenant Brady patted a yawn and grinned apologetically. "It's a good thing you happened by about that time, I guess," he said.

Bell hesitated. "I usually come by about that time," he said carefully. "And caught her last act."

The gray eyes pretended surprise.

"I see. You knew her before, then?"

"No, sir. I'd never talked to her, just listened to her sing."

"I guess she's pretty good."

"Yes, sir. She is."

"Ever take her out?" Lieutenant Brady was acting like he was interested in Marion.

"No, sir. Just had coffee with her."

"I see." The older man smiled. "You sound like you mean more than once!" he added jovially.

"Every night," Jimmy said. "She sneaked out for a few minutes after her second show."

"I don't know why I can't get breaks like that," the lieutenant said plaintively. "Not even when I was young. I didn't get breaks like that. I didn't know there was a coffee spot near there. Don't tell me you sneaked off your beat!" The lieutenant's smile said that it was worth it and he didn't blame Jimmy a bit.

"Coffee Jack's is just a couple of blocks away," Jimmy said.

"That's right, it is," admitted the older man ruefully. "What time was her second show?"

"One thirty to two. But she wouldn't get away until about twenty minutes after two."

"What did you usually do, wait for her after you caught her act?"

"No, sir. I'd leave right after she finished singing and then meet her at Coffee Jack's."

"And that's the way it went last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see this Richard Worth last night?" The gray eyes were sleepy.

"Yes, sir. He was sitting in a car a little ways from the club entrance."

"Was that when you went in?"

"I saw him there when I went in and he was still there when I came out."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No, sir. He wasn't doing anything, just sitting there."

"I didn't mean it that way. Did he look drunk?"

"I couldn't tell walking by him like that. He might have been."

"Then, you went on down to Coffee Jack's and waited for this Marion Lawson?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time did she show up?"

"At two-thirty."

"About two-thirty, huh?"

Bell moistened his lips. He knew at that moment that all the other questions had been meaningless. The lieutenant had known the answers to the others.

"It was exactly two-thirty," Jimmy said.

Lieutenant Brady's eyes narrowed and anger stirred in them, but the thin lips smiled tolerantly.

"You say exactly, Bell," his voice purred.

"Now, it's pretty hard to be exact about anything, especially time. When you're dealing with time, it's a good idea to allow yourself five minutes one way or the other. People make a lot of mistakes about the time element. Thinking back over something that's happened, they think they remember looking at their watch, or seeing a clock. What they don't remember was that it was a little before or a little after, when they looked."

Bell was silent.

"Looking at it that way," Lieutenant Brady said smoothly, "I don't think you can truthfully say it was exactly such and such a time, can you?"

Jimmy fought hard to keep his face looking like a cop's face. Nausea crept up from his stomach. "It was exactly two-thirty," he repeated, his voice sounding as though it came from somewhere else. "The reason I remember is because I was buying a package of cigarettes at the counter when she came in. She asked me if she was late and I told her, no, and showed her my watch. It was two-thirty on the dot. It's a new watch and it keeps perfect time."

Lieutenant Brady's hands were white on the arm of his chair, the thin smile frozen on his face. Then he relaxed and chuckled.

"I'll tell you what, Bell," he said. "I want you to think back over the times you've met Marion Lawson in Coffee Jack's. I want you to think back over the times you've bought cigarettes at that counter. Now, I want you

to tell me truthfully—could you swear on the witness stand that that particular incident happened last night or even two or three nights before that!"

"It was last night," Jimmy said, his mouth dry.

The lieutenant's face was leaner, darker. "Think hard, Bell," he said softly. "Maybe it was something else, besides looking at your watch, that made you think it was two-thirty. Maybe you heard someone remark 'It's just two-thirty.' Maybe Marion said something when she came in, like, 'I had to hurry to get here by two-thirty.' Think hard, Bell!"

Jimmy looked into the cold, pale eyes and shook his head, slowly, positively.

Veins stood out on Lieutenant Brady's temple. "How long have you been on the job, Bell?" he asked, and his voice slashed like a knife.

"Five months, sir," he answered.

"Then you have just a month to go to make probation?"

"Yes, sir."

In the silence, Jimmy could hear red-headed Mike Renwick turning the pages of a magazine in the next room.

"Tell me," said the lieutenant, "are you in love with this singer, Marion Lawson?"

In the other room, Mike Renwick hummed softly to himself.

"Yes, sir," Jimmy Bell said.

Jimmy walked down the steps of the City Hall with the sweat coursing down his legs. He walked down Main Street to Third and turned right. At the corner of Third and Broadway, he crossed to the call box and turned his key in the lock. He took the receiver from the hook and held it to his ear. After a moment the hum of the Gamewell phone was broken.

"Gamewell Desk," a flat voice said.

"Bell," he answered. "I'm ringing on, Box 248."

"Okay," acknowledged the flat voice and the connection broke.

He hung up and closed the box. He clipped his brass key to the snap on his belt and drew a slow, deep breath. He started across Third Street, down Broadway, his legs moving mechanically, oblivious to the flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk, the crawling lines of cars in the street.

He walked his beat as he had always walked it and the things happened that had always happened. He broke up a fight on Fifth Street, between Broadway and Hill.

He found a slugging victim in an alley, pockets turned wrongside out and lying in a pool of blood and broken glass. He found a wino sprawled in a doorway, roused him and walked him on rubbery legs to a call box around the corner.

And then, as though it were one of the



things that had to happen, he found himself under the glaring neon sign of the "Errant Knave." He looked in at the lobby and the thought crossed his mind. *She wouldn't be here tonight. Not tonight.*

But he walked in, past the potted palms, to the rear of the lobby. There, a wrinkled-faced, squat, heavy-shouldered man stood in front of the drapes that hung from ceiling to floor.

"Hello, Toby," Jimmy greeted him.

"Hello, Jimmy," the ex-fighter answered glumly.

Bell looked at the broken, scarred face of the older man, surprised at the deep grief in it. He struggled for something to say and said what he had always said when he came by, "Any trouble, Toby?"

And Toby answered as he always answered. "Not near enough." But there was no grin to go with it.

A woman's heels clack-clacked across the marble of the foyer and lost themselves in the rug. Jimmy stepped to one side and the couple coming in brushed by him. They were tipsy, the woman's eyes bright and saucy.

"Hi!" she said, as she swept past, leaving a faint odor of perfume.

Toby led the couple to the drapes and let them through. Jimmy stared at Toby's broad shoulders, the fighter's shuffling walk

and the thought came to his mind. *Every night Toby said there wasn't enough trouble, but there was trouble one night and Toby wasn't here, in the lobby.* He stood there, thinking, staring at Toby's heavy shoulders.

"You heard about Mr. Sawyer, huh?" the old fighter asked dully, coming back from the drapes.

Bell nodded. "You worked for him a long time?"

"Sure," Toby said. "Years. A nice guy." His knotty hands opened and closed. Through the heavy drapes came the muffled sound of the orchestra. "He never hurt nobody," Toby said.

Jimmy's throat was tight. "I was at the other end of my beat," he told Toby.

"It shouldn't have happened," Toby said, his eyes dull. "This guy must of sneaked by me. The first I know is when I'm standing here talking to Mr. Travis—you know, the guy that beats the piano—and all of a sudden he was, 'What's that?'"

"You didn't hear anything?"

"I half heard the shots, I guess. They didn't sound like shots. They sounded like a book closing, one and then two more. I didn't know what it was and Mr. Travis asked if it was the clock? Then, we went back and found them."

Bell looked at the clock beside the drapes, watching the slender pendulum swing back and forth. "It happened at two-thirty, didn't it?" His voice had a strangled sound.

"Two-thirty," Toby said, nodding.

"You called the police right away?"

"Mr. Travis called them," said Toby. "He told me not to touch anything in Mr. Sawyer's office. He came out and called from the pay phone in the lobby. There weren't any prints on Mr. Sawyer's phone, though, except Mr. Sawyer's. The plain clothes men said so."

Behind the drapes, the drum rolled to a frenzy of sound.

"I'd like to send Marion a card," Jimmy said.

Toby's eyes were pleased. "That would be nice. She'd like that."

"I don't know where to send it."

Toby turned toward the hallway leading to Mr. Sawyer's office, then hesitated. "I'll ask one of the girls," he said, and disappeared through the drapes.

Bell watched the heavy folds of the cloth fall back into place. He turned and walked down the hall. To his right was the door to Mr. Sawyer's office, the word *Private* on the frosted glass. To his front was the fire door,

a red bulb over it. He turned the knob and pushed it open.

Cool air from the alley came in and touched his face. He took his hand away and the door clicked shut. Jimmy stared at the red bulb and then walked back along the hall to the lobby. Toby came through the drapes, a yellow slip of paper in his hand. He handed it to Bell.

Jimmy Bell put the slip of paper in his pocket, said good night and walked out to the sidewalk. He went to the end of the building and turned into the alley. When he came to the fire door, he took his flashlight from his right hip pocket and flashed the light on the ground. He reached down into the middle of the circle of light, picked up a bent piece of wire.

It was three-thirty when he drew up in front of the four-story apartment house on Westlake. He found Marion's apartment at the rear of the building. There was a slit of light at the bottom of the door. He stared at it, then rapped softly.

There was movement inside, a swish of clothing and soft footsteps.

"Who is it?" Marion's voice asked.

The soft throb of the voice went into Jimmy.

"It's Jim," he said.

There was silence, then her voice came again, breathless, warm.

"Wait a minute, Jimmy."

Weakness started at Jimmy's knees and flooded his body. The footsteps came back and the hall door swung inward. Jimmy stepped inside and closed the door, his eyes hungry and haunted as he looked at her.

Marion Lawson came to him, leaning against him, resting her head against his chest.

"I'm glad you stopped by," she said, in the same breathless voice. Then, she moved away, over to the couch and lay back against it, the pale negligee clinging to her.

"I had to come," he said, his voice strangled. He walked over to the window, fighting the weakness in his legs. With his back to her, he took off his hat and slipped his stubby barreled .38 from its holster. Holding the hat over it, he turned from the window and sank down in the overstuffed chair facing the couch.

He looked at Marion Lawson, at the blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders, the curve of her cheek, the red mouth. His face was a cop's face, but a muscle in his

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cheek twitched in rhythm with the beat of his pulse.

Marion Lawson smiled a tremulous smile, a sad smile.

"You killed them," Jimmy said, his lips stiff. "You killed them. Why did you do it?"

The blue eyes widened as they looked into his and the handkerchief disappeared in her clenched hand.

"Jimmy!" Marion Lawson's voice was sharp. "You're out of your mind! How can you say a thing like that?" The blue eyes filled with tears.

"You killed them," he repeated dully, bitterly. "You and your piano playing gigolo, Phil Travis." He stared at her, stared at the tears running down her cheeks.

"You planned it a long time—and then you killed them," he said, his voice dead and hollow, his sweaty hand clenched on the gun under his hat. "You wanted your uncle's money, and the club."

"You're insane—or drunk!" Marion Lawson's voice lashed out at him, high and vicious.

"The night I met you. That was the beginning," Jimmy said dully. "Or maybe it began before that, when you noticed I came in the same time every night to hear you sing."

He stopped, his eyes dead, like his voice. He didn't want to start again, to say the things he was going to say, but his lips moved and the voice came out of its tomb.

"That first night, when you ran out and got me, Toby wasn't around. Toby wouldn't leave, unless you sent him away. You sent him on an errand, so you could send Richard Worth into your uncle to quarrel with him. You used Richard Worth that night and you used me—knowing you would use us again."

The girl's eyes were bright, and dark against the paleness of her face.

"You told Richard Worth a bunch of lies about your uncle and then brought me in to witness the quarrel. Then, you slipped away to have coffee with me every night after that, because I was to be your alibi."

"You're crazy!" she whispered.

"Last night, you had a date with Richard Worth. He was to pick you up outside after your second show. You came out to the lobby and sent Toby back to your dressing room. And while he was gone, you slipped down the hall to the fire door and opened it. You put a bobby pin in the door so that it wouldn't lock itself again."

Bell took the bent piece of wire from his left coat pocket and laid it on the arm of the chair. He looked at it and not at the girl.

"You had time to set the clock ahead, too—the one in the lobby—knowing that Toby doesn't wear a watch. And when Toby came back, you left. You went out to where Richard Worth sat in his car and made some kind of excuse to him. You took him by the hand and led him into the alley, and while Phil Travis talked to Toby and kept his back to the fire door, you led Richard Worth into your uncle's office."

"You—" Marion Lawson's face was white with fury.



"Richard Worth was drunk," Jimmy said. "He was always drunk. You fired a shot into his temple and then you shot your uncle twice. You shouldn't have shot him twice. Maybe your uncle started to get up and you lost your head. Anyway, Toby said they sounded like a book closing—one and then two more. He must have told Homicide the same thing, because they know it was murder from the way the shots came. One shot and then two. It should have been the other way around."

There were tiny beads on Marion Lawson's upper lip.

"Then, you had to get back outside and over to Coffee Jack's to meet me," he went on relentlessly. "But that was easy. You just slipped back out while Phil Travis was fixing Toby's attention on the clock. Phil took Toby back with him to discover the bodies. He left Toby to guard the scene and went back out to the lobby to phone the police—and set the clock back."

Across the room, the bedroom door swung open and Phil Travis stepped into the room. His face was pale and slack, his eyes dazed with fear. A nickel plated automatic glittered in his hand.

"You fool!" Marion Lawson said in an empty voice. "He's only guessing!"

Phil Travis' face crawled with muscular spasms. "He guesses too good," he said and pointed the automatic.

Bell's finger crooked on the trigger of the stubby .38 and the hat jumped halfway across the room with the muzzle blast. Travis looked down at the hat, at the hole in the crown and then at the little automatic in his hand. Then he sighed, took a lurching step forward and fell. The gun slipped from his fingers and skidded across the rug.

Jimmy Bell laid the snub-nosed .38 on the arm of the chair and with his right forefinger touched the spot on his cheek that was twitching. He pressed against the spot with the tip of the finger.

"He didn't have much to do with it, either," he said, looking down at Phil Travis, his voice sounding as if it were sorry for him. "You used him—that's all."

Marion Lawson scooped up the automatic from where it lay on the rug, leveled it. Jimmy's hand came down from his cheek

and picked the .38 from the chair arm. As he pulled back the hammer, a candle flame licked out of the muzzle of the automatic and a hot rod bored into his side. He flinched, pointed and aimed carefully. The stubby barrel barked with finality and the tiny automatic clattered noisily across the room.

Marion Lawson stared at her hand and then raised her forefinger to her lips, biting it.

Then, the hall door opened and she turned toward the sound. Lieutenant Brady came in with redhead Mike Renwick at his heels. He looked at the body on the rug and Mike Renwick went across the room and fished a microphone from the floor heater. Lieutenant Brady stared at Bell a long time.

Then, he cleared his throat. "I'm not going to say anything—because you know what I feel," the lieutenant told Jimmy.

Jimmy nodded, keeping his face like a cop's face, keeping his eyes from the hunched and sobbing figure on the couch.

THE END.

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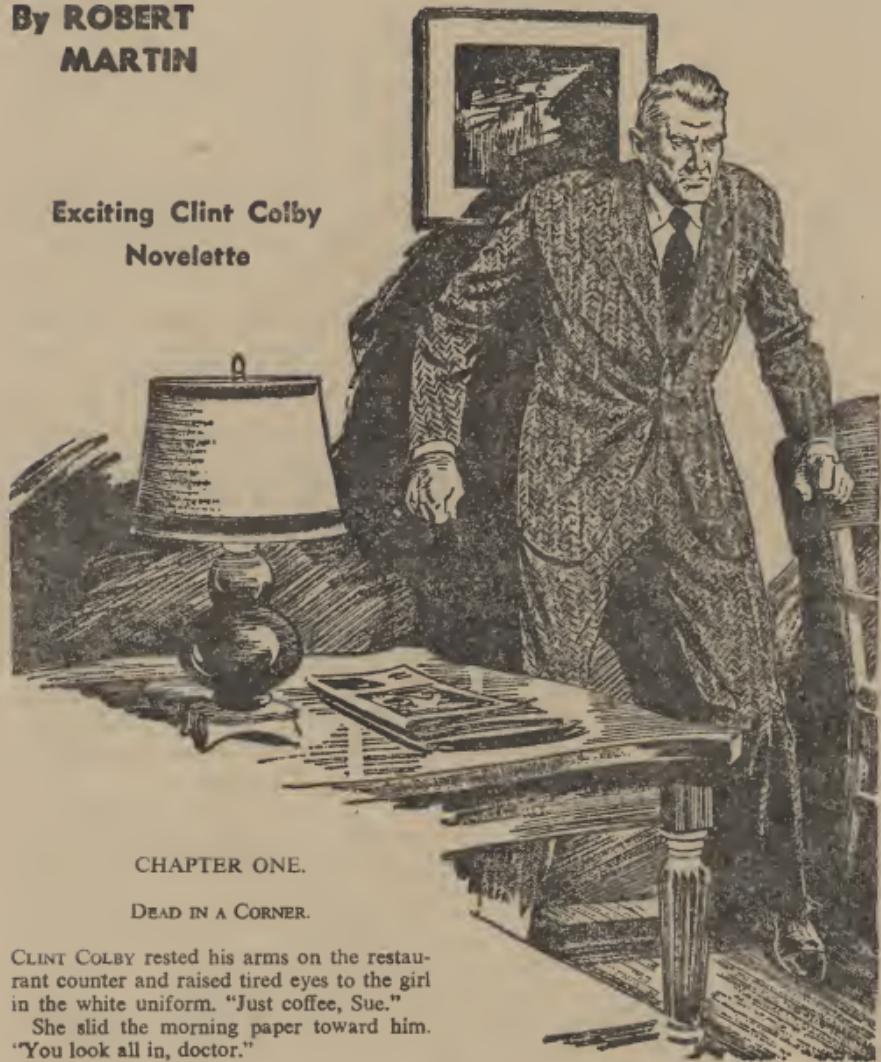
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LET'S ALL SWING TOGETHER

By ROBERT
MARTIN

Exciting Clint Colby
Novelette



CHAPTER ONE.

DEAD IN A CORNER.

CLINT COLBY rested his arms on the restaurant counter and raised tired eyes to the girl in the white uniform. "Just coffee, Sue."

She slid the morning paper toward him. "You look all in, doctor."

When Doctor Clint Colby discovered too many of the lovely Doris Faro's gilt-edged lies, the town big shots frantically maneuvered for a not-too-thorough autopsy of her cop boyfriend.

*A voice behind him said,
"Clint, what's—"*



BLACK MASK

He nodded, and a strand of black hair fell from beneath his gray snap-brim hat and dangled over his forehead. He was a rangy man, tall even while sitting on the counter stool. He had a dark, bony face, a strong chin and deep gray eyes, a little like an Iroquois or a Commanche.

He wore a well-tailored gray herring-bone jacket, gray flannel slacks, a soft white shirt and a dark blue knit tie. The collar of his shirt was unbuttoned, and the loose knot of his tie made a V across his chest. His hands were long and clean-looking.

A big man in a wrinkled blue serge suit and a dirty white straw hat came into the restaurant and sat on an adjoining stool. He had a heavy red face, a thick red-veined nose and little blue eyes.

"Morning, Clint." As the big man spoke, his eyes were on the neat hips of the girl drawing coffee behind the counter.

The girl turned and placed a cup on the counter in front of Colby. "Morning, Chief," he said.

"Bad night?" the big man asked Clint.

"Pretty bad. A breech birth—in River-town."

Chief of Police Elwood Simpson said to the girl, "Ham and eggs, Sue." He turned back towards Colby. "What in hell's a breech birth?"

"The worst kind—backwards. A nice kid, though. A boy. I've been out there since two this morning."

The Chief glanced at the clock on the wall. The hands stood at twenty minutes to seven. "A long night, Clint," he agreed. "But think of that nice fat fee you'll get."

"He wants to pay me a couple bushels of potatoes, and maybe do some office janitor work."

The Chief grunted. "Take it. It's all you'll ever get."

Colby sighed and held a match to a cigarette. "You look kind of beat up yourself, Chief."

The Chief tilted his head towards Colby and said in a low voice, "I had a bad night, too. We've got a job for you. Somebody pumped three slugs into Jack Horner last night and killed him dead."

Colby's head jerked towards the big man. "Jack? I always liked him—the only decent cop you got on the force."

The Chief sighed. "Well, he ain't any more. They found him in the alley behind Max Watson's grocery. He was dead when they picked him up."

"Was Jack on duty?"

"Naw. It was his night off. But since the Toledo cops sent us a bulletin on that finance company stick-up last week Jack's been like a beagle on a pheasant. I issued a routine alert to all the boys, of course, but those babies wouldn't hide out in a jerk-water like Dixie, Ohio. They lifted that forty-seven grand and high-tailed for the Canadian border. They'd be crazy not to—with Windsor so close."

"Poor Jack," Colby said. "Got any ideas?"

"Yeah? We already arrested Howard Faro."

"Faro? Works for Sam Landers?"

The Chief blew on his coffee and nodded. "It looks kind of bad for Howard. He stopped in Max Watson's store just before Horner got it. Max says he bought a nickle bag of peanuts, talked a little while, and then went out. A couple of minutes later Max heard three shots and he ran out to the alley behind his store and found Jack—dead."

"The night prowler heard the shots too, and they got there shortly after. They found a half-filled bag of peanuts about ten feet from Jack's body. Jack was kind of doubled over in a corner of the alley against a board fence, where the alley turns towards Main Street."

"Is that all you've got on Faro?"

The Chief shook his head slowly. "Don't you get around, Clint? Everybody in town has seen Jack's red Ford parked in front of Howard Faro's house evenings of late—when Howard is out of town. Doris Faro ain't bad, either." He made an hour glass motion with his hands.

"Faro must have got wise, and went gunning for Jack. I can't say I blame him much, but murder is murder. They found Jack's body a little before eleven, and at a quarter of twelve we picked up Howard in the Dixie Grille. He was pretty drunk, and he had a thirty-eight on him—with three slugs fired out of it."

Colby didn't say anything.

The Chief sighed. "I warned Jack about playing around with married women. But he was young and single and he got mad and told me to mind my own business."

The waitress brought in a plate of ham and eggs and put it in front of the Chief. He said, "Thanks, honey," and began to cut the ham into neat chunks. "We'll want a post-mortem, of course," he said to Colby.

"If those slugs in Horner check with Faro's gun . . ."

Colby nodded. "Let me know when you're ready. Where'd you take Jack?"

"Hoyt's Funeral Home."

A tall thin man in a double-breasted summer-weight suit and a panama hat with a turn-up brim came into the restaurant and sat down on the other side of Colby. He had a thin, gray face, a long, slightly curved nose, a thin wide mouth and large tired-looking gray eyes with bluish half-moons beneath them. He was smoking a coffee-colored cigar and he had a red rose bud in his coat lapel.

The waitress came up smiling. "Good morning, Mr. Mayor."

"Good morning, my dear." Urban Huxton had a deep, rich voice. "Just coffee, please."

The Chief winked at Colby. "You won't get fat that way, Urban."

The mayor mouthed his cigar and looked at the ceiling. "Clint, here, takes care of my health," he said, "but you, Elwood, are charged with more important matters—like finding the murderous fiend who snuffed out the life of Patrolman John Horner."

"We got Faro, Urban," the Chief said.

The mayor waved his cigar in the air. "Purely on circumstantial evidence."

"You'll get proof, Urban. As soon as Clint digs those slugs out of Horner."

"The Huxton administration has always stood for a square deal to all," the thin man said. "If Justice lifts her scales and finds Howard Faro wanting, he will be dealt with quickly and firmly."

"Get off the soap box, Urban," the Chief grinned. "You've had my vote for the last twelve years."

The mayor coughed and puffed on his cigar. Colby stood up and dropped his cigarette into his empty coffee cup.

He nodded at the two men, said to the Chief, "Let me know when you're ready," dropped a nickel on the counter and left the restaurant.

He walked with a slight limp to his blue Mercury coupe and drove down the main street of the town of Dixie.

The stores were not yet open, but a few clerks were sweeping sidewalks and lowering awnings against the hot morning sun. Two blocks from the center of town he parked beside a one-story red-brick building with a bronze plaque cemented into a corner. The

plaque read: *Dr. Clinton L. Colby, Physician and Surgeon.*

He got out of the car, unlocked a glass-fronted door, went up three brassbound steps into a small reception room, crossed to an inner door and entered his office.

Venetian blinds were drawn against the morning sun. The place smelled of anti-septic. Colby sat down behind a plain glass-topped desk.

In the middle of the desk was a prescription blank filled with neat penciled words. He picked it up and read:

Clint: I couldn't get you at home, and no phone at the Soxers'. Mrs. H. Faro called me (at 2:00 this morning, you bum!). She wants to see you. She says it's very important. What gives? I got out of bed to come down here and write this. How about a raise? C.

Colby grinned to himself, as he thought of Celia Brooks.

She had been with him since the day, two years before, when she had walked into his office, showed him her nurse's diploma, and said, "You need somebody to run things around here. I've been waiting two hours to see you, and there are still people out there who think they are sick. You take too much time with them. I'll bet you haven't had any lunch. I can give shots, treat colds, and type, and I have a charming bedside manner. When do you want me to start?"

Colby had grinned at her friendly and pretty—but not too pretty—face. She had red hair, a milky skin, a few freckles over her short straight nose, deep blue eyes, an erect young figure and long straight legs.

It was true that he needed some help, and she would certainly be an attractive addition to any young doctor's business office.

