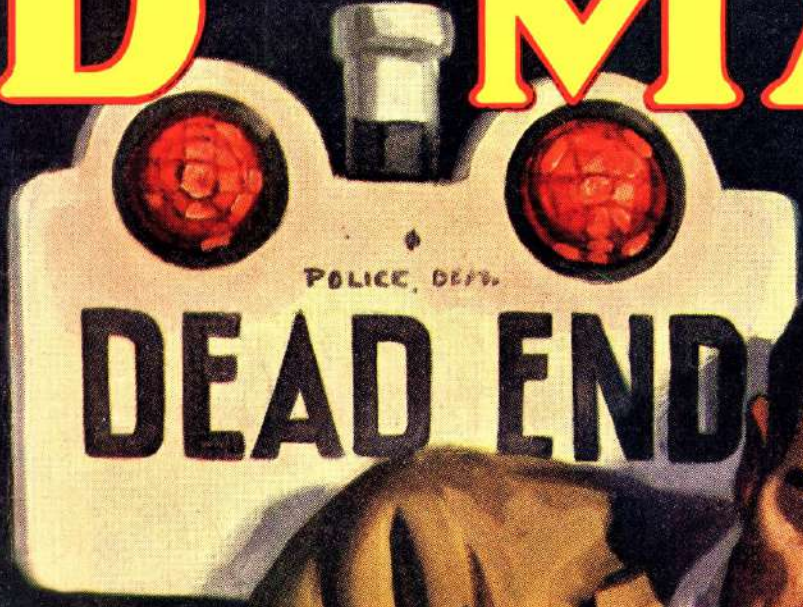


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JANUARY

BLACK MASK



**BAIL
BAIT**
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NOVELETTE*
by **ROBERT
REEVES**

WHAT'S MONEY?
A REX SACKLER STORY
by **D. L. CHAMPION**

C. P. DONNEL, JR. - WILLIAM BRANDON

Day buys a Watch

on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

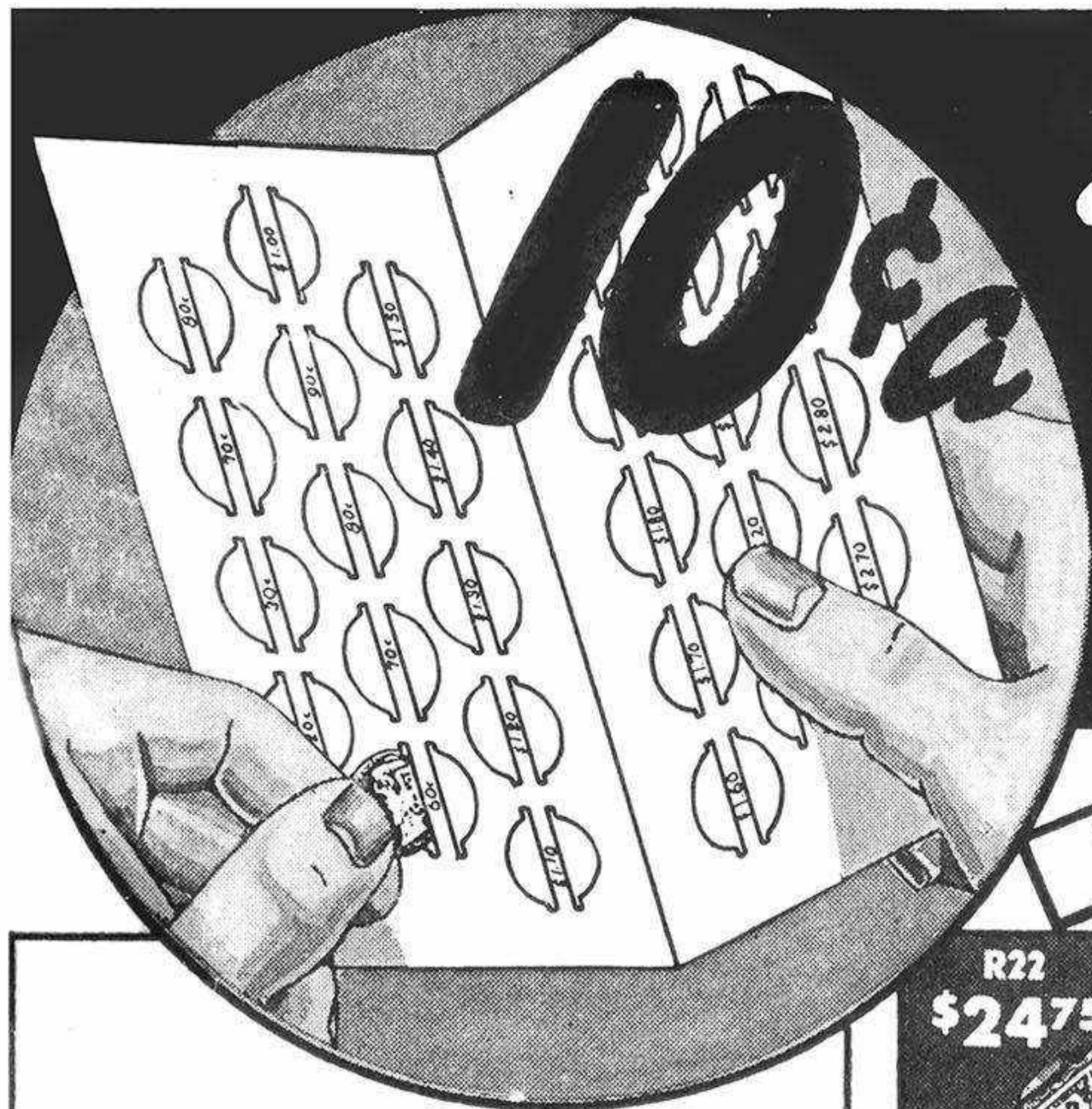
BULOVA

ELGIN

GRUEN

KENT

BENRUS



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WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

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10-DAY TRIAL

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L140 — Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. \$37.50
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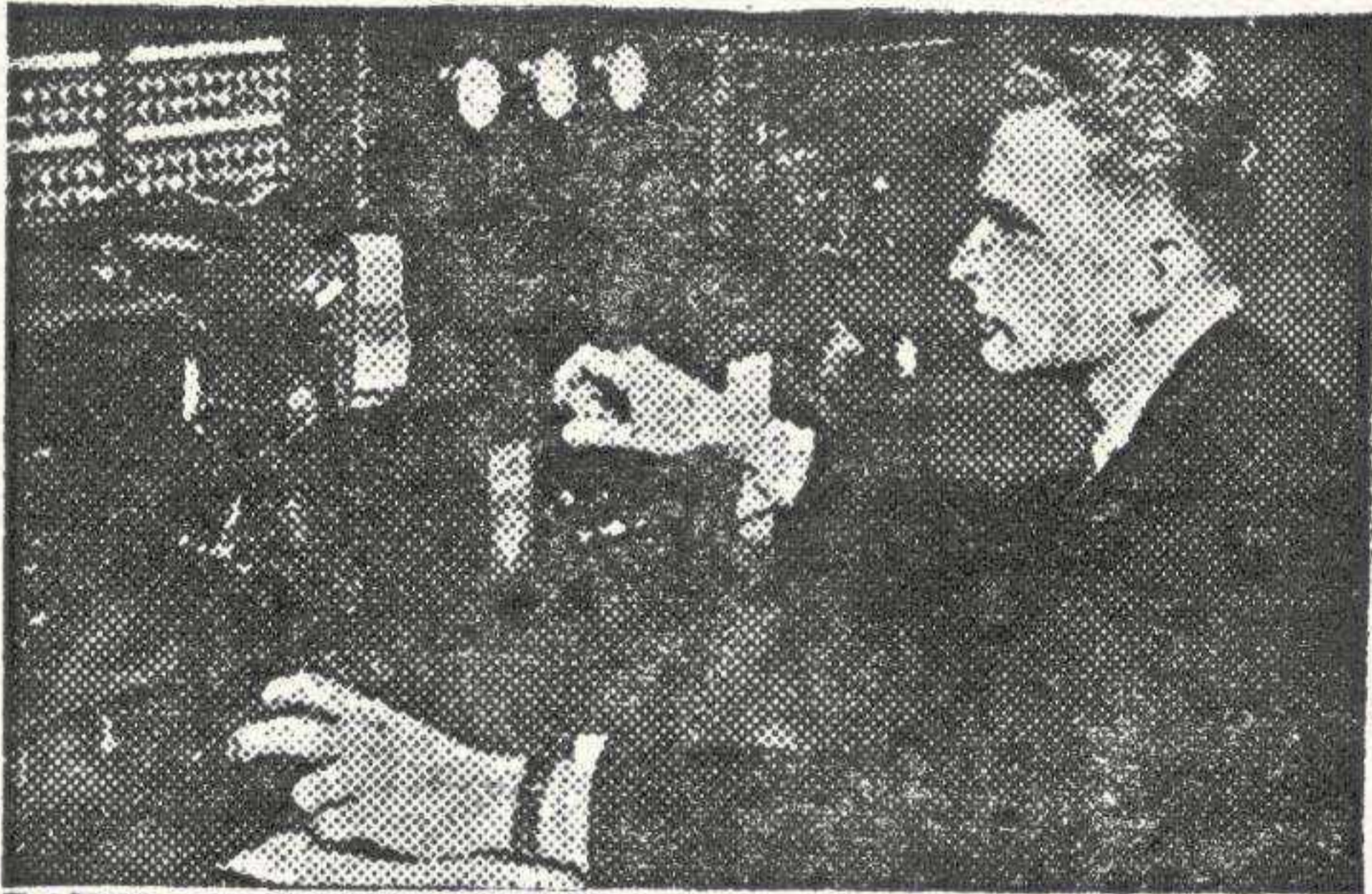
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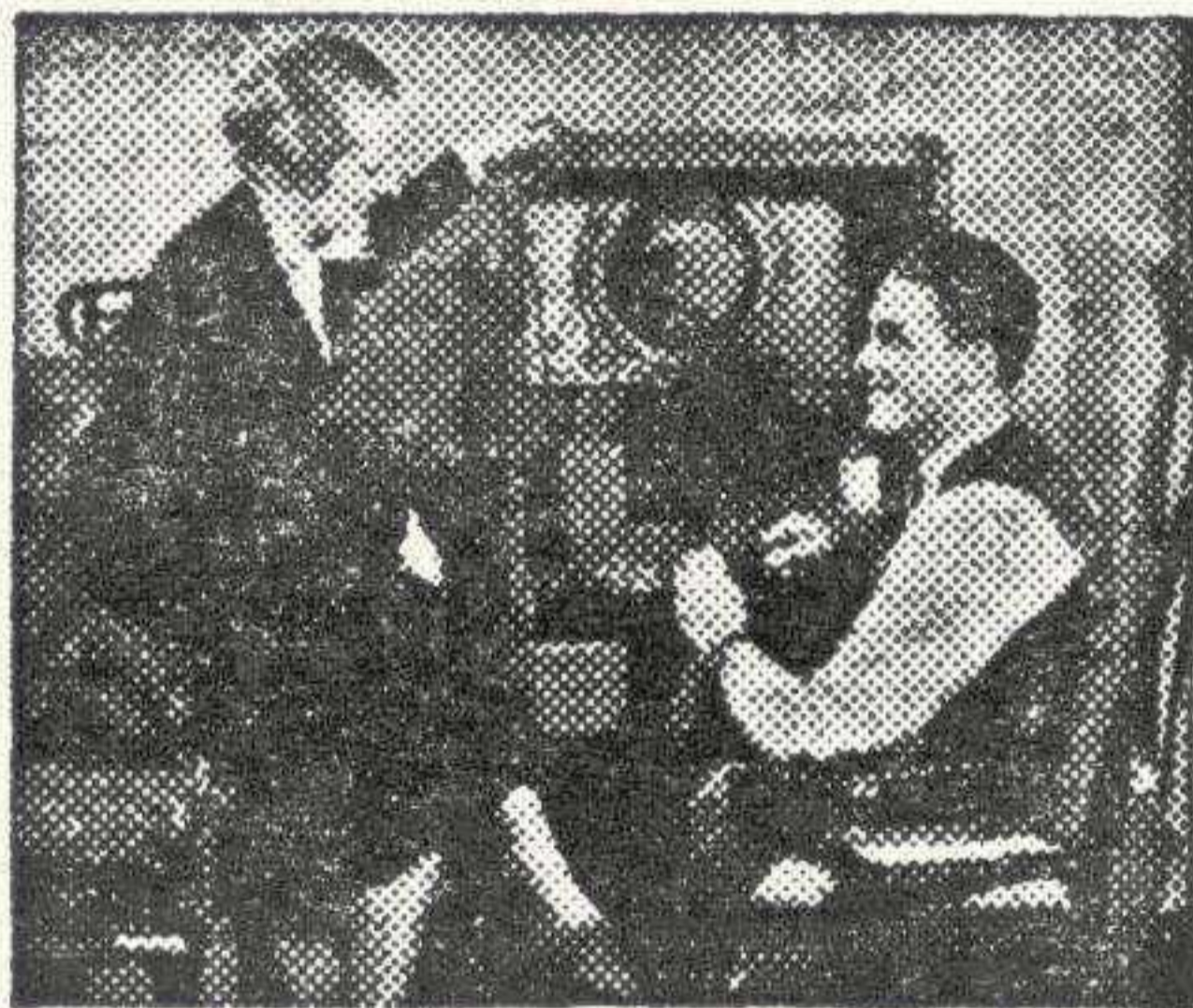
Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers beginners a chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now, and to train for opportunities paying up to \$30, \$40, \$50 a week for full-time Radio Technicians and Operators. On top of record business, the Radio industry is getting millions of dollars worth of vital defense orders. Many Radio Technicians and Operators have entered military service, opening many opportunities for men with Radio training. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I have trained men from 16 to 50 years old to make more money in Radio—how I will train you, too, for Radio's opportunities.



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J. E. SMITH, President,
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National Radio Institute,
Washington, D. C.



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**Had Own Business 6
Mos. After Enrolling**



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Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name

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City..... State.....



BLACK MASK



K. S. White, Editor

VOL. XXIV No. 9

January, 1942

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BAIL BAIT Robert Reeves . 11
A Cellini Smith novelette
Jimmy Legg was guilty as hell, there were witnesses galore to prove it, and the D.A.'s case against the little cracksman was perfect. So why did the worthy Judge Reynolds kick it out the window? Cellini gets real dough to explain why Justice is deaf and dumb—as well as stone blind.

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A partial preview of our plans for the next issue of this magazine.

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Cover painted for Black Mask by Milton Luros Black-and-white illustrations by Peter Kuhlhoff

Every story in Black Mask is new and, to the best of our knowledge, has never before been printed in any publication.

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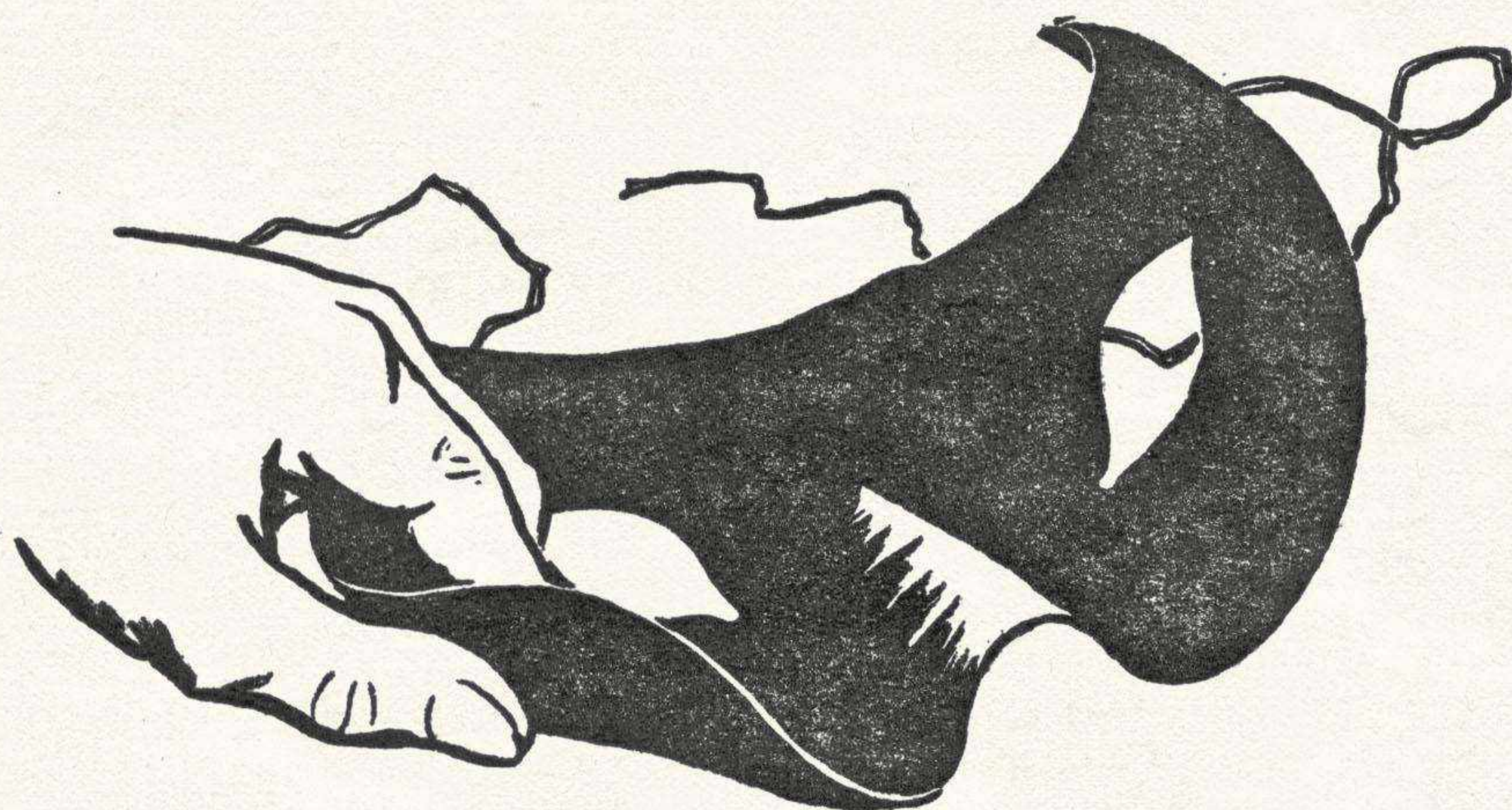
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LIFTING THE FEBRUARY



BLACK MASK

THE room was impregnable—literally. A square, cement-walled chamber, its only entrance was through a knobless, chilled-steel, vault-like door. Two keys only could open that portal. Powell, whose office it guarded, carried one; the other—his niece Celia's—had gathered dust in a safe-deposit box for two years. Inside the windowless room, a strong-box in itself, was a safe to which only Powell knew the combination.

Get the picture? When we said impregnable we meant just that.

Murder, Maestro, Please, JOHN LAWRENCE'S new novelette in the next issue, opens in that room and introduces you to the corpse found seated at Powell's desk, the killer who laughed at the crack-proof devices guarding the chamber and entered like a ghost to murder first then loot the safe inside of—exactly nothing!

Powell swore that there was not a single thing missing from the open vault—yet the killer had performed a miracle

in entering it at all and a fortune had been at his fingertips!

That was the slay-sequence that backfired straight into the lap of Jamie Harrod—maestro of swing at the Hotel Duquesne—for Celia, the girl with the other key, was in love with him and planned to back his new night-spot.

And A Little Child Shall Bleed Them brings back C. G. TAHNEY'S imp-of-Satan, Nickie, who last appeared in these pages back in the July issue in *Murder in Ten Easy Lessons*. Once again the sleuth in short pants confounds his elders and peddles them clues for small and progressively not-so-small-change, permitting them to solve the riddle of who killed Anatole Mattson just in time to save his own hide from a tanning and their supply of cash from total depletion.

Then there's another Bill Lennox novelette by W. T. BALLARD; a gripping yarn by PETER PAIGE, *The Night You Shot Hitler*; plus shorts by WILLIAM BRANDON and others.

This great FEBRUARY issue will be on sale DECEMBER 19th.

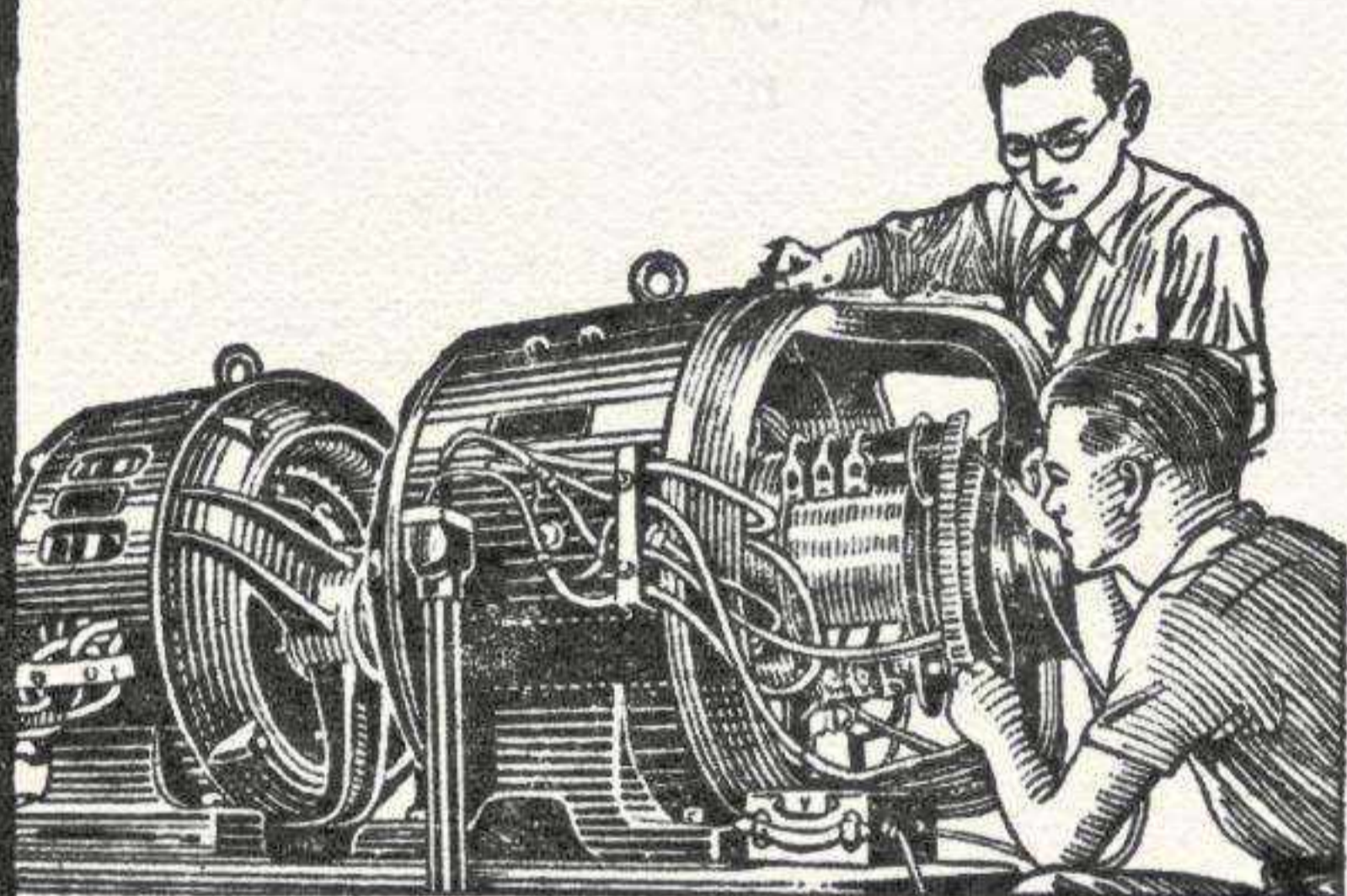


H. C. Lewis

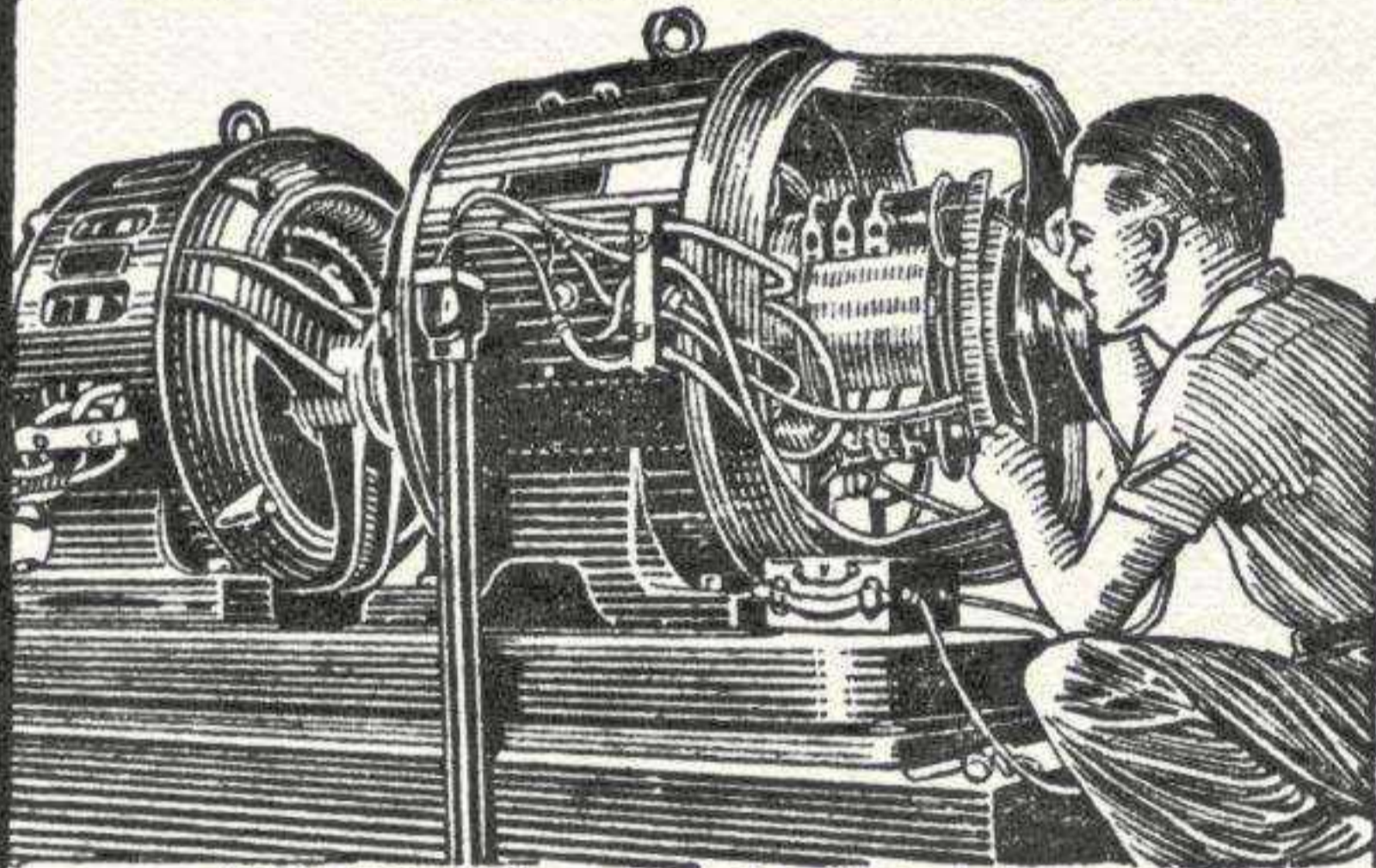
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You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you don't need previous experience or advanced education.

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4 WEEKS
COURSE IN
RADIO
INCLUDED

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You can get this training first—then pay for it later in easy monthly payments, starting 60 days after your 12 weeks training period is over—then you have 12 months to complete your payments.

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my "Pay After Graduation" plan, how many earn while learning and how we help our

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The Coyne Electrical School is 40 years old. Many hundreds of young men have become successful through Coyne training. My free book tells you how you, too, can get a training that will give you your start to a better job and a real future.

H. C. LEWIS, President

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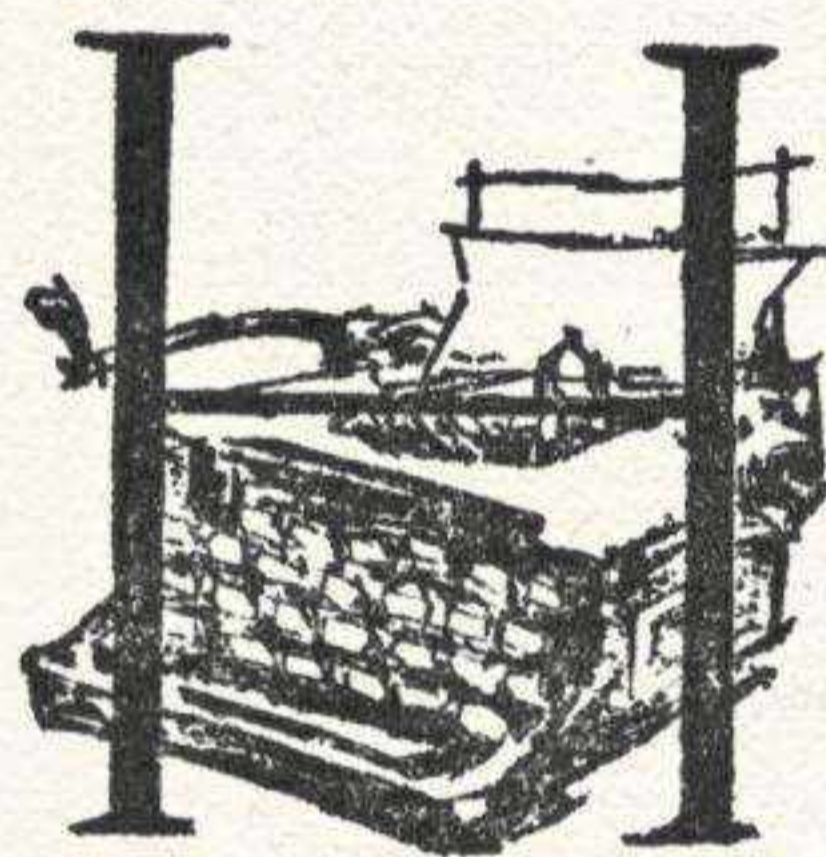
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BEHIND THE



BLACK MASK



HE WAS born in Melbourne, Australia and educated in New York City after his family moved to this country. At the tender age of fifteen he enlisted in the British army and saw active service on the Ypres sector in '18. (We didn't know him then but we're not surprised he was able to talk his way into the army so young—he's a big guy and if he was only half as glib then as he is now he could have convinced the most skeptical recruiting sergeant that he was old enough to join up). He returned to the United States after the war and he was a seaman in the merchant marine for a while. After that nautical hitch a friend got him a berth reading manuscript for one of the "true" story magazines. This lasted till the grim year of '29 when he found himself jobless and was reduced to hawking apples from a basket along with various and sundry other hapless white collar folk. That he picked the lobby of the building where he had last been employed for his one-man fruit mart, indicates he hadn't lost his sense of humor along with his editorial job. Whether this was a sadistic or masochistic gesture we can't quite decide. Shortly thereafter—apples having be-

come a glut on the market and even teachers beginning to pale at sight of the fruit—he turned to fiction writing. He's been at it ever since and between and during trips to Key West, Cuba, Arizona, Los Angeles, Mexico and points north, south, east and west has managed to turn out we'd hesitate to say how many million salable words. We've bought quite some few hundred thousand ourselves for both *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*.

Yeah, that's D. L. Champion, the guy who puts Rex Sackler on paper for you here every so often and who sired the legless Inspector Allhoff for *Dime Detective*.

Any reflection of his own character or personality in either Rex or Allhoff, you ask? Well, yes and no. D. L. has both his legs but the last time we lunched together—time before that, too, come to think of it—he outfumbled us with remarkable facility in reaching for the check. Sprained wrist he said it was, as near as we can recall. Well, that's O. K. by us. As long as he keeps Rex and Allhoff busy he can have a permanently crippled wrist and we won't kick about lunch money. It all goes on the expense account anyway, under the "keeping authors happy" column—so the next one's on us, too!

Don't Look Now!

but if you want to see a real

HE-MAN BODY...



Posed by
one of
Charles Atlas's pupils

WHAT do people say about YOU when they see you on the beach? When you're stripped to the waist you show what you REALLY are—a HE-MAN or a weakling! Do the girl's eyes just give you the silent "ha-ha"? Or can you FEEL their admiring glances as you strut along?

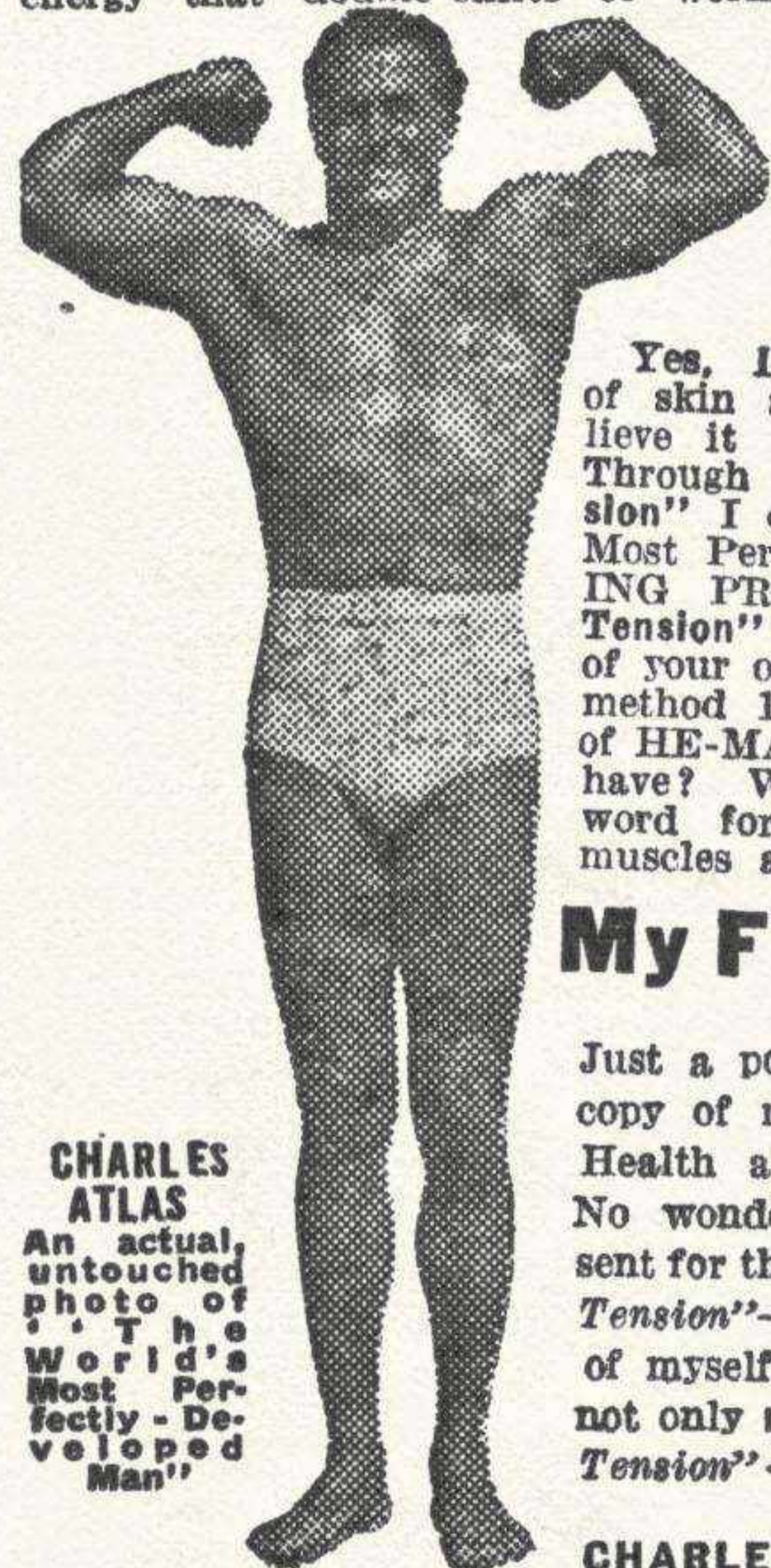
And don't think that clothes can cover up a flat chest, skinny arms, and pipe-stem legs EITHER! People KNOW at a glance when a man's got a puny build like Caspar Milquetoast—or when his whole personality glows with smashing strength, rippling muscles, tireless pep and energy! You CAN'T down a fellow like that—he's BOUND to be popular and the life of the party wherever he goes! Do YOU want to be that kind of a man? Then listen to THIS—

In Just 15 Minutes a Day, I'll Prove I Can Make YOU a New Man Too!

That's what I said—15 minutes a day! That's all the time I need to PROVE—regardless of how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be—that I can give you the kind of body that men envy and women admire. Biceps that can dish it out and a muscle-ridged stomach that can take it. A full, deep barrel-chest. Legs that never tire. A tough, sinewy back that you can put a mountain on. And a general all-around physique that can laugh at fatigue and ANY kind of rough going.

Charles Atlas

Today, a mighty wave of FITNESS is surging over America! What about YOU? Suppose YOU are called to the colors! Will your body be the laughing-stock of the company—or the kind of big-muscled physique that will command the envy of all your buddies? Suppose YOU are called for home defense! Have you the He-man strength and tireless energy that double-shifts of working and watching may call for?



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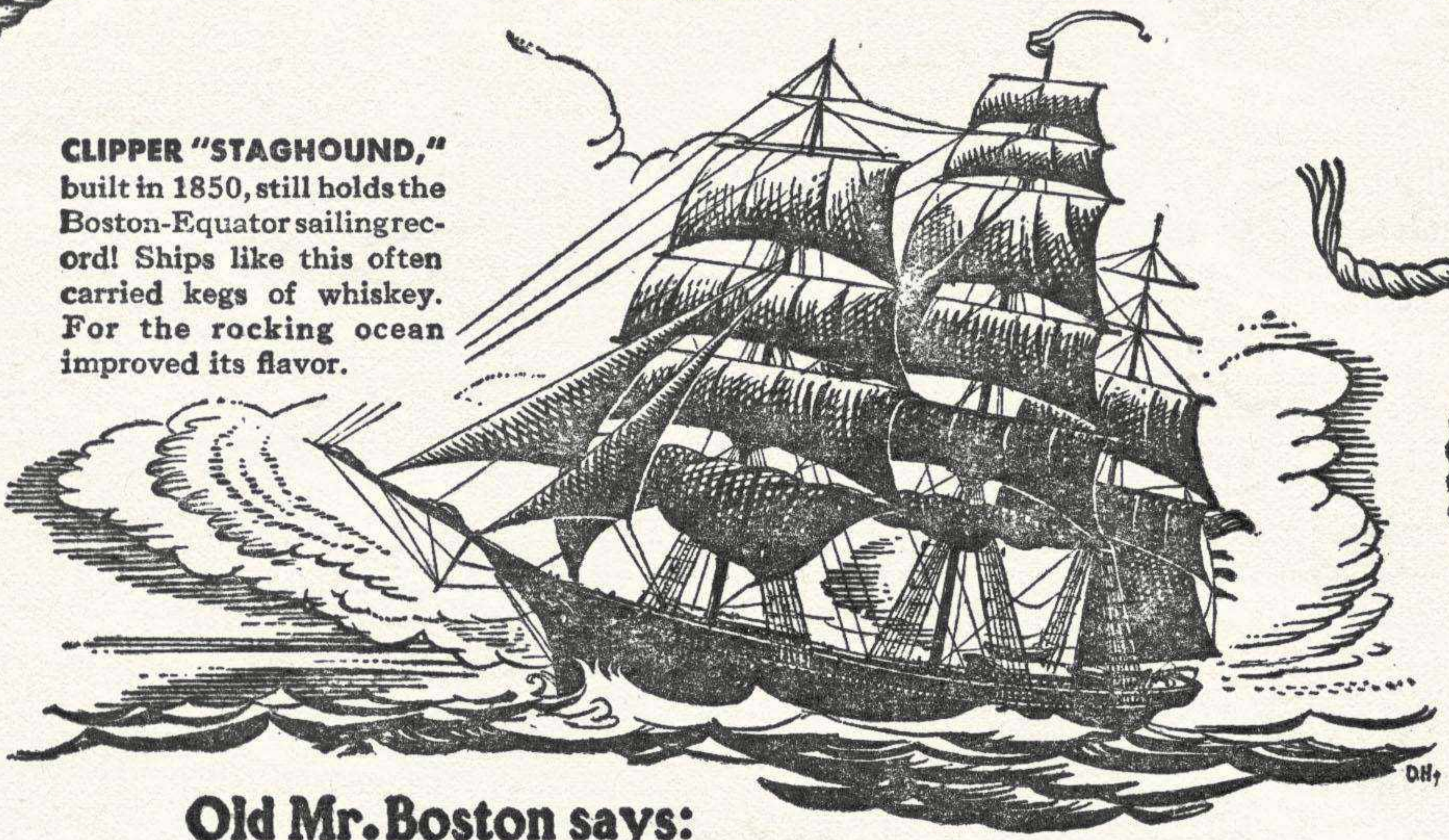
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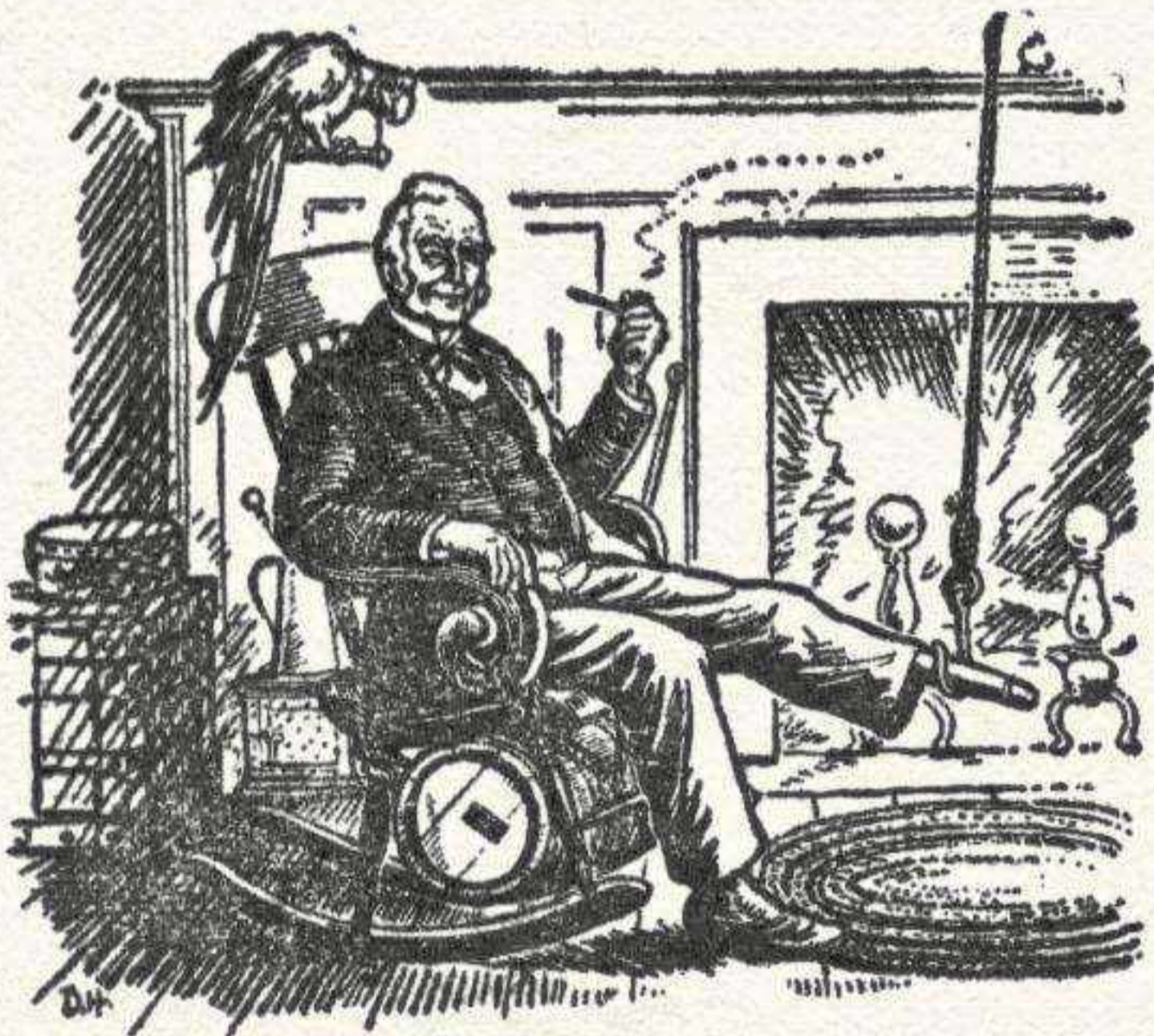


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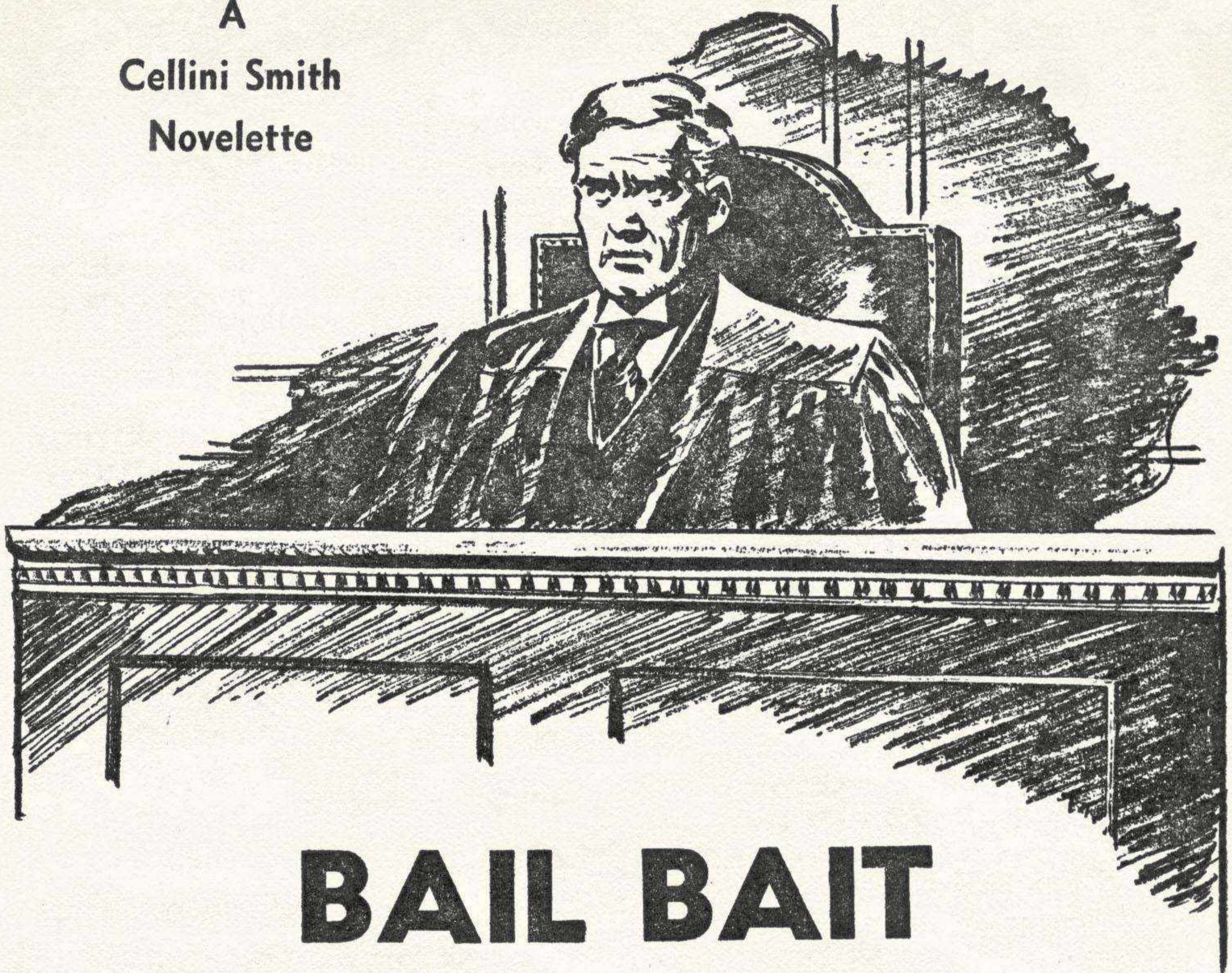


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A
Cellini Smith
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BAIL BAIT

By ROBERT REEVES

Jimmy Legg was guilty as hell—and there were witnesses to prove it. So—why did the worthy Judge Reynolds dismiss the D.A.'s case against the little cracksman? The answer was a surprise even to the shockproof Cellini—paid real dough for the first time in his checkered career to explain why Justice was deaf and dumb as well as stone blind.

CHAPTER ONE

Justice For Sale

HE CHECKED a curved wrist watch that you knew he couldn't have come by honestly and found that it was just two minutes short of nine in the morning. Chewing away at the toothpick between his thin, slitted lips, he entered the Hall of Justice.

His colorless eyes surveyed the signs and arrows on the walls of the vaulted vestibule. Coroner, Traffic, Small Claims, Bail—there were dozens. He read them

all and when he didn't find what he wanted he walked over to the elevator starter.

"Reynolds." He spoke the word without moving the toothpick.

"Huh?" asked the starter.

"Reynolds," he repeated. "Where do I find the guy?"

"Oh, you mean *Judge Reynolds*."

"I know what I mean. Where do I find him?"

The starter named a floor and office number and he entered a waiting elevator. Other passengers pushed in, crowding him to the back. A big man, well-cushioned with fat, squeezed him to the wall but suddenly stiffened. The fat man wasn't sure, but he thought he felt

something hard and unyielding—something like a gun—over the other one's chest. The fat man swung around to find himself looking into the colorless eyes. The fat man swallowed heavily, said nothing, and got off at the first stop.

He left the elevator four stops later and walked down the hall till he found the door he wanted. He pushed through without knocking. An elderly man sat alone behind a desk, robed in judicial black.

He spat out the toothpick and asked: "You Reynolds?"

"Yes," replied the jurist. "What can I do for you?"

"Plenty. My handle is Manny Simms."

"Yes?"

Manny Simms reached into his breast pocket and tossed an envelope onto the glass top. "Look at that first, Reynolds."

The judge removed a rubber band from the envelope and emptied its contents on the blotter. It was a packet of twenty-dollar bills.

"Count them, Reynolds."

The judge frowned. "Mr. Simms, I want to be certain before I do something about it. Are you trying to bribe me?"

Simms ignored the question. "There's fifty slices of that lettuce there—just one grand—and you can buy a lot of gavels with that. You got a case coming up in your court this morning. A guy called Jimmy Legg." Manny Simms shoved another toothpick into his face before continuing. "That grand, Reynolds, is to let Jimmy Legg go."

AN HOUR later, at precisely ten o'clock, Judge Reynolds left his chambers, crossed the hall, and passed through a door that gave into the rear of Magistrate's Court, Division Six.

The bailiff saw him coming and intoned: "Los Angeles County Magistrate's Court Division Six the Honorable Frank Reynolds presiding rise please sit down please thank you quiet everybody."

The crowd in the courtroom made a half-hearted gesture toward standing up as His Honor entered with dignified steps and sat behind the massive, elevated desk.

Reynolds fitted pince-nez to his razorback nose and thumbed through the mound of papers before him. They concerned the cases that were scheduled for hearing that day. He read the first sheet carefully, scanned through several of the following, then nodded to the clerk.

The clerk called the first case. A henpecked husband had gone berserk and forced his mother-in-law to eat his marriage certificate and had then proceeded to beat her with a telephone. The husband pled not guilty and Reynolds remanded him for trial. The second, third, and fourth cases were disposed of with equal rapidity. It was hardly ten twenty by the clock when the case of James Legg was called.

Jimmy Legg stood up and gazed at His Honor with all the doe-eyed innocence that a two-time loser can muster. Beside him stood Howard Garrett, one of the better mouthpieces, a comforting hand on his client's shoulder. Garrett gave the impression that this thing would make the Dreyfus case look like a traffic violation. A young, pimply-faced deputy district attorney rose for the state. He had Jimmy Legg dead to rights and he sounded very bored.

Legg, it seemed, had jimmied his way into the Lansing Investment Company, at the Tower Building, two nights before and had souped open the office safe. The janitor of the building heard the detonation and rushed up to be sapped for his pains. Legg made good his escape after slugging a screaming stenographer who was returning for some papers she'd forgotten.

Through a thumbprint on the outside door jamb of the Lansing offices, the police were able to identify Legg and haul him in two days later. Both janitor and stenographer picked Jimmy Legg out of a lineup as the man who had assaulted them. The deputy D. A. con-

cluded the bare recital by asking for an early trial.

Judge Reynolds regarded the accused. It was an open and shut case but Legg looked jaunty and confident. Howard Garrett, his attorney, pled not guilty. Legg was a victim of circumstances, the lawyer nearly sobbed. That thumbprint was on the door because Legg had gone up earlier that day to invest some money. As for the identification by janitor and stenographer—who knew what sinister forces were behind this whole thing?

Judge Reynolds asked several perfunctory questions. He didn't seem very interested in the replies but seemed, rather, to be debating something within himself. Finally, he buried his nose in the papers before him and said in a low voice: "Insufficient evidence for trial. Release the accused."

The deputy laughed. His Honor was some joker!

