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TOO FAIR  
TO DIE  
by  
CLEVE  
ADAMS

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FOR 25¢

COMPLIMENTS  
OF A  
FIEND  
by  
FREDRIC  
BROWN

MARCH  
No. 67

## COMPLIMENTS

## of a FIEND

by FREDRIC  
BROWN

TWO COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH MYSTERIES

Death walked in the wake of her perfume

# TOO FAIR TO DIE!

by CLEVE F. ADAMS



COMPLIMENTS OF A FIEND  
FULL-LENGTH CURRENT BOOK  
by FREDRIC BROWN

MARCH  
1951

TWO COMPLETE  
DETECTIVE BOOKS

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25¢

TOO FAIR TO DIE  
FULL-LENGTH CURRENT BOOK  
by CLEVE F. ADAMS



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Dept. M-707, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

# TOO FAIR TO DIE

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

*Cherchez la femme*, they told McBride. *Find the woman*. He hit the trail in the suburbs of L.A., and wound up in the heart of Montana; in the heart of a bitter, bullet-baited gubernatorial election; in the heart of the one woman he would have given his life to put behind bars.

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## COMPLIMENTS OF A FIEND

By FREDRIC BROWN

How did he kill? What caused the dread red stain? Who would be his next victim? Terror stalked the numbers racket as the fiend played his subtle game . . . and whoever balked his evil sway was faced with the deadly odds of 500 to 1.

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# TOO FAIR TO DIE

By CLEVE F. ADAMS

**. . . *Cherchez la femme*, they told McBride. Find the woman. He hit the trail in the suburbs of L. A. and wound up in the heart of Montana in the heart of a bitter, bullet-baited gubernatorial election . . . in the heart of the very woman he would have given his life to entrap.**

MCBRIDE CHECKED into the Lewis & Clark Hotel in Copper Hill so closely behind his quarry that he could smell her perfume, having tailed her for three months across thirty of the forty-eight states with little to go on beyond the fact that she had known, intimately, the guy he was really after: the man who had vanished two years ago. Following Thornton Avery's erstwhile mistress over a distance of some eight thousand devious miles had been no easy chore, but with perserverance it might ultimately lead to Avery himself, and, more important, to the quarter of a million dollars which Avery had embezzled.

The prolonged strain of keeping the lady under almost constant surveillance without apprizing her of his interest had left McBride tired and a little edgy, though in spite of this he now experienced, for the first time in many weeks, a quickening optimism based upon logic. If Margo Mazaryk had nothing on her mind she had certainly used a most erratic and suspiciously roundabout route to get from Los Angeles, California, to Copper Hill, Montana. McBride had a sudden sense of exhilaration, a feeling that here, in Copper Hill, the chase might end. He hoped it was not just the altitude.

Waiting to register, he watched the clerk, porters, bellhops and the dozen or so guests in the glittering, rococo lobby as they in turn watched Margo Mazaryk's progress toward the elevators. McBride himself would have been the last to deny that she was worth looking at. Taller than average, but shapelier than most tall girls in the current fashion, she moved with an animal grace that was at once an invitation and a warning. Hair as black as midnight crowned an imperiously held head, and as she paused for a moment

to let her gaze sweep the lobby her eyes had the brilliance and color of emeralds. Seven expensive traveling bags followed her into the waiting car. The doors closed. McBride could almost hear the mass exhalation of breath from the predominantly male audience.

The clerk was recalled to himself by McBride's impatient fingers on the counter. "Yes, sir?"

"An outside room," McBride said. "Preferably a corner."

His clothes, his luggage came in for an instant's appraisal. "Something about—ah—fifteen dollars?"

"You must have been reading hotel ads in the New Yorker," McBride said, "but that's all right. I buy and can usually pay for the best." He accepted the proffered registry card, signed it with a flourish.

"Here on business, Mr. McBride?"

"Yes."

"Mining?"

McBride's teeth shone whitely against the darkness of his skin. "No."

The clerk was a hard man to stop. "This is the copper capital of the world, you know."

"So I've heard," McBride said. "I'm a dirt farmer, myself." He did not look like a dirt farmer. He looked like a well-tailored, slightly arrogant Sioux, and for all he knew some of his Black Irish ancestors may have been a trifle promiscuous at that. He put both hands on the desk.

"Look, do you mind very much if we postpone this little chat until later? I'm tired."

"Sorry," the clerk said, though obviously he was not. He reached a key from the mail rack, wrote on McBride's card, saw Margo Mazaryk's still lying there and brightened. "Well, well, both from Los



Angeles, I see!" His pale eyes traveled to the elevators, came back to rest briefly on McBride's face. "No connection, I presume?"

McBride's smile became a shade less pleasant. "If I knew the lady, I'd practically have to wipe that smirk off your mouth, wouldn't I?" He leaned a little farther across the desk. "I could be nagged into it anyway."

A frightened gleam came into the clerk's eyes. "Front!" He tapped the call-bell furiously.

Two kids in plum-colored uniforms raced up. "Yes, sir!"

McBride was conscious of almost as much general interest as Margo Mazaryk's arrival had evoked. He decided he might as well go whole hog. He stripped a ten-dollar bill from his money clip, tossed it to the taller of the two. "Split that up any way you like, after you get me a fifth of White Horse and some ice." He left them wrestling over his bags, crossed to a row of public phone booths and shut himself in.

The classified section of a directory yielded the names of three private detective agencies, and he played eenie-meenie-minie-moe with these for a moment, finally deciding on one affiliated with a national chain. He dropped his nickel and gave the number. Presently a girl's voice said that he was talking to the Inter-Mountain Agency. It was a nice voice, neither brash nor too cultured. McBride thought idly that he'd like to meet its owner personally some time. "May I speak to your manager, please?"

"Mr. Patrick?"

"Is he the manager?"

There was the briefest of hesitations. Then: "I'm sorry, that was a little silly of me, wasn't it? I'll connect you."

"Patrick speaking."

"Rex McBride. I'm stopping at the Lewis & Clark. Could you drop over here for a while. I'll be in 511."

"Right."

McBride left the booth and rode an elevator up to five. His room door was slightly ajar, and from beyond it he heard an exaggeratedly tough voice saying: "Stick 'em up, Jack. Dis is de business."

Another voice remonstrated.

McBRIDE pushed the door open, cautiously. The remonstrative voice belonged to the taller of the two bell-hops. He was standing partially turned away from a wardrobe closet, his arms loaded with McBride's suits. Beside a luggage rack and above an emptily yawning bag the other kid had a leveled gun in his hand. His mouth was twisted in a movie snarl. "So yuh won't talk, hey?"

There was no doubt that the gun was McBride's own. He stifled an angry imprecation, took two quick steps forward and clamped down on the boy's neck and wrist. "Don't make me hurt you, punk."

The kid dropped the gun instantly. "Geeze, mister, we never meant no—"

"We!" the older one said. "I told you to leave it lay." He looked at McBride with neither fear nor trembling. "Call the office if you want to. You don't have to break his neck."

McBride released his captive. "And all the rest of it—is that part of the usual Lewis & Clark service?"

"No, sir."

McBride decided he liked this kid. No stuttering, no long-winded explanations, just that straight level look that said take it or leave it, big shot. He was reminded of times his own motives had been misinterpreted, and of how far he had come from the gutters of his youth. "All right, finish up what you were doing and scram." His eyes went to a third bag, a pigskin Gladstone, which fortunately they hadn't got into yet. The special lock must have discouraged them. In this one were photographs of Margo Mazaryk, and a single likeness of the man to whom he hoped she was leading him. He saw that the bottle of White Horse had been opened, but not sampled; that the ice he had ordered was in a thermos bowl. "The next time someone gives you a ten-spot you don't have to be such eager beavers."

"No, sir!" The smaller kid's eyes held open admiration. You could see he believed McBride an upper-crust gangster.

The older one racked the last of McBride's ties. "Come on, Joey." He was at the half door when McBride's "Wait a minute" halted him. "Yeah?"

"Thanks," McBride said.

A slow flush crept up around the tall

youth's ears. "Forget it." He hauled Joey out and shut the door.

McBride took off his hat, topcoat and suit-coat, loosened his tie and opened the shirt at the throat.

He poured himself a stiff shot of White Horse and sauntered over to one of the windows. Directly across the street from the hotel, atop a two-story building, there was an enormous electric signboard that said: DONALDSON—YOUR NEXT GOVERNOR! The accompanying portrait, though painted in broad strokes, gave a realistic picture of a powerful blond viking of a man in his late thirties or early forties.

Someone knocked, and he finished off his drink, crossed the room and opened the door. Facing him was a plumpish, old-young man with a pink-and-white complexion and bright blue eyes under a pearl-gray knockabout that looked as though it had just come from the hatter's. "Mr. McBride? I'm Lou Patrick."

They shook hands. "Come in," McBride said. "Drink?"

"What's this?" Patrick picked up the White Horse bottle, shook his head regretfully, put it down again. "I'm a Vat 69 man, myself. When I can't get rye, bourbon, beer or paint." As though against his better judgement he picked up the bottle again, poured himself a generous three fingers in a water tumbler. "Or White Horse." Over the rim of the glass his blue eyes regarded McBride with child-like wonder. "I've been beating my brains out trying to place you, Mr. McBride. I just made it. You did a job on the Palo Verde Dam project for Underwriter's Alliance. That would be eight, maybe nine years ago." He drained his glass with obvious relish. "I wish I had the nerve to go after some of that big stuff."

McBride's face gave no sign that he was displeased by the recognition. He was not sure that he was. "It doesn't take nerve," he said. "It's a kind of fever, like other forms of gambling." He sat on the foot of a bed, began taking off his shoes. "Right now, Pete the Greek is holding my marker for thirteen grand. You don't get that kind of money working for two-bits a day and expenses."

"That secretary of yours has a nice voice."

"Katie?" Patrick smacked his lips.

"Everything about Katie is nice."

"I'd like to meet her some time."

"No you don't." Patrick wagged his head. His hair was a very light brown, silky, beginning to thin on top. He exuded good humor. He looked like a prosperous, well-scrubbed traveling salesman with a load of good farmer's-daughter stories. "Nunh-unh. Katie's mine. She's thinking over a proposition I made her not long ago."

"Does she know you're married?"

For just an instant the blue eyes lost their smile. "Do you know it?"

"I'll give you odds," McBride said. He held his glass to the light. "Guys like you always are." Quite suddenly he centered a hard, intent stare on the other man's face. "There's a girl—a woman—named Mazaryk upstairs in 714. I'll want to know where she goes, who she sees, and who comes to see her." He scaled a five-by-seven photograph to Patrick, who caught it deftly. "If you can cut it, her telephone calls would be nice too."

Looking down at the portrait, the shorter, rounder man whistled appreciation. "It'll be a pleasure!"

McBride nodded. "She's not hard to spot, but a couple of times she's been a little shifty. Don't let her get away from you."

"We won't," Patrick promised. A plump pink forefinger caressed the likeness, as though feeling the texture of the lady's skin. "Nothing else you'd care to tell me?"

"I don't think so," McBride said. "Not until I know you better." They measured each other carefully, like strangers sitting down to a poker session. "Or unless you want to take the job on a contingent basis."

Laugh wrinkles deepened around the blue eyes. "Thanks, chum, I guess I'll stick to my own system. Twenty-five a day for each man the operation takes, plus expenses."

"You'll never get rich that way," McBride said persuasively.

"No, but I won't die in the poor house, either."

The telephone rang. McBride picked it up.

"This is Jack," said the voice at the other end. "You know, the red plush monkey-suit downstairs."



The voice dropped to an even lower key. "Look, Mr. McBride, one of the maids has been trying to pump Joey and me about you. She didn't say so, but I happen to know she unpacked a dame named Mazaryk up on seven."

McBride's face became wooden. "I don't think there's anything in that for me, kid, but thanks anyway."

"Sure, I just thought I'd tell you."

"Thanks." McBride hung up, looked at Patrick as though surprised to see him still there. "Well, that's fine," he said in a suddenly enraged voice. "That's just ducky. All I need now is a brass band." He glared at his reflection in a mirror. "Old Secret Agent X McBride!"

**A**T ELEVEN o'clock that night he awoke from a sound sleep, thoroughly refreshed, relaxed, and even disposed to be philosophical about the counter-espionage move of Margo Mazaryk.

At first he did not know what had awakened him. Then he heard it again, and much closer: band music, accompanied by a voice patently reinforced by a public address system. He got up and, without turning on the lights, went to the open window looking down on Copper Street. Store fronts were ablaze, seemingly a thousand neon signs heralded a thousand importunities, the street was alive with pedestrians and scurrying taxi-cabs and surprisingly opulent-looking private cars. McBride was pleased. He liked an after-dark town.

Down the middle of the street came a modest parade, half a dozen open touring cars led by a big flat-bed stake truck on which was the band, ten pieces balanced precariously on folding undertakers' chairs. The flapping canvas sign above their heads said: HODIAK FOR GOVERNOR, and there was a picture of a Lincolnesque old man with sad eyes and a tired, kindly smile. The loud speaker on the truck's cab intermittently announced that Governor Jan Hodiak would speak tomorrow night at Blanchard Stadium.

The telephone rang and he got into robe and slippers and went to answer it. Lou Patrick's voice said that he was downstairs, that maybe he had a little something for McBride.

"If you're not interested I know another place I can peddle it."

McBride's eyes narrowed. He was still not sure of Patrick, not enough to trust him all the way. "All right, come on up."

He was laying out fresh shorts, 'sox, a shirt and a gray-green gabardine when Patrick came in.

"Hi," Patrick said cheerfully. "Guess who's been calling on your pigeon?" He smacked his lips. "And in a very furtive manner too, if I may say so."

McBride crushed out his his cigarette in an ash tray. "I'll bite. Who?"

"None other than our governor-elect," Patrick said triumphantly. "He hopes." He peered intently at McBride's face. "Mean anything to you?"

"Not so far," McBride said. He sat on the lounge, began putting on his socks. "Tell me more, and funnier, please. Is Donaldson as big and handsome as his picture across the street?"

Patrick's nod was affirmative, positive. "Even bigger. He could take you"—he assayed McBride with a measuring eye—"or me, anyway, with one hand." He shuddered realistically. "I hope if he ever has reason to take a dislike to me I'll have a gun in each hand and five witnesses that it was self-defense." His smile became bland, his voice casual. "What kind of a dame is this Mazaryk, anyway?"

"Strictly de luxe," McBride said. He put on his shorts, snapped the elastic about his middle. "Just to give you some idea, she's been co-respondent in two divorce actions, both with vice-presidents of banks. She doesn't play around with us lower classes."

"Boy, oh boy!" Patrick's eyes glistened.

"And now," McBride said caustically, "if you'd be so good as to empty that paunch of yours of the gruesome details? It's me that's paying twenty-five a day for information, not you."

"You'd better count on fifty," Patrick laughed. "I've an idea this deal may turn into at least a two-man job." He took off his hat, twirled it on a pudgy forefinger. "Whether you know it or not, this town is boiling. The whole state is boiling. Donaldson is out to beat Hodiak, a man who has been governor since Rover was a pup, and who is pretty well liked, though getting on in years and some think a little

soft. Me, I wouldn't say one way or the other, but it's a cinch to be a close race, and neither side is above gouging with whatever tool comes to hand." He sighed. "That's what I meant by saying if you weren't interested, I could pick up a fast buck from—"

"No," McBride said. He shook his head slowly from side to side. "You couldn't do it without going farther—without somebody going farther—and I don't want my baby scared off what she's doing—what I hope she's doing." He lit another cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke in Patrick's direction. "You'll have to leave it lay, Lou. I mean that." His eyes were direct, serious.

"Well, sure, but—"

Angry blood darkened McBride's skin. "I said no, damn it!" After a moment he said in a milder tone; "We're too far into this for me to tie the can to you. You're stuck with me and you won't come unstuck. But if you lose any money by it I'll try to make it up to you."

Patrick let out his breath with a tremendous whoosh. "For a minute there you had me worried." His round pink face wore an aggrieved look. "What the hell, I came to you with it first, didn't I?"

"Sure, with the suggestion that you were open to bids." McBride thrust onyx links into the cuffs of his shirt, snapped them shut. "Look, I don't give a damn about your two-bit local politics. You can cut the throats of both parties for all I care, but let's not play knifey-knifey with either me or the Mazaryk in the middle. Okay?"

"Oke."

McBride's smile was genial, forgiving. "Now that that's settled, you can brief me on what you hoped to sell to the Hodiak camp."

It wasn't much, and there was nothing in it for McBride—not at the moment, anyway—except that it proved Margo Mazaryk was not exactly a stranger in town. According to Patrick, Trace Donaldson was not a man who could easily go unobserved, but he had certainly tried to be in attaining the seventh-floor suite of the lady in whom McBride was interested. He had ridden the elevator only to the sixth, walking up the last flight, which had naturally stimulated Patrick's curiosity. "Donaldson is supposed to be paying court to Elsa Blanchard. They're around to-

gether a lot, and she's switched her support to him instead of Hodiak." He sighed. "That must have hurt the old man. I'm comparatively new to this town, but as I get it Hodiak used to dandle Elsa on his knee. He and her father were pals; between them they practically built Montana up from a cow pasture."

"Blanchard the copper king?"

Patrick nodded. "And zinc and manganese and anything else you care to mention. He owned, or at least ran, Copper Hill the way a kid does a toy train."

McBride had finished dressing, and now he picked up his topcoat and hat. "After you, my good man. We'd better not be seen together until I figure a way to meet you socially." He opened the door, looked up and down the hall, gave Patrick the nod and watched him as far as the elevators. Then, closing the door again, he went back and emptied the pigskin Gladstone of its photographs. The one of Mr. Thornton Avery he studied intently for a moment, though there was no particular reason to. He already knew it by heart. Presently he spoke to it, with feeling and sincere admiration. "You were a heller with a set of books, bud. I hope you've still got the dough."

He hid Mr. Thornton Avery in the deep crack between sofa back and lower seat. Miss Margo Mazaryk, in three different poses, he spread face down beneath the paper lining of the topmost drawer in the wardrobe. Then, whistling cheerfully under his breath, he went out and locked the door and jingling his key carried it down to the elevators and pressed the button. The car doors opened almost instantly, and there, facing him, was Miss Margo Mazaryk in person. She was in mink and a gown of some shimmering green material that exactly matched her eyes. For the briefest moment the eyes held a startled look, as though she might have been thinking of him too. Then that was gone, and though she did not avoid his admiring stare, she withdrew into herself, impersonal, remote.

"Down!" the elevator boy said.

"Sure," McBride said. He stepped in side and with an engaging smile removed his hat. "Always the gentleman." The perfume of her hair was like incense in his nostrils.



## II

THERE WAS a dance going on in the main ballroom of the hotel, apparently a benefit affair of some kind, since it was big enough to include people from almost all walks of life and from all age groups. The doors to the lobby were thrown open, and the overflow from the dance floor spread out over the whole public area, lobby, mezzanine, bar, coffee shop. At a table in the latter, McBride divided his attention between his steak, a copy of the *News-Press* and the immediate scene. A new desk clerk had replaced the day man; there was a new set of bell-hops too. Since debouching from the elevator with her, McBride had not seen Margo Mazaryk, but he was not particularly worried: he had complete confidence in Lou Patrick's ability, if not in his morals. He scanned the paper.

There was a spread in the coy, Louella Parson's vein about Elsa Blanchard. "*Lady Haverill to you!*" the writer interjected. Elsa, it seemed, had been hostess at a tea for Blanchard executives' wives, but what the whole thing amounted to was a rehash of the lady's ultra-ultra schooling, her conquest of Society both at home and abroad, her marriage to and recent sad widowhood from a real, dyed-in-the-wool British lord. And wasn't it just wonderful to have her home, right here in little old Copper Hill, Montana, when she might just as easily have been setting the Riviera afire?

McBride's slightly jaundiced eye sought the mast-head of the paper. The *News-Press* had been founded by Asa Blanchard.

The accompanying picture of Asa's daughter impressed McBride that she was a lady who knew her own mind; that she was a proud-spirited filly it might be exciting to break, but that you wouldn't quite know what to do with afterward. He wondered how much it would annoy her to know that her candidate for governor, and possibly even more, was meeting sub rosa a lady of infinitely greater allure.

There was a picture of Trace Donaldson too, though not in direct juxtaposition. You gathered that the *News-Press* would be careful about things like that until given the word. He still looked like a blond viking; like a man who knew what he was after and would get it, come hell or high

water. Copper Hill was proud of Donaldson for more democratic reasons than it was proud of Elsa Blanchard. Donaldson, it seemed, had by his own heroic efforts come up from pit-boy in the mines; from a nobody in the shacks of Oroville to his now eminent position: that of the city's, and the State's, leading legal light. He was lucky, too. The build-up occasionally alluded to him as "Lucky" Donaldson. In the last two or three years everything he had touched had seemingly turned to gold, and it was the opinion of the *News-Press* editorialist that when—not if—Trace Donaldson assumed the gubernatorial chair much of this personalized good fortune would accrue to the benefit of the electorate as a whole. The nation, yes, and the world, would practically overnight become Montana conscious.

McBride lit a cigar with his third cup of coffee and wished that he too had been a little luckier in the last year or so. He was not worried over the thirteen thousand he owed Pete the Greek; Pete was not a man to settle a debt with violence—at least until all hope was lost; but there was the matter of prestige and the good, opulent feeling you get from a satisfactory bank balance. McBride felt that ten per cent of a quarter of a million dollars, the stolen quarter of a million he hoped that Thornton Avery was carefully hoarding, was a nice round sum with which to start rebuilding his fortunes.

A very fat man presently stood beside McBride's table looked uncommonly gross and untidy. His baggy, wrinkled three-piece salt-and-pepper suit was a stranger to the cleaner's; the collar of his shirt, though not noticeably soiled, had had no truck with an iron; a once-gaudy plaid tie was knotted carelessly and at least two inches off center, exposing the fact that the shirt's top button was gone. Above this unkempt ensemble and under a close-cropped thatch of curly iron-gray hair was an enormous, genial, flabby face whose nose and cheeks gave, at first glance, the impression of ruddy health. Closer inspection showed the ruddiness the result of a myriad tiny ruptured veins and blood vessels. Small twinkling gray eyes met McBride's dark stare with complete friendliness. "Name of McBride? Rex McBride from Los Angeles?"

McBride nodded. He smelled policemen. "Well, sir, I'm Ollie Kramer. Most folks just call me Ollie. I like it that way. No fuss nor feathers, just plain old Ollie to friend or foe, and I'd like you to feel free to make it a habit. That's if you're going to be in town long." The twinkle suddenly fled the small gray eyes. "Are you?"

McBride laughed. "Before I answer that, would there by chance be a badge on that tent-flap you call a vest?"

"There would," Kramer assured him happily. "There is." He showed it. It was large, gold, glittering with diamond chips. It said not only that its wearer was Chief of Police, Copper Hill, Montana; it said: "To Ollie from The Boys."

"Mind if I sit down and have a cup a coffee with you?"

"With that badge still shining in my eyes?"

"Oh, don't let that worry you," the chief said comfortably. He sat, pounded the table with a meaty fist. "Hazel!"

McBride's waitress instantly stopped what she was doing. So did everybody else in the place. Kramer would never have any trouble making himself heard. "Yes, sir?" She came over.

"A cuppa coffee, Hazel. Lots of cream."

"Yes, sir." She brought it. As she turned to leave, the chief's hand detained her. "You making out all right here, Hazel?"

She did not look at him, did not look at McBride. "Yes, sir, I'm doing fine."

Kramer ladled sugar into his cup, sloping it over. "Not trying to pick up anything on the side?"

"No, sir." Her voice was flat, emotionless.

The chief guffawed. "Not any more, hey, Hazel?"

She might have been hypnotized, the way she stood there. "No, sir."

KRAMER nodded, pleased. "That's good. Like I told you before, the place for that stuff is in the District. If you wanta move in there—"

McBride stood up violently. He was furious. "Listen, you fat tub of lard, maybe I can't stop you but I'll be damned if I'm going to be your audience!" He seized his check, was half way to the

cashier's desk when he remembered that he had not left a tip. Turning, he saw that the girl Hazel was gone; that the crowd had already forgotten the incident, or at least was intent on minding its own business. He went back and ostentatiously laid a five-dollar bill beside his empty cup.

"Sit down," Kramer said.

"While you throw your weight around some more for the yokels?" McBride's mouth was ugly, his eyes still bright with anger. "Thanks, no."

"You'd better," Kramer said. "Either that or we'll go down to Headquarters and I'll ask my questions there." He wasn't kidding.

McBride decided that some time, if he stayed in town long enough, he was going to find out just how soft Kramers' fat paunch really was. Until then a badge was a badge. He sat down.

"Now that's what I call cooperation," the chief said approvingly. He lifted his coffee cup with both hands, sipped with noisy relish. "The day clerk kind of called my attention to you, son. You registered from L.A., but he knew there weren't any trains or planes connecting from there that time of day, so he thought maybe you came from some place else."

"Look," he said carefully, as to a backward child, "I live in Los Angeles. When I leave here and stop over in, say, Salt Lake, should I give my place of residence as Copper Hill?"

The chief chuckled fatly. "Not unless you have an awful good reason for lying about it." The merry twinkle was back in his eye, the toothpick or one of its fellows back in his mouth. "I ain't saying that in this case you are, but you came in on the 3:40 from St. Paul. You could be from there, or even from Chicago, which ain't so much further away."

McBride wondered if this inquisition had really been instigated by the clerk, or if it could stem from Miss Mazaryk and her politically minded friend Trace Donaldson. He leaned back more comfortably in his chair, re-lit his cigar. "Geographically, Chiftie, you are absolutely correct. I have been in both places." He essayed a smoke ring, but it came out ragged, an artistic flop. "I still live in Los Angeles."

"In business there?"

"In a way."



"What business?"

McBride felt that in this instance the truth was less dangerous than a lie. "I'm an insurance adjuster."

The chief nodded happily, as though he had just verified a half-suspected truth. "If that means what I think it does, you're the same as a private dick."

"Oh come, now, leave us have our dignity!"

Kramer was silent a moment, seeming to struggle with some inner emotion. Then, placing both spread hands on his bulging diaphragm, he suddenly pushed inward. The result was a tremendous, soul-satisfying belch. "Boy, I'm glad that's outa me!" Once more he beamed across the table at McBride. "License?"

"Unh-hunh."

"Well, sir, I'm going to fool you," Kramer said. "I'm not going to ask to see it. I figure you're too smart not to have it if you say you've got it." He waved largely, paternally, to a passing group of youngsters. "Fact is, you look like an all-around smart cookie to me, except maybe you fly off the handle a mite too easy."

"You're killing me," McBride said.

A kind of glaze hardened the fat man's eyes. "I see Engstrom got in town this afternoon, too."

McBride stared at him blankly. "Engstrom?"

"Yeah, Nils Engstrom." Kramer watched McBride's face from beneath puffy, half-lowered lids. "The name doesn't mean anything to you?"

"No."

"He didn't maybe send for you?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

"Nobody." McBride leaned forward, put both elbows on the table. "Look, Pop, I'm getting a little tired of this, so I'm going to tell you the God's truth why I'm here." His gaze was direct, candid. Smoke from the cigar in his strong, well cared for fingers rose straight upward, unswerving. "All my life I've read about your rip-roaring, wide-open towns up here. I liked what I read. So when I finished up a piece of business in Chicago I thought I'd make this little detour on the way home, just to look you over." His teeth shone in a suddenly brilliant smile. "Now do you mind

very much if I go out and do just that?"

The chief wagged his head slowly from side to side. "Not at all—not if what you say is fact." He sighed heavily. "Of course, now, if I was to find out you did know Engstrom, that you was kind of—now—helping him at one thing or another, I'd naturally be kind of mad about your lying to me." He considered that while examining the dregs of his coffee. "There are some folks as'll tell you I'm a hard man to get along with, but that ain't so. It's just that I got a job to do." He was saddened at the thought of some of the things imposed on him by his duties as a peace officer. "You wouldn't care to change your story a little, while there's time?"

McBride looked at his strap watch. It was after midnight. "If it'll satisfy you, you might give me a quick briefing on this Engstrom that's worrying you. Then I'll know enough to run like hell if he even shows in the same block with me."

The chief brightened. "Why that's fair enough." He tilted his chair back on its hind legs, listened pleasurably to its complaint. "Nils Engstrom is what some would call a political boss. Me, I just think he's a kind of—now—fanatic on keeping Governor Hodiak in the saddle. They're friends, been friends a long time, and sometimes friends will do for a man what he wouldn't do for himself, maybe things he wouldn't want done if he knew about 'em."

McBride laughed. "Still not sure the way the cat's going to jump, are you?"

"I ain't for a fact," Kramer conceded. "But the point is, there's going to be trouble before this election's over. Been some already, and I'm a man likes to know where it's liable to break out next." He interlaced fingers like sausages across his enormous belly. "So right at this time, any strangers in town that ain't strictly Yellowstone tourists, or ain't got some real honest-to-God business, is apt to find me asking 'em questions." He rose cumbrously to his feet. "No hard feelings?"

"No."

"Well, then, I'll be running along." He offered his hand, which McBride shook perfunctorily. "Still mad at me about Hazel?"

"A little," McBride confessed. "I think it was a stinking, dirty play."

"Yes, well—" The chief sighed. Then, brightening abruptly: "But it did tell me something about you, son, didn't it?" He turned and lumbered out, making not the slightest gesture toward paying for his cup of coffee.

Scowling, McBride said something under his breath about fat punks who thought they were so smart. Presently he got up, put on his hat and topcoat, securely anchored Hazel's overlarge tip with a sugar bowl and went along the crowded aisle to settle with the cashier. Crossing the lobby a moment later, a sudden hunch detoured him to the elevators and up to his room. His suspicions were justified. Someone had done a reasonably thorough job of searching it.

McBride was impressed by his own acumen in hiding the photographs of both subjects, earlier, since whoever had prowled his room had not found them; the prowler either hadn't known what he was looking for, or had been too hurried in his search to hit other than the more obvious spots. Anyway, further interested parties could look and be damned, now, since the lady's likenesses had succumbed to a match, and the gentleman's, a greater rarity and more likely to awaken memory and the competitive spirit, was securely hidden elsewhere.

**E**VEN AT one-thirty in the morning the sidewalks were still crowded. Taxicabs, an awful lot of them for a town of sixty thousand, ran hither and yon, discharging couples and foursomes, only to pick up new loads and take them somewhere else. After watching the seemingly unwarranted turn-over at one of the cabstands for a while, McBride decided he must be missing something and pre-empted a hack for himself.

"Where to?" the driver said, adding neither a "sir" nor a "mister," not even a "bud." He was young, dark, good-looking in a surly, take-it-or-leave-it sort of a way. His manner was reminiscent of New York hackers, whom McBride always found curiously sullen and uncooperative in the matter of luggage, opening doors for the customers and so on. Back on the West Coast, or almost, he had hoped for better things.

"Well, I don't know," he said with a

tentative smile. "I'm a stranger in town, myself. What would you suggest?"

"I wouldn't," the dour young man said. "But if it's women you don't need a hack. Right around the corner, Montana and D Streets."

"You must make a lot of money for your employers," McBride said. "And I think we can skip Montana and D Streets, at least until I'm a lot harder pressed than I am right now." He looked interestedly out the side window, "Where is everybody else going?"

"Oroville, Searchlight, the dine-and-dance spots outside the city limits."

"What's at Oroville?"

"More of the same—if you stick to the same drag. Beyond that, there's the Blanchard No. 2 hole, filth, corruption and pigsties for Blanchard employees to live in. I was born there."

McBride lit a cigarette. "You don't have to brag about it. I've rolled in a few gutters myself, probably more than you since I must be around ten-fifteen years older." He let down the jump seat, put his feet on it and leaned back. "All right, let's go look at your birthplace."

They pulled out into the stream of traffic, presently left the lights and glitter of Copper Street for a sleeping, middle-class-to-poor business and residential section which rapidly dwindled into a slattern, disheveled shacktown. Descending the sloping side of the big butte by way of a winding, well-lighted causeway, they plunged with scarcely a break into the outskirts of Oroville. McBride saw that his brooding charioteer hadn't been kidding; even darkness couldn't do much to soften Oroville. He saw something else: the license above the driver's head was issued to Edward Mazaryk. He drew a slow breath, carefully removed his feet from the jump seat. He yawned. He made his voice casual. "Mazaryk," he said. "That name common around here?"

"As dirt," the dark young man said bitterly. "A lot of people think that's what we are."

McBride manufactured another elaborate yawn. "If you're not careful one of these Commie germs is liable to leap out of an alley and bite you. You sound ripe for it."

"I am a Communist."



"Well, why didn't you say so!" McBride became enthusiastic. "That's good. I like that. It's these guys who are but say they aren't that help dopey congressmen get re-elected." He leaned forward, put his elbows on the back of the front seat. "Who's your candidate for governor, comrade?"

A pair of green eyes suddenly blazed into his, "Lay off, Jack." They were remarkably like another pair of eyes, belonging to another Mazaryk. "I'm not in the mood for it."

"No," McBride said stubbornly. "I'm always interested in another man's sorrows, especially when I've got a few drinks in me. What're the odds on Hodiak, comrade?"

"Lay off, I said!"

It occurred to McBride that he was playing the same kind of sleazy trick that chief Kramer had played on him, and for no more worthy a reason. He was honest enough to concede that without the profit motive he wouldn't lift a hand to see that Thornton Avery was punished. "Forget it, kid. I was out of bounds."

They rode into the center of town in silence. The center of town was the middle of a three-block stretch of pitted, rutted soft asphalt pavement between rows of nondescript buildings rising from sidewalks built two feet above street level. But there was life there. As in Copper Hill, some neon sign salesman had hit the jackpot, but curiously enough the windows beneath the gaudy signs showed little or no light. Many were blanked out with paint, or the kind of glazed translucent paper that is sometimes pasted on glass in lieu of frosting. Even those doors which were wide open had screens or partitions set crosswise of the openings, so that one must actually go inside before seeing what he was getting into. People on the sidewalks seemed to move a little more furtively here, though there was laughter and the din from unseen juke boxes.

McBride got out, proffered a bill.

"Would it offend you, friend, if I said keep the change?"

"I don't take tips," Mazaryk said.

McBride was being very patient, for him. "That makes you the equal of any man? Perhaps a little better than most?"

"I don't take tips," Mazaryk said again, "and I don't lick boots."

"I hope you never have to," McBride said.

He leapt nimbly to the sidewalk, turned to watch the cab move off.

He was depressed by more than young Mazaryk's attitude toward life. That was a by-product of a fact of much greater importance to one Rex McBride: the name alone could be coincidence, but coupled with an undeniable facial resemblance, and Margo's rendezvous with Trace Donaldson, there seemed no room for doubt that Copper Hill and environs were her home bailiwick. Thus she had a perfectly good reason for returning here; a reason that had nothing whatever to do with Thornton Avery. He felt as a man does who takes his prized diamond ring to the hock shop, only to be told it is paste.

At the end of the street, outlined in thin blue neon tubing, was a two-story frame mansion of the gingerbread era, gabled, turreted, bedecked with scrollwork.

Before this architect's nightmare was an old-fashioned hitching post—there was no sidewalk here—in the form of a little red-capped Negro boy, his booted feet set firmly into a giant block of granite which said: *BLANCHARD*. A flashy sign said: "*The Blue Evening*." Music, hot and avid and almost certainly not recorded, rushed out of the front door. McBride went in.

A green spot illumined the interior of an orchestra shell, and the half dozen men knocking themselves out inside it looked like bilious demons.

Unaided he found an aisle between crowded tables and went along it to the bar. An unoccupied stool almost tripped him and he fell on it gratefully. "Scotch," he said to a pristine white mess jacket. "Double."

After the second or third double Scotch, he fancied he heard some very familiar sounds issuing from an open doorway near the distant end of the bar. He got off the stool and, not staggering exactly, but with some little difficulty, negotiated the distance to the doorway. It was a two crap-table, three roulette-wheel den of iniquity. He was pleased no end. He handed his empty glass to a passing waiter, and walking steadily now, very straight and military, attained the nearest crap table and exchanged three hundred-dollar bills for chips. In something less than fifteen min-

utes he had won seventeen hundred dollars and was beginning to believe he didn't care if Thornton Avery was at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. He could stay right here in little old Oroville, Montana, and make enough to satisfy Pete the Greek the easy way. Then as the dice were changing he looked up from racking his chips and saw Margo Mazaryk standing almost at his elbow; around the corner of the table from him, but there was no one between them. She still wore her mink coat, though it was thrown carelessly over her shoulders, her arms were not in the sleeves. Her fine hands riffled a stack of five-dollar chips, and as the players placed their bets she leaned over and handed the seventy or eighty dollars' worth to the stick man. "Any craps, please." Her voice was low, throaty.

Her nearness, and the fact that she must have been at another table without his seeing her, had a sobering effect on McBride. He laid a hundred dollars on the line, was indignant when the man with the dice, a guy in a plaid suit whom he wouldn't have liked anyway, threw an ace and a deuce. When the pay-off man pushed her winnings at her she shook her head. "Let it ride."

"On craps?"

"Yes."

McBride smiled at her. "Well, that's the way I like it." And after he had bet and the guy in the plaid suit was making a tremendous business of rattling the dice: "You're at the hotel, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The emerald on her finger was no more brilliant than her eyes. "I think I saw you on the train too, coming out from St. Paul."

"Confidentially," McBride said, "you're the real reason I got off in Copper Hill."

Plaid-suit threw a natural.

McBride sympathized with her. "Tough."

"But quick." Her smile, her shrug said that it didn't matter, one way or the other.

"Could I offer you a drink?"

"If you like."

She waited while he exchanged his chips for currency, then together they went back into the bar and found a table. It was still dim, but now the dimness was pleasant. Oddly enough the music from the

adjoining room seemed to have become a trifle less mad, too.

Along about the fourth drink—McBride was cautiously sticking to singles now, with soda, though she exhibited an extraordinary capacity for doubles—she said: "I wonder how much truth there was in that, about the real reason you got off the train?"

"Not much," McBride confessed. "Though you do fascinate me." His eyes were warmly admiring. "In fact, you intoxicate me." He discovered that he was not lying. She gave him goose pimples. She was terrific.

"Would you like to kiss me, Mr. McBride?"

Recklessly he put an arm around her. "I've never wanted anything so much in my life."

Her eyes were fathomless green pools in which a man might easily drown himself. "All right," she said. "It would be nice if I could make one man happy today."

### III

AT A FEW minutes past five the next afternoon McBride returned to the Lewis & Clark from a three-hour's cruise of the town which had netted him nothing whatever concerning the man he sought. As he asked for his key and any messages that might have come in, the desk clerk, carefully avoiding his eye, said that there was a young lady waiting to see him. A languid hand indicated a distant corner of the lobby. Turning, McBride discovered that in this instance he could agree with the clerk's appraisal. The girl appeared both young and a lady. He crossed over, taking off his hat. "You wanted to see me?"

She rose to her feet. "Mr. McBride?"

"Yes."

She was slender without stringiness in a beige sharkskin suit and white nylon blouse. Her hair was a warm, rich brown with coppery highlights; her eyes, a darker brown, suggested that there might be golden glints in them when she laughed, but she was not laughing now. A slender, brown-gloved hand tendered an envelope. "Mr. Patrick asked me to run this over to you on my way home."

McBride smiled at her. "Then you must



be Katie."

She nodded, not saying anything. It was almost as though she couldn't say anything. Her eyes stared into his, half embarrassed, half defiant.

"For Kathryn," he said. "The kind with a 'Y', I hope."

"Yes."

Her voice was just as he remembered it from their brief telephone conversation, and he thought that if he had consciously tried to fit a picture to the voice he wouldn't have missed by far. Certainly she was nothing at all like a girl who might be thinking over a proposition from Lou Patrick; not the kind of proposition Lou would be apt to make. Once in a great while McBride met a girl whose eyes made him wish he had led a better life. He was looking at one now. He discovered that her fingers were clenched tightly, almost desperately on her brown leather purse. "Really, I have no intention of snatching that, you know." He slit open the envelope, read the typed enclosure:

**Mr. Rex McBride**  
**Hotel Lewis & Clark**  
**City**

**Re: Margo Mazaryk**

**Subject saw Donaldson again today, this time openly, at his office. From there to Shacktown. Used to live there. Mother and father still do. Hunkies. You should see house. As for last night, you ought to know more about that than I do, you dog.**

**Patrick**

McBride was not as astonished by this information as he would have been yesterday. His encounter with young Edward Mazaryk had more than half prepared him.

"Mr. McBride."

He had momentarily forgotten Lou Patrick's charming, if somewhat peculiar, messenger. "Yes, precious?"

Her pallor grew more pronounced. "You have read what was intended to be a confidential report on Margo Mazaryk. It isn't. I have just come from showing it to her."

For an instant he could only stare at her stupidly. Then rage welled in him, and with it the urge to strike, maim, trample. He was amazed to hear his own voice saying, almost casually, "I see. You showed it to her. I suppose it wasn't just the pixie

in you—you had a reason?"

"Yes," she said, and drew a quick, uneven breath. "Margo—Margaret—Mazaryk is my sister."

He began to laugh then. A kind of hysteria seized him, and he laughed, not loudly, nor with any mirth in it. He laughed until his throat ached, and the muscles along his jaw and about his mouth. The sound of it was rather horrible. "Your boss must be a fine detective. A hell of a fine detective."

She did not retreat from the glare in his eyes. "He doesn't know that—" She hesitated, then with a faint shrug of distaste: "My name is Kathryn Leah Mazaryk. He knows me as Kathryn Lee. The abridgement seemed justified because—" Her eyes dropped to the message still clenched in McBride's fist, and now color came into her face. Two bright spots of it burned high up on her cheekbones. "A hunkey's daughter tried to become something else. Silly, wasn't it?"

He discovered that he was no longer angry with her; that the impulse to throttle, to crush, had fallen victim to another. And curiously, his rage in vanishing had cleared his somewhat devious mind so that now he was able to perceive a possible solution to even this latest contretemps. He touched her elbow lightly. His voice was gentle. "I'm sure none of this is as important as you seem to think it. Why don't we sit down and talk about it for a while?"

"Whatever you like," she assented. And when they were seated: "I've done a foolish, wholly unethical thing. There's no good saying I'm sorry. I suppose I am, but only because—" Again there was that faint shrug of distaste. "Had I been able to reach Mr. Patrick—after I'd decided—I'd have told him what I intended to do. My resignation is already on his desk. And my sister knows—I told her—that I was coming to see you."

McBride felt that nothing could surprise him now, absolutely nothing. "Good," he said. "Wonderful. That makes everything even up, doesn't it?" He tried to visualize the scene between the sisters Mazaryk. It would have been something to watch, he thought: the tigress and the fawn, only in this case the fawn seemed to have qualities which might have baffled

even so magnificent a cat as Margo. "What did she say to that?"

"She was furious."

"I can see where she would be," McBride admitted.

They were in a little backwater of the lobby's wash and flow of traffic. People moved back and forth on their own errands; a few sat and read the early evening editions of the town's two papers; a group issued from the cocktail lounge whence came the sounds of tinkling glasses and women's light laughter. The bellhop Joey sat on a bench with two of his fellows and tried to disguise his interest in McBride and McBride's companion. His pal, the tall youth Jack, was not in evidence.

"Mr. McBride."

He returned his attention to the young lady at his side. "Yes, precious?"

"What has my sister done?"

That one almost caught him unprepared. "Done?" He manifested astonishment. "Nothing, so far as I know. Nothing, that is, but exhibit a certain amount of curiosity about me."

"But you are a detective!" she protested. "You've employed other detectives to spy on her!"

His smile was a work of art. "Well, she started it, you know." By twisting so small a thing as the actual chronology of the two events he found he could make the lie plausible even to himself. "If she hadn't sent her maid snooping I wouldn't have hired Lou to check up on her." He sighed. "It's true that I'm a detective of sorts, when I work at it, but I'm also a gambler. I thought she might be tailing me for another gambler, a man to whom I owe considerable money."

She was incredulous. "Is that all?"

"If you knew the Greek like I do, that could mean plenty, baby." He shivered realistically. "Plenty."

A slow flush mantled her face. "What a fool I've been!"

He laughed. "You see? Now you can go back and tear up your resignation and forget the whole thing."

"No," she said.

He looked at her in surprise. "No?"

She shook her head. "Regardless of anything else, I've betrayed a trust. I've got to tell him."

"Even if it's all right with me?"

"You've been very kind, Mr. McBride. Very kind."

He was suddenly and unaccountably angry. "All right, damn it, tell him. And tell him that if he does anything about it I'll fix his wagon, but good." He looked at her slender gloved hands where they lay so still in her lap. "Also, if he tries to put any pressure on you about anything else, because of this—" He was aware of her quick indrawn breath. "What I mean to say is, I've met guys like Lou before. Where women are concerned—"

Her voice, very low, interrupted him. "So he told you about that too?"

"Listen," McBride said angrily, "if you can't be anything else, be logical about this: if he doesn't know you're a hunky's daughter, then he isn't making a play for you because of that. It's because you're a damned fine looking girl, and if you weren't so full of this thing they call character I'd make a play for you myself." He stood up. "How about a drink?"

"I don't know. Perhaps." She too rose to her feet. "I wish I could believe you—about a number of things. Why should Trace Donaldson have visited my sister secretly, as Mr. Patrick's note intimates he did? They used to know each other"—she flushed a little, but her eyes were clear, direct—"quite well."

"Didn't she tell you?"

"No, I—There's something very strange here, Mr. McBride. I rather had the feeling that she didn't know he had not come openly; that finding it out was one of the things that made her angriest."

MCBRIDE hazarded what he thought might be a pretty good guess, though for the life of him he didn't know where any of this touched his own affairs. "Possibly Margo's return right at this time might be a slight embarrassment to him. He's sort of depending on Elsa Blanchard's support, isn't he?"

"There is that," she agreed. And then, very quickly, as though hoping to trap him into some kind of admission: "You didn't know my sister in Los Angeles?"

"No."

"Nor anything about her?"

He was finding it increasingly difficult to lie to this girl. He was also having to revise some of his earlier impressions of



her. In intelligence—and looks too, for that matter—she was about seventeen cuts above the usual small-town secretary. "The name was vaguely familiar," he acknowledged. "I thought I remembered seeing it in the papers once or twice. That was quite a while ago."

She seemed satisfied with that, but only for a moment. "How do you know that she isn't working for this other gambler you mentioned? What other reason could she have for—for prying into your business?"

He laughed at her. "My magnetic personality?" And then, when her eyes remained serious and intent on his face: "Look, Kathryn, what are you trying to do—convict Margo of something? Or me? I sort of gathered, your going to her with the report and so on, that it was the old mish-mash of blood thicker than water. I could understand that. But now—"

For the first time since he had met her she smiled. "It's pretty complicated," she confessed ruefully. "I had the devil's own time making up my mind what to do about her. You see—Well, I felt I owed her something. She paid for my education." Her brown eyes grew remote again. "That was before I knew how she—" With a visible effort she abandoned that train of thought. "I think, when I was very little, I used to admire her. She had so many things I seemed to lack. But I've never loved my sister, Mr. McBride. And I wish, whatever her reasons are, that she had not come back here."

"Then I wish it too," McBride said, adding gallantly: "Though in that case I probably shouldn't have met you." It occurred to him, not for the first time, that people had the damndest way of unburdening themselves to him. He could not account for it. He had neither a kind face nor a bedside manner. It also occurred to him that all was not gold that glittered, and that Kathryn Lee-Mazaryk's somewhat personal disclosures were not necessarily due to a rush of conscience. He smiled down into her eyes: she was not quite so tall as her sister Margo. "We might drink to her early departure."

"No," she decided. "I'd better be running along."

"Dinner later, then?"

"If you like," she conceded, and gave

him an address on Fremont Street. "It won't be quite like slumming in Shacktown, but you needn't wear tails."

"Some day," McBride prophesied darkly, "somebody's going to turn you over his knee and wallop you good. You're nothing but a snob." With a hand on her arm he piloted her through the rapidly filling lobby to the street door. "See you around eight."

"All right," she nodded, and was gone. Turning, he went into a now jam-packed bar, finally caught a bartender's eye and accepted a drink thrust at him between the shoulders of two more fortunate customers who had stools. He was working on his second when a voice at his elbow said, "Mr. McBride?"

The man was of medium height, stocky, well—but inconspicuously dressed. Smoothly brushed, polished-aluminum hair and cold gray eyes placed him at a possible sixty, but the hard fitness of his body, an air of carefully leashed power suggested considerably less. McBride, always observant of such things, noted a slight bulge in the left breast of the man's coat; a bulge that the modestly displayed show handkerchief could hardly account for. "I'm McBride," he admitted grudgingly. "I'm also beginning to think I'm a celebrity."

"In a way, you are," the man said. His voice was low, musical. "Perhaps not in Copper Hill—yet—but I've been in touch with the Los Angeles authorities and you seem to be well-known there." The faintest hint of a smile curved his hard, thin lips. "If not always favorably."

"Well, for goodness sake!" McBride said. He was genuinely astonished. "If I knew who you are I might be honored."

"Sorry," the man said. "I'm afraid I've grown too accustomed to being recognized, especially in my own corner of the universe." He coughed a little, apologetically. "I'm Engstrom."

McBride emptied his glass thirstily. "Then you'd better get the hell away from me. You're poison." His eyes had a harried expression as they searched the immediate vicinity. "I crossed my heart and hoped to die I'd run like crazy if I even saw you in the next block."

Engstrom's face became gentle, almost dreamy. "Chief Kramer?"

"Please," McBride said, "no names!"

"That slob."

"But a smart slob," McBride said earnestly. "Don't ever think he isn't." He stared into his empty glass, a brooding, much put-upon Sioux. "Listen, I'm going to tell you the same thing I told him. I'm a tourist, an innocent by-stander. I may even go over to Yellowstone and fry an egg on Old Faithful." He lifted suddenly angry eyes to the older man's face. "But I don't want any part of him, or you, or this damned election you're all so stewed up about. Is that clear?"

"The statement, yes. I'll reserve my opinion about its truth until later." Again the faint smile touched the thin, hard mouth. "Then you're not working?"

"No."

"Would you like to be?"

"No."

"A man like you could be very valuable to the governor at this time." From a flat leather case Engstrom selected a thin dappled cigar. "Very valuable."

"I doubt it," McBride said. "Especially dead."

Engstrom appeared surprised. "You think there's any danger of that?"

"I don't think you're carrying that gun just for decoration," McBride said.

Engstrom's gesture disparaged the gun. "These things get to be a habit." He trimmed and lit his cigar with meticulous care. "You wouldn't be entertaining any other offers, I suppose?"

"No."

"I'm glad to hear it," Engstrom said. He said it as though he really were. "And if you should change your mind, don't hesitate to look me up." He turned away, paused and again let his cold gray gaze steady on McBride's face. "By the way, if you do go to Yellowstone you'd better take along two of those eggs." He drew thoughtfully on his cigar, blew a perfect smoke ring. "The other for Lou Patrick's secretary." This time he permitted the crowd to swallow him for good.

McBride discovered that he was holding his breath. He was sweating a little, too, and for a moment he did not know why this was. Then he realized that he was frightened. It was not so much Engstrom, nor the gun in Engstrom's armpit. It was the feeling that things, people, events, all were crowding in on him, menacing, inexorable, and that he was powerless to do

anything about them. He debated having another drink, decided against it on the grounds that one wouldn't do him any good, and more might be tempting fate. He went up to his room.

As he unlocked his door a smell came out to meet him, not unpleasant, not really definable at all, but as though something were in there in the darkness ahead of him that shouldn't be; that had not been there before. Silhouetted by the hall light, he made a fine target. He stepped quickly aside from the opening, reached in and snapped the wall switch. The ceiling lights came on, but other than that nothing happened. He went in.

The bell-hop Jack lay sprawled across one of the twin beds, his eyes wide open and beginning to cloud. His face was an odd lemon-yellow color, altogether horrible because of its contrast to the plum hue of his uniform, and there was a small trickle of blood from his left ear. Above the ear, the parietal bone was deeply depressed, and more blood had clotted in this depression, matting the hair all around where the murder weapon had made its single, brutal impact.

McBride fought down the nausea that threatened to turn his stomach inside out. He knew there was no need to touch the kid, to seek a pulse that did not and could not exist. Whatever the blunt instrument had been, whether blackjack, pistol barrel or bludgeon, it had been wielded savagely and unerringly, with death the inevitable and instantaneous result.

Behind McBride a woman screamed. He turned and saw one of the maids standing there in the hall doorway, her arms loaded with towels, her mouth open to scream again. "Oh, for God's sake shut up," he said. But she did not. He left her there, screaming her head off, and went into the bathroom and was sick.

"WELL, SIR," Police Chief Kramer said happily, "this is the damndest thing I ever heard." Behind his scarred and littered golden oak desk, huge hands interlaced across his vast paunch.

Of the three other men in the office, two of them were plainclothes detectives, and one in particular wanted to be sure that nobody mistook him for anything else. He wore his badge on the outside of his



coat, pinned just below his breast pocket, like a medal. His name was Feeney, and he leaned his back against the only door in an attitude which said he hoped McBride would try to make a break for it. The second dick was younger, better dressed, blond. He was an artist with a sap. McBride's face felt swollen, shapeless, but it showed scarcely a mark. Blood from a cut on the inside of his mouth was viscous and salty on his exploring tongue. He thought that two of his front teeth were loose, but he could not be sure. His eyes had a cunning, almost a mad gleam in them, and he waited, patient and expectant, for the next blow, so that he could add it to the score and not short Kramer when the time for reprisal came.

"Here is a guy," Chief Kramer mused aloud, "got a corpse in his own room and he claims he don't know nothing about it. We got one maid that sees him standing right over the body. We got a bell-hop that admits him and the dead kid had a little trouble with our—now—Mister McBride. We got another maid says she asked a few questions of the boys about this Mister McBride, and that maybe that stimulated this kid Jack's interest enough so he does a little snooping and gets caught at it." What he manifestly hoped was a benign gaze settled on McBride's face. "You kind of don't like people prying into your business, do you?"

"No," McBride said.

"Well, by God, we're making progress. That's the first honest answer we've got out of you in a hour."

"No," McBride said.

This happened to puzzle Kramer no end. "You mean it ain't a honest answer?"

"You know damned well what I mean," McBride said. His voice sounded thick and a little mushy, even to his own ears. "You don't want honest answers. You want to beat my can off while you've got a chance, because you think there's something between me and Nils Engstrom."

"Now why should I think that?" A fat thumb and forefinger transferred the perennial toothpick from vest pocket to fat red lips. "O' course, you was seen talking to him in a public place, but I don't know, in a bar like that, it prob'ly don't mean a thing." He was struck by a sudden

thought. "You wasn't thinking of getting him to alibi you, I s'pose?"

"I'll worry about an alibi when I know the time of death," McBride said. "The exact time of death."

Kramer shook his head reprovingly. "You ought to know better'n that. A town like this, and a case like this—Well, we ain't magicians like they claim they are in some of your big cities. It ain't hardly possible to fix it closer'n maybe two-three hours."

"Unless it suits you."

"Stengel," Kramer said to the dick with the sap.

"Yeah?"

"A guy like this, a guy would do what he did to a poor motherless kid, we shouldn't ought to let him crack smart to us, you think?"

"No," Stengel said. Hefting the sap he examined McBride's face critically, looking for a target that might have escaped his earlier attentions. From a loud-speaker on the wall came mumbled words and a lot of static. Then a voice said clearly: "—gives me great pleasure to introduce your friend, and mine—Governor Jan Ho-diak!" There was a lot of applause.

McBride took advantage of the momentary distraction and lunged out of his chair to drive his fist with tremendous force into Stengel's middle. He was gratified at how far it went in, at the look of pure agony on the man's face. Then Kramer and the third man were on him, pinioning his arms, forcing him back into the chair, and Stengel recovered enough to lay the sap, with a full-armed swing behind it, on McBride's temple. He plunged down into utter oblivion.

When again he opened his eyes, Trace Donaldson was bending over him. He had no idea how Donaldson had gotten there, or why the big man should be ministering to him, McBride, with a cold and dripping towel, but there he was, as large as life and twice as handsome as his pictures. "Better now?" Donaldson's voice was deep and rich; the bluest of blue eyes reflected what seemed to be a sincere sympathy.

McBride licked his lips. "Thanks."

"Brother, they must have smacked you around plenty!"

"Maybe I asked for it," McBride said. He saw that Kramer and the two dicks

were still there, Kramer's fat face wearing a worried look, Feeney and Stengel across the room feigning an intense interest in Governor Hodiak's speech.

"Ollie," Donaldson said.

"Yeah?"

"How about a shot of that rot-gut you keep in your desk?"

"For him?" Kramer shook his head in slow negation. "I wouldn't give the rot a drop of water." He paused as Donaldson swung to face him. "Well, if you say so, sure." Cumbersomely, laboriously, he got out the bottle, poured a generous three fingers into a tumbler and waddled over to thrust it at Donaldson. He did not look at McBride. "You ask me, I think you're making a mistake, Governor."

"I didn't ask you, Ollie." Donaldson's voice had a hint of iron in it now. "We can dispense with the title too. This damned election isn't over yet."

As though to verify this last observation, there was a crash from the loudspeaker on the wall. Governor Hodiak's speech was chopped off in the middle of a word, and from the ensuing sounds all hell had broken out in Blanchard Stadium. The four men in the office exclusive of McBride stood transfixed, their faces reflecting varying degrees of consternation. McBride reached out and took the glass from Donaldson's unresisting hand. "Here's how," he said to no one in particular, and drank. The liquor was rye, red hot and bitingly astringent to the inside of his bruised mouth. In his stomach it lay like a glowing red coal, radiating warmth and new strength. He began to feel that he might live. He hoped he would, at least long enough to kick Chief Ollie Kramer's discolored teeth in.

A uniformed cop banged the door open. "Hey, somebody just took a shot at Hodiak!"

