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EDITION

BLACK MASK[®] DETECTIVE



NOVEMBER 1941
TRAP FOR A TIGER
by JOHN D. MACDONALD

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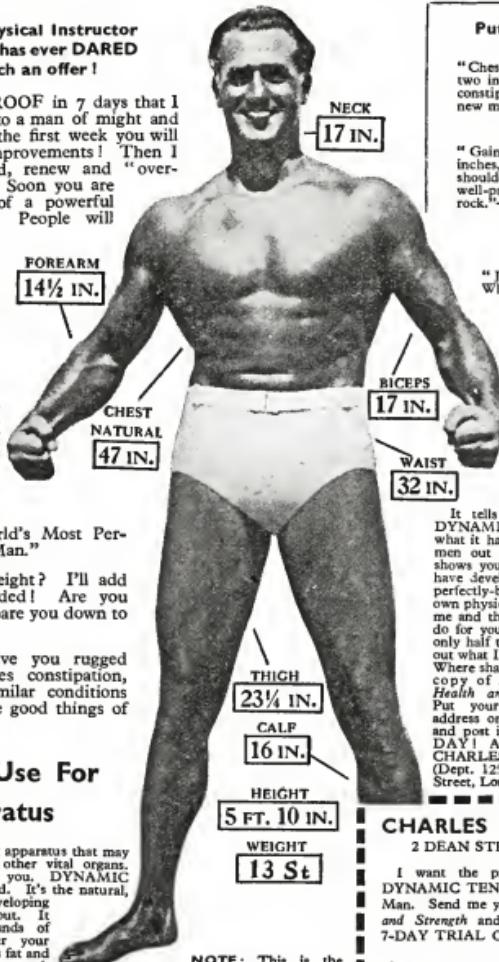
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DETECTIVE

A Magazine of Gripping, Smashing Detective Stories

Vol. IX, No. 12. (British Edition)

November 1952

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--- THURSDAY, NOV. 20th ---

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... TRAP FOR A

Powerful Murder Novelette

Marj was stacked to stop 'em all. She had the looks, the curves and the temperament, plus everything else it takes—to drag a sucker of an ex-husband into a one-way murder trap!



"Sign it," he said.
I signed it. My
own death
certificate.

TIGRESS!

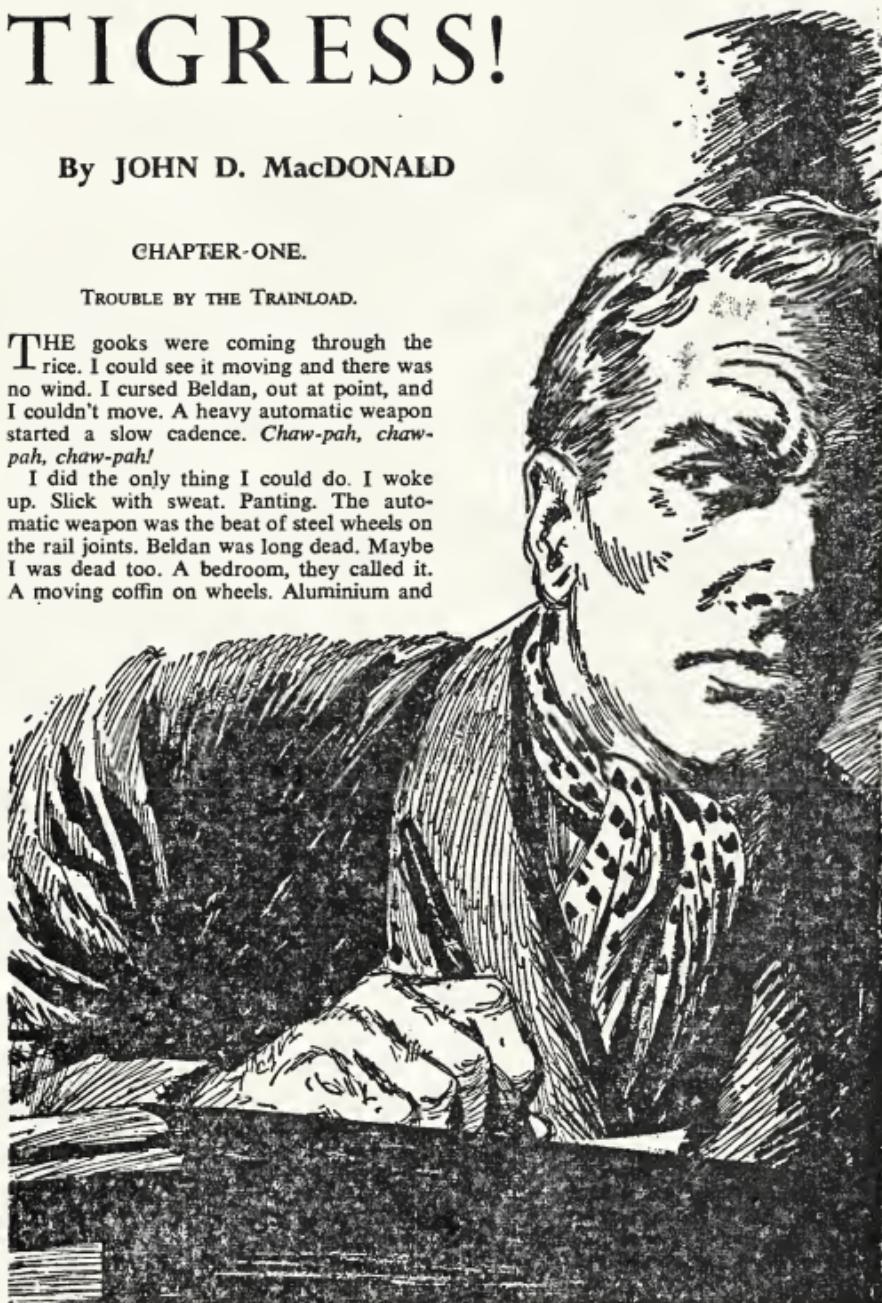
By JOHN D. MacDONALD

CHAPTER-ONE.

TROUBLE BY THE TRAINLOAD.

THE gooks were coming through the rice. I could see it moving and there was no wind. I cursed Beldan, out at point, and I couldn't move. A heavy automatic weapon started a slow cadence. *Chaw-pah, chaw-pah, chaw-pah!*

I did the only thing I could do. I woke up. Slick with sweat. Panting. The automatic weapon was the beat of steel wheels on the rail joints. Beldan was long dead. Maybe I was dead too. A bedroom, they called it. A moving coffin on wheels. Aluminium and



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stainless steel, boring a roaring hole in the afternoon.

I looked out. Flat land, a lot of horizon. A gray, baked ranch moved by in forgotten grandeur. I lay there, feeling rested in spite of the violent end of my nap, and scratched my naked chest while I conjured up a vision of bourbon in the lounge car. Taller than tall. Colder than cold.

I washed my face in my private little sink, put on some of the nice new San Francisco civilian clothes and admired myself. Oh, you old hollow-eyed veteran, you! Same face that I'd taken to the wars. Smug and bland. I looked like a prosperous young account executive from a New York agency. Which I had been, they tell me. But it didn't seem right that I should look like that now.

Funny thing. The Marines get stuffy about whether or not you have toes. They said, "Captain Pell, you have frozen off your toes in the service of the United Nations. You are obviously no good any more. No toes. Good-bye, and *muchissimas gracias*."

The shoes were tricky. When you walk, your toes bend and give you a little spring. When you don't have toes, they put the spring in the shoe. A steel one. So I went springing down to the lounge car, bourbon-minded.

Marj, my ex-wife, was sitting on the left as I entered. Hanneman, her statuesque, beefy lawyer, sat cozily beside her.

Marj opened her sweet, moist, musky lips. "You dirty stinking welcher," she said melodiously.

I smiled. "Enjoying the choo-choo ride?"

Hanneman smiled stiffly. "Sit down, please," he said. "I'm still sure we can make some arrangement."

He'd been saying that ever since we all got on the train. I sat down and waited. You know. Eager expression. Avid. Boy listening to smart gentleman.

"You can't talk to *that*," Marj said.

"Please, my dear," he said, patting her hand. "Please."

So I said, "Gosh, Mr. Hanneman, I don't know why she's so sore. I'm the one who should be sore. She tricked me into standing still for the divorce, and then she nibbled the judge into giving her fifty per cent of all my future earnings. Now she's mad because I went off fighting for the United Nations, and all she could collect was half my base pay."

"You dirty stinking welcher," Marj said, wetting her slightly redundant lip-line.

"See?" I said. "See, Mr. Hanneman? Now she's sore because I'm not going back to work. She wants me in there knocking off my twenty-five thousand like before. She's like a fight manager, trying to put a poor tired pug back in the ring. I'm a crippled veteran, Mr. Hanneman. They're giving me a teensy amount of money for the rest of my life. That isn't earnings, so she can't have half of it. With what I've saved, I'm going to build a shack in the tropics and lie on my back for the rest of my life. Can't a man retire, Mr. Hanneman?"

He looked at me as though he smelled something bad.

"Mr. Pell, Mrs. Pell considers your offer to be unsatisfactory."

I had offered ten thousand cash for a cancellation of the alimony agreement. This was a poker game we were playing. They were bucking aces backed.

"What does she want?"

"We feel certain that you could manage to scrape up thirty thousand, Mr. Pell."

I yawned. I made it a nice big juicy yawn. "I guess it's ten thousand or nothing. I'm retiring. No more work for Simon Pell."

Marj worked her fingernails like a cat. "If I take the ten, you'll go right back to your job, damn you!"

"And if you don't take it, I'm through working. Why should I work just so you can get half? You were a dope. You should have taken a property settlement instead of that silly fifty per cent business, Marj. You're over a barrel and you know it."

"We can't force him to work, Marjorie," Charles Hanneman said.

Marj switched tactics. She leaned across Hanneman's beefy thighs and laid her moist eyes and cream of raspberry lips against my little gray soul. "You're making things so dreadfully difficult, Sim, darling."

"Gosh," I said, "I thought you were having fun. A nice transcontinental trip like this. You and the majestic Mr. Hanneman. It gives you such a cozy excuse, you know."

She chopped at my face with those claws. I got a coat sleeve in the way and she broke one nail back to the quick.

Charles Hanneman said floridly, "I don't care for those implications, Pell."

I swallowed the remains of the bourbon and waved for more. I said, "And you, sir, should smarten up. Missy, here, is a playmate for men, not boys. She walks in an aura of dangling scalps. She's a gun-notcher. She's a pelt-stretcher. Why don't you trot

home to the wife and kiddies, Mr. Hanneman? Your wife probably senses the phoniness of your excuse for this trip anyway."

He rose to his full height, towering red-faced. He clenched his fists. "Stand up, sir!"

I smiled at him. He made the mistake of reaching with both hands for my new lapels. I put a hoof in his midriff and snapped my knee straight. The Hanneman bulk moved backwards toward the waiter bringing my drink. In the narrow space, the waiter did a pass with the tray that would have pleased a matador. He watched Hanneman bounce off the door frame and land on hands and knees on the rug. Then he served my drink with a special flourish and a white-toothed grin.

Hanneman grunted and stood up and clamped both hands over his kidneys. He wore the expression of someone listening for something. It had happened so quickly that the other people in the lounge ears looked at the poor man who had tripped and fallen. Up the line, a perfect hood-type in a sharp suit with the face of a depraved weasel watched alertly. Too alertly. As though he knew too much of the score.

Hanneman crouched behind a facade of upright dignity. "I shall not stoop to your level, Pell," he said. He turned like an LP turntable and strode off.

Marj stood up. She wears clothes that pretty up the merchandise, though the merchandise is such that it would make a flour sack blush. She gave a flaunt and twitch of her hips that melted ice in the drinks all down the line.

"You dirty little monster," she said in that musical sand-throated gurgle.

She tilted off on her mission of mercy to soothe the back-wrenched ego. I glanced up the lounge. The hood-type's nose was back in his scratch sheet. Up the line was an empty seat by a corn-flower blonde. The petaled eyes drifted across my face with a sensation like butterfly wings. She looked like the kind who wants to talk baby talk and is smart enough not to.

I trotted up and sat beside her. She smelled like grandma's garden.

I breathed deeply and said, "Hah!"

The blue eyes were sly. "What's with the 'Hah'?"

"It's a substitute. I get tired of an opening wedge about weather, or how fast the train goes or do you live in California. Hence the Hah."

"Hah to you too. Now where are we?"

"Launched on my favorite hobby. Hack-ing at attractive females."

"Hack away, MacDuff. You'll just dull your little hatchet. The girl is armor plated. I'll angle you for a free dinner, and then pat you on the head. I never get tight and I'm not impulsive, and I've got four brothers, every one of them over six feet."

"Round one coming up. I just got back from Korea. I haven't talked with a girl like you for many long months. My name is Simon Pell."

"I just got back from Hawaii, and you've never talked to a girl like me, and my name is Skipper Moran. End of round one."

"You must have read Thurber. The war between the sexes."

"Nope. Just another Sweet Briar graduate. Fencing III is a compulsory course."

Then we laughed, and began to get on well. So I drank two more than enough; and then we ate, and then we drank some more, and then, as promised, she patted me on the head and went off to bed, leaving my tentative kiss planted firmly in mid-air.

I trudged back to my little bedroom, whipped for the nonce. Marj was waiting outside my door. "Please may I come in, Sim? I have to talk to you."

Her underlip was out like a candy shelf and her eyes looked like a stoked furnace.

I opened the door and waved her in. Courty. Controlled. She had changed clothes. Where do they get that line about a simple print dress? Maybe the print was simple, but the dress was pretty complex. It had to be complex. It had a job to do. It had to fit like the hide of a speckled trout, play give and take with varied sinuosities, and still manage to make the package look like a lady.

She sat on the little padded shelf seat that folds down out of the wall beside the closed door. I sat on the unmade bed. She looked at me until smoke drifted out of my ears.

"We had something, Sim. Where did we lose it? How did we lose it?"

"Our pockets were picked, maybe?"

"Be serious, Sim. I'm serious. I'm dreadfully serious. You stopped loving me, Sim."

"I've always hated crowds, honey. I just got out when it started to look as though I were going to have to stand in line."

"Don't be cruel, Sim. Don't throw that up to me. I'm weak. I know I'm weak. I don't know how I could have done that to you."

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"You're weak, like the Kremlin."

"I know why you say such dreadful things to me, Sim," she said softly. "It's because I hurt you so dreadfully. You're striking back."

I smiled at her. "When they flew me to Japan, there was a nurse there. A little bitty thing with a face like a hopfrog and a figure like a mile post. She smelled of anaesthetic and walked so heavy she kept shaking the bed. I would rather spend five minutes with her than ten lifetimes with you, darling."

She shut her eyes and her lips went taut. I guessed she was mentally counting to ten. She got it under control, and stood up dramatically, spreading wide her arms. The simple little print co-operated nicely. She said, "Do I mean nothing to you, Sim?"

She moved closer to me, she and her perfume. I knew her, knew exactly how she looked in shadow or sunlight or under a two-hundred-watt bulb.

"Aren't you getting a little hippy, Marj?" I asked her solemnly.

She pivoted and tried to spoon out my right eye with her thumb nail. I stood up and hammered her twice with the heel of my hand. Her eyes went blank and her knees wobbled. She sat down hard. Panting. And then she started to cry.

"Okay," I said. "Now that we've had our little drama, get to the point."

She looked at me. Now she was herself. Chrome steel and broken glass. "I've got to have money. Quickly."

"How much and what for?"

"Thirty thousand dollars. I pay it or go to prison. I did something silly."

"What did you do?"

"I met a man. I thought he was nice. He sent me to Juarez, and a Mexican gave me a package to bring back. He wouldn't give it to me until I signed a receipt. I took the package back to the man and he gave me a thousand dollars. They picked him up twenty minutes later.

"A month ago another man contacted me. He has the receipt I signed. He wants thirty thousand dollars for it. If I don't give him the money, he'll turn it over to the authorities, and put them on me. I didn't sign my right name. But the handwriting is mine, and the cops have my description. I told him he had to wait until you came back, when I could get the money from you."

"What was in the package?"

"I don't know."

"Don't try to kid me, Marj."

"All right. It was dope."

"And you knew it in advance, before you went after the package."

"No I didn't."

"Keep lying, baby, and I won't even give you the right time."

"All right--so I knew what it was! But it meant a thousand dollars. That stinking allotment from you didn't even buy cigarettes."

"Anybody that gets messed up in a filthy business like that deserves to go to prison, Marj."

She started to cry again. She covered her face and sobbed incoherently. "Work in prison laundry . . . starchy foods . . . come out when I'm an old woman . . ."

"Where does Hanneman fit?"

"He's nothing. He's just on the string. I can brush him any time." She said it calmly, the tears gone.

"Why do you expect me to give you the money?"

"Because it is all your fault, Sim. If you hadn't gone running off like a fool, I would have had enough money so I wouldn't have gotten in a jam. Now you've got to get me out of it. You've got to!"

I pitied her. It wasn't her fault she had been born this way. Marj grew up without the very essential knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

"How much time have you got?"

"A week from today, Sim. He won't give me any more time."

"What am I supposed to get out of it?"

"I'll do anything you want me to do. Anything, Sim."

"There's nothing you can do for me, Marj. When you cured me, you cured me for good. I really loved you. Seems funny as hell, now."

"I wish I were back with you, Sim."

"My friends miss you too."

"Now you're being cruel again. Please don't be cruel. Sim, give me the money. You have it. I know you have it."

I sat and thought of all the times she had lied to me, her eyes bland and sweet and her mouth like an angel's. Turnabout was fair play.

"I guess I've been kidding you along, Marj," I said. "When I was ordered to active duty I liquidated my securities and put the whole works into irrevocable annuities. I couldn't touch it if I wanted to."

She looked at me. I saw her face change. First, incredulity. Then horrified belief. Then a fear that ripped through her like a rusty bayonet.

She stood up and reached blindly for the door. I said, "Let me know if they give you enough cigarettes while you're doing time. I can afford that for old time's sake."

Marj went out and shut the door softly behind her. I looked at the door a long time. You think of some way to take revenge, and then you get your chance, and it leaves an evil taste in your mouth. I'd been patsy for her, and now the situation was reversed. The saddle was strapped to her back, now. And I had sharp spurs. Let her tremble. Let her eat dirt. Let her come out of pokey with all the hopes and juices and muscled sheen dried up forever.

Serves her right, I said. But I knew that I couldn't do it. I knew that I was going to give her the money. Kiss it good-bye. I don't know why I thought I owed her anything. On the other hand, maybe it was a good deal. In three years I'd make it back, once I got out from under that fifty per cent agreement.

Anyway, I could let her sweat it out until we arrived in New York. That would be time enough. I undressed and turned out the light and shoved the shade up. Starlight was bright and I lay in the rattle-sway of the train, cradled in the night roar of wind and steel wheels.

CHAPTER TWO.

TIGRESS IN A CORNER.

I FUMBLED up out of sleep and snarled at the door. I wrapped myself in the sheet and, without turning the light back on, pushed the latch over. She came in with the recognizable perfume floating around her, and shoved something toward me. "Take this, Sim."

When awakening, I'm not at my best. I'm dull. I've got a reaction time like somebody in a morgue drawer. So I took it. It was sticky.

She shut the door with herself on the inside. I clamped the sheet with my arm, got the light on, and stared stupidly at what I was holding. A big fat switch-knife with a six-inch blade. A blade that looked as though it had spent all day on the farm, butchering pigs.

I opened my hand. The knife fell out.

I looked stupidly at the blood on my hand. And then I looked at Marj. She was the color of a skid-row handkerchief. Her eyes were holes in the side of the world, leading nowhere. She wore a blue something-or-other hung over her shoulders. Underneath the blue was black. Black lace and shiny black satin. She had blood on her hand, too. She was breathing fast and hard, putting considerable strain on the black lace.

I looked at the knife and then at her. "Who the hell did you kill?"

Her words were like moths trying to get out of a lamp shade. "I didn't kill anybody. Charles was in my compartment. I went down to the girl's room. When I came back, he was dead. I got to get him out of there!"

"Complain to the conductor."

"Hell with you, Sim. Now you're in it too. You help me, or I say you came in and stabbed him. Jealous. Ex-husband. I'll swear it on the stand, on a million Bibles. I'll never change my story."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know who did it. Or why. I just know he's there and he's too heavy to lift."

"So you came and gave me the knife. How sweet of you, darling!"

"I couldn't take a chance on your saying no, Sim. Get him back in his place. Then we can put the knife back in him and get the blood off us."

"Otherwise?"

"They'll try to call it on me, Sim. And I'll tell them I saw you do it."

It was nice and tight. A comfy fit. It was like a size-fifteen collar on a size-sixteen neck. A rope collar.

"You're in the next car, aren't you? Anybody see you come in here?"

There was triumph in her eyes. "I knew you'd help me. Nobody saw me."

She scouted the corridor while I pulled on pants and a shirt and shoved my feet into the trick shoes. I wished very much that I hadn't socked him in view of the whole lounge car. We went to her compartment in the far end of the next car toward the engine.

Charles Hanneman was exceedingly dead. He knelt beside the bed, chest and face flat against it, hands all tangled up in the blankets. The hole, like a wet coin slot, was on the left side of his back, just below the shoulder blade. Blood had run down his white shirt into the waistband of his trousers. Not much blood. I had recently

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seen some very messy bodies. This one had all its parts and did not bother me. And it didn't seem to bother Marj.

"I'd hate to think you did this, Marj," I said.

"I didn't, if that makes any difference to you."

"Where's his place?"

"The second bedroom down the aisle."

Hanneman's suit coat was there. I worked his putty arms into the sleeves, rolled him onto his back onto the floor and buttoned the coat in front.

"How do you want to do this?" she asked.

"I can manage him alone. Take a quick look and see if his bedroom is okay. Then come back and make like a guide."

I pulled him into a sitting position, then hoisted him up onto the edge of the bed and held him so he wouldn't topple over. His fat flesh jounced peacefully in the vibration of the train.

She came back and nodded. I pulled his arms over my shoulders, held his wrists down in front of me. Then I stood up, leaning forward like a man carrying a trunk.

I staggered like a nine-day drunk. I was carrying the horrid results of too much pastry and too many mashed potatoes. The motion of the train didn't help a bit. By the time I rolled him off onto his own bed, my eyes were out on the end of stalks and I was puffing like an also-ran at Santa Anita.

She tried to hand me the knife.

"Uh-huh," I said. "You take that into the girl's room, and if you're real bright, you'll find a way to drop it out onto the tracks."

Hanneman's wallet had fallen out of his pants pocket. Marj sat on her heels on the floor and opened it. She looked at the sheaf of Uncle Sugar's IOUs and her eyes shone like a bride's.

"This will make it look like robbery," she said.

"Odd, isn't it? Let me see the wallet."

She gave it to me, without currency. The card case was quite full. It was very interesting. Charles Hanneman, Attorney at Law. And some others, equally crisp, equally new. C. Arthur Hineman, M.D. Charles A. Hand, Bursar, Powelton College. C. Andrew Hanson, Broker.

"What do you know!" I whispered.

"What's that? What's so interesting?" she said, breathing down my neck.

"Never you mind. Pop will take care of this."

She used the blue thing to wipe the door, inside and outside. The coast was clear and we parted. I disposed of the wallet and cards in the manner I had suggested to her. I went back and sat on my bed and thought about obese, florid confidence men.

When she tapped on my door, I let her in without turning on the light. She came into my arms, trembling and whimpering. I held her and made comforting sounds. Pore little girl. Pore tired little girl. She was nice to hold. Her lips came up tentatively, then enthusiastically. I broke the clinch with the heel of my hand against her pretty chin. She blundered around in the little bedroom, grumbling and kicking anything handy, and then left in a tizzy.

As soon as she had gone, I put the light on and started hunting. It didn't take long. It was under the bed where she'd tossed it, covering the sound with her pretended anger. I reached under and pulled the knife out and presently sent it to join the wallet.

Skipper Moran gave me a pretty smile that meant, "Join me for breakfast." She said aloud, "Does your little head still burn where I patted it, Simon?"

"Burned all night. Throbbed like a toothache. All I could do was lie there and pant."

"You lie as good as you pant, Mr. Pell?"

"We're in Chicago in another hour or so. Are you going all the way through to New York? Can we get on the same train?"

She smiled. "Poor throbbing boy." I made another inventory of the face. Sweet stubborn chin. Flower-petal eyes. "Why are you staring?"

"It's just pleasant to look at a woman with a certain amount of decency in her face. You've a good face, Skipper. It has been around, and it has gotten wisdom instead of toughness."

She looked at me, oddly. "That's quite nice. That you should think so. Trying to disarm me, Simon?"

"That's a splendid idea."

She grinned. "You're too soon out of the hospital for the big leagues, rookie."

Something was wrong. I didn't catch on until the second strip of bacon. "I didn't mention any hospital, Skipper. I mentioned Korea, nothing more. What kind of spy are you?"

She looked upset. Prettily confused. "You must have said something about it, Simon."

"I was careful not to, Skipper. A sympathy pitch is not my style. And another

thing. That empty chair in the lounge car was almost too opportune. There are never empty chairs by lovely blondes. And I did get the eye. Oh, very subtly, but I got it."

She laughed. A good try, only faintly strained. "Oh, Simon! You've got to stop reading Eric Ambler. I'm a gal on a train. I'm heading for New York."

A neat, brisk young man with a neat, close shave and an eye like the accounts receivable ledger came down the diner, looked through me, and put his lips practically against my gal's little pink bunny ear.

She had been looking at me. She started looking through me. She got up, remembered her manners, gave me a smile about three millimeters long and departed.

When I had gotten tired of toying with my third cup of coffee and half decided it was time to pack, she came back. She sat down and ordered coffee.

She balanced me on the razor's edge of her eyes and said, "Your ex-wife's friend was knifed during the night. Know anything about it?"

"I never knew Dick Tracy was such a master of disguise."

"Don't clown, Simon. I'm talking off the record and out of order and against instructions. So don't clown. What do you know about it?"

I forked a groove in the tablecloth and admired it for a moment. I heard her coffee being brought. I heard her tear the paper off the sugar.

"My ex enlisted me last night. The corpus undetectable was in her boudoir. It was either pull an assist or try to talk myself out of an eye-witness report. So I moved junior back to his own room."

"You just made a very intelligent decision, Mr. Pell."

"Moving the body, or telling you?"

"Moving the body was most unforgivably stupid. I suppose you told her you wouldn't give her the money."

"If I kept a diary, I'd swear you'd been peeking."

"Why do you feel such a compulsion to be flip?"

"Counter question. Who are you?"

"A working girl. Working."

"You don't know what a shock this is to me. I thought it was my good looks and sparkling personality that intrigued you."

"When, as a matter of fact, it was the criminal tendencies of your ex-wife. Marjory has been a co-operative little morsel, Mr. Pell. Without knowing it, of course. We've

had the net over her ever since Juarez, hoping for leads."

"Hmmm. A junior G girl."

"No. A clerk-stenographer CAF 7, filling in because our little club is a bit short-handed. The man who came and spoke to me is phoning ahead, I'm afraid we're going to have to take her into custody now."

"Do you think she killed Hanneman?"

"Oh, no. Hanneman was hired to ride herd on her and protect the investment. She must have told him you turned her down. My guess is that he tried to tell the others and they thought he was pulling a fast one. The knife is typical of—some others we've found."

"Hanneman had her convinced that he was a trustworthy legal eagle."

She smiled sweetly. "No one is as gullible as a cheap crook, Simon."

"Then you can just pick up the guy who did it, eh? No fuss. No problem."

She snapped her fingers. "Sure. Just like that. All we've got to do is pick him or her out of a hundred and ninety-three passengers."

"Maybe I've spotted him for you. The slick-looking kid in the sharp suit in the lounge car."

"Mr. Delehanty is one of us, Simon. Sorry."

"Nice guess, Pell. Try again. Some sweet little old lady, maybe?"