"Have you got a uniform?"

"Yes, sir. I brought one with me."

He had nodded towards his drug room. "Put it on."

He chuckled aloud, remembering. Celia Brooks had proven herself to be an efficient nurse and assistant, a tactful secretary, and—Colby had to admit—a pleasant companion.

The telephone on his desk jangled. He picked it up. "Dr. Colby."

A woman's voice said, "Didn't your nurse give you my message? I've been waiting all night."

"Is this Mrs. Faro?"

"Yes, Doctor. I—I want to talk to you

about my husband. He was arrested last night for—for murder. I know he didn't do it—You know Howard isn't well, and I have reason to suspect—doctor, I don't know many people in Dixie, and I have no one to turn to. Couldn't you come over, for a little while. It's very important—" She began to sob.

Colby hesitated. Then he said, "All right, Mrs. Faro. It'll be about twenty minutes."

As he hung up, he heard steps in his outer office. The door opened and Chief of Police Elwood Simpson poked his head inside. "Thought I'd catch you here, Clint. We'll have the autopsy at two o'clock. Huxton wants to be there, and he won't be through with police court until then, O.K.?"

Colby nodded. "It shouldn't take long." He tapped a finger on the note from Celia. "Howard Faro's wife wants to see me. The way she sounded on the phone, she needs something to quiet her down."

"Pretty tough on her," the Chief said. "Even if she was going around with another guy."

"Maybe it's Horner she feels bad about?" Colby said.

The Chief grinned. "Could be. Jack was quite a boy, from what I hear." He went out.

Colby splashed cold water on his face in the small wash room in the rear. He needed a shave, and the soft collar of his white shirt was wrinkled.

He shrugged his wide, lean shoulders, tightened the knot of his tie, and went back into his office. He sat down at his desk and opened his appointment book noting the appendectomy he had to perform on the local banker's wife at ten o'clock. The little bronze electric clock on his desk told him that it was sixteen past eight in the morning.

He got up, put on his hat, went out to the street and got behind the wheel of his Mercury. . . .

The Faros lived in the bottom half of a brick duplex on Heidelberg Street five blocks from the center of the town. The front door was standing a little ajar. Colby pressed the button beneath the card marked, *H. W. Faro*, and waited.

Nothing happened and he stepped into a small hall with a stairway leading to his left, tried the knob. The door swung open into the Faro's apartment.

He saw Mrs. Faro almost immediately. She was about thirty years old, brunette,

with brown eyes and a rather wide mouth. She was dressed in pale blue silk pyjamas and a pale blue flannel robe.

On one foot was a red high-heeled slipper. The other foot was bare, and Colby noticed that the toe nails were lacquered a brilliant red. She was lying on her back on a rose-colored rug. There was a lot of blood on her.

CHAPTER TWO.

ALL IN A DAY'S SLAY.

HE made the merest pretense of feeling her pulse. Her body was still warm, but the knife wounds told him all that he needed to know. He stood up and crossed the room to a telephone and called the Dixie Police Department. He asked for Chief of Police Simpson.

"The Chief isn't in."

"All right. Connect me with the mayor."

"I gotta run down the hall to do that. Hang up and call his office."

"Run down the hall. I'll wait."

While he waited, Colby looked at his wrist watch. Eight-thirty of a hot sunny morning. He turned his head to look at the body of Doris Faro.

From this angle, except for the blood, with her blue robe and long brown hair fanned out on the floor and one knee bent gracefully, she looked like an advertisement from a glossy woman's magazine. For perfume maybe, Colby thought, or for some exotic shampoo.

A deep voice said in his ear, "Mayor Huxton speaking."

"This is Clint Colby, Urban. I just found Mrs. Howard Faro. She's dead. Murdered."

"W-what's that?"

"You better get someone over here. I can't hang around very long." He hung up.

From the apartment overhead he heard soft creeping footsteps. He moved across the room and knelt beside the dead woman. There were three knife wounds. The wounds were deep, and the blood was still red and wet. He felt gently in the pockets of the blue robe.

In one he found a half-empty package of cigarettes, and in the other a silver lighter. He stood up and lit a cigarette, strolled around the apartment.

He could no longer hear the footsteps overhead.

After a while, he heard a car door slam, and footsteps on the porch. Mayor Huxton and two patrolmen entered the apartment. They all stopped and stared at the body on the floor.

"There she is," Colby said. "Just the way I found her. I've got to get to work, and I'd like to shave first." He moved towards the door.

"Now wait," Huxton said. "Now just wait a minute, Clint. Tell us about this."

Colby told them in three sentences and opened the door.

Huxton said, "Clint, you can't go now. You're coroner of this county."

Colby backed out into the hall. "I pronounce this woman dead," he said. "Death was caused by knife wounds inflicted by person or persons unknown. She's been dead about twenty minutes, maybe less."

"Now, look here—" Huxton began.

"I'll see you later, Urban." Colby went out and got into his car.

He drove to his house on Crawford Street and parked in the gravel drive which made a wide curve across the big lawn and ended at the garage in back. The house had been left to him by his parents, both now dead. He had managed to hang on to the house, and he had worked his way through medical school.

When the Japs struck at Pearl Harbor he had been interning at a Cleveland hospital. He had secured a lieutenant's commission in the Army Medical Corps and caught a machine gun bullet in his leg while helping the Marine medics get the wounded off the beach at Saipan.

He came back to his home town, tired and thin, rented an office, hung up his shingle and lived alone in the big house. . . .

Now he went up the stairs of his big silent house to the old-fashioned bathroom. He shaved, took a bath, put on clean clothes, and went back down to his car. He made six house calls, did the appendectomy on the banker's wife, made four more house calls, and at twelve o'clock he entered the back door of his office.

Celia Brooks was in the drug room sterilizing hypo needles in a bubbling white enameled pan. She looked trim and neat in her white nurse's uniform, and Clint Colby smiled to himself and thought again that she looked more like a movie director's idea of how a nurse should look than how most of the nurses he knew really looked. Once more he wondered how he had gotten along without her.

"Good morning, doctor," she said primly. "I see by your eyes that you didn't sleep again last night."

"My knee aches," he said. "It's going to be a bad day. Did you know that John Horner was shot to death last night?"

She turned slowly to look at him. "Jack? He was a good guy. Who—"

"The police have arrested Howard Faro."

"The slick-haired man you are treating for stomach ulcers?"

Colby nodded. "They tell me that Horner was playing around with Faro's wife, and Faro found out."

She shook her head slowly. "Jack wasn't that kind of a guy. I went to high school with him. I had an awful crush on him when I was in the ninth grade." She paused. "Faro? His wife called for you last night. Did you find my note?"

He nodded. "Sorry you had to get up."

She laughed. "I didn't really get up, Clint. I had just gotten home when she called."

He grinned at her. "My, my! What hours you keep!"

She turned back to the pan of hypo needles. "Did you see Mrs. Faro?"

"Yes, she's dead, too. Stabbed to death."

She turned quickly, her face white.

"I told you it was going to be a bad day. I've got to do an autopsy on Horner at two."

She turned back to the bubbling pan. "There is a man waiting to see you. I told him that your office hours didn't begin until one."

"Who is it?"

She shrugged her slender shoulders. "He's big and he's got blue eyes and curly blond hair. He looks healthy."

"That helps," he said dryly as he moved past her into his office and opened the door to his reception room.

A man got quickly to his feet.

Celia Brooks had been right. He was big and broad shouldered, with short kinky yellow hair and wide-set blue eyes. And he looked healthy. He was wearing a hundred and fifty dollar gray Shetland suit, thirty dollar saddle-colored shoes, a soft pale blue shirt and a big-knotted maroon knit tie. A cream-colored panama lay on a chair beside him.

"Dr. Colby?"

Colby nodded.

The blond man stepped forward. He smiled and held out a hand. "Kessler's my name. May I speak to you privately?"

Colby closed the door behind him. "This is private."

"I understand you're doing an autopsy on a man named John Horner today?"

"That's right. Are you a relative?"

"No, not exactly." The blond man coughed slightly, reached inside his coat and took out a pigskin wallet. He extracted, one by one, five new one hundred dollar bills and flicked them lightly with his thumb. He looked up at Colby and smiled. His blue eyes were friendly. "Could you use it, doc?" he said easily.

"Sure."

The blond man almost laughed. He creased the bills neatly once and held them out to Colby. "It's yours. Horner died of three gunshot wounds—one in the head and two in his chest. Okay?"

"The autopsy will tell what caused his death."

The blond man looked hurt. "Now, doc. Don't you want the half grand?"

"I said I did." Colby held out his hand.

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you, doc?"

"Not for five hundred dollars."

Suddenly Kessler laughed. "That's better. I wouldn't want anyone to think that Horner wasn't—well, I guess you get it."

"I'm afraid I don't," Colby said.

Colby moved swiftly and swung his fist. Kessler reeled against a chair. When he swung around there was a big blue revolver in his fist. Colby kicked, and the gun hit the ceiling. Kessler laughed, and made a dive for Colby. Colby's knee caught him under the chin and he stumbled backwards against the wall. Colby scooped up the gun. It was a Smith and Wesson, .38, with a sawed-off barrel.

A voice behind him said, "Clint, what's—"

Colby turned to look at Celia Brooks in the doorway, and in that instant Kessler ran for the outer door. Colby wheeled and leveled the .38, but Kessler was on the steps and people were passing on the sidewalk beyond. Colby sighed and lowered the gun. Kessler hit the street and disappeared.

Celia Brooks said, "What's going on?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know."

Colby avoided his usual restaurant and had lunch in a city-limits diner. He ate slowly and thoughtfully, and afterwards he drove to the duplex on Heidelberg Street. He pressed the buzzer beneath a card reading, *J. L. Koffman*, and almost immedi-

ately the door clicked open. A woman was leaning over the bannister of the stairway on his right.

"Mr. Koffman?"

"Yes," she said. "Are you from the police?"

"I'm Dr. Colby. May I speak with you for a few minutes?" He nodded towards the closed door on his left. "It's about your neighbor, Mrs. Faro."

"Why, certainly, doctor. Come right on up." She smoothed her apron and beckoned with a thin hand.

Colby climbed the stairs and entered a neat apartment. Mrs. Koffman motioned him to a chair. She sat down opposite him, leaned forward and regarded him with eager bright eyes. She was a small, dark woman, with a sallow skin and a wrinkled neck.

"Were you on friendly terms with Mrs. Faro?" Clint Colby asked her.

She closed her lips tightly, folded her thin arms, and leaned back in her chair. "No, I can't say that I was, doctor. I believe in being neighborly, and all that, but Mrs. Faro—well!" She paused, drew in a breath. "Mr. Koffman and I moved to town about six months ago. Mr. Koffman is a coffee salesman, and he's out on the road all week. So I thought it would be nice to get to know Mrs. Faro. But she kept her door locked, and wouldn't answer when I knocked. I knew that she was in there, because the radio played all the time, day and night, and so I stopped going down. But I could hear her down there, and cars would come and go, and the back door would slam at night and early in the morning—when Mr. Faro was away, mind you."

He glanced away. "I could always tell when he was away, because his car wouldn't be out in front and none of us have garages here. That's when the doors slam, and I could hear voices and laughing down there. And the next day there would be more whisky bottles on the trash pile in the alley, and—"

"Did you ever see who it was who came to see her?" Colby broke in.

"It was a man. I know that. But I never saw his face. It was usually dark, but once I saw him get into his car a quarter of five in the morning, but I didn't see his face—"

"You were up at a quarter of five in the morning?"

"Why, yes, doctor. I have spells of heartburn a lot at night, and I get up to take

some baking soda, and this time I just happened to glance out the window—”

“Did you happen to hear anything last night or this morning?”

“Nothing unusual. The same old thing, doors closing, radio playing—just like I told the police. But I went to bed early last night. Julius is in Detroit, and—”

“What kind of a car was it, the one you saw the man getting into?”

“Well, doctor, I really don't know. It was just getting daylight, and I'm not much of a hand to know the makes of cars, except Julius' and his is a Plymouth sedan. This car was a coupe, and it was either blue, or dark gray—”

“Not red?”

“No, not red. Julius' car is gray, and that's how I know, because not long ago he was washing it out in front on the street, and I remember this time especially because she was out there in a skimpy pair of shorts, and she sat on the curb as bold as brass in front of Julius, and, well, you know what I mean—Julius was trying to wash the car, and she was sitting there with her legs crossed, laughing and talking and smoking a cigarette.

“Later Julius, he said, ‘Ethel, I guess the old car is gray after all. I kind of forgot with all the mud on it,’ and that's how I know that this coupe was either gray or dark blue. After that, a couple of times, I caught Julius talking to her and it wasn't Julius' fault, he is always so polite, and so bashful. And she's man crazy, that's what she is, and I feel so sorry for Mr. Faro.”

She sighed. “He seemed like such a nice man, quiet, and he wasn't well. Only he wasn't home much, just like Julius, and I should speak ill of the dead, but I can't help it. Mrs. Faro got what was coming to her, and—”

“Thank you, Mrs. Koffman,” Colby said wearily. He stood up and moved towards the door. “Thank you very much.” He glanced at the door of the Faro apartment as he went past, smiled grimly to himself. . . .

At five minutes of one in the afternoon he was washing his hands in his drug room. His knee pained him, and his eyes burned from lack of sleep.

Celia Brooks came in and lit a cigarette. “Last smoke before the stampede,” she said.

“How many patients out there?” he asked.

“Twelve, so far. Mrs. Huxton is first, as usual.”

“Send her in,” Colby said. He began to dry his hands.

“Why do you look so sad, Clint? Leg hurt?”

“A little. Get Mrs. Simpson's card for me.”

“It's on your desk. Let's talk about you for a change. You're working too hard. Why don't you go fishing for a couple of weeks?”

“Sure,” he said. “What about the sick and the lame?”

“They'd get some other doctor. Are you unhappy, Clint?” She crushed out her cigarette and lowered her eyes. “You never seem to have any fun.” She looked up at him and smiled. “Now, listen. No office hours tonight, and no babies due. I've got two luscious steaks in the refrigerator, and I'll mix some old fashioned—”

He patted her cheek. “Remind me around six.”

“Like heck,” she said. “You remind *me*.” She turned quickly away. “Mrs. Huxton coming up.”

Colby entered his office and sat down at his desk. He picked up the case history card on Mrs. Urban Huxton and began to study it. Flies buzzed against the screen, and through the open window beside his desk he could hear the sounds of traffic in the street. He leaned down to open a lower drawer of his desk, and that movement saved his life.

There was a sharp report, a deadly whisper over his head, and a bullet buried itself in the wall beyond.

CHAPTER THREE.

THOSE LITTLE BLUE LIES.

His head still lowered, Colby raised his eyes to the wall. He saw a small black hole, with tiny cracks in the plaster around it. He slid off his chair and walked in a stooping position to the window. As he reached up to pull the cord which lowered the blind, he saw the ragged hole in the screen where the bullet had entered. He moved back to his desk and sat down.

Colby opened the office door and stood aside to let a tall woman enter.

Colby said, “Good afternoon, Mrs. Huxton.”

“Oh, doctor.” The tall woman sank into a chair.

“Did a car backfire?” Celia asked.

Colby nodded. "I guess so." He turned to Mrs. Huxton. "How have you been feeling?"

Celia Brooks hesitated at the doorway. Colby looked up at her inquiringly. She turned quickly and went out.

"Oh, doctor, not well at all," Mrs. Huxton said. "I can't sleep, and sometimes I think I'll simply go wild, just wild." She had a long sharp face, which might have been pretty when she was younger, and she was wearing a wide-brimmed black straw hat and a gayly printed dress.

Colby looked at her case history card and his black brows came together. "Mrs. Huxton, you've had a complete physical examination, and all I can tell you now is repeat what I have told you before. Get your mind off of yourself and get plenty of exercise—"

Mrs. Huxton broke in, "Can't I have some more of those sleeping capsules?"

"No," Colby said bluntly. "I do not recommend sedatives except in emergencies. You must try and help yourself."

Two tears ran down Mrs. Huxton's face. She took a heavily scented handkerchief from her purse and dabbed at her long nose. "Oh, doctor, are you abandoning me? You've been such a help, my only consolation. I'm alone so much. If Urban's work was like other men's, but being mayor he's gone so much, and at night, all hours. I haven't any life at all, doctor, at all—"

"A doctor's hours are irregular, too, Mrs. Huxton, and so are lots of other men's."

"It isn't that." The tears had streaked the powder on her lean cheeks. "Oh, how can I tell you? It's eating at my heart, doctor. I-I must tell someone, I simply must. After all these years, I-I think Urban is unfaithful to me."

"Nonsense," Colby said. "The mayor is too sensible a man for anything like that. I'm sure you are mistaken."

Mrs. Huxton fumbled in her purse and took out a small sheet of pale blue note paper. She laid it on the desk in front of Colby. There were two lines of handwriting on it in lavender ink.

Honey—He won't be home until after midnight tomorrow night. Come early. D.

Colby stared at the note paper. Then he handed it back to Mrs. Huxton. "Where did you get that?"

"In Urban's coat pocket this morning. He

came home and changed his clothes around eight-thirty. He thought I was asleep, but I watched him and I saw him hang his suit in the back of the closet, and after he left I got it out—and I found that in a pocket."

Colby felt a prickling along the base of his neck. "Was the suit—soiled?" he asked.

"I-I didn't notice, doctor. I found the note, and I forgot everything else. I simply can't believe it of Urban."

Colby forced a laugh and stood up. "It's probably a bit of evidence in some police court case," he said. "I wouldn't worry about it."

She looked up at him, and he winced at the pleading in her eyes. "Do you think so, doctor? Oh, do you really think so?"

"Of course," Colby said.

She tucked the note back into her purse and stood up. "I'll put it right back," she said, "before he misses it. I get such crazy ideas sometimes. It's my nerves, I suppose. I'm alone so much, and I brood, and these two awful murders—"

"Of course," Colby said in his best bedside voice. He crossed the office and opened the door for her. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Huxton."

She went out, leaving behind her a rich aroma of strong perfume and face powder. Colby moved to the window and raised the blind. Traffic was moving along the street in an orderly fashion, and the afternoon sun slanted through the trees along the sidewalks.

Celia Brooks came in and handed him a card. "You're getting the whole family. His Honor, the mayor, just knocked at the back door. Shall I sneak him in ahead of the rest?"

Colby nodded. "I've got to do a post-mortem on Horner at two, but it shouldn't take long. Send him in."

Mayor Huxton entered the office by way of the drug room and sat down in the chair just vacated by his wife. His thin face was paler than usual, and the blue pouches beneath his eyes were almost black. He removed a long dark brown cigar from between his yellow teeth and laid it in an ashtray on Colby's desk.

Colby said, "You been cutting down on those?"

"I've been trying, Clint, but a man's got to get some pleasure out of life, and I'm only smoking eight or ten a day."

"Too many," Colby said curtly. "Your

heart won't stand it, that and liquor. I told you—”

Huxton waved a thin hand. “Now, now, Clint, don't lecture me. I'm old enough to be your dad. I was mayor of this fair city when you were a kid in grade school, and I have administered the affairs of Dixie, Ohio, with an impartial and unprejudiced mind. Urban B. Huxton is ready to meet his Maker, unafraid, with a clear conscience, and the knowledge of a job well done—”

Colby broke in. “I know you're up for re-election this fall, Urban, but you don't have to campaign with me. How have you been feeling?” As he spoke, he wondered idly how many times a day he asked that question.

Huxton slumped suddenly in his chair. “Not so good, Clint. I had a bad spell last night, and I had another attack just before lunch. I took some of those little black pills you gave me, and they brought me out of it. I want to get some more.”

“They're not a cure, Urban,” Colby said. “I told you that. One of these times they won't work. You've got to take it easy. I strongly advise you not to become a candidate for re-election this fall.”

“I've got to, Clint,” Huxton said quietly. “You know what my salary is, and I haven't saved any money. All I have is my life insurance. The job of mayor of Dixie is all I've got, and this killing of Horner may ride me right out of office. Horner was popular, and the town wants a change. I know that. But if I can get a quick conviction of Horner's killer, I'll be all set. Quick justice, reform, all that. See, Clint?”

“Yes, Urban,” Colby said slowly. “I see. But you can't take any chances, not with that heart trouble of yours.”

Huxton waved a hand impatiently. “I'll be all right. Now, that autopsy today, Clint. Howard Faro killed John Horner, no doubt about it. He knew Horner was seeing his wife, and many a man has killed for jealousy. We can prove the bullets came from the gun found on Faro, and I want you to return a verdict of death by three gunshot wounds from Faro's gun. I was a good friend of your dad's, Clint, and this means a lot to me. All I ask is that you do your duty.”

Colby said, “I can see that Howard Faro is already strapped to the chair. But who killed Mrs. Faro? Aren't you worried about that, too?”

Huxton shook his head impatiently

“Dammit, Clint, she was just the wife of a racketeer, a murderer. She hasn't got any friends in town. Horner was popular, and it's his murderer—the copkiller—I've got to convict, quick. If I put that over—well, the citizens of Dixie will be solidly behind me this fall.” He hesitated, and looked at his hands. “Clint, I haven't got much but I'll make it up to you. Would—a hundred, or two, help?”

“Save it for campaign expenses,” Colby said harshly.

After Huxton left, Colby took a deep breath and lit a cigarette. His telephone rang, and he jerked it viciously from its cradle, snapped, “Yes?”

A woman's voice said, “Oh, doctor, please come over right away. Someone is snooping around downstairs. I'm all alone, and I'm so frightened. Please come quickly.”

Colby was about to ask why she didn't call the police, but he checked himself. “All right, Mrs. Koffman,” he said. “I'll be right over.”

He stood up, put on his hat, and entered his drug room. He could hear Celia Brooks typing in her little office beyond. He stooped down, quietly opened the lower drawer of a cabinet, and took out a short-barreled .32 revolver and a box of cartridges. He flipped open the cylinder, filled it with the brass-tipped bullets, spun it, and clicked it back into place. He put the gun in his inside coat pocket and stepped out of the drug room.

Celia Brooks stopped typing and turned to look at him.

“I'll be back around three,” he said to her, and went out the back door before she could answer.

He walked swiftly around the building to the front of his office and got behind the wheel of his coupe.

A voice behind him said, “Hey, Clint. Just a minute.”

Colby turned his head, his finger on the starter button. A man crossed the walk and leaned in the window. He was a big man in a double-breasted light gabardine suit, tan open-necked sports shirt and rubber-soled buckskin shoes. He was hatless, and the sun glinted on his crisp black hair. He had a thick, well-groomed face and intelligent black eyes beneath heavy black brows.

“Lucky I caught you, Clint. I was just going in the office.”

“I'm in a hurry, Sam,” Colby said, and he pressed the starter.

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Sam Landers placed a big hand on Colby's arm. "This is important, and it'll only take a minute. Simpson and Huxton are trying to pin this Horner killing on my boy, Howard Faro. Well, I know Howard didn't do it. He was in Toledo at eleven o'clock last night. I talked to him there."

"Did you tell that to Simpson?"

Landers lifted his heavy shoulders. "Hell, no. You know better than that, Clint. I'm the town's bad boy. I own nasty gambling houses, and slot machines, and awful saloons. And Faro works for me. If I said anything, they'd probably arrest me for an accomplice."

Colby gently gunned his motor. He didn't say anything.

Landers held the back of a hand to his mouth and coughed slightly. "I hate to see a man railroaded, just because Huxton wants to be re-elected this fall. I just want you to be damn sure before you give out with a verdict on the cause of Horner's death."

Colby said, "The autopsy will tell how Horner died."

Landers coughed again. Then he said: "Clint, if a little dough would help . . ."

"Bribery?" Colby asked.

"Not for telling the truth, Clint."

"What are you worried about, then?" Colby pulled away from the curb, and Landers stepped back. Colby looked in his rear-view mirror, and saw Landers turn and enter the office.

As Colby went up the walk leading to the duplex on Heidelberg Street, he saw an upstairs curtain move slightly. He smiled to himself and pressed Mrs. Koffman's bell. The lock clicked open immediately, and he stepped inside.

Mrs. Koffman stood at the top of the stairs motioning violently to him. He held a finger to his lips, and tried the knob of the door leading into the Faro apartment. The door was unlocked, and it swung inward silently. Mrs. Koffman leaned over the bannister and peered down at him as he moved slowly through the open door.

Doris Faro's blood was still on the carpet. It looked dark in the afternoon sun slanting through the windows. The apartment was very quiet, and he stood still and listened. Then he began to move silently across the room.

A voice from behind him said, "Hello, Clint."

Colby knew the voice, and he turned

slowly. Chief of Police Elwood Simpson stepped out from behind the door.

"Heard someone on the porch," he said, "so I ducked until I knew who it was. Looking for somebody, Clint?"

"Yes. You."

The chief grunted, lit a match and held it to the black stub of a cigar between his teeth. "Well, here I am," he said.

Colby smiled faintly. "Only I didn't know who it was I was looking for. Mrs. Koffman upstairs tipped me off that someone was prowling around down here."

"We got a police force in this town."

"Sure, sure," Colby said. "Maybe she just likes me." He looked around the room. "Got any ideas yet about who killed Mrs. Faro?"

The chief flicked his burned match to the carpet. "I found this out—Mrs. Koffman didn't have no love for Doris Faro."

"You mean on account of Julius?" Colby asked.

The chief's small blue eyes narrowed a little. "So she told you, too?"

"She told me that Mrs. Faro made a few mild passes at Julius."