Like an echo a voice from the loudspeaker broke free from the jumble of others: . . . "just fired on Governor Hodiak. He is unharmed. I repeat, the governor is unharmed." There was more interference. Then: "The bullet, believed to be from a rifle, smashed the water pitcher at the governor's side, but he is . . ." Again the amateur newscaster was drowned out.

"You, Feeney!" Chief Kramer bellowed.

"Stengel, too. Get the hell out there and don't let any grass grow under your feet." He turned and saw the harness cop still standing there in the open door. "And you, what in hell you mean busting in here like that?" As the three men ran out he slammed the door behind them, hauled an out-size handkerchief from a side coat pocket and mopped his sweat-damp face. "Geez, am I glad I'm where I am, and can prove it!"

Donaldson drew a slow breath. His face too flushed. His blue eyes were angry and a little puzzled. "Your witnesses won't be entirely above suspicion, you know. With the possible exception of Mr. McBride, here."

"Hell," McBride said, "my word won't do you any good. I'm a murderer myself, remember?"

"No, you're not." Abruptly the big blond man smiled. He would have made a fine blocking back for the Green Bay Packers. "At least if you are you're more stupid than I thought when I came down here to offer you my services."

"I see," McBride said. "You don't think I'm stupid, but you think I need a lawyer."

"You'd have needed a doctor, or an undertaker, if I hadn't come in when I did."

"I guess I owe you something for that," McBride conceded. And after a moment: "All right, what's the pay-off? Why the hell should you bother?"

"Not because I love you," Donaldson said promptly. "As a matter of fact, I've got a couple of perfectly good reasons for not loving you, but that's something we can take up later." He turned a hard stare on Kramer. "You're going to spring McBride right now, or you're going to charge him formally and I'll make a monkey of you later. Take your choice."

Kramer's fat face turned an angry magenta. "Now wait a minute, what is this?" With surprising agility he ran over and slapped the loudspeaker into silence. When he again looked at Donaldson his small eyes were still angry, but his face had grown sullen, heavy. "You ask me, you'll be playing right into their hands, Counsellor."

"Maybe," Donaldson said. "Maybe not."

"So far," the chief said insistently, "he's



our best, our only, bet. Springing him is going to pull all hell down around our ears."

McBride moved over to the desk and poured himself another slug of Kramer's rye. No one attempted to stop him. "Old Political Football McBride," he said, and drank.

In response to another low-voiced exposition from Kramer, Donaldson said flatly: "I don't give a damn. Aside from the time element, he's too smart, too smooth a customer to have done it in his own room. There's something fishy here, and I've the feeling that you did just what they expected you to do. Spring him and something else will pop to the surface, something I can really nail them with"

"Yeah," the chief said with heavy sarcasm. "Like this shooting out at the stadium. Somebody—I'd like to get my hands on the stupid ass—got a little too patriotic there. He's made Hodiak a hero, that's what he's done."

"Not necessarily," McBride said. With two stiff slugs of rye in him, and nothing else, he was growing a little reckless. "Say Engstrom did it—or had it done—just for that reason."

Kramer's mouth fell open. "Well, by God!" He began to laugh then; his enormous belly, his whole body shook with it; he laughed until two fat tears rolled out of his eyes and down his bulbous cheeks. "Crucify me for a pink-striped Judas, if that ain't something!"

Donaldson did not find the suggestion quite so amusing. The muscles along his square, fighter's jaw were bunched; his blue eyes rested bright and hard and intent on McBride's face. "Is that just a guess, or have you something to back it up?"

McBride shrugged. "It's an angle I might have thought of if I were Engstrom. Or you, if the positions were reversed."

"I take it you don't like him very well."

"He hasn't done anything for me, so far."

"And I have?"

"I'm still hoping."

Donaldson looked at Kramer. "Well, Ollie?"

The fat man wrestled with the idea of

refusal, finally gave it up. "I guess I can take it if you can." He sighed.

#### IV

THEY WALKED along the street together, the tall, well-muscled dark man who looked like a rather cynical, somewhat saturnine Sioux and the slightly taller, considerably heavier blond man who looked like a clean-shaven viking. There was a florist's shop open and brightly lighted in the middle of a block, and McBride, remembering his eight o'clock dinner engagement with Kathryn, decided to send her some flowers by way of apology for not keeping it. He did this, scribbling on one of his cards and impressing upon the sales clerk the importance of enclosing the card with the flowers, lest their recipient miss the significance of the gesture.

Donaldson waited amiably just inside the shop's doorway while the transaction was being completed. McBride then rejoining him, they resumed their walk. People stood aside to let them pass, and occasionally someone spoke, saying, "How are you, Trace?" or, "Hello, Mr. Donaldson." Donaldson was punctilious about answering these. The rest he ignored, and they in turn, though terrifically conscious of him, maintained an attitude of careful neutrality.

"You'd almost think they were scared," McBride observed. "Or at least wary."

Donaldson nodded. "Some of them," his voice sounded mildly amused. After a moment he added thoughtfully, "I don't know that I blame them much. I used to be scared too, when a straw in the wind could affect my livelihood."

With a forefinger McBride had been trying to ascertain whether his front teeth were really loose. Two of them he could wiggle a little, or so it seemed, but on the whole the gums appeared to be firming up around them and he concluded that he would not have to go in for any extensive bridgework for a while. "I'm a stranger in town, myself," he said. "The issues in the election are about as clear as chowder."

"Basically, it's a feud between Elsa Blanchard and Governor Hodiak," Donaldson said. "In the last strike at the

mines there was a lot of rioting, a lot of damage done, and she expected Hodiak to send the soldiers in to help her."

"Which he did not?"

"Which he definitely did not. That was the end of a beautiful friendship."

"And you?"

Donaldson shrugged. "Me, I'm an opportunist—or hadn't you heard?" They walked another half block in silence before he said: "Sometimes, when I let my mind wander from the main objective, I think of the men and their families. Elsa will close her mines down, tight, if Hodiak is reelected. That will probably affect other owners. With the price of copper the way it is the operators won't be losing too much. The men will. They'll lose a hell of a lot more than they got out of the last strike."

"So you're really doing them a favor," McBride said drily. "Sort of in passing," he added, "and always keeping your eye on the main objective."

Donaldson nodded. "It probably won't mean anything to you, but my father was a Cousin Jack driller in this town—a no-good guy who used to get roaring drunk every Saturday night and come home and beat hell out of my mother, and sometimes me. I promised myself that when I got big enough I was going to kick his face in. I did that. Then I thought of something else, even harder. Right now I think it would be kind of wonderful to sit in the governor's chair up at Helena."

A newsboy was crying an extra on the corner, and Donaldson bought one, tossing the kid a quarter. The paper was the *News-Press*. McBride's picture was on the front page. He was cuffed to a triumphant Chief Kramer, and there was a hotel maid pointing a dramatically accusing finger at him. The caption: "Murderer!" was capgily enclosed in quotes, so that McBride could sue the maid if he wanted to, but not the *News-Press*.

"We'll put a stop to that right now," Donaldson said, and guided McBride into a street-floor office of considerable size and better than average furnishings. Restrained gold-lettering on the plate glass front said that Trace Donaldson, in addition to being a attorney-at-law and counsel for two railroads, also handled estates

and investments. There were several people still at desks in the main room, though the night was wearing on toward nine o'clock. Campaign literature was stacked in neat piles on a long mahogany directors' table. "Get Randolph for me," Donaldson told the girl at a small PBX board, and led the way into his private office.

McBride admired the big desk, the luxury of the other appointments. "This place reeks with money," he said, and helped himself to one of Donaldson's cigars. "You can have the governor's chair. I'll take money."

"That's only until you get it," Donaldson said. "After that you find you want something else." His phone buzzed and he picked it up. "Randolph? I want you to kill that extra. Yes, kill it, and clean it off the streets too. Then get out another, labeling the McBride thing a frame." He waited a moment while the man at the other end said something. Then, impatiently: "I don't care how you do it, do it. And here's another thing: that shooting tonight. You can't use any names, but make it good and strong that it was done to gain sympathy for Hodiak." He hung up and grinned across the desk at McBride. "I wish I had a strong right arm like Nils Engstrom. Outside of Elsa and one or two good men at the other end of the state, all I've got is a bunch of stumblebums like Ollie Kramer."

McBride laughed smoke out of his mouth. "Engstrom doesn't think much of Ollie either, but if I were you I wouldn't sell that fat bum too short. You could both be wrong." Reflecting upon his recent experiences with Kramer and certain other citizens of Copper Hill, including the unknown murderer of the bell-hop, it occurred to him that he, McBride, was far from being out of jeopardy as far as the police chief was concerned, not to mention the various other opposing factions and forces which seemed bent upon buffeting him at every opportunity. He realized, with a sudden angry flare of resentment, that he didn't yet know where he was going to sleep tonight, or how safe it was for him even to appear alone on the streets.

As though reading his mind, Donaldson again picked up the phone. "Get me the Lewis & Clark—No, wait a minute, you



can handle this. Tell them you're speaking for me, and that they are to transfer Mr. Rex McBride's stuff to another suite. Then call Kramer and tell him I don't want any of his bulls shooting Mr. McBride under the misapprehension that he's escaped."

McBride's anger faded. "Thanks."

Donaldson hung up. "That's all right." He smiled briefly. "Now we can talk," he said, and leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the desk. "About you and me and Margo Mazaryk."

McBride drew carefully on his cigar, expelled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "All right, let's."

"You see," Donaldson said, "I'm her lawyer too."

"Oh?"

"And as of yesterday her investment counsellor. And, before that—a long time before that—her lover." His blue eyes were unsmiling, direct. "I still love her. Margo and I are a great deal alike. Perhaps if you knew a little more of her childhood, and mine, you'd understand the drive, the compulsion—Anyway, we chose our own roads with our eyes wide open. Neither of us has any regrets." Abruptly he took his feet off the desk and sat up straight. "Have you any idea why I'm telling you all this?"

"Sure," McBride said. "You think I know most of it anyway, and you're building up a picture of complete candor. In return, and for favors already granted, I'm supposed to level with you."

"I said you were smart," Donaldson nodded.

"All right," McBride said, "I will." But he did not, could not, bring himself to a disclosure of his real reason for being here. It was not so much a distrust of Donaldson as it was a stubborn unwillingness to admit defeat in the matter of Thornton Avery. Besides, by refuting an already established and plausible story he would accomplish nothing beyond branding himself a liar. He repeated the tale he had given Kathryn. "You knew she had seen Margo?"

"Yes."

"Did she see her again after I talked to her?"

"I don't know." Donaldson's smile was a trifle rueful. "I imagine she thought

she'd done enough for one day." Once more he leaned back in an attitude of relaxation. "I suppose you want to know why Margo instigated inquiries about you?"

"Not if you don't want to tell me."

"But I do. I'd like to get everything squared away before I make you my proposition." He paused as though to order, to emphasize his next words. "Margo has had some experience with private detectives. She figured in a couple of rather prominent divorce actions, and anyway it's getting so that even the corner grocer knows what it is to be investigated. Her main reason for taking a trip around the States before coming home was to shake that sort of thing; a kind of purifying bath, if you will. She'd saved a little money—I don't know, fifteen thousand or so—and she wanted to break clean, to marry, settle down, and no hangovers from the past. Then she spotted you on the train from St. Paul, and again in the lobby of the Lewis & Clark. You can see how it might have worried her. You don't exactly look like a traveling salesman."

"No," McBride agreed. And after a moment: "Who does she intend to marry—you?"

"Yes."

"You haven't seen her in all these years?"

"Sure I've seen her. I've made a number trips to Los Angeles, not always for that purpose, but I've seen her. Why not? I told you I loved her."

McBride wondered if Donaldson had ever encountered Thornton Avery. He decided not to ask. "All right," he said, "if you're ready for the proposition, I am."

Donaldson hesitated. "Perhaps we'd better clarify that phrase: 'Intend to marry.' It sort of puts the onus on Margo. I intend to marry too. We've always intended it, when and if. But since I last saw her I've had an unbelievable run of luck. I've made a potful of money and I've got the governorship almost in my fist. I don't want anything to paralyze my fingers. Not anything." He stood up and began pacing the floor. "This is a hell of a thing to ask another man, but I want you to take her off my back for

a while. No, wait!" he said, as McBride would have interrupted. "It isn't as bad as it sounds. She's dead set against this race because she thinks that up at the capital she'll have to fight off a lot of gossips and tea-drinking old biddies out to cut her throat. I'd like you to keep her entertained, keep her mind off it, possibly make her see that as governor I can stop anything like that before it starts. I can do a hell of a lot of things I couldn't right now."

McBride tossed his cigar into an ash tray. "It wouldn't be Elsa Blanchard that's worrying her?"

"It might," Donaldson admitted. For the first time that evening he looked a little tired, almost as old as his pictures. "There's another thing. If you could convince her that Elsa is only an expedient, a means to an end—Oh, hell, maybe I really am a son of a bear!"

"You've picked yourself a spot and that's a fact," McBride said. "Not that I don't admire your singleness of purpose." After a while he said, "Suppose, just for the sake of argument, I could do all this. Where would you suggest I start?"

Donaldson's frown vanished. "We'll let it be known that you're working for me. As a matter of fact, and aside from Margo, this election isn't going to be a pushover by any means. We've less than five days left and I need all the help I can get. I don't care what you do, or how you do it, but on tonight's showing I'll gamble five thousand dollars you can make Hodiak look sick." He laughed. "Stop him cold and I'll triple that five thousand."

McBride conceded that if this arrangement were publicized enough it would give him a certain standing with others besides Margo. He smiled a trifle wryly. "Nils Engstrom, especially."

"It's not a job for a man who scares easily," Donaldson agreed. "You'll earn whatever you get."

McBride drew a slow breath. "If they dig up anything on Margo, it's me she's interested in, not you. Right?"

Donaldson flushed. "I'm afraid that's the way it'll have to be—for now."

"Before I say yes or no I'd like your assurance on just one thing," McBride said. His eyes were jet-hard as they

probed the other man's face. "You're not planning to cross her up at the finish?"

"I guess I deserve that. At another time, under other circumstances, I might do something gallant and heroic about it. As it is—well, you have my word."

"All right," McBride nodded. "You can deal me in."

"Good." Donaldson looked at his watch. "Would you mind waiting just a minute or two more? I want you to meet—" He broke off to answer his phone. "Yes? Oh, have her come right in, will you?" He stood up and went to the door, his handsome face alight and almost boyish again. The woman he presently welcomed to the office was Elsa Blanchard. "Elsa, this is Rex McBride. He's going to give us a leg up on this election."

"Oh?" She came quickly across the room, extending a slim cool hand. "How do you do, Mr. McBride?"

McBride said he was fine. As with Donaldson's pictures, he thought the newspaper cut of Elsa (Lady Haverill to you) Blanchard hadn't done her full justice. He was reminded of the time-worn phrase: every inch a lady.

Donaldson laughed. "Elsa snubbed me once, when I was a kid mucker in Blanchard No. 2. I hated her for years."

"Did I really?" Then she too laughed, and released her hand from McBride's. "You never told me that."

Watching them, McBride noted a curious change in the big blond man. It was as though with Elsa's entrance he had shed some of his stature, and she in turn had assumed it. "Well, I'll be shoving off," he said, and found his hat. "Nice to have met you, Miss—What am I to call you, anyway?"

"Elsa will do nicely," she assured him. "Come and see me some time, Rex. Now that we've got Donny, here, sort of in common."

Donaldson laughed delightedly. "She likes you, McBride. By God, she does!"

She studied him for a moment as though faintly puzzled. "Did you think I wouldn't like him, Trace?"

"I thought it possible," he admitted.

She shook her head. "You ought to know better." Slowly, thoroughly, she extinguished her scarcely touched cigarette in a tray. "I like anybody, or any thing,



chair." But when she again looked at McBride it was with a challenge which he that will help put you in the governor's felt had little or nothing to do with the election.

**T**HIS CAB DRIVER was more to McBride's liking; more in the great tradition of the West. He had meaty red hands, a thick red neck, and he drove with a fine disregard for the rights of others. On a thick shock of rust-red hair which needed cutting he wore his cap with reckless abandon, and he loved to talk. In three minutes of riding behind him McBride had learned that his charioteer was crazy about his mom; that he hacked for a living because he detested manual labor and wasn't good for anything else; that his girl worked for Dixie Due Chen, who ran the finest house on Montana Street, a place he could thoroughly recommend because, what he meant, it was absolutely the finest.

"I get so much a head for every sucker I deliver." In the rear-vision mirror he saw McBride wrestling with the name on the license. "Katzenellenbogen," he said proudly. "Ain't that a heller, though? The A is for Abe, but nearly everybody calls me Dutch."

"Well by God, I'm glad to hear it," McBride said, and looked at his watch. "You wouldn't be taking me to this address by way of Billings or Great Falls, would you?"

The cab shuddered under the impact of suddenly applied brakes, skidded its hind end against a curb. "Here's your number."

McBride mounted a porch which gave springily under his feet, could not find a bell and knocked on the door. Presently it opened and he was looking at Joey, the undersized bellhop from the Lewis & Clark. "Hello, Joey. Talk to you a minute?"

"Sure."

But still he did not invite McBride in. Behind him, in a kitchen at the end of a short hall, a woman of perhaps forty-five was ironing, tiredly, hopelessly, yet with a kind of dogged persistence. She did not lift her head when she asked Joey who it was.

"Just a guy," he said. "I'll be back in

a minute, Mom." He came out and shut the door. "Mom's kind of cut up about Jack," he said to McBride, not looking at him. "He used to live here with us."

"I know," McBride said. He took an envelope from his topcoat pocket, held it out. "I just dropped by to leave you this. If you need any more, let me know."

The kid drew a long, quivery breath. "Listen, those cops kind of caught me off guard. I wouldn't have told 'em a thing, except that—" A sob caught in his throat and he turned away so that McBride should not see his face.

"That's all right," McBride said. And after a while, gently: "Any ideas about what he was doing, or why he was doing it?"

"No."

"But you think it had something to do with me?"

"Maybe." The kid fumbled a handkerchief from his hip pocket, blew his nose angrily. "He was a funny guy, Jack. Never talked much, but he'd go to hell for anybody he really liked. He was sort of—sold on you, I guess."

McBride's eyes wore a harried look. "Joey. Promise me something. If you know anything now, or think of anything later, let me in on it first, will you? Don't go playing cute or smart. Just let me know. I'll take care of the pay-off."

McBride walked back to the hotel.

Three or four doors down from the lobby entrance to the Hotel Lewis & Clark he saw Lou Patrick talking to another man. He slowed, and presently Patrick fell in beside him.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I might ask you the same thing," McBride said.

Patrick looked a little less than his usual breezy and shining self. "I had to go over to Bozeman. Cattle man over there thought his foreman and a buyer were robbing him blind."

"And he sent for you?" McBride shook his head. "Jesus!"

"I know," Patrick said. "You must think I'm a fine detective."

"A hell of a fine detective," McBride agreed. He waited till they had turned into the side street before he said, "I suppose you've seen Kathryn?"

"No, I—talked to her on the phone."

Patrick still sounded unhappy about the whole thing. "She said if I saw you to thank you for the flowers."

McBride cursed him. "That's enough of the old hair-shirt routine. You'd think a man in your business would check up on something beside a prospective employee's legs, but we all have our little blind spots."

"That's the hell of it," Patrick protested. "I didn't have any. She worked for two other guys before me, both under the name of Lee."

McBride nodded. "Probably quitting them for the same reason she ought to quit you." He smiled, remembering his talk with her "A nice girl, Kathryn. A little confused, maybe, but honest. What are you going to do about her?"

"What are you going to do about me?"

"That's what I mean," McBride said. "You're fired—on this operation at least—but you needn't take it out on her. She hurried things a little, that's all. It would have ended up the same anyway." At the mouth of an alley midway of the block he paused to light a cigarette, offered Patrick one. "Talk to your men since you got back?"

"Yeah. Nothing startling on our pigeon, except her kid brother paid her a visit. He's a taxi driver."

McBride held his breath for an instant. "Would that be around the time of the kill?"

Patrick stared at him. "Not unless he paid her more than one." Smoke dribbled slowly from his Cupid's-bow mouth. "Listen, she's been covered as good as she could without my knowing what the hell you're doing; without tipping the house dick and the whole staff we were watching her. But that doesn't mean she couldn't go to the john by herself—or anywhere else on the upper floors if she put her mind to it." He shivered suddenly. "I'd no idea you were expecting anything like this."

"I wasn't," McBride said. "Anyway, don't get your little insides all stewed up about it."

"You don't think she did it?"

"No." McBride wished he could give the other man his complete confidence. He would have liked to have somebody at his back he was sure didn't have a

knife all sharpened up and waiting. The trouble was, Patrick had too many irons in the fire; he was to all intents and purposes a native, while McBride was still an outsider. There were risks involved now beyond the mere sharing of a prize. For all he knew a single misstep, a chance word let fall, could pull the whole town down on top of him. "I'm toying with the idea that it didn't have to be anybody on the inside who did it." He looked down the alley to where an unshaded bulb lighted the hotel's service entrance. "How many ways could you get into this drop without being seen from the desk?"

Patrick's blue eyes grew bright with interest. "Three, maybe four, depending on the time of day. Side entrance, service entrance, the stairs down to the engine room." He thought. "And from the top of a car I guess you could swing the lower section of that fire ladder down."

"That's four," McBride said. "If I ever contemplate a burglary I'll remember you, precious."

Patrick grinned. "Of course you might be a little conspicuous on top of a car like that in the daytime."

"But not now," McBride pointed out. "There hasn't been anybody pass us for all of three minutes." He began walking back toward the brighter, busier Copper Street. "Lou."

"Unh—hunh?"

"Margo and I will be together from now on. There's nothing more there for you, nothing I want you to touch, or to talk about, understand?"

Patrick shrugged plump, nattily tailored shoulders. "Sure, if you say so." He laughed. "See tonight's *Telegram*?"

"No."

"Hodiak's paper. At least it's against everything the *News-Press* is for." He took a last drag on his cigarette, snapped the butt into the gutter. "You're a menace, an imported thug, a tool of the vested interests, and Ollie Kramer's another for springing you." His round pink face shone with admiration. "I will say this: whatever the hell you're doing, you're a hurricane once you're started."

"Not me," McBride said. "I'm the guy the hurricane hit." And after a moment: "Tell me about Ollie. Nobody I've talked to calls him anything but a slob, with the



inference that he's stupid too. Is he?"

"No," Patrick said soberly. "He's a rat, I'll grant you that, but he isn't stupid. He packs the kind of authority a bunch of Hunyaks and Micks and crazy Swedes understand. Besides, he's the Mayor's brother-in-law."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" McBride shook his head in wonderment. "To think that I was sore at him for only kicking my teeth in!"

They watched the passers-by for a little while in silence. Then Parick said, casually, "Nothing else on your mind?"

"Sure," McBride said. "Bring me the guy that knocked off the kid and you can write your own ticket. I'll tell this town and the whole state of Montana to go to hell."

"You wouldn't be interested in anything I might pick up on Hodiak or Engstrom?"

"Why not?" Abruptly McBride laughed. "Just wheel it in, Lou. Anything I can use I'll pay for. You might whip up a few statistics on my employer too. A guy can't be too careful these days."

"You said it."

Patrick went off to join the man he had been talking to down the street. McBride entered the hotel, got his key at the desk and rode up to his new quarters on the seventh floor. But about to use the key on his own door, he suddenly changed his mind and went back along the corridor and around an ell to Margo's.

When she opened it in answer to his knock he saw that her beauty had not lessened since last night. Apparently her effect on him was the same whether he was drunk or sober. He made his smile tentative, propitiating. "Are you in or out to visitors named McBride?"

Her green eyes hated him; her mouth was a scarlet slash of disdain. "Have I a choice?"

"Certainly." Hat in hand he half turned away. "I never go where I'm not wanted—much."

"Oh, come on in," she said impatiently. "We may as well get this over with." She stood aside to let him pass. Then, when she had closed the door and followed him into the room: "Do let me help you off with your things."

"Thanks, no. I won't be staying long."

"But you must. Mister God wants us to see a lot of each other."

Some of the anger in her eyes was reflected in his own now. "Listen, precious, I don't go for this idea any more than you do. For me it's just one way of keeping out of jail."

"How flattering!"

"Do you want me to flatter you?"

"No."

"Then grow up. I didn't start any of this, you know. You did." He shrugged out of his topcoat, flung it and his hat at a chair. "Sicking a hotel maid on me and then crying to your friend Donaldson when I try to find out what's what!"

She recoiled as though he had struck her. "You think I'm responsible for that boy's death?" A kind of sick horror chased the fury from her face. "You really believe that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" he demanded savagely. "For all I know, you could have done it with your own two lovely hands." Abruptly his manner changed. His eyes glittered; a thin smile made his mouth unpleasant, cruel. "Not that I care—just so it isn't me that hangs for it."

She stared at him, incredulous. "I think I hate you for that."

"Good," he said. "With that as a beginning we ought to get along just fine."

She swung away from him, began pacing the room with her fine, long-legged stride. She had on a robe of shimmering gold nylon, tight in the bodice, very full in the skirt. She was working herself up to a fine pitch.

"Who does he think he is? Who do you think you are? My God, I don't need either one of you. Or my lovely righteous family!" She kicked an ottoman out of her way. On the turns, her swirling skirt made a sibilant, angry frou-frou. "My family! A sister who thinks I'm no better than a cheap tart, a brother who quits college to drive a hack because my money isn't good enough for him, a mother so stupidly stubborn she won't leave the beastial, sodden wreck I've got for a father." She paused to glare at him. "Tell me why I ever came back to this stinking town. Go on, tell me!"

He thought she was magnificent. "It's an urge everybody has at one time or another. You don't have to stay."

"No, he'd like to see me leave, wouldn't he?" She laughed scornfully. "Well, you can tell him I'm not going to. I'll stay here and really give him something to worry about."

"No, you won't," McBride said. "You may stay here, but if you do you'll be a good girl until this election's over." He lit a cigarette, snapped the match at a bowl of deep bronze chrysanthemums. "It's part of my job to see that you are."

"Ah, my chaperone, the masterful type. How sick I am of masterful types!" She whirled off on another caged-animal tour of the room. "Doesn't he know that he can't tell me what to do? Is he so dense, so self-centered—" Into her eyes leapt a curiously startled look, almost of fright. "What did you mean by that—'part of your job'?"

He shrugged. "I've a few other chores. Nothing so pleasant, probably, as escorting you."

"While he escorts Mrs. Richbitch?"

McBride let twin streams of smoke issue from his nostrils. "A matter of expediency only. I have his word for it."

"Expediency! Did he by chance use the word 'discreet' too? Or doesn't he care?" She laughed softly, mockingly. "Just how are you to keep me entertained, McBride?"

He made a great business of crushing out his cigarette. "He didn't say."

There was the faint rustle of her garments and he could feel her close to him, not touching him, but so close that he could smell the perfume of her hair. "McBride—Rex."

He looked at her then. His breathing had become uneven, ragged. "Yes?"

She put strong arms around him, her body flat against his. Her eyes were pools of green flame, enormous, compelling. "Hold me. Very tightly, please."

## V

**B**LINDING LIGHT hurt his eyes and for a moment he did not know where he was. Then he saw he was in his own room, his own bed, and that the drapes he himself had pulled the night before were now wide apart, letting in the morning sun. He saw something else. Standing there with his hand still on the drapery cord, watching him, was Nils Engstrom.

McBride's hand sought the comfort of the gun under his pillow.

"I wouldn't," Engstrom said. A bleak half-smile touched his thin hard lips. His eyes drew McBride's attention to the hall door. Leaning his back against this there was a second man. This one's gun was in plain sight, held with a careless ease which suggested thorough familiarity with its use. He was a tall, rangy, happy-looking young man in an ill-fitting suit of store clothes with the trouser legs worn on the outside of high-heeled cowpoke boots. His hat was of the type favored by Texans, narrow of brim, soft, white, spotless. "Art is a recent importation," Engstrom said. "Eager to make a good impression."

"Then he'd better put that gun away," McBride said. He sat up, being careful of his hands.

"So you decided to throw in with Donaldson," Engstrom stated.

"Who wouldn't? I didn't see you in there rescuing me from Kramer."

"Well, no," Engstrom conceded. "I guess I must be a little more particular than some. After the bell-hop incident I washed my hands of you."

McBride was indignant. "You think I did that?"

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"But you have some idea as to who did?"

McBride stretched his arms, yawned widely. "Sure."

"Who?"

"You," McBride said. He did not really believe this. He didn't care particularly whether Engstrom thought he did. His mind was on the young man over by the door, and on the gun in the young man's hand.

Engstrom's gun appeared and lifted in a short imperative gesture. "Get up."

McBride sighed. "Well, if you insist." He stood up, and trying to watch both of them at once rounded the foot of the bed. The carpet tickled his bare feet; he succeeded in stubbing his toe once before attaining a neutral corner, but other than that nothing happened to him. Engstrom crossed to the vacated bed, flipped over the pillow, picked up McBride's gun and looked at it thoughtfully, finally tossed it aside with the faintly contemptuous smile



of a man who doesn't think much of automatics. "All right, Art, see what else you can find." He straddled a straight chair, his bleak gray eyes and the round black eye of his gun regarding McBride steadily while the search of the room progressed. Art turned out to be an enthusiastic worker, and thorough. He even took the mattresses off the beds.

McBride said, heavily sarcastic, that if he knew what they were looking for he might offer a suggestion or two.

"A rifle," Engstrom said.

"Just any old rifle? Or have you a special one in mind?"

"Any one will be the right one."

McBride had a brief moment of panic as he realized that this was a fact, and how easily a rifle might have been planted there, thus offering Engstrom a fine excuse to shoot him. He yawned again, to show that he wasn't in the least worried; that he was, indeed, pretty bored by the whole affair. "I'll tell you about that," he said. "If I had really shot at the governor, and only hit his water pitcher, I'd have known damn' well the gun was no good and thrown it away. On the other hand, if I'd intended to hit the water pitcher—which would be your play, not mine—I might pretend to be looking for the rifle in another man's room." He laughed at the sudden startled expression on Art's face. "You think your boss wouldn't frame you and me into something like that? I've got an alibi for the time of that shot, and he knows I have. I was in jail."

"With four impeccable witnesses," Engstrom said, and smiled his careful, thin-lipped smile. "Donaldson, Ollie Kramer and two of Ollie's own men." He saw that Art had finished, rose to his feet and put his gun away. "We could go round and round on the argument that I did it to make Jan out a hero; that you did it, or had it done, so I could be accused of pulling a fast one. Personally, I favor the latter theory, but as you yourself observed it doesn't have to be either. It could have been a very bad shot instead of a very good one." A forefinger caressed the thin gray line of his mustache. His eyes were cold, direct. "I don't want anything even remotely like it to happen again."

McBride's face darkened with rage. "Meaning that if it does I'm in the Num-

ber One spot?"

"Meaning that should you become a sufficient nuisance, either to me or the governor, I'll take the necessary steps to abate you." Engstrom said this without heat, without particular emphasis, but his very quietude lent conviction to the words. "You may avoid that possibility by leaving the state of Montana immediately."

"That's mighty generous of you, pardner, giving me the whole state to leave. Ollie Kramer won't even let me out of Copper Hill."

"I'm sure you'll be able to work something out," Engstrom said pleasantly. He went to the door, opened it. "Art."

The lank young man with the white Stetson and the gun seemed unable to take his gaze from McBride's face. "Yes, sir?"

"Never mind, now."

McBride stared pointedly at the young man's boots. "Next time, don't try the train. Bring your horse."

Art laughed suddenly, a peculiar hiccupy sort of laugh. "Boots like these been known to come in handy," he said. "Real useful like, stompin' a snake." His gun still watchful, he backed out in the wake of his employer. The door closed.

WHEN McBride was ready to go downstairs he telephoned Margo's room. After the bell had rung three or four times her voice came to him still heavy with sleep and a trifle irritable: "Who is this?"

"Lover Boy McBride."

Her quick indrawn breath was followed by a moment of silence. Then she said, very low, "I wish you wouldn't joke about that, Rex."

"How else am I supposed to take it?" he demanded savagely. "With an aspirin? You were paying him off for something and I just happened to be handy, that's all."

"Is that what you called to tell me?"

He discovered that he was cursing. He stopped that. "I'm sorry. I thought you might like some breakfast."

"What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "A little after nine."

"Give me half an hour?"

"I'll be in the lobby."

He went to the phone and presently

was describing to Chief of Police Kramer the morning's experience with Engstrom and the Texan named Art. "That's what happened. It isn't quite the way we'll tell it. I'm reporting a burglary and I think I saw this guy leaving my room. It's lousy with his fingerprints, so you won't have any trouble about that when you pick him up. By implication, if he was interested in this room he may have been in my other one too."

"Well, Judas wept!" the chief said happily. "It could be he's the one knocked off the kid!"

"I don't know that he isn't," McBride said. He was whistling cheerfully when he affixed the Do-Not-Disturb sign to his door and went down to breakfast.

McBride laid the two room keys, Margo's and his, on the counter and watched with sardonic satisfaction the gleam of triumph appear in the desk clerk's pale eyes. Curiously, though, now that his earlier suspicions had been vindicated, the clerk was disposed to be friendly. A touch of genuine admiration showed through his carefully acquired veneer; McBride had not only increased in stature, he was a very lucky man. "Everything all right, sir?"

"Fine," McBride said, and then, lest the clerk get so chummy he wouldn't gossip about the now established relationship: "Only one burglary this morning. The police will be here any minute."

They were definitely estranged again. "The police? Why didn't you notify the management?"

McBride shrugged. "It was nothing to ruin your breakfast about. Besides, I hardly thought you'd have a fingerprint outfit in your pocket." He turned away and rejoined Margo just as Chief of Police Kramer came barging through the street doors with his two dicks, Feeney and Stengel. Feeney had a camera, Stengel a black satchel. They looked professional as hell. "You got him?" McBride asked Kramer.

"Did we get him?" The fat chief was complacent. "You think we gave you a working over, you should see this cowboy." He laughed. "Tried to pull a gun on us." His small bloodshot eyes took cognizance of Margo. "Excuse it, ma'am. Old Ollie Kramer's just a diamond in the rough." His gaze dropped to her lizard pumps,

climbed slowly, appraisingly. "Stranger in our little city?"

"I was born here," she said.

"You were?" He was delighted.

McBride performed the introductions. "Miss Mazaryk and I have discovered we have mutual friends in Los Angeles."

"Think of that, now!" Kramer seemed to be bubbling over with good humor this morning. His fat lips savored the name. "Mazaryk, Mazaryk—I've heard that before, somewhere."

Her fine mouth curved downward. "Probably. There's a lot of us around." She dismissed him, turned toward the main dining room. "Coming, Rex?"

"In a minute." McBride looked at Kramer. "Have any trouble with Engstrom?"

"Not a bit." Kramer shook with sudden mirth. "Fact is, he don't even know we've got his man. He's with the governor's party on a train that must be all of fifty miles out of town by now." He wiped his mouth on the back of a fat hand. "We kind of snagged the cowboy right from under his nose, you might say." A little of his phony benevolence leaked away. "You wasn't kidding about those fingerprints?"

"Would I be?" McBride lit a cigarette, snapped the match at a sand jar. "Just as a suggestion, why not get the reporters to watch you go over the room? Both papers. Then there won't be any arguments."

"Now there's a thought!" Kramer said happily. He gave Stengel the nod. "Get us a audience, especially the governor's own booster." He returned his attention to McBride. "You know something? I'm beginning to kind of like you. I wish I could take it as a fact that you ain't nursing a grudge for what we done to you last night."

"Hell, that's all right," McBride lied. "In your shoes I'd have done the same thing." He dragged smoke deep into his lungs. "What's the punk have to say for himself?"

"He wants a lawyer." Kramer laughed heartily. "I'll give him a lawyer!"

"It might be smart if you did," McBride said. "Don't take my word for it—get Donaldson's opinion."

"You coming upstairs with us?"

"No. I'll drop in at Headquarters later." He turned and followed Margo into the dining room, finding her presently at one



of the tables under the tall side windows. The room was not crowded, but there was a fair sprinkling of other late breakfasters. The service was quiet, leisurely efficient.

"You didn't tell me you'd had a burglary," she said after a time.

HE TOLD her about it, recounting the events as they had actually happened and his reasons for slightly altering the facts for public consumption. "Nothing may come of it. On the other hand it may make quite a stink." He attacked his grapefruit with energy. "Be interesting to watch Engstrom's reaction."

"It should be at least that," she said drily. Sunlight turned to silver the light gray wool of her tailored suit; the matching greatcoat draped over the back of her chair was lined with scarlet. There were faint violet shadows under her eyes, but he could not tell whether this was the result of fatigue or some trick of make-up. In either case he was moved to sincere admiration. "You're going to be the best thing that ever happened to the governor's mansion. Of this or any other state."

"I don't want the governor's mansion."

"What do you want—a vine-covered cottage with Donaldson hoeing turnips out in the back yard?"

"Not that either."

He grew mildly sarcastic. "You're sure you do want Donaldson?"

Her green eyes considered him. "Suppose I changed my mind about that too?"

"You are in a tizzy this morning!"

He pushed his plate aside. "Listen, why don't you take it easy? Donaldson is right, you know. When you're Montana's first lady nobody is going to bother to dig up ghosts. It'd be a reflection on their fair state." He warmed to his subject. "There's your family too. They'd sort of have to revise their opinions—the opinions you seem to think they have, anyway."

She smiled at that. "You're certain he's going to win, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"No." After a moment she added, "I'm not sure that I'll let him. Donny's a big man. In many ways he's very clever. In others he's curiously like a child, and there are some things it isn't good for children to have." She drew on a glove, not looking at McBride now. "I don't say that I won't,

you understand. I've been a good girl so far, and let him—you—establish me as your property. How I'll feel about it tomorrow, or next day, depends on something I have to find out for myself."

"What?"

"I just told you," she said with exaggerated patience, as though he too were a child. "I must find it out for myself."

He was not graceful in defeat. "With you, I'm beginning to wonder why in hell you ever came back here. Didn't you know he had this political bug?"

"No."

"Then you hadn't seen or heard from him for some time?"

She shrugged. "A little over two years, I think."

McBride had some difficulty concealing the faint trembling of his hands, the hot eagerness in his eyes. It was almost two years to the day since Thornton Avery had vanished, and this, together with something she'd said a moment before, opened up an exceedingly interesting line of thought. Coincident with this he had the uncomfortable feeling that she was far ahead of him; that there was deliberate intent behind her seemingly careless words. He busied himself replenishing their cups from the silver coffee pot. "Two years is a long time," he said. "Longer than I'd leave you alone, Maggie."

"Is it?" she said indifferently. And then, smiling: "Somehow I don't get the impression that I exactly set you on fire."

He was suddenly and violently angry. "If you didn't, what happened last night wouldn't have happened. I'm going to have a hell of a time looking Donaldson in the eye for a while."

"Conscience?" she said. "You?" She was scornful. "And anyway, what makes you think he'd care? In his plans for us did he even remotely suggest chastity?"

The dishes jumped and rattled, and people turned to stare as he struck the table with a flattened hand. "I'm damned if I understand either of you!" he said angrily. "In my book—"

"Love is love, and virtue its own reward?" Her mouth drooped. "What do you know about love—a man who sent the woman he was going to marry to the penitentiary?"

For a moment he could not speak. Fury

welled in him, and the old sickness that he had thought almost forgotten. When words came they were clogged with passion, unnatural even to his own ears. "Who told you about that?"

Her eyes were clear, candid. "Do you think Donny would have employed you for a job like this without thoroughly investigating you first? Or that Ollie Kramer wasn't curious enough about you to pick up the phone and talk to the authorities in Los Angeles?" Her cool slim fingers rested for an instant on the back of his hand. "Let's not quarrel, Rex."

"Why not? What's in it for me if we don't?" He laughed harshly. "Donaldson talks a lot of money. I haven't seen any of it yet."

She drew a slow breath. "Then you don't feel too obligated to him?"

"I didn't say that."

"But money is really all you're interested in?"

"It's something I've never had too much of," he admitted. He had control of himself now, was again watchful. "Are you offering me some?"

She veiled her eyes from him. "I don't know, yet. Possibly I may need someone like you to—protect me."

"You mean someone thoroughly unscrupulous like me?" He laughed at her. "Protect you from whom? Against what?" And when she still would not look at him: "All right, precious, any time, any place. Don't let me hurry you." He signed the breakfast check, laid a too-large tip on top of it, stood up. "What's on the agenda for today?"

"I'm going to the bank first. After that I think I'll buy a car." She too rose to her feet, allowed him to help her on with her coat. "I don't like riding in cabs, and I'm a little fed up with just doing nothing." She picked up her purse. "Coming with me?"

"Not unless you want me to," he said, and watched her face for some sign that it made any difference to her one way or the other. She betrayed neither relief nor disappointment. "If you do buy the car we might go riding this afternoon."

"All right," she assented.

They went out to the lobby just in time to see Chief Kramer and his party, now enlarged to include the house dick and two men who were obviously reporters, de-

bouch from an elevator. Kramer gave McBride the high sign, fat thumb and index finger describing a circle, went on out to the street followed by all save the house man. Presently there arose the wail of a siren. Then that too dwindled and was swallowed up by normal traffic sounds. McBride offered to put Margo in a cab, but she said no, it was just a matter of two or three blocks to the bank and she would walk. Hat in hand, he watched her through the front door. He waited two minutes, half expecting her to come back in, but when she did not he repaired to the elevators and rode up to the seventh floor.

He was surprised that the corridor showed so little evidence of the recent police visit. The boys must have been more circumspect than usual in such cases. One or two doors were open on rooms whose occupants had obviously checked out. A maid pushed a canvas laundry cart toward the freight elevator at the far end of the hall. He lit a cigarette, stalling till she had gone. Then, very quickly, he went into the short transverse corridor at the end of which was Margo's suite. The fifth key he tried let him in. Then he just stood there, an outraged look on his face, his breath coming angrily, gustily through his nose. Someone had been there before him. Someone not as careful as he himself would have been, but just as thorough.

**A**T POLICE HEADQUARTERS McBride found Chief Kramer sorely beset by at least two of the three other people in the office. The only one of these that McBride recognized was Dixie Du Chen. Dutch Katzenellenbogen, the taxi driver, had dropped McBride off at her bawdy house after the latter's visit to Joey, the bell-hop. Wrapped in about seven thousand dollars worth of mink coat, her hat askew and one of the rhinestone buckles missing from her pumps, she strode up and down the room telling the world loudly and profanely just what she thought of a dirty so-and-so who would try to frame one of her customers.

McBride looked inquiringly from Kramer to the other men. Without getting out of his chair, without removing the worried toothpick from his mouth, the fat chief introduced them. The first, a short, thick-



set, competent-looking man with fiery red hair was Dixie Du Chen's lawyer. His name was Dwyer. The second was taller, younger, wore a Phi Beta Kappa key prominently displayed and the righteous air of a crusading public official. It turned out that he was a public official. His name was Swann, and he was District Attorney of Maricopa County.

McBride looked at Kramer. "The fingerprints checked okay?"

"That they did," Kramer said emphatically. He seemed a little happier, now that he had at least one other person to share all this attention. "That they did."

"Well, then, what's the beef?"

Kramer's chair creaked as he shifted his weight. "Seems like Dixie, here, and her attorney kind of got the idea we was trying to railroad somebody for knocking off the kid—what's his name?—Jack." He sighed. "I don't know where they ever got such a idea." His bloodshot eyes probed Dixie Du Chen's face. "Fact is, I don't know how she heard about any of this. It ain't in the papers yet."

She laughed at him. "You fat slob, you just don't know, period!"

"Now Dixie," her attorney said.

District Attorney Swann cleared his throat preparatory to addressing McBride. "I understand you saw this man, Arthur Neumann, leaving your room in a suspicious manner."

McBride was indignant. "How else would you see a total stranger backing out of your room? Anyway, I wasn't sure until after I saw the condition of the room itself. Then I thought I'd better call the police." He appealed to the irate lady in mink. "Look, Dixie, if the guy's fingerprints were there, the guy was there. That's something you don't frame."

She snorted. "Is that any reason to beat hell out of him trying to make him confess to something else?" She pointed an outraged finger at Kramer's bulbous nose. "And don't tell me he fell, either. I heard different."

The chief bridled. "Listen, Due Chen, it ain't me that's on trial here. The punk pulled a gun on me and if he got scuffed up a little bit that's his headache." He glared at the district attorney. "Let's leave politics out of it. Your being here at all, with them"—he jerked his head at Dixie

and her counsel—"puts you where I always knew you were. Donaldson will be glad to know it too, but that's beside the point. We've got this guy cold on a burglary rap and packing a rod without a permit. It was McBride's room this time, and it was McBride's room before, the one the kid was knocked off in. That gives us a right to—now—question him 'most any way we feel like." A fat thumb and forefinger explored a vest pocket, found a fresh toothpick, stuck it between fat, liver-colored lips. His small eyes were triumphant. "So Du Chen and a couple of her floosies claim Neumann couldn't have done it—he was shackled up in their trap on Montana Street all yesterday afternoon and evening. What I want to know is why it makes so much difference to 'em?"

Dwyer said mildly that he and Dixie were only interested in seeing justice done; that it was only because Dixie knew for a fact that Neumann couldn't have committed the murder that she'd thought it possible he hadn't done anything else criminal. And then, very casually, "What did he have to say for himself?"

"He claims he don't know from nothing. Then when we cinch him with his own prints he gives us some song and dance about looking for the rifle that was used on Hodiak." He chuckled fatly. "Or on Hodiak's water pitcher." He looked slyly from Dixie Du Chen to her attorney. "Why should he care? Unless, o' course, he's working for Hodiak and Engstrom." He got laboriously to his feet, waddled over to the windows. With an unbelievably quick movement one of his enormous hands imprisoned a fly buzzing against the glass. "Anyway, it don't hardly seem likely he'd expect to find such a thing in McBride's room, on account of McBride was sitting right here in this office when the shot was fired." He listened pleasurably to the fly struggling within his closed fist. "With me and three-four other witnesses."

District Attorney Swann looked uncomfortable. "I don't suppose there's any doubt about the—"

"Fingerprints?" Kramer laughed. "We got witnesses for that too. Good, honest witnesses, like from the *Telegram*, Hodiak's most loyal supporter."

The red-haired Dwyer looked at Mc-

Bride. "Tell me, Mr. McBride, was anything taken from your rooms?"

"Not that I know of," McBride said. "I haven't had time to check very carefully."

"Then the charge might readily be reduced to breaking and entering?"

Kramer yelled. "No you don't! You try bailing that guy out of here I'll make you prove why you're doing it."

"Why, as to that," Dwyer said pleasantly, "he's just a very good friend of Dixie's. A personal friend." He addressed the district attorney. "I'm going to ask Judge Hagedorn to set bail. In the meantime I don't suppose there's any objection to letting me see my client?"

"I can't very well stop you."

McBride caught Chief Kramer's eye, shook his head slightly. Kramer's protest died. McBride said, "Well, if you'll excuse me now, I think I'll run along." He nodded to the men, showed Dixie Du Chen an apologetic smile. "If I'd known he was a personal friend of yours I'd never have mentioned it."

She was only partially mollified. "Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?"

"The next burglar that isn't," he assured her, "I'll send him out to get help." He went out of the office and down the street to a drugstore, entered a phone booth and called Chief Kramer back. "Don't let this worry you, Ollie. For our purposes it may work out even better. She's a known friend of Engstrom and Hodiak. Worded right, the connection should be obvious."

"Yeah."

"They may think of that themselves," McBride said, "and decide to leave him in. If they do, see that he gets a gun and crushes out. They'll have had the opportunity to give it to him, and—"

"Well," Kramer chortled, "stripe me for a pink zebra, if you ain't the shiftiest mugg I ever seen!"

"And Ollie."

"Yeah?"

"Something else is pretty obvious. She's got a pipeline into your department. Maybe you'd better find out who it is before you do anything careless."

"You think I won't you're crazy," Kramer said.

When McBride arrived at Donaldson's office he gave his name to the girl at the PBX board, and presently Trace Donaldson came to the door of the inner office and beckoned him in. The big blond man looked as though he had slept well, breakfasted well and had just stepped from the barber chair. He seized McBride's hand and wrung it. His grin was boyish. "I don't know whether you're smart, or just the kind of guy things happen to, but in either case I'm glad you're with me!"

McBride affected a becoming modesty. "Aw, it was nothin', mom." He helped himself to one of Donaldson's cigars. "I take it you've heard from Kramer."

"Twice this morning. The last time, just a minute ago."

"Good old Ollie," McBride said. He surprised himself by blowing a smoke ring. "I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth, but he seems a little too ready to accept suggestions from me. It's out of character. In his spot he ought to hate my guts—and yours for ringing me in on him."

Donaldson brushed this aside. "I can handle him."

"Can you?" McBride said. He pretended to find something of great interest in the tip of his cigar. "The first time I met him I got the idea he'd jump whichever way suited him best." After a moment he said, "I had to introduce him to Margo this morning. I don't think she came as a complete surprise to him."

Donaldson frowned. "Well?"

"He hasn't anything on you?"

"Nobody has," Donaldson said. "There isn't anything."

McBride drew carefully on his cigar. "Margo talks about stopping you if she happens to feel like it."

Anger showed briefly in the big man's eyes, the hard set of his jaw. Then abruptly he laughed. "Did she say how she intended to go about that?"

"No."

Donaldson stood up, thrust his hands deep into trouser pockets. "I suppose she could make me a little trouble with Elsa," he confessed ruefully.

"Blanchard doesn't know about her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason that others



shouldn't—right at this time." Donaldson's head came up; his stare was bright and hard and direct. "Look, we've been over all this before. When the governorship is an accomplished fact none of it will matter. Now, at this particular moment, it could be used as a weapon against me. It wouldn't be me running for governor, it would be the notorious Margo Mazaryk, and even denying that I intended to marry her wouldn't do any good."

"No," McBride agreed, "it wouldn't. It's like a judge saying 'Strike that from the record.' What the hell, it isn't stricken from the minds of the jury." He thought of something. "Let's get Hodiak's papers to deny he misused state funds, or has leprosy."

"Oh, brother!"

"You don't think it can be done?"

Donaldson shook his head. "I'm damned if I see how—without accusing him first in our own papers."

"For a lawyer you're not very bright," McBride said. "Or maybe you're just not willing to spend the money."

Donaldson opened a desk drawer, took out a checkbook. "How much?"

"Hell," McBride said, "I don't want to handle it. How would I know how much it takes to bribe a Montana editor? Off-hand, I'd say four or five hundred bucks, cash on the line, might induce him to print an item, especially if he could convince his owners afterward that he was only trying to scotch a damaging rumor."

Sudden laughter rumbled in Donaldson's throat. He slapped the desk top with a flattened hand. "By God, we'll give it a try. There aren't more than a half dozen opposition sheets big enough to work it on, but even three or four will do the trick."

"Sure," McBride said, and stood up. Donaldson came over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I want you to know how much I appreciate what you're doing. I mean, aside from this other stuff, Margo must be—" He broke off, oddly embarrassed. "You and she getting along all right?"

"So-so," McBride said. His eyes grew sleepy-looking, his face almost stupid. "How are you making out with Blanchard?"

Donaldson withdrew his hand. His voice

lost its friendliness. "I don't believe I quite understand that, McBride."

"She isn't planning to sit beside you in the governor's mansion herself?"

The big blond man appeared to find the idea ridiculous. "What in God's name would interest a woman like her in Helena? She's had the best of New York, Washington, London, the Continent."

"She's here," McBride said.

"Only because a lot of her holdings are here. Her louse of a husband ran through a good part of her liquid assets before he died. She's mending fence."

McBride nodded as though satisfied. "I'll try to keep that in mind," he said. Against the darkness of his skin his teeth shone whitely for an instant. "I'll try to keep it in Margo's mind too." But when presently he left the office he knew that doing either was going to be pretty difficult, not to say impossible.

## VI

IN AN OPEN-FRONT bar on Zephyr Street McBride let himself be rooked out of a stack of silver dollars by a blackjack dealer who could throw tops, bottoms, seconds or even thirds with equal facility. He could do this while talking about the weather, copper, politics and who won the fifth at Santa Anita yesterday.

"They tell me Donaldson is quite a gambler," McBride said, shoving two face cards under his dollar. He figured the dealer would have to work for this one, since he had a deuce showing.

"Who did?" The man gave himself three more cards, making a total of five, but the answer came out just the same, exactly twenty-one. "He's a gambler the way a one-shot author hits a run-away best seller. I've never heard of him winning or losing more than seventeen bucks in a game since."

"Since when?"

"Couple or three years back he took a hundred grand out of Vegas. You must have read about it in the papers. From then on he became a success story, but not in any games I've dealt or heard about." Just for the hell of it the nimble fingers gave McBride a blackjack and paid him a dollar and a half. "How's for a drink?"

"I might have known," McBride said sadly. They went over to the bar and had a couple. The second one they matched for, but McBride couldn't win at this either. "No wonder Donaldson fights shy of the local talent. When he's elected you're going to have to reform."

"If he's elected."

McBride tossed off the last of his drink. "You don't think he will be?"

"I wouldn't make book on it."

"Hell, there's nothing in that. You wouldn't bet the sun would come up unless you were dealing."

"Maybe you're right, friend."

They parted on excellent terms, and McBride went out and around the corner into Copper Street, heading for Lou Patrick's office. Midway of the second block he heard the screech of tortured rubber and someone yelled at him. It was Dutch. He jockeyed his cab in between two parked cars, only slightly crumpling the fender of one. McBride saw that he had the makings of a fine black eye. "What's the matter—some fellow motorist give you an argument?"

"You and your detecting," Dutch said. "You want to know who gave me this shiner? Mazaryk, that's who."

"What happened?"

Dutch's story, sifted of obscenities, was quite simple. He'd had a flat tire, see? So he'd gone back to the company garage to have it fixed, see? So while he was there and waiting around he'd noticed Mazaryk's cab in its stall and thought he'd have a look at it, the trip sheet and one thing and another. But he hadn't found anything suspicious, or even interesting, until he was getting out, when he observed that the front seat cushion didn't fit down very good. "It kind of wobbled, see?"

McBride said he had a perfect mental picture of the cab's front seat. "Get on with it. You're not writing an epic."

"What do you think it was?"

McBride sighed. "A monument to Lewis & Clark?"

"A rifle," Dutch said.

McBride pretended to be vastly surprised. As a matter of fact he was surprised, for until this moment it had not occurred to him to connect young Mazaryk with the rifle shot which had broken up Governor Hodiak's address to the voters of

Copper Hill. But his surprise was not unmixed with disappointment, since the incident appeared to have no bearing whatsoever on the murder of the bell-hop Jack.

McBride had Dutch drop him at the hotel. Three busloads of Legionnaires and their wives had been dumped on the Lewis & Clark, and these together with the Lions Club and assorted regular guests filled the lobby and other public rooms to overflowing. With some little difficulty McBride made his way to the Western Union desk and filed two wires, one to Pete the Greek in Los Angeles, the other to Pacific Coast Underwriters, with whom he had a working agreement and who had issued the bond on Thornton Avery. He had, or thought he had, an excellent reason for using Western Union rather than long distance telephone. This way, with a little active cooperation from the blonde at the desk, he would have an accurate check should anyone else be curious about the wires themselves, or about the expected answers. He showed platinum goddess an admiring smile and a creased twenty-dollar bill. "Let's keep this transaction a secret just between us two, shall we?"

Her eyes on the twenty, she said she thought that might be managed.

"Also," McBride said, "if anybody else seems interested I'd kind of like to know who they are." He watched the bill disappear down the front of her dress. "You're not afraid of being robbed?"

She giggled. "If I am it'll be just incidental."

McBride conceded that she had something there; that as a matter of fact she had a great deal there. He left her presently and was half way to the elevators when the bell-hop Joey intercepted him.

"Miss Mazaryk wants you to call her."

"Back in harness so soon, Joey?"

The kid shrugged. "The funeral isn't till tomorrow and I—Geez, a guy can't just sit still."

"Anybody been bothering you?"

"No, sir." The boy stared fixedly at McBride's chest. "You getting anywhere on this kill?"

McBride's eyes suddenly wore a harried look. "I wish to God I could tell you I was, Joey, but I don't know yet. I just don't know."



The kid's mouth twisted. "Well, as Kramer would say, one crummy bell-hop more or less don't make much difference."

McBride's hand tightened on the narrow shoulder. "Joey."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not Kramer."

A hot flush dyed the boy's face, and when he lifted his eyes they were ashamed. "I'm sorry I said that, Mr. McBride. After what you did last night—the dough and all—"

"Forget it," McBride said, and turning away came face to face with Nils Engstrom. "Well, what do you know! I thought you were well away from our busy little city."

Engstrom's smile was a trifle bleak. "Conditions seemed to warrant my return." A forefinger caressed the thin gray line of his mustache. "You haven't forgotten what I told you this morning?"

McBride shuddered realistically. "God, no!"

"You're either a very brave man or a very great fool," Engstrom said, and moved on through the crowd to the desk.

McBride wedged himself into an elevator and rode up to the seventh floor. When he knocked on Margo's door he carefully adjusted his face to express the proper degree of surprise at what he suspected she was about to tell him. He needn't have bothered. He was genuinely astonished when the door was flung open and he found himself menaced by the business end of what looked like a shiny, brand new thirty-two revolver. Above the gun her green eyes were enormous, cat-like in their intensity.

"Oh, it's you!"

The gun sagged, but only a little. "Come in."

He went in. When he was almost past her his right hand shot out, clamped down hard on the working mechanism of the gun, so that it could not fire even if she tried to pull the trigger. At the same time his body pivoted, crushed her body against the wall of the entry. A foot kicked the door shut. "Now, God damn it, what's the big idea?" His voice was thick with repressed fury.

She did not struggle against him, but her eyes glowed with green fire. "Let me go. You're hurting me."

"Then let go of the gun."

SHE released her grip on it. He stood away from her, dropped it in a pocket. "That's better. Now I can breathe again." He recalled her first words. "What do you mean—Oh, it's me? Who else were you expecting?"