"I said others. We know one of them. And we also know he didn't have the opportunity to kill Hanneman. So there are two of them. That was our tip. Two aboard. Plus Hanneman and Mrs. Pell. These people are canny. They don't contact each other. Not where it can be observed."

I frowned. It didn't seem to fit just right. "Look, maybe I'm stupid. But I thought, according to the comic books I read, that there was big dough in this importing dope for the twitch and flitter trade. So why the uproar over a lousy thirty thousand?"

"Thirty thousand plus a willing tool, Simon. First they'd take the thirty thousand, and then they'd show her one of the photostats of that receipt she signed. And then they'd send her down to join the Mexican end of the organization. They have a spot all planned for her we think. Using her obvious charms on gullible tourists to get them to take stuff across the border. She would do it well."

"And enjoy the work," I said flatly.

"She did hurt you, didn't she?"

"A long time ago, Skipper. Just the scar

itchés sometimes." I frowned again. "Say, don't they organize the smuggling better than that?"

"My dear Mr. Pell. The very best man you can get is some banker boy from Toledo with shining face, balding head and sterling reputation."

"Marj could collect that type like postage stamps."

"She's still got a little too much spirit for them. They planned to break her down, flatten her out good, and then put her to work after they had taken her for as much money as they could get."

"Lovely people."

"I've seen what they've done. I've seen a fifteen-year-old boy who was opening his wrist vein with a pin and using an eyedropper as a syringe to squirt himself full of dreams. I hate them, Simon. I hate their guts!"

"Look. I better pack. Not much time left."

"You'll have plenty of time, Simon. Everybody on this train is going to have a long personal interview, and show credentials. All of them are going to be hopping mad except one. And he's going to be scared and desperate."

CHAPTER THREE.

THE INVISIBLE MAN.

THEY ran the train over onto a siding that hadn't been used since Casey Jones took his header. It was out in a wilderness of tracks, out near a jungle of derelict box cars and rusting steam locomotives. Chicago came equipped with its usual strong wind. The train stopped and the men were already spotted. Spaced out. A perimeter guard with shotguns and riot guns through the crooks of their arms. Neat young men who leaned against the wind while their topcoats flapped.

A puffy little man with protruding glass-blue eyes collared me in the aisle "Friend, this is an outrage," he wheezed.

"What's the trouble?"

"Haven't you heard? Look where we are. Out in the middle of nowhere! Some bum was knifed on the train. Busybody cops have taken over one of the cars up front. We got to go up there, one at a time, and let them question us. Me. I got a meeting to go to."

The little man stamped on down the aisle, grunting and wheezing with indignation.

An official came through. "Kindly remain in your own car until called."

I looked out of my window for a while. They were handling it pretty well. Every few minutes one person or a couple would head across the tracks, wind-blown Elizas crossing the ice, heading toward civilization.

I wondered about Marj and decided to pay a little social call. I went into her car and tapped on her door.

"Yes?" a stentorian female voice said.

I pushed the door open. An iron-gray, slab-faced matron with eyes like roller bearings stared at me. She had three parallel scratches down her cheek. Marj sat on the bed. I forgot about the planted knife, about her greedy amorality. She was a child who now stood outside life's candy store, nose flattened wistfully against the glass, looking in at the goodies she could no longer afford.

They'd put handcuffs on her. The sleeve of her dress was ripped and her cheek was puffed, turning blue. She looked at me and said in a soft voice, "Thank's so much, Sim. Thanks for turning me in."

There was no hope of explaining to her. She had gone too far away. She wouldn't hear anything I said.

"Out," the matron said.

Out I went, feeling exactly as though, hat in hand, I had tiptoed into sickly flower scent to view a waxen face on the casket pillow. I felt soul-sick and emptied.

As I walked back, I told myself I was a big boy now. I shaved and everything. I'd even snuck up on a gook tank and blown the left tread off it before dropping a present inside that went boom. So this was just a tramp I happened to marry once. Lots of people marry tramps. Lots of tramps marry people. The silken wench was no longer a part of my life. It would be easy to forget her. Just as easy as leaving your head in the hatbox along with your hat.

I went into the boys' room and sat on the leather bench and exchanged cool stares with a salesman type inhabiting same bench, lipping an evil cigar butt.

"Hell of a note," he said.

"Yeah," said I.

He got up and slapped himself vigorously in the belly, belched largely and left, dropping the butt into a shallow spittoon where it hissed softly like a dying ballon.

I got up and aimlessly tried the john door. Locked, of course. I had me a drink of ice water. I wondered if the lounge car was in a fluid state. I wandered back toward it.

A conductor in a dark blue shiny suit said, "Stay in your own car, mister." He had bright red cheeks and frosty blue eyes and a shelf of yellow teeth that pushed his upper lip out of the way.

"Got the time?" I asked him.

He looked at his wrist watch. "Nearly eleven, mister."

I clumped back to the boys' room. I stood and looked out the top of the window, the unglazed part. The staunch young men were still leaning against the wind. I wondered how they'd work out as replacements in Korea. Replacements are so shocked at having the countryside loaded with eager little brown men who desire earnestly to shoot them dead, that they obligingly freeze and get shot. The ones who scramble fast enough to avoid this unhappy fate six or seven times thus become what the newspapers call "combat-hardened veterans."

The unobliging conductor appeared from somewhere on my right, spoke to one of the young law enforcers, and plodded across the tracks toward the distant station, shiny shoulders hunched against the fingers of the wind.

In due course they got to me. They said, "Okay, Pell. Sit over there." I sat. They were thorough with the ones who came after me. Name, occupation, residence, identification, any personal letters, please. Reason for the trip. All recorded neatly.

A hefty man with a tombstone face who seemed to be in charge said, with considerable satisfaction, "Okay. That's one ninety-two. He's on the train, boys. Go get him, and be careful."

Skipper moved over and sat across from me. "He was afraid to try to bluff his way through. We've got him now, Simon."

It took thirty minutes. The boys came back. They looked as if the old farmer had just rock-salted them out of the orchard.

"He's gone, Chief."

Tomb-face stood up. "Gone! How?"

Maybe he dropped off the train before it got here, Chief."

"Impossible! You know that as well as I do. Did you look everywhere?"

"Even the ladies' rooms," the thinnest one said with a pretty blush. "One part of them is locked, of course. The train people locked them as we were coming in."

"Maybe he picked the lock on one of them. Where's that conductor? Get his keys, Morgan."

"He went over to the station. He'll be back."

"Get keys some place, dammit!"

"Yes sir, Chief."

Skipper said, "If they don't find him that way, the only answer is that he brought his invisible coat along." She tried to smile, but there wasn't much heart in it. "We wanted to get this one. Our tipster told us he was very high in the organization."

I stared at her. I said, too loudly. "He did bring his invisible coat, honey."

Tomb-face glared at me. "Shut up, you."

I looked at him steadily. "Friend, maybe you've gotten too accustomed to talking to the lower classes. You use that tone of voice on me again and I'll slap a little courtesy into you."

"When we want suggestions, Pell, we'll—"

"Ask me, because I happen to have one. Something has been nibbling away at the back of my mind. Now I know what it is. If you want to hear it, suppose you tell me that you'll take it as easy as you can on Mrs. Pell."

"That isn't my decision to make, Pell."

"Then kindly go to hell. Every minute you stall, your friend is getting further away from here."

That got him. He probably had superiors riding him. He licked his lips and looked almost human.

"I'll see what I can do," he said uneasily.

"Okay. Did you ever ask a conductor what time it is? He pulls out a big gold turnip and tells you it is three and a half minutes to eleven. I ask a conductor the time. He looked at a wristwatch and said it was almost eleven. And then I saw him walk right through your cute little cordon out there. Who looks twice at a conductor's face? I can even tell you where the real conductor is. Knocked out, or dead, and locked in one of the johns with his own keys."

"I don't suppose you'd know what he looked like?" Tomb-face asked, but gently this time.

"I've got a vague idea. Five nine or ten. Hundred and sixty pounds. Gray hair, possibly bald on top. Bright red cheeks, high cheekbones, very cold little blue eyes. Big yellow teeth that stick out, making him look like Barney the Beaver. A lot of black hair on the backs of his hands. A gold ring, I think. Deep voice. Some holes in the side of his neck where he'd been lanced once upon a time. The right side-of-the neck."

"I didn't see him on the trip," Skipper said.

"You'll probably find a porter that brought his meals to his compartment or bedroom."

Tomb-face roared out of the car, and lit running, bellowing, waving his arms.

"You surprise me, Simon," Skipper said. "That was a nice job of identification."

"It doesn't surprise me as much as it would have a year ago. I've just had a lot of training in observation, Skipper."

They found the conductor with a mild concussion. He had opened a john door and a citizen had yanked him in by the front of his conductor suit and thumped his head against the wall. In there with the conductor was a nice gray expensive suit with the pockets emptied and the label ripped out of it. In a bedroom they found a brown bag, topcoat, felt hat. The hat had been purchased in Los Angeles, the bag in Seattle, and the laundry marks on the shirt were traced to a San Francisco hotel.

Skipper kept me informed. I had to remain in Chicago. I was the guy who could make a positive identification, when and if they picked up our boy. Evidently Barney the Beaver had walked through the station and into a bottomless pit. The man they had been able to grab on the train was small fry, and he was not inclined to be talkative.

CHAPTER FOUR.

THE EAGER BEAVER.

YES. Skipper kept me informed. She let me hold her hand in the movies. The petaled eyes stared at me over the rims of cocktail glasses. Her stride was long beside me as we walked dark streets. She let me kiss her, and, unlike Marj, it wasn't a tigress reaction. It was more like a kitten when you start to cuddle and then it takes a surprisingly sharp slash at you. We traded life histories, exchanged ideas and dislikes, discovered a song that was 'our song', and all the rest of it. You can't dress it up. It is common, ordinary, everyday falling in love. To the people involved it feels like it had never happened to anyone in just that way.

Marj's charms had been startlingly self-evident. But Skipper had a knack of creeping up on you. She would happen, by accident, to turn just so, or stand in a certain way—and whoomp—there would be a line so breathtakingly lovely, so full of

a soft and lingering promise, that it could make a bill collector weep.

Over three a.m. coffee in a bean wagon, I told her she better marry me. She was lifting her cup and it stopped in mid-air, wavered and floated back down to the saucer. Her lips were the shape of your first game of post-office.

"This is so sudden. Give me time to think it over. . . . Okay, I've thought it over. Yes, Simon. Oh, yes, yes, yes!"

The ham-handed counterman propped his chin on his fists and looked dreamy. "So lovely," he purred. "Such a beautiful emotion, love."

Coffee was on the house. Wedding present number one.

For three days I went around, patting children on the head. Some of the hard-bitten Chicago tykes spat through a curled lip and said, "Go pat ya own head, ya creep."

My phone rang beside my hotel bed in the middle of the night. "Simon, darling. I'm down in the lobby."

"Check in with the house dick and come up."

I had time to ice-water my face and belt myself into a robe and jam the ugly toe-less foot stubs into the trick shoes before she came through the door I had opened for her.

I kissed her. "Aha! You are now in my powah, fair maid," I said.

She didn't smile. "Simon, I had to come and tell you this. I had to be the one to tell you. Dear Simon. I've been so jealous of her, of what she had of you and what she took away from you. Now I'm so ashamed."

I stared at her, at tears she ignored. "You talking about Marj?"

"Get yourself a drink, Simon, and sit down."

I obeyed orders. I slugged myself with a dollop of bourbon. I had the feeling I wasn't going to like this.

I didn't like it at all. Mrs. Pell, in the middle of the night, had taken her baggy gray prison dress and had ripped it into strips, woven the strips into a makeshift rope, fashioned a slipknot. Then she had soaked the rope so that the knot would slide tight. There being nothing in the cell she could hang herself to, she had merely put the noose around her neck, tied the free end to a bar of the cell door, then thrown herself backward. Apparently she had tried to change her

mind later. She had clawed and torn her throat in the area of the wet knot, but it had buried itself too deeply.

I got up and walked to the windows, looking out, seeing nothing. I was remembering things. The position in which she always slept. Curled up, childish, seemingly innocent. Her passion for lizard shoes. Sound of her laughter. Her warm lips.

Though I had thought myself cured of her, some part of me died while I stood and looked out the windows at the sleeping city.

Incongruously, I remembered two Marine sergeants who had hated each other with bloody fervour. Twice they had gone after each other with knives. No name was too foul to call the other. Fate had trapped them in the same outfit, and kept them there. And then I had seen one of them by a bridge over the Yalu River, crying like a child, vocalizing his sobs, staring at the mortar-smashed body of the other.

Skipper came up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Do you want me to stay for awhile, Simon?"

"No thanks. I'll be okay in the morning. Thanks for telling me right away, Skip."

"I love you, Simon. Remember that."

"You're my girl. That woman was a stranger. Someone I happened to know once upon a time."

I smiled at her, but I guess the smile wasn't too convincing. Maybe the ache and the sense of loss was showing. Her tears had stopped and her smile was measured, precise, careful.

"Good night, Simon."

I walked her to the door and opened it. Barney the Beaver slid in, kicked the door shut and slid along the wall. His gun was aimed in exactly the right place to keep me from moving—right where Skipper's high round hip curved into her slender waist.

"You're the bright boy," he said huskily.

"Your looking a little shopworn," I said. "Lost weight, haven't you? Where have you been hiding? In the zoo with the rest of the beavers?"

"Pick the girl up. Go on. Pick her up."

I did so. One arm under her knees, one arm under her shoulders, my left hand under her armpit where I could feel, against my fingers, the delicate rib cage, the hard *ka-thud* of her heart. It was a cute idea. She couldn't do anything and neither could I. Unless I wanted to rush him, using her as a shield.

"What are the plans?" I said.

"With you gone, Pell, they haven't got anything that will stand up in court. They can inconvenience the hell out of me, but they can't prove anything for keeps."

"Sounds logical. Gets you out of one jam and into another."

It is distinctly a lot of shinola about guys fresh from combat sneering at a feeble little thing like a Police Positive with the barrel hacked off to a two-inch length. I did not feel confident that I could catch those slugs in my teeth and spit them back at him. I felt that they would make large holes in me and those holes would hurt like hell, and I wanted no part of them.

His face was more yellow than I remembered it. He still looked, though, as if he should be wearing a conductor suit. He chomped his underlip with those horse teeth.

He appeared to be thinking.

Skipper looked at him for a long time, then turned her face toward my chest. Her arm was around my shoulder. I didn't blame her for looking away. A truly evil man is never pretty, particularly when he is busy contemplating evil. He gave a little shrug that meant he had made up his mind.

"Now do just like I tell you, and it won't hurt either of you a bit."

"What are we going to have, a suicide pact?"

He sucked the big teeth. It sounded like a Ubangi kiss. "Out the window hand in hand," he said. "Lover's leap. But you'll be sleeping while you drop, kids."

Skipper took a deep breath and began to tremble more violently. She wasn't at all brave. Me, I showed no reaction at all, if you don't count the sweat that was running down into my socks.

"Set her down," he said. I did. "Now come here, girl. Circle around so I can keep an eye on smart boy. That's a girl. Now turn around. Easy."

As soon as her back was to him, he reached out with his free hand and grabbed her wrist, twisted it up between her shoulder blades. Her small whimper was quickly stifled. I saw her face turn gray.

"Now smart boy, sit down at that desk and write. Move!"

Any hesitation I felt was immediately cancelled out by her slightly shriller sound of pain. She didn't break down. She didn't cry. She stood and took it and shut her teeth hard on the pain of it.

Chess is a lovely game. The opponent starts making a series of forcing moves. You make the predicted answering move each time. And you wait and you hope to find a hole in the attack.

"Write what I say. To whom it may concern. We are taking the only way out. We have no regrets." Got that?"

The hotel nib scratched along the stationery. "Sign it," he said. I signed it. My own death certificate.

"Now don't move. Put your hands flat on that table and don't move a muscle."

My chance. I put my hands flat on the table. My ears went to work for me. I could hear the grass growing in a park three blocks away. I could hear city traffic in Cleveland. And with my hands braced, I heard the soft scuff of shoe leather on the rug. I heard the fabric of his sleeve scrape against the fabric of the side of his coat as he lifted his arm.

I shoved myself back toward him, hard. With all the strength I could put into my arms and legs, I shot back at him. And shot back into the direct path of some damn fool who was driving through the hotel room with a tractor-trailer combo. He ran me down and smashed my head like a stomped pumpkin.

I was nine fathoms deep in a warm tank of oil, dirty oil that would raise hell with your ring job. I was swirled gently, end for end, in the depths of the oil tank. And then I stopped whirling and began to float slowly toward the surface, face down. Surface tension held me under, then let me up with a popping sound. Now I rested on top of the surface of the oil. And under my cheek the texture changed. From oil to hotel rug. The truck had run over my head with tire chains on.

I have a notoriously hard skull. In my school we used to have butting contests. Simon the Goat, they called me.Flushed with victory, I let a girl named Hortense tap me one day with the flat of a hatchet. She used both hands. I was punchy for three weeks but otherwise undamaged.

I had recently come from a place where, if you are knocked down, you do not sit up until reasonably certain that what you intend to sit on has not been shot off in the excitement.

Shoes whispered on the rug. Hard fingers got hold of my ear and twisted it. My head was lifted off the floor by the car. When the fingers let go, I let my head bounce on the rug. I looked through the

lashes of the eye closest to the rug. A large shoe was three inches from my nose. It went away. Beyond it I saw my girl. Not all of her. Just the pleasant curvature of her back as she lay face down on the floor. Her back moved just enough so that I could tell she was breathing.

And suddenly she was hauled out of sight. The window was over that way. I took a look. Barney the Beaver was dragging her to the window. I didn't want my girl dropped out the window. My room was on the fourteenth floor. Barney had said we were going out hand in hand, not one at a time. Drop one first and somebody is going to look up in time to see the second party get thrust out. But it was hell to keep my head down and wonder if he'd changed his plans.

His feet came over again. He hoisted my ankles and dragged me over to the window, face down. I let my head roll to the side. Warmth touched my hand. Warmth under the girl-clothes. The window slid up. Nice and wide open. Probably the Beaver planned to put us face down over the wide sill, side by side, then upsy-daisy with our heels.

Thoughts and conjectures were roaring through my mind like trains heading through a tunnel. And before the sound of the opening window had completely ceased, it occurred to me that the most natural thing for any man to do when planning to drop a heavy package out a window is to take a look down and make certain that there is nothing in the way of the drop.

I counted up to the square root of minus three and came up fast.

Maybe some character comes to rescue the girl on horseback, waving his lance like crazy. And some other joker bares his manly fists and whips the seven villains while she looks on, her eyes glowing with girlish pride. Me—I merely put each hand firmly against the two hemispherical sections where his shabby pants were the tightest and gave a nervous shove. I think I also gave a nervous giggle. I didn't feel heroic. I even felt it was a dirty trick.

He went out like the fat clown who always gets pushed into the swimming pool. His legs scissored through the open window without even brushing the sides.

He must have taken a big gulp of that cold night air as he went out. Because the whistling scream started immediately, and

he screamed all the way down through the night, like one of those whistling sky-rockets they used to shoot off on the fourth of July.

When the scream stopped, I looked out cautiously, gagged weakly, and sat on the floor.

My girl had blood in her hair. I pulled her head into my lap. I kissed her lips, nose, cheeks, forehead and eyelids. I tried to pick her up, but she had gotten too heavy for me. I looked at her, and Marj was something that had happened to another guy in another country in another generation. I know that Skip would be very glad to know that this had happened to me, and I would tell her as soon as possible.

I struggled up with her and wavered over to the bed. There was a knock at the door. I opened it.

A chesty somebody beefed his way in and said, "You got a woman in here, bud?" As he asked the question, he was already staring at her.

My lovely sat up. Great girl. Bust her one on the head and she wakes up looking like a Simmons ad.

"That is no woman, sir, that is—"

"Don't give me no smart talk, bud."

A siren moaned in the distance, drawing nearer. I said, "Excuse me, sir, but I'm afraid we dropped something out that window a few moments ago. It landed down by the streetlight."

"Bud, there's an ordinance against dropping stuff out hotel windows. If it was hotel property, you got to make it good."

My cornflower blonde had begun to comprehend. Her eyes looked faintly sick, but at the same time awfully glad.

The beef trust waddled over and stuck his head and shoulders out the window. He stiffened and his wet lips made flapping sounds in the night. I paused behind him and looked, with a tinge of regret I must admit, at the general area where he carried his wallet.

I put my hands firmly in my pockets. You've got to watch a thing like that. It can turn into a compulsion neurosis.

My lovely lassoed me with her big shining eyes, and I didn't hear a yammering word the beef trust said, even though he was jumping clean off the floor every time he took a breath.

PSORIASIS

Whatever the extent, and it may be anything from two or three small spots on elbows and knees to large patches on the scalp, body and limbs. Psoriasis is always most distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer.

Psoriasis forms a white lustrous scale on a reddened area of skin. Both the scale and skin are always dry unless broken or brought away by too much force when scratching or combing.

In most cases the reddened skin is of a normal temperature and the scale thick and raised on the skin, especially on the scalp, elbows and knees. Where the skin is of finer texture as on the body, scaling takes place as thin flakes or a light powder. In severe cases all the scales—thick, thin, flake or powder—will come away in shoals.

The onset of Psoriasis varies considerably. It may be hereditary, may occur with puberty, may follow injury, exposure, shock, worry, faulty nutrition or faulty elimination. It may also be persistent and recurring, and sufferers despair of ever having a clear, healthy skin.

A NEW OUTLOOK Brochure for all sufferers

No matter how long you have suffered, no matter how many eruptions you may have, no matter how extensive the eruptions may be, the brochure will bring renewed hope of a clear and healthy skin. It tells of others who suffered for years but had complete relief. Psoriasis that was very extensive and persistent yielded to a skin without blemish.

Think what a healthy skin means to you. No unsightly scale, nor distressing patches or redness, no irritation and no more embarrassing anxiety when you are at work or with your friends. With a healthy skin you can work with pleasure; you can join freely in sports, recreation and social activities with your friends; you can dress with pride; you can share the freedom and happiness of holidays, a new life is opened out to you.

Here is the opportunity you have sought. Send for Brochure and full particulars of Tremol Treatment. They are of vital importance to all Psoriasis sufferers. Do not despair and suffer needlessly. Write to-day enclosing 6d. in stamps. You will receive the Brochure and particulars by return of post. Address your letter:—

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF HEALTH
ENQUIRY DEPARTMENT S. M.
GREAT CLOWES STREET
BROUGHTON, MANCHESTER, 7

STRICTLY GUILT-EDGED

Suspense Novelette

By ALBERT SIMMONS

*A murder sent Joe Bonney crashing millionaires' row—
to see how the other half killed.*

CHAPTER ONE.

RUN, FALL GUY, RUN!

THE man sat there next to the elevator, perching his meager hundred and twenty pounds on a small wooden stool. He was a gaunt old fellow, with small bony hands and a thick puff of hair as white as absorbent cotton. Time had stretched his thin parchment skin too tightly over his rugged cheek bones, and his watery blue eyes gave the impression of being lost eons ago behind the wrinkles etched so deeply on his thin face. His head nodded forward on his chest and he moved木denly to put it back. He caught himself dozing often these past few months. He was tired, very tired.

Somewhere a door slammed and he stirred slowly, lethargically. It can be murderously hot in mid-July—particularly in the City Hospital, running the night elevator.

The mechanical annunciator in the outmoded wire cage was strangely silent; everything was strangely silent. It was as if everyone living had surrendered to the heat, the hot, sticky waves of sultry heat that rose in ever-widening circles from the sunbaked pavements and spiralled up over the entire city like the undulating coils of a giant snake.

He leaned forward on the small wooden stool and laboriously pulled a large red handkerchief from his pocket and mopped slowly at his sweating face. The movement only made him hotter, so he leaned back again and sat still. He'd heard no sound for about an hour, except a door slamming nearby. He wondered about it a little. Sighing, he looked up at the pockmarked face of the clock high on the wall.

"Nine o'clock," he whispered to himself like a boy learning his lessons. "Only nine o'clock."

He heard the door slam again, and he

lifted the thin oval of his face from its resting place on his chest and listened. Someone was running—running with the swift, jerky sound of desperation. The footsteps were light, pattering on the floor above. Then they stopped directly above his upraised eyes.

He still was looking when he heard the stealthy sound on the staircase. Someone was coming down the stairs. But there was nothing unusual in that, except for the way the figure moved.

—Swiftly, smoothly the dark shadow flowed down the stairs. There was no sound except the sharp, staccato sound of leather heels against concrete—that and the labored breathing of the old man by the elevator.

He waited, his straining ears following the slithering movement down the short flight of stairs. Then, as he saw the shadow outlined on the wall, his tired old legs pushed his body to an upright position.

"Who's there?" he croaked. "Who is it?"

There was no answer. The figure moved quickly, silently, hugging the black shadows beyond reach of the lone bulb that burned dimly inside the elevator. The figure was small, thin, wearing a leather jacket open at the throat. A nondescript cap, pulled low over the face, hid the eyes.

The old man saw the hand come out of the pocket. It was small and white, but the .38-calibre gun was big and black. He backed away, terror grabbing him at the throat so he couldn't speak. As the figure followed him inside the cage, the old man threw his hands up in front of his face. He didn't want to see . . . he didn't want to see!

The gun spoke sharply once, twice, three times . . . The sound of running feet was soon lost in the darkness of the night, and all that was left was the silence and heat, the acrid smell of gunpowder and the crumpled, lifeless body on the floor of the elevator cage. And a red stain spreading over the old man's white hair. . . .

Joe Bonney was a patient guy. But when

he sat at his desk on the second floor of City Hospital and for the fourth time was asked to tell it again, Joe Bonney lost his temper.

"Damn it," he growled, "I've told you all I know! How many times more—"

Detective-Sergeant Keefer slapped the desk with a hand as big as a catcher's mitt. "As many times as we want you to, bub," he snapped.

Joe was tempted to tell him where to go. Then he sank back into the swivel chair and stared straight ahead of him. He was trembling, and he could feel the small rivulets of perspiration trickling down his chest. He yanked out a handkerchief from his hip pocket and swabbed the sweat from his neck.

Lieutenant Machelis got up and looked out of the open window. Then he went over and held out a pack of cigarettes. "Want one, son?" He smiled, and it was a nice smile for a cop. The detective moved his hand closer. "Go ahead, son, take one."

Joe fingered a cigarette from the pack and let the lieutenant light it for him. He was almost amused by the sudden switch in tactics; it was so obviously an attempt at the psychological approach.

Joe leaned back and his eyes followed the smoke to the ceiling. The clock on the wall said eleven o'clock. He could hardly believe it. Was it only two hours ago that they had found the body of old man Schwemer? He sighed. They'd been pounding at him now for about an hour and a half, but it seemed much longer.

They waited a few moments. Then the lieutenant said. "Go ahead, son tell it again. Just once more, huh?"

Joe inhaled deeply, fighting for control. He finally expelled a long feathery plume of blue smoke into the air and spoke quietly, as if he were telling it for the first time.

"The kid came in here around nine o'clock," he said. "He wasn't a big fellow. As a matter of fact he was rather small, but he was sure as young as hell."

"How young?"

"Sixteen, maybe seventeen." He rubbed his hand across his forehead. "I don't know—sixteen, I guess. He had a real baby face."

"What was he wearing?"

"A leather jacket and a cap. A cap pulled way down over his eyes."

"What kind of cap?" the sergeant asked.

"I told you three times before—I don't know. It was just a cap."

"Go on."

"He pulled a gun on me and told me it was a stick-up. I tried to tell him that there was no money around, but he kept waving his cannon in the air and yakking about money."

"What happened then?"

"He picked up the inkwell with his left hand and started to throw it at me, but when it dripped on his jacket he put it back on the desk and made me go into the closet."

"You're a brave guy, ain't you, sonny?" taunted the sergeant. "Somebody ought to give you a medal for being such a hero."

Joe got up slowly, the fingers of his right hand smoothing the side of his head—the side of his head where they'd put that silver plate thirteen days after they'd picked him up in a certain place in Korea.