The chief grunted again. "I can't say that I blame Julius for that, but women have killed other women for a hell of a lot less." He reached into his coat pocket and took out a small gilt-edged sheet of pale blue notepaper. He handed it silently to Colby.

Colby read:

Honey Girl—I'm supposed to be in Detroit, but I'll be in town around midnight. Wait up for me. J.

The notepaper was wrinkled, and the writing was in blue ink. He handed it back to the chief.

"I found it under her pillow in the bedroom," Simpson said.

Colby's knee was beginning to ache. He sat down on a tomato red davenport and lit a cigarette. "Then where's Julius?" he asked.

"How the hell do I know?" the chief said harshly. "Probably back in Detroit. But I think he was here last night. Mrs. Koffman sits up there every night with her ear to the cracks in the floor, and she probably heard her husband's voice down here, and after he left she came down here and stuck a knife into Doris Faro."

"If the J signed to the note stands for Julius," Colby said. "Maybe he did it."

"Like hell. Doris Faro was his sweet little baby. Why would he want to kill her?"

"Blackmail," Colby said wearily. "Maybe she was collecting from Julius—to keep quiet about his little affair with her."

"Nuts," Simpson said. "Howard Faro kept her in plenty of money. She might have been playing around with the old coot just for the hell of it, but she wasn't blackmailing him."

"The J could stand for Jack—Jack Horner," Colby said.

The Chief swung on him impatiently. "Horner's dead and we already got the guy who killed him. We gotta find the person who killed *her*."

Colby said, "Too bad Howard Faro was in jail when his wife was killed. You could have pinned both jobs on him."

The Chief laughed. "That's an idea, Clint. Maybe I can work it that way."

Colby got stiffly to his feet. "Can I give you a lift, Chief?"

"My car's down the street," the Chief said.

As they entered the hall, Colby looked up the stairway. He couldn't see Mrs. Koffman, but he knew she was there. He winked at the Chief and called out, "It's all right, Mrs. Koffman. Just the police."

He didn't get any answer, and he followed the Chief out to the porch. As they reached the sidewalk, a tan Plymouth coupe came up the street from their left. It slowed down and cut in towards the curb. The Chief was the first to see the gun barrel slanting over the lower window of the Plymouth.

"Get down, Clint!" the Chief yelled, and Colby felt heavy hands push him violently forward.

CHAPTER FOUR.

SWING FOR OUR SUPPER.

He stumbled, and went to his knees on the sidewalk. Out at the curb a gun barked, and Colby ducked his head and flattened out. It reminded him of the beach at Saipan. From behind him he heard Simpson curse, and then his right ear drum seemed to explode with the blast of the Chief's gun.

Colby clawed for the .32 in his inside coat pocket, but the gun in the Plymouth spoke twice more before he had his weapon clear. Something smacked the sidewalk beside his head and cement dust stung his face.

He got his gun in his hand, raised his head in time to see the Plymouth roaring away in low gear. He leveled the .32 and fired, and he saw the car's rear window splinter. But it kept going. He scrambled to his feet and ran for his car.

"Come on!" he yelled over his shoulder at the Chief.

He jerked open the door of his car. Behind him a woman began to scream. He turned, and he saw Mrs. Koffman standing on the porch. Her elbows stuck out at right angles and the palms of both hands were pressed against her face.

He saw the Chief then. He was lying very still on the sidewalk. A little puddle of blood was staining the cement beside his head. . . .

Fifteen minutes later the Chief sat on a chair in Clint Colby's office with a bottle of bourbon whiskey in one hand and a big black cigar in the other. Celia Brooks was deftly tearing adhesive tape into narrow strips, and Colby was gently daubing alcohol-soaked gauze along a two-inch shallow red groove in the Chief's forehead.

"There'll be a scar," he said to the Chief. "Can't even stitch it. Nothing left to sew to."

The Chief grunted and took a long swallow of the bourbon. Colby's fingers worked swiftly. "Who were they shooting at, you or me?" he asked.

Simpson said, "That rod was pointed straight at you, Clint. But when I pushed you down, they nicked me." He took another swallow from the bottle. "Say, this is good booze."

"I guess I owe you more than a drink," Colby said.

The Chief squinted his eyes up at Colby. "Who's gunning for you?"

Colby shrugged. "It's the second time today," and told him about the bullet zipping through his office window screen.

"Car backfire," Celia Brooks said mockingly. But her eyes were on Colby, and her face was suddenly pale.

Colby jerked his head towards the outer office. "How many out there?"

"Plenty. They're sitting on the mantel."

"Anybody I ought to see?"

"They'll live until tomorrow."

He grinned at her. "Good. Tell them I've been called out on an emergency, and that I won't be back today."

She nodded silently and went out.

Colby turned to the Chief. "I'll run you home."

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Simpson got unsteadily to his feet. "Now, look here, Clint. There ain't no call for that. I got things to do."

"Like what?"

The Chief chewed on his cigar. "Like finding the killer of Doris Faro. I aim to start with Julius Koffman, and then I'm going to have a little talk with Mrs. Koffman."

Colby ran a hand through his short black hair. "You better go home and take it easy. You got quite a jolt. About an hour from now that head is going to hurt to beat hell."

The Chief muttered something under his breath and picked up the telephone from Colby's desk. He asked for the Police Department. "Mac? Simpson. Put this on the radio . . . yeah, the radio. Block all county roads. Stop tan Plymouth coupe, don't know license. Occupant armed. . . . Yeah, yeah . . . that's right."

He hung up and flicked ashes on Colby's rug. "They had a good start," he muttered to himself. He moved to the door. "Thanks for the patch job, Clint."

Colby looked at his wrist watch. Five minutes of two. "Feel like going to the post-mortem on Horner?"

The Chief snapped his fingers. "I clean forgot. You going now?"

"I'll be a little late. I'll see you there."

Simpson nodded and grinned. "Don't keep His Honor waiting." He went out.

From his reception room Colby heard the murmur of voices, and the sound of footsteps on the stairs as his patients left. He sighed, put on his hat, and moved swiftly through his drug room and out the back door.

Max Watson was a runt of a man with a bald head and a small red mouth. "Why, yes, Dr. Colby, I saw Mr. Faro last night. It was going on to eleven o'clock, and I was getting ready to close up. He stopped in and bought a bag of peanuts, ate a few of them. Then he went out. I was bringing in the tomato plants from out in front when I heard the shots, and I ran back behind my store and found Mr. Horner. He was lying in the corner of the alley, where it turns toward Main Street, and there was blood on his face, and on his shirt—like I told the police."

"Little Jack Horner died in a corner," Colby said softly.

"What's that, Dr. Colby?"

"Never mind, Max. How late are you open in the evening?"

"Oh, ten-thirty, eleven, depending upon

business. I'm the only grocer in this neighborhood open in the evening. My wife complains, but you'd be surprised at the people who need a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk after the other places close."

Colby smiled. "Just like the doctors. People always get sick at night. Thanks, Max." He went out and drove to the Hoyt Funeral Home.

As he parked his car on the cement ramp in the rear, he decided that a funeral must be in progress. There were several cars at the curb in front of the rather pretentious establishment, and more were parked in the gravel lot at the side.

He rang the bell at the back door. A thin man in a tight black suit and a black tie let him in.

Colby said, "Hello, Lee. Big business today?"

Lee Hoyt rubbed the bridge of his sharp nose with a thumb and forefinger. "Clint, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. Death must come to all of us, and—"

"Sure," Colby grinned. "Who you burying?"

"We have no service today, if that's what you mean."

"Too bad. Maybe business will pick up tomorrow."

"Really, Clint."

"How come all the cars out in front?"

The undertaker peered out the door. "They started coming around noon, and there must be fifteen or twenty people in there waiting to see the autopsy on poor John. And they all had a note from Mayor Huxton. I had to let them in."

Colby said, "Tell them they'll have to leave."

"Now, just a minute, Clint," a voice said from behind him.

Colby turned slowly.

Mayor Huxton stood in the doorway. "Those people have a right to be here. They are all good citizens. . . ."

"And voters," Colby finished for him.

A little color crept into Huxton's gray face. He bit off the end of a long brown cigar and spat the shred of tobacco to the maroon velvet carpeting. "I'm mayor of this town, Clint. I say they stay."

Colby shrugged. "It'll be messy, and I'll be damned if I'm going to hold smelling salts for squeamish old biddies who never saw an autopsy."

Huxton showed his teeth in a wolfish grin.

"Don't worry about that. I've, ah, warned them of the unpleasantness. I'm glad that the citizens of this town are showing an interest in civic affairs. Let them see the intricate workings of justice. Let them see how the Huxton administration tracks down a killer like Howard Faro. Let them—"

"You sure need those votes, don't you?" Colby said sadly. He turned to the undertaker. "Is the body ready?"

Hoyt nodded silently and turned away. Colby followed him down a stairway into a big, white-painted room filled with rows of bottles and instruments of the embalmer's art. In the middle of the room, beneath a bright light, was a white enameled table equipped with rubber-tired wheels. On the table was a long white-sheeted object.

Colby took off his coat, put on a white smock and a pair of rubber gloves which Hoyt handed him. He moved over to the table and lifted the end of the sheet.

Jack Horner's face had a curious alive look to it. The edges of his front teeth showed in a faint, sardonic smile. His eyes were half open. Colby's face was grim as he pulled the sheet away. He had liked Jack Horner, a friendly, cheerful man, an honest cop, and a friend to all the kids in town.

There was a black hole in the dead man's head, just above his left ear, and two dull red lobes in his chest. Colby gently folded the sheet back and touched a thumb to one of Horner's eyelids. Behind him he heard footsteps on the stairs and the soft scraping of many feet on the stairs.

"Hand me a scalpel," he said to Lee Hoyt without looking around.

"Scalpel?" Hoyt's hands fluttered. "Don't you need a probe—to get the bullets out? The mayor said—"

Colby turned slowly to look at him. He was aware of the people lining the wall on two sides of the room, and he tried to control his voice. "A butcher knife will do," he said slowly and distinctly. "Any big, sharp knife. I've got to get a sample of this man's stomach. You know that, Lee."

The undertaker's hands moved helplessly, and his eyes shifted away from Colby.

Mayor Huxton stepped briskly forward. "That won't be necessary, Clint. Just get the bullets, so that we can match them with the gun found on Faro. Faro is guilty, of course, but never let it be said that the fair city of Dixie did not give a man a fair trial, even though he be a murderer."

There was a sprinkling of handclapping from the crowd along the wall.

Colby's gray eyes turned almost black, and the muscles along his jaw tightened. He turned slowly to face the crowd. The handclapping died out, and there was a movement of restless feet.

He knew all of them. Some were his patients, Mrs. Urban Huxton, for one. He was surprised to see her. She kept dabbing at her lipsticked mouth, avoiding Colby's gaze.

Mrs. Julius Koffman was there too, and she nodded her bird-like head eagerly as his glance met hers. A little distance from her stood Chief of Police Simpson. He had a cigar in his mouth, and he was scowling, his little blue eyes watching the mayor. The bandage over his eye showed white against his face.

Colby turned to Huxton. "As coroner of this county I demand that you clear this room so that this examination can proceed in an orderly manner."

Huxton waved his cigar. "Nonsense, Clint. They have a right to stay."

Colby nodded grimly and began to pull off his rubber gloves.

Chief of Police Simpson stepped forward. "We'll do it your way, Clint." He swung toward Huxton. "Urban, he's right. This ain't a three-ring circus. I'm Chief of Police of this town, and I'm going to clear this room."

Huxton's face was a dull red, and he seemed to be swallowing with difficulty. "You're fired," he choked out. "I-I demand your resignation—" He stumbled forward, and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly. He started to fall forward. Colby jumped and caught him in his arms. The crowd began to mutter, and Mrs. Huxton screamed and ran forward.

"Urban, Urban," she sobbed.

Colby brushed her aside. He picked up Huxton's lean form, carried him up the steps, across the soft carpet and laid him on a davenport in an alcove. Mrs. Huxton rushed past him and threw herself on the form of the mayor. Colby pulled her away, ripped open Huxton's shirt collar.

Lee Hoyt fluttered about, wringing his hands. Colby placed his hand on Huxton's chest, beneath his shirt. He held it there a long minute, and then he turned slowly. Mrs. Huxton looked at him with dumb misery in her eyes. Colby nodded gravely.

She covered her face with her hands and

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began to sob wildly. Colby jerked his head at Lee Hoyt. The undertaker nodded nervously and led Mrs. Huxton from the room.

Colby met the Chief at the top of the stairs leading to the autopsy room.

"Huxton's dead," Colby said. "Heart attack."

The Chief chewed on his cigar. "Urban didn't take care of himself."

"Did you get rid of that mob down there?"

"All but that nosy Mrs. Koffman. She says she's got her rights and she's going to stay. Want me to throw her out?"

"No. Let her stay. Who drives a tan Plymouth?"

The Chief fingered the bandage over his eye. "Dammit, Clint, if I knew, do you suppose I'd be hanging around here?"

"How about Julius Koffman? Locate him?"

"Sure. He registered at a Detroit hotel yesterday. I got the Detroit cops looking for him, and I got a man watching his house."

Colby grinned and patted the Chief's arm. "No offense, Elwood." He went down the stairs, and the Chief followed him.

Celia Brooks was standing just inside the door. Sam Landers stood beside her. The Chief started for them, his jaw outthrust, but Colby touched his arm. Simpson stopped, glaring.

Clint turned to Celia. "Get lonesome at the office?"

She smiled a little uncertainly. The freckles over her short nose looked dark against her white skin. Sam Landers put his hands in his pockets and looked uncomfortable. And from up the stairway they could hear the faint sounds of Mrs. Huxton's sobbing.

Colby moved over to the wheeled table and for a full minute he looked down at the face of the dead man. Then he sighed and crossed to a drawer beside a closet door beyond the table. He selected two glittering instruments—a slender steel probe and a razor-edged scalpel—and moved back to the table. He gently folded the sheet down to the dead man's wrist.

The room was silent as he worked. Presently there was a metallic sound as he dropped something into a white basin. He raised his head and nodded at the Chief. Colby held out the basin, and the Chief bent to peer at the three irregular-shaped chunks of lead.

"Yep," Simpson said. "I'd bet on it. Same caliber as Faro's gun—thirty-eight. The ballistics man can do the rest."

Sam Landers blurted out. "Howard couldn't have done it. I saw him in Toledo last night, at the time Horner was shot."

The Chief turned slowly. "I'd keep out of this if I was you, Sam."

Mrs. Koffman stepped forward suddenly. Her thin hands were clasped in front of her. "That's it! That's the name! I remember now. Howard! That's what she called him—I heard her through the floor, just before she was killed. He stabbed her to death, her own husband. Because he was jealous of her—"

"Mrs. Koffman," Clint said quietly. "Howard Faro has been in jail since last night. His wife was killed somewhere between eight and eight-thirty this morning."

The Chief pointed his chin at Mrs. Koffman. "Why didn't you tell us that today?"

"I-I didn't think. I was so upset, and so nervous. It's a horrible thing to have your neighbor—"

Sam Landers said, "Aw, nuts."

Celia looked at Colby and said quietly, "Clint, Howard Faro couldn't have killed John Horner. I-I saw him in Toledo last night, too."

Colby looked silently at Sam Landers.

Landers said, "Sure, Celia was with me. Anything wrong with that? We were at the Maumee Supper Club, and we saw Howard there, around eleven o'clock. I told you that."

"That's real cozy, ain't it?" the Chief said. "And what was you all doing at the Maumee Supper Club?"

"I own it," Landers said. "Howard was there checking the books for me. He stopped at our table before he left, and Horner was dead before he ever left Toledo."

Simpson said stubbornly, "We picked up Faro at eleven forty-five. He had the gun on him, a thirty-eight with three empty cartridges in it."

Landers jeered, "Toledo is sixty miles from here."

Colby peeled off his rubber gloves. "John Horner was shot on two separate occasions. The first bullet, the one in his head, killed him. The other wounds in his chest were made at least a half hour later." He paused. Then he added, "If anyone is interested, the conditions of the two sets of wounds tells me that."

The room was suddenly very quiet. From upstairs Mrs. Huxton's sobbing began anew, and they could hear Lee Hoyt's mumbling words of consolation.

Colby heard a slight noise directly behind him. He started to turn, and the Chief yelled, "Duck, Clint!"

Colby stooped low, instinctively, and in the same instant, the room rocked with blasts of the Chief's gun. Mrs. Koffman screamed, and Colby was aware of a thudding sound behind him.

He twisted his head, and the Chief's gun barked again. Colby felt the hot whisper of lead past his cheek. He stood up then, and the Chief ran forward, his smoking gun in his big fist. Colby's eyes followed Simpson's intent gaze.

The closet door beyond the embalming table was half open, and on the floor was the body of a man. His blood was already oozing over the cement. Colby could not see the man's face, but he was big and blond, and he was wearing a gray Shetland jacket.

The Chief put the toe of his shoe beneath the dead man's face and tilted it upwards. "Who the hell's this?" he said, and he looked up at Colby. "He damn near got you, Clint. I saw him open the door, and I saw his rod, pointed at you—"

"His name is Kessler," Colby said. "I've met him before, in the office. Looks like I owe you a couple of drinks, Elwood."

Sam Landers swiftly crossed the room and peered down at the body of the man on the floor. "It's Art Donagal," he said.

The Chief looked quickly at Landers. "The guy who stuck up the Riverside Finance Company in Toledo last week?"

"Hell, yes," Landers said. "A well-known character around Toledo."

Simpson mopped his face with a red bandanna and stuck his gun back into a hip pocket. "This is a big day for the Dixie Police department."

Lee Hoyt poked a white face around the end of the stairway. "W-what's—"

"You got business, Lee," the Chief said.

Mrs. Koffman put a hand to her eyes and swayed back against the wall. Celia Brooks stepped forward quickly and slipped an arm around the older woman's waist. Mrs. Koffman began to sob. "Julius, Julius—"

Lee Hoyt crossed the room and knelt down beside the body of the man on the

floor. His hands fluttered over it, arranging the coat and the necktie.

"Measure him up for a box, Lee," the Chief said. "We'll ship him back to Toledo." He started for the stairway. "I've gotta call the Toledo cops. There's a reward on that baby."

Colby took a deep breath and gripped the steel handle of the embalming table. "Wait, Elwood," he said. "How much did you pay Max Watson to say that he saw Howard Faro in his store just before Horner was killed?"

The Chief stopped and turned slowly. "That's a damn funny question, Clint."

Colby said evenly, "Don't attempt to leave this room, Elwood. You were in on the Toledo robbery. Kessler—or Donagal gave you a cut to let him hide out here in Dixie. Jack Horner got suspicious, maybe recognized Donagal from the police photos, and began to do some checking. You couldn't have that, so you and Donagal decide to get rid of Horner. How did you work it—when you put that first bullet in Horner's head?"

"You're crazy, Clint."

Colby's voice was sad. "I wish I were, Elwood. I've always liked you. You put a bullet in Horner's head, and then you carry him to the corner of the alley. You pay Max Watson to say that Faro stopped in his store before the shooting. Then you go out and pump two more bullets into Horner's chest. You picked on Faro because you were in love with Faro's wife. You spread the story that Horner is playing around with Faro's wife, to give Faro a motive for killing Horner, and you wait for Faro to come home from Toledo. You arrest him, and you plant the gun on Faro that you used on Horner."

He paused, fumbled for a match. "Only Mrs. Faro got suspicious. She knew that her husband was in Toledo, and when you came to my office this morning I told you that Mrs. Faro wanted to see me. You got scared then, and you went straight to Mrs. Faro—and killed her. And you tried to blame *that* killing on Julius Koffman by faking a note, which you showed to me. But I knew you had faked that note, on stationery which you found in the Faro's apartment, because Mrs. Huxton had shown me a genuine note which Mrs. Faro had written to you, and which Urban Huxton had found in her apartment."

He lit a cigarette. "You figured that Julius

BLACK MASK

Koffman would be a logical suspect, because Doris Faro had undoubtedly told you about him, and about Mrs. Koffman's jealousy. I know you were the one, and not Jack Horner, who had been seeing Mrs. Faro, because you told me today that Mrs. Koffman was always listening at the cracks in the floor. If you hadn't been downstairs on the nights that Howard Faro was gone you would not have known that.

"Huxton had nothing to do with it, but after he knew you had a suspect he decided to push it to a quick conviction in order to better his chances for re-election. The only fly in the ointment was me. You were smart enough to realize that I might notice the lapse of time between the head wound and the chest wounds, so you decide to play it safe and get Donagal to try and buy me off.

"I didn't buy off, so Donagal tried twice to kill me. You saw a chance to make yourself look good, and so you pretend to warn me and shoot wide at Donagal's car. Donagal got rattled, and his aim was bad. He nicks you by mistake.

"But after that you got worried about the autopsy, and so you and Donagal decide that he better hide in the closet in case things went bad. When I mentioned the lapse of time between the head wound and the bullet holes in Horner's chest, Donagal decided that the jig was up and starts to open up on me."

He paused again, looking down. "It was then that you suddenly decide to double-cross Donagal and make yourself a hero—and maybe accidentally sling a shot in my direction, too. Only I turned my head just in time. I wondered why you shot again, after I heard Donagal fall, but I know now."

Colby stopped talking and said to Landers. "Sam, run upstairs and call the police department—what's left of it."

Landers grinned and started for the stairway. "With pleasure, Clint."

The Chief didn't say anything. His hand jerked to his hip pocket, and it came up with a gun. In the same instant Colby pushed the embalming table violently forward. Weighted with the dead body of John

Horner it shot smoothly across the room on its rubber tires. The dead man's rigid feet struck the Chief in the stomach, and the Chief's bullet smacked into the ceiling.

As Chief Simpson collapsed over the corpse, Colby jumped forward and smashed his fist into his jaw. The big man clutched briefly at the dead man's legs, and then he slumped to the floor.

Colby wrenched the gun from his grasp, stood up, and carefully re-arranged the sheet over the dead man.

He rubbed his knuckles and said softly, "Thanks, Jack."

Two hours later Colby sat in Celia Brooks' kitchen, sipping an old fashioned. It was cold and smooth, with just the right amount of bitters. Colby sighed, lit a cigarette, and stretched out his legs. His right knee ached, and he began to rub it with his fingers.

Celia Brooks picked up his glass and smiled down at him. "Steaks coming up," she said.

Colby grinned up at her. "Almost as nice as the Maumee Supper Club."

She frowned slightly. "Sam Landers is all right. He—he wants to marry me. Maybe I shouldn't see him, but I don't have much fun . . ."

Colby reached up and patted her cheek. "We'll have to fix that."

She laughed happily. "As Mrs. Huxton would say, 'Oh, doctor!' But there's one thing I don't get. How did you know that Max Watson was being paid to say that Howard Faro stopped in his store just before the shooting?"

Colby took a swallow of his drink and smiled up at her. "Max Watson told me that Faro bought a bag of peanuts and ate some of them before he left the store. And according to Chief of Police Simpson, a partly filled bag of peanuts was found by Horner's body."

"Well, what of it, Sherlock?"

"A man with stomach ulcers wouldn't dare eat peanuts. And Howard Faro has some of the worst cases of ulcers I ever treated. Remember?"

Celia Brooks began to make him another old fashioned.



FLAMING ANGEL

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

CHAPTER ONE.

LAST GOOD-BY.

THIS is a day I will never forget, Rhea, my darling, because on this day I cremated you. Do you remember, Rhea, sweet, the night you whispered to me in a serious moment while I held you in my arms in the dark?

"When I die, Johnny, please don't bury me. It makes me shiver to think of lying deep down in that heavy black earth, all alone through all eternity. Instead, let me rise off the earth in a glow of lovely dancing light. Make me what I've always yearned to become, Johnny—a shining, hot fire. Just a brief one, Johnny, but bright and beautiful before it goes out forever."

It was that way today, my sweet Rhea—just the way you wanted it.

We stood with our heads bowed in the crematory chapel—the nicest crematory in the city, Rhea, the one out on Rendezvous Road, which direction you knew so well—and watched the attendants rolling your casket into the iron door of the great oven. I talked to you then, silently in my mind, just as I began to do the night you died and just as I am talking to you now.

I said, "Good-by, Rhea, my darling. You will never be really gone from me, never really gone. We will always be together in the keeping of our secrets—but good-by, good-by forever my sweet. We will miss you so much, so terribly much—both of us."

As I watched them rolling your casket into the great furnace, Rhea, I heard sobbing from your friends and neighbors who were present, and I saw tears glimmering in the eyes of our lovely daughter.

Bitter with deepest grief, our Darlene stood at my side, saying her own silent

farewells to you, her mother. I could hardly look away from her and back to your coffin because Darlene, only eighteen, looked so very much like you, Rhea. It was almost as if you were not gone at all.

You would have been pleased to see how many attended your funeral, Rhea. Among the crowd in the chapel was one mourner you would have noticed especially. A man. A young man, very handsome—much handsomer than I ever was, Rhea, and very different also in his debonair manner, expensive suit and man-about-town reputation. Can you guess who? Of course, Bruce Dallas.

He was there to see the final flames consume you. I'm sure that most of the other mourners wondered why Bruce Dallas should turn up at the funeral services for Mrs. John Long. Most of them hadn't even heard that the late Mrs. Long knew him. They seemed so unlike each other—he the smooth-operator type; and she, apparently just a homebody . . . the quiet little wife of a saleswoman of religious books.

He was looking a little worried, Rhea, and a little surly, too, almost as if it was not his own choice to be present. And he was not alone. The man with him was named Jennings, a police detective. Possibly Bruce Dallas had been forced by Jennings to attend the funeral services of Mrs. Long—but no one knew for what reason.