Not looking at him she began rubbing the wrist of the hand that had held the gun. "I don't know. I thought it might be the—whoever it was that searched my things."

He made an elaborate show of surprise. "This morning? Here?"

"Yes."

He looked around the room. Except for her hat, greatcoat, gloves and purse strewn over the white chaise longue nothing had changed since he had been there earlier. But just as he had noted evidences of an intruder, so she too must have, and certainly she was in a better position to know just how extensive the search had been. "Are you sure?"

"Don't be silly. I'm not a school girl imagining things under my bed." Quite suddenly her gaze lifted to his face. "At first I thought it might have been you."

He laughed at her. "What made you change your mind?"

"I haven't—not entirely."

He was overcome with righteous indignation. "Well, for God's sake! What am I supposed to have been looking for?"

"What was anybody looking for?" She shivered, though it was not cold in the room. "I'm a little—frightened, I think."

He discovered that she was indeed trembling. He put an arm around her, held her close. "Don't be. It was probably just the maid."

"No," she said, and leaned back against his arm so that she could watch his eyes. "You know better than that. After your own experience this morning you can't—There must be some connection."

He shook his head. "It wasn't Engstrom or his cowboy helper Neuman. They're both accounted for." He appeared to think for a moment. "It might have been Kramer."

"But why?"

He shrugged. "How do I know what any of these people are up to? I'm a stranger in town, myself." From the cor-

ners of his eyes he watched her face. "Nothing was taken?"

"No."

That was somebody's mistake, he thought. It would have been better to have lifted a ring or two, possibly his studs or the gun from his own room, if only to throw them away afterward. He thought that the man, woman, or whoever was growing a little panicky, certainly a little careless. But he was still far from sure of the woman he now held in the crook of his arm. "You mention this to Donaldson?"

"No."

"Why not?"

SHE swung away from him, her fine free stride carrying her across the room. Her eyes were angry. "I'm supposed not to know him, remember? Mr. Rex McBride is my protector now." She laughed scornfully. "All right, protect me!"

He showed her a smile in which only his mouth took part. His eyes were bright and hard and intent. "From what?" And when she did not answer: "You don't think it could have been Donny boy himself?"

For just an instant something was reflected in her eyes that might have been speculation, or possibly—as at breakfast that morning—fear. Then she shook her head. "No."

"Why not?" he persisted. "You sort of hinted that you had something on him."

She sat on the edge of the chaise, from her purse took cigarettes and a jewelled lighter. "Did I, darling?" Over the flame her eyes laughed at him. "Is that what you hoped to find?"

"You can forget that."

"All right," she said, "let's."

He did not ask her if the prowler might have been Thornton Avery. He had begun to build an interesting theory about her and Donaldson and Avery, but as yet no part of it was possible of proof. Besides, there were too many pieces that did not fit; that seemed indeed to make the theory absolutely untenable. He wished that this damned election and the varying motives of those most interested in it would not keep getting in the way. He wished he had not met Engstrom a while ago in the lobby. He wished he had never met Engstrom at all. Engstrom complicated things, dangerously.

Quite suddenly he was moved to something very like pity. In a way the town, Donaldson, her family, all were giving Margo a raw deal. Again it occurred to him that it would be a fine thing if she and Kathryn could get together, and since he intended to see Kathryn anyway, he thought he'd give the role of peacemaker a whirl. "I saw a shiny new Cadillac convertible out in front. Yours?"

"Yes."

"We could go somewhere. Drink a little, relax a little."

"All right." She stood up. "I'll want to freshen up a bit, and change. It's turned warmer."

Abruptly he went to her, put a hand under her chin and, after a moment, bent and touched his lips to hers, rather gently for him.

He took her gun from his pocket, dropped it on the chaise with her other things. "Well, don't shoot anybody you don't have to." He went out.

In the flower shop downstairs, the first person he saw was Elsa Blanchard. He thought that this was carrying coincidence a little too far, considering that his mind was full of her in relation to Trace Donaldson and the lady he had just left. Then he saw that she was really ordering flowers from the proprietor and apparently had been discussing elaborate arrangements for some time.

The florist's wife finished with another customer and came over to McBride. "May I serve you, Mr. McBride?" Seemingly everybody in Copper Hill knew him by name.

He said yes, she could serve him, and told her he wanted a spray sent over to the mortuary for the boy Jack's funeral tomorrow. "Don't spare the horses, but don't be too gaudy, either. I'll leave it to your good taste." He hoped that her good taste did not run to chrysanthemum horse-shoes with *Farewell Old Pal* worked out in violets. Turning away, he saw that Elsa Blanchard had become aware of him, and lifted his hat.

"Well, hello!" she said. She was all in black, but not by any stretch of the imagination in widow's weeds. Her street dress was a slim sheath of lightweight wool, and over this she wore a short jacket of glossy, tightly curled Persian lamb. The jaunty



little hat was no more than a bandeau of the same material, no more glossy than her hair. She looked expensive, cool, very sure of himself. The cliché "Every inch a lady" might have been coined just for her, and McBride remembered that she was, literally, a lady—Lady Haverill. Her smile linked his presence in the shop with the usual connotation. "Romance so early in the day?"

"I was ordering a funeral spray," he said.

She was contrite. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right," he said.

She moved closer to him as other customers came in the street entrance and engaged the attention of florist and wife. "There's a dinner dance at the country club tonight. Would you like to come?"

All at once he found her desirable; not in the sense that Margo was, or Kathryn, but as a new, an exciting and perhaps dangerous experience. "Will Donaldson be there?"

She was faintly surprised. "Probably. If he gets back from Butte in time."

With the hat in his hand as a focal point for his eyes he managed to achieve an air of diffidence, almost embarrassment. "Would you mind very much if I asked you a personal question?"

Her voice held well-bred amusement. "How personal?"

"Pretty personal," he said, and then, still not looking at her: "Are your intentions toward him—honorable?"

There was no tightening of gloved hands on purse, no tapping of slender, patrician foot, but he knew that she was angry. "I don't think we know each other well enough to discuss things like that."

"He's in love with you," McBride insisted.

"Really?"

For a long moment then, black eyes stared into black, his hot with fury, hers cool, composed. "Don't give me the old hauteur," he said roughly. "I didn't muck in one of your old man's mines and yearn to kiss the hem of your skirt. I don't think you're the queen of God's universe even yet." He drew an uneven breath. "Donaldson may not know he's in love with you, but you do. I want to know what you intend to do about it."

"I believe you do," she said, and then,

accepting an incredible fact, "I really believe you do." Her mouth, her small gesture, expressed distaste. "May I ask just how it concerns you?"

"I'm working for him."

"And arranging his life?"

"No," McBride said. "My life."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand that, Mr. McBride."

"You're not even trying," he said, but now he was no longer angry. "All I want to know is if you intend to marry him."

"He hasn't asked me yet."

"But if he does ask you?"

She laughed a little. "Suppose we wait until that happens, shall we?"

"He's quite a hunk of man," McBride said.

Again she laughed. "This has a suspiciously Alden-Aldrich flavor, don't you think?" Her eyes were calmly appraising. "You're quite a hunk of man yourself."

"But not your type," McBride said. "We're both in spades."

"My husband was fair," she said coolly. "It didn't mean a thing."

He bent toward her as though impelled by some force stronger than himself. Then, recovering, he too laughed. "Don't tempt me, baby."

"No," she said, and for the first time color came into her face and she avoided his eyes. Then, very low, she added: "Not here," and turned toward the street door.

Beside her, looking through the plate glass window, he saw Margo come out of the hotel entrance and get into the new Cadillac.

"What a magnificent creature!" Elsa Blanchard said.

"She is, isn't she?" Behind half-lowered lids his eyes were bright with malice. "Would you like me to introduce you?"

"You know her, then?"

"We're going out for cocktails and a little ride."

She shook her head, smiling a little. "Some other time, perhaps." She gave him a small nod of dismissal and turned back to the interior of the shop and her unfinished discussion with the florist.

McBride's impulse to slam the door on his way out was tempered by the knowledge that she probably expected it. He crossed the sidewalk and got in the car beside Margo, making a great business

of adjusting his hat. "Whenever you're ready, precious, we can get the hell out of here." He did not again look toward the flower shop.

She drove swiftly and surely through downtown traffic, and he watched her hands, her feet and presently her face, deciding that she was an altogether admirable chauffeur. He decided that she was admirable in other ways too. "I'd like to meet your mother, Maggie. She must be a remarkable woman to have had three such remarkable children."

She looked at him. "Three?"

"I've met your brother too," he said, adding modestly that it had been in a business way.

"You have a knack for coming up with the damndest bits of information at the oddest times," she said. "I suppose that's the detective in you."

"I wish you wouldn't keep reminding me," he complained. And then: "Have you any idea where Fremont Street is?"

"Of course."

"There's someone I'd like to see for a minute. Do you mind?" She said she didn't and he gave her Kathryn's address, watching to see if it meant anything to her.

Her face gave no sign that she recognized it. She swung left into a through boulevard south. "About my mother, I've told you what she is, and what sort of thing she's married to." Her color heightened and for just an instant her green eyes flamed at him. "Would you like to hear why I left home at the ripe old age of sixteen? It makes a pretty little story."

Rage and compassion and violent nausea knotted his stomach muscles, clutched at his throat, and for a while he could not speak. Then he said in a carefully matter-of-fact tone: "Kathryn too?"

"No," she said bitterly, "my priggish little sister escaped that. Later on I was able to see that she went away to school, and by the time she came home he had been—incapacitated." Her laugh held no note of hysteria; rather was it a mockery of laughter itself. "He was drunk on the job and what happened was his own fault, but the company paid a small pension anyway. Not enough to keep him drunk twenty-four hours a day, so they're dirty capitalists. Some of that's rubbed off on

Eddie."

He touched her hand where it lay lightly, competently on the steering wheel. "Have you ever told Kathryn all this?"

"No."

He decided that he would; that it was something she needed badly to know. But when presently he entered the house on Fremont Street he found that Kathryn was not at home. Her brother Edward was there, though, lying on the floor, dead.

## VII

HE LAY as he must have fallen from one blow which had killed him, a blow patently similar in force and technique to that which had ended the bell-hop Jack's life. Against the dark, rough-textured carpet he looked curiously tranquil. He might have been asleep. His face, turned slightly on its side and pillowed on one outflung arm, had the same waxen, lemon-yellow color that Jack's had shown, the color characteristic of this particular type of violent death; but there was no sign of suffering on it.

There were no signs of struggle, no indications that the room had been searched. Bright chintz hangings still screened the windows, and through these the sunlight outside was scarcely discernible, as though the drapes had been drawn to curtain a private conference whose participants had preferred not to have the meeting observed by any chance passer-by.

Regardless of his reluctance, McBride knew that he must go to Margo in her new convertible, and tell her what he had found.

He flipped a wall switch, then moved as does a man in a dream, oddly detached, seeing himself, seeing the body lying there, and the room bright with color under the artificial light. A console table held a vase full of stock and gladiolus, the florist's box placed nearly in the corner. A card with McBride's message of apology stared up at him from the table top, and he had an impulse to remove it; decided against this. He was here, and the fact that he had sent flowers to the dead guy's sister could not possibly involve him more deeply than he was already involved.

He picked up the telephone, not by the



hand grip but by the bulge at one end. "Police headquarters, please." When presently he had Chief Kramer on the wire he told him where he was and what had happened.

"Wait there," Kramer said.

McBride said he would do this, cradled the phone and stood staring at nothing in particular for a long moment. Then, shrugging, he went outdoors to the car. "Your brother Edward is dead."

Margo looked at him, uncomprehending. "Edward is—?" Then abruptly the full meaning of it hit her, his words, the way he stood there, the quiet house behind him. She did not cry out. The back of one hand stifled her quick, indrawn breath. Her eyes grew wide. "Dead? In there?"

"Yes."

"Is—is Kathryn in there with him?"

"No," he said, "she isn't here. There's no one here, just Eddie."

"Just . . . dead?" Margo said.

"No." McBride looked speculatively at an empty cab which was parked farther along the block, near the corner. "Somebody killed him." He turned to watch the clenching of her hands, the swift receding of color from her face. "If you know anything about it, now's the time to tell it. The cops are on their way. I phoned them."

"If I—?" She recoiled from him as though he had struck her. "Oh, no!" And when, unmoving, he continued to stare at her: "God, how I hate you!"

"That's all right," he said. "The point is, this didn't just happen. It's tied up with the search of your room, and the murder of the kid yesterday and all the rest of it. I don't know how much has got to come out, but some of it will. You'd better make up your mind what you're going to do about it."

Her eyes closed and she swayed toward him. For a moment he thought she was going to faint, but she did not. "Could I . . . see him, please?"

"If you like." He helped her from the car, felt the sudden trembling of her body and put an arm around her, holding her strongly. Then, his arm still supporting her, his free hand imprisoning one of hers, he guided her up the steps and into the apartment. But when he released her she still did not seem to know what to do. He saw that her eyes were blinded with

tears. Again he encircled her waist, and gave her a handkerchief. "All right, Maggie, let it out."

Not until then did the first sob wrack her. He let her cry. He was still holding her when the police arrived.

There were two carloads of them. In the van, Chief Kramer himself puffed into the room, followed by his pet stooges, Feeney and Stengel. Stengel carefully avoided looking at McBride except when he thought himself unobserved. He was, obviously, still nursing a grudge over the belly-punch McBride had handed him last night. There was a doctor and a nondescript guy whose equipment labeled him a laboratory technician. Some uniformed cops made up the balance. Kramer took one look at Edward Mazaryk's body and then made a great business of deploying his shock troops to the best advantage. For all his bulk and his village-constable get-up he knew his job. When the apartment was partially cleared out he came over to McBride and Margo. "Now then, how'd you happen to be in on this?"

"We were out driving," McBride said. "We thought we'd stop and take Kathryn with us."

Kramer's toothpick shifted from one side of his mouth to the other. His next question was addressed to McBride, but his small bloodshot eyes rested obliquely, appraisingly, upon Margo. "Kathryn? Kathryn who?"

"Miss Mazaryk's sister, Kathryn Lee," McBride said. "Lou Patrick's secretary," he added by way of further identification. "This is her apartment."

"And him?" Kramer glanced at Eddie's body.

"He was Kathryn's brother."

"And mine," Margo said. She was no longer crying.

A startled look came into Kramer's eyes. "The hell you say!" He put all of his attention on Margo, now. "Excuse it, ma'am, but I don't get it, her name being Lee and all, and your's Mazaryk. Yours and his," he flicked another glance at Eddie.

"There's nothing to that," McBride said. "Miss Lee just decided to drop the last part of her name for reasons that have nothing to do with this."

Kramer worried his toothpick. "Maza-

ryk. A hacker." His insolent stare evaluated Margo's expensive clothes, her poise, her dignity. "Your brother. Well, well."

McBride felt a sudden gust of anger rise through his big body, shaking him. He had an impulse to smash his fist squarely into the police chief's fat face. Instead, he said in a controlled voice: "Look, Ollie, this is pretty tough on Miss Mazaryk. She'll want to tell her mother, too. Can't we—"

"Why, sure!" Kramer said heartily. "Sure, only there are a couple questions we better straighten out first." He moved around the room, his deceptively indolent eyes missing nothing. "Where is this, ah, Kathryn?"

"We don't know."

Kramer stared down at the card bearing McBride's name and message of apology which had accompanied the flowers now in the vase. "Know her pretty well, do you?"

"I've met her once."

"You must've been mighty impressed, sending her posies." He smirked. "And coming right on in her apartment when she wasn't home. *If she wasn't home.*"

McBride put his hands in his pockets so that the fat man would not notice they were clenched tightly into fists. Still controlling his voice, he said, "I rang the bell. I knocked. I got no answer. The door was open just a little way and I looked in. When I saw what I saw, I came in for a closer look—and then I phoned you. Was that wrong?"

"I wouldn't say so, no. And the flowers?"

"They were your fault, Ollie." McBride manufactured a wry smile. "I had a date to take Miss Lee to dinner last night but you kept me so long down at your office that I never got to keep it, so I sent the flowers to apologize, so to speak." He was conscious of Margo's eyes on him, sensed the speculation in them. "God damn it, that doesn't mean I was on the make for the girl!" he burst out angrily. "And anyhow, what the hell has that got to do with this kill?"

KRAMER threw his toothpick on the floor, replaced it with a fresh one. "Nothing, maybe. I just like to find out all the angles when I get a thing like this

here dumped in my lap." He sighed to indicate how tough it was to be a chief of police in a town where people insisted upon being murdered. "What was Eddie doing here, I wonder? He didn't live here with his sister, did he?"

McBride looked at Margo. She shook her head and said, "I don't know."

"Your own family, ma'am, and you don't know?"

"We weren't on the best of terms," she said quietly.

"Bad blood between you, sort of?"

McBride quickly said, "Not the way you mean it, Ollie."

"How do you think I meant it?"

Margo gestured tiredly. "Is all this fencing necessary? Kathryn and I get along well enough. Eddie . . . well, Eddie wasn't too fond of me. He wasn't very fond of anybody. It wasn't something that would cause me to . . . kill him, if that was what you were getting at."

"Now, I don't remember accusing you, ma'am. Or even hinting such a thing, though of course—" he let the sentence dangle, unfinished.

McBride had an uneasy feeling that the situation was becoming a little brittle; that it might crack and break open into unpleasantness unless something were done about it at once. He looked at Eddie Mazaryk's body, which had not yet been moved. He wondered, briefly, if Dutch Katzenellenbogen could have followed Eddie here and paid off for the black eye Eddie had given him. He dismissed the thought. Dutch, though unpredictable, was not the type to go into a house and draw the curtains before striking an enemy. The guy was too much of an extrovert for that.

The thought of Dutch, however, caused McBride to remember something else in connection. He faced Kramer. "There's a cab down the street, Ollie, near the corner. Eddie's hack, I think. Do you suppose you ought to have your men search it, on the remote chance they might find something of interest?"

"Such as what?" Kramer peered at him suspiciously. You knew that he distrusted McBride, though it was equally patent that the fat man recalled several other pregnant suggestions which McBride had made, and which had proved



successful. "If you've got something on your mind, let's have it."

"All I've got on my mind is frisking Mazaryk's cab. You take it from there."

The chief sucked reflectively at a back tooth. Then, "All right," he said, and gave the order to Feeney and Stengel. While they were gone, Kramer again prowled irritably through the apartment.

After a while Feeney came back into the house, cradling a rifle. Kramer spat out his second toothpick, violently. "Where the hell did you find that?"

"In Mazaryk's hack, Chief, under the front seat."

Kramer glowered at McBride. "What's the meaning of this?"

McBride's lips curled sardonically, reflecting a momentary feeling of triumph, of vindication. He had a plan of action carefully thought out, now; the only thing that had worried him was the possibility that Mazaryk might have ditched the rifle after his fight with Katzenellenbogen in the garage. Since he had not, the way was now clear for McBride to drop a bombshell.

"Remember a rifle shot recently, Ollie?" he said to Kramer. "One that hit a water pitcher?"

"By God!" the fat man breathed. He stared down at Eddie's body with what seemed to be something akin to respect. "So he's the guy that took a crack at Governor Hodiak!"

Margo said, "No, I don't believe it! You've no right to accuse him when he's dead, when he can't deny it!" Stormily she faced McBride. "You—heel!"

"Have I ever pretended to be anything else?" he met her eyes, steadily. "Though in this case I think you're twisting my motives a little, misinterpreting them. I'm not trying to smear your brother just for the fun of it; I don't get my kicks fighting a dead guy who can't fight back." He made a bitter mouth. "I'm not even accusing him of shooting at Hodiak. For all I know, maybe every hacker in Copper Hill packs a rifle in his cab."

"Not if I find them," Kramer said grimly. He seemed struck by a sudden puzzlement. "How did you happen to know the rifle was in Mazaryk's cab?"

"Somebody saw it there, somebody I know. He thought I might be interested,

so he told me. At the time, I didn't attach too much significance to it. In fact, I practically forgot I had heard about it—until now." McBride looked thoughtfully at the weapon in Feeney's hands. "Now it may mean something."

"Like for instance?"

"Well, assume for the sake of argument that Mazaryk did take a shot at the Governor. I can think of two possible motives. One, Eddie was a communist. Maybe he disliked the Hodiak administration so much that he decided to take a little direct action by way of political protest."

Kramer's expression revealed that he did not care very much for this idea. Margo made a gesture eloquent of brushing the thought aside as unworthy of consideration.

"Then there's another possibility," McBride said. "You may remember I mentioned it in your office at the time of the shooting, when we heard it over your radio. Suppose Engstrom hired Eddie to shoot at Hodiak and miss him intentionally, in order to arouse public sympathy; to sway the voters over to Hodiak's camp."

Kramer obviously liked that better. "All right, but what's the connection with this?" He looked impersonally at the murdered man. "Who killed him?"

"That I wouldn't know. Offhand, I'd say Nils Engstrom may be worth a little investigating. If Mazaryk did the shooting on his own hook, Engstrom might have had him rubbed out to keep him from playing a repeat performance, on the grounds that an encore might not miss; that next time Hodiak might get it through the heart. Or, taking the second theory—that Engstrom hired Eddie to fire a shot which would merely graze the Governor—then it's entirely possible that Engstrom killed him, or had him killed, to keep him for talking about it. If Eddie talked, it would spoil the political effect of a phony assassination attempt."

Margo's eyes softened a little. You sensed that she was slowly, and perhaps reluctantly, coming to the conclusion that McBride was not such a heel after all; it seemed to be dawning on her that his apparent smearing of her dead brother had had a valid reason, in that it pointed

the finger of suspicion at the man who might conceivably be guilty of Eddie's murder. She voiced the name, "Nils Engstrom!" in a curiously harsh whisper, almost like an epithet.

Kramer, to the contrary, looked cautious, uneasy. "Well," he said, and hesitated. "You don't expect me to go out and arrest Engstrom with no more evidence than that."

"God, no!" McBride said. "Evidence? Hell, you've got no evidence at all. In the first place, how can you prove this was the rifle that fired the shot at Hodiak? The way I understand it, the slug smashed the water pitcher and kept on going, was never found. So there's nothing your ballistics experts can do, assuming you have ballistics experts. Besides which, if you were to bring out the rifle into the open, try to back up your theory with it, the Engstrom-Hodiak crowd would scream to heaven that it was a political plant framed by Donaldson and his interests. No, Ollie, you'll have to forget the rifle angle for now; wait and see how things break."

Margo said softly, "So Engstrom is to get away with it. Whose side are you on, McBride?"

"Yours," he said, and took her arm. "Yours and mine, pet. You'll have to trust me, though." With Kramer's nod of permission he led her to the door, out into the late afternoon.

In Oroville they pulled up before a scabrous, tiredly sagging frame house in the middle of a row of tiredly sagging frame houses, each framed by a small grassless yard and each yard framed by a scabrous picket fence as tired and sagging as the house which it enclosed.

"Not pretty, is it?" Margo said. "Do you wonder I waited so long a time before coming back?" He saw that her eyes were not on him, but on a group of dirty, curiously repressed children lethargically playing farther down the block.

He was impressed, then, by her poise, as it had impressed him from the first. Most girls of Margo Mazaryk's background, losing all faith in family, enduring the sort of experience that she had undergone at her father's hands, would ineluctably have gravitated toward Dixie Du Chen's establishment, or other places

even worse. McBride, as he got out of the Cadillac and walked around to open the curbside door, wondered how Margo had avoided that. The answer was not any innate moral stamina; her life differed in degree from that of Dixie's girls, but not in kind. He decided, cynically, that the main deviation was financial. Margo's way had paid better. The car, and the furs she wore so beautifully, were proof of that.

He helped her to the unpaved, hard clay sidewalk. Her mouth curved downward as she disengaged her arm from his hand. "Malnutrition Manor," she said. Then, "If you'd rather wait out here it's all right." Grief still shadowed her eyes, but her voice was level and contained. "I won't hold it against you, Rex."

McBride's answer was to fall into step alongside her, through the sagging gate in the sagging picket fence and up the hard earth path to the house. They had scarcely gained the porch when the front door opened before them, and Kathryn stood there in the dingy vestibule.

There was no welcome in the girl's expression, and her face had a sort of mask-like immobility, totally unlike the vivacious youthfulness which McBride remembered as her most striking characteristic. He stopped, noting with some amazement how very much she resembled Margo. The coloring was different, the hair, the eyes; but the shape of the face was the same, and so was the proud way she carried her head, not arrogantly, not haughtily, but with an inherent poise that bespoke both dignity and self-assurance.

"I never thought you'd dare come here. I didn't think you could bring yourself to stoop so low," her voice held an odd timbre.

She was looking at them both, but McBride knew that the words were addressed to her sister, and he was suddenly angry. He realized that Kathryn did not understand, because she had never been told the circumstances, why Margo had left home at sixteen; Margo had kept that sordid story from her. Margo surprised him by saying meekly, "I want to see Mama. I've got to, Kate." McBride trailed Margo through the vestibule and, beyond it, to a parlor as drab as an un-



pleasant dream. It smelled of dust, of past dampness that had left a lingering odor as of cellar mold. Mingled with this was the pungency of cooking cabbage, a thick rancid memory of old frying grease and the even thicker sourness of stale beer, cheap wine, cheaper whiskey.

The man and the woman in the room were as worn, as faded in their own way, as were their surroundings. McBride looked first at Stefan Mazaryk, hunched in a cumbersome and ancient wheelchair by the closed window. He was big, a giant of a man—or rather, the sodden ruin of a man who had once been a giant, though now the heavy flesh on his overlarge frame seemed repulsively shrunken, flabby. Upon his round Slavic head, unkempt gray hair was a mare's-nest too long a stranger to comb, brush, soap or water. He needed a shave; he had needed a shave for at least three days, McBride thought. His blue eyes were clouded, hazy; his mouth had the flaccid, loose-lipped droop of one who is very, very drunk.

Yet he was not too drunk to leer at McBride and Margo, and to hold out a hand, palm upward. "Two dollar," he said in a voice as pleasant as a parrot's screech. "You want to rent bedroom, is two dollar. In advance."

McBride felt a hot, crimson tide straining his own cheeks.

"Now papa, please." That was Margo's mother, Anna. Fat, dumpy, she moved toward the paralytic. "To your own daughter you shall not talk so." Even in reproof her voice was gentle, a little sad, carrying an echo of the suffering that had deeply lined her face and shadowed her eyes.

Mazaryk cackled toothlessly. "Is my house. I talk how I want under my own roof, by God. If comes in a streetwalker with strange man, for two dollar I rent them bedroom. You think I give to her free because she my daughter? Like hell. She charge five dollar, she pay me two dollar." He hawked, spat on the floor. "Old Steve, he take his cut, you bet."

"Please, papa—"

McBride growled, took a threatening step at the wheelchair.

"Never mind, Rex," Margo said. "Skip it. I warned you this wouldn't be nice."

She turned, put an arm around her mother's shoulders. "Mama, I've got bad news. It's about Ed. I—I want you to be brave, Mama. He's—dead. Mr. McBride and I found him a little while ago in Kate's apartment. Somebody—somebody killed him, Mama."

The cry of protest, when it came, was not from Anna Mazaryk, but from Kathryn. She moved past McBride, shoved him away so that she could face very closely to her older sister. Her eyes were not quite rational. "Dead? Eddie? Oh, damn you and the rotten life you lead! Damn you for bringing bad luck wherever you go! Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

Her mother seized her, shook her, slapped her once across each cheek. "Stop it, Katie. You shall stop it, you hear? This is foolish, such talk of bad luck—"

"Then don't call it luck. Call it God's punishment on us all for having a—a thing like her in our family! Why couldn't she have died? Why didn't she die years ago when she left home to be a—a common—strumpet!"

Her mother shook her again. "Is bad enough the sadness for my son who is dead. You shall hush these words you speak against your sister. You shall hush, understand? Is me, Anna, your mama, telling you."

"Maybe you should tell her the facts of life while you're at it," McBride said. "She thinks Margo should have died when she left home. Tell her why she left. Tell her how it happened. Or would you like me to tell her for you?"

Margo touched him. "McBride, keep out of this."

"Well all right, but—"

Kathryn's hysteria quieted, abruptly. "No, let him talk. If he knows so much about us—about you—let him say it."

"He knows nothing. He was just trying to snap you out of it. He succeeded. Let it go at that."

"I don't believe you. I want to hear—"

"Is nothing to hear," Anna Mazaryk said. "Is nothing to think about now but Edward." The light of suffering, of grief, was deeper now in her fine eyes, but her voice was steady and her expression almost serene, as though her life had been so blanketed by tragedy that one more sor-

row could add no greater wound than those she had already endured. Abruptly, McBride discovered that he had a vast respect for this dumpy unlettered woman; the kind of respect he rarely gave anyone. He turned and looked at Stefan Mazaryk and silently cursed him with his eyes.

The cripple sneered back at him, drunkenly. "That bum. That Eddie. That no-good." He hawked, spat. "Is good thing he dead. You got bottle whiskey, hah? Or are you cheap lousy capitalist, would not buy man a drink?"

"Don't answer him, Rex," Margo said. "Don't even look at him. He's only baiting you."

Beyond them, Anna was cuddling Kathryn against her shapeless bosom. "Now, now, my Katie, you shall not cry. Was not your fault, my little one."

"Yes it was. I knew something was wrong when he asked to use my apartment to meet somebody, when he told me to get out and stay away until his business was . . . transacted. I shouldn't have listened to him. At least I could have stayed to help him, to protect him . . ." Her voice faltered, broke. Then she pushed free of her mother, ran to an old fashioned box telephone on the wall. "I'm going to call Lou Patrick!"

McBride went after her, reached her just as she unhooked the receiver. He wrenched it out of her hand, slammed it back into its prongs. "You won't call Lou Patrick or anybody else. Not yet you won't."

"Let her alone, McBride." That was Margo, harsh, commanding. "After all, she works for Patrick."

"She did work for him. Past tense. She quit him."

Kathryn said, "What difference does that make? He's a detective. He'll investigate Eddie's m-murder for me."

"Damn it!" McBride raged. "What can Patrick do that the cops can't?" He swung around to Margo. "You want to let the whole world know the inside facts? You want to spoil what little chance we may have of nailing the killer? You want to tip off the guilty guy so he can cover his tracks? Why don't you hire a radio station and broadcast about the rifle Eddie had in his hack?"

Stefan Mazaryk rolled his wheelchair

away from the window. "Rifle, hah? So by God he did it! Little punk, I did not think he would have the guts."

McBride stared at the crippled giant. "Meaning what?"

"Lousy capitalists. Stinking blood-sucking thieves. That Hodiak. Pfah! I told Ed to shoot him. Shoot all of them. Dirty vulture politicians, wipe them out. Kill them. Is blood bath what this country needs." Mazaryk's rheumy blue eyes, inflamed, reddened with alcohol and hate, seemed to flare sparks. "Look at me. Paralyzed, can't move my legs, can't walk. My best years I give to stinkin' mines, so pennies they pay me, they call a pension. Pension! Not enough to buy bottle whiskey. Yah, cripple a man, starve him. Kill them, I say. Shoot down the stinkin'—"

"Stop it!" Margo yelled. "If somebody doesn't make that drunken bum shut up, I will! Look at him, look what he's done to all of us—and he goes on living, cursing the ones who feed him, vomiting up his hate!" The words seemed to stick in her throat, strangling her, and there was that in her eyes which made McBride think she might leap across the room to rip and claw her father with cat-sharp fingernails. Forestalling this, he grasped her arm.

"Swine!" she said through clenched teeth as she stared at the man in the wheelchair.

Mazaryk, in turn, glared back at her, but his vindictive frenzy of a moment ago had died down, and his expression held a kind of malevolent cunning. "Listen who tells me shut up," he jeered. "This fine wench with her fancy clothes, slumming to see her family for first time in how many years? A smart one you think you are, yes? Is wrong. You stupid, dumb. Yah, dumb Hunky tart. Could have got Nils Engstrom for husband, make him gave your crippled father decent pension. Could have stuck to Trace Donaldson, be wife of next governor. But no, you not satisfied to stay in Copper Hill, be respectable. Don't give damn for family. You run off with cheap lousy bookkeeper. Everything you throw away so you can crawl in Thornton Avery's bed!"

Margo turned, then, to her sister. "Come on, Kate, we've had enough." And,



to McBride: "Rex, take us out of this hellhole."

## VIII

**I**N THE CONVERTIBLE, which McBride was again driving, this time back toward Copper Hill, Margo said, "Stop at Kathryn's on the way in. She'll want a change of clothes, then, I'm taking her with me to the Lewis & Clark. Her apartment is no place for her now."

The younger sister's eyes were moist. "I don't mind staying there. After what happened, I feel that I—I belong there. If I hadn't left Eddie alone—"

"Cut it out," McBride growled. "Wearing a hair shirt isn't going to bring him back, so quite acting the martyr. If you think you've got to do penance, go ahead and do it, but not by mooning around where he was killed, hoping you'll see his ghost. There are no ghosts, except of your own making. What are you trying to have, a nervous breakdown?"

Kathryn flinched as though he had hit her with his fist, but at least a hint of color returned to her cheeks, and in her eyes the tears were replaced by a glint of indignant anger. Margo patted her arm. "Don't mind McBride, baby. He can't help being the gallant gentleman. It's his breeding."

"All right, so I'm an unchivalrous heel." He nudged more speed from the Cadillac. "I get a little tired of all this breast-beating and self-condemnation, though. Hell, if she had insisted on staying there with Eddie he'd have found some other place to meet whoever he was going to meet. The murder would have happened somewhere else, but still it would have happened. Why try to shoulder the blame for something that couldn't be helped?"

Kathryn's resentment faded. "I—I guess you're right at that, Mr. McBride."

"Damned right I'm right. And another thing, pet, you've got Chief Kramer to face. Either he's still at your apartment, snooping around, or he'll have a cop posted there, waiting for you to show. You'll be questioned pretty thoroughly, so if you want to amend any details of your story you'd better start thinking about it now."

"Why should I try to amend the truth?"

"I'll tell what little I know, nothing more, nothing less."

She did exactly that when they reached the Fremont Street house, where McBride was not at all astonished to find Kramer still present. The fat man, surprisingly enough, was courteous and even gentle with Kathryn, though you had a feeling that his sympathetic mien was a trifle spacious. Most of his questions were perfunctory, dealing principally with what Eddie Mazaryk had said, and how he had acted, when requesting the use of his sister's apartment as a place in which to confer with an unnamed and thus far unidentified person.

Did Kathryn know who that person was? No. Was it a man, or a woman? She didn't know this, either. Had Eddie appeared nervous, scared? "Not exactly," Kathryn answered thoughtfully. "Just a little . . . tense, I suppose you'd call it. Or impatient. Even eager." She hesitated, trying to remember. "There was one thing he said that struck me as odd, something about . . . election day was going to be the day of the underdog. He told me that I'd be proud of him when I saw the break he was giving the common people, the new social order he would force the politicians to legislate into effect. It didn't mean very much to me, didn't seem to make much sense, but then Eddie was always talking revolution, the rights of the masses, things I didn't understand, didn't want to understand . . ."

"Commie crackpot stuff," Kramer nodded, and presently dismissed her, allowed her to pack a bag. While she and Margo were doing this, the fat man drew McBride toward the hall. "Mean anything to you, what she just told us?"

"Not unless you attach weight to a remark Eddie's father dropped. It seems the old man was needling him to wipe out the dirty capitalists root and branch, give the state a blood bath starting at the top with Governor Hodiak."

"Where's the connection?"

McBride shrugged. "I gathered that Eddie took the rifle shot at Hodiak on his own hook, if he did it at all. Granting that to be true, let's suppose he then made a date to see somebody from the Hodiak camp, say Nils Engstrom. And, being both foolhardy and a screwball, sup-

pose he admitted to Engstrom that he was the guy who had fired the shot and missed—either accidentally, or perhaps intentionally, as a warning.” He looked at Kramer. “Like it?”

“I’m listening to it.”

“All right, suppose he tried to force a deal down our pal Engstrom’s throat, demanding certain legislation in favor of the masses when Hodiak was re-elected. Say he threatened Hodiak’s life unless these social reforms were put into effect. Having once demonstrated that he could assassinate the governor if he wanted to, he might use it as a club to gain his ends.”

“Nobody but a fool would pull a threat like that on a guy like Engstrom. Why hell, it would be the same as asking to get knocked off.”

“He did get knocked off,” McBride said. “You take it from there.” He fervently hoped that Kramer would take it as far as possible, for the thought occurred to him that he, McBride, had been devoting too much time to murder and not nearly enough to the mission which had originally brought him here to Copper Hill. Indeed, largely due to the complications arising from his involuntary involvement in two homicides, he had given practically no time at all to the problem of the mission Thornton Avery and the embezzled quarter of a million dollars. Particularly in view of a remark recently blurted by the drunken Stefan Mazaryk, McBride concluded that he had better rectify this at once. It was time, he decided, for Insurance Investigator Rex McBride to do some insurance investigating, lest the company employing him terminate his employment on grounds of insufficient application to the work at hand.

On this note of high and righteous resolve, he drove Margo and Kathryn to the hotel, watched the older sister register for the younger, and escorted both as far as the elevator. The car took them upward, leaving McBride free for serious thought. He headed toward the bar for a glass or two of cerebral stimulant, only to find himself confronted by Lou Patrick, who, it seemed, had been idling in the lobby all the while. Patrick’s eyes flicked toward the elevator door, now closed. “Tough on them, losing their brother.”

McBride glared at him with fury. “The eyes and ears of the world!”

“Now wait,” the smaller man said hastily. “Don’t fly off the handle. I’ve got a pipeline to headquarters. A man in my position couldn’t very well get along without one. I got the flash about ten minutes ago. Shocked hell out of me.”

McBride wondered if the guy was lying; thought it might be germane to check up on whether or not Patrick had made that speech at the luncheon club, and, if so, at what hour he had left the meeting. After all, the man had admitted an interest in, and an appetite for, Kathryn Mazaryk. It could be that he had gone to her apartment, if for no more crass reason than the hope of persuading her to return to work for his detective agency, only to encounter not the girl but her brother.

McBride swore sulphurously. “Everybody in this town seems to have a grapevine to the police department. I wonder what Kramer will say when I tell him about yours.”

He watched fear jump into the smaller man’s eyes, and had the satisfaction of knowing that, for once, he had penetrated Patrick’s protective shell of easy good humor. “For God’s sake, McBride, you don’t mean that!”

McBride’s smile was malicious. He felt curiously pleased at his power to frighten Lou Patrick, whom he was beginning intensely to dislike. Indeed, he thought that he disliked Patrick almost as much as he had disliked the drunken cripple, Stefan Mazaryk, though he was willing to concede that each had his uses. Mazaryk, for example, had furnished McBride with considerable cause for conjecture by alluding to Thornton Avery as the bookkeeper with whom Margo had run off when she could have done much better remaining in Copper Hill. This postulated that Copper Hill was where Margo had first met Mr. Avery. If true, McBride would have to revise his thinking, since hitherto he had assumed that Margo had entered into her liaison with the guy after leaving the mining town for greener pastures, whereas it now appeared that they had left together.

That being so, the missing embezzler must have been at least a visitor to Cop-



per Hill in bygone times, if not actually a resident. Therefore he must have known many people here, some perhaps intimately. For that reason, when he absconded from Los Angeles two years ago with a quarter of a million dollars, he might logically have selected the mining community as his hiding place. Any one of his former friends might even now be affording him sanctuary.

The possibility raised a curious paradox in that it both narrowed and widened the scope of McBride's search, limiting it to the town's confines but extending it to include the entire population. Even Margo, contrary to McBride's earlier belief, might not know exactly where Avery was holed up, though it seemed fairly obvious that she was convinced he was somewhere in Copper Hill. Otherwise, in coming here herself, why had she chosen such a devious route if not to throw off possible pursuit? Indeed, why had she come at all if not to rejoin the guy, or at least locate him and settle accounts with him for having run out on her?

McBride, back-tracking, mentally summed up his knowledge of the matter. Originally, Thornton Avery had been a traveling auditor for the Ajax Corporation, a holding company of vast interlocking enterprises with headquarters in Los Angeles. By diligent effort he had scaled the ladder of promotion, becoming comptroller and, eventually, treasurer of the firm, from which attained eminence, two years ago, he had vanished as though the earth had swallowed him.

Upon his disappearance, a special audit disclosed shortages slightly in excess of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, which, by bookkeeping wizardry, he had managed for a long while to conceal. When concealment was no longer possible, he skipped, leaving Margo behind.

There had, of course, been a great hue and cry. Avery's employers had enlisted every available means of seeking him, but he was as successful at eluding both police and private investigating agencies as he had been at juggling his ledgers. Pacific Coast Underwriters, too, had been tireless in their efforts to track him down, since they had bonded him and would have to make good the loss. After some twenty-one fruitless months, the

cold trail had finally been turned over to McBride with an offer of ten per cent reward for all funds recovered, if any. Plus expenses.

CASTING about for any spoor no matter how faint, McBride naturally had bent a suspicious eye upon the missing man's deserted lady friend, Margo Mazaryk, though others before him had tried that tack with no result. Shortly after he began the assignment she had taken off from Los Angeles with rather unseemly haste, as if, perhaps, she had at long last received some communication from Avery and planned ultimately to join him. Either this, or she could have learned his whereabouts through some intermediate source and, in the fashion of a woman scorned, set out to find him: object, revenge.

He stopped glaring at Lou Patrick and gave the guy a wry smile. "So you've got a pipeline to the cops. The hell with it."

"Hunh—?"

"Forget it. Let's have a drink, I'm not fond enough of Ollie Kramer to waste my time plugging his departmental leaks for him."

They sat in a corner booth, ordered double Scotches, Vat 69 for Patrick, White Horse for McBride. "I've got another job for you, Lou."

Patrick drank without enthusiasm. "Well, I'll tell you. To be frank, I'm not sure I want any job you'd give me. These kills worry me. They're too close to you, McBride. You draw violence the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts. I don't mind a nice clean divorce scandal or even a mild case of blackmail, but murder makes me queasy in the stomach."

"Me too," McBride confessed amiably. "It happens, though, that this job has nothing to do with either the election or the two killings." He took a thirsty pull at his White Horse, hoping that he was telling the truth. "I want a check-up on a certain man who spent some time in Copper Hill say six, eight years ago: who his friends were, the circles he moved in, the people he was most intimate with, socially or professionally."

"What's the guy's name?"

"Thornton Avery. He was a traveling

auditor. He may have had business with some of the local companies, the mining outfits for instance, if that helps any."

Patrick brooded over his drink, then stared at McBride in a wild-eyed double take. "Geez, you mean the Avery that lifted all that loot in L. A. a couple of years back? Two hundred and fifty grand, wasn't it?" Awe crept into his expression. "I remember reading about it at the time. Don't tell me that's why you're in Copper Hill! You think maybe he's here?"

"Could be," McBride said, "though it's not a certainty." He scowled. "If he is, the chances are that somebody is keeping him under cover. That's why I want to know what friends he had in town. And look, Lou, don't get any funny ideas about finding him yourself and turning him in. You're working for me, get it? And Avery is my baby. I won't stand for any capers. I'll come clean with you, pal; this thing stands to net me up to twenty-five thousand dollars. If I score, I'll see that you get a cut, but I wouldn't advise you to consider selling me out. I mean that. Any guy that made me lose twenty-five G's would get his throat opened. From ear to ear," McBride gestured graphically.

By piling it on so thickly, he hoped that it would have an effect diametrically opposite to the one he was pretending to make. Indeed, he was deliberately trying to plant in Patrick's mind the germ of an idea, the thought of a double cross. If Patrick crossed him, it might conceivably result in dynamiting a quarter of a million dollars out into the open. On the other hand, if the guy played clean, the results might still be profitable.

Patrick made a sour mouth. "You've got a sweet way of putting a man on the spot," he complained. "First you trust me with a confidence, then you warn me you'll kill me if I leak it. I don't like that one little bit. Suppose the leak comes from somewhere else? Do I take the rap for it?"

"If there's a leak, you'll be the only possible source," McBride said darkly. "So it will pay you to be discreet." Tossing a ten dollar bill on the table for their drinks, he stood up. "All right, Lou, get started. Work under cover, but work fast." McBride then strode from the bar without looking back. He had a feeling that he

had set important machinery into motion, and three double Scotches put something of a swagger in his walk. Humming under his breath a strain or two from *Sweet Leilani*, he crossed the hotel lobby to the elevator, rode up to Margo Mazaryk's floor. From now on, he reflected, it would be wise to keep a fairly constant eye upon Margo. If Lou Patrick stirred things up as he, McBride, anticipated, it should not be too long before rumors of this and that reached the ears of a certain embezzler in hiding. In turn, the embezzler might conceivably then contact his erstwhile lady-love with the thought of her joining him in new flight to safer territory, if that had been the original intention; or if she were on the warpath, to make peace with her and enlist her aid in seeking fresh shelter. One way or another, Margo was a person to be watched.

McBride rapped on her door, boldly. When she opened to him, he said, "Cocktail time, my pet. Would you and Kathryn care to indulge with me?" Walking into the room, glancing around and not seeing the younger girl, he added, "And where might little sister be?"

"Taking a shower."

"That should be an interesting spectacle.."

Margo regarded him with bitterness and, he thought, a hint of angry contempt. "Look, Rex, I told you once before and I'll tell you again: Kathryn's not for you or anybody remotely like you. That's got to be definitely understood if—" She paused on the dangling sentence.

"If what, hon?"

She smiled wryly. "If I'm to help you find Thornton Avery," she said.

McBRIDE was genuinely startled. Indeed, he was so taken aback that he could find no adequate words with which to cover his momentary confusion. He felt both foolish and infuriated, for it is a disconcerting thing to plan the exploding of bombshells only to have somebody on the opposing side explode them first.

Presently, though, when he analyzed what must have happened, he reached a conclusion which at once satisfied and soothed him. After all, he had more or less counted upon Lou Patrick's double



crossing him; had, in fact, adroitly implanted the notion in the guy's mind. By and large, the scheme seemed to be bearing its expected fruit, though perhaps a little sooner than McBride had anticipated.

He pretended to be incensed. "Well," he said. "The guy scarcely even waited till my back was turned, did he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Margo said.

"Of course not. I don't suppose Lou Patrick just phoned you and sold me out. Oh, no." He added in a bitter voice: "The two-faced rat. When I get my hands on him I'll break him in pieces."

"Patrick? Phoned me? He did no such thing. Why should he?" she demanded sharply. Then understanding came into her eyes, which became as cold and hard as the emeralds they resembled. "Oh, I see. You've told him about the Avery deal, impressed him with the need for secrecy. Secrecy," she repeated, and abruptly broke into rippling, sardonic laughter.

He sulked. "What's so funny?"

"You." Her voice held amused scorn. "For a man reputed to be shrewd you're the most transparent person I've met in years. And the biggest egotist, with your fat-headed assumption that everybody in the world except the great Rex McBride is either a halfwit or an idiot."

"Well, aren't they?"

Her lips curled cynically. "There's an old bromide about people who live in glass houses. I wouldn't throw stones if I were you. You're too vulnerable, and as obvious as the advertising pages in a telephone book. Hadn't it occurred to you that I went through more than my share of undeserved persecution when Avery stole that quarter of a million from the Ajax Corporation and dropped out of sight? Didn't you realize the experience would put me on my guard? Ajax hounded me, Pacific Coast Underwriters, the firm you work for," she added with a hint of malice.

"You must have checked up on me to know that."

"A couple of phone calls," she admitted. "Considering how I'd been questioned, shadowed and investigated two years ago, you could hardly blame me for wondering about you when I noticed you regis-

tering in right behind me here at the Lewis & Clark, especially since I'd seen you on the same train with me out of St. Paul. I even asked you point blank if you were following me, when I let you buy me a drink at the BLUE EVENING. You confessed that I was the real reason you got off the train at Copper Hill. What more did I need?"

"Are you always so suspicious of a guy who happens to get a yen for you, pet?"

"I am if he hires local detective talent to spy on my movements. Don't forget my sister showed me the report Lou Patrick wrote to you." Again she laughed sardonically. "Did you think I believed your feeble excuse that you hired Patrick because I'd questioned a hotel maid about you?"

"Well, you did question the maid."

"Of course. I suspected you even then. And when Kathryn showed me the letter it confirmed what I had sensed from the very first."

"At least I didn't tell Patrick why I wanted you watched," McBride said defensively. "I didn't mention the Thornton Avery angle to him till a few minutes ago." He wore the look of a man much put upon. "I wonder why I ever took up this line of work, I swear to God I do. It's nothing but trial and tribulation." Liking the sound of the word, he repeated it. "Extreme tribulation." His voice grew brisk. "All right, you made a couple of phone calls, to Los Angeles no doubt, and unmasked me. Now where do we stand?"

"Just where we stood before, but with the air cleared. You thought I might lead you to Avery. I can't. On the contrary, I want you to lead me to him." Her expression hardened. "The rat, running out on me after I gave him the best—"

"Don't say it," McBride begged. "I've had enough cliches. Practically everybody in Copper Hill talks like a daytime radio serial. So you gave Avery the best years of your life and he ran out on you." He grieved over this for a moment, then regarded Margo with sudden speculation. "Why are you letting your hair down to me this way, precious?"

She said, harshly, "Why not? You already know a lot about me, especially after that drunken crack my swine of a father made this afternoon. You may

as well know the rest of it; maybe then you'll believe I'm coming clean with you. We could work together on this, McBride. We're both after the same thing." Unpleasant memories shadowed her eyes. "I've told you what my father . . . why I left home when I was sixteen. I got a clerical job in the offices of the Blanchard Mining Company."

"At that age? No business experience?"

"Nils Engstrom hired me. Perhaps you can guess his terms." The corners of her mouth turned downward with distaste. "I slept with him. Oh, it didn't last very long; I've always suspected he preferred the atmosphere down at Dixie Du Chen's. Anyhow that part of it was finished when I took up with Trace Donaldson. There was no jealousy as far as Engstrom was concerned. I didn't get fired."

"Has all this got anything to do with Thornton Avery?"

She nodded. "The Apex Corporation owned an interest in the Blanchard mines and Avery was an Apex traveling auditor. He came to Copper Hill to go over the Blanchard books. He was here four or five months and I got to know him fairly well. Not in the way you're thinking; that was later. At the time, Donaldson was the man in my life. When Avery was ready to leave, though, he made me a proposition. He liked me and he asked me if I'd care to go with him. It was a chance to get away from Copper Hill, to make something of myself . . ."

"Wait," McBride said. "If that's how it was, it strikes me you're being a little inconsistent now. Here you are, sore as hell because Avery walked out on you in Los Angeles, and yet, years ago, you did exactly the same thing to Donaldson. How about that, hon?"

"I suppose it makes me look pretty bad," she said. "But it wasn't quite that way. I talked it all over with Trace before I left. Maybe you can't understand how I hated the filth of this town, the cheapness, the lack of future, the poverty; but Donaldson understood—because he felt the same way. He and I were in love, yes, and I didn't love Avery, never pretended to. Maybe it was because Trace did love me that he was willing to let me go. We were both ambitious, wanted to pull ourselves out of the drabness, the muck.

Avery was my opportunity, and Trace wouldn't stand in my way." She smiled gently, remembering. "There was nothing emotional about it, no big renunciation scene. We were young, but not too young to face facts. Our lives were ahead of us; the time might come when we could be back together again . . ."

"So you went," McBride said, recalling that Donaldson had told him almost the same thing, though not in such explicit detail. He reflected that Trace Donaldson and Margo Mazaryk must have had either a tremendous hatred for Copper Hill or an over-weening ambition for worldly success, or perhaps both, with one stemming from the other. It occurred to him that he had seldom encountered such mutually whole-hearted, and cold-blooded, devotion to the cause of personal advancement. "So Avery got himself a traveling companion."

"And housekeeper," she nodded, "after Ajax promoted him to comptroller and took him off the road so he could settle down in Los Angeles. We were discreet, of course. Avery was always discreet. He had a little bungalow; I had an apartment. The bungalow was his sop to respectability; the apartment was where he actually lived."

"A neat arrangement," McBride conceded. "All the uxorious comforts but none of the legal ties a marriage entails."

"I wouldn't have married him had he asked me. I told you I didn't love him; he was just a means to an end. It lasted longer than I ever thought it would, though. And he was generous, I'll give him credit for that. I was able to send money home, put Eddie and Kathryn through school, save a little for myself—not a great deal, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars, but enough for a rainy day."

McBride winced at the cliché, then, remembering another to the effect that if you can't lick 'em, join 'em, he seized upon Margo's and extended it. "So finally the rains came." He pursed his lips. "Just two years ago."

Remembered outrage glinted in her eyes, made them seem a deeper green. "He came home one night acting and looking . . . well, sort of crazy. I think now he was crazy. He told me he had been embezzling for a long time and had



gone past the point of covering the thefts on the books. He intimated that he'd saved almost all he had stolen and I suggested he put it back, restore it so the company wouldn't have anything against him. He said it was too late; the money was hidden somewhere, some place he didn't mention, but too far away for him to lay his hands on it in time to do any good. He was probably lying to me, the way it worked out; the way I see it now. He said he was going back to his cottage to pack for a getaway, promised he would pick me up, take me with him. He left, and that the last I ever saw of him." Her lips compressed to a thin, bitter line. "You probably don't believe a word of all this, do you?"

"Why shouldn't I? There are still a few things that need explaining, though. For instance, what made you take off from L. A. in such a hurry three months ago?"

"I'd waited a year and a half, no, a year and nine months, hoping I would hear from him. Finally a thought occurred to me. Long before we settled down I had gone with him over his entire route, covering cities and towns in some thirty states. We would spend a week or so in one place, several weeks in another, maybe two or three months where a job demanded that much time. Perhaps he was hiding in one of the cities that had been familiar to him when he was an Ajax traveling auditor; perhaps I could get some line on him if I traveled his old route myself, contacted some of the people he knew in the firms whose books he used to examine . . ."

McBride silently cursed himself for not having thought of this explanation. It made Margo's erratic journey clear, the motive for it comprehensible. He still wondered why she had elected to begin her hegira coincidentally with his, McBride's, assignment to the case, but he abstained from questioning her about this particular angle at the moment. "Then your roundabout way to Copper Hill wasn't to elude any possible tail?"

"It was not." She stared at him. "Were you following me the whole time, all the way from Los Angeles?"

He smiled modestly. "That's right, precious. I guess I was pretty good at it if

you didn't realize you had a shadow."

"Always the egotist."

"Incidentally," he said, "what was your purpose in hunting him? To chisel a cut of the money he stole?"

Her voice became vindictive. "Not to chisel it. To earn a reward for turning him in."

"Well, it begins to look as though you were right when you said a moment ago that you and I were after the same thing. Maybe we *can* work together, kitten. You'll have to prime the pump with information, though. Can you tell me if there's anybody in Copper Hill who was particularly friendly to Avery when he audited the Blanchard books?"

She pinched her lower lip in thought. "Nils Engstrom," she said presently. "I've already told you that Engstrom was manager of the Blanchard mines at the time. He and Avery did quite a lot of drinking together, among other things. The other things including many an evening at Dixie Du Chen's place."

"Engstrom, eh?" McBride said. He was not happy about this. Every time he turned around he seemed to find the gray, dapper man intruding in his affairs, and Engstrom was a guy to be respected as an adversary, if not feared. A small shiver crawled icily down McBride's spine as he considered the situation. Nils Engstrom was Governor Hodiak's good right hand. What better setup could an embezzler want than sanctuary with a man who had a pipeline straight to the governor's mansion? Even if McBride were lucky enough to locate Avery and consummate his arrest, there was yet the legal necessity of extraditing him back to California for trial, and the extradition papers would, of course, have to be processed through Hodiak's office.

McBride ruefully regarded the ramifications here. Engstrom might have a double motive for shielding and protecting Thornton Avery. First there was friendship. Next came the fact that Avery's thefts had been from the Ajax Corporation, which, as a holding company, owned an interest in the Blanchard mines. Therefore you might say that a portion of the stolen money had come, indirectly at least, from the Blanchard coffers. Meanwhile Engstrom, once the Blanchard manager,

but now no longer connected with the mining concern, had aligned himself with Governor Hodiak against Elsa Blanchard. In consequence, Engstrom, being inimical to the entire Blanchard layout, might logically undertake to hide the man who, by extension, had embezzled Blanchard funds. Spite would enter into it as well as friendship, all of which indicated that McBride's next move should be in Engstrom's direction. He felt like a guy mustering his courage to stick his head into a bear trap.

Margo surveyed him quizzically. "Does the name Engstrom frighten you, darling?"

"Who, me?" he demanded. "Hell, yes. That's not going to keep me from going after him, though."

Smiling, she drifted toward him, put her arms around him, pressed her warm dulcet body against his and batted her lips upon his mouth in a lingering kiss which could have been, perhaps, a reward for valor, though he sensed other connotations too. He responded vigorously, and, indeed, was still engaged in this when Kathryn walked into the room.

"I beg your pardon," the younger sister said in a choked, resentful voice. She had a clean, scrubbed-little-girl appearance, fresh from her shower and freshly clad in a plain blue jersey dress that emphasized, rather than subordinated, her youthful beauty. The glance she gave McBride was disdainful; the one she reserved for Margo held shock and embarrassment and shame. "I didn't mean to intrude, though I should think . . . so soon after Eddie's death . . . you might at least have the decency to . . ."

Margo pushed free of McBride. "I guess I'll take a raincheck on those cock-tails, Rex. You'd better go now. I think Kathryn disapproves of you. And of me."

He looked at the sisters, seeing again their astonishing similarity, yet aware as never before of their innate differences. He felt inexplicably chagrined that Kathryn had caught him with Margo in his arms, and he wondered why it should matter to him. It occurred to him, suddenly, that he didn't want what he could so easily have, and wanted something that he would probably never get. He decided that you couldn't be both a lecher and a Galahad at the same time, and somehow

the thought brought a gust of abrupt, ribald laughter from him. Patently, this puzzled Margo as well as Kathryn. He said, "Excuse it, ladies. It wasn't a very good joke, so I won't tell it. And anyhow, whatever kind of joke it may have been, it was on me."