The sergeant was saying, "Looks like the old guy had more guts than you, bub. At least he put up a fight."

But I'm alive, thought Joe. *I'm alive.* And then as the throbbing started again in his head, he wondered if he could call himself really alive. As long as he kept getting these headaches He sat down as suddenly as though someone had kicked his legs out from under him.

"That's all I know, Lieutenant," he muttered. "I've told you four times now; that's all I know about it."

The lieutenant was looking at a massive piece of heavy glass on the desk. "About that inkwell," he said, his eyes shifting to Joe's face. "Now let's see. The gunman picked it up and started to hit you with it and—" He cocked his head at an acute angle. "What happened again?"

"I told you," Joe cried desperately. "The ink spilled out on his shoulder."

The sergeant walked over and for the fourth time examined the floor around the desk. "You lie like hell, bub," he said. "Where's the stain?"

"The stain?"

"The inkstain! If he spilled the ink, where is it?"

Joe's mouth twitched. "I don't know. I guess the inkwell was almost dry"

"Dry! You just said that it spilled over his jacket."

"No, no!" Joe said quickly. "I said almost dry. There was just enough left in it to spill on his clothing."

But the sergeant wasn't listening and neither was Lieutenant Machelis. They were just looking. Joe Bonney knew then that

BLACK MASK DETECTIVE

they hadn't believed a single word he had said in the last hour and a half. That was why they'd made him repeat it four times. That was why they'd kept asking the same questions over and over again.

They were laughing at him now; he could see that quite plainly. Damn that headache, he thought . . . He shook his head from side to side.

The lieutenant was talking again. "Tell us about the boy again, huh, son?"

"Yeah," growled the sergeant. "Let's hear about this here baby-faced killer nobody saw but you, and the inkwell that dripped disappearing ink! Go on, bub. Tell us about it!"

Joe sat there with his fingers hooked around the wooden arms of the chair. Why were they looking at him like that? Why were they? . . . The pain in his head stopped as suddenly as it had started, and he knew what they were thinking.

They had their man. Why should they look farther? He was as good a suspect as anybody. It was Joe Bonney . . . Joe Bonney . . . Joe Bonney.

They let him go to the washroom alone. Ten minutes later, when the sergeant got suspicious and went looking for him, he was gone. The window was wide open and Joe Bonney was gone . . .

Betty twisted in bed and looked up at the ceiling of her small apartment. The gravelled roof had sopped up the hot sun all day long, and now the heat was seeping down into the floor below.

It was hot tonight, murderously hot, and Betty wondered if she'd ever get to sleep. She sat up and reached down below her knees to pull the sheet up to her armpits. Then she fell backwards onto the disturbingly warm pillow and gently shook the sheet up and down until enough of a breeze was created to dry the sticky perspiration on her lithe young body.

She stopped presently because even that slight effort made her warmer—and because she thought she heard footsteps on the roof. She listened, her body tense, her ears straining. There it was again, the subdued crunching of shoe-leather on gravel. She sat up slowly, her small, white hands still holding onto the end of the sheet. There was the slight clink of heels on metal, and she shivered.

Slowly, carefully, the footsteps came down the iron fire-escape outside her room. The window was wide open and the man

could see inside. She was sitting there, her face pale and tense, her hair a black blob against the white.

He leaned forward. "Betty?" he whispered softly. "Betty?"

"Joe!" It was a choked sob that wrenched itself from deep inside her. She jack-knifed out of bed and darted toward the figure just outside the window, her pink nightgown ballooning as she ran. "Oh, Joe, I was so scared!"

He crouched there on the fire-escape, his arms tight around her. "Betty, honey," he murmured, "I had to come."

She didn't answer but, as though from habit, tilted her head back to be kissed. She was trembling.

His lips touched hers. "I frightened you, honey," he said. "I didn't mean to. I wouldn't . . ."

There was something in the way he spoke. She freed herself from his arms, her brown eyes searching his face. "What's the matter, Joe? What is it?"

Worry was twisting the soft fullness of her red lips, and he wished he hadn't come. But he had. Where else could he go?

Betty looked down at her thin nightgown and backed away slightly. "Do you know the Blue Cabin?" she asked. "The place on the corner?"

He nodded.

"I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes," she said.

He sat there at a small table in the corner and let the air-conditioned coolness dry the beads of moisture collected on his chest and back. He looked up as the waiter approached. "Two rum collins," he said and glanced toward the door.

By the time the tall, frosty glasses were placed on the table-top, Betty's small, lithesome figure was coming through the doorway. He watched her, liking the way she walked.

He got up and kissed her, then sat back and looked at her. She looked lovely and cool in her white dress.

"How the hell do you do it?" he said. "You look so damned cool."

She sipped at the rum collins, then put her small hand on his. "What's the matter, Joe?" she asked. "Don't try to fool me because I know something's wrong."

He nodded. "There is, honey." He took a long swallow from his glass while she waited quietly. "Old man Schwemer is dead."

He saw shock and pity vie with each

other for possession of her face. "Oh," she said softly.

"He was murdered, Betty. They found the poor guy lying in his elevator."

"Oh, no!"

He nodded his head. "He was murdered, honey," he said again in a low tone, "and they think—" She winced, and he suddenly realized that his big paw was crushing her fingers. He was surprised; he hadn't even known he was holding on to her. He let go of her hand and clutched the tabletop. "They—the police think I killed him, Betty."

If he'd ever doubted that she loved him, the stricken look in her eyes removed all doubt now.

"Joe," she murmured brokenly. "Oh, my poor, poor Joe!"

"I've got to get away from them, Betty. Now—tonight." His voice was desperately quiet. "You've got to let me have your car."

She shook her head at him. "No, no, you musn't run. You can't do that!"

"You don't understand," he groaned. "It's the only way."

"Give yourself up, Joe. You must. You're not a murderer. Give yourself up."

He didn't answer. Almost automatically he took another drink from his glass. The throbbing had started in his head again. If only they'd believe him. They thought he'd made up the baby-faced gunman. Well, he'd just have to find him then—the berserk kid with the leather jacket and the thirty-eight caliber gun. In a city of millions. Damn that headache . . .

"Joe." Her voice came at him through a thick fog of pain. "I just realized something. He expected it, Joe. The old man expected to die."

"Huh?"

"Listen to me, Joe." She was tugging at his shirt-sleeve. "Mr. Schwemer once told me that they'd find him someday. They'd find him, he said, and when they did. . . ."

Joe fought the pain, focussing on what Betty was saying. "Go on!" He reached across the table and grabbed at her arms. A glass went over noisily and splashed out a puddle of liquid. He let go then and sank back in the chair, and the waiter came over and mopped at the wet place. "Bring two more," Joe said. The waiter went away.

"Remember when Mr. Schwemer used to come over to my place for spaghetti and meatballs?" Betty said. "One time when

you had to leave early, he stayed and talked to me. That's when he told me."

"Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah, I remember. But he never told me. He never said anything like that."

"Maybe not," she said, "but he told me, Joe. I paid no attention to it then. I thought it was just an old man's imagination. Maybe if I had . . ."

"What was he talking about?" Joe interrupted her. "Who was 'they'? Who did he mean?"

She shook her head, frowning. "I don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

He picked up the fresh glass and drank slowly. Was there really someone who wanted the old man dead? No, it was too fantastic. A gun-crazy kid had just pulled a holdup and the old man had tried to stop him. The kid had gotten panicky and shot him three times.

"Maybe I should open it now," Betty was saying. "I mean right away."

"Open what?"

"The letter, Joe." She sounded breathless. "Mr. Schwemer gave me a letter and told me not to open it until after his death. Do you think—?"

CHAPTER TWO.

THE HOUSE OF SCHERMERHORN.

He waited in the car for her outside her apartment. When she came back, a small white rectangle of paper was in her hand. He drove slowly while she opened the letter, but when the pink slip with the perforated edges fell into Betty's lap, he stopped the car fast.

"It's a check, Joe," she gasped. "It's a check for ten thousand dollars!" She started to laugh hysterically. "Ten thousand dollars, Joe—made out to me! See, my name's on it!"

He reached over and took it from her, looking for Schwemer's signature. It wasn't there. Instead, written in a small, cramped hand was the name: *W. C. Schermerhorn*.

He gave her back the check. Betty was talking a mile a minute about the money, and what they could do with it, but Joe Bonney wasn't listening. There was something he was trying to remember, something he knew he should remember. Schermerhorn. Schermerhorn. Where had he heard that name before?

"Betty!" He yelled her name so

suddenly that she jumped. "I remember now! Schermerhorn's the name of that missing millionaire! Schwemer was Schermerhorn—W. C. Schermerhorn!"

Six months ago the papers were filled with the name of W. C. Schermerhorn. He was an oil millionaire from Oklahoma who, as the years piled on his ageing shoulders, tried to give his wealth away faster than it flowed out of the ground. His family, living with him on his Long Island estate, had filed a charge of mental incompetence against him. One day, on the way to the hearing, the old man had disappeared. He'd been seen once shortly afterwards around his old haunts in Oklahoma, but after that he was swallowed up and never seen again.

Betty just sat there clutching the ten-thousand-dollar check in her hand. "That old man a millionaire," she whispered. "A millionaire!" She looked at him. "But if he was so rich, why did he live like that? Why did he run an elevator in the City Hospital?"

Joe shrugged absently. He was thinking, thinking hard. This opened up a world of possibilities. Maybe there was someone who wanted the old man out of the way. Maybe it hadn't been a trigger-happy gunman after all.

He drove her back to her house and opened the car door. "I'll be back," he said.

She didn't move. "What are you going to do, Joe?"

"Don't worry, honey, I'm not running away. Not any more." He kissed her briefly and said, "A man's got to do what he's got to do."

She got out reluctantly, knowing it was futile to argue. As he watched her figure rapidly shrinking in the rear view mirror, he wondered what the police would say when they identified the old man's body as that of the missing oil man. Would that start them looking for someone else—or was it just a fall guy they wanted? There had been rumors in the columns recently about Police Headquarters. One thing Joe Bonney knew for sure—he wasn't going to take a murder rap so some politically minded police lieutenant could be a hero!

Joe drove across the 59th Street Bridge to Long Island, and he didn't stop until he entered the little town of Rosedale about forty miles out on the narrow neck of land. He found a drugstore in the village, and a phone book told him where the Schermerhorns lived. That's what he wanted. He wasn't sure why, but that's where he was going. To the Schermerhorns.

It was a large fenced-in estate on a dark out-of-the-way road about a quarter of a mile off the main highway. He parked the car on the grass and got out. It was much cooler here than in the city, though still a hot night. He looked at the long black line of tall poplars. Somewhere behind them was the Schermerhorn home, and he went looking for it.

The hundreds of trees standing stiffly at attention, shoulder to shoulder in parade formation, were a natural barrier against the inquisitive, but Joe Bonney wasn't just inquisitive. He found a break in their military stance and pushed open the wire gate, then started up the long cinder road that led to the house.

He could see the shadowy outlines of the main building in front of him. It was large and it rambled, the way a millionaire's home should ramble. It was still partially hidden by trees and shrubbery. The thick grass muffled his footsteps, and everything was very quiet. The only sound was the whisper of a wind blowing up from the Sound. Then it died and the silence was absolute.

As he approached the front of the house, he could see that the entrance was dark. The entire house was dark except for a single light that laid its thin shaft of brilliance out on the green carpet of the lawn. He started up the three steps to the door.

"Hold it, fellow!" said a gruff voice behind him.

He turned, peering at the sound. He couldn't see the face, but a huge, dark form was standing on the grass nearby. It was tall and broad, with the kind of proportions usually found only in the prize ring or the circus. He moved ominously toward him.

"Where you going, fellow? Ain't you out kinda late?"

Maybe if the big hulk hadn't pawed at Joe's shoulder, it wouldn't have happened. Joe didn't like the feel of the hand on him so he moved his arm. The big guy apparently got the wrong idea, because he lashed out with a right fist as hard as granite. Joe went down on his face, making kissing noises at the green grass.

A big hand reached down, hooked into his shirt and dragged him roughly to his feet. "What you want, fellow, huh?"

Joe spat blood out of his mouth and told him to go to hell.

The big fellow moved quickly for such a

huge man. Joe's right arm suddenly was behind his back and so was the hefty guy. With that kind of armlock there was no alternative; Joe had to do exactly as he was told.

The strong boy marched him around to the rear of the house and turned him loose, but not for long. "Now, fellow," he said through his teeth, "let's hear it, huh? What did you say you were doing here?"

Joe was slow to answer and the giant moved menacingly.

"I want to see them," Joe said hastily as he bobbed his head toward the house. "I want to see the Schermerhorns."

The booming laugh had the deep-throated roar of the jungle in it. "Tonight? Now?" He promptly answered his own question. "Too late, bud. Come around in the morning."

"No," Joe said stubbornly. "I've got to see them tonight."

The giant laughed again and started forward with a low shambling gait that had a natural brutality built into it. He grabbed Joe's shirt in one oversized fist and cocked the other.

"What's going on here, Gino?" said a soft feminine voice out of the shadows.

They hadn't heard her come across the grass. Her feet were bare, and as she walked toward them, Joe saw she was wearing a scant white bathing suit moulded to her figure by hundreds of glistening drops of water. He hid his amazement. Of course millionaires had swimming pools, and they probably took moonlight dips whenever the mood struck them.

"What's going on here, Gino?" she asked again in a voice that had the low vibrant sound of music in it.

The big man nodded at Joe Bonney. "I found him sneaking around, Miss Schermerhorn. Trespassing."

She ran her hand through the thick, lustrous hair, pale gold in the moonlight, that caressed the tips of her ears and the white of her neck. She directed her question at Joe then. "What do you want? It's very late."

Joe didn't answer right away, and the heavy fist of the man called Gino crashed into his jaw and dumped him face forward on the grass again. He was slow getting up this time. When he did, his head was ringing with the thunderous clamor of many deep-toned bells.

Through the noise he heard Miss Schermerhorn saying, "Don't do that again, Gino,

do you hear? I won't have it." She stamped her bare foot on the grass. "I won't have it!"

Joe straightened up, rubbing the side of his head. "It's about the old man, Miss Schermerhorn," he said. "I want to talk to you about the old man."

"What about the old man?" Gino growled, and thrust his massive head close to Joe's face.

The girl bent over and pushed the big man away. "That's enough, Gino," she said. "I'll handle this." He backed away grudgingly, like a dog over a bone. She stood looking at Joe, carefully scrutinizing his every line. Her inspection was sharp, almost brazen. "What about Grandfather?" she asked. "What is it you want to say?"

Joe stood there, his feet wide apart, his eyes narrowed, squinting through the tormenting waves of pain that blurred his vision.

"Huh?" The word sounded thick.

"What is it about my grandfather?" She went closer, peering intently at his face. Then she seemed to make up her mind. She pulled at his arm. "Come on."

Gino stepped forward. "Look, Miss, you oughtn't to do that, I think—"

"You're not paid to think," her voice whipped out at him. It was as brittle as glass and cut just as deeply. Big, rough, brutal Gino winced and walked rapidly away, his broad back seeming to fill the entire horizon as he went.

She turned towards Joe. "I'm Greta Schermerhorn," she said quietly. "Come inside."

She threw a short white terrycloth robe over her shoulders. He noticed that she seemed to wear it with studied carelessness—the front slightly open like the partly drawn curtains of a well-ordered house.

"It was so hot," she murmured, as if to explain her late swimming. Then immediately she turned her attention to the problem of old Mr. Schermerhorn. "Have you found him? Do you know where he is?"

Joe nodded, trying to think what he should do, what he should say to the lovely creature so close to him. But now that he was here, inside the house, he didn't seem to know.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why did you come here?" Her questions were crackling with machine-gun rapidity. "What do you know about Grandfather?"

"I've got news about him," Joe said, for want of a better way to open the subject.

It hurt to see the way her eyes lit up. "Really?" she cried joyfully. "Oh, I've been so worried!" Pain crossed her face like a dark shadow. "Poor Grandfather, they said he was insane. But they could never make me believe that." She smiled then, and he thought that he'd never seen anything lovelier. "Where is he?" she asked with great intensity. "Where is poor Grandfather?"

There were sudden heavy sounds upstairs, as though someone were moving around in the room above. Joe seized upon the diversion. "Who's that?" he asked.

The girl moved closer and gripped his arm. "Don't tell them—please don't tell them you've found Grandfather!" Her gorgeous blue eyes were desperate. "They've tried to find him. They've tried for so long. And if they do . . ."

She left it unsaid, but Joe could finish it for her. They'd do just what they *had* done—murder him.

Gradually the headache was leaving him, and he began wondering about her—wondering about the people upstairs and the huge man she had called Gino.

"Who would stand to gain if the old man was committed?" he asked. He paused. "Or if he died?"

She looked at him, startled. "I—I would," she said simply. "And my aunt and uncle and my two cousins."

"But you don't think the old boy's off his rocker?" he asked bluntly.

"No," she told him. "And even if I did, I still wouldn't want him committed. I—I couldn't."

"Then who would?"

"I would!" said a loud bull-like voice from behind.

A red-faced man with a small, gimlet eyes and a thin mouth strode forward from the open doorway. A flush of anger colored his flat, uneven features. "Any old fool who would give his money away to strangers instead of to his own flesh and blood is crazy, plain crazy, and *should* be put away!"

He stopped with his jutting jaw inches from Joe's face. "What business is it of yours?" he shouted apoplectically. "Who the hell are you?" He turned to the girl. "This is some time of night to have callers, young lady!"

Her chin quivered, but Greta Schermerhorn wasn't the type to cry. "He's an investigator," she said. "It—it's about Grandfather."

He looked almost as surprised as Joe Bonney felt. "What?" he shouted.

She ignored the evident tone of disbelief and said, "This is my uncle, Mr. Schermerhorn—Frank Schermerhorn." she looked at Joe, her eyes flashing distress signals as fast as she could, and he realized she didn't know his name.

He stepped forward quickly, holding out his hand. "I'm Joe Bonney," he said.

Frank Schermerhorn glared at the extended palm and didn't take it. He frowned at the girl. "Look here, Greta, what's this all about?"

"I told you," she mumbled.

"Bah! He's no investigator. At this time of night?"

It did seem a little ridiculous on the face of it, but with Greta still flashing danger signals at him with her white, scared face, Joe played along, insisting that he'd come there for information to do with old man Schermerhorn's disappearance six months before.

Frank Schermerhorn went over and thrust his beefy hand on Joe's arm and his face under Joe's nose. "You're a liar!" he almost screamed. "I want to know why you came here!" A shrewd gleam came into his little pig eyes. "Who are you—really?"

Joe tried to pull away from him, but the heavy hand held on to his arm. He stuck out his palm and shoved it into the man's thick chest. Frank Schermerhorn let go suddenly, and Joe lurched forward and went spinning across the room. He stopped as suddenly as though he'd run into a brick wall. Except that it wasn't a brick wall, but a mountain of a human being, with arms and legs and a woman's face!

Her fingers clamped onto his arm with the grip of a steel vise, and he was looking at the fattest, biggest woman he'd ever seen outside of Cole Brothers Circus!

"Frank," she rebuked with an enormous grin, "that's no way to treat a guest." Her little eyes stared at Joe from her round moon of a face, her heavy lips open in a fixed smile that looked like it had been painted on with a thick brush. "You *are* a guest, aren't you?"

There was tremendous strength in those fingers, and Joe couldn't begin to pull away from her—any more than he could think of what to answer.

"He knows something about the old fool, Lollie," the red-faced man gritted. "Only he can't seem to find his tongue to tell us."

Lollie Schermerhorn kept him on the end of her fingers like a dog on a short leash. "Why, my dear boy?" she said. "You must have some reason for coming here this time of night."

Joe Bonney's eyes fanned the semi-circle of people around him, and he managed to break away from the fat woman's grasp. He forgot about old Mr. Schermerhorn lying dead and bloody by the hospital elevator; he forgot about the ten-thousand-dollar check; he even forgot why he'd come to Rosedale. He just wanted to get away from there—away from these weird actors in this strange, terrifying play he couldn't understand.

He'd almost made it to the door when he glanced back over his shoulder. Greta was standing there, her slim legs strong and straight, her small chin thrust out firmly, her soft blue eyes glistening and misty. She took one step forward—and Joe Bonney met a fourth member of the surviving clan of Schermerhorn.

He was slouching in the doorway as Joe turned around. He was small, slender, and had the soft mouth of a girl. His close-cropped hair and loose-limbed stance were typical teen-ager, but his surly mien wasn't. He just stood there, both hands thrust deep in his pants pockets, leaning against the door jamb as if he had to hold it up, and taking everything in.

"Who is he?" he asked, his lip curling with contempt.

"Frankie?" called his mother. "Come here, Frankie."

But Frankie didn't move, except for his eyes. Their expression wasn't pleasant to see in one so young. "I heard you say he was an investigator," he drawled in a sort of pseudo-southern accent. He glanced around the room. "Don't tell me they found the old—"

"Frankie!" thundered the red-faced man.

Greta went over and stood close to Joe, her elbow just touching his side. "This is my cousin," she said, and there was no attempt to conceal the hatred she felt for Frankie.

She slipped her fingers into the crook of Joe's arm, pulling him gently away—but he couldn't move. His feet were ankle-deep in a heavy morass of uncertainty and suspicion; he couldn't break free. Something was happening inside his head, too. It wasn't a headache this time—it was something else. As the slow-winding spring of

memory gradually loosened its tight coils, he started—stared with a fixed and searching gaze at the sharply accented features of young Frankie Schermerhorn.

Greta yanked at his arm impatiently. "What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong with you?"

Joe looked into her cousin's hard, young eyes, blinking like a man coming awake. He wanted to laugh and he almost did. "I wonder," he murmured under his breath, his eyes not wavering from the boy's face. "I wonder how Frankie boy would look in a leather jacket and a cap!"

CHAPTER THREE.

THE JACKET AND THE CAP.

THEY were all staring at him. The boy showed the palm of his thin, white hand in a quick fanning gesture. "He's nuts!" He grimaced in mock alarm. "He's worse than the old stupe!"

"Frankie!" Greta said and looked quickly at her uncle. But the red-faced man didn't speak. He seemed to be sharing his son's opinion.

The boy went over and stood beside the bulky figure of his mother, and Joe let Greta push him toward the door. Now that he'd found the kid in the leather jacket, maybe the police would believe him. Maybe they would let him alone....

He stopped so suddenly in his tracks that the girl's soft body bumped into him. Joe stared right ahead, gawking at the slight figure in front of him. They were right—he was nuts!

It was like looking into a double-faced mirror, because directly ahead of him in the doorway stood a small, thin boy who was a dead-ringer for Frankie. Yet Frankie was still in the room.

Joe turned quickly and looked from one to the other. "Twins!" he gasped. "Lord!" He couldn't tell them apart.

"This is Henry," Greta's voice was saying. "They're identical twins."

Joe walked out of there into the black velvet night. Greta Schermerhorn was hanging onto his arm. He was too dazed to wonder about it, and they didn't speak, walking down the dark cinder driveway in silence. She stopped finally and faced him, the small perfection of her face turned up toward his.

"You're nice," she said. "Very nice."

He could feel her softness next to him, and he could see the white evenness of her features. Under the silver spotlight of the moon, her blonde hair shone like gold. He did what he wanted to do. He reached out and pulled her toward him, and his lips sought hers.

She struggled. "No—no! Please don't, please . . ."

Her voice was suddenly loud, and it rang out startlingly on the sounding board of the still night. He let go and stepped back, smiling stupidly with embarrassment.

Something moved behind him. As he turned quickly, his jaw felt the paralyzing jar of a hard fist launched from a rocket about a foot away. He went down heavily. Gino picked him up and kept punching. The ape-man seemed to relish his task, and he went at it with vengeance.

Joe went crashing down to the ground again, dazedly wondering where the girl was. Why didn't she stop the slaughter? Why didn't she get this maniac off him? He couldn't see her. She'd run away!

He felt himself being picked up bodily and carried through space, carried a long way. His back hit a soft cushion and his forehead a hard object. He reached out, and his clutching fingers found the steering wheel of a car. Then as he tried to pull himself upright, Gino bent over and launched a rocket to end all rockets. Joe sighed softly like a tired little boy, keeled over face down on the front seat of the car and went quietly to sleep . . .

Somewhere there was a noise. A monotonous, droning noise like the purring of a giant cat. "Go 'way, kitty," he mumbled. "Go 'way." But the kitty didn't go away. It disturbed him. Joe pulled himself wearily out of the car. He promptly discovered that he had no legs, or else somebody had removed the running board. He went forward on his face and scraped his nose on a concrete floor.

He got up slowly, his fogged mind not comprehending. Why was there such a haze over his mind? What was the matter with him? He knew that he was sweating, his shirt was soaked with perspiration. It was stifling in that closed garage, stifling, and it kept getting worse. It was difficult to breathe. Each breath was more effort.

The damned cat kept purring away, and Joe couldn't get his mental processes working. Instinctively, without knowing why, he laboriously climbed back into the car

and turned off the ignition switch. Like magic, the cat stopped purring.

He leaned back, his tired head finding the seat top. It felt good; he was very sleepy. Then as he closed his heavy eyelids, snatches of his liquid thoughts started to congeal. Garage . . . motor running . . . garage! He placed his palm on the seat and pushed, forcing himself out of the car. Slowly, desperately, he crawled out. At last he knew what he had to do. Someone was trying to kill him, and he had to get out of here!

He crawled along the floor of the garage on his hands and knees, driving himself, not stopping. He recognized the car as Betty's but suddenly something was happening to his eyeballs. They were spinning like the gaudy pictures of fruit on a slot machine and he could hardly see where he was going. As he reached the garage door, his nose close to the floor, he literally crawled up the wall, and with an enormous effort thrust his fist through a small pane of glass.

He didn't notice the cut on his hand; he didn't even feel it. All he felt was the air—the clean, cool, exhilarating air. He rejoiced in the fresh smell of it in his nostrils, and after a while he got the door open and threw himself down on a patch of grass nearby.

He lay there, thinking, with the soft green quilt of the grass beneath his body and the soft black canopy of the sky above his head. Who had tried to kill him? Why? At no time had he told them in the House of Schermerhorn that he had seen the old man's murderer. In fact, he hadn't even indicated that the old millionaire was dead. Why then, had they tried to kill him?

Slowly, Joe Bonney got to his feet, smiling in satisfaction. He'd been right. The murderer was there in the Schermerhorn house. He knew now why there had been an attempt on his life. He'd been recognized—the killer had recognized him. And what's a second murder when you've already committed one?

Joe backed Betty's car out of the abandoned old garage deep in the rear of the Schermerhorn estate and went looking for Gino. Was Gino the man with the answers? Big, brutal Gino?

He followed the dusty, little-used road around its serpentine curves until it led him onto one paved with hard gravel. As he approached the rear of the house, he could see that it was ablaze with light.

Lights glowed from every window on the main floor, and when he braked in front he knew why.

There were two police prowl cars on the lawn and one automobile without any markings on it of any kind. As he got out, a man in uniform came up to him.

"Who are you, bud?"

Joe blinked as the bright glare of the flashlight hit him full in the face. He was blinded by its brilliance too much to see the service revolver come out of the young cop's holster, but Joe could certainly hear him say:

"Stick 'em up, Bonney! Stick 'em up real high and right quick!"

He walked in ahead of the policeman, his arms straight up in the air, but he wasn't afraid now. He was smiling.

"Here's your man, Lieutenant," the shepherd with brass buttons called out.

"Joe!"

It was Betty, his Betty. She came flying across the room, her small sandals making a clattering noise on the hardwood floor. He could see that she'd been crying. Lieutenant Machelis nodded and Joe gathered her to him. She began crying anew, her mumbled words difficult to distinguish among her sobs.

"I had to tell them, Joe, honey," Her tear-filled eyes were fixed upon him pleadingly. "I had to, Joe."

He didn't mind that she'd brought the police there. She was right. A man can't run. Besides, they could help him now. They could help him find the real killer.