No one but me, Rhea.

The attendants gently closed the massive double door of the furnace—they shut you in, Rhea, while an organ played and a soloist softly sang your favorite hymn.

Then we began to hear, behind the melody, the rumble of the growing fires inside the thick refractory walls. You attained your long-cherished dream of burning.

For the mourners, and for Darlene and

Out of the burning flames of his ghastly crime came the searing realization that he would have to kill the same woman twice.

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me as well, the services soon ended, although the muted thunder of the consuming flames continued to fulfill your wish.

Bruce Dallas, closely accompanied by the detective named Jennings, was one of the earliest to leave. As the others quietly dispersed, I could tell from their faces that they felt I had given you a very nice funeral—one done in a proper manner, showing the grief of a bereaved husband over the untimely loss of the wife he had loved.

I could also tell from their faces, Rhea—to my great gratification—that not one of these mourning friends and neighbors had the faintest suspicion that I had murdered you.

First inside the chapel, then outside on the marble steps, I went through the wearing process of saying good-by to all the mourners and thanking them for their friendly solicitude. Not dreaming that I had actually killed you, they saw me as the same upright and thoroughly proper man they had always known—a fairly successful salesman of religious books who had suffered a bitter loss and been left the lonely responsibility of his pretty eighteen-year-old daughter.

While I was still shaking hands with my well-wishing friends, Darlene came to me.

"The Fraziers want to drive me back home with them," she said, naming our nearest neighbors. "You won't mind, will you, Johnny?"

It startled me, Rhea. Not the fact that Darlene preferred to end this ordeal as soon as possible. The poor child was taking your death very hard. No, I was struck a small blow of dismay because Darlene had never before called me "Johnny." This was the first time she had ever called me anything other than Father.

This wasn't, of course, the place to rebuke her, particularly because she was so tired by the strain that she seemed hardly aware of what she was doing.

Somehow this grievous experience made her resemble you even more than before, Rhea. Her lovely oval face was pale, with vivid red touches on her cheeks; her full lips were parted a little as if with an indefinable hunger, and there was a mist in her blue eyes—the same mist I used to see deep in your own lovely eyes, my sweet.

Only eighteen! You were so young-looking when you died that you might have passed for your daughter's older sister, and on this unforgettably sad occasion Darlene seemed more like you than ever before.

"You won't mind, will you, Johnny?" she had said.

Frowning slightly, I answered, "Of course. Darlene, run right along. I'll join you in a few minutes."

She went down to the Fraziers' car. When I had nodded my farewell to the last mourner, I turned back into the chapel. It was deserted now, except for the crematory director, who was prowling among the chairs looking for lost articles.

He discreetly tip-toed out, leaving me entirely alone. There was no hush in this chapel, no reverent silence. The dull roar of the hellish flames continued inside the great furnace.

I had come to say a final farewell to you, Rhea. A moment that might bring tears easily to another new widower's eyes, but it's possible that, instead, there was a hard shine in mine as I said to you silently, "Again good-by, Rhea, my good and faithful wife—as people think. You're finally being in fact the bright flame you always yearned to be. It will help you to keep our secrets together, my lovely. Good-by again. And may you go on burning longer than you expected—in hell."

* * * * *

Night was settling when I drove back along Rendezvous Road. I don't need to remind you, Rhea, darling, how that road looks when you're driving it after dark with something better and cozier than just your thoughts for company.

Turning then toward our little home on Laurel Street, I found myself retracing the same course that I had taken every day for years when coming home from the office. In this same car, alone like this, I came exactly this same way every day, with expectations far different from today's. In pleasantest anticipation, I used to know just what would happen.

I would leave the car in the garage and turn to the kitchen door for your greeting. You had your graceful, playful little way of popping out and piping, "Welcome home, Johnny!" Fresh and crisp in a bright flowered dress, you would throw your arms around my neck and kiss me full on the lips. You always seemed as happy to have me back home as if I'd been away for weeks rather than hours. Every time it was the same delightful routine. But today?

I was driving home in exactly the same way as always before, Rhea, but today you wouldn't greet me at the kitchen door with your lively, laughing embrace. Today you

were back there in the crematory, a bright, hot flame in the furnace.

I missed you sorely as I turned the car into the driveway, Rhea. I almost wished I hadn't killed you—but only almost. You had destroyed all the goodness in yourself until only ugly sin was left. You deserved all the punishment I gave you, my little evil one. But before then my homecomings had been so pleasant—I felt a pang, thinking there would never be any more of them.

No more glad little greeting of "Welcome home, Johnny!" Your arms no more around me, your lips no more on mine. No more Rhea at all.

It had been such a trying day, seeing you cremated, my darling—I was utterly unprepared for the jolt that hit me next.

As I reached for the knob of the kitchen door it sprang open. Your voice—*your voice, Rhea!*—sang out in your old gay way, "Welcome home, Johnny!" Even more unnerving, Rhea, you actually appeared there before me—Rhea herself, alive, her eyes sparkling, her lips a happy smile. Rhea wearing her favorite flowered frock! *You, Rhea!*

Impossible? Yes, because you were back there in the crematory furnace, being devoured in the storming flames. Yet you were here with me, crying out my name. Calling to me as you always did.

A man doesn't easily admit having been unmanly, Rhea. It isn't easy for me to confess I fainted on the spot. But I did. Already overstrained, now suddenly overwhelmed, I simply dropped into a pit of blackness.

When the blackness swirled slowly out of my mind, I felt someone tugging at me. It was Darlene, asking breathlessly, "What happened, are you all right?" She helped me up to my knees, then into a chair at the kitchen table. I was still dizzy.

All I could say, when I found my voice, was, "Yes, what—what *did* happen, Darlene? Did you see?"

Darlene said, "I was in the living room, just sitting there, so tired, waiting for you to come home. Just as you came in the back door, you let out a hoarse kind of cry. I heard you fall. When I got to you, you were down on the floor in a dead faint. That's all I can tell you about it."

I looked hard at her—at her pretty face so much like yours, Rhea. She was still pale, except for the vivid spots on her cheeks. She was wearing the same black dress she had worn at the funeral—a simple dress

snugly fitting a perfect figure. A figure the exact image of yours, Rhea.

I gazed at Darlene's image in the mirror, chilled through, and asked softly, "Darlene—are you sure that what you told me is what actually happened?"

She smiled a little and answered, "Aren't you sure? You couldn't be fooled by a thing like that—could you, Johnny?"

CHAPTER TWO.

SHE-DEVIL'S DAUGHTER.

AFTER that I began watching Darlene closely, Rhea—with fear in my heart—the dread that had haunted me for years, that our lovely daughter had inherited the evilness of her mother.

You see, Rhea, I could not let myself be deluded into believing that you had supernaturally paid me a visit after death. I knew that could not be so. I was quite confident that you were destroyed as you deserved. Nor could I be such a fool as to imagine your ghost had begun to haunt me. So it came down to this, Rhea—either my senses had tricked me overwhelmingly—or I had reason to watch Darlene.

Watch Darlene! Isn't it odd, Rhea? Do you remember the time, right after we met, when it was my task to keep a watchful eye on you?

I find myself smiling at this romantic little reminiscence, Rhea. Our meeting was quite a romantic incident, you know. A meeting between a young book peddler and a young girl who was already losing her prettiness and her health, and her job as well, on a merry-go-round of sin—a kid skidding downhill fast. As you confessed yourself afterward, Rhea, you would have soon wound up in the gutter or in the river if I hadn't saved you from yourself.

That day I had gone down to the old Bijou Theatre. A squalid den, that place. A burlesque showhouse—catering to men's worst instincts.

When I went near that sinkhole, however, it was for reasons of business and high principle. Oddly, the burlesque people, especially the strippers, whom I usually saw in their dressing rooms between numbers, were ready buyers of the religious books I sold. Perhaps they never read the books but only bought them to salve their aching consciences. I liked to feel, though, that by going down into that vile valley of iniquity

and leaving The Word among those misled people, I was doing a good missionary work.

Just as I lifted my hand to the stage door, it opened. A girl was pushed out bodily, actually into my arms. Instinctively I held you. That was the first time we saw each other, Rhea—and your first glimpse of sweet salvation.

You huddled close to me, wearing almost nothing. You clung to me, Rhea, for the simple reason that you were almost unable to stand by yourself. You gave me a taunting smile. You were intoxicated—really staggering drunk. You had come to the theatre in that condition and had tried to get ready for the show, along with the other bare-skinned chorus "ponies." The stage manager, fed up because you had done it too often before, had chosen this moment to fire you out—straight into my arms.

Snarling after you, the stage manager said, "Don't bother holding her up, Reverend." They liked to call me that—"Reverend"—because I took my books seriously, and I really considered it a compliment. "Let the no-good little tramp fall on her face right now. It'll save time. She's hell-bent on wheels, and the sooner she hits bottom the less trouble she'll cause."

You clung to me, your lovely young body starting to shake with sobs, your eyes full of teary pleading. In them I saw goodness, Rhea. Reeking with liquor though you were, I told myself there was womanly sweetness in you waiting only to be brought out. I knew then, at that moment, that I must do everything in my power to save you from the evil into which you had fallen.

So romantic, wasn't it, Rhea, the way I hustled you into my car, then brought you your clothes from that filthy dressing room, and how I stood on the sidewalk to guard you from ogling passersby while you dressed yourself as best you could? Then I brought you hot, black coffee and gently forced you to drink it. Next came a decent meal in a good restaurant.

You were actually past the verge of alcoholism already, Rhea. Your pretty face was already developing haggard lines and sags—but in you I saw goodness. At least I believed I saw it and knew I must devote myself wholeheartedly to your salvation. And best of all you really wanted to be saved.

"I've been a crazy-fool kid," you confessed. "All because of a guy I fell for too hard. Until I met him, I'd never taken a single drink. He taught me to like the stuff,

and then I went overboard trying to keep up with him."

"That man should be jailed, except that jail is too good for him," I said. "What's his name?"

"Dallas," you said. "Bruce Dallas. There's no use trying to punish him because I went along with him willingly enough. Anyway, he's left town now—went to Chicago where the pickings are richer. The worst part is the tough time I'm having, trying to get over him. Maybe I never will. I've drunk more and more just trying to get him burned out of me. I hate it—what drink does to me. Please tell me how I can quit."

"I'll do better than tell you," I said, putting my hand over yours. "I'm going to be right there at your side, leading you every step of the way along the path of rightness. That's the goal for both of us—to make you the good woman you can be."

But it was not easy, Rhea, was it? We both struggled—you against the yearnings of temptation, I to give you the strength you needed to resist. There were little slips and relapses, but we both knew the long effort would win out. That was when I watched you, Rhea, to make sure you wouldn't weaken, even to the small extent of sneaking a single drink—because we both knew that that one taste, if you ever took it, would send you skidding straight toward hell again.

But we did it. My moral strength kept you good. Your health returned. You became sweeter and lovelier than ever. Indeed, Rhea, you were an angel on earth to me.

Our happiness was complete when we were married. When we moved into our little home on Laurel Street—the same home where you were later to meet such a sudden and tragic death—all the evil in your past was left far behind you. None of your friends and neighbors there dreamed you had once been an all-but-lost soul—a little alcoholic burlesque girl. You and I almost forgot it too in our simple blissfulness—you were so beautifully changed and purified, a model wife and mother.

It even made no difference at all, to judge from your visible reactions, when we later heard the news that Bruce Dallas had come back to this city, richer, smoother, an even hotter operator than before.

When Darlene was born, in the first year of our marriage, I had stopped watching over you for a possible relapse into sin. It had become unnecessary, your salvation was so complete. Now and then I would feel a

twinge of fear that the seeds of evil might be lying dormant in you, and might come out in some moment of stress.

At times too I wondered whether certain tendencies to evil had passed from you to your daughter . . .

Alone in our living room, I was casting about in my mind for an explanation of that incident at the kitchen door. Darlene had gone upstairs. I became aware of busy noises as she moved above. Puzzled, I went up the stairs and found her, not in her own room, Rhea, but in yours.

Darlene had gone into your room, Rhea, directly next to my own, with the connecting bath in between. She had seated herself at your vanity mirror and was quietly applying lacquer to her fingernails. She paused to gaze at me—looking so much like you, Rhea, that I felt my nerves squirming in my flesh.

"What are you doing, Darlene? Have you forgotten I've never permitted you to use paint on your nails? You're still too young."

She gazed at me with another of those new, quiet, smiles. She had never smiled just that way before. Something in Darlene was changing. She seemed more knowing; she had grown a little bolder. There was an audacity, almost a challenging shine in her eyes as she answered:

"Perhaps you haven't noticed, Johnny, how much older I really am now."

She went on smiling and quietly applying the enamel to her nails, taking it from the bottle left on your vanity. She left me feeling strangely helpless. What could I do about it, Rhea? Darlene was quietly defying me and really there was no way I could force her to stop.

Moreover it was true, as she had just reminded me, that she was, somehow, suddenly growing up—too grown up.

"I really am older than you seem to realize, Johnny," she said softly.

In a shaken but stern attempt at discipline I retorted, "That's another thing, Darlene—your calling me Johnny. You never did that before this afternoon. Please don't do it any more. It doesn't show the proper respectful attitude which a daughter should feel toward her father."

"But I liked so much the way mother called you Johnny," Darlene answered. "I thought that if I called you Johnny in the same nice way, it would help to make it seem that mother isn't really gone."

"But she is gone," I said flatly. "She's gone never to come back. I will always love the memory of her, Darlene, and of course you are very dear to me too, but in quite a different way. . . . That blue dress you have on is another thing—it's one of your mother's. You shouldn't have touched it, at least not so soon. And what do you mean by coming into her room like this? It should be kept closed out of proper respect—"

"But Johnny, I've always wanted this room," she broke in eagerly. "I love being amid mother's things because they're all so very much like me and now they're all mine."

"Darlene!"

It struck me so deeply, Rhea, that my sense pinwheeled. Overstrained as my nerves were, I was hardly aware of leaving. Then I discovered that I was no longer in your room, Rhea, but in my own. I had a sleepless nightmare of a night. . . .

When I came home early the next evening, Rhea—after an interminable day at the office—I brought the engraved silver urn containing your ashes.

With the urn in my hands I turned from the garage toward the house, and paused, staring apprehensively at the kitchen door. Then I went to it slowly, watching at every step. Thank heavens that the incident of yesterday was not repeated. Entering that door, in fact, I found the kitchen deserted. But there were sounds overhead, indicating that Darlene was upstairs, and her voice carried down gayly.

"Welcome home, Johnny!"

Unable to answer, I carried the urn into the living room and placed it on the center of the mantel. Left there in plain sight, I hoped it would serve as a constant reminder to our daughter that Rhea would continue to be present in this house only as a handful of gray dust reposing inside that silver vessel.

But only the next day I came home, numbly tired again, to find that in one more detail Darlene had caused herself to resemble you even more closely. She had had her hair bleached a shade or two, to the shade yours had been.

It was adding up tension toward the cracking point, Rhea. Darlene had also developed your trick of sneaking a smoke now and then, in just the way you used to do it, believing I didn't know. Darlene was fully aware that I disapprove of women smoking, especially mere girls of her age—so she tried

to hide her indulgence from me just as you used to hide it. But I could always smell the tobacco when I came into the house and I would find the butts stained with lip rouge, just like yours, in the trash basket.

This in itself was trivial, perhaps, except that Darlene had never before *liked* cigarettes. But now she was smoking in my absence, concealing it and undoubtedly becoming an addict.

Like mother, like daughter! Your evilness was your bequest to Darlene. Your sins were flowing in her blood, tainting it, cropping out of her now, more and more in hellish increase.

All these things were nerve-shattering. Darlene's new way of waiting for me just inside the kitchen door, smiling at me, was almost the worst trial to endure.

But then came the worst of all, Rhea—the dereliction proving once and for all that Darlene was going the evil way of her mother. It came so soon that it left me dazed and appalled—*inherited* evil completely claiming Darlene. Almost before I was aware of it, it came so slyly, she was plunging into your own secretly fatal sin.

CHAPTER THREE.

THE NIGHT YOU DIED.

I NEVER told you in life, Rhea, just how I discovered your unforgivable secret. At the time I judged it best to use your own tactics of silence and craft. You didn't even suspect that I had learned—and perhaps you do not know even yet how I brought a righteous punishment down upon you.

The first sign of it, Rhea, was a strange new tenseness in you. Your cheerful, content manner was gone. You had become on edge, anxious. When I asked you what was bothering you, your answer was evasive. "I just seem to be a little nervous, Johnny, that's all—probably because the weather is so unsettled."

But after the weather changed, you stayed agitated. Coming home from work these afternoons, I found your customary greeting strained. The stench of tobacco was stronger in the house and more butts than usual were discarded in the trash basket. At night, too, you were restless—you tossed and squirmed in bed so endlessly that neither of us could sleep. That was when you suggested it might be better if you had a room of your own,

so you moved into the second bedroom on the other side of the bath.

It did seem to help some, for soon your nervous tensions relaxed somewhat. In fact, you took on a new loveliness—there was a brighter flash in your eyes, a happier shine on your lips, and as you worked around the house you sang softly to yourself.

And I didn't suspect the reason, Rhea. Trusting my wife as a husband should, I didn't dream . . .

The first inkling of it came, with bitter irony, as the result of my husbandly concern for you, Rhea.

That night in bed I was also restive. Usually I sleep the sound sleep of a man whose conscience is perfectly clear, but on this night something caused me to waken. My first thought was of you, Rhea. I rose, wanting to make sure you were all right, and without turning on any lights, stepped through the connecting bath into your room.

A light had been left burning inside your closet. Thinking you had overlooked it, I reached in to turn it out—and then I saw the bottle.

On the shelf, Rhea, just barely visible behind a hat-box—a liquor bottle. You were keeping it hidden there. Only a few ounces of whiskey remained in it.

I stood there too stunned to move, Rhea—staring at that bottle as if at the suddenly dead face of a loved one. In a soundless revelation, it told me that all my years of loving patience and guidance had gone in vain. You had secretly deceived me, Rhea. The sweet, good wife I had known was gone, for she had yielded again to sinful weakness.

Heartsick, I turned my unbelieving eyes to look at you, Rhea, and then an even more staggering blow rocked me.

Your bed was empty.

Just in the nick of time I choked off a cry of pain. Darlene was asleep just down the hall, and the Fraziers' open bedroom windows were no farther away than the width of the driveway. I could not bear to let them learn of my discovery.

The condition of your bed showed you had been lying there for a while, Rhea, but now you had left it. And the clock on your vanity said the time was 4:20 a.m.

In a stunned turmoil of conjectures—unwilling to believe this thing until I had made doubly sure—I quietly went down the stairs. It took me only a few moments to search the house. It was horribly true. You were gone. You had risen from your bed in the middle

of the night, while your trusting husband slept, to sneak out of the house and away.

Where had you gone? How many times before tonight had you slipped out like this without my slightest knowledge? Did Darlene suspect, or the neighbors? I hoped to heaven they were as ignorant of it as I had been. I prayed that I could remain alone in my wretched wonder.

These questions would remain a torture in my mind even after they were answered. I resolved on the spot, in my heartsick dismay, that whatever the ugly truth about you might be, it must, at any cost, remain always concealed from our daughter and from our friends who thought so well of us.

Of one other thing I was instantly sure, Rhea. Whatever you were doing, I must stop you. You must be punished for your sins already committed, and I must not permit you to hurt me so ungratefully and so grievously with more of them.

First I must learn the dreadful truth. I went quietly back up the stairs. I left the bottle untouched on your closet shelf, the light burning just as you had left it. I closed the connecting door, leaving it as I had found it, and fell back into my own bed.

I lay there in acute wakefulness, listening and waiting.

Almost an hour later, just before dawn, I heard the sound of a car pausing in the street, then quietly rolling on. The faint sound of hurrying feet came down the dark, hedge-bordered alleyway behind the houses. You came into our home with such sly quietness that I could well understand why your secret prowlings had not disturbed me before.

All the while I lay still in my own room, letting you believe you were deceiving me again. Even when I heard you finally return to your bed, I kept my wretched silence—and planned.

The next night, Rhea, I was grimly ready to find the answers to the dark questions rankling in my mind.

At breakfast, to my secret amazement, you looked so fresh and unaffected. It showed your fine natural talent for sin, Rhea. As for me, I must confess finding it surprisingly easy to act as if nothing was wrong.

A shameful thing, Rhea, this mutual deception—but on my part it was justified.

Again when I came home that evening to receive your usual cheery greeting, the warmth of your kiss seemed an expression

of your duplicity. I suspected liquor on your breath too. But I pretended to notice nothing and was ready with a small deception of my own—one you had forced upon me.

"I came home by bus, honey, because I had a little clutch trouble with the car. Left it at the garage. Pick it up tomorrow."

That wasn't quite the fact, Rhea. Actually I had left the car parked down in the next block. I expected to have a special use for it during the night.

It wrung my heart to observe you during the evening, Rhea. Now I understood your nervousness. You were suffering pangs of guilt and remorse. You were tense with fear that I might somehow learn too much. Yet in your weakness you could no longer resist temptation.

Our double pretense went on through the evening until our usual time to retire to our separate rooms—and then the deceit became double-edged with a vengeance.

This time it was I who sneaked out of the house. Of course you didn't dream of such a move on my part, Rhea. While you lay awake or dozing in your room, giving me time to fall into my usual deep sleep, I slipped silently out of my room.

I managed it with great care and justified cunning, Rhea, and you never knew. You had no notion I had eased soundlessly out of the house and down the dark street to my waiting car.

Sitting behind the wheel, I pictured your covert actions. I could visualize you getting up very quietly. Perhaps before making a second move, you would fortify your evilness from the bottle hidden on the closet shelf. Then you might listen at my door, and, feeling sure I was sleeping as soundly as usual, you would sneak down the stairs and out the back door.

Then?

My intention tonight was to see for myself where my good and faithful wife went from there.

Sure enough, Rhea, you soon appeared. Having placed my car in the shadows of the maples to permit me to watch the mouth of the alleyway, I saw you hurry out. You turned to another car that was waiting there in the side street, a long convertible, gleaming new. I saw its door opened for you from inside. I watched you disappearing into it—and for moments of miserable suffering, I pictured you in the arms of the man you had met.

Finally the convertible lights gleamed on,

BLACK MASK

its motor purred and it breezed into the boulevard.

You must not have noticed my car following you, or if you did you thought nothing of it. Many cars cruised that way, to the end of the boulevard, then along Rendezvous Road. I trailed you all the way, Rhea, until the shiny convertible pulled into a special parking space outside the Clover Club.

Yes, the Clover Club, that notorious road house. I saw you leave the car with the man who had met you—the man with whom you must have come to this noxious place night after night. I recognized his handsome face, Rhea—with a blinding flash of realization.

Bruce Dallas. The same man you had loved so eagerly and so evilly years ago. Now you had gone eagerly and evilly back to him. Abandoning all the sweetest things of your life, you had gone back.

How did it come about, Rhea? Where and when did your meeting with Bruce Dallas occur? Even now I don't know the details, my sweet. But my own feeling is that he happened to see you again somewhere—to see how sweet and good you were, and how amazingly like the young girl you had been—and then he sought you out.

From the darkness I watched you going into this garish resort which Bruce Dallas himself operated. I saw you both appear at a window upstairs, in one of those private dining rooms. I saw a drink in your hand and heard shrill laughter on your lips before the venetian blinds were closed, mercifully to shut the sight of you, up there with Dallas, from my stinging eyes.

Then I turned back, Rhea, laden with a great sickness of the heart, fired with a resolve that a just punishment must be meted out to you.

Before you sneaked back home again that same night, I did something, Rhea, which you may never have realized.

Thinking and planning in my silent, anguished resolve, I closely inspected the head of the stairway. Darlene was asleep in her room then, also unaware of what I was about. As you have excellent reason to know, Rhea, those stairs are very steep—I was always careful to caution you about going down them.

The post on the one side of the landing, and the molding on the wall on the opposite

side, were ornately carved. I saw how it would be possible to brace a rod of some sort firmly across the top of the steps, a few inches above the edge of the landing, so that anyone moving onto the stairs would surely trip over it.

I tried it then and there, Rhea, using a tool of a completely innocuous sort. Bringing an umbrella up from the stand in the vestibule directly below, I found it was of exactly the right length to be placed in position. A slight bit of forcing kept it firmly in place. Black, it would be completely invisible in the dark.

I replaced the umbrella in its vase, undressed, got into bed and actually dozed off without waiting to hear you sneak back in. Because now my plan was complete. I could be confident that guilt would be punished. Tomorrow night I would set a trap of a just vengeance. . . .

I recall so clearly, Rhea, the night you died.

That evening, the normal course of incidents went along as it had on many other evenings. You didn't imagine I had learned of your deceit, and much less could you dream I had definitely arranged that you would pay for it within a few hours. Nor did you realize, Rhea, that you would never see Bruce Dallas again—that you had already held your last mortal rendezvous with him.

At her usual time, Darlene went upstairs. I heard her close her door—that door which could be counted on to stick shut for a few minutes when she tried to open it again. Soon I heard her bed bounce and knew she would be sound asleep within minutes.

These were your last living hours, Rhea.

You were reading a woman's magazine, remember?—and waiting with secret impatience for me to go to bed.

I finished reading the paper, quite deliberately prolonging it a little. Finally I rose and said, "I'm turning in now, honey. Pretty sleep. Good night."