"I was not aware of my reputation for wit," flared Judge Reynolds. "I said there was insufficient evidence to waste the taxpayers' money on a trial."

The pimples on the deputy's face reddened. "Insufficient—"

"Enough of this," snapped His Honor. "Next case."

A hiss of shocked astonishment passed over the courtroom. The deputy sat down weakly, staring at the judge in dumbfounded wonder. Even James Legg could hardly believe his good fortune and stood without moving till Garrett grabbed him by the arm and hustled him out.

More cases were called. White-faced, his hands clenched tensely, Reynolds handed down his decisions. It was some thirty minutes later when he rapped for silence and said: "Clerk, what time is it?"

The clerk checked. "Five minutes past eleven, Your Honor."

"In that case I should like to interrupt these proceedings to explain my behavior in freeing James Legg who should patiently have been held for trial."

The pimple-faced deputy D. A. swore

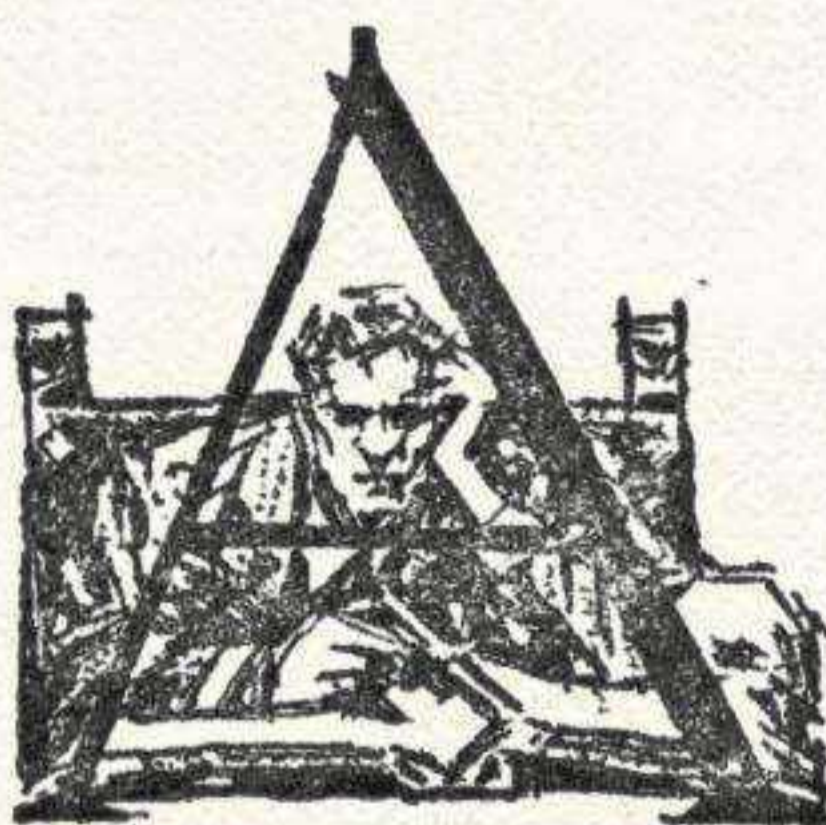
softly under his breath. A couple of reporters sat up straight, their noses twitching at the scent of a headline.

"This morning at nine," continued the judge, "I received a visitor in my chambers. He introduced himself as one Manny Simms, and offered to bribe me if I freed James Legg. Naturally, I refused and sent out an alarm but he escaped. When I later entered court I found this paper on my bench. Clerk, read it aloud."

The judge passed it down. The clerk's voice sounded strange in the hushed room as he read aloud the scrawled writing. "I'm hiding under your desk and I've got a rod on your belly so you better not move from the desk. Do as I tell you. Let Jimmy Legg go and give him a half-hour start. Not a second less if you want to live." The clerk looked up. "It is signed, Manny Simms."

A swelling murmur swept the courtroom and the bailiff called for silence. Judge Reynolds stood up and passed a weary hand over his eyes. He said: "Perhaps I should not have considered my own life so valuable. I don't know. At any rate, bailiff, arrest that man hiding under the bench."

Manny Simms stepped out and viewed the courtroom with a sardonic smile. The toothpick in his mouth was now soft and pulpy. He laid the gun in his hand on the bench. "O. K., Reynolds. You followed orders. I ain't kicking."



FREE man, Jimmy Legg left the Hall of Justice with Howard Garrett, his attorney, at his side. The lawyer was frowning. "Jimmy, you must have been born with a gold horseshoe in your mouth."

"The judge knew I was innocent," declared Legg with a grin.

"I'm your lawyer, Jimmy," Garrett reminded, "and I know better. And Reynolds knew better too."

"Yeah," said Jimmy Legg softly, "and

you know better than to stick your beak where it don't belong. I'm dusting now, Garrett."

The lawyer grabbed him by the arm. "Hold it, Jimmy. Where are you going?"

"None of your business."

"What's got into you? The D. A. might make a stink because Reynolds didn't hold you. I may have to get in touch with you."

"You got my address."

"Don't take me for a child, Jimmy. You wouldn't go near your apartment till you were sure the police didn't want you again."

"I'll ring you at your office."

Howard Garrett shook his head slowly. "I don't like it."

Jimmy Legg laughed. It sounded like a glass cutter in action. "What's the beef?"

"Why," asked the attorney, "should a judge as scrupulously honest as Reynolds even think of letting you go scot free? Why do you refuse to tell me where you're holing in? Do you expect more trouble? And why did you come to me in the first place?"

"You know damned well why I come to you, Garrett."

The lawyer nodded. "Because I happen to own stock in Lansing Investment and you thought I could persuade them to go easy on you."

"So they went easy and I still don't get your beef."

"You're acting dumb, Jimmy. You know the Lansing people did nothing because I haven't even had a chance to talk to them. Still you got off—and I don't like it."

Jimmy Legg absently rearranged the silk handkerchief in the lawyer's breast pocket. "Everything's just ducky, Garrett."

"But—"

Jimmy Legg said, "Easy does it," and ambled off. He rounded the corner into Sunset and the instant he was out of his lawyer's sight his casual saunter became a rapid stride. His quick, pur-

poseful steps faltered only when he looked behind to see if he was being tailed. But he saw no one and soon he gained a corner cut-rate drugstore.

He made for one of the phone booths at the far end, hunted in the directory, then dialed a number. The voice that responded said, "Hamilton Apartments," with an inflection calculated to let you know that the rents there were plenty high.

"Let's have Winnie Crawford." Jimmy Legg's voice sounded dry, almost frightened, and he had to repeat the name.

Another few moments and a languid contralto said: "Yes?"

"Are you alone, Winnie?"

There was a contralto gasp. "Jimmy! I thought they arrested you."

"I asked if you were alone."

"Yes." A moment's hesitation and she added: "Yes, darling."

"That's good. Now listen, honey," Legg said rapidly, "I'm coming up to your place. Pull the shades, lock the doors, and don't let anyone into your apartment till I get there."

"But I don't understand," said Winnie Crawford. "How did you get off? Did you get bail?"

"I'll tell you later, honey. I'm sitting on top of the world now and if you're smart there's a place right next to me for you. Get what I mean?"

"Of course, Jimmy. Only you'll have to give me a little time. You know I like you a lot but you mustn't rush—"

"That's good enough for me, sugar. You'll find out I like you enough for both of us when I get up there."

"But, Jimmy, maybe you shouldn't come up here. They'll see you at the desk downstairs."

"Don't worry, sugar. I'm coming up the back way."

Winnie Crawford said, "Good-bye, darling." She also said, "A fat chance you got to play bingo with me, you lousy bum," but Jimmy never heard that part for she had already cradled the receiver.

ONCE again Jimmy Legg consulted the directory. This time it was the yellow book and he searched under *Private Detectives* until he had his number, then dialed. The brittle, somewhat bored voice of a man answered.

"Is this Cellini Smith?" asked Jimmy Legg.

"Yes."

"Well, this is Jimmy Legg. I want to hire you to—"

"Listen, you underslung gungel," interrupted Cellini Smith, "you couldn't hire me to laugh at you. Where'd you get the nickel to phone me?"

"It's on the level, Smith," protested Jimmy Legg. "I want you to do a job for me and I'm willing to give you a retainer."

"Get back under your damp rock, Legg. You couldn't retain a square meal, let alone retain me."

It never occurred to Jimmy Legg to get insulted. He said: "Look, Smith, there's real dough in this for you if you can help me out. I want you to come around and meet me."

"In the pig's eye," scoffed Cellini. "Whatever mess you're in, Legg, you probably deserve it."

"Now don't go off the deep end, Smith. You know your way around and you got to help me out. I'll pay in advance. I've got sugar on me right now."

There was a slight pause before Cellini Smith said: "That sounds better, crumb. How come you're out? I thought you were hooked on that Lansing Investment job."

"That's just what I want to see you about, Smith, I want you to meet me at the Hamilton Apartments on Rossmore."

"Listen, you animated sewer, I'm not stepping out of this office till I find out what kind of a job you want me for—so you'd better tell me right now."

Jimmy Legg swore. "It's about that Lansing Investment job, Smith. I was in court this morning. The judge had me with my pants down but still he let me go. I want you to find out why that

judge didn't hold me. Something stinks and I got to know."

"That sounds kind of interesting," said Cellini. "O. K. I don't promise to do anything but I'll drop around for a look-see."

"Fine, Smith. The Hamilton Apartments in about forty minutes and make it the back entrance. If I ain't down there I'll have someone waiting to bring you up to the right apartment."

Cellini Smith promised to be there. Jimmy Legg pronged the receiver and left the booth. He went over to the counter and ordered a double-decker sandwich. Still eating the sandwich, he left the store and caught a Wilshire bus. After a while, he reached Rossmore, left the bus, and cut up the block toward a marble-fronted building.

When Jimmy Legg came abreast of the Hamilton Apartments, he paused to light a cigarette till the doorman's back was turned, then took the narrow alley on the north side. He walked down its length till he reached a fireproof door, pushed it open, and then stopped dead in his tracks.

Jimmy Legg's eyes bulged at what he saw and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. His face was suddenly shiny with cold sweat. "No, no." His voice was almost a whisper. "Please don't."

Even as he spoke he knew his pleas were futile. There was a sharp report as a small-caliber gun went off and Jimmy Legg slowly tumbled forward—as if carefully choosing the spot of ground on which to die.

CHAPTER TWO

Rendezvous



CELLINI SMITH worked his feet back and forth, trying to get the sleep out of them. Finally, he yawned and stood up. He decided that he might as well get around and see what that Jimmy

Legg business was about. Detectives who live in rent-due offices can't be choosy about clients.

Some twenty minutes later, Cellini turned off Wilshire at Rossmore and parked his heap of scrap iron opposite the Hamilton. He remembered that Legg had asked to meet him at the back entrance and he crossed the street and padded down the length of the alley on the north side—then stopped short. His face was a bored blank as he said: "Hello, Haenigson."

Ira Haenigson, detective-sergeant of Homicide, stood up from his examination of Jimmy Legg's corpse and made a wry face. "Why don't they draft you or something, Smith?"

"A killing?" asked Cellini disinterestedly. "Anyone I know?"

"Anyone you know!" The detective-sergeant seemed to swell like a blowfish. He turned to a porcine rookie. "Our friend wonders if it's anyone he knows."

The rookie laughed uncertainly.

"You're bloody well right it's someone you know!" Ira Haenigson suddenly shouted.

"How do you figure that?"

The Homicide man calmed himself, substituting irony for anger. "Now, I'm only a cop that goes out on homicide calls, Smith. Just a dumb cop from Homicide. Do you understand?"

Cellini's brows furrowed as he gave the appearance of concentration. "You're a dumb cop from Homicide. I think I understand. Go on."

"That's right, Smith. And then I get a call to go out on a killing. Where is it? On Hollywood and Vine? On Wilshire and La Brea? Any place where it would be reasonable for you to show up? No indeedy. The corpse is hidden in an alley by the rear door of an apartment building. Then by sheer coincidence you happen to show up in a place a quarter-hour later and you ask me if the body is anyone you know. Come, Smith, let me pinch your cheeks. You're so goddamned cute!"

The photographer finished taking his pictures of the body and chalk marks were made on the concrete outlining the position and angle at which it had fallen. Jimmy Legg was lifted on a stretcher and carted away. Then the fingerprint experts, sighing hopelessly as they regarded the stucco walls and the dull metal finish on the fireproof door, set about their jobs.

Cellini said: "I happened to be passing outside, Haenigson, when I noticed the department cars and I just came in here out of sheer curiosity to find out what had happened."

"Now that's entirely different, Smith. I shouldn't have left our cars on Rossmore right plunk in front of the apartment, eh?"

"I guess not."

"You great detective," said the detective-sergeant witheringly. "It so happens the department cars are not on Rossmore because I don't like to advertise my arrival. The cars are in *back* of this building. Anyone but a moron would have noticed that the body was just carried down the alley through to the street on the opposite side."

"That's what I meant," said Cellini smoothly. "I was passing through the other street and figured you were stopping at the Hamilton here so I came around the front—"

"All right," snapped the Homicide man. "Wrap it in Kleenex. Were you supposed to meet James Legg right here?"

Cellini Smith was a picture of innocence. "What's a Legg?"

"If you didn't show up here to meet Legg, then you came to meet his murderer. Which one was it?"

"I get it, Haenigson. Have I stopped beating my wife? Why don't you tell me what this is all about?" Cellini demanded.

"James Legg muscled his way out of court on a burglary rap this morning. An hour later he's garbage. A two-bit homicide, Smith, but the kind that makes good headlines. Can the underworld

make a mockery out of our courts? Get what I'm driving at?"

"Sure," nodded Cellini. "If you don't crack it quick you need somebody to throw to the wolves—and I'm handy."

"Exactly, Smith. This happens to be the wrong kind of case to play button-button with the police. So you better open up and say what you're doing here and who you were supposed to meet."

"I was driving by and saw the department cars," began Cellini, "and I figured I'd see what was cooking—"

Ira Haenigson's bulky figure slowly advanced on Cellini. "Get out! Quick!"

Cellini didn't move. Other than a narrowing of the eyes, his face was infuriatingly calm. But the tapered body was braced with catlike tensivity to meet the Homicide man's elephantine rush.

Haenigson suddenly thought better of it and halted. "That's better," said Cellini, "—and safer." He wheeled and walked out.

CELLINI SMITH sat in his parked car debating with himself. His client had been murdered. It would be little better than sucker stuff to try and nail the killer out of charity. Besides, whoever mayhemmed Jimmy Legg didn't do mankind any disservice. But there was Ira Haenigson and his threat could not be regarded idly. He could make much of Cellini's appearance at the scene shortly after the murder—and he would certainly refuse to accept the true explanation for it. Haenigson would never believe that a gungel of Legg's caliber would hire a peeper.

Cellini sighed and got out of the car. He had no alternative but to follow through—and to do so before Haenigson began wondering what Legg was doing in these parts.

He passed through the palm-studded doorway of the Hamilton and approached the desk. He asked: "Does Mr. James Legg live here?"

The clerk, a delicate, lavender specimen, flipped through his files. "Now let

me see. That should be under L. No, sir, I'm sorry. I've never heard of Mr. Legg."

"You've heard, all right. That's the guy who was shot outside in your alley an hour ago."

"Oh, you know of it?" said the clerk brightly. "I'm so glad. I'm such a poor liar."

"Fine. But did Legg have an apartment here?"

"Certainly not." The clerk sounded offended. "We don't lease apartments to such rowdies—such, such potential corpses."

Cellini leaned over the desk. "Listen, my androgynous friend. If Legg didn't park his shoes here then he visited somebody and the chances are you know who it is. Now why don't you open up and dish out an intelligible remark?"

"Fine, sir! I'm glad you asked that because we like to bruit about the idea that we supply no information about our lessees. And it's no use glowering because I know you're not from the police and I simply refuse to be intimidated by—"

Cellini didn't trust himself to linger longer. He walked out and circled around to the alley where Jimmy Legg had met, in rapid succession, his destroyer and his Maker. Haenigson hadn't even bothered to post a cop. Murderers, he well knew, rarely return to the scene of their crime.

Cellini passed by the tradesmen's entrance and pushed through a smaller door beyond. He found himself in the cellar. The janitor, a grimy individual in overalls, was laying out a game of solitaire on a side-turned wardrobe trunk.

Cellini dropped a dollar bill on the trunk. "I'll bet you that buck you don't know how many cards there are in that deck."

"Fifty-two," said the surprised janitor.

"It's yours. Now, what do you know about Jimmy Legg?"

The janitor palmed the greenback.

"For a moment I thought you was Santa Claus. Well, all I know is some dame found this Legg guy and started screaming like she lost her virtue so I run outside and called the cops. That's all."

"Didn't you hear any shots some time before that?"

"So a car backfired," said the janitor. "So what? That's like I asked the cops. I asked am I expected to go about having premonitions about a murder?"

"And you never saw or heard of Jimmy Legg before?"

"Nope. Not even for a sawbuck."

"Well, he must have been visiting somebody here and I've got to get a line on it. Start telling me about the tenants."

"We got five floors and six big apartments on each," began the janitor. "In 1-A we got a nice old couple. They're vegetarians. Next to them in 2-A is a family that's vacationing. Then—"

"Forget that. No families. Legg must have been visiting a dame or a man. What single tenants are there?"

"Only three because the apartments are pretty expensive for one guy. In 2-D we got an old maid."

"No good. Next."

"Then there's a guy with a Vandyke beard in 4-C. He owns a few oil wells and he hides under his bed all day and drinks."

"No good. Who's the other?"

"A blonde that's something. Her body ain't ersatz either. She's strictly the wrong side of the tracks but you got to have sugar to live here so I guess she's got it."

"That's a good bet," said Cellini eagerly. "What's her name?"

"Winnie Crawford in 4-E."

"Who's keeping her?"

"This'll kill you—nobody!"

"Are you sure?"

"So help me. She don't like men and it's sure a waste because if I ever seen production for use she's it. It's ridiculous!" The janitor sounded offended.

"It's impossible," said Cellini, "and I'll check right now."



CELLINI leaned on the button and heard the chimes sounding inside of 4-E. A husky contralto yelled: "Relax. I'm not deaf."

A moment later the door was opened by a woman in her late twenties and Cellini could see what the janitor had meant. She was something that the Hayes office would have banned even in a burlap bag. At the moment, however, she wore a form-clinging, silk dress that would have caught male eyes in a nudist colony.

"Who asked for you?" Her hands rested aggressively on her hips and she seemed surprised to see him.

"Are you Winnie Crawford?" Cellini asked.

"Uh-huh. Spring it."

"It's about Jimmy Legg. He's not coming."

"Why not?"

Cellini grinned. This was the right party. He walked by her through a short foyer and found himself in the living-room. He wondered if there was anyone else around and toured through kitchen, dinette, bedroom, bath, and dressing alcove but drew a blank. He returned to the living-room to find Winnie Crawford leveling a huge revolver at him with both hands.

Cellini sighted some bourbon on an end table and poured himself a stiff drink. He said: "That thing you got in your soft, white, creamy hands. You'd better put it down."

"What's the idea smelling around this place?" she countered. "What are you looking for?"

Cellini tasted the drink. It was good liquor. "I was just wondering if you were alone, Winnie—whether you had a couple of boy friends in the Frigidaire or something."

"I got no boy friends and I'm alone and I can take care of myself. You better tell me what you want. Make it quick."

"And you'd better ditch that rod,"

said Cellini casually, "if it hapuens to be the one that killed Jimmy Legg this morning."

Winnie Crawford sat down heavily on a divan. Cellini gave silent approval of the exposed legs. He walked over, removed the revolver from her unresisting fingers, and broke it. It was fully loaded and didn't smell as if it had been recently fired.

He tossed the revolver aside, half-filled a glass with straight bourbon, and handed it to her. Her face was white and drawn and her fingers trembled. He decided that Jimmy Legg must have meant a lot to her.

She drank deeply and seemed to regain control of herself. "I never got anything but trouble from that chiseling heel," she muttered.

Cellini decided, on second thought, that Jimmy Legg meant nothing to her and that she was worried about her own skin. "Did you kill him?" he asked.

She registered a look of disgust and pulled her skirts over her knees. She was her normal self again. "Where did it happen?"

"Downstairs in the alley at the side of this building. He was sneaking up the back way to see you."

"What gives you the ridiculously fantastic idea that he was visiting me?" Her head went back and the nose up in what she hoped was a chilling, regal look.

He grinned. "Too late to backwater now, Winnie. Get down to the monosyllables. You're more at home there."

She regarded him speculatively for a moment, then sighed resignedly. "All right. Tell me about it and especially what your racket is."

"My handle is Cellini Smith and I'm a private op. Legg phoned me to meet him in the back alley but when I got there he wasn't receiving. So I *cherchez-ed* the dame and here I am."

"What did he want you for?"

Cellini shrugged. "Something about the cops and a safe-cracking job. At the Lansing Investment Company, I think it was."

"I know all that. How come they didn't hold him?"

"That's exactly what Mr. Legg wanted me to find out."

"Oh. Listen, Smith, you know I didn't kill Jimmy. I'm just not the type."

"Perish the thought," he said. "Go on."

BUT I got other reasons for wanting to be kept out of this mess," Winnie Crawford continued. "Good reasons. Get out of here, Smith, and just forget all about me."

"Not a chance. The shams are down on me because they think I know more than I do and I'm not the kind of hero that'll get in a mess to save the name of some fair twist. Besides, Winnie, you forget the cops'll get around to you just as easily as I did."

"I guess that's so," she admitted. She drained her glass and nervously poured more bourbon.

"Of course it's so. Loosen up, Winnie, and tell me what you know about all this."

"Nothing. Jimmy phoned that he was coming up here. That's all. I was surprised, too, they let him go."

"Why was Jimmy Legg coming here? This is a pretty classy place you've got—not the kind of thing Legg could afford."

She drew herself up. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, come off it, Winnie. You know as well as I do that you look like a love captive in a penthouse."

"Get this, you louse! I'm nobody's keptie. Just because I'm beautiful and there ain't no cockroaches in the kitchen is no sign I am."

"All right. Simmer down. Your dimples disappear when you get angry. If you're not doing light housekeeping for a male, then who pays for all this?"

"Men," pronounced Winnie Crawford, "are beasts."

"Sure—the cads—but Jimmy Legg was still liquidated right outside this

building," he reminded her, "and the cops will be here in a little while."

"I'm not worried about the cops. I was up here all the time and it's no crime if Jimmy was visiting me."

"That kind of weasel talk doesn't jell," he hammered. "I've got to get some kind of lead on this and I think you can cupply it. So come across."

She chewed at one of her long, vermillion nails. "Listen, could you tell me why Jimmy was killed?"

"Holy mother of hell!" he exploded. "What do you think I'm trying to find out?"

"Well, when you do find out you'll tell me, won't you?"

"Sure and I'll pass out a ten dollar bill with each syllable," he replied not too subtly.

She stood up and waked over to a corner taboret that served as the bar. She opened a cocktail shaker and removed a fat roll of bills. Carefully, she counted five wrinkled twenty dollar bills into his hand. "Here. I'm hiring you to find out why Jimmy was killed."

"*Why* he was killed? Don't you want to know *who* killed him?"

"That's not so important."

"And suppose I pin it on you?"

"I'll take the chance."

He slipped the money into his slender wallet, frowning. "And I'll take the job, Winnie, though you're a rather phoney client. Are you sure you and Jimmy weren't soulmates?"

"You heard me. Why do men always think of only one thing?"

"I remember—because they're beasts. But you're not Bryn Mawr stock, Winnie, and you weren't born with any gold shovel in your mouth. Someone's paying your bills. Who?"

"Why can't you get it through your head I'm nobody's woman? I spent my life shining up to slick chisellers and visiting firemen. Now I'm through with the whole lousy breed and I'm relaxing."

Her voice was hard and grating and carried conviction. Cellini surrendered

the point. "All right, you're stainless. Then where did you get that fat roll of kohlrabi you flashed before and how do you pay the rent here?"

"That's none of your business. Just go and find out why Jimmy was killed."

"What difference does it make to you? Why was he coming up here anyway?"

"Nothing doing."

"Then at least tell me what time Jimmy Legg phoned to say he was coming."

"Around eleven."

"That's about when he phoned me," said Cellini. "All right. When the cops get around to you just tell them I'm handling your interests and they'll put you under arrest immediately."

CHAPTER THREE

Careless Lead



CELLINI SMITH stepped into the hallway, shutting the door to Winnie Crawford's apartment behind him, just as the elevator pulled level with the floor and a huge man stepped out.

Cellini said: "Hello, Mack. No, I'm not betting."

Mack was square and solid as the truck he was named after. There was a lot of him and his customers never fooled with him for he was one of the town's toughest bookmakers. But they liked him. "Your loss," he replied. "Everybody's taking me. Say, don't tell me you just came out of Winnie's stable. Please don't tell me that."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'd have to beat you to a gooey pulp, Cellini, and I hate to beat friends to gooey pulps."

Cellini looked up at the big man and smiled crookedly. "Maybe," he said, "but I never fight Queensberry with monsters like you. But I don't get it—why should you jump me for coming out of Winnie Crawford's apartment?"

"Because I long ago decided that if I can't have her then nobody else will."

"You can relax. That type's a little too synthetic for my tastes."

"You just don't know her, Cellini. She's the laziest white woman in the country without hookworm—but what a build!"

"You beast," said Cellini. "How come she snaps her fingers at a great big he-man like you?"

"Now you'd think Winnie would know better, wouldn't you?" His voice was charged with complaint. "That double-dealing twist gets her mitts on some real dough and right away she's through with men."

"Where'd she get the dough?"

"I wish I knew. I keep asking her but she don't even bother to lie. It's a hell of a life."

"She might have gotten it from her family," suggested Cellini. "Heiress stuff—like in the movies."

Mack's laughter sounded like the fall

of bowling pins. "Her family is the backbone of the W.P.A., when it's sober, and she was a carhop in a drive-in."

"Then how'd she get out of it?"

"A small-time crook saw her and picked her up. Maybe you know him. Jimmy Legg."

"Go on." Cellini hoped his voice was casual.

"So she stayed with him for a while. Jimmy Legg played the horses through me so I happened to meet Winnie. Then I took over and we made it a twosome until I made a big mistake."

"What was that?"

"I figured to keep her out of trouble while I was working so I got her a job with one of my customers. Switchboard girl at the Lansing Investment Company."

Cellini took a deep breath. At last something was beginning to connect. "Then what, Mack?"

"Then she left me flat and moved in with the head of that place—Lansing

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himself. Lansing is a big bettor with me so I didn't even have the satisfaction of beating him up. Then a few months later Winnie got this dough somehow and she ditched all of us."

"All this is very interesting."

"Winnie ain't interesting," said Mack. "This no-man business of hers is just irritating. There should be a law."

"I mean Jimmy Legg. He cracked the safe at this same Lansing Investment a few days ago."

"Yeah," frowned the big man. "I heard. But I don't catch."

"And that's not all," said Cellini slowly. "I was seeing Winnie Crawford before to get me a client and to let her know that Jimmy Legg was killed this morning."

The violence of the explosion was unexpected. For a full two minutes, colorful expletives issued from Mack's big mouth and bounced through the hallway of the Hamilton Apartments.

"Why the excitement?" Cellini was finally able to ask.

"Excitement! That guy Legg has been backing platers with me for the last year. *On credit!* I got over eight hundred bucks in I.O.U.'s from him."

"Well, you can't collect now."

"Say, nobody runs out on Mack. Not even a corpse. I'll get it if—" He suddenly paused. "Where's your angle in the killing?" he asked quietly.

Cellini shrugged. "Strictly the dough in it."

Mack's two large hands viced Cellini's shoulders. "Say, I don't like the way you were leading me on before."

"Your paws, Mack. I'm asking you only once. Drop them." Cellini stared fixedly at the big man's tie-pin.

The hands slowly loosened their grip. "Hell, Cellini, we're friends. We don't want to fight. There's a nag called Inquisitor running at Holly Park today. That should be a good hunch for a dick like you."

"Some other time." Cellini made for the elevator.

CELLINI SMITH went through every afternoon paper, reading the sensationalized accounts of how one Manny Simms had hidden under Judge Reynolds' desk, forcing the jurist to release Jimmy Legg.

It puzzled him. Obviously, Jimmy Legg had neither instigated Manny Simms' enterprise nor had he been aware of it—else he would not have wanted to hire Cellini to discover the cause of his release. This Manny Simms had acted either on his own or for someone else—but why? Why should Simms accept the certainty of a couple of years in jail to spring Jimmy Legg? Perhaps Howard Garrett, Legg's mouthpiece, had the answer.

Cellini turned his coupe around and urged it back to Hollywood. A half-hour later, he pushed by a frosted glass door in the Equitable Building that read: *Howard Garrett—Attorney at Law*. Under it were the names of a couple of junior partners.

The black-haired, eagle-beaked secretary-receptionist released the fetching smile reserved for men only and asked if she could help. Her voice had the high, irritating whine of a sawmill.

Cellini blocked the smile with a come-on leer. Secretaries can be useful. "I'm a very important guy," he said, "and I want to hold converse with Mr. Garrett about a crumb—one Jimmy Legg."

The secretary giggled, plugged in the switchboard, and announced him with that voice. He passed into an inner office and sank into a leather chair beside the desk. Howard Garrett, with a lawyer's caution, waited for him to speak first.

Flatly, without frills, Cellini explained who he was and what he wanted. When he was finished, Garrett said: "I'd like to help but I couldn't give even the police any information of value."

"I don't get it," insisted Cellini. "Don't tell me you didn't know that Jimmy Legg was probably guilty of cracking the Lansing Investment safe."

"We're both men of the world, Mr.

Smith, and so I don't mind admitting, off the record, that I knew Legg was guilty. But even the guilty have the right to counsel."

"Sure—if they can pay for it. But if you knew Legg was guilty, weren't you surprised when Reynolds let him off?"

"Naturally. Surprised, and pleased because my client had won."

"Did you get Manny Simms to pull that trick of threatening the judge from under the desk?"

"No. I didn't know of it. I don't even know this Simms individual, and I don't know who later killed James Legg."

The lawyer was unruffled, even slightly amused. A smooth article, Cellini thought. He asked: "What happened after Legg and you went out of the courtroom?"

"Nothing. He simply left me in front of the Hall of Justice and we went our separate ways."

Cellini lit a cigarette and thoughtfully watched the smoke curl up. "I just remembered," he said abruptly, "I know a guy who was pinched for stealing a bottle of milk. He's broke and I wonder if you could give him a break and try to spring him."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, but attorneys eat like everyone else and I can't afford charity cases."

"That's what I thought," snapped Cellini. "Yet you take on a nickel-mooching gungel like Jimmy Legg. How come?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Smith."

"Where did Legg get the retainer to hire you? It certainly wasn't from any dough he stole from Lansing because you're too smart to stick your neck out like that. Why did you defend him?"

Howard Garrett stood up. "I don't understand your tricky antagonism toward me, Mr. Smith, and I certainly don't have to stand for it. I'm sorry I can't say I'm glad I met you."

Cellini left little doubt that the feeling was mutual and walked out, closing the door. He leaned over the secretary-

receptionist's desk. "How about giving me Jimmy Legg's home address?"

"Have you asked Mr. Garrett?"

"Why ask him when I can have the pleasure of asking you?"

She giggled and reached for a box of filing cards. The leer was paying off. She supplied an address in her sawmill voice and added philosophically: "Isn't it just awful how the world is full of murder and sorrow, like this poor Mr. Legg?"

"Legg was no awful loss and he wasn't very poor. He probably stole a batch of bills from the Lansing Investment—crisp bills as shiny as your hair—and they're probably waiting to be found someplace right now."

The giggle sounded again. "My hair's shiny only because I haven't washed it in a long time. Isn't it funny? But it's peculiar how Mr. Garrett defended Mr. Legg in this Lansing burglary charge even though he owns a lot of stock in the Lansing company."

The strident-voiced secretary went on to say how she wasn't doing anything that night, but Cellini wasn't listening. He had hold of something good—a mouthpiece representing a burglar who had robbed a firm in which he was a heavy stockholder.



CELLINI SMITH fished among the tools under the seat of his car and selected a heavy screwdriver. It would be as good a jimmy for forcing a

door as anything else.

The apartment building where the late Jimmy Legg had parked his hat was a dreary affair with dark halls that smelled of unappetizing cooking. Cellini walked up to the third floor, then down the hall, checking the name-plates, till he had the one he wanted.

He was glad to find the door a weak-looking affair. He inserted the screwdriver into the crack between lock and jamb, and the door suddenly sprang

back inside. It had not been locked.

Puzzled, he stepped over the threshold. From the corner of one eye he thought he detected a movement and tried to duck but was too late. He felt himself yanked backward with one powerful jerk and a telegraph pole seemed to wind around his neck. It was unexpected and very efficient. The pole around Cellini's neck was an arm and his assailant's other arm circled his ribs with the same bone-crushing effect.

Cellini tried to twist around to get at his attacker but he was no match for those powerful arms. He kicked back and up at the groin with the heel of his shoe but connected with nothing. The other was an old hand at such tricks.

The arm around Cellini's neck tightened and he was slowly forced down till his back was in a painful arch. His breath became short and constricted. His fists clenched from the pain and he slowly became aware of the screwdriver still in his hand. He reversed it so that the point faced his attacker and drove it back, with all his power, in a short, vicious arc. There was a muffled yell of pain and the encircling arms dropped away from Cellini. He whirled—to find himself facing Mack's mammoth figure.

Astonishment mingled with the pain in Mack's face when he saw Cellini. He mumbled something indistinguishable and pulled his shirt up to examine the wound made in his side by the screwdriver. Though deep, the cut was small and narrow and the blood came only in a reluctant trickle. He took his undershirt off and tied it tightly around his body, binding the wound. Then he dressed again and suddenly became voluble.

"I know it looks bad jumping you like that, Cellini, but I swear I thought it was someone else. I wouldn't—"

"Who did you think I was?"

"Manny Simms. The guy that sprang Jimmy Legg out of court this morning."

"That's not good enough, Mack. Try again." Cellini's voice was not threatening but he kept one hand in his pocket

over a small, .25 caliber automatic and the bookie suddenly broke into a sweat.

"I mean it," he insisted. "I know Manny Simms and I tell you I saw him downstairs. I thought it was him coming after me. I'll show you."

They walked over to a window and Mack pointed down at a black sedan on the other side of the street. Two men stood by it and they seemed to be staring at the very window where they were. "That's them. The one on the left is Simms. If you was close enough you'd spot the toothpick in his puss. Always has one."

CELLINI relaxed. "O.K. I didn't think Simms would be out on bail this quick. Who's the other guy with him?"

Mack shrugged. "Another torpedo. Birds of a feather. If you want to go after them to make up a bridge foursome I'll help you."

"Not right now. I'd first like to find out who killed Legg and it wasn't Manny Simms because he was under the judge's apron at the time. But let's hear what *you're* doing here."

"Hell, man, you know Jimmy Legg stuck me for eight hundred dollars. And when you told me he was fogged I started figuring that maybe the dough he stole from the Lansing outfit was up here, and I could kind of collect the debt on my own."

"How did you get in here without breaking the lock?"

Unexpectedly, Mack grinned. His voice was a conflict of modesty and bragging as he confessed: "You don't know it, man, but I was the smoothest thing in the safe-cracking line in my youth and it takes a good lock to stop me."

Cellini looked at him sharply but he seemed sincere. "How come you stayed out of college?"

"I was smart. When I become too big to be inconspicuous I just quit and become a bookie. I had a terrific technique, too, for those days."

"All right, you're wonderful. Let's

look around for that Lansing dough."

It was a small, three-room apartment, sparsely furnished, and there weren't many likely hiding places. With a fine disregard for the furnishings, Mack took a jackknife from his pocket, and began slashing open cushions, pillows and bed mattress.

Cellini checked through closets and cupboards, searched under rugs and behind pictures, pawed through drawers, and even sounded walls. There was nothing even remotely suggesting the Lansing Investment loot. The only item of interest was a small cache of tools he came upon in the icebox. It contained hammer, nails, a spool of wire, pliers, and some files. It was, decided Cellini, a very sorry-looking burglar's kit.

He remembered that people often rolled money into shades and walked over to a window in time to hear the squeal of brakes as a car came to a halt in the street below. There was familiar authority about that squeal and Cellini looked down. Detective-sergeant Ira Haenigson and a couple of his men were getting out of the car below. Across the way, Manny Simms and his fellow hood climbed into their black sedan and decided to mosey along.

Cellini said: "We weren't the only ones with the bright idea of casing this place. The minions of the law are here."

"Let 'em come," replied the disgusted bookmaker. "They'll only find magnolia."

Cellini went into the kitchen and looked out the back window. It was just an empty lot below. He returned to the living-room. "No fire escape."

"It's all right. There's a back way."

They went out, proceeded down the end of the hallway, and started down the back stairs as they heard the Homicide men come up the opposite way. They reached the street and saw no sign of Manny Simms.

"I could use a drink," declared Mack. "Let's try the Greek's."

Cellini agreed and a couple of minutes

later they pulled up in front of a hole-in-wall honky-tonk.

They stepped out of the coupe and started inside when Cellini heard the sudden acceleration of a supercharged engine. He whirled in time to see a black sedan charging down the block toward them. Automatically, he wedged a foot between Mack's ankles, bringing the big man crashing to the ground, and, in the same instant, threw himself prone.

It was only split seconds before the sedan was by them and dime-turning the next corner. But in that time there was a crashing, trip-hammer *rat-a-tat* that made it seem very long, a vicious spatter of bullets that seemed never to stop. The counterpoint of a woman's hysterical scream, the hoarse shout of a passing motorist, the running, panicky feet that wanted only to get far away—all made the moments seem that much longer.

And when Cellini and Mack finally stood up they could see a strip of small holes against the building that housed the Greek's saloon. The strip was at a height of some forty inches. If they had been standing up the bullets from Manny Simms' sub-machine gun would have flattened out inside their stomachs.

"Shades of Capone," said Cellini unsteadily.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wild Goose



HE Greek, a bulbous-nosed, stocky man, shoved two more glasses of suspect Scotch over the bar to Mack and Cellini Smith. "That kind shootings is beeg time," he said. He patted an obsolete and rusty .455 Wadley revolver on the liquor case. "But next time they shoot bullets into my building I geeve them with this."

"I'll geeve that ——— Manny Simms

the lumps," said Mack darkly. He and Cellini were both several sheets to windward, their anger over serving as targets for Simms increasing with each drink.

Cellini tapped the bar for emphasis. "There can be only one explanation why he's gunning for us."

"He only needs one," Mack pointed out.

"He saw us go into Jimmy Legg's apartment and there must be something there that Simms was afraid we'd see or get our hands on."

then Manny Simms would be trying to get it from us—not just kill us."

"All right," hiccupped the overgrown bookie, "so you explain me why I got to go around ducking Thompson subs."

"I wish I knew."

The Greek said hopefully: "Thees people who do the shootings—maybe they are Eyetalian."

Cellini drained his glass. "We had plenty time to go through Jimmy Legg's apartment before Haenigson got there and we found nothing out of the ordi-



From the black sedan charging past came a vicious spatter of bullets.

"The haul from the Lansing job," guessed Mack.

"I wouldn't be so sure. That doesn't explain why Simms held up the judge to get Legg off. He would have let Jimmy go to jail and then gotten the loot for himself."

"I geeve them shootings," said the one-tracked Greek.

"Furthermore," Cellini persisted, "if it's just for the dough that Legg stole,

nary—excepting what's in the icebox."

"What about it?"

"That's where Legg hid the tools of his trade."

"Such as?" asked Mack interestedly.

"Pliers, wire, nails, and stuff."

"That Legg was small-time," declared Mack professionally. "All I ever needed to clean a box was a fine sewing needle. But it still don't explain why Simms got Homicidal about us."

The Greek refilled their glasses with the dubious Scotch. Cellini snapped his fingers as a thought crossed his mind. "Say, do you think my luscious client is in back of this?"

"I love Winnie madly but I got to admit there's nothing that slut ain't capable of."

"Let's see." Cellini went to the wall

"Damn you!" Winnie Crawford exploded. "I told you I was alone and liking it. Cut out the sex stuff."

"O.K., Winnie. Simmer down. Do you know Manny Simms?"

"I never heard of the guy."

The throaty voice was hesitant and falsely casual. Cellini knew she was lying. She said: "Listen, I gave you a



phone and dialed the Hamilton Apartments. When he heard Winnie Crawford's voice he said: "A hundred-buck retainer doesn't give you the right to try and get me chopped down."

"What are you talking about? You sound drunk."

"That's only from the liquor in me and I'm talking about Manny Simms. Is he the guy who pays your bills?"

century to find out why Jimmy was killed. What about it?"

"Give me time, Winnie. I'm lousy with clues."

He pronged the receiver and returned unsteadily to the bar for another drink.

"What'd she say?" asked Mack.

"Nothing much. She blew her own strumpet about males and claimed she never heard of Manny Simms when I

know damned well she read all about him in the papers."

"I love her," Mack sighed. "It'd be funny if she killed Legg."

Cellini finished his drink. "Haenigson's probably still messing around Legg's place. I'll go see what he knows about Simms."

"And I'll see if I can pick up Simms," declared the bookie.

Cellini shook his head. "You wait here for me. I want to be around when we catch up with Manny Simms."

CELLINI Smith's head was somewhat clearer and his step steadier by the time he got back to Jimmy Legg's apartment. He pushed open the door to find the police still at it. Two of them were taking apart the plumbing in the hope of finding some tell-tale residue in the U-traps, another was dusting for prints, and yet another was tape-measuring the rooms to make sure they had missed no hiding place. Ira Haenigson was doing a thorough job.

The detective-sergeant himself sat on the ripped living-room sofa, supervising the proceedings. He fish-eyed Cellini. "I know," he said. "You were passing by downstairs and you saw the squad car."

"No. I knew you were here and I wanted to talk to you."

"Sure you knew, because"—Haenigson's voice became milder—"you took this place apart before we got here."

"Me?" Cellini was injured innocence.

"No one else. And so help me, Smith, if it really was you, you'll be eating San Quentin plum pudding next Christmas."

"Why pick on me? Why couldn't Manny Simms have searched this place before you got here?"

"What about Manny Simms?"

Cellini could see that the Homicide man was interested and followed up his advantage. "I'm here for an armistice, Haenigson. You stop treating me like a dishrag and I'll open up."

"It's a deal," said the detective-sergeant after a moment's hesitation. "If

you're really on the level. Let's hear."

"Fine. I went to the alley behind the Hamilton to meet Jimmy Legg there. He wanted me to find out why he wasn't held in court this morning."

"He didn't put Simms up to that job of springing him?"

"That's what it looks like. After you and I had our sweet parting I checked and found that Legg was going to the Hamilton to meet a dame. But I suppose you found that out."

Ira Haenigson nodded. "That Winnie Crawford tramp. I don't know what to make of her. She looks faster than Legg's speed."

"I'm wondering myself. Anyway, she hired me on the killing and I came around here about an hour ago with a friend of mine. Just then I saw you pull up so I didn't come in."

"You sure of that, Smith?"

"Honest Injun. I went away for a drink and when I got out of the car along comes this Manny Simms and tries to chop me down with a Thompson sub."

Cellini wasn't sure whether the Homicide man's frown indicated perplexity or disappointment over Manny Simms's failure. He asked: "How come Simms is loose for such sport? Why wasn't he held?"

"Good lawyer, small bail," shrugged Haenigson. "He didn't commit any homicide—just threats—and there wasn't even any bullets in the rod he pulled on the judge so he got out on low bail. But what do you want me to do about it, Smith?"

"I want you to help me find Manny Simms. I don't like the idea of that baby gunning for me."

"Sure, Smith. I wouldn't mind finding out for myself why he's wasting bullets on you. What do you think?"

"I don't know. My hunch is that it's tied up with the dough that Jimmy Legg souped out of the Lansing Investment safe."

"He didn't steal any dough from them."

Cellini stared at Haenigson. "I don't get it. What then did he steal from that safe?"

"That's what I'd like to find out, Smith. That's why I'm up here taking this place apart right now."

"Didn't Lansing Investment make any claims about stolen stuff?"

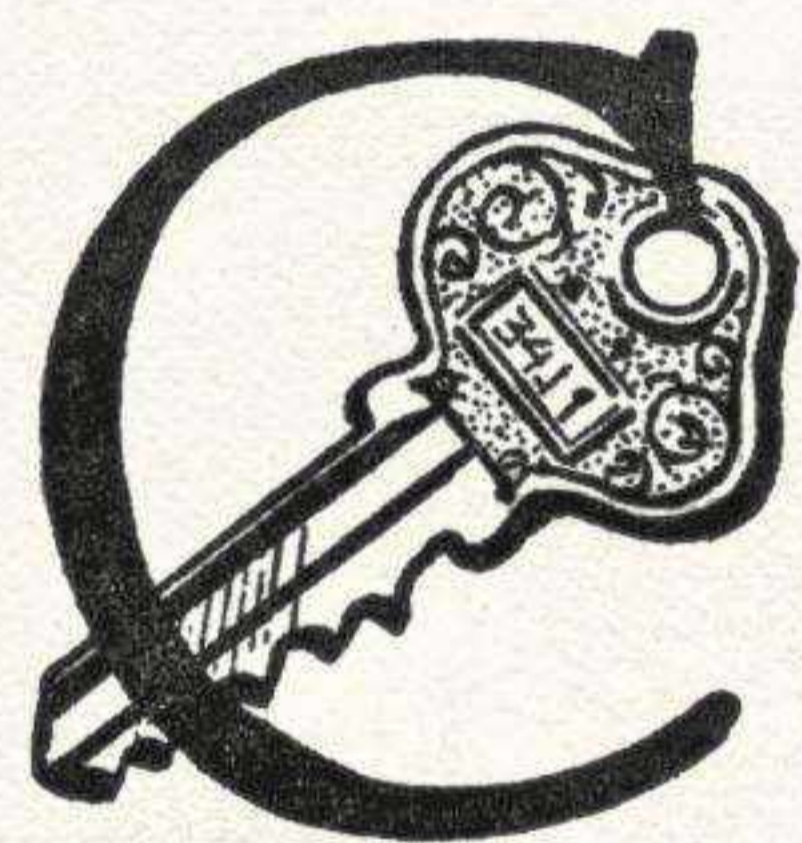
"Nothing at all. They just asked us to forget the whole thing. Mr. Lansing seemed to think his firm would get a bad reputation if the public found out it was successfully burgled."

"But if Lansing didn't charge Jimmy Legg with anything then why was he arrested and brought into court this morning?"

"They couldn't very well avoid it because Legg also slugged the janitor and a secretary and they identified him."

"Say," asked Cellini, "do you think this Lansing Investment is a crooked outfit?"

"Could be," said Ira Haenigson. "Could be."



CELLINI SMITH got out of the elevator and entered the offices of the Lansing Investment Company. The place was large with lots of pale-faced stenographers and sleek-haired clerks who gave their investment spiels with all the fervor of a Fuller brush man.

Cellini asked to see Mr. Lansing himself. He told what it was about, gave his pedigree, showed identification, and when he refused to settle for a vice-president he was finally shown past the balustrade and into an ornate inner office.

Mr. Lansing was bluff, confident, and obviously never tortured by self-doubt. Stocky from good feeding rather than hard work, he was in his forties and had a golf-tan complexion.

"Deplorable this murder of James Legg, very deplorable," declared the president of Lansing Investment without preamble. "Death except from God or

the legal executioner has always shocked me."

"It's very cruel," said Cellini.

"Yes, quite. Of course you realize, Mr. Smith, that the murder of James Legg and his lamentable burglary of our offices is sheer coincidence and can have no conceivable connection."

"If I realized that," replied Cellini, "I wouldn't be here."

"My good man, do you imply that we may have a connection—even a remote one—with murder?"

"Perhaps not so remote."

Mr. Lansing blinked. His voice was sharp. "Sir, my wife always kills a good joke but my connection with homicide ends there. It's been a pleasure." He stood up.

Cellini didn't budge. "Is your wife a luscious blonde?" he asked innocently.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Smith, and I don't wish to. I'm afraid I can waste no more time."

Cellini snapped his fingers. "How stupid of me! Of course your wife isn't a blonde. I was confusing her with Winnie Crawford."

Lansing stopped in his tracks. He sat down again with a sickly smile, hauling forth brandy bottle and glasses from the desk. Cellini helped himself, then reached into the cigar humidor. He wondered if the investment manipulator had a solid alibi for the murder time.

Lansing finally broke the silence. "Mr. Smith, you don't seem the prudish sort so you probably understand the necessity for an occasional peccadillo to relieve marital boredom."

"Sure. Especially peccadillos built like Winnie."

"Quite, sir, quite. And I'm sorry that you and I got off on the wrong foot."

"You mean the wrong Legg."

Lansing tried a laugh and missed. "It's just my natural desire to prevent any unsavory talk of murders and robberies in connection with Lansing Investment. Our business depends so much on public confidence."

"Then why don't you help me so that

I might clear it up?" Cellini suggested.

"By all means," said Lansing with forced eagerness. "Only there's very little I can tell you."

CELLINI SMITH said: "Start with the reason why you people didn't press any charge against Jimmy Legg when he knocked over the safe in this place."

"That was only because we'd much rather absorb a small loss than have such bad publicity," replied Lansing.

"What did the small loss amount to?"

"Oh, nothing of importance really."

"Was it money? Did you have currency in the safe?"

"I don't think so," said Lansing evasively. "Just some non-negotiable bonds, I believe."

"Aren't you sure?"

"I happened to be out of town the day of the robbery, Mr. Smith, and I haven't had a chance to check. However, I'll do so and mail you a list of the items."

"That's a lie," said Cellini deliberately. "You know damned well what was stolen."

Lansing squeezed another smile out of his face. "Please allow a difference of opinion, Mr. Smith."

Cellini sampled the brandy again and got up to leave. Apprehensively, Lansing asked: "Mr. Smith, can I rely on your discretion about that Winnie Crawford—um—involvement?"

"Yes. How come you two broke it up though?"

"You know how it is about these affairs of the heart, Mr. Smith. One or the other cools."

"How did you happen to meet her?"

"She used to work here as my secretary."

"And your checkbook said, 'I love you.' Which still doesn't explain where Winnie gets her dough if you're not around any more."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Smith."

"There's no need to." Cellini started out and Lansing took his arm in a

brotherly fashion, telling him to drop around if he ever wished some real good investment tips. They passed into the outer office and Cellini noted a large safe built into one of the corners. "Is that the one Legg cracked?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Smith."

"I thought the door was blown off."

"Of course, but the safe manufacturers have been in since. They put on new hinges and repaired it."

"All right." Cellini walked out, past the balustrade, into the reception-room. Waiting in one of the club chairs was Howard Garrett, Jimmy Legg's mouth-piece in court that morning.

"Surprise," said Cellini. "Are you here to return what your dead client stole—or to split the loot with Lansing?"

Garrett examined his fingernails, studied the ceiling, and gave no indication that he had heard. Cellini shrugged and walked out of the Lansing Investment offices.

A stout woman worked a vacuum cleaner over the carpeting of the hallway. Cellini could see her key-ring, hanging from the keyhole of a broom closet farther down the hallway. As he passed by the closet, his hand reached out and silently and quickly transferred the ring of keys to his own pocket.



CELLINI SMITH phoned Ira Haenigson and asked if they had located Manny Simms and his Tommy. They had not and he returned to his car and headed for the Greek's gin-joint to get Mack.

The gargantuan bookie took his liquor well. With another eight or nine drinks fermenting in him, his neck was redder and his voice hoarser but he showed little other effect.

Cellini straddled a stool and poured for himself. The bookie asked what was cooking. "I just checked with Haenigson," Cellini replied. "They

haven't caught up with Simms yet."

"That's good," said Mack. "Simms is our meat. What else you been doing?"

"I dropped up to see one of your customers—the president of Lansing Investment."

"What's he got to say?"

"He called my client a peccadillo and he showed me the safe that Jimmy Legg cracked."

"What about it?"

"Plenty," said Cellini. "Legg never touched that safe. The manufacturers were supposed to have put on new hinges but the ones I saw there aren't new."

"That's a laugh. We go nimrodding through Legg's dump looking for the stuff he stole and then you find out that he never even cleaned the Lansing safe."

"I didn't say that."

Mack stared accusingly at his drink. "I don't catch."

"I just said that our defunct friend didn't crack the safe Mr. Lansing showed me."

"Oh. I see it all now, Cellini. Like hell!"

The Greek said, "Thees shootings and the drinks are bad combination," and left to service a couple at a back table.

"Either Legg made a haul," Cellini said, "or he didn't. In either case, Lansing is not dishing out with information so I'd like to check just how phoney that investment company of his is."

"Check how?" asked the bookie.

Cellini took from his pocket the key-

ring he had lifted. "One of these fits the Lansing office and you claim you were pretty handy with safes."

"I begin to catch," said Mack slowly. "All right. I'll play along."

"Fine. Let's go out and get something to eat. We've got a couple of hours to kill."

The Greek came back and Mack asked to borrow his museum-piece Webley.

"No, no. I need it to geeve that man shootings."

"Come on. He's after us—not you."

The Greek acknowledged the point and gave in. Cellini and Mack had another brace of drinks and left.

MACK banged long and hard on the rear service door of the Tower Building. After several minutes, the night watchman opened it, a cautious hand over the revolver on his hip.

"Oh, it's you," said the watchman after he had identified the bookie's big figure. "Can't let you in. We've been having us a robbery. Besides, I'm broke."

"You're passing up a sure-fire thing, Harry," said Mack persuasively. "It's for the seventh, tomorrow."

Mack pulled the Pacific edition of the Chicago racing form out of his pocket and beckoned the watchman to a transom light two doors down. Despite himself, the watchman followed the bookie and read the form over his shoulder. It never seemed to occur to him why they could not read the form by the overhead

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light of his own door. He was absorbed.