He went out.

## IX

RIDING DOWN in the elevator, McBride bent the full force of his cogitations upon the problem of Nils Engstrom, with particular curiosity as to Engstrom's reasons for having left the employ of the Blanchard Mining Company. He recalled that Trace Donaldson had told him the estrangement came about as the result of labor trouble, but this did not completely satisfy McBride, who preferred first-hand information. In the current instance, first-hand was another way of saying Elsa Blanchard.

Thinking of her, he remembered her mentioning a dance this evening at the country club. He peered at his watch and was just a little startled to discover that it was now nine o'clock. The time, he reflected, was fortuitous. He debouched into the street and grabbed a cab for the country club.

At the Club McBride plowed through the dancers and drinkers until he heard his name. "Hello, there, McBride. So you decided to come after all." It was Elsa Blanchard.

"I got to thinking about you," he told her, "and couldn't resist." With bold eyes he admired her evening gown, a dazzling sheath of silver-metallic lame which seemed to cling with a sort of magnetized adhesion, so that it limned every subtle nuance of her magnificent figure. "Beautiful," he murmured appreciatively. "But what holds it up?"

"Nothing but faith, and stop ogling. People might talk." She drew him to a table against the far wall, comfortably distant from the orchestra's cacophony. "Forgive all the noise. We're still a trifle primitive in Montana." Seated, she indicated a pinch-bottle fifth of Haig & Haig, glasses, bowl of ice cubes and some individuals of charged water.

"Where is Donny-boy?" McBride said.



"He phoned me, told me he had to go see a client. There'd been a sudden death in the client's family and he couldn't postpone the call. Lawyers are like doctors, you know; duty first. He promised he'd be here later if he could get away in time."

McBride, intently studying her, wondered if she knew, or even guessed, that the client was Margo. If Elsa were aware of this, her expression did not reveal it.

Elsa broke into his silence. "Let's have another drink," she held out her glass. Then: "How are you coming with Trace's campaign?"

"I'm not," he said frankly, pouring Scotch for her, then for himself. "If it depends on anything I've accomplished, he's as far away from the governor's mansion as he ever was."

"Do you think he has any chance at all?"

"My opinion isn't worth much, baby." His white teeth, big and even and glistening, contrasted to his brown face as he grinned. "I'm a stranger in town, remember? I'll say this much, though: Jan Hodiak is already in control and he'll be hard to unseat, partly because he has a fairly good organization back of him but mainly because he's got Nils Engstrom running the machine. If I were running for anything in this neck of the woods, down to dog-catcher, I'd like Engstrom in my corner."

"Meaning you think Trace will be whipped?"

"That may depend on what we're able to do between now and election day. If we could hurt Hodiak by taking Engstrom out of contention . . ."

Elsa drank a little Scotch. "Removing Nils from the campaign sounds like a large order, if not an impossible one."

"Don't I know it!" McBride's tone was moody. Then, suddenly, he brightened. The thought came to him that if he could dynamite Engstrom out of the political picture it might serve two purposes, the second being the disclosure of a connection between Engstrom and Thornton Avery—and, with luck, Thornton Avery's arrest. "Do you mind if I ask you a frank question, Tutz?"

Elsa Blanchard, the erstwhile Lady

Haverill, appeared to find something very refreshing in being addressed as Tutz. She smiled delightedly. "I like you, McBride. You're gauche, but you're direct. A girl gets tired of fawning, hand-kissing sycophants. As between subtlety and a steam-roller I believe I prefer the steam-roller. Ask your question."

"Thanks. I understand Engstrom used to manage your mining company but left because of differences with you over some labor troubles—"

"That was the story we told to the public," she interrupted. "After all, there was the matter of saving face."

"His face or yours? Wait, I'll rephrase that. Did the guy resign or did you can him?"

"I canned him."

"What for?"

She moved her bare, snowy shoulders. "You're probing into something I'm not in the habit of discussing, but I'm going to trust you. This is in confidence. My former husband got rid of a lot of my money. You wouldn't believe one man could get rid of quite so much."

"Wouldn't I?" McBride smiled, thinking of the money which he himself had gotten rid of at one time or another. Perhaps he hadn't squandered an amount comparable to the fortune that Elsa's titled ex-husband had gone through, but then after all, McBride hadn't had so much to work on.

She said, "I never paid a great deal of attention to financial matters. After my father died I left things pretty much in Nils Engstrom's hands, but when my funds began running low I wrote to him wanting to know why. His answering letter seemed a little vague; the price of copper had broken since the war's end, the mines were getting deeper and more expensive to operate, taxes were higher, wages soaring, that sort of thing. Not only would there be no dividends that year, but perhaps an assessment of stockholders. Well, I was dissatisfied. I had my legal representative check into conditions, over Engstrom's protest. Our labor difficulties came around that same time."

"Could Engstrom have stirred that up in retaliation?"

"It's possible, though how could you prove it? Even if it were true, I don't

think it was so much spite-work as an attempt to cover his own shortcomings. You see, when I had my attorneys look into the company's condition, they reported mismanagement. That's why I fired Mr. Engstrom."

"Have things picked up since then?"

She gave him a rueful smile. "To some extent, but not as much as I hoped. In fact, McBride, I'm not at all what you might call well off. If most of the people in this room realized how nearly broke the Blanchard girl is, they wouldn't be so anxious to speak to me."

He was thinking fast. If what she said was true, it meant that she could not be giving Trace Donaldson's political campaign very much financial support. And if Donaldson's campaign funds were not coming from Elsa, who was footing the bills?

"One more thing, baby," McBride leaned toward her. "Do you think Engstrom had been stealing money from your company?"

Before she could answer, a voice at McBride's shoulder said crisply, "Maybe you'd better ask me that question. I'm probably in the best position to answer it." McBride swung around in his chair and looked up into the cold, impassive face of Nils Engstrom.

ENGSTROM pulled out a chair and, uninvited, sat down at the table. There was a clipped precision to his movements, matching the directness of his hard gray eyes, the unobtrusive excellence of his gray suit's tailoring, the impeccable gray line of his mustache. "Yes, McBride, I'll answer your question. The facts are, she did accuse me of embezzling funds from the Blanchard concern, though of course she didn't dare take me to court; insufficient evidence, you know. Or rather, no evidence at all." His sardonic grin reflected the thought that nobody in his right mind could possibly hope to convict Nils Engstrom of anything, so long as a man named Hodiak was governor. "Does that help you, McBride?" he said gently.

"No."

"I agree. It was not intended to. But here is something I believe will help you very much. I said it to you once before; I say it again, this time including Elsa.

Get out of town. Get out now. Both of you. We're in the middle of a nasty political campaign and you two have chosen to ally yourselves with the wrong side, the losing side. As such, you might get hurt. You don't belong here. You're outsiders, meddlers—"

Elsa narrowed her black, snapping eyes at him. "You call me an outsider, Nils? I was born in Copper Hill, remember?"

"But you've spent too many years away from it, my dear. You're alien to Montana; you even married an alien."

"And divorced him. My next husband will be the new governor, after election." She squared her shoulders. "Does it surprise you that Trace Donaldson proposed to me by phone only a little while ago, and that I accepted him?"

McBride coughed, strangled, gulped a monumental swallow of Haig & Haig to cover the confusion that churned through his mind; a confusion he felt certain must be mirrored upon his face. As he drank, he heard Nils Engstrom's bark of mocking laughter; heard the gray man say to Elsa, "Oh, come, my dear, surely you can't be that naive."

"Naive? What do you mean?"

"In the first place, Trace Donaldson is not going to be our next governor. In the second place, he already has a fiancée, if I may coin a euphemism for what she really is. In case you don't know about his Hunky sweetheart—"

"But I do," Elsa's voice was sweetly venomous. "You're talking about Margo Mazaryk, of course. I know all about her. Copper Hill is a small town in many ways, after all. She hadn't been back more than a few hours when some of my very dear friends called me to tell me that Trace's one-time mistress had come home."

Engstrom lost a little of his aplomb. "Well, well."

"Are you chagrined, Nils? I'm so sorry your bombshell turned out to be a dud." It was Elsa's turn to be mocking. "I assure you there's no more romance between Trace and Miss Mazaryk. Trace told me so. She's only a client of his, now. Incidentally, maybe that reopens the door for you, since I understand you were her lover yourself back in the old days, before Trace's time. I remember my father mentioning



it long before he died."

McBride's head was swimming, either from too much Scotch or too much unexpected information too hastily ingested. Somewhere along the line a towering double cross was being pulled.

Stung by Elsa's barb, Engstrom was now regarding her with a bleak and unconcealed hostility. If they had not been true enemies before, they were now; it showed in the gray man's eyes, a raw and naked rage, all the more deadly because he repressed its savagery. "So we're to rake over old sores, are we, my dear?"

"If it's not a private brawl," McBride put in, "I'd like to do a little raking myself." He leered at Engstrom. "Not that it's any of my business that you preferred the society of Dixie Du Chen and her girls to Margo Mazaryk's inexperienced kisses, back in those old days Elsa just mentioned—"

"You keep out of this," Engstrom breathed. Then he looked a trifle startled as the import of McBride's remark sank in. "You little punk, how do you know so much about my personal history?"

"Oh, I get around. There's an old cliché about birds of a feather flocking together," McBride added with seeming irrelevance. "I wonder if it applies to embezzlers and suspected embezzlers, too?"

The gray man stood up, overturning his empty glass. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning a former pal of yours, a missing thief named Mr. Thornton Avery."

"Thornton Avery . . .? What about him?"

"I've been trying to decide whether Dixie Due Chen is hiding him on her own hook or as a favor to you. That is, if she's hiding him at all." McBride was really dynamiting now.

The gray man's face resembled bloodless putty. "So that's what brought you to Copper Hill. Thank you, McBride. Thank you very much for clearing things. You're quite wrong, of course. I don't know anything about Avery. I intend to find out, though—if I can." He bowed to Elsa. "Nice to have seen you again, my dear." He turned, strode away.

McBride, too, got up. "Sorry I have to run, Tutz. I've got to see a louse about a rat. I hope."

"Good night, McBride. May I offer you

some advice before you go? Don't get hurt. By that I mean don't get too close to Engstrom. You shocked him, McBride, more than I've ever seen him shocked." She raised a glass. "Luck to you, soldier. I'm afraid you're going to need it."

He strode through the lounge and out into the night, where, to his immense gratification, he descried a familiar figure leaning against an equally familiar taxicab. It was Dutch Katzenellenbogen.

"Did you see a man come out of here a minute ago, gray hair, gray suit, gray eyes, gray mustache—" McBride barked.

"Gray Buick coupe, too," Dutch nodded. "Three-holer. Took off like a bat out of hell. Nils Engstrom. You mean him? There goes his tail lights now, heading for the highway."

McBride swarmed into the cab. "Tail him. Let's go."

"Not me," Dutch said with great conviction. "I know that guy's reputation. He's tough. You want to tangle with him, you go get yourself another boy. Hey, what's that you're poking at me?"

"A twenty dollar bill. In my other hand is a gun. Which would you sooner try for?"

DUTCH snatched at the twenty. "I wish I'd never met you," he complained. He sped along the private road, turned onto the main highway with such fury that only a miracle kept the hack on all four wheels. Far ahead, you could discern the distant twin red twinkle of Engstrom's receding tail lights, like a pair of evil eyes. Then they no longer receded; Dutch was keeping pace with them, perhaps even closing the gap a little. McBride settled back contentedly, riding his luck—and keeping his fingers crossed.

A long time later he noticed that the chase was leading toward Copper Hill's less wholesome district, and, presently, he observed that Dutch was slackening speed on Montana Street. In fact, he recognized the block as that in which Dixie Du Chen maintained her establishment. McBride's face darkened like that of a Sioux brave on the warpath. "Damn you, Dutch, I said I didn't want to go to Dixie's, I wanted to tail Engstrom."

Dutch, slowly drifting past a parked gray car, pointed to it with his thumb.

"That look like a garbage wagon?"

Thunderstruck, McBride stared, for once in his life speechless.

"Yan-n-nh!" Dutch jeered. He pulled over to the curb on the opposite side of the street. "Okay, hot shot, you got your twenty dollars' worth. Out, and to hell with you."

"How would you like to earn the mate to that twenty?" There was suddenly another bill in McBride's extended hand.

Dutch glared at it. "I knew you'd ask me to get my throat slit before you was done with me." Sighing, he grabbed the banknote. "All right, so I'm a Mongolian idiot. Instructions, please."

"Go into Dixie's. See if Engstrom is there. See if he and Dixie are talking; try to listen if you can do it without being too obvious. Didn't you tell me you had a girl friend working for Du Chen?"

"Yes, but—"

"Put her on it, too. Here's another twenty for her; she'll never make money any easier." McBride watched the third bill vanish in Katzenellenbogen's meaty paw. "What I'm after is information about a guy that may be using the joint as a hideout. Engstrom knows I'm looking for this man. He also knows I suspect Dixie of keeping the guy under cover."

"I get it. You figure Engstrom will tip Dixie you're closing in, so they'll maybe try and shift this monkey somewhere else. If he flushes out in the open, you nab him, hunh?"

"Right. Get going. Come back out and report to me if you learn anything."

Dutch shuffled across the street. Instead of using the Du Chen front entrance, though, he skulked along a shadowy alley to a side door. Perhaps this was a good thing, for less than a minute later the front door opened and a man walked out, a man who would have bumped directly into the hacker and, possibly, recognized him. McBride, sitting in the cab on the opposite side, narrowed his eyes speculatively. Here, he thought, was a development that he had not anticipated. He wondered what Lou Patrick had been doing in Dixie Du Chen's.

For an instant he debated calling to the plump little private detective, but before he reached a decision the matter was taken out of his hands. Patrick glanced furtively

up and down Montana Street, then, noticing the cab, crossed over to it, pulled the door open.

McBride said, "Fancy meeting you here."

Patrick jumped. The tonneau interior was so dark that he had not seen McBride, did not entirely see him even yet. All in all, considering his surprise, the smaller man made a fairly fast move for his left armpit, where, no doubt, he wore a gun. McBride grabbed his wrist. "Easy, Lou."

"McBride!" He let out his breath in a little rush. "Geez, I'm glad it's you." He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Who the hell did you think it was?"

Patrick laughed shakily. "I didn't know. Engstrom came into Dixie's a minute ago and I was afraid it might be that Texas hood of his."

McBride stared out at him through the open cab door. "Why should you be scared of them?"

"Not of them especially, I'm just scared, period." His eyes flicked restlessly up and down the dark street, then over toward Du Chen's. "I've been in there asking about Avery. Dixie doesn't like people who ask questions. I thought maybe she'd got wise to me and phoned her pal Engstrom to come teach me a lesson." He shivered.

McBride said, "So you had the same idea I had, that Avery might be holed up in Dixie's place. Find out anything?"

"Nothing useful. Mainly I talked to Charley, you know, the Chinese bartender, been there a long time. He owes me a favor; I saved his brother's life in a knife scrape over in Oroville last year. He remembered Avery. The guy hung around here a lot, some years ago; spent a good deal of time in Du Chen's, often with Nils Engstrom."

"I know that. Give me something new."

"Well, Charley hasn't seen Avery since then, definitely not in the past two years. The way I look at it, Dixie's would be the safest hideaway in Copper Hill for a man ducking the police, particularly a guy who'd been thick with Dixie and Engstrom, which Avery was. So if Dixie had taken him in, Charley would know about it, and if Charley knew, he'd tell me. I'm convinced that Avery isn't there. In my



opinion he may not even be in Copper Hill at all."

"This the only place you checked, Lou?"

Patrick made a resentful mouth. "Hell, you just put me on it three hours ago! Though I did get time to try the hotels," he added. "I found him on an old Lewis & Clark register, then I looked up the *News-Press* files of the same date. There was a little item that he was in town to audit the Blanchard books for the Ajax outfit."

"I know that too. Got anything else?"

"Well, hell," Patrick sulked, "everything I tell you, you're ahead of me." He brightened. "Oh, one other thing. A little while ago, just before I came here to Dixie's, I dropped by the hotel to see Kathryn, to offer her and her sister my condolences about the brother that got killed. I ran into Donaldson coming out of their suite as I was going in. When I did go in the two girls were acting kind of huffy to each other. Margo practically gave me the bum's rush before I could say I was sorry about Eddie. In fact, I gathered that she'd have liked to brush Kathryn out along with me, though I don't know how it ended; I left, myself, pretty fast. And alone. Mean anything to you, the fact that Donaldson had been visiting them?"

McBride said, "No, Lou, I'm afraid it doesn't ring any bells for me. Anyhow, I already knew about it."

Patrick bristled. "That tears it. You don't need me, McBride. You don't need anybody. You're Superman." He turned away from the cab as if to walk off. Before he had taken even one step, though, a gun flamed from the mouth of the alley opposite. Patrick toppled, fell backward into the tonneau, his legs sprawled grotesquely across the running board, his feet dangling. There was a hole through the center of his forehead. Death had been instantaneous.

## X

THE SECOND SHOT shattered the cab's window. Crouching down, keeping to the floor, McBride wrenched at the curb-side door's inner handle, and, as the latch yielded, went tumbling to the sidewalk. He bunched himself, rolled, came

to a stop near the hack's rear axle, the bulk of the tonneau shielding him as he clawed his gun from its armpit clip.

A third bullet whanged into the other side of the cab, and McBride, flat on his belly, peered under the back bumper; saw a wink of flame and heard the roar of a fourth shot. Lining up his own sights, he fired at the flash when next it showed at the alley's mouth, aiming slightly below it and holding down his trigger, feeling the automatic buck and kick in his fist as it sprayed slugs across the street. His ears rang with the concussion, the thundering reverberations of his own gun and that other one which sought his life.

Suddenly there was no more firing from the alley. He raced a zig-zag course to the opposite sidewalk; edged toward the alley. There was no sound, no movement.

McBride stooped, peered around the building's corner, into the narrow depths of the alley. Abruptly its shadows were landed by a shaft of yellow light as a door was flung open in the side of the Du Chen house. In this reflected glow the alley's entire length showed empty of life. Then two men rushed out the door, pelted along the passageway toward the street, raced past McBride without seeing him. His throat tightened as he recognized Engstrom and the Texan, Art Neumann. There was a six-gun in Neumann's hand.

McBride waited until they both had debouched onto the sidewalk. His automatic lifted. "Hold it."

Engstrom and the Texan pivoted. Neumann said, "A plant! He sucked us out here with gunfire!" and gave Engstrom a shove that sent him reeling into the gutter out of McBride's possible line of fire. Then he snapped his .45 to a loose-wristed angle. "All right, punk, let's see who shoots first!"

Simultaneously there came a wild yell from the Du Chen front door and Dutch Katzenellenbogen catapulted out, saw Neumann, saw Neumann's six-gun, saw that its target was McBride. Ignoring the obvious fact that McBride was armed, too, Dutch surged to his rescue, mouthing gleeful oaths. Engstrom shouted, "Art, look out behind you!"

The Texan spun around, too late for shooting; Dutch had already jumped him. They grappled, and then Neumann man-

aged to get his gun free. He clubbed the long-barreled Colt against the hacker's skull. Dutch grunted, went to his knees. Probably more by instinct than volition he seized the Texan's legs, yanked. Suddenly both men were floundering on the sidewalk.

McBride leaped at them, for an instant forgetting Engstrom. The gray man came out of the gutter, a .32 in his hand. "Drop it, McBride."

McBride let his automatic clatter on the pavement.

Engstrom moved toward him. "This is it, mister."

"Want to bet?" McBride said, and kicked the gray man's gun out of his fist, then drove forward, slugged him in the stomach. Engstrom gasped, doubled over. McBride said, "I've been scared of you ever since I hit Copper Hill. I must have been nuts." Grinning, he smashed Engstrom on the mouth. It was, he thought, the hardest blow he had ever struck any man. Engstrom dropped as if he had been pole-axed.

McBride turned—and felt his eyes film with a red haze. Tex had broken away from Katzenellenbogen, was aiming his Colt .45 straight at the hacker's heart. McBride shouted hoarsely, "No—don't!"

Callously deliberate, Neumann fired.

Something like a sob choked the curse that rose to McBride's lips. He lunged for his dropped automatic, got it. Dutch was dead, and Dutch had been his friend. He felt a sense of irremediable loss, an intermingled regret and insane rage, wholly unlike the cold, impersonal anger with which he had viewed Lou Patrick's murder. "Damn you!" he yelled at the Texan.

Neumann twisted around. McBride blew the guy's brains out and then was suddenly, violently sick.

Siren-sound straightened him. That would be the police coming. McBride tried to marshal his thoughts, to prepare himself for the questions he must face. It occurred to him that the Texan's Colt would be a substantial piece of corroborative evidence, and he picked it up by the tip of the barrel, got out a handkerchief so that he would leave none of his own fingerprints on the weapon as he broke the cylinder open. His eyes grew muddy when he saw that only one car-

tridge had been discharged—the shot which had killed Dutch.

Could Neumann have had time, after that barrage from the alley, to reload during the brief moment he had ducked back into the house? McBride pursed his lips, leaned down, picked up Nils Engstrom's .32 and inspected it. So far as he could tell, the weapon had not been fired at all. At least not recently.

Of course either man could have done the original shooting, then thrown away an emptied gun, replaced it with one fully loaded. But would the police believe this? Engstrom, when he recovered consciousness, would deny it, of course. He would shoulder the entire responsibility onto McBride if he could. What McBride needed was counsel, a chance to get his own story on record, the true story, before the police grabbed him. He needed somebody in his corner, someone with the power, and the ability, to help him. Say an attorney. Say Trace Donaldson.

The wailing siren was nearer, and you could see a red spotlight slashing at the night. Impulsively, McBride scuttled around into the alley, sprinted along its narrow length to the next parallel street, where he directed his steps toward the Neon kaleidoscope of the town's central business district. Wanting to run, he walked with only a casual briskness; wanting a drink to lull his jangling nerves, he passed up a dozen saloons. And so, finally, he came to the Lewis & Clark, crossed its familiar lobby toward the bank of public telephones. If he could not reach Donaldson at the country club he would try his office, his home, any place where he might conceivably be. No matter how many calls it took, he had to talk to the guy.

Fumbling in his pocket, McBride discovered that he had dimes and quarters but no nickels. He stepped to the Western Union clerk, laid a dollar bill on the counter. "Can you change that for me?"

"Mr. McBride! A wire came for you about an hour ago. I called your room but you weren't in." The girl eyed him. "Is anything the matter, Mr. McBride? You look sort of ill."

"I'm fine, thanks." He tried to keep the jumpiness out of his voice. "The telegram, please."

"I sent it over to be placed in your



mail box." Then, as he turned away, "Mr. McBride, your dollar!"

He scarcely heard her; he was already halfway to the mail desk. A moment later he was tearing open the yellow envelope, his eyes devouring a message from Pete the Greek. It was a long wire, answering the one which McBride had sent that afternoon, and the Los Angeles gambler had spared neither effort nor expense to obtain and transmit the information that McBride had requested. It was explicit in detail, and it could have but one possible connotation.

McBride moved to a big leather chair. He was breathing hard, and he had, curiously, a self-conscious feeling that everybody in the lobby must be staring at him. There was a *News-Press* on the chair, a late edition which someone had recently discharged, and he picked it up, unfolded it, held it before him to screen his stunned expression when he sat down to re-read the telegram.

He sat for a moment, deep in thought. Then, slowly, some of the *News-Press* headlines came into focus: a train wreck in Pennsylvania, an airplane crash near Tulsa, an Ohioan named Ballard who had won a fantastic radio give-away jackpot, a local item about a Bebe Washburn eloping with an Oroville blacksmith named Robert B. Leslie . . . and, below the page fold, in a box reserved for last-minute news flashes, a few brief lines that impinged upon McBride's mind like a blow from an unseen fist.

#### FIND MISSING EMBEZZLER'S BODY

**Los Angeles, Calif. (AP):—**House wreckers demolishing a bungalow in an area being cleared for the new Hollywood automobile freeway today unexpectedly exhumed a partially decomposed human body buried in the cellar. Police identified the gruesome find as Thornton Avery, former treasurer of the Apex Corporation, missing two years and wanted on charges of embezzlement. A bullet hole in the back of the skull indicated that Avery had been murdered, probably at the time of his disappearance with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars of his corporation's funds. Authorities are seeking a woman known

to have been on intimate terms with the murdered man . . .

McBride dropped the newspaper and stood up, his face bleak and dark and impassive, his dark eyes as feral as those of a Sioux warrior. He crumpled the wire from Pete the Greek, thrust it into a coat pocket. That telegram had unraveled part of the riddle of Thornton Avery's missing quarter of a million dollars, enough of it, at least, to have determined McBride to go up and confront Margo Mazaryk for a showdown. But the flash in the *News-Press* changed everything. It was no longer a matter of demanding a showdown from Margo on the stolen money; it was a matter of arresting her for murder.

He walked slowly out of the elevator into the seventh floor corridor and moved, like a man in a walking dream, toward the door of Margo's suite.

He turned along a transverse hallway. "Kathryn! What the hell are you doing out here?"

THE GIRL sat slumped on a bench in a window embrasure, her eyes a little glassy and unfocused. She looked gravely at McBride. "Quarreled with Margo. Went down to the cocktail bar. Drank whiskey. Drank a lot of whiskey. Four straight ryes."

In a gentle voice, almost wheedling, he said, "Hon, you shouldn't be here in the hall." Drunk or otherwise, he did not want her to see her sister being taken into custody. She had enough scars without that. "You ought to lie down somewhere."

"Not going to lie down. Not in Margo's suite." She frowned. "Never going near her again."

She leaned toward him and whispered, "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"You don't know what you're saying, kitten." He pushed her away, held her at arm's length, steadying her, looking into her not-quite-normal eyes. "This is a public corridor—and I've got to see Margo. Run along, hon."

"Margo, Margo, always it's Margo. She's not true to you. She's not true to any man. Donaldson was here. They talked. Just as Donaldson was leaving, Lou Patrick came."

McBride shook her. "Patrick wasn't on

the make for her. He was after you, only this time he just wanted to tell you that he was sorry about Eddie. Margo brushed him out."

"How did you know that?"

"Never mind how I knew it, I just knew it."

Her eyes tried to focus on him. "But you didn't know about the phone call. You didn't know she wasn't satisfied to have you and Donaldson on her string. Oh, no, she wanted more conquests." She swayed, and he had to catch her again, hold her. "You didn't know she called Nils Engstrom as soon as Lou Patrick left."

"What—? What did she say to him?"

"Nothing. She couldn't reach him. It made her sore. She . . . swore. She said the rat thought he could get away with murder but she was going to pull the state of Montana down around his ears."

"Engstrom's?"

"I suppose so. Who else? I told her she shouldn't use such language and she turned on me. She called me a . . . a stupid frigid little Hunky virgin and told me to get out. I did get out. And I went straight down to the cocktail bar and drank whiskey. I don't want to be a frigid Hunky virgin, I want to be like Margo, glamorous, beautiful, passionate." She clung to him. "Please . . ."

In desperation he got out his room key. "Look, hon, go take a little nap on my bed. I'll be there presently."

"No. Come with me now."

"Damn it, I can't till I see Margo first."

She shook her head, tipisly determined to keep him out of her sister's suite. "I don't want you to see Margo first. If you do, you won't be . . . interested in me."

"All right, Kathryn. Stick around if you must. You'll regret it, though, and so, God help me, will I."

He went to her door, tried the knob, found it unlatched. He pushed the door open without knocking, stepped into the room with Kathryn trotting erratically at his heels. Then he stopped, so suddenly that she bumped into his back.

There was a broken highball glass on the floor, and, beyond its raggedly circular liquor stain that dampened the rug, a burned place where a dropped cigarette had smouldered its length, leaving three inches

of gray ash upon black-charred nap. Near all this lay a folded copy of the *News-Press*, the same late edition which McBride had read in the hotel lobby, carrying the same flash about Thornton Avery. McBride's eyes raced past these things, absorbing them, evaluating them in their relationship to something else at which he was staring.

He swung around, then, and grasped Kathryn's arm. "Is this why you didn't want me to come in here?" he said thickly, almost incoherently. "Because you knew what I'd find?"

"No—no—no!" her voice rose to a horrified scream, shrill, shocked, perhaps even a little crazy.

McBride forced himself, then, to kneel and to touch the motionless figure of Margo Mazaryk. Her lithe, slenderly shapely body, only partially concealed by a sheer white nylon negligee, seemed oddly vestal in its haunting, flawless perfection; her hair, blue-black as the wings of ravens, swirled about her shoulders and throat like a framing aureole, its silken sheen marred only in one place, a spot slightly above her left temple where dried blood had matted there. A single savage blow had felled her, the same kind of blow which had killed her brother Eddie and the bell-hop Jack. Reluctantly McBride touched her neck, knowing that he would find no pulse-beat. Margo would never be arrested for murder, or for any other crime.

Margo was dead.

THE SINGLE small window faced east, so that morning sunlight cast an iron-bar pattern on the uneven concrete floor. In addition to a rusty bunk, the cell contained one toilet, incredibly soiled; one grimy washbowl from whose lone spigot you could get a discouraged trickle of very cold water; and, above this, one cracked fragment of mirror, as dim as an old man's memories.

McBride, naked to the waist, regarded his reflection in the cloudy glass and decided that he had come through his ordeal pretty well, all things considered. His face, he conceded, was still so shapeless as scarcely to be recognized as belonging to him, although at least it was less grotesquely swollen now than it had been at dawn.



Somebody clangorously rattled a gun barrel along the bars of the cell door, and McBride, swinging around, beheld a turnkey in slovenly uniform. "You got company, McBride."

The visitor was Trace Donaldson.

Moving a few paces down the corridor, the turnkey disclosed that he had no intention of unlocking McBride's cell for Donaldson to enter; they could do their talking through the bars, and even the granting of this privilege seemed to nettle the guy. He remained, ostentatiously, just beyond listening distance, his hand upon his holstered pistol.

Harshly, Donaldson said, "Did you kill Margo last night?"

"No," McBride said, just as harshly.

"Do you know who did?"

McBride touched the varicolored lumps on his face. "Would I have let the Kramer wrecking crew do this to me if I could have told them who killed her? I'm no masochist."

"Don't lie to me, McBride."

"Why should I? I didn't ask you to come here."

"I know you didn't. I want to help you if you're innocent, but I must have the truth. If you're guilty I wouldn't lift a finger in your behalf." He frowned. "I'm in an odd position, McBride. As your attorney of record, my duty is to defend you. But Margo was the woman I loved, even though she was a murderess—a fact I never suspected. And if you killed her—"

"You're a fine one to be handing me that kind of talk!" McBride cut in, angrily. "To think I fell for your line about wanting to marry her, wanting to install her in the governor's mansion as Montana's first lady as soon as you got elected. And then, you hypocritical punk, you turned around and proposed to Elsa Blanchard." He glowered through the bars. "That was the damndest double cross a man ever pulled on a woman."

"You're wrong," Donaldson said quietly.

"I didn't propose to Elsa till after Margo turned me down. Margo was opposed to my political aspirations. She didn't like the idea of my running for governor. You know that. Last night we had it out, Margo and I, there in her hotel suite. It wasn't a quarrel; she simply delivered an ultimatum. I could have her or I could have my

shot at the State Capitol, but not both. I refused to withdraw from the campaign; it would seem a confession of weakness, conceding defeat, surrendering to the Ho-diak party even before election day. I told her so, and that was that."

"She gave you the air?"

"She said she wouldn't marry me. I left her, telephoned to Elsa, asked her to be my wife. She accepted me, on the rebound, I suppose you'd call it, though she didn't realize that. I wouldn't want her to know it, ever."

"No, I suppose not," McBride said. "It might not make for a happy marriage."

Donaldson flushed. "Perhaps I deserve your sarcasm. Maybe I am a heel. The point is, the Margo part of my life is past, now. I loved her, yes, and I'd have made her my wife even though she had killed a dozen men like Thornton Avery. I'd have defended her come hell or high tide, and devil take the hindmost. But I'm damned if I'll defend her murderer."

McBride said, "I didn't murder her."

"I want very much to believe you, McBride."

"Then quit doubting me. What motive would I have? I needed her alive so she could tell me what happened to the quarter of a million dollars that Avery stole! I wanted her alive for another reason, too," he gave the blond man a brooding glance, "one you won't like, since you were in love with her. I was going to arrest her for the Avery kill. I thought it would put me solid with the cops, help me beat the rap for shooting Neumann."

"That's the trouble," Donaldson said. "Kramer contends that you went after her for those very reasons, and when she struggled you hit her too hard. It has a certain plausibility."

"Plausibility hell. It's not true."

"And, as you say, there's the shooting of Neumann." The lawyer's expression was grave. "No matter how it hapened, or why it happened, he was Nils Engstrom's man. Engstrom hates your guts, McBride, especially after the beating you gave him last night. He's in Chief Kramer's office right now, demanding your blood. And so is Kathryn Mazaryk."

McBride stiffened. "Kathryn too? Why?"

"Apparently she inclines toward Kramer's theory. He seems to have convinced

her that you killed her sister."

A grimace contorted McBride's puffy face. "Next they'll be saying I murdered her brother Eddie. And the bell-hop, Jack."

"That has already been suggested," Donaldson said, ruefully, "I think by Swann, the D. A. He's in Kramer's office, too, and remember he's an Engstrom-Hodiak man. About the only person in there who's on your side is Elsa, and that's largely because I'm your legal counsel. She came down with me, probably to lend me a little moral support, though I'm afraid I'm going to need a hell of a lot more than moral support to do you any good."

"Meaning you don't think I stand much chance?"

"I think you don't stand any chance at all, McBride. Even Ollie Kramer gave me a bad time when I asked permission to confer with you, and up to now I've had him in my pocket. I'm beginning to suspect he's about to throw me over, toss his chips on the Engstrom-Hodiak side of the table."

"That fat—"

Donaldson put his face close to the bars. "Look, McBride." His eyes seemed embarrassed, perhaps even ashamed. "I've never yet run out on a client. I'm not running out on you now. But—"

"But what? Go ahead, say it."

"Well, with this election coming up and all, it might hurt me to be on the losing end of a murder trial, especially the way public opinion is going against you. The newspapers are giving you the full treatment. Frankly, if you go into court you won't have a prayer; you're a dead duck. Even a plea of guilty and a request for clemency wouldn't save your neck." He hesitated. "On the other hand, if you don't go into court . . . well, think it over, McBride. And think fast."

McBride stared at him, puzzled. "If I don't go into court? How the hell can I help it?"

"Here are some cigarettes for you," Donaldson said, loudly. And in a whisper, "There's a key in the pack. Take it."

McBride's hand closed over the gift. "This must be my day to be stupid. I don't get it."

"The key is to your cell door. When I leave, the guard will go with me; his post is up front. I'll go to Kramer's office, try

to keep them occupied for, say, half an hour. There's a back exit at the end of this corridor and a car waiting outside, gassed up, ready to go. A charter plane is all set for you at the airport—with a pilot you can trust. He's been paid. If you're smart you'll get over the state line."

"As a fugitive from justice," McBride said bitterly. "That would be the end of me with the bonding company, the end of me, period."

"At least you'd still be alive." Donaldson drew back, turned away, beckoned the keeper. "All right, Dwiggins, I'm finished here." They went away.

For five full minutes McBride stood motionless after the two men had gone. Then, very carefully, he put a hand through the bars of the door, fitted the key into the lock, found that it worked. He slipped out and headed for Kramer's office. His mind was made up. McBride grasped the knob, twisted it, pushed.

It was, he thought, a little like a movie whose sound track blows a fuse and goes silent. Ollie Kramer, Dixie Du Chen, Nils Engstrom, Kathryn, Swann, the District Attorney—all stared dumbfounded at McBride. Trace Donaldson, seated across the desk from Kramer, twisted in his chair and whispered soundlessly, "You fool! You damned fool!"

Elsa Blanchard said pleasantly, "Hello, there, soldier." His glance went to Ollie Kramer, who was frantically clawing a revolver out of his belt. "I wouldn't advise you to blow my head off, Ollie. If you did, you'd never get to find out the identity of Margo Mazaryk's murderer."

Kramer's moon-like face darkened. "Why, damn your frog-eyed soul, you murdered her!"

"Wrong, Ollie. The killer is in this office, though."

## XI

THERE WAS a shocked silence, the very air seeming to crackle with a sort of electrified suspense. Then Donaldson stood up, his jaw-muscles twitching. "What the hell is this, McBride?"

"The payoff." He looked at Kramer. "Take him, Ollie. Donaldson and Margo were lovers in the old days, till she had a chance to leave town with Thornton Avery.



She discussed this with Donny-boy, perhaps already knowing that Avery was a thief even that far back. She and Donaldson had a cold-blooded, long-range plan. Margo would become Avery's mistress until he had stolen enough to make the next move worth while, say a quarter million or so. Then she would grab the money, come back to Donny-boy, live happily ever after."

Donaldson laughed like an amused viking. "If this weren't so preposterous I'd be within my rights gunning you dead."

McBride ignored Donaldson. "He kept rising in the Ajax outfit, kept on stealing. Two years ago, when he had two hundred and fifty grand and realized he couldn't cover his books any longer, he confessed it to Margo, though of course she had known it all along. He may have wanted to run or he may have wanted to make restitution; we'll never know. We do know that his body has just been found, so we can guess what happened. He never lammed with the loot, as the police thought. Margo killed him for it, buried him in his own cellar. Then she pulled the smartest trick of all. She knew she would be investigated. To leave Los Angeles would fasten suspicion on her; to spend any of the stolen money, or to cash any of the negotiable securities, would convict her as an accessory to the embezzlement and might even lead to the discovery of Avery's murder. For these same reasons, she didn't dare keep the cash and securities anywhere near her for fear it might be found. So she turned it over to Donaldson, her real lover. Then she sat tight."

"You damned liar!" Donaldson said. He swung a fist at McBride.

McBride parried, stepped in close, hit the heavier man in the mouth. He went down on his haunches, just sat there on the floor, dazed, wiping the blood off his lips with the back of a trembling hand.

"Geez!" Ollie Kramer's voice held undisguised admiration. Elsa Blanchard's cheeks went very pale.

McBride licked his lacerated knuckles. "Transferring those funds to Donny-boy was a stroke of genius. He could release them gradually, buy property, make investments maybe increase his capital if things broke right. First, though, he would have to account for possession of the money

he used in making this build-up; everybody knew he was just a poor struggling shyster, and naturally they would wonder how he got his start. To cover the point, he bribed a gambling house owner down in Vegas to release a news item that he, Donaldson, had won a hundred grand at dice and roulette. This is more or less standard procedure for publicity purposes; the suckers like to read headlines about somebody winning once in a while. It gave Donny-boy the front he needed, and it gave him his nickname, Lucky Donaldson."

"I—can't believe it!" Elsa said.

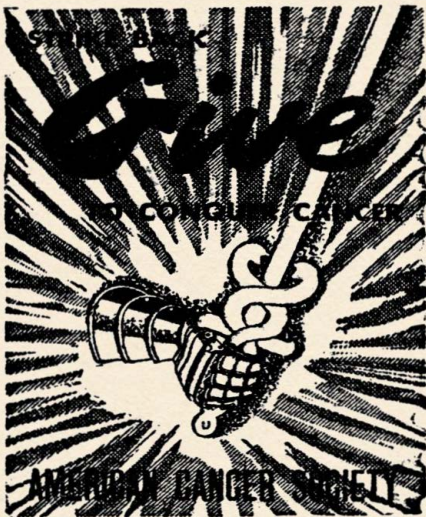
"You want proof, Tutz? I have it. I wired a gambler I know in L. A., Pete the Greek. He checked it for me by calling Vegas long distance, telegraphed me the answer. His Vegas connections told him the whole story of Donaldson's phony winnings. So much for that. Now we go back to Margo, sitting tight for nearly two years, waiting in Los Angeles for the heat to die so that she can come home to Copper Hill, rejoin Donny-boy, divide the take or, perhaps, marry him and keep it all in one pile. She even allowed herself to get involved in a couple of juicy divorce scandals, by way of added cover-up. Then, suddenly and for no apparent reason, three months ago she headed east, shortly after the embezzlement investigation was dumped in my lap."

Kathryn said in a tight, abnormal voice, "Get along with it, McBride. Tell me why she . . . had to die."

"First I'll tell you why she had to come home. I've checked back, and the day she left California was the day the newspapers carried the story that Donaldson had announced his candidacy for governor."

The D. A. frowned. "How was that germane?"

"Margo must have realized what a damned-fool thing Donny-boy had done. A politician needs a clean past or his future is liable to blow up in his face. She was probably afraid that Donaldson's opposition, the Engstrom-Hodiak combine, would dig up that fake gambling deal in Vegas, which could lead to worse discoveries that might incriminate her even more deeply than Donaldson. I imagine she hoped to persuade him to withdraw from the race, though she should have known better, considering his stubbornness and egotism, his



hunger for position and power. When she got here she found me breathing down her neck. So she called Donaldson, and he cooked up the notion of hiring me to help his campaign as well as to look after Margo, though actually that was a scheme to keep an eye on every move I made. Meanwhile he also decided to search my room, which led to the murder of the bell-hop and, later, Eddie Mazaryk. In the long run he killed Margo, too."

"Why?" Kathryn demanded. "Why?"

"Well, precious, when we found her body there was a late edition *News-Press* on the floor, remember? I hadn't left it, earlier, when I dropped by to invite you and Margo out for cocktails. Indeed, that particular extra hadn't been on sale at the time. I asked you if Lou Patrick had brought it, and you said no. Donaldson was your only other visitor, so he had to be the one. Obviously he had seen the flash about the finding of Avery's body in Los Angeles and the search that was under way for Avery's mistress, meaning Margo."

Kramer cleared his throat. "So what?"

"So Donaldson knew that Margo's jig was up. He couldn't marry her, now, even if he had intended to, which I doubt. He phoned Elsa, postponed his country club date with her, proposed to her, then went to Margo's suite to show her the *News-Press*, advise her to disappear, fast. Margo probably demanded her split of the Avery loot, maybe all of it. Knowing him, I have an idea that he refused to kick through. Oh, he may have offered her a few

grand for a getaway, promising to send her the rest of it later. But when he left, she knew it was the kiss-off. You've told me how she tried to phone Engstrom shortly after that. She remarked that the punk wasn't going to get away with murder; that she'd pull the state down around his ears."

Engstrom made a startled gesture. "Who, me?"

"No," McBride said, "she meant Donaldson. She probably sensed that he had killed her brother and the bell-hop, realized that he was double crossing her out of the Avery money. I think she wanted to make a deal with you. Information on where Donaldson's funds came from. In other words, ammunition to blow him out of politics and into prison, in exchange for your influence with Governor Hodiak to block her extradition back to California on the Avery kill. She made a mistake, though, in sending Kathryn away. When Donny-boy came back a little later, he found her alone. She probably threatened him with ruin, so he murdered her."

Donaldson, grasping the edge of Kramer's desk, pulled himself erect, faced the D. A. "As one lawyer to another, Swann, I want to point out that McBride can't substantiate any of this in court. You know the rules of evidence."

"At least he claims to have proof of the gambling collusion," Swann said.

McBride said, "That's not all I have. If you look, you'll probably find him still in possession of the negotiable securities that were part of Thornton Avery's thefts. He wouldn't risk disposing of them in the first couple of years, but he's not a guy who would destroy anything worth money. Those securities can be traced back, even though the cash could not. And then there's the matter of Lou Patrick's murder. Ballistics tests ought to indicate that the bullet in Patrick's head came from Donaldson's gun—unless he threw the gun away."

"I'm getting out of here," Donaldson said. "I don't have to listen to any more of this." He started for the door.

"Come back here," Kramer said.

McBride grinned, sardonically, into Donaldson's white face as the attorney slowly turned around. "Yes, come back and hear the rest of it, Donny. There's not a great



deal more. Mainly it has to do with your rushing to the country club after you killed Margo. That was to establish your alibi, wasn't it? Only you evidently noticed me leaving the club as you came in, and you were afraid of what I might know, or of what Margo might have told me. So, when I took out after Engstrom, you took out after me. You did that shooting from the Du Chen alley. You got Patrick, missed me, and ran, leaving Engstrom and Neumann in the middle, so to speak. I should have guessed it when I looked at their guns. Neumann's had been fired once, to kill Dutch, and Engstrom's hadn't been fired at all."

Engstrom said softly, "So that's how it was. And I thought you had tried to put me on the spot."

"No, I was the guy on the spot," McBride said. "Up to and including this morning." He tossed a key on Kramer's desk. "Donaldson slipped that to me a while ago, Ollie. That's how I opened my cell door. He advised me to make a run for it so one of his gunners could blow me down."

Nils Engstrom's laugh was low, musical. "All right, Kramer, I want the charges against McBride dismissed. The Neumann killing was self defense. And Swann," he turned to the District Attorney, "you will prepare to indict Donaldson at once."

"Try it and see how far you get," Donaldson said. "There's no way you can touch me, not for murder."

Kathryn Mazaryk came out of her corner, slowly, like a somnambulist. "Maybe the law can't touch you, but I can." Before anyone could move to stop her she snatched up Kramer's gun from the desk and holding it in both hands, shot Donaldson, not once but four times.

Never afterwards did McBride have a clear picture of the resulting chaos although he dreamed about it many times. He knew that the fat chief had grabbed Kathryn, that Donaldson was dead before he touched the floor.

It seemed like an hour before the doctors from the emergency hospital had led the screaming girl away.

Kathryn might recover. It was amazing what the human mind could stand at times. McBride could vouch for that.

## Voodoo!

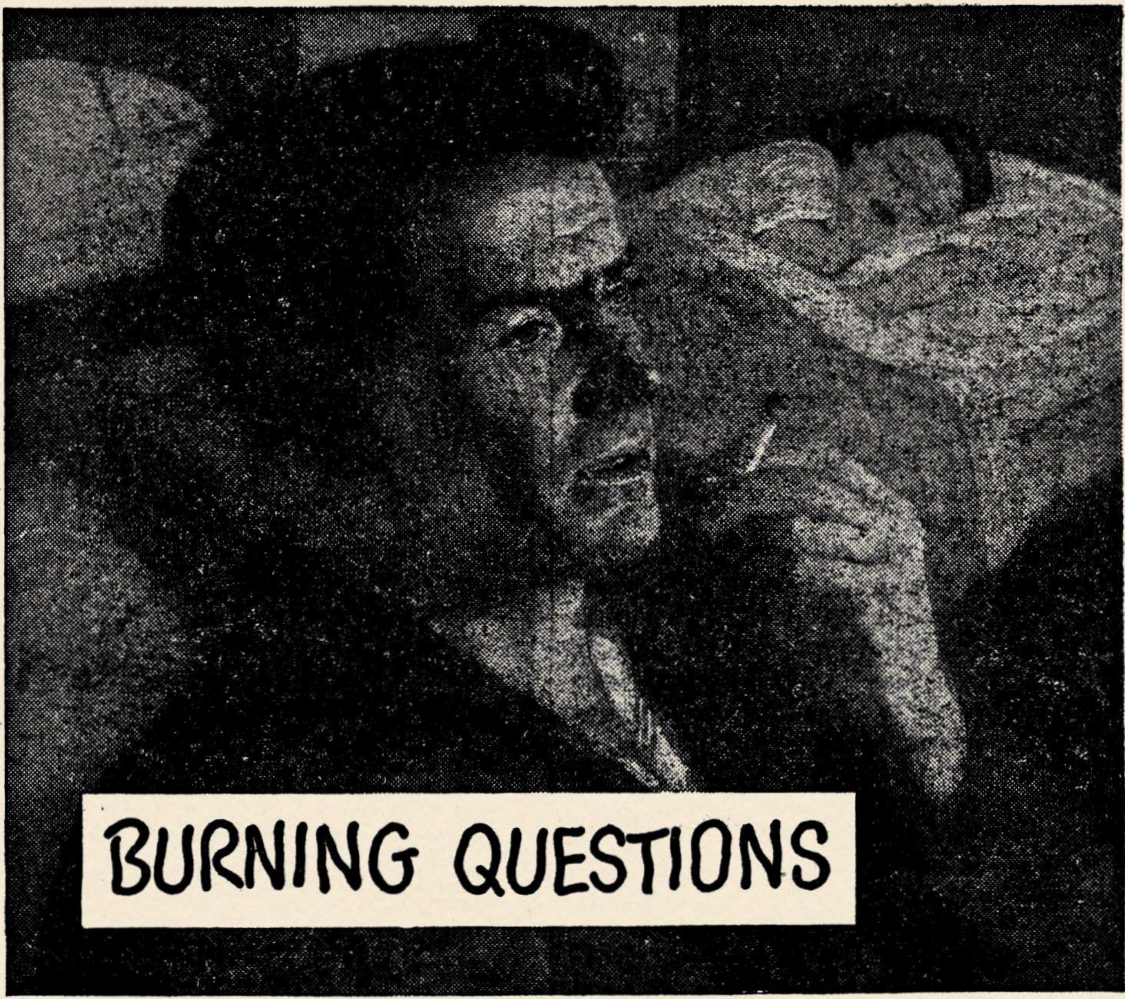


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# COMPLIMENTS OF A FIEND

By FREDRIC BROWN

**. . . How did he kill? What caused the dread red stain? Who would be his next victim? Terror stalked the numbers racket as the fiend played his subtle game . . . and whoever balked his evil sway was faced with the deadly odds of 500 to 1.**

UNCLE AM didn't get home that night. At quitting time he'd been out on a case and I'd been sitting around the office—the Starlock Detective Agency office, where both of us worked—with nothing to do, so I'd gone on home to our rooming house, figuring he'd show up by six o'clock and we'd go out together to eat. But he didn't show up by seven and I was so hungry that I didn't wait any longer; I walked over to Clark Street and had myself a barbecue special.

Estelle Beck, who rooms where Uncle Am and I do, was behind the counter; she'd been too busy to talk when I'd ordered, but things slacked off and she came over about the time I was finishing. She said, "Hi, Eddie. Haven't seen you for a few days."

"Can't eat barbecue all the time," I told her.

"I don't work here all the time. I get off at one-thirty."

"Past my bed time," I said. "I get up at half past seven in the morning. And if I took you out at half past one, I wouldn't get to bed before four o'clock. Or would I? Don't answer that; I might be tempted."

She made a face at me. "More coffee? And where's Am tonight?"

I said, "Yes to the first question. I don't know, to the second. Guess he's working late."

"Or maybe the Ambrose Collector's got him."

"Huh?" I said. But she'd gone away with my coffee cup to refill it, and I had to wait till she got back to ask, "Who's the Ambrose Collector?"

"Nobody knows."

"Fine," I said. "And why does he collect Ambroses?"

"Nobody knows that either."

"Lovely," I said. "But do you know that two new customers have come in and are waiting for you, and that the boss is glaring at you? Want to be fired?"

"Yes, I really do." But she moved down the counter to wait on the new customers.

I watched her over my coffee and wondered whether I was being a fool or being sensible. Uncle Am and I had known Estelle a long time; she'd quit the carnival the same season we'd quit it and had come to Chicago when we had. We'd been in touch with her ever since, but it had been only for the last few months that we'd been in the same rooming house. Anyway, maybe it was because I knew Estelle too well, and liked her too well, to want anything casual with her. And I felt that I was a long way from wanting any alliance that was permanent, or might turn out to be permanent.

But sitting there watching her, I wondered if Uncle Am was right in telling me how crazy I was to figure things that way.

And thinking of Uncle Am, of course, made me wonder if he was home yet, so I downed the rest of my coffee, waved so-long to Estelle, and headed home.

Uncle Am still wasn't in and it was nearly eight o'clock, so I walked back downstairs and knocked on the door of Mrs. Brady, our landlady. I asked if there'd been any telephone calls for me and she said there hadn't.

So I went up to our room. It was the second floor front, a nice big room, even for two people; I got out my trombone to kill a little time. I played softly, as softly as you can play on a trombone. A few scales to limber up, and then I

put a phonograph record on the portable, a Dizzy Gillespie bop disk, and tried to bop along with it.

There was a knock on the door. I reached over and shut off the phono and called out, "Come in."

The door opened and our next-room neighbor, Chester Hamlin, leaned limply against the door post. He was stripped down to an undershirt, trousers and slippers.

He said, "You play that thing like Jimmy Dorsey."

"You mean Tommy Dorsey," I said.

He grinned. "Do I?"

"You'd better," I said. "Is that all you want?"

He held up his hand and I noticed there was a screwdriver in it. He asked, "You any good with one of these things?"

"I know the system. The end of that thing has asquared blade. There's a slot in the end of the screw. You put the blade in the slot and turn. Clockwise, I think."

"That sounds complicated. Would you show me?"

I sighed and put the trombone down on the bed. I followed him into his room. He pointed to the closet door. "Been trying to put a hasp for a padlock on that thing and I can't even get the screws started. I can turn 'em in once they start, but how do you get started? That wood's hard."

I looked at him pityingly. "Ever think of trying a nail and a hammer? You drive the nail part way in and then pull it out again."

"Hell, I never thought of that. I did try hammering the screws in to start them, but that didn't work. Got a heavy nail I could use?"

"Not loose," I said. "But there are lots of nails in our closet we hang stuff on; you could pull one out and then put it back. But you've probably got a dozen or so in your own closet."

He shook his head. "Pulled them out and threw them away yesterday when I was rigging up the closet for a darkroom. Keep all my clothes in that wardrobe now. Got a pretty nice setup in there, now. Take a look."

He opened the closet door and flicked on a light inside. I stepped in and looked

around; it really was a nice darkroom setup. The closet was bigger than ours, about seven by four feet.

Looking over my shoulder, he said, "I've got nails; I forgot the ones that hold that picture wire I use to hang prints on. I can use one of them and put it back. How do you like the layout?"

"Swell," I told him. "You must have a lot of money sunk in all that stuff."

"About two hundred bucks. It's not a cheap hobby. Costs more than playing a trombone. But it makes less noise."

"Shhh," I said, and stood listening. Somebody was coming up the stairs and I wanted to see if it was Uncle Am. The closet wall was right against our room and I could have heard if he went in there. But the footsteps went along the hall instead and started up to the third floor.

I said, "I thought maybe that was my uncle, but I guess it wasn't. Hand me the hammer and I'll pull one of these nails for you."

He did, and I did, and then I sat down on the bed and watched him put the hasp for the padlock on the outside of the door.

"How come on the outside?" I asked him, while he was tightening the last screw. "I should think you'd want a bolt on the inside, if anything, so nobody'd open the door while you're working in the dark."

"I'm not worried about that. I can bolt the door of my room from the inside. It's just that I don't want anybody—Mrs. Brady or the cleaning woman or Mrs. Brady's kid—to mess around in there."

"You're missing a bet. Some of those chemicals are poison, aren't they?"

"Sure. That's another reason."

"I still think you're missing a bet," I said. "If Mrs. Brady's kid messes around in there, he might drink some of the poison."

Chester Hamlin grinned. "You almost tempt me, Ed. Say, going to play trombone any more this evening?"

"Hadn't thought about it. Why? You want me to?"

"I wouldn't go that far. But the way you were half-sitting, half-lying on the bed, when I opened the door, ought to



make a good pic. Looked like you had the trombone wrapped around your neck or something. And I got some new fast film in today I'd like to try out on a flash shot. I'll waste a bulb or two on it if you're game."

"Okay, why not? I'll run off a tune or two while you're tooling up. Just walk in when you're ready."

I went back to our room and started playing again, as I'd been doing when Chester had interrupted me, except that I didn't bother to start the phono again. And I held my position, but quit playing, when Chester opened the door a few minutes later. He set up his tripod and camera in the doorway. He said, "Go ahead and play; there isn't any sound track on this film so it won't matter."

"Not with the door open," I told him. "I'm getting away with murder to be able to play this thing at all in a Chicago rooming house."

"Put it back to your mouth and look like you're playing. Push the slide way out; that's it. Now roll your eyes up toward the ceiling and look soulful."

The bulb flashed.

He was moving the tripod a few feet to get a different angle on a second shot when I heard the phone ring downstairs. I got up quick and went past him for the head of the stairs. The call might be from Uncle Am.

I heard Mrs. Brady's voice saying "Hello" as I got to the top step, and waited. I heard her say, "I don't know. Just a moment," and then she called out "Mr. Hunter!" That meant the call was for Uncle Am; Mrs. Brady called me Ed.

But I ran on down the steps and said, "I'll take it, Mrs. Brady. Uncle Am isn't home yet but I'll take it."

She handed me the phone and I said into it, "This is Ed Hunter speaking. My uncle isn't home yet; can I take a message?"

The receiver said, "This is Ben Starlock, Ed. Hasn't Am phoned you?"

"No," I told him. "And I've been getting worried about him. He must be working late on whatever case he's working on, but he's always called me sooner than this whenever that's happened. Or is he on a tail job, where he can't get to a phone?"

"He isn't on any job, exactly, Ed. But he was supposed to phone me a long time ago. It's almost nine o'clock and I expected a call from him by seven at the latest."

"How come, if he wasn't working on a case? Was it something personal, Mr. Starlock?"

"No, nothing personal. And he wasn't working on a case, but he was supposed to see a prospective client and talk over with him something the client wanted done. When he'd done that, he was supposed to call me."

"What time was this?"

"He left the office a little after four o'clock, just before you came in, Ed. He was to talk to this prospective client and then phone me. At the office, if he got through talking to him before five o'clock. Otherwise, he said he'd phone me at home between six and seven."

"You're home now?"

"Been here all evening. And it isn't like Am not to do something he said he'd do. I got curious enough to phone him."

"Maybe he took on the case," I suggested, "and had to start work on it right away. And maybe it was a tail job and he can't get at a phone without losing the subject."

Ben Starlock said, "He wouldn't have taken on the case without consulting me. That was understood. The client understood it, too; he just wanted a preliminary interview with Am, and then he was going to come in the office tomorrow and arrange things. I didn't even quote him a rate."