You may have thought it a little strange that I placed my good-night kiss on your forehead this time, not on your lips. I could not bear to think of kissing the once-sweet lips which Bruce Dallas had defiled.

You said, "I'm tired, too, Johnny. Be up in a minute."

I climbed the stairs, entered my room, closed the hallway door, got ready for bed and lay down. All this was entirely

routine, except that tonight I had no intention of sleeping. I waited until you came to your room and went through the same process. Then once you were settled down for a brief doze, I rose in silence.

I went down to the vestibule to get the umbrella, brought it up and wedged it across the edge of the landing, in just the right position, as I had tested it last night. Then I went back to bed and waited.

Waiting, scarcely breathing, I soon heard your furtive sounds. First a motion of your bed as you got up. Then a stealthy squeak from the cork of your hidden bottle. Then a few more moments while you got back into a dress. Next you were almost soundlessly leaving your room.

Then your scream, Rhea.

Next the thumping fall of your body to the very base of the stairs.

I saw a light come on in a bedroom window of the house next door. Your scream had been loud enough to waken our nearest neighbors. Seeing Marie Frazier putting her head out the window beside her bed to stare across, I made the clever move of turning on my bedroom light also and going directly to my own window to speak to her.

"What was that, Marie?" I asked quickly. "Something wrong over there?"

"It was a frightful scream, John," she said. "But it didn't come from here. It came from your own house. I thought it must be Rhea's voice."

"But it can't be Rhea," I answered. "She's sound asleep."

Through the windows Marie Frazier watched me hurrying first into your room, Rhea, then into the hall. Darlene had also been awakened by your shriek but she hadn't yet appeared from her room. As I had expected it to do, her door was sticking shut.

I hastened to the head of the stairs, dislodged the umbrella, ran down, then snapped on the lights.

You were lying huddled on the floor on your back, your head oddly twisted over one shoulder. Your eyes were staring up into mine. You were not yet dead then, Rhea. Your neck was broken and you were paralyzed. The terrified light in your eyes seemed to show you knew what I had done—and why. I lifted you a little in my arms. At that moment Darlene succeeded in yanking open the door of her bedroom.

"Your mother's had an accident, Darlene!" I gasped out. "Call a doctor!"

Then you died, Rhea. You died and I felt an exultation.

CHAPTER FOUR.

ANOTHER IS CLAIMED.

THINKING back now, I can recognize that the disturbing change in Darlene showed itself the very first moment she learned her mother was dead.

I can bring back that moment very clearly, Rhea. Darlene had finished telephoning the doctor. Hurrying back, she found me holding you in my arms.

I recall vividly that as she stood there she gazed wide-eyed not at her dead mother, but at me. .

I made quite a convincing picture of a grief-stunned husband, I'm sure, Rhea, as I knelt there on the floor.

That was the way the Fraziers found me when they hurried in a few minutes later. I would not permit them to move you until after Dr. Kerwin arrived and pronounced you dead. I watched the good doctor solemnly filling out the death certificate—writing under the words *Cause of Death* his conclusion, *Accidental fall*.

The Fraziers and the other neighbors who came in all deplored the accident so sincerely, Rhea. "Such a terrible shame," they said.

But questions were buzzing in their minds—not about me, but about you, Rhea—questions none of them dared put into words. Finally Marie Frazier worked up the courage to ask, "How did it happen that Rhea was up and dressed, John?"

"But why shouldn't she be?" I said, sounding as if I hadn't the faintest idea what she was implying. "Naturally she had just gotten up to make breakfast for me."

"Poor John," Marie murmured. "You're so dazed you haven't even noticed what time it is. Only four o'clock in the morning now; and it happened about two hours ago."

I was the perfect picture of an unsuspecting husband, Rhea. Our friends privately wagged their heads. Not that they had any idea themselves of what an evil woman you really had been. But they did puzzle over the circumstances of that tragic little accident—never doubting that it was an

accident—and marveled that I apparently could see nothing at all questionable about it.

It fell to the lot of the minister of our church, Matthew Parker, to break the disillusioning "news" to me.

"John—Darlene," he said gently. "I'm sure you must appreciate the fact that in a sudden death of this kind certain doubts inevitably arise and must be cleared away. For your own peace of mind, I feel I must explain the apparent cause for Rhea's fatal fall. When Marie Frazier and my wife were tidying up Rhea's room today they found—brace yourself, John—they found a bottle of whiskey hidden on a closet shelf."

I did not laugh in his solemn face, Rhea. Nor did I put up a pretense that this of course explained everything. Instead I simply stared at our old friend Matthew Parker and said flatly, "I don't believe it."

He insisted very gravely, "I'm afraid it's true, John. We can't help believing that Rhea had a secret addiction to alcohol. That accounts for her fall—she had over-imbibed. Probably she had dressed in order to sneak out for another bottle. I'm sincerely sorry, John, but at least this does clear up certain puzzling details."

"Rhea was too sweet, too good," I said. "I can't believe it of her. I can't."

"Bless your trusting heart, John," Matthew Parker said. "At least you may rest assured that the Fraziers and the Parkers won't breathe a word of this."

After he had gone I said to Darlene, "I'll never believe it. Never let it change your own feeling for your mother, Darlene."

She smiled at me. "Mother and I always understood each other."

That was the first of Darlene's disturbing cryptic remarks, Rhea—the first hint of evil forces rising in her as they had risen to claim you. But at that time I was more concerned with other dangers. For example—Jennings.

He came to the door soon after the minister had left, a small man with sharp, darting eyes and a notebook. I put on a disturbed and puzzled look when he announced he was from police headquarters.

"The homicide law requires us to look at every case of violent death, including accidents, Mr. Long," Jennings began. "So this is just routine. Except for one angle. How come your wife was acquainted with Bruce Dallas?"

"Bruce Dallas?" I echoed. "Who's he?"

Jennings explained to me briefly.

I kept a puzzled frown on my face. "And what makes you imagine my wife was acquainted like that?"

Jennings said slowly, "I heard a report on the grapevine that she was seen once or twice with him at a place called the Clover Club."

"It's incredible," I said. "This man—what's his name, Dallas?—may have been seen there with a woman resembling my wife, but it couldn't possibly have been Rhea."

He rose, apologizing for having bothered me. I smiled at his back as he left. He had come with a vague suspicion of murder—but the suspicion pointed at Bruce Dallas, not at me. That was his reason, of course, for later jockeying Dallas into your funeral service—to watch his reactions as the flames consumed you.

So then, Rhea, nothing was left but the ceremonies of cremating you, and after that the tragic little event would begin fading from all our minds.

It would have done so, Rhea, except for Darlene.

Every night when I came home from work, dreading the moment as profoundly as I had once welcomed it, you met me. It was becoming such a hair-trigger thing. Rhea, that I was fast reaching the point where I could no longer endure it.

But what could I do? Order Darlene out of the house?

No, I must stay and cope with it. I must come home every evening to hear your greeting—"Welcome home, Johnny!"—and to find a duplicate of you waiting for me in the kitchen.

It was getting to be more than my shaken nerves would stand. It was becoming a nightmare, Rhea. But then came even more—the worst thing of all—the proof that her heritage of evil was now claiming Darlene.

As before, the whole house was silent. For a while I lay listening in a silent torment of tension. Then, almost as in a dream, telling myself that somehow, somehow this insufferable situation must be ended, I rose, opened the door.

A light had been left burning in Darlene's closet. Stunned by the repetition of this incident, I reached in to turn it out—and then I saw the bottle.

Staring at that bottle, I realized it stood hidden at almost the same spot where you had hidden yours. Darlene had been sneaking drinks exactly as you had done, for only

a few ounces of whiskey remained in it. Then I turned my stinging eyes to Darlene's bed.

Like your bed on that other night of horrifying discovery, it was empty.

CHAPTER FIVE.

PAID IN FULL.

THE next evening was also much like another I had had with you, Rhea—casual and commonplace on the surface, while underneath a grim plan was being acted out.

Darlene and I sat together in the living room, both reading. I could sense the impatience in her and feel her covert glances. At the usual time and in my usual way I said, "I'm turning in now, Darlene. Good night."

She answered, "Good night, Johnny; I'll go up in a minute."

I could feel her senses quickening as I went up the stairs. I closed and locked my door and lay on the bed without undressing. Presently I heard Darlene's sounds on the stairs, then in the room next to mine. Quiet followed.

Then, just as it had occurred with you, Rhea, I heard a motion of Darlene's bed as she rose. Next a squeaking sound from the cork of her hidden bottle. A few moments of quiet followed while she dressed. After that she left her room.

As soon as she was outside the house, I went into my own plan. Down the stairs and out the front door, I ran along the tree-shaded sidewalk toward the next corner.

I saw Darlene, halfway down the cross-street, hurrying out of the alleyway. She ran to a car waiting nearby. A long convertible, Rhea—the same flashy car that had waited for you!

I went back into the house almost blindly—resolved that the evil of you, Rhea, as it was living again in the body of Darlene, must be destroyed once and for all.

I would have it exactly as before. The normal course of incidents would go along this evening just as it had on previous evenings. Darlene and I would be in the living room, reading. I would finally rise and say, "Pretty sleepy. Good night now. Better get some rest yourself."

Then I would go into my room.

Presently Darlene would come up to her room. She would lie down and doze. Making no noise at all, I would then silently go down

to the vestibule for the umbrella. I would bring it up, wedge it in place just above the edge of the landing; then go noiselessly back to my bed.

I would wait to hear Darlene getting up. She would first sneak a drink, slip into a dress, then pad out in her stocking feet. I would follow the slight sound of her every step to the trap at the head of those steep stairs. Then—

At my first move, however, a small deviation occurred. When I finished reading the evening paper in the living room and said, "Well, I'm going up now, Darlene," she did not respond as I had expected.

Instead she said, "I feel sort of jittery for some reason, Johnny. I think I'll take a little walk, just down to the corner store and back."

I asked with concealed grimness, "Want me to come along?"

"Oh, no," she said quickly.

"All right, but hurry back, Darlene."

I told myself that the slight delay she was causing would not matter at all. I went up to my room to wait.

I lay in bed, fully dressed, waiting. It seemed to me that Darlene was taking too long a walk, and then, after I heard her coming back into the house, I felt she was remaining downstairs unusually long. But finally there were noises on the stairs. And presently an early-morning quiet pervaded the whole house.

I rose, making no sound, and went down the stairs. Coming back with the umbrella, I braced it firmly in the same place that had proved so effective with you, Rhea. Then I returned to my bed to wait for a just wrath to destroy the guilty.

Soon I heard furtive sounds in the hall. They rustled along the hallway to the top of the stairs.

Suddenly there was the thump of a foot catching under the barrier and a sharp, long scream from Darlene.

Next the thudding fall of a body to the very base of the stairs—followed by a terrible silence.

I sprang up from my bed. Again I saw lights appear in the bedroom windows of the house next door. Just as your scream had done, Rhea, Darlene's had wakened the Fraziers. This time I did not wait to speak to Marie. She had apparently seen me aroused from a sound sleep by the shriek, so now I let her watch me hurrying from my room in high alarm.

BLACK MASK

At the top of the stairs, seeing nothing else so far in the dark, I snatched the umbrella from its place. I ran down the flight hearing groans of mortal pain below. In the vestibule I put the umbrella in the stand with one hand and reached to the wall-switch with the other. The light brought a revelation that struck paralysis into my every fiber.

The victim of my trap lay huddled, helpless and bleeding at the base of the stairs.

But it was not Darlene, Rhea. It was Bruce Dallas.

What followed, Rhea, stays with me like a series of flashes from a nightmare.

Suddenly I found myself beating at Dallas with my fists, in a wild desire to destroy the last flicker of life in him. He lay limp and lifeless as I hit him, able neither to strike back nor to feel the power of my blows. Then I looked up and saw Detective Jennings hurrying in the front door.

Darlene?

She was standing on the stair landing above, dressed as I had last seen her, held still by horror, both her hands pressed over her lips to stifle her cries.

In a moment of unfeeling selflessness, even of wonder, I watched her as she came slowly down the stairs. She moved past the dead body of Bruce Dallas—she seemed not to give me a glance—into the living room, gazing at the shining silver urn on the mantel, and her lips spoke.

I thought I heard her speaking to you, Rhea. She said, "Now both of them are paid, Mother, for what they did to you."

* * * * *

They didn't bring out the real truth at my trial, Rhea. They tried to prove that I had furiously quarreled with Bruce Dallas, and had deliberately thrown him down the stairs because I had caught him upstairs with Darlene.

Darlene testified—falsely, for your sake—that she'd known Dallas for some time, but hadn't told me about it—that it was she

who had been dancing with him at the Clover Club, and not you. She said that Dallas had had a flat tire down the street a ways that night and had come in and gone upstairs merely to wash his hands. That was when I had found him, had misunderstood and had flown into a rage.

We know better than this, Rhea, much better. I doubt that they could have convicted me on this story if Jennings, having suspiciously kept an eye on Dallas, hadn't been waiting outside the house for Dallas to come out again. And then, hearing the scream—

Darlene?

I hadn't dreamed how much Darlene had observed and planned. A deep one, that girl, Rhea, one needing to be watched. When she came here to the death house to visit me I accused her.

"You knew all along what had really happened to Rhea. Did you notice the umbrella was slightly bent? Did you find that the tip of it had left a scratch in the woodwork at the top of the stairs?

She just gazed at me, Rhea, not smiling, not speaking. She was not so much like you any more. She had stopped using your cosmetics and your perfume; her hair had returned to its own natural tint and her new clothes were her own.

No, she was not like Rhea at all now. And I could feel her thinking again as she sat there in silence gazing at me through the thick wire screen, *Now both of them are paid back. Mother, for what they did to you.*

She went away then, Rhea, and she has not come back since. I am sitting alone here in my cell, waiting for the sentence of death to be executed upon me within an hour, and I have stopped wondering whether Darlene will return to visit me for one last time. In my heart I know she will not come. I'm sure instead that tonight she is at home, alone there—except that she is with you.



KILLING ALL MEN!

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

CHAPTER ONE.

FEMME FATALE.

WHEN she had awakened that morning, she had looked at her husband in the other bed. Howard's slack mouth was open, there was a stubble of beard on his chin and he was puffy under the eyes. It was at that moment that she realized she was bored.

Howard Goodkin bored her and so did the little city of Wanderloo, Ohio. As had happened so many times before, the plot and lines and scenery failed to wear well.

When he came down to breakfast she kissed him warmly, smiled up into his eyes—and wondered if he should be buried in the blue suit or the gray one.

The gray would go with his eyes, she decided. The gray suit and one of the new white shirts and the blue silk tie with the tiny pattern of white triangles. While she talked casually with him about the weather, the state of the flower garden and the leaking faucet in the upstairs bathroom, she mentally decided on the Gortzen Funeral Home. They seemed to do the best job. Mrs. Hall had looked so lifelike. She thought of it all, and she could almost hear the soft music, the sonorous words of the service. She wanted to hug herself with excitement.

Finally Howard stood up, patted his mouth with the napkin, leaned over to kiss her good-by and left. She stood at the window and waved to him, wondering how much she would get for the year-old car. She decided that she'd try to get seventeen hundred.

She hummed to herself as she finished up the breakfast dishes. The house was pleasantly warm. She kicked off her slippers and walked through the dim rooms of the pleasant house.

When she passed the full length mirror in the hall, she jumped. Then she smiled at her own foolishness.

She stood near the mirror and looked at herself. She thought it was odd how young her figure remained. Absurd the way it was still the figure of a young girl. She frowned

as she tried to remember her true age. Forty? No. Born in 1908 in Wilmington. That would make it forty-one. Howard thought she was thirty-two. She was a small woman with an erect carriage, shapely legs, a tiny waist. There was no trace of gray in her rich brown hair, and her large eyes were a pleasant deep blue, almost a lavender.

She assumed the exaggerated pose of a model, then laughed at herself with her voice of throaty silver, and tripped prettily up the stairs. She took the heavy suitcase from the back of her closet, lugged it out into the room.

With a needle she picked the stitches out of a place where the lining had been ripped and mended. Reaching through the rent, she pulled out the heavy packet, took it over to the bed and opened it with excited fingers. The packet contained three envelopes. That was the secret. To be systematic.

The first envelope contained small pictures of varied sizes. Five of them. Five pictures of five men. On the back of each picture, in neat, dainty printing, were a few facts. The name of the man. The city or town where they lived. The name she had used each time. A guarded phrase to indicate the manner of death. A tiny figure to indicate the net gain, in thousands, by his death.

Humming once more, she went to her bureau drawer, took out the small picture of Howard Goodkin, took it back to the bed along with her silver fountain pen. Resting the picture face down, she printed certain facts neatly on the back of it.

She put it in the envelope with the other pictures. In the second envelope was a listing of several Chicago banks. Following the name of each bank was the name she had used to open the safe deposit box, and a statement of the amount of cash in each box.

The third envelope contained the keys to the boxes, each one carefully tagged. On the back of each tag was the date when the box rent would be due. In the beginning she had paid ten years' rent in advance, and each box had been renewed through the payment of a second ten years' rental.

She sat on the bed and thought of the wonderful massive vaults, the tightly locked boxes, the neat bundles of cash in each box. A great deal of cash. An enormous amount, she thought, considering the ease with which it had been obtained.

She replaced the packet in the suitcase under the lining, repaired the rent with clean, tiny stitches.

Already there was great delight in thinking ahead to the wreath on the door, the neighbors bringing baked things, the quiet words of comfort. It was so easy to cry when they spoke to her—so easy to play the part of the stricken widow.

Then, after several months of wearing black had gone by and she had begun to tire of her practised role of widow, she would go to a few selected friends, the ones who would talk, and she would explain how she could no longer remain there where her memories of Howard were so clear and so sharp. She would sell everything and go away. Some letters, a few postcards—and then silence.

They would forget. They always did. Then she would be ready for a new little city, a new man, a new background, carefully memorized so that there would be no slip-up. The eternal delightful gambit of courtship, marriage, setting up a home and making friends. Then, in a year or two—death. It always ended in death.

To be such a friend of death gave her a feeling of power that she bore with her wherever she went. She looked on the dull, tidy little lives of the women in the small cities in which she lived, and she felt like a goddess. She could write all manner of things on the black slate of life, and then, with one gesture, wipe the slate clean and begin all over again. New words, new love, new tenderness, and a new manner of death.

She had read of stupid women who poisoned one husband after another. That was the most spectacular stupidity. Through such methods the police were enabled to establish pattern. No, murder, to be successful, must be done with infinite variety—and in ways that could not be connected with the heartbroken little woman who sobbed out her grief to the coroner and to the police.

Whenever she read articles which proclaimed that there was no such thing as a perfect murder, she laughed inside. She sat and laughed without any change of facial expression. And inside of her she felt a glow of triumph.

It was good to kill men. Only one thing sometimes bothered her. To get such joy out of killing men must indicate some psychotic condition. She was a well-read woman, but it was not until after the fourth death that she managed to connect her joy with that half-forgotten incident in the woods near her home when she had been fourteen.

The man had caught her by the wrist, reaching out from beyond a patch of brush as she walked slowly by. He was ragged and he stank of liquor and his filthy hand had muffled her screams.

Sometimes she would wake up in the night and once again feel the hand pressing on her lips.

They had sent him to jail. Shortly after that both of her parents died. As she had looked on their faces she had thought that they were dead and yet that horrible man still lived.

It bothered her that her hatred of men had to be based on a particular incident. She would rather it had been hatred without apparent cause, because it would have seemed cleaner that way.

She married at seventeen. A boy named Albert Gordon. After the first week with him, she knew that one day she would kill him. In killing him she would somehow be exacting her just vengeance.

She married him under her own name—Alicia Bowie. For two years she planned. For two years she endured him, and got delight out of being able to successfully play the part of the happy bride.

Two days after her nineteenth birthday, the papers announced the tragic death of Albert Gordon while on a swimming picnic with his young wife at Lake Hobart. According to the newspaper accounts, Albert Gordon had dived from the high limb of a tree and had misjudged the depth of the water.

She could still remember exactly how it was. The later afternoon sun slanting across the water. Albert was near her, waist deep in water, looking out across the lake. The tree was above them. She had fumbled on the rocky bottom, found a loose boulder of about ten pounds weight. She had held it poised. The shore dropped steeply, and the water, while up to his waist, lapped gently around her legs. She had brought it down on the top of his head. Some of Albert's blond hair adhered to the rock. She had carefully placed the rock in three feet of

water under the limb of the tree, bloody side up. That's where they found it.

With Albert's insurance, she had moved eight hundred miles away. She had changed her name. She had established the pattern. . . .

Now she got up from the bed, showered, put on a crisp cotton dress and raised the shades, filling the house with sunshine. As she listened with part of her mind to a morning radio program, another part, a cold mechanical part, was weighing, discarding, considering alternate methods of accomplishing the sudden death of Howard Goodkin, successful manager of a chain of grocery stores in and around Waterloo, Ohio.

By lunch time she had cut the feasible methods down to two. Neither of them duplicated any of the previous murder methods. Both of them were carefully selected to fit the habits of Howard Goodkin.

Howard came in for lunch, smiling. He kissed her, patted her affectionately and said, "Anything exciting happen this morning?"

I decided to kill you, Howard. "Not a thing, darling. That dog across the street chased the Robinson's cat up into our maple tree and Betty was standing around wringing her hands. When she was about to call the firemen, the dog went away and the cat came down. When she picked it up, it scratched her wrist."

Howard grinned, his eyes crinkling pleasantly. "Big morning, huh?"

It won't be hard to weep for you, Howard. In many ways you're quite nice. "A nice quiet morning, darling. Is the salad all right?"

"Wonderful, honey! I love it with onion." Cristofer, Florida, was a small, inland town, sleepy in the hot sun. Because it was not near the sea, the prices at the tourist courts, shabby hotels and cabins were low. Many old people came to Cristofer to live out what remained of their lives. The men, their work-gnarled hands resting on their thin thighs, dozed in the sun. The buxom and indestructible old ladies lifted shrill voices throughout the endless days and the monotony of the sun.

Ben Lawton, wearing ragged khaki shorts, his bronzed back knotted with muscle, trudged with the wheelbarrow down to where the truck had dumped the load of small, gleaming white shells, filled the wheelbarrow and pushed it back up the slope to

the Komfort Court—Cabins by the Season—Reasonable Rates.

There had been a time, just before the war, when Ben Lawton had sat behind a blond streamlined desk in a New York office. His novel sales promotion ideas had caught on, and he was looking forward to a great deal of money.

In the middle of 1947 Benjamin G. Lawton had been released from the Veterans' Hospital. The parting words from the resident psychiatrist had been, "Emotionally, Lawton, you're not able to resume your pre-war activities. We recommend some quiet and isolated spot—manual labor—no worries. Any sort of tension will tie you in knots that we may not be able to untie. Maybe, some day . . ."

And so Ben Lawton had ended up doing manual labor for Jonas Bright, proprietor of the Komfort Court. After more than a year, Ben thought of the outside world with a fear that chilled him through.

The Komfort Court consisted of sixteen two-room cabins. Jonas Bright, a semi-paralytic, was a blunt, gruff but fair employer. Ben took care of maintenance and the odd jobs that came up. Serena Bright cleaned the cabins, replaced the sheets, towels, pillow-cases. She was the nineteen-year-old motherless daughter of Jonas.

Ben jammed the shovel into the barrow-load of white shells, spread them along the path to Cabin 8. He straightened up for a moment, watched Serena carrying fresh sheets over to Cabin 11. It was only while watching Serena that Ben felt as though he were coming alive once more. Whenever he thought of Serena, whenever he watched her tall, slim, young figure, her proud walk, her warm strength, he thought of how wonderful it would be to take her to the New York shops he knew so well, to have the clever clerks transform her back-country charm into a city splendor that would halt the casual male in his tracks.

In spite of Serena's lack of advantages, lack of breeding and education, there was a fine sensitivity about her, an alert awareness of her surroundings.

He watched her, saw how the thin cotton dress clung to the superb lines of her body. When the screen door of the cabin slammed behind her, he sighed, returned to his work.

He knew that he had no chance with Serena. She had looked too long and too often on the gilded faces on the Bijou screen, and on the sleek automobiles, the shining clubs and bars. A subdued, solemn

psycho case, a man fresh out of a PN hospital, held no charms for her. Sure, she would laugh and joke with him, but always he saw that faint withdrawal in her eyes, and sensed that she was saving herself for someone who could give her the things she read about and saw in the movies.

Jonas Bright was pathetically proud of his daughter.

By the time Ben had worked his way down to the walk that led up to Cabin 11, Serena came out, perspiration beaded on her upper lip.

"Don't hit me, Ben," she said, "if I ask you if it's hot enough for you."

"If you were standing closer, I'd hit you, honey," he said, grinning.

"Phoo!" she said, sticking her underlip out, blowing a wisp of silver-blonde hair away from her forehead. Every visible area of her was honey-brown.

"Tonight," he said, "would seem to be a good night for you to walk a half mile with me and drink beer which I can barely afford. Okay?"

There had been many evenings like that. Gay and happy evenings, with lots of laughter and no hint of emotional entanglements.

There was a hint of amusement in her soft brown eyes. "Laddie," she said, "you are talking to a girl who has better plans. Mr. Kelso is taking this kid to the Palms Club."

Ben was surprised at the amount of annoyance he felt. "Works fast, doesn't he?"

"He's a perfect gentleman!" she snapped.

"He's a perfect phony!" Ben said angrily. She lifted her chin, gave him a cool stare and said, "And how would you know, Lawton? You've never traveled in his league."