With his shoes in one hand, Cellini Smith silently left the shadows of the building and slipped through the door just a few feet behind the watchman's back.

He could spot no immediate hiding place so he padded up the rear stairway and lay down flat on the first landing. After a few minutes he heard the watchman come in, lock the door, and move down the hallway. He waited another minute, then let in Mack.

Noiselessly, they mounted the eight flights to the darkened offices of the Lansing Investment, found the right key on the chain, and entered. Cellini locked the door from the inside. They waited some time before they felt assured nothing stirred in the hallway or adjoining offices, then snapped on a desk lamp.

Cellini led the way inside the railing. "There," he said in lowered tone. "That's the strong-box Lansing claims Legg cracked."

Mack dropped on his knees before it. The safe was large and imposing and of recent vintage.

"Four tumblers," the bookie muttered. "No ordinary chrome steele either. Work on it all day with an acetylene torch and get no place. I guess you're right, Cellini."

"About what?"

"Them hinges are the originals. Jimmy Legg didn't blow this baby. I'd think twice before trying it myself. She's probably wired from the back and if you'd try moving her to get at the wires the alarm would sound off."

Cellini nodded with satisfaction. "That's the way I figured. Now let's try to find the box that Legg *did* crack. We'll start with Lansing's office first."

They switched off the desk lamp and went into Lansing's office, closing the door before snapping on the lights.

They did not have long to search. Behind a Currier and Ives print they found a small wall safe. Its door was glossy and untarnished, as if new.

"This is the baby all right," said Mack.

"Just about Jimmy Legg's speed, too."

"Think you can manage it?"

"Sure. And I don't need soup. All I want is a needle."

"A needle?" repeated Cellini, puzzled.

"Yeah. An ordinary sewing needle. Maybe we can find it in a secretary's desk."

Mack went out and returned a minute later. "Here it is. It's a little thick but maybe it'll work."

He clenched the needle by its eye between his front teeth and placed the point over the lock, his forehead touching the safe. Then he began to turn the combination slowly, feeling every tremor through the highly sensitive nerves of his teeth.

Cellini watched with interested admiration as the bookie grunted through clenched teeth each time he felt a tumbler slide into place. Here was no need for wires or pliers or even nitro. Mack's kit was a sewing needle.

Finally, the bookie stood up and let the needle fall from his mouth. "That does it."

Cellini went to open the safe door when Mack's voice halted him. "Not so damned fast."

Pointed at him was the Webley the bookie had borrowed from the Greek. "What's eating you?" asked Cellini quietly.

"The eight hundred smackers Jimmy Legg still owes me," stated Mack harshly. "I didn't come here and open this box to do you no favor."

"I didn't think so."

"That's right, Cellini. So I'm counting out my eight hundred first." Without taking his eye off Cellini, he reached behind him with his free hand, flipped the safe door open and stuck his huge paw into the opening.

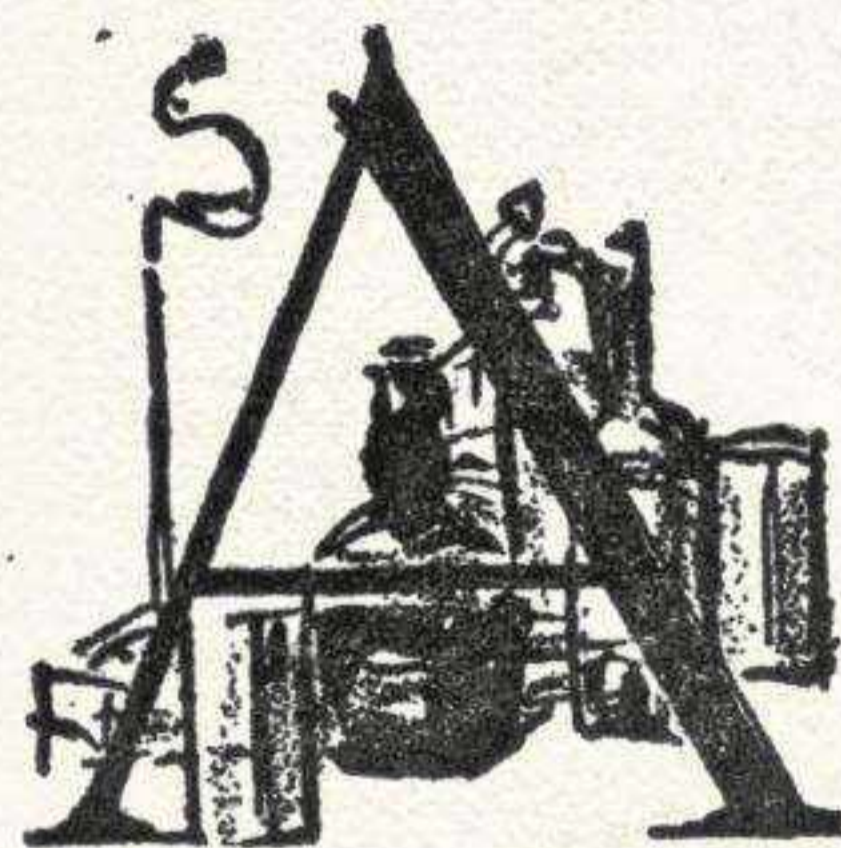
It was empty.

Cellini felt like having a good belly laugh but was afraid that the watchman might be making his rounds nearby. Instead, he said: "Put up the rod, Mack. Fate is forcing you to stay straight."

Whatever was in there, it looks like Legg beat us to it."

CHAPTER FIVE

Cooked Goose



SAFTER five minutes of searing concentration, Cellini Smith felt virtually certain that that thing next to the bed he was lying on was a telephone. Carefully, he lifted the receiver, brought it to an ear, and asked something. A honeyed voice informed him that he was in a downtown hotel and that it was ten in the morning.

He managed to replace the receiver and suddenly remembered what he was doing there and why someone seemed to be carrying out a scorched earth policy inside his head. It had reason.

After drawing a blank at the Lansing Investment offices, he and Mack had decided to go find Manny Simms—before Simms found them. They had gone from gin-mill to gin-mill but could not find the hood. And at each place they had drinks and after a while forgot to search for Mr. Simms.

Vaguely, he remembered phoning Winnie Crawford at three in the morning to find out if she got her money by blackmailing Lansing Investment. The reply was colorful—so much so that he felt the blackmail hunch wasn't far wrong.

Somewhat less vaguely, he remembered deciding to sleep at a hotel, safely distant from any visit by Manny Simms during the night. And he did not at all remember what had happened to Mack. The bookie had spent most of the evening bemoaning the \$800 he had lost through Legg's murder and yearning to get his hands on Manny Simms and Winnie Crawford—though for different reasons.

However, the night of alcoholic search had not been entirely fruitless. Nagging at Cellini's mind had been the problem

of why Jimmy Legg troubled to conceal apparently innocent items such as a spool of wire, pliers, and hammer in the icebox of his apartment. Somewhere between the double Scotches the answer had come. It added up beautifully.

Slowly, Cellini eased himself out of bed and floated into the bathroom. A needle shower helped a little and the black coffee and bromo in a cafe downstairs finally decided him against suicide. He tried several nearby parking lots before finding his car and then made for his office.

CELLINI SMITH sat behind his desk nursing both the hangover and the wisp of an idea that was beginning to form about Legg's murder. And that was its one fault—that it did everything but solve Legg's murder. It was an idea founded on the assumption that the Lansing Investment Company was a crooked outfit.

The phone sounded. Cellini lifted the receiver and gave a weak "Hello."

He heard that horrible, sawmill voice of Howard Garrett's secretary giggle coquettishly and then tell him to wait a moment as she plugged the lawyer into the board.

A click and Jimmy Legg's mouth-piece was saying: "Mr. Smith, I am well aware that we dislike each other. Nevertheless, since you're working on the murder of my former client, I feel there's an explanation due you."

"Goody. Let's have it."

"As you know, I represented James Legg in court on that Lansing Investment affair and yesterday you found me in those very offices waiting to see Mr. Lansing. That may cause you to suspect something."

Cellini's headache wasn't getting any better. "Come on, Garrett. There's a shortage of gas, so save it."

"The point is, Mr. Smith, that I was up there because I'm a stockholder in the Lansing Investment Company."

"How come Lansing didn't object to your defending Legg?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Lansing was glad to have me handle the case because he didn't want Legg punished. He thought I might be able to handle it discreetly."

"What did you do when Legg was arrested? Chase after him to let you be his mouthpiece?"

"Certainly not. That's unethical. He got in touch with me."

Cellini almost felt like laughing. "Lansing would be glad to have you defend Legg just at the moment Legg decides to pick you."

"It's not that absurd," Howard Garfarette conciliated. "Mr. Lansing got in touch with Jimmy Legg and asked him if he wished to have me for counsel."

A sweet mess, thought Cellini. A man is robbed and then goes to the burglar to recommend a mouthpiece to spring him. He asked: "Are you going to defend Manny Simms when he comes up for trial?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you or Lansing shell out the dough for Manny's bail?"

"Mr. Smith, I called to give you information as a favor. I regret that you're not sufficiently civilized to be polite about it."

"You didn't phone because you wanted to do me a favor."

"Perhaps you know better, Mr. Smith. Why did I phone you?"

"I don't know. But one thing I do know is that you and Lansing and that whole investment outfit will never have to worry about sunburn—you're too shady for that."

Cellini let the receiver drop into its cradle thinking that his parting shot would have been much better if he didn't have to cope with the damned hangover. He heard heavy, stumbling steps in the hallway outside and a moment later the door pushed in and Mack entered.

The giant bookie gaped silently at Cellini. He made a ludicrous picture. One side of his face was shaved and the other bearded, with lather still smeared

over it. His jaw trembled as if from some nervous tic.

"I just heard about Winnie." Mack spoke as if the words were being jerked out of him. "She's dying. She's been shot."



CELLINI pounded Mack with questions until he had, at last, a coherent picture of what had happened. As little as twenty minutes before, there had been several shots in Winnie Crawford's apartment at the Hamilton. A woman in an adjoining apartment had rushed out to see the back of a man disappearing around a bend in the hallway. She looked into Winnie's apartment to find the blonde on the floor, still alive but with three bullets lodged in her.

An ambulance from a nearby hospital made the round trip in record time and within ten minutes Winnie was on the operating table. An interne, who placed his bets through Mack, recognized Winnie and phoned him at the barber shop. The bookie had immediately come up to Cellini's office.

Winnie had evidently tried to put up a fight for the .45 was found by her side. No hope was held for her and her assailant had escaped.

Cellini felt a little sick. He remembered the clumsy way she held the big gun in her hands and thought that, unlike Legg, she was too decorative to be killed. But at last there was something to work on. It was now 11:25 and the murder had occurred at 11:05. It would be easy to check the alibis of the four persons who might have gunned for Jimmy Legg and Winnie Crawford.

Mack's voice broke hoarsely into Cellini's thoughts: "What the hell are you waiting for? I told you she's dying!"

They hurried downstairs and crowded into the coupe. "Which hospital?" asked Cellini.

"Who said anything about going to the hospital? We can't help her. Drive

to the Greek's. I know I need a drink."

Cellini considered that to be sensible and turned over the starter. They reached the Greek's a short while later and entered. It was early and they had the place to themselves. The Greek set out drinks and asked for the ancient Webley Mack had borrowed. After he got it he preserved a discreet silence for he saw that something was up.

Mack went to the wall phone and dialed his interne friend at the hospital. He returned to the bar, shaking his head. "Winnie ain't got a chance to pull ahead. Too big a handicap. Carrying too much weight."

"Sure you don't want to go down to the hospital?"

"No. The doc promised to phone me here."

"Good enough." Cellini tried his drink and found that it helped his hang-over jitters. 11:05, he thought. He had to find out where the four men were then—the four men who had a motive to murder Winnie Crawford. Lansing, Howard Garrett, Manny Simms, and the bookie himself.

The phone rang and Mack jumped for it. When he came back, unashamed tears cut two trails down his tough cheeks. "She's dying, Cellini. My darling's rounding the three-quarter mark."

The bookie started to extol Winnie Crawford's physical virtues when the sound of the phone interrupted him fifteen minutes later. He returned with another bulletin. "No hope. She's nearing the home stretch."

It was another half-hour before the phone rang again. This time, Mack's voice was barely distinguishable. "Winnie just crossed the wire." He reached for the bottle and drank out of it.

They drank without speaking and it was the Greek who finally broke the silence. "Do you remember thees Seems, thees people who do the shootings yesterday?"

"What about him?" asked Cellini impatiently.

"He comes now—with beeg gun."

CELLINI and Mack whirled too late. Manny Simms was entering the door, toothpick in mouth and the chatter gun in his hands. The torpedo who had been with him yesterday, flanked him now, sporting an automatic.

"All right," barked Manny Simms. "Line up against that wall and tell me where you got it."

Cellini and Mack backed slowly toward the wall. They were dealing with a known killer. Manny Simms spoke to the torpedo.

"You take care of the bartender," he growled.

"I show you who takes good cares!" The Greek was fighting mad. The Webley was in his hand, leveled at the advancing torpedo, and he pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The rusted, obsolete weapon was jammed. The Greek delivered a Hellenic curse. He hurled the Webley at the torpedo and, that done, dived behind the bar just as the automatic planted a bullet in the mirror behind him.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" snapped Manny Simms, his eyes not leaving Cellini and Mack. "Stop piddling around."

"Leave him to me, Manny."

The torpedo leaped lithely onto the bar, after the Greek. From behind the bar an arm arced up in a swift, sure curve and the torpedo tumbled back, an agonized scream escaping him. Buried three inches deep into his shoulder was an ice pick.

Manny Simms tried a quick look in back of him to see what had happened. It was the break Cellini had waited and hoped for. At that same instant he dived forward, football fashion, and caught Manny Simms in the midriff, bearing him to the ground. Simms tried to angle the clumsy Thompson sub at Cellini. But the weapon dropped as his arm was twisted back and up.

Mack was there now and he yanked Manny Simms away from Cellini. A

queer, chilling laugh escaped him. Now he could do something about Winnie Crawford's murder.

On the floor, the torpedo stirred and moaned. Mack's foot lashed out and caught him under his chin, returning him to unconsciousness with a crack that indicated a broken jawbone.

"Hold it, Mack," said Cellini. "I want to ask Simms a couple of things first."

"Sure. He'll tell you anything you want to know."

Cellini said to Simms: "What did you mean before, when you asked us where we've got it?"

Manny's yellow face stared impassively, registering no emotion. His shoulders tried to move in a shrug but they were viced tightly by Mack's big paws.

"Come on," said Cellini. "Did you want to know where we've got the stuff that Jimmy Legg stole from Lansing Investment?"

The same dead-pan stare.

Cellini asked: "Where were you at eleven five this morning when Winnie Crawford was shot?"

This time Manny's lips moved to say: "I been third-degreed by experts."

"Plenty time we got to become experts," stated the Greek who stood by them now.

He and the bookie dragged Manny Simms around one end of the bar. Mack said: "You killed the only twist I ever loved."

Simms made the mistake of laughing. Mack's arm moved and the hood dropped down. "Did you kill Winnie Crawford?"

There was no answer from the floor. Cellini saw the bookie's face twitch and was glad that his name wasn't Simms. Mack's eyes scanned the back-bar searchingly and saw a tray. "What's that?"

"Dry ice," replied the Greek.

"Good. That'll be just fine to start with." Mack sat on Manny Simms' chest and the Greek held down the legs.

Mack ripped open the hood's jacket and shirt and clamped one hand over his mouth. With the other hand he inverted the tray of dry ice on the bare stomach.

Cellini strayed away. He tried not to hear the sudden writhing and stifled moans, tried not to imagine the ice searing and burning into Manny Simms' belly.

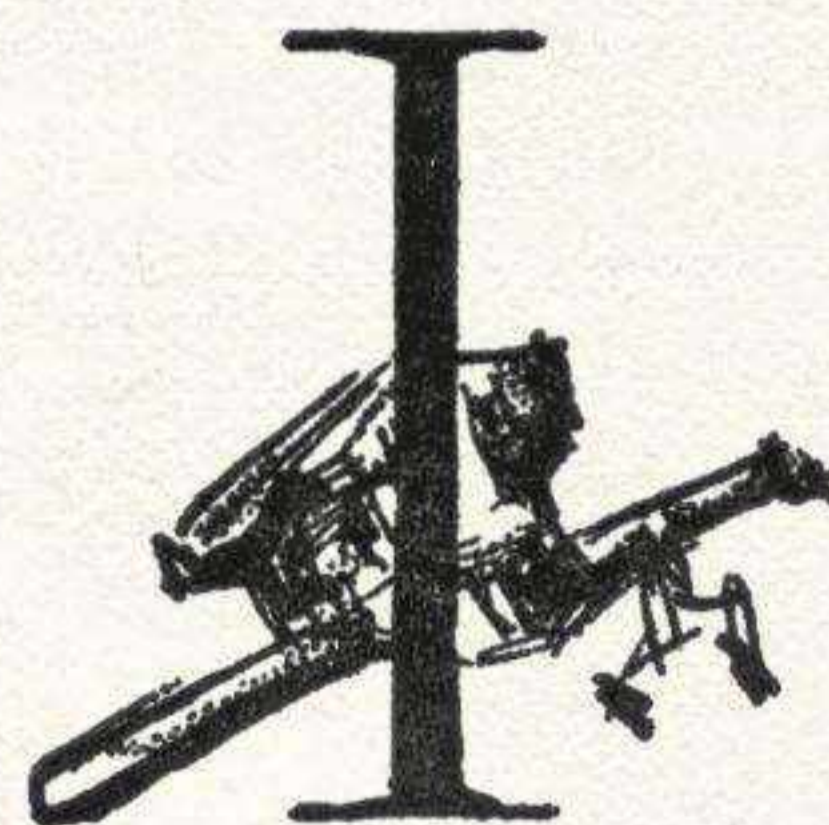
He felt he had to keep himself busy and phoned the barber shop where Mack claimed to be when Winnie was shot. There was no doubt of it, a barber replied to the question. Mack was there at 11:05, taking bets and waiting for his turn in the chair.

When Cellini turned away from the phone again it was over. Manny Simms, a tough hood a short while before, was now a gibbering, babbling mess—confessing to the murder of Winnie Crawford, moaning about crooked deals pulled by Lansing and Howard Garrett with the investment outfit.

Relenting, the Greek poured some olive oil over the burned, tortured flesh. The bookie, a little tired now that it was all over, held on to Simms and dully asked why and how he had killed Winnie.

Cellini said: "That's enough, Mack. You're doing fine. Let's go see Haenigson."

Cellini tried the phone again and was informed that the detective-sergeant was up at the investment company offices, seeing Mr. Lansing.



IT WAS a strange-looking crew that was ushered into Lansing's private office by the secretary. Leading them was the torpedo, his shoulder bandaged by one of the Greek's soiled napkins, his hands cupping the swollen, broken jaw. Behind, stumbled Manny Simms, every slight motion agonizing torture as clothing brushed against his skin. And bringing up the rear, Cellini and Mack, disheveled, sleepless, but satisfied.

"What's this?" asked Ira Haenigson. He was there with a couple of his men, dishing out what looked like a warm grilling to Mr. Lansing and Howard Garrett, the attorney.

"Here's your murderer," replied Mack.

"Manny Simms?" Haenigson's brows arched. "I was under the impression that Simms was under Judge Reynolds' bench while Jimmy Legg was being killed."

Mack, a little crestfallen, started to explain that it was probably the torpedo who did the Legg job but Cellini waved him into silence and turned to the Homicide man.

"It wasn't Simms who did the murders. I just brought him up here to show that we made him see the light and he's been talking. You can take them away to be fixed up."

"I don't like that kind of rough stuff, Smith, but we'll discuss it later." Haenigson nodded to one of his men and Simms and the torpedo were led out. "Now, who did you say the murderer was?"

"Not counting Simms, it has to be either Mack, or Lansing or Howard Garrett."

"Unless it was someone else. Thanks for the tip, Smith."

"They all had motive," Cellini continued, ignoring him. "Mack here, might

have wanted to cut a slice of the blackmail for himself that I'll tell you about later. However, his alibi looks good. I'm pretty sure he was at a barber shop shortly after eleven this morning while Winnie Crawford was being killed."

"Thanks, pal." The bookie said it not sarcastically but threateningly. Lansing and the attorney were cautiously silent.

"Mr. Garrett's alibi," said Haenigson, "is equally good for the Crawford killing. It so happens he was in his office phoning me at just about that time."

"I know," nodded Cellini. "I happened to talk to him, too, around that time. That leaves Lansing."

The Homicide man's voice fairly purred. "He was at a board meeting, at the bank."

Cellini frowned. It was the kind of alibi that could be easily checked and Lansing wouldn't have tried it had it not been true. But still, one of the three alibis *had* to be a phoney.

Haenigson smiled benignly. "Let there be more revelations, Smith."

"Sure. Some I know, some is guesswork—but it's the only possible explanation. In the first place, Howard Garrett is the chief stockholder in this investment outfit and he and Lansing have been milking the company, juggling the books, for some time now."

Haenigson made a face. "You're a

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back number, Smith. And I didn't have to use torture methods to find it out."

"And you didn't have to stand in front of a sub-machine gun. But here's something else. Some time ago there had to be a murder connected with this place—a murder committed by Manny Simms."

THIS time the Homicide man's voice was serious. "Lansing and Forrester," he murmured. "That's what this place used to be called a couple of years ago. Forrester just disappeared and I remember we had Simms on the carpet for it but we couldn't prove anything."

"Perfect," said Cellini. "Lansing had his partner killed by Simms when his partner found out that he and Garrett were juggling the books."

"Preposterous!" snorted Mr. Lansing.

"Shut up!" countered Garrett.

"But," Cellini went on, "Lansing also knew that once Simms did such a job for him he'd be blackmailed the rest of his life so, at the same time, he got proof that Simms had murdered his partner. Whether it's in the form of an actual snapshot of the killing, a written confession, or something else, we'll know later because that's one of the things Jimmy Legg stole from here. Understand?"

"I'm still listening, Smith."

"Then Winnie Crawford got a job here through Mack and soon she was playing office wife to Lansing. Being in a privileged position, she discovered that Lansing and Garrett were taking their gullible investors to the cleaners. So she simply left Lansing's couch, decided that all men were beasts, and blackmailed Lansing into supporting her in style."

"My relationship with Miss Crawford was purely personal," Lansing protested.

"I'll bet," remarked the detective-sergeant dryly.

"Enter now Jimmy Legg," continued Cellini. "He had been the first rung on Winnie's ladder to death. When he saw Winnie in clover without a panting male around, he was able to figure out the blackmail angle and decided to cut in."

Again Lansing protested. "This whole

thing is based on the assumption that Mr. Garrett and I have misappropriated company funds."

"Grow up," said Howard Garrett wearily. "By tomorrow a dozen accountants will be going over the books with a fine comb and you know what they'll find. But unless you keep talking we'll only take a larceny rap and not murder."

Ira Haenigson rubbed his hands together. "And that," he announced, "is what I call making progress."

Cellini picked it up again. "So Legg burgled this place. He knew that blackmail material wouldn't be in the regular box so he looked around and found a small safe behind that picture."

"How did *you* know there's a wall safe behind there?"

"Sheer deduction," said Cellini blandly. "Anyway, Legg cracked it and found the real books—the ones showing what Lansing and Garrett have stolen. So when Legg was picked up by the police he told Garrett that if he and Lansing wanted to stay out of jail they'd better mother him. That's why Garrett became mouthpiece for a small-timer like Jimmy Legg."

"You're on the right track, Smith—for a change."

"Then Manny Simms became panicky because he knew Legg had also gotten the proof of his having murdered Lansing's partner. So he pulled that trick of forcing the judge to release Legg because taking such a rap is better than going up for murder. Simms had to get Legg away from the police where he could be killed at leisure and the stolen stuff recovered."

The Homicide man interrupted: "Where is that stolen stuff?"

"I'll tell you later. It's obvious why Legg was killed. In the meantime, Winnie had hired me, trying to find out what it was all about and when Manny Simms saw me hanging around Legg's house he thought I had recovered the loot and tried to chop me down."

"And why," asked Haenigson, "was Miss Crawford killed?"

"The murderer knew that Legg intended hiding out at Winnie's house and got the idea he might also have hidden the loot up there. So one of these three men here went up to Winnie's house to search and when she showed fight—simply killed her."

"Very beautiful," said Ira Haenigson, "but for one thing."

"What's that?"

"You still haven't named the killer."



CELLINI SMITH nodded and glumly studied the tips of his shoes. One of the three alibis for 11:05 that morning had to be wrong. Lansing was at a board meeting—with many witnesses. Mack was at the barber shop—also with witnesses. The lawyer was in his office—and there could be no question of that because the sawmill voice of his secretary could not be mistaken.

Cellini looked up to find Ira Haenigson standing over him. "It's my turn, Smith. I've warned you before that I'll break you and this is my chance. I found your prints all over Jimmy Legg's apartment and I'm pulling you in."

The detective-sergeant meant it. There was no doubt of that in Cellini's mind.

Cellini stood up. "I want to make a call first."

"Don't try any Indian rope tricks, Smith."

"Since you're arresting me, I want to let my lawyer know." He went out to the front office, a cop trailing, and dialed his number at one of the desk phones. The girl who answered informed him that the lawyer was at home.

"Give me his home number," said Cellini. "I'll ring him."

The girl replied: "Would you want me to call him and connect you two? It would be no trouble."

Cellini gripped the phone hard. "How can you do that?"

The girl laughed. "Oh, that's just an

across-the-board call. You can connect two outside calls on most any P-B-X board. It's—"

"I love you," said Cellini, "and I want you to marry me." He returned to Lansing's office, a happy grin dominating his face. He walked up to Howard Garrett and said bluntly: "You're going up for murder and not larceny after all."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed. When you came out of the courtroom with Jimmy Legg you followed him to the drugstore and listened while he called me and Winnie Crawford. You heard him say he was going to the Hamilton Apartments through the side alley. Legg probably made sure nobody was following him to the Hamilton but you were already waiting there for him."

The lawyer didn't turn a hair. "And I suppose you'll deny talking to me and my secretary this morning just about when Miss Crawford was murdered."

"On the contrary. Right after you killed Winnie you made for the first phone and you had your secretary ring Haenigson and myself immediately on an across-the-board call to establish your alibi. Hearing your secretary's voice we naturally assumed that you were in your office. You thought—"

"All right." Howard Garrett's voice was very tired. "I know when I'm finished. Please don't lecture me."

Cellini beckoned Mack. "That's that. How about a drink at the Greek's?"

Ira Haenigson waved him back. "I don't know how you weasel your way out of these things, Smith, but I still want to know where that stuff is that Jimmy Legg stole from here."

"Certainly," said Cellini graciously. "Remember the pliers, hammer, and spool of wire hidden in Legg's icebox?"

"What about it? We looked through the whole place."

"But you didn't figure why Legg thought it necessary to hide those items. The stuff is hanging from wire underneath the outside sill of a window in Legg's apartment—probably the window facing the empty lot."

WHAT'S MONEY?

By D. L. CHAMPION



A Rex Sackler
Novelette

About to be blasted by Hymie the Gungel, Joey was deeply touched by Sackler's passionate plea that his assistant be spared. Then he remembered he was worth ten grand on the hoof to his nickel-nursing boss—

CHAPTER ONE

Check and Double Check



40

ACKLER came into the office, his face as long as a hundred years and his shoulders bowed beneath several tons of invisible sorrow. He ignored my greeting. He hung up a hat

which still bore the marks of rain that had fallen at Hoover's inauguration and sat down with a sigh dragged from the very roots of his being. He was the spirit of gloom.

I watched him with a critical eye and diagnosed the melancholy with facile accuracy.

"Well," I said pleasantly, "who took you?"

He lifted his dark thin face. He regarded me with suffering black eyes. He

ran his long white fingers through his ebony hair. He said inquiringly: "Who took me, Joey?"

I nodded. "A natural question," I told him. "Of the several million troubles in this world only one ever bothers you. That's money. When I see you come into the office looking rather like a sentimental collie dog might be expected to look on the day Albert Payson Terhune feels blue, it occurs to me that someone has dealt you a savage blow in the pocketbook."

He looked at me distastefully as if I were a bad egg he had been served for breakfast. He sighed again and said: "Money? What's money?"

Considering the fact that money was his life's blood, his God, his mistress and something for which he would eagerly barter his right eye, I dismissed this question as rhetoric. Sackler withdrew a small sack of tobacco from his pocket, then spying the deck of cigarettes on my desk thought better of it and put the sack away again. He snatched one of my cigarettes before I could move the package out of the danger zone.

"Joey," he said, "you're so ethically deficient it's impossible for you to understand what principle means."

"Usually," I said, "it means that someone's squawking about a buck and pretending they have a much more noble motive."

"That is cheap and cynical, Joey. I am disturbed this morning over a matter of principle purely. The amount of money involved is negligible. As a matter of fact, two cents. Can you conceive of my worrying over two cents?"

"With no effort whatever," I told him. "If someone has chiseled you out of two cents it was doubtless done at the point of a howitzer."

"Very funny," said Sackler in a tone which indicated it wasn't. "As I stood on the subway station platform this morning, I dropped a penny into a chewing gum machine. No gum came out. I tried another machine with the same result. The point is that I have been swin-

dled by a large corporation. As a matter of sheer principle, I am annoyed."

I grinned at him. Sackler prating of principle where money was involved sounded like a press release from the Wilhelmstrasse concerning the nobility of Hitler's battle to save civilization. Sackler sat on every nickel he made like a hen sitting on its eggs.

His money was not trusted to banks. That, for Sackler, was a trifle too risky. He scattered his earnings about in Postal Savings accounts all over the country. Revolution alone was going to rob him. He rolled his own cigarettes when he wasn't grubbing mine in order to evade the state tax and he wore a suit of clothes until the threads literally parted.

But now, I thought, he'd reached the apogee of it all. He was actually beating his breast because he was out two cents. His misery brought cheer into my heart.

"Write them a letter," I suggested. "A stiff letter. They'll undoubtedly give you a refund."

He smiled the sad bitter smile of a man resigned philosophically to his fate.

"I thought of that," he said. "But do you realize it costs two cents for the stamp alone, not to mention the stationery? Moreover it would cost a nickel to telephone them. No matter how I handle it, I don't break even."

My laughter rocked the room. "I thought it was a matter of principle," I said. "Purely principle. I notice, however, that you've figured out the cost of your protest very neatly."

"You have a moron's mind," said Sackler. "I'm damned if I know why I put up with it."

He took the makings from his pocket once more. He glanced over at my desk but this time I was too fast for him. I had the deck of cigarettes in the drawer before he could get out of the chair.

WE SAT in silence for a half-hour. Sackler, apparently, was so upset about his losing struggle with the slot machine that he failed to suggest some

form of gambling. It was his custom to leave no effort unexpended in order to win back from me during the week the meager salary he paid me each Wednesday. Usually, he was quite successful, too.

We looked up simultaneously as the outer office door slammed shut. There was a gleam in Sackler's eye. A polite professional smile spread itself over his face. His nostrils distended as if he were trying to smell the amount of the fee his potential client could afford.

The door of the inner office opened and Sackler's smile fell from his face. His eyes lost their glitter. A uniformed police officer stood on the threshold, a gold badge gleaming bravely on his broad chest.

Sackler said glumly: "Hello, Wooley. What do *you* want?"

Inspector Wooley sat down. He greeted Sackler cordially, which was odd. He disliked Sackler only a trifle less than Sackler disliked him. Wooley envied Sackler's income and his success in a score of cases where Wooley and his men had failed. There was something suspicious about his attitude this morning.

"Well," he said with all the sincerity of an Axis diplomat signing a non-aggression pact, "and how's the boy, Rex? How's business? How's everything?"

"Terrible," I said. "He's ruined. He dropped a fortune this morning in slot machine speculation."

Sackler shot me a glance more deadly than malignant virus. Wooley, not realizing it was a gag, shook his head and clucked commiseratingly.

"Too bad, old man," he said. "Too bad."

He was laying it on so thick by now that Sackler became suspicious.

"Look, Wooley," he said. "What do you want? Now that you've smeared me up nicely for the past few minutes you may come to the point. Though I'll tell you in advance if it's a favor I can't do it. If it's money I haven't got it."

"Rex," said Wooley gravely, "you're a private detective. I'm a public servant. Yet we both work toward the same ends, don't we?"

"You sound like an editorial in the *Sun*," said Sackler, "and it worries me. I don't like it. What the devil do you want?"

"Look," said Wooley, "you seen the papers about the Grattan killing, haven't you?"

"Yes. But you picked up a guy on that. Bellows, wasn't it?"

"We let him go this morning. Insufficient evidence."

"Well," said Sackler, "what do you want from me? You're talking like a guy who wants something."

"Even," I put in, "like a guy who wants it for nothing."

"Here's the setup," said Wooley. "This guy Bellows was engaged to Grattan's daughter. The old guy didn't like the idea. He and Bellows had quarreled. Long and often. Moreover, the old guy's dough goes to the girl after his death. She's nuts about Bellows. With one bullet he can get rid of the old man's objections to the marriage, and also fix it so that his wife has a pretty dowry. See?"

"What do you mean, insufficient evidence?"

Wooley scratched a head which held very little hair. "Alibi," he said, "and it's a screwy one. Bellows has this alibi: It seems someone called him from a downtown poolroom just before the killing. Four guys saw him in that poolroom. Every one of those guys is a bum. The lousiest assistant D. A. we've got could discredit their testimony in twelve seconds flat."

"So," said Sackler, "what are you worrying about? Pick Bellows up again. Discredit the testimony of his witnesses and stop bothering me."

"Wait," said Wooley. "Through sheer accident Bellows has one good witness. As he was entering the poolroom General Barker passed him in the street. Now do you get it?"



WELL, now it was rather obvious. The alibi testimony of some poolroom punk was one thing. The evidence of General Barker was another. Barker was not only an army officer with a national reputation, he was an upright guy with a tremendous reputation for integrity, probity and all the other virtues emblazoned in the copy-books. An alibi from Barker was as good as a reprieve from the Governor.

Sackler said as much. He added: "What makes you think Bellows is guilty, then? You don't think Barker's lying?"

"He may be mistaken. He came forward after seeing Bellows' picture in the paper. He'd never seen him before. He just recalled bumping into him accidentally the night of the killing. If Barker's right the time element would have precluded Bellows' having anything to do with it."

Sackler shrugged. "All right," he said, "why not assume Barker is right? Drop the case."

"The D. A. wants a conviction. The case is spectacular. The papers are playing it big. An election rolls around this fall. The D. A. and the commissioner would like a conviction. And it's quite possible Barker is mistaken." Wooley scratched his pate again, and added, a note of wistfulness in his tone: "If Barker *hadn't* run into Bellows, we'd have a cold case."

"Look," said Sackler suddenly. "By any chance is the police department retaining me?"

"Retaining you? The department can't retain a private detective, Rex. It'd look awful."

"All right," said Sackler, "then go away. I've listened to you for twenty minutes free. I have no interest in the case. No one is paying me and if you're merely unburdening your soul take it to a priest, your wife, or a sympathetic bartender. But go away from here."

Wooley looked wounded. "Rex," he said and his voice quivered with hypocrisy, "after all we're both fighting crime. We must work together."

"That," said Sackler, "is a beautiful gossamer thought. What is it you want from me?"

"Well, Rex, this Bellows is going to retain you."

Sackler's eyes lit up. He was performing some heart-warming mental arithmetic. One client equals one fee. One fee equals more dough in the bank. More dough in the bank equals three gallons of dreamy gloating happiness. He leaned over his desk and addressed Wooley with more affability than he had yet shown.

"What's it worth, do you figure? Has the guy any dough? What ought I ask him? What—"

"Wait a minute," said Wooley. "Let me tell you my angle. We still believe Bellows is guilty. The case is open and shut, save for Barker's testimony. We figure that if Bellows retains you, you'll be in a good spot to keep an eye on him. We want you to work with us, to keep in touch with us. You should be able to dig up something on the case. He'll be freer with you than with us. If you can do it, pin that murder on him. We'll be grateful, Rex. The D. A.'ll be grateful. It won't do you any harm."

Sackler took a deep breath. He looked very much like a man enjoying a moment for which he has waited many years. As a matter of fact, he was.

"For years," he said, "I have been harassed by an incompetent police department. For years their envy of my ability and my financial success has caused them to frustrate me at every opportunity. Now, in the person of Inspector Wooley, that department comes crawling to me on its stomach to help them solve a case they can't handle themselves. I laugh, uproariously."

He got out of his chair, took two paces toward me and snatched one of my tailor-made cigarettes before I could stop him. He lit it, smiling. Then turned again to Wooley.

"Moreover," he said, "you're damned insulting. I am a professional man of integrity. My client's interest is my own. Your implication that I would betray my client merely because the D. A. is worried about an election is outrageous. After such a suggestion I cannot countenance your presence in my office."

He drew himself up like a Victorian parent ordering the poverty-stricken lover from his daughter's drawing-room. Wooley, all his phoney beneficence gone, glared at him and stood up.

"All right," he said. "Ride me. But you'll regret it, Rex. You're only figuring how much dough you can take Bellows for. If I offered you more you'd sell him down the river like Uncle Tom."

"That," said Sackler, "is a foul lie. I serve my clients all the way whether they pay or not. Don't I, Joey?"

I searched my conscience very carefully before I answered. Then I looked him squarely in the eye and said, "No."

Wooley, still glaring at Sackler, marched from the room. Sackler didn't even bother to become annoyed at me. He sat down at his desk, leaned back, grinned happily and waited for the advent of William Bellows with his fee.

HE DIDN'T have long to wait. Wooley had been gone less than half an hour when the outer office door opened. I sprang up, went to the ante-room and admitted two men. Bellows, I recognized, from the picture which had appeared in all the tabloids at the time of the murder. He was rather tall and in his early thirties. He was good-looking in an ordinary sort of way. His face was thin and closely shaven. His eyes were alert and, at the moment, shadowed with worry.

His companion was short, middle-aged and well-dressed. He wore a pair of tortoise shell glasses through which two shrewd blue eyes peered and questioned. I led the pair of them into Sackler's presence. He bowed suavely like an undertaker silently estimating what price to put upon the funeral.

Bellows introduced himself. He indicated the short man and said: "This is Elmer Justis. He was Mr. Grattan's lawyer. He is now advising me."

Sackler unleashed his oiliest smile and I dragged up a couple of chairs for the company. Bellows drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. He spoke jerkily.

"You of course know, Mr. Sackler, that I've been questioned in the Grattan murder. Luckily for me General Barker came forward and told the D. A. he'd seen me on the night of the killing. However, the thing still hangs over my head. I want to feel that I'm completely in the clear. I want you to find Grattan's murderer. Alice Grattan, my fiancée, agrees with me on this move."

"Of course," said Sackler. "I appreciate your feeling. I offer you all the facilities of our office."

The lawyer lit a cigar. "The procedure seems ridiculous to me," he said. "The police have released Bellows. As long as they know the defense will call Barker, they won't dare prosecute even though they're satisfied they have a cold motive. To retain a private operative under the circumstances seems unnecessary and a waste of money."

Sackler paled. This was heretical talk, indeed. He took swift, drastic measures to prevent the fee from slipping away before he had even held it in his grasping hand.

"A man's reputation," he said sententiously, "is his greatest asset. I think it essential Bellows' name be cleared before the bar of public opinion."

Bellows nodded. "That's what we think. I mean Alice and myself. Besides, we should expend all effort to discover the actual murderer. Justis and I disagree on this. We've already argued about it. But my mind is definitely made up."

He reached inside his breast pocket and withdrew his wallet. The ethereal expression on Sackler's face shone with a holy light. He handed Sackler a blue oblong piece of paper. He said, a shade

of anxiety in his tone: "Will fifteen hundred be all right?"

Sackler looked at the check with the eye of Romeo regarding Juliet.

"Payable to me," he murmured. "But the signature?"

"Miss Grattan's," said Bellows. "She's helping me finance the investigation into her father's death. She wrote out the check."

"Quite satisfactory," said Sackler. "I shall undertake the investigation. I shall probably want to interview Miss Grattan and both of you gentlemen at my leisure. I shall get in touch with you if you'll leave your addresses with my assistant."

I took their addresses and they left. I brooded at my desk. It seemed to me that money fell into Sackler's lap like manna from heaven. And in this specific case there had been no stipulation made that he must solve the case. The fee was his no matter what. And since the police had been able to unearth no suspect beyond Bellows, it apparently wasn't going to be easy.



AFTER about ten minutes Sackler got up and reached for his hat. I didn't bother to ask him where he was going. I knew. Rex Sackler kept no checking account. Moreover, he wasted no time in turning a check into immediate cash ready for deposit in one of his several Postal Savings accounts.

Now, I knew, he was heading posthaste to Alice Grattan's bank to exchange the blue paper in his pocket for green bills. It would be utterly impossible for him to put his mind on the case until that detail had been taken care of.

He walked to the door, said over his shoulder, "Back in a few minutes, Joey," then stopped dead on the threshold.

A burly figure moved in from the anteroom. The door closed behind it. The burly figure fixed Sackler with a pair of cold black eyes. Two thick lips moved and a strong Brooklyn accent

said: "You're Sackler, ain't you?"

Sackler nodded. The stranger came farther into the room forcing Sackler back with him. He was flashily dressed in a light brown suit with pockets looking as if they'd been slashed in the fabric with a sword. His tie was bright yellow and the red scar that rippled down his cheek from temple to chin added no beauty to his appearance.

He thrust, suddenly, a heavy hand into the right pocket of his coat. He withdrew it again, gripping an automatic. Its muzzle aimed at a spot of space directly between Sackler and myself.

"All right, you guys," he said. "Give me your dough."

Sackler stared at him as if fate had slammed him over the head with an invisible baseball bat. Stunned amazement was in his eyes. It was bad enough for him to face the threat of having money removed from his person. But a stickup in the office of a private detective was only slightly better than a heist in the Second Precinct House.

Our holdup man's eyes flickered with impatience. "Youse guys will empty your wallets on the top of the desk," he announced. "If there's enough dough there, I won't bother with the rest of the joint. Now get started."

Sackler glanced at the automatic. Then he turned his gaze on me. "O. K., Joey," he said as if he were a German general telling the boys to knock off Switzerland, "take him."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Take him?"

"It's your department," said Sackler. "I furnish the brains and the financial backing. You're the strong man."

I removed my gaze from Sackler and studied the muzzle of our visitor's automatic. I estimated roughly it would take him all of four-fifths of a second to pump me full of lead. Conservatively, it would take me three seconds longer to open my desk drawer, grab my own gun and start shooting.

I moved my left hand slowly toward the inside breast pocket of my coat. To remove any possible misunderstanding,

I announced clearly: "I am reaching for my wallet."

I emptied the wallet on the desk. I tendered the sum of nine dollars to the stickup guy. I said, "That's the roll," folded my arms and let Sackler play out the rest of the hand.

Sackler looked at me like a child who has discovered that his mother's morals are not what he supposed. He opened his mouth preparatory to casting bitter reflection on my physical courage, but before he could articulate the words, the thug spoke impatiently.

"All right, you. Hand over the dough. We ain't got all day."

SACKLER took his wallet from his pocket with all the enthusiasm of a debutante picking up a rattlesnake. He put its contents on his desk. Rather to my disappointment the cash totaled only six dollars besides, of course, the Bellows check.

Our holdup man, maneuvering his gun, moved carefully across the room and picked it up. Sackler, a catch in his voice, said: "You don't need that check. It's made out to me. You can't cash it."

The scar-faced man sighed wearily as he picked up the check and the money.

"Why don't you mind your own business," he asked petulantly, "and leave me mind mine. Now, I'm going. You better stay here for at least five minutes because you don't know how long I might wait in the hall ready to plug youse guys if you come out."

He backed to the door and through it, slammed it and disappeared. Sackler fixed me with a halibut's stare. "After him," he said. "Go get him."

"I shall not. He is a professional thug. It is more than possible he will stand outside for a few minutes ready to shoot if I come out."

He looked at me as if he had nailed me red-handed with a jimmy at the poor-box. He brought up a sigh of resignation from his heels.

"Joey," he said heavily, as if more hurt than angry, "my opinion of your

mentality has never been high. My estimate of your morals has been none too optimistic. However, I never believed that, with all your faults, you were yellow."

"That," I said, "we won't argue. But you might revise your opinion of my mentality. Since that mug could have plugged us both while I was still going for my gun, you might grant that I'm not a complete moron."

"You sat there," he said accusingly, while he rolled me for fifteen hundred and six dollars."

"He rolled me for nine. He rolled you for six. You can have payment stopped on the check and get yourself another."

"The money, Joey, is nothing. It is a matter—" He paused. Then as if reaching the conclusion he was wasting valuable time, he snapped: "Get that Grattan woman on the phone. Tell her we were robbed. Have her stop payment at once and mail us another check. Hurry, Joey."

"Why not," I suggested, "phone the bank first, and tell *them* that you want payment stopped on the Grattan check at once?"

Sackler looked pained. "Joey, your ignorance of financial matters, at times, appalls me. A bank will not stop payment on a check except by order of the person who issued it."

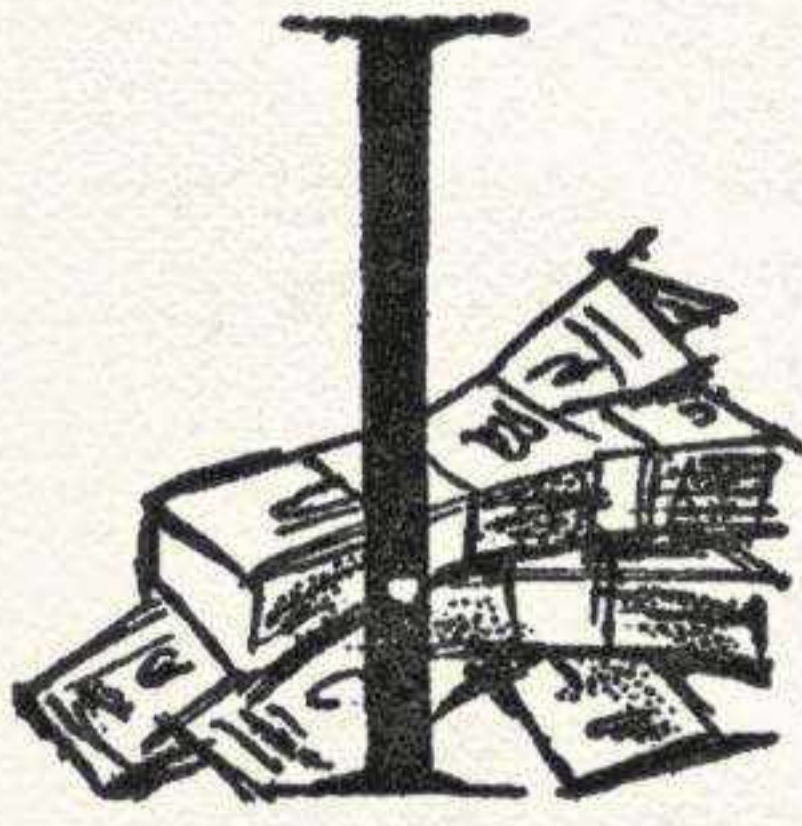
I shrugged and picked up the phone. I reported a moment later that Alice Grattan wasn't in.

"All right," said Sackler, "keep ringing her every twenty minutes until you get her. Don't leave that phone for a minute."

I called Alice Grattan without success the rest of the day. I resumed calling, on Sackler's frantic instructions, early Saturday morning. Shortly after noon, I got her and reported to Sackler that another check would be put in the mail immediately. It was only then that Sackler relaxed, sighed, and put his mind to the solution of Grattan case for the first time.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten Grand on the Hoof



I WASN'T until Monday, however, that he went into action. Alice Grattan's second check had arrived in the mail, had been duly cashed and cached. Sackler sat at his desk buried in thought. He sighed, looked up, and glanced at the package of cigarettes on my desk. I snatched them up quickly. Sackler sighed again and took the makings from his pocket. Slowly he rolled a cigarette. He came out with something that looked like a fat wet worm.

"Joey," he said, "on Sunday night there was a robbery at Grattan's. A wall safe behind an oil painting in the library was forced and emptied. Miss Grattan did not even know of the safe's existence until it was broken."

"So," I said, "are you arguing that someone knocked off the old man so that they could roll his safe several days later?"

"Joey," he said, "you are a fool. Grattan, I have ascertained, was a big independent dealer in diamonds. He kept large sums of money on hand and one hell of a lot of valuable ice."

"I thought you were retained to find out who killed him."

"That," said Sackler, "is precisely what I am finding out. And now after weeks of idleness—weeks during which I have still paid your salary—I have a task for you."

"Which is?"

"See Barker. For some reason Wooley thinks he may have been mistaken in his identification of Bellows. The D. A. would undoubtedly like a conviction and Bellows is a cinch save for Barker's testimony. See the old guy. Find out whatever you can. And hurry. After that I've got a couple more angles for you to work on. In the meantime, I'll find out what I can from the Grattan

girl, from Bellows and that lawyer."

Nothing loath, I hurried. I had been cooped up for two weeks in the office with Sackler. Adding what he had won from me at rummy, at dice and the cigarettes he had grubbed it hadn't been a cheap two weeks.

I went downstairs, climbed into the coupe and headed for General Barker's apartment house.

On the fourteenth story of an upper Park Avenue apartment house, I stood before Barker's door and stretched my finger forth to push the bell. From within the apartment a voice sounded through the door. It was a cultured voice, a gentle voice, withal there was a note of fear in it.

"Your motive," it said, "I do not understand. Your punishment I understand quite well. You will be executed for this. You will surely lose your life if I lose mine."

My finger froze a tenth of an inch from the bell. My right hand reached inside my coat to my shoulder holster. My ear pressed against the panel of the door. I heard a second voice—hard, tough and vaguely familiar. "Buddy, there's only two people ever going to know who knocked you off. And, from here on in, you don't count. You don't count at all."

Three shots sounded almost simultaneously. The first two came from within the apartment. The third was fired from my own automatic and its bullet blew the lock off Barker's door. Gun in hand I charged headlong into the apartment.

General Barker lay upon the floor. His head was cushioned on an expensive Axminster, the color of which was changing slowly from a deep blue to a dark red. Standing over him, a thirty-eight in his hand, was Big Joe Angers.

BIG JOE turned his head as I raced into the room. He made a movement as if to swing his gun in my direction. He recognized me and didn't. My automatic already covered him and Big

Joe knew me well enough to know I could shoot fast and accurately.

"Drop it," I said. "I thought I recognized your voice."

Big Joe dropped the thirty-eight. It fell with a padded thud upon the body of the man he had just killed. I regarded him over the muzzle of my own weapon and wondered just what I'd walked into.

Big Joe watched me with hard and calculating eyes. There was a taut expression on his face. The body at his feet did not disturb him. Big Joe had killed too many men for that. He was the town's ace killer. And he had at least one thing in common with Rex Sackler. Within the limits of his profession, which was murder, there was nothing he would not do if the price was right.

Now, he cleared his throat. He looked significantly down at the corpse of General Barker. He said hoarsely: "How much, Joey?"

God! How our reputation traveled!

"In a case like this," I said, "there isn't any price. I'd be an accessory and liable for the chair myself. I'm taking you in, baby."

Big Joe's eyes narrowed. "The cops ain't ever going to burn me, Joey," he said. "That's something I promised myself a long time ago. Let's make a deal. I got a lot of dough, Joey."

I sighed. The reputation of Rex Sackler and Company had certainly spread. Big Joe seemed quite convinced that I would risk putting my own body in the death cell if he handed me a certified check.

"No," I said, "you're coming in, Joe. You—" Then I committed the gravest error in all my career as an assistant private detective.

I took a pace across the floor toward Big Joe. The Axminster slid along the highly polished floor. I slid with it and lost my balance. As I strove to recover, Big Joe lashed out with his foot and caught me on the end of the spinal column. I fell, without dignity and dangerously, upon my face.

Big Joe sprang at the thirty-eight on the floor. He picked it up as I rolled over on my back and fired twice. I missed exactly the same number of times. Big Joe retreated to the doorway. He blasted at me as I ducked behind a huge armchair. I heard a bullet plow into the overstuffing. Big Joe shot once again, then I heard the door slam. Big Joe was beating a hasty retreat before anyone came to investigate the shots. For that I was profoundly grateful.

I stood up and used a handkerchief to wipe the cold sweat from my brow. There were footsteps at the door and an elevator boy and a copper burst into the room. The policeman looked at the body. He looked at me and of course recognized me.

"Ah, Joey," he said, not without satisfaction. "A corpse, and you with a gun in your hand. Wooley will be delighted. I'll be a sergeant in no time."

"Take it easy," I said. "I've got a tale to tell."

I told him about Big Joe. He seemed rather unconvinced until I showed him a hole in the wall where a bullet from the thirty-eight had landed. I pointed out that there was another slug somewhere in or about the chair. I drew attention to the fact that my gun was an automatic. Then I asked permission to call Rex Sackler.

Sackler listened to my recital, sighed heavily and said: "Well—it's too bad, Joey."

"What's too bad?"

"My God, you were right on the scene when a murder was committed and we haven't got any client who wants to know the answer. There's not a fee in it anywhere."

"It breaks my heart," I told him. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Go in with the copper and tell your story to Wooley. If we can't get a fee we may as well ingratiate ourselves with the department. I don't think they like us, Joey."

Which was the understatement of the week.



AFTER I had spent an hour or so at headquarters, it dawned on me that we were being pushed around. Sackler had met me at Wooley's office, where I had told my story. Later, we waited outside in the anteroom, with a uniformed copper standing over us, while Wooley made a number of private telephone calls.

Finally, he joined us again. He smiled and there was malice in that smile. There was an odd twinkle in his eyes.

"Come on," he said. "We're going over to the courthouse."