He looked across the large room. All the Schermerhorns were there. From the expressions on their faces, he knew they'd been told about the old man.

Greta's head was buried deep in her small hands, but as she raised her dry eyes to meet his, they were full of contempt, bitter contempt. "Why?" she moaned. "Why did you kill him? He was so helpless."

He didn't answer. He turned to Lieutenant Machelis, pushing Betty aside with gentle hands. "You've come just in time, Lieutenant," he said, "to make an arrest."

Sergeant Keefer went over, steel cuffs swinging loosely in his hand. "You ain't kidding, bub!"

Joe realized that the bracelets were for him and he backed away. Was all this wasted? Didn't the police understand what he'd tried to do? He pointed at the twins. "That's the kid," he yelled. "That's the kid who held me up in the hospital!"

Mrs. Schermerhorn's large mouth popped open like a fish's. "No!" she cried. "No, not my boys!" And she rushed over and gathered in her off-spring with one sweep of her huge arms.

The sergeant looked startled, but there was keen interest in the lieutenant's face. "Which one, son?" he queried softly. "Which one was it?"

Joe looked at him and he looked at the twins, but he didn't answer. He couldn't.

Frank Schermerhorn got up off the couch, his red face even more beefy than before. He didn't show the slightest sign of being upset over the death of the old man. But he did look angry.

"The lieutenant told us what happened at the hospital," he said, right into Joe's face, "and if you're accusing one of my sons of murder, young man, you're insane. Stark, crazy insane." Then he turned around and walked out of the room.

Joe whirled, appealing to the lieutenant. "What I told you at the hospital was the truth. You've got to believe me!"

"Then how come you ran so fast, bub?" the sergeant's coarse voice grated.

Joe ignored Sergeant Keefer and kept talking to the lieutenant. "Why don't you look for the jacket?"

"Which one of you kids has a leather jacket?" asked the detective calmly.

Young Frankie Schermerhorn snorted in ill-concealed disgust. "We both have. So what?"

"Yeah," echoed Henry. "So what? Lots of guys have leather jackets."

Lieutenant Machelis turned and spoke sharply to his sergeant, and the bull-necked cop strode off without saying a word. Joe Bonney went over then and told the detective about the man called Gino and the attempt on his life.

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Both Greta and Betty jumped up when they heard what he said, one indignant, the other frightened. "That's ridiculous," said Greta coolly. "Gino is just a chauffeur. He's certainly not a murderer!"

"We'll see," said the lieutenant. "Bring the chauffeur in here," he told the policeman at the door.

"I sent him home," Greta said. "He lives in a rooming house the other side of the village. But he wouldn't do anything like that, not Gino." And she glared at Joe.

Betty was watching him, too, her eyes pin-points of fear. He noticed that she seemed almost afraid to let him out of her sight. He looked over at her and winked reassuringly, but that didn't remove the worried expression on her pale face.

Frankie broke away from the tight grasp of his mother. "If you think we killed the old fool," he said evenly, "you're a hell of a detective." Machelis looked amused rather than angry but he said nothing. "If the old boy was bumped at nine o'clock, like you say," Frankie went on with a crooked smile, "we've got an alibi. Huh, Henry?"

The other twin stepped forward, nodding his head. "We were at rehearsal," he said.

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"Lots of kids were there. They'll say they saw us."

"Rehearsal?"

Frankie flashed annoyance at anybody not knowing about the Rosedale Summer School of Acting and started educating the police lieutenant in the fundamentals of the theatre.

"All right—all right," the detective interrupted with a disgusted wave of his hand.

"Make them prove it," Joe Bonney said. "They've got to have proof that—"

"Take it easy, Bonney," the lieutenant told him. "Come morning, maybe a lot of things will show up clearer."

Sergeant Keefer came back in the room, a leather jacket under his arm and a cap twirling on his forefinger. "Look what I found!" he croaked.

Frankie jumped forward. "That's mine."

"No," said his brother, "it's mine!" And they both went for it at the same time.

"Hold it, you two twirps!" stormed the big sergeant, as he moved the clothing out of their reach by the simple expedient of putting it behind his broad back. "Hold it!"

"Only one?" queried the lieutenant.

"Only one, sir. This is it."

The lieutenant crossed over and looked at the jacket. Even from where Joe was standing, he could plainly see there was no ink on the leather. Not even a single, solitary dab of ink. The detective glanced quickly at him, then let his gaze wander along until it rested on the twin boys.

"Okay, fellows—which one belongs to the jacket?"

They both claimed it as theirs. As there was no mark of identification on it anywhere and the other jacket didn't turn up after a thorough search, Machelis decided to take it down to the city for a laboratory test to try and prove the ownership. He also took the twins and Joe Bonney along. "Just for the ride," was the way he put it, but by the screaming sounds that emanated from fat Lollie Schermerhorn's over-developed lungs, she knew that her two sons were being held for further questioning.

"You'd better come, too, Mr. Schermerhorn," he told the red-faced man. "We'll want the body properly identified, and you might as well get it over."

And so the cavalcade started through the dark night, cool now from the sweeping breeze that came galloping across the Sound and took the island in its chilling grip. Betty shivered and Joe reached over,

put his arm around her shoulder. "All right, honey?"

Her head went down on his shoulder. "All right," she said. "All right."

Lieutenant Machelis leaned forward, speaking to the uniformed driver. "Stop at Forty-three Drive Road. That's just outside of the village."

"You want I should pick him up, Lieutenant?" said the sergeant from the front seat.

"Yes. Gino is your baby, okay?"

"Okay, Lieutenant, got it."

Betty shivered again and Joe drew her closer.

He looked up ahead between the dark canyon formed by the wide shoulders of Sergeant Keefer and the driver of the car. Somewhere in front of him, in one of those two police cars, was the murderer, the one who'd killed old Mr. Schermerhorn, and tried to murder him. But which one was it? Frankie? Henry? Which one?

Betty was shivering. Joe looked at her. "I'm just a little cold, Joe," Betty said.

Lieutenant Machelis pulled the leather jacket from behind him. "Here, fellow, give her this."

"No!" She shook her head violently.

But he insisted, and she finally put it on. As he helped her, he noticed that she was still shivering as though she was even colder than before.

Joe zipped it up, frowning at her thoughtfully. Suddenly an idea crystallized in his mind. He stuck his hand out toward the detective.

"Let's see the cap, please, Lieutenant."

The detective gave it to him, and Joe tried to put it on her head. She drew away from him, her hands in front of her, horror tensing the soft lines of her body. "No!" she cried. "What's got into you, Joe?"

The lieutenant was staring as Joe deliberately slipped the cap over Betty's head. Joe cupped Betty's soft chin in one hand, the other smoothing her dark brown hair back out of sight behind her ears. Then as he pulled the cap down, low over her eyes, he knew. At last Joe Ponney knew!

She was sitting there in the room when Joe went in silently through the partly opened french windows. She didn't hear or see him until it was too late. Then she turned, trying to hide the leather jacket behind her back. But he'd already seen it. It was the one the killer had worn at the hospital, the one with the inkstains on it.

She'd been sitting there calmly cutting at it with a straight-edged razor, hacking it up into thin curling strips of easily disposed leather. He stood there for just a moment, looking.

Greta Schermerhorn got up slowly, the razor still in her hand, murder showing in her eyes.

"If it's money you want," she murmured evenly, "I have it, you know. Plenty of it now." She let the razor drop to the floor, and walked up to him until her body was hugging his. "Half of it is yours."

He moved away, deep nausea engulfing him like a tidal wave. "Gino says it was you who drove the car away with me in it. It was you who tried to"

She laughed, slowly, deliberately. He could see in her now the cool cunning that would plan a fake robbery so that the death of the old man could not be connected to a Schermerhorn heir. He pushed her away roughly. She stumbled across the room and came up with the razor in her hand, throwing herself upon him like a wildcat.

Where was the lieutenant? He should come in now; he should step through those windows now—now Greta cut wickedly at his face with a vicious sweep of her arm, but Joe stepped agilely aside and she missed. Then as she spun by him, he threw out his fist with all the strength he could muster. Greta Schermerhorn went down on her face and didn't move.

Lieutenant Machelis walked in calmly through the french windows nad bent over her still form. "Whew!" he mumbled.

Betty was standing outside the window looking in. She was still wearing the leather jacket, her small fist jammed into her mouth as if to suppress a scream. Joe went outside and took her in his arms.

"It's all right, honey," he said. "It's all right, now."

She was still looking at the unconscious figure of Greta Schermerhorn on the library floor. "You—hit her, Joe."

He laughed grimly. "I had to, honey. It was me or her." He reached down and kissed her soft, cool, willing lips. "But don't worry, Betty," he said. "I'll never hit you." He grinned for the first time since nine o'clock. "Uh-uh, honey," he said, "I'll never hit you like that not after we're married."

She kissed him hard then, as if she knew she had no alternative. And she hadn't—not really!

THE BEAUTIFUL MISS BORGIA

By TALMAGE POWELL

*The bitter years in stir had taught Bob Myrick
that the blonde thrush was poison—but he had
to see her once more to prove he was cured!*

AT just after ten that night, Bob Myrick entered the apartment house where his sister Pam lived. As apartment houses go, it wasn't too fine a place. A thirty-five dollar a month walk-up, with worn carpets, the odor of everybody's cooking in the downstairs hall, and the sounds of everybody's living all through the building. On the second floor, Bob knocked on Pam's door. Light, eager wings beat their way up in his chest, brought a smile to his face. It had been three years—but tonight he was a free man.

He heard the crisp sounds of Pam's footsteps. She opened the door. She drew in a breath, said, "Bob! Bob, you're home!"

"Hi, sis." He took her chin in his hand and kissed her on the cheek. A lump came to his throat. She was small and neatly built, and the light behind her made burnished copper of her hair. But there were tired lines about her eyes, almost hidden, almost unnoticeable.

As far back as Bob could remember, Pam had meant home to him. Since their folks had died, he and Pam had been alone. Pictures of her flashed through his mind. Pam bundling him in a sweater and sending him off to school, when she was still as young as a lot of high school seniors herself. Pam standing on her feet behind a bargain basement counter to earn money for their food and clothes, to pay their rent.

And later, Pam trying to keep him out of trouble, telling the police that he was only a wild kid, getting him another chance.

Until that last time. Not another chance then. He'd drawn three years. And at that he'd been lucky. Burglary was a serious charge.

Pam closed the living room door, touched his pale, gaunt face as if assuring herself he was really there. "It's so good to see you, Bob. But I didn't expect . . ."

"Time off for good behavior. I didn't write. I wanted to make it a surprise."

He was aware of a sound behind him, turned. In the doorway across the room stood Steve Ivey.

For a moment there was silence. The room chilled as Bob stood and looked at Steve and Steve looked at him. Bob shifted his gaze to Pam, saw the sudden strain in her face.

"Bob," she said, her voice sounding quick, brittle in the silent room. "Steve and I—we were just throwing a snack together in the kitchen. Come on out and join us."

He saw that her face was white. She was pleading with her eyes. Steve Ivey, dropping by. It must be a pretty regular thing, Bob thought, if it had reached the stage of whipping up snacks together in her kitchen.

Bob could see Pam's thoughts mirrored in her eyes: *Please, Bob. Steve's a regular guy. He hated to do what he did to you. But he was a cop. He had to.*

Steve advanced across the room. "Glad to see you, Bob."

Bob turned. Steve was holding out his hand. Touching his lips with his tongue, Bob took the proffered hand, shook it. Behind him, he sensed Pam's faint gasp of relief.

Okay, Bob thought, if this was the way it had to be. He remembered the day Pam had met Steve Ivey. She'd come to headquarters to tell them again that Bob was a good kid, only wild. Steve had been in charge of the case, and had listened to her. But the sister plea hadn't done any good that time. Steve had Peewee Darran's statement; Peewee had ratted to save his own rotten skin. And Steve was a cop. . . . A crazy start for love's beginnings, Bob thought bleakly.

They went out to the six-by-eight kitchen. The awkward moment endured, lengthened.

Bob had the feeling that he'd like to shove the walls back, that the tiny kitchen was too small to hold the three of them.

He ate scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee that Steve prepared. Bob thought: *I've always wanted this for Pam—a good guy to love her, care for her.* But Steve Ivey? He watched Steve and wondered....

The same rawhide tallness, the same rugged, almost handsome face. That was Steve. But there it was—in his gray eyes. The coldness, the implacable light of the hunter. No human feeling; a hunk of stone where his heart should be. Human beings were mere pawns on his chessboard.

A guy like that for Pam?

They talked in spurts. Steve said he'd been promoted. He was on Homicide now, and had to catch his graveyard trick at midnight tonight.

Then at last Bob was rising, saying he had to run along. Pam followed him to the living room. He spoke softly, "You're pretty sweet on that guy back in the kitchen sis?"

She looked at him; he watched her swallow, saw her nod.

"Sure, he said, managing a smile. "Luck, sis, and all the happiness."

"But, Bob, you're staying here! I thought . . ."

"No, sis. Got to look for a job. A guy or two I want to see."

"Not Peewee Darran, Bob!"

The thought of the way Darran had sold him up the river knotted Bob's stomach muscles, but he shook his head.

"And, Bob—" Her voice caught. "Not the Gilded Lily? You're not going back there, to her? Please, Bob, stay away from the Gilded Lily."

"Sure, sis." He told her good night, gave her arm a gentle squeeze, and went out.

Down the street, Bob stood with his back against the wall of the building. Night had dissipated little of the heat of the day. Traffic crawled; a few people sat like shadows here and there on front steps. Young couples passed, arm in arm. It was life and people and free air. But Bob's senses failed to soak it up; the droplets of sweat on his forehead were not entirely from the heat.

His lips were flat, compressed. He kept thinking, *She's still there, at the Gilded Lily. Marcillene . . .*

He spun on his heel so fast he almost bumped into an old lady. She said, "Mercy!"

righted her hat and stared after the retreating back of the hurrying, pale young man.

Bob was opening and closing his hands. He'd had three years in which to think, and a man can do a lot of thinking in three years. He knew which road he wanted to take now. But he was going back to the Gilded Lily. Tonight. Something strong was driving him. He had to go back. He had to make sure he was cured.

The Gilded Lily was composed of equal parts of smoke, lights, darkness, shadowy people, the tinkle of glasses, and the low undulating buzz and hum of conversation. Bob's eyes swept over it all; the long crowded bar, glasses stacked before the back-bar mirror, chrome-framed tables and chairs, leather-upholstered booths. He lifted his gaze further, to the piano dais in back. But she wasn't there. The bench was empty, the grand piano waiting in almost total darkness for her, waiting for the touch of Marcillene's nimble fingers.

He moved on into the bar, feeling a little limp. For three years he'd been steeling himself against her. Telling himself she was no good, reminding himself that she hadn't been to see him once. She was Harry Heintz' girl. But his heart still beat thick and fast, filling his chest, whenever he thought of her.

He told himself that he'd built her up in his mind, made her a dream-like image of perfection. People are like that. Anything they can't reach out and touch always seems different. More enticing. But he was out now, a free man. He could see her as she really was, tickling a piano keyboard, singing her sultry little songs in a second-rate bar. One look, he told himself, and he'd never again doubt that he was cured. . . .

Bob crowded his way up to the bar and ordered a whiskey and water. He had the drink halfway to his lips when a voice behind him said, "As I live and gasp for air! Are these old eyes deceiving me, or is it really Bobby Myrick?"

Bob looked in the back-bar mirror, and in the mirror his gaze met two pale gray eyes set in a fat, blubbery face under a bald brow. In the dim lighting the face was indistinct, and Bob searched a moment for a name. Then it came to him. "Banklin."

"Right, lad." Banklin punched him on the shoulder with a fat pink hand as Bob set down his drink and turned. "Glad to see you, Bobby. I saw you when you walked in, but it took a moment for it to

sink in that I was really looking at Bob Myrick." Banklin's hand was on his arm. "Come on over to my booth and have a drink."

"I got a drink."

Banklin chuckled. "Sure. Bring it on over to my booth. I'll stand you another."

He was through with people like Banklin, Bob thought. It had cost Pam a lot of suffering and him three years behind bars, to make him see a few things sensibly. He was cured.

But he'd never be in the Gilded Lily again. Banklin was waiting. There was no real sense in insulting Banklin. "Okay," Bob said. "One drink."

He followed Banklin's waddling hulk over to a booth. The big fat man had aged. It was Banklin's boast that he'd been the finest con man in the country in his day. He'd posed as everything from a Western cattle baron to a stock broker. But his day was past, judging from present appearances. His suit was worn, needed cleaning. The back of his shirt collar, visible to Bob over his coat, was soiled and limp. They all fall on hard times sooner or later, Bob thought grimly.

With a wheezing sigh, Banklin worked his way in the booth. Bob sat down.

"Well, Bobby, how goes it? Any plans for the future?"

"A few."

Banklin toyed with an empty glass. Without moving his head up, he cut his gaze up to Bob's face. His voice came, fat and soft, "Plans for Peewee Darran, Bob?"

Cold washed down Bob's spine. His face felt stiff. Slowly he made himself relax. "I'd like to wring Darran's scrawny neck," he admitted, "but the answer is no. I got no plans for Darran."

Banklin chuckled. "Sure, I know. A lot of them feel like that when they first get out of stir. They're going to be lone wolfs, plenty tough, cutting nobody in on their plans."

"I told you the answer is no." Bob's voice sounded harsh and loud in his ears. "Darran and I broke in the pawnshop that night. I wanted to—buy nice things for a dame. Darran squealed when we got caught. He drew a suspended sentence, while I went up. But I'm not dirtying my hands with Darran. He'll get his one of these days without me."

Banklin's fat shoulders shook again in that knowing chuckle. "Anyway, you'd have to find him, Bobby." He jerked his gaze up,

as if trying to catch whatever might be in Bob's eyes. "You wouldn't have heard, but about three weeks ago an old playboy geezer named Thad Berrywinkle got killed. This Berrywinkle had dough. He liked to get around, to see every kind of joint. As near as the cops can figure, somebody got some plenty hot blackmail stuff on Berrywinkle—the old geezer was married. Berrywinkle wouldn't pay. He was about to turn in the blackmailer, and the blackmailer killed him."

Bob started to speak, but Banklin stopped him with a gesture of his hand. "That's where Peewee Darran comes in. Rumor has it that Peewee knows the identity of Berrywinkle's murderer. Darran has dropped out of sight, and if you wanted to do anything about Peewee, Bob, you'd have to find him first. It wouldn't be easy. Peewee is well holed up." He drummed on the table. His voice lowered. "It might be that I could give you an address, Bobby"

"I'm not interested."

"Hell," Banklin chuckled. "I know that." Then he pulled an old envelope from his pocket, tore off a piece of it, fished for a pencil. He wrote an address, stuffed the paper in Bob's breast pocket. "Think it over, Bobby. I'm just trying to do you a favor."

Bob passed his hand through his hair. "Are you going to order that drink, Banklin?" He was trembling a little.

Bob sensed a movement at his elbow. He looked up. Banklin, in the act of rising, retrained his half-risen position. Harry Heintz was standing beside the booth. "Hello, Bob. Come back to steal my girl?"

Heintz dropped a glance at Banklin. "Sit down. I'll buy." He caught a waiter's eye, told him to set up three over here.

Then he turned back to Bob. Heintz looked the same as ever. The same pinched shoulders, blown up by the well-tailored blue suit. The same pinched face, with the eyes close together over the nose. Crinkly blond hair. The same always-present imitation gardenia in the left lapel. He said, "Be around long, Bob?"

"I hadn't given it much thought." He used to fawn over this punk, Bob remembered. He used to think Heintz was hot stuff because he owned the Gilded Lily and wore expensive clothes and a gardenia in his buttonhole. And Bob was just a cheap sap to him. Send the young punk out on a job, let him risk his neck. It must have afforded Heintz many a laugh. And her—Marcillene

—had she laughed with him when the young punk had gone?

The drinks came. Heintz fingered his. He looked at Bob, his eyes hard. Banklin shifted uneasily.

"Just one thing, Bob," Heintz said. "I want you to get this straight, if you're thinking of staying around town long. Keep away from Marcillene. I didn't like the play you made for her before you went up the river, not a damned bit, Bob. The more I thought of it, the less I liked it."

As if the mention of Marcillene's name had brought her back, a rippled arpeggio came from the piano. The sounds were caressing, soft, but they crashed in Bob's ears. His throat went tight. He gripped the edge of the table.

Over the top of the booth he could see her, sitting at the piano. A golden flash of loveliness. A flowing body beneath a clinging gown, a soft face touched by soft light, a blonde vision of hair with a feathery sort of white flower in it. She was looking out at the faces turned toward her, smiling. White teeth, blood-red lips. Blood-red nails rippling over the piano keyboard. Marcillene . . .

"See what I mean, Bob?" Heintz' sardonic voice reached out to him. "My girl, Bob. Everything understood?"

"An angel," Banklin sighed. "A golden angel!"

Bob barely heard their words. He was limp inside. He felt sweat crawling down the back of his neck. He knew what had driven his steps here. It wasn't the desire to have a last look so he could forget her forever.

He tossed off his drink.

The liquor burned going down, but not enough to suit him. Three years of hating her because he'd once worshipped her. Hating her because she was identified in his mind with Heintz, the Gilded Lily, and its kind. With Peewee and Banklin, who'd once been Peewee's closest friend but who now was willing to sic a revenge-hungry ex-con on him. Bob had wanted to break from it all, but now he could only watch the dim blue lights of the place blur in his vision, until only her face was clear before him.

She seemed to be fading. It scared him. He felt Banklin's hand on his shoulder, shaking him. "Bobby . . ."

"I feel a little sick. A breath of air . . . Back in a moment."

He made it to his feet, stumbled his way

out of the bar. A strange cold feeling of suspension filled his mind. He wanted to heave, and lurched toward the alley beside the Gilded Lily. He wobbled down the dark tunnel of the alley, a numb terror growing in him. He knew that one or two drinks shouldn't have made him feel like this.

He pitched forward on his face in the middle of the alley. No sound left his lips . . .

The dampness on his face brought Bob back to life, but it was a slow process. Strands of gray swirled in the dense blackness; then lights sparked against his clamped eyelids. He uttered a short soft groan, stirred. He lifted one hand to brush away the moisture. He opened his eyes. Pale light was like steel wool against his eyeballs. He was conscious, but shadows still filled his brain. He sat up; the movement caused his stomach to roll and churn. He gasped, swallowing back the sickness.

Exterior objects began to come in focus. Pain crashed through his head. He was on the hard, bare floor of a room. His eyes picked out cheap, junky furnishings, dirty walls, a wan light bulb glowing in a cheap lamp on a rickety table. A movement beside him caught his eye. He jerked his gaze around. It was a dingy curtain, billowing out from the open window. He heard the faint patter of rain outside. The heat of the night had brought a shower. Droplets of moisture blowing through the open window had awakened him.

He remembered passing out in the alley. Now he was waking in a strange room. It didn't make sense.

Drawing breath hard, he stumbled to his feet. His toe met an object, sent it clattering. Bob looked down. It took a moment for the fact to sink in that he'd kicked a knife. A long, keen and very bloody knife. . . .

His throat constricted. He picked the knife up, dropped it as he saw his hand. His fingers were encrusted with splotches of dried blood.

His breath shattered against the dirty walls of the room. He stood without moving an instant, afraid to turn toward the bed, his flesh prickling with horror as he guessed what he would see lying there.

His guess wasn't wrong. In death, Peewee Darran looked smaller than ever. His thin, stooped body was in a twisted, queer huddle. The grimy sheets were mussed on the sway-backed bed, as if Peewee had struggled. His mouth was open, as if he'd tried to cry out, only to have the sound stopped by the

knife that had razored its way across his plucked-chicken neck.

Bob clutched the footboard of the bed and stared at Pee wee Darran. He'd hated Darran. Once he'd wanted to kill him. He'd got over that. Three years to think, to come to his senses. But . . .

Could he have regained partial consciousness there in the alley? Could the kill urge have come upon him, in his befuddled state, and crazed him momentarily? The address that Banklin had given him—had it led him to Darran . . . a knife . . . a struggle?

"Hell, no!" Bob choked. "I'm not going to think that. I wouldn't have done it. I couldn't have!"

His gaze had come to rest on Darran's left hand without, at first, noticing anything unusual. Then he realized that Darran's hand was clenched, pulled up in an awkward position. He moved around the bed, took the chilling hand, pried the fingers open.

At first he thought the hand was empty. Then, almost invisible against the dead flesh, he saw the minute white piece of lint. Part of a feather? It had stuck to Darran's sweaty flesh, but it could have easily been a piece of down that had worked its way partially from the lumpy pillow. In a last death spasm, Pee wee must have clutched at the nearest thing, his pillow—jerking his hand away, still clenched, as death swooped over him.

Bob shook his head. He tried to think. His mind was muddled, the thoughts coming through like car lights stabbing heavy fog.

He looked toward the window. There might be a fire escape, a way that he could get out of here without being seen.

He was halfway to the window when the door behind him slammed open. It brought Bob around in a half crouch. Steve Ivey was standing in the doorway.

A dim light in the deserted hallway silhouetted him. Like a jungle cat, ready to pounce upon its prey, Steve moved forward. The light glinted dully on the gun in his hand.

"I'd stand still if I were you, Bob." Steve heeled the door closed.

Bob's mouth set in bitter lines. He looked from Steve to Darran's body, back to Steve. "I guess you love this, don't you?"

Steve ignored the question. "Why'd you do it, Bob? Damn you, don't you know what this will do to her—to Pam? You think it's worth all that just to get your revenge on Darran?"

"Talk on, copper. You'll never believe I didn't do it."

He watched Steve's face, the motions of his body. Neat tailored suit; neat, almost handsome face. Neat inhuman efficiency.

A dumb punk found with a corpse. Caught red-handed. Another conviction for the fair-haired smart boy, the homicide cop. Steve might experience a momentary pang that it was his girl's brother, but he'd flick it aside. Duty, he'd say. And at headquarters they'd pat him on the back, offer their sympathy, make a legend of him, and Steve would go on until maybe one day he'd become the commissioner.

Bob stood with a great empty space inside of him. He forced calmness into his voice. "How'd you get here, Ivey?"

"A phone call. Another tenant here in the house."

Bob took a step toward him. "And where's the tenant? It doesn't strike you as funny, that kind of call, with the tenant not sticking around to see the excitement when you got here?"

"You'll have to do better than that, Bob," Steve said coldly. "Nobody likes to get drawn in murder, even as a material witness. A guy living in a neighborhood like this one wouldn't stick around after reporting a murder."

Bob took another step. His brow was hot and damp. A one-time loser already, with plenty of motive. Why look further? Why be silly and complicate a perfectly obvious killing?

He shivered a little, his mouth opening and closing. Steve laughed, smug and sure. "Give me your hands, Bob."

Bob set his teeth against the cocksureness of the laugh, held out his left hand. Steve Ivey reached toward his back pocket for handcuffs.

Bob moved then, going in fast. His left hand grabbed the gun, swung it up. His right fist smashed Steve in the face. Steve cursed, held to the gun, brought his other hand up in a short, hard jab.

Bob took the blow on his mouth, tasting blood, seeing the swift flash of fire across his brain. He hit Steve again, and again.

He saw Steve's head snap back, his eyes roll up in his head. Steve began to buckle at the knees, and Bob stepped back. He watched Steve crumple to the floor.

Breathing hard, Bob scooped up Steve's gun, crossed the room, cracked the door. The hallway was still deserted. With a sob of relief Bob closed the door on Steve's

prone form and Darran's corpse. He moved quickly toward the stairway that would lead him down to the black, rainy night outside.

The rain had slackened, but the street ahead of the cruising taxicab was still slick with moisture. The neighborhood was one of cheap shops, of old brick buildings with black, vacant-looking windows. Here and there one of the old buildings had been converted into an apartment building.

Before one of these, Bob's cab pulled to a stop. He paid the driver, tipped sparingly. The driver muttered, pulled the hack away.