"You've got this client's address, if you sent Uncle Am to see him. Have you phoned to see if he got there all right and what time he left?"

"Don't want to do that unless I have to, Ed. Makes us look foolish to be checking up on one of our own operatives. And it's still early in the evening. If we don't hear from him pretty soon, though, I'll start checking up."

"WELL, I'm getting worried, Mr. Starlock," I said. "Maybe he had trouble finding this guy he was to talk to, or something like that, and that would account for his not having called you yet but that doesn't explain his not calling me. He knew I'd come home from work and wait

for him so we could eat together."

"You mean you haven't eaten yet?"

"I went out to eat when he didn't get home by seven. But there wasn't any call for me while I was gone; I checked on that."

"You're staying in? You'll be there?"

"Sure. Unless you want to give me the name and address of this client; I can go around and check up sort of from the outside, if you don't want me to barge in."

"No, not yet, Ed. Let's take it easy for a couple of hours. If he hasn't phoned either of us, or hasn't come home, by eleven o'clock, we'll start checking. Okay?"

"I guess so," I said. Eleven sounded pretty late to me.

I went back upstairs. Chester Hamlin took another shot and returned to his room.

I managed to kill a little time polishing up the trombone and putting it back in its case and then I sat down to read the evening paper. When you're an operative for a detective agency, you read at least one newspaper a day, and you read all the local news—particularly criminal and political stuff—carefully and retentively.

It wasn't quite half past ten when the phone rang. I got downstairs in nothing flat and answered it before Mrs. Brady did.

But it wasn't Uncle Am; in answer to my hello, Ben Starlock's voice said, "Heard anything?"

"No. I guess you're worried, and I'm getting that way myself. Shall we start checking up now instead of waiting another half hour?"

"Swell. Shall I meet you somewhere, or what?"

"Not right away. Let's see what we can do with a few phone calls first. Suppose you call—No, wait. I'd better call our client first. It just could be that Am is still with him or that he can tell us what the score is. You hang up, Ed, but stick by the phone; I'll call you back in a minute or two."

I sat down on the bottom step of the stairs for a minute or two and then went back and stood by the phone.

So when it rang, I was right there.

Starlock said, "Ed, it isn't so good. Now wait; I don't mean I've got bad

news. But there isn't any such guy registered at the hotel."

"He gave you the hotel address this afternoon," I said. "Maybe he could have checked out since."

"No, I asked that. I don't like the looks of it, Ed. How about meeting me down at the office? I can think better there and we can use it as a base for operations. I imagine we can do more on the phone than otherwise, till we get a lead or an angle to dig in on."

"Fine, Mr. Starlock. How soon?"

"Half an hour if I take a cab. You can walk it in that, so you won't need to hurry."

But I wanted to hurry; I wanted to do something right away, only I couldn't even get into the office until he got there with the key. I said, "Isn't there something I can do first, to get us started, before I meet you?"

"Not a thing, Ed. Let's not get excited on this; let's get together and dope out what we're going to do, before we go off half-cocked."

"All right," I said. "But give me something to be doping out. What hotel was this alleged client supposed to be staying at?"

"The Gresham, just a few blocks from the office. He said Room four-eighteen."

"And gave a name?"

"Yes. An odd one, now that I come to think about it. And his first name was Ambrose, like your uncle's."

"And his last name?"

"An odd one—Collector," Ben Starlock said. "Ambrose Collector."

I TOOK a deep breath and said, "All right, Mr. Starlock. I'll see you at the office in half an hour."

I hung up the phone and deliberately made myself stand there and count ten slowly before I moved.

That way, I didn't rush out and leave loose ends. I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door and told her that if Uncle Am phoned she should tell him to phone the Starlock office and if no one answered there to keep trying. I went upstairs and wrote the same thing in a note, so if he came home instead of phoning he'd get that message even if Mrs. Brady didn't see him coming in.



I put the note where he couldn't miss it and tried not to think that he'd probably never see it.

And I held myself to a normal pace as I went down the stairs and out into the night. At State Street I caught a cab and gave the driver the address of the barbecue place on Clark where Estelle worked. Outside, I told him to wait, that I'd be out in a minute.

Estelle looked up, surprised, when I came in. She was off duty for the moment, eating a sandwich on the stool at the far end of the counter.

I hurried back to her and didn't waste time on any preliminaries. I said, "That gag you pulled tonight about an Ambrose Collector, 'Stella; where'd you get it? What's it about?"

Her eyes got wide as she looked at me. "I—What do you mean, Eddie?"

"Early this evening," I said patiently, "I told you Uncle Am hadn't got home. You said maybe the Ambrose Collector got him."

"It was just a joke, Eddie. Isn't he home yet?"

"He isn't. What about the Ambrose Collector? It was a joke, but where did you hear it? You didn't make it up, out of a clear sky, did you?"

"N-no. *Somebody* mentioned an Ambrose Collector to me recently but I can't remember who it was."

"It's important, 'Stelle. Try hard."

"It had something to do with a book somebody was telling me about. But I can't remember who—"

"You've got to."

"I—I *can't*, Eddie. I'll think of it later maybe, but—" She looked at me helplessly.

"Can you get off work now? It's nearly eleven; the rush ought to be over by now, hadn't it?"

"Sure." She got up off the stool. "I'll get my coat and tell the boss. He's back in the kitchen."

She was back in less than a minute, a light coat thrown over her uniform.

In the cab, on the way to the office, I told her what little I knew thus far, and it made me realize how little that little was.

She squeezed my arm a little. She said, "Eddie, maybe—"

"Maybe what? Go ahead and say it."

"No, it's wrong. I was going to say maybe Uncle Am was being funny, playing a joke on you and your boss. But—no, he wouldn't be, not that way."

I thought it over. "No, he wouldn't," I said. "He's got a screwy sense of humor all right—one that might tie in with the idea of an Ambrose Collector, whatever an Ambrose Collector is, but he wouldn't play any joke that would worry me this much. Could it have been Am, though, who mentioned the Ambrose Collector to you? That part of it sounds like him."

She shook her head slowly. "No, it wasn't Am. I—I'll think of it, Eddie. I almost had it then."

I opened my mouth to tell her to keep trying and then shut it again. She'd think better if I didn't talk to her.

In spite of my stopover for Estelle, we got to the office ahead of Starlock. The elevator operator—the red-headed guy with whom I'm usually on friendly and kidding terms—gave us a funny look, obviously wondering, or not wondering, why I was taking a girl up to the office at that time of the evening.

We waited in the dim corridor outside the office door for only a few minutes before Ben Starlock got off the elevator. He's got a good poker face and managed not to seem surprised at my having a girl with me.

I introduced them and then, as Starlock was opening the door I explained Estelle's presence.

He frowned a little, but he said, "Okay, Ed, her being here might help at that."

We went in and Starlock gave Estelle a chair and then sat down behind his desk. The swivel chair creaked in agony as he leaned back and put his hands behind his head, staring over us at the transom of the door. He looked—even to a small pimple above the bridge of his nose—like an oversized, benign Buddha.

I'd sat down, too, but I stood up again. I knew he was thinking, but I wanted to be in on what he was thinking about, so I said, "Do it out loud."

Starlock said, "Be patient, Ed. Jane's on her way here; I phoned her just before I left, and she'll be here in a few minutes."

"How come?" I asked. Jane Rogers is Starlock's secretary.

"Partly to take notes. I think I can still repeat that conversation almost word for word, and I want to get it down that way while I remember it. And then I want her to stay by this phone, all night if necessary. We may be going out together or separately and if it's the latter we want to be able to keep in touch through Jane. And then, too, I left word at home to tell Am to call here if he called there. Did you do the same at the rooming house?"

I nodded, and just as he was saying, "Good," Jane came in.

Starlock must have told her what the score was, because she didn't ask any questions. She said "Hi," to us and got her notebook right away.

Starlock said, "Take every word of this conversation, Jane. You'll have all night to transcribe it, after we leave. And you're going to be the first one to talk. Can you talk and write what you're saying in shorthand at the same time?"

"I guess so."

"All right, try it. You answered the phone when that call came at four o'clock. Tell us every word of it you can remember, every little detail about it."

Jane nodded. "It was just about one minute before four o'clock; I know because you'd told me I could—But you know about that."

"Ed doesn't," Starlock told her. "And anyway we want it in the record."

Jane looked up at him and then down at her notebook again. "You'd told me I could leave at four because of my appointment with the dentist, so at one minute of four I was conscious of the time; I was putting the cover over my typewriter when the phone rang."

It was strange, somehow, to listen to her talking and to watch the flying tip of her pencil, to know that the two were co-ordinating; it was almost as though the pencil was doing the talking.

"I picked up the phone," she said, "and said 'Starlock Agency.' A man's voice said, 'Ben Starlock, please.' I didn't recognize the voice; I don't know whether or not I'd know it if I heard it again. I don't think I would. I mean, it was a fairly average voice, if you know what I mean by that; there wasn't anything special about it to remember."

"Anything about the inflection?" Starlock prompted.

"Yes; he spoke confidently, as though he knew you and expected to be put through to you right away. 'Ben Starlock, please.'"

"So I said, 'Who is calling, please?' He said, 'My name is Collector, Ambrose Collector.' I wasn't sure I'd heard him just right even though he'd said it twice; I guess because I'd never heard of anyone with that name. So I asked him, 'Will you spell that, sir?' He said, 'C-o-l-l-e-c-t-o-r. I'd like to talk to Ben Starlock about a job I might want him to handle for me.'"

"So I said, 'Just a moment, please,' and put my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and told you that a Mr. Ambrose Collector was on the line and wanted to talk to you about a job he might want you to handle for him. And you looked up from whatever you were doing and said, 'Okay, Jane, put him on.' But before I did, I asked you if you wanted me to stay and take notes on the conversation and you shook your head and said, 'No, you run along; it's four o'clock.' So I switched the call to your phone and heard you say 'Starlock speaking,' and I didn't listen to any more of the conversation; I put on my coat and hat and left."

STARLOCK said, "Good report, Jane." He leaned back in his chair again, staring at the transom. "I said, 'Starlock speaking.' A masculine voice—and I can't describe it any better than you did, Jane—said, 'My name is Collector, Mr. Starlock. I'm looking for a detective agency that can handle a certain job for me.' I asked him what kind of a job it was; he said—in effect; I'm not sure of the exact words—'It's rather too complicated to explain over the phone, Mr. Starlock. It's an honest, legitimate job. But it hinges on your being able to furnish an operative with a certain qualification. Yours is the third agency I've tried.'"

"I asked him what the special qualification was and he said he needed a man with lots of carnival experience, one who'd traveled with a lot of carnivals and knew a lot of people in that game."

Starlock closed his eyes and then opened them and was looking at me. He said,



"If it was a put-up job to get Am, then that insistence on a lot of experience was to eliminate you, Ed. You spent one season with a carnival, but Am was in it for years. You see what I mean."

I nodded.

He said, "I told him we had an operative who filled the bill very well, who'd had ten years or more experience as a carnival concessionaire."

"Did you mention Uncle Am's name?"

I asked.

"Not then. He said, 'That's swell. Is he there? Is he free now?' Am was in the back room, so I said yes, he was free. He said, 'I'm staying at Room four-eighteen at the Gresham Hotel. I wonder if it would be possible for your operative to drop in a few minutes now so I can talk to him and see if he'd fill all the requirements—if he's really the type of man I want?'"

"I told him I was sorry but that wasn't our way of doing business; that he'd have to come in and talk the case over with me and that if I accepted it, he could then talk to the operative."

"He said, 'I wish you could make an exception in this case. It's this way: I'm going back to Milwaukee tonight and because of some other phone calls I've got to make, I won't be able to come to your office today. But if I could see this operative and convince myself that he's the man for the job, then everything will be set in my mind. I'll be back in Chicago Friday, day after tomorrow, and I can see you then and give you the case, and a retainer. It'll be a fairly long job, and I'm prepared to spend several thousand dollars on it if necessary.'"

"Bait," I said.

Starlock nodded. "Yes, bait. I see that now. But—as I saw it then—what did I have to lose? It was after four; Am was through with the job he'd been working on—a skip-trace matter—and I wasn't going to be sending him out on anything else today, so there was nothing to lose. And maybe—however slight the chance—a several thousand dollar bit of business to gain. If it was a trap, Ed, it was a beautifully baited one."

"And you walked into it?"

"It looks like I sent Am into it. I said, 'All right, I'll send the operative—his name

is Ambrose Hunter—over to talk to you, but you understand that he isn't authorized to accept the case; that will have to be handled through me.' And he said, 'That's fine, Mr. Starlock. I'll be here waiting for him.'"

He stopped for so long that I asked, "Was that all the conversation?"

"Yes, except that he said good-bye and I said good-bye. And then I called Am in from the back room and told him about it and sent him around. The Gresham's only a few blocks and I figured he might be through talking to the guy by five. I told Am not to commit himself on anything but to find out, if he could, what the job was all about and whether the guy seemed to be on the level, and to phone me as soon as he was through talking to him—here at the office if it was before five, or at home this evening if it was after."

I asked, "Why did you want to know before tomorrow morning?"

"So I could plan assignments. We've got a case starting tomorrow that I'd have put Am on otherwise—but I didn't want to if this thing looked really good. This other case might take a week or two—a shadow job—and I didn't want to start Am on it if there was a good chance I'd have to pull him off in a few days. In that case I was going to put you on the tail job and keep Am on the skip-trace angles. And I wanted to know tonight because I always plan out my next day's arrangements in the evening."

Starlock's swivel chair creaked again as he leaned forward and turned to face Estelle. He said, "That's all we know on this end, Miss Beck. Does it help you remember where you heard—whatever it was you heard?"

Estelle's face was white and her eyes wide and scared. She said, "I—I'm afraid it doesn't."

Starlock said, "Ed, while Jane's taking notes, put your conversation with Miss Beck on the record—just exactly what it was she said about an Ambrose Collector. Maybe it'll help her remember."

The few things she'd said, and I'd said or asked, about the Ambrose Collector were so vivid in my mind that I was able to repeat them word for word, and Jane took them down.

Starlock said thoughtfully, "Sounds like it might be a lead to something, but God knows to what. Miss Beck, now that you've heard everything we know, don't you think it would be a good idea for you to go off by yourself, in the back room, and just concentrate on trying to remember?"

"All right, I'll try."

"Fine. Ed, you show her back there and turn on the light for her. And shut the door so our conversation won't distract her."

I put my hand on Estelle's shoulder and she stood up. We got as far as the doorway and then stopped and turned when Starlock said, "Just a minute."

His swivel chair creaked protestingly. "Miss Beck, when you think of something—or when you give up for the night and want to go home—come back. Ed and I may be out by then; if so, tell Jane here anything you've got to tell, and we'll get it from her. Okay?"

Estelle nodded.

"If you decide to go home, and Ed and I are gone at the time, take a cab. The agency will pay for it; Jane will give you the money. And do us this favor; go right home and to bed when you decide to leave, and maybe it'll come to you while you're trying to go to sleep. That's sometimes when people do their best remembering. And if it does, telephone right away. Jane will be at that phone all night, whether we're here or not."

Estelle said, "I don't think I'll go to sleep till I think of it. I don't think I'll be able to."

I led her to the back room and turned on the light. Estelle started for the chair in the far corner, the one Uncle Am always sat in. I wished that she'd taken a different one, but I didn't want to tell her. She looked pale and scared enough as it was. Her eyes looked enormous and her mouth was a bright scarlet against the whiteness of her face.

She said, "Oh, Eddie, I feel so awful not to be able to think of something that ought to be so easy, and when it's so important."

I patted her shoulder. I said, "Don't take it that way, baby. Maybe it isn't important at all. Pretend it isn't, and just relax. Don't try too hard; that's prob-

ably what you're doing. Think about something else for a while. Maybe it would help to read a magazine; there's a stack of them on the table there. And give us a smile."

She tried, but it was a weak, frightened smile.

I leaned over and kissed it.

I said, "Don't worry, 'Stelle. Uncle Am's too smart a customer to let any Ambrose Collector collect him. He's all right."

I wished that I'd been able to believe what I was telling her.

I didn't give her a chance to answer; I went out and closed the door behind me.

Jane Rogers was dialing a number on the telephone. I heard her ask if Harry Dickson was there, and I wondered who Harry Dickson was. I looked at Starlock, but couldn't catch his eye; he was watching Jane.

Then Jane said, "Just a moment, please," and nodded at Starlock. He picked up his own phone and said, "This is Ben Starlock, Harry. How's everything?"

I bent over Jane's desk and asked, "Who's this Dickson character, Jane?"

She was looking down at her typewriter, although there wasn't any paper in it, and didn't look up at me. She said, "Mr. Starlock knows him. He's on nights at the morgue."

I said, "Oh," and walked over to the window. It's a window on an airshaft and all I could see in it was my own reflection standing there in silhouette against the lighted room, a rigid shadow with no face; perhaps it was just as well I couldn't see my face.

I heard Starlock say, "Listen, Harry, I want to give you a description—"

## II

HE wasn't at the morgue. Starlock's round face is pretty deadpan, but I could see relief in it when he put down the phone. I don't know whether I felt any relief or not; I was pretty numb just at that moment.

We were sure, though, that Uncle Am wasn't at the morgue. I'd heard the way Starlock had checked into it; identified or not identified, no body that remotely



could have been Uncle Am had been reported that afternoon.

I'd turned back from the window and he'd swiveled his chair around to face me. He said, "Any ideas, Ed?"

"Some pretty vague ones," I told him. "One point—the guy who called here at four. Do you think he knew Uncle Am was here and free to be sent over to the Gresham?"

"I'd say he probably did know, Ed. Otherwise, he was taking a long shot chance of getting him. You cops average maybe an hour a day in the office here, and that means that unless he knew Am was here, he was taking a chance no better than one out of eight of getting him. I think we can assume he specifically wanted Am, don't you?"

I said, "I think we can. First, from his asking for an op with an unusual kind of experience, a kind that Uncle Am has. Second, from his calling himself the Ambrose Collector—even though he disguised it as a proper name. But what I'm leading up to is that the call was probably put through from a phone right near here. I'd say he knew Uncle Am by sight and was watching the entrance of the building, here—or following Uncle Am. And when he saw him enter the building he allowed time for him to get up to the office, and then put in his phone call."

"Sounds logical, Ed. I don't think we could use the phone call angle—there are a thousand phones within a block of here that he could have used—dozens of public ones in booths. But I think you've got something there in that we can say he knew Am by sight as well as by name. The phone call came just a few minutes after Am came in. It looks more like timing than coincidence."

He got up from behind his desk and started pacing back and forth between it and the door.

He said, "I think we may as well go over to the Gresham. I don't expect to get anything there, especially as they've probably changed shifts between four o'clock and now, but we can try. We can find out who is in Room four-eighteen, even though I think we can assume Am was probably intercepted by someone before he got that far."

He took his hat down off the stand and

said, "Your're on your own, Jane, as long as you stick by that phone, after you call the hospitals and type up those notes. And use the unlisted phone for the outgoing calls so you won't block any possible incoming ones."

"All right, Mr. Starlock."

"And send out for coffee and sandwiches whenever you want to; Corey's is open all night, and they deliver."

The Gresham is a medium sized Loop hotel, medium priced and medium quality. We crossed the lobby, almost deserted by now, and walked up to the desk. A single clerk was on duty behind it, back of him a girl chewed gum at a switchboard.

Starlock said, "A little while ago I called and asked if you had a Mr. Collector registered here and was told you hadn't. Was it you I talked to?"

"I don't recall it. About how long ago was that?"

"An hour and a half ago, about ten-forty."

"Oh, then you probably talked to Mr. Blake, the night manager; he relieves me at the desk between ten and eleven. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Starlock said. "Who is in Room four-eighteen?"

"I'm afraid you'd have to talk to Mr. Blake for information of that kind. Unless—"

"No, we're not the police. Private detectives," Starlock flashed his buzzer. "Is Blake in?"

"One moment." The clerk said over his shoulder, "Dotty, get Mr. Blake; put him on the desk phone."

When the phone on the desk rang, he picked it up and talked briefly. When he put it down, he pointed to a door marked "Private." He said, "That's Mr. Blake's office; go right in."

We went in. A sour-faced man with patent leather hair was doing something at a big mahogany desk. I didn't like his looks and I didn't like his voice when he said, "Well, Gentlemen?"

But we sat down across the desk from him and Starlock explained what had happened—enough of it, anyway, to justify the questions he was leading up to. He said, "We'd like to have two things. First, the names and addresses of whatever clerks were behind the desk this afternoon be-

tween four and five o'clock, and second, we'd like to know who is in Room four-eighteen."

The manager frowned. "I'm afraid I can't supply either point of information, Gentlemen. There were two clerks on duty at the desk at that time, but you can talk to them tomorrow when they're on duty again. As for giving out information about one of our guests, that is definitely against our policy."

Starlock said, "This may be a very serious matter, Mr. Blake. Possibly it's kidnaping, or even murder."

"Then you should report it to the police. If the information in question is requested officially, I can't refuse it, of course. Otherwise, it is definitely against our policy to give such information."

Starlock stood up slowly. "If you feel that way about it, Mr. Blake, we'll have the information requested officially."

He went out and I followed him. Outside the door I put a hand on his arm and stopped him. I asked him, "Are you going to let that bum get away with that?"

"What else can I do, Ed? I'd love to slap him down, but he could sue me out of my shirt if I did. Anyway, we'll get the information tomorrow, or the police will—if Am hasn't shown up by then."

"But there's a chance—even a slim one—that it'll help us to have it tonight?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"Mr. Starlock," I said, "I quit. As of now."

He grinned at me, knowing what I meant. I wanted to grin back, but couldn't make it; I was too mad. Not at Starlock, of course. And I didn't want to grin anyway; I wanted to stay mad.

I went back in the door marked "Private" and closed it behind me. The sour-faced man looked up, and he must have guessed why I'd come back. But he guessed too late; I had hold of his wrist before his hand reached the button on the corner of his desk.

And then I was around behind his chair with the wrist twisted up behind his back. And I thought of the idea of his yelling before he did, and my other hand was clamped tight over his mouth. Just long enough for me to say, "You can yell if you want to, but by the time anybody gets here, you'll have a broken arm to start

with."

I took my hand off his mouth. He didn't yell.

I said, "Listen, I'm not a Starlock operative. The man who was kidnaped or murdered is my uncle and the best friend I've got. I'm going to find him and I'm not going to let any hotel rules or regulations get in the way. I want the names and addresses of those two clerks, or I'm going to beat the hell out of you. At least I'll have a plenty good start at it by the time any help gets to you. Shall I start now?"

"This is going to get you in plenty trouble, young man."

"I'll count to three; then I let go of your arm and start swinging. One. Two—"

"Their addresses are in the file box on the corner of the desk; I don't know them off hand. Their names are Wallace Corrigan and Henry Everest."

I let go his arm, but kept on the side of him that kept him from reaching for the buzzer button or the phone without reaching past me, and I let him look up the clerks' addresses. Neither of them had telephones but I noticed that both addresses were fairly close in.

"Who's in four-eighteen?" I asked him.

"I don't know. We've got hundreds of rooms here. And the cards on current registrations are at the desk."

"Call the desk and ask," I told him.

"Get all the information you can on him. And be careful what you say."

I pushed the desk phone toward him and I pushed him, chair and all, back a little so I could keep my eyes on his.

I handed him the phone and let him do his talking, and he kept in line. When he put it down, he said. "Name is Richard Bergman. Registered from Cleveland, been here three days. That's all the registration card shows."

I took a deep breath and straightened up. I said, "All right, Mr. Blake. Thanks. I'm going now, and you can call the police, if you want to. My name is Ed Hunter if you forgot it since Mr. Starlock introduced me when we came in here. And maybe you can get me a day or two in the jug on a charge of threatening physical violence, even though it's only your word against mine. But if you do, I'll be looking you up, afterwards. On your way home some morning."



I went out without looking back at him. If he had a gun in a drawer, he didn't shoot me in the back with it. And I didn't think he'd phone the police.

Ben Starlock was leaning against a pillar in the lobby, watching the door. I nodded to him and we went outside.

He asked, "Get it all? And will there be—repercussions?"

"I got it, and I don't think so. Wait a minute; I want to write down some names and addresses before I forget them." I took out my notebook and pencil and put down the information I'd got from the hotel manager.

I told Starlock the name of the man registered in four-eighteen.

We were passing a tavern that was still open. I said, "Let's go in here and phone him. That's easy enough to check."

We stopped walking. Ben Starlock rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He said, "I don't know whether that's a good idea or not. But let's have a drink anyway. And we can phone the office from here; if there's nothing new there, we can go look up those hotel clerks without having to go back to the office first."

We turned back and went into the tavern. I saw a closed door type of phone booth at the back and asked, "Shall I make the call to the office?"

Starlock's hand pulled me toward the bar. "Let's think this out first, Ed, about whether we should phone four-eighteen. I don't think we should. If he's there, he's probably okay, but there's just a chance he isn't—that he is tied in with Am's disappearance, but that he's sitting tight. And a phone call at this time of night, even if we play it for a wrong number, might scare him off."

"I guess that's right. But what if he skips out anyway during the night and we lose him?"

The bartender came over to us and Starlock ordered two straight ryes, without asking me what I wanted. But that was all right with me. After the bartender had poured them and walked away, Starlock said, "I don't think he will, Ed. If he was going to skip, he'd have done so early this evening, before Am would be missed. If he's still there now, he'll still be there in the morning. And in the morning I'll put two ops on him—one to tail him around if

he leaves the hotel. The other to check up on him from the outside. I'll phone Cleveland, too—the Carson Agency or the Pinkertons—to check up if a guy by that name really lives there, and what makes him tick."

I asked, "Have we got two ops free tomorrow?" I asked because I remembered that we'd been pretty busy, and the Starlock Agency isn't a big one; there are only seven regular ops, five besides Uncle Am and myself.

"Ed," Starlock said, "we've got every man we've got free, if there's any angle on this business we can put him on. The hell with anything else we've got on hand."

"That's swell of you, Ben," I said.

"Swell of me, hell. Your uncle's one of the best guys on earth, but I'd throw the whole agency on the deal if anybody working for us got monkeyed with. I'd call in every man we have tonight, if there was anything to go on, but so far there's so damn little that you and I and Jane can handle it. And speaking of Jane—Want another drink before you phone her?"

"You can order it for me," I told him. "I'll drink it afterward."

I went back to the phone booth and called the agency. When Jane's voice answered, I said, "This is Ed. Anything doing?"

"Yes, Ed. Miss Beck just remembered where she heard that Ambrose Collector business; she just came in to tell me about it. She's here; want to talk to her?"

"Yes."

Estelle's voice came on the wire, excited.

"It was Karl Dell who was talking about the Ambrose Collector!"

I took a deep breath. I said, "Stay there, Stelle. We'll be right around. We're only a few blocks away."

I hurried back to Ben Starlock; the bartender was just pouring our drinks.

**I** SAID, "Come on, Ben," and pulled at his arm as I went past him. I might as well have pulled at the trunk of a tree as I walked past it; Starlock didn't move an inch and the jerk brought me up short and almost threw me off balance.

He said, "Don't get excited, Ed. Drink your drink; don't waste it."

"But Estelle's remembered."

"That's fine. Now relax; we'll leave in sixty seconds, and sixty seconds isn't going

to make any difference. Drink your drink and calm down; you get places faster if you don't run, and you're in better shape to do something after you do get there."

I picked up my shot of rye and downed it. A little too fast. I choked and almost exploded.

Starlock said, "You see what I mean."

He downed his own drink neat, and neatly. He said, "If you're ready to walk and not run to the nearest exit, we'll stroll back to the office and talk it over with your friend."

I was over choking by then and I had to grin at him. I picked up my chaser and took a few sips of it—slowly. Then I said, "Okay, let's go. And we'll crawl there if you say so."

"That's better. Come on, then."

Outside, we looked both ways for a cab and there was none in sight so we started walking.

Starlock asked, "Did you find out what Estelle remembered? Or just that she did remember?"

"I didn't get the details. But she heard about the Ambrose Collector from a guy named Karl Dell. He rooms where Am and I do; Estelle rooms there, too. He's kind of a nut."

"What kind?"

"Astrology," I said. "He eats and sleeps it; he'll talk your arm off about it. He wanted to use it tonight to find out what had happened to Uncle Am."

"Tonight? You were with him tonight?"

"For twenty minutes or so, around ten o'clock. He had invited me to join a poker game, but I turned him down."

"Know where the poker game is? I mean, is there any chance of finding this guy Dell—after we talk to your friend and get the details—before he gets home from the game?"

"I don't see how," I said. "All I know is that it's a few blocks from where we live. But it's after midnight now, and he said he wasn't going to play very late."

Starlock said, "That's what they all say. What is he outside of being an astrologer?"

"Sells insurance for the Harrison Mutual. The kind they call industrial insurance, where they collect a dime or a quarter a week on a regular route."

"What's he like personally, Ed?"

"Fairly nice, when he isn't boring you to death riding his hobby. For short periods, anyway; he's a little too much of an eager beaver to wear very well. He makes friends and influences people. You know the type."

We didn't talk any more until we got back to the office.

Estelle looked much calmer than she'd sounded over the phone. Even so, her eyes were still shining with excitement. She was talking almost before we had the door closed.

"Eddie, it was about a week ago; I was right on that. Karl took me to a movie that evening—my evening off, Tuesday evening, so it must have been eight days ago. And it was a double feature; one of the pictures was 'Cuban Holiday' and that was the one we wanted to see and we got in just at the start of it. Then the B picture was 'The Case of Edward Dean.' Have you seen it?"

"No. Go on."

"It wasn't very good. We saw about a fourth or a third of it, and Karl thought it was even worse than I did, and I didn't think much of it. So we left before it was over. But the picture was what led up to his mentioning the Ambrose Collector, so I had to start out with it. The picture—'The Case of Edward Dean'—started out with a man, Edward Dean, disappearing. With no motive at all, up as far as we saw in the picture. I mean, he didn't have any reason for disappearing himself; he had everything to lose. And nobody had any reason for kidnaping or killing him.

"After we, Karl and I, left we stopped in to have a drink—I don't remember the place, but it was on Randolph in the Loop, I think; I guess that doesn't matter anyway—and the picture had made me a little curious so I asked Karl what he thought had happened to Edward Dean in the picture."

Starlock said, "Just a second," and glanced at Jane, whose pencil was flying over the lines in her shorthand notebook. "Getting all this, Jane? She's going like a runaway train."

Jane smiled up at him. "Yes, Mr. Starlock. I've got it all anyway; she gave it to me while we were waiting for you to get here. I'm just doing this for a double check in case she adds anything."



Starlock nodded at Estelle to go ahead.

She started a sentence back. "I asked Karl what he thought had happened to Edward Dean in the picture and he said, 'Maybe the Edward Collector got him.' I asked him what he was talking about—not knowing yet whether he was kidding or whether I'd missed something in the part of the picture we saw, and he grinned and said, 'Well, there's an Ambrose Collector. Why couldn't there be an Edward Collector, too?'"

"By that time I knew—or I thought then—that he was kidding, so I asked, 'Who is the Ambrose Collector?' just like you asked me when I mentioned him early this evening, and Karl said, 'Nobody knows who he is. All anybody knows about him is that he collects people named Ambrose.' And, just like you asked, I asked, 'Why does he?' So Karl said, 'Nobody knows why. He just does.' So I laughed, and we got to talking about something else. The other picture, I guess."

"And that was all that was said about it?" I asked her.

"Every word, Eddie."

"You did a swell job of getting all the details when you did remember, 'Stelle," I said.

Starlock sat down on a corner of his desk. He said, "Ed, even if it turns out to be a dud, we've got to follow it. So I think we'd better split forces. You know this Karl Dell; you can handle him. Take Estelle home and talk to Karl; if he isn't home from the poker game, you might as well wait for him. There's nothing else to do except see these two desk clerks from the Gresham. I can do that. Not that I expect to get anything out of them. I don't think Am got as far as the desk of that hotel."

"You might find out something about the guy in four-eighteen, Richard Bergman. Maybe they know something about him personally."

He nodded. "Maybe. It won't hurt to try. Although if Am didn't get as far as the desk to ask for that room number, then it's odds-on that the Ambrose Collector picked that number out of the air; in which case Bergman doesn't mean anything to us. But we'll let that go till tomorrow, except for what the clerks may know."

"All right," I said. "And we'll keep in

touch through Jane. I'll phone in as soon as I've seen Karl Dell, whether what he says means anything or not. Ready, 'Stelle?"

She was. We went down together and took the same cab, since one of the addresses I'd given Starlock was on Division, just west of Dearborn and he could take that one first and drop us off en route.

I was glad to see a crack of light under Mrs. Brady's door. I knocked and asked her if there had been any phone calls for either me or Uncle Am.

She shook her head. "Is something wrong, Ed?" she asked.

"I don't know," I told her. "Do you happen to know if Karl is home yet?"

"No, I don't, Ed. I've had my radio going most of the time, and even when I have it turned down soft like that I don't hear people coming and going."

"You would have heard the phone ring, though, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes. I can always hear the phone. I'm sure there weren't any calls for you or your uncle while you were out. There was only one call, and that was for Chester."

"Is he home?"

"Yes, but he's probably asleep by now. The call was an hour ago and he came down in a bathrobe over his pajamas to answer it."

I thanked her and Estelle and I went on up to the second floor. There wasn't a crack of light under any door. We knocked on Karl Dell's door and there wasn't any answer.

I said to Estelle, "I wish I knew whether he's a light or heavy sleeper. I hate to wake up the whole house by knocking loud."

"Let's try our keys, Eddie. Maybe one of them will open it."

It sounded like a good idea; the locks on all the rooms are ordinary ones and the keys are practically skeleton keys. I tried mine first and it wouldn't work, but Estelle's did. I reached in and turned on the light. The room was empty; the bed made. Just the same, I didn't take any chances of his being there but not wanting to see us. I looked in the closet and even under the bed.

But Karl wasn't home, hiding or otherwise, so I turned out the light and locked

the door again.

I went into our room to look around and to be sure Uncle Am hadn't been there. It would have been wonderful to find him in the bed, asleep. Even dead drunk, out like a light; not that I'd ever seen him that way. Uncle Am does his share of drinking, but he knows how to handle it. I've never seen him past the cheerful stage.

But he wasn't in our room, drunk or sober, dead or alive. And the note I'd left for him was still there.

Estelle was still in the doorway. She said, "Shall we wait in here, Eddie? If we leave the door ajar, we can hear anyone on the stairs."

"Don't you want to go to bed?" I asked her.

She lowered her eyes in mock modesty. "Why, Eddie," she said. "This is so sudden."

It would have been funny any other time. Or intriguing. But I gave her a quick grin and let it go at that. I said, "If you want to wait till Karl comes home, okay, sit down and relax. I'm going to phone Jane and keep her posted."

I went downstairs and phoned the office. Ben Starlock, Jane said, hadn't phoned in yet. I told her Karl Dell wasn't home yet and that I was waiting for him. I said I wouldn't phone again until I'd talked to him, but that if anything important came up meanwhile, she should phone me.

She said, "I've finished phoning hospitals, Ed. He isn't at any of them."

"That's good," I said, and then wondered if it was. If he was in a hospital, injured anywhere short of fatally, at least I'd know.

I went back upstairs. Estelle was lying back in the overstuffed chair, her eyes closed. But they opened and asked a question as I came in.

"Nothing yet," I told her. "Starlock hasn't phoned in; he's barely had time to get to the first guy he was going to see. Are you sure you're not tired, Estelle?"

"Of course not. What time is it?"

"Not quite one o'clock."

"Why'd I be tired then? I'd still be working for another half hour if I was at the restaurant. And I never get to

sleep before three or so. And I sleep till almost noon. Besides—well, I just couldn't sleep tonight anyway."

I sat down on the arm of the chair; she leaned her head against me and I reached across it and patted her shoulder.

She said, "I *am* tired, though, Eddie. Not sleepy, but tired. I hated being a waitress."

"Hated?"

"Yes, I quit tonight. Sam wouldn't let me off when I asked him. Oh, I suppose if I'd gone to a lot of trouble to explain how important it was and had argued him into it, but—well, I guess I wanted an excuse to quit anyway."

"What are you going to do?"

"Not even think about it for a few days. Just rest up and forget I ever was a waitress. Then—well, maybe I'll try to get into modeling. That's hard to get into, but it pays better and the hours are better."

I said, "I guess you've got what it takes." But I wasn't guessing; Estelle had been with the posing show at the carney and she did have what it took.

"And if I can't get into modeling—well, it's September now, so I'll have to take something for the winter, clerking or something, and in the spring I'll probably go with a carnival again."

I said, "That's a hell of a life for a girl, 'Stelle. You don't want to do that." She didn't answer.

That left me rather out on a limb. But the phone rang, and I ran down to answer it. I got there just as Mrs. Brady was opening her door. I said, "It's probably for me, Mrs. Brady," and took down the receiver.

I said, "Ed Hunter speaking," and Jane Rogers' voice said, "This is Jane, Ed. Mr. Starlock just phoned. He's talked to one of the two clerks and the clerk doesn't remember anyone having asked for four-eighteen late this afternoon. And he couldn't identify the photograph of your uncle."

"Has Starlock got a photograph?"

"Yes. You must have been in the back room when I was getting it for him from the file."

"But how—" And then I remembered that my application for work with the agency had required a photograph to be



clipped to it. Uncle Am's application would have been the same. So I said, "Okay, Jane. Anything else?"

"No. And the clerk didn't remember who was in four-eighteen or the name Richard Bergman. Mr. Starlock's gone on to find the other clerk."

I said, "Okay, Jane. And the man I'm waiting for isn't home yet, so I'm sitting tight. So long."

**E**STELLE was leaning back in the overstuffed chair as I came in. Her eyes were closed as though she was asleep and there was a faint smile on her lips. I stood there a moment, looking at her as though I'd never really seen her before.

Not that I hadn't seen her often enough. Even on the stage of the posing show at the carney, in nothing but a gee-string and a bit of net. And then there had been the night we'd wandered off the carney lot into the woods—but I'd been in love with Rita, then, and it hadn't meant anything to me. I hadn't thought it had meant anything, much, to Estelle.

But now I wondered. Her reason, I knew, for leaving the carney hadn't been because Uncle Am and I had left it; it had been because a guy she didn't like—that none of us liked—had taken over the management of it. I'd figured that she liked both Am and me and I knew that was part of the reason why she'd picked Chicago when we had. And she lived her own life here; she went out with other men.

Estelle opened her eyes and said, "Hi, Ed. Going to stand there all night? I wasn't asleep."

"I was just looking at you," I told her. "Maybe I never saw you with your eyes closed before."

I pulled up the hassock and sat down. "You're sure you didn't doze off?"

"I'm sure, Ed. I didn't close my eyes till I heard you coming."

"Why did you then?"

She laughed. "You'd never seen me with my eyes closed before. Maybe I wanted you to. You got up early this morning, didn't you, Eddie?"

"Usual time, seven-thirty. Why?"

"Karl might play poker all night, for all you know. Why don't you take a nap,

and I'll wake you when he comes in. I won't close my eyes; promise."

"I couldn't sleep."

"You'll be sorry tomorrow. And it might be important that you feel fresh and not tired tomorrow."

That made a lot of sense; right then I wasn't doing anything but worrying. I didn't even have any facts to think about and to try to build into something. I was just waiting for Karl Dell and I could do that as well asleep.

I remembered something I wanted to do because I might forget to do it in the morning; I wanted to get some pictures of Uncle Am and have them in my pocket, as Ben Starlock had one in his.

I went to the dresser and got a stationery box that held the few photographs we had—all of them just snapshots—and picked out the two that showed Uncle Am pretty well. Both of them were taken at the carnival, one of Uncle Am standing in front of his ball game concession, the other showed him sitting in the doorway of Hoagy's trailer on the lot at Louisville with Hoagy sitting beside him and both of them with beer bottles in their hands.

Marge Hoagland had taken both snapshots, and it gave me a turn to realize that Marge was dead and that Hoagy was dead.

I put the picture of Uncle Am and Hoagy back into the box and just kept out the one of him alone in front of the booth.

It looked most like him, anyway. He was grinning and he had on the sloppy black slouch hat—like the one the Shadow wears—that he always wears and that I've always kidded him about. And the sun was low, so the brim of it didn't shade his eyes and they showed up well, the little crinkles around the corners of them and the tolerant amusement in them. And his biggish nose didn't shade or hide the brown, scraggly mustache that's as much a part of him as his right arm. Yes, it was a better photograph for identification than the passport-sized portrait Starlock had. Of course, there was nothing on it from which to judge his height, but I could supply that. I remembered how I had described him to somebody once: "shortish, fattish, and smartish."

And he hadn't changed a bit since that snapshot was taken, except that—aside from the black slouch hat—he dressed a bit more neatly now than he used to on the carney lot.

I put the snapshot into my billfold and went back to the hassock and my coffee. It was plenty cool by now.

Estelle must have been watching me. She said, "He's really like a father to you, isn't he, Ed?"

"Yes," I said, and I wanted to let it go at that because this was something I'd never told Estelle about, but I found myself going on. "I never really got to know my own father until it was too late, until after he was killed. Then I got to know Uncle Am and he pulled me through that and well, together we found the guy who'd killed my father."

"Your father was murdered, Ed?"

I nodded. "Uncle Am took me back to the carney with him, and you know what happened there. The business about Hoagy and Marge. That, and the business about my father, showed me that Uncle Am and I clicked in some funny way when it came to detective work. We fitted somehow; together we were a hell of a lot more than the sum of what we were separately. And he'd been a private detective before he went with the carney and I talked him into going back into it and getting me a job along with him with the same agency. I even dreamed of having an agency of our own someday, 'Stelle—Hunter and Hunter."

The phone rang. I nearly broke my neck getting down the stairs to answer it.

It was Ben Starlock. He said, "Didn't get much, Ed. I'm heading back to the office. This Dell is still out?"

"Yes. You say you didn't get much; what did you get?"

"This second desk clerk, Everest, didn't identify Am's picture or remember anyone asking for four-eighteen at the desk, but he does remember Richard Bergman, the guy in four-eighteen. Says he's stayed at the hotel before and always registers under the same name and from Cleveland, but he thinks the guy is from New York and he thinks he's in the numbers racket."

"Thinks or knows?" I asked.

"Someone told him so, but he doesn't

remember who. About a month ago, Everest says, this Bergman was staying there a few days and Everest was talking to someone at the desk, someone else who was staying there and he doesn't remember who, when Bergman walked through the lobby, and this guy made some crack about the New York numbers rackets moving into Chicago."

I asked, "Has Uncle Am been working on any job connected with the numbers racket?"

"No. I don't take that kind of work, Ed. One other thing: I fixed it with Everest to check on slips for outgoing phone calls from four-eighteen. I slipped him twenty, and as soon as he starts work at nine tomorrow, he'll look and see if any outgoing calls were made from four-eighteen yesterday. Incoming calls won't show. Neither will the phone numbers unless on long distance calls but it could be interesting to know if he made a local call from his room at a few minutes before four o'clock. Anyway, Everest will phone the agency the minute he gets a chance to check the slips in the morning."

"Good," I said. "And that reminds me I forgot to get the name and address of the girl who'd have been on the switchboard this afternoon. One of us ought to talk to her."

"I got it from Everest, Ed. But we can't see her until tomorrow. Everest knows her fairly well; she's a cousin of his and he got her the job. And tomorrow's her day off and she went up to Racine this evening to spend the night with some friends there; she'll be back sometime tomorrow."

I went back upstairs and, since Estelle knew everything that had happened up to then, I told her everything Starlock had told me over the phone.

"All right, Eddie," she said. "And now you lie down on the bed and take a nap."

"All by myself?"

"All by yourself. I'm going to turn out the light so you can really sleep, and I'll leave the door ajar and move a chair so I can see through it out into the hallway. And I'll keep my eyes open so I won't fall asleep. Not that I'm sleepy."

I slipped off my shoes and lay down. Estelle clicked off the light and a moment later her lips were on mine. I put my arms



around her and pulled her down; I kissed her hard.

She laughed a little. "I'm just kissing you good night, Eddie. Don't get ideas; you've got to sleep."

I pulled her closer, but she said, "I mean it, Eddie."

And she did. Because she said the one thing that stopped me cold: "Don't forget why you've got to sleep."

"Okay, 'Stelle," I said. And then, "Do you remember that night at the good, old carnival?"

"Yes. I thought you'd forgotten it, Eddie."

Then her lips brushed mine lightly; she pulled away. I heard her move the chair and then dim light from the hallway became less dim as she widened the crack in the door.

I closed my eyes, knowing that I couldn't sleep, knowing that there wasn't any use trying and that the harder I tried the less use there'd be. I didn't even try not to think about Uncle Am; I just let myself go, and I must have gone to sleep within five or ten minutes for I don't remember lying there thinking for any longer than that.

Then Estelle was shaking my shoulder gently and sudden bright light hurt my eyes as I rolled over.

Estelle said, "Karl's home. He just came in."

I sat up. "What time is it?"

"Ten minutes to four. You slept a little over two hours."

We went out into the hallway and I knocked on the door just past Chester Hamlin's.

Karl opened the door a few inches. He said, "Hi, Ed. What—?"

"Estelle and I have to talk to you a few minutes, Karl. It's important."

He'd started to open the door until I mentioned Estelle and he looked past me and saw her. He pulled it part way shut again, then, and said, "Just a second till I pull on a bathrobe. Mostly ready for bed."

A few seconds later, in bathrobe and slippers, he pulled the door wide and said, "Come on in. Haven't you heard from your uncle yet, Ed?"

We went in. I said, "No. And it's something in connection with that, Karl,

that I want to ask you about. What's this business you mentioned to Estelle about an Ambrose Collector?"

He put back his head and started to laugh and then sobered suddenly as I took a step toward him and he saw the expression on my face. He stopped laughing so suddenly that it nearly choked him.

"I'm sorry, Ed," he said. "About your uncle being missing and all that. But the Ambrose Collector business is just a gag more or less. You've never read Charles Fort?"

"No. Who's Charles Fort?"

"I can't tell you in a sentence. Sit down."

Estelle took a chair and I sat down on the bed. Karl had turned to the bookcase. He bent down and pulled out a thickish book and handed it to me. The title was "The Books of Charles Fort."

I didn't open it; I looked back at Karl to let him explain.

He said, "You can borrow it if you like, and I think you'll like reading it, Ed, but it hasn't anything to do with your uncle; I'll tell you enough to show you that."

"Charles Fort was a New York newspaperman who died about twenty years ago. He was either a screwball or a genius, and plenty of people think he was a genius; people like Ben Hecht and Tiffany Thayer, and Carl Sandburg and Sherwood Anderson. They organized a Fortean Society and published a periodical. I don't know whether it's still running or not."

"But what did he write about?" I asked.

"Damn near everything. He believed that science, orthodox science, especially astronomy and meteorology, was screwy, that it had gone off the beam somewhere and led us astray. He gathered facts, mostly in the form of news clippings from everywhere, of things that didn't fit in with the current opinions of the scientists and are therefore ignored or explained away. Rains of frogs, rains of fishes, mysterious appearances and disappearances, werewolves, spaceships, sea serpents, earthquakes and meteors, Martians and mermaids. It's fascinating stuff, Ed."

"Take something that happened comparatively recently—this flying disk business. That would have been meat and

drink for Charles Fort. And has it ever been satisfactorily explained? Of course not. Only he's got thousands of unexplained things like that in his books, just as mysterious as the disks. And also never really explained."

I said, "It sounds interesting as hell. Where does an Ambrose Collector come in?"

"That's one of Fort's little jokes. In the fourth and last of his books, 'Wild Talents,' he's discussing mysterious disappearances. He mentions the disappearance of a man named Ambrose something-or-other in Canada, a particularly mysterious disappearance because if the man just walked off, he left more than a million bucks behind him and didn't even take a clean collar. Then he correlates that, tongue in cheek, I think, with the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce, the author, in Texas a few years before, and asks 'Was somebody collecting Ambroses?'"

"That part I want to read," I said. "You say it's in the fourth book, is it?" I picked up the volume from beside me on the bed.

"Yes, 'Wild Talents.' That's the omnibus edition, all four of his books in one volume. And it's indexed in the back. Look under Ambrose Bierce in the index, since I don't remember the other Ambrose's last name, and you'll find it. And by all means take the book along."

"Thanks, Karl."

"But what started all this? Your uncle's name is Ambrose, sure, but Good God, Ed, Fort was just kidding about an Ambrose Collector. And that was a long time ago, anyway."

I told him about the phone call that had pulled Uncle Am out of the Starlock office and the name the caller had used.

Karl whistled softly. "He must be someone who's read Charles Fort, but I'd hate to guess how many people in Chicago have read him. Thousands. Anyway, he must have a macabre sense of humor."

I said, "When I find him I'll find out how macabre his sense of humor is. I'll peel his skin off in strips and see how hard he laughs."

I stood up, and because I'd sounded over-dramatic, even to myself, I asked, "How about the poker game?"

"Not so hot." He grinned ruefully. "Which is a perfect buildup to can you let me borrow a fin till Friday?"

I handed it to him but couldn't resist saying, "Your astrology fell flat on its face, then?"

"Matter of fact, it didn't. I was fifteen bucks ahead up to midnight. If I could have quit then, I'd have been all right. This is Thursday, the fourteenth, and not an especially good day for me." He glanced at the clock on the bureau. "Especially it'll be a tough day after only three hours' sleep."

Estelle laughed. "Not hinting that you want us to leave, are you, Karl?"

He grinned. "Not you, Estelle. You may stay as long as you like."

But she followed me out.

I went down to the phone and called the office. Jane interrupted me as I started to give her a message. She said, "Here's Mr. Starlock, Ed; he must have heard the phone ring and come in from the back room. I'll let you talk to him."

A second later Starlock's voice said, "I was just dozing, Ed, and the phone waked me. What's the score?"

"Afraid we struck out." I told him the little we'd got from Karl Dell.

"Not so good," he admitted. "All we know is that whoever got Am must have read Charles Fort."

I said, "Or heard someone talk about him. I mean, Estelle had heard of the Ambrose Collector without even having heard of Charles Fort."

"Look, Ed, maybe that's an angle. There's one other thing we are pretty sure about—the guy who got Am must have known Am by sight. Did you ask Dell who, besides Estelle, he might have mentioned the Ambrose Collector business to? To anyone else around at your rooming house, for instance, besides Estelle? I think we can rule Estelle out."

"I know we can," I told him. "No, I didn't ask Karl that. I'll ask him. Then what? Shall I come down to the office?"

"Not a thing you can do here, Ed. I've put in all the routine calls I could think of with all results negative. I've even called the police and given them a report so if anything comes to them, we'll get it. Not that they'll do anything on it tonight, probably."



"What time shall I come in?"

Starlock said, "Make it eight. I've phoned the boys and three of them are coming in at eight. By that time I'll have assignments for them."

"You're sure there's nothing I can do now?"

"Not a thing, Ed. See you at eight."

I went back up the steps. Estelle was sitting on the top step waiting for me, and I sat down beside her. I told her what Starlock had said.

"Good," she said. "Then you've got about two hours to sleep before you have to leave for the office. I'll stand watch."

I shook my head. "Not in the mood for it, 'Stelle. I'll feel better now if I stay awake."

"All right, Eddie. Can I help you stay awake?"

I laughed. She put her head on my shoulder and said, "Tell me what's funny."

"I was thinking," I said, "of what Uncle Am would tell me to do."

"He's a pretty smart guy, Eddie."

I said, "I think so, too."

She whispered, "My room?"

"Go ahead up. I want to ask Karl one more question."

I kissed her and she tiptoed up to the third floor while I rapped on Karl Dell's door.

He called out for me to come in and I found he hadn't locked the door. The room was dark and he was in bed, but I could tell from his voice that he hadn't yet gone to sleep.

I said, "Sorry, Karl, but I've got to ask one more question. And it might be important."

"Shoot, Ed. Come on in."

I went in but didn't turn on the light. I asked him, "Have you ever mentioned this Ambrose Collector business to anyone besides Estelle?"

"Ummm—I may have, Ed. I read Charles Fort for the first time ten years ago, when I was in my teens. I don't specifically remember, but I may have."

"Let's put it this way, then. Have you ever mentioned it to anyone around here? Anyone in the rooming house, anyone who may have known my uncle?"

"That I can say for sure, Ed. I haven't. I've lived in Chicago only a year and I'm sure I haven't mentioned it to anyone

here. The night I had a date with Estelle I'd just happened to have been rereading that particular chapter; I hadn't thought about it for years before that."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks, and sorry I bothered you."

I pulled the door shut, and because he might be listening I went into my own room first and waited a moment before I tiptoed up to the third floor.

Estelle's door was open and her light was on, but she wasn't there. I sat down in the easy chair and opened the Charles Fort book, which I'd been carrying under my arm. The sound of water running in the shower down the hall told me I had a few minutes to wait.

I looked under Bierce in the index and found the passage Karl had referred to. The Canadian Ambrose had been Ambrose Small and I read the account of his disappearance; the circumstances really were puzzling. And I read:

*"Before I looked into the case of Ambrose Small, I was attracted to it by another seeming coincidence. That there could be any meaning in it seemed so preposterous that, as influenced by much experience, I gave it serious thought. About six years before the disappearance of Ambrose Small, Ambrose Bierce had disappeared. Newspapers all over the world had made much of the mystery of Ambrose Bierce. But what could the disappearance of one Ambrose, in Texas, have to do with the disappearance of another Ambrose, in Canada? Was somebody collecting Ambroses? There was in these questions an appearance of childishness that attracted my respectful attention."*

I put the book down and snorted a little. What did the gup mean by "appearance" of childishness? It was silly to connect two disappearances six years and a thousand or more miles apart just because of a coincidence of first names. Was he crazy or trying to be funny? Or both?

And then I realized that I had no business trying to judge that one passage in the book out of context, without knowing the writer's general style and purpose.

And then I forgot Charles Fort, for Estelle was in the doorway, barefooted, wearing a bathrobe.

She grinned at me and said, "Hi, Ed-

die," and then closed the door and turned out the light. A second later she was in my lap and the bathrobe had been lost somewhere between the door and me.

### III

STARLOCK had told me to get to the office by eight, but it was only a few minutes after half past seven when I got there. Jane, looking sleepy, was typing on a yellow telegraph blank; she pulled it out of the machine and used the switch that summoned a Western Union messenger from downstairs in the building.

She said, "Hi, Ed," and saw me glancing curiously at the telegram. "To the Carson Agency in Cleveland. Telling them to make a quick check on Richard Bergman and to wire us results."

"Anything new?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Not on the incoming end, Ed. We've put out a few hooks, as Mr. Starlock calls them."

The door to the back room opened, and Ben Starlock came in, rubbing his eyes. He said, "Hi, Ed. You're early. Early enough to have a cup of coffee with me before the boys get here. Everything caught up, Jane?"

"Yes, Mr. Starlock."

"Can you stick it out till nine o'clock, Jane?"

"Longer than that, if you want me to."

"Just till we can get an employment agency to send someone over, Jane. I doubt if any of them open before nine, but if you want to start trying sooner, go ahead. Tell them to send the best they've got—and one that's willing to take some overtime. We're going to have someone here—at least someone who can take messages—twenty-four hours a day till we find Am."

"And you want me to work nights?"

"If you will, Jane. And you can take twelve-hour shifts for a while? I don't know how long this will be—but I hope not long."

"Sure, Mr. Starlock."

"Good. Then when another girl gets here, you go home for twelve hours and then come back and relieve her. Come on, Ed, let's have a quick cup of coffee and get back here by eight."

We went to the lunch room just around the corner.

He asked me if I'd asked Karl Dell the question he suggested, and I told him what Karl had told me—that he didn't remember having mentioned the Ambrose Collector to anyone in Chicago except Estelle.

I asked him, "Why do you need another stenographer? Couldn't Dane take care of the office days?" I meant Dane Evans, whose title is head clerk although he's the only clerk in the office, and who handles the bookkeeping and billing.

Ben said, "I'm going to throw a lot of extra work on Dane, and I want him free to handle it. I'm going to let him do all the talking with clients and handle whatever ops will still be working on regular stuff, so I'll be completely free to concentrate on finding Am. And with all that besides his regular work, he'll have his hands full. He'll be able to break in the new girl, but he'll need her help on the things he can show her how to do."

He glanced at his watch. "Well, almost eight. We'd better get back."

When we got upstairs everyone was there. Everyone except Milt Eames, who'd been working on a job in Minnesota. There was Joe Streator, Emil Krazka, Art Wheelan and Bill Rogers, who's Jane's brother. Four ops besides myself. And Dane Evans, the head clerk.

None of them had gone to the back room yet; they were all sitting or standing around the office.

Ben said, "Listen, you all know what's happened, except the details. And you're going to know them. Nobody's going to be working in the dark on this."

"I'm going to start by having Ed brief you on everything that's happened up to now. Go in the back room for that. And while that's going on, I'm going to call the police and start the machinery going."

I led the way to the back room and the four ops and Dane Evans followed me. I started talking and gave them everything, starting with the phone call at four o'clock.

Ben Starlock opened the door before I'd finished, but he motioned me to go ahead, and stood there leaning in the doorway till I was through.

Then he said, "Pretty good job, Ed. I



don't think you missed anything. All right, boys, this is first. Do any of you know anything that might tie in with this? That even might possibly tie in with this?"

Nobody answered, and after seconds, Ben said, "Okay, but if any of you remember anything later, however slight, however improbable, that might have a bearing, don't sit on it. Come to me with it right away. Maybe something Am might have said to one of you. Maybe anything; I don't know what it might be."

He looked around at all of them. Then he said, "Regardless of facts, has anybody got any ideas? Any suggestions?"

Nobody said anything for a minute and then Joe Streater said, "I suppose this is so obvious you've thought of it, but for what it's worth, Ben, has Am worked on anything lately that might have made him any enemies?"

Ben said, "I haven't remembered anything, and I've been trying. But that's your job, Dane, as soon as we break this up. Go through the time records and list every job that Am's worked on since he's been here that has a criminal angle—even as criminal as a car skip. Dig out the files on them and put them on my desk."