"For what?" asked Sackler. "I'm busy on a case, Wooley. You've heard Joey's story. There's nothing to add to it. What do you want us for?"

"Perkins, the assistant D. A. wants a word with you," said Wooley. "Come on."

Puzzled, we went along with him. A few moments later we sat in the chambers of Judge Morrow. The judge, gray and exuding a beneficence which had enabled the machine to elect him several dozen times, sat behind his desk, toying with his watch chain.

Perkins and Wooley held a whispered conference in a corner of the room. Once Perkins looked at Sackler and me over his shoulder. The smirk on his face duplicated the expression on Wooley's.

My feeling that something screwy was going on strengthened. Sackler looked annoyed.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "Why are we being held here? It's sheer malice, Wooley. You don't like me because I make more money than you. You're wasting my time merely to annoy me."

Wooley didn't answer. Instead he winked at Perkins. Perkins moved over to the judge's desk, cleared his throat, and spoke like a congressman addressing the electorate.

"Your Honor, a prominent citizen has been murdered. It is an important police case. This man, Joey Graham, was a

witness to that murder. The prosecutor's office needs his testimony to convict. I ask that you hold him in ten thousand dollar bail as a material witness."

Sackler's jaw fell open. His eyes gaped open. There was stark horror written on his face.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he exclaimed. "That's utterly ridiculous. It's—"

The judge hammered severely on the desk with a pencil. "I shall be the judge of that, Mr. Sackler," he said. "In cases of this sort I am guided by the advice of the district attorney's office. I'll hold this man Graham in ten thousand dollar bail. Where are the papers?"

Perkins, Wooley and the judge grinned widely. Of course, it was a put-up job. It was a cinch I wasn't going to disappear. But I saw their point quite clearly. Asking Sackler to put up ten thousand dollars was a really beautiful thing. I grinned myself. Then suddenly I asked myself what the hell *I* was laughing for.

If it were a matter of my languishing in a cell for a few weeks or of Sackler withdrawing ten grand from his various Postal Savings accounts, I was as good as a prisoner right now.

"This," said Sackler, "is persecution. I'm working on a case now. I'm working on the side of law and order. I need my assistant badly. I should think the police department would want to aid the cause of justice, not hinder it."

"It shouldn't work any hardship," said Wooley. "You've got the ten thousand. You get it back later. It doesn't cost you a nickel."

That was true enough. But even the idea of withdrawing money from his accounts sent a tremor of horror down Sackler's spine. The judge wrote something rapidly on a form which Perkins had handed him.

"All right," he said. "Commit this man."

Perkins waved the paper. "Well," he asked, "are you bailing him or not?"

Sackler looked like a man who is offered the choice of hitting either his

mother or his wife. He shook his head slowly.

"If only I wasn't working on a case," he said. "But I might need you, Joey. I guess I'll have to spring you. But for God's sake don't leave my side. If you get lost or anything I'm out ten thousand dollars."

"My pal," I murmured, "my great golden-hearted pal."

They held me in the detention pen while Sackler scurried around town and returned with the money. As we left the building, he linked his arm through mine. It was a most unusual gesture for him. But I understood it.

A few hours ago I was just Joey Graham, his underpaid, long-suffering assistant. Now I was a valuable property. I was worth ten grand on the hoof. And for once Rex Sackler was going to take very good care of me.

WE WENT uptown again. We walked into the office to find two men sitting there. They were sitting quite calmly with their legs crossed. Each of them held his right hand balanced delicately on his left knee. In each of those hands were guns.

Sackler stood upon the threshold and blinked.

"My God," he said, "are we going to be held up again? This, Joey, is too much. I can bear no more."

I looked over his shoulder. One of the thugs I recognized. It was the scar-faced individual who had stuck us up a few days before. He stood up now, held his gun in my direction and spoke to the tall dark man with the Celtic face who was with him.

"Mike," he said, "there's two of them. What are we supposed to do?"

Mike got out of his chair. He looked at Sackler for a thoughtful moment. "Hymie," he said, "we better take them both. Otherwise, this money here"—he indicated Sackler with his gun muzzle—"will start howling copper right away and they might pick up our taxi on the way out."

Hymie nodded gravely. "O. K. Come along, both of you."

"Look," said Sackler, "I'm getting damned tired of having guns stuck in my stomach. Now what the devil's it all about this time?"

"There's a pal of mine in this town," said Hymie, "who ain't got any intention of burning in the chair. The coppers are looking for him. They'll probably find him. But if this here guy Joey is put where he can't talk, it don't matter whether the cops find my pal or not."

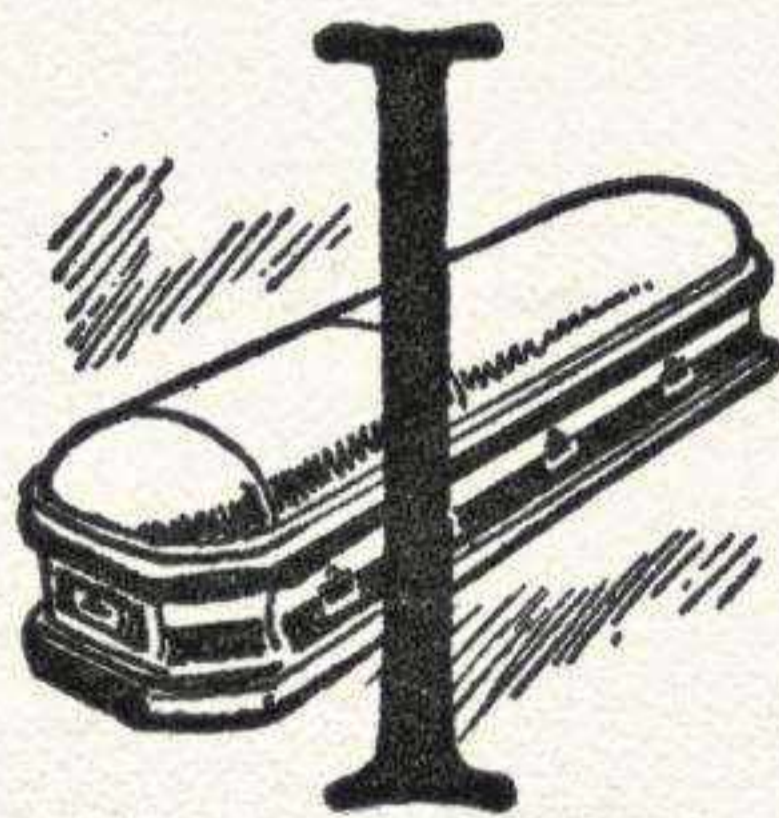
I felt a sudden emptiness at the pit of my stomach. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. Sackler opened his mouth to speak again but Mike prodded him gently in the stomach with a thirty-eight. Sackler shut up.

"All right," said Hymie, "come along, you two. Going downstairs we'll have our rods in our pockets. But we'll stand so close to you we couldn't miss anyway. I don't expect any funny stuff."

We went along. In the elevator I could feel Mike's gun pressing into my back. I was, at the moment, one scared assistant shamus. I looked at Sackler. He didn't resemble any conquering hero himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Anything for a Pal



I WAS a long silent drive across the Manhattan Bridge deep into the heart of Brooklyn. Sackler and I sat in the back seat with Hymie between us. Facing us from the collapsible seat was Mike, his hand in his pocket, through the fabric of which I could see the outline of his gun.

Sackler stared at the back of the hack driver's neck in brooding silence. He registered deep thought and I hoped to God he was accomplishing it. No one would need to pass a civil service exam

for detective-sergeant to figure out the object of this snatch. I was the only living guy whose testimony could send Big Joe Angers to the chair. Without me he was clean.

There was a queasy emptiness at the pit of my stomach, and my pulse beat at least ten strokes above normal. For once I was praying that Sackler would master-mind a way out of the jam we were in. For once I wasn't hoping that he'd make a humiliating mistake.

The cab drew up at a ramshackle house somewhere in Bay Ridge. Hymie and Mike escorted us up to the porch as the cab drove away. As we entered the house I shot a swift glance at Sackler, asking with my eyes if he'd figured anything. He gave no response. I entered the house with the reluctant step of a man walking the plank.

We sat in a living-room furnished in the early Garfield manner. A flight of stairs ran down into the room from the other story. A small hall led to the rear into, I supposed, a kitchen. Mike held his gun on us while Hymie went through our pockets. He appropriated my automatic and tossed it clatteringly onto the imitation marble mantelpiece. Sackler still stared into space as if he were about to conjure up a legion of angels to rescue us. I licked my dry lips and wondered somewhat hysterically why it was that fear freezes the salivary glands.

I said in a voice that I fought to keep steady: "How about a glass of water?"

Mike nodded at Hymie. "Take him in the kitchen and give him one. If there's any of that rye left bring me out a slug."

Hymie tapped me on the shoulder with a thirty-eight. I rose and preceded him into the kitchen. I helped myself to a glass of water at the sink. Hymie picked up a bottle of cheap rye which held about four ounces of whiskey and drained it. Then he drank a glass of water. We marched back into the living-room.

Hymie met Mike's eye. "Not a drop," he said. "The bottle was empty."

Mike frowned. "That's damned funny. I—" Then Sackler came to vocal life for the first time since we had left the office, and interrupted him.

"Look," he said abruptly. "What are you guys going to do with us?"

"Well," said Mike, "I ain't got the final orders yet. But I can give you a pretty good idea."

For that matter, I thought hopelessly, so can I.

"With you," went on Mike, "I guess we ain't going to do nothing. We got no orders about you. I just brought you along so you wouldn't have the coppers on our tail right away. I guess after we've done what we're going to do we'll just let you go."

Sackler nodded. His air of preoccupied worry remained with him despite Mike's information. He said: "What about Joey, here?"

"Well," said Hymie slowly, "he knows too much. You know how it is in cases like that."

"I know," said Sackler, "but just what are your plans?"

"We'll take him for a little ride," said Mike. "But he don't have to worry. Bang, bang. He'll never know what happened to him, see?"

WELL, that was just lovely. Bang, bang, and I'd never know what happened to me, see? I felt a strong urge to charge in with both fists flying and at least go out on my feet. I restrained myself. On several occasions I'd seen Sackler pull a miracle out of a hat. I was praying he hadn't lost his touch.

Sackler bit his lip, knitted his brow. There was an expression on his face approaching anguish.

"Look," he said, "listen to reason. You can't knock off Joey. Joey's a sweet character. He never did anything to you guys. Let's cook up some sort of a deal on this. I'd do anything rather than have anything happen to Joey."

Despite the fear which still dripped along my spinal column I looked at him curiously and not without affection. For

years we had bickered, fought and haggled vehemently about money. But beneath it all, I realized now, there had always existed a strong bond of friendship.

Hymie made a gesture of futility. "You know better than that, Sackler. You can't cook up a deal in a case like this. You can't trust a guy who's seen a murder committed. How can you guarantee to keep his mouth shut?"

Sackler sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll be responsible for him," he said and the sincerity in his voice moved me. "You *can't* kill him. You *can't*."

He spoke with a terrible zealousness. There was the slightest hint of moisture in my eyes. Sackler the tough guy, Sackler the selfish mug who never thought of anything but himself and his fees, pleading with every nerve for my life. It touched me oddly.

"Take it easy," said Mike. "It's a job that's just got to be done. You been around long enough to know that, Sackler."

Sackler sighed again. He looked utterly miserable. I felt as if I were in the middle of a big dramatic scene. I tried to play up to it.

"Rex," I said, "it's O. K. Forget it. I'm just stuck with it, that's all. I can take it, all right."

He did not meet my eyes. He turned to Hymie and said: "All right, if you do kill him what are you going to do with the body?"

Hymie shrugged. "Plant it somewhere. Hide it out in Long Island or drop it in the bay. All the better for us if there's no corpus delicti."

"No," said Sackler, a hint of desperation in his voice, you don't have to do that. Leave the corpse here. Or anyway tell me where you're going to leave it."

"Look," said Mike, "if the coppers find the body, they'll tie it up with Big Joe and Barker's murder right away. There'll be a stink raised. Why should we stick our necks out?"

"What if I talk?" asked Sackler.

"What if I tell the coppers the truth?"

"Your word'll mean nothing. There's no legal evidence to tie us up with Big Joe. Besides, without a body nothing you say'll make any sense. There ain't no proof of a murder. Anyway, if you're worried about a decent burial, Hymie and I'll bury him neatly ourselves."

"Thanks, anyway, Rex," I said. "I—"

He didn't let me finish. He was out of his chair, smashing his left fist into his right palm and roaring at the top of his voice.

"Burial! Who the hell cares about a burial? Do you realize I'm in for ten grand on Joey's bail? Do you realize I have to produce a live man, a death certificate, or a corpse? Do you realize if I don't I lose that dough? *Ten grand?*"

He sank back into his chair, clapping his hand to his brow as if the thought were too much for him. I glared at him with hell's own fires of hatred in my heart. I felt at that moment as if I were all the Gestapo and he was Jan Valtin. In one hundred years I shall never be as angry again.

"You louse!" I yelled. "All the time I thought you were worrying about me! A hell of a lot you care how many bullets they blast me with. When I'm lying at the bottom of the East River you'll be beating your yellow breast about your filthy money. Hymie, for God's sake, grant me a dying wish. Let me take one smack at him before I go."



ACKLER possessed the unmitigated gall to look at me reproachfully. "Now, Joey," he said, "they're going to kill you anyway. I can't do anything about it. Since you're going to get it, you may as well save me my money. There's no sense in both of us suffering. Ten grand's a lot of dough."

"On Judgment Day," I said bitterly, "you'll crawl from your grave and offer the guy who's keeping the books two and a half bucks to square yourself."

You'll be astounded when he belts you with his halo."

"Take it easy, fellows," said Hymie. "We don't want no trouble." He glanced down at his watch. "It's time, Mike. Go upstairs and call. Tell him it's O. K. We're ready."

Mike nodded. He tucked his gun away, rose and climbed the stairs. Hymie, his thirty-eight in his hand, took over the guard duty. Sackler face was gray. There was pain in his eyes. I came to the astounding conclusion that he was sicker about losing his ten grand than I was about losing my life. I found a single consolation. When Mike's first bullet exploded into my brain it was going to cost Rex Sackler the sum of ten thousand dollars. The grave would be warmer for that thought.

Hymie leaned back in his chair smiling. Our argument, apparently, had amused him. His right hand rested on his knee and his gun dangled carelessly from it. I glared over at Sackler again. He winked with his left eye and jerked his head in my direction. Then I looked around and realized what he was driving at.

My automatic still lay on the mantelpiece where Hymie had tossed it. From where I sat it was a reach of about eight feet. Hymie, still smiling, was not, at the moment, paying a great deal of attention to either of us. I knew, however, that any sudden move on my part would bring the thug immediately back to the alert.

But here was a case where I had absolutely nothing to lose. If I grabbed the gun and shot it out the chances were, say, two to one against me. If I didn't, they were infinity to nothing. I took a deep breath and moved like a pursuit plane.

I grabbed the automatic at precisely the same moment that Sackler threw his ancient hat full in Hymie's face. Hymie sprang from his chair and his thirty-eight fired a single shot into the floor. By that time I was pressing the automatic into his side.

"All right," I said, "you're licked, Hymie. Pipe down."

Sackler took the thirty-eight from his hand.

From the upper story came Mike's voice. "What the hell's wrong down there? What the—"

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Take him, Joey," said Sackler. "But here, use this."

He pressed Hymie's thirty-eight into my hand and relieved me of the automatic. He slugged Hymie, quite unnecessarily, over the head with the butt of my weapon, but I had no time to protest then. I raced to the edge of the stairs and ducked down behind the bottom newel. Mike was a cinch to handle.

I had the gun in his back before he had even reached the last step. I relieved him of his gun and the pair of them stood there disconsolately while I covered them. Sackler was beaming from ear to ear.

"Hold them there, Joey. I'm going upstairs to make a phone call," he said cheerfully.

I nodded. I said: "Why did you switch guns on me? I'm used to that automatic."

"Oh," said Sackler, as calmly as if he were telling me what he'd had for lunch, "that automatic wasn't loaded. Mike knew it."

"It wasn't loaded! Do you mean to tell me you had me jump Hymie with an unloaded gun?"

"Mike unloaded it when Hymie took you to the kitchen for that water. Hymie didn't know about it. You were in no danger."

"I am speechless," I told him. "Is there any way in which you wouldn't gamble for my life?"

"Joey," he said, "you hurt me. After all it was the only chance of saving your life. I took it."

"Saving *what*?"

"Your life, Joey."

"Saving your bail, you mean. For God's sake, go upstairs before I slug you."

He went upstairs registering the misunderstood beautiful soul, far too good for this mundane world.

THE situation was reversed in the hack going back to town. I enjoyed it infinitely more than the ride out. Hymie and Mike sat huddled together, glumly facing the gun I held in my hand. Sackler hummed a lilting tune far off-key.

I said: "I don't know why we're bringing these monkeys into headquarters. Why didn't you have them send out a wagon?"

"We're not going to headquarters, Joey."

"Where *are* we going then? Roseland?"

Sackler shook his head. "We're going to Alice Grattan's apartment. I just phoned Wooley. He's meeting us there along with Bellows and that lawyer guy, Justis."

"Why? If it's a cocktail party I'd sooner go to O'Shaughnessy's Bar and Grill."

"It isn't social, Joey. It's professional. You may have forgotten that I've been paid a fee to find out who killed old man Grattan. Well, now I'm going to tell them."

I raised my eyebrows. "You're going to *tell* them? You haven't worked a minute on the case. We've been held up. We've been kidnapped. We've been held in ten thousand dollar bail. When did you find time to discover who knocked off old man Grattan?"

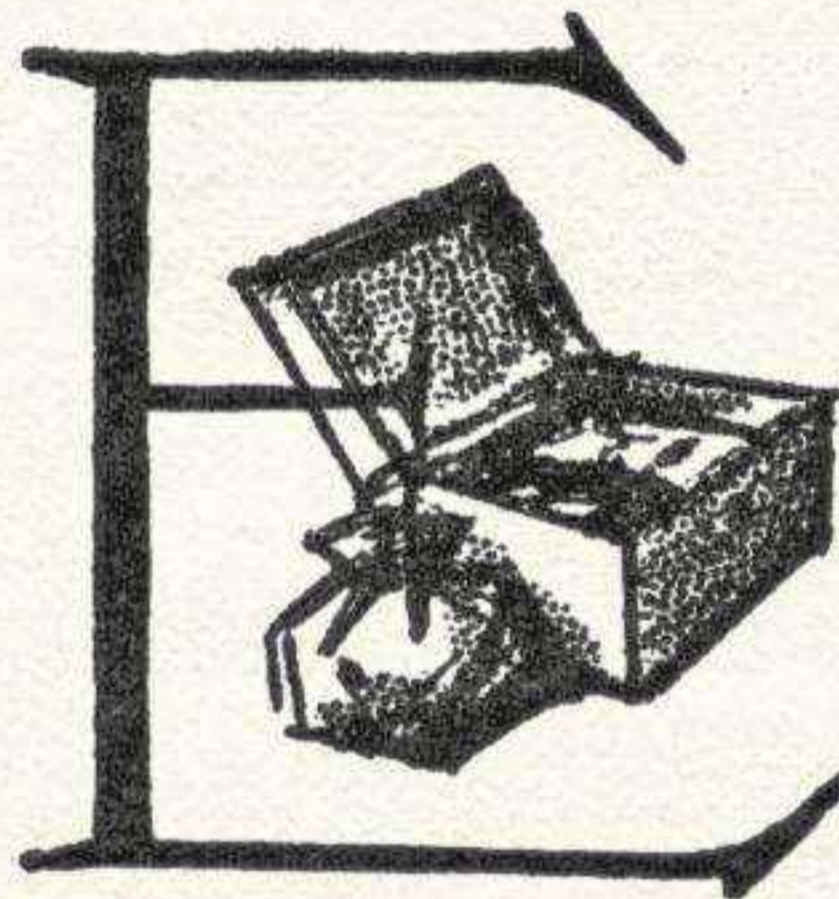
"I've been thinking," said Sackler. "A process you wouldn't understand, anyway, Joey. Besides, I made a couple of phone calls earlier today. I spoke to Alice Grattan and the Second Federated Bank. Also to a number of wholesale diamond dealers."

"And I suppose they told you who murdered old man Grattan," I jeered at him.

Sackler sighed happily. "In a manner of speaking, Joey, they did," he said smoothly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sackler Shares the Wealth



IGHT of us congregated in the huge book-lined study at the Grattan apartment. Hymie and Mike, subdued and apprehensive, sat together on a sofa looking very much like the Katzenjammer kids awaiting a sound spanking. Alice Grattan, an ash blonde with wide blue eyes, relaxed in an armchair and turned an adoring gaze on young William Bellows who stood over her chair. Elmer Justis, well-dressed and pompous as when I had first seen him, smoked a cigar and looked thoughtful.

Wooley leaned upon the mantelpiece and regarded Sackler with disfavor. Sackler himself strutted up and down the floor exceedingly pleased with himself. I still wasn't sure why. If he had found the time to turn up the answer to Grattan's murder between our adventures of the past few days, I was prepared to admit that he had half the brain he claimed he had.

Sackler cast a swift glance around the room. His eye lighted on a japanned box of cigarettes. He took one and lit it.

He bowed in Wooley's direction and said: "First, I want to know about Big Joe Angers. Have you broken-down Monte Carlo coppers got a line on him?"

"They're on the way to pick him up now," said Wooley. "We got a tipoff to his whereabouts right after you called me. He'll be in the can within the hour. But what's that got to do with the Grattan killing?"

"That," said Sackler, "is something I wouldn't expect a police inspector to understand."

"Do you really know who killed father?" said Alice Grattan. "You know the Association of Diamond Dealers has offered a twenty-five hundred dollar re-

ward for the arrest and conviction of the killer?"

Sackler's eyes glittered like green neon lights. He sighed contently. He sat down and inhaled on the cigarette, savoring its flavor, primarily, I supposed, because it was free.

"Look here," said Elmer Justis petulantly. "I'm a busy man. The inspector asked me to come here as a favor and I've come. Will someone come to the point?"

"Frankly," said Wooley, "I doubt if there's a point to come to. As I see it we can hold Bellows for murder. With Barker dead the defense can't produce a reputable witness to support his alibi. The motive's perfect."

Alice Grattan's eyes flashed. Bellows opened his mouth to say something. But, as usual, Sackler was in there first with the dialogue.

"Bellows didn't kill Grattan," he said. "Not that it matters a great deal to the D. A. However, I know who did and I can prove it. Moreover, I can get a conviction."

"For twenty-five hundred dollars reward," said Wooley bitterly, "you can do anything. Have you brought those two thugs, Hymie and Mike, here to confess the killing?"

Hymie and Mike looked very uncomfortable. Sackler stood up and faced his audience.

"All right," he said, "let's get started. Let's begin with the day I met my client, Mr. Bellows. He gave me a check for fifteen hundred dollars, signed by Alice Grattan. He gave it to me on a Friday morning. At eleven o'clock."

"Daylight saving time," sneered Wooley.

"Daylight saving time," said Sackler blandly. "A few moments later, Hymie over there walked into my office with a gun and stuck me up. He took six dollars in cash and that check. Now, what would a legitimate stickup man want a check made out to me for? He couldn't cash it. If he tried he'd be walking right into the arms of the law."

"Is this a puzzle?" said Justis. "I tell you I'm a busy man."

"It's a puzzle to everyone in this room but me," said Sackler. "After the hold-up, I called Miss Grattan to have payment stopped, to have a new check issued. I couldn't get her on Friday. I couldn't get her on Saturday until the afternoon. Where were you then, Miss Grattan?"

Alice Grattan stared at him in complete bewilderment. For that matter, so did I.

"Why, I told you that on the phone, Mr. Sackler. On Friday, Mr. Justis sent word for me to come to his office. He was detained for some time. I waited a long while for him to return. I remained with him all day. Had dinner with him and his wife and stayed overnight at their place. Saturday morning, I also spent in his office going over some of my father's papers."

Sackler waved his hand like a magician who has just pulled a dragon out of a child's hat.

"There," he said. "See?"

WE LOOKED at each other. It was evident that we all saw with the clarity of a blind man in London at midnight during a blackout. I realized that at least a third of my salary was paid for playing straight man for Sackler, so I came in.

"Could you make it a trifle clearer?" I asked him.

"Ah," said Sackler grandly, "excuse me. There are times when I forget the mentality of my auditors. Justis makes an appointment with Miss Grattan for Friday, during a period when he knows he will be out of the office. He keeps her waiting. He keeps her out of her own house until Saturday afternoon after the banks have closed. Now do you get it?"

"No," I said.

Sackler's sigh held compassion for all the deficient mentalities of the world.

"When I was first given that check there wasn't sufficient money in the bank to clear it."

Alice Grattan frowned. "That's a little-used account, Mr. Sackler," she said. "There's usually a considerable balance in it."

"So you thought," said Sackler. "So Justis intended you to think. He tried his best to talk Bellows out of retaining me. Failing that, he sent a thug—Hymie over there—to get the check back by force. He kept Miss Grattan out of the way so I wouldn't receive another check from her until Monday when the account would once more have money in it."

Justis slammed his fist down on the table. "That's absolutely ridiculous," he thundered. "What have I to do with it? And if there's no money in the account on Saturday, how would there be any Monday?"

"You put it in Monday morning," said Sackler sweetly. "As soon as the bank opened."

"My God," said Wooley. "Assuming he did it, why couldn't he deposit the cash Friday? Why Monday?"

"He didn't have it Friday," said Sackler. "He didn't get it until Sunday night."

A little light filtered into my brain. "Where did he get it on Sunday?"

"From the wall safe in this room. You recall it was broken into on Sunday night. He cashed in a fortune in diamonds and replenished the account he had been looting."

"You accuse me of embezzlement," said Justis. "You accuse me of robbery. Are you going to accuse me of murder next?"

"Precisely." Sackler beamed. "Thank God someone gets it at last."

Wooley wiped his forehead with his hand. Sackler's circuitous method of expiation invariably exasperated him.

"Keep talking," he said. "If you're accusing Justis of killing Grattan, the police department would like to know about it. The motive and the method particularly."

"Sure," said Sackler. "I shall use the simpler fragments of my vocabulary, so you will understand it. Justis was Grat-

tan's lawyer and confidant. He also held his power of attorney, looked after his bank accounts and business. Moreover, he was named executor of Grattan's estate. These things I was told by the Second Federated Bank on which that check was drawn. They also told me that a check for fifteen hundred bucks on Miss Grattan's account could not have cleared on Friday."

"All right," said Wooley. "You've already told us most of this."

"Justis," continued Sackler, "had been rooking Grattan for years. Then came a crisis. I don't know whether Grattan got on to it, or whether Justis' stock market losses were so big he had to do something about it. Anyway, he hired Big Joe Angers to kill Grattan."

"He knew just when Grattan would have a fortune in diamonds in that wall safe. So did one of the wholesale dealers from whom I got my information. Moreover, he had a made-to-order suspect in Bellows. He framed that phone call to Bellows, to lure him to a poolroom frequented by thugs. That sort of an alibi would be no good whatever. During that time he had Angers kill Grattan."

"Then," I said, "why didn't Big Joe force the safe that night? Why wait so many days after the murder?"

"Justis isn't fool enough to tell Big Joe about that safe. Joe could've kept all the swag that way. No, with Grattan out of the way, Justis could take his time about the safe. He had the freedom of the house, was a constant visitor. His hand, however, was forced by two things."

"You mean the check?" I asked. "He couldn't permit it to bounce because it would arouse Miss Grattan's suspicion?"

"Right. Undoubtedly he had visited the house often since the murder, awaiting his chance to open the safe which Miss Grattan didn't even know existed. He never had the chance. Possibly she was in the room with him all the time. However, he had plenty of time. So he thought. He knew he didn't have plenty of time after she wrote that check for me."



ELMER JUSTIS laughed. Not too heartily, I thought. "And I suppose I had this Angers kill Barker also?"

"Is this a confession?" asked Sackler. "You and I know just how right you are."

"Motive?" snapped Wooley.

"Obvious," said Sackler. "He knew how anxious you mugs were to convict Bellows. He knew you'd do it without Barker's testimony. He was already in for one murder, why not two? With Bellows already burnt, it'd take an awful lot of evidence before the D. A. would open the case again, admit he burned an innocent man, even if Justis' speculations ever came out."

Wooley scratched his head. "It sounds logical to me," he admitted reluctantly. "And examination of Grattan's accounts, of Justis' books, ought to prove it pretty well."

"Wait a minute," said Justis. "You forget that I'm a lawyer."

"You seem to have forgotten it once or twice yourself," said the Grattan girl bitterly.

"I'm a lawyer," said Justis again, "and I don't see that you have any case. Bellows' motive is as strong as mine. The case against him is as good. The whole theory is pretty conjectural from a legal point of view."

Wooley looked inquiringly at Sackler. There was an unpleasant degree of truth in what Justis had said. Sackler, I observed, appeared very calm. He looked as if he had at least one more rabbit in the hat.

"Big Joe Angers is cold on Barker's murder," he said. "Joey's testimony will burn him. He has a better chance if he comes clean in a courtroom. I have no doubt he'll drag Justis down with him."

Justis' face was pale. Wooley nodded slowly. He strode across the room to the telephone. "I'll see if they've picked up Big Joe yet."

He put the call through, spoke for a

moment, then hung up slowly. "Rex," he said, "there goes our case."

"My God," exploded Sackler, "I solve a case for you. Do you mean to tell me your coppers are so dumb they can't get a known crook like Big Joe Angers?"

"They got him all right," said Wooley. "But with bullets. He's dead."

Sackler clapped a hand to his head. The blood came back into Elmer Justis' cheeks.

"He came quietly enough at first," said Wooley. "But on the way to the station-house the boys told him what you'd already told me. That Joey's snatch hadn't worked. Big Joe said he was damned if he was going to burn. He snatched a copper's gun and started shooting. They shot back. Big Joe's in the morgue at this moment."

Sackler's shoulders sagged. His face was suddenly haggard and there was pain in his eyes. He uttered a groan that would not have been out of place at the Wailing Wall.

"Well, Mr. Sackler," said Bellows, "it certainly isn't your fault, even if we can't get a conviction. At least I'm cleared. That, after all, is what we were paying you for."

"You're cleared?" said Sackler as if that were the last thing he had been thinking of. "Who gives a damn about clearing you? The Diamond Dealers' Association says specifically: arrest *and* conviction. Those dumb coppers are plucking twenty-five hundred slugs out of my pocket."

"Well, gentlemen," said Justis rising, "if there isn't anything else at the moment, I'll be running along."

"Wait," said Sackler. "Wooley, don't let him go. I'll think of something. I *must* think of something."

I smiled happily. I examined the innermost core of my heart. I discovered that my interest in the triumph of justice was not so intense as my desire to see Sackler lose twenty-five hundred dollars.

All of us, even Justis, watched him with interest. There was anguish in his

eyes and the tortured frown on his brow was shaped like a grieving pretzel. Every brain cell had been drafted in a titanic battle for twenty-five hundred dollars.

HE LOOKED up suddenly. There was a familiar glint in his eye and his brow was clear again. He glanced across the room to Hymie and Mike. Then he looked at me. His eyes clouded again for a moment. He reached in his pocket, withdrew a worn leather purse and extracted fifty cents.

"Joey," he said, "will you run down to the corner and get two decks of cigarettes? I'm all out and you can get one for yourself."

"There are plenty of cigarettes here," said Bellows. "In that box there."

Sackler shook his head. "I've been smoking yours all afternoon," he said apologetically. "Go ahead, Joey."

I blinked at him. Sackler's worrying about smoking someone else's butts astonished me. Moreover, he'd never bought me a package of cigarettes since I'd known him. I took the fifty cents from his hand, suspicion welling up within me like erupting lava.

I donned my hat, walked from the apartment and closed the door behind me. I stood in one place and moved my feet up and down achieving the sound effect of diminuendo footsteps. There was something very screwy going on in Sackler's mind. I wanted to know what it was. I jammed my ear against the panel of the door and listened.

"I should have seen it before," Sackler was saying. "Hymie and Mike are the answer, Wooley. It's easy."

"Explain it," said Wooley.

"They're Angers' thugs. They were in on the deal all the way. They probably did none of the killing. Big Joe always does that himself. But they stuck me up for the check. They snatched Joey and myself. They know the whole story as well as Big Joe himself. They'll talk."

"I ain't saying nothing at all." This was Hymie's voice.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Sackler.

"Look at it this way. Talk and you'll be open for an accessory rap. Since you've turned state's evidence, you'll beat it with a few years."

"Rot," said Justis. "If they don't talk you can't put a finger on them. Why should they turn state's evidence?"

"If they don't talk," said Sackler, "God help them. They'll be held on a kidnapping rap. They'll get life."

There was a long silence. Then Mike said: "You mean if we play it your way you'll keep your mouth shut about the kidnapping?"

"Exactly," said Sackler. "Now will you sign a confession implicating Justis, here and now?"

There was a second silence. Then, "Yeah," said Mike. "Yeah," said Hymie.

"O.K.," said Sackler. Wooley, get a stenographer."

I grinned happily to myself. I tossed the half dollar Sackler had given me and caught it gaily. I went out of the house and bought two decks of butts. I took my time about coming back.



I TIMED my entrance nicely. The police stenographer had just pulled the typewritten sheets out of his portable typewriter. Wooley took them and handed them to Mike and Hymie. Justis, across the room, stared at Sackler as if he were a snake.

Sackler saw me, nodded hastily, and forced his fountain pen into Hymie's hand. I drew a deep breath and made my play.

"By the way, Inspector," I said, "I want those two men there held for kidnapping. They snatched me forcibly this afternoon."

Hymie dropped the pen as if it were a scorpion. Wooley uttered an oath, Sackler glared at me and there was sudden hope in Justis' eyes.

"Well," said Mike with finality, "that sort of changes things."

"Listen, Joey," said Sackler, "I don't think you ought to press that kidnapping charge."

"No? I thought we stood for law and order. I thought we stood for virtue. I thought—"

"Shut up," said Sackler, "I know what you're driving at."

"Good," I said. "How much?"

Sackler licked his lips and swallowed something in his throat. Wooley said testily: "What the devil are you guys talking about?"

Sackler said, not without a terrible effort, "Ten per cent?"

I said, with no effort whatever, "Twenty?"

It may have been a trick of the sunlight but I thought I saw a tear in his eye as he nodded.

"Very well," I said. "I was not kidnapped. I went with those two mugs of my own free will. I say this before witnesses. I shall make no attempt to press my trumped-up charge."

Wooley picked up the pen. "All right," he said. "Now will you sign?"

I beamed happily around the room as they signed. It was difficult to tell at the moment whether Justis or Sackler was more disturbed.

ON THE way back to the office, Sackler said, low fury in his tone: "Joey, you are a low, black-hearted eavesdropper. You listened at the door."

I smiled sweetly. "That I did."

"You are a blackmailing hound. You have no loyalty to your employer."

"Loyalty?" I said. "What about you? I was the guy they wanted to snatch. I was the guy to make the complaint, if any. Not you. You deliberately got me out of the room, hoping everything would be in the bag by the time I got back, so I wouldn't know what you were doing. You didn't even care if I did make the complaint after you had the confession signed and sealed. You were afraid I'd do what I did do. Threaten to screw up the signing until I got my rightful cut of the reward."

He shook his head and sighed. "What about the cigarettes? And my change?"

I gave him a deck of cigarettes. I gave him eighteen cents change. He weighed it in the palm of his hand for a long time.

"Joey," he said slowly, "under the circumstances I think you should pay for your own cigarettes. Give me another sixteen cents."

Personally, I believe that all Scotsmen are a horde of profligate spendthrifts.



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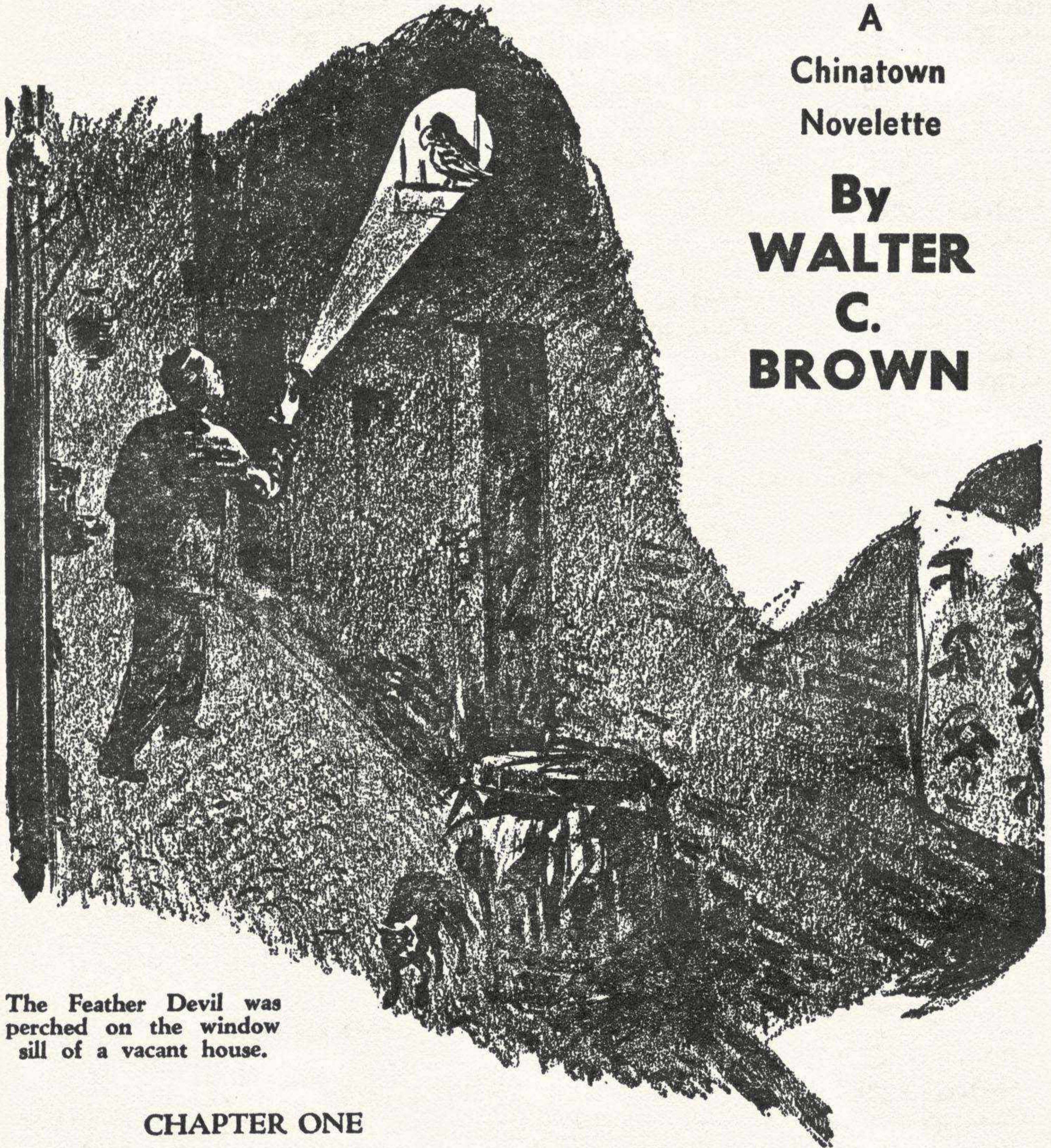
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THE PARROT THAT WOULDN'T TALK

A
Chinatown
Novelette

By
**WALTER
C.
BROWN**



The Feather Devil was perched on the window sill of a vacant house.

CHAPTER ONE

The Purloined Parrot



HE parrot is known by many names, but call it *perico*, *papagei* or *perroquet*, it is still a remarkable bird. Bespectacled professors describe it as a zygodactyl of the order Psittaci; howling

black savages of the Congo speak of it as The Talking Ghost—and down in Chinatown the slant-eyed Sons of Han call it The Feather Devil.

But mention the word "parrot" to Sergeant Dennis O'Hara of the Chinatown Squad and you will hear a shorter and stronger name for the species, for the Red-Hair Sah-jin, as the Yellow

Sah-jin O'Hara, Bluecoat Devil of the Chinatown Squad had been handed some queer crime clues in his dealings with the slant-eyed Sons of Han, but never a plastered parrot that wouldn't talk—not even to utter the three little words that held the key to a fabulous fortune.



Quarter calls him, is not likely to forget the mystery of The Parrot That Wouldn't Talk.

"That's the kind of breaks you get in Chinatown," O'Hara said. "Everywhere else the parrot is famous for imitating the human voice—so I get stuck with one that wouldn't talk. We didn't want a whole speech, either—just three little words, but drunk or sober, that blasted Feather Devil kept its beak shut."

Then O'Hara grins at you. "Never

heard of a drunk parrot, eh? Well, this one was plastered, all right—wobbling on its feet, and making noises like hiccoughs. Yes, sir, I've been handed some damn queer clues in my time, but that liquored parrot tops 'em all!"

It happened that the mysterious chain of events began one quiet evening as Yun Chee the tea merchant sat in his favorite bamboo chair, reading aloud from the poems of Li Po. Behind him, on a pedestal-stand near the open window, was a green parrot called Choy.

"Rawk-awk!" squawked the parrot, stirring restlessly.

"Silence!" Yun Chee commanded, frowning, then began Li Po's famous Moon Poem in a sing-song chant:

"I fish for the Moon in the Yellow River,
I cast my net with cunning hand—"

"Awk!" shrilled the parrot, and there was a swift sound like the rustling of feathers.

In rising anger Yun Chee twisted his head around—then his jaw dropped, and the wooden-bound volume of poems clattered to the floor, for a long arm had darted in through the open window, snaring the parrot in folds of black cloth. And before the startled merchant could spring to his feet, the pedestal was empty—the parrot gone!

"*Hai!* Thief! Thief!" Yun Chee yelled, dashing to the window in time to see a dark figure racing through the back garden. Snatching an antique Mongol dagger from the wall, Yun Chee dashed out to corner the brazen thief.

The marauder was halfway up a narrow ladder set against the high, spiked wall, when the merchant leaped forward and seized him by the legs, pulling him to the ground. As Yun Chee struck with his antique blade, his knife-hand was seized in a grip of iron. There was a brief, sharp scuffle—a scream—a groaning fall.

Wei Lum, the merchant's servant, hearing his master's cries, came running through the back door as the black silhouette of the thief was poised atop the wall, hauling up his ladder, then making a headlong leap into the darkness.

"*Ai-yee!*" Wei Lum wailed, crouching down beside Yun Chee's prostrate body to strike a match. The spurt of yellow flame revealed the antique dagger which was buried to the hilt in Yun Chee's chest.

"Mask—thief—steal—Choy!" Yun Chee gasped, then gave a bubbling

cough, shuddered, and subsided into limp silence.

"Poh-liss! Poh-liss!" Wei Lum screamed to the arousing neighbors, and dashing into the house, pounded out shivering crashes on a gong which hung in the hall.

DETEKTIVE DRISCOLL of the Chinatown Squad came on the run from Mulberry Lane, but Yun Chee was already dead when he arrived. He was busy questioning the servant when Sergeant O'Hara reached the scene in a red prowler car.

"Yun Chee—stabbed to death," Driscoll reported. "This is gonna be a tough nut to crack, Sarge. The guy made a clean getaway. We've got the knife, but it belonged to Yun Chee himself, and worse luck, Wei Lum pawed it over, trying to pull it out of the wound. That kills our chance of getting decent prints."

"Hell!" was O'Hara's brief comment. He stood outside the window through which the parrot had been snatched, his glance taking in the details of the richly furnished room. A red-and-gold lacquered cabinet stood just inside the window, holding a jade figure of Kwan-Yin and a vase with a plum blossom design.

"Look at the stuff on this cabinet, Driscoll. Here's a Kwan-Yin in mutton-fat jade. And this vase is genuine Ming. A thousand dollars' worth of loot right under the thief's hand, and he steals a five dollar parrot! Does that make sense?"

"Maybe he didn't know it was a Ming vase," Driscoll suggested.

"Could be," O'Hara conceded, "but show me a Chink who doesn't know mutton-fat jade when he sees it."

Driscoll rubbed his chin. "Look, Sarge, the parrot he stole wasn't even worth five dollars. For five bucks you can get a talking bird, and this one was just the squawky kind. Even so, it'll be enough to put a rope around that killer's neck—if he holds on to it! That's

the catch. If the guy has ten cents' worth of brains, he'll wring the bird's neck and toss it into the first ash can."

"I don't think so, Driscoll. This looks like a planned job to me. I think this fellow wanted Yun Chee's parrot—and nothing else."

"But why?" Driscoll argued. "Why kill a man for a dumb, no-account bird like that Choy? There's the Ming vase—and the jade. Either one would buy a boat load of parrots."

"Well, screwy things happen in Chinatown," O'Hara replied, "but there's always a reason behind it, and I'm betting this is more than just a sneak-thief job. We'll see, Driscoll. As the Chinks say: Time holds the key to every lock."

"I'd say the parrot was the key to this one," Driscoll replied. "How's chances of tracing it?"

"No dice," O'Hara growled. "There are dozens of those damn green parrots in Chinatown. The Chinks buy 'em from sailors along the waterfront. Some are kept for pets, others make parrot stew. If we start a systematic search, the news will be all over the place inside of five minutes. Our man simply gets rid of the bird, and we blow our only chance."

But the Blue Coat Devils were not the only ones in Chinatown concerned over the deed of violence which had sent Yun Chee to join his honorable ancestors. The tea merchant had been a high official of the Tsin Tien Tong, which would suffer a Number One "loss of face" if his death went unsolved and unavenged.

Soon it was rumored that the Tsin Tien Tong offered a reward of five hundred Rice Face dollars for the capture of Yun Chee's murderer, and that the tong council had already voted upon the punishment to be visited upon the guilty man. He would not be delivered to the Rice Face Law—no, by Tao! He would be taken to a secret place to hear his doom. Death—death by the split bamboo!

"Aye, a life for a life!" the yellow men whispered. "The Scales of Justice must be evenly weighted."

"It's a race, Sarge," Driscoll said, reporting the rumors. "If that Tsin Tien crowd get their hands on the killer first, he's a dead pigeon."

"All right, then, it's a race," O'Hara replied. "But I'll give you odds that their five hundred dollar reward goes begging."

But while the two greatest powers in Chinatown pursued their grim man-hunt in relentless rivalry, little Wei Lum, faithful servant of the murdered tea merchant, had his own ideas for tracking down the killer. Let the Blue Coat Devils hunt with death-dealing pistols, let the great tong bait its trap with silver. Wei Lum had a potent weapon of his own—music!

EVERY night the little servant went wandering through the crooked streets, pausing here and there in the shadows to play a Cantonese tune on his bamboo flute—a musical signal designed to catch the ear of Choy, the stolen parrot.

"In the house of Yun Chee," Wei Lum explained to O'Hara, "Choy always make a noise like whistling when I play the flute for the Master. *Wah!* Now I make music in the streets. If Choy hear my flute, he will whistle, wherever he is prisoner, and so I find him."

"That's a damn smart trick," O'Hara replied. "Keep at it, boy, but remember—if you're lucky enough to trace the parrot, don't try anything single-handed. This fellow's a killer. Just mark the house and come for me *chop-chop.*"

So Wei Lum played his squeaky little tunes in Half Moon Street and Paradise Court and Mandarin Lane, in Pagoda Street and Peking Court and Long Sword Alley—and when he had finished he would search the night hush with ears alert for the faintest reply from the captive Choy.

Then one night Wei Lum came racing breathlessly into the precinct station, crying out for instant speech with the Red-Hair Sah-jin.

"I find stolen Choy!" he panted to O'Hara. "Tonight, when I make my music in Lantern Court, I hear him call out. Sah-jin, the Feather Devil is a prisoner in No. 14—in the house of Chang Pao!"

"Chang Pao!" O'Hara exclaimed. "You must be crazy!"

O'Hara's astonishment was twofold. In the first place, Chang Pao was quite wealthy—Chinatown's most famous silversmith until he had been forced into retirement by a paralytic stroke which had left him with a crippled hand.

And to make Wei Lum's accusation even more fantastic, Chang Pao was at that very moment on his deathbed, speechless and completely paralyzed. O'Hara had the word of Doc Stanage, the precinct medico, for that.

"Chang Pao's had another stroke," Stanage had reported. "I stopped in to see him, but there's nothing I can do. It's just a question of time. He may linger this way for weeks, but the end is certain."

O'Hara placed these indisputable facts before Wei Lum, but the yellow man held stubbornly to his assertion that the stolen parrot was hidden away in No. 14 Lantern Court.

"Sah-jin, if there were a thousand Feather Devils in dark room, I will pick out the voice of Choy without fail!"

And Wei Lum's words rang with so much confidence that O'Hara was impressed. After all, there were two other persons in Chang Pao's house. There was his nephew, Chang Loo, who had been summoned from a distant city when the old silversmith's condition became worse—and there was his servant, Tai Gat, the limping *mafoo*.

But Tai Gat the *mafoo* was something of a Chinatown hero, noted for his unswerving devotion to his master. And as for young Chang Loo, a stranger to the quarter, was it conceivable that he

would go about stealing worthless parrots on the very eve of inheriting a great fortune?

Nevertheless, Sergeant O'Hara reached for his hat. "O.K., Wei Lum, we'll go around to Chang's for a look-see."

In the darkness of Lantern Court, the silversmith's house at No. 14 had the frowning air of a fortress. Lights shining behind the drawn shades of the upper floor revealed the tracery of iron bars, while all the windows of the ground floor were covered by solid wooden shutters, for Chang Pao had developed a fear of thieves that amounted to a phobia.

O'Hara's brisk rapping was answered promptly by a grim-faced *mafoo* wearing a *shaam* of dark blue denim.

"*Hola*, Tai Gat," O'Hara greeted.

"*Ala wah*, Sah-jin," the *mafoo* replied, bowing gravely. He walked with a heavy limp, memento of his courageous battle against two armed thugs who had invaded his master's house some years before.

"Sah-jin, you come for see Master Chang?" Tai Gat inquired.

"Yes," O'Hara answered, "but first there's another little matter. Tai Gat, do you have a parrot here in the house?"

"Yiss," the *mafoo* replied, without the least trace of hesitation or surprise at the question. "Master keep Feather Devil long time."

"Well, I'd like to have a look at it," O'Hara said crisply. "This man—Wei Lum—is searching for a parrot that was stolen."

"Stolen!" Tai Gat cast a disdainful glance at Wei Lum. "*Tsai!* Is this a house of thieves? Wei Lum is *gila*—crazy!"

"You lie, *mafoo!*" Wei Lum retorted angrily, roused by the measured scorn in Tai Gat's voice and bearing. "The Feather Devil we seek is here—here in this very house! With my own ears I have heard it."

"Pipe down, Wei Lum!" O'Hara commanded. "Tai Gat's offered to show

us the honorable Chang Pao's parrot."

"Words of wisdom, Sah-jin," Tai Gat declared. "One glance of the eye tells more than an hour's talk."

CHAPTER TWO

The Poh-liss Take Over



O'HARA looked about him with interest as he followed the limping *mafoo* toward the stairs, for the house of Chang Pao was a corner of the Orient magically set down in the very heart of the White Devil's city, and he had not been inside No. 14 Lantern Court since the night, several years before, when Chang Pao's shrill voice had screamed "Robbers! Robbers!" from an upper window.

Smashing his way in at the front door, O'Hara had found Tai Gat waging a desperate battle against two night-robbers, and holding his own against them despite a badly hurt leg from a headlong tumble down the stairs, an injury which had left the faithful *mafoo* with his heavy-footed limp.

But the attempted robbery had left its mark on Chang Pao as well. Grown secretive and suspicious, the silversmith lived in a hermit-like seclusion, fortifying his house with barred and shuttered windows, lining his doors with sheet-iron strips, so that they swung open as slowly and ponderously as the gates of a prison.

Tai Gat's slippered feet were noiseless on the stairs, but O'Hara chanced to stumble, and at the sound a door opened suddenly above, and a young Chinese in a gaudy house-robe of yellow silk moved quickly to the upper railing.

"*Hai!* What name you? What you want?" he demanded, peering down at them with sharp-eyed suspicion.

O'Hara knew this must be Chang Loo, nephew and heir to the dying silversmith. But before he could reply, Tai Gat's

voice cut in swiftly, naming the visitors.

"Poh-liss!" young Chang hissed, plainly startled. He straightened up stiffly, his right hand creeping into the folds of his yellow sleeve.

Tai Gat's voice went on in explanation. A Feather Devil had been stolen, and the Red-Hair Sah-jin merely wished to make a look-see at the Master's parrot.

The *mafoo's* words seemed to banish young Chang's momentary tenseness, although the sharp arrogance remained in his voice.

"Feather Devils!" he echoed haughtily. "Shall we be plagued with such trifling matters in the hour when my venerable uncle stands on the threshold of the Shadow-world? Poh-liss—*tsai!*" Young Chang spat over his shoulder and made a quick sign with his fingers. "Bid them begone till a more seemly hour!"

O'Hara's jaw settled into square lines, not liking the arrogant tone of this silk-robed upstart who made the "finger curse" as he mentioned the name of police.

"That trifling matter, Chang, happens to be a murder—Yun Chee's murder. I want to see that parrot—and right now!"

For a few moments their glances met and held in a tug-of-war—O'Hara's eyes of frosty blue, Chang Loo's shoe-button eyes of cold jet, with reddened lids that checked with the sour smell of rice-wine about him.

Then Chang Loo stood aside, sullen and silent, but as the *mafoo* brushed past he seized hold of his robe and pushed him against the wall. "Brainless fool!" he snarled. "Must you open the door to all who knock?"