Bob stood on the sidewalk a moment. Banklin wasn't living well, judging from the looks of his apartment. It had taken Bob an hour and a visit to two of Banklin's old haunts to get this address.

He mounted the steps, entered the building. The vestibule was dimly lighted, thick with old mustiness. Stairs creaked here and there under his feet as he climbed to the second floor.

With the passing of the light shower, the heat had returned to the night. Sweat beaded on Bob's forehead. Somewhere down the hall a man was snoring loudly.

Bob stopped before the doorway of Banklin's room. A thread of light showed under the door. He put his ear against the panel, heard nothing at first. Then he heard Banklin's heavy sigh and the clink of a glass against the neck of a bottle. Bob waited, but there was only that one clink, indicating that Banklin was probably alone.

Bob gripped the doorknob in his sweaty hand, turned it. He jammed the door wide, stepped into the room.

He got a flashing impression of a worn rug, a lumpy couch, a cheap radio almost buried in a mound of racing forms on a table. On the walls were photographs of prizefighters, ball players, night club entertainers: mocking, dusty reminders of Banklin's better days.

Banklin was in a threadbare easy chair, his shirt open at the throat, a glass in his hand, a bottle beside the chair on the floor. He heaved himself up at the sight of Bob, his eyes bulging. Breath rushed out of him as he stared at the gun Bob had taken from Steve Ivey. He slipped back in his chair.

"Well . . ." Banklin wheezed, trying to gain a little composure. "I see you're up late tonight, Bob. Have a drink?" He eyed the gun.

Bob advanced in the room. Banklin sat poised, his hands trembling faintly. He tossed

off his drink, eased his bulk up out of his chair.

"Bobby pal, why the gun?"

"To make sure a little talk we're going to have goes perfectly straight. I've got no time to beat around the bush. I saw Darran. He's dead."

Banklin's face went slack; his jowls quivered. "Dead? Hell, Bobby. I never dreamed . . . I just thought you'd rough him up. . . . Bobby, you'd better scram out of town fast!"

"Why?" Bob said harshly. "I didn't kill him. I think *you* did, Banklin!"

Stark surprise whitened Banklin's face. "What gave you that kind of idea, Bobby?"

"I think you were in that blackmail mess. Old Thad Berrywinkle, remember? You were shaking Berrywinkle down. He kicked. You're the one who killed him. But Darran knew. You located him, but were trying to figure a way to kill him with safety. Then I walked into the picture. The perfect fall guy. The perfect way to kill Darran and never have the police even suspect you, because they'd already have a sucker to burn!"

Banklin's mouth worked. "No, Bobby. You got it wrong. It wasn't me behind the Berrywinkle killing. You know me better than that! I wouldn't touch that kind of stuff. Not murder!"

Banklin backed up until he was against the wall. He could retreat no further. He was staring straight in Bob's eyes. What he read there made him shudder. He sobbed out words:

"Bob, no—not the gun! You got to listen to me!"

"I will. For about ten seconds."

Banklin was all blubber, slumped against the wall, his face oily-slick with sweat.

"Bob, here it is straight—you got to believe me! Darran had a little money stashed away, see? But he couldn't get to it. He knew that the Berrywinkle killer was after him. He was afraid the killer might know about his nest egg, be watching it. So Peewee made a contact—with me. He told me where the dough was so I could get it to him. He had to have it. It was his only way of getting away, out of the killer's reach."

Hard lines grew in Bob's face as he looked at Banklin. "I get it," he said flatly. "You're a big mass of slime, Banklin. Somebody ought to step on you and turn their heel hard. You were Darran's closest friend. You got his dough. But you didn't deliver it. You pulled about the lousiest double cross

BLACK MASK DETECTIVE

I've ever heard of. Then I walked into the picture and you sent me to Darran's, hoping I'd either kill him or scare him so bad he'd be willing to swim the river to get out of town!"

Banklin stared at the floor, his face working. "I had to do it, Bob. You don't know how rotten my luck has been. When I got my hands on that money, I couldn't just hand it to Peewee."

"Okay," Bob said. "Maybe you're telling the truth. It's just the kind of lousy trick you'd pull. But that still leaves the fact that somebody carried me to Darran's and left me there with his corpse. If you know anything else, talk, fat man, and talk fast."

"Sure, Bobby! Look, I'm your pal. Soon's you staggered out of the Gilded Lily, Harry Heintz left the booth. I sat there wondering what I could do for you, Bobby. I swear it! Then the girl, Marcillene, came up to the booth—asked if that hadn't been you."

"Marcillene?" Bob whispered.

"Sure, Bobby. She went back to the piano. But she only played one more tune. When I got up to leave, I noticed the piano bench was empty."

"And Harry Heintz?"

"He was already gone, Bobby. I don't know where the two of them went. It's the truth, so help me!"

Bob said slowly, "You're going to get a chance to prove it. Come on."

"Sure, Bobby, sure. Where we going?"

"To see Harry Heintz. Is he still living at the same place?"

Banklin nodded jerkily. "In the Ardmore. The same swell apartment. I . . ." He hesitated. "One more drink. Bob? Time for that?"

"Sure, take your drink. You're going to need it. I'm going to have the gun in my pocket, my finger on the trigger. One phony move, Banklin, and you'll do your drinking in hell. I already got one corpse around my neck. A big, fat, pink one extra wouldn't matter a damn."

"No," Banklin squeezed out a laugh. "It wouldn't, would it? But no phony moves, Bob I swear it!"

Bob tossed the bottle to the thoroughly cowed man, waited for Banklin to pour his drink.

The Ardmore Apartments comprised the upper five stories of a six-story arcade building. The arcade on street level and mezzanine was given over to a drug store, cafeteria, hobby shop, a few suites of offices, and small, expensive dress shops.

The building was quiet, filled with the hush of darkness before the dawn as Bob and Banklin walked down the fourth floor corridor. Bob punched the fat man with the gun. "You know what to do, Banklin."

Banklin mopped his face and nodded. The terror of the gun so close to him was greater than the terror of leading Bob to Heintz' apartment. Banklin pressed the buzzer beside Harry Heintz' door. Seconds walked away on fast, prickling feet. Banklin buzzed again, and there were muffled footsteps in the apartment.

"Heintz?" Banklin said against the closed door. "Let me in. It's Banklin. I got something you'll want to know."

Bob was over to one side, with Banklin's bulk covering him. The knob clicked. The door opened a crack. Bob couldn't see Harry Heintz' face, but it was Harry's voice. "This is a hell of a time to be calling," Heintz said to Banklin.

"I know, but this couldn't keep. Let me in, Harry. It's about Peewee Darran!"

A night chain rattled. The door swung back. Bob gave Banklin a heave that slammed him into Heintz and sent the two of them staggering. Bob stepped into the apartment quickly, closed the door. He leaned back against it, watching Harry's face whiten when he saw the gun in Bob's hand.

The living room was long and spacious, with wide windows at the far end. The carpet was pale tan and deep. Massive couches and chairs gave the place a feeling of indolent comfort.

Heintz got a grip on himself. He straightened his coat, touched the knot of his tie, brushed his hand back over his blond hair. He looked from the gun in Bob's hand to Banklin, eyes glittering.

"He made me do it!" Banklin said, almost in a sob. He sank in a chair, buried his shaking face in his palms.

With a slow, deliberate motion, Heintz turned his back on the gun, walked across the room, picked up a whiskey decanter from a scroll-legged table. "You got the gun, Bob. I hope you got some idea of what you're doing."

Before Bob could speak, a door opened across the room. Marcillene saw him, then the gun, and stood like a frozen bird.

He looked at her. She was wearing the same gown she'd worn earlier at the Gilded Lily. It hadn't been long since the Gilded Lily had closed for the night, since she'd got off work. And there in her hair, the same

feathery flower she'd worn at the piano. Bob's mind received the crashing picture of a dead man's hand. Peewee Darran clutching a tiny white piece of down, a feather that had stuck to his hand when he died. . . .

Angel-face, Bob thought. Through long years of separate, suffering days and nights she hadn't come once to see him. She'd never been Bob Myrick's girl; she wouldn't belong to a sucker.

She was moving toward him, trying to smile over her awareness of the gun.

"Stop, Marcillene!" he said harshly. "I mean it."

"But, Bob. . . ."

"I said, stand back! I just realized something, Marcillene. There has to be a woman in this. A woman, first, to get the goods to blackmail the old geezer, Berrywinkle. But why not a woman all the way? A woman to kill him, to track down Darran, and kill Darran too to silence him? It would be easy for her, with a hired hood, maybe, to lug the unconscious patsy to Darran's so the killing wouldn't come home to roost."

"Darran," she breathed. "Darran dead? I didn't know!"

"Let's can the act. In Darran's hand was a tiny white feather. Did he snatch at the feathery flower in your hair? Did you take the flower from his dying hand, fluff it out, put it back in your hair?"

His voice snapped off. Heintz had moved over to the writing desk. His hand was near the desk drawer. "Hold it, Harry!" Bob said.

They stood that way during a frozen moment. Then Bob said:

"Your lapel, Harry. No imitation gardenia in your buttonhole right now. I've never seen you without it before. It's always been as much a part of you as a toupee is to some men. So the bit of down in Darran's palm didn't come from the flower in a girl's hair—but from the imitation gardenia you were wearing when you killed him! Darran snatched the flower, struggling with you, but you got the flower back. But not all of it, Harry. You left just enough."

He jerked the gun up, but Heintz was moving fast, reading Bob's face. Bob fired, missed. Heintz threw himself down and sideways with blinding speed. He scooped the gun from the desk drawer. He squeezed the trigger.

Banklin flung himself on the floor, rolling for the shelter of a chair. Marcillene screamed, dropped beside Banklin.

Bob fired again. Sweat was needling down into his eyes. He heard the crash of Heintz' gun, felt the bite of the bullet in his shoulder. The impact knocked a cough from Bob. He was spun back, and the gun he'd taken from Steve Ivey slipped from his fingers.

In a haze, he saw Heintz's gloating face. Heintz was bringing his gun up, taking his time It was all so obvious now. Heintz behind the Berrywinkle mess, having to kill; Heintz, with his connections, inevitably locating Darran; Heintz finding a prime fall guy when Bob walked into the Gilded Lily, and making Bob drink a drugged drink and sleep for awhile with Darran's corpse. And now Heintz was ready to kill again.

But there'd had to be a woman from the beginning. Marcillene. She'd got the blackmail goods on old Berrywinkle. She'd played her string with Heintz right on through the murder.

For a moment, the thought of her, the memory of her lips, drove unbearable pain through Bob. Then the pain began to die, for the gun before him was very real and she was pulling herself from the carpet, crawling toward Heintz.

The gun crashed. But the sound came from behind Bob, not from Heintz' gun. Heintz jerked up on his toes, blood splashing down the side of his neck. His gun slipped from his grip, and he began a crazy, twisting fall to the carpet.

Bob turned. Steve Ivey was standing in the doorway, a gun in his hand. Big, competent, a hunter of men.

He pushed in the room. "You okay, Bob?"

"I'm all right," Bob said. "He barked my shoulder just enough to knock the gun out of my hand. But how did you—?"

"I figured you'd come here," Steve said, leaning over Heintz to watch him draw ragged breaths. "I was working on the Berrywinkle killing. Everything I'd dug up so far pointed to Heintz—old Berrywinkle's keeping company with Marcillene before his death, Berrywinkle's movements the day of his death . . . and of course Darran. We had a good idea that Darran was holed up because he'd been on the scene of the killing and knew who did it. So tonight, when I discovered Darran's murderer and let you get away, I'd already mentally tagged Heintz for it."

"You let me get away?"

"I had the gun," Steve said simply. "I could have blown your brain out."

"But why? Why let me get away?"

"I knew you hadn't killed Darran, Bob. No killer is going to hang around a murder long enough for the blood to dry on his hands. But if I'd hauled you in, I'd never have been able to tell that to the Inspector or the D.A. with the kind of case they'd have had against you. If I'd pulled you in, you'd have been their man. Another assignment for me, and . . . Oh, hell, Bob, I know you think I'm nothing more than a guy out hunting with a gun and a badge. Maybe I am—but I always like to hunt the right man."

Bob swallowed. Coldness in Steve's eyes? Sure, for the guys who deserve it. But that didn't mean it was part of the man. Pam had been right about Steve all the time . . .

A hand touched him. Bob turned. Marcillene was standing close beside him, looking up into his face, smiling.

"Bob," she said, "There's so much I've got to explain . . ."

It was there. A golden image of beauty. His for the taking. Heintz was down and he was top dog now. But Bob thought: *I was right in the middle of it when Berrywinkle's killer was brought down. I'll be a stellar witness at the trial. Maybe she's thinking that I can lie enough to save her lovely neck.*

Her beauty shook him. He couldn't deny that. But time would lessen the pain until it became only a vague memory. Time can change a man. Three years behind walls had shown him that, Bob thought.

Bob turned away from her and bent over Heintz. Heintz was groaning. The wound in the fleshy side of his neck was not too serious.

"Heintz," Bob said, "can you hear me? She was your girl. You said it, remember? She's been with you all the way, an accessory before and after the fact. But maybe, just maybe, you can tell it to them so she'll get off a little lighter than you. You'd hate to sit in the hot seat and know that all this beauty is going to be the next customer, wouldn't you, Heintz?"

Bob turned then and walked from the apartment. Steve didn't try to stop him. As he pushed through the aroused, excited crowd outside the apartment, toward the clean outside air of the early morning, Bob knew that Steve understood.

It had been a tough road. But Bob had reached its ending. He was home at last.

THE END.

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THE GOOD NEIGHBORS

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Many friends were determined to see all evil, hear all evil, and spill all evil to the cops—and let Mary take the rap!

SHE was angry. So angry she was a little frightened. She stared at Jim, choking off the bitter words which sought expression, and suddenly she knew she had to get outside, out into the cool air of the evening, away from this house which held her as a slave, and which she had come to hate. Abruptly, she jerked away toward the door.

Jim shouted at her, his words sharp, angry. "Where do you think you're going? Is it just another walk? And who do you see on these walks? Tell me that. Who do you see?"

He was as angry as she was, Mary knew. But their quarreling was always like that. It touched both of them, changing them into different people, lining them up as enemies, driving them on to hurt each other, challenging each to hurt the other most.

Mary made no answer. She opened the door, stepped outside and pulled it shut. For a moment, then, she stood leaning against it, breathing in the cool night air and trying to quiet the tumult in her chest. She told herself, "So here I am again, walking out again after another fight. And I tried so hard not to fight. So awfully hard." There were tears in her eyes now. Quick, sudden tears which she tried to blink away. A momentary impulse came to her to turn back inside and try to make up, but her pride wouldn't let her. As long as she lived she would regret she hadn't turned back.

The voice of Liz Potter came to her clearly from an open window in the next house. "I don't hear them anymore, Ed. I guess the row's over for the evening." There was an incoherent murmur for a moment, then Liz spoke again. "But why shouldn't I listen? What's wrong with listening, anyhow?"

Mary bit her lips. This couldn't go on, she knew. This incessant quarreling between her and Jim had to stop before the entire neighborhood became aware of it.

She left the porch and moved down the walk to the gate, thankful for the night's early darkness, which at least hid her departure from Liz Potter. She crossed the

street to Edith Sibley's and knocked on Edith's front door, but though the lights were on, there was no answer. Mary knocked again, then turned away, deciding that Edith had probably run up to the drugstore on the corner, or dropped in for a few minutes with some friend. If Edith went out at night and her husband was away, as he was much of the time, she always left her lights on.

Frowning, and disappointed that Edith wasn't in, Mary turned up the street. It was a quiet side street. There was almost no traffic and Mary met no one. In the middle of the next block she passed the Del Mar apartment house where another of her friends, Dora Wallingford, lived. But a glance at the windows of the corner third-floor apartment showed them to be dark. Dora was apparently away somewhere.

Mary moved on to the next cross street, and to the next, and then turned back. She was walking more slowly now and trying again, as she had tried many times before, to understand why she and Jim fought so much. It wasn't his fault alone, she knew. And the blame wasn't entirely hers. If they had more money, if they were out from under the terrible weight of the medical expense little Eddie had cost them, and if Eddie were still alive . . . It all went back to the boy, and his long illness and his death. Things had never been the same between her and Jim since then. With Eddie's death, something seemed to have gone out of their marriage. The closeness, the feeling of companionship. It wasn't there any more. But it would be. They could find it again.

Mary was suddenly walking faster. She came to the house and turned up the walk to the front door. She opened it and stepped inside and there was a determined smile on her lips. She called, "Jim! Jim, I've—"

And then she saw him. She hadn't when she had first entered the room. She had thought he was in the kitchen or bedroom, but he wasn't. He was right there in the

parlor, over to one side, on the floor near the davenport. Lying on his back on the floor, both arms outstretched, his face twisted in a horrible grimace of pain, and protruding from his chest, the haft of a knife. There was blood around it, blood which had soaked into his shirt in a spreading stain.

Whether or not she screamed, Mary never knew. She had no conscious memory of rushing forward or dropping on her knees at Jim's side, but she must have done that, for when her mind began to function again she realized that she was cradling Jim's body in her arms and calling his name over and over. It was no use. Jim couldn't hear her. He would never hear her again.

Mary eased his body back to the floor. After this, she must have gone to the bathroom, for her next conscious memory was of facing her reflection in the medicine chest mirror. But the face that stared back at her, she hardly knew. Her cheeks were pale and without color, her eyes wide and startled. Her chin hung loosely and trembled. There was a smear of blood on one jaw. Jim's blood. And it was on her hands and arms and on her dress, everywhere.

She moistened a towel and wiped her face and hands, and then suddenly, and for the first time since she had returned home, began thinking. It seemed to her that she was thinking very clearly and calmly. While she had been gone, someone must have entered the house and stabbed Jim to death. And so this was a case of murder and she should call the police, and she knew very well what the police would do. She had read enough books and seen enough pictures and television shows to be aware of what lay ahead.

The police would start searching for clues, and for a motive for murder. It might be they would look no further than her. Mrs. Potter could tell of the quarrels she had overhead. Even her friends, Edith Sibley and Dora Wallingford, would have to admit, under questioning, that she and Jim didn't get along very well. There was blood on her hands and clothes. It wouldn't be at all unlikely of the police to decide she had killed Jim, herself. And that wouldn't do. It wasn't of herself that Mary was thinking now, or of what might happen to her. It was of the murderer. Whoever killed Jim should pay the penalty, but whoever was guilty wouldn't be found unless the police made a search.

Standing there in the bathroom, Mary

stripped off all her clothing. She washed carefully, then tied her things in the towel she had used, and after this, dressed in fresh clothes. The bundle tied in the towel she carried to the attic and hid behind a stack of old papers and magazines which had been there for ages. She was careful not to disturb the dust. When this had been done she returned to the parlor and took another look at Jim. His wide-open eyes were glazed but seemed to be staring straight at her, and Mary suddenly started trembling.

It was all she could do to make it to the telephone and call the police. All she could do, for when they got there they found Mary lying near the telephone, where she had fainted.

Carnahan paced back and forth across the worn carpet in the police commissioner's office. He was a stocky, short, round-shouldered man, about forty years old. His hair was beginning to thin. He had a square and scowling face. The scowl was particularly heavy this morning.

"I don't get it," said the police commissioner. "I just don't get it. Show me one bit of evidence that you're right, or that you might be right, and I'll go along with you. Otherwise I can't."

"I don't have any evidence," said Carnahan. "I don't have any, yet."

"Then what makes you think the woman's innocent?"

"Call it a hunch, Commissioner. Call it a feeling I can't get away from. What the hell. All I'm asking is a chance to do more work on the case."

The commissioner shook his head. "We've too many other things to do. So far as we're concerned, the Briggs case is closed. Why not be sensible about it, Carnahan? Mary Briggs and her husband didn't get along. They had some terrible fights. The Potters, next door, listened in on some of them. Edith Sibley, who lives across the street, admitted that night after night, Mary came over to her place in tears after a fight with Jim. Dora Wallingford said the same thing. The knife that was used to stab Jim came from the Briggs' kitchen. It had Mary's fingerprints on it. We found her bloodstained clothing hidden in the attic upstairs. The night of the murder, Jim and Mary had another fight. The Potters heard it. Mary stabbed her husband to death that night, then hid her blood-stained clothing and told us a cock-and-bull story about going out for a walk and returning to find

him dead, killed by some mysterious intruder."

Carnahan stopped his pacing. He came up to the commissioner's desk and leaned on it. "You say Mary killed her husband, then tried to hide the fact of the murder?" he half shouted.

"What else would you call it? She hid her blood-stained clothing."

"Then if she did that, why didn't she wipe off the handle of the knife?"

"A murderer always forgets something. That's why most murderers are trapped."

"But they forget little things, not big things. If Mary had been trying to hide her connection with the crime, the first thing she would have thought of doing would have been to wipe off the handle of the knife."

"You say she didn't kill her husband."

"That's right."

"Then how did her fingerprints get on the knife?"

Carnahan straightened up. "You know the answer to that as well as I do. You know it from Mary's statement. She came back from a walk and found Jim's body and rushed to his side. She probably tried to pull the blade from his chest."

"She didn't say so in her statement."

"She doesn't remember what she did as she knelt at Jim's side. She was too shocked to remember."

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

Carnahan smoothed a hand over his hair. He said, "Commissioner, let me tell you about Jim and Mary Briggs. They were married ten years ago. Jim was in the service. He was shipped overseas and was in a hospital in France when his son, Eddie, was born. A year later he was home and in a hospital here for a time, then was discharged. He had a bad limp from his wound but it didn't bother him too much. He had been a mechanic, and he got a job here in a garage and put in all the overtime he could. He and Mary started saving money, planning ahead."

"What's this going to be?" growled the commissioner. "I've got things to do."

"It's just a short story," said Carnahan. "Listen to the rest. They were getting ahead when Eddie got sick. They didn't know what was wrong with him at first. They tried one doctor after another. He was in and out of hospital. The money they had saved began to dwindle and finally was gone. They went into debt, borrowing on Jim's insurance, on their house. They sold

their car, mortgaged their furniture. By this time they knew what was wrong with Eddie. It was muscular dystrophy. There was no cure for it. A year ago, Eddie died."

"Too bad, Carnahan. But I really don't see—"

"Listen," said Carnahan swiftly. "All through these hard times, Jim and Mary stuck together, giving up everything for their kid, denying themselves everything. If Eddie could have lived, the burden wouldn't have seemed too heavy, but they lost him. They lost the big thing in their lives, and all they had left was weariness and debt. They had forgotten how to have fun, they had no decent clothing, no money to go out at night. Their bickering and quarreling grew out of this weariness and defeat and the hopelessness of anything better until their debts could be paid. They didn't hate each other, they were fighting the trap they had fallen into. It wasn't jealousy or bitterness toward each other. Mary couldn't have killed Jim any more than Jim could have killed Mary. I tell you, the girl's innocent, and damn the evidence against her!"

The commissioner pushed back his chair and stood up. He crossed to the window and stood there, staring into the street. "You should have been an attorney, Carnahan," he muttered. "You make a good speech. What do you want?"

"I want to do more work on the case," said Carnahan promptly.

"Take a week."

"A week won't be enough."

The police commissioner jerked around. "I said a week. We've got other things to do. A week, and at the end of it, come in here with something or we drop the case."

A week. It can be long or short. Sometimes it's terribly short. Carnahan sat in the matron's quarters at the county jail, talking to Mary Briggs. He had talked to her many times before. He had asked the same questions before, and had heard the same answers.

"When you left the house," he said slowly, "you crossed over to Edith Sibley's and knocked on her door."

"That's right," said Mary. She sounded tired. There was no lift in her voice.

"Did you knock once or twice?"

"Twice, I think."

Edith says she was taking a bath, and that the radio was on in the parlor. Did you hear it?"

"I don't remember hearing it. Maybe I

BLACK MASK DETECTIVE

did, I don't know. I assumed Edith wasn't home, when she didn't answer my knock."

"Then you walked up the street, past the Del Mar apartments. You thought of going in to see Dora, but her apartment was dark."

"Yes."

"You're sure it was dark?"

"Yes, Mr. Carnahan."

"You continued on up the street another block and a half, crossed the street and came back home. You didn't pass anyone."

"No one."

"Did you notice anyone sitting on a porch, anywhere?"

"No. I—I don't think I looked at the porches."

"Did a dog bark at you anywhere?"

"No. That is, I don't think so."

"You were gone altogether how long?"

"About twenty minutes. Maybe twenty-five. I'm not sure."

"You didn't cross to Edith Sibley's again."

"No."

"Do you customarily keep your back door locked?"

Mary shook her head. "We lock it at night, but I don't think it had been locked yet."

"Edith, of course, has been in your kitchen. And Dora Wallingford. What about Mrs. Potter?"

"I suppose she's been in my kitchen, but not recently."

"What about Edith's husband?"

"He didn't come over often. Tom Sibley was away most of the time. He had a traveling job."

"But he's been in your home?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Potter?"

Mary nodded.

"Did Jim like the Potters?"

"No, but we had no trouble with them."

"Did Jim like Edith Sibley?"

"No. He thought she was always trying to interfere in our lives."

"How about Dora?"

"He liked Dora. That is, he liked her more than Edith."

"What about the men he worked with? Did he ever bring any of them home?"

"No."

"What about . . . ?"

And so it went. Another interview with Mary Briggs, but with nothing learned he hadn't known before, with nothing to point anywhere . . .

A week. It isn't long under circumstances like this. Edith Sibley answered Carna-

han's knock. She frowned when she recognized him. She was a tall woman who had once been thin but who had grown plump. She was in her late thirties, Carnahan guessed. Her dark hair was probably dyed. Her lips were too red, her face too powdered. She smelled too heavily of perfume. She might have been beautiful, once, and it was evident that she was still trying to be beautiful.

"You again?" she said to Carnahan.

"Yes," said Carnahan. "It's me again. I wondered if you had thought of anything more which might help me."

"No. I've told you everything."

"Or which might help Mary?"

Edith Sibley bit her lips. She took a quick look over her shoulder. "I'd do anything I could to help Mary," she said quickly. "Lie, even, but if I lied—"

"A lie won't help," said Carnahan. "But almost anything else might. Were there any other women at all in Jim's life?"

"I don't think so. Unless . . . "

"Unless what?"

"There was a time, a few months ago, when Dora Wallingford was over there a lot, but Jim didn't like Dora, really. He was—"

Tom Sibley, who was big and paunchy and who had an ugly scowl on his face, pulled Edith back into the house and confronted Carnahan. "Why can't you leave my wife alone?" he growled. "She's told you cops everything she knows."

"Have you?" asked Carnahan.

"Yes, I have too. Three times to you. I wasn't in town the night of the murder. I didn't get here until the next morning."

"How well did you know Jim Briggs?"

"Just knew him. That's all."

"Was he interested in any women besides his wife?"

"Of course he was. What man isn't?"

"Who was she, Mr. Sibley?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? Finding her is your job. Not mine. And leave my wife alone."

And then Dora Wallingford, slender, still youthful, blonde. A quiet, thoughtful and attractive woman. She sat in her apartment and crossed one knee over the other, drawing Carnahan's attention to her almost perfect legs.

"I wish I knew what to say to be helpful," she pouted. "If I only weren't a woman, I'd—I'd do something."

"What about Jim?" asked Carnahan. "Did you like him?"

"Very much."

"Too much?"

"No." And a flush came to her cheeks. "There was a time, a while back, when I found myself almost liking him too much, but before anything happened, Ted Roswell came along."

"Ted Roswell was the man you were out with the night of the murder?"

"Yes."

"Did he know Jim or Mary Briggs?"

"No. He didn't."

"What about Edith Sibley and Jim?"

"Shall I be honest?"

"Yes."

"Edith would go for anything in pants, but with Jim, she didn't stand a chance."

"Do you know Edith's husband?"

"The goon. I've met him."

"Why do you call him a goon?"

"Because of the way he looks. Oh, I suppose he's all right. I just feel out of sorts tonight. I mentioned Ted Roswell. He came along, he's gone. My love life never gets more than a start. Can I fix you a drink, Captain?"