Dane Evans nodded.

Ben said, "I just called the police and reported. I gave it to Missing Persons as a formality and to get it on the records so if anything's reported to them, we'll get it.

"Then I called Inspector Andrews and told him about it. And I put the screws on him. It isn't a Homicide job—anyway we hope to hell it isn't—but I got him to put a man on it, and the man we want because he's a friend of Am's. Cap Bassett. He's on his way around here right now."

He looked at me. "Any questions you want to ask 'em, Ed, before we start the ball rolling?"

I said, "It probably doesn't matter much, but I'm curious about one thing. Have any of you ever heard, before this morning, of the Ambrose Collector? Or of Charles Fort?"

Dane Evans said, "I've heard of Charles Fort, I think. Isn't one of his books 'The Book of the Damned'?"

"That's the first one he wrote," I said.

"The Ambrose Collector is in the fourth and last one, 'Wild Talents'."

Dane nodded. "Then I'd heard of Charles Fort. I read 'The Book of the Damned' some years ago. But I hadn't heard of the Ambrose Collector. Shall I get at those files, Ben?"

Starlock nodded, and moved out of the doorway to let Dane Evans past him. Slim as Dane is, Starlock is so heavy that Dane couldn't have got past him without squeezing.

Ben said, "First order of business is this Richard Bergman, the guy in four-eighteen at the Gresham. I'm going to put two of you boys on him, one to tail him and one to put the finger on him and to ask questions about him."

He pointed to Joe Streater and Emil Krazka. "You do the tailing, Joe. And you, Emil, the talking. There's a day clerk by the name of Everest. I slipped him a twenty last night and he'll co-operate with you. Maybe you can fix it with him to point out Bergman when he comes through the lobby. Or maybe if that doesn't look good, Emil, you can go up and see him on a wrong-room pretext and finger him for Joe. And then get everything you can out of Everest and anybody else, including the maid who does his room. And follow any leads you get. Right?"

Joe and Emil stood up. Ben said, "Get money from Dane on your way out. Draw a hundred apiece. If slipping ten or twenty to a maid or a bellboy or anybody gets you something you wouldn't get otherwise, don't pinch pennies. And, Emil, after he's gone out, get a look in his room if you can swing it. You can get a maid to risk her job for fifty bucks, if you let her watch while you look around so she knows you're not swiping anything."

Joe asked, "What if he's gone out already when we get there?"

"I don't think he will have. This clerk Everest that I gave money to phoned here while I was talking to the police on our unlisted line, and Jane held him for me till I could talk. He gave me the dope on outgoing phone calls from four-eighteen yesterday—which is that there weren't any—and I asked him to check with the maid on whether he was still in or not. He called me back on that and said he'd talked

to the maid on that wing of the fourth floor and she said he was still in and seldom left his room much before noon."

Emil Krazka grinned. "Sounds like you're getting your money's worth out of that twenty, Ben. And if the desk has already asked the maid about Bergman I'll bet you my buzzer will get me in his room without any fifty bucks. I'll give her ten if she's good-looking."

When Joe and Emil had gone, Ben Starlock asked me, "Any ideas, Ed? Anything you can suggest for Bill or Art to do?"

I shook my head.

Joe Wheelan said, "Maybe this sounds screwy, Ben, but is anyone looking into the angle of whether there maybe is an Ambrose Collector?"

"What do you mean, Art?"

"A nut. A nut who reads this Charles What's-his-name. In other words, has anybody else by the name of Ambrose disappeared recently?"

Ben Starlock looked up at the ceiling. He said, "It sounds screwy all right, Art, but you've bought yourself a job. Go to some newspapers and get their files on disappearances. Concentrate on out-of-own cases."

"Okay. But why out-of-town ones?"

"I can get the local ones easier and quicker than that, that's all. No use your wasting time on it. I'll ask Bassett to ask Missing Persons to run down their lists for Ambroses; it'll take 'em only minutes. But nobody's got a tabulated list from all over the country, or even Illinois."

Art said, "Right, Ben," and left.

"Only one other angle I can think of, Ed," Ben said, "and it's one I think you can handle better than Bill here. I mean, you already know the guy. So unless you've got any other ideas for Bill—"

"I haven't," I said.

"Then, Bill, I guess you might as well carry on with what you were working on yesterday. It's about the least unimportant of the things we were working on, and you were already on it."

At least the Starlock Agency would have one operative working on a job it would get paid for, I thought. Ben was surely throwing everything possible back of finding Uncle Am; I had no complaint on that score.

I asked, "What is it you want me to do?"

"It's a long shot, but why not check up on Karl Dell? Do you know for sure that he's on the up-and-up and really works for an insurance company, and really played poker yesterday evening?"

"Guess I don't really know any of those things," I admitted. "I mean, I never phoned him at work or anything like that. But what reason would he have had for collecting Uncle Am?"

"What reason would *anybody* have had? But somebody did."

There wasn't any answer to that, not that I knew of then, anyway. I said, "Okay, shall I wait for Bassett first?"

"Not unless you want to. He'll want to talk to you later, I guess, but I can give him everything we've got so far. And then I'll spend the rest of the morning going through those files Dane's digging up. Say, you and Am must talk over whatever you're working on, don't you?"

"Most of the time," I admitted.

"Can you recall anything he's worked on that might have led to—uh—this?"

"I've been trying to think," I said. "There are two guys he helped put away last year. You know which two I mean. But they're both still in jail, and one of them was an embezzler and the other was a forger. Both of them loners, not members of a gang or anything."

Ben nodded. "I'll make sure neither of them's been sprung. Or let Bassett check; he can get it easier and quicker."

I used the phone in the back room to call Harrison Mutual, and Karl Dell was there; he'd just got in and hadn't started on his rounds yet. I asked if I could meet him somewhere, and he said, "Sure, Ed. You're calling from the Starlock Agency? That's in the Loop, isn't it?"

I said yes and told him where. He said, "Then you're only a few blocks away. Why not walk around here? I'm in a sales meeting but it'll be over in ten minutes and then I can talk to you. Any news on your uncle?"

"Not yet," I told him. "Okay, Karl, I'll be around by the time you're out of the meeting."

Captain Frank Bassett of Homicide came in just as I was leaving. I'd have stuck around a while if I hadn't told



Karl I'd be there right away, but as it was I just said hi to him and said I'd see him later.

**T**HE SALES meeting was still on when I got to the Harrison Mutual; I sat in the outer office for about ten minutes and then Karl came out. He had his hat on and carried his brief case. He said, "Let's find a better place to talk than this. I haven't got a private office."

He said, in the elevator, "I could use a drink, Ed. I'm a little hung over from only a couple hours sleep last night and a lot of beer during the poker game. A drink'll help wake me up; I feel logy."

"Guess one wouldn't hurt me either," I said.

The place we went into had just opened and had no customers and only one bartender polishing glasses at the far end of the bar. He brought us a shot and chaser apiece and went back to his polishing. I paid for the drinks; in view of what I was going to say to Karl, it seemed the least I could do.

He said, "What is it, Ed?"

I decided to throw the blame on Starlock. I said, "Listen, Karl, Ben Starlock—that's my and Uncle Am's boss—asked me to check up on you. I know it sounds silly, but he thinks there might be more than a coincidence in—Well, about all we know about the guy who got Uncle Am is that he must know Uncle Am personally and that he knows about that passage in Charles Fort. You fit both qualifications."

"But why? I mean, what would I have against your uncle?"

"Not a thing that I could even guess, Karl. But then neither has anyone else that we know of. Anyway, I think Starlock's crazy. And that's why I thought it'd be easier and quicker to come to you and level with you and see if you'd let me ask you a few straight questions and get straight answers, and that would be that."

He laughed a little. He said, "I'll be damned. That's a new approach. I've read a lot of detective stories, but I never read about a detective using that angle in talking with a suspect. What do you want? An alibi?"

"Mainly that, yes. It would help if you'd tell me what you were doing between four

and five o'clock yesterday afternoon. And where you were playing poker last night."

"I'll make you a bargain, Ed."

"What kind of a bargain?"

"Won't cost you a penny and it'll take about two minutes of your time. I want to help you, Ed. I like your Uncle, and even if I didn't, I like you. Giving you the information you want won't help you at all. But I can help you, maybe, if you give me a chance to use astrology, see?"

"All right, then. I want you to get me your uncle's birth date so I can cast a horoscope for him. I'm not guaranteeing that I'll get a thing for you, Ed, but there's a chance. It'll be a hell of a lot better chance if I have the hour and minute, but I'll do what I can from the date and year. And I want your birth date too, in case I can get a cross reference. And if you get any suspects in the case outside of me I want their dates if you can get them. But mainly your uncle's. Fair enough?"

"You want it now?"

"Why not? The sooner the better. You can phone from here."

I sighed and got off the stool. I said, "You told me it wouldn't cost me a penny, but here goes a nickel already." But I went back to the phone booth and got the dope from Evans and went back to Karl at the bar. I gave him the date Dane had given me.

"No hour?"

I asked patiently, "Have you ever seen an application blank that asks what hour of the day you were born?"

He said, "They ought to," and he wasn't kidding.

I didn't want to get into arguing about astrology any more, so I said, "All right, you've got your price. Now, where were you between four and five o'clock yesterday afternoon?"

"Home with a headache. I started getting one about noon and by three-thirty it was so bad I left my territory and went home. Got there about four and lay down and dropped off to sleep after a while. I slept till eight and felt fine when I woke up. Went out to eat and it was after I got back that the phone call came about the poker game, and I decided to go and asked you if you wanted to come along."

"Let's stick to the four-to-five stretch," I said. "Can anyone prove you were in your room?"

"Mrs. Brady can prove I was home at four. I thought I had aspirins in my room, but found I was out of them. I got home at—well, maybe a few minutes before four o'clock. And when I found I was out of aspirins I went down and borrowed two from Mrs. B. But from then on till eight, I was alone in my room; don't know how I could prove it."

I said, "If Mrs. Brady can verify that and if the time is right, you're in the clear. Whoever got Uncle Am had to be busy from a little before four o'clock until quite a while after. How about the poker game?"

He gave me the address and phone number of Pewee Blaine, who'd called him, and the name and address where the game had been. And the names of four others who'd played, and the addresses of two of the four. He didn't know where the other two lived.

I offered him another drink, but he turned it down; I was just as glad because I didn't really want another myself. He said he'd better get going over to his territory, which was west of Halsted Street, and wanted to know if I'd be home in the evening so he could see me on the horoscope deal. When I told him I hadn't the slightest idea when I'd be home, he made me promise that I'd knock on his door whenever I got in, no matter what time it was or whether his light was on or not.

"I'll eat on the way home, Ed; I'll get there by six, and I won't make any calls this evening. I'll work on the horoscope from six on, and I'll have everything I can get within a couple of hours from then. Well, I've got to run."

He didn't run, but he walked fast toward Randolph Street where he could get a streetcar over to his territory. I went the other way and went to our bank to draw some money. I was getting low and wanted to have plenty of cash for anything that might come up, and I didn't want to get it as expense money from Starlock. He was already spending plenty and I felt that this was my business even more than his. He could cover expenses for the other ops, but I'd take care of

my own. I drew a couple of hundred bucks, which was all the checking account would stand without putting it under the required minimum. If I needed more than that, I'd have to cash in some of our bonds. Luckily, for convenience, we had both the bank account and the bonds under our joint names.

That had been Uncle Am's idea, and it had been a good one as far as our saving money for an agency of our own was concerned. He'd said, "Kid, if I keep my own money separate, I can't hang onto it as well. Knowing that if I lose money in a crap game half of what I'm losing is yours is going to keep me out of that crap game."

From the bank I took a cab home. Before I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door, I went up to our room to be sure Uncle Am hadn't come home, but everything was as I'd left it. I'd known it would be, but I had to look.

Mrs. Brady came to the door in a dressing gown, looking sleepy. I said I hoped I hadn't waked her and she said, "It's all right, Ed; I should have been up an hour ago. It's half past nine. Any word of your uncle?"

"Not yet," I told her. "What I want to ask is, do you know what time it was when Karl Dell came home yesterday afternoon?"

"Ed, you were waiting for Karl Dell to come home last night, weren't you? What's wrong? Do you suspect him of having something to do with whatever happened to your uncle?"

"I don't think so," I said. "But I'm trying to eliminate a remote possibility. Do you now what time he came home?"

"Well—not what time he came home, exactly. But I know when it was that he came down here to borrow some aspirin tablets. It was four o'clock."

"Are you sure of the exact time?"

"Yes, Ed. There are two radio serials I always listen to in the afternoon; one comes on at three thirty and the other at four. And Karl came right between them, during the advertising and station identification at four o'clock. I remember hurrying to get the aspirins so I wouldn't miss the start of the second one—and I didn't, either."

I went back to the office.



Starlock was sitting at his desk, leaning back with his hands clasped behind his head. I sat down in the chair in front of the desk. "Anything?"

"Nothing. Dell is out. He's alibied as of four o'clock."

"How good an alibi and how close is the time?"

I told him. He said, "Good work, Ed. Then that's one angle we can write off completely. Unless we'd ~~assume~~ a conspiracy with your landlady in it. I don't know her. How silly would it be?"

"Utterly."

"I'll take your word for it. So there's no use checking that poker alibi. It doesn't mean anything. And he wouldn't have given you all those names and addresses and phone numbers, anyway, unless it's on the level. All right, so Karl Dell is scratched at the starting post and that's off our minds. Bassett was just here."

I said, "He got here just as I was leaving. I'd have stayed except that I'd made an appointment with Dell. But I guess you gave him everything I could have."

Starlock nodded, still with his hands behind his head. He said, "Including something I didn't even know I had to give him. That I didn't remember, that is. It seems like a remote chance, but—"

He quit talking and started thinking until I had to prompt him. Then he said, "Bassett knows a little about the guy in four-eighteen. Richard Bergman. He's got something to do with the numbers racket. Know much about numbers, Ed? Ever play them?"

"A few times for small amounts. Just for the hell of it; I know the odds are against you."

Starlock said, "Damn near everybody seems to do it for small amounts, and plenty of them for big dough. It's a billion dollar business these days. There are people who make a living just selling tip sheets telling others what numbers to play."

"But what's the lead?" I asked. "You mean just that Bergman is in the policy game?"

"No, except that that ties in vaguely with something that happened a few days ago. Heard of Augie Grane?"

"Runs a night club on South State Street?"

"Yes, except that the night club is only a front, more or less. I mean, he makes a small fraction of his income from it; actually he runs one of the biggest numbers games here in Chicago, one of the five or six big ones. His head man in running the numbers is Toby Dagon. A tough boy, by the way."

"Monday Augie Grane and Toby Dagon were in here and offered me a job. At first glance, it looked okay to me and I was going to take it. I was going to put Am on it so I called him in from the back room to sit in on the conversation. Then I had a sober second thought and turned the job down. They didn't like it."

"Did Am have anything to do with your turning it down?"

"No, definitely not. He'd hardly opened his mouth; I'd just called him in to listen in so he'd be ready to start on it. They didn't like my turning it down—anyway, Toby Dagon didn't—but if they'd wanted to get seriously mad at anybody it'd have been me and not Am. And it was my own fault; I should have realized right away that it was something I didn't want to get into. If I'd turned down the job when they started to talk, it would have been better."

"What was the job?" I asked him.

"Somebody's been beating the racket and they can't figure how. But Augie Grane says they've been paying out more than the percentages would indicate. Not enough to break him or even to make him lose money. But he's making less than he should. He wondered if somebody had the fix in; if some other outfit was managing to beat him in some way he couldn't figure. He wanted me to put an op or two at checking things, especially watching his own ticket men."

I said, "I should think he'd use his own boys for that."

"He said he thought a detective agency could do better. And he was frank in saying he thought he could trust us more than any of his own men. And he had a point there."

"From our point of view it wouldn't have been dishonest. It might have been skirting the law a bit but no more than the police do for that matter. And he offered to pay me our regular rates, win

or lose, and a nice bonus if we put our finger on what was wrong. It looked good to me until, while we were all talking, I began to realize what I was letting myself in for."

I nodded. "You mean if you found out for them who was doing the rooking, they'd take care of the rookers their own way and that'd make you an accessory before the fact, in a way, for giving them the information they'd act on."

"Guess you're smarter than I am, Ed. Took me twenty minutes to see that, and by that time they thought I was taking on the job, although I still hadn't specifically said I would. But still I don't see how that would tie in with what happened to Am. It wouldn't give them anything against him. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they approached him privately and asked him to take on the job on the side. And if they had I don't think he'd have done it."

I said, "I know he wouldn't. If they had approached him he'd have turned them down. He wouldn't take a case behind your back. Even an honest one. That's out."

"That's what I told Bassett and he agreed with me. I don't think there's any squarer guy in Chicago than your uncle, Ed. But I remembered about that interview and I told Bassett about it, for what it's worth, when he asked me if we'd ever done any work for any of the numbers boys. And he asked that because, when I told him about Richard Bergman being in four-eighteen, he knew Bergman was connected with numbers."

I asked, "Any reports on Bergman yet?"

"Emil phoned and said he was still in his room. Emil went up there with a pass key he got from Everest and went right in the room, playing he was a drunk who'd got in the wrong room with a key that happened to work. Bergman was just getting up, he said. Now Emil's waiting out of sight in a corner of the lobby for Bergman to come down, and he'll finger him for Joe so Joe can tail him. Emil'll report in after that."

I said, "Numbers racket or no numbers racket, Ben, I can't see Bergman as having anything to do with it. If he had, the last thing on earth he'd have done would

be to give a wrong name and his right room number to you over the phone. Especially as he had no reason to give the right room number if Uncle Am wasn't going to get that far anyway."

Starlock said gloomily, "I agree with you, Ed. I'd give a thousand to one that Bergman hasn't anything to do with it. I wouldn't have two men on him if I had any other leads."

"What's Bassett working on?"

"He said he'd check into the Augie Grane-Toby Dagon angle, and also get some more on Bergman. Also the routine things to get the police machinery going all the way down the line. He wanted to talk to you, and I didn't know when you'd be in so he said he'd call in every once in a while till he caught you."

"What can I do meanwhile?"

He looked at me. "I don't know, Ed. I don't know a thing you can do."

I went into the back room and lay down on an army cot Ed had placed there. I tried not to think, but that kept me awake. So I let my mind alone and, after a while, it let me alone.

It was two o'clock when I woke up, and I was hungry. I remembered that I hadn't eaten any breakfast except one doughnut with the coffee I'd had with Starlock before eight o'clock. I put on my shoes and coat and went into Starlock's office.

He said, "You must've got some sleep, Ed. That's good."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing on the constructive side. Bassett called; he's mostly oiling the gears over at headquarters, talking Missing Persons into taking a more than routine interest, stuff like that. Also, he saw Toby Dagon. Tried to see Augie Grane, but Augie wasn't down yet; he sleeps late, I guess."

"How about Toby?"

"Bassett says Toby's alibied—according to Toby. He hasn't checked it yet, but says it looks good and will probably stand up. And it doesn't look like a rigged-up alibi either, Bassett says. He's decided he's fairly sure neither Augie Grane nor Toby has anything to do with it."

"And Richard Bergman? Anything new on him?"

"Well, Emil reported in. Bergman left



the hotel at noon; Emil fingered him for Joe, and Joe followed him. No report from Joe yet; probably won't be unless he loses Bergman or follows him back to the hotel."

"Bergman's going back?" I asked. "I mean, he didn't check out?"

"No, he didn't check out. After he left, Emil managed to get into the room for a look around. Found nothing of interest; if Bergman has any papers with him, they're in his pocket. Just clothes—one big Gladstone bag of them. Couldn't get any more information about him at the hotel than I got from Everest last night. Went around to headquarters to check with the boys there."

"Looks like a blank," I said. "I still don't see how he could have anything to do with it."

Starlock nodded gloomily. "Afraid you're right, Ed. Damn it, if we only had something that did look as though it might lead somewhere—Oh, your friend was here. Estelle Beck."

"You mean she phoned? Or came in?"

"She came in. Wanted to know if there was anything she could do. Said she'd quit her job last night anyway and wanted to know if there was any place she could maybe get herself into."

"Ummm," I said. "Well, the Augie Grane business looks like a thousand-to-one shot, but if he can use another waitress in his night club, what's to lose. She might pick up something."

"That's what I told her," Starlock said.

"Did she go there?"

"It's too early. Later, early this evening when they're getting ready to open." He shrugged. "She won't get anything, but what's to lose if she's looking for a job anyway and does happen to find one there? She's a swell looker, Ed."

"When can I see Bassett?"

"Said he'd phone again. I'll put you on if you're here, or make a date for you if you're out."

"Out doing what? Is there anything I can do?"

"Feed your face, I guess. It's after two and you haven't had lunch yet. Aren't you hungry?"

I admitted that I was. I went down to the lunch room on the corner and fed my face. When I got back, a Western Union

boy was just leaving.

Starlock was opening the telegram. He said, "From Cleveland," and I walked around and read it over his shoulder:

**Subject maintains home here. Travels most of the time. Connected numbers racket, believed liaison man among big syndicates. Police record gambling charges, several counts, ten to fifteen years ago, two convictions but fined only, no jail sentences. No arrests in ten years. Scale of living indicates income ten to twenty thousand year. Shall we continue? If so, what angle? CARSON.**

Starlock looked up at me.

"I would like to know a little more about what Carson means by liaison. Think I'll call him; he can give us more over the phone than he could put in a telegram." He raised his voice, "Maude."

I looked around and saw that a new girl was sitting at Jane's desk. Starlock said, "By the way, Maude, this is Ed Hunter. Ed, Maude Devers. Maude, will you get me the Carson Detective Agency, Cleveland, Ohio, on the phone. Get Claude Carson personally."

Maude nodded to me, said, "Yes, Mr. Starlock," and got busy on the phone.

Starlock said, "Bassett phoned for you while you were out, Ed. He was going to be tied up in red tape most of the rest of the afternoon, he said, and wanted to know if he could see you this evening. I made a dinner date for you, six o'clock in the Blackstone lobby. Buy him a couple of drinks and a good dinner."

"Sure," I said.

Maude said, "I have Cleveland, Mr. Starlock."

"Okay, Maude," Starlock picked up his phone. "Ed, if you want to listen in, take the other phone. Save me telling you."

I sat down on a corner of Maude's desk and picked up her phone. I heard Starlock say "Hello," and a voice, "Carson speaking."

"Starlock, Claude. About the wire you sent. I think it's enough—all you can get there that will be any good to us, but maybe you can fill in a detail or so. Exactly what do you mean by 'liaison man'? Is it a new angle?"

"The way I get it, Ben, is that it's an angle he worked out for himself. He

doesn't work for any one of the big operators in numbers, but for any of them that'll hire him. My informant says he gets about fifty a month apiece from the big boys who're on his list, and less from the smaller ones. He tries to keep them from stepping on one another's toes."

"How? I mean, has he got torpedoes back of him?"

"No, nothing like that. Just moral suasion. If one of them tries to chisel on another, or offer bigger odds or something, he tries to talk him out of it. And what he says throws weight, not because of anything he himself might do about it, but because he can line up the whole—uh—"

"Racket?" Starlock said.

"Industry, Ben. He can line up the boys against any one of them that steps too far out of line. They can put on economic pressure. More effective than torpedoes in the long run."

"Exactly how, Claude? Pretend I'm stupid. I think I know what you mean, but give it in words of one syllable. Say I'm running a policy game here in Chi. I step out of line by offering bigger odds, unfair competition. What happens to me after our subject tries to talk me out of it and I tell him no dice?"

"You pay protection, don't you? Well, so do the other boys in Chicago, and collectively they pay a lot more than you do and swing more weight. They swing pressure back of their dough, and yours doesn't mean so much any more. Your slip men start getting picked up oftener; you pay more fines. Maybe your headquarters get raided and you pay a big fine or two. Maybe your best customers get heckled, and maybe rumors go around that you're going broke and wouldn't be able to pay off if somebody gets lucky. You start losing money. If you've got any sense you get back in line."

Ben said, "Sounds good. Sounds like our subject is a pretty clever guy."

"He is. And he's clever enough not to push any of it too far."

"Sounds like a glorified public relations man," Ben said. "No, not that—inter-industrial relations man. You don't think he'd go in for any rough stuff, huh?"

"Hell, no. He's got a cinch as long as he doesn't. His whole job is to try

to hold down the rough stuff."

Ben said, "I've got the picture. Thanks, Claude. Send me a bill but don't go wild on it! I'm not working for a client. This one is on the house."

Captain Bassett and I strolled across the Blackstone lobby and into the bar.

Estelle was sitting there on a bar stool, a thin-stemmed glass in her hand. I walked toward her and was going to say something when she happened to look up and our eyes met in the mirror behind the bar. She started a little, and then shook her head very slightly and turned to say something to the man sitting beside her.

So I kept on walking past her and past the man, without looking at him, down toward the far end of the bar. I was in the lead, Bassett just behind me. When I was only a step past Estelle and the man who was with her, I heard Bassett's voice behind me say, 'Hello, Augie.'

I kept on going, hoping Bassett wouldn't stop either. And he didn't.

#### IV

I WENT a safe distance down the bar, past another couple, before I stopped. Bassett, beside me, said what I thought he'd say, but we were safely out of hearing so it was all right.

"That's Augie Grane, Ed. Ben tells me there's a remote suspicion he might have something to do with your uncle disappearing. I don't think so, myself. But do you want to meet him?"

"Not yet," I said.

"Okay. Jeez, but that's a gorgeous little piece with him. You have to be rich, I guess, to get next to something like that."

I wanted to laugh, and I wanted to get dramatic and say "You are speaking of the woman I love!" But then again it wasn't exactly funny, and I wasn't really sure whether I loved Estelle or not.

So I just said, "That's Estelle Beck. That's why I don't want to meet Augie now."

Bassett whistled softly. "The girl Ben was telling me about? The one that rooms with you and Am?"

"The one Ben told you about. She doesn't exactly room with me and Am. That would be polyandry?"

"You know what I mean. In the same



building."

I just nodded, because I was wondering whether it was just coincidence that Estelle and Augie Grane had happened to come to the bar at the Blackstone, or whether she'd learned from Ben Starlock where my appointment with Bassett was and had come here on purpose so I'd see her with Augie. I made a mental note to ask Ben, just out of curiosity.

The bartender came up to serve us, and when Bassett ordered a cognac, I took the same. When the bartender had poured our drinks and gone, I said, "I'm glad you ordered something we could drink down and not have to work on, Frank. Let's move on."

"Okay, Ed, but you said a couple of drinks. Now you're chiseling."

"We'll get another somewhere else. Let's not eat here; 'Stelle and Augie may be going from here into the dining room, like we were going to do. I just want to stay clear of them."

"But why? I mean, what have you got in mind about Augie that makes any difference whether he sees you here or not? You don't have to talk to the girl or she to you if she's working on him under cover."

"I just don't want him to connect us at all. It might be dangerous for Estelle. She may have suggested coming here for a drink—and then he sees you here and knows you're working on the case, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"He just might figure she brought him here for a reason—because you were coming. That's why I'm glad you didn't stop to talk to him when you went by just now. And if he notices me with you—which I don't think he has as yet—and then later finds out who I am, well—"

Bassett grimaced. "All right, all right. We'll go to a hamburger stand then. And here I had my mouth set for a good dinner; wish we'd gone to the dining room first." He tossed down his cognac.

I grinned at him. "No hamburger tonight, Frank. There's a little French restaurant a block from here that'll charge us even more than the dining room here would. And we can get drinks there, too. I've never been there but Uncle Am went with a client once and has been raving

about it ever since."

"Can I have a filet mignon?"

I said, "Sure, with whipped cream on it. Now let's get out of here. And one at a time. Grane wouldn't have noticed us come in together because I was past him before you spoke. So you go out first and I'll join you in the lobby in a minute. Don't stop to talk to him unless he stops you."

Bassett nodded and went out; the man sitting next to Estelle didn't look around. I gave Bassett half a minute while I pocketed my change and then went after him. I took a quick look at Augie Grane as I walked past him, managing to get a front view in the bar mirror without catching his eye. He didn't look at all as I'd expected him to. He was a bit plump but not really fat, and a bit thin on top but not really bald. He looked about forty, about Uncle Am's age, and he had the same kind of round, cheerful face that Uncle Am has. He didn't look like a racketeer or even like a night club owner. He looked rather like a nice guy.

I was almost safely past them when Estelle caught a glimpse of me in the mirror. She turned quickly and said, "Eddie," and I had to stop and turn. I felt like kicking the stool out from under her.

She said, "Eddie, I'd like you to meet my new boss. I'm going to be a cigarette girl at the Blue Croc; this is Mr. Grane, who owns it."

Augie turned and stuck out a hand. "Glad to know you," he said. "I didn't get the last name."

That wasn't odd, because no one had mentioned it. Maybe Estelle thought I'd want to give a phony one. But if I did and then later he learned who I was it would be worse for Estelle than if I gave the right one.

So I gave the right one. I couldn't tell whether it registered or not; there wasn't any reaction in his face. But then Hunter is a common enough name; even if Bassett had been asking him questions about an Ambrose Hunter only hours ago, he wouldn't necessarily connect it with me.

I said something about being late for something and got away from them. Estelle called out for me to drop in at the Blue Croc later if I was free.

Bassett was waiting in the lobby. I grimaced at him, and then told him what had happened.

He said, "I don't think it matters much, Ed."

"As far as I'm concerned, no. But Estelle has an in and might be able to get something for us, working at the Croc. Now, as soon as Augie finds out who I am, Estelle's goose is cooked as far as finding out anything is concerned."

"Sure, Ed, but I don't think there's anything to find out at the Blue Croc anyway. I'll tell you about it while we eat—and, say, we might as well eat here now. Or is this frog place really better?"

"I don't know," I said, "but let's go there anyway. I'd feel even more foolish now if Augie saw us eating together. He'd *know* that I'd tried to duck meeting him."

We went to the French place. There was a bar, but we took a table right away and ordered our drinks from the waiter.

Bassett said, "I want to pump you, Ed; that's what we're together for. But first I'll tell you the little I've managed to get so far. It all adds up to that we haven't got even a glimmer of what looks like a real lead.

"First, let's take Augie Grane. I talked to him. I think he's clear. He hasn't much of an alibi for yesterday around four o'clock, but I don't think that matters. For one thing, Augie isn't a killer. For the kind of racket he's in, he's a nice guy. He's a bit annoyed at Ben Starlock for taking so long to turn down the business he offered him, but that's understandable. He remembers Am vaguely; knew that an operative was listening in on the conversation with the idea of working on the case, but didn't remember Am's name until I mentioned it. Says the last thing on earth he'd have done is approach Am on the side—says one man wouldn't do him any good anyway. And I believe him, Ed."

It made sense; I believed it, too.

I said, "All right, let's scratch Augie. One thing, though; if he finds out Estelle is a spy from our camp, would that be safe for her?"

"Sure, Ed. He certainly wouldn't do any more than fire her. I doubt he'd do even that. Especially if he's in the clear on this, and I'm sure he is." Bassett

grinned. He said, "I wish that gal was trying to worm some secrets out of *me*. It'd be fun, even if I knew what she was doing. I wouldn't fire her; I'd lead her on."

"Let's leave you out of this and stick to Augie. Is Estelle safe with him?"

"She's safe if she wants to be safe. I mean, he isn't going to kill her or rape her. He'll probably make passes at her. Who the hell wouldn't?"

"Okay," I said, and tried not to wonder how far Estelle might go in trying to get into Augie's confidence. Maybe I was afraid to wonder.

Bassett said, "Now this other guy, this Toby Dagon, is a different breed of monkey. I wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw the Blackstone Hotel. And we've never got anything on him, but he is a killer. I'd bet on it.

"But he works for Augie, and the way I get it, Augie holds him down and won't let him do any rough stuff. He wouldn't have done anything to Am on Augie's orders, Ed, but if he had anything personal against him—"

"You talked to him?" I asked.

"Yeah, I talked to him. He's got a pretty good alibi. I checked it and it seems to hold up. Besides, there's no way he could have had anything against Am, personally. No motive whatsoever. And besides, I can't see him having the imagination to pull something like that Ambrose Collector gag. Anything he did, he'd do straight, not fancy. If you ever meet him, I think you'll see what I mean."

I sighed. "All right," I said. "It looks thinner and thinner that we might be able to tie in Augie Grane or Toby Dagon. What have we got left? Richard Bergman. What about him?"

"That's even thinner, Ed. What possible reason could he have for doing anything to Am? The only way this Bergman gets in is that the Ambrose Collector had to give some room number and he made up four-eighteen. Am never got there anyway, so it doesn't matter what number he gave. The way I see it, it really clears Bergman; why would he have given his own room number?"

I nodded. I wanted to ask him where that left us, but I knew the answer. It left us chasing our own tails.



We decided on one more drink before we ordered dinner and suddenly, just after we ordered it, I remembered something. I said, "I'd better phone the agency, Frank. They don't know where we are; if anything comes up, they'll be trying to reach us at the Blackstone."

I found a phone booth and called. I didn't recognize the voice that answered and thought I had the wrong number until I remembered that the new girl would still be there and Jane wouldn't get down for a while yet. I told her who I was and asked if Starlock was there.

She said, "He's here; he's talking on another line. Will you wait a minute?"

I said I would, and I did. Then Starlock's voice came on. "Ed? There's a call for you on the other phone. Karl Dell. I was just trying to get out of him what he wants so he wouldn't bother you while you're with Bassett. But he wants to talk to you personally, so—"

"Is he home? I guess he is; he was there when I left. If so, Ben, tell him I'll phone him as soon as I'm through talking with you. Tell him to stay by the phone; I'll be calling in a minute."

Starlock said, "Okay, Ed," and was gone from the line half a minute and then came back. "Guess you'd better call him right away, Ed; he sounded pretty excited about something."

"Astrology," I said. "He probably added Uncle Am's birthdate to a transit of Mercury and got the latitude and longitude of where Uncle Am is now. But I'll call him. Listen, Ben, the reason I called in is to let you know where you can reach me. Bassett and I aren't eating at the Blackstone. We're at Chez Julliard, on Madison."

"Okay, Ed. Don't spare the horses. Anything new?"

"Only that Estelle got on at the Blue Crocodile, as cigarette girl. And apparently Augie Grane hired her personally. Anyway, they're having cocktails at the Blackstone."

"Oh. So that's why you aren't eating there. That Estelle's a good kid, Ed. Wish I could take her on as a full time op."

I knew he wouldn't want to if I told him about the bonehead stunt she'd done in introducing me to Augie, but I didn't

want to go into that over the phone. I'd have to tell him if the question of my talking to Augie came up, but there wasn't any point in it otherwise. So I just said I'd better call Karl Dell and then get back to Bassett, and hung up.

I called home and Karl must have been waiting at the phone because he answered right away. He said, "Listen, Ed, I've got something damn important. I don't want to tell you over the phone, but can I see you right away? Your boss said you're eating dinner with a police captain—can I grab a cab and come there?"

He did sound excited. I said, "Won't it keep, Karl? I'll come home right after we eat. Or can't you tell me now?"

"I—I'd rather not tell you over the phone. But it is important, Ed. Or it might be. And it isn't astrology, exactly."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Well—I hit a lucky number and it made me remember something. I mean it was a lucky number because it made me remember something. Where are you? I'd rather tell you about it personally."

I began to think that if it was something he remembered, even if astrology had made him remember it, I wanted to hear it. And if it turned out to be nothing important, I could buy him a drink and get rid of him. So I said, "We're at Chez Julliard, Karl."

"That's on Madison, isn't it? I'll grab a cab and be there in fifteen minutes."

I went back to the table and told Bassett all about Karl Dell. "Well, Ed, I hope it's something. We can use it."

I took a chance on ordering cognac for Karl; anyway, there wouldn't be any ice in it to melt if he was a little later than he'd predicted.

Bassett said, "Might as well see what Dell has to say before we order dinner, huh? But I'm getting hungry. Hope it's nothing that—Come to think of it, I hope it is something that keeps us from eating. If it's that important, it'll be important."

I hoped so, too. But I said, "How about this pumping you were going to do. Might as well start that while we're waiting."

"Okay, Ed. You know about what I want. You start talking, and I'll interrupt when I think of a question."

I knew what he wanted and I felt pretty sure that none of it was going to

be any good. I started talking about what little I knew of Uncle Am's early life and how he and I had got together—and stuck together—after my father's death. About the carnival, our coming to Chicago, who our friends were and what we did with ourselves outside of working hours—and during working hours, for that matter.

Bassett interrupted with questions and I answered them as well as I could. After a while he shook his head. "There's nothing there, Ed. Say, isn't it about time that guy got here?"

I looked at my watch and it was a quarter after seven. I said, "Unless something held him up. Maybe he didn't start right away. Although I got the impression that he would, and he said he'd take a cab. Shall we have another drink?"

He shook his head. "Not before we eat. I'm beginning to feel those. Sure he knows where the place is?"

"Yes," I said. "I said Chez Julliard and he said 'On Madison, isn't it?' So he must know it."

"Why don't you call home and be sure he left?"

I was sure Karl would have left before then, but I went to the phone and called Mrs. Brady. She hadn't seen Karl at all, but she called upstairs and didn't get an answer. She asked me if there was any news about Uncle Am and I told her there wasn't.

The phone booth was near the front door and when I left it I strolled to the door and watched through it for a few seconds to see if Karl was coming.

I went back to the table and told Bassett, "Karl isn't there now, but Mrs. Brady didn't see him so she doesn't know what time he left."

"He'll be here any minute, then. Damn, I'm getting hungry."

"Let's order," I said. "If Karl brings us a lead that's worth following, and following in a hurry, so what's the price of a dinner? Through asking me questions?"

"That's all I can think of now. What time is it?"

I looked at my watch and said, "Seven twenty-six. It was almost an hour ago when I talked to him. He could have walked here in half an hour."

Bassett sighed and stood up. "I'll check," he said. "If he had an accident or any-

thing, the report might be in by now. You sure, though, he just didn't decide to do something else? Is he a dependable type of guy?"

"Without knowing him very well, I'd say he was, Frank. And he sounded plenty excited and seemed to think that what he had was pretty important."

Bassett went to the phone booth and stepped inside. His call seemed to take quite a bit of time; two or three minutes later he stepped out of the booth, still with the receiver in his hand, and motioned to me.

I got there fast. I asked, "Something about Uncle Am? Or—?"

"No. Karl Dell, maybe. Describe him, Ed."

I said, "Five-eleven, under thirty, slender build, slightly wavy brown hair, brown eyes. Wore a light brown tweed suit at five o'clock, probably wouldn't have changed it. Light blue shirt, dark blue solid color tie—"

"Hold it," Bassett said. "That's plenty."

He stepped back into the booth and didn't close the door. He said, "Yeah, that's the guy. Karl Dell, Karl with a K." He gave the address and said, "Yeah, I've got someone here with me who can identify him. Where's the body? . . . Okay, we'll go there, but first we're going around to the guy's home address, want to get whatever's there while it's hot. Probably get there about the same time you do."

He hung up.

I asked, "An accident?"

Bassett shook his head.

**I** DIDN'T ask for details until I'd managed to pay the check for the drinks and we'd got out of Chez Julliard and into a taxi.

Then Bassett said, "I checked traffic first; there weren't any accidents that would fit. So I called my own department. Got Andrews and asked him if there'd been anything in the last hour. And something had just come in. Guy found killed and robbed in a parked car way out on Howard Avenue."

"Howard Avenue?" I said, surprised. Howard Avenue is half an hour's drive north of our rooming house, in the opposite direction from the Loop.

"Yeah. He was down on the floor of the



car in the back seat. Hit in the head, probably with a pistol butt, although it could have been a hammer or a jack handle or something else heavy and hard. His wallet was gone; all they had was a description and the monogram D on his belt buckle. And the horn going like all hell."

I said, "Does it *have* to be Karl? I mean, there are lots of people in a city the size of Chicago that would fit that description."

Bassett said, "The height-weight-age stuff, yes. But the clothes fitted, too. Light brown tweed, light blue shirt, dark blue solid color tie. And belt buckle monogrammed D. And on top of that, Karl Dell missing. Don't kid yourself, Ed. It's him."

I knew it was, I guess; I'd just been looking for a loophole.

Our taxi made good time. We went upstairs first before trying Mrs. Brady's. Karl's door was closed and locked. Bassett was going to shoulder it down, but I told him Mrs. Brady had a duplicate key and there wasn't any use breaking the lock, so he said okay. I went into our room, just for a look around; I don't know why. Surely by now I'd given up hope of finding Uncle Am there, casually asleep in bed or reading the newspaper in his favorite chair. The room was just as I'd left it.

Bassett was starting down the stairs and said, "Come on, Ed." I said, "Just a second, Frank. I'll see if Chester's home. He may have seen something."

I knocked on Chester Hamlin's door and when there wasn't any answer, I tried the knob and found the door wasn't locked. I stuck my head inside and looked around.

Chester wasn't there, but his hat and coat were thrown on the bed; he'd been home, probably he was down the hall in the bathroom. But he could wait until we'd seen Mrs. Brady and got the duplicate key from her, so I joined Bassett on the stairs and went down them and I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door.

When she opened it, I got the worst over right away. I said, "Mrs. Brady, I've got bad news. Karl Dell has been killed."

Her face turned a bit paler than I'd

ever seen it, but otherwise she took it pretty well. She asked, "You mean—?"

I nodded. I knew the question she hadn't asked was whether he'd been murdered, and she knew that I knew. I said, "This is Captain Bassett, Mrs. Brady, of the police. May we have a key to Karl's room?"

"Of course, Ed." She keeps her duplicate keys hanging on a little rack just inside her door, so she could reach it for us without having to leave the door.

I asked, "When did you see Karl last, Mrs. Brady?"

"Why—the time you asked me about, Ed. Yesterday at four o'clock when he borrowed the aspirins. I haven't seen him today at all."

I said, "He was here for an hour and a half. I saw him at five o'clock, when I left. He'd just got home and was going to work on some astrology. And he was still here at half past six because I talked to him then on the phone."

"I didn't see him, Ed. I've been in my kitchen most of the time, though. I wouldn't have seen him. You say you talked to him on the phone here? I didn't answer it."

"He did. He was waiting by the phone for me to call because he'd just called the agency and I'd just called there and—well, that's complicated. Anyway he answered the phone first time it rang, so that's probably why you didn't hear it."

"Of course. I probably wouldn't, if it rang only once. Maybe Chester saw Karl. Do you want to ask him, Ed? He's here; he had dinner with me. He's in the kitchen drying dishes."

I said, "Sure, I'd like to talk to him." She stepped aside and we went in and walked through to the kitchen. Chester was wearing a kitchen apron of Mrs. Brady's and had a dishtowel in his hand.

He said, "Hi, Ed. Say, I developed those pics of you playing trombone and they're pretty good. Show 'em to you later. Any news of your uncle?"

I shook my head. "Have you seen Karl, Chester?" I asked him.

"Good Lord, isn't he home yet? You were waiting for him last night, weren't you?"

"I saw him when he got in last night. I mean, did you see him at all today?"

"No. Why?"

"What time did you get home?" I asked him.

"Oh—about an hour ago. I didn't notice exactly. Why, Ed? Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I said. "Karl's dead. This is Captain Bassett of Homicide, Chester. We're trying to find out what happened. Did you go upstairs when you came home an hour ago, or did you come right in here?"

"Well, both. I mean I stopped at Mrs. Brady's door here on my way in, to give her the fish that somebody gave me today. She asked me if I'd eat them with her and I said sure. But I went up to my room and left my coat and hat there, then I came down here."

"You left your door unlocked?"

"Yes, I guess I did. I thought I'd be in the building."

"And you have been ever since?"

"Sure. I've been in here ever since."

There was knocking on Mrs. Brady's door; it was two men from the Homicide Department. We, Bassett and I, joined them out in the hall. Bassett introduced me to them; their names were Jerry Dix and Tom Keyes.

"Well," Bassett said, "guess we'll have to have an identification. Jerry, will you drive Ed around and have him take a look? Tom and I will start working on Dell's room upstairs."

Jerry Dix took me in his car to the mortician's place on Howard Avenue where the body had been taken. It was Karl Dell all right. I signed a paper making identification of the body and Dix drove me back.

We went upstairs and found Bassett and the other detective going through the books in Karl's bookcase.

Bassett said, "One thing new. We got a report on the car. It was stolen from only a block from here. Don't know exactly when; the owner parked it at five and didn't miss it until eight. We've been through everything in this room, including the handwriting on the wall, and it all adds up to the fact that Karl Dell was an insurance salesman with astrology for a hobby. From what correspondence we found, his nearest relative is a maiden aunt in Detroit. And that checks with what

information Harrison Mutual had on him; we got the branch manager to go down to the office and meet a man we sent over there for a look at Dell's application."

"Get anything else from it?"

Bassett shrugged. "Nothing that matters. We underguessed his age; he was thirty-four. Never been married. Got a fair sized chunk of savings in the form of ten and twenty year endowment policies in his own company. The aunt in Detroit's the beneficiary, so she's the only one who gains by his death. And I doubt if she killed him."

"So do I," I said.

"Especially as she's in Detroit. Headquarters called her up long distance to notify her. She's coming here, incidentally, to take care of funeral arrangements and stuff. What time is it, Ed?"

"About a quarter after nine," I told him. And that reminded me; Starlock had been going to stick around the office until nine; I'd forgotten to call him. He didn't even know that Karl Dell had been killed.

I told Bassett what I was going to do and went downstairs and called the office. Jane answered and when I asked about Starlock she said, "Maybe he's home by now, Ed. I got down at half past eight, half an hour sooner than I was supposed to, and he left when I got here. If he went right home, he'd be there by now."

I called Starlock's home phone and he answered. He said, "I was just getting ready to cut off my underwear and take a bath, Ed. If there's nothing hot to follow up, Ed, I'll go ahead and take that bath before I come down and—"

"Why should you?" I interrupted him. "I mean, why should you come down, Ben? There's nothing you can do — at least nothing that Bassett and the police aren't doing. Bassett's in charge and has men helping him."

"What are you doing?"

"Just getting in Bassett's way, I guess."

"Then why don't you grab a cab and come out here, Ed? At least I want to hear all the details before I turn in, so I can sleep on it. We'll talk it over and if we can't think of anything constructive to do tonight, then I'll get some sleep."

"Okay," I said. "I'll tell Bassett and be right out."



"While you're talking to Frank, Ed, tell him there's one new development—on the negative side. Richard Bergman's in the clear as far as Am's concerned."

"Who says?" I asked.

"Judge Haberman. Bergman was down at the court house yesterday afternoon arranging bail for a couple of numbers peddlers that got pinched. He often fronts for the boys he represents on things like that ; part of the way he earns his money."

"How'd you happen to find out?"

"Joe Streater. Joe tailed him around from the time he left the hotel this noon until about three thirty he lost him in the court house; he was back there again doing the same thing. But he went in an office through one door and came out another in another hallway and Joe lost him. He doesn't think Bergman knew he was being tailed or shook him off deliberately; it was just one of those things that can happen."

"But while he was tailing him Joe saw that Bergman knew a lot of people at the court house and Joe knew some of the same ones. So when he lost Bergman he figured he might as well ask questions about him, and he came up with the fact that Bergman was there yesterday afternoon too. And at about the time Am was being collected, so that lets him out completely."

I said, "I'll tell Bassett—not that he thought Bergman had anything to do with it anyway. And I'll see you in half an hour if I can get a cab right away."

I went up and told Bassett what we'd learned about Richard Bergman and he said, "Good. I didn't want to waste time on him anyway, and I guess I'd have had to." He laughed without any humor. "You know what's wrong with this business, Ed, is that everybody's got an alibi. And a good one; none of them look like rigged-up ones. I don't see how this numbers racket business ties in anyway; I think we're on a wild goose chase. There's no motive in it, Ed. We won't get to first base until we find somebody that had a reason for—for doing something to Am."

"Unless it's a psychopath," I said.

"Psychoes aren't that fancy, usually. I mean that Ambrose Collector angle. Unless—damn it, unless somebody picked an idea from this Charles Fort and really is

collecting Ambroses. Hell, it's the nearest thing to a motive we've come across yet."

"Ben Starlock wants me to go out to his place and talk things over," I said. "That okay by you?"

"Sure, Ed. I don't know anything else you can do. Going over to the Blue Crocodile tonight?"

"Probably. Unless something better comes along. If I go, I'll go right from Ben's place. And I'll keep in touch with the agency—there'll be someone there all night—so if anything comes up will you get in touch with me through them?"

He said he would and I left. I caught a cab over on State Street and got to Starlock's place a few minutes before ten.

He'd had his bath and was in slippers and pajamas, ready to turn in. He looked dead tired.

"Want a drink, Ed?" he asked me.

I did, but I said that I'd probably end up at the Blue Croc and have to have some drinks there as an excuse for hanging around so I'd better save my capacity.

"That's smart. Well, I'm going to have one. Did you buy Frank a good dinner?"

"Sure," I said. "Hamburgers. He ate four of them and by that time he was so hungry they probably tasted better than a steak would have at six."

He laughed and poured himself a drink from a bottle on the table. He carried it across to a chair and sat down, throwing his legs up over the arm of it. His pajamas were black silk ones and they made him look more than ever like a benign Buddha.

He must have noticed I was looking at them and he smiled. "I didn't buy them, Ed. They were given to me. But let's get going. Start with the time you left the office."

When I finished, he sat staring at the ceiling for a while and then he looked at me. He said, "Ed, it doesn't look good. You know what I mean."

I nodded. I knew what he meant all right. He meant that it looked like one chance in a hundred that we'd ever see Uncle Am again, alive. Karl Dell's being killed meant that someone was playing for keeps.

He said, "It's thirty hours now, and we haven't got a lead left, not a one. All

we've managed to do is eliminate just about every possibility we've managed to think of. We're starting over again—except that we don't know where to start."

"There's one thing new now," I said. "The cops are in it with both feet. They've got a murder, and if they solve it they'll find Uncle Am in the process. Karl got killed by whoever kidnaped Uncle Am."

Starlock said, "Let's face it, Ed. Am wasn't kidnaped — any more than Karl was." He took a swallow from the drink in his hand. "Its going to hurt you less when he's found than if you won't believe it until then."

"I'll admit the probability. But if Uncle Am was killed and his body hasn't been found, it was hidden pretty well. And if the killer went to the trouble of hiding one body, why didn't he hide Karl's so that would look like just a disappearance too?"

"The horn button, Ed. I think he was taking Karl's body to dispose of it, probably the same way he disposed of Am's, and the horn button on the car he was using got stuck so he had to pull it to the curb and get away quick."

That made more sense than I wanted to admit. I asked him, "Anything new come up at the office?"

"Nothing important. Joe Wheelan came back after digging in newspaper morgues all day. The only guy named Ambrose who'd disappeared that he found was an Ambrose Guerry of Indianapolis, six months ago. I phoned the police there and found the guy had been located and brought back—it was just an abandonment case, it turned out. And this gal who was on the switchboard at the Gresham yesterday afternoon and then went to Racine is back in town and I talked to her. She didn't remember anything about calls to or from Bergman's room. A complete blank—not that it matters since we know now that Bergman was at the courthouse at four. And I canvassed the other detective agencies in town to see whether Grane and Dagon had approached them to do the work I turned down from them. They had been to one agency and were turned down there too. That was before they came to me and they probably gave up then on the idea of getting a legitimate agency to handle it. Anyway, it makes it look more like the deal was

on the level if we weren't the first agency he came to. Ed, I can't see any tie-in with Augie Grane or Toby Dagon."

"Neither can Bassett," I said. "Neither can I, for that matter. But I'm going to the Blue Croc just the same when I leave here, unless you've got some better idea for something I can do."

"Guess I haven't, Ed."

I stood up, realizing I'd stayed too long already. Starlock must be dead for sleep.

He drank the rest of his drink and got up too. He asked, "Got a gun with you, Ed?"

I shook my head. He went over to a cabinet and got out a thirty-two automatic in a shoulder holster. He said, "Put this on, Ed."

"But I won't—"

"Put it on," he said. "Karl Dell would probably have liked to have one sometime early this evening. And you might get an idea, Ed. Like the one Karl Dell got."

I took off my coat and put on the shoulder holster.

## V

THE BLUE CROCODILE was a medium sized night club, medium expensive. Not the best in Chicago, but a long way from being the worst. On a Thursday night, it wasn't crowded but there was enough business so you didn't have to feel sorry for Augie Grane. There were seventy or eighty people in a place that would hold a hundred comfortably and held half again that many on big nights. There was a five-piece combo—Harry Hart's outfit; I had some of his records—playing pretty fair stuff and there were about a dozen couples dancing.

When the headwaiter walked up to me as I came in, I said, "Table for two. My friend will be here later." If he noticed me after that, he'd think I was being stood up, but that was better than attracting attention by being a lone stag. He led me to a table for two that was probably the worst table in the place; it was farthest from the dance floor and a post blocked view of the combo, but that was all right with me. I hadn't come to hear the music. Come to think of it, I didn't know why I had come at all, unless



it was just to see Estelle.

And she must have seen me come in, for she came toward me the minute the headwaiter left. She looked beautiful as hell in an evening gown that had, I'd guess, a dozen yards of material in the skirt and a scant square foot of it above the waist. It was a beautiful gown and it had cost money.

Then as she reached my table she made her eyes and her smile impersonal and said, "Cigarettes, sir?"

I had a fresh pack and didn't need any; I started to say no, and then noticed that she had a package of them in her hand, held just above the tray, and that there was a folded slip of white paper that she was holding against the under side of the package with her finger; she tilted the pack slightly so I could see the note.

So I nodded and put a dollar bill in the tray and she put the cigarettes down on the table with the note under them. She said, "Thank you, sir," without even asking if I wanted any change and walked away.

I shoved the cigarettes into my coat pocket and palmed the note but I couldn't read it just then because the waiter came up. I ordered a whiskey and soda and a club sandwich. I figured I'd better call the agency and let Jane know where I was.

In the phone booth, the first thing I did was to unfold Estelle's note. There were only two words: "Hi, Eddie." I didn't know whether to laugh or swear.

I put the note back in my pocket and called the agency. I told Jane where I was but told her not to try to reach me there unless it was very important, that if she should want me she should ask for Estelle and Estelle would get word to me.

Then I called home and found that Bassett was still there, in Karl's room. He came to the phone.

"Getting anything?" I asked him.

"Not a damn thing, Ed. I've been over that room twice now, and I'm calling it a night. Oh, by the way, Ed, does the number 420 mean anything to you?"

"Not that I can think of. Why?"

"That's the last thing Karl wrote down on the paper he was doing his astrology homework on. Starts with a chart at the top and then a lot of stuff, mostly in symbols, and '420' was the last thing he

wrote down. Exactly what was it he told you about a number over the phone?"

"He said it was important and that it wasn't astrology exactly. I asked what he meant, and he said he hit a lucky number—in his figuring, I guess he meant—and that it was lucky because it made him remember something. And that's all he said about it; he wanted to know where we were, and I gave in and told him Chez Julliard."

"Then I guess four two oh is the lucky number he was talking about. What do you suppose it is, a hotel room?"

"Damned if I know. Or maybe it's a lucky number to play in the numbers game. But it must have some significance besides that if it made him remember something."

"Well," Bassett said, "it couldn't have been a lucky number for him. Another thing I'll do tomorrow is have an expert on astrology look over what Karl was doing and see what he can make of it."

I went back to my table. The floor show was starting and I turned to watch what little I could see of it from the bad table I had. Or at least I pretended to watch it. I was really thinking about the number 420 and trying to make some sense out of it. I couldn't. It could be or mean a lot of things, but no one thing seemed any more likely than another.

Estelle came over and stood leaning against the post that blocked my view of the orchestra and I watched her instead of the floor show. She was better to look at anyway. I began to wonder how late she had to work tonight.

And I wondered, too, why she pretended to ignore me and not to know me, after introducing me to Augie Grane at the Blackstone. Once she'd done that, she might as well talk to me here. Especially since we'd practically ruled out Augie and Toby as suspects anyway. She wasn't looking at me, but she must have read my mind, because just as I was thinking that, she came over to my table. She put her tray down on the floor beside the chair across from me and sat down.

She smiled at me and said, "Hi, Eddie."

"You said that once," I told her. "On paper. Shall I write you a note back, or can I just say hi?"

"But not in that tone of voice. Are

you mad at me, Eddie?"

I told her about Karl Dell and it hit her hard, harder than I'd thought. After I'd finished she sat there white and shaken.

I said, "I'm sorry, 'Stelle; I should have broken it more gently, I guess. I didn't know you especially liked Karl."

"I—I didn't, Eddie. I don't mean I disliked him. I was out with him a couple of times, three, I guess—once dancing and twice to shows, but we were just friends. But—"

"But what, 'Stelle?"

"Your uncle, Ed. I guess all along I've been hoping that this didn't amount to anything; that it was just a joke of some kind, that he was all right somewhere and would come back and explain it. I was sure of it, Eddie. But now—"

I patted her hand and wished I could think of something encouraging to say. I couldn't.

I felt that way myself. I guess that in my case trying to solve the problem as a problem, to figure out what had happened, had kept me from thinking too much that Uncle Am must be dead.

She said, "I want a drink, Eddie. Will you buy me one?"

I caught my waiter's eye and ordered two drinks for us. Estelle downed hers and a little of her color came back. She said, "Thanks, Eddie. Before I forget, Augie wants to see you."

"To see me?" I asked. "What about?"

"I don't know what he wants. He didn't tell me. He's in his office, I guess. I'll show you where."

She led me up some steps to the second floor and along a corridor to a door marked Private, and knocked. Augie Grane's voice called out for us to come in and Estelle opened the door.

She said, "Here's Ed Hunter, 'Augie." And to me, "See me again before you go, will you, Eddie? I'd better go back downstairs."

I nodded and went into Augie Grane's office.

**A**UGIE was sitting behind the desk, and I knew the guy sitting on a corner of it must be Toby Dagon. I didn't like him either.