So saying, he turned on his heel and stalked back into his uncle's chamber, while Tai Gat led them to a small room on the top floor—a room hung with plum-colored draperies and fitted out as a prayer shrine. There was an altar with jade bowls and the Chang ancestral

tablets, and a gilded wooden statue of Kwan-Yin, but O'Hara had eyes only for the green-feathered parrot perched on a shining steel hoop.

"*Hai!* It is Choy!" Wei Lum cried out, pushing forward, but the parrot gave no sign of recognition, merely staring at them with drooping, cynical eyes.

O'HARA caught the first dawning of doubt on Wei Lum's face as the yellow man scrutinized the green bird more closely—then saw the doubt deepen into reluctant conviction.

"I make mistake, Sah-jin," Wei Lum confessed. "This Feather Devil same for size and color, but it is not Choy."

"His name Shao," Tai Gat put in, and the green Feather Devil, cocking its head and cringing its claw, burst into sudden angry clamor with a raucous repetition of "Shao! Shao! Shao!"

"Shao—that means fire or flame," O'Hara remarked. "He should have some red feathers with a name like that. . . . Well, sorry to have troubled you, Tai Gat."

The *mafoo* made a polite bow. "You likee stop see Master Chang? Maybe you not see him again. Doctor Meng say Master go soon to join honorable ancestors."

On the way downstairs they stopped briefly at the room where the stricken silversmith lay silent and motionless on his *k'ang*, as though Yo Fei the Dread One had already tapped his shoulder.

Young Chang Loo stood at the window, smoking a cigarette. Doctor Meng the apothecary kept watch beside the *k'ang*, eyes fixed on Chang Pao's withered face. The gray-bearded *tuchum* of the Five Tongs Council was also present, and Sang Lee the scrivener, busy painting the prayers that would be burned the moment old Chang "mounted the Dragon."

They all bowed gravely at O'Hara's entrance, all but young Chang, who only turned his head far enough for a sullen, sidelong flicker.

O'Hara stood beside the *k'ang*, looking down at the unconscious silversmith. "Has there been any change?" he asked Meng.

The apothecary held a silvered mirror above Chang's nostrils and examined the result, peering through iron-rimmed spectacles which were without lenses. "Sah-jin, the Breath of Life grows weaker with every hour."

"I'm sorry," O'Hara said gently, for he regarded Chang Pao as an old friend. The Death Watch bowed gravely again as O'Hara turned toward the door, but out of the corner of his eye he saw young Chang scowl and make the same furtive "finger curse."

"Well, Wei Lum, we struck out on that clue," O'Hara remarked to the crestfallen yellow man when they were outside. "Are you sure you picked the right house?"

"Sah-jin, I play twice on the flute, and listen twice, to make sure it is Choy," Wei Lum declared.

O'Hara shook his head. "I suppose a couple of green parrots that look alike, sound alike, too. Don't give up your search, Wei Lum. Maybe you'll have better luck next time."

"*Kwei lung*—devil dragons!" Wei Lum muttered as he tucked the bamboo flute into his sleeve and padded off into the darkness of Lantern Court.

O'Hara glanced up at the lighted windows of Chang Pao's room. A distorted shadow slanted across the drawn shades—Chang Loo the lucky nephew, smoking his White Devil cigarettes, watching beady-eyed for the dawn of his Day of Riches.

And young Chang did not have long to wait, for the old silversmith died that night. Still unconscious, he breathed his last during the hour of the Tiger, which is between four and six A. M. by White Devil reckoning. O'Hara learned this from Doc Stanage, who had issued the death certificate.

O'Hara knew what routine steps would follow Chang Pao's demise. After prayers had been burned and the death

candles lit, Chang's body would be placed in its ironwood coffin and conveyed to the Hall of Sorrows in the Plum Blossom Joss House.



WHEN the tong *tuch-um*, with the proper witnesses, would seal the doors of Chang's house with paper strips bearing the tong insignia—seals which would not be broken until the silver-smith's will had been read and his lawful heir placed in possession.

Later in the day O'Hara and Driscoll attended that brief ceremony in the silk-draped office of Lee Shu the Chinese banker. Lee opened his iron vault and brought out Chang's sealed will, which had been in his keeping for several years. It turned out to be a short, concise document, leaving his entire estate, without condition, to his nephew, Chang Loo.

So Chang Loo presented his credentials for formal inspection by Lee Shu and the tong council, and became master of No. 14 Lantern Court and its sealed riches.

"That guy was born with a horseshoe in each fist!" Driscoll remarked. "Chances are he never had one dollar to rub against another, and now look at him. I hear old Chang left a shelfful of ginger-jars filled up and running over with Rice Face cash. But I bet young Chang'll empty 'em quick enough. You can see he's just itchin' to step out high, wide and handsome."

O'Hara nodded. "Funny, how Wei Lum's tip on the parrot brought us to Chang's house. When I caught young Chang making the 'finger curse,' I thought maybe we had something."

"Listen, Sarge," Driscoll grinned, "if we started hauling in all the Chinks who hate cops, we'd run out of cell-space in half an hour."

"But there *was* a parrot in the house," O'Hara declared.

"So what?" Driscoll argued. "Wei

Lum looked it over and told you it wasn't Choy. What more do you want?"

O'Hara made a restless gesture. "I don't know, Driscoll, but I have a sort of hunch that I've overlooked something—somewhere."

Then came the night when Sergeant O'Hara learned that stronger names than Feather Devil could be applied to a parrot. It was a night of lowering blue fog that turned the neon lights of Mulberry Lane into gaudy strings of smoldering jewels.

O'Hara, pursuing his usual rounds, paused at the gilded doorway of a tong house to put on the black slicker he had been carrying on his arm. The misty fog was changing rapidly to a steady, cold drizzle, and the few Celestials who were abroad drifted past like blurred shadows.

The iron bell of St. Mary's steeple tolled out ten solemn strokes—the hour of the Fox—as O'Hara came within sight of the glass lantern hanging beside the doorway to the Plum Blossom Joss House—a deep blue glow which floated in the smoky void like a sinister moon.

A globular shadow loomed up on O'Hara's left, bobbing along toward the brownstone steps of the joss house, and as the bulky figure passed under the peacock-blue lantern O'Hara recognized Mark Sin, Chinatown's Number One gambler.

He watched the slant-eyed master of gaming disappear through the Plum Blossom portals. Mark Sin's visits to the joss house were for one purpose only—to burn silver-paper prayers at the shrine of Liu Hai the Money God. Which meant there would be another "floating" fan-tan game tonight somewhere in Paradise Court.

"And just try to break it up!" O'Hara muttered, with the wry smile that came of long experience with the cunning ways of the Yellow Quarter.

O'Hara even knew who would be the principal players around Mark Sin's

gaming table. There would be Wing Lung the silk merchant, Kim Yao the goldsmith, Meng Tai the apothecary, Long Jon of the Tea House—and yes, no doubt young Chang Loo, the two-handed spendthrift who was treading a silken path since he had fallen heir to the wealth of his uncle, Chang Pao.

“Beggar on horseback!” O’Hara growled, recalling the many stories about young Chang’s unceasing round of carousing and drinking and reckless gaming. Chang Loo had not even made a pretense of mourning his dead uncle—no white sorrow-ropes for him, no period of fasting and seclusion, no ancestor joss burning in the Plum Blossom.

Moving like a black shadow, O’Hara proceeded through Half Moon Street and into Lantern Court. In passing, he glanced at the shuttered windows of No. 14, standing dark and silent as a Ming tomb.

“I wonder what old Chang would say if he knew how his hard-earned money was being thrown around,” O’Hara thought to himself. Well, when young Chang’s follies had eaten up all the Rice Face dollars, he could replenish his purse by stripping the old house of its valuable antique furnishings and start all over again.

“If Chang Loo lives that long!” O’Hara thought. For the slant-eyed upstart was arrogant and quarrelsome in his cups, conducting himself with the haughty insolence of a red-button mandarin.

THERE was a whispered tale of a rash insult to a certain tongster—one of the dreaded Red Lamp men—a deed which might well have cost Chang Loo his shadow had not Tai Gat the limping *mafoo* come to his rescue. But instead of being grateful, young Chang had screamed drunken curses at his uncle’s servant, and hurled a stone wine-bottle at his head.

“Guess I’d better give that blasted fool a talking to, before he gets a knife

between his ribs,” O’Hara said to himself as he groped his way across Lantern Court. The slow rain was beginning to drip eerily from hidden eaves, and somewhere in the darkness an unseen musician was playing a moon-fiddle.

Presently O’Hara found the narrow opening to Mandarin Lane, and so came out upon Canton Street. He walked past the dark houses, peering up at an occasional lighted window. Then O’Hara felt cobblestones under his feet, and knew that the bleary yellow glow to his right was the lamp-post at the entrance to the three-sided Court called Manchu Place.

And O’Hara stopped dead in his tracks, for in the murky depths of Manchu Place a tiny light winked on and off, on and off—and his ears caught a whistled signal, low and toneless and continually repeated.

Following the sidewall with outstretched hand, O’Hara moved toward the mysteriously winking light. “Flashlight!” he decided, and tried to make out the vague, blurred figure directing the beam.

The winking light focused briefly on the shuttered window of a house, clicked on again, centered now on a doorway above five brownstone steps. The toneless whistle sounded again.

O’Hara, quietly moving his gun to the pocket of his slicker, crept nearer the winking beam, closing in at an oblique angle.

“What goes on here?” he demanded sharply. “Don’t move, you! Stand there, and hold that light steady! I want a look at you!”

The beam steadied and seemed to freeze into rigidity as O’Hara stepped forward, but as he reached the brownstone steps he broke out with a muttered oath, for there was no one behind the light! At his challenge the quick-witted shadow had simply placed the flashlight on the top step and slipped away into the shrouding fog.

O’Hara snatched up the flash and swung the beam to and fro in a half

circle, then clicked it off while he stood motionless, listening. His ears picked out the faint pad-pad of slippers feet—a whispering sound that fled and died.

"A flashlight in a fog," O'Hara muttered. "Now what in thunder would he be hunting for?"

As if in answer to his question, a muffled cry shrilled through the murky dark—the raucous "*Awk-awk!*" of a parrot!

O'Hara whirled toward the sound, and when the squawk was repeated, his flash beam picked out the parrot. The Feather Devil was perched on the window sill of a vacant house, seemingly hypnotized by the glare of the electric eye turned upon it, for it made no effort to escape O'Hara's reaching hand.

"*Awk!*" said the parrot plaintively, and snuggled down in the crook of his arm. It was cold and wet and bedraggled, and one wing appeared to be injured. But it was green, this Feather Devil—all green—and a startling thought leaped into O'Hara's mind.

Could it be Choy, the parrot stolen from Yun Chee's house? Had it somehow managed to escape from its captor? And if this were so, the man with the flashlight might have been the masked killer of the tea merchant.

"And I let the guy run out on me!" O'Hara groaned. "Me, with a gun in my fist, and him not ten feet away! But at least I've got the parrot, and believe me, this Feather Devil gets a Number One going over!"

Unconsciously O'Hara's hand had tightened on the bird, and he felt something soft under his fingers, something that made him quickly focus the flash beam. There was a tight little scroll of cloth wound around the parrot's leg!

Steadying the flashlight under his arm, O'Hara unwound the ragged strip of cloth, eyes glinting as he saw that it was covered with ragged columns of Chinese writing in a deep red tint.

"Blood!" O'Hara exclaimed. "It's written with blood!"

With the precious scroll tucked away in his pocket and the Feather Devil nestled inside his slicker, O'Hara hurried back to the precinct station. "Hey, Driscoll!" he called, sticking his head in at the Squad Room door. "Get Sang Lee the scrivener! And take it on the jump!"

O'Hara went into his office and put the green-feathered bird on the edge of his desk while he closed the door and pulled down the windows. "All right, birdie, let's have a good look at you. Sort of mussed up, eh? What's your name—Choy? . . . Come on, speak up. Choy?"

"*Awk!*" the parrot said, and made a clumsy swoop to the top of the desk lamp. It swayed there for a moment, preening its ruffled feathers, then slid off awkwardly to the desktop.

"Hey, keep your tail-feathers out of the inkwell!" O'Hara exclaimed. "What's the matter—got a lame foot? You're wobbling around like you were drunk—"

O'Hara broke off short on that word, and leaning over the bird, sniffed. There was an odor, a most unmistakable Oriental odor.

"*Samshu!*" O'Hara burst out. "By God, it is drunk! A drunken parrot! What in hell's going on here, anyway?"

CHAPTER THREE

A Plastered Parrot



HE parrot wobbled along the edge of the desk, swaying. Its beak opened and a gurgling sound like a hiccup issued from its throat. Then it rustled its feathers and trumpeted "*Shao! Shao! Shao!*"

"What's that?" O'Hara stiffened alertly. "Say that again! Go on, speak up!" and he jostled the bird with his finger.

"*Shao! Shao! Shao!*" The raucous

word rattled out like machine-gun fire. The angry parrot sidled away, hiccoughing.

O'Hara sat down, slowly, not taking his eyes from the bird. Not the murdered Yun Chee's Choy, after all. This was Shao—Shao, old Chang's parrot! How had it escaped from the silver-smith's house in Lantern Court? And what desperate message needed writing in blood, to be sent out into the night with a drunken parrot as its fantastic messenger?

Unrolling the torn strip of cloth, O'Hara stared at the jagged red symbols as though he would tear out its meaning by sheer will power, but his limited knowledge of the "broken stick" writing was of no avail.

"Rawk!" The parrot made an awkward flight to the top of a filing cabinet as the phone whirred. O'Hara lifted the receiver. It was the switchboard man, telling him that Driscoll had returned with Sang Lee the scrivener.

"I'll be right out!" O'Hara replied, and hung up. The parrot was still perched, droopy-eyed, on the filing case as he carefully closed the office door behind him.

"*Hola, Sah-jin,*" Sang Lee greeted him in the Squad Room.

"Can you read this?" O'Hara questioned, thrusting the cloth message into the scrivener's hands.

"It is Number One poor writing," Sang Lee commented, squinting at the scroll. Then his breath hissed and his eyes grew round as jade buttons. "Sah-jin, hearken!" he gasped, and began to read the scarlet text.

"My name is Chang Loo, nephew of Chang Pao, silversmith. I am a prisoner in the fifth house on narrow street within one hundred fifty paces of my uncle's house in Lantern Court. Large reward to finder if this message is delivered to Blue Coat Men."

"Chang Loo—a prisoner!" O'Hara gasped in a startled voice. "In a narrow street, 150 paces from No. 14! That must be Mandarin Lane. But why

in hell doesn't he say Mandarin Lane?"

"Maybe he was taken there blindfolded," Driscoll suggested.

"If he was—how would he know it was the fifth house?" O'Hara replied. "But we're wasting valuable time. Get your hat and coat, Driscoll—and your gun. This is likely to turn out a shooting job."

"How about tools, Sarge?" Driscoll inquired.

"Bring a pinch-bar and a raiding axe," O'Hara directed, and hurried back to his office for his hat and slicker. But as he flung open the door, he stood rooted on the threshold, then let out a roar of angry surprise that brought Driscoll on the run.

"The parrot!" O'Hara fumed. "It's gone! Stolen again! I'll be damned!" He strode over to the open window, peering out between the wide bars. "This window was closed when I went out. That fellow must have trailed me from Manchu Place—"

O'Hara felt something crunch under his foot. He looked down, and found a number of melon seeds scattered on the floor by the window. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "This fellow opened the window and used melon seeds as bait to bring the parrot within reach of his hands. Then he pulled it out through the bars and ran—"

"And we'd better do some running of our own," Driscoll broke in. "Forget the damn parrot, Sarge. If that fellow gets to Mandarin Lane ahead of us, we're likely to find Chang Loo with his toes turned up!"

O'HARA commandeered one of the prowling cars and they sped to the Canton Street entrance to Mandarin Lane, picking up Detective Burke as they crossed Mulberry Lane. Leaving their car parked on Canton Street, the three men plunged into the darkness of Mandarin Lane.

"There's the fifth house!" O'Hara whispered, and they came to a halt, scanning their objective. It was not

really a house, but a two-story structure which had originally been a stables, later a garage, and finally abandoned altogether, judging by its neglected appearance and the planks nailed across its doors.

"No light showing," O'Hara declared, stepping back to scan the grimy upper windows, black and staring as blind eyes. The original pulley-bar of the hayloft still protruded between the dormer windows, like a hangman's gibbet. A separate door set in the sidewall led, apparently, to the upper floor of the building.

"O.K., Burke, stand guard here in the Lane," O'Hara ordered. "Come on, Driscoll, we'll crash this side-door and—hello, it's not even locked! That's funny—"

Driscoll's flashlight lanced the darkness of a flight of narrow, dusty stairs, ending at another door. They went up cautiously, O'Hara's hand slowly turning the knob of the upper door, then flinging it wide as Driscoll sent his beam sweeping over a bare, attic-like room festooned with cobwebs, its windows covered with heavy sacking.

The moving beam picked out piles of rusty and dusty junk—then focused suddenly on a brokendown armchair to which a Chinese was bound hand and foot. The Oriental writhed and wriggled in his bonds, trying to call out through a cloth bag.

"Cut him loose, Driscoll," O'Hara ordered, and struck a match to light an oil lantern which stood on an upturned box.

"Blue Coat Men! Praise be to Tao!" the yellow man gasped as soon as the gag was removed.

O'Hara straightened up, staring at the young Oriental. "What name you?" he demanded. "You're not Chang Loo!"

Then it was the Oriental's turn to stare. "Who say I am not Chang Loo?" he challenged. "Take me to my uncle Chang Pao the silversmith—he tell you *chop-chop* that I am his brother's son!"

"Hey, what is this!" O'Hara exclaimed. "I've seen Chang Loo a dozen times—I looked at his papers, his *hu-chào*, his *chock-gee*, when Chang Pao's will was read—"

"Chang Pao is dead?" the yellow man broke in excitedly. "*Hai!* Now it is as plain as black writing on rice paper! Tajen, I am Chang Loo! This other one is a thief who has stole my name, my papers—and now he steals my dead uncle's wealth! Hearken, Tajen—"

And speaking in a staccato jabber that was half-English and half-Cantonese, the young Celestial poured forth as strange a tale of evil plotting as Sergeant O'Hara had ever heard in this devious Quarter where the bizarre and the fantastic is a daily commonplace.

Chang Loo told how he had received a telegram advising him of his uncle's grave condition and had at once set out on his long journey to reach his dying uncle's bedside.

Arriving in the late evening, he had inquired his way to Lantern Court, but even as he set foot upon the steps of No. 14, a figure had loomed up behind him, jabbed a gun against his back, and growled a command to walk straight ahead and keep his tongue behind his teeth.

One hundred and fifty paces he had counted in the darkness, to this fifth house of the narrow street whose name he did not know. Still at gun-point, he had been forced up the dark stairs to this dark attic, where he had been tied into the chair and then gagged, by a man who wore a black cloth mask over his face.

"You've been a prisoner in this room, ever since?" O'Hara asked.

"Aye, Tajen," the young Chinese replied. The masked man had searched him thoroughly, taking away all his possessions, even a little jade luckpiece with the seal of Wan-teh.

He added the other details of his strange captivity. Once a day the masked man appeared to give him food and water and a few minutes' exercise walk-

ing to and fro, but always with bound hands. The masked man never spoke, only raising his pistol in a gesture that threatened instant death if the prisoner tried to summon help.

O'Hara and Driscoll exchanged swift glances. Beyond all doubt this young Chinese was the true Chang Loo—he had names, dates, facts at his command; he described with minute accuracy the very papers which O'Hara had examined in Lee Shu's office, even to a small piece torn from the corner of his official *chock-gee*.



THE other Chang Loo—the arrogant, wine-drinking, fan-tan-playing Chang Loo was a daring impostor who had engineered a brazen and spectacular theft of the old silversmith's house and fortune!

"There's cool nerve for you!" O'Hara exclaimed. "But this phoney nephew must have had help to pull off a job as slick as that." He turned to the young Oriental. "This masked man—did he walk with a limp?"

"No, Tajen, no limp."

"Hell!" O'Hara said. "I was sure it was Tai Gat."

"Well, it could be a single-handed job, Sarge," Driscoll declared. "Chang here says he hasn't visited his uncle since he was a small boy, so it wouldn't be much of a trick to fool Tai Gat. How could he tell it was a phoney?"

"I think the mask man is *gila*—crazy!" Chang put in suddenly.

O'Hara turned quickly. "Why?"

"Because of the parrot, Tajen. Always he bring this green Feather Devil with him, hidden under a black cloth. He tie the bird's foot to the floor, then he give it liquor to drink and poke it with a stick until the bird scream with anger. All the time the mask man mutter curses, and one time he kick the bird and hurt its wing—"

"Sounds crazy to me," Driscoll de-

clared, but O'Hara said nothing, his forehead knotted in thought.

"I think he is *gila*," Chang continued, "but it is Number One good luck for me. Tonight he bring the parrot with him, like always. He push it with stick, make it drunk. But while he is here there is big noise of bells and horns as the fire-wagons come close by the street—"

"That's right, Sarge," Driscoll confirmed. "There was a fire in the next block."

And young Chang gave the details of the sudden opportunity which had led to his rescue. The masked man, uneasy over all the commotion outside, slipped out to see if the fire threatened Mandarin Lane, leaving his prisoner bound to the chair.

But Chang had learned how to wriggle his arms free, although he could not release his feet, for the rope was knotted behind the chair. And since he had first seen the parrot he had worked out a plan for sending a message.

Coaxing the parrot within reach of his hands had been the hardest part, Chang declared. After that, everything had been easy. A feather from the parrot's wing gave him a quill pen, a scratch across his wrist drew blood for ink, a torn piece of cloth served as paper.

With the message hastily written and tied to the bird's leg, he had inched his chair over to a long-handled rake in the dusty rubbish. Perching the parrot on the rusty tines of the rake, he had lifted it up to a small air-vent under the roof.

"A push, Tajen, and the Feather Devil is on his way," Chang went on. "But I have just finish when the mask man returns. He make an angry shout and hit me. Then he tie my hands quick and run out, and I say a thousand prayers to Kwan-Yin that the Feather Devil will escape from him."

"That was a smart piece of work, Chang," O'Hara commended, "but you're lucky it didn't cost you your life."

"The fellow was too busy trying to

catch the parrot," Driscoll suggested.

"Yes—the parrot," O'Hara said slowly. "We're always running up against a Feather Devil. Look, Driscoll, the man who murdered Yun Chee passed up a thousand dollars' worth of easy loot to steal a worthless parrot. Why? And Chang's masked man, with a fortune at stake, risks everything to recapture Shao. Again, why?"

"That's easy," Driscoll replied. "He wanted to destroy that message."

"All right, then, let's see how he went about it," O'Hara said. "He chased the parrot along Mandarin Lane to Canton Street and then into Manchu Place, where I chased him away. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Driscoll said.

"I pick up the parrot *and* the message. That leaves the masked man with three choices of action: he can drop everything and take it on the lam, he can go back to Mandarin Lane and kill Chang Loo to silence him, or take him away to a different hideout. So what happens? He follows me back to the precinct and snatches Shao from my office. Why? What value has the parrot, after its message is in the hands of the police?"

"I don't know," Driscoll admitted, "unless the guy is *gila*, like Chang says."

O'Hara shook his head. "Well, we'll know more about that when we finish with No. 14 Lantern Court. Let's go!"

"We'll find nothing but an empty house," Driscoll predicted. "By this time that phoney nephew has packed up all the loose dough and skipped."

"And what about the parrot?" O'Hara queried. "Does the parrot go with the rest of the loot?"

"Oh, damn the parrot!" Driscoll snorted.

"Not so fast, Driscoll," O'Hara grinned. "There's a wild hunch floating around in my head, and if I'm right—there'll be a surprise waiting for us at No. 14 Lantern Court!"

THUS it came about that the real Chang Loo retraced the one hundred fifty paces which had deprived him of his

rightful inheritance, with three Blue Coat Devils walking by his side, armed and ready to enforce his lawful claim to the riches of No. 14 Lantern Court.

Chang Pao's house was as dark and gloomy-looking as it had been earlier in the evening, although the lifting fog had taken away its ghostly aspect. O'Hara went up the brownstone steps and hammered a brisk tattoo on the door.

There was no response, and he pounded again, while Driscoll watched with a smile. "I told you it'd be an empty nest, Sarge."

Then Burke called out from the rear: "There's somebody inside, Sarge! I saw a face at the upstairs window!"

"O.K., then, we'll waste no more time," O'Hara said. Jabbing the pinch-bar into the crack of the door, he gouged out an opening, then began to wrench. With a crackling of wood and a snapping of metal, the lock surrendered and the door creaked inward.

Gun in hand, O'Hara stalked into the hallway, where a silk-shaded light was burning. "Hey, Chang Loo! Tai Gat!" he shouted. "Come on down! Police!"

Then O'Hara scrambled for cover as Chang Loo's bright yellow robe moved in the darkness at the head of the stairs, and a long arm clutching a pistol reached snakily over the railings.

Flame sputtered from the black muzzle, and the dark stairwell echoed and re-echoed with the explosive reports. The glass panes of the vestibule door fell with a tinkling crash—a bullet skittered wildly from the face of a bronze gong, adding to the roaring clamor.

"It's no use!" O'Hara shouted up the dark staircase. "We've got you cornered! The house is surrounded! I'm giving you ten seconds to throw down that gun—or we come up after you, shooting!"

A harsh laugh was the answer, and a bullet that tore a long furrow across the wall, just missed Driscoll's head.

"O.K.—you asked for it!" O'Hara shouted as he sprang toward the stairs,

with Driscoll right at his heels, both pumping bullets into the upper darkness to clear their path.

The yellow robe whisked from sight as they raced up the staircase. They pounded in hot pursuit up the next flight of steps, but as they gained the upper hall a heavy door boomed shut and a cross-bar rattled into place.

O'Hara hurled his weight against the door. "Damn! It's like iron—must be lined with sheet-metal."

Driscoll hammered on the armored door with his pistol butt, calling out. "Better give up, Chang! This is your last chance! You catch bullet *chop-chop!*"

For a few moments he kept his ear against the door, listening, then shook his head. "No answer, Sarge."

O'Hara nodded. "Bring the tools—we'll smash our way in . . . Burke, cover the outside of the house . . . Chang Loo, keep back there on the stairs. There may be more shooting."

Sergeant O'Hara was an experienced hand with a raiding axe, but it took him nearly twenty minutes of furious hacking before the metal-shod door yielded to his attack. With the final blows, Driscoll moved forward, finger tense on trigger, but when the shattered door sagged back there was no need for shooting.

The impostor who had masqueraded as Chang Loo lay dead on the floor of the room, a pistol clutched in his hand, his bright yellow robe splashed and stained from the pool of blood collected around his head.

"What a mess!" Driscoll breathed, kneeling down beside the body. "Put the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger! Blew out the back of his head . . . Hey, Sarge, look! There's the parrot!"

The green Feather Devil was perched on the back of a chair, glaring at them with hostile intensity. "Rawk-awk!" it trumpeted, crisping its claws and ruffling its feathers.

"And look—the table!" Driscoll cried,

pointing. "We were just in time! He was gettin' ready to take it on the lam, with what's left of the loot."

O'HARA looked at the preparations for flight—at the disorderly heap of crumpled bills turned out, apparently, from two ginger-jars which lay empty on the floor, at a small camphor-wood casket packed with choice jade carvings in mutton-fat and *fei-tsui* and ornaments of gold and silver set with precious stones.

"Well, this guy was no piker," Driscoll commented. "It was all or nothing, and he sure gave us a run for our money. You'd think a smart guy like him would've fixed himself for a fast getaway. This room's like a jail-cell—bars on the windows, iron on the door."

"They all make mistakes," O'Hara said. He went over to the windows and tapped his finger against the metal bars, then opened a closet and sounded the walls briefly. Frowning in thought, he stood looking down at the dead man. "Funny we didn't hear the shot."

"Through that iron door?" Driscoll scoffed. "Say, he could have kicked off with a cannon while you were banging away with the axe."

"Too bad we didn't get him alive," O'Hara remarked slowly. "There are a lot of questions I'd like to ask."

Driscoll was busy searching the dead man's clothing. "Look, Sarge, here are the identification papers he stole from Chang Loo, even the little jade luck-piece . . . Recognize it, Chang?"

"Yiss, yiss!" young Chang cried, darting forward to clutch his luckpiece, while O'Hara examined the papers—the telegram which had summoned Chang Loo, his *chock-gee* and *hu-chao*.

"Hello—what's this!" O'Hara exclaimed, smoothing out a strip of red paper. "Chinese writing. Is this yours, Chang?"

Chang Loo ran his eye over the "broken stick" symbols, and his voice quivered with excitement as he said, "Not see this writing before, Tajen, but

it is for me—a letter from my dead uncle Chang.

"This writing, by the hand of Chang Pao, for the eyes of his nephew, Chang Loo.

Having great fear of thieves and night-robbers, who have thrice broken into my house in search of plunder, I have hidden the greater of my wealth in a secret place, safe from all searching, even by eyes sharp as the needle. Trusting no man, I leave the key to this hiding place in the keeping of Shao, my Feather Devil. Hearken to the three words he will speak—from those three words make one word—and that one will guide you to the hidden treasure. Use thy wealth with wisdom, son of my brother, so that the House of Chang may ever be held in honor."

For a few moments there was absolute silence after Chang Loo's voice was still, then Driscoll burst out excitedly: "There's your parrot clue, Sarge! Now we know why this phoney Chang hung on to the parrot through thick and thin! He wanted to get at old Chang's hidden treasure, and he couldn't make the parrot talk! That's why he poked it with a stick and made it drunk with *samshu*—he wanted to make it speak those three words!"

"*Hoya!*" young Chang Loo exclaimed. "It is plain as the rising sun!"

"Yes, and it's also plain that he never did get those three words out of Shao," O'Hara put in. "He was still working on that parrot tonight, when Chang Loo sent out his message. So the treasure is still hidden where old Chang left it, and the parrot still has the secret!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Triple Fire



WITH a single motion they all turned to face the green Feather Devil, sidling along its perch, staring back at them with a sullen hostility, as if defying them to wrest its secret by fair means or foul.

"Come on, Feather Devil, speak up!" Driscoll coaxed, scratching its crest. "Give us those three little words!"

"Rawk-awk!" said the parrot, and drew blood from Driscoll's finger with a nip of its sharp beak.

"Nice birdie!" Driscoll said soothingly. "Give us those three little words—so I can wring that blasted neck of yours!"

"You've got a job on your hands," O'Hara said. "Shao's been worked on by experts."

While Driscoll went on trying to coax the precious words from the stubborn parrot, O'Hara heard Burke's voice shouting up to him excitedly from downstairs.

"Hey, Sarge! Here's Tai Gat!"

"Send him up!" O'Hara called back, and the limping *mafoo* came hurrying up the stairs, bursting with excited questions about the broken doors, the bullet-scarred halls, the Blue Coat Man's tale that the New Master was lying dead.

With grim brevity O'Hara pointed to the sprawled body lying there on the stained floor, and recounted what had taken place in crisp, terse sentences that left the *mafoo* gasping with astonishment.

"Chang Loo not real Chang Loo!" he stammered. "Can there be two moons in the sky? *Ai-yee!* It is a devil-work past all belief! Sah-jin, I leave house after rice-time to burn prayers for Old Master at Plum Blossom Joss House. Young Master say he go to fan-tan game—now he is gone to ancestors. *Hoya!* The ways of the Lords of Destiny are hidden from the eyes of men."

O'Hara questioned Tai Gat about the arrival of the false Chang Loo. The *mafoo* replied that the impostor had simply rung the bell and presented the telegram as introduction. The silversmith had already lapsed into the coma which endured until the hour of his death, and Tai Gat declared that he had observed nothing to arouse suspicion about the stranger's identity.

Regarding Chang Pao's hidden treasure, Tai Gat professed complete ignorance. The Old Master had grown secretive and suspicious in his later years, and kept most of the rooms locked up, day and night. The *mafoo* was forbidden to enter his master's private quarters, unless summoned by the gong.

"Didn't you look after the parrot Shao?" O'Hara asked. "Feeding him, and so on?"

"No, Sah-jin," Tai Gat answered. "Shao live in Master's room until he fall sick. Then I move him to Kwan-Yin room so his noise not wake Master from sleep."

"Did you ever hear the parrot talk?" O'Hara questioned. "Did you ever hear him speak anything except his name?"

"Not listen, Sah-jin," Tai Gat replied. "Me not likee Feather Devil. Young ones good for eating, but old ones good for nothing but make noise."

"Well, you're wrong about Shao. Shao happens to be the most valuable parrot in the world." Abruptly, O'Hara turned to Driscoll, who was still trying to wheedle the magic words from the obstinate Feather Devil.

"Give it up, Driscoll," O'Hara said. "You're only wasting your time. You won't coax those three words out of him, not if you worked on it the rest of your life."

"Why, what do you mean, Sarge?"

"I mean that this parrot isn't Shao—not old Chang's bird at all! And it's not the parrot I picked up in Manchu Place, either!"

Driscoll straightened up, astonishment on his face. "But look, Sarge, how do you figure? Here, you can still smell the *samshu* on the bird, and here are the ink-stains on its feathers, from the inkwell on your desk."

"Yeah, take a good look at those stains," O'Hara replied crisply. "Those marks were made with black Chinese ink, thick as paint! Since when do I have Chinese ink on my desk?"

"Then—then there must be two parrots!" Driscoll exclaimed.

"Exactly! There's been a switch. This parrot is only a stand-in for the real Shao! But I haven't finished yet with the Chinese ink. Very interesting, that Chinese ink. It's going to tell us a lot of things, because the man who painted those marks on the phoney parrot spilled some on his own hand!"

O'HARA swung around suddenly, seized Tai Gat by the arm and twisted his hand into view, revealing a telltale smudge along the edge of the palm. "Now, Tai Gat, suppose you tell us how you got that stain on your hand!"

"Not know!" the *mafoo* declared with hissing breath, trying to jerk his hand away, but O'Hara only tightened his grip, pushing him against the wall.

"Where's that other parrot, Tai Gat? Where's the real Shao? You know! You're the one who made the switch tonight!"

The *mafoo* glared at him, sullen as a cornered animal. "Tai Gat know nothing about Feather Devil," he insisted. O'Hara straightened up, frosty-eyed. "So you spent the evening at the Joss House, burning prayers, eh? Well, we'll soon check up on that. The *bonze* will tell us if you were there, and how long you stayed. But I know you're lying, Tai Gat! You were in Mandarin Lane tonight—in the house where you kept Chang Loo prisoner! You were in Manchu Place, hunting for Shao with a flashlight! You followed me to the precinct to snatch back the parrot—then you came back here, back to this house, and *murdered* this fake Chang Loo!"

"Hey, Sarge!" Driscoll exclaimed in protest. "You're way off the course! This was suicide. Didn't we chase this guy up the stairs, didn't he shoot at us?"

"What we saw was a yellow robe," O'Hara replied, and leveled his finger at the dead impostor on the floor. "This man was dead before we set foot in Lantern Court. I could tell by the way his blood had soaked through the straw matting."

"I still think you're shootin' wild, Sarge," Driscoll said. "If this was murder, how did Tai Gat get out of this room? Look at it—door bolted, windows barred."

"I don't know how Tai Gat got out," O'Hara replied, "but I *know* he was inside. I can prove it. Look at this letter of Chang Pao's about the parrot. Here's that Chinese ink again—a fresh smudge, right across one corner. Tai Gat handled this letter within the past hour!"

"Not so!" the *mafoo* cried out. "It is a Number One lie!"

"I still don't see it, Sarge," Driscoll argued. "If you're right, why didn't Tai Gat keep this letter for himself, or else destroy it. It's the key to the whole thing."

"Wrong!" O'Hara corrected sharply. "The parrot is the real key. What's the letter worth if you haven't got Shao—the real Shao—to give you the three words?"

O'Hara eyed the *mafoo* in cold appraisal. "Your little game is all washed up, Tai Gat. You'll do no more hunting for Chang Pao's treasure, because you're going to jail for a long, long time. So you might as well hand over that other parrot. I know you've got it hidden somewhere in this house, and I'll find it, if I have to take the place apart brick by brick."

Tai Gat's tongue moved uneasily across his lips, his eyes darting here and there as if seeking an avenue of escape. But as O'Hara's hand gripped him in warning, his momentary panic passed, his slant-eyed face settled into the imperturbable mask of the Oriental.

"The Lords of Destiny frown upon me. *Wah!* I strive no more against the tide of evil fortune. Release your hands, Sah-jin, and I will deliver the true Shao into your keeping. He is hidden in the Kwan-Yin room."

"No more tricks!" O'Hara warned, alert for a treacherous move as he followed the limping *mafoo* into the little prayer-room. Tai Gat lifted the gilded

statue of Kwan-Yin to the floor, and then pulled away the black cloth which covered its pedestal. And there, under the stand, prisoned in a square wire cage, sat Shao—the real Shao—bound to silence by an ingenious wire gag fastened over its beak!

Tai Gat took out the bird and perched it on his forefinger. "Shao not talk for me—not tell me the three words of wealth," the *mafoo* said softly, then his face contorted with sudden rage and his voice rose to a snarling screech. "Now I fix so he tell no one!"

And Tai Gat seized the parrot by the neck, twisted its head around with one vicious swirl and hurled the dead Feather Devil at O'Hara's head.

"*Wang pu tau!*" the *mafoo* snarled, wrenching free from O'Hara's clutching grasp and springing for the door, no longer the limping *mafoo*, but a frenzied killer darting toward escape with full-striding vigor, twisting away from Driscoll, hurling Chang Loo aside, slamming the door behind him to delay pursuit.

"The stairs!" O'Hara shouted, wrenching open the door, gun in hand. But Tai Gat was not racing down the steps. The wily *mafoo* had darted into the room where the false Chang Loo lay dead and flung up the sash of the far window.



HE two detectives reached the battered doorway in time to see Tai Gat lift one foot to the sill as the seemingly solid web of iron bars swung outward in their wooden frame, like a grilled gate.

Driscoll fired and missed, but Tai Gat turned at bay, snarling, reaching for a shelf that held an array of bottles and drinking-bowls. With the fury of a madman he hurled stone bottles and porcelain cups and pottery jugs in a crashing barrage that filled the air with flying splinters and the rising fumes of rice wine and white Chinese whiskey.

O'Hara stumbled backwards as a stone bottle caught him on the shoulder, while Driscoll crumpled and fell under the impact of a blue-glazed *samshu* jar, his second shot plowing wildly into the ceiling.

Tai Gat took advantage of the momentary confusion to scramble out over the sill, and by the time O'Hara reached the window, the *mafoo* had left the narrow outside ledge and was crawling up the steep slant of the shingled roof.

"Come back here, or I'll shoot!" O'Hara warned, leveling his .38.

Tai Gat turned his head, spitting curses as he glared down at the detective. Then his hand-hold slipped—

O'Hara leaned far out, snatching at the blue *shaam* as Tai Gat slid past, but the cloth tore away from his straining fingers. For one sickening moment the *mafoo* held fast to the rain-spout, then the frail metal sagged and snapped off.

O'Hara's ears rang with the *mafoo's* last wild cry—he heard the dull thump as the body landed on the hard brick pavement three stories below. He saw Burke come running from the house, his flashlight probing the darkness, but he knew that Tai Gat was dead even before Burke's terse shout reached up to him.

By that time Driscoll was stirring again, brushing aside the broken pieces of blue pottery.

"Are you all right?" O'Hara asked.

"I'm O.K., Sarge." Driscoll managed a crooked grin as he tenderly explored the lump on his head. "Hey, what about Tai Gat? Did he get away?"

"A permanent getaway," O'Hara replied grimly. "He slipped and fell from the roof. Not a bad little trick, this window with the phoney bars. Now you see how he made that other getaway, earlier tonight."

Driscoll shook his head. "White or yellow, Sarge, they don't come any slicker than Tai Gat. Everything phoney—phoney parrots, phoney nephews, phoney suicides—yes, even a phoney limp. And the guy hooked us at the end, too. There's Shao, dead as a doornail. That

damn *mafoo*! Now we'll never get those three words!"

O'Hara turned to young Chang with a wide gesture that took in the cash and jades and jewelry spread out on the table. "Well, Chang, there's what's left of your inheritance. And of course, you'll have the house and the furnishings, so you won't exactly starve."

"*Kan hsieh, Sah-jin*," young Chang said, with a grateful bow. "What remains is wealth far beyond my simple needs."

"That's the spirit," O'Hara commended. "With the parrot dead, perhaps we'll never find the rest of your uncle's money."

"Yes," Driscoll agreed. "Parrot or no parrot, you can bet Tai Gat and his pal gave this house a Number One going over—and no dice." He went over to the table and stood looking at the heaped up valuables.

"The way I figure it, Sarge, they got the jitters when the parrot escaped with Chang's message and started packing up to take it on the lam. Then Tai Gat got the bright idea of bumping off his pal and letting the dead man take the rap."

"I think it goes even deeper than that," O'Hara put in. "I believe that this false nephew was only a stooge for Tai Gat's scheming. I doubt if he knew anything about the parrot, or the hidden treasure."

"But Chang Pao's letter!" Driscoll exclaimed. "We found it in his pocket!"

"Yes, but don't forget the smudge of China ink from Tai Gat's fingers," O'Hara replied. "I'll never be able to prove it now, but I'd bet Tai Gat planted that letter after the murder, to make the job look even more complete. He'd still have the inside track, so long as he had the real Shao under cover."

O'HARA opened out Chang Pao's fateful letter, and stood staring at it for a moment. "I'm convinced that Tai Gat engineered this whole job, from start to finish. Very likely he got hold of this letter when Chang Pao had his

second stroke, and started the ball rolling by stealing Yun Chee's parrot as a stand-in for Shao.

"But the parrot wouldn't talk, and old Chang was obviously on his deathbed, so he cooked up his scheme to install a false heir while he went on searching for the hidden treasure. However, his stooge got out of control—drinking and gambling and quarreling—throwing away the money too fast to suit Tai Gat, so when the parrot got away from Mandarin Lane with the message, he saw a chance to eliminate his partner.

"His first job was to get Shao back in his possession. With that done, he scurried back to Lantern Court, fixed up the phoney parrot with China ink and *samshu*, and then disposed of his pal—by treachery, no doubt. He put on the yellow robe to fool us, fired a volley, then dashed in here, bolted the door, put the yellow robe back on the dead man, and made his getaway over the roofs. That's my line on what happened."

"It sounds O.K. to me, Sarge," Driscoll agreed. "That joss house alibi will turn out to be as phoney as Tai Gat's limp. . . Phew! Smell the *samshu*, Sarge? I'm splashed all over from that damn jar. If I don't get these clothes off quick I'll get a drunk on just smell-in' the stuff."

O'Hara pointed to the dripping stain on the wall where the blue jar had smashed. "You're lucky Tai Gat didn't aim a couple of inches lower, Driscoll, or you'd have been a gone goose. . . Hey, what's this?"

O'Hara bent down and picked up a lustrous pink globule from the debris on the floor, and as he held it between thumb and forefinger his eyes lit with excitement.

"A pearl!" he exclaimed. "A big one—a beauty! And look, here's another one, and another!"

By that time Driscoll and young Chang had joined the hunt, eagerly turning over the jagged fragments of the *samshu* jar. They found more pearls, many more, some rolling free, others im-

bedded in a kind of waxy tallow which still clung to the broken jar.

"Pearls! A fortune in pearls!" O'Hara exclaimed, when they had finished their searching and young Chang Loo's hands held the gleaming heap of lustrous sea-gems. "Old Chang Pao dropped them into this *samshu* jar, then poured wax over them to seal them to the bottom. It's his hidden treasure."

"I'll say it was hidden!" Driscoll put in. "Why, even if you poured out the liquor and looked inside the jar, you wouldn't notice anything. Unless you smashed the jar, you'd never find 'em!"

And suddenly the solution to the strange riddle of the old silversmith's parrot flashed into O'Hara's mind. He turned excitedly to Chang Loo.

"Listen, Chang, the parrot's name was Shao, wasn't it? And Shao is the Chinese word for fire. But the parrot always squawked out its name *three* times—Shao! Shao! Shao! Get it? The three-word key to your uncle's hidden treasure wasn't three *different* words, as Tai Gat thought, but only *one* word, repeated three times—fire, fire, fire! Follow your uncle's directions, make one word of the three, and what do you have? Three times fire—triple fire."

"*Hai!*" young Chang exclaimed. "Triple fire—it is the name for *samshu!*"

"Exactly!" O'Hara said. "*Samshu* is a powerful liquor, distilled three times. It's as clear as crystal, once you get on the right track. Perhaps the parrot always squawked its name three times, and that's what gave your uncle the idea for hiding the pearls in a *samshu* bottle."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Driscoll exploded. "Think of that! Tai Gat prodding the parrot for its secret, and the bird screaming the answer at him all the time! And maybe the *samshu* he gave it was poured from this very jar!"

"Yes, it's strange the way things work out sometimes," O'Hara said thoughtfully. "You know, Driscoll, sometimes I almost believe those invisible Lords of Destiny the Chinks are always talking about do take a hand in things!"

THE SHADOWY LINE

By

J. LANE LINKLATER



HE was sitting at a table near the kitchen door, eating. It was a little after eight in the evening and she was no doubt through work and eating before going home. She was new on the job, too. Morrie couldn't put his finger on just why he knew that; she was acting composed and quiet yet he knew she was nervous underneath. A large

purse lay on the tablecloth near her hand, a good leather purse but a little worn and shabby. There was nothing shabby about the girl. She was neat and trim and her straight-featured face showed a quiet pride and her brown hair was fine and clean-looking.

Morrie, his back to her, was watching her, in the long mirror behind the Diamond Grill's counter.



The girl was almost through eating. She was wrapping something in a paper napkin, something from her plate. That was the second time Morrie had seen her do that. Whatever it was she had wrapped up was slipped into her purse.

She looked up suddenly, and saw him in the mirror. Well, what she saw shouldn't hurt her. He was still young,

built like a lightweight boxer, with a good blond head on top of a straight neck. Morrie smiled at her. He could do pretty well with a smile. Her smile was very faint and hesitant, and she lowered her head.

Her name was Myrna. He had heard her called that.

Morrie got up, paid his check and



"I hit him. Once. He never made a sound."

"I figure on taking the other guy all down the line. So I don't like to play with people I like," says the gambler. But when the gal he likes knows everything's a gamble and is willing to play the game—

walked out. He stood on the sidewalk and looked up and down the main stem and found it good. Gambling palaces flashed their invitations all up and down, both sides. He was new here in Las Vegas but he liked it. He liked the brisk fall air pushing in from the Nevada plains beyond, but best he liked the bright pulsing life of the place, the light, the clink of western coins, the tenseness of the play.

In a little while the girl came out.

Morrie touched his hat and said: "Nice evening. Going home?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"Mind if I walk with you?"

"Thank you," she said in a small voice. "But, if you don't mind, I'd rather go alone."

"O. K." Morrie grinned. "You don't think I'm fresh?"

"I don't think so."

Morrie watched her and admired the way she walked. She was small and erect and moved easily. She turned down Third Street and Morrie walked that way, too. Those trees, planted all along the Las Vegas streets, except for the main stem, darkened them and made following her easy. She walked past the courthouse, three or four blocks, and then turned along a boardwalk. The walk ran by the side of a house fronting the street to a smaller house at the back of it. A door opened and stood open for a moment. By the light behind, Morrie could see that it was a young man who let her in.

MMORRIE was at the Diamond Grill at ten o'clock the next morning, for breakfast. Myrna was on duty. He liked to watch her, liked to hear her voice.

Yet there was a line between them. He had been aware of that line with a few other girls, but more than ever with Myrna. It wasn't that he didn't have confidence in himself, but with some girls, like with Myrna, he felt there was a shadowy line between him and them—shadowy, but real as steel.

It was a feeling that if he stepped across to the girl's side of the line, it might not go well with her.

Not that he wanted to hurt her, not at all. But maybe it was the way he had lived: always gambling, on one side of the table or the other, ever since he could remember. Chicago, Philly, New York, New Orleans, Kansas City. It was the first time he had ever got as far west as Las Vegas, but there was gambling here, too.

He had thought, vaguely, of doing other things.

Morrie was through with his breakfast. He went out, walked up the main stem and turned into Third Street. He came to the walk that led back to the little house and followed it to the door. He knocked on the door.

The young man opened the door. Morrie looked him over quickly. He was fairly tall but very frail. He had dark curly hair and it was rumpled. The guy isn't well, Morrie thought, and besides there's something on his mind.

Morrie said: "Myrna sent me. She said she was worried about you, thought you weren't feeling so good this morning and for me to drop in for a few minutes. I saw her just now down at the cafe." Morrie stuck out his hand. "I'm Morrie Random."

The young fellow seemed puzzled at first. Then he said: "Well, thanks. Come in."

Morrie went in and looked around. The place was small, three rooms, and furnished barely. It was home-like, though. There were a few letters and postcards on the sideboard; Morrie glanced at them and saw some were addressed to Myrna Pierce and some to Ralph Patton.

Morrie turned to the young fellow, who had sat down, and said: "Well, Myrna said, 'If you aren't doing anything this morning,' she said, 'why not drop around and see Ralph. I'd like you to meet him anyway.'"

The young fellow, still nervous, but polite, said: "Well, I appreciate it. I

don't think my sister has mentioned you. She's been working there only three days. And we don't know anybody around here."

Morrie nodded. "I'm a stranger myself in these parts. Have you been staying here long?"

"Only a week."

Morrie grinned. "Five weeks more to go, huh?"

"That's right."

So one of them, either Myrna or Ralph, was here for a divorce, living out the six-weeks residence required before filing. He guessed it was Myrna.

Ralph said: "How about some coffee?"

"Sure," said Morrie.

They went into the tiny kitchen. Ralph put the coffee pot on the gas. While he was doing that, Morrie's eyes traveled. He saw a couple of green paper napkins, crumpled down in the trash bucket.

Those napkins came from the Diamond Grill. Morrie guessed one napkin had held a sandwich and the other a piece of cake. A sandwich and a piece of cake for Ralph.

They sat and drank coffee. Morrie began to find out things. It's easy to draw some people out, Morrie very well knew, especially when they are hard pressed.

Ralph talked without knowing it. Mostly about his sister, Myrna.



MYRNA was twenty-one, a year younger than Ralph. She had been married at sixteen to a man much older than herself. It turned out pretty bad.

The man had a job in the city hall, out there on the Coast, and he was a good fellow with the gang but a tyrant at home. Myrna had stood it three years and then she had left him.

That had been hard to do. The man threatened all sorts of things if she left him, but she finally did. Then he threatened all sorts of things if she divorced him. "If you go through with it, I'll kill you! I'll kill your brother! I'll kill myself!" That was the way he talked. That was the kind of a heel he was. Morrie understood; he had met guys like that.

Maybe he'd carry out his threats and maybe he wouldn't. Myrna had no way of knowing, so it made it hard. She had decided to work and save her money and then go to Las Vegas, and get a quiet Nevada divorce. It would be much easier that way. She had saved seven hundred dollars. That was to pay for her living and legal expenses and something more to take her and Ralph back to the Coast.

Morrie didn't ask what she was doing working in a cafe and toting home food in napkins if she had seven hundred dollars. But he noticed that when Ralph

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touched on that subject he was pretty nervous.

"Trouble is," Ralph said, "I'm no help." He thumped his puny chest. "No good. Can't hold down a job."

"You do any kind of work?" asked Morrie.

"Some, but I never made much at it. I like to think I'm an artist. I've sold a few paintings, that's all. It's all right if you're darn good and manage to get recognition. If you're one in a thousand, you do all right—otherwise it's slow starvation."

"I guess it's a tough racket," Morrie said. "It's great stuff, though. You got anything here of yours?"

"Not much." Talking about art seemed to quiet Ralph a little. "Like to see it?"

"Sure."

They went into a bedroom. An easel was set up close to the window. A curtain was hung across a corner and Ralph drew it aside. Half a dozen paintings were tacked on boards. Most of them were landscapes. Morrie noticed one peaceful-looking scene showing cows in a field. There was one nude and Morrie felt a little embarrassed. The face was turned away but he had a feeling that Myrna had posed for it.

Morrie said: "I don't know much about art, but they look swell to me. Say, I might be able to sell one of them for you."

Ralph brightened perceptibly. "Do you really think so?"

"Maybe. To a pal of mine. How much would you want?"

"Well, I know I can't expect much," Ralph said dubiously. "If I got twenty dollars for the best of them I'd be lucky. You think you could get that much for me?"

Morrie shook his head. "Twenty bucks isn't much. You need more than that, don't you?"

"Need!" The word seemed to shake Ralph. He sure is in bad shape, Morrie thought. "Need! I'm afraid there's no hope of getting what I need!"

THAT was getting around to it, getting close to where Morrie had been heading.

"I don't get you," Morrie said. "I thought you said Myrna had seven hundred bucks. I don't see why—"

"She *had* seven hundred," Ralph cut in. His eyes were getting wild and his long fingers were trembling. "She had it until her rotten brother lost it for her!"

"Take it easy, Ralph. How'd you lose it?"

"I thought I was smart. We got here a week ago. Myrna saw the lawyer and made arrangements, paid him an advance. We had about six hundred left. I had it. But I thought I was smart—"

"Gambling, huh?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Morrie, "these layouts are all right. That is, they're straight enough. But the percentage is against the customer. You can't win if you stay with it."

"It wasn't a gambling house. I met a fellow who was just having a little game up in his hotel room. Poker. He was a crook. I let him rob me! I really thought I could make some money for Myrna. I was a rotten fool. I might have had a chance, but he was a crook. He had another fellow with him—"

"What's his name?"

"Nolan. Hank Nolan."

"I know him," Morrie said. "Nolan is no good. I don't like him. Who was the guy working for him?"

"The other fellow's name was Harber."

Morrie nodded. "Jake Harber. I've met him, but I don't know him very good."