"Next time," said Carnahan . . .

And the Potters. Liz Potter eager to talk and her husband frowning at her, shaking his head, stopping her. Liz saying, "We thought it was just another fight that night. Of course it was louder than some of their fights. They were both shouting at each other. And then—that awful silence."

It probably hadn't been an awful silence, Carnahan realized, but in Liz Potter's imagination it was.

"What were they fighting about?" he asked.

"I told you before," said Liz. "Jim was late getting home. He said their dinner was burned. Mary said it hadn't been burned an hour before, and how could she get a decent dinner anyhow on the little money he gave her. Then one thing led to another."

"You didn't hear Mary go out?"

"No. If she went out."

"You stood at the window, listening?"

"Of course not."

"Tell me what you know about Mary and Jim."

But there was nothing new the Potters could tell, or thought to tell . . .

It was night. The first day of the week was gone and Carnahan felt he had accomplished nothing. He sat in his own room and planned the work ahead. There was Jim's boss to talk to, the men Jim

worked with, the doctors Jim and Mary had consulted about their son, the nurses and interns at the hospital. The grocer, the druggist, the baker. All the people in all the houses up and down the street where Mary had said she had walked, for one of them might have seen her. A hundred people to see and talk to, and six days to do it. A hundred interviews, and most of them, or maybe all of them, a waste of time. But maybe not. The fifth or the ninety-fifth person he talked to might drop the hint which would break the case.

Carnahan got to his feet and started pacing the room and thinking back over what Mary had said, and what Edith Sibley had said, and her husband, and Dora, and the Potters. But it all added up to nothing.

"Why am I doing this?" he muttered. "Why? What makes me so sure Mary is innocent? Maybe she did kill her husband. Maybe she did hide her bloody clothing and forget to wipe off the haft of the knife."

He shook his head, puzzled, confused. He had told the commissioner that it was a hunch, but a hunch came from somewhere, from some subconscious observation. What had given him this hunch? He didn't know, couldn't find the answer.

The second day passed. The third, the fourth, the fifth. And on the night of the fifth, a Saturday night, Carnahan stood in front of the drugstore on the corner, half a block from the Briggs' house. A short, stocky man, undistinguished in appearance, tired and looking it. And still baffled.

Next to the drugstore was a beauty shop, still open. Carnahan had talked to the woman who ran the place several days before but had learned nothing from her. He pushed open the door and stepped in again.

"Hello, Mrs. Carmichael," he nodded.

The woman smiled at him. "Still around here asking questions?"

"That's right," said Carnahan.

"I don't see what more information you could possibly need," said the woman. "It's perfectly clear that Mary Briggs killed her husband. If I were on the jury I'd—"

"She never came in here, did she?" said Carnahan.

"No."

"But other women who come here have talked about her."

"Since the murder, of course. But they all feel like I do."

"All of them? Even Edith Sibley?"

"Mrs. Sibley never talks much. She was in yesterday for her regular appointment, but I don't think she even mentioned Mary Briggs."

"Her regular appointment?" said Carnahan, frowning. "Does she always come Friday?"

"Yes. At three in the afternoon."

"It was on Friday night that Jim Briggs was murdered. Had Edith Sibley been here Friday afternoon?"

"Of course she had. Her name's in my appointment book, if you'd like to see it."

Carnahan shrugged his shoulders but the woman was already looking back in her appointment book. She found the proper page, then looked up, pointing to Edith's name.

"Here it is. I remember now. Mrs. Sibley was late that day and I ran another woman in ahead of her. Mrs. Sibley called up about three and said she hadn't noticed the time, and that she'd be over as soon as she had her bath."

"Had her bath!" asked Carnahan, startled.

"And what's wrong with a bath, Captain? Most women take a bath before they have their hair done."

Carnahan took a deep breath. He was suddenly excited. If Edith Sibley had taken a bath late Friday afternoon, it seemed strange that she had taken another bath early Friday evening. Yet her story had been that she had been taking a bath and had had the parlor radio on, and couldn't have heard Mary's knock on the door. Here was the first crack in the case. Just a little crack, but perhaps it could be widened.

"What's the matter, Captain?"

"Nothing," said Carnahan. "Nothing at all."

He left the beauty shop and walked up the street, stood for a while in front of the Sibley home, then moved up to the door and knocked. Mrs. Sibley answered the door, her lips tightening a little as she recognized him.

"May I come in?" said Carnahan. "I have just learned something. Something important."

Fear jumped into the woman's eyes. He could see it. He pushed into the room as she backed away from the door, watching him. Watching him closely, her hands clasped together.

"I've learned this," said Carnahan slowly. "You weren't taking a bath when Mary knocked on the door. You were here, but

not in the tub. You let her knock, then turn away. After she started up the street, you crossed over to see Jim Briggs."

Edith Sibley was shaking her head. "No! No, I didn't."

"But you did," said Carnahan. "I want the truth, Mrs. Sibley. I'll get it from you now or we'll go down to headquarters and have a good, long talk."

"No. I've told you the truth."

"Did you kill him?"

There was no color at all in Edith Sibley's face. Her body was rigid. Her eyes were wide, startled.

"Shall we go?" asked Carnahan. "On the way I want to make one stop. I want to pick up the man who saw you crossing the street."

"I didn't kill him," said the woman, and her words were scarcely above a whisper. "I didn't kill him. . . ."

"But you did cross the street."

"I—ran over for just a minute. That is—"

"Shut up, Edith," said a harsh voice from the kitchen doorway. "No one saw you cross the street. Can't you see the man's bluffing?"

It was Tom Sibley entering the room. A scowling, angry Tom Sibley, both fists clenched.

"When we know the truth," said Carnahan quietly, "we can always dig up the evidence to prove it. She crossed the street all right."

"She was taking a bath when Mary Briggs knocked on the door—if Mary ever knocked on the door."

Carnahan shook his head. "No, she had taken her bath in the afternoon before her appointment with her hair dresser. I already have proof of that."

"I tell you, she was taking a bath. The water was still in the tub when I—"

Sibley's voice suddenly choked off. His eyes widened as though from realization of what he had just said.

"Keep talking, Sibley," said Carnahan. "So you didn't get home the next morning? You got home the night before. You saw your wife crossing the street to the Briggs' house. You followed her. I wondered who the man was who followed her. I wondered—"

Sibley reached into his pocket and jerked out a gun. He leveled it at Carnahan. "You wonder about too many things."

"No, Tom—no!" Edith Sibley was screaming. "You can't—"

"Keep out of this, Edith," said the man sharply. "Let me handle it."

"No, Tom. No. Not again."

She was moving toward her husband. She grabbed suddenly at the gun in his hand. Carnahan heard the roar of the explosion as the gun went off. How far the bullet missed him he didn't know, and didn't care now. It had missed, and that was enough. He lunged forward at Sibley, slashing out with his fists. Sibley was no match for him at all.

"You're lucky," said the police commissioner. "Just plain lucky."

"No, it was good detective work," Carnahan grinned. "Routine detective work, pounding the pavement hour after hour, driving question after question at all sorts of people. Digging for the truth."

"What happened, exactly?"

"Edith heard Mary at the door but didn't answer. She let her walk on up the street, then crossed over to see Jim. She was Mary's friend, but in the trouble between Mary and Jim, was on Jim's side. She thought Mary was too hard on him. She went over to sympathize with Jim, to be the understanding pal. Maybe she was a little in love with Jim."

"And Sibley, arriving home from a trip early, saw her cross the street, and followed, playing the jealous husband role."

"That's it. He was out of town a lot, suspicious of his wife. The curtains were down. He couldn't see a thing, so he went in through the back door and stood in the kitchen, listening. That's where he picked up the knife. What he heard, I don't know, but a man already suspicious wouldn't have to hear much to convince him he was right. He walked in on Jim just after Edith left. After he killed Jim, he wiped his fingerprints from the knife."

"That's what started you on this, isn't it?" said the commissioner. "If Mary had killed her husband and hidden her bloody clothing, you couldn't understand why she would have forgotten to wipe off the haft of the knife."

"Well, that was part of it," Carnahan admitted.

"And the rest?"

"Just a hunch, Commissioner."

"Do you get these hunches often?"

Carnahan chuckled. He shook his head. He said, "Chief, can I tell her?"

"I guess you've earned the right. She's a nice-looking woman."

"It's not that," said Carnahan. "I never noticed how she looked. But I would like

to tell her we know she didn't kill Jim. Now and then a detective likes to say something nice to someone."

You Can't Get Away With MURDER!

DIVORCE is the easiest way when there's another woman; but Adolph Luetgert, a Chicago sausage manufacturer, thought murder without trace would be simpler. The scheme he worked out was diabolically clever.

First he complained to police that his wife Louisa was playing around with another man. Then, on the eve of the April weekend in 1897 when he was supposed to surrender his bankrupt business to creditors, he sent the night watchman to a nearby tavern, lured Louisa to the deserted factory, killed her and popped her body into a vat of potash. Stoking up the furnace with her clothing, and shoveled the ashes out into the backyard.

A week later he reported his wife had run away, and asked that she be arrested for desertion. Police aware of Adolph's own philandering, began their search at the factory, where they found evidence of the potash. Sifting the ashes, they came upon Louisa's wedding ring, the remains of a steel corset stay and a bit of bone forming a human toe—and arrested the sausage-maker for murder. Adolph was ready with an explanation. He had been, he said, trying out a new soap formula that contained potash; and his wife's ring, which he sentimentally carried in his vest pocket, must have fallen out as he bent over stirring the mixture.

His defense was based on this explanation, plus the contention that a body could not have been destroyed in the time available to him. But the prosecution disposed of a medical school cadaver about the size of his wife in the manner and within the time they claimed Adolph had. Then they brought out their clincher—witnesses who testified that the knuckle of Mrs. Luetgert's left hand third finger had grown so large that it was utterly impossible for her to remove her wedding ring.

And so the unsuccessful sausage-maker, who nevertheless thought he could get away with murder by making sausage meat out of his victim, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

HERE'S BLOOD IN MY EYE!

Headlong Saga of a Pickled Patsy

By RICHARD DEMING

A lost weekend could mean a lost lifetime—but Tod Horton, murder suspect, couldn't resist one little drink for the corpse!

CHAPTER ONE.

THE FATAL SLIP.

HAVING a hangover was bad enough, Tod Horton thought, but to have to smile with a hangover was a punishment that even a heel like himself didn't deserve.

Resisting an impulse to place his hand on top of his head to keep it from popping off like a champagne cork, he smiled at Evelyn Parrish. *What a man won't do for the woman he loves*, he thought, as the effort jolted him clear from his neatly brushed hair to the tips of his brightly shined shoes. Much as he delighted in gazing at Evelyn, at the moment he wished she would take her beautiful body out of his office and let him die in peace.

"You're as neat and scrubbed as a Sunday school kid this morning," Evelyn said. "What's the occasion?"

Camouflage, he almost said, in a sudden irrational impulse to confess he had fallen off the wagon the night before and was trying to disguise it with an immaculate appearance. It occurred to him he had overdone the camouflage. It would have been smarter to arrive at the office as usual, clad in slightly baggy tweeds and with his hair only casually combed. Evelyn had once told him he reminded her of a bed sheet in the wind: clean but mussed.

Stifling the impulse at candor, he snarled a sensual leer. "I'm trying to make the public stenographer across the hall."

"You wasted the effort," said Evelyn, who was the said public stenographer. "She's much too busy today to bother with designing men." Then her eyes studied his face with sudden worry. "Are you sick, Tod? Your eyes are all bloodshot."

"Woke up with little cold," he mumbled.

Kenny Sheridan came in at that moment. Tod had never been more thankful to see his business partner. He greeted him with

such cordiality, Kenny stared at him in amazement.

It would have been hard to find two men as opposite as Tod Horton and Kenneth Sheridan. Big, blond, plump and round-faced Kenny had the friendly and rollicking nature of an overgrown puppy, while Tod, slim almost to the point of gauntness, nonchalant in appearance and generally suave in manner, smoldered beneath the surface with an intense drive to succeed and a violent nervous energy which only a satiric sense of humor prevented him from exhibiting. Occasionally it burst forth in a flash of quickly spent anger which left him subdued and ashamed of himself—for basically he liked most people and managed to get along with them well—but most of the time a mild restlessness was the only indication of the deep fires which burned within Tod.

Kenny asked, "You going to a wedding or something?"

"Going to meet a man and try to sell him a gross of bolt-cutters," Tod growled. Pointedly he looked at Evelyn. "That is, if the women from other offices along the hall leave me alone long enough to get my mail read."

"Hah!" Evelyn snorted. "If I started billing you birds for all the after-hours typing I do out of the goodness of my heart, I'd get some respect around here."

And she swept across the hall to her own office, slamming the door behind her.

"What's eating you?" Kenny asked.

Tod closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "Hangover," he said simply.

Kenny whistled. "Jeepers! After eleven months you fell off?"

Without opening his eyes, Tod nodded miserably.

"Evelyn know?"

"No." He opened his eyes and sat up. "She's not going to. It was a slip. It doesn't mean anything and it won't happen

again. I know I can't take the stuff, but I also know I couldn't take another year of waiting for Evelyn to be convinced I'm not a drunk any more. I've got it licked, Kenny. I know I have, or after last night I would have disappeared for two weeks instead of sobering up and coming to work. Last night scared me; I know I won't slip again. But you know how Evelyn would take it. We'd be right back where we were eleven months ago."

"Why'd you do it?"

Tod shrugged. "Feeling sorry for myself, I guess. Got to thinking that in another month the twelve-month probation Evelyn put me on would be over, and we'd be free to get married insofar as the liquor problem is concerned. But we won't be able to afford it until you and I get our heads above water in this damned bolt-cutter business. The more we sell of the damned things, the deeper we seem to get in."

"We're not getting in deeper," Kenny protested. "We're better than breaking even. We've retired half our investment in only two years. Any increase in volume of sales from here on out ought to be gravy."

"That's what you told me six months ago. So we doubled the business and the profits still stay the same."

"Well, costs have gone up twice since then. Steel is up, and we pay higher wages, more for shipping, everything. It costs money to run even a little plant like ours. If you think you can do any better, you take over the plant and I'll get out and sell."

Rising, Tod walked to the window and gazed out at the building next door housing the Horton and Sheridan Bolt-Cutter Company's machine shop. Because of lack of space in the flat-topped one-story building and the advisability of having their business office removed from the noise of the shop, they had rented a two-room office in the building next to it. For a moment he regarded the squat building sourly, then turned back to his desk."

"I don't know anything about plant management," he said, "I'm a salesman."

Kenny said, "Maybe we'll show a bigger profit than we figured when the books are audited. The annual audit is due in a week."

"Did you tell that jerk down the hall he's lost our account?" Tod asked.

He referred to Gerald Katt, C.P.A., whose office was two doors from theirs and who had audited the company's books ever since Tod and Kenny had formed the company three years before. Katt, who had wolfish

tendencies, had cornered Evelyn alone in her office a few days previously and left the public stenographer quite mussed before she managed to break away and flee into Tod's office.

Though Tod had never liked the C.P.A., ordinarily he did not interfere with Kenny's management of business matters. This was more than he could stomach, however. After blacking Gerald Katt's left eye, he told Kenny Sheridan to hire another accountant to go over the company books.

Kenny said, "I told him. He wants to talk it over with you though." Apologetically he explained, "He wanted to know why, and I told him it was your idea. He's coming in this morning."

On the announcement, Gerald Katt stuck his head in the open door and grinned at Tod ingratiatingly. He was a man in his mid-thirties, tall and sleek and with a blond hairline mustache which made him look like a clothing store mannequin. There was an insincere oiliness about him which irritated Tod.

"See you in a minute?" he asked.

"Come in," Tod invited shortly.

He entered, closed the door and turned his ingratiating smile on Kenny. "Alone, I meant."

Kenny's eyebrows went up, but he rose to his feet. Tod growled, "Sheridan and I don't have any business secrets."

"This is personal, not business," Katt said, and his smile widened.

"Drop in before you go out on your call, Tod," Kenny said casually, and moved through the connecting door into his own office, pulling it shut behind him.

"Well?" Tod asked without asking the accountant to sit.

Negligently Gerald Katt leaned his back against the hall door. "Have a nice time at Danny's Bar and Grill last night, Horton?"

Tod looked at him sharply. "Were you there?"

"Just before closing. While Danny was —ah—assisting you out."

"Then you know I had a nice time," Tod said shortly.

Katt nodded. "I know. But does Evelyn know?"

Tod's head jerked up. "What?"

Gerald Katt's eyes glittered and his smile was no longer ingratiating. "Everybody in the building knows she's agreed to marry you if you stay off liquor for a year. I'll put it to you cold, Horton. I need Sheridan

and Horton's account. Unless I keep it, Evelyn Parrish is going to hear about your little drunk last night."

Tod gripped the edge of his desk and threw himself erect. His thin face reddened with rage and his voice was almost gutturally indistinct when he spoke:

"You dirty blackmailer! I'm going to close your other eye!"

Though he outweighed Tod by at least twenty pounds, the accountant's eyes showed panic. Jerking open the door, he backed into the hall as Tod stalked toward him. Suddenly jumping, Tod swung an enraged left which missed when Katt leaped backward.

"Stand still so I can beat your head off!" Tod yelled.

Doors opened along the hall as tenants peered out to identify the disturbance. Harry Bannister, the bald-headed little professional bondsman whose office was across from Katt's, peered at them owlishly through horn-rimmed glasses. David Easterly, the wizened insurance broker from next door, fearfully watched through a door open only a crack. Both Evelyn and Kenny stepped into the hall, looking anxious.

Tod swung again and again was foiled by Gerald Katt's quick leap. In a paroxysm of frustrated rage, he shouted, "Hold still or I'll kill you, you dirty blackmailer!"

Turning, Gerald Katt fled to his office at a dead run and slammed the door behind himself. But Tod was after him and had shoved it open again before the C.P.A. could lock it. After his initial anger, he suddenly became almost deadly calm. Slowly he pushed the door shut in the faces of the curious people now flocking into the hall and advanced on Katt, who was trying to squeeze himself into a corner.

"Every day until Evelyn and I get married I'm going to do this," he told the cowering man.

This time he connected with Katt's jaw because the latter had nowhere left to dodge. It was a satisfactorily solid blow, and Tod felt it clear to his shoulder, deriving pleasure from the pain. Gerald Katt slid to the floor with a vacuous expression on his face, out cold.

At that moment an explosion in the street immediately outside the window startled Tod. Then he realized it had been a truck backfire.

Flexing his numb fingers, he opened the door, stepped out into the hall to face the

curious onlookers and pulled the door shut again behind him. As his anger cooled he was beginning to feel a little ashamed of himself, but he was not prepared for the look of horror the people in the hall were directing at him.

Evelyn said, "Tod, you didn't— You didn't—That shot!"

He gazed at her puzzledly a moment before he remembered the nicely timed truck backfire. Then he grinned.

"No I didn't," he said. "See any guns sticking out of my pocket?"

Smiling rather foolishly, the spectators dispersed and went back to their respective offices. And that, for the moment, was that.

At about eleven-thirty, Tod left the office of the morning's third potential customer, and noted that it was just too late to squeeze in a fourth call before lunch. He managed to consume an hour over a leisurely lunch. Then, since it was still too early to start his afternoon calls, he returned to his office to finish reading the mail he had not gotten to that morning.

Though the second floor of the Universal Building contained half a dozen independent business offices, twelve noon to one p.m. had somehow been adopted as the official lunch hour by them all, so that in this one respect the floor operated as though it were all one business concern. Arriving fifteen minutes before one, Tod was surprised to find two of the offices had broken the schedule.

As he entered the building, he saw the bald-headed little bondsman, Harry Bannister, come down the stairs, carefully glance both ways, and when he spied Tod, move quickly in the opposite direction toward the alley door.

Tod experienced mild surprise that Bannister had used the stairs instead of the elevator, since he had often watched the man wait ten minutes for the car rather than walk the one flight, and at the moment the car stood idle at the main floor. Dismissing the matter, he took the stairs himself rather than interrupt the operator's perusal of a newspaper.

As he passed the door next to his own office, it opened a crack and the wizened face of old David Easterly, the insurance broker, peered out at him. Unaccountably the man's face turned frightened when his gaze fell on Tod, and the door quickly clicked shut again.

I suppose the old dodo thinks I'm a maniac after that scene this morning. Tod thought ruefully as he entered his own office.

Seating himself at his desk, he swept the pile of unopened letters in front of him, pulled open his top drawer and dropped in one hand to grope for his letter opener. Not finding it under his fingers, he pulled the drawer wider and peered down. He saw it under a litter of paper clips and rubber bands near the back.

He was starting to reach for the letter opener when something odd about the drawer struck his attention. He frowned down at it, trying to identify the odd note, and suddenly it registered.

The .38 caliber revolver he kept in the drawer was missing.

Quickly he searched the rest of the desk, but the gun was not there. He had not expected to find it, for he recalled seeing it in the top drawer only the day before, and knew he had not touched it since. It had been stolen, he instantly realized, rejecting all other possible reasons for its disappearance.

Hearing a movement in the adjoining room, he crossed to the connecting door, opened it and found Kenny Sheridan hanging up his hat.

"Somebody swiped the gun out of my desk," he announced abruptly.

Kenny looked at him in astonishment. "Who?"

Tod frowned impatiently. One by one he thought over the occupants of the Universal Building's second floor, and one by one he dismissed them as not possibly stooping to petty larceny. Until he thought of Gerald Katt.

"Kenny," he said, "do you think that jerk Katt would be stupid enough . . . ?"

When he let the sentence hang, Kenny said, "Gerald? Why would he—?" He paused and abruptly changed tack. "My door's been open ever since you left. He'd have to pass it to reach your office. I don't think he's even come out of his room since you chased him in there."

"I'll check anyway."

Swinging out into the hall, Tod marched toward Gerald Katt's office. After a moment of hesitation, Kenny followed after him. Tod rapped on the door peremptorily, then pushed it open when there was no answer.

Both men stood staring at the corner for

a long time after entering the room. Then Kenny Sheridan slowly pushed the door shut behind him.

Gerald Katt still lay in the corner where he had fallen when Tod hit him, but now there was a gaping wound in the center of his forehead. And lying on the floor half-way between the corpse and the doorway, too far for Katt to have throw it if he had committed suicide, was Tod Horton's .38 caliber revolver. Both Tod and Kenny recognized it instantly.

Kenny said, "That shot! Then you did—" and stared at Tod in horror.

"Don't be a damned fool," Tod said irritably. "That was a backfire outside. You were standing in the hall. Did you see a gun in my hand when I chased him in here?"

"No," Kenny said slowly, still watching him with an expression of horror on his face. Almost reluctantly he added, "I mean I don't think so. It all happened so fast." Then he seemed to gain control of himself. "I'll say you didn't have a gun anyway, Tod. Of course I'll stand by you."

Tod glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean by that? Why shouldn't you say I didn't have a gun?"

His partner regarded him levelly. "Frankly, I don't know whether you had one or not, Tod. When I heard that sound—the one you say was a backfire—I thought you had shot him. I didn't notice a gun in your hand, but then I wasn't looking for one. But I told you, I'll stand by you. I'm willing to swear you didn't have a gun."

The implications in what Kenny was saying brought a sinking sensation to the pit of Tod's stomach. Kenny would be loyal. Evelyn, too, could be depended upon to swear he was unarmed when he chased Katt into his office. But what of the other witnesses? If Tod were not sure what he had seen, what could a smart policeman do with witnesses to whom he was no more than a casual acquaintance?

He knew the answer before he asked himself the question. Before the police investigation was well started, witnesses would have him running after Katt with a gun in his hand. And the ill-timed backfire would condemn him. Even Evelyn had thought it a shot from inside the room before he reassured her.

He said harshly, "Somebody took advantage of my scrap with Katt and is trying to frame me!"

CHAPTER TWO.

ONE SHORT SNORT.

MOVING to the center of the room, Tod picked up his pistol and thrust it into his pocket. Then he opened the door, motioned Kenny out into the hall and closed the door again.

"What are you going to do?" Kenny asked.

"Find out if anyone heard a shot after I left first. Then get rid of this gun. Then call the police."

"There wasn't any shot. I was here till noon, and couldn't possibly have missed a thing like that."

"Maybe it happened during lunch hour when everyone was gone, or supposed to be gone," Tod said.

His eyes narrowed as they fell on the door to the insurance man's office. "Easterly was here when I came up at a quarter to one. Let's see what he has to say."

He rapped on the door, opened it and found the little man at his desk reading a newspaper.

"Were you here during the whole lunch hour, Mr. Easterly?" he asked.

The old man looked at him blankly. "Except for about fifteen minutes. Just long enough for coffee and a sandwich at the corner. Why?"

"Hear anything like an explosion in the building?"

David Easterly's eyes grew wide. "An explosion? What happened?"

"Nothing," Tod said patiently. "Sheridan thought he heard an explosion and I've been arguing it was a truck backfire. We just wondered if you heard it."

"Oh. Trucks are always backfiring on the street. No, I didn't hear anything. Come to think of it, I did hear a truck let go right outside the window about twelve-thirty."

Tod thanked him and returned to Kenny's office with him.

"That does it," he said. "With trucks passing here all day long, and a backfire sounding exactly like a shot, who's going to take my word for it that it was a backfire when I was in the room, and a shot that Easterly heard?"

From the hallway outside came the sounds of people returning to work. Glancing at his watch, Tod saw it was two minutes after one. He heard his own office door open, then close again. Evelyn glancing in to see if he were there, he thought, but

made no move toward the hall to greet her. At the moment he wanted no distractions to prevent him from thinking out a course of action.

"I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going to have a drink," Kenny said, crossing to his desk and removing a nearly full quart of whiskey from the bottom drawer.

He took a long pull from the bottle, set it on the desk and glanced toward Tod. "You better have one yourself. You look like you'd seen a ghost."

Tod shook his head, eyeing the bottle longingly.

"Go ahead," Kenny urged. "It won't send you off on a drunk, because I won't let you have more than one. It'll straighten you out so you can think."

"Maybe it would," Tod admitted. "Being framed for a murder on top of a hangover is giving me the shakes." He lifted the bottle, then looked at Kenny appealingly. "For God's sake hide it and keep me away from it after one. If ever I had to stay sober, it's now."

"I'll hold you to one if I have to break the bottle over your head," Kenny promised.

Dubiously Tod elevated the bottle, let a little liquor trickle down his throat, then as he felt the welcome burning sensation, swallowed deeply.

"Hey!" Kenny said, snatching the bottle from him. "I said a drink, not a complete refueling."

Slipping the whiskey back in his bottom drawer, he removed a key from his pocket and twisted it in the lock. Tod eyed the action disappointedly, but accepted with resignation.

As the liquor created a warm spot in his stomach, then began to spread its warmth through his whole body, his tight nerves began to unravel. As Kenny had suggested, the one drink had straightened him out just enough so he could think. He was able to examine his situation coolly, the edge of panic deadened by alcohol.

"There isn't any doubt in my mind I'll be nailed for this," he told Kenny calmly. "Even if I manage to get rid of the gun so the cops never find it, I won't be able to explain its disappearance. Practically everybody on the floor knows I kept it in my desk."

"So?" Kenny asked.

"So the logical move is to try to figure out who framed me before we even tell the

cops there was a murder. Once they hear the story of my fight with Katt, they'll slap me in jail and not even look for any other possible murderer."

"It must be somebody on this floor," Sheridan muttered.

"Right. Somebody who witnessed the fight and realized what an opportunity it gave him. Possibly someone Katt has been blackmailing like he tried to blackmail me."

Kenny looked thoughtful. "Look, Tod, how does this sound? Nobody knows we discovered the body. The killer must be on pins and needles waiting for its discovery. You stay out of sight in here for a little while and I'll casually drop into each office along the hall. If I can find someone who acts nervous and upset, we'd have at least a suspicion to start on."

"Why should I stay out of sight?" Tod asked. "I'll take half the offices and we'll finish it sooner."