He was younger than Augie Grane, maybe about thirty-five. He was well

dressed and wasn't bad looking. I couldn't put my finger on what I didn't like about him.

Augie said, "Hello, Ed. This is Toby Dagon." Toby stuck out a hand and I shook it.

Augie said, "Sit down, Ed," and pointed to a chair. Toby said, "You're wasting your time, Augie, but it's okay by me."

"You don't have to listen," Augie said. "You know what I'm going to tell him. And what have we got to lose?"

Toby shrugged. "Nothing, I guess, but the time you're wasting. And telling people your business."

"Everybody knows my business, Toby."

Toby stood up. "Okay, Augie. It's a thousand to one shot, but thousand to one shots pay off sometimes. We've been paying off on them. Well I'm going to run along and catch that new canary. If you want me for anything I'll be at the usual table." Augie Grane swiveled his chair around to face me. He said, "Ed, you're trying to find out what happened to your uncle. And I'm trying to find out what's happening to my numbers business. I think we can help each other."

"How?" I asked him. "I mean, according to what you told Frank Bassett, there can't be any connection between the two. Or were you lying to Frank?"

"Bassett was not frank enough with me, Ed. He told me the only way he was led to me was that talk Toby and I had with Starlock and your uncle in Starlock's office. This afternoon, your friend Estelle told me a little more about it and I learned for the first time the fact that the man who kidnaped your uncle gave a certain room number at the Gresham. I don't believe in coincidence. Do you?"

"Not too far," I admitted. "But where's the coincidence? Maybe I'm dumb but I don't see it."

Augie Grane leaned forward across the desk. He said, "I mean that Richard Bergman is here because I sent for him, and I sent for him to handle the very thing I was talking to Starlock and your uncle about. When Estelle Beck told me that—well, things looked different."

I whistled softly. He said, "I'll tell you all about it, but first, how much do you know? Who Bergman is?"

I told him what we'd learned about that



and he said, "That's pretty straight. I've been paying Bergman a hundred a month for almost two years. I don't know why I didn't think of him first when things started to go wrong. Maybe I was dumb to even try to get a detective agency to work for me. But when Starlock and one other agency turned me down flat, I suddenly remembered Bergman. And I phoned him and he came right away. And somebody gave his room number when they kidnaped your uncle."

I asked, "How long has — whatever's been going on been going on?"

"About a month, maybe a little longer. It's cost me about thirty thousand bucks so far. That isn't much, but I don't like it."

I said, "I wouldn't say thirty thousand dollars isn't much."

"Ten times that might break me, Ed, but not thirty. And here's another angle. You find out what outfit is gypping me and I'll give you five thousand? And cheap at the price."

I asked first, "Did you make that offer to my uncle?"

"No, Ed. I never saw your uncle except that one day at the office. Neither did Toby."

I said, "Sorry, but I can't take it. I'm working for Starlock, and he turned the job down. So how could I take it on my own?"

"You're not taking any job or even any proposition. I'm not even asking you to work on it. I'm just telling you that if you find out I'll give you five grand. Bonus, for free. A Christmas present. What's wrong with that?"

I didn't see what was wrong with it myself on those terms. Except that it would be too good to be true. It would mean that Uncle Am and I, adding that much to what we already had, could go ahead and start our own agency.

If Uncle Am was still alive, that is.

I asked, "What makes you think I might find out without even trying?"

He smiled. "Frank Bassett tells me you're a smart kid. Estelle doubles that in spades. She thinks you're brilliant. So I think you might find your uncle or what happened to him. And I don't think it was any coincidence that Bergman's room number got used. I think when you

find the guy who got your uncle, you'll find the guy — or the syndicate — who's costing me a thousand bucks a day."

"A guy," I said. "Not a syndicate."

"How do you figure that?"

"Did Estelle tell you about the Ambrose Collector angle?" I asked. He nodded. I said, "That's why. Somebody with a macabre sense of humor. A syndicate hasn't got a sense of humor. Of course, some other numbers outfit might be back of him, paying him to do whatever he's trying to do."

"Smart figuring," he said. "Well, is it a deal?"

I didn't want to commit myself that definitely. I wasn't going to digress any from my main point of investigation, I told him, but if it turned out that looking for what I was looking for would lead me to the information he wanted, I didn't see what was wrong with that.

He said, "Good. We'll have a drink on that. Whiskey?" I nodded and he picked up the phone. It must have been a direct connection with downstairs for he gave the order without giving a number first.

I said, "If you want me to find the answer, I don't suppose you'll mind my asking questions. First, do you know a Karl Dell?"

"No. Ought to, if he's in numbers. Is he?"

"Insurance," I said, and let it go at that. "Does the number four-twenty mean anything to you?"

"Ummm, no. Except that it's close to four-eighteen and that's Bergman's room at the Gresham."

I hadn't even thought of that angle. Four-eighteen would be along the same corridor as four-twenty. Someone in four-twenty could easily step out to intercept a man heading for four-eighteen. But Uncle Am wouldn't have gone upstairs without asking at the desk, and he hadn't gone to the desk, if the desk clerk was telling the truth. And if the Ambrose Collector had planned to intercept him at that point, he'd have told Starlock, "Have your operative come up to the room when he gets here." That wouldn't have sounded suspicious, and in the absence of such a suggestion, people always ask at the desk before they go up to a room. Uncle Am would have, I felt sure.

But I filed away the idea for later consideration and went back to my questioning.

I said, "You told Estelle that Dagon has an alibi—that he was in Gary at the time my uncle was being kidnaped. Do you mind if I check up on that?"

He shrugged. "Not at all. Can't say I blame you for wanting to. Toby doesn't make a good impression. But it happened that I saved his life once, and got him out of trouble another time, and he's intensely loyal to me. He wouldn't do anything I didn't know about, or have any private motives."

"All right," I said, "but what's his alibi?"

"He called me long distance at four-thirty. From what little I've learned from Frank Bassett and Estelle Beck, I gathered that the mur—the kidnaper would have to be pretty busy for a while from four o'clock on. At least not able to be in Gary at half past."

"That's right," I told him. "But how do you know the call came from Gary? I mean, even if a female voice said 'Gary calling,' it could have been Dagon—with the help of a girl friend—from a phone in the Loop."

"Well, I suppose it could, except for one thing. And that is that he wanted some dope that I had to look up, so I called him back. About ten minutes later."

"Where was he?"

"At the Melton Hotel in Gary. I don't mean he was staying there; he went early in the afternoon and came back that evening. But he called me from a lobby phone there and that's where I called him back. Had him paged."

It sounded airtight unless Augie was lying. And I didn't think he was. But I made a mental note to ask Bassett whether he'd had anyone check at the Melton Hotel to see if the page boy there remembered paging a Mr. Dagon about that time.

A waiter came up just then with a bottle and accessories. Augie told him to leave, and poured drinks for us himself. He said, "By the way, did you come right up, or spend some time downstairs?"

"I was there a little while. Couple of drinks and a sandwich."

"What table?"

I told him where it was and he said, "When you go back down, there'll be a better table for you; I'll phone Georges when you go. And there won't be any bill."

I said, "I hadn't planned on staying. But the price seems right."

He grinned and handed over my drink. "Here's bumps, Ed. Or better, here's to your finding your uncle."

After we'd drunk to that, he said, "Anything else I can tell you, while we're talking?"

"Well," I said, "if this ties in with numbers, then I ought to know how numbers banks work. How would another bank go about making you lose money—except by canceling out your protection. And it isn't that, I take it."

"It isn't that. No more arrests than usual." He frowned. "That's the catch, Ed; I don't know how it's being done. It isn't the fix. You know how the fix works—or used to work?"

"Not exactly."

"ALL big numbers banks, Ed, pay off on the basis of figures that appear in the newspapers every day. Some use Clearing House figures, some use the U. S. Treasury figures, some Pari-Mutuel odds on certain tracks. We use stock advances, declines and unchangeds. The final digit of each of the three figures. Say the stock market page shows that forty stocks advanced, seventy-two declined and eight hundred and six remained unchanged, then the figure we'd pay off on for that day is naught-two-six. And the customers can see the figures tabulated in the paper and check whether they win or not."

"And you pay five hundred to one if they hit?" I asked.

"Yes. Sure, the actual odds are a thousand to one, but don't forget the ticket seller's commission, the overhead, and all we pay for protection. I run an honest bank, and my profits are about ten percent of the play. That is, I did until recently."

I said, "You were going to tell me about the fix."

"Oh, yes. Well, back a ways when the game wasn't so well organized, one bank used to break another occasionally by getting a stooge into the copy room or composing room of the local newspaper and



having him doctor the figures that the opposition bank paid off on once in a while. Once in a while would be enough at five hundred to one odds. The tip would go out what the figure was going to be, and the bank would pay off plenty that day.

"That works best, of course, in a city where there's only one newspaper, or maybe two; it's tough to pull in a town like Chicago or New York, because if the papers didn't all agree, it'd be spotted quick. And even so, I protect myself against that. I get my payoff figures right from the horse's mouth, from New York by telegraph, to check with the newspapers. And those figures can't be fixed at the source, either; there are too many checks and rechecks on them and too many people watching them."

"How bad is your percentage off? It couldn't just be a run of bad luck, could it?"

"Not for this long. We're a small bank, as numbers banks go. We just work the territory right around here, south part of the Loop and immediately south of the Loop. Our average gross take is about ten thousand dollars a day, so by the law of averages our payoff should be five thousand. For over a month now it's averaged six."

"I told you my net profit is ten percent—that's based on the payoff being average. With the payoff that much higher, I'm almost exactly breaking even. For the last month, that is. And by the law of averages—and that's the highest law of any gambler, Ed—I'm out thirty thousand bucks that I should have made."

I asked, "What would you do if you hit a really bad day, a lot of people plunged on a certain number and the number hit and you had to pay off, say, a hundred thousand bucks for that one day?"

"I'd pay it, naturally. But I'd close down the bank until and unless I found out who was biting me and how."

I said, "I suppose you'd have checked up on Toby Dagon. But is there any way he could be gypping you?"

"I'm not stupid, Ed. I've checked up, naturally. I don't think Toby would do it, but I couldn't overlook the possibility. There's no way I can find that he could beat the system. You see, Ed, the way

we've got it set up, Toby and a ticket seller and a customer would all three have to be in cahoots to beat the game.

"We tabulated the payoffs, and there've been about as many through tickets sold by one seller as by another. That would mean they'd all have to be in cahoots, not only with Toby, but with the winners of the tickets. And you can't have that many people in on a conspiracy without it leaking out. One of the ticket sellers would have figured he'd make more money coming to me and talking. And he would have, too. I can't figure it being from the inside, Ed—but damn if I can figure it from the outside either. If it was easy, I wouldn't be offering five grand for the answer. Have another drink?"

"One more," I told him. "Want to explain how the ticket selling system works? And the payoff system?"

"I think Toby could explain it better. Not that I don't know it, but I'd rather have you get it from him. But listen, just to avoid argument—between Toby and me, I mean—don't tell him about the five grand I offered you for an answer. He was mad as hell because I offered that much as a bonus to Bergman if Bergman got the answer for me." Augie grinned. "Toby's sort of the watchdog of my treasury. Sometimes I think he worries more about my money than I do. He gets mad if I get generous."

"To anyone else?" I asked.

"There's no question of generosity between us, Ed. He works on a straight percentage of my net. And I told you what my net's been the last month. That's why Toby's even more worried than I've been; I still have the profits of the Blue Croc. Toby's living off his capital, and I don't think he's got much. But he won't take anything from me, even though I've offered."

He stood up. "Come on, I'll take you down to Toby and tell him to give you the dope you want."

We went out and down the stairs and stood in the arched doorway to the main room looking around. The headwaiter came over to Augie.

"Toby leave?" Augie asked him.

"Yes, sir. He had just one drink after he came down and then left; he said to tell you he was going right home, sir,

if you wanted to reach him."

"Okay," Augie said. "I'll give Toby a ring, Ed, and make an appointment for you to see him here at ten in the morning. That okay with you?"

"Sure," I said.

JANE was reading a love pulp magazine when I went into the office. She put it down and looked up questioningly.

I shook my head. "Nothing important, Jane," I told her. "But I thought I'd better make a report in case—in case I'm late getting down in the morning." I'd started to say in case something happened to me, but that would have sounded foolish.

"Want me to take it in shorthand, Ed?"

"If you don't mind," I told her. She got her notebook ready and I dictated a report of everything that had happened since I left the office. Even about Karl Dell's murder. I'd told Starlock everything I knew about that—except for the number four-twenty that Bassett had asked me about afterwards over the phone—but I thought it would be a good idea to have it in a regular report while it was all fresh in my mind.

While I was finishing the report of my conversation with Augie, Emil strolled in from the back room, blinking his eyes against the light. "Thought I heard voices," he said. "Anything up, Ed?"

I started to say no, and then remembered that he wouldn't know about what happened to Karl Dell, so I told him briefly and told him he could read my report when Jane had typed it.

When I left the office I decided I'd done about all the thinking I was capable of doing that night anyway, so I took a cab the rest of the way. I was dead tired, and I was feeling, slightly, all the drinks I'd had at the Blue Croc. I didn't regret them, though, because I knew they'd help me go to sleep.

It was about a quarter to three when I got home.

As I started up the stairs I heard footsteps in the hall above, and a police detective, one I didn't know, was waiting for me at the head of the stairs. The door to Karl's room was open and a light was on, so I knew he'd been stationed there for the night and was checking on everybody that came in.

I told him who I was and he nodded. "Captain told me about you," he said. "Said you're working with us on it. Anything new?"

I decided he wouldn't be familiar enough with the case, probably, to make anything of my conversation with Augie, so I just shook my head. I asked him if Bassett had told him about Estelle Beck.

"Got a list of tenants, and that's one of the names on it. She's the only one that isn't in by now, and I'm supposed to question any of them that come in late."

"She's working late at a night club," I told him, "and I'll vouch for her. She'll be along sometime between now and morning."

"Okay, I won't third-degree her then. It's lonesome as hell sitting around in there. Want to come in and talk a while?"

I told him I'd like to, but that I had to get up early and had better get some sleep. He said, "Sure. Well, 'night then," and went back into Karl's room, leaving the door ajar so he'd be able to hear anyone who came in.

I wondered how Estelle would handle that, if her "maybe" meant what a woman's maybe generally means. I thought of calling her up to tell her that the place was guarded, and then decided not to.

I went into my room and turned in. I must have gone to sleep the second my head hit the pillow.

But I sleep pretty lightly and the sound of voices in the hallway outside—Estelle's voice and the detective's—woke me up. I looked at the luminous dial of my watch and saw that it was almost five o'clock. Dim gray light of early morning was already coming in the two big front windows.

I heard a scraping sound from the direction of the door and rolled over in bed to look. A folded piece of paper was being pushed under the door. As I got out of bed and went to get it, I heard Estelle's footsteps going on up the next flight of steps to the third floor.

I took the note over to the window where I could read it without having to turn on a light. It read: "Hi, Eddie. Augie asked me to marry him. Should I?"

I put on a bathrobe and slippers and



went out into the hallway. The detective was outside Karl's room the second my door opened, but when he saw it was me, he grinned at me.

He said, "I suppose that note was something important about the case that you want to talk over with her, huh?"

"It could be," I said. "Would it have to go in your report if I went upstairs?"

He shook his head. "But I thought you were too tired to talk. I wanted you to come in and talk to me."

I said, "I am too tired to talk."

He chuckled and went back into Karl's room. And this time he closed the door, although I heard him open it again after I reached the top of the flight of stairs.

## VI

STARLOCK had told me not to get down before eight o'clock, so I didn't get there until a few minutes before then. Starlock was already there; he must have been there for at least ten minutes because he'd just finished reading my report.

He put it down and said, "Nice work, Ed."

"But I'm afraid it doesn't get us anywhere," I told him. "The more I think about it the less I think of it."

"Probably. But I'm going to have another look at that angle of it. And a talk with this Richard Bergman."

I'd put in the report that Grane had offered me five thousand bucks if I found out what was going wrong with his numbers bank. I asked Starlock what he thought about it.

He said, "The only thing wrong with that would be your trying to get it. If Augie's right that it's part of the answer to what happened to Am, then you might get it without trying. Only trouble is, I can't see that Augie's right. It's too thin."

"I think so too, now. Should I call off my ten o'clock date with Dagon?"

Starlock grimaced. "If we had a lot of other hot leads for you to chase down, I'd say yes. But if you don't do that, what better idea have you got?"

I admitted that I didn't know.

He said, "As far as the money's concerned, I can't see anything wrong with

your taking it if it's a by-product of what we're really working on. But don't hold your breath till you get it."

I said, "I won't. What do you think about checking Dagon's alibi in Gary?"

"I'll send Emil out there. He got a good night's sleep here, says the only time he woke up was when you came in. I sent him down for some breakfast when I got here. He'll be back pretty soon and you can give him Toby's description."

"A photo would be better. Maybe Bassett would get us one."

Starlock shook his head. "Frank said that Toby Dagon's never had a conviction. He's been picked up often enough, but it never stuck. So he hasn't been mugged or printed."

"Anything I can do before ten?"

"Stick around. Bassett's on his way here. He went to headquarters first, but he'll be here any minute."

Bassett came about five minutes later. He read my report first, skimming over the first part that covered the time I'd been with him and reading carefully what I'd learned at the Blue Croc.

Emil Krazka came in about the time he finished. Starlock told him to wait a minute and then told Bassett what we had in mind for Emil to do, and asked if he had any suggestions.

Bassett said, "I phoned that hotel in Gary yesterday afternoon. Their call sheet shows that a Mr. Dagon, except that they had it Dragon, was paged at four twenty-five. I had them put the call boy on the phone and talked to him; he remembered it because of the name 'Dragon,' the way they got it. Call was answered, but about all the description he could give me was that the guy was somewhere between twenty and sixty and between five and six feet tall and didn't walk with crutches or a cane. If you want to go to some trouble, though, I know how you might get a better check than that."

"How?"

"Dagon was in some trouble a few years ago and one of the evening papers, I forget which, ran a picture of him. Not a posed shot; one of their own photos must have got a sneak shot of him. I didn't figure it was worth the trouble, what with Dagon not having any motive we can figure out anyway, but if you

want to have one of your ops canvass the evening papers, he'll find that pic in one of their morgues. And the call boy in Gary might identify the pic, even if he couldn't give a description."

Starlock said, "Emil, you've read Ed's report, haven't you, and got all the dope?"

"Sure."

"Get going, then."

Emil got going. Bassett said he was going to start out at the Harrison Mutual, get what dope he could on Karl Dell's route and see what he could do toward retracing Dell's calls from the time he had left me yesterday morning and the time he'd got home—five o'clock. He admitted he didn't expect to get anything, because whatever had happened that had led to Karl's death had probably happened after he'd seen me at five. But it was routine that had to be done.

The janitor at the Blue Croc opened the door and I said I had an appointment to see Toby Dagon. He asked me my name and when I told him he said, "Sure, Mr. Dagon's expecting you. Know where his office is?"

"I know where Mr. Grane's is; is it the same one?"

"Right next to it, west."

He let me go up by myself. I found the right door and knocked. Toby's voice sang out and I went in. It was a little swankier office than Augie's. Toby Dagon sat behind a big mahogany desk. Two other men were in the room, both standing in front of the desk. I judged that they were ticket peddlers turning in reports and money.

He looked over as I came in and said, "Hello, Hunter; just a minute," and then turned back to the men. "Guess that takes care of you, Joe. And Slim, if you want me to go out with you and make that payoff this morning, wait outside in the hall. Or go in Augie's office; you can sit down in there."

The peddlers didn't pay any attention to me at all. One of them went out the door I'd come in, and the other went through a connecting door into what would be Augie Grane's office.

Dagon said, "Okay, Hunter, sit down. Now exactly what is it you want?"

"This is Grane's idea, not mine," I told him. "He thinks there may be a tie-in

between your outfit's losing money lately and what happened to my uncle, Ambrose Hunter."

"Do you think so?"

"Frankly, no," I said.

"Then aren't you wasting your time?"

"I think I am. But I haven't got any better way to waste it that I know of. Grane might be right for all I know."

Dagon shrugged. "For all I know, too. I don't see where the hell your uncle would fit in, but then again I'm up the creek on even guessing why we're losing money. Unless the odds have been running against us. And it's damn unlikely they'd go against the percentages that long. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about it."

"But you still don't agree with Grane."

He ran a hand over his hair. "No, I don't. I think it was a crazy idea even to think about getting a detective agency. I think it's a crazier one to tell details of our business to a private dick. But Augie's the boss. He said to level with you. What do you want to know?"

I said, "Just the mechanics of the thing. How tickets are handled and how pay-offs are made. What a ticket looks like. Maybe the simplest way would be for me to buy a ticket. Do you sell them? Retail, I mean."

"Well, yes and no. I don't peddle them, but a lot of the customers from downstairs—the Blue Croc—know who I am and want tickets and I sell them. But that's not the usual thing, and I don't take the peddler's commission, just my cut on the net. You say you want to buy a ticket now to find out how it works?"

"Why not?"

"Since Slim's in the next room, I'll let him sell it to you." He raised his voice, "Slim."

The man who'd gone into Augie Grane's office came back and Dagon told him to sell me a ticket.

"Sure," he said. "How much?"

"What denominations do you sell mostly?"

Slim looked at Dagon and Dagon nodded. Slim said, "From two bits to twenty bucks. Most of them fifty cents or a dollar, some two and five bucks. Not many over a fin."

I took a five dollar bill out of my wallet.



I said, "Make mine a fin. That'll pay me two thousand five hundred if I hit?"

"That's right. Five hundred to one on any size bet." Slim took tickets from his pocket, picked one that was printed FIVE DOLLARS. I saw that it was double, with carbon paper backing on the top part. It also had a serial number and a printed date, today's date.

He pocketed my five and held out the slip. He said, "You write whatever number you pick, from triple zero to nine ninety-nine on here. Or I can write it for you."

I said, "You write it." I was going to give the "lucky number" that Karl Dell had figured out through astrology. I wanted to watch Toby Dagon's face. That number might mean something to somebody, since it had got Karl Dell killed. I made sure my hand was ready to make a quick dive toward the shoulder holster Ben Starlock had given me.

I pretended to hesitate as though trying to think of a number at random. I looked away and then back and caught Toby's eyes. I said, "Make it four-two-oh. Four hundred and twenty."

Nothing happened except the scrape of the pencil writing down the number. There wasn't the slightest flicker of surprise or anything else in Dagon's eyes or in the muscles of his face. And he couldn't have been that good; the number didn't mean anything to him.

Slim tore the slip at the fold and handed it to me and pocketed the other half; we each had a record that showed the date, the amount of the bet, and the serial number and the number I'd chosen.

Dagon said, "Okay, Slim. Go on back in Augie's office. I'll see you in a few minutes."

When Slim had gone, I said, "Now what happens?"

"Slim turns in his slips to me before a deadline—safely ahead of the time when the New York Stock Exchange closes for the day. He turns back the unsold ones as well as the stubs on the ones he sold. I give him a supply for the next day. He pays—less his cut—for the ones he sold."

"And if four-twenty hits what would I do?"

"Well if you'd bought the ticket in

the ordinary way you'd go to Slim. If you were one of his regular customers, you'd know where to reach him. And he'd arrange the payoff."

"Not make it?"

"Not on over a fifty-cent bet. Most of the boys carry enough money to pay off a two-bit bet—that's only a hundred and twenty-five—or a fifty-cent bet. A buck or more—five hundred bucks or more payoff—they make a payoff appointment. That is, the peddler and I go around together to see the mooch and pay him. We check his stub against the one the peddler turned in, and they've got to match. He makes sure it's a serial number he sold on that day and we both check that the numbers match. If it's okay I pay off."

It looked reasonably foolproof to me. The way it worked out it would take a three-way conspiracy involving the customer, the peddler and Toby to gyp the bank. That could be done once or twice for big amounts, but not consistently for smaller ones. But three twenty-dollar bets would account for the thirty thousand dollars that Augie Grane's numbers bank was out, by the law of averages.

I asked him about ten and twenty dollar bets.

He said, "In the last month, we haven't had to pay off on any twenty-dollar ones. We don't sell many. Twenty bucks is a big bet at five-hundred-to-one odds. We've paid off on three ten-dollar ones in a month but that's within the law of averages; we sold close to fifteen hundred ten-buck tickets, so technically, one and a half of them should have hit and three did. That can happen easily. Next month, maybe no ten-bucker will hit."

"Then you'd say most of your loss has been because too many of the smaller tickets have been hitting the right numbers?"

"That's right. Mostly the one, two or five denominations. And maybe Augie told you this, but not any too many of them through any one seller. All along the line."

"Does Augie Grane ever handle any of the payoffs direct? Or go with you on any appointments for payoffs?"

"He didn't use to. But since things have been going sour I've talked him into going along on some of the appointments for payoffs. Spot checking. I mean, letting him pick out which ones to go along

on, or to go out and pay off himself instead of me."

"And he's done that?"

"Fairly often the last couple of weeks."

That meant, I thought, that Augie wasn't quite as trustful of Toby as he had seemed. Augie hadn't told me about that.

So I stood up and said thanks, and I folded my numbers ticket and put it in my pocket. It was worth two and a half thousand dollars, maybe. Mathematically, until the New York Stock Exchange advances and declines were figured for today it was worth two dollars and a half.

It was only seven blocks back to the office so I walked. I got there a little after eleven and Starlock wasn't back yet. I checked with Maude, the new day shift steno, to make sure that nobody had called in and that nothing had happened.

I started for the back room just as the phone rang, and it was Emil Krazka phoning in from Gary. I told Maude I'd take the call, since Starlock wasn't there.

Emil said, "It's on the up and up, Ed. The page boy recognized the picture, so I guess Toby Dagon was here in Gary at the time Am was being picked up."

"Okay, Emil," I said. "Guess it's all right for you to come in. The boy was sure?"

"Yep. He picked the right picture out of half a dozen of them. I have to take back the pic of Dagon, so I borrowed half a dozen in all. Listen, while I'm here, want me to find out what he was doing in Gary?"

"I don't see that it matters as long as we know for sure he was there."

"Okay, Ed. I'll take the pictures back to the newspaper before I come in. Might as well eat first before I report. Tell Ben I'll be there by one or one-thirty."

I told him I would, and went on into the back office. Joe Streator was there, playing the same kind of solitaire Starlock and I had tried our hands at, going through the files of cases Uncle Am had worked on.

He said, "Hi, Ed. Say, there's at least one file missing here. There ought to be an incomplete one. Am couldn't have had time to write up a report on whatever he was working on Wednesday. He was out all day till he reported in about four, and Ben sent him over to the Gresham only a few minutes after he got in."

I said, "Starlock says he reported verbally on it and that it wasn't anything important. But I'll ask him more about it; I'm having lunch with him this noon."

SINCE Joe was working on the files, I went back to the main office and talked to Dane Evans, the clerk, about numbers. I had him tell me how and where he bought his tickets and how the deal was handled. It wasn't exactly like the Grane-Dagon system, but it wasn't too different. Dane played almost every day, but usually only a quarter or fifty cents. Once in a while a dollar if he had a strong hunch on a number. But apparently his hunches weren't good; the only time he'd hit had been on a quarter bet. I made him figure back and he decided that in the last couple of years he'd spent about two hundred and fifty dollars on numbers and had got exactly a hundred and twenty-five back.

He admitted cheerfully that those were exactly the odds he was bucking, but he grinned and said, "Don't forget though, Ed, that maybe I got a hundred and twenty-five dollars' worth of excitement out of it over two years."

I showed him the five-dollar ticket I'd bought on four hundred and twenty, and he whistled. "You're really plunging, Ed. But I don't blame you. I bought two dollars' worth myself, and it's the first time I've ever gone over a buck."

For just a minute I started to get excited, thinking I had something, and then I remembered that the lucky number calculation of Karl Dell had figured in the report I'd dictated to Jane last night; naturally, Dane would have read a copy of that report. And how could I blame him for betting two dollars on Karl's number when I'd bet five myself? Of course I had the excuse that I wanted to buy a ticket anyway to see how the system worked, but I could have bought a two-bit one just as easily.

Starlock came in just before twelve, and I told him about the call from Gary. He told Joe Streator to stick around until Emil reported in and then to go to lunch.

When we left, he said, "Let's have a good lunch, Ed. I'm feeling lousy and maybe some good grub will pep me up. Get anything interesting from Dagon?"

"Nothing that seems to mean anything,"



I admitted.

"I got a large dose of that myself from this Bergman. Grane must have told him to level with us if we came to him. Anyway he sounded as though he was leveling and what he told me fitted everything else we learned about him and Augie and the numbers banks in general. Damn so many honest people. If somebody'd only tell us something that didn't fit in with something somebody else told us then we'd know one of them was lying and we'd have something to get our teeth into. And speaking of that, how'd you like a steak?"

We went to the Chez Julliard.

We ordered lunch, got it, and ate it without interruption.

I showed him the ticket I'd bought and he laughed. He said, "I've got a couple of bucks' worth of that myself, but you really plunged. Dane put down two bucks for me, and two for himself, and I think some of the other boys came in. It's going to be a bad day for the numbers banks if Karl Dell had anything on the ball. I guess we've all got a little superstition somewhere down in us, huh? Me, two dollars' worth; you, five dollars' worth."

I defended myself against that by explaining that I wanted my bet sizeable because I wanted to watch Dagon's face for a reaction when I gave the number.

He grinned at me. "A good answer. So I'll prove you're lying in your teeth, Ed, by offering you three bucks cash for that five-buck ticket. I'll let you get out from under, since the only reason you bought it was to watch Toby's face and you've already done that."

I put the ticket back in my pocket and admitted that I'd been lying in my teeth. And it surprised me to learn that I had been; I'd really thought I wasn't superstitious.

I asked him if we were still going to check on Bergman's alibi.

He grimaced. "It's silly, Ed, to do it, but I suppose we might as well. Bergman sold me that was on the level. But what else have we got to do? Unless Bassett comes up with something and—unless it's damn hot and he phones us sooner—we won't know about that until five o'clock. I'd rather go over to the courthouse and waste time there than sit around the of-

fice and go nuts."

I admitted that I would, too. But I remembered what Joe Streator had mentioned and asked him what Uncle Am had been working on up to four o'clock Wednesday, the day he'd disappeared.

He shook his head. "There's nothing in it, Ed. I'll show you the file on it—all of one page—when we get back to the office. But there's nothing in it."

Starlock phoned the office again to be sure there wasn't anything, and there wasn't. So we went over to the courthouse and he showed me what a really thorough job of checking was. We found four people who'd talked to Bergman Wednesday afternoon, and they all remembered that it was late in the day. But Starlock didn't quit until we found someone who was sure of an exact time—exact within five minutes, anyway. And the time was a quarter after four, so that was that.

We went back to the agency and found that nothing had happened there. Two ops—Emil and Joe—were doing nothing in the back room; the others were working on other cases. Nobody was working on finding Uncle Am; there weren't any angles left to work on. You can't just go out and walk up and down the street to look for a man who's disappeared. I told Ben that since both of us were around, he might as well let Emil and Joe start on other jobs, but he wouldn't. He said, "Ed, a break has to come sooner or later. One man can't disappear and another get killed without making a splash and some ripples. Some of those ripples are about due to reach us. I want plenty of men around, so we can hit several angles of it all at once the minute we get a lead."

"What can I do? Now, I mean."

"Go back and play rummy with Joe and Emil. Unless something breaks sooner, there's nothing either of us can do till Bassett comes in around five. And it's half past three now."

I said, "Okay, but tell me about the job Am was working on Wednesday up to four o'clock. You said you would when we got back here."

He sighed and said, "Okay, sit down. It was just a car skip case for Bartlett Finance Company. Guy named Thomas Reynal had them finance his purchase of a used car eight months ago. Amount of

the financing was only three hundred bucks, which means it probably cost only about five hundred and he paid a couple of hundred cash. We got the figures on that but I don't remember them exactly.

"He was paying twenty-five a month plus interest on the balance, which would have paid it off in a year. He paid for eight months, so he owed only a hundred plus interest. But he skipped town with the car and Bartlett Finance told me to have an op put in one day's work on it to see if we could trace him. Mostly as a matter of principle; they hate to have a guy beat them."

I said, "He must have had some other reason for skipping; he wouldn't have done it just for the car or else he'd have done it sooner."

"That's what Am found out. It was an abandonment case. Basically, the guy was skipping out on his wife, not with the car. He just took the car along."

"And the bank account?"

"Didn't have any, Am said. But he borrowed money from several people the day before he left. And he took along practically all his clothes in two suitcases. His wife was out, working, when he left"

"Any possibility at all," I asked, "that it wasn't just an abandonment case?"

"Am said not, Ed. And he put in a full day on it—up to four o'clock. He talked to Reynal's wife first, then checked a lot of his acquaintances and contacts, and he says there isn't any doubt at all."

"Wife swear out a warrant for abandonment?"

"No, she decided it was good riddance. Says he was a no-good, anyway, and she's going to divorce him and let it go at that."

"Did he quit a good job?"

Starlock said, "Ed, you can't make anything out of it. No, he didn't quit any kind of a job. He hadn't worked at all for nearly a month."

"What did he work at when he worked?"

"I don't know, Ed. I suppose Am found out and it would have been in his report when he'd written it up, but he didn't mention that. He went out on the job at eight thirty and came in at four, or a few minutes of. He came in my office and I asked him, 'Any luck?' and he said, 'Not a bit,' and told me what I've just told

you. He went on into the back room and was going to write up his report between then and five. But the call from the Ambrose Collector came right after that and I called him back into my office before he started the report."

"You're sure he didn't start it?"

"Yes. When I called him in to tell him about going over to the Gresham, I asked him whether he had and he said no, that his fountain pen seemed to be on the blink and he was trying to get it to feed right and hadn't started writing yet."

"Did he leave his notes on the case, whatever he was going to write up the report from?"

Ben shook his head. "If he took any notes they must have still been in his pocket."

"Have you reported to Bartlett Finance on it? And are they going to pay you for the day's work he put in without a detailed report?"

"Glad you reminded me, Ed. I forgot all about it, but I might as well call them and tell them what Am told me. I can tell them what happened, and I won't bill them for the day's work since I can't give them an operative's report. But I might as well keep their good will by giving them Am's conclusions for free."

"They in a hurry on it?"

"I guess not. Don't see why they would be, for a skip of only a hundred bucks."

"Then don't call them yet, Ben. You might as well collect on it, because I'm going to do that job over again tomorrow. Unless some better lead comes in. I'm going to start out the same time Uncle Am did, and I'll take things in the same order—go to the guy's wife first and find out what names and contacts she gave him, and follow them down just as he would have. I can probably find most of the places he was Wednesday and what time he was at each."

I asked Ben for the file on Thomas Reynal, so I could copy down whatever dope Uncle Am had had when he'd started out on the case Wednesday morning. He told me to get it from Dane Evans and I did.

I took it into the back room. Emil and Joe were playing rummy on one of the two tables, so I took the other and copied from the file folder into my pocket note-



book.

There wasn't much to copy. The only thing in the folder was a single sheet of the foolscap Ben keeps on his desk for taking notes of telephone conversations when he doesn't have Jane to listen in to take shorthand notes. A few lines in Ben's handwriting read: "Bartlett—Thos Reynal, 682 S. Briwick Apt 7—last emp Kennel Bar, S Clark, mar. no. ch.—38 Chev ser 1987-B6729 Lic 341-294—pr. 500, fin. 300, bal due 100 plus int and pen, refs Jas. Jennings, same ad, Apt 2, bro-in-law, Wm Demminton atty Corwin bldg. 1 day auth."

That was all there was, so I copied it word for word and abbreviation for abbreviation. Uncle Am had probably done the same thing Wednesday morning.

I took the file back to Dane. Through the door to Starlock's office I could see that he was just sitting and staring at the ceiling, so I went in again. I said, "I copied the file notation word for word. Was there anything besides? Anything you didn't bother to write down but might have told Uncle Am when you gave him the notes?"

"Not that I remember; did you turn back the file?"

I said, "Here's all that was in it. Only difference is that this is my handwriting instead of yours." I showed him the page in my notebook, and he studied it.

He said, "Guess the only thing I didn't write down was that the guy had skipped the last payment and they phoned him. His wife answered and said he'd skipped town and that she didn't know where he was and didn't give a damn. I think I told that to Am; outside of that he didn't have anything or know anything that isn't here."

"Okay," I said. I put my notebook back in my pocket. "Sure there isn't anything I can do between now and whenever Bassett gets here?"

"Yes, Ed. You can get out of my hair. Go back and play cards with Joe and Emil."

He sounded impatient and I decided that maybe I had been heckling him too much.

And what he suggested was as good as anything I could think of, so I went back and made Joe and Emil switch from gin rummy to a three-handed variety so

I could sit in.

It was several hands later that Emil was dealing and happened to look at his wrist watch. He said, "Four-twenty. And that reminds me and I think we can find out. Wait a minute."

He put down the deck without finishing the deal and went out.

Joe Streater said, "Dane's got a friend on a newspaper; he can phone and find out. You got a ticket on four-twenty, Ed?"

I nodded.

Joe said, "I got half a check and Emil put down a buck. Five hundred for him, if it hits; two hundred and fifty for me. And it's funny, neither of us believes in astrology. I don't expect it to hit. It's just that—well, what the hell is fifty cents if I lose it? But two hundred and fifty bucks if I win—well, you can't say what the hell is two hundred and fifty bucks, can you?"

"Or two and a half thousand."

Joe whistled at almost exactly the pitch Dane Evans had used when I'd told him about my five dollar ticket. He said, "Cripes, you really back a hunch. Come to think of it, why didn't I—"

Emil came back, shaking his head sadly.

Joe said, "But on second thought, I'm glad I didn't. Did we come close, Emil?"

"Not a figure the same. Nine thirty-two. We missed by only—uh—five hundred and twelve. Well, I see I'll have to win my dollar back from you guys."

He sat down again and finished dealing. I didn't pick up my hand right away because I'd just thought of something and I wanted to keep on thinking about it. We'd all thought of four-twenty as a number and we'd all subconsciously tied it in to the numbers game because the numbers game had kept trying to get itself involved in our guesses as to what might have happened to Uncle Am. But four-twenty could be a time, twenty minutes after four.

And twenty minutes after four could have been the time something had happened to Uncle Am. It was just about the time he'd have arrived outside the Gresham if he'd walked there from the agency.

Karl could have thought of it as a time when he'd written it down, even though he hadn't put in a point or a colon and had written just the figures.

But even if that was right, I didn't see how four-twenty as a time could have meant anything to Karl Dell that would have led him to get me on the telephone and would have made him sound so excited about having something important. If he hadn't said "It's not astrology, exactly," I could have thought he'd calculated twenty minutes after four as the time that whatever had happened to Uncle Am had happened. And that wouldn't have been a bad guess. But it couldn't have been that, or he wouldn't have said—

I was going in circles, so I picked up my cards and tried to concentrate on the game. But I made a mental note to bring up the possibility of four-twenty being a time instead of a number when I talked things over with Starlock and Bassett at dinner.

I played until a quarter of five when Bassett got there and then I went into Starlock's office.

From Bassett's face I didn't have to ask him whether or not he'd got anywhere; he looked tired and discouraged.

He ran a hand through his faded red hair. "Well," he said, "I found just about every call Karl Dell made yesterday. He followed right down his collection list and everybody I talked to that he saw noticed that he was in a hurry. Just made his collections and didn't try—as usual—to sell some more insurance. He was probably rushing to get home early and do his homework in astrology.

"I even found where he ate both meals. One of his collection calls was at a restaurant on Halsted and he timed that for about noon and ate there. A quickie; the guy said he couldn't have been in the place over fifteen or twenty minutes, collecting and eating both. And your guess was right, Ed, as to where he ate the second time. He was at the barbecue place on Clark where Estelle used to work at about four-thirty. He had a barbecue sandwich and coffee and that would get him home about five when you saw him coming in. His whole day is covered. We know everything he did up to the time he phoned the agency here at twenty-five minutes after six and then you phoned him back at six-thirty."

That reminded me about times, and I told them what I'd thought of—the

possibility of four-twenty being a time rather than just a number.

Bassett said, "I think it was. We dug up an astrologer and gave him the paper that Dell had been working on. He says Dell's methods aren't orthodox. He must have worked out a system of his own that isn't the usual one. He couldn't make much out of it, but he did say that he thought Dell's calculations had brought him to a time when something had happened and that four-twenty was probably twenty minutes after four o'clock, P. M."

"On Wednesday?" Starlock asked.

"He wouldn't stick out his neck on that. Said he couldn't make out any definite indication of a day of the week or of the month. He said Dell's system was screwy anyway. He's taking Am's birth date and starting a horoscope of his own. Says he'll try to get something for us. Well—it looks like he's got a chance of beating me to it. I haven't got a damn thing left to work on. What have you guys been doing besides sucking your thumbs?"

We told him, and it didn't sound like much.

He grunted and said we were doing a swell job in eliminating what possibilities and suspects we did have.

He said, "I was thinking of suggesting that," when we told him I planned tomorrow to retrace Uncle Am's calls on the day he disappeared. But he added gloomily, "That's what I did today on Karl Dell. And a lot of good it did me."

We went to Chez Julliard and had a wonderful dinner but none of us enjoyed it much.

We broke up after that and Starlock told me to go home and get a good night's sleep for a change, and said that he'd do the same thing. It sounded like as good an idea as any.

But when I got to my room it was only eight o'clock and I didn't feel like turning in that early, or like reading either. It occurred to me that Estelle must have a night off once a week and that this could be it, so I went up to her room to see and she wasn't there.

When I came back down I saw that Karl Dell's door was closed and locked, and there wasn't any crack of light under it. Apparently the police weren't guarding



it any more.

There was a crack of light under Chester Hamlin's door, so I knocked. I wasn't crazy about Chester, but didn't feel like sitting around alone.

He seemed glad to see me and asked me in. He said, "Say, Ed, let me show you those two shots of you playing trombone. They came out swell."

He showed them to me and they were good photography and one of them was funny. My face was hidden behind the bell of the trombone and about all you could see was my feet, my hands and the slide and bell of the trom.

He said, "Ed, I bet I could sell that shot somewhere. You won't mind if I try, will you? Your face doesn't show, so nobody could tell who it is."

I told him I didn't mind.

"Still no news at all on your uncle, Ed?"

When I told him there wasn't, he wanted to know if there was anything he could do and I thanked him and said there wasn't.

"Don't you think, Ed, that after this long no news is good news? I mean, if anything had happened to him, wouldn't you have heard by now?"

I said, "Something did happen to him. It's only a question of what, Chester."

"I—I have a hunch he's all right, Ed. I've never told you this, but I'm a little—clairvoyant. You don't believe in that, though, do you?"

I shook my head. I wondered how many people were a little screwy that way. Karl Dell with astrology, now Chester Hamlin coming up with the idea that he was clairvoyant.

I said, half seriously, "Better not push that hunch, Chester. Look what happened to Karl Dell. Or did you know why we think he was killed?" I remembered that they'd kept that part of it out of papers. As far as the news stories told it, the murder of Karl had been merely a robbery—"although police are investigating the case in search of other possible motives."

He said, "I thought there was a connection, Ed. A detective was here last night asking questions about Karl. And he asked things about your uncle, too, so I figured they thought there was a

connection—but that's natural with them both living on the same floor of the same building. Is there more than that?"

I admitted that there was, but said I'd better not talk about it. Since the police hadn't given it out to the papers, apparently they wanted to keep it to themselves.

To change the subject, I picked up the pictures Chester had taken of me and admired them again.

He said, "If I sell that one, Ed, you've got a drink coming for being my model. And come to think of it, why shouldn't I buy you the drink anyway? Feel like going over to State Street for a little while?"

I was going to say no, and then wondered why I shouldn't and said that I would. It was still too early even to try to go to sleep and maybe a few drinks would make me sleepy.

They didn't. Not right away, anyway. They made me drunk. Maybe because I was overtired and had been worried stiff for over two days now. I know I've drunk much more and felt it much less.

I'm even a little fuzzy as to exactly how many places we dropped into, but they were all on State Street and within a dozen blocks of where we started.

We didn't talk about Karl Dell or Uncle Am; we talked about trombone playing and photography, and when Chester began to get a little tight, he talked about clairvoyance but it turned out he thought even less of astrology than I did. I remember that, although we avoided current issues, we did get onto the subject of crime in general at one time, and I remember Chester saying how much he hated murder and starting to say something about a brother of his and then getting sidetracked.

Chester turned out to be a swell guy, once you got to know him. A little on the screwball side on just the one topic. I remember once he wanted to get a crystal ball that he had somewhere—I got the idea that it wasn't in his room—and wanted to try to find something in it to reassure me about Uncle Am. I think I tried to get him to use the bald head of a guy sitting in a booth across from the bar, but he said that wouldn't work.

Yes, the Ambrose Collector turned out

to be a swell guy. He took me home and poured me onto the bed, and I guess he must have taken my shoes off because I don't think I did it myself.

## VII

**I**T WAS the start of the third day of the search for Uncle Am. It was going to be the last day, but I didn't know that.

I strapped the holster on. I didn't guess that I was going to shoot—and kill—with this gun before the day was over.

I didn't guess a lot of things.

Starlock wasn't down yet when I got to the office, but he came in a few minutes later. He said, "You look fresh, Ed. See what a good long night's sleep will do. How do you feel?"

"Swell," I told him. "Ben, have you any idea where Am started Wednesday morning? Whether he saw the wife first, or what?"

He thought a moment. "He didn't see the wife first because he phoned her from here to see if he could make an appointment. And the call got her out of bed; it turned out she worked nights and slept late. But she took it all right and made an appointment to see him later. I don't remember just when."

I took out my notebook and studied the notations I'd made in it. Aside from the wife and the employment reference—the Kennel Bar—I had only two names. One was a brother-in-law and all I had for him was a home address, a different apartment in the same building as the wife; the other name was that of an attorney in the Corwin Building, only a few blocks away. Today was Saturday and that meant there was only about an even chance that he'd be coming to his office at all.

I tried calling the office and—as I expected at only a few minutes after eight—there wasn't any answer. I called the home phone, hoping I wouldn't be waking him up, and got a break. A woman—his wife, I presume—answered and said that Mr. Demminton had just left to go to the office, that he'd be there by half past eight, or not much after that.

That meant I could get an earlier start than I'd hoped for. I could leave the

agency in ten minutes or so, and I thought of a way to kill that much time. I called Bassett and asked him if he'd have someone check the files to see if there was any record on Thomas Reynal.

"Sure, Ed," he said. "Shall I call you back or want to hold the line?"

I told him I'd hold the line and I held it for him about five minutes. Then Bassett's voice said, "Yeah, there's a record, Ed. Four convictions. Six months for statutory rape in nineteen forty-two. Suspended sentence of ten days, and a fine, in forty-four, for petty larceny. Made him serve the suspended sentence when he was picked up only a month later on two charges at once—drunk and disorderly and inmate of a disorderly house.

"Nothing more till last month. He lost his license as a bartender for serving drinks to minors. And there was a fine of a hundred bucks, too. That's all."

"Nice guy," I said. "Thanks a lot, Frank."

I walked over to the Corwin Building, taking my time, and got there at eight-thirty on the head. Demminton wasn't there yet, but he showed up within a few minutes. I let him get the door unlocked and then followed him in and told him who I was and what I wanted.

He looked at me a little strangely. "One of your men was here only a few days ago," he said. "Not that I mind, but did you get your wires crossed?"

I told him the story I had ready, that the investigator who'd seen him Wednesday had quit without notice and without turning in a report, that we were sorry but we had to do the work over again.

"All right, come in. I came down early this morning because I have some piled up work, but I guess I can give you a few minutes, and it can't take longer than that."

We went through an outer office into an inner one, and he waved me to a chair at one side of his desk and sat down across from me.

He said, "I'll tell you just what I told the other man your company sent. I've known Reynal for about three years but never very well. When I got to know him he was tending bar at a place on Dearborn Street near Goethe. I lived around the corner on Goethe; I was a bachelor



then. It was a nice little bar that he worked in and I spent a fair amount of time there, evenings. Tommy and I did quite a bit of talking and I liked him. Two years ago I got married and moved away from that neighborhood. I didn't see Tommy for about a year after that and then he came into my office and wanted me to handle a minor legal matter. His car had been in a collision with another car; the other driver was suing him and he claimed it was the other driver's fault and wanted me to file a countersuit."

"Whose fault was it?" I asked him.

Demminton spread his hands. "It was one of those things—no witnesses and one driver's word against the other's. I filed a countersuit for him, not because I expected to win it but just as a bargaining point in settling out of court. And that's the way it wound up. The other man's attorney agreed to withdraw his suit if we withdrew ours. No hits, no runs, no errors."

"And that was the last time you saw Reynal?" I asked.

"Yes. That is, about six months ago. The matter I handled for him took that long. I don't mean it took much time—all in all I didn't spend over a day's time on it but it dragged out for six months before we called it a draw."

"He paid you?"

"No. I sent him a bill for fifty dollars but he never paid it."

"You made no effort to collect?"

He shrugged. "It wouldn't have been worth it for that amount. Possibly eventually I'd have sold it to a collection agency that buys up bad accounts. Now that he's skipped town, even such an agency wouldn't give me a nickel for the account."

"Did you know that he'd skipped town before—uh—our other representative was here?"

"No. That was my first intimation of it. I sent him a bill for fifty dollars about six months ago. And a statement on the first of the month ever since. But I hadn't heard from or of him since the case was settled."

"And yet you gave him a favorable reference?"

He frowned. "I told exactly the truth, as you'll see if you consult your records.

I said that I'd known him between two and three years, that he was at that time a client of mine, and that I knew nothing against him."

"You've no idea where he would have gone when he skipped town?"

"No, except that he used to talk a lot about California; he'd been there once and said he'd like to live there again. But he didn't mention any specific town that I remember. And that, young man, is everything I can tell you about him. We had no mutual friends, nothing in common except the conversations at the bar I told you about, and the accident case I was handling for him at the time he used me as a reference."

I thanked him and stood up. Then, as though it was an afterthought, I said, "I nearly forgot, Mr. Demminton. The boss asked me to ask you how our other investigator acted—the one who was here Wednesday. Did he seem normal while he was here?"

"Normal? Just what do you mean? And what does it matter if he quit working for you?"

"It might matter if we're ever asked to give him a reference. It was a funny thing; he'd worked for us for three years, and then all of a sudden Wednesday afternoon he telephoned in and said he was quitting and leaving town and that we should mail his check to General Delivery, New York. He never sent in a report and never made any explanation. You can see why our company is curious."

"Hmmm. I can, at that. Well, he acted perfectly normal while he was here. Very pleasant person; I liked him."

"This would have been his first call, I imagine. Do you have any idea where he intended to go from here, who he was going to see next?"

Demminton shook his head. "Not an idea. I remember that he was here early, not much after nine o'clock. I told him just what I've told you. And that's all; I wouldn't have the slightest idea where he went from here."

I thanked him and left.

There were three leads left: the wife, the brother-in-law who lived in the same building, and the Kennel Bar where he'd been employed last. I had one new lead now, through Demminton, the fact that



# The dress that needn't have been so beautiful

THERE'S NO REAL REASON for a girl to have the most beautiful dress in the world. Even my daughter Sally. Even if she has her heart set on it.

But—I bought it. And when I paid the bill, I whistled! Partly with the well-known father's bill-shock. Partly for happiness. Because, Sally was right—there never was a prettier dress to get married in.

It's times like that—when we can buy something really important even if it is a luxury—that I feel *lucky!*

I know the luckiest day of my life was when I signed up to save regularly through the Payroll Savings Plan at the office. I'd tried every which way to save before, but, brother, this *automatic* way is the only way that *works—for you—all the time!*

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from three years ago to two years ago, he'd been employed at a bar on Dearborn near Goethe. But that didn't look like a very hot lead. It had been some time ago, and I didn't think Uncle Am would have bothered with it at least not until after he'd seen the others. I decided in favor of the bar. I got there about a quarter after nine and the place wasn't open yet. I went into a little greasy spoon restaurant next door to it and asked the man behind the cash register if he knew what time the bar next door usually opened.

"About ten o'clock, usually," he said. "Place in the next block usually opens earlier if you want a drink."

I said, "Guess I'll wait here. Could I have a cup of coffee?"

"Sure." He went back to the urn and drew it. I sat down on the end stool of the counter, nearest the register, and he brought it to me there.

I took the snapshot of Uncle Am out of my pocket and put it down on the counter. "Ever seen this man?" I asked him.

He bent over the picture. "Looks familiar. Think he was in here not so long ago."

"Wednesday, maybe? Three days ago, about this time?"

"Sure, that's it. He asked the same question you did. About the bar next door. I told him it opened at ten and he said he'd have a cup of coffee, just like you did. Only he didn't have so long to wait; it was pretty near ten at the time. Only I'm not sure it was Wednesday."

I was, so I didn't worry about that. So far I was on the trail all right, only now I'd lose whatever time advantage I'd had on Uncle Am. I'd have to wait longer for it to be ten o'clock so the Kennel Bar would open up.

I asked him, "Know a bartender who used to work next door by the name of Tommy Reynal?"

"There was one named Tommy. I don't know his last name. Why? You a cop or something?"

"Private detective. What do you know about this Tommy?"

"Nothing much except that he—and the bar, too—got in trouble about a month ago, selling drinks to minors. They both

got fined and Tommy lost his license. I guess Perry was worried he might lose his tavern license, too, but he didn't. Hell, he shouldn't have. He wasn't around when it happened."

"Still," I said, "he's legally responsible for what his employee did."

"Well, he paid a fine. Hell, I don't think it was Tommy's fault, either, for that matter. A lot of kids a year or two under age look older than they are. Only—Are you working for the license commission or bureau or whatever it is?"

He seemed friendly to Tommy Reynal, so I thought I'd get farther if I took a tack that favored Tommy too. I said, "No, I work for a private agency, and we're looking for Reynal because a firm of lawyers we're working for have some news for him, to his advantage. Only he moved away and they can't find him."

"You mean he inherited some money?"

He wouldn't quite have believed something that simple, so I made it a little more complicated for him. I said, "It isn't an inheritance, although they represent an estate. It's about a sale of property; they need his signature to quiet title."

I didn't say the signature might be worth a few dollars, or a few hundred; I left that to his imagination.

He said, "Well, I guess you're telling the truth. That's just about what the other guy said, the guy whose picture you showed me. Only why they sending two of you on the same job?"

"No reason," I said, "except that he missed. They thought they'd take another try and see if I could get a lead he missed."

"How come you showed me his picture and asked if he was here?"

I had to take time out to shovel a spoonful of sugar into my coffee on that one. I said, "As a matter of fact, the guy missed so completely that they asked me to check up if he'd really seen as many people as he said he did, or if he was just building up a nice report. They asked me to check up on his work because he's new with our agency."

"Oh. Yeah, he talked to me all right. Only I couldn't tell him anything, because I knew Tommy only from having a few drinks next door once in a while. Haven't heard anything about him since he left there—month ago, or whenever it was."

# *If Polio Comes!*

**Keep children with their own friends.** Keep them away from people they have not been with right along, especially in close, daily living. Many people have polio infection without showing signs of sickness. Without knowing it, they can pass the infection on to others.

**Try not to get over-tired by work, hard play or travel.** If you already have the polio infection in your body, being very tired may bring on serious polio.

**Keep from getting chilled.** Don't bathe or swim too long in cold water. Take off wet clothes at once. Chilling can lessen your body's protection against polio.

**Keep clean.** Wash hands carefully before eating and always after using the toilet. Hands may carry polio infection into the body through the mouth. Also keep food clean and covered.

**Watch for early signs of sickness.** Polio starts in different ways—with headache, sore throat, upset stomach, sore muscles or fever. Persons coming down with polio may also feel nervous, cross or dizzy. They may have trouble in swallowing or breathing. Often there is a stiff neck and back.

## **ACT QUICKLY—IT MAY LESSEN CRIPPLING**

**Call your doctor at once.** Until he comes, keep the patient quiet and in bed, away from others. Don't let the patient know you are worried. Your doctor will tell you what to do. Usually polio patients are cared for in hospitals, but some with light attacks can be cared for at home.

**Call your own Chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis if you need help.** (Look for the number in the telephone book or call your health department for the address.) Chapters are made up of people in your own town or county, banded together to give help to polio patients. Polio is a very expensive disease to treat. *But no patient need go without care.* You pay what you can afford—your Chapter pays the rest of the cost of care. This help includes payment of hospital bills, nurses and physical therapists, transportation to and from hospitals or clinics, treatment after the patient leaves the hospital, wheelchairs and braces when needed. This is not a loan. The American people make these services possible by giving to the March of Dimes.

**Remember—there is no “quick cure” for polio and no way as yet to prevent it.** With good care, most people get well, but some must have treatment for a long time.

**The more you know about polio, the less you fear.** More than half of all people who get the disease recover completely without any crippling.



"If he went out of town, you don't know where he might have gone?"

"Nope. Not an idea. He never talked about his personal affairs or anything, the few times we did talk. I never even knew his last name."

Another customer came in, then, and the proprietor of the restaurant went down to the middle of the counter to wait on him. I sipped my coffee and wondered if there was any constructive use to which I could put the half hour I still had to wait.

I decided there was. I went over to the telephone booth on the opposite side of the restaurant and used the directory to look up the number of the brother-in-law who lived in the same building as the wife. Nine-thirty was too early to call her, since I knew that she worked nights, but it wouldn't be too early to call him.

I called him.

I gave him a name and said I was with the Bartlett Finance Company, and could I see him to talk to him about his brother-in-law.

He said, "I guess so. But I told everything I knew about him to the other guy your company sent a few days ago."

I told him I'd like to see him anyway and that I'd explain why when I got there. I asked him how late his sister slept, and he said she generally got up about ten. So I made an appointment to see him about ten-thirty and asked him, if he saw his sister sooner than that, to try to fix it so she'd stay around so I could talk to her about eleven o'clock. He said he would.