Ralph stared at Morrie. "What would you do if some crook beat you out of your money—out of your sister's money?"

Morrie didn't even think about that. He said: "I'd take it away from him. One way or another, I'd take it away from him." Morrie was leaning against an old bureau. He noticed a small pho-

tograph in a frame on the bureau, a picture of a young man. He picked it up. "Say," he said, "who's this?"

"Eh?" Ralph's mind was churning over about the money, and he barely looked at the photograph. "Oh, that's Jim Field. Jim works in an aircraft factory, out on the coast. He's a swell fellow."

Morrie grinned. "Jim is whacky about Myrna, huh?"

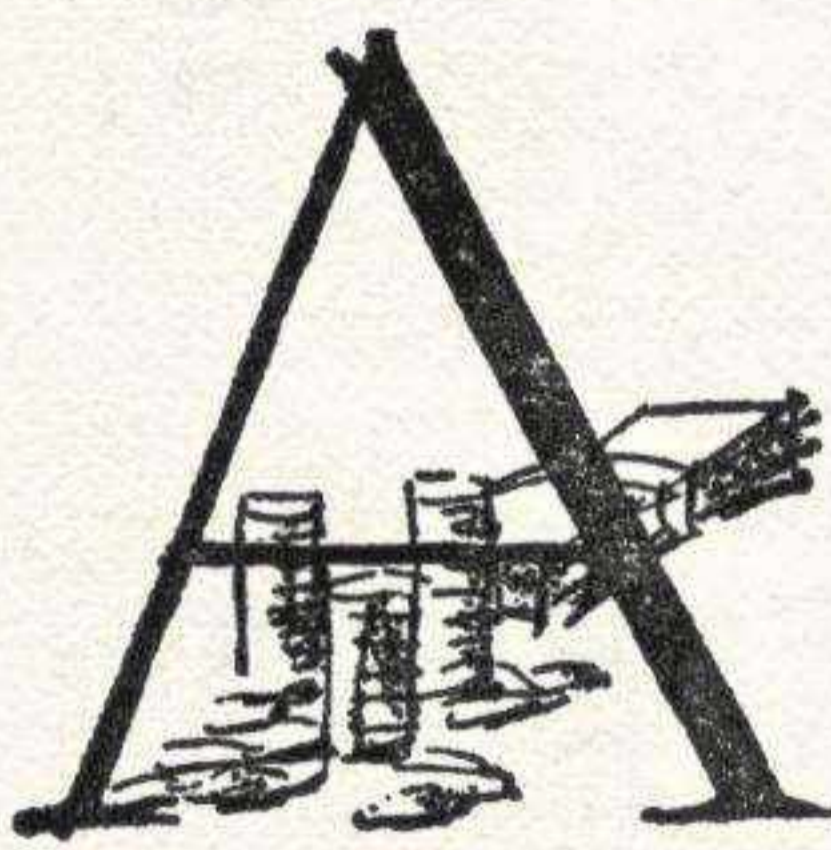
Ralph smiled feebly. He seemed to be thinking of something else, but he said: "Yes. Always has been. I guess Myrna likes him first rate, but she wouldn't think of anything like that until she got the old business cleaned up."

Morrie studied the face. Yes, it was a good face. Uneven features, but they were put together nicely. A friendly straightforward face. There wouldn't be any line between a guy like that and a girl like Myrna.

Still, Jim was 'way out on the Coast, busy in a factory. And Morrie was here, and he could take all the time he wanted.

Morrie said: "Well, Ralph, I got to go. I'll see about peddling a picture for you. We'll do all right."

Ralph let him out. He was quiet. It was bad, though, Morrie thought. A bad kind of quietness.



AT TWO o'clock Morrie went back to the Diamond Grill. Myrna would be getting off for the afternoon. She was just sitting down with her lunch at the table near the kitchen door.

Morrie said: "Mind if I sit at this table with you?"

She hesitated, then smiled. "All right."

"I got a confession to make," Morrie said, as soon as he had ordered his sandwich. "I was over to your house, talking to Ralph."

She colored a little. "I didn't know you knew him."

"I just barged in." Morrie grinned.

"You think I'm kind of nervy, huh?"

She hesitated again. "Maybe, but that's all right."

"Ralph is a swell guy," Morrie said. "He paints fine pictures, too." Morrie fiddled with his paper napkin. "That Jim Field looks like a great guy, too," he added.

She colored a little more and her lip tightened. She looked beyond Morrie, out of the window, as if she were looking far west. "Yes," she said, "Jim is certainly swell."

Morrie was glad that was out. He expected her to feel that way, and it didn't worry him, much. Now it was time to talk about himself.

"I haven't done much of anything myself. I guess I'm what you'd call a gambler."

"I had wondered," Myrna said. She looked at him quite straight. "Well, I'll bet you're a good one."

"In some ways I'm pretty good," Morrie conceded. "Only I don't like to gamble with friends, with people I like. That's bad business, feeling like that."

"Why don't you like that?"

"I play hard. I figure on taking the other guy all down the line. So I don't like to play with people I like. It's bad business, being that way."

"Have you never thought of doing anything else?"

"Why, yes," said Morrie. "Yes. Especially being out here in Nevada gives me ideas. Now, right here in town is something like I always been used to, bright lights and hotel rooms and cards and dice. But all around the town is different. The wind blows the smell of the country into the town. It is the west, like you see in the movies. Cattle and horses. Even guys with guns, guns they have hanging on a belt out where you can see 'em, not hid away in a pocket."

"Yes," said Myrna. "I like that, too."

"So I think maybe I'll get me a ranch. I could blow into town any time I felt like it."

"Yes," said Myrna. "That would be good."

Morrie got up. "Glad you like the idea," he said. "Well, I got to go now." He fingered his lower lip, more nervous than he was used to being. "I thought maybe tonight, at eight o'clock, when you got off duty, being as I know Ralph now, you might let me walk home with you."

Myrna thought about that. Morrie knew what she was thinking. She was thinking about her life, and about Jim Field. And about what was happening to her. Morrie wasn't worried about that, much.

"All right," she said presently.

HE WALKED home with her, under the trees along Third Street. They didn't talk much. They turned along the boardwalk and Morrie noticed that she was hurrying.

"There's no light," she said. "There's usually a light in the front room but I don't see any. Maybe something's happened."

The door was locked. Myrna found a key and unlocked it. They went into the dark house and turned on lights. Ralph wasn't there.

Myrna sat down. She said: "He shouldn't have gone out. He might get sick. And why should he have gone out now anyway?"

"He'll be here soon," said Morrie. "He probably expected to be back before you got in."

That was the way he figured it. But he didn't blame Myrna for being worried. He had a feeling there was something to worry about.

And, in a few minutes, Ralph came. They heard him running down the walk. Myrna had the door open for him. He stumbled in. He had been running hard. He dropped on the couch. His long fingers were shaking.

Myrna said: "Ralph! What's happened?"

Something had happened. When anything happened, Ralph wasn't the kind who could conceal it. Ralph would spill it, Morrie thought.

"I got it!" Ralph said. "I got it back! Yes, sir! I got it back!"

"You got what back?" Myrna said.

"The money. I got it back from Hank Nolan." Ralph was shaking all over. He was sick and crazy. "The crook! If I hadn't known he cheated, I wouldn't have—"

"Ralph!" Myrna was down on her knees in front of Ralph. She was talking like a mother to her boy. "What have you done? Tell me—how did you do this thing?"

"I got it back," Ralph said, very tired. He pulled a long wallet out of his pocket, broke it open, showed the edges of a stack of currency. "All of it, I guess. Maybe more. I don't know." Ralph looked at Morrie and grinned. "That's the way to do it, eh?"

Morrie said nothing. He was looking at Myrna. But he knew what Ralph meant. Ralph had asked him what *he* would do if someone robbed him of his money—his sister's money—and he had said he'd get it back. Just get it back, that's all.

But this was wrong. This was different.

Morrie said quietly: "How did you do it, Ralph?"

Ralph looked up. "Eh? Oh, I knew I had to use force. But I couldn't use a gun. If I had a gun I might kill him. So I used a club. I got a piece of wood about a foot long and hammered some nails in one end to make it heavy and then wrapped it in canvas. I put the club under my coat and went over town. I watched for Nolan. I saw him come out of his hotel. I followed him. Pretty soon he was at the bar in the Monte Drake and I was behind a slot machine. I heard him tell someone he was going some place and would go out the back way. So I went out to the alley and waited. It was dark. He came out. I hit him. Once. He never made a sound. He lay on the ground and I took the money and ran home."

"You—you haven't killed him?" said Myrna.

"No. I don't think so. He was breathing all right."

Morrie sat down. This would take some thinking. This was wrong. If he had done it himself it might have been all right—anyhow, not so bad. He probably wouldn't have done it that way, but anyhow it would have been more in line if he had done it.

"How about the stick?" Morrie said. "The stick you made the club out of. Where did you get it?"

"Out in the back yard here. I think it was part of an old table leg. It made a good club."

"And the canvas," Morrie said. "The canvas you wrapped around the stick?"

"Oh, that," said Ralph. "It was some of my canvas."

"And where is the club now?"

"The club? Why, I guess I just dropped it in the alley."

"You left it in the alley?"

"I left it there."

Morrie wagged his head. "Did Nolan get a look at you before you conked him?"

"Eh? I don't know. I guess he did. My arm seemed paralyzed for a moment just before I hit him and he stared at me. He seemed paralyzed, too."

Yes, Morrie thought, Nolan would have been paralyzed with fright. It was pretty bad. Ralph hadn't used his head at all. In fact, he didn't have any head to use, not for that kind of a job.

Myrna, kneeling in front of Ralph, was stroking his fingers, along the backs of them. Ralph looked sick now.

Then Myrna said gently: "Ralph, we must return this money!"

"What?" said Ralph.

"We must return the money, darling. It was fine of you to try to set things right, but it was the wrong way to do things. This money won't do us any good—not getting it this way."

Ralph was dazed. "But it's your money!"

"Not this money isn't," Myrna said. "We must get it back to Nolan." She looked up at Morrie. "Isn't that right?"



HE was making it tougher. Here Morrie was trying to figure some way to keep the money and protect Ralph at the same time, and Myrna was bothered about who the money really belonged to.

But Morrie said: "Well, yes, I guess that's right."

"I don't understand," Ralph said. "How can I get the money back to Nolan?" He was docile with Myrna, obedient. "I guess I'd have to give myself up, wouldn't I?"

Morrie put in briskly: "Myrna is right, but we don't have to rush into this. You're all in, Ralph. You'd better go lie down for awhile and take a rest. After that we can figure what we ought to do."

Myrna nodded. "That's right, Ralph. Go in and lie down."

Ralph got up. He was tired and sick. He went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Myrna said: "I want to do this right. I want that money to go back to Nolan. At the same time, I must see that Ralph is protected. You understand?"

"Well, we've got to figure something fast," Morrie said. "Just getting the money back would be easy, but covering up for Ralph is something else again. I hope Nolan is hurt bad."

"Oh, I hope not," said Myrna.

"Better if he is, then maybe he can't talk for awhile. Maybe he recognized Ralph. Anyhow, it was pretty bad, leaving that club in the alley. That stuff can be traced without much trouble. The stick and the canvas."

"I hope you understand about Ralph," Myrna said. "It's been too much for him. He and I are all of our family. You stick pretty close when there are two of you like that. He's been carrying my worries in his head for the last five years. It's been too much, in his condition."

"Sure. But how about the dough?"

"Ralph can't handle it," said Myrna. "So it's up to me. I'll take the money and go find Nolan and talk to him. Maybe, me being a girl, it'll go easier."

Morrie said: "Not with Hank Nolan. He's a snake. He's a robber himself but let anyone touch *him* up and he yells copper at the top of his voice."

"I've got to take a chance on that," Myrna said. "Because Ralph can't—"

The bedroom door opened. Ralph leaned against the door. He looked sick, and grim, and very sober.

He said: "I'll take that money back to Nolan. Nobody else can do that. It's my job."

"All right," Myrna said soothingly. "But you'd better rest for awhile."

"Sure, go back to bed," said Morrie. "There's no rush."

Ralph went into the bedroom again and closed the door.

"No, this is my job," Myrna said to Morrie, speaking low. "Ralph can't do it himself—"

"Listen," said Morrie. "Look at it straight. If Ralph is caught, he's through. Maybe he was robbed but he can't prove that. And slugging a guy on the head and taking his dough brings plenty time in the jug. Nolan won't go easy with him, no matter who brings his dough back. Ralph or you, it's all the same with Nolan. Either way, Ralph draws time."

Myrna drew breath in fast. "That would kill him!"

"Sure. So there's only one thing to do."

"What?"

"Leave it to me."

Her head moved slowly from side to side. "How?"

"Just leave it to me. Give me the cash and leave it to me to get it to Nolan. Maybe I can cover up for Ralph, too. I don't know."

"But wouldn't that be bad for you?"

"Not if I do a good job. How much money is there?"



RECIPE FOR MURDER

The black horse van pulled up in front of the all-night lunch wagon and the driver got out and pushed through the door. "Couple hamburgers in a sack," he gruffly told the waitress. "Bottle of beer to go with 'em . . . and a couple dozen of them bananas . . . and about five sacks of that popcorn on the rack there . . . and an old spoon and some big kitchen matches. I'm in a hurry." The girl was wide-eyed as she turned to fill the order. . .

Mr. Maddox was curious, too, for in all the years he had been following the bangtail circuit, the bland Buddha-like bookie had never heard of feeding a race-horse popcorn from a spoon by the light of a kitchen match. You'll get a kick out of this smashing novel-length murder mystery by T. T. FLYNN—*The Devil in the Horse Van*.

Plus a new Max Latin novelette—*Don't Give Your Right Name!*—by NORBERT DAVIS, in which the brandy-guzzling gourmet of Guitierrez' restaurant is back to solve a brace of murders after each drink; *The Corpse With Two Left Feet*, an Acme Indemnity Op novelette by JAN DANA; *Eight Hours to Doom*, a novelette by W. T. BALLARD; and others shorts and features. This great DECEMBER issue is on sale now!

**10¢ DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

Ralph had dropped the wallet on the couch. Myrna handed it to Morrie. He counted the money carefully.

"There's a little over three grand here," he said.

"Three thousand? Well, I hate to put this job off on you. I couldn't forgive myself if anything happened to you because of it."

Morrie put the wallet in his pocket. Myrna went with him to the door. She looked worried.

"Maybe I'm watching out for myself," he said, and laughed. "I got three grand. I got it easy. Maybe I'll just decide to keep it."

He looked down at her. She was very pale, but there were bright spots of color in her cheeks. He kissed her, hard. He couldn't tell by her eyes what she thought of that. Well, maybe he shouldn't have done it. It wasn't right, but it wasn't bad either.

"Yes," he said, "I guess I'm looking out for myself."

HANK NOLAN was in his hotel rooms. Morrie found out about that first. His hotel had been handy and they'd carried him there. Nolan had some concussion. He'd come out of it all right, the doctor said, but he was still dead to the world, might stay that way for several hours.

No doubt Nolan had recognized Ralph, Morrie thought. But maybe he wouldn't remember. Sometimes people couldn't remember what had happened for hours before they got knocked out. But you couldn't depend on that. No. You could depend on Nolan remembering. And of course the police would stay with him. The police would want a statement from him as soon as he could waggle his tongue.

The coppers were good here in Las Vegas, Morrie had heard, smart police officers.

"VIVA CHINA!"

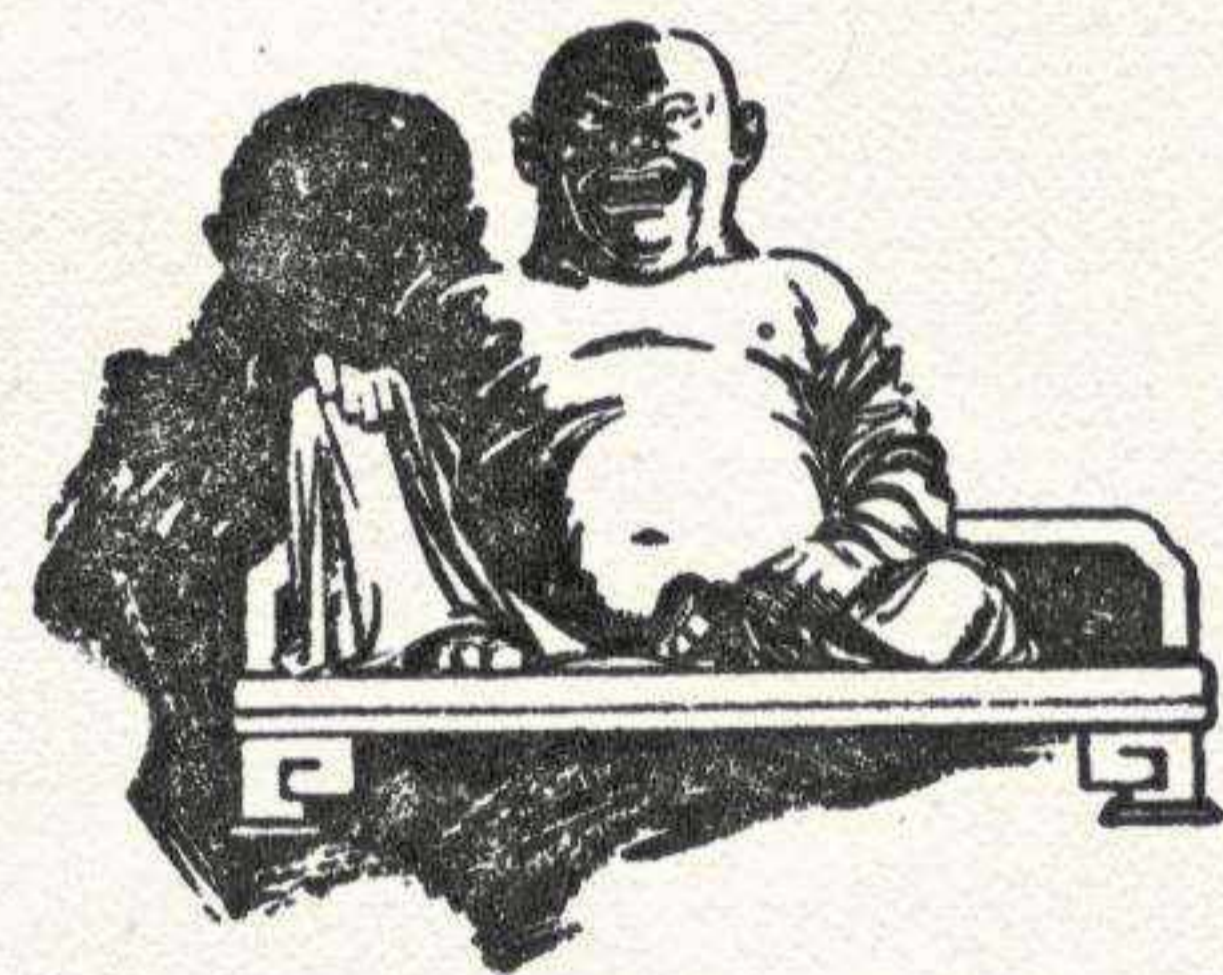
This gripping two-part novel of the Sino-Japanese War today, by James Norman, takes you on a camouflaged train up the Yellow River Valley, where you'll meet American ambulance drivers, British newspaper correspondents, soldiers, coolies, refugees—all the welter of humanity swimming against the flood tide of invasion—and one character you won't forget: Gimiendo Hernandez Quinto—blood cousin to Pancho Villa, commander of the Guerrilla Fighters' Training School at Lingtung, and the best damn *caballero* in all China!

Plus a thrilling novelette of the Caribbean Neutrality Patrol—"Murder in Martinique" by Richard Howells Watkins; Thomas H. Raddall's "Petticoat Pilot," culled from the log of the *Linda M.* and proving that ladies and lime-juicers don't mix; "Three Roads Home," an unusual Western by Jack Byrne; "Kag the

Killer," a tale of the dawn of man, by John Murray Reynolds; "Riders East," a factual account of the Great Cowboy Race, by Walter Livingston; and the usual features found only in Adventure!

Adventure

 15c



On Sale Now!

Well, he had three thousand bucks of Nolan's dough. It didn't seem right to hand it back—not to a guy like Nolan. But that's what Myrna wanted, and it had to be done.

But Ralph had certainly overlooked everything. There should be an angle that might work the other way, too, but Ralph would never be able to think of it.

For instance, Ralph had heard Nolan say he'd leave the Monte Drake by the back way. That hadn't meant anything to Ralph except a chance to get Nolan alone in the alley. But why leave by the back way?

That wasn't so difficult to figure. Nolan would go out the back way because he wanted to avoid somebody. Who would he want to avoid? A sucker. What kind of a sucker? One whose cash he had already acquired. Why would he want to avoid the sucker? Because the sucker had woke up, sore, and wanted to start something.

Well, now it was necessary to get to Nolan, fix up the cash angle, and keep him from tweeping to the police. From here on it would take a bit of doing.

On the way to Nolan's hotel, Morrie stopped at the newspaper office and went through the files. While he was there he bought a paper.

At Nolan's hotel, Morrie told the clerk: "I want to see Hank Nolan."

"I don't know about that, sir," the clerk said. He was looking past Morrie at someone beyond, but Morrie didn't look around. "You heard what happened to Mr. Nolan, sir?"

"I heard," said Morrie. "Has he come around yet?"

"Not that I know of, sir." The clerk was talking loud. "No, sir. You ask about Mr. Nolan, but I can't say, sir. The orders—"

"Excuse me." The voice was at Morrie's shoulder. The man was large and he was dressed in a dark suit, something like a uniform, only it wasn't. An officer, Morrie knew: one of those good Las Vegas coppers, a very fair guy but tough. "I heard you ask for Nolan," the

man went on. "I'm Macy of the police. You know this man Nolan?"

"I know him quite good," said Morrie. "I knew him back in Chi and other places. I've only been in town a couple of days. I'm Morrie Random. I just heard about Nolan getting bopped. Thought maybe I could help." Morrie looked at Macy. He was a smart copper, all right, easygoing but shrewd. "How is he?"

MACY shrugged. "Not serious, I guess. The doc says he should be O. K. quick now. How did you think you could help?"

"Well, I don't know." Morrie grinned. "I know Nolan. He maybe won't talk. You know how it is. But if he ain't hurt much, you boys won't be interested."

"I think we will. There's some cash missing."

Morrie lifted an eyebrow. "Robbed, huh? How'd you know?"

"Nolan's partner, Jake Harber, says Nolan had several grand on him. It was gone." It seemed to Morrie that Macy had his eye fixed on Morrie's coat. It was there, in the inside pocket, that Morrie had Nolan's money. Macy added: "You know Jake Harber?"

"Not very good. Nolan picked him up lately. I've seen him but I don't know him. Could I get up to see Nolan?"

Macy considered. "You'll help get him to talk?"

"Why wouldn't I?" said Morrie.

There was no reason why Morrie should want Nolan to talk, and Morrie knew that Macy would think of that. Still, the officer didn't know that Nolan was more likely to talk than not to, in this case. Anyhow, the police would want Nolan to talk, more than anything else. It was more than just finding out who bopped Nolan, or if he had been robbed. The Las Vegas police wanted to know who was who around the town, and what was going on.

Macy said: "Let's go up."

Nolan had a small suite, two rooms

with a bathroom between. His stooge, Jake Harber, occupied one of the two rooms.

Harber and a young man nurse were in the room with Nolan when Morrie and Macy went in. Harber was a thin scraggly man with thin hands and large dreamy eyes.

Harber stared. He recognized Morrie and said: "Hello, Random."

"Hello, Harber," Morrie said affably. "It's too bad about what happened to Nolan."

"Sure."

Morrie nodded. Sure, Harber would have a very good idea what had happened, but he wouldn't talk—not before Nolan did. And Nolan wasn't ready to talk yet. Nolan was lying on the bed, and there were bandages wrapped around his head.

He was a short heavy man and his fat jowls were dark with the whiskers that showed through the pale skin. With his head on the pillow, his face looked like an upside-down chocolate pudding, Morrie thought.

The young man nurse was sitting on the bed. "Glad you came up," he said

to Macy. "I think this bird will come around soon."

Macy said that was very good and sat in a chair near the bed. Morrie sat in a chair, too, close to the bed, near the head end. Nobody made much noise, just waited for Nolan to show some signs of life.

Morrie pulled his newspaper from his pocket and sat there reading it. He did not open it out, just read the back page. There was nothing on the back page except vital statistics and legal notices, but that's all that seemed to interest him at the moment.

Presently Nolan groaned. His eyes opened. It took a little time to figure out where he was, and then he whined: "A drink!"

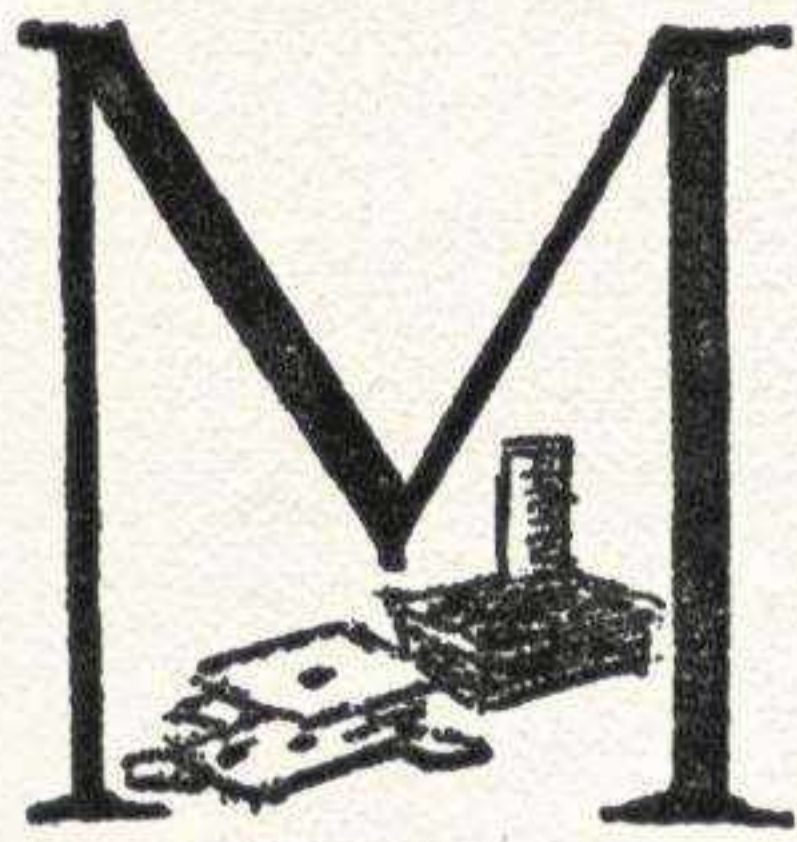
The nurse gave him a drink and he looked around. He saw Macy and Morrie. He understood Macy's being there but Morrie puzzled him.

Macy started right in: "You sure got a sweet wallop, Nolan."

"Yeah," mumbled Nolan.

He looked at Morrie again. He was certainly puzzled about the presence of Morrie.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Black Mask, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1941. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Black Mask, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1941. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 26, Register's No. 2-W-178. (My commission expires March 30, 1942.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.



MACY said: "Can you talk, Nolan? Somebody whammed you hard and took your dough. Maybe we can get the guy if you talk fast."

Nolan's ugly little eyes gleamed. Sure, he wanted to talk. Morrie could see that. But he was still looking at Morrie.

Macy urged: "Better tell what you know."

Nolan worked his tongue and started: "Well, I—"

"Better tell it right," put in Morrie, very softly.

Nolan looked at Morrie again. Morrie was still holding his newspaper in front of him, looking over it at Nolan. The front page of the newspaper was facing Nolan. Gently, Morrie's forefinger, as he held the paper, was working up and down. It was caressing the first column on the front page.

Nolan put his hand to his head. "I dunno," he said vaguely. He looked up at Macy. "You know how it is. It was hard to see—"

"Oh, I wouldn't talk that way, Nolan," Morrie cut in again. "Macy needs something definite. You should give it to him. Now, try to remember. Some guy bopped you. Was he tall or short or maybe in between?"

Nolan said: "Huh? Aw, I guess he was sort of in between. Yeah, he was a kind of stocky guy."

"Now, about his color," prompted Morrie. "Dark or fair, or maybe red-headed?"

"Huh? Well, I dunno. I couldn't see very good, but my guess is he was a red-head."

Macy grinned. He was getting somewhere now. Morrie grinned, too, but Macy didn't notice that.

"And how was he dressed?" said Morrie. "I mean, good or bad?"

"Pretty bad," said Nolan. "Yeah, like a bum."

Morrie leaned forward. "Did you recognize him?"

Nolan swished down another drink, a small one. He said: "I never saw the guy before in my life."

Morrie turned to Macy. "Well, that's that. Looks like the guy was a hobo, passing through. But maybe you can catch up with him."

Macy seemed a little disappointed. Morrie turned his paper around and pretended to read it. Macy went on asking questions but Morrie didn't pay much attention. The first column on the front page was headed:

INVESTIGATION OF INDEPENDENT GAMBLERS

Police Closing in on Crooked Unlicensed Operators

Nolan had been able to read that easily, from where he lay. It had certainly scared him. It meant that if he pointed the finger at Ralph as his assailant, he would also be pointing the finger at himself as a "crooked unlicensed operator." Of course, at the time of his being knocked out he hadn't known of any police clean-up, but these investigations were likely to bob up at any time.

Well, Nolan wouldn't go back on his original story, no matter what happened. To do that *would* start something.

Macy was now busy talking to Nolan, and not getting anywhere. Morrie got up and strolled through the bathroom to Harber's room. He had caught Harber's eye and the weasly little stooge followed him.

Morrie pulled a wallet out of his pocket. Nolan's.

Harber's eyes bobbed and he muttered something.

Morrie said: "Shut up. I found this thing. You can give it to Nolan when you get a chance. Be sure you don't snitch it. I'll be around to check up." Before handing the wallet to Harber, Morrie opened it and counted out six hundred dollars. He put the money in his pocket. "Tell Nolan that for a measly six hundred bucks he is now a patron of the arts."

Morrie folded his newspaper under his arm. One thing, Nolan hadn't been close enough to read the date-line on it. If he had, he would have known that *this* issue of the paper was three years old.

MORRIE slept very late the next day. It was two o'clock in the afternoon before he got as far as the Diamond Grill. Myrna was just eating lunch. She saw Morrie come in. From her eyes, he thought she had been looking for him all day. She was trim and neat and fresh but her eyes were very tired.

He sat down with her at the table. "It's all fixed," he said. "All you and Ralph got to do is sit tight and say nothing."

She didn't question that. Her eyes were bright with relief now, and deep with gratitude.

She said: "How did you do it?"

"I talked to Nolan. I just appealed to his better nature." Morrie laughed. He took out the six hundred dollars and slid it across to her under cover of a napkin. "That's Ralph's. Nolan is buying one of Ralph's paintings for six hundred bucks."

Even that, she didn't question. Whatever Morrie said, she didn't question. Of course she knew this must be some kind of a queer deal, but she didn't question it. "That's wonderful," she said. And from the way she said it Morrie could see that she was also saying: "*You* are wonderful."

Morrie thought a moment. He knew which painting he'd like, but it wouldn't do. He said: "Have Ralph send the painting to me and I'll see about it.

Room 612 at the Apache. Send the one with the cows in the field."

"The one with the cows in the field." Myrna seemed to be thinking. She said: "I guess everything's a gamble, isn't it?"

"That's the way I always figured," Morrie said. He smiled. "You hear from Jim Field lately?"

The question shocked her. "Jim? Yes. This morning."

So she'd got a letter from Jim this morning. Morrie watched her as she looked away. She'd rather not talk about Jim, rather not be forced to think about him. She was looking out of the window, out toward the west, again.

She got up and went into the kitchen to get her coat and hat. She was anxious to get home and tell Ralph. Morrie walked out to the street. He went half a block west and stopped just outside one of the gambling houses. The door was only a half-door, a cut-away door, that swung both ways. The door was light and the hinges well oiled. They always made it easy for you to push your way into a place like that, Morrie thought.

Myrna would be along in a minute, on her way home. Everything is a gamble, she had said. Sure, Morrie thought, she'd play the game with him, knowing it was a gamble. She was dead game, all right. But there was another angle, one that always counted big with him. He had always avoided gambling with people he liked. And he liked her. Liked! Well, it was a pretty weak word, but—

He could see her coming out of the cafe. Trim and fresh and eager. Like the Nevada air that was pressing in off the hills and plains into the streets of the town. She hadn't seen him yet, but he knew her eyes were searching.

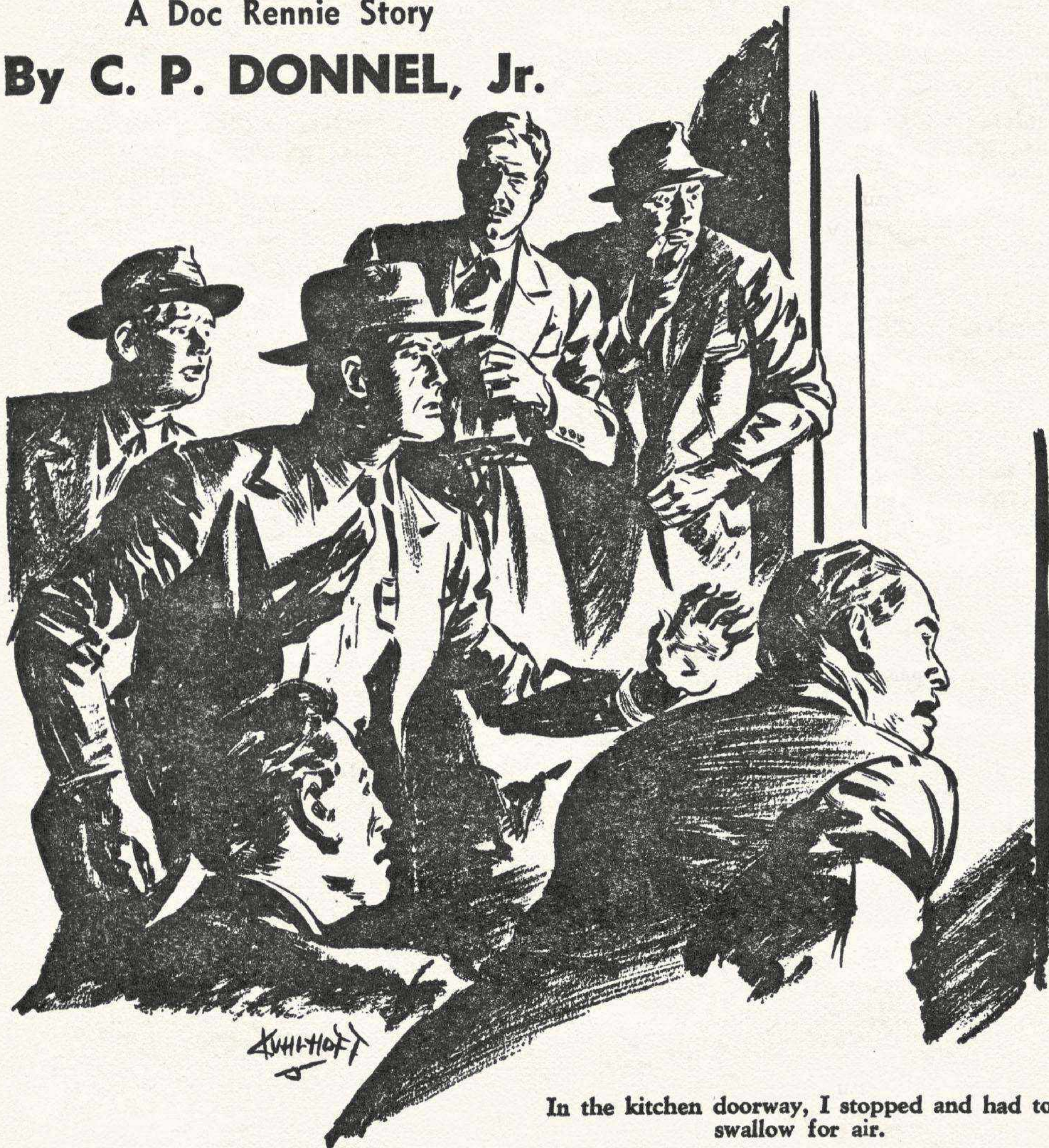
Morrie turned and pushed in through the door.



5 SHRIEKS AT 10

A Doc Rennie Story

By C. P. DONNEL, Jr.



In the kitchen doorway, I stopped and had to swallow for air.

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the Kitchen

It was the grisliest murder the town had ever seen and the sheriff's own nephew had been labeled "killer" and was slated to do the dangle act at the informal lynching bee the neighbors had organized. It looked like rope's end for fair till the Doc went to work and discovered how to bottle up the mob's conscience, the killer's and his own.

94



DOC RENNIE looked sour. "Women!" he snorted. His broad mouth curled in a sheepish grin as he sighted along a crutch at his bad ankle. Then his head fell back on the pillow and his blue eyes glinted in the moonlight.

Over Doc Rennie's head Dave Tyson, my deputy, winked at me.

The Doc was low. In fact, he was horizontal. He'd driven up to Lake Inn to catch the last two days of the bass season with Dave and me. We were over at Whaleyton on a cattle case when he arrived, so to fill in the afternoon he'd let a blonde at the Inn lure him into a game of this battledore-shuttlecock foolishness called badminton.

Now he was laid out on an invalid chair he'd made the Inn people rig up on the lawn for him. Doc Rennie's just short of six foot six, but stretched out that way the distance between his red head and the white sock over the plaster cast on his chipped ankle looked about eight foot.

Dave and I had come over to kill the evening with him and we'd been downing gin rickeys and yarning away and watching the lights of Essexville, half a mile down and across the elbow of the lake, wink out one by one.

"Women!" the Doc muttered again, wagging his head on the pillow. He was peevish, thinking of the bass he wouldn't catch.

Bong!

The sound rolled across the water from the clock in the Methodist church tower, down in the village.

We listened. We all knew it was ten o'clock, but have you ever seen anybody who could keep from counting the strokes?

Bong!

That clock's as deliberate as ice melting, I thought. Doc Rennie squirmed himself comfortable.

Bong!

I thought of a new story on Tiny Hinkle, our fire chief, that would amuse the Doc.

Bong!

And I'd forgotten to tell him that Hiawatha Quantrell Fillmore, editor of the *Essexville Daily Farmer*, was courting Julie Welch, one of the Welch twins.

Bong!

What was that sound right after the

bell-stroke? Too high for a train whistle, too low for a bobcat or a . . .

Bong!

And there it was again, following the bell-stroke like an echo. I tensed myself against the next stroke and the sound that would come right after. . . .

Bong!

Doc Rennie shot bolt upright in that invalid chair. There was that sound again! I stared across the water. Was it my imagination, or were lights really coming on in the outskirts of the village, up Maple Road way. I knew what the sound was now, only for the moment I was frozen to my chair.

Bong!

The tenth stroke. Quiet. Then, for the fifth time, a woman's shriek trailed the bell note across the lake.

The next thing I knew, Dave and I were stumbling down the springy Inn lawn to my car. I yelled, "See you later, Doc," over my shoulder.

Something hot—no, cold—burned my wrist. I found I was still holding the gin rickey glass and pouring ice up my sleeve as I ran. I flung the glass aside as I plunged ahead. It must have hit the only rock on the lawn, for I heard the crash and tinkle.

Way behind us, Doc Rennie was bellying something, but I couldn't understand him and didn't stop to try.

Dave's big, panting bulk was already at the car when I got there. I fumbled for my keys and my key case hooked itself into a loop of my belt. In my mind I could still hear those five shrieks, and this delay was like a nightmare.

My pants ripped as I tore the key case free and hopped into the car. I cursed my butterfingers as I groped for the dash light. Suddenly I began to do things right and the engine roared. I threw her into gear and—

"Wait!" It was Dave screeching this time, right in my ear. He reached over and nearly pulled the guts out of the emergency brake.

"Wait hell!" I hollered, as the car ground to a stop. "What the—"

"The Doc!" panted Dave, motioning with his thumb.

AND there he was at the rear door on Dave's side. Dave jerked open the door. Doc Rennie pitched his crutches in, stuck his bad ankle in after them, and finally muscled himself into the back seat, swearing at the pain while I swore under my breath at being held up. I loosed the emergency brake.

"You quite comfortable?" I asked Doc Rennie, sarcastic.

"Nice guests," grated Doc Rennie, extra peevish now. "Run off and leave a fellow helpless at a hotel. . ."

We skittered down the gravel to the Lake Road.

". . . at a hotel with a bunch of women, bored to death."

I twirled us onto the greasy red clay of the Lake Road. "So you wanted to go for a little ride?" I said as I straightened her out and took off on the long swing around the lake.

"Why yes, Sheriff." He had honey in his voice. He usually calls me "Ed," so I felt something coming.

"Also," he said, "I was afraid someone might sell you a bill of goods."

Dave chuckled, the big dope. I rammed the gas pedal to the floor and gave them both a touch of high life. We burned through town and took the Maple Road hill like a towering partridge. I saw folks running now, so I knew we were heading the right way.

"Some'eres near the Thoroughgood place," shouted Dave, who'd had his head out of the window.

But the people were running past the Thoroughgood place to the Welch place, where the Welch twins, Julie and Johanna, lived. My nephew from agricultural college, Dan Garner, was working for the Welch girls this summer.

I slammed on the brakes.

"There's Ed McKay," I heard somebody say as Dave and I piled out.

I'd forgotten all about Doc Rennie in the back seat. Something had happened here. You could smell it in the air; you

could hear it in the low chatter of folks hustling up the long, flagstoned path to the big old frame house set well back among a grove of maples.

We ran up the path. The lights were on downstairs. A handful of folks on the steps drew apart to let Dave and me through, and those on the porch clustered up to watch us go in the door.

I heard a man say, "Howdy, Ed," and I nodded without looking around. Another man said, "Here's the sheriff now," and a woman, probably Granny Watkins, cackled, "About time, too." And just as I passed into the parlor, I caught another man's voice: "Garner's his nephew, you know."

It had been foolish of me to slam the front door, because the parlor windows were open and at each one a dozen or more eyes were staring at the group around the sofa—and at what was on the sofa.

It was one of the Welch girls on the sofa, smears of blood bright red on a face as white as china. Her white dress was a mass of blood. Beside her knelt Dan Garner in blood-smearred dungarees, and old Ma Thoroughgood, chafing her wrists, fanning her. Crumpled in a chair beside them was Hi Fillmore, head in his hands, rocking from side to side, nerves all shot to hell.

I elbowed Dan Garner aside to get a look at the girl on the sofa, and felt Dave stretching his neck over my shoulder. I noticed that my nephew had blood on the knees of his dungarees and streaks of it along his thick brown arms and on the shoulder of his checked shirt.

Old Ma Thoroughgood turned her pointed nose up to me. "She's all right, Ed—just fainted." Her false teeth clicked as she spoke. "Go in the kitchen; that's where *you're* wanted."

"Which one is it," I asked, pointing at the girl on the sofa, "Julie or Johanna?"

"How should I know?" snapped Ma Thoroughgood. Hi Fillmore glanced up without recognizing me. I saw blood on his hands and on his white shirtfront.



DAVE was peering about the room, eyes on the floor. Brown smudges everywhere.

Then there were footsteps through the dining-room and old Doc Frisbie, the coroner, ambled in. He was wiping his knobby hands on a red-and-white dish towel that had once been a white dish towel. Behind him rose Ben Thoroughgood's parrot's crest of white hair.

"Come back here, Ed." Frisbie's voice was hollow; his lips trembled. All of a sudden the horrors crept up my legs and across my shoulderblades and I dreaded going into that kitchen more than I dread fire.

"Come on, Dave," I told my deputy gruffly.

Doc Frisbie went ahead. Ben Thoroughgood, face pasty gray and head shaking with palsy, stood aside to let us pass. We skirted the dining-room table—set for tomorrow's breakfast—and stalked into the kitchen. In the doorway I stopped and had to swallow twice for air.

It was on the floor in front of the old kitchen fireplace. I knew it was the other Welch twin, because the white dress was identical in material and design with the one worn by the woman on the sofa, and because the two or three locks of hair that weren't blood-drenched were the right color.

That was the only way I'd ever have guessed it, though.

Even now my heart pounds and I sweat a little when I think of it. The neck was almost hacked through, and the face was—well, I guess "destroyed" about covers it. Like the neck, the face had caught the sharp edge of something—many times.

I looked, numb, at Dave and Frisbie. Doc Frisbie read the question in my face and nodded toward the kitchen table. Under it I saw the weapon: the kindling hatchet from the woodbox just inside the door. It looked like one of those red-

painted hatchets they used to give us kids on Washington's Birthday.

Dave, his beefy face gone gray as Ben Thoroughgood's, heavy shoulders rigid and hands balled into fists, didn't take his eyes from the thing on the hearth. I knew what he was doing. He was making himself look. Blood frightens Dave, and it makes him mad to be afraid.

He said: "Which one is it, Doc?"

Frisbie used Ma Thoroughgood's words: "How should I know?" He said it crossly.

My nerves made me want to laugh. It was just too damn silly. All of us had known the Welch girls well—and liked them. They'd lived in Essexville most of their lives. And now one was hacked to death and the other was out cold and we couldn't tell which was which.

If the one on the sofa'd been up and moving about, there'd have been no doubt. People seeing them on the street never had any trouble telling them apart, even though they looked and dressed alike. Julie carried her head high; her eyes sparkled and she swung her hips and shoulders like she was proud of her figure and enjoyed being alive. It was Julie that the men looked at twice.

I said to Frisbie: "Aren't there any scars or marks. . . .?"

Then I remembered. Abner and Abigail Welch had had no use for doctors and made no secret of it. Why, once when Julie was a kid she'd taken a terrible spill out of a black-cherry tree behind the house and banged her head on a sawhorse, and folks had talked a lot because Abner wouldn't send for Frisbie. Then Julie got well and Abner was awful cocky over it and more bitter about doctors than ever. When the girls grew up they were healthy as tigers and never needed Frisbie.

I was stumped. It was embarrassing as all hell, but until the one on the sofa came to. . . .

"Didn't I see Dr. Perkins on the porch?"

I woke up with a start. My cheeks got hot when I realized how I'd jumped.

DOC RENNIE was behind me, shoulders hunched up by the crutches. His lips were pale and there was no mockery in the question or in his hard blue eyes and freckled face.

"What the hell would a dentist—" I began. Then my cheeks got hotter. Of course. The Welch girls had been to Perkins.

Doc Rennie didn't answer. He wasn't trying to show me up before Frisbie—just helping to get things started.

I said to a cluster of heads at one of the kitchen windows, "Get Dr. Perkins, will you?" and heard the call go around the house.

Perkins popped in at the back door. He's a round-bellied, thin-haired, pompous little guy who sings bass in the Congregational church. He stole one look at the mess on the hearth and then kept his eyes on me.

"Doc," I said, "you've worked on these girls' teeth. Now which one is..."

Perkins was getting whiter with every word.

Doc Rennie pushed me gently aside and cut in, smooth: "The sheriff wants you to examine the teeth of the young lady in the front room, Doctor, and tell us which one she is."

Perkins almost fainted with relief. I could have booted myself out the door for being so dumb. I was so mad at myself that I nearly tipped Doc Rennie over as I stamped out through the dining-room. I saw a smile flicker across the corners of his mouth, but his face told me that his ankle was aching like fury. I made a mental note to apologize later.

Ma Thoroughgood moved aside to let Perkins get at the girl on the sofa.

The muttering of the crowd outside got quieter instead of louder. I didn't like it. It wasn't just gabble-gabble-gabble. The men were talking deeper than usual, and lower, and over it all was the hiss of whispering women. I learned something about crowds when the town got down on me about those arson cases. This gang knew something, or suspected something, and they were heating up.

Perkins was thumbing the girl's mouth open now.

Through the windows I caught snatches. . . . "Jumped off the porch and ran" . . . "No kiddin'?" . . . "Ma Thoroughgood says he" . . . "The most awful sight I ever saw in my life."

Then one heavy voice chilled me. "Well," it said, and it was ugly, "if it's Johanna Welch in that kitchen we'll know who done it."

And a lower voice said, real easy: "Yeah, and I think we'll know what to do."

Dave nudged me. He heard this, too. He tried to get Doc Rennie to sit down, but the Doc stayed beside me.

Perkins asked for my flashlight. Under cover of showing him how the switch worked, I whispered something. His eyebrows climbed. I scowled and he nodded.

Perkins handed the light to Ma Thoroughgood, standing over the sofa like a sharp-nosed old harpy. I showed *her* how it worked. The girl on the sofa moaned and twisted a little as Perkins forced her mouth open in the yellow light beam.

Doc Rennie's shoulder brushed mine. "Look at Garner and Fillmore." He barely breathed the words. My glance slid from Fillmore, still in the chair, to my nephew.

If I live nine thousand years I'll never forget those faces. Their eyes were on Perkins and what he was doing, and they looked—yes, they looked like two murderers when the foreman of the jury stands up to announce the verdict: Fillmore, smallish, nervous, tense as a violin string, his black eyes saucer-wide behind the thick lenses of his spectacles; my nephew's handsome, dumb, brown face ridden with a fear that you could see came right up from his bowels.

Perkins got up, wiping his thumb on his trousers. Outside, the chatter stopped so suddenly that the silence was like a smack in the face. Fillmore bounced to his feet, shaking all over.

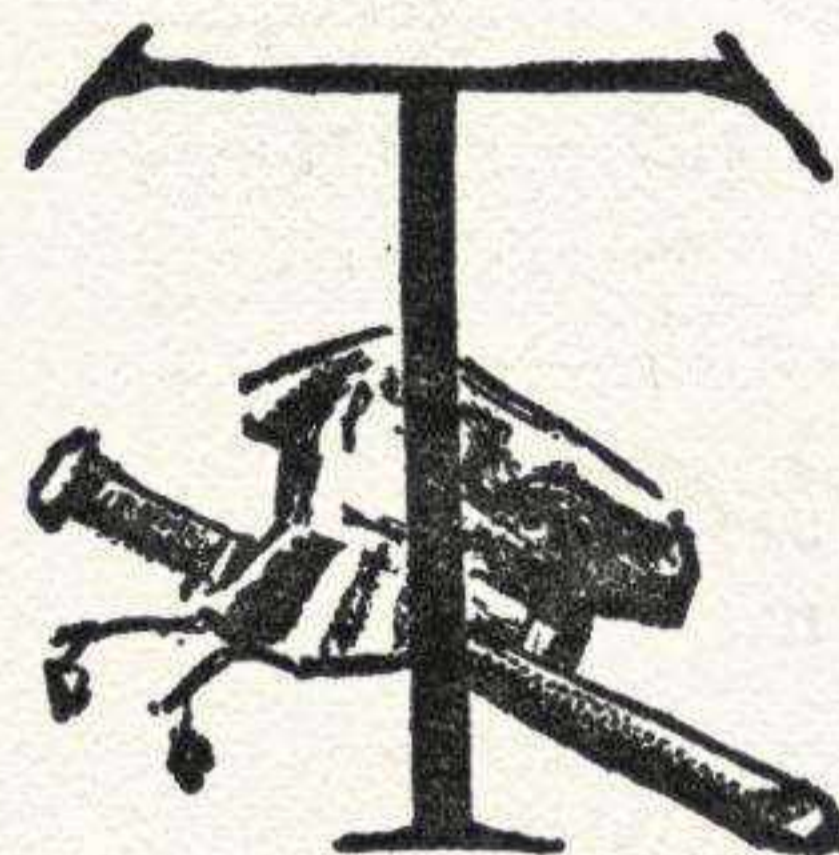
The heavy voice boomed in from the

darkness: "Come on, Perkins, which one is it in the kitchen?"

So they'd understood why Perkins was doing what he had done. I'd hoped they wouldn't.

CHAPTER TWO

Case History



HE tubby little dentist bit his lip. Popularity's an important thing in a town as small as Essexville.

I caught his glance and held it. I heard Doc Rennie, still beside me, draw a long breath. Doc Rennie's a psychiatrist. He was a brain surgeon once, but he's a psychiatrist now. He hadn't missed one tick of the feeling in the folks outside. On the other side, Dave stepped up, fronting the windows with me.

The three of us must've loomed pretty solid there, and besides, I was the law. I drilled Perkins with a look hard as a diamond drill.

Perkins came to me, sweat pearls starting along his forehead. I bent my head. He whispered one word in my ear, repeated it to make sure I heard.

"Thanks," I said, in a normal tone. "Now you and Mrs. Thoroughgood take"—here I was mean enough to hesitate a second, for the crowd's benefit—"take Miss Welch upstairs and look after her. You go with 'em, Ben." Old Ben Thoroughgood doddered up and lent a hand. Dave started to help, but changed his mind.

When the crowd saw the girl being carried out, the rustling and chatter began again and another voice came through the screen.

This one said: "Won't do you no good to cover up for that nephew o'yourn, Ed McKay. We know about him and Johanna Welch."

I recognized that voice. It was Sam Chronister, that mean little devil I'd had to stick in a cell during the arson cases.

And I knew now who the heavy voice was: Tom Hogan, a loud-mouth seelawyer who worked in Fillmore's press room. Chronister had always wanted my job, and I'd heard he'd promised Hogan the deputy's badge if he ever got it.

A hand pulled my sleeve. Fillmore's usually a fiery little guy, but tonight he was burnt out. I could hardly hear him. "For God's sake, Ed, which one is it?" His eyes kept wavering toward Dan Garner.

Feet rumbled along the porch. They were getting ready to come in. Dave started for the door, thunderclouds in his face. Doc Rennie caught his arm.

Hi Fillmore said: "Julie Welch accepted me tonight. You've got to tell me which one—"

I made for the front hall. Tom Hogan had his foot inside the screen door. He drew it back when he saw the look on my face. They gave me room when I stepped out on the sill. In the light from the hall I could distinguish most of the faces. With a few exceptions they were substantial people like the Welches and Thoroughgoods.