Kenny shook his head. "The killer would automatically be on the defensive with you. He'd have no reason to suspect me of anything but a friendly visit, and I'd be more likely to catch him with his guard down."

Seeing the logic of this, Tod reluctantly nodded. As Kenny left the room, he moved over to the desk and settled himself in his partner's chair to wait. The gun in his hip pocket dug into him as he sat down, and he transferred it to a coat pocket.

Sitting there idly, his eyes strayed with longing at the locked bottom drawer containing Kenny's whiskey. Then he stared in surprise. Guiltily he glanced at the closed door, and a curious tingle of anticipation washed over him.

Kenny had forgotten to remove the little key from the lock in the drawer.

It was a full half hour before Kenny Sheridan returned from his tour of the other offices, and in the interim Tod managed to consume half of the nearly full quart. He had no intention of drinking so much, of course, fully intending to sneak only one more drink while Kenny was out of the room. In fact he even returned the bottle and relocked the drawer after the first drink, rationalizing himself, with the alcoholic's inverted logic, into believing it would stop there.

Subconsciously he knew it would not, for too many times in the past he had gone through the same involved reasoning step by step, after each drink assuring himself that *this time* he was going to drink sen-

sibly, and ending in a drunken coma. But as the pleasant warmth stole through him and the liquid level grew lower, it seemed less and less important to return the bottle to its drawer.

When Kenny finally returned, he had his feet on the desk and was holding the bottle in his lap.

His partner took one horrified look, said, "My God!" and locked his office door behind him. Quickly he crossed to the connecting door and locked that too.

Tod gave him a charming smile and started to raise the bottle to his lips.

"No you don't!" Kenny said sharply, moving forward to jerk the liquor from his hand.

Corking it, Kenny held it by the neck in his left hand, as though not trusting its safety if he set it down anywhere. Tod pouted aggrievedly.

"I have no intention of getting drunk," he said in a dignified tone.

"You couldn't," Kenny informed him grimly. "You've already gotten there." He examined the liquor level. "How am I going to tell you what I found out so it will make sense to you? Tod, why did you do it?"

"I am in perfect possession of my faculties," Tod said frigidly, rising from the chair to prove his point and staggering against the edge of the desk.

"Oh, brother!" Kenny clutched his hair and stared wildly about, as though seeking a solution hanging on the walls. With a visible effort he spoke calmly. "Listen, Tod, I've got to get you out of here and somewhere where I can sober you up. Will you behave and do what I tell you?"

"No need to talk to me like I'm drunk. Perfectly capable taking care of myself."

Shrugging hopelessly, Kenny unlocked and eased open the door. After peering out into the hall, he pulled it wide, grasped Tod's arm and hurried him along the empty hall toward the stairs. They had to pass two open doors en route, but went by so rapidly they were out of sight before the occupants looked up.

Supported by Kenny, Tod descended the stairs at a staggering shuffle. The lower hall was empty and the elevator indicator showed the car was stopped at six. They made the alley door without being seen by anyone.

Still jerking him along like a puppet on a string, Kenny managed to get Tod into the rear seat of his car. For a moment he stood panting.

"Listen, Tod, don't you move from this

BLACK MASK DETECTIVE

car or I'll break your silly neck. I've got to go back and give Evelyn some excuse for being out of the office and ask her to take calls for us. Just sit there and be quiet."

Then he discovered he still carried the half-full whiskey bottle in his hand. He looked at it in amazement, started to set it on the floor of the car, then picked it up again and took it around to the trunk. Locking it in, he carefully put the key in his pocket.

Smiling vaguely to himself, Tod patiently awaited Kenny's return from his errand. His partner was all upset over nothing, he told himself. He was thinking all the clearer for having had a drink or two. Thing to do was get an alibi. Go somewhere they served drinks and stay there till the body was discovered. Pleased with the thought, he turned it over and over in his mind in order to fix it there, so he would not forget to suggest it to Kenny when he returned.

When he came back, Kenny leaped into the driver's seat as if he were pursued. Flicking on the ignition switch, he eased the car out the alley exit, then gunned it away as soon as he reached the street.

"Somebody discovered the body," he said over his shoulder. "They're all running around like a pack of maniacs up there. That fool Harry Bannister took one look and decided you did it. He was phoning the cops when I got back, and spilled the whole story of the fight before I could stop him. They'll have a pickup order out on you in a matter of minutes."

Tod had a ready solution. "Let's hide in a saloon. They'll never look there." He smiled broadly, pleased with the way his mind was functioning.

But Kenny was exceeding the speed limit and driving toward the edge of the town.

"Listen, Tod, can you understand me through that alcoholic haze? We've got to get you out of sight until we can figure out how to get you out of this jam. I'm taking you out to my cabin on the river. We may run into a road block if they get the alarm out fast enough. If we do, you drop to the floor. I'll flash my auxiliary police badge to get us through. Understand?"

"Don't like my idea, huh?" Tod asked wistfully.

"Do you understand what I said?" Kenny shouted in exasperation.

"Sure," Tod said in a reasonable voice. "You don't have to yell your head off."

They failed to encounter a road block, and an hour later Kenny turned off the

main highway onto a dirt road. A half mile farther he heaved a sigh of relief as they pulled up alongside an isolated cabin situated on a small neck of land formed by a bend in the river.

The cabin was a neat, one-story building with an attached wood shed. Though no other sign of human habitation was within sight, there was visible evidence of its connection with civilization in the form of twin telephone wires running from a pole near the dirt road to insulators on the roof.

With a curt, "Stay here," Kenny Sheridan went to the door and entered.

He was gone a very few minutes, and when he returned he opened the car's back door and motioned Tod out. Leading him into the cabin, he took him through what seemed to be a combination kitchen and living room into the building's sole other room, a small bedroom. Directing Tod to the bed, Kenny pushed him back on it in a prone position and removed his shoes.

"Now you just lie there and sleep it off till I get back," he instructed. "If the phone rings, don't answer it unless it's my signal ring. If I call, I'll let it ring three times, then hang up and ring again. Got that?"

"Three times," Tod said. "Then you ring again."

Kenny examined him dubiously. "You'll stay in bed and sleep it off? You won't get fancy ideas of starting out to find a saloon?"

"I'm not sleepy," Tod said. "But I'll lie here. The ride sobered me up pretty much. I think I'll be all right."

Kenny looked a little encouraged. "You sound a little soberer. Maybe you can understand me now. When I dropped in on people back at the Universal Building, I learned a couple of funny things. Harry Bannister told me old David Easterly was scared to death of Gerald Katt for some reason."

"Easterly's afraid of everybody," Tod said. "He's even scared of me."

"Yeah, but listen to this. Easterly told me exactly the same thing about Bannister. How do you figure that?"

"Maybe Katt was blackmailing them both."

"Easterly also told me Bannister came back to his office at twelve-thirty, and left again fifteen minutes later. He didn't see him, but his office is almost right across the hall and he heard his door open and close both times. Course it could have been someone other than Bannister going in his office."

Tod shook his head. "No. I saw him when he left at one-fifteen. He used the stairs instead of the elevator."

"Then we got two people who had opportunity to put a slug in Katt during the lunch hour. Bannister and Easterly. I kind of favor Bannister because he was so quick to put the blame on you."

Kenny turned to leave, then in after-thought turned back again. "Give me that gun and I'll get rid of it."

Obediently Tod pulled the gun from his pocket and handed it to his partner. Kenny thrust it into his hip pocket, offered a final admonition to Tod to stay in bed and left the room. Tod heard the back door open and close, waited ten minutes and rolled off the bed.

In his stocking feet he padded into the kitchen, then stopped in embarrassment when he found Kenny leaning in the doorway waiting for him.

"I thought you'd be up the minute my back was turned," Kenny growled at him. "Now get back in that bed and stay there."

"Yes, sir," Tod said, snapping him a brisk salute. He returned to the bedroom.

This time he waited until he heard the car drive away. When after ten minutes there was no sound of its returning, he climbed from bed again.

In the kitchen he switched on a table model radio, only to find it lighted up but failed to receive anything. Disgustedly he shut it off again and began to search the kitchen cabinet with the idea of making himself a cup of coffee.

In the first compartment in which he looked, he was startled to find the gun he had just given Kenny. *What an idiotic place to hide it*, he thought irritably, thrusting it back into his coat pocket.

In the second compartment he searched, he found a half-full bottle of whiskey.

CHAPTER THREE.

DATE WITH A KILLER.

TOD HORTON possessed an unusual capacity for alcohol. During his half hour alone in Kenny Sheridan's office he had consumed nearly three-fourths of a pint, and while this rapid rate of consumption brought its inevitable effect almost immediately, the effect had now largely passed. He still felt fuzzy around the edges, but the long ride in the open air had sobered him considerably.

His first emotion on finding the whiskey was one of foreboding rather than jubilation, consequently; for he was sufficiently in command of his senses to know that if he sampled it, he would drink it all. At the same time he still had enough alcohol in him to make the bottle impossible for him to resist.

I'll just have one drink and put it back, he thought to himself, knowing with despairing certainty as the thought went through his mind that the one drink would stretch to an empty bottle. Setting the bottle on the table, he studied it with a mixture of eagerness and hopelessness.

I won't touch it until I swear to myself I'll stop at one, he thought, and then suddenly had the idea which saved him.

Hunting through the cupboard until he found a small shot glass, he poured a single drink, carefully set it aside and happily poured the rest of the bottle in the sink. There was exultation in his eyes as the last of the liquid gurgled away. *I've beaten it*, he told himself, and with a sudden burst of will power flung the contents of the shot glass after the rest.

Hunting through the cupboard again, he found coffee, brewed a pot and had three cups black. Then, still slightly tipsy but with his head rapidly clearing, he stripped, ran the fifty feet to the river bank and plunged into ice-cold water. Though it was the middle of June and the air was comfortably warm, the water was still near freezing from the melted snow from the mountains which still flowed into it.

After fifteen minutes of vigorous exercise, Tod came out of the water shivering but dead sober.

Back in the cabin he dressed, then examined the radio to see if he could discover what was wrong with it. He found the trouble easily. The aerial was disconnected.

Slipping the bare end of wire through the hole in the proper connecting post was the work of but a moment. He switched on the radio and tuned in a station just in time to catch the four o'clock news.

The news was full of the murder of Gerald Katt. The body had been discovered by old David Easterly, Tod learned. And as he had suspected, the police had immediately decided Tod Horton was the killer.

"It is not easy to comprehend why the body lay undiscovered nearly four hours," the news commentator said, "inasmuch as a half dozen persons were virtual eyewitnesses to the shooting. According to witnesses, the

murder was preceded by a violent alteration between Tod Horton and the deceased, which ended by Horton chasing Katt into his office and pushing the door shut in the faces of the observers. A sound which all witnesses assumed was a shot immediately came from within the room, but when Horton emerged a moment later, again shutting the door and preventing witnesses from seeing what had happened in the room, they seem to have accepted without question his statement that the sound they heard had been a backfire from the street.

"District Attorney Hutchinson, when asked by this reporter what he made of this amazing testimony, bluntly said were not so many witnesses involved, he would suspect a conspiracy to aid the killer, and would have arrested the lot as accessories. However, since there were so many, and they were all reputable people, he was forced to the conclusion the failure of any witness to investigate what had actually occurred in Katt's office was merely an incredible example of mass bad judgment.

"Though the shooting occurred at nine-thirty in the morning, it was not till Easterly, whose insurance office is next door to the deceased, visited the dead man's office on a business matter at one-thirty p.m., that the body was found."

They've already tried and convicted me, Tod thought.

"A .38 caliber revolver which Tod Horton was known to keep in his desk, and which presumably is the murder weapon, is missing, indicating the fleeing man is armed, and possibly dangerous. Police have thrown out a city-wide dragnet and have issued a four-state alarm. Kenneth Sheridan, the wanted man's business partner, is a member of the auxiliary police, and is personally assisting in the search. Arrangements have been made for Mr. Sheridan to issue periodic appeals over this station directed at Horton in an attempt to convince him the wisest course is to give himself up."

Good old Kenny, Tod thought. Being in on the search himself, he would know immediately if it began to get warm, possibly even turn it in another direction if it got too hot.

But what difference would a short respite mean in the end? He could hardly spend the rest of his life in a two-room cabin, and the moment he stepped back into civilization, he was finished. At best he could anticipate the life of a fugitive. He would have to

desert his business, his few savings, never see Evelyn again. Perhaps he should take the tongue-in-cheek advice Kenny planned to issue over the radio, and give himself up.

Shaking off the mood, he told himself his present situation at least granted him some time. If Kenny could unearth some motive one of the other tenants at the Universal Building might have for killing Katt, perhaps he could swing the investigation away from Tod. And would not medical evidence show Katt had died at twelve-thirty instead of nine-thirty?

He felt uncertain on the last point, vaguely recalling he had read somewhere it was frequently impossible to fix time of death closer than within a few hours, mystery novelists to the contrary.

Switching off the radio, he moved restlessly into the bedroom and stared at the phone, as though concentrating could make it ring. It flashed through his mind to call Evelyn at her office, then occurred to him police were probably listening to all calls coming through the Universal Building's switchboard. In another hour she would be home and he could try her there. Or would her phone be tapped too?

He would take the chance anyway, he decided, rather than just sit and do nothing.

He spent the hour nervously prowling from room to room, switching the radio on and off, trying to read one of the two magazines he found in the kitchen and casting it down in disgust after five minutes. At exactly five-fifteen he called long-distance and asked for Evelyn's number.

She must have been sitting near the phone, for she answered immediately.

"Tod!" she said breathlessly when she recognized his voice, "Where are you?"

"At Kenny's river cabin. Haven't you talked to Kenny?"

"Not alone. He's too surrounded by policemen." Her voice took on a slight note of hysteria. "Tod, why did you do it?"

The question shocked him, for it had not even occurred to him Evelyn would believe him guilty.

"I didn't," he snapped angrily. "Didn't you know it was a frame?"

There was silence from the other end, and after a moment he said, "For Pete's sake, do you think I'd lie to you? Do you actually believe I did it?"

"No," she said with a sudden rush of gladness in her voice. "Not down inside, I didn't. Tod. But everybody was so sure. And

after that sound while you were in the office . . ."

"It was a backfire," he said irritably. "Katt was killed later. Probably at twelve-thirty, because David Easterly heard what could have been a shot then. Only the old fool thought it was a backfire."

"But who would do a thing like that and attempt to pin it on you, Tod? Nobody on the floor except Katt disliked you that much."

"I don't think the killer has anything against me personally," Tod said. "I just created a wonderful opportunity for him and he took advantage of it. He'd have done as much for anyone. Can you get back to the office tonight?"

"To my own. I could pretend to have some night work. Not to Katt's, because the police have it sealed off."

Tod said, "I've got a hunch Gerald Katt was blackmailing either Harry Bannister or David Easterly. If you could get into their offices, maybe you could find some evidence of it."

"I'll try, Tod. I'll go back as soon as I have something to eat. Can I phone you there?"

"Yes, but you better pass along to Kenny whatever you find out instead. Phoning is dangerous. Matter of fact, if the operator is listening in, my goose is already cooked." He thought a minute and suddenly changed his mind. "On second thought, if you tell Kenny I phoned you, he'll scalp me for taking such a chance. Better phone here, and I'll pass the information on to him when he calls me."

He told her the phone signal arrangement that he and Kenny had decided upon and asked her to use the same signal.

After he hung up, he went back to restless pacing. There was now nothing he could do but wait.

To help pass the time, he drew the revolver from his pocket with the intention of cleaning it, laid it on the table and rummaged until he found some rags and an ice pick which would serve as a cleaning rod. With this material arranged on the table near him, he picked up the gun and broke it.

He looked down at the empty cylinder in surprise.

Now why, he thought, did Kenny unload the gun? Did he think if I found it, I might shoot myself?

It was seven o'clock before Evelyn phoned back. She called from a drug store pay phone in the city.

"I found something in Harry Bannister's office," she said. "It doesn't prove anything, but it might be enough to make the police look into it at least."

He waited for her to go on.

"I looked through his check books, and regularly every month he has been drawing a check cash for one-hundred dollars. The last one is dated today, but then voided, as though he suddenly discovered after he wrote it he wouldn't have to make the payment. Does that sound interesting?"

"Very," he said. "What else?"

"His desk ash tray is full of black paper ashes. Like he had burned several letters in it."

"Hmm. Are you far from the office?"

"A half block," she said.

"Go on back, get the check book and ash tray and lock them in your own desk," he said. "If they mean anything, it may occur to Bannister to get rid of them in the morning."

"I already have," she told him. "You're not the only one in this potential family with brains."

Another hour passed before anything else happened to disturb the monotony, and then Tod heard a car approaching. It was just beginning to grow dusky, but Tod had not turned on the lights for fear some casual passerby would see them and know the cabin was not empty. Though it was too dim in the room to read, he could still see fairly distinctly, and outside it was light enough for him to identify the car which pulled up outside as Kenny Sheridan's.

He had been seated at the kitchen table, his feet elevated to its top and his hands idly resting in his lap, simply waiting for time to pass. He did not change his position when Kenny came in the door.

Kenny paused in the doorway and peered at him, apparently able to make out his figure only dimly because his eyes were not adjusted to the room's subdued light. Kenny's eyes took in the empty whiskey bottle on the table and suddenly he grinned.

"So you found it, did you, you drunken bum?" he said cheerfully. "And now you're so paralyzed, you probably can't even move. Can you understand me?"

For a moment the words meant nothing to Tod. Then their meaning hit him like an ice-cold shower, and temporarily he was too paralyzed to move.

The whole thing fell into place in his mind instantly, with no loose ends hanging over. He knew who had framed him, how

he had done it, and why. He knew why his partner and best friend, knowing that to an alcoholic one drink was as dangerous as a barrel of liquor, had talked him into taking one on the assurance he would prevent him from taking any more. He knew why he had been left alone in his partner's office, the key conveniently forgotten in the lock of the drawer containing the whiskey, and why he had managed so easily to find the second bottle of liquor in the cabin.

Then he suddenly realized it was not a second bottle, but the same one Kenny had so carefully locked in the trunk of his car. As soon as he'd put Tod to bed, he'd got the liquor from the car and placed it where Tod would be sure to find it. Tod had almost caught him in the act when he entered the kitchen on stocking feet and found Kenny still there.

Tod even knew, with sudden icy clarity, why Kenny had left the unloaded murder weapon. He could almost visualise the story Kenny would tell the police.

"I just took an off-chance he had holed up at my cabin, because he'd been up there before and knew how isolated it was. I didn't expect to find him drunk and homicidal. I meant to reason with him and get him to turn himself in. After all, he was my best friend. But when he jumped me, there wasn't anything I could do."

And Tod would be found, the murder weapon in his hand, reloaded and probably with another shot or two fired from it. Kenny would receive nothing but praise for doing his duty as a member of the auxiliary police.

The entire picture formed in his mind so rapidly that there was hardly a pause between Kenny's words and the mumbled reply Tod made.

"'Lo, Kenny, Jus' havin' lil drink."

Kenny laughed. "Can you stand up, Tod?"

Tod's legs moved slightly and his body barely shifted in its chair. "Stan' up?" he asked dully.

"Too paralyzed to move," Kenny decided with satisfaction.

He moved to the table from the doorway, picked up Tod's revolver and loaded it with cartridges taken from his pocket. Then walking behind Tod, he aimed at the door and fired twice. Splinters of wood kicked from the jamb on either side.

"Too bad you were such a lousy shot, Tod," Kenny said ironically. "You had two

tries at me and missed them both before I managed to get you."

Removing a handkerchief from his pocket, he carefully wiped off the gun. Then he lifted Tod's limp hand from his lap and forced his fingers to grip the butt.

Walking back to the open door, Kenny flicked the switch next to it, flooding the room with light.

"Getting a little too dark for accurate shooting," he remarked as he turned.

Then he froze in position, his gun pointing down at an angle toward the floor. Standing and facing him was an entirely sober Tod Horton with the .38 pointed at his stomach.

Tod said gently, "I poured the liquor in the sink and went for a swim in the river. Drop it, Kenny. Drop it fast!"

Kenny's gun thudded to the floor.

"Listen, Tod, I was just having a little joke. I was just—"

"Save it," Tod said bleakly. "I've been pretty stupid, but I'm not that stupid. Gerald Katt had you over a barrel, didn't he, Kenny? Running the audit on our books, he knew what I should have known but never suspected when profits failed to increase no matter how much our volume gained. It never even occurred to me you were dipping into the till. But Katt knew and was bleeding you white. You both faced ruin if a new auditor got a look at the books, and when I dropped a heaven-sent opportunity in your lap, you took advantage of it. With one shot you got rid of your blackmailer and left yourself the firm's sole surviving partner. With a free hand you could make it look like I had been the embezzler."

Kenny was sweating and his face had turned the color of weak custard. "Listen, Tod, if you let me out of this, we can fix it on Harry Bannister easy. It would serve him right, because he was going to let you take the rap. He saw me come out of Katt's office."

Tod's face registered surprise. "What?"

"He was being blackmailed by Katt too," Kenny said eagerly. "Katt had some letters he had written. He knew I killed Katt, but I shut him up because I knew about the letters too. You wouldn't have to feel sorry about framing Bannister. He was going to throw you to the wolves."

When Tod only stared at him woodenly, Kenny's voice became pleading. "After all, Tod, I helped you get away when you were

so drunk you didn't know what you were doing. At least you ought to let me have a head start."

The illogical brazenness of this suggestion almost startled a laugh from Tod. "Turn it off, Kenny," he said irritably. "Start for the car. We're driving to the nearest state patrol station."

Kenny's shoulders slumped and he turned dejectedly toward the door. As Tod started to round the table toward him, Kenny unexpectedly leaped through it and to one side. The movement caught Tod off-center, and by the time he had rushed to the door, Kenny had made the twenty feet to his car and placed it between himself and Tod.

As his partner jerked open the far car door, Tod sent a warning shot over the top of the car. Then he saw that instead of attempting to climb behind the wheel, Kenny was groping in the glove compartment. When he suddenly pulled his head back out of the car, something metallic glittered in his hand.

Tod fired through the rolled-down window, heard the bullet strike the frame of the open door on Kenny's side, and pulled the trigger again. There was a sharp, disheartening click.

His first wild thought was that there should be one more shell in the gun, for he had seen Kenny load five chambers, leaving the one under the hammer empty. Then he realized one of the loads had been the spent cartridge of the bullet which had killed Gerald Katt, and which Kenny would naturally have had in his pocket, since it was he who had unloaded the gun originally.

The pistol Kenny had obtained from the glove compartment spoke, and a streak of fire ran along the side of Tod's neck. Ducking, he dived headfirst back into the cabin, grabbed up the pistol Kenny had dropped and cocked it as he spun to face the door again.

But his partner contented himself with throwing two more bullets through the doorway, and did not follow.

Scrambling to one side, Tod came erect next to the wall and switched out the light. It was now beginning to get dark even outside, and when he peered through the window he was unable to determine whether or not Kenny still crouched on the other side of his car.

It occurred to him he was not in a very advantageous position. Kenny could keep

him trapped in the house simply by keeping the single door covered. The windows on all sides were screened and the screens were nailed in. He could, of course, knock a back screen out in an attempt to leave the building that way, but the noise undoubtedly would bring Kenny around that way to greet him with a bullet as he climbed from the window.

After a moment's thought, he went into the bedroom and quietly made a phone call.

Just as he finished the call, he heard the car start, and rushed to the door. A hundred yards away at a wide place in the road he watched it perform a U-turn and head back again. Puzzled, he stood waiting with raised pistol while he tried to decide what Kenny was attempting to do. At fifty yards the car suddenly halted. The head-lights flashed on and bathed him in their glare. A dark shadow leaped from the car and disappeared into the darkness to one side.

Too late Tod realized he should have taken advantage of his chance to get away from the cabin. Now, with the whole front of the cabin lighted, he would be a target to the unseen Kenny if he even so much as tried to peer from the door or a window.

Retreating inside again, he huddled beneath the kitchen window with his eyes on the door. *At least, he thought, if I can't get out of here without getting shot, Kenny can't get in after me either.*

When twenty minutes passed without a sound, he called, "Kenny!"

"Right here," came the prompt answer from close by outside.

"Neither one of us can win this. It's a stalemate. Why don't you climb in your car and take off?"

"Because I want to shut you up first, my friend. Nobody but you knows I killed Katt, and you aren't going to tell anybody."

"You're puffing on the wrong pipe, Kenny. I'll just sit out here till dawn, and then when I come out I'll be able to see you as well as you can see me. You can't overshoot me in an even fight."

Kenny's only answer was a sardonic laugh.

Again there was a long silence, which was suddenly broken by a heavy object crashing through the front screen in the bedroom. Tod shifted his position so that he could eye both the bedroom door and the front door at the same time, wondering whether

Kenny was merely trying to distract his attention, or was actually attempting to break in through the bedroom. Tod could hardly imagine he would try that.

A faint gurgling noise from the bedroom puzzled him until he caught the strong odor of gasoline. Kenny had thrown an open can of gas through the screen and it was gurgling out on the floor.

Desperately he took the chance of exposing himself by crossing in front of the door and leaped toward the bedroom. He arrived just as a flaming wad of paper came through the hole in the screen.

He was swinging the bedroom door shut as the flaming paper arched toward the floor. Its slam was instantly followed by a sharp WHOOSH! and flame spouted under the door at his feet.

Instantly Tod realized two things: flames would force him to make a break from the tinder-like building in a matter of minutes, and at that instant he knew what Kenny's position was. The thoughts clicked into his mind and were acted on in the space of a watch's tick.

Spinning out of the door, he leveled his gun toward the bedroom window just as Kenny leaped back from it. Both guns crashed at once.

A burning sensation pierced Tod's shoulder. He staggered slightly, then steadied himself for a second shot. Then he lowered his gun as he saw Kenny slowly buckle at the knees and slump to the ground.

He was stiffly walking toward Kenny when two men stepped from behind the car and approached. Wordlessly they picked up Kenny, who was dazed but conscious, and carried him beyond the range of heat from the cabin's flames.

"Who are you?" Kenny asked faintly, looking up at them.

"Sheriff's deputies," one of the men said tersely. "Your partner here—" he nodded at Tod—"did a very simple and logical thing while you was piddling around outside figuring out a way to kill him. He phoned and told us the whole story." He grinned down at Kenny without humor. "We snuck up just in time to hear you admit you killed this feller Katt, so I guess your partner told us a straight story over the phone."

He glanced at Tod. "You hurt bad, son?"

Tod prodded his shoulder. "Just a flesh wound, I think. It'll keep till we get where I can make a phone call. I have to phone a public stenographer I sometimes employ."

COPS AND ROBBERS

JEAN W——'S freedom from the county jail at Carthage, Mo., was rather short-lived. As she walked through the jail door after winning a parole, a sharp-eyed policeman stopped her. She was wearing a fashionable coat she had stolen from a hook in the jail dressing room.

* * * * *

Burglar alarms have been installed in Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. If a would-be thief breaks in, the new system automatically telephones Scotland Yard and a record, in a nice, mellowly modulated British voice repeats, "Intruders have entered Buckingham Palace (or Windsor Castle)."

* * * * *

In a case over the custody of a 19-month-old baby, Judge Chester D. Adams, Lexington, Ky., observed, "A child that young

should be with its mother." "Judge," replied the father, "just ask her who changed the first diaper on this baby." Judge Adams here bridled. "Hold on, I have been asked to decide almost everything, but I am not going to hear testimony on who changed a baby's first diaper."

* * * * *

Just to make things easier for her insurance man, Mrs. Jean Carey, Milwaukee, pinned a note on the front door: *There will be no one at home until 3 p.m.* When Mrs. Carey returned she found her house ransacked and this note left by the thief: *Sorry you were out.*

* * * * *

Car thief Arthur R. S. _____ persuaded a Philadelphia judge to double his six-month jail sentence. He wanted to qualify for a prison job.