I thought I might be able to get one more thing out of the way in the twenty minutes or so I still had to kill before the Kennel Bar opened, so I opened the classified directory to the taverns and ran a finger down the addresses looking for one that was on Dearborn around 1300 north. There were a good many pages of taverns, but I was lucky; I found one on the third page that looked like about the right address. I called the number and it was.

I used a simple credit reference pretext and found that yes, a Tommy Reynal had been employed there once, for about a year and a half. He didn't remember the dates, but it would have been up to

a year and half or two years ago. He sounded a little cagy when I asked him why Reynal had left. He said, "We just didn't get along," and I didn't press the point; probably he'd decided that Reynal was dragging down too much out of the register but hadn't been able to prove it, and he couldn't very well say so now without proof.

I didn't care about that anyway. I thanked him as though that was all I wanted to know and then started after what I really wanted.

I said, "I'm sorry we had to bother you again. But our man who talked to you Wednesday forgot to ask you why he left."

"Huh?" he said. "What man of yours?"

"One of our investigators," I said. "This is the superintendent speaking. One of our men called there sometime Wednesday to make a routine check." I laughed a little. "Maybe he told you a different story as to why he was asking, but that's all in the game."

"Nobody was here Wednesday asking about Tommy. Nobody's asked me anything about him for a long time. Last time was almost a year ago. Some finance company. He was buying a car, and they were just checking his employment record."

"You're sure?" I said, as though I didn't believe him. "If that's right, I'll have to call the investigator on the carpet for making a false report. He said he was there, and we can't let our employees get away with anything like that."

"Well, I don't want to get a man in trouble. But he wasn't here. I know for damn sure because I lost my bartender Monday and haven't found one I want yet and I've been running the place all by myself. Nine in the morning till one at night; I even eat here."

I thanked him and hung up, sure now that Uncle Am hadn't gone there, or even phoned.

THE KENNEL BAR looked as you'd expect a place called the Kennel Bar to look. Pictures of dogs all over the walls. A doghouse in one corner, Great Dane size, big enough for a man to crawl into on all fours, and probably more than one drunk had done it. They even

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used the old gag of having a picture of a dog on the door of each of the two washrooms—a pointer on one and a setter on the other. The big bald-headed man behind the bar got the same song and dance I'd given the attorney.

But I didn't get any leads. Reynal had worked there, all right, for about four months, up to a month ago, but he hadn't seen Tommy since, didn't have the faintest idea where he was or what he was doing, except that it wouldn't be tending bar anywhere else unless he was doing it without a license.

So I led around to the other investigator who'd been here three days ago, at this same time of day, and went into the story about his having walked off the case and the job and out of town and about my company wondering why.

The bald man shrugged. "Looked and sounded all right to me, and asked me the same questions you did and I told him the same thing."

"Do any drinking while he was here?"

"He had one drink and bought me one. That's all."

That sounded like a hint, so I did the same thing, to keep him talking in case he might remember something.

But it was wasted money. He didn't know anything about Reynal's wife or friends or his life outside of the hours he'd spent behind the bar. He'd liked him all right, but hadn't got to know him personally at all. He'd neither heard of or from him since he'd left—at least not until the other man from the finance company was in a few days before and said Tommy had skipped town.

No, he didn't know where the other investigator had gone next, but like as not it would have been to the place where Tommy used to live, because that was only a few blocks away. No, he'd never been there but he had the address written down somewhere if I wanted it. He knew it wasn't far because Tommy always walked to work.

I plugged away with a few more leading questions that failed to lead anywhere. I felt pretty sure Uncle Am hadn't got a lead here.

It was only a quarter after ten when I left the Kennel Bar, so I walked from there to 682 South Briwick. It was a four

story building with a plumbing supplies store on the ground floor. The stairway to the flats above was at the back of an areaway. Twelve mailboxes in the short hallway at the foot of the stairs indicated that there'd be four flats on each of the three floors above. Number two, then, the brother-in-law's place, would be on the second floor and number seven, where Reynal had lived, would be on the third.

I climbed to the second floor and rang the bell of number two. A stocky man in an undershirt and with his hair tousled and at least a day's growth of beard on his face opened the door. "You the guy from the finance company? Come on in."

He led the way along a hall past a kitchen where a woman was washing dishes into a sitting room with well worn upholstered furniture. He sat on the arm of the sofa and waved me to a chair.

He said, "I told the other guy all I know, but go ahead and ask anything you want. I hope you find the punk."

I told him I was sorry but that it wasn't a matter of asking extra questions; that I had to repeat the work of the other investigator. I gave him the same story I'd given Demminton and the man at the Kennel Bar.

He said, "The guy looked all right to me. And nothing happened to him here that'd make him do something like that. He didn't even turn in a report?"

He sounded curious and I figured I might as well find out what I could about Uncle Am before we got onto the subject of Thomas Reynal.

I said, "Our company's wondering what did happen, so I've been trying to trace his movements along with doing the work he did over again. What time did he get here?"

"Just about this time. He was here maybe half an hour and then went upstairs to talk to Madge. I don't know where he went after that. He didn't say, unless Madge gave him something that he went after."

"Is she awake now?" I asked.

"Yeah, having breakfast. I dropped up just before you came and told her you were coming and would drop in there after you left here. She said to make it around eleven if you could; she wants to go out before noon."

It almost scared me to realize how close my timing and sequence of calls was coming to Uncle Am's.

But I pulled my mind away from that and started asking questions about Reynal, pretending I was interested in finding him so I'd ask the same questions Uncle Am would have asked, and come up with the same leads. Not that I expected to find Reynal. Uncle Am is good; if he'd reported to Starlock that Reynal had really skipped without leaving any loose ends behind him, then Reynal couldn't be found in one day's work.

Jennings was telling me that Reynal was a no-good, that he drank too much, although he wasn't an alcoholic, that he got mean when he drank, and that he gambled away most of the money he earned when he worked.

It seemed a remote connection, but I picked up my ears at that. I asked, "Did he play the numbers?"

"Not that I know of. Oh, maybe he bought a dime or a quarter ticket once in a while if he felt lucky or had a hunch on a number or dreamed of it, or something. He was pretty superstitious. But the ponies were what he went in for. His big betting was on the ponies."

"Would you say it's likely, then, that he headed for somewhere where there's a track? One where they're running now or were a month ago when he skipped?"

Jennings rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Doubt it. He never cared to watch 'em run, just to bet on 'em. Never knew him to go to a track."

"Do you know where he did his betting?"

"Cigar store somewhere in the Loop but I don't know just where. Offered to take me there but I never cared much for the ponies. Oh, back when he and Madge were first married and we were friendly, I used to let him place a bet for me once in a while if he said he had something hot. A buck or two if I happened to have it to spare."

"Is there any way I could find out where he placed his bets? A cigar store in the Loop is pretty vague. Would your sister know?"

"Don't think so. Why? What would that matter?"

"I might be able to find out if he made

a killing just before he left. Generally when a man skips town it's because he just made some money or has run up debts over his head. But there's always something that sets him off at that particular time. Maybe he's wanted to for a long time, and then something happens that either makes it possible for him to run or makes it necessary."

Jennings' hand scraped over his chin again. He said, "Sounds sensible, but damn if I know which. He wasn't any *more* in debt than usual."

I decided I'd better get down to brass tacks, so I asked him who some of Reynal's friends had been and got out my notebook and a pencil ready to take down names and addresses, if he knew them.

He said, "Well, he didn't have any really close friends. He knew a lot of people, naturally, tending bar. I know names of some of the guys he used to pal around with, but he didn't tell any of them where he was going, I'll bet. He wouldn't have been that dumb. But if you want, I can give the names of everybody I know of that he knew. It won't get you nowhere."

"How many names did the other investigator take down?" I asked.

"Three." He gave me three names. Addresses of two and the place where the third worked. "Thanks a lot." I started toward the hallway and then turned. "Did the other man from our company talk to Mrs. Jennings?"

His hand scraped across his chin again. "Didn't exactly talk to her. I called her in once to tell her to give him the name of a fortune teller she went to and that Tommy went to once, too, when she told Tommy about him. Or maybe more than once, I don't know."

He waved toward the kitchen. "You ask her about it, huh? I got to start getting ready."

I went along the hallway to the kitchen. Mrs. Jennings turned away from the sink, drying her hands, and I stood in the doorway. I told her what I wanted.

She said, "Oh, yes. His name is Ramah Singh. S-i-n-g-h. He's wonderful. He told me everything about myself the first time I went to him. I don't know how he does it but he's wonderful."

"A Hindu?" I asked.



"Well I don't know. He doesn't look like one, but he wears a turban around his head. He speaks perfect English but I think he said he studied in India or somewhere."

"And Reynal went to see him?"

"He said he did."

I thanked her and went on out. I went up to the next floor and rang the bell of apartment seven.

The woman who answered the door and asked me in looked to be about thirty, quite a bit younger than her brother. Also quite a bit less intelligent. She didn't exactly look stupid, but she came close. Her face might have been pretty had there been more animation and intelligence in it. She already had twenty to thirty pounds more weight than she needed and in ten years she'd look more like a cow than a cow does.

She took me into the living room to talk, and she talked. I didn't have a chance to say much; I managed to get across my explanation of why the investigation was being made over again, but I wouldn't have needed to. She was perfectly glad to tell everything a second time.

I learned everything that I'd learned from Jennings over again and a lot of domestic and intimate details besides. But nothing that sounded at all helpful in locating Tommy Reynal or Uncle Am.

After about three quarters of an hour of it, I started bearing down on what I really wanted to know, which was what leads she had given Uncle Am which he might have decided were worth following down. I knew now, for sure, that he'd seen all the people who'd been mentioned in Starlock's notes before noon. He hadn't got back to the agency till four, so he must have spent three hours following leads he got from Mrs. Reynal and her brother.

Mrs. Reynal wasn't as good at specific remembering as she was at general talking, but I kept bearing down and finally came up with two points. One was the name and address of a fairly close friend of Tommy's whom Jennings hadn't mentioned. She was pretty sure that the other investigator had written that down.

The other was the fact that he had an uncle—the only relative she'd ever heard

him mention—by the name of Charles Reynal, who was in the real estate business in Jacksonville. She thought Tommy would likely have headed for either California or Florida, because he always hated Chicago weather. And if he went to Florida, he might get in touch with his uncle there. She thought she'd told that to the other man from the finance company, but she couldn't be sure. I felt sure that she had, for Uncle Am wouldn't have missed asking if Reynal had any relatives anywhere, and that would have brought it out.

That was at least something I'd have to give to the finance company for the day's work they'd authorized. They could write to the police at Jacksonville to watch out for the car and for Tommy Reynal.

It was a little after twelve when I got away from Mrs. Reynal. I doubt if Uncle Am could have done it any sooner, so we were still even. He'd have probably eaten lunch next, so I did the same thing. Maybe even in the same restaurant, because it was only a block from Mrs. Reynal's place. I might possibly have found out by showing the snapshot of Uncle Am, but it didn't seem worth the trouble. And I think it would have scared me a little if I'd found out that he really had eaten there.

Before I even ordered lunch I went to the phone and called the agency. Ben said nothing had come in and nothing had happened. He wanted to know how I was coming. I told him I was doing swell on finding out where Uncle Am had been and when, but that none of it seemed to be leading anywhere or to have any possible connection with what had happened after he got back to the agency.

He said, "Stick with it, Ed. The more I think of it, the more I think you had an idea there. I mean, tracing everything he did up to the time he reported in. We should have done that even sooner."

When I left the phone I took one of the booths at the side instead of sitting at the counter. I wanted to look over my notes, the names and addresses, and plan out my afternoon's work. Uncle Am would probably have done the same thing while he ate.

I had four names down, probably the same ones Uncle Am had taken. If Jen-

nings' and Mrs. Reynal's memories were correct, he'd not made notes of any others.

Three of the four were on the near south side, all within a radius of a mile or so. Those three Uncle Am would have seen in person, or at least tried to. The other address was way west, almost out to Cicero.

When I finished eating, I went back to the phone book and looked for Harvey Spengler, the one who lived far west. He wasn't listed so I called Information and gave them the address and found there was a phone listed and got the number. I called it.

Apparently it was a rooming house; Spengler wasn't there, but they thought he'd just gone out to eat and would be back pretty soon.

I picked the nearest of the other addresses and walked there; the guy's name was Albert Burgoyne. I learned that he worked on Saturday afternoons, so he wasn't home. I got the address of the haberdashery shop where he worked, and learned that he'd been working Wednesday afternoon too. The shop wasn't far; a Clark Street car would take me there in five minutes or so.

But first I stopped in a drugstore and tried the phone number for Spengler again. This time I got him.

The finance company line doesn't go so good over a telephone. People clam up unless you're talking to them face to face.

So I said, "This is Jay Wheeler talking. Could you tell me where I can get in touch with Tommy Reynal?"

"No, I haven't seen Tommy for over a month. Who is this?"

"Jay Wheeler. Met you with Tommy once. I got some money for him. Not much, but I want to get it off my books."

"Money for what?"

"A bet," I said. "A little over a month ago he gave me five on a nag and it came in. Thirty-four bucks and sixty cents. He never came around to get it, so maybe he didn't know he hit. And I don't like unpaid bets on my books; I'd rather get it off. You don't know where he is?"

"I heard he skipped town. So I guess you're in that much dough. Unless you want to give me twelve bucks of it. He owes me twelve bucks."

I just laughed. I asked, "No idea where

he'd have headed for?" I knew that wasn't a good question because, in character, I wouldn't have asked it. But he didn't notice.

"Not unless it's California. But I'm wondering now if he did skip. Another bookie called me a few days ago and damn if he wasn't holding a winner for Tommy, too. More than yours. Damn if I see why he wouldn't have waited to collect any money he had coming."

I thanked him and hung up. It was funny—Uncle Am having used exactly the same pretext I'd thought of. It was funny but I didn't want to laugh. Anyway, one name was off my list.

I took the streetcar to the haberdashery. Burgoyne had just come in. I gave him the finance company story and asked him if he knew where Tommy Reynal was.

He frowned and hesitated for a few seconds. Then he said, "Sure, I know where Tommy is."

## VIII

IT WAS the last thing on earth I'd expected him to say. It nearly floored me. Hadn't Uncle Am been here? Jennings had said he'd taken down the name. Actually, I didn't give a damn where Tommy Reynal was. I wanted to skip that and ask right away about Uncle Am. But I had to stay in character, so I curbed my impatience and asked him where Reynal was.

"In Louisville, Kentucky. Staying at the Kentucky House, under the name of Tom Reynolds. I got a letter yesterday."

"From him?" I asked.

"Hell, no. From a cousin of mine in Louisville, makes deliveries or a big liquor store. He was here in Chi for a couple of weeks about a year ago, and he and Tommy met once. He wrote me that a few days ago he had some liquor to deliver to a Tom Reynolds at the Kentucky House. He said the name reminded him of having met a Tommy Reynal here and when he took the liquor up to the guy's room, it *was* Reynal. He says Reynal didn't recognize him—they'd met only the once, and he might not have been sure about recognizing Reynal if it hadn't been for his taking a name so close to his own. Any-



way, on account of the change of name he didn't say anything; he wrote me instead."

"You got the letter just yesterday?"

"Yeah, and I was still trying to remember the name of your company. Another guy was here a few days ago, Wednesday I think. Or was that a different outfit that's after Tommy too?"

I told him it was the same one and gave him the usual line about the other investigator and why we were curious about him. I asked what time he'd been there and how he'd acted.

"About this time or a little later. He acted okay, didn't seem screwy or anything if that's what you mean. I'd have told him about Reynal if I'd known then. But he didn't leave a card, and I couldn't remember his name or the name of the finance company. What'll you do about Reynal? Bring him back?"

"That's up to the company," I said. "I don't know whether they'll extradite or not, but they'll at least repossess the car."

"I wish they'd repossess the twenty-five bucks of mine he ran off with. That's why I'm glad to give you the dope. I thought he was a friend of mine, but it isn't like he just owed me the money and walked off. It was worse than that. He borrowed it the day before, so he must have been planning to skip out. Probably borrowed everything he could from everybody, knowing he'd never have to pay it back."

"I guess he did," I said. "Were there any more details in your cousin's letter?"

"No, that's all. But I know the Kentucky House; I lived in Louisville once. It's a fairly nice place. Not swanky, but he isn't on his uppers if he's staying there. And it isn't a transient hotel; they rent places by the month, bachelor apartments. So he's probably still there if he was there a few days ago. But that's all I can tell you."

I thanked him and then went back to the subject of Uncle Am and asked if he knew just what time he'd come here, explaining that we were trying to trace everywhere he'd been that day.

"He got here while I was out to lunch, somewhere around half past one. I knew because when I got back the boss told me someone had been in to see me about

half an hour ago, and he'd told the guy to come back after two. I'd say he got back about two-fifteen; I'd been working fifteen or twenty minutes when he came back."

"Have any idea where he went from here?"

"He asked me if I knew a Tex Wilkins who was another friend of Reynal's, and when I said I did, he asked me if I knew whether Tex would be working that afternoon. All he had on him was the address of the hash house where Tex is a counterman, and he didn't know what shift."

"Good," I said. That was one of my two remaining names. "And was Tex Wilkins working then, and is he now?"

"Yeah, until four o'clock. He works seven in the morning till four in the afternoon, every day but Sunday."

I thanked him again and left. Tex would be next on my list, as he had been on Uncle Am's, but first I called the agency again.

Starlock said, "Hi, Ed. Got something?"

"On Uncle Am, no. But I got a hot lead on Thomas Reynal. Thought I'd call in right away so you can pass it on to Bartlett Finance while it's hot. They'll probably want to phone the Louisville police right away."

I told him what Burgoyne had told me about Reynal and explained that Uncle Am hadn't missed the boat, that Burgoyne had got the news after he'd talked to Uncle Am.

Starlock said, "Nice work, Ed. I'll phone Bartlett. But I wish you'd got something about Am instead of about Reynal."

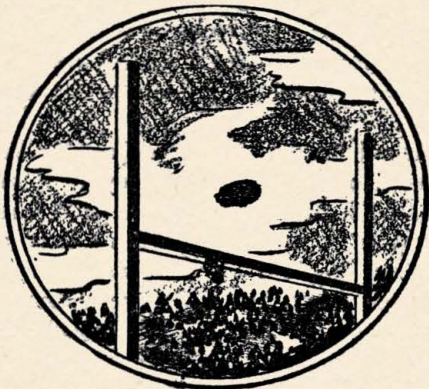
"So do I. I've got two calls to go. I'll be in before five."

I tackled Wilkins with the same approach I'd used on the others but he didn't know anything about Reynal, hadn't seen him for almost two months. He'd heard Reynal had skipped town, but that was all. Yes, another investigator had been here a few days ago, but he hadn't been able to tell him anything.

No, he hadn't mentioned any specific contacts or people whom the other guy might have traced down; he was sure of that.

He thought it was about three o'clock that the man had been there, but he wasn't sure; it might have been a little earlier.

I thought three o'clock was a good guess;



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I'd been fifteen minutes ahead of Uncle Am at the haberdashery, and it was a quarter of three now.

I had only one address left, a man named Gaines. It was over a dozen blocks so I took a cab.

He wasn't home, but I talked my way inside the door and got the information I needed from his wife. It didn't help.

Mr. Gaines had been out of town on Wednesday, too, when another man from a finance company had called to see him. He was a traveling salesman and was away from Chicago over half the time. She knew almost less than nothing about Thomas Reynal; she'd heard her husband mention him and knew they were friends—but she didn't think very close friends—and that was all. She'd never met Reynal, and didn't recall her husband having spoken of him recently. She hadn't even known that Reynal had left town until the other investigator, in asking the same questions, had mentioned it. And she hadn't talked it over with her husband because he hadn't been home since Wednesday; he was on a selling trip in Minnesota and would be gone another two or three days.

Aside from the fact that it had been in the afternoon, she didn't know when the other investigator had been there until I jogged her memory a little by asking if it hadn't been about half past three. Then she remembered that it was after she'd been out shopping for the day, so it must have been at least that late.

And I knew it couldn't have been later because Uncle Am had been back at the agency before four o'clock.

I thanked her.

I walked back over to Clark Street slowly, trying to think if there was any possible angle I might have missed.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was three o'clock. If I went back now, I'd get there just about half an hour before Uncle Am had. I'd been every place he'd been, as far as I could figure and from ten o'clock on I'd been just about even with him, time for time, except for fifteen minutes I'd gained by seeing Burgoyne at two o'clock instead of two-fifteen or so, and the fifteen minutes I'd saved by taking a taxi between my two final calls, instead of walking or taking a streetcar as Uncle Am would have.

That second fifteen minutes was easily

enough explained, but what had happened to the first fifteen? Uncle Am had reached the haberdashery, just as I had, at about half past one and he had found that Burgoyne was out to lunch and would be back at two. But he hadn't returned until two-fifteen or two-twenty. What had he done during that three quarters of an hour?

I'd killed my half hour between one-thirty and two by dropping in at the corner tavern and having a beer. Uncle Am might have done the same thing, but it was unlike him to overstay and be fifteen minutes late unless there was some reason for it. He had a watch that kept good time.

That fifteen minutes nagged me. It kept me from starting back to the agency and turned my steps north on Clark Street instead. I was only a couple of blocks from the haberdashery and from the tavern where I'd killed half an hour waiting for Burgoyne to come back from lunch.

I walked the two blocks and went back into the tavern. I showed the bartender my snapshot of Uncle Am and he didn't remember ever having seen him, although he'd been working, he said, on Wednesday afternoon.

I covered a few blocks either way on Clark Street, trying three other taverns and two restaurants. No dice. I even tried a drugstore on the chance that he might have stopped there for a coffee or a coke. And because that drugstore was the last place likely for him to have dropped into, I ordered a coke at the fountain and sat down to think things over.

If Uncle Am hadn't dropped in anywhere to kill time waiting for the end of Burgoyne's lunch hour, then I had three quarters of an hour of his time to account for, not just fifteen minutes. And if he'd been just killing time, he'd have dropped in somewhere. He wouldn't just have walked around for forty-five minutes. Uncle Am wasn't that crazy about walking.

There was a Chicago street map on the magazine rack. I bought it and unfolded enough of it to show the Loop and the near south side and put it down on the soda fountain. I took a pencil and traced my own route from the office to the point where I was now. And Uncle Am's route must have been just about the same,

up to the point where he'd talked to the wife of the traveling salesman. He must have gone back to the office from there.

But where could he have gone during those forty-five minutes from one-thirty until two-fifteen? Had he picked up a lead that I'd missed?

I put an X where the haberdashery was and stared at it and then around it. Crossing Clark only a few blocks away I saw Polk Street, leading to the Polk Street bridge. Who had said to me, "You go over the Polk Street bridge"?

Mrs. Jennings, telling me about the wonderful fortune teller, Ramah Singh. On Barr Street, just off Polk.

It hadn't looked worth following up, the name of a fortune teller that Reynal had been to once. I hadn't figured that Uncle Am would give it a second thought. But it was only ten minutes walk from here. And maybe he had given it a second thought when he'd discovered at the haberdashery that he had some time to kill, and had realized that he had nothing to lose by going there.

I put the map in my pocket and went out of the drugstore. I headed for Polk Street and across the bridge. When I reached Barr Street I started looking at mailboxes in buildings near the corner. In the third building I tried I found one with the name of Ramah Singh on it, for Number six. No ad, of course, saying he was a seer or mystic, just the name Ramah Singh.

I went up rickety stairs to the second floor and found the door of Number six. There wasn't any name on it, but a white card in one corner of the frosted glass pane said, "Walk In," so I walked in.

It was a waiting room; there was another door beyond. There was a worn sofa on one side of the room and a few other pieces of furniture including a small open bookcase on the other side. I walked over to the bookcase and glanced at the spines of the books; they were all on occult subjects.

Beyond the inner door I heard faint voices and I walked nearer to it and I could hear them more loudly but couldn't make out anything that was being said, only that it was a woman's voice and a man's and the man was doing most of the talking, probably with the woman asking

questions or agreeing.

I strolled back to the bookcase and picked out a book at random. It was called "The Geometry of the Soul," and I put it back where I'd found it. I looked over the other titles, wondering whether there were any books by Charles Fort, but there weren't. All the titles sounded equally screwy to me, so I picked another out at random and opened it to the flyleaf. I was inscribed *Ramah Singh* in heavy pencil, but another name had been erased under it. I wondered idly what Ramah Singh's real name was and picked another book to see if he'd missed one. The flyleaf of that one was torn out, probably because it had been inscribed in ink that couldn't be erased. I put it back in the bookcase and didn't bother looking at any of the others. I went across the room and sat down on the sofa.

It was only another minute before the inner door opened and a woman came through it. I didn't know her. And to this day I don't really know what she looked like, because after a quick glance at her face just to be sure she wasn't someone I knew, my eyes went to the turbaned man who stepped into the doorway as she came through.

*It was Chester Hamlin.*

HE DIDN'T seem surprised to see me. I don't know how much surprise showed in my face, but he winked at me over the woman's head, apparently a signal for me not to say anything until she was gone. So I waited until the outer door closed after her, and then Chester beat me to the punch.

He said, "Come on in, Ed. I rather thought you might come here."

He stepped back into the inner room and I followed him. It was smaller than the outer room, and was dimly lighted. There was a carpet on the floor but the only furniture was a small table with a straight chair behind it and a more comfortable chair in front of it. There was a black cloth on the table and a mad-ball—a three-inch crystal sphere—lay on a bunched piece of black velvet in the middle of the table. There were no other trappings, unless you counted Chester's turban, and aside from the turban he was neatly dressed in ordinary clothes.



But the setup, because of its very simplicity, was more effective than most elaborate layouts would have been.

He took the straight chair behind the table and sat down, but he looked across at me and not at the crystal ball. He said, "Sit down, Ed. I know what you want to know, and I'll tell you without your having to ask. If it had meant anything, I'd have told you sooner. I feel bad about not having told you, but it might have got me into trouble and it wouldn't have done you any good. It still won't but—" He shrugged. "—you're here now."

I said, "Uncle Am was here Wednesday afternoon."

"Yes. He came here to ask me about a Thomas Reynal who'd been here to see me professionally. I told him what I could but I don't think it helped him any."

I asked, "Did you try the crystal ball?"

He took it seriously. "I offered to. I might have seen something in it, but he just laughed at the idea like you did last night when I offered to use my clairvoyance to see if I could help you find your uncle. I can still try if you can put yourself in the right frame of mind to work with me, in rapport. If you sit there looking and feeling skeptical I won't be able to get anything."

He was right on one point; I didn't feel in rapport. I felt a little cold and a little suspicious. I don't know exactly what I was suspicious of, but I was trying to figure that out.

He said, "Ed, I've been clairvoyant all my life. I'm going to level with you. I guess I haven't any choice but to tell you the whole thing. I've been a fortune teller all my life since I got out of school. Nine years to be exact. And, damn it, Ed, it's genuine. I am clairvoyant and I do see things in that crystal. And I've really helped plenty of people.

"I'll admit I've faked, too. It isn't something you can turn on and off like a faucet, and plenty of times nothing comes, and I have to make up things, harmless things, because you've got to tell a mooch something. And you've got to use a name like Ramah Singh, because who'd believe anything a guy like Chester Hamlin told him?"

"I've used a dozen names, Ed, because

there's one sad thing about being a clairvoyant—it's illegal, most places, to do it for money. Whether you're real or a faker, like I'll admit a lot of them are, and I am once in a while when I have to be. But I've learned one thing in nine years and that is to keep my real identity and the identity of my current professional name separate. Any day the police can come around here and tell me to move on, and I'll have to close this place and start somewhere else under another name. But they won't know I'm Chester Hamlin, so I won't have to start all over again; I'll still have a base of operations."

He shrugged. "I suppose you'll tell them now. I suppose I can't blame you, Ed."

I said, "Let's stick to Uncle Am for a moment, Chester. What time was he here?" I knew what time Uncle Am had been here, but I just wanted to see how well his story fitted.

"It was right after I went out to eat—rather, after I came back. I generally get hungry about one o'clock. I think—let's see—Wednesday I must have got back about a quarter of two. And he was here in the outer waiting room sitting on the sofa. I brought him on in here to talk, and I guess we talked fifteen or twenty minutes. I told him the little that I actually knew about Thomas Reynal; I could have told him more but he didn't want it. Things I'd seen about Reynal in the crystal, I mean. And I asked him to keep my secret over at the rooming house, and we talked about that and he said he would."

It fitted. The times, in particular. Ten minutes walk from here to the haberdashery. Uncle Am would have been waiting here for him if he came back at a quarter of two, and if they'd talked about twenty minutes then he'd have got back to the haberdashery to see Burgoyne at about a quarter after two. And he had.

I said, "You should have told me."

"Damn it, Ed, I would have if it would have helped you. But how would it? Your uncle told me why he was looking for Reynal—the guy had skipped town with a car and the finance company had hired your agency to find him. And how could that have had anything to do with whatever happened to your uncle? And I know

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his stopping here couldn't have had anything to do with it."

I dug deeper. "How did he happen to come here?"

"He told me, so I happen to know. Reynal's sister-in-law told him that Reynal had come here; she'd sent him. Incidentally, what he really wanted was tips on horse races."

"Did you give them to him?"

"In this racket, Ed—if you've got to make a living out of it—you give a man what he asks for and wants. But unless it's something that really comes to you and you know is true you make it ambiguous, so he can't call you too closely on it. Frankly, I don't remember exactly what I told Reynal except that it was strictly off the cuff. I didn't like him. He impressed me as a small-time crook. Anyway, I couldn't really get anything for him so I stalled him along. Maybe he thought what I told him the first time was pretty good because he came back for more. But not after that, so maybe he lost money on the way he interpreted the guff I gave him on his second visit."

"Which was when?" I asked.

"I don't remember exactly, Ed. Maybe two months ago. I do remember that the two times he came here were only a few days apart, though. And after that he didn't come back."

He started to tell me minor details of things he'd told Thomas Reynal but I wasn't interested in them. I'd found Reynal, and I was interested only in Uncle Am.

I stood up and said, "Okay, Chester."

"You won't give me away on this, will you?"

I said, "Yes and no. I'll tell Starlock, naturally. And I'll tell Bassett—he's the man from homicide who's in charge of this. But he's interested only in murder, not in heckling fortune tellers. I'll ask him not to pass the word down the line to whatever department would heckle you. He's a good guy so you don't need to worry about that. And I won't tell Mrs. Brady or anyone else around the rooming house."

"Thanks, Ed. Thanks a lot."

I walked back to Clark Street slowly, thinking. I had covered Uncle Am's day perfectly. None of it seemed to mean any-

thing, not even finding that he'd seen Chester Hamlin, alias Ramah Singh. I couldn't see any motive in that.

But just the same, I decided, I was going to look for one. And while the looking was good—before Chester got home.

I caught a cab on Clark Street and took it home to the rooming house. I decided to try my own key on Chester's door before I asked Mrs. Brady for a pass key. I remembered that all the keys were pretty much alike and that Estelle's key had opened Karl Dell's door without any difficulty.

Mine opened Chester's door almost as easily.

I closed the door behind me and looked around, wondering what I was looking for and where to start. The closet he'd padlocked on account of the darkroom chemicals was probably the best bet, but I'd have to take off the hinges of the door to get into it, or pull off the padlock, hasp and all, with a crowbar.

I'd take the easier things first. My eyes lighted on the bookcase and I remembered the one in Ramah Singh's waiting room and walked over to glance at the titles. There weren't any books on the occult in this one, just the ordinary assortment of books you'd expect a man of moderate intelligence to collect; historical novels, plays, a few mysteries, a smattering of non-fiction books on a variety of subjects.

I pulled one of them out and opened it to the flyleaf, as I'd done with two or three of the books in the waiting room. It read Chester Hamlin all right but—like the books in the waiting room—there was an erasure under the name.

What other name had he used? I was curious. He wouldn't have erased a professional name like Ramah Singh to put his own name instead, because he wouldn't, in all probability, ever have kept his books on other than occult subjects in any office he had. He said he'd always kept his professional and personal identities apart.

I held the book up to the light to see if I could read what the erased name had been. I couldn't.

I put that book back and started systematically at the left side of the top row to see if the name had been changed in all of the books. After I'd tried a few and found that it had, I held each book upside

down and shook it before I put it back. Often people leave things in books and forget them.

Chester had.

In about the eighth book I tried, an old envelope had been left as a bookmark; it had slid down out of sight so it didn't show when the book was closed.

But it fell out to the floor when I shook the book upside down.

I picked up the envelope. I never got around to noticing the return address or the postmark, or even the address at which Chester had received it. All I saw was the name of the addressee:

*Chester Dagon.*

**I**T TOOK me all of a second to drop the book and the envelope and to get to the closet door, ready to try to break it down with my bare hands, but a lot of things went through my mind in that second. Toby Dagon, killer. Chester's starting to say something, in his cups, about having a brother who—

I forced myself to stand and think calmly for another second, and I remembered watching Chester put the screwdriver and hammer away after putting the padlock hasp on the door. The screws had been short ones; I was sure with a screwdriver and hammer I could pry the hasp off by pulling the screws right out of their moorings.

I got the screwdriver and hammer from the bottom dresser drawer. I put the screwdriver against the top edge of the hasp and began driving it down with the hammer, between the hasp and the wood.

It was because of the noise I was making that I didn't hear the door to the hallway open and close. The first I knew that I wasn't alone in the room was a voice behind me.

"Go right ahead," It said.

I swung around. Toby Dagon, Augie Grane's right hand man, was standing only a few feet away with a gun in his hand. A forty-five automatic that looked as big as a cannon and was aimed right at my solar plexus.

I had the hammer in my hand; I could have swung it or thrown it, but he could have pulled that trigger in a hell of a lot less time, and he couldn't have missed

at four feet.

He said, "Go right ahead and open it. Save me the trouble."

I kept my hands carefully at my sides. I said, "The key would be easier, wouldn't it?"

Toby Dagon said, "I haven't got the key. Go ahead. You were doing fine."

There was amusement in his voice but not in his face.

Well, I wanted in that closet worse than he did. I'd been fairly sure before; I knew now.

I turned back and started work with the screwdriver and hammer again. I didn't try to be quiet about it; in fact, I made as much noise as I could, hoping to attract attention. But it wasn't going to. When you drive a nail into the wall to hang a picture on, nobody calls the police, and I wasn't succeeding in making any more noise than that.

I got the blade of the screwdriver driven down behind the hasp and tried to pull it. I couldn't, so I wedged the nail-pulling side of the hammer head back of the screwdriver handle and used the leverage of the hammer handle, and the screws started to pull out. I dropped the hammer, hoping it would make a louder noise than it did, and pulled the hasp the rest of the way out with the screwdriver.

I dropped the screwdriver, too, and jerked the door open.

Uncle Am was there all right; and he was alive. That was the first thing I made sure of. His chest moved as he breathed.

He was tied up and gagged, but that was an extra precaution because he was drugged, too.

But he was alive.

It took knowing that to make me remember the spot he and I were in right now, with Toby Dagon and a forty-five automatic right behind me.

I knew part of the score now; not all of it, but enough to know that Chester had called Toby after I'd left and that Toby had come around here to finish off Uncle Am and get him out of Chester's room before I did too much thinking. And I'd thought just fast enough to stick my head into a rattrap. He'd finish me off, too.

My ace in the hole, if any, was the



gun in my shoulder holster. Apparently Toby hadn't even suspected I might be carrying one, or he'd have relieved me of it before he'd told me to go ahead and take off the padlock. Only his gun was in his hand, aimed at the small of my back, and mine was still in the holster.

He said, "Okay, you found him. Drag him out of there and into his own room."

I stepped into the closet and started to bend over Uncle Am, reaching down with my left hand and trying to look, from behind, as though I was reaching with both hands. I kept my right elbow close to my side, but reached up, as I bent down, through the lapel of my coat and got the gun.

The safety was on and I got my thumb on it, but I didn't dare risk the click it would make until I was ready to pull the trigger. But I got it out of the holster, and at the same time I bent over farther, stepped astraddle of Uncle Am and slid my hands inside his coat, which wasn't buttoned, and under his armpits. The light in the closet was dim, the gun was black, and I moved my hand fast and naturally, covering most of the movement with my body.

And, astraddle of Uncle Am and with my hands inside his coat and under his armpits, I partly lifted and partly dragged his shoulders across the doorsill of the closet until I was facing Toby Dagon. Now all I'd have to do would be to lift my arm and fire the gun, snickering off the safety as I brought it up, and I might have a reasonable chance, even though his gun was already aiming at me.

But I got an even better break. He said, "Hold it. Wait," and backed away from me toward the door, opening it with his left hand. Naturally he'd want to be sure nobody was in the hallway or coming up or down the stairs before we took Uncle Am from one room to another.

He opened the door a few inches. He didn't stick his head out, but stood there listening. The gun still pointed at me, but he turned his head slightly to put his ear nearer the crack of the door. His eyes weren't directly on me.

I wasn't going to have any better chance than that. Maybe it isn't in the best Lone Ranger tradition to start shooting at a man who isn't looking directly at you, but

just at that moment I was more interested in keeping Uncle Am and myself alive than in being sportsmanlike about the way I did it.

I straightened up and fired, snicking off the safety en route. He was looking at me when I pulled the trigger; the click of the safety gave him time to do that. But he didn't have time to pull the trigger of that forty-five calibre cannon in his hand. Maybe he started to pull it, but lost interest when he died.

I don't mean that my shooting was good, but it worked. It was the first time I'd ever fired a pistol from the hip and I shot high. I aimed for his chest and the bullet went in right below his left eye. But it killed him just as dead, and probably even more quickly, than if I'd hit where I was aiming.

He fell with a thud that seemed to shake the whole room.

I stood there trying not to jitter. I opened my mouth to give a yell for Mrs. Brady, but I heard a lot of footsteps coming—the shot had sounded like a blockbuster—so I bent down and got the gag off Uncle Am and started untying him.

Then I had to go to the door to help open it because Toby Dagon was lying against it holding it shut and was bleeding all over his brother's floor. I dragged him aside and got the door open. Mrs. Brady was there, and others behind her.

I said, "I've got Uncle Am, Mrs. Brady. Will you finish untying him, and don't worry about the other guy in the room. He won't bother you. I've got to phone for an ambulance."

I knew Mrs. Brady would be able to handle things. She'd been a trained nurse ~~once~~, so she wouldn't scream at the sight of a dead body, and she'd be able to do more for Uncle Am than I would.

I ran down the stairs and got Bassett on the phone. First I got him to start a police ambulance on the way and then when he came back on the line and said it would be there in minutes, I gave him the main facts quickly.

I said, "Put out a call for Chester right away. You'd better stay there and keep things moving. I've got an idea that he's somewhere waiting for Toby. You met him; you can describe him all right.

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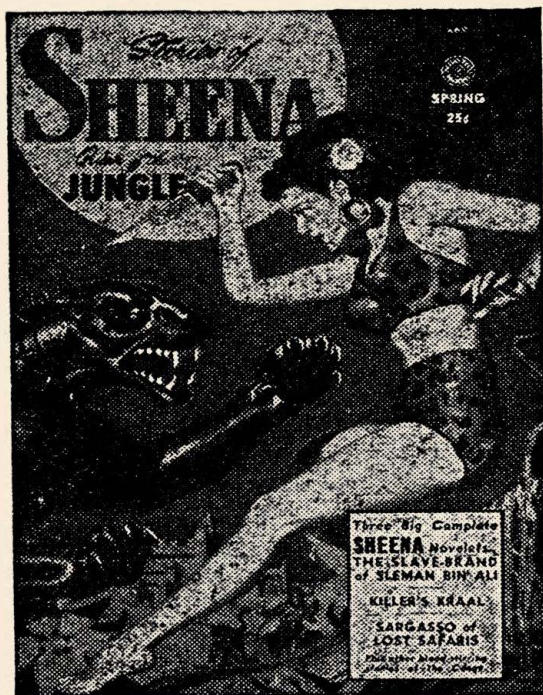
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Bassett said, "Yes, Inspector. I'll be busy on that, then, so you better call your boss, if you haven't. Good work, Ed."

I called Starlock and gave it to him fast. He said he'd be right around. I told him I might not be here, that I was going along with Uncle Am in the police ambulance if they'd let me ride or follow it in a taxi if they wouldn't.

I went to the foot of the stairs and asked Mrs. Brady how Uncle Am was. She called back, "He's fine, Ed. Not conscious, but his breathing and heart are okay. Only he needs a shave pretty bad."

I grinned and went back to the phone. I might as well see if Augie Grane really meant what he'd said about five thousand bucks. I called him and told him who I was.

I said, "Toby Dagon was gypping you, Augie. With the aid of his brother Chester, who was a fortune teller in your neighborhood, using the name of Ramah Singh. Chester picked the mooches; I'll give you the details later."

"Where's Toby?"

"Dead," I said. "I shot him. There's a pick-up order out for Chester."

"Might give you a tip, then, Ed. Toby got a call here half an hour ago. He left right after, but he made an outgoing call first. I didn't hear the conversation but I just happened to overhear him giving the number. He was calling the municipal airport. If they were going to run off together—"

"Thanks," I said. I didn't mention the five grand; that was up to him, now that I'd given him what he wanted. I didn't have any legal claim to it; it would be just his word against mine, so I wouldn't dun him for it.

I heard the siren of what must be the police ambulance, but I went ahead and called Bassett back anyway. I told him there was a good chance he'd find Chester Dagon in the waiting room at the municipal airport.

I hung up in time to show the ambulance boys the way up to Chester's room to get Uncle Am. They let me ride along on the way to the hospital.

I waited in the waiting room there for a few years and then a doctor came out and told me that they were gradually

bringing him out of it, that he wasn't fully conscious yet but ought to be pretty soon. He said there wouldn't be anything wrong with him once he came around, except that he'd be weak for a few days from the effects of having been kept doped for three days. I could probably see him for a while, the doctor said, as soon as he was fully conscious, and that shouldn't be more than another hour or so.

Before that hour was up, Bassett came in and Augie Grane was with him. Augie smiled and handed me an envelope. He said, "Here are those tickets I promised you, Ed. Frank here let me listen in while Chester was singing. I got the story, all of it. Frank will tell you."

He said he couldn't stay, and left.

Bassett said, "We got Chester at the airport and he talked. He talked plenty to clear himself and blame Karl Dell's murder on Toby. Says he didn't want Toby killed. But he was accessory and he'll take a plea on that and on kidnaping your uncle. And you know, Ed, I think he probably saved Am's life. Toby would have killed him. Here's how the whole mess started:

"Toby had been gypping Augie for a long time. He had a system that was foolproof except that he could work it only on a small scale. He had the numbers tickets printed and numbered in duplicate—the printer thought it was part of the system. Toby kept one set. Once in a while he'd get a friend of his, somebody he could trust to split with him afterwards, to buy a moderate sized ticket. It didn't matter which peddler he bought it from or what number he wrote down on it. But he'd call Toby and tell him the serial number of the ticket he bought, see?

**"A**ND after the numbers had come up the next day, Toby would take the duplicate of the ticket and write the winning number on it. He'd switch the carbon, the stub, for the one the peddler had turned in. Then he'd give the original with the winning number to the friend. Friend takes it to peddler and the serial number checks as a ticket he sold, and when it comes to payoff, the number on his ticket matches the winning number on the stub that the peddler thinks is the one he's

turned in to Toby. After the payoff, the friend splits with Toby. That the way you'd figured it?"

"Just about," I said. "I wondered how he worked one thing, but getting the tickets printed in duplicate answers it. Go on."

"So the only trouble is, he had to do it on a small scale and he wanted a killing. Trouble was picking the right guys and enough of them to front for him and split with him. So he figured out working in his brother who's a fortune teller. Chester opened shop in the neighborhood where Augie's syndicate does their business. And he was a natural for picking the right guys. A fortune teller, talking to someone who'll open up to him, can pick guys with just enough larceny in their souls and not too much. Guys who'll go in a deal like that and keep their mouths shut about it. Chester took his time picking them and didn't make a single mistake.

"They were just getting going good and were about set to make a big killing. They'd lined up half a dozen of Chester's best picks and were going to have half a dozen or more big hits—ten and twenty dollar tickets paying plenty—all on the right number the same day. Augie would have paid up, even though he closed down his numbers business. And he never would have known what hit him. They had things lined up and the day was set for Monday, day after tomorrow. Meanwhile Chester was keeping on lining up more mooches for the big day and the big killing.

"And Toby was working with Augie to find out where Augie's money was going to. And keeping Chester posted as to everything they were doing. Chester knew all about Richard Bergman and he knew all about Augie and Toby's trip to Starlock and who they talked to there. So he knew Am had met Toby and knew that Augie was being taken."

I said, "And then Wednesday afternoon Am walked into Chester's fortune telling setup looking for information on Tommy Reynal. And Reynal had been one of Chester's mooches; he had skipped town and abandoned his wife after he'd got his cut on a winning ticket. But I don't see why Uncle Am's walking into his office scared Chester. And it must have."

"Because Chester was out when Am went in. And when Chester came back, he found Am reading a book out of the bookcase; it happened to be a book by this Charles Fort, not the omnibus edition, but just one of his books, *The Book of the Damned*.

"After Am had left, Chester got worried and looked in the book and found he'd forgot to change his inscription in it. It was inscribed *Chester Dagon*. And he knew that if Am knew he was named Dagon Am would put two and two together any minute and get the score about what was happening to Augie's money. And he could have gone to Augie and got plenty for that little bit of information. And he thought, from something Am had said while they were talking, that Am had seen that name in the book he'd been reading.

"So he doped out a plan. All on his own; he knew if he told Toby, Toby would simply kill Am. And Chester says he hates murder."

"He told me that once," I said. After I said it, I realized that it had been only last night, but it seemed like a long time ago.

"And he knew if he could get Am out of circulation for five days, through Monday, he and Toby would have made their big killing and have lit out, so it wouldn't matter if Am got the answer. So he figured out a way to get Am out of circulation for five days. You know most of that, except one thing."

"Go ahead," I said. "There might be two things."

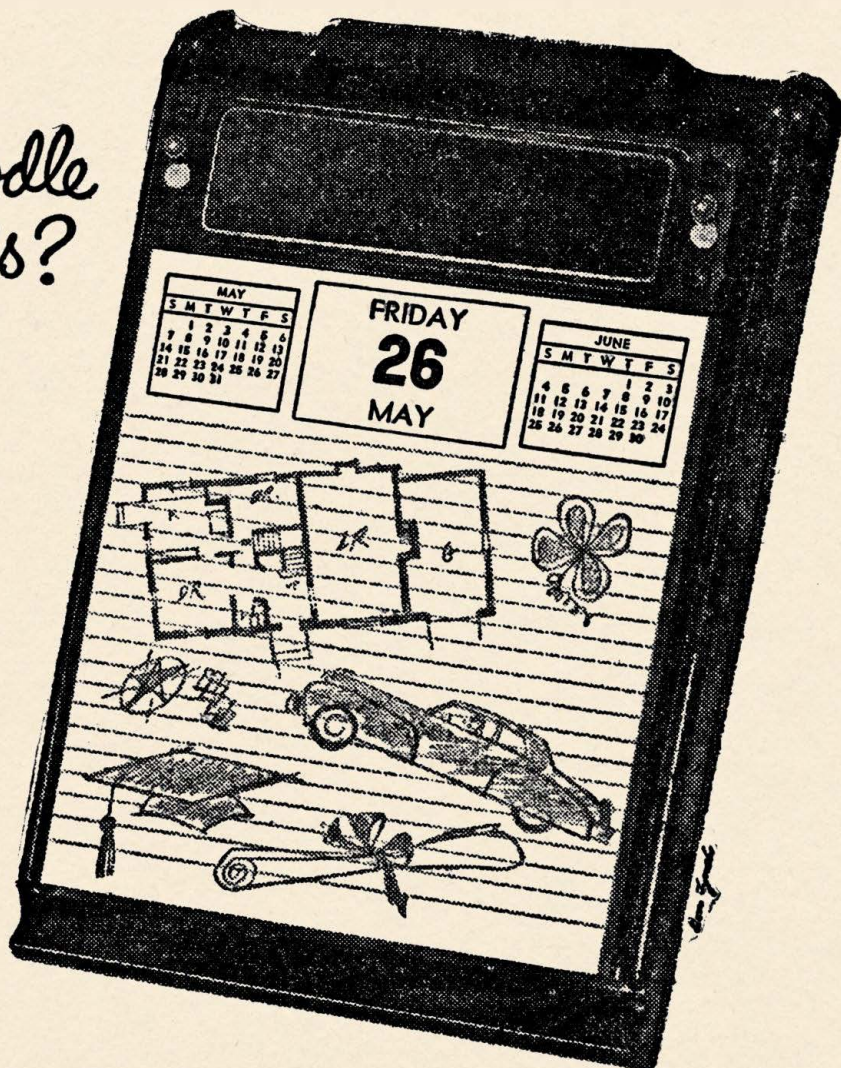
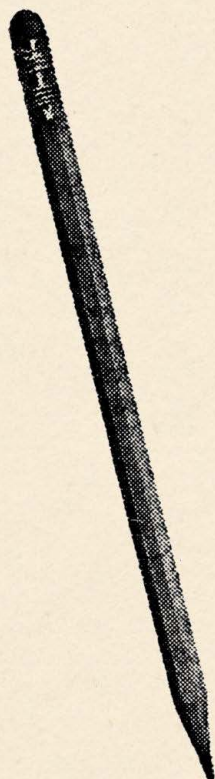
"He went around and rented a car and parked it outside the building the agency is in until he saw Am go in. He gave him time to get upstairs and then, from a phone booth right in the building downstairs, he put in the call to Starlock—and you know all the details of that call. And—"

I interrupted. "But why did he get so elaborate about it? The Ambrose Collector business, and using Bergman's room number?"

"He used Bergman's room number because Bergman was working with Augie to find out how Augie was being gyped. He thought if he could get Bergman in hot water with the police, Bergman would



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have less chance of getting anywhere with what he was trying to do.

"He got the Ambrose Collector business because the book he'd caught Am reading had been Charles Fort—only not the particular book that had the Ambrose Collector thing in it, so he knew Am hadn't read that—they'd talked a little about Charles Fort while Am was there; I guess he was fishing to see whether Am had seen the inscription and Am must have said something that made him think he had.

"Anyway, after Charles Fort had already reared his head because of the book with the inscription, it probably tickled his sense of humor to collect an Ambrose, using the name Ambrose Collector to do it. He says it wasn't that, though, that he wasn't being funny. He says he hoped we'd figure a madman—or anyway a crank—had done it and using that screwy angle would help us think so. He was being as clever as hell."

I said, "And now comes one thing I don't know. How did he collect Uncle Am when he came out of the building?"

"Easiest thing he did. Soon as Am showed, he got out of the car and ran toward him, pretending he'd just swung in to the curb, and said you'd had a bad accident—been hit by a car—and they'd brought you home because it happened near there and you had identification showing the address, and the doctor was there now and— Well, he got Am in the car and drove him home and kept feeding him details that sounded logical enough, so Am wouldn't get suspicious.

"Maybe there were things about it that sounded thin—like why he would have driven down for Am instead of phoning—but I guess Am would have been so worried about you and getting there in a hurry that he didn't see any of the slight holes in what Chester was feeding him."

I said, "And when they got upstairs at the rooming house he hit Am with a sap, I suppose."

"Right. And stashed him temporarily under the bed and then, that evening, while you were just starting to worry about Am, he had you help him put a padlock on the closet he was going to keep Am in for the five days he'd have to keep him."

"You can't say it wasn't a macabre sense

of humor that prompted that," I said. "Having me help fix the padlock!"

"He says it wasn't. He says he wanted you to get a look inside the closet while it was still empty so you wouldn't think of that padlocked closet in connection with Am after you'd found he was really gone and not just late getting home."

"I didn't," I admitted. "And all the while he's been gone, I've been sleeping six feet from him!" I thought of something even worse than that and slapped my forehead with the palm of my hand. I said, "And he was under the bed, Chester's bed, while I was watching Chester put on that padlock. And I sat on the bed. I was sitting on him."

Bassett grinned. "We get to Karl Dell. How much have you doped out by now about what happened to him?"

I said, "I know what, but not why. You tell it."

"Okay. Wednesday he gets home around four with a headache, as he told you, and lay down to take a nap. That was at four. At four-twenty—this is guesswork because Karl can't ever tell us—he heard Am and Chester come in. He recognized Am's voice, and—"

"Four-twenty!" I said. "That number cost me five bucks."

He laughed. "It cost me only four bits. I guess I'm not a plunger like you. How much for Starlock?"

"Two bucks. Go on. Let's not think what saps we were about that number."

"That's all for Wednesday, except that he must have forgotten about it. That's all for then. Skip to early Thursday evening when he's in his room working out by astrology what happened to Am. Some combination of calculations—an unorthodox one according to the astrologer who looked over his work—gave him four-twenty. Probably as a time, and maybe he thought four-twenty was the time something happened to Am—which would have been fairly close to right.

"But thinking about four-twenty the day before, he suddenly remembered that while he'd been lying down in his room at about four-fifteen or four-twenty he'd heard Am's voice while Am was coming up the stairs. He knew Am had come home from the office and hadn't been alone. And, astrology or no astrology, he knew that would



be damn important information for you so he ran right down to the phone and called Starlock. And Starlock had you call him back from Chez Julliard.

"But meanwhile Toby Dagon was in Chester's room, talking to Chester. I'd seen Toby by then and he knew something was up; he wanted to check with Chester, to see if Chester knew what went on and took a chance coming to Chester's room. Chester told him what he'd done—and he says Toby first wanted to kill Am but he wouldn't give him the key to the closet, and finally he made Toby see that now that he had Am safely put away, it was safer that way than to kill him and have a body on their hands."

I said, 'But while they're talking, they hear Karl run downstairs as though something is up; they open the door a crack or come out on the landing and hear his conversation over the phone.'

"Right. And he's got that four-twenty, and they know that's about the time Chester got Am home and conked him, and Chester knew—had found out afterwards—that Karl had been home, in his own room, at that time. They knew Karl had something that would lead us to Chester."

"So Toby walks down the steps and just as Karl hangs up after talking to you, Toby sticks a gun in Karl's ribs, takes him back upstairs to Chester's room. Chester's scared stiff by this time and does what Toby tells him—but swears he didn't know Toby was going to kill Karl. But that's guff, not that it matters. Anyway, Toby tells Chester to go swipe a car and park it in front. Chester does. Then they take Karl downstairs—Toby with the gun in his coat pocket walking behind Karl. Toby tells Chester to get in front and drive and he and Karl get in back. They drive a block or two and then Toby tells Chester to pull in and stop. Chester does; he looks around and Karl's gone. Then he looks down and Karl's on the floor in the back seat. He says he thought Karl was only knocked out, but he was probably dead already."

"Toby tells Chester to go home right away and establish an alibi, get with someone who'll vouch for him and stay with them. He'll take care of Karl. So Chester walks home, picking up those fish at a market enroute, and offers them to Mrs.

Brady, knowing she'll ask him in to help eat them. Which she does. And that's why Chester was eating dinner with Mrs. Brady at the time the car with Karl in it was being abandoned ten miles away."

I said, "Then Toby jammed the horn button on purpose. So Chester's alibi was solid."

"Right. He took a little chance walking away from a car with a stiff in it after he'd reached back in and jammed the horn button, but it made sure the car would be found right away, while Chester was alibied."

"It fooled us all right," I said.

"That it did. Say, Ed. That envelope Augie gave you. Did he really kick through with—"

I took the envelope out of my pocket and opened it. There were five new dollar bills in it—dollar bills with three zeros after the dollar. They were beautiful examples of engraving.

I took one out and handed it to Bassett. I said, "Maybe they're counterfeit. I'd better let a policeman try to pass one first; he's less likely to get in trouble for it."

Bassett looked at the bill and then at me as though he didn't believe either of us. Then he looked as though he was going to cry. He said, "And my wife needs an operation that's going to cost six hundred bucks and I've been going nuts about it. But, hell, Ed, you cracked the case. I was sitting on my fanny at the office when you called and told me. You don't have to split with me."

I said, "Call it a bribe. Uncle Am and I are going to start our agency pretty soon. We'll need a friend at headquarters."

He cursed but it didn't sound like swearing. He put the bill in his pocket.

He took out a cigarette and lighted it and his hand shook just a little. He said, "There's only one angle left I don't figure, and Chester can't either. Why did Toby go back to Chester's room? The jig was up anyway and he had nothing to gain. Chester was waiting for him at the airport and they'd have taken the next plane out after Toby got there. Why did he go back? To kill Am for the fun of it?"

"Not exactly that," I said. "But Toby was tougher than Chester. He hadn't given up yet. When Chester called him and gave

him the lowdown on my having been to his office, and said the game was over and they'd better lam, Toby probably said okay and told Chester to go out to the airport and wait for him.

"But Toby hadn't given up yet. He thought I might do just what I did, head for home to look over Chester's room. And he figured if he caught me there, he could kill Am and me both, put us in our own room—and there still wouldn't be any lead to Chester or to him. If what he had in mind to do had worked he'd have gone

out to the airport and brought Chester back instead of lamming with him. And if they could have sat tight for two more days they could have lammed with four or five times as much money as they had."

Bassett sighed. "I should have thought of that. Say, Ed, I can't wait much longer. I'm going to check at the desk and have them phone upstairs. Wait a minute."

He went away and came back in a few minutes. He said, "The doc says about another half hour and Am will be happy to see everybody."

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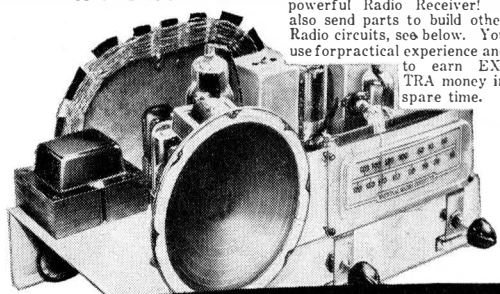


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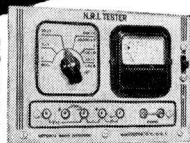
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