I cooled off a little. I couldn't really blame them for being sore and excited—not after they'd had a look in at that kitchen window. And I know my town well enough to know that every man, woman, and child of them had.

"Well, what about it?" blustered Hogan. "We're taxpayers here. We got a right to know."

For a burning second there were just the two of us there. Hogan felt it and took another step back.

A woman piped: "Get your big dirty foot off my white shoes, Tom Hogan."

That saved it. A chuckle got away from Tiny Hinkle. Two or three kids giggled, and a man snickered. Hogan flushed. Sam Chronister pushed his way through to Hogan's side, but I ignored them. I spoke to the solider element, which was mad, but not beyond reasoning with.

"Folks," I said, "you'll help me a lot

—and speed matters up—if you'll leave the house and grounds while we're working on this case. You know—most of you do, anyway—that this stuff about me covering up for my nephew is a lie. I won't go into that. And you'll find out soon enough whether that girl in the kitchen is Julie or Johanna Welch. Now will you please go?"

I'd kept my voice calm and friendly. Chauncey Morgan and his wife and Dexter Bassett and Carl Woettel and Tiny Hinkle led the movement toward the gate. Tiny called back: "If you need any help, Ed, lemme know." That took guts. I could've kissed his bald head.

But a dozen or so, all men, left the porch slowly. They hadn't changed their minds. They were just giving me a little more time. Tom Hogan was the last. He went so slow that I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder. I didn't lower my voice, either. The others turned.

"I *asked* the others to leave," I said, "and they left. Now I'm *telling* you to beat it. D'you hear me? Beat it!"

He didn't run. But he pretended he was hurrying to catch up with Sam Chronister.

DOC RENNIE was waiting for me in the parlor doorway. All he said was, "My compliments, Ed," and spread his broad mouth across that square, freckled face of his in a grin. But the tone was a pat on the back and the grin was a medal on my chest. He'd realized what Dave Tyson hadn't: that the little matter of getting the crowd away without real trouble had been tight stuff.

"Doc," I said, reddening, "about you getting in the car there, back at the Inn—"

He reddened, too. "Forget it," he growled. "You've got plenty to do." He made a great to-do about getting himself seated and arranging his cast on a second chair. "And the first thing I'd suggest," he said, looking up, "is that—"

"Save your breath," I told him.

Hi Fillmore hadn't moved an inch

since I'd gone out on the porch. I gave it to him straight.

"Your young lady's upstairs, Hi," I told him. "That's Johanna out in the kitchen."

Dan Garner groaned. Dave, who's pretty agile in his hefty, loose-jointed way, caught Hi as he started to topple.

But was it relief that almost floored Hi, I wondered? I saw Doc Rennie's eyes, sharp and hard on Hi, trying to answer the same question.

Hi had hold of himself in a second. He shook off Dave's hand and spoke to me, but he was looking at Dan Garner.

"Ed," he said, "if I were you, I'd get Dan to tell me what happened between him and Johanna tonight."

I saw Dan's jaw set itself just like my sister's used to when mother told her to do something she didn't want to do.

"And Dan,"—Fillmore's voice had a bite in it now—"I think you'd better explain why you were on the porch spying through the parlor window tonight after I left. Yes, and why you jumped off the porch and ran around the house just a couple of minutes before Julie"—he caught his breath over the name—"began to scream."

There was a moment's silence before Dan said quietly: "That's a goddamn lie."

He didn't run at Hi. He just exploded across the room, big brown arms reaching out. He's a powerful youngster. I'm not exactly anemic myself, and Dave's built like a grizzly bear, but it was all we could do to tear his hands from Fillmore's throat.

Dan's got my sister's temper, all right. He was whimpering mad when we hauled him across the room and pushed him down on the sofa. Finally he ran the back of his hand across his nose and said to Hi, who was pulling his tie straight: "Why did you come back, Mr. Fillmore?"

Hi's eyes blazed up behind the thick glasses, but before he could flare back at Dan, Doc Frisbie came in from the dining-room, bag in hand, dog-eared hat

on his long head. He was anxious to go. He hates arguments and shouting.

"No sign of criminal assault," he said to Doc Rennie. He likes Doc Rennie. He'd thought Doc Rennie was just a quack nut-doctor until that time they conducted the autopsy together on Wilhelm Borcker's baby. "And no weapon used but the hatchet."

"Strong hand on the hatchet, I suppose?" said Doc Rennie, frowning.

"Yep. Well, good-night, Ed. I'll be home if you want me."

"Now we can get going," I said grimly. This business was beginning to knot me up inside. "Dan, suppose you tell me everything you did tonight from—"

Doc Rennie planted his crutches and levered himself into a more comfortable position. "Ouch!" he said, as the ankle got him. He swore.

The knot inside me grew tighter, harder, because I know Doc Rennie's style well enough to know that this was a deliberate interruption.

I started again. "Dan, where—"

"Tell me something about these young ladies—their family and background," said Doc Rennie, rubbing a hand across his forehead in a tired way.

"Hell!" I yelped, and flopped down beside Dan like a sullen kid. Dan drew away, like he was afraid to touch me.

Doc Rennie ignored me, which didn't cool me off any. He looked at Dave.

Dave looked vague and said: "Ma Thoroughgood knows more about 'em than anyone else in town. I'll get her down." He stepped out quick and ran up the stairs before I could stop him.

THE lump inside me was so big now that it hurt. I jumped up. "I know all I need to know about 'em," I told Doc Rennie. "Ma Thoroughgood'll take all night. And we ain't got all night." I thought of the last dozen or so men that had left the porch. Doc Rennie didn't seem to realize those boys weren't kidding. I repeated: "I know all I need to know, Doc."

Doc Rennie stuck one of those black-

tobacco cigarettes of his into his face and cupped his lean hands around a match.

"Maybe there's something you've forgotten," he said, lazy. I caught the tone. It was a flat attempt to make me blow up and ease the tension. So I held onto myself—and stewed inside.

Dave came back with Ma Thoroughgood. Ma's washed-out eyes were shining. Talk is her racket. Those thin lips don't ever tire. One question from Doc Rennie hit the jackpot.

First we had the life history of Abner and Abigail Welch: how tight Abner was with his money, what a goose Abigail Welch had been about this faith-healing foolishness. Next we got the birthscene of the twins: no doctor, and Ma Thoroughgood pressed into service as midwife. ("Never so much as gave me an apple from his trees, Abner Welch didn't.")

Then came the girlhood of Julie and Johanna. Johanna's measles, and how Ben Thoroughgood told Abner Welch he oughta call a doctor, and the argument they had. Then Julie's fall from the black-cherry tree and Abner's refusal to call Frisbie, and what Ben Thoroughgood said *this* time. ("And she laid unconscious two days, poor little mite.")

Then Abigail Welch's death from diabetes. (Abner wouldn't call a doctor until her people forced him to, and then it was too late.) And Abner's death (when the girls were fifteen) from an infection following a torn toenail. (Wouldn't call a doctor, and it served him right.)

Ma Thoroughgood kind of ran down at this point, for after the death of Abner the twins had gone to live with an uncle in Indiana and she'd lost touch with them for eight years. Then the uncle had died and left them some money and they'd come back to Essexville and bought the old Welch home back again and lived here ever since. Kept the place up themselves; never had a maid and just hired a man in the summer to help with the kitchen garden. They were thirty now.

The last five minutes were about how dee-voted the twins were to each other. Always dressed alike. Not that they were *alike*, you understand—

At this point Doc Rennie leaned back and stared at the ceiling, and I knew he was getting extra interested.

"Julie's always been the lively one," said Ma Thoroughgood, store teeth clicking like knitting needles. "Johanna's always been—always *was*, that is,"—she sniffed and dabbed at her eyes.

"Oh, you knew that was Julie you were helping upstairs?" asked Doc Rennie quickly, coming to life.

"Not till I heard Ed McKay tell Hi Fillmore that it was Johanna in the kitchen, poor lamb," snapped Ma Thoroughgood. So the old harpy had been listening at the top of the stairs.

"Johanna always was the one that did the looking-after," she went on, her face triumphant. "Julie, she just worshipped Johanna, and Johanna laid herself out to spare Julie everything. Johanna was quiet—yes. But wait till something bothered Julie and you'd see Johanna rise up and take over quick enough. She'd've died rather than let anything upset Julie. Why, I remember once when Julie got in an argument with the Widow Mitchell at the Notion Shoppe over a slip she'd bought that wouldn't fit. Julie was never used to trouble, and she began to tremble, and Johanna just sailed in and—"

"Fine! Fine!" cut in Doc Rennie. "An excellent account, Mrs. Thoroughgood."

Ma Thoroughgood looked part pleased and part miffed. She wasn't through. Not by a darn sight.

"And now I think Sheriff McKay would like to ask you what you saw and heard tonight," went on Doc Rennie, with a nod to me.

I stopped pacing and sulking.

Ma Thoroughgood went for this part in a big way—the present, I suppose, being more exciting than the past.

"Well, Ben was on the porch, it being hot, and when I come out after doin'

the supper dishes he said, 'Welch girls got quite a lot o' company—at least Julie has.' And I said, 'Who, Ben?' And he said, 'Hi Fillmore and Gerald O'Moore.'"

CHAPTER THREE

A Lynching Bee



ERALD O'Moore! I'd forgotten he was said to be sweet on Julie Welch! Dave whistled under his breath. Doc Rennie sat up, and this time he didn't bother to say "Ouch!" although I could tell by the way he winced that his ankle was giving him a fit.

"Who's Gerald O'Moore?" he demanded.

Ma Thoroughgood swelled up at getting such a rise out of us. "Why, he's—" she said. But I took it away from her.

"He's Dexter Bassett, the hardware man's nephew," I said. "Lived with his mother over in Suffern. One of these big, plump bachelors who always talks about his mother and never goes out with girls. That is, not till his mother died about six months ago and he moved over here with Dexter. Works in Dexter's office. I'd heard he was real sweet on Julie, but I'd forgotten it. . ."

I kind of trailed this part off, for bait. But Dave, the big goop, bit first. "Ed," he said, eyes shining, "tell Doc Rennie about O'Moore."

So I had to come out with it.

"The folks here don't know about it," I said slowly, letting Doc Rennie's mouth water, "but Dexter told Dave and me. O'Moore's been away three times to sanitariums with mental breakdowns."

"Oh," said Doc Rennie. "Go on, Mrs. Thoroughgood." He yawned. Once upon a time that would have made me mad, like he intended. Now I've learned some of this psychology stuff myself.

Ma Thoroughgood speeded up. The

old girl was busting to get out and spread the news about Gerald O'Moore.

"A little later," she said, "Ben and I took a walk out back, to look at the garden, and we couldn't help overhearing Dan Garner and Johanna on the back porch."

I felt sorry for Dan. Plain misery was written all over his face. His eyes were deep and hot.

"We heard Dan asking Johanna to marry him. She was putting him off. She said, 'Why, Dan, you're only twenty-two and I'm thirty.' And he said, 'I'll finish my course next February and I've got a good job promised me over at the Suffern Nursèries.' And he began telling her about how he loved her, and how she was—" The old lady was enjoying herself—too much.

"Skip that part," said Doc Rennie, sharp, and I was glad.

Ma Thoroughgood tossed her needle-nose in the air. "Very well," she snapped. "But it's my bounden duty to tell you the end. Because Dan Garner"—she aimed her bony forefinger at Dan, and if looks could kill his eyes would have cut her throat then and there—"got up and said, real passionate, 'You're the only woman I've ever loved, Johanna, and nobody else is going to have you as long as I'm alive.' And she said, 'Dan, if you're going to talk like that I'll have to ask you to stop working here.' And he grumbled, 'I won't leave,' and stamped off to that lean-to behind the barn where his room is. And now I'll leave you gentlemen." And Ma Thoroughgood stamped off, too, and went upstairs.

"That right?" I shot at Dan.

He looked me in the eye. "That's right," he said. He was defiant now, and suspicious.

Hi Fillmore held out his hand to Doc Rennie, who gave him one of those stinking cigarettes. Hi dropped it, picked it up again. His hand shook so that the match nearly went out.

"What happened then?" I asked Dan.

"I was in my room by the barn, try-

ing to study," said Dan, "when I heard the screams. I ran right to the house and into the kitchen"—he swallowed, and one hand went to his throat—"and there was Johanna—just like she is out there now. And Julie had flopped down over her and was screaming . . . and then . . . I don't remember exactly . . . but Mr. Fillmore ran in from the dining-room and we got Julie up and got her out in the parlor here. I didn't even know, then, which one. . ."

His head went to his knees and the sobs shook him all over. I had to remind myself that I was sheriff and he was a front-rank suspect in the ugliest murder case. . .

I wheeled on Fillmore. "Take it from there, Hi," I ordered.

HI SAID: "O'Moore was here when I called on Julie tonight." His eyes kept going from Doc Rennie to me as he talked. "I suppose you'd call Gerald my rival, but—well, I think it would have taken him a couple of years to work himself up to popping the question. He's a bit of a dreamer, Gerald is, and it was plain that he idolized Julie. He still had that mother fixation, I think, although he's my age. Still, there's something kiddish about him. . ."

Doc Rennie nodded understandingly. I didn't get it, but this wasn't the part I was interested in. In the pause it came to me with a shock that Hi Fillmore must be over forty now. God, it seemed only yesterday that he was fresh from college and starting the *Daily Farmer* and beating around the county selling ads and button-holing folks for news items.

Forty! They say that when a man over forty falls in love for the first time it's a pretty violent proposition. And did Hi Fillmore know that Johanna didn't want Julie to marry him? Or was that a lie of Dan Garner's?

"He had a little suitcase with him," went on Fillmore, "and he left about nine. Said he was going downtown and catch the nine thirty bus for Suffern—

going over to Suffern on business for Dexter. He kept looking at me. I think he knew what was on my mind. Finally he tore himself away. And a little later," said Hi, and there was a new note in his voice, "I asked Julie if she'd marry me and she said she would."

Here Doc Rennie whispered something to Dave and Dave drifted out, avoiding my eye.

Hi Fillmore took off his glasses and wiped the thick lenses with a handkerchief. Without the glasses he looked younger, like a different man.

"I had to stop by my office a minute," went on Hi, "and I went down to get it over with, so I could come back. I got back a little before ten."

"I was standing on the sidewalk, leaning on the gate and looking at the house—I still couldn't believe my good luck—when I thought I saw a figure on the front porch peeking in at one of the windows. I opened the gate real easy, and just as I did, the guy jumped off the porch and tore around the house in the direction of the barn."

"Was it Dan? Can you swear to that?"

He thought a minute, then shook his head. "Couldn't swear it. But the guy was about Dan's size and build, and who else could it have been?"

"Then you shot off your mouth too quick when you said it was Dan," I suggested. "Go on."

"So I waited—oh, about four or five minutes. Finally, through the front window, I saw one of the girls—I know now it was Julie—walk through the parlor and head through the dining-room in the direction of the kitchen. Just as I started up the walk, the screams began. I ran like hell, and when I got to the kitchen, there was Dan trying to pull Julie off—off Johanna's body. So I helped him get her to the parlor. Then the Thoroughgoods ran in—and when I found she wasn't hurt—and I began wondering which one—"

Dave came back, downcast over something.

"Hi," I said, "did you kill Johanna?"

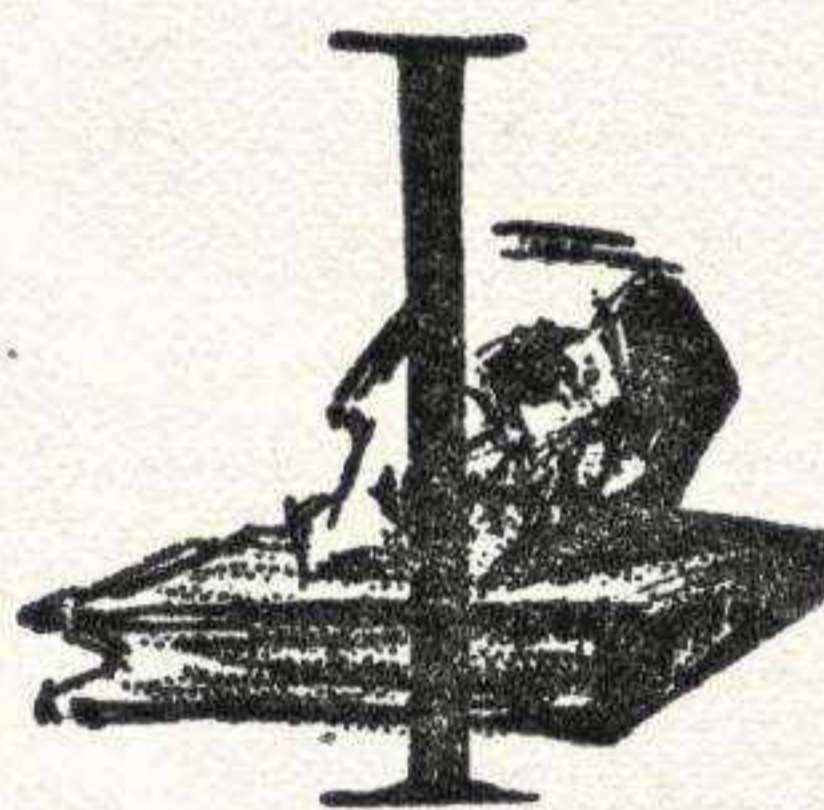
He puffed out like a pouter pigeon. "Are you crazy?" he yelled.

"He asked you if you killed Johanna Welch?" asked Doc Rennie. Something in his voice made me glance around. He was hunched forward, and his eyes were all you noticed in that square, plain face under the wiry red hair. You can have your mechanical lie detectors. I'd rather go up against one of them any day than those ice-blue eyes of Doc Rennie's when they drill you deep.

"Of course not." Hi fumbled the cigarette and jumped up, smacking sparks from his white linen pants.

"Did you, Dan?"

Dan faced me, red circles around his eyes. "You know I didn't, Uncle."



In spite of everything I found myself believing him—Dan, I mean. I turned to Doc Rennie.

"We'll check up on O'Moore before we go any further," I said, trying to sound brisk and like I had a firm grasp on the case. "Dave," I said, "you and Doc Rennie take a good look around that kitchen while I go phone the bus terminal, and then I'll give you a hand and—"

"No use," said Dave, shaking his big head.

"Whadda you mean, no use?" I yelled. "Goddamn it, Dave, get going and do like I—"

"I just called the bus terminal," said Dave simply. "They said O'Moore was on the bus when it pulled out for Suffern."

So that's what Doc Rennie had whispered to Dave to do. All my worries came to a head. I know now it was just my vanity, but for the moment I was so mad I couldn't speak. When I could, I said: "Since you're taking command here, Doc, suppose you tell me what we do next. I must've been mistaken when I thought I was runnin' things."

Dave screwed up his face. It always embarrasses him when I blow off.

Doc Rennie's voice was honey—with plenty of vinegar stirred in. "I'll be glad to assist you in any way I can, Ed. Just let me know—"

Feet on the front steps! Somebody panting. The screen door slammed. Tiny Hinkle stumbled in, his big, bald melon of a head bright red, his one eye wild.

"For God's sake, Tiny!" Dave jumped across the room and grabbed a fat arm. Tiny was about three gasps from apoplexy. I thought he'd keel over where he stood. Dan slid off the sofa and Dave steered Tiny to it. He tried to speak, then gave up. It was a full three minutes before he got back enough wind to make sense. I suspected what was on his mind, and I think Doc Rennie did, too. My knees began to tremble and my wrists went all watery, like when you have a fever.

"They know it's Johanna got killed!" Tiny wiped his mouth with a bandanna and gulped in more air. "It's all over town. And they know what Dan told her—how he threatened her. And about Hi here seein' him jump off the porch. . . ."

Frisbie, of course! I'd forgotten to warn him not to talk!

"And there's a story goin' around that Dan raped—"

"Oh my God!" Hi Fillmore went green and sick.

Dan just stood there, staring at Tiny. Tiny hesitated.

"Let's have it," I snapped. "Where are they gathering?"

"Down in the old stable back of Granberry's Feed Store," panted Tiny. "There's about forty of 'em. Ed, you better call the state police and—"

"Listen," I said, and they listened. "You and you"—I pointed at Hi and Dan—"are under arrest. Dave, they're in your custody. Keep 'em right in this room. "Doc,"—Doc Rennie shot out a hand and I hauled him and his crutches up from the chair—"you get upstairs

with Julie. See if you can bring her around—if there's anything at all she can tell you."

"O.K., Ed."

"I'll see you boys later." I tried to make it sound matter-of-fact.

Dave went into the hall with me.

"You're goin' down to that stable," he said, "and I'm goin' with you."

"You are not," I said.

"The hell I'm not. You think I'm gonna let you go up against that gang by—"

"Dave, come in here a minute." Doc Rennie's voice, from the parlor, was sharp-edged. I saw Dave waver.

"Doc'll explain why it's best for me to go alone," I said quickly. I beat it out of the house and down the walk while Dave was trying to make up his mind. As I started the car, I took one last look at the house. Through the window I saw Doc Rennie and Dave in an argument, Doc waving one arm, Dave waving two. Doc Rennie seemed to be winning.

I rocketed down the hill into town, trying my best not to make up a speech in advance. I had a feeling I'd do better on the spur of the moment.

I parked the car a block from the old stable, and the last thing I did before I left it was to take out my gun and stick it under the seat. I was in my shirtsleeves, and no man could say afterward, no matter what happened, that I'd tried to run a gun-bluff on him.

THE alley beside Granberry's Feed Store was black as tar, which was why the man on guard at the stable didn't recognize me until I was right on him. I guess he figured that the law, if it came at all, would come in quantity.

"Who's that?" he asked from behind his mask, when I was five or six feet away.

"Me," I said, low, closing in on him.

"Who?"

He was jumpy. I saw his white-sleeved arm reach for the door.

My hand snaked out and I curled

four fingers and a thumb around a skinny wrist and reeled him in. I knew him, mask and all. It was Simp Bradley, an ornery little cuss, sly as a fox, who'd been doing odd jobs around town since he got heaved off the W.P.A.

I shifted my grip to his stringy throat and listened. The livery stable hummed like a beehive. That was encouraging. They hadn't got to the shouting stage yet, but they would soon. If I knew my town—and I did—there were bottles in there, and the boys were priming themselves.

Simp was very still under my hand—too still. Suddenly he drew breath.

My eyes were used to the dark now, so my free fist had no trouble finding the point of his undershot chin. There was a half-turn of my shoulder and body behind the blow. Fist, arm, and Simp went numb at the same time. I dragged him, limp as spaghetti, over to the rain-barrel and propped him against it. He sagged over when I loosed his throat and I heard the thud of his head against a cobblestone.

There was only the faintest "click" as I raised the old latch, and the creak of the door drowned in the buzz of talk inside. I stepped over the high board sill and found myself in the rear rank of a circle of masked men drawn up around an up-ended feedbox with a couple of lanterns on it.

For a second the reek of the place—moldy feed, manure, strong tobacco smoke, whiskey, and sweat—filled my throat and stung my eyes. I won't pretend my legs weren't behaving in a cowardly manner, because they were. They were straining to take me out of there, and I had a tough time making them stay.

A heavy man with black hair was climbing on the feedbox. It was Tom Hogan. He stood up and swept the circle, eyes gleaming behind his white cloth mask. Sweat plastered his black hair down on his forehead and his dirty white shirt was damp in great patches. He'd been drinking.

I took a look around the circle myself, and what I saw I didn't care for. A good two-thirds of this mob was farmers, I guessed from their clothes; the rest, village riff-raff. I could have blown that riff-raff—yes, Tom Hogan included—back into its hole with one good, loud "Boo!" But farmers are kind of inevitable. They don't bluff easy, and they're slow to start, but when they start they're hell to stop.

Tom began, very impressive: "I suppose you men seen what was on the floor of that there kitchen at the Welch place tonight."

The few that hadn't seen it had heard about it from somebody else, and in a village, like in the city, a story don't lose anything in the telling. The buzz of talk dropped to a deep growl.

"We don't wanta take any chances on losin' the guy that done that thing to Johanna Welch," went on Tom. The growl died away. They were listening close now.

Tom shook his fist in the air. "Ackerman Smith tried to burn down this here town," he bellowed. "Ed McKay caught him. And what happened? Between Ed and that fancy-pants, high-brow doctor friend o' his Ackerman got in the state hospital, where he's livin' easy, instead o' bein' on the rock pile where he belongs.

"I seen that doctor friend o' Ed's at the Welch place tonight. I suppose if Ed finds he can't get outa jailin' that big nephew o' his, him and that doctor'll dope out some hocus-pocus. Why d'you suppose Ed thrown us off the place tonight, unless he was fixin' to pull somethin' phoney?"

His fist smacked into his palm and it touched off a louder growl. Hogan's got just enough animal cunning to make him dangerous. I figured the time was getting near. If this thing went much further, nothing I could do would stop it.

"You seen Johanna Welch's awful, bleedin' body," roared Tom. "The guy that done it oughta hang. Any fool in

this town—except maybe Ed McKay and Dave Tyson—knows dam' well Dan Garner done it. Essexville wants justice"—it was a regular Fourth of July oration now, and it was getting them—"and we ain't gonna get justice for Johanna Welch until we string that Dan Garner." He pointed up to the rafters and drew breath.

"Aw, shut up, Tom," I said, loud. "You make me sick."

EVERY head in that half-dark, stinking stable turned my way. Tom's jowls dropped. I pushed through to the open space by the feedbox. The talk started with a rush: "It's Ed McKay!" . . . "McKay's been here spyin' on us!" . . . "Sheriff's here, all alone."

"Get down off that soapbox," I told Tom, still loud enough for everybody to hear.

He pushed his chin out. "Make me."

My knees weren't shaking any more. Something hot was pounding in my veins now, something hotter than the hot, stale air of that stable. "Hold on," I told myself. "You're taking it too fast."

"Make me," said Tom again, when he saw I didn't move. "You ain't God around here, Ed McKay." He laughed.

The laugh did it. I jerked him off that feedbox in a hurry. The men on the inside of the ring surged forward a foot or two, but they weren't *quite* ready to jump the law yet. But that throbbing inside me had knocked loose my self-control, and the shame of the whole business had me dizzy.

"It's a fine crew," I said, "that can't get movin' without a stump speech to make it move. It's a fine bunch that can't find anything better to lead it than Tom Hogan. And it's a black shame on this town—"

"What about what happened to Johanna Welch?" This was a long, deep drawl from the back rank. "What's blacker shame than that?"

Like an idiot I tried to argue. "We're making the most thorough investigation possible," I called.

"Investigation hell," came the drawl. "We don't want no more investigatin'. We want justice, and we want it quick."

"You'll get jus—" I began.

Tom Hogan caught his cue. He jumped back on the feedbox.

"What are we waitin' for?" he screeched. "Ed McKay's just stallin' us till he gets that murderin' nephew o' his outa the county."

And I went for him, a red blur in my eyes. We crashed down on the far side of the feedbox. His heels drummed on my ribs as we went over, and for a black minute the whole stable and the crowd spun away from me. Sick at the stomach from the pain, I felt a dozen hands fasten on me.

"Get some o' them harness straps," Tom was yelling as my brain cleared. I struggled. I wanted only one thing now: to smash my fist into that sweating face.

"Easy, Sheriff—we don't wanta have to hurt you." It was one of the gang that had pulled me off Tom. I heard the jingle of harness buckles, and a dusty tangle of cinch straps was handed over to the men holding me. Two of them turned loose and went to unsnarling the straps.

Through the clatter came that long drawl from near the door: "Better git some more straps, boys. Here's two more of 'em." Then another voice: "Lay off the Doc—he's crippled up anyhow." Then, rocking the old stable, Dave's roar: "Where's Ed McKay?" And then: "Take your dirty hands off me!"

It flabbergasted them for a second. I saw men falling back as Dave put his bull shoulders through the crowd. For an instant, at the far end of the little alley Dave was making, I caught a glimpse of Doc Rennie, pale as a ghost by the door. And in that instant he saw me and raised his hand, and hope came back.

"You guys crazy?" demanded Dave. He crossed the puddles of lamplight. "Come on, Ed, the Doc and I got something hot."

It wasn't acting, either. That was what made it convincing. The men holding me let go.

Tom Hogan started. "Come on, boys, get—"

From the group that had just let me go I recognized the voice of Bill Dorset, one of the older farmers. He said: "Shut up, Tom. Let's hear what Dave's got on his mind."

"We know who the man that jumped off the porch was," blurted Dave.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death of a Suspect



WE KNOW him too!" came that drawling voice from the back, and things tightened up again.

"Like hell you do," shouted Dave, glaring into the dark. "It wasn't Dan Garner."

"You able to prove that, Dave?" asked old Dorset. The place was still as death.

Dave hesitated. Instinctively I glanced at Tom Hogan. Under the edge of the mask I saw the spread of an evil grin. He waited just long enough for Dave's silence to sink in, then started to say something.

From the back of the room a cool voice cut him off. "With the sheriff's assistance it can be proved very quickly."

I picked up Doc Rennie's lead. "That's what I was trying to tell the lot of you when you—"

Tom Hogan pleaded: "Can't you see he's just—"

Old Bill Dorset poked Tom in the chest with a forefinger like an oak knot. "I think we had about enough o' you, Tom," he said.

The crowd at the edge of the lamp-light let Doc Rennie through. He stood there, long frame swinging easy from the crutches, but I could see from the twist of his mouth that what he needed

was to be in bed—yes, and with a shot of something to make him sleep.

Bill Dorset spoke to the Doc and me. "What proof we got," he asked, "that you ain't gettin' ready to ring in a bunch of state cops and take over the town the minute we let you go?" His hand rasped over the stubble on his chin, and I knew that behind the mask his eyes were like gray granite.

Doc Rennie said: "I don't quite understand."

Dorset looked up at him. "I'd do a good deal for kin o' mine in trouble," he said softly, weighing each word. "How do we know Ed McKay wouldn't too, even bein' sheriff. And let me tell you, mister, this is one case where there ain't goin' to be any hole-and-corner stuff. I knew Johanna Welch's father. I seen her body in that kitchen tonight. I got girls o' my own. Now d'you understand?"

Doc Rennie kept his eyes on Dorset. I don't think a man in the place breathed. Dorset had stated the crowd's case in black and white. Now it was our move. I couldn't think of a thing to say. My stomach was still heaving from Tom Hogan's heels, and a burning feeling down my right side made me suspect a brace of ribs had parted.

Doc Rennie, still looking at Dorset, said: "I suggest a compromise."

There was a movement beside me. Dorset spun around. "For the last time, Tom Hogan," he said, "I'm warnin' you to stay outa this." He turned to Doc Rennie. "Go on," he said.

"I suggest," said Doc Rennie, raising his voice, each word clear as a bell, "that this gathering name one or two men to accompany the sheriff on the investigation. These men can report back to this group. I suggest further that since both the sheriff and Dave Tyson will be busy with the case, that this gathering name two more men to remain with Hi Fillmore and Dan Garner at the Welch place—where they are now, by the way—pending the outcome of the investigation."

He paused. Something else was needed—some immediate proof of good faith on our part.

Doc Rennie looked at me. He wanted me to have the last word. For a muddled second I couldn't think. Then it came to me.

"I could have brought a dozen state police to this meeting," I said. "The reason I didn't is that this is our town, and we don't need outside help, one way or the other. I've been figuring I could get all the help I need from my own people. Now what do you say?"

The long drawl again. "Bill Dorset can speak for me," it said. They picked it up all over the stable. . . . "And me" . . . "And me," . . . "Me too."

BILL DORSET looked around the crowd. Then he pulled out a silver turnip near as big as an alarm clock and stared at it. Everybody started to fidget.

"Sid Deevers," called Dorset.

The long drawl said, "Here, Bill."

"You and Charlie Kinsey go up to the Welch place and keep an eye on Garner and Hi Fillmore."

Two voices, the drawl and another, answered, "O.K., Bill."

"Me and Tom Hogan'll go with you," said Dorset to Doc Rennie and me. "Listen, men," he raised his voice.

All movement stopped.

"This is just for the time bein', you understand? It's quarter to midnight now. If Dave and this feller with the crutches are bluffin', I'll find it out. So you all better be back at the stable here around two. If I ain't here, come look for me."

He pursed his lips under the mask edge, and a jet of tobacco juice banged the side of the feedbox.

"We're wastin' time," he said. "Let's git ahead with it." Men began stripping off their masks, stuffing them in hip pockets.

Dave kept looking back at me as we made our way up the alley to my car. He was busting with something, but he

didn't dare spill it while the crowd was straggling up the alley behind us. We piled into my car, Doc Rennie and Dorset and Hogan in the back. I trod on the starter and let the motor idle. I didn't have to wait long.

"Ed"—Dave's voice was taut with excitement—"I took a look around, after you left, and look what I found under a bush right where Hi said he saw the feller jump off the porch."

He held it under the dash light. Dorset and Hogan leaned forward to look. I could smell the whiskey on Hogan.

My spirits hit bottom. "Is that all?"

It was a fountain pen, one of those fancy brands with silver chasing all over it. On a shield-shaped nameplate was engraved, "G. O'M."

Dorset spoke up, putting my own thought into words. "I heard about O'Moore courtin' Julie. He could ha' dropped that thing there any time."

"Like hell he could," said Dave, bumptious. "He dropped it there tonight."

"How do you know?" I was trying to sound interested, but it was all so thin. I'd thought from the way Dave had talked in the stable. . . .

"Doc Rennie," answered Dave. "He got me to call the guy who works next to O'Moore in the office. The guy said that O'Moore was using that pen this afternoon."

I was too tired and sick to pretend before Dorset and Hogan. "What good is that," I asked, "when we know O'Moore left town on the nine thirty bus?"

"Doc Rennie again," crowed Dave. "He got me to call the bus terminal at Suffern. I got hold of the driver of that nine thirty bus, and what do you suppose he said?"

I just sighed.

"He said O'Moore got off the bus at Edmonds Corner—half mile outa town," said Dave. "Said he seemed nervous. Forgot to take his bag with him."

"He got off the bus?" Way down in me a spark lit up. A man could cut

across from Edmonds Corner to the Welch place in twenty minutes easy. I shot the car into gear.

From the back, Doc Rennie said, "Ed—"

"I got you, Doc: Dexter Bassett's."

The sickness was most gone now, and the burning pain in my side hurt only half as much. Two minutes later we pulled up in front of Dexter Bassett's fine old house.



IN DOC RENNIE'S advice I went alone to the door. Dexter came down in his pajamas.

I lied to Dexter. I said we thought O'Moore might have seen or heard something at the Welch place that upset him, and told Bassett about him getting off the bus. I made out like I thought he might be going into one of his spells.

I must've laid it on too thick, for the longer I talked, the paler Dexter Bassett got. He shook his head when I asked him if O'Moore had showed up at home.

Finally he said: "Ed, you know that mountain land of mine up beyond the ridge?"

I knew it well. Doc Rennie and Dave and I had shot birds over it a dozen times. We used to stop in at the—

"The shack!" I said.

Bassett looked very old as he nodded. "He's been going up there a lot this summer—whenever he feels one of those nervous spells coming on. If he's really upset, that's where you'll find him."

He passed a hand across his eyes. I felt awful sorry for him. He'd never had a son, and he'd been fond of Gerald. Matter of fact, everybody in town liked Gerald, although he didn't exactly fit in.

But I had to ask him. "Dexter," I said, "those mental spells of Gerald's—did he ever"—I finally got it out—"ever attack or hurt anybody?"

Bassett shook his head again. "Never. And Ed, he worshipped Julie Welch. He told me so not long ago. All his af-

fection for his mother seemed to be transferred to her. But he was always afraid to ask her to marry him—afraid of those spells coming back."

There was something else on Bassett's mind, so I waited, although I was wild to get started to the shack. At last it came.

"Ed," he said, "when you find Gerald, please remember that whatever—that if he's done anything—that he didn't know what he was doing."

"Sure," I told him, and he knew I meant it. He closed the door slowly, like he was shutting something out of his life. I jumped down the steps and into the car.

"Bassett says O'Moore's been using that old shack a lot this summer," I told them. "You remember, the one up beyond Forty-Rod Fields."

Doc Rennie's voice sounded a mile away. "Just a minute, Ed. Let me get this blankety-blank ankle of mine fixed."

I said: "Doc, I'll drop you off at the Inn. We're goin' up that way anyhow."

"The hell you will," said Doc Rennie, even more faintly.

Bill Dorset spoke up. "Leg hurtin', mister?"

"A little," admitted Doc Rennie, and you could just hear him.

I turned just in time to see Dorset handing Doc Rennie a pint bottle. "Good brandy," he said. "Made it m'self."

The bottle was half full when Doc Rennie turned it up. Bill Dorset whistled. Doc Rennie finally took it down, coughed once, and even in that dark car I could see his grin. It was a pale grin, but a grin. He handed the empty bottle to Bill. The grin faded.

"Ed," said Doc Rennie, "if I were you, I'd drive like the very devil." And he braced himself with his crutches.

IT'S SEVEN miles over mountain roads to Forty-Rod Fields. Nine minutes later we were helping Doc Rennie out of the car, and I'll lay even money I wasn't the only one who was glad that ride was over.

Dave said: "There's a light in the shack."

I fished my gun out from under the seat and we worked our way up the path and across a rocky meadow toward that single line of yellow light on the hillside. It was Bill Dorset who was helping Doc Rennie now. The Doc cussed once or twice and that was all. That brandy of Dorset's will pretty near raise the dead.

At the rock fence that marks Bassett's land I made them stop, and Dave and I went on alone. I'd turned off my flashlight and the going, through brambles and over lichened rocks, was dead slow. We'd covered perhaps fifty yards of the hundred-odd to the shack when we heard the shot.

The shot had come from the shack, but there was no gunflash. Before I breathed again, the echo had come back across the shallow valley to our right.

Neither of us said a word; just kept going. Twenty yards from the shack I pulled Dave into the lee of a big rock. I laid my gun on the rock and cupped my hands.

"O'Moore!" I called. "Gerald O'Moore, can you hear me?"

I waited. No answer but the echo.

"O'Moore!" I called again. "Open the door and stand in the light with your hands up. This is Sheriff McKay." Still no answer.

"Your last chance," I called. "We're coming for you."

And we left the cover of the rock and started up. Dave wormed his way off to one side so he could come in from behind. I headed for that window. The shade was down, all but four or five inches.

When I heard Dave's whistle from the rear I ran along the side of the shack to the window and smashed out the glass with my gun-barrel.

I heard Dave yelling, "Are you all right, Ed?" Then, when I didn't answer, I heard him racing and stumbling around the shack. He pulled up beside me, panting.

I said, "Look."

Then I turned and shouted down into the dark. "It's all right, boys, come on up."

Three minutes later we were gathered around the table with the oil lamp on it. Gerald O'Moore had shot himself through the head with an old .22 target pistol. He was seated in a chair, head forward on the table, gun still in his dead hand. The blond hair over the little red holes in either side of his head was almost white in the lamplight. There was almost no blood.

I guess he hadn't figured on writing anything when he came to the shack, so that's why he'd had to use a pencil stub and the back of a sheet torn from a five-year-old calendar. The sheet lay right under the lamp. On it he'd scrawled:

"How can I go on living with this thing on my mind? O Julie, I loved you so." And there it trailed off.

So he thought it was Julie Welch he'd killed!

BILL DORSET turned his seamed face to Doc Rennie.

"Mister," he said, and there was double horror in his eyes, "you and Ed McKay kept us from. . ." He shuddered and bogged down. Then he glared suddenly at Tom Hogan, who stood there dumb, jowls slack and eyes staring straight ahead.

"Tom Hogan," growled Dorset, fierce as an old bear, "if you ever open your trap around this town again I'll kick your teeth down your throat."

Hogan never said a word—just stared at O'Moore's body.

"Dave," I said, "suppose you take Bill Dorset and Hogan back to town. There's a few folks they want to see. Doc Rennie and I will wait here till you come back for us. Bring Chronister's dead-wagon."

I figured the Doc could use a rest. I'd never seen him take anything like he was taking O'Moore's suicide; just staring, like Hogan, but he looked like a man who was being dragged by his neck through the lower reaches of hell.

Dave said: "Let's go, boys."

When they'd gone I put a hand on Doc Rennie's arm. "At least it's settled," I said briskly, trying to cheer him up a little.

He had me worried. It was his eyes that bothered me.

He reached out a long arm and took hold of the back of O'Moore's coat collar. He pulled the body upright in the chair. The gun clattered on the floor. The head hung down, chin on breastbone.

Doc Rennie looked at me. The lamp-light flickered and he seemed to grow taller.

I looked at O'Moore, and a chill like I'd never felt before settled right around my heart, and the sweat was cold along my wrists and forehead.

"Oh my God, Doc!" I flopped down on the edge of a pine bed. "What do we do now?"

"I wish I knew, Ed." Doc Rennie said it like he was trying to soothe a scared child.

O'Moore hadn't killed Johanna Welch. Even I could see that. Whoever killed Johanna Welch had blood on them, plenty of it. There wasn't a speck of blood anywhere on O'Moore, outside of the little around the holes in his head. And he'd had no time to change his clothes between leaving the Welch house and scrambling on foot all the way up to the shack.

I tried to talk to Doc Rennie about it, but he waved me silent. He was thinking. He stretched himself out on the cot and smoked those oily cigarettes until I had to open the door.

"Let things stand as they are," was all I could get out of him that night. He said this when Dave and I left him at his room at the Inn. He was terribly earnest about it, and we swore we wouldn't scotch the story that Dorset and Hogan were spreading. As we left him, he was muttering something to himself about whether Messick or Tilling would be the best man.

Who Messick and Tilling were, I had no idea.

CHAPTER FIVE

Awakening of Julie



AT FOUR A. M. I was no nearer sleep than I'd been at three A. M. My mind was a movie screen, and all it would run were close-ups of Johanna Welch's face—or rather, what had been Johanna Welch's face. Sitting on the edge of the bed in undershirt and shorts, I quinched my eyes tight together and gritted my teeth and forced myself to see her as she was when she was alive.

The next thing I knew I was up and pacing the floor almost at a trot, and my wife was bolt upright in bed, staring at me, scared. I'd seen Johanna Welch's face as it was in life, all right: very dark brown hair with a glint of red here and there; creamy skin; big, calm brown eyes; full lips. A lovely face.

It *was* a lovely face, beautiful, in a quiet way. That was the Godawful part of it. How could even a crazy man drive a hatchet-edge into that face, over and over again? Gerald O'Moore had gone off his head. But Gerald hadn't killed Johanna. He couldn't have. . .

My wife read my own face. She knows I'm inclined to take things hard.

"Why don't you take a little ride up to Lake Inn and talk to Dr. Rennie?" she asked.

That was what I'd been aching to do. "He's asleep," I snapped.

"From what you told me when you got home, I should think he might be awake," she said, pounding her pillow.

"I'll wait till morning," I said. Morning? Then I knew she was right, as usual. If I stayed in the bedroom seeing Johanna Welch's face I'd go screwier than Gerald O'Moore. I climbed into my pants in a hurry.

It was cloudy gray dawn outside, just the color of the taste in my mouth, but the cooler air felt good.

(Continued on page 114)

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The man, a well-known explorer and geographer, tells how he found these strange methods in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enabled many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man-power mind, has within him the mind-power of a thousand men or more as well as the energy-power of the universe which can be used in his daily affairs. He states that this sleeping giant of



mind-power, when awakened, can make man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 176E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

(Continued from page 112)

Before I knew it, the car was taking the hill road to the Welch place. I pulled up there and lit a cigarette. There was a man on the porch, feet on the railing. He got up and came down the walk.

It was Hi Fillmore. He looked all of fifty now. I remembered he'd been in the last war, overseas. Hi's square-built; not a bad-looking guy, even with those thick glasses on. But all I could see was a suspect. I wondered if he'd been shell-shocked in France.

Hi put a foot on the running board.

"I heard about O'Moore," he said. "Ed, when I think he thought it was Julie. . . God, suppose it *had* been Julie!" His eyes told me he'd been having the same kind of horrors that I had. "I'm going to marry Julie right after the funeral and take her away from here for a long while," he said suddenly.

He'd got all the blood off his hands and clothes, I noticed.

"Can Julie talk yet?" I asked.

"Good Lord, no!" The mere idea seemed to excite him. "She passed right from that faint into sleep; been asleep ever since. Ma Thoroughgood's here, you know." He put a white hand on my shoulder. "Ed, you mustn't think of worrying Julie. After all, O'Moore's dead and it's all over."

"I'll be around later, then," I said, starting the engine. He stepped back, wondering at my tone. I couldn't tell, myself, why I'd been short with him.

I took the Lake Road, just in case.

My wife had been right. There was a light in Doc Rennie's room.

The night clerk at the Inn, Timmons, knows me well. He said: "Glad to hear you got that Welch thing settled up, Ed."

He looked surprised when I snorted at him. I said: "Doc Rennie all right?"

He rallied and grinned. "Busy as a bird dog."

"Busy?"

"On the phone. Trailing some guy named Tilling—Dr. Tilling—all over everywhere. Ran him down at some va-

cation place in Vermont about an hour ago. And when he got him, boy did they talk! About thirty-eight dollars' worth. Wait'll Doc gets the bill for—"

But I was racing up the stairs. Maybe Doc Rennie had something, although what he could get on a case in Essexville by calling a Dr. Tilling in Vermont I couldn't see.

DOC RENNIE'S door opened as I reached for the knob.

"Thought that might be you, Ed." From his face, his night had been a thousand times worse than mine. Not just from his ankle, either. He'd been seeing things, too, and from the look behind those blue eyes, he'd seen something worse than I had, something that had nearly taken him to pieces inside.

"Why aren't you in bed?" was all I could think of to say. He had all his clothes on, even his topcoat. I glanced past him around the room. Every ash-tray was full.

He pulled his old felt fishing hat down over his red hair and slipped a black leather case into his topcoat pocket.

"Come on," he said. "Now's as good a time as any. We may as well get this thing over with."

"But what in—" I began.

"Ed," he said, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you. I won't believe it myself until I see it. If I told you what I think you'd swear I was sicker than my sickest patient. Now come on."

I hardly thought he'd try to mystify me just for effect at a time like this, but I couldn't help feeling a little sore at being left out in the cold. After all, the case was my job, not his.

"Better get Fillmore and take him over to the Welch place with us," he said, after he had tucked his bad ankle into the front seat. The morning air had brought a little of the color back to his face, but the hollows were still deep around the eyes and his hands were anything but steady.

"He's over there already," I said

(Continued on page 116)



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C. P. Donnel, Jr.

(Continued from page 114)

shortly, and we tooled off. This time I drove slow, on account of his ankle.

He spoke only once on the way over, and that was when we were in sight of the house. "Those two girls—what they've been through," he said, and there was thick pity in his voice. "Ed, if we can save anything at all from this wreck we'll be putting stars in our crown."

So tired he's addled, I thought. But when I stopped the car, and he got out, I could see him getting a grip on himself. His square chin came up and his eyes narrowed as Fillmore hurried down the walk a second time. His voice, as he spoke to Fillmore, was crisp and firm.

Hi Fillmore glanced at the watch on his wrist. The day was orange now, and in another fifteen minutes yellow sunlight would be flooding Maple Road.

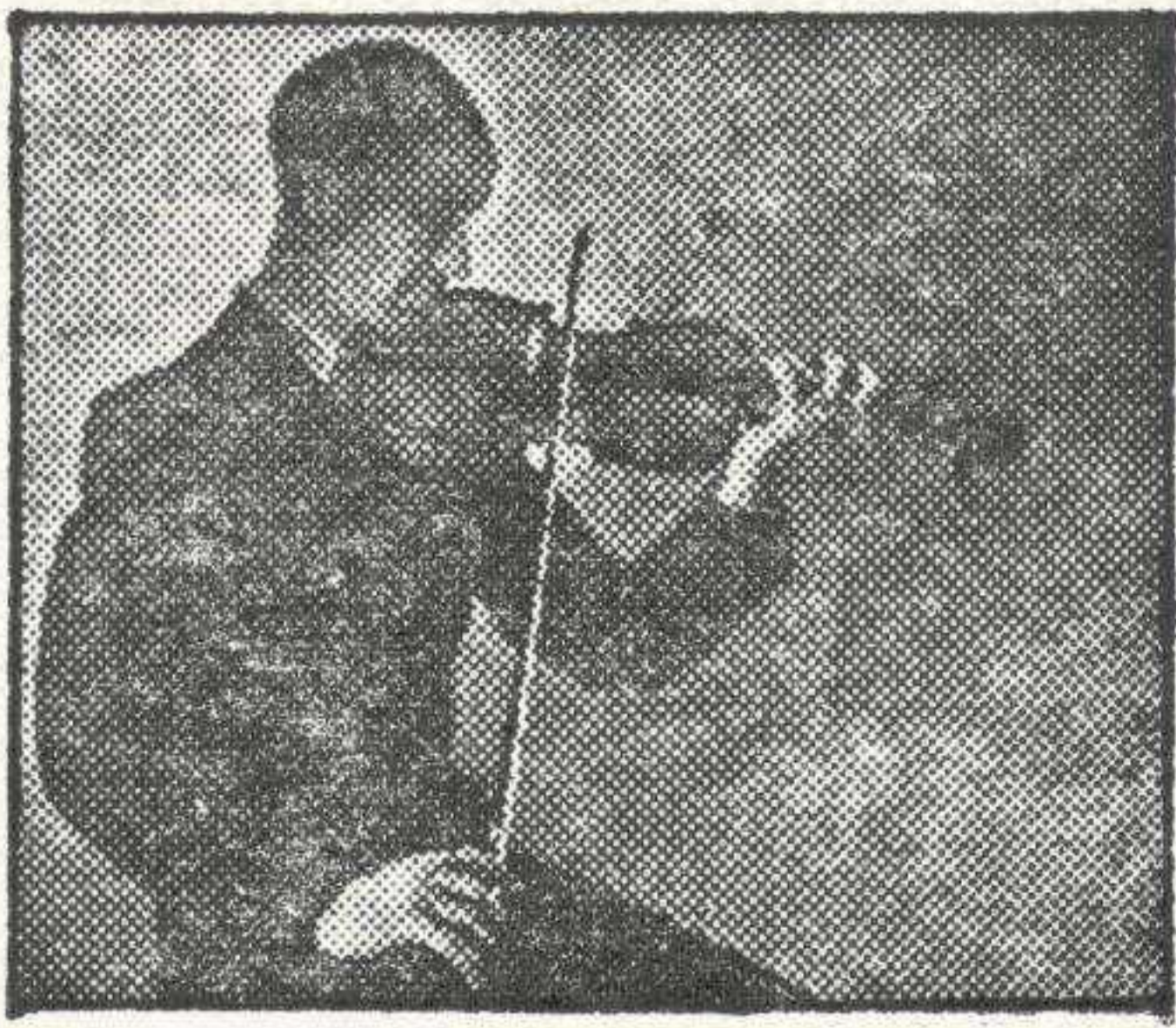
"We're going up to talk to Miss Julie," said Doc Rennie. "You'd better come along."

Hi's jaw dropped. "You can't possibly do that," he said. Then, angrily, "Why, the poor kid's asleep, and after what she went through last night—"

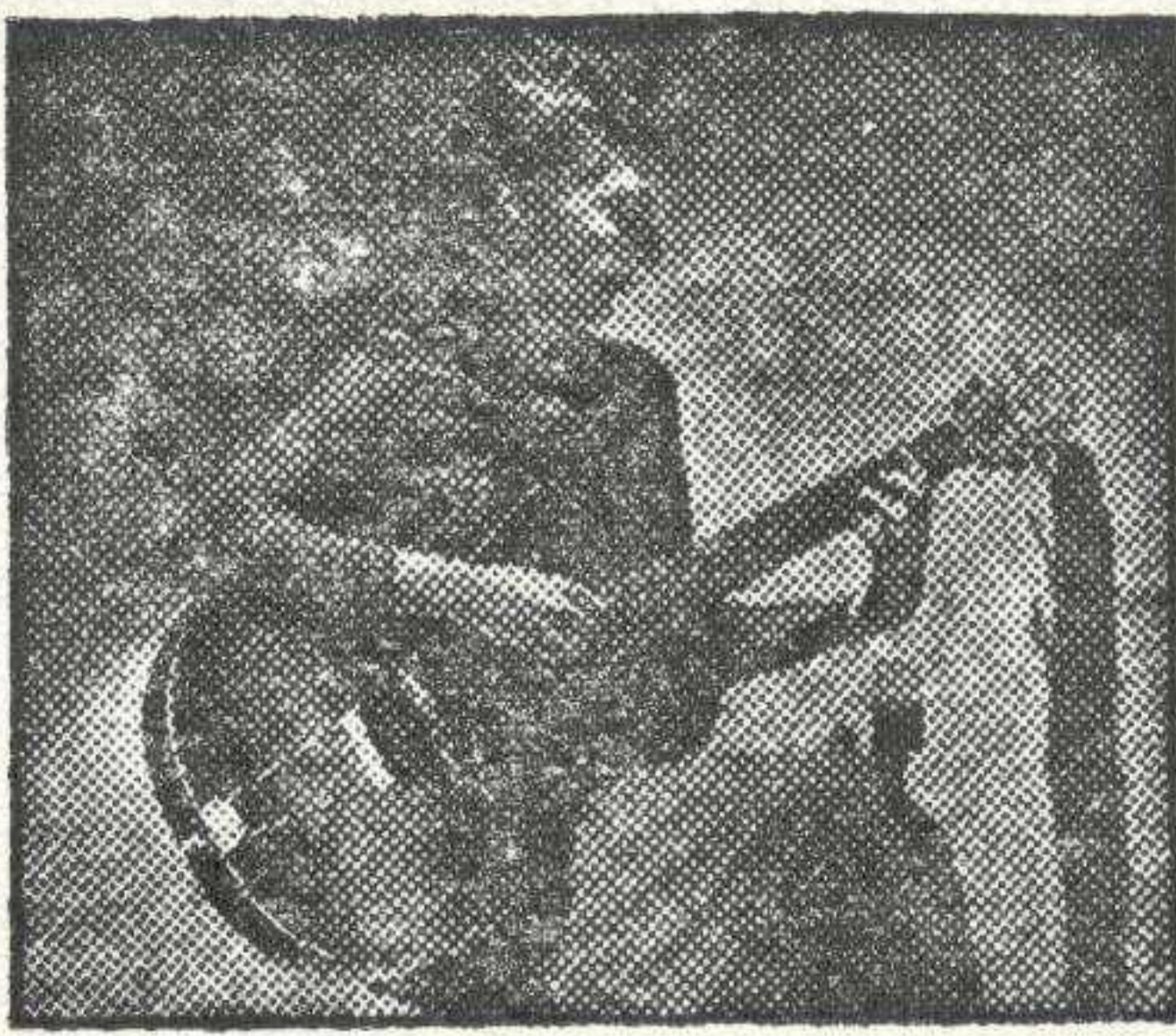
"We'll be the judges of that." Doc Rennie's tone was sharp and irritable. His face gave me the answer. He'd nerved himself to do something he didn't want to do, and he knew that the longer he put it off the harder it'd be to do. He started up the path, crutches thumping the flagstones, swinging the casted ankle wide. Hi's mouth was tight with anger.