—Harold Helfer

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more."
B. C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER
FROM THE LUCKY SAINT'S WELL

AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that—'the who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000, he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the Public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly GUARANTEE that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Send at once for full information about this PROVED Luck Bringer. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

"SUNDAY GRAPHIC" PICTURE PUZZLE.
No. 175.—"Dear Joan the Wad, I received this week cheque for £71 8s. 7d. My share of the £1,000 Prize of the 'Sunday Graphic' Picture Puzzle. I have been near winning before, but you have brought me just the exact luck I wanted."—F. T., Salisbury.

WON £152 17s., THEN £46 10s. 3d.
No. 191.—"General account of Luck . . . since receiving Joan the Wad . . . I have been successful in winning £152 17s. in 'People's Xword' No. 178 and also the 'News of the World' Xword No. 289, £46 10s. 3d., also £1 on a football coupon, which is amazing in itself, as all the luck came in one week."—A. B., Leamington Spa.

WINNERS OF £6 11s. 1d.

No. 195.—"My father, myself and my sister had the pleasure of winning a Crossword Puzzle in the 'Sunday Pictorial,' which came to £6 11s. 1d., which we put down to JOAN THE WAD, and we thank her very much."—L. B., Exning.

WON PRIZE OF £13 13s.

No. 214.—"Arrival of your charm followed the very next day by the notification that I had won a prize of £13 13s. in a Literary Competition."—F. H. R., Wallington.

"DAILY HERALD" PICTURE CONTEST.

No. 216.—"Since having received JOAN THE WAD received cheque, part share in the 'Daily Herald' Picture Contest £3 1s."—M. E., Notting Hill.

All you have to do is to send 1/- stamp (Savings Stamps accepted) and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to

JOAN THE WAD

is the Lucky Cornish Piskey
who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.

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

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP.

If you will send me your name and address, a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. **JOAN THE WAD** is the QUEEN of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys, and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

AS HEALER

One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the lucky Well?"

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has Joan the Wad.

AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staying at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

£30,000 WINNER.

No. 222.—"Mrs. A. . . , of Lewisham, has just won £30,000 and says she has a JOAN THE WAD, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V. Bromley.

FIRST PRIZE "NUGGETS."

No. 228.—"I have had some good luck since receiving JOAN THE WAD. I have won First Prize in 'ANSWERS' 'Nuggets.' I had JOAN THE WAD in February, and I have been lucky ever since."—Mrs. N. W., Wolverhampton.

WON £1 DAILY MIRROR HAMPER.

No. 245.—"I have just had my first win since having JOAN THE WAD, which was a 'DAILY MIRROR' HAMPER."—E. M. E., Brentwood.

WON "NUGGETS" £300.

No. 257.—"My Husband is a keen Competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him JOAN THE WAD, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week FIRST Prize in 'Nugget' £300.—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

CAN ANYONE BEAT THIS?

No. 280.—"Immediately after receiving my JOAN THE WAD I won a 3rd Prize in a local Derby Sweep, then I was given employment after seven months of idleness and finally had a correct forecast in Picture Puzzle 'Glasgow Sunday Mail,' which entitles me to a share of the Prize Money." W. M., Glasgow, C.4.

224, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL

For Canada and U.S.A., send 50 cents for History, or \$2 for both History and Mascot.
For Australia, send 1s. 6d. for History, or 8s. 0d. for both History and Mascot.

Florida's sunny beaches and plush nightclubs couldn't tempt Marty and his girl—they were too busy trying to get a fat lush to . . .

SING A SONG OF MURDER

By LARRY HOLDEN

MARTY RIORDAN stood at the window and watched Belle come up the blinding white beach toward the cottage. Behind her, the blue Gulf of Mexico moved restlessly, pawing at the beach. She was a slim, exciting girl—especially exciting in that brief white swim suit—but there was no life in her walk. Her face was thin and her eyes enormous, as if she had slept badly for too many nights. Her white terry-cloth beach robe trailed listlessly from her hand.

When she came into the room, she gave Marty a brief glance and walked straight to the portable bar and poured herself a glass of bourbon. She drank it fast and shuddered.

"Well?" said Marty harshly. "How did it go this time?"

"How did it go?" Her voice was husky, tired. "How does it always go? He's down in the Casino Bar, out cold. The same as yesterday, the same as the day before, the same as all the other days."

"Did he say anything? Did he talk?"

"He always talks. Intermittently. Always about the same thing. His brilliance as a doctor. Compared to him, the Mayos didn't know a forceps from a pair of pliers. Lord!"

"He'll talk." Marty's eyes burned fiercely. "He'll brag, and one of these days he'll let it slip."

She lifted her bitter face. "Will he? Will he, Marty? You're sure he has something to let slip?"

Marty hunched his shoulders. "Erden shot my father," he said heavily. "For fifteen months my father worked, gathering evidence that linked Erden with every racket in the county, and he was ready to take that evidence to the Grand Jury when he was shot and the Erden file disappeared. That file was loaded, and that's how I know

that Erden, personally, killed my father. Erden would never have dared let another living man set eyes on that file. It was one job he had to do himself. There was enough evidence in that file to have sent him up for life three times over. He was at the mercy of anyone holding those papers. He killed my father with his own hands to get that file. And yes, I'm sure!"

A hundred times during the past three months, Belle had heard this same speech almost word for word, but still she argued. "Marty, listen to me. Three reputable doctors—one of them the police doctor—testified that Erden's wrenched knee was so sore and so swollen that he could never have climbed that ladder to your father's study that night. They proved to you that no matter how that knee was braced Erden couldn't have walked across the room without unbearable agony. How could he have climbed a ladder? You stood there in Erden's room and I stood right there beside you, and you saw the sweat break out on Erden's face when they moved that knee even slightly. How could he have driven a car clear across Newark?"

"But he did!" Marty interrupted flatly. "I don't know how, but I know he did. And there's one other man who knows it—that lush down there in the Casino Bar. He was Erden's doctor, and he knows how it was done."

Belle said mechanically, "Erden wrenched his knee the day before your father was—" but broke off. It was useless. You couldn't talk to him. He simply turned to stone.

"Damn it, Marty," she cried a little wildly, "If you're so sure that drunk knows all about it, why don't you take him down the beach some dark night and beat it out of him? Burn his feet with cigarettes, stick lighted matches under his finger-nails!"

"Talk sense!"

"Talk sense? I don't have any sense left to talk!" She seized his arm and pulled him to the mirror over the sofa. "Look at us! Just look what three months of this has done to us."

He looked into the mirror, but he was not shocked at the faces that stared back at him. He was as lean and grim as a winter wolf, and his mouth was a slash of bitterness—but the face matched the way he felt inside. He was not surprised at Belle's face either, though it was pinched and worn, and anyone else would have been shocked that there was so little youth left in it.

"You're hysterical," he said shortly.

She looked at him with a numbed expression, then walked over to the bar and poured herself another bourbon. She drank it down and shuddered again.

"Yes," she said dully. "I am hysterical, and it gets worse every time I remember that we used to be in love. I don't know any more what it feels like to be kissed. You did kiss me once, didn't you? Or did I just dream that? You used to smile, but I can't picture you smiling any more. It's destroying us, Marty!" she cried. "It's destroying us!"

He stood there, hard and silent. "I think," he said finally, "that you'd better go back to Newark. It's beginning to get you."

Her head jerked as if he had slapped her. She leaned against the wall beside the bar and became very still. "It's not getting me," she said tonelessly. "I've come this far. I can go the rest of the way. I'll get the Doctor to talk—if he has anything to say. You don't have to worry about me. Though perhaps you should start worrying about yourself."

"There's nothing the matter with me."

"But something could be made to be the matter with you. Remember when you passed the Doctor and me on the beach this morning? He turned and watched you, and he had that look on his face that doctors get when they are going to do something to you that they know will hurt. You're staying at the same hotel as he is. So if I were you, I'd watch myself."

"That's nonsense. He doesn't know who I am. I'm registered under the name of Rogers." He scowled. "But I'll watch myself, all the same. He's got a gun. I saw it in his bag of doctor's tools when I searched his room. But he couldn't know who I am."

"Your father was district attorney. You had your picture in the papers when you went into his law office."

"That was a long time ago."

"Some people have memories. Anyway, I'll soon find out." Now she was brisk, impersonal. "I'm having dinner with him tonight, as usual. He'll sober up in a couple hours."

"Don't talk to him about me," he said sharply. "You're not supposed to know me. Keep his talking about himself. Keep him boasting, and sooner or later he'll brag about how he and Erden put it over on the Newark police. Talk to him about himself, and that's all."

He made that little grimace, hardly a smile, with which he terminated their interviews. That's all they had now, interviews. Next he would glance at the door and tell her to call him at the hotel if she needed him for anything, but not to use her own name. Then he would go.

She watched him with a kind of hopeless expectancy as he went through the foreseen ritual. Then she moved to the window and bleakly watched him stride to his car. She turned her forehead to the wall and began to cry, but it was no more than a tearless convulsion, as if the warm, flowing ducts had atrophied. Only when she was crying like this did her face look young, vulnerable and frightened. She walked back to the bar and poured herself a third glass of bourbon. This time she shuddered in anticipation as she raised the glass to her lips . . .

Marty drove a half mile up the road and parked in front of the Casino Bar, but he did not go inside immediately. He sat with his hands still clasped on the wheel, staring down the row of coconut palms. It was very hard to think coherently these days.

Those ten desperate weeks when the detective agency was trying to find the Doctor after he disappeared abruptly from Newark had been bad enough, but these past two weeks here in this Florida resort had been worse. It was the tension. Belle had insisted on coming with him, wanting to help. It was lucky she had. The Doctor had no desire for male companionship. Though he never did anything but drink and get drunk he wanted a woman around to brag to, and Belle had picked him up in the Casino Bar without any trouble.

They were going into their third week of it now, but it was like going into the third

year of a life sentence in Alcatraz. Belle was wonderful. He couldn't have done without her. When this was over . . . But his mind stopped there. He was bushed, he thought dully. Bushed.

He went into the Casino and ordered a beer. While he was drinking it, he glanced covertly around until he spied the Doctor, sprawled sleeping across a table in the corner. Marty relaxed a little. Each day he had to check several times to make sure the Doctor had not run out, the way he had run out of Newark. Now he could relax for a little while—but soon the tension would begin to mount again and he would be driven like a man obsessed, whose only ease was sight of the thing he hated. His hatred suddenly flamed with such blinding incandescence that he put down his glass and walked quickly out of the bar before he flung himself on that sodden figure and beat it savagely with his fists.

It was Erden whom he should hate, but he could hardly remember what Erden looked like. It was the Doctor, with his puffy face and foxy eyes, whom he hated. With horror, Marty discovered that he could hardly remember his father, either. It was the Doctor, and the Doctor alone, who consumed his thoughts. One of these dark nights, he would do just what Belle had so bitterly suggested—he would take the Doctor down the beach and beat the truth out of him.

But that wasn't the way. He had to control himself.

He drove to the jetty, a jumble of rock that extended into the Gulf for two hundred yards. There was a high, unrailed boardwalk over the rocks, and two women with fishing rods were walking carefully in the center of it as if the mere fact that there was no railing made them fearful of falling onto the rocks below.

Marty walked out to the end and stood looking down into the water, watching the schools of fingerling mullet dart around the rocks. This green needlefish swam slowly, like miniature pickerel with tremendously elongated snouts. A two-foot sandshark cruised into the shallows. Marty closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic surge of the water against the rocks. There was peace here—but very soon, the uneasiness began to creep over him again.

He forced himself to stay another half hour, but the peace was gone. He felt nothing but the terrible growing need to get back to the Casino Bar to reassure himself

that the Doctor had not run out. Every hour, now, he had to check up. Soon it would be every half hour. He knew it was a kind of madness, but he had to check up, he had to be sure.

He merely glanced in through the screen door this time. The Doctor had not moved. His mouth was dropped open and he was snoring heavily. With a shudder of disgust, Marty went back to the hotel and sat in the patio. He had a newspaper, but he could not read it. He could not concentrate long enough to make sense of even the shortest items.

It was five-thirty when the Doctor came weaving up the street. He gave Marty a vague, heavy-lidded stare and staggered into the lobby. Marty put down his paper. The sight of the Doctor had made him think of Belle, and suddenly, yearningly, he wanted to talk to her. It was some minutes before he could think of an excuse to call her. It was very important to have an excuse. He couldn't call her for no reason except that he wanted to hear her voice.

He finally walked across the street and called her from the public phone booth in the drugstore?"

"What's the matter?" she asked, surprised. "Did something go wrong?"

"Not exactly," he mumbled. "I just wanted to tell you that the Doctor's still drunk."

"Don't worry about it. He sobers himself up with a pill or something. He'll be here to take me to dinner. Is—is there anything else, Marty?"

They both waited, but the words wouldn't come. Too long the touch of tenderness had been missing between them. They were both miserable when they hung up.

Marty was in a grim, desperate mood when he walked out into the waning sunshine. For two weeks, he told himself, he had been stalling, had been letting Belle do the job. This was the end of *that!* He had been afraid to tackle the job himself. That was the whole thing. He had been afraid of failing. That was why he had devised the devious plan of letting Belle get the Doctor to brag. Belle was right. It was destroying them. They could not even talk to each other normally anymore.

Damn the Doctor! He was as guilty as Erden. He had fixed Erden's wrenched knee so that it was usable, for Erden *had* used that knee to drive a car and to climb a ladder, no matter what the other doctors

said. Marty's hands clenched so hard that the skin stretched white across his knuckles. If he had to use violence, he'd use violence. He'd do anything to end this intolerable tension, the thing that had made Belle and him a pair of dehumanized avengers.

He knew where they were dining. There was only one really decent restaurant in town, the Fisherman's Wharf, a passable copy of the San Francisco original.

He was there ahead of them, and he saw them come in. The Doctor had sobered amazingly, though his face looked a little swollen from too much alcohol. Belle's eyes widened when she saw Marty, for Marty usually ate elsewhere when she was dining with the Doctor. She maneuvered so that she faced Marty across the room, but it soon became apparent that the Doctor, too, had spied Marty when he walked in, for he kept glancing back over his shoulder.

Marty ate stolidly. He didn't give a damn what the Doctor thought any more. He was going after him, and he was going after him hard. This was the Doctor's last date with Belle. Marty would be waiting when the Doctor reeled back to the hotel.

The Doctor had four straight shots before the waiter even brought the rolls, and he began to talk to Belle, gesturing arrogantly. Bragging again, Marty thought grimly. *Enjoy yourself, chum*, he thought. *This is your last night on the town.*

Belle was trying to catch his eye over the Doctor's shoulder, but Marty ignored it. Her face looked pinched and she seemed frightened; she was trying to warn him with her eyes. But now that he had made up his mind about the Doctor, he didn't need the warning. He knew what he was going to do. When he finished his dessert, he called for the check, dropped a half-dollar tip on the table and rose to leave. The Doctor glanced back over his shoulder, and for an instant their eyes met.

The Doctor's eyes were small, gray and bloodshot, like bits of mutton fat floating in tomato sauce. Marty grinned thinly and deliberately, turned his back and walked out. He went back to the patio of the hotel. There was no telling when the Doctor would roll in. Belle would leave him around midnight, as usual, but the Doctor would go on from there until the last gin mill closed. It didn't matter how long Marty had to wait. He knew just what he was going to do

It was eight-thirty when the police car screamed up to the curb in front of the

hotel. The policeman sprang out and ran around the front of the car as a man in hip-high rubber waders backed out of the rear door. Between the two of them, they eased the Doctor out to the sidewalk.

Marty sat up, and his breath caught in his throat like a fishhook. The Doctor's hands and legs were bloody, and there was blood on his swollen face. His pants were torn, and the sock and shoe had been removed from his right foot. Gently, the two men picked him up and carried him up the walk, into the patio. Behind them, white-faced, came Belle.

As they passed, Marty saw that the Doctor's right foot and ankle were hideously swollen and purple. Belle did not even glance at Marty as she followed them into the lobby, her hands knotted together at her waist. She looked as if death had brushed her face in passing.

Marty stood indecisively for a moment, wondering if it would be too obvious if he rushed into the lobby after them. He strode to the screen door and saw them carry the Doctor into the elevator, his head lolling like a wilted flower from a dying stem. Belle looked back once, tragically, then stepped into the elevator. The doors clanged shut.

Another car swooped to a halt behind the police car, and the local doctor came running up the walk, his black bag slapping his leg as he ran. As Marty stepped aside to let him through the doorway, the doctor muttered:

"Time and time again I told them to put up handrails!" Then he was gone.

It was a half hour of torment for Marty before they came down. First the man in waders tramped down the stairs and turned into the hotel bar, then the doctor, who plodded wearily back to his car, and finally Belle and the prowler cop. Belle looked as if she had been wrung dry and flung into a corner.

The cop was saying solicitously, "Don't worry about it, lady. He's okay. Can I take you anywhere?"

She shook her head. Then she spied Marty. "I know this gentleman. He'll take me home," she said dully.

The cop grinned at Marty. "Tell her not to worry," he said. "It wasn't nobody's fault."

"I'll take her home," said Marty, but something constricted around his heart.

He got the car from the hotel parking lot. Belle didn't say a word as he drove her back to her beach cottage. She was like a

zombie. He took her arm and led her into the cottage. He sat her on the sofa and said:

"I'll make you a drink."

She looked up at him. Her eyes were enormous and dark. "I pushed him," she whispered. She shivered. "I pushed him!"

"It's okay, honey," he said soothingly. "I'll make you a drink."

He started across the room toward the portable bar.

"I don't want any more to drink!" she cried. "That's all I've been doing for the past two weeks—drinking. Oh, Marty, I pushed him!"

She burst into tears. The tears that wouldn't flow before now erupted in torrents. He leaped back to the sofa and cradled her in his arms. She clung to him, shaking. She moaned and her fingers dug into him as if frantically seeking support. Out of the hysterics, gradually came the story.

The Doctor had gotten drunk in the restaurant, as usual. He always got drunk, but this time there was an undertone of malevolence. He knew. Marty had been watching him. He knew that Marty had checked up on him twice that afternoon in the Casino Bar. He didn't like to be checked up on, and he was going to fix that louse who was checking up. He said he knew just how to do it—and the look in his eyes had been terrifying.

Then he had turned sentimental. He wanted to go down to the jetty and listen to the "ocean." When he lived in Jersey, he told Belle, he had sometimes taken off at midnight to drive to Asbury Park, just to listen to the ocean. He loved the ocean. So they had gone to the jetty, with Belle becoming more frightened all the while.

As they were walking out the boardwalk toward the end of the jetty, a party of fishermen came walking toward them.

"The boardwalk over the rocks is only ten feet wide." Her voice gathered darkness. "And when they passed us, I knew. I knew I had to kill him! I pushed him, and he went over the edge and down into the rocks. And all he got—" her voice went shrill—"was a sprained ankle!" She began to laugh. "That fall into the rocks would have killed anybody else, but all he got was a sprained ankle!"

Her laughter became a wild arpeggio, and he slapped her sharply across the cheek. She whimpered and strained away from him, holding her cheek.

He held her tightly, smoothing the blonde hair back from her forehead. He could feel the tears smarting in his eyes. "It's all right, honey," he murmured, his voice filled to bursting. "It's all over. We're not going to let it destroy us. We're going back to Newark in the morning, both of us. I was crazy. I shouldn't have done it. But we'll go back. Nobody knows you pushed him off the boardwalk. They think it was an accident. They think he was just crowded off by that party of fishermen. We'll go back, honey. It's all over now."

She protested feebly, then clung to him. She was rational for a moment, alternately crying and laughing. Then she cried abruptly:

"You'll always hold it against me! You'll say I broke down. But he was going to kill you—I know he was! I could see it! That was the reason I pushed him into the rocks, Marty. I didn't break down. But I didn't want him to kill you, and he would, he would . . .

He held her more tightly, and gradually she subsided until her sobs were no more than mere shudderings in his arms. He made her lie down on the couch.

She smiled up at him, a pinched white-faced smile. He leaned over to kiss her lightly, but it became a kiss of hunger, a kiss three thwarted months delayed, and her arms tightened convulsively around his neck. He stood up unsteadily.

"Tomorrow," he whispered, "tomorrow we'll go back and try to be human beings again."

"You won't hold it against me, Marty? There won't be any reproaches?"

"Reproach you because I went crazy?"

"Kiss me, Marty. Oh, kiss me, kiss me!"

He kissed her again. He smiled down at her and pulled an afghan over her. "I won't sleep, either," he smiled, "but we'll try, won't we? And tomorrow we'll go home."

"Tomorrow," she smiled back at him. "Tomorrow, darling, tomorrow!"

He drove back to the hotel with a singing in his heart. He felt as if he had come alive again. It was over. He hadn't succeeded, but he had done what he could. He and Belle had gone to the very trembling edge of human endurance. Tomorrow they would start to live again.

He put the car in the parking lot, but he was too exhilarated to go to bed. He walked back to the beach, then southward on the hard sand, laughing at the white ghost crabs that scuttled before him.

He did not have to worry about the Doctor any more. The Doctor was killing himself with alcohol. As for Erden—but he wouldn't think about Erden. What he had to think about now was Belle and himself, and all he had to make up to Belle. She loved kids. After they were married, they'd have a dozen. *Oh, Belle, I love you so!* It was a bursting ache in his heart.

When he walked back to the hotel, the night clerk looked up from his *Miami Herald* and called to him, "Oh, Mr. Rogers, there was a call for you. A Miss—" he consulted his pad—"a Miss Belle Muir. She said to call her back immediately. That was an hour ago. She said also," the clerk looked arch, "that this was it. She said you'd understand."

Marty felt his heart stop. He grabbed up the desk phone and called Belle's cottage. There was no answer.

He put down the phone and looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to penetrate the three floors between the lobby and the Doctor's room. He muttered, "Thanks," and strode for the stairs.

On the third floor, he put his ear against the Doctor's door and listened for a moment. He opened the door and peered into the room. The Doctor was spread-eagled on his back on the bed, snoring, his mouth open, his monstrously swollen ankle and foot taped with adhesive. Marty closed the door, ran down the stairs and out to his car in the lot.

He drove directly to Belle's beach cottage. It was dark, but the door was unlocked. He strode from room to room with growing anxiety. She was not there.

On the chair was a pair of gay canvas beach shoes she had been mending. Apparently, she, too, had been unable to get to sleep. The long, sharp needle was still sticking into the arm of the chair. She would never have left it like that . . .

He ran outside—and there she was, lying on the grass, her golden hair matted with blood. Choking, he went down on his knees beside her. Her eyes were partially open, but glazed, and her breathing was very shallow. Her lips moved; she was mumbling, "Erden . . . Erden yes . . . Erden yes . . ." He did not dare touch her, for fear that her skull had been fractured. He sprinted for the phone in the living room and called a doctor. He was sitting beside her, holding her hand, when the doctor came fifteen minutes later.

Marty waited long enough to learn that

Belle had a possible fracture from a heavy blow struck from the side; her condition was serious, but not critical. He helped carry her into the bedroom, then strode out, grimly jabbing his leg with the needle he had snatched up from the arm of the chair.

The doctor called angrily, "Hold on, there! There are a few things I want to—"

Marty jumped into his car and roared away. At the hotel, he went straight to the drunken Doctor's room and switched on the bright ceiling light. The Doctor opened his eyes and stared.

"W-what do you want?" he stammered.

Marty walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. He leaned over the man, propping himself on his right hand. His left hand was behind his back.

"My name is Riordan," he said, almost pleasantly. "A little over three months ago your boss, Erden, killed my father. Tonight you tried to kill Belle Muir. That's true, isn't it?"

"You're mad! I haven't been out of this room. It's an impossibility."

"Of course. I forgot. You have a badly sprained ankle. Is it very painful?"

"Will you kindly get out of my room?"

"Yes—but first I want your professional opinion on sprained ankles and wrenched knees. Excruciating, aren't they? I mean, the slightest touch causes unbearable agony and all that. That's true, isn't it?"

"As any competent physician would tell you! Now, if you please . . ."

Marty leaned back and smiled. "Then how do you explain that?" he asked, pointing. "I did it while we were talking."

A bare quarter of an inch of Belle's needle, still threaded with red wool, protuded from the Doctor's swollen ankle.

"That needle," Marty observed, "is two inches long, which means that an inch and three quarters have penetrated your excruciatingly painful ankle. You felt nothing. You didn't even know you were—" he smiled again—"being needled! I wonder what a competent physician would say about that?"

The Doctor's hand moved under the cover. "I'm afraid I am going to shoot you, Mr. Riordan," he said harshly. "You broke into my room. I thought you were a burglar. There won't even be an inquest. *Don't move!*" The Doctor slowly brought the flat, stubby gun from under the blanket.

Marty didn't take his eyes from the monstrously swollen ankle. "A local anesthetic?" he asked softly.

"Novacaine, Mr. Riordan. Ordinary novacaine, hypodermically injected. The anesthetic, for your information—though what good such information will do you, I don't know—that I used on Mr. Erden's knee. I must confess I was quite shocked when I learned that he had killed your father. Later, though, I could see that he had no choice."

Marty controlled a savage spurt of fury. "But why did you try to kill Belle Muir?"

"Miss Muir—your associate, I believe?—pushed me onto those rocks. Oh yes, I knew she pushed me. It bothered me. Why did she do it, I asked myself? What motive could she have? Revenge, of course. I was really quite upset. What had I told her while I was in my cups? I knew I must have babbled something damning to have prompted that and then I realized that I must have let slip my part in the Erden affair . . . Now please, Mr. Riordan, I'm tired of all this chatter. Please stand and walk backward toward the door."

Marty stood. His hands knotted at his sides, then slowly relaxed. "Oh, go ahead and pull the trigger," he said wearily. "I removed the clip when I searched your room two weeks ago."

He heard the hammer clicking futilely and frantically as he turned and walked across the room to call the police . . .

THE END

FELONY FOLLIES

By JAKOBSSON and WAGGENER

BILL CHAPPELL, Georgia prison-camp overseer, hit on a seemingly fool-proof scheme for murdering Edward Peek, an enemy. He had one of his convicts do the job, then took the man back to prison where he could keep an eye on him. Since Lewis Turner, Chappell's tool, had never been able to stay out of jail very long, Chappell figured he could depend forever on the silence of the only witness against him. Two years later, in 1940, Turner found himself transferred to another jail, where he told all, thus risking his very life.

It is satisfying to record that the treacherous prison overseer was given a life sentence —while the state let Turner off with a mere

one to three years, on the theory that he was more harmless out of prison than in it.

There lived a thief in Baltimore, a few years back, who didn't believe in taking chances . . . so he trained his bulldog to do his leg work for him. For some time, mystified poultry-keepers of that city berated the police for not catching the sly chicken-thief who raided them periodically.

It was a private individual who solved the crime wave at last. One night, Mrs. Anna Bloom, hearing a racket in her henhouse, went out to find that her tough little gander "Gandy" had knocked a bulldog out cold—a dog who had been in the act of seizing a helpless fat white hen. All honors went to Gandy, the police goose. It only remained for human police to discover the thief dog's owner.

London police, a year ago, unearthed what may be the most sinister racket ever to threaten a city. At the heart of it, they found a quack doctor, who advertised hypnosis as a cure for all ills, with a flat fee of \$80 a patient. He actually knew how to hypnotize his patients—and to keep them from complaining, later, of being bilked, he threw in a course in hypnosis technique with the treatment, thus authorizing each patient to become a quack doctor himself.

How far the geometrically-growing chain of hypnosis-doctors had spread, police didn't try to estimate. But a little arithmetic showed them that unless the racket were nipped forthwith, the entire population of London would be in a state of trance within fourteen months!

When James Irving Peterson, of Montana State College, made the fraternity of his choice, one of his initiation chores was to stage a bogus breaking and entering of the college heating plant. Childish stuff—but Peterson went along with the gag. The joke turned deadly earnest when the startled engineer in the plant shot Peterson through the heart.

And the joke seemed even more tragic in view of Peterson's background. No mere boy, he had entered school under the G.I. Bill. He was married and had a son. During World War II, he had survived thirty-six combat missions over Europe with the AAF.

Perhaps a hold-up, even a bogus one, is never really very funny.

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