She pushed by him, carrying the laundry down to the main building to be picked up by the truck. He watched her go, saw the indignation that she managed to express with each step.

For a moment he was tempted to call her, to tell her that Jay Kelso could never have made the league that he once traveled in. But he had never talked of his past to the Brights, and this was no time to start. Probably she wouldn't believe him anyway.

He wheeled the barrow down toward the pile of shells. He frowned as he thought of Jay Kelso. The man had arrived in a flashy convertible some three days before, had rented Cabin 3 for an indefinite period.

It was impossible to guess what his

business was. To Ben Lawton, Kelso looked like a race-track tout who had cut himself a piece of a killing. He wore loose-weave sports shirts in pearl gray, lemon yellow and powder blue. His gay neckties were knotted into great bulky triangular knots. His luggage was of shining aluminum. His faun and pearl slacks were knife-edged, and his sports shoes were obviously elevators.

His face was thin, with a deep tan over the sallowness, dark hair pompadored with a greasy fixative, his facial expression a carefully trained imitation of a movie tough guy.

He carried his wad of bills in a gold money clip, and he went out of his way to adopt an air of patronizing friendliness with Jonas, Serena and Ben. He ignored the other tenants, and his every action said, "I'm one hell of a smart and pleasant guy. I know all the angles and I'm giving you people a break just by being around. See?"

Ben had seen Jay Kelso practically lick his lips the first afternoon when Serena had walked by. The program was clear. With Kelso's motives and Serena's ambition to be a city girl, the end result seemed more than obvious.

Ben wondered how much longer Jonas Bright would be able to be proud of his daughter. . . .

The sun was low by the time Ben Lawton had finished his work. He took the barrow and shovel to the toolhouse, walked slowly down to his room in the west wing of the main building. Business was slow. He saw that Tommy, the boy, was pumping gas into a big car covered with road dust. The tourists from the car were in at the counter, and Beth Bronson, the fat high school girl, was serving them cokes.

He took a long shower to clean off the dust and sweat. When he turned his shower off he heard, through the thin partition, the roar of the shower in the other side of the thin partition, in the portion where Jonas and Serena lived. He guessed that Serena was getting ready for her date. He changed to white slacks and a T shirt and went to his front door, sat on the concrete step and lit a cigarette.

Within ten minutes Jay Kelso came wheeling down in his canary convertible, parked near the pumps and bleated the horn. Serena came hurrying out in a matter of seconds. Her linen suit was a bit too short and a shade tight across the shoulders. She climbed into the car and Kelso reached across her, pulled the door shut. He roared

it out onto the highway in a cloud of dust. Ben saw the setting sun brighten her fair head. Kelso's dark one—and the two heads were close together.

He sighed and stood up.

Jonas was beside him. Jonas spat, the brown tobacco juice slapping into the dusk. He said softly, "She's too old to give orders, to, Ben."

Not believing his own words, Ben said, "She's smart enough to find out for herself."

Jonas sighed. "I hope so. I surely hope so." He turned and limped dejectedly away.

CHAPTER TWO.

BACKWATER WHIRLPOOL.

THE investigator looked so much like a depressed bloodhound that she wanted to laugh at him. But of course that would be a silly thing to do. The room was darkened and he sat across from her, obviously ill at ease. The tiny wadded handkerchief was damp in her palm. She inhaled, a long, shuddering sound, and mopped at her eyes with the handkerchief.

"I know how tough this is for you, Mrs. Goodkin, but we just have to ask these questions so that our reports'll be complete. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand," she said in a small, weak voice.

"It was Howard's practice to do minor repairs on the car?"

"Yes, it was. He was always doing something or other to it. He loved to—to get all greasy, and he said that he was saving money by doing things himself. He always said he—he should have been a mechanic."

"And then yesterday afternoon, after he finished work, he went right to the garage?"

"Yes. I remember he said something about repacking the rear wheels and adjusting the rear shocks, whatever that means, Mr. Brown."

Mr. Brown sighed. "Well, it's a pretty clear case. He jacked the car up and took off both rear wheels and blocked the axle with bricks. It was a damn fool thing to do. Probably when he was tightening a nut or something, he moved it enough off balance so that it—"

She suddenly covered her face with her hands and sobbed hoarsely. In a matter of seconds, she felt his heavy hand on her shoulder, patting her gently.

"There, there, Mrs. Goodkin," he said. "Sorry I had to upset you this way. Howard

wasn't in any pain. He never felt a thing. That differential came right down and killed him instantly."

As she sobbed, as she felt his comforting arms around her, she relived those few moments in the garage. She had bent over, looked under the car, said, "How are you doing, honey?"

His face was smeared with grease. "Just about another twenty minutes ought to do it."

He was in the right position, his face under the bulge of the differential. She had straightened up, walked to the side of the car, picked up a dust rag, used it to shield her hands as she pushed the car with all her strength.

It had swayed and the bricks had cracked in warning. Howard had given one startled gasp as the car had come down heavily.

Screaming wildly, she had run out into the street. As soon as she was certain that neighbors were running toward her, she had slowly and gracefully collapsed in a mock faint.

Yes, this one had been smoother than most of them. Less questioning. She could leave sooner, cover her tracks, go to some quiet resort place and start over again.

Seventeen hundred for the car and at least twelve thousand for the house. Counting incidentals and insurance, you could figure on twenty-six thousand after all expenses.

Through her sobs she said, "Mr. Brown, I—I can't stay here. The—the memories. I won't be able—to stand it."

"I understand," he whispered. "We'll all understand."

Mr. Davis, the vice-president of the Waterloo National Bank, coughed a few times and said, "This is—well, it's rather a large sum of money for a woman to take away in cash, you know. We could establish a trust for you and send you the income every—"

She lifted her chin bravely. "Mr. Davis, I'm sorry, but I want to cut all strings tying me to Waterloo. If you'd authorize the cashier to give me the cash balance—"

"Possibly travelers' checks, Mrs. Goodkin?"

"No one but you and the cashier and myself will know I'm taking that amount of cash with me. And I certainly don't plan to advertise it. If you must know, Mr. Davis, I plan to pin the major share of it inside my girdle. I rather imagine it will be

safe there until I decide where I want to settle."

Mr. Davis blushed, scratched his chin and sighed. "How do you want it, Mrs. Goodkin?" he said, standing up.

"Twenty one-thousand-dollar bills and the balance in fifties, hundreds and twenties."

"I may have to contact the other two banks."

She glanced at her watch. "Please hurry. My train leaves in an hour and fifteen minutes."

With the money on her person, she bought her ticket to Detroit. She carried one suitcase containing her best clothes and the all-important packet. In Detroit she could shake off any possible pursuit and then take a train to Chicago. The large bills would go into one of the four boxes. The remaining four thousand and something would give her a new start with a new name in a new place. Resort places were best.

She decided that this time she would look for a younger man. They felt so flattered when an older woman became interested.

The trip from Chicago to whatever resort she decided on could be used in devising a new name and new background. A new identity was the easiest thing in the world to establish. It was merely a case of arranging to take out a driver's license, opening a checking account and a few charge accounts.

She would be forgotten in Wanderloo. "I wonder what happened to that sweet little Mrs. Goodkin. She left town, you know, after her husband died. Tragic affair. They had a perfect marriage. A good thing there were no children, you know."

As she waited for her train to be announced, she looked at herself in the oval mirror in her compact. The odd lavender eyes stared back at her with clarity—innocence—and an uncanny youthfulness. It was good to be free again. Free for adventure. . . .

Jay Kelso sat like a scrawny Buddha in his bed, clad only in blue silk shorts that were a bit too big for him. The afternoon was hot and he was bored and troubled. A pair of faun slacks were slung over the back of a straight chair not far from the bed. He knew without looking that there was but forty-two dollars in the gold money clip in the pocket of the slacks.

He had intended to stay a week in this hole called Komfort Court, but the week had turned into six weeks. That was bad.

By now the finance company in New Jersey would have turned the license number over to the skip tracers and they would be hunting the yellow wagon. He knew from experience that his equity was just large enough so that they would enjoy repossessing the wagon.

And maybe that Myra dish in Camden had hired lawyers. That would be bad, because they could make trouble and he didn't have the money to buy the legal talent to squeak out of it. He had always felt wonderfully independent of the female sex.

And here he was stuck in inland Florida just because a hick babe was keeping him on the hook.

He wondered if he should run out, make some dough and come back this way for a second attempt. No, that tan bruiser, Lawton, had too eager a look in his eye when Serena—what a hell of a name—walked by. It would be a sad thing to come back and find Lawton had nailed her on the rebound.

He knew that the longer he stayed, the worse shape he would be in. He knew that already his stake was too small.

He smacked his fist into his palm and glared at the far wall. Suddenly a startling thought entered his mind. Maybe he wanted to marry the girl.

Maybe that was the right deal. Unload the car. Sell it for cash. Then ease that Lawton punk out of his job and settle down right here. After the old man kicked off, which shouldn't be long, he and Serena would own the business. Then if he got sick of her, he could sell and shove off.

But he remembered how the muscles stood out on Lawton's back while he worked. No, better keep Lawton around for the heavy stuff. Besides, it might be too tough to ease him out. He and the old man seemed to get along pretty good.

He grinned. Jay Kelso—thinking of marriage. That was a hot one!

Slowly he got off the bed. He put on a sand pink sports shirt, carefully knotted the white and crimson tie, belted the high-waisted faun slacks around his trim, flat middle, and slipped into a pair of brown and white moccasins.

At that moment there was a knock on his door. A gentle knock. Eagerly he opened the door, hoping that it was Serena Bright. Instead he saw Lawton's bronzed chest, impassive face.

"After the trash," Lawton said.

"Hell, you knock like a woman," Jay Kelso said, turning away in disgust.

"Thought you might open quicker if I did," Lawton said gently.

Kelso wheeled on him, "Are you being wise?"

Lawton smiled tightly. "I wonder exactly what you'd do if I said yes."

Kelso straightened his shoulders. "I might take a poke at you. I was Golden Gloves, guy. Remember that."

Lawton grinned lazily and said, "Yes, sir. Anything you say, sir." The contempt was obvious.

At that moment a small woman stepped to the doorway. Jay Kelso gave her a quick appraisal. Not too bad for a biddy in her middle thirties. Nicely stacked. Wearing a dress that spells dough. No gray in the brown hair. Funny color of blue for eyes. Not bad at all, at all.

She smiled at Kelso, turned to Lawton and said, in a voice of throaty silver. "You are the man that works here, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Oliver."

"I just moved into Cabin 11 an hour ago, and I can't seem to get any hot water. I wonder if you'd—"

"Right away, Mrs. Oliver."

Jay Kelso noted the "Mrs." But there had been more than casual politeness in those odd blue eyes. Maybe a chance to chisel a little money. Badger game in reverse. A "loan," please. You can lend it to me, or I can ask Mr. Oliver for it.

With his best smile, he stepped forward, extending his hand and said, "As long as we're almost neighbors, Mrs. Oliver, we might as well know each other. I'm Jay Kelso."

"How do you do, Jay Kelso," she said dimpling. "I'm Betty Oliver."

Her hand was very soft in his, and lay passive, warm, giving him an oddly protective feeling. Also it was nice that she was short. He liked short women. Even with the trick shoes, he was only about a half inch taller than Serena.

Lawton carried out the trash and went up toward Cabin 11.

Jay Kelso sauntered out, said to Mrs. Oliver, "How do you and your husband like it here?"

"Oh, there's just me, Mr. Kelso. George died over a year ago." She laughed softly. "I guess I'm just a footloose, lonesome woman."

He beamed at her. "Footloose, yes. Lonesome, never."

"And I thought courtliness was dead!" she laughed. "We must get better acquainted."

"We certainly shall," he said warmly.

"Is your wife with you, Mr. Kelso?" she asked.

"I'm the footloose lonesome type too," he said. "Yes, I'm on a little vacation all by myself. I'm in the—real estate business in Camden, New Jersey. I got pretty tensed up over a few fair deals I pulled lately and decided I needed a rest."

He laughed. "I told my employees when I left that they'd better make all decisions themselves because they wouldn't be in touch with me at all. At first I thought I'd go to my usual hotel at Miami Beach, but then I realized that I'd run into friends and there'd be parties and all that sort of thing. So you might say I'm hiding here."

He strolled casually over to the canary convertible, leaned on the door.

"Is this your car?" Mrs. Betty Oliver asked. "It's pretty."

Jay coughed. "This is the one I brought along."

"I've never learned to drive," she said wistfully. "I'm really a helpless woman."

"If you're staying long enough, I could teach you."

She looked up into his face, swayed so that for a moment she brushed against him. "Oh, would you?"

Jay Kelso was suddenly faintly dizzy and very exultant. This was pie in the sky. This was coin in the pocket. It wouldn't be too tough to fix it with Serena. Milk this doll for a few hundred or a few thousand, and then grab Serena and kite off to a license bureau. From there he and Serena could hit the tracks. By the time they came back the Oliver woman would be gone. Perfect!

When the last sobs were finished, Serena waited a while, the damp pillow against her face. It was dark outside. On the highway an occasional car roared by at high speed. The headlights made patterns that flashed across the ceiling of her darkened room.

After a time she stood up, padded into the bathroom, stepped into the shower stall. The chill water felt fresh and good. She made up carefully to conceal the signs of tears, put on a cool white dress, walked out into the warm night. The sound of laughter from some of the cabins accentuated her loneliness.

In Cabin 2 four old people were engaged in their nightly bridge game. A radio was playing a sweet, sad tune from a distant

cabin. Far off, near the marshes, the frogs croaked dolorously.

The cool breeze stirred her pale hair. She tried not to look up the slope toward Cabin 11. Of course that woman, that Oliver woman, wasn't there. No, she was out with Jay. Out with Serena's Jay. Probably at their spot—at the Palm Club.

She wondered bitterly if Jay would park with her, would try to kiss her. How could he? Why, that Oliver woman was old, old, old. A hag. A simpering, silly hag with a lot of money.

She wondered how many hours Jay had spent with the Oliver woman since she had arrived four days before.

Jay had acted so funny. He had taken her out for the last time the same evening that Betty Oliver had arrived. He had been quiet at the Palm Club. Later on, in the parked car, he had made no attempt to kiss her—had merely said, "Serena, honey, there are a lot of things about this world that you don't understand."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, baby. I love you. That's the first time I've said those words since I was fourteen."

"Oh, Jay."

"Now don't go soft on me. Understand? Love means trust. Look, baby. Look into my eyes. I trust you. See? Now, the sixty-four buck question is does Serena trust Jay?"

"You know I do."

"Now, here's the kicker. I got my own angles, see? I can't talk about them. And I don't want you to talk to anybody about what is going to happen."

"But what is going to happen, Jay?"

"You and I are having a fight. We don't talk any more. We don't go out any more for maybe a long time. You are going to see me running around with that Mrs. Oliver that checked in today. But you don't ask any questions. You trust me. Remember?"

"But Jay, I—why do you—"

He had touched one finger to her lips. "No questions, baby. Then after maybe a week, maybe two, maybe longer, we move fast. I ask you the ring question and you say yes and off we go. Right?"

"But I—"

She had seen the gleam of his teeth as he had smiled in the darkness. "Look, baby, it's a wonderful night. Come here."

Yes, it had been easy right then not to ask questions. But the next day it wasn't so easy. Not when she had seen the yellow car

head out with Betty Oliver's brown head behind Jay's shining dark one. It hadn't been easy to see Betty wriggling kittenishly, smiling up into Jay's shining snug face. Nor had it been easy to hear their merged laughter, their warm friendliness.

And on the third day she had walked by the two of them, had heard Betty Oliver giggle and whisper to Jay. Jay had laughed also. Serena Bright knew that they had talked about her.

She strolled aimlessly down the narrow street between the cabins, avoided the glare of the floodlights that lit the front of the main building. She circled the left wing of the building, saw the pale gleam of Ben Lawton's white shirt in the darkness. He was sitting on the concrete step at his doorway.

"Hi, lady," he said softly. "Sit down and smoke up one of my hard-earned cigarettes."

"Thanks, Ben," she said gratefully. He moved over to make room. She glanced at his face as he held the match to her cigarette, and she detected no expression that she could identify.

"Nice night," he said.

"I guess so."

"Little bit blue, gal?" he asked.

It was too much. She buried her head in his shoulder. "Oh, Ben!" Then great, hoarse sobs shook her.

But they didn't last long. Finally she moved back to her side of the step, dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. She laughed thinly. "Sorry to use you for a crying towel, Benjamin."

"The guy isn't worth it, you know. Not by half," he said flatly.

In cold rage she stood up. "I'll be the judge of that," she snapped.

She walked off into the night. But the night was lonesome. The sky was an immeasurable distance away and she felt small, futile, purposeless. Everything seemed to be going wrong. If only Jay could send her a note, or glance at her, or arrange to speak to her. But every time he looked in her direction his face was cold and his eyes were hard.

She wandered into the part where the tables and soda fountain were. Jonas Bright sat in a wooden rocker, his shoulders slumped.

He smiled up at her and said, "I'm sure glad, honey, that you aren't running around with that fancy clothes fella any more."

She glared at him for several seconds and then walked aimlessly out into the night. Ben and her dad were fools, both of them. In

some funny way they were jealous of Jay Kelso. Jealous because his clothes were nice and he had nice manners and was a perfect gentleman. And his dark eyelashes were long. And his lips were hard and demanding. She felt a deep warm tumult inside her as she thought of his lips and his arms.

Then like an angry child she bent over, picked up a stone and hurled it out across the highway. She remembered all the bad words she had ever overheard, and she said them under her breath. She went back to her room and stretched out across her bed, her chin propped in her palms. What could he be thinking of, going out with that hag? That silly, simpering hag!

CHAPTER THREE.

TO THOUGHTS OF MURDER.

THE feeling of excitement had been growing for a full week, and this time there was something completely different about it. She had fallen so completely into her assumed part that she really thought she was Betty Oliver.

She looked at Jay. He was cupping his hands around the flame from his lighter, and the orange-red light threw his cheekbone into sharp relief, deepened the hollows in his cheeks.

Yes, Jay Kelso had created a puzzle. Not in himself, because she knew all too well exactly what Jay Kelso was. She had seen many of them. Flagrant little men strutting around in gay plumage, hard and selfish, unbelievably greedy and cruel. A most despicable little man. Yet there was something so pathetic about his swaggering and his strutting, something so forlornly second-rate about his tin-plate veneer, that he oddly touched her heart as no man ever had.

A plucked little chicken of a man trying to be masterful, sophisticated. His clothes were a horrid taste, she knew. His manners were frightfully obvious. And he was full of a deadly seriousness as far as using proper English was concerned.

All in all, a very amusing little man. And obvious. She guessed from the way he licked his lips when he had to pay a check that he was close to the end of his small hoard of money. And pretending to be such a big-shot.

Such a second-rate little person should have revolted her, she knew. And yet she wanted to cradle his head in her arms, hold him close and soothe him—

tell him that she knew the wide world and he could cease his frantic struggling that got him nowhere.

She wondered if it could be some misshapen form of love.

He must be at least thirteen years younger than I, she thought. At least. Maybe more.

She smiled in the darkness. Jay Kelso had been quiet for a long time. She knew that he was going over in his mind the words he had planned.

Abruptly he laughed. "A pretty funny thing has happened to me, Betty," he said, a nervous note in his voice.

"Yes, Jay, dear?"

"You remember I told you how I was having my employees make their own decisions while I was gone? Well, I got a letter yesterday from the man I left in charge. He had my power of attorney. He got a line on a big deal and sunk all the working capital into it. I didn't bring along as much as I should. I was wondering if you'd trust me with a little until I got word that the deal has gone through, and the bank account is back to where it should be."

"Why, of course, Jay! How much do you need?"

"Oh, a few hundred ought to carry me over all right?"

"Will five hundred do?" She grinned inwardly as she saw him suck hungrily on his cigarette.

"Fine. That is, if it won't put you out."

She knew how it would work. He would take the five hundred and be very attentive and spend quite a bit on her—and then he would come to her, very excited and yelling about the big deal that his man in charge was pulling off, only they needed just a few thousand to grab the property options necessary. Just a few thousand. And then she'd never see Jay Kelso again.

She said, laughing. "Goodness, Jay. You've kept me so busy that I haven't gotten around to opening up a bank account down here. I'm carrying far too much cash on me. You might as well take the five hundred right now. Hold your lighter over here so I can see into my purse."

It was sort of a nasty little trick to play on him, she thought. She unsnapped the white leather purse, held it so that Jay couldn't help seeing it. She held open the red-leather wallet, fingered off four hundred and two fifties, crumpled them and

handed them to him. "Here you are, Jay dear," she said casually.

His hand shook as he snapped off the lighter. Hoarsely he said, "You certainly carry the cabbage—er—carry a great deal of money around with you."

The same small demon that had inspired her to show him the large wad of cash made her say, "Oh, money is the least of my worries. I could just as easily have loaned you five thousand—or fifty thousand."

When she said the last figure, he started as though a pin had been jabbed into him. Quickly he recovered control. "I don't need quite that much," he said, laughing. But his laugh was hollow.

She was filled with secret amusement. The smell of money was to him like sunshine and rain to a growth of weeds. It expanded him, made him luxuriant.

And she noted, as he pulled her roughly into his arms, that it gave her a new sense of mastery. She tilted her piquant face up and prepared herself to give a time-worn imitation of interest.

It was as though a tiny fire, a strange fire never before experienced, burned deep inside her; growing, finally bursting through the cold artifice, shattering the layer of indifference.

Never before had she experienced such a feeling.

She pulled herself away from him, suddenly frightened of herself more than of him. Her cheeks were hot—partly with anger, because up until that moment she had been the dominant party, the superior being, amused at this tiresome little man. And suddenly he was dominant, his teeth glowing whitely in the darkness as he smiled at her, as he sensed her confusion.

It was with shame that she heard her own disordered breathing, and she stilled it with enormous effort. Her voice sounded rusty and old as she said, "Don't you think we ought to head back?"

"Sure thing." He started the motor, turned out into the road and she heard him humming under his breath as he drove rapidly back toward the Court....

Long after she was alone in her cabin she still walked restless back and forth, from the bureau to the bed, her hands clenched in fury. She fought to regain her feeling of power, of amused condescension. At this late date was she to fall into a sticky emotional trap like any schoolgirl?

At last she lay exhausted on the bed, de-

fated, abject. She knew that this emotion which had struck her down was stronger than her will. She wanted nothing more than to be with Jay Kelso for every hour of every day. And it was impossible to think of his dying, to think of a world where he did not exist. After weeping, she laughed—softly and without humor.

Jay Kelso felt that he was rapidly approaching the biggest opportunity of his life. He stood outside his cabin in the darkness, and fingered the crisp texture of the bills in his pockets. The taste of the liquor he had just drunk from the opened bottle was raw on the back of his tongue.

Life had suddenly become very complicated. He had been almost completely discouraged about the Oliver woman. She had seemed so—so remote. And he had caught her looking at him from time to time as though he was some sort of a bug she found when she tipped up a flat rock. She had made him feel stupid and rather young.

When he had given her the yarn about needing a few hundred, he had done so with the idea that she would brush him off, maybe laugh at him. She had an odd way of hurting his confidence. The willingness with which she had handed it over—in cash—had taken his breath away. And then, when she had said that about five thousand or fifty thousand, he had felt as though somebody had hit him in the pit of the stomach with a hammer.

Yes, he had figured it wrong. The old biddy was a hell of a lot better heeled than he had suspected. And she had no reason to lie.

Then, when he had kissed her, she had fallen apart—come to pieces like a young kid. That was funny. His lips curled in slight distaste as he thought of the sagging looseness of the flesh under her chin. But to give her the benefit of the doubt, that was the only place she showed her age. Yes, she was all right. But compared to Serena—hell, it was like comparing a cube of sugar to a hundred gallons of honey. And he had all that dough on the hook, but good!

He arched his chest and beat his clenched fist against his thigh. More dough than he had ever had a smell of before!

The deal was to get hold of as much of it as possible. He knew that if he chiseled five thousand, he'd always think of the much larger amount he had left behind. What was five thousand? You couldn't even

live a year on that. No, there had to be a better way.

In the morning he would send a hundred to the finance company and a hundred to Myra. That would shut both of them up. Give him time to think.

Betty and Serena. Serena and Betty. What a mess! Now if Serena only had Betty's money—or if Betty had Serena's looks. The deal was to find some way of grabbing all of Betty Oliver's money, and then marrying Serena.

There was that marriage idea again! Must be getting soft in the head. But no getting around it. He wanted to marry Serena. The trouble was, the only sure way to get all of Betty's money was to marry *her*. From the way the old Biddy had reacted, she would be a pushover for marriage. Yeah. She'd grab the hook like a starving bass. Then where would he be? Tied to her apron strings for a couple of thousand years while Serena went off with somebody else. Maybe even with that Lawson punk. What'll you have, Kelso—money or the gal? But why not both?

Suddenly he stood very still and almost stopped breathing. The idea was vivid, startling, and full of cold fear. Marry both of them! Marry Betty and fix her up with an—an unfortunate accident. Husband inherits. Widower, loaded with dough, marries young gal.

For a moment a vision flashed across his mind. A neat little chair with straps on the arms, electrodes and a black cap to fit over his head.

No, that would have to be avoided at all costs. . . .

Maybe his marrying Betty would put Serena off him for keeps? But then he'd have dough to help him forget. Forgetting was easy with money in the kick. And if he moved fast enough, talked fast enough after Betty was—was dead, he could probably rope Serena back into the fold. "Darling, I made a horrible mistake. It was you all along." Something like that.