MA Thoroughgood had heard us. She was at the top of the second-floor stairs, gray hair straggling, nose quivering, teeth out. She came down when Doc Rennie crooked his forefinger. She was mad at being waked up and started to give us a blast of the temper that's made Ben Thoroughgood's life hell, but Doc Rennie shut her up quick.

(Continued on page 118)



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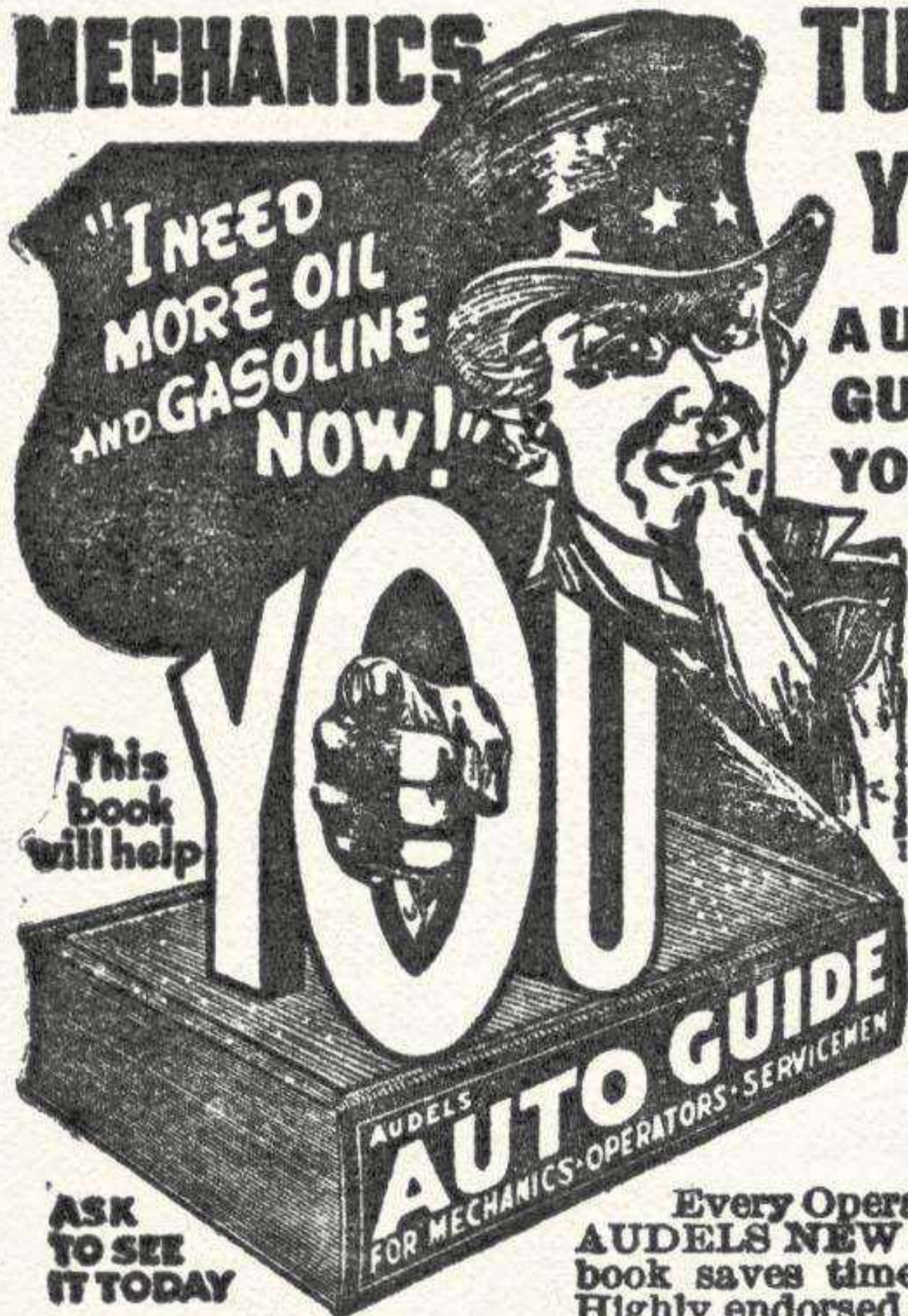
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C. P. Donnel, Jr.

(Continued from page 116)

"Mrs. Thoroughgood," he said, "the sheriff wants you to go upstairs and awaken Miss Welch at once. Get her into a dressing gown or something. Then come to the top of the stairs and nod."

"I'll do no such-a thing," spluttered Ma Thoroughgood, indignant as all hell, for which I couldn't blame her. She looked at me.

"Do what he says, Ma," I told her. She raged off up the stairs. She must've had some trouble waking Julie, because it was a good five minutes before she came out and nodded down to us like a thundercloud.

When Doc Rennie started up the stairs, Hi Fillmore tapped my arm.

"You bully Julie," he said evenly, "and the *Daily Farmer*'ll run you out of this county, Ed McKay—for good."

Doc Rennie turned and beckoned. He meant both of us. I was so furious at Doc for taking such a high hand—and with no real excuse for it, since eight o'clock or ten o'clock would have done just as well—that I took it out on Hi. The fat was in the fire anyhow. My hand closed around his wrist.

"You'll come up and do like I say," I said into his ear, "or you won't get out any paper tomorrow. You'll be in jail."

Doc Rennie faced Ma Thoroughgood's pouting face. "Which room?" he asked.

It's a wonder her eyes didn't sear him. She pointed to a door.

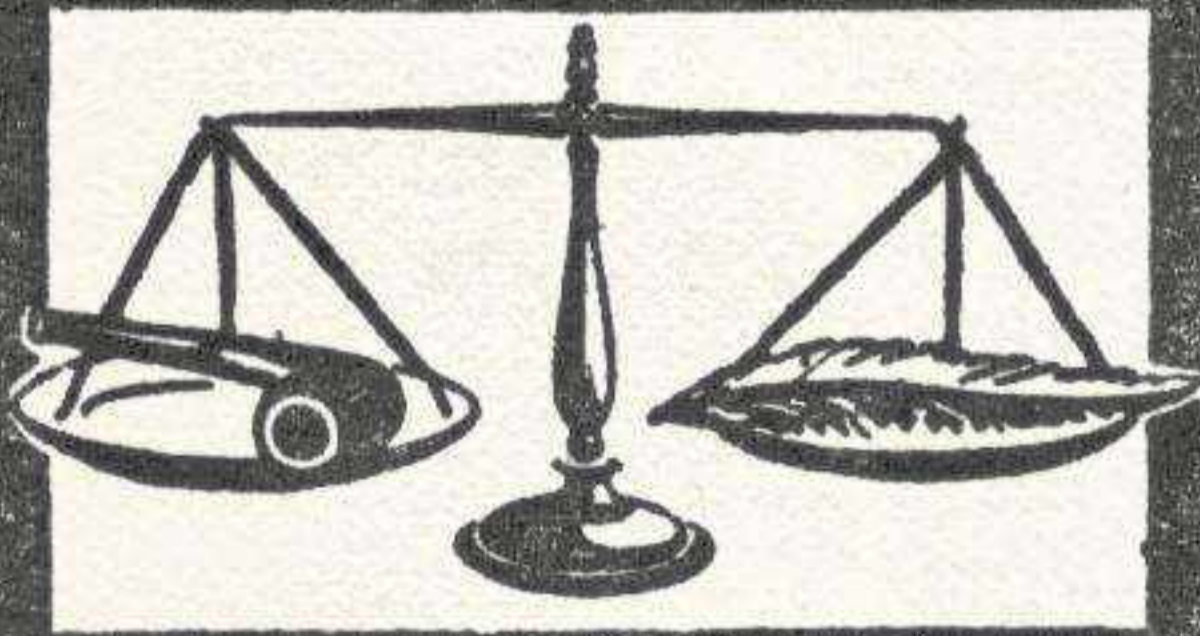
Doc Rennie eased the door open a handsbreadth. Julie Welch, dark hair tumbling down over her shoulders, was sitting on the edge of the bed, hands rubbing her cheeks slowly. We couldn't see her from that angle—just her reflection in the mirror.

Doc Rennie turned to the three of us. We could hardly hear him. "If one of you so much as whispers," he said, and his look was bitter cold, "you'll regret it as long as you live."

And with that he opened the door a

(Continued on page 120)

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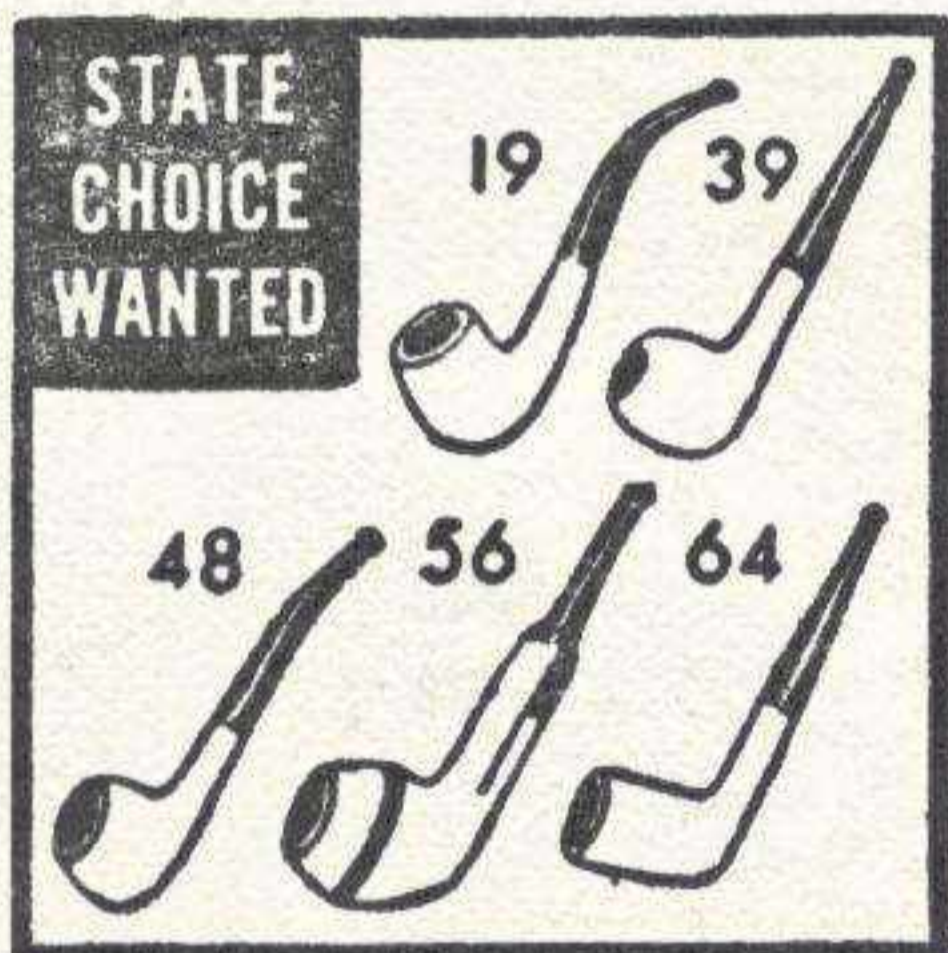
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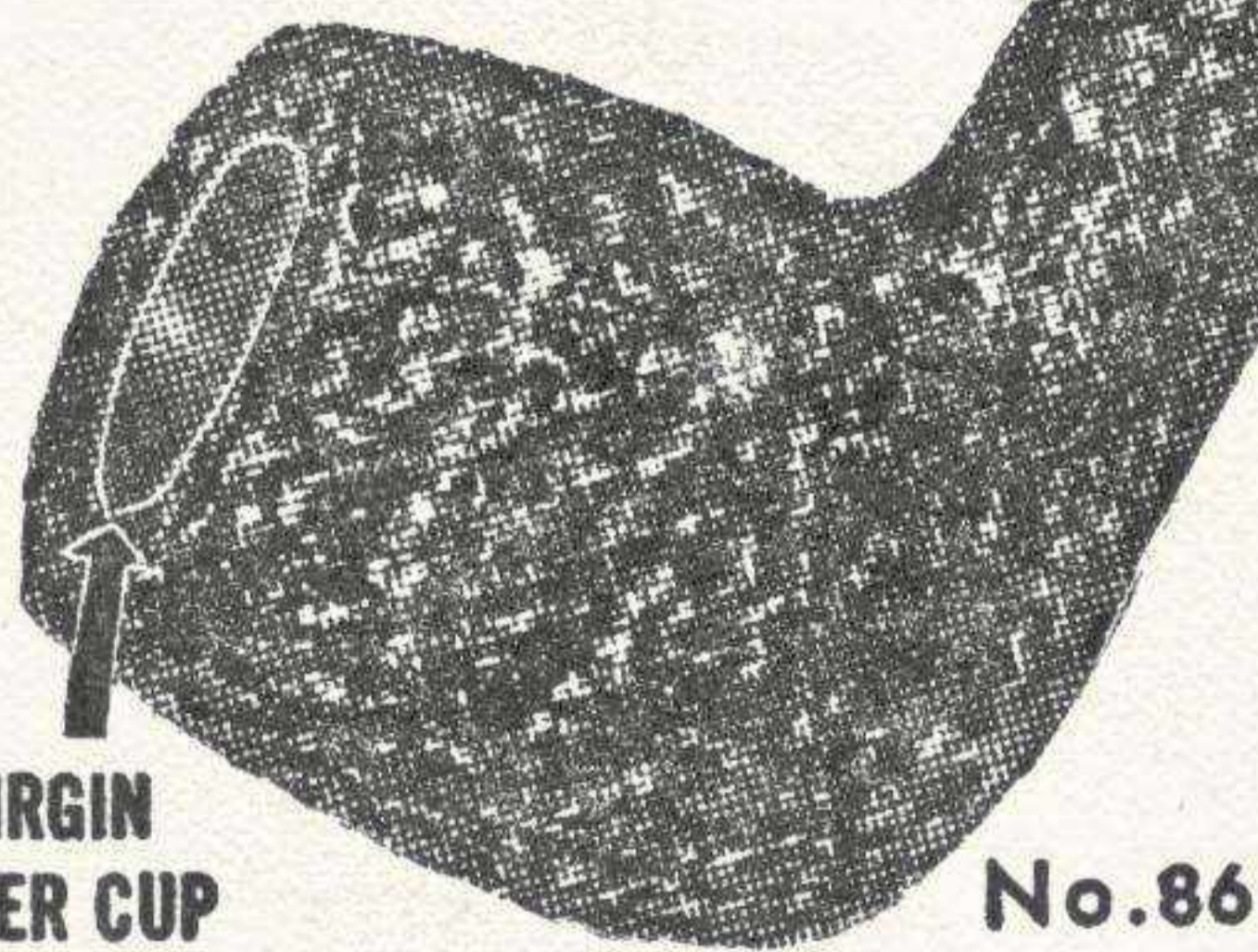
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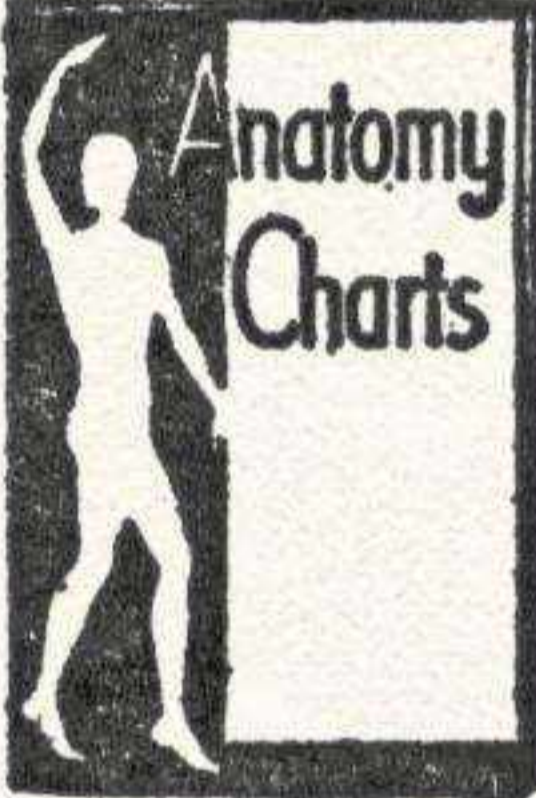
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C. P. Donnel, Jr.

(Continued from page 118)

little more and stuck his game ankle inside and went in after it. And there we stood, looking through the crack at the mirror. We saw his lank, square-shouldered figure appear, in the mirror, at the foot of the bed.

Julie Welch looked up at him. Oh, but she was a beautiful woman! We heard her little cry of surprise. My hand shut down like a vise on Fillmore's wrist as I felt him move.

"I am Dr. Rennie," we heard. "I'm a friend of Sheriff McKay. I've come to talk to you about your sister."

"My sister!" In the mirror her eyes opened wide, her hands went to her mouth. She glanced around the room. "Where's Johanna?" Her voice hit a high, almost hysterical note. "Where is she?" She was swaying.

"Where is she?" repeated Julie. Her hands were massaging her cheeks now, passing up over her temples, in a strange frantic sort of way. "Has something happened to Johanna?"

A PRICKLING sensation crawled up the back of my neck. The hysterical note was gone from Julie's voice and the last words were delivered in sort of a flat hush, like you get before a storm.

Doc Rennie just stood there, looking at her. I could see his profile in the mirror: no expression at all. Just watching her.

Julie's hands came down. "You said something about my sister?" The hysterical note was creeping back.

I stole a look at Hi Fillmore's face. Fishbelly white it was, and his eyes seemed to fill the thick lenses of his spectacles. The wrist I held was limp.

"You are in love with Mr. Fillmore, are you not?" Doc Rennie asked the question in an ominous voice that I spotted for acting.

What with being up all night and not eating, I was getting kind of sick at my stomach. Doc Rennie was deliberately torturing this girl.

5 Shrieks at 10

"Your sister," he went on, shifting his attack like a boxer, "has been murdered. You will never see her again. Never again, as long as you live. She has been murdered, do you understand?"

Julie disappeared from the mirror. I could see by the half turn of Doc Rennie's body that she had gone toward the dressing table near the head of the bed. There was a sound like running feet. I pushed Hi Fillmore aside and peered around the door.

Julie Welch was running around in little circles in front of the dressing table in a kind of horrible dogtrot, and she was making soft moaning noises. Her hands were outstretched, groping blindly.

Doc Rennie raised his voice. "You'll never see your lover again, either." Then, even louder, "We're taking your lover away from you. You'll never see him again."

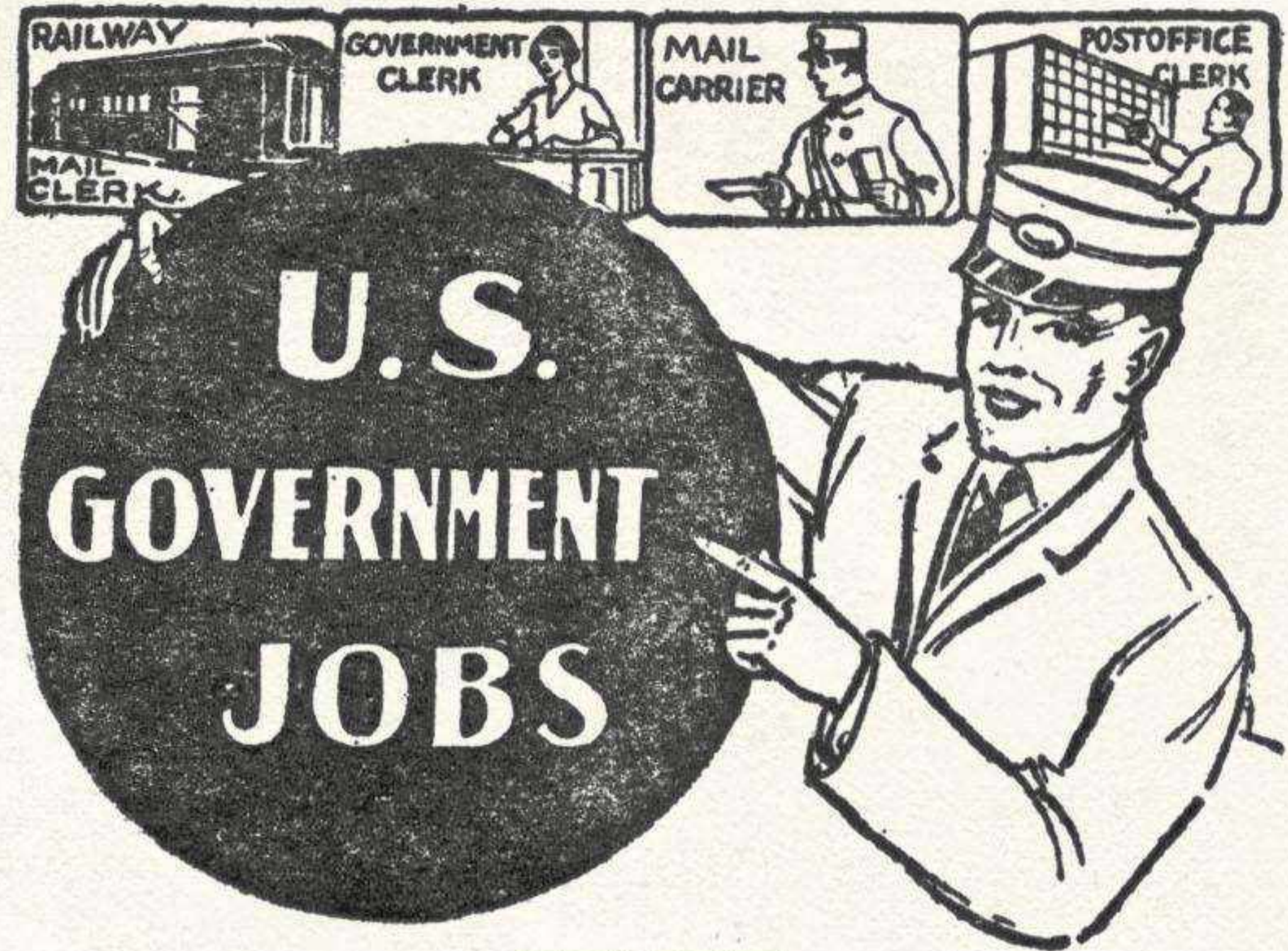
I couldn't stand it any longer. Doc Rennie was inhuman. I dropped Fillmore's wrist and stepped into the room, knees nearly buckling under me, but determined to stop this awful business even if I had to throttle Doc Rennie.

It was just as well I stepped in when I did, for at that moment Julie Welch, face contorted, snatched a big, silver-mounted hand mirror from the dressing table and flung herself at Doc Rennie in a crazy rage.

Up went Doc Rennie's long arms to cover his face. The crutches fell. He took three or four smashing blows from the mirror on his forearms before his bad ankle gave way and he went down with a crash. In another second I had come to life and caught Julie from behind.

She paid no attention to me. She was trying to fling herself on Doc Rennie as he lay sprawled on the floor.

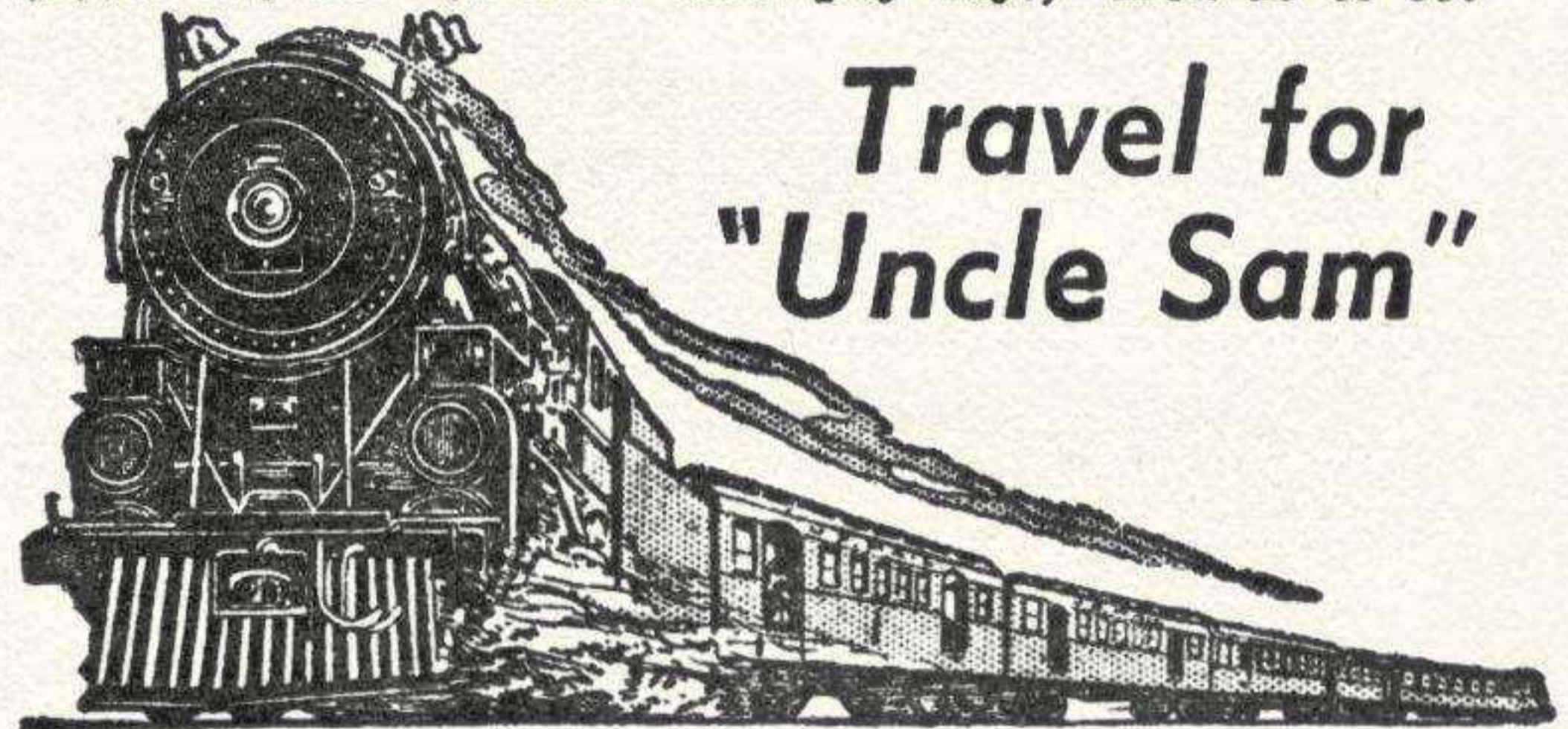
Julie Welch's strength was that of a crazy person, and all the while she was slashing the air over Doc Rennie with that mirror. Even as I braced myself my mind registered, in all that welter of emotion and shock, that she was swinging



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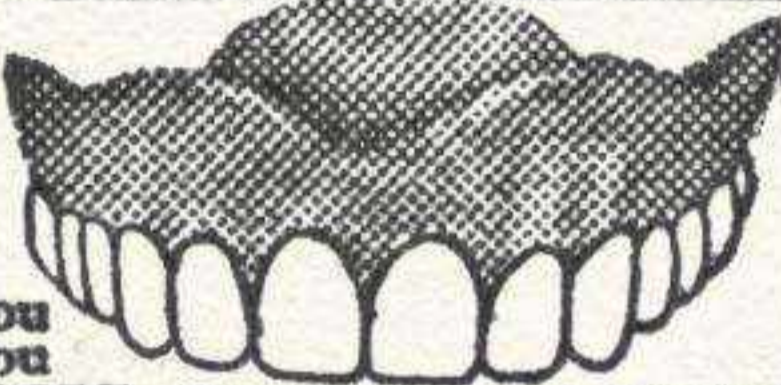
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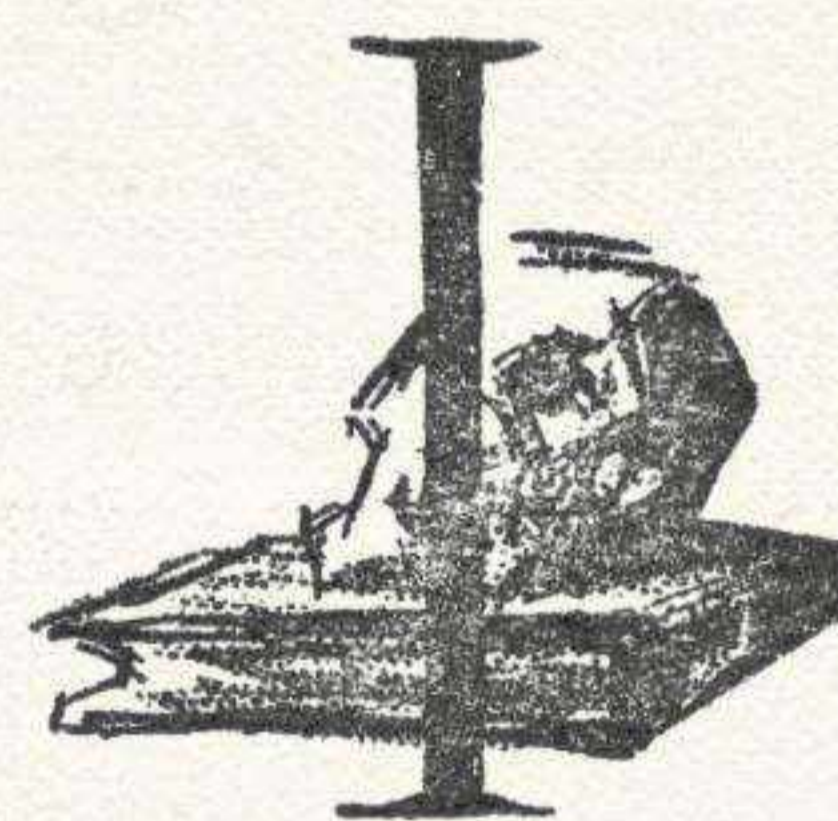
Then Hi Fillmore came to his senses and ran in to help. Together we managed to fling her to the bed and hold her down, which took some doing. Gradually her struggles died down. Finally she relaxed like a tired child and closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed down to the heavy breathing of sleep.

I couldn't make myself look directly at Fillmore. He was standing by the head of the bed. Out of the corner of my eye I could tell that his whole chunky frame had drawn into itself.

At my shoulder I heard Doc Rennie's breathing. I could look at him, and I did. He was watching Julie Welch again and his expression, in spite of his sunken eyes and gray cheeks, was professional, strictly professional.

CHAPTER SIX

Escape Into Life



THOUGHT I'd had my fill of horrors for one day, but there was one more to come.

There was a click behind me as Doc Rennie took something from the black leather case he'd put into his pocket at the Inn. His long frame bent over Julie Welch, and his long fingers drew up a curve of the fine white skin of her arm.

Her eyes opened as Doc Rennie, with that underhand motion doctors use, jabbed the hypodermic needle into the white skin and drove his thumb against the plunger.

Julie's glance fell on Hi Fillmore. Her smile was puzzled.

"Hi, darling," she began, "what in the world. . .?"

Doc Rennie twitched the needle out

5 Shrieks at 10

and turned away quickly. I did the same. A rustle and thump told us that Fillmore had dropped to his knees.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "You mustn't be afraid."

"Afraid?" Julie Welch's voice, her chuckle, were sane as her eyes had been when they opened. "Afraid?" She chuckled again. "With you here?"

At this point she must have seen us. "What's happened, Hi?" She was more curious than alarmed. "Did I faint? How silly of me! Where's Johanna?"

A ghastly silence.

"My,"—long, drawn out—"my, but I'm sleepy."

There were no more questions, thank heaven. I think we barely breathed until Julie Welch was asleep, which was a minute later.

Hi Fillmore heaved himself to his feet and came over to us. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and twice something stopped the words in his throat. But I could read the question in his mind a full five seconds before it came out.

"They can't do anything to her, can they? She was crazy when she killed Johanna—stark, staring crazy."

That was when I realized for the first time that it was my duty to arrest Julie Welch for the brutal hatchet murder of her twin sister.

Doc Rennie's voice jarred us both.

"Get out of here," he told us.

I stared at him, amazed. He tottered over to a chintz-covered rocker. He just made it. Automatically I shoved a straight chair forward for his bad ankle. The sunlight, striking in through the open window, picked out the hollows in his cheeks and around his weary eyes.

Doc Rennie was cracking up. One lean, freckled hand shot up to shade his eyes. But he wasn't through.

"Get some sleep," he ordered. "And listen: don't either of you leave this house, or tell anyone what happened in this room this morning. And don't let that old crone in the hall get out or telephone anyone. You understand?" His



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C. P. Donnel, Jr.

hand came down and he squinted at us. "Now beat it."

We almost fell over Ma Thoroughgood in the hall. Apparently she'd fainted early in the excitement.

I almost laughed out loud as we picked up her skinny old body and put her on a bed in the next room—and locked the door. But something warned me that if I started laughing I might not be able to stop, and I had no intention of making a holy show of my nerves before Fillmore.

THE REST of that morning is still vague to me. The thought of arresting Julie Welch for something she obviously had no memory of was like a steel brace drawn tight around my chest. Of course, she was insane when she wielded the hatchet.

But that meant years of hell in an asylum—that fine girl, with her life, in every sense, just beginning. A homicidal mania is incurable—that much I knew.

I glanced across the room at Hi Fillmore. The reaction had set in. He was asleep. If I was a true friend to him, I thought, I'd step over and put a bullet through his head while he slept. What was there for him when he woke up? Gerald O'Moore, I thought with a shudder, was the lucky one.

I must have dozed off at this point. It was Doc Rennie who woke me. While I was still stretching the cramps out, he was over shaking Hi Fillmore. Hi came to with a start, wondering where he was. Then everything came back to him and he buried his face in his hands.

Doc Rennie sat down. He was about to say something that, from the set of his face and the wrinkles across his brow, was pretty important. My mind flew to Julie Welch and what I had to do, and I wondered what else there was in the world that could be important at this time.

"Let's go over this case from the beginning," he said.

Hi Fillmore looked up quickly, all the

5 Shrieks at 10

strain of the past twelve hours evident in the droop of his shoulders and the miserable down-curve of his mouth. I spoke for him.

"Forget it, Doc," I said wearily. "I don't think I can stand any masterminding just now—even from you."

Doc Rennie's eyes snapped at me. "Just omit the tragedy, will you, Ed?" His tone left me raw. "It's just barely possible, you know, that certain phases of this situation have escaped you."

I didn't mean to bicker about it, but neither could I let him stuff Hi Fillmore with any false hope.

"What's the use?" I flared. "If the jury decides Julie's insane, she goes to the asylum. If she's sane, she—" I didn't bother to finish.

"Now that you've had the final word," said Doc Rennie, too politely, "may I be permitted to talk a little?"

I gave up. "Hell," I told him, "talk your head off."

"Let's dispose of Gerald O'Moore first," said Doc Rennie, like he hadn't heard me. "O'Moore's case is painfully simple. A neurotic with a mother fixation. He idolizes, worships his mother. She dies—a terrible blow. He transfers all the inner violence of his affection for her to Julie Welch. He senses last night that he is about to lose Julie to Fillmore. He grows desperate. He gets off the bus, deciding to beg Julie to give him at least a chance. He cuts across country from Edmonds Corner to the Welch house and hesitates on the porch, afraid to go in and face Julie's answer to his plea.

"Through the parlor window he can see into the kitchen. What does he see? He sees Julie Welch, in what appears to him to be a fit of temper, snatch up the hatchet and make that incredible attack on Johanna.

"He had been building his life around the thought of Julie. Now that dream is shattered forever. He goes to pieces, makes for his refuge—the shack. He would rather be dead than face the future with that horrible scene forever in



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his mind. So he starts that note, and then puts himself away with the bullet. In the light of suspicion, that note was a confession. In the light of fact we see it for what it is—

"Now,"—here everything in me cringed—"for Julie and Johanna Welch."

Doc Rennie's voice was very grave. Poor Hi—I could see him nerving himself to listen. But my mind and body had taken all they could take.

"Doc," I said, "answer me one question and then we can let this drop. Was Julia Welch insane when she attacked Johanna? Of course she was. Then why go on with it?"



COULDN'T believe my eyes. He was shaking his head.

"No," he said. The room was perfectly still. "No," he repeated, "not in the sense you mean."

I was disgusted. "If you're going to split hairs—"

But Hi Fillmore was sitting up straight now, hands balled into fists, chunky body so taut he was shaking all over.

"She wasn't insane," said Doc Rennie. "But—and this is the horrid part—Johanna believed she was. And Julie knew there was something wrong with herself, and those two girls arranged their lives so as to hide Julie's occasional 'insanity.' You see, they had never had confidence in doctors, so when Julie's spells of extreme excitability began, all they could do was cover them up for fear Julie might be committed to an asylum.

"Johanna most certainly noticed that Julie had these spells only when subjected to some physical or emotional strain. Thus things were easier when they moved back to Essexville.

"In Essexville," continued Doc Rennie calmly, "life is generally peaceful. Contacts are few. Johanna devoted her-

5 Shrieks at 10

self entirely to protecting Julie from situations which might bring on her trouble. But the trouble was always just around the corner, as Mrs. Thoroughgood indicated with the incident in the Notion Shoppe.

"Then Gerald O'Moore and Fillmore began courting Julie. Johanna was worried, for Julie was plainly falling in love with you, Fillmore. There was no telling when the trouble might start up again.

"And now," said Doc Rennie, "we come to tonight. I know what happened. It can never be proved, for Julie remembers nothing and Johanna is dead. But it is the only thing that could have happened.

"O'Moore was here and left. Fillmore proposed, was accepted. Julie was in love for the first time. When Fillmore left, Julie ran into the kitchen to tell Johanna.

"Johanna must have reminded Julie that marriage, for Julie, was out of the question, all the time believing, as Julie did, that Julie's 'insanity' was incurable. She tried to make Julie promise to give up the idea of marriage.

"If an incident in a shop could upset Julie, imagine what this conversation did to her. One moment in the clouds, elated, feeling perhaps that with the happiness of marriage the spells might go away and not return. Her sister is forced to tear this rosy picture to pieces—a terrible shock to Julie. So terrible that Julie's state of mind culminates in such a frenzy as she had never experienced before. She goes blind to everything, picks up the hatchet, and attacks the only human being present—her sister.

"The fit passes. Dazed, she throws the hatchet aside, wanders out of the kitchen through the house. All memory of the attack is gone."

Doc Rennie shook his head.

"O'Moore, poor devil, has witnessed the attack without knowing the cause. He runs. Fillmore returns. He sees

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"Those screams we heard were pure hysterics. Their timing with the clock was, of course, pure coincidence. Garner runs in, Fillmore runs in. They pull her off. She has fainted—a normal faint. The faint passes into normal, exhausted sleep, as it sometimes does. While she sleeps, we hunt the murderer."

Doc Rennie looked from Fillmore to me.

"O'Moore was such an obvious suspect," he went on, "that he blinded me to certain medical indications in the case. Once he was eliminated, the picture of Julie as the hatchet-wielder appeared. I couldn't be even partly positive, however, until I had talked with Tilling. I told him every detail and he agreed with me."

Doc Rennie drew breath.

"JULIE WELCH is an epileptic," he said.

"Epileptic!" I shouted. "But—"

Doc Rennie's long hand went up. "You think all epileptics grow rigid and foam at the mouth and fall down during an attack," he said. "That's where you're wrong, Ed. Thousands of them

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never do. Their seizures manifest themselves only in frantic or apparently insane acts. Sometimes they try to climb walls, sometimes they babble irrationally, and some, during violent seizures, lose all consciousness of their surroundings and attack the nearest person.

"Tilling agreed that, since we had no real knowledge of what took place last night, a test was necessary. Accordingly, this morning you heard me deliberately excite and enrage Julie Welch. And you saw the results: proof positive of her condition."

I felt kind of dizzy, for a big, black problem was swelling in my mind. After all, Julie Welch *had* killed her sister, and I was sheriff and sworn to. . .

Doc Rennie and Fillmore were both looking at me.

"Doc," I said finally, desperate, "you're sure this Tilling fellow knows what he's talking about?"

Doc Rennie smiled. "Well," he said, "he's been able to cure—completely—many people like Julie who twenty years ago would have gone to insane asylums or the electric chair."

"Cure!" Fillmore shouted it.

"Tilling told me over the phone," said Doc Rennie, "that Julie Welch's case sounded like a brain lesion—remember that fall from the cherry tree—or possibly a glandular disturbance."

Hi Fillmore said: "What are you going to do, Ed?"

I thought a long while. When I decided, it was like snapping those steel bands which seemed to have been binding my chest for hours and hours.

"Nothing," I said. I looked at them. "You two are going to do it all."

I won't say I didn't enjoy the start Doc Rennie gave.

"Doc," I said, "you're going to take Julie to this Tilling guy as soon as possible. Hi,"—he was on his feet now and I pretended not to notice what was happening to his eyes behind those thick lenses—"you're going to stay here and run your paper and pray that Julie gets

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C. P. Donnel, Jr.

well soon so you won't have to wait long before you get married."

"And what are you going to do, Ed?" asked Doc Rennie, and his eyes were glistening like Hi Fillmore's.

I yawned. "Going home to bed," I said. "When I wake up, I'll have forgotten every word said in this room this morning—like you two will. Come on, Doc. Hi, you take charge and give it out that Julie's had a breakdown because of her sister's death and that Doc and you are taking her away for a long rest."

Hi couldn't speak but he shook my hand. I could still feel the pressure when I was helping Doc Rennie into the car.

I said, "Doc—"

He said quickly: "You're worrying about letting people think O'Moore killed Johanna Welch."

"Yep," I said. "That's it."

"Look at it this way," he said. "By allowing people to believe a lie, you turn O'Moore's suicide from a life thrown away to no profit into a sacrifice that will purchase happiness for two very decent people. After all, your townspeople believe O'Moore was insane, so they won't think too harshly of him."

So I put it out of my mind. Once in a while I think, "Here I've helped cover up a murder by letting people lay it at the door of an innocent man."

But then I see how happy Hi Fillmore and Julie are—she's cured now and they've been married some time—and it reminds me of what Doc Rennie said. And, funny thing, the old conscience doesn't bother me a bit.

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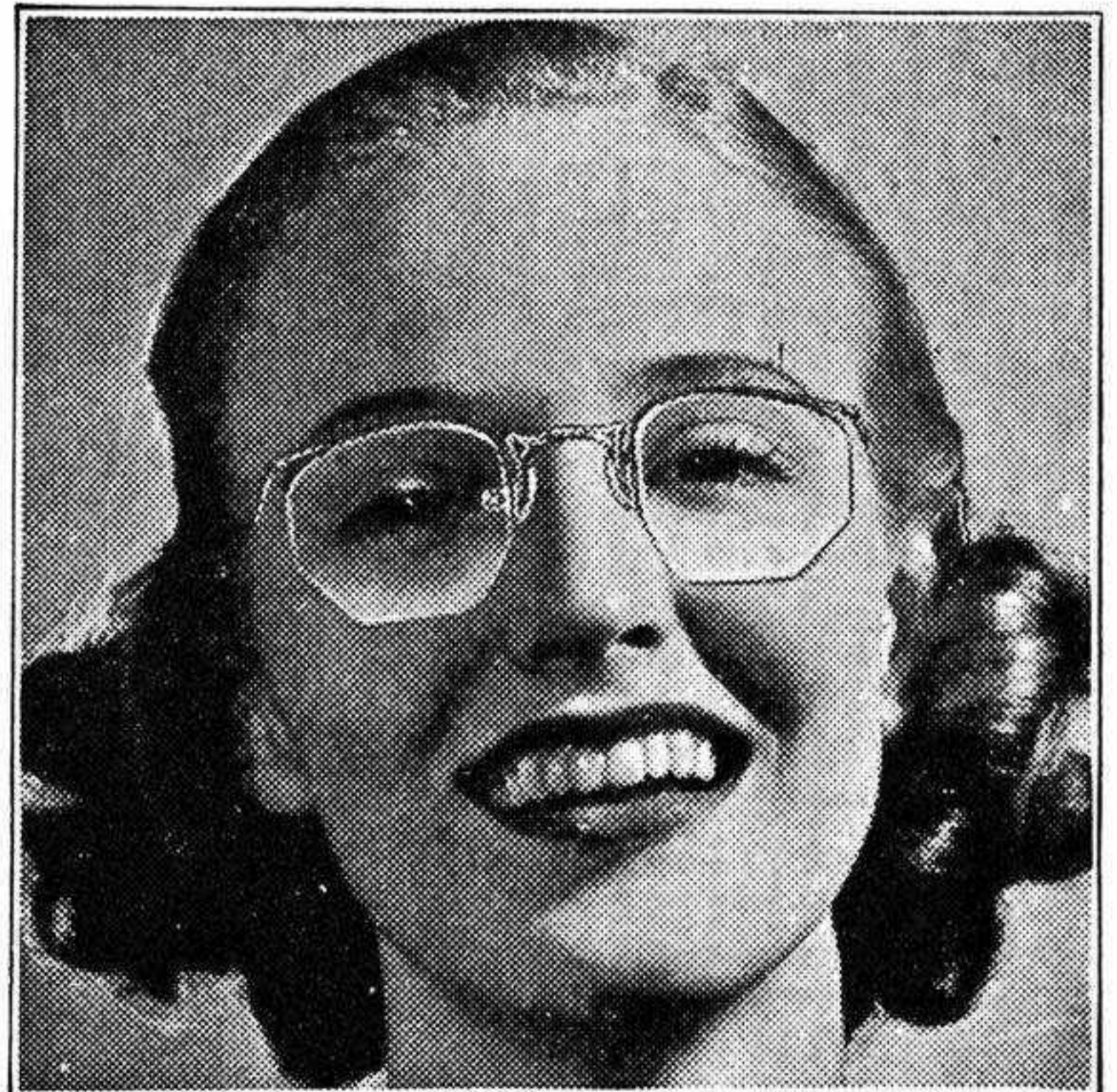
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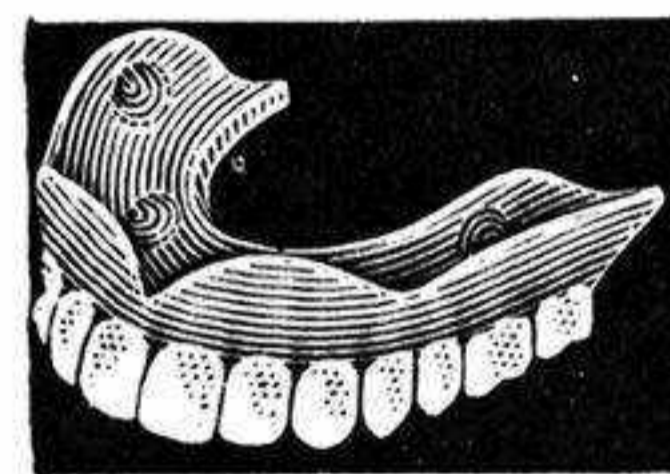
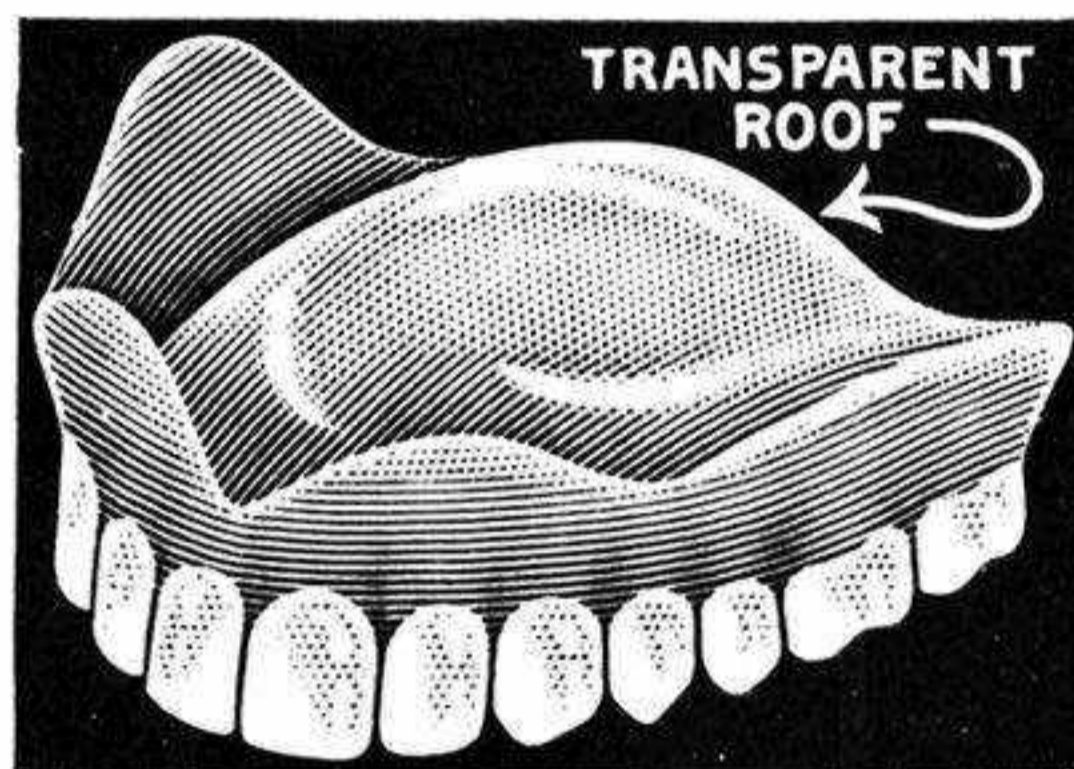


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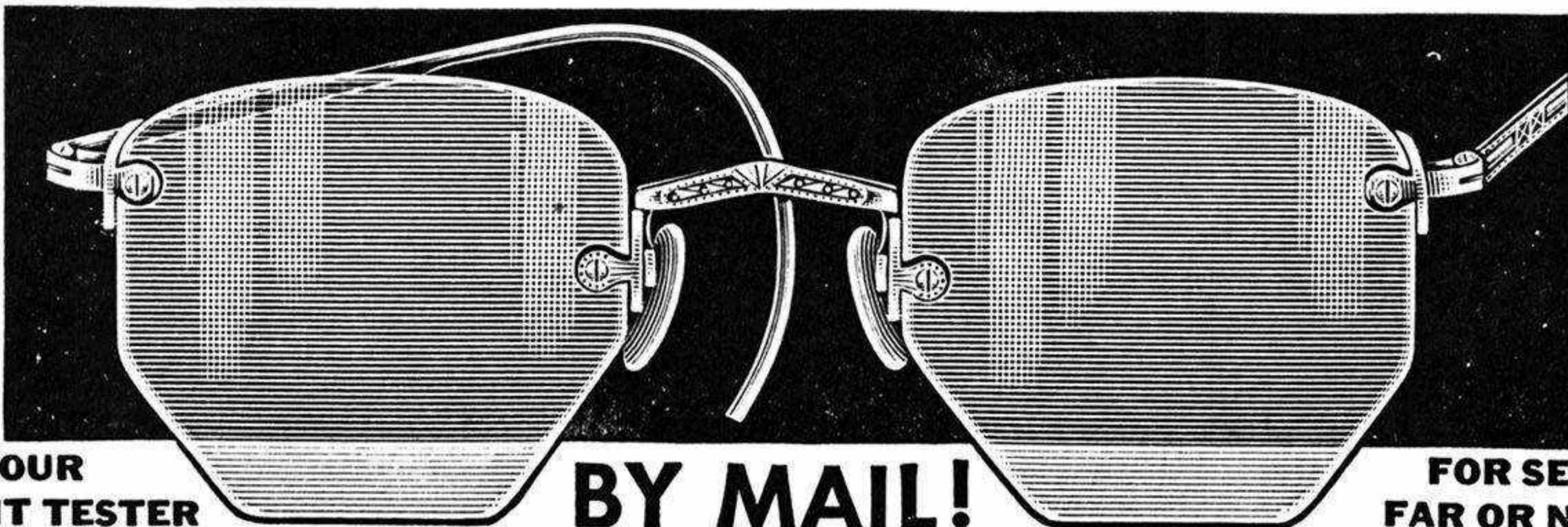
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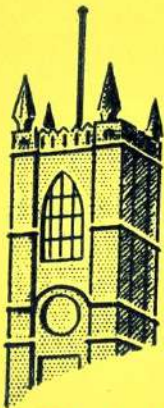
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