Probably be a good idea to lay the groundwork before Betty died. But how would she die? Fall guys were better than accidents. How many fall guys were there around this dump? Just one. That Lawton guy.

Kelso frowned in the darkness. With sudden resolution he strolled down toward the main building. It was so late that the floodlights were off. He knew that Jonas Bright, unable to sleep, often sat out there

after the place was closed, thinking old-man thoughts, remembering, tasting the night.

Jonas was in his usual chair. Kelso went up behind him, said softly, "Nice night."

The old man's head jerked around. "Yep. Can't you sleep either?"

Kelso laughed. "Usually I can. Tonight, no." He let a long period of silence go by. Then he said, "You know, pop, that Lawton is a funny guy."

"How do you mean?"

"I saw the son of a gun talking to himself yesterday. Is he a little bit nuts?"

Jonas was quiet for so long that Jay thought he wasn't going to answer. Finally the old man said, "Guess he had a bad time in the war. From a couple of little things he said, about prison camps and stuff like that, I shouldn't wonder if he was in one of those head hospitals."

Kelso fought to keep the delight out of his voice. He said, "Yeah, that makes it a rough deal. They wouldn't take me, you know. Bad teeth. I got a full set of choppers top and bottom. The rule says you got to have eight of your own teeth."

Jonas Bright grunted. Kelso turned the conversation onto the weather, and then walked slowly away. When he was out of earshot of the old man, he quickened his steps.

What a break! A psycho right on stage. His mind began sifting through the possible clues he could leave. That Lawton was a powerful guy. It would have to look as though a powerful guy had done it. Snatch a couple of hairs out of her head and sneak them into Lawton's quarters. Those torn khaki shorts of Lawton's would be a good deal. Rip off a small hunk and wedge it into her dead hand like she had torn it off in a struggle.

That ought to be enough. Too many clues would be bad, would make even the hick cops wonder about a frame.

He reached toward the door knob of his own cabin, then paused. Hell, this was too good to hang back on. Better use the speeding hours to talk the Oliver dish into that quick ceremony that would make Jay Kelso the legal heir.

With quiet steps he went up the slope toward her cabin. All the cabins were dark. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. A little after two. He knocked lightly.

"Who is it?" she said softly.

He made his voice hoarse. "Me, Betty. Jay. I want to talk to you."

"Can't it wait until morning?"

"Please, Betty. It's important. Don't show a light when you open the door."

There was a long period of silence. Then her latch clicked softly and the door opened. He slipped through, reached for her, pulled her gently against him.

"Oh, Betty," he said.

"You shouldn't have come here," she whispered.

Ben Lawton was putting new washers in the faucets of Cabin 5 when Serena Bright walked dully in with clean sheets, pillow cases and towels. He looked up, saw her face, desolated and ravaged by tears, and his heart went out to her.

She had been badly fooled by Kelso, but that didn't make it any less bitter for her. He had a sudden appreciation of the agonies she must have to go through when she took fresh linens to Cabin 11, now shared for this past ten days by Jay Kelso and his bride.

But it was time that Serena snapped out of it, he thought. The girl couldn't go on this way forever. And that marriage escapade certainly must have given Serena some idea of the sort of man she had been dealing with.

Ben grinned up at her, straightened up and said, "Well, maybe she'll be a mother to him."

A weak, sad smile touched Serena's lips. "I thought so at first, Ben. But have you looked at the darn woman? She's dropped fifteen years. Now I know what they mean by the 'radiant bride.' Ben, I can't understand how it happened so—so quickly."

"He probably got a look at her financial statement."

"But he really isn't that way, Ben. That woman must have some hold over him."

He put the wrench down, wiped his hands on the sides of his shorts, went over to her and took her by the wrists.

"Honey," he said, "I've never talked this way to you before. I've kept my past to myself. I'm working here to get back some measure of mental stability. But before the war, I was successful in a rough, tough business in New York City. Kelso comes from around that area. I cased him the minute I saw him. His type are a dime a dozen up there. Amateur sharpies. Hangers on.

"But you can't condemn them. They come out of the city slums, and they get their training battling for nickles when they're six years old. Life makes them unscrupulous, selfish—and the smarter ones pick up a

sugar coating of the mannerisms and dress they see in the movies. Kelso is one of the smarter ones, but that doesn't make him a more noble human being. His life and his instincts are on an animal level.

"You are a nice gal, Rena. It would be a shame if, this early in your life, you threw away everything you have to offer on a citizen with the sweet instincts of a rooting hog."

"But, he told me—"

"Serena, he told you the things he thought you wanted to hear. And if I don't miss my bet, he wants to have his cake and eat it, too. He married the Oliver woman because he was running short of money. Now you watch him. When he gets a chance, he'll feed you some more sweet talk just to keep you around. Maybe he'll milk her of as much money as he can and try to talk you into running off with him."

Her eyes were suddenly angry. "He won't get anywhere, not after this!"

"That's what I wanted you to say, Rena. I think you got through this without being hurt too bad. And it probably taught you something. You're a sweet gal, believe me."

Still holding her wrists, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly. He let go of her wrists, and she came into his arms, young, fresh, eager.

He held her away, his hands on her shoulders. "Hey," he said, "don't you understand about rebound?"

In a wondering tone she said, "And you've been around all the time! Right under my nose."

"Hey, hold it! I don't help anybody do their forgetting. Once you get rid of the weeping look, then we'll see if I hold the same attractions."

"I'm not doing any more weeping, Benjamin," she said.

"Good. Will you go out with me sometime?"

"Of course, Ben. When?"

"Exactly one month from today. Okay?"

She frowned. "Hard to get, huh? I can wait, Mr. Lawton. One month from today."

CHAPTER FOUR.

THERE DIES THE BRIDE.

AFTER Jay Kelso had heard Serena's and Ben's voices, and had looked in at the open door of Cabin 5 without being observed, he had walked in anger up to Cabin 11, wondering if he had waited too long.

Before entering Cabin 11, he put on the mechanical smile that had become a habit with him. It was hard to conceal the distaste when he stepped in and Betty came prancing kittenishly toward him, put her arms tightly around his neck and whispered, "Ooo was gone so long, loverman."

"Yeah. Sure," he said absently, untangling her arms, trying not to see the hurt look in her eyes. He dug back into an uncertain education to find the word he wanted. Oppressive—yes, that was it. This was an oppressive woman. No wonder that Oliver guy had kicked off. She had drowned the poor guy in melted sugar.

If only she wouldn't try to be twelve years old. It made her ridiculous. All this prancing and posturing and baby talk was turning his stomach. He felt as though he were being sucked down into a sticky pool.

And those kid clothes she was buying. Bright halters and shorts and sandals. He was forced to admit that from the rear she looked like a slim young girl. But when you saw the face, it didn't go with the get-up. There were too many fine lines around her lavender eyes, too much fullness at her throat.

Yes, it would have to be quick before he was smothered. It was like being married to a combination chorus line, girl scout troop and kindergarten. But at least she was liberal with her dough. She had said that pretty soon she'd have to make a trip to get more, that it was tied up in a trust that she could cancel and take in cash. He had hinted around about how much cash, and she had said that it was enough for the two of them to have everything they wanted for the rest of their lives. Cars, clothes, fun, nice places, cruises.

The silk gabardine suit she had bought him was the nicest piece of goods he had ever owned. As though by mutual consent, they had never mentioned his mythical business in Jersey. It was as though she had known all along that he had been lying.

Yes, it was time to have a quiet few words with Serena, and then to put the plan in motion. He suddenly realized that he would be deathly afraid to kill Betty. But he would get a great deal of satisfaction out of it just the same.

Her heart sang her new name. Betty Kelso! Betty Kelso! She thought of herself as having been a barren winter landscape. And now the warm sun of spring had melted the frost.

Never before was it like this. She had

not known that she was capable of such feelings. How had she ever thought Jay was a cheap and amusing little man? No, Jay was the finest man she had ever known. He was sweet and dear and kind and wonderful. She wanted to dance and sing whenever she thought of him. She was upset when he was away from her, wonderfully happy when he was with her.

Her past was a strange, horrible dream, full of things done by an entirely different person. That part of her life was definitely finished. She wondered if fate had saved her for this delectable happiness.

And yet, with that thought came a superstitious awe. She knew that she had sinned against society—against the laws of the church, against the moral laws of civilization—and she was afraid. Afraid that, in retribution, this new happiness would be taken from her.

No, that was impossible. She and Jay were the two happiest persons in the world. Her tracks had been so carefully covered that there was no chance of the authorities catching up with her, even if they did suspect any of the deaths.

No, nothing could happen to spoil it. She felt warm, alive, vibrant—beyond anything she had ever felt before. She was sorry that she hadn't met Jay first instead of Albert Gordon. Then she smiled. That was silly. At the time she had married Albert Gordon, Jay Kelso had been, at the very most, four years old. But the difference in ages was unimportant. She felt younger than Jay. And she knew that this new love would keep her young.

She walked to the door of Cabin 11 and looked down the narrow sloping street. There was that Serena girl. She smiled as she remembered how Jay had been going out with Serena before she, Betty, had come along. Now Jay knew how silly he had been.

That old couple had moved out of Cabin 7 the day before. The girl went into the cabin laden with linens. Jay had gone down to buy cigarettes from the girl behind the counter. She saw him turning into the road, walking slowly, and her heart gave a great leap as it always did when she saw him again after a short absence.

She stepped back out of the doorway, as she wanted to watch him without his knowing that she was doing so. She wanted to try to look at him as a third person, to see how wonderful he was. She looked through the venetian blinds. He was coming near, nearer.

Soon his arms would be around her.

He paused, glanced toward her, though he could not see her, of course, and then turned into Cabin 7. She frowned, then realized that he probably wanted to give that girl some instructions.

But a deep jealousy stirred inside her. As the seconds passed she grew restless. Quickly, and with unconscious animal stealth, she went down the street, avoiding the line of vision of anyone inside Cabin 7. The door was ajar.

Unconscious of who might be observing her, she flattened herself, shoulders against the outside wall of the cabin, her ear near the crack of the door.

"Let me go!" Serena Bright said, her voice muffled and irregular, as though she struggled.

"Don't! You've got to listen to me, Serena, darling, listen to me!"

"What do you want to say?" Her tone was sullen.

"I made a mistake, Serena. I don't know what was the matter with me. She's a horrible woman. I hate her. I love you, Serena. Only you. I should have known that. Please don't condemn me for a mistake. Please."

"Is that all?" Serena said in a flat tone.

"Don't do this to me, darling. I'll be free of her soon. Believe me. I'll find a way. You're the only one, Serena. The only one I love. When I'm free, will you marry me? Will you?"

Betty Kelso walked away from the cabin, walked mechanically back to Cabin 11, and shut the door behind her.

It was as though in the back of her mind there was a gleaming and accurate machine which had, a few weeks before, ground to a stop. And while it was stopped she had gone through antics that were ridiculous and absurd. She had made a complete fool of herself, and, in the bargain, had lost that deep sense of power, that power of death that had made her feel like a goddess.

Now the machine had started again, slowly at first, then faster, until it was running as before.

How had she thought that Kelso, the absurd man-child, was charming and attractive? She flushed when she thought of the things she had said, the way she had behaved. That was over. Her mind was clear and firm again. She thought of death. She was not known in this place. They had no address for her. Their description would fit any of ten million women.

Kelso had taught her to drive. Obviously the best thing to do would be to kill him quickly, take the car, drive a good distance, abandon it, cover her tracks, re-establish herself. Some other state. Idaho. She had never lived in Idaho.

Yes, this could be done quickly. But in this case it would be worth it.

Yes, this time she could be brutal, and this time she could let the man know, as he died, just why he died. Suddenly it seemed very good. Very, very good.

Jay Kelso reached into his pocket, and his fingertips touched the little torn fragment of khaki cloth. It would fit the ragged edge of Lawton's work shorts as perfectly as a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

Serena had been difficult. She had been cold and distant and contemptuous. But he thought that after Betty had died and Lawton had been taken away, it would not be too difficult to bring her back to his side like a well-trained puppy. He thought of how well Serena would look in clothes from the Miami branches of the better New York shops. A girl to be proud of.

He went into the cabin, and Betty came tripping across to him, her arms reaching up, tightening around his neck. He held her close and she murmured, "Betty missed you."

"I missed you, too," he said softly.

But when a few minutes later he looked into her eyes, he wondered if something were wrong. Her odd lavender eyes didn't have that depth of warmth they had before. They seemed—brittle.

He shrugged away the impression. Probably it was because he had thought of her dead body so many times. When he thought of killing her, his hands began to sweat and the hair on the back of his neck pricked oddly.

It would have to be tonight. Everything was set. The plan looked perfect. He would kill her, as quietly as possible, then run down the hill, yelling for the old man. He would say he couldn't sleep, had gone for a walk, had come back just in time to see Lawton sneaking away from the cabin. Inside he had found the body of his wife.

The police would do the rest.

It was eight o'clock. Four hours to wait. Betty sat at the dressing table and he stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders, looking at her face reflected in the glass. She was filing her nails, using a long heavy file with a plastic handle.

He felt her eyes on him and glanced into

the mirror. Odd. She seemed to be staring in a fixed way at the base of his throat. She was smiling. It was a warm, contented, wifely smile. The nail file made a raw buzzing noise as she used it deftly. He took his right hand from her shoulder, touched his fingertips to the base of his throat.

"After we eat, we'll come back here and have a long evening alone, just the two of us," he said quietly.

"Big loverman understands his little Betty," she cooed.

He concealed his irritation at the liquid baby talk and managed to smile at her. He glanced at her face and throat. Her features were delicate. They would have to be spoiled a little. It would have to look like a killing by a powerful man. . . .

He moved his arm with great stealth until he could see the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Just midnight. Faint light drifted into the room, and he could make out the shape of the chair where his clothes were. Beside him, Betty was breathing softly and regularly.

His nerves were bad. The room seemed very cold, and he shivered. But it had to be done. To give himself courage, he thought of Serena walking in the sunlight.

He looked at Betty, lifting himself up on one elbow. He imagined that there was a gleam of the dim light against her eyeballs. That was silly. She was sleeping. Her breathing was soft and regular.

He reached gently until his fingers hovered inches from her slim throat. Then, tensing his muscles, he drove his hand down onto her throat, fingers biting into the soft flesh.

She exploded into motion with such sudden, horrid strength that it frightened him. One hand slipped but he managed to replace it, his lean thumbs on either side of her throat. She writhed, and together they tumbled off the side of the bed. A stinging, burning pain ripped across his shoulder.

They were in the patch of light that shone in the window. He was underneath, panting with strain, his arms straightened and rigid, holding her high above him. The pain struck again, this time across the muscles of his arm. When her flailing hand paused for a moment in the moonlight, he saw that she clenched the nail file.

Sudden fear gave him strength. The moonlight struck her darkening face, her eyes that widened and bulged, her lips that seemed to snarl.

Her struggles slowly weakened and something gave under the pressure of his thumbs. The nail file clattered to the wooden floor. Her arms hung limply, and he lowered her so that she rested beside him.

He took his right hand from her throat. With bitter, sodden strength, born of fear, he drove his fist into her face, again and again and again. He was dimly glad that her face was in the shadows. The sound of his fist was wet and heavy.

Shivering he stood up. Her legs sprawled loosely in the patch of moonlight. Sweat ran down his body. And something else. Blood from the two shallow rips.

That was dangerous. Quickly he closed the blinds, took the flashlight and shone it on the floor. He didn't shine it on Betty. He went to the bathroom, got a scrap of tissue, moistened it and cleaned up the drops of blood. He hurried into the bathroom, washed the nail file, dried it and put it on her dresser.

Time was flying by. He dressed hurriedly, and felt sudden nausea when he forced the scrap of khaki into her hand, because her hand had lost warmth and life.

He paused for a moment, checking back to see if anything had been forgotten. No, he had taken the hairs from her comb, had planted them in Lawton's room when he had sneaked in at dusk three days before to rip the khaki patch from the ragged work shorts.

One more thing. It would be natural for him to turn on the cabin lights. He did so, and, leaving the door open, he ran down the hill, yelling hoarsely.

"Help!" he shouted. "Murder!" Even as he ran, he wondered why she had been in bed with that nail file in her hand. Could it be that she was going to . . . No, that was absurd.

The investigation seemed to be going nicely. Jay Kelso sat at one of the round tables near the soda fountain.

The two police cars were parked out by the gas pumps. The men in charge were up in Cabin 11, investigating.

"Why haven't they picked Lawton up?" Kelso demanded angrily of a man in the doorway.

"If they haven't, they will," the man said grimly.

Finally he heard the crunch of steps on the gravel. The tall man in charge half turned and said loudly, "There's nothing more to see. All you people go on back to your cabins."

"Have you got him yet?" Kelso demanded.

"We know where he is. I just want to check the identification again with you. You say you came back to the cabin after a short walk and you saw the door open."

"That's right," Jay said. "It surprised me so I stopped. I was in the shadows. The moonlight hit the door. Lawton came out, sort of crouched. I saw his face as plain as day. He was wearing those ragged old work shorts of his."

"He stood for a minute as though he was listening for something. Then he went off into the darkness. It worried me. I knew he'd been acting funny lately. Mumbling to himself. In fact, I mentioned it to Mr Bright a week or so ago. Lawton was a mental case. There's no getting around that."

The officer yawned cavernously, said. "Well, Mr. Kelso, we can sure wrap this up like a Christmas package if you can stand back of that identification."

Jay pretended annoyance. "I tell you I saw him like I'm seeing you. No possible doubt about it." Secret glee replaced the fear he had felt before.

The officer turned in his chair, looked back at the old man and said, "Jase, let

me have that thing you showed me a little while back."

Without looking at Kelso, Jason Bright shuffled over and handed the officer a small folded slip of yellow paper.

The officer opened it, read it, his lips moving with each word. Then he slid it across the table to Jay Kelso. "Yes, sir, I guess that positive identification sews this case right up."

Jay felt sudden coldness as he read the telegram.

DON'T BE ANGRY, DAD. THIS WAS MY IDEA AND NOT BEN'S. THE CABINS CAN TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES FOR A FEW DAYS. I'LL BE MRS. LAWTON WHEN I GET BACK. WE ARRIVED HERE IN DAYTONA AT MIDNIGHT. ALL MY LOVE, SERENA.

Jay tried to speak and his voice was a pitiful squeak. "Dark. Just moonlight. He must have looked like Lawton. You can't think that I—that I—"

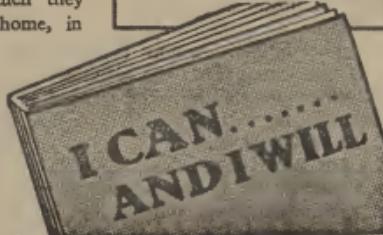
The officer opened a big brown hand and put a scrap of khaki on the top of the table.

Jay Kelso got almost to his car before the slug smashed his knee.

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FRAME FOR A DAME

By DEAN EVANS

JOHNNY REESE paused outside the door of the balcony office of the *Club Sharlet*, one hand on the knob, and looked around. "Yes, Carl?" he said softly.

Carl, his eyeman and long-time employee hurried up to him along the dim corridor that led to the office.

"Johnny!" he said, a little out of breath. "Going in the office?"

"Yeah. You want to see me?"

Carl waited until Johnny Reese opened the door and stepped through. Then he followed his chief into the small room.

It was a tiny gold and leather-appointed office built somewhat like a theater box. The wall that faced the gaming rooms downstairs was a sweeping curve of plate glass covered with heavy deep-red drapes that reached from ceiling to floor. The opposite wall had an adobe brick fireplace built into it. Bookcases and filing cabinets lined the third; and the fourth, wedge-shaped, held Johnny's desk and console radio. All the trimming in the room was gold and all the bare wall spots tan leather.

Johnny Reese went around behind the desk, seated himself and looked up expectantly at Carl. "Something on your mind, old boy?" he asked casually.

Carl seemed embarrassed. His eyes flicked to a tan leather-framed picture on Johnny's desk. It was a double frame, standing on edge like an open book.

One side held the photograph of a man who looked somewhat like Johnny Reese, and the other had a colored likeness of a pretty woman of perhaps twenty-eight or twenty-nine years. Hard, but pretty, Carl had decided long ago when he first laid eyes on her.

But the most startling feature about the woman was her hair. It was bunched high on her head almost like a spiraling pyramid and the color was the pink of a double hibiscus. In the picture the woman wore a high-necked tight-fitting dress.

Carl pulled his eyes away from the picture and looked down at Reese. His tongue licked over dry lips and the words stuck in his throat. Finally he spoke.

"Johnny, I know it's none of my business, but there's something I thought I'd better remind you about."

"Yeah? Spill it, Carl. No secrets between us."

Carl breathed easier and rested both palms on the top of Johnny's desk. He looked into Johnny's eyes, stared hard.

"Johnny," he said slowly, "this is strictly your business, but I'm worried about it. Your wife—ex-wife, that is. . . ." He stopped, cleared his throat, turned a deeper red.

Johnny's eyes narrowed, became two tight slits. "What about her," he asked, voice carefully under control but casual, too, in front of his friend.

"Well, Johnny, here it is the seventh of the month and I notice going over the books, that you didn't send her the alimony check yet. I was worrying about it because you know what she did the last time you forgot. . . ."

He paused, breathless. Johnny knew by the look on his face that only a long-rooted friendship had forced Carl to speak.

Reese smiled and reached over to give Carl a slap on the back. "Hell, boy," he breathed. "You don't need to go formal on me. But thanks. Thanks loads. I'd forgotten all about it and that's a fact. I'll make out a check tonight. Right now." His smile turned to a grin, and Carl began to grin back, a relieved look in his blue eyes.

He nodded. "Well, I guess I'll get down below. Pretty slow tonight. Raining hard outside." He went to the door.

Johnny followed him with his eyes, still grinning. "Carl?" he said, as the other opened the door.

"Yeah, Johnny?"

"Just want to say that if I ever forget again, don't hesitate to tell me. And don't feel embarrassed about it." He winked with one eye.

After the door closed, Johnny pulled out the tiny drawer in the center of the desk and took out his check book. He wrote in the date. Then on the bearer line, "Bonnie Sharon Reese" in a long tumbling script.

On the space below he filled in the amount: Five thousand dollars.

Johnny snapped the cap back on his pen, stuffed it into his pocket and stared at the check. "The kicking I get," he whispered softly. "For the kissing I got."

His eyes left the check and raised to look at the picture on the desk. "Have fun with it, Bonnie," he said. "Have lots of fun with it, you two-timing skunk."

He looked at the other picture in the frame. With the exception of a leaner face, hair a little thicker, wavier, it could have been his own likeness. He stared at it for a long while.

The foggy gray of his eyes seemed to deaden and get like old, weather-beaten lead. He sighed, picked up the check and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he leaned back and slumped in the chair.

He reached out a tentative toe and touched the hidden button under the carpet. At once the office lights darkened. He folded his thin warm hands across his chest and closed his eyes.

The tiny office was almost completely dark now, and quiet. The logs in the adobe-bricked fireplace in one wall stirred with a sound that only accentuated the silence. Now and then a restless flame threw a prowling glitter across the thick rug, toasting the memories that crowded the place.

No chatter from the roulette wheels or the buzz and clank of the machines downstairs bothered him. No sound of the dance band in the cocktail lounge reached him up here. Johnny Reese was at peace with the world, relaxed.

He opened his gray eyes again, inquiringly sought out the radiant electric clock on the desk. The two hands of the clock had met at twelve, midnight.

Johnny frowned. That meant news reports, transcribed advertising, sport talks. A whole half hour before he could hear Tim Morgan's tremulous baritone and the muted trumpets of his band.

It was his custom each night at 12:30 to drop the professional smile, the whispered confidential jokes at the bar, the winks here and there—all part and parcel of his role as owner of a small gaming club in the heart of downtown Reno, and sneak up here to his balcony office for a half-hour of soft music.

He liked to think of it as his hour of meditation and no one was allowed to disturb it. No one, that is, except Carl, who understood.

Tonight, however, it had been slow downstairs and he had come up here without realizing how early it was.

He sighed, reached out his left arm and flicked the switch that brought up the music from the cocktail lounge downstairs. He

listened in the darkness for a minute to a girl whose voice sounded tired as all hell as she pecked away at the hard surface of a vocal number. He looked surprised, touched the switch again putting the tired voice back downstairs in the cocktail lounge, where it belonged.

It didn't fit, he decided. Funny. He was paying the girl four seventy-five a week, but coming through the hidden loudspeaker her voice sounded like something over the counter of the five and dime store.

Reese sighed again and hunched up in his chair, leaned over crosswise until he touched the door of a big console that faced him against the wall at his right. He gave the door a shove, reached ever farther until he palmed the knob that turned on the current.

Then he sank back again and refolded his hands across his chest.

The big console began to whisper. The 12:00 news of the world was coming on, the announcer's voice sounding weary, but determined.

Johnny Reese listened with half an ear, his eyes closed, his chin sunk on his chest. A small glow from the radio reached out and touched his cheekbones, highlighting them softly, making them gleam like old, shiny leather.

The voice whispered on. Seven minutes of that and the announcer paused. Another voice, probably a transcription, was injected into the air and beat an urgent drum about the tenderness of Milo's steaks and chops.

Johnny knew Milo. He knew Milo's dinners. Milo had a chromium-plated beanery one-half block down the street from the *Club Sharlet*. Milo, through the combined good luck of a heavy run during the lunch hour and the frantic efforts of electric refrigeration, kept one jump ahead of the pтомaine squad. For eleven months of the year, that is. The other month he closed up and went to Palm Springs to rest.

Johnny's lips curled in a gentle smile. He wondered if Milo ever ate any of his own stuff.

The announcer's voice returned with news of Nevada. Local news.

Suddenly the announcer stopped, rejected the script and launched out in a crisp, excited voice:

"Special! Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed a special bulletin to the effect that James, better known as Curly, Reese has just been killed in a running gun

fight with the police on Route 395 just inside the city limits.

"Reese was fleeing after having entered and robbed the main branch of the Olympic National Bank here in downtown Reno. It is not known definitely at this time whether there were others involved in the robbery who escaped.

"There will be more details on the six o'clock newscast this morning. Stay tuned to this station for . . ."

Johnny's hand reached out and clicked the small knob that controlled the current of the big console. His foot felt around on the rug and the overhead fluorescents flicked on brightly.

Johnny blinked. His eyes looked like smouldering flames from a bonfire of old leaves.

He stared for a long minute at the picture of the man who resembled him, then looked at the likeness of the woman. His breath was coming hard, as though he had been running.

Finally he got out from behind the desk, went to a small closet built into the wall beside the filing cabinets, took out a soft leather harness with a polished .32 revolver in it. He put it on, put on his suit coat over it, then a tan topcoat. He jabbed a dark green felt hat at his head and left the gold and leather office.

He walked down the dark corridor outside, found the tiny half-illuminated steps that led downstairs, and stepped out into the brilliance of the big gaming room.

Off to his left he could just hear the band in the cocktail lounge, soft this time in a waltz. To his immediate right the croupier tossed the white ball at the spinning roulette wheel, watched it click dryly for an instant and then looked up. Johnny didn't see him.

He walked toward the entrance. A few slot machines around the walls were rattling like a box of stripped gears. A tall skinny dark man was clicking cubes in a sweaty palm, preparatory to a throw at the dice table. The dealer at the blackjack table looked up, caught Johnny's eye and smiled.

Carl caught him at the door.

"Going somewhere, Johnny?" he asked. Johnny looked at him. "Yeah."

Carl smiled a half smile and stood aside. "You're going to miss your program," he reminded. "Be on in a few minutes, Johnny."

"Where's my car, out front?"

Carl nodded. "Right in front of the door. And Johnny?"

Johnny Reese paused with his hand at the door ready to push, "What?"

"The coat, Johnny. I'd keep it buttoned."

Johnny drove north on Virginia Street. The signal at Second was red. He stopped, watching it through the slow frequency of his windshield-wiper blades. It looked alive, gleaming brightly behind the rain that ran down off the circular red glass of its lens. Suddenly it changed colors and the bell that signalled the change banged away eerily.

The rain came down in slanting sheets that laved at his car as he crossed the tracks at Commercial Row. At Fifth, he turned left, went down to Nevada. At West Tenth Street he turned left again and pulled up on the corner before the *Terracina Apartments*.

The lobby was dimly lighted at this time of night. The clerk who should have been behind his cubby hole in the far right hand corner was non-existent.

Sitting half in the dark in a deep leather lounging chair was a man with a newspaper before his face. He didn't move as Johnny came down the carpet. Otherwise, the lobby was empty.

Johnny looked up at the dial on the wall above the elevator doors. The car was up on ten. He turned, made for the stairs to the left, took them silently by twos and disappeared around a turn in the spiraling marble staircase.

The door to apartment 14 B was closed. Johnny touched it with his fingers, felt the knob, turned. The knob went around all the way. He pushed carefully, stepped inside the room.

A small table lamp over on the far side of the room and directly in line with the door, blazed suddenly with a dry click. The glare made Johnny blink, but not before he saw who was seated in a chair beside the lamp.

The man was almost lounging there, legs sprawled out in easy fashion. He seemed to be asleep, until you looked down closely at his lap. In his right hand, pointed straight at the door was a .38 service revolver. And it never wavered.

"Hello, Johnny," said the man, beckoning to him with the sight on the big gun.

Johnny stood motionless, watching. Finally he nudged the door with his shoulder, closed it, and stepped into the room.

The man got up from the chair, pushed his coat back a trifle, revealing a gold and enamel badge pinned to his vest.

"All right, Avila," said Johnny. "We've met before. What's the idea of the buzzer?"

The man smiled, took off his hat and laid it carefully on the table. Next, the gun went back into his holster behind him on his hip. "Just to show you, Johnny," he explained with a funny smile. "Not a social call, that is. Strictly business."

"I thought you were on Homicide now," said Johnny.

"Yeah. I am. Something that turned into a killing brought me out in the rain tonight, Johnny. I was sitting here in the dark resting my eyes and waiting."

"Waiting for my ex-wife?" said Johnny. He waited.

Avila came over to him. "What brings you out in the rain this time of night, Johnny?" he asked curiously.

His right hand touched Johnny's coat. At the shoulder he stopped, unbuttoned Johnny's coat, reached in, removed the .32. He threw it over on a couch against the wall.

"You got a license for that?" he asked.

"You know I have."

"I forgot. I get so used to asking that question around town lately. What are you carrying it for tonight, Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged. "Just happened to have it on," he said. "I'm using the license, you see. No reason not to."

Avila closed his eyes, nodded at the ceiling. "No," he agreed slowly. "I guess that's right, Johnny. But you haven't told me what you're doing here this time of night. In the apartment of your ex-wife. I should think you'd want to stay away from her."

Johnny's teeth clenched. The skin above his jaw bones moved slowly as though he were biting on the inside of his mouth.

"Alimony," he said at last. "Blood money, Avila. You know, or haven't you tried the quick cure yet?"

Lieutenant Avila grinned sourly. "Not yet," he said. "But why at night, Johnny? Late at that. Ain't the mails any good now days?"

Johnny stared, creases around his mouth forming slowly. Then he smiled. The smile looked a little guilty. Like a small boy caught in the cookie jar over at grandma's house, where it isn't such a big sin and won't mean anything. The smile turned to a grin.

"This is the seventh of the month," he explained. "I'm supposed to sweat promptly on the first. This month I forgot. And tonight Carl down at the club reminded me. I thought, since Bonnie was so hot-tempered

I'd better scoot it over right now. She snapped a little at me the last time I forgot it."

That started Avila grinning too. "Yeah," he said, nodding. "I remember. You made the papers that time. Spent a couple of days in the cooler over it, didn't you?"

He reached out his hand, rubbed his fingers lightly with a fetching motion. "Let's see, huh?" he said.

Johnny reached inside his breast pocket and pulled out the check he had written in his office. He handed it over.

Avila examined it. "Yeah," he said. "My, but you get it hard every month, don't you, Johnny? Almost as much as I make in a year. Good thing you can afford it."

"I can't," Johnny grunted. "It keeps me on my back. She had good lawyers is all."

Avila quit grinning and he sat down, waved at Johnny. Johnny went over to the couch, picked up his gun, put it away and sat down.

"I got something to tell you, Johnny," he said.

Johnny Reese's lips flattened out in a narrow line but he said nothing.

"This," continued Avila, "ain't the easiest thing I ever had to do because you're not a bad guy. You've had some pretty rough rocks to climb over in your time. And now I gotta put another one in front of you."

Johnny's lips parted. "The neon in front of the club," he said softly, "says 'no limit.' That means we take it and we like it even when we're not winning."

"Yeah." Avila licked at his lips, hit his right fist into his left palm. "Tell you what, Johnny. Your kid brother Curly stopped a big one tonight. Prowl boys. He had it coming, Johnny, he was begging for it. He got in the Olympic Bank down town and was a little unlucky. The alarm went off. He came out shooting. And somebody else with him."

Avila stopped and looked over at Reese's eyes. They looked dead, now, like cold glass marbles.

"Well," said Avila hurriedly, "the boys must of been asleep from so much rain, Johnny. And when they woke up your brother was halfway across the city. The boys got all the breaks though, lights and such. They stopped the car right inside the city limits. And they stopped Curly with it. Wasn't till then they discovered he was alone. The other got away."

Avila looked around the room, spied a bowlegged table in one corner. He made

it in two steps, looked at the whiskey. "Since you're paying for it, Johnny," he mentioned dryly, "how's about asking me to a drink?"

"Have a drink," said Johnny.

"Thanks, want one? You'd better." He poured four fingers into a tall glass, took it across the room. Then he went back and poured himself a little less and added just the merest fragrance of soda to it.

"Want to tell you I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Sure, I know. You guys got guns. They teach you to use them. And then you go out and see can you really do it like big tough guys. And that's that." He drained the four fingers and set the glass on the floor.

Avila shrugged. "Imagine me," he said. "Getting mushy about a thing like that. He was aching for it. Only this time it was a guy with a name that's familiar, that's all."

"Okay, Avila, okay. That isn't quite the end, is it?"

"No, not quite. Curly's partner was recognized, Johnny. It was a dame. The gal who believed in having both brothers from the same family. She got away. That's what I'm doing here. Waiting in the dark."

Johnny Reese put his hand up to his forehead and pressed hard. When it came away, the imprints of his fingers were still there.

"He wasn't a bad guy, Avila. Just no head for figures. And when she began to mess around with him, I slapped him hard and put him in the hospital for a while. But what can you do? He wasn't bad. Not until Bonnie got him, I mean."

"I believe you, boy," said Avila quietly. "Well, you better run along and get drunk at your own bar. Me, I got to wait a while yet."

"Wait?" said Johnny.

"Yeah. They broke open the night deposit can inside the bank. That's what set off the alarm. They got something but I don't know what. You just leave your alimony check with me. I'll hand it to the little lady when she comes in."

Reese curled his lips in a sneer. "Fine," he breathed. "Don't forget to pucker up before you gave the kiss. . . ."

He went out, leaving Lieutenant Avila staring thoughtfully into his glass.

It was still raining, but not so hard now. The wipers were able to keep the little arcs clean. They looked like glinting bits of a kaleidoscope, from the lights of the streets.

The club was busier, too. Most of the tables were full, and the sounds greeted Johnny like a familiar phonograph record.

He made his way to the little back steps, went up them, walked down the long dim corridor and entered his tiny office.

He took off his hat and coat, went over behind the desk and sat down. The little radiant clock said 12:35.

Carl's confidential knock came at the small door. Johnny recognized it at once. It was like a soft furry paw stroking the wood in little taps.

"Yeah?" he said.

Carl came into the room. His face looked a little anxious. He smiled apologetically, looked at the radio, saw that it wasn't turned on and came over to the desk at once.

"Downstairs, Johnny," he said quickly. "Take a look."

Johnny grunted, got up and went over to the middle of the long red drapes, pulled them aside two inches. He looked out and down.

"The dice table right below," whispered Carl.

Johnny's eyes caught the dice table, the small knot of people standing around one end. In the very center of the knot he saw a woman in a white coat. The woman had a spiral pyramiding hair that was an odd shade of red, rather like a pink. She seemed to be gesticulating excitedly, and talking to a man at her immediate left. The latter's head was hanging down loosely like that of a very tired or a very drunken man. Johnny turned away.

"Your ex," whispered Carl. "She's half lit and the guy she's got with her is blotto. She's a little loud, Johnny. I thought maybe you'd like to know she was here."

Johnny nodded. "Thanks, Carl. How long they been here?"

"Just a couple of minutes. Came in right before you did. I tried to get your eye before you come upstairs here, but you weren't looking. Coming down?"

Johnny nodded. In a second. First, you go down there and get everybody away from the table. I'll be watching. Is my wife shooting dice?"

Carl nodded. "She's been winning. But loud."

"How much?"

"A couple hundred. Nothing serious."

He went to the door and Johnny watched from above. He saw Carl stroll over to one of the roulette wheels, say something to the croupier. The croupier nodded, and Carl walked away. Pretty soon a little crowd began to drift over to the wheel. Carl had started a run. One of those times when

everybody wins at roulette. Everybody but the house.

Johnny watched. The knot at the dice table broke up. All except the girl in the white coat and a man whose head was hanging very low. A man who gripped the table with both hands to keep from falling. Johnny left the office and went downstairs.

"Hello, Bonnie," he said softly. "Didn't know you were here. Who's the boy with you?"

The woman's hand was high in the air holding dice loosely, ready to throw. She stopped that way, looked over at Reese and giggled.

"Hi, sucker!" she yelled. "We're taking the house!" She threw the cubes and leaned over the table, eyes round, watching for them to land.

Johnny palmed the dice, grabbed the drunken man on his right and looked around. Carl caught his eye, melted the distance between them and took the drunk away.

"What's the idea, you—" the woman snarled.

Johnny put the cubes in his pocket and moved closer to her.

"Your boy's a little on the weak side, Bonnie," he said quickly. "Carl's taking him to the bar for a Bromo so he won't be sick." He looked at the woman. She wasn't drunk, he decided, but she'd been drinking a lot.

"Where'd you pick him up?" he asked.

The woman's eyes blinked. "Been with him all evening, it it's any of your damned business," she said loudly. "Met him in a bar. Gimme the dice, I'm gonna take the joint!"

"No more, Bonnie."

"Huh? What the hell, no more? Your sign says no limit and that's as high as I want!"

"Yeah," said Johnny softly, backing away a trifle. "But not tonight. Some other time, maybe, but not tonight. You're drunk. Besides, I've got something for you up in the office. You'd better come up and get it while the getting's good."

The woman's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Your alimony," said Johnny. "Or don't you want it?"

The woman's eyes opened suddenly in surprise. "Oh! Well, it's about time. I thought I was going to have to give you another jolt in the pokey. Bring it down here."

Johnny looked at her steadily. His eyes were like cold, a fire behind them. "You

want it or don't you?" he said and walked away.

The woman followed him up the steps. The crowd in the club was jamming the roulette wheel. The croupier looked pained, but obedient.

Johnny Reese opened the office door, went over to the filing cabinets. He touched a small button on top, near the edge, pulled at the right side of the cabinets. They swung away from the wall on hinges, revealing a strong box built into the wall behind.

"You still got that damned toy?" demanded the woman.

Johnny didn't answer. He fiddled with the knob, swung the steel door open, reached inside and brought out a small wooden drawer. He took out three one-thousand notes, handed them to the woman. Then he counted out twenty one-hundred dollar bills, gave them to her.

"It makes a wad, doesn't it?" she muttered. "How come you're not giving me a check?"

Johnny put the wooden drawer back in the safe. He didn't look at the woman. "You'd rather have a check?" he asked casually.

The woman stuffed the bills in her handbag. "No," she said. "This saves me a trip to your bank. They won't cash 'em anywhere else. Your credit shot? What're you doing with your money?"

Johnny closed the safe, swung the filing cabinets back against the wall again. "You can go, now," he said. "Do you want us to take care of the boy downstairs?"

The woman looked up quickly. "I'll take care of him!" she said.

Johnny stood at the cabinets, staring at her. She wasn't drunk, not half drunk. He walked slowly over to the desk, picked up the leather framed double picture, folded it and took it over to the woman.

"You'd better take this," he whispered.

The woman grabbed the photo, tucked it inside her white coat. She laughed shrilly. "The sucker's got himself another girl. As pretty as me?"

Johnny watched her go. After the door closed, he pulled out the deep drawer of his desk and opened the bottle that was in there. He put it to his lips, took a swallow. It burned wickedly, but he let it burn. He took another. And then another.

He looked at the little radiant clock on his desk. The hands were almost together once more. Twelve fifty-eight, they said. He

[Continued on page 64]

THE HIGH COST OF DYING

By EDWARD VAN DER RHOER

ELAINE RIDLEY was afraid of her husband. It was as simple as that. The thought came to her as she lay awake in bed, staring into the darkness. There was no sound to alarm her. All she heard was the monotonous humming and throbbing of crickets in the fields outside her window. The hot, sultry summer night pressed into the room and weighed upon her like a stifling cloak. It would have been a relief to sleep, but sleep would not come.

He hates me, Elaine thought suddenly. It did not seem possible that calm, easy-going, elderly Martin Ridley could hate anyone, yet she could not mistake the hate that had been in his eyes that day. She wanted to laugh, thinking about Martin's face when she told him—how his heavy jaw had dropped and his eyes had opened wide.

Still Elaine realized that she had made a mistake in revealing the truth to her husband. Whatever happened, she should not have admitted her love for Bruce, even when confronted with the facts.

At first she denied everything, protesting her love for Martin. But he was remorseless in his probing. He made her angry.

"Why don't you believe me?" she demanded, facing him directly. Martin Ridley fixed his eyes on the glowing embers in the fireplace before him, avoiding her gaze. "Why don't you believe me? How can you place any faith in this—this village gossip?"

He turned his head slowly. His face, in the pitiless glow of the fire, looked older than his fifty-eight years; gray, and lined, and sunken-cheeked.

"I believe it," he said quietly, in a somber voice, "because I followed you yesterday. I saw you meet Bruce Livingston. I saw you together."

Now rage swelled within Elaine, sweeping

away all the restraining dikes of reason. "You spied on me? You—you—"

And when Martin simply nodded in reply, she cried furiously, "All right. So now you know. Do you think I married an old man for love?"

That blow hit home. She saw it in Martin's face.

She was unable to deny herself a little amused laugh. "You must have been a fool!" she said. And it was true.

Elaine had been his secretary when he was Executive Vice-President of Palmer Motors, before his promotion to Chairman of the Board of Directors. She was young and pretty and popular. Many young men had courted her assiduously. But in the end she chose to marry Martin Ridley, an old man.

"I won't give you a divorce, if that's what you're after," he said.

Elaine didn't want a divorce. She knew that Bruce Livingston, who was in debt up to his ears, had nothing to offer her but the meager living obtained from his riding academy. No, they could not be happy together without Martin Ridley's money.

It was for this that they had planned and schemed ever since the beginning; Martin Ridley was an old man who had only a little while to live, and when he died, his money would go to her.

Martin seemed to read Elaine's thoughts. His voice became sharper than she had ever known it to be before. "And if it's my money you want, don't be sure I won't outlive you." But he appeared to lack conviction.

"The doctor told me your heart is getting weaker," she said exultantly. "He doesn't give you much longer to live. Six months, a year, no longer than two years."

The Ridley family situation had reached such a chaotic climax, that both Elaine and Martin were waiting to see which one would kill the other first.

"You lie!" cried Martin, his eyes bright with hatred. Then he sank back exhausted in his chair. His body became slack. He must have known that, for once, Elaine was telling the truth.

"Good-by, old man," Elaine said mockingly and turned toward the door, pausing before a long mirror on the wall to look at herself.

She touched her long, wavy, golden hair with deft fingers, surveying her fair complexion, the slim and willowy figure clad in the latest mode from Paris, her well-shaped silken legs. There could be no doubt that she was still beautiful . . .

Now fear came over Elaine as she lay in bed, surrounded by darkness. The silence was oppressive, overpowering. What would Martin do? Perhaps she had misjudged his weakness, his inability to do anything about the situation. He had never seemed the sort of man who would ever resort to violence, yet, for some strange reason, she feared him and dreaded the darkness.

The luminous dial on the clock at her bedside pointed to five minutes before midnight. Dawn was still many hours away.

She must have dozed off. Suddenly she awoke and sat bolt upright in her bed. Martin Ridley had materialized like a wraith out of nothingness and stood beside her, looking down at her.

She opened her mouth to scream, but Martin clapped a hand over her mouth, choking off the sound. "Shh, don't make any noise," he whispered hoarsely and released her.

"What do you want?" she demanded indignantly, forgetting her fear for the moment.

"Don't talk too loud!" Martin warned, keeping his eyes directed toward the door. "I heard a noise downstairs. I think there's a thief in the house."

Elaine could hardly repress a smile. Martin was always worrying. "Don't bother me," she said, yawning. "I want to sleep."

"I'm going downstairs," he said. "You still have that .32 automatic in your vanity drawer. Lock your door after I go, and if anyone tries to get into this room, don't hesitate to shoot."

"Why don't you wake up Matthew or one of the other servants?"

"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."—F. W. Dodridge, South Brent.—16.8.48.

"DEAR JOAN THE WAD.—Some time ago I received 'Joan the Wad' and 'Jack o' Lantern' and this morning I bad a cheque for £51. 2s. 10d. which I had won with 'Spot the Bell Competition' and that is the best bit of luck I have had for years, so hoping I shall still be lucky one."—Mrs. R. Gray, Horncastle, Lincs.—8.8.47.

"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."—O. 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.

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Wallsend
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"Just a 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. Woodall, 146 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. Caupland, Nettleham, Lincs.

and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to:

LANIVET, BODMIN

"There's no need to wake him for nothing. It may only be my imagination. I'll go downstairs alone."

"Well, don't bother me with your old wives' tales," Elaine said crossly. She fell back on her pillow and closed her eyes. Soon she heard Martin's steps retreating in the hall. She tumbled out of bed and locked the door. Then she went back to bed and tried to sleep again.

It occurred to Elaine that Martin could not be so angry with her after all. This thought made her feel much more at ease. For the first time she sensed that she was going to sleep. And it was just then that an odd sound brought her upright in her bed.

She listened, her ears attuned to the night, and the odd sound came once more. This time she knew what it was, a scraping noise from her balcony that told her an unseen intruder was climbing over the parapet.

Her first instinct was to run quickly and close the French windows that gave access from the balcony to her room. But on second thought she realized that the windows had only a flimsy lock which could easily be forced.

Now she heard footsteps. They were light, cautious steps. Full of terror, she remembered the .32 automatic in her vanity. She crossed the room swiftly, stooping to open the left top drawer. Her hand touched the comforting cold metal almost immediately. She backed against the wall, holding the gun in readiness.

And the steps came closer. The drapes at the side of the French windows rustled. She saw a long figure outlined against the purple night sky. Her heart pounded uncontrollably at the menace that confronted her. She released the safety catch and pressed the trigger.

The staccato explosions throbbed in her ears. The figure swayed and came forward toward her with arms outstretched. Then it fell to the floor.

For a moment Elaine could not move. She pressed herself against the wall, gasping for breath. Far away, it seemed, there was the clatter of many feet and the hubbub of excited voices, and she realized thankfully that the servants had been aroused by the shots.

At last she found the courage to press the wall-switch within reach of her hand and flooded the room with light. Then she screamed. The sound was loud and shrill,

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scarcely human. The figure at her feet was that of Martin Ridley. He was lying in a pool of his own blood, still alive. He turned his head slightly as Elaine kneeled beside him.

"I didn't mean to do it!" she cried, her eyes dilated with horror. "It was a mistake. I thought—"

Martin smiled. "Never mind, my dear," he whispered. "I know. But what will you tell the police?"

The steps in the hall were closer. Elaine blanched. "You mean—it was all a trick. You planned it this way?"

He nodded his head with a great effort. "You wanted my money, my insurance. Now it is yours! The police will find that—interesting—"

If Martin meant to say any more, the words died on his lips. All comprehension faded from his eyes, and the smile was frozen like a grotesque mask over his face.

And Elaine knelt motionless at the side of her dead husband, the gun still clutched in her nerveless fingers. She knew that she could not escape a charge of murder. And she would be convicted. . . .

When the door to the bedroom burst open, Elaine did not move. She was looking down at her hands, which were covered with the blood of her husband.

FRAME FOR A DAME

(Continued from page 60)

reached over, got the knob on the console, turned it, and sat back. His foot reached out, touched the under-carpet button and the room became black. The fire over in the adobe fireplace was low now. Almost ashes only. He looked over at it.

The radio hummed softly, began to give out little intimate sounds from a deep baritone throat that had somewhat of a tremulous quality about it.

The voice faded into the background and made room for the cheery mutterings of the announcer who put it away till the next time. There was a little pause and the announcer mumbled about drifting away like the Arabs and their folding tents. Johnny closed his eyes.

A buzzer jolted wildly somewhere. Johnny sighed, opened his eyes, pulled out

the top drawer on the left side of his desk, palmed a phone.

"Yeah," he said.

A voice on the other end came in strong as though the owner were only a foot away. "Johnny? Lieutenant Avila. Just thought I'd call, I thought you'd like to know for your brother's sake. We got the dame, Johnny and she's hot. She says she didn't have anything to do with the bank job tonight, Johnny, and she's got a lush with her she claims is her alibi for the whole night."

"Yeah?" asked Johnny.

"Yeah. She's got a nice stake, Johnny. Says you gave it to her a few minutes ago at the club. Alimony she says. How about it?"

Johnny sat up, gripped the phone tightly. The knuckles of his fingers hurt under the taut skin. "You got my check, haven't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, Johnny. You weren't paying her twice, were you?"

Johnny sneered. "What do you think, Avila?"

"Yeah. That's what I thought. She also says she was gambling at your joint. How about that?"

Johnny nodded in the darkness. "That's right. At the table. She picked up two or three hundred and then I broke it up when I got back from talking to you."

There was a little pause on the other end. Then a grunt. "That checks, Johnny. Just had to make sure. The dame claims you took her to your office and paid her. I'm booking her."

Johnny pulled his mouth a little way from the instrument.

"In a way she's telling the truth, Avila," he said slowly.

"Huh? Hey, what's this?"

"I did take her to my office, Avila. Gave her a leather framed picture of herself and Curly. I couldn't stand it any more after what happened tonight."

"Oh! Yeah, son, she had that with her, too. Everything fits like the jay in jam. How come you ain't drunk, son?"

Johnny laughed a little into the mouthpiece. It sounded dry and brittle, like last year's leaves blowing across concrete.

"It doesn't come that strong tonight, Avila," he said. He dropped the instrument back into the drawer, shut it again.

The radio still buzzed softly. Johnny looked over at it and turned it off.

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